

Storm Surge

By Melissa Good

The sun peeked over the horizon, lighting up an already coral pink sky with the bland yellows of morning. It's rays spread over the flat calm water, faint ripples brushing only lightly against the hull of a motor yacht bobbling quietly at anchor.

A seagull circled overhead, its white wings outstretched to catch the slight breeze as it watched the water's surface carefully, hoping for an easy breakfast while the air was still comfortable, before the sun started really heating things up.

Inside the boat's cabin, it was equally quiet and peaceful. The main living space was dark and cool, sprinkles of light coming in past the curtained windows to illuminate a blue and tan interior and splashing over the body of a half asleep woman meandering around the counter into the kitchen.

Blond, sun bronzed, and dressed in a sleeveless shirt that came to her mid thigh, the woman stopped to yawn and stretch, rubbing her eyes as the boat rocked a little and she leaned against the counter, waiting for it to stop.

Eventually it did. "Hope that wasn't some dude with a couple of waveriders and a six pack." Kerry paused to peek out one of the windows, drawing aside the curtain to let the light in, before she ambled over to the small refrigerator and removed a bottle of juice from it.

"Did you just say you wanted a six pack for breakfast?"

Kerry turned and leaned against the kitchen counter as she watched her tall, dark haired partner climb the steps from the forward cabins into the living area. "Have you ever seen me have beer for breakfast?"

"Always a first time." Dar squeezed into the kitchen area with her and ducked her head down, taking a drink from the bottle Kerry offered her. "Besides, it has grain or wheat or whatever in it, doesn't it?"

"Hm." Kerry took a sip from the bottle herself. "You know, it's probably healthier than those Frosted Flakes you're about to pour in a bowl, matter of fact." She bumped Dar with her hip. "Glad it's Sunday?"

"Always." Dar leaned back and gazed around the interior of the boat. "Sometimes I think my parents had the right idea."

"Living on the boat?"

"Mm."

Kerry felt the motion as the sea rocked gently under her. "Well, now that you got that satellite dish installed and we can get TV and internet...."

"Slow internet."

"Still."

"It'd be tough on Chino." Dar mused. "Think we could teach her to use the head?"

Kerry took another swallow of juice. "She's a Labrador. Anything's possible. I keep expecting to walk into my office any day and see her sitting at my desk sending email."

Dar chuckled. "Maybe we should try taking her out on one of these overnights first." She eased past Kerry and went over to the door that led to the back deck. "I'm going to kick over the engines to charge the batteries."

"Want me to bring your coffee up there?" Kerry called. "I may jump in before breakfast."

"In my coffee? Fabulous. Bring it up then." Dar winked at her on the way out the door, letting it close behind her as a shaft of bright sunlight appeared and then disappeared.

"Punk." Kerry chuckled to herself, as she put her bottle down and turned to the coffee pot, hearing the rumble of the diesel engine and the vibration of it through her feet as Dar settled it into idle. She whistled softly under her breath as she scooped fragrant ground beans into the basket, and poured water into the machine.

She turned as the coffee started dripping, and headed down the steps into the front part of the boat. She ducked into the comfortable master cabin and pulled off her shirt, trading it for a one piece swimsuit. "Living on the boat. Hm."

Kerry regarded her reflection in the wall mounted mirror and paused to imagine what that would be like. "It sounds good." She informed herself. "But I think I'd miss the broad band." She wrapped a towel around her neck and went back up into the main cabin, where the coffee was almost finished dripping. "Not to mention Starbucks."

She took two cups, appropriately milked and sugared, and emerged onto the back deck to find Dar loitering there, bathed in the early sunlight of a late August day. "Rats. I wanted to climb the ladder with this tray in my teeth."

Dar tipped her head back and watched as her partner set the tray down on the outside counter. "Nice morning." She commented. "Want to go down near Pennecamp later for a few dives?"

"Sure." Kerry handed Dar her coffee, then took the seat next to her with her own cup, putting her bare feet up against the transom and enjoying the pretty day.

It was warm, and humid, expected weather for the time of year, and on the edge of the horizon she could see the faint gathering of clouds that towards the afternoon would likely result in a thunderstorm.

Expected. Very normal. Kerry exhaled and flexed her toes. "So, how did the meeting with Hans go? I never asked you about that on Friday."

Dar had her sunglasses on, and she was sprawled in the chair in tank top and a pair of cotton shorts. "Pretty good." She said. "I really wanted to be there when those ships got into port, but now I'm glad I postponed going over until week after next."

"Big scene?"

Dar chuckled. "Hans said it was the most excitement in those parts since World War II, and not in a good way. I'd rather wait and meet with their executive board. A lot more fish to fry and the European sales team is drooling so badly we had to send three cases of old lobster bibs to them."

Kerry sipped her coffee. "Well, you get one week to shake them all up, then I'm heading over there. That's a lot of infrastructure we're going to need."

"No kidding." Dar wiggled her toes. "Sure you don't want to come with me?"

Kerry sighed. "Stop teasing me, Dar. I told Angie I'd go up there and help her pack up to move. I can't back out on her now."

"I know." Her partner relented. "Sorry."

"It's not like I want to go to Michigan, y'know."

"I know." Dar repeated. "Hey, but it'll give me a week to scope out the best beer spots for you." She added, resting her elbows on the deck chair arms. "Hey, what do you think about softball?"

Whiplashed into a completely unexpected redirection of their conversation, Kerry nearly choked on a mouthful of coffee. "Bw.." She swallowed. "Huh?" She turned her head and looked at her partner. "What brought that on?"

The taller woman shrugged. "I bumped into Mariana in the hall Thursday and she said she had a bunch of people asking her if we could form a softball team to play in some half assed corporate softball league or something around here."

"Ah."

"I didn't think it sounded all that stupid, and the league raises money for charity." Dar reasoned. "And we're done with that other stuff for now."

"So, she asked you because she expected you to play?" Kerry put her cup down and half turned, resting her chin on her fist.

"Us."

"Ah."

"The other choice was bowling." Dar said. "I don't know about you but for me the biggest draw of the bowling alley is the cheese fries."

"Hmm." Kerry wrinkled her nose. "I think I'd like to try softball." She decided. "I never played it in school, and I wanted to."

"You said that once." Dar remarked. "I think you look really cute in a baseball cap." She added. "Sounds like it might be fun."

"You want to do it?" A little surprised at her anti social partner's sudden interest in team sports, Kerry watched her profile out of the corner of her eye. "I didn't think you were into that sort of thing."

Dar blew bubbles into her coffee, making a very odd gurgling noise. "Yeah, I know." She admitted. "But I've never tried this, so what the hell. Why not?"

"Works for me." Kerry got up and went over to the transom, sitting on it and swiveling so her legs were on the outside of the low wall, above the platform they stepped off of when diving. "Tattoo, motorcycle, wife, softball." She glanced over her shoulder at Dar. "I think my rebellion is complete." She turned around and dove into the dark blue water.

Dar smiled, and toasted Kerry with her coffee cup, content to remain in her deck chair as the sun slowly lifted higher over the horizon. She could hear Kerry splashing a little over the sound of the idling engines, and after a moment, she moved the deck chair closer to the back of the boat so she could keep an eye on her partner.

Kerry was doing the backstroke, swimming a few body lengths away from the boat and then coasting, putting her hands behind her head and floating like an otter in the warm water.

"How is it?" Dar asked.

"Bathtub." Kerry stretched her body out. "Big enough for two." She gazed up at the pink tinged, fluffy clouds overhead as she floated on the surface, enjoying the peace and quiet for about ten seconds when a wall of water swept over her. "Hey!"

Dar bobbed up a moment later, shaking her dark hair out of her eyes. "You invited me into your bathtub." She grinned at Kerry, stroking through the water towards her. She ducked under the surface as she came closer, grabbing at the blond woman as she backpeddled rapidly through the water.

"Hey hey hey!!" Kerry twisted and reached out to grab Dar's shirt, finding only smooth skin under her fingertips. "Holy pooters, Dar! You're naked!"

Blue eyes appeared above the waterline, blinking innocently.

"You are naked!" Kerry hissed, glancing around. "What if one of those fishing charters comes by? Or a dive boat?"

Completely submerged aside from the top of her head, Dar started moving towards her partner.

“Dar.”

A puckish grin appeared.

“Shit.” Kerry ducked her head under the water and swam forward, kicking in a frog kick with her hands outstretched to grab whatever they had a mind to.

She found them clasped, and the next thing she knew she was being hauled up half out of the water, ending up landing on top of Dar as her partner flipped over and came up under her.

Abruptly, Kerry wished she’d forgotten her suit as well. She could feel skin everywhere she touched and she almost breathed in a mouthful of salt water as her body reacted.

Then she was flipped over again and dunked, and she could only manage a quick breath before she was under the water again and being pinched on the butt. She flailed around and tried to grab Dar’s arm, but as she surfaced, she found herself alone as she turned in a circle. “Hey!”

Dar surfaced on the other side of the boat, snickering.

“You’re such a punk.” Kerry let her catch up and they were nose to nose, just off the stern of the boat. “Just for that, I hope a cuttlefish nibbles you.”

“Ready for breakfast?” Dar batted a piece of seaweed away.

“Well, now..” Kerry laid one hand on her cheek, leaning forward to let their lips brush. “Depends on who’s cooking.”

Dar licked a drop of salt water off her nose. “G’wan.” She indicated the ladder.

“Oh no.” Kerry shook her head and smiled. “You first.” She rolled onto her back on the surface and put her hands back under her head, watching her partner with a wicked twinkle. “Little Miss Exhibitionist.”

Dar stuck her tongue out.

“You’re just sooo lucky I didn’t take my camera in the water.”

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“Hi, Kerry.”

Kerry looked up from her computer screen, and waved a few fingers. “Hey Mari.” She greeted the Vice President of HR for ILS. “What’s up?”

Mariana entered and crossed over to Kerry’s desk, taking a seat in her visitor’s chair and settling herself. “Good morning, Kerry.”

“Uh oh. What did I do?” Kerry turned away from her monitor and rested her elbows on her desk.

“You? Not a thing.” The HR VP smiled.

“What did Dar do?” The blond woman replied, with a wry grin. “That I have to explain?”

“She volunteered you to be captain of our new softball team, and before I sent out a memo with that delightful information I thought I’d check with you first.”

Kerry leaned back in her chair and chuckled. “Nah, that’s fine. I actually did volunteer for that.” She told Mari. “I figured if I was going to do this, I’d do it right. So what’s the deal with all this? I didn’t know we had such a demand for intercorporate sports in the company.”

“Well.” Mari sighed. “I don’t know, really.” She crossed her ankles. “You know the suggestion box down in the café?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, we usually get the usual. Less chicken in the café, lower the air conditioning on the sixth floor, raise the air conditioning on the 9th floor, change the dress code.. you know.”

Kerry nodded. She did, in fact, know, as she was the representative from Operations to the Employee working group sessions that took place monthly. "Change the coffee. Don't change the coffee, bring bottled water in, stop using bottled water because of the environment, yeah."

"Exactly." Mari said. "So anyway, the last couple of times I opened the box, we had requests for more group activities, more employee activities, and stuff getting involved in the community. So I put out feelers, and this league's what I came up with."

"Ah."

"People activity, sports activity, charity activity, all rolled into one. I figured it was at least worth mentioning," Mari went on. "However."

"Yeah?"

"When I mentioned it, everyone went batty bonkers on me."

Kerry blinked. "Really?"

"You'd think I was suggesting we go to the Olympics." The HR VP shook her head. "So anyway, I thought I'd ask the poobah if she wanted to participate, since we all know you both are big into sports."

"We're..ah.." Kerry paused. "Yeah, okay." She said. "We're not really into sports, per se, but we do like being active, and I think Dar's intrigued since she's never done team sports before." She considered. "And I never got to play in school, so I have to admit I'm kinda looking forward to it too."

Mari's face split into a pleased smile. "Great." She said. "I know Dar can speak for you, but I just wanted to make sure this wasn't something you felt obligated to do" She explained. "We've got so much of that around here. Y'know?"

"I know." Kerry played with one of her colorful pencils. A stack of them were in a cup on her desk, in every color of the rainbow and she'd selected her favorite, purple, to mess with. "So where do we start?"

Mari got up and straightened her skirt out. "Remember you volunteered." She warned. "The first team meeting's tomorrow night, after work, at the Biscayne ballpark down the street."

Kerry held up her pencil. "No problem for tomorrow, but you know we're out of town for a couple weeks after that, right?"

"I know." Mari said. "Tomorrow's just a kick off meeting. We've got to get everyone the shirts, and the hats, and the shoes.. and get bats... practices don't start until third week in September. You should be back by then, right?"

"Right." Kerry saluted. "I'll be there." She said. "We're providing the shirts and hats?"

"Of course." Mari waggled her fingers. "See you later."

"Bye." Kerry watched the older woman leave, then she chuckled and set her pencil down, getting up and grabbing her cup as she headed for the door. She pushed through, poking her head into her assistant's office on the way out to the kitchen. "Hey Mayte."

The slim young latin woman looked up. "Oh!" She smiled. "Good morning, Kerry." She said. "How was your weekend?"

"Great." Kerry said, pausing when she heard her cell phone ring. "Hold that thought." She unclipped the phone from her waistband and opened it, gazing at the caller id before she half shrugged and pressed the answer button. "Hello?"

"Hello." A woman's voice responded. "May I speak with Kerrison Stuart?"

Uh oh. Kerry winced in pure reflex. "Speaking." She reluctantly admitted, glancing at Mayte. She held her coffee cup out to her and mimed filling it.

"Of course." Mayte gave the impression of leaping to her feet with gentile grace, and took the cup from her. "No problem!"

"Yes, my name is Allison Barker." The woman said. "I doubt you remember me."

Five seconds. Kerry closed her eyes and put her early training to use. "Actually I do." She managed to produce after a count of four. "You were the class president the year I graduated high school."

"Yes, yes I was." The woman sounded pleased. "I'm so glad you remember. This makes things a lot easier."

For you. Kerry sighed and took a seat on the edge of Mayte's desk, not wanting to take this buddingly unwanted phone call back into her office. "What can I do for you?" She glanced up as footsteps passed her, smiling in response as two accounting clerks waved hello at her.

"I bumped into your sister at church today."

Kerry tipped her head back and gazed at the ceiling, hard pressed to come up with a scarier statement than what she'd just heard. "Really?"

"Yes. She told me you were going to be in town next week, and you know, we're having our school reunion."

Kerry was silent.

"Hello?"

"Sorry." Kerry cleared her throat. "I was trying to remember what the penalty was for fratricide in Michigan."

"Excuse me?"

"Nevermind. Yes, that's true. I will be in town next week, but I'll be very busy helping Angie move. I don't really have time to attend the reunion." Kerry looked up as Mayte returned, holding out a steaming cup to her. "Thanks."

"Well, yes, she told me that." Allison responded, not at all put off. "And I'm sure you'll be very busy, but you see, I've been asked to contact you and see if you could make just some time to stop by during the banquet and give the keynote speech."

Kerry had just taken a sip of her café con leche and she stopped, holding it in her mouth as she stared at her cell phone as though it had grown fingers and was waving at her.

"Kerry?" Mayte saw the expression on her face. "Are you all right?"

The blond woman swallowed. "Excuse me?" She said into the phone. "You want me to what?"

"I know this seems odd." Allison apologized. "And I do understand, really... but the senior class is participating in the reunion and they asked for you."

Kerry put her coffee cup down and shifted her phone from her right to her left hand. "Okay." She said. "Are you saying the senior class of my all Christian girls high school wants me to speak to them?"

"Well.. yes. I mean, after all, you're a very successful businesswoman." Allison said.

"Have you read the newspapers in the last few years/" Kerry covered her eyes. "Listen, Ms. Barker, I knew about the reunion. I decided not to attend it. Please respect that."

Mayte's eyes widened.

The voice on the other end of the phone sighed. "Ms. Stuart, believe me, I do understand what you're saying, and yes, I know very well what's been going on around your family the last few years. But you know.."

Kerry mouthed a curse, making Mayte's eyes widen even further.

"I think you have a modern, relevant message, and the girls here, they want to hear what you have to say." Allison went on. "We didn't solicit this, and believe me when I tell you I had my reservations before I decided to call you, but I thought it was important."

Kerry took a breath to answer, then she paused.

As though sensing an opening. "You don't have to be at the whole reunion. I know that would probably be uncomfortable for you."

"For me, or for the rest of you?" Kerry's mouth twitched into a faint, wry smile.

It was Allison's turn to be silent for a moment. "Well." She said. "We're not all that uptight."

Kerry looked over at Mayte, who had her mouth covered by one hand and was watching her in fascination. "So, the senior class wants to hear what I have to say, huh?"

"That's what they said."

What would it take, twenty minutes? She could probably stop by there between packing and getting some dinner with Angie and after all, she had talked Dar into going to hers, now hadn't she? Hypocrisy stunted your growth sometimes. "All right." She said.

"All right?"

"I'll stop by and give a piece of my mind." Kerry said. "But let me just warn you, Ms. Barker – I take a lot less bullshit now than I used to."

A sigh of what might have been either relief or resignation sounded on the phone. "Fair deal, Ms. Stuart. I'll tell the committee." Allison said. "So we'll see you the night of the 10th. The get together starts at 8, we'll have dinner, then the speakers."

"Okay." Kerry gave in, with a bemused shrug. "See you then. Bye." She waited for the click on the other end, then she closed her phone and leaned over Mayte's desk to punch her phone pad.

A ring, then Dar's voice growled through the speaker. "Yes, Mayte?"

"Sorry, honey, it's just me."

Dar chuckled softly.

"Do me a favor?" Kerry tapped her cell phone against her jaw.

"Sure."

"Turn around and look out the window and tell me if it's snowing."

There was a moment of dead silence on the phone, then the squeak of Dar's chair sounded clearly. Kerry waited patiently, listening to soft scuffles and sounds of the air conditioning cycling on and off. "The window behind you, hon."

"Is it SNOWING?"

The answer came right in her ear, accompanied by the sudden warmth of Dar's body against her shoulder, making her jump nearly off the desk. "Yeek." Kerry cut off the intercom. "Well, after what I just got asked, it damn well should be." She picked up her coffee. "C'mon. You won't believe it."

Dar followed her into her office, pushing her sleeves up after exchanging puzzled looks with Mayte. "I can't wait to hear this."

Mayte watched the door close, and went back to her work, muffling a smile.

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"Ugh." Kerry threw the mail down on the dining room table as she passed it, scrubbing her fingers through her hair as she headed for the back door to let Chino out. "Yes, honey. I'm coming." She told

her excited pet, who was whirling around in circles near the door. "Cheebles, you're going to smack your head against the wall one of these days."

She unlocked the door and watched the dog ramble down the steps into the small outdoor garden, then she headed back across the living room and trotted up the stairs to her bedroom.

As she entered, she glanced at the big doors leading out to the balcony, where the early evening light was still drenching the stucco surface. "I like summers." She announced, as she stripped out of her business suit, hanging the skirt and blazer neatly on hangers inside her closet. "You still get home as late, but you feel like you've got some day left."

Kerry changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top, and retreated back down the stairs just as Chino came bouncing in from outside. "Hey Cheebles." She knelt and gave the Labrador a hug. "Are you glad to see me?"

Naturally, the dog was. Chino's tail wagged furiously as she licked Kerry's face, only stopping when the blond woman stood up and made her way over to the cabinet that held the all important dog food supply.

"Gruff!" Chino sat down next to her bowl, tail sweeping the floor.

Kerry turned and put a hand on her hip. "Excuse me, madame?"

Chino's tongue lolled out happily at her.

"Dar taught you that look, didn't she?" Kerry had to smile, as the dog looked back at her with those utterly unquestioning brown eyes, as steadfast and honest in fact as her beloved partner's were. "Little punklet." She opened up the dog food and filled Chino's bowl with both wet and dry, setting it down and watching her wolf it down. "Glad I don't eat that fast."

"Gruff?" Chino looked up at her, then went back to eating.

"I'd bite my fingers off." Kerry chuckled. She watched Chino for a minute, then she leaned back against the counter and considered the question of her own dinner. Or more precisely, hers and Dar's, since Dar was stuck on a late conference call and wouldn't be home for at least an hour.

Dar would be completely happy if she offered her a bowl of cereal and some ice cream, and Kerry knew it. She also knew she probably would be happy with the same thing, and on occasion that's what they ended up with when they came home very late together.

If she wanted to order something from the club for them, that would be okay too. Kerry peeked inside the refrigerator, pondered her choices, then she removed a pre made pizza crust from the fridge and pulled the flat pan it went on from the oven.

She removed the crust from its wrapper, then she went back to the fridge and removed a small jar of marinara sauce, a small jar of olives, some jalapeno peppers, a package of pepperoni, several slices of ham, a bag of mozzarella cheese, and a can of peaches, taking them back over and setting them on the counter.

Whistling softly, she assembled the pizza, putting down a layer of the sauce, then a handful of cheese, then scattering the rest of the items indiscriminately over the surface before she covered it all over with more cheese.

Only then, did she carefully place peach halves on one half of the pie, her face twitching a little.

Once she was done, she popped it in the oven and dusted her hands off, returning her fixings to the fridge and removing a bottle of ice tea from it. She wandered out onto the porch with the tea, settling on the two person swing as Chino joined her. "You finished already, Cheebles?"

Chino licked her lips, and sat down.

"I guess so." Kerry popped open her tea and sipped it, as she gazed out across the Atlantic ocean. Pushed aside all day, the memory of her conversation and unexpected request now surfaced, and she nibbled her lip, thinking about what on earth she was going to say to a bunch of...

Kids? Like she'd been?

Kerry frowned. The kid she'd been, and the girls she'd gone to school with probably would not have stepped outside the carefully constructed conservative box they'd grown up with to request who she'd become speak at their event.

Just would not have happened. Maybe they'd have talked about it, though she doubted even that much, but to demand it?

So what in the hell was she supposed to say to them? And if they were that confident already, why even ask her to give a speech? Kerry sighed. "Maybe they are interested because I'm a successful businesswoman." She reasoned. "I mean, I am."

That idea seemed a lot more appealing than thinking the girls wanted her just for the scandal it would cause the school. Kerry appreciated a good scandal, and she had to admit she was a little bit amused at the request, but she decided she'd come up with a respectable presentation and take the opportunity to visit her hometown without causing any headlines.

She was still going to kick Angie's ass though. Kerry relaxed against the back of the swing chair, a little ambivalent about the prospect of her sister's moving. On the one hand, she was glad Angie was getting out of the big house she'd lived in with her ex husband, but disappointed she was moving in with Kerry and Angie's mother.

She'd half dreaded Angie's idea of moving down to Miami, for very selfish reasons. But she understood that by moving back with mom, the chances of Angie's son's father joining her were pretty much done. Brian's reluctance had disappointed her profoundly and she truthfully wasn't looking forward to meeting up with him during the move.

She knew she wasn't going to be kind. Kerry managed a wry smile. Brian probably knew that too. But you never knew about people, and maybe he'd end up surprising her.

Maybe she'd end up surprising him with a punch to the jaw. You just never knew. Kerry glanced down as her cell phone buzzed. She put the cap on her tea and answered it, smiling when she saw the name on the caller ID. "Hello, oh love of my life."

"Boy I'd love to have patched you into that god damned conference call." Dar's voice emerged from the speaker. "That sure would have livened it up."

"Anytime." Kerry could hear the sound of the ferry in the background. "You get out early?"

"Yeah." Dar replied. "I told them I had to go get fitted for cleats. That pretty much stopped the conversation and everyone said they had to leave."

Kerry started laughing in reflex. "Oh noo...."

"Hehehe." Her partner chortled along with her. "I can't wait to send Maria around the building tomorrow to see what rumors **that** stirred up."

"How about if I use my red pencil to put little dots across my forehead." Kerry suggested. "Like mini train tracks. I can pretend not to be wondering why everyone's looking at me."

"Everyone looks at you anyway." Dar said. "All right, let me get off the phone so I can drive. Be home in a minute."

"Cool. I made pizza."

"Remember the peaches?" Dar asked, in a hopeful tone.

Kerry grimaced. "Yes." She cleared her throat. "Honey, couldn't you be hooked on something more normal, like anchovies?"

"Yuk."

"Okay." Kerry sighed. "Let me go see how it's doing. See you in a few."

"Bye."

Dar clicked off. Kerry spent a moment more watching the water, before she got up and went back inside, trading the muggy warmth of the patio for the brisk chill of the air conditioning as she slid the door shut behind Chino and walked into the kitchen.

She could smell the pizza. She put a glove on her hand and opened the stove, peeking at her creation and judging the bubble factor of the cheese. Satisfied, she removed the pan and set it down on the stone cutting board, dusting the top with a bit of parmesan. "There."

"Gruff." Chino was sitting near her bowl, watching Kerry expectantly.

"Oh no. You don't even think about thinking you're getting pizza for dinner, madame." Kerry pointed the can of cheese at her. "Go get mommy Dar."

Chino's head swiveled towards the front door immediately, and they both heard the sound of Dar's car door closing. "G'wan, go get her."

The Labrador raced for the front of the living room just as Dar entered, plowing excitedly into her knees and knocking her backwards. "Hey!" The dark haired woman grabbed for the door frame. "Watch it, you furball!"

"Aww.. she loves you." Kerry watched from the doorway, leaning against one side of it as her partner got the door closed and tossed her briefcase on the loveseat, and her linen jacket on top of it. She had a white shirt on, with its sleeves rolled up partway to expose her tanned forearms, and the ends of it were already untucked from her skirt in an appealingly rakish picture. "So do I."

Dar looked up from petting Chino, and smiled. "I have a surprise for you."

Kerry's brows lifted a little, seeing the warmth and the mischief in Dar's eyes. "Oh oh." She pushed off from the doorway and went over to where Dar was, bumping against her and then wrapping her arms around her and giving her a hug. "That's all the surprise I ever need."

"Aww." Dar echoed Kerry's earlier speech. "But don't you want to see the Swiss Alps?"

Kerry peered up at her, a look of surprised delight on her face. "Huh? Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack." Dar grinned. "I figured after we lock up this deal with the old man, we take a week and go see how the other half lives."

"What other half?" Kerry's mind tumbled into overdrive, the possibilities crowding onto themselves like pushy tourists.

"The half that takes vacations." Dar leaned over and kissed her. "You in?"

"Hell yes." Kerry bounced up and down. "Can you fast forward us a couple weeks, please? It's going to seem like a year getting through Angie's moving and my damn high school reunion now."

Dar bounced a few times with her, making Chino bark in surprise. "Now where's my peach pizza?"

"C'mon." Kerry slipped an arm around her. "Let's get you undressed, before I have to suffer watching you eat that."

"That's what you used to say about grits."

"Not the same thing."

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"Thar she blows." Dar pulled her Lexus into the weed studded parking lot that ringed the small ballpark. "Nothing like a scroungy dirt pit on a muggy evening here in the thunderstorm and lightning capital of the world."

As if to punctuate her speech, a low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

"How did you do that?" Kerry asked, leaning back in the passenger seat and enjoying the last few minutes of air conditioning before she had to get out and face the humidity.

"Practice."

Kerry eased herself upright, studying the half filled parking lot where she spotted quite a number of familiar faces. "Hm. A lot of people are here."

Dar pulled into an empty spot. She was dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank top, and she paused a moment to pull her dark hair back into a pony tail and fasten it before she turned the car off. "Nice crowd." She agreed. "Wish we'd stopped for dinner first."

Kerry got up and half turned, reaching into the back seat. "I've got a granola bar here."

Dar eyed her. "I'll wait, thanks" She demurred. "You said this wasn't going to be a long session."

"That's what Mari said." Kerry straightened back up, holding her bar in one hand. "Share?" She ripped the plastic off the snack and broke it in half, handing one part over to her reluctant companion. "It's the peanut butter one you like, Dar. C'mon."

Dar's brows lifted, and she accepted the offering, sniffing it. "Mm. Okay." She bit into the bar. "Ready?" She indicated the gathering crowd, some of whom were looking curiously at the Lexus. "Before we become the entertainment?"

"Aren't we always?" Kerry stuck her granola bar in her mouth and opened the door, hopping out and taking a breath of the hot air. "Whoo boy." She tugged her sleeveless muscle shirt away from her body and spared a grateful thank you to Dar's suggestion they change into shorts before coming out to the park.

Dar joined her, sticking the door opener in her front pocket and letting the key hang down outside it. She munched her half of their snack as they walked towards the group of people. "You up for a swim after this?"

Kerry made a small groan of agreement. "Hi Mari." She greeted the HR VP, who had just arrived in a neatly pressed pair of walking shorts and a crisp, white short sleeved shirt. "Looks like you had a great turnout."

"Sure does." Mari agreed. "However, it was forcefully brought home to me that if you call a meeting at dinner time you're obligated to provide dinner." She gazed pointedly at Kerry's granola bar. "I don't suppose you brought enough to share, did you?"

Caught in mid chew, Kerry shook her head slightly. She swallowed hastily. "Sorry."

"Hmph." Mari sighed.

"Hey, she shared with me." Dar licked the last crumb off her fingertips. "Tell everyone to go out and find a pizzeria after this. No one's gonna starve."

Kerry gave her a wry look, receiving an innocent bat of Dar's dark lashes in return. She chuckled and shook her head, as she followed Dar over to the big group, feeling the sweat start to gather already on her skin.

"Hey Kerry!" Mark waved at her as they approached. "Hey big D."

"Hey." Kerry glanced around, seeing quite a number of people from their own department mixed with others from the office. "Hey guys." She wagged her fingers at two of the junior accountants. "So here we are."

"Hello, Kerry." Mayte appeared. "I am glad you were able to come here. This should be fun. No?" She had her hair pulled back into a neat tail like Dar's and she was smiling. "I have never played baseball."

"Me either... but I think it'll be a blast." Her boss went over to the rows of wooden, weathered, bench seating and carefully eased down on one of the less splintered planks.

"Really? You never did?" Mayte sounded surprised. "Mama thought surely you were a superstar at the least!" She took a seat next to Kerry.

"Really." Kerry rubbed her temple, trying to stifle the blush she could feel coming on, not being helped at all by her snickering partner. "Your mama is way too nice. Sometimes." She added. "Actually, Dar was and is the superstar athlete in the family."

Mayte peeked past her to smile at Dar, who shrugged modestly. "I've never played softball either." The dark haired woman clarified. "But I've done other things."

"Did you know Dar still holds her high school's record in the broad jump?" Kerry asked, split seconds before her mind realized what she'd just said and she nearly fell off the bench when Mayte's eyes widened almost into the size of golf balls. "Not.. ah.. it's a track and field event."

Dar put her head down on her folded arms resting on the plank and started laughing.

"Jesu." Mayte covered her eyes. "I was thinking schools have changed so much it is amazing."

Kerry sighed. "Sorry about that. If it's any consolation, I went to an all girl Christian high school, and we didn't have.. that.. event either." She paused. "That I know of."

The rest of the crowd joined her and settled on the ominously creaking structure. Dar eyed it, then decided to remain standing next to Kerry, just leaning an elbow on one of the planks.

"Thank you all for showing up on time." Mari took up her familiar role standing on the dusty ground in front of the stadium seats. "I really appreciate it. This won't take too much time, I just wanted to go over what the schedule is going to be, and what's expected of us."

"And give out hats." Dar supplied, after she stopped speaking.

"Do you have a fixation on those hats?" Mari asked, giving her an exasperated look. "I'll have cows horns put on them in a minute."

The crowd chuckled, a lot of heads turning to look at Dar's distinctive profile.

"Moo." Dar promptly responded. "I like cows. They produce my two favorite foods, cheeseburgers and milk."

Mari cleared her throat conspicuously. "Ahem." She went back to her clipboard. "As I was saying. Thank you for being here on time, I really appreciate it. One of the first things I want to tell you is that we're all here to have fun, okay? This isn't major league baseball."

The crowd chuckled a little.

"Kerry Stuart has volunteered to be our captain." Mari smiled, looking over at Kerry as applause broke out. "So I'm sure we'll end up having a great time, and doing good things for a good cause."

"Mariana, how many other teams are in this league?" One of the accountants spoke up.

"About twenty." The HR VP was glad to turn her attention from her hecklers. "The games are played in a round robin tournament style, and where the charity comes in is that the company will contribute a certain amount to the charity fund for every employee who participates."

"So it doesn't matter if we win or not?" The man said, with a frown.

A little buzz went up at that.

"Well." Mariana lifted her hands a little. "Its about the charity, really...."

"It matters to us if we do." Dar spoke up again from her corner. "But the charity gets the bucks no matter what, is that how it is, Mari?"

"Exactly." Mari nodded. "There are many things to strive for in the contest, there are trophies and awards and so on, and also several things donated by the various corporations that will be given to those who complete the tournament."

"What did we give?" Kerry whispered. "Please don't tell me a lifetime supply of Cat 5e cabling"

"Cool!" Mark spoke up. "So we can get some swag, huh?"

"Nerd gift certificate I think." Dar whispered back. "For one of the big online places." She added. "Enough for a nice system."

"Hm." Kerry grunted approvingly. "Nice."

"So." Mari got everyone's attention back. "Here's the rules. Games will be on Friday nights, here at the park. All the other companies are more or less in the area around Miami, so there is no home, and no away or anything like that. Each team has to have enough players to play the game, or they forfeit."

"That means everyone shows up or she posts it on the company bulletin board on Monday." Dar announced. "If you're gonna do this, do it, or stay the hell home."

Everyone swiveled to look at their CIO, who raised one eyebrow and gave them all a stern glare. Silence fell briefly, until Mark cleared his throat.

"Yes, boss." He said, in a mild tone.

"Ahem!" Mari put her hands on her hips. "Do you want to run this?"

"Do you want me to run this?" Dar returned the volley neatly. "Bet the other teams end up regretting it like everyone else here who just realized they're going to be sharing space with me and a baseball bat."

After a second's pause, everyone laughed, even Dar. Kerry reached over and tweaked her nose, giving her a look of loving exasperation.

"Hats? Anyone want hats?" Mari chuckled herself. "How about pizza?"

That got everyone's attention, and all heads turned as though the crowd were a collection of spaniels at dinnertime.

"I thought that might work." The HR VP lifted her hands. "Okay, everyone to Santorini's after this, on me. But as for the team - for every game you show up for your name gets entered into the drawings for the donated prizes." She said. "So, the more games you attend, the better your chance to win some pretty nice stuff."

"Like what?" Someone asked.

"Ah, altruism." Dar chuckled softly under her breath.

"At least it's not some thousand buck a plate dinner just so you can put your mug in front of some politician." Kerry reminded her. "It's a good incentive."

"Mm."

"Well, we have a three night stay in Cozumel..." Mari was drowned out by oohs and aaahs. "A cruise to Bermuda, shopping spree at Macy's... some crazy tech company threw in a certificate for a new computer..."

"Did we ever decide if we really wanted to do a cruise?" Kerry asked. "Or did we finally decide we wanted to sail on one of those things about as much as we wanted a root canal?"

Dar glanced at the cloudy sky, and breathed in a lungful of air deeply tinged with ions. "We dropped the question." She said. "Hey Mari."

"And that.. what?" Mari put her hands on her hips and gave Dar a look.

Dar pointed up at the sky, then held her hand out as she felt the first droplets of rain, bringing a cool down that was worth the dampness. "Take it up at the pizza shack?" She suggested, as the rest of the crowd started to scramble down from the benches.

"Sure." Mari raced by her, shielding her head with her clipboard, as the rain started to come down in earnest. "You can grab the damn hats!" She pointed behind her. 'Ahhhhh!!!!'

Kerry hopped off her bench and started for the bag with Dar right at her heels. "How do we get ourselves into stuff like this?" She yelled over the thunder. "Jesus! Dar we're going to be soaked!"

"We volunteer." Dar grabbed the bag and got it and it's contents over their head as they ran back towards the parking lot looking like a moving lily pad with the droops. "Bet Mari didn't figure on this being a wet tshirt contest."

"Oh. Don't you even go there."

**

Kerry rested her head on her fist, tapping her pen on the pad of paper on her desk. She wrote a few words, then she paused, and studied them, a frown on her face. "What in the hell am I supposed to talk about?"

She heard a soft ding, and turned to see a new mail alert on her pc. She clicked it, and brought up her personal mail folder to find a note from Angie. "Ah." She clicked on it.

Hi sis.

Please don't hate me too much. I realized after I talked to that woman that I probably should have asked you first. It just sounded pretty innocuous, you know? She kind of tricked me, she started to talk about knowing you and the reunion and all that and before I knew it I spilled the beans. Sorry about that - but hey, how bad could a little speech be? Remember your senior event?

Kerry grimaced. "Oh yes. I sure do."

Anyway, I'll take you to that brewpub you liked afterward to make it up to you, okay?

"Eeeehhhh.... Okay."

Mom said she wants to have dinner with us. That I didn't commit to. I told her we'd be really busy moving stuff, and she got pissed off because she thinks I should have just hired the movers to pack up everything. Can you believe that?

Looking forward to seeing you -

Angie

Kerry scratched the side of her nose with her pen. Her last meeting with her mother hadn't been the most cordial, and though she'd spoken to her since, she didn't really want to spend that much time in the house. She hit reply, and started typing.

Hey Ang.. eh, I got over being pissed. It is what it is, and Dar thinks it might be funny for me to do a speech there so whatever.

I can do dinner with mom, but let's go out. I don't want to sit at that table if I don't have to. I'm not looking for lectures and if she really pisses me off it's not going to be fun for any of us. If we're out in a restaurant, she'll probably behave.

See you on Saturday.

K.

Kerry turned back to her pad, but after a few more minutes of staring at it, she gave up and dropped the pen on it, getting up and stretching before she left her office and trotted off down the steps to the lower level.

She crossed the tile floor and entered the bedroom she and her partner shared, it's soothing blue walls already making her feel more relaxed. "Dar?"

"Uh?" Dar was stretched out on their waterbed.

"Do we actually know how to play baseball?" Kerry trudged over, and dropped onto the waterbed, making Dar's body rock back and forth. "Boy that hottub felt good." She added. "But it gave me time to think about what we've gotten ourselves into here."

"Well." Dar folded her hands over her stomach. "It cant be that hard, Kerry. Someone throws a ball at you, and you hit it with a bat and then you run like hell."

"True." Kerry squirmed over and put her head on Dar's stomach, extending her body at right angles to her. "But tennis looks pretty easy too, and I really suck at it." She paused. "And don't you tell me I don't just to be nice."

Dar chuckled softly. "I wasn't going to. You really do suck at tennis." She told her partner. "But then again, so do I. So what does that say about tennis?" She laid her arm over Kerry's midriff. "I'm sure we can handle it."

"We should practice."

"Now?"

Kerry rolled onto her side, looking up at Dar. "You're so silly sometimes." She said. "I meant, before we go and make fools of ourselves out there. I want to know at least what I'm supposed to be doing." She explained. "We can practice here, can't we?"

"We can practice over near the golf course, sure." Dar agreed. "Tomorrow we can go get some gloves and balls and whatever, and work it out." She said. "Did you decide what position you want to play on defense?"

Kerry's green eyes narrowed. "If you even start to suggest shortstop I'm going to bite you."

Dar's lips twitched. "Actually, I think I'm better for that." She admitted. "Long arms, fast reflexes." She studied Kerry for a moment. "I bet you'd be a good pitcher."

Her partner snickered. "You never saw me throw anything other than a Frisbee." She said. "How about I try outfield first?" She suggested. "I think I can manage to catch the ball out there."

"We'll see." Dar ran her fingers through Kerry's hair. "Looks like a decent bunch showed up for it - if they keep showing up, this should turn out all right."

"Yep." Kerry exhaled, closing her eyes. "I'm tired."

"Long day."

"Long day, and having to chase you all over the hot tub at the end of it." Kerry opened one eye and winked at her. "One of these days a night vision camera tape of us is going to end up in the hands of Panic 7 and boy, are we going to have our fifteen minutes of fame."

"Hmm.... That'll make for an interesting intro to the next board meeting." Dar mused. "I think at this point, they look forward to stuff like that."

Kerry chuckled, and closed her eye again, exhaling in contentment. "We have to pack." She said. "I'm trying to figure out what I should wear for the speech."

"Clothes?"

Kerry bounced her head against Dar's stomach twice. "Punk." She moaned. "C'mon, Dar. I thought about just wearing a suit."

Dar yawned.

"Business suit, not bathing suit." Kerry clarified. "I figure if they really want to hear from some business chick I can do that."

"You really think they want to hear from some business chick?" Dar asked, lacing her fingers and putting her hands behind her head. "I think they're looking for some crazy rebel who used to be who

they are.” She studied the ceiling, as she felt Kerry’s hand come up to rest on her shoulder, thumb rubbing against the bone at the front of it. “Rebellion sort of thing.”

Kerry had to admit she suspected the same thing. She remembered, vaguely, being that senior in high school and the last thing she’d have wanted to hear was some boring old lady in a suit talking about career paths. “I still don’t know what the hell I’m going to say to them.”

“Why not ask them.” Dar suggested. “Get up there and say. ‘okay, you asked for me. I’m here. What the hell do you want?’”

Kerry laughed, her breath warming the skin under Dar’s shirt. “Sweetie, that works for you. Not for me.” She sighed. “Oh well. I’ll think of something.”

“Wear something sophisticated and sexy.” Dar spoke up after a moment’s quiet. “And if you can’t think of anything to tell them, just open it up for questions. They know more about you than you do about them.”

Sometimes, Kerry reflected, Dar had a knack for bringing home to her in sudden, vivid ways the reason she’d been so successful in life. Aside from her being smart, she had a lot of what Kerry’s aunt would have called ‘good horse sense’. “I love you.” She replied simply, turning her head to kiss Dar’s chest through her shirt. “Everyone else has Google. I have Dar.”

“I love you too.” Dar smiled. Then she unfolded her hands from behind her and half sat up, resting on her elbows. She waited for Kerry to lift her head up, then she rolled over and stretched out lengthwise on the bed as her partner squirmed around to join her. “I’m sorry I’m going to miss that speech, by the way.”

Kerry pulled the covers up over them and sighed as Dar shut the bedside light and twilight shadows settled over them. It wasn’t quite dark in the room – the blinds let in moonlight and the outside lighting – but it was comfortable and familiar and she’d come to be so used to falling asleep here she’d forgotten really anything before.

She eased over and snuggled up next to Dar. “Are you going to miss it? I’m probably going to end up sounding either boring or crazy.”

“You think I’d want to miss that?” Her partner inquired. “I love watching you give speeches. I duck into the back of the presentation room when you do at the office.”

Kerry blinked, invisible in the darkness. “You do?”

“Sure.”

“How come you never told me that?”

Dar put her arms around Kerry and half turned onto her side. “Didn’t want to make you nervous.” She said. “The setup staff started leaving me chocolate cupcakes back there.”

Kerry started laughing silently.

“Maybe I can have a little refrigerator installed with milk chugs. You think?”

“I’ll order one tomorrow.” Kerry assured her. “Now go to bed, cupcake. We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

**

Kerry sat down on the carved wooden bench and studied her new toys, as she waited for Dar to come out of the condo and join her. On the bench next to her was a bucket with six balls in it, and her lap was a leather glove, it’s new hide smell making her nose twitch as she examined it.

A baseball glove. She fitted her left hand into it, pausing when the edge of the glove caught on her ring. “Ah.” She put the glove down and removed the ring, unlatching the chain she had around her neck and stringing the ring on it. “There. “

She put the glove on again and flexed her hand, feeling the strange constriction as she tensed her fingers and made the leather move. It felt stiff and awkward, and she reasoned that she'd have to work it a little to get it more flexible.

At least, that's what Dar had said.

Experimentally, she picked up one of the balls in the bucket and dropped it into the glove, examining how the leather fit around the object as she closed her hand around it. She held her hand up and turned it upside down, agreeably surprised when the ball stayed in the glove and didn't fall out.

She opened her fingers and the ball emerged, dropping to land in her other hand. She reversed the position of her arms and dropped the ball into the glove again. "Hm."

The far off sound of a door closing made Kerry look up, and across the short grass sward to where the condos were nestled. She spotted Dar trotting down the stairs immediately, and leaned back against the bench to watch her partner cross the road and head towards her.

She was carrying her own glove, and a bat resting on her shoulder, and an expression that could best be described as 'here we go again.'. Kerry stood up as she approached and held her hand up in it's glove, flexing the fingers like a leather crab. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar greeted her. "Got it on, huh?" She tucked her own glove under her arm and examined Kerry's, tugging the back of it to make sure her fingers were all the way in. "Fits all right." She decided. "How's it feel?"

"It feels like I have a honking chunk of leather on my hand." Kerry responded, with a cheeky grin. "How's yours?"

"Mm." Dar put the glove on. It was a bit larger than Kerry's, and a deep russet color. "Hm."

Kerry glanced at her partner's throat in reflex, seeing the slight bulge under the fabric of her shirt that meant Dar had, as usual, thought ahead to remove her ring. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Dar turned her hand around. "It just feels weird." She left the bat near the bench and picked up a ball. "Want to start with some catch?"

"Sure." Kerry walked with her onto the grass and they faced each other. Dar tossed the ball at her without much preamble, and instinctively Kerry put up her free hand, the one with out the glove on it, and caught it. "Yow!" She dropped the ball and shook her hand out. "That stung!"

Dar put her hands on her hips, best as she could with the glove on. "Ker." She said. "You're supposed to use this." She held up her gloved hand.

"I know that." Kerry picked the ball up and examined it. Then she faced Dar, and tossed it back to her, unsurprised when her partner caught it in her glove. "You just surprised me."

"Okay." Dar put the ball in her free hand. "Ready?"

"Ready." Kerry watched her partner toss the ball back, and she concentrated on grabbing it with her glove, finding the thing awkward and clumsy but managing to clamp it around the round target anyway. "Ugh."

"What's wrong?"

"This is hard." Kerry frowned at the glove. "Dar, a billion children do this every year, why does it seem so weird to me?"

Dar walked over to her. "Hon, you've only done it once." She said, in a mild tone. "Give it a few minutes." She pulled her own glove off and adjusted Kerry's again. "It's stiff."

"Yeah."

"Stiffer than mine." Dar removed the glove and handed over hers. "Trade."

"I think that one's too small for you." Kerry protested, but she fitted the new glove on her hand and found it to be a lot more comfortable. "Oh." She murmured in surprise. "That feels nice."

"Okay, let's try that now." Dar retreated, putting on Kerry's glove before she turned around and held the ball up. "Ready?"

"Ready." Kerry held her hand up, and when the ball came at her, she reached out and grabbed it, feeling the round surface hit the palm of the glove in a very satisfying way. "Lots better!" She yelled back, removing the ball and tossing it to Dar.

The new glove just seemed to fit her hand better, and it was easier to close her fingers. It felt like a more natural extension of her arm and not quite so much of a club hanging off the end of it.

Weird. Kerry caught the next throw, already getting use to the feel of the ball hitting the glove. She tossed the ball back, pitching it overhand instead of the underhand they'd been using. "Catch that, Dixiecup!"

Dar stretched out one arm and snagged it, just barely. "Hey!"

Kerry grinned.

"Told you you'd make a pitcher." Dar tossed it back to her, with a grin of her own. "Ker, this is going to be a lot of fun." She tossed the ball back at her partner, watching it get caught with a touch of nascent confidence. "Atta girl."

Kerry felt better about the whole thing, too. The last thing she'd really wanted to do was make a fool of herself in front of half the office, so it was a little reassuring that she could at least handle the basics of baseball.

So far, anyway. She dropped the ball into her hand and tensed her fingers around it, then she faced Dar and whipped it back at her, aiming as close as she could to her partner's midsection.

Dar caught it, and returned it, and they spent the next half hour playing catch with each other as the sun slowly dipped behind the trees and brought a bit of relief to the warm, muggy air.

Then they took a break, and met back at the bench. Kerry sat down and picked up the water bottle she'd brought with her, taking swig from it as Dar traded her glove for the bat. "That's the hard part, isn't it?"

Dar put her hands around the bat and took a step back, away from the bench before she extended her arms and took a few tentative swings.

Kerry leaned back and watched. "I thought you said you never played softball."

"I didn't." Dar swung a few more times. "Not on team, but we played catch and lot sandball on the base when I was growing up and I played a little with Dad."

Duh. Kerry smiled wryly. Of course she did. "I can't imagine for a second my father playing a sport." She mused. "Well, maybe golf."

Dar's face wrinkled up into a scowl.

"Yeah, me either." Kerry admitted. "Golf was acceptable for girls, in a 'let's ride in the cart and sip ice tea while gossiping' sort of way. Or Tennis."

"I played football with the guys."

Kerry tipped her head back and gazed fondly at Dar. "Of course you did, honey." She said. "So I guess you know how to use that thing?" She set her water bottle down and picked up a ball, walking out into the grass and turning to face her partner. "Ready?"

Dar assumed a very credible batters position, setting her feet at shoulder width and cocking the bat. "G'wan, toss."

Amiably, Kerry complied, throwing the ball at her partner. A second and a soft crack later, a white missile was coming right at her face and she only barely evaded it by diving for the grass with a startled yelp. "Dar!!!"

"Whoops." Dar let the bat rest on her shoulder. "Sorry about that."

"Jesus!" Kerry got to her hands and knees, then stood up, brushing the grass off her. "What in the hell was that?"

Dar actually looked mildly abashed. "Um..." She shrugged her shoulders. "A hit?" She walked over to where Kerry was. "Didn't mean to buzz you with it." She handed Kerry the bat and trotted over to where the ball had ended up, on the other side of the green space.

Kerry recovered her breath and removed her glove, tossing it onto the bench and addressing her attention to the wooden pole she now held in her hands.

It felt weird. She wrapped her fingers around the handle and swung it. "Yow." She only just kept from hitting herself in the knee. It was top heavy and awkward, and heavier than she'd expected. She looked up as Dar came back with the ball. "Show me how you did that."

Her partner came around behind her and pressed up against her back, wrapping her arms around Kerry and taking hold of the bat. "Okay, Now."

She paused, to reposition her hands, then became suddenly aware of Kerry's warm body, pressed against hers. "Um... now." She repeated, a bit bemused.

Kerry leaned against her, tipping her head back and batting her eyelashes. "Now what?" She asked. "Did you say something?"

It was an interestingly sensual moment, unexpected and public and Dar had to force herself not to do what had become natural for both of them. Instead, she nibbled a bit of Kerry's hair and bumped her with her nose. "Do you want to learn this or.."

"Or?" The green eyes took on a warm twinkle.

"Or do you want to get another homeowner complaint letter?" Dar reminded her. "There's some guys behind us driving a golf cart. Want to cause an accident?"

Kerry sighed melodramatically. "Oh, all right." She turned back around and focused on the bat again. "Now where were we?" She felt Dar move her hands back. "Oh."

"Okay. Stand like this." Dar nudged Kerry's feet apart a little. "Hold your arms like this." She shifted her grip and the bat lifted a bit. "Now, the thing is, you can't look at the bat."

"No." Kerry agreed. "I have to look out for the ball, or I'll be taking the helmets off anyone in the vicinity." She let Dar swing her arms through a stroke, twisting her body around to the right as she imagined connecting with the ball. "Right."

Dar released her, and picked up the ball, then she walked twenty feet or so away and turned. "Ready? Watch the ball."

"Watching." Kerry focused on the ball intently, watching it as it left Dar's hand and headed her way. She swung at it, but it didn't connect and the force of her swing turned her all the way around and made her sit down abruptly on her butt. "Ow!"

She looked quickly up at her partner. Dar's face had that stony expression she often used in important board meetings when she didn't want everyone in the room to really know what she was thinking. Kerry accepted that as the compliment it was, and got to her feet. "Thanks for not cracking up."

The dark haired woman's lips twitched.

Kerry picked up another ball from the bucket and tossed it to her. "C'mon. It's getting dark." She took up her position again, gripping the bat tightly.

Dar tossed the ball at her, and she swung at it again, this time catching a small piece of the ball and sending it ricocheting off the bench, nearly beaming herself in the kneecap with it. "Yow!"

"Ker?"

"Yes?" Kerry peered over at her, a touch frustrated. "Dar, this is ridiculous. Little kids do this."

"Stop trying so damn hard." Her partner told her. "Just relax."

Kerry put the bat end on the ground and wrapped her hands around the top of it, taking a deep breath and letting it out. Twilight was coming on in earnest, and she had an abrupt desire to trade the muggy, gnat filled air for the cool of the condo, leaving this odd and frustrating activity behind.

Immediately, then, she was ashamed of herself. "Jerk."

"Ker?"

"Not you." Kerry lifted the bat and faced her. "Sorry, one more time?"

Dar waited, the ball held in her right hand, her left hand perched on her hip, watching Kerry's body posture until she saw her partner's shoulders drop just a bit, the muscles in the sides of her neck relaxing. Then she gently pitched the ball towards her, as Kerry's eyes tracked its progress, and then she swung at it.

A soft crack split the gathering gloom, and Dar tipped her head back as the ball arched away from the bat and up into the sky. "Nice!"

Kerry blinked in surprise. "I hit it!"

Dar got herself under it and caught the ball as it fell. "Yep." She walked back over to where Kerry was standing and leaned forward, giving her a kiss on the lips. "You sure did." There was relief in her partner's eyes, and she bumped against her lightly. "Not bad for the first try."

It was really almost stupid. Kerry bumped Dar back. "Yeah, not bad." She agreed. "It's harder than I thought it would be though. I'm glad we got some stuff to practice with." She tugged Dar's shirt. "Let's go chase down those balls."

"Sounds good to me." Dar collected both of their gloves and the bucket. "We can play around the rest of the week with this, before we travel."

Kerry walked along with her for a few steps. "I know no one expects us to be really great players." She said. "But... um... I don't know, I just .."

"Want to win." Dar finished her sentence.

"No, it's not really that." Kerry protested.

"You're competitive as hell, Kerry. Of course you want to win." Dar disagreed placidly. "There's nothing wrong with that." She collected the last ball and draped her arm around Kerry's shoulders as they headed back towards the condo.

"You make me sound like a soccer dad."

They both chuckled as they climbed the stairs up to the door. "Better than a soccer mom." Dar said, as they went inside. "I can't even imagine what that would be like."

"If you had a mini van, it'd have a machine gun turret." Kerry closed the door behind them, and finally, had to laugh. "And a satellite dish."

"And a beer keg for you."

**

Kerry slowly opened her eyes, aware of the warmth of sun coming in the window on the bare skin of her back. She was curled up in the waterbed, the condo around her quiet save for some muffled sounds in the living room.

She looked at the clock, then she yawned, and rolled over, reveling in the comfort, and the pretty sunlight and working hard to ignore the fact she'd have to get up soon and drive to the airport. "Peh." She reviewed her schedule, glad she'd packed the night before.

A morning flight had been an option. However, Dar had an afternoon flight out, and so she'd decided to match her partner's itinerary so they could go to the airport together. Silly, really. They were on separate airlines and different terminals but Hell, she wasn't looking to spend more time in Michigan than she had to.

So, a Saturday afternoon flight. Kerry smiled. They'd pack Angie up on Sunday and Monday and probably Tuesday, she'd do her speech on Monday night, so one more day of messing with her family, then Thursday she'd head out to Europe to meet Dar as part of the integration team for their new agreement there.

Not so bad, really. Just a couple of days.

"Hey."

Kerry turned her head to see Dar standing in the doorway of the bedroom. "Hey."

"Sure you don't want to change flights?"

Kerry rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. "Dar! Cut that out!" She pulled the covers back and got out of bed. "You're such a punk!"

Dar entered and intercepted her, putting her arms around Kerry's naked body and pulling her close in a hug. "Sorry." She kneaded her partner's neck. "I just hate the thought of you being in that state and me being across an ocean." She said. "Last couple rounds with your family weren't much fun."

Kerry returned the hug, squeezing Dar so hard she could hear her bones creak. "Thanks." She murmured. "Don't think that hasn't crossed my mind. I'm glad I'm going to help Ang, and I want to spend a little time with her, but my hometown hasn't been a happy place for me for a very very long time."

"I know." Dar rubbed her back. "So don't kill me for wanting to kidnap you from that."

Kerry smiled. "I don't." She said. "I'll be okay, Dar. I'm a big girl."

Dar peered down at her. "No you're not."

"Punk."

"Sometimes." The dark haired woman agreed. "But you're my one and only. I'm allowed."

The casual confidence in Dar's tone almost took Kerry's breath away. For all the chaos of their recent past, it had brought Dar a closure that was wholly unexpected and totally delightful. Kerry had always felt a sense of confidence in their relationship but there had always been that shadow of uncertainty in her partner before.

Not anymore. The change had taken her a little by surprise, but in a good way "Yes, I am, and yes, you are." Kerry agreed. "Thanks, hon."

They released each other, and Kerry continued on her path to the bathroom, removing a tshirt from the hook behind the door and sliding it over her head. As she brushed her teeth, she glanced at her disheveled reflection, noting the slightly overlong bangs and the image of Yosemite Sam flipping everyone off plastered over her chest. "Maybe I can wear this to dinner with mom. You think?" She watched her eyebrows hike. "Yeah. Maybe not."

She finished up and wiped her lips with a tissue, the bathroom still feeling a little damp and scented with apricot scrub from Dar's shower. Then she headed for the kitchen, pausing to greet Chino along the way. "Hey, puppy. What's up?"

Chino presented her with a stuffed lamb and a hopeful expression. Obliging, Kerry tossed it across the living room, escaping into the kitchen as their pet retrieved the toy. "What are you doing?" She asked Dar, who was standing next to the counter.

"Me?" Dar turned her head. "Making breakfast." She moved aside to display the fruits of her labor, which had fruits, but little else in the way of solid nutrition.

Kerry observed the platter, and sighed. "Cheesecake." She said. "Well, it has cheese in it. That's protein."

"And strawberries." Dar pointed.

"Yep." Kerry selected a strawberry half and popped it into her mouth. "Yum." She slid around Dar's tall form and poured coffee into her cup, already resting on the counter. "Actually, that's a perfect thing for breakfast considering where I'm going."

"Me too." Dar licked a bit of strawberry sauce off her fingers. "It's already almost dinnertime there." She added. "But I figured having a beer with it would be pushing things."

Kerry paused in mid sip and looked at her. She put the cup down. "How long are you going to be in Europe before I get there?" She inquired, in a wry tone. "Angie's going to wonder why I'm duct taping her boxes and throwing everything into the back of that pickup."

"What pickup?" Dar inquired, getting her own cup of coffee. "Your sister has a pickup truck?" Her voice rose in disbelief.

"No. I rented a pickup truck." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "I figure I can pick my mother up for dinner in it and start the trip off right." She picked up the plate of cheesecake and settled it onto the nearby breakfast counter. "Sit."

Dar took the stool next to her and they shared their breakfast in silence for a few minutes. Then Dar sucked on her fork tines, and gave Kerry a look. "What color pickup truck?"

"Bright red."

"Nice." Dar chuckled. "Now I really wish I was going just to see that." She rested her head on her hand, waiting for Kerry to finish her cheesecake, content to merely watch the morning light bring out the golden highlights in her partner's hair.

"Well." Kerry neatly cut a bit of cake and ate it, pausing to swallow before she continued. "I figured it would be useful to move things, and it's what they had. Either than or a sedan and you know, I just wasn't in to a sedan."

"Uh huh." Dar murmured in sympathy. "Kind of like when I rented the motorcycle to drive to HQ in Houston."

Kerry looked up and grinned. "Exactly." She said. "I know it's really silly and a little juvenile." She admitted. "And I know my mother was really pretty cool about us the last time we were there, it's just that this time you **won't** be there and I don't want any crap from her."

"Maybe she caught a clue from the last time." Dar suggested. "After you told her off."

"Mm." Kerry sipped her coffee. "Maybe." She conceded. "She's been all right on the phone, it's just that she gets these family idea things and just doesn't understand where I'm coming from." She went back to finishing her breakfast, leaving Dar to study her in silence.

"Y'know." Dar said, after a long enough pause to be awkward.

Kerry put her fork down and wiped her lips neatly with a napkin. "I know." Her lips twitched into a reluctant smile. "I know that I was the one who was all over you to reconcile with your mother, and did my damndest to aid and abet that by any means I could think of."

Dar's eyes warmed.

"But your mother didn't stand by while your father threw you in the looney bin, Dar." Kerry went on, in a more serious tone. "And even though you had issues, they weren't those kind of issues, were they?"

Dar didn't immediately answer. She sat quietly for a few minutes, sipping the remainder of her coffee, a thoughtful expression on her face while Kerry finished up. "At the time." She finally said, as Kerry stood to take the plates back over to the sink. "They felt like a lot worse issues."

She got up and took Kerry's cup, following her partner over to the counter. "But I was young, and clueless, and looking back, yeah." She set the cups in the sink and gave Kerry a kiss on the back of her neck. "I didn't have those kind of problems."

Kerry waited. "But?" She asked, after a pause.

"But nothing," Dar reached around her to wash off the dishes, trapping her neatly. "Gonna show her your tattoo?"

Kerry chuckled, a low throaty sound as she wiped off the dishes as Dar washed them. "Pick her up for dinner in my red pickup truck in a leather no strap bustier. How's that?" She smiled, her good humor restored. "Actually, I'll show it to my sister. She'll tell my mother because she can't keep her mouth shut about stuff like that."

"Here we go with that sibling thing again." Dar put the plates up and they walked back through the living room, Chino trotting behind them. "You want to grab a shower? I threw the bags in the car already."

"Sure." Kerry stifled a yawn. "When are your folks due by?"

"Six." Dar said. "Assuming dad doesn't cause chaos in Government Cut again."

"Uh oh."

**

Airports generally sucked. Kerry shouldered her carry on and eased her way through the crowded terminal, assaulted on all sides by a loud volume of voices in many languages echoing off the terrazzo floor. The Miami airport was large, sprawling, disorganized, and difficult to navigate at times around the groups of travelers standing with what seemed like months worth of luggage.

She'd just left Dar by the International gates, their extended hug completely unnoticed by the surging crowd as they parted and she'd continued on to her domestic gate further down the concourse. Announcements echoed overhead, but she let them bypass her as she got in line for the security check and tried to pretend she wasn't bummed.

She put her backpack on the belt, pulling her laptop out and placing it in a tray along with her cellphone and her PDA. Then she watched it disappear into the Xray before she walked through the portal as a bored looking guard waved her on. "Thanks." She picked her things up and restored the laptop to its place, then she shouldered the bag and headed down a long, badly carpeted slope towards the waiting area.

Her gate was crowded, apparently the flight before hers was late getting out. So Kerry bypassed it and went to the small brewpub at the end of the terminal and claimed a seat, letting out a long breath as she eased her pack to the floor.

"Can I get you something?" The bartender stopped by, glancing around the mostly empty space.

"Amber, and a plate of wings." Kerry answered, after reviewing her options. "Thanks."

"No problem."

The bartender moved on, and she turned sideways in her high bar chair, resting her elbows on the back and the bar top and hooking her feet on the rungs.

She was bummed. Kerry flexed her hand, rubbing the edge of her thumb against the ring on her finger. She wasn't really sure why, since she and Dar traveled independently on frequent occasion and anyway, she'd be flying to join her in a week.

It was just that she really wanted to get on Dar's airplane and not her own, and that was sort of pissing her off. "Thanks." She accepted the cold glass of beer from the bartender, and took a sip. Her PDA alert light stuttered red, and she put the beer down and picked it up.

Hey. Why the hell would they put a Budweiser Brew House in the international terminal?

Kerry chuckled in reflex and typed out an answer. *Are you in there?* She was glad of the distraction, her unease calmed by this disassociated communication that had become their way of staying in each other's pockets when they were separated.

It was either that, Burger King, or a heath food place. What do you think?

Kerry thought that the fact they'd both ended up in the same bar in two different terminals was pretty funny and also predictable, but she only chuckled and sent back a ☺ *Enjoy your wings.*

You too. ☺

"Now, why can't we both be having wings together?" Kerry sighed. "Ah well. Stop being a jerk." She reminded herself, taking another sip of her beer, and forcibly putting aside her gloom. The bartender came back and deposited her plate of wings, and she nibbled on one, leaning back and watching as her gate cleared itself of it's crowd, and things around her started to settle down.

After a moment, she put her wing down, divested of it's flesh, and licked her lips. "Should have packed that damn bustier."

"Ma'am?" The bartender looked up from cleaning his glasses.

"Just talking to myself." Kerry said. "You know us crazy travelers."

"Yeah." The bartender eyed her, moving a little ways away to continue his cleaning. "Have a great trip."

A loud sound made them both turn, looking out into the concourse to see a woman racing across the carpet, her arms outstretched, her voice panicked as she chased a white chicken across the hall. Kerry watched the crowd dodge out of the way of the woman and bird, then she turned and looked at the bartender.

He shrugged. "It's Miami."

Kerry picked up her beer and took a healthy swig, then she toasted the terminal. "It's Miami."

**

Dar climbed the spiral stairs up to the first class section of the big 747, giving the flight attendant a brief smile as she went down the aisle and put her briefcase in the overhead, settling into her seat and leaning back to observe the space around her.

It was quiet. Two other travelers had taken seats, on the other side of the plane from her but it didn't look like the section was going to be very full. Dar was glad for that, even though she certainly had a decent amount of space and a seat that reclined into a bed, still, she didn't like people crowding in all around her.

Well, except for Kerry.

"Can I bring you a water?" The flight attendant stopped by her. "Or perhaps a glass of wine?"

Dar considered, glancing up at the woman. "Got any milk?"

The woman's eyelashes blinked. "Yes of course." She rallied. "Just one moment."

"Thanks." Dar watched her move off in search of her requested beverage. After a moment, she got up and opened the overhead, rooting in her back for two magazines, then sitting back down and tucking them into the pocket on the side of her seat.

Flying bored her. Dar folded her hands in her lap and studied the tops of her thumbs, wishing she could just fall asleep and wake up on the other side of the world. No matter how comfortable her seat, it still meant she had to stay relatively still for eight or nine hours and suffer the dry air and incessant drone of the engines for all that time.

"Here you go." The flight attendant returned with a goblet of milk and a cocktail napkin, depositing both in the tray next to Dar's right hand. "Enjoy."

"Thanks." Dar picked up the glass and sipped from it. Her tongue was still tingling a little from the extremely spicy chicken wings, and the cool, rich milk both tasted and felt good in her mouth. She got halfway through it before her ears popped slightly, and the flight attendant came over the PA system announcing the door had been closed and everyone should get ready to leave.

Dar put her milk down and fastened her seat belt, noticing her PDA flashing as she did so. With a glance to see where the flight attendant was, she opened it and peeked at the screen.

AC in the plane's not working. Can I take my shirt off?

Dar spent a pleasurable moment imaging her partner scandalizing the first class cabin in her short haul jetliner, then she sighed. *Only if you give me a chance to pop the door on this one and come over to watch.* She paused, then she sent it, closing the cover on the PDA and folding her hands over it as the flight attendant walked by checking that her seatbelt was fastened.

"Nice and quiet tonight." The woman said, gazing at her three passengers. "It will be good flight."

Dar had to admit being pretty much alone in the upper cabin with no one next to her and a lack of noise and people would be very nice. "Easy for you." She said, with a smile for the flight attendant.

The woman inclined her head in agreement, then she went to the service area, and busied herself getting ready for takeoff.

Dar went back to her PDA, which was, in fact, flashing again. She opened it up. *Waaa!! There's a bigmouthed salesman with more gold rings than a carnival yelling on his cell phone in here!*

Dar winced, having been there, and done that. *Put in your earplugs.* She advised *See? Toldja you should have come with me. It's almost empty on my flight.*

Punk!!!!!! Kerry answered back immediately. *Just wait till I catch up to you in Europe you're toast!*

The plane started to move, pushing back from the gate, and the bright lights in the cabin dimmed as the late afternoon sunlight poured in the windows. Dar scribbled an answer for several minutes, long enough for them to taxi out to the runway, and pause, waiting for permission to take off.

As the engines spooled up, Dar finished and sent the message, tucking the stylus away and putting the PDA in her pocket as the sound rose around her and gravity shoved her back into her seat. She laced her fingers together and closed her eyes, willing the plane into the air and the trip to begin.

She hoped Kerry's flight would end on a better note than it had started on.

**

Kerry folded her hands together with her PDA between them, exchanging a brief smile with the harried looking flight attendant at the front of the plane. The clammy, hot air wafted over her, over ripe with perfume, sweat, and aviation kerosene. "Hell isn't fire and brimstone." She mused. "It's a perpetual 757 on a hot tropical afternoon."

"Ma'am?" The flight attendant bent over her. "Can I get you something?"

"Ice cream. I'll share with you." Kerry suggested. "Or how about a pina colada."

"Oh honey." The woman sighed, giving Kerry a pat on the shoulder. "Don't I wish. Give me a few minutes and I'll see if we have anything cold in the back, okay?"

"Thanks." Kerry took a deep breath, and exhaled, hoping they got the air conditioning issue fixed before they started flying to Michigan. She could hear screaming children behind her, and far from resenting them, she found herself in sympathy with their frustration and almost let out a squawk of her own before she recalled her upbringing and merely sighed instead.

Her PDA flashed. She eagerly flipped the lid up and tilted her head to read the message, her eyes slowly traveling across the words and then down to the next line in what was for Dar a very long note.

I got stuck on an airplane like that once. I had just started traveling for the company and I was on this late night flight to Pittsburgh with a load of high school girls going to a cheerleading convention.

At this point, Kerry had to stop, and put her hand up to cover her mouth, stifling a giggle. "Oh my gosh there are so many things going through my imagination right now."

She knew her beloved partner hadn't been the most patient person in her younger years. She could picture Dar slumped in her seat, scowling at the girls with that dour glare and those narrowed blue eyes.

They would not shut up the whole damn flight. By the time we were close to landing the crew, the rest of the passengers, me, and even the co pilot were ready to open the door at altitude and let the little nitwads get sucked right out of the damn airplane.

Kerry tried to imagine the scene. Then she grimaced a little, as a brief memory of being a high school student on the way to Washington for a class trip made her blush.

I finally stood up and yelled there was a rat between the seats. They all took off for the back of the plane and the damn flight attendant nearly kissed me.

Kerry blinked. "Was it a guy or a girl?" She muttered.

After that, I figured out how to hack into the airline database and find out who else was on the flight before I booked it.

"You little hacker." The blond woman chuckled, shaking her head.

We're outta here. Talk to you in eight hours or so. ILY. DD.

Kerry extended her denim covered legs and crossed her ankles, resting her elbows on the arms of her seat as the crew struggled to get the last of the unwilling passengers onboard and deal with the environmental annoyances.

"Are we going to have to suffer like this the whole flight!?" A woman standing in the aisle asked, loudly. "This is unacceptable!!! I paid good money for this damn ticket!"

What, Kerry wondered, constituted bad money? Did the woman think anyone on the plane had just walked on for free? She rested her head on her hand and tried to block the noise out, flinching as the woman slammed the back of her seat in the middle of her tirade.

"Ma'am, please sit down. They're working on the problem. Yelling about it doesn't help." The flight attendant came forward and force the woman to take a step back. "And please stop banging the seats. People are sitting in them."

Kerry looked up at her with a grateful smile.

"Horrible airline!" The woman said, but she retreated to the back part of the plane, grumbling loudly all the way. "I'll sue!"

The flight attendant sighed. "Boy it's going to be a long flight." She turned and looked at the people in the small first class section at the front of the plane. "We're about to close the door, ladies and gentlemen. Once we get up at altitude, we can adjust the temperature so it's more comfortable." She

went on down the aisle, looking right and left as one of her co workers accepted a sheaf of paperwork and helped the airport workers close the front door.

On one hand, that meant they were leaving. On the other, without even the little air that was getting in from the jetway, the heat started building and Kerry felt herself start to sweat under her light cotton shirt.

"Here you go." The flight attendant reappeared suddenly, handing Kerry a glass. "I didn't forget about you."

"Thanks." Kerry said, glancing at her name tag. "Ann." She met the woman's eyes. "I really appreciate it, and I appreciate you getting that woman to stop whacking my seat."

The woman smiled at her. "No problem, Ms. Stuart. Just be patient, we'll try to get going as soon as we can."

She was about to move on, but Kerry held her hand up. "How did you know my name?" She asked, curiously. "Have we met?"

Ann chuckled. "No, ma'am, your boss called and gave us a few special requests for you, Like that. "She indicated the glass. "It must be nice to have your company value you like that, I have to say."

Kerry glanced at the glass, which she realized was full of chocolate milk. "Ah." She murmured. "My boss." She looked up at the woman. "You know, I love my boss."

"Wish I did." The flight attendant chuckled, and patted her on the shoulder. She moved off down the aisle leaving Kerry to ponder her unexpected gift.

She sipped the milk, finding it cold, and very chocolatey. The annoyance of the heat faded a little, as she focused her thought on Dar, the little bit of thoughtfulness making her feel just a tiny bit giddy inside. It wasn't at all unusual, they both tended to do soppy little things for each other, but for Dar to do it in such a public way was somewhat new.

Nice.

She wondered what else she had in store, suspecting perhaps she'd even be spared either chicken Florentine or three cheese vegetable lasagna for dinner.

Hot planes, screaming women, and her mother notwithstanding, life was good. Kerry smiled. Life was very good indeed.

**

Kerry flicked the high beams on for a brief moment, before she returned the lights to their usual position and settled back in her seat. The Ford Ranger pickup truck handled better than she'd anticipated, not really that much different from her Lexus to cause her any anxiety as she traveled down a reluctantly remembered road.

It was in the mid fifties, cool enough for her to have dug her sweatshirt out of her bag, but comfortable as she walked to the car rental lot and picked up her buggy.

Ahead of her lay the bland drive to Angie's house. She turned on the radio, punching the buttons and finding a station she could listen to, then turning the sound down a little as her cell phone rang. She checked the caller id, then she keyed the speakerphone. "Hey Ang."

"Hey." Her sister's voice emerged from the speaker. "Where are you?"

"About twenty minutes out." Kerry responded. "Need anything?"

"Nah, we're good." Angie said. "Andrew's sleeping tight. I'm looking forward to hanging out with my sister."

Kerry smiled. "Yeah, it's been a while." She admitted. "Glad I made it up here."

"Me too." Angie said, her voice warm. "So much has gone on the last year it's hard to take in sometimes. Anyway, let me let you off the line, sis. See ya in 20."

"See ya." Kerry hung up the phone and turned up the radio. Now that she was here, she was glad to be getting a chance to spend a little time with Angie, and her brother Michael said he'd be over to 'help' too.

Not that Kerry had any illusions that Michael would do so much as pick up a book to put in a box, but she was looking forward to seeing him anyway. There were parts of him that she understood so much better now.

There were parts of herself she was starting to understand a lot better now. Kerry smiled, and shifted her hands on the wheel, her eye catching the faint reflection of the streetlights on her ring. The visit might turn out to be interesting after all.

She let the miles slip by until it was time to turn off the main road, and onto the sloping one that led up a gentle hill to the house her sister had until recently shared with her ex husband Richard who had sued her for divorce upon finding out her second child wasn't his.

Finding out her sister was an adulterer was almost as surprising to Kerry as finding out her sister was sleeping with the man Kerry had been supposed to marry. While finding out Kerry was gay had apparently been no surprise at all to Angie, who had seemingly known it all along.

Life was funny, that way. Kerry chuckled under her breath as she pulled into the stately, curved driveway of the house her sister lived in, seeing Angie's Mercedes parked along the front curb. With a grin, she parked her little red pickup right behind it, shutting the engine off and opening the door.

She drew in a breath of air, then paused, aware of the scent of pine and honeysuckle so completely different from her adopted southern home. It tasted strange on the back of her tongue, and she had to shake her head as she closed the driver's side door and opened the extended cab door to retrieve her bag.

One of her bags, anyway. She shouldered the overnighter, leaving her suit bag inside and circled the truck as the door to the house opened and she spotted her sister's outline in the light streaming out of it. "Hey."

Angie emerged from the house and stood on the porch as Kerry walked up the sloping path. "Hey stranger." She held her arms out and greeted Kerry with a hug, which her older sister returned promptly. "C'mon inside."

Angie was taller than Kerry was, and she had dark hair and their mother's hazel eyes. Even though Kerry was the elder of them, Angie's conservatively coiffed hair and clothing made the opposite seem true.

They entered the house, the hallway brightly lit and smelling of wood wax and chocolate. Angie shut the door behind them, and joined Kerry as they walked across the marble tile. "Elana, can you take this, please?" Angie addressed a middle aged woman in a neat uniform standing nearby. "You remember my sister Kerrison, don't you?"

"Yes ma'am, I sure do." Elana took Kerry's bag. "Welcome back, Miss Kerry." Her face was mild and there was no hint of either approval or disapproval at this invasion by their families blond haired black sheep.

Kerry felt her nostrils flare, but she smiled anyway. "Thanks Elana. Nice to see you again." She watched the woman leave, then she turned to her sister. "Hi."

"Hi." Angie responded agreeably, stepping back and looking her over head to toe. "You look great." She said. "And it's really good to see you." She added, with a grin. "Feels like it's been way too long."

Kerry grinned. "Right back at you." She said. "Got a cup of something hot around? It's been a long day."

"Absolutely, c'mon." Angie led the way back into the large kitchen. She was dressed in a pair of slacks and a red pullover, casually elegant and a definite contrast to Kerry's worn jeans and sweatshirt. "Did you have a decent flight at least?"

"Eh." Kerry took one of the seats around the kitchen table, everything around her clean and spotless, but in some disarray due to the impending move. "No AC on the way up."

"Ugh." Angie brought an already prepared tray over. It had two cups on it, and a plate of chocolate cookies. She set it down and sat down across from her sister. "How's Dar?" She watched Kerry's face, seeing her expression shift into a grin as warmth erupted into her eyes at the question.

"Great." Kerry responded. "We both had flights out today. She's on her way to England." She picked up her cup and sipped from it. "Mm."

"Did I get it right?" Angie's eyes twinkled. "You haven't stopped being a chocolate addict, have you?"

"Nope." Kerry relaxed, leaning back in the chair and resting her elbows on the arms as she cradled the cup in her hands. "Dar and I both are. It's hopeless." She admitted. "I've given up worrying about it I figure if I'm going to Hell, might as well enjoy it."

Angie laughed. "Kerry, you're not going to Hell." She said. "You look fantastic. Last time I saw you it was such a stress fest I was worried about you but looks like you bounced back just fine."

Stress fest. Mild way of putting it. "Yeah." Kerry remembered how she'd felt coming back from Michigan the last time, and long it had taken her to throw off the effects. "I felt like crap when I got home. They almost had to put me in the hospital for my blood pressure."

Angie's eyes opened wide. "What?" She leaned forward. "Are you kidding me?"

Her sister shook her head.

"Ker, that's awful. Are you taking anything for that?" Angie looked concerned. "That's not anything to joke about, you know?"

"I know." Kerry said. "But no, I've got it under control. I cut down on my salt, and we went out on the boat for a week to chill out. Did wonders." She sidestepped the issue. "We went down to the Caribbean and got involved with pirates. It was crazy."

"Pirates!"

"Well, we can't just have normal vacations, you know? Dar and I could walk to the grocery store and we'd end up causing a riot without meaning to." Kerry chuckled. "We have the damndest stuff happen to us. Anyway, so what's up with you?" She regarded her sister. "Glad you're moving?"

Angie gazed shrewdly at her for a moment, then allowed herself to be sidetracked. "I am." She admitted. "I don't really feel bad about what happened with Richard, you know? It was my choice and I knew what could happen. At least we ended up with split custody of Sally."

"Mm." Kerry selected a cookie from the plate and nibbled on it.

"That's a lot of why I decided to move in with mom." Angie studied her cup. "It's just easier."

Kerry understood that. She remembered being both elated, and scared when she'd moved out – after so many years of having everything in her life taken care of for her and provided without question. "Yeah, I know what you mean." She agreed.

"No you don't." Angie burst into laughter. "You never did anything the easy way the entire time I've known you."

Kerry had to grin at that and raise her cup in her sister's direction in acknowledgement of the truth. "Touche." She admitted. "The only easy thing I've ever really done was fall in love with Dar. That was fast and painless. Everything else... eh." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think I'd change anything though."

"I bet you wouldn't." Angie agreed. "Anyway, thanks for coming up to give me a hand packing all this stuff up. I really need help deciding what to get rid of. I didn't think I was a packrat until I started looking in the closets here."

Kerry finished her hot chocolate and dusted the cookie crumbs off her fingers. "I got off sort of lucky." She said. "When I moved in with Dar, it was over a couple months so I moved stuff a little at a time. I still think I've got like three times the junk she does though."

"Not a keeper?"

The green eyes twinkled. "She's definitely a keeper, she just doesn't collect frivolously."

"Ahh." Angie stood up. "C'mon, let's get you settled in." She waited for Kerry to join her and they walked through the hall, their footsteps echoing against the marble as they got to the wide, wood tread stairs and climbed upward. "I won't miss these stairs."

Kerry felt the slight strain as she climbed. "They're steeper than mom's." She noted. "I think you've got higher ceilings."

"Yes. Richard's point of pride." Angie's voice took on a sharper note. "He made a point of mentioning that whenever he could."

Kerry rolled her eyes. "Sorry Ang, he's an ass." She said. "The only thing he had going for him was our father liked him, and that should have told you something right there." She looked around as they got to the 2nd floor, trying to remember if she'd ever really paid attention to the inside of her sister's house before.

"Well." Angie sighed. "I was just glad to get past that whole approval thing. I'm not a renegade like you are."

Renegade. Kerry pondered that title as Angie led her over to an open door, and they entered a nicely proportioned, robin's egg blue room with a canopied bed and a bay window. "I don't think I ever thought of myself like that."

"We did." Angie went over to a rocking chair in the room and sat down on its padded surface. "Mike and me, anyway. Especially when we got older."

Kerry went to her bag, which was resting on a low bench near the window. She unzipped the top of the leather case and removed her sundry kit and a long tshirt, setting it down on the bench before she pulled her sweatshirt off and folded it. "I don't think I felt like a renegade until I told our father about Dar." She turned and faced Angie. "That night is when I crossed the line between being a passive aggressive milktoast and being my own person."

Angie slowly nodded.

"Until then, I was trying to have it both ways." Kerry put her hands on her hips. "You can't, you know?"

"I know." Her sister sighed. "But that's why you're different than we are, Ker. I was just grateful he was already dead before Richard filed for divorce. I can't take that. I can't handle being that strong."

Kerry came over to sit on the edge of the bed. "How's Brian doing?"

Angie's expression grew wry. "Scared spitless to see you." She confessed. "Ker, he's just not ready to settle down. I'm not sure I'm even mad at him, or.. " Her lips pursed. "That I even want to be in a relationship right now."

It was Kerry's turn to shrewdly study her sister's face. She half suspected Angie really just wanted to keep the peace over the days she was there, but after all, it was her relationship wasn't it? Maybe Angie really wasn't ready to rush into anything, much less force Brian to.

Kerry could respect that. Even if it was a farce for her benefit. "Whatever makes you happy, sis." She said. "I'm the last person on earth to preach conformity, remember?" She straightened and reached

down to grab the hem of her tshirt and pull it up and over her head. "Speaking of which, let me get this out of the way."

"What are you..oh my god!" Angie bolted upright in her chair. "Are you kidding me? Is that really a tattoo?"

Kerry let the shirt rest on her denim covered knees and glanced at her chest. She drew her bra strap aside a little to give a better view of her artwork. "Yep."

"How could you do that?" Her sister got up and came closer to see. "Oh my god, Kerry."

Kerry studied her face with some interest, not expecting her sister to be as shocked as she obviously was. "Are you freaked out?"

Angie looked up from examining the design on Kerry's chest, the colors standing out in muted brilliance against her tan. "I can't believe you did this." She said. "Kerry, what were you thinking!"

What was I thinking? Kerry looked at the tattoo, then back up at her sister. "I was thinking that I wanted something I felt so strongly about to be visible on the outside of me like it was on the inside." She said. "Talk's cheap. Tattoos are expensive and painful."

Angie sat down next to her on the bed, still studying Kerry's skin. "Wow." She finally murmured. "Well, it's beautiful, at any rate. What did Dar say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Angie's brows shot up.

Kerry shook her head. "She just started crying. She didn't have to say anything." She rested her elbows on her thighs. "It was worth the pain."

Her sister sighed. "Wow." She repeated. "I really didn't think you'd do something like that."

Kerry felt obscurely satisfied, at shocking her sister. Angie seemed to take anything and everything she did in stride, so it was oddly nice to provide her with a truly radical change she hadn't anticipated. "Well, I love it. A couple of days after I got it I wore a strapless gown to Radio City in New York and it felt great!"

Angie covered her eyes. "Oh my god."

"Maybe I can talk you into one."

Angie got up and retreated to the door. "Go to sleep." She suggested, as she escaped from her surprisingly dangerous sibling. "You obviously need the rest if you think I'd get anywhere near some guy with a bunch of needles."

"Night." Kerry chuckled, as she disappeared, leaving her in splendid isolation in her pretty room with her colorful tattoo. She got up and took her jeans off, tossing them over her bag as she put her sleep shirt on. "I knew I should have brought that damn bustier."

**

"Dar!"

Hearing her name, Dar turned from signing her registration card and spotted a familiar figure moving towards her. "Morning, Alastair." She turned and met his outstretched hand with her own. "Good flight?"

"Not bad." The CEO of ILS, Dar's boss, was dressed in what was for him an astonishingly casual pair of courderoys and a chain knit pullover sweater. "Yours?"

"Decent." Dar put her corporate credit card back in her wallet and returned that to her jeans pocket. "A little rough leaving, but I got some sleep." She looked around at the stately confines of the hotel, it's tall ceilings and antique furniture giving an air of a well kept castle to the lobby she was sure was quite intentional. "This is fun."

"Have you had breakfast?" Alastair asked. "They've got a nice joint in here for that, or so I'm told by the locals."

Dar handed over her bag to a quietly waiting bellman. "Lead on." She told Alastair. "Last thing I had was cookies on the plane." She followed her boss through the lobby and into a mahogany trimmed dining room, giving the host a brief smile as he picked up two menus and motioned for them to move on.

It was just nine AM, and the room was reasonably full of well dressed men and women enjoying their breakfasts amidst the soft tinkle of china and the hum of quite conversation.

"If it's any consolation, the trip from Houston wasn't any better, just a couple hours longer." Alastair commiserated with her. "I gotta tell you, even in first class these days it's like being back in the school cafeteria sometimes. What in the hell are we paying all that damn money for?"

"Legroom." Dar answered succinctly. "For me it's worth it even if it was on my dime."

Her boss turned and regarded her length, Dar's head topping his by a few inches, and lifted one hand in concession. "Point taken." He smiled. "And even if you were two feet shorter it'd be worth it to lose the aggravation. We get enough of that as it is."

The host led them to their table, and gestured for them to sit, giving them both a quite smile as they eased past. "Enjoy your breakfasts."

Dar settled into a comfortable chair at a table for four across from Alastair, and leaned on one arm of it as she studied the menu. "Funny how this all worked out, huh?"

"Funny?" Alastair glanced around, and lowered his voice. "Lady, I've seen a lot of pulling furry woodland animals out of one's ass before, but this has to be the best one ever." He removed his reading glasses as a waiter came by and stood next to the table diffidently. "Could I get a couple of poached eggs and toast with some coffee, please?"

"Sir, of course." The man said, turning to Dar. "Madame?"

Alastair winced in reflex as Dar looked up, but his often tempestuous employee merely folded her menu shut and put it down on the table.

"Eggs over easy, sausage, and potatoes." Dar said. "And coffee."

The waiter nodded and left.

Dar turned her attention back to her boss. "Anyone else joining us for this?"

"David and Francois." Alastair responded. "They're due in tonight, said they'd join us for dinner. Meetings at ten tomorrow morning?"

"Ten." Dar confirmed, as the waiter returned with a pair of cups, a sugar caddy, and a silver pot of coffee. She waited for the man to pour out the beverage and leave, before she continued. "Hans said he'd join us tonight too, so we can touch base."

"Lucky meeting the two of you, eh?" Alastair sipped his coffee. "Sometimes I think the gods of commerce have a crush on you, Dar. Things happen around you that are damned unpredictable." He smiled at Dar. "And always to our advantage."

Dar shrugged. "This was a tough one." She admitted. "I didn't think we were going to get a damn thing other than a black eye out of it, to be honest. "It really was just dumb luck this time."

"I'll take it." Alastair leaned back and folded his hands on the table. "But it wasn't dumb luck for you to come up with a pitch and an end around using that new contact, Dar. That was good thinking, no matter how it worked out."

"Seat of my pants." His CIO disagreed. "I just couldn't let it go. Couldn't let them win after all that crap. Bastards. They're lucky I wasn't here when those ships got in or I'd have found that jackass and smacked him."

Alastair regarded his companion with a look of healthy respect. Dar had a sharp intellect, a lot of business sense, and an iron will but behind it all he knew was a potent temper and though she was a woman, and a nerd, and not crazy there was a danger about her he recognized.

Not entirely safe. But he knew it was a tradeoff he'd decided to pay when he chose to take advantage of that intelligence and take the risk on the rest. So far, it had paid off in spades. "Hell, Dar. If I'd have seen the little creep I'd have probably kicked him." He said. "Gave me indigestion for weeks."

They made small talk until the waiter returned with two steaming plates, which he put down in front of them. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"Nothing for me." Dar picked up her fork. "Thanks."

"More coffee here." Alastair said. "Hey, Dar, did I hear right that you were going to hire that gal from Synergenics? What's her name, Graver?"

"Thinking about it." Dar neatly cut her sausage patty into squares and ate them.

Alastair fiddled with his eggs for a moment. "Isn't she the one who sent me those pictures?"

"Uh huh."

ILS's CEO paused to study his dining companion. Dar was munching on a mouthful of sausage, gazing back at him with those big blue eyes so full of completely fake innocence. Though his CIO had a mercurial temperament, he'd discovered she also had an unexpected Puckish side that had emerged in the last year or so. "Ah huh."

"Can't beat em, buy em?" Dar finished her sausage and started on her potatoes. "Nah, Michelle's pretty sharp, and we banged heads enough over the ship disaster to get her viewpoint changed." She chased her mouthful down with a sip of coffee. "We'll see if she bites."

Alastair wisely decided to simply nod in response and change the subject. "That's a nice ring." He commented, stifling a smile as Dar's hand stopped in midmotion, and her already sun darkened skin darkened just a shade further. "Don't think I noticed it before."

"I've had it for a while." Dar recovered her composure from the unexpected question. "Remember that damn disaster up in Charlotte? When we lost the network?"

Her boss made a whining, groaning sound.

"Yeah, well, we took a few days off after that up in the mountains and got engaged." Dar paused and thought about that, then she chuckled and shook her head. "Ever been in London before, Alastair?"

Bemused, he cleared his throat before answering. "Sure, once or twice. We had a few international board meetings here. Just a day up and back. You know." He dipped his toast into his eggs and took a bite of it. "Why?"

"Want to go do one of those double decker bus tours?" Dar asked. "I've never been here but I don't feel like walking around all day."

Alastair blinked at her. "Wh.. ah, you mean us? You and I?"

Dar looked around. "Was there someone else here you think I was talking to? How often do I get to hang out with you?"

Her boss stared at her for a long moment. "Well, absolutely, Dar." He finally said. "I'd love to. The missus always dings me for not seeing a damn thing when I travel. Last thing I brought her back was a bottle of jalapeno jelly from Tijuana and let me tell you she didn't much appreciate it."

"Great." Dar returned her concentration to her eggs. "Keep me from falling asleep and screwing up my body clock too."

"Isn't that the truth." Alastair agreed. "Isn't that just the absolute truth."

**

Kerry brushed her teeth, leaning on the marble sink as she regarded her reflection in the mirror. It was early. The sun was just rising outside, and she was glad that she hadn't overslept since they had a lot to do and she really had no desire to get kidded about sleeping in.

She finished up in the bathroom and walked back into the bedroom, rolling up the sleeves on her tshirt as she crossed to the window and looked outside. The slope Angie lived on gave her a view of Lake Michigan in the distance and it brought back memories to her of her childhood.

Not altogether bad ones, really. Kerry had to admit as she watched a flock of birds wing towards the huge body of water. She decided to take time out for a walk down to the lake before she left, wanting to recover a few of those better times from the place she'd spent most of her life.

Her PDA beeped softly, and she turned and picked it up, flipping the top open to find a message from Dar waiting for her. "Hey honey!" She tapped the message, bending her head to read it.

Hey Ker.

Damn, I miss you.

Kerry's eyes closed briefly, and she smiled.

I just had a decent breakfast with Alastair and talked him into going sightseeing with me. I think I freaked him out asking.

Kerry snickered.

So we're going to grab one of those buses and go see the sights. Want anything?

"You." Kerry answered. She pulled out her stylus and scribbled an answer, checking the time of the message and seeing a few hours had passed.

Hey sweetie! How's the sightseeing going? I just got up and found your message waiting. Tell Alastair I said hello, and don't do any shopping until I get there! Have fun. It's going pretty good here except I think I freaked Angie out with my tat.

She tapped the stylus against her chin.

Maybe you could come up here with me sometime and we can stay by the lake and go sailing. Aside from my family it's not really so bad.

K

A soft knock came at the door, and she turned. "Yeah?" She closed the PDA cover and stuck the device in the mid leg pocket of her carpenter's pants

The door opened, and Angie's head poked inside. "Hey, you up?"

"Believe it or not." Kerry turned and walked towards the door. "I am." She smiled at her sister. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Let's go." Angie opened the door all the way to let Kerry out. "Those are cute pants." She studied her sister's clothing. "They look comfortable."

"They are." Kerry agreed, as she followed Angie down the hallway. "How's Andrew? He up?"

"Downstairs waiting on us. You don't catch him missing a meal." Angie chuckled as they walked down the stairs together. Today she herself was dressed more casually in deference to their impending packing, a pair of sweatpants and a cotton shirt and she had her hair pulled back into a tail as well.

"Ah, we must be related." Kerry smiled easily as they reached the bottom of the steps and headed into the kitchen. "Looks like it's going to be a rainy one outside, perfect day for packing." She looked around as she entered and spotted her nephew in his highchair, and diverted immediately to head in his direction. "Hey cutie!"

Andrew looked up from his tray, his eyes opening wide at this new distraction. He pointed at Kerry with his spoon and gurgled, his head tipping back to follow her as she approached. "Gah!"

Kerry crouched down next to the high chair and offered him a finger to squeeze, his dark cap of hair and blue eyes making her smile. "What are you up to, little man?" She inquired. "Is that good stuff there?"

Angie motioned for the quietly waiting cook to put their food down, and she took a seat on one side of the table, watching her sister with a indulgent smile. "You're a natural with kids." She observed, as her son giggled in delight, dropping his spoon and slapping at his aunt's wiggling fingers.

Kerry looked up from playing patty cake with the baby. "He's adorable." She said, then turned back to the chair as the cook came back with two plates. "Tell you what, Tiger, let's both eat, then we can play some more, okay?"

She got to her feet and ruffled Andrew's hair, then she joined her sister at the table, taking a seat and putting the crisply pressed linen napkin over her lap. "I love kids." She said, as she picked up her fork. "Long as they aren't mine."

Angie cut off a bit of her egg white omelette and put it on her toast. "Really?"

"Yup." Kerry tasted a bit of the egg, finding it as bland as she'd feared. "Tell you what." She said. "I'll do all the heavy lifting today but you have to let me cook breakfast tomorrow."

Her sister chuckled. "I forgot to warn them we had a chow hound descending on us." She said. "You still do the cooking down in Miami?"

"Sure." Kerry got up and went to the sideboard, evading the cooks belated attempt to intercept her and using the container of milk meant for the coffee to provide her with a glassful instead. "Dar doesn't mind cooking, but when she does, we either get something scientifically bizarre or like breakfast the other morning. She sat down with her milk. "Strawberry cheesecake."

"Yikes." Angie watched her sister tear into her breakfast with some bemusement. "So you don't want kids? Have you talked to Dar about it?"

Kerry looked across the table, for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Oo." Angie waved a fork at her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to piss you off. I was just asking."

After a moment, Kerry relaxed, and she gave her sister an apologetic look. "Sorry." She said. "Usually people who ask me invasive personal questions don't have any good reason to." She admitted. "Dar and I have talked about it, sure."

"Ah."

"Dar thinks she doesn't have the patience for it." Kerry said, after a pause. "I, on the other hand, know damn well I don't have the patience for it, and I just don't want to be a parent." She went back to her plate. "It may sound selfish, but I like my life the way it is, and I like the freedom of being able to go and do what I want to do when we want to do it."

"I don't blame you." Angie interjected mildly. "I was just curious Ker, because you really seem to like kids, that's all. You always said you never wanted to end up a soccer mom."

Which was true. "We have a dog." Kerry said. "That's enough for us, though I do have to admit I once told Dar she had to have kids so the gene pool wouldn't lose out on hers." She paused as she heard a beep from her pocket. "Speaking of." She pulled the PDA out and opened it. "I have no desire to perpetuate mine."

Angie motioned for more coffee, prudently letting the subject drop. Her sister had, without a doubt, certainly grown up a lot in the last couple of years and taken on more than a hint of the steely will Angie remembered all too well from their father.

Definitely not the time to bring **that** up either.

**

"You know, Dar." Alastair politely held the door open for his CIO as they re-entered the hotel. "I have to say, going to mediaval torture show in the Tower of London with you has to be one of the most unique experiences I've ever had."

"Glad you enjoyed it." Dar strolled into the lobby, a bag slung over her shoulder and a relaxed grin on her face. "Gonna hang that flail up in your office?"

"Erm.."

"Tell everyone I gave it to you." Dar cheerfully suggested. "That'll stop people in their tracks."

Alastair looked at her sideways for a long moment, then he burst out laughing. "Do you have any idea what my wife would say?"

"Where's mine?" Dar bantered right back. "Hey, it beats a jar of jalapeno jelly."

Her boss clucked his tongue and shook his head. "I can see this trip is going to get me in a world of trouble." He sighed, as they walked through the lobby to the elevators, entering one of the narrow, woodlined cars and pressing the old fashioned round button for the top floor.

Dar leaned against the back wall of the lift and folded her arms over her chest, watching the floor indicator rise slowly. "What time are we doing dinner?" She asked. "Are they late or early here, I forget."

Alastair folded his hands in front of him, his back against the side wall. "Early, I think." He said. "I think we're set to meet at seven. They've got a car arranged to take us somewhere or other." He glanced sideways at Dar. "Anything you don't care to eat? I'm not sure what they have in mind."

"Vegetables." Dar said, succinctly. "Anything else I'm all right with. I want to check in with the office, and get a shower, so seven sounds fine." She stifled a yawn with one hand, as the doors opened. For a moment, neither of them moved, then Dar gave her boss a wry look and exited the lift. "Sorry."

"Not into the old courtesies, Dar?" Alastair chuckled.

"I'm usually the one holding the door." His CIO admitted. "Learned it from my dad."

"Me too." The older man agreed cheerfully. "He was a proper Southern gentleman who brought his sons up to be courteous to ladies, and respectful to men even if you didn't like em."

Dar grinned. "My father's Southern also, but he played by a little different rules." She admitted, as they bot left the elevator and emerged into the hall. The space had sedate carpet, and surprisingly striped wall paper but the lighting was dim, and it made the hall a little dingy.

"So I remember." Alastair murmured. "I think we finally just did all the mildew out of the carpet up in the kitchen near my office. "He really did mix it up with Ankow, didn't he?"

"Oh yeah." Dar said. "Bastard was lucky he got out of there in one piece. What ever happened to him, anyway?"

"Went to work for his father." Alastair replied succinctly. "Bad egg. Good riddance." He added. "Though, worlds gotten more conservative lately. "

"Mm." Dar grunted.

"Well, meet you in the lobby at seven, Dar. Get yourself some rest." He paused at the door to his room, as Dar went down two doors past him. "Thanks for the entertaining afternoon."

"Anytime." Dar opened her door and pushed it inward, giving Alastair a wave as she entered and let the portal shut behind her. Inside, her bag was sitting quietly on a luggage rack, and the room was dim and peaceful, the sounds of the city below muted by the thick glass of the window.

She checked her watch, then she went over to her bag, unzipping it and removing the inset that held her dress suits. Tomorrow she'd have to slip into her corporate persona, but she was glad enough to put the suit bag in the closet, giving it a shake to loosen the wrinkles, and remain casual for the night.

She took her sundry kit from her suitcase and went into the bathroom, setting the leather case on the marble counter and opening it. She removed her various toiletries and set them up neatly, feeling the jet lag starting to catch up with her.

Dar exhaled, and glanced at her reflection, then she turned the water on and splashed some of the cold liquid on her face. It had a rich, mineral tang very different from the water at home, and she experimentally licked a few droplets, finding it as brassy tasting as it smelled. "Peh."

She wiped her face with one of the thick hand towels and retreated back into the bedroom, bypassing the danger of the bed and going to the small desk near the window instead, pulling her laptop out of her backpack and sitting down to open it.

Her cell phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID, then she keyed the answer button and set the speakerphone on. "Hey cute stuff."

"Hey hon." Kerry's voice echoed slightly from the speaker. "Whatcha up to?"

Dar was very glad of the distraction. "Just about to check mail in the office." She replied. "You?"

"Lugging boxes." Her partner supplied promptly. "Did you go sightsee?"

"Sure." Dar booted her laptop, resting her head on one hand. "Took Alastair to a torture exhibit and then shopping in a whip and chain shop."

Dead silence.

"Ker?"

"Honey, we do actually work for him, you know?"

Dar chuckled. "He enjoyed it. He bought a flail."

Kerry's flaring nostrils and blinking eyes were clearly audible through the phone. "For w... no, never mind. Forget I asked that." She muttered. "Flush cache. Flush cache. Flush cache." She paused. "Okay, better now. Please don't reload."

"Okay." Dar agreed. "How's the packing going?" She could hear birds in the background, and guessed her partner was taking a break from the work and possibly her family. "Everyone there being nice to you or do I have to have a case of live gerbils delivered there to distract people?"

Kerry laughed. "Nerd." She said. "Everyone's being fine. I'm having fun playing with my nephew, and Mike's on his way over now so I'm sure whatever progress we're making will grind to a complete halt." She said. "And hon, if I ever become as big a packrat as my sister you need to kick me to the curb."

Dar gazed at the phone. "Over my dead body."

"What?"

"You get kicked to the curb over my dead body no matter what junk you collect." Her partner informed her. "I don't care if you pile crap up to the ceiling as long as theres a couple of square feet open in the bed for us to sleep in."

Kerry sighed. "I love you." She said.

Dar chuckled as her laptop booted up and she plugged in the internet port in the room. "So did your sister really freak out about your tat?"

"Yeah." Her partner said. "She was like, how could you do that? Which is sort of what I asked myself the morning after I did it but I love it now."

"Me too."

Kerry sighed. "Well, back to digging through boxes." She said, with a touch of reluctance. "You going out to dinner tonight?" She asked. "I think we are."

"With your mom?"

"Uh huh."

Dar could read the several levels of commentary in the single grunt without much effort. She could also picture Kerry's face. "Send me a text if you want me to invent a tech nightmare for you to come save the day on, huh?"

Kerry chuckled. "I'll just make them go to a barbeque joint. I'm in the mood for ribs and a nice loaded baked potato."

"Hedonist."

"Takes one to love one." Kerry's voice sounded a lot more cheerful. "Okay, hon, talk to you later. Have fun at dinner, and watch out for the haggis."

Dar closed the phone and went back to her laptop, smiling as she reviewed the mail careening wildly into her inbox and whistling softly under her breath.

**

Kerry clipped her phone back onto her belt and took a last long breath of cool air before she turned and re-entered Angie's house, to be greeted by her brother coming in the other door. "Hey Mike."

"Kerry!" Michael rambled across the tile floor and flung his arms around her. "Good to see ya!"

"Oof." Kerry returned the hug. "Glad you see you too." She released him. "Nice haircut."

Mike ran his hand through what was almost a mohawk, the sides shorn close to his skull and the top longer. "Like it?" He looked at her. "Hey, you got short cut too!"

"Not that short." Kerry shook her finger at him. "I thought you were working for some big shot company. They let you look like that?"

Her brother put his hands on his hips. "Oh now look who's talking." He said. "I'm working for a marketing company, sis. They like outrageous. Hey.. want a job?"

"I have a job." Kerry replied. "And besides, your company probably couldn't afford me."

"Ooo..." Mike stuck his tongue out at her. "Listen to the big shot." He turned as Angie entered, carrying a tray. "I can't believe you dragged her all the way up here just to carry boxes for you!"

Angie put the tray down and put her hands on her hips, giving her brother a withering look. "She volunteered." She said. "Just like you did. It's not my fault she didn't come up to help you move the last six times this year."

"Now now." Kerry maneuvered her way through the lines of boxes on the floor of the living room, most partially filled with various things. "No fighting, children." She accepted a glass from the tray and took a sip of it, agreeably surprised to find it lemonade. "So now that there's three of us here, I'm sure we'll get even less done."

Angie took a seat on one of the stools. "Probably." She admitted, scrubbing her hair out of her eyes. "Boy, this is a lot of crap." She glanced at her sister, who was leaning against the bar. "Maybe I should have just hired someone to pack it all up and take it."

Kerry studied the living room floor. They'd been working since breakfast to sort out a lifetime of memories, trinkets, and items that even Angie had some trouble identifying. There were fifteen boxes on the ground, and thirty or forty plastic bags piled haphazardly around full of trash and things her sister could bear to give up. "You'd have just ended up having to sort it out over at the house." She predicted. "You know that place. It's got no closets and this stuff won't fit in the attic."

"Mm."

Mike surveyed their work. "Holy cow." He said, after a moment. "What is all this stuff?"

Angie sighed. "Stuff." She admitted. "Stuff from us when we were kids. Stuff from my kids." She gazed quietly at the boxes. "Letters."

Kerry rested her chin on her fist. "We'll get through it." She said. "Now that we're started, and Mike'll help. Right?"

"Um..." Mike looked at his older sister, seeing her brow arch. "Yep! I sure will." He hastily agreed. "Besides, I hear we get dinner out of all this."

Kerry rolled her eyes.

Angie snorted. "Oh, yeah." She addressed Kerry. "Mom called." She said. "She's got reservations at the Clearbrook. Are you going to freak?"

The Clearbrook Golf Club. Kerry remembered so many Sunday dinners at the Clearbrook, a stuffy and conservative bastion of very decent food she had been unable to fully enjoy. It had been her father's favorite 'neighborhood' place to show off his family and hold a very informal court. "Hm."

"Foods not bad." Mike said. "If you get past all the frilly crap on the plate."

"Ker?" Angie moved closer to her. "I didn't say yes or no. You worked your ass off all day, if you want to go get pizza, I'm there."

Kerry gazed quietly past the boxes for a moment. "Nah." She finally said. "Let's get it over with." She straightened up. "Like Mike said, they've got decent food and I can shock three quarters of the town if I start a belching competition with him in the middle of dinner."

"Ker." Angie covered her eyes, while her brother snickered. "Please don't make me have to listen to her bitch for six months."

Kerry chuckled and patted her sister on the shoulder. "I'll be good." She promised. "Now c'mon. Let's get through this side of the room at least, before dinner." She circled the counter and pushed Mike ahead of her. "Grab that box."

"Uh.. shouldn't I watch for a while to get clued in on your system, sister?"

"Clue this, you lazy punk." Kerry lazily turned and roundhouse kicked him in the ass, sending him nearly head over heels across the room. "C'mon, the faster we do this, the faster it's done."

"Ow!" Mike yelped. "Bet you wouldn't talk like that to Dar!"

"Bet she'd kick you a lot harder."

**

Dar leaned back in her chair, the soft murmur of conversation around her as she watched Alastair order a bottle of wine from a very deferential waiter.

Hans was seated next to her, looking pleased. Across the table, David McMichael and Francois Aubron were in obvious high spirits, bestowing happy looks in her direction as they waited for the server to leave and conversation to resume.

"Dar, I'm very glad you chose to join us for this meeting." David said. "It's so nice to finally meet you after all these years."

"Nice?" Dar's eyebrows lifted, but she smiled to take the edge off. "Wouldn't have missed it."

"I am thinking we would not be having this meeting if not for you in any case." Hans chimed in. "Or for me either, in fact." He added, after a pause.

"Without a doubt, without a doubt." David said. "It's a great opportunity for us to gain brilliant new partners, and investigate new business avenues."

"Do you talk to these people regularly?" Hans asked Dar, in German.

Dar nodded. "On the phone." She clarified.

"Do you make faces at them?"

"Constantly."

"Gut." Hans smiled benignly at his new colleagues.

Dar steepled her fingers and tapped the edges against her lips, hiding a smile. "What do you recommend her, David?"

"Everything." The European Sales executive answered without hesitation. "If you eat the napkin you'll be fine." He advised. "I'm for the ox tongue, myself."

Dar eyed the menu, and wondered if she could get away with having a rabbit appetizer without having to admit that to Kerry. After a brief wrestle with her conscience, she folded her arms and looked up to see the waiter patiently waiting for her.

Huh? Dar started to frown, then realized it was because she was the only woman at the table. Heroically managing not to roll her eyes, she gave the bunny a last regretful thought and glanced at the menu one last time. "I'll take the scallops and the lamb roast, please."

"Excellent." The waiter responded immediately. "Sir?" He turned next to Alastair.

Women, then older men? Dar wondered if it was a courtesy method or the way they planned to evacuate the restaurant in case of fire. She picked up her glass of white wine and sipped cautiously, finding it mild and a little sweet. "Nice." She lifted the glass towards David.

He beamed at her.

"So." Alastair put his reading glasses into his pocket. "Are we all ready for tomorrow? Hans, I understand you have a well established relationship with our new partner in this venture."

"I do." Hans agreed. "He is uncompromising, but he is fair."

"You brushed up on your English since the last time we met." Dar remarked dryly, in German, chuckling under her breath when he blinked innocently at her. "Prussian fraud."

"Ah, we all have our secrets." Hans acknowledged. "And speaking of this, how is your charming wife?"

"Doing just fine, thanks." Dar smiled. "Alastair, lets make sure we put together a comprehensive package for this one. No ala carte."

The two sales executives looked at their boss, who pursed his lips for a moment before he answered.

"I don't want to be hasty." Alastair said. "If that's the plan, and I think it's a good one, Dar, then we need to take enough time to make sure we get all the wants and needs crossed and tied up." He picked up his wine glass and swirled it, then took a sip. "This is a big deal, and I want to be sure we can deliver what we promise."

Hans grunted and nodded, but didn't say anything.

"There's a lot riding on this. Lots of people watching." David spoke up. "You know, we've always been reasonably successful here, but that whole American company thing is tough to get past in a lot of places."

Dar lifted her hand, and let it drop. "We can't change that." She said. "And besides, we're high technology. It's not like America doesn't have a history of that."

"True." David said. "And that's why we've been as successful as we have, because that's exactly where a lot of this starts, and a lot of it generates from."

"It also helps." Francois spoke up. "That the offices here are all local people."

Alastair sniffed, and sipped his wine. "Well, just because I grew up on a farm outside Houston doesn't mean I'm dumb." He said. "Of course people want to deal with folks they can talk to, who understand their culture and share the same views and values." He said.

"You grew up on a farm?" Dar interrupted. "Alastair I can't imagine you in overalls."

Everyone around the table laughed, as the ILS CEO gazed drolly across at Dar. "Thanks, Dar." He sighed. "Remind me to swap donkey tales with you later on."

They paused, as the waiter returned with a busboy and a tray, and their first courses were delivered. Dar studied the three dimensional food artwork in front of her and picked up her fork, not entirely sure where she was supposed to stick it in.

Oh well. There was always room service if she couldn't figure it out.

**

Kerry got out of the truck, closing the door and brushing a bit of cardboard scrap off the sleeve of her blue sweater as she waited for Angie and Mike to join her.

It was soft, and cashmere, and had a casual elegance about it that she liked, especially when paired as it was with her jeans and leather boots.

"Mom's gonna croak." Angie indicated her sister's denims.

"Not my fault." Kerry said. "I came up here to move boxes. She picked the pretentious place to eat at." She adjusted the three quarter sleeves and ran her fingers through her hair. "Let's go get this over with."

"Y'know." Mike spoke up. "I don't think she wants to piss you off again, Ker." He walked next to his older sister as they crossed the parking lot and approached the entrance of the club, where valets were busy handling a parade of well dressed diners. "It didn't sound that way to me."

"Me either." Angie chimed in. "Honestly Ker, he's right. I think she wants to just make peace."

"Well." Kerry grunted as they reached the sidewalk and headed for the double doors. "That's up to her. I hope you're both right." She politely edged around a group of three older women standing on the stairs, ignoring the looks she got as she pinned the doorman with her eyes and dared him to say anything. "Good evening, Charles."

Caught by surprise, the elderly man gaped at her for a second, then he collected himself and reached for the door handle. "Good evening, Miss Kerry. It's been such a long time."

Kerry gave him several points. One for recognizing her, and two for smiling, with a bonus added on for treating her as though she was a very welcome guest. She returned his smile and gave him a pat on the arm as they entered. "Is my mother here yet?"

"Yes ma'am, inside." The doorman answered briskly. "Have a great evening."

"Thanks." Angie said, as she followed Kerry and her brother inside. "I'm sure we will."

Kerry paused for a moment as she cleared the door, sweeping her eyes over the interior and finding it not much changed since the time she'd been gone from her hometown. A fresh coat of white paint, and some new pieces of furniture appeared to be the only difference, and she continued on towards the dining room confidently.

The hall was moderately crowded. Kerry caught a few familiar faces in her peripheral vision, not usual for as small a town as this was. She kept her focus forward though, and spotted a man in a suite hovering near the maitre d' station who had the air of a political aide.

Accordingly, she changed her path slightly, and addressed the man in the suit as he watched them approach. "Are you waiting for us?"

The man blinked. "Ah..." He spotted Angie and Mike behind her, and his face relaxed in relief. "Yes, absolutely. We have a table waiting, won't you come with me?" He waited for her to nod, then turned and started into the large dining room.

Angie poked her. "Stop scaring people!"

"Me?" Kerry looked over her shoulder innocently. "I haven't done anything. Yet."

"I should have brought my camera." Mike lamented. "This is probably going to be the first and only time I have a good time in this dusty old place." He caught up with Kerry as they turned a corner and entered a more or less secluded cul de sac, where a beautifully set table was waiting, their mother standing at the head of it.

There were three aides milling behind her, and Mike realized everyone was more than a little freaked out. He saw the guy who had met them scurry out of the way, and then Kerry just took control of everything with a manner that made him cover his mouth not to laugh.

"Mother." Kerry went to the head of the table and extended her hands, giving the aides a brief nod of greeting. "Good to see you."

Cynthia Stuart was caught faintly aback, but she rallied. "Kerrison, it's lovely to see you as well." She took Kerry's hands and clasped them. "I am so glad you were all able to come tonight." Her eyes flicked over Kerry's outfit, but to her credit, she sailed right past it. "Wont you sit down? Let's have some wine and celebrate being together."

Kerry allowed a real smile to emerge, seating herself just to her mother's right hand side as Angie and Mike took seats next to her and the serving staff replaced the hovering aides. "That sounds wonderful." She took her napkin and flicked it open expertly, settling it over her lap as her crystal goblet was filled. "They haven't started serving chili dogs here, have they?"

"Ah..."

"Too bad. I wonder if they'll make me one. "

**

Dar was pathetically grateful to close the door to her hotel room behind her and trudge across the carpet, tossing her jacket down on the chair and continuing on through the room to the bathroom.

Inside, she stripped off all the clothing she'd been wearing, and put it into the linen laundry bag hanging neatly on a hook beside the door. Then she turned the water on, waiting for it to come to a reasonable temperature before she stepped in and simply stood there, letting it rinse over her.

After a minute, she picked up her scrubbie and body wash, and scrubbed her skin all over, sneezing a few times as she soaped her face, then following that with three washes of her hair with as much shampoo as she could fit in the palm of her larger than average hand.

After a good rinse, she shut the water off and stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel to dry herself with. She opened the door, wrapping the towel around her as she picked up the laundry bag and took it with her back to the door. She unlocked it and dropped the bag outside, then went to the phone and dialed the number for the concierge.

"Good, ah, morning." A polite, male voice answered. "Ms. Roberts, what can I do for you?"

Nothing. Dar was convinced, nothing was better than a hotel with a 24 hour concierge. "I have a laundry bag outside my room. Can you get it picked up and taken care of?"

"Of course." The man answered. "I'll send someone right up."

Dar considered. "And could you get me some warm milk and honey sent up as well?"

"Absolutely." The concierge said. "Right away."

"Thanks." Dar hung up the phone and went back to toweling her now thankfully smoke free self off. It was just after one AM local time, but her body still thought it was eight PM, and she hoped the warm milk would let her get to sleep. "All I need is to be a zombie tomorrow." She muttered under her breath, looking up as a knock came at the door.

Was it physically possible for anyone to come up that many flights that fast? Dar wrapped her towel around her again and tucked the ends in then ran her fingers through her wet hair before she went to the door and opened it.

"Ah." Alastair's eyes widened. "Listen, Dar..."

"Listen, Alastair." Dar cut him off. "Let's get this clear. The next time you drag me into a bar full of cigarette smoke and drunk assholes and force me to stay there, consider my resignation on your desk."

Alastair's mouth closed with a click.

"I am not bullshitting."

"Never would have thought you'd bullshit about that." Alastair recovered. "Sorry about that, Dar." He said, in a more conciliatory tone. "I know the boys are just so thrilled about the opportunity here, they went a little overboard."

"Grr." Dar glanced at the man from housekeeping, who sidled up and took the bag as quickly as he could and ducked back out of the way again. "Thanks." She turned and looked at Alastair. "I appreciate it's a cultural thing, Alastair, but next time, just leave me out of it. I can't stand being in places like that, no matter how good the beer was."

"I forgot.. well, no, really, I never even thought to ask but you don't smoke, do you?" Her boss mused. "Or Kerry, I suppose. I guess it's what you get used to, and with all the new laws on our side, you don't bump into that as often."

"Yeah, well." Dar glanced down the hall. "That's true, I guess." She conceded. "Well, let me get back inside and try and get some sleep before we have to go act like world killers tomorrow morning."

Her boss lifted a hand and started off towards his own room. "Good idea, Dar." He turned at the door and looked back at her. "But you know, you play a mean game of darts."

Dar paused before she shut her door. "It could have been a lot meaner." She said, giving Alastair a brief smile, before she ducked inside and left the hallway in stately silence again.

The knock at the door made her turn and grab the handle, yanking it open as she started to yell, only to swallow her outrage and muster a smile instead for the young woman holding a silver tray. "Oh. Sorry. Hi. Come on in."

She backed away from the door and the server entered, placing the tray down and removing a soft, quilted cover from the pot on it. "Thanks."

"You're very welcome." The woman presented the billfold to her, and Dar signed it, handing it back. "Will there be anything else you need this evening?"

Dar glanced at the clock. "I hope not." She sighed.

"Well then, have a good night." The server disappeared out the door, and Dar sat down next to the table holding the tray as it got blessedly quiet again. She picked up one of the nice, big stoneware cups and poured a glob of honey into it, then added steaming milk and stirred.

It smelled wonderful. Her throat, scratchy and sore from the night spent yelling over bad music and breathing in smoke was aching for the sweet taste, and she picked up the cup and took it over to the beside table, setting it down and going back to her bag to get her sleep shirt.

She picked up her PDA on the way and brought it back to bed with her, setting it down as she replaced her towel with the worn baseball shirt and shorts she seldom wore anymore. They smelled like home, though, and she sat down and picked up the PDA, flipping it open and checking for messages before she took out the stylus and scribed one of her own.

Hey.

I'm alone in my hotel with a pot of hot milk and a bad attitude. – where are you?

D

She set the PDA down and stretched out on the bed, picking up the cup and sipping from it. The milk tasted a little different than she was used to, but not in a bad way and she at last allowed the stress and aggravation of the day to dissipate.

Just like the old days. She glanced at the PDA, waiting impatiently for the red flash to appear. Well, almost just like the old days.

**

"Are these some of your new staff, mother?" Kerry put her glass down, relaxing a trifle as the servers gently interrupted the silted conversation by placing salad plates in front of them.

"Hm?" Her mother glanced around, as though first noticing the hovering aides. "Oh, yes. Yes they are." She said. "A nice bunch of young people. I will introduce you to them tomorrow." She said. "Angela says you all have been very busy today?"

"Yes." Kerry sliced up her salad and decorated it with appropriate amounts of dressing. "Sorting through things, packing, you know."

"Well, I really don't understand why you just didn't have someone take care of that for you, Angela. Having Kerrison come here for that seems very silly to me." Cynthia frowned. "Very silly."

Kerry took a moment to eat a big mouthful of the salad, because it would take some time for her to chew it, and because she knew if she answered right at the moment the dinner probably would start sliding downhill faster than she'd anticipated. She swallowed, and washed down the crisp lettuce and greens with a sip of wine. "How could some hired firm decide what to keep and what to throw away?" She asked. "I don't understand that."

"Yes." Angela stepped up. "Really, mother, you didn't want me bringing a lifetime worth of old plastic cups and shopping lists back, did you?"

"Well." Cynthia paused, and frowned. "I suppose not." She conceded. "But really, all that hard work."

"Definitely worth it." Angie said. "Besides, it's been fun spending some time with my sister just hanging out."

"Yeah." Mike added. "It's hard catching up in email or on the phone. You can't see her goofy faces."

Kerry looked across at him, her eyes twinkling a little. "Ah, my secret's out. Now you know why I do all those conference calls."

"I'm sure, I'm sure." Their mother replied. "But surely you don't need the excuse of rummaging through all that to speak to one another. I'm positive Kerrison was glad to visit just to see you. Isn't that so?" She looked at Kerry.

"Of course." Kerry replied quietly.

"There, see?" Cynthia said. "So to have you endure this manual labor is just senseless, really."

"Eh." Kerry made a noncommittal sound. "It's not that bad." She went back for a second mouthful of salad, pausing when her ear caught the faint beep from her PDA. She put her fork down and unclipped the device from her belt, opening it and peering at its screen. "Excuse me."

"What on earth is that?" Her mother asked. "A calculator?"

"A personal digital assistant." Kerry replied absently, as she scanned Dar's message. "With a note from Dar inside it." She extracted the stylus and started answering her partner's note, a smile tugging at her lips.

Honey, if I could click my cowboy booted heels three times and disappear from having dinner with my mother just to share your milk and your attitude I'd be there in a heartbeat."

K

"How strange."

Kerry covered the PDA and put it on the table. "Not really." She picked up her fork again. "We use many different types of communications in our line of work. This is just one of them." She selected a wedge of tomatoe and ate it.

"Dar's in London right now, isn't she?" Angie spoke up. "It's late there."

Kerry nodded, and swallowed. "She is, she got there this morning. She just finished meeting with our international team there, and she has a client meeting tomorrow morning."

"London? How lovely." Cynthia took back the conversational ball. "I've always wanted to see London and Paris. So lovely and cultured." She looked past Kerry to where Angie was seated. "Isn't that something you'd be interested in, Angela? To see the continent?"

Angie put her glass down. "Well, sure I guess. Who wouldn't?" She said.

"Perhaps we can plan a visit there." Cynthia said, with a glance at Kerry. "I would invite you as well, Kerrison but I know how busy you are with your.. work."

Mike snorted. "Too late. She's going there next week." He was plowing through a bowl of soup and rolls, having turned away the salad. "London, Paris, some place in Germany.. then what was it, Ker, a vacation in the Swiss Alps?"

Kerry wiped her lips. "That's the plan, yep." She said, mentally making a note to give her brother a hug for the quick response. "We've got business meetings for the first week, then I think we're taking some time and doing some touring around, the Alps, maybe hang around for Octoberfest."

"Well." Cynthia said. "Isn't that lovely?"

"Sure is." Mike said. "Hey, can I come work fro you, Kerry? I can carry your briefcase around and pretend I understand one word in ten you're saying."

The PDA beeped softly. Kerry opened it, and glanced at the screen.

Tell your mother to kiss my ass.

Kerry looked up from the screen, directly at her mother.

"Yes, Kerrison?" Cynthia peered back at her. "Did you want to say something?"

It was tempting. But Kerry knew she just couldn't, not just like that. Not yet, anyway. "Dar says hello." She reported. "She's sorry the timing of our travel worked out like it did. I know she would have liked to have been here to help too."

"Now.." Her mother smiled. "Isn't that so gracious of her. I am certainly glad she's enjoying her travels. Do you know where you're staying in London? Some friends of ours just got back from there."

Kerry looked back at the note.

I've just spent the night in a dive bar with twisted English karaoke going on in the middle of a smoke pit with darts added into the bargain. I told Alastair if he did that to me again I was quitting.

"I think she's enjoying the culture." Kerry commented mildly. "They're at the Stafford. Dar said it was nice."

These people are pissing me off. You better get over here fast, before I cause an international incident.

D

"And she's looking forward to me joining her." Kerry scribbled a reply and closed the lid. "The feeling's mutual." She wiped her lips as the waiter removed her salad plate. "So, Mike. What's up with your new job? You started telling us about it before we left for dinner."

"Well..."

**

Kerry welcomed the cool breeze as they stepped outside into the wide entranceway. She moved to one side to let her family emerge behind her, and stood on the top of the drive, her hands shoved casually in her front pockets.

"That really wasn't too awful." Angie murmured in her ear. "Was it?"

"Nah." Kerry licked her lips. "That was great crème brulée." She drew in a breath of air tinged with pine and waited as her mother's aides attended to bringing her car around. Mike came up to stand next to her, and she bumped him with idle affection. "Hey."

"Hey." Mike responded. "I'm glad you're here, even if you aren't."

"Eh." His sister shrugged her shoulders a trifle. "Actually I don't mind it. It's great to see you guys." She glanced past Mike as her mother approached them. "Being the black sheep's not so bad."

"Kerrison." Cynthia was fussing with her bag. "I'm very upset with you!"

News flash. "For what?" Kerry turned to face her. "Paying for dinner?"

"Of course. So inappropriate." Her mother frowned. "My staff had it taken care of."

Kerry rolled her eyes a trifle. "I'm the vice president of a multinational corporation. I can afford it." She said, in a mild tone. "I think I actually get paid more than a Senator does." She added.

"Kerrison!"

Mike made a sound like a duck being shot at. He shuffled a step away from Kerry, while Angela merely covered her eyes with one hand.

"Well, we're a public company. It's published in our annual report." Kerry shrugged. "Anyway, it's no big deal, mother. I was glad to do it. How often do I get to take my family out for dinner?"

Cynthia took a breath, then she merely pursed her lips.

"I'm glad I'm in a position where I can do that." Kerry continued, in a quieter tone. "I'm not sure why that's upsetting."

"Ma'am?" One of her mother's aides approached. "Your car is ready."

"One moment." Cynthia held a hand up. "Of course, I understand." She said. "Forgive me, Kerrison. It was a generous gesture, and I do appreciate it."

Kerry smiled at her. "No problem." She said. "I guess we'll see you at the house tomorrow, once we get all those boxes packed up."

"Indeed, yes." Her mother looked happier. "It will be so nice to have you all there. I'm very much looking forward to it."

There was a truth there, Kerry felt. "I'm looking forward to it too." She replied.

Satisfied, her mother lifted her hand and then followed the aide towards the limo waiting for her. She got in the car, and waved at them, and they waved back.

"It would have been funny if you offered her a ride home in the back of the truck." Mike commented, smiling as he waved. "Or even in the front seat."

"Mike." Angie chuckled. "You're a bigger troublemaker than Kerry is."

"I gotta be better than her at something." Mike replied, as they descended the steps and crossed the parking lot, dodging between the cars busy trying to leave. "Thanks for dinner, sis!" He put his arm around Kerry's shoulders. "You rock."

Kerry chuckled wryly. "Actually you guys are cheap dates." She told her siblings. "You should see the bill when Dar and I go out for a night on the town." Her lips twitched into a grin.

"Party city?" Angie asked. "I don't know, Dar didn't seem the type to me."

"Well.. no, not really that kind of stuff." Kerry said. "We go out for dinner, maybe a little bit of dancing. Dar doesn't drink much, but she likes champagne."

"Hm." Mike mused. "I figured her for a Jack Daniels woman."

"No way." Kerry beeped open the doors to the trunk. "Bubbly, and the good stuff too. We've got a few seafood restaurants we like to hit." She opened the driver's side door. "It doesn't take much stone crab and Cristal to beat what we just had in there, let me tell you."

"Fancy fancy." Mike got in the back and sprawled across the bench seat.

"Yeah." Kerry closed the door and started the truck. "Then the next night we stop at Burger King. My life's a study in eclectic."

Her siblings laughed. "You actually eat Burger King?" Angie asked.

"Sure." Kerry carefully pulled out of the parking lot, waiting until she saw her mother's limo drive off in the other direction. "Wendy's is my favorite fast food though. They have killer spicy chicken sandwiches." She settled back into the seat and concentrated on driving, the roads not quite as familiar as they used to be.

All in all, she had to admit, it hadn't been that bad. Her mother, after those first few jabs, had kept her conversation to superficial matters and they'd talked mostly about Mike's new job, the weather, local news, and a light mention of the conservative rumblings at the national level.

Having her mother be a Senator was very strange, and Kerry found herself almost unable to wrap her mind around it. In a way though, it gave her some small insight on how perhaps her mother felt about her, since her life in Miami and with Dar was so outside her experience as well.

So odd.

"Hey Ker?" Angie half turned in her seat to face her sister. "Do you really get paid more than mom?"

Kerry laughed. "Oh, hell yes." She said. "Any bets she has her goons google our annual report when she gets home to find that out?"

Mike snorted.

"Well." Angie chuckled. "At least this bunch is a lot nicer than the old ones were. They don't give me the creeps, and they stay out of the way, mostly."

"Yeah, they're okay." Mike agreed. "I think one of them is gay, but don't tell mom." He advised. "I caught him and one of the cleaning staff out behind the kitchen door the last time I was at the house."

"What were you doing back behind the kitchen?" Angie asked, her brows arching. "Mr. Nosy Butt."

"Uh oh." Kerry could hear a very familiar argument starting. "Here we go."

"Hey, it's not my fault you never see the fun stuff." Mike retorted. "If you'd get your butt out of the library once in a while you would."

"Library this, monkey face."

Kerry smiled, keeping her eyes on the darkened road as she let the good natured trading of insults go on around her. It felt like home used to be, back when they were all running around on the second floor of the big house, when the biggest thing they had to worry about was knocking over one of the alabaster statues near the stairs.

George Washington had toppled to his demise from a ill judged tackle on her part. She could almost see his white, startled head tumbling down the steps, thumping and cranking all the way down until he reached the bottom, and the marble floor, and shattered into dozens and dozens of pieces.

She chuckled.

"You think that's funny?" Mike poked her. "Hah! And I thought you were on my side!!" He poked her again. "Holy crap." He grabbed her shoulder and squeezed it.

"Mike!" Kerry hissed. "I'm driving! What the heck's your problem?"

"You've got muscles like a wrestler!" Her brother accused her.

"How would you know?" Angie jibed him, giving him a shove back against the seat. "Leave her alone, you weirdo."

Kerry suddenly felt fifteen years younger. "Stop pawing at me and I'll take my shirt off and show em to you back at Angie's." She warned her brother.

"And your tattoo." Angie teased.

"What?????" Mike squealed, crawling up from the back seat and up halfway into the front of the truck. "You got one? You did?????" He slid forward and almost landed on his head, between his sisters.

"Bowah..."

"Oh for the love of.." Kerry released one hand off the wheel and grabbed him. "Mike, if I have an accident driving this damn thing I will never hear the end of it so cut that out! Sit still!" She checked her mirrors, glad to see she was almost alone on the road. "You want us to get pulled over by the cops?"

Mike twisted around and hung his legs over the seat back, his head almost hitting the console. "That would be funny as hell." He said. "Can you see the headlines in the Sentinel? We'd be the talk in the coffee shop for a month."

"Oh god." Kerry heard her cell phone go off. "Now what? Shh, both of you." She pulled it off her belt and keyed the speaker. "Kerry Stuart."

"Hey." Dar's voice emerged from the speaker, a trifle tinnily.

"Hey." Kerry glanced quickly at the display. "Why are you up? It's three AM there, isn't it?"

"I can't sleep." Dar complained. "You're not here in bed with me."

Oh god. Kerry felt a sudden rush of blood to her face, as her siblings burst into laughter. "Thanks, hon." She sighed. "Things weren't chaotic enough in the cab of this pickup with my nutcase family here."

Dar chuckled. "Hey, it's the truth." She said. "How'd dinner go? Did you guys scandalize the town?"

"No, we didn't." Angie spoke up. "How are you Dar? How's England?"

"Annoying the crap out of me. Thanks for asking." Dar answered. "Other than that, I'm fine thanks, Angela. How's the packing going?"

"Ugh. Hard work." Mike announced, folding his hands over his stomach.

"Like you've done any." Kerry gave him a withering look.

"Everything's going fine, thanks for asking Dar." Angie covered her brother's mouth. "Thanks for lending me your SO for a few days to help."

Dar chuckled again. "Well, she wouldn't let me rent her." She sighed. "But you better take good care of her or I'll reroute your paychecks to feed starving wolves in Oregon."

Mike was laughing so hard he was making the seat shake.

"You're so romantic." Kerry said, affectionately. "That's one of the things I adore the most about you, Dardar." She said. "Dinner went fine. We're headed back to Angie's house now." She slowed before the turn up to her sister's road. "You should try and get some sleep."

"Okay." Dar agreed. "Just wanted to find out how things went. Talk to you later, Ker. Love you."

"Love you too." Kerry closed the phone and put it on the seat next to her, aware of the sudden and almost awkward silence from her siblings. She let that go on for a few minutes, then she glanced at them just before she pulled into Angie's driveway. "Least she got you two to stop fighting."

"Yeah." Angie sighed. "You guys sound so storybook married."

Kerry smiled, as she parked the truck, turning off the engine and popping the door open. "That's probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me, sis. Thanks." She got out, and Angie hopped out on the other side.

They looked at each other, then they both slammed their respective doors, leaving Michael hanging upside down in the front seat.

"Hey!" He yelled through the door. "Hey! Help me out of here!"

Kerry and Angie bolted for the house, running up the sidewalk toward the front door as the horn started honking behind them, laughing as they headed for the door.

**

Dar woke up as the window across from her started to glow with early light, her internal clock as oddly dependable as it was at home despite the five hour time difference. She studied the outline of the sill, content to lay there wrapped around her pillow as sleep slowly receded.

Softly, far off, she could hear the sounds of the city. Horns, and the sounds of machinery, no different than any other city she'd ever woken up in save the one where she lived. Out on the island, there was no real traffic, and if anything penetrated the soundproofed walls of the condo it was the roar of the ocean and the occasional hoot of a barge.

Or sometimes a mating peacock.

The peace there was something she'd come to appreciate. It gave her a period of space in which to live, and get ready for the day before she had to cross the water, and enter the insanity of Miami traffic and head to work.

Spending the morning with Kerry, going through their routine, the gentle banter, the morning run, or walk over to the gym in bad weather, just talking together, or being silent together – she found that with a start like that, her entire attitude at work had completely changed.

People used to absolutely avoid her. Dar realized that. She knew that she'd done a lot to foster the notion that she was likely to bite people's head off in the morning unless she'd at least gotten a gallon or two of café con leche into her, and that if you wanted anything, you'd better wait until after lunch, to be safe.

Now? People actually approached her in the damned elevator on the way up to the fourteenth floor. Dar rolled over and stretched her body out. Sometimes some of them even smiled at her, and occasionally, when she was in a particularly mellow mood after one of their long joint showers, she smiled back.

Less coffee, less stress, less screaming, more fun. Dar smiled at the ceiling. Life was charming the hell out of her at the moment despite the fact she'd had to spend the previous night in a smoky pub. Stifling a yawn, she pulled the covers back and rolled up out of the bed and onto her feet, stretching her limbs out as she wandered over to the window and peered out.

Raining. Dar pondered the gray exterior, glad she had her long coat handy. The meeting was not that far away, perhaps ten minutes, and she reveled in the notion that she had a reasonable amount of time to order breakfast up and shower before she had to get ready.

Nice.

She sat down at the sleek desk near the window and flipped the room service menu open, propping her head up on one hand as she studied it's contents. After a minute she closed the book and touched

the speakerphone keypad, dialing room service and placing her order with the amiable and cheery voice on the other end.

That done, she opened the screen to her laptop and started it up, leaning back in the chair as she waited for it to boot. Since it was in the middle of the night back at the office, she really didn't expect there to be much mail but you never knew, and anyway, sometimes Maria forwarded her unintentionally funny jokes she'd come to enjoy.

The room was pleasantly cool, and she felt a sense of contentment as she watched some birds fly past outside the window, turning her head back only when her laptop beeped, wanting attention. She keyed in her password and let it continue, connecting to the surreptitiously hidden wifi connection and starting up her secured session to the office.

Mark had found them biometric laptops. They had a scanner attached that took fingerprints. Dar had tried one for a period of a week and ended up almost tossing it off the balcony on the 14th floor as the technology was just not ready for her prime time apparently.

Either that, or she had weird fingerprints. Mark swore it worked for him. They were going to try retinal scanners next, but she figured if the stupid things couldn't even read her index finger, they had scant chance of being able to read her eyeball.

"Technology sucks sometimes." She informed her laptop, as it presented her inbox to her. "It's just never where we want it to be, is it?"

The laptop beeped back at her.

"Shut up." Dar leaned forward and reviewed her mail. As expected, there was nothing much urgent and she picked through them with casual interest, pausing to smile at a forwarded picture of a sunbathing cat from Kerry, and to shake her head at yet another request for people to stop cooking fish in the building from Mariana.

"Ah." She saw another one from the HR VP and opened it. It was the softball team lineup, listing Kerry as captain and laying out the game schedule. She reviewed it, nibbling her lip as she realized they'd only be back from Europe a few days before the opening night. "Hm."

Mariana had told everyone that winning wasn't as important as participating. Dar understood that intellectually, but she knew fully well that no one wanted to lose, least of all her, and really least of all her curiously competitive partner.

So. She opened a message and addressed it to Mark.

Hey. Make sure everyone shows up for those practice games since we'll be out here. I don't want to look like a jerk when we play the first one.

D

She reviewed it, then sent the mail. That left the problem of when she and Kerry were going to practice, and she frowned. Maybe getting involved in the softball thing when they were traveling wasn't the best idea.

On one hand, she figured she could probably handle a game without much preamble, trusting what she thought of as a reasonable set of athletic skills and a cursory memory of the sport to carry her through.

Kerry, however, though she had good reflexes and could handle her body really had nothing to go by in terms of knowing what to do in the game and Dar had gone and volunteered her as captain.

"That was idiotic." She remarked to herself.

A knock came at the door, and she left the problem to sit as she went and answered it, letting in the room service waiter complete with a little wooden cart full of her selected breakfast. She signed the check and handed it back, then sat down as the waiter left and closed the door.

In the midst of opening her cereal box, her cell phone rang. Dar cursed, launching herself over the bed to the nightstand where the device was rattling, and grabbing it. She opened it and managed to get it to one ear without falling off the bed, but without time to see who it was. "Yes?"

"Hey honey."

Dar stuck her tongue out and stifled a laugh. "Hey."

"You okay? You sound weird."

"I'm upside down." Dar squirmed into a more comfortable position and relaxed. "What are you doing up? It's late."

"I can't sleep." Kerry told her. "You're not here in bed with me."

Dar chuckled. "Sorry about that." She said. "I didn't realize you had me on speaker until it was too late."

"No problem." Her partner assured her. "I absolutely loved having my brother and sister hear what you said to me. Angie said we sounded so married."

"Aw."

"So how's it really going?" Kerry said. "I almost threw peas at my mother here. She finally stopped with the snarky bs about halfway through dinner."

"It's fine." Dar assured her. "I was pissed off about the bar, but that's no one's fault. I'm looking forward to the meeting at ten. You got more packing to do?"

"Yeah." Her partner agreed mournfully. "Then we're going over to the house and haul everything in there. I'm having fun with Ang and Mike but boy, I'm not looking forward to hanging out with my mother."

"Want me to invent a disaster for you to fix?"

"You keep teasing me with that offer." Kerry reminded her dryly. "Don't jinx us, hon. We're both out of the office and we don't really need something to crash, y'know?"

"Mm."

"We'd just have to fly back to Miami and fix it."

"Hm." Dar's low grunt grew far more cheerful. "We'd be in the same place then." She offered. "That can't be all bad, can it?"

Kerry laughed softly, for at least thirty seconds. "Let's see." She said. "It's been, what... two days now? That must be a record for us before we start whining about being apart." She said. "We're so nuts."

"But in a nice way."

Kerry was silent for a brief moment. "In a very beautiful way." She said. "Being with my mother, and my sister, and my brother who is on his fourth girlfriend this year made me realize all over again just how blessed my life is."

Dar studied the ceiling, feeling a stupid grin stretch her lips. "You're better than Frosted Flakes for breakfast, you know that?" She said. "Ah, Ker. Go back to sleep. You're going to be toast tomorrow if you don't and you'll end up going off on everyone."

Kerry made a small, grunted sound.

"Won't you?"

"Probably." Her partner sighed. "This bed's just not comfortable, and I miss my dog, and I want some chocolate milk." She admitted. "And you're the only one I can say that to who won't look at me funny or tell me to grow the hell up."

Dar chuckled.

"I'm not sure I even know who these people are anymore." Kerry added. "I feel like I hardly know them."

"They hardly know you." Dar said. "Give it a few days. You sounded pretty rambunctious with them in the car."

A small silence. "Yeah, I guess I did. It's all right. I think I just keep freaking them out. "

Dar's eyes flicked over the ceiling, her sensitive ears catching the change in her partner's tone. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Just be who you are, Ker." Dar advised gently. "They'll get used to it. Don't be afraid to not pretend, you know?"

Kerry sighed. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of." She confessed. "It's hard to make everyone change the way they see me. It's easier for me to pretend I'm someone else. It always was." She paused. "But you know something, I don't think I can do it anymore."

"Would it help if I sent you flowers at your mom's house?" Dar asked, with a hint of a wry chuckle. "You know I always get you the most expensive ones."

Finally, Kerry chuckled, after a long pause. "I can do this." She said. "I'll be fine. I just needed a Dar time out."

Talk about freaking out. "Anytime, sweetheart." Dar assured her. "I'll always be there for you." She heard the slight inhale, and the faint sound of Kerry swallowing. "Now go to bed, and let me eat my English Frosted Flakes and weird tasting milk for breakfast."

"I love you." Kerry replied, simply. "Talk to you later, okay?"

"Later." Dar hung up the phone and let it sit on her chest for a few minutes. Then she chuckled and got up, taking her box of cereal with her back to the tray. "Dar time out." She shook her head and poured the cereal into the waiting bowl. "And she thinks HER life's changed."

**

Kerry hummed softly under her breath as she neatly flipped a set of pancakes, a plate of omelettes and bacon already waiting nearby. She had her back to her sister's servants, aware of their nervous anxiety and she wondered briefly if they were more worried about her getting burned or if that she was auditioning for their jobs.

Not really much danger of either. She'd cooked long enough and often enough to know how to avoid getting hurt and even when she'd been younger and willing to take about any job, short order cook had never been in her personal horizon.

She didn't mind cooking for herself, or for Dar, or for family. Cooking for strangers, however, was another story especially after a night of little sleep and a morning full of gray rain outside. Her ears pricked, as she heard footsteps in the hall, and she caught the nervous jerks from the staff as they heard them as well.

"Wh.. Kerry!" Angie entered, spotting her at the stove. "What in blazes are you doing?"

Kerry looked at the pan, then she turned her head and looked at her sister, then she looked back at the pan. "You have done this, Ang. I know you have. I used to live with you, remember? Don't tell me you never told these guys about those banana brownies you used to make."

Angie came over and peered over her bare shoulder. "You're cooking." She said, avoiding the brownie issue.

"I am." Her older sister confirmed. "I said I was going to. You didn't believe me?" She scooped the last of the pancakes into their dish and covered it, then she turned off the gas to the stove. "I didn't get

much sleep last night so I figured I'd better make something I liked for breakfast so I didn't whine all day."

Angie picked up one of the dishes, a bemused but understanding look on her face. She gave her staff a wry smile as she turned and headed after Kerry to the dining room. "Don't worry about my sister. She's just got a mind of her own."

"Got that right." Kerry set the plates she had in her hands down. "Well, good morning." She greeted her brother, who was rubbing both eyes. "Fine state of affairs when I'm the early bird in the family." She took a seat near one end of the big table, the warm light bathing her tanned arms very visible in her tank top.

"Pissant" Mike grumbled, sitting down across from her before he peered at Kerry, and jerked upright. "Holy shit. You did get a tattoo." He scrambled out of his chair and came around the table, as Kerry continued to calmly butter her toast. "Wow."

"Eat breakfast first, gawk later." Kerry advised him. "It's not going anywhere." She dumped some pancakes, an omelette, and a slice of bacon on her plate.

"Did it hurt?" Mike asked, curiously. "What made you get it?"

Angie motioned the staff to bring coffee over. "I think it's pretty."

"Can I touch it?" Mike asked.

Kerry put her fork down and half turned to face Mike. "Sure." She moved the strap of her tank top over to give him a better view. "Yes, it hurt." She said, as he bent closer. "It hurt a lot, but it was worth it."

"Wow." He repeated, putting a finger out hesitantly and touching the design. "Oh." He said. "It just feels like skin."

Angie appeared on her other side, running her thumb over it. "It is." She said, in surprise. "I thought it would be raised up, like those inoculations."

Kerry felt herself twitch, just a little, as they touched her. "Well, when he first did it, it was kinda." She said. "It was pretty swollen."

"It was?" Angie looked up at her at close quarters, nearly making her eyes cross. "Is it like a burn?"

"It's.. yeah, I guess." Her older sister said. "I mean, they take needles and jab them into your skin over and over again, so it kind of gets all sore and puffy. But it heals pretty fast." She went on. "It stops hurting really bad as soon as they stop sticking needles in you."

Mike shook his head and went back to his seat. "You are totally crazy." He announced. "But it is really nice looking, Ker. Did Dar like it? She should. It's her name there."

Kerry went back to sorting out her breakfast. "She did. I think one of the reasons maybe that I got it was because I knew it was something I could do that she probably wouldn't."

"She doesn't like tattoos?" Angie eased away from her and went back to her place at the head of the table.

"She's scared to death of needles." Kerry responded, with a wry grin. "Don't you remember in the hospital?"

Angie's eyes widened, as she helped herself to the plates. "Oh my gosh, I do. That's right!" She gave the woman at her shoulder a nod, and sat back as coffee was poured into her cup. "She almost went crazy there before everything got horrible."

They all fell briefly silent as they started breakfast, and Kerry was left in peace to think about Mike's first question.

Why. Why had she really gotten the tattoo? For herself? For Dar? Kerry chuckled a little under her breath and shook her head. She still really didn't know for sure. "So anyway." She broke the quiet. "I

love the thing. Dar was in New York when I got it, and I had a day or so to let it heal before I showed it to her. I could see it was going back and forth in the back of her mind if she wanted to get one too.”

“Kerry?” Mike looked up. “Thanks for making breakfast. This rocks.”

Angie looked around, but the two servant women had retreated back to the kitchen. “Yeah.” She said. “Thanks... I know I used to make brownies but I have no idea how to tell these people to make things I like.”

Kerry waved a fork at them, busy chewing.

“Have you decided what you’re going to speak about at the banquet tonight?” Angie asked. “You know, Marga Smithton called me last night and said she saw us in the restaurant with mom and she said everyone’s been talking about it.”

Kerry rolled her eyes.

“Hey, slow news week.” Her sister held a hand up. “C’mon, Kerry. You used to live here. How many weeks did duck racing make the front page?”

Kerry swallowed and wiped her lips with her napkin. “They need to get a life.” She said. “I’ve figured out two different ways to go tonight, and it depends on how they react when I get there. Either they’re going to get my professional presentation, or they’re going to get the radical biker dyke. All up to them.”

Both her siblings blinked at her.

“Ah. Forgot to tell you I got a motorcycle too.” Kerry grinned, and took a sip of her coffee. “Actually, it was a joint purchase. Dar and I use it down by the cabin in the Keys.” She explained. “Which by the way, you both have to come down and stay at sometime.”

“I’ll take you up on that.” Mike said. “Can I ride the bike?”

“Sure.” Kerry could still sense the faint waves of shock rolling around the table. “We go down on weekends a lot and just bum around there. It’s quiet, and it’s right on the water, I love chilling out on the beach in front.”

“Sounds gorgeous.” Angie recovered and picked up the conversation again. “Is it a long drive?”

“Well.” Kerry answered. “It’s about an hour and a half, I guess, but we also take the boat down there and that’s a little longer. We don’t care though because we stop and dive on the way down.”

“Man.” Her brother shook his head. “What a life.”

Kerry smiled and took a forkful of pancake to eat. She felt a faint buzz in her pocket and pulled out her phone, setting it on the table and opening it. “Excuse me.” She put the forkful down and pressed the answer button. “Kerry Stuart.”

“Hello, Ms. Stuart?” A male voice answered. “This is ops. We have kind of a situation here and we need someone to make a decision.”

“Called the right person.” Kerry regretfully glanced at her plate. “Go on. What’s the problem?”

“There’s a new sales account, the International Cellular group?” The tech ventured. “Do you know about them.”

“Sure.” Kerry said.

“Okay, well, they were supposed to come live next week, but it turns out their stuff came early so they want to bring up the circuits into the network, but the change control’s not ready.”

Ah. Kerry leaned back and folded her arms, considering the issue. “Does Mark have the network provisioning ready?” She asked.

“He says he can have it.”

Ah. Kerry almost laughed. That meant everyone really wanted to help out their new customer, and no one wanted to stand on procedure – but no one wanted to cross her strict insistence on documented change control either.

Only Dar would casually do that, and often did. But to be fair, if anyone else asked Dar if they could do it, Dar sent them to Kerry. She reserved the right to bypass the rules for herself and Kerry had accepted that without much qualm, not only because Dar was her boss, but because she trusted her instincts. “Okay, you have my verbal to proceed, so long as Mark files the paperwork in the system and it comes up after business hours.”

“Right oh, ma’am.” The tech sounded happier. “Mark’s on the way to do that now. Thank you!”

“Anytime.” Kerry hung up the phone and went back for her fork, glad the issue had been simple.

“So who was that?” Angie asked.

Kerry held up her finger, and managed to get a mouthful of her breakfast. She patiently chewed it and swallowed. “Our operations center in Miami.” She said. “We put some new policies and procedures in place and they’re determined to stick by them.”

“So you really do run that place, huh?” Mike said.

Kerry nodded, but kept eating.

“She does.” Angie said. “I don’t know if mom googled you last night, but I did. Holy bananas, Kerry. You’re an executive vice president.”

“Uh huh.” Her sister nodded again.

“So, I have a question.” Angie leaned forward a little. “If you make what you do, and Dar makes what she does, and you live in a gillion dollar condo on some ritzy private island, and you own a boat, and a snazzy cabin in the Keys... why the heck do you cook for yourself and drive your own car?”

Kerry stopped chewing and looked up at her, head tilted slightly to one side. After a second she hastily swallowed and picked up her coffee cup, washing her mouthful down. “Huh?”

“Yeah.” Mike had no such worries. He plowed through his pancakes as he talked. “How come you don’t have a half dozen people chasing after you holding your briefcase? I could be one of them.”

How come? Kerry was honestly perplexed, never having even considered anything remotely like it. “Well.” She said, after a long pause. “I like cooking, and I like driving. Why would I let someone else do it for me?”

She looked at her siblings, and they looked back at her, and she suddenly felt the gulf between them like it was a physical void. It was strange, and upsetting, since she’d grown up in this same type of home, in this same type of environment and yet living like her sister lived, like her mother lived, was as alien to her as winter had come to be.

“Huh.” Mike grunted. “I like people doing things for me. Who likes to do laundry and stuff? I’d rather have clean clothes appear like magic.”

“Me too.” Angie agreed. “If I didn’t have someone helping me with Andrew, I’d go crazy.”

Kerry sucked on her fork tines, then she shook her head. “I don’t have time in my life for that.” She said. “It’s way too complicated, dealing with people doing stuff for me. It’s a lot easier just to do it myself.”

Angie looked at the plate, and then she just chuckled and shrugged. “Well, no one can argue you know what you’re doing, sis. Whatever makes you happy.”

“Right on.” Mike agreed. “You can cook for me anytime.”

“Thanks.” Kerry went back to her breakfast, more than a little bemused. “Now can we shut up and eat?” She added. “Before I have to get up and cook it all over again?”

“Oo.. she’s the boss.”

**

Dar took advantage of being slightly behind Alastair to take a moment to pull her cuffs straight as they stood waiting to enter the sturdy oak doors to the conference room. She then put her hands together over her leather binder, shifting her shoulder a little under the weight of her laptop case as she listened to Alastair’s cheerful chatter with their hosts.

She was the only one with a laptop, naturally. The rest of the team with them were sales executives, who had thick leather portfolios clasped under their arms, dark suits, light shirts, classy ties and appropriately confident, but reserved expressions.

Like theirs, Dar’s business suit was a conservative charcoal grey, but that’s where the resemblance stopped. She was wearing a knee length skirt and a creamy beige silk shirt, and her lapel was impudently decorated with a jewel encrusted microchip just to drive the point home that she wasn’t one of the front of the house boys.

Nerd. Dar licked her lips and hid a smile, straightening her shoulders as she heard the doors start to open, and the chatter died down.

“Well, here we go.” Alastair turned, glancing behind him as if to make sure Dar was there. “Ready, lady?”

Dar wrinkled her nose at him, and chuckled.

“Gentlemen..” The polite man opening the door paused. “Ah, and lady. Please come inside. Welcome.”

“That’s twice in sixty seconds.” Dar muttered, as she followed Alastair inside, the rest of the team deferring to her. She glanced around as she crossed the thick carpet, appreciating the high ceiling and expansive proportions of the conference room.

At the head of the table sat Sir Melthon Gilberthwaite, who was such a stereotypical Forties movie style British magnate Dar half suspected there was a film crew around somewhere. Seated next to him was Hans, who solemnly winked at Dar as their group entered.

“Ah, Sir Melthon.” Alastair advanced confidently. “It’s good to see you again.”

“McLean.” The magnate barked gruffly. “Good start. You lot showed up on time. I hate slackers, like this godson of mine.”

Hans smiled benignly.

Alastair reached the table and took Sir Melthon’s extended hand in a firm grip. “We try not to slack, though I have to tell you this time difference smacks the heck out of us.” He released the man’s hand and turned. “Let me introduce my team here.”

Dar stood quietly waiting, letting Alastair’s genial introductions of the sales team roll past her as she waited her turn, fairly sure that he would introduce her last as he usually did when they were in a group. She wasn’t sure if it was something to do with her being a woman, or just her being her, but she realized the magnate at the end of the table was waiting as well as he looked right at her the whole time.

“And of course, our Chief Information Officer, Dar Roberts.” Alastair concluded, turning to give Dar a nod. “The architect of our infrastructure.”

“Sir Melthon.” Dar inclined her head in response, meeting his eyes. “It’s good to meet you.”

The magnate stood up and walked around the table to where she was standing, shooing the others out of the way. He stopped in front of her, his head nearly but not quite even with hers, and put his hands on his hips. “You the git who kicked my godson in the rear?”

“I am.” Dar replied mildly, aware of Alastair’s widening eyes behind him.

"You're one of those smart mouthed women, aren't you?" Sir Melthon accused. "One of them who thinks they know everything?"

"Absolutely." Dar agreed. "I wouldn't be here otherwise. I don't waste my time on small potatoes and two bit thinkers." She could hear the air being sucked out of the room around her, and wondered if the two European sales managers were going to pass out right on the conference room floor. "I don't think you do either."

Sir Melthon grunted. "Hah." He turned and went back to his chair. "What's the world coming to, hah? Foreign women in my boardroom. Scandalous!" He looked at the rest of them. "Well, you idiots! Sit down! You think I'm going to talk to you getting a crook in my neck? Especially that smart mouthed woman! Sit!"

Everyone hastily grabbed for a chair except for Dar, who meandered around to the other side of the table and set her laptop case down first before she took a seat in one of the comfortable leather chairs. "Nice." She commented to Hans in German.

"It will get better. He likes you." Hans advised her, in a low mutter. "I think perhaps he wants to take you to bed."

Dar nodded, steepling her fingers as the sales team prepared their presentation. "Did you tell him I was married?"

"I did so." Hans replied, in a regretful tone.

"To another woman?"

The German half shrugged. "Not so much."

Dar chuckled under her breath and removed her laptop from its case, opening it and starting it up. "This is going to be a party I can tell already. He's going to love it when Kerry gets here."

Hans smiled and folded his hands over his stomach, beaming contentedly at the room.

**

"That it?" Kerry nudged the box she'd carried and lifted into the flatbed of the pickup into place. She stood up and dusted her hands off, glad she'd decided to keep her tank top on to work in as the afternoon sun warmed her skin.

"Ugh. I hope so." Mike sat down on the tailgate of the truck. "That was hard work."

"You carried three boxes." Kerry took a seat on the edge of the truck side, resting her elbows on her knees and removing the pair of leather work gloves she'd put on. "Give me a break."

Mike looked up at her. "Hey. We're not all athletic like you are." He swung his legs a little, watching his sister out of the corner of his eye as they waited for Angie to join them. As he'd expected, Kerry did in fact have visible muscles, but they weren't the kind you saw on sports shows or in those freaky infomercials.

They were just there, along her arms and shoulders, just under the skin where you could see them move when she did. They didn't look bad, he decided, and they didn't look like a guys, either. But with her cropped hair they presented a picture of her that just didn't match the one he'd held in his head for a very long time.

She leaned back and crossed her ankles, resting her hands on the truck side and tipping her head back to look up at the sky, and Mike felt suddenly that this was a person he really didn't know that much about. "Hey Ker?"

"Hm?" She rolled her head to one side and looked at him. "Just kidding, Mike. I'm glad you showed up even if you didn't carry a box. It's good to see you."

He grinned. "I was gonna say pretty much the same thing." He said. "So much craps gone on the last couple of years, it's been a bitch, you know?"

"I know." Kerry agreed. "It's been tough for me, all that stuff."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad I have Dar's family around." Kerry said, gazing at her work boots. "I don't think I was ready to just not have anyone but me and her. I missed having people around me and her folks are amazing. They're at our place now, dog sitting."

"They seem really cool." Mike agreed. "Dar's mom scares me."

Kerry chuckled. "She's hilarious." She said. "There's so much of her in Dar, and neither of them will admit it. Dar looks just like her dad, but really, her wit's just like her moms."

Mike got up and climbed into the bed of the truck with her, sitting down next to Kerry on the side. "We had some fun before, though." He said. "It wasn't all bad, growing up together. I didn't think so, anyway."

"There were good times." His sister said. "I had fun with you and Angie. I just wish we could have stayed like.. around ten. Once I started growing up is when things got weird." She pondered the boxes around them. "I'm just really glad I didn't figure out I was gay until I left home."

"That didn't go over really well." Her brother agreed. "Was it weird for you?"

Kerry thought about those long, confusing days, and after a moment of silence, she nodded. "It was really hard." She said. "For a while I wasn't sure... I knew if I had to tell the folks it would be the end of me being a part of the family." She paused. "I thought a lot about whether it was worth it."

"Telling them?"

"Living." Kerry answered briefly.

Mike turned and looked at her, with a shocked expression.

Kerry looked back at him. "You have no idea what it's like." She said. "Being hated that much for something you can't change."

Mike was silent for a minute. Then he nodded. "You're right." He said. "I have no idea what that's like. I think... well, I know the folks thought you were just being stubborn, or rebelling or whatever." He frowned. "It was like, why did you have to do that?"

"For a long time I didn't." Kerry said. "I just lived with knowing I was going to have to say something sometime but I was too scared to take the next step, until the day I met Dar." She studied her hands, her thumb rubbing against her ring. "Then I knew I couldn't pretend anymore. I had to fish or cut bait, as they say in the marina."

"Ang and I felt.. " Mike paused. "Well, we kind of felt like you picked Dar over us."

Kerry glanced up at him. "Actually what I did was pick me over the rest of you." She answered. "I decided my being happy was more important than my family, and you have no idea how much it hurt to have to make that choice."

Mike was quiet for a few minutes. They both looked up hearing the house door close, and saw Angie making her way towards them with one last box. "I'm glad you picked you, Ker." He said, in a serious tone. "You're one of the few people I know who honest to God is happy."

"Hey you two." Angie thumped the box down. She was in jeans, and a sweatshirt. "That's it. I'm over packing. Anything else goes to charity." She pushed the box into the truck and sat down on the tail. "Jesus, what was I thinking keeping all that stuff?"

"Eh." Kerry leaned back again, relaxing. "I have to admit, if I had to move now with all the toys and gear and what not Dar and I have, I probably would need to hire a moving company myself." She said. "So are we ready to get this stuff over to mom's? I need some time to get changed for the shindig tonight."

"You going like that?" Angie pulled one knee up and wrapped her hands around it. "I have to bring the camera for mom's face if you do."

Kerry considered it, then a cool draft hit her between the shoulderblades and she looked up at the sun. "Nah." She decided. "I'll throw a sleeved shirt on. I'm going to freeze my ass off if I don't and it's not worth the freak out." She got up and went to the other side of the truck, putting her hands on the side and vaulting over it to land with some grace on the other side.

"Okay, we'll wait out here for you." Angie agreed.

Kerry raised her hand and waved it as she trotted off towards the house, taking her gloves off and stuffing them in her belt as she went.

Angie leaned back against the wall of the truck and reviewed her pile of stuff. "Not that mom's not going to freak out as it is, us pulling up in a pickup in jeans." She remarked. "But what the hell. Kerry didn't rebel until her late twenties, maybe it's our turn."

Mike eyed her dubiously. "You're not going to get a tattoo are you?"

His sister gave him a look.

"Just asking."

**

Kerry dropped into the swing in the solar, glad to get off her feet after a day of hauling boxes. She looked around at the quiet, glass lined room, the air rich with the scent of carefully tended plants around the borders of it.

It was quiet here, though she could hear voices through the door coming from the direction of the hall where she'd left her sister getting her things arranged in their new surroundings, though surely this house was almost as familiar to her as her own since she knew Angie spent a lot of time here.

Ah well. Kerry let her head rest against the chain holding the swing up, savoring the peace around her. She'd always loved the solar, and now as she leaned back and gazed around her, she allowed memories of scampering around hiding behind the plants surface in her mind's eye.

It smelled so green, and there was so much for a small child to look at. Plants with their big leaves, and the rich potting soil, and the occasional ladybug to capture and watch.

She glanced back into one corner, where there were now rose bushes but where there once had been a stand of potted pines, clustered in a clump she'd learned to worm her way into and which had provided a haven for her whose Christmas tree scent she could remember still to this day.

She stretched her arms out along the back of the wooden bench seat, and rocked back and forth a little, looking up as she heard footsteps to see her mother approaching, and inwardly she bit off a curse, not really wanting to face an interaction with her at the moment.

"Ah, there you are, Kerrison." Cynthia Stuart said. "My goodness, what a lot of work you children did."

"It was." Kerry had to agree, as her mother seated herself on the bench across from her. "But we ended up with a lot of stuff that can go to charity, and I think Angie's happy to have her things the way she likes them."

Her mother smiled. "I think so too." She replied. "I have to say it will be nice to have at least one of you back in the house. It's been so quiet."

Kerry relaxed a trifle. "You should have seen us last night." She said. "We ended up locking Mike in the truck and having a pillow fight in the living room. Sure you want that much excitement around?"

"Did you really?" Her mother asked. "My goodness, and you're all grown up."

"We're still brothers and sisters." A smile crossed Kerry's face. "We had fun."

"It certainly sounds like it." Cynthia said. "I'm very glad you have had some time to spend with Angela and Michael. I know they have both missed you."

"I'm glad too." Kerry answered.

Her mother cleared her throat. "So you're speaking at the reunion tonight?"

Kerry nodded. "They asked me to." She said. "I wasn't going to go."

"Why not?" Her mother asked, in a mild tone. "After all, you were going to be here this week."

"I just didn't want to." She'd gotten the invitation. Dar had even encouraged her to go, and had said she'd work around the Europe schedule to be there if Kerry wanted to, and wanted her there. "I don't much like being the celebrity freak show, I guess."

Her mother straightened. "Oh, but surely that's not the..." She paused, and frowned.

That, at least, made Kerry smile, if only a bit wryly. "Anyway, I'll do the speech then we're going out to the pub for dinner." She said. "So I guess we should get back to Angie's old place so I can change." She stood up, stretching her body out and reaching back to free her shortened hair from her polo shirt collar.

"Ah, yes of course." Her mother said, rising hastily. "We thought perhaps we could all have brunch here tomorrow. Would that fit in your schedule?"

Kerry's ears twitched. "Sure." She answered, after a moment's hesitation. "I think we're done with packing. What time?"

Her mother looked pleased. "Eleven, I believe." She said. "Just the family, really. I just want to get a chance to chat with all of you alone."

Uh oh. Kerry nodded. "Sounds like fun." She answered, reasoning that at least if they all were there, the subject could hardly be anything relating to her, personally. "Well, let me get going." She eased past her mother and ducked under an errant limb, heading back into the hall where she could see her brother standing.

"Kerrison?"

Urg. Kerry paused and turned, giving her mother a questioning look.

"I do like that haircut on you." Cynthia said. "It frames your face very nicely."

Kerry ran her fingers through the layers near her eyes and produced a brief grin. "Thanks. It got so hot this summer I had to get rid of some of it." She said. "I like it, though. I may keep it this way." She turned and slipped out of the door and back into the lit entryway, where Angie was now also waiting for her. "Hey. Ready to go?"

Angie glanced past her to see their mother emerging, then she gave her sister a wry look. "Ready if you are." She slid her small clasp purse under her arm. "Mom, see you tomorrow."

Cynthia wagged her fingers at them, as they stood together for a minute before the door. "So nice to see the three of you together. We must get some pictures at brunch."

They got out the door, and Kerry realized a second later that not bringing a jacket wasn't the brightest thing she'd ever done. The cool air blew right through her polo shirt, and she was really glad she'd decided against wearing the tank. "Brr." She rubbed her arms with her hands. "Where'd the damn sun go?"

Mike snorted. "Boy did your blood thin."

Kerry didn't deny it. "Hey, it was 93 degrees when I left." She protested. "I'm used to walking outside in a bathing suit in September." She scooted ahead of them and unlocked the truck door, sliding inside and shutting it after her to block the wind.

Angie got in the passengers seat, laughing, and Mike slid in the jump seat also chuckling. "It must be so bizarre not to have winter." Angie shut the door as Kerry started the engine. "I can't imagine it"

"We have winter." Kerry put the truck in gear and pulled around the big stately driveway. "We have at least two days where it drops below sixty. Dar and I make hot chocolate and wear our footie pajamas." She turned and waited for the big iron gates to open, then she eased out onto the road, looking both ways first. "I don't miss it. I like not having to think about putting layers of clothing on and being able to go swimming at midnight outside the whole year."

"Do you?" Mike poked his head over the seat. "Go swimming at midnight?"

Kerry had stopped at a traffic light, and now she turned and looked at him. "Yeah." She admitted. "When we get home from work sometimes. Or in the ocean when we're down at the cabin. We've got a little cove all to ourselves."

"You guys swim naked?"

"MIKE!" Angie slapped him. "Of course they don't!"

"Well, actually we do." The light changed, and Kerry moved forward. "Sometimes." She answered, smothering a grin as she heard Angie nearly swallow her tongue while her brother chortled with glee. "Rebellion has it's good points, y'know."

"Oh my god."

"Sweet!"

**

The sales pitch over, it was time to get down to the real business.

"We understand that there are companies here with a lot more built out infrastructure." Dar faced the room, holding the remote for her presentation laptop in her right hand. "So your question for us likely is, how in the hell are we going to support this application until we can catch up."

Sir Melthon grunted.

"It's a good question." Dar clicked the control, and her laptop obediently responded with a lively, pulsing display, projected against a silver chased, insanely expensive screen set up at the far end of the table. It displayed a reasonably scaled diagram of their global network, long lines of green and blue tracing across the planet.

"Animated, eh. At least that's more interesting than the last idiots." Sir Melthon interrupted. "Bloody boring the lot of them. You put me to sleep, woman, and you can go sell your slides out on the street."

"That's live, isn't it, Dar?" Alastair remarked from his seat next to Sir Melthon, drawing both the magnates attention and that of the two men on the other side of him that had been introduced as his business leaders for the project. "That screen there?"

"Live?" One of the men leaned forward. "Do you mean to say that's showing a realtime view of something?" He looked around. "What the devil are you connected to?"

"It is." Dar responded. "This is a reflection of the main operations console at our commercial headquarters in Miami, Florida." She went on. "I have a cellular link up to our international gateway and we're backhauling the signal from there."

The man studied her. "Sorry, go on." He murmured.

She reviewed the screen. "As you can see, we are very built out in North America, but we also have a significant presence in South America, India, Africa, and the Far East."

The man got up and walked around to get closer to the screen.

"We do have a basic set of pipes in Europe." Dar manipulated the control and a set of green lines grew brighter, across the European continent. "But since we size the infrastructure to the business, we haven't upgraded the port speed to provide a high capacity full mesh. Yet."

The man looked at her. "How long will it take you to do that?" He asked, sharply.

Dar studied the screen for a moment. "Two months." She answered.

"That's not possible." The other man next to Sir Melthon said. "We know it isn't, I'm not being a fly in the ointment here." He said, as Dar turned towards him. "We did a study to put our own network in. It would take over a year, and that's why we're looking to outsource."

"Two months." Dar repeated, unmoved. "We have a certain degree of leverage."

The man looked at Sir Melthon, and shook his head.

"McLean, is this rot?" Melthon turned his head and peered at Alistair. "I don't need a load of hot air. I have a wife for that."

Alastair didn't turn a hair. "Nah." He said. "If Dar says two months, it's two months, and probably earlier." He said. "She rebuilt an entire networking center in one night, y'know. Reliable as the day is long."

The magnate snorted. "You willing to lay a bet on that?" He asked. "You do it in time or the whole deal's off, how's that for a bet?"

"Sure." The genial Texan didn't so much as glance at Dar. "But I'll tell you what, we do it in two months, and you toss in a contract for the rest of your network. How's that for a bet?"

Dar stood quietly waiting, gaining an new appreciate for her bosses always surprising wheeling and dealing side she didn't get to see very often. Usually she was pulling Alastair's ass out of the fire, this time, they were both playing a somewhat dangerous game of poker that was making the sales reps eyes bug out.

Sir Melthon studied the gray haired man sitting next to him, his hands resting relaxed on the table.

"Sir." The man next to him murmured. "This sounds dangerous."

"Hah!" The magnate barked suddenly. "Damn straight it does." He turned to Dar. "Well, smart mouthed woman, get to talking. We've got a bet on." He held a hand out to Alastair. "Good enough for you, McLean?"

"Absolutely." Alastair took his hand and gripped it firmly. "Dar? You were saying?"

Everyone turned back to Dar, and she collected her train of thought, looking back at the screen. "As I was saying, the question is, how do we support this project until I can upgrade those pipes." She illuminated two other lines, a pulsing blue one that landed in London, and another in Germany, with a heavy tracing of smaller, green lines between them. "Here's how."

"Wait." The man still standing near the screen held up a hand. "This is our premier product. We can't rely on a single line back to the States. What if it goes down? Even for.. ah.. two months?" His voice expressed extreme doubt.

Dar walked over to her laptop and put the control down, trading it for her keyboard which she studied for a moment before she started typing in it. "Here's the average response time across that circuit to our London hub." She enhanced the display, showing the statistics of the two links. "Here's what happens when it goes down." She executed a few keystrokes, and the blue line landing in London went dark.

"B.." One of their own sales reps started to stand up.

The rest of the map fluttered, then the pulsing settled down, the link into Germany growing brighter, and the lacing of green lines expanding to take up the slack. The response time counter, in it's small box, remained steady.

Dar let the silence go on for a moment, then she smiled. "I like to sleep at night." She reopened the link and it surged back into place, the map giving that little flutter again. She glanced over at Sir Melthon, catching him with his jaw just slightly open. He scowled at her and shut his mouth with a click. "So our proposal is that we will support your infrastructure from our Miami offices until a local hub is in place."

"With local staff?" The man near the screen rallied weakly.

"Of course." Alastair said. "Do you know how much it costs to relocate people from Oklahoma?" He chuckled. "I've told the boys here to get ready to move fast, and bring in as many good people as they can find."

"Hmph."

"We're expecting to start up a support center with at least one hundred people." David spoke up. "And Francois here is handling the logistics and distribution facility near Nantes."

The men looked at Francois, who merely nodded, keeping his fingers pressed against his lip.

"Hah." Sir Melthon barked again. "What a pack of smart alecks you lot are." He turned to Alastair. "Lunch. Then we'll get down to pen and paper. I've had enough egghead chatter for the morning." He stood up and headed for the door, clearly expecting them to follow.

Dar chuckled and went to her laptop to shut it down. "You know what this business is like sometimes Hans?"

"Pig's tail soup." He answered succinctly. "But he does like you, that I am sure." He reassured her. "It is mostly an act, yes? That Lord of the British empire loudness."

Dar closed the lid on the machine. "Wait until he sees Alastair's contract terms." She advised him. "That's mostly an act too, that Texas good old boy stuff."

"Ah." Hans got up and joined her as they walked to the door, the last to exit the room. "So it seems with the big shots acting, the truth of the situation then depends on you."

Dar held the door and smiled. "We'll soon find out."

"That we will."

**

Kerry towed her hair dry and paused in front of the bathroom mirror, regarding her reflection. She hung the towel around her neck and leaned on the marble countertop, wrestling with that age old question of women everywhere.

What to wear.

Normally, it wasn't much of an issue for her. She had work clothes, and she had casual clothes, and she had scroungy old rags in abundance. Twice as many as Dar, in fact, and she didn't often spend much time deciding which category to put on.

However. Kerry studied the pale green eyes in the mirror.

"I think I feel like being a grown up tonight." She announced, putting aside the fleeting notion of wearing jeans to her speech. She finished drying herself off and put on her underwear, leaving the bathroom and crossing the carpet to where she'd laid out her choices.

Without hesitation, she lifted the crisply pressed suit up and hooked the hanger on silent butler, sliding the jacket off and laying it across the seat as she loosened the silk, ice blue shirt and prepared to slip it over her shoulders.

A soft knock at the door made her eye the closed panel with some wariness. "Yes?"

"It's me." Angie's voice answered.

Slipping the shirt on, Kerry started buttoning the sleeves. "C'mon in." She glanced over as her sister entered, shutting the door behind her. "Hey."

"Hey." Angie dropped down onto the bed, leaning on one hand. "That's a nice blouse." She said. "So you're not going to go strapless?"

"No." Kerry smiled, finishing her sleeves and fastening the front closed. "I decided to present my professional side. Aside from not wanting to come off as a jerk, I always feel like I have a responsibility to encourage girls into IT."

"Really?" Angie's brows lifted. "Is it really that much a guy's world?"

Kerry removed her teal skirt from its hanger and stepped into it. "Well.." She tucked her shirt in and buttoned the skirt, then buckled the leather belt. "Yeah, it is." She admitted. "I think Dar's one of the few female CIO's, and our technical group is mostly guys though we do try to recruit women."

"Try?"

Kerry went to her bag and removed her jewelry case. "Believe it or not, for some reason, women don't seem to gravitate to infrastructure." She took out a pair of favorite earrings and started to put them on. "I've seen great women programmers, project managers, service delivery reps, you name it. But high tech plumbers? Not so common."

Angie got up and came over, peeking at the earrings. "Ker, those are gorgeous." She said. "Can I see that other one?"

Her sister handed it over, then she retrieved her necklace and ring from the dresser and slid them into place. She brushed her hair out, glancing briefly in the mirror as the already drying, shortened strands settled around her face. "Sure is nice not to have to blow dry this stuff all the time."

"You like it short?"

Kerry took back the proffered earring and inserted it. "Yeah." She studied her reflection, and smiled. "I think it looks more sophisticated. Dar likes it. I keep trying to get her to cut hers short but she thinks she'll look like a punk."

"Mm." Angie got up and stood next to her. "Her hair's wavy, though. Yours is straight. It might look weird unless it was really short." She pointed out. "I'm sure she doesn't want to look like a guy."

Kerry's eyebrow arched. She turned and looked at Angie. "Shaved bald she wouldn't look like a guy." She said, bluntly.

Her sister gave her a wry look.

Kerry made a face. "Sorry." She apologized. "I think I'm getting sensitive in my old age." She brushed her hair out again, feeling a little embarrassed. "Smack me."

"No way." Angie said immediately. "Are you kidding? I'm not hitting She Ra. Not in this lifetime." She bumped Kerry with her shoulder. "Mind if I come along to the dinner? I know I wasn't in that class, but I'd love to hear you speak."

"I don't mind at all." Kerry was relieved. "I'd love the company." She finished her mild primping and reached for the jacket to her suit. "Thanks."

Angie followed her as she pulled the jacket on and tugged the lapels straight with an automatic gesture, reaching back to clear the short hairs in the back of her neck from the collar. "Is Mike meeting us after for dinner?"

"Actually..."

Kerry sensed a plot at hand. "Let me guess. He wants to come too."

"Well..." Her sister lifted both hands, as she watched Kerry slip into her mid heel shoes. "Why not? We know we don't have much time with you, Ker. Besides, if they start giving you a hard time, we'll gang up on them."

Kerry entertained herself with a mental vision of her siblings batting her old classmates around. She grinned. "Yeah sure, why not?" She said. "Let's go and get this over with." She clipped her Palm in it's case to her belt and picked up the keys to the pickup. "Wanna drive?"

Angie chuckled, then she cleared her throat as they headed for the stairs. "Maybe."

**

Kerry folded her hands over her stomach and watched as the once familiar landscape whipped by, only half listening to her brother's chatter from the jump seat behind her. In her mind, she ran over what she might say at the dinner, reviewing a few different approaches depending on the reception she was given.

It would be the easiest if everything was just at face value. She could talk about what was needed to enter the business world, and ramble on about the state of the technical industry for any length of time without any danger of either scandalizing anyone or being completely understood.

She scratched her nose, wrinkling the bridge of it a little as she acknowledged how stuffy and jaded that sounded even in the privacy of her own mind. It was true, though, that the world she worked in was full of over arching concepts and buzzwords that tried to describe in layman's terms what it's functions were and most of the time it just ended up sounding like dystopian poetry.

"So Ker." Mike got her attention back. "You think this is a publicity stunt or something?"

On the other hand, Kerry smiled grimly, her brother had probably just spoken aloud what her own primary suspicion was, that her school, always in search of funding, had used the opportunity of it's class reunion to gain some press in an otherwise slow year.

What was that about any publicity being good publicity?

"Maybe." Kerry said. "I don't see what it really gets them though, except mention in the paper when the paper covers me." She glanced at her sister. "Did you say the paper was going to be there?"

"Of course." Angie said. She slowed, then turned onto a busier road. "I'm surprised they didn't call the house looking for you." She added. "A half dozen other people did."

Kerry blinked. "Huh?" She said. "They did? Who?"

"Guys wanting dates. We told them off." Mike answered for her, reaching across the back of the seat and flicking Kerry on the back of her neck. "Then Oprah Winfrey called and we told her you were booked for the next two years already."

"Oh damn." Kerry had to laugh. "And here I really wanted to be on Oprah." She twiddled her thumbs a little. "Did I ever tell you guys that I got a call from Face the Nation after the hearing, wanting me to appear?"

"Oh my god you're kidding." Angie gasped. "They would have had a fit!"

"Face the Nation? They're used to weird political scandals." Kerry chuckled.

"Our parents." Her sister clarified. "He hated that show."

"They roasted him the last time he was on it." Mike snorted. "Don't you remember that time, Kerry? I thought I sent you an email he was going to be on, they nailed him on the offshore drilling crap he was supporting."

Kerry's brow creased a bit. "I must have been swamped with something." She admitted. "I don't remember seeing it. That's not something Dar and I usually watch." She spotted the beginning of the brick wall topped by wrought iron gating that marked her alma mater, and almost wished they would just keep driving past now that it was here, and now.

"Looks like its' busy." Angie eased the truck into the turn lane, reviewing the line of cars ahead of her. The truck was positively out of place, and she could see the people in the car ahead of her staring at it in their rearview mirror. "Can this go over the top of those little suckers?"

"Bet it can." Mike instigated immediately. "Creep up on that guy's bumper, let's see if we can freak him out."

Kerry eyed her suddenly radical siblings. "What the heck's gotten into you two?"

"You're a bad influence." Her brother informed her. "Everyone always said you would be." He reached over again and tugged Kerry's ear. "C'mon, you only live once. Let's get into trouble."

"Ah ah ha.!" Kerry grabbed his hand and held it. "It's not you two who'll get in trouble if we crash this thing, it's in my name." She pointed out. "Let's just get inside. Then you can go around giving my old anything but pals wedgies if you want."

Angie chuckled. She eased the truck forward as the line moved, holding down the brake, then giving the engine just enough gas to startle the car in front of her. "Vroom."

Kerry just covered her eyes as she heard the crunch of the tires. She started thinking of what possible story she could come up with to explain why she'd totaled a rental car. At least Dar would probably find it funny. After no further sounds, she peeked out from between her fingers to see the car ahead of them pulling out of line, and heading off down the street. "What the heck?"

"We scared em." Mike said contentedly. "Weinie!!"

Angie pulled the truck up to the next car in line. "Want to see if I can do that again?" She asked. "Get us through this queue in no time."

"Holy crap." Kerry sighed. "No, just chill, okay? Remember, you do live here. I get to go home in a day or so and I don't have to hear all the gossip."

"Screw that." Mike said. "If they want something to talk about, let's give them something. Otherwise they'll just make stuff up about you and you know it. I'd rather have them saying we shoved some Lexus into the wall."

The line started moving again, though, much to Kerry's relief, and she rested her elbow on the doorframe as they made the turn into the entrance to the school and through the tall arched gates.

Mixed memories. She studied the name in the scrollwork as they went under it. She hadn't really disliked school, and she'd been more or less successful at navigating its social labyrinths since she'd been old enough to know better when she'd started attending.

Being Roger Stuart's oldest had brought both positive and negative attention, and now when she looked back on all the little things, the parties and invites, the snubs and the suck ups, she was content to acknowledge that all in all it could have been worse for her.

"Did Dar go to any type of.. ah.." Angie paused. "No, probably not, huh?"

Kerry smiled. "Just regular school." She said. "But it wouldn't have mattered, I don't think. She's brilliant. They could never keep up with her down there, and I doubt they could have here either." She paused as Angie pulled up to the attendant, who peered inside with a doubtful expression. "Hi there. Is this Dominos Pizza?"

Mike fell back in the jump seat, chortling.

"Can I get a pepperoni and extra cheese?" Kerry continued pleasantly as the man frowned. "With a two liter of coke?"

"Ma'am, I don't think..." He hesitated, thrown off by the sport truck filled with unexpectedly well dressed people. "Ah..."

Angie removed the invitation from the sunshield and handed it to him. "Maybe this helps." She said. "Before my sister tells you we're hauling fertilizer for the dance hall."

The man looked at the invitation, then looked back at them. "Ah." He said. "No problem." He pointed to the left. "Valet parking's over there, ladies."

"Hey!" Mike popped his head up again. "Watch who you call lady, bub!"

"Thanks." Angie closed the window and got the truck moving before they could cause more chaos. "And you say **we're** causing trouble?" She said. "Ker, you're the one who was going to show up in a tank top and jeans."

"Shoulda." Kerry chuckled, as they swung around the big, paved circle to the porta chachet, where valets were milling around, taking care of the well kept, expensive cars being dropped off. She had a moment to look at the crowd before it was their turn, her eyes spotting one or two people she was pretty sure she knew already.

Heads turned as the pickup pulled into the valet stand, and she was out of time to think about it. Kerry waited for the valet to hesitantly approach, then she opened the door from the inside and gathered herself to get out. "Okay, kids. Let's go."

As the door opened, the buzz of the crowd got louder, and she got that feeling she often did when she was about to enter a company they were acquiring and face the person she'd been once for the first time. She gave the valet a brief smile and turned to flip the seat forward so Mike could get out. "Evening."

"Ma'am." The valet reacted to her appearance and adjusted his attitude from seeing the truck. "Welcome to the homecoming."

Kerry saw heads turning nearby, and her peripheral view caught the flash of a camera. "Thanks" She said, as Angie came around to join them, and they walked as a group towards the steps. "Ready or not, here we come."

"Can I tell everyone I'm an alumni too?" Mike asked.

"It's an all girls school." Angie poked him. "What are you going to tell them, you had a sex change?"

Mike grinned evilly.

"Had to suggest that, didn't you?" Kerry said under her breath, as she saw a group of older women start in their direction. She recognized several as once upon a time teachers, and the lady in front, incredibly still there, as the headmistress in charge.

"Ms. Hauderthorn's coming right at you." Angie whispered. "What a witch! She hated me!"

Kerry plastered a determined grin on her face. "Remind me to tell you later why." She gave herself a little shake, and squared her shoulders. "But not until we've both had a beer."

**

"Dar?"

Dar opened her eyes, to see Alastair standing in front of her chair, holding out a glass. "What is that?" She asked, eyeing the dark liquid with some suspicion.

"Irish coffee." Her boss said, in a wry tone. "I figured you could use it."

Coffee. Dar took the offered mug without further preamble, and sipped gingerly from it. "Thanks." She said. "Time lag's still kicking my ass."

Alastair took a seat next to her. They were in a quiet lounge off the main meeting space, the soft buzz of conversation trickling in through the adjoining door. "Well, lady, it's late in anyone's time zone." He glanced at the door. "But I think we're close."

Dar checked her watch, and winced. "One AM. I sure as hell hope so." She stretched her legs out and crossed them. "Is he done asking me questions?"

Her boss brought one foot up onto it's opposite knee and rested his hands on his ankle. "I think so." He said. "Actually I think he's more tired of getting your answers so I think he's just decided to beat me over the head with the terms again."

"He's tough."

Alastair chuckled. "They all are. No one in there wants to give money to anyone, least of all a bunch of smartass Yanks. I think our boys here are starting to piddle."

Dar snorted.

"McLain!"

"Ah." Alastair sighed. "Hey, they're bringing some dinner in. C'mon, maybe if we go in there together he'll settle down some." He patted Dar on the arm.

"Sure." Dar obligingly got up. "I was just out here because I was bored listening to all the sales crap." She said, as she followed the older man towards the double doors. She kept her coffee with her, though, sipping it as they entered the big conference room where Sir Melthon and his team, and their sales reps were going at it.

At this point, she figured, it was just a chest beating contest, and since she had no intention of bruising her own infrastructure she'd been sitting around merely waiting for a technical question to come up since she'd already gone over their plan four times and had no intention of doing it a fifth.

"Right." Sir Melthon looked up as they entered. "Ah, there you are, and your little girl too."

Alastair stopped in his tracks, turned, and looked Dar up and down. He then turned back to the magnate. "Sir Melthon? I know this lady's father, and let me tell you, neither you, nor I want to make that statement even in jest."

"None of that now, just get over here." Melthon waved a hand at them. "I want..."

"I MEAN THAT." Alastair suddenly raised his voice in a loud bark, cutting off all other conversation and making himself the sudden, startling center of attention. After a moment of silence. "I expect my staff to be treated with the same respect we show to yours."

Sir Melthon leaned back in his chair and studied him. "You do say?"

Alastair stared back at him. "Damned right I do say."

Dar stood quietly, sipping her coffee, not wanting to do anything to either escalate or downplay the moment. It went against her instincts to allow anyone to take her part the way her boss was doing, but she was smart enough to know there were dynamics here her usual bull in a china shop style would not mesh with.

Sir Melthon pondered a moment. "Well, then all right." He shrugged. "Sorry about that. Didn't think you were the sensitive type." He directed the last comment at Dar.

"I'm not." Dar put her cup down and settled into a soft leather seat across from him. "But Alastair is right. I'm the Chief Information Officer of the company. If you sign on, I hold your family jewels right here." She held up her hand and crooked the fingers. "If you don't respect me, how can you trust me not to send your business to hell or get bored someday and reroute your datastream to Iran?"

Melthon and his team stared at her, as Alastair took a seat next to Dar. "Is that a threat?" The magnate asked, in a splutter. "McLain, what is this?"

"Now, I am sure." Francois started to break in hurriedly, stopping when Alastair held his hand up.

"This, is who we are." The Texan folded his hands on the table. "So let me tell you now, if you can't deal with my people being anything other than whitebread old men like me tell me now, and we'll just cut the deck and go home. I'm not making us both miserable signing a contract with you." He gazed steadily across at the magnate, his blue eyes open and guileless. "I do mean that."

Melthon actually gaped at him.

"You are one fish, in my very very big ocean." Alastair went on placidly.

Even Dar was hard pressed not to react, keeping her eyebrows in their customary places and concentrating on not letting her eyes widen. She leaned back in her chair and laced her fingers

together instead, appreciating for perhaps the first time how hardball her boss was willing to be when he felt he needed to.

Hans was watching both men, with a fascinated expression as he tapped his fingers on the table, everyone else in the room was seemingly frozen in place.

Finally Melthon turned and looked at Dar. "I don't like women in business!" He thumped his fist on the table.

Dar cocked her head, looking down at herself before she looked back up at him. "Too bad?" She said. "I'm not going to change into a man anytime soon. Sorry."

"Hah!" The magnate turned back to Alastair. "She'll get married on you, see if she doesn't, McLean! Then what!?"

Alastair smiled. "Dar's already married." He said. "Hasn't been an issue."

"And have brats! You know how they are!" Melthon shot right back.

Alastair turned and looked at Dar, one brow edging up just a trifle.

"We have a dog." Dar could see the twinkle in his eyes. "The mainframe will have kids before I will." She leaned forward and picked up her cup. "Besides, can you imagine there being two of me?"

"No." Her boss replied instantly. "I can't afford two of you. My heart would give out." He turned back to Sir Melthon. "So what's it to be? It's late, y'know? We can call it off now and I can get my people some rest before we move on to the next opportunity."

Melthon eyed him shrewdly. "You've got brass ones." He said. "This is not a small contract."

"It isn't." Alastair agreed. "It's got huge potential for us, and I think we can do a good job for you. But I'm not interested if it exposes my people, especially one of our single most valuable resources to being treated like an afterthought. It's not worth it to me."

"Indeed."

"Yup."

The magnate leaned back, most of his irascible attitude fading. "Valuing people is very old fashioned, you know. In this day and age, we are all expendable, or so they say."

"People who say that are the only expendable ones." Alastair replied quietly. "I've lived long enough in this business to have learned that the hard way."

After a moment's silence, Melthon nodded. "All right then. Fair enough." He said. "I have long been accused by many." He turned and deliberately looked at Hans, who smiled. "Of being old fashioned myself. I didn't think I'd find an American who had any interest in anything but the dollar. You surprise me, McLean."

"The missus says that on occasion to me too." Alastair replied. "But that usually involves tacky Mexican jewelry and never comes with good brandy like this." He held up his glass, tipping it slightly in Sir Melthon's direction.

The magnate burst into laughter. He lifted his own cup and inclined it. "We will do business, McLean. I like a man who knows how to stand up for himself." He glanced aside. "And for a woman!"

The sales execs relaxed and so did Sir Methon's minions, as nicely tuxedo'd servers entered with mahogany serving trays from the far door. The first one of them paused and looked at the table, timidly eyeing the magnate before moving any further.

"Bring that in." Their host waved a hand. "Bring that, and bring me a couple bottles of that rotgut my godson forced on me the other week. Might as well get rid of it with this lot."

Dar eased back into her chair and drank her cooling coffee, the rich taste of the liquor in it burning her stomach as it settled. She watched the servers bustle around putting out plates and dishes and only after the noise in the room dispelled some of the tension did she glance over at Alastair.

Solemnly, he winked at her.

Dar lifted her mug up and behind it, poked the tip of her tongue out at him. She then glanced at her watch, and unclipped her PDA, opening it and tapping on the screen with the stylus.

Hey Ker.

You missed an eyeball busting moment here. It's possible I might not leave this place tonight without kissing Alastair.

Hope your speech is knocking them dead. Buy your family a beer for me when it's all over with and make sure someone took pictures.

DD.

"So."

Dar closed the Palm and turned, to find Sir Melthon now sitting in the seat right next to her. "So." She repeated.

"My godson there." The magnate spoke conversationally, as though the preceding standoff with Alastair had never happened. "Tells me you can do some very tricky stuff. Is that on the up and up?"

Dar peered over at Hans, who studiously avoided her gaze. "Maybe." She said. "We have some very proprietary technology that I developed, to help us provide the best services to our customers. If that's what he meant, then yes. "

Her PDA beeped. Dar resisted the urge to look at it while she waited for the magnate to continue, aware of someone putting a plate down in front of her on the table.

"You own it then, eh?" Melthon asked.

"He owns it." Dar indicated Alastair, who was sitting by quietly watching and listening. "Or, more to the point, ILS owns it because I developed it on their time and their gear."

"Ah hah." The magnate got up and went back around the table. "All right, let's get a bite to eat, and then we'll carry on." He said. "Hope none of you enlightened Americans are vegetarians." He looked around the table, his bushy eyebrows hiking.

Dar studied the slab of beef in front of her. "Looks good to me." She put the PDA down on the table and casually flipped it open. "Got any katsup?"

The men across the table stopped, and stared at her.

"Just kidding." Dar smiled. She waited for them to start working on their plates again before she looked down at the Palm.

Get pictures. What the heck, give him a kiss for me too. I am about to go on stage and I've already had two confrontations with women older than my mother and just about kept my brother from kicking one of them in the shins. If I end up in jail, will you come home and bail me out?

Wish you were here. I have a headache.

K.

"Excuse me." Dar got up and tucked the PDA into her hand. "I need to make a phone call." She ducked past the chair next to her and headed for the small antechamber, pulling her cell phone out as she cleared the door and keying the speed dial without looking.

It rang twice, then picked up. "Hey."

"Hey." Kerry's voice sounded stressed, but also, wry. "Was the whining that loud?"

"Tell me some old witch gave you a hard time. What's her name? I'll hack into her pension and send it to the ASPCA." Dar said. "I knew I should have co-opted you out of this."

After a brief pause, Kerry chuckled. "Nah, it's not that bad really." She demurred. "I just ran into a few of my old teachers, that's all." She paused. "And.."

Ah.

"I don't know. I just want to get out of here." Kerry admitted, in a quieter voice. "It's just weirding me out. Too many memories."

Dar exhaled, sensing the turmoil. "Hang in there." She said. "One more day, Ker. Just blow through this and go have a plate of wings and a beer. I'll be there with you in spirit."

There was a brief pause on the other end. "Know something?" Her partner finally said. "When I get to Europe, I'm going to buy you a tiara."

Dar's nostrils flared and her eyes widened. "Huh?"

"You rule my world. Gotta go, sweetie. Love you." Kerry hung up, leaving a faint echo behind her.

Dar tapped her cell phone against her jaw, before she turned to head back into the meeting room. "I'd look stupid as hell in one of those." She sighed. "But I'd love to see her try it."

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"Was that Dar?" Angie asked, leaning against an unused podium as they waited behind the small stage.

"Yeah." Kerry tucked her cell phone away. "How'd you know?" She glanced up in question.

"You're smiling." Her sister replied. "I haven't seen you do that all night." She put a sympathetic hand on Kerry's back. "Listen, I'm really sorry I got you into this." She added, softly. "I didn't think it would be such a big deal."

"Neither did I, but I probably should have." Kerry admitted. "Anyway, we're here now. I just want to get it done."

Angie patted her shoulder. "Just think about the brewpub. If it gets too obnoxious out there, I'll call Mike and have him moon the crowd and we can escape out the back."

The thought was startlingly appealing. Kerry smothered a grin, and ran her fingers through her hair again, feeling the dryness in the back of her mouth and wishing she had a tall glass of ice tea. "We're just a family full of scandal, huh?"

"Hey, it beats reading about the flower show in tomorrow's paper."

"Yeah, well." Kerry sighed, as she spotted one of the event organizers heading her way through the small backstage area. She straightened up and twitched her sleeves out a little, taking a deep breath and exhaling it as she'd often seen Dar do before she presented. "Are we ready?"

The woman hesitated, glancing over her shoulder. "I think we are. Everyone's seated."

Kerry felt her nerves settle, as the waiting was over and now, at least, she could just do it and get it over with. "Okay, let's go then." She said. "Hope I don't cause a riot."

The organizer's face twitched. "Let me just go introduce you and... oh."

Kerry brushed by her. "You don't need to. I'll take it from here." She unabashedly stole a page from Dar's "do the unexpected" book and slipped past the curtains, emerging into a pool of typically wishy washy school auditorium lighting.

She crossed to the small podium, mahogany wood and long worn with the forearms of decades of speakers before her, and rested her hands on it, simply standing there and waiting to be noticed.

It gave her a long few seconds to look out over the room. She'd last been in it for graduation, and her mind flashed back to long hours spent there listening to religious instruction and lectures on morality and her place in the world.

The sudden absurdity of the contrast made her smile, and she felt her shoulders relax as she let her eyes scan the crowd as the crowd began to realize she was standing there. It was a full house, a mixture of current students, her old classmates, and teachers and she allowed herself a moment of surprised gratification that at least someone wanted to hear whatever it was she had to say.

The buzz settled down quickly, as all eyes turned to her. Unlike Dar, however, Kerry didn't find this intimidating. "Good evening." She injected her voice into the room, making sure to project a quiet confidence she almost actually felt.

"My name is Kerrison Stuart." She hadn't intended consciously to use her real name, but as it came off her tongue, it sounded right. "Some of you know me. Some of you only know of me, and some of you wish you'd never heard of me but since you asked me to speak here, you get what you get so let's get started."

She paused, and after a long moment of startled silence, the crowd applauded. "Mph." She muttered under her breath. "Can't be worse than that women in business seminar last year, now could it?"

Kerry waited for the noise to die down, then she studied the crowd for a few beats. Then she removed the microphone from the podium and came around from behind it. "Putting aside what's mostly public knowledge about me, I'm going to take a minute to briefly introduce myself for the benefit of those of you who are wondering just who the heck I am."

Angie watched from behind the curtain, bemused at the confident figure that had so recently been nervous and withdrawn back stage with her. She could just see Kerry's profile, and her sister had seemingly transformed herself now that the moment was on her.

Kerry had always been funny that way. Shy and reserved, Angie remembered her keeping her own council mostly when they were teenagers. Part of that had been their parents, of course, by then Kerry had gone through the early stages of questioning their father and suffered the consequences.

Part of it hadn't been though. Kerry had once told her that it was just too bad she understood as much as she did. That she'd have been a happier person if she'd been dumber. At the time Angie had thought she was being dissed, but now, knowing her sister a little better, she'd come to realize that it was just the truth.

Just the truth, that Kerry was smart, and though she didn't want to see or admit it, she had their father's calculating shrewdness and a certain toughness that she could hear echoing in Kerry's voice when she probably wasn't even aware of it.

Angie sighed. She and Michael had just been 'the children', but Kerry had always been something special to their father since aside from being smart, and good looking, girl or not she'd been his firstborn and no matter how rough he'd made it on her and no matter how awful things had gotten at the end there were parts of him that had been proud of her.

Seeing her here, now, in front of this crowd – Angie knew he'd be proud of her again.

"So now that we're past the fact that I went to school here, and lived in town most of my life, let me tell you what it is I do now." Kerry paused, and considered, aware of all the eyes on her. "The company I work for is ILS. We're the largest IT services company in the world."

Angie blinked a little. She hadn't known that, though she knew Kerry's company was large and she'd spent a few minutes reading about it on ILS's website when she'd hunted down their public filings. Seeing Kerry's name in them had seemed very weird, almost like she was reading about a stranger.

With a shake of her head, she turned her attention back to the stage.

"I'm glad I've gotten a chance to use the education I started here, and continued in college in the work I do now." Kerry was saying. "As Operations Vice President, I've had the opportunity to take what I

learned and apply it in an industry that engages me mentally and provides me with an exciting work environment that I'm happy to go back to every day."

Kerry paused, evaluating the crowd. "So now that I got that far, any questions?" She prompted, seeing the startled reaction from her old instructors. The crowd didn't respond at first, and she felt a wry grin trying to emerge. "C'mon." She said. "I can think of one question I know someone out there wants to ask."

Angie stifled a laugh, covering her mouth with one hand as she heard the audience react, and a low hoot, definitively male, she knew was their brother.

Kerry heard it too. She managed to suppress a grin, then she turned as she saw first one, then a few hesitant hands go up. Questions were a risk. She figured she'd probably get at least one that would make her wish she hadn't done it, but Dar had been right. The crowd knew more about her than she did about them, and she just wasn't in the mood to preach the IT line tonight. "All right, go on."

One of the current students, a dark haired girl stood up. "What made you pick high tech?"

Delightful surprise. "Why did I pick high tech." Kerry repeated the question into the microphone. "Well." She thought about it. "It was a lot sexier than law and it was like being on the frontier of something really new."

Another hand went up. "How much money is there in that?"

Even more delightful. Kerry smiled. "In my job specifically or in the tech industry?" She replied. "As I was telling my mother the other night, my compensation's public knowledge." She felt the slightly startled reaction. "Our executive salary structure is equal or better than the industry average." Her eyes twinkled a little. "But in terms of high technology - our lowest entry level is at least twice what the minimum wage is."

"Not really something you find listed in exciting careers though." The girl suggested.

Kerry shrugged one shoulder. "Depends on how you look at it. We usually call the line teams button down blue collar staff because they do things like set up machines and run cabling but they also qualify for mortgages and drive nice cars."

Another figure lifted a hand, this time older, one of her own classmates. Kerry recognized her and almost ignored the motion. Fairness overcame her though, and she turned and acknowledged it.

"Do you ever get tired of people making comments about you sleeping your way to the top?" The woman asked, making heads turn towards her in surprise.

Ah, yes. Kerry resisted the urge to throw the microphone at her. "C'mon, Stacey. Do you really think people say that to my face?" She asked, above the sudden murmur in the room. "Let me tell you something about what I do, and who I do it for. You can get a job like mine by sleeping with the boss, but you can't keep it that way in a competitive business like ours."

One of the event organizers was heading purposefully down the aisle towards her old classmate. Kerry caught her eye and lifted a hand, waving her off. "Please, I've had tougher questions over croissants in Vermont."

The woman slowed, and hesitated, as the crowd looked around, and then back at Kerry with gathering interest. "We expect people to be respectful." She glared at the woman who had asked the question. "Or else we'll ask them to leave."

Kerry's heckler took a breath to answer, then the older woman's eyes narrowed and she put her hands on her hips and Stacey subsided. "Sorry about that. I was just asking a question." She apologized. "It's not like it's a deep dark secret." She paused. "These days."

Kerry's right brow lifted a little. She wondered what that was supposed to mean, then she saw her old teacher's face tighten in anger and realized the jibe possibly wasn't pointed at her.

Ah huh. She heard the crowd buzz, some of the current students snickering a little and it occurred to her that there might be some drama in the room that had nothing at all to do with her presence. Something Dar once said popped into her mind and she scanned the crowd thoughtfully.

Hm.

"It's always nice to see how our students mature." The organizer said. "Or not, as the case may be." She gave the room a severe look, before she returned to a small group of the older teachers and resumed her seat.

The murmurs died down. "You have to walk the walk." Kerry added, as her old adversary finally sat down and the attention swung back to her. "Besides, if it wasn't people saying that, they'd be saying my father got me the job. What's the difference?" She added, looking right at Stacey. "In the end, it doesn't matter how you get there, what matters is if you succeed." She said. "And I have."

Stacey looked away casually, ignoring her.

Another current student raised their hand. Kerry nodded at her. "Go on."

The blond girl stood. "Do you face a lot of bias when you deal with men in your same position?"

Kerry felt pretty good about this class, a lot better than she had about her own. "Sometimes." She answered candidly. "When I go out to consolidate a new account, I have to deal with that sometimes because that's usually an adversarial circumstance anyway and some people, both men and women, think they can take advantage of me."

She went strolled around back to the podium. "If you decide to pursue a career though, you're going to face that pretty much anywhere. It's just something you learn to deal with, and if you're smart you use it to your advantage."

"How?" The girl asked. "If people treat you without respect, how do you use that?"

Kerry leaned on the podium. "Let me tell you a little story." She said. "Maybe that will answer your question, because I wondered about that too, when I first started out."

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"Penny for your thoughts, Dar?"

Dar looked up from her plate of beef. "Kerry's worth more than that." She answered Alastair candidly. "She's at her high school reunion tonight giving a speech."

Alastair's face squiggled between surprise and consternation. "Ah. Oh." He murmured. "Well, I'm sure she's having a good time."

Dar looked at him.

"Or maybe not." Her boss said. "Did she have a tough time in school? I wasn't that fond of mine, now that I think of it."

"Christian all girls school." Dar said. "Actually, she's never spoken badly of it, but she's just not that comfortable going back to her hometown after the last couple of times there and she got roped into this speech at the last minute."

"Ahh." Alastair picked up his glass of red wine and swirled it a bit before he took a sip. "Yeah, she's had a tough time up there from what you said. Surprised you didn't go with her."

Dar paused in mid bite. She swallowed the bit of potato and cocked her head at him. "And missed this meeting?" She asked, in a quizzical tone. "I offered. Kerry told me to stop talking crazy."

Alastair smiled. "You know, I never figured you for a family woman, Dar, but you make a damn fine one." He said, putting his glass down and checking his watch. "Well, damn it all. Does this guy think people don't need to sleep? It's two am!"

"Uh huh." Dar ate another bit of potato. "On the other hand, I'll be sick to my stomach if I fall asleep after I eat this so maybe staying up is better." She glanced across the table, where Sir Melthon was in consultation with his minions. "By the way, thanks for kicking him in the ass for me."

Her boss smiled as he neatly cut his steak into squares. "Figured I owed it to you." He said, in a conversational tone. "But y'know, even if I didn't, I'da done it. Man was giving me an itch."

Dar frowned, her dark brows contracting across her forehead. "You owed me what?" She asked, puzzled. "Did I miss something?" She looked around, but the rest of the group was busy with their own dinners, or talking amongst themselves – even Hans was leaned over talking to Sir Melthon in a low mutter.

"Ah well." Alastair chuckled softly. "Remember when that crazy feller Ankow was in our shorts?"

Dar snorted, and rolled her eyes. "Jackass."

"Mm." Alastair agreed. "But y'know, I felt like I was the jackass in all that, Dar." He said. "I look back and that, and I know I sat back and let you take heat you didn't deserve."

Dar blinked. "Well... "

Her boss looked over at her. "He was after me." He said. "And the only thing standing in his way was you."

Dar blinked again, caught utterly by surprise, and unsure of how to react.

"You coulda given him what he wanted, Dar, and done well by it." Alastair said, his eyes watching her curiously. "Any particular reason you walked into a bear trap on my behalf?"

Was there? Dar felt a little bewildered by the question. "Alastair." She said. "It never occurred to me to do anything else." She muttered. "Besides, you asked me to help."

"I did." He said. "So you know, when I look back at that, and how you were treated at that meeting, I kick myself every single time."

Well. Dar ate a few pieces of her steak, and recalled that tense, angry few days when she'd been torn between the stress of the board's being prodded to fire her and her anxiety about Kerry, testifying at her father's hearing.

She paused, putting her fork down and taking a swallow of the wine that had been untouched in her glass. "You know, I almost walked away from it all in that meeting." She tasted the unfamiliar tang of the tannins on her tongue. "There was one minute there, when I just almost said to hell with it."

"Glad you didn't." Alastair remarked.

"Me too." Dar smiled, and raised her glass towards him. "Alastair, you don't owe me anything. I just did what comes naturally to me."

Alastair lifted his glass and touched it to Dar's. "Exactly." He said. "I can't tell you how much of a pleasure it's been the last year or so getting to actually know you."

Unsure if that was a compliment or not, Dar decided to smile anyway. "Likewise." She covered her bases. "I just wish I'd seen my father kick his ass. I was incredibly pissed off that I missed that."

"Security cameras caught it." Her boss said. "I'll send you copy." He winked at her, and went back to his steak.

Dar took another swallow of wine, deciding that her life was enduring an evening of new experiences. She only hoped Kerry's would turn out as pleasantly interesting.

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"You know, the truth is that people don't get respect." Kerry moved around in front of the podium, taking her microphone with her as she closed in on the audience again. "Especially, if you grow up in

the spotlight like I did, everyone assumes the worst of you because in a quirky kind of way, that makes people feel better about themselves if they do, doesn't it?"

She scanned the crowd, finding a lot of very curious eyes mixed with those very full of disapproval. "So I knew that even before I started working for ILS." Kerry paused, and made eye contact with a few people. "I knew that before I left here."

Kerry walked over to one side of the stage. "I knew that, even though I was a good student, and that was I smart, even though I went to college and got a degree, that no matter what I achieved, everyone would assume someone handed it to me on a plate."

The room had settled into silence.

"So I eventually decided that I couldn't worry about what other people thought." The blond woman said. "What mattered is what I thought about myself, and that's why I decided to leave here, leave my home and my family to try and achieve what would be success in my own eyes."

A hand lifted. Kerry pointed at the girl. "Go ahead."

"Couldn't you have done that here? Wouldn't it have been more impressive, if you had?"

Good question. "I might have been able to." Kerry conceded. "It would have been harder, staying here and being so close to everything that I felt was boxing me in. But the fact is, I didn't."

She paused, then continued. "What I did, was take a job in the field of my major, in a city far away from home. It was scary." She said. "But the people who hired me had no idea who I was, only that I could speak English and construct compound sentences, so it was like starting from scratch in a way."

Another hand. "What job was it?"

"Manager of an IT department." Kerry said. "It was a small company, and I actually did well there until one day a much bigger company bought us." She nibbled her lower lip. "When that happened, the person in charge of **their** IT department came in and told me that we just weren't wanted or needed, and we'd be getting pink slips in very short order."

The audience reacted, mumuring a little.

"In a way, that was pretty horrific." Kerry said. "But in a way, it's just reality. That's what its like out there." She made eye contact again with a few of the watchers. "That does happen, every day. It's business. And one thing it meant to me was that I was being treated just like any other unwanted worker would have been. There was nothing personal about it."

It was hard not to smile as she said it, seeing as now she knew just how much of a lie they were both telling themselves at the time. "When you grow up in privelege like I did, like a lot of you did..." She paused meaningfully. "You don't expect that. You expect someone to come in and fix things don't you?"

She could tell at least some of them were thinking about it. It had taken her a long time to be able to. "So for me, it was a learning experience because I hadn't faced that kind of situation before."

"What did you do?" The same girl asked. "Go to another company?"

"Well." Kerry smothered a grin. "Not exactly. I worked hard to make the transition less painful for the people working for me. I wasn't worried about myself, but there were people there who really were depending week to week on that job to survive."

"Wait wait." Her old friend stood up again, glancing behind her at the headmistress, before she continued. "You can't have it both ways, Kerry. Either you were on your own there, or you were just posing, in which case you're right, you had nothing to worry about."

Kerry smiled. "I was on my own." She clarified. "But I knew I was unattached, and I could get a job again fairly easily. Most of the people working for me had families and mortgages they had to worry about, which I didn't." She said. "But it was a very tough time for me, because the last thing I wanted was to have to come home, having failed."

Several of the girls in the front nodded.

“So then I had my second big learning experience.” Kerry went on. “That same person in charge from the bigger company came to see me, and, not knowing me from Adam’s housecat, told me ‘Hey. You’ve got talent. We’ll keep you.’”

The crowd laughed, a bit hesitantly.

“Honestly.” Kerry said. “It was the first time in my life practically that I’d been taken at face value and been told I was competent – by a virtual stranger.” She added. “So the lesson there was, you never know where your inspiration in life is going to come from. It could come at you from very unexpected places.”

“So you stayed.” The blond girl in the front called out.

“The bigger company was ILS. So yes, I did.” Kerry smiled. “And as you can see, it worked out very much in my favor, which is another lesson – sometimes bad things can lead to good results.”

“Would you do the same thing again?”

Kerry’s smile broadened. “In a heartbeat.” She said. “Do yourselves a favor – whatever you do, wherever you choose to do it, follow your heart. Do what feels right to you and you’ll end up being grateful for it.”

She stepped back to the podium, and put the microphone back in its holder. “Now I think it’s time to get this party started.” She said. “Thanks for inviting me to speak, but this is about old friends getting together, and rediscovering what they left here, so let’s let everyone get at it.”

There was a brief pause, then applause sounded. Kerry lifted a hand in acknowledgement, then she turned and headed back to where Angie was waiting, resisting the urge to wipe her palms on her skirt.

“Wow.” Angie greeted her. “That was impressive.”

“Gag.” Kerry made a face. “I wish I could have just kicked Stacey in the teeth. Now that would have been impressive in these heels.” Privately though, she felt good about her presentation. It hadn’t been her best, but it hadn’t been her worst, and at least no one had tossed a balled up program at her.

“C’mon.” Her sister gave her a hug. “Stop dissing yourself Ker. You were great.”

“I’m just glad it’s over. Let’s get out of here.” Her sister exhaled, rocking her head to either side to loosen up tense shoulders. “Boy, am I looking forward to that beer.”

Angie chuckled and she turned to lead Kerry out from behind the stage. They’d only gotten three or four steps though, before a tall figure intercepted them. “Ah, Ms. Strickfield.”

“Girls.” The older woman said. “A word with you please.”

Angie pulled up uncertainly. Kerry, however, didn’t hesitate.

“Sorry, Ms. Strickfield.” Her older sister said. “My brother and sister and I have a previous engagement. Thanks for your hospitality, but we need to be going.”

The older woman seemed surprised. “You won’t be staying for the reception then?” She asked. “I thought perhaps you would enjoy meeting with your classmates. I think your speech was very well received.”

“No.” Kerry said firmly. “I appreciate that, and I’m sure the reception will be just lovely, but unfortunately I have prior family commitments.”

“Of course.” The woman recovered. “I’m sure you want to spend time with your loved ones while you are here. Forgive me – and thank you for coming, Ms. Stuart. It really was a pleasure to listen to you speak.”

Kerry blinked, caught a little off guard. “Thanks.” She said. “Bit of a tough crowd, but I did my best.”

Ms Strickfield smiled at her. "Ms. Stuart, I had no fear of that. Your grace under pressure is very well recorded in recent years. At any rate, since we won't have the pleasure of your company at the reception, have a good evening, and enjoy your time with your family." She gave Angie a brief nod, and slipped out a side door to the auditorium.

"Wow." Angie murmured. "Who'd have guessed?"

Kerry scratched her nose. "Dar, actually." She muttered. "But that's another long story best told over lager. Let's get Mike before he starts kissing someone and get out of here." She resumed course for the door, straightening her jacket again before she put her hand on the knob to turn it.

"Why do I get a feeling I'm going to get more of an education tonight than I bargained for?" Angie followed her with a wry grin. "You know, Ker, life around you must never be boring."

"Hah."

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"So, it is agreed."

Dar watched in utter relief as Sir Melthon and Alastair clasped hands. She avoided looking at her watch, resting her chin against her fist instead as she waited for the rest of the niceties to be finished. The negotiations hadn't been that lengthy, but it was late, and she was tired, and she was very much looking forward to that nice big bed with its fluffily soft pillows.

"Good deal" Alastair said, briskly. "It's been a pleasure spending the evening with you good folks, but now it's time for me to get my team some rest so they can start planning the integration transition tomorrow."

Sir Melthon nodded, looking tired himself. "Right." He said. "We can pick up tomorrow at lunchtime. I will have my lot set up a workroom, and we'll put a spread on. Mimosas'll start the day off right, eh?"

"Sounds great." Alastair waved at his group. "Let's go people." He picked up the signed contract paper in its folder and tucked it under his arm, as the rest of the ILS team stood up and started their goodbyes.

Dar stretched her back out, and let her hand rest on the back of her chair. She waited for Alastair to move towards the door, then she followed him, with a casual wave towards the rest of the team. "Goodnight, gentlemen."

"Good night, Dar." Francois responded. "See you tomorrow."

Hans caught up with them as she reached the door and smiled, as he opened it. "It was a good day, yes?" He asked Dar in German. "Long, but good."

"Long, but good." Dar agreed. "I think everyone pretty much got some of what they wanted."

"That is very true." Hans was at her shoulder as they walked down the long, curving staircase that led to the ground floor of the big mansion. "I think he is happy. He likes your boss."

"I like my boss." Dar smiled. "In fact, today he's on my A list."

Hans chuckled.

They reached the outer door, which was opened for them by a uniformed doorman. Another was standing by, holding their jackets. Dar took hers and escaped in the chilly, very early morning fall air and took a minute to shrug into the soft leather as they stood waiting for their cars.

"Damn good way to end the night." Alastair commented.

"Any way you'd have ended it would have been good at this point." Dar said, dryly. "I thought we were going to have breakfast over foxhounds or something at this rate."

Alastair chuckled. "He's a tough negotiator, but I think we'll do all right." He stepped forward as the first of the cars pulled up. "C'mon, Dar. We're in the same place."

Dar didn't argue. She settled in the back seat of the sedan and pulled out her cell phone, checking the time on it before she dialed.

It rang twice, and then was answered. "Hey." Dar listened, but heard only a quiet humming in the background.

"Hey, sweetie." Kerry responded. "Are you finally done?"

"Mhmm." Dar leaned back as Alastair shut the door on his side and the car started to pull away. "How'd it go?" She guessed not that bad, just from her partner's tone.

"Not bad." Kerry promptly confirmed. "We're on our way to the pub now."

"Glad to hear it."

"How'd your part go?" The blond woman asked, after a moment of quiet.

"You've got your work cut out for you." Dar informed her. "Bring your pencils and a bucket of patience."

Kerry's smile was audible through the phone. "Don't worry, I will. Were they tough?"

"A little."

"Want anything from here?" Kerry asked. "I have some shopping time tomorrow."

"You."

"Anything else?"

"You."

Kerry chuckled. "Okay, you got it." She exhaled and there was a faint sound of traffic that floated through. "That really wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be." She admitted. "I think I worked myself into a froth for no reason."

"Well." Dar glanced at Alastair, who was peering out the window with deep and abiding interest. "It's a good thing for them they didn't give you a hard time." She said. "I'd hate to think I was stuck here babysitting Alastair when you needed me to kick some ass."

Her boss turned his head and looked over at her, eyebrows hiking.

Dar grinned at him.

"Is he there?" Kerry asked. "You didn't say that in front of him did you?"

"Sure did." Her partner cheerfully acknowledged. "What the hell. It's Zam and I'm so wiped if we had a problem I'd have to Fedex myself a box of brain cells to take care of it."

Alastair snorted, and leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Glad that fella didn't tell us to meet him for breakfast."

"Me too." Dar agreed. "Anyway, I just wanted to find out how your speech went." She addressed Kerry again. "Go have fun, and buy your sibs a round on me, okay?"

"Absolutely." Kerry said. "Bye hon, get some rest."

"I will. Later." Dar closed up her phone and put it away. "I think he was trying to see if he could wear you down and get those last set of concessions."

Alastair snorted again. "Listen, he may be a big shot royal whatever, but lady, I've played poker with slicker men than he ever will be." He said. "They're big here, and I like their setup. Good properties, good business model – but in terms of volume it's one of our smaller contracts."

"I know." Dar said. "Didn't think it paid to mention that though."

"Not at all." Her boss cheerfully agreed. "And besides, I like to think we give all our customers top notch service, no matter what the size of the contract." He glanced at Dar. "I don't recall you ever asking if any of your high wire act schenanigans were worth the size of the deal."

"Huh." Dar grunted in agreement. "Yeah, never really mattered to me." She said. "But all in all, it's been a good day."

"Sure has." Alastair said. "Everything go all right for Kerry?"

"Yep."

They were both quiet for the rest of the ride to the hotel, and they got out in the subdued quiet of early morning to a mostly empty street and a dim, very sleepy lobby.

"Evening." Alastair greeted the doorman as they entered. "Well, Dar, I think it's safe to say we can all sleep in. Give me a buzz if you want to do brunch before we go over. If his menu tonight's any indication we'll probably get whole pheasant or something for lunch."

"Sure." Dar got her key out as they rode the elevator up and walked down the stately hallway that held their rooms. She left Alastair at his and went gratefully to her own. She pushed the door open and let it shut behind her.

It was cool inside, and quiet, and smelled unnervingly like chocolate. Dar smiled as the scent hit her nose, and she rested her hand on the back of the chair in the room as she kicked her shoes off and looked around for its source.

Near the bed, she spotted it. A small tray was sitting on the table, a silver pot squarely in the center of it. Even from where she was, she could see the faint steam coming from the spout and as she walked over, she recognized little dishes of condiments meant to be added to the waiting cup.

Dar pushed these aside to retrieve a small, white card, turning it over to read the words on the back with an already knowing smile. "Thank you, Kerrison." She put the card down, and inspected the dishes, selecting a few mini marshmallows and a gummy bear, dropping them in the cup, then pouring the steaming hot chocolate over them.

Then she left the gooey tidbits to melt as she removed her suit and returned it to its hanger, trading it for her long tshirt and bare feet.

She glanced at her laptop, then she deliberately turned her back on it and went back to the bed, pulling aside the already turned down comforter and sliding under it, appreciating the smell of clean linen mixed with cocoa surrounding her.

She picked up the cup, lifting it towards the window. "Heres's to you, Ker." She said. "Hope you like the cake at the pub." She took a sip and smiled, and wiggled her toes in contentment.

**

Kerry leaned back in her bench seat, resting one arm along the back of it as she picked up her frosty mug and took a sip of her second beer. Having traded her suit for a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, and having her speech behind her, she found herself to be in a good mood, and happy with the world around her.

"What in the hell was that one chick's problem??" Mike asked, around a mouthful of jalapeno popper. "Did she have a tulip stuck up her butt or something?"

"Who, Stacey?" Kerry tried to remember just what had been Stacey's problem. Her first beer had put enough of a displacement between her and the event that it took an effort, and she used the arrival of her coconut shrimp appetizer as a delay tactic while she rummaged in her memory.

"She was the one you beat in that debating championship your senior year, wasn't she?" Angie spoke up. She had a luridly colorful fruit drink in front of her and she was happily sucking the pineapple from it. "I remember she pitched a hissy fit at the Palace afterward."

"You remember that?" Kerry found she did also, but very vaguely. She hadn't known Stacey that well, they'd gone in different social circles. Just one of the many girls not too different from her and her sister that she'd known. "I sort of remember that debate." She put her beer down and selected a shrimp to nibble.

"I remember, because I heard her mother yelling at her in the bathroom at the Palace that night." Angie sucked her daquiri through its attendant straw. "She was blaming the fact that Stacey'd spent the night with her boyfriend before the debate on her losing it."

Kerry made a face. "Ah, yeah, now I remember." She said. "I forgot all about who I was debating because I was scared spitless having father in the audience." She recalled. "I could have been facing Ronald McDonald and it wouldn't have made an impression."

"Oh yeah." Mike reached over and stole one of Kerry's shrimp. "What a big deal he made out of being there. I think every freaking paper within a hundred miles was straggling in the back of that place taking pictures."

Kerry glanced casually around, but the pub was quiet, and she didn't see anyone she knew around them. Not really surprising given that it was a Monday night and it was fairly late. There were a few men at the bar, and two groups of younger people near the pool table, and there was a low strain of Celtic music playing she found familiar. "I think that was one of the few times we had our picture together in the paper."

She had a copy of it, that she'd saved. A slightly tattered bit of newspaper tucked in a protective sleeve she'd stuck in a scrapbook of her school years and ended up taking to Miami with her. She and her father standing next to the wooden school podium she'd only recently spoke at, her father with his hand resting on her shoulder, a pleased and satisfied expression on his face.

For once.

She wondered what he'd have thought hearing her tonight. Would he have been able to set aside all the crappiness between them and just been glad for her success?

"Yeah, what a photo op that was." Mike said. "I remember him telling the paper he thought you might have a career in politics ahead of you."

"Oh gag." Kerry moaned, retreating to her beer. "I'd rather have flipped burgers for a living." She stretched her legs out and crossed her ankles. "We should get drunk and show up to mother's hung over tomorrow."

Angie covered her eyes. "Let's not." She said. "As you reminded me, I've got to live with her now." She glanced up as the waiter sidled up. "Can I get another one of these?" She ignored Mike's snicker and held up her daquiri glass.

"Sure." The waiter took the glass. "Your dinners will be coming out shortly, but remember to leave room for dessert."

"Well..." Angie waggled her hand.

"Trust me, you'll want to." The waiter grinned and sauntered off.

Kerry chuckled, taking another shrimp. "Worse comes to worse we can take it home for breakfast." She reminded them. "Cheesecake in the morning's great."

"Hedonist." Mike accused.

"If you think that's hedonism, you've got a lot to learn."

**

Kerry sat cross legged on the bed, writing longhand in a small cloth bound book propped up on one of the pillows.

It was quiet in her room, and quiet in the rest of the house. A glance at the clock told her it was well after midnight, and she pondered a moment before she went back to writing.

Sept 10th, 2001.

Well, today went better than I expected it to. I keep saying that. What was I really expecting? Did I really think they were going to throw rotten apples at me?

I don't know, Maybe I did. I'm glad the younger crowd showed some brain cells and class, and to be honest I wouldn't have minded talking to them a little longer if all of my old classmates hadn't been at the reception.

Is that cowardly? I don't think so. I just think it's normal for someone not to like being insulted like what Stacey did there. What a jerk. But Angie was right – she was a jerk when we went to school here, she didn't become one just because it turned out I was gay.

That was the one thing the kids didn't ask about. They were more interested in how to succeed in business. That's amazingly cool. I may even have to join my alumni society and start tossing them a few bucks if they're turning out people with those kind of goals.

Does it really matter that I'm gay? It's the 21st century. People shouldn't care at this point in humanity's history but you know, I think it does matter to the older crowd because I think they feel like they're not in control of things and life's accelerating out of control.

I'm used to it. Technology changes every minute. If you spend your life immersed in constant change, then when the world changes around you it just seems normal, doesn't it?

Hm.

I wonder if that's how mom's coping with everything. Just invest in the change, and maybe you stop stressing about how things used to be, and how you wanted them to turn out, and you just start surfing the wave and living in the minute.

I think I like that. Life is never boring if it's full of change, is it?

I was worrying about what mom was going to talk to us about tomorrow, but I've decided to just not get mad about whatever it is, assuming it's something I might get mad about. The only power to stress me out she has is the power I give her.

Isn't that great? Only took me how many years to figure that out? I bet Dar would crack up.

Kerry reviewed her words, and chuckled.

After a few minutes, she heard footsteps approaching, then she looked up again to see Angie in the doorway to her room. "Hey. Thought you were sleeping."

"Andrew was fussing." Angie explained, entering the bedroom. "And I saw your light on when I came back upstairs. Why are you still up?"

"Oh." Kerry glanced at her little book. "I just.. it sounds silly but I've started keeping a diary." She explained, a touch sheepishly. "I'm about done. Is Andy okay?"

"Oh sure." Her sister sat down on the edge of Kerry's bed. "He's teething." She said. "After you go through that the first time, like I did with Sally, you know what to look for and what to do, but boy, the first time it freaks you out."

Kerry closed her diary up and capped her pen. "How's Sally doing?"

Angie paused, then she shrugged a little. "She's confused." She said. "She doesn't really understand what's going on, or why she sometimes is in one place with her daddy, and sometimes here with me, but for all his other faults Richard doesn't play the blame game so I think she'll adjust after a while."

"Mm." Kerry tried to imagine what that would have been like, and found it hard. "We never had to deal with that." She said. "It would have been weird."

Her sister nodded. "It would have been. Fortunately for the kids, our divorce was a lot like our marriage was – passionless and businesslike."

Kerry winced.

"Hey, it's true." Angie said. "Ker, when I see you and Dar, and hear you talk to each other – you have something I have no clue about, you realize that right?" She cocked her head to one side and regarded her older sibling. "The whole bit with you sending each other notes, and for Pete's sake, sending fudge covered mousse cakes? Unreal."

Kerry made a wry face. "You know, we've always done that." She confessed. "I thought it was one of those things you do when you're.. uh.. dating. Or whatever." She cleared her throat. "But we just kept doing it. I guess we'll stop sometime. Most married couples I know don't.. do that."

"But?" Angie watched her, as her words slowed to a stop.

"Dar's parents still do." Kerry chuckled. "Oh well. It's nice though. That was killer cake." She licked her lips in memory. "I didn't even remember seeing that on the menu."

"It wasn't." Her sister said. "The manager told me it was delivered from some bakery in Detroit, hand carried."

Kerry had the grace to look mildly embarrassed. "All I had was hot chocolate sent to her room." She muttered. "And you know what? She probably had that all planned way before I called her hotel."

Angie covered her eyes in mock despair.

"So." Kerry cleared her throat. "Are you going to stay with mom long term?" She turned her pen in her fingers. "I know it's a lot quieter here now."

Her younger sister got up and wandered around the room, pausing to look out the darkened window. "You know, I wish I was you, Ker." She turned to see a pair of blond eyebrows hiked up. "You've got guts, you're successful, you're in a great relationship..."

Kerry remained quiet, since there was no denying any of that.

"But I'm not." Angie concluded. "I'm a typical second child, and you know what? I don't want to risk what I'll have to risk for a sexy, adventurous life. So yeah, I'll probably stay here with mom, unless Brian decides to make a commitment and then we'll see. Even so, we'll probably end up living with her. She likes Brian."

"Even now?"

Angie chuckled dryly and sat back down on the bed. "With everything that's happened in the last few years, I think she's learned to take her successes where she finds them. She wanted Brian for a son in law, so if it turns out he becomes one, she'll take it even if it's not really what she envisioned before now."

Fair enough. Kerry sighed. "I hope that works out." She said. "But anyway, if you ever do decide you want a radical change, you know where to find me."

Angie smiled. "Sally wants to come down to see her Aunt Kerry's log cabin. Maybe we can visit for a couple of days near Christmas, when it's all snow here, and anything but there."

"You're on." Kerry agreed instantly. "The kids would love it down there. It's right on the beach, and there's a bunch of cool stuff to do all around there, like glass bottom boats and paddle boats and things."

"Great." Angie got up. "Let me let you get to sleep. It's going to be a long day for you tomorrow." She said. "And hey, maybe I can even get mom to come down and visit for a day. Show her you really don't live in the middle of some third world country."

Eh. Kerry waved at her, as she left. "Actually..." Though she loved her adopted home, very often between the massively immigrant population and the overly graft ridden political scene it did sometimes seem like they lived on one of the nearby Caribbean islands.

However, she figured her mother would actually be pleasantly surprised with a visit to the condo so she was content to let the chips fall where they might on that subject. She got up and put her diary into her briefcase, then she turned the lamp off and climbed under the covers.

Somewhere, halfway across the planet, she knew Dar would be getting up soon, despite her late night and she wished suddenly that they would be sharing breakfast with each other. She wanted to talk to her partner about the interesting things she'd seen and felt the last few days, and she was already looking forward to her part in the new project and wanting to get started on it.

When she got there, there would be the initial meeting with Dar, to find out what Alastair and she had promised as part of the contract. Kerry trusted her partner not to sell her down the river, but there were times when Dar would okay a concession if she thought the contract was important enough and then sometimes they scrambled.

This was an important contract. Not for the size of it, but for the visibility and the foothold it gave them in an area they hadn't really been that successful in before now.

It tickled her to no end that she'd been a part of that win, even though she knew that it had been more pure luck than any real skill on her or Dar's part that had achieved it. Take truffles where you found them, Dar had said.

Yum. So she would. Kerry closed her eyes and relaxed her body, hearing the patter of leaves against the window and the soft creaks of the big house around her, until it lulled her into sleep.

**

Dar was glad enough to sleep in, spending most of the morning working off some of the mail overload that had built up in her inbox over the past few days. She was sprawled in the desk chair in her sleep shirt, the remnants of her breakfast tray nearby and a pot of coffee still handy.

It felt good to just relax for a few hours. The trip had been very frenetic so far, and Dar appreciated the chance to sit back and get her act together before she had to meet with their new clients again. They had meeting scheduled most of the afternoon, and then Alastair had arranged to host a dinner someplace in London for all of them.

Thursday, they'd meet with the local folks, hopefully all day to keep her mind occupied and off the fact that she'd be suffering the nine or ten hours of Kerry in the air and unreachable while she flew from Michigan through Chicago and then onward to London.

Of course, Dar realized she herself had been in the same state just the other day, but ever since Kerry's near miss in the storm, she'd found herself a nervous wreck whenever her partner flew. Kerry, on the other hand, had put the event in the past and didn't mind the travel and didn't seem to stress over when Dar flew either.

When they flew together, naturally, it didn't bother her. Dar decided not to think too much about why that was, and went back to her inbox instead. She clicked on a note from Mark, and opened it.

Hey boss!

Practice went good today. I think we'll do okay, so long as we don't have to do stuff like hit or catch baseballs. So far, we're really good at wearing funny looking pants, and tripping on cleats.

We miss you guys. How's it going?

Mark.

Dar grimaced a little. She clicked on the little video embedded in the mail and waited for it to spool up, then watched as she got a Mark's eye view of two of her employees crashing full into each other and bouncing back at least four feet. "Nice."

She shook her head. "At least Ker and I won't be the worst ones out there." She clicked on reply.

Hey Mark.

I hope the team can at least not knock each other over by the time Ker and I get back because if that's what's gonna happen we'll be laughing so hard we might as well just forfeit and go get drunk.

Meetings are going well – be ready to start this one up running because these people are skeptics. I hope that damn hub's going to come online soon because if there's one customer who's likely to push our SLA's to the limit it's this guy.

Throws decent meals though. We had prime rib of some creature or other for dinner and unlimited bottles of grog.

D

She went on to the next mail, glancing down at her news ticker poddling along at the bottom of her screen. "Slow morning." She flipped over to the network monitoring screen that always, from habit ran in the background and she viewed the gauges she seldom saw at this hour of the Miami morning.

Nine AM here, four AM at home, and she rested her chin on her fist, observing the traffic patterns. She could see the heavy usage fluttering across their internal networks both in Miami, and in the big data center in Houston. Backups, probably, unending streams of data being copied to their storage arrays, mirrored to make even that precaution redundant.

Dar respected that. She knew her team took the need to cover her ass very seriously, and she knew her peers in the company depended on that to make sure if something inevitably did happen, that they could recover from it with no harm done.

A blinking blue light caught her attention, and she shifted her gaze to the Houston links, watching the big routers there chewing over a healthy size chunk of traffic, which she realized was the government financial datastream going through it's nightly reconciliation.

Between the offices, the parallel tie lines were quiet. They didn't share much data, since Miami was the commercial hub and Houston the governmental one, but traffic like payroll and mail, corporate shares and intranet servers were quietly replicated so that the IT operation to most people was pretty much invisible.

Just how Dar liked it.

Just then, her messenger software popped up. Dar blinked at in surprise, half expecting it to be Kerry. It wasn't.

Ms. Roberts? Sorry to bother you.

Dar recognized one of their night net operators. *No problem.* She typed back. *What's up?*

We're having a little problem with the Niagara 3 node. We were going to call Mark but we saw you come online.

Dar cocked her head, marveling in the fact that the ops crew felt they could approach her now in so casual a manner. Respectful, but casual. She accessed a secure shell session and navigated through the net to the node in question, one of the three that surrounded the New York area to handle the stupendous amount of traffic there. *Yeah? What's the problem?*

We're seeing routes being injected and then squelched. We think it's a circuit issue but the LEC up there swears NTF.

LECS lie like fish. Dar informed him. *Let me take a look.*

Node 3 was her newest, an interlink to Canada that had only been online a few weeks. She poked around in the router, pecking away happily at the device as she went through its configuration. She checked the logs, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, and then she went through all the interfaces one by one. *Ah hah.*

Ma'am?

Found it. Dar typed back. *Give me a sec.* She reviewed the flapping interface, a little surprised to find a timing mismatch coming in from one of their major service providers. She watched the errors for a minute, and then she experimentally changed a setting, watched, and then changed a second. The interface settled down and stopped its gyrations and after another minute the data commenced flowing normally.

It looks great now ma'am!

Dar smirked, then she cut and pasted the circuit information into her notepad and got out of the router. *Anytime.* She typed back. *Now I have to go find out why the damn vendor changed his clocking without telling us.*

So it wasn't the LEC?

Not this time. Dar confirmed. *Service provider.*

Well ma'am, sorry about that but you just won me a bet here and now Chuck has to go out and get me Dunkin Doughnuts so thanks!

Dar laughed out loud. She pasted the information into a new message, and addressed it to the vendor with a couple of snitty pecks and sent it on its way. *Have a Boston Crème for me. Later.*

Thanks again, Ms. Roberts. Have a great day.

Well, she'd certainly do her best. Dar glanced up as an incoming mail binged softly. She was very surprised to see it was from the provider she'd just yelled at. She opened it.

Ms. Roberts –

We were about to contact you about this issue. We had a service interrupt out of the 140 West Street facility in Manhattan that resulted in a non scheduled recycle of the switch servicing your account.

Dar translated that without difficulty. "So. Someone rebooted the thing accidentally. Sucks to be you."

There was a configuration anomaly that was under review.

"Uh huh, and someone forgot to write the memory before you rebooted it too."

However, the issue seemed to self-correct, so no further action was taken.

Dar hit reply. *The issue didn't self correct. I went into our router and matched your timing change. I don't mind leaving it that way, but get your god damned procedures straightened out and tell your operations people to get their heads out of their asses and follow the rules next time.*

She reviewed the note and hit send with a satisfied little grunt. "Nitwads." She lifted her cooling cup of coffee and sipped from it, then set it back down. With a touch of curiousness, she clicked back to the network map and went into the graphical view of the node again, reviewing the traffic, then checking the other two nodes in the area.

Tons of data, even at this hour. What was it they always said? New York never slept? Watching this she could believe it. With a shake of her head, she closed the monitoring tool and went back to her mail, realizing there was one there from Kerry she'd somehow managed to miss. "Hey!"

She clicked on it.

Dar –

Ah, business. Dar knew a moment of disappointment, but immediately chastised herself and read on. Even using the corporate mail system, Kerry often sent short personal notes to her, and those were always addressed as something other than her name, so seeing one addressed with it made her aware it was probably either a problem or a solution to one.

Reviewing the growth chart, I found a hole here, in the mid Atlantic interchange.

Dar's eyes widened. "Oo!" She said out loud. "Checking up on me, Kerrison? You little scoundrel!"

With the new backhaul contract for the cellular consortium I think we're going to run out of space within six to twelve if the curve maintains. What do you think?

"What do I think?" Dar propped her chin on her fist and reviewed the graphs Kerry had inserted in her email. Her brow creased as she studied the bandwidth usage, then she quickly hunted something up on her hard drive and looked at it, switching between the document and Kerry's mail with rapid-fire flicks of her eyes.

After a long moment of silence, she snorted again. "Well, I'll be damned." She said. "What in the hell are those people doing? They're overshooting their per connection bandwidth by fifty percent." She flipped through the original proposal, wondering if she'd made a wrong calculation somewhere.

"Did they sign up a billion new users or something?" She puzzled over the numbers. "What the hell did I do wrong here?" She went to her browser and clicked on it, calling up one of the consortium web pages. After a moment's studying, her expression cleared. "Ah." She came close to slapping her own head. "Data. Pictures. No wonder."

She clicked over to Kerry's note, and hit reply.

Kerry –

Nice catch. I'll add bandwidth. Looks like they put in new services right after they signed the contract – maybe they figured they could get away with it.

Good work.

D

Then she added two small GIFS, one of a sheep, and one of a rock, and clicked send. Then she got up and stretched, leaving the laptop behind as she roamed over to the window and looked out.

Today, it was reasonably sunny outside, and the streets were full of walkers. Dar suddenly had the urge to be outside as well, and she put that plan immediately into motion, closing down her laptop and heading for the shower.

There was shopping to be had, and cute trinkets for Kerry to be bought, and she thought she saw a couple of street food vendors just off in the distance.

Just the thing to start the day off right.

**

Kerry lay flat on her back on her bed, her hands behind her head as the early morning sun poured into her window. After a moment's rest, she continued her crunches, counting under her breath as she worked through her last set, ending up grimacing on the last few but getting through them.

"Ugh." She spread her arms out and stretched them, waiting for the burn to fade in her midsection. Then she rolled over and got up, twisting her torso and making shadowboxing motions to shake her muscles out as she went to the dresser.

Her laptop was seated on it, whirring through its screen saver placidly until she touched the track pad and it presented her login screen. She rattled in her password and unlocked it, opening her mail program and watching the screen fill with dark lines.

"Aha!" She pounced on the one from Dar immediately, clicking it as the rest of the mail downloaded. She leaned on the counter and scanned the words, a relieved and happy grin appearing a moment later. "Yes!" She pumped her fist in the air. "Score!"

Finding Dar in a mistake was so rare that when it did happen, she spent hours and hours going over the data just to make sure she just wasn't looking at it from the right point of view until she felt secure enough to mention it.

Dar never seemed to get pissed off about it. Kerry suspected if she approached her in public with the issue, her beloved partner wouldn't appreciate it but she never did, and Dar's reaction either was an explanation of why whatever it was happened to be that way, or else, like this time, a cheerful admission of guilt and an action plan to fix it.

Awesome. Kerry stepped away from the desk and went to the window, peering out through the teak wood slats at what was going to be a gorgeous day. Though just seven, it was already light outside and she could see a beautiful, almost cloudless sky through the tree branches.

Great day to go out on the lake. She sighed. "Oh well, next time." She turned and went back to the dresser, picking up her laptop and carrying it back to the bed with her. She sat down cross-legged, and studied her mail.

Relatively uneventful. She clicked over and opened her morning report from operations, scanning it lightly until she came across an entry for the northeast sector and saw the outage notation. One eyebrow lifted. "And I didn't get a page, why?" She clicked the report. "Oh, that's why."

Opportunistic of her night admins. Kerry couldn't really argue with the logic of contacting her apparently available boss, but really, there was a process for that sort of thing. She blinked as a small box popped up next to her cursor.

Hey.

Ah. Speaking of the devil. *Hey cowboy. What's up?*

Cowboy?

Kerry smiled. *I saw the outage report from this morning.*

Ah. Dar seemed to reflect on that. *I sent a nasty gram to the vendor. I copied you. Looks like someone tripped over a power cable at their NY CO or something.*

Where are you? Kerry asked.

Just about to leave the hotel for the client site. Dar said. *I just got back from walking around outside. It's gorgeous here today.*

Kerry smiled again. *Here too. I wish I could go out sailing instead of to mom's brunch. Oh well. Are you doing anything tonight?*

The sun winked in the window and striped across the bed, warming Kerry's bare legs. She wiggled her toes in it, and wished very briefly and pointlessly that she was having this conversation in person.

Waiting for you.

So apparently the feeling was mutual. *I'm not leaving until tomorrow morning, sweetie. I have to get through the day at moms then I talked Angie into going down to the shops near the lake so I can get goofy trinkets for everyone.* She paused. *Wish I were at the airport taking off right now though.*

<ROFL>

Kerry cocked her head at the screen. *What's so funny?*

Tell you when I see you. I have to head out. Tell your crazy family I say hi and try to have a good time, okay?

Okay. Kerry typed. *Have a good meeting. Love you.*

Love you too, later. DD

Kerry chuckled and closed the window, and then she ran her eye over her mail. Not finding anything really urgent, she closed the program and got up to put the laptop back on the dresser.

"Hey, you up?" Angie stuck her head in the door, blinking in surprised to find her older sister in a pair of shorts and a sports bra apparently wide awake. "Boy, you have become an early bird haven't you?"

Kerry chuckled. "I have." She admitted. "I was doing my traveling exercise routine and then chatting with Dar for a bit. C'mon in."

Angie entered, still in her nightgown. "What's a traveling exercise routine?" She asked. "Is that what you do every morning?"

"No." Kerry turned and leaned against the dresser. "At home, Dar and I usually either go for a run in the morning, or if it's too hot and sticky which is a lot, we go to the island gym or to the pool." She replied. "I just have a few things I do when I am out of town like some sit-ups and push-ups and stuff."

"You're nuts." Angie informed her.

"I am." Her sister cheerfully agreed. "But it makes me feel good to do it so who cares?" She spread her arms out. "Hey, I even joined a baseball team. Our company's doing a league."

"Oh my god." Angie rolled her eyes. "You always wanted to do that. You used to bitch about it all the time I remember."

Kerry grinned. "Yeah, I know. But this was something that just came up. It should be fun though." She folded her arms over her chest. "Hey, want to go roust Mike up?"

Angie grinned back. "Actually, I was going to suggest we do that, then we go out and grab some breakfast somewhere. I gave my cook the morning off because she had a dental appointment."

"I'm all for that." Kerry agreed instantly. "Let's go for it." She headed for the door. "We can get some ice cubes to get Mike awake."

"Ker?"

"Hm?" Kerry paused at the door, with her hand on the knob.

"You going to go wake him up like that?" Angie asked, pointing at her sister's lack of real clothing.

Kerry glanced down at herself, and then she shrugged. "This is what I go out jogging in." She said. "C'mon. You can't tell me Mike's more conservative than the ghost of Commodore Vanderbilt."

Angie followed her out, shaking her head. "Guess we'll find out in a minute."

**

Dar resisted the urge to stick her hands in the pockets of her dress slacks as she entered the big dining room along with the rest of their team and Sir Melthon's people. There was a huge sideboard set up, and everyone was definitely in a much better mood today.

Deal was done. Papers were signed. Now they were partners, and as partners, they were no longer the bad guys so everyone was chilled out and a lot friendlier.

"Hello, Ms. Roberts." The man who had been pounding her mercilessly with questions yesterday was now all smiles. "John Status, by the way." He held a hand out. "No hard feelings, I hope?" He had a distinct, rolling accent that was almost musical.

"Not at all." Dar amiably gripped his hand and released it. "I like hard questions. People who don't ask them either aren't serious about dealing with us, or don't know what they're doing."

Status grinned. "Now there's a good solid saying." He took a seat next to Dar at the table. "I'm the lucky man who gets to be in charge of our company net."

Dar was mutely delighted to be sitting next to another nerd. She left Alastair on her other side discussing grouse hunting with two of the other men. "Gets to be, or is?" She was aware of the servers moving around them and the smell of something roasting.

"Is." John said. "Am. Whatever." He clarified. "I've been here for about a year, and the first thing I was asked to do is hook us up with a global network provider." He glanced around. "From this side of the Atlantic."

"Ah." Dar nodded. "We'd heard that." She gave the server a nod as he filled her glass with something that smelled like apples and cinnamon. "It's been tough for us to grow here because of the bias."

"Eh." John lifted his hands.

"I understand the bias. If the positions were reversed, it would be the same on our side." Dar said. "No one wants to work with people who are different and hard to understand. Our business methods are very polar."

The man sat back. "You know though, most Americans don't understand that." He observed. "They just come over here, and try to ride over people with high pressure sales jobs. They never come in and say, well, here's what we do. You interested?"

Dar smiled.

"Now, understand, it helps that His nib's godson came in like a raving loony about you." John said. "We were all saying, if Hans has his knickers in that kind of an uproar, must be something to it."

"Hey, Dar, your admin people in yet?" Alastair interrupted them.

Dar checked her watch. "Quarter to nine? Sure. Mine is anyway. What do you need?"

"Can you get one of the big portfolios headed this way?" Her boss asked. "The one that shows all the lines of business?"

"Sure." Dar opened her phone and dialed her office number. "Excuse me." She apologized to John.

"No problem." John turned to his plate, which had just been delivered, complete with a selection from the sideboard. "Ahh... now that's the thing."

"Hey, Maria." Dar heard her admin answer. "Good morning."

"Ah, good morning Jefa." Maria replied. "How are you? How is the England?"

"So far, very interesting and successful." Dar said. "Need a favor."

"Of course."

Dar paused, as her PDA buzzed. "Hang on a second." She opened it and glanced at the screen. "Hm. Hey, Maria, can you ask Mark to check out what's going on over near Boston? One of the supplemental links just came up and they're using some unusual bandwidth for the links."

"Surely." Maria said. "Is that all, Dar? How is Kerrisita? Is she having a good time with her familia?"

Dar closed the PDA. "She's fine, and her speech went great." She told her assistant. "Alastair needs one of the circus tent displays sent over here, can you get that in the works?"

"I will call over to the Sales right away, Dar." Maria said. "Oh, and Senora Mariana has delivered some packages to the office here for you and Kerrisita. I think they are your baseball costumes."

"What color are they?" Dar chuckled. "Please don't tell me they're either yellow or purple."

"No no, it is a pretty blue." Maria said. "And the pants, are white. Mayte was showing me hers last night, and they are very very cute." She paused. "The shoes were very strange. They had nails in the bottom? Is that right, Dar?"

Her boss chuckled, and then glanced down as her PDA buzzed again. She opened it, and after a minute, her brows creased. "What the hell?"

"Como?"

"Maria, can you conference Mark on? I'm getting pages that aren't making any sense. I think the monitor's gone whacky again." Dar paged through the messages.

"Surely. Hold on for one moment, Dar." Maria put her on hold.

"Something wrong?" John asked.

"Ah." Dar shook her head a little. "I think its just.."

Maria came back on the phone. "I have Mark, Dar, but..."

"Hey! Boss!" Mark's voice echoed through the phone, sharp with excitement. "Holy crap!"

Dar felt a surge of adrenaline, but she wasn't entirely sure why. "What's up?"

"A freaking plane just hit the side of the freaking World Trade Center!"

"Jesu!" Maria gasped. "Madre di Dios!"

Dar absorbed that in silence for a minute. "What?" She finally said. "How in the hell did that happen? Someone get lost looking for LaGuardia?"

"I have no friggen clue." Mark said. "But they just put it up on CNN and it's crazy! Smoke all over the place! People freaking out!" He said. "There's a hole in the side of that thing the size of the space shuttle!"

Dar pressed the mute button, and leaned over, touching Alastair on the sleeve. "Alastair."

Her boss turned and looked at her, his gaze sharpening immediately when he saw her expression. "What's up?"

"We need to find a television. Something's going on in New York."

**

Kerry strolled through the big atrium and paused, looking around and remembering the last time she'd spent time in this space. Her father's funeral reception. It was much quieter now; even the echoes of that tumultuous time were gone along with his presence.

She suppressed a smile, and continued on into the formal dining room where the rest of her family were gathered, getting ready to sit down to the promised brunch.

Kerry regarded the trays of salad and light sandwiches with a benignly polite interest, since their early morning breakfast escapade had resulted in a visit to Pumpernickels, and an English Scramble that both satisfied her salute to where her partner was, and adequately satisfied her appetite before their visit.

"Well, Kerrison, I hear your speech went very well." Her mother took her customary seat, and the rest of them joined her. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

Kerry picked up her glass of orange juice and sipped it, her brows hiking as she realized there was champagne in the mix. "Mimosas, mother?" She put the glass down. "I had a lot more fun at the pub afterward, but I think it went well."

"Well, I thought it would be festive." Her mother said. "After all, it's a lovely occasion, having all of you here." She took a sip of her own beverage. "It seemed to me to be a good chance for a little celebration." She added. "Even at nine am."

Kerry had to smile. She set her glass down, and then almost jumped as her cell phone buzzed against her side. "Yow." She unclipped it and glanced at the caller ID, her smile broadening. "Excuse me a minute." She answered the phone. "Hey hon."

Unintended, but she could almost imagine the grimace her mother was hiding.

"Where are you?" Dar's tone, however, wasn't what she'd expected.

"My mothers." Kerry said. "What's up?"

"She acting like something's going on?"

Kerry's brow creased, and she looked across at her mother, who peered back at her with a puzzled expression. "No. Is there something?"

"A jet flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center." Dar said. "There's a lot of confusion going on, and I've got some traffic alerts on our net up there."

"Oh no." Kerry gasped. "That's horrible! Did it lose an engine, or..?" She glanced up, finding her family now quiet, and listening to her. "There's been an accident in New York." She explained. "A plane hit the World Trade Center."

"Dear God!" Her mother straightened, her eyes widening. "How incredible!"

The doors opened, and one of her aides rushed in. "Senator." He got out. "Come quickly. Please." He indicated the door. Visibly confused, Cynthia stood and started towards him.

Instinctively Kerry got up, her body reacting to the sudden tension in the room and the edge in Dar's voice. She followed her mother as they crowded through the double doors and into the media room, where a large screen television was on. "Oh, wow."

"Are you watching it now?" Dar asked. "We're all here at the client site. Alastiar's trying to get hold of Bob."

"Our guy in Manhattan?" Kerry asked, her eyes studying the horror on the screen. "My god, Dar. Look at that hole!"

"He was supposed to be at a client meeting there at eight thirty."

"Good heavens." Cynthia Stuart finally spluttered. "How on earth could they have allowed a plane to hit that building? What was the pilot thinking? Why didn't they stop it?"

"Oh no." Kerry exhaled. "Hope he's okay..." She stopped speaking.

Everyone stopped speaking. There was a shocked moment of silence before Mike grabbed the back of a chair and leaned forward. "Holy shit!" He said. "There's another one!"

"Fuck." Dar's voice echoed softly down the line. "That's no accident."

Kerry was stunned. She was watching the screen. She'd seen a second plane appear, and crash into the other tower. Her mind was unable to grasp what she was seeing, however, as she struggled to make sense of the smoke, and the fire, and the sound of screaming and sirens coming from the television's speakers.

"Oh my god." She finally said. She could hear exclamations in strange accents from Dar's end of the conversation and it reminded her suddenly of where her partner was. "I don't think we're going to see the Alps, Dar."

Dar exhaled. "Not this week. No."

"Oh my god." Kerry repeated. "Dar we've got people all over that area." She finally forced her mind into a different gear. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Dar answered. "I've got to call my parents."

"I'll get my laptop. I'll call you back." Kerry said. "I'll call you back in ten minutes. "

"Okay." Dar said. "No, let me call my dad, and then I'll call you back. See if you can get on net." She said.

"Talk to you in a few." Kerry said. "Tell mom and dad I love them."

"I will." Dar's voice said. "I don't know where this is going, Ker. It could get worse." She said. "Talk to you in a few." She hung up.

Worse? Kerry folded her phone shut, only to have it ring again immediately, the caller ID showing the distinctive number at her operations desk. "Mother, do you have an internet connection in the house?"

Her mother turned, her eyes wide and staring. "W.. what?" She said. "What do you mean?"

Kerry shook her head. "Never mind, I'll find it." She turned and started out of the room, as she answered the phone. "Stuart." She paused as she passed Angie. "I'm going to get my briefcase."

"Okay." Her sister answered softly. "Kerry, what's going on? What's happening there?"

Kerry looked at her. "People are flying airplanes into buildings, Angie." She said. "On purpose." She eased past her sister and headed for the door, putting the phone back to her ear. "Go on."

Angie watched her go, then turned around to look at the television again. "Why?" She asked. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

**

Dar held one hand over her free ear as she waited for the line to be answered. Behind her, the room was raucous with all the consternation over what they were watching; only Alastair wasn't joining in as he was still, as was Dar, on the phone.

The line picked up. "Hello?"

"Mom?" Dar said.

"Well. That's one checkbox off my list." Ceci sighed in relief. "By the Goddess, this world has gone completely insane."

For once, Dar found herself in complete and total agreement with her mother. "How's dad?"

"Freaking out." Ceci said succinctly. "So am I. Did you see those poor people jumping?"

"Yeah." Dar said. "It's horrible. I was on the phone with Kerry when the second plane hit." She glanced up as Alastair approached, one hand over the mouthpiece of his cell phone. "Did you get Bob?"

"No." Her boss said. "But John Carmichael just got through to me and he says they think there's more." His face was set and grim. "We need to start getting our people under cover."

"Right." Dar turned back to the phone.

"I heard." Ceci said. "Dar, please be careful. You're the only child I have and believe me, there aren't going to be any more."

The moment of macabre humor set her back a step, but Dar smiled anyway. "You guys be careful too. Glad none of us is anywhere near New York." She said. "I'll call back in a while. Stay put, that condo's built like a bunker."

"So your father said. Talk to you later, Dar." Ceci hung up.

Dar closed her phone, and looked up as John approached, his face ashen. "What a way to ruin a lunch. Huh?"

"Is there anything we can do?" John asked. "We've already sent word to our people in upper Manhattan to get out of town, but I know you probably have a much bigger presence there."

"We do." Dar said. "I need net access. Can I get it here?" She looked over at Alastair. "I'm going to activate global meetingplace."

"Absolutely, just come with me." John led her out of the room and through a wide, oak door. They emerged into a smaller room, with several desks positioned around its edges. John indicated one of them. "There, and give me a minute and I'll get a line run."

Dar put her briefcase down and got her laptop out, sitting it on the desk and opening the top. She started it booting, while she removed her power plug and added the adapter that would allow it to connect to the UK power strip fastened neatly to one leg.

It was all mechanical. Her mind was going seventeen ways to Sunday in every possible direction, a brain cell overload that wasn't really helped when John flipped on the television in the corner on his way back over with an Ethernet cable.

She sat down and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

John glanced at the screen, shaking his head. "Here you go." He handed over the end of the cable. "You have an office in one of those?"

Dar plugged the cable in and waited for her logon screen. "No." She said. "I had a three week long screaming argument with the New York office when I refused to rent space there and put them in Rockefeller Center instead."

"Bet they're thanking you now." John remarked.

"Bet they are." Dar said. "But we have probably two dozen clients in the towers, and a lot more in that area."

"Ah."

Alastair entered the room. "There you are." He said. "I can't reach anyone in the Northeast." He said. "Damn cell system says all lines are busy."

"I bet." Dar entered her password and watched her desktop appear. She triggered the VPN tunnel to the office, and watched as the authentication system ran its routine.

Alastair perched on the edge of the desk, watching the television. John sat down in a nearby chair, doing the same.

After a moment, Sir Melthon entered, his face grave. "McLean, how about you and your lot moving here until this is sorted out. We've got space, and better facilities than the damn hotel." He glanced at Dar. "Who knows where this mess is going to end at."

Alastair looked at Dar, who nodded. "Sounds good. Thanks, Sir Melthon." He said quietly. "We've got things there."

"Right. I'll send a man over for them." The magnate left, all his air of country squire completely vanished. "Things can spread. We're closing the gates."

Dar felt a headache coming on. She rested her chin on her fist as her work desktop appeared, and there, in the corner, a violently blinking box.

Global Meeting has been initiated. Please sign in immediately. "Someone beat me to it." Dar logged in. "Damn I hoped we'd never have to use this." She said, as Alastair came around the corner and sat down in a chair next to her. "Here we go."

"Here we go." Alastair murmured. "Damn it."

**

Kerry shouldered the door to her father's inner office open, flipping the overhead light on and scanning the walls as she crossed the carpet over to the wooden desk. Her mind was so packed with dealing with the situation she felt no emotional charge on entering, focusing intently on finding a connection instead.

No wall jacks. She went to the desk and dropped her laptop on it, pulling the chair back and dropping to her knees to investigate the space underneath. Seeing nothing, she frowned, and started to get up again. "Guess it's the cell card. Damn."

Halfway up, she paused, suddenly aware of a soft humming sound. She thought it was her laptop, but as she moved away from the back of the desk it got softer instead of louder. She looked around the top of the desk, but saw nothing mechanical.

Puzzled, she got back down on the floor and turned over to lay flat on her back, inching forward so she could look between the desk and the wall to see if perhaps that was where either the elusive sound or the equally elusive connection might be.

There wasn't much space, but she managed to get an eye into position to look up and she immediately blinked at a box with blinking lights and a familiar logo. "Huh." Kerry reached up and

freed an Ethernet cable already connected and coiled neatly, and brought it back with her as she wriggled back into the light.

She got to her knees and plugged the end of the cable into her laptop, hoping she wasn't about to expose her equipment to anything. 'For someone who said they didn't trust technology..' " She got up and pulled the rolling chair back over, seating herself in it and starting to log in. "Pretty strange to find a router nailed to the back of your desk."

The door swung open and Angie appeared. "There you are." She approached, a nervous expression on her face. "Oh my god, Kerry. They threw me an Mike out of mom's office." She looked around. "Is it okay to turn the TV on? You look so weird in here."

Mike burst in. "Stupid assholes."

Kerry glanced up from typing in her password. She found her brain completely unable to process this multiplicity of inputs and went back to the screen instead.

Mike went over and put the TV on, then dropped into the leather couch against one wall. "These people suck." He said. "Freaking government secrets? The big secret is the government has no clue what's going on."

"Mike." Angie sat down and twisted her hands. "This is really serious."

Kerry checked the IP settings her laptop had received, and then started up her secure VPN session to the office. It wasn't completely safe. She really didn't know whose router that was, or who controlled it, but the line in the back was an Internet circuit and she didn't have a lot of other options.

She hoped her Dar designed firewall was up to snuff.

"See?" Mike said, pointing at the screen. "No one's sure what's going on, look at those news guys."

"Give them a break, Mike." Kerry started up her profile and watched as her desktop appeared. "There are planes crashing into skyscrapers that doesn't happen every day." The background of her profile was a picture of sunset from their cabin, and for a split second, the familiar sight made her feel better.

Only for a split second. She signed into her management console as she got a barrage of network popups, the little boxes multiplying like hamsters across one side of her screen.

"Oh!"

Kerry glanced up, to see a fresh plume of smoke issuing from one of the towers, and then a ground shot of people running amidst showering debris. She jerked her attention back to her screen and ignored the popups, calling up the administrator access that allowed her control of their various systems and processes.

Selecting the Global Meetingplace application, she activated it, clicking three times on the "Are you really sure?" warning boxes then sending it on it's way.

Simple act, complex program. Kerry then turned and selected Mark's box from the popups. "Hey."

Poqueto Boss!

Kerry smiled grimly. *I just triggered the disaster plan. You better assemble your team in the conference room and get the situation stuff on the screens.*

Gotcha.

For a moment, Kerry just watched the disaster program assemble itself on her screen, opening up tabbed layers that broke the company down into regions and offices, placing a bare bones chat area in the background, and presenting her with a box asking for her corporate identification, location, status, and role in the process.

"Kerry Stuart, Saugatuck Michigan, safe, moderator." Kerry muttered, as she answered the questions.

"What was that, Ker?" Angie asked. "They shut the airports down. Isn't that like locking the barn after the horse left?"

"What if there's more planes out there?" Mike asked.

"Oh no." Angie gasped.

Kerry's cell phone and PDA beeped, and she opened her phone first, seeing an SMS message on the screen that echoed the request on her desktop. She then checked her PDA, and found a copy of it there. "Okay." She said. "So we know the SMS and email alerts are working."

A soft crackle alerted her in the background, and she reached into her briefcase for a small headset in a back pocket she'd never had to use before. She settled the buds in her ears, clipped the microphone on her shirt collar and plugged it in.

Already, information was flowing across the screen. She could see the senior management dashboard, icons lighting as their scattered main offices logged in to the system. A box opened, with Mariana's icon flashing, the system reporting her status on the header bar and very different from the normal net pops. *Hey*. Kerry typed in the box.

Hey. Mariana answered. *Have you contacted Dar?*

She was the one who called me and told me what was going on. Kerry typed back, aware of the chaos on the television across the room. *She's fine; she's at the client site in England. Alastair's fine too.*

Do you know if he got hold of the people in the NY office?

Kerry took a slow breath. *No*.

In her ear, she heard a soft chime. "Virtual conferencing coming online." She typed quickly. *I'm going on the conference bridge, you joining? I don't really know what's going on but it's a good excuse to try the system out isn't it?*

Mari's answer was wry even in written form. *I'd rather be doing shredder comparisons again.*

"What the hell was the point of this?" Mike asked. "How are they going to put those fires out anyway, drag hoses up a hundred floors?"

"I guess." Angie said. "I don't think there's ladders that reach that far."

"Okay." Kerry said, into her microphone. "I'm opening the bridge, this is Kerry Stuart."

Cracklings and murmurs answered her. "Houston ops here." "Lansing." "Charlotte." "Los Angeles Earth Station."

Slowly, a map built in front of her, stretching out from one side of the screen to the other, an outline of the world with the United States in the center and circles of light that indicated all their major offices, installations, infrastructure and service centers.

"Kuala Lumpur calling in." The acknowledgements continued. "Dubai." "Sydney's on."

"Miami Ops on." Mark's voice echoed softly. "Kerry, I'm inserting the news crawler into the global desktop."

"Thanks." Kerry saw the ticker appear.

"Oh, there's the president." Angie said. "Kerry, look!"

Kerry glanced up at the television. The destruction had been replaced by their president, with several aides, standing in what appeared to her to be a schoolroom. "Where in the hell is he?"

"Florida." Mike said. "Some school."

"Great." Kerry muttered. "Like the air traffic isn't screwed up enough." She said. "Every time he visits I end up sitting at some gate for six hours."

"Kerry!" Angie turned. "Maybe we'll find out what's going on."

"CNN's got the prez on." Mark commented. "See if the feed updates."

"Miami exec?"

Kerry turned back to the screen. "Kerry here."

"This is Danny Chambers, at the Joint Chief's office." A man's voice said, sounding stressed. "Ma'am, it's crazy here."

"I bet." Kerry murmured. "I'm sure everyone's upset."

"No ma'am, that's not it." Chambers said. "They think there's more out there. More hijacked planes! There are folks running up and down the hallways around here no one knows where the planes are."

There was a moment of dead silence. Kerry stared at the blinking status lights in front of her, and then she looked over her screen to the television, where the president was talking.

"Hello? This is Sherren, from the Manhattan office! IS anyone there?" A voice broke in. "Is anyone there? I can't find half our people, and there's sirens and smoke everywhere! They closed the bridges and tunnels and they're saying to evacuate Manhattan!"

Voices now burst in, startled and afraid. Kerry took a few deep breaths, and then she spoke up.

"Okay, okay, people, please settle down." She said. "Let's not panic. I know it's really confusing out there, but a lot of things are getting said and we don't have all the facts."

"This is Michael Talmadge up at the air hub." A new voice spoke up. "Kerry, I have a landslide of requests for more voice and video bandwidth for the FAA and essential services."

"You got it." Kerry said at once. "Whatever you need up to link speed up there."

"This is Houston ops." Another voice said. "We're getting reports of cell failures on the East Coast, the government support team here says they're seeing a lot of dropped calls."

"Everyone's using their phones." Mark said. "Can't handle it, probably what's going on in NY. I can't reach any of the staff there, only Sherren's on the VOIP conf."

"That's right." Sherren agreed immediately. "Most everyone who's here is outside, or up on the roof trying to see what's going on. Sirens are going off like crazy."

Kerry thought fast. "Mark, send an SMS blast to everyone in the New York node and tell them to evacuate north. I don't know what's going on there either, but I think it's too dangerous where they are."

There was a blast of confused noise, overwhelming the call.

"What in the hell.. " Mark said. "Kerry I got that and we're working it but half the damn... oh, crap! The secure Virginia nodes just went down!"

"Danny?" Kerry asked. "Danny, you still there?"

Silence.

"Oh wow!" Angie exclaimed. "Now they think a bomb went off in the capital!"

Kerry felt her breathing getting faster. She could see on her network grid that there were flashing yellow and red lines now where she was used to seeing sedate greens and blues, and they were centered around the three nodes they had that ringed the Pentagon military complex.

"Yeah look! What? Oh.. crap!" Mike half stood. "I think.. did it go off at the White House? Is that what they said?"

"Pentagon." Kerry corrected him. "I think something happened there." She keyed her mic back on.

"Okay, Mark, get those SMS messages out to New York, and also to anyone in the area of DC, Maryland, and Virginia. Tell everyone to get the hell out of there and get under cover."

"Kerry." Mari's voice broke in. "They're telling us to evacuate here."

"There?" Kerry leaned closer to the screen. "Why?"

"Oh my god! They just said another plane is heading here!" Sherren screamed. "Oh my god!"

"They think... they're afraid there's more targets." Mari blurted out. "We're a tall building, in the glide path... the building management just called they got a call from Metro Dade and they told them to get out. They're evacuating a lot of the buildings behind us."

Too many inputs. "Sherren, why don't you go ahead and log off, go home, and then either text us or login from there if you can, okay?" Kerry suggested. "Mark, did you get those texts off?"

"Done, boss."

"Okay, I'm getting out of this office." Sherren said. "How do I text? Oh, no, wait, I see here in my phone, it's the first address, right? At least I can use this for something! I can't get a line to no one!"

"Kerry, I just heard from one of our techs. A plane plowed into the Pentagon." Mark said. "He's texting me like a crazy person. The damn thing came in almost at ground level and smacked into one side, he says it's on fire there, and walls about to come down."

"Okay." Kerry considered. "Houston Ops, are you there?"

"Here, ma'am."

"Can you take all the monitoring from Miami ops?"

"We're setting up consoles now."

"Mari, go ahead and tell everyone to leave the building." Kerry said. "I honestly don't think Miami's a target but who the hell knows and it's better not to take a chance."

"You got it."

"Mark, see if the tech can find Danny." Kerry said. "Get a text blast out and see if we can get a count of people out there."

"Working it."

"This is Sufir in Dubai." A voice very quietly broke in. "I know there is not much that we can do, but we are all thinking about all of you there and wishing with all our hearts the danger stops quickly."

"Miami Financial." Duks voice broke in. "Houston, please stand by we're syncing the accounting systems."

"Standing by." The Houston Ops tech said.

Kerry looked up at the television, aware that her sister and brother were half listening to it, and half to her as pictures continued to roll along the screen, more smoke, more screaming people, more destruction.

Where would it end?

What if it didn't?

**

"Coffee?"

Dar glanced up from her screen to find a server there, standing with a tray of steaming cups. "Thank you." She accepted one, and set it down, nodding as the server placed a small dish with four sugar cubes next to it, and a container of cream.

Alastair was still sitting next to her, one hand cupped over his ear, the other pressed against his cell phone. The television was on and Hans, John, and Francois were seated at the nearby desks watching the screen with expressions of bewildered disbelief.

"All right, thanks." Alastair closed his phone and turned back to Dar. "So where are we?" He picked up a set of ear buds connected to the second jack on Dar's laptop and inserted one in his ear. "Kerry's doing a hell of a job."

Dar nodded.

"Never seen her work before. Very impressive."

Dar nodded again.

"Dar?"

She looked up at him. "Sorry." She murmured. "Aside from all our people, I'm worried about my friend Gerry Easton."

Alastair's face tensed. "Ah. That's right. He works at the Pentagon, doesn't he?" He studied the screen. "What a god damned mess."

Dar reached over to drop three of the cubes into her coffee cup, stirring the liquid with the provided spoon before she added cream to it. "So many damn people unaccounted for."

Alastair sighed. "What do we have down in that area?"

"Mostly commercial." Dar said. "Closest net node is near Penn Station." She leaned closer to the screen, listening as voices now echoed again.

"Hello? Hello? This is Sherren again."

Kerry's voice answered. "Sherren? Did you get out of the office? Where are you?"

"I did.. but you can't get anywhere." Sherren said. "I'm near Central Park though, at a Starbucks."

"Miami ops." Mark's voice sounded. "Kerry, I've gotten the blasts out to DC and NY." He said. "I'm only getting about fifty percent positives."

Everyone went quiet, and Alastair briefly closed his eyes.

"Well." Kerry said. "You know the cell systems' pretty overloaded, Mark. Let's wait and see what happens before we assume anything."

"Oh!" Sherren suddenly said. "Hey, it's Larry. Larry! Over here! I'm online!"

Dar studied the traffic patterns on the network screen behind all the chatter. She could see the bare bones chat window filled with lines of talk, the employees online who were not participating in the conference bridge sharing with each other in this remarkable time.

"Network looks pretty stable." Alastair commented. "But that shouldn't surprise anyone."

Dar glanced at the keyboard, then turned her head and looked at him, one eyebrow lifted.

"Well, I have seen you work before." Her boss said. "So what's our plan here? Can we send help out to Virginia and New York? I know it's early yet.."

"OH MY GOD!"

Both of them jerked upright as though they'd been shot, and turned back to the screen.

"Good lord!" John blurted. "Look!"

"It's falling! Oh my god! Oh my god!" Sherren was yelling at the top of her lungs. "Oh my god! The whole tower! It's falling down!"

Dar's heart rate shot up as she found herself unsure of where to look first. The television screen showed a scene of unreal destruction, hundreds of stories of the World Trade Center collapsing in on itself as though taken down by an expert demolition team.

People were running.

People were screaming.

The air was full of thick, choking gray dust filled with debris that flowed and rushed over everything, leaving a landscape behind that must have been what Pompeii had been like just before the end.

Lunar. Horrifying

She stood up behind the desk, staring at the screen, unable to imagine actually being there and realizing she had been, the cross streets now covered in debris places she'd walked on her last visit. "Damn."

"Son of a bitch." Alastair added, standing at her shoulder.

Hans covered his eyes, and then shook his head, opening his fingers to look at the screen again. "Mein Gott." He said. "Die ganzen Leute hinein."

Dar remembered, then, suddenly, the moment after the explosion in the hospital when she'd been on the floor, lying in something like that same gray dust, in a completely different world.

Slowly she sat down and rested her elbows on her knees, and after a moment, Alastair perched on the edge of the desk, gazing quietly down at his shoes.

"Miami ops." Mark said. "Kerry, we're almost evacuated here."

"Miami ops, this is Houston ops." The Houston group broke in. "We are showing large scale outages now in lower New York."

"Miami exec, this is Herndon." Another voice. "We've had a request to activate the emergency circuits for Cheyenne, and add seventy two more channels to the tie lines."

It took a second, and then Kerry answered. "Ah." She said. "Sorry. Herndon, go ahead. Take standby circuits 2105 through 2110 and shut down the failover."

"Miami HR." Mari's voice. "Sorry to break in, but we're out of the building except for a few people."

"Miami exec, Miami ops." Mark's voice. "I'm staying."

Sir Melthon entered, his eyes wide. "Did you see that?" He pointed at the screen. "Never in my life have I seen the like of it.." He turned. "Got your things from the hotel, and they're settled here. Anything else we can do?"

Alastair sat back down in the chair and rested his elbow on the arm of it, propping his head up on his fingertips. "Got any good Scotch?"

Melthon snorted with wry understanding. "Of course we do. What do you think this is, America?" He snapped his fingers at one of the servers. "Bring me a bottle of the Talisker and a couple of dirty glasses."

"Sir." The man inclined his head, and scooted off.

Dar turned back to the screen, and settled the bud more firmly in her ear as she heard her partner's voice, sounding more than a little stressed.

"Miami ops, Miami exec. Mark, please shut down the center and leave." Kerry said. "The last person we need something to happen to is you. Work from home."

"Miami exec, you're not here, and you can't make me leave." Mark said, in a firm voice.

Dar keyed her mic for the first time. "I can." She said. "Get your ass out of there before I have my father drive over and smack you over the head and drag you out."

Totally against protocol. However, Dar figured the two people involved would know who was speaking without her announcing who and where she was and given that the apocalypse was showing on television at the moment who really cared anyway?

There was a moment of somewhat shocked silence. Then Kerry sighed audibly. "Boy, is it ever good to hear your voice." She said, in an achingly sincere tone.

Alastair chuckled softly under his breath as Dar's face tensed into a mildly embarrassed half grin.

"Uh.. okay, boss, I'm leaving." Mark responded meekly. "I don't want your pop thumping me." He said. "Or you thumping me."

Dar cleared her throat. "Good job, Kerry." She said, mindful of the global audience. "Everyone please just stay as calm as you can, and follow the plans we've laid out as best you can. This is horrific." She paused and exhaled. "This is unprecedented, and there are a lot of people out there both in the company and our clients that are going to need our help."

"Miami exec, this is Herndon." The voice almost sounded apologetic. "Excuse me, Ms. Roberts, but I have one of the folks at the Pentagon on a land line and he said part of that building just collapsed. They're going to need infrastructure support there."

What next? Dar rubbed her temples.

"Let's get some mobile units assembled." Kerry said. "Lansing, are you on?"

"Lansing here." A voice answered. "We have four vans."

"Lansing, this is Houston ops." The Houston office stepped up. "We have portable sat units here. Miami exec, can we roll them east?"

"Going to need those in New York too, I'm afraid." Alastair murmured.

"Miami exec? This is Halifax." A crisp male voice broke in. "We have heard all the inbound international flights are going to end up diverting to Canadian airports and they're worried about the phone and data backhaul."

"Houston go ahead and roll the units towards Virginia right now." Kerry said. "Halifax - Dar, do we have any spare capacity in that area to shift?"

Kerry could, Dar knew, have looked it up in the painfully detailed dynamic utilization chart she designed but she knew that Kerry knew that she would know off the top of her head and in fact she did. "Well." Dar said. "I've got spare capacity right now in the Niagara node. I'm getting pretty much nothing from New York."

A small silence.

"We can land the net traffic, the phone backhaul's going to depend on how much damage the interchanges took." Dar went on. "There's a three carrier interchange that holds most of the big international circuits that sits right under 2 World Trade."

Another silence. Then Mark cleared his throat. "I guess that's why we're seeing red across the board up there."

Alastair clicked his mic on. "Ah, Houston?" He said. "Let's get the community support teams rounded up and headed out. Not sure they'll let anyone near Manhattan but we can get to DC." He paused, and then added. "This is Alastair. I realize I'm probably not as instantly recognizable as some other people."

"Houston ops, we copy sir."

A loud crackle, and everyone jumped. "Hello? Anyone there?" A breathless voice came through. "Oh Hell. This is Danny at the Pentagon. What a mess. We need some help. I just managed to get my cell connected but they took out one whole side of the building and they're evacuating."

"Danny, do they need a trunk for backup?" Kerry asked. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Well." The tech sighed. "I've got a broken arm or something. We got lucky though the side they plowed into was the side they just finished the reno on and we were just pulling cable. Not many people were there."

Dar closed her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck, feeling a little relieved.

"But they say there's more planes out there so everyone's scrambling," Danny concluded. "I don't know if they're thinking about backup. I'll find out and let you know."

"Just text us, Danny." Dar broke in. "You'll probably lose cell."

A crackle, and there was no answer.

"Miami, this is New York." A new voice spoke up. "It seems we've moved the office to the Central Park Starbucks, but there's ten of us here now. We can't get cell to pick up, even for SMS. Can we get someone to log in okay?"

"New York, this is Miami HR – go head." Mariana answered. "Glad to hear from you."

Alastair clicked off his mic. "What the hell's going to happen next? This is nuts!"

Dar merely nodded, and then shook her head.

**

Kerry sucked slowly at a cup of tea, her throat already a touch sore from talking. There seem to be a slight lull for the moment, or else everyone was just a little shell-shocked and holding their breaths that nothing else bad happened.

She was resisting the urge to ask Dar to explain something esoteric, like node density, just to hear her voice.

"Ker?"

Kerry looked up over the edge of her laptop screen at her sister. "Hey."

Angie took a seat in one of the leather chairs on the other side of the desk and leaned forward. "What are you doing?"

"My job." Kerry said. "We're on a... I guess you could call it a big conference call, sort of." She explained. "But it's on the computer. We can all talk, and text messages to each other and we try to make sure everyone knows what's going on."

Angie got up and came around the desk. "Is it okay for me to watch?" She asked. "I can't look at that television any more."

"Where's Mike?" Kerry eased over. "You can watch, sure."

"Getting some food. I think he's getting some for us too." Angie settled down next to her sister and peered at the screen. "Wow. That's a lot of stuff."

"It's what we call our Global Desktop." Kerry found herself glad to be just talking about something that wasn't a catastrophe. "That's a chat room in the back, those are people all around just talking to each other over the computer."

"Uh huh."

"These folders are all the offices we have, and those dots are the people in them." Kerry indicated the other side of the screen. "These three over here are for our New York and Washington staff, and the people at the Pentagon."

Angie peered at her. "People at the Pentagon?" She asked, in a puzzled tone. "Why do you have people there? Is your company part of the military?"

Kerry heard people starting to talk again on the conference bridge. She keyed the external speakers so Angie could hear also. "The Pentagon is really just a humongous office building." She said. "We do their IT. Just like we do the IT for lots of other companies. We have about two hundred people there."

"Wow."

"Yeah." Kerry rested her head on her hand. "We can only find about half of them."

"Oh."

"Miami exec, Houston ops." A new voice came on. "This is Harold, I'm taking over for this shift."

"Go ahead, Houston. This is Miami exec." Kerry answered. She leaned back and tried to ease the stiffness in her back.

"Ma'am, the satellite trucks are ready to roll." Harold said. "We dug up enough gear for six."

"Good work." Kerry said. "Get them on the road, and please send at least three people in each one so they can spell each other driving and get rest."

"Yes, ma'am." Harold said. "We've got a lot of volunteers. Everyone wants to help."

"Miami exec? This is Danny in Virginia."

"Go on Danny. How's your arm?" Kerry responded.

"Um.. it's okay." The tech said. "We just heard here that another plane is heading towards us." He added. "Two of the guys who were off got through all the barricades and we're going to get away from here for a little while. I think I could use a coke."

"This is New York!" Sherren broke in. "We just heard a bomb went off at the White House!"

"Maybe that's where the plane hit!"

Kerry drew in a breath, and then released it. She turned her mic off. "I just had the most Un-Christian thought of my entire life." Then she clicked the mic back on. "This is Miami exec, let's try to take in what facts we can, and not react to what we're hearing on television or rumors until there's some substantiation, please. "

"Miami ops here." Mark said. "From home." He added hastily. "I'm going to start cataloging the down circuits."

"Miami ops, this is the air hub." An unhappy voice interrupted. "Another plane just went down, but they're not sure where. "

"Pentagon here." Danny said. "At least it wasn't us again."

"New York here. Us either." Sherren sounded profoundly relieved. "I have a great view of the Empire State Building from here and that's where everyone said it was headed."

Kerry exhaled. "This is Miami Exec – everyone check and advise if there is any indication of an attack in your areas." She said. "Air hub, do they think there's more?"

"Air hub, Miami exec – they have no idea." The voice answered. "There's a lot of people in tears around here. They just evacuated LAX."

"LAX?"

"Miami Exec, Air Hub, this is LA Earth Station." A voice answered immediately. "Local news is saying they're not evacuating LAX, but they are evacuating a lot of buildings in downtown and the studios."

"LA Earth, this is Seattle Netops." A new voice said. "We heard they were going to close down LAX and SFO also, they think that's where the planes that hit the towers were going."

"Seattle, this is Herndon control – that's confirmed." A woman responded. "American Flight 11, America flight 77, United flight 175. Those are confirmed so far as the planes that hit."

"LA Earth station, Miami exec." Kerry broke in. "Do you have transponder space for 24 channels? I have Newark Earth station on text, they're getting overloaded."

"Miami exec, we'll check. Hold on one please."

"Wow." Angie whispered. "This is unbelievable."

"What is?" Distracted, Kerry whispered back.

"You know more than CNN does!" Her sister said. "I've heard more about what's going on in the last five minutes than I've heard all day on the television."

"Well, I wish I didn't." Kerry replied, turning her mic off. "The only reason we know as much as we do is because we're in the middle of it. We have a lot of government contracts, I know you remember our father complaining about that."

Angie blinked. "Oh." She said. "Wow. Was that what he meant?"

"Miami exec, this is LA Earth, we're good to take 24 channels." The LA satellite center responded. "Tell Newark to switch to our coordinates."

Kerry turned her mic on. "La Earth Station, thanks." She typed into the text box open on her desktop.

"Miami exec, Miami HR." Mariana said. "Miami office confirmed closed, the management company has locked the doors and verified that the generator is tested and ready to go."

"Thank you, Miami HR." Kerry said. "Houston ops, Miami exec. Do you see everything stable at the moment?"

"Miami exec, Houston ops. Stand by we're verifying."

"Macro level looks stable." Dar's voice broke in, deep and rich and reassuring all out of proportion to what she was saying. "The autonomic programming expanded bandwidth across the northeast and it's doing a decent job of handling the backhaul but I can see retransmits at a very high rate from the cell services."

Kerry smiled. "Thanks boss."

"You're welcome, Kerrison."

Kerry felt like melting, just a little, at the warm affection so evident in Dar's voice. She knew the rest of the company could probably hear it too but heck, if they didn't know by now about them the hell with it. She caught a small box blinking at the corner of her screen, and she clicked on it.

I am so damned proud of you.

"Aw." Angie said. "She's so sweet, Ker."

"I'm sure she wouldn't agree with you." Kerry typed in a response. *Boy do I wish you didn't have to be right now. But thanks, honey. I'm doing the best I can.*

"Oh!" Sherren's voice cut in. "Oh! Oh, there it goes! Oh! Oh my god! The North tower's falling! Oh! Oh no!"

Kerry and Angie looked up at the television, and stared as the screen showed a shaking picture of the second big tower collapsing into itself, the stories just dropping down and down and down as smoke and dust went up and up and up, outlined by people running towards the camera as fast as they could being chased by a roiling, thundering cloud.

"Miami Exec, this is the Air Hub." The Air Hub called out. "We've got a confirmation that the fourth plane is down, but it's in Pennsylvania."

"This is Danny at the Pentagon. We're still here. Now we heard a bomb went off at the state department and some helicopters just took off fast from the yard here." Danny said. "I can hear fighter planes going overhead."

"Miami, this is Seattle Netops." Another voice. "Vancouver hub's asking for more bandwidth. They're taking the Pacific overseas flights."

"Miami exec, Miami ops, Newark Earth Station just went down." Mark said. "We just lost the international telecom links in the Northeast. Only the Miami ones are up."

"Confirmed." Dar's voice said. "Everything from New York is down. I'm shifting the overseas banking through Miami."

"This is Herndon, Miami exec. We just got word another plane is inbound to Washington."

"Herndon, this is the Air Hub – we heard the same thing."

Kerry looked up again as Mike entered, carrying a big tray. "How much more of this can we take?" She asked. "Jesus."

He walked over and set it down, looking over his own shoulder at the television showing the collapse of the North Tower over and over and over again. "This just sucks."

"This is New York." Sherren said. "People are screaming all over Central Park." She reported. "Just screaming. Screaming. Crying."

"Miami exec, this is Mid Atlantic Operations." A new, female voice interrupted. "We've gotten word they're evacuating all of Washington DC."

"New York too!" Sherren said. "They've got the bridges and tunnels closed south. Everyone's trying to get out north. You can't move. You can't move. Everyone's crying. Oh my god."

Kerry took in a deep breath, and then released it. "Seattle, give Vancouver what they need." She said, quietly. "Mid Atlantic, are you in a position to shift control to Lansing? Lansing, can you take that?"

"Miami exec, this is Lansing, we're working it." The local to her center said. "We've got a lot on our plates."

"Miami exec, this is Charlotte, we can take it." The southern center replied. "Mid Atlantic, give us five minutes and we'll be set up."

A soft knock made Kerry and Angie look up at the door to find their mother there, peering back at them.

"Children." Cynthia Stuart said. "I don't want you to be alarmed, but some very serious things have happened. Everything is under control, and I don't want you to worry, but you should plan to stay here for a few days while everything gets sorted out."

Angie looked at her mother, then at Kerry, then at the screen in front of them. She looked back at her mother, and then she looked at Kerry.

Kerry merely shook her head, and went back to the screen. "Thank you, Charlotte. Herndon – have you heard any more about that last plane? Is it confirmed in Pennsylvania? Miami ops is seeing a trunk down in the west there but we don't want to assume."

Cynthia took a step into the room. "Whom is she talking to?" She asked Angie.

"The rest of the planet." Angie said. "Do you think you could ask the kitchen to make some fresh coffee? I think Kerry's going to need it."

"I beg your pardon?"

**

"Dar, did you say all the transatlantic phone lines were down?" Alastair pulled his seat a little closer to his hurriedly typing CIO.

"Alastair, don't talk to me for a minute." Dar said. "I'm rerouting traffic and you don't want me sending financial datastreams to Tibet."

"Oh." Her boss said. "Well, no, I sure don't."

Dar kept her eyes on the screen and her fingers on her keyboard, going through the somewhat delicate task of rerouting traffic across alternate paths they were never intended to travel. At stake were a lot of American tourists in Europe who needed to get to their ATM accounts, or use their credit cards.

Including herself and Alastair of course.

There were four links across the Atlantic from New York, from four different providers, going to four different headends in Europe. Absolutely rock solid redundancy unless you happened to lose the major landing point offices for all four providers on the same day.

What were the odds of that? Well. Dar exhaled, blinking a little as she peered at the screen. It was too bad she hadn't taken a bet on those odds, wasn't it. Probably could have paid off ILS's outstanding debt with the winnings.

She finished typing and reviewed the results, switching over to her network monitor to watch the lines out of Miami branching to South America, across to the Bahamas, and out to Africa. The traffic would have to take a back route across Africa to Europe, and the access would be hundreds of milliseconds slower.

A thousand milliseconds was a second though – and the end result would be an extra tap of someones fingernails on the top of an ATM before it barfed out the local currency.

"Damn." Dar sighed. "The world's getting smaller every damn day."

"What's that, Dar?" Alastair turned around in his chair. "Can I talk to you now?"

His CIO sat back and let her hands rest on her thighs. "I'm done." She said. "For now anyway, until the next damn thing happens." She flexed her fingers a little, reviewing in her head the details she knew she had to send over to the operations group soon.

Twenty changes that in normal times would have gone through four levels of approval, been scheduled weeks in advance, with carefully coordinated validation from the individual banks and networks involved. No one except for Dar would have even considered doing it on the fly, but that was her role in this type of situation.

Anyone could have made the changes, one by one. Only Dar had the comprehensive understanding of the intricate spiderweb that was their network to do it without documentation and trusting her instincts and so could get the moves done at the speed at which events were actually transpiring.

Had she not been there, or had net access, it still would have happened. Dar wasn't nearly so arrogant as to write a single point of failure into either her network design or their corporate processes. No one was indispensable.

Sir Melthon entered. He crossed over to Dar's borrowed desk and stuck his hands in his pockets. "My people are telling me it's no good trying to call over to the States." He said. "We've got resources in New York we can't contact, and it's a bit worrisome."

"The main trunks from overseas come into New York City." Dar said. "The termination point was underneath the World Trade Center."

"Ah." The magnate grunted. "Putting a kink in your work, I'm guessing."

"Not really." Alastair said. "We've got a pretty comprehensive plan for this sort of thing."

Sir Melthon's head dropped forward a little, as he peered at Alastair. "For **this** sort of thing?"

"Well, disasters." Dar's boss explained.

"Dar?" Kerry's voice echoed softly in her ear. "Can you cover for me for ten minutes?"

"Sure." Dar put her other earbud back in. Then she removed it, and reached over to trigger the speakers in her laptop and half turned the machine so that their newest client could see the screen. "This is a system we developed to direct and coordinate a response to any kind of widespread disaster."

"We?" Alastair moved back so give Sir Melthon a better view. He folded his hands over his stomach and twiddled his thumbs. "Charmingly modest as always, Dar, but didn't you design this?"

Dar gave him a look from the corner of her eye. "Someone had to." She went on. "The system alerts everyone corporatewide where there is an event, either by sending them a network message.."

"Not much good if they're not in the building," Sir Melthon commented.

"Or via a PDA alert, SMS text message, or automated cell phone voice mail. Sometimes all four." Dar continued. "They're asked to respond in any of those methods, and the system logs their location, response and status."

Sir Melthon leaned closer. "Huh." He said. "How many people?"

"A quarter of a million." Alastair supplied. "It's a lot of people to keep track of."

"Those that can get on net connect to this global desktop." Dar said, taking advantage of the slight lull in the chaos. "There's a chat area, a status tab for all the locations showing who's accounted for and who isn't, and the global conferencing system, which is a voice over IP bridge that lets us all talk to each other."

"Some folks call into that with their cell phones if they can, or a landline." Alastair supplied. "Keeps everyone informed, and let's us react to whatever we need to react to in real time."

"Miami exec? This is LA Earth station." A voice erupted suddenly. "Do we have a go to bring up the reserve transponders? We are not at capacity yet but I bet we will be and we'd like to grab them before someone else does."

"LA Earth, this is Miami." Dar conceded to protocol, mostly for Sir Melthon's sake. "Go ahead and bring up whatever you have and hold it ready."

"LA, this is Seattle Netops, we're getting a request for additional uplink from Vancouver, can you take it? Four channels."

"Miami exec, this is Charlotte. Can you advise the status of interbank? We have a text from London asking."

Dar cleared her throat a bit. "Charlotte, interbank is routing via the southern links, approximately an extra seven hops, plus two hundred milliseconds, but stable." She reported.

"Uh, thank you ma'am."

"Miami exec, this is Miami ops, we're publishing the new routes on the big map." Mark said. "Be advised, we're assembling technical teams and checking inventory."

"What's that about?" Sir Melthon inquired. "Checking inventory?"

Dar checked the news ticker, then looked up at the television screen. "Any word on how long the flights are grounded?" She asked. "They're getting teams ready to go and help all our customers get back onto service."

"Tomorrow noon, at the earliest I heard." Alastair said. "I've been exchanging mail with Bea. She's trying to see if she can get us international flights into Mexico and arrange a pickup if you don't mind going to Houston first."

"Huh." Sir Melthon got up and moved out of the way, strolling back across the room towards the door. "Not bloody bad, for Americans." He disappeared, leaving them to listen to the new voices coming from Dar's speakers.

"This is Tom Stanton from the New York office."

Dar recognized one of the senior salesman's voice. "This is Miami, go ahead Tom." She said. "Good to hear you."

"I just made it up to our office on the Rock." The man said. "We were up in the South Tower."

Dar felt a chill run up and down her back, and Alastair leaned forward, his expression altering to one of grim seriousness. "Go on." She said, as the rest of the background chatter faded.

"What a nightmare." Tom said. "We were up on the ninetieth floor when the North Tower got hit. I saw the damn plane plow right into the side of the building and saw whatever was in its way come flying out the back side."

"Good lord." Alastair muttered.

"A lot of people stayed to watch." Tom said. "We started to head out of the place because it seemed to us the tower might lean over into the South. We couldn't get an elevator, so we started walking down and we were just past the sky lobby when that second bastard hit."

Dar caught a pop up box from the corner of her eye. She opened it.

I'm back, thanks sweetheart. Needed a bio break.

Dar flexed her fingers and typed back.

Anytime. I reported the interbank reroute and told Seattle they could take four more sat channels from LA for Vancouver, and told LA they could bring up the cold reserve transponder space. She paused, glancing at Alastair who was typing on his PDA. Wish we were home on our couch.

"So we kept going." Tom said. "The stairs were full of dust and hot as hell. You could hardly breathe, and there were these firemen trying to go the other direction. What a mess. Pieces of concrete kept falling on everyone."

I wish we were too. My mother's here listening. I want my dog, and my PJ's and you and all I have is my father's desk and my family not understanding what the hell I'm doing.

"Tom, this is Sherren." Sherren interrupted. "Are you all back? Are you at the office? We're up at Central Park, about a dozen of us."

There was a silence. "Just me and Nancy are here right now." Tom answered. "I don't know where everyone else is. We lost them. Bob stopped to help this lady, and two of the other guys did too, and then part of the stairwell caved in."

"Jesus." Alastair whispered.

"Oh no." Sherren said. "Maybe we should go back to the office and wait there, maybe they'll show up next."

"Anyway." Tom continued, tiredly. "We got down to the bottom floor and out into plaza. There were bodies all over the place. People jumping, I guess. The firemen were trying to move them but they kept getting called to go this way, then the other way. They were going crazy."

Dar closed her eyes. She was aware that someone had muted the television, and the room they were in was totally silent.

Alastair clicked his mic on. "Tom, this is Alastair. I'm glad you made it out. I know it was rough."

"Thank you sir." Tom answered. "We were just past the plaza when everyone started screaming, and I heard this rumbling in back of me.. it sounded like a big plane, you know, a seven forty seven? That rumbling when they're going to take off? And these huge bangs – I never heard anything like it. " He took a breath. "There were cops in front of us and they just started yelling for us to run, run, run – they shoved us down the street and I looked behind me and saw it coming down."

"Oh no." Sherren murmured.

"We started running, but there were these firemen.." Tom stopped, then went on again. "They started yelling and running the other way, towards the building and the cops were trying to catch hold of them and stop them and then the cloud was on top of us and all we could do was get behind some trucks and lay down and pray we didn't die from it."

At the end of the sentence his voice broke, and they could hear him crying. Dar bit her own lip and looked down at her keyboard. She folded her hands and rubbed the tips of her thumbs together, unable to truly fathom what it must have been like to have been there.

Alastair keyed his mic again. "Tom. Is there anything you need done? What can we do to help out?"

Tom drew a shaky breath. "We're okay." He said. "We both live down in Greenwich. We can't go home." He added. "Is Dar there?"

Startled, Dar looked up. "I'm here." She said, after a brief pause.

"God bless you." Tom said. "God bless you for not listening to us."

"Tom, we're all heading back to the office." Sherren said. "We'll stay together and help each other out. Okay? We'll see you soon."

Alastair put his hand on Dar's arm. "Do they have any kind of facilities there, at the office? Food?"

Dar nodded. "Showers, gym, kitchen, vending, yeah." She said. "They were so pissed at me for not putting them in the Trade Center I decided to throw in the works for them there."

"Hindsight." Alastair said, grimly.

"Yeah." Dar typed a response into the waiting message box. *On the flip side, at least we're both away from the trouble and safe instead of in the middle of it. One building collapsing on me in my lifetime was more than enough.*

Kerry's response was almost immediate. *You are so right. I'll stop my whining and get back to work now - talk about getting a new perspective.*

Definitely. Dar leaned back and looked around, finding the room full of both their team, and Sir Melthon's people, all quietly listening. "Damn." She shook her head. "Not a good day."

Not a good day at all.

"Scotch all round, I think." Sir Melthon turned to practical matters. "Think it's going to be a rather long night."

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Kerry stood up and stretched, twisting her body right and left. "Pentagon, Danny, this is Miami exec. Are you still out there?"

A soft crackle. "This is Roger, Miami exec. Danny is getting his arm taken care of finally." The voice that answered was hoarse. "Part of the wall, the outside, just fell down. Fires are still burning here, but a lot of the paramedics are around and taking care of people."

"Miami exec, this is Herndon. We believe the outage in Somerset is due to the United 93 crash near there. One of our techs reported it's in a large field about 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh."

Kerry rubbed her neck. "Okay." She said. "Thanks Herndon. How many people are we looking at for the outage?"

"Ten major customers, Miami exec." The voice on the other end sounded apologetic. "And our backhaul to Houston."

"Ah." Kerry sighed. "Okay. How many transponder channels are we looking at? I want to send as many of the sat rigs to New York as we can, since they've got so much infrastructure down."

"We can probably do it with three megs., Miami exec"

Kerry considered. "Hang on." She glanced across the room, uncomfortably aware of her mother watching her like some match at Wimbledon. She keyed her mic again. "Tell you what, Herndon. If the lines aren't repaired by the time the trucks get to your area, I'll send two your way. Can you pressure the vendor?"

There was a moment of silence. "Uh.. I don't think we've even called them." Herndon answered meekly. "Everyone's still freaking here."

Understandable. “No problem, Herndon.” Kerry said. “Let’s revisit the question in about ten hours. It’ll take that long for the trucks to get out of Texas anyway.”

“Will do, ma’am.” The tech replied. “That sounds like forever. It feels like today is already twenty four hours gone.”

Kerry looked at her watch. “And it’s not even noon.” She murmured. “You’re right.” So much had happened in so short a time it was hard to process it. Had it really been less than three hours? So short a time for the world to have changed so profoundly.

It seemed incredible. But at least they hadn’t had any catastrophic news in the last fifteen minutes. Kerry wondered if there were more planes out there, heading to places further away. Could they have gotten them all?

What if there were other things planned? What if it was just the start?

“Miami exec, this is Miami HR.” Mari’s voice caught her attention. “I’ve just gotten off the phone with the community support team. We’re working on sending assistance to Washington and New York, but we need some input on what the requirements are.”

“Miami HR, this is Roger at the Pentagon. We sure could use a chuck wagon and a hot spot here.”

“Roger, we already have the big bus headed your way.” Mari said. “I’ll tell them to stop and pick up food.”

“I remember that big bus.” Kerry commented to Angie. “It’s what showed up outside the hospital the last time. I was so glad to see it I almost cried.”

“I remember you told me about it.” Angie said. “I think you mentioned leather couches and a beer tap.”

“Oh, thanks ma’am.” Roger did, truly sound grateful. “We’ll tell the guys with guns to let us know when it gets here. They’re really tight right now.”

“I can well imagine.” Mari said. “Which reminds me, Miami exec? Do we know when we can get relief teams into Manhattan? I heard the bridges and tunnels are all closed inbound.”

Kerry’s brow creased, then she keyed her mic. “Hang on, let me see what I can do.” She turned to her mother. “Mother? Can you find that out for me?”

Caught utterly by surprise, Cynthia Stuart stared at her for a long moment. “I beg your pardon, Kerrison?” She finally spluttered. “What are you asking me?”

The irony was almost too much. Kerry felt uncannily like she wanted to sneeze. “We want to send community support trailers into New York to help our people, and anyone else.” She explained. “I need to know when they’ll let people into the city. Can you find that out for me?”

Her mother looked honestly perplexed. “Me?” She asked.

“You’re a Senator, mom.” Angie supplied helpfully. “I think Kerry figures the government would probably tell you sooner than they’d tell her if she called.” She ignored Mike, who had covered his mouth with one hand. “Right Ker?”

Kerry nodded. “I think our nearest ones are in Boston and Albany.”

“Senator.” One of Cythia’s aides poked his head in the door. “I think they are ready to start the conference call again, apparently the lines are working better now.”

Cynthia regarded him. “Albert.” She said. “I need you to find something out for me, urgently.”

The aide blinked in surprise and entered all the way in the room, glancing at Kerry and her brother and sister briefly. “Yes, ma’am? Do you want to discuss it in your office?”

“No.” Cynthia said. “Please find out at once when the roads into Manhattan will be reopened to allow assistance in the city.”

"Senator?"

"Was I not clear?" Senator Stuart asked. "I realize there is much confusion in this situation, but there are resources ready and willing to help some of those poor people and we must assist. So please go at once."

"Ah, sure." The aide said. "We have resources?"

"Yes." The senator confirmed.

"Okay." The aide turned and headed for the door. "I'll start working on that right away. Do you want to come to your office for the conference call?"

Cynthia sniffed. "Based on the last one, I think my time is more valuably spent sitting here. I certainly have learned far more."

The aide looked puzzled, then he merely nodded and left.

There was a brief, awkward silence. "Hey Ker." Angie got up. "Want some ice tea? My throat's dry listening to you yak this whole time."

"Sure." Kerry said.

"I'll help." Mike followed his sister out the door, leaving Cynthia and Kerry alone in the room.

Kerry made a mental note to properly thank her siblings at a later time. She sat down and rested her elbows on the desk, half hoping for an interruption from the conference line. "Thanks." She said belatedly. "I know there's a lot going on but we want to help where we can."

Her mother folded her hands together. "I had no idea how involved you were with this sort of thing." She said. "Your company seems quite organized."

"We try to be." Kerry said. "I don't think you can ever prepare for something like what we're living through today but we do have plans for different types of problems."

Her mother digested this. "You seem very competent." She looked up to see Kerry's expression. "I'm sorry. That must sound very patronizing." Cynthia said. "But to be truthful, I really had no idea until today what it is you actually did, Kerrison."

Kerry grunted.

"And, actually, I still don't really grasp what it is you were discussing on that machine." Her mother went on. "Except that it seems to be very involved with different parts of the government, which surprises me."

"It shouldn't." Kerry said. "Don't you remember father saying he wanted our company out of all the government contracts we hold?" She said.

Cynthia studied her. "Extraordinary." She murmured. "I do remember him saying that. I just had no understanding of what he meant until now."

It almost made Kerry smile. But not quite. "Don't worry." She said. "You're in good hands." She turned hers over and exposed the palms of them. "We know what we're doing."

"It certainly sounds like you do." Her mother said.

"Does that surprise you?" Kerry asked.

Her mother frowned. "Of course not." She said. "You've always been quite clever, Kerrison."

"Senator? The call's starting." Another one of the aides popped his head in. "They think they've gotten ahold of someone at the Pentagon to give an update, and they're asking for all of Congress to go to Washington to be in session tomorrow."

Cynthia Stuart glanced at him. "Please put the call in here, to this phone." She indicated the console phone on the desk Kerry was sitting at. "I'll take it here."

"Ma'am?" The aide looked pointedly at Kerry. "It's a secure line."

"Yes, thank you for clarifying that for me." The senator said. "Now please just do as I asked, and while you are at it, tell the staff to bring coffee service in as well." She added. "I will need to evaluate if I can leave my family here before travel is arranged to Washington."

"All right, Senator. If you say so." The man still looked dubious, but he nodded and escaped out the door, shaking his head a little.

Cynthia waited a moment, then she turned to Kerry. "I would rather we have all of the information in one place. I trust you understand how confidential it is."

"It's okay." Kerry rested her chin on her hand. "I've got a top secret clearance."

Her mother paused in mid breath, tilting her head to one side as she regarded her daughter. "You do?"

Kerry nodded.

"Miami exec? This is the Air Hub."

Kerry turned to her screen. "Go ahead, Air Hub, this is Miami exec."

"We've been alerted to possible power disruptions." The Air Hub tech sounded exhausted. "We've only got a four hour generator at the moment since the big one's on service."

"I'll take this one." Dar's voice broke in. "I'm just in the mood to scream at someone."

Now, Kerry couldn't help but smile. "Thanks boss." She keyed her mic. "My throat's giving out."

"Miami exec, this is LA Earth station. Any word on Newark Earth station? We're running out of transponder space here."

Kerry checked her text messages. "Miami ops, anything from Newark?"

"Nada." Mark answered. "I'll text them. See what I can find out. They probably lost the backhaul. It went through the 140 West station into the Niagara 3 hub."

"Everything's down on that hub." Dar said. "We lost a ton of facility."

"Miami, this is Sherren in New York." Sherren broke in. "We're all back in the office at Rockefeller." She paused. "No one else has showed up from the Tower yet."

"Okay, thanks Sherren." Kerry said. "Are you sure you all don't want to leave and go home?"

"No." The woman sounded tired, but definite. "We want to stay together here and wait for the others." She said. "Anne's making some soup for us in the kitchen."

The aide returned, and went to the phone, picking up the receiver and punching some buttons on it. "They're a little late Senator."

"Mm." Cynthia said. "More than you possibly know."

"Ma'am?"

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"Alright, thanks Bea." Alastair closed his PDA, and sighed. "Well, damn it all. Bea said it's hard to even get the travel agents to talk to anyone." He said. "Everyone's packed to the gills busy with people stuck all over the place trying to get from point a to b."

"Mm?" Dar was chewing on a rib.

"Right now, there are zero planes flying." Her boss said. "So everyone's trying to get around that, and Canada's not letting anything take off so a lot of people are looking to Mexico." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking more than a little stressed. "Mexico City and Guadalajara are booked solid. Cabo's open, but that's a hell of a trip."

Dar put her rib bone down and selected another from the plate in front of her. "Fly us into Cancun and I'll have my parents pick us up in the boat." She suggested. "They can drop you at Galveston and take me home."

Alastair pursed his lips. "Are you serious?" He asked. "That's an awful lot of trouble to go to."

Dar shrugged. "It'll take days, but it's going to take days to get home anyway." She said. "Dad's boat'll go thirty five knots and he's got a small satellite onboard." She said. "Worth a try, anyway."

Her boss pondered a moment. "Well, let me let Bea look at that possibility." He opened his PDA gain, half turning away as he typed. "Beats driving up from Cabo I guess."

The idea was on the crazy side. Dar had one ear cocked into the direction of the laptop, and she was listening to the stream of chatter from the conference bridge while she worked her way through some unbelievably excellent barbeque. Everything today had been on the crazy side though, and she saw little advantage in not thinking as outside the box as she could.

The pictures on the large screen flat panel television were bleak. She'd watched the crashing of the planes and the falling of the buildings dozens and dozens of times and she found she was starting to get a little shell shocked from it.

The pictures of the men and women covered in gray dust were almost surreal, and she had to keep reminding herself that this wasn't a made for television disaster movie every time they showed the huge, billowing cloud chasing people down the street.

Hard to believe it was real, until she heard the counterpoint of Kerry's voice behind her acknowledging this outage and that, and taking reports from people who were really there, really experiencing the horror and trying to stay professional and work their way through it.

High point for the company. Bottom of a crater point for humanity.

Sir Melthon entered. "Well, things seem to have settled a bit."

"Planes are out of the sky." Dar agreed. "Who knows if that's the end of it though?"

The magnate sat down in the seat across the desk from her. "Hell of a thing." He said. "We've still got some missing people in New York. Could I pass you along the names, and see if your fellows there have seen or heard of them?"

"Sure." Dar said. "We're missing some of our own."

"So I heard." He replied. "Dinner turn out all right for you? My second chef's from Dallas, and he insisted on making some of this stuff for you lot. Been cooking since last night."

"It's very good." Dar said. "I don't get to eat barbeque very often. Takes too long, and the local joints are all chains." She admitted. "Miami's not really a part of the south."

Sir Melthon snorted. "The wife's been after me to visit there. Worth it?"

Dar shrugged one shoulder. "My hometown, so I think so. If you want to enjoy it, come in winter. If you want your wife to ask you to go somewhere else stop by in the summer."

"LA Earth Station, this is Miami exec." Kerry's voice emerged from the speaker, sounding more than a bit hoarse. "We have Newark on text, they not only lost their backhaul, they have a total power outage and their plumbing backed up."

Dar turned all the way around and stared at the laptop in bemusement.

"Uh. Miami exec, this is LA Earth. We copy that." The Earth station replied. "Sorry to hear it. We'll keep squeezing everything we can up to the birds."

"Thanks." Kerry answered. "Okay, what's next?"

"That one of your people?" Sir Melthon asked. "That gal? Sounds like a sharp one. Been listening to her go on for a while now."

Dar put her rib bone down. "That's our vice president of operations." She replied. "Kerry Stuart." She picked up her napkin and wiped her lips. "She's very sharp." She caught sight of Alastair watching her out of the corner of her eye. "And yes, she's mine."

"Another one of those smart mouthed women?" But Sir Melthon smiled when he said it.

"I wouldn't have any other kind." Dar replied mildly. "Especially not in Kerry's position." She picked up a french fry and bit into it, aware of the faint shaking of Alastair's shoulders nearby.

"Well, to each their own." The magnate pronounced.

"Hey, Dar?" Alastair turned around and faced her. "Can you think of a reason why the government's looking for me?"

Dar stared at him in momentary bewilderment. "What?"

Her boss held up his PDA. "Bea just messaged me that she got a call from Washington asking where I was, and could they talk to me."

Sir Melthon held his silence, looking between his two guests with a look of absorbed interest.

Dar folded her hands together. "Well." She considered. "We do have a lot of accounts with them." Her brow creased. "But this is hardly the time for them to be asking about contracts and we're already doing everything possible and some things not possible to keep things rolling."

"Exactly." Alastair said. "Ah, maybe it was a mistake. Someone following up on something that doesn't really matter today, probably."

Dar nodded. "Happens sometimes. People focus on small stuff when they can't handle the big." She agreed. "We've got a lot of work to do, though. Those six sat trucks aren't even going to be a drop in the bucket with all the lines we lost."

Alastair exhaled, forking up a piece of brisket. "Should we even be worrying about that, Dar? Lot of people lost a lot of things, including their lives there today. What the hell do our circuits matter, really? Everyone's going to understand if things aren't back to normal by tomorrow." He looked uncharacteristically grim. "I feel like a bit of an ass listening to us go crazy there on the link when people are lying under tons of debris on the south end of Manhattan."

There was a small silence. Dar picked up a rib and bit into the side of it. "Alastair." She said, after she finished chewing. "What are our options? Do nothing and just watch CNN all day? We can't help those people."

"Well, yes but.."

"We can, however, work our asses off keeping people communicating with each other." Dar cut him off. "That's what our people are doing. That's what Kerry's doing, making space for people stuck in Canada trying to send mail home and make arrangements, or keeping the cell centers connected, or people's ATM cards working." She said. "We do what we do. We're doing more to help the damn country than ninety percent of the planet."

"Woman speaks the truth." Sir Melthon broke in. "It's been damned impressive to watch. Wasn't looking for a practical demonstration of your abilities, McLean, but I'm no idiot not to take advantage of the opportunity."

Alastair sighed. "Of course, and thanks." He said. "It's just such a rotten excuse for it."

Dar finished her rib and wiped her fingers, then picked up her glass of tea and took a swallow. She understood Alastair's frustration. At least she had something she could do, instead of just listen. "I'm going to give Kerry's throat a break." She said. "Last thing she needs is laryngitis."

Her boss managed a smile at that. "Bet she wishes you were there." He said.

"We both wish we were home." Dar answered, sliding her chair back to face the screen and keying her mic. "Ker?"

There was a scuffing noise. "Here."

"Go take a break." Dar said. "Drink some hot tea. You're starting to sound like a frog. I've got this for a little while."

Kerry cleared her throat. "Ah. Yeah." She sounded grateful. "Thanks boss. Any word on flights?"

Dar had to smile. "Not so far." She said. "They're still working on it."

Her partner sighed. "Okay. I'll be back in a few." She clicked off and Dar settled down to watch the screen, consciously aware of how far she was from home. "One problem, Alastair." She glanced over at him. "We'll be in the air a hell of a long time."

"I know." Alastair said, rubbing his eyes. "I know."

Too much happening, too fast. Dar rested her chin on her hands. Now that the immediate threat seemed to be on hold for the moment and she had time to reflect, her mind was starting to churn over with all the problems she now had to worry about.

Getting home. Getting Kerry home. Finding out about their people. Finding out about Gerry.

Figuring out how this was going to change their world.

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Kerry retreated to the solar with her big mug of tea and honey, curling up on the bench as she let the silence and the rich, green smell sooth her nerves. Her ears still felt like they were ringing with all the voices and the sounds from the television and it took her a few minutes before her mind wound down and she could relax.

She hitched the knee of her jeans up and rested one socked foot on the opposite knee, comfortable in her t-shirt in the relatively warm air.

She sipped her tea, grateful for the warm sweetness as it slid down her throat, and more than grateful to her partner for taking over the reins for a while so she could have a chance to chill out and collect her scattered thoughts.

Thank goodness for Dar. What would she do without her? Kerry thought about some of the things that had gone on and how if just a few things had been different how they could have so easily been affected more dangerously.

It felt good to just sit quietly, out of the limelight, and away from the watching eyes of her family and her mother's aides. She thought she'd done a very creditable job so far but she felt exhausted from all the emotional and intellectual turmoil of the past few hours.

The television had just been showing shots of people being recovered from the Pentagon. Kerry had sat there watching with a sense of odd disconnection, knowing some of the people on the screen were surely known to her by name, but not by sight.

Then they'd shown a press conference from New York. How many were dead? No one knew. Or else, no one wanted to say, all the mayor would admit to is more than they could bear. People were shell shocked, literally.

Terrorism. Kerry remembered, vaguely, her father once talking about the country's tendency to serve its own best interests being good for business, but bad for politics and she wondered if that notion was finally coming home and proving him right.

Odd. Roger Stuart had never been a friend of the rest of the world. He'd been an America first supporter for as long as Kerry could remember but now, she had a sense that despite his views, he'd understood more of the truth of the world than he'd preached to his constituents.

She thought about how he'd have reacted to what had happened. She suspected he'd have been at the head of the line urging retaliation immediately. Eye for an eye. He'd been that kind of man, something

that had always made her very uncomfortable and had led to him doing his best to interfere in her life.

It was internally very surprising then to her to find she had more of an understanding of that viewpoint than she'd imagined. She could think about these people, who had destroyed so much and hurt so many and knew in her heart what she felt for them wasn't anything close to compassion.

A little shocking.

"Hey Ker." Angie entered the solar, and took a seat on the other swinging bench.

"Mm." Kerry lifted her mug in her sister's direction.

"I was just listening to Dar talk on the computer. She's got a little Southern accent, doesn't she? I never noticed it before."

Kerry was quite happy to focus her thoughts on her partner for a minute. "Hm." She considered the question. "A little, yeah." She agreed. "Not all the time. It comes and goes."

"I like it." Angie said.

"Me too." Kerry smiled. "When she's around her father a lot, it gets more pronounced because he has one, and sometimes when we spend time down in the keys, too." She spent a moment thinking about Dar's voice, hearing the faint drawl echoing in her imagination. "Wish she was here."

"I bet you do." Angie said. "Is mom being in there freaking you out?"

Kerry swung back and forth a few times. "Not really." She finally said. "I mean, there's a lot of other people on there listening to me, you know?"

"Not in the same room."

"No." Kerry admitted. "I think it's freaking her out a little."

"It was freaking me out." Angie said. "It was all happening so fast. But you just handled everything like it was an everyday thing." She added. "It was such a weird contrast to that conference mom was on. No one knew anything."

"Mm." Her sister grunted agreement, as she slowly sipped her tea. "Or didn't want to admit anything." She said. "After all, we have whole chunks of the government we pay a lot of money for that are supposed to keep this kind of thing from happening."

"Well, I'm sure they tried. I mean, who'd ever have thought someone would fly a plane into a building?" Angie asked. "I mean, you think about bombs and stuff, not things like that."

Maybe that was true. Kerry leaned back and let her head rest against the chain support of the swing. The sun was pouring in the windows of the solar and it warmed her skin, providing her with some quiet peace as the silence lengthened between them.

"Richard's dropping Sally off here." Angie finally said, after about five minutes. "He thinks he might have to go to Washington for his firm."

Kerry started back to alertness from the light haze she'd fallen into. "Oh." She said. "Well, it'll be nice to see her anyway." She said. "How long has he had her?"

"Only a week. He picked her up a few days before you got here." Angie said. "I'm glad. Not that he has to go to Washington but I'd feel better with her here. Things are so weird." She gazed at her sister with a smile. "And she can't wait to see her Aunt Kerry."

Kerry returned the smile. "Ah well." She finished her tea. "I'm going to go back in there and see what Dar's up to. She's the one who's under pressure, really. Alastair's right there next to her and they're in front of our new clients."

She got up, a little surprised at how tired she felt. She waited for Angie to precede her and then followed her sister out of the solar and through the hallway, checking her watch as they emerged into the big entranceway where several of the Senator's aides were gathered talking.

The voices cut off as soon as they were recognized. Kerry and Angie exchanged wry looks. "Some things never change." Angie commented, as they walked past and pushed open the door to their father's former office.

"Isn't that the truth." Kerry glanced around, spotting her mother talking with another aide near the far wall, while her laptop sat quietly in the desk, a soft murmur of voices coming from it. She went over and sat down behind the desk, reaching down to pull her socks up a little as she glanced at the screen to see if anything had radically changed.

"Kerrison?" Cynthia left the aide standing near the other door and came over to the desk. "It seems that it's felt we all, that is, the Congress, should all go immediately to Washington to show our support in this horrible time."

Kerry rested her elbows on the desk. "Well, I guess that does make sense." She said. "But.. is it safe?" She asked. "Weren't they evacuating Washington?"

Her mother perched on the edge of the desk. "Well, that did come up." She said. "But the general thought was, for that reason especially we should all go and show we aren't afraid." She explained. "Ah, I think the term was, show the flag."

Kerry stared at her for a long moment. "Mother." She said. "That's idiotic."

"Kerrison."

"I'm sorry, but it is. If you have people who are willing to fly airplanes into buildings, what's to say they're not also willing to drive trucks into the front of the Capitol?" Kerry said. "They're not even sure who did it yet."

Her mother sighed. "That actually did occur to me, as well as to several others." She said. "However, as I say, the consensus is that we need to come together and show support and I am not entirely sure that's wrong either. We must set an example for the country, after all."

Kerry caught a motion out of the corner of her eye and she focused on the screen, surprised to see a familiar figure sitting in the corner of her desktop, holding up a sign. "Will work for hugs." She murmured. "Oh sweetie."

"Excuse me?" Her mother said.

"Sorry." Kerry tore her eyes from the forlorn looking Gopher Dar. "Mother, I understand what they mean. I just hope it turns out that everyone stays safe, and they're not part of another catastrophe."

Her mother looked more than a bit discomfited. "Yes, well.." She looked around, then looked back at her daughter. "You know it was so curious to me that really, you had so much more information than we did during this morning's horrible events."

A little surprised at the subject change, Kerry resisted the urge to return to her desktop and concentrated on paying attention to her mother instead. "Information is what we do." She said. "We have to know what's going on."

"Exactly." Cynthia Stuart said. "That's what I told some of my colleagues and they were also very surprised at how much better organized it all seemed for your company."

Kerry frowned. "Well, they do pay a good amount of money for our services, mother. I'd like to think we give the American taxpayers their dollar's worth."

"They were very interested to hear about that." Her mother said. "They would like you to accompany me to Washington." She added. "I was sure you'd be more than glad to go."

For a moment, Kerry sat very still, aware of a flush of cold anger that made her hands tingle and left her slightly lightheaded. "Number one." She said, after waiting long enough to make sure she wasn't going to stand up and yell. "You had no right to tell them that, and number two, no I would not be."

"Kerrison, I don't think that's called for."

Now, Kerry did stand up, aware her body was tensing and her hands were curling into fists. "I don't give damn what you think." She said. "And I certainly don't care what your friends in Congress think. I don't owe them any explanations."

Her mother got up off the edge of the desk. "I told them you'd come talk to them." She said.

"Too bad."

"Kerrison!" Her mother's voice now lifted in anger.

"No, mother." Kerry managed, just barely, to keep her own temper from getting completely out of control. "I'm not going with you, and I'm not discussing our business with anyone." She folded her arms across her chest.

Cynthia Stuart stared at her, but Kerry's grim expression and truculent posture didn't alter and she finally looked away. "Well, if that's your decision." She said, after a pause. "But I think you should consider carefully, and then we will talk again." She motioned the aide out, and followed him to the door, going through it with as much dignity as she could muster.

No slammed doors, no yelling.

After a brief silence, Angie made a face, biting her lip as she approached the desk. "Sorry, Ker."

"Blech." Kerry finally relaxed, leaning her hands on the desk and letting her muscles unlock. "My own god damned fault. I should have kept the earbuds in and not shown off." She looked down at the screen when she heard an odd sound, to find Gopher Dar knocking on the inside, peering at her. "Wait until Dar finds out. Just what we didn't need."

"Maybe she'll drop it. I think she knows you were pissed." Angie suggested. "That look you were giving her could have frozen hot coffee."

"Hmph." Kerry grunted, and sat down. "Got any Advil?" She sighed. "I'm gonna need a case of it."

**

"Well, hello to you too, Ham." Alastair had answered his cellphone in some surprise when it rang for the first time in hours. "I'm in London. Oh, what? Sure, of course you knew that."

Dar was half sprawled across the desk, her legs wrapped around the chair base and her head propped up on one hand. The other hand was wrapped around the mouse, but now it released the creature and rattled over a few keys instead.

Ker?

"Dar? She's right here."

Dar looked up over her screen, one eyebrow lifting.

"No, she's fine." Alastair went on. "Bea's been keeping my wife and the board filled in on what's going on. Have to say, this digital assistant thing Dar made me start using sure paid for itself today."

Dar's screen beeped softly. She looked back at it.

Hey. Need to talk to you.

Dar's brows knit. She unhooked her cell phone from her belt. "If you can get a call in, I'm going to try a call out."

"Hm?" Alastair put his hand over the phone. "Ham says he had to call over and over again for an hour to get through." He said. "Seems there's a lot of hullabaloo around his area."

Their corporate lawyer, who lived, Dar recalled, in Boston. "Tell him I say hello." She opened the phone and started to dial, then looked back at the screen when the speaker cracked.

"Miami exec, this is Miami ops." Mark's voice emerged.

"Go ahead." Dar listened to her phone with her other ear, hearing a fast busy signal. She hit redial.

"Boss, we can't get a good handle on how many pipes we need to replace." Mark said. "We need to eyeball."

Dar released the button, and dialed again. Having someone onsite in both Washington and New York was probably a good idea, especially in Manhattan where most of their presence there was business services. "You think we can wait for the planes to start flying again?"

"Hard to say." Mark said, honestly. "I'd rather jump on my bike and start up there."

Dar triggered the dial again, considering the request. "Tell you what." She heard the line start to ring. "Rent a van and take three or four people with you. Don't make me sweat you ending up wrapped around a tree on that Harley."

The phone was picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey." Dar said, only barely remembering to click off her mic. "What's up?"

"Hey." Kerry exhaled. "I love you."

Mark cleared his throat. "Okay, I can do that. I've got a bunch of guys here who just held up their hands to volunteer to go with."

"I love you too." Dar replied, with a relieved smile. "Damn, it's good to hear your voice."

Kerry chuckled a tiny bit. "Honey, you've been hearing my voice all morning, "

"Not the same thing."

"Thanks for sending Gopher Dar to keep me company."

"That okay, boss?" Mark asked. "We can leave tonight."

"Hang on." Dar said.

"Nah, I'll answer." Kerry replied. "Miami ops, this is Miami exec, that's fine. Make sure you pack a case of Jolt. "

"Uh. Okay." Mark seemed caught offguard with this sudden change. "We'll get moving."

"Why don't you take as much spare gear as you can pack in the back while you're at it? I'm not sure when we'll be able to ship anything in there." Kerry suggested.

"Good call." Dar complimented her. "Alastair thinks you're the bomb, by the way."

"Will do." Mark said.

"Miami exec, this is the Air Hub."

Kerry sighed. "Air hub, hold on a minute, would you please? I need to take a call."

"Air hub, will do."

"Hey." Kerry's voice returned to the phone. "Where was I?"

"Saying you loved me." Dar was aware of the tiny, startled reactions from Alastair every time she mentioned the word. "What's up? You said you needed to talk."

Kerry sighed again. "My effing mother." She said. "Dar, she told someone else in.. I guess another senator or something, about all the stuff we were talking about on the bridge and told them I'd come to Washington and talk to them."

"Dar, Ham says he needs the list of down customers as soon as we can get them, so he can head off any legal action." Alastair said.

Dar glanced over at Alastair, and nodded. "Well." She said. "How bad is that, Ker? You're doing a first class job, maybe she's just proud of her kid."

Dead, absolute silence.

"Ker?" Dar said, tentatively. "Granted the last thing we need to get distracted by is government bullshit but.. I assume you said no, right?"

"I said no."

Dar could hear the tone. "Didn't mean to piss you off, sweetheart." She said., waiting until she heard the slight exhale. "I'd rather you go find a canoe and start paddling in this direction."

"Sorry." Kerry said, after a pause. "You just made my brain go somewhere I wasn't expecting." She admitted. "Dar, she has no right to go and tell people in the government the stuff we're doing. She was all freaked out about how we knew stuff she didn't, I think that's what she wants them to talk to me about. How did we know what we knew."

"Hon." Dar almost chuckled, but thought better of it. "We get paid to know what we know."

"Yes, I know that." Her partner said. "But I told her off. I was so pissed."

Dar felt a bit out of her league. She understood how Kerry felt about her family, and for sure she understood what it was like to be at odds with a mother. But she had always felt the evil in the family had rested with Kerry's father.

Maybe she'd been wrong. "Well." She said. "You don't need me to be the bad guy for you, but if you want to tell her Alastair and I said absolutely no way is anyone from our company going to go and chat with Congress, feel free."

"Huh?" Alastair craned his neck around and peered at her. "What was that?"

"Any luck on you heading this way?" Kerry asked, in a quiet voice.

"Miami exec, this is LA Earth Station." A voice interrupted. "We have the local FBI office demanding bandwidth we don't have. Need some help here."

Both Kerry and Dar keyed their mics at the same time. "Hold on a second." They said together. Then Dar released hers and cleared her throat. "Bea's trying, hon." She said. "Soon as I know anything I'll text you on it."

"Okay." Kerry said. "Is it okay if I go expense a hotel room?"

"Buy the hotel if you want." Her boss said. "Put it on Alastair's credit card. I think I left the number on a sticky yellow pad by Maria's desk."

"What?" Alastair covered his phone again. "Dar, what trouble are you getting me into?"

Finally, Kerry chuckled. "Okay." She said. "It may not get that bad, but this is already so stressful I don't really need my family adding to it."

"No problem. Totally understand." Dar said. "Hang in there, okay?"

"Okay. Talk to you later. Let me go put a hose on this fire." Kerry said. "Bye Dardar."

"Bye." Dar closed her phone. "Sorry, Alastair. Kerry's mother's caused a problem and she's thinking of staying elsewhere."

"Ah hah." Her boss nodded. "My wife doesn't get along with her folks either. Wants to serve them the dog's kibble every time they stop by." He went back to the phone. "Ham? Yeah, I'm back. What's that? Well, sure, I understand the board's probably upset, Ham, but you know everyone's pitching in like gangbusters to keep things moving along."

"All right, LA Earth Station. " Kerry came back on the bridge. "Give me a second to clear up the Air Hub's issue then we'll discuss the FBI request."

"Will do, Miami exec." The west coast facility said. "We told them we're carrying the East Coast right now so they backed off for a few minutes."

"Nice of them." Kerry said. "Air Hub, go ahead."

"Miami, we have some spare capacity if you need." The Air Hub said. "We aren't carrying any air traffic other than management layer. Everything's landed."

There was a moment of silence. "Well." Kerry finally said. "I'm sure we can use it somewhere, no matter how rotten the reason is. Thanks Air Hub."

"You're welcome, Miami exec."

"Okay. LA, who contacted you? Get me a name."

"Will do, Miami exec."

Dar rested her hands on the desk, her phone clasped lightly between her fingers. She looked across the room at the big screen television, her thoughts almost completely focused on her partner.

"Alastair?"

"Eh?"

"Bea having any luck with flights?"

Her boss peered at her. "Haven't heard back yet."

Dar juggled her phone. "I'm going to call my folks. See what they think about taking a run to Cancun." She said. "Sooner we get back in the States the better."

"Funny." Alastair said. "That's exactly what Hamilton just said." He related. "He heard from a buddy of his things are damned bad in New York. Worse than they're letting on the television."

"Yeah. Well." Dar opened her phone and started dialing again. "Tell Ham the FBI's trying to grab signal over on the west coast. See what he can do about that."

"Eh?"

**

Kerry scribbled down the number, one hand holding her head up as she studied the computer screen. She was aware of her sister and brother entering, and she heard the door shut quietly, but she focused on what was being carried over their stressed infrastructure and what she was going to say to the person on the other end of the phone when it answered.

Dar had a way of turning her viewpoint at different angles. Kerry tried to recapture her former indignation, but that calm voice kept intruding into it, forcing her to reassess what she was feeling and examine whether or not there wasn't a different way to look at it.

Ironic, since that's what she'd hoped to do for Dar when they'd first started working together, wasn't it? Change her perspective? Sometimes, Kerry admitted, she had, but more often she'd found herself pulling up short when faced with her new partner's internal logic and having to really think about where the right and the wrong was sometimes.

Dar didn't do or not do things because they were 'right' or 'wrong' – she did them because they made sense, or they didn't. It was a far more profound difference in their mental working than Kerry had ever suspected when they'd met and it had taken both time and effort to get used to it.

Instinctive intellectualism. That odd, sometimes disjointed instinct that Dar used to make business decisions, write her programs, solve her problems. It was what led her to hire Kerry, or so she often claimed.

Kerry had enough ego to suspect that was only ninety percent true, the other ten percent being something a little more primal. Certainly it had been on her side of the question. "Okay." She opened her cell. "Let's call the FBI."

"Huh?" Mike said. "What did you do? Or what did we do? You calling the FBI on mom? Holy crap!"

"No, I'm not." Kerry punched in the number, and waited. "They're just another customer of ours."

"For real?"

"Hello?" A man's voice answered.

"Hello, I'm looking for Robert Ervans. This is Kerry Stuart, from ILS." Kerry said. "Our West coast facility advised some help was requested."

"Huh? Oh." The man said. "Yeah, okay, Sorry. This is Agent Ervans." He added. "You're the computer people?"

"Yes." Kerry agreed. "What can I do for you?"

"Listen, we need to send a lot of pictures over our Washington office. It's taking too long. We need more space so it can happen faster." The man said. "I know your guy there said you already had a lot of other things happening, but this needs to take over. It's important."

Kerry's nose wrinkled. "Mr. Ervans, I can review what traffic's on the line there, and certainly we can prioritize yours because I understand you must be working on critical items.."

"That's right. Exactly right." The man sounded approving. "It's really important that we get these files to Washington."

"But the fact is, you're on our satellite link and the slowness there is due to the latency, the time it takes for the packets to get to the other side of the continent, rather than a lack of bandwidth." Kerry explained. "I can see if we can find more space, but I don't think the speed will get much better."

"Oh." Ervans said. "Well, what can we do about that, then? My boss said whatever it takes, just get it done."

Kerry sighed. "My boss usually says the same thing." She said. "In terms of the latency, there's not much we can do, since that's caused by the traffic having to go up to the satellite and back down. Other than shrinking the circumference of the planet we're stuck with it."

"So you can't do anything?"

"Not with the satellite." Kerry said. "But let me see what other options we might have and I'll get back to you."

The line abruptly cut off, and Kerry gazed at her cell phone in bemusement for moment. "You're welcome." She closed the phone, and looked up at her siblings. "So." She said. "Am I in trouble?"

Mike snorted, throwing himself down on the couch and slinging one leg over the side of it. "Bunch of jerks."

Angie came over and sat down in the chair across the desk from her sister. "Mom's upset." She said. "But I think she's upset because you're upset more than she's upset about the whole going to Washington thing." She made a face at her sister. "Anyway, I think she's going to go with those aides to Washington tonight so once she's gone it should relax around here."

"Like they're all going to do anything there except yak." Mike said. "What are they going to say, oh, this is terrible. We have to get the people who did this and make sure it never happens again." He lifted his hand and let it drop. "Bunch of self important little prickheads."

Angie looked at Kerry, and they both half turned to look at their younger brother.

"When, exactly, did you become a radical?" Kerry asked, in a quizzical tone. "We've lived as part of the government in this house as long as any of us has been alive."

"Yeah, well." Mike said. "Now I can say how I feel and not worry I'll get thrown in the cellar."

"Miami exec, this is Herndon."

Kerry turned back to her computer. "Go ahead, Herndon." There wasn't much she could really say to Mike anyway and not sound completely hypocritical and she suspected he knew that. She'd kept her own silence in the house for how long? "Miami exec here."

Until life had handed her something more important to her than herself. That was exactly how long.

"Miami exec, we just had a visit from some people from the government. They want access to the center, ma'am. They want to put taps in place and I don't think they want to hear no from me."

"Taps?" Kerry's voice went sharp. "What kind of taps? On their own stuff?"

"Ma'am, I'm not sure." The tech said. "They weren't specific."

Kerry put her fingers on the keyboard and rattled a sentence into the open messenger application.

Did you hear that?

Dar's voice broke in. "Herndon, this is Dar Roberts." She said. "I have just locked all our infrastructure out with my personal passcode. You tell those people from the government they need to contact Alastair McLean if they want to discuss tapping into anything."

"Oh boy, she sounds pissed." Angie said. "Can she do that?"

"I think she just did it." Mike said. "Good for her! Government jerks!"

"I hear you, Ms. Roberts." The Herndon tech sounded relieved. "I don't know what it was they were looking for ma'am, and to be honest I don't think they knew either, based on how they were asking."

Kerry glanced down at a soft beep.

I don't think they're going to take that from the local folks. They'll be back and that's a major commercial link not just a government one.

"She can do it." Kerry said, quietly. "Dar isn't someone who does something just because someone in authority tells her too. Believe me."

"Understood, Herndon." Dar said.

"I back that up completely." Alastair broke in. "I'll call our contacts in the government, and see if I can determine what's going on."

"Yes, sir."

"Is that your big boss?" Angie asked. "The one who's with Dar?"

Kerry nodded. *What do you think they're after? Could this be related to the terrorists, Dar? We don't want to be accused of obstructing anything.*

I don't know. Dar typed back. We could be in a bad spot here.

Kerry studied the string of text, starting with the first message. "Shit."

"What?" Mike sat up.

Kerry exhaled, and typed. *I should go there. All we have is an infrastructure manager. Not fair to put them on the front lines.*

Maybe flights will be allowed out tomorrow sometime.

Kerry had to smile, no matter how wryly. Dar knew perfectly well what her options were, and what was best for the company but Dar also made no bones over whose priorities were more important to her. *Maybe I could go apologize and suck up to my mother and go out tonight.*

In no way am I asking or expecting you to do that. Let them wait. Let them call me. If they want it that bad, I'll make em send a damn bomber to pick our asses up here.

"God, I love her." Kerry said. *This could seriously be a matter of national security, Dar. We shouldn't screw around with this.*

"What's she saying?" Mike asked. "Did you just tell your whole company you loved Dar? That mic was on. I heard the reverb."

Kerry blinked, and looked at the mic in her hand, and felt the blood rush to her head. "Oh, crap."

Thanks hon. Love you too. Dar rattled back. *At least, I assume you were talking about me.*

"I'm pretty sure they already know." Angie watched her sister's face. "Whoops."

Of course I was talking about you. Kerry put the mic down to be safe. "Jesus." She muttered. "Too much crap happening at once."

Anyway, I know it's serious. Dar responded. *It might be a matter of national security but you know what? Bottom line is, we're the experts, and that's our facility. We handle that data. If they need something from it, we and I mean Alastair too, we have no problem doing whatever we have to in order to help but I'm not giving the people who let this happen carte blanche access into my network.*

"Wow." Kerry murmured, as she read. "I'm not sure we're going to get away with that."

"What?" Angie got up and went around the desk. "What's going on?"

"Dar's being Dar." Kerry said, picking up the mic again. "Okay, Herndon – if you get another request, let us know as soon as it happens, and you can tell them our senior management is contacting the government to find out what their requirements are so we can do our best to fulfill them."

"That sounds cheesy." Mike said.

"Are you really going to go suck up to mom?" Angie whispered. "Wow!"

Kerry sighed. "We learned political compromise early, didn't we?" She tasted the smarminess on her tongue like a coating of stale fry oil. "Oh, lord I don't want to do that but the bottom line is someone should be there and I'm closer than Dar is."

"Isn't there someone else they can send? Surely you two can't be the only responsible people in that whole ginormous company." Angie pointed out. "For Pete's sake, Kerry."

"There's lots of people." Kerry typed back. *Can you see if Hamilton Baird can get someone over there from his department?* "The problem is, this is all operations and that's our division. Mine and Dar's. We don't have anyone else in the company that does that at an executive level."

"She and Dar are the only ones with balls, she means." Mike said, from his perch on the couch. "Gorgeous women with bad attitudes scare the crap out of guys. Everyone knows that."

Angie turned around and stared at him. "How in the hell would you know?" She asked. "Your girlfriends are all empty headed bimbos."

"That's how I know."

Alastair's on the line with him now. Dar responded. *This is getting crazy.*

Crazier. Kerry responded. *Okay, I'm going to bite the bullet and go find my mother. Cover for me? You sure?*

"I'm sure I'm going to be sick to my stomach." Kerry muttered. "Where's that bucket of Advil?"

**

Kerry decided a glass of tea was in order, to get her handful of pain killers down before she went in search of her mother. She crossed the dining room and pushed open the door to the kitchen, surprising the woman standing just inside. "Hey Mary."

"Ms Kerry." The cook greeted her. "Terrible things are going on."

"They are." Kerry agreed, going over to the cabinet and taking down a glass. "It's been a really tough day."

"What can I get you?" Mary asked. "I have to say it's going to be nice having your sister back in the house with the little ones. It's been too quiet around here."

"Some tea, if you don't mind." Kerry offered up the glass without protest. Mary had worked for her parents since at least as long as she'd been alive, and this kitchen was her territory, no doubt about it. "How have you been, Mary?"

"Well thanks." The cook returned with the glass full, and handed it to her. "And yourself? How's your sweetheart Dar?"

My sweetheart. Kerry had to smile at that. She swallowed her pills and washed them down with a mouthful of tea. "Dar's fine, thanks, she's in England right now. I think we'd both be better if we were home in Miami though."

"Just a good thing you were out of harms way." Mary said. "And I was thanking the Lord that your mother was here too, and not in the way of those crazy people."

Kerry sipped her tea, leaning back against the counter. "I'm glad too." She said. "I tried to talk her out of going to Washington tonight."

"Crazy people." Mary repeated. "No sense to it at all. I wish she was staying here and not going out to be with the rest of those government people. It was fine for your papa, he was a strong man."

"He would have been very upset." Kerry said, quietly. "This would have made him very angry."

"Oh yes, ma'am. That's very true." Mary nodded. "Now, I know you didn't get on with him, Ms. Kerry, but he was a good man to have around when things were terrible like this."

And that, Kerry had to acknowledge, was true. "As long as he was mad at something other than you, yes." She said. "And he would have been furious at the people who did this. He'd have been trying to find out how it happened."

Mary nodded. "Would you like more tea, Ms. Kerry? I have to say I do like that haircut you have. It looks very nice on you."

"Sure." Kerry handed back her glass. "And thanks. I like it too." She ran her fingers through her hair, pausing to rub the back of her neck a little as she willed the Advil to start working. "I didn't think I'd like it at first, but it ended up being nicer than I thought."

Mary poured the glass full again. "Well, don't get upset at me for saying this, Ms. Kerry, but short like that, you do remind me a just a bit of your papa."

Well. Kerry took the glass back. "How could I be upset at you, Mary?" She said. "He was my father. No matter how much we disagreed, that's not going to change."

Mary smiled at her. "Glad to hear you say that." She said, then fell silent as the door to the hall opened.

"Mary, I will need for you to.." Cynthia Stuart entered, then stopped as she saw who was visiting with her cook. "Ah. Kerrison."

Ah. Yikes. Kerry exhaled silently. "Mother." She returned the greeting in a mild tone.

Her mother's expression brightened just a trifle at that. "Mary, could you please see what we can arrange for a luncheon in perhaps an hour? I know it's late for it, but everything's so out of sorts today."

"Of course, ma'am." Mary gave Kerry a knowingly sympathetic look. "Nice talking to you, Ms. Kerry. Let me know if you need anything else." She ducked out the door into the pantry.

Kerry quickly considered her options. "Want some tea?" She finally asked. "I just had to take a handful of aspirin." She eased over a few feet and sat down at one of the chairs at the worktable.

Her mother relaxed a trifle. "Yes. It's been that kind of day, hasn't it?" She went to the refrigerator and opened the door, removing a small bottle and taking it over to the table in the corner along with a glass. "I've had to take some myself." She took a seat. "This was the kind of thing your father would say was a full bottle of whiskey day I believe."

"Yes." Kerry agreed. "I could use a beer."

Cynthia glanced furtively at her. "That does sound so odd." She said. "I don't think either of us was ever partial to beer."

"Probably why I am." Her daughter admitted. "All part of that complete rebellion thing." She looked up and found her mother looking back at her in wary surprise. "I was rude before. I'm sorry." She said.

Cynthia looked momentarily overwhelmed, as though Kerry had gone in a direction she hadn't anticipated.

Which she had, Kerry realized. Straightforward apology was something she'd learned from Dar, not something she'd picked up growing up where admitting fault was never easy. "I've got a lot on my shoulders. I wasn't expecting complications from the government."

Her mother nodded at once. "It is I who should have apologized, Kerry." She bit off the last part of her daughter's name with visible difficulty. "It completely did not occur to me that I was speaking so far out of turn." She went gamely on. "I didn't mean to cause you difficulty. I just saw an opportunity to help and thought your involvement would be a good thing. I should, in fact, have asked you before proceeding."

Kerry pondered her glass. "I probably would have reacted the same way, if you had asked." She replied honestly. "Being here is very uncomfortable for me. I don't trust you." She looked up again, to see her mother's eyes wide as saucers. "And given what happened, you probably shouldn't trust me either."

Way too much truth in one sentence, she realized. Her mother had no idea how to react, and merely sat there blinking at her. It was hard, and it was making her headache worse. "I'm not trying to be a jerk." Kerry said. "I just can't help how I feel."

"Well." Cynthia finally said. "I have no idea what to say to that."

"I know." Her daughter said. "It's probably going to be easier for both of us if you try not to think of me as the little kid who used to run through this kitchen, and more like an adult you don't know that well."

Her mother set her glass down. "Do you have any idea whatsoever how impossible that is? I am your mother."

"I know." Kerry said, again. "And no, I have no idea at all how impossible that is. I just don't want to make this so hard on both of us."

Cynthia sat back and regarded her. "How can you still be so angry?" She asked, in a quiet voice. "I don't understand it."

Reasonable question, Kerry felt. From her mother's point of view at any rate. "I don't know." She said. "I guess maybe along with the eyes and the high blood pressure, I inherited father's long grudges." Her eyes lifted again and met Cynthia's, watching several emotions cross her mother's face; first shock, then a touch of anger, and what might have been a flicker of grudging understanding.

Might have been.

"Well." Her mother said. "Perhaps in time we can adjust." She concluded. "But at this time, I fear we cannot, since I do have an eight PM flight and I am sure you will be on your way home before I get back." She poured the rest of her bottle of juice into her glass and placed the bottle down with a slightly more than necessary force.

Kerry felt her headache start to ebb a little. "Actually." She said. "I do have to go to Washington tonight." She watched her mother's eyes start to blink again, this time in confusion.

"You... changed your mind?" Cynthia said, doubtfully. "I'm not sure..."

"No." Kerry decided honesty was the best route. "The government wants to take over some of our facilities in the area. I have to find out why, and give them a face to yell at with some authority." She said. "If you don't want me to ride with you, I understand. I'll drive."

Her mother's lips started twitching. "Well." She spluttered. "K.. surely you aren't.. you can't drive by yourself there. It's dangerous!"

Kerry propped her head up on one hand, a faint smile appearing on her face. "Wasn't I saying that to you earlier?"

Cynthia's mouth opened, then closed. Then opened again, then closed. Then she sat back and took a sip of her juice. "This is all very confusing." She said. "You said the government was trying to take over your things? Why would they do that?"

"I don't know, mother. Why would they?" Kerry asked. "You are the government, remember? So maybe if you're going to talk to your committee... if you still want me to talk to them, we can ask them that first?"

Her mother frowned. "Are you going to be rude to them, and embarrass me?" She asked, directly.

"Possibly." Her daughter answered just as honestly. "But that could have happened anyway." She sat back and regarded her mother. "Didn't you realize that when you told them about me in the first place?"

Cynthia met her eyes, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I should have." She conceded. "I think you're right, you know. I don't think you're the child I raised at all."

It was almost a relief. Kerry merely nodded.

"In fact, I'm not really sure who you are at all." Her mother said. "I don't know that I want to find out."

"Fair enough." Kerry said. "We all make choices we have to live with. I know. I've had to make a few." She said. "Losing my family was one of the consequences of that."

Cynthia eyed her in somber silence for a minute. "Well." She got up and put her glass in the sink. "We do all have to make choices." She went to the door. "I will see about adding you to the flight."

She left, and Kerry tipped her head back and regarded the ceiling, unsure if the situation had just gotten marginally better or a lot worse.

Time would have to tell.

**

Dar curled her arm around her bundled sweater, putting her head down and allowing her body to relax in the semi-darkened room. The rest of their team and most of the clients were in the media room next door, watching three or four different television screens and talking.

Dar had no desire to either join them or talk. She closed her eyes, just letting the chatter in the background of the computer go past her, trying to tune out enough to get a few minutes of rest before it was time for Kerry to go to the airport with her mother.

Kerry's only comment to Dar's question about how that worked out was 'Ugh.'. It made her unhappy because she sensed her partner was unhappy and there wasn't a lot she could do about it. What was that Alastair had said earlier? She'd turned in a good family person?

Ugh.

Alastair had gone to the rooms Sir Melthon had prepared for them. He was waiting for a call back from one of their contract administrators from the government, but Dar frankly didn't hold out much hope in that regard because she figured everyone was either glued to CNN or in the middle of the confusion and didn't have much time to call back some CEO of some company.

Kerry's voice filtered softly into her awareness, and Dar opened her eyes to peer at the nearby screen. Then, after a moment's consideration she opened a browser and clicked over to their corporate travel website.

Kerry hadn't said if she was staying at the family townhouse she knew they had in Washington. She might, Dar reasoned, but she also might rather escape to one of the high end business hotels they used when they traveled.

She reached over and typed in the location, then reviewed the results as the website searched and disgorged its results. "Hm." Dar grunted. Hotels were packed, not unreasonable considering air travel was at a standstill. Everyone stuck at the airport had to stay somewhere.

There was, however, an obscenely expensive suite available and Dar clicked on it without hesitation. She pulled down the available profiles on the website and selected Kerry's, and watched as it filled in her information and obediently reserved the space.

Dar selected and copied the details, then she pasted them into the open instant message box where Kerry's last "Ugh" was still blinking mournfully. She clicked send, then settled her head back down on her sweater.

Kerry's voice, in the middle of acknowledging Mark's status update, stopped in mid word.

Dar smiled, watching as the message came back with a tiny graphic, a small beating red heart that was a complete, if charming, waste of bandwidth.

"As I was saying." Kerry's voice now had an audible grin in it. "I will be out of contact for a few hours in transit to Herndon this evening. Dar will be covering for me."

"Miami exec, this is Herndon. We're looking forward to seeing you." A voice answered. "Do you need a pickup?"

One blue eye opened and its dark brow lifted as Dar listened for her partner's answer.

"Ah." Kerry was muffling a laugh, she could tell. "I'm going to rent a car at the airport, thanks. I'll let you know if that doesn't work out. I'm sure it's crazy around there."

Dar reached over, and one handed, typed out a series of instructions into a console session, reviewing them before she compiled the results and sent the new little routine to run. A moment later, she heard a soft chuckle come through the mic.

"Hey Miami exec - this is Miami ops." Mark broke in. "Wouldn't that be god of the clock in England?"

"Yes." Kerry responded. "Dar's supposed to be getting some rest now so she can take over but I just found out she's actually dealing with some petty details behind the scenes."

"Petty?" Dar murmured. "Wench."

"How about I burn minutes and watch stuff from the van?" Mark suggested. "It's not like we've got a lot else to do, you know?"

Dar frowned, considering the question. She trusted Mark implicitly. He'd been working for the company nearly as long as she had, and his knowledge and loyalty were unquestioned.

Trust? Not trust? Dar reached over and picked up her mic, bringing it over to her head.

"I think that's a great idea, Mark." Kerry answered before she could click in. "Thanks. I appreciate it, and I know Dar will appreciate it since there's a lot going on over there too."

Touche. Dar knew rejecting the offer now would seriously embarrass her partner and make her look like a cad since it was made in her best interest. Kerry's little payback for her hotel reservations. She clicked the mic on. "I do appreciate it, Mark." She said. "Especially since now I can send Kerry offshift to get ready to leave and relax before she has to fly."

Kerry forgot to turn her mic off, and her laughter echoed through the speaker, a strangely light sound after so much tension. "Right Kerry?" Dar inquired.

"Right boss." Kerry surrendered. "You win this round."

Dar glanced down expectantly at the message box.

Hoisted, wasn't I? Kerry's typing popped up.

Figured you could use some time to decompress. Dar typed back. *You don't know what you're going to get into when you get to Herndon.*

True. Her partner responded. *I'm going to go grab a shower and crash for a few hours. Thanks for the hotel reservations – I hadn't even started to look into that and I sure don't want to spend the night in DC.*

I figured. Dar said. *Sure you're okay with going?*

There was a moment's pause in the response. *Yeah.* Kerry finally answered. *I don't know. Maybe I'll get a chance to get this family thing worked out. I think you were right about the whole thing with my mother. I think she just wanted to have something to show her committee.*

Dar smiled. *Hell must be freezing over if I'm telling you not to think the worst of someone.*

Ah heh. Kerry responded. *Yeah. I know. Part of me wants to just move past it all and just drop the whole thing, and the other part of me just thinks about stuff they did and gets pissed off all over again. I just really wish I were home.*

Right there with you. Dar sighed, glancing around the room, pausing when the door opened fully and Alastair entered. *Hang on, Alastair just came back.*

"Well, we've got good news and bad news." Alastair came over and sat down. He looked tired. "Which do you want first?"

"I can't believe there's any good news. So bad first." Dar said.

"Okay." Her boss responded. "Bad news is, there's not one person in the government that can tell me why someone from some agency is knocking on our doors in Virginia. This group says they think that group may be doing it and when you ask that group, they don't know anything about it."

"Ugh." Dar wasn't surprised.

"Hamilton's working on trying to track the request down, but he's coming up against a lot of people who are in high gear with no brakes, if you catch my drift." Alastair said. "But on the bright side, we've got flights to Mexico City tomorrow morning."

Dar blinked in surprise. "They found seats?"

"The board instructed me to charter an airplane." Alastair looked a touch bemused. "Apparently you and I are considered a little important. We've got a transfer in Mexico City to an executive jet service out to Nuevo Laredo and we're being picked up there for the ride across the border."

"Wow." Dar said.

"Lucky for us, there's quite a number of airplanes that are hanging around here unable to fly to the US. Finding one to charter was easy, or so Bea tells me." Alastair said. "At any rate, sorry we'll have to end up in Houston, but at least we won't be on the other side of the world."

"I'll take it." Dar said. "Maybe by then domestic flights'll be going again." She felt a sense of profound relief, regardless of the destination. "That is good news, Alastair. Thanks."

Her boss smiled. "I know you want to get back home. Me too." He slapped Dar on the shoulder and stood up. "You going to get some rest?"

Dar nodded. "Mark's covering for us." She said. "He's heading up in the equipment van and has a lot of time on his hands. I sent Kerry off to get some downtime before she goes to Herndon tonight."

Alastair nodded. "All right. I'm going to go get some rest myself." He said. "The devil only knows what we'll have to deal with tomorrow, if today was any indication."

"Night." Dar waited for him to leave. Then she turned back to the screen. *Ker?*

There was no response. Dar frowned, then she picked up her cell phone and dialed, getting a fast busy. She sighed, and sat back, then rocked forward again when her message was answered.

Hey. What's up? Kerry typed. *Sorry, Brian just showed up here, same time as Richard dropping off Sally.*

Dar winced. *Nice.* She typed. *Like it needed to be crazier.*

Uh huh. Kerry agreed. *Did Alastair find anything out?*

No, Hamilton's still trying. Dar rattled her keys. *But they chartered a plane for us to fly to Mexico tomorrow morning.* She hit enter, and waited.

Yahhooooo!!!!!!!!!!

Dar smiled. *Yeah, well, then we fly local to the border and someones picking us up to make the run into Houston. At least it's halfway home.* She said. *And maybe by then I can just fly up to DC and meet you.*

There was a long silence. Dar almost decided to send a followup, when a response came back.

Sorry. Yelling match outside the study here. For once, not involving me.

"Oops." Dar sighed.

Fly fast. Kerry typed, after a pause *I need you.*

There was a rawness there that made Dar's breath catch. She reached out in reflex to touch the screen with her fingertips, then let them drop.

I'll try to hold things together in Herndon. Kerry went on. *But I've got a gut feeling this is going to be something more than a request to track some IP addresses.*

Dar nodded to herself. *Go with your instincts, Ker. You know what I'd go for and what I wouldn't. If it's something you know I wouldn't do, just tell them you can't do it and wait for me to land. I still have the systems locked down there.*

"Systems control is passing to Miami ops." Mark's voice interrupted. "We are heading north. We picked up a Trailrider RV hitched to my truck and we've got every spare piece of gear we had in inventory with us."

"Miami ops, this is Danny at the Pentagon. That's great to hear. We'll need some of it to get stuff spooled back up, and some facilites. Do you have WAN rigs with you?"

"We sure do. This thing's even got a sat hookup and we're pulling a generator."

We have good people. Kerry typed.

"It's still on fire here." Danny said. "But we just got asked when all the stuff's going to be back up. We can't get inside, but we think the crossconnect room was burned up."

We have the best people. Dar replied.

"Okay, we'll stop for some sixty six blocks. Can you guys source some three quarter ply if we need to rebuild the dmarc?" Mark said.

"We can do that." Danny said.

"Then go ahead and get a dozen sheets." Mark said. "We'll get there, and we'll get it done."

"Will do, Miami ops. We'll be ready for you."

Dar keyed her mic. "Sounds like a good plan, gentlemen." She said. "Miami exec signing off for the evening. If something happens that requires senior approval, try my cell phone first."

"Try mine second." Kerry added. "Let's all stay alert. We don't know what might happen next."

Go get some rest. Dar typed.

You too. Kerry responded. *Let's hope tomorrow's a much better day.*

**

Rest wasn't in her cards, apparently. Kerry almost decided to turn around and go take back over operations when she eased out of the study and found her sister and her ex husband facing off with an unhappy looking Sally in the middle of them.

Richard hadn't changed much. Tonight he was wearing a shockingly casual leather jacket and corduroys though, something he'd have never worn in her parents house when her father had been alive. Kerry took a deep breath and forced herself to move forward towards them, hoping her presence would break up whatever the issue was.

"If you think I'm going to leave her here with him here you're crazy!" Richard was saying. "She's upset enough as it is, she doesn't need that to complicate her life!"

Angie's face was set and angry. "Stop being such a jerk, will you?" She said. "He's not going to complicate anything. She's known him all her life, for pete's sake."

"That's not the point!"

"Aunt Kerry!" Sally spotted her and bolted, distracting her parents just long enough for them to turn and see her target before she collided with her aunt's sturdy legs.

"Hey, kiddo." Kerry gave her sister a brief smile. "How about I take her into the library and tell her a story."

Angie looked utterly relieved. "Thanks, sis." She said. "That would be great."

"Would you like that?" Kerry held a hand out to her niece. "Want to come hear a story?"

"Yes!" Sally was hanging onto her leg, looking up at her. She reached up and grabbed Kerry's hand, swinging on it.

"Okay." Kerry gave her ex brother in law a nod of acknowledgment. "Richard."

"Kerry." Richard answered, stiffly. "You look well."

"You too." She escaped with her niece through the archway and headed for the library at the other end. They ducked inside the dim, quiet room and closed the door behind them. "All right, here we go."

"Aunt Kewwy." Sally reached up for a hug, and Kerry gladly complied, picking her niece up and wrapping her arms around her. "You been gone a long time." She put her arms around her aunt's neck and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah." Kerry walked over and sat down with her on the big leather couch. "I know. It has been a long time, huh?" She sat Sally down on her lap and studied her. "How old are you now, almost five, right?"

Sally nodded, her dark blond hair in it's childish curls bobbling with the motion. She was an engaging child, with a rounded, cute face and a snub nose that Kerry had seen in the mirror once upon a time. She had hazel eyes and a dimpled smile, and she smiled now, at her aunt. "Where you been?"

"Well." Kerry said. "I don't live in Michigan anymore. I moved down to Florida.. Do you know where that is?"

"How come you went there?" Sally swung her legs a little. "Mommy said you live far far away."

"That's where I work." Kerry told her. "And it's warm there, and pretty. I like it a lot. Your mama came to see me there, where I live now."

"Oh."

"It's far from here, but I have lots of friends there, and even a dog." Kerry said. "Maybe you can come visit and meet her."

Sally's eyes lit up. "You gotta doggy?" She squealed. "Oh wow!"

Kerry smiled at this unrestrained enthusiasm. "I sure do. Her name is Chino, and she's about as big as you are." She bounced Sally up and down on her lap. "She's really cute, too."

"I wanna see her." Sally said. "Daddy won't let me get a doggy."

No, Kerry bet he wouldn't. "Oh, maybe when you get a little older." She said. "They're a lot to take care of you know." She added. "I didn't get to have a doggy when I was little either."

Sally pouted.

"Aw, cmon." Her aunt chuckled. "So you want to hear a story? I know a good one, about a bumblebee."

"I want a doggy!" Sally said. "Can I come to where you live and stay there?"

Kerry studied her for a minute. "You can come visit us, sure." She said. "I said so, right? Then you can play with Chino, and go the beach and see the ocean."

The little girl pouted again.

"Want to see pictures of my doggy?" Kerry suggested.

Sally nodded.

"Okay, c'mon." Kerry set her on the floor and stood up, leading the way into her late father's study, where her laptop was still resting on the desk. She sat down as Sally climbed up onto the chair next to her, and unlocked her screen saver. "Let's see what we have here."

She had a folder of pictures, collected specifically together just for the purpose she was using them for right now. Safe pictures of home, and work, of Chino and humorous ones of Dar. "Okay, see? Here's Chino."

Sally squealed. "She's so cuuutte!"

"I told you." Kerry gazed fondly at her pet. "That's her favorite bed. She loves to swim in the ocean, too."

"I want a doggy." Sally lamented. "All I got is a stuffed chicken and it's stupid."

Kerry gave her a one armed hug. "Aw. You'll get one someday. I did, right?"

"I don't wanna wait till I'm old!"

Kerry started laughing. "Gee, thanks!" She made a face at her niece. "Tell you what, I'll ask your mom to get you one, okay?"

Sally's eyes lit up. "For real?"

Paybacks were certainly, certainly a bitch. "For real." Kerry assured her. "I'll tell her to get you one just like Chino. She'll have plenty of room to run around and play here."

Sally looked around the room. "Mommy says we have to come stay here now."

"Mmhm." Her aunt said. "You know, your mommy and I grew up here." She said, seeing a sad look in the little girl's eyes. "We had lots of fun with your uncle Michael, playing hide and seek and running around."

Sally looked around. "You did?"

"We did." Kerry said. "I used to close my eyes, right over by the wall there, and your mommy and uncle Michael would find a place to hide and I'd have to track them down." She said. "One day, I thought they were hiding in the kitchen, and I thought I would surprise them in there."

Sally giggled.

"So I got a basket, and I filled it with dirt from the garden, and I crept along the hallway really quiet." Kerry lowered her voice. "And I crept, and crept, and when I was at the door, I threw the door open and ran inside, and threw the basket up in the air."

"Oh! They got dirty!"

"Not exactly." Kerry smiled. "Your grandma was in there talking to a stranger in there and they got dirty."

"Ooooo.." Sally giggled, her sadness forgotten. "Did you get in trouble?"

"I ran really fast outside and they couldn't catch me." Her aunt told her. "And then I climbed up a tree and got stuck and everyone got so scared about that they forgot about the dirt." She chuckled as her niece giggled harder.

"That was funny." Sally said. "Can we play hide and seek?"

"Sure." Kerry said. "I'll get your mommy and uncle Michael to play too, and we'll see how much trouble we can get into. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"Yes!"

Kerry gave her another hug. "It'll be fun for you here. When your brother's a little older, you can play with him too, like I did with uncle Michael."

Sally got quiet. "Did your daddy live somewhere else too?"

"Well, sort of." Kerry turned her head and regarded her niece. "Do you remember grandpa?"

Sally nodded. "He's not here no more."

"No." Her aunt agreed softly. "Did you know grandpa was my daddy?" She asked. "Mine, and your mommys, and uncle Michaels?"

"Oh. He was?"

"Mm.." Kerry nodded. "And grandpa had to spend a lot of time in a different place, because of his job. A lot of times we had to go there too, so sometimes we lived there, and sometimes we lived here, and a lot of times, he wasn't here because he had to do things."

Sally put her thumb in her mouth. "Mommy told me grandpa went to Heaven."

Kerry just nodded. "I'm sure he didn't want to go, but I know he's happy there, and waiting for us to come too. Isn't that what your mommy told you?"

Sally nodded emphatically. "I miss grandpa." She was watching Kerry's expressive face intently, and there was no way for her aunt to dissemble.

Kerry exhaled. "I think he misses us too, sweetheart." She said. "But we all have things we have to do, and he had something he had to do in Heaven, so he had to go there and wait for us."

The child threw her arms around Kerry's neck. "I miss you too, Aunt Kerry. I thought you went to Heaven too, but mommy said you just went to Miami."

Kerry bit her lip to keep from laughing, despite the pang in her chest. "You'll have to come to Miami to visit me there, honey. Then you can see if it's anything like Heaven."

Sally released her and sat up, looking back at the computer. "More pitchers?"

"Sure." Kerry was glad enough to leave that conversation alone. She opened up the folder and the pictures popped up, tiny little colorful chunks of her life spread out on the screen.

"Who's that?" Sally pointed at one of them.

Ah. Kerry found herself looking back into a familiar pair of very blue eyes. "That's my friend Dar." She said. "She lives in Florida too."

Sally studied the picture. "She's pretty."

The picture was Dar sitting behind her desk in the condo, chin propped up on one fist, and a look of bemused tolerance at what Kerry knew was a just showered, tshirt covered camera wielder on the other side of the office snapping the shot.

Nothing really remarkable about it, save the smile, and the warmth in those eyes, which were looking right through the viewfinder into Kerry's.

"I think she is." Kerry said, with a smile. "Dar's my best friend. We have a lot of fun together."

"Do you play hide and see?" Her niece asked.

"Sometimes." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "We do a lot of things together." She pointed at another picture. "See that? It's a fish."

"Big fish!" Sally said..

"That's a shark." Kerry told her. "I took that picture, under the water."

Sally turned all the way around and looked at her. "No you didn't." She said. "You're not a fish!" She looked up as the door creaked open. "Mommy! Aunt Kerry isn't a fish, right?"

Angie entered, looking very stressed. She took a moment to relax, then she shut the door behind her. "What's that, honey? What crazy story is Aunt Kerry telling you now?"

"I was showing her my diving pictures." Kerry turned the laptop so her sister could see them. "That one."

"That on.. holy Christ, Kerry! That's a shark!" Angie came over and sat on the edge of the desk. "Tell me you didn't take that."

"I took that." Her sister said. "Honestly they're not bad to swim with. You just have to remember not to stick any body parts near their mouths."

"Oh is that all." Angie peered at the pictures. "Well, you still have all your fingers anyway. That's a nice shot of Dar." She said. "So, what have you two been up to?"

"Mommy, aunt Kerry says you'll get me a dog." Sally piped up. "Like that one!" She pointed at the picture of Chino. "Can I have one, huh? Please?"

Angie looked at the picture, then she looked at Kerry, who smiled charmingly at her. "You're lucky you're my sister, and I love you."

"Can I mom?"

**

Dar spread her arms out across the bed and let her body relax, wincing a little as the stiffness from sitting as long as she had eased.

It felt very, very good to just lay down and do nothing. The day had seemed to her to last at least a week, and to have it be quiet, and still, with just the sound of a ticking wall clock around the corner was a wonderful thing.

Her neck ached. She debated if she should get up and go to her briefcase, which held a supply of pain killers to address the problem along with her customary bottle of water.

Deciding that getting up and undressing while doing that instead of falling asleep was easy. Dar rolled over and pushed herself up to her feet, standing and trudging over to the mahogany sidebar where she'd tossed her case.

She unzipped it and took out the bottle of Advil and the water, then she opened her suitcase and took out a long shirt to sleep in. She draped it over the nearby chair and turned, leaning against the wood as she opened the bottle and shook out a few pills.

The room was a relatively pleasant space to spend the night. It had a small bathroom with an old fashioned tub in it, a decent size bed long enough for her legs not to hang off it and a rich tapestry on the wall that featured dogs and horses in unlikely poses that made Dar smile.

She swallowed her pills and washed them down with a mouthful of water. Then she picked up the shirt and walked into the bathroom, glancing in the mirror as she unbuttoned her shirt. She pulled the fabric off and crossed her arms, studying her mostly naked upper half with a thoughtful expression.

A game she played with herself, lately.

Tattoo, or no tattoo? That was the question. With a wry chuckle, Dar studied her tan skin, trying to imagine what it might look like with the sort of colorful decoration her partner now had spread across her upper chest.

It felt good to waste some brain cells on triviality after the long day. It was like a tiny slice of normality in what had become a morass of uncertain stress.

Would she do it? Dar rubbed her thumb over the skin on her chest where Kerry's mark was. She found the tattoo sexy, and not even because it incorporated her name. But if she had to choose her own, she knew it wouldn't be anything like what her partner had.

What would it be?

Dar studied her skin, then she shook her head and laughed. "I have no damn idea." She finished changing and brushed her teeth, then she went to her briefcase and pulled a diving magazine from it, settling down in the leather armchair near the window where the light from the lamp would allow her to comfortably read.

She was tired, but not sleepy yet. There was a small television set in the corner of the room, almost hidden – but she had no desire to turn it on and listen to yet another retelling and see again the terror and the destruction she'd lived with the entire day.

It was good, just to sit, sipping her water, and looking at pictures of colorful fish and clear blue water, reading about live aboard adventures and what the price of a good rum drink was in Roatan in the spring. She leaned back and turned the page, losing herself in the text as her mind remembered the rich tang of salt air and the deep, rumbling sound of underwater breathing.

A soft knock at the door made her jump. She put her water bottle down on the desk, and looked up at the door. "C'mon in."

The door pushed open, and Alastiar's head poked around it. "Hey, Dar I..oh, my gosh. Sorry. Didn't realize you were... ah..."

"Wearing a tshirt?" Dar gave her boss a wry look. "Relax. It's more than I wore to that damn Halloween party that time."

Alastair cautiously entered. "Just thought you'd like a nightcap." He held up a bottle. "Our host had this delivered, it's good stuff."

"Sure." Dar closed her magazine. "Last time I shared whisky with you I was resigning. We should find happier occasions."

Alastair walked over and sat down in the chair opposite Dar. He was still in his slacks, but had his shirt untucked and the sleeves unbuttoned and partly rolled up his forearms. "I do remember that." He said, pouring a measure of the golden liquor into one of the two glasses he'd brought and handing it to Dar.

"Wasn't fond of how that day started."

"Me either." Dar waited for him to pour his own glass, then she lifted hers. "Here's to better times."

"Amen." Alastair reached over and touched his glass to hers, then he sat back and sipped it. "I just talked to the missus." He said. "Seems a neighbor of ours was in the North Tower, and cant' be reached."

Dar shook her head.

"Nice feller." Alastair said. "His family's in tatters, of course. My wife said she'd never been so glad to have me out of the country as she was this morning." He studied the scotch in the glass. "Could easily have been otherwise. I was in New York last week."

"Could have." Dar agreed quietly. "We all travel a lot. It was just a toss of the dice." She considered. "But then again, so's driving to work every morning in Miami." She sipped the scotch, the unfamiliar burn making her nose twitch.

"Well, that's true, or so I've heard." Alastair said. "It's not so bad in Houston, but still." He leaned back. "You think though, so many of us work like dogs so we can retire and take it easy, and those boys in New York work harder than most, and then something like this happens."

"Sometimes it takes something like this happen to make you take a step back." Dar said, after a sip of the whiskey. "We get so damned focused sometimes." She held the glass up to the light, admiring the honey color. "Some times you have to stop and live. You miss out otherwise."

Alastair smiled. "Learned that relatively recently?" He guessed

Dar's eyes twinkled wryly. "You could say that."

Her boss chuckled. "What are you reading there?" He took the extended magazine and turned it around. "Ah... your crazy hobby." He flipped through the pages. "Those islands do look nice, but the missus won't hear of it. She wants to go see Niagra Falls our next trip."

"I've seen them." Dar said. "Alastair, take her someplace you can spend more than ten minutes at. The falls are nice, but unless you're going to go over them in a barrel they're not much fun."

"Have you?" Alastair asked. "Gone over them?"

Dar's brows shot up. "How nuts do you think I am?"

"Just asking." He chuckled again. "We usually end up at tourist central locations like Vegas. I don't mind exploration, but I like mine to come with a scotch and sour and a limo driver, I'm afraid."

"Well." Dar extended her legs and crossed her ankles. "We call our cabin down south Microsoft Rustic for a reason. Ker and I talk about going camping and hiking in the Grand Canyon, but I had my fill of that as a kid and I'd rather call room service myself if the truth be known."

"Camping in Florida?" Alastair asked. "And you lived to grow up?"

Dar smiled. "We were actually going to take a trip around Europe when we were done here. See the Alps. See if I'm as bad at skiing as I was the last time I tried, and maybe end up on down in Italy." She exhaled. "Kerry was really looking forward to it. She never got the chance to travel much."

Alastair set the magazine down and cradled his glass in both hands. "Chance'll come again soon enough." He said. "I know we've got a rough patch to get over now, but the world'll keep turning, y'know? We'll get through it. Then you two can take a month and see the place up right here."

Dar cocked one eyebrow. "I'm going to hold you to that." She warned.

"Deal." Her boss said. "Say, what do you think about Key West?" He asked. "That was the missus other idea. She got some brochures from a little place down there on the water. I'd like to try some fishing myself."

"That's the place for it." Dar turned her head as she heard her cell phone ring. "Uh oh." She got up and reached across to the sideboard, grabbing the phone and opening it. "Ah." She recognized the number. "Hey hon."

"Hey." Kerry's voice came through the phone. "Were you sleeping? Sorry if you were."

"Nah." Dar sat back down. "Alastair and I were having a nightcap and talking about our vacation plans. What's up?"

"I had to call you. Danny just called from the Pentagon, and he said one of the techs there came to find him, because someone wanted to get a message to you."

"Yeah?" Dar didn't hear any upset in her partner's tone, so she reasoned it was probably good news. "What was it?"

"General Easton." Kerry said. "He just said to say he said hello, and that he needs to talk to you when you can get through to him tomorrow."

Dar felt a sense of profound relief. "That's great news." She said, glancing at Alastair. "Gerry Easton's okay. He wants me to call him tomorrow." She turned back to the phone. "Why aren't you sleeping, by the way?"

Kerry cleared her throat. "Um... well, I was playing with my niece and then we got into a game of hide and seek."

"You and your niece" Dar asked.

"Me and my brother and sister." Kerry muttered. "It ended up with a broken table leg. Don't ask."

"Um.. okay."

"Listen, when you talk to the General, can you find out if his dog's had puppies again?" Kerry asked. "My sister wants one."

"She does?" Dar's brows knitted. "She didn't seem like a dog person to me."

"She isn't. Yet."

Dar decided ignorance was probably better for her at this point. "Okay." She said. "Listen, have a good flight, and let me know when you land." She said. "Be safe."

"I'll text you." Kerry promised. "It's a commuter plane. I'm sure we'll be fine. I just wish there was more room inside it."

Dar chuckled briefly. "Catching my claustrophobia?"

"Don't want to be that close to my mother." Her partner said, succinctly. "Later hon."

"Later." Dar closed the phone, and smiled. "Well, that's good news at least."

Alastair stood up. "Sure is." He said. "Let me let you get some rest." He picked up his glass. "And let's hope that call tomorrow is just him wanting to catch up on you personally."

Dar blinked at him in surprise.

Her boss smiled wryly, lifting his glass in her direction then making his way to the door. "Nice fella, glad he's safe." He said, as he eased out. "But he's also a big customer." He reminded her, closing the door behind him.

True enough. Dar tossed back the rest of her whisky, grimacing as it burned its way down her throat and into her gut. Then she exhaled, puffing her dark hair up out of her eyes, and pulled her magazine back over. "Hope it's personal too." She opened the pages. "I'm not going to have time to call in any favors."

**

Kerry zipped her bag closed and set it on the floor, glancing around out of habit to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She'd left her share of travel alarm clocks, toothbrushes, and other sundries in hotels across the country and learned her lesson the hard way.

"Ker?" Angie stuck her head in the room. "You ready? I told mom I'd take you over down to the airport to meet her so we didn't have to swing back by the house."

"Yup." Kerry shouldered her overnight bag and picked up her laptop case. "Let's go." She said. "Am I safe letting Mike return the truck to the rental joint?"

Her sister chuckled.

"That's what I thought." Kerry sighed. "Oh well." She followed her sister out of the room. It was already well dark outside, and the kids were tucked in bed in the half empty house, already echoing with the impending move and a little sadder for it. "How much can one of those cost anyway?"

Angie led the way down the steps and over to the front door, picking up a handbag and slinging it over her shoulder and picking up her keys. "Marco, is the car ready?" She asked the man standing near the door.

"Yes, ma'am." Marco replied. "I filled the tank. Do you want me to drive you though? Roads are pretty dark."

Angie regarded her house manager with a smile. "Thanks, but I'll be okay." She said. "My brother's coming with us. He can keep me company on the way back."

Marco looked dubious at this proffered safety, and Kerry shifted her overnight back and reached up to scratch her nose.

Angie seemed to sense the unspoken doubt. "We'll be fine." She grabbed the strap of Kerry's bag and tugged her out the door. "We're in Saugatuck, for pete's sake."

"Mm." Kerry followed without further comment though, walking down the steps towards where Mike was waiting by her sister's big sedan as the cool air hit her face. She blinked into it, feeling the dryness against her eyeballs, and thought briefly of the sauna bath she lived in most of the year.

That had been hard to get used to. Now this was hard to get used to. Kerry shook her head as Angie opened the doors and went around to the driver's side.

"Here, gimme." Mike took her bag and tossed it in the back seat, sliding in after it.

Kerry got in the front passenger side and closed the door, glad enough to relax into the leather seat for the relatively short drive to the regional airport. "Think mom's still pissed off?" She asked. "My shoulder's killing me where I hit that table."

Angie started the car and gave her sibling a wry look. "Your shoulder's killing you? Remember you bounced into me after you broke the furniture. I feel like I was hit by a truck."

"I was just glad it wasn't me for a change." Mike commented from the back seat. "It was worth it to see mom's face when she came around that corner and saw you sitting there with all that broken china around you holding that stupid leg."

"I felt like I was six." Kerry admitted. "But it was funny."

"It was freaking hilarious." Her brother said. "I mean, after that whole lousy day it felt great to just be stupid and laugh and not worry about what building was falling down on the television or if a plane was going to crash on my head."

They were all momentarily quiet. "Yeah." Angie finally said. "It sure was a horrible day." She looked at Kerry from the corner of her eye. "I think you and mom are crazy to be flying tonight. I can't even believe they're letting you."

"I know." Kerry said. "But this is different. It's a private plane."

"A crappy tiny commuter." Mike said. "I've seen the inside of it. I'd rather drive."

"I should have gotten a van, like that guy of yours did, Kerry, thrown the kids in there and we could have all taken a road trip." Angie said. "Even mom."

Kerry covered her eyes with silent eloquence.

"Ang, you're a retard." Mike said. "That didn't work when we were ten."

"Shut up." Angie said. "We're adults now. We could have made it work."

Mike slid around and extended his legs behind Kerry's seat. "Ah, maybe." He conceded. "I looked up that thing Kerry's guy got, it's not a van. It's an RV. It's pretty cool." He said. "It's got a kitchen and a bathroom and everything."

"It's a long trip from Miami." Kerry said. "I'm glad they found something comfortable. Last thing I'd want is for them to zonk out on the ride and have an accident. It takes.. I think ten or twelve hours just to get out of the state."

"Have you driven that?" Angie asked.

Kerry shook her head. "Just to Orlando. With Dar." She said. "But Dar's driven up the east coast. She says unless you take the scenic route through the mountains it's a snore." Her eyes flicked to the dark countryside they were passing through.

"You staying with mom?" Her sister asked. "Hotels must be crazy there."

"No." Kerry shook her head. "Dar made me reservations on the edge of town. I can just pick up a car or have the office pick me up in the morning, then maybe stay out there after that." She let her head rest against the back of the seat. "I haven't told her yet. I think she assumes I'm going to the townhouse."

"She does." Mike supplied. "She was telling some dude over there to get a room ready, like you care what the view is."

"Sometimes I do." Kerry objected mildly. "But then again.. " She pondered. "Usually I'm with Dar so the view inside the room's better anyway." She chuckled under her breath as her siblings both groaned. "I hope her flight goes okay tomorrow."

"She's flying into Mexico?" Mike asked. "I heard on the news that's nuts there, the airports are crammed." He said. "Hope they don't give her a hard time coming back in the country."

Kerry extended her legs out and crossed her ankles. "I hope not." She said. "I can imagine they'll be pretty freaked out, and Dar does get touchy sometimes about official stuff. She gives the airport people grief when they want her to start up her laptop."

"Glad I don't travel much." Angie sighed, as she turned onto the access road for the small local airport. "Especially now. I'd be scared to death to get on an airplane."

Kerry thought about that. She remembered thinking once that you had no idea, really, who you were going to share a plane with, who was sitting next to you, what their motives were.. or even, what viruses they were going to gift the rest of the passengers with.

Scary. Now, it was a lot scarier. She imagined being on those planes that had taken off, and finding out that passenger sitting next to you was a killer.

Ugh.

Her flight, and Dar's, would at least be private this time. But the next? Kerry sighed, hoping that the domestic flights wouldn't start flying so soon that Dar needed to hop on the first one available to come out to meet her. Much as she wanted to see her partner, and she certainly did, she'd rather her be safe.

Was there a train from Texas to Washington? Kerry drummed her fingers on the armrest. Hmm. Dar might like a train ride.

"Wow, look at those lights." Angie interrupted her musing. "At the gate.."

Kerry peered through the windshield to see the entrance to the field approaching, bracketed by a line of emergency vehicles with their flashing lights on. "What's that all about?" She wondered.

"Maybe mom's limo crashed into the guardhouse." Mike suggested.

"Michael." Angie scolded him. "That's not funny."

"Why?" Her brother retorted. "That thing's built like a brick. I'd feel sorry for the guy in the guardhouse not anyone in that tank."

Angie slowed the car as they approached, shadowy figures emerging from the vehicles and blocking the entrance. "Oh. Wow."

"Guns." Kerry observed. "I hope it's the Michigan National Guard."

"Me too." Mike agreed, in a far meeker voice. "I don't like guns." He slid back against the back of the seat, moving over to Kerry's side of the car. "Bet Dar does."

"Bet she doesn't." Kerry watched as Angie rolled the window down. "I'm the registered gun owner in the family."

"This airport is closed, ma'am." The man was dressed in guard uniform, and sounded very stern, but polite. "Please turn around and go back the way you came."

Kerry heard a sound behind her. She glanced through the window and saw three more soldiers, standing with their rifles pointed not quite at the car, but not quite at the ground. "Oh boy." She fished for her identification in her briefcase.

"Thank you officer." Angie replied in her most polite voice in return. "I know the airport is closed. My mother, Senator Stuart, asked us to join her here. I am dropping my sister off to accompany her to Washington."

The soldier looked at her doubtfully.

Angie removed her wallet from her purse, and extracted her driver's license. She handed it over to the man. "Glad I had my name changed back." She muttered. "This doesn't need to be any more complicated."

Mike prudently just kept his mouth shut, for a change.

Kerry leaned slowly over and handed her own ID over, in a leather folder that held not only her driver's license, but her passport, and her corporate ID. "Here you go."

The soldier took both ID's and stepped back. Another man joined him, and shone a flashlight on the documents.

"Got mom's cell phone number?" Kerry asked, keeping her voice low.

"Yep." Her sister answered. "Hope we don't need it." She glanced behind her. "Give me your license, Mike."

"I don't have it with me." He answered, in a small voice. "I left my wallet in my car."

Angie closed her eyes and exhaled. "And you called me a retard."

"Can you open the trunk, please, ma'am?" The guard said.

Angie and Kerry exchanged looks. "Oh boy." Angie triggered the trunk lock. "I'm trying to remember what I have in there. Hope it wasn't the diapers."

Kerry faced forward and folded her arms over her chest, very aware of the men watching through the window. "I guess given what happened, Ang, they don't have any choice. I'd rather be sure, even though this is creepy as hell."

"True." Angie looked out as the soldier came back, and she heard the trunk slam.

The soldier handed her back her ID, then he leaned forward and handed Kerry hers with a little duck of his head. "ma'am."

"Thanks." Kerry took the leather portfolio, and put it back in her briefcase. Then she gave the soldier a smile. "Long night?"

"Long day." The man responded. "Gonna be a lot of them." He looked back at Angie. "Go down the road there, ma'am, there's a guard in front of that little terminal. They'll ask for ID again. The Senator's not here yet, but I got a radio she's on the way and will be here in a few minutes. Said she was expecting you."

"Thank you." Angie said. "Very, very much."

"You ladies be careful, okay?" The soldier said. "This is not a night to be out drivin." He lifted his hand, and the other soldiers went over to pick up the barrier, moving it aside to let them through.

Angie put the car into drive and eased through the gates, passing the cluster of soldiers and their trucks and gaining the relative safety of the short road that led to the airport terminal building. "I don't think he noticed Mike."

"Not if he called me a lady he didn't." Mike finally scraped up the courage to lean forward and sling his arms over the seat. "I think he liked Kerry. He was nice to her."

"Yes, he was." Angie glanced at her sister, with a grin. "But then, she was always the magnet in the family."

Kerry eyed them. "He probably recognized the logo of the company that handles his paycheck." She remarked dryly. "But if it's like this here, what's it going to be like where we're going?"

Angie parked the car. "I don't know, but no matter how much it's needed, I don't like it." She indicated the squad of armed soldiers waiting for them, complete with helmets and sidearms.

"Me either." Mike agreed. "Too forties movie like."

Kerry zipped her jacket up and opened the door, letting in a rush of pine scented cold air. "Well, let's just hope for the best." She got out of the car and picked up her briefcase, seeing the lights bright on the small plane in the field beyond. "Cause I'm not sure we've got a lot of choice right now."

"Crazy." Angie said, as they walked towards the line of armed soldiers. "Just crazy."

**

Kerry slipped past the crowd of aides and found a seat near the front of the plane where it was quieter. The aircraft had eight seats, plush and comfortable, and she settled into the one nearest the cockpit and stowed her briefcase.

Her mother and her three aides were clustered towards the rear of the plane, where the four seats were turned facing each other and there were small tables to work on.

Kerry leaned back and crossed her legs at the ankles, glancing at the two empty seats nearby and wishing her siblings weren't back in Angie's car waiting to watch them leave.

Safety in numbers? Kerry had to admit she'd always felt more comfortable and a bit more anonymous in the presence of her siblings at family events. Even though she tended to stick out with her fair hair and shorter stature, still, it had diluted the attention.

Well. She folded her hands in her lap and twiddled her thumbs. Here she was.

"Kerrison?" Her mother was looking around the plane.

Kerry looked past the set of seats opposite her. "Over here." She lifted one hand and let it drop. "Thought I'd just stay out of the way."

"Oh." Her mother studied her for a moment. "If you like, one of my aides can sit over there, and you can sit her with the rest of us."

Kerry smiled. "I'm sure you have work to do." She demurred. "I'm fine over here. After all, I'm just hitching a ride." She caught a look of relief out of the corner of her eye from the aides. "It's not that long a flight."

"True enough. Possibly two hours." Cynthia said. "Very well, we will continue our business." She went back to her discussion, dismissing Kerry to sit quietly in her corner.

That suited Kerry just fine. She fished in her briefcase and removed a magazine from it, laying the pages open on her lap and turning the reading light on.

Colorful fish faced her. She turned to an article on underwater photography and relaxed, leaning against the chair arm as she read.

She glanced at her watch, then she went back to the review of new models of underwater cameras. She had seen divers with rigs the size of small minivans taking pictures, and she knew the results were often spectacular but she herself was more prone to moderation in her gear, preferring to trade off professional quality for ease of use and handling.

However, the enticing possibility of filming Dar swimming underwater in high resolution, now.....

"Kerrison?"

"Huh?" Kerry looked up to find her mother looking back at her, two of the soldiers at her side. "Ah, yes?"

"This gentlemen wishes a word with you." Her mother indicated one of the men. "I hope there's no problem."

Kerry wondered what problem her mother thought would involve her and the Michigan National Guard. "Sure, what can I do for you?" She asked, closing the magazine and setting it aside. "Sit down." She indicated the seat across from her.

The man came over and sat down gingerly, moving his automatic rifle out of the way. "Sorry to bother you, Ms. Stuart." He said. "But I got a favor to ask."

Kerry was aware of a silence behind the man, as everyone else listened in. "If I can help, sure." She gave the soldier a smile. It was her friend from the gate, she realized, a tall man with sandy brown hair and a square, Midwestern face.

"My brother Joshua works for your company." He said, without preamble. "He works out in Manhattan? He runs cable for you all"

"Okay." Kerry nodded. "We have a service office there, yes."

"We haven't been able to talk to him since last night and my mother's about having a heart attack." He said. "Do you know if he's okay?"

Yikes. Kerry took out her PDA. "Let me see if I can find out for you." She said. "His name is Joshua.."

"Douglass." The man supplied. "He's my brother."

Kerry typed out a quick message to Mark. "I'll give that a minute, and if not I can log onto our systems and check." She said. "I know there's a lot of people that couldn't be contacted. The phones are jammed up, and a lot of lines are down."

The soldier nodded. "That's what they said on the television." He glanced behind him. "Sorry to cut in here, ma'am." He addressed the Senator. "Uh, and you know – the press is here too, wanting to take pictures, I guess."

"Are they?" Cynthia asked, sharply. "Oh my. I didn't think we notified them we were leaving tonight, did we Charles?"

"I'll go see them." One of the aides immediately rose. "Shall I bring them onboard?"

"Well.."

"Let me see what their angle is." The aide said, scooting for the door. "It could be a good op."

"Guess I shoulda said that first." The soldier said to Cynthia. "Sorry about that. Ma'am."

"Please." Cynthia held a hand up. "Your family is more important than the press, or I should hope!" She came over and took the seat on the other side of Kerry. "Let's hope for good news."

Kerry's PDA beeped, and she opened it, crossing her toes as she scanned the note. "Hm." She picked up her cell phone and dialed a number. "Let's see what this is about... Mark?"

"Hey, Kerry!"

Mark's voice sounded relaxed, which made the sudden knot in her gut relax. "What's up? Do we have anything on the name I sent you?"

"That's why I'm calling." Mark said. "I thought it was so completely freaking weird that you sent me that note when I was actually on the phone with that same guy." He said. "How did you do that?"

"You were?" Kerry said. "Oh, wow!"

"Still am." Mark said. "So what's the deal with him? He's one of our line techs. Spent the whole damn day getting out of Manhattan and ended up upstate near Buffalo." He said. "He got the alerts on his cell but couldn't answer and then he turned it off for a while."

Kerry looked up to see her mother and the soldier watching her anxiously. Behind them, the sound of people approaching echoed. "Can you conference me in? I have his brother here."

"For sure." Mark said. "Hang on a sec." He clicked off, then clicked back on. "Okay, we're here. Say hi to Kerry, Joshua."

"Uhhh.... Hi ma'am."

Kerry smiled. "Hang on." She held the phone out to the soldier. "Here. Want to say hello?"

The man stared at her, then he reached out for the phone, his eyes wide. "Are you kidding me?" He put the phone to his ear. "Hello?" He paused. "Josh, is that you? Yeah! Yeah it's Mike! I can't believe you're on the phone! Jesus Christ, bro, mama's about sick to death with you!"

Kerry leaned on her seat arm, a big grin on her face, very satisfied to have pulled this particular undeserved rabbit out of her navel in typical coincidental fashion. Across the aisle, her mother was also smiling as she listened, and behind them she caught the flash of a camera capturing it all.

"No, no man, I'm guarding the airport here!" Mike was saying. "I saw that lady from your company come in and so I came and asked her what was up... what? Where are you? Buffalo?" He paused. "Well go have some damned chicken wings then!"

Kerry chuckled. "Mm." She said. "I love chicken wings." She saw her mother's eyebrows hike.

"Okay, okay, listen!" Mike said. "Call mama! She's crying, man! Okay? Yeah, you used to make fun of me for being in the Guard, and look who was nearer the hard stuff, huh?" He glanced around. "Listen,

I gotta go. I'm holding these people up here. You call mama? Okay. Bye!" He hung up the phone and turned to face Kerry.

"Feel better?" She took the proffered phone.

"Man, that was cool." He said. "That was great. I can't believe you just called up and found him. We have been trying and trying all day long we were so scared cause he was supposed to be downtown today." He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Wow."

Kerry reached over and patted his arm. "I'm really glad we found him." She said. "It was just really great timing that you asked right after he called us."

He grinned at her. "Sometimes you gotta have some luck." He said. "After a crappy day like this, man, that was just cool." He looked over at the Senator. "Thanks for letting me on the plane, ma'am."

"Oh! Of course!" Senator Stuart said. "I'm so glad, so very glad it was good news, and my daughter could help. It's fabulous. Simply fabulous." She told him. "Worth every moment of the delay, without question."

The soldier stood up and carefully lifted his rifle so it didn't smack Kerry in the head. "I can go out there with a light heart now." He said. "You want everyone to be safe, but when it's family, man, that's just different, you know?"

"I do know." Kerry also stood up. "We had a lot of people in harm's way, and we care about all the people who work for us. It's not exactly like family, but it's close." She said. "I hope you have a quiet night after this."

"Me too." The soldier said. "Thanks again, ma'am. I really, really appreciated what you did." He said. "Let me get out of your way now." He edged into the aisle and headed for the door, ducking past the television camera and the man holding the still, with a third person ahead of them with a microphone. "Man, that was the best."

Kerry tucked her cell phone back on its clip. "That was pretty awesome." She commented. "We have so many people unaccounted for in New York, I'm glad his brother wasn't one of them."

Her mother stood up and twitched her jacket sleeve straight. "Well, I shall go talk to the press." She said. "They might want to speak with you." She warned. "I believe they are looking for any bit of news in our area about this."

"Well." Kerry eyed the reporter. "They could also want to talk to me about a lot of other things. But that's fine." She put her hands on her denim clad hips. "I'm up for it if they want to." She took a deep breath, feeling the finely knit wool of her sweater tighten around her body.

"That is another lovely sweater." Cynthia remarked. "Just lovely. What are those designs, are they animals?"

"Beavers." Kerry's lips twitched as she muffled a grin. "Dar gave it to me."

"Ah." Her mother said. "Is she a supporter of wildlife?"

"Yes." Her daughter answered. "She loves wildlife. And beavers."

Her mother merely nodded, then she turned and walked down the narrow aisle to where the reporter was waiting. The television light went on immediately and the aides closed in on either side, blocking Kerry's view.

Which was fine. She sat back down in her seat and picked up her magazine, glancing at her watch again. "Should have kidnapped Angie and drove." She shook her head and started reading.

**

Dar woke up in complete darkness, disoriented and not entirely sure of where she was. The smells and sounds were wrong for home, and she remembered light pouring in her window from the street in her London hotel.

Here, just darkness, and lots of quiet.

After a second of confusion, she remembered, and her tensed body relaxed back onto the goose down topper on the bed's mattress.

Sir Melthon's estate, set back from the road and surrounded by hedges and land, and thick gates. Far enough from the city sounds to be silent, much like it was in her own condo back in Miami.

But no ocean sounds. If she concentrated, she could hear crickets though.

"Sheesh." Dar rolled over and lifted up her watch, pressing the side button and checking the digital display. "Ngh." She set it back down. "Four AM." She counted back, then reached over and picked up PDA to check for messages.

Sure enough. Dar clicked contentedly and opened it.

Made it. Slept most of the way. Mother won't hear of my getting a cab this late so she's sending me in the car to the hotel once we drop her off at the townhouse. Lesser of two evils. I will end up being on the local late news in Michigan though there was a press bunch that cornered us at the airport. Interview wasn't bad - they were too busy with all the disaster news to ask me stupid questions about my sex life. Mom likes my sweater by the way. She thinks you have good taste if a rather odd fixation on small mammals. Love you. K.

Dar started laughing, the motion waking her up enough to make going back to sleep immediately out of the question. The tone of Kerry's note was a little resigned, but amused, so she figured things weren't going along too badly.

She sat up and pulled her legs up crossed under her, leaning her elbows on her knees as she removed her stylus and started an answer.

Hey Ker -

I've commissioned a knitted pullover for you with the Gopher from my program in poses guaranteed to get you thrown out of Walmart. Tell her that.

Glad you made it okay. Hope everything is calm in the city, mother or no mother I'd have rathered you go directly to the border and not stayed near anything white and colonnaded just in case. I know that sounds callous and obnoxious but I am sometimes.

Dar could almost hear Kerry's objection to that, but it was true, and she knew it.

Send me a note when you get to the hotel. I have no doubt the Mandarin Oriental will have a room ready for you, but I'd sleep better if I knew you were in it.

DD.

Dar clicked send and laid back down, letting the PDA rest on her chest. Aside from the early waking, she'd slept pretty well, the quiet and comfort of the room allowing her to get more rest than she'd really expected to.

She wasn't really tired. She didn't want to spend hours lying in bed staring at the ceiling either. After a moment more of it, she sat up and swung her feet off the bed, reaching over to turn the lamp on. A soft, golden light filled the room and she took a moment to stand and shake her body out before she walked over to retrieve her laptop.

It was quiet enough that the zipper of the case sounded loud, and she glanced around a trifle guiltily, though she knew full well the sound wouldn't penetrate the walls.

At least she hoped it wouldn't. She removed the machine and its cable from the case and took it back with her to the bed, laying it down and then returning to the sideboard where there was a tray resting with cups and several bottles.

Reviewing her options, she poured a cup of still warm milk out of a very efficient thermal carafe and brought it back to the bed with her. She set it on the bedside table and sat down, opening the lid of the machine and pressing the power button.

Her PDA was blinking.

Dar smiled and opened it, bending her head slightly to read the message.

I would wear Gopher Dar on my chest any time, honey. But telling my mother that here in front of her little aides is not going to make this road trip any shorter if you catch my drift.

"Probably not." Dar had to agree. "And you'd have to explain it anyway."

And I'd have to explain it anyway. You know I would.

Dar started laughing.

Why are you up? It's four AM there. But if you are, after we drop mom off, can I call you? I want to try and get through, and it would be nice to talk for a few minutes before all the crazy stuff starts up all over again. I'm sure tomorrow's going to be worse than today – I think everyone; the business people I mean, are in shock. Tomorrow it'll be – well, okay, but when will I be back up?

Dar nodded in agreement. "Yup."

It's so quiet here in the city. I know it's sort of late, but there's hardly a car on the street. It's almost spooky it's so quiet, and I realized just earlier how funny it was to not hear airplanes. You never think of that, but we have them all the time at home over head and I've been here a couple hours and not one except for fighters. So strange.

There are lots of soldiers around. It almost feels like we're at war. Are we?

Dar gazed thoughtfully at the message. "Good question." She said aloud. "Have we ever not been at war?"

Anyway, we're pretty close to the townhouse now. So hopefully I'll be calling soon. Hope you're up just because you're up and not because you're doing stuff.

Dar glanced guiltily at the laptop. Then she half shrugged and decided to look forward to talking to Kerry instead of worrying about it. She took a sip of her warm milk and logged in, waiting for the machine to present her desktop before she started the cellular card up and connected.

It wasn't nearly as quick a connection as she was used to, of course. The cellular service provided speed more or less like a fast modem though, and it was enough for Dar to start up her VPN session and connect to the office. "Might as well clear some mail." She decided. "With any luck, everyone will have been a lot busier with everything else than sending me a lot of it."

She took another sip of milk, licking her lips a little at the strange but not unpleasant taste. Different grass, maybe, or just a different way of processing the milk.. she wasn't sure. She suspected she'd get used to it after a while.

The computer chimed softly, and she started up her mail program. "Of course, I'm not gonna get the chance." She sighed. "Bastards."

It wasn't logical for her to be upset, and she knew it, because given what so many others were going through her lack of a touring vacation was so petty she'd have been embarrassed to mention it to anyone other than herself.

But she was mad. She was pissed off her life had been disrupted. She was even more pissed off that she wasn't going to get to enjoy some simple wandering with Kerry she'd looked very much forward to. "Bastards." She repeated. "They're damn lucky it's not my finger on the nuclear button cause if it was I'd have pressed it."

Self centered, shocking, and unworthy of even thinking it. Dar watched her inbox fill. A thought she wouldn't consider repeating to Kerry. But the venal stupidity of the act chewed at her, since the

reasoning behind most of the world's ills right now was based in the unthinking animal tribal instinct that humanity had no real hope of getting rid of any time soon.

There was no logic there. The instinct to hate what you weren't was written so deeply, Dar felt, in the genes that on some level it wasn't something you could address with words or thoughts. It was a burning in the gut. A fire in the brain that resisted any attempt at change.

It was easy for people, and she'd heard many of them in the last few hours, point at particular group and act like those people were so alien and so isolated in their hatred. Easy, especially on a day like yesterday had been. But the truth was, the ravaging need to destroy what wasn't you was universal.

Dar sighed. "So I go and say something like, yeah, I want to blow them off the face of the earth, and thereby prove out my species." She shook her head. "Asshole."

She scanned the mail, seeing not a lot that wasn't either group sent mails or brief acknowledgements. Her brows raised in surprise. "I know I said I didn't expect much mail but I did expect **some**."

But really, there wasn't any. Dar reasoned that maybe the fact that they'd all be in a huge conference call all day accounted for that. She could imagine sitting down to write some mundane note and just stopping, and clicking the close button instead.

She minimized the mail program and called up her status screen instead, waiting for it to draw and the counters to settle in and show what the latest was across the company. There was no audio, she wasn't about to trigger the voice link over the slow connection.

Instead, she studied the lists of employees, checking first the one from the Pentagon area, and then the one from New York.

Each person's name had a red, a green, or a yellow tag next to it. Green meant they'd been heard from, and were okay. Yellow meant they'd been heard from, but were having problems. Red..

Dar exhaled slowly, her eyes running over all those little red dots. A dozen in Washington, and three times that in New York. She studied the names, her stomach dropping when she saw Bob's name still stubbornly crimson.

They hadn't exactly gotten along. She hadn't exactly enjoyed his company. But he was an old friend of Alastair's and now, his proud enthusiasm about his city caused a pang in her chest as she remembered very clearly not wanting to hear a second of it.

She'd argued with him just the other day, over parking spaces at the office there. He wanted to spend money for covered parking.

Native Floridian Dar had thought that was crazy. Bob had gotten frustrated, and almost hung up, but then had gotten lucky in the form of Kerry's arriving and explaining to her tropical lover. trying to get your door open in an ice storm.

Saved by the Midwest. Bob had almost seemed embarrassed, but they'd ended up splitting the cost and now, she was glad.

She was glad they'd ended the meeting not screaming at each other.

Her PDA flashed. Dar was glad enough to push aside the laptop and pull the smaller device over, opening it up to find another message from Kerry there.

Streets full of soldiers, Dar. They blocked off most of the streets. I don't think we're going to be able to get close to the townhouse I'm not sure what's going on.

Dar sat up straight in alarm, feeling a surge of adrenaline hit her.

Something about a car bomb. Crap.

Dar reached over and grabbed her cellphone, hitting the speed dial button. Instead of a fast busy, the call went through and she heard it ring twice before it was answered. "Hey."

"Hey." Kerry cleared her throat.

Dar could hear Kerry's mother in the background, and a male voice, lower and official sounding. "Listen, you want me to call up the hotel and make reservations for the whole lot of you? Kerry, you are not going anywhere near a damn car bomb."

There was a moment of silence. "Yes, I would like you to do that. A lot."

Dar yanked the laptop over and rattled in the travel website. She stopped on hearing noises in the background on the phone. "Were those gunshots?"

"I don't know."

The website responded, and she typed in the information. "Hell, your suite's got three rooms you could probably cram everyone in there if you had to."

Kerry cleared her throat again, this time with a completely different inflection.

Dar scanned the response. "They have two rooms available." She said. "I'm grabbing them. Must be last minute cancels because they weren't there earlier."

"Okay, let me get things organized on this end." Kerry sounded resigned. "Wish me luck. Thanks sweetie. I'll call you back in a minute."

"You'd better." Dar clicked the reserve button. "And get away from those damn sounds!"

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"Ma'am, I do understand but I can't let you go any further. It's dangerous. They have the road blocked off, and they called the bomb squad." The soldier said. "No telling when they'll get here. They've been all over the city tonight. People are real nervous."

Senator Stuart folded her hands in exasperation, turning to look at her aides. "This is ridiculous." She said. "I understand security, but what are we supposed to do, sleep here in the car?"

"Senator, please." The most senior of the aides, a middle age man with a bearded face said. "Let me arrange an alternative. I'm sure there's a hotel in the area we can go to. I have your overnight bag in the trunk."

"That's a good idea ma'am." The soldier added, respectfully. "Though you might need to call around, I hear it's pretty busy."

Cynthia sat back, distress apparent on her face. "Well, my goodness."

"Mother." Kerry leaned forward and touched her knee. "My hotel had two rooms left. I had them held."

Her mother glanced around at the four aides. "I certainly do appreciate it..however..."

"My suite's got three rooms." Kerry accurately intercepted her concern. "You're more than welcome to share it with me." From the corner of her eye she saw the aides relax, their shoulders dropping and veiled looks of gratitude being nudged in her direction.

Her mother though, still hesitated.

"I mean.. " Kerry could feel the irony right down to her toes. "We are related."

That seemed to snap the Senator out of her reverie. "Of course we are." Cynthia said, briskly. "Of course, and that's a perfect solution. Thank you so very much, Kerry." She motioned to the window separating them from the driver. "Please tell him to drive on to.." She glanced at her daughter.

"Mandarin Oriental" Kerry supplied. "It's on the edge of town."

Her mother's eyes blinked. "Yes, it is." She agreed, in a mild tone. "Lovely hotel. I attended a banquet there just last month."

"Mandarin Oriental." One of the aides told the driver. "Let's get out of here."

The car turned, and headed away from the blockaded area, and every settled back in their seats as they moved through the almost deserted city.

"Well." Cynthia said, after a moment. "That was unexpected." She folded her hands in her lap. "I'm glad you had the forethought to call the hotel, Kerry. That was very proactive of you."

"I've been called that before." Kerry decided her boss wouldn't mind her taking credit for her quick thinking just this once. "I'm glad they had the space. It's been a really long day." She said. "I'm looking forward to just getting some rest."

The aides nodded. "You're right there, Ms. Stuart." The senior aide said. "It certainly has been a rough time today."

Kerry realized it was the first time the aide had addressed her directly. "This is one of those things where, I think, you'll remember where you were when it happened." She remarked. "I know I will."

The other aides nodded.

Cynthia pursed her lips for a moment. "I do honestly think I'm very glad I was at home when I did hear." She said. "And that all my children were there also. You do worry about your family at times such as this, and we had so much going on."

Surprisingly, Kerry found herself in agreement. "I'm glad too." She said. "I'm glad you weren't in Washington, and I'm glad I didn't have to chase around looking for Mike and Angie to make sure they were okay and that Mike wasn't off in New York on some promotion or other."

"Absolutely." Her mother murmured. "Do you still have people unaccounted for?"

Kerry nodded. "But we hope it's just because so much communication structure is not working." She said, quietly. "Maybe we'll hear from them tomorrow."

A pensive silence fell. Kerry let her head rest against the window. Her eyes burned, and she checked her watch, seeing the hands pointing nearly to midnight.

It had been a very long day. The time she'd spent doing crunches in the early morning light now seemed to be from a different time.

A different lifetime.

She glanced out the window, seeing a blast of flashing lights. A line of police cars blazed past, heading in the opposite direction in an eerie, sirenless silence. She studied the buildings going past, most with darkened windows, some with entryways blocked by large, solid looking vehicles.

Under siege?

Kerry supposed that's what it must feel like. No one really knew if there would be more attacks, and if there were, what form they might take. Car bombs? Maybe. Human bombs? Happened in the Middle East every day.

"Crazy." One of the aides was also watching out the window. "What the hell's wrong with these people?"

"Well." Senator Stuart spoke up. "I would guess that they... whomever they are, probably are saying much the same about us, wherever they might be." She said. "There's just too much intolerance in the world. That's really the problem."

"Senator, these people are crazy. People who fly airplanes into buildings aren't intolerant, they're nuts." One of the younger aides said. "That's not human."

"They were celebrating over there. Did you see that on CNN?" The young woman aide said. "There were people over there cheering when they saw bodies dropping from the tower to their deaths."

Senator Stuart laced her fingers together. "Now, why would they do that?" She asked. "What kind of hatred can they have that makes them celebrate such a horrible thing?"

"I don't think I want to know why." The woman aide said. "There's no way to understand that. We should just send our own planes over there and get them back."

"Make them stop cheering." The young male aide agreed. "They're just animals."

Cynthia frowned. "I'm sure we will do something as a response." She sighed. "And yet, what will that bring in the long run? More disasters." She shook her head. "I fear though, you are correct. We have no common reference."

Kerry tilted her head to one side and poked her finger in her ear, wiggling it vigorously.

"Something wrong?" Her mother asked.

"Sorry." Kerry gave her head a shake. "Thought I felt my brains leaking out there for a minute." She laced her fingers together in her lap. "Lack of tolerance and understanding is not unique to the people who drove those planes." She said. "I think it's something that's part of human nature, to not like and fear things we don't really have a handle on."

Her mother's eyes narrowed slightly, but Kerry managed to retain a mild expression. "But still, there's no excuse for what those people did. There would be no excuse for us if we did it. Violence isn't the answer."

The senator nodded immediately. "Exactly what I meant."

"Especially not in this circumstance." Kerry went on. "Let's say we do send planes over and drop bombs. Then what? We don't know where the people who planned this are, so we drop a bomb and kill a couple thousand innocent people. How does that help? How does that make us any better than they are?"

"Well.." The woman aide said.

"So they just send more people to do more horrible things, and we send more bombs... what's the point? That doesn't get you anywhere." Kerry sighed. "My mother's right. We have no common frame of reference with this group of people who have been a civilization for twenty centuries at least more than our country has even existed. They might as well be ET."

Cynthia looked a bit overwhelmed by the agreement. "Yes." She said, after a pause. "My point exactly."

Silence fell, as they drove on past another block of police cars.

"That was a really good movie." The young male aide ventured. "ET, I mean."

It almost made Kerry giggle. She leaned against the arm of the limo door and rested her head against the glass again and hoped the hotel wasn't that far off. The conversation was veering towards the positively dangerous.

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The hotel lobby was definitely quiet. Kerry had her bag over her shoulder, and she headed for the reception desk where two receptionists were standing, backs turned to her, watching CNN on the television.

One of the aides hurried to catch up to her. "Listen, Ms. Stuart.."

"Hm?" Kerry turned her head and regarded him. He was a medium sort of person. Medium height, medium coloring, medium shade of brown hair. The only thing that stood out was a set of beautiful, long, well maintained eyelashes that looked very much like they were fake.

She hoped they weren't. "Yes?"

"Thanks for getting the rooms." The man said. "I wasn't looking forward to sleeping in the car."

Kerry's brows creased a little. "Don't you have an apartment here?" She asked. "You don't sleep in the townhouse garage, do you?"

The man chuckled. "No, there's a staffers apartment building but it's right across the street from the Senator's place. We live there."

"Ah." Kerry removed her wallet as she approached the desk. "Good evening, folks."

The two receptionists spun around. "Oh." The one on the left hurried forward. "Sorry about that. We were just..."

"We know." Kerry held a hand up. "It's okay. I have a reservation.. actually, probably three of them.. under the name of either Stuart or Roberts."

The aide looked at her, his brows knitting over his outstanding eyelashes.

"My married name." Kerry was unable to resist, adding a smile after it as the man jerked a little. "I never know how Dar's going to book it."

"Yes, we do have them, Ms. Stuart." The receptionist interrupted. "I have two deluxe rooms with two beds, and the Presidential Suite." He glanced behind her. "Is there luggage we can take care of for you?"

"No." Kerry handed over her corporate card. "I have just my overnight, and the rest of our party wasn't expecting to need a hotel. Do you have a sundry kit available for them?"

"Of course." The man said, instantly, handing her back her card. "This is prepaid, ma'am."

Kerry rolled her eyes. "Of course it is." She chuckled under her breath. "Okay, we need two keys for each room, please." She tapped the card on the desk. "And could I get a pot of hot tea sent up to the suite? My head's pounding."

"Absolutely." The receptionist scribbled something on a pad. "Any particular type? We have a selection."

"Green Jasmine?" Kerry asked, hopefully. "With honey?"

"Not a problem."

"Do we want to mention.. " The aide glanced behind them, into the depths of the spacious lobby where the Senator and the other aides waited"

"Probably not." Kerry said. "No sense advertising, even if my mother's not really a hot potato on the international scene like my father was." She caught the receptionist's furtive glance, and smiled.

"Good point." The aide agreed. "Presidential Suite huh? I've seen pictures of that. It's swank."

Kerry collected the keys being handed to her. "After a while, they just all look like hotel rooms." She handed the aide the other keys. "No matter how nice, it's just not home."

They walked back across the lobby floor to where the rest of the group were waiting. The other three aides stopped talking as they walked up and glanced at each other.

The female aide cleared her throat. "Basil, you want to share? We went to college together."

"Sure." The other younger aide said. "No problem."

The aide with Kerry passed out the keys. "That means I'll share with you, Robert." He said. "Ms. Stuart asked them to bring us up necessities."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Kerry." Senator Stuart said. "I am very glad I thought to bring my little overnight bag, myself."

Kerry hefted her own bag. "Okay, have a good night, folks. Time to get some rest." She herded them towards the big elevators, already imagining she could feel the softness of a bed under her back and the taste of hot tea on her tongue.

"Robert, please make sure my schedule is set for the morning." Senator Stuart said, as they entered the elevator and it started to rise. "I think we convene at ten AM tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am, that's correct." Robert said. "I'm sure the roads will be clear by tomorrow at breakfast."

"I hope so."

The elevator doors opened on the 4th floor, and the four aides got out. "Have a good night, Senator." Robert gave her and Kerry a little wave. "Ms. Stuart."

"You too." Kerry waved back, as the doors closed and they headed up to the top floor.

"Well." Her mother said, as she exited, and headed to the door of the suite. "This was certainly an unexpected end to a very unexpected day."

Kerry opened the door and entered, holding it for her mother. She detected the competing scents of fresh wax, steaming tea, and chocolate, and even she blinked at the grand entranceway, and expansive stretch of the room they were staying in. "Wow."

"My goodness." Her mother stopped and peered around. "Is that a grand piano?"

"Is that a telescope? Kerry muttered in response. "Well, mother, I think we've got enough space here."

"To play tennis, it seems." Cynthia remarked, with surprising humor.

"I had them send up some tea." Kerry felt a little nervous, and more than a little unsettled, now that they were there, and alone and she realized it. "Have some if you like. My throat's a little sore." She moved past the ornate living room and found her way into one of the bedrooms.

"There's a large basket here. Is that from the hotel too?" Her mother called in. "How nice of them."

"Is it fruit or chocolate?" Kerry responded.

"I believe it's... yes, some type of candy."

"Not the hotel. Dar." Kerry looked around the room. "Hm." She set her bag on the credenza and opened it. "Feel free to have some of that too." She untucked her shirt from her jeans and unbuttoned it, kicking off her sneakers at the same time.

The windows had an expansive view, and she turned to look out them as she removed her shirt. It was a little hard to believe she was here.

Okay. It was impossible to believe she was here. Kerry went back over to her bag, removing her bra and trading it for a long, soft t-shirt that she pulled over her head. She unbuttoned her jeans and slipped them off, folding them in thirds and laying them down with her shirt on the dresser.

Then she squared her shoulders and faced the door, heading back out to where she could still smell the tea and hear her waiting parent. "Be good, Kerry." She muttered under her breath. "Be good."

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The basket was a typical Dar basket. Kerry studied it, loosening the ribbons as she pondered whether her partner had some cosmic internet shopping service with her favorite things predefined and simply pressed the correct button at the correct time or whether she took the time to select each item.

Knowing Dar, if she'd had the time, it was the latter. She was single minded about certain things, and Kerry knew she was one of them.

The basket held several types of chocolates, a pair of soft, fluffy socks, an aromatherapy eye shade that smelled of peaches, and a beanie baby that was the image of her pet Chino.

The crinkly plastic came off. She set it aside, glad her mother had decided to retreat into the second bedroom. "Hmm." She selected a wrapped Lindt chocolate ball and took it with her over to where the teapot was sitting along with the socks.

There were comfortable wing chairs to either side of the small table, and she sat down in one, putting the socks on her feet, then extending them across the marble floor and crossing her ankles. Dropping

two sugar cubes in a cup, she poured out some of the steaming beverage, releasing a strong scent of jasmine in the air.

She unwrapped the chocolate and bit into it, enjoying the rich, creamy center. She washed it down with a sip of the hot, mildly astringent tasting tea, the clean freshness contrasting with the indulgence of the chocolate in a nice way.

"That smells lovely." Her mother emerged, wearing the a plush robe and slippers. "Do you still favor tea? I remember you did always like it better than coffee." She walked over to the table and prepared a cup for herself.

"I do." Kerry said. "I'll drink a cup of coffee in the morning, but tea after that unless I'm doing an all nighter or that sort of thing." She took another bite of her chocolate. "This is pretty good."

Her mother sat down in the other chair on the other side of the table with her cup. She took a sip. "It's quite good. I prefer tea myself. I find it more delicate." She said. "I think it's calming."

Kerry thought so too. "Might be the illusion of Zen." She said. "But it works for me."

They were silent for a minute. Kerry got up and went over to the basket, picking up a couple more of the Lindt balls and bringing them back with her. She sat back down and stifled a yawn, unwrapping a chocolate.

"That was very kind of Dar." Cynthia ventured. "Very thoughtful. Does she do that often? I seem to remember Angela saying she'd gotten you a cake at the restaurant the other night or something like that."

Kerry rolled a Lindt ball over in her direction. "On special occasions, sure." She said. "When we're apart, we try to do little things for each other." She sipped her tea. "Not always baskets, but like reserving each other the nicest hotel room, or renting each other a fun car."

Her mother paused, and looked around the hotel room completely. Then she picked up the Lindt ball. "I would say she did well in this round." She commented. "It's nice to here that you two get along so well. You're really quite unlike each other."

"Probably why we get along as well as we do." Kerry said, briefly. "We like a lot of the same things though, and naturally we've got our work in common."

"Of course." Her mother said. "And you are both so clever." She said. "You know, I was listening to Dar speak earlier. What a charming voice she has."

Charming. There were lots of things about Dar Kerry found charming, but she half suspected her mother was trying to be a little over the top nice, to avoid any uncomfortable discussion between them. That was okay by her. It was very late, and she was both tired and emotionally overloaded from the day. "I could listen to her talk all day." She responded with a smile. "But really, you should hear her sing."

"Really?"

Kerry nodded, taking a sip of her tea. "We have a lot of fun together." She said. "I'm sorry she's going to be flying so long tomorrow. A lot can happen in ten hours."

"Goodness." Her mother murmured. "Isn't that the truth. I don't really know what to expect, actually. I think everyone was just overwhelmed today, and tomorrow all the reactions will start." She said. "It's been very curious to be involved in the government, you know. After being a spectator for so long I mean."

"I bet it has." Kerry said. "From the interviews we were seeing on the news, it seems like most of the people in Congress are pretty much in agreement with each other though."

"Well." Cynthia curiously inspected the unwrapped chocolate, then bit into it. "My, that is wonderful." She said. "In any case, there is the things one is expected to say to the press and in public, and then

there are the things everyone says in private in the council chambers, and that is what made me understand just how much of a charade we do play here in Washington.”

Kerry blinked a little in surprise. Not from the revelation that Congress often said different things to the press than to each other, but that her mother seemed so disapproving about it. “I just hope everyone sits down and thinks about what to do instead of just reacts.”

“I hope so too.” Her mother agreed. “What will your plans be for tomorrow?”

The long day was now creeping over her. Kerry blinked a few times. “I have to go to our offices in Virginia in the morning, to see what the problem is with the government officials showing up wanting to tap our circuits.” She said. “Then we’ll probably go to the Pentagon. I want to visit my team there.”

Cynthia pondered this for a minute. “Well, if there is anything I can help with on the government side.” She offered diffidently. “Please let me know.”

Kerry nodded. “Thanks. Hopefully, it’s just a misunderstanding.” She replied. “I’ve gotten requests like that before, where people ask for things because they’ve either been told to, or someone mentioned a buzz word and there really isn’t a full understanding of what they’re asking.”

Her mother finished up her tea and set the cup down. “Well, it has been a long day, so I will leave you to get some rest. Perhaps you can join us for breakfast before you leave?”

“Sure.” Kerry was too tired to even mind. “Good night.... Oh.” She felt a little sheepish. “Sorry about the table.”

Her mother, already at the door to her bedroom, turned and peered at her, a faintly bemused expression on her face. “I have to admit.” She said. “After all your talk about being this terribly different person, finding you under my dining room table amongst broken crockery was really quite amusing.”

There wasn’t really any defense to that. Kerry rested her head against her hand and gazed back at her mother through her somewhat disordered bangs. “Not everything’s changed.” She admitted, with a wry smile.

“No.” Cynthia smiled back. “Not everything Good night.” She turned and went into the bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind her.

“Night.” Kerry remained slouched in her chair, sipping her cooling tea. She finished her chocolate, then she stood up and set the cup down, heading for the refuge of her room as the days tensions and discomfort started to rub against her like sandpaper.

She sat down on her bed, resting her hands on the mattress as she looked out the window.

She could see the Jefferson Memorial. It was shrouded in shadows, its normal brilliant lighting dimmed for safety she supposed, but she felt somehow that the somber sight reflected her attitude about the events of the day.

She felt like the world was overcast. With a sigh, she got up again and turned out the desk light, then she went to the already turned down linens and started to get under them.

Her cell phone rang. Kerry cursed under her breath at it, then she leaned over and grabbed the phone, turning and using her momentum to land back on the bed as she opened it. “Kerry Stuart.”

“Hey sexy. You naked under the sheets yet?”

The mental whiplash made her sneeze. “Buh!” She rolled over onto her back, her gloomy thoughts lifting like magic. “I forgot to text you!”

“Is that a yes or a no?” Dar’s voice sounded amused. “Or were you partying with your mother?”

Kerry started laughing, ending a wry sound. “Actually we had tea and chocolate together. Thank you, my love. The socks are warming my toes as we speak.”

"I was just standing on my head for twenty minutes. My nose is throbbing." Dar informed her. "It's goddamn boring in a country mansion in England at five in the morning you know that?" She complained. "I'm afraid to go out and run in case they have foxhounds or something out there."

"Well." Kerry smiled. "You're a fox. It's a valid concern." She heard a conspicuous silence on the other end and her smile grew wider. "Oooo.. I gotcha."

Dar chuckled softly. "You did." She admitted. "So how's it going?" Her voice altered. "I'm stopping you from sleeping so I'll keep it short."

"Don't." Kerry said. "I could easily talk to you all night long." She added. "Even my mother thinks you have a charming voice."

"Huh?"

Kerry cleared her throat a bit. "It's not bad." She said. "This thing you rented for me could hold our entire department with room for our dog. Mom's being okay. I think after that blowup she's just staying away from a lot of stuff. Which is fine by me."

"Yeah."

"I wasn't in the mood for a fight tonight anyway." Kerry said. "And after I made that whole speech about being grown up and everything we were playing hide and seek in the house and I knocked a freaking table over. Ended up breaking a bowl the size of our sink at home."

She could hear Dar muffling a snicker. "No, go ahead and laugh." Kerry sighed. "Talk about blowing my image. I could have smacked Mike. He tripped me right into the damn thing and I hit the legs sideways."

"Table didn't have a chance." Dar commiserated. "You've hit me in the knees. I know what that feels like."

"My sister was laughing so hard she was crying." Kerry admitted. "And the look on my mother's face when she came around the corner to see what the hell was going on was pretty much priceless." She paused. "It reminded me of the fact that growing up in that house wasn't always a horror show."

Dar chuckled aloud.

"Anyway." Kerry sighed. "So it's not going too bad. How about you? Are you ready to fly?"

"Yeah. Actually, the timing is going to give me a problem trying to get hold of Gerry." Dar said. "If I don't get him before I take off, I might need you to call him." She said. "I'll message you if that's the case. It'll be really early your time when I leave."

"No problem." Kerry said. "I think I'm going over there in the afternoon so I can touch base with him. Shouldn't be an issue."

"Good." Dar said. "We can stop talking about business now." She said. "How did my voice come up in conversation?"

Kerry closed her eyes and smiled, narrowing her world down to the sound in her ear. She reached over and turned the bedside light off, leaving her in darkness that only made their conversation all the more private. "She was being nice. She was listening to you when you were on the conference call. Angie said something too, about your accent."

"My what?"

"Your cute little Southern twang." Her partner clarified. "I'm so used to hearing you I don't really hear it anymore but they both noticed."

"I don't have an accent. My father has an accent." Dar said. "You have an accent."

"No I don't."

"Sure you do."

"I do not!"

"You do!" Dar insisted. "Everyone had an accent." She said. "Except me."

Kerry started laughing. "You're so funny." She said. "Thank you for calling me. I was starting to really get bummed out."

"Why?" Dar asked. "You said things were going okay."

"I know. I don't know." Kerry replied. "I just was. All the stuff going on and thinking about our people who are still missing, and not knowing what's going to happen with the government tomorrow... it was just bumming me out." She thought about that. "Do I sound like a weenie?"

"No." Dar's voice deepened a little, warming audibly. "I was getting bummed here too. I feel like I'm so far away from everything." She admitted. "I'm glad we're leaving today, but knowing I'll be out of touch for that long is driving me insane."

"Me too." Kerry agreed, in a wry tone.

They were both quiet for a moment. "We're a couple of goddamned idiots." Dar said. "We'd give Mr. Rogers diabetes." She sighed with exaggerated exasperation. "Wait. Let me go out and see if I can find a box of bonbons and a pair of pink fuzzy slippers."

Kerry started laughing. "I have the bonbons and fuzzy slippers here, honey. Come'n get them."

"If I could." Dar said. "If I could close my eyes and will it, and be there, I would in a heartbeat." She sighed. "But unfortunately I'm not a refugee from a bad science fiction movie of the week. I did tell Alastair I'd need to head out to Washington as soon as we got in the states though. I'm hoping the planes'll be flying by then."

"Me too." Kerry could feel the beginnings of a disassociation that meant she was falling asleep. "Would you do me a tiny favor?"

"You have to ask?"

"Sing to me. Just for a minute."

Dar hesitated. "Oh. Uh.. okay. Sure."

"I just remembered when I was talking to mom what that sounded like and I want to hear it. I love your singing voice." Kerry smiled, as she heard Dar clear her throat softly, and she took a deep breath and released it as her partner complied, easing her into sleep so gently she didn't even remember the tune.

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Dar turned the collar of her leather jacket up to protect her neck against the damp, chilly wind as she waited for Alastair to finish his goodbyes. She'd made the mistake of dropping off to sleep again after talking to Kerry and now she felt as foggy as the sky appeared, waking up again only ten minutes before they were supposed to leave.

The only thing that had saved her ass was that she'd grabbed a shower and packed while waiting for Kerry to get to her hotel, so she just had to throw her clothes on, brush her teeth and hair and try to pretend her brain wasn't somewhere in the southern Caribbean where her dreams had taken her before she woke.

On the boat, in the sun, Kerry's warm body curled up next to her and the late afternoon sky getting ready to set and provide them with an evening entertainment.

God damn she wished it hadn't been a dream.

Her cell phone rang. She unclipped it from her belt, glancing at the caller ID and hoping it was Gerry Easton. It wasn't, but she was glad to see the name anyway. "Morning, Mark."

"Hey Boss." Mark sounded absolutely exhausted. "We just crossed into North Carolina. What a bastard of a drive."

"It is. How are things going? I didn't have time to login to the desktop this morning. We're about to leave for the airport." Dar felt a distinct sense of embarrassment.

"For us, we're cool." Mark said. "Nothing big new on the board, and all that, since it's like two thirty am. But we just heard they closed down NY again and found some truck bomb trying to cross one of the bridges."

"Shit." Dar exhaled. "Kerry's in Washington."

"Yeah, I know." Her MIS chief sounded unhappy. "But hey, she's probably safe someplace, right? She's not like, at the Pentagon, is she?"

"No." Dar caught motion of the corner of her eye, and saw Sir Melthon and his staff walking towards her, the magnate still in discussion with Alastair. "She's in a hotel, but I'm about to get on an airplane and be out of touch for ten hours. I'm going to lose my mind."

"Well, Dar, we ready?" Alastair said, as they closed in on her. "Everything all right?"

"Hang on Mark." Dar put her cell phone on mute. "Just getting a status." She said. "Sir Melthon, it's been a true pleasure working with your team, despite the circumstances."

"Likewise." The magnate said. "Now, I know this is not really the time to discuss this, but I have a schedule to meet. I need to know how this event is going to impact that." He held a hand up. "McLean, this changes nothing in our pact. I'm not an idiot. I know full well this disaster requires attention."

Alastair and Dar exchanged looks. "I'll know better once we get back to Houston." Dar said. "The resources tied up normally in that side of our organization would not be dedicated to your project, but I'm going to have to pull people in so I need to assess."

The Englishman frowned, but he also nodded at the same time. "Fair enough." He said. "My godson tenders his regrets. He had to hurry back to Hamburg last night. An aunt of his was taken sick."

"Hope she's doing better." Alastair said. "As Dar said, let us get back and sort ourselves out, and we'll be back in touch soon as we can." He held his hand out, and the magnate gripped it. "Thanks for your hospitality. Hope I can return it sometime if you're in my neck of the woods."

"Could be I'll take you up on that." Sir Melthon said. "Wouldn't mind seeing your headquarters, but not until after all the frooha passes on." He extended his hand to Dar. "Ms. Roberts, believe me when I say it has truly been an honor."

Dar took his and traded strong grips with him. "I'm glad you're a customer." She said. "You're the kind I don't mind going two hundred percent for."

Sir Melthon smiled, looking for a moment as though twenty years had been erased from his face. "Have a good flight home, you lot. Let us know if you get in safely. My man here will get you to the airport fast as London traffic allows. Which means... hold on to the armrests and close your eyes if you're smart."

Dar waited until they were in the car before she unmuted the phone. "Sorry about that Mark."

"No problem boss, I got a grilled cheese sandwich and a Bawls out of it." Mark replied, in a somewhat muffled tone. "These RV's are awesome. We should keep one around the office."

Dar sighed. "I'll put it on the budget list." She said, in a distracted tone. "Now, where were we?"

Mark rustled some paper. "We were just talking about stuff going on." He said. "You were bitching about having to be out of touch for ten hours."

"Ah." Dar glanced at Alastair. "Hang on again." She waited for her boss to turn his head. "Mark says they reported a truck bomb in Manhattan."

"Damn it." Alastair exhaled. "Damn it all to hell, this has to stop."

"Sorry." Dar went back to the phone. "Just catching Alastair up." She braced her elbow against the door and rested her head against her hand. "I talked to Kerry earlier and there were bomb threats in Washington too."

"Yeah, they were saying." Mark murmured. "Some place near the Capitol, and two other ones around there." He hesitated. "Listen, boss, you want me to go find her instead of heading through? If we keep driving, we'll probably make it before you land."

Dar was silent for a moment, weighing her personal desires against her judgement.

"Hey Dar?" Alastair touched her arm. "You all right? You look a little pale."

Dar felt a little pale. "Yeah." She said. "Just woke up with a headache." She drew in a breath. "Keep going, Mark. I'm not sure where Ker's going to be by the time you get there, and it'll be a wild goose chase."

"You sure?" Her MIS chief asked.

"Yeah." Dar said, briefly. "She'll be all right. They're going to need you in the city."

"Okay." Mark said. "I'll drop her a note with my cell and remind her I'll be passing through though, okay?"

Dar managed a small grin. "Sure." She said. "At worst maybe she'll need you to rescue her from her mother."

"Uh."

"Hey, you volunteered." Dar felt her neck muscles relaxing a trifle. "What else is going on? We find any more of our folks?"

"Two, in Washington." Mark replied. "They weren't even at the Pentagon, like they were supposed to be. They got sent on a run to get freaking doughnuts, and got in a car wreck."

"Oh." Dar murmured. "Hope they're okay."

"Sure." Mark said. "Numbskulls didn't have a cell with them, and decided to take the rest of the day off with a freaking doctor's note and went hiking."

She could hear the frustration in Mark's voice, a mixture of relief that the two workers were all right and anger at their desertion. "Did you talk to them?"

"Yeah."

Dar watched Alastair watch her, distracted by the realization that her boss had never really seen her exercise the management part of her position. It got her mind off Kerry, and her discomfort, and she felt her concentration sharpen. "How old are they?"

Mark chuckled wryly. "Twenty." He admitted. "Freaking kids."

"Do you remember what you were like when you were twenty?" His boss asked him, suppressing a smile. "Hm?"

"Sure." Mark replied. "But that's squashed by the fact I also remember what **you** were like when you were twenty so I don't wanna cut them that much slack."

The unexpected retort made Dar laugh, despite everything. "Ahh, yeah." She said. "I was an anal retentive workaholic control freak, wasn't I?"

"Was?" Alastair asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Was?" Mark asked, at the same time.

"Hey." Dar growled. "You can't have it both ways, the two of you." She said. "Either I've mellowed or I haven't. Pick one." She knew the answer, though. She wasn't the asshole she had been back then, because if she had been she and Kerry would never have lasted together.

That was her yardstick. She could look back now on things she'd done and things she'd said, and she just knew it wasn't in her to be like that anymore. "Well?"

"Now, Dar." Alastair patted her knee. "I'm just kidding you. For heaven's sake."

"Just messing with you, boss." Mark chuckled. "You sounded down." He added. "These guys pissed me off, but they're pretty good techs."

Dar was glad of the distraction. "They weren't in the right place at the wrong time." She said. "I think they probably know that, and they'll remember it."

"Yeah."

"Besides, we're going to need every hand we've got. So make em feel guilty and get them back to work." Dar concluded.

"Okay. I'm cool with that." Mark said. "I think they'll be cool with it too."

"And if that doesn't work." Dar mused. "Tell them I'll show up there and spank their asses."

"Blurp." Alastair had been drinking from a bottle of water, and nearly sprayed it over the inside of the car. "Who approved that bonus plan?"

There was a moment of silence from Mark. "You want me to give them a perk after they pulled a stunt like that?" He queried. "Jeez, boss. I'll be hiking to Paris next week. Can I get in it?"

Dar actually felt herself blush. Fortunately, the car was too dark for it to be visible. "What a bunch of kinks I work with." She rallied, watching her boss chuckle. "All right. Let me let this line loose for someone else to get bad news on." She added. "Talk to you later, Mark. Drive safely."

"Will do, boss." He answered. "Have a good flight, okay?"

Ugh. "Okay. Bye." Dar closed the phone and let it rest in her hand as she leaned back in the car seat. "Damn it." Despite the levity, she couldn't dismiss the knot of worry in her guts. "Too much going on."

Alastair watched her quietly for a moment, as she rubbed her eyes. "Sure you're okay, Dar?" He asked. "I've got some aspirin if you want it."

"Nah." Dar tapped the briefcase by her right knee. "I've got some in there. I just woke up on the wrong side of the Atlantic this morning." She pressed her fingers against one throbbing temple. "You think those bomb threats are real, or just people being nervous?"

Alastair took in his CIO's tense body posture. He'd seen Dar in a number of business situations now, and he knew how hard it was to rattle her. Being almost fired by the board hadn't. Standing up to new clients like Sir Melthon hadn't. Even being in a hospital collapse had produced nothing more than that cool, collected front that put forward total confidence and total belief in self.

This was different, and he recognized that. This was personal. "Kerry make it to Washington?" He asked casually. "She doing okay?"

Dar went still for a minute, then she looked up, an openly vulnerable look on her face that probably surprised both of them. Then she took a breath and glanced out the window. "She's fine." She said, in an even voice. "I'm just not crazy about having her around things that might blow up."

"Well." Her boss folded his hands over his knee. "Tell her to get in a damn car, and start driving away from the place and keep going. Get the hell out of town or.. hey. Head back to Miami."

Dar refused to meet his eyes. "It's her job to be there."

"Oh, screw that." Alastair snorted. "Please. Give me a Christly break, Dar. Do you really think this job or any job is worth harming a hair on her, or yours, or mine for that matter's head?"

"No."

Alastair waited. "But?"

Dar took a breath. "I can't tell her not to do her job." She said. "Not if everyone else is doing theirs. She won't take that from me."

Her boss studied her in silence for a moment. "That's complicated." He said, eventually. "Dar, I don't envy your balancing act there." He reached over and clasped her shoulder. "Want me to tell her?"

She appreciated, truly, what Alastair was saying. However, she'd agreed with Kerry that she needed to go to Herndon to do what it was the company paid her for, and at this stage, it was all in motion. "No." She glanced up at him. "She's a big girl, and she can make her own choices. Sending her off to hide somewhere is only going to royally piss her off."

Alastair pondered that, then he nodded. "I can buy that." He said. "But lady, it's tough watching you sweat, know what I mean?"

Dar smiled faintly. Then she was saved by her cell phone ringing again. She opened it up and glanced at the screen, a prickle making her nape hairs stand when she saw Gerry's name. "Ah." She pressed the talk button. "Gerry??"

"Dar! Where in the hell are you!" The general asked.

"London." Dar said. "Glad to hear your voice."

"What? Oh." Gerald Easton paused. "Bastards."

"Mm." Dar agreed. "Ker said you were trying to get in touch with me. I'm on my way to the airport." She explained. "Everyone okay on your end?"

The General sighed. "The family's fine." He said. "Listen, Dar, I need to speak with you right away." He cleared his throat. "You're in London, are you? We can fly you back here."

Dar glanced at Alastair, whose brows were twitching. "We've already got a plane chartered, Gerry. But what did you have in mind?"

"Hang on." He clicked off.

Dar exhaled. "Wants to fly me back to the states. Says he needs to talk to me." She told her boss. "Doesn't sound good."

"Mm." Alastair grunted. "Depends what he wants to talk about, I suppose."

"Hello, Dar?" Gerry came back abruptly. "We can have a transport pick you up just near dinnertime there. How's that?"

"Our flight leaves at ten AM, Gerry. I think it'll be faster, but.." Dar considered. "We're flying into Mexico and driving to Houston. I could use a lift from there."

"Houston!" General Easton spluttered. "What in the hell's the.. oh, that's right. That's where your paycheck's cut, isn't it?" He said. "Okay, call me when you land in Mexico. We can swing that easier than the overseas flight."

"Okay." Dar said. "Kerry's in Washington. Anything she can help with?"

"Is she?" General Easton said. "I think I should talk to you first, Dar. It's a little sticky."

"All right." She responded. "Gerry, this doesn't have anything to do with a bunch of suits showing up at our Herndon office does it?"

Long pause. "Eh?" The General grunted. "Well, to be honest, it's hard to tell from here right now what has to do with anything, Dar. Do yourself a favor though, will you? Don't say no to anything right off. There's a bit of a headless viper lashing around and I don't want you to get bit."

Uh oh. "Okay." Dar said. "I'll call you from Mexico City then. I have a commuter scheduled for the border."

"Right. Gotta go, Dar. Good to hear your voice too. Glad you were out of harm's way." The line went dead, leaving a faint echo in the car.

"Hm." Dar closed the phone. "Headless viper." She looked at her boss. "That doesn't sound any way good."

"Sure doesn't." Alastair murmured. "Sure doesn't."

**

Cynthia Stuart sat quietly, sipping her morning tea and watching the sky outside turn from black to gray with the coming dawn. She'd woken early, as she always did, and treasured the peace of the early morning to think about the coming day and go over her busy schedule.

She opened her organizer and flipped to the last page she'd updated from the day before, going over her notes, rereading again the horrors she'd put down in brief entries.

Only by reading the words was she really able to absorb the fact that all the terrible things had, in fact, happened. Sitting here in this lovely hotel room, it cut through the surrealness. After a moment, she closed the book and got up, walking silently across the floor to the just ajar door across from the table.

She pushed it in and peered inside, her eyes adjusting to the dim light as she studied the large bed inside with its still asleep occupant.

Kerry was curled on her side, her head on one pillow and her arm wrapped around a second. Relaxed in slumber, she was far less threatening a presence, and seeing the familiar position reluctantly made her mother smile.

Her eldest, Cynthia sighed, and closed the door, retreating back to the table and settling down to resume her notes. She picked up a pen and found her place, scribing a careful addition as she shook her head over the subject. "Terrible."

The world was still gripped in its peculiar insanity, it seemed. She picked up her morning news brief, delivered quietly by her staff, and reread it. If she looked out the big windows at the edge of the hotel room, she knew she would see flashing lights, and the oddness of military transports in the streets and for a moment she honestly regretted her decision to complete her husband's government term.

It would indeed have been better to be home. There was Angela and her children to get settled, and many small things requiring her attention and perhaps she could have had another day of Kerry and Michael's presence to make it seem as though her family wasn't quite as fractured as in truth it was.

Hard on the furniture that it might have been. Cynthia glanced up and smiled, hearing the echoes of that laughter the day before, and Kerry's exasperated "Michael!!!" that had brought back so many more pleasant memories.

"Good morning."

Cynthia jumped a little, not expecting the sound. She looked up to find Kerry in the door to her bedroom, still dressed in just a t-shirt. "Good morning" She replied. "Did the room service wake you? I'm sorry if it did. He was trying to be very quiet."

"No." Kerry came over and sat down at the table. "I've been up. I didn't really sleep that well." She rested her forearms on the table and laced her fingers together. "Too many things on my mind, I think."

The older woman studied her daughter. The tanned, serious face under its mop of shaggy blond hair was a little unfamiliar to her now; the planes had gotten a little longer, the jawline a touch more rounded, and there was a definite wariness shadowing the light green eyes that hadn't been there before.

The t-shirt she wore pulled tight over her shoulders as she leaned against the table, showing the outline of muscles Cynthia didn't find really appealing in her eyes, not really approving of women working so hard and gaining the attributes she more properly applied to men.

Though, it really wasn't terribly unattractive. When her daughter was properly dressed it lent her body a pleasantly tapered shape despite her carrying more weight on her frame than ever before. It wasn't really fat, and it wasn't really the slimness she preferred; it just seemed odd to her eyes.

Cynthia supposed it gained her nothing to mention it. Kerry was obviously content with the way she looked and perhaps her own view was a little biased as she'd heard from friends around town how everyone else seemed to think she looked quite good, really.

Ah well.

She glanced at the strong hands on the table, her eye catching a glint as the light reflected off a ring on Kerry's third finger. It was attractive and refined, and it fit her well. "That's a lovely ring." Cynthia said. "Is it new?"

Kerry glanced at her hand. "No." She said. "Dar gave it to me at our commitment ceremony." She explained. "We exchanged rings."

Cynthia pondered over that. Commitment ceremony? "Is that..." She paused, not wanting to upset her daughter with any assumptions over breakfast. "What exactly is that? What does it mean?"

Kerry tapped her thumbs together. "What does that mean." She mused. "I'm not sure what it means to everyone else, but to Dar and I, it means we belong to each other." Her fingers flexed a little. "We're married." She clarified.

She glanced up to gauge her mother's response, seeing mostly a mildly encouraging thoughtfulness there. "As legally as we can be, of course, since our government seems to think gay marriage is as dangerous as an unstable nuclear stockpile." She added a wry smile. "Dar and I had to spend a long time with a lawyer to get the same legal protection a five minute blood test and signature get for everyone else who isn't gay."

Cynthia's face twitched.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Kerry got up. "Room service." She said, as she went to the door and opened it. "Hello."

"Ma'am." The room service waiter, a slim woman, entered. "Your breakfast?"

"Thanks." Kerry indicated the table. She followed the server over to the table, and waited for her to set the tray down. The woman did, then she turned, with a leather billfold in her hand, which Kerry held her hand out for, then signed.

"Do you need anything else, ma'am?" The woman asked, as she handed the bill back.

"Not right now." Kerry smiled at her. "Thank you."

The woman smiled back. "My pleasure." She gave Kerry's mother a respectful nod and left, closing the door quietly behind her.

Kerry opened a packet of raw sugar and poured it into her cup, filling it with hot coffee before she added some cream and sat down to enjoy it. She sipped from the cup, aware of the faintly pained look on her mother's face. "You don't like that word, do you?"

Cynthia looked up, startled. "I beg your pardon?"

"Gay." Kerry said. "You don't like it."

Her mother frowned, stirring her tea as she added a bit more hot water to it. "It makes me uncomfortable." She admitted finally. "Yes."

Kerry uncovered one of the dishes on her tray and picked up a cheerful looking cherry and cheese Danish. "Me too."

Cynthia blinked, and her brows creased again.

"I don't think I should have to define myself by who I sleep with." Kerry studied the Danish and selected a spot, biting into it and chewing. She swallowed, and wiped her lips with her napkin. "It's kind of stupid."

"Well." Her mother took a sip of her tea. "You know, I think I agree with you on that subject." She watched her daughter chew her breakfast. "Really, it shouldn't matter, should it?"

Kerry looked up at her, eyes glinting with wry bemusement.

Cynthia seemed to appreciate the irony. She remained silent, fiddling with the teaspoon in obvious discomfort.

"It shouldn't." her daughter finally said. "So what's going on this morning?" She shoved the conversation onto a different track forcibly. "Anything new?"

Her mother sighed. "I'm afraid they stopped a bomb, a truck bomb from crossing into New York last night."

Kerry sat up, her brows creasing. "Good lord." She said. "So they're still doing things?"

Cynthia shook her head. "Apparently so." She said. "I was waiting to hear further details. Perhaps.. " She hesitated. "Perhaps your people have heard more?"

"Let me get my laptop." Kerry set her cup down and got up. "And Dar's flying. I'm going to be nervous wreck all day." She disappeared into her room, leaving the living space in silence.

Cynthia folded her hands in her lap and bowed her head for a moment, her lips moving as she whispered a short prayer. Then she straightened back up as she heard Kerry coming back in the room, taking a deep breath as her daughter reappeared holding her computer in her hands.

It was exhausting, dealing with this child of hers. Though Kerry was certainly being civil, the hostility she felt was obvious to Cynthia just under the surface, and she wondered when, not if, that simmering anger would erupt again.

Very difficult. Hard to know where to start, really. She didn't want to be so much at odds with her eldest daughter, but everything she'd tried so far to smooth the waters between them had ended bewilderingly badly and she wasn't truly sure why.

She knew Kerry was angry about all that had happened before, but really now – it was in the past. Couldn't be changed.

"What about what we ran into last night?" Kerry asked, as she opened the device and started it up. "Was that real? Mother, honestly, if there are bombs in the city, it's insanity to go into the center of it." She sat down and glanced across the table. "What if they already planted something at the Capitol?"

Her mother pursed her lips. "It's a concern, certainly." She agreed. "My staff was calling around to find out what the rest of my colleagues are intending on doing."

Kerry leaned on the table with both hands, waiting for her laptop to boot up. Then she straightened. "Let me go throw some clothes on." She said. "I've got a feeling it's going to be a busy morning and your staff probably won't appreciate my nerdish pajamas."

She left the laptop where it was and went back into the bedroom, rubbing the back of her neck to work the crick out of it from her nights tossing and turning. She went into the bathroom and stripped out of her shirt, turning on the shower and taking the sponge and bottle of body scrub from her kit bag.

Ignoring her reflection in the mirror, she ducked under the spray and squeezed a blob of wash onto the scrubbie and started using it. The faintly rough texture felt good against her skin, and the pounding of the water across the back of her neck was working to loosen the muscles there.

She felt a little anxious. She wasn't sure if it was the situation she was in, or some subliminal worry about Dar, or perhaps even a reflection of Dar worrying about her but it was rubbing her nerves raw

and she really wished she was alone in her palatial hotel room and didn't have her mother to deal with.

"Now." She muttered to herself over the water. "I'm guessing she probably feels the same way." She glanced at the reflection of her eyes in the small, surprisingly unsteamy mirror fixed to the wall. "Cause I know I'm not being little miss sunshine."

She got a handful of shampoo and soaped her hair, scrubbing above her ears and standing under the water to rinse the suds out. Then she let her arms drop and simply stood, appreciating the powerful pulse of the water against her body.

A bad dream had woken her, this last time. She couldn't even remember now what the dream was, except that she could recall feeling sad, and scared and alone in some strange otherworld of her sleeping imagination.

Now she felt tired, and irritated, and anxious, with a day of conflict and confrontation with the government ahead of her. "Rats." Kerry folded her arms across her wet body. Then she exhaled and reluctantly left the warmth, shutting off the water and grabbing a towel hanging on a rod nearby.

She dried herself off, her ears picking up low voices in the room next door and making her glad she'd decided to get changed when she did. Unlike Dar, who pretty much completely lacked body consciousness, she really had no comfort level in facing fully dressed people in her sleepware.

Crazy, really, since she walked around in what amounted to less at home all the time, on the island, either a pair of shorts and a tank, or shorts and a bathing suit, or just her bathing suit which was absolutely more revealing than a damn t-shirt.

Just a weird crick in her brain. Kerry studied her choice of clothing, then she pulled on a pair of jeans, buttoning them before she added a bright red polo with their company logo on it. She ran a brush through her damp hair and studied the results.

Hm. She set the brush down and tucked the polo in, reaching into her bag and adding a braided leather belt and buckling it around her waist. With a satisfied grunt, she clipped her phone to the belt and slid her PDA in her pocket, and headed back out to face the world.

**

Dar woke to the smell of sizzling steak nearby, the dichotomy of the view around her, the drone of the engines, and the scent making her look around in utter bewilderment before she remembered where she was.

"Feeling better?"

Dar glanced to her right, across the wide aisle where Alastair was ensconced in a leather lounge much like hers, a reading light glowing dimly on the sheaf of papers he was reviewing. "I was until someone started roasting a steer somewhere." She said. "Where the hell did the barbeque come from?"

He removed his reading glasses and peered back at her, a bemused expression on his face. "You know, I've been on private jets before, but I bet you haven't."

"No." His CIO readily admitted.

"They asked Bea how to cater the plane when she reserved it." Alastair put his glasses back on and went back to his papers. "I took the liberty of ordering for you. I've been with you traveling long enough that I figured I could guess right on what you eat."

Dar glanced at her watch, surprised to see they'd been flying for four hours and she'd slept for three of them. "Ah, okay." She said. "Yeah, the nap helped." She eased a little more upright, running her fingers through her hair. "What's so interesting?"

Alastair picked up a glass with ice and liquid in it and took a sip. "Our SEC pre-filing report for quarter three." He said. "Want to read it?"

Dar eyed him. "I just woke up." She said. "You want me to go back to sleep? You'll have a lot of dinner to eat by yourself."

Alastair chuckled. "I was trying to put myself to sleep, to be honest." He set the report to one side, and tossed his glasses on top of it. "Sometimes I look forward to retiring, when the most urgent thing I have to look at is an LL Bean catalog." He admitted. "You get tired of all the fine print, y'know?" He put his hands behind his head and stretched out.

"Do you?" Dar half turned onto her side, drawing one knee up as she faced her boss. "What would you do if you retired?"

Alastair tilted his head back and regarded the ceiling of the private jet, pondering the question.

Dar took a moment while he was to look around the jet she hadn't paid much attention to when they'd boarded. It was reasonably large inside, but had two single lines of fully reclining leather couches on either side of a wide aisle instead of the usual rows of upright chairs.

It was quiet, the drone of the engines muted, and it felt expensive, and Dar realized this was likely what it was like for the truly elite when they traveled.

She liked it. It meshed well with her view of appropriate personal space and comfort and the leather loungers were just big enough that she and Kerry could possibly squish together on one.

That thought made her wish Kerry was on the plane with her, and she frowned, turning back to Alastair as he cleared his throat and started to answer.

"Well you know I have the ranch." Alastair said. "I'd love to spend more time with the horses. I've got a granddaughter who's learning to ride the circuit and it would be great to watch her out there instead of sit on my ass in my office in Houston."

"Sounds nice." Dar said. "I like horses. I saw the pictures in your office, those are beautiful animals."

"Good blood." He turned his head a little. "What about you? What would you do, if you retired, Dar? I know it sounds crazy for you given how old you are, but you've got fifteen plus years in. Ever think about it?"

"Sure." Dar responded, with a smile. "I'd move down to the Keys and spend my days diving and bumming around on the beach, with an occasional consulting stint to pay the bills."

Alastair smiled. "Ah, the child of the sea. How could I forget."

"Which is exactly what I'd do if you decide to retire. By the way." Dar continued, her smile widening as she caught the look of honest surprise on her boss's face. "I have no intention of doing this for anyone else."

Alastair looked at her in silence for a long moment. "Are you serious?"

Dar nodded. "As a heart attack."

Her boss's eyes twinkled. "That might be the nicest thing you ever said to me." He said. "Thank you, Paladar." He paused. "Now let me tell you something. You remember when you sent me that resignation letter?"

Dar nodded.

"Had mine written out too, stapled to it." Alastair said. "So it's probably a pretty good thing for the company you decided to stay." He considered. "Though, gotta admit there have been times lately I almost wish you hadn't."

"Yeah." Dar said. "I know what you mean." She hoisted herself out of her chair and stood, stretching her body out before she crossed the aisle and knelt next to where her boss was sprawled. "Thanks, Alastair. I know I've been a pain in the ass over the years." She held her hand out, and as he reached over, she clasped his in a powerful grip. "Hope it was worth it."

He chuckled again. "Bet your ass it was." He released her hand. "You know, the one bright spot of that whole mess with Steven and you was getting to meet Kerry for the first time."

Predictably, that made Dar grin. She got up and strolled down the aisle, exploring their little world. "She was so pissed at me for quitting."

"She's a firecracker." Alastair said. "You know she called me up and told me I had to get my ass on an airplane and get over there because everyone in that office was an idiot who didn't have a clue."

Dar turned and looked at him, both eyebrows lifted up to her hairline.

"Not in so many words." Her boss admitted. "But that was the gist, couched in soft, genteel Midwestern politeness and it was at that point I realized you were gone hook line and sinker for very good reason." He smiled at Dar's sheepish expression. "She was your match."

Dar leaned back against the wall of the cabin. "She is." She said quietly. "She changed my life."

"She up for being a beach bum too?" Alastair asked. "I thought she likes the craziness."

"After this last cluster, she's open to it." Dar responded. "She does like the job. She likes the energy of it."

"But?"

Dar looked mildly embarrassed. "She'll go wherever I do."

"Loyal kinda gal." Alastair commented, with a smile. "But then, you're two of a kind in that regard so I'm guessing the company's in for a world of hurt some day."

"Mmph."

The door to the front of the plane opened, and a tall, lanky young man entered. He was dressed in a pair of pressed black slacks and a ribbed black pullover, with striped epaulets on his shoulders. "Ma'am, sir." The man said. "We've run into a weather issue and wanted to advise you on it. A tropical depression has formed in the Gulf, and the outflow is going to extrude into our course and make it a very rough ride."

"Can we go around it?" Alastair asked. "My kidneys are not in the mood to be rattled tonight."

"I can certainly ask, sir." The man replied. "It might make us need to change our flight plan though." He said. "We're taking a very long route over the Southern Caribbean to avoid US airspace and this would mean a shift nearer to the coast of South America."

Dar and Alastair exchanged looks. "Depression look like it's going get worse??" Dar asked. "Strengthen?"

The man nodded. "They expect it to become Tropical storm Gabrielle tomorrow."

"Let's avoid it if we can." Dar said. "Nothing against your pilot's skills but I'm not in the mood for a swim off Tortola today."

"I'm not up for a swim off Tortola any day." Alastair chimed in. "Even though I do float like a cork."

The man nodded, and disappeared again.

Alastair grunted. "Figures."

Dar leaned back against the wall again. "That time of year." She said. "Wish I'd taken Gerry up on his offer now." She admitted. "He sounded like he had a thousand irons on the fire though."

Alastair regarded her. "Lady, if you think these old bones wanted to spend eight hours crossing the pond in an Airborne jumpseat you're nutty as a fruitcake without any rum in it."

Dar chuckled, and started to roam again, walking to the front of the cabin past the service bulkhead she'd been leaning against, then turning and moving along the rows of chairs to the back where a

small suite of bathrooms were tucked. "I'm pretty sure he meant a civilian transport, Alastair. I'm sure they had other people that needed a ride home, diplomats and whatever."

"Let them ride in a steel bucket seat." Alastair said. "Damn politicians spend most of their time busting my chops anyway."

Dar went over to where their carryon baggage was stowed and dug in hers, removing her bathroom kit and retreating with it into the typically small airplane facility.

For shorter people, it was bearable. For Dar, the experience usually left her with a crick in her neck and so she brushed her teeth and splashed some water on her face as quickly as she could. The nap had definitely cleared her head, but now that she was awake, the uncertainty of what was going on below was starting to gnaw at her again.

She checked her watch. Kerry was up and working by now, she was sure. It was maddening to know her partner was in the middle of who knows what and not be able to help. Not that she thought Kerry needed her in order to do her job – her performance the day before amply demonstrated that – but they were in uncharted territory right now and she had the greater experience.

Dar gazed at her reflection on the mirror, seeing the somber furrow in her brow. "She's going to be fine." She told herself. "She's just going to Herndon, and she knows how to deflect someone if she has to."

Kerry did. She could politely, charmingly, and warmly tell the most demanding, insistent customer they weren't going to get what they wanted and leave them unable to voice a complaint about it. Dar had seen her do it on more than one occasion, and she had no doubt she could handle whatever request awaited her there.

She studied the blue eyes reflected in the glass surface. "So why are you chewing nails?"

Was she afraid Kerry would do so well, she'd show how much she didn't need the support? Dar's nose wrinkled. "Yeesh I hope not." She really didn't think so, though. It was actually a pleasure to be able to count on someone and not have to worry about babysitting them at work.

Was she worried her prolonged contact with her family would change the way she felt about anything? About anyone? Dar watched her own eyebrow lift, and her lips curve into a smile. No. She was not worried about that.

She was just, she reasoned, worried about the person she loved most in the world simply because that's what people in love did. They worried.

She packed up her kit and bumped the door open, emerging into the main cabin of the plane and restoring her sundries to her bag. Alastair had turned his reading light off, and was standing near the front of the plane, peering out the window in the boarding door. "See any good birds?"

"I see a lot of ocean." Alastair responded. "Imagine what it was like for the first fellas who crossed that thing in a boat. That took a lot of guts."

"It's a big ocean." Dar agreed, coming over to stand by him. "I've only sailed part of it, and those long stretches of just water really hit you sometimes." She said. "And I've been caught in storms that made me wonder how sun and star navigators ever made it across."

"Ah yes. Captain Roberts, isn't it?" Alastair glanced at her, with a grin.

She smiled back. "Yes, it is"

The door behind them opened and the steward came back in. "Oh." He turned, evidently surprised not to see them sitting in their seats. "The captain says he's filing an amendment to our flight plan, that'll bring us just north of the Grenadines, and along the south coast of Cuba and then across to Mexico. It means adding a hour to the flight, but it will end up being a lot smoother. We were intending on slipping between Cuba and Florida before.

An hour. Dar sighed inwardly. "Damn I wish we could just land in Miami."

The steward looked sympathetic. "Us too." He agreed. "We'll try to make it as comfortable as possible." He gave them a brief smile. "We're about ready to serve, if you want to freshen up." He slipped out again, closing the door behind him.

"Well." Alastair said. "That's a damn shame." He eased past Dar and went back to his seat. "But I think it's better than flying through a storm."

Dar gazed out the small window, feeling more than a little trapped. She hoped things were going well for Kerry, and that the company plan was proceeding.

She hoped there were no more attacks.

"Dar?"

"Hm?" Dar turned and pushed off from the window, walking back down the aisle and stopping by her seat. She sat down on the arm of it, and rested her elbows on her knees. "Guess all we can do is put up with it."

"It'll be fine." Her boss reassured her. "We've got good people running the show, don't we?"

Dar nodded.

"Want a drink?"

Dar slid backwards into her chair, leaving one leg slung over the arm of it. "Not yet."

"How about a tranquilizer? Got a bottle of em."

Dar turned her head and looked at him, her eyebrows lifting.

"If you don't take one, I'm gonna have to." Alastair informed her. "If you're going to pace like a cat for the rest of the flight."

Dar chuckled wryly. "Let me see if they have chocolate milk first." She sighed. "That'll probably be less destructive for both of us."

**

"Okay." Kerry had her headset on, and she checked her watch as she glanced over the screen of her laptop to see her mother emerge from her room. "So what's the status there before we go any further."

Senator Stuart paused, as she fastened her earring. She was dressed in a well fitted business suit, and an aide was standing quietly by holding her briefcase. "Are you sure we can't offer you a ride?"

Kerry covered the mic with her hand. "I'm fine. Our office is sending a someone to pick me up." She said. "I'll rent a car out there." She paused. "But thanks."

Her mother hesitated, then nodded. "Well, take care in that case. Things are very unsettled." She warned her daughter. "Please let my staff know if there is anything you need."

"Hold on." Kerry hit her mute button. "Thanks. I think we have it covered. Take care yourself." She watched her mother follow the aide out, feeling a sense of relief as the door closed behind them.

"Okay." She went back to the line. "Listen, I've got about ten minutes before I go mobile. So give it to me fast."

"Boy." The male voice answered her. "That's going to be tough, Ms. Stuart because it's more like, what isn't going on? We've got a ton of stuff hitting now because of deliverables that were missed yesterday."

As she'd expected, the world that had stopped turning the day before had now started up again.

"Okay." Kerry said. "Well, obviously we need to put out the message that we're in a holding pattern ourselves for a lot of things."

She sat down and picked up her third cup of coffee, sipping it as she reviewed the laptop screen. On her status map, large chunks of the Northeast were blinking red, and to one side, she now had a list of

accounts with stoplights by them most of them also red, though with a few yellows sprinkled in here and there.

"Miami exec, this is Houston ops."

Kerry checked her watch again. "Go ahead, Houston."

"Miami, we've got a list of demands from the government groups here." The voice answered. "More circuits, more bandwidth, some extra processors.. and they want it all right now."

"Miami exec, this is LA Earthstation." A very tired voice broke in. "We're getting the same kinds of requests too. I've explained transponder space about three hundred times already and it's only six AM here."

Kerry thought a minute. "Okay." She said. "Let's just start gathering up requirements, and getting a list together of our available resources. We can't give everyone everything."

Her cell phone rang. "Hang on." She said, then muted, as she answered the phone. "Kerry Stuart."

"Ms. Stuart? This is Daniel Green. I work for the NSA."

Yikes. Lovely. "What can I do for you?" Kerry asked. "It's a pretty busy morning."

"I can appreciate that." The man said. "As I am sure you can appreciate it's the same for us." He added. "My department has been trying to secure the cooperation of your facility in Virginia since yesterday, and we've had some problems. I was told you could help."

Kerry paused to draw in a steadying breath. "Okay. Hold on one moment, please. I am in the middle of a conference call. I'll be right back to you." She put the call on hold. "Folks, I need to duck out. I have the government on the line here."

"Great." The voice from the Earth Station sighed.

"Okay. Listen up." Kerry stood. "Right now, no one gets anything." She decided. "Just take detailed notes of what is being asked for, and post that to the desktop workspace. Miami ops, are you on?"

"Right here, boss." Mark's voice answered. "We're rolling up the road past you right now."

"Can you please get me an updated resource list and post it on the desktop?" Kerry said. "I don't want to start pulling circuits until I know what the real priorities are."

"Everyone thinks theirs are., Miami exec." Houston replied. "You know how it is."

"I know." Kerry agreed. "Maybe this guy I've got on the phone can get me to someone who can tell me what the real first in lines are." She said. "Until then, we just listen. Everyone understand?"

"Understood." Houston said.

"Fine by us." LA answered. "We don't have any spare capacity anyway."

"Okay." Kerry said. "I'm signing off until I pick up on mobile. Mark, cover me."

"Covering." Mark replied. "If you need anything, text me, boss. We can pull over."

"I'll be back on shortly. I'm off." Kerry hung up the connection and started to close down her laptop, while she took her cell phone call off hold. "Mr. Green?"

"I'm here." The man answered. "Ms. Stuart, I really don't have much time to discuss this with you."

Kerry closed her laptop and maneuvered it into its case one handed. "Well, Mr. Green, let me tell you something." She said. "I have hundreds of customers, including the government, all having all kinds of problems all over the country and halfway across the planet right now."

"I'm sure you do."

"So I don't have much time to talk to you either. I would like to help you." Kerry said. "I would like to understand what it is you need from us. I am on my way to our offices in Virginia right now, would you like to meet there?"

She waited for him to answer, draining her coffee and picking up the last bite of the Danish her mother had professed to be horrified by and popping it into her mouth.

"That will be good." Green finally said. "Two of my men are already there, but they aren't being allowed inside the building."

"It's a secure facility." Kerry came perilously close to having to speak with her mouth full, swallowing just in time. "So that sounds right."

Green sighed. "I will meet you there." He said. "I hope we can come to an understanding, Ms. Stuart, without me having to get my upper eschelons involved. You won't like dealing with them."

Kerry licked her lips. "Likewise." She said. "See you there." She hung up the phone and clipped it to her belt. She scanned the tray for any remaining edibles, then she lifted her jacket off the back of the chair and slipped into it.

It wasn't really cold enough to need a jacket, but it gave her a place to clip her identification badge to, and she felt it was just slightly more formal than her jeans and polo shirt were. Technically, since she was making an official visit to the office, she should be wearing a business suit but she hadn't brought it, leaving the folded suit bag she'd intended on bringing to Europe with her with Angie instead.

So they had to deal with her in casual clothes. Kerry spared a moment to wonder if it would put her at a serious disadvantage, then she shrugged and decided if it did, there were plenty of stores in the capital she could remedy the situation with.

No time to worry about it now, at any rate. She pocketed her room key and shouldered her bag, heading for the door to the room. The conference call would wait until she was in the car, and the few moments silence as she rode the elevator gave her a space of time to think about what Dar was up to.

Besides 35,000 feet, that was. Kerry's eyes flicked the inside of the elevator, noting the advertisements for the hotel's spa and making a mental note to investigate it after what she was sure would be a long, painful day.

She hoped Dar was getting some rest on her trip across the Atlantic. At least the private flight would be quiet, and she was sure her partner would be well taken care of by the professional crew. Maybe she'd have picked up some new magazines to read on the way.

Her PDA beeped, and she jumped, grabbing at it and wondering if her clever partner had found some way to send messages from the sky. Opening it, she was profoundly disappointed to find that was not the case, and in fact, the message was doubly unwelcome since it bore the address of the national hurricane center on it. "Oh please."

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WTNT44 KNHC 131458

TCDAT8

TROPICAL DEPRESSION EIGHT DISCUSSION NUMBER 4

NWS TPC/NATIONAL HURRICANE CENTER MIAMI FL AL042001

0900 AM EDT MON SEP 12 2001

"Just what we need." Kerry read the rest of the advisory as she exited the elevator and crossed the lobby, keeping an eye on the path with her peripheral vision in an odd, disjointed sort of way common to nerds who had to learn to communicate and walk at the same time.

She studied the coordinates, giving the doorman who opened the door for her an absent greeting as she emerged into the hotel's front entranceway, her brows creasing as she pictured where the storm was forming. "Shit."

"Madame?" The doorman looked at her, his head cocked to one side.

"Sorry." Kerry tucked her PDA away and glanced around, seeing no obviously waiting cars. "Just got some bad news."

The man nodded, and stepped away.

Kerry rummaged in her briefcase and pulled out her cellphone earbuds. She set the case down and untangled them, trying not to be impatient as the slim cables knotted stubbornly. It required a more intense concentration than she'd anticipated, and so she was surprised when someone cleared their throat unexpectedly close to her.

"Excuse me, Ms. Stuart?"

Kerry looked up, to find a young, slim, dark haired woman standing at the curb. "Hello." She glanced at the ID clipped to the woman's crisply pressed shirt. "Nan? I don't think we've ever met."

"No, we haven't." The woman replied, with a smile. "I thought I recognized you but wasn't sure."

"Well, you guessed right." Kerry held a hand out. "You my ride?"

"Yes, ma'am." The woman smiled, and returned her grip. "Sorry if I startled you. They made me park the car down the slope."

Kerry got her buds sorted out and shouldered her briefcase. "Lead on." She followed the woman down ward towards where she could see a one of the standard issue company SUV's parked. Nan was a technical supervisor at the Herndon center and Kerry had both spoken to and emailed her on countless occasions before.

Laid back and competent. Kerry had formed a favorable opinion of her from their previous interaction and nothing so far had contradicted that. She had a fine boned face and a well shaped profile and a slender build that matched her relatively short stature.

"It's been frantic crazy." Nan said, after a brief silence. "I know the PTB's are really glad you're here though. We're running out of excuses and coffee for the government guys."

"I bet." Kerry said. "Their boss is meeting me out at the office. I'm sure we'll get it straightened out." She opened the passenger side door of the SUV and settled into the seat, putting her case down between her boots.

Leather boots, jeans, leather jacket. There was nothing western about any of them, but Kerry had to smile privately at just how much her taste in clothing had changed and the look of dubious surprise on her mother's face at that.

She didn't look bad in it. One glance in a mirror attested to that. Dar had told her, in fact that she actually looked really sexy in the clothes and Kerry was fully willing to bow to her opinion in the matter.

It was, however, probably not what her colleagues here expected.

Nan got in the driver's seat and started the SUV up. "Seat goes back if you need." She said. "I adjusted it before I left but you're taller than I expected you to be."

Huh? Kerry stopped in mid motion and turned her head, both eyebrows shooting up. "Well, that's the first time I ever heard THAT comment before." She blurted. "Excuse me?"

Nan chuckled wanly. "Beg your pardon." She said. "I know we've etalked a lot but the only pictures I've seen of you are on the intranet."

"Ahh." Kerry started chuckling. "Where I'm always standing next to Dar. Yeah. I'm surprised most people don't think I'm a circus midget." She extended her denim covered legs and crossed her ankles. "Let me get back on the conference call. Sounds like things are going to hell this morning."

She pulled her earbuds from her pocket and put one in her right ear, then dialed the conference line. "How long have the NSA people been there today?"

Nan glanced quickly at her, then back at the road. "Is that who they are?" She asked. "Wow. They wouldn't tell us. They were there when the admins opened the guest center at seven."

"Nice." Kerry exhaled, shaking her head as she typed in the conference code. "Do you know what it is they're asking for, or are they still being vague?" She heard the call connect, but she left her mic on mute for the time being, electing to listen to Nan instead.

Nan paused at a light, and waited for it to turn. "They were pretty obscure. They have some big black box with them." She said. "And they told us they wanted to put it in the center, and have our core switch hooked up to it."

Kerry eyed her. "You have got to be kidding me." She said. "Do they realize what goes through that center? What do they think they're looking for? Those are internal government systems."

"We told them that." Nan agreed. "They think they can see traffic coming in from the outside to them. They say they're looking for terrorist hackers." She continued. "They seem to be convinced that the whole attack thing isn't over and they'll be making an attempt at our systems next."

Kerry folded her arms over her chest, her brows contracting. "What in the hell do they think connecting something to our core switch is going to do to stop that?" She asked, in a puzzled tone.

Nan shrugged. "It's the government." She said. "You know how they are. Someone tells them to do something and whether or not it makes sense goes out the window. I talked to their lead tech guy." She confided. "He told me we just have to do it, or else we'll get in really big trouble."

Hm. Kerry pulled out her PDA and glanced at the next to last message, one from Dar.

Sweetheart.

I'm about to get on this damn plane. I talked to Gerry, and something's up but not something he wants to talk about over the phone, and not to anyone but me. Sounds screwy. He doesn't know anything about what's going on where you are, but says not to say no automatically to anything because everyone's flying blind and there's a lot of knee jerking going on.

Nothing goes in our facility. Feel comfortable about saying that to them, because hon, it's locked under my login and though you know it, you've got a perfectly good reason not to. Let them wait for me and Alastair - we're legally responsible for the contracts anyway.

Love you. Wish I could fly right to DC to be with you. Hang tight.

DD

"Wish you could too." Kerry muttered under her breath. "We can talk to them, and try to find out specifically what they're looking for." She told Nan. "If I can't convince them they're barking up the wrong tree, then we just have to tell them to wait until Dar lands."

Nan nodded. "They said the systems were all locked." She said. "It's making the network guys nervous." She added. "Like I said, they'll all be glad to see you. No one minds making decisions but man, when you've got the dark side of the government camped on the doorstep it's freak city time."

"Yeah." Kerry rested her head against the back of the seat, listening with one ear to the chatter on the call. "Freak city? We're living on Freak Planet right now." She shifted and drew one knee up a little, resting her hand on it as she cupped the other over her ear. "That's for damn sure."

Nan leaned back in her seat, watching Kerry from the corner of her eye.

"What?" Kerry caught the look.

The dark haired woman appeared to be suppressing a smile. "You're really not what I expected." She explained.

"In a good way, or a bad way?" Kerry asked, wryly.

"Oh. Good way." Nan said. "Definitely."

Now what, Kerry wondered. Did that actually mean? "Well, glad to hear it." She clicked her mic on. "Scuse me a minute... Miami ops, this is Miami exec back on. What was that about a power outage?"

Nan drove on in silence, passing quickly through unusually empty streets, for once the lack of traffic causing no one any cheer.

**

Dar leafed through her magazine, reading the technical articles then amusing herself by viewing the ads that luridly bracketed them.

"Whatcha reading?" Alastair asked.

Dar held up the front page.

Her boss rolled his eyes. "Jesus, lady." He folded his hands across his stomach. "Don't you ever go off duty?"

"I like technology." Dar protested mildly. "Shit, Alastair, what do you think you pay me for? My typing skills?" She had one leg slung over the arm of the chair and now she leaned on her knee a little. "This stuff changes every damn second. You have to keep up."

Alastair chuckled. "I don't have to keep up. That's why I have you." He put his hands behind his head and stretched. "Wasn't bad dinner, eh?"

"Very good, matter of fact." Dar agreed. "Sure beats chicken Florentine or three cheese pasta, which would have been our choices otherwise." She put the magazine down and got up to wander to the back of the cabin and stretch her legs.

There was an open space there, enough for her to stand and extend her arms. She did so, and twisted her body back and forth to loosen up the stiff muscles in her back.

"Now what are you doing?" Alastair asked.

"Jumping jacks." Dar replied. "Wanna join me?"

Her boss leaned on his chair arm and craned around to watch her. "My last jumping jack was in basic training when I was eighteen years old way before you were born." He informed his CIO. "My idea of strenuous exercise is letting the caddy drive the cart on the golf course."

"Ugh." Dar tested the luggage racks strength, then she gripped them and let her body drop back, tensing her shoulders as they took her weight. "I can't handle golf." She said. "I don't have the patience for it. I end up hunting for grasshoppers and losing track of what hole I'm on."

Alastair snickered. "Y'know, I can picture that." He said. "You do sports though, don't you? I thought I remember seeing some pictures of you winning some karate tournament or something and Bea said you were all joining a baseball league down there?"

Dar lowered herself to the ground and decided on a few pushups. "I do sports." She conceded. "I've been doing martial arts since I was a kid." She settled into a smooth rhythm, glad for the distraction. "Lets me let off some steam." She paused, her body held up off the floor and peered up at Alastair. "You saw pictures?"

"Sure." Alastair said. "Kerry's quite a photographer." He watched Dar as she merely looked at him, remaining in place. "How long can you stay like that?"

"Long as I have to." Dar pressed herself up into a handstand and felt her back relax as gravity inverted. "I'd forgotten she put that in the department news blurb." She crossed her ankles and

pondered the matter. "They wanted me to continue on in that circuit but I figured I'd quit while I was ahead and not push my luck."

"Mm." Her boss got up and sat on his chair arm to better watch her, extending his legs across the aisle.

"Yeah, I'd rather you didn't risk getting kicked in the head." He said. "You get into enough damned situations as it is."

Dar bent her elbows, then she pushed off gently from the floor of the aircraft and flipped herself upright, shaking her arms as blood returned from her head to the rest of her where it belonged. "It's been a little crazy the last year or so." She conceded. "Maybe I'm just doing more."

"Maybe you actually got a life." Alastair's eyes twinkled. "I used to worry about you sleeping under your desk down in that office."

Dar snorted softly. "I've got a perfectly good couch in there. What kind of a nitwit do you think I am?" But she smiled to take the sting from the words. "But yeah, maybe." She sat down on the arm of the chair across from Alastair. "Feels like it's been busier."

"Been good for you." Her boss concluded. "Hasn't it?"

"Hell yeah. Wouldn't have traded a minute of it." She stuck her hands in the pockets of her cargo pants. "But I don't think what we're going through now counts."

Alastair's face grew serious. "No." He said. "I'm sure this is going to have a lot of consequences." He folded his arms over his chest. "You can bet on a military response. I sent a note to Ham to review our contracts with the service branches to see what we're obligated for."

Dar nodded. "I thought of that." She said. "I'm having Mark spool up the new tech groups to start reviewing everything they can get their hands on." She said. "I don't know what they'll ask for. I have a feeling Gerry's need to talk to me is something along those lines."

"I figured the same."

Dar exhaled and looked around the plane, then back at Alastair. "Are we there yet?"

Her boss chuckled wryly.

They turned as the forward door opened, and the steward appeared. "The captain wanted me to tell you he's submitted the new flight plan, but he's been told it needs to be cleared by the US Government, even though we're not going to encroach on US airspace."

"Ah."

"It's very tense." The steward explained. "We had to forward a manifest to them. I hope neither of you has any outstanding issues in the States, because that could be a problem."

Alastair and Dar glanced at each other. "Well." Alastair said. "We both have dozens of outstanding issues but they're not personal ones. I believe they'll be glad enough to let us by." He thought a moment. "Maybe we can ask them for permission to land, while we're at it."

"I don't know about that sir." The steward looked mildly alarmed. "The people I heard the captain talking to really didn't sound very friendly." He said. "We really don't want trouble. We didn't contract for that."

Alastair held a hand up. "Hold on there, son. We're not looking for trouble either. We work for a company with a lot of government contracts, and it's possible they'd make an exception because there's issues they're looking to us to solve. Chances are when they put our names into their system..."

"Which I wrote." Dar commented, in a mild tone, peering back at her boss when he looked at her in surprise. "That was before I got a life." She clarified, her eyes glinting with amusement. "I had more time back then."

Alastair scratched the back of his neck, and shook his head. "Anyway, when they call us up, they might say something about it."

The steward didn't look reassured. "Well, I'll let the captain handle all that." He said. "Is there anything I can get you in the meantime?"

"Got any ice cream?" Dar inquired.

"Ah, yes. I think we do." The steward nodded. "Sir?" He turned to Alastair. "Would you like some as well?"

Alastair reseated himself. "Not for me, thanks." He lifted a hand. "I'll take a glass of cognac though."

"Very good, sir, I'll be right back." The steward disappeared again behind the service door, leaving them in solitude.

Dar fell backwards into her seat, sprawling sideways across the chair with her legs over one arm and her head resting on the other. She studied the ceiling of the airplane and wished the time would just go damned faster. "Hope they don't give them trouble."

"Got a lot of scared folks down there." Alastair said. "Did you really write that system?"

"Uh huh." His CIO said. "It's just a flexible relational database with a custom index. Not that big a deal." She said. "The biggest pain in the ass was writing the API they wanted so they could connect it up to other government systems and exchange data."

"Mm. What other systems did they hook up to?"

"None." Dar crossed her ankles. "That's why it was a pain in the ass. I wrote it so it was a standard data exchange interface, and every other god damned system in the government was a, different, and b, proprietary so no one could talk to them anyway."

"Oh, for Pete's sake." Her boss said. "So what do they do?"

"Export to a flat file and reimport." Dar folded her hands across her stomach. "Know how long that takes?"

"Especially in a situation like this? Too long." Alastair shook his head. "We should do something about that." He took out his PDA. "I'll have Ivan work up a white paper to pass around after this is settled down a little."

Dar considered that, as she waited for the steward to return with her much needed dessert. "Wonder what's going on in Herndon?" She asked. "Hope they're not giving Kerry too hard a time."

Alastair gave her a wry look, which she missed. "I'm sure she can handle it."

"I'm sure she can too. It's just that people try to take advantage of her because she's not a big mean looking macho dude." Dar said. "Then she has to kick them in the ass a few times before she gets their respect and frankly, that sucks."

The steward slipped back in, with a tray. "The captain will be coming back to speak with you both in a few minutes. We've got some further questions from the US government." He moved forward, pausing as Dar shifted her position to a more normal one and swung her tray out in place. "Right now, they aren't clearing us to fly south of Florida."

"I thought they only control their local airspace?" Dar asked. "How in the hell can they stop someone from flying to Central America?"

The steward put a bowl down on her tray. "Ma'am, I don't know. You can ask the captain." He turned and put Alastair's snifter down, filled halfway with a clear golden liquid. "Right now, we're considering just withdrawing the request and continuing on our original flight plan, which was approved. It will be a rough ride, but at least we'll get there."

Alastair sighed, and picked up the glass. "Well." He swirled it. "Sorry if it caused a hassle. If that's what we need to do, then we do. Got any seasick pills? I don't tolerate turbulence well and I'd hate to hand you back your nice dinner."

"We can provide some, of course." The steward looked relieved. "Ma'am, I can get you some as well."

Dar waved her hand in negation at him, busy with her mouthful of ice cream.

"Captain Roberts sails the bounding main on a regular basis." Alastair chuckled. "I don't think she needs any help."

The door opened again and the captain stuck his head in. "Folks, we've got trouble." He said, his face serious. "I'm being instructed to land in Nassau. The US military are grounding us for inspection."

Dar licked off her spoon. "What?"

"That's crazy." Alastair put his glass down and got up. "C'mon, son. Let me go talk to these people." He headed for the door to the service area. "I'll throw some names around. We'll get it sorted out."

"Sir I.. " The pilot had to either back out of the way, or get hit by Alastair's forward motion, and he chose the better part of valor and moved. "We can see if they'll talk to you, but they were pretty explicit."

"I'll be explicit, too." Alastair shooed him towards the cockpit. He glanced back at Dar. "Now let me see if I can get you my paycheck."

Dar shook her head. "Crazy."

"I hope the gentleman knows what he's doing." The steward said, unhappily. "I heard those people on the other end, and I don't think they're going to appreciate someone questioning them." He looked at Dar. "This is very intimidating."

Dar found herself caught in the dilemma of both being concerned about the situation, and guiltily happy about the possibility of being on the ground with the ability to get ahold of Kerry. "I'm sure it'll work out." She told the man. "It's probably just a misunderstanding."

"I sure hope so." The steward muttered. "I knew I should have called in sick today."

**

Kerry was glad enough to bypass the stately main entrance to their Herndon office and use the staff door instead. There were two big, black, ominous looking SUV's parked near the front and she wanted a few minutes to get herself settled before she had to interact with the people who'd come in them.

"This way." Nan led her through the door, pausing to scan her badge, then her handprint at the glass double door inside. "Wait for me to go through, then scan. It should validate you." She waited, nodding her head a little bit as the system pondered for a while then clicked and turned green. "Eventually."

"Guess we'll find out." Kerry waited for the door to close behind her guide before she removed her badge from her lapel and held it against the sensor, then presented her palm on the glass plate when it glowed.

It turned green instantly and the door opened. Kerry's brow twitched a little, but she pushed the door open and let it close, then opened the inner door which clicked when the outer locked. She rejoined Nan and glanced around, finding the sedate gray and maroon interior weirdly familiar. "I see we had the same interior decorators."

Nan chuckled. "You mean, here and Miami?" She asked. "Is it the same?"

"Pretty much." Kerry followed her down a long hallway inset with cherrywood doors. It was thickly carpeted, and quiet, despite all the unsettled chaos. "I'll need a workspace." She said. "But I'd like to stop in at Operations first."

"Right." Nan nodded. "Bob Willingsly is getting an office set up for you. He said it would be about five more minutes." She indicated a large security door just ahead in the corridor. "That's ops." She stood back to let Kerry pass her. "I'm not credentialed for that."

Kerry gave her a brief smile. "Well, thanks. I appreciate the ride, and the tour." She said. "I'll be back shortly, I just want to check things out." She went over to the door and pressed her badge against the sensor, then offered her palm to the reader. The door clicked without hesitation, and she pushed it open.

"Hey, Ms. Stuart?" Nan called after her. "You do something special to your badge to get it to clear that fast? We'd love to copy whatever it is. Takes ours forever."

Kerry glanced back. "I know the designer." She admitted. "I'll see what I can do." She entered the ops center and let the door closed behind her, turning to face the operations staff who were standing as they spotted her. "Morning guys."

The operations center, like the one in Miami, was a half circle of admin stations behind a heavy desk spaced with chairs on the inside curve. Unlike the one she was familiar with though, behind the console there was a big, intimidating plate glass double wall separating the operators from the data center equipment they managed.

"Ms. Stuart!" A man hurried forward, extending his hand. "Dave Draper. We've talked many times."

"We have." Kerry smiled at him. "It's good to meet you, Dave, but I wish it wasn't for this reason." She said. "I hear we have visitors already."

"Sure do." Dave said. He was a man in his mid forties, with thinning dark hair and a square jaw. "We're real glad you're here. Those folks are getting pretty mean." He told her. "My boss, Ken, is with them but I know he'll be glad to see you too."

"I bet." Kerry put her briefcase down on a nearby chair. "Okay, before I go mess with them, give me the five cent and bring me up to speed on what the status is."

"Sure." Dave turned and faced the room. The console operators were all busy at their desks, but each had turned their chair just a bit so they could watch what was going on.

Kerry could see the global meetingplace screen on their monitors, split with various console ops applications that monitored the traffic and data that ran through the center.

"Y'know we've got a mix here." Dave said, pointing to the secured space. "One side's the government racks, they're green, and the other side's the commercial ones, their that flat gray color. We keep the cabling and everything color marked so no one gets confused and connects the wrong thing to the wrong infrastructure."

Kerry nodded. "Looks very good." She complimented him. "Dar would approve."

Dave managed a grin at that. "Anyway." He said. "The only thing they share is the net dmarc. Ms. Roberts put in a parallel infrastructure, but they all terminate to the same blocks in the back. That's where this guy wanted to put his thing."

Kerry folded her arms. "What did he want to connect it to?"

"That's just it." Dave said. "He wanted us to let his guys in there, and let them connect it to whatever they wanted to."

"Oh hell no." Kerry said. "What are they, nuts?"

"I heard them, ma'am." The nearest of the console ops had turned around. "They said they were trying to find the terrorists, and we had to let them."

"That's right." Dave said. "So we have console ops here, split into two sides. The left side is government, the right side is commercial, and John here was the man on ops when it all came down yesterday on the government side."

Kerry remembered the voice. "Hello, John." She extended her hand to the tech. "Thanks for the great job."

The lanky blond man blinked, and accepted her grip. His eyes had shadows under them, and he looked tired. "Thank you ma'am. I hope I never, ever have to do that again."

"Me too." Kerry agreed. She looked up at all the operators, who were now openly watching her. "Everyone did a good job. Everyone's doing a great job today, and we're just beginning. I think everyone here knows that the hard part's just starting."

The men all nodded.

"Show me the big board." Kerry turned to Dave. "I want to see what we're up against in bringing services back before I talk to those folks in the guest center."

"Sure." Dave walked over to the other side of the ops console and turned, pointing at the large screen display with the tracework of connectivity for the resources the office was responsible for.

Kerry exhaled, seeing the big red circle around the Pentagon, and the scattering of outages around that area due to the loss of infrastructure. "Boy, that's a lot of damage."

"Problem was, we were using one drop room." Dave said. "Cause the other one was in the section that got taken out." He sighed. "So you'd figure we'd be fine, but the other droproom was at the inner edge of the area and it got trashed and the one under construction is.. well.."

"Still under construction." Kerry finished for him.

"Yes ma'am."

"Okay." Kerry knew there wasn't much she could do from the office. "I'm going to need a ride out there after I finish with these guys. I have resources coming up, but I want to see the lay of the land firsthand."

"Nan'll take you." Dave said. "She's all yours whatever you need."

Kerry retrieved her briefcase. "Then let's get this over with." She motioned for him to precede her. "Lead on. I could guess where the guest conference room is based on the floor plan but you probably don't want me wandering around knocking on doors."

Dave managed a smile at that, and led the way out the door. He opened the door with his badge. "You'll have to clear through after me. We have a scan in scan out policy."

"Sure." Kerry waited for him to pass through, then followed. She took the few minutes the walk through the halls afforded her to concentrate on relaxing as much as she could, and preparing herself mentally for what she suspected was not going to be a pleasant confrontation.

She didn't really mind confrontation any more. She hadn't liked it much when she'd first started with ILS, but over the months she'd gradually gotten herself used to the stress of it, getting her mind around the fact that it wasn't so very different than her debating challenges had been way back when.

"Hope they're not too pissed." Dave said. "I'd hate to have them just go off at you, ma'am."

"I'm used to it." Kerry said. "I've done a lot of new client consolidations and contract challenges." She assured him. "And my very first confrontation with ILS was with Dar Roberts. It kind of goes downhill from there, you know what I mean?"

Dave produced a surprised little laugh. "Ms. Roberts sure is something."

"She sure is." Kerry readily agreed.

They passed through a larger hallway, and came around corner where a security door blocked the way. "Guest sections past there." Dave said. "You want me to go with you?"

Kerry was pretty good at reading body language, but in this case she had no need do. Dave's voice told her everything she needed to know. "Nah." She patted him on the shoulder. "Hang in there, Dave."

Just try to keep what we have working, running as smoothly as possible, and call me if anything starts going to hell, okay?"

"You got it." Dave said, watching as she held her badge to the door. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Kerry went through the door, finding herself now in the two level, stately lobby that featured a big reception desk on one side, and a glassed in conference space on the other. She could see several people inside the conference hall, and she paused to settle her nerves before she headed for them.

"Oh, Ms. Stuart?" The receptionist spotted her. "Sorry, didn't realize you were here. The gentlemen were asking for you."

"I bet." Kerry gave her a wry smile.

"Would you like some coffee brought in? We've been holding off." The woman said, her nose wrinkling. "They weren't really very nice."

"Go ahead." Kerry patted the desk. "Let me go see what I can do with them." She shouldered her briefcase and approached the entrance to the conference center, pausing at the door way just long enough to interrupt the heated conversation inside before she entered. "Good morning."

The men had been caught by surprise. They turned and watched her as she made her way around the table to the head of it, setting down her brief case and leaning her fingertips on the polished wood surface. "Okay. Let's start with who you gentlemen are, what department of the government you work for, and who your bosses are."

The men glanced at each other in some slight puzzlement.

"I'll start. My name's Kerrison Stuart. I'm the Vice President of operations for ILS." Kerry said. "I think you can appreciate that I have a slate of issues to deal with taller than I am so if we can discuss what your issue is quickly and efficiently, I'd really appreciate it."

Now they all looked at one of the men, an older gentleman of middling height, with copper curly hair. They all had dark suits on, and Bluetooth earpieces and Kerry suspected their jacket pockets held identical pairs of dark sunglasses they had no use for at the moment.

"Okay." The ginger haired man said. "I'm Dan Cutter. I'm the agent in charge for this area for the Secret Service."

"Okay." Kerry said. "So, I guess you're different people who want something from us than the gentleman from the NSA who's on his way here."

"NSA?" One of the other men said. "What do they want?"

"The NSA's on the way here? Who?" Cutter asked. "This is not their jurisdiction."

Oh Jesus. "Please sit down." Kerry did so, folding her hands on the table. "Suppose you tell me what you need, before they get here and confuse things."

Cutter did. "Listen, Ms. Stuart. No offense, but your people here don't seem to know there's a crisis going on."

"They know." Kerry said. "Every single person in this corporation knows."

"Well, then they don't seem to want to cooperate." Cutter said. "We have a surveillance appliance we need to install here, and they won't let us."

"I won't let you." Kerry corrected him. "The people here don't have the authority to either grant or deny that request."

"What?" Cutter stood up. "Listen, lady, who in the hell do you think you are?" I'm a Treasury officer! You've been blocking my men since yesterday and I'm not going to put up with it a minute more!"

Kerry remained seated. "I am the vice president of operations for this company." She repeated. "I am under no legal obligation to allow you to enter this facility, in fact, I have a mandate to not allow anyone unauthorized from entering it – and please don't try to browbeat me." She merely gazed up at him. "Why don't you start by explaining to me what exactly you need to do, and what information you're looking for?"

"I don't have to do that."

Kerry shrugged. "I don't have to continue speaking to you. This facility is secured. There are high level government accounting systems that process through it. If you seriously think I am going to let some people from some agency with some unknown device come in and connect to that frankly sir, you are nuts."

"I can arrest you." Cutter said. "For obstruction."

"You can." Kerry agreed. "But that's not going to get you your information. These people here not only will not help you, they can not. Our systems are in security lock down mode."

Cutter stared at her.

Kerry gazed back at him. "Would you like to tell me what you gentlemen are looking for? Before you go off arresting me and causing yourself a lot of trouble it would help to know if what you need is even in here."

"Cutter, sit." The man seated at the far end of the table spoke up. He was tall, and dark, and had a Latin accent. "Ms. Stuart, my name is Lopez." He stood up and came around the table. "I know you have your responsibilities to take care of, but so do we."

Kerry decided this apparent bait and switch was legitimate, and that this was the actual boss of the group. She and Dar played that game sometimes, with new companies. "Mr. Lopez." She tapped her thumbs together. "No, I don't think you really do understand what kind of responsibilities I have here." She stood and opened the whiteboard at the back of the room.

Lopez stopped and waited.

She turned and faced them. "I have a quarter of a million employees." She said. "I have two dozen of them missing in New York, and a dozen missing in Washington." She turned and scribbled on the board. "I have most of the infrastructure for communications down in Manhattan. I have an entire secure multipoint structure to restore in the Pentagon." She scribbled again. "I have overseas links down, a major satellite uplink used by the Navy down, bandwidth shifted in gigabits to cover planes in Newfoundland and Vancouver, satellite endpoints to establish, cellular backhaul to rebuild, and last by not least, several hundred major financial and banking customers who are depending on us to put them back in operations and prevent a major financial crisis."

She turned and faced him. "Now explain to me again why I am in this room, listening to you bitch at me for something you won't explain instead of letting me go and do my job bringing this country back from crisis?"

Lopez blinked at her.

"As my late father would have said, put it on the table, or take a hike." Kerry found the irony almost painful, but the quote fit. "I don't have time to play games with you." She could feel an exquisite tension in her guts, and knew she was playing with fire. She could see in Lopez's face that he wasn't a goon, and he could, in fact, drag her ass off to jail and might very well do so.

"This is a matter of national security." Lopez said.

"I have a top secret clearance." Kerry shot right back. "Next excuse?"

Lopez sat down in the chair next to hers. "Okay."

Kerry sat down, and folded her hands.

"Close the door." Lopez looked at Cutter. "Is this room secure?"

"It is." Kerry said. "We had them sweep for security yesterday after you first got here." She paused. "Though, I would still love to know where the NSA fits in."

Lopez frowned. "First things first. "He waited for the door to be shut, and glanced up as the air compressed a little around them. "Soundproofed?"

"Yes." Kerry said, quietly.

"Okay." Lopez looked a little more relaxed. "I'm sorry." He said. "I didn't realize the extent of your company's involvement in all this. I was told you were simply a service provider."

Kerry nodded. "Then I understand your approach" She said. "Please go on."

"This device." Lopez said. "We suspect that the people who planned and executed the atrocities yesterday are still here, still planning, still executing more horrible things. We have to find them. Do you understand how critical that is? We have very little time."

Kerry nodded again. "Okay, what exactly is this device looking for?" She held a hand up when he started to protest. "I don't want to know specifics. I need to know what type of datastream you're hoping to intercept. Are you thinking these people will be trying to attack the government financial systems?"

"They could be." Lopez nodded. "This device analyzes conversations and determines if they are of interest to us."

"Conversations from where? Inside the government?"

"No. From the public."

Kerry sighed. "Then you're in the wrong place." She said. "There's no public access here."

Lopez frowned. "There isn't?"

"No." Kerry said. "These are all closed systems. Isolated."

Lopez turned to Cutter. "Didn't you say they had internet access from here?"

"That's what I was told." Cutter said. "The guys in accounting said they had internet." He looked accusingly at Kerry. " You saying they're lying?"

"No." Kerry said. "They get internet via our secure gateway." She said. "But that's not here. They go out to the internet via three different nodes, in New York, Chicago, and Dallas." She got up and drew a rough circle, with three points on it. Then put an X near one edge. "The request goes through two NATS and three different gateways. There's no outside access."

"Shit." Cutter muttered.

Kerry could see the consternation around the table. She almost felt sorry for the men. "If it's any consolation, the systems here are protected. I won't quote my boss and say they're un-crackable because it gets us into trouble but they are secure. Feel free to run tests against them."

"Shit." Cutter repeated. "We wasted a whole fucking day."

Lopez rubbed his temples. "Ms. Stuart, are you telling us the truth?" He looked up into Kerry's eyes. "Peoples lives can depend on your answer. We have to find these people."

Kerry gazed gravely back at him. "I'm telling the truth." She said. "If you really want to tap public access, you need to go to the tier 1 providers, and put your appliance there." She said. "We provide our own access for our customers, but the rest of the country uses one of them."

"Tier 1?" Lopez got out a pad and scribbled that down. "Can you give me the names?"

Kerry promptly provided them. "There are lots of smaller companies, but those three form the public backbone." She told him. "Now. I will tell you that we maintain a lot of filtering capability on our net access nodes. If there's something, some phrase or type of information you are looking for in specific, I would be glad to put a scanning routine in place and output the results to you."

"You would?" Lopez lost some of his menace. "You can do that?"

"Just let us know." Kerry said. "The security of the country is very important to us. The government is one of our biggest clients."

Now, the men were nodding, and the whole atmosphere had completely changed. "Okay." Lopez handed her his business card. "We'll be in touch, Ms. Stuart. Thanks for the info."

Kerry selected one of her own cards and handed it over. "Good luck." She said sincerely. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to head out to the Pentagon."

Lopez extended a hand. "Sorry about this whole thing, Ms. Stuart." He shook Kerry's hand. "Everything's in a lot of flux right now. We're all scrambling."

"Us too." Kerry felt a sense of relief, and more than a little pride. "Gentlemen?"

They filed out, and headed for the door, walking quickly and bending their heads together as they left the building. Kerry watched through the smoked glass as they got into their SUV's and pulled away, and shook her head. "Wow."

The receptionist looked over at her. "Are they gone?" She said, as a service person arrived with a cart of coffee. "Wow. That was fast."

Kerry shrugged modestly. "Bring that up to wherever they've stuck me." She told the service person. "I'm sure I'll be needing it." She turned to the receptionist. "I'm expecting someone else from the government looking for me. I'll be here for another thirty minutes or so, and if they're not here by then, I'm heading for the Pentagon."

"Yes ma'am." The receptionist scribbled a note. "Good to have you here."

Kerry smiled and headed for the security door, her shoulders straightening. "Wish Dar'd seen that one." She muttered to herself as she swiped through. "She'd have loved it."

**

The small cockpit was getting very crowded. Dar stood just outside the door, her hands braced on the frame as she listened to Alastair arguing somewhat forcefully on the radio.

The steward had edged back way out of the way, and was busy in the galley, seemingly glad not to be involved in what was going on.

Dar didn't blame him. In front of her, Alastair was perched on a small jumpseat behind the seats that the pilots were in, crammed in next to the slim, dark haired navigator.

Everyone was nervous. She could see the pilots all trading off watching their instruments with looking back at Alastair, as the intractable voices on the other end of the radio got angrier and more belligerent.

Not good. "Alastair." Dar leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "Should I try to get Gerry involved?"

Alastair glanced back at her. "Hold that thought." He turned back to the radio. "Lieutenant? Are you there?"

The radio crackled. "Listen mister, I don't know who you think you are but you better just listen to instructions and shut the hell up before I send planes up there to blow you out of the sky."

"Nice." Dar said. "Sad to say, I grew up with jerks like that."

"Son." Alastair kept his voice reasonable and even. "You don't really need to know who I am. If you've got your last paycheck stub, just pull it out and look at the logo in blue on the right hand side on the bottom. That's the company I work for. We're not terrorists." He said. "So stop threatening us."

The radio was silent for a bit. Alastair let the mic rest against his leg, and shook his head. "What a mess." He said. "I appreciate things are in chaos down there, but for Pete's sake we don't even want to land in the damn country."

The pilot nodded. "That's what I tried to explain to him." He said. "He just kept saying security threat, security threat... I couldn't get a word in edgewise." He glanced back at Dar. "Are you in the military, ma'am?"

"No." Dar felt a surprising sense of relief at the admission. "My father was career Navy. I grew up on base."

The radio crackled. A different voice came on though. "This is Commander Wirkins. Is this Mr. McLean?"

"Ah." Alastair picked the mic up. "Maybe we're getting somewhere." He clicked it. "It is." He said. "Go ahead, Commander."

"Mr. McLean, we've established who you are. We understand you are trying to file an amended flight plan." The commander said. "Due to a situation in the area, I have to ask you to please instruct your pilot to land in Nassau. This is not negotiable."

"Something's going on." Dar shook her head. "Damn."

"Commander." Alastair gathered his thoughts. "I appreciate that you have your own issues." He said. "So let me ask you this. If we land in Nassau and your people are satisfied we're not going to hurt anyone, can we get cleared to fly on into the States so your pit stop doesn't cause a delay in what we have to do?"

"Mr. McLean, you're not in a position to bargain with us."

Alastair sighed. "All right then, please put your ass in your chair and call the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Get Gerald Easton on the line." He said. "I'm about out of patience with you too. He was going to send a plane for us, damn well shoulda let him."

Silence on the radio.

"If they force us down." Dar said. "Chances are they're not going to let the plane take off again."

The pilot glanced over his shoulder at her. "We'll be out of air time anyway." He said. "No offense folks, but the storm would have been a better option."

"Agreed." Alastair held his hand up. "My fault. Sorry about that."

The radio remained silent.

"It's only about four, five hours from Miami by sea." Dar said. "We can charter a boat to get there."

The co pilot turned and looked at her. "Ma'am, are you crazy? That's not a trivial trip across the Gulfstream."

Dar didn't take offense. "I know." She said. "Been there, done that."

"I've been to the Bahamas. You won't get a captain to take you over like it is now. They're not stupid." The co pilot said. "They don't like risk."

"I'll captain it myself." Dar shrugged. "Pay enough money and they'll rent us a tub."

Both flyers looked at each other, then shook their heads. Alastair merely chuckled wryly.

Finally the radio buzzed. "Mr. McLean, this is Commander Wirkins."

"Go ahead." Alastair said. "At least we've got a plan B." He added, in an aside to Dar. "Though spending four hours bouncing over the Atlantic ain't my idea of fun."

"Mr. McLean, we're in a state of national emergency here and I do not appreciate, and my command does not appreciate you asking for special dispensation."

"Too bad." Alastair said, in a genial tone. "We have a job to do, mister, and you're keeping me from it. You may think that's not nothing to do with you, but if you do about ten minutes research on who we are, you'll catch a clue that's not the case."

The commander cleared his throat into the open mic. "I have done that research, or believe me, buddy, there'd be two fighters up there blowing your ass out of the sky right now." He said. "So like I said, I don't appreciate you dropping names, no matter how justified you think you are."

Dar held her hand out. "Gimme."

"C'mon Dar." Alastair bumped her knee with his elbow. "He's about to cave. He's just pissing all over the wall so everyone knows what a big guy he is first." He clicked the mic. "Fish or cut bait, Commander."

"Well, Mr. McLean, sorry to tell you, but you're not getting to where you want to go today." The commander said, a note of smugness in his voice that made both Dar and Alastair's lips twitch. "You can call me an asshole if you want to, and report me to whoever you want to, but I've got a job to do too, and I'm going to do it."

"Shoulda given me the mic." Dar sighed. "At least we'd have gotten some laughs out of it."

"So my controller is going to instruct your pilot to land that plane at the Opa Locka airport, where we're going to have you met with a security team so that I can get my job done. I don't much care about yours."

"Whooho." Dar laughed. "Score!" She lifted her hand and Alastair smacked it with his own, surprising the crew.

"How you get your affairs in order after that isn't my concern." The commander said. "But it's a nice long drive to Texas. So have a great day."

"Well. How do you like that?" Alastair chuckled. "First time I had someone's sand up their ass work to my favor. "If that's what your decision is, Commander, then we'll have to take it." He said, mildly. "It sure is a long drive from there to Texas."

The radio clicked off with a snitty hiss, and Alastair handed the mic back to the navigator. "Well, gentlemen, after all that crap in a handbasket I think we ended up winning that round."

"You didn't want to go to Texas?" The co pilot half turned. "I don't get it."

"Well." Dar said. "Houston is where our main offices are, and where Alastair here lives." She said. "On the other hand, Miami is where our main operations center is, and where I live, and we both need to end up in Washington and New York so this guy just did us a big favor trying to screw us over."

"Yep." Alastair nodded. "Be sorry not to see the wife and the kids, but this cuts what, two days travel for you?" He nodded. "That cloud sure had a silver lining. Maybe by the time we sort things out we can get a flight up from your friend the General."

"Otherwise I'll go pick up my truck at the airport and we can drive." Dar said. "But that gives us a lot more options. You can even stay in the Miami office and run things if you want, while I head up."

Alastair nodded. "So, sirs, please do what the nice men want and land us in Miami." He chuckled. "Bea's gonna kill me after all the arrangements she had to make."

The pilot nodded in relief. "You got it." He said. "Get us out of the air faster, we don't have to fly around a storm, and if we're all still grounded I get a layover on South Beach. Doesn't get any better than that." He looked at his co pilot. "You up for that Jon?"

The co pilot shook his head and laughed. "I'm up for that." He said. "Man, I thought this was really going to end up like crap." He looked back at Alastair. "You sure have brass ones, sir."

The older man chuckled. "Live as long as I have, you learn to figure out how much you can poke the stick at the bear, if you get my drift. Once that fellah knew who we.." He indicated Dar and himself. "Were, I figured he knew better than to be serious about shooting us down."

"I don't know. He sounded pretty aggressive." The co pilot said. "We've heard from other pilots that the attitude is they've got carte blanche to do whatever they want in the name of national security."

"Someone still has to be accountable." Dar said.

"Do they?" The co pilot asked. "I sure hope they do. I've been on the wrong side of an INS officer in a bad mood. Almost cost me a paid flight."

The pilot half turned in his seat and addressed the navigator. "Egar, you okay with us landing there? I forgot to ask you."

The tall, slim man nodded. "I have family in Miami." He said. "I am very happy we're going there. It's good." He smiled. "I achieved my pilots license at that airport. It's very nice."

Alastair stood up and waited for Dar to clear out of the way so he could exit the cockpit. "What a relief. No offense to your boating skills, Paladar, but I'm no yachtsman." He slapped Dar on the shoulder as they retreated back down the aisle to the passenger compartment. "Besides, fella was probably right. We'd have to end up buying the damn boat and then what? Be tough to explain a motor yacht on our inventory list."

Dar chuckled. "We could have auctioned it off." She was, however relieved. Much as she would have stepped up to sail an unfamiliar craft across what were sometimes very treacherous waters, she was damned glad she wasn't going to have that particular bluff called.

Silver lining. Absolutely. "We lucked out."

"Sure did." Her boss agreed. "Well, sometimes we have to, y'know?" He added, as they resumed their seats. "Wish it hadn't gotten so nasty, though. I know the fella has a lot of issues he's contending with but my god."

Dar pushed her seat back. "They teach you to do that." She said. "Be a bastard, I mean. You try to overwhelm whoever your opponent is with loud, aggressive talk to knock them off balance and put them on the defensive."

"They teach you that in the military?" Alastair asked, in a quizzical tone. "I thought you never went through that."

"They teach you that in most of the negotiating and ninja management classes these days." Dar informed him dryly. "But a friend of ours who's a cop in Miami says taking the offensive when you're confronting someone is a well used tactic of theirs too."

"You use that, yourself." Her boss commented.

"Sometimes." Dar admitted. "If someone knows you're going to be an asshole, they usually do what you want, faster. Like our vendors. They know if they don't do what I'm asking, I'll just keep going up their ladder and get louder and louder until they do."

"Like what I just did to that fellah."

Dar nodded. "That's why they like dealing with Kerry better." Her eyes twinkled a little. "She's got the best of both worlds. She gets to be nice, and they like her, and she's got me in her back pocket to threaten them with."

Alastair laughed. "Well, all in all, I guess I can forgive that guy. I know he must be dealing with a thousand different problems. I was just his most annoying one that minute." He folded his hands over his stomach. "He must be laughing his head off thinking about how he showed us though."

Dar suspected he was. Probably cursing about them, and telling everyone around him how he showed these damn jerks who was boss. Dar couldn't really blame him either, since they had asked for special treatment, and had threatened him with going up the chain, and in fact, were the jerky pain in the asses he actually considered them to be.

However, it had gotten them what they wanted, in a rather classic case of the end justifying the means. Dar checked her watch. So they'd end up in a few hours in Miami. Awesome. "I'll send him a

note telling him how much he helped us out after this is all over." She said. "My body's so screwed up I can't figure out whether to take you out to breakfast or dinner when we get there though."

"Well, it'll be different than burritos in Mexico City." Alastair put his hands behind his head. "Wasn't looking forward to all that, or the drive to Houston."

Dar smiled at the ceiling, relaxing for the first time since she'd woken up. She was already looking forward to landing, her mind flipping ahead to the messages she'd need to send, and more importantly, how happy she knew Kerry would be to hear from her. "I'll have someone go to MIA and bring my car down." She decided. "Figure it'll take a while for them to get through the paperwork once we land."

"Take me a few minutes to call Bea and get everything squared away anyway." Her boss said. "It's going to feel good to be back home."

Dar exhaled. "Sure is." She said. "Sure damn is."

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Kerry settled her earbuds in and peered at her laptop screen. "Okay, Mark, did we get an inventory availability from the vendors yet? I know you've got everything we had with you, but from what they're telling me here we lost the whole WAN room."

"They got." Mark said. "But they can't get it to us faster than a truck. The distro's in California."

Kerry looked down at the pad on the desk. "Well, tell them to start driving." She said. "By my count here, rebuilding that will take most of the inventory on your truck, and we're not even started yet."

"Will do."

"Miami exec, this is the Air Hub."

Kerry blinked. "Go ahead Air Hub."

"We're hearing rumors that they might let some flights up tomorrow, ma'am." The voice answered. "Sorry we can't be more specific. It's pretty quiet here."

"Miami, hello? This is Sherren in New York." Sherren's voice interrupted. "We've got good news! Six people just showed up here. I'm logging them in now!"

"That's great, Sherren." Kerry exhaled slowly. "Do they know about any of the others? Have they seen them?"

"No, no they don't." Sherren said. "Everyone got separated, they said. They're all taking showers, they're covered in that white stuff. They said a lot of people went south, too, towards the battery."

Kerry watched the red led's slowly change to green. Too few. "I'm really glad to hear that, Sherren. How are you all doing? Are you all right? Do you need anything?"

Sherren's voice sounded calmer today. "We're doing okay, you know?" She said "We needed some clothes, we went out and got some. We got bagels. The dog carts are there. People are out there. You can't stop this city. People are in shock, but we keep going."

Kerry thought about the empty streets she'd traveled through the night before. "You sure do."

"I'm sure the rest of the office will be here any time now." Sherren said, confidently. "We're going to get some coffee on. I wish we could get the phones working." She added. "I know some of our customers need us."

"Miami exec, this is Miami telecom." A new voice broke in. "We're handling the inbound 800 service trunks for New York. We can get messages to the people there, if you can get us a mailing list built."

"Oh, that would be great!" Sherren said. "You can get calls out, if you try hard enough. Or maybe if they have email, we can email them. That works a lot better than the phones."

Kerry nodded. "Good idea." She glanced at the screen. "Miami server ops, are you on?"

"Yes, ma'am." A quiet voice answered. "We're here."

"Build a list based on the reported list onscreen." Kerry said, after a brief pause. "And get that to telecom."

"Will do."

"Miami exec, this is LA Earthstation. I have Newark Earthstation on landline. They need generators. They've got a seven day estimate on repairs to the power station there. Someone told them it was sabotaged."

"Oh my god." Sherren said.

"Miami exec, this is Miami ops." Mark's voice replied. "That needs industrial. That little trick you and I pulled ain't gonna cut it."

Kerry tapped her pen on the desk. "Shouldn't their facilities operator be handling that?"

"Miami, no one's doing anything there. Everyone's been sent to staging to go into the city." LA Earthstation reported. "If we want help, we need to do it ourselves, that's what they were told."

"Right." Kerry scribbled a note on her pad. "Let me get in touch with APC. Everyone's going to be hitting the usual providers let's try the high tech ones."

"Ms. Stuart?" Nan stuck her head in the door. "I have some president or other of ATT on the line for you."

"Tell them hang on a minute." Kerry finished writing.

"Miami exec, this is Danny. The bus is here." Danny sounded relieved. "Man, are we glad to see that." He added. "We're waiting for clearance to start going in there but we're going to need some help."

"Danny, we're almost there." Mark said. "Hang in there, buddy. I got ten people with me."

Ten? Kerry glanced at the screen, then back at her paper. "Hope that's a big RV." She muttered under her breath. She looked up. "Okay, you can transfer whoever it is from ATT here." She pointed at the phone. "Thanks."

Nan disappeared.

"Mark, we're looking for you man." Danny answered. "Did you say you have a truck? We haven't been able to shake loose and get that plywood yet."

"No prob." Mark said. "Miami exec, any word on when we can get into lower NY?"

Kerry keyed her mic. "Let's concentrate on DC for now since we have access to the facility. With all the damage in Manhattan it could be a while."

"Miami exec, this is Lansing." The Michigan center broke in.

"Hold on, Lansing. I have to take a call." Kerry put her mic on mute and hit the speaker phone. "Kerry Stuart."

"Ms. Stuart?" A man's voice answered. "This is Charles Gant from ATT. I think we met at that technical conference in Orlando a few months back."

"We did." Kerry nodded. "What can I do for you? I assume this is something critical."

Gant sighed. "Much as I'd rather be just asking to meet me for coffee and chat about high end routers, it is a critical issue. I just want to bounce a question off you, since I know of all the private providers you guys are the biggest."

"Okay." Kerry picked up her bottle of water and took a sip. "I'm listening."

"We lost everything in lower Manhattan." He said. "I think you probably know that, since we had a lot of tie ins to you."

"We know." Kerry said. "We have almost nothing coming in to our three nodes in the region at all. A lot of customers are affected."

"Well, let me give you the laundry list." Gant said. "We lost the triple pop. Verizon said nothing's recoverable. They also lost their West office. Power's out for the area, including all the cell towers, and the ones that do have power either don't have backhaul or are overloaded."

"Wow." Kerry murmured.

"I got my counterpart at Sprint on the other line. Between us, we lost everything overseas, and so did MCI."

"We realized that." Kerry said. "We had to backhaul a lot of overseas financial via our southern circuits."

There was momentary silence. "So how badly are you affected?"

Kerry took another sip of water. "We obviously can't service the local accounts in lower Manhattan, and we lost our major switching office in the Pentagon." Then she stopped speaking.

There was another moment of silence. "So you have service otherwise? Transatlantic?"

"We have data service, yes." Kerry confirmed. "We rely on your interchanges, and the other telcos for phone service, naturally, so that's down but we're backhauling everything else across our redundant links, or sending it up to the birds."

"Interested in renting some bandwidth?" Gant asked, in a wry tone. "We've got nothing between New York and our main service centers. I can't even guess what's down because our systems can't connect." He cleared his throat. "I figured I'd ask you before everyone else does."

Kerry thought about all the times she'd had to browbeat the telco vendors for everything from bad circuits to late ones. "How much do you need?" She said. "And what would it take for you to get a tie into our Roosevelt Island node?"

"I'll take ten meg if you have it." His voice sounded utterly relieved. "I think our sub station on the island can carry the traffic over. I can check but my notes here show we're in the same building."

Mentally, Kerry did a quick calculation. Dar had provisioned a larger than normal spare of bandwidth in the area, thankfully, but she knew there'd be more requests to come. This was just the first. "We can do that." She said. "Get me your LOA and I'll send it to my internal provisioning group."

"God bless you." Gant sighed. "Sorry if I sound overwhelmed, but damn it, I am." He said. "My brother's missing in that mess and I can't think straight."

"Charles, I'm glad we can help." Kerry said gently. "We have some people missing ourselves. Most of our office in Manhattan were in the Towers for business meetings yesterday morning."

"My god."

"So we're sweating right along with you." Kerry said. "And speaking of that, could you possibly do me a favor?"

"If I can, for sure." Charles said.

"My Rockefeller Center office is down hard." Kerry said. "Any chance of getting one of our lines up?"

"Give me the circuit id." He answered instantly. "We've got service near the Rock. You probably are just terminated closer to the triple... to where the triple was."

Kerry typed a question into her search applet, and was rewarded with a number. "Here it is." She gave it to him. "It would help the people left there. Most of them lived down in the affected area and can't go home."

"You got it, Kerry." Charles said. "Expect that LOA in the next five minutes."

"Call me if you need anything else." Kerry said. "Talk to you later." She hung the phone up, and went back to her screen. She clicked her mic on. "Miami exec to New York, you still on Sherren?"

"I'm here." Sherren responded promptly. "Two more people just showed up! We're all like kids here, screaming."

Kerry smiled. "I'm very glad. We're working on getting you some phones there, too."

"Oh, that's great!" Sherren said.

"Ma'am?" Nan poked her head back in. "Do you want a CNN feed in here?" She indicated a dark panel on the wall. "We've got one running in ops."

"Sure." Kerry said. "Any sign of more government visitors?"

"None yet." Nan shook her dark head. "When did you want to leave for the Pentagon?"

Kerry checked her watch. "I think I need to spend a little more time here, maybe an hour. Let's say eleven?" She said. "Mark's almost at the Pentagon and he's going to be tied up for a while when he gets there."

"Okay, I'll be around." Nan said. "We'll push the feed in here." She ducked out and closed the door behind her.

Kerry scribbled a few more notes, listening with one ear bud in to the conversation going on in the background. A flash of motion caught her eye, and she looked up at the screen just in time to see a shot of the inside of the Capitol, where the hall was full of men and women all milling around.

Her mother was there, she realized. She spotted her immediately off to one side of the chamber, with two other senators who were vaguely familiar to her. "Hi mom." She briefly waved at the screen, remembering the odd occasion when she'd flip past CSPAN2 and find her father talking.

She always stopped and listened.

"Miami exec, this is Miami HR."

"Go ahead." Kerry keyed her mic. "Good morning, Mari."

"Good morning." Mariana replied. "Not sure if you caught the news, but it's all over the local here that they've issued search warrants for a bunch of locations in Miami."

Kerry's head jerked up and she stared at the screen. "What?"

"No one's really sure what's going on. Duks says one of his people had a police raid in their apartment complex around four am." Mari said. "We heard something about some of the hijackers coming from here."

"From Miami?" Kerry found this hard to believe.

"That's what they're saying."

Holy crap. Kerry stared in bewilderment at the television, reading the crawl on the bottom that repeated what Mari had just said. Hijackers from Miami? "But didn't they say yesterday this was something from the middle east?"

"I don't know." Mari said. "Just wanted to give you the heads up since believe me, there's a lot of crazy nervous people down here at the moment. We have about half the office in. A lot of people stayed home."

"Wow." Kerry said. "Okay, thanks for the warning." She scanned the lists again, then sighed. "I'm going on hold for a minute, to call APC."

"Good luck, Miami exec." The LA Earthstation chimed in. "Those guys sound pretty tapped."

"Mari, can you find out how close our community support teams are to Newark?" Kerry asked, as she searched her address applet for the phone number of their racking vendor. "Make sure they stop for a cold keg of beer."

Silence. "I don't think that's spec, Kerry." Mari said.

"Don't give damn they've been there all night." Kerry said. "It's as muggy there as it is here. Have them bring fans and make sure they've got six volt to 110 converter lines so they can run them."

"Okay, will do." Mari said. "You're the boss."

"Until three thirty PM, I sure am." Kerry sighed. "Someone turn the planet faster please."

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Kerry checked the time, then she put her pen down on her pad. "Okay folks." She said. "I have to head out of here. Mark, I'll see you in about thirty."

"Gotcha, boss." Mark replied. "We're waiting for clearance to pull this rig in. "

"Mark, this is Danny." Danny said. "We'll come over there and talk to them. Give me five."

"Will do. Kerry, I've got it."

"All right. Miami exec off. " Kerry pulled out her ear buds and stood up, walking around in a circle to shake the cramps out of her body from the tension of dealing with issue after issue for a solid hour. She had a headache from it, and even two cups of tea hadn't prevented her throat from gaining a painful rasp.

The door cracked open, and Nan stuck her head in. "Ready to go? Sally at the front said no one else showed up for you."

"Well, good." Kerry flexed her hands and walked back over to the desk, picking up her jacket and slipping it on. "Maybe they changed their mind, or figured out something else to do, or talked to the Secret Service. Either way, I'm outta here."

She shut down her laptop. "Is there a Wendys between here and the Pentagon?" She asked. "Love my hotel, but they have seriously deficient continental breakfasts."

Nan smiled. "Yeah, there is. You sure you don't want to stop somewhere else? There's some great restaurants around there."

"Nah." Kerry buckled her briefcase and slid the strap over her shoulder. "So little time, so many fubars." She followed Nan out the door and down the hallway. "I've got my fingers crossed hoping I get a call back from APC. They have a manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania."

"APC.. the rack people?" Nan asked. "Do they need that many new ones for the Pentagon?"

"Well, they need some, but I called them for a couple of UPS's." Kerry shouldered the staff door open and held it as Nan went through. "For the Earthstation."

"Ah, yeah. Right." Nan pulled her keys from her jacket pocket. "Those poor guys. They were being pounded yesterday. I think they were almost glad they lost power because everyone stopped bugging them for space."

Kerry slid into the passenger side seat. "Right now, I need to get the pressure off the station on the other coast, so hopefully we can get them some power and get them running again."

Nan started the SUV and pulled out of the parking lot, pausing at the gate as the security guards waved and the big iron portal slowly slid aside to let them out. The big doors were set into well made concrete and stone walls, that stretched around the facility to an impressive height and came complete with a set of serious looking security guards whose bulk and stance were staunchly professional.

Kerry liked the guards in Miami, but most of them were what Dar called domesticated tabbies, nice men and women, and very competent but they focused on watching the building, and checking for fire alarms, helping the staff out when they locked their keys in their car, and manning the badge issuing equipment.

They weren't the ILS Police. Most of them were far less intimidating than some of the marketing reps were with their big white teeth and aggressive tactics.

These guys here, on the other hand, looked like they were ready to turn back a platoon of Marines. Kerry was pretty sure she didn't want to swap them for her uniformed friends down south, but it was nice to have them here, especially given the shifting uncertainties of the situation they were in. "Nice guys?" She asked, as they waved on the way out.

"Oh, absolutely." Nan said. "In a no neck, space ranger kind of way." She pulled out of the entry road and onto the main street. "They really take themselves very seriously, if you know what I mean. Most of them are ex military."

"Mm." Kerry remembered her time at the Navy base with Dar. "Are they reserve?" She asked. "I have a feeling this situation's going to end up with us fighting someplace again."

"Well, I don't know that much about them." Nan said. "But I thought I heard someone saying that they had to be completely retired, not in the reserves to be hired. Someone was complaining that it was wasn't fair, because being a reservist or National Guard is supposed to be a good thing."

Kerry considered that. She rested her elbow on the armrest and leaned back, watching the buildings flash by. "Boy, I can see both parts of that." She admitted. "I do think serving your country is an admirable thing, and shouldn't be a reason to block someone from employment."

"That's what that person was saying." Nan said.

"On the other hand, if my whole security department was reserve and guard, and they all got called up, I'd be a pickle." Kerry said. "It's a really tough question, especially these days. Used to be, if you were guard, the worst thing you'd have to deal with is helping with a flood, or being asked to patrol streets during a riot."

"Well, yeah."

"Now, it's not like that." Kerry said. "Before, employers didn't really worry about hiring someone who had that commitment, because it wasn't likely to impact them more than that one weekend a month or whatever. Nowadays, you've got a reasonable chance of being sent overseas for six months, a year, who knows?"

"We shouldn't stop people who want to do it though." Nan said, with a frown. "That seems selfish, I guess."

"Business very often is." Kerry agreed. "It's all what's in the company's best interest.. " She had to smile, however wryly at this. "Sometimes. But actually I agree, you shouldn't stop people from serving and it shouldn't be a bar to employment, so I am going to find out from Mariana why that's so for this group since it doesn't apply to anyone else that I know of. "

Nan nodded. "That's cool." She said. "My brother's in the guard. He didn't have to go the last time, but his boss pretty much told him he'd never promote him to anything really critical because he just couldn't afford to have to replace him on short notice and it was too much of a hassle."

Well. Kerry felt very ambivalent. She thought about how she'd feel if someone, say, Mark, had decided to join the guard and what that would mean for them if he had to leave and go overseas. "Well, you know, you have to deal with that all the time in business. I mean, people get sick or they quit and find other jobs." She commented. "I'm not sure that's fair of his boss, though.. I have to admit I do see the man's point."

"That's what my brother said, pretty much." Nan sighed. "He understands, but it still sucks. He really likes being in the Guard, and he has a lot of friends there. But he's also got a kid on the way, and he also needs to make more money."

Kerry folded her arms. "What does he do?" She gazed out the window, watching trees flash by that had the first tinges of leaves losing their green color on them.

"Java developer." Nan said, succinctly. "There's the Wendys. Sure you want that?"

"Yep." Kerry could already taste the spicy chicken. "Tell your brother to send me his resume." She added. "Mariana was saying last week she was desperately looking for more developers for two or three new projects we're doing."

Nan slowed, and pulled into the driveway of the fast food restaurant. "Are you serious?"

"Sure." Kerry reached down and removed her wallet from her briefcase. "Dar once hired an out of work police receptionist with a nose ring off the streets in New York who now runs the data entry department at our largest payment processor in Queens." She said, straightening up. "What?"

Nan was looking at her as though she'd grown a horn. "Really?"

"Really." Kerry assured her. "We look for talent everywhere. It's a bitch trying to keep up with the turnover on a quarter of a million people, you know? So if he's interested, have him email me his resume. Most of the developers are flexible work space, so they can work from home, or here, or go to one of the local centers."

Nan studied her for a brief moment, then she smiled. "Um.. you want to get this to go or eat in?" She asked, after a second. "And thanks. That wasn't my motive in mentioning it, but I'll tell him. He's always asking me to get him into ILS, but I never felt comfortable recommending my own family."

"Drive through's fine." Kerry said, opening the wallet and flipping past her driver's license to her corporate credit cards. She selected one and waited, as Nan pulled the car up to the ordering kiosk. "Spicy chicken sandwich with cheese, sour cream and chive baked potato, and a medium Frostie. Get whatever you want, lunch is on me."

Nan took the card she held out, then she rolled down the window to place their order.

Kerry had a moment's peace, then her cell phone rang. She put her earphones back in and answered it. "Kerry Stuart."

"Kerry? This is Michael from APC, we spoke earlier?"

Never had she been so glad to hear from a salesman. "Hi, Michael, you got good news for me?"

"Well, I think I do." Michael said. "We've got two big units, the EPS model, that we'd just finished fitting out for a road show, you know? To show the capabilities? Anyway, they're truck mounted, with a diesel generator and we can have them over to your Newark location by tonight."

Kerry did a little nerd dance in her seat. "Michael, that's awesome. Doesn't even matter how much it is, just send me the bill."

"Do you one better." Michael said, sounding pleased. "We'll do it for the promotion, since the names all over the truck, but in return give me a shot at providing the racking and power for everything you rebuild."

"You got it." Kerry answered instantly. "I'll tell Mark to start sending you a list of what we'll need."

"Great. I'll get the guys rolling." Michael said. "I'll let you go, I know you must be swamped. Call me if you need anything else, okay?"

"Will do. Talk to you later, Michael and thanks again." Kerry hung up, chortling softly under her breath. "One down, a hundred to go." She finished dialing in and waited, as the phone connected to the global conferencing system.

They pulled forward to the delivery window. "Guess that was good news?" Nan handed Kerry's card over to the cashier. "Thanks for lunch, by the way. It beats heat up pizza in the data center."

Kerry held up her hand. "Miami ops? This is Miami exec." She said. "Someone please get Newark on the landline or text, tell them we'll have power generators there around dinnertime." She listened to the ragged cheers. "Okay, I'm off again. Mark, see you in a few. You inside yet?"

"Just let us in, boss. We're driving over to the far side." Mark said. "I can see part of it. Holy crap."

Kerry considered. "Thanks Mark. Be there shortly." She closed her phone and turned in her seat. "You know what, we'd better pull over here and munch before we get there."

Nan nodded, as she handed over Kerry's bag. "Yeah, it's probably going to be pretty busy. That's a good idea."

"Right." Kerry waited until Nan pulled the big SUV into a nearby spot, and parked it. She then opened her bag and removed her sandwich, settling her frosty in the cup holder and unwrapping her chicken. "Actually." She said. "I've been around a collapsed building. It's not some place you want to have a picnic near."

Nan took a sip of her drink, setting her taco salad down on her lap. "Was that the hospital thing from last year?"

Kerry nodded. She took a bite of her sandwich, enjoying the spicy taste.

"That was scary as hell. I was at project management training in New Mexico that week, but I saw it on the television, and the papers were full of stories about it for days after I got back." Nan speared her salad with a fork. "You must have been scared in there."

Kerry chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed. She wiped her lips with a lurid yellow napkin and reached for her frostie. "I sure should have been." She said. "But I was too freaked out to be scared. I know that sounds bizarre, but I just wasn't. I was pissed off and wanted out of there, that was for sure."

"Did you get hurt?"

Kerry nodded. "Dislocated my shoulder." She swallowed a spoonful of her frostie and went back to her sandwich.

"Ow."

Kerry nodded again, but remained silent as she chewed.

"How in the heck did you climb out that window with a dislocated shoulder?" Nan asked, suddenly, after they'd eaten quietly for a minute.

"Dar put it back in place after it happened." Kerry explained.

"Good thing she knew how." The dark haired woman spluttered. "That's no joke! I've seen someone dislocate a shoulder on the football field and they were screaming!"

Kerry chuckled softly. "Her list of talents never ends." She finished up her sandwich and folded the foil wrapper, putting it neatly inside her bag before she removed the baked potato in its container. She'd gotten the top off, and the sour cream applied when her phone rang again.

"Niblets." Kerry got the mic clipped into place and answered it. "Kerry Stuart."

Nan glanced at her, eyebrows hiking briefly, then she put the cover on her now empty container and put it away in it's bag. "I'll get us moving again." She said, starting the car and releasing the brake.

"Hello, Kerrison?"

Kerry sighed. "Hello Mother, how's the meetings going? I saw you on TV this morning." She mixed her potato up and ingested a forkful as they pulled out of the parking lot and back out onto the main street.

"Did you? Ah, well, things are about as expected." Cynthia Stuart responded. "Everyone is terribly upset, of course. But my committee would really like to speak with you if it can be arranged."

"Which committee is it?" Kerry asked.

"The intelligence committee." Her mother replied. "They were very interested in how much more information was available to you yesterday, and I know you were upset when I mentioned it, but really, I cannot take that back now."

No, she couldn't. Kerry had to admit.

"I did tell them I would ask you, if you could arrange a little time, to speak with them but could not promise anything."

Fair enough. "Okay." Kerry decided. "I'm on my way to the Pentagon now. I have to do a situational analysis there, and see what needs to be done to get everyone back up and running. Once that's done, I'll give you a call and we can arrange something."

"Excellent." Her mother sounded profoundly relieved. "Are things going well for you today?"

Kerry peered through the windscreen as she spotted the unmistakable bulk of the Pentagon looming in front of them. "So far, yes." She said. "We found some of our people in New York, and my staff made it up here from Miami safely."

There was heavy traffic around the entrance to the crash site, backing up onto the roadway. Nan slowed to a stop and they both looked through the trees at the building. "Holy Moses." Nan breathed. "That looks totally different than it did on CNN."

"I'm glad to hear that." Cynthia said. "Perhaps we can have dinner together tonight?"

Kerry's eyes were fixed on the huge black hole, smoke still drifting from it. "Sure." She answered absently, her mind trying to sort out the horror. "I'll call you later. Okay?"

"Excellent. Until later then." The phone clicked off and Kerry merely closed it and put it on her lap, still peering out the window. "My God." She closed up the remnants of her lunch and put it into it's bag, rolling up the opening and putting it down between her boots.

It was shocking. She had a clear, though somewhat dim memory of the building in all it's imposing, concrete glory and somehow seeing it squatting there in the grass, a black gouge taken out of it seemed completely unreal. "It's like a bad movie."

They inched up, towards the police guarding the entrance until they were even with them, tired, harried looking men trying to move cars past with impatient gestures. Nan rolled the window down and visibly braced herself for the argument she was sure was coming.

"Please move along, ladies." The man said. "C'mon, we have to get emergency people in here."

Nan took a breath, but Kerry put a hand on her arm, and leaned over. "Hello, officer." She said, already holding out her badge in her hand. "I'll make this quick because I know the last thing you need is a stopped car out here."

The police officer leaned on the door and peered in at her. "Yes?"

"My company handles the IT for the building." Kerry said, nodding towards the Pentagon. "We want to get things rolling again."

The officer looked at her ID, glancing over it to look at Kerry. "One of your guys just went in there."

"Our equipment van." Kerry nodded. "With generators."

The officer nodded. "You people don't waste no time. Go on in, Ms. Stuart. They told us you'd be here." He stepped back and motioned to the next officer, who dragged aside a barrier blocking the entrance to the big inside parking lot.

"Thanks." Kerry said, taking back her badge. "Tell your guys to come by our truck later. We've got food and coffee there. I bet you could use some."

The policeman managed a smile. "Thanks." He said.

Nan rolled the window up and maneuvered the SUV through the opening in the barriers, the wheels bumping up over debris as she edged into the parking area.

"Over there." Kerry spotted Mark's truck, with the RV behind it, not far from the company courtesy bus. "That's our area." Already there were techs surrounding the spot, in jeans and company polos. They were in the back part of the lot. The front was filled with emergency vehicles and military ones, with a huge cluster of press tents behind the lot and separated by a fence.

Nan parked, and they got out. Kerry stepped away from the SUV and faced the building, her eyes taking in the smoking, gaping gap in disbelief.

She could smell the smoke. Mixed with that was the tinge of fractured concrete, the smell of burning electrical and shot through, with every other breath, a darker hint of decay and ruin. She took a few more steps towards the building, and stood, arms crossed as her eyes slowly scanned the area, seeing wreckage, and people, and exhausted faces.

Anger. Grief. Sadness.

To one side, a huge American flag was draped, as though in defiance. Kerry felt tears sting her eyes as she saw it and knew a moment of solemn kinship with everyone around her.

"Sucks." Mark came to stand shoulder to shoulder with her.

"Yeah." Kerry drew in a long breath. "Fifty states, right and left, Yankee and redneck, two billion opinions and twice as many assholes but right now we're all Americans." She turned and gave him a brief hug. "Let's get to work."

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Dar was sideways in her chair again. She had both legs over one arm of her seat, and her head resting on the opposite padded rest. She had her eyes closed and her hands folded over her stomach, the drone of the engines filling her ears.

Her anxiety had faded, buoyed by the knowledge that she'd be landing hours before she'd expected to, and be in a position to immediately jump back into the problems she knew were waiting rather than facing international immigration, a second flight, a cross border drive, and a long haul up into Houston.

Across the aisle from her, Alastair was finally napping himself, and the lights had been lowered in the cabin along with the windowshades producing a dim, peaceful atmosphere and Dar was content to sprawl where she was in a state of half waking, half sleeping.

She'd started out by trying to think ahead to what was going on down on the ground, but the long day and the stress had caught up to her and now she was merely daydreaming, letting her mind run free with thoughts of where she'd wander with Kerry in Europe after world events calmed down.

Where would Kerry really like to go? She'd seemed enthusiastic about the Alps, Dar mused. Would she rather go to one of the ritzy winter resorts? Dar opened her eyes and looked around the inside of the private plane. She reluctantly admitted privately that she wouldn't mind spending time in someplace nice; she suspected that though Kerry poo poo'd high society trimmings that she wouldn't argue too hard against an in room marble Jacuzzi or chocolate dipped strawberries before bed either.

But would she rather be in some nice lodge somewhere quiet, where they could go outside and simply sit on a hill and look at the stars, rather than go outside and sit in a café looking at other kinds of stars living the high life?

Maybe they could find a compromise, like their cabin. She loved the comforts of it, and the contrast of that, against the raw, weatherworn dock outside and the proximity of the wildness of the sea. She

and Kerry could go out and get as sandy and seaweed ridden as they pleased, and then relax on the couch in the air conditioning with a bowl of microwave popcorn.

Were they wimps? Maybe. Did she care?

Hmm.

Dar let that thought drift for a moment, then pondered the notion that it might work out that they were on vacation during Kerry's birthday. What would she like to do for that? Dar decided her partner would probably want to do something special, maybe something exciting and new to her for her birthday.

Maybe they could go to Venice. Or Rome. Dar smiled. Or maybe the Greek Isles.

A soft sound made her open her eyes, and she turned her head to see the door opening quietly, to allow the steward to enter. He paused when he saw her somewhat odd position, but then continued moving, shutting the door behind him.

"It looks like we picked up an escort." The man said, quietly, as he stopped next to Dar's seat. "I don't think it anything to worry about. They seem to be keeping their distance."

"Fighters?" Dar asked.

"I guess." The man agreed. "Not my area of expertise. But the captain's okay with it." He continued. "They called him and just told him to keep on course, which is exactly what we want to do."

Dar smiled. "Yep." She said. "I'll be damn glad to be home, even if it's just for a little while."

"I can well imagine." The steward smiled back. "I'm going to go get my passport. I'm sure they'll want to see it when we land." He moved past Dar and went into the back of the plane, leaving her to resume studying the woven cloth ceiling.

After a moment, though, she sat up and reached across to the window shade, opening it to peer outside. Off the wing, at a reasonable distance, was a Navy fighter. "Ah. Hornet." Dar put the shade back down and extended her seat out again.

She wasn't sure how she felt about the escort. On one hand, she suspected they'd rattled more than one cage and no one was taking chances. On the other hand, she knew damn well there was a good chance whoever had sent the planes up recognized her name.

That was arrogant. Dar acknowledged it with a smile. But it was also true that there were a lot of people who would remember her either for better or for worse. Some now, for a lot worse. Her smile disappeared as she remembered Chuckie and what a mess that had turned out to be.

She wished again, for the nth time, that she could go back and do that all over. She thought maybe her father did too.

Her father. Dar found her thoughts moving to a different track. What would this mean for him? Would the Navy try to get him to come back?

No way.

Would he?

Dar was troubled to realize she honestly didn't know the answer to that question. She knew her father was very much invested in how he'd spent his life for all those years, and he had friends by the hundreds and probably thousands still in service.

But then there was her mother. After what he went through, Dar had to think that at the very least he had to seriously consider the question if they asked.

And if they did ask, she knew she'd go to the wall to convince him to say no. For her mother, for herself, damned if she was going to lose her family again. She'd get Kerry to help her if she had to.

She picked up the bottle of orange soda on the table and took a swig of it, and checked her watch, wondering what Kerry was up to. She'd probably made it to the Pentagon already, and Dar was sure she'd have plenty to tell her when she called.

Once she got the squeal out of the way.

She felt a faint pressure change against her ears, and let the thoughts go as the steward came back through the cabin, giving her a smile as he passed. "Heading down."

"We are." The steward nodded. "Boy, I'll be glad to get on the ground." He went to the front of the cabin and started preparing it for landing, bringing up the lights a little and fastening the curtains back.

Dar reached across the aisle and gave her boss's sleeve a tug. "Alastair?"

"Eh?" Alastair blinked and lifted his head. "What? More people need yelling at?"

Dar chuckled. "No. We're starting down." She moved her seat upright and reached for her briefcase, digging in it to retrieve her leather ID holder, which had her passport and her company badges in it. She also got her PDA and cellphone out, and set them on the small table next to her seat.

"Ah. We're there." Alastair stretched. "Damn, that's great. But I could definitely use a cup of coffee." He rubbed his eyes and rummaged around, getting his things together. "This is the tough end of the jet lag. We've got a whole damn day to get through now."

"True." Dar sighed. "Ah well, there's always Cuban coffee."

Alastair eyed her. "I heard about that the last time I was in the office here. What exactly is it?"

Dar settled back in her chair. "Strong espresso coffee, essentially, not that different from Italian but when they make it right, they take a pyrex mixing cup, put a half pound of sugar in it, and a half cup of the coffee then they whip it in to a froth, before they put the rest of the coffee in, mix it, and there you go."

Her boss's eyebrows knitted. "Are you telling me it's coffee and sugar one to one? Half and half?"

Dar nodded.

"And you actually drink that?"

Dar nodded again. "I like it." She said. "You can also mix hot milk with it, and then it's café con leche."

Alastair covered his eyes with one hand. "When was the last time you had your blood pressure checked?"

"One ten over sixty six." His CIO replied, her eyes twinkling a little.

"Disgusting."

Dar chuckled. "Stress does more to you than coffee" She said. "Best thing I did for my health in the last couple of years was get an assistant." She held up a hand as Alastair started to laugh. "Ah ah.. not a joke. Aside from everything else."

"I told you for years to get an assistant." Alastair shook his finger at her.

"I couldn't." Dar said, swallowing a few times as the air pressure started to increase. "Everyone I even interviewed either drove me crazy, or was out to knife me in the back. Do you know how many of them were brought in by other people inside the company?"

Alastair sighed. "Yeah, I'm glad those days are behind us." He admitted. "But you're not going to BS me and tell me the only reason you hired Kerry was her business skills."

Dar was silent for a few minutes. Then she turned and regarded Alastair. "The only reason I hired her as my assistant was her business skills." She said. "I wasn't about to screw either of us over by putting her in a spot she'd end up looking like a jackass in."

"Really?"

"Really." Dar said. "Oh, I won't say I wouldn't have brought her in to some other position. I liked her. I knew we were attracted to each other. I knew there wasn't much else she could do in that piss and little company she was in."

"Uh huh."

"But she had brains, and the guts to stand up to me, and I could tell by how she kept changing her game depending on what I threw at her that she'd be able to step in and handle us at an executive level in ops." Dar rested her elbows on her chair arms and laced her fingers together. "And I was right."

"You sure were." Alastair agreed cheerfully. "She does a damn fine job. If that wasn't true, your ass would still be back in London on the conference call because I wouldn't have risked having you in the air with me for this whole time."

Dar nodded. "Yep."

"And it was a good opportunity for her. I'm sure she appreciated that." Her boss went on. "Seems like she has ambition. I'm not surprised she jumped at the offer."

All very true. Dar acknowledged. "I'm just glad she did." She rubbed the edge of her thumb against the cool band of her ring. She swallowed again, and leaned over to pull the shade up. The Hornet was no longer visible outside, but the ground was, and she smiled as she recognized the very familiar outlines of the Everglades passing under the wings. "Landing from the west."

"How can you tell?" Alastair lifted his own shade and peered out. "What in the hell is that?"

"The River of Grass." Dar said. "The Florida Everglades." She added. "In reality, one whomping big ass swamp."

"Ah."

The steward poked his head into the cabin. "We're about to land. Please stay in your seats until we do, and try to keep your seat belts fastened. It's not a lot of fun bouncing off the inside walls if we have to stop short."

Dar obediently clicked her seatbelt in place and tugged it snug. She was already looking forward to feeling the ground hit their tires, and she flipped open her PDA, tapping it open to a new message and scribbling it as she heard the landing gear extend, and felt the distinctive motion as the plane moved from a nose down, to a nose up posture for landing.

"Ever wanted to learn to fly, Dar?" Alastair asked, suddenly. "One of these things?"

"No." Dar shook her head. "I'll stick to boats, thanks. You?"

"Have my pilots license."

Dar stopped what she was doing and looked over at her boss, in real surprise. "You do?"

Alastair nodded. "Bunch of fellas and I went in on two of the little single engine putterbouts." He said. "It's a nice way to spend a Sunday, when you get tired of golf." He fastened his seat belt and folded his hands, letting them rest on one knee. "I buzzed the country club last time I flew and scared two ladies right into the lake. I'm living in fear they'll find out it was me."

Dar started laughing.

"All those years in the boardroom sure came in handy when the wife came telling me all about it." Her boss chuckled, glancing out the window as they approached the landing strip. "Well, here we go."

The plane slowed, its wings drifting to one side and the other as the edges slid down to cup the air. Outside the windows, clouds were replaced by buildings and trees, flashing by as they settled down through the atmosphere and lined up with the runway.

A shocking sound made both of them jump, and look, but it was only the Hornets breaking off and roaring past, their engines sounding a brass thunder that rattled the interior of the cabin and made Dar's ears itch.

"Thanks for stopping by, fellas." Alastair remarked. "Good to see my tax dollars at work."

Dar finished her message and hit send, waiting until the wheels of the plane touched down with a thump and a bounce before she activated the PDA's comm link. Then she picked up her phone and opened it, dialing the first speed dial number on the list.

Home. She could almost feel the humidity and the smell of rain tinged hot air already.

**

Kerry blinked in the thick dusty air, sucking in breath through a white mask that covered her mouth and nose. In front of her was a door hanging off its hinges, and half a wall. Past that was a mass of concrete and metal, fused into unrecognizable lumps with a scattering of cables drooping out of it.

"Shit." Mark exhaled, directing the beam of his flashlight into the wreckage.

"Well, that's a total loss." Kerry concluded. She folded her arms over her chest. "Someone just needs to confirm the inventory list for that room so I can have legal claim it against our insurance."

"I don't have nearly enough crap to replace this." Mark said. "There was at least ten racks of gear in there."

"It was just a fluke." Another masked man said on her left side. "You see, this corridors pretty okay."

Kerry looked around. "I see." The hallway was broad and mostly silent, only a few ceiling panels and bits of concrete knocked out near where they were, and then nothing but long expanses of carpet and concrete walls further off. "So we were duplicating this on the other side, Danny With a link between them?" She glanced at the man on her left.

"Yes, ma'am." Danny nodded. His arm was in a sling, but it was encased in a thick compression bandage rather than a cast. He was a fairly short man, with gymnast's build and thick curly brown hair. "But there's nothing in it yet. Not even racks."

"Do we have runs in there from the distro closets??" Mark asked. "They were really doing duplex? Not just runs from half to this room and half to that one with a crossover?"

Danny shook his head solemnly. "Runs from each distro to each core room." He said "Ms. Roberts told em to, and you know whatever Ms. Roberts says..."

"Yes we know." Kerry and Mark said at the same time. "God bless Dar's forethought again." Kerry went on, with a sigh. "All right. Let's go over to the new room and get a list started." She turned and waited for Mark to precede her with his flashlight. "I'm not going to be able to count the favors I'm going to have to call in on this one, and we're nowhere near Manhattan yet."

"No shit." Mark shook his head. "I can start having everyone get their spare stuff ready to ship but I heard from the office today they won't even let Fedex or UPS pick up."

Kerry thought about that. "Well, how do you make sure all those brown packages aren't bombs?"

"They want to blow up Fedex trucks?" Mark's brows knitted.

"Maybe they want to blow up Fedex trucks delivering last minute bouquets to Pro Player Stadium."

"Oh." Mark said. "Yeah."

Yeah. Kerry tried not to think about Dar, flying over the Atlantic in a potentially enticing to terrorist plane since it was coming so close to the US. She was sure the company had chartered the plane from someplace reputable, but after yesterday, anything could happen.

She didn't want anything to happen. "Just get down, and have a margarita." She muttered under her breath.

"Ma'am?" Danny leaned towards her. "Did you say something?"

"No, just clearing my throat." There was no power, and the smell of crushed concrete and burning debris brought back surprisingly strong memories of the hospital collapse. "How's the roll call doing, Danny?" Kerry asked, to get her mind off that.

"We're still down three, ma'am." Danny said. "Ken Burrows, our lead punchdown guy, his assistant Charlie, and Lee Chan, our Wan specialist." He wiped the dust out of his eyes with his free hand. "They were all in the section that took the hit, we think."

Kerry involuntarily glanced behind her, at the crushed room. Then she turned her head and looked resolutely ahead, picking her way through the fallen ceiling debris carefully. "And you said five people are in the hospital?"

"Yes, ma'am." Danny said. "We logged them in yellow, though. The other four we were missing turned up last night. Said they were helping people get out all day and didn't get a chance to get online." He explained. "It was really crazy here yesterday."

They moved through inner hallways, mostly empty, the air still and almost stale. Kerry felt sweat gathering under her shirt and she fought the urge to pull the mask off her face as she followed the group along one wall.

Everyone was pretty quiet. The masks muffled speech and the lack of power and air conditioning let them hear creaks and pops in the walls around them. Kerry felt anxious, and she walked a little faster even though they'd been told several times the building was safe.

Inside, it was hard to picture the destruction she'd faced on the outside of the building. The walls of the structure looked very much like some huge giant had taken a hatchet and whacked the top side of one of the five sections, cutting right through the concrete and exposing inner offices as it collapsed inward.

Chillingly bizarre. At the edge, you could see file cabinets. Chairs. The beige inevitability of computer monitors.

It felt so unreal. Just as it had when she'd been in the hospital collapse, the familiar turned strange and frightening, making her want to get past it, get out, and feel cool, fresh air again. She heard voices ahead, and she looked up and past Mark's shoulders to see a cluster of men in work clothes ahead at the junction of two hallways.

"Uh oh." Danny said. "Those are the electrical guys."

Kerry patted him on his uninjured shoulder and eased past, coming up even with Mark as they approached the crowd. There were men in fatigues mixed in with the workers, she now realized, and several others were in more formal military uniforms. "Damn."

"What?" Mark whispered. "What's wrong?"

"Wish Dar was here."

Mark eyed her wryly. "44 75 68, boss."

Kerry's brows knit, as she allowed herself to be briefly distracted. "Hex?" She finally hazarded a guess. "No, not for the reason you're thinking. She's just a lot better at relating to the guys in uniforms than I am."

"Uh huh." Mark slowed and came to a halt since the crowd was blocking the hallway. "Let's see what's up with this now." He removed his mask. "Driving me nuts."

Kerry had about enough herself. She eased the mask off and sniffed the air, relieved to smell nothing more ominous than a little dust, this far from the destruction. The rest of the crew did the same, clustering warily behind Kerry and Mark as they eased closer to listen.

"Okay, here's the plan. Everyone has their clipboard?" One of the men in uniform was saying. "You have your sectors. I need to know the power, status, ability to work in, and damage in every square inch of the four sections not involved in the crash."

He glanced up as he sensed motion and spotted Kerry and her group standing there. "Excuse me." He said, in a stern tone. "Who are you people, and what are you doing in here?"

Kerry nudged her way to the front and met his eyes. "We're from ILS."

The man looked blank.

"Those are the IT people, chief." One of the men in fatigues supplied. "The computer guys."

"Oh." The officer nodded at them. "Well, none of the computers are working."

"We know." Kerry agreed. "That's what we're here for. To get them working again." She stuck her hands in her pockets.

The officer looked at her with interest. "Okay, hang on a second." He turned to the group. "Move out, gentlemen. I expect you to report back here in four hours."

The men dispersed, easing around Kerry and her crew and moving down the hallways in groups of three or four. They led the way with flashlights, the beams flickering around the half darkened walls in an odd and disjointed rhythm.

"Now." The officer faced Kerry. "Sorry, let's start this again. I'm Billy Chaseten." He held a hand out, which Kerry gripped firmly. "You said you were from what company now?"

"ILS." Kerry said. "My name is Kerry Stuart. My team and I are here to start the process of restoring communications to the facility." She glanced at his name plate. "Do you know when they're going to turn the power back on for starters, Captain?"

"Still got people cutting the live lines into the bad section." The captain said. "They can't turn the juice on until that's secure." He added. "You all the ones who handle the internet, and the phones and all that too?"

"That's right." Kerry said. "Our main core space was destroyed. We need to get rolling on replacing it." She smiled at the captain. He was tall, and had a handsome face under a brown buzz cut. "I know everyone's scrambling."

"That we are, and I don't want to get in your way, ma'am." The officer smiled back at her. "Anything I can do to help you?"

"Well." Kerry cleared her throat gently. "Actually you can get out of our way. You're standing in front of the door to our backup core center."

The man blinked, then he turned, shining his flashlight on the big metal door he'd been leaning against. "Well, shoot. I am." He moved aside. "Sorry about that."

"I've got the keys." Danny moved forward, going to the door and fishing a set of thick silver keys from his pocket. "They hadn't even put the scan locks in yet."

The soldier sidled over closer to Kerry as Danny sorted amongst the keys. "You folks lose a lot of stuff? I was talking to the security system people and they said they had a ton of rewiring to do."

"Got it." Danny unlocked the door and opened the room, pulling the metal portal towards him and back against the wall.

The inside of the room was dimly lit with emergency lighting, and they all shuffled inside, Mark and one of the other local techs shining their flashlights around to illuminate the space.

"Well." Kerry sighed. "We lost enough equipment to fill this room." She glanced at the captain, who was still interestedly at her side. "Unfortunately."

"Ouch." The captain shook his head. "I heard my CO going on or really, going off about nothing working in the rest of the building. He know you all are here?"

"Probably not." Kerry admitted. "We.. well, my team came up from Miami with our equipment truck and I .. just got here from Michigan. We didn't talk to anyone first."

The captain looked at her strangely.

"We know what to do." Kerry smiled briefly. "It's not like someone had to call us to tell us there was a problem."

"Hey boss?" Mark called over. "This room wasn't near ready for occupancy. They haven't run the power, or the environ."

"Ah." Kerry removed her hands from her pockets. "Excuse me." She eased between two of the local techs and went to Mark's side. His flashlight was shining on a very un-terminated power distribution box and a set of wires hanging from the ceiling. "Oh, boy. Nothing easy here."

"They were supposed to put that stuff in next week." Danny agreed glumly. "We didn't even have storage yet, that's why we told them to hold delivery of the gear."

Damn. Kerry exhaled and took a step back, somewhat at a loss. What was that Dar was always telling her? Think out of the box?

Think out of the box. "I think this box just got slammed over our heads." She muttered. "Danny, can you take me to whoever's in charge of the building electrical?"

"Uh. Sure." Danny nodded.

"Mark, start calling in a list of PDU's and racks to APC." Kerry said. "Bring what you can in here. Let's just do what we can to start."

"Got it, boss." Mark said. "Okay guys, go get the lanterns, and get the trolleys out and unfolded. Let's get moving."

The techs trooped out. Kerry and Danny were the last ones out, and he turned to close the door and lock it behind him. The captain was still standing there, leaning against the wall.

"Ah, hey. Ms. Stuart?" The captain pushed off as she cleared the door. "Heard you say you needed to talk to the building people. Maybe I can help with that? My CO'S got some push."

Kerry patted his arm. "I'll take any help I can get. C'mon with us." She motioned Danny ahead of her and they trooped off down the hallway. "Thanks for the offer, Captain."

"Call me Billy." The officer said. "All my friends do."

"Ma'am?" Danny cleared his throat. "Maybe we could invite the facilities chief to the bus for lunch?" He suggested. "He's been here all night." He peeked over at the captain. "Maybe we could all go?"

Kerry chuckled wryly. "Hungry?" She asked. "Sure. I think that's a great idea. We can meet in the bus if the chief is up for it. You're invited too, Billy."

"Sounds good to me." Billy was more than willing to go along. "Let's take a shortcut through here..". He indicated a guarded hallway. "I'll stop and give my CO a heads up. I know for sure he's very interested in this whole computer thing."

"Lead on." Kerry checked her watch. "Jesus.. half past one already?"

"Day's flying." Billy said. "Not like yesterday." He added. "Every minute yesterday lasted an hour."

They all sobered, as the guards opened the doors on their approach and the entered a cooler, grayer hallway, with metal doors on either side of it. Billy headed for one, his hand on the knob as Kerry's cell phone rang.

"Hang on." Kerry unclipped the phone and glanced at the caller ID, stopping and staring at it for a long moment before she hastily opened it. "Dar?"

"Hey, love of my life."

Kerry felt like she had electrical prickles heating her skin. "You guys go on. I need to take this." She told Billy and Danny. "I'll catch up with you."

"Yes ma'am." Danny went over to where the captain had paused. "That's our big boss." He explained, as they entered the office, and closed the door behind them.

Kerry leaned against the wall. "Where are you?" She was glad the hall was empty. "Are you in the air?"

"Nope." Dar said. "Just landed in Miami."

Another surge of pricking across her skin. "Miami?" Kerry squealed. "Are you kidding me? You're really home?" She said. "What happened to Mexico? They let you land? Did you call Gerry?"

"Long story." Dar said. "Bottom line is, we just landed at Opa Locka.. I figure we've got some explaining to do to the local officials then they should let us out of here."

"Explaining?"

"Like I said, long story." Dar replied, in a wry tone. "I'm just glad to be on the ground."

Kerry felt unexpected tears stinging her eyes. "I'm glad too." She said, lowering her voice. "I feel like fifty pounds just came off my shoulders. I was worried about you."

"Back at you." Her partner said. "Where are you?"

"Pentagon." Kerry sniffled and wiped her eyes.

"Bad?"

"Yeah."

"What do you need me to do?"

Kerry sighed. "Where do I start." She tried to put her thoughts in order, squirming through the emotion with some difficulty. "Can you lean on Justin and get us gear?" She asked. "I'm trying to deal with facilities here."

"You got it." Dar said. "I know what was in that room. I'll get it out there."

"The black box thing... that was just a foul up. They were looking for something we didn't have." Kerry said. "I sent them to the Tier 1's."

"Good girl."

"I want to squeeze you so hard your eyeballs pop out."

Dar started chuckling.

"I'm not kidding."

"I know. I wish I could have wangled them letting us land in Dulles. Hang in there, hon." Dar said.

"We're getting surrounded by tin soldiers. I have to go be me. I'll call you back once I'm getting a café con leche with Alastair and we figure out the next twenty minutes of the plan."

"Okay." Kerry relaxed against the wall, smiling whole heartedly. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Kerry closed the phone, letting out a long, heartfelt sigh. Then she clipped the phone to her belt, squared her shoulders, and headed for the CO's office. "Let's hope my lucky streak hauls it's ass right on." She pushed the door open. "But it's going to be hard as hell to beat that."

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Dar got up and clipped her phone onto her front pocket, stripping off the pullover she'd worn and leaving herself in just a tee shirt. She folded the pullover and tucked it into her briefcase, as Alastair closed his own phone and sighed. "Bea pissed?"

"Relieved, actually." Alastair pulled his own briefcase over and started to gather his things. "She said at least she knows me landing here means I probably won't be dancing on some table with a bottle of tequila."

Dar paused, and glanced over her shoulder. "We could arrange for that if you really wanted to."

"Ha hah." Her boss said. "Bea seems to think you'd be a good influence. I don't think we have any pictures in the archives of you with a flowerpot on your head."

"I'm sure you don't."

Alastair chuckled. "How's Kerry?" He watched Dar's face crease into a brief grin. "She doing all right?"

"Yeah." Dar said. "She's at the Pentagon. She needs me to take care of some things but we'd better wait to get off this tub."

"Waiting till then to call the wife, myself." Her boss said. "I can hang up on Bea and not get in too much trouble."

Dar chuckled.

The steward came in and went over to the door to the cabin. "Folks, please take your seats until we get the plane fully secured here. They're going to come inside."

Dar dropped into her chair, setting her briefcase down by her feet as she tucked her passport and identification into one hand. She looked out the window, not surprised to see several military transports pulling up. "Ah. C'mon."

"What?" Alastair looked up from rooting out his passport.

"I have too much to do with too few energized brain cells to deal with pissed off officials." Dar sighed, bracing her foot up against the small desk as the steward opened the door and carefully lowered it with its attached stairs. "Alastair, just cut them a check."

Her boss chuckled and shook his head, then straightened as three men in uniform came into the plane, with machine guns pointed right at them. "Ah."

"Everyone stay where you are and don't move." The first man said, in a firm voice.

Dar took in the tense posture, and the flicking eyes, and had the sense to stay still, just watching as two of the men came down the aisle and the third slammed the steward against the wall. "Don't move, Alastair." She said. "That's loaded and he's jacked enough to pull the trigger."

The lead soldier swung his muzzle around and pointed it at her, his face obscured behind a gas mask.

Dar met his gaze evenly. "My father taught me not to point at something unless I'm going to shoot it." She remarked. "Especially civs."

He stared at her briefly, moving the muzzle of his gun away from her, then he just continued on down the aisle, moving to the back of the plane and kicking open the bathroom door.

The second man, after sweeping the area around them turned and headed for the cockpit. "Get him secured, and come with me." He instructed the third man. "They said these people are all right."

The third man hustled the steward out to hands they could see reaching in the door, then he whirled and ducked through the door and headed up to the front of the plane.

"Well." Alastair folded his hands on his lap. "Ain't this nice."

"At least we're 'all right'." Dar got out her PDA and started typing on it. "I was definitely not in the mood to be body slammed."

"You're pretty cool in front of a gun." He commented. "Not that you're not pretty cool in most situations."

"I was hoping I was talking to a pro." His CIO admitted. "They really do know how to do this. Military training is not the oxymoron most people think it is."

"Ah."

The third man came back down the aisle and passed them without comment. He went to the door and motioned to someone, then he, too, headed for the cockpit.

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs and two men entered, dressed in dark uniforms complete with a gunbelt and mace cans. They approached Alastair and Dar with very no nonsense expressions.

"Hi." Alastair greeted them. "How're you doing, fellas?" He held up his passport. "Want to start with this?"

The man in the lead did take the passport, opening it to study the contents while his companion held out his hand to Dar for hers. "Ma'am?"

Dar obliged. She watched him flip through the pages, then noticed behind him that two more soldiers had come in and were standing in the aisle, blocking her view of the front of the plane. They weren't facing towards her, though, they were facing away.

Hm.

"You folks say you boarded in England?" The first man asked Alastair.

"That we did." Alastair agreed. "Little airfield in London. Nice place. Nice folks."

"Where did you expect to land?" The man asked.

"Mexico City." Dar answered.

The customs officer turned. "I didn't ask you."

Dar merely looked at him, one eyebrow lifting.

"Mexico City." Alastair spoke up, in a dry tone.

The customs officer turned back to him. "Did you know your pilot asked for a course change?"

"Sure. I told him to." Alastair leaned on his chair arm. "I didn't feel like flying into a storm and spending a couple hours losing my lunch." He added. "So yes, I knew. I asked him to fly south, and go around the storm. For some reason, that wasn't appreciated."

"No, it wasn't." The man said. "What was your business in Mexico?"

"It's the closest place I could land to Houston." Alastair said. "That's where we actually were going."

"Houston? You live there?"

"I live there." Alastair confirmed. "Our corporate offices are there."

There was a hustle of motion near the front, and Dar got a glimpse of the crew being crowded out the door, surrounded by the soldiers. She got a look at the pilot's face, and saw utter fear there. "What's going on there?" She asked, pointing at the door.

"That's not your concern ma'am." The other customs officer studied the rest of her ID. "I see you have a Florida driver's license in here." He glanced up at her. "Can I ask what that's for?"

"Driving." Dar answered. "You need one. It's the law."

The officer looked hard at her. "You need a Florida license in Texas? That's news to me. What about you, Roger?"

"News to me too." The other officer said. "Can you explain why you have a Florida license if you live in Texas?"

"I don't live in Texas." Dar was starting to find the conversation irritating. "I live in Florida. At the address on the license." She pointed at the passport. "That's why the passport was issued in Miami, too. Flying to Texas to get one would have been pointless."

"But you were going to Texas?" The man ignored her sarcasm.

"We were going to Texas because it has a country on it's border we could fly into." Dar explained. "And we were trying to get home. But trust me, I'm a lot happier to be in Miami." She paused. "Where I live. At the address on the license."

"I'm not, given this conversation." Alastair said. "I'd rather have played poker with the agents in Laredo."

The first officer swung around to him. "You may think this is funny, but I can assure you its not."

"I don't find it funny at all." Alastair shot back. "Considering you've had our names for four hours and a five second visit to Google would have identified us, and the company we work for, and since we've got to now go bust our asses fixing things for the government I'd just appreciate it if you agree we are who the passports say we are and let us get on with it."

"Alastair, you're getting grumpy in your old age." Dar remarked. "C'mon, the only pressing thing we have to deal with is getting the government payroll out and bringing the systems back up for the Pentagon. I'm sure they'll understand we had to spend time with customs."

Alastair sighed again. "Bring back the fellas with the guns."

The customs officer studied Alastairs passport. "Do you have anything to declare?" He asked. "I assume they didn't get you entry cards."

"Nope, and nope." Alastair said. "Didn't even stop for a bottle of Scotch."

The second man handed her back her identification. "Ma'am, anything to declare?"

Dar took her passport and tucked it into her briefcase. "No..wait, yes." She said. "About four hundred bucks worth of stuff I got for friends before the planet crashed in on us."

The customs agent nodded somberly. "Souvenirs?" He watched Dar nod in response. "Did you bring in any tobacco, alcohol, or prohibited products?"

"No."

"Roger?" Another man stuck his head in the door. "We need you guys over here. We may have something with these pilots."

Roger handed Alastair back his passport. "Welcome home." He said, briefly. "No one wants to give you a hard time, Mr. McLean. We just have a job to do."

"I appreciate that." Alastair said, sincerely. "Its just been a very long day, and it's only half over. I'm sure yours is too." He added. "And I realize it's not our affair, but is there a problem with the fellas who flew us here?"

Roger hesitated, then he shook his head. "I can't discuss that." He answered. "They're being investigated. They may just be allowed to go on their way. They may not." He motioned his companion to move towards the door. "Have a good day, folks. Watch your step on the way down."

They rattled down the steps and there was a sound of engines revving outside, then silence.

Alastair looked at Dar, as a gust of hot air blew in the door. "So that's it?"

Dar got up and went to the door, peering out. The tarmac was now empty, the cars disappearing into the distance where a big hangar was abuzz with military activity. There were no other planes anywhere near them, and they were alone. "Guess so."

"Lord." Alastair sighed. He got up out of his seat and came over to where she was standing, poking his head out to look around. "Y'know Dar? I'm not getting much out of today."

"C'mon." Dar went to the back of the plane and unlatched their luggage. "Glad they didn't put this underneath. I've lost my chops for breaking into aircraft."

Her boss came over to claim his rolling bag. "Did you used to do that?" He asked curiously. "I didn't think you had a larcenous youth, Dar."

"I didn't." Dar followed him down the aisle, pulling her own bag behind her. "Just a wild one. We used to run all over the base getting into things. Personnel carriers. Old airplanes."

"Ah."

"Tanks."

They climbed down out of the airplane, awkwardly dragging the luggage behind them. Outside, it was a very typical muggy Miami afternoon, and after about ten seconds Dar was direly grateful she'd stripped down to her T.

She paused, something odd niggling at her senses. The airfield was dead quiet, and there was a warm breeze that moved the muggy air and the thick foliage of the trees at the perimeter of the field. It was partly cloudy, and everything seemed normal.

"Dar?"

"Hang on." Dar turned all the way around, then slowly, she tipped her head back and scanned the sky. It wasn't something odd, she realized, it was something missing. "It's so quiet."

Alastair looked at the sky, then at her. "No planes?"

"No planes." She answered. "The only time before this I remember no planes is when Andrew hit. And it sure as hell wasn't quiet."

"Huh." Alastair shaded his eyes. "Well.."

"Yeah." Dar turned and started walking. "Where were we?"

"Tanks?" Alastair asked, as they trudged across the steamy tarmac towards the terminal.

"Tanks." His CIO confirmed. "Ask my father. He loves to tell people how I took out the dining hall with one."

"Didja?"

"Not on purpose." Dar admitted. "I ordered a car for us."

"Are those two statements related?" Alastair asked. "We could take a cab, y'know."

"Only if you'd be amused at me knocking the driver out and taking control of the air conditioning and the radio. I lost my love for sweat and someone else's taste in music years ago."

"Well, all righty then."

"Besides, with our cab drivers the car's cheaper." Dar opened the door, standing back to let Alastair enter. The inside of the terminal was cool and empty, only a single security guard slouched in a bored posture at the entrance desk. He looked up and studied them, then went back to reading his magazine.

"Ah." Alastair mumbled. "High security."

"Guess he figures if the goon squad let us loose we're safe." Dar gave the man a brief nod. They passed the desk and exited the front of the small terminal and back out into the muggy sunshine. The drive in front was full of empty cars, military vehicles lined up against the curb and some pulled up randomly. "Must be using the Coast Guard base here."

"Sure." Alastair took advantage of a small bench and sat down on it, glancing at his watch. "Hope that car's fast." He said. "Or he'll end up pouring me into the back seat." He rested his elbows on his knees. "I'm too old for all this crap."

Dar took a seat on the concrete, leaning against one of the support posts that held up the seventies era concrete overhang that would in a rainstorm almost completely fail in protecting anyone from getting wet. She could smell newly cut grass, and the dusty pavement, and drawing a breath of warm damp air, admitted privately to herself that no matter how uncomfortable it was, it was home.

She'd been in prettier places, with better weather, and nicer scenery but there was something in her that only relaxed, only felt 'right' when she was in this air, with these colors and the distinctive tropical sunlight around her.

She wondered if Alastair felt like that too. "Were you born in Houston, Alastair?"

"About an hour north of there." Alastair replied. "Little place called Coldspring, near Lake Livingston." He glanced at her. "Why?"

"Just curious." Dar said. "You ever want to live anywhere else?"

Alastair leaned back and let his arms rest on the bench, extending his legs and crossing them at the ankles. "Y'know, I never did." He admitted. "When I was younger, I traveled a lot and saw a lot of places. I thought about moving, maybe to Colorado. It's pretty there."

"Mm."

"But I'd come back, and look around, and say, well, why move?" He continued. "Every place has it's peculiar problems. Nothings a paradise. I like Texas. I like the people, I like the attitude. It fits me."

"That's how I feel about here." Dar watched a lizard scamper down the pylon she was leaning against and regard her suspiciously. "I bitch about the traffic and the politics but it's home." She glanced at her watch, then she turned and looked at the long, tree lined approach to the terminal. "Here we go."

Alastair leaned forward and spotted the car approaching. "Well that wasn't too bad, now was it?"

"No." Dar got up off the ground. "I wanted to wait until we were rolling before I started yelling at people on the phone." She studied the big Lincoln Town Car that was rapidly approaching them. "Hope they remembered the YooHoo."

"Eh?"

The driver stopped the car and got out, coming around the front of the car rapidly. "Afternoon, folks." He said. "I had a little trouble getting past the police barricade, and I don't think they want me in here so we should make a little haste." He reached for their bags, popping the trunk with his remote in his other hand.

"Police?" Alastair frowned, handing his bag over. "Place is closed... why do they need police?"

The driver threw his bag in the trunk and grabbed Dar's. "I guess you haven't heard what's been going on here, huh? I was real surprised to get a note to pick up here, tell you that."

"No, we haven't.." Dar headed for the now open back door. "We've been in the air for nine hours..."

Alastair was getting in the other side as the driver slammed the trunk and trotted for the front seat. "Something going on here in Florida? More terrorist activity?" He got in and joined Dar, as the driver slid behind the wheel and threw the car into gear. "There's not a problem here, is there?"

"Problem?" The driver turned the car in a tight U, heading back down the approach as six police cars came rolling down the opposite lane. "Lady, they're arresting people and kicking down doors right and left around town." He watched intently in the rear view mirror as he drove, turning it so he could see the police cars. "My brother works for Dade County and he just told me the guys who took over those planes lived down here."

"Here?" Alastair said. "What the hell?" He looked at Dar. "They lived here? I thought they were saying on the news before we left this was from some group outside?"

"Who knows at this point?" The driver said. "Hey, I'm Dave, by the way." He added. "You gave me an address off Brickell, right?" He looked quickly behind him. "Guess those guys forgot about me."

"Right" Dar murmured. "This all doesn't make sense."

"Nothing's made sense since yesterday morning." Dave said. "That cooler in the back's got the drinks you asked for. They aren't very cold yet, I had to stop by Publix to get them." He glanced at them in the rearview. "How'd you folks end up landing here anyway? We heard there were no planes allowed to land. It's been real dry for us. I sure was glad to get the call. You need to go anyplace else? Want to stop and pick up some java?"

Dar met his eyes in the mirror. "Do we look like we need it?" She asked, wryly.

"Anyone flying for 9 hours needs it." He neatly sidestepped the question. "You a Starbucks or Versailles kinda lady?"

"Versailles, please." Dar had to smile. "I promised my boss here a café cubano."

"You got it." The driver said. "Sit back and relax, and I'll get you right there. I figured you were local."

"Thanks." Dar did, in fact, sit back in her seat. She opened her PDA and looked up a number. "Might as well get this started." She was about to dial, when the phone rang. "Dar Roberts." She answered it, only to have it beep for a second incoming call.

Alastair was already on the phone, waiting for it to be answered. "Does that java come in buckets?" He asked. "I think we're going to need it."

**

Kerry felt a sense of odd déjà vu as she took her bottle of ice tea and settle down in one of the thick leather chairs in the courtesy bus. "Gentlemen, thank you very much for taking time out of your day to talk with me for a minute."

The facilities chief, an older man with a bristly gray buzz cut and a weathered face dropped into the chair across from her with a tired grunt. "Any excuse to sit down." He glanced up as one of the bus workers approached him and offered a tray. "What's that?"

"Roast beef sandwich, sir." The young woman supplied. "And we have chips and fresh potato salad."

The chief didn't hesitate, reaching over to envelope one of the rolls in a large, callused hand. "Hand em over. First thing I had since dark of the clock this am."

Having supplied herself with spicy chicken, Kerry was content to watch as the military men were served, Danny and two of the other techs already busy at the nearby counter chowing down. She opened her bottle of ice tea and sipped from it, jerking just a bit as her PDA went off. She pulled it out and opened it, unable to repress a smile when she saw the message's sender.

Hey.

We're out of the airport and heading for coffee. Did you know all hell's breaking loose down here? People getting arrested and all that?

Jet lag sucks.

We are going to the office after this. I'm working on your gear. I got two calls from clients up in New York who complained they were down and told them off. I think I scared Alastair. Some guy from the NSA called me, but hung up before he could tell me what he wanted.

Left a message for Gerry. Maybe he can get me up there tonight.

Kerry's eyes widened. "Tonight???"

"Ma'am?" The bus attendant was in front of her. "Would you like a sandwich?"

Tonight? Kerry blinked at the tray, completely distracted. "Uh... no." She held up her tea. "I'm fine thanks. I stopped and had lunch on the way here." She waited for the server to move away, then looked down again at her PDA.

I need a good night's sleep with you wrapped around me.

"So now, what's this all about." The chief said, wiping his lips with a company logo'd napkin. "You people the computer people?"

Kerry hesitated, then she closed the PDA. "Yes, we're the computer people." She fought the urge to go back to Dar's note. "But we work with a lot more than computers. We handle the systems that let you communicate with the rest of the military infrastructure, and run most of the programs that bring in information and send out things like accounting and payroll."

The chief chewed his sandwich, studying her with faded blue eyes. "So what you're saying is you're important."

Kerry shook her head. "No. You're important." She disagreed. "The people here working their tails off to get things back up and going are important. Our mission here is to help you do that."

One gray eyebrow cocked. "Good answer."

The CO, a tall, lanky man with straight, dark hair chuckled softly under his breath. "Ms. Stuart, I've been trying to get hold of your management since yesterday." He said. "You don't need to sweet talk me into pushing to get you what you need."

"Well." Kerry paused. "We had to evacuate our commercial operations center and they took the brunt of that over in Houston. I know they were slammed. I was traveling yesterday here, Dar Roberts, our CIO and our CEO Alastair McLean were in transit back from England."

"Seems like you were putting together a plan to come help us anyway." The CO said. "But then, you people always do. I hate computers." He said. "I wish I could throw the lot of them into the Potomac but at least you make ours work."

"Most of the time." Kerry accepted the compliment with a smile. "They're machines. They break." She paused a moment. "So what I need, to bring this conversation to a point – is power in our backup core space."

"One that ain't finished yet?" The chief asked.

"Sure." Kerry replied. "We never do things the easy way."

"What's the point of that, Ms. Stuart?" The CO asked.

"Please, call me Kerry." Kerry said. She stood up and went to the side mounted white board and picked up a marker. "Your systems are laid out like this." She quickly sketched in the five sided building, and it's rings, putting squares in place rooted out of her memory of Dar's planning sessions. "Each area has a wiring closet, and those closets are connected with a fiber backbone."

She glanced behind her, finding the military men watching her intently. "Eventually, everything has to come back to one place, so we can take it out of the building. In this case, for this facility, we had two central locations for redundancy."

"Ah huh." The chief said. "Remember you all bitching about all that space that took up?" He turned and looked at the CO. "Had to hear that from you for a month."

"You did." The CO agreed. "Thought it was a waste of time until I got told I didn't know my ass from a teakettle and to leave the IT stuff to the IT people."

Kerry eyed him. "Talked to Dar, huh?"

"Certainly has a smart mouth." The CO said. "I was about to kick up when she went off talking for about twenty minutes and I have to admit to you I did not understand one single word she said. Might as well have been speaking Turkish."

"The mouth goes with the rest of her." Kerry said, in a mild tone. "She's brilliant. Sometimes she goes on for twenty minutes and I don't understand a word."

"Yes, well, I realized that when we went through the plan for the reconstruction of the wing there, and figured out if we hadn't had a spare, we'd have been in a world of hurt trying to work around that. So all's good." The CO said. "But here we are, nothing's working."

"Right." Kerry went back to the diagram. "There is no way we can quickly recover the destroyed room." She looked over at the chief. "I think you probably realize that."

The man nodded. "Find all your folks?" He asked, the tone of the conversation suddenly growing quiet, and grim.

"Not all of them." Kerry said. "We're still missing a few."

The chief studied her. "Might have been in there. Your folks were, a lot."

There was an awkward silence. Kerry folded her arms, gripping the marker in her right hand. "That had occurred to me." She said. "But I hope that's not the case. I hope they're just out of touch and we'll hear from them today."

The CO cleared his throat. "So you need power in this new space." He said. "Chief, can we do that?"

The chief chewed his sandwich thoughtfully as they waited in silence for his answer. Kerry went over to the table and got her ice tea, leaning an elbow on the counter as she gave in and opened her PDA again.

I need a good night's sleep with you wrapped around me.

"I need that too." Kerry muttered under her breath. "Maybe I can call Gerry and ask him."

"How much power you need?" The chief spoke up suddenly.

Kerry glanced over at Danny. "Do you have that handy, or do I need to get it from the master doco server?"

Danny stopped in mid chew. "Uh.."

"Ah hah." Kerry went over to where her laptop was resting on the counter and unlocked it. She opened a browser and typed in an address, waiting for the page to display over the satellite link before she entered a request. "Hang on."

She glanced back at the PDA on the counter.

I entered a request. "Hang on."

She glanced back at the PDA on the counter.

We're driving through Little Havana now. There's a lot people on the street talking. Want some café con leche? Alastair's trying a croqueta.

"Okay." Kerry reviewed the list on the screen. "Boy, there was a lot of stuff in there." She ran the calculations. "Ten racks at sixty amps per rack." She looked up at the chief. "Six hundred amps. Twenty 30 amp lines."

The chief stopped chewing and stared at her. "In that little room????"

Kerry nodded wryly. "We also need AC."

"Son of a bitch!"

"Can we do it, chief?" The CO broke in. "Who the hell cares how much it is? It's not like we have a budget for it. What does it mean, a bigger cable? C'mon now, you know what's at stake here. We're blind without that equipment."

"You don't even have equipment for me to plug in there." The chief turned around and said to him. "I know it ain't here, because I heard those IT people talking about it."

The CO looked over at Kerry. "What's the story with that?"

Kerry leaned against the counter. "Dar's working on it." She said. "It'll be here. Our racking vendor is already preparing a truck heading here with the framework."

The chief looked around at her. "We can do it." He said, surprisingly. "I'll have power pulled in there by tonight. That do you?"

"Thank you." Kerry smiled warmly at him. "Yes, that takes a big weight off my shoulders. I wouldn't want to call in the markers I'm calling in just to get everything here and not be able to use it."

There was a little silence. The military men subsided into pensive thought, and Kerry took a sip of her ice tea. She took a breath, and from one moment to the next, seeing those tired faces, they changed from a problem she had to solve to human beings she just wanted to help.

She'd never felt a kinship to the military. She'd always regarded that world with a wary respect, not understanding it, or the people who chose to be a part of it. Getting a closer look had never really been in her plans, right up until her partnership with Dar.

Dar had been her window into that world, however unexpected that had been. She still wasn't sure she understood most of it, but having talked with Ceci, and knowing and loving both her and Andrew, she'd gained at least a sympathy for these people who chose to serve.

"What else can we do?" Kerry asked, gazing at them. "Can we get something, do something for the people here? Do people need help? Access to their systems for emergencies? We're bringing up an internet hotspot here and if you send your financial people to see me, I can get them into workstations here on the bus, or in our Herndon center."

The chief leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Can you take back yesterday?"

Kerry put her tea down and went over to where he was sitting, taking a seat on the couch next to him. "I wish I could." She said. "I think every single person I know would."

The chief looked at her. "Have you ever wanted to hit someone but you ain't got a target, young lady?" He said. "I just want to find the people who thought this was a great and noble thing to do and keep hitting them until their guts come out on the floor."

"We all feel that way." The CO put a hand on the chief's shoulder. Billy remained silent, eyes wide, just watching behind them. "We all lost friends. We all have people in the hospital, and families hurting." He looked at Kerry. "But we have a job to do. We have jobs that only we can do, so we can turn this around."

Kerry nodded. "We'll get you back in operation." She stated. "We'll get everything fixed. We have the resources and the will to make it happen."

The bus attendants came back in, with chocolate cupcakes and hot coffee. The scents filled the interior, and the men all looked up, visibly brightening as the women came over.

"I know you're not part of the military." The CO addressed Kerry.

"No, I'm not. But my father in law is retired Navy, and my partner grew up on a Navy base down in south Florida." Kerry replied. "I won't pretend to understand your world, but I dearly love people who were a part of it."

The CO nodded, after a pause. "Good enough." He said. "We'll get you what you need, Kerry. You get us what we need."

"Hey, boss?" Mark entered, then stopped, and sniffed. "Ooo.. Chocolate." He looked hopefully at the trays. "Got extra?"

Kerry patted the chief's knee and stood. "What's up?"

"ETA six hours for the sat trucks." Mark said, succinctly.

"Six hours? For the trucks that came from **Houston**?" Kerry asked, in disbelief. "What the hell did they do, put afterburners on the pickup trucks?"

"Didn't ask." Mark said, through a mouthful of cupcake. "Dar taught me sometimes its better not to ask stuff like that."

The CO's eyes swung from one to the other. "What does that get us?"

Mark licked his fingers. "Couple of long ass cables and it gets your critical systems back online in slow motion." He said. "But it'll work. I've got enough gear in the back of my truck to get rudimentary routing moving as long as we can bring Newark back up."

"In six hours?" The CO's eyes lit up. "You're serious?"

"Sure." Mark nodded. "They said the power generator trucks would be there by then, didn't they?"

"They did." Kerry said. "They sure did."

"Great. We'll start cabling up the gear and running the lines in." Mark said. "I'm gonna need juice though. I can't run those enterprise switches and routers off my truck battery."

The chief stood up and latched on to his arm. "C'mon boy." He said. "I got your power for you. Come with me."

The CO and Billy got up and started after them. "Let's see what we can do to help" The CO said. "Billy round up some of those carts of yours."

"Sure thing." Billy turned and waved at Kerry. "Thanks, ma'am. For everything."

"Bwf..." Mark grabbed another cupcake as he was hauled bodily out of the bus. "Later boss!"

"Later." Kerry went back to the counter and picked up her tea, her eyes flicking to the PDA waiting on the shiny surface. She sat down on the stool nearby and took a cupcake from the tray, studiously unwrapping it as she went back to her message.

She had a lot to do. There were things to arrange, and the conference call to get back to, her mother to call, the government to worry about... but she blocked out a space of time to sit, and have her cupcake, and recover her equilibrium.

Time for a Dar break.

**

Dar led the way towards the front doors to the office, better for a handful of croquettas and a large Styrofoam cup of café con leche inside her. "Know what?" She said suddenly. "I forgot to tell them you were with me."

Alastair chuckled deep in his throat. "As though the world isn't topsy turvy enough, I show up you mean." He glanced up at the tall building. "Weren't you going to move out of this place?"

"I still might." Dar waved at the guard as the doors slid open, releasing a blast of cold air at them. "Afternoon, gentlemen."

"Ms. Roberts!" The guard nearest the door came around the desk and approached her. "Boy are we glad to see you!" He said. "They said you were overseas! We had the building management here five times already today asking for plans, and emergency authorizations."

"I bet." Dar paused and clipped her badge to her tshirt. "Give me a half hour to get into my office upstairs then send them up to me." She spotted a few familiar faces crossing the floor, and with an effort, wrenched her brain back into place to deal with being back at the office. "C'mon."

"Right behind you." Alastair had regained his cheerful good nature. "You know, that was some damn good coffee, Dar. You were right."

Mariana had just exited the elevator. Dar put two fingers between her teeth and let out a loud whistle, making the HR VP stop in her tracks and look quickly around, scanning over them twice before she stopped and stared, then let out a yelp. "AH!"

Heads turned. Dar caught the looks of recognition and then the double takes as Alastair was spotted at her side. She waited for Mariana to reach them, then was surprised almost beyond speech when the woman threw her arms around her and gave her a hug. "Uh."

"Thank god you're safe." Mariana released her. "Alastair, you too." She added hastily. "Great to see you!"

Alastair burst into laughter. "Oh hell." He chuckled. "Nice to see you to, Mari." He patted her on the shoulder. "It ain't home, but it's damn nice to be on home soil again."

"Why didn't you tell me you were back?" Mariana turned on Dar. "Does Kerry.. no, of course she knows you're here."

"She knows I'm in Miami, sure." Dar said. "But she didn't know until I landed because we didn't know until we landed. We were supposed to still be in the air heading to Mexico right now." She looked up as a group of people surrounded them. "Hey o.."

Later on, she had time to reflect on the fact that her relationship with Kerry had slowly but surely gotten her used to physical contact and how lucky that was for her co workers.

Jose grabbed her arm, and got a hand around her back. "Shit! You're here! Jesus, thank you." He wrung her neck a little, then grabbed Alastair's hand. "Boss, good to see you."

Eleanor gave her a quick hug. "No bull, Dar." She said in a quieter tone. "Glad you're safe."

More hands. More voices.

"Jefa!"

Dar turned and found herself enveloped by Maria. This at least she welcomed. "Hey Maria." She returned her admin's hug. "Glad to be back."

Maria released her. "But not for so long, no?" She said. "I think you will go find Kerrisita and help her. She is doing so much."

"I think you're right." Dar smiled.

"Hey Dar!" Duks elbowed in and got an arm around her shoulders. "Now things are looking up." He announced, giving Alastair a pat on the shoulder. "Sir. Welcome to our banana republic."

"Thanks." Alastair patted him on the side. "Good to see you Louis." He glanced at the crowd. "I think we should move this upstairs, folks. We're blocking the lobby."

"Hey, Ms. Roberts. Welcome home." One of the ops techs timidly clasped her hand. "Boy, we're glad you're here."

Dar felt a little overwhelmed.

"All right, everyone to what our friends in England call the lifts." Alastair took charge. He handed off his bag to a willing Jose. "Someone want to get Dar's roller here? Let's go, march people. We've got work to do." He put his hand on Dar's elbow and started herding people simply by the act of moving and presenting them with the choice of moving with him or being bowled over.

Mariana fell in next to Dar. "Did you get any rest at all since yesterday? Doesn't look like it."

"Not a lot." Dar collected herself. "Catnaps. I was covering for Kerry while she was traveling."

"We know." Mari gave her a sympathetic look. "And Mark was covering for you both while he was traveling. You know, we recorded the entire global meeting place, Dar. One day, a long time from now you should sit down and listen to it."

"That was something, wasn't it?" Alastair had been listening with one ear, apparently, carrying on two other conversations with the other.

"I think it was the finest moment this company ever had." Mari said, simply.

"Well." Dar reached the elevator and got in, going to the back corner and turning to face those following her in. "Maybe we can look at it sometime. Right now, it's a drop in the bucket." She clasped her briefcase in both hands as the elevator filled, and they started up.

"Alastair, I'll have an office set up for you." Mari said. "Just give me a few minutes when we get upstairs."

"Oh please." Alastair said. "What in blazes do you think **I'm** going to do here? Just give me a damn phone and a chair so I can let people bitch at me." He glanced sideways at Dar. "Keep them off the back of the people who do the real stuff."

"Well.."

"Shut up, Alastair. You do plenty." Dar said, in a loud enough voice to cut through the chatter in the elevator. "Cut the BS."

Her boss looked over at her, both gray eyebrows hiking.

Dar mirrored his expression right back at him.

The doors slid open, and everyone escaped out of the car into the hallway, pouring into the gray and maroon space as they cleared the way for Dar and Alastair to exist. Dar turned and headed towards her office, and after a second, her boss followed her.

Maria also followed her. "Jefa, do you want something from the café?"

"More coffee." Dar said. "And some of the cheese pastalitos. They make them better here than at Versailles." She glanced back at Alastair. "Want coffee?"

"Sure." Alastair agreed. "I'm just going to borrow your outside office to make a call until they finish setting up whatever poobah area they've come up with for me."

Dar snorted. "You can go work in Kerry's office if you want. She's got a boxing dummy in there if you get bored." She led the way into her office, pushing the door open and feeling a sense of relief as her eyes took in the familiar surroundings.

It was all a little too much, coming back like this. It had been too long a day, too long a flight, too many strange happenings to end with this clamor of familiarity rubbing her nerves so raw.

She opened the door to her inner office and went through, slowing down a little as she took in the plate glass walls, and the view of the ocean. Her desk was clean, as always, only the fighting fish and her monitor disturbing the sleek wooden surface.

"Well, you do have a couch in here. What do ya know." Alastair poked his head in.

"Yes, I do." Dar put her briefcase down and settled into her comfortable leather chair, it's cool surface chilling her back a little through her thin tshirt. She reached under her desk to boot her computer, giving the trackball a spin as it started up. "Okay."

"Okay." Alastair came inside. "I'll take you up on that office offer. Just tell me where it is and I'll get out of your hair."

Dar gave him a wry look, and pointed at the back door. "Go down that hall, door at the other end is Ker's."

Alastair looked at the door, then at her. "You've got to be kidding me."

Dar lifted both hands up in sheepish acknowledgement. "You can go out in the hall, turn left, find the kitchen, and go in the front way if you want to. Don't scare her admin though."

"The two of you. I swear." Alastair chuckled, making his way to the door and passing through it.

At last it was quiet. Dar sat back, then she turned her chair around to face the water. The surface was ruffled with white waves, a cavalcade of boats heading up into the bay and reminding her of yet another potential issue. "First things first."

She turned back around and tapped her speaker phone, dialing Gerry's phone number. Her desktop came up, and she typed her password in, watching as her backdrop came up, along with the global meetingplace login box. She logged in, and changed her status.

Login: Roberts, Dar

Location: Miami Operations Center

Role: Miami operations executive.

Status: Missing my wife.

She backspaced over the last, and typed in *good* instead, and sent the box on its way.

The phone rang twice, then it was answered. "General Easton's office. Can I help you?" A woman's voice answered, sounding harried and a touch out of breath.

"I'd like to speak to the General please." Dar said. "It's Dar Roberts. He's expecting my call."

"One moment."

Dar scanned the screen as the status boards popped up, and there was a soft crackle that warned her the conference bridge was starting. She lowered the volume, as the phone came off hold.

"Hello, Ms. Roberts?" The woman's voice came back. "Hold on a moment, the General is getting to his desk."

"Sure. Tell him to take his time. I bet he's as tired as I am." Dar remarked.

"You know it." The woman said, her tone warming. "Hang on, I'm transferring."

A click, and then Gerry's voice boomed over the line. "Dar? That you?"

"It's me." Dar acknowledged. "How's it going there, Gerry? I'm in Miami."

"Miami!" The general said. "What the hell? I thought you were heading for Houston!"

"Me too. Long story."

There was a rustling noise and the sound of a door closing, then Gerry cleared his throat. "Well, I'm damn glad to hear you're back and on the ground safe." He said. "Things are a little better today. Had everyone on my backside this morning until I got a call from the fella's down trying to make sense out of this place and found out your people are already moving on everything. Wonderful!"

Dar smiled. "I sent the best I have there, Gerry." She said. "Mark Polenti, my chief techhead, and Kerry's there, too."

"Y'know, that's what my fella said." Easton agreed. "Said your people are the best. Bringing in cupcakes and fixing everything. I really appreciate that, Dar."

"Anytime." Dar said. "So does that mean you don't need my ass up there? I'm sure Ker's got it under control."

"Ah." Gerry sighed. "Well, no."

Dar knew a moment of perfectly balanced conflict, as her desire to be where Kerry was battled against her knowledge that whatever Gerry was going to ask of her was by definition worse than what she was dealing with there already. "What's up?"

"You someplace quiet?"

"I'm in my office." Dar said. "The only thing listening is my fish."

"Right." Gerry said. "Listen, Dar.. I don't usually get involved in the civilian side of things, I've got more than enough on my plate right now, you see?"

"Sure."

"Just had the head of the White House financial office in here kicking me in the kiester." Gerry said. "Thing is, they lost a lot of facility there in New York."

"I know." Dar said. "We have a lot of customers down."

"Well, you'd know more about that than I would. Anyway, y'know they shut down the Stock exchanges, right?" Gerry said. "All the financial stuff down in the south tip of Manhattan?" He paused. "You knew about that right?"

"I didn't.. well, I probably heard that in all the clamor yesterday but didn't pay that much attention." Dar admitted. "There was so much going on."

"Well, don't you know? Here too!" Gerry said. "Feller from the White House seemed to say I'd been derelict in my duty because I didn't know a bull from a bear." He sighed aggrievedly. "So this guy comes over here and tells me it's a national emergency about those stock houses. Have to get them back working. Government is counting on it. World stability is at stake."

Dar's brows contracted. "Granted." She said. "Having the markets down sucks but didn't they say yesterday they shut them down on purpose to stop a run on them? I thought I heard that in a sound bite."

"Pish tosh." Easton said. "I got an earful about keeping consumer confidence up and all that, but the fact is, all the blinking things and doodads in there can't work because of all the damage. They don't want to admit it, trying to make everything seem like it wasn't that much. You see?"

"Ah." Dar murmured. "I see." She paused. "Why the hell are they after you for that, Gerry? Since when is the Joint Chief's in charge of telecommunications repair?"

"We aren't." Gerry stated, with a snort. "Which is what I told this feller and he told me he didn't want to hear my problems, he wanted me to get his solved. " The general cleared is throat. "Apparently because I." He said. "Know you."

"Me?"

"You." Easton confirmed. "Someone told this guy that you'd be able to fix this thing."

"Me?" Dar repeated. "Gerry, they're not customers of ours. We have nothing to do with the Exchanges. That's all private line work." She protested. "I don't even know anyone down there."

"Well, Dar, I don't know what to tell you, but this guy said I should get hold of you and make you fix this problem for the White House." Gerry said. "Now, he said I wasn't suppose to tell you it was for the White House, but I told him if he wanted me to ask you to do something you had to know why or you'd tell them to..ah.."

"Kiss my ass?" Dar exhaled. "To be honest, Gerry, I really wouldn't tell the White House that, even though I think the current occupant has the mental capacity of a woodchuck and the personality of what it excretes."

General Easton cleared his throat.

"I just don't know what we can do about it." She went on. "Honestly. None of that is ours, and they lost so much infras..."

She paused, thinking hard.

"Dar?"

"Yeah, sorry." Dar said. "I was just considering something. So what do they want me to do, Gerry?"

A soft buzzing sound came through the phone. "Damn thing." Gerry sighed. "Dar, honest, I don't know because all that whoo hah you do is just so much mumbo jumbo to me. I think you need to come up to talk to this guy. Tell him the straight facts. If you can't do it, you can't."

"Okay." Dar agreed. "Can you get me a lift? I'll do him one better, I'll bring my boss with me so we can dispense with the 'let me talk to your boss' routine right off."

"Sure can." Easton sounded pleased. "Let me get my girl on it, and she'll call you with the scoop." He said. "Listen, Dar.. "He hesitated. "If you can do anything for this guy, you might want to think about it. He's big. He can cause you a lot of trouble, if you catch my drift."

"Yeah." Dar murmured. "I catch your drift."

"Good. See you tonight then." Easton said. "Later, Dar."

"Later." Dar hung up the phone, leaning back in her chair with her hands laced behind her head. "Well, shit."

The door opened, and Maria poked her head in. "Ready for café, jefa?"

Dar looked at her. "Oh yeah." She said. "I sure am." She waited for Maria to enter. "Looks like I'll be flying out to DC tonight, Maria. Any chance of getting someone to run by my place and grab another overnight bag?"

"Of course." Maria said. "Mayte has already mentioned she would be glad to do that if you needed her to, and also to bring anything Kerrisita might need. We want to do our part as well."

Dar smiled at her. "This is a hell of a time, isn't it, Maria?"

Her admin set her coffee and pastries down and came around to the back side of the desk, leaning against the edge of it as she studied Dar. "I was crying so much, all day." Maria said. "I was so scared, for everything."

"Me too." Dar replied.

"Listening to Kerrisita, she sounded so upset also." Maria said. "But you know, when you came on to the big conference, and what Kerrista said? We all said the same thing, all of us. Everyone."

Dar cocked her head in momentary puzzlement. "Oh, you mean about being glad to hear my voice."

"Si." Maria nodded.

Dar exhaled. "Now that yesterday is over though, it's hard to know where we go from here." She said. "It all just makes so little sense."

"My Tomas says the same." Maria said. "Let me leave you to get your things done. I will send Mayte over to your house right away."

"I'll call my folks and have them have a bag ready." Dar said, leaning forward and reaching for the phone. "And I guess I better warn Alistair."

"Como?"

"I think I got us into a hell of a situation."

**

Kerry leaned on the steering wheel, waiting for the lights to change so she could continue her slow progress towards the Capital. She glanced at her watch, then pulled through the intersection and continued along her way.

She checked her watch. Thirty minutes until the time she'd told her mother she'd be there, and she figured she would even have time to find her way without having to run through the hallowed halls.

"Talk to Congress." She drummed her fingers on her steering wheel. "How completely freaky that I'm considering that taking a break from what I was doing all day."

She picked up a bottle of juice from the cup holder and unscrewed the top, tossing a few tablets into her mouth and washing them down as she found the cross street she was looking for and turned down it. On one side was a stately office complex, its limestone front the same sedate cream she remembered and she entertained a few old memories of the place as she turned into the parking area.

The first time she visited the Russell building to visit her father in his offices there, she'd been about eight. Kerry remembered, dimly, the feeling of wonder as she walked at her mother's side between the trees and up into the solemnly colonnaded rotunda.

Now she took a moment as she got out of the SUV to collect herself, and tug her jacket sleeves straight before she shouldered her brief case and closed the door. The cool air puffed against her hair as she crossed the road and walked down the sidewalk, giving the armed soldiers there a brief smile.

They glanced at her, but none of them made a motion to stop her. Apparently blond haired Midwestern looking chicks weren't on the watch list. Kerry reached the visitors entrance and went inside, not surprised to see more armed soldiers there.

She approached the visitor's desk and stood quietly, waiting her turn as two men spoke to the receptionist ahead of her. The room was quiet, several people sitting in chairs on one side, one or two people working at tables, and the soldiers, looking shockingly out of place in their field uniforms with guns slung over their shoulders.

What exactly, she wondered, were the soldiers supposed to do in case someone wanted to blow themselves up in the room? Jump on them? Surely not. Shoot them? Would that stop whoever it was from pressing a button?

Technology moved faster than people. Kerry knew that better than most. If someone in the room had explosives strapped to their chests and pressed a button, there was nothing on earth that could stop that signal from reaching its target.

Security, men with guns, presupposed the threat they were guarding against could be reasoned with or intimidated. If your aim was killing yourself and everyone around you, like those pilots, how secure could you really make anything outside requiring people to go around naked and putting them through plastic explosive detectors every six feet?

Bad. Kerry exhaled. Violence never really was the answer, was it? At best, it was a temporary roll of duct tape in a series of escalating contests of humanities drive to claw its way to the top of whatever anthill they occupied. "As a species, we sure suck sometimes."

"Ma'am?" The woman behind the desk was looking at her, one eyebrow lifted.

The men had left, and Kerry apologetically stepped forward to the edge of the table. "Sorry." She murmured. "I have an appointment with Senator Stuart."

The woman studied the book in front of her. "Your name, please?"

"Kerrison Stuart."

The receptionist glanced up and studied her face for a moment. "Yes, she's expecting you." She said, after a pause. "Sergeant, can you please escort this lady to suite 356."

The nearest soldier came over, and gave Kerry the once over, then nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He said. "Come with me please."

Kerry obediently circled the table and followed the soldier through the back door and into the building. The hallways too, were quiet. She could hear the far off sound of typing, something that had become an alien sound in the office buildings she now frequented.

It smelled of stone, and polish, and old wood. The buildings were from the early 1900's, and you could sense the history in the place as they walked along the wide corridor.

"Ma'am?" The soldier glanced sideways at her.

"Yes?"

"Do you know where you're going?"

Kerry repressed a smile. "Yes, I do." She said.

"That's a good thing. We just got here this morning, and I don't know even where the bathroom is yet. The soldier confessed. "There's a lot of little rooms around here."

"There are." Kerry agreed. "It used to hold around ninety different senator's offices, but now it's only about thirty of them, since everyone needs more people, more computers, more conference tables... it's a warren with all the interconnections now."

"Yeah." The soldier said. "You know the senator? I met her this morning. Seems like a nice lady."

"She's my mother." Kerry replied.

"Oh, wow. That's cool" The man seemed to relax a little. "My mother would come in this place and want to right off paint it some other color. Put some plants around, you know?"

Kerry chuckled. "I know." She said. "This is more or less the same color as the walls in the house I grew up in, unfortunately. I'd go for a nice teal myself."

She led the way to the doors to her mother's offices. "Well, here we are."

"Okay. Thanks for showing me." The soldier said. "You have a good day now, okay ma'am?"

"Thanks." Kerry pushed the door open, giving the man a smile. "By the way, the bathrooms are down the next corridor, on the left." She winked at him, and ducked inside the office, closing the door behind her.

The soldier digested that information, and nodded. "That was a nice woman. Wish we had more people around like that."

He turned and started back towards the reception area, whistling softly under his breath.

Kerry was spared the need to interrupt the harried looking staff when her mother came out of one of the side doors, and spotted her.

"Ah, Kerry." Cynthia Stuart looked relieved. "I'm glad you could make it over here. Please, come inside and tell me how it is over at the Pentagon."

Kerry followed her back into what she remembered had been her father's office and knew a very strange moment of skewed déjà vu as she crossed to a chair across from the desk and set her briefcase down. "How are things going here today?"

Cynthia seated herself behind the desk. "Troubling." She said. "I hardly know where to start in addressing all of these issues. I just am quite glad my home area was not one of the ones affected."

Kerry sat down. "I'm sure you heard Florida was."

Her mother blinked a little. "I had heard. Yes. That's so very strange." She said. "I remember your father saying so many times how he felt uneasy about Miami, and now to hear all this makes me wonder if he didn't somehow know more than he realized."

"I don't think that's what he had in mind." Kerry said, after a brief pause. "I always got the sense he didn't trust Miami because of all the immigrants there. Hispanics are a majority. But I never got the idea that they were part of anything dangerous to the country."

"Perhaps." Her mother said. "We will have to see what it is they found there. Maybe those men felt they could blend in more than in other places."

Kerry half shrugged. "Like any other major city." She said. "We're working with the people at the Pentagon to get their systems back up. We should have some basic connectivity back in a few hours."

"I see." Her mother folded her hands. "Or, well, let me not lie about it. I assume that means something positive since I don't really understand what it is you mean."

Kerry relaxed a trifle in her seat. "It is." She paused. "They depend on computers to exchange information with everyone and everything. Right now, they have some dialup ability with a few servers, but it's very limited. What we'll do tonight is get their main computers to talk to the rest of the world using a portable satellite truck while my team is rebuilding the pieces that were destroyed in the attack."

"I see." Cynthia said, again. "Has Dar returned? I know you were concerned about her."

Kerry's face broke into a grin. "Believe it or not, she's home in Miami." She said. "I heard from her around one thirty or so. She may be heading up here tonight. It's a big load off my shoulders, that's for sure."

"How lovely!" Cynthia said, with sincere warmth. "I'm so glad she's back safely. It's impossible to believe how dangerous simple travel now is. I was talking to one of my colleagues today about it, and he's terribly worried about tourism, and how that will affect the economy."

Kerry blinked. "Because people will be afraid to fly?"

"Yes." Her mother nodded. "You may not realize it, but many of our airlines are on the borderline in terms of being profitable. This sort of thing devastates them. It's a domino also, as so many state economies depend on tourism, you know."

"Like Florida's." Kerry nodded. "Maybe people will just start staying closer to home. Travel in a car." Her brows twitched. "I always wondered what that was like. The longest car trip I've made is from Miami to Orlando."

Her mother looked thoughtful. "We never did have time for that as a family." She allowed. "I think I would have enjoyed driving through the Grand Canyon area. It's so beautiful."

"It's on our list too."

"Well, at any rate." Cynthia sighed. "Several of the intelligence committee would like to meet up with us in the caucus room at four. Does that suite you?" She watched Kerry's face carefully. "It shouldn't take more than perhaps an hour, and then I thought we could have some dinner."

"Sure." Kerry agreed readily. "That's fine by me. I was actually grateful for a reason to get out from under my staff at the Pentagon and let them do their jobs. When I'm around they tend to hover." She smiled briefly. "And really, there wasn't much for me to do there once I got the facilities straightened out and arranged for power and air conditioning."

"Excellent." Her mother said.

"Senator?" One of the aides stuck their head in the door, and paused as they spotted Kerry. "Oh, hello there."

"Hi." Kerry smiled at the aide, the older man who'd been with them the night before. "How are you doing?"

"Much better for not having slept in the car, thanks." The aide briefly smiled. "Senator, they've confirmed it. It was the White House and Air Force One that was targeted. No doubt at all."

"Goodness." The senator frowned. "Then that last plane in Pennsylvania, it was headed there?"

"They think so, yes." The aide nodded. "I'm not sure how they were going to target Air Force One, but it was flying all over the place yesterday so..." He shrugged, and ducked back out.

"Thank goodness that came to nothing." Cynthia said. "What a horrible thing this is. So many people hurt. So many people killed." She looked up as her phone rang, then glanced at Kerry. "Excuse me, Kerry. I have to take this." She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Sure." Kerry checked her PDA, gratified to find a note from Dar waiting for her like the fudge at the bottom of a sundae. She leaned on one arm of the chair and opened the note, half listening to her mother's end of the conversation.

Hey babe.

Kerry smiled, hearing Dar's voice saying the salutation. That was a recent development too.

I'm sitting here at my desk trying to get over being hugged by Eleanor.

Kerry stopped reading, her eyes going wide. She leaned closer to the PDA and reread the line, not quite able to believe what she was seeing. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry, did you say something, Kerry?" Her mother asked, putting her hand over the receiver.

"Uh?" Kerry looked up. "No, sorry. I was just reading something here." She indicated the PDA. "Status report from Dar."

"Ah, good." Cynthia went back to the phone. "Edgar, I'm sure you're concerned, and I know we have a somewhat large community of.. well, yes, I agree it's possible. People are very upset."

Kerry wrenched her eyes back to the PDA.

I definitely have to head up there. I talked to Gerry, and I need to fill you in, but I'd rather do it in person.

Me too. Kerry agreed readily. I don't frankly care why he wants you up here, matter of fact. They could want us to light the White House with double redundant tin cans and strings and I wouldn't care.

So I'm waiting to hear from Gerry's secretary about flights. I'll drop you a note or call you when I find out anything. Alastair's got everyone in a twitter - he's working out of your office.

Kerry stopped again. My office? She ran quickly over what she'd left on her desk, relaxing when she remembered cleaning it off before she'd traveled. "They couldn't find him an office in that mausoleum?" She muttered. "Sheesh."

Mari wanted to get him space, but I told him he could work out of there and punch your dummy if he got frustrated.

Oh. Kerry scratched her nose. "Hope he likes having you looking back at him, sweetie. That's a big picture of you on my desk."

Anyway. I hope things are settling out there for you. I'd rather not spend the night configuring routers again.

Nope. Kerry could think of much better things to spend the night doing.

I'm going to go grab a sandwich. My body's all screwed up from the damn time change.

Later DD.

"Well, thanks for keeping me informed, Edgar." Cynthia sighed. "Please tell the chief to keep his eyes out for anything. I understand how people feel, but we have to uphold the law." She listened and put the phone back in its cradle. "Well. That's worrying."

"What's up?" Kerry gazed across the desk.

"You know, there are quite some number of Muslims that live in Michigan." Her mother said. "Edgar Braces, one of the commissioners in Deerborn, is afraid there might be some repercussions against them."

"Ah." Kerry grunted. "I hope people don't react like that."

"I hope so too." Cynthia said. "But you know, anger makes people so unreasonable sometimes."

How true that was. Kerry felt a sting of possibly unintended reproach in the words. She decided the retort that was in the back of her throat wasn't appropriate and her mother didn't deserve to hear it. She was being as gracious as Kerry had ever seen her, and she, herself had the inner grace to feel a little abashed at herself for her previous behavior. "It kind of proves the theory though, that violence usually breeds nothing but more violence, doesn't it?"

Cynthia nodded. "We learn from our lord Jesus that we must turn the other cheek, and love our neighbor, but sometimes I think that lesson stops when our neighbor does not share our values, or our faith, or our history." She studied her hands. "At times, it doesn't even extend to our families."

"Sometimes it doesn't." Kerry gazed back at her evenly. "It doesn't even take much of a difference."

Her mother's face wrinkled a little, then she nodded. "Very true." She looked at her watch. "It's time to go down to the caucus room. Are you ready?"

"As I will ever be." Kerry closed her PDA and tucked it into her briefcase. "Let's go." She stood up and locked the tab on the case. "Okay to leave this here?"

Cynthia paused in the act of standing up. "Of course." She said. "We won't be long." She gestured towards the door, and followed Kerry towards it. "Did you have something in mind that you would like for dinner?"

"How do you feel about sushi?"

"Sushi." Cynthia murmured. "I suppose I could try that. It certainly can't be any worse than the Samoan cultural dinner I attended last month."

**

Alastair took a moment to stroll around his borrowed office space. The room was neat, but he noticed at once that there were more personal items in it than there were in Dar's. Certificates on the walls, for one thing. He examined them.

Dar most likely had the same, and probably more, but he decided his CIO was so secure in her technical reputation she found no use for the things as wall hangings. Kerry hadn't been at it as long, so she probably felt she had something to prove.

Both attitudes worked, he decided. He moved along to the front of the office, pausing to study the full size boxing dummy complete with what were obviously used gloves. Was it something he expected to find in a vice presidents office?

Probably not. He turned and wandered back to the desk, pulling the chair out and taking a seat in it. The first thing he noticed were the pictures near the monitor. One big one of Dar, another of her and Kerry together, and one of Dar's parents with a small one next to it of the dog.

Not very different at all from his own desk. Alastair tapped his thumbs together. Then he pressed the speakerphone's button and dialed the extension to his office in Houston.

"Alastair McLean's office."

"Who the hell's that?" Alastair inquired. "Some old crackpot?"

Bea chuckled. "Hello, boss." She said. "Where are you now?"

"Caribbean Hell." Alastair answered. "I just got introduced to a demon's brew of coffee and sugar they suck down here by the gallon and my eyeballs are bouncing off the walls."

"Well that explains a lot about Dar." Bea said. "I just got off the phone with John Peter at travel, and he said he heard they'll let planes start flying again tomorrow. You want me to book you home?"

Alastair exhaled. "See what you can arrange." He said. "I've got a feeling I'm not going to make it back there before I have to go talk to some double breasted pair of wingtips in Washington, but it pays to be prepared."

"Will do." Bea said. "How's Dar?"

"Typically Dar." Her boss said. "Y'know though, I'm glad I got to travel with her for a few days. I've come to the conclusion I think I like her." He added. "As a person, I mean, not as my top ass coverer."

"You're deciding this now?" His admin asked, in a puzzled tone. "I always thought you liked Dar."

"I always liked Dar Roberts, my often pain in the ass but frequently brilliant beyond belief employee." Alastair clarified. "I didn't really know Dar the karate expert who does handstands on airplanes for fun."

"Ahh."

"She's neat."

Bea started laughing. "Oh, Alastair."

Alastair chuckled along with her. "What a stinking damned mess this all is." He said, after a moment. "I have to say, though, Bea, I honestly couldn't ask for a better response than we had from everyone in the company. Across the board."

"Absolutely." Bea agreed. "Jacques was just here, and he was saying the same thing. Horrific situation, absolutely, but we did the right things so far."

"Yup." Alastair glanced up as he heard someone coming down the back hallway. "Hang on, I think I'll know in a minute if you can book those flights or not."

A moment later, the door opened and Dar's tall form eased inside. She had a look on her face that Alastair had come to characterize as *here comes trouble*. "Hi there. Bea's on the line."

"Hi Bea." Dar responded promptly. "How are you?"

"I've had better weeks, Paladar." Bea said. "I'm sure you have too."

"Ain't that the truth." Dar sighed. "Alastair, how do you feel about ending up in Washington tonight? Gerry's offering a flight for us. I got hold of him."

"Yeah?" Alastair's brows twitched. "What's the scoop?"

Dar sat down in one of Kerry's visitors chairs. "It's... at first I thought he needed to pressure me to get the systems back up there, but he said he's been in touch with the folks on the ground and he's very happy with our response."

Alastair smiled. "That's what I like to hear." He watched Dar's face, it's sharp planes twitching into a wry acknowledgement. "But?"

"But." Dar repeated. "The loss of facility down in the tip of Manhattan's knocked out the financial sector."

"Well, sure."

"They seem to think we can fix that." Dar said. "I explained to him that it's not our piece of business. We don't deal with Wall Street, that's all private service."

"Hm." Alastair looked thoughtful. "No, it's not our piece of business." He agreed. "Yet."

Dar tilted her head in acknowledgement of the unspoken words. "The government people put pressure on Gerry to get me involved, because they've got some idea I can do a fast fix, and that's their interest. They don't care, I got the sense, of who's business that really is, they just need it taken care of because they need to open the markets."

"Ahh." Her boss nodded sagely. "I was wondering about that. I know they closed the indexes with some mention of market stability, but knowing where they are.. yes, I see their point. They can't let the bastards know they hit us that hard in the monetary groin." He nodded. "Get in there, Dar. That's not only important to them, it's also important to us. Our liquidity is tied up in those markets."

Dar gave him a look. "Gee, thanks." She groaned. "What in the hell do you expect me to do, go to New York and start running balls of twine and tin cans? Alastair, that's a lot of destruction in someplace

we usually have to unearth hundred year old conduit to run through and have thirty seven pissed off unions to deal with.”

“And?” Alastair inquired. “We lost a lot of facility there too, Dar. You were going to have to have people in there fixing things anyway. This is just one more tick on the task list. Call ATT and Verizon, find out what their plan is, you know the drill.”

“I know the drill.” Dar said. “So back to my question. You ready to fly up and talk to the White House about all this?”

Alastair leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. “Unlooked for, Dar, and I hate to sound so mercenary given the circumstances, but this a first class opportunity for us. Of course I’ll head up there with you. Are you kidding?”

Dar nodded. “Okay. I told Gerry you would.” She acknowledged. “I’m waiting to hear back from his people on the pick up details.”

“Great.” Her boss seemed quite pleased. “Bea, can you write up something about this just to keep the board informed?”

“Absolutely,” Bea responded. “So I won’t bother trying to book you a flight then, I guess. You going to break the news to your wife or you want me to?”

“How big of a chicken do you think I am?” Alastair spluttered. “Good grief!”

Dar started laughing.

“Stop that.” Alastair pointed at her. “You’d be a basket case if you had to tell Kerry you weren’t coming up there and you know it.”

Dar blushed visibly, but kept laughing.

“Pah.” Her boss finally chuckled too. “I’ll call her, Bea. I think she suspected it would end this way, after I told her about the Pentagon.” He said. “I think I’ll have to end up holding the fort there while our dynamic duo here go take on the real work.”

“Dar, I have an ear in to the global conference.” Bea said. “It’s getting a little hectic in there. You might need to drop in – they’re asking for Miami ops and I don’t think Mark’s on. His representative is getting squashed.”

Dar got up. “Will do.” She said. “I’ll leave you to beg your forgiveness in private.” She sauntered over to the door and disappeared through it as her boss searched for something to throw at her. “Forget it.” She stuck her head back inside the office. “Kerry doesn’t leave trash around.. whoa!”

A rubber ball bounced off the wall, deflected by a rapid motion of Dar’s hand. “Watch it. I have darts in my office.” She warned, pulling her head back in and closing the door.

Alastair chuckled, then sighed. “Oh boy.” He said. “I wasn’t really ready to go up and duke it out with the White House this week. Bea, do me a favor and fill Ham in, will ya, while I call my wife”

“Sure.” Bea said. “You tell Dar to take care of you, okay? No stabbing you with darts.”

“With the amount of coffee I’ve had so far here, I’d probably be better off with a pair of darts in my ass.” Her boss informed her. “Call you back, Bea.”

“Will do, boss. Talk to you soon.”

**

Dar dropped back into her seat, and gave her trackball a spin. She barely had a moment to review the information on the screen when her phone buzzed. “Yes, Maria?”

“Jefa, I have your papa on the phone for you. Line uno.”

Dar pressed the key. “Hey dad.”

"Lo there, Dar." Her father's deep voice emerged from the speaker. "That little girl helper of Kerry's just done left here."

"That was fast." Dar said. "Thanks for pulling a bag together for me. I'm waiting to hear back from Gerry."

"Don't they need you two in this here office?" Andy Roberts asked. "Seems like you'd be more use here then messing with those crazy people up north."

Dar leaned on her elbows, regarding the phone with some puzzled bemusement. "Well." She said. "I'm sure Kerry would much rather be here than in Washington, and I'd rather not get on a military transport when I've been up for what feels like three days but we don't really have a lot of choice."

"Why not?"

"Because it's our job, Dad."

"Silly ass company."

Dar chuckled a little. "Hey, the White House is calling for me." She said. "What I am I supposed to day, no, I'd rather go lay in the sun with my partner?"

Andrew sighed. "World's just gone nuts." He said. "Ah just heard on the television that some of them people who took them planes down got trained to fly here."

"Here?" Dar said. "In the states?"

"Here in this here town." Her father corrected her. "They arrested some folks, and roused a bunch more and they ain't finished yet."

Dar scanned the news ticker, seeing the confirmation there. "Crap." She muttered. "Like we aren't called a banana republic already."

"Anyhow." Andy said. "You kids be careful with them govmint people. Worse than alligators sometimes. Don't let Gerry get you into nothing, Dar. He candied assed his way out of that last damned mess we did get into."

Dar had to privately admit that was true. "I know." She said. "I don't think this really involves Gerry though, Dad. He was just passing the message. I'm taking my boss with me, so we should be okay."

"That Alastair feller?"

"Yeah." She said. "And our corporate lawyer's going to be up there too."

"That coon ass?"

Dar snorted, and started laughing. She covered her mouth to stifle it. "Ah.. yes." She cleared her throat. "Hamilton's not that backwoods, dad. He's lived in Boston for years."

"Coon ass." Andrew grumbled.

The speaker buzzed a little. "Miami exec, this is Newark Earth."

"Hang on Dad." Dar opened her mic. "Go ahead Newark. Did you get cell back?"

"For the moment, Miami – just wanted to let you know the trucks just got here from APC. They're setting up now to generate some power for us. We just sent some of the ops staff out to get .. uh.. supplies."

"Get them an entire barbeque with beer on me." Dar replied. "We have a dependency on your birds coming live for the uplink at the Pentagon." She said. "When that happens, that traffic takes priority. Tell everyone else to contact me if they have a problem with that."

"Yes ma'am!" The voice sounded exhaustedly ecstatic. "I sure will tell them that."

Dar clicked off. "So anyway, Dad. " She said. " My plan is to get everything squared away, get the teams working, and then get my ass and Kerry's ass back here and out of it. You get too close if you're on the ground sometimes."

"Good girl." Andrew said. "Too damned easy to get sucked in. Had me a call from some old buddies before all hopped up and pissed all'em off telling them to just sit and wait for the arm waving to settle down some."

Dar studied the phone somberly. "This isn't going to end here."

"Naw." Her father grunted. "Aint' going to end no where, long as folks got what other folks want and everybody hates everybody." He paused. "Politics fight."

"True." Dar murmured. "There aren't any real winners anywhere in this."

"Ain't my fight." Andrew stated. "Got my fill the last time. No body damned learned nothing out of that and a lot of good people ended up losing from it." He sounded pissed off. "Jackasses."

"You tell mom that?"

"Woman has been listening to me hollar about it since o dark." Her father said.

"Yes." Ceci's voice broke in from the background. "It's nice not to be the anti government radical in the family for twenty minutes. Novel experience. I'm enjoying it a lot."

Dar laughed softly. "I bet." She laced her fingers together and studied them. "Hey Dad?"

"Yeap?"

"Want to come with me?"

There was a slight pause. "What in the hell do you think I am on this damn phone for?" Andrew said. "That button down feller and that coon ass ain't going to do squat with them people."

"Okay." Dar smiled. "I'll let them know, and call you when the arrangement are done."

"Thank you, rugrat."

"I love you too, dad." Dar replied. "See you soon." She hung up the phone and considered her decision, then after a minute she nodded. "Yeah." She said. "Another pair of strong hands never hurts." She went back to the conference call, turning up the volume a little as she let herself absorb the flickering information. "Never hurts."

**

Kerry was conscious of the eyes on her as she entered the caucus room, a step or two behind her mother. The last time she'd seen some of these men and women, she realized, was at her father's hearing. A few, at her father's funeral reception.

She resisted the urge to fuss with her hair and merely followed her mother across the floor to one of the desks, letting her hands rest on the back of the chair behind it as the room started to fill with harried looking, upset looking, tired looking people.

She sat down and rested her forearms on the table, having a vague memory of her father showing her this room, impressing on her the history behind it. The investigation of the sinking of the Titanic had been held in this room, for instance, along with Watergate to put an alpha and an omega on the room's dignity.

She tried to imagine what it would have been like to stand in a corner, and listen to men in handlebar moustaches and top hats argue about icebergs and lifeboats in a matter where the vessel was British and the seas international.

The senators were still gathering. Her mother wandered over to talk to one of the newcomers and she took a moment to lean back in her chair and stretch, easing her shoulders back and popping them into place to relieve the stress.

Long day. Kerry exhaled, wishing her sleep had been better. Her eyes felt sore around the edges, and she blinked, rubbing them as she straightened up and rested her elbows on the table again. She checked her watch, wishing the session was already over so she could hurry the evening along, get past dinner, and then with any luck end her day in Dar's arms.

Just the thought made her eyes sting just a bit more. She glanced down at the table, rubbing her thumb over the lightly scarred wooden surface that reminded her faintly of the old pews in the church she'd grown up going to.

"Ms. Stuart?"

Kerry looked up, to find an older woman standing in front of the table she was seated at. "Yes?" She responded politely.

"Alicia Woodsworth." The woman extended a hand. "I'm Senator Marco's security analyst. Can I have a word with you before we start?"

"Sure." Kerry indicated a chair nearby. "I just hope I'm not going to have to say all this more than once. It's been a long day." She cautioned, in a mild tone. "I'll extend the courtesy to you though, since the Senator's from my state."

Alicia perched on the edge of the next table instead of taking a chair. She was a ginger haired woman with an athletic frame, a bit taller than Kerry was. "Thanks." She said. "I understand, and I'll be brief." She paused. "That's right, you do live in Florida, don't you."

"I do." Kerry nodded. "Wish I was there right now, in fact." She studied her unexpected inquisitor, deciding her often off kilter gaydar was possibly accurate this time and she was in good family company. "But I'm sure everyone feels that way."

The woman nodded. "I'm sure the Senator does." She commented. "He was scheduled to fly home to attend his daughter's quinces this coming weekend." She cleared her throat. "Anyway." She folded her hands. "I'll leave the why and how and when to my bosses esteemed colleagues. My question for you is this."

Quinces. Kerry felt her attention drift a little, the word bringing back the memory of her and Dar attending Maria's daughter's quinces, there in the heart of conservative Little Havana surrounded by the scent of saffron and mint and the buzz of passionate Latin speech. "Boy I'd love a mojito right now."

"So given that... excuse me?" Alicia paused and started at her. "Did you say something?"

"Just clearing my throat." Kerry rested her chin on her fist. "Go on."

"As I was saying, given that your company is so integral to national security, what security processes do you have in place to keep terrorists from getting a job with you?" She asked. "That's my concern. Especially after what's been going on down in Miami."

"Well." Kerry leaned back and propped her knee up against the table, her peripheral vision watching the room fill behind them. "I don't think there's really a way to prevent that, honestly." She admitted. "How do you filter for someone who did what those men did?"

"They didn't come from Idaho."

Kerry studied her face. "We're an international company." She stated. "Most of our employees don't come from Idaho. I don't come from Idaho." She considered. "We run a reasonable battery of background checks. Our staff that works in secure facilities has to undergo security clearance processes."

"Would you have hired one of those men who piloted those planes?"

Pointless question. "If they were a skilled IT worker with no criminal background, they filled a job need and could legally work wherever they were applying, we might." Kerry said. "I don't think any company can say differently. Heck, I don't think the military can say differently."

"We have to do something." Alicia said. "We have to protect ourselves from these people. That's the trouble down in Miami. That's why they hid down there. Too many people from other places." She frowned, glancing around as the senators started to take seats. "I can't say that to my boss. But you understand."

Kerry's pale green eyes narrowed a little. She straightened up in her chair, her body coiling up a little as she brought her feet under her.

A man walked to the dias in the front and knocked a wooden gavel against it. "Ladies and gentlemen, please sit. This is an informal session, but given the circumstances we should keep it a short one."

Alicia stood up, and nodded slightly at Kerry. "Later then. Thanks." She walked over to where Alejandro Marcos was settling himself down, and bent over him, talking in a low voice.

"Good heavens, Kerry." Her mother was back, taking the chair next to her. "I wasn't expecting so many people to still be here. They must have gotten tied up in committee."

"Mm." Her daughter grunted. "Just my luck."

Cynthia gave her a half nervous look. "I'm sure it won't be that bad." She said. "Really, it's just a few questions."

"At father's hearing, they just had a few questions." Kerry pronounced the words carefully. "That ended up with me escaping in a cab from a mob."

Her mother didn't say anything.

Kerry laced her fingers together and rested her chin against them. She didn't really feel that intimidated, somewhat to her surprise, more annoyed to have to face questioning about a company she knew was performing as well as anyone had any reason to expect.

"All right." A tall, distinguished looking man stepped to the dias. He had gray hair, and an impeccably cut suit, and he glanced over at Kerry for a long moment before he assumed a pair of reading glasses and studied the contents of a folder he opened.

Alan Markhaus. Kerry drew in a little breath, remembering him from numerous visits in her younger years. An ally of her fathers, and always a welcome guest to her parents. Son of a Presbyterian minister, she also recalled, the senior senator from Minnesota and as conservative as they came.

Great. Kerry sighed silently, and waited, hoping her father's old friend would keep his questions to the emergency at hand.

"Let me start off then." The Senator removed his glasses. "Thank you all for attending. I know we're all tired, and I hope this won't take long." He waited for the murmuring to die down. "Based on the information we received from my esteemed colleague from Michigan.." He gave Cynthia a nod. "I thought it would be a good idea for us to get some clarification before things started running away from us again."

Several of the group nodded.

Kerry stayed where she was, aware of the eyes watching her. She was conscious of her own breathing, a little faster than normal, and the uneasy knot in her gut as she sensed the edginess in the room. "Now I really wish I had that mojito."

"Kerry?" Her mother leaned closer. "What was that?"

"Just clearing my throat." Kerry lowered her hands and folded them. "Wish I'd brought my briefcase."

"Ms. Stuart." Senator Markhaus half turned to face her. "It's come to our attention that during the crisis yesterday, when attacks were being made in various places, that you had a good deal of information, immediate information, as things were happening." He paused and waited.

"Yes, I did." Kerry answered.

The Senator waited, but when it was obvious nothing more was coming, he glanced back at his notes. "It's been suggested that you had more accurate information than we were provided." He returned his eyes to her. "Is that true?"

"I have no idea." Kerry replied. "I don't know what you were being told."

Markhaus nodded briefly. "Fair enough." He commented. "Suppose you tell us, then, what your experience was, and how this information was provided to you."

Kerry stood up, always more comfortable standing when she had to address others. Part of that, she suspected, was her relatively short stature, but she also found it easier to project her voice that way. "Certainly."

Chairs shifted and she waited for everyone to turn to face her. She took a moment to collect her thoughts, then returned the gazes evenly. "It's fairly simple." She said. "Let me give you some background on what my company does, however, so you will all understand the context of the information we gathered."

She stepped around the table and put her fingertips together in front of her, putting out of her mind her history with some of the people in the room not the least of which was her mother. "ILS has been contracted by a number of government agencies, including the military services, the general accounting office, the logistics office, among others to provide information technology services."

"What does that actually mean?" An older woman asked. "Information technology services?"

"It depends." Kerry backtracked. "We provide a wide range of services ranging from onsite help desks to programming, to network management." She paused, but the woman didn't speak up again. "We also manage a wide area network that carries most of the data between government agencies, and from the government and military to the public internet."

"What kind of data?" Markhaus asked. "Confidential data?"

"Again, it depends." Kerry said. "A large percentage of the data we carry, yes, is confidential at the least, and up to top top secret encrypted on the other end of the scale. Accounting traffic. Payroll for the civil service. Command and control datastreams for the armed forces."

She could see eyeballs starting to roll back in some heads. "In any case." She said. "We do a lot of work for the country. We have a presence in most military bases, in the Pentagon, at Cheyenne Mountain, and we maintain a good percentage of the computers all of our tax dollars pay for."

"Incredible. One company?" The woman turned towards Markhaus. "How was this allowed?"

Markhaus merely looked at Kerry, raising his eyebrows.

"It's called the free market." Kerry dryly informed her. "The government sends requests for pricing. We bid on them. So do a number of other companies."

"Ms. Stuart." Markhaus said. "Let's get off the subject of contracts. I am sure this is interesting to my colleagues, but frankly, I know all about your company's portfolio so please move on to the information we asked."

Kerry studied him for a moment. "I'm sure you are aware." She said, with a faint smile. "In any case, during the attacks yesterday we instituted a process we have for crisis management that involves the widespread communication of all of our resources."

She walked towards the dias. "One of the components of this process is the rapid collection of observations, information, and statistics between all parts of our company."

"But how did you get the information." The woman said. "That's what I am interested in. I understand passing it among yourselves, though I have to question the security around that."

"Boots on the ground." Kerry replied, in a mild tone. "The information comes from the people who were there. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to describe what you're seeing with your own eyes. We had people in the Pentagon when that plane hit. We had people handling data centers who were

affected by the buildings collapsing. We handle the telecommunications for the airlines.. of course we knew what was going on.” She lifted her hands a little and let them drop. “We were in the middle of all of it. When the planes were rerouted to Canada, and they needed extra bandwidth to send reports and let people call home... we get that request.”

A soft buzz of conversation followed her statement. Kerry watched the faces opposite her carefully, seeing surprise, doubt, suspicion, and boredom facing her. “I get that request.” She clarified. “We spent most of the day dog paddling like a Chihuahua on Cuban coffee trying to keep things going.”

“Who did you inform of all this?” A man asked.

“Inside our company? Everyone.” Kerry said.

“In the government.” The man said. “Who knew what you were doing?”

“No one.” Kerry replied. “That’s not what we’re paid for. We get paid to know what to do and do it.”

“What?” Another man stood up. “No wonder no one could tell us what was going on. How could you work in a vaccum like that?”

“There was no vaccum.” Kerry felt her body tense, as she reacted to the rising emotion in the room.

“You were meddling in the government during a disaster!” The woman stood up, clearly outraged.

“What do you mean, you didn’t tell anyone what was going on!”

Cynthia stood as well. “Now, please.” She said. “I did not ask..”

“Oh shut up!” The man said. “We know where your part is..”

“HEY!” Kerry startled even herself, as a loud bark erupted from her chest. She took a step towards the man as he whirled to face her. “Keep a civil tongue in your head to my mother.” She glared at him. “Or you can take your questions and shove them up your ass.”

There was a moment of utter, total silence after her yell’s echoes faded.

“Sit down.” Kerry followed that up with another bark. “Who in the hell do you people think you are to be questioning me?” She felt the anger surging through her, making her vision lose a little color and bringing a flush to her skin. “Of course we didn’t tell anyone. Why should we? What in the hell use would that have been? No one had any control over what was happening the least of all the people in this room.”

“Ms. Stuart.” Markhaus said. “Please recall where you are.”

“I know where I am.” Kerry retorted.

“Then please act like it.” The Senator said. “We’re due respect. I know you were raised knowing that.”

Kerry turned her head and looked at him. She put her hands on her hips. “Someone once told me.” She said. “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, become consultants. Those who have no clue at all run for Congress.”

Markhaus’ lips twitched, his eyes narrowing a little.

“I can, and I do.” Kerry said. “If you people did not have proper information from your regular channels, take that up with them. Don’t stand here asking me why I didn’t stop what I was doing to send updates to anyone.” She spoke slowly and forcefully. “That is what my customers who happen to include the government pay me for.”

Markhaus studied her, as the rest of the room shifted angrily. Uncomfortably. “So let me understand.” He said. “All these people calling, all this chaos going on. People needing information, needing whatever it is.. what did you call it, bandwidth?”

Kerry nodded.

“Who decides what takes priority?” The woman asked. “I know my offices were down. Why weren’t they considered?”

"I make those decisions." Kerry stated. "Based on a set of priorities we catalog and adjust to fit the circumstances."

"You?" Markhaus asked.

"Me." Kerry's green eyes took on just a hint of wry amusement. "Now, let's not get too dramatic about it. We're a very large company. We have a very large number of contracts and customers and worldwide resources. We handle minor emergencies all the time. We plan for this." She paused. "We know what the priorities are."

"I am very disturbed." Cynthia Stuart came out from behind the table and joined Kerry. "Kerrison and her colleagues performed amazingly yesterday. I heard quite some parts of what they were doing. They deserve our thanks not this horrific inquisition."

"Cynthia, we just.." Markhaus waved a hand. "Please."

"Please nothing." Kerry's mother frowned at him. "I am sorry I asked Kerrison to appear here. I am even sorrier that I confided how competent her staff was yesterday. You make me very ashamed, as though you asked me to do this so you could take out your frustrations, our frustrations, on my daughter."

"Maybe we did." Markhaus agreed. "Welcome to the Hill." He didn't look apologetic at all. "You're damn right I'm frustrated. Standing up in front of the rest of the world with my pants around my ankles makes me that way."

"Then why not take that out on someone who deserves it?" Cynthia said. "It seems to me that we have spent the day in ridiculous debate about how terrible this was, and we have not even discussed the fact that someone allowed it to happen."

Go mom. Kerry eyed her mother with wry surprise.

Markhaus grunted, and shook his head.

"The question is." The woman next to her spoke up, but in a quieter tone. "Why did they know so much, and no one else seemed to." She eyed Kerry briefly. "I didn't mean to be rude."

Kerry altered her body posture, removing her hands from her hips and sticking them in her pockets instead. "Well." She said. "It's called Information Technology for a reason. Knowing what's going on is what my business is. We have a good communication plan, we all speak the same language, and we're used to passing data to each other without the constraints of different agencies, different politics, or different chains of command."

Markhaus grunted. "Probably got a point there." He admitted. "I just heard the police and firemen in Manhattan couldn't even talk to each other because their radios were incompatible."

Everyone got quiet again.

"Did you hear, on CNN earlier, those sounds?" The woman said. "All those chirps, from the firefighter's pagers they said."

Kerry let her eyes drop to the ground, as the silence lengthened after that. She jerked a little, then when her cell phone buzzed softly, and she looked up in apology before she removed it from her belt. "I'm sorry, excuse me."

Mark's cell phone. "Hey." Kerry kept her voice low. "What's up?" She moved away from the now whispering Senators, and turned her back to them.

"Hey." Mark sounded subdued. "Listen, I was just listening in on the bridge. They found our big guy in NY."

"Bob? Where?" Kerry murmured.

Mark hesitated. "He's um... he didn't make it."

Kerry's heart sank. "Damn." She exhaled. "Does Dar know?"

"She was on the bridge." Mark said. "She went to go tell the big cheese. The NY people are pretty slammed."

"Damn it." Kerry sighed. "He and Alastair were good friends."

"Yeah." Her MIS Chief murmured. "How's it going there?"

"I'm about to kickbox a few senators and get my ass thrown in jail." Kerry admitted. "Tell Dar to bring cash."

That got a tiny laugh out of Mark. "Hey, listen. Good news is, they got the Newark E up. Birds are synced, and I'm doing some bandwidth hacking while I wait for power here."

"Good job, Mark." Kerry sighed, and glanced over her shoulder. Some of the people were moving towards the door, and she realized the session seemed to be over. "Let me wrap this up, and I'll get back to you. The boss said she'd be heading out here tonight."

"Woo fucking hoo I'll be glad to see her." Mark said.

"Me too." Kerry agreed. "Me too." She repeated, closing the cell phone. She turned and walked back to where her mother was standing, talking to Senator Markhaus. "Sorry."

"Is everything all right, Kerry?" Her mother asked. "You look upset."

Kerry gazed past them. "One of our people in New York was killed in the attack." She said. "They just confirmed it."

"Oh dear. I'm so sorry." Cynthia put her hand on Kerry's shoulder. "Was it someone you knew well?"

"No." She shook her head. "But we've been trying to support our people there, and it's very hard news for them." Her eyes flicked to the door. "Are we done here?"

"For now." Senator Markhaus said. "Nice bit of fencing, by the way. Quoting your father back at me." He studied her coolly. "Wonder what he'd say if he'd heard you do that."

Kerry stared right back at him. "He'd tell you not to piss me off." She glanced at her mother. "Excuse me. I'll wait outside." She eased past them and made for the door, twitching her jacket across her shoulders as she cleared it and went out.

"Was that called for, Alan?" Cynthia asked. "Please don't expect me to ask Kerry to come in here again."

Markhaus put his hands in his pockets, regarding the now empty doorframe. "Interesting kid." He said. "Turned out more like him than he ever dreamed." He said. "He'd have popped a button listening to her tell us off like that."

"Kerry has quite a temper." Her mother agreed. "But in this case, I agree with her. She did our country good service, and was rewarded with accusations and your mean tongue. Why not turn that on your dear friends in the administration instead? Is it just so much easier to yell at a young woman?"

Markhaus gave her a sour look.

"Perhaps Roger was right." Cynthia straightened up. "We are ruled by fools and cowards. Fortunately for me, my daughter is neither." She turned and marched out, slamming the door with a resounding bang behind her.

**

Dar sat quietly in the chair in Kerry's office, listening to the quiet conversation on the speaker phone. Across the desk from her, Alastair was crouched, leaning forward towards the phone with his head resting on both fists.

She'd had to deliver bad news more than once in her lifetime, but usually it was bad news of an impersonal sort. Telling Alastair about Bob's death had been anything but impersonal. It made her feel sad, and angry all over again at the senselessness of it all.

Her guts were in knots. She could see how upset Alastair really was, though his expression was merely somber and his voice even as he spoke into the phone to the devastated New York office.

"They're sure, John?" Alastair said.

"Yes, boss." A somber voice came back. "I got a call from St. Vincents. They thought they were going to get swamped, but they didn't. Only a few.. ah. Anyway, one of the doctors there knew him."

"Damn it."

"Most of the people here are in the big room. They're pretty upset. I came in the conference room to talk to you." John Brenner added. "I think we're all still in shock."

Alastair sighed. "Has anyone called his family?"

"No sir."

Dar watched her boss's face tense into a grimace, and she felt a wallop of sympathy for him. She'd known Bob in a casual way, met him once or twice, and argued with him extensively but Alastair had been a personal friend.

"All right. I will." Alastair said. "Damn, I'm sorry to hear it. John, is there anything I can do for the folks there? I know they must be taking it hard."

John Brenner sighed. "We all hoped everyone made it." He said. "After people started showing up today, we all thought, hey, we'll get through this and it'll just be getting things moving again."

"Yeah, I know." Alastair murmured. "We all hoped that."

"He stopped to help some people. It must have just taken too long, I guess."

Alastair glanced across the desk, watching Dar's somber eyes watch him. "Sometimes I'd rather our people be a little less heroic." He said. "But he did what he had to."

"Yes, sir. He did."

"All right. Whatever the folks there need, people, alcohol, whatever, make sure they get it John." Alastair said. "I'll get hold of Mari here and see if we can get a councillor down there."

John hesitated. "I think we'd appreciate it." He said. "It would be good to have someone to talk to." He admitted. "I'll call you later, boss, if we hear anything else. I'm going to go back inside with the rest of them."

"Okay John. Take care." Alastair exhaled, reaching forward to release the speakerphone. He then settled back in Kerry's chair and gazed across at Dar. "God damn it."

"Sorry." Dar murmured. "I know he was a friend, Alastair."

"He was." Her boss said, in a sad tone. "His family's old friends of mine for a couple generations back, matter of fact. My granddad and his great granddad were business partners." He shook his head. "What a damn shame."

"Yeah." His CIO nodded quietly. "They were all down there Alastair. The odds weren't great in our favor to begin with."

Alastair gazed past her. "How many times in bad odds did you bring us out without a scratch? Maybe I got used to thinking we were just lucky that way."

Dar didn't know what to answer to that, so she just sat there quietly, wincing at the upset in her stomach.

"Damn it." Alastair whispered. "Damn it, damn it, damn it."

Dar jumped a bit, as her cell phone rang. She unclipped it and checked the caller ID, then opened it. "Gerry." She warned Alastair, before she answered. "Dar Roberts."

"Hello, Dar. Gerry Easton here." The General said. "We've got you all set up. They want to grab you in a helo, you have space for that there?"

Dar's brows creased. "A h... a helicopter?" She asked. "Gerry, we can drive to the damn airport. I'd have to clear half the parking lot to get one in here unless it was the size of one of those traffic copters."

"Well, hang on a minute." Gerry put her on hold.

Dar looked across at Alastair and shook her head. "Helicopter. Jesus."

Alastair pressed his fingertips against his lips. "Y'know Dar." He said. "Given the news, I think I'd better renege on my offer to go with you."

Dar's eyes opened wide. "What?"

"I think I'd better get Bea to book me to New York tomorrow morning." Alastair said. "Those people need support. Bob's family needs support. The government can wait."

"Hello, Dar?" Gerry came back on. "They'd rather pick you up. Got their pants on fire, now they're scuttling I guess. Man said he can put the chopper down near by you. Fifteen minutes?" He said. "Hate to push the point, Dar, but we've got several hells in handbaskets around here and everyone's in a rush."

Dar studied her boss. "I'll be ready." She said. "See you soon, Gerry."

"Well done. Good job." The General said. "Talk to you later."

He hung up. Dar closed the phone and held it in her hands, her expression thoughtful. Then she opened the phone again and dialed. "Dad? Hey. Last minute crap. They want to helo me out of here in fifteen. Can you.. ah, you are. Okay, see you in a few"

She closed the phone again with a wry grimace. Then she cocked her head and looked over at the man behind her lover's desk. "So."

"Think I'm throwing you to the wolves again?" Alastair asked.

"No." His CIO answered. "But does this give you a better perspective on why I went to be with Kerry when you needed me in Houston that time?" She asked. "When she was in Michigan?"

Alastair tilted his head, and frowned. "Was I mad about that?" He queried. "I wasn't, was I?" He watched Dar's brows lift. "I was, now that I think about it. That General of yours was threatening God only knows what, wasn't he?"

Dar nodded.

"Scared the pants off me." Her boss mused. "Then Bea came in and told me what a jackass I was to even think about yelling at you." He admitted. "With Kerry's father passing on. I just let that get lost in all the craziness. Shouldn't have pushed you."

"We did all right out of it." Dar half shrugged. "But there wasn't any way I was leaving. So I understand. Family comes first. Friends come first. Business is just business."

"It is." Her boss agreed, mildly. "But I am sorry about that, Dar."

"Ah." Dar cast her mind back to that dark time, when Kerry's father had passed away and everything seemed to be turned against them. She'd never regretting getting on the plane to Michigan. "I didn't care."

"About me yelling?"

"Yeah. I felt bad about selling a piece of my soul to Gerry but it didn't matter. Kerry needed me there." Dar remarked. "Everyone else could have gotten screwed three ways in a leaky raft as my father says for all I cared."

Alastair nodded. "People matter. Glad you understand, Dar. I don't want to pitch you into the fire, but I know you can handle it."

"I can." Dar agreed. "It's my infrastructure anyway. I grew out of needing a buffer a long time ago." She eyed her boss. "You've been stepping in front of trucks for me for a week. I could get insulted. Let me go bust my own balls for a while."

Her boss managed a half grin. "I am throwing you to the wolves, Dar." He said. "I'm sorry. But I can't go dick around with a bunch of politicians when I know those people in New York are hurting. I gotta go."

"I know." Dar got up. "I'm going to grab my stuff and go say hi to my dad. He's on the way up to my office." She said. "Go take care of those people, Alastair. They need it. We'll be fine." She circled the desk and put a hand on Alastair's shoulder. "Leave the politicians to me."

Alastair's pale eyes met hers. "That's supposed to make me feel better?"

Dar chuckled. "Think of how they'll feel." She gave her boss's shoulder a squeeze. "Maria'll take care of a hotel for you for tonight and getting you to the airport. Just let her know what the details are."

Alastair reached up and clasped her hand with his own. "Thanks. I will." He said. "Be careful, will ya? Having you get dinged again because of this place ain't worth it, lady."

"You too." Dar smiled, her voice warm with affection. "Give the people in Manhattan my regards. I have a feeling I'll be seeing them soon myself." She straightened up and headed for the door, slipping through it and closing it behind her.

Alastair exhaled, letting his elbows rest on the chair arms. Then he reached out and punched Bea's extension in again, waiting for her to answer. "It's me."

"I heard, Alastair. I'm so sorry." Bea said. "What a shame. Do you know if there's any arrangements yet? What can I do for the family for you?"

Alastair closed his eyes, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose for a long moment before he answered. "Don't know yet." He answered, briefly. "Haven't talked to the family." He fell silent, biting the inside of his lip.

Bea was quiet for a moment. "Tough day, boss?" She said, eventually.

"Yeah." He agreed. "Just got a whole lot tougher."

"Dar's admin just messaged me with your hotel details." Bea said. "She's such a sweetheart. I'll start working on getting you a flight up tomorrow morning. You want the first one out, I guess?"

"Yeah." Alastair cleared his throat. "Sounds fine. Early as you can."

"You want to stay somewhere near the office there? I can try getting something close. Hard to say what's available though."

"Get me whatever you can." Her boss answered quietly. "Doesn't matter."

The inner door opened, and he looked up quickly, to find Dar emerging in to the room again with a set of keys in her hand. "Ah." He cleared his throat again. "Thought you were out of here."

"Almost." Dar set the keys down. "I know you can get a ride from anyone here, or a cab, but sometimes it's good to have your own transport. Just leave it at the hotel, and I'll get it picked up." She knelt down and put her hand on his knee. "Pick a causeway and find a beach. That's where I go to chill out."

His eyes met hers, and he managed a faint smile. "Thanks, Paladar. I'll try not to crash into any palm trees."

Dar patted his leg, then stood up. "Later." She disappeared again, leaving silence, and the faint scent of leather in her wake.

Alastair jingled the keys lightly in his fingers. "Y'know, Bea, if I was thirty years younger, Kerry'd have a fight on her hands." He chuckled wryly. "No offense to my wife."

"You know, Alastair, you're right." Bea said, after a pause and a long sigh. "She is really neat. How did we miss seeing this side of her all these years?"

"Don't know, and really don't care. I'm just glad we have her because she's damn good people." Alastair regarded the pictures facing him. "I'm going to get out of here, Bea. Arrange what you can, just drop me the details."

"Will do, boss. Have a margarita for me."

Alastair stood up. "You can bet on it." He said. "Who knows? Maybe I'll go get myself a tattoo. It's been that kind of week."

"Alastair."

"Yeah, I know. My wife would kill me." Alastair sighed. "Talk to you later, Bea." He hung up the phone and circled the desk, heading for the door. Just short of it, he stopped and regarded the boxing dummy.

It's face, what there was of it, was scuffed. He picked up one of the gloves and looked at it, the laces loosened from the last hand it fit over. He put it over his fingers and slid it on, finding the inside of it snug, but well worn.

Did Kerry really spend that much time beating the daylights out of something? Was the stress here as bad as all that?

Experimentally, he faced off against the dummy and socked it one in the puss, making the spring loaded torso rock back and forth energetically. It's stolid face looked back at him as it wobbled back and forth.

He hit it again. "Huh." He was faintly surprised at how satisfying it felt. Then, after a moment's thought, he wasn't surprised. Quietly, he removed the glove and hung it back next to it's mate, giving the dummy a pat on the head.

The corridor was empty when he left the office, and he took advantage of that to stroll to the elevator, slowing when he spotted Maria approaching him. "Hello, Maria."

"Senor McLean." Maria responded politely. "Dar has asked me to make sure your bag is put in her car, yes? I sent Mayte down to take care of that for you." She said. "I think the army has come for her and her papa out in the parking lot. I was going to go see that."

"I'll join you." Alastair punched the elevator button. "Thanks for grabbing my things. Does Dar always think of everything?"

Maria merely looked at him, both her dark eyebrows lifting.

"Silly question. I know she does." Alastair held the elevator door and followed Maria inside. "She's thought of everything ever since I've known her."

The door closed and they rode down in companionable silence.

**

Kerry held the door for her mother as they entered the small, typically decorated Japanese restaurant. It was quiet inside, too late for the happy hour crowd, and she was glad enough to settle in a comfortable banquette to one side of the sushi bar.

It felt very good to simply sit. Even with her mother across from her. "Ugh." She leaned back and let her arms rest on her thighs. "What a bunch of posers."

Cynthia looked up from examining the menu, peering at Kerry across a pair of half glasses. "Are you speaking of my colleagues?"

"Yes." Kerry lifted her hand and rubbed the back of her neck, too tired to worry about being rude.

"Well, I have to agree." Her mother said. "I can't believe they disregarded all of the things we discussed earlier in favor of a senseless attack on your company."

A waiter came by, bowing to them and waiting in silence.

"Can I get a Kirin, please?" Kerry asked. "Mother, would you like a drink?"

Cynthia pondered a moment. "I would." She decided. "Could I perhaps get a glass of white wine?"

"Yes of course." The waiter said. "You want something to start?"

Kerry glanced at the menu. "Trust me to order?" She asked.

Cynthia hesitated, then nodded. "Of course." She said.

The waiter turned to Kerry, his eyebrows cocking.

"Ah.. two orders of the Edamame, please, two of the watercress salads... mother, I think you'd like the tuna tataki roll, and I'd like the sushi and tempura plate, please." Kerry glanced across the table. "All right with you?"

Her mother looked a touch nonplussed. "Well, certainly. That sounds lovely." She handed her menu back and settled back in her seat. "I can't say I've tried sushi. Your father wasn't partial to oriental food."

Kerry remembered that. "Strictly old fashioned American food. I recall." She said. "I didn't acquire a taste for it until I moved down to Florida. It's too hot to eat that heavy all the time." She played with her fork. "Japanese food is usually cool or room temperature, looks great on the plate, and it's good for you on top of it."

"Hm." Cynthia murmured. She glanced up as the waiter returned, bearing a tray with Kerry's beer, her wine, and two plates of green pods. He put the pods and the drinks down, gave them another little bow, and retreated.

Kerry picked up her glass and took a sip of her beer. It was cold, and light, and it went down easy. She leaned back against the padded surface and relaxed, glad the day was almost over.

Almost. She just had this dinner to get through, just had to drop her mother off back at her office, the make the drive back to her hotel and wait for the crowning end to her day that with any luck would involve her, Dar, and being naked.

Or her, Dar, and footy pajamas. Or her, Dar, and remaining fully clothed. She really didn't care as long as she and the Dar part were in there. She missed her partner something fierce, and now the constant strain and aggravation were starting to wear on her.

"Are these like peas?" Her mother asked, studying the edamame.

"Soy beans." Kerry put her beer down and picked one up, squeezing it and popping the resulting bean into her mouth. "With a little salt."

"Oh." Cynthia picked one up and examined it, then put pressure on the end and started a bit as the pod split and the bean almost went across the table. "My goodness." She captured it and put it cautiously to her lips, chewing it as though it might explode.

Kerry finished her pod and went on to the next one. "Dar and I play games with these." She related. "I can squeeze one into her mouth from across the table."

Her mother stared at her. "Kerrison." She said, after a moment. "You don't really."

Kerry smiled wryly. "Yeah, I do." She said. "It's our neighborhood joint near the office. They all know us there. They don't care if we throw food at each other." She picked up another pod. "We do lunch there a lot. It gets so hectic and stressful at the office, it's nice to just sit and blow off steam sometimes."

"That seems very strange." Her mother said, then she sighed. "But really, what isn't strange these days. I don't understand what the world is coming to."

True. Kerry felt like the world had stopped, and started spinning the opposite direction. So much had changed in so few days, and looking forward she saw only more change ahead of them. Not good change, either.

It was an uncharacteristically pessimistic feeling. She didn't much like it.

Cynthia ate another bean slowly. She picked up her glass and sipped her wine, watching Kerry over the rim. "It's been a terrible day, hasn't it?"

"Lousy." Her daughter agreed. "Lousy couple of days. The only bright spot for me today was Dar telling me she's heading up here." She paused. "Well, that and you telling the other senators off."

Cynthia blinked. "Well, I don't think..." She stopped. "On the other hand, perhaps I did. They made me very upset."

"Me too."

"I am sorry about that." Cynthia said, in a sincere tone. "I really did not expect them to do what they did. I knew they had questions, but I thought they were more interested in finding a way to better communicate. Not..." "

"Not find someone to blame?" Kerry half shrugged. "Well, it's over. I hope they learned something from it, but if they didn't, they didn't. I don't have time to worry about it." She gave the waiter a smile, as he returned with their salads. "Thanks."

Cynthia picked up her fork and investigated the watercress. "Oh, this is lovely." She said, after tasting a bite. "Quite delightful."

Kerry maneuvered her chopsticks expertly and spent a quiet moment ingesting the greens. They were crisp and fresh, the dressing a touch spicy, and with more than a hint of citrus. "That is good." She said, after wiping her lips.

Her mother took another sip of wine. "This is really very nice, Kerry." She said. "Is this some place you plan to bring Dar to, when she arrives?"

Kerry slowly finished her salad, considering the question. "Maybe. She loves sushi." She allowed. "I don't think we're going to be here long though."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes." Kerry wiped her lips on her napkin. "Soon as we get the backups running here, my guess is we'll both be needed in New York." She studied her glass. "There's a lot more to do there." Her brows knit a little. "So many people. So much damage. What a total waste."

Slowly, her mother nodded. "I was very sorry to hear about your colleague. Did you know him well?"

Bob. She hadn't really known him at all. He'd been a name on an email, a voice on the phone. He'd been the guy Dar had been with when Kerry's plane had gotten in trouble, and that was the one set of personal memories she had of him.

He'd been touring Dar around the city, so very proud of it, her partner had said.

Now, being in that city had ended in his death. Kerry was sure he'd never even considered having something like that happen to him a remote possibility. No one did.

Just a routine day for them. Just a regular visit to clients, a bid in process, a day that had probably started with coffee at the deli across from the office at Rockefeller Center, and plans for lunch down in the business district.

"He was our senior sales executive in the Northeast." Kerry said. "I spoke to him often. He was a nice guy." She paused. "He loved New York."

Cynthia shook her head. "Terrible."

"He was a good friend of our CEO's." Kerry went on. "Dar had to tell him they found his body."

"Oh my." Her mother put a hand to her mouth. "How terrible for her. "

Kerry nodded, taking a swallow of her beer. "I'm sure it was tough. She and Alastair are pretty close." She leaned back again, stretching her back out a little. She felt stiff, and her body felt tired, a bone deep ache that made her hope she wasn't coming down with something.

"Really?" Cynthia took a sip of her wine. "I thought he was an older man."

"He is." Kerry agreed. "But Dar's worked for him for a long time. She's pretty much his right hand. He depends on her all the time to get things right." She smiled as the waiter returned, placing down their plates with a flourish. "Thanks. That looks really great."

"Ma'am, excellent. Can I get you another beer?"

"Sure." Kerry readily agreed. "Mother?"

"Well, yes." Cynthia handed over her empty glass. "This looks lovely, and smells delicious." She concluded. "Really, I can't think why I haven't tried this before. Certainly we have plenty of oriental places here in Washington."

Kerry was busy with her sushi, mixing her soy sauce and wasabi just so, and adding a bit of the pickled ginger to it. "Dar tricked me into trying it the first time." She related. "She said I could have just teriyaki chicken and a salad, and she had this big plate of really gorgeous colorful sushi in front of her.

"Oh my."

"I ended up eating half of it." Kerry selected a piece of her meal and dipped a bit of it into the soy sauce, then she popped it into her mouth and chewed contentedly.

"This is wonderful." Cynthia tried her tuna. "So light."

Kerry merely nodded. It had been a long time since her spicy chicken sandwich and the cupcakes hadn't done anything to stabilize her blood sugar. She had a nagging headache, and she just hoped the sushi would settle her body down and let her get through the rest of the night and back to her hotel.

Last thing she needed was a migraine.

"Angela was telling me you have a vacation cabin?" Her mother asked. "It sounded lovely."

Kerry swallowed, glad of the subject change to safer and less tense waters. "We do." She said. "Dar and I decided we liked spending time down in the Keys, so we found a place just south of Key Largo and restored a cabin down there."

"How charming!" Cynthia smiled. "I know you and your brother and sister both used to love the cabins down by the lake in the summer."

"Yes, we did." Kerry took a sip of her freshly filled beer. "It's really cute. It has a kitchen, and a nice big living room, a bedroom, and two offices that also have pulldown beds." She said. "It's right on the water. We love watching sunsets from the porch."

"You always sound so busy. I'm so glad you take time out to relax." Her mother said. "It was so hard for us to take family vacations with your father so occupied all the time. I know you children went to camp, but it's not the same thing."

Kerry chuckled. "I told Dar about my camp experiences a few times and we had to laugh because her idea of camp and my idea of camp were way far apart. "

"Really? But of course, she grew up in Florida, didn't she? I'm sure it's very different there than up in the mountains."

"She grew up on a navy base." Kerry said, quietly. "I think she wanted to be in the navy until she was in high school. So yes, it was very different."

Cynthia glanced at her. "Goodness. What on earth would she have done in the navy? She's far too clever for that."

What would Dar have done in the navy? Kerry used the excuse of ingesting more sushi to give her a moment to ponder the question. She knew Dar had wanted to be a Seal, like Andrew had been, but if not that then what?

"I'm sure she'd have ended up in some position in intelligence, or planning." Kerry wiped her lips. "But I'm very glad she decided to go into IT instead, since I don't think I'd have had a chance to meet her if she'd gone into the service."

There was a small silence. "Well." Cynthia said, after a pause. "I'm glad too."

Kerry looked up from her plate in surprise.

"I am glad." Her mother said. "That you found someone who makes you so happy, Kerry. No matter who that person turned out to be."

Kerry studied her mother's face, reflected in the sedate light of the restaurant. "Thanks." She replied in a quiet tone. "I never had a choice about loving Dar and I never wanted one, but losing my family because of it really hurt."

"I know." Cynthia said. "It hurt your father and I too, though I know you probably find that hard to believe. We did things that I look back on now and wonder how I could have thought they were right. They weren't."

Kerry exhaled. "I did some of those things too." She admitted. "I think I figured if you hated me anyway, it didn't matter what I did."

Her mother reached over and touched her hand. "We never hated you." She said. "As angry and frustrated as your father was, he truly felt in his heart what he did he did because he loved you."

"You know." Kerry studied her mother's face again. "I believe that."

"Do you?" Cynthia seemed surprised.

Her daughter nodded. "Because despite everything that happened, I didn't hate either of you." She fiddled with her chopsticks. "I didn't expect you to like or accept what my choices were."

Her mother ate quietly for a few minutes, giving Kerry the chance to do the same. The air had lightened though, and Kerry felt a wary sense of relief along with a hope that the thaw would continue.

She didn't really like conflict. Dar reveled in it, taking every opportunity she could to dive into the deep end of the combative pool, relishing the challenge of going head to head with anyone who cared to argue with her.

Except Kerry. Dar didn't like arguing between them any more than Kerry did.

"We didn't really understand." Her mother said, after a while. "I don't think your father ever did, really, though I believe he did come to respect Dar and her family." She took a sip of her wine. "I decided after he passed away that I would educate myself and try to gain an understanding of how you have chosen to live and really, Kerry, it's not terribly different than anyone else."

Kerry felt like a Martian had just taken a seat at the table and was asking for popcorn. "Ah... you're right. It's not." She managed to respond. "We wake up, go to work, hang out, go to the gym, come home, balance the checkbook, watch television, go to bed... it's not any different from anyone else. We just both happen to be women."

Her mother nodded. "So it seems. I cannot pretend I do not wish it was otherwise, but I have come to accept that it is your choice, and that is all right with me." She said. "I like Dar and her family very

much. They seem like very sincere people, and I do not find much of that around here. I often wish I hadn't decided to take this task on."

"You'd rather be home?" Kerry guessed.

"I would, yes." Her mother replied. "I understand the politics around me, but I truly do not like them. It often makes me quite disgusted with humanity."

Kerry nodded wryly, knowing a moment of personal growth she hadn't expected. "I hear you." She could almost hear Dar's knowing chuckle. "Maybe you can come with Angie and Mike and visit us. We'll give you a ride in our boat, and you can meet my dog."

Her mother was quiet for a long moment. "I would like that." She said. "After this horrible emergency is over, we shall make plans to do so."

Kerry smiled, and lifted her beer glass, waiting for her mother to hesitantly do the same before she reached over and clinked them together. Then she put the glass down and went back to her sushi, determined not to waste a single bite.

**

It was late when they pulled back into the parking lot outside Cynthia's offices. Kerry briefly regretting the need to retrieve her briefcase, then she shrugged and shut the SUV's engine off, opening the door to hop out of it.

She took a moment as her mother got out of the other side to check her cell phone. Again. "Darn it." She frowned at the instrument, conspicuously lacking in messages from Dar. "Where are you, Dixiecup?"

With a sigh, she returned the phone to her belt and circled the front of the SUV, joining her mother as they walked across the still half full parking lot in the brassy glare of the security lights.

"What are your plans now?" Her mother asked. "It's a shame your things are at the hotel, you could easily have stayed in the townhouse."

Kerry stifled a yawn. "Best laid plans." She remarked. "In any case, Dar'll probably come in late tonight and she knows to go there."

"Ah, yes. Of course. Well.." Cynthia lifted a hand. "If you stay over another night, please, both of you are more than welcome to stay at our home here."

Kerry appreciated the offer, honestly. However, she remembered the somewhat cramped and often busy confines of the townhouse and knew her partner would appreciate the space and hot tubs of the hotel instead. "Thanks very much." She replied. "I really appreciate that, mother, and I know Dar will too. Hotels can get old after a while. "

Her mother smiled.

"It just will depend on our task list once Dar gets here." Kerry demurred. "I think I mentioned that she's got some confidential information she didn't want to discuss over the phone, no telling what that involves."

"Of course." Cynthia nodded. "I've had a lovely time tonight. I'm so glad we got a chance to visit a little."

They entered the door, and got only the briefest of looks from the soldiers standing guard, all of them looking tired and more than a little discouraged.

"Good evening." Cynthia greeted them.

"Ma'am." One of the soldiers responded. "Do you know how late everyone's supposed to be here?"

Kerry's mother paused. "Well, it's hard to say." She said. "Usually, perhaps nine, perhaps ten pm, but with the extraordinary events going on, possibly people will be staying later. I myself am leaving as soon as my daughter here retrieves her things from my office."

The soldier sighed. "Thanks ma'am." He said. "Wish they'd put some vending machines in." He muttered. "They even turned off the coffee pot."

Cynthia looked around the small reception room. The soldiers were the only occupants, the receptionists having long gone home for the day. "Are you staying here all night?" She asked. "My goodness."

"Yes, ma'am." The soldier agreed. "Long as you all are."

"I vote we pull a fire alarm and clear the building then." Kerry spoke up for the first time. "I think you all need your sleep more than the senators need to grouse and wring their hands."

"Kerry." Her mother eyed her. "I'm sure everyone here has a good reason to be at work."

Kerry exchanged wry glances with the soldier, who reached up and touched the brim of his camo cap. She pulled her cellphone from her belt and dialed a number. "Hey Mark, it's Kerry."

"Hey boss." Mark said. "We're in the trailer, chilling."

"If you're chilling, that must be good news." Kerry smiled. "Newark up?"

"Yeah, and soon as they finish the power feed we can do something for this place, at least barebones." Mark replied. "You're gonna have to come play ref on them though, everyone's a prio 1 in their own minds around here."

Kerry nodded. "Yeah, I know. Anyone there free to take a little ride?" She asked. "If you've got some spare chow, the poor guys down here guarding my mother's office could use some."

"Hang on." Mark put the line on hold.

Kerry looked at the soldiers, who were now focused on her with imperfectly hidden hopefulness.

"So.. you want stuff over at your mom's office?" Mark got back on the phone. "I got a couple of volunteers here to bring it. How many guys?"

"Six." Kerry smiled. "Six big, hungry Marines."

"Can do, boss." Mark said. "You sticking around there? Be cool if you could make sure they get in all right."

Kerry's brows twitched. "Ah... sure." She said. "But tell them not to sightsee on the way over. I'm about out of steam."

"No problem." Mark replied. "They'll be right over. You just hang tight."

"Thanks Mark." Kerry said. "You get some rest, okay? Let me know when the power gets put in."

"Sure will. Later, boss."

"Isn't that lovely." Cynthia said.

Kerry replaced the phone on her belt. "Okay guys." She said. "It'll probably be sandwiches and chips, but at least it's better than a vending machine. A couple of our guys will be over in a company truck with it."

The Marines grinned. "Now that's service. Thank you ma'am." The senior one said. "We were supposed to get a relief three hours ago but they've got our whole platoon out all over the place."

"My pleasure." Kerry said.

Cynthia clasped her hands. "Shall we go to my office? I'm sure it won't take them long to get here. For once the traffic's not so abominable." She gestured towards the inner door, then followed Kerry as she eased past and headed for it. "Gentlemen."

"Ma'am." The soldiers all smiled at her, more cheerful now.

Kerry exhaled as she walked along the marble floor. The building was quieter now, some offices showing lights and shadows, others quiet and dark. She wondered, briefly, what the difference was, between those who'd gone home, and those who'd stayed.

"Kerry, that was wonderful of you." Her mother said. "So thoughtful, to take care of those soldiers. Tomorrow, I will find out why they were left there like that, to be sure."

"No problem." Kerry said. "I was pretty sure we had extra. We always order enough food for three times the people we have."

"Really?"

"Nerds eat anything and everything as much as you'll give them." Her daughter chuckled a little. "When we have lunch meetings we put the extras in the breakroom and get out of the way. It's like locusts descending."

Cynthia made a small sound of surprise. "In any case, it was a lovely gesture. I know they appreciated it."

The door to the Senator's office was closed, and the panel dark behind it. Cynthia removed a key from her purse and unlocked the door, pushing it open and reaching inside to turn the lights on. "I see everyone's left."

"They had a long day." Kerry entered and moved past the quiet desks, and now silent computers. She entered her mother's office and went to her briefcase, fishing her PDA out of it and opening it up.

Three messages, none from Dar. She frowned, and glanced briefly at the ones that were there, finding nothing more than automatic notifications. After a moment, Kerry closed the device and took out her cell phone again, dialing the first speed entry with impatient motions.

Her mother entered. "The intelligence committee is still meeting." She commented. "I'm sure they're trying to make sense out of everything that's going on. I wonder... perhaps I will join them for a few minutes to see what's happening."

Kerry listened to the ringing on the other end. "Sounds like a good idea." She said, scowling as the phone went to voice mail. She listened to Dar's gruff message, waiting for the beep.

This is Dar Roberts. If I am not answering, I'm probably too busy for a message, but you can leave one at the beep.

At other times, it would have made her chuckle. But Kerry was starting to get a knot in her gut, a shadow of worry over the absence of any sign of her partner. "Hey hon." She said into the phone. "Where are you? Give me a buzz, huh?" She closed the phone. "Damn it."

Cynthia blinked. "Something wrong?"

Kerry tossed her phone up and caught it as it fell. "I can't reach Dar, and I don't know where she's at." She said. "She said they were trying to fly her up here tonight, but I haven't heard anything since." She leaned on the back of the chair. "So I'm a little worried."

Her mother went behind her desk and sat down. "Is there someone we can call?" She asked, practically. "Surely if as you say, the military was allowing her to fly on one of their planes, someone must know about it."

Kerry sat down in the chair, setting her briefcase on the floor. "I'm sure someone does." She said. "I just don't know how to get in touch with anyone... it was probably General Easton, and he's a family friend of Dar's. I don't have his direct number here."

Her mother frowned, and sat back. "General Easton?" She asked. "Gerald Easton, you mean? From the Joint Chiefs?"

"Yes." Kerry nodded. "Our dog Cappucino came from one of his Labrador Alabaster's litters." She paused. "She was a gift."

"Oh." Cynthia didn't seem to know what to make of that. "How lovely." She pondered that. "I have to admit, I am not terribly fond of dogs." She said. "Is yours large?"

Kerry nodded. "She's beautiful." She replied. "She's so smart, and so funny. She's almost human." A thought occurred to her. "Here, let me show you." She opened her briefcase and removed her laptop, opening it and starting it booting. "I've got pictures."

"Wonderful." Cynthia said. She got up and went to a small, wood paneled refrigerator in one corner of the office. "I have some water here, would you like some?"

"Sure." Kerry put her laptop on the desk and waited for it to finish starting up. "I've always liked dogs."

"I know." Her mother came back with two glasses, and two small bottles of Perrier. "I remember how terribly upset you were when your little pet passed on. I felt terrible for you even though as I say, I am not fond of them myself."

Kerry gazed at her slowly forming screen, then she looked up over it at her mother as she seated herself. "Did you know Kyle had her put down?"

Caught right in the act of sitting down, Cynthia stopped, half standing, one hand on the desk and the other on the bottle of water. She stared back at Kerry.

She didn't Kerry felt an odd wash of relief as her skill at reading body language detected the honest shock in her mother's posture. "He paid off an intern at the hospital." She added quietly. "He ended up working for us and came in and confessed to me two or three months ago. Said it haunted him."

Kerry paused, blinking a few times. Then she shook her head and concentrated on her laptop, calling up her photo albums as she pushed aside the memories. "Haunted me too."

The sound of a body hitting a leather seat was loud in the room as she clicked. "My god." Cynthia finally said. "No, I did not know that.. What a b.." She stopped. "Certainly, your father didn't know."

Kerry looked up at her, one brow lifting.

"We spoke of it." Her mother seemed to sense the skepticism. "He wanted to get you another one." She watched Kerry's face. "I'm afraid I talked him out of it. But if I'd known... ugh!" She got up, visible agitated. "I look back and wonder how we could have been so unaware."

She turned back around. "Kerrison, are you sure? This is true?"

Kerry nodded. "I'm sure." She said. "Hell, mother, he killed my fish when he broke into my apartment in Miami and searched it. The man was a psychopath."

Cynthia's jaw dropped slightly. "W.. what?"

"You knew he visited me there." Kerry felt an odd mixture of regret, relief, and curiosity. "Father sent him. Don't tell me now he was acting all on his own. I won't believe it."

Her mother blinked. "Yes." She said. "Your father sent him. He sent him to find out how you really were doing. He thought you were perhaps not doing well, but too proud to tell us." She murmured. "Kyle said nothing about a fish, or breaking into anyplace, he just.. he told us he felt you were hiding something from us."

"Well." Kerry exhaled. "I was."

"But he said he spoke with you." Cynthia sat down. "Didn't he?"

"He did. He came back the next day." Kerry said. "He started to threaten me but Dar was there." She shook her head. "Anyway." She got up and turned her laptop around, coming to kneel next to her mother's chair. "Here's Cappuccino."

With a visible effort, Cynthia focused on the screen. "Oh!" She murmured. "She is quite large." She studied the profile on the screen. "But quite attractive, as well. Lovely color, almost white, isn't it?"

"Cream." Kerry agreed, calling up a second picture. "This is our cabin."

Relieved as the subject changed, her mother leaned forward. "Charming." She said. "Is that stained glass? How lovely with the sun coming in."

"That's our bedroom." Kerry's lips twitched a little. "Here's the kitchen, and that's the view out the bay window in the living room."

"Stunning."

"That's our motorcycle."

"Oh my."

"Stay with me, mom." Kerry had to fight to stifle a laugh. "It's a Honda." She heard the sound of footsteps, and looked up, as the inner door opened. "Ah."

Cynthia also looked up. "Hello Alan." She said. "I didn't realize you were still here. It's late."

Markhaus entered, pausing when he spotted Kerry behind the desk. "I was hoping to discuss some matters with you in private." He removed half glasses from his eyes and gave Kerry a disapproving look. "We have a serious situation here."

Cynthia merely gazed back at him. "I'm afraid my family is quite the most serious matter in my life at the moment. Whatever it is, Alan, can wait until tomorrow."

"It can't." He said.

"Then feel free to discuss it in front of my daughter." Cynthia replied. "I believe she's cleared for this sort of thing, Aren't you, Kerrison?"

"Yes." Kerry confirmed briefly. "But I'll be glad to step out, mother. I wouldn't want to add any of our confidential information into the mix."

Markhaus openly glared at her.

"Certainly not." Her mother said. "Alan, please be brief. Kerrison has been kind enough to provide a meal for our guards since no one else seems to have remembered them. We are merely waiting for that to arrive, then we are going home for the evening."

"Cynthia, are you not aware of what's going on here?" Markhaus came closer to the desk. "This country's been attacked. We are effectively at war. I realize you have no experience in any international matters, but at least pretend to give a damn."

Kerry slowly stood up.

"I do." Her mother folded her hands on her desk. "I just seem to have the sense to know that all of us sitting here burning the midnight oil so to speak and talking about it is simply pointless. We do not have any information. All we have is speculation, and rumor. Or has the White House responded to your questions?"

"They were trying to kill the President."

"At least he's a valid target." Kerry said quietly.

"What?" The man looked at her. "What kind of nonsense talk is that? These people are insane!" He waved his free hand. "We have to have plans. We have to find out how this happened. We have to put together a strategy to get back at them, and make sure this never happens again."

"Do you know why they did it?" Kerry countered.

"It doesn't matter!" Markhaus shot back. "I don't care why they did it."

"Then you won't ever keep them from doing it again." Kerry folded her arms over her chest. "What are you going to do, send bombers over there and blow them up?"

"That's an option." Markhaus said. "If it were up to me, I'd have them send a nuke over there and just sterilize the whole damn region."

"Alan!" Cynthia stood up. "What are you saying?"

"No bleeding hearts here." He said. "Or pansys." He looked directly at Kerry. "That's what the problem is. We don't have enough right thinking people. Just perverts and peaceniks."

"Are you calling me a pervert?" Kerry asked, sharply. "Hold on a minute, mister. Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Now, hold on." Cynthia stood up. "This is ridiculous. Please!"

"Ridiculous?" Markhaus pointed at Kerry. "How do we know you didn't help them, since you had all that information? How do we know you didn't sell us out?"

"Alan!"

"Oh yeah sure." Kerry shot back. "I sold out to a fundamentalist organization that probably prefers to have gay people euthanized. Yeah. I'm into that." She put her hands on her hips. "If anyone sold this country out it's you. It's this damn government."

"Kerrison!"

"That's the kind of patriot you raised." Markhaus pointed at Cynthia. "That's what the biggest problem this country has. Sick minds!" He turned and left. Cynthia chased after him in furious silence, leaving Kerry to stand bristling in the middle of the room with no place for her anger to go but inside.

"Shit." Abruptly she sat down, her temples threatening to explode. She could hear her heart hammering in her chest, and the throbbing was making red streaks against the inside of her eyes as she sat there with them closed.

It was too much. She wanted to throw up, every inch of her body twitching with unreleased anger. It was hard to think.

Hard to breathe.

Then a hand gripped her knee, warm and sure, a casual familiarity in the touch that made her eyes blink open. "Uh?"

"Hey beautiful." Dar's voice tickled her ears. "Can I buy you a drink?"

She felt a moment of tingling shock, then the anger and frustration evaporated as she took in the twinkle in those blue eyes and felt a smile replacing the grimace on her face.

Heaven.

Kerry exhaled audibly, slumping sideways against the tall figure kneeling at her side, her head coming to rest on Dar's shoulder as she felt Dar's hand come up and cradle the side of her face, the warmth against her skin intoxicating in its own right. "Oh thank God"

"Thank Gerry, a couple of Air Force pilots, and six big hungry Marines." Her partner said. "We're your volunteers."

"Ungh." Kerry captured Dar's hand and kissed it relentlessly. "Mark 's dead for not telling me you were there. You're dead for not telling me you were there. I was a nervous wreck wondering where you were."

"Sorry." Dar kissed her on the forehead. "I idiotically left my cell and PDA in my briefcase that's sitting back in Miami. I figured another ten minutes wouldn't matter after that and I wanted to surprise you."

"You did."

"Didn't mean to stress you."

"Don't care." Kerry closed her eyes, absorbing her partner's scent, and the sound of her voice and the gentle touch stroking her hair. "All better now."

The inner door closed. Kerry heard footsteps and the sound of a chair squeaking nearby. She opened one eye to see her mother looking back at her, her expression distressed. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Cynthia said. "The man is an ass."

Kerry felt Dar's body jerk with silent laughter. She smiled in reaction, feeling a physical sense of relief it was hard to quantify or describe. "Dar's here."

"Yes, I did notice that." Cynthia said. "I'm glad."

"My dad's outside talking to the Marines." Dar said. "Alastair went on to New York."

"Awesome." Kerry mumbled. "Can I have that drink now?"

Dar stroked her hair. "Sure." She glanced over at Kerry's mother. "Want a drink too?"

"Absolutely." Cynthia Stuart said. "I think we should get out of here at once."

"Best idea I've heard all day." Kerry managed to stand as Dar rose to her feet, she wrapped her arms around her partner and hugged her as hard as she could. "Unnngh."

Dar returned the hug fully. "Damn I missed you." She said, in an undertone. "Damn, damn damn."

"Damn, damn damn." Kerry repeated, rocking them both back and forth. "You got that right."

**

"You must be exhausted." Kerry nevertheless was content to sprawl half across Dar's lap in the back of the SUV, her head resting on her partner's thigh as Dar's hands worked the kinks out of her neck. "Do you even know what time it is?"

"Do you even think I care?" Dar glanced at the driver's seats, where her father was ensconced at the wheel with Kerry's mother directing him. It gave her a Twilight Zone feeling and she quickly returned her attention to Kerry.

"Probably not."

"You're probably right." Dar was tired, but not sleepy. In truth given all the travel she really had no sense of what time her body thought it was, but regardless she was looking forward to a dark hotel room and a nice soft bed with her partner in it. "Mark made some good progress over there."

"I know." Kerry said. "I really wanted to get out of there because I was more in their way than anything once I'd gotten the brass on the same page as us."

Dar chuckled. "Our technology bus has become the social center onsite. If the PR department were here they'd be pissing in their pants at all the good press they didn't arrange or pay for."

Kerry smiled, her fingertips tracing the seam line of Dar's jeans. Then her smile faded. "It's awful about Bob."

"Yeah." Dar exhaled. "Alastair's pretty shaken up over it. I think he really wanted to be here with us, but his family's old friends of Bob's." She kneaded Kerry's shoulders, feeling the tension in the tight muscles there. "I think the rest of the staff there will be glad to see him though."

"Ungh."

"How's your headache?"

"Better." Kerry murmured. "Just having you here makes me feel better. Why is that? You always do that to me."

Dar gazed quietly down at her. "I don't know." She said, after a pause. "I know I feel better just being here. You think we're nuts?"

"Probably." Kerry acknowledged. "Do you care?"

"Nope."

"Me either."

"I need to call Gerry in the morning." Dar said. "I'm sure he tried to call me tonight but the only place I have his private number is in my cell." She sighed. "I'll have to have Maria get it for me."

"I can't believe you forgot your briefcase." Kerry mumbled. "Jesus, Dar. That has your laptop in it."

"Also had my wallet in it." Her partner informed her. "Luckily for me I did remember to bring my father."

"What's that, Dardar?" Andrew asked, from the driver's seat. "You kids all right back there? We're almost to that there hotel of yours."

"I was just telling Kerry about our trip." Dar said. "I hear that hotel has a nice bar."

"With leather chairs." Kerry supplied. "The big cushy ones."

"Ah do believe a beer would be right nice about now." Andrew allowed. "Been one hell of a day after another damn hell of a day."

"It was so nice of you to come along, commander." Cynthia said. "You have always been so supportive." She added. "I believe you need to turn... ah, no left there. Ah. Oh."

"Hold on there." Andrew directed the SUV across several lanes of traffic. "Jest be a minute."

"Keep your eyes closed." Dar advised her partner, who had stirred and started to get up. "Don't look. I just got that knot out of your back."

"Mmph." Kerry grunted and relaxed again. "Company has insurance on this thing, right?" She had her knee braced against the back of the front passenger seat, and with Dar's grip on her, and her hold on Dar's leg, she figured she was pretty safe.

It was getting late, and she was really feeling it. She wished she could ask Andrew to just drop them off.

"Thank you again for bringing all those supplies for our poor guards." Cynthia went on. "They were very happy with what you brought I believe."

"Damn sure shoulda been." Andrew said. "That was some nice roast beef, Dardar. You all sure don't fool around with grub, do ya?"

"Nerds require a lot of protein liberally applied." Dar said. "Keeps the brain cells running." She riffled through Kerry's pale hair, as one eyeball appeared and rotated up to watch her. "So yeah, we don't eat quiche."

Andrew chuckled.

"Have you ever eaten quiche?" Kerry asked, in a low mutter.

"Not knowingly." Dar confided back. "Have you?"

Kerry nodded mournfully.

Dar leaned closer. "What is quiche?" She whispered.

"Overcooked egg omelette in a cake pan with a bunch of weird stuff in it and not enough egg."

Dar made a face. "Ew." She leaned back against the seat and peered through the front windshield, spotting their hotel rapidly approaching. She could feel a vague disassociation clouding her senses, a product of the long day's worth of overwhelming input and though she knew there was lists of things she should be doing right at the moment she also knew she wasn't going to do them.

People made mistakes when they were as tired as she was. Like leaving briefcases full of important documents, machines, and credit cards somewhere. Dar gently kneaded the back of Kerry's neck with one hand as she watched the streetlamps go by in silence.

They pulled into the hotel valet lobby, and reluctantly Dar released her partner and gave her a scratch on the back. "Here we are."

With an audible sigh, Kerry pushed herself up and sat back, running the fingers of one hand through her hair. She waited for the valet to open the door and hopped out, blinking a little in the cool air as the sounds of the hotel abruptly surrounded her.

It all looked a little different. She glanced around her as they walked up the steps and into the lobby, wondering if she was just not remembering what it had been like or if she was imagining differences. She followed Andrew into the big bar, among only a few other patrons, most gathered at the bar watching the television.

She sat down in one of the comfortable looking chairs, and extended her legs as the rest of them settled around her, a waitress in an impeccably cut suit gliding their way at once.

Bad day for business, she guessed. Or, maybe they recognized her mother. She glanced to one side. Or maybe the tall, scarred Andrew caught their eye.

"Ms. Stuart, welcome back." The waitress addressed her directly. "What is your pleasure?"

Beh? "Uh?" Kerry felt her brain wrench off onto a siding. She turned her head and looked at Dar for just long enough for her partner to start snickering.

"I think she means to drink, hon." Dar drawled. "I'll take an Irish coffee, thanks." She told the waitress. "And she'd probably like a mojito if you can manage it."

Kerry got lightheaded, as the blood rushed to her face. "Thank you. Yes. That will be fine." She muttered, rubbing her face. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

"Of course." The waitress didn't even turn a hair. She swiveled and addressed Cynthia. "Ma'am?"

Dar patted Kerry's knee. "Sorry." She leaned on the chair arm. "You okay?"

Kerry slouched back into her chair, and simply took a moment to study the angular face across the chair from her. That's what was different, she realized Dar was here, and that made everything different.

She felt different, having her partner here. She felt less defensive, less on edge. Her eyes met Dar's and she tried to quantify the change, seeing both exhaustion and happiness reflected back at her. "I'm really glad you're here." She said, watching the smile appear on Dar's lips.

"I'm not glad I'm here." Dar replied. "But I'm really glad we're together."

Ah. Yes. Kerry felt that nailed down her feelings completely. "Yeah." She felt the blush finally fade, and she was able to glance across the low table at her mother and Dar's father. "That's exactly what I meant."

"Kerry." Cynthia said. "I have to say I'm terribly sorry for what happened at my office. I was wrong. I should not have involved you at all." She said. "I thought I was doing a good thing, bringing information to my colleagues. Instead, it seems to have only made them angry."

"Jackasses." Andrew commented. "Gov'mint people got caught with their shorts round their ankles now they're hollering foul."

Cynthia half turned and regarded him. "Are you saying they should have known this was going to occur, Commander?"

"Anybody with a eyeball and half an ear knew that." The ex SEAL responded mildly. "Them folks tried to blow up them buildings before. They aint' got no voice. That's how they talk. Blow things up. Blow up buildings, blow up police stations, blow up their own folks."

Cynthia blinked at him. "Oh. My."

"Ah been there." Andrew added, almost as an afterthought. "Ain't no love there for us. Only thing we got between us is money."

A silence fell, as the waitress returned with a trayful of drinks. She set down Kerry's first, then went around the table, her motions quick and efficient.

"Please put this on my room." Kerry finally made the connection as to why she'd been addressed first. Her waking in the palatial suite seemed to be from another time, and had happened to another person. "And do you have a dessert menu from the restaurant?"

"Of course." The waitress smiled at her. "Here you are." She handed Kerry a leather bound folio. "I'll be right back."

Kerry leaned on the chair arm and opened the menu, immediately gaining a dark head resting on her shoulder as Dar peered at it as well. "What do I want." She mused.

"That." Dar pointed at the brownie sundae. "Get it twice the size and I'll share it with you." She suggested, her shoulder bumping Kerry's. "Either that, or this." She pointed next at a peach cobbler with ice cream.

"We're going to be bouncing off the walls all night." Kerry said. She turned her head to see that tiny bit of mischief erupt in her partner's eyes just a moment too late. "Jesus. Don't say it." She sighed. "Not twice in ten minutes."

Dar snickered, but held her silence.

"Well." Cynthia sighed. "I'm not sure really what to do at this point. What I am truly afraid of is that some of my colleagues will use this as an excuse to put in place some ideas that might not have found wide acceptance before."

Kerry put the menu down and sat back, picking up her mojito and taking a sip of it. The cool minty sweetness almost hid the bite of the rum and she licked her lips and put it back down on the table. The waitress came back, and Kerry pointed at both herself and Dar. "Sundae." She glanced at Andrew, who nodded, then at her mother. "Mother?"

Cynthia frowned, then she shrugged. "Why not?"

"Four." Kerry felt her second wind kicking in. Or perhaps it was her third or fourth by this time. "Dar, can you let us in on what the issue is with Gerry?"

Dar glanced at Kerry's mother, then at Kerry. One brow twitched, then she half shrugged herself. "Sure." She said. "Take this with a grain of salt, since I haven't talked to anyone but Gerry about this, and he was pretty vague."

She paused, and glanced around, but they were quite alone in their corner of the bar, the television providing an irresistible draw to everyone else including the staff. "The problem is, they lost all the local feeds into the stock exchanges and the banking centers down on the tip of Manhattan."

Kerry nodded. Cynthia nodded. Andrew grunted. "Okay." Kerry added, after Dar paused. "And?"

"And, they need to get them back online, and not let out how damaging that is to our financial infrastructure." Dar supplied.

Everyone nodded again. "Well, that's understandable." Cynthia ventured. "But I'm not quite sure.. I mean, surely everyone knows that, and by now it's being worked on." She paused. "Isn't it?"

Kerry folded her arms across her chest. "Probably not yet." She said. "The place where all those connections were is buried under the debris from the South tower."

"Oh." Kerry's mother murmured. "Well, then..."

"Where do we come in to this?" Kerry looked at Dar. "None of that's ours." She added. "We've got some customers down there, sure, and I'm already working on plans to get them rerouted, but we don't touch the markets. I remember them saying how we were locked out of those contracts."

"Someone told someone we could fix it." Dar said, succinctly. "That's what Gerry wants me to talk to that someone about."

Cynthia was looking from one of them to the other. "I don't understand. What is this about locked contracts?"

"Politics." Dar and Kerry said together. Then Kerry half turned to face her partner. "They think we can fix it? Dar that makes no sense. We don't have anything down there. No contacts, nothing. You remember what happened the last time they tried to put a bid in?"

"It doesn't make sense." Dar agreed. "That's why we need to talk to them. Find out why they think that. Alastair said I should get in and do whatever I needed to... but Ker, he doesn't get it. He doesn't know what's the score there. I think he's just not thinking straight."

Kerry shook her head. "Well, okay." She said. "On one hand we've got part of the government pissed off because we know everything, and on the other, we've got part of the government thinking we're Thor, god of the Internets. Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow."

"Thor, god of the internets." Dar mused. "I'm going to get a tshirt that says that."

Andrew chuckled. Cynthia paused, then she laughed as well, and the mood lightened a little.

"Really, it should wait for tomorrow." Kerry's mother said. "It's very late, and I'm sure we're all very tired. I hope the morning will bring some return to normal, I hear airplane flights are resuming." She looked over at Dar. "I am glad you arranged to arrive this evening, however, Dar. I know Kerrison missed you terribly."

"Mother." Kerry sighed.

"Didn't you?" Dar reached over and took Kerry's hand in her own. "I sure as hell missed you."

"Of course I did." Kerry felt a little flustered. "But sheesh... you came for other reasons." She eyed her partner, who had a faint smile on her face. "Didn't you?"

Dar shook her head.

"Dar."

The dark haired woman shrugged. "I'm too tired to lie." She said. "It just so happened Gerry's plan coincided with where I needed to be. If it hadn't, I'd have told him he had to wait." She gazed back at three sets of eyes, then looked over at Kerry. "Don't give me that look. You were going to start driving for Houston yesterday."

Kerry scratched her nose, and looked faintly abashed.

"Anyway." Dar sipped her coffee with her free hand, the fingers of the other tangled with Kerry's. "You and I will go down to the offices of whoever it is Gerry talked to and straighten it all out tomorrow."

"The other sat trucks are holding out side Newark." Kerry informed her. "Not sure if you got that on the call. They won't let anyone down into lower Manhattan yet."

Dar nodded. "We can compare notes tomorrow morning. See where we want the plan to go from here."

"I know what my intentions are." Cynthia spoke up suddenly. "I have decided to return home, as early as I can. We have many things back in Michigan that I'm worried about." She said. "I realize there is much debate going on here, but there are people there that might be in danger."

Kerry nodded. "I think that's a good decision."

"I already know what will happen here." Her mother said, in a quieter tone. "I already know speaking against it will do nothing. One of my colleagues spoke with me earlier today, she's afraid even to ask questions. Everyone is so angry."

"Ah get that." Andrew said. "Ah know what that feels like. Someone done kicked you, all you want to do is get up and kick back." He folded both arms over his broad chest. "That whole turn t'other cheek business never did much take hold in this here country."

Cynthia sighed.

Kerry took a swallow of her mojito, glad of the warmth of Dar's fingers around hers. From the corner of her eye she could see ice cream heading their way, and she could sense the end of the evening coming as well, when she'd walk with Dar across the lobby and take the elevator to her .. no, their suite.

Everything was changing around her. The world, her family, her relationships with people.. the one constant being the hand holding hers, the steady confidence in Dar's eyes, the knowledge that she would sleep tonight wrapped in the warm comfort of love.

She had no idea what tomorrow would bring. But for tonight, life was doing the best it could and she was glad enough to take what she could get.

"Want my cherry?"

And then again.

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Kerry lay flat on her back on the bed, her arms outstretched and her legs hanging off the edge with her bare feet on the floor. She wasn't doing much of anything except listening to Dar prowling around the suite, the faint snickers and sounds of things moving making her smile.

She'd teased Dar, of course, about the suite. Dar had scoffed at her, accusing her of blowing the place out of proportion until she opened the door and stepped back to let her skeptical partner enter.

Dar had, stopping in the lobby and looking around with an honestly startled expression. "Holy crap."

Kerry had merely smirked and strolled past her, securing a piece of chocolate from the waiting basket before heading for the bedroom and the waiting, already turned down, comfortable looking bed leaving her partner to explore their miniature palace. "Tolja."

"Holy crap."

Kerry smiled benignly at the ceiling. She was totally spaced, and totally exhausted. She studied the tiles for a while, then drifted off for a while, then started as a sound at the doorway made her turn her head and lift it up off the surface to look towards the opening. "Uh?"

Dar was in it, leaning casually against the frame, her body now draped in a clean tshirt and a glass of milk in her hand. "Okay, you're right." Her partner said. "You're going to have to bust your ass to beat this one." She said. "Its got three bathrooms. I had an entire shower and didn't make enough noise to wake you up."

Kerry smiled, and lifted one hand, curling her finger in a come hither gesture. "Glad I did now. C'mere."

Dar obliged, setting the glass down on the bedside table before she launched herself into the bed next to Kerry, making the smaller woman bounce. She rolled onto her side and settled down, taking hold of Kerry's hand and bringing it to her lips for a kiss.

Now that they were alone, and they could say anything to each other, she really didn't feel like saying anything at all. Kerry angled her head and pulled Dar closer, reveling in the tingle in her guts as Dar abandoned her fingers and kissed her lips instead.

She looked up and found Dar looking back at her at close range, her partner's slightly bloodshot eyes expressing gentle affection that seemed to seep right through her. "I shouldn't have had that second mojito." Kerry murmured mournfully. "I see three of you."

Dar grinned, the skin around her eyes crinkling up and glints of mischief coming into them. She leaned forward and kissed Kerry again, then rolled over and captured her partner's body, tangling her legs with Kerry's and pulling her over until they were in an untidy squash in the middle of the bed.

"Urgh." Kerry reveled in the heat where their bodies were pressed against each other. Dar's skin felt typically warm, and her skin held a hint of the apricot scrub from her shower. It was utterly familiar, and comforting out of all proportion. "You smell good."

"Do I?" Dar bit her ear gently. "I'm just glad to get the smell of airplane off me."

"What kind of plane did you come here on?" Kerry eased up onto her elbows, the air conditioning suddenly cold against the spot on her ear Dar had been suckling. "Did you have lots of Marines with you?"

"Nah. It was a transport." Dar slid her arms around Kerry's waist and studied her face. "Lots of nervous looking guys in suits. I'd have rather had the Marines. The ones in your mom's office were nice guys."

"They were." Kerry nodded. "I liked them."

"They really liked you." Dar's eyes twinkled. "One of them said he was going to try and get a job with us after his hitch was up and find you again."

"Oh for Pete's sake." Kerry started laughing. "All I did was get them freaking sandwiches." She let her head drop, and they kissed for a few minutes, ending with heightened breathing as they paused, and Kerry let her forehead rest against Dar's. "Mm."

"Keeerrrry." Dar warbled in her ear. "I mmmiiissed you."

"Sweetie, I sure as hell missed you too." Kerry nibbled at her partner's neck. "I think more than anything I missed being able to talk to you."

"More than anything?" Dar gently cupped one of Kerry's breasts, rubbing her thumb teasingly over the nipple.

"Heheh." Kerry chortled softly. "Okay, point taken."

"I can do that too." Dar tweaked her. "But yeah, it was frustrating as hell for me to have to listen to you on that call and not be able to just talk back however I wanted to." She admitted, closing her eyes a little as Kerry's hands slid across her hips. "I felt so far away."

Kerry leaned forward and kissed her again, her hand slipping under Dar's shirt. She felt her ribs move as she inhaled and a warm surge of desire flushed her skin as she felt Dar's thigh ease between hers. "You sure don't feel far away now."

Dar cupped her hand behind Kerry's neck and drew her down again. She rolled onto her side and took Kerry with her, as she felt her shirt peeled up and the cool air hit her skin. She felt flushed and the chill felt good, goose bumps raising as Kerry ducked her head down and kissed her breast. "Hope not."

Kerry smiled. She felt the exhaustion lifting as her body reacted to her partner's touch, a burning in her guts igniting as Dar unbuttoned her shirt and slid the bottom of it up, glad she'd already shed her jeans.

Impatiently, she ducked her head as Dar pulled her shirt off, busy herself with doing the same to her partner. A moment of chill, then Dar pressed against her and all she could feel was a burn that felt like it was washing her clean.

Washing the last two days out. Washing the tension of dealing with her family out. Driving aside the memories of the destruction and the accusations at her mother's office.

Dar's hand slid over her hip and down the outside of her thigh. Kerry abandoned herself to the growing tension in her guts and simply lived the moment, savoring the ragged edge to her breathing as the light touch became more deliberate and her body arched, wanting the release.

Wanting that deep burn, and the knowing jolt. "God, I love you." She breathed, just as the sensations became to intense for words and her body was shuddering in reaction, her arms clamping around Dar's as she let out a yell.

Dar chuckled, breathing hard as Kerry's weight bore down on her, pushing her back over onto her back as she nuzzled the side of her neck. "Love you too." She closed her eyes as Kerry started her attack. "Specially when you do that."

Kerry laughed on an irregular breath, as she felt tears sting her eyes at the same time. "That?"

"Ungh."

"Thought so."

**

Kerry was content to lay where she was, her body relaxed as she gently traced an imaginary line across Dar's bare skin. It was hard to keep her eyes open, but the steady, light stroking on the inside of her thigh was stoking a lazy desire and keeping her from dropping off into sleep.

She didn't mind. It felt good. It wasn't too demanding, just a teasing sensuality that made her very aware of Dar's near presence and focused her on the sound of her partner's breathing and the scent of her skin.

Dar kissed her shoulder.

"Hey Dar?" Kerry returned the kiss, letting her fingers trace her partner's nipple. "Were you really serious?"

Dar's eyes opened. "About what?" Her voice rose. "This? Hello? Earth to Kerry?"

Kerry leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. "No." She rested her elbows on either side of Dar's head, and gently rubbed noses with her. "About coming here."

Dar looked up at her for a long moment. "Duh." She said. "Give me a break, willya?"

"I feel so crummy then." Kerry ducked her head for another kiss. "I should have tried harder to go to you."

"I was in England, Ker."

"I can swim."

Dar chuckled, and wrapped her arms around her partner. She felt Kerry's body shift against hers, and she savored the moment. "You had a lot to deal with here. I'll cut you some slack." She advised. "Besides, if you had paddled over we'd just have had to fly right back here."

"I know." Kerry kissed her neck, nipping her collarbone a bit. "It's been crazy." She admitted, resting her head against Dar's shoulder as she felt Dar's hand resume it's stroking "First my family, then yesterday. Just nuts."

"You seem to be getting on okay with you mom." Dar ventured cautiously. "At least based on tonight anyway."

Kerry was silent for a moment. "Yeah." She said. "Once we got a few things out of the way... it hasn't been that bad, really. I took her for sushi tonight."

"Radical."

"No, she liked it." Kerry smiled, nestling closer. "I had her get the safe stuff, like what you did to me the first time."

Dar chuckled softly. "You ended up eating most of mine that night."

"I told her that." Kerry admitted. "I talked about you a lot." She rubbed the edge of her thumb against Dar's breastbone. "She said she was glad we met."

Dar's eyebrows hiked up. She studied the curve of Kerry's jaw, seeing the muscles move under the skin. "You think she meant it?"

Kerry was silent for a bit, then she exhaled. "You know, it's so hard for me to tell. I want to think she did, because she said that and some other stuff about how she and my father really weren't aware of stuff Kyle did... but I don't know whether she's saying it because it's true, or because she wants it to be true and she wants me to stop being so damned pissed off."

Dar started gently massaging her partner's neck again. "Do you want to stop being pissed off?" She asked. "Y'know, when I finally got back together with mine, that's what I decided. I'd just blow off the past thirty years of my life, and start fresh. Too much crap to dig through."

"Is that really fair?"

Dar shrugged. "Is life really fair?" She countered. "What makes you feel good in side, to let that all go, or just let it fester?" She felt the warmth as Kerry exhaled, her breath warming the skin over Dar's breast.

"Well, duh." Kerry murmured. "Who'd feel good festering? It just seems so... I don't know. Wussy to just say, okay, forget it, let's just move on." She pondered a bit more, feeling her body slowly relaxing again, the room around her retreating a little. "That whole turn the other cheek thing is a really tough sell."

Dar hugged her. "For what it's worth, I think your mom's legit." She said. "I think she was a chickenshit when your father was alive, but she's got to live with that. Life's short enough."

Kerry remained silent for a few minutes, then she stifled a yawn, and wrapped herself firmly around her partner. "Save it." She said. "I just want a nice long night of listening to your crazy heartbeat. To heck with everything else."

"Works for me." Dar squirmed backwards, hauling Kerry with her until they hit the pillows. "Let it wait for tomorrow along with all the other problems." She tugged the covers loose, helped more or less by a silently giggling Kerry and managed to get them wrapped over them without rolling them both out of the bed.

That left only the light, and that was a short matter well within Dar's long reach. She slapped the button and they were in darkness. The sound proofed windows blocked the noise from the street, and only the soft hum from the air conditioning and two simultaneous sighs were heard.

"That hole in the side of the building is pretty terrible, isn't it?" Kerry asked, softly.

"Yeah." Dar whispered back. "Surreal. Seeing the flag draped there made me tear up."

"Me too. They said it happened so fast no one had a chance to get away." Kerry took a little tighter hold. "Must have been horrible."

"Like in the hospital, for us."

"Yeah." The silence lengthened a bit. "We were really lucky that night, weren't we?"

"Very." Dar replied, in a soft voice. "Very, very lucky."

Kerry thought about that for a long moment. Then she pressed her body against Dar's, lifting herself up a trifle and kissing her with simple passion. She rode the surge of energy and felt Dar respond, their bodies tangling again as the covers became irrelevant.

It was a moment to just live life, without regard to what happened next.

**

Amazing what difference a day made. Kerry whistled under her breath as she settled her headset on her ears, her laptop already alive with information. She was seated in front of the window, with a view of a breezy fall day outside just at dawn.

At her side rested a cup of steaming coffee and a croissant neatly piled with eggs and swiss cheese. She picked up a sliced of strawberry and ate it, her eyes scanning the screen as she tried to assess what the status was.

Behind her, Dar's low burr was audible as she talked to Maria, and behind her partner the big television was on showing CNN's attention deficit disorder inducing screen complete with it's new ticker scrawl and live footage behind the announcer.

"Good morning, this is Miami Exec currently in Washington." Kerry announced as the conference line connected. "Hope everyone is doing good."

A brief crackle, then a host of voices responded. "Morning, ma'am." "Morning Kerry." "Hello, Miami... welcome back." "Glad to hear you on, Exec."

"Morning boss." Mark's voice echoed slightly a little afterward, sounding tired. "Now that you're on I'm gonna go catch a few z's. Is the big kahuna there?"

"She is." Kerry smiled as she said it, glancing up to see Dar framed in the entranceway, leaning back against the stately dining table dressed in just her tshirt. . "You sneaky little bugger. I'll get you for that."

"Hey, she told me not to say anything." Mark protested. "You think I'm dumb enough to not to listen?"

Kerry chuckled, a warm, rich sound that echoed a little on the call. "So where are we? Give me a status then go get some rest." She picked up her coffee and took a sip, stretching one leg out and flexing her toes against the thick carpet.

Unlike the previous day, when she'd woken up tired and tense, defensive in the presence of her mother – today she felt a resurgence of her usual optimistic nature and a sense of animal well being she wasn't stupid enough to deny the cause of.

"Well, we got some good stuff to tell and some bad stuff." Mark said. "The good stuff is Newark's up, and they've stopped beating up on the LA Earthstation."

"Miami ops, that's almost true." A voice interrupted. "We just had a request from the governor here to belay a full 24 channels for the national guard."

Mark sighed. "Hold up a sec, LA." He said. "Anyway, they got the power up here about two hours ago, and I was able to get a link up to Newark, but holy molassas, boss, it's like shoving an elephant through a punchdown. We ain't doing crap for traffic."

"Latency?" Kerry asked.

"Not just that, everyone wants to put up on the wire. I can't get a priority list out of anybody cause they all think they're the most important."

"Not like we never heard that before." Kerry said. "Okay, hang tight and tell Newark to hang tight. I'll be over there to beat back the arm wavers shortly."

"Miami exec, this is Newark." The Earthstation spoke up. "We're fully online now. Please tell those folks at APC we're all going to buy stock in them."

"Me too." Kerry agreed, smiling again. "They really came through for us. So now we have to turn that around and come through for everyone else. Just prioritize best you can until I can sort everyone out."

A window popped up, and she glanced at it. *Good morning. You sound more chipper today.*

"Duh, Mari." Kerry switched to the window. *Yeah and I even got some sleep. Did Alastair get off okay?*

Jose and Eleanor took him to the airport and said they'd stay with him until his flight at 8. He said he took Dar's advice last night down on South Beach. Dare I ask?

Kerry glanced at her partner. *Hopefully she just gave him the name of a good steakhouse.* She typed back. *Otherwise I don't wanna know.*

"Miami exec, this is Lansing."

"Go ahead, Lansing." Kerry got back to business.

"Ma'am, we had six installs due today, but we have them all on standby. Fedex advised us they don't know yet when they are going to be able to come off ground hold and deliver anything."

Ugh. Kerry picked up her croissant and took a bite as she thought. She chewed and swallowed before she answered. "That's a problem." She acknowledged. "Anyone from Logistics in Miami on?"

"It's Dogbert here, ma'am." A voice answered. "They're telling us the same thing. We were expecting a lot of stuff today."

Dogbert. Kerry repressed a smile. "Can you get me a manifest of what we've got held up in Fedex, UPS and DHL?" She asked. "Logistics in Houston?"

"Here." A gruffer voice answered. "My brother's a director in DHL. He told me they're not even allowed to open the warehouses. They've got soldiers crawling all over them with dogs."

Kerry exhaled. "Okay, everyone out there – whoever's in operations for your respective areas, I need a list of activities in jeopardy due to non delivery, please. Let's get a calendar up and running and on the desktop so we can see the impact."

"Miami Exec, this is Herndon." Another voice. "We got word flights will take off this morning, but passenger only, and there's a lot of activity on the wire."

"Miami, this is Lansing again. The two installs we had gear for, the guys are telling us they're being denied access to proceed."

Dar came over and sat down next to her, resting her chin on one hand. "This is gonna be like a slow motion train wreck." She commented. "Our ops schedule is not designed to just stop for a few days."

Kerry knew that was true. The intricate webwork of installers and technicians, product deployments and implementation scheduling was designed to be flexible, but only up to a point. She often had to shift resources around if a facility wasn't ready in time, or if a part was on backorder.

This was a completely different scope of interruption. "Okay, once we get a schedule up I need someone to run a match against the equipment we have tied up in transit against our distributed inventory. We may need to start driving."

"Maria says she's getting a lot of calls from clients." Dar said. "She's been in the office since five thirty. I'm waiting on a callback from Gerry now."

"Clients from New York and around here?" Kerry asked, clicking her mic off. "Sheesh.. don't they know what's going on?"

Dar shook her head. "From all over. I'm not really sure why they're calling. Maria said it was almost like they just wanted to know everything was all right."

Kerry's brows knit. "Huh?"

Dar shrugged. "She's pulling my address book off the phone and she'll email it to you for me." She said.

"Can't she just.. " Kerry let the thought trail off. "No, I guess she can't just Fedex everything to you. Damn. You don't realize how dependent you are on some things until they don't exist."

"She offered to fly with it." Dar said.

Kerry studied her face. "She hates flying."

"I know." Her partner smiled briefly. "I told her I'd wait. You're here. It's not like I'm out wandering the streets sleeping under a bench."

"That's true." Kerry covered Dar's free hand with her own and squeezed her fingers. "I'll definitely take care of you."

"Miami exec, this is Houston Logistics." The gruff voice came back. "We just got notified we can't move tapes to storage. Facilities been ordered closed by the Feds."

"Oh god." Kerry covered her eyes. "Thanks, Houston. For how long?"

"No idea."

Dar shook her head. "Everyone's running scared now." She said. "I'll order up some storage containers for them and us. Keep working it." She got up and headed back to the room phone, the early rays of sun splashing over her bare legs.

"Okay, Houston. We got that. We'll see what we can do to help." Kerry said. "Newark, have you had any indication on an ETA for your city power? I have a feeling we're going to need those trucks in Manhattan."

"Wish I could say yes, Miami exec." The Earthstation sounded apologetic. "My boss called this morning, and ConEd had a message on just saying to try calling in a couple days."

"Nice." Kerry took another bite of her croissant. "Well, I'm sure they've got a ton of other issues. Doesn't help us much though."

"Miami exec, this is the Air Hub." A woman's voice broke in. "Air traffic control is back online. " Her voice held a note of excitement. "We just got a request to host a big share for them for repositioning."

"Go ahead." Kerry said. "Houston ops, watch the links and make sure they get space."

"On it." A male voice answered. "We are running a little hot across the board."

Kerry glanced over at Dar, who was on the phone, cupping one hand over her free ear. "I'll get the pipe meister to look at it in a minute. She's on another call."

Kerry?

Kerry looked at the popup, then she clicked on it. *Go ahead Mar.*

I heard from our office in Springfield. They had a big riot up there last night, apparently people protesting against people from the Middle East.

Oh great. Kerry remembered what her mother had said, and exhaled. *Kneejerk.*

Agreed. Should I send an alert out though? People don't stop to think sometimes.

"Hey Dar?" Kerry turned her head as she heard her partner hang up. "Mari said they had some anti-Arab ugliness in Illinois last night. She's asking if she should send out a bulletin?"

Dar came over and sat back down, taking a sip of Kerry's coffee. "To do what? Tell our employees who happen to be Middle Eastern they should hide in the office?" She asked, practically. "I'm sure CNN is covering it, and I'm sure they're watching CNN."

Kerry studied her face. "What pissed you off?"

Dar put the cup down. "Did I say I was pissed off?" She asked, arching her brow as Kerry continued to look at her. Her lips twitched. "I just got yelled at by Gerry for ten minutes for being the forgetful nitwit I know I was yesterday."

"Well, sweetie..."

"I know." Dar set the cup down. "Yes, she should send out a note. I think people are just starting to be stupid and I don't know where it's going to end."

Kerry turned back to her keyboard. *Dar says yes. Everyone should be very aware of what is going on around them.*

"We have to go to the White House."

Kerry stopped typing in mid word, going very still, before she turned her head and looked at her partner. "Excuse me?"

"Hope you brought your rainbow nerd t-shirt." Dar got up. "I'm going to take a shower. Let's hope they don't want to see my driver's license before they let us in."

Kerry stared at the retreating figure in somewhat stunned silence for a long moment before she wrenched her attention back to the laptop. "Ah.. I'm going to have to go offline for a few minutes." She managed to get out. "Everyone just hang tight."

"Will do." "Sure." "No problem Miami exec."

Kerry got up and headed for the bathroom, hoping Dar hadn't really said what she thought she'd heard her say. She ducked inside the door, already hearing the water running, to find Dar in the middle of taking her shirt off. "The White House?"

"They're sending a car." Dar tossed her shirt on the counter. "C'mon. We don't have a lot of time. Apparently we've pissed a lot of people off and we've got a lot of explaining to do." She opened the shower door, allowing a healthy blast of steam to enter the room. "Dad's already down at the Pentagon helping."

"Helping to do what?" Kerry hurriedly got out of her shirt and joined her partner in the shower. "Dar, what the hell.. the White House? What did we do? Who did we piss off?"

"Wish I knew." Dar squirted gel on a scrubby and started indiscriminately washing both herself and Kerry. "But I'm guessing we'll soon find out."

"Ugh."

**

Dar folded her arms and glanced out the tinted window as the car sped through the streets. Kerry was sitting next to her, earbuds planted firmly in her ears as she directed the conference call in muted tones.

"Dar?" Kerry looked up. "Hamilton Baird just dropped into the call, said he'd meet us."

Dar nodded. "Good." She said. "Never thought I'd be glad to see his puss, but annoying as he is he's a first rate lawyer."

"Your father is listening from the RV." Kerry said. "What's a coon ass?"

Dar snorted in laughter, covering her mouth and then her eyes with one hand. "He didn't say that on the call, did he?"

"Um. Well, actually..."

"It's a slang for someone from Cajun Louisiana. It's not really a compliment." Dar peered through her fingers. "Sort of like being called a hillbilly. Only worse."

"He laughed."

"My father?"

"Hamilton." Kerry said. "Then he called your dad a redneck. I think the entire company's stunned to complete silence."

"Mari must be on the floor behind her desk out cold." Dar sighed. "Round out the electroshock therapy by calling dad Dad and telling them to behave."

"Whatever you say, boss." Kerry went back to her headset with a grin on her face.

Dar returned her gaze to the streets of Washington, working to ignore the twisting in her guts and faintly envying Kerry the distraction of her current task. She'd been in many high profile situations for the company and certainly she had a lot of confidence both in herself and her organization but being called to the carpet at the White House was both a new and very nerve wracking experience for her.

She didn't like politics. Based on her previous experience, she didn't much like politicians. Dar felt that in order to be elected by a majority, politicians had to become the lowest common denominator and promise everything to everyone, delivering not much to anyone in the end.

Except, in South Florida, to their relatives. Dar unfolded her arms and let her hands rest on her denim covered knees. Corruption wasn't viewed so much as a scandal in Miami as a bit of entertainment for the residents to discuss over café along with the latest news of Castro, the traffic, and whether or not hurricanes would be heavy or light this season.

Expected. Politicians were wheelers and dealers where she lived, and while it did earn Miami the banana republic reputation it had, Dar also found the up front acknowledgement quite a bit more refreshing than the usual political pretending to virtue and desire for public service as a reason for election.

Straightforward, and local. The county and city leaders didn't much give a rat's ass about the rest of the state, or in fact, the rest of the country. Their focus was on drawing people and businesses in, pushing development to its limits, scooping in as much in taxes as they could, and spending money on whoever's pet project they got the most kickbacks for.

No euphemisms about bettering humanity. No long harangues about family values. Very commercial, very crass, very ethnic. Dar liked that. She remembered hearing one local politico talking to some moral values types at a fundraiser she'd been roped into attending and they'd asked him about the dangers of a gay neighborhood springing up in a certain area.

"Let them come." The politico had said. "They improve any area they live in. Property value goes up, taxes go up. Show me that around a soup kitchen."

Blunt. Shocking. Very Miami. Dar remembered after Hurricane Andrew, when there had been hundreds of thousands of tons of debris to get rid of, and the state and federal government, citing pollution regulations, had forbid burning to get rid of it.

They'd burned it anyway. The county manager had told the regulators to come arrest him if they didn't like it.

Dar felt a certain sympathy with the attitude.

The car turned into a long driveway, and pulled to a halt at a large, iron, guarded gate. "Ma'am, I'll need to show them your identification." Their driver half turned to look at her. "Can you pass it up please?"

"No." Dar laced her fingers. "Actually, I can give you Kerry's. Not mine."

The driver looked at her.

"I'm not deliberately being an asshole." Dar correctly interpreted his expression. "I just don't have it. My wallet and all my ID is back in Miami."

The driver continued to stare at her. "Ma'am, they won't let you in there without ID."

"Well." His passenger cleared her throat. "That could be true. But the government paid a lot of money to bring me up here from Florida on a military airplane and then send you to fetch me to the White House. Chances are, someone in there knows who I am or at least will trust that I am who they think I am."

The driver shrugged, and turned back around. "See what they say." He drove the car forward a space, waiting for the rest of the line to clear the gate. Dar took the opportunity to fish inside Kerry's briefcase, bringing out her ID and holding it in one hand.

Kerry glanced up at her in question, one hand still cupped over her ear. Dar held up her passport folio, and she nodded, then went back to her conversation, reaching out with her other hand to pat Dar's knee.

The car pulled forward, and the driver opened the door, putting one leg out and standing up to talk to the guard rather than opening the window. Dar didn't much envy him, since she figured he was probably telling this armed, anxious, hyper alert man that he had some chick in the car who wanted in to the White House without even a driver's license.

"Dar, Houston's saying they're running really high on usage across the net." Kerry said. "You probably need to check it out."

Dar wiggled her fingers, and looked down at her empty lap, raising her brows at her partner. "They haven't put the chip in yet, hon. Can I borrow your laptop?"

"Of course." Kerry nudged her briefcase over with her foot. "You have to ask?"

"I have to ask because I'll need to sign in with your cached credentials and then rig the VPN system to ask for mine." Dar was drawing the machine out and putting in on her lap. "I usually ask nicely when I'm hacking my SO's system."

Kerry gave her a fond smile. "I love you." She said, then paused, and looked down at her mic, cursing silently. "What's that? No, no, I was... okay, never mind. Who has the name of the guy I need to talk to?"

Dar chuckled under her breath.

"You get me in so much damn trouble." Kerry overly obviously keyed the mic off this time, scribbling on a pad with her other hand. "Jesus."

The driver dropped back into the car. "Ma'am, they need to verify with the folks inside. I'm going to pull off over here so we don't block the gate."

"Sure." Dar clicked away at the keyboard. "I'll just be back here rerouting all of your paychecks to the French Foreign Legion." She inserted the cellular card and waited for the computer to fully boot, then opened a command line window and started typing.

"Didn't you rig the VPN system so no one could log in with someone else's laptop?" Kerry asked, idly.

"Yes."

"Mm." Kerry paused, then cleared her throat. "Yes, Mr. Mitchell? This is Kerry Stuart from ILS." She paused again, listening. "Yes, I understand.... Mr. Michell, I do un.. sir." Kerry's voice lifted. "That's not correct. I do understand what has been going on the past two days, since I'm sitting in a car outside the gate to the White House right now waiting to talk to the folks inside about it."

Dar finished her typing, then she triggered the VPN connection. It obediently presented her with a login box, which she entered her credentials into and sent it on it's way. "Problem?" She asked, in a casual tone.

"Not Dar level yet." Kerry covered the mouthpiece, then removed her hand. "Right. So explain to me now why my technicians, who are busting their asses to try and keep their schedules on track, aren't being allowed to complete your install? The one you contracted for? You did ask us to do this, didn't you?"

Dar drummed her fingers on the palm rest, as her desktop formed itself in front of her. She could have actually used Kerry's, but their working style was so different it drove her crazy trying to find things on it.

She opened her custom monitoring application, glancing over the top of the laptop screen towards the driver. He was sitting quietly, relaxed and reading a notepad, occasionally looking up to watch the guards at the gate to see if they were going to come over to them.

Dar pondered what to do if they got turned away. Go to the Pentagon? Maybe Gerry could get her some temporary credentials. "I'm such an idiot." She sighed, as the gages formed up and she studied the results.

"Okay, then we have an understanding," Kerry said. "I'll send my team back up there, and they'll get on with the work. It shouldn't take long." She added. "Thanks." She hung up and went back to the conference call. "Jerk."

Dar keyed on the government routers that were managed from Houston, separating them out in a window and reviewing their statistics. "You're such a hardass, Ker."

"Pfft." Kerry keyed her mic. "Okay, I'm back." She said. "Lansing, this is Miami Exec. Please resend the techs up to Browerman and Fine, they're cleared to enter."

"This is Lansing, will do."

Dar heard the driver shift, and she peered past him to see the guards approaching. She put her head back down and typed quickly, her eyes flicking over the sets of numbers that flashed on and off the screen.

The window opened and the guard leaned down to peer in at them. "Good morning."

"Good morning." Kerry closed her mic.

"Which one of you is Paladar Roberts?" The guard asked.

"That'd be me." Dar glanced up, but kept typing. "I'm the jerk who showed up with no ID." She added. "And I am sorry about that."

The guard nodded. "That's posing a big problem for us." He watched Dar nod back. "But the people inside said to let you in with an escort, so I'm going to let you in, with an escort." He patted the window on the driver's side door. "Go on, Jack. We'll send two guys with you, and two guys'll meet you at the stairs."

Kerry regarded him with a touch of concern. "Are we that dangerous looking?" She asked.

The guard just shook his head and waved, and the window closed as the driver put the car in gear and edged his way between two other vehicles towards the gates.

"Houston's right" Dar was clicking away. "They're eating up the wires. I'm going to throw some reserve at them."

"Without finding out why?" Kerry questioned.

"Wouldn't even know where to start asking." Her partner admitted. "I'm sure it's all TCP/IP encapsulated frantic arm waving and ass covering mixed with legitimate intelligence movement but there's really no way for me to step in and question it."

Kerry nodded, and went back to the call. "Folks, I'm going to have to drop offline in a few minutes here. If anything comes up, just call my cell and get me back on."

"There." Dar finished her configuration changes, saving them and cutting and pasting a large swath of tiny text into an email message. "I'll tell Houston I did that, but they need to keep it under their hat. I don't want anyone getting the idea we have inexhaustible bandwidth."

"Okay, I'm out." Kerry said, then she closed the phone, peering out of the window. They were pulling past a line of trees, liberally guarded by machine gun toting soldiers. Ahead there was a small parking area, in front of a huge, almost gothic looking building she only vaguely remembered. "Ah. The old executive."

Dar glanced up from her keyboard and looked out the window, peering at the large structure. Then she shook her head and went back to her keyboard. "Almost done."

Kerry ran her fingers through her hair. "There's Hamilton." She indicated the tall, urban figure leaning on the gate in a posture of bored waiting. "I have to admit, I'm pretty glad to see him given where we are."

Dar shut the laptop and leaned over to slide it into Kerry's briefcase. "Me too." She admitted briefly. "But don't let him know that."

The car pulled to a halt, and two soldiers approached immediately, signaling the vehicle following them. "Please wait and don't open the doors." The driver warned. "Let the soldiers do it."

"Sure." Dar leaned back and twiddled her fingers, as she watched the soldiers approach cautiously as though she was some sort of hyper technical land shark. It kept her mind off what waited for them though, and she only smiled at the man who opened the door, staying still until he realized she was pretty much harmless.

"Thank you ma'am, you can get out." The soldier said, courteously. "Sorry about that, we're a little tense here today."

"I completely understand." Dar swung her legs out and got up, surprising the soldier when she straightened to her full height that topped his by a few inches. She closed the door and paused, as Kerry made her way around behind the car to join her, then they started off towards the gates and their waiting corporate lawyer.

The two soldiers walked along side them. Both were young, but not too young, and they both had five o'clock shadows that probably had started sometime the previous afternoon. They looked tired. Dar suddenly felt an empathy for them she hadn't expected. "Hang in there guys." She told the one to her right. "I know it's been rough."

The soldier looked at her, his shoulders shifting into a more relaxed posture. "Thanks, ma'am."

They crossed the street and Hamilton pushed off his post and came to meet them. "Well, hello there ladies."

"Good morning, Mr. Baird." Kerry greeted him politely.

"Hamilton. Good to see you." Dar chimed in. "Thanks for coming down."

The lawyer seemed to be more subdued than usual. "Good to see you both." He said. "Let's go see what this whoo hah is all about."

They started up the steps. "Sorry about my father." Dar commented. "I'm not sure he realized how big his audience was."

Hamilton chuckled. "Darlin, he's your father. Of course he realized. But he's a gorgeous old salt so it didn't bother me a bit." He glanced to either side, at their silent escort. "Ain't enough like him and any how my mama raised me to be proud of being a coon ass."

"I don't think he meant it as an insult." Dar smiled. "Not from where we came from."

The lawyer laughed. "Lord I hope they don't regret asking us into this place." He waited for Dar and Kerry to enter the big doorway, then followed before the soldiers could. "Sorry boys, beauty and treachery before virtue."

The soldiers bumped into the frame in their haste to follow. "Sir! Ma'am! Wait!"

Kerry shifted the strap on her briefcase and shook her head, resisting the urge to move faster just to get to the end of the waiting. "Going to be one of those mornings."

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Dar had her hands stuck in her pockets, her head tipped back a little as she studied the shelves full of books in the room they'd been shuffled off to.

Kerry was sitting at a mahogany table behind her, working on her laptop as Hamilton spoke softly into his cell phone on the other side of the room.

Hurry up and wait, was that the tactic? Dar rocked up and down on her heels. In the distance, she could hear the muffled sounds of activity, the halls they'd been walked through to this waiting room had been full of men and women rapidly moving from one place to another, all with grim, intent faces.

Hamilton joined her at the shelves. "Al just buzzed me. He's still hanging around in that lovely airport of yours." He informed her. "But he does think he's going to get to sit on an airplane in the next twenty minutes."

Dar glanced at him. "Given how screwed up everything is, can't really expect flights to be taking off on schedule. He's probably going to get on something that's supposed to be in New York."

The corporate lawyer nodded. "It's a fine mess." He agreed. "But listen, thanks by the by for taking care of old Al through all this. He said you were just a peach."

Dar's brow lifted sharply.

"In an Al sort of way." Hamilton conceded, with a smile. "And speaking of, shall we play this as a bad cop with a worse cop routine? Neither you, nor I, are going to be mistaken for a good cop any time soon."

Dar pointed over her own shoulder with her thumb. "Brought the good cop." She explained succinctly. "Though the way she was telling off some senior senator last night I'm not sure they want to piss her off."

"With any luck they'll all realize they've got a lunch date and leave us alone." Hamilton said. "I do think what I am hearing about them being all up in their shorts at us is making me itch in places men should not."

Dar folded her arms. "I gotta agree with that. I don't know what the hell they think they're mad at I've had a thousand people working round the clock for two days busting their asses to keep everyone's pie plates spinning. What damn more do they want?"

They both turned as the door opened, and a lot of footsteps echoed into the room just ahead of a crowd of men. "I do believe we're going to find out." Hamilton said. "C'mon, Igor. Let's go be bad."

Dar was already heading towards the table that Kerry was seated at, since the group of men who had entered the room were also headed in that direction. She got in front of them before they reached her partner, bringing them up short as she simply stepped into the way and blocked it. "Gentlemen."

She missed the sweetly amused expression on Kerry's face as she looked up and observed this bit of unconscious chivalry, and it only lasted a moment before Kerry removed her ear buds and stood up as Hamilton joined her.

The man in the lead, a slim, tall dark haired guy in a suit in his mid forties or so, took a step back and held his hand up to stop the crowd. "Are you Roberts?"

"Yes." Dar stuck her hands in her pockets and regarded him. "And you are?"

"John Franklin." The man said. "I'm from the NSA. Now, you listen to me..."

"Hold up." Dar didn't raise her voice. She put her hands back in her pockets and tilted her head a little, regarding the man carefully. "Can we discuss a few ground rules before we start swinging?"

Franklin frowned. "I don't think you understand the situation here."

"I do." Dar answered, in the same even, almost gentle tone. "You obviously want something from me. Since I'm as horrified as any other American over what happened two days ago, and since I'm from a military family, chances are I want to do whatever's in my power to help you in whatever your problem is."

"Well, okay." Franklin's posture moderated. He leaned back a trifle, shifting his weight to his back foot.

"So please don't start out by yelling and trying to browbeat me." Dar said. "I don't respond well to threats, so chances are you'll have a lot faster results if you just tell me what you need, and let me see what I can do to give it to you."

Franklin motioned the rest of his group to sit down. He put his briefcase on the table across from where Kerry was standing and rested his hands on the handle of it. "All right, Ms. Roberts we can try that route."

"Great." Dar pulled a chair out and sat down, patting the one next to her which Kerry promptly took. "This is our vice president of operations, Kerrison Stuart, and our senior corporate legal counsel, Hamilton Baird."

Franklin nodded at them. "Mr. Baird. Ms. Stuart." He opened his briefcase, as the rest of the men with him settled at tables nearby. One stayed by the door, as though guarding it. "This is what we need." He took out a folder and opened it. "We need you to turn over the operation of all your computer systems to us."

Dar didn't answer. She tipped her head back and looked at Hamilton, one of her eyebrows lifting. "I think this is your gig."

"I think you're right." The lawyer agreed, with a smile. "Mr. Franklin." He leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table, clasping his hands. "If that was in fact a serious request, we can end this discussion right now, and I'll go call my office so they can start burping up little baby lawyers to handle all the paperwork for the lawsuits."

Kerry folded her hands together and kept quiet. She watched Franklin's face as he stared at Hamilton, and noted that neither the lawyer nor her partner appeared in any way tense.

Amazing. Mostly because Kerry knew Dar was strung up like a horse about to start the Kentucky Derby and she could feel the faint vibration of her muscles through the kneecap that was firmly in contact with her own.

"What on earth would make you even think we'd consider that?" Kerry asked, to break the silence. "Mr. Franklin, the government pays us a lot of money to do what we do. What makes you think that a - we would betray that trust and those contracts, and b, that you have anyone who could take over them even if we would?"

"Look." He said. "They're just computers. You're not rocket scientists."

Dar rolled her head to one side, and chuckled. Kerry turned and regarded her. "You could be a rocket scientist." She remarked. "But in answer to your statement, Mr. Franklin, no. They're not just computers. You don't really even understand what we do."

"I understand very well what you do." Franklin protested. "We need to have those computers. We have to be able to see everything."

Dar stood up, and rested her fingers on the desk. "Are you talking about the Virginia facility?"

"Yes." Franklin said. "We went there. We were supposed to meet Ms. Stuart there, but she never showed up."

"I did." Kerry said. "I was there for hours. You were the ones who never showed up."

The tension was rising. Hamilton lazily removed his hand from his pocket, displaying a tape recorder. "Just so we're all on the same page."

"We don't have any government computers in the Virginia facility." Dar said. "What we do there is move data traffic between a number of government offices, mostly for the purposes of accounting. Can you explain to me what the national security need is to see that?"

"Okay." Franklin remained calm. "We think there are people, maybe a lot of people, here in the United States who have been here for a while, and who are working behind the scenes to promote terrorist activities."

Hamilton cleared his throat. "I do have to remind you there have always been people inside these United States who work behind the scenes to promote all kinds of agendas."

"This is not a joke." Franklin frowned at him.

"That's a fine thing, because I am not joking. Those very same people, starting way back in the 1700's, have included the Continental Congress and lots of crazy half frozen men up in Massachusetts who used to run around in wigs and short pants setting fire to Tory underwear and dumping tea in Boston Harbor."

"Sir."

"That is not a joke, mister." Hamilton's voice got louder. "In case you grew up in Arkansas and didn't get history books in school, this country was born in terrorism. It ain't nothing new." He leaned forward on the table. "So please don't start waving the flag at me saying my company's got to do this illegal thing and that illegal thing because of this new fangled scary threat."

"What we're asking is certainly not illegal. I have the request right here, signed by the president's Chief of Staff." Franklin took out a paper and pushed it across the desk. "We are to be given access to everything."

Dar let Hamilton take the paper and study it. "Who is performing the access?" She asked.

Franklin turned, and indicated the men with him. "This is my team." He said, with a hint of a smile.

Dar studied the first of them. "What do you do?"

"Data analysis." He responded promptly. "Myself, David, and Carl here are senior data analysts."

"Robert and I are database specialists." The man next to him promptly supplied.

Dar nodded slowly. "Any of you network engineers?" She asked. "Infrastructure specialists? Layer 3 people?"

The men looked at each other, then at Franklin.

"No." Franklin said. "We don't do that."

"We do that." Kerry picked up the ball from her partner. "That's what we do in the Virginia facility."

"Gentlemen and beautiful ladies." Hamilton pushed the paper back over. "That's legally worth about as much as a one legged man in an ass kicking contest." He stated bluntly. "Nothing in there applies to us. We're not letting you put a pinky in the door."

Kerry could sense an explosion waiting to happen. She put her hand out, and touched Franklin's arm. "What actually are you looking for?" She asked. "Accounting records? You know it's probably going to be easier if you apply directly to the offices who generate them."

"That takes too long." Franklin said. "We don't have time for all the red tape."

Hamilton looked at him. "Are you saying it's just easier to browbeat a contractor?"

"I can get the president to write an executive order to have the army take over your office." Franklin said. "I don't really care what you say at this meeting, we'll get in there, and we'll get what we want. If you want to end up in jail today, that's okay with me. I don't like you. You people are just trash, and you're in my way."

Hamilton looked over at Dar. "Darlin, I think this is your gig."

"I think you're right." Dar agreed. She turned back to Franklin. "Okay, jackass." She said. "I don't give a shit whose weenie you're swinging off of. Jesus Christ couldn't get into my systems unless I wanted him to so you go ahead, and go get whatever orders your heart desires because trust me buddy, they mean jack nothing to me."

"You really don't understand." Franklin said. "I'm going to have you arrested."

"For what?" Dar said.

"I don't need anything in specific. Not anymore." The NSA man said. "You don't get it. The rules all changed. We don't care if what we're doing is illegal, we'll just change the laws." He stared at Dar. "We don't care. I will wreck you, and wreck your family, and wreck your company if yo don't do what I want, because I can. I can do anything. So you better decide you're going to take us back to that office,e and open up everything, and just get the hell out of my way or.."

"Or." Dar said, a short explosion of sound. "Arrest me. Comrade. Take me to the gulag."

Both Kerry and Hamilton remained absolutely silent.

"That's not funny."

"Neither is what you just said." Dar shot back. "That I have no rights? That as an American citizen I can be tossed in jail for no reason, with no charges, with no recourse because I won't break the law for you? That's your new world? Someone point me out the nearest foreign embassy. I've got a passport to burn."

Franklin was breathing hard. "We're at war." He said.

"My father is a retired Navy Seal." Dar said. "What the hell do you know about war he didn't teach me before I was out of grade school?" She leaned on her hands on the table, looking him right in the eye. "You can arrest me, you can toss me in the gulag, you can scream and rant and rave and weenie waggle right across the White House lawn. You will not get into those systems."

Franklin stood, and they stared at each other.

"Excuse me." Kerry held up her hand. "Can I ask a question here?" She didn't wait for permission, suspecting correctly it wouldn't be forthcoming. "If you're looking for terrorist financial activities, why are you looking for them in the records of the civil service health plan, or the department of state payroll instead of asking the credit card companies to help you?"

Everyone turned around and looked at Kerry.

"Do you really think the general accounting office is full of Taliban?" Kerry persisted. "Or NASA's website?"

"What did you say about the credit card companies?" Franklin asked, slowly.

"Lord, I swear." Hamilton sighed, and put his head down on one fist. "It's enough to make a man want to move to Japan."

"If you really want to find people who are trying to do bad things, then you should look at things they buy. I don't think people can bring things like bombs into the country." Kerry said. "But they can buy things to make bombs and those places they buy them have to have records of it."

"We understand that." Franklin said. "We know more about it than you apparently give us credit for."

"Okay." Kerry said. "Then I'm sure you're already in touch with the major retailers and the credit card clearinghouses, right? I'm sure you've asked them to crossreference charges for whatever it is that interests you? Like phosphorous or whatever."

"Or flight lessons." Dar chimed in. "I'm sure they've already thought of that Kerry, if they're here asking us to review the traffic to the National Park service."

"Stay here." Franklin got up and motioned for a man to follow him, as he left the room, walking quickly.

There was a small silence after he left. Dar bumped Kerry on the shoulder, then turned to Hamilton. "Now what?"

The lawyer was already on his cell phone. "I'm calling in some backup. This ain't even slightly funny."

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Kerry clasped her hands, wishing she could continue working just to pass the time if nothing else. But Dar and Hamilton had told her to close her laptop down and get off the call, both of them keyed and nervous in front of the eyes of the watching men around them.

Dar was pacing around in back of her. Hamilton was across the room, his head bent over his cell phone, muttering in a low Louisiana accent that obscured all meaning from whatever it was he was saying.

Kerry sighed and looked around the room again, her irritation at the whole situation creeping slowly towards a breaking point.

She could feel Dar's agitation, and her nape hairs prickled just as she sensed her partner turning and heading towards her seat, the rush of energy making her eyes blink a little.

"Okay." Dar's voice lifted, catching everyone's attention. "That's long enough. We've got work to do."

Kerry gathered herself up, getting her hiking boots under her as she prepared to stand up, guessing rightly that Dar intended on leaving.

"I don't think that's a good idea." One of the men said.

"I don't think you think." Dar shot right back. "So unless you're going to pull a gun and keep us here, move the hell out of the way." She tapped Kerry on the back and waited for her to rise, then started for the door.

"And if you all are going to pull that gun, you betta make sure you shoot to kill and hide the bodies." Hamilton joined Dar as she got to the aisle. "Because you ain't never going to get loose of the legal trouble if you don't, I guarantee it."

"Listen Mister..."

"Listen Mister is a Louisiana lawyer, son." Hamilton waved a hand in his direction. "I ain't fooling with you. I have half the legal staff of ILS, which is bigger than most of your government departments heading here with torts and complaints enough to half bury this building. We ain't talking no more to you. Tell your lawyers to call me."

Kerry decided she really didn't have much to add to the conversation. She merely shouldered her briefcase and stuck close to her partner, resisting the urge to latch on to the back of Dar's belt. The whole situation was scaring her, and she felt very glad to be tucked behind Dar's tall form in relative safety.

"Agent Franklin said for you to stay here." The man said. "I think it's a good idea for you to do that. You don't want to get him pissed off at you." He was standing in their path, both hands raised, palms outward. "We're not going to do anything ridiculous like take guns out, but this is a serious situation, and it's in your best interests just to stay put until he gets back."

"No." Dar kept going. "It's in the best interests of our customers, which includes a lot of you, for us to get out of here and get on with doing our jobs." She squared her shoulders and looked the man right in the eye. "We're not going to do what you asked us to, no matter how long we stay."

"Well, now, just think about this a minute..." The man took a step backwards, towards the door as the three of them bore down on him. "We're not asking."

The door opened behind him before Dar could come up with any more bullshit responses. She looked past the man to see Franklin entering, but from the expression on his face, she wasn't sure now what was going on.

"Sir, but.. let me explain." Franklin was coming in sideways. "I have a mandate!" He tried to hold the door shut but someone was pushing it open from the other side. "Sir!"

"Get the hell out of my way you little weasel!" A gruff, older voice answered. "Take your useless bunch of yuppies with you."

Hamilton and Dar exchanged glances. "This is getting ticklier than an octopus with athletes foot." Hamilton said. "It's never boring around you, is it? Now I know why Al went to New York and sent me here. The man was probably exhausted."

Kerry edged up next to her partner for a better view. The NSA agents had stood and now they were milling a little, looking nervously at the door.

It was shoved open, and Franklin got out of the way as a tall, grizzled haired man entered, sweeping the room with his eyes.

"Ah." He put his hands on his hips. "Which one of you is Roberts?"

Dar lifted her hand and let it fall.

"You stupid bastard." The older man turned on Franklin. "We've been waiting on this damned person since yesterday, and you're dicking around with her in here? Get the hell out of my sight."

"SIR!" Franklin bravely raised his voice. "I have a MANDATE."

"I don't give a damn!" The man shouted right back. "You had a mandate to keep the country safe too, and you didn't do that either! Now get out!"

"Oo." Kerry muttered under her breath.

"You've got no right to say that!" Franklin stood up to him. "You didn't do anything either!"

Hamilton leaned closer. "Ya'll think we should take this opportunity to skedaddle?"

"I dunno." Dar whispered back. "I think that's the guy who told Gerry to find me."

"That's enough." The older man said. "You folks, you IT people. Come with me." He gestured to Dar and company. "Franklin, I'd start packing. Take your hairbrained schemes somewhere else."

Selecting the better part of valor, Dar led the way to the door, passing behind the older man and escaping out into the hallway with a sense of relief. Even if it was momentary, and she was about to dive from the pan into the fire.

"Absolute disaster." The older man slammed the door and turned to them. "Michael Bridges. Advisor to the President." He said. "Where the hell have you people been? We expected you last night."

Dar studied him. "Long story." She said. "You want to hear it, or just get down to business?"

Bridges studied her in return. Then he snorted a little. "Let's go." He pointed down the hallway. They walked along, moving from side to side to avoid the throngs of busy people who seemed to be going in every direction possible.

"So you're a friend of Eastons, eh?" Bridges asked.

"Family friend, yes." Dar agreed. "This is my vice president of operations, Kerrison Stuart, by the way, and our senior corporate legal council, Hamilton Baird."

Bridges spared them a bare glance. "Had to bring a lawyer with you? I told Easton I only wanted you here. Bastard."

"Mamma always called me a son of a bitch, matter of fact." Hamilton smiled at him. "But thanks for the compliment."

"Meant Easton." The older man frowned at him. "Don't get all smart ass with me."

"Based on the conversation in that room, I don't intend on going to the bathroom here without a lawyer." Dar interjected, suspecting their legal council was about to get downright Cajun on the man. "I've had people from the government asking me to break contracts and break laws for two days."

"Hmph." Bridges indicated a door, and shoved his way through it scattering secretaries on the other side like birds before a cat. "Move it! Get that damn conference room cleared!"

Dar paused before she entered the room, letting her eyes flick over it and noting the smoked glass panels in the ceiling. In the center of the room was a large, oval wooden conference table, with comfortable leather chairs surrounding it.

In the back of the room was a mahogany credenza, looking completely out of place against the lighter wood of the conference table, and the cream leather of the chairs. It had doors in it that were flung back to reveal a large screen television, and playing on the screen, unsurprisingly, was CNN.

Dar wondered, briefly, if most of the government didn't get their information from the same place it's citizens did. "All hail Ted Turner."

"What was that?" Bridges got to the head of the table and dropped into the seat there, conspicuously larger and more comfortable looking than the rest. He was dressed in a pair of pleated slacks and had a white button down shirt on, but the sleeves were rolled up and his tie was loose enough to reveal an open top neck button. "Sit. Margerie, close the damn door."

One of the secretaries looked inside and nodded, then she shut the door behind her. It blocked out most of the noise in the office, but not all of it.

"All right." Bridges leaned on his forearms. He was probably in his sixties, and had a long, lined face with thick gray eyebrows and light hazel eyes. "I'm not sure if you people know how the government works."

Kerry held her hand up. "I have some idea." She remarked, in a quiet tone. "But you know, Mr. Bridges, I don't think this situation has anything to do with how the government works." She went on. "Mr. Franklin told us the rule book got thrown out the window. Is that true?"

Bridges looked at Dar, then at Hamilton, then he studied Kerry. "Where the hell do I know you from?" He asked, instead of answering the question. "You look familiar."

"Thanksgivings at my parent's house." Kerry replied. "We didn't sit at the same table though."

Bridges blinked, then his brows knit. "Oh, son of a bitch. You're Roger's kid, aren't you?" He said sounding surprised. "What in the hell are you doing here? Ah, never mind." He turned back to Dar. "We're wasting time. Here's the deal."

Kerry settled back in her seat, lacing her fingers together. She remembered Bridges, all right. A mover and shaker that even her father had respected, rude and brash and to her mother, a most unwelcome guest.

Not someone she'd really wanted to get involved with.

"I imagine you know all about the damage to all that technical stuff in New York." Bridges said. "That's all your company's business."

"Not exactly." Hamilton broke in. "Just want to get that cleared up. That ain't all ours."

"That's right." Dar agreed. "We do have some customers affected there, but most of the business infrastructure there isn't ours."

"You finished talking?" Bridges said. "Yes? Good." He leaned on his forearms again. "I don't give a damn if it was yours, or Martha Stewarts to begin with. The problem is, it's broke."

Dar shrugged, and nodded. "It's broken." She agreed. "What does that have to do with us?"

"Well, I'll tell you." Bridges said. "I called all those bastard phone company people into this office, and they all told me the same thing. Sure, they can fix it, but it's going to take time." He studied Dar's face intently. "They gave me all kinds of bs excuses why. Now.." He held up a hand as Dar started to speak. "I'm not an idiot. I know two goddamn buildings at least fell on top of all that stuff. Don't bother saying it."

Dar subsided, then she lifted both her hands and let them drop. "Okay. So they told you it would take time to fix. It will. They're not lying about that."

"I know." The president's advisor said. "The issue is, it can't."

Kerry rubbed her temples. "Mr. Bridges, that's like saying the sun can't rise tomorrow because it would be inconvenient. There's a physical truth to this. It takes time to build rooms, and run wires, and make things work."

"I know." Bridges said. "But the fact is, it can't take time. I have to open the markets on Monday. That stuff has to work by Sunday so those idiot bankers can test everything. We have to do it, Ms. Roberts. I'm not being an asshole for no purpose here. If we don't restore confidence in the financial system, we stand to lose a hell of a lot more than a couple hundred stories of office space housed in ugly architecture."

There was a small silence after that. Bridges voice faded off into faint echoes. Dar tapped her thumbs together and pondered, reading through the lines and in between his gruff tones and seeing a truth there she understood.

Alastair had understood, immediately. There was a lot at stake.

"Why me?" Dar asked, after a long moment. "You had all the telcos in here. It's their gear. It's their pipe. It's their equipment. They have to do the work. What the hell do you want from me in all this? I don't have a damn magic wand."

"Ah." Bridges pursed his lips. "Well, fair enough. You're right. It's not your stuff. Your company has nothing to do with the whole thing, other than being a customer of those guys who were in here. But the fact of the matter is, when I squeezed their balls hard enough, what popped out of the guys from ATT was that if I wanted this done in that amount of time, come see you."

"Me." Dar started laughing. "Oh shit. Give me a break."

Hamilton had his chin resting on one hand, and he was simply watching and listening, the faintest of twitches at the corners of his lips.

"Why is that, Ms. Roberts?" Bridges asked. "I don't really know who the hell you are, or what your company does, except that it keeps coming up in the oddest conversations around here about who knew what when and how people who work for you keep showing up in the right places with the right stuff."

"Well now." Hamilton spoke up for the first time. "What old Dar here's going to say is, she's damned if she knows why but fact is, I do." He drawled. "It's in our portfolio, matter of fact."

"Hamilton." Dar eyed him. "Shut up."

"Dar, you know I love you more than my luggage." The lawyer chuckled. "Mr. Bridges." He turned to the advisor. "Those gentlemen from our old friends American Telegraph and Telephone told you that because they know from experience standing in front of hurricane Dar here is one way to get your shorts blown right off your body and get strangled by them." He ignored Dar's murderous look. "She just doesn't take no for an answer."

Bridges got up and went to the credenza, removing a pitcher and pouring himself a glass from it. "I see." He turned. "Is that true, Ms. Roberts?"

Dar drummed her fingers on the table. "When it suits my goals, yes." She said, finally. "I've been known to be somewhat persistent."

Kerry covered her eyes with one hand, biting the inside of her lip hard to keep from laughing. She could sense Dar peeking over at her and worked hard to regain her composure.

"All right." Bridges sat back down. "So. What's it going to cost me then? I won't waste my time appealing to your patriotism."

Dar was silent for a long moment again. "You could." She said, looking him right in the eye. "Appeal to my patriotism. What makes you think I don't have any?"

"Just a hunch." Bridges said. "You don't seem the type."

Dar's eyes narrowed a trifle. "Do the country a favor." She said. "Flush your hunches down the toilet if they're all that worthless." She got up. "Unfortunately for everyone, my patriotism doesn't count in this case. There is nothing I can do to fix what's broken. I don't own any of the infrastructure, none of those companies has any reason to do me any favors, and that union tangled century's old mess down at the tip of Manhattan's way beyond my skills to sort out in three days no matter who says yes or no. It can't be done."

Bridges leaned on his knuckles and stared at her. "Can't be done?"

"Can't be done." Dar said. "But for a price, I'll give it my best try."

The advisor sat down.

Kerry felt like she was watching a game of tennis, where the volley was getting faster and faster and the ball was a small thermonuclear device. She had no idea where Dar was going with all this, and it had been a while since she'd seen her partner in this kind of a mood.

It was almost like watching a stranger. Dar was focused, and her eyes were like chips of crystal, with no emotion at all in them.

"What's your price?" Bridges asked, in a sardonic tone. "Maybe I'll try to pay it if you're only going to try and do what I'm asking."

"Get the NSA off my ass." Dar said, ticking one finger off. "Give my people clearance to get into the city." She ticked a second finger off. "Give me some kind of leverage to get through the politics. I'll give it my best shot. You get whatever you get out of it. Maybe it'll work. Maybe it won't."

The advisor rested his forearms on the table again and gazed at her, with a slightly puzzled look. "What's in it for you, then?" He asked. "What do you get out of it?"

Dar managed the faintest of smiles. "Service to my country." She answered, in a quiet tone. "It's the right thing to do, no matter how impossible it is."

"You really don't think it's possible." Bridges mused. "Everyone agrees with that. Even the president. He wanted me to find some way to fake it." He looked up to find three sets of eyes staring at him in disbelief, and he shrugged in response. "Ms. Stuart will tell you just how much of the government is smoke and mirrors, I'm sure."

Kerry cleared her throat gently. "That's true." She said. "But we aren't smoke and mirrors. If Dar commits us to this, we'll go a hundred percent at it."

Bridges nodded. "Cheap enough price." He said. "All right, Ms. Roberts, do we have a deal?"

"I guess we do." Dar looked at Hamilton, who burst into laughter.

That seemed to strike Bridges funny too, and he chuckled. "Now I understand what Easton told me." He stood up. "Get out of here, people. I have an unending pile of crap to put on a potter's wheel and make into china."

They were glad enough to escape, slipping out the door and evading the flock of secretaries, emerging into the hallway where the pace hadn't slowed a bit. Hamilton steered them over to a corner out of the flow and they all took a minute to catch their breaths.

"That." Kerry finally said. "Was seriously freaky."

"Got us out of the way of the spooks." Hamilton commented. "And Dar, no jokes here, darling. That was some good shuck and jive in that room. I couldn't have negotiated a better deal."

Dar exhaled, and shook her head. "Let's get out of here." She said. "I don't know what the hell I just got us into, but I sure don't want to spend any more time in this place. Let's go somewhere and scratch together a plan."

Kerry spotted Franklin heading down the hall in their direction. She grabbed Dar's arm. "Great idea. C'mon He hadn't had a chance to talk to Bridges yet."

They did, heading around a corner, and down a hall, hoping they ended up somehow at an outside door without getting into any more trouble.

**

"Okay." Kerry led the way through the visitors entrance to their offices. "Dar, I'm going to have to sign you in." She could feel her partner silently snickering. "Do you know what a pile of paperwork that's going to be?"

"Sorry." Dar said, with not a lot of sincerity. "Hey, if they won't let me in, we can go work out of the nerd bus. Dad's there, and I hear the foods pretty good."

"Dar." Kerry eyed the receptionist as they approached. "How about we get you a loaner laptop and just push your image down to it? I'm sure we've got one in this place that can handle it."

"Bet they don't."

"Good morning, Ms. Stuart." The receptionist greeted her with a smile. "A lot of people were asking after you inside. I'm sure they'll be glad to see you."

Kerry set her briefcase down and removed her sunglasses. "Yeah, it's been that kind of morning." She agreed. "I need to sign in a corporate employee that doesn't have a badge with them."

The woman glanced past Kerry at the tall, lanky figure behind her. "That's no problem, ma'am, I just need to see some ID and I can process that for you."

"She doesn't have that either." Kerry said. "And we haven't installed integrated biometrics here yet, have we? Everyone needs a card." She took the visitor form that had been held out to her and passed it back. "Fill this out, hon."

Dar took the form with it's clipboard and started obediently scribbling. "What's my purpose for visiting? Anarchy and general disruption of the business?"

The receptionist frowned. "If you mean the government handprint thing, no ma'am. But I can't issue a visitor pass without seeing some identification."

"You're just going to have to take my word for who this is." Kerry told her. "I'll authorize it. no wait." She turned and glanced at her partner. "I'm the requester, I can't also authorize. Shoot. I think you have to authorize it since you're my upchain."

Dar chuckled and kept writing.

The receptionist caught the clue. "Oh." She said. "Sorry, Ms. Roberts. We weren't expecting you."

"No one ever is." Dar produced a reasonably sexy grin. "I'm the Spanish Inquisition of ILS." She handed back the clipboard and the pen. "There you go."

The receptionist took it and studied the paper, then she pulled out a visitor pass and punched in the programming for it. "One of the people from the NSA was here yesterday looking for you, Ms. Stuart, after you left."

"I know. We found them." Kerry said, leaning against the counter as she watched Dar wander around the lobby examining it. "I think we got that all sorted out. Hopefully they won't be bothering us again."

"Okay, here you go ma'am." The receptionist handed over the visitor badge. "Should I let them know you're here?"

"And spoil my fun?" Dar took the badge from her and winked. "Nah."

"Thanks." Kerry smiled at the woman and led her troublemaking spouse towards the inner door. "We can use that office they assigned to me. It's big enough to party in." She scanned the door open and held it as Dar went past her. "So what's the plan?"

"Whats the plan." Dar sighed, as they walked down the hallway side by side. "I wish I knew what the plan was. I need to sit down and think for a few minutes and try to figure out where the hell to start." She said. "Want to stop in at ops first? You said they were a little rattled at my locking them down."

"Good idea." Kerry led the way to the security door and swiped through it, leading Dar into the inner operations center. Their entry caught the group by surprise, and voices fell off as people's heads turned as they spotted Kerry.

Kerry watched their eyes, as they shifted to her companion and stayed there, putting two and two together a lot faster than the receptionist did. "Good morning folks." She said. "As you can see, I called in the cavalry. Dar and I have just gotten back from the White House, and I think we've gotten a few things worked out that will take some of the stress off you all."

No one said anything for a very long moment. Then the shift supervisor, a different man than the previous day, came over. "Oh, well. Wow. That wasn't expected. Ms. Roberts, it's an honor." He timidly extended a hand, which Dar clasped in a genial manner. "Don Abernathy. We've been on conference calls a few times."

"We have." Dar agreed. "Someone want to vacate a seat so I can check things out in here?"

Kerry took a step back and amused herself in watching the staff as they scrambled around to make space for Dar on both the government and commercial side of the monitors. They had all been extremely respectful to her the previous day, but their attitude towards her partner was one of utter awe, and completely different in scope.

People usually did react to Dar differently. Kerry expected that. But she spent so much time around her at their Miami office that she often forgot how the rest of the company viewed her since everyone in Miami was pretty much used to having her around.

Dar slid into an emptied chair and rested her long forearms on the console surface, pausing a moment to review the screen before she logged the user out and logged herself in with a patter of rapid keystrokes that sounded ridiculously loud in the suddenly quiet room.

Dar seemed to realize it. She stopped, and looked slowly around, first one way then the other. "People, sit the hell down. They don't pay me to teach typing."

Kerry chuckled under her breath, as the staff sidled back to their seats, save Don, who had an excuse to remain standing near the front of the console. "Dar, be nice." She remonstrated her. She walked over and put her hands on her partner's shoulders. "I'm going to go get some work done. Come get me when you're done showing off."

Dar leaned back, her head thumping gently against Kerry's chest. "Get me that laptop if you can. We're also going to need a video conference with Hamilton and his friends about what contacts we have in New York."

"Okay." Kerry just barely resisted the urge to give her a kiss on the top of her head. "I'll get that set up and let you know when it's ready."

Dar winked at her.

Kerry squeezed her boss's shoulders and then she stepped back and headed for the door, leaving a lot of bemused faces behind her.

She was used to that too. She made her way through the hall to the office she'd been issued and shouldered her way into it, crossing the carpet and putting her briefcase down on the desk. Before she opened it though, she went over and used the hot water dispenser tucked in one corner, getting a cup and a teabag sorted and steeping in short order.

A soft knock came at the door. "C'mon in." Kerry looked over her shoulder as the door opened, and Nan's dark head poked itself in. "Good morning, Nan." She greeted the woman. "How are you doing today?"

"Oh, hi. You are here. I'm doing okay, thanks." Nan slipped in. "Everyone's looking for you, though." She told Kerry. "In a bad way."

"Not the NSA again?" Kerry slipped her laptop out and opened it.

"No. Everyone but them." Nan said, frankly. "We're getting pounded for resources from all sides. I've been here since six and the phone hasn't stopped ringing off the hook."

That sounded a little strange. While the center did house a lot of systems, both government and civil, Kerry didn't really understand why the overall need would have surged now. "Okay." She said. "Let me get booted up, and I'll get on the bridge. You can also have them transfer any real trouble to the phone here." She circled the desk and slid into the chair. "And if it gets too scary, we'll throw Dar at them."

Nan cocked her head. "Literally?"

Kerry glanced up and grinned over the top of her screen. "She's in the ops center. If they all know what's good for them, they'll just be understanding and reasonable."

"Wow. I didn't realize she was here." Nan said. "I don't think anyone did.. er, does." She put her hands in her pockets. "I'm sure I'd have heard if they did."

"We just got here." Kerry logged in as her laptop finished booting. She reached for her ear buds as she waited for the desktop to launch and key in the conference bridge. "We had a meeting we had to go to earlier."

"Okay, well, I'll let everyone know you're here then." Nan said. "I know they'll be glad to hear it. Anything else you need?"

Kerry paused before hitting the mic. "Matter of fact there is." She said. "I need to get my hands on whatever the highest end laptop you've got here is." She said. "Biggest hard drive, biggest chunk of ram, highest screen res."

Intrigued, Nan removed her hands from her pockets and crossed the office, taking a seat in the visitor chair across from Kerry. "Okay." She said. "Most of the staff use the standard type."

"I figured." Kerry started scanning the screen. "But that won't do, unfortunately. What else do we have here?" She read down the list of requests posted on the desktop, grimacing a little at the blinking red lines that had moved from requests to demands.

"Well." Nan frowned. "You want something like what you're using? I think we have one or two of that model around, maybe in the test center - I'd have to check on the RAM though. Mine's last year's model and it's got a gig."

Kerry glanced at the opposite wall briefly. "No. Has to be more horsepower than this one." She said.

"Would a server work?" Nan suggested. "I'm pretty sure we don't have anything even close to that in a laptop."

Kerry imagined her partner tucking one of the big suitcase size items under her arm to walk out with. "Ah.. no.. hang on." She clicked the mic on. "Miami ops, this is Miami exec. You on?"

"Go ahead boss." Mark's voice answered. "You still with the goons?"

"In Herndon." Kerry answered. "You have any laptops with you?"

"Sure."

"Big enough to take the Godzilla image?"

"Miami exec, this is Newark Earthstation." A voice broke in. "We're maxed here, and I have the city of New York on the line demanding we give them priority on the birds."

"Hang on Newark. Mark, do you or not?" Kerry repeated.

"Yowp hang on one sec, Boss, we're checking the back tank." Mark called out, his voice obviously away from the mic. "Big Kahuna's box take a dive?"

"It's in Miami."

"Crap."

"Newark, this is Miami exec." Kerry said. "What traffic are they asking for priority for?"

"Boss, we don't have anything close." Mark said. "Not that'll take the image for that beast without rolling over and crying, even mine."

"Miami exec, this is Newark. Some kind of telecommunications relay. City business they said." The Earthstation informed her. "They're getting pretty pushy, even for New Yorkers."

Kerry tapped on the desk. "They're under a lot of stress, guys. Cut them a little slack." She glanced at Nan and cut the mic off. "Where's the nearest hard core gaming shop?"

Nan blinked. "What?"

"Miami exec, we are, we are." Newark answered. "I told them we could only give them maybe 256, and they went off on me."

"Yeah?" Kerry said. "Okay, well get them on the line, and I'll conference." She put the mic on hold again. "A gamer shop. You know, PC games. First person shooters? 3 D gaming world sims?"

Nan stared at her. "You mean, like video games?" She queried. "Sonic the Hedgehog? That stuff?"

"Okay, Miami exec, hold on a few." Newark clicked off.

"Miami exec, this is Miami ops." Mark broke in. "Nego on anything we can give big D outside maybe my setup server. They got anything there?"

"They don't Mark. Can you find me a gamer hack shop around here?" Kerry said. "I'll send someone to get whatever their top of the line is."

"Sweet. Hang on."

Kerry picked up her tea and sipped it, taking advantage of the moment's lull. "Okay, while that's going on, Lansing, how's it looking there today?"

"Miami, we have a lot of cellular backhaul hitting us today." Her hometown local office said. "Also, it looks like VOIPs getting hit pretty hard in the Northeast. I'm running hot across the board."

"Confirm that, Miami, this is Herndon ops." Another voice added. "We've seen building traffic since about seven and..eh? Oh, ah yes. Ah, someone's looking at it."

Kerry muffled a grin, knowing full well who the someone was. "Thanks, Herndon. Lansing, keep the shaping in. We don't know what we're going to be called on to move today with all that's going on."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Miami, this is LA Earthstation."

Kerry checked her watch. "Good morning, LA."

"Ma'am, we've got Intelsat on the line. They've got a software issue on one of their control systems and they want to know if we've got anybody there that can look at it. They're tapped for resources."

"Okay poquito boss, I got a place for ya." Mark came back on. "Got a pencil?"

Nan quickly grabbed a pad and a pen. "How do you keep up with all this?"

"Acquired attention deficit disorder. Comes with the job." Kerry was scribbling something herself. "Hang on LA. Miami applications support, you on?"

"We're here." A male voice answered. "I think we're the only ones not that busy today, Ms. Stuart. Would you like us to call Intelsat and engage them?"

"I would. Go ahead Mark, we've got a pen waiting." Kerry said. "Apps, see what you can do to back up ops there too, I know folks must be pretty tired in the center."

"Will do."

Marks voice rapidly recited an address that Nan just as rapidly copied down. She finished and looked at it. "You want me to go get the biggest thing they got, right?" She asked. "Max RAM, max storage, max pixel."

"You got it." Kerry said, busy making notes. "Shoot, we've got some stuff hitting the fan here.. damn it, I can't get deliveries in freaking Iowa. How in the hell are we supposed to go fix New York?"

"Any particular color?"

Kerry looked up and over her laptop screen for a long moment of silence. Then her eyes twinkled a little. "Not. Pink." She enunciated very carefully.

"You got it." Nan got up and headed for the door. "Be back in a flash." Behind her, a burst of chatter erupted, as issues suddenly scaled over each other, and the tempo rose.

"Miami exec, this is Lansing, we just got an alert from Citibank they're spooling backups from Buffalo." Lansing broke in. "They're pushing the shaping profile."

"Miami, exec this is Newark, I have the Governor of New York on the line for you."

"Miami exec, this is the Air Hub, we're seeing a lot of congestion, we've got packets dropping here."

A loud whistle suddenly cut through all the chatter. Nan paused at the open door and stared back at the desk, but Kerry merely smiled.

"All right." Dar's voice briskly followed the whistle. "Thor, god of the internets is here. Kerry, go handle the Governor. I'll start squeezing the pipes. Everybody just relax. This is where we earn our reputation."

"Dar, what about..." Kerry paused, the time limit and the commitment they'd made weighing on her suddenly. Yes, they told the government they'd go try and fix their problem but what about all of their own?

"Already doing the prep." Dar answered. "I've got about a dozen reports running that're going to need my algorithms. Hope you find that laptop."

"Hope you find room in your pipes for me to pull your image." Kerry remarked wryly.

"First things first." Her partner said, with easy confidence. "See what we can do over at Newark. We're going to need the leverage."

Ah. Kerry punched in the conference line for the Earthstation. Complications. "Will do, boss., will do."

**

Dar leaned against the console, bracing her elbows on the surface and folding her hands together as she studied the screen. She was aware, in a disconnected way, that there were a lot of people watching her but her attention was absorbed by the thin tracing lines and flickering statistics in front of her.

The barebones diagram she was studying was a scaled down version of what she was used to looking at in her office, with fewer colors and sketchier details. It was enough, though, for her to see the imbalances caused by the outages and the need to route around them.

Any individual outage, was no problem. Dar had built more than enough redundancy into her design to cope with that. In fact, multiple outages were usually not a problem either. But the combination of

multiple outages of their own, and the suddenly heavy demand from everyone trying to route around outages themselves was giving her usually robust network fits.

Giving Dar fits. "Damn it." She put her hands back on the keyboard and rattled off a few commands. "We need to get those damn nodes reconnected north of the city." She muttered. "I've got everything coming south and it's crunching the hell out of us."

"Ma'am?" One of the console techs timidly leaned closer. "Are you talking to us, or just to you?"

Dar glanced up, watching everyone quickly pretend to look at something else. "Well." She drummed her fingers. "I was talking to myself, but if you've got any good ideas cough em up." She waited, but the crowd remained respectfully silent. "C'mon, people. I don't bite."

Don came forward, with a air of martyred bravery. "Well, uh, ma'am..."

"Whoa." Dar held her hand up. "First of all, I'm going to be around for a while. Stop the ma'am crap and call me by my name, please."

Don's eyes widened, and his nostrils flared visibly. "Uh." He said. "Okay, Ms. Roberts. If you say so."

Dar gave him a wry look.

"Anyway." Don glanced at the big board behind them. "Um, what exactly are you doing? It's hard for us to make suggestions when we don't really have a clue what's going on."

Everyone held their breath when he finished, but Dar merely chuckled. "Good point." She agreed, settling back in her chair. "The network's imbalanced, because of the outages. We're pulling too much, especially on the commercial side." She pointed at the big board. "That's why all the lines are purple tending to red, instead of blue like they usually are."

Heads swung towards the board, then back to her. "That makes sense." One of the techs said. "But what can we do about it?"

"I think a lot of people are using more data bandwidth than usual too." One of the female techs added. "Sending emails, and listening to the internet with all that streaming video going on."

"Agreed." Dar said. "Same thing we're doing, since some of the traffic is us, on the big bridge." She said. "That global meetingplace isn't a text screen and a bunch of black and white pixels."

"Wow." The woman said. "I never even thought of that."

"Can we ask our customers to not do that?" Don spoke up. "How can we? This is something where people really need to communicate with each other, like what we're doing. That global meeting is an amazing thing."

Dar folded her hands. "Very true. So no, we really can't ask them not to reach out to each other. So that's why I'm rooting around in the bits and bytes to see if there's anything I can do to optimize what's going through." She went back to the screen and reviewed the results of her last command. "Let's see..."

She focused on the black screen again, studying the flows. Then a memory surfaced, and she cursed to herself, flipping through parts of the configuration, searching through the code with rapid, impatient flicks of her mouse.

"Boy it's really getting stuffed." Don remarked. "I bet we get calls any minute."

"You'd think folks would just remember what's going on." The female tech on Dar's other side muttered.

Ah. Dar found what she was looking for. "I'm such a jerk sometimes."

"Ma'am?" Don turned and looked at her.

Dar sniffed and rattled her keyboard, muttering under her breath.

"Air Hub, are you picking up the feed from the ATC? They're on the line here saying you're dropping it." Kerry's voice crackled over the speakers. "And, LA Earthstation, stand by, I managed another 24 transponder channels for you from Hughes."

"Miami exec, this is LA Earth. We're standing by. We've got a half dozen requests for upgrades from the government side."

"Miami exec, this is the Air Hub. Stand by please we're checking."

"LA Earth, this is Newark Earth, save a few for us, please. We have two dozen to your half." A harried voice answered. "Miami exec, any extra for us?"

Kerry's voice sounded apologetic. "Newark, we're trying. They're absolutely saturated. The only reason we got west coast space is the airlines are moving again and the requests from Vancouver have slacked off."

"Miami exec, understood. Also be advised we were asked about our power trucks. The City wanted to know where we got them from. I told them they would need to talk to you."

Dar kept typing, one ear twitching as the flow of complaints. She could hear the strain starting again in her partner's voice, and resolved to attend to that critical issue next.

"Miami exec, this is Roosevelt Island." A new voice interrupted. "I have a cross-connect request here for new service? They said it was priority."

"Roosevelt, it is. Please provide them service at my request." Kerry's voice answered. "We've provisioned a ten meg slice for them. It's data services for ATT. Tunnel them through to our common carrier point in Philly, please. They're expecting it."

Dar looked up at the big board, her eyes lifting a little.

"Okay, ma'am, will do."

Dar wrenched her attention back to the screen, a set of changes already inputted, waiting for her confirmation. She hesitated, then she saved the changes without executing, and stood up. "Be right back."

**

"They thought I was crazy." Nan set a large cardboard box down on the desk Kerry was using, as it's occupant was retrieving another cup of tea. "They were saying, "But what are you going to play with it.. is it for a LAN party? Can you tell us where?"

Kerry chuckled as she returned, dropping back into her chair and rocking her head back and forth to loosen the tightening muscles in her neck. She glanced at her screen, then shifted her attention to the box and watched as it was opened releasing the scent of new computer equipment into the air.

Plastic offgassing mostly, but also a hint of the chemicals inside. As distinctive as a new car, and occasionally as expensive. "Bet they did." Kerry said. "If they only knew."

"If only." Nan agreed. "I told them I was buying it for my brother for his birthday." She admitted. "They wanted me to adopt them."

Kerry chuckled. "Nerds."

"They were glad for the sale." Nan opened the Styrofoam bag the machine was carefully encased in and slid it free, lifting it with both hands and placing it on the desk. "I was the only one in there."

Kerry folded her hands together and peered at the laptop. "Sexy." She said. "I think she'll like it."

"Like what?" A voice at the door surprised both of them.

Kerry looked across the room to see Dar entering, a cup in her hand. "Hey boss." She said. "How's it going?"

"It's going." Dar's nose twitched and she made a beeline for the desk as she spotted the boxes. "What do we have here?"

Nan's eyes widened and she stepped back from the desk, picking up the boxes and wrapping and getting hastily out of the way.

"Hm. I like the color." Dar hitched one knee up and took a seat on the desk, handing her cup over to Kerry as she reached over to take hold of the laptop. "Drink that. You're froggy again." She picked up the laptop with one hand and set it on her thigh, opening the latch and lifting the screen.

"Thanks." Kerry accepted the cup. "I've been drinking tea but it's not helping." She sipped the cold chocolate milk as she watched her partner. Then she shook her head a little, and glanced up at Nan. "Sorry. My manners went south there for a minute. Nan, this is Dar Roberts."

Nan cleared her throat. "Hello."

"Nan's been nice enough to run around for us the past two days. She went out to get your new toy, hon." Kerry unobtrusively gave her partner a nudge, distracting her from an apparently fascinating encounter with the laptop's BIOS.

Dar's eyes lifted and met the woman's. "We've spoken on the phone." She said after a moment. "You do the inventory recaps."

Nan blinked. "Um.. yes, Yes I do. Nice to meet you in person finally." She stammered a little. "I hope the machine's okay. It's pretty much the best they had."

Dar bent her head to study the machine's screen briefly. "I think it'll be fine." She said. "Good choice." She added, with a smile. "Thanks for doing my shopping for me."

Nan smiled back. "Anytime."

"Okay." Dar got up and circled the desk, dropping to her knees and peering under it. "Got a cable, Ker?"

"Oh, wait, hang on.. I can do that.." Nan scrambled forward, hauling up as Kerry lifted her hand and waved her back. "But..."

Dar's head popped up over the desk's surface, and her eyebrows hiked. "What?" She rummaged in Kerry's briefcase and disappeared again, with a grunt. "I hate these kind of jacks. What moron had them installed here?"

Kerry scooted out of her way a bit, and leaned on the top of the desk. "Miami ops, this is Miami exec. How are those transfers coming?"

"Miami exec, this is Houston Ops." Another voice broke in. "We have a bulk backup request from Cheyanne Mountain to secure storage, and a database parse."

"Acknowledged." Kerry said. "Are you mentioning it just because it's out of time range?" She almost bit her tongue when she suddenly felt a warmth against the side of her knee and realized it was Dar's breath.

"Yes, ma'am." Houston answered. "We can give them their standard bandwidth but if something comes up while it's transferring we're tapped."

Kerry glanced down, to see twinkling blue eyes looking back up at her. "What do you think?"

"What do I think." Dar drawled, pressing her cheek against the outside of Kerry's leg. "Hm....." She watched the light blush climb up her throat before she relented, moving away and coming back up from under the desk with the end of an Ethernet cable in her fingers. "Houston, let them go for it. I'll keep an eye on the pipe and if you start stressing it I can throw some compression on it."

"Okay, uh.. ma'am." Houston said. "Will do."

Dar remained on her knees, plugging the laptop into the Ethernet cable after she scribbled some numbers off the bottom of it. "Let me get at your session for a minute." She told her partner. "Miami

ops, this is Miami exec. Stand by for a high speed encrypted image transfer. You're going to redline. No one freak out please."

"Copy that, Miami exec." Mark's voice broke in. "I tanked the alerter."

"All yours." Kerry slipped out of her seat and took her milk, retreating around the side of the desk to where Nan was somewhat awkwardly standing. She took up a spot next to the woman and sipped from the cup.

"Thanks. So's the computer." Dar dropped into the chair and flexed her hands, cracking the knuckles of her fingers before she started typing on Kerry's laptop. "Hope to hell this thing isn't different enough hardware for the image to choke."

"Dar's machine image is a one of a kind." Kerry said, conversationally to Nan. "She goes through laptops like popcorn, so we always have a snapshot ready."

"Oh." Nan murmured. "What's so different about it?"

"Programs." Dar answered without looking up. "A handful of cranky, self written piles of code that do analytics on pretty much everything." She glanced at the paper, and then back at the screen. "Along with consolidated control consoles for the majority of the infrastructure."

"And Gopher Dar." Kerry commented.

"And Gopher Dar." Her partner agreed. "Okay, Mark, here it comes, I ran it by mac."

"Gotcha."

"I'm going to clear out my inbox." Nan said. "If you all need anything, give me a ring." She backed away from the desk and escaped out the door, closing it quickly behind her.

Kerry watched her go, then turned back to her partner. "I think you're scaring her, hon."

Dar's brows twitched. "Me? I didn't do anything." She protested. "I thought I was being nice."

Kerry gave her an affectionate smile.

Dar hit a few more keys, then turned to watch the newly purchased laptop. It blinked, then the screen shimmered and blanked out, replaced by a spinning pirate flag. "Nice touch." She drummed her fingertips on the desktop. "This snap is from before I left for London, but I didn't have time to do much with it there so it should be all right."

"Holy crap!" A voice echoed on the line through Kerry's laptop.

"Didn't I tell everyone not to freak out?" Dar frowned, and tapped the mic. "Hold tight, people. This won't take long." She muted. "I hope." She leaned on the desk and tilted her head, peering over at Kerry. "We're going to have an issue."

Kerry blinked mildly at her. "Another one?" She asked. "Dar, we've got a metric ton of them now, you're sitting there thinking of more?" She perched on the edge of the desk, swirling her milk in it's cup.

"Paradox." Dar said, succinctly. "We're going to need to be in lower Manhattan to make things happen."

"Sure."

"There's no damn comms or cell service in lower Manhattan. How do we make things happen if we can't communicate?"

"Ah." Kerry frowned. "We have to bring comms with us then, I guess."

"Miami exec, this is Miami ops, we just got a call from the banking center. They're saying they're seeing degraded response." A voice interrupted them.

"Shoot." Kerry leaned over and hit the mic. "Miami ops, tell them we're aware, and we're working to clear space. Please remind them we have a lot going on."

"Yes'm."

"We've moved big chunks of data before, and not caused that." Kerry looked at her partner. "Is that you, really?"

"Me, really." Dar admitted. "I prioritized the stream. Sixty more seconds and we're done. It would have taken a half hour otherwise." She drummed her fingers on the desk again. "I need those damn programs. I have structure diagrams from New York in one of them that might help us."

"Do we have anyone local we can call..." Kerry let her voice trail off. "Boy, that was stupid. Sorry." She muttered. She got up and went around the desk, coming to kneel next to Dar so she could see the laptop screen a little better. There was a black window open, full of Dar's cryptic typing and she rested her chin on her fist for a minute, releasing a long sigh.

Dar's hand immediately settled on the back of her neck, the strong fingers kneading the skin there with gentle sureness. "God, Dar. There's so much to do."

"I know." Dar responded. "I just feel like taking off and going to the beach when I think about all the crap we've got to get through." She kept rubbing Kerry's neck, feeling the bones move under her fingers. "Not looking forward to it."

"Me either."

Dar reached over and hit a few keys. "Done." She said, keying the mic. "Miami ops, Miami exec. Transfers complete." She draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders, then she leaned closer and kissed her on the back of her neck, just above her collar. "Let's hope I don't have to do that again."

"Honey, you can do that whenever you want." Kerry was content to remain where she was, one elbow resting on Dar's thigh as she listened to the chatter on the bridge call. To one side, she could hear the laptop rebooting and she struggled to gather her thoughts and go back to work as soon as she knew the machine was ready.

"That's not a bad idea." Dar said, suddenly.

Kerry paused, then cleared her throat gently. "What isn't?"

"Getting someone local." Her partner replied. "We need someone really local. Someone who knows people."

They were both quiet. "I think Bob probably really knew people." Kerry said, finally.

"Yeah."

"Hello, hello, Miami?" Sherren's voice broke in. "Are you there?"

Kerry reached over and hit the mic. "We're here. How are things there, Sherren?"

"The phones came back on." The woman said. "We were all sitting in the boardroom just keeping each other company, and all of a sudden the phones started ringing off the hook in here. It's a madhouse now."

"Sorry about that, Sherren." Kerry sighed. "I did ask ATT to try and work us into their priority schedule."

"No, hey, it's great." Sherren protested. "You don't know, we couldn't make calls here or nothing, and now everyone can talk to their families. It's.. that's the calls. People trying to talk to us, find out if we're okay."

"Oh."

"It's good. We're okay." Sherren said. "And oh my gosh. Oh, look. Mr. McLean just got here. I didn't know he was coming!"

Dar leaned forward. "He wanted to be with you all there. He thought you could use some support, Sherren. He knows you all have had a terrible time."

There was a long silence. Then Sherren's voice came back on, she was clearly in tears. "Oh" She gasped. "Oh, that's so wonderful. It's so wonderful people care about us." She sniffled. "We're trying to take care of each other."

Behind her, Dar could faintly hear Alastair's voice, sounding quiet and sad. "Sherren, tell him we're doing fine here, okay?" She said. "You all just hang in there."

"We will. We will. We're tough people." Sherren said. "I'll tell him. I'll be back."

"Miami exec, this is Combus 2." A low, deep voice took advantage of the break in the chatter. "We're in bound from Albany and I have Combus 3 about two miles behind me."

"Will they let them in?" Kerry whispered.

"From the north, maybe." Dar murmured back. She keyed the mic. "Combus 2, you and 3 try to get as far down towards the Rock as you can."

"Roger that, Ms. Roberts." The deep voice said. "Anything we need to stop and pick up?"

Dar glanced over at the monitor, which was showing desperate scenes of men digging in debris, a pall of smoke hanging over the air. "Find a medical supply warehouse." She said. "Get breathing masks. Filters, whatever you can. Suits." She added. "Miami exec, Miami Financial, you on?"

"Right here, my friend." Duks answered. "I will have my purchasing people find such a place, and let the good drivers know where it is. We will handle the payment for it."

"Thanks Duks." Dar said. "Combus, see if you can pick up bottled water or Gatorade, too."

"Will do ma'am."

Dar signed into her new laptop and got up, clearing Kerry's chair for her. "Let me get out of your way. I think I can.." She stopped, as Kerry put a hand on her arm. "What?"

"Stay here." Kerry said. "Just bring that chair around to this side." She said. "I want you here." She got up off her knees and settled into the chair. "Please?"

Dar studied her for a moment, then smiled. "Works for me." She dragged the other chair over and settled back down. "Let's get back to business."

**

The RV and bus had, in fact, become the social center of their piece of the parking lot. Dar was glad enough to stick her hands in the pockets of her jacket and head towards the crowd, shifting her shoulders to settle the weight of a company issued backpack that held her new laptop in it.

It was almost dark. The lot was bright with emergency lights, though, and activity was plentiful and obvious. Kerry walked quietly at her side, speaking in an undertone to Nan, her own briefcase slung over her shoulder.

Dar was tired. It had been a long day, and she hadn't quite caught up to her jet lag, her body grumbling at her and wanting that soft hotel bed they'd left so early that morning. She glanced at the bus, seeing a swarm of activity around it and found herself resenting the need to be in the middle of that.

"Dar?" Kerry put a hand on her elbow.

"Hm?" She turned her head and peered at her partner. She noted the furrow in Kerry's brow, and realized she wasn't the only one tired. "What's our plan here?"

"Our plan." Kerry mused, distracted. "That's a damn good question." She sighed. "Have you heard from Justin? I know that's the first question I'll get when we reach the bus."

"Maria said he hadn't called me back when I talked to her before we left the office." Dar said. "Gimme your cell and I'll call him again." She waited for Kerry to fish her phone from its clip on her belt. "He might actually answer the phone if he sees your name."

"Not after what I did during that whole ship thing." Kerry handed the device over. "He hasn't forgiven me for that one yet."

Dar paused to recall the number, then she dialed it, putting the phone to her ear as they walked between the parked trucks towards their little compound.

The bus was in the back, its extended sections fully extended, and its roof thick with antennas and the satellite dish that provided the transport with television and data. In front of it was a work area, tables covered with various bits of technology on one side, and tables covered with various bits of daily living on the other.

There were camping chairs scattered around, and the busses integrated barbeque grill was out and being used.

On the far side of the bus was the RV and Mark's truck, with the big satellite trailer parked in a clear spot nearby with its dish fully extended. There were thick, black power cables snaking everywhere, and a large LCD television was fixed to the side of the trailer, showing CNN.

Their techs were busy around the tables, but they were mixed with a plethora of military in several different kinds of uniforms and the combination of high tech and post Apocalyptic camping made Kerry's eyebrows twitch.

"Justin, don't give me that." Dar was saying. "I'm not asking for extra equipment, just what you have scheduled for us. What's the damn problem?"

"Uh oh." Kerry muttered. "That doesn't sound good."

Nan glanced past her at the scowling CIO. "Who's she talking to?" She whispered.

"Our network equipment account manager." Kerry said, as they crossed the last line of cars and entered their space. "Hey guys. How's it going?"

The techs looked up, and their eyes brightened immediately. "Hey, Ms Stuart.. Mark was just asking for you." One said, "Lemme go get him."

"No need... we're heading for the bus ourselves." Kerry demurred. "We'll find him."

"If you don't cut the crap, I'm going to ... what? No, you idiot, I'm not going to threaten you with pulling the contract I'm just going to tell my customer here you're sitting on his god damned gear for no good reason!" Dar's voice lifted into a familiar bark.

Kerry patted her back comfortingly, and gave the staff a smile. She spotted Andrew crossing between the RV and the bus, and waved to him as he saw them and changed direction. He had on an ILS sweatshirt and dark carpenter pants with tools poking from every pocket and just seeing him made Kerry feel better. "Hey dad." She opened her arms and gave him a hug that he returned warmly. "What a day, huh?"

"Justin, stop being a moron. Where in the hell do you think I am? Did you even look at what order I was talking about?" Dar said. "Don't give me that crap! He did? Then let me talk to him. Put his ass on the phone!"

"Lo there kumquat." Andrew greeted her, giving his growling offspring a wary look. "Dar got problems?"

Kerry gave him a wry look. Then she half turned. "Nan, this is Andrew Roberts, Dar's father. Dad, this is Nan, she's from our Virginia office and she's been giving us a big hand in getting things done."

"Lo there." Andrew greeted Nan amiably.

"Nice to meet you." Nan said.

"Got some folks inside I think want to talk to you two." Andrew informed Kerry, as Dar stepped to one side and half turned, lowering her voice. "Seems like they got some kinda issue they just come up with. That Mark feller just kept saying Dardar's name over and over again."

"Uh oh." Kerry winced. "Well, let's go see what that's all about while Dar straightens out our gear issues. She touched Dar's arm and pointed to the bus, waiting for her partner to nod before she started off in that direction.

Andrew paused, then followed her, evidently figuring his daughter didn't need any help in yelling.

The bus was a beehive of activity, and they had to dodge a flurry of moving bodies in uniform until they finally made it to the steps and up into the courtesy bus. Kerry almost stopped short at the mild chaos inside, but after a brief pause she edged her way in and got into enough of a corner space to turn and look around.

Mark was in one corner with three techs, and four or five military men. Others were spread around the inside of the bus, working on clipboards, standing over the fax machine in the corner, and munching on some of the snacks laid out on platters in the service area.

One whole wall had been taken up by a whiteboard covered in scribbles. Kerry was glad to see so much apparent progress, but slightly overwhelmed at the amount of people stuffed in the bus. "Evening everyone."

Heads turned. "Hey, Kerry. Glad you're here." Mark said at once. "I hope you brought big D with you, cause we need her like crazy."

Know the feeling. Kerry nodded. "She's outside yelling. What's up?" She edged to one side a little to give Andrew room to stand, as Nan plastered her slim figure against the back wall. "This place is nuts."

"Tell me about it." Mark said wryly. "They got me power in the comms space. I got a truck with the racks due in like six hours, and what equipment I have I can throw in there since they got me aircon too."

"Good job." Kerry said. "Did you get the demarc installed?"

"If that's them plywood things, I done it." Andrew spoke up. "That's some damn hard concrete in that room I will tell you that."

"Yeah, I can still hear you drilling in my head." Mark said. "But that's the problem, poquito boss. We got the blocks installed and we're ready to punch down."

"Great." Kerry smiled in relief. "So that's a problem?"

"Nu uh." Mark shook his dark head. "I could tell you, but it's gonna be easier to show you. Can we grab big D and go look?"

"Well.." Kerry turned as the door to the bus opened, and Dar entered, her powerful charisma clearing space for her as she made her way over to where they were standing. She was juggling the cell phone in one hand, but looked moderately triumphant. "How'd it go?"

"What a moron." Dar said. "They put a hold on everyone's damn orders because they're scared to death they're going to get a call from the government asking for all their inventory." She lifted her hands and let them drop. "I had to yell at some executive vice president of something or other and threaten to put Gerry on the phone before they got it through their heads where I was calling from."

Everyone nodded in agreement. "And?" Kerry added, after a pause.

"Truck's leaving Chicago in ten minutes." Dar replied, glancing around and spotting a tray nearby. She reached one long arm over and snagged a brownie. "I told him if they better be flooring it all the way here." She bit into the brownie and chewed it. "So how are things going here?"

They all looked over at Mark, who grimaced.

"Uh oh. Maybe I should have some milk first." Dar saw the expressions. "What's wrong?"

"Let's go take a ride." Mark said. "That's what me and the dudes were just talking about before you guys got here. We just found out."

"Found out what?" Dar grabbed another brownie as she followed Mark out the door.

"C'mon. I'd rather you just see it. Maybe you can tell me it's not as bad as I think it is."

Dar snorted. "If you're looking to me for optimism we're seriously in the weeds." She handed Kerry half the brownie. "This could require more than chocolate."

They trooped down the steps to the bus and around the side, where there was a six seater golf cart parked somewhat haphazardly, draped in cables and other bits of nerd paraphernalia. Dar cleared a termination kit out of the way and slid into the front passenger seat, setting her backpack down between her feet. "Let's go."

Mark took the wheel and started off, turning the cart in a tight circle and nearly flinging them out in all directions. "Whoops. Sorry."

"Wow. This has got a hell of a lot more kick than the one at our place." Kerry grabbed hold of the sides of the cart. "Jesus!"

"Gas powered." Mark threaded the cart through the parked cars and headed for the side of the damaged building. "Pretty cool though. I never realized how freaking big this place was until we had to hump all our crap out to that room."

They rode around the side of the building, the cool night air making them blink a little as Mark maneuvered through the grounds. There was still smoke smouldering up from the destroyed area, and erratically as they moved along, the air would bring shocking hints of death that made them all go silent.

Save Andrew. "Big ass place." He commented. "Built like a damn brick. Ain't nothing left of what hit it."

There was an awkward silence. "Airplane's just an aluminum shell." Dar eventually commented. "Dangerous part was the aviation fuel."

"Did you hear what people were saying though?" Nan spoke up from the rear seat. "People were saying that there wasn't any airplane that hit the building. That it was a bomb, or something else that the government was lying."

Andrew turned around and peered at her. "Gov'mint's always lying." He said. "But that's just foolish talking. People don't know squat yapping on the television. I heard that."

Kerry frowned. "Why in the heck would they lie about that?" She wondered. "I mean yes, I agree with Dad, but sheesh. There's a hole in the side of the building. What difference would it make what made it?"

Dar cleared her throat as Mark aimed for a square of light. "Probably because it's easier to excuse not being able to get out of the way of an airplane than allowing some bunch of jackasses to plant a bomb in the biggest military office building in the continent."

Mark pulled the cart to a halt and put on the parking break. "You think that's what happened, boss?" He asked, hesitantly. "I mean, that's a pretty big hole."

"No." Dar got out. "I think a god damned plane hit the side of the building. I just can see where the tin foil hat brigade pulled that rumor from, that's all." She shouldered her backpack and followed Mark between two huge personnel carriers and over to a door in the side of the building.

It was open, spilling a bright yellow incandescence out across the ground and there was motion and voices obvious just beyond it. Mark walked through without hesitation and turned to the left, moving along a hallway filled with boxes to a brightly lit space that smelled of concrete and plywood. "Here we go."

Dar entered the comms room, pausing to look around before she cleared the doorway and let the rest of them follow her. Inside, the big, square space was lit by hanging florescent lamps, and the floor was obviously freshly swept.

Power cables were hanging everywhere from the ceiling, and the entire back wall had been covered in sheets of treated, three quarter inch plywood surmounted by rows and rows of circuit patch down blocks. "Nice." Dar commented.

The floor was already marked out for racks, and the floor tiles were half missing, most of holes containing a tech and a spool of cabling. The smell of plastic and copper were sharp in the air. "Mark, you made amazing progress." Kerry added, "Great job."

"Thanks. My guys did most of the humping." Mark led them to the corner of the room, which had a large cabinet set in one wall. "And speaking of humps, here's my problem." He opened the double doors to the cabinet and stepped back, clearing the way for the rest of them. "That."

There was a long moment of silence. Then, as if by common accord, everyone looked over at Dar, who was standing closest to it, her hands planted on her hips.

Dar studied the huge mass of cabling, all a uniform, dull gray and terminating in an absolute hairball of multicolor strands. "I take it none of this is tagged?" She asked, finally.

"Nope." Mark shook his head. "I guess they had a project planned to come in here before the room went live to straighten it all out." He glanced around at the little group. "Sucks, huh?"

Dar rubbed her forehead. "Shit." She said. "There's a thousand pair there at least."

"Wow." Nan murmured.

"Some's phones, some's data, some's wan..." Mark agreed. "I had the local telco guys here but they say most of it's not theirs so they're not touching it."

Dar turned and looked at him. Mark shrugged.

"Let me see if I can leverage our relationship with the local." Kerry pulled her phone out. "At least they can give us a list of the circuits in here other than ours." She paged through her directory. "It's Verizon, isn't it?"

"And Qwest." Nan murmured.

"Doesn't really help us find our stuff though." Mark commented. "Man, I'd hate to break my ass for two days and get this space up only to have to stay on that freaking sat."

"We can't handle the traffic they're going to ask for over that." Dar said. "How many WAN people do we have here, Mark?" She shrugged her pack off her back and set it on the floor. "We're going to have to do this the hard way."

She looked over at him, after he didn't answer for a moment. "Well?"

"You mean, besides you and me?" He answered wryly. "Dar, the two WAN techs I had up here are in the missing group."

The room was now conspicuously quiet, as the techs busy wiring in the floor turned to listen. Dar leaned back against the punch down, letting her hands fall to her thighs. She was quiet for a long moment, then she exhaled. "Going to be a long damn night then, I guess." She said, at last. "Do we have kits?"

"Yeah." Mark responded glumly.

"Break them out. Let's get started." Dar shoved away from the wall and flexed her hands, turning to face the mess with an air of grim determination. "Bring all the punchdown kits you have. Might as well do some on the job training while I'm at it."

"You got it boss." Mark turned and trotted out, shaking his head a little.

"Bring some of that damn barbeque with you!" Dar yelled after him. "And all the Jolt you got."

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"Kerry, the governor of New York is on the line for you again." A quiet, apologetic voice broke into the chatter. "I told him you were working at the Pentagon but he wants to talk to you anyway."

Kerry rested her head against her fist, her body curled up in one of the buses leather chairs, finally vacated by one of the busy military officers. "No problem, give me a minute." She clicked her mic on, resisting the urge to rub her eyes. "Believe me, Newark, we're going to the wall here to pull the Pentagon traffic off your grid and put it back where it belongs."

"We know that, ma'am... I tried to explain that. I just." The satellite supervisor sounded as exhausted as Kerry felt. "He just doesn't want to take that answer. I think he's as frustrated as we are."

Kerry reviewed the status on her teams. "Maybe he'll let me send the remote sat trucks in then." She mused.

"Would you like some coffee, ma'am?" One of the buses seemingly tireless attendants stopped by with a tray. "We have some fresh cookies baking too."

"Sure." Kerry checked her watch, wincing a little at the time. "Strong as you've got it. Thanks." She rattled at her keyboard, then settled her ear buds more firmly. "Okay, go ahead and call my cell, Newark. Patch me into the governor."

"Stand by, ma'am."

Nearly midnight. Kerry leaned against the chair arm, glad it was big enough for her to curl up in, tucking her tired legs up under her in relative comfort. She knew herself to be far luckier than her partner – Dar was half buried in cables in that dry and dusty room faced with an almost neverending task before her.

Kerry felt a little abashed, in fact, that she was here in the bus instead of at Dar's side, but there wasn't any way for her to connect to the conference in there and there was just so damned much to do.

So damned much. Her cell phone rang, and she closed the mic off to open it up. "Kerry Stuart." She announced quietly, turning her head a little as the attendant came back with a big, steaming mug that smelled of hazelnut.

"Hello, Kerry?"

Poised to deal with an annoyed politician, Kerry had to rapidly ratchet through her mental gears to deal with another one altogether. "Hello, Mother." She said. "Sorry, I was expecting the governor."

"Oh. Well, of course, I'm sorry I disturbed you, ah.."

Kerry smiled, and picked up her coffee cup. "No problem. I'd rather be talking to you since you probably aren't going to ask me to do something impossible in a pretty rude way."

Dead silence for a moment. "Ah, well, yes, I see. Of course." Cynthia spluttered. "My goodness, that sounds terrible. Are you still working? It's so late. I just wanted to find out where you and Dar ended up this evening."

Was I supposed to call her? Kerry suddenly wondered. "Right now, we're at the Pentagon." She said. "Dar's hip deep in cables and I'm still working on issues from our bus."

"Oh my!" Her mother said. "Kerry, it's midnight!"

"I know." Kerry acknowledged. "It feels like it's midnight. But we don't really have a choice. We have to get things fixed here, so we can get things moving for the governor, so we can get out of here and head to New York where apparently we're needed to save the Western world." She paused. "Or something like that."

"My goodness."

"By Monday." Kerry added. "So anyway. How was your day? When do you head back home?"

Her cell phone buzzed a second incoming call. She briefly toyed with the idea of letting it go to voice mail, then sighed. "Hold on a minute, okay? I think that's the governor."

"Of course."

Kerry put the call on hold and answered the second. "Hello?"

"Ms, Stuart, I have the governor for you." The sound of the Newark ops manager's voice echoed softly in her ear. "Okay to conference?"

"Sure." Kerry sipped her coffee and waited for the click. "Good.. " She checked her watch. "Morning, governor. What can I do for you?"

"Yes, Ms. Stuart, good morning to you too. Now listen, I know we spoke earlier but things are getting fairly critical here and.."

"Governor." Kerry interrupted him gently, but with force in her tone. "Things are critical here, too."

"I do understand that." The governor said. "But here's the situation. Our emergency command center was in 7 World Trade. Never even been used. We're working to set up a center to replace it but without being connected to anything we might as well be setting it up on a boat on the Niagira River."

Kerry closed her eyes in frustration. "I know.. please understand sir I do know you need to.. " She stopped and took a breath. Stop, think, then act, Ker. "Where are you setting up a command center, sir?"

"Pier 92." The governor said. "It's the old passenger cruise terminal. Right on the Hudson."

On the Hudson. Kerry racked her brains for a long moment. "I don't think we... " She paused. "Wait. That's right next to the Intrepid Air museum, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is." The Governor agreed. "Just down from there. Does that help? Is there something you can do? Come on, Ms. Stuart. We contracted with you because you people were supposed to be the best. Now, I need the best. We don't have a choice."

"We might be able to." Kerry said, after a pause. "I need to pull up our schematics in that area. I will have to get back to you on it."

"I need an answer, Ms. Stuart."

"You need an answer that's meaningful and correct, Governor. Not bullshit I'm pulling out of my ass just to make you get off the phone." Kerry could scarcely believe she'd just said that. "I'll do my best. That's all I can give you right now."

The man sighed. "When can I expect to hear from you? We're running out of time."

"As soon as I have the answer, you'll hear from me. That could be in ten minutes, or it could be tomorrow morning. Depends on how much detail I need, and if I can get hold of someone on the ground there." Kerry said. "You may need to clear some obstacles for us."

"Obstacles?" The governor said. "You mean people? Ms. Stuart, you find obstacles, you call me. Understand?"

"I do."

"Hope to hear from you soon. Goodbye." The governor hung up .

Kerry took another sip fo her coffee, before she clicked back to her call on hold. "Hello, mother." She looked up as a wonderful scent of fresh cookies came close, and found a platter almost at eye level to her. "Thank you." She mouthed at the attendant, capturing three of the cookies, their warmth stinging her skin a little.

"Dear, I don't mean to keep you. I hope things are going better." Cynthia said. "I have a flight back to Michigan tomorrow. Is there anything I can do for you here before I go?"

"Hold that thought a minute, mother." Kerry motioned to the attendant, taking a bite of the warm cookie as the woman came back over. "Could you please have a tray of those, and a gallon of cold milk with cups taken to the work site?"

"Absolutely, ma'am. Let me get one of the guys to ride me over." The attendant said. "Not a problem at all."

"Thanks." Kerry smiled at her, then shifted her attention back to the phone. "Mother." She said. "Thanks for hanging on. It's a little crazy here."

"I can hear that." Cynthia said. "Are you going to get some rest? What about poor Dar? She must be exhausted after all that traveling."

Dar must be. Kerry felt faintly abashed. "I'm going to go see if I can get her to take a break right now, matter of fact." She said. "But we've got a lot on our plates.. and getting more every time the phone rings."

"My."

"Anyway." Kerry sighed. "Thanks for offering. Just travel safe, and give Angie and Mike a hug for me."

"Well, I'm sure they'd be happier if you were coming back with me, but I will give them your best wishes. Try to get some rest." Her mother said. "If there's anything I can do to help, just call."

"I will." Kerry said. "Good night, mother."

"Goodnight."

Kerry closed the phone and gazed at it, as she broke off a cookie half and chewed. That had ended pretty much all right, she figured. If one reasonable thing had to come out of the disaster she was living, maybe it was that she, and her mother, could at least talk again.

She wasn't ready to let it all go. But she also didn't feel like she wanted to hold the rage inside her so much anymore, and she was content to think that if things hadn't really moved forward, they also hadn't moved backwards, and she was in a place where she actually wouldn't mind having her mother visit their home.

She chewed her cookie, getting up and making her way through the much smaller crowd to the galley area to find herself some milk. She spotted Nan curled up in a chair near the back of the bus sleeping, and she felt a little bad about keeping the woman around so long.

"Hello, Ms. Stuart." Danny appeared, his sling covered in concrete dust. "Boy, we're sure getting things done here today, aren't we?"

Kerry leaned against the counter as she poured her cup of milk. "You know, we are." She admitted. "It doesn't seem like that to me, because there's so much left to do, but you guys are doing an amazing job."

Danny took a root beer from the small refrigerator and opened it, sucking down half the bottle in a gulp before he answered. "It's dry as heck in that room." He explained. "But let me tell you, Ms. Roberts is amazing."

Kerry felt a smile stretch her face muscles out. "She is."

"I mean.. I know you know that." Danny blushed, just a little. "But we never got to work with her before, and you hear all kinds of stories from people but in reality, wow."

"Dar is an amazing person." Kerry said. "And I'm not just saying that because she's my boss, or because we're partners. She really is. In fact, I was about to head over there and see if I could get her to take a break for a few minutes. I know you guys have been at it for hours."

"It's tough work." Danny agreed mournfully. "I just came back to pick up more zip ties. The other guys don't want to take a break while Ms. Roberts is there cause she hasn't."

"Oh for heaven's sake." Kerry drained her milk and set the cup down in the small sink. "C'mon. Let's go back over there. Those poor guys." She dusted her hands off and wiped her lips on a napkin, as Danny hurried to finish his root beer. "I'm going to tell the bridge I'm going offline."

She walked back over to her laptop and put her earbuds in again. The chatter had faded off the last hour or so, only a few sporadic voices coming back on at intervals. Kerry keyed her mic and cleared her throat a little. "Folks, this is Miami exec. Just want to advise I'm going offline for a little while. I'll have my cell if anything's urgent."

"Noted, Miami exec." A soft voice answered. "This is Houston night ops. Everything's pretty quiet right now."

"Great. Check in with you later." Kerry unplugged herself and shrugged her jacket on, then she met Danny at the door and they exited the bus into the chilly night air.

**

Dar was pretty well convinced she'd actually died and gone to Hell. She braced her tester with it's one attached wire and reached for yet another dangling strand, bringing it over to touch it against the probe.

The tester lit up, surprising her. "Son of a bitch." She muttered, unclipping the wires and twisting them together. "Gimme a tag."

Mark handed over a piece of cardboard with a string. "Here you go." He said, his voice slightly hoarse. "Hey, that's ten, isn't it?"

Dar shook her head, reclipping the wires and reading off the identifier. She scribbled it on the tag, then tied the tag firmly to the twisted cables. "First person who gets our circuits gets a 200 percent raise and a month vacation."

A soft chorus of voices answered back. Dar glanced to either side of her, where techs were almost covered in the prickly, copper mass of wiring, testing patiently cable by cable looking for a match.

It was like finding a bird feather, and catching each one you saw to see if it was the one who lost it. Frustrating, maddening, aggravating, uncomfortable... if Dar had possessed a machete the chances were, she decided, that she'd have just gone amok with it and ended the problem in a mass of copper fragments.

There was no place to sit, no place to relax. You had to stand almost inside the cabinet to reach the wires, and the ones you weren't testing were poking through your clothes like tiny needles.

She and Mark had started off doing the testing. They'd managed to show three other techs how to use the testing sets, but though there were four other units, there wasn't any more space in front of the cabling cabinet so they'd just started plugging through it.

Dar knew she could get someone else to take over her set, and do the testing. She was, after all, their ultimate boss. But she felt all the eyes on her, and understood she was having to live up to her reputation, and so she kept slogging.

Her eyes burned. She blinked a little, then a very different odor penetrated all the concrete and plastic and she turned to look over her shoulder as a woman entered the room with a tray and a pitcher. "What do we have here?"

"Cookies and milk." The bus attendant smiled. "Ms. Stuart told me to bring them over here."

Dar could smell the chocolate all the way in the back of the room. "Are those just baked?"

"They are." The woman affirmed.

"Is that cold milk?" Dar asked, as she saw the techs all starting to turn around, faces covered in smudges of dust and eyes exhausted.

"Yes, it is." The attendant said.

Dar held her hands up, letting the tester fall against her thigh. "Did you bring towels?" She displayed her grunge covered palms with a wry expression.

"Ah." The attendant had to admit to being at a loss. "Well, we can go get some."

"Cookies'll get cold." Dar eased away from the cabinet, carefully extracting her boots from the snarls of cable. "Take a break, boys. Let's not waste good, warm cookies."

The techs needed no further prompting. They laid their tools down and scrambled out of holes in the floor, stretching out sore backs and shaking out stiffened fingers. "Man, what time is it?" One asked. "I feel like I've been doing this for three days."

Dar wiped her fingers on her shirt to get the worst of the dust off, before she selected a cookie from the tray and accepted a cup of milk from the smiling attendant. "Thank you."

"You should really thank Ms. Stuart." The woman chuckled.

"She'll get hers later." Dar responded, with a somewhat rakish grin, which grew even more wry as a short, blond woman appeared in the door way, leaning against it as she looked inside. "Well well. Speak of the devil."

Kerry entered, waving at the techs who all called out greetings back. "How are you guys doing? Is Dar running you into the ground yet?"

"Hey." Dar seated herself against the bare wall, extending her legs out as she took a sip of her milk. "I'm working here too."

"I know." Kerry sat down next to her, the entire reason for her coming over now moot, but she didn't care in the least. "I came over to see how you were doing." She glanced up at the crowd, but they were clustered around the cookies, moving away once they'd gotten their share and settling down on the other side of the room.

Or wandering outside in the hall. Kerry wondered if they were being given space out of courtesy or just coincidence.

"I'm doing complete and utter suckitude." Dar gazed down at her now empty hand, it's palm scraped and reddened. "We've found ten circuits out of a thousand in six hours."

"Jesus."

"If he was here, I'd give him a phone tester and tell him to get his ass working." Dar said. "Ker, this is insane."

Kerry took hold of Dar's hand and stroked it, clasping her fingers around her partner's. "Can I help?" She asked. "I'm tired of yapping on the bridge. Why don't you go yap for a while, and I'll do this."

"And make me feel like a total zero for sticking you with this night mare while I lounge in the bus?" Dar eyed her. "I don't think so."

"Are you saying that's what I was doing?"

Dar saw the quirk of Kerry's eyebrows, and the sudden bunching of her jaw. The last thing she really wanted to do this late in this crappy a situation was trigger her partner's temper. Kerry was tired. She was tired. No way she wanted a squabble. "No, hon. I sent you to the bus, remember?" She replied. "Is there any sense in both of us being miserable?"

Kerry studied her face. "Yes." She laced her fingers with Dar's. "Because I was just in that damn bus thinking I was a creep for not being out here with you." She admitted. "I'm tired of people telling me all their problems, and politicians calling to yell at me. The governor of New York wants his new office connected."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Well, it's their disaster response office." Kerry said. "Long story, and anyway, we can't even look at that until we get through this. So teach me to use one of those things and let me suffer here with you like the sappy lovestruck goofball I really am."

Dar sighed, looking across at the cabinet with its morass of wires. "I feel like just quitting and going to bed." She admitted, in a soft voice. "Ker, I don't want to sit here and do this. It's going to take days. We don't have days."

Kerry gently rubbed the side of her hand. "Is there any other way to do it?"

"No."

"Can we get the vendor in here to do it? It's really their hairball." Kerry asked, reasonably. "Let me call them again."

Dar was silent for a moment, then she nodded. "Call them." She said. "I've had enough of this."

Kerry leaned over and rested her head against Dar's shoulder for a brief moment, then she straightened up and pulled her cell phone out. "You got it, boss."

"Ten freaking lines in six hours." Dar sighed, letting her head rest against the wall. "Most moronic thing I've ever done."

**

"What do I want? I want your technicians standing in front of me ready to go help, that's what I want." Kerry heard the sharpness in her own tone, and knew she was close to losing her temper.

"Ms. Stuart, I don't have anyone to send you." The male voice on the other end of the line sounded as harassed as she felt. "I'm not trying to blow you off. I just don't have anyone. We sent everyone.. everyone we had to New York."

Kerry felt her neck start to get hot. "So what am I supposed to tell the generals here at the Pentagon?" She asked. "And by the way, let me make sure I have the spelling of your name right."

"Ms. Stuart, please. Don't think threats are going to get you anywhere."

"I'm not threatening anyone." Kerry said. "I just have to know what the hell I am supposed to say to the military leadership of this country when they ask me why they have no communications."

The man sighed. "Look, we're under a lot of pressure from the political people. They told us to send everyone to New York, and damn it, that's what we did."

"They told us the same thing. "Kerry shot back. "But we're intelligent people, and we know better. So fine. That's what I'll tell the people here. That your company abandoned them to go hook the mayor's phone back up and make sure the stock traders can make money."

"Oh come on." The man said, in exasperation. "Would you please cut the crap? This isn't a stupid game anymore."

"I'm not playing anything. That's exactly what I am going to go tell the Joint Chiefs of Staff." Kerry said, in an inflexible tone. "And trust me, when we pull everyone's ass out of the fire here, we're going to take every bit of business you had and make it ours, because that's my CIO in that demarc room punching down your lousy circuits."

The tension, and the exhaustion were getting to her. Kerry was on the verge of just hanging up.

"What is it you want from me, Ms Stuart?" The man asked, after a pause.

"I want linemen in here, sorting out your part of the fucking hairball someone left in this facility." Kerry responded, in soft, precise tones. "And if you can't do that, I guarantee not only with the Pentagon not do any more business with you, we don't either and we're a hell of a lot bigger."

A click sounded down the line, and she was listening to nothing but a busy tone. Kerry closed the phone and exhaled, letting her head rest against her hand. She was sitting in the hallway, lit by orange fluorescent lights that made her head pound all the harder.

She checked her watch. 2 am. "Jesus." She leaned back against the wall, feeling the hard surface cold against her the skin of her back through her shirt. Her skin was covered in dust, and her lack of progress in getting help for Dar and the rest of their crew made her feel covered in dust inside as well.

She heard a sound, and turned her head to see a tall figure approaching her, a little too tall, and too broad to be Dar, but with the same bouncy stride. "Hey Dad."

"Hey there kumquat." Andrew came over and slid down the wall to settle next to her. "You don't look so hot."

"I feel crummy." Kerry agreed. "I can't get anyone to come here and help us. It's so frustrating"

Andrew absorbed this, drawing his knees up and resting his forearms on them. "Hell of a lot of work." He agreed. "Ah was watching Dar do that for a while, made my eyeballs ache."

"Me too. She won't let me take over for her." Kerry said. "We've rotated the other techs in at least once. But she won't stop."

"Stubborn kid." Her father in law agreed. "Gets that from me, I do believe."

Kerry leaned over and rested her head against his shoulder. "Can you go talk her into taking a break?"

Andrew's brows quirked. "Ah could try." He said. "But she's outstubborned me before now."

Kerry sighed, and straightened. Then she gathered herself up and climbed to her feet. "C'mon. Let's both try." She said. "Maybe that'll work." She waited for Andrew to stand and then she led the way back to the demarc room, pausing in the doorway to look inside.

Most of the pockets in the floor were now closed. The majority of the techs were now clustered around the back of the room, where four were stolidly at Dar's side working on the cables, and the rest were doing busy work waiting their turn.

Everyone looked utterly exhausted. No one was even trying to leave. Kerry felt a tiny prickle of pride, the hint of a lifting of her nape hairs at the understated loyalty of their staff and the stolid, equally understated leadership of her steadily working partner.

She started across the room, gathering her arguments, steeling herself to maybe even get Dar mad at her, as she straightened her shoulders and sucked in a lungful of air.

"Oh!" One of the techs yelped, as though he'd been bitten. "Ms. Roberts.. Ms Roberts.. I think this is one of ours!" The man froze in place, gripping the wires in a deathly tight clutch and not taking his eyes off them. "Holy cow!"

Dar clipped her kit to the wall and crawled over the pile of cabling to where he was standing, the rest of the techs edging out of her way as fast as they could. She peered over his shoulder at the readout, then she clapped him on the shoulder. "It is."

"Oh holy Christ." Mark came in on the other side. "Dude, you just won the brass ring. That's the fucking backbone management uplink." He looked at Dar. "We can bring up services on this, boss. It's only a T1.5, but it's a hell of a lot better than that portable sat."

Kerry sidled up in back of Dar and looked over the man's shoulder too, her arm slipping around her partner's waist and giving it a squeeze. "Wow. Nice job, Ken."

The tech looked around, and smiled at her. "I feel like I won the lottery." He confessed.

"You did." Dar said. "I promised a 200 percent raise and a month vacation. You got it." She took the cables from him and carefully routed them, winding them through the spools on the top of the punchdown and seating them with a double punch of her tool. "Little bastard."

She removed a pen from her pocket and scribbled a mark on the punchdown. "Someone cross connect that over to the temp rack please."

"Right on that ma'am." A tech was already routing wires from the other side of the room.

Ken looked around at Kerry. "Is she serious, ma'am?"

"Absolutely." Kerry answered immediately. "She never promises anything she won't deliver on." She waited for her partner to come back over and bump her lightly, stopping next to her instead of going back to the hairball. "Dar, if we've got basic comms back, I think we should let these folks take a break and get some sleep."

"You think so, huh?" Dar rested her elbow on Kerry's shoulder.

"I do." Kerry said. "I know it's just a drop in the bucket, but you all can't keep this up all night and expect to also keep working again tomorrow. Which we have to do." She reminded her partner.

Dar slowly looked around the room. Three of the techs were busy running cables and making connections to the thick panel that then ran out of the room and around the corner, ending at the satellite rig Mark had set up.

The rest were sitting quietly, just watching her and waiting. Everyone would continue working if she said to, and Dar knew that. They were no where near in the clear, and stopping now would probably be a mistake, and certainly would lose them time they could not afford.

However.

"I think you're right." Dar said, after a pause. "Moving the management traffic off the sat will get me enough wiggle room to work with. We can take a break."

She could see the utter relief on everyone's faces. A glance to her right showed a similar expression on Kerry's face, and the shoulder she was resting her arm on relaxed. "Let's go hijack one of those SUV's." She turned to the rest of the techs. "Take a break, people. Get some rest. You all did great work here tonight, and it'll make tomorrow a lot easier."

"Back at you boss." Mark said. "I've got two or three guys in reserve, bunking out waiting for the rack truck to get here. Should be any time, so it's a good deal we're gonna take a break to get out of their way."

Dar nodded. "Let's go." She slipped her arm around Kerry's shoulders and steered her towards the door. "C'mon, dad. Time to go back to that scandalous hotel of ours."

Andrew had his hands in his pockets, and was nodding slowly. "Been a damn long day." He agreed, as he joined them in leaving the room. "Ah will be glad to wave bye to this here rock pile for today."

"Me too." Dar exhaled, as they exited the door and walked outside into the night air. It was much quieter now, though work was going on at the impact site as they passed it, cranes removing debris, and people moving in and out, there was a hush over everything that let them hear the flutter of the big American flag draped over the building with startling clarity.

A cluster of motion drew their attention, and they turned their heads to watch a group of six people leading dogs fanning out to enter the destroyed area.

"Are those search dogs?" Kerry asked.

"Looks like it." Dar stifled a yawn. "Guess it's safe enough for them to go in now." She added. "So no luck with the telco vendors?"

"Ugh."

Dar gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Don't stress over it. They really can't do any more than we're doing, Ker. At least we can prioritize what circuits come up if we're the ones punching them down."

Andrew grunted, and wagged his head back and forth. "Them people should be helping though." He disagreed. "Not right for you all to be doing their work."

"Exactly." Kerry said. "I know we can do it. The point is, we shouldn't have to. Dar shouldn't have to be standing there for.. what, eight? Ten? Hours sorting through that mess."

Dar chuckled. "Eh." She shrugged. "At least it was doing something productive. I'm about out of options relieving all the throttle points until we relieve some of the congestion in Newark. There's just too much routing that way."

"Ugh." Kerry repeated. "You know, I gave that guy such a hard time too, about sending everyone to New York. But we're going to have to do that too, Dar. I don't know how we're going to do all that work there, and still get stuff here all going."

They stepped over the dividers into the parking area and headed for the bus. This late, most of the activity had settled down, but still there were techs gathered around the satellite rig, and two unfamiliar ones at the work tables setting up cable rigs. "Good morning all." Kerry called out, as they arrived.

The techs at the table looked up, then went still, their eyes widening as they recognized the figures appearing out of the darkness. "Oh, hell. It's the big cheezes!"

"Big mangos." Dar disagreed, with a wry grin. "You folks getting ready to cut some traffic over? We got one link up in that hell hole in there."

The techs around the sat hurried over. "That's what we heard." One said. "Mark called us on the radio. A T1 he said? That's going to be a lot better than the rig here. We're so maxed on it we can barely get management traffic through."

The door to the RV opened, and two more techs climbed out, rubbing their eyes. "Hey, what's the scoop out here?" One asked. "Anything interesting.. oh. Hi Ms. Roberts."

"Ah will go get that car." Andrew decided. "Be right back." He ambled off, disappearing between the RV and the bus before they could stop him.

"Guess he figures we'll never get loose of here given our own devices." Kerry whispered. "Want a cup of coffee?"

"Nah." Dar waited for the new techs to join them. "Randy, the most interesting thing that happened is that after ten hours of cable wrangling we got one circuit up. They're moving traffic off the sat."

"Hot damn." Randy stretched. "We're waiting for the rack truck. Mark said it should be here any time. We'll get them in and constructed, and the PDU's in and hopefully tomorrow morning the gear'll get here."

Dar checked her watch. "Sounds right." She said. "Should be about twelve, fourteen hours from there to here. So we're right on track." She turned to Kerry. "Remind me to talk to Mariana about bonus packages for everyone here, will you?"

"Sure will." Kerry didn't miss the veritable forest of pricked ears suddenly around her. "Even though I know everyone's pitching in because that's the kind of people we have, we need to reward the really spectacular performance we've seen the last few days."

"Yup." Dar looked around, nodding in satisfaction. "We're on the right track here for sure. I think we can schedule ourselves to move on to New York tomorrow. I hope we're as lucky there in terms of staffing."

The moonlight shone down on a small group of smiling faces, as the techs enjoyed the praise. "You know.." Randy said. "We don't usually get a chance to really make a difference like this. It's kind of cool."

The techs nodded. "Yeah." Another one said. "It sucks big time that this happened, but coming here, and doing this stuff... it makes me feel good. My parents are all excited back home, that I'm here, helping the country out."

"Better than being stuck in the configuration room in Miami?" Kerry smiled warmly at them.

"Heck yeah. Plus the bus is here." Randy said, with a rakish grin. "We don't get brownies made for us back home."

Everyone laughed, and both Dar and Kerry joined in. "We'll have to look at that when we get back." Kerry mused. "And those fresh cookies were pretty good too."

"Fresh cookies?" Randy said. "Where? In the bus? Man, let's go get some and some coffee before that truck shows up and we've got to hump all that tonnage inside." He trotted towards the bus with his partner chasing after him. "Thanks Ms. Stuart!"

"Anytime." Kerry called after him.

A low rumble caught their attention, and they turned to see one of the company SUV's trundling it's way towards them. "Our chariot." Dar said, with a sigh. "Damn, I'm so tired I actually don't mind my father driving it."

A cheer went up from the sat rig. "Circuit's up! Yeah! I'm seeing frames from our net!" One of the techs almost yodled his excitement. "Boy is it great to see that router again!!"

Dar unwound her arm from Kerry's shoulder and walked over to them, peering over their shoulders at the laptop propped up on one end of the sat rig. "That's ours, all right." She commented. "Good."

"We did it." The tech shook his head a little. "On tin cans and strings and a lot of duct tape, but man, we did it."

Standing there, in the fluorescent lit glare, in the shadows of so much destruction, Kerry knew a moment of relieved triumph. They had done it. No one would ever probably know they'd done anything, no one would probably care, save those few people who had worked with them, but here in the chill of an early morning she knew they'd surmounted a lot of odds in a single facet of the total disaster.

One small step. One small achievement, but in all the chaos and all the grief surrounding them it felt good.

"Hey, Ms. Stuart!"

Kerry turned, to see Billy approaching. "Well, hello there." She greeted the captain.

"My guys just told me something just happened." Billy said. "All of a sudden, our stuff's moving."

Kerry indicated the sat rig. "We got one of our circuits up." She said. "Only one, but it's a start." She smiled as the techs all started cheering, and doing a little nerd dance around the rig. "I think they're as excited as your guys are."

The captain had been talking into a mouthpiece, a cable trailing down from his ear to a radio rig clipped to his shoulder. "That is one fantastic piece of news." He put his hands on his hips and exhaled. "We've been feeling a little like second class citizens around here. Everyone's focused on New York."

Kerry nodded in understanding. "I got that sense also. But you know, Dar and her father are personal friends of Gerald Easton's. They understand how important it is to get you up and running again even if other people don't."

"That's what I heard." Billy said. "You're good people, Ms. Stuart. Thank you."

Kerry felt tears sting her eyes. "You're good people here too, Billy. Thanks for putting it on the line for us."

He blinked, and Kerry saw his jaw muscles clench.

"Ready to go, Ker?" Dar came up next to her. "Hello there. Guess you heard the good news."

Billy nodded. He held his hand out to them. "Thanks." He gripped Dar's and then Kerry's. "Get some rest, you all. That's what I'm going to do now." He walked off, pausing to rub his face on his sleeve before he disappeared between two trucks and into the shadows.

Kerry looked very thoughtful as they walked towards the waiting SUV. "You really giving Ken a 200 percent raise?"

"Yep."

"You realize he'll make more than most of our VP's."

"Don't give a damn. It's my budget, I'll be glad to be on the line for it." Dar rocked her head from side to side, exhaling. "It's worth it. I'm so tired I can't see straight. He probably saved me from cross-connecting an electrical lead into my damn navel."

Kerry put an arm around her waist. "Me personally, I'd be more excited about the month vacation."

"We get that too. Everyone involved in this gets that."

"After we fix New York."

"Yeah." Dar opened the door and climbed in, surprised when Kerry climbed right after her, and settled squished in the seat half sprawled over her lap. Then she laughed faintly and shut the door, burying her face in Kerry's shirt and letting the tension roll out of her. "Let's go."

"You got that right, rugrat." Andrew started the SUV forward. "This here be the end of this day."

**

Crawling into bed was an exquisite relief. Kerry felt sore and exhausted, her legs aching from the constant activity they'd been experiencing since early the previous morning. She lay there limp in the middle of the bed, dressed in just a tshirt.

It felt amazing to be laying still. But in the back of her mind, the press of all the things that she knew still needed doing, needed checking up on, needed arranging for was making her head hurt and her stomach queasy. "Hey, Dar?"

"Uh huh?" Dar entered the bedroom, rubbing her eyes. She dropped onto the bed with atypical gracelessness and exhaled audibly, stretching her long body out before she rolled over and pulled Kerry into an embrace. "I think I want to stop time for a few hours."

"Only a few?" Kerry silently savored the heat of the contact. "I just want to go home."

"Do you?" Dar reached over and turned the bedside light off, leaving them in darkness. She settled her arms back around Kerry and lightly rubbed her back. "We're caught in a pretty tough situation here."

Kerry draped her arm across Dar's waist and sighed. "I feel so crappy."

"Tired? Me too." Dar nestled closer and nibbled her ear.

"Frustrated." Kerry admitted. "Besides being tired. I feel like we're just starting to climb a really tall mountain full of angry people and bad situations."

"Yeah, we are." Dar agreed. "But y'know, Ker, I decided tonight when I felt like taking a weed whacker to that panel that we just have to look at the whole damn thing as one big challenge. We can't freak out, and we can't just chuck it."

"Even if we're being asked to do the impossible?" Kerry felt her body relaxing, Dar's light touch on her back easing away the aggravation of the day.

"Sure. What fun would it be if it was easy?"

Kerry looked up at Dar, her eyes adjusting and seeing the angular profile tilted towards her. "You amaze me sometimes."

"Do I?" Dar smiled.

"Yes, you do." Kerry kissed her on the shoulder, pulling the fabric of her shirt down a little so she hit skin instead of cotton. "I think you did a fantastic job of leadership tonight. I was so proud of you, and the rest of our guys."

"I was just glad that line tech found that damn circuit." Dar admitted. "I don't know how much more of that I was going to be able to take. Talk about timing." She nibbled Kerry's ear again. "The only worse thing I could think of happening was me starting my period."

Kerry blinked, feeling her lashes brush against Dar's skin as she silently called up a mental picture of their joint calendar. After a moment she thumped her forehead against Dar's shoulder. "Oh mushrooms. We're both due." She exhaled in aggravation. "Did you even bring..."

"I'm sure this swanky hotel has a concierge who'd love to go shopping for supplies for the owner of the penthouse mansion in the morning." Dar reassured her. "I was just glad to get out of there before anything started. Me bleeding on those cables woulda thrown every damn thing into a royal spin."

"Yikes." Kerry said, after a moments reflection. "I don't think I'd want that to end up in the departmental newsletter."

"Me either." Her partner stated firmly.

"No wonder I've been in such a pissy mood all day." Kerry now, belatedly, recognized the symptoms. "Jesus I wish you'd said something before."

"I was busy." Dar reminded her.

"I know. Me too." Kerry sorted through what she had packed, and sighed in relief when she realized pain reliever was among the items. "Damn we're going to have to run around all day tomorrow too." She closed her eyes, as the nibbling moved around the edge of her ear to her earlobe.

Hard to stay in a bad mood with that sensation, she reckoned. Hard to stay in a bad mood when the warmth of their bodies pressing against each other penetrated all the aches and the stiffness, and she felt her breathing slow.

Felt her breathing come to match Dar's rhythm, an odd synergy she'd started to notice more and more lately.

Tomorrow might be hell. Kerry let the worry slip from her, savoring instead the immediate reality of this comfortable bed and the intrinsically greater comfort of Dar's embrace. "Mm."

"Mm?" Dar exhaled against the skin on Kerry's neck. "I've been dreaming all day of this moment."

Kerry felt a little happy chill go up her back. She slid her arms around Dar and gave her a hug, then she relaxed against her body with a satisfied wriggle. "I always dream of this." She admitted. "Especially during sucky days."

Dar chuckled softly, almost soundlessly, more a motion than a sound.

"I have the weirdest dreams with you and me in them." Kerry closed her eyes. "Did I ever tell you about the one with penguin?" She took a breath to go on, then found she couldn't because Dar's lips were blocking the sound.

But that was all right too.

**

As it turned out, it wasn't quite their time the next morning. Kerry was glad enough for any reprieve, and she applied herself to her blueberry pancakes, listening to the conference bridge with one ear and to Dar's pacing ramblings with the other.

It was just seven o' clock. Getting up that early had been painful, but Dar had gotten a call from the board, and her consolation prize had been this plate of excellent pancakes and acceptably crisp bacon.

"Hello, is Kerrisita there?"

Kerry swallowed her mouthful hastily and switched on the mic. "Right here, Maria." She said. "Is there a problem?"

"No, no problema, Kerrisita. The Fedex says they can come pick up Dar's package. I just was wanting to make sure, where to send it."

Ah. "So, Fedex is flying again?" Kerry said. "Miami ops, did you hear that?"

"Boo yah!" Mark's voice erupted, sounding a touch sleepy. "Right from the RV, boss. I hear it. That's great news. Hang on, let me get status here."

Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "Hang on for me too, Maria. Let me talk to Dar and see where we're going to be." She clicked off and got up, putting her ear buds down as she went into the next room where Dar was using the room's speakerphone. "Hey."

Dar had stopped and was leaning over the phone with both hands braced. She glanced up at Kerry, her dark bangs falling into her eyes. "Hold up, people. I need to check something." She put the call on hold. "Que Paso?"

"Fedex is moving again." Kerry said. "Maria wants to send your ID and phone."

"Great."

"Where?" Kerry held still as Dar circled the desk and nuzzled against her, licking a drop of syrup from her lips in a miniature cascade of sensuality. "Ah." She closed her eyes and they kissed again, the silence going on for quite some time.

"What was the question?" Dar asked, opening one eye and peering down at her.

Kerry had to admit her mind had gone completely blank. "I have no idea." She muttered. "I'm sure it was important. I came all the way out here about it."

"I remember." Dar rested her forearms on Kerry's shoulders. "Where to send my damn wallet." She said. "Paradox, again. I'd say here, since it'll be easier to get here at the hotel, but we need to go to New York and it'll probably be this afternoon. So to the Rock, please."

"Okay." Kerry obediently nodded. "I'll tell Maria. Do you think you'll be able to fly though, without ID?"

"Guess we'll find out." Dar gave her a kiss, then she bumped her towards the other room. "Go finish your breakfast before it gets cold."

"I'd rather finish you before you get cold." Kerry responded, with a rakish grin, as her partner's brows lifted and her eyes widened. "But I guess I'll settle for pancakes for now." She winked at Dar and ambled back into the other room, taking a moment to drink half her glass of orange juice before she got back on the phone. "Phew."

She clicked the mic. "Maria? You there?"

"Si, Kerrisita. I am here. "

"Dar says to have it sent to the New York office, please. She's expecting us to leave from here today and head up there." Kerry said. "I'm just hoping they'll let her on the plane with no ID."

"Jesu." Maria said. "They were just saying here on the television how strict it is now. Kerrisita, did you hear all the things going on? They went and took someone off one of the cruise ships even!"

Having been involved in cruise ships in the not so distant past, Kerry somehow didn't find that surprising. "One of the terrorists was on a cruise?" She asked.

"They did not say." Maria sounded disappointed. "They found something in the Europe too, in some countries in the north. People they had arrested."

Kerry sat down and cut a forkful of pancakes. "Unreal." She said, before ingesting them. She chewed and swallowed. "Maria, call the airline, would you? Let's find out what Dar's supposed to do so we don't get surprised at the airport."

"Si I will do that."

"Hey, poquito boss." Mark got back on. "Man, we got good news here. Truck just pulled up with the gear, and the racks are ready and humming for em.. and.. wait for it... we found another circuit!!!"

Kerry put her fork down and clapped, hearing the echo in her earbuds of the sound. "Nice work!" She complimented her team. "Go go go."

"Miami exec, this is Newark." The earth station reported in. "We do see a decrease in saturation today. Boy. Is that a welcome site. Good work, you guys." She paused, and studied her plate. "Mark, can you just run down where we are, overall."

"Sure."

Kerry applied her fork to her plate as she clicked her mic off, nodding a little as she listened and chewed.

**

Dar sprawled in the leather desk chair, her bare feet propped up against the desk and her elbow resting on it's surface. She listened to the voices on the conference call with barely contained aggravation, shifting forward suddenly only to relax again, as another voice took up the argument.

She picked up her glass of grapefruit juice and sipped from it. The astringent beverage was cold, and she swallowed a few mouthfuls before there was a gap in the discussion and she saw her chance to dive in. "Hey!"

The phone almost visibly shuddered. "Yes, Dar?" Alastair said, after a moment. "Listen, I know things are tough where you are, but we're getting a lot of pressure here from a lot of people."

"Too bad." Dar said. "Have any of you been listening to what I've said the past twenty minutes? It's eight AM. I got back from the work site at three AM. We just got things moving there."

"Now Dar." Hamilton chimed in. "Settle your shorts. Nobody said you weren't working hard. We just made some promises to the government and they're wanting to know when we're gonna keep them."

"I can't see why we're delaying" Another voice chimed in. "This is big. We've got a great opportunity here."

Dar glanced plaintively at the ceiling. "What the hell's wrong with you people?" She asked. "Did you not see the hole in the side of the Pentagon on CNN? Do you not know what goes on in that building?"

"Now Dar." Alastair sighed. "Well, listen folks. Today they're doing a big ceremony, and I've got to go get ready for it." He said. "I know your people there are working like anything, Dar. I understand it's important to get things going there. I know you've got a personal responsibility for the place. But damn it, I need you here."

Dar turned her head and glared at the phone. "So, what part of, yes, I'm making arrangements to get to the city today wasn't clear?" She asked. "Did that whole five minute spiel from me at the beginning of this call not mean anything to anyone there?"

Alastair sighed. "I was hoping you'd be here this morning."

"I was sleeping this morning." Dar said. "And frankly, you all can kiss my ass. Anyone who thinks they can do this better, c'mon. Bring it."

"Dar, no one said that."

"Then everyone just shut up and go do something productive." Dar turned and slammed her hand on the desk, raising her voice to a loud yell. "Instead of tying me up when I should be!" She turned, to find Kerry unexpectedly standing behind her. "Yeop."

"What was that, Dar?" Hamilton asked. "Cat get your tongue?"

"Nothing." Dar leaned back in the chair and let Kerry rub her shoulders. "Are we done?"

Long silence. "Well, I guess I'll see you here later today, huh Dar?" Alastair said. "The mayor was just on the line, something about an office at the pier.. any chance of looking at that first?"

"Sure." Dar said. "Done now?"

"Good bye, all." Her boss sighed and gave in. "I'll do what I can here. Going to be a rough day." He clicked off the phone and it echoed a little, then the room was once again silent.

"He sounds pissed."

"He wants me to be there making him look good." Dar said. "Screw that, Kerry. We had work to do here. "

"Uh huh. And we'd better be taking a train to go there." Kerry informed her. "Cause sweetheart, they're not letting anyone fly without ID." She said. "If we get packing, we can catch a train in an hour, and be in New York in three more after that. We end up in Penn Station. "

"A train." Dar mused. "Think we can get tickets? Probably pretty busy. No one wants to fly."

"Already got them." Kerry kissed the top of her head. "C'mon. Let's just get there. I'll give Dad a call." She held a hand out to Dar. "Shower? We'll save time together."

"Hedonist."

"Takes one to know one."

**

"Hm." Dar strolled back down the aisle way and resumed her seat next to Kerry. "I think I like trains." She concluded, folding her hands over her stomach as she regarded the inside of the somewhat narrow first class car.

"I suspected you would." Kerry looked up from her laptop, which she'd been assiduously typing on. "There's windows to look out, and lots of mechanical stuff around to explore. I'm not sure I like the motion though."

"The wiggle waggle?" Dar stretched her legs out. "It's not bad."

"Mm. It's making me a little queasy." Kerry continued typing, tucking the bud in one ear more firmly into place. "At least we can stay in touch riding on this." She held a finger up then she clicked her mic on. "LA Earthstation, what was that? Who's asking you for that bandwidth?"

Dar rested her elbows on the arms of her chair, taking the time to sit back and consider an action plan for when she reached the city. Tough situation. She reached down into Kerry's briefcase and drew out a small pad, taking a pencil from her shirt pocket and hitching one knee up to rest the pad against it.

She could have hauled out the big laptop she'd been given, but it seemed too much trouble to do that just to take a few notes. "Okay."

"Okay?" Kerry glanced up.

"Talking to myself."

"Oh. Well, you know, all the traffic we took off the sat back to the network is being filled with requests from the city." Kerry shook her head. "They're stuffed again."

"I figured they would be." Dar spent a moment doodling on the pad. "So let's see. We have the pier office to worry about, right?" She scribbled a note. "Whats our best option for that? We don't have much on that side of Manhattan."

"You do, hon. You're forgetting the Intrepid Air Space Museum you managed to wheedle a contract out of after you visited the last time." Kerry reminded her.

"Mm. Not a big pipe." Dar groused.

The train hummed along, and a service person appeared, with a tray. She started down the aisle, smiling at the travelers and offering them champagne flutes filled with orange juice. A few people took them, but most seemed glum and withdrawn, huddled near the windows, or with radio headsets covering their ears.

Kerry wondered if it was always like that, or a reaction to what was going on. She accepted the glass from the server with a smile, and waited for her to pass by before she took a sip of it. "Oh. Hello." She blinked. "Mimosa. Wasn't expecting that."

Dar set her own down on the table between them and cleared her throat. "Fizzy."

"Miami exec, this is the New York office." A male voice intoned quietly. "Mr. McLean is asking your eta."

Kerry checked her watch. "New York, we're looking at two hours to Penn Station." She said. "Is there anything we can do from here?"

"No ma'am." The man said. "There's just a lot of people here from the city and from the state and he was asking."

"Well, we're moving as fast as the train lets us." Kerry said.

"I'll let him know, thanks." The man said.

"God we do need someone on the ground there." Kerry muttered. "Let me check who we've got accounted for." She typed into her keyboard and sighed. "Someone with some initiative."

"Send a mail to Hermana Jones." Dar said. "Tell her to meet us at the Rock." She continued scribbling on her pad.

Kerry paused, and looked at her. "Hermana Jones?" She asked, her voice questioning. "Who is that? Names not familiar to me."

A blue eye appeared, faintly twinkling. "My friend who now runs the Jersey data center?"

Kerry blinked. "Oh. You mean.. um.... What was that funny name that sounded like a part from Intel?"

"Scuzzy."

"Scuzzy." The blond woman opened her mail. "That's right. You met her in Manhattan, didn't you?" She typed the message, trying to remember if she'd ever had occasion to talk to the woman. The data entry side of the house really wasn't her area, and she decided she probably hadn't.

She remembered Mariana having a heart attack about Scuzzy though, and Dar's mischievous laughter when Hermana had turned out to not only be a worthwhile addition to the company but was promoted to center manager to boot. "Why did you do that?"

"Huh?" Dar looked up, then was distracted as the forward door to the train opened and Andrew sauntered back in after being absent for a good part of the journey. "Hey dad."

"Hey rugrat." Andrew sat down in his seat across from the two of them. There was a line of single seats along one set of windows, and double seats along the other, and there was ample room for Dar's father to stretch out his long legs in front of him. "This here is a nice train. I like it."

He was dressed in a company logo sweatshirt, the arms pushed up past his elbows and a pair of carpenter's pants. His scarred face took in reflections of the passing sunlight from the window, as he watched the countryside go by in the train's path.

"I like it too." Dar agreed. "Thanks for coming with us, Dad. I thought maybe you'd want to stay back in DC with the guys." Andrew told her.

"Our people?" Kerry leaned forward a little. "What did they do?"

Andrew glanced up as the server came by and offered him the tray. He took a glass with an expression of dubious suspicion, and sipped it. "Jesus P Fish there's alcohol in that." He set the glass down. "No, kumquat, not your fellas. Those are good folks there. Ah was just getting ticked off because e'verybody's runnin round in circles and no body wants to own up to how bad things got screwed."

"Dar, Hermana just answered. She said 'Hell yeah!'" Kerry seemed bemused. "This should be interesting."

"You'll like her." Dar made another note on her pad. "Dad, it's only going to get worse where we're going. That's all civ."

"Wall, somebody's got to keep you kids out of trouble."

Kerry almost laughed, caught between answering a question just posed to her on the bridge and processing what was going on around her in that slightly disjointed way she'd had to develop over the past few days.

What was it she'd called it? Acquired Attention Deficit Disorder? "Okay, that's good news guys. Go on in to the city, and get down to the office. We'll meet you there, and set up a command center." She r: power, we could use those trucks in the city."

"Ms. Stuart, this is the New York office again. Mr. McLean would like Ms. Roberts to call him, please."

"Dar, Alastair wants you to call him." Kerry muted her cell. "Okay, New York, message passed. Can you clear some space for us when we get there? Is there a big room we can take over for logistics?"

"Should have brought some of them fellers with us." Andrew commented.

Dar stopped writing and looked at Kerry. "Okay. Give me a second to draw a cell phone." She remarked dryly. "What in the hell does he want that can't wait an hour and forty five minutes?" Her head swiveled towards her father. "Mark'll bring the RV with him after they finish up the install at the Pentagon."

"I have no idea, sweetheart. I'm just the messenger." Kerry said. "Borrow dad's phone."

The attendant came back through. "Sir, can I offer you some breakfast?" She addressed Andrew. "We have cheese omelettes, waffles, or cold cereal."

"You all got any hot dogs? Ah already had my egg things at o dark hundred."

Dar chuckled, and shook her head. "Better have something. We're going to get swept up in a pile of crap as soon as we get there." She warned her companions, giving the server a glance as the now harried woman turned to her. "Omelette for us." She indicated Kerry and herself.

The server moved on, and Andrew handed his cell phone across the aisle to her. Dar took it and flipped it open, frowning a little before she punched in Alastair's number.

"Miami exec, this is Newark Earth." Kerry's ear bud crackled. "Good news. We just heard from Con Ed, they're expecting to finish re-tying us in around lunchtime."

"Great." Kerry smiled.

"Course, that means we know it's really probably sometime tonight." The Earthstation acknowledged. "But soon as we're back, we'll send the trucks to the office with you."

"Alastair, we're on the way. What the hell more do you want me to do?" Dar was saying. Then she paused. Then her free hand hit the arm of her chair in muted frustration. "Because I don't have a god damned driver's license! You want them to put me in as cargo? For Christ's sake, Alastair it would have taken us three hours to get on a damn plane this morning anyway!"

"Easy honey." Kerry patted her arm.

Dar abruptly cut the call off and closed the phone, tossing it over to her father. "If he calls me back tell him to kiss my ass."

Andrew caught the phone in one big hand and eyed his daughter dubiously. "What's that feller's problem? Thought you two got on?"

"He's losing his mind." Dar folded her arms over her chest. "I think the pressure there is getting to him. God damned politicians." She glanced at Kerry. "No offense to your mother."

"Who tried to hijack me into a senate investigation? No offense taken, sweetie." Kerry responded in a mild tone. "But he is our boss. You sure you should be hanging up on him?"

Dar reclined her chair and put her pen and pad away. "What's he going to do, fire me? He'll be lucky I don't belt him one when I see him."

Kerry patted her arm again, and went back to her conference call. After a moment, she found her hand captured, and her fingers interlacing with Dar's. It was inconvenient for typing, but she made no move to disengage, pecking at the keys with one hand as she studied her screen and faintly shook her head.

Crazy day.

**

The three of them stopped short on exiting the train platform, finding themselves in a circular lobby with people moving around them in pretty much all directions.

It was disorienting. The last part of the trip into Manhattan had mostly been underground and so they'd arrived in the station without a real sense of being in New York at all.

"Now where?" Kerry looked around. "I don't think I've ever been in this station. Where are we in relation to the office?" She took in the numbers of National Guard troops, with submachine guns cradled in their hands and serious faces. "Wow."

Dar looked around as well, resisting the urge to reach up and cover her ears at the harsh, echoing clatter from the trains, the people and the announcements bouncing off all the faux marble walls and the hard stone floor. "Loud."

"Yeah." Kerry raked her hair off her forehead. "Okay, so.."

"South." Andrew had been studying the walls. "We can take that little train up there. C'mon." He shouldered his overnight bag and headed off down one corridor. "Ain't no point going outside just yet."

After a moment's hesitation, Dar and Kerry followed him. They made their way down a side corridor until they reached an area with ticket dispensing machines and turnstiles. "I remember this." Dar said. "Hope my experience this time isn't as much of a pain in the ass."

"Mm. Subways." Kerry fished some folded bills from her pocket and studied the machine. "Let's get a pass. Who knows how long we'll be here?" She inserted the bills and punched in her order, rewarded when a square of cardboard dropped into the dispenser.

She removed it, then rejoined Dar and Andrew who had already gotten theirs. "Not really conducive to luggage, huh?" She regarded the turnstiles.

Andrew took her bag and threw it up on one shoulder. "City folks livin like water rats down here. Ah swear."

Dar did the same with her bag and they made their way through the turnstiles and into the subway station track area. "Uptown, I guess." She indicated a passage, and they walked down a set of steps to a lower level, with tracks on either side, and a somber group of fellow travelers waiting for the train.

Dar set her bag down and looked around. No one was talking much and there was a feeling of oppression she didn't remember from her last visit.

Andrew had put down the bags he was carrying and was standing with his hands in his pockets, his pale blue eyes regarding the crowd.

The loudspeaker crackled, suddenly, and everyone around them jumped, a little. Kerry tried to picture where she was in the city, and realized she was under Madison Square Garden. "Wow." She murmured. "Guess people are a little shell shocked."

"What's that, kumquat?" Andrew asked.

"Just thinking." Kerry felt a gust of wind hit her in the face down the long, dark, empty tunnel. It smelled of dust and iron, oil and a sense of time and it made her aware of the age and the history of the walls around her.

Different than Miami. Different than Michigan.

New York was one of those few cities in the United States whose bones showed. That raw skeleton born in the turn of the last century's industrial revolution that had laid a foundation buried in the stone Manhattan was built on that was often covered over but never replaced.

How many of those bones were exposed now on the southern tip of the island?

But there was no real time to think about it because in a moment, the train was there, poking its nose out of the tunnel and screeching to a halt in front of the platform in a rush of silver humming. Kerry took possession of her bag and waited for the door to open, glancing aside at Dar as she did. "You okay?"

Dar had her bag held in both hands in front of her, and she turned her head and peered down at the question. "I'll live." She said. "It's not a long trip. Only a couple of stops."

They entered the train, along with the rest of the waiting people. At midmorning, it wasn't that full, and everyone got a seat, waiting in silence until the door alarm sounded, and the door slid shut, and they lurched into motion, but not before a national guard soldier entered the car from the door between them, and took a seat at the front, facing them.

His face had a smear of gray dust across his cheeks, his uniform was half covered in it, and his eyes were bloodshot. He exchanged nods with Andrew, though, and then leaned back, hands resting on his rifle as the car rumbled through a station.

"You going to call Alastair?" Kerry asked. "Let him know we're here?"

"Nope." Dar stolidly watched the walls flash by in the shadows. "I'm just going to walk up behind him and smack him in the back of the head when we get there."

"Ah."

"Then we'll get to work."

"Mmph. All righty then."

**

They exited the subway right under the building their offices were in. "What time is it?" Dar asked, as she studied the selection of no less than four exits to the street the station offered.

"Just eleven." Kerry edged closer to her partner, as the crowd flowed around them. "Is that the stairs there?" She pointed.

"Good as any." Dar started towards it. They crossed the hallway and started up the steps, emerging from the underground into an overcast sky and a surprisingly un-crowded street. "There." Dar pointed at the entrance to the tall, distinctive building nearby. There were several men standing outside, and after a cursory glance, they moved aside to allow them to enter.

Dar ignored them. She entered the revolving glass entrance and strode through it, entering into the lobby and heading immediately for the elevator stacks with Kerry and Andrew following close behind her.

The inside of the building was stunning. Kerry glanced around as they stopped in front of the elevators. It was in an art deco style, and every inch of it spoke of class and money. The people inside though, weren't bustling around much. They were standing in small groups, talking, or watching the televisions mounted on the far walls.

Kerry caught a glimpse of one. "Ah." She followed Dar into the elevator car. "The President's here today."

Dar punched the floor button. "Good. Maybe they'll all go mess with him and leave us alone." She waited for the doors to close, then leaned back against the back wall.

They were alone in the elevator and as it ground gamely upward, a pensive silence fell.

"Know what I was just thinking?" Kerry said, after about twenty seconds of that. "I was just thinking that given what happened here earlier this week, I'm pretty sure I don't like being in a building as famous as 30 Rock and sharing it with NBC."

Dar gave her a wry look, then patted her shoulder as the doors opened and they were on their floor. Obviously their floor, as the elevators spilled out into a lobby with a curved wall of glass with their logo chiseled into it in all it's staid and definitely boring corporate detail.

A big reception desk guarded the opening, curved in the same shape and made of polished teak. Behind it, a young woman was standing, a headset on her ears, her head bent and cocked to one side and her hand on the buttons of a big console phone. "Sir.. sir.. please, just hold on a minute... sir.. I'm sure I don't know if... sir, please stop yelling at me. I'm trying to.."

Dar went over and tapped her on the shoulder, make the girl jump almost into the glass wall. "Gimme." She held out her hand for the headset, glaring at her until the receptionist surrendered it in bewilderment, staring around and spotting Kerry and Andrew standing there.

Her mouth dropped open.

Dar put one ear muff to her ear and got the mic in position. "Who is this?" She asked sharply. "Mister Dobson? What do you want?" She paused. "Let me give you some advice. Turn on a god damned television set. Half the city is down."

The receptionist's eyes almost came out of her head. Kerry stepped forward and put her briefcase down, giving the girl a smile.

"I don't give a damn. Tell your boss if you don't stop calling and harassing my people I'm going to put him last on the list of things to worry about behind the pushcart vendor outside and some taxi driver going by. Understand me?"

"Ma'am.." The receptionist bravely held her hands out in a placating gesture. "He's a big customer."

"I don't care." Dar mouthed back at her. "Roberts." She said into the phone. "Dar Roberts. I'm the only person in the damn company who can help him so stop pissing me off and get off the phone." Her voice rose into a muted yell. After a pause, she nodded. "Thanks. Goodbye." She released the line and handed the girl back her headset. "Here."

The receptionist took them as though they were going to explode. "Uh..."

"Hi." Kerry distracted her. "We're from Miami. They're probably expecting us inside." She held her hand out. "Kerry Stuart."

"Uh." The girl merely pointed at the entrance.

"Thanks." Dar picked up her bag and motioned them inside. "Let's go."

Andrew picked up Kerry's luggage and followed her, giving the receptionist a polite nod of his head. "Lo." He ducked inside and waited for Kerry to catch up, then they both hurried to catch up with the visibly annoyed, stalking CIO ahead of them. "Tells folks off real nice, don't she?" He conversationally said to Kerry.

"Best in the world." Kerry acknowledged, with a wry smile. "Nobody does that better than Dar does."

Dar turned and walked backwards, giving them a dire look. "You better be talking about my phone skills and not anything more intimate." She turned back around and kept going, turning left down a corridor and whisking past various mostly empty offices.

Kerry felt herself get lightheaded as a deep blush colored her face, not helped in the least by Andrews deep chuckle. "Someday I'll learn not to do that." She muttered. "She gets me every time."

She could hear the sound of raised voices and she quickened her steps, catching up to Dar just as her partner stiffarmed a large, heavy mahogany door open and the sounds got a lot louder as they entered a big conference room full of people.

Four men were faced off opposite Alastair, all talking at once. Three more were surrounding Hamilton, who had both hands up and was arguing forcefully. Two or three more men were standing around, aides apparently, and they were the only ones who looked up as they entered.

Then they went back to watching the disagreement, dismissing the new arrivals.

"You made a commitment to the mayor." One man said. "This aint' no joke anymore. I need an answer on when that office is going to be up."

"That and the president's office said you'd get things working. What's happening with that? You've been telling me for two days you've got a plan.. where is it?" An older man said.

Dar tossed her bag towards the wall and went right to the table, slamming her hand against it and creating a loud, startling sound. "Excuse me."

Alastair turned immediately, recognizing her voice. He spotted her behind the table, and a look of utter relief appeared on his face. Even Hamilton looked glad to see her, and they quickly abandoned their opponents and circled the table to join her.

The other men followed, staring at them. "What's this?" The oldest of them said. "We have no time for more interruptions, McLain. You've stalled long enough. I need results! The governor's expecting an answer!"

"Well, Dar. Glad you made it. Glad you're here." Alastair greeted her, ignoring the man for the moment. . "I was just explaining to these fellas..."

Dar stared right at him, until his voice trailed off and he fell silent. Then she turned and looked at the rest of the men long enough for them to start to fidget a little. "Everyone sit down, please." She said, resting her hands on the table.

The older man looked annoyed. He started to say something, but Dar stared him down until he pulled out a seat across from Alastair and sat down, motioning for those with him to do the same. "All right, lady. Make it fast."

Kerry settled into a seat to Dar's left hand, and Andrew ambled around and took the chair on the other side of her. The rest of the men grudgingly took seats also, leaning forward and looking at Dar.

"Thank you." Dar remained standing, resting her weight just a bit on the hands she still had resting on the table. She looked at the older man. "Can you please introduce yourself so I know who the hell I'm talking to?"

Hamilton put a hand up over his mouth, his eyes twinkling a little. Alastair merely clasped his hands and worked to keep a benign expression on his face.

"Ivan Falcuzzi." The man said, shortly. "I work for the governor. Who the hell are you?"

"Dar Roberts." Dar responded matter of factly. "So let me get my plan out on the table so we can stop all the horse crap and actually get something constructive done." She drew in a quick breath, and started talking again before she could get interrupted. "You don't really have to tell us your problems, Mr. Falcuzzi." She straightened. "We know what the problems are."

"Then why aren't you doing something about it?" The man asked bluntly. "We were told you people would fix things. Things ain't fixed."

"I was fixing things." Dar responded. "We've been fixing things since this situation started. Tell me what you'd have liked us to do here before you let people back in the city, before we could travel, before we could get anything shipped in to help you, or before we made sure the military was going to keep running so nothing else could happen to anyone else?"

Falcuzzi lifted his hand. "Wait a minute."

"What did you expect us to do?" Dar enunciated each word separately. "What in the hell do you people think we are? Any of us here look like Poodle the Magnificent? Think we have rabbits we can pull out of our ears?" She leaned forward again. "I appreciate that you are frustrated Mr. Falcuzzi but you are not one tenth as frustrated as I am to come in here after working round the clock for three days and finding you in here blowing hot air up people asses for NO GOOD REASON."

He opened his mouth, then shut it again.

"WE WILL FIX ALL YOUR DAMN PROBLEMS." Dar hollered at top volume. "IF YOU GET OUT OF HERE AND LEAVE US THE HELL ALONE!!!!"

He stared at her. "You got any idea who you're talking to?" He asked.

"You have any idea how little I care who I'm talking to?" Dar countered. "You're keeping us from doing our jobs. Get out of here, and we'll deliver whatever it is Alastair promised we would. I don't have time to talk to you any more."

Falcuzzi studied her for a moment, then he glanced to the side, where Andrew was seated, his big, scarred hands resting on the table, folded together. His mouth pursed, then he shrugged, and stood up. "All right." He said. "At least you ain't pitching me any excuses." He made a curt gesture to the rest of his gang. "But if I were, you, lady, I'd make good on that fixing business. Know what I mean?"

"Gentlemen." Hamilton smoothly stood up, recognizing a legal cue when he saw one. "As our dear CIO has so eloquently said, we know what we need to do. Now take your distinguished selves on out the door, and let us get on with it." He opened the door. "I'll walk you on down."

The men filed out, the last three, big men with very little in the way of necks, made a point of looking around before they walked out, tugging their jacket sleeves straight as they left and closing the door behind them.

The conference room became quiet. Dar rested her weight on her elbows and glanced at Kerry. "Got any Advil?"

Kerry grimaced in sympathetic understanding, and leaned over to rummage in her briefcase.

"Well, Dar." Alastair put his hands on his chair arms, and sighed. "I'm really glad to see you." He eyed his dourly scowling CIO. "I know I've been a pain in the ass all day. You going to kill me?"

Dar stood and went to the credenza, pouring herself a glass of water and using it to chase down the pills she was juggling in her right hand. "I'm not going to kill you Alastair. Too many crappy things have happened to too many people in the last few days for me to get pissed off about a couple of phone calls."

Alastair twiddled his fingers on the chair arms. "You sure sounded pissed off at the politico's boys."

"I don't know or care about them." Dar came back and sat down, exhaling. "I know and care about you." She caught her boss's eyes widening in surprise. "So I'd rather take my cramps out on them since they weren't doing anything productive for us anyway."

"Ah."

Kerry reached over and gave Dar's back a little rub. "We have a short list of critical tasks, sir." She addressed Alastair. "The emergency office and some kind of coverage downtown are top on the list. Is there anything else they're pressing us on?"

"Alastair, please." The CIO smiled briefly. "Actually we do have a little longer short list. Some things came up today, and I guess they thought they'd throw everything at us and see what stuck."

"Bring it on." Kerry took her laptop out and put it on the table. "Dad, you want some coffee? I'm going to find some tea."

"Naw." Andrew said. "How bout I get yours and Dardar's bunks squared away. I figure you got a lot of stuff you got to take care of." He offered. "Ah'll find out what's going on round here anyhow."

"Thanks dad." Dar said "That'd be great."

Andrew stood up and slung his own bag over his shoulder. He stepped behind them and patted Dar on the shoulder, then collected their bags and ducked out the door. "Better find me that coon ass, too, fore he gets into trouble with them folks." He muttered as he left, his words echoing softly.

That left the three of them. Kerry focused on getting her laptop up, as Dar and Alastair regarded each other.

"Here we go again." Alastair said, finally.

"Here we go again." Dar repeated, with a sigh. "Got any rum?"

"Eh?"

**

"First things first." Dar had her hands in her pockets, as she studied the conference room wall. Once sedately weave covered, it now sported various plans and blueprints spread out from end to end of it. "Kerry, who do we have here from services?"

"I've got three people here, Dar. They're the support folks for this office." Kerry said.

Dar ran her finger along the coastline of Manhattan. "Okay. So let's get them out to the Intrepid. If this is to scale, and it's correct, we'll need a fiber spool and someone who can terminate it. We got that?"

Kerry reviewed her notes. "I don't think so." She admitted. "We contracted out the fiber install here. I don't think that's our access either."

"Okay." Dar moved to the other end of the map. "Let's start from a place I know they'll let us into. Have the guys take the biggest spool we have, make sure it's rubberized, and have them start at the mayor's damn offices and move towards the Intrepid. Maybe I can work on getting us access while they do that."

"Will do." Kerry leaned over her laptop and put her headphones in.

They were alone in the conference room. Alastair and Hamilton had gone to join the rest of the New York staff in watching the visit of the president, leaving them in peace to get things rolling.

Dar didn't feel like rolling anything. The pills had taken the edge off her cramps, but only the edge, and her body was aching so badly she felt like curling up in the corner of the room and forgetting all about the long list of problems facing them.

She suspected Kerry knew that. Her partner kept watching her, and giving her little rubs on the back, and looking like she wanted to tuck her into bed somewhere.

Dar would have given a year's salary to be able to let her.

"Dar?"

She turned around and leaned one shoulder against the wall, finding Kerry gazing back at her with wry sympathy. "Yes?"

"The guys are on their way in the company van. They said they hope they'll let them down there." Kerry said. "Can I get you some tea?"

Dar held her hand out. "Gimme your cell." She waited, and caught the implement as her partner tossed it. She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and keyed in a number, then held the phone up to her ear. "Yes. Can I speak to the governor please? This is Dar Roberts. Yes, I'll hold."

Kerry got up and came over to her, circling her with her arms and resting her cheek against Dar's shoulder. She felt Dar exhale, and looking up, saw the wry expression on her face. "What can I do for you, my love?"

"What more can I ask of you besides loving me?" Dar responded, with a gentle smile. "Hello, yes?" She returned her attention to the phone. "Governor. You said you could remove roadblocks. You ready to make good on that?"

Kerry kissed her on the upper arm, and gave her a gentle squeeze. Then she moved around behind her and started massaging Dar's lower back, making small circles with her thumbs on either side of her partner's spine.

"Are you telling me you can't clear them through there? Get someone to help us?" Dar's voice rose and took on a darker edge. "What in the hell do you expect me to do, bring guns and force our way into the telco demarc?"

Kerry started humming New York, New York under her breath as she worked on her aggravated boss's tall frame.

"You people are as useless as tits on a boar." Dar clapped the phone shut and almost tossed it across the room, remembering at the last minute it wasn't hers to destroy. She handed it back to Kerry and growled, leaning with both hands against the wall. "Son of a bitch."

"Easy, babe." Kerry soothed her. "We'll find a way. "

A soft knock came at the door. They both paused, then sorted themselves into a semblance of decorum as Dar cleared her throat. "C'mon in." She resumed studying the wall, but didn't hide a smile as Kerry kissed her hand then let it go just as the door opened.

A woman with dark golden skin and dark hair entered, wearing a colorful jacket and leather pants. "Hey!" She spotted Dar. "Dar from Miami! How are ya!"

Dar chuckled and stepped forward to take the extended hand. "Hello Scuzzi." She said. "How are you doing?"

"Well." Scuzzi stuck her hands in her pockets and shrugged. "Not so great, you know? It's been tough the last few days."

"I know." Dar said. She half turned. "Scuzzi, this is Kerry Stuart, our vice president of operations." She could see the quirk in her partner's brow. "Ker, this is Hermana Jones, from the Jersey data center."

"Hello." Kerry extended her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh hey!" Scuzzi took her hand and shook it vigorously. "That's been you on the phone that whole time, huh?"

"Mostly, yes." Kerry agreed. "It's been a long couple of days."

Scuzzi released her. "Everyone here's pretty shook up, you know? It's been tough. My brother's FDNY."

"Oh no." Kerry said. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah." Scuzzi nodded. "He was uptown saving some lady who got stuck in her car or something. He was all pissed off that he didn't get down there until them buildings fell down. Then he wasn't so pissed anymore, just mad about all the other guys."

They were all silent for a moment. Then Scuzzi shrugged. "My mama wants to send that lady a basket of flowers, you know?" She glanced around. "But they weren't so lucky here, huh? I heard about the big cheese."

"They weren't." Dar agreed. "But we've got a lot of other things to worry about too. That's why I asked you to come down here, to see if you could help us out." She turned to face the map. "You up for that?"

"You kidding?" Scuzzi said. "Meeting you in that subway changed my whole freaking life. You want me to do something? Whatever, you know?" She glanced at Kerry. "Sorry, I know that sounds crazy."

Kerry's green eyes twinkled. "I know exactly what you mean." She demurred. "Dar certainly does have that effect on people." She patted her partner on the side. "Let me get back to the conference. Do I take it we get no help from the governor?"

"Jerk." Dar said. "No." She looked at Scuzzi. "But you might be able to help. Here's the deal." She turned to the map, finding the pier with one long finger. "The city's putting in a command center here."

"The pier? That old creaky place?" Scuzzi seemed dubious. "You got to be kidding me, right?"

"Wish I was." Dar said. "They want communications. There's nothing down there, no phone lines, nothing."

"You ain't kidding. I had a cousin used to live under the terminal." The other woman stated. "There ain't nothing but rats under there, I'm telling you."

Dar eyed her. "Nice." She said. "Well, I've got some guys going down there to run a big cable from there, down to the Intrepid. The air museum, where I was going when I met you."

Scuzzi nodded. "Allright."

"Problem is, we have to get it into where we have an office there, and get them to let us connect it up." Dar said. "In the electrical rooms."

"Oh man." Scuzzi made a sound with her mouth like a mouse screaming. "They ain't going to let you in there to do nothing like that. Not those guys down there. They don't 'like nobody messing around down by the docks."

Kerry, who had been listening, now spoke up. "We could pay them to do it." She suggested. "It'd be worth it if that would get it done."

"How many fiber optics technicians you figure work off the side of the Hudson, Ker?" Dar put her hand against the wall and leaned on it. "Who haven't already been sucked down into the financial district?"

"Ah."

"Y'know." Scuzzi had been looking at the map. "I got an uncle I could maybe call." She offered.

Dar's lips twitched. "I was hoping you did."

"He does some business down there, you know?" Scuzzi explained. "He's in real good with those guys. You want me to call him, see if he could maybe help us?"

"I do." Dar went over to the conference table and perched on it's edge. "Scuzzi, we don't mind paying whatever service fees they want, understand? This is important. We have to get the city emergency center up so those people can do what your tax dollars are paying them to do."

"Gotcha." Scuzzi pulled out her cell phone, a bejeweled item with three or four things dangling off the edge of it. "No problem. Lemme see what I can do here, okay?" She moved to one side, and started punching buttons. "Uncle Jazzy Uncle Jazzy where are ya in here..."

Dar folded her arms over her chest and turned her head, giving Kerry a wry look. Kerry merely smiled back at her charmingly, letting her chin rest on her hand. "Got that tea?" Dar finally asked, with a mild grimace. "Or a hammer to hit my head with?"

"Absolutely." Kerry got up and slid her laptop over, handing the ear buds to her partner. "Listen in while I'm out doing your every bidding." She winked at her partner, and ducked past, going to the door and slipping outside into the hallway.

Dar sighed, and put one bud in her ear, doing her best to ignore the cramps that were getting on and stomping all over her last nerve. It was even making the back of her eyeballs ache and she swallowed, feeling a little like she was going to throw up.

Like life wasn't a pain in the ass enough as it was, right?

"Miami exec, you on? This is Miami ops."

Dar clicked the mic. "Miami exec here." She dutifully responded. "Go ahead Mark. How's it going out there?"

"Boss, we're doing pretty good." Mark said. "Specially since a freaking truck just showed up here with linemen from three of the phone companies dumping into that closet. They're in there giving our guys a break now."

Dar managed a smile at that. "Well, I'll be damned." She said. "That is good news." She spared a wistful thought of the bus, and the crew they'd left behind. The two other community buses were here, and parked downstairs but it wasn't the same thing. "Listen, do we have any fiber guys there? I'm going to need one."

"Hold one, boss." Mark clicked off.

Dar was glad enough to remain silent. She checked her watch to see if she could take more painkillers, sighing and rubbing her temples when she realized she couldn't. She turned and looked out the window, finding her eyes drawn to the east, where a dull plume of smoke was still rising between the skyscrapers in the distance.

Sitting here, she realized, she could have seen the whole thing happen. Had the people here wondered if they were next?

Dar sighed, hearing Scuzzi talking at the other end of the room. She got up off the table and sat down in the nearest chair, resisting the urge to put her head down on her arms as the cramping worsened. She focused on Kerry's laptop instead, moving aside the window with her mail to study her desktop background.

It was a picture of a sunset from the boat, she recognized. She vaguely remembered it, a lazy Saturday out on the water that had ended with a freshly caught fish dinner and Kerry leaning back against her on the bow snapping shots of the sky.

Dar could almost smell the salt tang on the air and feel the warmth of Kerry's back pressed against her as she rested her chin on Kerry's shoulder and gently blew in her ear.

"Dar?"

The hand on her shoulder nearly made Dar jump out of her skin. She turned to find Kerry standing there with a faintly concerned look on her face, and a cup of steaming tea. "Ah. Sorry. I zoned out for a minute there." She took the cup and set it down. "Mark's finding us a fiber man."

"You were a million miles away there." Kerry sat down next to her, glancing past at the still talking Scuzzi, who was now pacing back and forth, gesticulating with her free hand. "You okay?"

Dar took a sip of the hot, minty, honey laced beverage. "Not a million miles." She disagreed. "Only about two thousand or so. I was thinking about the day you took that picture." She pointed at the screen. "Wishing I was there again right now."

"Mmm." Kerry settled the ear bud in her ear and gazed at the red orange scene. "That was the day you caught the grouper." She said. "What a gorgeous night that was, too. So many stars. The sky was so clear."

"You found so many loony animals in the sky I ended up tossing you overboard." Dar added, with a grin.

"And I ended up tangled in seaweed half scared out of my mind." Kerry concluded. "I wish I was back there now too."

"Hey, Miami exec? This is Miami ops." Mark came back on. "Found one guy who can do splicing. That what you need?"

"Sounds good, Miami ops. Put him on the train." Kerry answered. "When are you heading up here? We're really short on techs and really heavy on sales folks here."

"Hey, I got him." Scuzzi came back over, and the pace picked up again around them. "He says he's interested in doing business with us, yeah?"

"Great." Dar half turned to face her, catching Alastair entering from the corner of her eye, a frown on his face. "Alastair, get your checkbook ready."

Her boss stopped in mid step, and blinked. "Eh?"

"We need to start doing business here." Dar said. "The old fashioned way." She motioned to Scuzzi. "Meet Scuzzi."

"Hey. How ya doin?" Scuzzi held her hand out. "Nice ta meet ya."

Alastair took her hand automatically, his pale blue gray eyes going wide. "Charmed." He looked over at Dar. "I'm sure?"

His CIO smiled briefly at him. Then the door opened again, and one of the sales staff poked their head in, and a flashing alert went off on Kerry's screen and in the distance, a siren went off.

And it still wasn't time to take more drugs.

**

"Dar." Kerry looked up from her laptop, and across at her visibly miserable partner. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but they're going to need you to go down there." She grimaced in sympathy at Dar's hunched over posture.

"Fuck." Dar had her eyes covered with one hand, having just swallowed a second set of pills. "Why?"

Kerry felt as emotionally miserable as Dar physically was. "They won't let them in the demarc room at the Intrepid. Not even our local people." She got up and circled the table, putting her hands on Dar's shoulders and beginning a gentle massage. "Want me to go? If you tell me what to look for, and I take Dad, maybe we can do it."

"Stupid fucking bastards. What do they think they're going in there for with a three hundred pound spool of fiber optics? Wiring the admirals urinal?"

"Does the admiral have his own urinal?" Kerry returned the wry attempt at humor. "I'll go down there. Let me get some usefulness out of my PMS before I'm as miserable as you are."

Dar sighed. "I'm in hell." She straightened up. "We'll all go down there. If I don't kill someone we can stop by a bar I know near there and get me some alcohol and see if that helps."

"Aw, honey." Kerry kissed the top of her head. "You're making me crazy watching you be so miserable." She wrapped her arms around Dar from behind, resting her cheek against her hair. "I wish I could do something besides ache for you."

"Life sucks." Dar sighed mournfully. "Someone once asked me if I wasn't pissed off I was born a woman instead of a man. I told them - Absolutely. For about four or six hours every god damned month."

Kerry chuckled wryly. "Buy me a beer at that bar?"

"Buy you the bar if you want." Dar gathered herself and stood up. She followed Kerry around to her laptop and waited for her to start to shut it down. Then she came up behind her and wrapped her arms around the blond woman, returning the hug and the emotion behind it. "We get this office up, you and I are going to our hotel, and chilling."

Kerry glanced at her watch. It was almost two PM, and she figured it would be at least two hours before they had an even chance of getting the problem on the river resolved. That would make it four. "We can schedule more stuff from there." She agreed. "And at least get comfortable."

"What have we done to get someone into lower Manhattan?" Dar asked. "That's going to be a lot tougher than fixing this damn office of the mayors."

"I called my contact at ATT." Kerry said. "He's arranged to get us credentials down there. I haven't told him what we're doing. I just said we might be able to help somewhere."

"Mm."

"Well, it's true." Kerry closed her laptop. "Just not how he's going to think of it." She went still, taking a moment to savor the warmth of the body pressed against her back, finding herself rocking gently as Dar did.

How crummy and unbearable it would be if Dar wasn't here, she mused. No matter how lousy they both felt. "I love you." She said, into the silence they were standing in. Dar didn't answer. She just hugged Kerry a little harder and nibbled the edge of one of her ears.

Then they both sighed at the same time, and Dar released her so she could slide her laptop into its case and zip it shut. "Let me call Dad." She took possession of Kerry's phone and opened it, half turning as she heard footsteps outside the door. "Grrr."

"C'mon honey, remember where we are." Kerry murmured. "They've had it really rough."

"Rowr." Dar's eyes narrowed, but she subsided, juggling her phone in one hand as they waited.

The door lock worked, and then it opened, and Alastair came inside, shutting the large wooden panel after him and leaning against it. "Y'know, I could get to not like people after a lot of this." He studied them. "You two off somewhere?"

Dar's brows twitched. "We're going to the emergency office. Try to get the cross-connects done and get those people off our backs at least." She paused, holding the open phone in one hand. "Wanna go with us?"

"Yep." Alastair didn't hesitate even an instant. "One more person calls this office from somewhere in New Jersey and tells me they're down and I'm going to take my Longhorns coffee mug and stick it right up their behind."

Kerry's eyes widened. "Wow."

"I didn't think so many people these days didn't read the newspaper. Or watch the evening news. Or have CNN in their houses. Or lived in such a bubble." Alastair said. "I simply don't understand it. The farriers on my damn ranch know more about what's going on in the world than some of these folks."

"You mean, they really didn't know what happened?" Kerry asked, in an incredulous tone.

"Apparently not." Alastair sighed.

"C'mon." Dar was at least glad for this startling distraction to her cramps. "I think you could use a beer too." She indicated the door as she put the phone to her ear. "Let's get out of here for a while. I need some fresh air." She paused. "Hey dad. Meet you downstairs?"

"Air." Alastair agreed, waiting for them to exit and following along. "Don't much care if it's fresh or not at this point."

Dar hung up as they got to the elevator, pausing to exchange a brief smile with the receptionist. "Sorry if I startled you earlier." She apologized. "It's been that kind of day."

"Oh." The woman smiled back. "Actually, what you did was really cool." She said. "And I forgot to say thanks."

"What did you do?" Alastair asked, as the doors slid open.

"Told a customer to kiss my ass." Dar entered the elevator and impatiently waited for them to follow before she punched the door button. "Dad's downstairs at the bus."

"Ah."

Kerry leaned against the back wall of the elevator, swallowing a little as it descended and she felt the familiar pressure against her inner ears. It reminded her of their last diving trip on the boat, where Dar had taken the Dixie out deep to a wreck in nearly 140 feet of water.

They had descended in the blue, clear water until the wreck had morphed out of the depths, half on its side, filled with ghostly schools of fish robbed of their brilliance by the depth.

Gorgeous and spooky, startling when a huge grouper came nosing around from the gloom around the wreck, and reeking with mystery they could only barely get a few minutes look at. The loneliness of the wreck's position, settled in its bed of white sand had triggered her poetic side and she'd thought about the site frequently since.

What story was behind it, she mused.

"Ker?"

"Huh?" Kerry looked up, to find the elevator doors open and her partner gazing back at her with mild bemusement. "Oh. Sorry." She pushed off the back wall and scooted out of the car, feeling a little embarrassed. "Daydreaming."

Dar patted her on the back as they walked across the huge lobby and out the side door, where a large parking area complete with two of their buses were to be found. There were a few people around them including Andrew, and they walked quickly across the lot to join him.

"Hamilton's gone down to represent us at the big shindig." Alastair commented. "I figured it wouldn't do for me to be showing the flag there with all this stuff yet to be done."

Dar gave him a wry look.

"Glad I'm not trying to fly out of here today." Kerry muttered. "I'd be stuck on the tarmac at Laguardia until the circus leaves town."

Alastair gave **her** a wry look.

"Kerry had an unfortunate ground hold the last time the president was in Miami." Dar explained. "She got stuck in a 737 in the middle of July for six hours with no air conditioning. It made an impression."

"I can still smell the inside of that airplane, matter of fact." Kerry said. "Closest I ever came to going postal in public"

Alastair grimaced "That does sound painful." He dredged a smile up as they arrived at the bus, and people turned to greet them. "Hello, folks. How's everyone doing?"

"Lo there" Andrew cocked his head and regarded Kerry and Dar. "How are you kids doing?"

"I've been better." Dar didn't bother to dissemble. "Let's get a cab and get down to the pier. The faster we do that, the faster Alastair can go preen for the press."

"Well, hey." Her boss turned around, startled. "I didn't mean you should go make me into a hero, Dar. For Pete's sake!"

"Don't worry about it." Kerry whispered to him. "She's just in a really bad mood."

Alastair frowned. "I'm in a really bad mood too." He said. "Should I say mean things?"

"If you want to." Kerry exhaled, blinking into the cool air. "I don't think she meant to be mean. It's just been a long couple of days and she doesn't feel well."

Alastair grumbled under his breath, but kept his comments to himself and stuck his hands in the pockets of his khaki pants instead.

"C'mon then." Andrew pointed to the curb. "Dardar said you all's got some folks down at the flattop giving you a hassle?" He asked Kerry, as they steered between the buses and headed for the road. "What's that all about?"

Dar hailed a cab and they got into what was fortunately one of the mini van versions. "I need to go to the Air Space museum, please." She said, crisply.

"S'closed, lady." The man said.

"I know. I need to go there anyway." Dar told him. "It's business. We don't want a tour."

The driver took off without another word, pulling into the traffic stream with a typically supreme lack of regard for anything including other cars and his own safety.

"What's that all about." Kerry sighed. "Well, see, they decided to put the new emergency response center down at the pier, Pier 92 I think Dar said."

"All right." Andrew's brows knit a little. "Seems like a funny place to put something like that, ain't it?"

"Well." Kerry's lips twitched. "I have to say if I was thinking of doing an emergency center in Miami, that port we were in is the last place I'd pick but I'm sure they have their reasons. Anyway, they need things to connect and the only place we have something close enough that's got a good link to our systems is at the Intrepid."

Dar let her head rest against the window, wishing fervently she was several thousand miles away in a quiet, dark room, with a cup of hot chocolate and nothing more to do than read a magazine. She didn't really feel like making the effort to get out of the cab and get involved in all the chaos she knew she would have to and for once, didn't mind the traffic making it take longer to get somewhere.

She let Kerry's quiet voice go past her, not really hearing the words or the answers to them, aware only of the warmth of Kerry's fingers curled around her hand, her thumb idly rubbing against Dar's knuckle in absent caress.

Kerry probably didn't even realize she was doing it. Dar remembered when they first started dating, when Kerry was so very self conscious about touching Dar in public – though she'd never been in private.

Now, it was second nature to her, and to be honest, second nature to Dar as well. She liked the warmth of the touch and the affection in the gentle squeezing. It soothed her ragged temper a little, and allowed her to put aside her discomfort in favor of this tiny bit of physical pleasure.

Outside the window, the city moved past. Though traffic was heavy, she noticed the frenetic pace of the cars seemed subdued, and the people on the streets were as well. Men and women were gathered around storefronts, talking. There were few trucks on the road.

They passed a crossroad, and she watched two men simply standing, looking at each other in front of a subway entrance, seemingly frozen in place. A woman was sitting in front of them on the edge of the road, her feet resting on the tar surface itself, her arms wrapped around her knees.

In her hand, she clutched a sheaf of papers. Dar could see something square on them that looked like a picture, but she was struck by the expression on the woman's face, which was dull, and lost and so full of grief it was hard to look at.

It brought back to her, suddenly, what had happened a few days prior, and she felt small thinking about how she'd been bitching to herself only a minute ago and wanting to be somewhere else.

"Dar?"

"Hm?" Dar turned her head and regarded Kerry's face. "Sorry. I was just thinking of something else."

"I just got a message from my contact at AT&T. They've got credentials for us. He's dropping them by the office." Kerry glanced behind her, as Dar did the same. They looked at each other, then Kerry shrugged a little. "For what it's worth."

"We'll use them." Dar settled back as they started moving faster, heading across town towards the Hudson River. "Okay." She said. "Did we get a handle on what the roadblock is at the Intrepid? Are we running into labor issues already, or is it something security related?"

Kerry's eyes looked apologetic. "Sorry, don't know." She said. "All they said was it wasn't working."

"All right." Dar rested her elbow on her knee. "Then we'll get it working."

"One way or t'other." Andrew remarked, from his seat behind them. "Let's get this here show on the road. I've bout had enough of people fussing."

"You got that right." Alastair agreed. "It's time to get things rolling."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances, and Kerry leaned closer, lowering her voice. "We're the only ones who are actually going to do anything, aren't we?"

Dar chuckled dryly, and shook her head. "Guess we'll find out."

**

Security around the Intrepid was heavy. Kerry edged to one side as they got out of the taxi, seeing a line of National Guard in front of the entrance to the Museum. There were also large orange traffic barrels blocking any vehicle access and to the right hand side, she could see the ramp that led up to the pier entrances sealed by yet more guard vehicles. "Wow."

Dar settled her backpack onto her back and cinched the straps a little tighter. She paused to study the front of the structure, spotting a cluster of vehicles and a barrier that was surrounded by people. "Over there." She started for the spot, quickly joined by Kerry as her father and Alastair trailed a little behind them.

Scuzzy was there, and she spotted them as they approached. "Oh, hey." She called out. "Now we're talking."

Dar kept walking towards her and the guardsmen who were gathered around turned to watch them approach. She had about ten steps to decide on her approach, and with the cramps and her exhaustion, she decided on mellow just as she reached Scuzzy's side. "Good afternoon, gentlemen" She greeted the guards courteously. "Sorry we're causing a commotion."

The guard nearest her, apparently in charge, had opened his mouth to respond, his body tense and shoulders squared off, but blinked and paused at her words.

Dar smiled at him, cocking her head slightly as she stuck her thumbs in the straps holding her backpack on and shifted her own posture. "I know you've got a big load on your shoulders here. I don't want to add to it. What can we do so I can provide what you need to let me do what I have to do?"

Kerry merely stood there, her hand on the strap of her briefcase looped over her shoulder, as she watched her partner use one of her rarest strategies, her innate charm. She often wondered why Dar didn't use it more often, since it was compelling and irresistible, and she wasn't just saying that because they were lovers.

She could see the man wavering, in fact. He'd been all set to respond to anger, to aggression, to a yelling civilian out to make his life miserable, and faced with that gentle smile and those pretty blue eyes he had no idea how to get the adrenaline out of the way of his testosterone fast enough to respond.

She understood. In the few times they argued, more often than not it was that charm that made her anger evaporate no matter which one of them won or lost the fight and even now, Kerry felt herself responding to it, her body relaxing and a smile edging her lips as she watched Dar's face.

"Well." The man said. "This is a secure area."

Dar nodded. "I'm sure it is. That flat top's a big target, and there's a lot of history both inside and on her decks. No one wants anything to happen to it." She went on. "I don't want anything to happen to it."

"Okay." The man leaned back against the truck blocking the entrance. The other guardsmen also relaxed, moving their guns down and turning aside a little as it became apparent these civilians were not about to physically storm the barrier. "So what is it exactly you people need to do? This lady here was explaining it but it didn't make any sense to me."

Scuzzy frowned. Kerry winked at her, and gave the waiting, grubby looking techs a smile. "Why don't you guys go relax for a few minutes over there. I think they have sodas over at that hot dog stand on the corner."

"Thanks, ma'am. Great idea." The taller one said. "It's like a nightmare under those piers running this stuff." He turned and pointed at the big spool of rubber coated wire, the strand a full two inches wide. It trailed back behind them, snaking across the ground and underneath the rampway towards the depths of the inner pier structure. "I live here, but man, I saw rats bigger than my brother under that thing."

"I'm up for lunch too." Scuzzy said. "C'mon you guys. I'll buying." She tilted her head in Dar and Kerry's direction. "You want something?"

"We're fine for now, thanks." Kerry answered for both of them. "But the next round we're having after this I'm buying."

Scuzzy grinned. "You got it." She jerked her head at the two techs.

They set their gloves on the top of the spool and trotted quickly to the nearby crossing light, waiting for it to change before they headed across towards the pushcart vendor.

"Well, it's like this." Dar half turned and pointed over towards the pier. "The Mayor decided to put his new emergency management office in that building over there."

The soldier nodded. "Yeah, we know. They've been coming back and forth and going crazy over there since yesterday. Trucks full of stuff." He said. "What's that got to do with you and this thing?" He thrust his thumb behind him, towards the Intrepid.

"It's the closest place I can connect the Mayor's new office to so they can have computers and phones." Dar explained. "I have a connection in there, because we run all the IT for the gift shop, and the museum."

The guard thought about that. "Oh." He said. "So you want to run that cable in there for the mayor?" He turned and looked up the ramp, where the entire top was filled with official looking cars. "How come no one just said so? For pete's sake."

"Well, you know it's pretty crazy for them up there." Dar regained his attention. "Just like it is for you, and for us too. It's hard to keep track of everything that's going on, but we just want to get them connected, so they can work. We have identification."

Kerry glanced at her partner, wondering if she was forgetting that she, in fact, did not.

The guard nodded. "Okay, I need to get my lieutenant here to sign off on it, let me radio him and have him come up. Sorry to have caused you some heartache, ma'am, but I know you understand what's going on here."

"I do." Dar kept eye contact, and injected a good dose of sincerity into her tone. "We'll just move over here and wait, and you let us know when you're ready." She held her hand out. "Thanks."

The man took her hand and they exchanged clasps. "Can I get your name?" He asked. "Lieutenant's going to ask. They probably need to run a check."

"Sure." Dar motioned Kerry forward. "I'm Dar Roberts, and this is Kerry Stuart. We're with ILS."

The man scribbled down the names. "And those guys?" He indicated the bemusedly watching Andrew and Alistair.

"We're just footmen." Alistair spoke up, in a mild tone. "We came to help move that big round thing."

Andrew chuckled, and handed the man a bit of pasteboard card. "Thar." He said. "Ya'll don't don't half understand me when I talk up here anyhow."

Thus prompted, Alastair handed over his own business card. The guard took it and tucked it into his clipboard, then he moved over to the truck and stuck his head inside, picking up a radio mic and talking into it.

They walked over to the spool and sat down on it, the techs having laid it flat on the ground to keep it from rolling anywhere. "Dar." Alastair peered over at her. "How come you never talk nice to me like that?"

"You don't have a gun." Dar responded, deadpan. "Besides, with how I feel right now it was either be nice, or pick up that pipe and end up getting arrested. I figured nice was more productive." She rested her hands on the edge of the wooden spool and sighed.

Alastair was facing the pier, watching all the activity. "So." He said. "We roll this big thing inside the aircraft carrier, then what? "

"Then we hope the fiber tech coming here by train gets his ass here in time to terminate it to a patch panel I have no idea if we have inside, with connectors I don't know he has with him and we can't get at your average hardware store or Radio Shack, and then connect that patch panel to another patch panel with cables that don't exist yet."

"Ah."

"Sounds like a Navy kinda plan." Andrew commented, with a faint chuckle under his breath. "Good to be out of that damn office though."

"Amen." Alastair said. "Is there anything we can do to fix any of those variables, Dar? Someplace we can get those things while you're charming the fatigues off all the boys?"

Dar turned her head and looked at Kerry. "Did we source those yet?"

Kerry checked her PDA, scrolling through messages with a flicker of the LCD. "Ah." She tapped on one and read it. "Yes, we did. We found a place that can make the patch cables, and has the bits and pieces for the patch panel." She tilted the device so Andrew could see it, as he pulled a half pencil from his shirt pocket and wrote down the address on the back of one of his cards.

Alastair craned his neck to watch. "Where is that? Long Island?"

"Yes." Kerry agreed. "It's nowhere close. I'd better send one of our guys for it so.."

"Ah. Ah ah." Alastair stood up. "Good grief. I'm the CEO of the biggest tech company on the planet. Don't you think I can find Long Island?" He motioned Andrew to stand up. "C'mon, Daddy Roberts. Let's go find us some bits and parts."

"All right." Andrew agreed. "Dar, you be all right here? I think these fellers are going to be okay."

"We'll be fine." Dar assured him. "Thanks for taking care of that for us. Sooner it gets here, sooner we can get this connected." She watched her father and boss walk off, heading for the corner to hail a cab. "Why do I feel nervous all of a sudden?"

Kerry leaned her head against Dar's shoulder. "Honey, I'm sure they can handle this." She exhaled. "Besides, we really need the stuff. I sent a list to the vendor, and he said he had it, but he didn't deliver and wasn't about to start."

"Nice."

"Can't really blame him." Kerry kicked her feet out a little. "We're not really local here. He didn't know me from Adam."

"With your voice, if he didn't know you from Adam I'm scared to be buying fiber from him." Dar remarked dryly. "Okay, here comes our boy. Let's see where this gets us." She got up as the two men approached.

The lieutenant was an older man, with grizzled gray hair and stocky body. He looked tired and harassed, which put him in league with everyone else in the city, she reckoned. "Lieutenant. Thank you for coming to talk with us."

The man nodded briefly. "Ms. Roberts, I've had a call from the mayor's office. We'll give you the access and anything else you might need. Sorry to hold you up. Everything's crazy here." He glanced at the pier. "I don't know what the hell's going on."

The other guard looked somber, and apologetic.

"Please. Don't apologize, we know how stressed everyone must be." Kerry picked up the conversational ball. "We appreciate that you took the time to get everything sorted out. Is it okay for us to proceed now? I'll get my guys back from the hot dog stand."

"Sure." The lieutenant said. "John, give these folks an escort back to where they need to be, and a few hands to help moving whatever this is." He gestured to the spool. "Ladies, have a good day." He turned and walked off. After an awkward moment, the other guard hurried after him, leaving Dar and Kerry alone with their spool again.

"Well." Kerry exhaled. "That was easier than I thought it would be. Want me to go get the gang?"

"Sure." Dar said. "I'll just sit here and wish I was under a bus."

Kerry stroked her arm. Dar's face was a little pale, and she could see her biting the inside of her lip. "Honey, why don't you go to the hotel. I can handle this." She urged. "C'mon. You look like hell. It makes no sense for you to sit here and suffer. Go relax and get a heating pad or something."

Dar paused, then looked mournfully at her. "I can't." She tilted her head and indicated the returning techs. "My macha won't let me. C'mon." She got up as the techs approached. "All right, folks. Let's get this rig rolling. They're letting us in."

"Your macha can kiss my ass." Kerry growled, earning her a raised eyebrow look from her partner. "I should have made your dad take you back to the hotel."

"Hey, good deal!" Scuzzy said. "You knew how to talk to those guys for sure, Dar from Miami."

The techs put their shoulders to the spool and got it upright, then pulled their gloves back on. They started rolling the spool carefully, laying out the fiber wire behind them as they maneuvered down the slight incline to where the entrance to the museum was.

The guardsmen drew the barricades aside and two of them came over. "Can we help?" The first one asked, a tall blond with a scar across his mouth. "Where you going?"

The techs looked at Dar in question. "That way." She indicated a tight path around one edge. "Down that ramp, between those two posts, and then stop by that second hatch panel." She stood back as the guard and the techs wrestled the spool of wire forward. "What was that about my macha?" She asked Kerry.

Kerry stuck her tongue out.

They followed the techs down the ramp and through the truck barricades, past the visitor entrance down to the walkway alongside where the big carrier was anchored. It was quieter here, since the museum was closed, and the sound of the Hudson lapping against the old pier was much louder.

It smelled rank. Kerry's nose wrinkled, as she glanced past the pier towards the shores of New Jersey. Above that, she could also smell the scent of iron, and grease and sun warmed metal, and they stopped just before a big metal housing from which extended thick black cables that ran into a hatch onboard the ship.

Dar studied it. "We need to figure how much we're going to need in slack, and cut it." She said. "That spool can't fit in the hatch."

The techs straightened up, and peered at the ship uncertainly. "Wow." The younger one sighed. "Didn't bring my measuring tape."

Dar ducked to one side and looked, trying to measure with her eyes. She shook her head. "Need to extend inside too." She headed for the lower gangway, which was chained off and led to an open shell door in the ship's side. "Let's see for how long."

After a quick look around, Kerry followed her, and after a moment, the rest of them did too. They waited for Dar to unlatch the chain and let it fall, then they all trooped across the gangway, its surface flexing under their weight as they made for the entrance.

Dar didn't hesitate. She stepped over the edge of the shell door and entered the ship, ducking inside the next watertight door and into a larger open space.

Kerry got a flashback, suddenly, to the cruise ship. It had the same smell of age and old oil and she rubbed her nose as she carefully stepped over the door sill and followed Dar into the shadows. She found herself in a narrow hallway and spotted Dar ahead of her, sticking her head into an open doorway. "Dar?"

"In here." Dar squirmed into another compartment, this one admitting some light from outside. Kerry poked her head in, and saw the cables running in the opening. "Oh. That's the hole from outside."

"Uh huh." Dar turned and followed the cables to a pipe on the far wall, and tipped her head up. "Oh crap. I forgot it was two decks up."

Kerry looked up at the pipe, aware of the techs behind her. "Hang on guys, Dar's tracing the cable path."

"Dar's wishing she was curled up in a ball in the bilge, actually." Her partner sighed. She went to the pipe and stuck her hand in it, then pulled it out and studied her extended fingers. "Might have space." She muttered. "Okay, we need to find either a thin cable, or stiff rope."

"Okay." Kerry backed up so the techs could hear. "Did you get that, guys? We need some cable – I guess Dar wants it for a pullstring."

"Got a spool of Ethernet in the truck." The nearer tech offered. "That work?"

"Perfect." Dar's head appeared from around the doorway. "Get it, and I'll show you where the demarc room is. We can run a pull cable down here, and pull the fiber up once we get it across from the pier. Ker, while they do that, let's see if we can find a hank of rope."

"Rope. You got it." Kerry backed up so Dar could exit the space and then followed her as she started a methodical exploration of the pretty much deserted ship. They moved out of the tightly confined hallway and into a bigger space, with a tall ceiling that spanned the interior of the ship. "Wow."

"Hanger deck." Dar interpreted the exclamation. "Watch your step. There might be tie downs on the decking."

"Aye Aye, Captain Dar." Kerry shifted so she was walking in Dar's footsteps and put a hand out, hooking one finger on her partner's belt loop. "Did Dad sail on one of these?"

"He did." Dar answered, as she wandered around the big space, peeking behind boxes. "C'mon, they have to have a damn coil of rope in here. Who the hell heard of a Navy ship without rope?"

"What about over there?" Kerry pointed to something vaguely circular on the wall. "Is that rope?"

They walked over to the wall and looked up. On the metal surface was a hook, and from the hook a coil of thick rope was coiled, with a float fastened on one end. "Perfect." Dar complimented her partner, then for good measure, she turned and kissed her on the lips. "Absolutely perfect."

Kerry rested her hands on Dar's hips, gazing up into her eyes. After a long pause, they kissed again. "This has to be one of the last places on earth I'd ever expect to be doing this." She admitted, when they paused for breath. "But y'know, it's kinda sexy."

Dar's eyes took on a twinkle in the half light. "Sure is. Making my cramps feel better too."

They rubbed noses, then reluctantly parted, as Dar turned to face the wall and started to take the rope down. "However, business first."

"Pfft."

**

Kerry's cell phone rang, sounding loud and jarring against the steel she was surrounded by. With a muffled curse, she pulled it out with her free hand and flipped it open, putting it to her ear as she squirmed around into a marginally better position. "Hello?"

"Kerry? This is your mother."

Kerry blinked at the steel wall inches from her face. "Oh. Hi." She said. "Where are you?"

"I have just returned home. Are you terribly occupied? I was wondering how things were going for you there."

How were things going. Kerry felt the cold surface chilling her back through her shirt. "Well." She grimaced as the edge of the pipe she had her arm extended up into bit into her skin. "We're making some progress."

"Are you? Wonderful. Where are you now?"

Kerry heard a curse echo softly down the interior of the pipe. "Lying on my back on the deck of a decommissioned aircraft carrier with my arm shoved up a pipe covered in axel grease." She responded with complete honesty. "You?"

Absolute silence. Kerry wiggled the tips of her fingers in the vain hope of feeling a bit of cable impacting them. Above her, through the pipe's metal confines she could hear Dar cursing, the soft grunts traveling down with wry accuracy to her ears.

"I don't understand." Cynthia finally said. "What exactly are you doing?"

"Well." Kerry squirmed a little and extended her fingers a bit more. "It's a long story. I'm helping hook up the emergency management office for the City of New York. In a really material way."

"Ah. I see."

"Ker?" Dar called down. "Anything?"

Kerry stretched and wiggled, closing her eyes as she wished the end of a cable probe into her hand. After a moment, she relaxed. "Sorry hon, no." She called back. "Not a damn thing."

"Shit."

Kerry returned her attention to the phone. "How are things there?" She asked. "Since they're sort of crummy here?"

Her mother sighed. "I'm very disturbed. That's why I decided to call you. When I got here, one of my aides informed me that we have had several incidents of people being beaten."

"Beaten?"

"For being.. .well, I suppose they were thought to be from abroad."

Kerry heard footsteps and she turned her head, to see Dar's tall body slipping into her torture chamber. "Hey." She said. "Say hello to my mother."

"Hello Kerry's mother." Dar dropped down into a crouch. "Listen. There's something in the middle of that damn pipe that's stopping the probe. I can't get it to go any further."

"Hang on mother." Kerry put the phone on her chest. "So what's the plan?" She watched Dar's face, which had liberal streaks of grime on it. "Is there any way to clear whatever the obstruction is? Can you get inside the pipe anywhere?"

"I can." Dar said. "But it means I've got a good chance of ripping up what ever else's in there. I think it's a damn cable tie that's blocking it."

"A cable tie???"

"Yeah." Dar sat down and braced her elbows against her knees, grimacing. "I feel like such crap."

Kerry gazed compassionately at her. "I wish I could give you a hug, hon, but I don't think this axle grease being all over you is going to make you feel any better." She put the phone back to her ear. "Sorry, mother. Did you say someone was attacked?"

"I can see you're very busy Kerry. I will be glad to fill you in later, if you want. Please go take care of poor Dar. She sounds terrible." Her mother said. "I have another call to take, so we can speak later."

"Okay. I'll call you when I'm somewhere more comfortable." Kerry promised. "Goodbye." She closed the phone and clipped it back on her pocket to free her hand, which she then put on Dar's leg. "Cable tie?"

"Yeah." Dar repeated, gazing at her dirt covered hands glumly. "One of the big half inch ones, turned sideways."

Kerry pictured it and made a face. "How in the hell do we get past that? Why the hell would someone put it in there, anyway?"

"Figured nothing else would need to go in the pipe I guess, or it twisted.. who the hell knows." Dar sighed. "Maybe if I can find a rod long enough, I can put some kind of edge on it and cut through it." She blinked a few times. "I tried to find an outside hatch or something.. anything, to bring the cable through somewhere else but I couldn't."

Kerry eased her arm out of the pipe, her skin covered in black goo. She sat up and flexed her fingers, looking around with a vague sense of despair. The light was just a bare fluorescent fixture, a pale, dim glare that hurt her eyes and made the metal space even more depressing. "Dar, I'm sorry."

"For what?" Tired blue eyes regarded her.

"Sorry I can't just make this better." Kerry admitted. "Sorry we're here. Sorry we can't just leave and go rest."

"Me too." Dar agreed. She rested in silence a moment more, then she started hauling herself to her feet. "Jason?" She called into the hallway. "You back?"

"Yes, ma'am." One of the techs appeared immediately. "We measured the rope you threw over to the pier, and we've got enough cable, ma'am. You want me to tie the end of the rope to the end of the fiber? John found a hardware store too, so he's going to go get some flexible ducting."

Dar paused, one hand on the metal doorsill. "He found a hardware store near here?"

Jason nodded his tow, curly head. "Little place. Not like a Home Depot or anything, but they got stuff." He glanced over at Kerry who was carefully keeping her greased up forearm away from her clothing. "Wow. That looks gross." He blurted, then looked abashed. "Sorry ma'am."

"It does look gross." Kerry agreed. "I feel like a plumber on a bad day."

"Jason." Dar spoke, suddenly, her eyes a trifle unfocused. "Tell John to get to that hardware store. Get a metal rod, long as he can find, and a stick soldering iron, the narrowest one they have. Plus a spool of metal wire."

"Uh." Jason pulled a small pad out of the back pocket of his khakis and started scribbling on it. "A metal rod, ma'am? How big?"

"Half inch. If they don't have rods, get the narrowest conduit they have." Dar said. "Eight or twelve foot length if you can get it."

"Gotcha, ma'am." Jason nodded. "And you want a soldering iron?"

"A soldering iron." Dar confirmed. "And a 16 or 14 gauge extension cord at least twenty five feet long. Got that?" She asked. "And a bar of soap."

"Got it." Jason trotted off. "Not sure what I got, but we'll get it. Be right back."

Dar went to the open hatch and perched on the edge, taking in a breath of diesel tinged brackish water air, letting her hand drop to rest on the coil of rope. She glanced up as Kerry came over to join her. "Ugh."

"Ugh." Kerry sorted through Dar's hair, pulling it out from under her collar and riffling it in the light breeze coming through the hatch. Looking up the river this way, everything looked so normal. She could see the other piers, all old and rusted, and the buzz of activity on the rooftop parking of the furthest one down that was the emergency center.

A few small boats moved quietly past, police boats, with slowly flashing lights. They were too far away to see the two figures in the opening, but they cruised past, obviously watchful. In the distance, the air was hazy and from the right she could hear the sounds of the city in a muted way.

Jason finished tying the rope to the cable, and waved at them. He stood by the spool, and started unwinding it as Dar sighed and stood up again, taking hold of the rope and starting to haul it in. "Watch it."

Kerry took a step back, holding her grease covered arm out to one side and out of the way. "Want more Advil?"

"Yes." Dar stolidly coiled the rope as it came in, making a neat circle on the deck. "Please."

With a nod, Kerry turned and headed out of the small space, glad herself to take a break and stretch her legs. She moved down the hallway and into the hangar deck again, aware of the slowly fading light as the sun edged towards the west and left the outside in a haze of blue.

She entered the small office like room they'd stored their bags and gear in. It had a desk against the wall, and filing cabinets on either side. The furniture was functional but plain, and there were banners on the wall celebrating the many functions and trials the Intrepid had gone through.

"Ugh." Kerry paused, as she remembered not to touch her bag with her right hand. She opened the latches with her left, and fished inside the leather sack, finding her bottle of Advil and pulling it out. She removed her bottle of water along with it, and latched the bag shut again, turning to head back out of the room.

Her cell phone rang. She almost reached for it, then stopped again, and cursed. "Son of a.." She went back to the desk and put the bottles down, then grabbed the phone. "Kerry Stuart."

"Hey, Kerry. It's Mark."

Could be good, could be bad. "Hey, Mark. What's up?" Kerry sat down on the edge of the desk. "We're making some progress here in case anyone's asking on the call." She wrinkled her nose at the smell of the axle grease.

"They found our two guys here."

Kerry felt her own breathing stop. The tone of Mark's voice held more explanation than any words could have, and she bit the inside of her lip, feeling a deep pang of loss for these unknown to her techs that had, at some level, traced up an org chart to her name. "I see."

"They were in that part that got hit." Mark added, after a moment's silence. "About all they could identify were their badges."

Oh my god. "I'm sorry, Mark. Did you know them well?" Kerry wasn't really sure of what to say, or really, of what she was saying, It sounded just like random words.

"I didn't. The guys here did though." Mark sounded somber. "Danny's pretty trashed. I sent them off to hang out for a while. My guys are handling the stuff."

Kerry exhaled heavily. "Okay." She said. "Have you told Mariana yet?"

"No. Called you first."

Only right. "Send me their names." Kerry said. "I'll call her. We'll get the process started." She felt profoundly sad. 'And contact their families.'

"Okay. Will do." Mark said. "Sorry to bring such totally suckage news. Stuff's going pretty good here otherwise. We got a few more circuits in. Those telco guys really helped."

"Good." Kerry murmured. "Glad to hear that, anyway. Let me get hold of Mari so she can get the ball rolling. I know she was sending some people here to talk to the staff, I want to make sure she sends some folks there too."

"Okay boss." Mark said. "Talk to you later."

Kerry closed her phone and simply sat there for a few minutes. The senselessness of it all overwhelmed her, and she closed her eyes, sparing a bit of her soul and thinking of the split second of terror and heat and pain the techs must have suffered.

There was no sound, no indication of any one approaching, but Kerry was suddenly aware of Dar's close presence, and she opened her eyes just as her partner's hand touched her cheek and she looked up at her in question.

"Had a feeling you needed me." Dar said bluntly. 'What's wrong?'

Kerry leaned against her touch. "Humanity." She answered. "I think the whole fucking species sometimes is just one big screw up."

Dar ignored her grease covered arm and settled against her anyway, putting an arm around her shoulders and pulling her close. "Present company excluded."

Kerry turned and buried her face against Dar's shoulder, allowing herself that little time out before the nightmare continued to roll on.

**

Andrew studied the small bit of cardboard in his hand as he maneuvered down a steep set of stairs bracketed by old fashioned brass railing. He got to the bottom of the steps and was pleased to find a train waiting, it's doors open. "Figure that's the one."

"You're probably right." Alastair agreed. "And with the bridges and tunnels still tied up, this is the fastest way to get where we need to be. Damn nice to have rapid transit that's both, isn't it?"

Andrew made a low grunting sound. He led the way into the train and they found a couple of seats near the front, with enough room for Andrew's long legs and got themselves settled. "Hope them kids are getting on all right." He said.

Alastair folded his hands over his stomach. "You know, I don't think of them as kids."

"You ain't their father."

"That's very true." The ILS CEO admitted. "I've got my own handful back home, but I'll tell you what, they're nothing compared to yours."

Andrew chuckled and sat back, tapping his thumbs together in front of him. "How many you got?"

"Threee." Alastair responded promptly. "Two girls and a boy. Two of them are married, and I've got three grandkids." He glanced at his traveling companion. "I think Dar said she was an only child?"

One grizzled eyebrow twitched, as Andrew peered back at him. "Ah do believe that one was sufficient." He paused, as the doors closed, and the train prepared to leave the station. "Though mah wife and I did think about another, it was tough on her."

"Ah." Alastair nodded. "My daughter had trouble with her first. He was born breech."

"Wall." Andy glanced out the window as the train moved through the underground tunnels that burrowed into Manhattan island and into Penn station. "Dar came right way round, but wasn't no small baby and mah wife ain't big." He glanced down at his long legs. "I do believe that's likely mah fault."

"Dar does take after you, no doubt." Alastair agreed. "Spitting image, matter of fact. I remember meeting you the first time and being struck by that." His PDA chirped, and he removed it from his pocket, opening it to review. "Excuse me."

Andrew was content to turn his head and watch the windows change from underground darkness to the late afternoon light. He was glad they were off doing something useful, though it was possible they could have done some good back at the flattop.

He pulled the list of things from his pocket and studied them again. They appeared to be something like electrical parts to him but he figured Dar certainly knew what she was looking for. He watched the landscape go by for a moment more, then he removed his cell phone from his pocket and opened it.

There were only a few numbers in the speed dial, and he selected one and keyed it in, putting the phone to his ear and waiting for it to be answered. "Lo there."

"Ah, my husband." Ceci replied. "Where are you?"

"Nother damn train." Andrew said. "Goin out to get Dar some special cables and some such. What are you up to?"

"Well." Ceci said. "Believe it or not, my family called to find out either if we were all right, or if we were part of the insurrection, hard to say. My sister sends her regards."

Andrew made a slightly snorting noise.

"Well, she does." His wife responded mildly. "How's Dar and Kerry doing?"

"Them kids are having a time." Andrew said. "Ah don't think Dar's feeling well, and ever'body's chewing a piece of them all over. Makes mah eyeballs itch." He grumbled. "People here are pretty shook up though. Bad stuff."

"I saw on TV." Ceci murmured. "Andy, you stay away from that place, okay? They've still got buildings falling down around everywhere and I don't want you near any of them."

"No problem." Andrew said. "Right now me and th... Dar's boss are on this here train heading for Long Island. Ain't nothing keeling over out there, and Dar's over at that old flattop off the Hudson fussing with them bolts and nuts there."

Ceci chuckled wryly. "No matter what the situation, she ends up with the Navy."

"Eh." Her husband smiled briefly. "Got salt water in her even if she didn't end up no swab." There was something of that he was happy with. The sea had been a passion of his since the first time he'd seen it, opening wide in front of him after an eternally long two months in basic training up at Great Lakes.

Huge. Beautiful. Full of deep greens and blues and rich with salt like nothing ever before in his life had been back in Alabama. He'd loved everything about it, even the rough motion in weather, and the agonizingly small amount of space he'd been assigned for someone his size.

Finding his daughter with the same love in her heart had charmed him and some of the best times when Dar was growing up had centered around the beach, and the sea and the underwater world they all shared.

"She certainly does." Ceci interrupted his musing. "But that's not helping her there now. Anything we can do from here? Can I use my nonexistent family influence and insult someone for her? Browbeat some government official? Offer to paint the president in the nude? Wait. Scratch that one."

Andrew chuckled in reflex. "Y'all do say the damnedest things."

"It's hard being here and just watching." Ceci admitted. "At least you're there on trains getting gizmos. All I can do here is watch CNN and try to imagine what scandal Miami'll be involved in next in this whole thing. You know that airport Dar landed in was where all those terrorists trained in."

"Ah heard."

"I feel like they're going to close the border at Orlando."

Andy chuckled again. "You just keep your head down there on Dar's island. We'll fix this joint up best we can and head back soon as we're able." He promised. "Got to go now. Ah think this train's fixing to tunnel again."

"Call me back later, sailor boy."

"Yes' ma'am. G'bye." Andrew shut the phone and leaned back, tapping it against his knee as his brow furrowed into a frown. "Know what?" He addressed Alastair. "This here world surely does suck sometimes."

Alastair looked up from his PDA. "Sure does." He answered after a brief pause. "Wish we could just find another one sometimes."

**

Kerry removed the contents of the brown paper bag and set them down on the piece of metal wall near where Dar was working. They were up on the second level now, in the space where the cable would have to come up.

There was no opening in the space save the small oval door hatches, and it was close inside, full of the scent of grease and silicon. Against one wall was a large patch cabinet, painted to match the inside of the ship with thick coats of paint. The door to it was open, exposing a plethora of connections, and there was already a shunt opened in the side to receive the new cable.

Dar was standing near the wall where the pipe emerged, a long piece of thin conduit in her hand, and a soldering iron in the other. "Let's see."

Kerry set out the various supplies, glad she'd taken the time to go and get most of the grease off her skin so it wasn't getting all over the place. She could still smell it though, and cast a brief, wistful thought towards a nice long shower with lots of soap to scrub with.

Dar leaned the pipe against the wall and concentrated on the soldering iron, using a tiny screwdriver from the tech's tool kit to unfasten the plastic grip and remove it. She experimentally fit it into the end of the pipe, glancing up as Jason stuck his head in the hatchway. "I think this'll work."

Jason eyed her. "Yes ma'am." He responded dubiously. "If you say so. Is there something else we can do in the meantime? Any prep we can do for the fiber guy?"

Dar looked around. "I need some 110 in here. Can you rig that while I'm duct tape and twining us into a solution for this pain in the ass problem?"

"Sure." Jason disappeared.

Kerry took the opportunity to sidle closer. "What are you doing with that, hon?"

"Trying to resist the urge to bash it against the wall." Dar responded. "It's probably good they're leaving us alone in here. You're the only person I want around me right now."

Responding to the compliment, Kerry pressed her cheek against Dar's shoulderblade, then kissed it.

Dar put the pipe back against the wall and looked at the plug of the soldering iron, holding it up against the opening. It was obviously too big to fit inside. She went over to the makeshift shelf and pawed among the supplies. "I need wire nuts."

"Wire nuts." Kerry repeated. "Is that something I need to send the guys back for?"

"No." Dar removed a pair of cutters from the toolbox. "I'll just tape the damn thing." She cut the end of the plug off, then she removed the extension cord from its wrapping and cut the female end of that off as well.

Kerry merely stood back and watched, her arms folded across her chest.

With the cutters, Dar clipped the cord in the middle of the two wires that made it up, and pulled the ends apart. Then she stripped the ends off, exposing the copper. She then repeated the process on the end of the cable connected to the soldering iron.

Setting the cutters down, she took one of the ends from each cable and twisted it together, taking a piece of the duct tape and wrapping it around the ends. She repeated the act with the other end, then she wrapped all of it together into a neat bundle. "There."

"Okay." Kerry glanced at the pipe. "Did you want to put that through the pipe there before you connected that? Cause the other end won... sorry, sweetheart."

Dar was banging her head gently against the metal wall.

"You did such a pretty job though." Kerry picked up the other end of the extension cord and examined it. "You can do that with this end too if we cut it off, right?"

"I want ice cream." Dar said, on the tail end of a long sigh.

"Me too. Should I cut this off though? I got the idea." Kerry picked up the cutters. "You want to put the cable down that pipe, then plug it in, right?"

"Right."

Kerry clipped the plug off and retrieved the pipe, carefully threading the end of the cord through it and pushing it down. She continued until she got to the taped part, which she wiggled in and coaxed onward, glancing at the bottom of the pipe and smiling as she saw the end of the cord emerge. "There."

Dar fitted the soldering iron into the end of the pipe and took the tape, strapping the device in as tightly as she could. "Thanks." She eyed Kerry. "My brain's a little off right now."

Kerry walked to the other end of the pipe and drew the cable out. It extended a good foot outside, and she took the cutters, neatly cutting the end and pulling it apart as she'd seen Dar do.

Electrical work was definitely not a general part of her skill set. In fact, she hadn't thought it was part of Dar's since her partner had contacted electricians on the few occasions they had issues either at the condo or the cabin.

However, this seemed simple enough. She picked up the plug she'd cut off and split the ends there, then looked at it. "Dar, does it matter which one connects to what?"

"One of the cables has a white line." Dar answered. "White to white. Brown to brown."

"Oh." Kerry examined the cable, and proceeded. "Cool."

They worked in silence for a few minutes, until Dar had the soldering iron fastened to her satisfaction. Then she set the pipe aside, coming over to Kerry's end to watch her finish taping the ends of the cable. "Good job."

"First time I've ever done that." Kerry admitted. "Now what?"

"Now we wait for 110 power." Dar carefully leaned the conduit against the wall. "Then we plug that in, I stick the pole down the pipe, and with any luck, I use the soldering iron to melt the cable tie."

Kerry studied the pipe, then turned to look at her partner. "Dar, that's really ingenious."

"Thanks." Dar sat down on a metal shelf. "I could have tried to shear through it with a blade, but chances are I'd cut through some of the damn cabling in there and that's the last thing we need." She exhaled as her partner came over and put her arms around Dar's neck, cradling the side of her face and kissing her on the cheek. "Mm."

"You're so damn smart." Kerry whispered in her ear. "I wanna be you when I grow up."

Dar let her forehead rest against Kerry's collarbone. "Know what I want?"

"More Advil?"

"That or a gun." Dar sighed. "Cause I don't think this day's ever going to end."

**

It was full dark by the time their train pulled back into Penn Station, halting with a jerk and a screech and the hiss of hydraulic doors preparing to open.

"Well." Alastair stood up and opened the storage bin over the seats. "That wasn't so bad."

"Nope." Andrew also stood, stretching out his long frame before he carefully lifted a box from in front of his feet and cradled it. "Glad that place wasn't but a minute from the train. That feller was looking to close up on us."

"Wasn't very friendly was he?" Alastair agreed. He pulled down another big brown sack and followed Andrew as he stepped off the car and back into the lower levels of Penn Station.

"Jackass." Andrew grunted. "Like he was doin us a favor selling this stuff." He paused to let a woman with a large child stroller move past, then continued.

"Then asking twenty questions about what we're doing to do with it." Alastair frowned. "What in the hell did he think we were going to do with it? Install fiber optics in our hotel room?"

"Jackass."

It was a bit quieter now, the rush hour just getting passed, and when they climbed up the brass lined stairs to the concourse there seemed to be more National Guard in the area than passengers, a number of the guard with large dogs on leashes nearby.

Everyone looked a little nervous, walking by. But the dogs merely sat there, tongues lolling, waiting to be called into whatever action they were apparently trained for.

At least it was less chaos. Alastair tucked the bag of gewgaws under his arm and was glad of the noise reduction. He gave the guardsmen a pleasant smile as they crossed the open concourse and headed for the hallway that would take them eventually to the escalator and outside.

"Long day." He commented, as they entered the main part of the station, a large, high ceilinged space with several branch corridors and plenty of signage pointing to trains and subways in three different directions.

"Got that right." Andrew agreed, as they headed up another hall. He glanced to one side, then paused. "Goin to get me a hot dog. You want one?" He indicated a shop to one side.

Alastair looked past him, to a cluttered gathering of fast food marquees, all crammed into one low ceilinged space. "Why, sure." He said. "Been a long time since lunch."

Andrew went inside and set his box down on a table near the hot dog counter. He removed his wallet from his back pocket and advanced on the woman behind the counter, turning his head as he stopped. "You want one with all them things on it?"

Alastair set his bag down on the box and pondered the menu. "Chili dog." He said. "Might as well hold up my end of the Texas stereotype."

"Gimme two of them there things, and some taters, and a couple of cokes." Andrew addressed the woman.

The woman studied him. "You want two chili dogs, French fries, and two sodas?" She hazarded a guess.

"Yeap."

"No problem." The woman turned to take care of the order, leaving Andrew to loiter in front of the desk. Near the back, a man was starting to clean up, putting chairs up on tables to sweep under them, carefully avoiding the two tables of guardsmen finishing up their dinner.

Andrew briefly pondered bringing some dogs back for Dar and Kerry, then figured they'd be stone cold before they got out there, and a mess to boot. He turned and leaned against the counter, folding his arms over his chest.

Alistair took a seat and rested his elbows on his knees. Ending up having a chili dog in a train station didn't even seem odd after the last few days; he could barely even remember how the morning had started and he found he was mostly looking forward to some kind of success before the night ended.

He suspected there would be one. Dar generally created success, which was one of the reasons he trusted her the way he did. He also suspected she was probably waiting on their return, but he figured a five minute stop for hot dogs probably wouldn't skew the pitch one way or the other.

His cell phone was off. He intended it to remain that way until they were back at the port, when there was some chance he could actually report on whatever status whatever politician on the other end was asking for.

Right now, tired as he was, he gained a glimmer of understanding of the undisguised sigh of exasperation that Dar sometimes uttered when she was being hounded for something. Sometimes, you could just do what you could do, when you could do it.

"Here." Andrew handed him a cardboard box, which had a hot dog and a paper dish of fries in it, with a little plastic pseudo fork poked in them. "Figure that's good as any till we finish up." He took a seat at the table and bit into his dog.

Alastair followed suit, tilting his head just a bit as he realized the guardsmen were watching them from the corner of his eye. He wondered if they looked particularly suspicious or something. He glanced at both himself and Andrew, then at their burdens, which he'd shifted carefully to the floor so they could eat on the table.

Hm. Two guys, in a train station, with a brown box and a brown bag full of electrical parts, and one of the guys was wearing combat boots and a face full of scars. He watched the guardsmen in his peripheral vision, as they all started looking their way and whispering.

Andrew shifted a little, so that he was facing Alastair and could see over his shoulder. His eyebrows hiked up a little.

Alastair took another bite of his hotdog. "Not bad." He commented, wiping his lips on a lurid napkin and just hoping the guard would find some other thing to interest them.

"S'allright." His companion agreed. "Two things I always did like t'eat round here is hot dogs and pizza pie." He said. "Had liberty here once and mah whole SEAL team went and got us ten of them big pies and nearly got ourselves sick to death with it. Still like it though."

The ILS CEO chuckled. "Have to say when I was in the Army, the most interesting place we ended up having liberty in was Fargo, North Dakota. Those people know how to party, I'll say that." He thought the conversation had died down over at the other table, but didn't want to be obvious and look

"Army, huh?" Andrew gave him a wry grin.

"I'm from Texas. It's a family tradition." Alastair admitted. "Granddaddy was in, daddy was in, I did the ROTC rounds in college...I kept it to one hitch, though. After that I decided I liked climbing the corporate ladder better than the one in the obstacle course." He finished off the last bite of his hot dog and poked among the wedge cut fries, selecting one with the little forklet and tasting it. "What made you pick the Navy?"

"Didn't like hiking around with them big old packs." Andrew said. "And ah figured at the least I'd learn me to swim in the Navy. Don't do that much in Alabama." He paused, studying a fry. "Wanted to see something but dirt roads and candy assed rednecks."

Alastair glanced casually over at the guardsmen, who were now studiously looking in another direction. "I got to see a little bit of Korea." He mused. "Then I got posted in Italy and Belgium. That wasn't so bad."

Andrew stood and took his cardboard tray over to the trash and disposed of it. He glanced at the guardsmen as he finished. "Lo there, you all."

"Hello." The one nearest him nodded respectfully. "Something you need from us?"

"Nope." Andrew shook his head. "Hope you all have a good night now." He returned to the table and picked the box back up while Alastair disposed of his tray, and came back to join him. They exited the food stop and headed across the concourse towards the exit.

"Yknow, I don't think I ever heard you mention what you did in the Navy before." Alastair commented, giving his taller companion a sideways look.

Andrew chuckled a bit. "Didn't want them fellers asking me what all was in these here boxes cause I don't have not one jack clue what it is." He admitted. "Figured if I started flapping my jaw about what I done they'd mind themselves."

"And they did." Alastair clapped him on the back. "Good decision. Because frankly, though I paid for em, and I can pronounce the names, damned if I know what this stuff is either." They got to the escalator and rode it up, passing from the claustrophobic concourse into the street that was quieter than they expected, in a city that now seemed exhausted in a strange kind of way.

"Taxi!" Alastair waved one down. "Let's see what your kids have gotten us into." He handed his bag to the driver, who set it in the trunk along with Andrew's box. "And if we're very lucky, it's beer time."

"Won't be luck."

"Not with your kid, no. You're right. It sure won't"

**

"Okay, hang on." Kerry wriggled under the pipe again and got her eyeball to where she could see up it, poking her slim flashlight into the space and turning it on. "See that?"

"Got it." Dar's voice came down tinnily to her. "Get your face out of the way in case something comes shooting out of this damn pipe."

"Yes, grandma." Kerry edged over so she could keep the light in place, but removed most of her head from the danger zone.

She could hear Dar maneuvering the pipe into place overhead, and just as she reached up to scratch her nose, a big clump of pipe crud came tumbling down to land near her ear. She could hear a soft curse, and in the tone, she sensed her partner's frustration both with the tedious project and the cramps she was still suffering from.

Dar wasn't usually that unlucky. Kerry suspected it was the stress of the situation that was tying her up into knots and making her monthly cycle worse than usual, and she herself had the same thing to look forward to any minute now.

"Okay, I'm heating up the iron." Dar called down.

"Go for it, babe." Kerry tapped lightly on the pipe with her flashlight. She was tired, and hungry, and the worst part of it was knowing that even when they finished this crazy jury rig, all they could do was pull the cable into place.

They still had to wait for the fiber terminator to come in, and finish the connection so they could get it working.

Kerry's nose twitched, as she smelled the odd scent of heating metal. She peeked up the pipe and saw a hint of motion in her flashlight's glare, now outlining the blockage that was preventing the cable from passing.

Sure enough, the light reflected off dusty white plastic, a zip tie wrapped around the cables already in the pipe, its end extending across and bending against the far pipe wall. Kerry could just see the tip of the soldering iron approaching the tie and she had to smile again at the ingenuity of her partner.

Who would have thought of using a soldering iron? She was pretty sure she wouldn't have. Kerry pondered a moment as to what she would have done, given the limited options they had. Used a knife on a stick?

Not try getting it through?

Would she have gotten someone, a construction worker, to come in and cut through the pipe so she could access it?

"Watch out." Dar warned. "I'm about to start melting things."

Kerry gazed bemusedly up at her overprotective spouse. "Okay, I'm clear." She edged her head out of the way, cocking her ears as she heard Dar curse again. She felt sorry for the two techs, trapped in the small space with her irritated partner. "Easy honey. We're almost done."

She could smell burning plastic. "I think you got it, Dar. I can smell it."

"Maybe that's my brain cells frying." Dar responded, her voice echoing softly.

Grumpy grumpy. Kerry licked her lips, and peeked up the pipe again, seeing a wisp of smoke showing in the light. A moment later, the tip of the soldering iron jerked to one side, and a piece of curled, blackened white plastic plummeted down and smacked her flashlight before she jerked her hand out of the way and it landed on the ground. "Hey! It's out!"

"Wooeffing hoo." Dar grunted, soft clanking noises and dust bunnies issuing down the pipe as she removed her makeshift tool. "I'm going to send the pull cable down."

Kerry removed the flashlight and shut it off, laying there quietly and enjoying the cool breeze from the opening, resisting the urge to close her eyes. She could hear the cable snaking its way down the conduit, and a moment later, the RJ45 end covered in tape plonked its way onto the metal deck near her head. "Yay!"

She got up and took hold of the cable, pulling it gently until about two feet of it was outside the conduit. Then she turned and took hold of the cable Dar had pulled in through the hatch, carefully tying the end of the fiber to the Ethernet cable and pulling it taut. "Dar?"

"Yes?"

Kerry jumped, as the voice sounded right behind her head. "Yow!" She reeled backwards off her crouch, waving her arms until Dar grabbed hold of her and let her regain her balance. "For Pete's sake!"

Dar chuckled tiredly. "Left the guys up there to haul this thing up. I vote we go and get something hot to eat, and a beer."

Kerry stopped moving and slumped back against her. "Ungh. I love you."

"Likewise." Dar hugged her, then let her go. "Feed the wire up there, and let's haul. Maybe by the time we get back, our fiber man'll be here, and we'll be in the home stretch."

Kerry eased the end of the fiber into the pipe, and Dar knocked against it. After a moment, it started to move, snaking its way slowly up from its pile of coils on the floor up through the pipe to the second level.

Dar watched it, and dusted her hands off. "Things are looking up." She said. "We might get outta here tonight."

"Piece of cake now." Kerry agreed. "All we need is some ends." She jumped a trifle as her end was smacked, and scooted for the door. "It should go smoothly now, right?"

"Right."

Dar was glad enough to feel the springiness of the gangway under her feet as she preceded Kerry towards the pier. Around her, the city seemed muted, sounds of sirens audible and the soft roar of traffic only barely so.

She could smell the pungent scent of the water, but above that, on the wind now blowing from the sea, she could smell the burning, acrid scent of destruction, and the taint left a strange taste on the back of her tongue.

The darkness hid the billow of smoke still emerging from the Trade Center site, but if she looked up, and off to the horizon, she could see the stars being obscured by it.

"So where do we go from here?" Kerry asked, her hands tucked inside the pockets of her jacket. "All we need is the terminations, right?" She caught up to Dar and walked alongside her, their steps sounding an odd echo as they moved off the gangway and onto the concrete pier.

"Right." Dar said. "And to integrate the datastream, but that's trivial compared to everything else on the physical layer."

Kerry removed one hand from her pocket and tucked it through Dar's elbow. "You sound so sexy when you talk like that."

"Ker-ry." Dar gave her a sideways look.

"C'mon hon. I have to take my fun where I can find it tonight." Kerry responded wryly. "Let's walk down to that bar you mentioned, and see if we can get some nasty bar food or a pizza and a beer. Hell, I'd even take a hot dog right now."

"Me too." Dar exhaled, feeling some of the tension in her unwind. The last big hurdle was done, and she was actually looking forward to finishing out this particular task and getting on with the much larger one ahead.

They walked along the pier towards the gates, which now had some lurid, orange lights outlining the guard vehicles blocking the way. As they got closer to the gates, the sounds of arguing voices were heard, though, and they stepped up the pace by silent accord.

"Hope that's not dad out there." Kerry muttered. "I thought those guys were okay with us."

"If it was dad, they wouldn't be yelling." Dar responded. "Let's see what's going on."

They got to the gates, and ducked through the opening to find a half circle of armed guardsmen facing off against three young men in jeans and windbreakers. All were carrying backpacks. Two of them were tow headed and fair skinned, the third was dark skinned, and had black, straight hair.

The guardsman in charge, a different man than when they'd entered, was on a radio, giving the trio dark looks as he talked into it. "Not sure what to do with these guys, sir." He said, just audible to them. "They've got all kinds of tools and some crazy story."

"Uh oh." Kerry slowed. "Maybe we should stay back."

Dar hesitated, taking in the angry stances and the weapons and almost decided Kerry was right, until their forward motion took them into the floodlights and the young men spotted them.

They weren't familiar to her, but apparently she was familiar to them, because the look of relief on all three faces was almost comical.

"Ms. Roberts!" The closest one called out. "Tell these guys not to shoot us!"

"Then again, maybe not." Kerry released Dar's arm and followed her into the light. "Looks like they're ours. Mark's guys, probably."

"Probably." Dar sighed, continuing past the trucks towards the crowd. "Don't shoot, gentlemen."

The guard in charge turned, startled to find them emerging behind them. "Holy shit hang on.. I've got some people inside here.. " He pulled the radio from his mouth. "Who are you people? What are you doing inside that gate?"

"Someone didn't leave handover notes." Kerry sighed. "Jesus."

"Now I wish it was my father out here." Dar grimaced. "Okay, hold it everyone. Let's just discuss this before people start getting hurt." She said. "Let me start from the beginning."

"Let me start from the beginning." The guard captain said. "Let's see some identification from you people."

Uh oh. Kerry removed her identification case from her pocket and stepped forward, holding the leather case out to the man. "Okay, here's mine. We've been in here since this afternoon, one of your colleagues allowed us in after he checked us out with the Mayor's office."

"What?" The man grabbed her folio and glanced at it. "No one said anything about people being inside there. Who are you people?"

"I'm sorry if they didn't leave you word." Kerry said, in a calm voice. "But we came in here around three o'clock. We've been working inside the ship this whole time." She took a step closer to him, aware of Dar's alert presence at her back. "We don't want to cause you trouble. These people here are employees of ours."

"Boy, we're glad to see you, Ms. Stuart." The tech said. "They sent us from Washington. They said you needed us."

"Shut up." The guardsman ordered. "Go stand over there, both of you. I don't know who you are, and I'm not buying some crazy story that you got let in here earlier. Don't you people know what's been going on around here?"

Dar just walked past him, catching Kerry's arm as she went and gently hauling her along with her. She stopped where the techs were, all of them visibly relaxing. "You our fiber boys?"

"Yes, ma'am." The talkative one said. "I'm Shaun Durhan, this is Mike Thomas, and Kannan Barishmorthy."

Dar had her hands in her pockets, and was regarding them mildly. "Dar Roberts." She finally said, then glanced to her left. "Kerry Stuart."

The men all blushed a little. "Yeah, we knew that." Shaun said. "Glad you came out here. They were really starting to hassle us, especially Kannan."

Dar glanced at the third man, her brows contracting. "Kannan?" She knew the name, vaguely. Mark had spoken well of him, she remembered, one of their H1B Visa candidates she recalled signing off on. "Why?"

"They often joke that some people do not understand geography." Kannan said, in a quiet voice. "However I did think most knew the difference between the Middle East and India."

"Don't count on it." Kerry glanced behind her, where the guardsman had now taken her identification and ducked inside his command car with it, and his radio. "My mother said they'd been expecting some problems in Michigan with a backlash."

"Expecting?" Kannan eyed her. "Ma'am, there were two men killed already there from my home country, beaten in their shops from people thinking them Arabs."

Kerry remembered the call earlier, and bit off a curse.

"Well." Dar exhaled. "I'm sure having a bunch of them living in Miami without being detected didn't help anything." She looked around. "It would be like one of them living here. How could you tell? Half the cabbies in the damn city come from that part of the world."

"Well there." A new voice approached. "What are you folks all doing out here?" Alastair shifted the bag in his arms. "Waiting for us?"

Andrew was right behind him with his box, glancing alertly around at the guard, the command car, and the small group waiting outside the gates. "We got trouble now?" He came up next to Dar and cocked his head in question. "How're you feeling, Dardar?"

"Frustrated." Dar craned her head around to look at the command car. "You can give those things to these guys. It's their gear." She indicated the techs. "You three might want to fish through there and make sure we got everything."

The techs took possession of the bundles and knelt next to them on the ground, opening up the bag and peering inside it. "Kannan, this is your stuff." Shaun handed it over. "Let me get the box open."

"Ah, yes. Thank you so much." Kannan sat down on the ground and removed his pack, swinging it around and setting it down next to his leg.

"Hey! What are you people doing?" The guard commander circled his truck and approached them. "What's going on here? Who are you two?" He pointed at Kannan. "Get those things away from that guy – he's one of them!"

"One of them what?" Kerry turned in confusion. "He's our fiber tech. What's wrong with."

"Shut up. You're probably in it with him. All of you, a bunch of t..."

Kerry got in front of him. "They're also part of our company. Look, can't we just call the command who was here earlier?" She held up both hands, then realized he wasn't going to stop and couldn't get out of the way in time before she was shoved hard to one side. "Hey!"

"Get out of my way. You men, over here. Bring that.." The guard commander hauled up short as Dar suddenly surged into rapid motion, coming right up into his face with her hands raising up into fists. "What the hell do you.. hey!"

Dar had him by the front of his shirt. "You stupid little piece of shit." She yelled at top volume. "What in the hell do you think you're doing pushing the people who pay your fucking salary around?"

"OH boy." Alastair moved nervously forward. "This is going to end badly, I can just tell."

The guard reeled backwards, then reached for the gun hanging off his back and started pulling it around only to find himself lifted up off his feet and shoved through the air back against his truck as his rifle was taken from his hands in a single, smooth motion. "Why you.."

"Hold UP." Andrew barked, taking the safety off the gun and cocking it. "Paladar, you get back."

Dar took a single step back, her hands at her sides, fingers twitching.

The other soldiers belatedly started forward, only to halt when Andrew slowly moved his head in their direction.

"Put them damn things down." Andrew ordered. "And you still yourself, mister." He addressed the guard commander. "Fore I shoot you in the nuts and save us all the trouble of you spreading out them no nothing genes."

The other guardsmen hesitated, then put their rifles down on the ground and stepped back.

Kerry eased forward, and got her hand around Dar's arm. "Hey." She rubbed her thumb against her partner's heated skin. "I'm okay. He's just an idiot."

The guard commander at least had the sense to stay where he was, sitting on the ground with his back against his truck. "You're all ending up in jail." He said. "You better put that gun down, buddy. This is no game."

"No, it aint." Andrew agreed. "Most times when I been holding one of these here things, it weren't no game and not so much as when you can't tell who you got on the other end, a friendly or a target." He stared, unblinking, at the man's face. "Like now."

The guard captain went very still, only his breathing evident in the rise and fall of his shirt.

"Now." Andrew said. "These here people are here to do something for the gov'mint. You are going to get on that there radio and get your CO over here, so he splain why you ain't letting them do what they need to do. Right now."

"Okay." The guard captain held his hands out. "I'm just trying to do my job."

"No you ain't. That feller there today was doing his job. You just ain't got no sense, and don't want to listen to nobody." Andrew disagreed. "So get yourself up and get on that comm., for I do it and get them collar bugs turned to half stripes for you."

The guard got up and reached in the open window. Andrew shifted the rifle audibly and he paused, then slowly pulled his hand out with the radio mouthpiece in it. "Can I ask who you are?"

"No you may not." Andrew told him. "But ah will tell you that if ah don't know someone who will bust you, ah know someone who knows someone. Just get on that thing and get someone with a brain ovah here."

The man hesitated.

"And if you all don't believe that, ah'll just let mah little girl here beat the tar out of you and take pitchers." Andrew continued mildly, with a straight face.

The guard captain keyed the mic. 'HQ, HQ.. this is Hudson Midtown. Over.'

"Thought that might do it." Andrew turned his head slightly. "You kids want to get on back in case someone does something jackass here?"

"No." Dar replied.

Kerry shook her head in agreement, half turning as Alastair eased up next to them. "We're all jackass, right?"

"Without question." Alastair agreed. "I've never been as jackass, in fact. But you know, the Commander is right. Let's get back a little."

Both Kerry and Dar just looked at him.

"No, huh?"

Dar finally relaxed, her shoulders easing and her hands uncurling. "Let's see if we've got everything." She gave in, and stepped back from the half ring of uncertain guardsman, and her father's threatening, brace legged form.

The techs were all crouched near the ground, eyes wide. "Wow." Shaun muttered, as they joined the three of them. "This is getting crazy."

"Getting?" Kannan looked upset, and tense. "Never have I felt so scared, you know? Intimidated by my own nationality being in question. It is terrible. I feel like I am walking target, for people to think badly of."

Kerry felt her heart finally starting to settle back down in her chest. She felt a trembling weakness in her legs and she leaned against Dar for support as much as in comfort. "He didn't even know who you are. He didn't even care." She said. "Jesus."

"Asshole." Dar said, quietly.

"You all right?" Kerry murmured, leaning close to her.

Dar didn't answer for a moment, then she exhaled. "Well." She said. "At least my cramps are gone." She glanced down at Kerry. "I just saw red."

Kerry bumped her shoulder with her head. Then she looked down at the techs. "Kannan, I'm sorry. I know what it's like to be judged on something you don't have control over." She knelt next to him. "Is there something we can do to help with that? We might as well get started, since I think we're stuck here for a little while."

The techs were willing to be distracted. Kannan pulled his bag over and took out a tool kit and set it on the ground, then removed a handful of bits and pieces from the paper bag. "Not too much light here." He looked up at the orange lamps.

"I have a flashlight." Shaun paused, removing it from his pack. "Want me to hold it?"

"I will." Dar held her hand out for it. "Let's get done what we can. Then the beer's on me."

The techs smiled timidly at her, and started to get to work. Dar turned the light on and focused it on the sidewalk with its odd scattering of technical debris, glad of a chance just to stand still, the sense of thrumming anger only slowly fading from her awareness.

Kerry's shoulder was pressed against her knee. Dar slowly turned her head and stared past her father's form, at the soldiers who were staring back at them.

Assholes.

**

Kerry put her hands on her hips as they listened to the guard commander, casting a glance behind her where the three techs were now seated in a ring of bright white light from the headlamps of four guard vehicles.

"Listen, I know how damned crazy this all is." Dar said. "But you people need to think before you start wailing away on folks you don't even know did anything."

"Ms. Roberts, I understand what you're saying." The guard commander replied. "But to be honest, there's no time to think right now. Just react. I know you know what I mean."

Dar sighed. Andrew sighed. Alastair grunted and shook his head.

"I'm really sorry we..no, I didn't leave notes for Josh there about you people being inside." The commander went on. "I got called out on a bomb threat, and three men were arrested with parts in a backpack, a lot like what your guys there looked like."

They turned to look at the three techs, who were working contentedly on the sidewalk. "I mean, what the hell were they supposed to think with all that? What is it? Do we know? We're not mechanics." The guard commander asked, plaintively.

"Commander, we understand." Alastair spoke up. "You're just trying to get a job done, we're just trying to get a job done. We're on the same side, y'know."

"The guys that did that." The guard commander pointed in the general direction of the disaster site. "Lived among us. Tell me how we can trust anyone?" He let his hand drop. "I can't. I know you're all

right because the Mayor's office said so, but those people, coming walking up here, with backpacks and a wild story, and one of them looking like one of those guys who did that, what can you expect?"

Dar exhaled. "Kannan's from India." She said. "It's not even the same continent. Are you telling me anyone who doesn't look like Kerry here is eligible to get shot now?"

The guard commander lifted his hands and let them fall. "I don't know. You hear the news. People are getting shot and beat up all over because everyone's so angry they want to lash out. Me to. Us to. Maybe I would shoot someone like him if I had a doubt, if I thought maybe something else was going to happen. Yeah." He answered, honestly. "I would."

"Wow." Kerry murmured.

"You asked." The commander said. "But anyway, if you say he's okay, these guys are okay, then I have to go with that because the Mayor says you are okay. But you could be lying."

"We're not." Alastair said. "These people are employees of ours. They have government clearances." He shifted his gaze to Dar slightly, and caught the equally slight nod of her head. "We all do. That's how the Mayor knows we're all right."

The commander shrugged. "I don't have that information when people are walking towards me. I'm not saying it's right, I'm not saying people aren't going to get hurt in this who are innocent, I'm just telling you what the truth is. We don't know, and we can't afford to risk erring on the side of caution anymore."

They were all briefly silent. "Gotta wonder why the heck we're here trying to help then." Alastair said. "Because these people's lives are worth a hell of a lot more than making sure the Mayor has a phone and a connection to the internet."

The guard commander now looked a little embarrassed. "Anyhow. I'm sorry this happened, Mr. McLean. I've talked to Josh, and I made sure everyone in this area knows you people are here. Maybe they can get some badges or something. I don't know. I just don't know what the answer is right now."

Shaun had gotten up and now he cautiously approached the group. "Ms. Stuart?"

Kerry turned towards him. "Hey. You guys finished prepping?"

He nodded. "We're done, and we've got the gear packed up."

"Okay." Dar ran her fingers through her hair. "Dad, you want to take Kannan back into the ship where the other guys are waiting and let him get that fiber done, and we'll go up the ramp to prep the office side. That work for everyone?"

"We'll send a couple guys in with you just in case anyone else's gotten in there." The commander said. "No more screw-ups on this end tonight."

They walked back over to where the techs were packing up, and getting their bags together. With a faintly anxious look, Kannan followed Andrew towards the gates, as the rest of them trooped on towards the ramp leading up to the new offices.

"He going to be okay, ma'am?" Shaun asked Kerry. "He's kind of freaked out about everything." He shifted his pack on his back. "I would be too, I guess."

"He's in good hands." Kerry told him, feeling a little freaked out herself. "Dar's father is a retired Navy Seal. They're not going to mess with him. Let's just get this done, and get the heck out of here. It's been way too long a day."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wonder if they'd deliver pizza to this damn emergency office." Kerry said. "Or I'm going to have to call that damn bus to come down here before I pass out."

"Ma'am?"

**

A pale slice of moonlight peeked through the clouds, illuminating the peeling iron and concrete of the pier with grudging nobility.

"Can I speak to the governor, please?" Alastair leaned against the railing, his back to the city.
"Alastair McLean here, from ILS."

In front of him, the tarmac of the port's driveway stretched out to either side, separating him from the front of the pier itself, which was dusty concrete and steel, the glass doors spidered with cracks and partially plywooded sections.

Behind the doors he could see Dar, her arms crossed over her chest, talking to two men in blue coveralls. At a desk just inside the door, Kerry was perched, likewise talking to two men in guard uniform.

It was near midnight. He was exhausted. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to get on a plane to Houston and leave all the messy, uncomfortable, gritty details of it all to Dar, and he was almost too tired to be ashamed of himself for that.

"McLean?" A voice answered. "That you?"

"It is, governor." Alastair said. "Just wanted to tell you, we got your emergency office up. My people are making the last connections and bringing up systems now."

"Yeah? About time." The governor said. "You people took long enough."

Alastair exhaled. "Well, you know, sometimes these things just take time." He said. "As you may realize, it's not that easy to get things done in the city right now."

"I'm not looking for excuses. Just get it done." The man said. "Now if you don't mind, I have to call the White House. Good night."

Alastair closed his phone and juggled it in one hand. Then he walked across the road and into the terminal, the doors creaking reluctantly open to admit him inside. "How's it going, folks?"

Dar glanced at him. "Just waiting for Mark to call me back and confirm the routing integration." She informed him. "But we've got good signal. We just need to push their routes."

Her boss nodded sagely, as though he understood what she was saying. "Well, wish I could say it was much appreciated by the governor, but I just got yelled at for taking too long. Hell with him." He said. "Let's gather our folks up and get out of here, if we're done."

One of the coverall suited men put his hands on his hips. "If it's any consolation to you, we're grateful as hell to you people for coming in here and getting us going." He said. "All we've been getting from the politicians today is pointless jaw flapping." He looked cross. "All of them in here wanting this, wanting that, but when its time to throw a little influence around, forgetaboutit."

Alastair smiled at him. "Thanks." He said. "But we're used to being abused, aren't we Dar?"

Dar rolled her head around and looked at him, one eyebrow hiking up. "I've had enough abuse for one day." She announced. "The governor can kiss my ass." She looked up as Kerry's cell phone rang and waited while her partner answered it. "Hope that's Mark."

Kerry gave her a thumbs up.

Dar exhaled, just as the two men at the desk started clapping and cheering. "Woo effing hoo." She said. "It's done."

Alastair studied the two men, who were high fiving each other. The activity in the room, which had been subdued, now perked up and a flow of workers poured from the break room behind a broken wooden door, and approached the endless rows of banquet tables set up for use.

It was done. Now that he stood there and looked at the room, with its peeling steel columns and dirty walls, it seemed anticlimactic considering the effort and the struggle that they'd gone through.

Crazy, after hearing what Dar had done, with a soldering iron, and watching the young technicians sweat over the tiny glass strands of the fiber in a process so alchemic, he almost felt like he'd been watching some magic rite.

The techs emerged from the break room, and headed towards them. They were smiling, as they pulled their packs up onto their back and headed for the small group near the door.

"Ready to go back to the hotel?" Kerry folded her phone, and clipped it to her belt. "I think we're finished here." She tucked her hand around Dar's elbow. "I need a drink. Finally."

"Let's go." Dar replied quietly. "I'm about done in myself. Alastair?"

Her boss snorted tiredly. "Lady, you got to be kidding me. I was done before sundown." He indicated the door. "I see Papa Roberts out there, so let's get ourselves someplace more comfortable." He glanced at the techs. "Fellas, did they make arrangements for you?"

The techs exchanged glances. "I don't think so." Shaun admitted. "They weren't really specific about what we were supposed to do when we finished - I think they expected us to be here all night so maybe it wasn't a concern." He looked shyly at Dar. "We thought we'd have to run the big cable too."

Dar managed a return smile. "Glad you didn't have to."

"Well, c'mon with us, then, and we'll get you sorted out." Alastair decided. "You fellas did a great job tonight, and you deserve a nice bed and a shower, at the least." He turned and regarded the door. "Now. As to finding a taxi."

"No probl'm." Andrew had entered, and was loitering near the door. "Them fellers down the ramp said they'd take us in their truck. Ah think they're just trying to poligize."

"I'll take it." Alastair shooed them towards the door. "Let's go, troops. Shops closed for the night." He gave the men inside a wave, then followed the group out the door. They turned and started down the ramp, in the cool dampness of a fall night that despite the late hour, wasn't really all that quiet.

Emergency sirens still sounded. They could hear trucks on the lower level pulling up and the clank of forklifts unloading.

Dar let the sounds move past her. She was almost at a point where she was so tired she wasn't really cognizant of where she was, and the ability to care about what was going on was fading fast. She felt Kerry's hand clasp hers, and focused on the comfort of the contact, willing the ride to the hotel to be over and the long day to end at last.

She was glad, in a distant way, that they'd brought the office up. Knowing the bigger task that faced them though put this in a meager perspective and she wondered briefly if the governor was expecting them to go right from this to reviewing downtown without a break.

Probably he was. Probably he could just put his head between his legs and kiss his own ass, too. Dar bumped Kerry lightly with her shoulder, smiling tiredly as she was bumped equally gently back.

The guard post was now very quiet, only two of the men standing by the barricade with their rifles, the rest hunkered down behind the truck, legs sprawled out and a pizza box nearby. As they approached, the two men on guard alerted the others, and by the time they reached the bottom of the ramp, the guard captain was there to greet them.

"You folks finished up?" He asked.

"Yeap." Andrew did the talking for them. "We're fixing to get out of your space now. Got all them people up there happy, time to move on."

"John, bring that truck up, give these people a ride to their hotel." The captain said. "And listen, sorry again about that mixup earlier, Commander. Things are so mixed up here, we're just trying to be safe." He glanced over at Dar. "So much is going on."

Dar frankly couldn't have cared less at the point she was at. "No problem." She waved it off. "Let's just get the hell out of here."

They got in the personnel carrier and it rumbled off, turning onto the roadway and heading for the nearest cross street, a blinking yellow traffic light fluttering overhead. The driver, leaned on his wheel and glanced at Andrew. "Where're we going, sir?"

"Doubletree Metropolitan." Alastair provided, then he settled back in the hard, bench like seat as the truck turned and headed east. "Boy. What a day."

Dar was leaning against the door on the other side of the vehicle, with Kerry between them. The window was shaded, but she was able to look out and see the buildings flow by, blinking lights and lurid neon decorating the mostly empty streets.

"Ms. Roberts?" Shaun spoke up from the back seat. "So, are we going to stay and help out with whatever else is needed tomorrow? My folks were asking. They 're kind of nervous I'm here."

Dar stirred herself to some kind of skewed alertness. "Yeah." She said, after a pause. "Tomorrow we have to go down to the Trade Center site and see what we can do about putting the country's financial infrastructure back together."

Shaun leaned forward and put his hand on the back of the seat Dar was in. "For real?"

Kerry half turned her head and nodded at him.

Shaun sat back. He blinked a few times, then exchanged looks with his coworkers. "I'm going to tell my ma you're sending me to Niagara Falls."

"Very good idea." Kannan agreed. "Or maybe to Buffalo, so we can get some wings."

Kerry managed a faint laugh. Then she let her head rest against Dar's shoulder and tried to forget the cramps she was now experiencing. "Barrel over the falls sounds good right about now." She muttered. "Hope the hotel has room service."

"They better." Dar sighed. "They damn sure better."

**

They damn sure did. Dar ruffled her hair dry as she emerged from the bathroom, to find Kerry sprawled on the bed with her arm wrapped around a pillow and a cup of rum laced chocolate nearby. Her forehead had that little wrinkle it got when she was in some discomfort, and Dar fully empathized with her on that subject.

"Ugh." Kerry reached over and picked the cup up, lifting herself up enough to take a sip from it, then putting it back down. "Life sucks."

Dar draped her towel over the chair and climbed into the king sized bed, laying down behind Kerry and slipping one arm over her as she blew gently in her ear. "Could be worse."

Kerry leaned back against her. Despite her current discomfort, she could appreciate the wonderful feeling of that solid connection and was very glad she could simply lay here with Dar wrapped around her and not have to move, or think, or yell at anyone.

Wonderful. "What a long freaking day."

"Ultimately a successful one." Her partner countered. "I'm glad we saw that connection through. At least we won't have that on our plates tomorrow morning."

"Only thing I want on my plate tomorrow morning is some French toast." Kerry sighed. "But somehow I don't think we'll get that lucky."

"Advil kick in yet?" Dar asked, her voice warm with sympathy.

"Not yet. But I think you're enhancing it's attempt." Kerry told her. "It's nice to just lay here. I'm trying not to think about having to get out of this bed tomorrow morning and go do what we did today again only in a much worse place."

Dar exhaled. "I feel like we busted our asses all day and ended up getting the finger from the city. I appreciate they've having a crisis here, but we're not the cause of it."

Kerry folded her arm over Dar's and exhaled. "Yeah. It's a weird attitude. I think it's because they're just so pissed off at what happened, and they can't lash out at the people who did it. So they're taking it out on everyone else."

"Peh."

Kerry smiled. "Hey, we're going around saying we're being mean because we're having our periods. Cut them some slack, okay?"

Dar chuckled dryly. "I never needed that as an excuse." She demurred. "Though it sure didn't help today. I felt like doing some surgery on myself there for a while."

Kerry grimaced in reflex. "Ouch."

"Mm."

"Do you think we can get the financial stuff going, Dar? Is it going to be more of what we had to do today? That was kinda nuts." Kerry said, after a brief pause. "I mean..." She went briefly silent. "I don't know what I mean."

Dar pulled her a bit closer and felt her eyes drifting shut. "I don't know." She answered. "If it's as big a cluster there as I think it is, maybe we don't have to do anything. Or maybe we have to come up with some wild ass scheme no one's thought of yet."

"Ah."

"Or maybe someone else will be brilliant for a change."

Kerry felt her own eyes closing, and she relaxed against Dar's warm body, setting aside the aggravations of the day and letting them go for the moment. Far off, she could hear the late night sounds of the city, but already that too was fading, and before she could take another breath she was a sleep.

Dar was awake just a bit longer, savoring the peace and quiet after the long day. She felt Kerry's body go limp against her and her breathing even out and hoped they'd be able to get through the night without any calls, or demands, or...

Screw it. She reached over and turned Kerry's phone to silent. Then she closed her eyes, and tugged the covers up over them.

**

"Okay, so where are we." Kerry blinked into the pallid dawn light coming in the window, half distracted by the scent of coffee nearby. "Mark, your three guys are here in the hotel with the rest of us."

"Cool, yeah." Mark answered. "I got an email from Shaun last night." He paused. "He sure was glad to put his head down on a pillow."

"Me too." Kerry agreed. "So, what's the status right now? Who's here, who's on the way here, and what kind of gear is everyone bringing."

There was a soft knock at the door. Kerry went to mute the mic, but stopped when Dar appeared from the bathroom and waved at her, heading over to answer it. "Who the hell is knocking this early?" She grumbled under her breath.

"What was that, boss?" Mark asked.

"Nothing. Go on." Kerry sighed. She leaned forward a little, grimacing as a cramp gripped her.

"Anyway." Mark cleared his throat. "So we've got six guys and me in the truck, and we're like one, maybe two hours out. I left a bunch of guys there, a half dozen showed up from different accounts yesterday to help out so I thought it was okay to take off out of there and head over."

He sounded a touch nervous. Kerry half smiled, understanding the feeling from her first weeks working for Dar, and having to lay out her own decision making. "Great plan." She said. "We need you here badly."

Mark didn't answer for a moment, then he audibly chuckled. "Thanks boss." He said. "So we've got the camper, and we'll pick up the sat units and the power trucks on our way down there. Where do we go?"

Ah, good question. "For now, come here .. well, to the Rock." Kerry clarified. "We have to find out where the best place is to start working from. I know we'll need stocks of cable and patch equipment, do you know if we've got that on the truck?"

"Hang on, lemme check."

Kerry muted the mic and hissed a small curse as another cramp hit.

Dar came back over to the desk she was seated at and emptied the contents of a packet on the table. "Ah. I'm legal again." She flicked her slim billfold with one finger and pushed the folder of identification cards around. "You don't have to worry about me being deported."

"That's a relief." Kerry managed a smile. "Though I have to admit razzing the admin at the office was pretty funny."

"It was." Dar sat down and extended her long, mostly bare legs across the floor. "Gut still hurting?"

"How'd you guess?" Kerry made a face, resting her chin on her hand. "I feel like dog poo."

"Been there."

"No kidding." Kerry turned her attention back to the phone as she heard rustling against the remote microphone. "I'm surprised we haven't gotten called from Alastair or anyone yet this morning."

Dar picked up her newly reunited cell phone and opened it, triggering it on and watching as it obediently started up. After a quiet moment, it started buzzing and rattling loudly, making her jump in startlement. "Yah!"

"Holy crap!" Kerry blurted.

Dar dropped the phone and it danced across the table in truly spectacular fashion. "Any idea how to bulk delete voice mail messages?"

"Okay, boss." Mark came back on the line, then paused as he heard the noise on the other end. "What the heck's going on there?"

"Um.. not much." Kerry grabbed the phone and tossed it to it's owner. "So what's the scoop?"

"Let me put it this way, you got any pull with those guys at ADC? We used all the stuff they sent rebuilding the space at the old P, and we ain't got any more."

"Ugh." Kerry uttered. "So we don't have patch panels, or anything like that, right?"

"Right."

She sighed. "What do we have?"

"Got some routers, some little switches, a couple spools of STP, couple spools of UTP, another big roll of that fiber the guys used last night, and a handful of RJ45 plugs."

"My mother could probably do a three dimensional art project with that." Dar commented, her eyes fixed on her now rattle free phone, as she thumbed through the alerts and messages. "Want some coffee?"

"Well.. I'd say let's get ordering, but you know what Mark?" Kerry sighed.

"We got no idea what to order." Mark supplied. "I know. I thought of that when I got up this morning and took over the driving again. I think we gotta get eyeballs on it, then figure it out."

Kerry muted the mic. "Coffee sounds great, except it's going to make my stomach ache worse." She mourned.

"Figured you'd say that. I had them bring tea too. Want blackberry or honey lemon?" Dar didn't even look up from her phone. "Mark's right. Let's wait for him to get here, then we all go down to the Trade center and see what we've got to work with."

"I love you."

Now Dar looked up, and smiled. "Blackberry?" Her eyebrows lifted. "And we've got some warm muffins. You up for that?"

Kerry merely rested her chin on her fists and gazed at her partner.

"Take that as a yes." Dar set her phone down and sauntered back over to the room service tray.

"You hear that, boss?" Mark queried. "Hello?"

"Sorry." Kerry wrenched her attention back to the phone. "That sounds like a plan, Mark. Dar was just saying we should wait for you to get here, then all go down together. You think you'll be here by eight? It's just ten past six now."

"We can probably do that unless we get held up nearer to where you are." Mark replied. "They going to let us in there?"

"We've got passes." Kerry didn't elaborate. "All right, you guys just head on up here. We'll meet you at the office." She waited for the line to drop, then she closed her phone. "What else do we need to do?" She wondered. "Why do I feel like I'm so damned behind the eight ball today?"

Dar came back over with a plate containing a buttered muffin, and a steaming cup of tea. She set them down next to her partner's laptop and leaned over, giving her a kiss on the top of her head. "I love you too."

Kerry leaned against her. "Oh honey, I sure know that." She murmured. "Thanks for breakfast."

"No problem." Dar straightened up and went to retrieve her coffee, pausing to watch the silent television screen full of frenetic activity and destruction. More people. More rubble. More talking heads. The scroll at the bottom spat a neverending series of numbers that she had to force herself to realize mean human beings either missing or dead.

It was strange. The whole thing had started to take on a surreal glaze and it was hard to concentrate on the facts that seemed to come at her from the screen in so many different directions. She watched shots of the president down near the still smoking rubble yelling into a bullhorn, an American flag flapping in the wind nearby.

Behind him, a fireman sat on a flat, twisted piece of iron, his head down, paying no attention, his elbows resting on his knees in exhaustion.

Dar nodded to herself a little, then she went over to the small table and picked up half a corn muffin, taking a bite of it as she tried to focus her mind on the task at hand. She glanced at her new laptop, open on the table, and watched the network metrics, a slowly healing graph of yellows morphing to greens rather than blotches of solid red.

The company was recovering. Things were starting to move back into normal patterns, and along with that her list of tasks shunted aside for the emergency was starting to build.

The world had held still, since that morning. Now, she had a sense, that her world, if not anyone else's, was starting slowly to turn again and she had to admit a trace of impatience that she found

herself tied up here, working a problem not remotely her own, heading towards a hopefully successful end that probably would get little notice and less credit.

Uncharitable, probably. Dar chewed her muffin and turned to watch the television screen again with a thoughtful expression. "Ker?"

"Hm." Kerry looked up from her laptop, her cup of tea just returning from a trip to her lips.

"Can we get a list of our customers who are still out of service here?" Dar asked. "Let's see what synergy we can get with getting them on the wire at the same time we're relieving our obligation to the government."

"We don't have enough to do with that?" Kerry's tone was, however, merely quizzical rather than accusing. "Sheesh."

"Let's just say we have a responsibility to them, and I'd like to walk out of here with a sense of accomplishment beyond some rubber chicken." Dar replied. "Getting the job done for the markets, but leaving our own customers high and dry ain't my way of doing business."

Kerry smiled. "I want to be you when I grow up." She stood up and popped the last of her muffin into her mouth. "Well, the day's not getting any younger, so I guess I'll go get my shower, and start getting ready to get ready."

"Be right there with you." Dar sat down to finish her muffin, leaning back and watching the dawn light slowly growing in the window, turning her back to the frenetic TV screen playing behind.

**

Kerry leaned back against the driver's partition in the courtesy bus, watching the street roll by outside the window. "At least the traffic hasn't built up so much again."

"You got that right, ma'am." The driver agreed. "People are still in shock, I think. I was talking to a man who came by the bus earlier. His son worked in one of those investment offices up near the top of one of the towers, and he just kept saying he was going down there to visit him real soon now."

Kerry grimaced a trifle. "It's hard to take it all in." She murmured.

"Can't imagine it myself." The driver agreed.

They were traveling east, heading towards the disaster site. Kerry eased forward and knelt, resting her arms on the front console as she started to see a dusting of ash on the streets, and the cars, and the buildings.

It was not that strange to her eyes, it resembled a light coating of snow more than anything. As they passed, she could see some shops open, some closed, some in an inbetween state where the rolling garage doors were half open and people were standing outside, talking or sweeping the ash.

The bus stopped at a stoplight, and she watched one man carefully sweeping his sidewalk clean of the stuff and in putting it into a tiny pile. He then knelt and pulled out a dustpan and hand brush, and whisked the ash into a small plastic bag, standing when he was done and looking at it.

Would he throw it away? Save it as a memory of the horror? Or sell it on Ebay? Kerry watched him put a twist tie around the top of the bag and take it inside, ducking under the half drawn door and disappearing.

Could go any of the ways. Kerry sighed. The bus started moving forward again, and on the right hand side, they passed a fire station. The big doors were wide open, and she looked inside, to find it completely empty of either trucks or people.

A prickle ran down her spine. She looked at the sign above it. "Ladder 11. Hope they're all okay."

The driver glanced at the empty station, then looked at her. "Ms. Stuart, beg your pardon, but no one here's okay." He said. "No matter if they walked out of that mess or not."

True. Kerry saw the coating of ash getting thicker, as they turned left on to Houston Street. "What insanity."

Dar came up behind her and looked over her shoulder. "Mess." She said, succinctly. "Are we going to end up east of the site?"

The driver nodded, as he turned the big bus right. "Yeah, that's what the cops told me to do. Take the FDR around the end of the island and come up from there. Too much destruction on the west side, and besides, they've got Battery Park there, wide open."

Now through the walls of the bus, they could hear sirens, though as yet all they could see was the outline of Staten Island across the water. A pensive silence fell over the bus, as everyone picked a window and stared out of it.

"Mark still behind us?" Dar asked, in all that quiet.

The driver glanced in his mirror. "Yeah, he's there."

Dar watched out the window, at the thick plume of smoke rising from between the buildings, and the debris that was starting to line the road. "Jason, break out the case of radios, please." She ordered quietly. "And the masks."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Everyone just stay calm. This is going to be hard." Dar added, after another brief pause. "Just stay focused, and remember that everyone here's been through a hell of a lot worse nightmare than we're about to experience."

Alastair came up behind Dar and gazed past her, his face quietly grim. "Know something, Dar?"

"Wish you'd turned the White House down?"

Alastair's lips pressed into a humourless smile. Then he turned and went back to the side window, seating himself on a stool and staring outside.

**

Kerry slowly stepped down from the bus, the third one out after Dar and Alastair had emerged to deal with the gun toting guardsmen who had flagged their convoy to a halt. She stood quietly for a moment, the wind at her back as she slowly scanned the area around them.

They had been pulled to a halt on State Street, just across from Battery Park. The roads were eerily silent, covered in thick white gray dust and debris, with cars and trucks parked every which way. She could look right up Broadway, and see more automobiles, and more dust, and windows blown out with curtains being sucked out and fluttering in the breeze.

She could smell burning rubber, and diesel oil, and the strong scent of the water. Fireboats and barges were churning just offshore, and a ferry was coming past, its decks packed with uniformed figures.

Small groups of police, firemen, and other workers were clustered around. Some were sitting in the grass of the Park, a few were collapsed with their backs against trees facing away from the city with their faces towards the water.

Mark came up next to her, his arms folded over his chest as he stood and looked around. "Man."

"Yeah." Kerry half turned, as a car with a siren blaring turned the corner and headed up Broadway, the sound echoing between the buildings and then fading.

"We going all the way up there?"

"Depends." Kerry leaned forward slightly to watch Dar and Alastair, with the guard. Dar's body posture was still relaxed, so it didn't look like the situation was getting confrontational. "Let's see where they'll let us go to. I told our telecom friends we'd be trying to get over here before we left the Rock."

"It's like a ghost town down here." Mark commented, then grimaced. "That was tacky bad. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Kerry walked across the street and into the park, carefully skirting around a pair of firemen sitting in the grass.

One of them looked up at her as she passed. "Hey." He called out. "Where'd you come from?"

Kerry stopped and went over to him, kneeling down in the grass and letting her hands rest on one knee. "That bus over there." She indicated the waiting caravan. "What about you?"

"Me?" The fireman looked exhausted, and his face was coated with the gray dust, outlining red rimmed eyes. "I'm from Connecticut. What's the bus for?"

"It's our company bus. We're going to try and help to get communications back up and running down here." Kerry readily explained.

The fireman snorted. "Good luck." He picked up his radio, lying beside him, and let it drop. "Hear more static'n talk on these things."

"All these tall buildings." Kerry agreed.

"Ker?"

Kerry turned, to see Dar motioning her over. "Well, time to go back to work. Nice talking to you."

"Same here." The fireman nodded.

Kerry got up and crossed the grass, glancing both ways in reflex before she crossed the road. She could feel the dust under her hiking boots, feeling like a light, powdery sand. She joined Dar and Alastair, who had moved closer to the bus. "We set?"

"Not quite." Dar said. "They're trying to move heavy construction rigs in – cranes, whatever – we can't pull the trucks down yet. They told us to park them up here until we can move closer."

"Nice fella." Alastair commented. "Thought we were going to have a dust up again, but this guy seemed like good folks."

"Okay." Kerry said. "So we walk up from here? Is that what you're saying? I know John and the telcom folks are up nearer the site."

"We walk." Dar turned and faced the bus, lifting her hand and waving it. "We should pull the sat and power trucks up on that side street there. Get them out of the way." She stared towards the bus, as Andrew appeared from behind it and headed her way.

Alastair put his hands in his pockets and regarded the scene. "I have a feeling this is the most pleasant we're going to see today." He said, giving Kerry a sideways look. "Shall we go get our togs? This stuff looks nasty." He kicked a bit of the dust with his boot.

"Sounds like a good idea." Kerry turned and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Everyone get your overalls and masks! Sync up radios!"

A swarm of activity started around the bus, as the driver got out and popped open the underneath storage, and techs started to drag big cases out and open them. Kerry joined Dar near the door to the bus, waiting their turn to pick up equipment.

"Dad's getting the trucks parked." Dar said. "You ready for this?"

"Dar." Kerry leaned briefly against her. "How in the hell could anyone be ready for this?" She asked. "I've already got a knot in my gut that has nothing to do with having my period."

Dar looked around, then grunted.

"Ma'am, I think this one will fit you." One of the techs approached Kerry with a coverall and handed it and a mask to Kerry. "We didn't have many this small."

"Thanks." Kerry smiled wryly. "I think."

Dar eased past him and rummaged through the bin on her own, removing a set of the clothing. "I have to fight the wolves for mine, on the other hand." She came back toward where Kerry was standing, leaning back against the bus and starting to pull the coveralls on. "Someone get the tool belts out!" She added in a loud yell.

Kerry picked a spot against the bus next to her and got her first boot into the leg opening of the thick, dark green garment. The fabric was tightly woven and tough, and it reminded her just a bit of a military flight suit.

Not tremendously attractive, even with the company logo bold on the chest and across her back. She snapped the wrists closed, which thankfully were in fact her length, and bent to unlace her boots, tucking the legs into them and lacing them back up again.

She stood up and examined the mask Dar had handed her, a full face unit with surprisingly lavender filter cartridges poking out both sides of the bottom. She fitted it to her face, and found it relatively comfortable.

"Not bad." She removed it and let it hang around her neck, as Dar handed her a smaller, mouth only mask. "What's that for?"

"Wind's right." Dar said. "I figure we can leave these big ones off until we're pretty close, but it doesn't pay to take chances. You see that stuff? Ten bucks it's full of silica particulate." She pointed at the dust in the streets.

"Powdered glass?" Kerry remembered the fireman, and his red rimmed eyes. "Ouch."

"Not to mention asbestos." Alastair had come up next to them, clad in his own green outfit. "Nasty stuff."

Andrew circled the bus from the other side, already draped in a tool belt and bearing a pack on his back. He had a mask gripped in one big hand and to all appearances absolutely knew what to do with it. "You gals." He addressed Dar and Kerry seriously. "Keep them damn masks on. Hear?"

Dar had just finished clipping a utility belt around her, and fastening her radio to it. "Got it." She said. "You too." She adjusted the radio and clipped the transmitter to her lapel. "Check." She keyed it. "Check. Mark?"

"Here." Mark's voice crackled back. "I did a radio scan. We're clear on this frequency. Most of the rest of them are using lower band. I've got the base repeater up and going."

"Run radio checks with everyone." Dar looped her credentials around her neck and settled them under her collar. "Then let's meet up near the head of that street there." She pointed.

"Broadway." Kerry supplied.

Dar looked at her. "Really?"

Her partner nodded. "It's where it starts. Kind of like where US 1 starts in Key West."

"Huh." Dar muttered. "Okay, we'll go try and find your telco folks and see what we can do in that area, then we can come back and see what's left of our technical office down here. It's just south of the Exchange."

"Sounds like a plan." Alastair said. "I told the gals to see what they could offer those poor guys out there after they get set up." He indicated the firemen. "Can't be easy."

They started towards the edge of the park, as Mark's voice crackled and echoed doing his checks. The guardsmen glanced at them, then waved as they went by, pausing at the end of the park for the entire group to gather.

Dar gazed down the street, and acknowledged the sense of nervous dread in her guts. This was something past her experience.

Something past all of their experience, save maybe her father. She looked at him as he came up to stand next to her, pale eyes flicking back and forth as he watched everything around them. "Dad?"

He focused on her. "Yeap?"

"Glad you're here."

Andrew reached out and clasped her shoulder, but didn't say anything in response.

"We all here?" Dar asked, assuming the leadership role. "Everyone geared up and got radios? Listen up." She turned to face them. "Stay together. No one go wandering around anywhere. This is a dangerous place."

Everyone sobered, and regarded her seriously.

"I don't know what we're going to have to do. If it's something I think is too dangerous, then we're not going to do it. Everyone understand me? No one is risking their lives for someone's stock options."

Everyone nodded. Even Alastair.

"We're not heroes." Dar pointed past them. "Those guys over there? They're heroes. They went into those damn buildings while they were falling around them to try and get people out. A lot of them are missing. We're not here for that."

One of the techs raised his hand. "Ms Roberts?"

"What?" Dar put her hands on her hips.

"We get the point." The tech said. "And that's really cool. But we all saw you on television hanging out of a ten story window putting kids in a basket." He looked past her. "So can we just go see how we can help out?"

Kerry scratched her nose to give her an excuse to muffle the smile on her face.

Dar sighed. "Let's go." She turned and started up the street, with her stolid little army behind her, walking carefully around lumps in the road that could have been anything.

**

Kerry decided, after a few minutes quiet walking, that the settling of the dust over everything reminded her not so much of snow, but of the underwater landscape she and Dar so often explored together.

The dust had that kind of silty, grungy appearance to it. It draped over everything, the sidewalk, the cars, anything on the sidewalk – just like it did underwater over discarded concrete blocks, and forgotten anchors.

The odd gust of wind from behind them stirred it just as an errant fin would, and she'd only gone half a block before she'd put her smaller mask on, convinced she could taste the stuff on the back of her tongue.

There were workers and firemen, an isolated few, walking the other way, but they all looked exhausted and none of them paid attention to either their surroundings or the passing techs. Some had breathing masks, some had full face units like they did, a few had nothing at all protecting them and were rubbing at their eyes with the backs of their hands.

It was quiet. Far off, she could hear the sound of heavy machinery, the faint hoots of a big truck or something backing up, and the sudden, unexpected sound of metal against metal that rang in the middle of her ears, making them itch.

It was surreal. If she looked behind her, she could see the clear blue sky of an autumn day, with wind riffling over the waters of New York Harbor. But ahead of her, she felt like she was going down into a duneon, as the air seemed to be getting thicker, and more hazy, and the ravaged building fronts rose high on either side of them.

"Put your masks on." Dar ordered, her voice startlingly loud.

Kerry removed her small one, and replaced it with the full face mask, adjusting the straps as it put a surprisingly comfortable veneer between her and the scene. The constriction of her vision almost seemed welcome, and after a minute she realized it was because it wasn't really very different from her putting her diving mask on.

They turned a corner and headed west, and now rising in front of them were fire trucks and cars, beaten and half destroyed.

"Wow."

Kerry glanced to her left, to find Nan there behind her mask. "Hey."

"This is unreal." Nan said. "I feel like I'm in a scifi film."

The sunlight filtered through the haze, outlining the destruction in a peculiar beauty. Kerry pulled her small camera from her pocket and paused, focusing and snapping a quick shot of it. "It's definitely unreal."

They walked along the center of the small cross street, and at the corner, turned right and faced north.

Everyone stopped in their tracks, the people in front like Dar and Kerry only barely avoiding being crashed into by those following until their eyes could take in what they saw and freeze their steps too.

"Holy shit." Mark said, after a few moments of silence.

**

Dar found it hard to absorb what she was seeing. The entire end of the street she was on was blocked by a huge pile of twisted debris, with heavy smoke coming out of its depths and chunks of ruin tumbling down towards her amidst the wreckage of cars, trucks, and vans.

Kerry put a hand on her back, easing closer. "I saw this on television but my God, Dar."

"Yeah." Dar looked around. "Don't think we can get through that way. I guess we better .. well, hell. I have no idea where we should go. Want to give your buddies a call, find out where they are?"

"Sure." Kerry unclipped her cell phone and opened it, finding the number and dialing as she switched her headset over to the phone from her radio.

Andrew and Alastair had walked a little further down the street and now had stopped, next to an ambulance that had been flipped on its side and burned almost past recognition. They studied it and shook their heads.

"This is fucked up." Mark finally commented. "This is really , really fucked up."

"Yeah." Dar said. "It is."

"This is crazy." ILS's MIS manager said. "They should just move all the freaking banking stuff out to Wyoming. We've got lots of power and bandwidth there."

Dar pondered that. Could they?

"Look at this place. Holy shit." Mark shook his head. "Man. I can't believe it."

Dar mimicked the motion and studied the scene.

The shops on either side of the street were blown out. Windows had imploded, driven inward by the blast of roiling debris the tall buildings had funneled down away from the collapse, no where to go but out and down , scouring the area raw.

It smelled, Even though the mask and the filters, she could smell rot, mixed with electrical burn, and garbage from the surrounding areas that hadn't been touched since Tuesday. Bags, covered in dust were on the sidewalk, buzzing with flies.

A puff of air brought a stronger scent to her, one of death, and she only just barely stifled a gag.

She realized she didn't want to be here. Dar never minded reality, and considered herself a straightforward person, but there was such a thing as being too much in the moment and she thought this might be one of those times.

"This is one bad thing."

Dar turned, to find her father at her shoulder. His voice was slightly muffled by the mask, but the somber look in his eyes wasn't. "It's hard to take in." She admitted. "It's like a bad scifi movie."

"Yeap." Andrew agreed. "Real bad things are hard to look at, and take serious." He went on reflectively. "Cause your mind says, nah, that can't be. Can't be so."

"But there it is." Dar studied the smoking, twisted debris. "And the more I look at it, the more I wonder what the hell we're doing here."

Her father snorted a trifle.

"We can't fix any of this, daddy." Dar told him. "This is broken past my ability to make it right."

Andrew studied her. "So what're you all doing here?"

Dar folded her arms over her chest. "Good question."

"Dar." Kerry came back over. "Okay, they're one street back down, and further in front of 2 World T... " She paused. "Where 2 World Trade Center was. There's a damaged subway entrance there." She pointed to the street they'd just come from. "There, and then the first left."

"Lead on." Dar told her.

They trooped back down to the corner and headed back the way they'd come, turning again at the corner Kerry indicated and walking down this wider street, full of wreckage.

The building faces here were ravaged. Parts of the brickwork had been scoured off, and the fronts were crumbled in and sagging. One of the roofs nearby was draped in metal debris, dripping down into the street and forcing them to circle it to get past, the metal stained in a dark rust color that made Dar's guts shiver.

Once past that, she could see a group of men clustered at the corner, near a set of stairs going underground. As they approached, the men at the edge of the group turned, and shuffled, splitting apart to allow two figures through from the center.

The one in front headed right for Kerry. "Kerry Stuart, you're a welcome sight."

Kerry extended a hand. "Hello, Charles." She could see his red rimmed eyes behind the shield of his mask. "Did you find your brother?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "They're still looking at the hospitals in Jersey. A lot of guys were found over there today." He said. "Glad you could come down here. We were just going to see how far we can see underground, maybe there's clearance enough to get to the line pipes."

"Okay." Kerry half turned. "I brought some help."

Charles nodded briefly. "Any help's welcome." He gave the rest of them a distracted look. "Do you have ...oh, yeah, you do have flashlights. Great. We can get going then." He gestured towards the half wrecked staircase downward. "See what we can see."

Another man walked over, in a vest with Verizon on it. He had a small breathing mask on his mouth, but no other protection. "You people ready?" He asked. "We got a lot of other things to do, y'know? I got people chewing my ass right and left here."

"Let's go." Charles motioned them all forward. The group by the stairs was a mix of Verizon staff, his own staff, a few people in different color protection suits with Sprint's logo, and one with MCI Worldcom on the shoulder.

They all looked at the newcomers in question. Charles gestured vaguely at them. "ILS sent a team to see what they could do help." He said. "I figure the more help the better." They started carefully down the steps, which were full of dust and debris, the railings half collapsed. "Be careful folks."

"Took them four hours to clear them this good." One of the other men said. "We're crazy to be going down here."

Everyone turned their flashlights on, and the space erupted into a dancing, bobbing light show as the beams reflected against all the dust in the air, and what they were walking down into. Kerry felt like she was descending into some cave, and she felt Dar's reassuring hand rest on her shoulder as they picked their way downward.

One of the Sprint techs was right in front of her, and he turned as they slowed, waiting for the people in front to continue. "Jake Davies." He offered a hand. "Thanks for coming down. We got some cell sites up and running on generator, but it's tough."

"Kerry Stuart." Kerry returned the grip. "We've got some satellite trucks and generator vans with us."

The men closest to her half turned, their ears perking up. "Yeah?" One said. "We could sure use those."

"Everyone could." Dar answered. "Once we finish seeing what the needs are, then we can talk about who gets what." Her voice indicated lack of debate on the subject.

The men looked at Kerry, then looked up at Dar.

"She's the boss." Kerry remarked. "Want to go on down? I think they're waiting for us."

The men turned and headed down the steps, with Kerry and her group behind them. It was very dark, and the ground was very uneven, and she reached the bottom of the stairwell with a sense of anxiety as the flashlights danced around the dark interior.

"Holy shit." One of the men said, as they moved a little further inside. His light shone on the walls, which had big, gaping cracks in them, tile scattered all over the floor and sliding around with a brittle sound as boots kicked them.

They moved past the turnstiles cautiously. "We sure this ceiling's all right?" One of the men from Sprint asked. "There's a ton of concrete over our heads."

"Look at that!" Another man said, shining his flashlight down the second set of stairs. A huge metal column was piercing the ceiling, extending down and bisecting the steps halfway down.

"Wow." Charles shook his head. "I don't know about this."

"Aw, c'mon you little girls." The Verizon man headed down the steps.

"Now there's a right jackass." Andrew started to push past Dar and Kerry, only to have his daughter casually block him with one arm. "Scuse me, rugrat."

"Dad. Relax." Dar started down the steps. "If asses need kicking, I'm capable of that."

Kerry was glad of the banter, since the area around her was giving her the severe creeps. Aside from being dark, it stank, and despite the filters her eyes were watering from it. Her imagination was painting almost anything in the corners, and she was halfway afraid of looking too closely in the glare at what might be there.

She edged closer to Dar instinctively, hooking one finger in her partner's belt as she followed her down the second set of stairs deeper into the earth, under the collapsed tower, down to the platform that was the subway.

There she had to halt, as Dar had halted, because everyone else had.

The flashlights couldn't do the scene justice. "Hang on." One of the Verizon men went over to one side, and worked a latch on something, accompanied by a long, screeching sound that made everyone jump.

A floodlight flickered on, dim with age. "Shit for batteries." The man muttered. "But it's better than nothing."

The light blared down the tracks, showing the destruction. A subway train car was at the end of the platform, it's top crushed in, the tunnel ceiling collapsed on top of it.

They were all silent for a moment. "Hope that was empty." Kerry murmured.

On the other side of the tracks, the entire tunnel was collapsed on top of the platform, blocking any further travel in that direction. The tunnel leading east, away from the towers, was still intact, but a light shown down it displayed debris covering the tracks as far as the eye could see.

A rain of debris suddenly came down from the ceiling, rattling down on the tracks.

"Shit." The Verizon man said. "This ain't going no where. We can't even get to the intake blocks." He ran his flashlight along the back wall. The concrete and steel pylons were cracked and bent and somewhere, a faint hissing noise was going off.

"No." Charles said. "Dead end."

Another silence. "Probably a lot of them." The Verizon man finally muttered. "Let's get outta here. Waste of time." He took a step backwards, as another rain of debris came down. "I tolja it would be. We should get back to the damn work site and do something productive."

Rude or not, Kerry was totally in sync with the idea. She kept thinking she heard things moving in the distance, and she could feel her heart racing as the shadows seemed to move closer. She backed up and got on the steps, swallowing hard to keep her stomach down.

The upper level was almost bright by comparison. Hazy sunlight was coming down the steps to the outside world, and Kerry made a beeline for it, relaxing only when she knew her head was out from under the cracked ceiling and she could see sky above her.

"You okay?" Dar asked, climbing up the steps at her back.

"Yeah." Kerry answered after a brief pause. "Just freaked me a little."

Dar patted her back in comfort, as they emerged onto the street, faced with the pile of wreckage and the sound of sirens blaring suddenly.

They both jumped. Dar turned in a circle, her eyes scanning the area.

"Shit. Now what?" The Verizon man hauled up out of the stairwell after them, looking quickly both ways. On the next street, a police car growled by, it's lights cutting the dusty air as the officer inside aimed a high beam light on one of the building fronts.

The Verizon man relaxed. "Looter." He guessed. "Bastards." He looked around again. "We should get the hell..."

"Away from here? I agree." Dar turned and counted quickly, making sure all her team had emerged from the suway. "Tell you what. We've got a tech office a block or so over. No lights but we can sit and talk about what we can do there."

The group gathered around her, most looking a bit shaken, and even Andrew assuming a somber expression on his face.

"You said you had sat trucks?" Charles said, finally. "I thought I heard you say that, Kerry." He turned to look at her. "Right?"

"We do." Dar answered for her. "So let's go put our heads together and figure out a plan." She suggested. "Maybe we can start from the other end, at the Exchange, and see where that takes us."

After an awkward pause, Charles nodded, though the rest just looked at Dar. "Sounds like a good idea." He ventured. "Sorry, I didn't... I don't think we were introduced."

"My manners are slipping," Kerry shook herself out of her funk. "Sorry, Charles. This is Dar Roberts. Dar, this is Charles Gant, the technical executive on our account." She paused, as she took in Charles wide eyed expression and the sudden, startled looks from the other men.

It would have been funny, if it had been any other situation. Kerry just couldn't appreciate the humor at the moment. "Let's go folks. You can gawk later." She said. "We need to get out of here."

"Git." Andrew started herding them towards the cross street. "Just git."

Another siren started screaming behind them, and they retreated around the corner, just as a second joined it, and then a third, rending the air as though the sound were chasing them.

**

Kerry sat quietly in the corner, perched on a wooden table shoved against the wall. They were inside a fairly small room in the back of the New York Stock Exchange, a space filled with pipes and racks that was both stuffy and dank at the same time.

There was a rough, wooden table in the center of the room and at the moment, Dar and Alastair were seated at it along with some of the guys from Verizon, Sprint, MCI and ATT all clustered around a set of yellowed blueprints spread on the year scarred plank surface.

The rest of them, Kerry, and the techs, and the lineman from Verizon, were back against the walls. Kerry knew she could have squeezed in next to her partner, but she was content to stay where she was and leave the wrangling to someone else.

They had their masks off, this far from the destruction, but she could still taste the dust and the smell on the back of her throat and she found she really just wanted to be out of here and done with it.

Maybe it was the juxtaposition of the pressure to bring up these banking systems put against the smell of death and the look in the eyes of the firefighters she'd seen. She felt almost ashamed they were putting out as much effort as they were do to what they were doing instead of helping all the people around them who had lost so much.

She hiked one knee up and circled it with her arms, briefly debating if she should ask Dar if she could go back to the bus and get back in touch with the rest of their organization, working to get the rest of the problems and outages sorted out.

As if divining this, Dar turned and looked back at her, one dark brow hiking up.

It felt like her mind was being read. Kerry gave her partner a wry look, then she glanced at her watch and lifted her own brows in question.

Dar held up her hand, then turned back to the discussion at the table.

Kerry settled back against the wall, wishing she'd thought to bring a bottle of water with her. "Going to be a long day." She commented to Mark, who was perched next to her.

"Yeah." Mark agreed. "I'm not really into this."

"Being here?" She asked, lowering her voice.

"This part." Mark indicated the building with a circle of his finger. "I was cool with being at the Pentagon. That was cool, helping those guys out. All I'm getting from this place is a what can you do for me vibe."

Kerry glanced past him, where the technicians who supported the building were standing around, arms crossed, dour expressions on their faces. "I think I'd rather be helping the people who can't even get back to their homes here."

"Exactly." Mark agreed. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I know this is important, but like, when you see people scraping up body parts from the street it kind of puts it in perspective."

Kerry grimaced. "On second thought, I'd rather be in here than seeing that."

Mark eyed her. "Sorry about that." He said. "I didn't really see it either. Just heard the guys talking outside."

The room they were in had power. The whole building did, driven by generators that were being fed by a line to a tanker barge tied up off the end of the island. All the other buildings around it were still dark, and the apartments that ringed the area likewise, but this place, and one or two others, had lights glowing through the windows still caked completely with dust.

"I'm not even sure how we're doing to help with this. All they're doing is arguing who should get the resources we've got first." Kerry shook her head. "If I was Dar, I'd be yelling already."

The door opened, and Andrew entered, a backpack on his back. He removed his mask and crossed over to where Kerry was seated, easing the pack off and setting it down on the table. "Lo there."

"Hey, dad." Kerry was glad to see him. "Where'd you go off to?"

He opened the pack and handed her a bottle of Gatorade. "Back to that bus thing of yours." He said. "Got tired of all the yapping here." He took out a bottle for himself, then offered one to Mark. "Got some folks outside doing more yapping, some of them gov'mint types."

"Great." Kerry opened the bottle and gratefully took a sip. "Thanks for the drinks. My throat's coated with that dust."

"Yeap." Andrew leaned against the table. "What's Dardar up to over there?"

Kerry had lost track of the conversation. "Talking to them about resources, I guess." She said. "Everyone thinks they're priority one. Same story as usual."

Andrew crossed his arms and took a sip of his own drink, shaking his head as he listened.

**

"Gentlemen." Dar rested her forearms on the table. "We've been around the block with this a dozen times. We need to get moving on it."

Charles lifted his hands and let them fall. "Well, that's mostly because we keep coming back to how in the hell do we start?" He said. "I've got a demarc here with a thousand lines that go no where."

"Look." The Verizon man stood up and put a dirt smudged finger on the blueprint. "Just like I told everyone else around here. This ain't no magic. Just because you people think you got some kind of priority here don't make the truth any different."

"Hey, it's your damn last mile." The MCI representative said. "What are you going to do about it?"

"What d'you think?" The Verizon rep shot back. "We lost a whole fucking switching center. You think I got one in my back pocket? Tell your big shot customers they gotta wait, like everyone else. We gotta find a place, we have to pull conduit... shit. It'll be six months to get service back to everyone down here."

He stood up. "I'm outta here. I've got things to do. C'mon boys." He motioned for his crew to join him. "So long."

"Then we'll bypass you and light the building up ourselves." The MCI rep said.

"Yeah?" The local man snorted. "Don't try it, buddy. We're all union here and any of my people will tell you to go kiss their asses. You people are gonna wait until we're good and ready." He strode out with his men behind him, slamming the door on the way out.

Dar sighed, and rested her chin on her fist. "Just what the situation needed. More assholes."

The door opened again, and one of the other ATT men came in. "Charles, the governor's rep is outside. He wants some answers."

"Maybe he should ask one of the jerks who just left for them." Charles pushed back from the table in disgust. "Jesus." He got up. "I'll be right back. I don't know what the hell I'm going to tell this guy, but I'll think of something."

He left, and took his assistant with him, leaving the rest of them to sit around the table in pensive silence.

"Okay." The Sprint rep said, after a long pause. "So, what are our options?" He asked. "I've got twenty customers leaving voice mails for me every ten minutes."

"We all do." The MCI rep agreed. "Except you people." He glanced across the table at Alastair and Dar. "Bet you're glad they're not your customers."

"Well now." Alastair settled back in his chair. "You're right. I don't have a dog in this hunt. We'd be happy enough to be one of your customers calling and bugging you but as it happens, the folks in Washington did hear we have some experience in this type of thing and asked us to stop by."

"Really?" The MCI rep said, after a pause. "Chuck didn't say that."

"Not sure he knew." Alastair admitted with a brief smile.

"So." Dar picked up the ball. "Let's discuss what the possibilities are. If there are any."

**

They clustered into the demarc room, only six of them this time as the rest waited outside. Dar was there along with Mark, the reps from the three telcos, and one of the techs who worked in the Exchange.

Kerry found a bit of wall to lean against, between Alastair and Andrew. "What a mess."

"You could squeeze in there if you wanted to." Alastair pointed at the room. "See what's going on."

"Nah." Kerry shook her head. "This is Dar's ballpark." She paused, the word triggering a memory. "Ballpark. We were supposed to play our first practice game today."

"Eh?"

"We joined a corporate softball league." Kerry said. "Today's Saturday right? We were supposed to all meet at the park today and see how bad we all are at playing baseball." She let her head rest against the wall. "Sorry I'm not there. I'd even enjoy striking out and falling on my ass right now."

Andrew patted her shoulder. "Can't last forever, Kerry." He said. "We'll be getting on home soon, for sure."

Kerry rubbed her eyes. "I hope so."

"This really stinks, doesn't it?" Alastair said, after a moment. "What in the blazes are we all doing here?"

"S'what I asked Dar." Andrew said. "Leave these here people to fix their own problems. They give me a hive." He added. "Don't appreciate nothing no body does for them, like it's owed."

Kerry thought about that. "Well." She said, after a moment. "I think maybe they do. I think they expect everyone to go the last mile for the city, because of what happened."

"True enough." Alastair allowed. "But does that mean we throw off all our own responsibilities to take on theirs?"

Andrew and Kerry looked at Alastair. "I think that's your call, isn't it?" Kerry asked, after a long pause. She studied the older man's face, which was tired looking and smudged with dust. "Can we just walk away from this?"

Alastair thought for a moment, his eyes going a little unfocused as he considered the question. "Sure would be nice to go home, huh?"

Kerry flashed back to that underground nightmare, and the strong desire it had spurred in her to turn and run and just keep on running right back to the warm sun and blue skies waiting for her back... home.

Home. Miami was home now, in a way Michigan had never been. "It would." She replied softly. "Its not that I don't want to help those guys in there. I just don't think it will end up being worth anything to us."

"Hm." Alastair rubbed his nose. "Not sure we should expect any worth out of it. There is something to be said for public service. We don't always get a return on an investment, at least in the short term. I have a feeling if we turn our backs on these bastards, we'll suffer in the long term." He paused. "Not fair, really."

"Jackasses." Andrew muttered.

"Let me go see what's going on." Kerry pushed away from the wall and headed over to the doorway, more to give Alastair room to think than because she thought she would be of any help inside. She eased into the space, spotting Dar's tall form to one side as her partner pointed out something.

She could sense the tension in the room. With a gentle excuse me, she edged behind the Sprint rep and came up behind Dar, finding a spot between her and the wall that was just about the right size for her to fit into.

With a gentle clearing of her throat, she fit into it.

Dar sensed her, stepping back and draping an arm over her shoulders with a complete lack of self consciousness. "Hey Ker."

"Hey." Kerry hoped the layer of dust on her skin masked the mild blush. "How's it going?" She studied the demarc, rows and rows of telecom cards in shallow racks festooned with tags in a rainbow of different colors.

Dar shook her head. "Hard to say where to even start." She admitted. "It's not just communications with the rest of the exchanges. Data comes in here from all over the world."

"Yeah." The tech from the Exchange said. "That's what I was trying to explain to those other guys." He walked over to the wall. "This stuff's just here in the Financial district. It's all local point to point." He indicated one rack. "This goes to the banking system. This goes to the major trading houses in like, forty cities."

He slapped the wall. "None of it's working."

The MCI rep put his hands on his hips. "I don't think we can do this." He said. "Even if we bring in a full sat setup, there's not enough transponder space up above to handle the traffic."

"They'd never let you anyway." The Exchange tech said. "The trading houses, and the other exchanges. The foreign ones. They've got security on this stuff big time."

Charles exhaled. "That's true." He said. "Most of those tie lines are ours. I've already had a call from London and Hong Kong."

"We had enough trouble getting space on the sat to relay our mobile cell units down here." The Sprint rep said. "They're jammed."

"They are." Kerry spoke up. "We've got a majority of the transponder space up there and we're using it for our customers."

The men turned and looked at her, then looked back at the maze of wires. "So what the hell are we doing here?" Charles asked. "Let's just tell them we can't do it. What can they do? I'm already toast and I don't have an ass left... begging your pardon.. " He glanced at Kerry. "For them to chew anymore."

Kerry looked at all the tags, then she glanced up at Dar. "What are our options, boss?"

Dar regarded the mass of wires. "Our options?" She asked. "Our options are which direction we're going to drive the bus out of here on our way out of town, unfortunately. We can't fix this."

The rest of the men nodded in simultaneous agreement.

"No way?" Kerry nudged. "Nothing at all we can do? I sure got the impression from the White House that this was really important. "

"It is important. " The Exchange tech spoke up again. "If the market doesn't open, that's a huge amount of money tied up that can't go nowhere."

"Can't they do it by hand?" Dar asked. "Y'know, computers are a lot younger than this building."

"You got to be kidding me." The tech said, in chorus with Charles and the MCI guy.

"Guess not." Kerry murmured. "Dar, there has to be something we can do. Even to bring up basic services. Isn't there?"

Dar removed her arm and put both hands in the pockets of her coveralls, tilting her head to one side as she gave the question it's just due. Everyone waited respectfully in silence, until she cleared her throat and shrugged slightly.

"Think of something?" Kerry could tell, by the body language alone, what the answer was.

"Won't fly." Dar demurred. "The only way we could help out is if we get a trunk line from here, over to Roosevelt Island. That's our closest node." She went on. "You'd have to do it underground."

"Impossible." The Exchange tech said, immediately. "Especially not without the union guys. I can't even get in a manhole without paying them through the nose."

"We'd never get the clearance." The MCI rep said. "He's right. That's all Verizon right of way and there's no way they'll let us run cable in there. Not taking money out of their pocket. I wouldn't either." He added. "If it was me."

Charles looked thoughtful. "Okay, it's impossible." He said. "But what if we could do it? What would that get us?" He asked Dar. "It gets us to your network. That's private. We all know it."

"You're riding on it right now." Kerry reminded him mildly. "I'm tunneling you between your headend to your office here."

"Sure, but you can't do that for all of us, and all of this." Charles said. Then he paused, when Dar didn't respond. "Can you?"

Dar merely shrugged slightly again. "No point in wondering, since it can't be done." She said. "But theoretically, if we could do it, and get the pipe over to my node, I might be able to do something useful with it."

There was a moment of silence, as the men all stared at Dar, who kept her hands in her pockets, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Are you shitting me?" The MCI rep finally said.

"No." Dar replied. "Excuse me." She removed her hands from her pockets and patted Kerry on the shoulder. "Be right back." She advised, as she slipped past, and ducked out the door.

The men turned around and looked at Kerry, who folded her arms across her chest. "Don't ask." She said. "But if she says it's possible, you can take that to the damn bank."

"Yeah." Mark spoke up for the first time. "But if we can't get that cable from here to there, it's crap."

"Yeah." The Exchange tech said. "Crap."

Charles sighed. "Well, I can call Verizon. I think someone in my company high enough is probably related to someone in their company high enough."

"Their name Bell?" The MCI rep asked, wryly. "Better start digging. You're gonna need him."

**

Kerry was glad enough to drop into a soft, leather chair, safe in the confines of the bus and surrounded by her colleagues. "Buh." She let her head drop back. "Glad we're here."

"Glad the wind is blowing off the water." Dar finished stripping out of her jumpsuit, tossing it over the back of the chair opposite Kerry before going to the bar and pouring herself a glass of juice from the waiting carafe.

"You got that right." Mark was toweling his face off. "This is some nasty shit. "

Kerry slung one leg over the arm of the chair and squirmed in the corner, letting her head rest against the soft leather. "You're right. " She said. "That was nasty."

"It was." Dar sat down in the chair next to her, extending her long legs across the floor of the bus and cradling her juice between her hands. "Glad it's over."

"Is it?" Her partner asked, in a surprised tone.

"Well, for now." Dar clarified. "Until they come back and talk to us about getting action on that cabling I don't see a reason for us to go back in there. Do you?"

Kerry shook her head emphatically. "I can live the rest of my life not going back in there given my choice, thanks." She said. "I'll be having nightmares about that underground for a month."

Dar reached over and curled her fingers around Kerry's arm, gently rubbing the inside of it with her thumb. "Sorry."

"Not your fault." Kerry muttered. "I could have stayed upstairs."

The door to the bus opened, and Alastair entered, putting his mask down and closing the door behind him. "Son of a bitch."

Dar's eyebrows hiked.

Her boss unzipped his dust covered overalls and removed them, sitting down on the nearby barstool to remove the legs.

"Can I get you something, sir?" The bus attendant zipped over, alertly

"Scotch. Double." Alastair said. "Straight up."

"Yes, sir."

"Governor's office get you again, Alastair??" Dar asked.

"Stupid son of a bitch." Alastair took the glass the bus attendant handed over, putting it to his lips and swallowing the contents at a gulp.

"Wow." Mark edged over to the counter nearby, giving his CEO a look of healthy respect. He opened a glass covered case, and removed a sandwich, sitting down to take a bite of it. "Want one of these, Mr. M?"

Alastair set his glass down with loud clacking sound. "I gotta tell you, ladies and gentleman." He said. "I'm about to just pull this company out of here." He got up and crossed over to where the chairs were, detouring long enough to grab a sandwich before he sat down across from Dar. "Son of a bitch."

Dar gave him a wry look. "Welcome to my world." She remarked.

"Lady, you can keep it." Alastair said. "I should tell that damn governor to take his threats and shove them up his ass."

"Threats?" Kerry frowned. "What on earth does he have to threaten us with? None of these are even our circuits." She got up and went over to the counter, selecting two sandwiches. "Sheesh."

"Hungry, boss?" Mark asked, giving her two fistful selection a quizzical look.

Kerry merely gave him a look, as she retreated back to her chair, stopping to deliver Dar her sandwich on the way. She sat down again and took a bite from the roll, glad of the tang of the horseradish sauce taking the taint of dust from her mouth.

"Thanks." Dar licked a bit of the sauce off her fingers.

"He said if we didn't come through on this damn Exchange issue, he'd cancel all our state contracts." Alastair said. "Can you believe that? In the middle of all this? I asked him if he didn't have enough problems without us pulling out and taking the rest of his offices down."

"I think he's just panicked." Dar chewed her mouthful of prime rib thoughtfully and swallowed it. "I think the federal government's all over him, and he's just punching at whatever's in reach." She took a sip of her juice to wash the sandwich down. "Besides, we committed ourselves to help out here."

"We did." Alastair agreed mournfully. "Sorry about that."

"I'm not." His CIO replied.

Kerry tilted her head to one side and regarded her partner. "Really?" She asked. "You like being here?"

Dar shook her head. "No." She licked another bit of sauce from her thumb. "I hate being here. But if those people get their heads out of their asses, and get that cable run, we can do something to help." She glanced at Alastair. "Did you explain that to him?"

"Do you think they can do it?" Kerry nibbled the edge of her sandwich.

"There's no technical reason they can't." Dar said. "If they have the cable, and they're the damn phone companies so they should have the damn cable, and they can find their way into the subway which goes right over onto the island, they can do it."

Alastair extended his legs and crossed his ankles. "Seems like a lot of work for two days." He said. "I did mention to the governor we had a dependency on those folks, but he wasn't hearing any of it. Said I should get it done myself."

Dar rolled her eyes.

"Hey, it's your reputation that got us into this." Her boss reminded her. "I wasn't the one who called the government and volunteered us."

"Like I did?" Dar shot back. "You're the one who told me to go do it. I could have told Gerry we didn't have a chance at fixing this."

Alastair paused and thought, then he shrugged. "Well you know, you're right. I did." He said. "But you never do listen to me, so why did you this time?"

"Children." Kerry cleared her throat. "Can we table the snipefest? We've already got enough issues here to deal with."

"Doesn't she work for you?" Alastair pointed at Kerry, staring pointedly at Dar. "Insubordination?"

"Don't I work for **you**?" Dar grinned suddenly. "What's your point?"

Alastair chuckled wryly after a brief pause. "Damned if I know. Someone get me another scotch." He waved a hand at the bus attendant. "All right. So you're saying if those folks do manage to get some agreement then there's a chance this can happen?"

Dar got up and went to the white board on the far wall of the bus. It was covered in scribbling, and she picked up an eraser and wiped it off. "Okay." She grabbed a marker and started drawing. "Let me just sketch this in."

Kerry took the opportunity to finish her sandwich. It was good, thinly sliced prime rib with just the right amount of salt, and a layer of creamy horseradish sauce on it. Her body was craving protein, and it really hit the spot.

Dar was drawing in a reasonable facsimile of Manhattan, with the Hudson and East rivers on either side of it. Her hand made easy, sure motions and after a moment, she was finished. "We're here." She made a mark near the tip of the island. "Mark, hand me that subway map over there will ya?"

"Sure." Mark hopped off the barstool he'd perched on and brought the map over. He handed it to Dar then stepped back out of the way.

"Thanks." Dar opened the map and spread it on the bar, studying it for a moment. "Okay." She turned to the whiteboard again. "Here's where we were today." She marked a spot on the map. "That's Cortlandt Street. Here's the disaster site." She marked a large square. "Here's where the triple pop was, and Verizon's CO."

Kerry watched in fascination, sipping her drink. Dar's sense of space had always intrigued her. She'd seen her partner draw underwater diagrams with a three dimensional precision that was amazing. Now, she laid out the diagram with absolute sureness.

"Now." Dar moved on to the east side of the island. "Here's Roosevelt Island. The subway comes in here.. and then the line that goes through there comes back around this side down to here." She tapped her marker on the map. "If they bring it up Lexington Avenue, to Central Park, they can come down the tunnel here, and they'll end up not that far from our node."

"That's a hell of a long way." Alastair protested. "Not that it looks that far on that board, but Dar, I've been on that side of the city. You're not talking about a trivial effort here."

"I know." Dar juggled the marker in her hand, flipping it end from end. "You didn't ask me if it was reasonable or likely. Just if it was possible."

Kerry was about to voice her doubts about the possibility of it happening it all, when her mind flashed back to a rainy night in the Carolinas and she felt her jaws click shut instead.

It was possible. Dar wouldn't have bothered discussing it if she thought it wasn't. Whether or not those other guys could achieve it was another question, but it was a question Kerry wasn't sure she should be asking.

It wasn't their problem, after all.

"That's a crazy amount of work." Mark spoke up. "If those guys have the reels, then maybe... but I don't think they can get through all that red tape, Dar. I heard those guys from the phone company talking - they're not into it at all."

"Well." Dar went to the bar and sat down on a stool. "Governor or no governor, I'm not going down there and do it for them." She said, quietly. "This is their city. It's their customers. I'm not crawling around in a tube kicking rats out of the way on their behalf."

Kerry nodded in relief. "Dar." She said. "I'll go wherever you go. But I don't want to do that either. Being under there today freaked me out."

"Right there with you." Mark said.

Alastair sipped on his scotch. "I can work with that." He decided. "Let me get hold of Ham and we'll go see that damn jackass again."

"Somebody call me?" Hamilton Baird entered the back of the bus, wiping his hands off on his handkerchief. "Why, hello there you all. Gentlemen. Ladies." He glanced at Dar. "Maestro."

"Just talking about you Ham." Alastair said. "Dar's got a plan. We've got to go sell it."

"Now that's different." The corporate lawyer drawled. "Ah got to tell you, Dar, I heard from those people down at Crisis on the Bay, or whatever they're calling that junk shop on the Hudson and they do think you're just the cat's litter box."

"Thanks." Dar said, in a dry tone.

"Did you really do something with a welder?"

"Soldering iron." Kerry supplied. "It really was pretty spectacular and brilliant, but that's pretty typical of Dar."

Dar looked at her, eyes widening a little.

"Do tell?" Hamilton half turned towards her, a humorous tone in his voice.

"When we're done with the chit chat, we've got a jackass to go see." Alastair said, pointedly.

Hamilton paused at the sandwich tray. "Do I have a New York minute to swallow this like a civilized man or should I have this lovely young lady put it in a blender and make it a smoothie for me?"

"Eat." Alastair waved a hand at him.

Hamilton picked up his sandwich and his drink and wandered back to the front of the bus, where a television was playing. After a moment, Alastair got up and followed him.

Mark dusted his hands off. "I'm gonna go see what routers I've got to mess with left back there." He unlatched the back door and disappeared, leaving Dar and Kerry alone in the small seating section.

They were both quiet for a moment, just looking at each other. Then Kerry got up and moved over to Dar's chair, taking a seat on the arm of it and leaning along the back.

"Children?" Dar rested her head against Kerry's shoulder. "You crack me up."

"Sorry." Kerry ran the fingers of her free hand through Dar's hair. "My brains running in circles. Can they really do this, Dar?"

"Probably not." Her partner conceded. "It would be like us running a cable from the office in Miami to our house. Possible, but pretty damn unlikely."

"Can they get it to our office at the Rock? We could take some of the traffic there, and not go all the way across to Roosevelt." Kerry suggested. "It's a little closer."

Dar considered that. "Which one of us is spectacular and brilliant?" She asked. "I forgot all about that. I have extra capacity at the office. We might be able to take part of the traffic there." She closed her eyes. "But I was serious, Ker. They have to step up, just like we had to step up yesterday and get the job done."

Kerry kissed the top of her head. "I love you." She replied, simply.

Dar smiled.

"Anything we can do to help though?"

"I knew you were going to ask that." Dar remarked. "Let's get Scuzzy up here, and see if she knows someone we can talk to. I met her on a subway. Maybe it's a sign." She reached over and put her hand on Kerry's leg. "Want to hear my ulterior motive?"

"That if they run the cable up to our uplink, we can piggy back our customers down here on it?" Kerry supplied promptly. "Starting with our tech office?"

Dar chuckled under her breath, a soft, light sound that echoed in the inside of the bus. "Busted!"

Kerry started laughing too, her body finally giving up its tension as her headache faded and her blood sugar stabilized. The sense of horror from the disaster site moved to the back of her mind, and the optimism that was more natural for her returned.

Dar turned her head and brushed her lips with her own, ignoring the rest of the bus just within earshot.

Shocking. Kerry returned the kiss, caressing Dar's face with gentle fingers. But who cared?

The whole world was different now.

**

Kerry rested her chin on her hand, as her other hand moved her mouse, clicking on another mail. "Go ahead, Air Hub. I think it sounds like everyone has everything pretty much together. "

"Roger that, Miami exec." The voice answered. "Traffic's not back to normal, but it's steady, and I think we can handle the additional service requests."

"Miami exec, this is Herndon." A female voice broke in. "We're getting calls from sites affected by the Pennsylvania outage. They want a status."

Kerry tapped on the mouse. "Do you have someone on now?"

"Yes, ma'am." Herndon answered. "Docson Pharmaceuticals."

"Put them on."

There was a moment's silence. "Put them on the bridge, ma'am???"

"Yes." Kerry said. "I only have two ears and one set of vocal cords. Put em on."

"Uh.. yes ma'am. One second."

Kerry released her mouse and picked up her cup of hot tea, taking a sip of the mint and raspberry flavored beverage as she waited for the customer to come on the line.

She was in the last section in the bus, a small, discrete office barely the size of her bathroom in the condo, but appointed in solid teak, and with the most comfortable leather office chair she'd ever encountered.

Plush and expensive, it was designed to provide a marginal business purpose for the courtesy bus and in the case of strange and utter emergency, it allowed whoever was using the bus at the time, always senior officers of the company, to perform whatever office it was they held in dignified good taste.

She liked it. It was private – there was a smoked glass wall that separated it from the rest of the bus, and a door she currently had shut. The glass kept it from being too claustrophobic, but the shading kept it from being a fishbowl and it was soundproofed to a moderate degree.

"Standby." Herndon warned her. "Mr. Eccles? You're on the line with Kerry Stuart, our VP of operations. Go ahead."

The only thing it lacked was enough space for Dar to be in there with her. "Go ahead, Mr. Eccles. What can I do for you?" Kerry spoke into the mic.

"Ah, okay, yes. Ms.. ah, Stuart was it?" A male voice came from the speaker, along with faint static.

"That's right." Kerry saw a popup start to flash, and she clicked on it.

Hey Kerry – got a minute?

Kerry typed into the box. *Go ahead Mari.*

"Well, listen. I need to know what's going on here. I've tried to get hold of my account rep, but he's not answering, and the support center said there's no one available down there so.."

Kerry clicked on another box, a text message passed through their internal messaging system rather than to her phone.

Scuzzy knows a guy. She smiled at the words. "Well, Mr. Eccles, I'm very sorry but you'll have to be a little more specific on the question." She answered. "There's an awful lot going on right now. I am sure you can appreciate that we have many issues we're working on, including yours."

She waited for the answer while she typed a response. *Scuzzy's going to be worth a promotion by the time this is over*

She'll end up a regional director. Can't wait for the conference calls with her on them.

Kerry stifled a laugh, appreciating Dar's wry humor. Then Mari's box started flashing with a new incoming message, and she clicked over to it.

Kerry, I've got a request here from the FBI to provide them with all our employment records.

Kerry's head jerked up. "What?"

"Well, I ... what?" Eccles answered. "What did you say?"

"Sorry." Kerry typed furiously into the machine. "Go ahead. I just have quite a few things working here right now."

"As I was saying, our offices have been down since Tuesday. I'm the first one to understand that there's been terrible things going on, and I assume your people are busy, but my business is at a standstill and I need to know what's being done for us."

What??? Dar's response came back.

What should I tell them? Mari asked.

"Hang on a minute, Mr. Eccles. Let me call up the support system and see what I can find out for you." Kerry said, as she typed *Mari, I'm getting Dar on this. She's with Alastair, and I hope also with Hamilton. They really need to handle that request. Who's it coming from?*

I'm on the way there. Dar's message somehow sounded as indignant as Kerry knew her partner probably really was.

Bring Alastair and our lawyer. Kerry advised her. "Okay, Mr. Eccles, what I have here on your outage is that you have three circuits down.."

Her cell phone rang. "Hold on a second, maybe that's news." She put the mic on hold and opened her phone without looking at the caller ID. "Kerry Stuart."

Okay, gotcha. Mari typed back. *I halfway understand the request, Kerry – it's become very obvious to a lot of people just how involved we are in the government, but I'm concerned.*

She's concerned? Kerry took her eyes from the screen briefly as he heard a slight buzz on the phone. "Hello?"

"Ms. Stuart? Hello? This is Danny down at the Pentagon.. I'm trying to get ahold of Mark. Do you know where he is?"

The door opened, and Dar entered the small room, bringing her restless energy with her. "Who's asking?"

"Danny, last time I saw Mark he was inventorying the routers here. Can I get him to call you? I'm on a few things right now." Kerry blocked out the distraction of her partner with difficulty.

"Oh, sure. Sorry about that." Danny said. "They're just all of a sudden chewing me to move some of our rigs and I don't want to disconnect anything."

"Let me see that.." Dar circled the desk and squeezed behind it with her, leaning over to peer at Kerry's screen. She clicked on Mari's box and typed into it.

"Okay, yeah, I'll have Mark call you." Kerry promised. "Bye." She hung up the phone and picked up the mic. "I'm on the bridge, hon. Don't start yelling."

"Idiots." Dar growled, reading the screen.

"Okay, sorry about that." Kerry keyed the mic. "Mr. Eccles, according to our system..'" She paused, as Dar's typing removed the view from her screen. "Sorry, hold on one more minute." She clicked the mic off. "Sweetheart, I need to see my stuff. I'm in the middle of something here."

"I know.. I know.. just one second." Dar muttered. "Freaking idiots... I'm having her give them Hamilton's number. He's earning his salary today, that's for sure."

Kerry took the opportunity to take a sip of tea. Despite Dar's interruption in her flurry of communication, she didn't mind having her partner hanging over her. It gave her a chance to rearrange her thoughts, anyway and the warmth of Dar's breasts pressing against the back of her head didn't hurt either.

"There. Sorry. Want me to pass that message to Mark?" Dar kissed the top of her head. "Since I messed up your flow here?"

"That would be awesome." Kerry took possession of her laptop back. "Now let me go and give some bs story to this guy about his circuits. Do you think they'll look at the Philly ones any time soon?"

"All the techs are here." Dar said. "Want me to send him a sat truck? Is he big enough?"

Kerry called up the account and studied it. Then she sighed. "Honestly, no." She said. "Let me see what I can do to placate him."

"Okay." Dar gave her shoulders a squeeze, then she edged out from behind the desk and got the door open. "Let me know if you need anything else, okay?"

"Absolutely." Kerry resisted the urge to come up with something else on the spot. "Thanks babe." She waited for Dar to close the door, then she went back to her mic. "Okay. Where the hell was I?"

**

Dar shut the door to the bus behind her and emerged into the area defined by the bus, and the sat trucks and equipment vans that had accompanied it. In the middle of the open space, they'd set up a rough wooden worktable, and on it was spread the underground map with a handful of techs and Scuzzy all looking at it.

She rejoined them, and the techs cleared a space for her. She was about to delve back into the underground puzzle when her conscience poked her. "Where's Mark?"

"He was just here." Shaun said. "Just a second ago."

"Mark!" Dar's voice lifted, ringing against the solid square of metal car bodies.

"Whoa whoa.. right here, Big D." Mark appeared from around the back of the bus. "I got that stuff you wanted me to look for.. what's up?"

"Pentagon was calling for you. Something about moving a rig." Dar replied briefly. "Call them. Tell them not to bug Kerry if they want you. She's not your sitter."

"Okay boss, you got it." Mark reversed course and headed for the bus. "My cell's gone wonky. It keeps losing sig. I'll tell them to text me on the PDA."

Dar returned her attention to the map, satisfied she'd taken one annoyance off her partner's plate. "Okay." She pulled out another schematic, one of the office building their office was housed in. "Let's say, by some miracle of political voodoo they do manage to get a wire in this direction."

"Y'know, they could." Scuzzy said. She leaned on the table with both hands, appearing pleased to be involved. "Those union guys, they ain't that bad, you know? They just want their stuff the way they want their stuff, if you know what I mean."

Dar nodded. "Matter of fact, I do know what you mean." She said. "But I don't lay bets on people I don't know. So all we can do is have a few plans in our back pocket." She tapped the blueprint. "As I was saying, if they do manage to get up here, then what? How do we get the signal upstairs? Riser?"

Shaun hunkered down over the plan, leaning on his elbows. "Here's something labeled electrical room." He said. "I think."

"But are there any openings between the room and the lower basement?" Kannan added, folding his long, slim arms over his chest. "I am thinking that will be the largest of the problems. I do not think they will let us put a hole through the wall."

Dar drummed her pencil against the plans. "I think we should relocate back to the office." She said. "At least half of us anyway. We can start figuring out what to do about the connection, while some people stay here and work on this end of it."

"You really think these guys are going to do this?" Shaun asked, in a quizzical tone. "I was talking to one of those Verizon techs. He didn't sound too enthusiastic."

"I don't know." Dar answered honestly. "But I do know if they do decide to come through, and we're not ready for it, we'll look like a bunch of jackasses. That's not on my agenda for today."

"Ah. Yeah." Shaun blushed a little. "Sorry."

"Lo there Dardar." Andrew had slipped between the bus and the sat truck and came up next to her. "What's the problem with them fellers? All these people round here looking to help, and all they're doing is push back."

He stuck his hands in his pockets, and cocked his head. "Don't make no sense."

"It doesn't really." Kannan agreed. "I don't understand it myself."

"You guys don't understand, yeah, that's right." Scuzzy spoke up. "These guys, like the tunnels, and the buildings and everything, they've been these guys like, home plate, you know?" She said. "Like, my cousin, he's a guy who works in the tunnels. His pop, he was a sandhog. You know what that was?"

"Fellers work underground." Andrew supplied.

"Yeah, but here, that's like, something special." Scuzzy told them. "This whole place, this whole city? It's built on what's underground. So they take it real personal about all them spaces."

Dar now folded her arms. "You know something?" She said, after the small space of silence that followed Scuzzy's speech. "I get it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." The ILS CIO said. "I get it, because our entire company is built on a foundation I laid. I take that really personally also." She said. "But right now, they need to either get their heads out of their asses and be part of the solution, or be the ones who are going to answer to the damn politicians when their banks won't open on Monday. I'm not covering for them."

Scuzzy nodded. "That's pretty much what I told my cousin to tell those guys." She said. "Cause you know what? They ain't into seeing their pictures in the Times, you know?"

"Let's hope so." Dar pulled a pad over and started to scribble on it. "So. Let's see."

"Ms. Roberts?" A strange voice broke in.

Dar looked up, to find Charles somewhat timidly sticking his head around the corner of the bus. "Yes?"

He took that as permission to approach. "Listen, we're having a meeting with the city and union folks.. would you mind stepping in and giving your view on the situation?" He asked. "There's some skepticism as to what our goals are."

Dar's brows lifted slightly.

"Okay, they all think we're nuts." Charles amended hastily, after a lengthening silence. "I'm not having much luck convincing them otherwise. I thought maybe you'd have a better chance at it." He looked hopefully at Dar. "Please?"

Dar let him wait for minute, then she shrugged and dropped her pencil. "Have it your way." She said. "The rest of you folks - let's get packed up to move back uptown. I don't care which lot of you stay here to work on the Exchange, sort it out among yourselves and be ready to head out when I get back."

"Yes, ma'am." Shaun said. "Will do."

"Let's go." Dar gestured for Charles to precede her. "I don't know if I can talk any sense into them but I guarantee they won't have any question about what our goals are when I'm done." She glanced behind her as she felt a presence, not really surprised to find her father strolling along at her heels.

"Well, we're sure not getting any help from the politicians on this one." Charles shook his head as he walked quickly ahead of her. "They want us to fix the problem, but they don't want to help us do it."

"Now." Andrew mused. "Why is that, ah do wonder?"

"Maybe we can ask them that when I'm done with the rest of those guys." Dar said. "Should be an interesting answer."

"Should be."

**

Kerry washed down a handful of Advil with a swig of her water, then she set the bottle down and shaded her eyes, listening to the chatter on the bridge without looking at her screen. Her cramps had returned with a vengeance and she was glad all she had to do was keep her ear glued to the activity and not do something more strenuous like move equipment around at the moment.

She knew there was a lot of activity going on around the bus. She could hear thumps and bangs, and voices through the thin aluminum walls, there was a flurry of coming and going through the bus's three doors, and the rumble of the truck engines of their little caravan was rattling the window near her shoulder.

"Miami exec, this is Vancouver hub."

"Go on." Kerry kept her eyes closed.

"Okay, we're finally back to normal traffic patterns. We released the last bandwidth advance for the airport." The Canadian hub reported. "Everyone's rather chilling out we think."

"Good to hear." Kerry murmured.

"Miami, this is Houston ops."

"Go ahead."

"Miami, we're running into some pretty big issues with new contracts that were due to start this week and early next." A male voice answered. "We've been told pretty much not to expect any circuit acceptance or demarc changes in the foreseeable future."

"In Houston?" Kerry's brows knit.

"Anywhere." The man answered. "We were told all the line techs, for telco and power too, are being sent to New York to help out there, and anyway, some are going regardless because of all the work available."

"We had the same issue in Washington believe it or not." Kerry replied. "What is up with that? How many techs do they think they're going to need here? It's not that big an island. I realize there was a lot of damage done but there are only so many guys that can fit in a manhole."

There was a bit of silence when she finished.

"Well, okay, but what are we supposed to tell all these clients?" The voice from Houston asked finally. "I'm running out of excuses."

Kerry drummed the fingers of her free hand on the table. "Yeah." She said. "That's a good question. Rather than answer every one of our hundreds of thousands of customers, I think we should probably put out a note to everyone."

"Miami exec, are they really serious, that no one is going to get connected until whenever?" Another voice asked.

"Another good question. We have some of the head guys of the different companies around here, let me go round them up and see if I can find out. It could be that a lot of the local companies are just putting everything on hold because they're not sure what's going to happen."

"That would be great, Miami exec." Houston said. "We sure could use the help, or at least, something we can tell all these people. We were supposed to bring thirty two branch offices of the local credit union here online, and the guy in charge there's my wife's brother in law. He's calling me every five minutes."

"Gotcha." Kerry reluctantly got to her feet. "Okay, folks, I'm going offline for a few. I'll try to get us some answers."

"Hey Kerry?" Mariana broke in. "Where are you guys?"

Kerry paused. "Battery Park." She answered, finally.

"How is it down there?" Mari asked. "I know we saw on the television, but..."

How was it. Kerry let the silence lengthen, as she tried to come up with an answer. "Its like a nightmare." She said. "The wreckage up close.. it's overwhelming. The dust, is overwhelming. The smell is horrific. "

"Wow." The man from Houston murmured.

"We went underground, to see if we could see any of the cables and I could swear I heard all those souls screaming."

Now there was dead silence on the bridge. Kerry took the moment to breathe, swallowing the lump that had come up in her throat. "So anyway." She continued, after the tightness relaxed. "Let me go see what I can find out from those telco guys. I'll be back in shortly."

She disconnected the mic and let it drop on her laptop, taking a moment to lock the screen before she eased wearily out from behind the desk and went to the panel door. She opened it and went through, glad the interior of the bus was now quiet.

The floor of the bus shifted slightly, and she paused, then continued on towards the outer door hoping the motion was just some last loading and unloading and not anything more ominous. She cycled the door and went down the steps.

The haze in the air seemed to have gotten thicker. Kerry wondered if it had, or if it was just her impression. Most of the sun was blocked out, and as she watched a layer of dust was settling on the table Dar had set up in the center of their technical encampment.

She felt the breeze blow into her face, and realized the wind had changed, and that accounted for the thicker air, and heavier dust. "Crap." She turned and went back into the bus, picking up the mask she'd left near the bar and adjusting it over her head.

It felt gritty, and uncomfortable. However, she tightened the straps and returned to the outdoors, turning her head to look around for the others she expected to find somewhere outside.

It was too quiet, though. Kerry walked around the bus, then around the satellite trucks sitting silently aligned with it. She opened the back door to trailer Mark had hauled, but it, too, was empty. "Where in the hell is everyone?"

Past the truck she could see clusters of workers seated in the park, their backs to the wind as they huddled over paper wrapped sandwiches. Nearby, on a table she spotted three of the company coolers, and cups that were clutched in many hands, and then at last she could see one of the bus attendants heading back towards her. "Hey, Sharon!"

The attendant skewed her route and ended up next to Kerry. "Oh, hi, ma'am. Did you need something? I was just giving those guys some of our sandwiches. They really don't have a lot of supplies down here yet."

"Do you know where everyone else is?" Kerry asked. "And absolutely, give those guys whatever we've got. They look exhausted."

"Well, you know I was just wondering that myself." Sharon said. "I was inside cleaning up and then I came out here, and everyone was gone. Maybe they went back to the site?" She glanced over her shoulder, then sneezed.

"You should have a mask on." Kerry told her. "This air's thick with who knows what."

"I know." Sharon said. "I'm going inside to get one now. It just started to get bad again. I got sidetracked listening to those men talk about that place. My God, Ms. Stuart. They were here when it happened. One of those firemen said bodies were dropping out of the sky all over the place."

Kerry grimaced. "Yeah." She pulled out her PDA and opened it. "Well, let me find out where the gang is. I thought we were trying to get out of here." She typed a quick message to Dar and sent it. "Ah, here are some of the guys now."

Shaun and Kannan were headed towards her, masks firmly settled on their heads and collars turned up on their jumpsuits. Kerry waited for them to come over, then she motioned them over to the bus and pointed on the other side of it. "Let's get out of the wind."

"Great idea." Shaun said.

They followed her to the far side of the vehicle and pulled their masks off. "Ms. Stuart, I am very apprehensive here." Kannan said. "My brother has just called me, and has said there are many instances of people from my country being hurt here."

"Here?" Kerry looked around. "What's going on?"

"Everywhere." Shaun said. "Jerks in pickups with guns shooting out convenience stores and some guy got gunned down on the street because he had a turban on. I heard it on the news."

"What?"

"It's true." Kannan said. "My family is very upset. They do not wish me to stay here."

Kerry nodded. "Absolutely." She said. "Where is your family? We'll get you there." She felt her PDA buzz, and she opened it. "Hang on."

Hey Ker.

I'm in a meeting with the telecom people. Wasting my time mostly. What's up?

DD

"Well, isn't that handy." Kerry muttered. "Hold on a second guys, I need to ask Dar something."

"No problem, Ms. Stuart." Kannan said. "I am just glad to be back here, with our vehicles. I am going to go inside our camper there, and perhaps do some wiring while we wait." He headed off towards the camper Mark had brought, not without glancing around carefully before he crossed between the bus and it.

"That totally sucks." Shaun said.

"It does." Kerry agreed. "Where's his family? In Virginia?"

"Arizona, I think. That's why they're so freaked. One of the killings happened there." Shaun informed her. "So maybe his family should take off and go somewhere else, huh?"

"Could be." Kerry tapped into the PDA. *Good timing. I was just on the wire with Houston, and we're getting complaints from all around that we can't get circuits completed. Can you find out if that's a kneejerk one day thing, or if we're in real trouble? Where are you? It's getting creepy here. We should get out of this damn dust cloud.*

She hit enter. "Where were you guys, with Dar?"

"No." Shaun shook his head. "We were with some of the Verizon guys, trying to make friends with them. We were in one of the manholes a little bit away from here, just helping them out and stuff."

"Did they say anything?"

Shaun shrugged. "They're just linemen." He said. "They're.. I don't know, it's hard to figure them out. I think they're pissed because of all the destruction, and all that, but they also were almost sort of jazzed because of all the OT they'd be making."

"Welcome to humanity." Kerry remarked dryly. "The one truly consistent trait of the species is self interest. But if that's the case, why are they pushing back so hard in helping us? If they want OT, we're sure offering a lot of it."

"They aren't." Shaun shook his head. "They don't' give a squat about it, in fact, they thought the idea was sort of slick, to run a cable up the subway. It's their bosses who are being such a PITA."

"Uh huh." Kerry mused. "I wonder why."

"Maybe they want a payoff." Shaun suggested. "I heard it was like that here."

Kerry's PDA buzzed. "Hang on." She tapped the new message.

Charles is calling his head office. He'll let me know. These Verizon bastards won't budge.

Kerry tapped her stylus on the edge of the PDA, then tapped a response. *Offer them a payoff. I was just talking to Shaun, and he said he talked to the linemen. They're fine with running the cable.*

The message came right back. *You're kidding me right?*

No. Kerry typed back. *It's New York, Dar.*

We're a public company and I'm an officer of it, Ker. Dar responded. *I could get thrown in jail for that.*

Kerry somehow doubted it. *Then tell Alastair to do it. He's there, right? Dar, I love you but please don't tell me ILS has never paid a bribe to get something pushed through.*

ILS has. I haven't.

Despite it all, it made Kerry smile. Ruthless, smart, quick thinking, driven.. and yet, there was a line that Dar just wouldn't cross. It was a beautiful thing, really. *Okay. Just a thought. I can't really think of what else is holding their management layer back, if the line boys don't care. I thought it would be them, the union guys who would be balking.*

Good point. Dar responded.

"Hey, guys?" Kannan came running back out. "Did we fix it? Did Ms. Roberts do this already? I am amazed!"

"Huh?" Kerry's head jerked up. "We haven't done anything. Why?"

Kannan skidded to a halt, his thin face crumpling in confusion. "I have just heard, on CNN, that they have tested the systems successfully, for this Exchange? Is that not what we were supposed to be helping with?"

Kerry and Shaun exchanged deeply puzzled looks.

Kerry opened her cell phone and dialed it. "Are you sure?"

Kannan spread his arms out and lifted his hands slightly. "That is what the new said. I am sure of that."

The phone crackled, ringing once and then crackling again as it was answered. "Dar?"

"Yeah." Dar's voice sounded slightly muffled. "Hang on, I'm going outside." She paused a moment. "Go ahead. What's up?"

"Kannan just heard on CNN that they successfully tested the Exchange computers to work on Monday. Are we doing this for nothing?" Kerry asked.

"Huh?" Dar said. "Ker, I'm in the Exchange. We're in the technical center. Trust me. Nothing's being tested here. They just lost power to the data center and there's no AC. Nothing's even turned on." She said. "And listen, I do appreciate the suggestion before, it's just not my style."

"I know hon." Kerry said. "So if nothing's working, what did they test?"

"The public trust?" Dar asked. "I haven't a clue. Hang on, Alastair? Kerry just said they announced on the news that they tested the Exchange systems and they were all good to go for Monday. You know what's up? What? No? Okay." Her voice got louder. "Ker, we don't know squat here. I'll try to find out."

"Okay sweetie." Kerry sighed. "I'll do the same. Maybe I'll call my mother. Maybe she knows something." She said. "It's getting really cruddy here. We moving out anytime soon?"

"Soon as I get back there." Dar promised. "Hang in there, love."

Kerry exhaled. "I'll do my best." She said. "But do me a favor huh? Kick their asses and don't hang around to take names. We should get out of here."

"Will do." Dar said. "Talk to you shortly."

She hung up the phone. "Dar says they're not testing anything." She told the techs.

"So... the news was a lie?" Kannan asked.

Kerry shrugged a little. "I don't know." She said. "I don't really know what that's all about." She indicated the trailer. "Let's go see what else they say about it."

"Weird." Shaun said. "But hey, we've got oreos and milk in there." He said. "If you don't mind paper cups."

"Lead on." Kerry found the thought of the familiarity of Oreos appealing. "Let's see what else they're putting out on the news. Maybe aliens have landed. Who knows?"

**

"Look, what you're asking is nuts." The stocky man threw his hands up and let them drop. "Lady, even you know it's nuts. Run a cable up to midtown? In the subway? Where the hell you think we're going to get the cable? Macy's?"

Dar stared him down. "You're a phone company. You don't have cable? What the hell do you use then, tin cans and strings?"

"Not that much cable!" The man protested. "You know how much that stuff costs?"

"Well, sir.." One of the other Verizon reps cleared his throat. "We got that cable. In Jersey."

The man whirled. "Shut the fuck up. Who asked you?"

"If you have the cable, why shut him up?" A tall man in a rumpled tie and suit spoke up from the back. "Why the stall?" He asked. "This isn't some fucking game, buddy."

The man from Verizon turned back to him. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Aide to the governor." The man said. "Who maybe wants to know why someone's holding up a critical promise of his."

The man didn't seem fazed. "Yeah? He can kiss my ass. Him and his let's squeeze the union bullshit." He said. "I'm not putting my guys down those holes for you. I don't give crap what you promised."

Ah. Dar revised her opinion for the third time in less than five minutes. At first she'd suspected Kerry was right, and the man was looking for a payoff. Then she'd decided he was probably really looking for an excuse not to have to bust his ass.

Now she figured he might just be an asshole with a grudge. "Listen." She brought the room's attention back to herself by standing up. "Let's can the bullshit. What's at stake here is a lot bigger than any of us. No one wants to be on CNN explaining why they deliberately harmed the nation."

"Aw, c'mon with the crap already." The Verizon man rolled his eyes.

"She's right." The governor's aide said. "Matter of fact, I'm going to call the cops in and have your ass arrested. Maybe you're in it with the terrorists. Sure sounds like it to me."

"Would you shut up?" The man said. "You ain't calling no one. And you lady, even if we did have that stuff there's no way we could lay it out in time. It aint' possible."

The governor's aide opened his phone and dialed. "Hello? Yes. Is this Agent Jackson? Yes, this is Michael Corish from the governor's office. Yes, thanks, I am. Listen, it's come to my attention we could have someone here who might be of interest to you. Can you send a few boys over to the Exchange?"

Everyone looked at each other, then back at the aide.

"You will? Great. I'll wait here for them. Thanks." He closed the phone and regarded the man from Verizon. "Hope you like body cavity searches."

The man's jaw dropped a little. "What are you crazy? I'm not a terrorist!"

"Doesn't matter." The man said. "You're in the way, and I'm going to remove you." He turned to the man who'd spilled the beans about the cable. "Now. You want to help us out here, or go with your friend?"

The man swallowed.

"You're bluffing!" The other man said.

"No." The aide replied. "I just called yours. Here we have a room full of people who all have one goal, which, is what our government wants. " He gestured, taking in the other telco men, and Dar and her group. "They're working hard to do what we need, and your stupid pigheadedness is blocking that. You're worthless. We don't need you."

"Listen! Who do you think ya are, anyway? My uncle..."

The door opened, and a man in dark, paramilitary looking clothing entered. "Mr. Corish?"

"Here." The aide said. "It's that fellow over there. You might want to question him on his background."

The agent nodded, and unclipped the strap on his sidearm. "Let's go buddy. Don't make any trouble for me." He advanced around the table, the rest of the crowd parting before him as the man from Verizon backed up against the wall.

"Hey!" The man said. "Wait.. I ddin't do nothing!"

The agent grabbed his arm and swung him around, slamming him against the wall as he pulled a set of handcuffs from a case in the small of his back. "Then you've got nothing to worry about, right?" He snapped the cuffs on and got him in a solid grip around one bicep. "Thanks, sir. We'll take it from here."

"Thanks for coming so soon, officer. I, and of course the governor, really appreciate it." Corish said. "Let me get the door for you." He smiled as the man was dragged out, then he slammed the door and looked around at the room. "Where were we?"

"I'll help." The other Verizon man said quickly. "I know where we've got that cable. But I'll need someone to pull some strings for us to get it on a barge over here."

"I think I can help you with that." Corish said. "Let's go outside and make a few calls." He glanced around. "The rest of you better be ready to move once we get this accomplished. I don't want any more excuses."

He left, taking the chastened Verizon man with him, closing the door behind them both.

"Holy shit." Scuzzy whispered.

Hamilton crossed his arms, looking as nonplussed as Dar had ever seen him. He turned and looked at her and they both simultaneously shook their heads. "Well." The lawyer said. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but now ah do understand in full that old Southern saying that goes something like.. ah do declare!"

Andrew had been sitting quietly in the corner, and now he snorted audibly. "Mah neck of them Southern woods they said "Somebitch!"

"I can't believe that just happened." Charles pushed back his chair from the table.

Dar stood up. "Well, it did." She veered towards the practical. "So that means you all need to get your line folks in here and get ready to hook up to one end of that damn cable. We'll go prepare the other end. "

Charles nodded slowly. "I'll get my guys in here. Roger, do you have a big router we can all use? I don't see much point in running separate links on this end if Dar's just going to combine them on hers."

The MCI rep opened his cell phone. "Let me see what they got on the truck. I think we do." He said. "Sam, I've got a service trunk going up to the roof, you want to tie your cell temps in there?"

The Sprint rep nodded. "We can do that. Yeah." He said. "Tell you the truth, folks, I don't much know what's going on with the FBI and all that, but I'm glad we're moving forward with this. Sitting still and listening to people pissing on each other's not my idea of a good time."

"Mine either." Dar agreed. "Let me go pack up my crowd and get back up to midtown. I've got three sat trucks, anyone need them? I'm reserving one for our technical office. I need to get them online for some critical backhaul."

"I'll take one." Sam said. "I can use the back channel for the cell sites. I hear they're going to start letting people back down here, at least on the east side, tomorrow or maybe Monday."

"I'll grab one for our business office." Roger said. "Thanks Dar. Any little bit helps."

"Then we'll take the third one off your hands." Charlie said. "Even though we've got our tie lines up thanks to your generosity, we'd like to bring up a communications center we can work out of down here."

"Great." Dar said. "Now you can all do me a favor and get your operations groups to take the lid off completing new orders in the rest of the damn country. You're not going to need all those techs here."

"We can." Charles said. "But it's not so much us, Dar. I talked to my ops VP before when you asked, and it's the local LECS. They won't drop the last mile. I've got a call into my counterpart at Qwest and Bellsouth, trying to see what's going on. "

"I heard they'll start releasing that on Monday." Roger spoke up. "Everyone outside the Verizon area, anyway." He added. "So at least that's probably good news."

"If it's true." Charles said.

"Come on then." Dar gestured to the door. "Bring whoever you need to take them over. I'd rather get moving before they come with some other request we have to find a way to support." She waited for the men to walk ahead, then joined Alastair and her father as they followed behind.

"Glad we're going to end up getting somewhere from this." Alastair said. "But I can't say I'm enjoying the ride."

"That was pretty scary." Dar admitted. "I'm not sure what the rules are anymore."

"I ain't sure there are any." Hamilton said. "Listen, Maestro, no one loves your ass kicking attitude any more than little old me, but I'm not sure even this Louisiana lawyer could dig you out of the spook's palace so do me a little old favor and keep a sock in it, will ya please?"

Dar was silent for a moment, then she shook her head. "I'll do my best." She finally muttered. "But this is getting down a dark road I'm not sure we want to be on."

They emerged into the dust filled, overcast street, and pulled their masks on. "I'm not sure we've got any choice left." Alastair said. "I thought we might get some good press out of it, but after what you told me about them giving that story about the systems being fine, I'm not so sure."

They walked down the street, passing firemen and other search workers trudging back in the opposite direction. They got only cursory glances, as the exhausted men went back towards the disaster site, some holding small brown bags in their hands.

One looked up at Dar as he went past, his eyes briefly focusing on the logo patch on her jumpsuit. He lifted the small bag and nodded at her. "Thanks."

Dar had no idea what he was talking about. She lifted a hand and gave him a wave. "Anytime."

They moved on. "Alastair, I'd be happy if we just get out of this here thing with our skins intact at this point." Hamilton remarked, in a serious tone. "We can write it all off as service rendered. The press may not know what we did, but they're going to have to write one mean non disclosure if it's going to keep us from telling the stockholders."

"Well, that's true. We do have to book the expense." Alastair said. "Anyway, I'm glad we're moving back up to the office. We can start a triage center for our accounts there. See what we can do for them while your team is getting the rest of this ready, Dar."

Dar was merely looking forward to a shower and a cold drink, at this point. "Sure." She walked on, clearing her throat a little.

The streets around them were covered in dust, as were the buildings, and the cars alongside either curb. But there were a few now that weren't so covered, and in two places it looked like emergency service organizations were setting up shop.

The strangeness was wearing off, she realized. She was getting used to seeing this destruction, just like she was almost used to the rough cotton constriction of her jumpsuit, and the claustrophobic enclosure of the mask she was wearing.

The late afternoon sun could barely penetrate the cloud of smoke and dust, and as she walked, she had a sense they were moving through some strange otherworldly dreamscape, kicking up puffs of dust as they went along in quiet procession.

They had won the day. They were getting what they wanted. Despite all that, Dar felt a sense of unease at how the achievement had been made. Was the Verizon crew leader really in trouble? Or would the city just keep him out of the way long enough for them to get what they wanted?

He'd been removed so easily. Dar exhaled, acknowledging that Hamilton's advice had probably been very sound. She had no desire to be in that guy's shoes, despite the fact she felt he was just speaking his mind and heart regardless of what his real motives were.

What did that say about the situation?

"Ah. I think someone's looking for you, Dar." Alastair poked her.

Dar started out of her inner musings and looked up, to find a somewhat short, jumpsuited figure moving towards them out of the gloom. Even in the coverall and mask, Kerry was immediately recognizable. "I think you're right."

Dar sped up her steps and eased between the others, watching Kerry's path alter as she was, in turn, spotted. She wondered if her partner had some new problem or whether she just..

Dar was betting on the just. "Hey." She greeted her as they neared. She could see the pale green eyes watching her through the mask, and even through the two layers of plastic, she could also see the smile in them.

"Hey." Kerry responded. "There you are."

"Looking for something?" Dar's brows lifted.

"You."

"Ah." Dar smiled and gave her a quick hug. "C'mon. We're heading back to the bus." She indicated the crowd around them. "We're leaving the sat rigs. We're going to park one near our tech office, and give one to each of our friends here. Then the bus, and us, are heading back to the office."

"Did we make any progress?" Kerry willingly turned and kept up with her.

"Yes. But not the way I'd like to have." Dar admitted. "I almost wish I'd taken your advice and got out the checkbook."

"Really?" Kerry frowned.

"Really. Let's get to the bus, and I'll tell you all about it." Dar glanced casually around. "I think it threw all of us for a loop."

"That doesn't sound good."

"I'm not sure it is." Dar put her arm around Kerry's shoulders. "In fact, I'm pretty sure it isn't. There's a lot more going on under the hood here than we know."

"Ugh." Kerry grunted. "Right now all I want under my hood is a cold beer and a shower."

"I can make that happen." Dar assured her.

"I bet you can."

**

Kerry leaned both hands against the tile wall and let the shower beat down over her shoulders. The water felt so wonderful, she was contemplating just falling asleep where she was, but after a minute, she straightened up and reached for the scrubbie sitting in the stainless steel basket.

She squeezed a blob of apricot scrub on it, and started soaping herself. It felt good to feel the clean tingle, though she'd worn her jumpsuit she'd felt like the dust had formed a film on her skin and she was literally itching to get it off.

It was good to be back by the office, away from all the destruction. Kerry rinsed herself off, then applied a good handful of shampoo to her hair and scrubbed her scalp. Up by the hotel, there were people and cars, and a lot of activity, a far cry from the ghostly wasteland they'd so recently left.

With the last of the soap circling down the drain, she shut the shower off and stepped out, wrapping herself in the thick towel that was hanging nearby. Even that felt good and she dried herself off, glancing briefly in the half fogged mirror at her reflection.

Grim. She stuck her tongue out at the disheveled image. Then she got her underwear on and ran a brush through her hair, before she wrapped the towel around her neck and emerged from the bathroom.

It was quiet. The windows were surprisingly sound proofed, and the room itself had a thick carpet, and a comfortable king size bed – not a specially grand space, but right now it seemed like heaven to Kerry's tired eyes.

She pulled on a pair of carpenter pants and a polo, but left her feet bare as she went over to the desk and sat down next to it, picking up her water bottle and taking a swig.

Laying down was an option, but she knew if she did, she'd fall asleep and she wasn't sure she wanted to do that. Dar was down in the basement of their office looking for pipes, and she wanted to wait for her to come back up to the room to see what she'd found down there.

The team – she'd started to think of all of them as just one big team – would probably want to gather for dinner. She'd heard them talking on the ride back up from Battery Park, and there was something of a group mind going on she could appreciate in the situation.

She did appreciate it. However, on a personal level, she would have rather spent the time alone with Dar simply decompressing. Her body wasn't that tired, but her mind was, having spent hours and hours chasing problems around in circles.

"I don't think I'm up to a communicative evening," Kerry remarked to the empty room. "But let's see what happens." She glanced at her laptop, then she extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles, leaving the machine sitting closed on the desktop.

Her cell phone and PDA rested next to it, both blessedly quiet for the moment.

That was good. She was tired of telling people what to do, and getting mostly bad news from all quarters. She wanted to be able to just chill out, and not feel guilty that she was letting issues lie without her attention.

There was a point, she had discovered, when you just lost the ability to quantify everything you had to do when there was just too much of it. It was like trying to dig a hole in the sand by the ocean – fast as you kept digging, it kept filling.

She'd found that point today, just before she'd shut her laptop and turned off her mic. No matter how many customers she'd talked to, there was more waiting, no matter how many times she explained the situation, there were people that begged the exception and to their credit, most of them were not frivolous requests.

Never enough.

Kerry took a swallow of her water, then decided she really wanted something stronger. She got up and put the cap on the bottle, then she started looking around for some shoes, figuring even a seat in the corner of the bar would probably keep her from falling asleep until Dar finished fiddling.

Maybe they'd even have some decent jalapeno poppers or something. Kerry found her boots and put them on, then she tucked her room key into one of her side pockets and slipped out the door and into the hallway.

It, too, was quiet. She passed one other person on the way to the elevator, and rode all the way down in solitary splendor to the floor which housed the bar. This area was more crowded, and she spotted a few familiar faces as she made her way into the dark, wood lined space. "Hey guys."

"Hey boss!" Mark waved her over. "The big Kahuna was just checking one more thing, then she said she'd meet us up here."

"Good." Kerry claimed one of the leather chairs in the midst of her techs. "Someone get me a beer, please. The bigger the better."

"Right you are, ma'am." Shaun got up and trotted over to the bar.

"Long ass day, huh?" Mark asked. "Man, I don't envy those phone guys though. I wouldn't want to be creeping around in that subway at night."

"No way." Another of the techs agreed. "They've got balls." He paused, and blushed. "Sorry ma'am."

"No problem." Kerry sighed. "They've sure got more balls than I do, anyway." She glanced at Mark. "So what's Dar doing now? Did you find a route through the basement?"

Mark shook his head. "No such luck." He replied, mournfully. "I can't even get them to tell me where our damn demarc is. They have to call some guy who was on vacation or something to find out. We couldn't find any easy way to get from the building out."

"Ugh." Kerry accepted the large, frosty mug of beer Shaun was handing her. "Thanks. Where's Kannan?"

"In our room." Shaun said. "He's still pretty freaked out. I told him to just order some room service and relax."

Kerry took a sip of the cold beer and swallowed it "Good choice." She complimented Shaun. "And good idea to have Kannan just rest tonight. I have my admin trying to get him a flight out of here tomorrow to go home. I don't think he's really in danger here – after all, so many people here in New York are from India it's not really unusual – but I understand how he feels."

"Yeah, I know." Shaun picked up his own glass, which seemed to be some kind of highball. "He's just freaked out by all of it. Sucks too, because he's our best WAN guy."

It did suck. Kerry sat back in her chair and looked around the bar. Aside from her group, there were several others, clustered around the scattered tables or watching the three television sets mounted on the walls.

Ordinarily, the screens would have sports on them, she figured. Basketball, or football, or whatever ESPN was serving up. Now, all three were tuned to CNN, and those sitting around seemed fixed on the pictures, which showed again and again, the horrific sights she'd gotten to know up close and personal earlier that day.

Shots of the wreckage. Shots of the Pentagon. Shots of a burned field in Pennsylvania. Talking heads. Shots of the president, with his bullhorn standing on a mound of debris. More talking heads. Shots of smoke, of the mayor at a funeral, of the barges removing remains to Fresh Kills landfill along with mounds and mounds and mounds of debris.

Fresh Kills. What a cosmically ironic name. Kerry was truly surprised someone hadn't changed it just to spare everyone the wince. It was Dutch, she'd learned, the old word kille meaning water channel and the place itself was an estuary that drained wetlands into the sea, but in the current context it was ghoulish and she was tired of hearing it.

Certainly, she'd winced. That reminded her of something, and she set her beer down, removing her cell phone from her belt and opening it. She looked up a number, then pressed the dial, listening to the ring until it was answered. "Hello, mother."

"Wh.. oh, hello Kerry!" Cynthia Stuart answered, sounding surprised. "What a surprise." She confirmed the sound promptly. "I hadn't expected to hear from you this evening... where are you? Still in New York?"

"Yes. Across from our office at Rockefeller Center." Kerry replied. "How are things there?"

"Frustrating." Her mother answered honestly. "I have to say it's very difficult talking to people, who cannot see past someone with perhaps a different religion, or so on, and who must assume everyone who is from somewhere else is suspect."

"I heard about the attacks." Kerry said. "I'm sorry. We encountered that here, one of our techs is from India and he's had a tough time."

"Terrible." Her mother agreed. "I have to say your being there also makes me quite anxious, however, Kerry. Angela is also concerned."

"Thanks." Kerry said. "It's been a rough day. We were down at the disaster site earlier. We just got back uptown a little while ago."

"Oh my." Cynthia gasped a little. "I had no idea! I saw the pictures on television just before – it seems absolutely horrific." She added. "Hold on, Angela, I have your sister on the phone. She seems right in the middle of everything again... what.. oh, all right. Yes hold on.."

"Ker?" Angie's voice came over the line. "Are you nuts? Get the hell out of there!"

"Hi, Ang." Kerry gave her tablemates a wry look, and a shrug. "Family." She mouthed. "Get out of here? We're in the lobby bar at our hotel. What's wrong with it?"

"Kerry, cut it out! Why are you guys there?" Angela actually sounded upset. "It was bad enough when you were at the Pentagon, but Jesus!"

Perversely, after being horrified the whole day, now Kerry felt the need to downplay the whole thing. "C'mon, Ang. There's a whole city full of people here in this city. Chill." She told her sister. "We had to come here. There's a lot of stuff that needed taking care of."

"How long are you staying there?" Angie asked. "Have you heard what's going on here?"

"I heard. People are just going a little crazy, I think." Kerry said. "We have a lot of customers down here, and some things we're doing for the government. It's not just me and Dar, either, our CEO is here, and a bunch of our corporate people."

"So you and Dar aren't running the planet as usual?"

Kerry spotted her beloved partner entering the hotel, surrounded by men, all of whom were glued on whatever it was she was telling them. "Who us?" She said. "Nah, we're just little fish here." She watched Dar, hands moving in a decisive motion, dismiss her acolytes who scattered in all directions. "We're just a couple of nerds to these guys."

"Uh huh." Angie said. "Sis, be careful, please? It's easy to get hurt in all the stuff going on."

"I will."

Dar stopped at the front desk and leaned over the top of it, talking to the short, well dressed woman behind it.

"Ker?"

"Huh?" Kerry wrested her attention back to her phone. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I said, here's mom back. Be careful!"

"Here comes Big D." Mark spoke up. "Looks like she could use a beer too, Shaun."

"Hey, you'd think my family were Irish bartenders or something.. oh wait. They are." Shaun good naturedly got up and headed back for the bar, where the crowd had somewhat thickened.

"Kerry?"

"Yes, I'm here." Kerry could see the irritation in her partner's body language, but she smiled anyway, as the stormy blue eyes lifted and found hers. "Listen, I hope everything settles down and people start to think again. I know this has to just be a knee jerk reaction."

"I certainly hope so. Will you be there long?"

Kerry considered the question as Dar arrived and took a seat on the arm of her chair. "I think we'll know more on Monday, to be honest. I'll let you know." She said. "I'm sure Dar will want to get out of here as soon as we can."

"Bet your ass." Dar commented.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Cynthia said. "Was that Dar? I thought I heard her voice."

"It was." Kerry said. "She was just agreeing with me."

Shaun came back over and offered Dar a glass. "They told me to get this."

Dar eyed him. "They did, did they?" She let her eyes narrow. "Now why would they say something like that?"

"Um." Shaun took a half step back.

"C'mon boss." Mark called over. "Be nice."

A grudging smile appeared on Dar's face and she extended one hand to take the glass. "Thank you." She told Shaun. She lifted the glass and glanced around the table. "Let's hope this is one day in a million."

"Hear hear." Kerry lifted her own glass. "Mother, we're going to rustle up dinner now, so let me let you go. I'm glad the family's safe there, and I hope things cool down." She listened, then closed the phone and put it down on her knee. "People, you all did an amazing job today."

"Ma'am, we just hung out and watched." Shaun said.

"That's okay, I did too." Kerry bumped Dar's leg with her shoulder. "Dar did the heavy lifting. But everyone hung in there, and now at least we have a plan, and we're moving forward." She glanced up. "Right?"

Dar waggled her free hand, and took a sip of her beer.

"Uh oh." Kerry retreated to her own mug.

"We have some challenges." Dar said, after a pause, waiting for everyone to lean forward to listen. "I found out we need to go and take a closer look at the subway tunnels coming under the office tomorrow. Apparently there's more than one set."

"Oh sure." Scuzzy spoke up. "You ain't gonna believe how many tunnels are under this city here. I think there's like ten that come into Grand Central.. you remember Grand Central? That's where we met up that time."

"I remember." Dar nodded. "Looked like a maze made by whacked moles fighting blind badgers." She said. "So tomorrow we need to try and scope a path for them to take that cable up into the building so we can crossconnect it to our gear."

"We can't use the copper riser." Mark said. "I didn't find any ground level demarc."

"I'll go with ya tomorrow." Scuzzy said, confidently. "My old man worked here. I used to sleep in some of them little rooms, me and the rats and the bums."

Kerry felt the air in the bar hit the outsides of her eyeballs as they widened.

"Y'know, you never know. They might have coal bins and who knows what down there. We'll find something. But I thought you were telling them to take it out to Roosevelt?" Scuzzy went on. "What's up with that?"

"Kerry reminded me it'd be a lot closer to just bring it here." Dar said. "We've got enough pipe here to take at least part of the traffic."

"That sure helps." Scuzzy said, sucking on the straw poked in her luridly fruity drink. "Cause you don't want to be in those tunnels under the East River, you know?"

"I know." Dar agreed solemnly. "Me either."

"Specially since the Roosevelt is like, halfway to China." The native New Yorker continued. "It's like, ten, maybe fifteen stories underground and I got my ears all screwy going up and down from there."

Dar regarded her for a moment, then she looked down at Kerry. "This project lucked out having you in it. I sure as hell am not going ten stories underground to fish fiber cable up."

"Anytime, honey." Kerry leaned her head against Dar's hip. "Though I have to admit I'm not crazy about going ten stories underground right now either."

"That was rough, today." Scuzzy commented. "I thought I seen some bad stuff before but that was bad. Real bad."

"I've asked our real estate branch to find a different location for the technical office there." Dar said, after a brief silence. "I don't know how long it's going to take them to get things going again."

"I feel bad for the people who all live down there." Shaun said. "Like the office folks. They can't go home. That must be terrible on top of everything else."

"Living down there right now would be a lot worse." Scuzzy said. "They better off stay uptown. I got a cousin who's right on the edge of where they don't let you go no more and she's thinking of staying with my uncle in Jersey for a while."

"I'm sure most of the people here would rather go somewhere else for a while." Nan said, in a quiet voice. "I know I would. It was horrible in DC, but nothing like this."

Kerry listened to the voices around her, and found a kinship in the mental exhaustion she heard in them. She felt Dar's fingers close on her shoulder, and figured they needed a change of scene. "How about we all go find some dinner now. You guys up for that?"

"Hell yes." Mark put his glass down hastily. "I'm starving."

"That sounds damn good to me too." Andrew had been sprawled in a nearby chair. Now he straightened up and studied his neatly laced military boots. "Find us some place we can get some steak and taters."

"Let's go." Dar slipped off the chair arm and offered Kerry a hand up. "Alastair and Hamilton are meeting with some board members, so they'll just have to miss out." She waited for the group to rise and start to file out the door. "With any luck, wherever we find'll have ice cream Sundays."

"There's a Ben and Jerry's around the corner." Kerry answered instantly. "Caught my eye on the way in."

Dar chuckled.

"Hey, gotta find the essentials."

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"We're going to regret staying out this late." Kerry trailed after Dar down the hallway to their hotel room. "Tomorrow is going to really suck."

"It is." Her partner agreed, keying the door open and shoving it inward. "But I don't care. I needed a mindless night out." She trudged inside, passing the bathroom and moving further into the space. "We'll survive. Mark has two cases of Bawls in the truck."

"Good point." Kerry closed the door behind them, then sat down in the nearest chair and unlaced her boots. "A lot of people were out tonight. I was sort of surprised."

"Hysterical relief." Dar dropped down onto the bed and laid down flat on her back. "Felt a little desperate."

Kerry finished with her other boot, then she got up and went over to the bed, sitting down and picking up one of Dar's legs to get at her laces. "I feel a little desperate." She said. "Christ, I want to go home." She pulled a lace loose.

Dar rolled her head to one side and gazed at her. "We will soon."

"Not soon enough." Kerry replied. "I just feel so damned overwhelmed here, Dar. I'm not sure why." She pulled off one shoe, then the sock beneath it, pausing to tweak her partner's toe before she got up and went around to the other side of the long legs, and sat down to pick up the other foot.

Dar's eyes followed her. "You don't know why you feel overwhelmed? Ker, you're in the middle of a disaster zone in an unprecedented act of terrorism against our country. How are you supposed to not feel overwhelmed? I was watching those guys out there today - they're just digging, digging, they had no real idea of what they were digging for. You don't think they're overwhelmed?"

Kerry removed Dar's other boot, and then set her foot down, leaning back along her side on the bed. "I know they are. That's what makes me feel so crazy. I should be able to just do my job here because

I wasn't a part of all that but it's just making my brain go in circles." She propped her head up on one hand. "Why can't I be more like you?"

"A single minded idiot?"

Kerry smiled wryly. "Focused." She corrected her partner. "With an infinite capacity for innovation."

Dar turned on her side so they were facing each other. She lifted a hand and stroked Kerry's face with the backs of her knuckles. "You can only focus so long." She said. "That's why I stopped looking for holes in the wall today and took tonight off. Yes, I'll pay for it tomorrow, but I've finally learned the value of chilling out."

"You didn't chill with those darts." Kerry enjoyed the touch, savoring the look of gentle affection gazing back at her. "I can't believe you beat your dad."

Dar grinned "Neither could he." She gently traced one of Kerry's pale eyebrows. "You weren't so bad yourself."

"It was fun." Kerry admitted. "But I'm glad we skipped the karaoke bar." She clasped Dar's hand with her own, and studied her face, half hidden in the shadows of the dimly lit room. There was a furrow over her brow, and she looked tired.

"Heheh. Me too." Dar said. "I guess we should get undressed and get some sleep, huh?"

"We should." Kerry agreed. "Especially if we're going to spend tomorrow digging around in office basements." She levered herself up and stood, unbuckling her belt and getting out of her cargo pants, hopping over to one side as Dar did the same.

"Careful." Dar reached over to steady her, as she draped her pants over her suitcase and stripped off her shirt one handed over her head. "Last thing you need is rug burns."

"Thanks, sweetie." Kerry said. "I know I can always depend on you to keep me from falling on my butt."

Dar chuckled, then she moved over a few steps to put her shirt away.

Kerry folded her clothing up and put it to one side of her suitcase, rummaging inside it to remove her sleep shirt. She had it in one fist, when a long arm snaked a round her and removed it from her grasp. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar dropped the shirt back on the bag and took her hand instead, drawing her towards the bed. "C'mon. There are plenty of sheets on the bed. You won't be cold."

Kerry felt the faint thrill of unexpected raciness. "I'm not cold already."

Dar glanced over her bare shoulder at her, a faint grin twitching at her lips, as she waggled an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"Really." Kerry planted a kiss between Dar's shoulderblades, then bumped her gently forward. "Lead on, hot stuff."

"Remind me of that again tomorrow after we're both conscious again." Dar responded, in a wry tone. She continued moving forward, towing Kerry along behind her.

Kerry smiled and followed willingly. "Bet your booty I will." In a moment the room was in darkness and she was under a set of cool sheets rapidly warming to her and Dar's bare bodies and the comfort of the skin on skin touch pushed the day's anxieties aside.

Animal comfort. She wrapped her arm around Dar's waist, and felt her exhale. "Dar?"

"Yees?"

"Why do you really think they made that announcement today? About the systems working? Do you think they were playing with us?"

"No." Dar said, after a pause. "I'm not sure why they did it." She added. "Maybe so people.. so investors wouldn't panic."

"Hm." Kerry nibbled a bit of the skin on Dar's shoulder. "I think they're going to anyway. I bet when that market does open it drops like a rock."

"Nah." Dar shook her head. "People had time to stop and think. Having it closed wasn't a bad idea regardless of what the technical situation was. No knee jerking, if you've had almost a week to react."

"But what if we can't actually bring everything back up by Monday? Won't that..." Kerry paused. "Maybe that's why they made that announcement. To put pressure on us."

Dar snorted softly.

"It just bothers me. I don't like people playing games when we're going crazy trying to get things done here." Kerry grumbled.

"Yeah, I know." Dar rubbed Kerry's back with her fingertips.

"Sorry I'm whining."

"You're allowed." Dar looked up at the dimly seen ceiling. "Seems like this has been going on forever, huh? It's hard to remember I was in London just a few days ago." She said. "Working with those guys... I feel like it's been a year since then."

"I was giving a speech just a few days ago." Kerry replied. "You know, I can't even remember what the hell I said." She admitted. "But I wish that reunion was the worst of my worries right now."

"Yeah." Dar let her eyes drift shut, glad of the thick glass windows that blocked most of the city noise. "I wish the worst thing I had to worry about was playing in that damned softball league and hitting myself in the head."

"Y'know though." Kerry mused. "Before this all happened, that visit was turning out better than I expected. I think my mother caught a clue."

Dar gave her a squeeze. "I think your mother values family." She said. "And she wants you to be a part of that." She kissed Kerry on the top of her head. "I don't blame her a bit."

Kerry smiled. "I love you."

Dar's eyes opened again. "Back atcha, but what brought that on?"

Kerry snuggled a little closer. "Because I'm sitting here at three in the morning bitching and you're not telling me to shut up and go to sleep." She could feel Dar's body shudder with silent laughter. "You're so sweet to me."

Dar hugged her a little tighter, still chuckling.

"When we were down at the park today, I was looking out the front window at all those rescue workers, just sitting there, and it kind of brought home to me just how many blessings I have in my life." Kerry said, after a pause. "The primary one being you, of course."

"Likewise." Dar exhaled. "I'm one of the luckiest people on earth."

"We're both sappy mushballs."

"Guilty."

Finally, Kerry found herself smiling, and just letting it go, unable to resist the love she could feel wrapped all around her. She closed her eyes and listened to Dar's breathing for a few minutes, until the dim shadows faded out and she drifted off into sleep.

Dar stayed awake a few minutes more, enjoying the sensation of Kerry's breath warming her shoulder. They would try and accomplish the task they'd started on, she decided, and then, once that was either finished or failed at, they would go home.

They were too close to the center of this. Dar could envision an unraveling ball of requests if they kept going, the pressure to succeed growing greater and greater, as the shadow threat of what might happen if they didn't hung over them.

Too much risk, for too little return. Tomorrow she'd corner Alastair, call Maria, make arrangements for them to get transport out and by the end of the day Monday, she decided, she'd be sitting on her patio playing ball with Chino and listening to Kerry rustling up coffee in the kitchen.

She closed her eyes, and exhaled, nodding her head in confirmation.

**

Kerry breathed in the scent of fresh coffee as she entered the hotel café, pausing in the doorway then lifting a hand to wave hello to Hamilton who was already seated inside.

"Good morning, Ms. Stuart." Hamilton waved back, then waved her over. "Come on over and sit yourself down here so I don't have to be talking to the maple syrup will you please?"

Having very little choice unless she wanted to start the day off profoundly rude, Kerry crossed the parquet floor and joined their corporate lawyer at his table. "Careful what you ask for." She sat down and accepted the menu from young male server as she opened her napkin and put it on her lap at the same time. "Dar's on her way down."

"Honey, even that thought can't stir my grits this morning." Hamilton told her. "You all do know what grits are, right?"

"I know what grits are." Kerry assured him. "I can even cook them."

"Shocked. I'm shocked." Hamilton said. "A Midwesterner cooking grits. What is the world coming to?" He picked up a piece of rye toast and methodically buttered it. "I had the honor of attending a shindig at the governor's place with Al last night."

"He had a party?" Kerry's voice dropped.

"He called it a strategy and planning meeting." The lawyer told her. "But I will say that was the first planning and strategy meeting I ever have been to that had salmon canapés and whisky highballs." He took a sip of his coffee. "Ah am guessing all those federal people in town needed some catering to."

"Well, we went out ourselves last night." Kerry half shrugged. "I guess salmon and whiskey are about equal to beer and cheeseburgers and a good game of darts."

Hamilton looked up at her over cup. "Now doesn't that sound down home."

"Home would have included my motorcycle and my dog." Kerry glanced up as the server reappeared, hovering politely at her elbow. "Can I have two orders of eggs over easy, with crisp bacon, white toast, and one side of blueberry pancakes, please?"

The waiter blinked, then he scribbled it down.

"And coffee." Kerry handed him the menu. "My father used to have meetings like those. The only bright part of them for me were the chocolate mousse cups they always left close enough to the door for me to steal."

Hamilton sipped his coffee again. "Somehow I can easily picture that." He remarked dryly. "We apparently got our selves onto the good boy list in all that hullaballo yesterday. Given my preference, I'd have rather stayed bad."

"Did you get an idea last night of what their motives were? What they really want?" Kerry asked. "Some of the things they were saying and doing were really very intimidating."

"What do they want." The lawyer sighed, and leaned back in his chair. "That's a damn fine question. I do think first of all those men are scared half to death."

"I thought they were acting as though they were embarrassed." Kerry responded. "That this happened. That it was allowed to happen."

Hamilton regarded her. "There is that there piece too." He acknowledged. "I heard a lot about getting back to normal, putting on a tough face, that sorta thing, but you know, honey, there ain't no getting back to normal in a thing like this. It changes people."

"It changes everything." Kerry said.

"Yes, it does." The lawyer nodded. "It will change a lot of things, for us. No matter what the outcome is, in this thing we're doing, people now understand what we do in a very different aspect. That could end up good, and it can end up bad."

Kerry took a swallow of water from the glass in front of her. "You know, my father was very unhappy about our government contracts. He felt we had too much control."

"I do remember that." Hamilton nodded. "No offense to those passed, but your father was a right pain in my ass."

"Mine too." She answered steadily. "But was he right?"

Her table companion thought about that in silence for a few minutes, then he shrugged. "I honestly don't know the answer to that question right now." He said. "Not through any fault of ours, understand. We just did what we do. But you know, I just don't know."

"Hm." Kerry picked up her fork and studied it. "I'm not sure I do either."

"Good morning, Hamilton." Dar appeared from thin air, even making Kerry start a little as she took the chair to her partner's left. "I hear you and Alastair had a good time last night."

"Well, good morning to you too, Maestro." The lawyer said. "I was just telling your charming colleague here about it. You seem to have won the approval of the powers that be, unlikely as that may seem to all an sundry."

"Peh." Dar fastened her gaze on the water, and reeled him over. "Coffee, please." She glanced back at Hamilton. "I didn't do a god damned thing. That bastard threatened his way into a solution."

"Only too true." Hamilton agreed. He paused as the waiter returned, carrying a tray full of plates. "So what did you ladies do last night?" He changed the subject, as the waiter put down his breakfast, then tried to figure out what to do with all of Kerry's.

"I took the team out to dinner." Dar reached over and took one of the plates from the waiter, putting it down in front of her. "That goes there, the other plate put between us. Thanks." She took a gulp of her coffee. "Then we found a sports bar that had something other than CNN on and just chilled out for a few hours."

"Ah would have traded my salmon canapé for a beer and a pretzel in a heartbeat." Hamilton said.

"Ah, there you all are." Alastair arrived, taking the fourth chair at the table. "Ham, I've had two calls from the FBI this morning already. I don't think I can stall them on the employee lists much further."

"Well, Al, then I'm going to have to file a damn injunction against them in Federal court and that ain't happening till Monday."

"I don't know..." Alastair shook his head. "This guys' not giving up."

"Tell them we locked the database and no one can get access to it until we've had a chance to file in Federal Court." Dar bit into a strip of bacon.

"Can we do that?"

"Yes." Dar and Kerry answered at the same time.

"And even if we couldn't." Kerry wiped her lips with her napkin. "They have no way of knowing that. It's in a data center in the middle of the Houston campus in a building among hundreds that only four people have access to. What are they doing to do, go room by room tapping on the outside of the servers?"

"Well." Their CEO gave her a wry look. "They could arrest me."

"We'll never let them take you alive, Alastair." Dar said.

Alastair sighed. "You all seem to think this is funny."

"I don't think it's funny, I think it's idiotic. What the hell do they want our employment records for?" Dar asked. "Is this all about the damn taps or something again?"

"Just coffee for me, thanks." Alastair told the waiter, who had returned to find his table had spawned again. "And a glass of grapefruit juice, if you've got it."

"Of course sir."

"Dar, it ain't nothing about taps." Hamilton lowered his voice. "They need a list of all our people who are in government facilities. That part makes horse sense. It's the rest of the records they want with it that's giving my Louisiana ass a hive."

Dar chewed a mouthful of her breakfast as she studied her table companions. "A list of our people." She said, after swallowing. "In their facilities?"

"Yes." Alastair nodded. "It's a security issue."

Dar folded her hands on the table and leaned forward a little. "Why don't they just run a report in their own damned database?" She asked. "Why the hell do they need our records for??"

"Their database?" Hamilton removed a pad from his pocket and pushed his plate aside. "Dar, have I ever told you just how much I do truly love you more than my luggage?"

Kerry eyed him. "Hey."

"Yes, their database." Dar went back to stabbing her eggs, making them yolk all over the plate. "How in the hell did they think all those people got credentials to work in those facilities? Pulled them out of their asses? They all have security clearances. Issued by the damned GOVERNMENT."

Alastair and Hamilton exchanged glances. "Did you write that database too?" Alastair inquired. "Maybe you could just go run the report for them, if you can spare a minute."

Hamilton waved his pen at him. "Al, hush. This'll help I think. Just tell those folks to call me if they call you again." He smiled at Dar. "Always lovely to spend time with you ladies. I'll be off to fence with the Federals now. Wish me luck." He got up and lifted his jacket off the back of his chair. "Al, I'll let you know what I find out."

"Sure." Alastair waved at him as he left. "Well."

"Want a pancake?" Kerry nudged the plate towards him. "It's probably going to be a really long day."

Their CEO gazed at her for a moment, then he reached over and took the top pancake on the stack, rolling it up and dunking the end in the cup of maple syrup. He took a bite. "Can someone tell me why we're doing all the right things, but everything is going to hell anyway?"

"Welcome to our world." Dar crunched noisily on her bacon. "Just wait. It'll start raining any minute."

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Kerry pulled up the zipper on her jumpsuit, then she went over to the plastic shopping bag on the desk and removed some power bars from it, stuffing them in a couple of the pockets. She then clipped her cell phone, and a new accoutrement, a radio, to her belt.

The masks she gratefully left behind, settling a company logo baseball cap on her head instead. "Okay." She addressed her reflection. "Let's see what we can go find in the bowels of the city."

The subway. Kerry shook her head. Dar was already on the lower floor of the hotel, talking to the maintenance people. Kerry figured by the time she got down there either they would be ready to move ahead or Dar would be veering off on another path altogether.

She hoped it was a different path. She knew they were far from the disaster site, but she had no desire to be anywhere underground. With a last patting of her pockets she tucked her room key away and headed out the door.

The elevator opened, and she entered, to find Alastair already inside. "Hello, again." She greeted the CEO. "Going to join us in the tunnels?"

Alastair had his hands in his pockets. He had a pair of khakis on, and, surprisingly, a rugby shirt. "I think I'd rather do that than meet with the press. That's where I'm off to."

"Ah. Ugh." Kerry sympathized. "Are we in trouble again?"

"Not this time, apparently." Her ultimate boss said. "Seems like word got around about our hospitality buses, and our folks taking care of some of the workers down there. One of the local stations wanted me to chat about it."

"Oh. Well, that's great." Kerry said, as the elevator arrived at the lobby and opened. "Isn't it?"

"Any press is generally good press." Alastair followed her out into the lobby. "But, we've just been high profile here, and I've got a gut feeling that might not be the best thing in the long run."

"Not after what happened to that guy yesterday." Kerry shook her head. "I'd rather be under the radar myself."

"Exactly." Alastair agreed. "But I suppose giving out cookies and pop can't be too controversial."

They walked across the lobby, and Kerry wasn't surprised to find Dar standing by the coffee stand. She reached for her radio then paused as the dark head turned Dar looked around the lobby, spotting her in a few seconds.

A faint grin appeared. Dar indicated the stand with her thumb, then turned as Kerry nodded emphatically. "Well, good luck." She told Alastair. "We'll try to hold up our end of this."

Alastair chuckled. "Not worried about that at all." He said. "I never had any doubts before over what Operations could do, but now I've got a whole new respect for you and Dar. Been a real eye opener."

Kerry wondered what that meant. "Well, we try." She veered off to where Dar was waiting, now with two big cups of coffee in her hands. "See you later."

Alastair continued towards the front door, and Kerry ambled to a halt next to her partner and her heavenly burden. "I feel like swimming in that coffee." She accepted her cup. "Find anything?"

"Labyrinthine basements." Dar informed her. "Soon as Mark and the boys get back from grabbing flashlights and water, we'll head down there. No one knows where the hell some of the corridors go."

"Great." Kerry sighed.

"Hon, you can stay up here and work on issues if you want." Dar rested her hand on Kerry's shoulder. "You don't need to come spelunking with me." She tweaked a bit of Kerry's pale hair. "There's plenty to do topside."

"I know. But I want to go." Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "And it can't be as bad as yesterday. I thought I was going to have nightmares from that."

"You didn't."

"I didn't." The blond woman confirmed. "I didn't dream at all, that I remember. I think I was too tired." She spotted Mark and his crew coming out of an elevator. "Or maybe I just dreamed about you the whole time. I felt like I did when I woke up."

Dar turned her head and gave her partner a puzzled look. "Huh?"

"Never mind. Tell you later." Kerry raised her cup towards Mark. "Hey. You guys ready for some exploration?"

Mark looked tired, but he nodded. Shaun was with him, along with Scuzzy and Nan, and Joshua, a tech from the office. "Ready as we'll ever be." He said. "Hope we find something though. I'm whacked from last night."

"Me too." Shaun agreed, stifling a yawn. "What were those drinks we were having?"

"Yo, you're some kinda lightweight." Scuzzy said. "We weren't out there late!"

"Yes, we were." Nan disagreed. "I've still got karaoke ringing in my ears." She covered one. "I've never been in a club that loud before."

"Hey it's the city." Scuzzy said. "People need to blow off steam around here, you know? Been rough this week."

"Hey, I had fun. I'm just tired." Nan said. "You guys had the right idea, heading back." She gave Dar and Kerry a wry look. "I think I had an hour sleep."

Dar took the flashlight Mark was holding out and slipped it into the long pocket along one seam of her coveralls. "Okay, let's go." She pointed to the front doors. "We'll walk down to the office, then find a subway entrance. The concierge said there's one right near by."

They exited the hotel and started down the block, crossing two streets before they neared the rear entrance to their offices. "Can we get to the subway from inside?" Dar asked.

"Sure." Scuzzy led the way into the complex. "They got lots of underground stuff here. You know? Great for when it's snowing. You don't want to freeze your ass off getting coffee in the morning."

"Smart idea." Kerry agreed. "But it makes me realize why all those people from New York moved to Florida. You never freeze your ass off doing anything there."

They walked through the concourse and down a set of stairs, passing from the light into the underground part of Rockefeller Center. "Is that where we're going?" Dar pointed to a sign that said, simply, 'Subway'.

"Yeah, that's the 6th Ave, you know? Independent line." Scuzzy said, as they started for the stairs. "You guys are gonna have a big problem getting from there to the IRT, you know?"

"The what?" Kerry asked.

"Don't the tunnels all connect?" Dar added, after a pause.

"Well, sure." Scuzzy led the way down the steps. "Like, eventually." She continued. "But not here on 6th, probably maybe near the shuttle, like where we met, you know? This subway was built like after the other one. The IRT, that was the first."

"I see." Dar grunted.

"I don't." Kerry chimed in. "There's more than one subway?"

"Well, not now. Now they're all one system." Scuzzy explained. "But back in the day they were all fighting with each other putting tracks down everywhere."

"Uh huh." Dar looked around the lower mezzanine. "So where do we go from here?"

"C'mere, let me show ya." Scuzzy led them over to big map on the wall, sealed behind scratched plastic. "See, we're here." She pointed at an orange line. "This subway, it goes over here, and then over towards Roosevelt, see?"

"Right." Kerry nodded.

"But them guys, they're coming up here, on the East side line." Scuzzy pointed at a green tracing, that wound it's way up the map. "Cause that's the closest to the Exchange, you know? Maybe they're going down the kiosk there, or something. I don't think there's any opening down below the building or nothing."

Dar looked from one line to the other. "Do they connect here?" She pointed at a blue line just north of them.

"Well, that's where the eventually comes in." Scuzzy said. "They sorta cross around there, but theres like long corridors and stuff and stairs and escalators..."

"Oh boy." Kerry muttered.

"Okay." Dar held a hand up. "First things first – lets find a way to get a cable from our offices down into one of these tunnels. Is this one the closest?" She pointed at the orange line.

"Sixth avenue, sure." Scuzzy nodded. "So we can go to the basement of 30 Rock, and go down into the subway from there, and see what we can find, okay by you? We can ride down to the 53d, and see if that crosses over, and then get over to the Lexington from there."

"Right. Let's go." Dar paused and looked around at the busy activity underground. She pictured the buildings above them, and started off down the corridor. "Mark, do we have a line we can start running down from our offices?"

"I got some guys up there." Mark said. "Kannan decided to stick it out, now that we're hanging around here so he's up doing some prep. I wouldn't try to bring out a fiber line from our side, boss – melding those pipettes underground's gonna suck."

"I'm glad he decided it was okay to stay." Kerry said. "He's very nice."

"He's a freaking awesome fiber tech." Mark replied. "So I am too, specially since the next guy I could get up here is in Miami."

They walked along the concourse, which now sloped downward a bit and widened, gaining shops on either side. "We're under 30 Rock now." Scuzzy announced confidently. "They got some cool shops here now. Not like it used to be, all the windows empty."

Kerry found it somewhat incongruous. She understood the logic of having things underground when the weather above sucked, and also, how they had to use pretty much any square footage they could find in an island as small as Manhattan was, but she still found an underground shopping center weird and depressing.

Or maybe she was still in a bad mood. She walked alongside Dar and tried to put that aside as they traveled along a thick wall that looked like it had been verneered over more than once. "So our offices are over this."

Dar stopped near a large set of stairs. She peered up them. "Elevator stacks don't go down this far."

"No." Scuzzy shook her head. "I heard this was going to be the big entrance to the subway from the Rock, only the shops kinda died off so they made it into the skating rink and all that stuff."

Dar folded her arms. "Okay, so let's go up one level first and see where we can bring a line down from." She started up the steps with the rest of her little group behind her. They ended up in the main lobby of the building their office was in.

It was full of people. "Doesn't look like anything's here, Dar." Kerry murmured. "Where's the demarc?"

"Mark.."

"I'm on it." Mark headed off towards an information desk.

"There's the entrance to the subway, in that corner." Shaun pointed towards the front of the building. "I can see the sign from here."

"Okay. Let's go back downstairs then." Dar removed the radio from her belt. "Mark, we're going back down to find the subway entrance."

"Gotcha boss." Mark's voice crackled back.

Kerry followed Dar back downstairs, trying to ignore the people who were staring curiously at them. She felt a bit like they were going in circles. "There has to be pipes coming in here, right?"

"Sure." Scuzzy said. "Lots of pipes under here, but not the kind we put our stuff in. Big pipes, water, sewer, steam pipes.."

"Steam pipes?" Shaun asked. "For what?"

"Heat."

"Oh." Kerry scratched the bridge of her nose. "Of course."

They crossed the busy concourse and headed over towards the front corner of it, where people were streaming in and out at a rapid pace. Dar dodged several oncomers, then she pulled them all over to one side against the wall.

"Sheesh." Kerry looked back the way they came. "That's going to be tricky to run a cable through."

"When was this built?" Dar asked Scuzzy.

"Thirties, something like that."

Dar's radio crackled.

"Hey Boss?" Mark's voice emerged from the radio. "I found the door to he demarc. You might want to come over here to check it out." He said. "I'm down here behind the stairwell."

"Uh oh." Kerry murmured.

"You folks stay here." Dar motioned to the rest of them. "Think about how we can run a thick cable, the kind we ran yesterday, Shaun, across that floor if we have to." She bumped Kerry. "C'mon. Let's go see what the bad news is."

Kerry willingly went along with her, as they crossed the floor yet again back towards the way they came in. "We're starting off kinda slow today huh?"

"Ungh." Dar rolled her eyes. "I swear I feel like just packing everyone into that damn bus and driving south." She led Kerry around the stairs, spotting Mark behind them by a thick metal door, accompanied by a dour looking man with a ring of keys. "Ah."

Mark indicated the door with his thumb. "In there."

"Least you people got the sense to dress fer this." The man with the keys shook his head and sorted through the ring, finally coming up with one of the keys and trying it in the lock. He turned it three times, and then a loud clank was heard. "That's it." He pulled the key out and turned the door handle, pulling the door open to release a puff of musty, dusty air.

It was dark inside. "Any lights in there?"

The man muttered, and felt around inside the door, finally slapping at something which resulted in a weak yellow illumination. Then he backed out and gave them a gruff jerk of his head in the direction of the door. "I ain't going in there."

Dar stepped to the entrance and looked around. "All right, lets..."

"Got bit by a rat in there once." The man wandered off. "I'm getting coffee. You're on your own."

"Thanks." Dar had stopped dead, her eyes flicking down at the ground in search of rodents that might attempt to snack on her toes. "Appreciate the warning." She glanced behind her. "Anyone coming with me?"

Only Kerry stepped forward immediately. "Right here."

After an awkward pause, Mark followed her, fishing his flashlight out of his pocket. "I don't like rats."

"I had mice in college." Kerry edged past her partner and entered the room without hesitation. "As pets." She paused and looked back over her shoulder. "Not for lunch." She flicked her flashlight on and went further into the room, which was full to the rafters with dust covered wall boxes, and wires hanging down low enough to almost brush her head.

Dar twirled her flashlight in her fingers and followed, a faint grin on her face. "Watch your head."

"Mine's a lot lower than yours is, hon. "

Dar ducked under a loop. "Good point."

"Hope those aren't electrical." Mark muttered, bringing up the rear. "This could get way more exciting than we need it to."

**

The electrical room was a labyrinth on it's own. It had several levels that seemed to have been built in different times and styles and the floor itself wasn't level on top of that.

"Careful of that damn ladder." Dar warned, as Kerry started to climb down one. It was a cast iron pipe with diamondplate steps, and it shifted creakily as she put her weight on it.

"Yikes." Kerry went down it as fast as she could, arriving on a lower level to be greeted by rustlings and a pair of glowing eyes in the dark that vanished when she shone her flashlight in the corner. "What in the hell.."

A huge pipe ran over her head, it's width twice her armspan at least. It's sections were held together by huge, riveted collars and it's outer surface was covered with thick, peeling paint. She put her hand on it, surprised when she felt warmth against her skin.

Shaking her head, she ducked under the pipe and went past a huge bin with a closed lid, and three more large pipes running up and down vertically. They all seemed ancient, and were thick and heavy cast iron. "What is all this stuff?"

"It's not telecom." Dar was methodically searching the far wall. "I don't care what it is."

"Reminds me of that old cruise ship ." Kerry edged through two large black iron posts with rivets in them and ducked under a pipe as she spotted a bit of wood through the gloom. "Is that it back there?"

Dar peered past a large box she was looking in. "Where?" She shone her flashlight into the dark corner. "Mark, over there." She closed the box and ducked under the pipe. "Kerry, you rock."

"Holy shit." Mark crawled out from under a step and got up. "In the back there? Dar, this is nuts! There's power running all over this place. How in the hell does our data not suck here?"

"My engineering can overcome pretty much anything or so everyone keeps telling me." Dar edged in next to where Kerry was standing, and they peered over a big iron pipe to see an old, tattered piece of plywood bolted to the back wall with a familiar set of telephone punch down blocks on it.

They were covered in dirt and dust, so obscured the colors of the wires were completely indistinguishable. Kerry squirmed over close to it and shone her flashlight on a tag, which was completely blank, brown from age, and crumbling at her touch. "Wow."

Dar peered at the electrical board perilously close to Kerry's shoulder. "Ker, don't move back. I think that's a live block."

Kerry froze, then carefully looked over her shoulder, shining the flashlight on the cast iron works. "New York Edison Company." She read. "Nineteen hundred and one."

"Didn't Scuzzy say this building was built in the thirties?"

"Maybe they reused the hardware." Mark managed to squeeze in closer. "Shit most of this room is older than I am." He said. "Hey, there's a door down there. For midgets."

Kerry gave him a sideways look, then she turned carefully and pointed her light at the back wall, under the block. Sure enough, there was a door there. "Wow." She said. "Midgets for real."

The door was about as high as her knees, with a knob near the bottom of it as though a regular height door had been cut in half. "Wonder where it goes? Looks like it's been painted over a few times."

"Probably doesn't go anywhere. They just didn't feel like removing it." Dar dismissed the painted over panel and started exploring the punch down. "I can't believe this is the demarc."

"For the whole building?" Kerry's voice rose in utter disbelief. "No way. No way in hell, Dar. There are hundreds and hundreds of tenants here. This block is barely big enough for a dozen of them."

"Well, the way they guy said it, the big boys have a nice room up one level in back of the elevator stack." Mark said. "We're private line, so.."

"Are you kidding me?" Kerry asked. "Do you mean to tell me they wouldn't let us drop a line into their room, and I'm carrying one of those bastard's entire backbones on my network??"

"Um." Mark's eyes widened.

"Grr." Kerry fumed. "Let me call the office and have those bastards cut off." She started to fish for her phone only to find her arms gently held. "Dar!"

"You're going to electrocute your ass. Hold still." Dar tugged her away from the electrical panel. "Cutting them off doesn't really get us anything, Ker. Money probably crossed hands to get them a new facility. We had nothing to do with it."

"But that's not fair!" Kerry protested. "We pay just as much as any of them do for this damned access!"

Mark kept his mouth shut, peering at the blocks instead and trying to read some of them.

"Shh." Dar managed to maneuver her pissed off partner into a clearer space, then she wrapped her arms around her. "Leave it, Ker. Not worth the headache."

Kerry drew in a breath to continue arguing, then she paused, and exhaled, unable to keep the anger roiling inside the warmth of Dar's embrace. "It's not fair." She repeated. "Look at this place, Dar. They're probably laughing their asses off at us over this."

"Probably. But we're a level under them, and that means we're closer to our goal. Just leave it."

"Grr." Kerry sighed, giving in. "And I'm damned well going to get this changed, but yeah, it'll wait until this is over."

Dar gave her a squeeze. "Now let me in there to see what the hell's going on with that demarc." She slipped past Kerry and carefully eased her way between the electrical panel and the iron pylon to get closer to the age scarred wood.

"You tricked me." Kerry issued a half hearted protest, before she inched in after her, raising her hand to stifle a sneeze as they stirred the dust around them. "I'm safer in there, Dar. I'm smaller than you are."

"Nah, I'm fine." Dar disagreed, poking her head around a pipe.

"Okay." Mark finally spoke up. "I think there's only six or eight active on here, so we should be able to find ours pretty easy." He peered into the far corner. "Hey, Dar, is that a smartjack? There in the back? That has to be ours."

Dar directed her flashlight in that direction and leaned closer to look, inadvertently brushing her elbow against the electrical panel. She yelped and jumped back, nearly knocking Kerry on her butt. "Son of a bitch!" She grabbed her elbow, which was numb and tingling.

"Live, huh?" Mark asked, weakly.

"What kind of idiocy is this!" It was Dar's turn to be outraged, as she examined the panel. It was floor to ceiling copper strips, with clamps at various levels. "You could get killed in here!"

"Easy honey." Kerry patted her hip. "How about we find our circuit and get out of here before we both end up in the hospital?"

Dar muttered under her breath, then cautiously eased back over to the back wall and peered at the box Mark had found again. It was the same dingy gray as the rest of the inside of the room, but there were somewhat newer looking cables coming out of the bottom of it, and a tag that was more white than brown hanging from the front.

She extended her arm carefully and got a fingertip on the top of the box, almost jumping out of her skin when her cell phone rang. "Brpht!"

"I got it." Kerry fished in her partner's pocket and retrieved the instrument. "Hello?"

"Glad you were here." Dar went back to prying the box open.

"Me too." Mark chimed in. "No offense, Big D, I'da let it ring."

Dar paused and looked over at him, then chuckled briefly.

"Hell... ah, is this Kerry?" Alastair's voice trickled hesitantly through the speaker. "I'm sorry, I thought I.."

"You did. Hang on." Kerry tapped Dar on the arm with her phone. "It's Alastair."

"Take a message." Dar was struggling with the box top. "If I overbalance I'm going to be a French fry."

Kerry pulled her arm back, and took a step sideways out of the way, and away from the electrical panel. "Sorry about that. Dar's occupied right at the moment. Anything I can do to help?"

"Got it." Dar pulled the top of the box off with a rusty sounding screech of metal on metal. She set the top aside and shone her light on the inside, which had a modern piece of equipment clamped in it, full of blinking LED's and reassuringly clean plastic. "Ah hah."

"That it?" Mark stood on his tiptoes to look over the iron grillwork separating him from the section Dar was inside of. "Damn, look at that thing. That box looks like it should be coal fired."

"Well, it's a smartjack." Dar muttered. "I think that box use to be something else though."

Kerry was torn between listening to the phone and listening to the discussion. "Sorry, what was that again? No, that wasn't a smart ass.. no, no we've.. we're looking for our circuit in the office... oh, okay." Kerry put her hand over the mic. "Paladar?"

Dar stopped in mid motion, and carefully turned fully around, giving Kerry her full attention? "Yes?"

"ABC News is outside. They want to talk to you."

Dar looked at her, then looked to either side at the inside of the grubby, dingy workspace. Then she held up one finger and turned back around, careful to edge away from the copper panel.

"That meant for me, or them?" Kerry asked.

Dar turned back around, one eyebrow hiked all the way up.

"Just checking." Her partner smiled.

"Tell them to kiss my ass." Dar went back to her task.

Kerry gave her a fond look. "Alastair, she's trying to read a circuit tag in a dark room that look like a medieval torture chamber and not be electrocuted at the same time. Can they wait a few minutes?"

She half turned and spoke into the phone. "I don't want to rush her. She'd look really strange with curly hair." She waited. "Okay, that's what I figured. I'll call you when we're out of here. Bye."

She closed the phone. "Well."

"23T234X6RZ45R." Dar replied.

Mark scribbled on the back of his hand. "I'm pretty sure that's ours, Dar. It's the right sequence."

"Me too." Dar agreed, pulling her hand back from the box and letting the top close over it. "Glad we found it, but I have no clue in the world how we're going to get the damn cable into this room. I don't think we can cross the shopping center with it."

She backed slowly out of the gap between the iron works and the live electrical panel and joined Kerry near the sloping back of the room. Now that her eyes had grown used to the gloom, Dar looked around at the space and studied the structure.

There was an old iron chute that cut off at the edge of a newer looking wall, and she walked over to peer at it, rubbing her thumb along a set of hammered letters. "Castle Coal." She said. "I don't get it. What's a coal thing doing in the middle of a modern building?"

Mark turned around. "These are steam pipes." He pointed. "We don't really have steam upstairs, do we?"

They all looked at each other, then both Mark and Dar looked at Kerry.

"Don't ask me." Kerry held her hand up. "I assumed we had central air and heat in the building. We never used coal in Michigan. You signed the lease, Dar. Did it mention steam? Scuzzy said there was steam pipes but sheesh."

"Hell if I remember." Dar shrugged. "Doesn't really matter I guess. Now that we found it, let's just go back to the rest of the group and see about a path. We probably need the building management involved."

"Should I get them to bring a router and a fiber hub here?" Mark asked. "We're gonna need to split the signal but..." He looked around. "Wonder if they've even got an outlet for power." He flashed his light around the walls and looked under a few of the boxes. "Crap."

"Can we get an electrician to... well, what am I saying? We'd have to contract Methuselah for that electrical panel. Maybe he's free." Kerry started making her way towards the entrance, scribbling herself a note. "Worse comes to worse, Dar, we can run a power cable in too. This isn't going to be pretty no matter how we do it."

Mark climbed up into another section, ducking under the iron supports as he peered along the underside of a large pipe. "Lemme see if I can find something here. Running cable is gonna suck."

Dar leaned her elbows on Kerry's shoulders and whispered into her ear. "How could it possibly be anything but pretty if you do it?"

Aw. Kerry had to smile, despite the surroundings. "Flattery will get you anything you want, you know that?"

Dar chuckled. She felt Kerry's body lean back a little against her, and she savored the moment, nibbling on the edge of her ear. "Did you really think I was flipping you off?"

"No." Kerry tilted her head back and gave Dar a kiss on her jawbone. "I'm just glad I'm here with you and I felt like messing with you a little." She admitted. "This is so insane. What are we doing here?"

"C'mon." Dar bumped her gently. "Let's go see what other bad news awaits us." She put her hands on Kerry's shoulders and steered her towards the door. They had left it open, and the light from outside seemed an odd contrast to the dank, dark, interior of the old closet they were poking around in.

The tangle of pipes and iron bars made their progress slow, but they climbed up the steel steps and onto the platform that held the door just as Mark crawled back out from under an ancient console, his jumpsuit now liberally covered in grunge.

"Anything?" Kerry asked.

"Maybe." Mark said. "But I think the outlet's older than I am. Scary." He dusted himself off as they emerged from the room, blinking a little in the light. The building superintendant was leaning against the opposite wall, and he pushed off to come meet them as Mark pushed the door closed.

"Seen enough?" The man asked.

"We found what we were looking for, yes." Kerry said. "Now we just have to find a way to get to it. Do you have a building electrician? We need some work done."

The man stared at her. "Work done? Lady you seen that room? No one does no work in there."

"They put our circuit in there. That's work." Kerry's nape hairs bristled. "Though I'm going to have a word with the management here as to why that happened."

The man held his hands up. "That's not my area." He said. "You want the electrician? I'll call him. He can tell you himself." He said. "You want to wait here? I'll have him come down." He didn't wait for Kerry to nod before he picked up his radio and started speaking into it, turning away from them and lowering his voice. Then with a glance at them, he walked away, heading for a door in the back of the hall.

"I'm going to go grab a router and see what mounting stuff we have." Mark said. "I'll come back here and wait for the electrical guy if you want to go see what's going on."

"Sounds like a plan." Dar said. "Thanks Mark."

"No prob." He trotted off towards the stairs, leaving Dar and Kerry behind.

"You want me to tell Alastair you can talk to the press now?" Kerry asked.

"No." Dar replied placidly. "That's not part of my job. That's part of his job. He's got Hamilton with him, and the entire New York office publicity machine with him, and I've got better things to do."

"All righty." Kerry said. "But honey, even though I love you more than anything on earth, you're going to be the one to tell him that, mokay?"

Her partner chuckled wryly.

Dar's phone rang again. Kerry promptly handed it over to her.

Dar took it. "Hello?" She answered briefly after glancing at the caller ID. *Not him*. She mouthed at Kerry. "Yes, this is Dar Roberts. Who is this?" She paused, folding her free arm across her body and resting her elbow on her fist. "Okay, bu.. oh, all right. Okay." She nodded. "So what's the issue?"

Kerry half listened, and half watched their surroundings. There were a lot of people walking around, but they all seemed distracted, and the stores she could see had workers in the doorways, mostly standing and watching the passersby.

"So they're fighting over that? What the hell do you want me to do?" Dar said. "What makes you think that?"

Kerry spotted their team coming out from the entrance to the subway. She waved at them, catching Scuzzy's eye and smiled as they changed direction to come over to where she and Dar were standing. "Here's the rest of the gang, hon."

"I think that's a crock of bullshit." Dar said. "I'll head over there, but only because I want to see the datapath. If you're still there wasting time then I'll see you but I hope you get your head out of your ass and get working before then."

Kerry patted her partner's hip. "Easy, tiger."

Dar closed the phone abruptly and clipped it back on her pocket as the rest of the crew arrived. "Jackasses." She muttered. "Did you find a route?" She asked the gang.

"We found a lot of mad people." Shaun said. "Boy, people get pissed off when you ask dumb questions in the subway around here." He said. "They even got mad at her." He indicated Scuzzy, who nodded.

"Okay. Well, I'd like to ride from here back to where they have to drop the line into the tunnels." Dar said. "They've got some kind of hangup somewhere up there about the cable they want to talk to me about."

"What kind of trouble were they giving you, Shaun?" Kerry asked. "What were you guys asking?"

"Just where the tunnels met and stuff like that. You'd have thought we were asking for the president's fax number." Shaun said. "They're just freaking tunnels. What did they think we were going to do, set a bomb off in them?"

Everyone fell silent after he finished talking, looking at each other awkwardly as the words penetrated.

"Well, ya know.." Scuzzy murmured.

"They might have thought just that." Dar finished, quietly. "Let's go folks. We found the drop and Mark's going to work on getting our end of this set up. We might as well find out how far they've gotten before he goes to too much trouble."

"We can take the six." Scuzzy said. "I'm sure they're up past Brooklyn Bridge station already." She added. "We can walk, or take the 8th Ave up to the 53rd."

Dar eyed her. "You pick." She said. "None of the rest of us know what the hell you're talking about." She added. "But since the cable's probably going to have to come from underground, we should go the same route."

"You got it." Scuzzy turned and motioned them back the way they'd come from. "Let's get a move on, people. We got trains to catch."

**

"Anything?" Dar peered out the door to the subway train, which was idling briefly in the station. "See anything, Scuzzy?" She glanced at her watch, uncomfortably aware of the rapid passage of time. "This is nuts."

"Not a damn thing." Scuzzy scratched her chin, as she hopped quickly back into the train. "Where the hell are these guys?" She asked. "I thought for sure they'd be up at least halfway up to the place by now."

"You and me both." Dar ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't get it. They were all fired up to get this done after that meeting."

"Maybe they got a problem." Scuzzy looked apologetic. "Them guys ain't bad, mostly. They were pretty spooked after that guy got in trouble. My uncle said all of em were talking about it. Nobody wants that sorta trouble, you know?"

"Mm." Dar gripped the bars of the train, rocking back and forth against them as though her body motion could make the car move with it. She went to the door again and looked out, squinting into the darkness as she peered into the tunnel. "Damn it."

They were in the first car of the train, just behind the conductors booth. Kerry was sitting in one of the seats with her cell phone pressed to her ear, and her free hand cupped over the other side of her head.

Dar glanced at her, then stepped back as the doors started to close. "Ker? We're moving again."

"I feel it." Kerry muttered. "Okay, folks, I'm going to lose you again. I'll call you back." She closed the phone as the train rattled forward, plunging from the fluorescent light of the station into the darkness of the tunnels again.

Dar sat down next to her and put a hand on her knee. "If this is driving you nuts, you can take off at the next station. Go back to the office and deal with Lansing there." She studied the frustrated expression on Kerry's face, watching the pale lashes flicker a little. "Okay?"

Kerry rested her elbows on her knees, her phone clasped in her hands. “No.” She said, after a moment. “I want to stay here.”

“Sure?” Dar gave her kneecap a little scratch.

“Yeah.” Her partner nodded. “I’m just saying the same thing over and over again. It’s probably a good thing I keep having to get off the line before I start screaming.”

“Ah.” Dar leaned back, extending her long legs across the floor of the car. She regarded the interior, then shook her head a trifle. “I can’t believe I’m in one of these things and it’s not freaking me out.” She remarked. “Last time I nearly chucked my guts up.”

Kerry straightened up and sat back. “Relative levels of things to freak out about?” She suggested. “I know it would take a hell of a lot to freak me out right now, that’s for sure.”

Dar spread her arm out along the back of the seat behind Kerry, waiting until she felt the tense back relax against her touch. “So what’s Lansing’s problem? Can I help?” She rubbed the bottom of her thumb across the top of her partner’s shoulder. “Someone I can yell at for you?”

A grudging smile appeared on Kerry’s face. “Backups are taking too long.” She said. “They’re still pretty saturated across the northern links and they’re running into issues finishing the drive mirroring.”

“Are you kidding me?” Dar peered at her. “They’re bitching about that?”

“It’s causing problems with their autonomic scripts.” Kerry tilted her head back to rest on Dar’s arm. “Their production jobs aren’t kicking off on time and it’s throwing everyone off. I understand how frustrated they are, but damn it, Dar, it’s not like we’re hanging out having Daquiris here.”

Dar reflected on that. “I could use a Daquiri right now.” She said. “Just tell them to split the backup into two segments, and run them on alternate nights until we get a little more clear and I can spend some time working the metrics. We’ll take the risk.”

“I suggested that.” Kerry watched Dar’s profile. “That’s what we were arguing about. When I call them back I’ll just tell them you said so, and that should end that conversation.”

“You make me sound like such a pirate captain.”

“Here’s the next station.” Scuzzy stood up. “They got to be here. This is freaking the last stop on this here train. It’s Brooklyn Bridge!!”

“Hold that thought.” Kerry stood up as they pulled into the station and clipped her phone to her belt as Dar joined her and they both went to the door and peered out of it. The station was relatively quiet, and as they stepped out onto the platform the rest of the passengers exited and headed for the stairwells further down.

Scuzzy had bounced out ahead of them, and she was near the very end of the platform, her head poked out into the tunnel as she shaded her eyes. “Okay, so here we are. Where the hell are these guys?”

Dar studied the tracks, not seeing any indication of new cable running through that would hint at the teams passing. “Kerry, get your buddy on the phone and find out where the hell these people are.” She said, going over to the cracked Plexiglas covering a subway map and studying it. “If this is Brooklyn Bridge, we’re almost back to where we started yesterday. What the hell have they been doing?”

Kerry joined her, phone pressed to her ear. “I don’t want to go any closer to where we were.” She stated. “We don’t have any protection, Dar.”

“Right there with you, Ker.” Her boss stated. “They should have been a lot further up by now. This may all be just one big damn moot point.”

The train behind them was still idling in the station. Scuzzy came back over to where Dar and Kerry were standing, extending her arms out in visible bewilderment. “I don’t get it.”

"Us either." Dar acknowledged. "I find it very hard to believe these people haven't gotten up this far yet. What the hell are they doing, laying the damn cable an inch an hour?" She went to the edge of the platform and looked down the tunnel, seeing not much other than a few lights off in the distance.

It smelled. A gust of surprisingly cold air blew back down into her face and she stepped back quickly, glancing behind her at the train.

"No, you aren't." Kerry was speaking into her phone. "I'm standing right here, looking at the wall and we're in the city hall station."

Across the platform, against the far wall, Dar could see another, smaller concrete slab that was darkened and obviously not used. She turned around and saw the twin of it against the other wall, then she went again to the edge of the tunnel and peered inside.

The driver had come out of his cubicle and he approached her. "What are you people doin?" He asked, in a gruff tone.

Dar turned. She held up her ID and credentials, which he peered at. "We're working with the government." She said. "Try to lay some cable down these tunnels."

The driver looked down the tunnel, then at her. "You're crazy, right?" He said. "You think you're putting cables down the subway? We got manholes for that." He pointed across at the other, darkened platform. "They're over there, not in the tunnels lady."

"Are they?" Dar looked where he was pointing, seeing a rolldown door in the gloom. "Can I get over there to look at it?"

The driver studied her, then he shrugged. "Gwan inside the car. I'll open the other doors. You might need to jump a little."

"Look, I'm telling you I'm right here. No one... what? What do you mean, another city hall?" Kerry motioned Scuzzy over. "Can you talk to this guy? He's not making any sense to me."

"Sure." Scuzzy willingly came over. "He's probably from Brooklyn or somethin."

Dar entered the car through the open doors and crossed over, waiting until the driver entered his cubicle and opened the far set, exposing the dark, shortened platform. It wasn't much of a jump, actually, Dar merely stepped across onto it, and pulled her flashlight out to explore.

The platform was filthy. She had the brief sensation of what it might be like inside a coal mine as she walked along the concrete slab carefully, glancing up at an old mosaic embedded into the wall. "Brooklyn Bridge." She muttered under her breath.

It was obscured with plaster, and a half wall of whitewashed wood forming a crude storage area. Next to that was a door, painted black to match the inside walls and battered with years. Dar walked over and turned the knob, fully expecting it to be locked but not entirely surprised when it wasn't.

She pushed the door open and peered inside, and sure enough, she was faced with more cable trunks than she knew what to do with. She entered and looked around, tipping her head back to look up and see tiny chinks of light above her head.

They flickered, then flickered again, and she realized she was looking at daylight. Manhole? She turned and looked at the door, then shook her head and continued exploring.

"Hey, Dar!" Kerry's voice echoed through the station. "Where are you?"

"Over here." Dar examined the huge bundles of cables and thick, riveted pipes that ran along the wall. A rustle of movement made her jump, and she flashed her light into the corner, which now had a pair of glowing eyes. "What's up?"

"C'mere!"

Dar backed out of the room with guilty relief, shutting the door quickly behind her before she turned and found Kerry looking out of the open doors at her. "What's up?"

"What's there?" Kerry countered. "Did you find something?"

"Cable trunk." Dar joined her in the car. "Not sure it helps us. Not sure where it ends up."

"Hey, if you people wanna keep talkin, I got to pull the train around to the other track." The driver said. "You want to ride around? I got no problem with that, since you're with the government and all."

"We're n..." Kerry started to answer, then she stopped. "Sure, that's fine. Thanks." She waited for the door to the driver's compartment to close. "Dar, they told Scuzzy they were in some other City Hall station. She thinks they're in the wrong tunnels."

Dar looked over at Scuzzy, who lifted her hands again. "There ain't no other City Hall station on this line, yeah? They got one over on the BMT though. I think they came down into the wrong stations or something."

"Great." Dar exhaled, pressing her nose against the window as the train started moving. "We're screwed."

"I think it's the stock market that's screwed, hon." Kerry said, pragmatically. "It's not our fault they took the wrong stairs."

"We'll still get screwed over it. No one's going to care if they did the wrong thing. We're the ones who promised we'd fix it." Dar stared grimly out the window, as the train eased into a turn, and the walls shifted from a drab sooty black to a lighter brick.

She got the impression of light, and she cupped her hands against the glass to see better. "Wh..." Her eyes took in arches and brickwork, a flash of mosaic, flickers of light, and outlined in it, a group of workers with a familiar spool. "Hey! Hey! There they are!"

"What?" Kerry crowded against her and looked out the window. "Where who.. oh.. huh?"

"Scuzzy, get this guy to stop, willya?" Dar called out. "There are the bastards. In there!"

Scuzzy was already hammering on the door to the driver's compartment. "Hey buddy! Hey! Hold it up!"

The train shuddered to a halt, jerking and rattling and throwing Kerry against Dar and both of them against the window. Dar grabbed Kerry and the pole she was standing near and got them both upright as the door to the driver's pod yanked open and the driver emerged.

"What in the hell are you people yelling about?" The man asked. "Jesus Christ you scared the shit out of me! You know what it's been like the last couple days? I'm having a heart attack!" He fumed. "What's wrong wit you?"

"Hey, take it easy." Scuzzy held her hands out. "We just found the guys we were looking for, yeah? We didn't want to miss them."

"What are you ta..." The driver ducked back inside and looked out his window. "There's no one... oh hell. There is people there. What the hell are they doing there?" He opened the slat and stuck his head out. "What you people doin out there, huh?"

Dar leaned closer to the doorway. "Can you open the doors?" She asked. "We need to talk to those guys."

"What?" The driver was still yelling out the window. He reached back inside and triggered a switch. "How in the hell did you get in here? They told us this was strickly offlimits!"

"We're the phone company, shaddup!" The man on the platform yelled back.

Dar went to the door and stepped carefully over the shoulder width gap onto the platform, turning to hold out a hand to Kerry without really even thinking about it.

Kerry paused in the act of hopping out and eyed her, a faint smile twitching at her lips. She shifted her flashlight to her left hand and reached over to clasp Dar's fingers, squeezing them as she stepped out over to the other side and gave her a little bump. "Thank you, sweetie."

Her partner paused, and a tiny wrinkle appeared on the bridge of her nose. "Was I being pretentious?"

"Just charming." Kerry moved past her. "Wow. What is this place?"

Dar glanced briefly around, then she headed for the cluster of men around the spool. "Let's see what those bastards are doing here."

Kerry let her go ahead, taking a moment to tip her head back and look around. Scuzzy came up next to her, and they both slowed to a halt, and simply stared around them. "Wow."

"No kidding." Scuzzy agreed. "I aint' never seen nothing like this in the subway. That's for sure."

It seemed like it was part of the tunnel itself, which curved around in a big loop, the far end disappearing into the darkness again on the far side of space. But in the center, the ceiling lofted up in a series of gothic arches that culminated in a thin ironwork tracery of windows that allowed light in from outside to spill across the intricately bricked walls.

It was surprising and beautiful, completely unexpected and Kerry took her camera from her belt pouch and adjusted the flash, taking a few pictures of the work. "I guess there were two City Halls." She pointed at a mosaic tile sign on the wall, which held the words. "How weird."

Scuzzy was looking right up at the ceiling. "Woah." She said. "You know? I think this is like, right outside the freaking entrance to the Hall. I seen those glass things from the top, you know? I asked my brother what they were once and he had like no idea."

"Ker." Dar's voice interrupted their sightseeing.

Kerry put her camera away, turning and heading over to where her partner was standing. "Sorry, what's up?"

"Wrong fucking cable." Dar enunciated the three words in the most clipped tone imaginable.

"Oh Jesus." Kerry pinched the bridge of her nose, as a headache she'd been keeping at bay started up again. "Not what I needed to hear."

"This is what those guys gave us." The man from Verizon spoke up immediately. "This aint my fault." He immediately added. "This is the stuff those guys from Jersey brought over, right Mike?"

"Right." Another tech agreed immediately. "So that's what I told that guy, you sure it's this code? I had the code. I told him the code, and he said yeah, it was the right code, but I knew it wasn't no right code because I been laying this cable since I was eighteen years old and I know what code it should be, and it aint this code."

"Right. So we told those guys somebody needed to come down here and look at this before we went no further, because this is a lot of crap to go through for no reason." The first tech said. "And my guys gave me a lotta crap about it and just said to go on with it, but ain't no way was I gonna have these here guys run this here cable if it's the wrong stuff."

There was a brief silence. Then Dar folded her arms over her chest. "Right choice."

The tech nodded. "You got that right. So they sending someone down to here now?" He asked. "I ain't got all day to be sitting in this tunnel."

"They sent someone." Dar answered, before Kerry's bristling hackles could make her pale hair fluff out like a chia pet. "I'll look at the cable."

"You?" The man gave Dar a doubtful look.

"Yes."

"Okay" The man motioned the other techs over. "Unreel some of dat, willya? This here lady wants to see it." He looked back at Dar. "You sure you know what you're looking at?"

"Yes."

"Whatever." The man motioned her forward. "C'mon, c'mon. We aint got all day."

"Shit." Dar pulled out her flashlight and walked over to the spool, where the telco techs were unhitching the end of the cable in the spool and twisting it back for her to inspect. "This was one complication I wasn't expecting."

"Can I punch him while you're figuring out what to do?" Kerry asked, from between gritted teeth. "Stupid piece of ignorant pork rind."

"Easy slugger."

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Dar leaned against the intricately bricked wall, her arms crossed over her chest, her mind racing. In front of her the track was now clear, as the train had moved along into its appointed time slot and she had been left to ponder the cable, the techs, and the pit she'd dug herself into.

Shit. She felt like kicking herself. After all the bullshit she'd been spilling about everyone else's lame ass actions she had to face the fact she had screwed up to an intolerable degree in not simply checking what type of cable this half ass vendor was giving them.

Inexcusable.

Kerry came over and leaned against the wall next to her, their shoulders brushing. "Hey." She braced one booted foot against the brick. "Thanks for the advice on the Lansing issue. It worked."

Dar looked sideways at her.

Kerry peered mildly back.

"You're welcome." The dark haired woman finally said. "You trying to make me stop kicking myself?"

"Well." Her partner plucked at the knee of her pants. "Actually I was just trying to find something to say to you that wouldn't make you blow up at me."

"At you?"

"You know what I mean." Kerry said. "Hon, I know you're freaking out. I don't want to make it worse for either of us."

Dar sighed.

Kerry felt the gentle pressure as Dar leaned against her, a non verbal acknowledgment and surrender she felt a great deal of sympathy for. There really wasn't much she could say, to be honest. Dar was right. She should have checked.

Of course, she could try to take responsibility for that on herself, but if she tried, she knew Dar would just go ballistic and frankly she wasn't looking for any kind of tension between them since the situation was already more than wretched enough.

Honesty seemed the better route. With Dar it always was, even if her own inclination was to try and make excuses or find some way to entice her lover into feeling better about whatever it was she was kicking herself over. "So it's the wrong kind of fiber."

"Wrong kind of fiber." Dar agreed. "Multimode. The long distance optics are single mode."

"No options?"

"Longest reach multimode will do is 550 meters." Dar let her head rest on the wall. "Eighteen hundred feet."

Kerry did the math, and sighed. "Do they have any other spools?"

"Sure. All the wrong kind." Dar supplied. "Know what that bastard said? Oops."

"Oops." Kerry mouthed the word. "Nice."

"Yeah." Dar acknowledged. "Mongolian clusterfuck, courtesy of yours truly." She gazed up at the skylights, then she pushed off from the wall. "Well, screw it." She started back towards the techs, who had been taking a break leaning against the cable spool. "No point in standing around."

Kerry gathered herself up and followed, catching up as Dar neared the work crew. "Hon..."

Dar held a hand up. "Okay, go ahead and keep rolling it out. We'll deal with it on our end." She said, in a brisk tone as she came up next to where the men were lounging. "We're running out of time."

The crew leader turned in surprise. "Yeah? This is the wrong stuff though." He pointed out. "You said so."

"Not a problem." Dar replied steadily. "I'll handle it. Just get the cable rolled out. We've got a solution."

The man studied her. "Awright." He shrugged. "Overtime for us, and not doin what those guys down town from here are doin. Sounds good to me. Okay boys?"

The techs dusted their gloved hands off, most of them nodding. "Better than digging out pipes." One agreed. "At least it's quiet down here, and no dust."

The men got to work, standing up and taking hold of the spool. "Down the line here." The crew leader motioned Dar and Kerry out of the way. "Scuse me, ladies. We got work to do."

"Sorry, we definitely don't want to hold you up." Kerry gave him a smile. "We'll be waiting for you on the other end. Thanks for taking the time to let us know about this, by the way. At least it gives us time to get a solution in place before you get up there."

The man nodded briefly at her. "You the people with the bus?"

Kerry nodded back. "We'll send some snacks down the line to you when we get back. We really appreciate you guys coming through for us with this."

The men reacted to Kerry's charm and sincere tone. They gave her brief smiles, and one of them touched the rim of his hard hat as they rolled the spool by. "See you down at the Rock, pretty lady." He said, giving Kerry a wink.

Kerry gave them all a genial wave. She waited for them to move down the curve of the track, before she turned and looked at her partner. "Come up with a plan?"

"Nope." Dar had her hands in her pockets. "I haven't a damn clue what I'm going to do."

Kerry turned her head and looked at the men, then swiveled back to face Dar. Her brows lifted. "Is this something maybe you can come up with a fix for?"

"Probably not."

"Hon? Is there a reason you want these guys to work all night doing this then?" Kerry asked, gently. "I know you hate to give up, so do I, but there's a lot of work they could be doing too, huh?" She laid a hand on her partner's arm to ease any sting from the words.

Dar merely lifted her shoulders in a mild shrug, though. "I can't just tell them to stop." She said. "Even if I know it's probably going to be a waste of time."

"Probably?"

"Well." Dar removed one hand from her pocket and raked her hair back from her eyes with the fingers of it. "I know the physics of it, Ker. But let's go back to the Rock, and I'll get on the phone with some of the eggheads I know up at our network vendor and see what they say."

Kerry studied her face, cast in the shadows from the skylight's grill. Even she could see the doubt in her partner's eyes, and from her own knowledge of the technology she faced the understanding that this time Dar really was just tossing crap in the air.

Sobering.

“Okay.” Kerry said, after they were both silent for a minute. “We really don’t have much choice, do we?”

“No.”

“Then let’s boogie.” Kerry turned around. “Scuzzy? You around here? We’ve got to get going.”

Scuzzy trotted down a set of steps in the center of the curve. “Man, this is amazing.” She said. “I ain’t never seen nothing like this place. You know what this is?” She came over, full of enthusiasm and oblivious to the nerdish gloom around her colleagues. “This is like the very first station in the subway.”

“Is it?” Kerry looked around again. “It’s really interesting.”

“Yeah. I found a plack over there.” Scuzzy pointed. “This is where it started, you know? The first station, where all the trains left from back in like in 1904.” She looked up. “Man, they used to make things cool, huh?”

“Why don’t they use it anymore?” Dar spoke up. “Seems like a waste to just leave it here.”

“Oh.” Scuzzy pulled out her phone. “Hang on a minute, that drive told me to like call him when we needed to get out of here. Walking down the track’s not cool” She dialed a number, turning her head to one side and covering her ear as she waited for it to be answered.

Her decision made, Dar turned her attention to her surroundings. She walked over to the plaque and studied it, tipping her head back to look at the mosaic sign above. There was an elegance, and an architectural beauty to it that surprised her, and she allowed herself to be distracted by the artistry in the tiles and the arches.

She felt a moment out of time, hearing the echo of a different era as Kerry walked quietly up behind her, coming to stand at her side, sliding the fingers of one hand into Dar’s front pocket.

The silent support in the motion both charmed her, and made her feel more than a little guilty. She glanced to the side, catching Kerry’s profile in the dim light from the work lamps.

After a moment, Kerry sensed it and turned her face a little, their eyes meeting. “Know what I think?” She said.

“Bet I’m about to.” Her partner wryly answered.

“I think Heaven is really going to be a plane seat heading home.” Kerry tugged her a little. “C’mon, boss. Let’s get out of here. I think I hear our chariot approaching.”

“Here we go.” Scuzzy confirmed it, pointing down the track. “Man, I wish I’d took pictures down here. This was freaking amazing.”

“I have some. I’ll share.” Kerry clasped Dar’s hand with her own and started towards the edge of the platform. Ahead of them, on the far side where the track seemed unused, the men were already working their way along, flashlights casting odd bursts of light against the soot darkened walls.

“That’s cool.” Scuzzy joined them at the edge of the concrete. “I mean, I know this is real serious and all that stuff, but I think New York is the coolest city, and I love seeing stuff like this. Like, you been over Brooklyn Bridge?”

“I have.” Kerry responded, since her silent partner wasn’t looking likely to. “It’s an amazing construction.” She added. “I know the head of the office here, who died in the attack, was also a big fan of the city wasn’t he Dar?”

“He was.” Dar said. “I’m sure he would have loved to have seen this place.”

The train pulled slowly into the station, it’s bright number six prominent in the gloom. Scuzzy tilted her head back and looked up at the skylight. “Like that stuff. Today, we just put these lights everywhere. Back then, they were smart. They used what they had, you know? Got all kinds of light in here from that.”

"Using prisms." Kerry waited for the door to open, then she hopped inside.

"Prisms." Dar repeated, as she joined her.

"You people done with all this now?" The driver poked his head out. "My boss said I can't do this no more. They got real pissed at me."

"We're done." Kerry said. "Thank you very much for picking us up."

"Yeah, that was really cool." Scuzzy went over to him. "This place is great."

The driver shrugged. "It's just a tunnel." He went back in his cubicle and closed the door, then closed the outside doors and put the train in motion. They sat down as they left the old, unused station and pulled around, shuttling through only a short period of darkness before they were pulling into Brooklyn Bridge.

Dar settled back in her seat to wait out the ride, folding her arms over her chest as she half closed her eyes and thought about light.

And prisms.

Kerry felt her phone buzz, but she left it on her belt, content to merely sit, sharing Dar's space as she let her mind go blank. There would be time when she got back to the office to continue her neverending problemsolving.

Right now she could use the tunnels as an excuse to rest her head against Dar's shoulder and think about something trivial, like the pretty mosaics on the wall back there, and how warm her partner's skin was.

There was no real point in wondering what they were going to do about the problem of the cable. If Dar didn't know what to say about it, no one did.

She really had no idea what they were going to do.

**

Dar rested her forearms on the mahogany wood surface, appreciating the sound proofed walls and the stillness of the office.

On the desk was a phone, and her laptop, which was closed. The rest of the office was fairly sterile and empty, a spare the staff had rapidly found for her when she and Kerry returned from the subway, moving from an active part of the work back to something a bit more administrative.

For once, Dar was glad. She didn't really want to be around the fiber guys, and Mark, who were setting up the gear needed to make the connection she knew wasn't going to happen when it was all said and done.

She didn't want to say anything to them, but she was finding it hard not to anyway. It was an odd mix of embarrassment and anger, frustration at the situation and self disgust at her part in it.

Ugh.

She looked at the phone, then she removed her PDA and opened it, flicking through the address book as she searched for a specific entry. After she found it, she exhaled, studying the phone pad for a long time before she made a move towards it.

A knock at the door stilled her hand in the act of dialing. She released the line and put her hands back on the desk. "C'mon in."

Alastair poked his head in at the invitation. "Hello, there."

"Hey." Dar waved him forward, guiltily glad of the interruption. "How was the interview?"

Her boss smiled briefly. "Well, that went just fine. But you know, they followed me back here. Really want to talk to you."

Dar made a face. "Alastair, I'm busy."

"I know." Alastair said. "But they're right in back of me, lady. Don't make me turn around and boot them. They're not bad folks. Just want a few minutes of your time."

Silver linings. Dar sighed. "Okay, sure." She said. "Might as well get it over with before I get on a conference call." She shifted and rested her chin on her fist. "Bring em in."

Alastair smiled again, this time far more warmly. "Thanks." He drew back for a moment, then he opened the door and entered, holding it open for the rest to follow. "C'mon in, folks. Dar's just got a minute, so please keep it brief."

A group of four people entered, two men dressed in khakis carrying cameras with pockets full of technical items, a tall man in a turtleneck and a jacket, and a medium height woman in a leather coat and boots.

"Hi." Dar briefly wished Kerry was in the room. "What can I do for you folks?"

The tall man approached the desk. "John Avalls." He held a hand out. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Ms. Roberts. We won't be too long."

Dar stood and took his hand. "I'd appreciate that. We're in the middle of a lot of activity here."

"This is my colleague, Sarah Sohn." The man indicated his female companion. "And our cameramen John and Barry."

Dar gave them all a brief nod. Then she stuck her hands in her pockets and waited.

The reporters came closer to her while the camera people set up their gear. Alastair loitered in the background, perching on the credenza that held a set of glasses and probably hid a large screen television panel.

"Okay." Avalls was flipping through a notepad. "Sorry, Ms. Roberts. It's been a long couple days for us too. I'm trying to get my questions straight here so I don't waste your time."

"No problem." Dar watched the cameramen wrangle their gear. "I can imagine that you folks have been going without any sleep just like we have."

"Exactly." Sarah nodded. "You almost feel guilty taking a nap, like you're going to miss something if you do." She had a portfolio open, and she took up a position near the short edge of Dar's desk. "For a while there, even going to the restroom felt like that."

Dar nodded. "Can't be like that forever though."

"No." Sarah said. "It's funny you say that, because I was thinking, just this morning before we met Mr. McLean, that I had so many other things to do, personal things, laundry, you know, shopping - that I haven't even thought about since Tuesday."

"Life's moving on." Alastair suggested. "I know we feel it. Our customers were completely understanding the first few days, but now, their priorities are changing too."

Avalls looked up from his notes and nodded. "I found myself hoping over coffee this morning they'd find me an assignment somewhere else." He said, honestly. "You can just take so much. I felt like going to cover baseball in Wisconsin."

Dar nodded slowly. "Wish I was home in Miami, myself, matter of fact." She remarked. "Alastair and I were in London when it happened, and we've been going full out since then."

"I was at my in laws in Virginia." Avalls said. "My father in law was having his sixtieth birthday party, and we had the whole family in for a big barbeque." He glanced up from his notepad. "Now he never wants to celebrate his birthday again."

They were all silent for a moment. "Tough to know who to be mad at, isn't it?" Alastair came over and settled on the far edge of the desk Dar was standing behind. "Anyway, here we are."

"Here we are." Avalls said. "John, you ready?"

"Yeah. I think there's enough light in here not to use ours." The cameraman said, peering into his lens at Dar's image. "We're good."

"This is a high pickup mic." Sarah said. "So we don't need to do the whole stick it in your face thing. It's picking you up fine." She looked at a meter on the device she was wearing over her shoulder. "And it's quiet in here."

"Great." Dar rocked up and down on her heels. "One warning. I'm tired, and I'm not a talking head." She said. "Don't ask any questions you don't want to hear the answers to."

Sarah looked up and smiled at her. "We know." She said. "Ms. Roberts, I've been a fan of yours since you did an interview about that ATM breakdown for a colleague of mine." She added. "I can't speak for John but we're not here looking for a headline on the crawler. We just don't understand some things we've seen happening and we'd like to, and we think you have the answers."

"You speak for me." Avalls said, in a mild tone. "I **am** just the talking head."

Dar relaxed, sensing a weary doggedness in the little crew she understood at a gut level. She was usually wary of the press, given her recent experiences with them sometimes more than wary, but in this time, in this place, she felt like it was going to be okay.

Alastair, after all, knew her well enough not to put her in front of a couple of antagonistic reporters, didn't he? She glanced over at him, seeing only mild interest on his face. "Nice shirt, Alastair."

Her boss eyed her. "Laundry's in the hands of the hotel, Paladar. I wasn't banking on spending an extra couple of weeks on the road with you."

Dar grinned, then she turned back to the reporters. "So. What can I answer for you folks?"

"Okay." Avalls studied his pad and paper. "Let me put on my weatherman voice and get the started." He cleared his throat. "Ms. Roberts, we all know everyone rushed to New York to help in this time of great tragedy. But what did that mean to you? What are you doing here?"

"Dar, be good." Alastair got in, just as his beloved CIO was taking a breath to answer. "Remember this will probably be national."

Dar merely laughed. Then she sighed. "What am I doing here." She mused. "Well, for one thing, we didn't rush up here." She said. "This was our second stop."

"Second?"

The door opened, and a familiar blond head poked inside. Dar motioned her partner forward, then returned her hands to her pockets. "We went to the Pentagon first, physically, but in reality we were everywhere after it happened."

"Can you explain that?" Avalls said.

"Not without a white board and at least ten colored markers." Dar replied. "In brief, we reached out and connected all of our corporate resources so we could understand what was happening and mitigate the effects when we could, and where we could."

Kerry came over and took a seat out of camera range in one of the comfortable leather chairs to one side of the desk.

"Then, after we got a team on the ground at the Pentagon and resolved their immediate infrastructure problems, we came here." Dar concluded. "And since we've been here, we have been using the resources we have to try and help the city knit itself back together."

"The city asked you to come?" Avalls asked.

"We came for our people here." Alastair answered. "City didn't have much to do with it."

"But once we were here, and they knew we were, they gave us a priority list and we did what we could with it." Dar added.

"Yet you brought your infamous bus with you." Avalls consulted his pad. "This bus, which I've heard about from roughly everyone including all our production people has been seen all over the city passing out drinks and cookies." He glanced up. "Was that calculated? Good corporate PR?"

"I'm sure it is good corporate PR. The name of the company's plastered over the outside of the damn things." Dar replied. "But in fact, no. We sent the buses because we knew we had people here who needed help. Not people in general, our people here in the city."

"I'm sure a cynic would doubt that." Avalls said, but he smiled.

"I'm sure they would." Dar agreed. "And in the end, it really doesn't matter because the buses did what we wanted them to do and more, no matter what anyone considered the motive to be. We know better."

"So what now? What are you doing now, and what do you intend to do in the future here?" Avalls asked, after a brief pause. "How long do you focus on New York?"

Dar remained silent for a moment, pondering what to answer to that. "We focus on all our customers." She said finally. "So in that sense, we'll be busy here for a while. We have a lot of facility down we need to take care of."

"That's not exactly what I meant." Avalls said. "I understand of course you take care of business. What I meant was, how long will you be acting in this – well, let's call it philanthropic mode? I'm sure you're not billing Manhattan for the cupcakes."

Dar turned her head and looked at Alastair, her brows lifting.

The camera swung over and focused on the CEO. He had his arms folded over his chest, and a thoughtful expression on his face. "Well now." He mused. "I don't think we ever even thought about it that way. I recall being on our conference bridge and naturally when I heard about the problems our people were having here of course we sent our service personnel. It's part of who we are as a company, you know? It's the people."

"The people?"

"The people." Alastair indicated the general surroundings, and then specifically Dar and Kerry. "Our company is our people. It's not the technology and the gew gaws and wiring. Of course we focus on taking care of the most precious resource we have, and the buses will stick around until we no longer need them. If the city benefits by that, great. I'm fine with funding as many damn cupcakes and cups of lemonade we can pass out."

"Now." Dar cleared her throat. "Will that bring us good PR? Sure. Will people remember the logo on the bus? Sure." She shrugged. "But we'd do it anyway. Our people are as glad to see those buses as anyone else is."

"Okay, cut it, John." Avalls said. "So now let me ask you, shouldn't the city, or the government be out there doing the same thing?"

Dar sat down behind the desk. "Not my area."

Kerry chuckled.

"Not being provocative?" Sarah chuckled also. "The Red Cross is out there. There's nothing in the government really that provides that type of service. That isn't their area either."

"That's true." Kerry responded. "We have to have that facility because, like Alastair said, our people are our most important resource. We have to provide for them so they can do the jobs we need done in situations like this. It's tough to be away from your family, and thrown into a relatively dangerous situation."

"Well, we could say the city workers and the military have the same issue." Avalls commented.

"Yes, but they get paid to do public service." Kerry said. "Our people get paid to be nerds. That doesn't usually mean you put your life on the line for your job."

"And yet, here you are." Sarah said. "And from what Mr. McLean said, you were down in the disaster area in the wreckage yesterday where you could easily have been hurt, true?"

"True." Kerry agreed.

"Do they pay you for that, Ms. Stuart?" Avalls asked, folding his hands over his pad.

"No." Kerry shook her head.

"So then why go?" He followed up. "I'm not asking to be contrary. I'm curious."

Kerry glanced past him. "Because Dar went." She answered honestly. "And I go where she goes, no matter how crazy it is."

That shut them up. They glanced between Kerry and Dar, as the cameraman fiddled with putting his gear away. "All right then." Avalls finally said. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to us. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime." Dar leaned back in her chair, as Alastair got up from the desk.

"I'll walk you folks out." Alastair said. "Dar, the board's asked for a short recap call, can we squeeze that in next?"

"Sure." Dar agreed.

They left, closing the door and leaving Dar and Kerry alone in the office. Dar turned in her chair and regarded her partner, a wry smile on her face.

"Was that too goofy?" Kerry asked.

"Nah. Wish theyd' gotten it on camera." Dar replied. "We might as well get all the good press we can now, because you know we're going to get thrown under those damn buses when nothing works on Monday."

Kerry sighed. "So you haven't come up with a brilliant plan to fix the problem yet?"

Dar snorted. "Ker, thanks for the vote of confidence but even I can't change the laws of physics." She went back to her PDA. "Hang out. You can hear the guffaws of laughter when I ask the guys over in the optics division of our network vendor if they can."

"Yerg."

"Mm."

**

"How's it going, Mark?" Dar released the radio button and waited. She leaned back against the wall behind the desk Kerry was seated at, studiously pecking at her keyboard, the tip of her tongue sticking out as she concentrated.

Dar found the expression adorable and despite her current aggravation it made her smile.

"Good news." Kerry said, after a moment. "They got all the circuits back up at the Pentagon, Dar. That room's fully operational now." She glanced up at her companion. "What's so funny?"

Nothing." Dar cleared her throat. "That is good news." Her partner said. "That should give you some slack on the bandwidth in that area." She added. "I know that was stressing the backhaul carrying most of that on the sat."

"It does." Kerry agreed. "I'm glad, because I told some of the customers we have riding on the sat as primary we'd maybe see some improvement after the weekend." She went back to her keyboard. "Not that it kept them from bitching at me."

"Hey boss, Mark here." Dar's radio crackled. "I got the router mounted down here. Had to pay to get some guy to give me power though. They freaked out when I wanted to run a cord over the ground."

"Expense it. Whatever it was." Dar responded.

"He.. uh, didn't exactly give me a receipt." Mark admitted. "And I kinda had to pay in cash, if you get my drift."

Kerry turned and peered over her shoulder again. "We're not going to pass the ethics certification this year, are we?"

Dar gave her a wry look. "Expense it anyway, Mark. We'll approve it." She said. "We need to get a pull cord run down to the tunnels. Any progress on finding a path?"

There was a few clicks on the speaker, before Mark answered. "They're working on it, boss. Kannan and Shaun are down there looking for a way up." He said. "Nothing yet."

Damn. Dar tapped the mic against her chin. "Okay. Keep me in the loop."

She clipped the mic and sighed. "I feel like a complete shit head making them go through this knowing it's for nothing." She said. "I'm going to pay them all bonuses when we get back just for that."

"Are you going to tell them?" Kerry leaned on the chair arm and studied her partner. "I guess, really what I mean is what are you going to tell them once the cable gets here? Mark's going to know when he sees it, certainly Kannan will."

Dar slid down the wall to sit on the floor, extending her legs out. "I know." She said. "I don't know what I'll tell them. I'm not going to tell anyone now. Let the damn cable get here, and then.. I don't know." She scratched her ear. "I'll just be honest I guess. Tell them we were working on a way around it but it just didn't work out."

Kerry got up and walked over, sitting down next to Dar and stretching her legs out alongside her partner's. "This sucks, sweetie."

"It sucks." Dar's cell phone rang, and she pulled it out and answered it. "Dar Roberts." She listened. "Oh, hey, Chuck. Hang on." She keyed the phone's speaker. "Go ahead, Kerry's here too."

"Hey, yeah, hi Kerry." Chuck's voice echoed. "Listen, they just briefed me on what you asked, Dar." He said. "I've checked with a few people. That spec won't carry the distance. It can't."

Kerry closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I'm aware of that, Chuck." Dar said. "Problem is, that's all they got here. You know what's riding on it." She added. "I've been through the specification with a fine tooth, I know it says it's impossible. I want to know what is possible, and whether all it's going to take is a lot of money, which I'm willing to cough up."

"Well, I know, Dar." Chuck answered. "I got fifteen senior engineers here in the white board room looking at this from every angle, but you know, it is what it is." He said. "At most, they can tweak the modules to go a thousand, maybe twelve hundred meters. That's it."

Dar sighed. "Damn." She exhaled. "You were our best shot, Chuck. You've developed the latest set of optics everyone uses."

"I know." Chuck agreed. "Not to toot our horn, but if we can't do this, nobody commercial can. We're the big dogs."

"That doesn't really..."

Chuck uncharacteristically cut her off "So what I decided to do, was call in some friends of mine who work over at NASA." Chuck continued. "My brother's an engineer over at Lockheed Martin, and he's got some contacts on the team who did the Hubble."

Kerry peered at the phone with renewed interest. "Never thought of that." She murmured. "When it doubt call a rocket scientist."

"All right." Dar answered. "Do you think they'll help?"

"I don't know." Chuck answered honestly. "It beats sitting in this room watching everyone scratch their heads and shrug their shoulders. We can't do beans with this Dar. Maybe they got some bright ideas." He said. "It's optics. If anyone can come up with some hair brained idea to make duct tape and mirrors work, it'll be those guys."

"I appreciate it, Chuck." Dar said. "We're at our wits end here too. The nearest spool of the right stuff is 2,000 miles away and I can't get it here before Tuesday."

"Ouch." He responded "Well, I have no idea if anything will come of it, but I didn't want to just drop it." Chuck said. "I'll let you know if we find out anything, okay?"

"Thanks." Dar responded. "Later, Chuck." She closed the phone and studied it. "That's not going to happen. We just don't have the time."

"You having that cable sent?" Kerry asked.

"Yeah."

"I'm glad he took the initiative." Kerry said. "Without you having to ask." She reached over and patted her partner's leg "Come with me to get some lunch? It's getting pretty late and we got up pretty early."

Dar sighed.

"Hon, you're doing the best you can." Kerry said, gently. "You engaged the right people, they brought in the right people, if this doesn't happen, it won't be because we didn't try." She leaned close, and captured her partner's eyes. "We can just do what we can do."

"Yeah, I know." Dar picked up Kerry's hand and brought it to her lips, kissing the knuckles. Then she turned it palm up and kissed that. "We just have to keep going and see where it takes us." She got up and hauled Kerry up with her, pausing to kiss her palm again as they stood.

"Keep doing that and I'll tell you where it's going to take us." Kerry said. "Right back to our hotel room. That's where." She slapped her partner on the butt and nudged her towards the door. "Scoot."

Instead of scooting, Dar turned and let Kerry's forward momentum bring them together. She wrapped both arms around her and tilted her head, kissing her on the lips.

Far from protesting, Kerry returned the hug, and the kiss with enthusiasm. They parted a little after a minute, and she looked up into Dar's eyes, enjoying the frank passion she saw there. "What were we about to do?"

"Go back to the hotel." Dar promptly supplied. "You mentioned something about lunch."

"Hm."

"They have room service."

"Heck with that." Kerry smiled. "We can stop for a hot dog on the way back." She stretched up and stole another kiss, then she firmly took Dar's hands and started leading her towards the door. "C'mon. I need a break. Chances are we're going to end up in some dusty wiring room tonight."

"Hm." Dar sighed regretfully. "Unfortunately Alastair scheduled a board conference call I think. We may just have time to get that hot dog."

"Grr." Kerry thumped her head against Dar's shoulder. "Why can't the board just watch CNN?"

"Easy, hon." Dar scrubbed the back of her neck and gave her a hug. "We'll take a break after that. Let's skip the group dinner tonight and just chill, okay?"

Kerry kept her head resting against her partner. "I've been wanting to do that for days." She admitted. "I know it's anti social but my nerves are getting rubbed raw in all this."

Dar leaned against her and kept up her gentle rubbing along Kerry's spine. "We're going home Monday." She said, after a long moment. "I sent Maria a note to make our reservations."

Kerry shifted her head and looked up. "Good." She replied. "That's the best news I've heard all week. I was going to ask you later on if we could."

Dar smiled briefly. "So there's a light ahead in our tunnel, Ker. We'll do what we can until then, so just hang in there."

"Hanging." Kerry wrapped her arms around Dar and hugged her tightly. Then she let go, and pointed to the door. "So now that my libido is going to be thwarted, I'll settle for lunch. Lead on, Magellan."

Dar did, opening the door and heading out into the hallway.

They bumped into Alastair, almost literally, as the doors to the lift opened. "Ah." Dar stepped back out of the way. "You see our friends off?"

"I did." Alastair said. "Not bad folks, really. I thought that went pretty well. Didn't you?"

Dar nodded. "Far as that sort of thing goes, yeah." She agreed. "Seemed pretty innocuous. I'm willing to bet they were glad to get a soft story for a change after what they've been covering the last few days."

"You got it." Alastair agreed. "Dar, I set the conference call for forty five minutes. Can I buy you ladies lunch?"

"Absolutely." Dar indicated the door. "We were just heading out for that ourselves. I need to let you in on some technical issues that have cropped up."

"Uh oh."

"I'll translate." Kerry promised. "I've also got some major customer complaints you probably should know about."

Alastair sighed, as he punched the button for the lobby. "Fair trade. The FBI is after us again."

"Great."

**

"Why did I let you talk me into this?" Alastair studied the sushi menu wryly. "Don't tell me you don't eat hamburgers, Dar."

"I do." His CIO replied. "I love cheesburgers. I just also love sushi. Relax, Alastair. It's good for you."

"I even got my mother to go to a sushi restaurant." Kerry added, "She liked it."

"Your mother isn't from Texas." Alastair grumbled. "They have anything barbeque here?"

"Barbeque eel."

Alastair looked up over his glasses at Dar, as stern an expression on his face as Kerry had ever seen.

"I got Dar's father to try it and he liked it." Kerry informed him. "Honest."

"Is that why he turned down going to lunch with us?" Alastair asked, dryly. "I was wondering about that."

Dar chuckled. "He doesn't really like sushi. He eats it to humor Kerry." She explained. "But here, Alastair, just order the beef teriyaki. You'll be fine, unless you're allergic to soy sauce."

"Hm? Ah. I see." Her boss looked moderately pacified. "Well, that looks all right. At least I know what it is."

"Does he really?" Kerry inquired, peering at her partner. "Do that to humor me?"

"Sure." Dar went back to the menu. "Just like you tried sushi to humor me back in the day." She studied her choices. "That worked out a little better though."

"It did." Kerry agreed. "I love sushi." Her eyes flicked up to Dar's profile. "Not as much as I love you, of course, but still." She watched the pink blush color her partner's ears and smiled. "And really, Alastair, California rolls are pretty innocuous. Rice, crab stick, some cucumber and a little seaweed."

"Seaweed?"

"Seaweed." Dar set her menu down. "So." She leaned back in her chair. "Here's the mess we're in." She paused as a young waitress stopped at the table, her eyebrows lifted slightly and a pad in her hand. "Everyone ready?"

"Yup." Kerry put her menu down. "Dragon roll for me, please, and some miso soup."

The waitress looked at Dar. "Same for me." Dar said. "And a glass of ice tea, please."

"Of course." The girl turned to Alastair. "Sir?"

Alastair took his glasses off and handed her the menu. "I'll have the same." He announced. "What the Hell. You only live once." He settled back in his chair. "And I'll have a glass of wine with that, if you don't mind."

"Certainly sir." The waitress took their menus and disappeared.

Dar folded her arms, and exhaled. She felt as tired as Kerry and Alastair looked. They could have stayed at the office and had lunch there, but the noise, and the constant questions had driven all of them out into the streets in search of a few minutes peace.

"So." Alastair said. "You were saying?"

Dar wished she wasn't saying. "We have a problem." She said. "Verizon sent over the wrong type of fiber optics cable. They didn't realize it until they'd already rolled it part of the way out, and there's none of the right type anywhere near here."

Alastair folded his hands on the table. "I see."

"Aside from that, the path from the subway up to our office is problematical, and we don't know if we can bring the cable from the other subway to the one near the office." Kerry added. "But that's all pretty minor. The cable type isn't."

"Wont work?" Alastair asked. "Or is it just tough to make work?"

"Wont' work." Dar said. "Not without optics that don't exist yet." She cleared her throat a little. "I've asked our networking vendor to look into it, but the design cycle for those things is around two years."

Alastair checked his watch, then looked at her. "Doesn't sound good. What's our plan B?"

"We have no plan b." Dar's voice remained quite steady. "If this doesn't work, it doesn't work. I wont' have the right cable in until Wednesday, maybe Tuesday night. It weighs half a ton."

"I see." Her boss digested this. "Well. That sure sounds like a problem." He twiddled his thumbs, pondering the news.

Dar just waited, watching his face. She'd known Alastair long enough to predict most of his responses, but the situation they were in was so extraordinary, she found herself unable to imagine what he was thinking much less what he would say.

She'd gotten used to the idea that they were screwed. At this point, she really just wanted to get it all over with.

"Okay." Alastair finally said. "If it happens, it does. If not, I'll deal with it." He smiled as the waitress brought back tall, fragrant glasses of ice tea. "Thank you, that looks great." He took a sip. "I wish I

could work up a froth over it, ladies, but to be completely honest with you, I'm pretty out of arm waving."

"Me too." Dar agreed. "I can't even get mad at the jackass from Verizon. He was scared enough to be wetting his pants. He just wanted out of that room."

"I think he thought he was doing the right thing." Kerry murmured.

"Probably did." Alastair said. "I take it we're going to keep trying, right? I mean, we're not just going to walk away from this, are we?" He cocked his head and regarded his tablemates. "I'm not going to say anything to the government people, of course. Let them think whatever they want."

Dar hesitated.

"We'll keep going." Kerry spoke up. "Because you never know, until it's over, that it's over. I've learned that the hard way over the past couple of years."

Alastair nodded. "Is there anything more we can do? Anyone I can call and take my frustration out on?"

Dar shook her head. "Me." She added, after a pause. "Since I'm the one who didn't check to make sure they were using the right damn cable."

"You can't idiot proof the world, Dar." Alastair dismissed her admission with a gesture. "Fella who brought the stuff over to his own people to run shoulda known." He added. "I know we're trying to help out here but hellfire."

Kerry smiled warmly at him, aware of the vaguely sheepish expression on her beloved partner's face. "We expect everyone else to be as good as we are. We get bit with that sometimes." She remarked. "You get used to people performing at a certain level which our people do, but not everyone else does."

"Exactly." Alastair said. "So Dar, don't be silly. It's not your fault." He peered around, pausing to watch the sushi chef behind the bar. "That's the cook?"

"That's the sushi chef." Kerry said. "We usually sit near the bar at the sushi place near our office down south and watch him work. It's like food art."

"Interesting culture." Alastair commented. "Been to Japan a few times, to our regional office there. They're always wanting me to send Dar over to visit them for some reason."

"Some miso soup?" The waitress was back, with three steaming bowls. She set them down, and spoons with them, then smiled and vanished again."

Kerry settled in to enjoy her soup, her eyes drifting idly past their table at the small crowd around them. It was late for lunch, and the restaurant was only a quarter full, most of the tables with one or two occupants either engrossed in their papers or staring off into the distance as they waited for their meals.

"Is this tofu?" Alastair asked, in a quizzical tone.

"Yes." Dar lifted her bowl and sipped directly from it, cradling it in both hands. "I'm not fond of it."

He studied the white block, then he bit into it gingerly, chewing and swallowing with a noncommittal expression on his face. "Hmph. Doesn't taste like anything."

"That's why I don't like it." Dar said.

Kerry let the conversation flow past her. She watched three men enter, and look around, then motion peremptorily at the hostess. They were heavysset, and all had dark hair and irritated expressions. They pointed at a table, and walked over to it, sitting down as the waitress hurried over with menus.

"Gimme a pitcher of coke." One said. "Then get lost. "

Kerry's lip twitched. The waitress didn't seem fazed, though. She brought the pitcher and three glasses back, put them on the table, and walked away without a word. Was it the men being rude? Or was a something typical for New York that the woman was well used to?

"Ker?"

Kerry started, and turned her head. "Sorry. Just thinking." She scooped up a spoonful of mushrooms and tofu and munched them contentedly. Tofu didn't taste like that much, it was true, but she liked the texture and the contrast between the silky blocks and the other vegetables in the soup.

"So anyway." Alastair had lowered his voice. "After I got off the phone with the guy at the FBI main office, another fella called me and asked for something else, wanted to know if we had any telephone records from our customers."

"Telephone?" Dar's brows knit. "Did it not occur to them to call the telephone company for that?"

"Hell if I know. That's what I asked him. They were looking for something else though, they said something about narrowing the focus."

"But why our customers?"

"Maybe they asked the phone company, and they got what they asked for." Dar said. "And it was a trillion one line entries in tapes delivered in a big box on their doorstep. There's such a thing as too much data."

The waitress appeared, with three plates. She set them down, and smiled at them. "Please enjoy."

"Thanks, we will." Kerry glanced around, as the woman left. "Don't they need to have court orders for this kind of thing, Alastair? What's the legal part of this?"

Alastair was studying his sushi roll. "Now, what in the hell am I supposed to do with this?" He asked. "As for the legal stuff, I tossed that over to Ham. I'm not about to cough anything up with out a subpoena, but y'know, he heard rumblings that someone told them they didn't need one."

"What?"

"Chopsticks." Dar held them up. "Put the in your hands like this." She demonstrated, watching him try to imitate her. "Or pick the damn things up with your fingers. We don't care."

"Dar." Kerry remonstrated her. "It's not that hard, here. Do it this way."

Alastair bemusedly studied her fingers. "That's what Ham said they said." He continued the conversation as he tried to make the sticks come together. "That they didn't need any court order, they had orders from high up to just get what they needed, however they had to."

"Wow."

"Scared Ham." Having achieved dubious success, Alastair applied the chopsticks to the sushi roll. "Not much does."

"So what does that mean for us?" Dar asked, fiddling with her own implements. "Is he saying we should... what is he saying?"

"Y'know, Dar?" Alastair studied the bit of sushi. "Now what?" He looked at Kerry.

"Dunk it like this." Kerry motioned with her own piece of sushi, dipping it into the little bowl of soy sauce near her plate. "Then you just eat it."

"Then I just eat it." Their CIO mused. "Ham said he was going to call a friend of his in the government, try to feel them out, see what the real deal is." He dunked the piece gingerly and then popped it into his mouth, chewing with a stolid resoluteness.

Kerry exhaled. "That doesn't sound good." She put her sushi in her mouth and chewed it, glancing past Alastair's shoulder at the table of men behind them. They had their heads bent together, and as she watched, they looked up and over at them, then quickly looked away as they saw her attention.

Hm.

Alastair finished chewing, swallowed, then took a sip of his tea and sat back, looking reflectively at the plate.

"Not good?" Dar hazarded a guess.

"If we can't rely on the law... what the hell does that mean?" Kerry said. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Well." Alastair said. "That was completely unlike anything I expected." He picked up his chopsticks again. "I like it. Good stuff." He picked up another piece. "Kerry, don't worry yet. I'll let you know when it's time."

"Can't do much about it anyway." Dar plowed through her lunch. "So let's talk about something else. When they let people back down into the tip of the island, they're going to need comms. How do we handle that?"

Kerry was chewing. She eyed her partner.

"How about those Padres?" Alastair blinked mildly. "You like baseball, Dar?"

Dar looked from one to the other, then she shook her head and went back to her sushi. "I feel like I'm having lunch with a tableful of abstract art."

Kerry swallowed hastily and smothered a laugh.

Alastair paused in the act of wrangling another piece of his sushi. "Not gonna ask." He concluded. "And none of you say a word to my wife about me having this. She'll think I've joined a cult."

"Cult." Dar mused. "That mean you're going to get a tattoo?"

Alastair stopped chewing and looked at her.

"Just asking."

**

Kerry trotted down the steps, descending down to the lower level of their office complex as the crowds were thinning out and the hallways emptying. Outside, it was already dark, and she glanced at her watch as she rounded the corner and headed for the small closet in the back of the stairs.

Time to go. "Hey guys, you back here?"

"In here." Mark's voice floated out.

Kerry ducked inside the doorway to the closet, spotting lights in side. She found Mark and Kannan there, hunkered down next to a box mounted on the wall and a panel full of blinking lights. "How's it going?"

"Not bad." Mark dusted his hands off. "Kannan's just finishing the prep on the fiber box."

Kannan looked up from his work. He had a white helmet on with a light in the front, and its beam nearly pegged Kerry in the eyes before she stepped sideways to avoid it. "It is almost done, yes." He agreed. "This will be all right, I think. We left room for them to bring the cable up here, against the wall."

He indicated the path. "Then it is a simple curve into the termination box, here, where we can then connect it up to our router."

The router was on a makeshift shelf, a flash of new steel against old, blackened iron but sturdy enough to hold the square, stolidly blinking device that was already trailing wires that led to the half buried panel they'd found earlier.

"I just finished making the hookup." Mark seated a punch down tool in his belt kit. "I think I blurred everyone upstairs, did you see it?"

"Dar did." Kerry's eyes twinkled a bit. "That's how she knew you had to be about done."

Mark grimaced. "She'd probably have done it without a hitch." He grouched. "But man, it's dark in here."

Kerry patted his shoulder. "So, we're ready on this end?" She asked. "Ready for them to bring the cable up from the subway, and that's it?"

"Well." Mark sat down on a piece of jutting pipe. "I mean, in terms of connecting it, yeah, that's it. But once it's hooked up, Dar's got to figure out what to do with all those different data streams. I got no clue what's going to come down that pipe and I don't think she knows either."

"Can we get a list of what it is from the Exchange?" Kerry frowned. "That can't be that hard."

"Can't figure out who to ask." Mark admitted. "I talked to a few of those guys down there and they all had different answers. Apparently the people who really knew what was up.. I guess two guys anyway aren't around anymore."

"Ah." Kerry crossed her arms. "Okay, well I'm sure she'll figure it out. But we're done on the physical side."

"Yep." Mark nodded. "Next thing that happens is the cable gets here, and Kannan connects it up to this panel" He patted the structure. "I plug it up, we get blinkies, and then Big D can figure out how to get the bits where they need to go."

Kerry exhaled silently. "What about the other end?"

Mark gathered up his tools. "I figure we can run down and do that end tomorrow. They get any further today? I know you guys were saying they were stuck down there." He edged carefully around the electrical panel, which bore a new, shiny clamp with cables trailing from it towards the wall and the equally new socket the router was plugged into.

"They're working on it." Kerry said. "They know what the deadline is. We just have to make sure we're ready so we're not the hold up, right?"

"Aaabsolutely." Mark agreed. "C'mon, Kannan, pack up. I'm dying for a beer."

"That sounds good to me too." Kannan agreed. "I think I have just enough of these ends to make the connections for tomorrow at the other place. Then I hope they get this done quickly. Once we are finished with this, Ms. Stuart, will we be going back to Miami?"

"Yes." Kerry answered, in a definite tone. "We have a lot to do back home getting our own house in order. I'm glad we're helping out the country here, but we're at the end of our ability to extend ourselves while our own people and customers also need help."

Kannan nodded.

"Too right." Mark tucked his gloves into his belt. "I think these guys are taking way advantage of us. We're too freaking convenient." He said. "I heard those dudes down at the exchange talking about how they'd get us to do all this stuff for them and then they'd bill the feds for it."

Kerry stared at him. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope." Their MIS chief shook his head. "I've been meaning to tell you about it, I just kept forgetting with all this crap going on. I mean. " He held one hand up. "Like, they're happy we're helping and they think it's great we're doing this, but they're also checking to see how they can line their own pockets at the same time if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean." Kerry stepped back and held the door open. "Let's lock this and go get that beer. Dar and I have some work we need to catch up on tonight, so we'll pass on dinner but she wanted to buy the first round of drinks."

"That is very nice." Kannan shouldered his backpack as he and Mark moved past Kerry and she shut the door behind them. "It is difficult, these things we are doing but all the same satisfying. It is good to do hard work."

They walked around the back of the stairwell, and headed for the steps up to the lower level of the offices. The shops were mostly closed, though the restaurants were still open, and there was a small scattering of people still walking around.

Near the entrances, there were National Guard troops, standing near the walls and watching the remaining people, their eyes following the odd one walking along, as their hands cradled their rifles.

It brought home, again, what had happened. Kerry had realized she'd started to forget, caught up in the moment of doing what they were doing until she was pulled back into focus on it seeing one of the guardsman, or hearing someone talk.

Seeing the pictures of the site. Pictures of the dust covered firemen, doggedly searching through the wreckage for survivors or signs of their lost comrades.

Resolutely she turned her back on the guard and led the way up the steps, reaching the lower level and heading to where Dar and the rest of the team were waiting near the doors to steps up to the street.

The offices above were already quiet, emptied out. The staffers had gone home, those that could, and the rest were going with them over to stay at the hotel until they were allowed back downtown. Alastair had visited the hotel manager and leased a floor of the place out, to give the dispossessed a place to call home that wasn't the office they'd been camping in.

Life was moving on. One of the salesmen had commented on it, as they'd broke up and closed the office down for the first time since the attack, and there was a sense of sadness about that. A grief that was only partially acknowledged, and not yet dispelled.

She could see Dar, leaning against the wall, her hands in her pockets as she talked to one of the New York staff. Her partner looked tired, there was an uncharacteristic slump to her body posture that was visible to Kerry, if not to anyone else, and she felt a moment of impatience that they had to postpone a retreat to their room if even for the best of motives.

Dar sensed their approach and looked up, past the person she was talking to right into Kerry's eyes. Her expression shifted and one brow rose wryly, the message as clear as the crystal goblets in the storefronts she was passing.

Absolutely expressive. Kerry could recall only a few times she'd seen that particular look, usually at the end of a very long day, when the inner door to her office would open, and Dar would be leaning on the sill of it looking at her with that look, and saying "Take me home."

Everything went into the to do folder when that happened. No matter if she was working on who knows what urgent problem, she'd put her phone on voice mail, pick up her laptop, and they'd go. That was where they line was drawn, and always had been.

"All right, we're all accounted for." Kerry said, as she reached her partner's side. "Let's roll, people." She waited for Dar to push away from the wall and then she put an arm around her, giving her back a little rub with her fingers.

They climbed up the steps and out into the night, crossing the marble courtyard and heading for the streets beyond. Traffic had picked up a trifle, and the streets seemed busier, but Kerry wasn't sure if that was something really different or if it was just that it was Saturday night, and there just would be more people out.

Dar's arm settled over her shoulders with welcome warmth. She looked up at her partner. "Tired?"

"Headache." Dar replied briefly. "Looking forward to kicking back and chilling."

"Me too." Kerry exhaled. "I think I'll settle for a bowl of soup for dinner and a bubble bath."

"Mmhg." Dar made a low sound of appreciation. "And ice cream." She added.

"Of course."

They followed the group along the sidewalk, not at the very back, but near it. Kerry was glad the pace was casual, since the long day of running around had tired her out. She had a slight headache herself, and the cool breeze they were headed into felt good despite the city scents on it.

She felt a little sweaty, a little dusty, and another thought crossed her mind. "Hey Dar?"

"Mm?" Dar seemed supremely content to amble silently at her side.

"That hotel has a pool, doesn't it?"

"I think so." Her partner said, after a brief pause. "Wow. A swim sounds like a great idea." Dar perked up a little bit. "What made you think of that?"

"You in a bathing suit." Kerry answered, in a serious tone. She felt Dar twitch a little, then start to laugh. "You asked."

"I did." Dar chuckled, giving her a one-arm hug.

A tall figure dropped back to join them. "Hey there." Andrew greeted them. "What are you kids up to?"

"I was just going to ask you that, Dad." Kerry responded. "We haven't seen you since lunch. What have you been up to?" She tucked her free hand through Andrew's elbow. "I heard some of the guys saying you were yelling at someone before?"

"Wall." Andrew made a dismissive gesture. "I been sticking around that coon ass. He got himself mixed up with some of them gov'mint fellers and they was giving him a hive over some reports." He said. "Fellers were jackass rude."

"Alastair was telling us about the FBI wanting more reports. Was that it?" Kerry asked.

Andrew nodded. "Yeap." He said. "Got my back up when they started saying how they were thinking how cause all them boys of yours weren't from here that we were some suspect or something."

"What?"

Dar craned her neck around to look at her father. "What?"

"Yeap." Andrew said. "Don't know where they got that idea, but ah talked to them about it and I think they're all right with it now."

"Huh." Kerry frowned. "What's that all about? Dar, we've had non-US workers on visa to us here for years. You know as well as I do we take every qualified network tech we can find."

"I know." Dar said, her expression a little grim. "But I also know there's an isolationist streak in this country a mile wide, and I've got a feeling this disaster's going to give that a chance to show."

"Them folks just ain't been much in the world." Andrew remarked.

"My father was one of those people." Kerry said, after a short pause. "He used to say all the time that we had to watch out for what he called that foreign element."

A siren erupted nearby, and everyone flinched. But it was just a lone police car, pulling around a corner and racing through the taxi crowded street, lights flashing.

"And a couple days ago, what was undeniably a foreign element killed a few thousand people and brought down two buildings and part of a third." Kerry went on. "So maybe those people feel justified."

They walked along in silence for a few minutes, crossing a street at the light and moving along the block towards their hotel. Their colleagues were walking in a group around them, talking in low voices.

"Country's always had people from other places." Andrew finally said. "Ain't nobody hardly can say they b'long here."

"No one likes to remember that in times like this." Kerry agreed wryly. "My father's family, back in the early nineteen hundreds, came from Scotland." She paused. "My mother's came from Germany."

"Wall." Andrew scratched his ear. "I believe my folks been here a while longer. Dar's mother's folks came with them Pilgrims."

Kerry turned her head and stared at her partner, one blond brow arching sharply.

Dar shrugged. "She thinks it's funny."

"No wonder she made that crack about the turkey last Thanksgiving." Kerry said. "But anyway, here's the hotel. Let's leave this for tomorrow, and take a mind break. Okay?"

"Sounds good to me." Dar was glad to see the doors to the hotel. Her headache had gotten worse during the walk and even the enticing leather chairs of the bar weren't appealing to her. There was noise there, and people moving around, and she wanted none of it.

"Alastair?" Kerry called out softly, as they entered the lobby.

Their CEO turned, spotting them and pulling up. "Well, hello there." He said. "Glad to be at the end of this long day as I am?"

"You bet." Kerry said. "Hey, looks like they resumed the games this weekend."

The bar was relatively crowded, most of the screens shifted from CNN's tense pictures to the colorful flash of football and green grass, and the drone of the stadium. One screen, a large one in the back, had the news going but most of the patrons were around the bar, with an attitude of perceptible relief.

"You a fan?" Alastair asked.

"Not so much." Kerry admitted.

They paused in front of the bar, the big group of them, watching the screens.

"Hey, folks." Alastair addressed them. "Give me an ear, eh?"

Everyone turned to face him. "We've got the whole floor, matter of fact, we took over the concierge lounge up there too. It's got a big screen. How about we all go up there and I'll get some suds in, and we can watch from there."

Big smiles.

"You are a real cool dude." Scuzzy said. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

Alastair managed a brief grin, and then he waved them towards the elevators. "Let's put this plan into action then, shall we?" He waited for the group to start trudging towards the end of the lobby, before he turned towards Dar and Kerry. "Feel free to skip the game shindig, ladies. I'm sure you have other things to do."

"Thanks." Dar didn't miss a beat. "We do." She gave Kerry a kiss on the top of her head. "C'mon Ker. You owe me some ice cream."

"Owe you?" Kerry got her arm wrapped around Dar's waist again. "Thanks Alastair. We were hoping for a chance to just chill for a while."

He winked at them, and strolled ahead. Andrew chuckled and joined him, leaving Dar and Kerry to bring up the rear at their own pace.

Which they did. "He's a good boss." Kerry commented, as they passed the front desk.

"He is. Or I wouldn't have stayed for fifteen years, and in fact he wouldn't have put up with me that long either." Dar responded. "He's as conservative as they come, and yet, he never turned a hair at my being gay. "

"Never?"

Dar shook her head as she waited for the elevator. "When he was promoting me to VP Ops, I met with him and warned him I was, and that it would probably cause a problem for him. He said he really didn't give a damn who I slept with."

"You think he meant that though? A lot of people say it." Kerry said.

"Then? I think he said it because he thought it was the right thing to say." Her partner acknowledged. "But over the years he grew into that statement and now I absolutely think he means it."

"He just sees value in people." Kerry exhaled. "Wonder if his kids know how lucky they are." They got into the elevator and were quiet for the ride up, exchanging mild nods with the three other guests who had joined them.

The floor was already noisy down near the lounge when they got off, a trickle of television sound coming out along with the chatter of many voices.

"Glad we're down at this end." Kerry waited for Dar to key the door open and followed her in, closing it behind them and shutting out the sound. "Ugh."

"Ugh." Dar repeated, trudging across the carpet towards her bag. She opened it and took out her bottle of Advil, opening it and shaking out a few of the pills. A warm body bumped into her, and she turned to find Kerry standing there, hand outstretched.

"Share." Her partner bumped her again.

Dar did, and then she put the bottle back and rooted in the bag for her swimsuit. She took it out and paused at the credenza, picking up the bottle of water there and uncapping it. "Want some?" She took a swig and passed it over.

Kerry swallowed her handful of pills and wandered over to the book of services, opening the front page. "Dar? Where is the pool?"

Dar pointed up.

"Wow." Kerry went over to her bag and opened it to retrieve her suit. "Glad I got into the habit of always packing mine like you do." She commented. "You don't know how many times I've thanked you when I was traveling and ended up in some business hotel with a nice pool and a nice bar and this suit made me pick the virtuous path."

Dar's warm chuckle surprised her with its closeness, and she turned to find Dar standing behind her, already in her suit. "Holy cow how did you change so fast?"

"Lots of practice with you taking my clothes off." Dar gathered Kerry's shirt in her hands and started easing it over her head. "There are robes in the bathroom. We better take them before we end up being entertainment for that crowd in the other room."

Kerry stifled a giggle as Dar's fingers brushed her bare ribs. "Go get the robes." She said. "I'll get changed and we can head down."

"Up." Dar tickled her navel, and then she backed off and headed for the bathroom.

Just ten minutes ago, she'd been toast. Kerry quickly shed her pants and underwear and got into her bathing suit. Just ten minutes ago she'd been a little down, a lot tired, and wanting nothing more than to crash.

Now? Kerry looked up from adjusting her strap to find Dar leaning in the doorway, a knowing look in her eye. She felt a surge of sensual energy, a clean, powerful sensation that made her smile. "Ready?"

"Always." Dar tossed her the other robe and held a hand out. "Let's go. I want to get wet."

"Me too." Kerry answered, with a frank grin. "Let's hope no one else in the hotel does."

"Let's hope they don't have lifeguards."

**

The water felt unspeakably good closing over her as she dove in. There was that moment of silence, quickly overwhelmed by bubbles as she headed for the surface and felt the agitation next to her of Dar's tall form plunging in one step behind.

She surfaced and sucked in a lungful of chlorine-tinted air, blinking droplets out of her eyes as she flipped over onto her back and relaxed. "Ahhh."

Dar emerged from underwater next to her, shaking her head to clear her hair from her eyes. "Not overheated. Nice."

"Nice." Kerry agreed, enjoying the pleasantly cool liquid cradling her body as she floated. The pool was reasonably large, a rectangle of clear water against a painted blue background with lanes marked on the bottom.

There were no slides to go down, or diving boards to tempt Dar's quirky daredevil side. Just a placid expanse of water inside a glassed in space that would be pleasantly sunny in the daytime but now was full of watery shadows and highlights.

Around the pool were chaise lounges, and on one side was a bar that was currently closed.

That was fine with Kerry. It was just nice to have the pool and Dar to herself. She rolled over and dove under again, pulling herself along with her arms and kicking from one side of the pool to the other, the chlorine only stinging her eyes a little as she swam along.

She rose to the surface again and exhaled, then turned when she heard splashing behind her.

Dar was swimming along the length of the pool, with smooth, efficient strokes, barely creating any wake as she reached the end of the pool, disappeared underwater to turn, and then surfaced again still in motion.

Kerry didn't feel so ambitious. She stroked forward slowly in a lazy frog motion, blowing bubbles as she meandered around in a circle, going from side to side as Dar turned and came back towards her again.

She took a breath and ducked underwater again, diving down to the bottom of the pool and swimming along the bottom, enjoying the silence and the sensation of weightless gliding. She reached the wall and turned, heading back across the width of the pool in the other direction.

Halfway there, she felt something snag her suit, and she turned, to find Dar turning with her underwater, those blue eyes glinting with mischief visible.

Kerry twisted free and shook a finger at her in mock remonstrance, heading for the surface as she rain out of air.

Dar went with her, and they broke the surface together, inches apart. "Hey, it's a fish." Dar smiled.

"Was that a fishhook that caught my suit?" Kerry splashed her a tiny bit. "Boy this feels great."

"It does." Her partner agreed. "Wish it was in the pool back home, but I'll take it." She eased over onto her back and stretched her arms along the pool edge, gripping the tile rim with her hands.

Kerry swam slowly around in a circle, the sound of her displacing water the only echo in the large space. "So, where's the first place in Europe we're going to visit? You want to go the Alps?"

Dar's face relaxed. "Thank you for not talking about work." She replied, simply. "I just can't take any more thinking about it right now."

"Me either." Kerry paddled over to her. "So, where?"

"Where do you want to go?" Dar countered. "It's going to probably be near your birthday."

"Oo." Kerry put her hands behind her head and floated, bumping Dar gently and then moving away. "Where do I want to be for my birthday this year. Let me think."

Dar was content to do just that. She tilted her head to one side and admired Kerry's lithe body, glad to enjoy the moment.

"Dar?"

"Uh?" She straightened up and stifled a grin at Kerry's raised eyebrows. "Sorry. Drifted off there."

"Ah hah." Kerry looked skeptical. "Maybe it was mentioning it earlier, but you know, I think I'd like to go to Scotland." She said. "Could we start there?"

"That would be cool." Dar agreed. "I'm up for that."

"That's what I'd like to do for my birthday this year. Go to Scotland and have a blast with you. Climb some mountains, see some castles, and just hang out." Kerry said. "I hadn't really thought about it before, when we're talking about the Alps and everything that would have been fun too."

"But?"

Kerry gazed up at the glass ceiling, the smoked surface barely showing the fuzzy outline of the moon overhead. "But I don't know. It would be so easy to go to all those ritzy places. We could afford it."

"We could afford damn near anything we want." Dar agreed. "You'd look good in a Swiss chalet."

Kerry smiled. "That's just the point, I think. I want to be touched by the places we go to, not just buy a nice vacation. I think that'll happen in Scotland." She turned her head to look at Dar. "I'd like to see Antarctica, and maybe the Sahara desert."

"How about climbing Everest?"

Kerry's brow twitched. "Ahhhh... no." She grinned briefly. "That idea doesn't thrill me. I don't mind working for my fun but that's way too much work, hon."

"Phew." Dar chuckled. "For me too. I'd like to see the Mayan ruins in Central America though." She paused, thoughtfully. "It's hard for me to think about just going somewhere else for a month. There are so many places I'd like to go."

Kerry rolled over and swam back. "You know what the truth is, Paladar?" She went nose to nose with her partner, stretching her hands out and bracing them on either side of Dar's head. "Just going with you anywhere for a month is something I very badly want to do."

Dar released the wall and settled her arms around Kerry instead. "Me too." She said. "We need to do this." She added, in a softer tone. "I wonder how many of those people in those towers were telling themselves, someday I'll do that."

Kerry remained still, and quiet, just listening.

"Someday I'll see that." Dar went on. "Someday. Bob wanted to buy a sailboat someday, he told me."

"No more somedays." Kerry let her forehead rest against Dar's. "We could so easily have been in harms way in this, Dar. I want to savor every minute living my life with you from now on."

Dar kissed her. "Scotland it is." She promised. "That's going to be a blast. Maybe I'll get a suit of armor there to match that old sword I've got."

"Maybe we'll try haggis." Kerry suggested.

"Maybe we won't." Dar smiled anyway, and then paused. "Or what the hell. If Alastair can try sushi, I can try oatmeal in sheep innards." She kissed Kerry again, and then she nipped her nose and surged forward, taking them both underwater.

"Bwwflhh.." Kerry spluttered, as they surfaced. "Dar!"

"Tag." Dar pinched her in a sensitive spot. "You're it."

"Yowch!" Kerry yelped, grabbing for her partner who was no longer there. "You pissant!"

Dar took off, diving under the water to escape, just eluding Kerry's outstretched fingers. "Slowpoke!"

"Oh, I don't think so, madam." Kerry plunged after her. "This ain't no forty foot piece of ocean." She dove under the water and swam after her elusive tormentor, reaching for skin or any bit of bathing suit.

The moon slid behind the clouds overhead, wisely hiding its eyes.

**

"I've got water in my ears thanks to you." Kerry hopped on one foot, as they waited for the elevator to re deposit them on their floor. "That was a fun though."

"It was." Dar felt very pleasantly tired, after two hours of water horseplay. She put a hand on Kerry's back to steady her, as the elevator slowed to a halt and the doors opened. "We're here."

Cheers echoed through the hall as they exited, and they could see the doors to the lounge still open. "Sounds like a good game." Kerry said, as she removed the room key from the pocket of her robe. "Glad everyone's enjoying it. They needed a mind break."

"Yeah." Dar agreed. "Tomorrow's probably going to be rough. I'm glad Alastair thought of it." She glanced down the hall. "Speaking of."

Alastair had just come out of the lounge, and was heading towards his room. He saw them and paused, then continued past his door and approached them instead. "Well, what have you two been up to?"

"Really want to know?" Dar asked, folding her arms over her terrycloth-covered chest and leaning against the wall.

Their CEO paused and considered. "Am I going to have to speak to the hotel manager tomorrow because of it?" He asked cautiously.

"Probably not." Kerry ran her fingers through her wet hair somewhat self-consciously. "We were swimming in the pool."

"Ah." Alastair nodded. "That sounds pretty innocuous." He leaned against the wall himself. "Game's about near done. I'm going to let all these kids finish the night out. I'm bushed." He stifled a yawn. "Good bunch there."

"Glad they had a chance to relax." Dar said. "I think tomorrow's going to be a little different."

Alastair eyed her shrewdly. "Even with our challenges?"

Dar shrugged. "Who the hell knows? Maybe we'll get lucky." She straightened up and started for their hotel room door. "Anyway, good night, Alastair. See you in the morning."

"Bye." Alastair waggled his fingers and turned to head back to his own room.

Kerry opened the door and held it for Dar to enter, and then she followed her inside. The room was dimly lit, and she caught the scent of chocolate wafting in the space, along with something a little spicier. "Did you send a telepathic message to room service again?"

Dar was by the desk, investigating the tray resting there. "Sorry to disappoint you, babe. I used the phone by the pool while you were doing that last set of laps. Hot chocolate, Thai chicken soup, and baked Brie with some crackers and fruit. Sound all right to you?"

Kerry detoured to the desk and liberated a grape from the bowl, popping it into her mouth and biting down. It was juicy and sweet, and she gave her partner a one armed hug for it. "Yum." She agreed. "I'm going to go change out of my suit."

"Me too." Dar untied her robe and eased it off. "Last thing I need is to catch a damn cold at this point." She draped the robe over a chair and wandered into the bathroom.

Kerry stole another grape, then she followed suit, shivering a little as the draft from the air conditioner hit her damp skin. "Dar, could you... thanks." She caught the towel coming at her face one handed, and then she got undressed and rubbed herself dry.

Dar came around behind her and draped a shirt over her shoulder, then kissed the back of her bare neck, making her shiver for a completely different reason. "Thanks." Kerry ruffled her hair into some sort of dryness.

"For the shirt?"

"That too." She put the cotton garment on, and ran her fingers through her hair to straighten it. "You know, that really was a great idea to go to the pool. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I really miss our gym time."

Dar paused and peered over her shoulder, one eyebrow lightly raised.

"When we're there, we focus on something other than whatever problems we're dealing with that day." Kerry clarified. "You get out of that mind space."

"Ahhh."

"You know what it is? I'm not physically tired." Kerry sat down and pulled over one of the bowls of soup. "My brain is just exhausted." She took a spoonful of the spicy broth. "It's like those people downstairs at the bar. You can't just keep watching those pictures."

Dar sat down opposite her, picking up her cup of hot chocolate and sipping from it as she considered what Kerry had said. It was an odd feeling. In her, unlike Kerry, it manifested in a sense of intolerant impatience that made it difficult for her to concentrate on what she was doing.

The swim break had been a relief. Just being silly and chasing Kerry around the pool had let her buzzing brain relax and now that they were back in the room, she was content to concentrate on what was on the tray and leave worrying about work until tomorrow.

She pulled her soup over and fished out a chunk of chicken. It tasted of coconut and lime and both she and Kerry were quiet as they chewed. The silence was comfortable though. Dar put some of the Brie on cracker and put it on Kerry's plate, then assembled one for herself, taking a bite as Kerry reciprocated by putting a handful of grapes in front of her.

She looked up, and their eyes met. Kerry's expression eased into one of tired affection and she reached out with her free hand, capturing Dar's fingers and simply clasping them.

The warmth of it made her smile. The sweetness of the moment made her focus intently on it, savoring the strength of Kerry's fingers curled around hers and the spicy scent of the soup and the knowledge that there were hours and hours left before the sun would rise and bring another day.

Time to hoard every moment of it.

**

A flare of brilliant light and crash brought Dar awake with a painful suddenness, the echoes of the sound ringing in her ears as she instinctively reached for Kerry just as another flash lit the room followed instantly by a boom that rattled the windows.

Without really thinking, Dar bundled her nearly startled witless partner in the sheets and rolled off the bed, landing them both of the floor on the side away from the window.

"Hey!!!!" Kerry yelled. "What the hell is going on???"

Dar frantically tried to untangle herself from the sheets as her brain finally woke up and placed the sound, and the lights, and the rumble into a familiar context. Then she stopped, and slumped to the floor, her head thumping against the carpet as she let out a groan. "Son of a bitch."

Thunder rumbled again, and Kerry struggled up onto one elbow, raking the hair from her eyes and she peered around. "Thunderstorm?"

"Thunderstorm." Dar confirmed, as she listened to rain pelt the window. "Sorry about that."

Kerry sat up, cautiously untangling her legs from her partner's. Aside from the bursts of lightning, it was dark inside the room and a glance at the clock confirmed her suspicions that it was far from dawn.

She groaned, and settled back down on her side, pillowing her head on Dar's stomach. She could hear Dar's heartbeat slowing and she closed her eyes, willing her own to stop racing. She thought she might have been dreaming, though she couldn't really remember anything.

She had that odd sense of disassociation that usually meant she had been though. Not a bad one – probably one of those hazy weird dreams she sometimes had where she was running around in a forest chasing rabbits.

No idea what that was all about but Kerry greatly preferred them to the darker ones that made her wake shaking or in tears.

Bleah.

She felt Dar's fingers slide through her hair and scratch gently across her scalp. "Well, that sure wasn't the way I like to wake up."

"Me either." Dar agreed mournfully. "I don't know what in the hell I was thinking."

"You were thinking there was a bomb going off outside and we needed to be out of the way." Kerry placidly responded. "Which we are. But now that it's just Mother Nature scaring the crap out of us, we can probably get back up where it's more comfortable, huh?"

"Yeah." Dar pushed herself up into a sitting position, as Kerry did the same. They got to their knees, and then stood up. Kerry crawled back into bed, while her partner pulled the covers back up off the floor and settled them over her. "I see my PDA flashing. Let me see what's up since I know that's not you."

"Not me." Kerry agreed, snuggling back into a comfortable position and wrapping one arm around her pillow. She watched Dar walk over to the dresser and pick up the flashing device, her body outlined in flashes of silver from the window.

Mm. "What's up?" Kerry asked, after a moment.

Dar brought the PDA back over to the bed and sat down on it, handing it over to her partner before she got under the covers and reclaimed her pillow. "Hurricane Gabrielle, crossing Florida."

"Great." Kerry thumbed through the message. "Glad we're not in Disney World. I forgot all about the damn storm." She said. "It won't come up here, will it?"

"With our luck?" Dar put her arm around Kerry and snuggled up to her. "Probably be a cat five with a tidal wave." She exhaled. "Damn. Now I've got a headache from waking up like that."

Kerry studied the PDA. "Hon, you got another message here. I think it's from our network vendor buddy." She passed the PDA over her shoulder.

"Read it to me." Dar nuzzled the back of Kerry's neck. "I'm sure it's bad news anyway."

Kerry cleared her throat. "Dar – I'm in Bethesda at Lockheed Martin. Just had a five-hour meeting with the folks here, and once they got past asking me not if I was crazy, but how crazy was I, not to mention how crazy you were, we got to talking. "

"Sounds like fun." Dar mumbled.

"It gets better." Kerry promised. "Sort of." She scrolled down.

"Everyone agrees there's no way to develop an optics that'll handle the specifications of multimode over that distance."

Dar lifted her head. "That's better?" She asked, her voice rising.

"Put a sock in it, Roberts. Let me finish." Kerry chided her. "Here we go. – But when I told them what the stakes were, they called in a couple of specialists who agreed to see what they could come up with."

"Peh." Dar put her head back down. "In two years we'll hear of some military application for an optic that can go ten miles on multimode."

"One of these guys." Kerry went on, undeterred. "Is the guy who figured out how to make the Hubble work after they sent it up with a bad shaped mirror?"

"Peh."

"Anyway, I'll know more in the morning. I'm gonna go get some coffee and find a chaise lounge somewhere. Hope you all are doing good up there." Kerry finished and half turned, putting her hand on Dar's hip. "Honey, at least he's trying. It's four AM, and he's at some think tank working to get help for us."

"I know." Dar relented. "I'm just in a bad mood. My head hurts and I feel like a moron for pulling us both out of the bed." She admitted. "And I was having a nightmare."

Kerry set the PDA aside and turned over, facing her partner. She gently pushed the unruly hair from Dar's eyes and stroked her cheek. "Want some Advil?"

Dar's expression shifted, and she produced a mild grin. "Got everything I want right here in bed with me."

Aw. Kerry was charmed; both by the sentiment and the almost shy look in her partner's eyes. "You know what? I just remembered. I was dreaming about you when you woke me up."

"Me?"

"Mhm." Kerry traced one of her partner's eyebrows with a fingertip. "We were celebrating something in some cabin somewhere. I have no idea what. But you gave me this really pretty carved wooden bird, and we were laughing like crazy about it."

"What was so funny about it?" Dar asked. "Did it have two heads or something?"

"I don't know." Kerry put her head down on the pillow. "There was a fire in the fireplace, and I could smell the trees outside, but I don't know where we were or why that bird was so funny." She admitted. "You have such a beautiful laugh."

Dar's brow wrinkled a little. "No I don't."

"In my dream you did." Kerry disagreed. "And you really do. I love your laugh."

Dar stretched, and then she relaxed against the bed. "Trying to make me feel better?"

"Working?"

Dar's brief grin altered into a true smile. "The thunder was worth it." She tucked her arm under her pillow and let her body relax, hoping her now buzzing brain would settle down and let her get a few more hours sleep.

She felt Kerry's hand touch her cheek, with no further words, the gentle stroking against her skin speaking as loudly as her partner ever could.

What a gift. Dar closed her eyes, feeling the faintest of stings. How many people had woken together last Tuesday, had a little pillow talk, gotten up, gone to work and then hours later found themselves forever sundered from this gift they probably hadn't thought twice about when they'd left the house.

"Dar?" Kerry's touch became firmer, a pressure against her cheek and there was a rustle of bedclothes as she shifted and brought a comforting body warmth into the sudden chill around her. "Hey."

Dar opened her eyes. "Sorry." She didn't bother to dissemble. "Just freaking out a little."

"About the fiber?" Kerry sounded confused, and a touch distressed.

"No."

Kerry eased over and put her arms around Dar. "Did I do something?"

"No." Dar returned the embrace. "It just hit me." She paused, as her throat tightened. "All those people who had people they loved never come home that day."

Kerry's breath caught. She swallowed audibly.

"Could have been any of us." Dar whispered. "What a crappy world this is sometimes."

"Sometimes." Kerry finally replied, her voice rough. "Do you know how glad I was it was you who told me what was going on? That we were on the phone no matter if you were thousands of miles away?"

"Wish you'd have been there with me." Dar said, after a pause. "I was so damn scared something would happen to you before I got back."

Kerry buried her face into Dar's neck, feeling a shiver go down her spine. "Likewise." She "I don't know what I would have done if anything had." Tears welled up, that had been trapped inside her for days. "Oh my god, Dar."

Dar returned the hug. "Longest few days of my life." She drew in a shaky breath. "Damn I can't wait to go home. I want out of this." She couldn't quite stifle a sniffle.

"So do I." Her partner whispered. "It's been making me crazy."

They were both quiet for a moment. Then they both exhaled at almost the same time. "Wow." Dar cleared her throat. "Sorry this got so lousy."

Kerry shook her head a trifle. "I'm not." She said. "I'm glad I said that to you. I've been wanting to, before we let this all pass. We've been up to our eyeballs since it happened and I've got all this stuff bottled up making my guts ache."

Dar slid her hand up along the back of Kerry's neck, kneading the muscles there with gentle fingers. She felt the warmth as Kerry exhaled against her skin, and blinked her eyes to clear the tears from them.

She didn't cry often. Dar suspected the stress wasn't doing her any favors and she could feel the shivers rippling through Kerry's body. "Let's table it for a few hours." She pulled the covers over both of them. "We'll be okay."

Kerry relaxed against her. "When I'm right here, I'm always okay." She said, after a short pause. "Hope I find out why that bird was so damned funny." She closed her eyes and kissed Dar on the collarbone. "Love you."

That made Dar smile again, finally. "Love you too." She tuned out the muted sound of the air conditioning and the far off grind of elevator machinery, letting the darkness and the rhythm of Kerry's breathing lull her back into sleep.

Maybe, she mused, it was a cuckoo bird.

**

"Not a good morning." Dar followed Alastair into the conference room, which already had a half dozen people in it.

Angry looking people. Dar gathered up the gruffest of her attitudes and put them in place before she took a seat at the end of the table, while her boss circled and went to the center. She put her forearms on the mahogany surface, clasping her hands together.

"All right folks. Let's sit down and talk." Alastair took the middle seat and waited for the rest of the people in the room to follow suit. "I understand everyone's pretty upset."

"Upset?" The man directly across from him leaned forward. "McLean, that's not close to what I am. My business is dead in the water, and what do I see on the news last night? You giving cookies to firemen."

Dar propped her chin on her fist, and decided to remain quiet. She had certain sympathy for the customers who had come to complain, but she also had sympathy for Alastair and couldn't really think of anything to say that wouldn't piss off either one or the other.

She wasn't even really sure why she'd accompanied Alastair, except that he'd asked her to, and it delayed her needing to go take Mark aside and confess about the fiber before he caught up with the cable layers, or went to the Exchange and found out for himself.

"I can understand that." Alastair said. "But the fact is, I'm not the fella who's going to fix your problem, so I don't really see what the harm is in my answering questions about our community relations group." He added. "It's not as if my being interviewed is stopping anyone from working."

"That isn't the point." The man stood. "All I am hearing about is how you're helping the government, helping the rescuers. I hate to be crass, but what about us?" He pointed at himself, then at the rest of the people who apparently were content to let him speak for them. "When do we get help?"

"Well..."

"Come on, McLean." The man said. "You've been here for days. It was all over the news. When do we get some attention? Or are you all about the publicity and kissing the governor's ass?"

Alastair looked over at Dar. "Wanna give me a hand here?"

The tableful of people turned and looked over at her.

"I could undress and pose on the table." Dar suggested. "That help any?"

Alastair had the grace to look scandalized. "Dar." He sighed, missing the sudden reactions to the name from the rest of the table. "It's not funny."

"I wasn't joking." Dar shifted and rested her weight on her elbows. "Listen." She addressed the customers "If there was something we could do to fix everyone's issues, don't you think we would be doing it? You think we like being in this room being yelled at?"

"But what about what you're doing for the government?" One of the other men spoke up. "Why can't you do that for us? My business is on the line between the closed zone and they told me I wouldn't have service for months. Months!"

"Because we haven't done that much for the government." Dar replied. "Who are, by the way, as much our customers as you are." She stood up and circled the table, ending up next to Alastair. "Do you know how much damage was done around the area of the Towers? DO you know how much infrastructure, electrical, telecom, plumbing, you name it, was destroyed down there?"

"Of course." The man said. "I watch CNN just like you do."

"Have you been down there?" Dar asked.

"They won't let us." The first man answered, frustration evident in his tone.

"Want my advice?" Dar sat down next to her boss. "Get your asses out of there. I've been in the area. Cut your losses. Find other space."

The men looked at her.

"I'm not kidding." Dar said, after a period of silence. "If you want me to tell you I can put a satellite rig in there to get your systems up, and backhaul your traffic that way, I will. I can do that." She looked at each face in turn. "But if you want your business to survive, if you depend on walk in traffic, on people coming to you, then get out."

"But..." The leader said, and then fell silent.

"Thousands of people died there." Alastair said, in a quiet voice. "I was down in the area myself, along with Dar here... and by the way, sorry. My manners went out the window. This is our chief information officer, Dar Roberts." He paused. "In case you didn't guess."

"I guessed." The man murmured.

"How are we supposed to just move?" The second man asked. "Don't get me wrong, Ms. Roberts. You're not the first person who's told me that. But we've been there for twenty years! How do we just leave our customers behind like that?"

"Some of them will be moving too." Dar said. "It's a matter of survival." She looked at them with some sympathy. "Come up here. I'm sure Alastair can negotiate good rates here at the center for our valued customers. Right Alastair?"

Alastair's wry look said it all. "I'd be glad to work on that, absolutely." He said. "I know they've got some vacancies here, and we've got bargaining leverage with the management." He paused. "Just let me know what kind of space you're looking for, and I'll do my best."

"That's crazy. I can't afford these rents." The second man said. "I don't think I can afford you now."

A silence fell after he finished talking, and the men on the other side of the table looked suddenly discomfited. "Well, matter of fact, I've been leaving messages here about that subject." The spokesman said. "Haven't gotten a call back. Is Bob in the office? I'd like to talk to him."

Alastair's jaw shut with a click and his nostrils flared. "Sorry." He said, in a clipped tone. "He's not in." He folded his hands, tension showing in his knuckles.

"Oh, well.." The man didn't seem to notice. "I guess I can talk to someone else about it. We need to defer your bills; I can't afford to pay when I'm not getting paid myself. Someone filling in for him?"

Alastair let out a careful breath. "Not yet."

"Well, he should at least put an out of office message on." The man went on. "If that's not too much to ask I..." His voice finally trailed off as he caught Dar's glare. "What?"

"Our sales team was in the towers during the attack." Dar reached over and put a hand on Alastair's shoulder. "Bob was there. He didn't make it."

The spokesman stared at them in shocked silence.

"I'm sorry." The woman next to him said. "We didn't know that."

"We're also missing some people." Dar responded quietly. "So if you're wondering, that's why we're here. We don't really give a rats ass about the governor."

Alastair lifted his clasped hands and rested his head against them.

"Well hell." The spokesman muttered, after a pause. "Why didn't you say something? For Pete's sake people. Now I feel like a prize jackass."

Dar half shrugged. "You have a right to be here, asking us what you are asking us. You're our customers."

"Yeah, but." The man exhaled. "Sorry. We're just so frustrated."

"So are we." Dar picked up the desk phone and dialed a number. "This is Dar. Is Nan out there? Send her to the small conference room, please."

Now everyone looked uncomfortable, trying not to stare at Alastair's silent figure.

The door opened, and Nan stuck her head in. "Ms. Roberts? You asked for ..." She stopped, her eyes flicking from the customers to their CEO. "Is something wrong?"

"Could you please take these people to one of the reception areas? They need to discuss space requirements, maybe relocating to this area." Dar said. "See if Kerry can talk to them, get some details."

"Yes, ma'am." Nan responded instantly, opening the door the entire way. "Could you come with me please?"

The customers scrambled to their feet and headed quickly to the door. "Thanks. We'll work it out." The spokesman muttered. They followed Nan out the door and she closed it behind them, leaving Dar and Alastair alone.

It was quiet for a few minutes. The air conditioning cycled on and off, and very far away, a siren was heard. Finally Alastair dropped his hands to the table, and looked sideways at Dar, appearing as tired and as human as she'd ever seen him. "Sorry about that. "

"Don't be." Dar studied his face. "Kerry and I both lost it last night." She glanced away. "It's just to damn much to keep dealing with."

Alastair sighed. "I want to do the right thing by everyone, but damned if I know what the right thing is right now." He tapped his thumbs on the desk. "That was a good idea, telling them to find other space by the way."

"They haven't been down there." Dar leaned back in her chair. "Or they'd have thought of it themselves."

A knock came at the door. Alastair sat back and hitched one knee up. "C'mon in."

The door opened, and the secretary poked her head in. "Sir, there's someone here to see you." She looked apologetic. "He's very insistent."

"Jesus." Alastair looked plaintively at the ceiling. "Sure. Bring him in." He said. "Dar, stick around, willya?"

Dar merely kept her place, letting that be her answer as the door opened again and a tall man in dark khakis and a leather jacket entered. He crossed to the table and set down a briefcase, leaning on the surface and looking right at Alastair.

Dar herself could have been a coffee machine in the corner for all the attention he gave her.

"McLean? My name is Jason Green. I work for the Department of Defense." He said. "I'm going to cut to the chase. Your people have been stonewalling me, and it's going to stop, right now. I want a list of your people in our facilities and I want it now."

"Why?" Alastair asked.

"What?"

"Why?" He repeated. "I know Hamilton's talked to you. You all have the information you need in your own systems. Why do you want mine?"

"You don't really need to know that." Green said.

"Sure I do." Alastair remained calm. "They're my employees, and I have a responsibility under the law to protect their information and their privacy."

"You don't get it do you?" Green sat down. "McLean, I'm not your enemy. I don't honestly want to be here jerking you around. You don't have a choice. You have no recourse. You can't ask me what I want this for, because I've been given the authority to do whatever I need to do in order to get what I think is important."

"Regardless of the law?" Alastair asked.

"Law doesn't mean anything. You ever heard of martial law? We're in it. They just haven't announced it to the press." Green told him. "I could throw you in jail as a suspected terrorist and you'd spent years in some hole without contact with your family or anyone else. So do yourself, and myself a favor and just give me the damn list."

Alastair steepled his fingers and tapped the edges of his thumbs against his lips as he studied the man. Then he turned and glanced at Dar. "What do you think?"

Green turned, as though noticing Dar for the first time. His eyebrows rose.

Dar rested her hands on her knee. "I think if my father was here, he'd kill this guy." She remarked. "That's what I think."

"Who in the hell are you?" Green asked.

Dar ignored him, pulling her laptop over. "But I'm not going to sit here and watch you get dragged off to some gulag on account of a database, Alastair." She opened the laptop. "I'll parse a file for them. They won't know what the hell to do with it, they won't be able to read the format, their program will spit out a pile of EBDIC crap when it tries to ingest it and there's no information in there they don't already have but what the hell." She rapidly logged to the machine. "I'll give it to him and he can go weenie waggle somewhere else."

"Hmph." Alastair grunted. "Well, if you think that's a good idea..."

"Do you have something to put the file on?" Dar looked up at the man. "Or do you want me to pour raw packets down your god damned underwear?"

Green stared at her. "What?"

"Did you bring a portable hard drive?" Dar asked. "Or did you bring a truck to haul off the five hundred pounds of paper it'll take me to print out eighty thousand records on?"

"W.."

"You came here, and asked for something." Dar enunciated the words. "Do you have any idea in hell what it is you're even asking for?"

Green turned to Alastair. "I don't appreciate being spoken to in that way, McLean."

Alastair regarded him for a moment. "Too damned bad." He said. "Answer the woman if you want your list. If not, hit the road. We're busy people."

The man sat back in his seat, bracing his hands on the table. "Did you not listen to a word I just said?"

"We did. We just don't care." Dar said bluntly. "All we've heard from you people since this whole damn thing happened is pointless demands and threats. You have no idea on the planet what to do with what you're asking for, and your people can't use the data I give you. But what the hell. To get you out of here I'll go ahead and produce it but you've got to cough up something to put it on or carry it away with and do it fast."

"I'm sure you have something..." Green blurted, half standing. "You can't expect me to.."

"No, I don't." Dar said. "We don't allow portable storage devices in our facilities. It's a security issue." She rattled some keys. "And these databases are protected by encryption so I hope what you've got can handle it, not to mention interpret the structure."

Green leaned on the table. "You're interfering with National Security." He spoke the words emphasizing the capital letters.

"I'm just telling you the truth." Dar stood up, stretching to her full height. "You want us to break the law? You threaten us with jail? You stand here and talk nothing but utter bullshit, you waste of my taxpayer dollars." She put her hands on her hips. "Who the hell do you work for?"

"Listen, lady."

Dar circled the table with surprising speed. "You listen, jackass." She let her voice lift as she closed in on her target, missing the widening of Alastair's eyes behind her. "Get your boss on the phone. I want to talk to him and tell him what a complete idiot he has working for him."

The man stood up. "You want to speak to my boss? All right. I'll arrange for that." He stepped back from the table and pushed the chair into place. "Don't go far." He turned and walked to the door, leaving and closing it with surprising gentleness behind him.

Alastair rested his chin on his hand, his elbow propped on the table. "I think we just got ourselves in trouble, Paladar."

"You care?"

"Not really." Her boss shrugged. "Let me warn Ham. He's about ready to disown us anyhow. With any luck maybe I can get them to throw us all out of the city and we can take everyone out of here." He stood up and picked up the phone. "I'll warn the board they may need to post our bail too. That should start their morning off right."

Dar smiled briefly. "Let me go talk to my people." She said. "Call me if you need me." She headed for the door, as Alastair raised a hand and wagged it at her in farewell.

Not a good morning, at all.

**

"See, here's the deal." Mark was sitting on the floor, his coveralls more gray than green, a thick loop of rope over his shoulder. "We figured we'd track back, and get a rope down to where those guys have to bring the cable so we can just haul it when they get here."

"Like a giant pull string." Kerry was crouched next to him, a flashlight held in one hand.

"Yeah." Mark nodded. "Problem is, we're kinda stuck getting out of this freaking room." He looked around the old, small space. "I don't know what the hell we're gonna do."

Kerry backed out of the room and looked across the floor towards the entrance to the subway. The space was filled with people crossing back and forth. "Well, with enough arm twisting we can run it across the floor I guess."

Mark joined her. "They're gonna freak."

Kerry shook her head. "It's dangerous. That's a big cable. Everyone's going to trip, they're going to have to put a shield over it or shut this floor down."

"Guess they'll have to." Mark agreed in a mournful tone. "Let me get hold of that maintenance guy and give him a heads up. I bet we're going to have to go up the chain for it."

"Probably." Kerry agreed. "I'll go talk to the building management. I think I just booked them a couple thousand in rentals so I've got some good points in the bank with them at the moment." She dusted her hands off. "I'll be back."

"You got it boss." Mark dropped his loop of rope and started off towards the back of the hall.

Kerry slid her flashlight into the side pocket of her coveralls and moved in the opposite direction, climbing up the steps and crossing the floor towards the management office for the second time that morning.

It felt like she was being constructive. The morning session on behalf of their customers had been almost pleasant, her bringing more business, and the complex glad not to have someone asking for exceptions, or rent deferrals.

She pushed the door to the office open, and returned the brief smile of the receptionist. "Hello, me again." She said. "Is Tom available for a quick moment?"

"I'll ask, Ms. Stuart." The girl got up and disappeared into the inner maze of office hallways as Kerry went over to the courtesy counter and started fixing herself a cup of tea.

One thing about New York. Kerry selected a fragrant bag from a box of assorted kinds and dispensed hot water over it. People liked their comforts here. She stirred the cup and took a sip, turning and leaning against the wall as she waited.

The girl came back. "Right this way, ma'am." She smiled, waiting for Kerry to join her before she led her back into the managing director's office. "Here you go."

"Hello there again." Tom Brooks waved her in. "What can I do for you, Kerry?" He was an older man, with a close-cropped beard and salt and pepper hair.

"Well." Kerry came in and took a seat across from him. "I wish I could say I've got another dozen tenants we'll guarantee for you, but this time I'm here to make trouble."

"Oh no." The man behind the desk didn't look overly alarmed. "How much trouble can a nice young lady like you cause anyhow?"

"You'd be surprised." Kerry remarked, dryly. "Just ask my boss. Anyway, here's the problem we have." She went on. "As you know, we've got an emergency project going on for the city government."

"I didn't." Tom said. "But doesn't surprise me. Every little thing these days is an emergency."

Kerry toasted him with her cup of tea. "Point made. In this case, there are a bunch of telecom wiring people running a big piece of fiber cable from the New York Stock Exchange to our demark down in the dungeon here lower level."

Tom blinked at her. "Seriously?"

Kerry nodded. "Seriously."

"Jesus." He shook his head. "How in the hell are you going to do that? There's no opening from that area near the steps to the subway." He thought a minute. "You'd have to bring it up through the station and cross the concourse with it."

Kerry nodded.

"You want to do that?" Tom's voice lifted sharply. "You kidding me?"

Kerry shook her head.

He leaned back in his chair and tapped his pen on the desk. "Wow." He mused. "That could be a big problem. There's a lot of people down there." He warned. "I don't know if we can run a cable across the floor. Maybe we can run it along the wall or something."

Kerry grimaced a little. "That's a long way."

"Well, it's coming from a long way." Tom said. "I just don't think they'll let us cross the concourse due to safety reasons. Let me take my guy down there, and we'll look at it. What size cable are we talking about?"

"Two inch round." Kerry admitted. "We know it's a hassle, but the project we're working on really is a number one priority for the government."

"Surprised they're not in here telling us what to do then." Tom got up. "I'll see what we can arrange for that, Kerry. I know you all have been working down there, my facilities chief's been bitching about having to leave the door open. I'll let you know what I find out."

"Thanks." Kerry got up. "Believe me, I know we're asking a lot. We're just trying to get this working and there's a lot riding on it." She took his proffered hand. "Thanks, Tom. I really really appreciate it."

"Save that till I can do something about it." Tom warned. "And you folks be careful of that room in there, okay? There's some dangerous pipes and things in there."

"We know." Kerry said. "Dar nearly got knocked on her behind from that electrical panel." She followed him out of the room and down the hall. "Do we really use steam heat here?"

Tom chuckled. "Sure as hell do." He agreed. "Glad we're not having to turn those pipes up with you all in there. I'd have to charge you for a sauna bath." He held the outer door for her. "After we get through this, let's talk about moving your connections someplace else."

"How did we end up in there anyway?" Kerry waited for him to catch up to her and they walked across the floor together. "Dar was wondering about that."

"Long story," Tom said. "We'll get it straightened out." He started angling away from her. "Be in touch with you, Kerry. Let you know."

"Thanks, Tom." Kerry headed for the steps, her cup of tea still clasped in her fingers, feeling another, though minor, sense of accomplishment. She didn't envy Dar, who was floors and floors above her, dealing with the press, and with the government, and with board.

She'd heard Dar yelling in the conference room, and then a man had stormed out of the office, nearly knocking down people on his way out. Department of Defense, Dar had told her afterward, and probably a lot of trouble headed back their way.

Ugh.

She trotted down the steps and headed back to their little dungeon. Shaun was seated outside with a piece of pizza, and Kannan was sitting cross-legged sipping from a steaming cup. "Hey guys." She greeted them. "Mark back yet?"

"Not yet." Shaun shook his head. "Ms. Stuart, we want to go down to the other end and do the setup there, but we're kinda not sure how to do that. I don't think they'd just let us in there, you know?"

Kerry took a seat next to him. "Good point." She took a sip of her tea. "Well, tell you what. Once Mark gets back, I'll go round up dad and one of the trucks and we'll all go down there together. That work?"

"Sure." Shaun agreed. "Maybe we can even do the whole cross connect, if they got the other end of that cable up in the right spot."

Ah. Kerry turned and looked inside the room. "You mean the connection box, like that?" She indicated the new panel.

"Yes." Kannan spoke up. "It would be good to get the melding down, and the connectors polished and ready. Then we have only this side to do when the other end of this cable arrives here."

Kerry felt a little awkward, not entirely sure of whether she should spill the beans now, or wait until they arrived downtown. Part of her wanted to just tell the techs the truth, but she also felt that Dar had wanted to keep it under wraps, and she wasn't sure if this was the place or time for her to countermand her lover's wishes.

She didn't mind disagreeing with Dar. They did, sometimes. But she was sensitive about doing it in front of people who worked for them because she never wanted to give the impression that she was leveraging their relationship to appear to control her partner when it really wasn't anything like that.

Or. Well. Kerry drank her tea, allowing the silence to continue. Well, she did leverage their relationship, all the time, but not really to control Dar, more to find a consensus when they were on opposite sides of any particular question.

She knew that Dar would listen to what she was saying, even though she didn't agree with it, just because Kerry was who she was, and they were what they were to each other. There was no way around that. Dar often blew other people off, and refused to take them seriously. With Kerry, that was never the case.

Dar always took her seriously. She always took Dar seriously. Sometimes they compromised. Sometimes they didn't, and Kerry would accept Dar's opinion. Sometimes Dar would listen to what she had to say, and then change her mind and agree with Kerry's view.

But they would never had gotten that far if there wasn't that total trust between them that gave her that edge is dealing with Dar's mercurial, restless nature.

Speaking of. She heard a set of distinctive footsteps approaching and looked up just as Dar came around the corner of the stairwell, trailed by Mark and Andrew. Her partner looked frustrated and she felt the glower just before her eyes met Kerry's and she headed their way. "Here comes trouble."

"Uh oh." Shaun started chewing faster. "Better suck that up fast, Kan. Her nibs looks pissed."

"There you are." Dar addressed Kerry.

"Here I am." Kerry agreed, patting the floor next to her. "Come. Sit. You look mad."

In the act of turning and accepting the offer, settling herself gracefully next to Kerry, Dar managed to somehow lose most of the frustration in her attitude and ended up merely looking bemused. "What's the scoop here?"

Mark crouched down next to the two techs, and they started talking in low tones. Andrew picked a spot on the wall and leaned against it, crossing his ankles as he waited for everything to shake out.

"Scoop." Kerry offered Dar the remainder of her tea. "Well, I talked to the building about us running cable across the floor. I don't think they'll go for that, but they're looking at alternatives."

"Uhgh." Dar grunted.

"The team wants to head down to the Exchange and make the connections down there." Kerry kept her voice neutral. "So I thought I'd take dad and help them get in there and get set up."

"Ah." Her partner grunted again, with a completely different inflection. "Okay." She took the cup and finished the beverage.

"But I wanted to discuss that with you first." Kerry said. "I know you have some concerns." She put her hand on Dar's thigh. "But if you want, I can handle that end of it for you."

Dar studied her, a faint smile appearing on her face. "Thank you, Kerrison."

"What are friends for?" Kerry smiled back. "You take your share of tough calls, sweetheart. I don't mind shouldering this one for you."

"I know." Dar uttered softly. "One of the many reasons I love you."

Aw. "Any fallout from the DOD?" Kerry leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Do you want me to pander to my genes and call my mother to see if she can help with that?"

"No." Dar set the cup down. "Hamilton advised me to get the hell out of the office and go hide somewhere in case they show up to drag me off. I'll take the team down town. I know you don't want to go back down there."

"Any word from Lockheed?"

Dar shook her head.

"Let's both go." Kerry said. "Let's go, and we can lay it out for everyone, and just do everything we can do. Okay?"

Dar studied her laced fingers, then she looked up and over at Kerry. "All right." She said. "You and me, all the way." She reached over and clasped Kerry's hand. "Let's go."

They stood. "Okay, team." Kerry said. "Let's get our gear together, and go down to the other end of this situation. Dar and I have some information to give you, and then we can get what we need to get done taken care of."

The techs were already scrambling to their feet, and Mark had ducked inside the room for his backpack. "Hey." He poked his head out. "We taking the bus? I threw a bunch of the gear in it, and it's got three cases of Red Bull."

"Sounds like a plan." Dar said. "It's going to be a long night."

"Ain't they all?" Mark disappeared inside the room again, as they got ready to move out. "But hey, we'll make history, right?"

Dar stuck her hands in her pockets and regarded her father. "I think sometimes making history's overrated."

"Yeap." Andrew agreed. "That is the truth, rugrat. That is surely the truth." He clapped her on the shoulder. "Specially since histry's ain't always your friend."

They gathered up their gear and headed off, walking up the steps and out into the afternoon light into a street full of people and sirens and cool, dusty air.

**

Kerry braced her hands on the sides of the doorway leading from the main part of the bus leading into the driver's compartment. Ahead of them the road was relatively clear, though the sky was hazy with smoke and the dusting of ash remained on almost every surface.

There was still an air of desolation present. Here and there, she could see where a car had been removed, or boxes were now piled on the sidewalk, and scattered here and there were people walking slowly, looking around as though in disbelief.

"Just opened the east side here to people." The driver remarked. "Just this side of Broadway."

Now that he'd mentioned it, Kerry started noticing figures moving around in the distance, activity that had been absent the last time they'd been in the area. She could see flashlight beams in windows, and it brought back the memory of the big power outage they'd suffered in Miami not that long ago.

She'd used a similar flashlight to stumble through the darkness of the condo, the stuffy closeness driving her outside and down to the Dixieland Yankee's cabin where the boat's batteries and a solid charging from the engines kept her and Chino comfortable through that very long night.

So many people hadn't been nearly as lucky. She'd heard the stories at work the next day. Just like so many people here now weren't lucky, were rooting through dust covered belongings and cleaning out putrid refrigerators while they cruised by in their powered and air conditioned bus.

"What a mess." Dar had come up behind her, and now Kerry could feel the warmth along her back as her partner came into her space. "These people are coming back to Hell." She leaned back into her partner's chest. "What a nightmare."

"Reminds me of Hurricane Andrew." Dar let her hands rest on Kerry's shoulders. "We sent a bunch of people down south to help clean up. Some of our staff lived down there. Total disaster."

"Did you go?"

"Sure." Dar replied. "Ended up puncturing my hand with a rusty nail and getting hauled off to the first aid station. They have picture of me sitting there with two guys hanging on to my paw with a three inch piece of iron sticking out of it."

Kerry turned her head and stared at her. "You didn't pass out?"

"Only by a whisker." Dar overturned her left hand and flexed it. "Only my ego kept me upright. I wasn't going to take a dive in front of half the company." She looked up to find Kerry gazing indulgently at her. "It was damn close though."

Kerry could imagine it. She knew how squeamish her partner was about injuries and she could just picture the stubborn set of Dar's jaw as she fought to remain unfazed. It had nothing to do with courage - Dar had more of that than most. "You poor thing." She leaned over and gave Dar's palm a kiss. "Too bad I wasn't there to take care of you."

"Mm." Dar glanced past Kerry, as the bus came to halt, the air brakes blasting out a hiss. "Here we are." She drew in a breath, and then let it out. "Time to pay the piper."

Kerry turned all the way around and bumped Dar lightly with her fists. "I'm right with you, tige." She followed Dar down the aisle to the center of the bus, where the team was getting their masks together and testing radios.

Dar took up a position near one of the doors and folded her arms over her chest. "Folks, listen up."

Kerry stuck her hands in the pockets of her jumpsuit and stood just a half step behind her boss, underlining her support. She watched the faces of the techs as they stopped what they were doing and turned towards them, attentively.

"We've had a major screw-up." Dar got right to the meat of the matter. "Those guys running the cable are running the wrong kind."

The techs all blinked in surprise. Mark put his backpack down and leaned on the bar. "Huh?"

Dar nodded. "We found out after they'd already started rolling it." She said. "The right stuff won't be here until Tuesday at the earliest."

The techs looked at each other, then at Mark, then at Dar.

"How wrong is it?" Mark asked. "The wrong micron?"

"Multimode." His boss answered.

"Oh no." Kannan groaned. "That will not be good."

"Shit." Mark looked nonplussed. "What are we doing down here then? We'll just have to do it again on.. like on what, Wednesday? You going to tell them to stop?"

"No." Dar shook her head. "We're going to make the connections as though the cable was the right kind. I knew they were using the wrong type yesterday, and told them to keep going."

Even Mark looked at her with confusion and disbelief. "Bu.." He started then stopped. "Bu.." He started again. "Boss, that's not gonna work."

"I know."

Kerry decided to keep quiet. She edged a step closer to her partner and leaned against the wall, looking steadily from face to face, mildly wondering what Dar was going to tell them.

"There really isn't any option." Dar said. "They expect this to work tomorrow. I know it won't work until Wednesday at the earliest, if they can get that other cable run. But at least we'll have all the connections in place and ready to go."

"But.." Mark hesitated. "Won't they be pissed? I mean, I heard them talking, boss. This is serious shit."

"They'll be pissed." Dar agreed. "But that's not your problem. That's mine and Alastair's problem."

"Mine too." Kerry piped up. "I'll walk the plank with you, Captain Roberts."

That got a nervous smile from the techs. "And." Dar shrugged lightly. "We've got some people looking at the technology to see if there's anything to be done."

"That will be very interesting if they discover anything." Kannan said. "It will be very difficult I think."

"Very interesting." Dar said. "So just go in there, and make like everything's normal. Set up the connections and put the patch in. Don't talk about the cable being a problem. Let's get in and get our part of this done, and get out of here."

"Right." Mark nodded. "Sounds good, boss. You guys got all your gear? Let's get moving." He shouldered his pack and slipped the smaller of his two masks over his head to nestle under his chin. "You think we need the full ones?" He asked Andrew, who was lounging nearby.

"Figure you should take it." Andrew held his up. "Sure as hell if you don't you'll need it."

The techs trooped out the door and down onto the sidewalk, all with laden backpacks and leg pockets stuffed with tools and water bottles. The bus driver came up behind them as Andrew started to follow.

"I'm going to park it here. The cops say that's all right." The driver said. "I'll pop out the sat dish and see what I can pick up in the way of news." He held up a radio in one big hand. "I'll let you know if anything stirs up."

"Thanks." Dar glanced out the door, where the techs were gathering. "Hopefully this won't take long." She patted Kerry on the hip. "C'mon pirate. Let's get this done."

Kerry followed Dar down the steps and blinked, her eyes already stinging a little as she drew in a breath of dusty air. "Ugh." She slipped on her mask and adjusted it, hoping it would block out the stench an errant puff of air brought her.

Dar adjusted her credentials and edged through the crowd. "Let's go." She started for the steps to the Exchange, aware of the armed guards at the top of them. "Ker?"

Kerry dodged around Mark and joined her. "They took that pretty well." She uttered, in a low tone as they trotted up the steps to the building.

"There's an advantage to having everyone too scared to disagree with you." Dar remarked dryly. "Sometimes, when you really need it, they just shut up and do what you tell them to."

"Dar." Kerry patted her side. "They always do what you tell them to. If you told them to wrap our building in twisted pair cabling and paint Alastair's car pink they'd do it."

"You wouldn't." Dar gave the guards at the top of the steps a brisk nod, and went right past them, reaching out to open the door and hold it open.

"Paint Alastair's car pink? I might."

"Ma'am? The guard moved to intercept her. "This is a restricted area."

"Damn well should be." Dar presented her credentials. "If they didn't put us on the access list they will as soon as we get in there. Excuse us." She motioned the crew through. "Kerry, go in there and find whoever's in charge and get them to give this gentleman the right data."

"Yes, ma'am." Kerry marched past without hesitating, watching the guard try to untangle his tongue as they slipped past and into the building. "I'll get right on that."

"Ah. But.. ah.. " The guard glanced at Dar's credentials. "Oh, well, okay, I'm sure that's fine." He said. "I think I remember some people from your company here earlier, right?"

"Right." Dar agreed. "Thanks." She pointed at the bus. "There's hot drinks and snacks in there if you get tired of holding the wall up out here." She went past into the building and let the door shut behind her, catching sight of Kerry waiting patiently not far away.

"See?" Kerry commented to the techs, who were likewise waiting nearby. "It's like having a beautiful animated can opener sometimes."

Dar stopped in her tracks, both eyebrows shooting up. "Excuse me?"

A loud argument down the hall distracted them, and Kerry was saved as they turned and looked towards the noise, seeing a group of men coming out of a room all talking at once. They were dressed in business shirts and slacks, most carrying jackets.

"Move!" The man in the front ordered them. "What in the hell are you people doing up here? Get back to where you belong!" He was relatively short, but had bristling gray eyebrows and hair, and a pair of what would be extremely shiny patent leather shoes that were currently covered in dust.

Kerry saw her partner's eyes narrow, and she instinctively put a hand out, catching Dar's arm as she moved back against the wall to let the men pass. "Dar, hold on."

She could feel the tension as Dar stood her ground. "Dar, c'mon. These people aren't worth it."

The man pulled up short, since Dar was standing in the middle of the hallway effectively blocking it. "Did you hear me?"

"Listen, sir, we're doing all we can." The man behind him caught up to him and grabbed his arm. "You don't understand what's gone on here. What these people have been through."

"I don't give a shit what these people have been through." The man in the lead turned around, throwing the hand off his arm. "This place has half the liquidity of the planet tied up in it. You fed some bullshit to CNN but if it doesn't open tomorrow morning, everyone's head's gonna roll." He turned back around. "Move out of the way or I'll toss you on your ass, lady."

Dar grinned with absolutely no humor, and a good deal of delight.

"Lord." Andrew shoved his way back down the hallway. "Can't leave you for a minute, can I?" He took the man by the shoulders and shoved him past Dar. "G'wan, blowhard. Git your ass out before you done get hurt."

"What? Get your damn hands off me! Police!" The man yelled, thrashing around.

Andrew gave him a final shove then he put himself between the angry figure and Dar's tall form, his bigger body blocking the hallway with even more effectiveness. "Git!"

"Sir!" The other man dashed after him, taking hold of his arm. "Whoever you people are, you better get lost. Now!" He hurried the man past, before he could recover and say anything at all, and they disappeared around the corner towards the door.

Dar sighed. "There goes my fun for the day." She turned back towards the rest of the men, who were standing there gaping. "Who is that?" She indicated the now vanished man.

"Marcus Abercrombie." The young man nearest her answered promptly. "The second richest man in the world. He's just really upset about the market. We just heard they're having problems with the systems."

"We're the ones trying to fix it." Kerry told him "We don't appreciate being yelled at."

"Well, sure. No one does." The young man agreed. "Hi. I'm Barry Marks." He offered Kerry his hand. "I'm the trading floor coordinator." He glanced past her. "Are you the technical people? Our director said they were expecting some people here to look at the computers."

Dar joined Kerry, now that it appeared the excitement was over. "We're working on the problems, yes." She said. "I heard the CNN report too – that guy didn't buy it?"

"Nope." Marks shook his head. "He came in the back and started snooping around, and figured out that it wasn't working. He said he'd keep it to himself, but I bet we see it on CNN in ten minutes. He's probably telling his chauffeur about it right now."

"Great." A man behind him sighed. "Like we don't have enough problems. I don't want all those damn Federal guys shouting at me again." He looked at Dar. "Can you fix it?"

"Ultimately? Yes." Dar said, with quiet confidence. "There's nothing in technology enough time and money can't fix."

"By tomorrow morning?" Marks asked.

"That's an open question." Dar pointed down the hallway. "Let's go downstairs, team. We're wasting time."

They filed past the brokers, who looked dubiously at them, and shook their heads. "Tomorrow's going to suck." One said.

"No matter what happens." Marks agreed. "Let's go get some coffee. My mouth's dry as a bone from the damn dust."

They headed in the opposite direction. Dar was glad to be rid of them, as they walked down the hall and headed down the steps to the lower level of the building. "Did you call me a can opener?" She asked Kerry, about halfway down.

Kerry chuckled under her breath.

"Manual or electric?"

**

Another dusty, concrete room. Another raise floor. Another long stretch of time between humming black racks of equipment that gave off the faint scent of ozone and plastic.

Kerry lifted herself up off the floor, pulling her head out of the space under the floor and resting her weight on her elbows as she waited for the blood rush to fade. "Can't see anything."

Kannan and Shaun were over by the wall, against a sheet of plywood that was as age worn as Kerry felt at the moment. They had a black box partially assembled; their heads bent over thin strands and tiny posts, their tools gathered neatly around their feet as they sat there cross-legged.

"They had the end right there." One of the techs from the Exchange was sitting on a desk nearby. He pointed at the hole in the floor. "Then those guys pulled it back, I guess. It disappeared."

Kerry folded her hands, and studied her knuckles. "Didn't occur to anyone to anchor the cable?" She inquired.

"It's not our stuff." The tech shrugged. "No one told us what they were doing."

Kerry silently counted to ten. "Boy, that's a shame." She shifted her flashlight and inched herself forward, extending her head down under the floor again. It smelled dank and musty, and she had to keep convincing herself she didn't smell anything worse than mold.

It was uncomfortable, and it gave her a headache hanging upside down as she was. She pushed that aside and extended her arm down into the space, turning on her flashlight and examining the underside of the floor.

It was full of trays and pipes, the cabling so dense she could barely see past it. She squinted hard, peering past a clump of metal and dust and spotted a stretch of the cabling that was scraped free of the grim. "Ah."

"Found it?" Shaun asked.

"Found where it was." Kerry pulled her head back out and moved down two squares, picking up the aluminum floor puller and thwacking it down against the surface. She wiggled it then she leaned back, hauling the floor tile up off its frame and sliding it out of the way.

She got down on her belly again and continued her investigation. She could see the scrape marks traveling over the piping and squirmed further into the opening, shining her flashlight under the next section of floor.

Eyeballs reflected the shine. Kerry stifled a yelp and somehow kept herself from scrambling out of the opening by sheer will.

"Something wrong ma'am?" Shaun looked up.

"Um. No." Kerry bravely resumed her search. She looked for the eyes, but there was nothing in that back corner now except some hanging cable.

She was about to move on, when her eyes registered something unusual, and she looked back at the spot, carefully craning her neck to one side and narrowing her eyes. "Oh crap."

"Ma'am?"

Kerry got up and crawled over two more squares to where she'd seen the eyes, and then she slapped the floor puller into place and settled back, both hands on the device. "You might want to get back." She told the tech. "I saw something move under here and it's too small to be one of us."

The tech didn't need to be told twice. He jumped off the desk and went around it, backing away from Kerry. "You're crazy to be opening that up. Could be anything under there. Someone one said there were snakes."

Kerry took a deep breath, and yanked her shoulders back, pulling the tile up off its seating. She rocked back onto her heels and pulled the tile with her, tensing her thighs as she prepared to have to jump clear just in case.

Nothing stirred. She slid the tile to one side, and shone her light on the cabling underneath. "Look at that."

The tech got up on the desk and peered over it into the space. "Holy crap."

Shaun and Kannan scrambled to their feet and approached, staying cautiously behind Kerry's kneeling form. "Oh wow." Shaun said. "That's all chewed up!"

Exposed now in the light, a thick bundle of cabling was exposed, a lurid blue color that was marred by a huge clump in the center that was chewed all the way almost to the bottom of the bundle, resulting in tangle of butchered wires. "Sure is." Kerry examined the hairball. "Well, this didn't happen in a week, did it?"

The tech circled the desk and knelt next to her warily, looking at the cables. "That's new." He said. "For sure, because I know where that bundle goes and that stuff was working before all this happened."

"Wow." Shaun said again. "That's a.. what a mess."

"For sure." Kannan agreed. "That will take many hours to fix."

"Guess you guys better get started then." The tech said. "Cause this stuff'll never work if that's not connected."

"Us?" Kerry looked up at him. "This isn't our wiring."

The tech shrugged. "It's not our wiring." He responded. "We just do server management here. That's all. We don't touch any of the infrastructure stuff."

"Who does?" Kerry asked. "And where are they, by the way?"

The tech shrugged again. "Some company that some big guy here owns a part of." He said. "They got a couple of guys and a truck, and they come in when we need new cables run and stuff like that. They monitor everything remotely."

Kerry counted to ten again. Then she counted to twenty. Then she gave it up and started to put the tile to one side, her temper flaring.

A bang issued from the space. It put a cap on her reaction, and made everyone jump. "What the.."

Another bang, and she started to get up and get away from the hole, which suddenly started to issue flashes of light.

"Oh my god." The tech jumped back, bumping into the desk and falling into it, then bouncing off and lunging back across the open hole, his arms flailing. "Ahh!"

Kerry succumbed to latent heroism and grabbed him, throwing herself into him and taking them both to the other side of the open floor just as a loud sound emerged and the hole erupted with a flurry of brown forms.

"Holy shit!" Shaun let out a yell, jumping back wards and grabbing Kannan by the shoulder as rats boiled out of the floor scattering in every direction.

Kerry hit the floor with a painful jolt and rolled clear of the tech, unable to place the sounds and hearing the alarm in her people's voices as she smelled a deep, raunchy stench emerge into the room. She wrenched herself around and got her hands under her, shoving her body away from the floor and nearly pitching herself right back onto it when a rat ran over her hand towards the server cabinets.

She bit her tongue, and got enough command of her body to get her feet under her and stand up, fiercely resisting the urge to jump up onto the desk. "Nice." She croaked. "What the hell brought that on?" She grimaced a little, as her ribs protested her impact with the floor.

The tech jumped onto the desk. "That's it. I'm getting out of here. All that OT ain't worth it." He said. "That's a freak show." He walked to the end of the desk and hopped off, then disappeared out the door without a backwards glance.

"Nice." Kerry looked around. The rats had all disappeared. She walked cautiously over to the hole and crouched down at a respectful distance, peering inside. As she watched, the end of the cable she'd been searching for inched into view, with a loud scraping sound and a clinking of the metal ends that protected it. "Ah."

"Hey. It's the cable." Shaun had eased warily up behind her. "Where'd that come from?"

"Someone has found it." Kannan came over and knelt right next to the opening, reaching down without hesitation and taking the end of the cable in one hand. "I am going to pull this now." He called down. "Be relaxed."

He braced one foot and pulled gently on the cable end.

"Don't pull too hard." Shaun advised. "We have to get it back under the floor over to the wall." He came out from behind Kerry and knelt down by his teammate's side.

Kerry eased slowly upright, as a sudden motion caused a jolt of pain. She bit off a curse and stepped back, getting out of the tech's way and moving back over to where the desk was.

"Got it?" A voice echoed softly up to them.

"Got it." Shaun called back. "Was that Mark?"

Kerry perched on the edge of the desk, pressing her elbow against her side. "I think it was." She agreed, removing the radio clipped to her shoulder. "Mark, this is Kerry. You there?"

She heard a crackle of noise on the speaker, then Dar answered, her deep tones roughened with the radio's interference, but comforting to Kerry's ears nonetheless.

"We're here." Her partner said. "They get the end of that damn cable? We had to push it up back through a bunch of garbage and through a damn access pipe."

"We got it." Kerry acknowledged. "You chased a bunch of rats up here with it."

"What???"

"And, we've got another problem." Kerry went on. "Dar, you better come up here and look at this." She paused. "And I think I.. " She stopped, aware of the techs listening. "If you're done there, come on back."

"Be right there." Dar's voice had taken on an edge, and Kerry exhaled, as she clipped the radio mic back on her shoulder.

Breathing hurt. She figured that meant nothing good, but she decided to remain where she was, watching the techs work the cable under the floor towards the wall. She saw Kannan examine the end closely, and nod, but neither he or Shaun said anything about it.

Good people.

"That was crazy, huh?" Shaun looked up. "This place really is crazy."

"It is." Kerry agreed. "I don't know what we're going to do with that cable mess in there. We keep having everyone else's problems dropped in our lap."

"That's a mess." Shaun agreed. "That's probably a hundred cables that need to be fixed."

"Not too good at all." Kannan said.

There were footsteps in the hallway, and suddenly the door was filled with Dar's tall form. The ILS CIO stopped in the opening and looked around, focusing on Kerry after a split second. "Hey." She crossed the floor to her partner's side, ignoring the open sections, the mass of screwed up cable, and the two techs.

Her jumpsuit was covered in dust and grime and she brushed her hands off as she arrived in front of Kerry. "You okay?"

Kerry managed a brief smile. "What makes you think I'm not?"

Dar moved closer. "You're white as a sheet. What happened?" Her voice dropped, taking on a concerned tone. "Ker?"

"Sorry." Kerry waited for the pain to ease. "I did something stupid crazy. When you were pushing the cable back in here a bunch of.. I guess those big rats? They came up through the floor." She took a shallow breath. "Anyway, the other guy that was here was falling into the open hole and I grabbed for him and we both landed on the floor."

Dar put a hand on her knee. "And?"

"Caught my ribs on the edge of the tile." Kerry admitted. "Think I cracked something." She saw Dar's reaction start as she was saying it and she reached over to grab her hand. "Not bad, at least I don't think so."

"Cracked anything isn't good." Dar glanced around. "C'mon. I'll take you over to the hospital. They can take some X-rays."

"No, c'mon. I don't think it's that bad." Kerry protested. "I just got the breath knocked out of me." She amended her diagnosis. "Just a bruise. Chill."

Dar's brow arched sharply.

"You would say the same damn thing." Her partner accused.

"So, because I'm an idiot, you have to be an idiot?" Dar asked.

Kerry thought about that. "Yes."

Dar gave her a dour look. "Go back to the bus, and catch your breath." She said. "I don't want you to bruise anything else."

"Dar.."

"That wasn't a request." Dar's voice sharpened unexpectedly.

Kerry tilted back a trifle and studied her companion, seeing the storm in the blue eyes glaring back at her. "Okay." She responded quietly. "Boss."

Dar stepped out of the way to let her leave, and she did, swallowing against the lump of unease in her throat. Dar didn't pull rank on her often, and even less so in situations like this that crossed into their personal lives but it stung every time, and this was no exception.

Even if she knew Dar was in the right, and she was being stubborn. It didn't help. She kept her elbow near her side as she made her way down the steps; the hallways eerily empty, as were the sidewalks when she emerged.

The bus door opened as she approached though, and she climbed inside, to find a quiet oasis waiting for her completely bereft of staff or visitors. As the door closed shut behind her, the air even cleared and she felt her shoulders relax. "Thanks, Alan." She called into the driver's compartment. "Quiet today huh?"

"Yes, ma'am." The driver called back. "I'll just be here reading my paper. Let me know if you need anything."

Kerry removed her mask and tossed it on the table, wincing as the ache in her side started throbbing uncomfortably. She walked over to the courtesy kitchenette area, and opened the small refrigerator. Inside there were milk chugs. She took one out and opened it.

"Ow." The twisting made a jolt of pain go all the way down through her groin. "Stupid idiot." She went to her pack and fumbled out the bottle of Advil, opening it and then tossing down the handful of pills with a swallow of the milk.

It tasted good, soothing against the roughness in her throat. Kerry took the chug with her and carefully sat down in one of the leather chairs, leaning a little on her good side to take the pressure off her ribs.

The pain eased. She exhaled, reaching up to unclip the radio mic and pausing.

Call Dar? Find some excuse to reach out and make that contact? She felt the urge to do that, to smooth over the moment's anger between them before it festered and yet, she didn't want to interrupt Dar in front of the rest of the staff for something silly.

Something she knew Dar knew would have nothing to do with what she was calling for.

"Ugh." Kerry let her hand drop, and sipped her milk instead. "Dear God I wish it was tomorrow already." She decided she'd rest here for a few minutes, and then go back to the data center and make her amends in person.

Her side did hurt. A lot. She concentrated on breathing shallowly and put her head down on her arm as she waited for the medication to kick in. "Rats." She muttered. "What in the hell else is going to happen to us here?"

Her radio crackled softly, it's speaker right near her ear. Then it clicked off, much as she had only moments before.

Kerry closed her eyes, and managed something almost close to a smile.

**

Dar knelt beside the open floor, working hard to focus her mind on the problem in front of her. She stared at the cable mess for a long minute, before she glanced over at Mark, giving him a half shrug. "Our options are fix it, or tell them to fix it."

Mark nodded. "Shaun said the guy in here said their network people are somebody's cousin."

"Great." Dar rested her elbow on her upraised knee. "All right." She finally said. "Get a couple of the LAN guys down here with a kit. I'll go find the idiots running this place and see if I can get them to take responsibility for it."

"Think they will?"

"No." Dar said. "But I want them on the record refusing to." She stood up and stepped carefully over the open space. "Stupid bastards."

"This is a lot of crap." Mark got up. "Crap on top of crap if you know what I mean."

Dar looked past him, silent for a moment. Then she looked back. "Yeah." She answered briefly. "I'll be back." She ducked out of the computer room and looked both ways, and then she turned right and reluctantly headed further into the building.

Reluctant, because her conscience was really driving her the opposite direction, back to the steps, and the door, and the bus where her partner was supposedly resting.

She felt bad about ordering Kerry out. Even if she was right, and even if she knew her partner knew she was right, it put her guts in a knot remembering the imperfectly hidden hurt in Kerry's eyes when she'd left.

Stupid, really. Dar prowled the hallways, poking her head into the doors on either side. Most were empty, given that it was Sunday and getting late, and she suspected finding a responsible person who'd be willing to help her was going to be unlikely.

Also stupid. Really.

She paused before a barred window and stared out of it. Maybe Kerry was really pissed at her for what she'd done. She watched the shadows move past the glass. Her partner knew her well enough to give her ten minutes to chill, and then usually she'd be back around her, nudging and poking and putting her in a better mood.

She'd expected that this time. But an hour had passed, and her partner had remained in exile, and Dar was starting to feel very unhappy about it.

"Shit." She turned and put the window behind her. "Grow the hell up, would you?"

She climbed up the steps towards the large inner doors and pushed them open, emerging into the trading floor, which now was dark, and silent and empty.

It smelled. She wrinkled her nose. Not of dirt and decay as the basement below had, when she'd worked with Mark to push the cable back up, but of wood and paper, oil and dust, with the scent of stale perspiration just at the edges of everything.

The room was vast, but seemed far less so with the strips and outlines of cable supports that criss crossed over the endless series of kiosks and connected them with miles of wires.

Without the clutter, it would have been grand, reminding Dar just a bit of the Grand Central terminal she'd visited on her last trip to the city. But with all the machinery and trappings of modern technology it seemed more like a cyber junkyard.

Dar studied it, reflecting on how much her life had been influenced by the goings on here. Then she shook her head and turned, walking out and back down the stairs.

"Oh, Ms. Roberts?"

Dar paused, and waited, as a young man caught her up. "Yes?"

"Hi." He said. "Barry Marks. We met earlier?"

Dar turned and faced him. "Yes?"

"Listen." Marks looked both ways, then back at her. "My boss just called me. "

"I don't care." Dar said. "I've had it up to here with everyone's bosses calling everyone's bosses trying to make people kiss their asses. I'm over it."

"Wait..."

"I don't care who your boss is, or who he called, or what he's threatening, or what he says some other jackass is threatening." Dar continued on placidly. "I just don't care. Either the damn thing will be fixed tomorrow or it won't. Not a jack thing you can do about it."

Marks stuck his hands in his pockets. "Boy, you're a tough cookie." He said. "Okay. I just wanted to pass along a warning, that's all."

Dar rolled her eyes.

"The governor's on his way here." Marks added. "I guess he's spoken to Abercrombie." He gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry about that. Everyone's kind of losing their mind about tomorrow. Any idea what we're going to do?"

"Postpone the opening." Dar leaned against the wall.

"We can't do that."

"Better figure out how to do this the old fashioned way then." Dar indicated the doors to the big room. "I'm not going to tell you it's going to be all right, buddy. It's a clusterfuck. There's parts of this thing ripped up and I can't even find someone from here to go fix it."

"Well.."

"You know whose cousin does the wiring here?" Dar pressed him. "Maybe you can have him call me, since no matter what we do with the uplink it's not going to help with the piled of cable chewed up by rats in there."

"Rats!"

"Can your boss find whoever's cousin it is?" Dar persisted. "Because that would help a lot more than sending me some ridiculous warning."

Marks held his hand up. "I'll call him." He said. "I'll call him. He knows the guy who's in charge of the facilities here. Probably some friend of his. Want him to come see you?"

Dar turned and started walking. "Have him see Mark Polenti, in the computer room. He knows what to do." She called back over her shoulder. "I've got a..." She paused. "Something more important to take care of."

"Right." Marks shook his head and headed for a small office nearby. "Knew I should have just taken the train up to Niagara this morning. Screw this."

Dar heard the echo, and felt certain sympathy with it. But she kept walking, down the hall and down the stairs to the street, ignoring the guards and the people walking down the side walk as she focused on the bus door.

It opened as she approached and she waved a hand in the direction of the driver as she climbed inside, glad when it closed behind her and she was sealed inside the quiet peace of the bus.

Very quiet. Dar found herself stepping cautiously as she went through the front part of the bus to the back, spotting the flash of Kerry's pale hair against the leather fabric of the furniture immediately. She circled the chair, finding her partner fast asleep against one arm, her breathing slow and even.

So that was the reason she hadn't come back outside. Dar felt both relieved and a touch embarrassed. She went over to the storage compartment and removed a small lap blanket from it; opening it up before she returned and settled it around Kerry's sleeping body.

She waited a moment, to see if that would wake her. When it didn't she knelt down and carefully loosened the laces on her partner's hiking boots, unlooping them from the top stays and easing them off her feet.

She set the boots down, then straightened up and went to the refrigerator, removing a chocolate chug and leaning back against the counter to drink it.

It was very quiet. Even the sounds outside had fallen off, except for the beeping of cranes and the sound of heavy machinery in the distance. She could also hear a fading siren, but around the bus there wasn't much going on.

She felt her PDA go off, bringing a welcome distraction. She put the chug down and pulled the device out of her pocket, opening it and reviewing the messages. "Ah." She muttered softly, taking out the stylus and touching the top one.

Hello Dar. Good news and bad news. Bad news first. They've looked at all the existing optics and nothing we've got can be altered to work over MMF at that distance, even with some classified stuff they have here

Well, that was bad news. Dar found herself shrugging over it, having expected the message. She had decided they were going to have to wait until the new cable got here.

So now the good news. They have an experimental optic here they're putting together for the space station and they think maybe they could see if it could be adapted. My guys are working on building an enclosure for it, so if they hit pay dirt we'll be able to fit it in the chassis you guys have there. It's a pretty slim chance.

Dar blinked at the message. Pretty slim? It was a hell of a lot more of a chance than she'd considered possible.

So anyway, that's the news. We'll be burning the midnight oil – let you know if anything looks promising. Hope it's worth something by the time we're done.

Wow. Dar tapped the screen to respond.

We're burning the midnight oil here too, just in case. Slim chance or not, this is the only hope we have, so whatever you come up with will be better than what we've got now. Whatever the costs turn out to be for this – bill me for them. If you come up with a solution, name your price. DR.

She sent it, then folded the PDA cover down and slid the device back in her pocket. Could they do it? At least they were trying. Dar picked up her chug and drank it slowly, the cold, sweet beverage easing the ache in her throat.

What next? She glanced over to where Kerry was still soundly sleeping. With a sigh, she set her empty chug down in the garbage and retreated to the door of the bus, opening it and emerging outside quickly, shutting the door behind her.

No sense in waking Kerry up, after all. Better she get some rest. Dar was glad of the decision a moment later when her cell phone rang, making her jump a little. She glanced at the caller ID, and then opened it. "Hello, Alastair."

"Dar. Where are you?" Her boss sounded exasperated.

"At the Exchange. Outside." Dar replied. "What now?"

"Well, do me a favor lady, and take all those people you got down there and pile them in that bus and take off." Alastair said. "The governor's on his way down, and I just told him to kiss my ass."

Dar leaned back against the bus, finding a smile somewhere. "You did, huh?" She said. "What happened?"

Alastair exhaled. "Jackass." He said. "Someone got wind of their little game with the test yesterday and says they're going to tell the press. So the bastard told me he was going to cut them off and tell them we screwed something up and now we're trying to fix it."

Dar blinked. "Fuck him."

"Pretty much what I said." Her boss admitted frankly. "So gather the troops, Dar. Put em on the bus and head back up here. We're out of this."

"Just like that?" Dar asked.

"Just like that. I told him he could tell the press whatever he wanted, but then again, so would I." Alastair said. "I've had it up to my eyeballs. I already told the board."

It occurred to Dar suddenly that she wouldn't want to cross Alastair, not in this mood. "You got it, boss." She responded. "I'll go get the team and tell the driver to get ready to move. I don't want to be here when that jackass gets here to start yelling at me."

"Damn right." Alastair said. "See you back here in a little bit."

Dar closed her phone, and exhaled. "Well." She tossed the phone up and caught it. "So much for that." She headed for the door, then halted, turned, and went back to the bus. She keyed the door open and trotted up inside, heading over to where Kerry was napping.

The blanket was now tucked around her, her fingers clasped lightly in it, and there was the faintest of smiles on her face.

Dar knelt, and put a hand on her shoulder. "Ker?"

The green eyes fluttered open at once, and the faint smile grew into a real one.

"How are you feeling?" Dar asked. "Sorry I was a bastard before."

Kerry drew in a breath, and then grimaced. "Ow." She muttered, sheepishly. "Don't apologize. I should go get this checked out. It's killing me." She extended her hand and clasped Dar's. "Thanks for

the blanket.” She added. “I figured you were the only one who could have done that and not woken me up.”

“Well, we’ve got time to go do that now.” Dar said, wryly. “Alastair just pulled us out. I wanted to wake you up before I got the rest of the crew in here rattling around. We’re going back uptown.”

Kerry blinked. “Really? What happened?” She asked, startled.

“Long story. Tell you when I get back.” Dar stood. “We could be heading home sooner than I thought.” She stroked Kerry’s head as she circled the chair. “Hold down the fort, okay?”

“Sure.” Kerry eased to seated position as the door closed again behind Dar. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and tried to find a comfortable position, wiggling her toes as she blinked the sleep out of her eyes. “It’s over?” She looked over at the television screen, which, muted, was showing scenes of the Pentagon. “Wow.”

She felt a sense of relief. Her head fell back to rest against the leather surface and imagined herself stepping off a plane into Miami’s muggy heat. “Awesome.”

**

Dar rested her elbows on her knees; glad she’d sent the bus on ahead back to the office. The medical examination was taking longer than she’d expected it to, and she was starting to get flutters of nervousness in her guts.

Not that it was her guts being examined, but still. . She was hoping Kerry’s injury was nothing serious, but experience had taught her that the longer they poked, the more they generally found. It was the reason she avoided doctors when she could, and even though her better sense insisted that Kerry’s ribs had to be looked at, her animal anxiety wished they’d just kept driving by.

“Ms. Roberts?”

Dar lifted her head quickly, turning to find a nurse at her side. “Yes?”

“Could you come with me please?” The woman asked, pleasantly. “Your friend asked to see you.”

Friend. Dar took a breath, and then she merely stood and waited for the nurse to move forward so she could follow her. There were places, she reasoned, where making the point about their relationship wouldn’t have gotten a second’s hesitation from her.

Here, in the waiting room of St. Vincent’s hospital, surrounded by dozens and dozens of people who were sitting there, in crisis, waiting in vain hope that a loved one who had gone to work on 9/11 would come straggling in – this wasn’t a place to make a personal point.

She followed the nurse down the hall and past a set of sliding doors, the floors that supernaturally clean linoleum common to hospitals. There were rooms on either side, with old wooden doors and wooden sills, and the desks were age worn Formica when they weren’t buried under paperwork.

The nurse paused before one of the exam rooms, and gave her a brief smile. “In there.” She stood back so Dar could enter, and then left.

“Hey.” Kerry was lying on an examining couch, halfway reclined. She had her boots and her jumpsuit off, but was fully clothed otherwise.

“Hey.” Dar glanced around, finding them alone in the room. She crossed over to her partner and studied her. “You okay?” She found the lack of blinking and beeping machines, needles, or other medical equipment encouraging, so she took Kerry’s hand in hers and clasped it, feeling the chill under her fingers quickly warm.

“Yeah, I will be.” Kerry looked more than a little chagrined. “I did crack a stupid rib on that damn tile. Dar, that’s freaking embarrassing.” She complained. “How am I supposed to explain to everyone that I hurt myself escaping from a bunch of rats while falling into a raised floor?”

"You want me to tell them you actually saved me from falling off a balcony or something?" Dar asked. "I'm cool with that. After all, you told everyone I saved you from a shark." She chafed Kerry's hand, seeing the unusual pallor of her skin. "Hurts?"

Kerry nodded briefly. "They wrapped me up, and they're giving me a pain prescription. Not much else they can do. The doctor said it was just a hairline fracture, and that I was lucky as hell." She drew in a cautious breath. "Pain's making me sick to my stomach though."

"Does that mean I get to take you back to the hotel and put you to bed?" Dar's eyes twinkled gravely. "Now that we're not on the hook anymore?"

"God, that sounds like heaven." Her partner admitted. "It's so hard for me to wrap my head around the idea that we're just walking away from this. What about you?"

Dar shrugged. "You want to know the truth?"

"You want to go home." Kerry studied her face intently. "The guys want to go home. I heard them talking. They don't really like being here. The only thing that's been keeping them on the job is you."

"Me?" Dar looked honestly surprised.

"Oh, honey please." That brought a smile to Kerry's pale face. "We'd all walk over hot coals for you and you know it."

Dar's brow creased. "Do you seriously think I'd let you walk over coals?"

Kerry was prevented from answering by the return of the doctor. "Hey doc."

The doctor, a middle-aged man with curly gray hair and a kind face, bustled in with a clipboard and a folder. "Well, hello there again, young lady." He said. "I think we've about got you wrapped up here. This your friend?"

"Yes, it is." Kerry nodded. "Dr Ames, this is Dar Roberts."

"Hi." Dar responded warily.

"Hello, there." The doctor gave her a smile. "Well, here's what I've got." He handed Dar a big envelope. "These are her x-rays, for her doctor at home."

Dar took possession of them. "Okay."

"Here's her prescription. It's pretty strong." The doctor handed over a smaller square of paper. "If you want my advice, don't let her sleep lying down. Find a recliner, and use the arms for support until the bone starts healing."

"Okay." Dar repeated, feeling slightly bewildered. "I'm sure we can do that."

"Good." The doctor said. "Take care of her, she's a cutie." He patted Dar's shoulder and left the room, whistling softly under his breath.

Dar turned and looked at a bemused Kerry. "Does he think you're my lover, my kid, or my puppy?"

Kerry started laughing, then immediately regretted it. "Oohh." She held her side. "Honey don't make me laugh, please. It hurts like hell." She moaned.

Dar set the envelope down, stuffed the prescription in her pocket, and carefully got her arm around Kerry's shoulder. "You ready to go be coddled unmercifully?" She could feel a chill under her touch, and put her other arm around her partner, cradling her gently.

Kerry relaxed, and exhaled. "They gave me a muscle relaxant." She said. "I'm a little loopy. I think that's why the doctor was letting your brain do the work for me"

"No problem." Dar kissed her on the top of her head. "Let's go. We'll grab a taxi outside and be back at the hotel in no time. I'll call them and have them buy a recliner while we're on the way over."

Kerry chuckled faintly. Then she swung her legs off the couch and got up, helped by Dar's firm grip. "Want to hear the good news?"

"Sure." Dar left her arm around Kerry as they made their way to the door.

"My blood pressure was on the low side of normal." Kerry didn't quite manage to keep the smug tone out of her voice. "Even after all the crap we've been through."

Total shock, when the nurse had glanced up and patted her shoulder, releasing the cuff and taking the stethoscope from her ears. "Perfect." The woman announced. "I love to see nice, healthy women."

Amazing. Kerry had almost forgotten about her damn ribs in her delight. The injury was painful, and annoying, but finite and her blood pressure wasn't. She was glad to hear the recent stress hadn't resulted in a reading that would guarantee to cause her far more of it.

"Now that's awesome." Dar agreed. "I'll take that news any damned day." She looked both ways as they emerged from the room, and then eased out into traffic. "Probably a good thing they didn't take mine while I was waiting for you."

"Aw." Kerry was content to shelter in Dar's arm, as they dodged the quiet crowd in the waiting area on the way out. "Why were you so stressed? I think we both pretty much knew what they'd say." She glanced to either side as they reached the door.

"I hate hospitals." Dar muttered.

Kerry patted her stomach. "I know, hon." She caught the eye of a woman standing just outside the hospital entrance, her hands full with a stack of colored paper. The woman came forward, and held out one of the sheaves.

"Oh." Kerry took it instinctively. She looked at it, seeing a round face looking back at her, with a fringe of dark hair.

"This is my husband." The woman said. "Have you seen him?" She asked. "He went to work on Tuesday. I know he must be here somewhere. Please look at it. Have you seen him at all?"

Kerry felt Dar's body shift, and she stopped walking, touching her partner on the arm as she bent her head to study the page seriously. "Dar, look. Did you remember seeing anyone like this?"

Thus called, Dar tilted her head and focused her eyes on the sheet. The man's face was ordinary and unremarkable. He had a golden skin tone, and in the picture, he was smiling broadly at whoever was taking the picture.

Could have been anyone.

"Anything, Dar?"

Dar put her photographic memory to work, flicking through pictures of the last couple of days, above ground and below, going along streets, and standing on the steps of the Exchange, riding in the subways, walking around their hotel.

Down in Battery Park.

"I don't think I have." Kerry said finally, in a regretful tone. "Dar?"

"I didn't see him." Dar lifted her eyes and met the woman's squarely. "I'm sorry."

The woman wandered off without answering, going up to the steps to greet the next people to emerge from the hospital, with her colored paper, and her eternal hope.

"Jesus." Kerry murmured. "My god, Dar. These people have no freaking closure." She watched the woman plead. "Did you hear the news? I was listening while I was waiting for my x-ray. They think four thousand people are missing, and they've only found a hundred and eighty bodies."

"Yeah." Dar guided her to the curb, and turned to watch for a cab. "You don't have closure."

Kerry turned and looked up at her. Then she leaned into Dar's body. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Dar signaled a cab. "My father's waiting for us at the hotel. If ever I had to have it beaten home to me what a lucky son of a bitch I am, you just did it."

They got into the cab without further conversation. Kerry leaned against Dar's shoulder and watched the streets go by, feeling a sense of separation from the world around her.

She wished they were home already. She was tired of the crowded chaos of the city. She no longer wanted to help out, or deal with the problems, or face the impatient antagonism they'd been subjected to by pretty much everyone they tried to help.

She'd just had enough. She felt bad for all the people here, she felt bad for their customers who were in the affected area, and she felt bad for her country and about the future that had suddenly become very, very murky.

But she'd had enough. It was time to let someone else step up and take care of things, and respond to the government's demands. They had done their part. She had done her part, and had a cracked rib to show for it. "What time's our flight tomorrow?"

"I have Maria trying to change it for the morning." Dar said. "It's one something right now."

"Wish there was a flight tonight." Kerry mused. "I'd love to be home right now, on our comfy couch, petting Cheebles."

"Me too." Dar agreed. "I miss my milk dispenser." She added, in a mournful tone.

Kerry snorted softly, trying to stifle a laugh. "You're so bizarre sometimes."

The cab pulled up in front of their hotel. Dar paid the fare, and they walked inside, not really surprised to find the rest of their team gathered in the bar. "Let's say hi." Kerry nudged her partner in that direction. "And I'd love a beer before I start taking those drugs."

Dar hesitated, and then she surrendered. They walked into the bar, crossing past the service area to the pit of chairs filled with their staff. "Hello, folks." Dar said.

"Hey!" Scuzzy waved. "How are you guys?"

"How's the ribs, boss?" Mark was seated next to Scuzzy, a frosted beer mug in one hand. "You look kinda washed out."

"I feel washed out." Kerry eased into a seat. "I have a cracked rib."

"Ow."

"Ooh." Scuzzy made a face. "Man, that hurts, huh?"

Dar rested her hands on the back of the chair. "Someone please order Kerry a beer. I'm going to go arrange for her drugs."

"Hey. I've got a cracked rib. Not broken vocal cords." Kerry reminded her. "Scoot. I'll get you a Kahalua milkshake."

"Mm." Dar patted the back of the chair, and then she headed off towards the concierge stand. The lobby was relatively empty, and she found the concierge ready and willing to help her. "I have a prescription." She produced it. "Can you get it filled for me?"

"Of course." The man said, immediately. "May I ask what it's for?"

Dar studied the paper. "Painkillers?" She handed it over. "My partner has a cracked rib."

"No problem." The man accepted the slip and briefly looked at it. "Do you have a preferred pharmacy?" He asked. "We've got one right around the corner, but it's local, might not take your insurance."

"Just get whatever's fastest." Dar waved her hand a little. "I don't care what it costs."

The concierge smiled at her wholeheartedly. "Now, there's a woman after my own tastes." He said. "Ma'am, just leave it with me. I'll have it brought to your room as soon as it's filled. You're in 1202, correct?"

"Correct." Dar said. "And while you're at it, I could use a few other things up there. Got a pad?"

The man whipped a pen and paper out faster than her eye could follow.

**

"So, that's what happened." Kerry cradled the mug of beer in both hands. The twinge of holding it, she decided was worth its cold comfort. "I can't figure out what the rats were doing there."

"I got that cleared up." Scuzzy held her hand up in the air as though she were in class. "I was talking to these guys here, in the hotel? They got a place down near where the towers was. They said it was all full of rats, when they went down there today. They came up from the sewer."

"From the sewer?" Mark cocked his head. "For what?"

"They said, from all that stuff that happened down near the towers." Shaun spoke up. "I heard the guys at the Exchange talking. They're in all the basements."

"Ugh." Kerry grimaced.

"I am glad we are not going back there." Kannan spoke up. He was seated in one of the big chairs, his slim form almost swallowed by it. He had a steaming cup in his hands that he'd been sipping from. "That place disturbed me very much."

"Me too." Kerry said. "I think I have too much of an imagination."

"The big cheese has big brass ones to pull us out of here." Mark said. "Those guys down there couldn't believe we were just leaving. They thought we were bullshitting."

"No bullshit." Kerry shook her head. "They finally pushed Alastair too hard."

"Someone call my name?" Alastair entered the bar and went over to the service area, taking a seat on a barstool. "Ladies and Gentlemen, you have my greatest admiration and gratitude for the work you've done here."

"Include yourself in that, sir." Kerry told him. "Teamwork gets you nowhere without good leadership to go along with it."

Alastair looked exhausted, but that made him smile. He lifted his newly poured beer in their direction. "To being homeward bound."

"Yeah!" Mark lifted his mug. "Café con leche at the airport's on me!"

Dar returned and perched on the arm of Kerry's chair, picking up the cup on the table in front of her and taking a sip from it. She let her free hand rest on Kerry's shoulder, and listened to the chatter of the group around her.

It felt good. They had done their best.

Now they could move on.

**

Kerry paused and leaned her hands on the back of the room's chair, staring at the bed. "Dar."

"Yes."

"What in the hell is that?"

Dar wandered over and stood next to her.

"If you say it's the bed, I'll bite your arm." Kerry warned her. "What did they do to that bed?"

Dar studied the piece of furniture in question. The top of the bed was literally covered in pillows, some stacked against the back, some arranged long ways down the mattress, a few dotted around apparently as decoration. "Well." She cleared her throat a little. "They said they didn't have time, or the space to get a recliner."

Kerry turned her head slowly to look at her partner. "Did you actually ask them to?"

"Yes, I did." Dar responded in perfect seriousness. "So anyway, this was what they came up with. G'wan up there and see how good they did."

"Let me get undressed first." Kerry demurred. "Because I have a feeling once I sit down in that nest of feathers, I'm not getting up again." She went over to her bag. "Did you say the drugs got here?" She unfastened her pants and let them drop off her.

"They did." Dar opened a bag lying on the dresser and removed a bottle, examining the label. "Ready for some?"

"Oh yes." Kerry exhaled, wincing as the throbbing got a little sharper. "I'm glad we spent some time with the team, but I'm paying for it." She removed her sleep shirt from her bag, and draped it over the chair. "Be right back."

"Yell if you need help." Dar patted her on the hip as she eased by. "I have some goodies here too."

"Thank you, Doctor Dar." Kerry had to smile, as she made her way into the bathroom. "Have we gotten paged for anything?" She called back. "It seems too damn quiet."

"Jinxer."

"Well, it does." Kerry carefully washed her face, trying not to move around too much. The water was startlingly cold, and she let it run a moment, turning on the warm water until it was bearable. In Miami, she never had that problem. The cold faucet produced, at best, lukewarm water in all but the coldest weather.

She brushed her teeth and rinsed, then studied her reflection in the mirror. "Ugh." She put her toothbrush back into its glass and returned to the room, finding Dar already in her t-shirt, standing there with Kerry's shirt bundled up in her hands.

It felt amazing to know she could just change, despite the relatively early hour, and then go sit quietly for as long as she wanted. "Thank you." Kerry unbuttoned her shirt and let Dar strip it off her, then she stood as her partner got her into her sleep garb with careful, gentle hands. "You make me almost forget how much of an idiot I feel like getting hurt the way I did."

"I popped my knee falling in a sinkhole, got smacked with a baseball bat, and got bitten by a fish. You want to have a dumbass injury competition with me?" Dar inquired. "Go sit on the bed, Kerrison."

"Yes, ma'am." Kerry went over and sat down on the soft surface, carefully squirming into the nest of pillows until she was leaning against the ones in the back, with her elbows tucked into the ones down the middle. "Ah."

"Comfortable?" Dar was busy at the tray.

"Yeah. Matter of fact." Kerry crossed her ankles. "I am." The support took the pressure off her ribs, and the pain eased. She leaned back and relaxed, letting out a long sigh of relief. "So no calls?"

"No." Dar brought a tray over. "I have our phones forwarded."

"Oh. I see." Kerry tilted her head so she could see what was in her immediate future in terms of edible items. "Wow. What is that?"

"This is lobster." Dar regarded the tray. "Cut up in nice bite size chunks with appropriate things to dunk them in."

"Mm."

"These are corn fritters." Dar went on. "These are green beans because I knew you'd yell at me otherwise, and this is a chocolate fondue."

"Wow."

"With cheesecake to dip in it along with strawberries."

Kerry had been pretty sure she'd entered the hotel room convinced she wasn't hungry, but at the moment, her body wasn't buying that. "This is for both of us right?"

"Yes." Dar confirmed. "Hang on. Let me get the bubbly."

Kerry folded her hands over her stomach as Dar got up to retrieve a bottle and two glasses. Despite the long day, and her aches and pains, the solicitous attention could only make her smile and she did, tilting her head a little again to take a sip from the glass her partner offered.

A little sweet, a little fizzy, a little spicy. The champagne tickled her tongue and she settled back to enjoy as Dar squiggled herself into a comfortable position on the bed and commenced delivering lobster to her.

Perfectly cooked, chilled just right. Kerry licked her lips. "I think I know why emperors had servants now." She commented, accepting another bite of lobster, neatly dipped in butter sauce and a touch of lemon. "This is lovely."

Dar chuckled softly, taking a piece for herself before she offered Kerry a bite of corn fritter. "I just wanted something simple I could handle with my fingers." She explained. "I'm too tired to mess with silverware. Ready for your pills?"

"Just my luck." Kerry sighed happily. "You know what?"

"What?" Dar delivered a sip of champagne to her.

"Save the pills for tomorrow when we fly." Kerry leaned on her pillows and accepted a mouthful of lobster. "Right now, I feel great." She gazed lovingly at the angular face next to her. "Thanks."

Dar kissed her. "Anytime."

Kerry took another sip of bubbly to clear her mouth. "Dar, how do you really feel about us walking out like that? Do you regret it?"

Dar sipped her champagne, set the glass down, then picked up a piece of corn fritter and bit into it. She chewed slowly, thinking about the question. Then she handed over the other half of her fritter to Kerry's waiting lips. "Yes."

Kerry chewed, and swallowed. "Yes, you regret us backing out?"

Dar nodded. "I hate quitting. You know that." She said. "I don't blame Alastair for a minute for what he did, but yeah. I do regret it, a little. But on the other hand..." She offered Kerry more lobster. "Now if it doesn't work we don't have to stand there looking like jackasses either."

"You think that's why he did it?"

"Maybe." Dar allowed. "I might have. He knew what the deal was. Might have been a calculated decision. This is going to cause a huge wave, but from that standpoint, better than public failure."

"Hm." Kerry cautiously reached for her glass of champagne, and took a sip. "That actually makes sense." She admitted. "You really don't think we'd have been able to do it?"

"No." Dar answered. "Ultimately we'd have gotten everything in place, but there's no way they could have worked the optics. We'd have been standing there when that bell rang with a lot of egg on our faces. That's why I didn't say anything to Alastair when he told me. He's right."

"That really sucks though." Kerry selected a green bean and ate it. "It sucks that they put us in that position." She paused. "Or did we put ourselves in it?"

Dar extended her legs along the bed and stretched out on her side. She lifted her glass in Kerry's direction in a wry toast.

"Mm." Kerry took a sip of her champagne and set the glass back down. "Can you reach me a bug bit?"

"Sure." Dar produced a chunk of lobster. "So tomorrow, let's work on wrapping up things here, and get a task list we can throw at ops in Miami. See what we can do for our customers aside from letting them camp at our doorstep."

"Sounds good." Kerry chewed and swallowed. "I can start looking at the capacity we have here. We can find out what we need to do if we need to start mounting sat rigs on people's roofs."

"With solar panels." Dar suggested. "Maybe we can have the gang down at integration start putting together mobile kits."

Kerry settled back and licked her lips. The pain in her side had subsided to a mild throbbing, and she was perfectly content to lay here nestled in her pillows, enjoying the chance to just sit and talk to her partner.

She hoped the rest of the team was having as quiet an evening as she was.

**

Alastair sat down in a leather chair in the empty floor lounge, glad the rest of the team was off resting – he hoped- or enjoying some time off. He glanced over at the door, where a secret service agent was standing, his attention fixed on the hallway rather than inside the room.

He thought he perhaps should be more nervous than he was, having been called out of his room for this meeting on just a few minutes notice. But he'd discovered he was just too tired, and too over it to be anything more than mildly thirsty.

Fortunately, the lounge was equipped for that. He got up and went to the sidebar holding a self-service beverage station, selecting a teabag and setting it into a china cup. He poured water over it, and let it steep, even when noise behind him indicated he was no longer alone in the lounge.

"Hello, Alastair." A voice sounded behind him.

"Hello, Dick." He added a touch of cream, and a cube of sugar, stirred, then took the cup and returned to his seat. "If you're here to either yell or threaten me, give it up." He sat down, and regarded the man standing across from him. "I'm not in the mood."

The Vice President took his hands from his pockets and sat down. "Won't waste my breath." He responded. "We've known each other too long. When you tell someone to fuck off, it's usually for a reason."

Alastair took a sip of his tea. "So what are you here for then?"

"I want to understand." The man across from him said. "What the fuck you think you're doing, putting everything you worked half your life at risk here. This is big, Alastair." He said. "There's no going back from this. Either you're with us, or you're not, and those that are not, might as well move to Japan."

Alastair regarded him benignly. "Y'know, funny thing. Tried sushi for the first time just the other day, matter of fact. I liked it." He remarked. "Why don't you tell me something? Why are you letting all these jackasses scrambling around like idiots treat people like me like a hired hand?" He continued. "I've spent the last week being smacked around by your lackeys and threatened with everything from jail time to being taken into a back room somewhere all because we're here doing you a fucking favor."

The Vice President pursed his lips. He was dressed in a pair of dark slacks, and a dark windbreaker, in an apparent pitch to avoid notice. "People are tense. You can't blame them."

"I sure as hell can blame them." Alastair shot back. "Just because every jack one of you got caught bare assed is no reason to take it out on me."

"Alastair." The man shook his head. "You're not doing yourself any favors."

"I'm not looking for any favors."

The Vice President exhaled. "You were always such a hard ass." He complained. "Al, this needs to happen."

Alastair shrugged. "Maybe you shoulda thought of that before you told everyone it was working yesterday."

"Figured I was safe. They told me you were handling it." His visitor responded. "We have to show how little this affected us. You know that."

"I know that." Alastair said. "So back to my original question. "

"Oh for Pete's sake." The man said. "Give me a break, Al. Every single department in the whole government was thrown into a high speed reactive mode and told to not let anything stand in their way. This was no joke. This was not some half assed tornado we were responding to. People died"

"Some of mine did." Alastair said, quietly. "I lost a good friend down there."

The Vice President sighed. "So you won't do this?"

Alastair took the time to sip his tea again. "No." He said. "We've done what we could."

"You know you'll get blamed for this. You'll have to stand there and explain why you walked out on helping your country in this time of disaster." There was a perceptible touch of irony in the words. "You really want to do that? Do the people you work for really want that spotlight? You've got a lot of contracts with us, Al. More than most companies."

"The board's been advised." Alastair shrugged. "They agree with my decision."

His visitor looked surprised. "Would your stockholders?"

Alastair shrugged.

"I don't get it."

"Maybe I just don't like being pushed around." Alastair gazed steadily at him. "I'll be there. I'll be glad to stand by my decisions, and my people. If that frustrates you, Dick, sorry. Nothing personal. For what it's worth, I think we did a damn fine job for you through this."

The Vice President nodded slowly, shrewd eyes watching Alastair's face with sharp intent. "Nothing personal, Al. I know our wives are close. But we'll bury you for this." He got up and waved, then headed for the door, zipping his jacket up as he gave the secret service man a nod. "Let's go."

Alastair lifted a hand and waved back. Then he let his hand fall to his knee as the door emptied, lifting the cup to his lips to sip his tea.

After a long moment's silence, the doorway filled again, and he looked up to see Dar's tall form leaning against the sill, arms crossed, pale blue eyes watching him with intent question.

"Tea?" Alastair raised his cup in her direction.

Dar crossed the room and went to the credenza, opening the refrigerator and removing a chocolate milk. She brought it back over and dropped into a chair next to him, extending her long legs and bare feet across the carpet before crossing her ankles. "We in trouble?"

"We?"

Dar opened the milk and drank from it, swirling the liquid around in the container as she waited him out in silence, one eyebrow fully hiked.

"Nah, we'll be fine."

Dar's other eyebrow hiked to join its mate.

Alastair toasted her wryly with his tea, his face creasing into a rueful smile.

**

Dar wasn't sure what made her wake up. She lifted her head off the pillow, looking around in the darkened room. The clock on the bedside table blinked a ruddy four AM; she cocked her head to listen to see if some sound had broken through her dreams.

Nothing. It was quiet, some soft mechanical sounds evident, the cycling of the air conditioning, and the working of the elevator down the hall, but nothing else seemed to be stirring.

Dar turned her attention to her sleeping partner. Kerry was propped up half sitting against her nest of pillows, with the blanket tucked around her, her face relaxed in slumber.

Seemed like a good idea. She started to compose herself to go back to sleep, when the dryness of her mouth annoyed her just enough to spur her to get up and do something about it.

With a soundless sigh, she eased out of the bed, getting her feet under her and standing up, and then moving quietly across the room to the credenza. She sorted through the choices there, not finding anything to her liking.

Being a milk fanatic sort of sucked when you didn't have ready refrigeration. She picked the room key up off the counter and palmed it along with her PDA, giving herself a cursory glance at her dimly seen reflection in the mirror, before making her way to the door, opening it and slipping outside.

The hallway was, not unexpectedly, empty. She crossed it and went down to the lounge, where the big screen television was playing mutely the audience of couches and chairs.

They'd left the sports on, but at this time of day it was soccer. Dar glanced idly at the screen as she headed for the service fridge, opening it and retrieving a bottle. She took it back over and sat down on the couch, the leather unexpectedly cold against the backs of her thighs. "Urg."

She opened the milk and set it down, then turned her attention to the PDA, which had displayed the stuttering red light indicating she had messages. She flipped the top open, wondering if it was her mother sending one of her infrequent notes.

Her eyes scanned it, and then scanned it again, more slowly. Then she took a deep breath, and released it. "Son of a bitch."

Hey Dar! Just a got a second to drop you a note before I head for the airport and a flight out there! Tried calling, your phone went to voice mail. But they did it! Those boys worked until their eyes were bleeding, and got that thing working. Couldn't believe it!!! Still can't! Got some special refractive diamond mirrors in the damn things, but I saw it myself, saw it link up at over a mile!

Shit. Dar knew a moment of total dismay.

Figure to land there around 8, realize it's cutting it close as hell, but it's the best they could do for a flight. Anyway, see you then, and I can't wait to see this thing work!

Dar set the PDA down on her leg and rested her elbow on the arm of the couch, leaning her head against her hand. Then she looked up, and tapped her fingers against her lips, staring blankly at the silent screen.

There had been very few moments in her career when she'd been caught in so complete a quandary as she was now, faced with a situation she hadn't really believed was going to happen. Of course, she could simply do nothing.

Let it all be for nothing. But she knew she should have called when Alastair pulled them out and told them to stop working on it and she hadn't. Hadn't even remembered, focused as she had been on Kerry's injury and taking care of her.

On a human level, she knew that was the right thing. Even if she told the men that, they'd agree. Family did come first, and Kerry was her family.

Didn't make it any easier to take though. Dar rubbed her eyes, and exhaled. "Shit." She opened the PDA and tapped the reply key, pausing with the stylus held between her fingers as she tried to compose an answer.

"Couldn't sleep, boss?"

Dar's head jerked up and she looked at the door as Mark entered. The MIS chief was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, and he'd obviously also been sleeping. "Got thirsty" She held up her milk. "What about you?"

"Ops woke me up." Mark trudged over to the counter and took out a can of Coke, returning to the seating area and dropping into a chair with it. "Freaking accounting jobs didn't run again. I hate those damned scripts."

Dar gave him a wry look. "Want me to rewrite them?"

He paused in mid sip. "Those are yours?" He asked, his eyes going wide.

Dar let him wait for it, and then she smiled. "Nah. But if you want I'll redo em anyway."

Mark relaxed. "Man, you had me." He admitted. "I should have figured they weren't. They suck." He took a swallow of his soda. "They crap out at least once a week and we have to restart them. This time they tanked Duk's reporting and he bitched out ops."

"Reporting shit definitely rolls downhill." Dar commiserated. "Speaking of which." She held up her PDA. "C'mere."

Puzzled, Mark got up and edged over, joining her on the couch. "What?"

Dar opened the message and showed it to him, watching his face for a reaction. His eyes widened again, then his body shifted, as he turned to look back at her.

"Are you kidding me?" Mark said. "Is this guy for real?"

Dar sighed. "Apparently he is." She leaned back. "So now this guy's on the way here, ready to save the world and he's going to run right into a pissing match he had no part of."

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow." Dar closed the PDA. "Guess I'll wait until he lands then call him."

"Ouch." Mark murmured. "That's gonna suck." He glanced at his boss. "You didn't think they'd do it."

"I didn't think they'd do it." Dar confirmed, nodding. "Not only that, I didn't bother to tell them to stop trying once we did." She sighed again. "So I suck twice."

"You were kinda busy." Mark objected. "I know if it had been my wife who'd broken a rib I wouldn't have thought a half second about work crap." He paused. "So how's Kerry feeling, anyway?"

"Right now, hopefully she's not feeling anything since she was asleep when I came out here." Dar said. "Probably a good thing, since I know she'd be as freaked as I am about this note."

Mark remained silent briefly, sipping his soda. Then he cleared his throat a little, and watched his boss out of the corner of his eye. "We could go do it, if you want."

Dar looked at him.

He shrugged.

"Alastair pulled us out." Dar stated. "I respect that decision."

"Yeah." Mark agreed. "But we can do it. I know he had heartburn with the governor and all that stuff, but man, if those guys went to the wall for us, it sucks if we can't get it done." He said. "And it's really gonna suck for him tomorrow when that bell goes off and nothing happens."

"He knows that."

Mark shrugged again. "He's pretty cool. He's been all right to have with us here. I wasn't sure about it, at first, but he's a good guy." He considered. "So we could make his morning, if you catch my drift."

Dar thought about that. It put the question into a different light than she'd been looking at it in – and she felt herself becoming attracted to the idea. "Alastair's good people." She finally said, in a quiet tone.

"He really likes you." Mark spoke up, unexpectedly. "He was talking to me and your pop yesterday and he was telling your pop how lucky he was to have a kid like you."

Dar blushed mildly. "I'm sure my father loved hearing that."

Mark laughed. "Yeah he did." He admitted. "He's a great guy."

"My father?"

"Yeah."

Dar took a sip of her milk. "We're surrounded by good people. You know that?" She mused, and then fell silent for a long moment. "You want to go do this?"

"Yeah." Mark said, without hesitation.

They both half turned at a sound at the door, to find Andrew entering. He was dressed for the outside, unlike the two of them, and he slid the hood down on his hoodie as he crossed the carpeted floor. "Lo, there. You people never heard of sleeping?"

"Hi, dad." Dar watched as he went to the refrigerator, retrieved a milk, then came over and sat down across from them. She lifted her own milk and toasted him with it. "Mark and I were just going to grab our tools and go fix the damn cables. Wanna come?"

Andrew paused in mid sip, and lowered the milk. "Excuse me?"

Dar stretched her bare legs out and crossed her ankles. "Our vendor and his friends came through. They duct taped something together that's going to work"

Her father blinked. "I thought you all said you weren't doing this no more?"

"Me too" Dar acknowledged. "But they did it, and I don't want to waste that. Those guys wore their asses to the bone for us."

Andrew studied his daughter's profile, despite the difference of age and gender very much like his own. "So you all going to go do this thing, no matter what that flannel feller says?"

"Mhmm."

"What about all them gov'mint people?" Andrew said. "They were some pissed off at you all."

"I don't care." Dar was now at peace with her decision. "These people have been shoving us around since we got here. Maybe they have a good reason, maybe they don't, but I'm just going to take my team, and go do what we do, and in the end of it someone else can decide if it was the right or wrong choice."

Her father produced a wry grin "Paladar, do you know ah once said something just like that" He said. "Turned out all right, I suppose, so ah will surely be going along with you to do this crazy thing."

"Thanks, dad." Dar smiled at him "Sorry to make your retirement so contentious."

Andrew studied her, and then he burst into laughter, genuine and real, a happy sound the echoed off the walls of the lounge.

"Well, I'm gonna go wake the troops up." Mark got out of his seat, taking his coke can over and disposing of it. "Meet you back here, boss?"

"I'm going too." Dar got up. "Let me let Kerry in on what's going on and see if I can talk her in to staying here."

Andrew snorted. Mark shook his head. "Good luck with that, boss." He escaped out the door ahead of Dar's reach.

Dar tossed her milk chug and tucked her PDA in her pocket. "Don't tell Alastair if you happen to see him, Dad." She paused at the doorway. "He's setting himself up to take a fall for us, and damned if we're going to let him."

Andrew smiled at her. "G'wan, rugrat." He stretched his legs out. "Ah couldn't sleep fer nothing no how. Too noisy in this here place."

Dar waved briefly, then she ducked out of the room and crossed the corridor, spotting Mark down the hall knocking on a door. She keyed her own open, and slipped inside, closing the door behind her and walking over to the bed.

Kerry was still sleeping. Her breathing was slow and deep, and Dar lowered herself to perch carefully on the edge of the mattress, reluctant to disturb her. She knew in the long run that it would be better for her partner to stay here, comfortably resting.

However. Dar reached over and took Kerry's hand, squeezing it gently. "Ker?"

After a moment, Kerry's fair lashes fluttered open, and her fingers returned the pressure. She blinked a few times, and then focused on Dar, taking in the darkness of the room with some alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing" Dar leaned over and let her head rest against Kerry's thighs. "But something unexpected happened."

Kerry blinked a few more times, clearing the sleep from her eyes. "Like what?" She asked, her voice still husky. "Are you okay? Did something happen to one of the staff?"

"No." Dar squeezed her fingers gently. "Those guys who were trying to help us? They did it."

"Huh?" Kerry's brows creased. "What guys?"

"Our network vendor."

Kerry was momentarily silent, and then her eyebrows lifted sharply. "They did it? They came up with something that works?"

"That's what they say." Dar nodded. "So they're on their way here."

"B.. " Kerry started to sit up then bit off a curse, her eyes going wide. "Oh shit."

"Easy." Dar got up and reversed her position, putting her arm around Kerry's shoulders and supporting her until she could get upright again. "Forgot about that, didn't you?"

"Ooof. Yes." Kerry recovered her breath. "Stiffened up I guess. So ... but Dar, why are they coming here? We didn't do the runs. They're going to do that for no reason." She paused, and then looked up at her partner, seeing the grave look in the pale eyes. "Uh oh."

"I told Mark about it." Dar said. "He wants to go for it. He's waking the guys up." She put her hand against Kerry's cheek. "You do not have to get out of this bed. I just wanted you to know what's going on."

There was a curious mixture of emotions on her partners face. "That's not fair, letting you guys do all the work." Kerry predictably protested. "I don't want to just sit here wondering what's going on."

"Honey." Dar stroked her cheek. "Please don't be an idiot."

"I'm not." Kerry frowned. "Give me those drugs. Let's see if they do anything useful."

"Ker."

"Don't Ker me." Kerry said. "I've been through this whole thing with you. Don't ask me to sit out now." She took a cautious breath. "At least I can just go and be with you. I won't pick anything up."

"You're going to make it impossible for me to concentrate." Dar objected. "C'mon, Kerry. This isn't anything to joke about. You could get really hurt."

"Don't give me that." Kerry reached up and took hold of Dar's jaw. "Please don't even try that after what I've seen you go through in some of the crap we get into."

Dar sighed. "Now we're back into that if I'm an idiot realm again, huh?"

"Dar."

"Kerry, we're going to be crawling on the floor splicing cable. Is that something you really want to be a part of?" Dar asked, practically. "Tell you what."

"You're right." Kerry interrupted her. "I don't want to be on the floor splicing cable."

"Okay." Dar regrouped. "Well then.."

"I want to be with you." Kerry cut her off again. "Can I just go and watch?"

Dar sighed again.

"Besides, you never know. You may need someone to make a phone call, or type a message, or call a relative who happens to be in Congress." Kerry negotiated skillfully. "Besides, now that you woke me up, there's no damn way I can get back to sleep again."

Having known beforehand the argument was going to be moot, Dar was relatively satisfied with the compromise. "Okay." She kissed Kerry's shoulder. "Can't blame me for trying."

"I don't." Kerry responded with a smile. "Dar, I'm glad."

Dar rested her cheek against Kerry's arm. "Glad? That we're doing this?"

"That we're not just walking away." Her partner responded softly. "Even if it was for the very best of reasons." She patted Dar's cheek, and then kissed her on the nose. "Thanks for waking me up."

Dar gave in, nuzzling her and exhaling – enjoying a last moment of peace before the craziness started up again. "I'm glad too." She confessed. "Which makes us all nuts."

"Cashews."

"Gesundheit."

**

Kerry climbed up the steps to the bus, its engine idling in the quiet of early morning. She paused just inside, spotting a familiar figure behind the wheel. "Hi dad. You driving?"

"Yeap." Andrew said. "No sense getting that feller up out of his bunk. I know where that place is right well by now." He pushed a button, jerking a little as the windshield wipers turned on. "Whoops"

"Have you ever driven a bus before?" Kerry asked, curiously.

"Naw." Andrew pushed another button, resulting in the bus's hazard lights coming on with an orange blare. "Drove me a tank a few times though. Cant be that different."

Kerry studied him. Then she walked over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, straightening carefully and retreating to the midsection of the bus before he started experimenting with anything else. Kannan and Shaun were already there, the two of them dressed in dark jeans and navy blue hoodies, with equipment belts buckled over the top of them filled to the brim with nerdish jewelry.

"Hello, ma'am." Kannan looked up from stuffing cable ties in a pocket. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, really." Kerry went over to the far side of the bus and opened the door to the small office in the back. Her laptop was already inside, set up and she walked around behind it to find a handful of chocolate kisses on the keyboard, along with two bottles of green tea and her bottle of drugs resting nearby. "Aw."

"Something wrong, ma'am?" Shaun called in.

"Not a thing." Kerry sat down slowly in the chair, testing her ribs reaction to the motion. The chair had nice, padded arms just like her bed cushions had, and she rested her elbows on them in relative comfort. "This'll work."

The door opened again, and she heard Dar's voice trickle back into her little haven. With that as a reminder, she unwrapped one of the kisses and put it in her mouth, humming softly under her breath and she booted up the laptop and waited for her login screen.

On the desk she also had a radio, and her PDA, and she grabbed for both as the bus lurched unexpectedly into motion. "Whoa."

"Everyone hang on." Dar said. "Dad's driving."

"Is that a bad thing?" Mark's voice cut in.

"Let's put it this way." Dar said. "If my mother were here, she'd be calling in an airstrike on the bus to stop us from getting hurt."

Kerry pinched the bridge of her nose and tried not to laugh. She made a note to relate the conversation to Ceci when she saw her, as she knew her mother-in-law would find it worth a chuckle knowing well her husband's method of driving.

Such as it was. "Glad you didn't inherit that part, Paladar." Kerry remarked in a voice loud enough for her partner to hear.

"So's my mother." Dar responded. "She threw a party when I got my driver's license."

"Wow." Mark said. "All righty then. Everyone got all their gear? Shaun, you concentrate on that Ethernet rats nest and I'll help Kannan finish the fiber uplink."

"What about the stuff on this end?" Shaun asked. "Those guys weren't finished running the cable, were they?"

"First thing's first, since we're done on this end with the connectivity." Mark said. "That rats nest'll take us longer than our end will."

"Not only that, the later it gets on that end the more people we have to contend with." Dar said. "I want to get in and get out and then we can deal with the rest of it."

"What if they just quit and left it there?" Shaun asked. "Under the ground in that tunnel?"

Kerry wondered the same thing herself. She had no idea if the workers had been told to stop what they were doing, or if, like their vendor, they'd just kept working in ignorance.

"We'll deal with that when it comes to it." Dar answered, her voice coming closer to Kerry's little den. "I don't want to split up at this point. It's dark and we don't know what we're going to run into." She appeared in the doorway, studying Kerry intently. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." Kerry held up a kiss. "Thank you Dr. Dar."

Dar grinned unexpectedly. Then she shrugged and turned back to the rest of the team, presenting Kerry with an attractive view of her bare shoulders emerging from her tank top as her partner lounged in the doorway, resting a hand on either side of it.

The bus lurched into motion again, rocking back and forth alarmingly as its tires apparently climbed up onto the sidewalk as Andrew got them underway. "Dar, do we have insurance on this bus?"

"Not my area." Dar glanced over her shoulder. "Should I rig seatbelts in there?"

Kerry settled back in her padded chair for the ride, the motion making her a little seasick when she looked down at her keyboard. She rested her elbows on the chair arms and looked past Dar, seeing the first hint of gray tingeing the windows of the bus.

No sense in looking at the laptop anyway. There was either too much or too little for her to do, especially at this hour of the morning, so she abandoned any pretense of work and simply relaxed as best as she was able for the ride.

A blaring horn and a sudden lurch of the bus made her close her eyes for good measure; glad she wasn't up in the front.

**

Dar swung the door open and flipped the lights on, not surprised to find no one else in the area as she stood aside to let her team in. "Where was that pile of cabling?"

"There." Kerry walked over and tapped the toe of her hiking boot against a square. "I won't forget that any time soon."

"Got it." Mark grabbed a tile puller and thumped to his knees on the floor. "Lemme get this up. You get ready to start clipping, Shaun."

"Watch out for the rats." Kerry said, just as Mark pulled the tile up.

He froze, and then he peered cautiously into the opening he'd just made. "Thanks boss."

Kerry backed away from the space, taking up a perch on the desk. Dar had circled it, and was kneeling down next to Kannan, plugging the configuration cable from her laptop into the router resting on the floor.

Mark carefully shone his flashlight into the opening, and then he pulled his kit over and settled on the floor. "C'mon, Shaun. No critters." He removed a set of cutters, an Ethernet crimping tool, and a handful of ends and mounded them on the floor near his knee, studying the mess to see where to start.

Shaun sat down on the other side of the open tile and removed his own tools.

"Who the hell prepped this router?" Dar asked.

"Uh oh." Mark eyed her. "Why?"

"It's the wrong damned image." Dar said. "Would have truly sucked if they showed up here and we didn't have the right code to support an optics module, wouldn't it?"

Mark made a face, but he kept his mouth shut, his eyes focused on the task at hand.

Dar sighed "Kerry, would you.."

"Mind using the buses satellite hook up to download you the right image? Of course not, hon." Kerry gazed fondly at her partner. "Which one do you need?"

Dar handed her up a slip of paper. Kerry took it and headed for the door, glad she had a task to take care of. Sitting there watching everyone work, while it fulfilled her promise to Dar, wasn't really to her liking.

She walked down the darkened corridor, past the closed doors in the nearly silent building. As she came close to the door though, she could see an outline of gray light, and hear the sounds of the city waking up around them.

Not much time. She eased out the door, surprising the guard standing there. "Sorry." She gave him a brief smile. "Need something from the bus."

The man nodded. "All right, Ms. Stuart." He said. "But I have to tell you, my boss isn't going to be happy you people are in there. I know you got those passes and all, but no one's supposed to be near this here building at this hour. Got a lot of important people showing up soon."

Kerry didn't even feel annoyed. "I understand." She patted his arm. "We'll try to do what we need to do and get out of here, before we can get ourselves and you in any trouble." She walked down the steps and crossed over to where the bus was parked, its door already open.

She entered, grimacing a little as she felt a jolt in her side "Hi dad."

"Hey kumquat." Andrew appeared from the back of the bus. "You all doing all right?"

"Yeah, just getting something for Dar." Kerry made her way to the small office and sat down behind the desk, carefully leaning forward and trying not to breathe deeply. She put the piece of paper on the desk, and logged in to her laptop, waiting for it to give her desktop.

"Had some fellers come by here." Andrew had followed her inside. "Think they were them secret service type people."

Kerry kept her arm on her injured side tucked against her side, and typed one handed on the keyboard. "What did they want?"

"Ah do not know that." Her father in law said. "But they were asking a lot of questions and ah do think they will be back here."

"What did you tell them?" Kerry pecked out a website, waiting for the slow satellite link to return the page to her. Then she logged into their image repository and slowly typed Dar's request into the search box.

"Told them ah was just a tour bus from Japan."

Kerry stopped typing, and looked up over the laptop's screen at Andrew. His scarred face tensed into a grin, which she returned. "You did not."

"Naw. Just told him you all were doing some work for the gov'mint in there. That's all." Andrew relented. "You all want some water or something?"

"Do we have any coffee?" Kerry clicked on the result of the search, and watched it start downloading. She fished in her pocket for a thumb drive, and plugged it into the side of her laptop. "My drugs are making me a little sleepy."

"Ah think we might." Andrew moved away, rattling around in the kitchen area of the bus and leaving Kerry to watch her creeping progress bar.

While she was waiting, Kerry clicked over to her mail program, which was sorting itself out in the background. She scanned the new items, relieved that nothing seemed really urgent, and her cleaning of the box on Friday hadn't resulted in a cascade of new mail over the weekend.

In fact... She clicked on one, a rare personal note from her sister.

Hey sis.

Mom said you were right in the thick of everything as usual. I hope you're safe, and Dar's okay. I thought it would be better to send you a mail because I didn't want to call and interrupt you. I have some good news and I wanted to share though.

Kerry perked up. Good news? "Damn. It's been so long since I've gotten good news in my email I'm not sure what to do."

Brian proposed.

"Holy molasses!" Kerry blurted, straightening right up and then regretting it. "Ow!"

Andrew ambled in at a deceptively high rate of speed given his bulk. "What's the matter, Kerry?" He asked, his eyes flicking over her in concern. "You doin all right?" He put the cup of coffee he was holding down and rested his big hands on the desk.

"Oof." Kerry tried to catch her breath, closing her eyes as the stars faded. "Wow." She exhaled. "Who'd have thought a little crack would hurt this much." She eased her eyelids open, to find Andrew looking at her with an expression so familiar it made her smile.

Dar's image, that concerned glower facing her, right down to the twitching fingertips resting on the wood surface. Kerry reached out and patted one hand. "I'm okay. I just got a surprise from my sister, that's all."

"Uh huh."

Kerry relaxed as the pain faded. "No, really." She said. "Brian proposed to her."

Andrew studied her for a moment, and then he hitched up one knee and perched on the edge of the desk. "That the feller who's the daddy of that little boy?"

"The one named for you? Yes." Kerry nodded.

"Took him long enough."

Privately, Kerry agreed. "Well, you know that was complicated." She demurred. "I mean, Angie was married and all that."

Andrew snorted. "I'd a been her daddy that feller woulda stepped up a lot sooner."

Kerry got lost in a moment of wondering what her life would have been like if Andrew had been. Then she shut that out deliberately, as a pang stung her chest. "I bet he would have." She admitted. "But I'm just really glad he did, no matter how long it took."

"Hmph." The ex-seal grunted. "Let me go see what's going on out side. Heard me some noises out there." He nudged the cup. "Made that like I do Dar's. Figured it would do."

"Absolutely. Thanks dad." Kerry turned her attention back to the mail as he wandered out, leaning forward cautiously again and studying the screen.

I can hardly believe it. He came over last night and after we put Sally and Andrew to bed we were just talking and we ended up in the solar, and the next thing I knew he was kneeling down and taking a box out. I almost freaked!

Kerry smiled quietly. "Good for you, Brian."

He said what happened this week made him realize the world isn't a sane place. That you have to do the right things at the right time and not worry about the future. Maybe he's right. You know, I thought I didn't care, but I found out last night I really did.

So anyway. Will you be my best lady? Maid of honor sounds so stupid. I want you and Dar and Dar's folks to be there. We're planning for a Christmas ceremony, but mom's freaking out because it's so short on time. She's glad though.

"Sure." Kerry rested her chin on her fist. "I'm sorry I didn't ask you to be mine, but I don't think you were in a space where that would have happened then, Ang." She flipped over to the download, then back to the mail.

"Thanks for making my morning a lot brighter, though." She clicked the reply button, and started to type. "And if it's any consolation to you, Dar freaked when I proposed to her, too."

**

Dar closed her laptop. "That's it." She watched Kannan finishing up the delicate task of fusing the fiber ends to the patch panel. "Mark, how are you guys doing?"

"Sucky." Mark grunted. "My eyeballs are coming out of my head keeping track of these damn cables."

Dar studied him for a minute, and then she slid over across the floor. "Got a spare set of crimpers? Let me in there."

Mark handed over a tool without comment, and Shaun squirmed out of the way as Dar joined them at the hairball, pulling her legs up crossed underneath her as she settled down. "You just putting. oh, okay. I see."

"Terminating them male and putting couplers in." Mark said. "Easier than me trying to put a splice rack in there, no space."

"Good thing they didn't chew them completely apart." Dar muttered, as she sorted out one set of mangled wire, and clipped out the chewed parts. She tightened a zip tie against one end of the cut wire, and started working on the other. "What a pain in the ass."

"Ms. Roberts?" Shaun cleared his throat somewhat timidly. "Can I ask you something?"

"We're sitting on the floor over a hole that could throw rats at us at any minute. You can call me Dar." Dar didn't look up from her task, as she pulled the insulation off the wire end and separated the pairs, sorting them with expert fingers.

Mark muffled a smile. "You still remember how to do this?" He asked his boss.

"Do you still remember how to do this?" Dar countered, clipping the wires off and inserting them to a clear, plastic end. "How in the hell can anyone forget?" She examined the work critically, then clipped the end into a coupler and went on to the other part of the cable.

"Okay. Uh. Dar." Shaun said. "Is this really going to work?"

They could hear voice in the corridor outside, but so far no one had come inside the room. Now, two, loud, angry male voices erupted just outside, the words so stumblingly fast they could hardly make them out.

"Damned if I know." Dar said, after a moment's listening. "But I think we better get hustling."

Mark checked his watch. "Kannan, if you're done there, wanna give us a hand?"

"Surely." The fiber tech was packing up his gear. "I would be most glad to."

"I find it very hard to believe." Dar stripped the end of the cable. "That this all happened between Tuesday and Friday."

"I don't know.. I heard those rats can chew through a car tire in a day." Mark replied, dubiously. "I saw them down in there Dar. They're big as your dog."

"Mm."

Just then the door opened, and Kerry's blond head poked in. "Hey." She said, looking a bit harried. "Dar, you need to hurry up. They're evacuating this lower level because they're bringing some big shots in."

"Give me a break." Dar was clipping the other wire. "We have authorization to be here."

"No, we don't." Kerry said. "They specifically told them no one, especially our company, was allowed in here. They're coming back in ten minutes and they said if we're not out, they're arresting us and taking us to the federal prison."

"That again?" Dar rolled her eyes. "C'mon."

"This time it's no BS, Dar." Kerry stated flatly. "This isn't those bozos were we were dealing with before. They scared the hell out of me."

Dar looked up, and saw in the set of Kerry's jaw, and the tension in her posture how serious the situation really was. "Okay." She said, in instant decision. "Everyone just do as much as you can in nine minutes and then we're out of here." She looked up. "Can you stall them if they're early?"

"Do my best." Kerry promised. "We got that ten minutes because of dad." She ducked back outside the door.

"Great." Dar sped up her motions, as Kannan slid into place next to them, already reaching for cables with his slim fingers.

"Wonder what that's all about." Mark snapped a cable into place and reached for another one. "Shit I wish these people would make up their damn minds."

"You must realize." Kannan spoke up, after a moment's quiet. "We must come to this place, once again, when the technical people we are expecting arrive. We must install the optic unit."

"Worry about that when it happens." Dar reached for another coupler. "Let's just get this done. Or as much of it as we can. If some things don't come up, well, they'll just have to deal with it." She snapped the coupler in place and selected her next target.

Focused intently, her eyes fastened on the cables, her hands making the motions of stripping, and sorting, and ordering automatically. Kerry's warning still ringing in her ears, she crimped the ends on then coupled them and reached for the next set.

"Jesus, boss." Mark eyed her with respect. "You really didn't forget how to do this did you?"

"Shut up and cable."

**

Kerry eased her hands carefully into her pockets as she emerged into the pearly gray of an early dawn. She looked quickly in both directions, relieved not to see the black SUV's pulled up onto the sidewalk anymore.

Her nerves were wracked. More because she'd seen Andrew's nerves wracked by the agents than by what they'd said to her. Dar's father was one of the most unflappable, bravest people she knew, and to see him shook up by mere humans scared the poo out of her.

"They coming?" Andrew dropped out of the bus, seeing her.

"Nine minutes." Kerry checked her watch. "Seven now."

"The hell." The ex seal exhaled. "Ah do not want any of us to be here when them fellers come back, Kerry."

"I know, dad." Kerry bumped him very gently with her shoulder. "Dar knows. She'll get back here."

There were already some people on the sidewalk. Not many, several policemen in their distinctive black uniforms, and cars were beginning to park along the street, shadowy figures busy behind the wheels.

They were running out of time. Kerry felt a prickle go down her back. Not only because of the government agents. "C'mon Dar. "

"Them people are trouble." Andrew said, unexpectedly. "Them are the kind of people who don't have to account to no one for nothing, you understand me, Kerry?"

Kerry studied his face. "You mean they're above the law?"

"Yeap."

"My father thought he was too." Kerry spotted motion in the distance. "Uh oh."

Andrew turned, and saw the trucks coming back. "Shit." He looked up at the entrance. "Let me go get them people."

"Dad." Kerry caught his arm. "Get the bus started. I'll stall these guys if they get here." She nudged him towards the bus. "Dar said she'd be here. Two more minutes."

"Kerry, you do not understand." Andrew protested.

"I do." His daughter in law insisted gently. "It's okay. They're part of the government, dad. I've lived with part of the government most of my life. I know where their buttons are. Please. Just leave it to me, and let's get ready to go."

Andrew studied her for a brief moment, and then he nodded and disappeared back up the steps to the bus, leaving Kerry standing alone on the sidewalk.

Kerry took a careful breath and released it, hoping she hadn't pissed her father in law off too much. She then turned and watched the approach of the black SUV's that appeared to be heading directly for them.

She checked her watch and leaned against the bus, feeling the rumble as it's engine started up and nearly scared out of her wits as the air brakes hissed suddenly.

The lead SUV pulled into the next block, and the one behind it continued on towards her. She could see the man behind the wheel, and the one in the passenger seat, both in black jackets, neither of whom were smiling.

The passenger pointed at her, and looked at something.

Oh boy. Her heart started to race. She kept her calm posture though, her ear cocked for the sound of her partner and their team approaching. "Maybe I should call my mother sooner rather than later."

A weak card, and she knew it. "You may think you're outside the law, but I bet your boss really hates to be embarrassed."

The SUV pulled into the curb just behind the bus, and the men prepared to get out. One was talking rapidly into a radio, glancing at her all the while.

"Here we go." Kerry prepared herself for the confrontation, deciding a gentle approach to start would be a good idea. "I don't understand officers. What's going on?" She muttered under her breath. "We're just here taking care of a problem, I'm sure this is just a misunderstanding."

The men got out and headed her way. One took a baton out and was holding it.

"On the other hand, screw you asshole works too." Kerry readied a retreat route, and pushed away from the bus, getting her center of balance over her boots. "And so does calling for help."

Loud voices suddenly erupted. Kerry half turned, then turned all the way around as the door burst open and Dar rapidly took the stairs two at a time, the techs right behind her with their eyes wide.

"Get in." Dar ordered Kerry. "Dad, get ready to move."

Kerry didn't waste any time. She climbed onboard just a whisker ahead of Dar's rapidly moving form and moved inside to make room for the rest of them. Just as she got to the far wall, the bus surged into motion, the air breaks releasing and the door hissing shut almost in the agent's faces.

Dar grabbed hold of her as they lurched to one side, cradling Kerry against her as they swung around a corner and lots of things went flying, including the techs and a fair assortment of hand tools. Dar had a good grip on the doorway into the back office and didn't.

"They are laughing at us." Kannan was looking out the back window. "Those men."

"Nice." Kerry had no intention of protesting the hold. Her chest hurt, and the thought of holding herself in place made her grimace. "Did you guys finish?"

"Not quite." Dar braced herself against the doorframe as the bus swerved again. "The building infrastructure people finally showed up."

"Oh, that somebody's uncle company?"

"I think it's Uncle Guido's company." Dar said. "They jumped all over us. They were pissed we were touching their stuff, not that we were in the building though. I wasn't going to stick around to argue about it."

"Yeah." Mark had gotten himself and his gear into one of the armchairs. "Lucky for us big D was there to kick their asses."

Kerry glanced up at her partner. "Did you?" She muttered under her breath, watching Dar's face take on an almost adolescent expression that held its own answer. "Oh boy."

"Yeah, especially since we're going to need to get back in there when the module shows up." Dar said. "Or else this is just a pointless waste of a morning."

"I've never seen anyone kick someone like that." Shaun looked up from gathering his scattered supplies on the bus floor. "That was pretty cool."

Kerry looked back up at Dar, her eyebrows lifting in question.

"They were blocking the door and not letting us out." Dar explained. "Not sure that was intentional, but you said ten minutes and I didn't have time to explain to the stupid bastard.... Whoa!"

The bus was turning completely around now, leaning over to a scary degree as the horn blared. Both Dar and Kerry were thrown against the doorsill, and Kannan kept his feet only by the slimmest margin.

"Holy crap!" Mark yelled.

"Hang on back there." Andrew yelled. "Got to get this thing heading back straight."

"Jesus." Kerry tucked her elbow against her sore ribs and tucked her other hand around Dar's waist. "Maybe we should go sit down."

Then the bus straightened up and started going forward, settling down into a more regular movement. "We back on the main road, Dad?" Dar called out.

"Yeap."

"Okay." Dar cautiously released her partner. "Everyone get your gear together. We've got a lot of work to do when we get to the office. Kerry, can you arrange for Skuzzy to pick our guys up at the airport?"

"Already did." Kerry stayed where she was, tucked along Dar's side. "I sent her and Nan the flight details. She's tracking them too, she'll let us know if they're late."

They rolled along in silence for a moment. Then Dar sighed. "This is insanity."

Mark looked up from zipping his tool bag. "Yeah, but in a good way, right?"

Dar leaned back and put her arms around Kerry again, leaning back as the sun started to rise and flash through the curtained windows of the bus, splashing them all intermittently. "We'll find out soon enough, I guess."

**

"Where did they leave it?" Dar had her hands on her hips.

"It's below in the tunnels." The building manager said. "The guy with it said it wouldn't reach any further."

"Oh crap." Mark echoed the words sounding in Dar's skull. "You gotta be kidding me."

The building manager shrugged. "I wish I was. He left the message with me, said he didn't have time to wait for you guys to wake up."

Dar snorted. "Yeah. Thanks." She let her hands drop. "Okay, let's go see where they left it. Maybe they were lying." She motioned Mark and the others to follow her, unclipping her radio from her shoulder as she walked. "Ker?"

The radio hissed, then crackled. "Right here, go ahead." Kerry's voice answered. "Scuzzy reports the flights on time, Dar."

"Everything else isn't." Dar said. "Cable's still down in the subway."

"Jesus."

"And they think it's too short."

"Oh, man." Kerry's voice reflected the frustration she was feeling. "Dar, I don't t... " She stopped. "What's your plan?"

"I don't think we're going to make it either." Dar turned and headed down the steps. "Just... could you grab someone, maybe two people, and see if you can find a pipe, something, anything, in that damn hole our dmarc's in that I can shove a cable through?"

"You got it. On the way." Kerry clicked off.

"This is gonna suck." Mark tugged at the collar of his jumpsuit. "I knew we shouldn't trust those guys. They gave off bad juju."

Dar rolled up the sleeves on her own jumpsuit as she trotted down the steps. She dodged past the hurrying figures of people coming up out of the subway, and paused only when she got to the ticket turnstile. "Damn it."

"Machines over here." Mark had started towards it. "What do we need, four? I'll get em."

"Thanks." Dar put her hands on the bar and peered through them. "Kerry has my wallet." She ignored the stream of people coming out of the turnstiles, studying the wall and stairwells on the other side of the gates until Mark came over with four squares of cardboard.

She took hers, and they passed through, walking past the fare booth and going down the steps to the level where the trains were. There was a train on one side of the platform, so Dar went to the other side, and looked up and down it. "Which one would it be in?"

"Um." Mark went to the map in the center of the platform and studied it. "They'd have to be in the tunnel from... here?" He traced a line with his finger uncertainly. "Man, where's that native woman?"

"Fetching our world savers." Dar went over to the map and looked at it. "Yeah, this is the cross over from that other line so it has to be this way." She pointed up the tunnel the train was in. "Let's wait for this thing to leave and go look."

Mark eyed her. "Go into the tunnel?" He asked. "Boss, that's sorta dangerous. We touch that live rail and we're all toast."

"They had to be in there." Dar reminded him. "There's a ledge along the wall here. We can walk on that."

"Oh, my goodness." Kannan murmured.

"Dar?" Kerry's voice crackled faintly on the radio. "You there?"

"Yeah." Dar keyed the mic. "What's up?"

"The secret service was just here." Kerry's voice sounded tense. "They asked Alastair to go with them down to the Exchange."

Dar glanced around. "Just giving him a ride?" She asked.

"Well." Kerry exhaled audibly. "They made it sound like a polite request."

"That sounds kinda crappy." Mark muttered softly.

"Yeah." Dar clicked the radio a few times. "All right, Ker. Thanks for telling me. See what you can do to find me that pipe."

"Will do." Kerry clicked off.

The train hooted, and the doors shut, then it pulled out of the station, disappearing down the tunnel with a whoosh of dank air behind it.

Dar walked immediately to the edge of the platform and climbed over the rail, getting her boots on the small ledge and walking along it with stolid confidence. She didn't look behind her to see if anyone was following, leaving it to their individual conscience.

It was dark in the tunnel, but this close to the station there were lights against the wall just barely glowing from the layers of soot and grease covering them. She climbed up a few steps onto a platform that faced set of closed doors, the faint hum from behind them audible to her.

The platform had steps back down to the ledge, and then she paused, as the wall dipped into a darkened angle as though a wedge had been cut into it.

Dar pulled out her flashlight and turned it on, flashing it down to the tracks to see a set of them diverging from the main ones and heading directly into the wall. The gap they made was far too wide for her to jump, and she wasn't really sure which one of them was live in the dim light.

Jumping down seemed like a bad idea. Dar turned her flashlight to the wedge instead, playing it against the walls. There were old pylons there, branching off to go with the tracks but it all ended up in bricked off wall.

"Over there, boss." Mark voice spoke up right behind her. "See the cable? It's coming down... where the hell does it go?"

Dar flashed her light over to the edge of the tracks and spotted the thick cable. "Yeah." She examined the ground beneath the platform she was on, seeing piles of litter and eyeballs reflected back at her. With a sigh, she gathered her courage and stepped off the concrete, falling through the air for a few seconds before she landed in the trash, sending cracklings and squeals in every direction.

"Yow." Mark stayed where he was.

"You know something?" Dar said. "I went into information technology so I'd avoid crap like this. I should have stuck with the damn Navy." She edged carefully along the platform into the shadows, spotting a much bigger bulk in the darkness in the very corner of the wedge.

"Careful, boss."

Dar lifted her light and moved forward into the gloom, pausing when she heard a frantic rustling just near her right foot. "Oh boy." She muttered. "Glad I have boots on." She scuffed her feet forward, and felt her toe impacting something soft and moving.

Expecting a squeak, she was shocked at a hiss instead, and froze in place, her senses on momentary overload. "Holy shit." She yelled. "I think there's a damn snake down here!" She trained the light down at her feet and searched the litter.

Then she felt something strike at her boots and instinctively she kicked out with one of them, impacting a body and sending it flying.

"Boss! Dar!" Mark scrambled off the platform. "Hey!"

A loud yowl made them both freeze.

"That's not a snake." Mark said, after a nervous silence.

"No." Dar felt her heart about to come out of her chest. "I think it's a cat."

"Kitty cat or wildcat?"

Dar heard motion again and prepared herself to be attacked, but a furry form dashed past her, eyes glinting in the flashlight, and disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel. "Okay." She moved a little further, and then stopped as her thighs bumped into something big. "Oh."

"Wh.. oh." Mark peeked past her, at the big spool blocking the way. "Hey, good job, boss. You found it."

Dar leaned over and examined the remaining cable, and then she straightened. "They're right. Not enough." She said, briefly. "Barely get to the damn stairs in the station."

"Shit." Mark peered at the cable. "Now what?"

Dar started searching the walls with her light. "I don't know." She said. "I honestly don't' god damned know."

**

Kerry stood back as they opened the door to the old storage closet that they'd used as a demarc. "Thanks." She told the custodian. "We really appreciate it."

The man grunted, and walked off, shaking his head.

"What a nice guy." Scuzzy said. "A real New Yorker." She looked inside the room. "So what are we lookin for?"

"Wow. What a place." Nan entered, shining a big flashlight around. "Good grief, Ms. Stuart. Don't tell me this is an actual telecom demarc."

"Kerry, please." Kerry poked her head in. "Unfortunately, yes, it is. Here's the problem. They have the cable for this thing down in the subway tunnel, and it's too short for us to bring up the steps and across the floor there. Dar wants us to find a pipe or conduit that might go down there so she can bring the connection up."

"Oh. Wow." Nan peered around. "Are we still trying to do this? I thought we were giving it up last night." She looked back at Kerry. "It's almost eight o'clock."

"Yeah." Scuzzy looked at her watch. "I gotta get going to the airport, yeah? Bring this guy right back here?"

"Right back here." Kerry agreed. "Okay, Nan, Robert, let's see what we can find." She entered the room cautiously, with the office applications support specialist behind her. "We're looking for a pipe."

"Plenty of them in here." Nan said.

"Keep clear of that one, its steam." Kerry pointed. "And don't touch that panel, it's live electrical."

Nan stopped, and turned around to look at her.

"Dar found out the hard way." Kerry took a careful breath, and edged along the wall, inspecting everything within reach of her flashlight. She'd passed on resuming her jumpsuit, since the idea of struggling into it was just too much for her at the moment.

Dar had insisted on her boots though, going so far as to put them on her in a moment of exasperating over protectiveness in front of the staff standing there waiting for them.

Goofball. She found a pipe and tapped on it, shaking the rust off the outside and exposing the old lettering. "Water. No, that won't do it."

"These are huge pipes.. steam you said?" Nan was moving around the other side. "They're big."

"We have steam heat." Robert supplied diffidently. He was kneeling on the floor near the front of the room looking at the pipes protruding through the concrete. "What are we looking for, Ms. Stuart? Will they be labeled? I think these are electrical, they say Edison."

"What we're really looking for is an empty pipe that might go down." Kerry stepped carefully over their router and the fiber patch panel Kannan had just finished with. "Something that might be going down into the subway from an office building."

"Well." Nan slid between two of the bigger pipes, her slim form almost obscured by them. "This one says fire alarm system.. it's going down."

Kerry abandoned her search and made her way to the other side of the closet, easing her head between the pipes since she was pretty sure the rest of her wouldn't fit. "Okay..oh." She turned her head sideways. "Telegraph conduit. Telegraph?"

"There used to be fire boxes on the street." Robert explained helpfully. "Connected to the fire department. It worked by Morse code or something."

Kerry unclipped her mic. "Dar? You there?"

A loud rushing sound answered her and she pulled the mic away from her ear. "Yow."

"Sorry." Dar clicked in a minute later. "Train going by. What's up? You find anything?"

"Are you in the tunnel?" Kerry asked. "Where the tracks are? Holy crap, Dar!"

"That's where the cable is." Dar reminded her.

"Be careful." Kerry felt her stress level rising. "We found a pipe that is supposed to be for the fire alarm system – it says 'telegraph' on the outside. Can you find one down there?"

"Bang on it." Her partner said. "Get something and keep banging on it and we'll look."

Nan nodded. "Good idea." She looked around. "There's a piece of brick.. maybe that 'll work." She squeezed over near the wall and retrieved it, and then she came back over and started banging on the pipe.

"Hear that?" Kerry asked over the radio.

"Hang on."

Kerry held the mic with one hand, keeping her other elbow pressed against her side that had started to ache again past the fuzziness of the medication. "Good catch, Nan." She complimented the woman. "Last thing we needed was to be stuck in here for a long time."

"Ker? I can hear it." Dar answered back. "Just keep banging, we'll try to find ya. Good job."

"Thank Nan." Kerry backed away from the pipe. "Robert, can you find a brick and spell Nan when she gets tired? I don't think my ribs are going to be up to me whacking something."

"Sure." Robert agreed instantly. "Boy, that took a lot less time than I thought it would."

"How are we going to get the cable inside the pipe up here?" Nan asked over the pounding. She whacked the pipe at one-second intervals; making a low, gong like sound that wasn't quite pleasant. "There's no hole in the pipe."

No, of course there wasn't. "Hey Dar?" Kerry keyed the mic. "I'm going to need someone up here with a hacksaw."

"Send them up when they're done here." Dar answered, her breathing sounding a bit strained. "Get back to you in a minute."

Kerry released the mic, trying hard not to turn tail at once and go chasing down the stairs to see what her partner was up to. "Boy, that was a lot shorter than I thought, too." She commented. "We may make this if Dar can find that pipe."

"They're making a big deal out of the Exchange this morning." Robert straightened, with a small section of pipe in his hands. "The Vice President's going to be there, and a bunch of other people. I hear they're going to have one of the firemen ring the opening bell."

The underlying hypocrisy made Kerry's eyeballs twitch. She turned and looked around; searching out a path for the cable to come up once it came out of the pipe. The floor was crowded with mechanics but she traced out a route with her eyes, taking the cable along the floor and past the dangerously humming electrical panel.

Yes, that would work. She eyed the bend the cable would have to make to get to the router, and while it was steeper than Dar probably would have liked, beggars in this case certainly could not be choosers and they'd just have to try and make it work.

She was just relieved they'd found a solution. She checked her watch. Quarter past eight. They had, really an hour to get everything hooked up and tested before the exchange opened at nine thirty. If the modules got here in time, it was do-able.

Just.

"Ker?" Dar's voice crackled through, sounding tired and irritated.

Uh oh. "Here." Kerry answered. "What's up?"

"We can't get at that damn pipe." Dar answered. "It's inside an equipment room behind some locked doors."

"Well..."

"Which Mark already picked. Someone decided to dump a load of unwanted concrete in the closet and it's covering the pipes. They're inside the concrete."

Shit. Kerry clicked the mic, looking over at the others, who were looking back at her in dismay. "All the pipes in that area?" She looked around. "They're all on that wall, Dar."

"All of them." Dar confirmed. "Every last god damned one of them buried in side a pile of rock with construction worker's graffiti marked all over it."

Nan stopped pounding, and let the brick fall to her leg. "So, now what?"

"Good question." Kerry exhaled; slowly letting her eyes wander over the inside of the room. "Damned good question."

**

"Quarter to nine." Kerry wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. She was kneeling on the dirty concrete, as Nan squirmed under the consoles looking for something, anything they could use to solve their current problem.

"I don't see anything." Nan said. "Just a lot of dirt."

"Son of a bitch." Kerry exhaled. "This stupid piece of shit room. If I had a stick of dynamite I'd just blow a damn hole in the floor."

Nan eyed her, a trifle nervously.

"Is there anything I can do other than hold this flashlight?" Robert asked. "I feel a little useless standing here letting you ladies do all the dirty work."

Kerry lowered herself carefully down until she was lying flat on her belly on the ground. She slowly moved her flashlight around every inch of the floor, ignoring the throbbing pain in her chest.

"Ker, I think we're about out of time." Dar's voice crackled softly over the radio. "I can't find a damn thing down here."

Kerry cursed under her breath. "Hang on." She keyed the mic. "I'm going to have one last look here."

"Okay." Dar responded. "Good luck. We're not having any."

"Thanks hon." She released the radio and continued her inch-by-inch search, running her flashlight over the back wall past the electrical panel, over the painted over wooden half door, over the brick...

Wait.

Kerry moved her flashlight back. She focused on the long sealed half portal, her eyes flicking over it with startling intensity. 'Robert?'

"Yes, ma'am."

"Get me a sledgehammer. Immediately."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Nan squirmed over to see what she was looking at. "What are you going to do?"

Kerry pointed. "That was a door once." She said. "It went somewhere." She rested her flashlight on the ground and her chin on the flashlight, trying not to breathe too deeply. 'It's lower than the level of the floor.'

"You think it goes somewhere?"

"Haven't a fucking clue." Kerry keyed the mic. "Dar, I found something. Give me two minutes, and then see if you hear me knocking."

"Will do." Dar responded. "Got my damned fingers crossed."

Nan studied Kerry. "You people from Miami curse a lot." She commented. "No offense. It just sounds weird."

"We have a lot to curse." Kerry edged forward, now regretting that she'd declined the jumpsuit. She could feel the chill of the concrete against her belly as she angled herself under a large metal shelf towards the door. "It's either hot and steamy, or it's a tropical storm, or it's bad drivers, corrupt politicians, and roads under perpetual construction."

"Oh." Nan watched her. "You want me to do that? You must be hurting like crazy crawling around like that."

Kerry turned her head and looked at her. "Can you swing a ten pound sledge hammer underhand?"

Nan blinked. "Um... you know, I never tried, but I'm more into marathons than weightlifting."

"Well." Kerry squirmed a last few inches. "I can, and I'm short enough to get in here." She arrived in front of the door. There was an alteration in the floor there, a pour of concrete that had settled into a depression, three feet wide. It made the floor in front of the half door a good twelve inches lower than what she was laying on. She ran her fingers over it. "Stairs?"

"Hard to say." Nan looked up over her shoulder at the door. "Found one?"

"I did." Robert came forward. "The custodian was there. I just paid him twenty bucks and he handed it right over." He edged towards where Kerry was. "You want it there, Ms Stuart?"

"We must be in New York." Nan said, in a wry tone.

"Like Washington doesn't know anything about bribes?" Robert jibed back.

"Can you get the head of it here, next to.. yeah." Kerry curled her fingers around the shaft of the sledgehammer and steeled herself, tucking her right arm up against her side to support her ribs. Then she lifted the hammer and smacked the head against the door, making a loud cracking boom

"Whoa." Nan squirmed back out of the way. "Let me get outta here before splinters start flying."

Kerry smacked the door again, then again, and again. It didn't seem to be moving, but she could see the paint cracking along the sealed edges. "Hope Dar can hear that."

"Ker. " As though in answer, Dar's voice sputtered near her ear. "What the hell are you do... where is that? Mark! Mark! Where in the hell is that coming from?"

Kerry felt a jolt in her side, and she took a quick breath against it. She kept up her attack, feeling some of her rage at the situation coming out as she swung against the door harder and harder. "Stupid." Bang "Piece" Bang "Of crap." Bang.

"I think the edge is breaking there." Nan had slid over under the back section of piping to get a better look. "Yeah, it is."

"Should be." Kerry grunted, slamming the hammer against the wood as she felt the burn in her triceps. "Glad for all those hours in the gym now."

"You guys actually have time for the gym?"

"We make time for it." Kerry paused and studied her target, and then she selected a different spot and slammed the hammer against the edge of the door near the frame, seeing flecks of brown wood under the black paint.

"Nine o'clock." Robert said. "Ms. Stuart, they're back with that part, upstairs just paged me."

"Go down into the subway and get Kannan and Shaun back up here." Kerry felt her breath coming fast, and her heartbeat hammering against her chest. "Tell them to get ready."

"Yes, ma'am." Robert disappeared again.

"C'mon. C'mon." Kerry closed her eyes and just concentrated on the hammer, blocking out the pain and the burn in her arms. She banged the tool against the wood again, and again and again and again
Faster.

Slam.

Slam.

Slam.

"KERRISON! STOP!"

Kerry almost jumped and smacked her head against the pipes, the voice so loud in her ears it hurt. She dropped the hammer and let out a gasp as the surface she'd been pounding disappeared into a black hole and gust of cold, oil scented air blew hard against her face.

She stared at the opening, until Dar's upper body appeared, her arms resting on the depressed floor.
"H... hi."

"Sorry I yelled." Dar said. "But one more smack and you'd have gone through the damn door and knocked me off this stack of crates and old railroad ties I'm standing on." She disappeared. "Hang on."

Kerry was very glad to stay completely still, blowing her hair out of her eyes with a puff of relieved breath.

"Wow." Nan said. "Just, wow."

"Here." Dar reappeared, with something her hand. "Feed this in." She got a good look at Kerry's face, and then shifted her focus. "Nan, grab this please. Pull it forward to the rack." She had a cable end in her hand and now she fed it through under the rusted iron pipe work.

"Got it." Nan took hold of the cable and squirmed backwards. "Got it, got it... whoa!"

"Hey!" Shaun skidded to a halt, breathing hard. "There's the cable! Kanny! Move it, buddy!!"

The cable slithered forward as Dar fed it up, past Kerry's shoulder. "That's enough." Dar called back.
"Tie it off for strain relief, Mark."

"Doin it!" Mark's voice called back. "Dar, for Christ's sake don't fall, okay? I don't think I can catch you and we're both gonna end up across those freaking tracks!"

"I'm all right." Dar leaned on the sill again. "You okay?" She focused on Kerry.

"Absolutely not." Kerry reached over and extended her hand, which Dar clasped. "We're not done. The part's here, Dar. We've got to get it down to the exchange."

"I know." Dar said. "And I've got to be here to configure this end of it when the traffic starts coming down I told the router on that end to send me everything. I'm going to split it up here."

"We're insane." Kerry rested her head against her arm. "I'll get the part and go to the Exchange. If the wont' let me in, at this point, I'm going to start biting and kicking people so get the bail money out."

"Ker, we can send someone else." Dar said. "I'll send Mark."

"Who do you think has the best chance of getting in there?" Kerry kept her eyes closed. "Honestly."

Dar sighed.

"You're taking me to dinner at Joe's Stone Crab tonight, Paladar."

Dar pulled her hand closer and kissed her knuckles. "Ker, I'll buy Joe's Stone Crab for you if you want, but.. ah.... can you move back out of the way?"

"Huh?"

"Gotta jump up here." Dar looked behind her.

"Boss! Watch it!" Mark yelled suddenly. "Watch it!"

Kerry's eyes popped open. "Honey you're not fitting through here." She said. "Dar, wait.. no wai.. Dar!"

With a sudden surge, Dar hauled herself through the opening. "Mark! Move!"

"Outta here boss!"

There was thundering huge crash behind her, and far off, the sound of alarms going off. "I think we just blocked the tracks." Dar reviewed her options in the tiny, cramped space. "I think I'm gonna end the day pissing a lot of people off."

Kerry was wriggling backwards as fast as she could, trying not to kick Shaun and Kannan who had descended over the cable and were working furiously.

"Guys?" Dar said. "Stop."

Shaun looked up. "Ma'am?"

"Pull Kerry out of there." Dar pointed. "Just grab her legs and pull gently before she passes out." She looked up, then jumped and grabbed a pipe, pulling her body up and over the top of it. "C'mon people, we're out of time."

**

Kerry boarded the subway train with Andrew right behind her, her hands pushed into the front pocket of her hastily donned hoodie. One hand clutched the optic device as she was shepherded to a seat by her tall companion.

"This is a crazy thing." Andrew sat down next to her in half full train.

"It is." Kerry was aware of every minute ticking by. "But Scuzzy said it would be faster to do this, than try to drive down there with everything going on. I trust her to know New York."

"Some right." Andrew acknowledged. "Lots of traffic now, up there."

"Lots." Kerry sat back, feeling utterly exhausted. Part of that was the drug she was taking for her ribs, she knew, but there was a bone deep tired along with it she hadn't felt for a long time. "You know, I said to Dar I was glad we were doing this."

"Not so glad now?" Andrew asked, watching her from the corner of his eye. "Y'don't look so hot."

"I don't feel so hot." Kerry admitted. "I think besides my ribs I'm coming down with something. I've got that ache all over feeling." She exhaled carefully. "Just my luck."

Andrew patted her shoulder. "Hang in there, kumquat. This here thing's about done ah think."

"I'll be glad to get on that darn airplane, that's for sure." Kerry agreed. "Bet you will too."

Andrew let his big hands rest on his knees. "That is a true thing." He said. "Place here's got some of the same things I saw some places I been." He continued, in a reflective tone. "A lot of fussing with folks haid. Mad. Crazy. Sad. Hating."

"You mean places you've been deployed?" Kerry asked, after a pause.

"Yeap."

The train rattled through the tunnel, and pulled into a station. A few people got off, a lot of people got on. Most were quiet, as they settled in seats, or took hold of the bars. Andrew scanned them, and then he remained seated, pulling his boots in a little to keep them from tripping anyone.

Kerry checked her watch, and then shook her head.

**

"Well, Dar, we knew it would be down to the wire but..."

"Sh." Dar staked out a spot on the floor behind where Kannan and Shaun were feverishly working. "Don't get me wrong." She paused and looked over her shoulder. "I am deeply grateful to all of you for doing this but if we don't get finished, it's not gonna mean much."

"Sure." Don found a spot near the wall. "Mind if we watch?" He indicated his companions, two men in khakis with tucked in short sleeve shirts and actual, real pocket protectors. They had glasses, and that intense look that rocket scientists do.

"No." Dar plugged her laptop into the router and started it up. "Sit down, it'll be a while." It was already stuffy inside the room without the extra people in it, and she felt the sweat gather under her jumpsuit adding to an already significant discomfort. "Hell."

"Dar?" Mark's voice erupted near her ear. "I've got good uplinks.. you want me to.. what do you want me to do up here?"

"Hang on." Dar unzipped her jumpsuit and pulled it off her arms and shoulders, exposing her tank top covered upper body to the sluggish air. She tied the sleeves off around her waist and retrieved the mic. "All right, listen. We're taking the whole stream from down there so when it starts up I'm going to have to parse it by IP and set up sub interfaces to route it."

There was a long moment's silence. "You're going to do that on the fly, boss?"

"Do you have another suggestion? Cough it up."

"Um."

"Aside from not trying this at all?" Dar exhaled. "I just hope we've got existing gateways to where this stuff's going." She scrubbed the hair out of her eyes with one hand.

"Wow." Mark said, after another long pause. "You want me to..."

"Capture everything so we can put it all back if this tanks? Sure." Dar logged into her laptop. "Wish me luck? Sure."

"Okay, will do." Mark responded. "I feel kinda lame up here."

"Just hang tight." Dar said. "It's all in Kerry's pocket right now anyway." She setup her monitoring tools, opening a console to the router in one window and several sessions with the routing systems in the Miami office in others.

"Think we can get a case study out of this when we're all done, Dar?" Don asked, as he clasped his hands around his knees.

Dar gave him a sideways look.

"How about you keynote our next tech convention?"

**

"One more stop." Kerry stood up as the train lurched into motion. "Ready, dad?"

"Right with you, Kerry." Andrew stood behind her, one hand resting lightly on her shoulder. They waited for the train to stop, then were the first ones out of the door, dodging the rest of the travelers as they reached the steps and headed up them two at a time.

It was loud and bustling under the ground, and Kerry got through the exit turnstiles yearning for a sight of the open sky again. She evaded crashing into two men rushing for the entrance and got to the steps to outside, running up them and emerging into the open air.

It was gritty and dusty, but there was no time to worry about a mask as Kerry broke into a run towards the exchange. The jolting of her own footsteps sent shocks up and down her side, but she ignored them and focused on the gothic front of the now familiar building a short distance away.

There were people clustered in front of the main entrance. She saw police there, and military. The streets were blocked off.

Men were yelling. There were two people being held by their arms.

"Kerry, that does not look good." Andrew was keeping pace with her. "Gonna be a fight."

It was. Kerry could see it. She glanced at her watch and knew they had no time for it. Twenty after nine.

A policeman spotted them running, and pointed. Two military men reacted, and started forward. Kerry took it all in a series of vivid impressions. She realized she had no time to make a decision; her forward moment was taking her towards the main steps as fast as she could run.

Soldiers ran towards them. "You.. have a card you can show them dad?" Kerry felt her breath coming shorter, and the pain made flashes of black and red on the backs of her eyeballs.

"Lord." Andrew didn't sound happy.

Kerry prepared to haul up as they were intercepted, when a motion caught her eye and she looked down the street to the back entrance, spotting a cluster of suited figures shuffling from a set of black cars.

One moment. One view. Instantly, Kerry changed course. "Dad, hold em off." She called back as she bolted down the side street.

"Lord." Andrew dug in his pockets for his identification as he came to a halt in front of the military men. "Whoa there, fellas, Hang on."

Kerry kept going. She ducked between two wrecked cars, her boots tossing up puffs of ash dust as she powered along the sidewalk towards the group of people. The guards at the top of the steps spotted her and turned, and the group on the steps turned to see what was going on.

"Watch it! Stop her!" One of guards yelled. A policeman standing nearby lunged at Kerry, but missed her as she ducked past. "Hey! Stop! Stop!"

The guards pulled their guns off their shoulders, one hopping over the railing and falling to the ground with a grunt as he tried to get in between this oncoming threat and the people on the steps. "Stop!"

"Kerrison!" Cynthia Stuart blurted in surprise, as Kerry closed on them. "What on earth!" She pushed to the front of the crowd. "Wait, stop. That's my daughter!"

The guards hesitated, just long enough for Kerry to slide past them and get to her mother's side. "Wait... ma'am!"

"Mother." Kerry got hold of Cynthia's arm. "I have to get inside. There's no time to explain." She uttered. "Trust me, please."

Cynthia stared at her for a long heartbeat as their eyes met. Then she blinked. "Well, of course." She said. "We must go. Excuse us gentlemen. Sorry for this disturbance I'm sure Kerrison just didn't want to be late for the opening."

Nine twenty five. Kerry barely held her impatience as they filed in the door among the group of senators, most of them looking at her with varying levels of surprise and distaste.

No time. Kerry broke from them the minute they cleared the inner door, past the guards, past the security in black jackets, past the secret service stationed carefully long the walls. She dodged a set of outstretched hands and went down a hallway, hearing yells behind her.

Ignoring them. Down a set of stairs, around a corner, and she was in the lower level again. Two doors down on the right, and she was throwing her shoulder against the surface as her hands turned the knob, almost falling inside.

Men inside. Startled, they turned, hands outstretched.

Kerry avoided them, her eyes focused on the setup in the corner, the one they'd left there, blinking quietly untouched.

Untouched.

The men were yelling at her, but all she could hear was her heartbeat thundering as she dropped to the floor and slid the last few feet, her hands wrenching at the static wrapping around the module she'd brought.

Footsteps. "Don't touch me!" Kerry yelled in warning, as she felt people closing and her fingers felt cold steel instead of plastic. She got the optic out and shoved it into place, then grabbed for the patch cable as hands grabbed her.

Digging her boots in she leaned against the yanking, almost blacking out as a jolt of fire went through her chest. "Ahhhh!!!!"

The pull relaxed, for an instant, just enough for her to fall forward on to the router and get the end of the cables into place, shoving them home with a set of soft, unremarkable clicks.

So close to her eyes, she couldn't make out the features. For a moment, nothing happened.

"What the hell is that crazy woman doing?"

Then a soft, green light came on. It lit her face up, and as she blinked sweat out of her eyes, she swore she could almost taste the green on the back of her tongue.

"Leave her be." Andrew's voice cut in, loud and uncompromising. "Let her loose for I rip your damn arms off and choke you with em."

Nine twenty seven.

Kerry felt the grip come off her, and she rolled over to sit on the floor, legs splayed, breathing hard, flashes of red in her vision timed with her heartbeat. There were three men in the room aside from Andrew, and they were in logo'd shirts and pressed chinos.

"It's that crazy lady." The tech who'd been in the room when she'd gotten hurt blurted. "What in the hell are you doing?"

Kerry licked her lips. "Finishing what we started." She got to her knees, and then had to stop.

Andrew came over and held his hands out. "Here." He took her hands and lifted her up. "You done now? This thing working?"

Kerry turned to look at the router, which was now flashing with a lot of activity lights on the front. "Something's going through. Whether it works or not 's in Dar's hands now."

"Wait.. are you saying you're fixing this thing after all?" One of the other men stepped up. "They told us you weren't. Some guy came in here and said... there was an FBI agent here asking questions, said they were.. that you..."

The tech was looking at something on his screen. "Well, something's happening because all of a sudden this stuff's trying to work." He said. "So if those guys are going to arrest these people they probably should wait a few minutes."

"I should call them.. " The man hesitated. "But if you're fixing it..."

Kerry held her hand up. "Spare me the details." She said, exhausted. "We're doing what we can." She turned to Andrew. "Let's go find my mother again. She's going to kill me for using her like I just did."

"Wait, you can't leave." The supervisor started to block the door, then found himself against the wall, pushed there by Andrew's big fist. "Okay. Maybe you can."

"Smart feller." Andrew opened the door and guided Kerry out. "

**

"LINK!!!!!" Shaun bawled, shocking everyone in the silence that had fallen as the minutes ticked away to nothing. "LINK!!! We got a link!!!!!!!"

Dar felt like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on her head. She took a steadying breath and then dove into the console session, seeing the port come active and quickly surge with a stream of traffic.

Many streams of traffic. Dar threw a flow filter in place to sort it, searching for the largest ones first. She clipped and pasted into a notepad file as she found them, her mind registering the networks involved. She dialed her cell phone and put it into speaker mode. "Mark, you there?"

"Here boss." Mark answered the phone. "We got data?"

"We got." Dar rattled the keys. "Get ready for a set of IP's, see if we've got gateways. I'm setting up the interfaces."

"Dar, we've only got like two minutes."

"You're wasting them." Dar concentrated fully on the screen, blocking out the distractions of the room, and the men watching, the heat, and the pressing of the ticking clock against her shoulder blades.

"Okay ready." Mark answered, in a chastened tone.

Dar quietly uttered a set of addressing. "That's going to be interfaces zero one, zero two and zero three."

"Got it. They're starting the speech up there." Mark answered. "Got gateways."

"Clear the ACL's for it."

"Done."

"Bringing the interfaces up." Dar muttered. "Ready for the next set?"

"Ready."

**

The buzz of voices was almost overwhelming. Kerry emerged onto the gallery, pausing in the entrance and looking around to see if she could spot her mother.

On the floor below, the kiosks and stands were filled with traders, the atmosphere frenetic and with an air of almost desperation to it. She spotted her mother on the far side of the gallery, and then, on the other side, she saw a group of men clustered tightly within the confines of heavy security.

Alastair was there. Outwardly as calm and composed as ever, seeming to ignore the presence of the security agents spaced around where he was standing.

"Kerr...y."

Kerry turned to find her mother approaching. She walked forward to meet her, Andrew right at her heels. "Sorry, mother." She said, as they met. "I had to get something done."

"Good grief!" Cynthia whispered. "What on earth are you involved in? Someone just told me the FBI has your company under investigation? What's going on?"

Kerry held a hand up. "Give it five minutes, mom." She said. "Then I'll explain everything."

Cynthia looked at her, and then glanced at Andrew. "Oh. Hello, Commander."

"Lo." Andrew responded.

"Well." She turned back to Kerry. "I'm sure there must be an explanation. This is all so.. " She fell silent as the speaker went to the gavel across from them, and rapped for attention. "But I agree. Let's see this through, then we can discuss it."

They moved to the rail to listen. Kerry rested her hands on it, so tired it was hard to concentrate on what was going on.

Hard to stand there, and not know what was going on at the other end of the cable. No way was she going to call Dar, and break her concentration, or cause any second's more delay in what had become the worst of her worst nightmare of a circumstance.

She could feel Andrew behind her, and her mother came to stand at her side, the other senators and dignitaries clustering around them.

"May I now have two minutes of silence." The speaker said and bowed his head.

It went absolutely silent. The only sound was the air conditioning and the soft squeak of a chair moving, somewhere in the distance.

An American flag fluttered lightly in the fan breeze, rustling against the stonewall.

Kerry kept her head up, and she let her eyes slowly scan the crowd, watching the traders below, heads dutifully bowed but anxiety for the trade showing in the shifting of shoulders and clenching of fists.

On her level, the dignitaries all were standing in solemn silence, the men with hands clasped before them, and heads bent, the women mostly clasping their hands just over their hearts, some with lips moving in silent prayer.

Behind the pedestal, a group of firemen in their turnout coats waited, too tired to pray.

Kerry turned her head a little and found her gaze caught by a pair of gray ones in the cluster of business suits to one side of the podium. Alastair cocked his head just slightly in question, and she managed a tired grin in response.

What was he thinking?

One more minute. Kerry looked down at her hands, rubbing her thumb across a scrape she didn't remember getting that stung as she touched it.

One more minute.

**

"Sixty seconds, boss."

Dar barely heard him. She focused completely on the screen, instinct driving her typing more than conscious thought. Flows and errors flashed in front of her, and she forgot where she was, and who was watching.

Focus.

She typed, and exported, and filtered and watched results as she fought to make the data streaming into her monitor go where she wanted it to go, alerts and warnings flashing by so fast they hardly registered.

"Forty seconds."

Routing. Rerouting. Redistributing directions from the machine under her hands to the big routers sitting quietly in the first floor of the Miami office, which Dar would have teleported to if she could have.

Protocols stuttered and skewed, probably affecting traffic across the breadth of their network. Dar didn't have time to worry about it.

"Thirty seconds."

Too much data, trying to get to too many places, all of it critical. Dar muttered under her breath as she recycled the router for the nth time, and waited for it to boot. "Cross your fingers."

"Got everything including my eyebrows crossed." Mark said, nervously. "Twenty seconds."

They waited. Dar gazed at the blinking cursor as the boot screen scrolled across her laptop, checking ROMS and ASICS in a process that seemed glacially slow.

"Ten seconds."

Router prompt. Dar rattled in a command, reviewed the results.

"Five seconds."

Another command, and a refresh. Then five keystrokes and a slamming of her enter key so loud it startled everyone watching.

**

Ding, ding, ding. The fireman released the striker, and let his hand fall, as a burst of noise suddenly exploded through the tall space.

Chattering. People's voices. Traders. The rattle of printers.

An LED sign burst into action, spewing out ticker symbols.

Everyone clapped.

Kerry felt her hands start to shake on the ledge, feeling lightheaded. Anxiously, she searched the crowd, but the traders had gone to work and blocked out their watchers, busy at kiosks, busy in clusters, busy at terminals, busy at the business of making money.

Completely anticlimactic. Like nothing was wrong at all.

"All right, now Kerry." Her mother turned to her. "What is all this about?"

"Excuse me." Alastair's voice intruded, now close by.

Kerry turned and faced him. "Hi." She started to take a breath, then paused as she was enfolded in a heartfelt hug by her ultimate boss. She could feel the catch in his breathing, and felt the sting of tears in her own eyes, and it was all just so crazy and stupid.

She blinked a little. "We couldn't let it go." She whispered. "We just couldn't."

"Meant a lot more than you think it did." Alastair uttered back. "Tell you all later."

"McLean?"

Alastair released her, and they turned to find the vice president there, with several of his retinue. "Well, hello Dick." Alastair's voice was calm, but it's usual amiable tone held a distinct edge. "Nice moment there, with the fireman."

"Beautiful." The politician responded, aware of all the watching and listening ears. "Real testament to the resiliency of the American spirit." He said. "Can't keep us down."

"Absolutely." Alastair agreed. "I couldn't agree more."

The vice president turned and put his hands on the ledge. "Everything's in good working order I see." He studied the busy floor. "As it should be."

"Why yes, it appears that it is." The ILS CEO said. "As you say, you just can't keep us down."

The politician turned back to him, eyeing him sharply. The he straightened up and fixed his tie, notching it a bit closer to his neck. "Glad to see everyone pulled together to make it happen." He dismissed them. "Excuse me." He moved past them and joined some of the senators standing nearby, trying to catch his attention.

Alastair and Kerry both exhaled at the same time. Then Kerry leaned back against the wall, as her knees started to shake. "Wow." She said, and then fell silent.

Cynthia cleared her throat. "Is... everything all right?" She asked. "I'm sorry, is it.. " She peered at Alastair. "Mr. McLean? I believe I have seen you on the business news."

"Ah. Yes." Alastair nodded. "You must be Kerry's mother." He held hand out. "It's good to meet you."

Kerry let it all go past her. "I need to go make a phone call." She finally said. "Excuse me."

Alastair took her arm gently. "I think we all have to make that same phone call." He said. "Senator Stuart, would you care to come with us? I'm sure you have some questions about all this."

"Absolutely." Cynthia looked around to where her colleagues were clustering around the vice president, and the press. "I'd be glad to. Let's go, this way. It's shorter, and I believe, with less people."

"Damn good idea." Andrew finally spoke up. "Bet you got one of them limo cars outside there too."

"Well, yes, actually... it's shared but.."

"S'allright, we'll just borrow it." Andrew said, firmly. "Excuse us."

Kerry let herself be guided to the stairs, completely spent and wanting nothing more than a chair, her partner, and a drink; too tired to even feel triumph or satisfaction at a job well done.

**

Dar slowly stretched her cramped fingers, listening to the sounds of raucous yelling coming from the speakerphone. She turned her head slowly and looked at Don after a moment, letting out a long exhale. "Congratulations." She said. "You made that happen."

Don chuckled wryly. "Dar, these guys made that happen." He pointed at the optic unit attached to the router. "And by the way, fellers, what you just saw was the IT equivalent of this woman flapping her arms and flying to the moon."

The two visitors had settled cross-legged on the floor. "I've been in enough bullpen situations to know that was one of those two seconds to blastoff kind of things." One said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "Pretty neat."

Dar closed her laptop. "Let's go upstairs." She said. "I need a drink."

"Boy that sounds good." Don got up, and they all left the little closet and emerged into the shopping level.

Outside, the world coursed past them completely oblivious to the drama in their midst, only giving a passing glance to the engineers and the scruffy looking woman in a tank top and coveralls trudging past them.

"Long day, huh Dar?" Don asked.

"Long week." Dar admitted, as they headed for the elevators. She could feel her shoulders slumping, and she mostly watched the floor as they boarded the car, pausing only to punch the button for their level. "But you folks really did the job. That's an amazing feat of engineering."

"Well, thanks." One of the engineers said. "My name's Orin Wellings, by the way." He offered a hand, which Dar took. "We were glad to help. We found out some things that might help us in some other research, so it's all good." He added. "This is my colleague Doddy Ramirez."

Dar extended her hand. "Thanks."

"My pleasure." The man shook her hand. "Talk about down to the wire."

"Mm." The doors opened and Dar led them out, past the receptionist's desk. She pushed the glass doors open and headed down the hall to their client presentation center, marked by a set of teak doors and frosted glass windows. "C'mon."

They followed her inside. "Coffee and soft drinks over there." Dar pointed without looking. She headed for the couch on the far side, dropping into it just as her cell phone rang. "Help yourself to whatever you like." She didn't even check the caller ID. "Yeah."

"Hey." Kerry's voice sounded every bit as drained as Dar felt. "We're on our way back there. Me and dad, and Alastair and my mother."

"I'm sitting on a couch in the pres center waiting for you." Dar said. "But you can't bring the other three on the couch with you. They have to sit somewhere else."

Kerry managed a wry chuckle. Then she fell silent.

"You okay?" Dar asked after a moment.

Another hesitation. "I've been better." Kerry admitted. "Had a bit of a problem getting that part in."

Dar felt a jolt of concern that chased away the fog of exhaustion. "Want me to meet you at the hospital instead?"

"No." Kerry answered immediately. "I just want to go home. We can go to Doctor Steve's as soon as we land if you want but I'm not spending another day here."

Dar nodded to herself. "Hear ya."

"Have some chocolate milk waiting for me?" Kerry added, with a sigh.

"You got it." Dar waited for the line to hang up and then she closed the phone and rested it on her knee. "The rest of our team's on the way back. Our CEO's with them, I know he wants to thank you guys in person."

The engineers took seats across from her, with cups and plates and pleased expressions.

Mark entered, with Kannan and Shaun, tired, but visibly happy. "Hey boss. Welcome back from the pit"

"Hey." Dar lifted a hand and waved. "Good job, people."

Scuzzy entered. "Hey! You guys did it!"

"We did it." Dar agreed, gesturing around to include the rest of the room. "You did it." She pointed at Scuzzy. "Everybody needs to slap themselves on the ass for this one."

Don chuckled. "Boy, I tell ya, I don't get to hear that very often." He admitted. "Mostly its can you give me a bigger discount, Don, or your damn service center blew me off, Don, or your competitors are doing more for less, and what about that, Don."

"Yeah, we get that too." Mark brought a bottle of soda back to the seating area and took a chair near where Dar was sprawled on the couch. "Dar, there was only one or two streams we didn't have a gate for. I called the endpoint owner and threw a tunnel up for them, and they're good now."

"You know what the sad part is?" Dar stretched her arm out along the back of the couch. "We're the only ones who are going to know we did this."

"Who the hell cares." Mark slid down and took a swig from his bottle. "I don't. I know I did it. That's all that matters to me."

Dar watched them all gather, and she let the conversation flow around her, as the rest of the team straggled in. She was tired, but at some level satisfied, glad the circumstances had arranged themselves to allow her to end this day with a sense of personal triumph.

It felt good. She was glad they'd done it.

She realized she must have faded out for a minute, because she looked up at the doorway just in time to see Kerry enter, with her mother, and Dar's father, and Alastair right behind her.

Dar got up off the couch as they approached, opening her arms up as Kerry walked right into them, pressing her body against Dar's with a soft, guttural moan. She enfolded her partner in a gentle hug, oblivious to the room. "Hey babe."

"Ungh." Kerry rested her head against Dar's collarbone. "Get the jam, Paladar. I'm toast."

Dar stroked her hair. "You look it." She said. "Sit down on the couch and I'll get you your milk."

Kerry didn't move an inch. "Actually a protein shake would probably do me more good. Any chance of that?" She tilted her head and looked up. "My body's really bitching at me."

"Your wish is my command." Dar gazed down into her eyes, a faint smile shaping her lips.

Kerry's nose wrinkled just a little. "You couldn't care less if the whole room is staring at us, could you?"

"Nope."

"Me either." Kerry pulled herself up and gave Dar a kiss on the lips. "Fantastic job, boss. You brought it home."

"Likewise." Dar returned the kiss and then she released her partner and bumped her very gently towards the couch. "Let me get you something to put in your stomach." She watched Kerry settle on the couch, and then she turned to find Alastair in front of her. "Hey."

Alastair put his hand on her shoulder and just looked her in the eye.

Dar winked at him. "Sorry to ruin your martyrdom, Alastair."

She was not overly surprised when Alastair pulled her into a hug. She returned it without reservation, feeling a moment of true personal happiness. "Bastards."

"We need to talk later." He uttered just loud enough for her to hear. "But thank you, Dar. From my heart, thank you."

Dar patted his back and released him. "No problem."

"No problem." Alastair clasped her shoulder, and made his way to an overstuffed chair, which he sunk into with a long, tired exhale. "Anybody got a cup of coffee?"

Dar started to turn, only to find her father there with a bottled protein shake in his hand. "Ah. Thanks dad." She said. "Did you..."

"Heard the kumquat ask you for it." Andrew said. "Think she's hurting." He added. "Was a hell of a thing getting to that there place, I will tell you, Paladar. That woman should be in a doctor's office."

Dar glanced at her partner, who had collapsed on the couch. "I know. But I promised we'd go home first. She said we can stop at Dr Steve's on the way from the airport."

Andrew grunted.

"I'm not hypocritical enough to argue with her." Dar said. "Thanks for helping out, dad."

Her father clapped her on the back. "Didn't do squat rugrat. Kerry done it all."

Dar took the bottle and returned to the couch, sitting down next to Kerry and opening it. "Here you go." She put her arm over Kerry's shoulders and sighed, as Cynthia Stuart finally got through the crowd and sat down on a chair next to the couch. "Hello again."

"Hello, Dar." Cynthia said. "I'm very worried about Kerry. She seems quite sick."

"Me too." Dar glanced down at her partner, who was sucking at the protein shake, her body pressed against Dar's. "She has some cracked ribs."

"Oh my goodness!" Cynthia blurted. "Kerry! Why didn't you say something!"

Kerry looked up from her shake, licking her lips a little. "Didn't have time." She said. "Sorry. I guess we need to fill you in on everything else too." Her voice was husky. "Mom got me into the Exchange, Dar. They weren't letting anyone in the front door."

"Thank you." Dar looked at Cynthia. "We were running out of time."

"Well... yes, I could see that.. but what exactly were you doing?" Kerry's mother asked. "I kept hearing the oddest things, about some accident, and some problem or something." She added. "I was even told you were under some kind of investigation!"

Dar looked over at Alastair, and raised an eyebrow.

"I think that was really more of a misunderstanding." Alastair said, drawing Cynthia's attention. He put his hands behind his head, interlacing his fingers. "We got it sorted out." He paused. "I hope."

"They asked us to help out with some connections to the Exchange." Dar offered.

"Yes, I remember Kerry telling me that." Cynthia returned her attention to them. "Some cables, or something was it?"

Dar nodded. "We ran in to a lot of issues, and had to get these engineers from NASA to help us.." She indicated the two men. "They came up with a solution at the last minute. That solution was what Kerry was carrying into the Exchange."

"Oh!" Cynthia looked at her daughter. "My goodness!"

Kerry gave her a brief smile. She turned slowly and put her legs up on the couch, putting her head down on Dar's lap. "Yeah, it wasn't really a well thought out plan, but we were out of time." She admitted. "I'm really glad I spotted you going in. Wouldn't have worked otherwise."

"Oh, well." Cynthia looked more than a little confused. "Well, of course I was glad to help, but it was so curious that you were having problems with them letting you inside. Didn't they want this problem addressed?"

"Now there's the Sixty Four thousand dollar question." Alastair mused. "I tell you, Senator. There were a lot of conflicting motives in that building today."

"Goodness." Cynthia turned towards Alastair again. "But why would that have been, Mr. McLean. Please explain it to me, because I can see no reason for this strange confusion, and I want to understand since I am sure this will come up between myself and my colleagues."

"Well.." Alastair drew her attention, giving the pair on the couch some time.

Dar draped one arm carefully over her partner's body. "Feeling any better?"

Kerry turned her head a little, peering up at Dar. "A little." She lifted one hand and rubbed her eyes. "I just feel so damned washed out. It's driving me crazy. I can't think straight." She answered, in a low tone. "Not to mention my guts hurt." She put a hand on her chest. "And I can't get a deep breath cause of it."

Dar smoothed the hair back out of her eyes. She could see a glaze in the green pupils looking back at her, and she frowned in concern for a long moment before she pulled out her cell phone. "Okay." She dialed a number from the memory. "Second opinion time."

Kerry closed her eyes and let her cheek rest against Dar's belly. It felt good to be lying down, and even better to be lying down on top of her partner. She wrapped her fingers around Dar's arm and concentrated on breathing shallowly, as she listened to the phone conversation.

"Hey Sheryl. It's Dar." Dar watched the twitching tension across her partner's face. "Is the doc in? Can I talk to him for a minute?" She waited through a few moments of Gloria Estefan hold music, and then a familiar voice answered. "Hi Dr. Steve."

"Hey Dar. What's up? Where are ya?"

"New York." She said. "Listen, Kerry's here with me and she ran into some trouble."

Their family doctor chuckled wryly. "You're rubbing off on her."

"She got a couple of cracked ribs." Dar went on. "They said it was hairline, but she's feeling pretty bad right now. Says she feels drained and can't think straight."

"Where is she?"

"Lying in my lap." Dar admitted. "But I don't think that's causing it." That even got a smile from Kerry, who opened her eyes and peered up at her. "She's white as a sheet."

There was a bit of rattling, and a scuffing noise. "Hang on." Dr. Steve said, his voice a little more serious now. "You know which ribs they are?"

Dar looked down at Kerry, who shrugged faintly, and then casually unbuttoned her shirt.

"Go ahead and count. You can see where the bandages are." Kerry closed her eyes again; feeling a bit of a draft from the room on her now exposed skin. "Glad I decided on a sports bra this morning."

Dar gently counted up from her waistline. "Six from the bottom?" She spoke into the phone. "Somewhere around there."

"Uh huh." Dr. Steve grunted. "They said it was a crack?"

"Just a hairline fracture, according to the guy at the hospital." Dar reported. "He said to have her sleep sitting up and gave her a prescription for the pain. He sent the x-rays back with us."

"What drugs he give her?" Dr. Steve asked.

Dar pulled the bottle out of Kerry's pocket and examined it. "OxyContin." She responded. "We picked it up yesterday."

"Honey, throw that in the trash." Dr. Steve said immediately. "Where the hell are you? I'll call you in something else. That stuff's a pile of problems. She having any trouble breathing? Dizzy?"

Dar could feel Kerry's ribcage moving under her hand, and it seemed to her to be doing so with more effort than usual. "I think so."

"Don't let her take any more of that." Their doctor said. "How long you going to be there?"

Dar felt a sense of relief. "We're heading back home at one." She said. "Can I give her some Advil until we get back?" She looked down into Kerry's inquisitive eyes. She held up the pill bottle and rattled it. "I'll make sure she doesn't take any more of this."

Kerry's face relaxed a little.

"You can do that, rugrat." Dr. Steve said. "I'll see you when you get here, right?"

"Right. Thanks Doc." Dar hung up the phone. "He doesn't like the script."

Kerry blinked a little. "That makes sense." She said. "I didn't start feeling this crappy until after I started taking it. When I got back from the hospital I was fine that whole night." She stifled a yawn, and let her cheek rest against Dar's body again. "I'll be fine here until we leave."

Dar tucked the bottle of pills into the cushion. She glanced up as Cynthia returned her attention to them, apparently done with Alastair. She saw the woman's eyes fall on her partner's half bared chest and belatedly realized her tattoo was showing, the snake's head saucily exposed.

Covering it with her shirt would be only too obvious. Dar rested her hand on Kerry's bare belly instead, rubbing lightly the skin just over her navel.

"Kerry, is that..." Cynthia leaned closer. "Is that a tattoo?"

Kerry's eyes went wide, and her nostrils flared. Her hand twitched, as it lay right next to Dar's, and her breathing sped up.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" Dar gallantly came to her rescue. "It's an oraborus, a symbol of eternity, curled around my name." She lifted her hand and traced the design, moving the edge of Kerry's sports bra over so her mother could see it better. "Look at those scales."

"Ah." Cynthia edged closer and peered, not without hesitation. "How interesting." She cleared her throat. "Angela did mention something about that."

"I can always count on Angie." Kerry now dared turn her head and peek at her mother. "She saw it when I stayed at her house last week. Was it last week?" Her brow creased. "Seems like a long time ago."

"Yes, it does." Her mother recovered. "It's quite intricate."

"You don't like it." Kerry said, in a mild tone. "It's okay if you don't."

"Well." Cynthia said. "No, I don't. I don't think it's right for a young woman to mark herself up in that way." She paused. "So, no, in fact, I do not like it."

Kerry felt refreshed by the honesty. "That's okay. I didn't expect you to." She replied with equal candor. "A lot of people don't."

Her mother paused for a long moment, and then she shook her head. "Why did you do it then? I am curious."

Kerry looked back up at Dar. "Why did I do it." She mused. "I think I just wanted that statement, that emotion to be as vivid on the outside of me as it is on the inside." She closed her eyes again and exhaled, another wave of lethargy passing over her.

"I see." Her mother murmured.

"I heard Angie's good news." Kerry decided a change in subject was probably a good idea. She could hear her mother struggling to keep her thoughts to herself and she had no desire to spark an argument at the moment.

"Yes." Cynthia sat back, with a genuine smile. "I'm so pleased." She seemed glad of the change as well. "It was a great surprise, but a very welcome one."

Dar cleared her throat gently.

Kerry forced her eyes open, to see the raised brows. "Brian proposed to my sister." She informed her partner. "Angie was as freaked out as you were when I proposed to you."

Dar produced a big grin at that. Then she glanced up at Cynthia. "Congratulations."

"Thank you." Cynthia said, taking a deep breath. "Well, I'm glad these things worked themselves out. I believe I must go back and meet with my colleagues, and then perhaps we might attend a working dinner with the vice president."

"By then we'll be home." Kerry exhaled. "Thank god." She turned her head and opened one eye. "Hope it turns out okay for you."

"And a safe trip to both of you as well." Cynthia concluded. "I'm sure we'll be speaking, Kerry. Angela has told me she wishes you to stand with her at the wedding."

Kerry nodded. "I told her absolutely." She said, getting a smile from her mother. "I'm really happy for her."

"As am I." Cynthia stood up. "Hope you feel better soon, Kerry. I'm sure you're well taken care of here." She gave Dar a nod. "And it was nice meeting you, Mr. McLean. Thank you for explaining things to me."

"My pleasure." Alastair was still sitting quietly in his chair. "Nice meeting you too."

Cynthia gave them all a wave, and turned, making her way out of the room.

Dar gently buttoned up her partner's shirt and settled her arm protectively over Kerry's middle again. "Take a nap, champ." She told her obviously groggy companion. "I'll wake you up when it's time for us to leave."

"Gotta." Kerry muttered. "Damn this stuff's kicking my butt." She gave in to the desire to sleep, as Dar's fingertips gently massaged her temples. "Dar I'm gonna have to come up with something more radical."

"Huh?"

"m outta things to shock my mother with."

Dar chuckled faintly, and that was the last thing Kerry remembered before she let the room slip away.

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Cynthia crossed the lobby of the building and approached the front door. She paused, when she spotted Andrew Roberts entering. "Oh, Commander." She waved at him.

The tall ex-seal altered course, and intercepted her. He had two overnight bags slung over his shoulder. "Lo."

"I just wanted to bid my farewell to you." Cynthia said. "I assume you are heading home as well."

"That's true." Andrew glanced around. "You want a cup of coffee fore you go? Ah just saw pictures of them people back at the exchange and it's crazy there."

Cynthia hesitated, and then she nodded. "I could use a cup of coffee." She admitted. "There's a nice café, will you join me?"

"Sure." Andrew followed her over to one of the seats and they took over one of the tables in the little café to one side of the lobby. It was before lunchtime, so it was still quiet, and a waitress scooted right over to them when she saw them sit down.

Andrew set the bags down and exhaled. "Biggest cup of coffee you got." He told the girl, who nodded.

"Do you have tea?" Cynthia asked. "I'd prefer that, please."

"Sure, be right back." The waitress left, still scribbling.

"You look tired, Commander. I know it must have been a long week for you as well."

"Yeap." Andrew admitted. "Ah will be glad to get home to mah wife and mah boat, I will tell you. I do not regret coming here to help the kids out, but ah will be very happy to see that there airplane shortly."

"I do understand." Cynthia commiserated. "I didn't want to come here, you know. I wanted to stay in Michigan, dealing with the issues we have there. But I was told it would be highly unpatriotic if I did not come to support the city so I did."

Andrew snorted. "Patriotism." He said. "Most these people round the gov'mint don't know how to even spell that word less what it means."

Cynthia studied him. "It's so interesting that you say that." She looked up as the waiter arrived, and deposited their drinks. "May I also have, perhaps, a tuna on croissant?"

"Sure." The waitress looked at Andrew expectantly.

"Ya'll got hamburgers?" Andrew asked.

"Sure."

"Have me one with cheese and some fries."

"No problem." The waitress whisked off, in a better mood.

Andrew took a sip of his coffee. "You going back home today?"

Cynthia sighed. "Probably tomorrow." She admitted. "As much as I am not enjoying this position I accepted, one does have to stand up for it, you know."

"Yeap."

"Though, I have to admit, I do not think it matters whether or not I go. I am not going to continue in this post, and therefore, the decision really should be mine."

"Yeap." Andrew agreed. "Thought I had to live up to stuff fore I almost lost everything I ever had for that. Don't go there no more." He shook his head. "Figured out I love my family more than my country."

Cynthia smiled. "That's so charming." She said. "And you know, I do think you're right. I believe I will change my itinerary, and leave this afternoon as well, since I have so much to do back in Michigan."

"Here you got a wedding coming." Andrew sat back and sucked his coffee. "Glad that feller stepped up."

The woman across from him lifted her teacup in his direction. "Thank the lord." She said. "I was so disappointed with Brian, really. It's been very hard on Angela, though surely she had to take the same responsibility for her actions." She studied his scarred face. "I did think that was going to be quite awkward between Angela and Kerrison."

Andrew chuckled. "Kerry was some pissed at that boy." He said. "Though he wasn't doing right by her sister."

"Oh." Cynthia said. "Well, yes, I suppose she would feel that way." She sipped her tea. "After all, she'd met Dar by then, hadn't she?"

Andrew smiled. "She done that." He allowed. "Dar said they got to be sweethearts right off."

They were both quiet, as the waitress came back and set their plates down, then left again to attend to the customers now coming in for lunch.

"That. ah, never bothered you, did it?" Cynthia asked.

"Naw." Andrew cut his burger in half and selected the left side of it. "Never had to worry about no feller coming by and doing her wrong while I was out there overseas, anyhow."

"Oh." Kerry's mother sounded surprised. "Well, I never thought of that." She picked her way through her tuna croissant. "At any rate, I am glad she's happy, and that she and Dar are so very fond of each other."

"Me, too." Andrew ate a fry. "Your kid's good people. I am damn glad she's part of mah family."

Cynthia smiled wryly. "I would imagine she feels the same." She murmured. "I know she's had a trying time with her own."

Andrew finished his burger. "Wall, ah think y'all will be all right in that way." He wiped his lips. "She's right fond of you all. Just take some time. Y'all got that."

"Yes, we do." Kerry's mother smiled a little more easily. "As terrible as this past week has been, it has given me hope that my family can find a way to come together again. Kerry has invited me down to see their home and meet their friends."

Andrew chewed his fries as he considered this. "Got a nice place." He finally said. "Ah like that little place they got down south better than the fancy one, but it's all right too."

"Do you mean the cabin? Kerry showed me pictures. It looks so charming." Cynthia sipped her tea. "I'm looking forward to seeing it. She even showed me photos of their pet."

"Hairball." Andrew chuckled softly. "Cute dog." He amended.

"Yes." His table companion said. "Kerry told me... "She hesitated. "I never actually knew what had happened with her little Cocker Spaniel. "

Andrew merely grunted.

"I feel terrible now about it. Roger wanted to get her another one, and I convinced him not to." Cynthia said, a pensive look on her face. "I just didn't want to have to deal with a puppy. All the mess.. I just never knew how much it meant to her, or what... "

"That feller who done that was a wrong headed man." Andrew said quietly.

"Yes, he was." Cynthia said. "Do you know, the police finally closed that case they were investigating about it." She watched his face intently. "They decided it was an accident after all."

Andrew lifted his eyes and met hers squarely. "That man got what was coming to him." He said. "Ah only wish it'd come to him twenty years b'fore then so he did not have no chance to do what he done to your daughter."

Cynthia took a breath, and released it. "Roger finally realized the things Kerry had said weren't lies." She lowered her voice. "It upset him so much. He sent Kyle away while he investigated, and the night he got so sick.. it was after he finally spoke to Kerry's old doctor."

Andrew cocked his head slightly.

"You know, I had never seen him cry before." Kerry's mother said simply. "It astounded me. I had no idea why he was so upset, and then... well, then he had this meeting he had to go to and after that...it was too late and he couldn't tell me."

"Lord."

Cynthia wiped her lips slowly with her napkin. "Terrible." She murmured. "I am glad he died. It is not a Christian thing to say, but it's true." She watched Andrew slowly nod. "I do like to think he got what he deserved."

"Ah do believe he did." Andrew said. "Might be he even knowed that fore he died."

Cynthia exhaled. "May the Lord grant that he did." She reached over and patted his hand.

"Commander, thank you for taking the time to have lunch with me. It's always lovely talking to you."

Andrew's eyes took on a humorous glint. "Ya'll be sure to let mah wife know when you're coming down our way. We can go have us some conch fritters together."

"I certainly will." She stood up, as the waiter came over. "Here, I believe this will cover it. Thank you." She handed the man a folded bill. "Commander, thank you for letting me buy you lunch. I hope you have a wonderful trip home."

"Same t'you." Andrew lifted a hand and waved it at her. "And call me Andy. I ain't in the Navy no more."

Cynthia smiled. "I will do that. After all, we're family, aren't we?" She turned and left the café, heading for the front door again.

Andrew shook his head and chuckled briefly. "Lord."

**

Dar was content to sit quietly on the couch, providing a pillow for Kerry's sleeping form. The room had gotten crowded with both New York staff and their visiting team, and a pile of boxes had just been deposited on the conference table filling the air with the scent of cheese and garlic.

Kerry was oblivious to it all. Someone had brought a blanket up from the bus and she had it tucked around her, and around Dar's arm that was draped over her body.

Alastair came over with a plate. "Piece of pizza, Dar?" He offered her a slice. "Probably won't have much at the airport."

"Sure." Dar maneuvered the big slice with one hand, getting it folded between her fingers before she nibbled at the small end. It was hot, cheesy, and had a nice crisp crust that tasted a touch smoky. "Mm."

"Sometimes you like life's simple pleasures." Alastair took a bite of his own. "This is one of them."

Dar had to agree. "Bet your wife is looking forward to you getting home, huh?"

"Lady, you know it." Alastair settled back in his chair, balancing a can of root beer on the arm. "We can share a ride to the airport." He said, casually. "Get a few minutes of private chat time."

Dar nodded. "You talk to the board?" She glanced up to see the door open, and Hamilton appear. "Ah. Lawyer's in the house."

Alastair turned his head. "Hey, Ham, over here." He called out. "Grab yourself a piece of pie and sit down."

Their corporate lawyer complied. He laid two pieces on a paper plate and came over to join them. Atypically, he was dressed in jeans and a polo shirt rather than his usual suit and he settled into the chair across from Dar with a weary grunt.

"Got your tickets?" Alastair asked.

"Hell yes." Hamilton answered. "I've had enough of the neighborhood to last me a coon's birthday." He bit into his pizza. "I'm on your flight back to Houston, Al. I've got so much paperwork to dig through I might as well take up your space to do it."

Alastair grunted, and nodded.

"Where are we with all those government demands?" Dar asked.

"Don't go there, Maestro." Hamilton waved his pizza at her. "Do not ask about any of that. Just please go back to Miami and continue being brilliant and let me do my job."

Dar blinked at him. "Sure." She said. "All yours."

"Let's just say I had my hands full the last couple of days." The lawyer said. "Al, you owe me a damned fine steak dinner out of this."

"No problem my friend." Alastair took a swig of his root beer. "That's a debt I'm glad to pay. We've got a lot of work ahead of us in the next few days."

"Got that right."

Dar could feel Kerry's gentle breathing under her hand, and she was reassured by the easy rhythm of it. She could sense a feeling of relief in the people around her, both the natives and the visitors, and even a few smiles from the New York staff as they joined their teammates in the pizza and drinks.

She wished she could go to sleep along with Kerry. The thought of going through the hassle at the airport and then the flight home was absolutely exhausting.

"Hey Maestro."

Dar looked up at Hamilton. "Mm?"

"Good job." The lawyer toasted her with his soda.

"Thanks." Dar answered. "Was it worth it?" She indicated the television screen in the background, which had CNN on it. "Market's dropped how many hundred points?"

Hamilton shrugged. "My daddy, who I will tell you thought I was coming down in the world when I went to law school, advised anyone who would listen that only fools lost money in the stock market. Everyone else just recognized a fabulous buy opportunity when they saw it."

"Our stock's up." Alastair remarked dryly.

"Airlines are dropping." Hamilton added. "That's why I want to get my Louisiana lily white ass out of here before they go bankrupt and stop putting fuel in the tanks before they take off."

"Think they will?" Alastair asked. "People won't stop flying."

"Won't they?" Hamilton asked. "Who's to say it won't happen again. People don't like dying. It ruins their day, Al."

They all went quiet for a moment. "Well." Alastair half shrugged. "I'm not walking back to Houston so I guess I'll risk it. Bad enough I almost ended up having to swim from the Bahamas or get sailed in by Captain Roberts, here."

"What?" Hamilton stared at him.

"Oh, didn't tell you about that part, did I." The CEO rested his head on his fist. "So damned much has happened I'm losing track." He pondered that. "I need a vacation."

"C'mon down by us." Dar offered. "I'll teach you to scuba dive."

Hamilton chuckled. "I'd love to see that." He leaned back in his seat. "See some octopus chasing your ass around the ocean."

Alastair rolled his eyes. Then his cell phone rang and he set his pizza down to answer it. "Now what?" He opened the phone. "Hello?" He paused, listening. "Well, hello governor."

"Even if I had grits, I wouldn't let that cheap excuse for a catfish kiss them." Hamilton indicated the phone. "He's got nothing but everyone's worst interests in mind."

"Well, thanks, but we.... No, I don't really think we've got the... ah, sure, but.." Alastair removed the phone from his ear and stared at it. "Well, goodbye to you too." He studied the instrument, and then he folded it and returned it to his pocket.

"And?" Dar asked.

"The governor has a list of things he wants us to do." Alastair said. "He's on his way over here with a group of something or other and intends on staging a press conference and setting up a task force center."

"Guess he figured out which side we were on." Dar mused.

"Guess he wants everything for free." Hamilton added dryly.

"Guess he can kiss my ass." Alastair stood up and put his hands in his pockets. "Ladies and gents, please listen up."

The room got quiet quickly, and everyone turned to face him.

"I'd like to thank you all for everything you've done in the past week. We've done a hell of a job here, despite a lot of personal struggle and tragedy, and believe me when I tell you I personally appreciate that more than I can say."

Tentative smiles appeared. "It's been good having you here, sir." One of the New York staff said. "We really appreciate all the support we've gotten. Everyone's been so wonderful."

"Thanks." Alastair smiled at them. "But right now, what I'd like you all to do is get your things, and pack everything up, and leave the office, quickly as you can."

Everyone stared at him in some surprise.

"Sir?" The man said. "Is there something wrong?"

"Not a thing." Alastair assured him. "There's just some folks coming down here to try and ask us for something I don't want to be around for. So let's get moving, please. Those of us who are visiting are about to head for the airport anyway."

Everyone stirred, and started to leave the room, still obviously puzzled. "Paid time off, of course." Alastair added. "Chop chop."

Hamilton had his head tilted back to watch the CEO. "You're becoming an ornery old bastard, Al." He commented. "How's that going to look if the governor shows up here, and no one's home?"

"No one's here, he can't ask anyone, can he." Alastair retorted. "Get a move on, Ham. Get us a car ready and let's scoot. Move it."

Hamilton got up and bowed, then headed off towards the door, chuckling under his breath. Alastair turned to Dar, his brows hiking "You ready to go home, lady?"

"More than." Dar said. "Dad just got back with our bags, so we're ready to go soon as I wake Ker up." She glanced down at her partner. "You sure you want to piss this guy off again?"

"Bastards were threatening to have us all picked up as terrorists and held without counsel, Dar." Alastair said, in a mild tone. "You want to spend any more time here?"

"Would they have really done it though?" Dar started to gently scratch Kerry's stomach, to get her to wake up. "Or was it just a bluff?"

"I had federal agents on either side of me with handcuffs in that Exchange." Her boss said. "They were all set to announce to the press that they'd uncovered a terrorist plot to overthrow the government by co-opting its information technology."

Dar stared at him. "You're serious?"

"As a heart attack." Alastair said, with commendable calm. "So wake up your sleeping beauty, and let's get outta here. I only hope they don't give us a hassle at the airport." He turned and watched the room empty, except for Andrew who was perched nearby on a chair arm, the bags on the seat next to him. "Ready to move out, commander?"

"Surely, gen'l." Andrew responded. "Sooner we get out of this place, better for us."

"You got that right." Alastair headed for the door. "Move it people! Move it!"

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"All right, let's go." Alastair got into the limo and settled across from Dar. "Feeling any better, Kerry?"

"Eh." Kerry was wedged in the corner of her seat, her hands tucked inside the pocket of her hoodie. "My ribs are killing me, but my head feels a lot clearer." She admitted. "The nap helped."

The limo started moving, with the bus right behind it where the rest of the team was riding. Kerry and Dar were alone with Alastair and Hamilton, and Kerry almost wished she wasn't. She had a feeling she was going to be hearing things she wasn't going to like.

Dar was seated next to her, stifling a yawn. She had her briefcase next to her and a bottle of water in one hand, and she looked both tired and distracted. "You think they'll... what do you think they'll do when they get here and the office is closed?" She asked.

"Beats me." Alastair put his hands behind his head. "I'm sure he'll call me, and I'm sure I'll think of some lie to tell him about it. Maybe I took the office out to Central Park for buggy rides."

"Al." Hamilton tsked.

"Sorry Ham, I just don't care." Alastair said. "I'm not spending one more minute here getting beaten to hell by these bastards. I'll exit the contracts, all of them."

Even Dar blinked.

"I figured." Alastair cleared his throat. "I figured they'd pin me, when I told them we weren't doing the work for them. I figured we'd get bad press, and I'd be pretty embarrassed on television, but hell. How bad could it really be, right?"

"But that wasn't going to happen." Kerry spoke up, her voice still slightly husky. "Was it? I heard the technicians in the Exchange talking about the FBI."

"Found out when I got there that it was a lot worse." Alastair said. "They figured they'd out us as plotting against the government, the company, that is. Had it all laid out. The fact we snuck into the country, all the exceptions we asked for, the guard fracas down by the river, you name it. They had so much detail on so many things they could twist to make us look like the bad guys... hell."

"But none of it was true." Kerry said. "We did nothing but good for them."

"Truth didn't matter." Alastair said. "They wanted a big splash on CNN, big scandal, show they were on the ball, they'd uncovered a plot..."

"They didn't fall down on the job like they did last Tuesday?" Dar spoke up for the first time. She smiled grimly as Hamilton pointed both index fingers at her.

"But really." Kerry said. "They have to prove things like that."

"No they don't." Hamilton said. "That's what changed, They passed a law that gives them the right to hold anyone they think's a terrorist for however long they want, wherever they want, without no charges, or no lawyers."

Kerry stared at him. "What?"

"Ask your mother." Hamilton said. "They said it was necessary so they could find more terrorists planning other atrocities here."

"But we're not terrorists." Kerry said.

"It doesn't matter." Alastair exhaled. "That's what I finally understood, standing there on that damn platform with those damn smug jackasses all around me, the one of them telling me exactly what they were going to do because they knew I couldn't do anything about it."

"All that mattered was the spin." Hamilton said. "They told me that when I was looking to file those lawsuits. Told me to not even bother. The law didn't matter right now."

"So anyway." Alastair picked the ball back up. "There I am, standing in the middle of hell wondering how I'm at least going to warn my wife I won't be home when I spot Kerry standing there with a gaggle of senators and I'm wondering what on earth's going on."

Kerry managed a smile. "I walked into the building with my mother." She said. "It's the only way I was going to get in - she ran interference with the guards but she had no idea what was going on either. I just had time to get to the server room and put the optic in place before I got upstairs."

"So you knew they were up?" Hamilton asked.

Kerry shook her head. "I knew the link was up and I knew the rest of it was up to Dar." She looked over at her partner. "She had about two minutes to do what I guess was about three hours work."

Dar shrugged modestly. "I type fast." She gazed over at Alastair. "So you're telling me after we did what we did at the Pentagon, and after we did all we did for them up to the Exchange, they were going to railroad us?"

Alastair nodded. "Honestly, Dar, it wasn't personal." He saw both women make a face, and glance at each other. "The VP and I go way back. In their minds it was a case of what they thought was right for the country versus a bunch of nerds from some company giving them a hive."

"Scary." Dar murmured.

"It was." Alastair admitted. "I was standing there kicking myself for making a stupid decision and knowing we were all going to pay for it. I didn't want us to be in a public failure. Instead, I almost walked us into the end of the company."

"Except we got lucky." Dar said.

"You really think that was luck?" Alastair asked, with a smile. "I think it was just people who refuse to stop until they hit the end zone."

Dar shrugged again, lifting her hand in the air and letting it fall. "We made it happen." She acknowledged. "I'm very proud of our team."

"So am I." Her boss said.

"What are you going to tell the board, Al?" Hamilton asked.

Alastair gazed out the window for a few moments in thoughtful silence. "Haven't decided yet." He said. "They know I turned em down – I told them I'd take the fall and they were all right with that."

"Morons." Dar commented.

Hamilton snickered. "Al, you have to tell them the whole deal. Lay it out. They gotta know in case this comes back at us."

"Beh."

"Have Dar tell em." The lawyer persisted. "She can get on that call with her typical badass attitude and tell them "Hey morons! Listen up!" He gazed fondly at Dar. "You'd do that for Al, wouldn't you, Maestro?"

"Sure." Dar readily agreed. "But I think he's right. I think you should tell the board exactly what happened, Alastair. Everything, including the threats because I think we'll need to decide what the hell we're going to do with our being the government's IT Siamese twin."

Kerry nodded, but kept quiet.

"Half our business is US Government." Alastair stated. "Might get tough."

"If we disband the company." Kerry spoke up at least. "I vote we open a clam shack down in Key Largo where the highest tech item is a wifi hotspot on the tiki roof."

"You ready to retire already?" Hamilton asked her, with a smile.

"Right now, yes." Kerry answered. "In a heartbeat."

"I'm with you on that one." Alastair responded, surprising them. "I'm going to have a hell of a time going in to work behind that damn desk after what we all just went through."

Kerry felt that at a gut level. The experience had changed all of them, to a more or lesser degree. She glanced past Dar out the other window, as she heard the faint rumble of an airplane taking off.

"Almost there."

Dar turned to look too. The entrance to the airport was guarded, and the limo slowed as they reached the checkpoint. "Let's hope they don't have orders to throw us in a paddy wagon." She sat back as the driver opened the windows for the guards to peer inside.

"Hello there." Alastair remained in a relaxed pose, his hands still behind his head. "Just catching a flight."

The guard studied them, then turned away dismissively and waved them on. The window closed and they pulled into the airport terminal. "Guess we didn't look dangerous." Hamilton commented. "Little do they know, the poor suckers."

"They're going to freak with the bus." Dar predicted. "We still have half a ton of gear in the back lockers."

"Let's hope they don't." Kerry said. "Dad's back there."

They got to the curb and eased out of the limo onto a sidewalk that was eerily quiet. There were guards stationed along the walk, but only a few cars were there discharging passengers. Alastair signed for the limo driver, and then they stepped back and stood together for a moment.

"Here comes the bus." Hamilton indicated the big vehicle now winding its way towards them. "We should go in as a group. I think our tickets are booked on one big itinerary."

"They are." Alastair confirmed. "Bea took care of it."

Kerry stood with her hands tucked into her hoodie pocket, watching the bus unload itself of its human and luggage cargo. The techs were all in good moods, glad the work was over and even more glad to be headed home.

She certainly was. She drew in a careful breath and let it out, wincing against the throbbing ache in her side. It felt raw and very painful, as though the bone was creaking in there and every movement almost made her bite her lip.

She felt Dar's hand settle on her shoulder. "Hey." She murmured.

"Doing okay?"

Kerry pulled the hand on her good side out and waggled it, then returned it to its nest. "I'm glad I don't feel like a zombie anymore but boy, this hurts."

"I've got some Advil. Dr. Steve said you could take that." Dar offered. "Let's go inside and get through security and I'll get you some."

That sounded great to Kerry. She followed Dar into the building, with the rest of the group as they entered the terminal and started across the worn carpet towards the check in area. It wasn't that busy, and they all went up to the counter at the same time.

Kerry stood quietly just behind Dar's shoulder as her partner handed over both of their identifications and declined the offer to check their luggage. It all sounded very normal, and Kerry wondered if it had been that normal for the hijackers as she had checked in not quite a week ago.

The gate agent asked Dar if she'd packed her own luggage. Dar answered that she had, and that no one had given them anything to take on. But that wasn't true, really, since Andrew had packed both their bags.

Should Dar have said that? In this case of course it didn't matter because it was her father. But what had the terrorists said in response?

Had they smiled?

Were there more of them right here in the terminal, just waiting for their chance? Waiting for everyone to relax again?

"Okay, c'mon, Ker." Dar handed her a folder. "Here's your boarding pass."

Kerry took it and stuck it in her hoodie pocket. She followed Dar through the winding lines around the corner and into another line, this time for security. "Hope they don't ask to frisk me." She said. "I can't hold my right arm out."

"Why in the hell would they want to f... no, let me rephrase that." Dar settled the straps of both their bags on her shoulder. "I totally understand the desire to frisk you. They better not think about it."

Kerry chuckled faintly. "You're so funny." She sighed, as the rest of their group caught up to them in line. "Hey dad."

"Hey kumquat. You doing okay?" Andrew had his bag over his shoulder, and he eyed the ones Dar had but didn't grab for them.

"Eh." Kerry moved forward in line as they approached the security station. "I'll be happy when the plane lands."

"You got that right, boss." Mark agreed. "Thanks for making a deal to get those trucks back, Dar. I really didn't feel like driving back tonight."

They got to the front and filed into the security line. Kerry was guiltily content to allow Dar to put all her stuff on the belt, as she waited her turn to go through the x-ray machine. She stepped through and heard no tell tale beeps, but she looked at the guard anyway in question.

He took her boarding pass and looked at it, then waved her through. Gratefully she went to the belt and reclaimed her overnight bag and briefcase just as Dar appeared behind her. They got their stuff and continued on, moving down the hallway and then pausing to wait for the others.

Andrew was being held up in the line. Dar watched as her father produced a card, then waited, his arms crossed as it was examined. "He's got metal plates in him."

"I know. I remember when we went into the Federal building during my father's hearings." Kerry said. "Should we go help out? Oh, here he comes."

Andrew shook his head, and picked up his bag. He slung it over his shoulder before he joined them. "Can you take it out." He mimicked the guard's question. "These people are some idiots sometimes I swear."

Kerry smiled. They walked slowly towards their gate, the rest of the techs in group behind them. They all stopped at one gate, then Alastair, Hamilton and Nan started their good byes to go on to their own.

"I can't say this was fun." Nan said, to Dar. "But it certainly was something I will never forget." She shook Dar's hand. "Thanks for letting me be a part of it."

"Thanks for volunteering." Dar responded. "I know the Virginia office will be glad to get you back."

Nan moved on and faced Kerry. "I hope you feel better. "

"Me too." Kerry worked her left hand out of her pocket and reached over to squeeze Nan's. "Take care, Nan. I know I'll be talking to you on the phone." She paused. "And make sure you get your brother's resume in."

Nan blinked. "You remembered that? Wow." She laughed a little, in surprise. "I feel like it was a year ago when we had that conversation."

Kerry smiled. "I have to catch the details." She waved at Nan as she walked towards her gate. "Have a good flight."

She turned to find Hamilton there. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a wry grin. "Boy, I hope we don't meet like this often." Kerry stated, catching sight of Alastair giving Dar a bear hug nearby.

Hamilton laughed. "You and me both, Kerrison Stuart." He patted her gently. "Take care of the Maestro, will you please? I owe her one for this little shindig."

"I will." Kerry watched him step aside then she was being gently hugged by Alastair. "What a week." She gave the CEO a one-arm hug back. "Hope you have a safe trip back to Houston, Alastair. Come visit us soon, okay? I want to see Dar teach you to scuba dive too."

Alastair chuckled. "You're on, Kerry." He agreed. "You all have a safe trip home too. " He gave the group a wave, and then he followed Hamilton down the hallway towards the next set of gates.

Kerry exhaled, as she turned and Dar put her arm around her shoulders. She looked up at her partner, seeing the exhaustion in her face. "I like Alastair."

"Me too." Dar agreed. "He's seriously thinking of retiring." She added in a quiet tone. "That's what he just told me."

"Wow." Kerry looked back down the hallway. "I don't blame him, but...."

"Yeah, but." Dar mused. "I don't want to work for anyone else."

"Me either."

"Dar, they're starting to board." Mark came over and touched Dar's arm. "I know you guys want to get on and sit down."

Kerry was glad to head for the jet way. She was glad to hear the beep as her boarding card was processed, and the motion under her feet as she walked down the ramp to the airplane door and passed inside, greeted by the flight attendant who stepped aside and indicated her path to her first class seat.

They all had them. Dar had told Bea to book the whole team as first class, so she settled into her leather seat surrounded by the chatter of the techs and Dar's low, burring response as they filled the first class cabin.

"Can I get you something to drink, ma'am?" The cabin attendant asked. "Some coffee maybe? You look a little tired."

Kerry looked up at her. "How about some warm milk?" She asked. "Can you manage that?"

"Sure."

She sat back in her seat, resting her elbows on the arms. She was in the front row of the plane, and she could see the cockpit, a crude metal plate hastily covering it and it reminded her all over again of what had happened less than a week ago.

Were they safe? She looked around the first class area, which was mostly full of their own people. What if there was a bad guy, or more than one in the back? She watched the crew. They looked wary and worried, their eyes taking in everyone and everything.

Including Kerry and the rest of them here in first class, which she realized, included Kannan's exotic features, and Andrew's scarred intimidation. Was the crew worried about them? Should they be?

The flight attendant returned with a steaming cup. She set it next to Kerry's hand, and set down a small dish of warm nuts next to it. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Kerry said. "Terrible week for you guys, huh?"

The attendant made a face. "The worst ever." She said. "You live in New York?"

"No." Kerry indicated the people around them. "We're from Miami. We work for ILS. We drove up to help out, now we're going home."

"Oh." The attendant looked around the first class cabin. "Are these people all with you?" She glanced back at Kerry, who nodded. "That's good to know. Every time I fly now, I wonder; who are these people? Are they crazy? Are they going to hurt me? I never felt like that before."

"I think we all feel that way now." Kerry commented, as Dar returned to her seat and dropped into it. "Hey. You got that Advil?"

"Sure." Dar got up and rummaged in the overhead bin, pulling the bottle out of her backpack. "Can I get some coffee?" She asked the attendant. "Before we take off?"

"Sure." The attendant gave her a friendly smile. "Be right back."

Kerry watched her return to the service area and talk to her colleague, who had a list in her hand and was reviewing it. She looked at the list, then out at them, and then nodded, a look of perceptible relief on her face.

Wow. Kerry leaned back, as Dar handed her some pills. She popped them into her mouth and swallowed them down with a sip of her warm milk. What would it be like to go to work every day and worry about someone trying to kill you and everyone around you?

It would be like being at war, she guessed. Or being somewhere that bombs going off was an everyday occurrence.

Welcome to the rest of the world, America.

Dar took her seat and reached over the divider to take Kerry's hand, curling her fingers around her partner's and letting out a tired sigh, as they closed the door to the airplane, and they knew they were on their way.

At last.

**

"All right, you little scamp. Stay still a minute."

Kerry did, closing her eyes as she heard the hum of the X ray machine. She was flat on her back, the chill of the table cool against her bare shoulder blades and her skin still just a little warm from the sun outside.

The sun of home. The achingly hot sun, and the thick, swampy air that coated her with sweat not ten steps outside the door to the Miami airport they'd landed at shortly before.

Heaven.

"Okay, got it." Dr. Steve stepped around the X-ray shield and came to Kerry's side. "That's a hell of a bruise you got there, spunky."

Kerry glanced down at her side. "Yeah." She said. "It was so stupid, Dr. Steve. I tripped trying to keep some guy from falling on his face and ended up halfway under a raised floor."

Their family doctor put his fingertip on her nose. "Next time let the guy fall on his head. Don't cause yourself such a pain, huh?"

"Twenty twenty hindsight." Kerry accepted his hand up and swung her legs off the table, easing off it to stand next to the doctor in her jeans and sports bra. "It still hurts like hell. But at least I'm not all foggy from those drugs they gave me."

"Hon." Dr. Steve put his hands on her shoulders. "That stuff could have killed you." He told her bluntly. "You were lucky you were running around like a crazy woman because you could have sat down somewhere, and nodded off, and not woken up."

Kerry stared at him.

"I am not kidding. Not only wasn't it the right thing, but it was too big a dose for you. That size dose is for someone like Dar's daddy. You are not the size of Dar's daddy. I am going to call up that doctor and read him the riot act."

Kerry took a breath, and then released it. "I don't think he did it on purpose."

"That's not the point. We're doctors. We're supposed to know what the hell we're doing and not deliberately try to kill people. It's called the Hippocratic oath. Ever hear of it?" Dr Steve seemed truly outraged. "I'm sure that guy didn't do it on purpose, he was just in a hurry."

"Well." Kerry picked up her t-shirt, holding it in her hands. "It's a good thing Dar called you then, huh?"

"For once, she did. If it had been her, I bet she wouldn't have." Dr Steve patted her shoulder. "Now, go on in there and keep her company while I develop these. After that prescription, I want to make sure you don't have a tennis ball inside there or something he might have missed."

"Okay." Kerry walked out of the X-ray room and down the hall of the small family practice, passing two occupied rooms with nurses busy at their work. Dr. Steve had cut the bandage she'd had on off and as she passed the reception desk, she saw the doctor's daughter glance over and wince.

"Yow." The girl stood up and came over. "Wow, looks like you got hit with a baseball bat."

"Yeah." Kerry smiled as Dar jumped up and headed over. "Hon, give me a hand with the shirt. The doc's looking at my x-rays."

Dar took the garment and gathered it in her hands. "If I'd known your ribs looked like that two days ago we'd have been home way before now." She frowned at her partner, getting the clothing over her head and settling it around her carefully.

"I don't care what they look like." Kerry leaned against her. "I just want to go home and spend a few hours in our hot tub, have something scandalously decadent delivered for dinner, and crash with you in our waterbed after that."

Dar paused, and looked slightly overwhelmed. "Boy, that sounds great." She said, after a minute. "No laptops, no pagers, no pain in the ass government officials..."

"You guys had a rough time up there, huh?" Sheryl commiserated.

"We did." Kerry said. "We're glad to be home."

Dr. Steve came out of the hallway, and crooked his finger at them. "C'mere, kiddies."

Dar and Kerry joined him in his small office, where he put the X-rays up on a screen and turned it on. "Look here." He pointed at a curved shadow on the picture. "That's your rib, Kerry. You have not one, but three hairline fractures." He indicated three things that looked like scratches. "A little more pressure, and that would have been a real fracture, and probably caused you a hell of a problem."

"Yow." Kerry grimaced. "So what do I do?"

"Nothing." Dr. Steve said. "They're already healing, see here?" He indicated a blur on one end. "We wrap you up and you go home and relax, which I gather is what you want to do anyway."

Kerry nodded vigorously.

"I will give you something to take the edge off." Dr. Steve continued. "Can I talk you into taking a few days off as well?"

"Absolutely." Dar answered for her. "We're both taking the rest of the week off."

The doctor stared at her suspiciously.

"Thanks boss." Kerry gave her a kiss on the shoulder. "Can we go out on the boat?"

"Absolutely." Dar agreed.

"Let me get you wrapped up before this pipe dream disappears." Dr. Steve waved Kerry out to the hallway. "I should take an x-ray of her head, the way she's talking."

**

Twilight found Kerry seated on the porch, a tall glass of ice tea by her side, and a Labrador at her feet. She rocked the swing chair back and forth with one foot braced against the railing, and savored the salt tinged air wafting past her face.

It was so good to be finally home. She reached down and scratched Chino's ears. "Hey Cheebles.. you glad we're back?"

Chino stood up and licked her knee, laying her chin there and staring soulfully up at Kerry. "Gruff."

"I'm glad we're back too." Kerry told her pet. "I missed you." She watched Chino's tail wag, and felt like wagging her own in response. "Thanks for being good for your grandma."

The sliding door opened, and Dar appeared, wandering over to join her and stepping over Chino to take a seat next to her.

"Ahhh." Dar propped her feet up on the rail, and put her hands behind her head. "Damn I'm glad to be here."

"Me too." Kerry took a sip of her ice tea. "Listen to those waves."

The ocean was crashing up against the beach, and the seawall, and they could hear rollers coming in. "Dad just called. He and Mom just made it back over to South Point." Dar said. "He said we should get together for dinner sometime later on this week."

"Sure." Kerry leaned a little and kissed Dar on her bare shoulder. "Whatever you want to do is cool with me."

Dar put her arm over Kerry's shoulders and let her head rest against her partner's. "I want to put you in the hot tub." She said. "I have some cold apple cider chilling next to it and a bowl of cherries."

Kerry was more than ready for that. She was already in her swimsuit and she joined Dar on the steps to the tub, easing down into the heated water as the scent of chlorine rose around her. The warmth stole into her bones and she felt a sense of relief as she settled in place and the bubbles rumbled around her soothingly. "OOohhhh."

Dar slid into place next to her. She tipped her head back and looked up, to see a partly cloudy sky just starting to show a few stars scattered around. They usually visited the hot tub at night, when the shadows and indirect lighting let them dispense with the swimsuits, but it was very nice to just float weightless in the water as the sky turned dark. "Feel better?"

Kerry let herself relax, and felt the tension drain from her as the bubbles flowed gently over her body. Her muscles relaxed, and even the ache in her ribs subsided a little as she no longer bore weight on her chest. "That feels wonderful." She admitted.

"It does." Dar agreed. "If you didn't have cracked ribs I'd suggest we go out for a night dive."

"Ooh." Kerry imagined the immersion and the rich twilight. "Stupid damn ribs."

"We have time." Dar offered her a glass of cider. "We can just be beach bums this week."

Kerry sipped the cold, fizzy drink. "You were serious? We're taking the week off?"

"This week, and next week if we want to." Dar responded. "They just got a month's worth of hours out of us in six days. We're due."

"Good." Kerry set the cup down and closed her eyes. "I want to sleep in tomorrow. I told Mayte to just tell everyone who calls I'm on sick leave."

Dar rolled onto her side and nibbled Kerry's ear. "I told Maria to say our offices are closed for the week." She whispered. "And not to save the voice mails or emails."

Kerry eased over onto her side facing her partner. She rested her hand on Dar's hip and leaned forward, kissing her partner on the lips. "We're going to regret these suits, aren't we?" She savored the sensual rush as Dar's arms gently encircled her, pulling them together.

"Just this once I wish we'd put on bikinis." Dar admitted. "Or waited until it was dark."

Kerry had to admit she agreed. "Twenty twenty hindsight." She settled a little closer and kissed Dar again, the rush of the water over her skin now equal parts comforting and erotic. She blocked out the recent past and concentrated on body pressed up against her, fingers already itching to slide the strap of Dar's suit down her shoulder.

There was no pressure against her ribs, and though she still ached, she could breathe with some comfort in the weightlessness of the water. Even the ache faded as Dar's hand slid along the back of her thigh and their lips met again, for a longer exploration.

It was so strange not to feel anxious. Kerry gave in to her inclination and slid Dar's strap down, feeling a faint chuckle against her lips as she did so. So strange not to have all that tension and the ticking clock hanging over them.

The warm water suddenly swirled against her bare breasts as Dar neatly extracted her upper body from her suit before she even realized it was happening. She shoved aside her thoughts and focused on the teasing touch against her nipples, the gentle tweaks wringing a guttural sound from deep in her throat.

It was still twilight, but she didn't care. She got Dar's other strap down and they worked their suits off in something like harmony, motions slow and easy, ending in a rush of passion as their bare bodies met and brushed against each other.

Dar's hand stroked lightly down the inside of her thigh, and Kerry forgot about everything except the desire she felt and the craving of her body for that touch. She half rolled onto her back as Dar's attentions became intimate, her hands sliding down Dar's sides in response.

The sensations built so fast she barely had time to take a breath, Her body felt like it was on fire and she surrendered to the wave of intensity, just holding onto Dar to keep herself from slipping under the water.

Her body tensed and convulsed, her grip tightening instinctively and then slowly loosening as her heart hammered incessantly in her ears. She let her head fall back and looked up at Dar, who was gazing lazily down at her, a sexy, knowing smile on her face.

The whole world could have changed around them, but it didn't matter. Kerry cupped the back of Dar's neck and pulled her head down for a kiss, her other hand making it's way down her partner's belly.

They mattered. This mattered. Being in love mattered. Let the world go crazy. She couldn't give a damn.

**

Dar surveyed her handiwork on the tray, trying to decide if there were exactly enough grapes surrounding the crab claws and shrimp or if she needed to add another handful. Eventually she selected a few strawberries instead, and settled them in place, and then she picked up the tray and headed into the living room with it.

Kerry was sitting in one of the plush leather chairs in her pajamas, her feet up on an ottoman, and a colorful dive magazine in her hands. She looked up as Dar entered, her face creasing into an easy grin. "Oh my gosh, Paladar. What do you have there?"

"Dinner." Dar set the tray down on the table between the two chairs. "You wanted decadent, you got it. We've got seafood platters with a half dozen things to dunk stuff in, hush puppies, corn fritters, conch fritters, spicy fries, corn on the cob, a token bowl of cream spinach so you don't spank me, and Baileys mocha milkshakes."

"Ahhh." Kerry surveyed the feast. "Where do I start?" She picked up the milkshake and sucked on it. "Mm." She pointed at the magazine with her pinky. "We should go on a dive boat, Dar."

"We own a dive boat, hon." Dar curled up in the chair across from her partner. She picked up a crab claw and dunked it in a few things, then sucked the flesh from it with a low gurgle. "Mm.."

"Yes, I know." Kerry selected a shrimp and scooped up a thick coating of cocktail sauce. "But I think it would be cool if we go somewhere the Dixie can't take us, like Australia or Papua New Guinea and do a diving live aboard there."

"Hm." Dar nibbled on a corn fritter. "That could be fun. Is there a package advertised in there?" She pointed at the magazine. "Gimme. I'll book us."

Kerry tossed the magazine over. "Page 74." She said. "It's a nice looking boat, and they got good reviews."

Dar examined the page, while she sucked on a crab claw. "You got it." She said. "They've got a ten day going out end of October. Want that for a birthday present?"

"Yep."

"Done."

Kerry grunted in contentment, carefully lifting her plate over and resting it on the arm of the chair as she dug into its contents. "That's going to be so cool."

They hadn't talked about work since they'd gotten home. Dar had no intention of changing that trend. "How's your side feeling?"

Kerry chewed her shrimp and swallowed before she answered. "It hurts." She admitted. "If I breathe the wrong way, it's painful, and if I move my arm around a lot. It's not that bad though." She went back for a crab claw. "It feels a lot better just being here in our home."

Dar nodded in agreement. She stretched her legs out and propped her feet on the ottoman, reaching with her other hand out for the remote control. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Crocodile man." Kerry said. "Anything except news and sports."

"Gotcha." Dar found the channel and set the remote down. "After we wake up tomorrow I'm going to go down and spool the boat up. Maybe we can do sunset on the water tomorrow night. I'll have the club cater the galley."

"Sounds great to me." Kerry took a sip of her milkshake. "You think the seas are still up from that storm?"

"Hurricane Gabrielle?" Dar chuckled. "I'll check the marine forecast, but it should be all right if we head south."

"Head south." Kerry mused. "Want to go to the cabin? Chino'd love that, wouldn't you, Chi?"

The Labrador's head popped up, ears perked. Her tail started sweeping the tile floor.

"Yeah, I do." Dar said, after a brief pause. "I want to get lost for a few days. Hard to do that here."

Kerry looked up and studied her partner's profile for a moment. Dar didn't seem upset, just somewhat thoughtful and quiet, and she wondered what was going through her head. She almost asked, and then she decided to be patient and see if Dar would start talking about it instead.

They ate in silence for a little while, watching the antics on the screen. Kerry took a few forkfuls of the spinach and munched them, enjoying the fresh, green taste that cut the richness of the fritters and the tangy taste of the cocktail sauce.

The items were familiar to her. She and Dar often shared fresh seafood, which they both liked, and she'd gained a taste for the sweet spiciness of the fritters and the rough texture of the corn. She dipped a fritter in the spinach and chewed it, washing the whole thing down with a mouthful of milkshake that tasted almost as bad for her she figured it probably was.

Who cared? She picked up another crab claw and dunked it in the butter sauce. "Did I dream it, or did I actually show my mother my tattoo?" She asked, glancing at Dar. "I sort of halfway remember something like that."

"You did." Dar agreed. "You pulled your shirt off in the conference room and your mom was right there. I was counting your ribs."

"Jesus." Kerry laughed softly. "Oh well, Worse ways for her to see it I guess." She said. "All in all, she really wasn't that bad for all this, even before it happened. I think I was more of a jerk to her than the other way around."

"She's had her moments." Dar demurred.

"No, I know." Kerry worked on cleaning her plate. "Nothing's going to change what happened between us, it happened. I know that, and I think she knows that. But I really was a bastard those first few days, Dar. I'm kind of ashamed of that."

"But you're such a cute bastard, Ker." Her partner didn't seem fazed. "Anyway, it all ended up pretty much okay, didn't it? I thought she reacted pretty well to the tattoo. She didn't freak out. Dad said she told him she was happy she'd been invited down here."

Kerry munched a fry. "Yeah." She said, after a moment's thought. "She came through for us at the Exchange. She had no idea what was going on, but she just went with what I was asking." Kerry remembered the moment. "Maybe there's hope for us."

"I'm thinking we'll find out at your sister's wedding." Dar said, dryly. "I hope you get to pick your own dress, and you don't have to wear one of those creepy bow front things."

"I'll pick my own dress. They know better." Kerry smiled. "I'm glad for Angie."

"Me too." Dar said. "I was hoping they'd get together. I know your mother had them move in but two kids to take care of can be tough. I know my mother had a rough time with just me."

"Just you?" Kerry looked affectionately at her partner. "Honey you're equal to triplets in anyone's book." She finished the last of her fries and sat back. "Whoof. I'm stuffed." She rested her chin on her fist, her elbow propped on the chair arm.

"Too stuffed for key lime pie?" Dar eyed her.

"Hm."

"That's what I thought."

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Kerry idly watched a seagull wheel over the dock, peering hopefully down at the tall figure wandering back up the beach. She was ensconced comfortably in the big hammock on the porch of their cabin, her bare feet dusted with sand and her skin slightly tight with sun and salt air.

It was Friday. She was several shades bronzer, a few pounds heavier, and her ribs had subsided to an ache she could manage with Advil. They had spent most of the week just lazing around the cabin, swimming in the surf and taking walks down the beach together since the weight of their dive gear was too much for Kerry's injured side to handle.

They had spent time shell hunting instead. Kerry now had quite a collection of them, and she was pondering what to do with them as she swung in the languid air. Maybe some jewelry? She'd found several tiny olives she imagined would make pretty earrings, at any rate.

She wondered if Dar would like them. She knew some of her work colleagues would. Maybe she'd make a few for Mayte and Maria before they went back. There was a place down the road that she knew would have the settings for them and a goldsmith's shop she could get chains at a little further south.

"Hey." Dar arrived on the porch, tweaking one of Kerry's toes as she dropped into a chair nearby. Chino trotted up after her, shaking herself free of salt and sand, before she went over to a large bowl near the door and lapped thirstily.

"Hey." Kerry amiably replied.

"You decided yet?" Dar leaned back and laced her fingers behind her head.

Kerry studied her partner. Dressed in a tattered pair of shorts and a tank top, her dark hair windblown all to hell, it was very hard to imagine her willingly going back to their maroon offices in Miami encased in a business suit.

Or was that just rationalization for what she wanted to do anyway? Eh. Kerry smiled. Who cared? "I want to stay here. We can do a little work from our offices back there."

"Great decision." Dar complimented her. "Especially since we're getting a couple of visitors next week. Alastair's dropping by for his scuba lesson."

"Really?" Kerry rested her hands on her stomach and twiddled her thumbs. "That should be fun. Is he bringing his wife?"

"Yes. They're going to stay in one of the resorts down the road." Dar said. "We're going to have a board meeting while he's here. Get some stuff resolved. Talk about the market. The whole worlds in a tailspin."

"Okay." Kerry wriggled into a slightly more comfortable position. "Sounds good to me. I still don't have to look at email until Monday, right?"

Dar gazed at her, a faint grin on her face. "Nope."

Kerry closed her eyes. "Good." She wiggled her toes. "I've almost got my brain to the fully flushed point, where I maybe could start thinking of dealing with all the crap again by Monday."

Dar got up and circled the hammock, taking hold of the edge and lowering herself into it next to Kerry. She snuggled up next to her partner and sighed happily. "I vote we move the company down here. What do you think?"

"Mm." Kerry pondered that. "We'd have a hell of a time in hurricane season, honey." She mused. "But yeah, I would love to leave the traffic and the chaos behind for a while."

"Well." Dar rested her head against Kerry's. "It'll depend which way the company wants to go. If we pull out of the government contracts like Alastair was talking about, that's one thing. But I got an email from Gerry."

"Uh oh."

"Apparently." Dar cleared her throat. "That little bit of weenie waggling Alastair did had the reverse effect than he was looking for. He got some major mojo points for telling those bastards to kiss his ass."

"Oh for Pete's sake." Kerry rolled her eyes. "Why in the hell would we want to get involved with them after what they did, Dar? They tried to screw us to the wall!"

"Huge amounts of money." Her partner replied. "Unlimited budget. Unlimited resources. Gerry's happy as a clam. He apparently thinks I should be too."

"Are you?" Kerry turned her head to study Dar's profile.

Dar looked up at the porch overhang for a little while as they swung together. "I'm a moderately patriotic person." She said, finally. "My father's a retired career military officer. I grew up on a military base. I came very, very close to joining the service."

"I remember when you got that medal." Kerry said. "You couldn't have stood up any straighter if you'd been a soldier."

Dar nodded. "I've always been very proud of the fact that our company handled.. no, protected so many resource of our country. I felt it was... it was always sort of a way I could be a part of that world even though I decided against it way back when."

"And?" Kerry asked, after a period of silence.

"And now, after what we just went through with the people representing our government I feel ashamed to admit to anyone we have anything to do with them." Dar's voice was gentle, and reflective. "I feel betrayed."

"When I was down by the battery, I gave one of those firemen working there some ice tea." Kerry said. "He said the same thing. He felt betrayed." She curled her fingers around Dar's. "See, and I always came at it from the opposite direction, Dar. I always felt betrayed by our government because I lived with it. I saw it from the inside."

"Mm." Dar grunted. "I never thought of you like that."

Kerry chuckled. "I know. I think you see me as a lot more innocent than I really am." She said. "I don't show you my bastard side."

"You never did Even when I was going to fire you."

"No." Kerry admitted. "You never gave me a chance. I fell in love with you the minute I saw you and the worst I could be was indignant. God, how confusing that was for me. I wanted to be so nasty to you and I think the worst thing I ever said was..."

"That you hoped I was going straight to hell because that was where I belonged." Dar interjected.

Kerry was quiet for a moment. "Yeah." She said. "Right before you saved my ass from being robbed, and maybe raped, and probably killed. So much for my ability to judge people, huh?"

"Meh." Dar shrugged, chuckling under her breath.

Kerry exhaled. "What are you going to do, Dar?"

"I don't know." Dar answered. "I just don't know. I want to talk to Alastair, find out what he thinks, and tell him what I'm thinking. I know we talked about starting our own company before but..."

"But now maybe we mean it." Kerry finished, in a soft tone. "I could make a change. I like what I do, but sometimes it's like looking at a never-ending train track of problems just coming at you. I don't know how you did it as long as you did."

"You know what our biggest problem is?" Dar pondered the ceiling again. "I know they'll put me under a non compete clause if I resign, for one thing, and for another, if I open a consulting firm the first people who are going to banging at my door will probably be the government."

"How long for the non compete?" Kerry asked.

"A year, probably. That's the standard." Dar replied. "But in return for that I get all my accrued vacation time, my pension, stock options... it's a bribe but it's a pretty good one."

"So can we go traveling around the world for a year?" Kerry asked. "Just seeing stuff?"

Dar cocked her head thoughtfully. "Now, that doesn't sound bad at all." She admitted. "Is that something you'd like to do? You want to just blow everything off for a year?"

"Are you kidding me?" Kerry eased over onto her left side and wrapped herself around Dar's body. "Yes. I would very much like to do that. Maybe after Angie's wedding, we can just take off and go everywhere. Anywhere."

"That would work." Dar said, after a brief pause. "Because we'll need to give them a couple months to find our replacements." She smiled. "Wow. I can't believe how good it feels to say that."

Kerry gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks."

"For?" Dar nibbled her earlobe.

"Not making me ask you to fire me."

Dar looked at her in surprise.

"I'm halfway kidding." Kerry admitted. "It's just been so nice to be able to do whatever I wanted this week instead of what I felt like I had to do." She traced one of Dar's ribs. "I guess seeing what happened to so many of those people... made me realize how precious every minute is."

Dar captured her hand and lifted it, kissing the knuckles. "Yeah." She said. "That's pretty much how I feel too. I don't want to waste all my life minutes on broken routers." She went nose to nose with Kerry. "We need to have more fun."

Kerry grinned. "Of course, every time we try to have fun..." She reminded Dar. "We get our asses in trouble."

"That can be fun too." Dar cupped her cheek, and then kissed her on the lips. "You up for a walk on the beach before dinner?" She asked. "I think we're going to have a nice sunset."

They rolled carefully out of the hammock, and paused long enough for Kerry to duck inside and get her camera and a couple of bottles of beer. Then they sauntered down the steps and headed off across the sand, with Chino racing ahead of them.

"You think I could make shell jewelry Dar?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"But would you wear it?"

"Sure."

"Even if I made you a pair of three inch round sand dollar earrings?"

"No."

"You wouldn't?"

"No."

"How about a shark's tooth necklace?"

"Now you're talking."

**

The End (for now)