MOVING TARGET

MELISSA GOOD

PART 1

THE CONFERENCE ROOM WAS ALMOST FULL, EVERY SEAT AT THE LONG TABLE TAKEN save the one at the head of it. Late afternoon sunlight poured into the room, resisting the valiant efforts of even the several ton air conditioning plant to alleviate it's effects, and after a moment shading his eyes, Mark Polenti got up and walked over to the glass panel. "Son of a bitch." He lowered the shades. "You could cook a damn egg on this thing."

"No kidding." Peter Prescott, one of the IT group leaders agreed. "I start sweating just thinking about going out to my car."

With a shake of his head, Mark returned to his seat. The MIS manager picked up and flipped his pen, settling back in one of the leather chairs that ringed the table. "Long damned summer."

"Mm."

"Yeah."

Agreement chimed in from around the table full of assorted technical managers. "I wouldn't go outside for ten minutes longer than I had to." Peter added. "Man, I see those freaking tourists on the beach… you can just see them frying like turkeys at Thanksgiving."

"You got that right." Mark snorted.

The door to the conference room opened, and they all turned. Eyes opened wider as the newcomer commenced to dance inside, jiving to a song apparently audible only to her as she made her way across the room and ended up bouncing into the chair at the end of the table.

Relatively short, but sporting a lithely muscular build, the woman shrugged out of her neatly tailored blue jacket and draped it over the back of the chair, before she leaned on the padded surfaced in a jaunty finish to her dance.

"Hi, guys." Kerry grinned at them. "Is today not an awesome day, or what?"

The operations department heads all looked at each other, then peered down the table at their blond leader. Kerry was dressed in a no nonsense business suit, with an impeccably pressed cream colored silk shirt, but her pale, summer cropped hair was so tousled it appeared that the vice president of operations had stuck her head out of some car window on the way back from lunch.

"Um." Mark cleared his throat. "Yeah, it's okay." He allowed. "We got the espresso machine working again, at least." His eyebrows quirked. "Did you.. like.. drink a couple cups to celebrate or something?"

"Nope." Kerry laced her fingers together before her on the table. "Guess again."

"Did… we make our numbers?" Peter hazarded.

"Yes, but that's not why I'm jazzed." His boss replied.

"Did.. your dog have puppies?" Ellen Jasmine chimed in from across the table, her weathered face wrinkling up in a grin.

"No, no no." Kerry waggled her hand. "No puppies, no kittens, and neither Dar nor I are pregnant so don't even go there." She danced a little in her seat. "C'mon, c'mon… we've only been talking about this for a month."

Mark made a face. "Don't tell me you're all whacked about going to the technology convention."

Kerry grinned widely.

Her audience wasn't sure whether to laugh or groan. "Jesus." Mark covered his eyes. "Man, I thought I was the primo geek in this place." He pointed at Kerry. "Not no more. You win. I give."

The Operations VP opened her leather folder, and chuckled. "Actually." She glanced around and lowered her voice. "I could give a gopher's wazoo about the convention. I've been waiting to go back to Disney World with Dar since forever." Her face creased into

a grin again, it's summer tan emphasizing the bleached lightness of her hair, and the vivid green of her eyes.

"Ahhhh!" Ellen laughed. "Now I get it!"

"Augh… Orlando in July? Kerry, you're gonna regret it." Mark objected. "Not even the Mouse could get me up there in this weather."

"You." Kerry pointed at him. "Have obviously never done Disney with Dar." She pulled out her agenda. "Now. Let's see where we are this month." She smoothly switched gears, her voice dropping a few notes and becoming more businesslike. "Okay, I've got some good news, and some bad news."

The room settled down, and became more serious. Around the table, eyes met in mild apprehension, the universal fear of skilled, valued, but ultimately powerless parts of the company machine to statements of that nature. Even though most in the room trusted Kerry, and all liked her, still they also knew exactly where her loyalties were.

"Let me get the bad news out of the way." Kerry said. "First of all, let me make it clear that in no way do I, or Dar for that matter, hold anyone here responsible for the fact that twenty percent of our contracts up for renewal this quarter did not sign." She looked up, meeting the eyes facing her squarely. "Our service was not in question, nor was it a factor in the signings."

Mark exhaled. "Fuckin lowballers."

Kerry's expressive face twitched a little. "For the record – when sales brought the final numbers to the table, it was Dar who drew the line and said we would not counter bid them. Okay?" She gave them a moment to absorb the words. "Dar said she would not trade off our services levels for paper numbers. We decided we couldn't provide acceptable levels of response for the dollars they were suggesting." She paused. "I agreed wholeheartedly."

Bodies relaxed around the room, falling back into the leather chairs with faintly audible squeaks.

"Kerry, that's an amazing thing to hear." Ellen said, in a serious tone. "I have a friend who works for our friends out west, and last time something like this happened, they took big time heat for it."

Kerry rested her chin on her hands. "Dar would never let that happen." She said. "But let me tell you, those meetings in Houston last week weren't pretty."

"Yeah, I bet." Mark muttered. "But, Kerry, I saw those freakin numbers. No way in hell those guys can deliver what they said they would."

His boss shrugged one shoulder lightly. “Time will tell. But in the meantime, we have twenty percent of our budget we need to find funding for, or else lose it. That means you all need to look vveeerrrryyy carefully at your books and see if we have slack room.” She warned “If we have a repeat next quarter, things are going to get very tight around here.”

Everyone nodded in grim understanding.

“Now, on the bright side.” Kerry changed gears again, seeing in the looks she’d studied the response she was looking for. “We did make our service numbers, in fact…” She smiled warmly. “We exceeded them. I’m very proud of that, and so’s Dar.” Her eyes twinkled just a little. “And so, even though I know you all must have heard about the salary freeze…”

Mark cleared his throat. Ellen looked away, out the window. The rest of the table found something to study that didn’t involve middling height blond women. Everyone knew how much Kerry hated office gossip, and wise people didn’t bring it up in her presence.

“It doesn’t apply to us.” Kerry finished quietly. “I’ve processed the first of this quarter’s raises and bonuses, and they should be hitting your worklists by the time you get back to your offices.” She almost smiled at the instinctive gasps at the very unexpected statement. “Please let your people know that we appreciate all the hard work they’ve put in this year, and we hope they continue along through the rest of the year the same way.”

For a very long moment there was silence around the table. Then Mark rocked forward and thumped his elbows against the table. “Holy crap, boss. My socks are still bouncing off the walls here.” He said. “Aren’t the rest of those guys gonna be pissed?”

Kerry leaned back in her chair, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankles. “Well.” She steepled her fingers and tapped the tips against her chin. “First off, no one should be talking about it.” One blond eyebrow cocked meaningfully. “But second, if someone has a problem, just direct them that way.” She jerked her thumb sideways, in the general direction of Dar’s office.

“Not to you?” Ellen asked, curiously.

Kerry’s nostrils flared just slightly. “Dar’s orders.” She replied in brief words. After another moment of silence, she nodded. “Okay, so, next on the agenda….”

Her staff shifted around the table and leaned forward, sorting their own papers and relaxing. Kerry took the opportunity to silently evaluate them, absorbing the air of surprise at her last statement. They knew her to be a fierce defender of her own prerogatives, and one of the very few people in the company not only willing, but able to stand up to their legendary CIO.

Ah well. Kerry folded her hands over her stomach, twiddling her thumbs idly. Everyone would get over it in a few days, and after all, there was Disney World to contemplate.

It wasn't that she was making light of the company's troubles – they weighed on her shoulders more than most. But as she'd told her staff, the troubles hadn't been laid at their doorstep, and the best thing they all could to right now was just keep doing their job, as best as they were able.

And that meant putting on a good show at the convention. "Everyone ready for the trade show, since I mentioned it?" She asked.

"Advance team's packed and itchin." Mark replied, checking something off on his agenda.

"Who's in charge?" Kerry asked. "You going?"

The MIS manager glanced up at her. "Peter. He's buds with Eleanor's chief whiner. They get along great."

"He the one with the pierced eyebrows?"

"Eh…"

"Good choice." Kerry spun her papers. "Okay, tell me what didn't come in on time this week."

* * *

"Dar, listen."

"I'm listening." Dar Roberts selected a colorful dart from the case resting on her knees and let fly, grinning in triumph when it's point buried itself in a newly wall mounted target. "I'm not hearing anything but bilge wash so far, but I'm listening."

"Bilge wash? You been out on that boat of yours again?" Alastair McLean chuckled.

"Been around my daddy." Dar replied, launching another dart. "Alastair, we've been around and around with this. We both know there's no damn good answer."

A long sigh issued through the phone.

"I've put as much pressure on every supplier we have, pushed as hard as I could, gotten everyone down to the lowest cost they can do without losing money." Dar said.

"I know that."

“Cut our costs to the bone. We don’t have any padding, not one area that I can point to and say, fluff.”

“Dar, I know that too.”

Dar thwacked another dart in the target, nailing the bulls eye. “So why are we still on this call? What else do you want from me, Alastair? Want me to sell my desk?”

Another long sigh. “You could can those raises.”

“No.”

“Dar.”

“No.” Dar repeated firmly. “Take it out of my check if you want to. Those people deserve it.”

Her boss grunted. “Hell of a time for you to be turning into Robin Hood.”

The inner door to Dar’s office cracked open, and a shaggy blond head poked inside Dar’s face responded with a wide grin, and she twirled a dart in silence, pointing at the phone and mock aiming at it. “Me, Robin Hood? Get out of here. I just value my people like you value yours.”

Kerry snapped her fingers in silence, then pointed at Dar, biting her lip.

“Ahem.” Alastair cleared his throat. “Walked into that one, didn’t I?” He admitted. “All right, but please, Dar – try to drum up something good at the convention, will ya? I need something other than bad news for the board meeting next month.”

“Do what I can.”

“I know I can count on you Dar.” Alastair concluded. “Good luck!”

The line clicked off. Dar rolled her eyes as she waited none to patiently for Kerry to cross the carpet and arrive at her side. “Hey there.”

“Hi.” Kerry sat on the edge of Dar’s desk, dangling her feet and allowing her moderate heels to slip off. “He sounds worried.”

“He is.” Her partner agreed.

“You don’t sound worried.”

Dar flipped another dart at her board, a newly christened present from Kerry. “Wanna know the truth?’ She searched Kerry’s face intently. “I don’t know how much I really care.”

Kerry reached over and ran her fingers through Dar’s thick, dark hair, moving the slightly shaggy bangs out of her pale blue eyes. “Yeah, I know.” She murmured. Dar’s skin was a shade darker tan than her own, and there were several sun lightened streaks in the locks her hand stirred.

Dar’s lashes fluttered and she fiddled with a dart. “Ah, I still do care.” She half shrugged. “I just can’t take the whole thing so damn seriously anymore.”

“It’s okay.” Her partner said. “I have to admit I’m more excited about going back to Disney World with you than I am about the convention, so don’t feel bad.”

Dar peeked up at her. “Really?”

Kerry grinned wholeheartedly. “Yeah. I keep trying to figure out how we can run the display scenarios from our PDAs.” She scratched Dar behind the ears with her fingertips. “How’d you like to go up a little early, just to check out the convention center?”

Her tall boss slid open the flat drawer at the front of her desk and withdrew a folder, dexterously opening it with her thumb and displaying the contents.

“Mmm…. I think those are plane tickets.”

“I think you’re right.” Dar agreed. “C’mon.” She got up, curling her arm around Kerry’s waist and drawing her up as well. “Let’s go get some bags packed, Yankee.”

Kerry amiably returned the hug, resting her head against Dar’s shoulder and reflecting on her lover’s surprise at finding their bags well and truly already packed. “Hey, Dar?”

“That’s me.”

“If we get a memory upgrade for my Palm, I really think I can run the data apps.”

“While we go down the water slides?”

“Yeah.”

Dar walked her towards the door, considering the question. “You’ll need a waterproof case for it.” She finally concluded. “I think the dive shop has them in blue.”

Kerry only chuckled, as they walked through the door, and headed for the elevator.

* * *

Ahh. Kerry closed her eyes, and exhaled, enjoying the slight chill of the condo's air conditioning against her newly showered skin. She could still faintly smell the spices of their stir fry dinner in the air, and feel the ache of their joint sparring session in her upper arms.

Life was good. Even though she wasn't entirely sure she was going to really catch on to kickboxing, she found she loved every minute of the classes they were taking for it. It was a new skill for Dar as well, and just the learning process felt exciting and fun.

Besides, Dar looked so cute in boxing gloves.

"Hey, Ker?"

Kerry opened one eye, and rotated it around towards Dar's bedroom. "Yeah?" She wriggled into a more comfortable position flat on her back on the couch, and waited.

"Think a t-shirt'll be okay on the plane?"

T-shirt. Kerry considered the question with due seriousness. "Tank top." She disagreed. "Like that nice pale blue one you had on the other day."

The faint scuff of bare footsteps intruded into the living room, accompanied by their maker. "What?" Dar queried, putting her hands on her hips. "The damn things are air conditioned, Kerry."

"I know." The blond woman agreed readily. "But I really love you in that tank top, and if you get too cold, I can always warm you up." She studied the tall, lithe figure in its worn jeans and bra. "Or you could just go like that."

Her lover sauntered over and took a seat on the edge of the couch, draping her arm over Kerry's hips and gazing affectionately at her. "Does that mean you'll wear your new suit on the plane then?" She asked, with a grin.

"The gray one?" Kerry hazarded. "Dar, it's sorta see through."

Dar grinned.

"Hm." Kerry slid her hand up the inside of Dar's thigh. "Nah, let's save it for the wave pool." She conceded. "I am so looking forward to this trip." Her face creased into an easy grin. "I have such cool memories of the last one."

The blue eyes twinkled brightly. "Me too." Dar said. "I wish we didn't have the stupid convention to deal with, but I guess it's as good an excuse as any to spend a week up

there." She leaned a little against Kerry. "You all packed? Dad picked Chino up while you were in the shower."

"Yep, I'm all set. One medium sized case full of fun clothes, and a garment bag for the monkey suits. You all ready? I'll go start up the buggy."

"Just have to put my shirt on." Dar leaned forward, smiling as Kerry's arms slipped around her neck and they kissed. After a few moments of increasing intensity, she braced herself and slid around, stretching out half beside, half over Kerry's body.

It was a good size couch, and they had a lot of practice fitting on it together. Dar kept up the kiss as she slowly eased her hand under the fabric of Kerry's cotton shirt, tracing a path up the center of her belly and ending up curling her fingers around the curve of Kerry's right breast.

Even after a year and a half, it still grabbed her right in the guts, the reaction of her body so strong under Dar's gentle touch it made it hard to think straight. Kerry returned the attention, easier for her since there was nothing between her partner and herself except the thin silk of Dar's bra.

She loved the way Dar's body fit her hands. "We're gonna miss the plane." Kerry whispered, circling Dar's navel with her index finger.

"We can drive." Dar bit her earlobe gently. "My folks and I used to, all the time."

Kerry lost herself in the rich scent of Dar's skin for a little while. Then she paused, and poked her partner in the ribs very gently. "Know what?"

Dar went nose to nose with her, licking her lips with an attentive tongue. "What?"

"Let's drive." Kerry undid the top button on Dar's jeans. "It'll be fun." She let the rest of her thoughts drift away, burned off by the heat of passion igniting in her guts. "You.. me…"

"Corn dogs on the turnpike. Yeah." Dar laughed softly. "I'm all for it."

Kerry laughed with her, and savored the touch of her bare skin. She loved how Dar felt; loved the silky texture of her skin, and the light twitches of her reactions as Kerry's hands explored her.

She loved the low hum of approval when it tickled her ear, and pressure as Dar slid her thigh between Kerry's and tugged off her shorts.

And you know, sometimes life just rocked.

* * *

Two hours later, they were sitting side by side in Dar's Lexus, tooling down the Florida turnpike as the last of the sun disappeared behind the pines bordering the road. Kerry had the passenger seat pushed all the way back, and she had her bare feet propped up against the dashboard while Dar leaned back in a relaxed attitude with one hand on the wheel.

"Y'know, I think this really is a good idea." Kerry commented, after they'd been companionable silent for a few minutes while she chose a new CD to listen to. "We need a car up there anyway, and with all the time getting to the airport in Miami, and from the airport up there, it's probably a wash."

"Uh huh." Dar reached behind her, and removed a bottle of Yoohoo from the cooler in the back seat. "And we've got better in-flight refreshments."

Kerry slid a CD into the drive and leaned back, circling one knee with her arms. She watched the passing scenery, and decided most of the state of Florida had a lot in common with parts of the state of Michigan in terms of flat terrain and boring horticulture. "Is it like this all the way up?"

Dar glanced around in the twilight. "Pretty much." She admitted. "We used to leave at… four am, I guess, to get up here. Dad always said there wasn't nothing to look at, no sense in wasting sunlight on it." She recalled, shifting the car into the left lane to pass a dawdling truck. "You go on road trips much?"

Kerry laid her head back against the seat. "Not with my family, no." She replied, in a quiet tone. "But when we went to camp in the summer, yeah. All of us in the bus. That was kinda fun." A brief flash of civilization whipped by, a lone white house facing the road with a old, half rusted bus in front of it. "It wasn't really a wild and crazy camp – it was from my school. But Angie and I counted the days till we went there and we were always sorry to leave."

Dar moved to the right again, and settled back. "Where was it?"

"Up in the mountains." Her partner replied. "We had these precious little cabins, with maid service twice a day, and a valet to do our laundry. You know." Her eyes slid sideways. "Well, no, you don't know, but I look back on it now, and realize just how bloody damn pretentious it all was."

"Eh." The dark haired woman chuckled a little. "I went to the Y camp one or two summers, but when I got old enough, I went to the summer programs on base."

Kerry's lips twitched. "No valets, huh?"

"No." Dar shook her head. "You had kids who grew up on a military base, who had that mindset to begin with, and who lived in that culture. We did war games, camping,

hunting…" A smile appeared. "I had a blast. It was one of the few times I remember just being really…" She paused.

"Happy?" Kerry guessed.

"Content." Dar amended. "Accepted, maybe." She moved to the left again to bypass a Lincoln Town car longer than the Lexus being driven by what appeared to be an elf. "I was so damn sure that was the world I wanted."

"Well." Kerry swiped the bottle of Yoohoo and took a swig. "I never felt that way at camp. I was just glad to be out from under my parent's eyes. It was all so damn fake.. they had comportment classes, for Pete's sake."

"What?"

"How to walk, talk, and greet people without tripping and dumping your bad white wine on them." Kerry translated. "That and lanyard making. Jesus, do you know how many lanyards I made? Every damn color in the rainbow and let's not talk about the potholders."

Dar snickered. "You and I come from such different planets." She said. "Only thing I made in camp was a belt from old ammo cartridges I collected on the base and rifle webbing someone'd thrown away." She glanced at Kerry, watching the corners of her mouth curve up in a smile. "I'd have taken a potholder and used it to wipe my.."

"Dar!"

"Hey, you know what choices you have out in the bush?" Dar said. "Now you know where I got my dislike of camping from."

Kerry burst out laughing. "Oh my god… you have no idea how funny that is. In our camp, one summer, they got the wrong toilet paper delivered. It was that brown craft paper kind of stuff they usually have in really bad rest stops?"

"Ow."

"Yeah." Kerry nodded, still chuckling. "Well, me, the little rebel that I was, stole a case of it, and led the rest of my cabin in TP'ing the lead counselor's house so badly you couldn't even see the door." She did a little dance in her seat. "Oo..oo… the little bitch turned red as a tomato and didn't talk to us for a week!"

"Troublemaker."

"Angie was so pissed at me." Kerry snickered. "But that woman already hated my guts so…"

"Why?" Dar asked, curiously.

"I have no idea. She always wanted to make a lot of me, and I… she just made me really uncomfortable. I figured she was trying to get something from my parents." Kerry said. "She gave me the creeps."

Dar watched the Lexus' powerful headlights carve up the road ahead of them for a long moment, then she turned her head towards Kerry. "How old were you?"

"High school." Kerry replied. "Why?"

"Hm." The dark haired woman tapped her thumb against the steering wheel. "Ever think maybe she was interested in you?"

Kerry's brow creased. "Well, yeah – I mean, I said she was, Dar." She replied, then paused when she watched Dar's eyebrow hike up expressively. Realization hit, and she inhaled in slight surprise. "Oh. You mean…that kind of interested? Like.. romantically?"

"Uh huh." Dar returned her attention to the road, flicking her eyes to the passing sign and noting it's contents. "Wouldn't surprise me. You were cute in high school." She drawled, with a slight smile. "I've seen pictures."

Kerry remained absolutely silent for a few minutes, sucking absently on the neck of the Yoohoo bottle as she watched the shadowed trees flash by. Finally, she snorted a little, half surprised and half disgusted. "Never would have crossed my mind." She admitted. "I think I…. Brian and I had just started to go out.. I wouldn't even call it dating, it wasn't that serious. I probably would have freaked out if she'd…"

"Tried to seduce you?" Dar stretched out her free arm and laid it over Kerry's shoulders. "She'd have been an idiot, given your folks, but…" She scratched Kerry's neck with her fingertips. "You were really an adorable kid."

Kerry blushed, just slightly. "You know, I really never even thought anything like that. By that time, I'd learned just how far people would go to get in with my father, I just…" She exhaled. "Assumed she was more of the same."

"Well, maybe she was." Dar sensed her partner's discomfort. "I was just presenting another point of view." She tugged on Kerry's earlobe. "Want a pit stop?" She pointed to a sign indicating a rest stop ahead. "It's all commercial now, but I can show you where they used to sell the tackiest Florida souvenirs this side of Key Largo."

Kerry relaxed, and finished off the chocolate soda. "Sure." She agreed. "We've got plenty of time."

Dar signaled and pulled to the left, preparing to leave the highway. After a second, she glanced at Kerry, not surprised to find herself being studied by those sea green eyes. She winked at her partner, and was rewarded by a grin, which she returned.

The ride was turning out to be a darn sight more interesting than she'd remembered it.

* * *

People were so funny. Kerry leaned against the wall and watched some of their fellow travelers walk by. They were pretty much oblivious to everything on their way to get food, or drinks, or relieve themselves, and yet just about every other one of them paused to look at the figure studying the turnpike map on the wall.

Of course, Kerry was doing the same thing, but she felt she had an innate right to, since the sleek body wrapped in faded denim and tank top cotton belonged to her partner. Dar's jeans were the old, ripped ones Kerry had found way back when for their biker school reunion, and she had her tank top tucked in them and boy, she looked good.

She'd just gotten her second summer haircut, and it left most of her shoulders bare. The last few months of their life had been a lot of work, true, but almost every weekend spent down at the cabin and their new gym classes had given Dar a deeper tan and added a little more muscle to her tall frame.

Mm.

The rest stop was an interesting combination of retail outlet and tourist hard pitch. Kerry wandered around in the main lobby, examining the racks of leaflets as she sucked on a cone full of frozen strawberry yogurt. Florida was definitely both tourist driven, and eclectic, and she riffled through advertisements for things as varied as a mystery house where things ran uphill, to Monkey Jungle, to Weeki Watchee. "Paladar?"

"Yes?" Dar's voice erupted from right behind her, even after all this time making Kerry jump. "You rang?"

"What the heck is a Weeki Watchee?" Kerry selected the lurid pamphlet from the rack and held it up. "It looks like a mermaid farm."

"Sorta." Dar agreed. "It's a place where mermaids give shows, and sell trinkets."

Kerry stared at the advertisement. "And people go there? Really?"

"Well." Her partner examined the ad. "They have nice gardens, too, and I think a snack bar."

Kerry giggled, and wandered off, shaking her head. The rest stop was a relatively small place, with a central lobby that had restaurants off either side, and a set of surprisingly

clean restrooms. There was also a gift shop, where you could, if you for some reason had forgotten to purchase candy oranges or bright pink flamingo Christmas lights somewhere else, obtain those last minute gifts to bring back home with you.

Hm. “Snow globes.” Kerry selected one and shook it, amused by the white plastic flakes drifting down on the palm trees and beach. A flash of motion caught her eye and she glanced to one side, spotting her own reflection in the mirrored back of the display case.

The neatly pressed, carefully ironed and tucked prep she’d once been sure was gone. Kerry felt her eyebrows lifting as she reviewed her cutoff, ragged shorts and long, faded t-shirt.

Correction, long faded t-shirt that didn’t even belong to her. She’d also let her hair grow out longer than usual, not really out of control, but giving it a touch of shagginess she hadn’t had since she’d been small. The overall effect, given her tan and the sun bleaching of her already pale locks was that of a beach rat caught out shopping.

“So, rat… get shopping.” Kerry cheerfully directed herself, toasting her reflection with her yogurt.

She spotted a stuffed alligator and picked it up, finding herself smiling at it’s toothy cotton visage. She tucked the toy under her arm and continued browsing. To her booty, she added a package of chocolate covered orange slices and a t-shirt before she dropped it all down on the counter and removed her wallet from the back pocket of her jeans. “Hi.”

“Hi.” The cashier replied. “Yawannalotta?”

Kerry blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Yawannalotta? Big this week.”

At a total loss, Kerry instinctively looked around for her native guide, who plunked down a twenty dollar bill on the counter. “She’ll take three.” Dar pronounced. “And take the rest of this Floridiana out of that.”

“Three of what?” The blond woman whispered.

“Sure.” The cashier took the money and rang up Kerry’s purchases. She gave Dar back some change, then punched in some numbers in a black machine nearby and handed over the resulting pink and white tickets. “There ya go. Ya’ll have a great old day.”

“Thanks.” Dar took the tickets, the change, the bag, and a totally befuddled Midwesterner and hauled them all out of the gift shop and out into the lobby. “Here. Put your Lotto tickets away. If you win on em, I get ten percent.”

"My what?" Kerry took the tickets and examined them. "Oh!" She nibbled her cone. "Jesus, you know in all this time down here I never bothered to buy one of these things?" She followed Dar outside, trading the stinging chill of the air conditioning for the warm soup of the night air. "Thank you for buying my junk, sweetheart. You didn't have to do that. I've got my wallet."

Next to them, a minivan with Miami plates had just parked, and the side door slid open allowing a gaggle of children to emerge. They bolted for the doors to the building, with a harried looking woman chasing after them. In the back of the van there were Mouse droppings squeezed into every square inch.

A man got out of the driver's side and shut the door with an air of martyred exhaustion. He glanced at Kerry and Dar and gave them a civil nod before he trudged after his family.

Dar watched him go. "Think it'd be cruel to tell him he's going in the wrong direction?"

Kerry peered after him, then glanced at the big "Northbound" sign over the door. "What if he isn't, and that's all just from last time?" She pointed at the van. "And you didn't answer me about buying my stuff."

"Uh huh." Dar unlocked the Lexus, tossing the booty inside on the rear seat. "You bought dinner." She glanced at the van again. "Mom had a point."

"About?"

"Only one." Dar pointed at her chest and slid into the driver's seat.

"Ah. Hm. Yeah." Kerry got in on the passenger side and settled comfortably into the big leather seat. "That new place was pretty good, wasn't it? I really liked those spices they used."

Dar sucked a mouthful of milkshake up and set her cup into it's holder before she started up the car. "It was pretty good.. but yours is better." She said. "I like those crunchy things you put in."

"Peanuts?" Kerry chuckled. "Or do you mean the water chestnuts?"

"Whatever it is." Dar backed carefully out of the spot she'd parked in, and navigated her way through the parking lot and past the massive truck park. "I like it." She let an aggressively speeding Volvo pass them by, then got into the merge lane to return to the turnpike.

Once on the road, she leaned back in her seat and relaxed, enjoying Kerry's nearby presence and the prospect of spending the long trip at her side. It was quiet, the roads were nearly empty now that they'd left the more populated part of Florida, and at the end of the drive there was some serious fun waiting for her.

Life was good. Dar tapped the side of her thumb against the wheel and nodded a little to the music coming out of the speakers. "So, what did you think about that bird theory?"

Kerry had shed her sandals, and now had her bare feet propped up on the dashboard again. "Dar, did you know that it's pretty darn likely you'd have been tied to a tree and beaten to death by the teachers at my high school just for thinking about the bird theory?"

Dar looked at her. Both eyebrows shot up. "What did they have against birds?"

"Nothing." Kerry neatly nibbled an exact circle around her cone. "But boy, did they have a problem with Darwin."

"Ah."

"Mm." The blond woman agreed. "You know something, it's funny, but I think that was the first time I found myself questioning the absolute nature of my religion." She mused. "I remember seeing something… on PBS, I guess.. about species evolution, and the way they explained it, it just made so much sense, Dar!"

"Uh huh. Always pissed me off they insisted on calling it the theory of evolution instead of the science of it." Dar agreed. "I had this argument with someone on base about it.. the woman wanted to have me jailed for heresy."

"Mm." Kerry nodded. "That's about what happened to me when I went into school the next day and started asking my teachers about it. Hoo boy." She finished up her treat and dusted her fingertips off. "But you know… for me it never caused a problem if I bought into evolutionary science, but still believed in God, and in Jesus and the bible." She continued. "Seeing the exquisite wonder of how life works, how could anyone not believe in a higher power?"

Dar stretched her arm across the divider and let it rest casually on Kerry's shoulders. "It's easy for people to get stuck in a narrow view, Ker. You know that. Even those guys, the scientists – they were practically fist fighting over the idea that dinosaurs evolved into birds… and it's so structurally obvious." Dar's voice grew a touch more animated. "All you have to do is look at those carnivorous dinosaurs, and look at an ostrich, and it's right there in your face."

"Dinosaurs into birds, lizards into snakes, proto-hominids into us…" Kerry mused. "Whoops… guess I'm going to Hell for that last one. Again." She chuckled. "Hey, what did you think about that one we saw the other night… about humans being water mammals during their evolution?"

The theory was an interesting one, Dar conceded. "Navy brat's the wrong person to ask about that." She joked. "I always assumed I was some kind of freak otter." Her face grew faintly introspective. "For me, the water was always home."

“Yeah.” Kerry agreed, with a smile. “You’re so natural underwater. I thought of you when I was watching that show. I wish I felt that comfortable.”

“Give it time.” Dar advised her. “I’ve been diving since I was two.”

Leaning back, Kerry tipped her head to one side and regarded the thick, black night sky. It was fun to just sit and talk. Dar had an active, intelligent mind and she was as curious about many things as Kerry was. Keeping your mind in a learning state, she’d realized, made you a lot better at whatever you did. You were always open to new ideas, and new ways of looking at things. “Hey Dar?”

“Yeeeesss?”

“Wanna play ‘what is it?’”

“Okay.” Dar grinned. “You start.” She gave Kerry a few microseconds. “Animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“Would I pick a vegetable for you to guess? Give me a minute.”

Dar drummed her fingers on the wheel and waited, humming under her breath., already anticipating the game. Would it be an animal? Kerry liked animals. She’d pick a strange one though.

Platypus duck, maybe?

* * *

They arrived at the convention center late, closer to midnight than Dar had originally planned for. The building was lit on the outside, though, and there were both security guards, and a stir of motion about the place that reassured them.

Dar strolled across the front courtyard, approaching the doors and making eye contact with the guards. “Evening.” She greeted the first one cordially, as she removed her id from her back pocket and offered it up.

The man studied the card, then glanced at her. “Dock entrance is round back.” He told her politely.

One finely arched dark eyebrow lifted. “Excuse me?”

“Construction workers enter in the back.” The guard clarified, still with careful politeness.

Dar looked down at herself, then up at the guard. “Do I look like a construction worker to you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The man replied. “You can enter in the back.”

Kerry covered her mouth to keep in the laughter threatening to burst out. The expression on her lover’s face was just so priceless.

“This is not funny.” Dar told her, testily.

“C’mon.” Kerry swallowed her amusement, taking Dar’s arm and starting for the rear of the center. “No point in arguing with him, Dar. Just call the convention services group in the morning and have the entire company fired.” She let her voice raise slightly, enough to know that the guard would hear her.

“Do I look like a construction worker to you?” Dar ignored the speech, turning and giving her an indignant look.

“Absolutely not.” Kerry reassured her. “It’s just the tank top and the ripped jeans, sweetie. Orlando is obviously not ready for CIO’s in less than pin stripes.” She took Dar’s arm again and patted it. “C’mon.” Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the guard’s eyes turning into round saucers. “I bet if you really tried, you could get the entire convention services company kicked out. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Dar’s eyes narrowed suddenly. “You’re having fun freaking the guard out, aren’t you?” She uttered, in a low voice.

“Yes.” Kerry smiled charmingly at her. “Give me two more minutes, and he’ll need a change of shorts.” She waggled her fingers at the man. “He deserves it for being a prick butt with the vision of a rhino in the dark.”

Dar snickered, her humor restored. She draped her arm over Kerry’s shoulders and headed towards the rear of the building, leaving the hapless guard behind them. Her ego was still stinging from the man’s remark, though, and she was self aware enough to know it.

“Jerk.” Kerry held the gate open that lead into the loading dock and waited for Dar to pass through. “What could he be thinking, Dar? Let’s just say it was true.”

“What?”

“Shh. Let’s just say you were one of the setup crew.” Kerry pacified her prickly partner. “It’s nearly midnight. Who cares if you go in the front door? Who’s gonna see you, the cleaning staff?" She closed the gate behind them and followed Dar towards an open loading dock door, the sounds of hammering and banging clearly audible inside.

“I don’t know, and I don’t give a damn.” Dar grumbled, as they crossed from the warm night air into the cooler, but musty smelling building. Lit by fluorescent lights, and featuring a poured concrete floor it resembled the inside of a warehouse more than anything.

Which, of course, it basically was. Kerry’s nose wrinkled at the scent of mildew coming from a set of draperies dropped in a pile near the door. “Nice.”

“Maybe they’ll have a sledgehammer I could borrow.” Dar muttered.

“Dar.” Kerry patted her on the behind. “Would you relax? He was full of horse poots. Don’t tell me you’re getting so sensitive in your old age.”

Her partner scowled dourly.

“Okay.” Kerry could see a pile of people ahead of them, all busy. She took hold of Dar’s arm and pulled her to a halt just inside the loading area, out of sight of the main room. “Sweetheart.” It really wasn’t like Dar to be so sensitive, and Kerry sensed a moment taken here would pay off in the long run. “Did that really bother you?”

Her taller partner leaned against the wall, and scrubbed one hand through her hair. “Stupid, isn’t it?” She admitted, lifting her eyes. “Just hit me the wrong way, I guess… and I don’t even have the excuse of it being that time of the month.”

Kerry tucked her fingers into the waistband of Dar’s jeans. “Listen, I asked you to wear this because I think it’s really sexy.” She tugged a little. “And I didn’t marry a construction worker.”

Dar’s expression gentled. “I know.” She looked down. “And given I picked a pair of boots to wear that I used when we were painting the cabin, I guess he might have had a point.”

“Hm.”

“Tank top, ripped jeans, paint splattered hiking boots.. all I need is a tattoo and I could pass as a very good butch stereotype.”

Okay, crisis over. Kerry relaxed, and smiled. “Nah, you’d need leather pants for that.”

“I have those.” Dar reminded her. “But you’d have to arrest me to get me to wear them in summer.” She bumped Kerry’s knee with her own. “C’mon. Let’s go see what the kids are doing, and get the hell out of here.”

They walked through the open garage door and into the convention center, pausing for a moment to catch their bearings. The room was huge, and it was full of nerds. The smell of new computers mixed with the scent of old coffee was almost overwhelming.

“Whoa.” Kerry rubbed her nose. “What a zoo.”

“Uh huh.” Dar stretched to her full height, reviewing the room. It was laid out in regulation trade show fashion, with wooden frame booths stretched in orderly rows interspersed with larger displays custom built by some of the bigger companies. “Ah. There we are.” She pointed to a familiar logo banner, half hung, half draped over some metal pipe supports.

“Nice spot.” Kerry followed her between two wooden stalls, ducking as a technician struggled with a projection screen and almost clocked her in the process. They walked through piles of equipment cases, and emerged into a more open area that held ILS’s display.

Four of their techs were on ladders trying to lift up and bolt into place the steel tube framing the marketing department had designed, and as they watched, the heavy structure tilted precariously to one side. Without a word between them, Kerry and Dar reacted, leaping forward to help.

Kerry grabbed the nearer ladder, which had started to tip over, while Dar used her greater height to reach up and take hold of the steel frame, taking it’s weight as the techs fought to regain control over it. “Whoa!” The blond woman grunted, throwing her body against the ladder as it threatened to come down on top of her. “Take it easy, guys!”

“Damn it!” The tech on her ladder cursed. “This piece of shit was built by freaking Gumby!”

“All right, hang on.” Dar grabbed the ladder and climbed up several steps of it, hoisting the frame with her as she walked. “Get that end on there, Bruce.”

The tech on the next ladder blinked, only then realizing who it was addressing him. “Holy crap!” He blurted. “When’d you get here, ma’am!”

“Just in time, apparently.” Dar grunted. “You gonna bolt that into place, or are we all going to end up with our asses on the concrete?”

Kerry could hear the tension in her partner’s voice, and beneath the worn denim, she could see Dar’s legs straining to keep her load balanced. With Dar’s weight on the ladder, though, it no longer threatened to tip over and she shifted her grip to wrap her arm around Dar’s calves in a secure hold.

“Okay.. okay… almost got it!” Bruce panted, extending himself out on his ladder to put a socket wrench on the bolts that Dar was holding even. He ratcheted them quickly, muscles jumping under his skin as he tightened the grid into place on one end. “Done!”

Dar relaxed her hold cautiously, relieved when the structure seemed likely to stay in one place. She flexed her fingers and shook her arms out, glancing up at the tech still perched on the steps above her. “Why the hell are you guys doing this?”

Bruce finished bolting down the other end of the structure then scampered down the ladder. He was of middling height, and lightly built, with wide brown eyes that had a perpetual look of astonishment in them. “We gotta get the booth up ma’am.” He paused. “Don’t we?”

Dar got off her ladder, and dusted her hands off as the tech above her gingerly climbed down as well. “They don’t have a setup crew here?” She looked around, aware now that at many booths around them conspicuously corporate t-shirted crews were struggling to assemble the structures. “What the hell?”

Kerry ducked out from under the ladder and joined her, as the rest of their techs gathered around. “Hi, guys.” She greeted them with a smile, keeping an eye on Dar who started investigating their surroundings like a large, suspicious house cat.

“Hey, boss.” The one nearest her returned the smile, his tow blond head not topping her own by much. “What are you guys doing here? Mark said you’d be up in a few days.”

“Eh.” Kerry put her hands on her hips. “We decided to come up a little early… did they say why no one was here from the production company? You guys shouldn’t be doing this, Dar’s right. We pay big bucks to have someone in to do it.”

“Well.” Bruce sidled over to her. “We got here a couple hours ago, and the guy in charge told us if we wanted anything else put up, we’d have to do it. He said, with a tiny shrug. “Everyone here was bitching for sure, but what could we do?”

“Call?” Kerry eyed him, spreading her hands out in question. “It’s not like my cell phone number’s a secret.”

The blond tech next to him winced. “We didn’t want you to think we were whiners. It’s not that much to do.. just get those pipes up so we can start cabling. Not like the other guys, they’re trying to get that wood together without hardly any tools.”

“Mm.” Kerry shook her head. “The guys in charge, they still here?”

“No way.” Bruce snorted. “They took off, just left the guards out front. Bunch of…um…” He remembered who he was talking to and his voice trailed off.

“We met them.” His boss muttered. “They didn’t make a very good impression on us. Hey, Dar?”

Her partner had wandered over to the next booth, and was talking to it’s occupants. She held a hand up to acknowledge Kerry’s call, but continued her conversation. “Well,

anyway, we can help you get set up." Kerry told the techs. "What's up next, those poles over there?" She pointed.

Dar returned before they could get started, and she didn't look happy. "The Lucent guys say they heard the center didn't pay their setup crew for the last convention, so they walked." She reported. "They're pretty torked. According to their lead tech, the center basically told them they could wait until tomorrow, when maybe they'd have some workers, or do it themselves and shut up."

Bruce nodded. "That's what they told us too." He agreed. "So we talked about it, and decided to see what we could do. We didn't want you guys to get here and have stuff not ready."

Dar sighed. "So instead, you get to have us show up and help you haul cable. It'll make a good story back at the office. Let's go. Faster we do it, faster we get out of here."

Kerry walked over and claimed a spool of cable, and a wrench. "Are those the switches over there?" She pointed at a stack of brown cardboard boxes with a familiar label on them. "Cody, why don't you start unpacking them?"

"Speaking of." Dar turned, then tipped her head back. "Let me guess. They didn't pull any telco drops, did they?"

"Nope." Bruce said. "That was going to be a real problem." He admitted. "Mark didn't send any WAN guys up here."

"Not a problem any more." Kerry tossed Dar a punchdown kit which her partner fielded with consummate grace. "I think the jack boxes are over on that pole, Dar." She nudged Bruce towards the remaining unhung structure. "Let's go guys – move those ladders over."

Dar removed a pen from her pocket and scribbled down the jack numbers on the pole Kerry had spotted, then paused as she put the pen back when she spotted several people near the back entrance just standing there watching them.

None were familiar, but if she squinted, she could just make out the logo on the nearest one's shirt. "Ahh." Dar murmured. "Our lowballing adversaries." The faintest twinkle appeared in her eyes, as she stuffed the bit of paper she'd written on in her back pocket, and headed for the telco room, which they'd passed on their way in.

Two of the newcomers walked on past her into the room, sparing her only cursory glances. The other three remained at the entrance, talking amongst themselves with sour looks on their faces. They absently returned Dar's nod of greeting, then dismissed her as she walked by.

"You want to wait for tomorrow? Jackson swore they'd have a crew in." The tallest of them said. "I'm not dragging all that gear through this place."

"I'd love to take off, but I want to wait till ILS gets their system set up, then see what we can find out about it. Those guys look like they'll talk our ears off." The second replied, a well built man with thick, black hair who had the air of a manager. "Maybe we can recruit some of em… I heard they're looking at layoffs."

The first man laughed.

But he probably would have stopped, if he'd bothered to turn around and see the ice blue eyes drilling unseen holes in the back of his head.

"You go for the guys. I'll take those babes with the cables." The shorter man also laughed. "I'll give em one thing, they hire for looks."

Dar glanced at the kit in her hands, and opened it, selecting a pair of needle nose pliers and studying it, wondering how much jail time she'd incur if she pulled the bastard's gonads out with the tool. Then she sighed, and put it back, turning and continuing on her way with commendable restraint.

Work before pleasure. Their time would come soon enough.

* * *

"Here you go, guys." Kerry eased back into their booth, cradling a half dozen cans of soda in a pouch made from the long tail of her t-shirt. The techs gathered around her shyly selecting their choices as Kerry stood in their midst. "C'mon, they're cold."

"Thanks, ma'am." Bruce sat down on a switch, wiping his brow.

Two hours had gone by, and they'd finished the structure of the booth only to realize the center had turned off its air conditioning. It had rapidly gone from relatively comfortable to stuffy, to stifling before Dar had hoisted up her pirate's pennant and found the a/c control room.

Now the air was sluggishly circulating again, and Dar had gone back to methodically hacking her way through the unlabeled circuits in search of the one they'd ordered.

"Okay." Kerry sat down with her own soda and opened it, taking a long swallow before she continued. She was sweaty and covered in dust, and her knee ached where she'd banged it on the corner of a switch, but as she looked around at their progress, she was satisfied. "Once we get the line up, we're pretty much done until the servers get here tomorrow."

The techs looked tired, but relieved. "Think the circuit'll be up tonight?" Bruce asked.

“Oh, I’m sure it will.” Kerry leaned back and extended her legs, crossing them at the ankles and regarding their bare length studiously. “Even if Dar has to run a fiber cable all the way to Miami, it’ll be up.” She looked up at her troops, with a grin. “I have faith.”

The four techs grinned back.

“Thanks for stopping by and giving us a hand, ma’am. That was really cool.” Cody said.

“No problem.” Kerry glanced to one side as a motion caught her attention, and stopped speaking when she spotted a pod of their competitors approaching. She watched them as they came over, observing the booth with intent eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi.” The man in front greeted her with a friendly grin. “You guys sure have been busy.”

“Hasn’t everyone?” Kerry replied. “What a mess, huh?”

“Yeah.” The man agreed. “We’re going to wait for some help tomorrow to put things up, but I guess you folks decided to do it yourself, huh?”

Kerry glanced around at their booth. “Looks like it.” She agreed. “We can take off and go to sleep in peace now.”

The man stuck his hands in his pockets and chuckled. “Yeah, I’m sure you guys have to be careful about that. I hear things are up in the air for you. You don’t want to take any chances, huh?”

The techs all looked at Kerry, who looked at the man with gently inquisitive green eyes. “Pardon me?” She asked.

“Ah, c’mon, we’ve heard about your problems.. hell, we caused some of em!” The man laughed. “No hard feelings.. in fact, you guys look pretty bright. Interested in coming over o the other side?”

Kerry’s eyebrows lifted. The rest of her troops remained prudently quiet, apparently quite satisfied to let her do the talking. “I have no beef with who pays me.” She said. “What about you folks?” Her eyes shifted to her techs.

“We’re fine.” Bruce replied. “No gripes here.” He added, as the rest of the techs shook their heads.

“Now, come on.” The man lifted both hands up. “Here you are, sweating like pigs, busting your humps to get this all running, and the guys who make the big bucks are sitting on their asses in some leather chair in a penthouse. That how you like things?”

Bruce giggled, his eyes fastened on Kerry's disheveled figure, which had started taking on distinct lines of angry tension.

"That's not how our company works." The man said, apparently oblivious.

"That's not really how our company works either." Kerry replied in a quiet tone.

"Yeah? When was the last time your saw your boss pick up a cable?" The man countered. "I bet you never have."

Kerry's lips twitched into a reluctant grin. "I bet you're wrong." She said, as she spotted Dar's distinctive figure approaching the group. Her lover looked harassed, but triumphant, and she brushed past the intruders as she picked up an interface cable and shoved it into place. "We up?"

"Son of a bitch piece of shit half assed infrastructure." Dar growled, plugging in their router and booting it up. "I'm surprised the damn sixty six block wasn't put together with grape bubble gum."

"So, we're up." Kerry interpreted the cursing. The techs all clapped and whistled.

Dar studied the lights, then grunted. "Yes." She dusted her hands off an gave the two strangers a dour look. "Excuse me." She sat down next to Kerry and examined the palm of one hand, which was covered in dust and scraped raw. After a second, she looked back up at the men . "You want something?" She snapped.

Caught off guard, their jaws dropped. "Ah, no, just visiting. Listen, you guys take it easy, okay? Come talk if you're interested in what I had to say." The man in front lifted his hand and waved it. Then he stepped forward and offered it to Kerry. "My name's Robert Caustens, and I'm the director of IT, for Telegenics."

Kerry readily took his hand and gripped it. "Kerry." She replied. "Nice to meet you. Hope you get things straightened out."

The two men left.

"Jesus." Kerry started laughing. "What a dork."

"He pitch you?" Dar inquired, her eyes flicking to the rest of the techs in question.

"Yes, ma'am." Cody nodded. "Said we shouldn't work for a company where the big shots stay up in their ivory towers." He blinked at Dar, keeping a straight face. "It was pretty funny."

Dar extended her boots, and let her scraped hands rest on her knees. “You know, that’s just damn hilarious.” She glanced at Kerry. “Are we supposed to be in a tower? How come you didn’t tell me that? And how come he didn’t pitch me?”

“I dunno, boss. Maybe you scared him.” Kerry took Dar’s right hand and turned it over. “I think you have a splinter here. Let me get it out.”

“Thanks.” Dar relaxed. “Okay, let’s get cleaned up here, gentlemen, and get the hell out of this damn garage.”

Bruce got up and straightened the router, as the rest of the techs began tidying up the space as Kerry bent her head over her task, straining to see clearly in the annoying florescent light.

“Are those the guys who took those accounts?” Cody asked Dar, shyly. “That everyone was so pissed about?”

“Mm.” Dar nodded. “They’re an upstart company. Just came onto the scene this past year, and they targeted a bunch of contracts coming into renewal. Not just us, but we got slammed pretty bad them, though our other friends…” Dar pointed to the right, where another of their bigger rivals was setting up. “Lost a couple too.”

“Are they that good?” Bruce asked.

“They’re that cheap.” The CIO replied. “That’s their pitch – that they’re lean and mean, and they can service the contracts at a lower cost.” She regarded Kerry’s pale head. “Which on a small scale, they can, if everything runs perfectly.

“Like when does that ever happen?” Kerry muttered.

Bruce was mounting the switch they’d brought into a rolling cabinet with a locking door, as Cody helped him. “But they tell that to everyone.” He said. “So – they can do it for one company at one time, but they can’t do it for all their companies every time.”

Dar produced a warm, sexy grin. “You got it.” She complimented him. “It’s like the stock market. You can’t get hung up over the short term.”

“There.” Kerry straightened, smoothing her thumb over the roughened skin on her partner’s palm. “That wasn’t a splinter, Dar, it was metal.” She said. “And it might have been rusty. We should go get you some first aid.”

“Thanks, Dr. Kerry.” Dar gave her an affectionate look, bumping her shoulder lightly. “Well, I think we’re done here. Let the marketing wonks crawl all over this place in the morning.” She glanced at the techs. “You guys got a ride to your hotel?”

“Um.. I think there’s a shuttle..” Bruce said, hesitantly, checking his watch.

"C'mon." Dar got up, clasping Kerry's hand in her own and hauling her up as well. "It's gonna be crowded, but we'll get there." She straightened to her full height, looking around. Most of the crews had given up and left, and they were virtually alone in the cavernous chamber, only a few other teams still making desultory attempts at completing their set ups. "Good job, everyone."

Bruce peeked up at her. "Ma'am?" He said. "I think you all did most of it."

"Us?" Kerry drawled in response. "Nah. We're up in our ivory tower, remember? In our nice leathers chairs, eating…um…"

"Quiche." Dar patted the rolling case. "Or caviar."

"Ick." Kerry's nose wrinkled. "I'll pass. How about a pizza, instead?"

The techs all chuckled, as they followed their two leaders towards the back door, after Bruce double checked the locks on the rolling cabinets. They passed a few stragglers, but didn't see any of their friends from Telegnics, and the area they'd been setting up in was dark and quiet.

Outside was dark and quiet too. The guard at the back door watched them as they left, circling the building and heading for Dar's lonely looking Lexus, crouching balefully in the cone of light from a security lamp. A soft buzz came from crickets in the bushes ringing the parking area, and Dar make the car chirp in response as she remotely unlocked the doors.

"Someone want to let Kerry sit on their lap?" Dar asked, as they reached the car.

Four sets of stunned eyes faced her, in such evident shock it made her smile. "Didn't think so." She opened the rear hatch, and shoved their bags over. "One of you in here, the rest in the back. It's not a long trip."

"You're so bad." Kerry opened the front passenger door.

Dar watched the crowd pile in, then she opened her own door, pausing when a motion across the parking lot caught her attention. A car was parked near the front door of the center, and as she watched, two figures got out and headed for the guarded front door.

Dar blinked, and leaned forward a little. Despite the distance and the darkness, she recognized them both, a knowledge that brought a faint grimace to her face.

"Dar?" Kerry called her.

"Yeah." The taller woman slid into the driver's seat. "See that?" She pointed to the two figures. "Recognize them?"

Kerry peered through the glass. “Um… not really… oh.” She sat up. “Isn’t that Michelle Graver?”

“Uh huh.” Dar nodded. “Sure is.”

“Didn’t she go into business on her own? You told me that, I thought.”

“Uh huh.” Dar said again. “Found herself a new partner, apparently.” Her face could have been cut in ice, the angles were so cold. “They deserve each other.” She started up the Lexus, and put it into gear. “Looks like Shari’s finally found a kindred spirit.”

Kerry’s jaw clicked shut audibly.

Dar pulled out of the parking spot and drove slowly past the parked car, which bore a blazon on the driver’s side door. She chuckled humorously as she read it, and heard a sound of mixed consternation and disgust come from Kerry. “Shoulda guessed.” She picked up speed and drove past the front door, where the guard was courteously opening the glass for the two women. “Telegenics.”

“Two lemon dykes on a stick more likely.” Kerry uttered, so under her breath it was a miracle Dar heard her. “But I guess they wouldn’t register the name.”

“Something wrong, boss?” Cody asked hesitantly, from the back seat.

“Oh, no.” Kerry leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms. “Everything’s just peachy.” Her eyes slid to Dar’s profile. “Juuuust peachy.” She repeated. “You don’t think they’d mess with our stuff, do you?”

Dar paused at the exit to the lot, leaning on the steering wheel and considering. “No.” She continued her turn, moving out onto the main road. “They don’t think they need to right now.” But her fingers drummed on the wheel pensively.

“But you’ll set up a monitor when we get to the hotel.”

“Yeah.”

Kerry sighed. “This is going to get icky.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Well, we’re gonna damn well make it ickier for them than for us.” Kerry decided. “To hell with them.”

Somewhere in that, Dar found a true smile. She relaxed, and leaned back, the knots in her gut easing. “Yeah, wait till they see the wreck their booth’s in.” She agreed.

“And the wreck ours isn’t in.” Kerry grinned.

It would almost be worth being there to see it. Dar acknowledged, glad of the car’s cold air conditioning against her, and looking forward to the shower she knew was at the end of the ride. Kerry reached over the seat divider and laid a hand on her knee, the green eyes full of a promise she knew as also waiting there.

To hell with them. “Let em sweat. I turned off the a/c before we left.”

Kerry muffled a laugh. The techs joined in, not really sure what was going on, but willing to follow Kerry’s lead anyway.

They drove on into the night, leaving the blazing lights of the convention center behind them.

PART 2

"THANKS." DAR PASSED THE VALET A TIP, SHAKING HER HEAD WHEN HE WENT TO remove her luggage and Kerry's from the back. "No, that stays with us." She shut the hatch and walked around to the driver's side door.

"Aren't we staying here?" Kerry laid one hand on the frame of the car door, giving Dar an inquisitive look. "I thought we had reservations." She glanced up at the tall, respectable looking hotel they were parked in front of, having let the techs out.

"No." Dar got in and closed the door, waiting for Kerry to do likewise. "I have other plans."

"Ah. Okay." Kerry got in and leaned her elbow on the seat arm, watching her partner's profile as Dar pulled out of the Marriott's driveway, and headed back out onto the mostly empty roads. "I see." She evaluated the half hidden smirk, and decided whatever Dar's plan was, she'd appreciate it. "Telegenics. Big surprise, huh?"

Dar snorted. "You'd have thought the detail analysis Mark did would have tossed THAT little bit of intelligence up to the top. Did we miss it?" She wondered. "No way. He'd have flagged it, at the least."

"I'm sure." Kerry reached idly over and pushed a bit of Dar's hair back behind one well shaped ear. "I'd say they targeted us, but you know, they didn't. There've been other companies hit by them too."

"Exactly." Dar nibbled her lower lip a she thought. "Didn't think Shari had any interest in the IT field."

One of Kerry's blond eyebrows lifted. "I'd say she had a very significant interest in a specific part of the IT field." She remarked dryly. "Maybe she saw an opportunity to poach two eggs in one cup."

Dar looked at her. "You calling me an egghead?"

They both laughed, relieving the tension. "Ah." Dar shrugged. "So it'll make it interesting. Helps, sort of. At least I know some of their motives and more than one of their tactics." She wrapped her hands around the steering wheel and flexed her fingers. "A tisket a tasket…"

"Pair of bitches in a basket." Kerry warbled back at her, joining Dar in another round of pretty darn close to giddy laughter. "Jesus, it's late." She finally sighed. "I'm losing it. We're losing it." Her fingers curled around Dar's bicep, and she leaned her head against her shoulder. "So, where are we going?"

"Same place we went last time." Dar said. "For a lot of reasons." She went on, evidently realizing Kerry was staring at her. "First off, if I want to ravish you on the balcony, I really don't to worry about someone whose paycheck I sign watching from the next one." She cleared her throat. "Second.."

"Ahahahaha." Kerry reached over and covered her mouth. "Whoa. One's enough for me."

Dar smiled, feeling the pressure as Kerry's fingers gently tweaked her skin. After a moment, she was released. "I wanted to wake up with you wrapped around me, and not have you almost pass out from the horror of it all."

"Ahhh." Kerry chuckled softly under her breath. "Oh, do I remember that." She half covered her face with one hand. "If I could have crawled through the floor of that room, I would have." She reminisced wryly. "You have no idea how I almost levitated off the bed when I woke up – only thing that kept me from freaking out was knowing I'd wake *you* up if I did."

Dar turned onto the access road that led to their destination. "I think I knew, even in my sleep." She said. "I was dreaming about snuggling."

Kerry peered at her from the corner of her eye. "Did you really?"

Her partner nodded. "It felt great. Then I woke up, and it was gone. I was pissed."

"I remember." A slow smile crossed Kerry's face. "You said it was a hangover." She paused. "Wait a minute – how did you know? I never did ask you that.. was it just a lucky guess?"

Dar reached out and riffled her fingers through Kerry's pale hair. "You left evidence." She replied. "But yeah, it was half a guess. You were acting like you'd gotten caught in the cookie jar."

"Hmph." The blond woman managed a dignified look, which swiftly dissolved into a sheepish grin. "I felt really, really stupid."

Dar pouted.

"No, not…" Kerry drew her knee up and wrapped her arms around it as she watched the quiet streetlights whisk by. "I felt like I was out of control.. like I had my heart pinned on my jacket lapel or something."

"So… " Her partner drawled. "My hoodwinking you into sleeping in my bed didn't clue you in that I was in any better shape?"

Kerry thought about that for a while as they drove through the vast Disney property, towards the large, white, spread out Grand Floridian hotel. How had she ended up in Dar's bed, anyway? They'd been watching the news, and she'd gotten sleepy… she remembered the sweet taste of hot chocolate on her lips… and then the cup had been taken from her. "I could have gotten up and gone to my own room."

"Uh huh."

"But I didn't want to." The memory surged sweetly over her. "I didn't want to be alone."

"Me, either." Dar skillfully navigated the big Lexus into the driveway of the hotel, pulling up at the stately Victorian styled portico and putting the car in park. A valet trotted alertly out to meet them. "So I wanted to come back here, and revel in the fact that what I felt that morning.." She opened the door and gave the valet a slight smile, then ducked her head back inside the car. "Was dead on real."

Kerry felt, and suspected she looked, slightly wide eyed at Dar's sudden and somewhat unexpected headlong dive into rampant romanticism. "Okay, honey." She agreed. "I'm all for it!'

Dar's face split into a grin, and her eyes twinkled before she disappeared again and went to open the trunk for the valet. Kerry sat for a moment, and then she simply shook her head, opening the door and hopping out.

The hotel hadn't changed. Kerry drew in a breath of warm air scented with night jasmine as she joined Dar in walking towards the door. This late, it was very quiet, a soft hint of music from the speakers and the clatter of cleaning crews was all the accompanied them to the door.

A blast of chilled air met them as they entered, and they strolled across the beautiful lobby that almost succeeded in bringing them right into another world. Kerry allowed herself to be entranced, and she spent a few minutes simply looking around at the soaring ceilings as Dar worked out the details of their room.

"Let's go." Dar put a hand on her shoulder, and smiled.

Kerry took her hand and held it as they walked from the front desk, and strolled across a silver ribbon of their own memories.

* * *

"Mm. Pretty." Kerry gazed outside, watching the small, blinking lights as a boat crossed the lake towards the pier in front of the hotel.

Or maybe it was the back of the hotel. It was hard to tell, though the views on this side had it all over the ones on the other side. Kerry leaned against the chilled glass, her breath fogging it slightly as she exhaled. Below them, she could see a few, lone figures walking down the paths, and on the end of the pier two figures sat together, apparently simply enjoying the view as she was.

She watched them lean together, against each other, and it made her smile because she knew just exactly how good that felt.

Her shoulders ached, and she felt tired, from the long day and their active evening, but she wasn't sleepy. Behind her, she could hear Dar rattling around in the bathroom and she spent a moment contrasting the reality of her now, with the memories of the past.

It was almost too disparate to compare. Then, Dar's every motion, every sound had flicked against her unsure awareness, making her heart jump.

Now, they made other parts of her jump, and her heart merely beat calmly, waiting for it's other half to finish fussing and come to join her. Kerry could already feel the warmth of Dar's touch and she divided her attention – half to the glistening castle seen in the distance past the glass, and half in the reflection of the room behind her, waiting.

Dar finished arranging their toiletries and re-entered the room, watching Kerry press her nose against the glass sliding door. ""I think I remember being suckered into those pretty lights last time I was here." She flexed her bare toes against the carpet. "By that same look, too."

Kerry had turned and was grinning at her. She was draped in her old, worn Pooh t-shirt, her hair damp from the shower they'd just shared. "You didn't take much suckering." She said. "It was just a tiny appeal to your pride, and presto." She snapped her fingers. "Instant monorail ride."

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah." The blond woman cheerfully nodded. "Although I did keep trying to convince myself I was doing it to help you relax, and it was for your own good."

"Mm." Dar stretched her body out, popping her shoulders into place. "It was."

"For your own good?"

"Oh yeah." Dar joined her at the glass and slid an arm around her as Kerry turned and they gazed out over the dark water, to the brightly lit theme parks beyond. "I'm damn ticked."

"At me?"

"At those stupid pieces of horse manure." Dar's eyes narrowed. "They're putting a damper on my fun plans, and I don't like it."

Kerry reached over and gave her a rub on the belly. "We can still have fun. We got our stuff done tonight, didn't we?" She asked. "Any reason why we need to be there tomorrow for them to put the froo froo up?"

Dar considered. Then she grunted. "No." She answered. "We're not supposed to be here for another day and a half."

"Exactly." Kerry agreed. "So you, me, and a pair of Florida resident park hopper passes are going to go have a wild and crazy time tomorrow."

"Hm. Do we have those?"

"Yeees." Kerry smirked. "Since I knew you weren't going to let me put this place on *my* card." She batted her fair lashes at her partner. "So get your bathing suit ready, Dardar."

For an answer, Dar moved a bit of Kerry's hair out of the way and gently kissed her neck. "Want some hot chocolate?" She uttered into the smaller woman's ear.

"No." Kerry's eyes closed. "I want you." She let her hand slowly glide up Dar's thigh. "I wanted you the last time I was here, but I couldn't have you."

Dar laughed softly into her ear. "Kerrison, you had me from day one." She slipped her arms around Kerry, and guided her towards the bed, turning in lazy circles as they smiled into each other's eyes.

"We could really recreate this, and turn the news on." Kerry suggested, between light kisses across Dar's collarbone.

“Try it, and I’ll bite your fingers off.” Her partner replied.

“Oo.”

* * *

They both woke at the same time. Kerry heard Dar take a sudden, irregular breath, just as she opened her eyes to see the early morning sun pouring through the window. Once again, she was sleeping half on her side, half on her stomach, and once again, she was snuggled tightly up against Dar’s body.

Oh, but what a difference. Kerry smiled. This time she had no urgent desire to levitate herself off the bed in pure shock, and her heart didn’t attempt to emerge from her ears with its hammering. This time her welcome was sure, and the shoulder her cheek was resting on was as familiar to her as her own pillow.

Well, it often was her own pillow. Kerry slid one thigh up over Dar’s and gave her a squeeze, humming low in her throat as sleep slowly cleared from her eyes. “Morning, sweetheart.”

“Eeurrgh.” Dar made a purring noise in return. “Morning to you too.” She rubbed Kerry’s back with her fingertips. “And what a pretty one it is.” She turned her head and watched the sunlight creep across the floor, still tinted coral instead of the bright white yet to come.

It would be yet another in an almost endless series of summer days, hot and sticky, the morning fair with the ever-present possibility of thunderstorms in the afternoon as the earth struggled to throw off the sun’s heat.

Water parks in the morning, Dar decided. Then maybe a visit to Epcot in the afternoon, since the technology park offered up lots of indoor attractions to escape the heat, and possibly the rain as well. “You up for dinner at the Living Seas?” She inquired. “I love that tank.”

The sea green eyes brightened. “Oo.. yeah.” A nod. “Good idea.”

Dar smiled contentedly. “I think that sounds like a plan.” She said, as she arched her back to stretch it out, lifting Kerry a little with her before she relaxed again under the covers. “Damn, I’m glad we got all that crap squared away last night. If I’d had walked in there today with nothing done, heads woulda rolled.”

Kerry traced an idle pattern on Dar’s ribcage. “So the only reason you didn’t was because there were no heads to roll?”

“Hm.” Her partner grunted after a moment’s silence. “You know something? I really don’t know.” She lifted one arm and settled her hand behind her head. After another short, pensive silence, she shrugged. “Ah.. probably faster if I did it myself anyway.”

Kerry nodded slightly. “I had the neatest dream last night.” She related, changing the subject. “You and I were getting married.”

Dar’s eyebrows twitched. “Um..”

“Yeah, I know we are married, but not… I mean, it was this whole ceremony with rice, and flowers..” Kerry felt Dar start to laugh. “You and me in pretty gowns..”

“Don’t tell me white ones.”

“Sure.” Kerry cheerfully agreed. “You looked gorgeous… you had this lace sheer neckline thing on and…”

“Kerry.” Dar tapped her on the shoulder. “You need some coffee or something?”

“No, why?”

“Just wondered.”

“Anyway. We were in this beautiful cathedral, with stained glass windows, and everyone was throwing bags of rice at us..”

Dar half sat up, bringing Kerry up with her and displaying the considerable strength of her abdominal muscles. “What?”

Kerry tumbled and rolled into Dar’s lap, ending up peering up at her as she lay on her back across her partner’s legs. “What?”

“Bags of rice? What was this, a Cuban wedding? Were there bags of beans too?” Dar queried, tossing her head back to clear the disordered hair from her eyes. “Five pound bags? Ten? Fifty?”

Kerry folded her hands over her bare stomach. “Sweetheart.” She twiddled her thumbs. “Yankees don’t like to whip out their dustpans during a wedding. We wrap a *pinch* of rice into a cloth bag and toss that at newlyweds.” She informed her lover. “It’s supposed to be good luck.”

Dar put a fingertip against her nose. “It’s supposed to be for fertility, so you’ll have lots of babies.” She corrected her in a wry tone. “Leave it to Yankees to conveniently forget *that*.”

"Mm… we didn't forget it." Softly glinting green eyes peered up at Dar. "It was just so nice. All our friends were there, and Chino had a hat on… your dad was in a tux."

Her partner smiled in reflex. "You have cute dreams."

"I had one the first time we stayed here too." Kerry admitted. "Remember you were saying you did? Before we woke up? So did I." She sat up and pulled her legs up crossed under her, pushing her hair back with one hand.

"It didn't have rice in it, did it?" Dar leaned on one elbow, facing her. The sheets draped loosely over her body, exposing roughly half of her torso and all of the length of one long leg.

"No." Kerry leaned her elbows on her knees. "I didn't remember it until way after we left Orlando. It was you and I up in a tree."

"A tree." Dar sniffed reflectively. "I like trees." She allowed. "What kind of tree?"

A shrug. "I have no idea. But we were up in it, looking at the sky." Kerry glanced at the sheets, drawing her finger over the soft surface. "I remember just being happy, and that was such a strange feeling for me back then."

Dar laid her hand on Kerry's knee. "And now?"

"And now?" Kerry laughed, a light, joyous sound. "Oh, my god, Dar. Now I have that dream when I'm awake." She peeked up into her partner's eyes. "Do I sound like a babbling idiot this morning or what?"

The blue orbs twinkled. "Wanna have breakfast here, or go find some hapless characters to harass?" Dar rubbed the skin under her hand gently.

"Here." Kerry rolled over onto her side and stretched out on the bed. "Banana stuffed French toast?" She suggested. "Then we can grab our swimsuits and go look for trouble." With a quick twitch, she yanked the covers off Dar and scrambled back off the bed with them as her partner rose to the challenge and chased her.

She almost got away, when her feet got tangled up in the sheets and she hopped madly to free them, bouncing all over the room and nearly causing Dar to cough up an eyeball laughing. At the last hop, the taller woman got an arm around her and they both fell, hitting the carpet and thrashing around with the sheet winding itself around them.

"Ee!" Kerry squirmed, as long, ticklish fingers attacked her bare ribs. "You punk!"

"Yeah? Takes one to know one!" Dar grappled with her, the fabric tangling around them both and winding them tighter together. "Auarrgguhhh!!"

“Ooooo…gotcha!” Kerry wrapped her arm around Dar’s calf and attacked the inside of her knee, feeling the powerful limb jerk in response to her tickling. “Ahahahahahah!!!!”

Buzz.

Dar’s head popped out from under it’s wrapping of cotton as she glared so intently at her cell phone the leather cover visible shriveled.

Buzzz.

One long arm snaked out and snatched the instrument, but then paused as Dar took a moment to catch her breath before she opened the phone. “What?” She snarled into it.

“Oo.” Kerry wriggled up between Dar’s legs and poked her head out into the open to listen. “

“Well, good morning to you too, Dar. Always such a pleasure to talk to you.” Eleanor’s voice held equal parts sarcasm and amusement. “Were you up?”

Dar’s pale blue eyes slitted. “Yes.” She said. “You get assigned wake up call duty this week? I though Alastair was gonna invest in software to do that.”

The VP of Marketing chuckled. “Oh, there’s just parts of you that never change, aren’t there? It’s a relief really… like death, taxes.. you know.”

“Ahem.”

“Is Kerry there?” Eleanor asked, giving up on her torment.

Dar gave her cell phone another evil look. “It’s quarter to seven in the morning, I’m in my hotel room, and I’m not dressed. What do you think?”

A pause. “Well wouldja put her on the phone, please? She’s at least civil before coffee.”

Kerry fell forward against Dar’s chest, laughing helplessly, covering her mouth to keep Eleanor from hearing.

“She’s occupied at the moment.” Dar gazed down at the blond woman draped over her. “What do you want?”

Eleanor sighed audibly. “Okay, okay – there are a lot of really ticked off people here, Dar.” She said. “I’m about to head into a meeting with ten of our fellow exhibitors.”

“And?” Dar nuzzled Kerry’s hair, nibbling it’s softness. “If the hall’s screwed up, what do you want from me? It’s not my fault.” She leaned back against the bed, sliding her free hand around Kerry’s now still form. “And it sure as hell isn’t Kerry’s fault.”

“No.. Jesus, all right! I’m coming!” Eleanor sounded more than exasperated. “Listen, Dar.. bottom line, these guys want to know who you paid off to get our booth up. Nothing fancy. They’re frustrated, and out of time, and they just want to get it all done so… who gets the check?”

Dar grinned at her cell phone. “Me.”

“What?”

The tall CIO smirked. “I didn’t pay anyone off, Eleanor. I went… sorry… we went in there last night and just made it happen.”

“You?”

“Me.” Dar confirmed. “Tell them I take credit cards. What do you think, three, four thousand a minute? What’s my time worth?” She chuckled. “I tell you what, it’s gonna take them the whole god damned day to pull the circuits, because the nitwits who installed them didn’t label the damn things; I had to check them one by one and let me tell you, I was raising the roof in that telco room cursing.”

“Oh, my god.” Eleanor muffled a laugh. “Everyone thinks you bribed the management company.”

“Hah.” Dar looked down into Kerry’s expressive eyes. “We don’t need to bribe anyone to execute the technology we’re responsible for implementing.”

“Can I quote you?” Eleanor sounded gleeful. “Please?”

“Sure.” Dar lowered her head and brushed Kerry’s lips with her own. “Just don’t raffle me off. I’m busy.”

“Rats. I could have recouped the outlay for the damn convention.” The VP of Marketing mock sighed. “When are you coming over?”

“We’re not.” Kerry neatly captured the phone. “Hi, Eleanor.” She cleared her throat. “We got you guys all set up, so its your turn now. Dar and I will be reachable on our cells, but we’re spending the day elsewhere.”

“Uh.” Eleanor was caught off guard, and it showed. “Well, all right, Kerry. Sure.” She responded. “We’ll.. ah.. call you if we need you.”

“Thanks. Bye!” Kerry closed the cell and tossed it on the bed. “C’mon nerdmeister. I hear a banana calling my name.” She got a last tickle in, laughing as Dar rocked backwards with her in her arms. “Score one for the geek squad.”

The sun poured into the room, painting it silver, splashing across the carpet and catching on tan skin and tangled dark and light hair.

Dar broke off for air, rubbing Kerry's nose gently with her own. "Score two."

Yeah.

* * *

Kerry clipped her cell phone to the waistband of her shorts, and slid her sunglasses by one ear next to them. She studied the result in the mirror and decided that, plus the tucked in tropical fish t-shirt was acceptable.

She had her bathing suit on underneath, a relatively sedate aqua green one piece, with a racing neckline that she'd just gotten the week before. Shopping for bathing suits had gotten a lot easier since she'd started purchasing them for function, rather than the form her family had always insisted on, that was definitely for sure.

She remembered the first time she 'd gone shopping for the beach with her mother, after she'd gotten old enough to really be conscious of her body, and her figure. What a horror show that had been. She'd wanted a two piece like all her friends, and she'd been treated to a hour of critique on why she couldn't possibly wear one because of what the press would say about her not quite shed layer of baby fat.

Jesus. Kerry met her own eyes in the mirror and winked at herself wryly. So even now, she stayed away from bikinis even though she knew she could pull one off in rather grand style these days.

Besides, Dar said she looked sexier in the sleek, one piece solid color functional ones she tended to wear, so who needed a bikini anyway? Dar only laughed when she suggested to her partner than she wear one herself.

Ah well.

"Right." She gave herself a nod, then looked up as Dar appeared behind her in the mirror, already decked out in her wraparound shades and sleeveless cotton shirt and shorts. "Would you mind?" Kerry handed back the sunscreen.

"Never." Dar sprayed some of the tanning lotion on her hands and started working it into the exposed portion of Kerry's skin. "Want to pull your hair back?"

Kerry moved her pale locks out of the way, so Dar could get the oil all the way up the back of her neck. "You think it'll stick?"

"For a while." Dar glanced at the bottle. "Theoretically waterproof, but we'll take it with us. I don't want to get toasted, and I know you don't either."

“Nuh uh.” Kerry simply stood in place, enjoying the strong hands giving her a massage in the process of protecting her hide. “Dar, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Aren’t you at all curious as to what those two are up to?”

“No.”

Kerry looked up into the mirror, watching her partner’s face as she worked. Dar’s expression was relaxed and calm, and when the blue eyes lifted and met hers, there was no evasiveness in them. “Really?”

“Nah.” Dar shook her head. Then she half shrugged one shoulder. “I mean, I guess I don’t want to see them run us out of town, and I guess we’re going to have to sit down and really analyze what they’re doing… what their plan is… if they’ve really got something different that we can’t compete with, that sort of thing.”

“But you don’t care that it’s them?”

“No.”

“Hm.”

“Do you?” Dar studied her for a moment. Kerry’s face twitched a little, her jaw muscles bunching as she considered. “You think it’s personal?”

Kerry took the oil and capped it, She gestured for Dar to turn and precede her from the bathroom, and didn’t speak until she’d tucked the bottle into the small pack she’d planned on carrying and fastened it around her. “I think it might be, yeah.” She admitted, as they walked to the door and exited into the hallway. “But maybe that’s just my green eyes talking.”

Dar touched the button for the elevator, maintaining a thoughtful silence.

They walked through the lobby, and out to the bus stop, Kerry removing her sunglasses as they walked outside and settling them firmly onto her nose. They took a seat together to wait for the correct bus, wincing a little as their bodies had to adapt from the air conditioned comfort of the hotel to the sauna like heat outside.

“I think I just realized somewhere along the way the past year I grew up.” Dar said, out of the blue. “Maybe they do have personal motives, but I don’t give a crap. I don’t have time in my life for their dramas.”

Kerry flicked an adventurous love bug away from her bare knee. She could already feel sweat gathering under her light clothing, and she was looking forward to the cool kiss of the water at their current destination. She'd realized herself the past year that though she chose to live in the subtropics, she didn't much like breathing swamp air most of the time and saved her excursions in the summer for the early morning and late evening hours. "That's an interesting point of view."

Dar shrugged. "Would you rather go to the convention center and mess with them?" She asked bluntly. "You having second thoughts about our being out today?"

"No." Kerry shook her head. "That's not it at all, Dar."

"Then what's the problem?"

Did she have a problem? Kerry frowned, feeling the edges of her own temper prickle. "Did I say I had a problem?" She asked, half turning to face her partner.

Dar merely raised her eyebrows, folding her arms across her chest in mute eloquence.

Kerry exhaled, looking up as the bus approached with their destination on it. "I don't have a problem. I just want to make sure my job is covered." She got up and started for the door. "We get paid a lot of money to do what we do. I just don't want to think I'm blowing that responsibility off."

Dar climbed up after her, and they took seats near the middle of the bus. The taller woman stretched her legs out and studied the neatly folded half socks peeking over the edge of her sneakers, "Hmph."

Several other guests filed in behind them including a family with three or four children, all wide eyed and excited as their parents corralled them in the back. Dar watched them for a few minutes, then she glanced at Kerry's profile.

Kerry looked back at her at the same time. "If it is personal, and they are gunning for us, it's going to sting them like hell if we don't show up."

Dar grinned like a pirate.

"It's like we don't consider them a worthwhile threat." Kerry went on, giving her taller companion a poke in the shoulder. "You're too freaking smart for your own good, Paladar."

"You're not so bad yourself." Dar leaned back. "If it makes you feel any better, yeah, my gut instincts were to go over there and just run roughshod over everyone, micromanaging every detail like a concierge on steroids." She admitted. "But strategically, since we're already a jump ahead of them, it makes sense to steer clear and let them all scramble."

"Mm."

Dar gazed at the roof of the bus. "And it's a great rationalization for me to just do what I want to do anyway." She cleared her throat. "Which is spend the day having fun with you."

"Ah." Kerry surrendered with a wry chuckle. "Is this a case of the action plan having two parallel goals?" She asked. "Or are we just coming up with a good excuse for ourselves?" After reviewing her words, and the stillness of Dar's face, she held a hand up. "Okay."

The bus trundled over a myriad of bumps in the road, and eventually pulled into the water park. The door opened, and through the heat Kerry caught a whiff of sun warmed concrete and chlorine. She followed Dar down the steps and stayed behind her a step as they walked towards the entrance.

Well, screw it. With a shake of her head, Kerry increased the length of her strides and caught up to her partner, deliberately bumping her with her shoulder.

Dar looked at her, then bumped her back. "Done wrestling?"

"Mm." Kerry patted her cell phone. "If they need us, we're here." She concluded. "Besides, what the heck could happen at a trade show?"

They showed their passes at the gate and were admitted, the sounds of splashing and laughter already beginning to surround them much as the scent of the water did. They secured a locker and Kerry stripped off her shirt and shorts, stuffing them and the rest of her gear into the small space. Save the phone which she snapped into a waterproof housing before looping the lanyard on the case around her neck. Then she picked up her towel, and joined her now swim suited companion as they headed out into the sun.

* * *

Dar hoisted herself out of the wave pool for the nth time, shaking herself free of a spray of chlorinated water as she waited for Kerry to join her. The blond woman was heading her way, towing a body board behind her with a big grin on her face. "Nice one." Dar complimented her.

"Yeah." Kerry exhaled, raking her fingers through her drenched hair. "Next stop, Hawaii." She sat down on the edge of the pool to catch her breath, tipping her head back to observe the sun's slant in the sky. "Know what?"

"It's lunchtime." Dar responded. "Want to do the big slide one more time before we grab something?"

Kerry accepted the offered hand up and stood, looking around at their surroundings. The park wasn't busy at all, not nearly as much as it had been the last time they were there. It was the heat of summer now, though, so that wasn't unexpected. However, it had made it all the more pleasant to not have to fight the crowds and stand in long lines. "Sure." She concluded. "Let me just get a towel and wipe my eyes, though. The water's killing them."

Dar lead the way back to the chair they'd taken possession of, picking up Kerry's towel and handing it to her as she lifted her own and dried the largest of the water droplets off with it. Now, instead of being oppressive, the sun felt good and warm on her back, and she felt pleasantly tired from all the activity.

Out of habit, she checked her phone. No calls. With a grin, she checked Kerry's, which was also devoid of any missed calls. She admitted to herself that curiosity was beginning to prick her softly, wondering what, if anything was gong on in the trade show.

"Why don't you call?" Kerry had been watching her, and now she produced a knowing grin.

"Would it make you feel better if I did?" Dar countered.

Kerry took a seat on the beach lounger, and extended her bare legs out, crossing them casually at the ankles. "Yes." She waggled her fingers "Dial, your Nerdiness." She arranged herself more comfortably on the lounger and put her sunglasses on, then folded her hands over her stomach.

Dar chuckled, but unzipped the case and flipped the phone open. She dialed Eleanor's number and waited. It rang twice, then was answered.

"Yes?"

"Is it a convention yet?" Dar asked.

Eleanor just chuckled nastily.

"That's what I thought. Need us for anything?"

"Dar, did you know who the principals were in Telegenics?" The Marketing VP asked suddenly. "The big movers, I mean? Not the money people?"

Dar exhaled. "Yes." She answered evenly. "Always nice to have .. old friends… in the business."

"Mm." Eleanor grunted. "Well, I think they figured to have a little competition with us here. My sources tell me they were involved in why we had no staff here last night."

"Ah." Dar smiled humorlessly. "That would explain why they showed up to the offices as we were leaving." She said. "So they thought they'd throw a wrench in, eh?"

"Apparently." Eleanor sounded so very smug. "They were looking to be the big shots and come riding to the rescue this morning. Terribly disappointed, apparently, when they discovered we were already providing that role by generously lending out our resources to help all our prospective clients get their gear running."

"Aww."

"Terribly disappointed to not find you here."

"Double awww." Dar chuckled. "They can kiss my ass."

"That would be playing right into it, no?" Eleanor quipped. "But just so you know, they left, and one of the boys heard them saying they were going to go looking for you. The short bitchy one apparently had some idea of where you might be."

Dar's ears pricked up and she very slowly turned her head to scan her surroundings. She didn't see anyone she knew, but there were a lot of areas she couldn't see, either. "Nice." She muttered.

"You do make charming enemies, Dar." Eleanor sighed. "Anyway, they left us alone, so thank God for that. You will stop by tonight to make sure everything's a go for tomorrow, right?"

"We'll be there." Dar responded quietly.

"Good. Later!" Eleanor hung up, her voice already raising to talk to someone as it vanished into the cellular ether.

* * *

"You were right. There they are." Shari leaned on the balcony of the restaurant, gazing pensively down across the forest of chaise lounges.

"Seem to have an affinity for water." Michelle Graver commented, biting off the words with sharp precision. "I remembered they spent time here last time."

"During the Vista bid?" Shari asked.

"Exactly."

"Mm." The bigger woman turned her attention back to their subjects. As she watched, Dar wrapped her towel around her neck and took a seat on the lounge next to where her

blond companion was lying, but instead of joining her, the tall woman remained upright, just looking around her.

"She always been that good looking?" Michelle asked, curiously.

Shari thought about it. "Eh." She shrugged one linen covered shoulder. "The potential was always there, but there was so much crap covering it you'd never have guessed." She snorted slightly. "She sure kept herself in shape though. Damn sight better than I did."

"Mm." Michelle nodded. "She's into karate, or so I hear."

"Not karate." Shari shook her head. "Some other weird thing. Not surprising. She grew up on that navy base and it screwed her head up royally. Half the time I thought she was psycho."

"Doesn't look it now." Graver observed, noting the elegant lines of Dar's profile. "If you hadn't told me what her background was, I'd never have guessed it."

"No." Shari conceded. "She cleans up all right. Now, at least." Her eyes drifted over to the other chair's occupant. "So she's still with the little blond rat, huh?" She mused. "Wonder how she's managed to get her to stay around."

Michelle turned her head to give her companion a look. "Don't sell our young blond wasp short. She's got brains." She said. "And from what I hear, she's got a set of well taken care of, exquisitely dentured fangs beneath all that sweet Midwestern bullshit." She added. "The few times I had to deal with her, I respected what she did for me."

A shrug. "Whatever." Shari stared down at the two with an almost obsessive look. "Never thought it would last, especially if she's got brains. Who could live with an animal like Dar?"

"She could have changed." Michelle suggested. "I never got the sense that she was anything but sharp, and damn ruthless. When she took that bid group apart it just made my heart go pit-a-pat, that's for sure." She considered. "Her reputation's not built on BS, Shari. I know you've been on the sales and development side, but I haven't."

"Leopards don't change spots. " Shari shook her head. . "But she's the key to ILS all right. She's the cornerstone. You see what she did last night? Busted my ass, but that's Dar all over." She snorted in disgust. "Here I figured we'd make a little stir, and get a face off this morning between her and us."

"It was a good plan." Her companion allowed. "Let the clients see our style differences, head to head. I just never figured on her showing up last night."

"No." Shari's lips wrinkled. "Or her turning grease monkey on us. Though I should have remembered that side of her. Used to drive me nuts. "

"Mm." Michelle nodded thoughtfully. "She makes things happen. I said that when I met her and nothing I've seen since contradicts that. So." She watched their subjects. "Now she's going to be gunning for us. We lost our surprise."

"So." Shari watched Dar draw one leg up and circle it with both arms, the muscles under her tan skin rippling visibly even at this distance. "So, okay, maybe we need to rethink our strategy. Maybe we're going about this the wrong way. "She turned to look at Michelle. "Maybe we don't need to beat her."

The shorter woman raised a ginger colored eyebrow at her.

"We need to seduce her." Shari smiled. "Maybe it's not smart to go head to head. She expects that. But maybe there's a way to get her where she's vulnerable, and.. you know… I just might know how."

Michelle looked doubtful, but intrigued. "Go on."

"Let's go have lunch." Shari suggested. "Get out of this damn heat. I'd forgotten just how much I hated it."

They turned and strolled towards the door. As they reached it, Shari paused and glanced back over her shoulder. By design or chance, Dar's head was turned, and she was staring right at her from behind silvered shades.

Though she was far away enough to know the dark haired woman couldn't see her, Shari shivered anyway, and hastily ducked inside. "Psycho." She muttered, closing the door behind her.

* * *

"I love Epcot." Kerry said, as they strolled through the main entrance to the park. "I think it's my favorite place here."

"Me too." Dar agreed. "Not just because it's nerd heaven, either. I just find my interest held more than at the other parks."

That was significant, Kerry decided. Dar had a surprisingly limited attention span, something that she'd found out over time much to her bemusement. If you wanted her help, you condensed your problem down into it's essentials, and got it in front of her in squarely black and white terms. Then she would review it, decide, and give it back to you sometimes in a matter of minutes.

Anything longer than that, or heaven forbid, if someone chose to do a PowerPoint presentation to make their case, and you lost her. Kerry had seen it happen more than once. Her lover would let her head rest on one hand, and start sketching, occupying her

restless mind with something more interesting than whatever the person presenting was saying.

Which brought up an interesting question. “Hey, Dar? Were you hyperactive when you were a kid?”

Dar turned her head and focused on Kerry, away from the dancing fountains they were walking towards. “Was I?” She mused. “I don’t know. I was a pain in the ass child, that’s for sure. Just ask my mother.”

The scent of pastry distracted them both and Dar steered Kerry towards a bakery shop in the central plaza. They walked up the steps and into the shop, getting in line as they reviewed their options. “Mm.” Kerry eyed a chocolate mousse. “Another reason I like Epcot. Good food.”

“Uh huh.” Dar agreed, making eye contact with the cashier and pointing at the mousse. “Two, and two cappuccinos, please.” She said. “Yeah, I think I was.”

“Huh?” Kerry had her mind on the pastries. “Think you were mousse, hon?”

“Hyperactive.” Dar deftly evaded Kerry’s attempts to pay for their treat and plunked down a handful of bills instead. “Probably my parents had no clue, but when I look back now and think of how I was, yeah. Why?”

“Just curious.” Kerry answered. “I noticed you’re so restless a lot of the time when you’re at work, so I wondered.”

Dar picked up the tray with their treats and nudged Kerry towards a table. “Either that or it was all the damn chocolate I ate.” She sat down and handed over Kerry’s mousse, taking her own and commencing a methodical attack on it. “Okay. Let’s grab some dinner reservations, then we can wander around in this part for a while.”

“Okay.” Kerry licked her spoon. “First stop, Test Track. Vroom, Vroom.”

“Vroom vroom.” Dar agreed with a smile, daubing a bit of mousse on Kerry’s nose. “You got it.”

* * *

It was getting on to evening, and the raw heat of the day was moderating slightly as the breeze picked up. Kerry plucked at the front of her shirt, glad to feel the cool touch of the air and she was wishing the sun would drop faster and bring on the twilight’s relief. “Whew.”

“Yeah.” Dar ambled into the path of a mist gun, letting it spray her with a fine fog of water. “Let’s go find something indoors.”

They stopped in front of a reservations kiosk, and Dar poked at the touch screen looking for what she wanted. “Reservations.. reservations… World Showcase, no…Ah. Living Seas. Here.” She reviewed her choices. “Time.. what do you think, seven? If we can get it?”

“Oo.” Kerry put a hand out and grabbed her partner’s wrist. “Hang on.. what’s that?” She pointed. “Scuba reservations?”

Dar’s eyebrows shot up. She punched the required button and leaned forward, with Kerry pressed against her side in curiosity. “Whoa.” She said. “Never saw that before.” She studied the announcement. “Dive in the Living Seas. Tropical fish, turtles, sharks..hm.” Her eyes turned to Kerry. “Wanna do it?”

“You need to ask?” Kerry said. “Scuba diving in the gazillion gallon aquarium? Sign me up!” She watched as Dar indicated their interest. After a moment, a real person appeared on the screen. “Hi.”

“Hello!” The face smiled back at them. “How can I help you?”

Having punched a specific button, Dar had more or less expected the operator to know what she wanted. However. “We want to go dive on the Living Seas.”

“Great!’ The woman replied. “Would that be for today?”

“Yes.”

The woman did something on her end that involved typing. “Great.” She said again. “We have spaces available at five thirty. How’s that?”

Kerry checked her watch. “It’s five now.” She said. “Sounds perfect.”

Dar bounced up and down on the balls of her feet happily. “Do it.” She instructed the woman. “What do we need?”

The woman typed for a while, then she looked up. “Okay, you’ll need bathing suits, and of course, you do have your certification cards?”

Dar nodded. “Yep, we do.”

“Terrific! Just go to the customer service center at five fifteen, and they’ll take it from there.” The woman smiled broadly. “Excited?”

“Yes.” Kerry forestalled Dar’s answer. “Thanks!’ She watched the woman sign off, then she turned to Dar. “Oh, this is going to be so cool.”

Dar grinned, as she requested their dinner reservations. “Yeah.” She said. “It’s not like we haven’t been diving in more exotic places, but this’ll be different all right.” Finishing, she put her hands on Kerry’s shoulders and directed her towards the service center. “Let’s go.”

* * *

There were six others in their group of eight, Dar discovered, a diverse bunch ranging from resort certified divers with very limited experience, to two others like Dar herself, experienced divemasters just out for some fun.

After a solemn introductory session, and the paying of the fee, they all trooped through an unmarked gate, going from the public part of the theme park, into the work area guests mostly never saw. Dar more or less ignored the chattering around her and spent time looking around at the facilities, which were well kept and spotless though far less ornate than the theme park areas themselves.

They walked past administrative offices, and across a service roadway to the rear part of the Seas exhibit, which featured a huge marine system serviced by entire buildings full of pumps and water treatment equipment.

Inside the exhibit, they moved carefully around huge pipes and up several flights of narrow stairs to a small classroom, where they were given release forms and refreshments while they filled them out. “When was the last time we dove, Dar?” Kerry chewed the end of her pen. “Tuesday or was it last Thursday?”

“Thursday.” Dar was busy scribbling. “You nearly got bitten by that cranky parrot fish you kept chasing down.”

“Ah. Yeah.” Kerry finished writing and signed her name to the bottom of the release, dating it neatly. “I was just trying to take his picture. You’d think he was a TV star in LA or something.”

“Maybe that barracuda that kept following me was his agent.” Dar slid Kerry’s form out from under her hands and gave both to the khaki clad man giving them directions. “Here you go.” She sat back and regarded their fellow divers as the guide collected all his paperwork, and checked off sizes for their gear.

“Okay, guys.” The man finished and gave them a sunny grin. “Next, we go down to the locker rooms and suit up. Your gear bags are on the benches, and when you’re done, just walk out into the hallway and I’ll meet you there to take you up to the dive platform. Okay?”

“Good deal.” Kerry stood and followed Dar as they left the room, traveling down a short flight of stairs to another in a seemingly endless series of pale blue corridors. Touching the wall, she could feel a distinct vibration, and the scent of water seemed to penetrate

even the thick concrete. The air was also damp, and combined with the chill of the conditioners, rather refreshing after being outside.

The locker rooms were surprisingly plush. Kerry's eyebrows rose as she noted the well equipped showers, complete with shampoo and soap. "Hey. Nice." She complimented them, as Dar sorted out their respective wetsuits. "Almost like home."

"Here." Dar tossed Kerry a suit, moving forward as one of the two other women walked past her to the changing booths. The other woman followed, leaving Dar and Kerry in the main room together.

They exchanged looks, then Kerry pointed to one of the changing booths. "After you, little fishie. Give me a hand getting this thing on?"

Dar grinned knowingly. "Sure." She answered in an offhand tone. They entered the same space and closed the door, as Dar draped the two wetsuits over the partition wall. "We don't use these much."

"Nope." Kerry removed her shorts, and her t-shirt, leaning forward and giving Dar a kiss on the navel as she did the same. "Too hot most of the time." She removed her still dampish swimsuit and slid it on, grimacing at it's clammy touch. "Someone's going to invent instant suit dryers some day. Brr."

Dar adjusted the strap on Kerry's suit, then ducked her head and nibbled her neck, running her hands over the sheer fabric lightly to warm it. "That better?" She inquired, into Kerry's now bright pink ear.

"Much." Kerry rubbed the bridge of her nose, as the surge of heat from her guts felt like it was going to produce steam off the dampness. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Dar put on her own suit and adjusted it, then she picked up Kerry's wetsuit and held it up for her. "Squiggle."

Kerry stepped into the shortie suit and tugged it up over her thighs and past her hips before she stuck her arms into it and straightened. "I always feel like a penguin in one of these." She remarked, as Dar pulled the neoprene into place and zipped the back. The suit was restrictive, and she spent a moment moving her arms and adjusting the half sleeves as Dar got into hers. "I ever tell you that you look really good in a wetsuit?"

Dar paused in the process of pulling on a sleeve and peered at her. "I look good as a penguin? Thanks, Ker.. you're a peach." She tugged the neoprene over her muscular shoulders and stretched her arms out, grimacing as the stubborn fabric pulled overly taut before it grudgingly inched into place.

Kerry pulled her zipper up and gave her a pat on the side. The thick rubber outlined Dar's body sleekly, and despite the overwhelming scent of carbon, she did find it kind of sexy looking. "You don't look like a penguin, sweetie. You look like a superhero."

Dar looked down at herself, then up at Kerry. "I think you're the one who needs glasses, Kerry." She laughed. "C'mon. Let's go see some fish." She picked up their clothing and opened the booth door, waiting for Kerry to exit before she moved towards a set of lockers where they'd been assigned a top one for their things.

The two other women had already exited, and when Dar and Kerry opened the door they found most of the rest of the group waiting. They joined their guide, now also suited up, and stood quietly as the last of the group finally ducked out of the men's locker room.

"Okay, let's go up." The guide turned and lead the way, past anonymous blue doors and up another set of stairs before he reached a door marked "Stage Entrance". "Okay, we're going into the Living Seas now, so everyone suck it up and look good."

Before anyone could react, the guide opened the door and they were greeted with a blast of chilly air. Past the entrance, they could see the inside of the public pavilion, filled with guests some of which were now glancing their way curiously. "Oh… hm." Kerry murmured, as they filed out and started across the carpeted floor. "Boy, that could be embarrassing."

Dar merely kept walking, wryly hoping she didn't bump into anyone she knew.

They traversed the main floor and got to the central area, where a huge tube with Plexiglas windows showed a diver's lock in area. For a moment Dar wondered if they were really going to lock through, then the guide took them to a door in the rear and they disappeared into a stairwell leading up.

The scent of water was much stronger here, to the point that Dar could almost feel the salt collecting on the back of her tongue as they walked upwards. At the top of the circular stairs a door opened, and they walked out onto a steel platform.

The aquarium was laid out below them, the entrance to it a huge circular room criss-crossed with steel catwalks to give access to the water's surface. There were huge slings and cranes over the water, and equipment for servicing the giant tank was clamped everywhere. Here, rather than the public viewpoint of an entertaining, safe, cheerful show was instead the rig of a professional marine habitat and an air of scientific matter of factness.

Dar found out fascinating. But they were being herded down to the launch area, so she dismissed it and followed Kerry down to the lower platform where the divers would enter the water. Already, eight sets of gear were perched on the side, neatly arranged. Very professional, she noted approvingly.

"Okay." The guide faced them. "We're going to gear up, and get in the water. I'll lead you around in the tank, and let you know when it's time to interact with the guests. Now, you know a big part of this is being part of the show, so make sure you have fun with it."

Kerry swiveled her head and looked up at her partner, whose eyebrows were crawling almost into her hairline. "Uh oh."

"Part of the show?" Dar mouthed in outrage.

"You'll get to interact with our guests in the observation bubbles, and at the restaurant! Isn't that great? The guests love it. They' think you're one of us, so let's get going!" The guide took the first woman's arm and started moving her towards the gear.

"Wait a minute." Dar started to protest, but fell silent when Kerry put a hand on her arm. She turned a glower on her partner, but found herself pinned by warm green eyes, and a gently entreating expression and knew she was going to dissolve under it the moment she saw it. "Kerrrryy…"

"It'll be fun." Kerry insisted, taking her arm and tugging her towards the gear. "C'mon, Dar, didn't you always want to work at Disney World?"

"No." The taller woman scowled. "I don't do the Wal-Mart greeter, Kerrison."

"Just pretend they're just more fish to look at." Kerry soothed her. "It'll be fun."

Dar snorted, but reluctantly followed her down onto the platform, blinking a little as the cold water hit her feet. "If I kiss you underwater, think they'll throw us out?" She muttered.

"Dar."

"Heh."

* * *

Kerry slowly sank into the water, letting herself submerge as she looked around her at the inside of the tank. Beside her, the still visibly glowering even through her mask Dar was doing the same, her hands folded over her stomach as she remained at the vertical beside Kerry.

Kerry poked her. Dar turned her head and waited, her eyes fastened on Kerry from behind the glass panels.

I love you. Kerry signed with her hands, watching intently until she saw the flow of bubbles change as Dar smiled around her regulator. After a glance at the guide, Dar

signed back the same message, then she appeared to relax, tilting back and finning lazily around in a circle as the rest of the group descended.

That left Kerry free to simply float and watch the fish surround her, an explosion of sea life greater than any she'd experienced so far even in the prolific Caribbean. The water was crystal clear, and though the corals were fake, the colors made the fish stand out in vivid waves.

It was very different than ocean diving. For that, you needed to take into account the waves, and the currents, and the visibility was often not that great due to floating debris. This was a complete departure – like having the best parts of a dive set before you without the nasty parts you had to live with.

How Disney. Kerry mused, as she put a hand out curiously towards a large parrot fish circling near by. It drifted closer and nibbled her skin, a ticklish sensation that made her nose wrinkle. She felt a tug on her arm, and turned to see the guide motioning them all on towards the main part of the tank.

The water was cold, but the shortie wetsuit kept her warm enough until her body started adjusting to it. Kerry gently bled some of the air from her BC and sank a bit, moving down towards the bottom. She stayed back a little then, watching the rest of the group as they explored the first large fake coral structure.

Dar had relaxed enough to take up her usual diving posture, her buoyancy completely balanced, her arms clasped lightly in front of her as she dolphin kicked in a slow circle around the coral. She slowed, and a cloud of fish surrounded her, coming closer than they ever would in the wild. Dar went still, only her head moving as the silvery bodies brushed hers and behind the glass Kerry could see those pale blue eyes widening.

Cool. Kerry smiled, wishing she had her underwater camera with her. A motion caught her attention, and she turned her head, her own eyes widening as a long, sleek gray form swam towards her. She stayed completely still as the small shark nosed at her fins, then moved on with a negligent flick of his tail. She watched it swim off, then she turned to find Dar gazing at her, one hand lifted with it's thumb up.

Kerry responded positively, and swam over to join her partner as they followed the group towards a large circular rock. The guide had all the divers swimming up through it, she realized, emerging at the top where there was a cameraman filming each one as they popped up. Ah. She got into line amiably. A videotape offering must be in the near future.

Dar was in front of her, so she put her hand on the taller woman's hip, holding herself in place as Dar started forward, towing her along. They both reached the circular hole together, and she pressed close to her partner as they slid through, their gear just barely clearing the rocks. On the other side, the cameraman caught them, giving them a big

thumbs up as they both swam free of the enclosure and tumbled into somersaults in front of him.

Heh. Kerry took the lead now, heading downward to where the guide was pointing out something behind a rock. When she got closer, she saw it was a huge turtle, and she settled down cautiously next to it to get a better look.

Dar hovered above her, studying the reptile with interest, then motion caught her eye and she looked up to see faces pressed against the Plexiglas wall next to them.

Several people waved at her. Dar lifted a hand and hesitantly waved back, surprised when the smallest faces started moving as their owners jumped up and down. Curiously, she drifted closer, and watched the children point at her.

She pointed back. They squealed, their mouths opening and closing. With one eyebrow raised, Dar decided to try something more interesting, and she inverted herself neatly, flipping her body over and hanging in the water upside down with bubbles trailing up the length of her.

A crowd had gathered now, and she was apparently the center of attention. Dar glanced down, to find Kerry sprawled over the floor of the tank, flippers crossed at the ankles, watching her with great amusement.

The turtle decided he was being upstaged, and lifted up, his flippers clawing through the water as he drifted past Dar and nudged her with his foot.

Dar drew her knees up and somersaulted over him, then she dove for the tank bottom as the rest of the group came wandering over. Kerry caught up with her and gave a playful tug on her weight belt, and she found a school of yellow reef fish to focus her attention on.

Another tug. Dar sighed, a plume of bubbles rushing up towards the surface, but then she looked over at her partner and lifted her hand in question.

Kerry pointed at her, then closed her fist, then she held both hands together and rocked them.

Dar removed her regulator and stuck her tongue out, then pulled it hastily back in as the cold water surprised her with its sting. She put her regulator back into her mouth and bit down on the mouthpiece, sucking in a breath of cool, dry, rubber scented air. Gathering the remaining shreds of her dignity, she rolled over in the water, looking around as the guide motioned them on.

Ahead of them were more floor to ceiling plate glass windows, with people behind them. Dar edged closer, realizing it was the interior of the restaurant they would be eating dinner in that she was looking at.

As she floated down past the first window, her eyes focused on the people beyond it and she found a shock going up and down her spine as she recognized the faces. She half turned to find where Kerry was, only to have warm fingers clamp down on her wrist as Kerry eased in next to her.

Inside the glass, outlined in the eerie aqua shadows from the water, were Shari and Michelle. Seated in one of the best viewing tables, neither was paying attention to the sights. Instead, they were talking animatedly over full plates of dinner, as Michelle pointed her fork at Shari to make a point.

Shari put her glass down and shook a finger playfully at her, and they both laughed.

Dar made a hand sign. Kerry nodded. They both turned and swam a little ways off, floating in mid tank as they watched the rest of the group wander past the main windows. After a moment, Kerry pointed to the tank floor, then lifted her hands suddenly, pushing them upwards in a rush.

Behind the mask, her partner's blue eyes twinkled mischievously. Dar glanced around, then she and Kerry swam slowly down to the bottom of the tank, drifting just off the surface as they made their way to the wall. At the base of the wall they paused, neither breathing. Dar held up one finger, then two, then three.

At the third, they both shot up past the window, exhaling a huge exhaust of bubbles that sounded like thunder around them.

Dar heard, even through the window, faintly, the clattering sound of dishes being dropped. She angled up and over with Kerry next to her like a limpet, diving down to another part of the exhibit and exchanging friendly waves with two small boys in identical Mickey Mouse ears.

After a few moments, Dar peeked over her shoulder, watching as two waiters hastily tried to clean up the two tumbled plates of food, while Shari tried frantically to wipe the red wine off her jacket. A snicker escaped her, causing a cloud of bubbles to emerged from her regulator, and she mouthed her regulator, biting down on the rubber as she tried to control her laughter.

It was childish, she acknowledged to herself, as she saw Michelle throw her soiled napkin from her in disgust.

But it was fun. Dar resolutely turned her head towards her waiting audience, and proceeded to make a face at them, blowing bubbles as they pressed their faces against the glass.

Kerry rolled onto her back and rested her hands on her belly, twiddling her thumbs as she grinned. Then she hastily rolled back over and paid attention to the little boys, as the two

women suddenly turned and looked out the viewing port, pointing and yammering at the harried looking waiter.

Dar drifted down to her knees in the shell bottom holding out her hands and playing pat a cake with the smaller of the two boys. He was squealing in delight, his eyes sparkling with excitement as he slapped the Plexiglas from his side, as his mother looked on with a smile.

Kerry peeked past Dar's shoulder, hoping her features were obscured enough by her gear as she spotted the figures in the window peering at them. For a moment, she thought her eyes met Michelle's and she was busted, but after a split second the figures looked elsewhere, finally pointing towards two of the men divers who were chasing each other in and out of the coral.

Aww. Kerry felt a sense of guilty enjoyment. That'll teach you to mess with us, huh? She turned her back on the window and fastened her eyes on her partner instead, who was now swimming slowly away from the restaurant panes, coming alongside one of the small gray sharks.

Kerry followed her, falling into her usual position at Dar's shoulder as they came alongside the next big coral formation, settling slowly to the bottom on their knees as an entire school of brightly colored fish swirled around them.

She tipped her head back and spread her arms, feeling the fins brush her fingertips. Ahead of them, most of the group was clustered near the clear Plexiglas tube, amusing a host of guests snapping photos. Kerry decided it was their turn to be on stage, and she stayed where she was, playing with a curious, small angelfish nibbling at the side of her mask.

Her heart was still beating fast from their prank. She wondered if Dar's was, noticing her partner was merely drifting around the rock formation, turning slowly along her length as she took in the inside of the tank. Casually, she reached up and closed her hand around Dar's bare ankle, feeling the steady flutter of her pulse beneath her fingertips.

Dar looked over at her, and waggled her flipper, giving Kerry a thumbs up and a wink clearly visible even behind her mask.

Heh. Kerry released her and undulated her body, diving down towards the bottom of the tank to have an up close and personal introduction to another big turtle plodding along.

This was fun. She touched the turtle's shell, drifting back a little as it stopped it's methodical chewing of algae and peered at her with it's fathomless black eyes. Had the turtle seen their joke?

Did he think it was funny, too? Kerry scratched him on the side of his neck, charmed by the creature's gentle regard.

Then the turtle winked at her, and swam on, searching for new patches of algae to consume. Kerry leaned on her elbow, then turned her head as something nudged her expecting to see Dar there.

Instead, a shark was. But since it was a Disney shark, instead of eating her, the animal merely bumped her with it's nose, and slid past her, letting her trail her fingers over it's sandpaper skin.

Incredible. Kerry grinned. Just an incredible day.

* * *

"That was amazing." Kerry wiped her face with a towel, wishing for a glass of anything to clean the taste of rubber out of her mouth. "Dar, can you believe we got afrrff." Suddenly the taste of rubber was made irrelevant as Dar swung the door shut on their changing cubicle and kissed her, effectively cutting off what she'd intended on saying. "Mm."

"Shh." Dar whispered into her ear, jerking her head towards the next cubicles where they two other women on the dive were getting out of their gear. "Yeah, I can't believe we got so close to those fish either." She added, in a louder tone. "Incredible."

Kerry made a twirling motion with her fingers, unzipping Dar's wetsuit when her partner complied and peeling the neoprene off to reveal Dar's tanned shoulders. "Did you see that shark?"

"Mmhm." Dar stripped off the suit and stepped out of it, hanging it over the wall of the cubby and leaning in to start the shower running. "We've seen most of those things before, but never in one place, and never so damn clearly."

"Yup." Kerry peeled out of her own suit and added it to Dar's, then removed her swimsuit and hung it up as well. She stepped into the shower as Dar got naked and joined her, and bowing to the close confines of the small space, she made the most of it by putting her arms around Dar and hugging her.

Dar pressed the button on the shampoo dispenser, and used a handful to lather Kerry's hair for her. She scrubbed the thick, pale strands as Kerry simply stood quietly, her fingertips running up and down Dar's back in a lazy rhythm.

The water pounded down on them, warming them after the long immersion in the cold tank, and the chilly walk down from the diver's lock. Dar rinsed the soap out of Kerry's hair, and knelt, resting her chin against Kerry's thigh as Kerry returned the favor.

Her skin felt a little tender, and the long day's exertions had started to spread a slight ache through her body. She was looking forward to a nice dinner with Kerry, and then

sliding under the covers with her back in their comfortable room. Then a thought occurred. “Oh, crap.”

“Something wrong?” Kerry leaned towards her. “Did I hit sunburn on your neck?”

Dar sighed. “No. I just remembered I promised Eleanor I’d stop by the convention tonight and just make sure everything’s all right for the opening of the show tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Kerry ran her fingers through Dar’s hair, removing the soap from it as her partner tipped her head back and looked up at her. “Well, that won’t take long. We can… oh, crap.”

“Mmhm. We have to go back and get the car.” Dar said. “We took the bus and monorail.” She sighed again. “Oh well. We’ll just have to go do it.” With that, she rested her hand on Kerry’s tensed thigh and stood, reaching for the shower controls to turn them off. “After dinner.”

“Absolutely. I’m hungry enough to have started chewing on those turtles down there.” Kerry agreed, as she followed Dar out of the shower and handed her partner one of the two large towels they’d left waiting. The other two women had already finished dressing, and they heard the door close as they dried off. “Not real friendly, huh?”

Dar lifted herself up on her tip toes and peered over the partition, making sure they were alone in the room. “No.” She nipped Kerry’s ear playfully. “Did you see the crosses? They’re from a Kansas seminary.”

Kerry stood quite still, enjoying the tingles brought on by Dar’s teeth. “And?” She patted her partner’s body dry with her towel, removing impudent droplets from between her breasts. “Did they guess we’re gay or something? What clued them?”

“Beat’s me.” Dar watched Kerry lean closer and kiss a few more droplets away. “Maybe it’s our haircuts.”

Kerry looked up at her, one eyebrow arching sharply.

“More likely it’s the way we look at each other.” Dar grinned. “Or the fact that we spend more time dressing and undressing each other than all the rest of them combined.” She ruffled Kerry’s wet hair. “C’mon. Let’s get our t-shirts and our certificates, and go eat.”

Kerry toweled her head vigorously, and reached for her clothing, dismissing their unfriendly neighbors with a shrug. Not everyone, she reminded herself, accepted their lifestyle as easily as their friends or Dar’s parents did.

In fact, she mused, as she pulled on her shorts and fastened them, most people who were not gay really didn’t seem to be comfortable with the idea, at least at first. What she’d discovered, however, was that after a while, even the most wary generally got used to it,

and then they forgot about it. That was pretty much what happened with her and Dar and work – in the beginning, there had been many people who had avoided her like the plague unless they had to come to her for something.

Now, however, she very seldom got what she referred to as the 'ew – gay cooties!' response. People generally just treated her like anyone else, and that really was all she'd ever could have asked for.

With a satisfied sigh, she shouldered her small bag and followed Dar out of the changing room, setting down both of their wetsuits in the marked hamper. She ran her fingers through her hair to put it in some kind of order, and rubbed a little remaining water from her eyes as Dar opened the door into the hallway and they joined the rest of the group.

"Okay." The guide reappeared, with two of his buddies carrying a clipboard and a pile of bags. "I've got your shirts and your guaranteed frameable certificates here… anyone interested in getting the video? We've got it inside, and it's just twenty bucks. The money goes towards the marine sciences institute here, so we can keep doing these kinds of services."

"We'll take one." Kerry spoke up, just ahead of the others, who also agreed and nodded.

"Great." The man smiled at her. "Hey listen, did any of you see anything weird happen in the tank? Like around the windows to the restaurant?"

Kerry felt Dar inhale, and she instinctively took a step closer to her, caught flatfooted by this new danger of revelation. Had any of the others seen them? And if they had, would they tell? She let her eyes slowly drift around the group, then fastened them back on the guide.

Everyone had a puzzled look. Even Dar had manufactured a nice one, cocking her dark head to one side and lowering her eyebrows.

"Okay, well, I didn't see anything either, but somebody inside the restaurant swears they had someone scare the poo out of a couple of people at one of the window tables, so.. I had to ask. Probably was a fish." The guide dismissed the entire affair, and went about passing out their goodie bags.

"Whew." Kerry muttered under her breath.

"Mm." Dar returned the guide's smile and took her booty. "Thanks.. that was great."

"Hey, thanks yourself! You were great." The guide responded. "You were a real trooper with the kids, they loved ya! Got any yourself?"

"Just a dog." Dar responded. "Glad I was a hit."

Kerry took her bag. “It was really fantastic.” She complimented the guide. “I had a great time.”

“You’re a good diver.” The man responded. “You’ve got great buoyancy control, you dive a lot, huh?”

“I do, yes.” Kerry agreed. “Mostly in the Caribbean and South Atlantic.” She smiled at him. “This was really cool.”

“Thanks! Tell all your friends!” The man smiled back, and moved on. “Your tapes’ll be out in a minute, and after that, my buddy John here will take you back out to the lobby. Hope you all had a great time!”

“Yes!” The group responded in a chorus.

Dar rested her forearm on Kerry’s shoulder, and they both relaxed as the guide left and the rest of the group milled around waiting for their videos. “This was nice.” She remarked. “Totally Disneyfied, but nice.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry agreed. “And at least they don’t pipe ‘It’s a Small World” at you through underwater speakers.” She guided Dar towards the doors, where a new staffer had appeared with a stack of plastic video tape cases. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Dar took the tape from the woman and they escaped into the Living Seas, blending into the sparse crowd and heading for the exit. As they passed through the doors, Shari and Michelle entered from the other direction, pausing to look around intently before moving on.

* * *

Dar didn’t even bother with the front door this time. She pulled the Lexus around to the back and parked in the loading dock, hopping out and slamming the door as Kerry did the same. They strolled over to the entrance in companionable silence and ducked inside.

It was much less chaotic, and much more organized, Dar noticed at once. She paced slowly down the aisles of now completed booths, giving the odd security guard now on duty an amiable look as she passed them.

Their booth was relatively in the center of the room, and she circled it entirely once before she entered the neatly made up space. “Nice.” She commented to Kerry, who was checking out the locked case full of routers and switches. “Everything look good?”

Kerry walked to one of the sets and brought it up, coding in her password and running a few quick commands. “Looks very good.” She said. “Decent throughput.”

Dar leaned against the center column with her hands in her shorts pockets, admiring the contrast of Kerry's sun gilded skin against the white cotton of her shirt. The sleeves were rolled up, and the shirt was tucked into her worn denim shorts and Dar found the whole picture quite appealing. "Know what?" She drawled.

"What?" Kerry looked up inquisitively.

"You're gorgeous."

Kerry's sunburn deepened several shades, and she glanced around the room before she produced a grin. "Um.. thanks." She murmured. "What brought that on?"

Dar shrugged. "Just an observation. Are we getting a two meg download?"

Kerry blinked. "What?" Her brows creased for a long moment before she realized what Dar was talking about. "Oh… um." She looked back at the screen in confusion, then punched a few more keys. "One point eight."

"Good enough." Her partner decided. "We're streaming locally anyway. At least I hope we are. Check to see if the marketing nitwits downloaded the mpegs." She wandered over to the far side of the booth, examining the colorful brochures curiously as Kerry bent over the console again.

A door slammed, and Dar lifted her head at the sound, turning and peering across the center towards the front of the room. She spotted the two figures entering and only just stifled the impulse to grab Kerry and disappear, reasoning that they'd have to face off against their two adversaries sooner or later.

But there was no point in rushing the confrontation, so she merely went back to examining the marketing literature.

"Dar?" Kerry's low voice reached her.

"I know." Dar answered calmly. "Just do your thing."

Kerry sat down in the nearest seat and continued her parsing, examining the file structures of the presentations they'd sent out from the office earlier that day. Her ears were perked, though, as she listened to the footsteps wandering through the hall which would, she knew, eventually end up right where they were.

She grinned, just a little, and cracked her knuckles.

* * *

Michelle stopped as she reached the edge of the booth and waited for the two women inside it to look up.

When they didn't, she cleared her throat. "Well, well."

Kerry glanced up from her screen. "Oh, hi." She greeted their guest cordially. "C'mon in."

Michelle availed herself of the invitation and stepped inside the booth, circling the desk Kerry was at and taking a seat on the edge of the console. "Hello, Dar." She peered at the booth's second occupant and paused.

"Hi." Dar rested her chin on her fist and looked up briefly, then went back to studying the settings she had been investigating. "How's it going?"

Somehow, it wasn't the reception Michelle had been expecting. "Damned good, actually. Bet you're surprised to see me here."

"Not really." Kerry finished checking her screen, and moved to another one. "You guys get everything taken care of? We heard there were some problems last night… I thought your booth looked pretty well together."

"Our booth?"

"Mmhm.." Kerry indicated the Telegenics display a few rows down. "I like the LCD scrolling – it's nice." She tapped a few keys, and clicked twice with her mouse, reviewing the results. "There, that's better. Did you adjust that, Dar?"

"Uh huh." Dar responded. "Put prioritization in and filtered out some of Mark's crap."

"So you liked our stuff, huh?" Michelle decided to go with the flow of the conversation. "Glad to hear that. We worked hard on it, just like we've been working hard on getting new accounts around here. You must have noticed that too."

Kerry sat back and gazed thoughtfully at Michelle, then she turned her eyes to Dar, who had looked up and was now twiddling her thumbs at her workstation. Dar shrugged. "Are you? Well, congrats, then." She replied.

"So, you didn't noticed we took eight of your accounts from here?" Shari stepped around the pylon and confronted them, leaning on the counter right above where Dar was sitting. "Hello, Dar."

"Hi." Dar responded, without budging an inch. "Business is business, I figure. You win some, you lose some." She tipped her head back, meeting Shari's eyes evenly, feeling an inward sense of embarrassed relief when her guts didn't clench even a little.

After a long moment, Shari looked away first, ostensibly turning her attention to Kerry. "That the way you see it too, Ms. Stuart?"

"Is there any other way?" Kerry queried. "We've got lots of competitors."

Michelle and Shari exchanged quick glances. "Well, that's great." Michelle said. "Frankly, we were hoping you'd feel that way. I mean, yes, we're competitors, but we've all got a lot in common, don't we? It'd be nice to do some friendly networking for a change." She smiled at them. "Matter of fact, we were hoping you both would be here today. We checked in a few times, but didn't see you around."

"Nah." Dar leaned back and extended her long legs, crossing them casually at the ankles. "We came in and did our part last night. We've been relaxing all day."

"At the parks?" Michelle smiled again.

"Like you were, huh?" Kerry indicated the Goofy shirts they were wearing. "It was a beautiful day, wasn't it?"

Shari glanced down at herself, and her face twisted into a half grimace. "Yeah, well, we love shopping." She muttered. "Never can have too many of these."

Dar slid her hand up, covering the grin that threatened to appear on her face. It was hard for her to bring back up that feeling that she'd always gotten when she'd thought of Shari, those nightmares that had chased her for so long until she'd met Kerry and they'd fallen in love with each other.

"Listen." Michelle wrested control of the conversation back. "We just dropped by to make sure things were ready before we headed back to our hotel. You two free for breakfast tomorrow? Maybe we can chat then."

I'd rather eat Donald Duck jello eggs on toast with a pack of mimes. Kerry hesitated, trying to recall what their schedule was for the following day. The convention started at ten, so… She looked at Dar, reading the resigned set of her eyebrows and the faint twitch on either side of her mouth.

Kerry wrinkled her nose slightly, and saw the wry twinkle appear in Dar's eyes. "I think we're free for breakfast, aren't we? Unless you promised Marketing we'd meet with them." She gracefully gave Dar an out anyway, and waited for her decision.

"I can't take Eleanor before coffee." Dar replied. "Yeah, we're free." She glanced up at Shari. "Where are you staying?"

"The Sheraton across from here." Shari answered warily. "But their restaurant is pitiful."

"Ours isn't." Kerry said. "Why don't' you meet us there? It's the Grand Floridian." She flipped off the monitor she'd been working at and stood up. "They've got great banana

stuffed French toast." She let her hands come to rest on her hips and cocked her head at them. "Eight all right? We get up early."

Dar folded her arms over her chest, content to let Kerry hack and slash her way through with her charmingly piratical good manners. "Yeah, that's early enough to miss the characters. I don't want to scare Pluto again." She remarked with an easy grin.

Michelle appeared as though she'd sucked on a sour orange. "Sure." She finally agreed. "We'll meet you there." She got up and stepped out of the booth, giving Shari a backhanded slap on the arm. "C'mon. Let's get out of here."

Kerry perched next to Dar's seat and watched them leave, casually leaning her wrist on her partner's shoulder. "I think we scored." She remarked as they walked through the entrance and out of sight. "You were right, Dar. That was exactly how to handle them. Good call."

"Oh yeah." Dar closed down her connection and stood, stretching her body out. "Round one to Roberts and Stuart, Ding ding." She added. "But now we've got round two at eight am tomorrow."

"Yeah." Kerry sighed. "What a way to ruin perfectly good French toast. " She slipped her arm around Dar's waist as they walked together towards the rear door. "You know, Dar, I really don't like Shari."

"Oh, really?" Dar opened the back door and held it as they exited.

"Really." Kerry took a breath of the warm, humid night air. "In fact, I'd like to take a set of cat five crimpers and clamp the end of her nose with them."

Dar looked at her. One eyebrow lifted. "What would that do?"

"Make her scream like a cat in a blender." Kerry replied, with a firm nod. "Start my day off just right."

Dar's nostrils flared. "Remind me not to piss you off, okay?" She draped an arm over Kerry's shoulders. "You just made my nose want to run off to Denver."

Kerry just chuckled, and shook her head.

* * *

"Thanks." Kerry scribbled her name on the room service check and handed it back to the waiter, then closed the door after him as he slipped out into the hallway. On the table near the window he'd left a tray, which had a large white china pot, two cups, and a plate full of chocolate dipped strawberries.

Kerry inspected the tray, lifting the lid on the pot and sniffing appreciatively. “Mm.” She put the lid back down and dusted her hands off, turning her back on it and heading for the bathroom.

Dar was inside, applying aloe to her shoulders which were a deep, burnished color half tan and half sunburn. Kerry took the bottle from her and smeared the stuff across her back, rubbing it gently on the patches between the straps of her swimsuit. “You got toasted, honey.”

“I feel it.” Dar seemed embarrassed. “Next time remind me to put my damn sunscreen on after I get out of the water, willya?”

“Sorry. Thought you had.” Kerry winced at the red marks. “My fault. I should have checked when I had you put some on me.”

“Your fault?” Dar chuckled softly. “I could have remembered when I **was** putting some on you.” She flexed her arms and turned, taking the bottle and putting a little on her fingers. Then she carefully painted Kerry’s face with it, tracing the pink skin over her rounded cheekbones. “You got a little toasted too.”

“I sure did.” Kerry let her hands rest on Dar’s hips. “But you know what? I had a great day. The dive was stupendous, and scaring the poo out of those two was so choice.”

Dar grinned. “Yeah, it was.” She admitted. “A little juvenile, though.”

“So was their trying to make trouble last night.” Kerry stated. “So there.”

“So there.” Dar leaned over and kissed her, tasting a hint of lip balm as she explored Kerry’s mouth. “I am starting to wonder now what they’re up to, though.” She added. “The bitchiness I understand. Them being nice is scary.”

Kerry took her hand and tugged. “Well, let’s give em the benefit of the doubt, Dar. You never know – maybe they decided to grow up too.”

“Mm.” Dar followed her willingly. “Like us, you mean?”

“Exactly.” Kerry paused and indicated the tray. “So, grownup. Wanna share some hot chocolate and berries with me?”

They walked to the table hand in hand. Dar gazed down at the treats with a smile, picking up a piece of apple garnish and taking a bite of it. “What more could any woman ask for?” She inquired, around her mouthful of apple.

“Share.” Kerry stood on her tiptoes and closed her teeth around the apple slice, and they both nibbled towards the center, giggling as their noses bumped and they fought over the last scrap of it.

“Whoops..” Dar rolled her tongue around a small, hard point. “Seed.”

“Where?” Kerry caught the pink appendage in her teeth, surprising Dar into releasing the seed into her mouth. “Ah! Got it!” She pulled back and swallowed the seed, sticking her tongue out a few times like a lizard. “Mm.”

Dar laughed. “Did you just swallow that?”

“Yup.” Kerry picked up a strawberry chaser and bit into its chocolate shell ruthlessly. “I heard a story once that if you swallow an apple seed it makes the tree of knowledge grow inside you.”

“Um.”

“Here. Don’t think about it. Just eat.” Kerry offered her half a strawberry. “It was a goofy story, but it’s better than the other one I heard.”

Dar chewed her berry contentedly. “That it makes you healthy, wealthy and wise?” She hazarded a guess.

“That it makes you pregnant.”

Dar spit a bit of berry halfway across the table and nearly inhaled the rest of it. She covered her mouth as a laugh erupted from her.

Kerry patted her back solicitously. “Told you it was goofy. You’d be surprised at what you end up being taught in Sunday school that far north, honey.”

“Jesus… remind me to throw some of our education budget up there, will you?” Dar buried her face into Kerry’s shoulder. “Before they start teaching Cabbage Patch creationist theory.”

Kerry gave her a kiss on the head, and exhaled happily, patting Dar’s cheek when she lifted her head up. “Will do.” She brushed Dar’s cheek with her lips. “But they threw the book away when they came up with you.”

Dar poured out two cups of hot chocolate, lifted hers, and clinked it’s edge against Kerry’s when she picked her own up. “Here’s to us.” She looked into Kerry’s eyes. “To hell with everyone else.”

Kerry took a sip, and gave a kiss. “I’ll drink to that anytime.”

* * *

Dar settled her balance, gripping the bar on the weights with both hands at shoulder width and pressing her back against the weight bench. Slowly, she lifted the barbell clear, and lowered it, pushing it away from her with the same deliberation until her arms were straight.

It was very quiet in the hotel's gym, not surprising since it was before dawn. Dar lowered the bar and pressed it up again, keeping an even rhythm until she'd done it ten times. Then she set the weight back on the bar and let her arms drop.

"Ouch." She flexed her shoulder carefully, reaching over to probe the tightness she could feel still in the joint. It had mostly healed after her injury, but getting a full range of motion back and evening out the strength between her two arms was proving a long and to her tedious process.

But a process it was, and she slid down, fitting her legs under the leg press and flexing her thigh muscles to lift the weights she'd set on it up steadily. Aside from their new kickboxing classes, she'd felt the need lately to reaffirm the power she'd taken years to build into her body and she'd started doing a little more weightlifting than she had been for a while.

Wasn't any real reason for it. Dar folded her hands across her stomach and counted silently. Just a phase she was going through, apparently, maybe her running and other efforts getting her bored at the moment.

Breakfast was also on her mind. As she exercised, Dar went over the possible tacks she could take in their next fencing match with Shari and Michelle. Should she give them the benefit of the doubt and assume maybe they did just want to bury the hatchet? Maybe Kerry was right.

Dar slid up on the bench and switched back to the chest presses. Maybe she was letting the personal side of the issue get in the way a little too much. After all, Shari wasn't anything she needed to worry about now. She'd past her years back in the business strategy arena, she was a successful corporate executive, and she had the stable loving relationship Shari had been so sure she hadn't been capable of.

So it was her game, match, and goal, and she had nothing to fear from either her ex lover, her ex lover's company, or the breakfast they were going to have in just a few hours.

Right. Dar let the bar drop again, and braced her legs, beginning a set of sit ups, contracting her torso muscles in a more rapid rhythm. So why did she have knots in her guts?

For a few long moments she turned the thoughts off, concentrating on the exercise instead. Then her eyes lifted and met her reflection's gaze from the mirrors on the wall and she saw the wry lift of her own lips. "I think that whole 'grown up' crap wasn't a

hundred percent now, was it Paladar?" She addressed herself in a mocking tone. "Still smarting from that first blow off, huh?"

Just the articulation seemed to help. The knotted feeling inside her stomach eased, and she felt her body relax in response to it. "Redneck squirt fraud." She stuck her tongue out and slowed her motion, turning the last crunch into a rise to her feet as she ambled over to the leg press with a sigh. "Turn off the hormones, turn on the synapses. Think about what you've got right now."

She loaded an extra plate onto the bar and got under it, lifting it up onto her shoulders carefully and pausing to set her feet. With a deep breath, she went down with the weight, then straightened her legs and eased back up.

She did it again, reveling in the reassuring sense of control as her body responded smoothly. You are the energy in this, Dar. She reminded herself silently. They want something from you. That means you have to drive the situation to your advantage.

I can do that. Her inner confidence responded. *We can do that.* Dar corrected herself, with a smile. *They are out of their league but they just don't know it yet.*

* * *

The next morning started off charmingly enough, Kerry reasoned, as she surveyed the chocolate kiss resting squarely on her navel. Dar was no where to be seen, but she concluded the kiss could not have come from a Disney waiter, so she unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth as she slid from under the covers and got out of bed.

A rumble of thunder caught her attention, and she glanced outside the window, where a gray, drizzly day met her eyes. "Hm." She lifted her t-shirt from the back of the chair and slipped into it, turning to check the clock by the bed. "Six thirty."

She poked her head into the bathroom, and deducted by the one neatly hung, but still damp towel over the shower bar and the distinct, lingering scent of their body wash that Dar had taken her morning scrub and gone out to do…

To do what? Kerry scrubbed her teeth and ruminated on that for a while. Dar hadn't mentioned going out before meeting their unwelcome breakfast guests, so what was her partner up to?

The answer came quite unexpectedly when the door to the room opened. Kerry stuck her head out and spotted Dar entering, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a cutoff cotton shirt. "Hmph."

"Morning." Dar greeted her with a cheerful grin. "Ready for breakfast."

"Nph," Kerry pointed her toothbrush at Dar. "Wherf yof gop?"

“Gym.” Dar replied. “I got up at five, and couldn’t go back to sleep.”

“Hmph.” Kerry disappeared, going to the sink and rinsing the toothpaste out of her mouth. “You could have woken me up. I’d have gone with you.” She wiped her lips and returned to the doorway.

Dar was stripping out of her sweatpants and slipped past her, giving her a kiss on the back of the neck. “I know. But I was doing heavy presses, and I know you hate those.”

“Mm.” Kerry wrapped her fingers in the fabric of Dar’s half shirt and followed her like a puppy towards the shower. “That’s true, but I didn’t have to do them.”

“You looked too cute to wake up.” Dar removed her shirt and sports bra, then tugged on Kerry’s t-shirt. “Share a shower with me?”

Mollified, Kerry removed her shirt and stepped into the shower as Dar adjusted the spray. “Thanks for the kiss, by the way.” She picked up the scrubber, still damp from it’s earlier use, and squeezed some gel onto it.

Dar joined her. “No problem.” She stretched both arms out and flexed her hands. “I just thought you’d want to get as much sleep in as you could, since we’re starting early, and it’s gonna be a long day.”

Kerry stifled a yawn, and managed to not quiet suppress a rueful grin. “Yeah.” She admitted. “Now I wish I hadn’t been such a smart mouth and suggested breakfast at the crack of dawn.” She scrubbed Dar’s chest industriously. “Though, it was worth it to see their sour pusses.”

Dar slid her arms around Kerry and just held her for a brief moment, giving her a hug before she released her again. “You know what?”

Cautiously, green eyes peered up from between a few wet strands of pale hair. “ Are you going to make me blush again?” Kerry asked. “Not that I minded the compliment.” She added.

“It was true.” Dar exhaled contentedly. “But what I was going to say was that I’m sort of looking forward to this damn breakfast.”

Kerry gave her a light scrub around the belly button. “Why?”

“I just am.” Dar replied, stroking Kerry’s cheek with the backs of her knuckles. “We may even have fun at it.”

We just may. Kerry chuckled silently to herself. She freely admitted that her dislike of Shari had it’s roots in the cruel treatment the woman had given her partner, and if

Michelle had bought into that kind of mentality, she didn't deserve much respect either, especially given the dirty tricks she'd tried to play with the pictures of them from their first visit to the parks.

She had always fiercely defended Dar, even from the first. Now, faced with someone who had quite deliberately hurt her beloved friend and lover, Kerry found a very unexpectedly fierce protective instinct rearing it's head inside her.

She wanted to kick her ass. Kerry finished her washing, and they stepped out to dry each other off. She wanted to kick Shari's ass, and the violence of the thought almost surprised her.

Almost.

* * *

Dar relaxed on the bench in the lobby, stretching her legs out and leaning back as she watched Kerry circle the pretty atrium examining the birds. Arriving a little early, they settled in to wait for their guests, as the rain continued to drum on the plate glass windows.

She hitched one denim covered knee up and rested her ankle on it's mate, examining the little blue and white cross stitches on one side of her sneaker. It was cool in the lobby, and she briefly wished she'd put on a long sleeve t-shirt instead of a short sleeved one, but considered that the writing on the front of it was probably worth a little chill.

Kerry returned from her impromptu bird watching and took a seat next to Dar, kicking her heels out a little as listening as her sneakers squeaked a bit on the newly polished floor. "Nice weather." She commented.

"Mm." Dar agreed, with a nod.

"Hope they got caught in it." Kerry went on, in a mild voice.

"Your wish to the god of thunder's ears." Dar pointed through the window. "Nice work."

Kerry peered through the rain streaked glass to see Shari and Michelle running awkwardly through the rain to get to the door from the parking lot. "Heh." She chuckled. "Must be tough running in those heels."

"Mmhm." Her partner agreed. "Must be."

The two reached the doors and entered, their smart and well fitted business suits spotted with rain, which also glistened in droplets on every square inch of them. Both shook their hands in disgust as they looked around.

“Hi.” Kerry waved. “Over here!”

Dar waited for them to walk over before she uncrossed her legs and stood. “Morning.” She greeted them briefly. “Dining room’s that way.” She turned and headed for the steps, clearly expecting them to follow.

“Good morning.” Michelle greeted Kerry in a polite tone. “Lovely weather.” She glanced at Shari, who merely started off after Dar. After a second, she started walking as well, and Kerry fell into step next to her. ‘So, is this where you start the good cop, bad cop routine?”

“Hm?” Kerry cocked her head. “What routine?”

Michelle shook her head and snorted. “Never mind.” She exhaled. “Looks like the convention’s going to start on time, if anyone comes in this mess, that is.”

“I think they will.” Kerry said. “But in any case, the people who we really want there are already here, and with this weather, they’re really more likely to attend the con than skip out and go to the parks. So it works in our favor.”

Michelle glanced at her, then made a small sound of grudging agreement. “So how are things otherwise?” She asked. “We tried to get into Vista, but I heard they resigned a long term with you this year.”

“True.” Kerry indicated Michelle forward as they reached the restaurant. Dar and Shari were already at the server’s stand, waiting for them so they could be seated. “We were able to put most of their stuff up on our new net, and it meant a good cost savings for them if they signed now. So they did.” She continued, as they followed a uniformed woman to a table near the front.

They sat down across from each other, Kerry neatly slipping in next to Dar as the woman handed them their menus. “Thanks.” She let hers sit, already knowing what she was going to order.

And what Dar was going to order, for that matter. She watched Dar fiddle with her fork, then she shifted and leaned forward, bringing her knee into contact with her partner’s. “So, how are things with you?” She asked Michelle. “Are you having fun doing this start up?”

“It’s been a blast.” Michelle responded amiably. “Until this week, that is.” She took her napkin and attempted to dry herself. “We’ve got a lot of plans for the future.”

The waiter arrived and stood poised, a look of polite inquiry on his face. “Ma’am?” He addressed Michelle first. “Would you like to order?”

“I’d like to be put through the spin dry cycle.” The short red-head answered. “But I’ll take a continental, please.” She added. “Coffee, wheat toast.”

The waiter scribbled for a moment, then shifted his gaze to Shari. “Ma’am?”

“Juice and a bowl of whatever dry cereal you have.” The woman answered shortly. “Skim milk.”

Kerry folded her hands together on the table and made eye contact with the waiter as he looked inquiringly at her. She shifted her gaze to Dar’s profile, then looked back at him. “Two orders of French toast with crispy bacon, coffee, and two large glasses of milk, please.”

The man beamed at her, and took the menus she handed over. “Be right back.”

Dar leaned back and rested her elbows on her chair arms, steepling her fingers together, then folding them inward. “We have plans for the future as well.” She allowed. “We’ve just started development work on G2 of our net.”

Shari frowned, but Michelle blinked and sat forward. “But you just put it up last year.” She objected. “You can hardly have a baseline yet.”

“We’ve got one.” Dar replied. “I’ve projected out five years, and with current trends in applications development, I’ll need a G2 in twenty four months at the very latest. We short wired some whole development cycles in firmware.”

“Impressive.” Michelle nodded, with a serious expression. “But if your projections come short, it could be an expensive white elephant.”

Dar’s expression remained relaxed. She flexed her fingers a little, the lights catching on the ring she wore on her third finger as they moved. “It’s circular.” She shook her head. “Right now, we’ve provided a pipe for some companies that allows them to triple their production cycles. That’s speeding up their demand, which they’ll come back to us for. No one else can do it right now.”

“So your marketing hype says.” Shari interjected. “But there’s more to it than expensive hardware.”

“The system capabilities aren’t hype.” Kerry said. “Or else the accounts of ours you targeted for conversion wouldn’t have been the external and programming services ones. You didn’t go after anyone with our infrastructure.”

Shari looked over at Kerry, her eyebrows lifting slightly. Kerry gazed back at her with a mild expression. “Contracts are contracts.” She countered. “We only started with those.”

Dar chuckled. “And service is service. What’s gonna happen the first time one of them calls you up and wants their contract expanded on the spot to new coverage, or they move to a different system that you don’t have?”

“We can handle that.” Shari answered quickly. “We’ve got the best people in the business… some of them were damn glad to come over from you, in fact.”

Michelle took a breath and gave her companion a look. “Hey. We’re supposed to be networking. Not boxing.” She said. “Of course we picked certain arenas to compete in. We’re not stupid.” She added. “But we are in an expansion mode.”

The waiter returned and poured their coffee, giving them all a moment’s break. When he finished and left again, Shari leaned back. “Michelle’s right.” She conceded. “It’s just that it’s been a tough startup, and we’re damn proud of the progress we’ve made.”

Kerry stirred her coffee and took a sip. “Well, you can thank us for making it easier than it might have been.” She spoke up. “A lot of accounts that I go in on the bid teams for, who’ve never worked with us are still not sure if women can handle IT, y’know. The accounts you worked with already know we can.”

Michelle and Shari exchanged glances. Shari tilted her head to one side, and her lips quirked. “Never really considered that.” She allowed.

“Mm.” Michelle nodded briefly. “That’s a good point. I was on the other side for a long time, and I never had any doubts myself…” She chuckled self deprecatingly “But I remember sitting at inter company seminars with lots of old boys who did.”

“Yes.” Kerry’s lips tensed into a half smile. “I lived with one for many years.” She rested her hand on the table, her wrist brushing Dar’s crossed knee. “We’ve worked hard for what we achieved too.”

The waiter came back again, this time with a big tray. He placed their breakfasts down, then came to the front of the table and straightened up. “Anything else I can get for you right now?” He inquired. “Everything all right?”

Kerry inspected her plate of French toast, while Dar picked up her glass of milk and took a long swallow. “Looks great.” She complimented the man. “Thanks.” She picked up her fork and knife, cutting off a piece of the fragrant toast and dipping it neatly into some syrup before she put it into her mouth.

It was quiet for a few minutes, as everyone concentrated on eating. Dar typically sliced her toast into manageable squares then put her knife down, and selected the closest square to liberally drown in syrup. “So.” The dark haired woman finally spoke again, glancing up across the table. “Now that we’ve exhausted all the small talk we’re all probably capable of, what the hell do you two want?”

The noise of cutlery ceased entirely from the other side of the table.

Kerry paused in mid bite, then went on chewing. So much, she sighed inwardly, for a peaceful morning.

PART 3

"THAT WASN'T VERY SUCCESSFUL."

Dar leaned on the inner balcony, watching a bird fly across the inside of the huge lobby. "Not for them, no." She agreed. "But I sure had fun."

Kerry looped a finger into Dar's belt and tugged. "Let's go change, sweetheart. We're due at the convention in forty minutes." She turned and started walking, towing her taller companion behind her. "You know, Dar, I don't know that antagonizing those two was a really good idea."

Dar sighed aggrievedly.

Kerry unlocked the door to their room and pushed it open. "I mean, I don't like them either, but we could have had a truce just during the show. I don't really want to spend the next two days dodging darts."

"Yeah, I know." Dar trudged past her and kicked her sneakers off, pulling open the closet door to expose the neatly pressed business clothes hanging there. "Sorry." She pulled her t-shirt over her head and tossed it over the back of the nearby chair, unbuttoning her jeans one handedly and sliding out of them.

Kerry leaned back against the dresser, just watching her partner for a few minutes. Then she pushed off and walked over to her, pressing her cheek against Dar's bare shoulder for just an instant before she gave her a kiss on the same spot and slipped past, scratching Dar's back with her fingertips as she headed for the bathroom.

Dar almost let her get out of reach, then at the last minute she extended one long arm and caught Kerry's sleeve.

Feeling the tug, Kerry stopped and half turned, her brows lifting in question. Her searching eyes found something in Dar's that made her walk back over and lean against her, waiting in silence as her partner's jaw muscles worked briefly.

After a little silence between them, Dar lifted one hand and gently traced the curve of Kerry's jaw, an unusually sad look on her face.

"What?" Kerry asked, in a low tone. "It's Shari, isn't it?"

Dar's lips twitched slightly. "It's idiotic." She replied. "I just can't be nice to her, Kerry. No matter how I try to rationalize it."

Kerry leaned into her touch. "I know she hurt you."

Dar blinked a few times. "She almost made me miss out on meeting you." She replied quietly. "Kerry, I hate her. I can't pretend I don't." She exhaled, feeling a sense of almost absurd relief and just saying the words, and even more so when she saw the understanding in Kerry's eyes. "I know this is business, but I can't do it."

The cell phone still clipped to Dar's discarded jeans buzzed. But Kerry took both of Dar's hands in hers and ignored it, looking her partner squarely.

Her breath almost stopped in her chest, seeing an expression on that face she'd never seen before. Then Dar blinked, and it was gone, but Kerry knew she'd gotten a glimpse of the confused young woman who had gotten kicked in the head by love all those years ago.

It stirred a feeling inside her, deep and powerful, and she pressed her body against Dar's, slipping her arms around her sturdy form and pulling her close. "I understand." She tilted her head to look up. "We'll deal with it. You be as nasty as you want to be.. I'm right there with you." Her arms tightened. "I'm right here for you."

Magic words. Dar could almost see the wonder of them as they settled around her, a precious gift that put a gossamer bandage on wounds she hadn't suspected she'd still possessed. "Boy I must sound like a nitwit." She murmured softly.

"Never." Kerry replied.

"Yeah, I do." Dar rested her cheek against Kerry's head. "But what the hell. They expect me to be an asshole, I'll just live up to their expectations." She half chuckled, a tiny, wry sound. "But no more breakfasts. I'm not wasting one more cent of my expense account getting indigestion."

Kerry dropped her hand down and gave Dar's belly a rub. "Did you really?"

A sigh. “Yeah.” Dar admitted.

“Okay.” Kerry took a deep breath. “Here’s what I’d like you to do. Will you think about it at least before you start making those grunting no noises?”

Caught in the actual act of preparing to do just that, Dar cleared her throat instead. “Um. Sure.”

“I’d like you to just crash here for a while, and let me show my title off at the show for a while.” Kerry said. “Would you do that for me?”

“I don’t need to do that.”

“No.” Kerry agreed. “But I’d like you to anyway. Please?”

Dar considered the request seriously. Her first instinct was to refuse, and she mulled that over as her fingers sorted through Kerry’s hair, watching the gray illumination outside catch light and dark shadows in the soft locks. The pros and cons sorted themselves out as easily, and after a brief pause, she nodded “All right.”

Kerry smiled at her.

“On one condition.”

The green eyes rolled. “Always.”

“If anyone asks you where I am…” Dar clasped her hands and put them behind Kerry’s neck.

“Mm?”

“You tell them you wore me out last night and I had to take a nap.”

Kerry produced a noise somewhere between a sneeze and a cough, both of her eyebrows hiking up. “Dar!”

At last, her partner laughed softly. “Just kidding.” She relented. “Actually, I’m going to boot up and start some deep research on Telegenics.” Her brows contracted. “If we missed who was behind them, we might have missed a lot more. You know how much I hate surprises.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Kerry plucked at the waistband of Dar’s briefs, a spiffy blue pair covered in grinning goldfish. “You could lay out on the balcony in these. Everyone would think it was a swimsuit. No one would know.”

“I would know.” Dar objected. “My daddy didn’t raise me to show my drawers in public, you pithy little Yankee.” She nudged Kerry a little. “G’wan. Eleanor is probably getting so nervous her eyelashes are touching her navel.”

Reassured by her partner’s tone, Kerry stepped to one side and removed Dar’s cell, then she moved to the closet to get her suit out. When she turned, Dar had tugged a pair of shorts on and was sprawling onto the bed, already pulling her laptop over to her.

Satisfied with her plan, Kerry hooked the hanger with her suit, a new silver blue one with a deep aqua silk blouse that she’d picked up not long before. She spent a moment attaching her favorite pin to the lapel, then studied the results.

It would do. She glanced over her shoulder at Dar, whose half bare body was vividly outlined against the white sheets and spared herself a moment of envy, and then she started dressing for the show.

“Hey, Ker?” Dar interrupted her. “You should keep that t-shirt on.”

Kerry paused and glanced at the garment. “Oh, that’d make a great impression, Dar.” She laughed, a touch embarrassed. “Were you thinking I could open my jacket and flash anyone who pissed me off?”

Dar rolled onto her side and crossed her ankles. “Hm.”

“I was joking.” Kerry tossed the shirt at her, landing it on her head and watching in amusement as it draped half over her face and obscured one pale eye. “I’m not wearing a shirt that says RTFM to a trade show.”

Her partner wiggled a sock covered toe at her. “Yeah.” She agreed. “You’d spend your whole damn time explaining what it meant.”

Kerry chuckled, removing her jeans and reluctantly replacing them with the austere, straight line skirt that came to a respectable knee level and the light, silk shirt that was thankfully sleeveless. She tucked the blouse in to the skirt’s waistband and buckled the integrated belt, picking up her shoes and taking them to the bed with her as she sat down to put them on. “I think I like the one you have better.” She said. “The programming one?”

Dar chuckled. “I like the ‘no, I won’t fix your damn computer’ one myself.” She rested her head on her fist and ignored her laptop screen. “Hey, Ker?”

Kerry fastened her watch around her wrist and stood, turning to face the bed. “Hm?”

“Thanks.”

“For?”

The visible blue eye twinkled. “Being my best friend.”

Kerry picked up her jacket and walked over to the side of the bed, leaning over to kiss Dar on the lips. “And what a pleasure it is to be that.” She whispered, nudging aside the still draped shirt so she could look into both eyes. “I’ll give you a call when it’s time for you to make your grand, triumphant entrance, okay?”

“Okay.” Dar agreed. “Have fun.”

Kerry shrugged into her jacket, twitching the light linen fabric straight and fastening the single button. It was cut somewhat low, accentuating her tapered physique, and she gave Dar a wink as she accepted the frankly admiring gaze turned on her. “Look okay?”

“You look better out of it.” Dar replied. “But it’ll do for now.” She watched Kerry check her image in the mirror, then pause to clip the cell phone to her belt. “Give them heck.”

“Do my best.” Kerry went to the door, looking back as she opened it an leaned against the jamb. “Will you…”

“Keep my eye on the pipes?” Dar swiveled her laptop around, displaying a screen full of jumping gauges. “Nah.”

Kerry grinned, and ducked out the door, letting it slide shut behind her.

Dar let the echoes fade before she turned the laptop around and minimized the displays, bringing up another screen and keying in a terse request. “All right… let’s see what the hell we’ve got here.” She muttered to herself. “Before anyone other than me realizes how frigging embarrassing it is that I let these guys stomp all over us and didn’t even pay attention to it.”

She set the request to run, and laid back against the pillows. After a few moments, the silence of the room started bothering her, and she reached for the television control, flipping on the room’s set on. After browsing her choices, she settled on ESPN and let it run in the background as she opened her mail program.

The inbox filled with black lines that she glanced over, dividing her attention between the headers and the women playing volleyball on the screen. After a few minutes, however, she abandoned the mail and just watched the game, tucking Kerry’s discarded t-shirt under her head as she put it down on the pillow. In her peripheral vision, a thin line of alert gauges winked reassuringly green.

* * *

It was a short trip, but Kerry was glad it was over. Driving in the rain heavy enough to drown lobsters with nervous tourists wasn't her idea of fun at any time, and she was more than happy to park Dar's big Lexus near the front of the parking lot and bolt for the door.

A small crowd was milling there, and as she ran her fingers through her hair to shed the rain from it, the guard spotted her company badge and politely cleared a path. Kerry gave him a gracious nod then realized belatedly it was the same guy as the night they'd arrived. Her face crinkled into a wry grin as he held the door for her. "Thanks." She addressed him pleasantly. "Sure beats coming in the construction entrance."

He froze, but she didn't give him a chance to answer as she strode inside and headed for the show hall. Now, the lights in the outer lobby were on, and a buzz of conversation filled the high ceiling'd space. Banners were strung across over the doorways, and company representatives were everywhere, passing out marketing gimmicks and the occasional business card.

It was all too familiar to Kerry. She'd attended more than her share of trade shows on behalf of ILS, and as she made her way through the crowd and was recognized, she returned the greetings with pleasant good manners.

It was ironic in the extreme that her early training in her father's household now served her so well, making her responses gracious and automatic and completely forgettable. Kerry excused herself from between two of her major distributor's sales directors and escaped into their booth, giving the techs and the salespeople a brief wave. "Hi guys."

"Kerry!" Mark appeared from apparently nowhere, dressed in a crisp company shirt and black pleated slacks. "Glad you're here."

"Uh oh." Kerry brushed a last droplet off her sleeve. "What's broken?"

Her MIS manager put his hands on his hips. "Does it have to be a bad thing that you're here?" He asked plaintively.

"No." The blond VP smiled at him. "True disasters wait for Dar." She glanced around at the crowd. "They about to open the doors? There's more people here than I thought there would be, with this weather."

"No shit." Mark agreed. "Hey, you know who's here?" His voice dropped, and he moved closer to Kerry.

Kerry gave him a wry look.

"Guess you do."

"We had breakfast with them." Kerry ran her eye over the interior of the booth, and gave the approaching Eleanor a quick smile. Everything looked ready, and she exhaled out

that tiny bit of apprehension still tensing her guts from their abandonment of the prior day. "Morning, El."

"Good morning to you too, Kerry." Eleanor was in a good humor. "Fricking weather's going to knock us on the ass for a while, but that's a good thing. Start slow, less bull." She leaned against the counter next to Kerry. "Where's Rambo's worst nightmare?"

"Chilling." Kerry watched a group of salesmen from their biggest network equipment supplier break out of a huddle and make a beeline for her. "She'll be by later."

"Good." Eleanor spotted a slow, but steady flow of people into the room. "Let's keep them waiting… I know there's a t least four big talkers around who were looking to meet her." The marketing VP brushed her hands together. "All right folks – it's show time. Let's go get 'em."

Mark eased back in next to her as the marketing people cleared out, starting to filter through the crowd with their bags full of ILS stress balls and the rather clever little beanbag monitor perchers that resembled a cartoon Rottweiler theoretically watching over you. "Man, there were people talking all over the place today." He told Kerry. "Those Telegenics guys were over here talking shit, but I ran them off."

"Mm." Kerry folded her arms across her chest. "They tried to recruit us the other night."

Mark laughed. "Yeah, the boys told me." He agreed. "Bet he's going to crap when he finds out who he was talking to."

Kerry spied their little friend in question and chuckled under her breath. 'Yeah." She pushed off from the console and strolled off. "I bet he is."

* * *

The soft chime of her laptop slowly penetrated Dar's idle, formless dreams and after a few moments of confusion, she opened her eyes, blinking them a few times to regain their focus. "Umph." She lifted a hand and scrubbed her face, putting her head down and almost letting the warm comfort of her pillow reclaim her.

One hand lifted and touched her track pad, and she studied the results of her query in silence. One eyebrow slowly lifted. She raised up on one elbow and typed another request in one handed, rolling the pointer over and clicking to submit it.

She'd slept for two hours, and she felt like she could sleep for a few more. Maybe it was the weather. Dar peered over her own shoulder at the window, which was still being lashed by rain. It was dark inside the room, and cool – perfect day for staying in bed.

Well. Dar shifted a little. That's exactly what she was doing, wasn't she?. Lazily she rolled over and stretched her body out, peering up at the television. The volleyball game

was over, replaced by a gymnastics competition. She watched the girls tumbling in their intricate routines, and idly imagined Kerry participating when she was younger.

One of the girls stood at the edge of the mat, her tongue sticking out a little as she concentrated and Dar found herself smiling, knowing Kerry would have likely been doing the same thing. She did, when she was focused on something, often without realizing it.

It was really cute. Dar put her hands behind her head and indulged in a little daydreaming time. It was interrupted, however, by the room's phone ringing. Dar turned her head, frowning as she judged how long Kerry had been gone. She picked up the phone and put it to her ear. "Yes?"

"Ms. Stuart?"

"You had a fifty-fifty chance and you blew it." Dar replied.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ms. Roberts?"

"Yes?"

"I have a package here at the front desk for Ms. Stuart. Is it all right for me to send it up?"

Package? Dar was puzzled. "Sure." She answered, trying to recall what package Kerry might have been expecting. It didn't come to her, so she just put the phone down and got up, walking over to the bathroom and running some water to wash her face with.

She was patting her skin dry when the door knock came, so she tossed the towel down and went to the door, opening it to find a short, curly haired boy standing there with the promised package. "Hi."

The boy blinked and swallowed, then held out the package to her. Dar took it, watching bemusedly as he turned and sped away, disappearing around the corner of the hallway and into a culvert in mere seconds.

"Huh." Dar closed the door and glanced down at the box, only then realizing she was still in just her bra and jeans. An embarrassed chuckle forced it's way out and she covered her face with one hand, wondering if she was due a smack to the head to get her brains working again.

She dismissed the bellboy and examined the package instead. It was relatively small, but heavier than she'd expected for it's size. The label on it was addressed to Kerry, sure enough, at the hotel address, but the return address was…

"New Zealand?" Dar repeated. "Who in the hell do we know in New Zealand?" Several major accounts, of course, but she didn't think Kerry knew any of them personally, and besides, the box was from what appeared to be a business.

Dar walked over to the table and set the box down, then dropped into the chair next to it and folded her arms across her bare belly. She was curious. One hand lifted and she thunked the box with her finger, hearing a sturdy solidity inside.

Hm. Dar picked the box up and brought it close to her face, sniffing it. Cardboard. "Okay." She examined the wrapping, which was very thoroughly taped. After a moment, she put it back down and drummed her fingers on the table.

She could probably open it. Kerry probably would not mind, since the object had been sent to their hotel room and it would be logical to assume Dar would see it anyway.

"Okay, how would you feel if she opened it and it was yours?" Dar asked the empty room. "Would you care?"

Would she? Dar drew one knee up and circled it with both arms, taking a rare delve into her own psyche.

"No." She finally spoke frankly. "I wouldn't give a damn, which means Kerry probably would. So leave it alone," She got up and left the package where it was, returning to the bed and plopping back down beside her laptop.

But now that she was up, she felt restless again. So though she put her computer up onto her lap, she also dragged the phone over and picked it up.

"Room service." The tinny voice answered promptly.

"Hi." Dar tapped a command into her mail program. "Can you send me up a really big pot of coffee, a jug of milk, and a bowl of chocolate ice cream?"

Silence.

"Hello?" Dar frowned at the phone.

"Yes, ma'am – that'll be one pot of coffee for… how many people?"

"One person who really likes coffee." Dar replied. "Whatever your biggest one is."

The sound of writing. "Okay, and a jug… is that like a glass?"

"No." Dar glanced at the first mail in the box. "If I wanted a glass, I'd ask for a glass. Just bring me a half gallon, or whatever.."

"Our biggest is. Gotcha." The room service clerk replied. "And our biggest bowl of chocolate ice cream?"

"You're catching on." Dar said.

"That will be about fifteen minutes."

"Thanks." Dar hung up the phone and settled back, plumping the pillows up behind her and resolving to at least get some work done. After a few minutes though, she found her attention wandering from the mundane mail again and focusing on the television. An extremely cute blond girl was on the balance beam, and as Dar watched, the kid did a back flip and missed.

"Ouch." Dar winced, as the small body hit the bar, then the mat. She got up immediately, but she was obviously stunned, and wavered as she tried to get back on the bar. "Hey! Stop her, you creep!" She instructed the girl's coach, visible just on the side of the floor exhorting her.

The girl put her hands on the bar and boosted herself up, getting her feet under her and standing up. But as she started to walk, she lost her balance again and fell in a heap on the mat, this time staying there.

Dar was surprised at the outrage she felt, as the coach yelled, faintly audible, for the girl to get up. "Stupid son of a…" She barked at the television. "Go help her!"

The coach did not. However, as though hearing Dar, one of the other competitors, a taller girl with dark hair did rush over and kneel next to the fallen gymnast even though her costume indicated she was on a different team.

The coach yelled again, but the dark haired girl looked up and yelled back angrily, and then people began rushing on to the floor and surrounding them both.

"Mm." Dar returned her attention to her mail. "That's better. You go, kid." She typed in silence for a moment, then the irony of the situation struck her and she looked back up at the screen just in time to see the tall gymnast helping the shorter one off the mat, their arms wrapped around each other.

Dar chewed her inner lip and then she smiled, making a mental note to check the ESPN website later and find out who the kids were. There was, she suspected, a story in there somewhere. Her eyes shifted to the table, suspecting there was a story inside the box too.

With a sigh, she went back to her typing. As she finished one mail and found herself checking the television before going to the next, she recalled something Kerry had said. "Restless." Dar murmured under her breath. "Hmph."

* * *

Kerry walked up in back of Mr. Slimy, giving him a smile as he sensed her presence and turned to face her. “Hi.”

“Oh! Hi.. um… “ The man’s eyes dropped to her corporate badge. “Kerry wasn’t… it…ah.”

‘That’s right.” Kerry replied. “And you can do me a big favor by cutting the crap out and stop wasting my people’s time.”

He actually took a step back. “Hey, wait a minute…”

“No wait a minute.” Kerry squared her shoulders and gave him a direct stare. “They’re too smart to do anything but laugh at someone who would go behind their bosses back and approach them like that. If you’d do it to me, you’d do it to them. None of my people like stupid games.”

The man blinked. “Look, it was just business as usual, Ms. Stuart. Don’t tell me you don’t do it.”

“I don’t do it.” Kerry shot right back at him. “And if you do it again, you’re going to have to explain to my boss why you’re annoying my staff.”

He held up both hands. “Okay, lady. Okay.” He took a step backwards into Telegenic’s booth. “No problem… I get the message.”

Michelle Graver suddenly appeared around the other side of the booth. “What message?” She glanced at Kerry, one ginger eyebrow lifting at the blond woman’s aggressive stance. “Problem, ah… Kerry?”

Of the two of them, Kerry found it much easier to tolerate Michelle, for some probably not to noble reasons. “You have slimebags working for you.” She informed her. “I’m over it. He doesn’t know how to take no for an answer.”

Michelle gave her manager a look, and he ducked away, disappearing into the interior of the booth. Then she turned back to her visitor. “Ah. Tried a little poaching, huh?”

Kerry put one hand on her hip. “He tried to recruit me and Dar.”

Both of Michelle’s eyebrows hit her hairline with an almost audible crack. “Ambitious.” She murmured under her breath.

“Not really. He had no idea who we were.”

"Ah." Michelle cleared her throat. "Sorry." She grinned slightly. "We are pretty aggressive. I wont' apologize for that." Her eyes drifted, then went back to Kerry. "Sorry about breakfast."

For a moment Kerry didn't answer, as she wavered, deciding how to respond. Then she relaxed her stance a trifle. "What did you really expect?" She asked.

Graver exhaled, and half shrugged. "That we'd all act like adults." She said, giving her head a slight toss to take the edge off the comment. "Let's see if I can start over. Buy you a cup of coffee?"

Good cop, bad cop. Kerry almost smiled. "Sure." She agreed,

Michelle turned and lead the way towards the snack bar on one side of the convention hall. "Nice turnout. Didn't expect that with the rain."

"We did." Kerry let her arms drop to her sides and lengthened her steps, secretly enjoying the sensation of having someone shorter than she was have to keep up with her. Dar was such a beast that way – she didn't do it on purpose, but her legs were so much longer than Kerry's she always felt like she was having to take a little hop to keep up.

"Did you?"

"Orlando is full of distractions." Kerry arrived at the snack bar and pointed at the coffee, then held up two fingers. "However, most of them are outdoors. We're not." She leaned on the counter and faced Michelle. "I'm glad I got my fun in yesterday."

Michelle took one of the cups the server offered them and indicated a small table nearby. She lead the way over and sat down, waiting for Kerry to take the seat opposite her before she spoke. "Listen." She leaned on one elbow. "This is a.. touchy… kind of situation, I know that."

Kerry's eyebrows twitched.

"We really didn't want this to turn into a war."

"Sure you did." Kerry cut her off, but in a remarkably mild tone. "You came in here setting the stage for us to clash."

Michelle sighed.

"Well, you did. It's not my fault." The blond woman said. "I wasn't the one who tried to pay off the convention staff not to help set the place up, and I wasn't the one who sent my lackeys around trying to steal other company's employees."

Michelle eyed her. “You’re not as nice as you used to be.” She remarked. “Dar must be rubbing off on you.”

Far from taking offense, Kerry produced a sunny grin at that. “Thank you.” She sat back and sipped at her coffee, waiting for Michelle’s next salvo. In the mean time, she let her eyes scan the room casually, spotting ILS’s marketing team doing their thing in the aisles. Eleanor had the vice president of technology of one of their biggest clients by the lapel, and she made a point of making eye contact with Kerry as she cruised along with him. “Ah. Sorry to cut this short, but my services are required.”

Michelle was nothing if not tenacious. “Okay. Can we try all this again at dinner tonight? Call me a stinkweed, but I still want to try and make this work. We can all learn from each other.”

Kerry crumpled her cup and tossed it into the nearby wastepaper basket. “Thanks. “ She stood up and braced her hands on the table, leaning on them a little. “But no thanks. We’ve got plans for tonight.” She straightened and turned, walking away without a backward glance.

Michelle got up and dropped the half unfinished cup into the garbage can. “Well, I think I’ve wasted enough time for one day.” She commented to the receptacle. “Don’t you?” With a snort, she followed Kerry out onto the floor.

* * *

Dar had traded her unorthodox lounge wear for a pair of cutoff overalls and a polo shirt and had left her laptop behind as she investigated the hotel. She’d answered all her mail that she felt needed answering, and ditched the rest of it, losing interest in the weightlifting that had been showing on ESPN as well.

So here she was, sauntering around the lobby in her bare feet, watching the tourists mill around giving the still stormy weather evil looks. The interior of the hotel was a pristine white, and the whole décor was one of lightness and elegance.

Dar found a comfortable and mostly empty corner and selected a seat in it, leaning back against the cool fabric as she watched the world go by for a few minutes. There were families here, but she saw a lot of couples, too, walking together or sitting and talking around her.

Her own visits in her youth here had been very different. Dar propped her leg up with one ankle on her knee and rubbed the prominent bone with her thumb. They hadn’t been rich, far from it, and the best her father could do was one of the ratty little motels on the strip in Kissimmee or memorably the camping ground inside the park itself.

Fort Wilderness. Dar smiled to herself. She'd loved that place. It had been full of pine scent and horses, and she had spent hours with her father swimming in the manufactured swimming hole on the side of the lake.

It had been one of the best vacations ever. Just four days, a long weekend's leave before his next deployment, but one of the few times Dar could remember where they'd all been just… happy together.

They'd slept in the back of Dad's truck, under the nylon tent and sweated like pigs. It had just made the lake that much sweeter.

"Excuse me."

Dar looked up to find a man standing next to her, peering down. "Yes?"

"Are you Dar Roberts?"

A prickle of surprise rippled up and down her spine. "Yes." Dar replied briefly. 'Why?"

The man sat down and extended a hand, which Dar ignored until he awkwardly withdrew it. "My name is Peter Quest. You don't know me."

"You're right. I don't. What do you want?" Dar gave him a direct look.

"I'm just looking to do a little business, Ms. Roberts. I was told you would be someone I could talk to." Quest replied. "I was at the trade show this morning looking for you, but they told me you weren't around."

"So you decided to walk around Disney hotels asking people at random if they were me?" Dar asked. "Nice."

The man shook his head and chuckled. "No, I had a picture of you." He admitted. "Hope you don't mind."

Dar set her feet on to the floor and leaned forward. "I do mind." She spoke softly. "So you better explain why you're stalking me before I kick your ass right out that door in the rain, buddy."

Quest eased back away from her. "I beg your pardon, Ms. Roberts.. I'm making a big mess of this, and I'm sorry. I really meant no harm.. I just wanted to talk to you." He licked his lips. "I've got a business proposal I think you might be interested in."

Dar was on the verge of booting him anyway, when Alastair's words echoed into her memory. New business. "Okay." She replied instead, relaxing again into her chair. "I'm listening." Her head cocked slightly, and she pinned the man with a sharp stare. "Start talking."

“Um… “ Quest visibly gathered up his scattered wits, confused by her change of attitude.

‘Well??” Dar inquired.

The man held up one hand, then took a breath. “Okay.” He said. “Tell me. How do you feel about cruise ships?”

Dar’s eyebrows knit fiercely. “Cruise ships?”

“Yeah.” The man went on more confidently, producing a big smile. “Cruise ships.”

Well. Dar signed inwardly. Lucky me. He could have said pig farming.

* * *

Kerry could feel a headache building, and she subtly put her hand behind her neck and rubbed it as she listened to Eleanor’s smooth pitch. Their booth was now crowded with interested onlookers, most peering at the network monitor screens prominently displayed at each corner. They were showing a real time display of their systems, mirrored from the big monitor Mark had in the operations center down in Miami.

Out of long habit, she found herself keeping an eye on them also, because the colorful, bouncing screen represented things wholly her responsibility. At work, she had a twin of that screen mounted on a flat panel display in her office and she knew every graph like it was written across the back of her hand.

“Ms. Stuart?”

Kerry turned, vainly trying to keep her nostrils from flaring as she recognized Shari’s voice. “Yes?”

The husky woman leaned on the edge of the booth. “I’ll make this short and sweet.” She kept her voice low. “Michelle’s a decent sort, and she really has an idea that your company and ours can help each other.”

Kerry simply waited in silence.

“Leave me out of it.” Shari continued, after it was evident she wasn’t going to get an answer. “I know Dar has a problem with me.”

“You’re wrong. She doesn’t have a problem with you.” Kerry interrupted.

Shari rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. She doesn’t have a problem, but it’s not really likely that we’re going to start being pals any time soon, how’s that?” She gave Kerry a

sarcastic look. “She never did have a handle on dealing with people. It’s nice to know nothing’s changed.”

The burn of anger didn’t surprise her this time. It almost felt good, in a way, because she knew the emotion was based squarely in the love she felt for Dar. “You know what?” Kerry finally spoke. “I guess you’re still the same asshole you were back then too. She doesn’t have a problem, but that doesn’t really matter to me because **I** have a problem with you, and with Michelle, and with your entire company. So do me a favor and go find someone else to hover over. Okay?”

Shari fell silent and just looked at her for a second, and then she straightened and took a step back. “O..kay.” She lifted both hands and dropped them. “Nice to have the air cleared.”

“It will be, as soon as you leave.” Kerry felt slightly abashed at letting her temper get the better of her. “Excuse me.” She moved over to where Eleanor was bidding her latest victim farewell. “El?”

“Hm?” The marketing VP turned. “Oh, hey Kerry. You ready to go get some lunch? My snappy patter’s wilted.”

The thought of lunch made her slightly sick to her stomach. She was shaking inside that much. “Actually, I was just going to tell you I’m heading back to the hotel to pick up Dar. I’ll get something there.” Kerry looked around. “We’ve got a nice crowd going.. I figured it was time for the uber-geek to show up.”

Eleanor smiled knowingly. “Go on.” She nudged Kerry. “See you after lunch.”

Kerry signaled to Mark that she was leaving, getting a thumbs up from him as he stood guard over the locked switch box. Feeling that everything was relatively well in hand, she turned and started to work her way out of the room.

Even the rain outside didn’t deter her. She cleared the door and stepped out into it, almost welcoming the wash of warm water that plastered the hair on her head and quickly dampened her clothes. She reached the Lexus and triggered the door lock, opening the driver’s side and sliding inside with a sense of relief.

It smelled like leather tinged with the faint hint of Dar’s usual perfume, and Kerry just sat there for a minute breathing it in.

Remembering the first time she’d ridden in this car, in a rain not really unlike the one she’d just escaped from.

It had been one of the most miserable nights of her life, and one of the most wonderful. Kerry leaned back in the comfortable seat and ran her fingers through her wet hair,

pushing it back off her forehead. “You know what?” She mused. “A navy sweatshirt sure would feel good right about now.”

With a sigh, Kerry shook a few droplets of water off her hands and started the car up, shifting smoothly into reverse and backing out of the parking spot she’d chosen. If she couldn’t have a navy sweatshirt, at least she knew where to find the next best thing.

* * *

“No.” Dar slung her leg over one chair arm, leaning on the other. “I’m not interested.”

Peter Quest looked puzzled. “You’re not?” He asked. “I don’t understand. You’re a services company, we’re looking for someone to come in and install, maintain, and run networks on all our ships. What’s the problem?”

“I’m not in the business of being part of a circus.” Dar replied. “Why don’t you just throw open the business for bids? Plenty of companies around who’d be willing to tender. Why sneak around making secret deals to have people come in?”

Quest looked around carefully, then lowered his voice. “It’s really complicated.” He said. “Listen, can we go somewhere more private.. like the bar?”

Dar’s eyebrow lifted. “No.” She said. “My partner’s going to come back through here looking for me and damned if she’d look there.” She told Quest. “So talk, or take a hike.”

The man exhaled. “You’re a difficult person, Ms. Roberts.”

Dar shrugged.

“Okay, here’s the deal.” Quest went on. “My company, American Visions, intends on being the first American cruise line in decades.” He said. “We’ve gotten a hold of six ships, and we’re having them rebuilt to US specifications in New Zealand.”

New Zealand again? Dar almost let herself get sidetracked. “Yeah?”

“But it’s all hush hush. If we can bring them into the States by January, we can grab a big segment of the homeland cruise market.”

Dar looked at him. “Hush hush?” She repeated. “They’re cruise ships. What do they go… seventy, eighty thousand tons? How the hell do you hide them?”

Quest looked around again. “We’re not revealing who owns them.” He said. “And they’ll get their final paint in San Diego. Anyway, seventy percent of the referb stuff needs to be US, and that includes the technical infrastructure.”

“And?”

“And if we throw open bids, chances are people we don’t want to find out about this are going to find out, because they’ll send spies in to figure out what we’re up to.”

Dar braced her chin on her fist. “So what if I’m a spy?” She asked.

“Your company has no connection with the business.” He answered readily. “Neither does the other two American companies we asked to compete for the contract… and I’ve got some friends in the government who tell me you can keep your mouth shut.”

Dar shook her head. “Still not interested.” She said. “Who else are you asking? Maybe I can give you some names to talk to.”

Quest gazed at her, biting in the inside of his lip. Finally he leaned forward a little. “Advanced Tech, and Telegenics.”

“Ah.” Dar’s expression didn’t change, but a dark sparkle lit in her eyes. “Interesting choices.”

“Telegenics talks a good game. They’ve been wooing my director over another contract, so..” Quest shrugged. “Anyway, since you’re not interested, let me stop wasting your time.” He straightened up in his seat, and half turned, pausing as one of the figures walking across the lobby caught his eye. “Sure must be raining outside.”

Dar watched the object of his attention, an unconscious smile appearing on her face. Even drenched, Kerry had her head held high, and despite the rain dampened clothes she had an innate grace as she approached that attracted more eyes than Quests. “Mm.”

Quest started to stand as Kerry closed in on them, but she just gave him a polite smile as she dropped into the chair next to Dar’s and leaned on it’s arm. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Dar rolled her head to one side and indicated her somewhat unwelcome visitor. “Kerry, this is Peter Quest, Mr. Quest, this is Kerrison Stuart, my partner.”

Kerry extended a hand politely, and gripped his, then released him. “Mr. Quest.”

“Nice to meet you.” He replied. “Well, Ms. Roberts, as I said, no sense in wasting your time. I’ll leave you to get on with your..day.”

He turned and walked out, leaving Dar and Kerry behind as he disappeared.

Kerry remained silent for a moment, then she turned to Dar. “So, what was that all about?” She asked. “Someone propositioning you, since you’re hanging out in such cutely provocative clothing?”

“Hardly.” Dar pushed herself upright. “Let’s go upstairs and I’ll take your clothes off while I fill you in.” She stood and waited for Kerry to join her. “You look like a..”

“Drowned rat?” Kerry sighed, getting up and following her partner. “I feel like a drowned rat that’s been hit on the head with a brick.” She rubbed her neck. “I’m not having a good day.”

Dar slipped her arm around Kerry’s back, ignoring the dampness. “Problems at the show?” She asked. “You should have called me.”

Kerry sighed and fell silent, taking solace in the comfort of Dar’s close presence. “Not the show.” She admitted after they’d entered the elevator. “I got pegged by both our new little friends and I think I lost it with them. They pissed me off.”

“Uh oh.” Dar chuckled softly. “Did you draw blood?”

“It’s not funny, Dar.” Kerry muttered. “I told them both off.”

Dar slid her keycard into door and opened it, then held it open as Kerry entered. She followed her partner inside and closed the door, blinking as she realized housekeeping had been in and cleaned the room while she’d been gone. Somehow, they’d managed to make the bed and place the laptop in it’s exact position where she’d left it. “Glad I locked the screen.”

Kerry took off her jacket and laid it across the back of a chair. She didn’t look up when Dar came over to her, but as a pair of a warm, strong hands touched her neck and began to massage it she turned her head to the side and brushed the nearer one with her lips. “So what was that guy all about?”

“Had an offer I refused.” Dar said. “But now I’m not sure I should have.”

“Mm. Been that kinda day.”

“I may call him.. but I wanted to talk to you first.” Her partner replied, keeping up her rhythmic kneading. “You had lunch?”

Kerry shook her head. The ache in her head was fading, and she felt the tension draining out of her at her partner’s skilled touch. She unbuttoned her skirt and let it slip down, kicking it off to one side and almost tripping as Dar started mixing a few playful nips along with her massage. “So you don’t mind if I blew out any possibility of us being civil to our booth neighbors?”

“Nope.” Dar blew in her ear. “You just saved me the trouble.” She slid her arms around Kerry. “Besides, it might work to our advantage if we end up competing head to head with them for a new services contract.”

Kerry stopped in mid motion and looked over her shoulder. “What?”

“How do you feel about New Zealand?”

Kerry’s brows knit. “New Zealand?” She asked. Wh..”

Dar chuckled. “Let’s get some lunch, and I’ll explain the whole damn thing.” She said. “And you can tell me what happened with Heckle and Jeckle”

“Mmph.” Kerry half turned in Dar’s arms and snuggled up to her, plucking at one of the catches on her overalls. “That’s the best deal I’ve heard all day.” Her eyes fell on the table. “Oh.” She blinked. “Did that come for me?”

“Uh huh.” Dar waited expectantly. “Gonna open it?”

Finally, a smile appeared on Kerry’s face, along with a devilish twinkle in her eyes. “Nope.”

“No?”

“We’ll never get lunch.” Kerry gave her a quick kiss, and slipped out of Dar’s grasp, heading for her suitcase to get a change of clothes.

Dar looked at her, then turned and looked at the mysterious box. Both eyebrows crawled up into her hairline and a delighted grin appeared. “Ah hah.” She folded her arms. “Couldn’t we just call room service?”

Kerry merely chuckled.

* * *

If anything, the hall was even more crowded when they re-entered it. However, the rain had slowed at least, so they were only lightly misted with dampness as they passed from the warm humidity into the chill of the hall.

Kerry ran her eyes over the throng, and spotted Mark making his way back from the snack bar “Mark!”

The MIS manager recognized the hail and paused in mid stride, turning and giving them a wave as he saw them approaching. “Hey.”

“Everything okay?” Dar asked. She’d reluctantly traded her comfortable overalls for a well fitted business suit, and she was aware that her distinctive appearance was already attracting attention from several people in the nearby stream of people. “Looks like a good crowd.”

“Smooth so far, jefe.” Mark nodded. “The marketing goons were looking for you a few minutes ago… some kinda presentation or something.”

Dar frowned and looked at Kerry. “Was I supposed to do one? Someone forget to tell me?”

Kerry was equally surprised. “Not that I know of.” She replied. “I didn’t see your name on the schedule, Dar. I would have mentioned it.”

“I figured you would.” Dar straightened, and peered over the crowd, finding Eleanor standing near the entrance to the hall. “Let me go find out what the hell’s going on.” She made her way forward, easing through the packed lobby with surprising ease.

“You know something? I’m getting really tired of having perfectly good meals ruined by bull poop.” Kerry shook her head and started after Dar, finding it quite a bit tougher to get through the crush than her taller partner.

She reached Dar’s side in time to see her take up a belligerent stance, however, and deftly avoided Dar’s elbow as the taller woman planted her hands on her hips. “What’s up?”

Eleanor looked more amused than worried. “Oh, her nibs doesn’t want to go show off, that’s all.”

“That is not the point.” Dar growled. “Where do you get off volunteering me for a dog and pony show?” She kept her voice low, but the anger behind it was real.

“C’mon, Dar.. I thought you’d love it.. you and a couple other geeks up there talking over everyone’s head.. what more could you ask for?” The marketing VP protested.

Dar glanced around, spotting a small vending room just off to one side. She took hold of Eleanor’s arm and turned, pulling the smaller woman with her as she started for the alcove. Biting off a protest, Eleanor did her best to keep up, as Kerry slid up on the opposite side of her and helped clear the way with brief smiles and somewhat charming ‘excuse me’s.’

“Hey. If you two are gonna put me in cement boots, lemme call home first, okay?” Eleanor said, in an exasperated tone as they reached the room and entered it. “C’mon now. This is business, Dar!”

“Yeah.” Dar whirled and let her temper ignite. “It’s business.”

Eleanor took a step back out of pure instinct. “Now, Dar.” She held up both hands. “Just take it easy. I’ll go tell them you’re not interested. I don’t need a screaming match with you in here.”

Dar held her eyes with fierce intensity. “I wasn’t going to scream.”

“Whoa, whoa whoa.” Kerry stepped between them, putting a hand on Dar’s back. “Hang on, guys.” She kept her voice gentle. “Let’s do a Zen break here.”

Dar swiveled her head around. “Zen break?”

Kerry’s objective was to break Dar’s single minded focus, and she congratulated herself silently on doing it in one try. It wasn’t easy, and despite their relationship she always held her breath when she did it. “Dar, you’re right.”

“Damn friggen straight I am.” The dark haired woman snorted. Eleanor sighed audibly.

“But that aside, would it really tank you to do it?” Kerry asked. “You and some nerds…talking electronic gears and sprockets.. sounds more fun than listening to Jose’s repetitive BS all afternoon.”

Dar scowled at her. “Kerrison.”

Mild green eyes watched her. “Would it?” Kerry asked, relying on the simple logic of her argument. “I mean, yeah, I know how you feel, Dar. I would feel the same way if someone volunteered me for something without me knowing.” She turned to Eleanor. “You didn’t do that, did you?”

“Crossed my mind.” Eleanor admitted.

Kerry’s eyebrows hiked up. “Eleanor, that really is inappropriate.” She said. “We don’t work for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The other woman held up a hand. “Look, I’m sorry.” She said. “I honestly didn’t think you’d give a damn, Dar. You’ve got to be here anyway, I figured you’d have some fun.”

“I make my own fun.” Dar growled. However, she straightened a little and moved closer to Kerry, relaxing her posture. “Damn it, Eleanor, don’t do this shit to me.” She poked the other woman in the shoulder, then brushed past her. “Or I’ll make sure your entire department works on scratch pads with VGA screens.”

Out of Eleanor’s line of sight, Kerry gave her partner a pat on the butt, then watched as she stalked across the lobby and ducked inside the hall. Her head then turned to regard Eleanor. She put her hands on her hips. “What was that?”

Eleanor shrugged. “Y’know, I didn’t even think about it.” She admitted. “These days, we forget sometimes what Dar used to be like. I just got reminded. I’ll remember next time.”

Kerry was at a loss for words briefly. “Oh, I don’t know, Eleanor.. I mean..”

"Don't you dare say it." The marketing VP cut her off. "Don't you dare say she hasn't change, Kerry. We both know different. You remember what it was like when you first started. You remember walking into meetings representing ops and having people cheer."

Kerry did remember that. "Mm." She nodded briefly. "Damn, I hated the place." She admitted. "I wanted to just throw up most afternoons."

Eleanor had the grace to look uncomfortable. "Anyway, it's been a huge difference, and even though some things probably got done faster the old way, I wouldn't trade for it. I used to dread staff meetings." She peered back into the lobby, which had started to empty. "She isn't intimidating the entire industry anymore, and yeah, we probably lost out because of it, but I don't care."

Kerry's brow creased. "You don't' really think that, do you?" She queried. "That we lost sales because Dar isn't screaming at everyone all the time?"

"Well." Eleanor turned and leaned one shoulder against the wall. "It's tempting, isn't it? Easier to think it's because of that than because me and Jose aren't doing our jobs." A sardonic look crossed her face. "Nah, I don't really think that. The market's just turned towards smaller companies right now. Everyone thinks it's better economics."

"But it really isn't." Kerry relaxed. "In the long run."

"Mm." Her companion gave a half shake of her head. "Doesn't help my quarterly earnings statement though." She gave Kerry a wry look. "Want to go hear the old grump blow the new kids on the block away? They have no idea I volunteered her."

An irrepressible grin appeared on Kerry's face. "You've got a mean streak yourself, El." She gestured towards the hall. "Sure, let's go."

* * *

Dar paused at the edge of the open space, reviewing the small group of men clustered on a single step mini-stage. Two she knew slightly, senior technical managers in the industry she'd met earlier that year at a networking function, and three others whose names she'd heard around. All men, all in their thirties, all with that air of not quite management about them that technical people did tend to have; pleated chinos with sports jackets, or workmanlike suits.

Dar halted briefly to shed her annoyance at Eleanor, and then she eased her way through the last line of watchers and took the one step up onto the platform. "Afternoon, gentlemen."

The five men, and what apparently was a moderator turned at the sound of her voice. The two men who knew who she was immediately took on what Dar had always thought of as the dirty diaper attitude, and she realized it had been quite a while since she'd seen it.

The moderator stepped forward and extended a hand. “Ah, Ms. Roberts? Glad you could join us.”

Dar gripped his fingers in hers then released them. “Anytime.” She drawled, turning her eyes on the two men nearest her. “Hello, John. How’s that experiment with consumer grade switches going?”

The man she addressed winced. “We.. ah.. well, we went a different route with that one, Dar. Thanks for asking!” He turned to his companion. “Ted, you know Dar Roberts, don’t you?”

“Uh.. sure.” Ted extended his hand gingerly. “We bumped into each other at the IEEE conference a couple months back.. great presentation you did there.”

“Thanks.” Dar replied graciously, giving the other three a brief nod as the moderator made introductions. “So what’s the deal with this? We talking about IP v6, or something really earth shattering like the latest security holes in SNMP?”

“Eh.. hah.” The moderator finished putting some stools in place for his guests. “Well, securing our networks was the topic.. ah yes.”

“Mm.” Dar claimed the last stool on one side and settled onto it, letting her eyes run idly over the crowd as the rest of the speakers got into place. She spotted Shari’s distinctive features near the back but let her eyes just pass right over her, settling instead on the blond woman who had picked a perch on a nearby booth that was a foot higher than the floor.

Kerry gave her a thumbs up. Dar rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, but directed a wink her partners way nonetheless.

“Okay, folks.” The moderator clapped his hands. “Let’s get this debate going.”

“Debate?” Dar chuckled. “Eleanor screwed up again. She picked the wrong one of us.”

John leaned closer. “Sorry, did you say something, Dar?”

“No.” Dar replied.

“The question we’re posing here… “ The moderator glared surreptitiously at them. “Are our networks safe?” He asked. “With all the stuff we’ve been hearing in the news lately.. Internet sites hacked, credit cards stolen, drive by hacking… are you all worried? Are your networks safe?”

Dar watched the speakers glance at each other, waiting to see who was going first. “That’s an idiotic question.” She threw out the sentence, just to stir up a little fun.

“Wh.. what?” The moderator stammered.

“That’s an idiotic question.” Dar repeated, a little slower for him. “Do you really think anyone here is going to stand up in front of potential customers and their peers and say ‘why no.. my network’s a positive sieve! Thanks for bringing it up!”

The other men on the platform chuckled a little and John nodded, gesturing in Dar’s direction. “Yeah, what she said.”

Discomfited, the moderator cleared his throat. “Okay, okay, I see your point. But what if.. “ He paused. “Okay, what if I brought a hacker up here, onto the platform, and he said he could break into any of your networks. What would you say to him?”

The other four looked at each other, then in unison, they looked at Dar.

“Want a job?” Dar remarked, with a grin.

The entire crowd started laughing.

“Ms. Roberts, it’s a serious question.” The moderator desperately tried to yank control back.

Dar got up and stuck her hands in the pockets of her skirt. “Of course it is.” She replied. “We all pump a significant portion of our collective budgets into hardening our networks.” A half tilt of her head. “But to answer your question, no.”

“No?”

“No, nothing’s ever perfect.” Dar shook her head. “You can put machinery and manpower into it until you’re blue in the face, but somewhere there’s gonna be a hole. There’s too many places where it’s possible and sometimes out of your control.”

John nodded again. “Dar’s right.” He said, then paused. “Well, of course, because Dar’s always right, and we all know it.”

The crowd laughed again. Dar responded with a relatively gracious smile. Her eyes caught a motion at the back of the crowd, the distraction turning out to be Shari having a some what animated discussion with Michelle.

They were arguing. Dar’s eyebrows hiked, as she caught a gesture in her direction. But Michelle got a firm hold on Shari’s arm and just started pulling her away.

Hm. Dar’s eyes slid to her left, seeing Kerry’s head turned in that direction.

“But you know, we really have made some strides in that area.. let me go over some of them.” John went on.

“Wait a minute.” A stocky man in a light gray suit interjected. “Lemme just ask.. hey, lady.”

Dar gazed at him.

“You really hire hackers?” The man asked. “I mean, that’s a big story.. that ILS hires hackers.” He turned and got agreement from those next to him. “As a customer, I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“You ever been compromised?” Dar asked.

“No.. I mean, not that I know of.” The man replied.

“Like you’d tell them?” Shari’s voice cut through the crowd.

Out of the corner of her eye, Dar saw Kerry slip down from her perch and start through the crowd like a determined miniature cyclone. The romance of the motion appealed to her, and the chuckle it caused brushed the sound of Shari’s voice form her ears. “Of course we’d tell them.” Dar answered the question in an unruffled tone. “We’ve just never had to.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” The man in gray accused.

“What’s your question?” Dar turned the tables on him. “Are you asking if I ever knowingly hired someone who had deliberately broken into someone else’s computer systems?”

“Yes.”

“Sure.” Dar answered.

The other men on the podium were shifting away from her, putting some distance between them as if to disassociate themselves from the very idea.

“But only if they were successful at it.” She continued. “I only hire the best. That’s why our network… “ Her eyes went over the room. “Has never been compromised.”

“Never?” John blurted.

“Never.” Dar said, with quiet certainty. “G’wan. Give it a try.” She threw the challenge out. “Anyone out there got the guts to take us on?” She looked over to where Shari had been, but that was just a hole in the crowd now. Kerry had, ominously, also disappeared.

“Bet your security manager’s not loving you at the moment. “John muttered.

Dar gave him an amused look. “He’d lick his chops at the challenge.”

“Okay, folks.” The moderator finally decided to wrest control back again. “So this turned out to be a pretty interesting subject after all.”

“Very.” The man in gray muttered.

Dar sat down on her stool again and folded her arms. And that, she mused. Would teach Eleanor to volunteer her, wouldn’t it? She felt eyes on her, and she turned her head, not entirely surprised to find her friend Peter Quest nearby, watching her, a grin on his face.

Now he didn’t seem worried about hackers at all. While Dar, on the other hand, was worried about having to bail out a certain green eyed woman she dearly loved.

Time to end the debate.

* * *

There were times, and this was one of them, that Kerry cursed the genetic dice throw that doomed her to a life nearly a foot shorter than her partner. She could see her quarry ahead of her, but as she squeezed through the last line of suited bodies and got into the clear, Shari and Michelle were nowhere to be found.

“Son of a bitch.” Kerry stalked towards the booths, half listening to Dar’s damning commentary behind her. The security discussion had started off badly and went down from there, and her bosses blithe confirmation that they hired hackers sure wasn’t going to make her life any easier, but those were minor details.

Shari going out of her way to attack Dar wasn’t. Kerry prowled the aisles, looking for the two women. As she passed her own booth, though, she paused. “Okay, wait a minute.” She collected herself. “Just what are you going to do when you hunt them down, Kerrison?” She asked “Start a cat fight? Bar room brawl in the trade show? That’ll make headlines.”

“Ma’am?” One of her techs scurried over, seeing her standing there. “Did you say something?”

Kerry sighed. “Nothing intelligent, no.” But her eyes kept sweeping the hall anyway, half hoping she’d spot what she was looking for.

“Hey.” Mark appeared. “Dar outted me!” He seemed amazed. “Did you hear that?”

Kerry leaned on the edge of the booth. “I heard it. So did everyone else. I know what I’m going to spend the next two weeks explaining.” She sensed the crowd coming back into

the display area in back of her, and without turning, somehow, she just knew Dar was heading her way.

It was a really weird feeling. To test it, Kerry casually turned her head just as Dar cleared the booths one aisle over and came into view. She watched a muted look of relief cross her partner's face on seeing her, and she felt a little sheepish as Dar hopped up onto the platform with her. "Hi."

"Hi." Dar glanced around. "You okay?"

Kerry cleared her throat gently. "If you mean, did I flatten anyone recently, no." She muttered under her breath. "Boy, did I feel like it. I think you better get me out of here before my hormones land us in libel court."

"Nah." Dar grinned. "I'm gonna put you in a tank top with the words "My bodyguard" right across your chest." She blew a lock of dark hair out of her eyes. "Okay, I think I botched that pretty big time. Sorry."

"Eh." Kerry indicated Mark, who was studying a console across the booth. "Most of our clients have worked with Mark for years. It's not going to be that big a deal. I'll take care of it." She laid her hand on Dar's shoulder. "By the time I'm done, you'll have started the newest trend in IT hiring."

Eleanor hurried into the booth from the other side, hauling up as she spotted Dar. "Okay, you win!" She held up both hands. "Next time, I'll just pass out ILS pens for advertising!"

"Dar!" Jose arrived from the opposite direction, sweating. "Jesu! Could you have warned you were to do that? Dios Mio!"

Dar sniffed. "Got us attention." She remarked. "Aren't you the one who's always says any publicity is good?"

They certainly were becoming the center of attention quickly. The booth was surrounded by curious onlookers, as well as customers now clamoring for attention. The man in gray pushed his way forward, heading right for Dar.

"Is this where I take off and let you all clean up my mess?" Dar inquired, with a faint smirk.

Eleanor sighed.

"Just kidding." Dar faced the crowd and held her own hands up. "Okay, folks. Settle down."

"Dar.."

“I’ve got it.” Her partner told her quietly. “Keep an eye out for our friends. If you see em…”

“Go into my WWF impersonation?” Kerry joked.

Dar turned and regarded her with a puzzled expression. “You going for a panda?”

“Panda?”

“Never mind.” Dar turned back to the crowd. “All right. Let’s put this in perspective, shall we?” She raised her voice. “How many people here believe police officers always obey traffic laws?”

“What?” The man in gray spluttered. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Raise you hands.” Dar ignored him. “”C’mon.”

“How can you seriously expect us to trust someone who breaks the law? The man stubbornly kept in her face. “Huh?”

Dar gazed at him. “I’m from Miami.” She reminded him with a slight grin. “We elect felons.”

“Dar.’ Eleanor was getting nervous.

Mark wandered over. “Hey, Mr. T.!” He greeted the man in gray. “How’s that website, still stable?”

The man frowned. “Um.. yes, fine, fine, Mark. Listen, we can discuss that later. Right now I want some answers about this hacker thing.”

Mark leaned over the edge of the booth and lowered his voice. “Hey, Mr. T?”

Annoyed, the man glared at him. “I said…”

“I’m the hacker.” Mark indicated his own chest. “Only I’m like the number two, if you know what I mean.” His thumb inched towards Dar’s towering form. “You’re pretty safe. Don’t sweat it.”

The man in gray goggled at him.

“Okay, so let’s talk about security.” Another man pushed forward. “I don’t give a damn who you hire. You say you can’t be broken into? My site’s been taken offline three times in two months. Tell me how I can stop it.”

“Hire us.” Dar perched on the corner of the counter, letting her hands rest on her thigh as she settled down in a more comfortable element. Her comment drew a few laughs, and she smiled in response. “Seriously. It’s a lot of intensive effort, and a damn substantial budget. You can’t ever stop.. there’s no time where you can take a breath, and say we’re okay.”

“Right.” Mark nodded. “Twenty four seven, we’re out there checking, rechecking, double checking, coming up with new checks… it never stops.”

Kerry eased back and relaxed a little, realizing Dar did, in fact, have the situation very much under control. She leaned back against the booths’ center pylon, releasing a silent sigh of relief. So then, of course, she spotted Shari and Michelle at the fringes of the crowd. Her eyes narrowed, but the two seemed content to just stand and listen.

“What a circus.” Eleanor leaned on the pylon next to Kerry. “Next time I’m gonna send my assistant. I’m going on a cruise instead.”

“Mm.”

“Y’know, it’s kind of fun to see the old Dar again, though.” The older woman mused. “I’m just glad she’s pointed that way not this way.”

Kerry exhaled. “I’ll be glad when the damn doors close tonight and we can get the hell out of here.”

Eleanor looked at her, with a puzzled expression. ‘You not feeling well, Ker? You’ve been antsy all day.”

Had she been? Kerry frowned, thinking about her actions since the morning. “Yeah, well…” She shrugged one shoulder. “Between the weather and our friends over there, my last nerve got Fed Exed to Fargo around lunchtime.”

Eleanor clapped her on the shoulder, then she groaned and headed off to join Jose. Kerry watched a moment more, then she sat down behind one of the consoles and smiled at a customer brave enough to wander past Dar to look over her shoulder. “Hi.”

“Hi.” The man sat down next to her and looked at the screen. It was currently displaying their top level view, the huge backbones that made up the core of their network. “That’s really impressive.”

“Thanks.” Kerry smiled at him. “It’s a really good design. There’s so much redundancy, even when we try to crash it, we can’t.”

“Bet it cost a pretty penny.” The man grinned back.

“It did, but it’s already paid for itself.” She replied. “Watch this.” Kerry typed in a command, taking down one of the core routing centers and removing it from the network. Other than a little greener pulse, the net barely flickered, rerouting around it in a blink of an eye.

“Wow.”

Kerry restored the center before her pager started hitting the roof and watched the routes reestablish themselves. “It’s flexible and self healing. A pleasure to manage.”

“Hi.” The man repeated, holding his hand out. “My name’s Peter Quest.” He took Kerry’s outstretched fingers and clasped them. “People tell me you’re the one to talk to about some new business. That true?”

Kerry’s ears perked up a little. “It could be.” She allowed. “I’m one of the people. What did you have in mind?”

Quest smiled at her again. “Let me ask you something first.” He said, leaning on the counter with an elbow. “Are you up for a challenge? Can you put your name on a dotted line, and go head to head for some business… could turn out to be pretty big?”

Kerry folded her hands. “What are you asking me?” She queried. “Can I negotiate a contract for ILS? Of course.”

“Even if someone else in your company already said no?”

“Well.” Kerry sat back. “Maybe. Why don’t you tell me what your pitch is, and then we’ll talk about it.”

Quest nodded, with a satisfied look. “That’s all I’m asking for.” He leaned forward. “Here’s the deal.”

PART 4

DAR CAME OUT OF THE BATHROOM, TOWELING HER HAIR SOMEWHAT DRY, DRESSED only in a second towel that was barely decent on her tall frame. She stopped to lean against the door, eyeing the sprawled form on the bed. "Ker?"

"Ungh." Kerry had her arm thrown over her eyes. "Shh. Kerry isn't here. It's just a prune, masquerading as Kerry."

"Uh huh." Dar sat down on the bed next to her, very nearly pulling her towel loose. "That was some downpour. I'm glad we made it back here." She reached over and used the other towel to dry off Kerry's head. "What a pain in the ass long day."

Kerry rolled over and draped her arm over Dar's thigh. "We have to do that again tomorrow, Dar. Augh!" She drummed her feet against the sheets and squiggled into Dar's lap. "Pig farts!"

Not at all displeased by the development, Dar tossed the towel somewhere in the vicinity of the bathroom and concentrated on her armful of cute blond instead. She was relieved herself that the day was over, and she was very much looking forward to the coming hours alone with her partner.

Accordingly, she slid her hand under Kerry's neck to support it as she leaned over and gave her a leisurely kiss, enjoying the simple passion of it. She could taste the last remnants of the lemon soda Kerry had grabbed on their way out of the trade show, and as their tongues gently played against each other, she let out a chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Kerry asked.

“I had fun in the afternoon session.” Dar admitted. “I think I got everything back under control.”

Kerry tweaked the towel, tugging it free of its tuck and exposing Dar’s torso. “Mmhm.” She traced a circle around her partner’s navel. “I think you did too. Thanks.” She felt the muscles just under the skin twitch. “I have a feeling you’re going to make the news, though... I saw reporters there. With cameras.”

“Eurgh.” Dar made a face.

Kerry chuckled. “Not that they needed a scandal to take pictures of you… they do that anyway. You could have been explaining subnet masking and you’d still have gotten a crowd.” She let her hand fall to the bed and closed her eyes. “Umph.”

“Something wrong?” Dar asked.

“Headache.”

“Again?” Dar curled her fingers around the back of Kerry’s neck and kneaded it gently. “I see my friend Quest found you... that what gave you this?”

Kerry remained silent, enjoying the massage. Then she exhaled. “He wasn’t that bad.” She admitted. “He had some interesting things to say.”

Dar kept up the motion of her hands. “Ah.” She murmured, surprised. “What did he say? Must have been different than what he told me.”

Her cheek was resting against Dar’s leg, and Kerry let her fingers stroke the skin there before she answered. “I think it was the same offer.”

Dar considered that for a little while. “What did you tell him?” She finally asked. “Did you agree to do it?”

Kerry rolled her head to one side and opened her eyes, looking up at Dar with a faintly rueful expression. “Sweetheart, do you honestly think I would go do something you’d already told me you’d turned down on the company’s behalf?” She reached up to tickle Dar’s navel again. “I was really, really curious as to why you just turned him down flat, though.”

“What I don’t get is why he asked you.” Dar said. “What’s his game?”

“Well... if mom says no...” Kerry kidded her. “Just go ask... um... you know what I mean.” She closed her eyes again as Dar’s fingers found a knot at the back of her skull. “He asked me if I had the guts to go over your head.”

“And?”

Kerry opened one eye and regarded her. “What do you think?”

A smile twitched at the corners of Dar’s mouth. “I think right now I trust your judgment better than mine. To be honest, I can’t tell you why the hell I just blew him off, Ker. I had no reason for it... no business reason, anyway.”

Kerry’s eyebrows lifted.

“Then when I reconsidered… it was because Telegenics was also bidding, and I wanted to kick their ass. Not because I made a good business choice.” Dar exhaled, but looked peaceful. “I think it’s time I vacate that office, my friend. I’m just not into it anymore.”

“Dar...”

Dar put her fingers across Kerry’s lips. “It’s the truth, we both know it.” She said. “I’m not going to just walk out, Kerry, but I’m not doing my job.”

Uncertainly, Kerry subsided, confused and disturbed by her partner’s admission. Dar didn’t seem upset by it, but she was, and it was no use pretending she wasn’t. “I’m really not happy to hear that.” She sighed. “Especially because I think you’re brilliant at what you do, and this last year’s proved that over and over again.”

Dar traced the furrow in Kerry’s brow. “Anyway... we can talk about it when we get home.” She said. “So... what did you tell little Peter?”

Kerry rolled onto her back and settled her hands on her stomach. She recognized the change of subject for what it was, and pondered whether to let Dar get away with it. Then the ache in her head made itself felt again, and she decided if Dar didn’t want to talk about it right now, that was okay with her.

Maybe she would think about it some more. It had just been a ratty day. “What did I tell little Peter?" She repeated. “Well, I told him it was an interesting proposal, it was something we’re very experienced at doing, something we could probably easily handle, and something we’d be interested in getting involved in.”

Dar slipped her hands under Kerry’s head and resumed her massage.

“However.” Kerry continued. “I also told him I had nothing but the highest respect for your judgment, so if he was looking for a champion to butt heads with you, he picked the wrong blond.”

“Mm.”

“He seemed to think that was funny.”

"Hmm?"

"I think that's when my headache started again." Kerry closed her eyes against the light in the room. "I just told him I'd be in touch and booted him out of the booth."

Dar let the silence lengthen after that, as she kept working on Kerry's tense muscles. She watched the skin over her partner's brow smooth out, and her breathing slowed as she relaxed. "You want to do it?" She finally asked, in a low voice.

The tiniest hint of a smile appeared on Kerry's lips, and she cracked open one eyelid. "I want us to do it." She replied, huskily.

Hm. "Us as in... you and me, you mean?"

Kerry nodded. "I think it would be good for the company, sure… but just to prove I have my head in my workstation just as much as you do, I really just wanted to go there, just us, and whip everyone else's butts."

"Ahhh... Ulterior motives." Dar chuckled softly.

"Something like that." Kerry reached behind her and captured Dar's foot. She ran her fingers over the corded tendons and threatened a tickle, feeling the muscles bunch instinctively. "Besides, I'd like to see New Zealand."

Dar let one hand rest on Kerry's stomach. "Ahhhhh." She tapped the edge of her thumb against Kerry's abs. "That brings this whoooollllee thing full circle." With her other hand she lifted something from the nightstand and dropped it onto the bed next to her partner. "To this."

Kerry turned her head and regarded the box. "Ahh." She mimicked Dar. "You know, sweetheart, if you really wanted to know you could have just opened it."

"That's not my name on the label." Dar wriggled into a more comfortable spot and leaned on one elbow, looking expectantly at the package and then at Kerry. "Feeling better?"

How could she not feel better? Kerry wondered, as she rolled over onto her side and reached for the box. She was lying in bed, with her head in Dar's naked lap, with the prospects of what was in the box yet to emerge to look forward to.

Her headache had faded under Dar's touch, and the feeling of pent up tension was being leeched out of her by a combination of being where she was and being able to feel the affection almost pouring out of her companion as the gentle, feather light stroking traveled over her body.

It would be very easy to just let the world fade out.

But there was her box to open, and dinner to be had, and fireworks to watch from their balcony. So Kerry obediently plucked at the box's wrapping, ripping it apart and freeing the box from its bindings. "There. You have two hands free. Open it."

Dar needed no second invitation. She took hold of the box and pried the top off, peering inside. Then she turned it over and let the contents drop into her hand.

It was a jar, with a white top, and a seemingly hand written label. Dar blinked it. "Double fudge body paint?" She read it aloud. "From New Zealand?"

Kerry affected an innocent look. "They didn't have it at Sawgrass Mills."

Dar bit her lip, then burst out laughing, flipping the jar over in her hand in delight. "Oooohh…. Housekeeping's gonna be mad at us." She chortled. "Kerry, what made you order this?" Her eyes went to her partner's face. "Getting bored?"

For the first time in a long time, Kerry turned brick red, the color change very evident against her white cotton t-shirt. "No!" She got out, grabbing the jar. "I was just shopping! On the internet!"

"Shopping for… " Dar teased. "Jars? Fudge? Sex toys?"

Kerry cleared her throat loudly. "Did you know they have milk flavored candy there?" She changed the subject. "And hey, look... I've got a canvas all ready to test this stuff on." She tweaked Dar's bare belly. "To be honest, I was looking for some stuff we could take on the boat, and the pointing and clicking just got a little... ah..."

"Off course?" Dar grinned. "You and a mouse. Dangerous."

"Trackball. I hate mice." Kerry corrected her. "Dirty balls – just not my style." She leaned over and nibbled a bit of Dar's skin. "So what do you say, Dixiecup? Wanna see if I have even one artistic bone in my body tonight?"

Dar set the jar down and picked Kerry up instead, curling her body around her partner's and delivering a passionately serious kiss that coaxed a soft groan from Kerry's guts and set the blond woman's' hands wandering over Dar's skin. "Yeah." She breathed into Kerry's ear. "Paint anything you like on me... I won't even check the spelling."

"Spelling?" Kerry snickered, easing her body flat against Dar's. "Baby, I'm not gonna be writing ANYTHING. You're going to see how us repressed WASPS do finger-painting."

They tumbled together across the bed, laughing as they got tangled in the sheets and ended up almost falling off. Dar clasped her arms around Kerry and held her tight, releasing a deeply satisfied sigh. "To hell with all of them." She said. "Let's go have fun."

"Grrwol."

* * *

"I'm in heaven." Kerry put her bare feet up on the railing next to Dar's, as they sat and watched the fireworks. Absently, she reached over and took Dar's hand in hers, as she let her other one rest on a very satisfactorily stuffed belly. "Thank god we don't do this all the time. I can only imagine the amount of gym sweat I'd have to put in to keep up with it."

Dar flexed her toes and leaned closer, pressing her shoulder against Kerry's as a new set of colorful lights exploded in the distance. "Mm." She agreed with both sentiments, though it was hard to focus on the question through the beer they'd shared over dinner and the lassitude the warm air was pressing on her. "That was pretty."

"Uh huh." Kerry rested her head against Dar's upper arm. "Paladar Katherine?"

"Mmm…" Dar peered at her. "What have I done?"

"Nothing. I just like your name." Kerry exhaled contentedly. "So... what's our strategy for tomorrow? There's two big panels in the afternoon… one's on the direction of wireless, the others on outsourcing. I think we should be on both of them, don't you?"

"Oh." Her partner mused. "Like I didn't make enough trouble today, you want me to try again tomorrow? Alastair's probably already shredded his desk blotter." She lifted the mug of coffee resting by her left elbow and took a sip from it. "I'm surprised he hasn't called."

"Maybe he hasn't heard." Kerry suggested. "It wasn't that big a deal, Dar. Once you started talking them through it, everyone really relaxed."

"Umph." Dar watched several rockets go up, bursting into red and blue patterns overhead. "Yeah, all right. Sign me up. It's more interesting than wandering around in the hall bullshitting." She squeezed Kerry's fingers. "Besides, I get the feeling one of the pitches Telegenics made is that they're a lot more cutting edge than stodgy old ILS."

"Really?"

A perceptible twinkle appeared in Dar's eyes. "I got an email today from an old acquaintance at one of the accounts that switched, just passing the time of day." She said. "And a little insider info."

"Ahhh." Kerry rumbled softly. "Do I sense some early reservations?"

"Hedging her bets." A grin appeared. "Shirley Applebaum… she's got a lot of sense, and even though we bumped heads when they first signed with us, she's all right."

“Bumped heads… like you and I did?”

Dar laughed. “Kerrison, no one in my life ever bumped heads with me like you did.” She assured her partner. “No, I’d just become a regional manager when they came onboard... they were my first account.”

“Oh.”

“Talk about a learning experience.” Dar briefly covered her eyes with one hand. “For a while, I thought they were going to be my last account. But it worked out.”

“Obviously.” Kerry admired a sudden burst of color as it spread across the sky. “That really is pretty… but I’m glad I’m not under it. I hate the smell of gunpowder.”

They both jumped a little and turned as a knock sounded inside the room, echoing faintly through the sliding glass door. Dar frowned. “Are we expecting anyone?”

“Hell no.” Kerry got up and shoved the door open, trading the warm concrete for the rough nubble of the carpet against her bare feet. She pressed her hands against the door and peered through the eyehole, pushing back in annoyance when she recognized Michelle’s face on the other side. “Son of a bitch.” She muttered. “What do you want at ten o’clock at night?”

For a short moment, she debated with herself, seriously considering ignoring the knock and returning to the balcony. Then with a sigh, she grasped the door hand and turned it, her breeding overcoming her baser inclinations for once. “Yes?”

Michelle gazed back at her, for once dressed down in a shirt and jeans and having left most of her pretensions at home, it seemed. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Kerry responded, leaning against the jamb but not allowing the door to open past her body width. “What can I do for you?”

“Can we talk?” Michelle asked. “I know it’s late, I know it’s been a long day, I know you’re not pleased to see me here.”

Kerry felt a warm stream of air suddenly on the back of her neck, and somehow managed not to jump as Dar’s hands settled on her hips. Her partner remained silent, however, leaving the decision up to her. “If you know all that, why push it?” She asked. “Maybe tomorrow’s a better idea.”

“It probably is. But I’d like to talk to you anyway.” Their unwelcome visitor stated. “Both of you.” She added, a little belatedly.

Kerry's face twitched a little as she was pinched very gently on the behind. Then the warmth behind her disappeared, and she straightened up. "Make it fast." She backed up a step and opened the door. "We've got plans for the rest of this evening."

Michelle raised her eyebrows as she slipped past, giving Kerry's faded t-shirt and bare feet a glance. "Thanks."

Kerry followed her inside. Dar had settled on the couch, her long, bare legs sprawled out across the carpet and her arms spread across the back of the cushions. It left just enough space next to her for one other person provided it was someone Dar liked.

Michelle prudently took the chair across from her, and waited until Kerry sat down within the spread of Dar's reach before she crossed one ankle over her knee and cleared her throat. "Okay, I'll cut to the chase, since we all don't want to be here."

"No." Dar let her arm drop down over Kerry's shoulders. "We want to be here." She turned her head and regarded her partner's profile. "What I can't figure out is why the hell you don't just follow your business plan and leave us the hell alone." She glanced back at Michelle, raising her eyebrows in question.

Michelle exhaled. "Because you're part of my business plan." She responded. "Look. I know my infrastructure right down to the nuts and screws just like you do." She looked right at Dar. "I know what the capacity is, and I'm at it. I can't expand any more."

"And?" Dar shrugged. "I could have told you that. You've promised the same service level to all the accounts you stole this year. If... " She pointed back at Michelle. "If everything runs perfectly, and no one has any increase in demand, you can provide what you promised."

"Yes."

"But things never do work perfectly." Kerry said.

"Except in your network." Michelle concluded. "So that's why I'm here. I know what ILS must pay you. I also know you've been with them forever, and maybe you're ready for a new set of challenges. I want to hire you."

Kerry looked at Michelle, then she turned and looked at Dar. "I know she's talking about you, not me." She stated, with a half chuckle.

"Actually, I'm not stupid." Michelle contradicted her. "Both of you. I know what conflict of interest is and I hate wasting money."

Holy crap. Kerry kept her mouth shut and waited for Dar's reaction. She could feel the slow, rhythmic stroking of her partner's fingers against the back of her shoulder and she was close enough to hear Dar's steady breathing.

Dar sniffed reflectively. “You don’t have the money.”

“To pay you?” Michelle chuckled. “Mm… you do have an ego.”

But Dar shook her head. “You don’t have the money to put in the infrastructure you’ll need to compete, not only with us, but with the rest of the dog pack we run with.”

Their visitor got up and walked around the back of her chair, pacing with short, deliberate steps. “If I can get projections justified, I can get the money. I have backers lined up who are just waiting… watching to see if we can make it over the top. They were very impressed at the progress we’ve made so far… but now I need to take the next step.” She paused and leaned on the back of the seat. “You are the next step. There is no fuzzy logic involved. Every deep pocket I have behind me knows who you are, and what you can do.”

Dar merely watched her, a faint smile on her face.

“So.” Michelle concluded, coming around to the front of the chair again and sitting down in it. Dressed as she was, she seemed more like them, than the starched figure they’d been dealing with for the last few days. “That’s what brings me here. I’m sorry it’s been so uncivilized the past two days. My fault. Stupid choices.”

Kerry decided to remain quiet. She was in no way tempted by the offer, and she knew despite Michelle’s words that she’d been included for reasons that did not wholly encompass her qualifications as an IT executive. However, Dar’s words earlier that evening echoed into her mind, and she had to wonder if her partner wasn’t just a little bit flattered and intrigued by the interest.

And in fact, she didn’t blame Michelle one bit – far from it. She gave the woman high points for going after a prize she herself valued above all others. In fact, if she’d chosen this approach from the get go, she might indeed have gotten the synergy she’d been hoping for.

However.

“I don’t expect any answer.” Michelle went on. “I just want to put the idea out there. We’ve got the rest of this damn show to get through, and it would make my life a lot easier if we could can the feud now.”

“It’s not my feud.” Dar finally spoke, in a quiet voice.

Michelle watched her face closely, but apparently found nothing there. She lifted a hand and let it fall onto her denim-clad knee.

They were all briefly silent. Then Kerry cleared her throat a little. “Want some coffee?” She offered, indicating the table. “It’s pretty good here.”

Michelle glanced at it. “No thanks.” She half grimaced, half smiled. “I’d never get to sleep. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Not really, no.” Kerry shook her head. “Though I generally prefer tea at night.” She leaned against Dar unobtrusively. “Why don’t we just agree to just behave like professionals for the next few days? I’m sure we can all handle that.”

“Mm.” Michelle glanced at Dar.

“You didn’t get any special treatment.” Dar said. “This is how I always act when people get in my face. Have your people stay out of my face, and we’ll have a grand old time.” She pinned Michelle with a cool gaze. “Your staff has been messing with us since I got here. You made me spend half the night in that damn hall because of your little tricks, and your managers keep harassing my staff. What makes you think any of that makes you or your company even the least bit appealing for someone like me to work for?”

Michelle, surprisingly, didn’t counter her accusations. Instead, she ducked her head to one side. “Granted. Like I said, bad choices. I take responsibility for that.”

Dar relaxed a little. “All right then.” She conceded. “We should have no problems anymore.”

“Good.” Their visitor put her hands on the chair arms and pushed herself to her feet. “Then I won’t take up more of your time. It’s late, and it’s been a long day.” Her eyes fell on the jar, sitting patiently on the table and she blinked, reading then label, then glanced at them, one eyebrow lifting.

Kerry smiled kindly at her. “See you tomorrow.” She waggled her fingers.

Michelle walked across the room and let herself out, pulling the door to after her with a definite, crisp snick.

Dar drummed her fingers on Kerry’s shoulder, then tilted her head back and let out a long chuckle. “Oh, ain’t this a tangled web.”

“Yeah, well... those two black widows can just kiss my butt.” Kerry snagged the jar and wrapped her hands in Dar’s shirt, tugging her upward. “C’mon, Dixiecup. Hedonism beckons.”

Outside the window, the fireworks peaked in silent glory, speckling the room with twinkling lights. They were, however, lost on the occupants.

* * *

Kerry greeted the perkily emerging sun bathing the balcony with a yawn. The warmth felt good right now, after the chill of the hotel room, but she knew it wouldn't be long before it went from soothing to annoying and decided to enjoy it while she could.

So much had happened the day before, she spent a few minutes just reviewing it all. Then she looked up as the sliding door opened and Dar emerged onto the balcony.

She took the seat next to Kerry and cradled her coffee cup in her hands, sleepy eyes regarding the view amiably. "Kerrison?"

"Yes?"

"I have chocolate in many places God did not intend." Dar announced. "And you, my salacious little mudpuppy, are going to scrub it off me this morning in that there shower." She toasted Kerry with the coffee. "In fact, I think I still have your name scrawled across my leg."

"No, you don't." Kerry licked her lips. "Trust me."

Dar chuckled, stretching her legs out into the sunshine and tensing her thigh muscles. "Tell you what. How about we get out there before all the munchkins and go in the pool for a while, before we get into our monkey suits? Show doesn't start till ten."

Kerry sucked in a lungful of pine scented, though warm air. "Yeah. I like that idea." She decided. "Let's do it. Then we can grab a fast breakfast down at that little snack bar thing."

They got up, passing together through the glass door and bumping each other playfully as they maneuvered to the bathroom to grab their swimsuits.

Several minutes later, they had towels in hand and were headed out the door. This early, the hotel was quiet, and they could hear workers beginning to set up in the restaurants as they slipped out the back door and headed for the pool.

It was huge. But they had it pretty much to themselves, save a few tentative sunbathers collecting down on one end and timidly spreading towels out on the comfortable looking lounge chairs. Dar tossed her towel on a vacant one on the far side of the pool and dove in without a second's hesitation.

Kerry took a moment to fold her towel and put it down next to Dar's. She straightened and went to the side of the pool, stepping up onto the edge of it and diving in.

The water was warmer than she expected, but still refreshing. She surfaced and swam over to where Dar was somersaulting lazily in place, enjoying the clear liquid for a change after swimming mostly in seawater for the last few months.

Dar had on her silver gray suit, which had a functional tank neckline, but high cut sides that showed off her long legs. She flipped over onto her stomach and started to swim down the length of the pool, her powerful arms pulling her through the water with apparently effortless ease.

Kerry took off after her, working a little harder to keep up as they swam side by side all the way to the other end of the irregularly shaped pool. Arriving at the wall, they both turned, then leaned back and gazed across the water, blinking chlorine out of their eyes.

"Race you?" Kerry grinned.

Dar looked at her knowingly. "How many minutes head start do I have to give you?"

Sticking out her tongue, Kerry kicked off and started swimming as hard and as fast as she could, knowing perfectly well it was a lost cause. She liked swimming, but she'd come late to the sport, since they hadn't had a pool in Michigan and the idea of her going to a public pool would never have been countenanced.

After moving to Florida, and certainly after moving in with Dar, she'd gotten a lot more experience at it, but she still was working to acquire the skills, whereas her partner… "Dar!" Kerry felt hands pluck impudently at her suit. She stuck her face in the water and opened her eyes, spotting Dar almost right under her, swimming under the surface as fast as she could swim on top of it.

As she watched, slowing her strokes, Dar flipped over and coasted beneath her, releasing a lungful of bubbles that rumbled against Kerry's skin and surfaced around her. Then Dar stroked upward and emerged just in front of her, treading water around Kerry in a circle.

"Show off." Kerry splashed her.

Dar stuck her tongue out. "Yeah, sometimes." She agreed, relaxing onto her back and heading off with neat strokes and powerful flutter kicks.

Kerry eased into a breaststroke and followed, starting to grin as she saw Dar angle towards the tall slide. She surged after her, catching up as Dar pushed herself up out of the water and onto the concrete, then turned to offer her a hand up.

"Thank you, ma'am." Kerry latched onto the back of Dar's suit and followed her up the steps to the top of the slide. "I think this is supposed to be for the kids."

"And?" Dar launched herself down the slippery surface. "C'mon, you punk!"

Kerry settled on the slide and shoved herself forward, enjoying the spray of water as she whirled downwards towards the pool. "Better get out of my way, slowpoke!" She yelled in warning, tucking her arms against her sides as she sped up. "Yahhhhhhh!!!"

She dropped out of the slide and plunged into the pool, relaxing her legs as she anticipated hitting the bottom.

Halfway there, she was abruptly intercepted as strong arms wrapped around her and yanked her to a halt. Dar had pushed off the bottom already and they surged back towards the surface, breaking through it into the warm air with a twin yell.

“Me a punk?” Kerry swept an armful of water towards her partner, dousing her thoroughly. “You’re a punk, you little...”

“Little?” Dar picked her up and leaned sideways, taking them both underwater. They wrestled around until Kerry managed to wriggle free, then broke out into the open air again. “Rat!” She dove at Dar and grappled with her again, but made the mistake of getting too close and growled as she felt Dar’s arms tighten around her with irresistible force.

“Rat, huh?” Dar’s low voice tickled her ear.

Kerry tried a wriggle, and then relaxed, realizing she was good and caught. She turned her head to regard her companion, giving her a kiss on her wet nose. “Okay. You’re not a rat.” She said. “You’re a HAMSTER!” She twisted suddenly and got a leg wrapped around Dar’s, pulling them both off balance and back under the water.

They finally came back up near the edge of the pool, laughing like kids. Dar ducked backwards and straightened, slicking her hair back as she leaned against the concrete. “Whoo.”

Kerry rapidly shook her head, scattering water everywhere before she joined her partner. “That was fun.” She glanced around, noting that the pool deck was becoming a little more populated, and several solitary bodies had joined them in the water.

“Yeah, it was.” Dar agreed, her eyes drifting across the deck. “Ah. Look who’s headed this way.”

Kerry actually growled. “If their names start with M or S, this pool’s gonna run red I swear it.”

Dar snorted, but shook her head. “No. It’s our friend Peter, Peter, Cruise Ship eater.” She assumed a cool expression as Quest arrived at poolside, hunkering down next to her in his crisp, gray suit. “Morning.”

“Good morning, ladies.” Quest answered. “Ms. Stuart, did you think about what we discussed yesterday? I have to leave right after the conferences today so I don’t think we’ll get a chance to meet again.”

“Gosh, that’s a pity.” Kerry replied mildly. “Mr. Quest, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Peter rested his arms on his knees.

“How did you know where to find us?” Kerry reached casually out and took hold of the hem of his pants. “I’m pretty sure we didn’t leave a note at the desk.”

He hesitated. “Um...”

Dar leaned closer, giving him an icy look. “Answer the lady.”

“Or?” Quest rallied, with commendable bravado.

“Or we’re going to pull you in the pool and possibly drown you.” Kerry smiled kindly at him. “Neither Dar nor I like snoops or weasels.”

Quest glanced down to the strong fingers clamped around his sartorial splendor. “No big mystery.” He replied. “I paid the bellboys to keep an eye on you.” A smirk appeared. “They didn’t seem to think it was a tough task.”

“Ah, I see.” Kerry murmured. “Well, Mr. Quest, aside from the fact that I don’t like sneaks, and you have really bad taste in tailors, I really don’t think you need a company of our caliber in your little contest.”

Quest blinked, obviously not hearing what he’d fully expected to. “But…”

“But?” Kerry replied, releasing his pants.

“You said you could make decisions.”

“Um... I just did.” The green eyes twinkled a little. “I could repeat it if you want me to. I said...”

“I heard you.” Quest frowned. “But damn it, I thought…”

Dar put her hands on the concrete and pressed herself up out of the water. She stood up and glared down at Quest. “You thought Kerry would go against me.”

He looked up. “She’s ambitious.” He shrugged. “Moving up that ladder ain’t a piece of cake, even in your company.” He stood up and brushed his hands off. “My sources told me it was something she was interested in.” His eyes dropped to a slightly boggled Kerry. “My sources said you better watch your back, Roberts.”

Kerry put a hand over her mouth, muffling a laugh.

Dar rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Did your sources bother to mention to you that Kerry and I are married?” She paused, watching his face go slack. “To each other?”

His nostrils flared. “Ah… “ An eyebrow twitched. “No, no they didn’t.”

Dar almost felt sorry for him. “How does it feel to be used?” She reached down and offered Kerry her hand. “Tell you what, Quest. We’ll enter your bid. Send me the papers first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Y… you will?”

“Yeah.” Dar pulled her partner up out of the pool. “And you can tell your source they better duck.”

Quest stood and watched them walk away, his jaw hanging slightly.

* * *

“What the hell was that?” Kerry threw her towel around her shoulders, lengthening her strides to keep up with Dar’s rapid walk. “Hello? Dar?” She snagged her partner by the back of the suit. “Dar!”

Dar slowed, but didn’t stop. “Yeah?”

“If I have to put up with you making me look like an idiot, I’d at least like to know why.”

Now Dar stopped. She sidestepped into a smaller alcove off the path, which had a sturdy bench in it. “Sit.” She took a seat herself, and waited for Kerry to follow suit. “I wasn’t trying to make you look like an idiot.”

Kerry leaned on her knees. “Honey, I know that. I didn’t think you did it on purpose, you just reacted to something and I can’t figure out what it was.”

Dar looked at her. “Didn’t you hear him? Didn’t you hear him say he’d been told you were looking to stab me in the back?”

“Dar, we’ve heard that before. Don’t you remember?” Kerry put a hand on Dar’s knee, seeing the upset in her posture. “I didn’t pay any attention… I’m used to people thinking all sorts of things about our relationship.”

“I know.” Her partner sighed, leaning back and stretching her arms out over the back of the bench. “But didn’t you find it really coincidental that this guy comes here…to this show… and gets that kind of stuff? You think it came from our people?”

“No.”

“Neither do I.” Dar bit the words off precisely. “But I’d be willing to bet I know where he got it from.”

Kerry slowly let out a breath. “Okay.” She also leaned back, feeling first the chill of the water droplets, then the warmth of Dar’s skin touch her shoulders. “So... you’re thinking it was deliberate? Or... what are you thinking, Dar?”

Dar remained silent, gazing morosely at the green hedge separating them from the path.

Kerry waited patiently, wiping her arms off with her towel. The crickets sounded loud around her, and she jerked her foot as an ant tried to use her as a highway.

“It’s something Shari would have said to him.”

“Ah.”

“That’s exactly how she thinks.” Dar went on. “That everyone has an angle. Wants something.”

“I don’t get it.” Kerry shook her head slightly. “Yeah, she seems like the kind of person who would say that, but damn it, Dar… what’s the point? What’s she trying to do?”

“Break us up.”

Kerry sneezed.

“My mother always said you sneeze on the truth.” Dar remarked wryly.

Kerry turned and faced her, leaning her elbow over Dar’s arm. “Are you really serious? You think that’s what she was trying to do? Or... I mean, if they’re bidding, it makes no sense at all to provoke you... us... into participating.”

“No.”

Kerry sneezed again. “Pooters.” She wiped her face with the towel. “All that chlorine got up my nose.” She sighed. “Dar, what the heck’s going on then? Let’s say you’re right. Let’s say her motive was trying to break us up. What does that get her?”

Dar studied Kerry’s face, watching the sunlight pick up amber glints in the depths of her eyes. “The satisfaction of hurting me?”

Blond brows lifted. “You really think that’s what she’s after? It’s been a long time, Dar.”

“I really think so.” Her partner replied. “That’s why I told him we’d do the bid. It’s not that I want it... hell, it’s not really even big enough for us to bother with. I just don’t want her to get it, and I’m willing to make sure that’s not going to happen personally.”

Kerry nibbled the inside of her lip.

“So. I’m sorry I overrode you.” Dar went on. “It was a snap decision. Probably not a good one. Definitely based on something other than business.”

“Heh.” Her blond companion chuckled softly. “Well, poop, Dar... I was just saying no because I didn’t think you wanted anything to do with going up against them. I thought we were going to just leave them alone. But if you want to go up in their faces, I’m there with you.” She rubbed Dar’s shoulder. “My ego will live.”

Dar’s eyes dropped.

“Of course, we could actually send a bid analysis team, like we would for any other prospective client.” Kerry reminded her. “I have people that do that sort of thing, you know.”

“I know.”

Kerry reached up with a corner of her towel and wiped away the sweat forming on Dar’s temple. “That’s probably what they’re going to do. I don’t think Michelle’s a qualified engineer, and you said yourself Shari was in marketing.”

“True.” Dar admitted. “But it’s not that way for us.” She tilted her head, one brow arching. “We can do this.”

“Sure.”

“I want to do it.” A shrug. “It’s new, it’s different… I’ve never been inside that industry before.” Dar considered thoughtfully. “I like ships.” She pushed a bit of sodden blond hair back off Kerry’s forehead. “Maybe you were right. I’m restless. But you don’t have to get involved – you’ve got a lot on your plate back here.”

Kerry caught her hand and kissed her fingers. “Where you go, I go.” She replied simply.

“Poetic, but you know what I mean.” Dar smiled anyway.

“It’s development of new business, and implementation of new technologies.” Kerry answered blithely. “Both are my job. In fact, it’s actually my prerogative to assign an engineer to the project, you know.”

“That’s true, it is.” Dar hauled herself to her feet. “How about we negotiate my services over a corn muffin? I’m hungry.”

Kerry got up and followed as Dar started out back onto the path. She caught up and bumped her taller partner's shoulder as they strolled along together. "Hm... Can I afford you?" She wondered facetiously. "Maybe I should assign a junior engineer."

"And why would you want anything but the best?" Dar inquired. "I work for Oreos and milk. Can't get much cheaper than that."

"Heh. True." Kerry studied the smooth rock surface they were walking on. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Dar headed for the small café. "Sure."

"Sometimes I'm a little restless too." Kerry nudged Dar to a plastic covered seat, heading herself towards the counter. "My treat, cookie monster. You stay here."

Dar settled into the chair and looped her damp towel around her neck, content to merely watch Kerry as she stepped up to the counter and placed their order. After a moment, she smiled, propping her head up on one fist. "Where I go you go, huh?" She uttered softly. "Y'know, I like the sound of that."

Kerry turned, leaning on the counter as she waited. Her eyes met Dar's, and she grinned.

Dar grinned back.

Today, she decided, she wouldn't wait to see what fate had in store for them. They wanted a show?

She'd give em one.

* * *

Kerry hopped up onto the platform of their booth, waving a greeting to the techs working busily at the consoles. "Morning, guys."

"Hey, Kerry." Mark looked up, then got up and walked over. "Listen, I think the marketing geeks screwed up again. I saw her name listed on another one of those presentations."

"I know." Kerry nodded. "It's okay. I put her on it. Matter of fact, I'm on one too. Anything going on?"

The dark haired MIS manager shook his head. "Nope... well, you guys were starring big time on Tech TV, that's all. That's who the cameras were yesterday. I think they're back." He pointed over her shoulder. "They kept looping that whole thing with Big D holding off the masses at the booth entrance."

“Ah.” Kerry put her hands on her hips and regarded the oncoming news crew. “Well, let’s see how much good press we can get today.” A wry look crossed her face. “Jesus, I never in my life thought I’d hear myself say that.”

Kerry started forward, making eye contact with the reporter in the lead. The man grinned, appreciating the attention, and made a beeline for her. “Here we go.” She muttered under her breath. “You are the Midwestern Republican WASP face of ILS, Kerrison... now let’s let them get a look at the radical gay biker chick considering a tattoo under all of it.”

“Hey!” The reporter hailed her. “Can we get a quick interview with you, Ms. Stuart?”

“Absolutely.” Green eyes twinkled. “Long as you don’t ask me for my hacker card. I left it in my gym bag.”

The reporter laughed. So did the crew. Out of the corner of her eye, Kerry spotted Michelle strolling in her direction, and she perched on the edge of the booth, the ILS logo right behind her shoulder giving a great shot to the cameramen.

“Got anything new for us??” The reporter asked first. “ILS doesn’t usually come across as razor’s edge, but I thought we got a different view yesterday. Want to follow up on that?”

Kerry smiled, crossing her arms. “Yes, I do.” She replied. “Let me tell you what we’ve got planned… but you better duct tape your socks.”

A crowd had gathered to listen in, and she saw Michelle on the edge of it, pretending to study a brochure from a nearby booth. “We’ve gotten a lot of press lately for what everyone thinks is a negative reason.” Kerry said. “Let me tell you what the real story is.”

Michelle turned and stared, looking her right in the eye.

Kerry’s smile broadened, and her gaze turned sea ice cold. *You want a fight?*

You got one.

* * *

Dar prowled through the exhibits, aware of and enjoying the attention being directed at her. After the aborted session the previous night, and her grandstanding at their booth there weren’t many in the room who didn’t know who she was.

She intended on making sure that number was zero before she left. As she peered critically at a new firewall product, however, her cell phone went off. She pulled it out and glanced at it, recognizing the number immediately. “Sheesh. About time.”

Walking over to a small alcove, she answered it. “Morning, Alastair.”

"Holy crap, Dar!"

Dar smiled. "I love starting the day out having made you say that." She announced cheerfully. "Better than a cup of café con leche."

Her boss sighed audibly. "I didn't expect to start **my** morning by seeing you on MSNBC, as the technology headline."

"Was I?" Dar mused. "Didn't even see them there. I thought AP and UPI were giving us a skip this year because technology is 'out'." She glanced casually around, spotting one of their biggest competitors cornering two ILS clients.

"Well, Dar, when you go and announce we hire hackers, and dare anyone to try and hack our network to prove we only hire the best ones…" Alastair replied, in a dry tone. "It's a sound bite they just can't resist."

"Got us attention."

The ILS CEO sighed again. "The only thing that offset the 'attention' was the way you handled it. The camera is fascinated by you." He cleared his throat. "With good reason. Nice suit, too."

"Uh huh." Dar leaned against the woven weave wall, feeling it's faint prickliness through the cloth of her jacket. "So let me guess. The board is freaking."

"Surprisingly, no." Alastair answered. "Actually, they asked me to give you a call and say how pleased they were."

Dar pulled the phone away from her ear and studied with a deeply quizzical expression. Then she knocked it against the wall, making a sharp rapping sound.

"Dar?" Her bosses voice came to her tinnily. "Dar? What's going on?"

"Sorry. I think we've got a crossed line." She replied. "I know I didn't just hear that."

Alastair chuckled. "Well, you know, it surprised me too." He admitted. "But John said he'd gotten a lot of flak lately about how stodgy we are… well, most of us, anyway. He thought this was a damn good boot in the short pants for all those pundits who thought we were mummies in three piece suits."

"Eh." Dar grunted. "Glad they liked it, but it wasn't planned. Damn guy just got my goat."

"Whatever the reason." Her boss shrugged it off. "Something good'll come of it."

Dar watched Peter Quest enter, and cross over to their booth, where Kerry was currently holding court. Michelle was there also, she noted, by her posture not entirely happy. "Kerry's giving an interview right now to TechTV." She commented. "So listen, let me go see if she needs backup. We got invited into a little bid for some new cruise ship it business."

"What?"

"Yeah. " Dar craned her neck to watch the crowd. "Could end up being a decent sized contract."

"Dar! Why didn't you tell me!"

"Because I just decided to do it. Listen, Alastair… let me get back to you. I've got people looking for me here." Dar studied Kerry's body language anxiously.

"Dar, damn it, just talk to me for a minute." Her boss shot back. "Kerry's perfectly capable of doing an interview, isn't she?"

The rough bark drew Dar's attention from her lover. She collected herself and focused back on the phone. "Yes, she is." She replied. "I don't have that many details, Alastair. I got approached by some guy over at American Cruise Lines, who wants to put new tech in all their ships, especially the ones they're bringing over to the states."

"Fabulous!"

Dar sighed. "Yeah, well, we're up against two other companies, including Telegenics."

There was a small silence on the other end of the phone. "Really?"

"Yeah."

Another silence. "Well, we're gonna have to make sure we win this one!" Alastair stated positively. "No taking chances, Dar. I want you to handle this personally."

Dar examined her cell phone again, this time with a bemused look. She poked a button experimentally, then a second, making a small musical interlude.

"Dar?"

"Sorry." Dar put the phone back to her ear reluctantly. "I was just checking something. You know, I do have qualified people working for me."

"Dar, this is no time for that. These bastards have been running roughshod all over us. Here's one major chance to stop their momentum.. this is too important to let someone

else do it." Her boss argued. "I want you to handle it. In fact, take Kerry if it'll make you feel better. She's your protégé."

"Alastair?"

"What?"

"Could you arrange for an ice cream machine to be installed in my office?"

"WHAT?"

"Never mind." Dar almost laughed. "I'll take care of it. I've got a vested interest… did you know who the movers and shakers were in Telegenics? I bumped into them here."

"Ahem." Alastair cleared his throat. "I know they've got deep pockets. Japanese, I believe."

"Michelle Graver, and someone from my past I hate with a passion." Dar informed him. "So yeah, I'll take this one, Alastair. I'll take it and beat them so badly they'll go running off to San Francisco to sell tie dye shirts and tickets to Alcatraz."

It was, apparently, her bosses turn to be nonplussed. He made a sound something like a cluck, then cleared his throat.

"Now, can I talk to you later? The person I hate with a passion is about to start bugging my wife."

Another cluck.

"Bye, Alastair."

"Uh.. bye, Dar. Talk to you later, huh?"

"Sure." Dar closed the phone and clipped it to her belt. Then she straightened her jacket and headed for the booth, wrapping her attitude around her like a dark, weighted cloak.

* * *

"We know where we hold the market lead." Kerry leaned back and crossed her ankles. "Right now, our priority isn't spending time fending off lowball services contract hawkers. We're interested in taking another step forward in providing our backbone customers with the best infrastructure in the world."

"That's bold." The Tech TV reporter remarked. "You guys put a really solid network in place, everyone knows that. But where do you go from there? Only so many bells and whistles you can add before it just becomes more frills customers have to pay for."

“Exactly.” Michelle piped up, her lip twitching at the lowball comment.

Kerry met her gaze evenly. “We don’t bother with frills.” She turned back to the reporter. “What’s the next step? The next step is making the network intelligent. Giving it the sentience to be able to react to changing conditions, and flexible enough to respond to the challenge of new bandwidth requirements dynamically.”

The man stared at her, then cocked his head. “You can’t do that. The intelligence doesn’t exist.”

“Not yet.” Kerry agreed quietly. “But it will.”

“if it’s not just empty promises.” Shari called out. “Sounds like vaporware to me.”

Kerry could have reacted, but she chose not to. She merely gave Shari a brief, dismissive look, and then turned back to one of the men in the front. “Eddie, you know what I’m talking about. You’re a pilot location.”

Thrust suddenly in the spotlight, her client almost melted into a pocket protected puddle. Kerry gave him a smile though, and he blinked at the round, staring eye of the camera and managed a nod. “Uh… yeah.” He stammered. “It was cool. It was like the pipes knew when the program needed more space, and like… um… “ He shrugged. “Gave it to em. Real cool.”

“Wait.. I thought you said it didn’t exist yet.” The reporter eased closer to her. “Didn’t you just say that? She just said that, right?” He asked the audience.

“Right.” Michelle drawled. “That’s what she said.”

Kerry slipped into a nearby console chair and turned the monitor on the desk around so the audience could see it. “It’s not production.” She conceded. “But we’ve prototyped it. Wanna see?”

They were lucky the booth was well built. Kerry suddenly found herself surrounded by curious nerds and a cameraman who seemed more interested in checking out her earlobes than seeing what she was doing on the monitor.

She flexed her fingers, and spared a glance at the part of the crowd unable to fit, giving their rivals a brief, very pleasant, wordlessly wicked smile. “Okay, here’s how it works.” She tapped out a quick command, fishing in her memory for the codes she’d learned from Dar.

Cryptic codes. Dar never made anything obvious or easy, at least on the back end. She permitted the applications people to put snazzy looking front ends on her stuff, but where it counted, it was all grease on the hands and you better know what you’re doing time.

Basic and functional, straightforward yet elegant.

Just like Dar. “Let’s say you have this allocated bandwidth…”

“So what, it bursts. Big deal.” Shari commented.

“Hey, shut up.” One of the men in front turned around. “You don’t want to hear this? Take a hike.” He glanced at Shari’s badge. “Take your petty rivalry and ditch it, sister.”

Ah, chivalry. “Thanks.” Kerry put a hand on her unlikely champion’s arm.

“Don’t thank me yet, lady.” The man warned her. “If this is all BS, I’ll chew you next.”

Bet you won’t. Kerry just… she felt Dar’s presence and knew, if she turned her head, she’d find her partner nearby. “I’m not worried.” She told the man. “Now, where was I? Ah. Yes. Bandwidth. Let’s use a T1 for example.”

Shari started to push forward, but suddenly found herself held back firmly. She turned in annoyance, only to find herself the focus of two chips of icy fury only slightly tinted with blue. “All right, now..”

“If you know what’s good for you.” Dar spoke in an absolute flat voice. “You’ll take the gentlemen’s advice.”

“Okay, you two. Break it up.” Michelle gently eased between them, giving Dar a determined smile. “Time out. We’ll continue the discussion later.” She took hold of Shari’s arm and despite their size difference, maneuvered the larger woman away from their bristling adversary.

“Like she said, it bursts.” The loud man shook his head, oblivious to the drama going on behind him. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is how it bursts.” Kerry released a breath, watching Michelle and Shari leave from her peripheral vision. “It analyzes the traffic flow, and makes decisions on how to route, what to route, and what to prioritize based on the application layer.”

“What?” The man snorted. “At a network level? That’s impossible to deploy large scale. Sure you can do it for one router…”

“It’s not impossible.” Kerry shook her head. “Dar’s working with the hardware manufacturers to burn the essential code into firmware.”

“No way.” The man shook his head.

“Guess you’ll just have to wait and see.” Kerry smiled. “But don’t wait too long. Your competitors won’t.”

“Oooh. Nice sound bite.” The reporter complimented her. “But.. does this really work?”

“It really works.” Dar judged that her body had stopped shaking enough for her to move up onto the platform and join Kerry. Her knees were still quivering a little as the adrenaline slowly drained from her bloodstream, and as she came up in back of her partner, she felt a sudden warmth as Kerry’s hand patted her calf. “Not bad for an old hacker, huh?”

A chuckle went around the crowd. “Can we ask you a few questions about it?” The aggressive man countered, with a visibly higher degree of respect.

“Maybe.” Dar let her hands drop on Kerry’s shoulder. “But if I answer, I might have to kill ya.”

Another chuckle.

So far, Dar decided, so good. Roberts and Stuart several, Michelle and Shari, none.

Let’s just make sure it stays that way.

* * *

Michelle found a corner, and put them both in it. “Can I ask what your damn problem is?” She fumed. “Damn it, I’m trying to build something we can use here. “

Shari glared back at her. “It’s all bullshit!” She said. “Can’t you see what they’re trying to do? We spent how many months putting together a campaign, getting new clients, digging a wedge into them. We’re going to blow it if we let them steal the spotlight!”

Michelle ran her hands through her hair. “Shari.. Shari… you’re not seeing straight. Look at them.” She turned her companion around and pointed. “How in the hell would you like to remove them from the spotlight?”

“You should have let me alone! If I kept at them…”

“If you kept at them… “Michelle gritted her teeth. “You were going to get your clock cleaned any minute. Didn’t you see that look you were getting? You’re the one who used to sleep with her.. I’d have thought you’d clue into that.”

Shari made a disgusted sound. “Psycho.”

“Hey.” Michelle patted her arm. “It’s not psycho to go after someone who’s taking potshots at your SO. You were being obnoxious.”

"I wasn't."

"You were." The shorter woman exhaled. "So just cool it. Go back to the booth and schmooze. Let me deal with those two. At least I can have some sort of conversation with Stuart. Besides.. I want to see whatever it is they're developing – that sounds like technology we can't afford to ignore."

Shari glared at the ILS booth, then she shrugged. "Whatever."

"Just stop antagonizing them." Michelle's voice gentled. "You just keep pushing them, and they push back. ILS could cover our budget in Robert's lunch money. So let's back off, and see what they're going to do next. Last thing we want is for them to come gunning for **us**"

"We can handle it."

"Technologically, no we can't." Michelle told her, with a wry twist to her lips. "Our strength is small, personalized niches, and accounts where we can compete with them based on skinny margins. When it comes to the big silicon… baby, we're recycled glass."

Her taller companion stuck her hands in the pockets of her skirt. "I want to keep them off balance." She said seriously. "Dar likes to control what's going on. She doesn't do well when she has to improvise."

Michelle studied the lanky, dark haired form lurking behind Kerry's seated figure. "I don't know about that." She disagreed. "But at any rate, go on back to the booth and let me do my thing. I'm the nerd, and it'll be up to me to find a way to give us enough technology to get a leg up on these guys while you dazzle them with the savings they'll get."

"Mmph. Okay." Shari finally agreed. "I guess I just sometimes look at Dar, and I see that grotty kid I actually slept with in the depths of my stupid youth. I can't adjust my focus to believe this is actually a CIO of a major IT services company. I just can't."

Michelle patted her arm again. "Well, I first met her that way, so it's easier for me. G'wan." She gave Shari a push, watching as she reluctantly retreated to their smaller, but snazzy looking booth. She started back towards her target, but stopped when Peter Quest stepped into her path unexpectedly. "Oh, hello."

"Well, Ms. Graver, how are you?" Quest seemed quite pleased with himself. "Ready for a challenge?"

"Absolutely." She assured him. "We're very confident we can put together a package for you that'll knock your socks off."

He chuckled. “You’d better.” He turned and indicated the crowd around ILS. “It’s going to take a lot of snaz to knock them off. Hope your lean, mean, cost savings machine’s up to it.” With a grin, he sauntered off, clasping his hands behind his back as he paused to listen to Kerry’s smooth, Midwestern voice.

“Shit.” Michelle cursed. “I thought he said they’d turned him down. What in hell changed…. “She paused in mid mutter, and her eyes narrowed. “Oh, brother. We probably just shot ourselves in the kneecap. Damn it.”

“Did you say something, ma’am?” A passing usher inquired. “Need directions?”

“I need a tranquilizer. Got any?” She responded. “No, huh?” She watched the usher retreat in confusion. “Damn, damn, damn.” Once they’d accepted the bid challenge, her focus had been to defuse the rising tension between them, and even though she hadn’t expected either Dar or Kerry to rise to her offer of employment, she’d counted on the gambit altering their relationship enough to make them feel a little wary of head to head competition.

Quest had been so damn sure. Pissed off, in fact, at how he’d been treated and she’d taken quick advantage of that in arranging their position as the prime bidder on his contract.

So what had changed? Michelle’s eyes narrowed, remembering suddenly Kerry’s altered attitude on coming into the hall that morning. If the blond woman had possessed a ruff, in fact, she was sure it would have bristled. She drummed her fingers on her thigh.

Kerry finished up her presentation, to applause from the her audience. Dar lounged behind her like a well dressed eagle, one hand never far from her partner’s shoulder. As though sensing it, Kerry half turned and bumped the taller woman with her shoulder, grinning at her with almost intimate warmth.

“Dar’s having ‘Hi, I’m an ILS Hacker” shirts made up.” Kerry announced. “I don’t think they’ll be ready before the show ends though.”

“Aww.” The Tech TV reporter chuckled. “That was a real hot question yesterday. Did you do that on purpose, Ms. Roberts? You’ve been accused of being too conservative, you know.”

Both of Dar’s eyebrows hiked. “Me?” She drawled. “Buddy, I’ve been called a lot of things by a lot of people…that ain’t one of them.”

The crowd laughed with her.

“ILS.” The reporter restated, with a tolerant smile.

Dar perched on the corner of the desk Kerry was sitting at, letting both powerful hands rest on her knee. “No, I really didn’t.” Her voice altered, going a touch more serious. “It was something that came out of the discussion we were having. It isn’t something I’ve ever hidden, but on the other hand, it’s not something we put in the shareholder’s folio every year either. It comes down to having the right skill sets in the right places all the time. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don’t, but I would never not hire someone with that skill set just because it might be viewed as radical.”

Kerry took a breath, having run out while listening to one of the longest single bits of speech she’d ever heard her partner make.

“I think most of us view hackers as something bad.” The reporter conceded.

“Sometimes they are.” Dar agreed. “But the really good ones also have a spirit of discovery, and a hunger for gaining knowledge that in my business, sir, is priceless.”

Wow. Kerry blinked. I like that. She cocked her head and looked up at Dar’s profile. “You know, you’re about the best example of that I’ve ever seen.”

Startled, Dar turned and met her eyes, a hesitant grin tugging at her lips. “Thanks.”

The room faded out for a single moment.

Then the air conditioning cycled on, and buzzers next to them went off, and another question was shouted at them from the crowd. Dar swiveled back around and answered it after a brief hesitation, leaving Kerry to rest her elbows on the counter to simply watch and listen.

She spotted Michelle near the corner where two walls joined, also watching, but there was no longer any sign of Shari. Kerry gave Michelle a point for good sense in getting her out of the room, because she’d seen Dar’s face as she’d come up behind her heckler.

Oo. She’d been pissed. Shari’s obnoxious comments hadn’t really bothered Kerry that much – she’d seen much worse in both takeover bids, and competing boardrooms. But she found Dar’s protective instincts charming in the extreme and she was glad to know she could always count on that solid, forceful backup whenever she needed it.

“So that’s really all we have to say for the moment.” Dar concluded. “You guys better go pay everyone else some attention.”

The television lights went out, and the crowd slowly started to disperse, talking among themselves as Dar eased off the desk and dropped into the chair next to Kerry instead. “Ever tell you how much I hate trade shows?” She uttered under her breath.

“Right back atcha.” Kerry smiled pleasantly at the passing throngs. “Boy, will I be glad when five o’clock gets here. Can I interest you in dinner and a beer after that, boss?”

“Mmmmmm.” Dar rumbled low in her throat. “I have a taste for Mexican. Want to go pavilion hopping with me at Epcot?”

Kerry found the irritation of the morning slipping away. “If we can have dessert in France, sure.” She agreed. “And you buy me that beer in Germany.”

Dar leaned back and laced her fingers behind her neck. “You’re on, Yankee.” She agreed. “I’m gonna send our crew back to the hotel once we shut down. Let someone else clean this crap up – I gave the bar manager over there my credit card to get them all plastered.”

“Dar.” Kerry covered her eyes. “That’s so responsible of you.”

A shrug. “They’re not driving.” Her partner replied unrepentantly. “They deserve it. They worked their asses off.” She paused and leaned over, touching Kerry’s arm. “Did you talk to any of them yet?”

Kerry shook her head slightly. “Didn’t think this was the place.” She said. “I could pull them out one at a time… might make for a lot more entertaining afternoon for me than it would otherwise.”

“Do it.” Dar said. “I’ll cover this joint.”

“Let me get my paperwork.” Kerry got up and headed for the locked switch cabinet, where she’d stowed her likewise locked briefcase. “Is there a little room.. oh, yeah, I see it. Over there near the entrance.”

Dar nodded.

Kerry removed a folder from her case and closed the cabinet back up. Then she stood and went to the first of their techs, sitting at one of the smaller consoles. “John? Can I talk to you for a minute?”

The dark haired man glanced up at her, surprised. “Sure.. um..”

“C’mon.” Kerry took him by the elbow, and lead him out of the booth, giving the rest of the techs now very alertly watching her a smile. “You all are next. Don’t worry.”

Dar watched the guys after her partner walked out of earshot from the corner of her eyes. They were plainly bewildered, but none of them looked particularly worried.

Now, if it’d been her doing it…..

“All right, Roberts.”

Dar tilted her head to one side, making eye contact with the aggressive questioner in gray whom she'd thought had moved on to more interesting things. "Ye..s?" She moderated her usual response.

The man stepped up into the booth and flipped a card at her. Dar picked it up and looked at it, noted the Army insignia then flipped it back to him. "Something I can do for you, Captain Mousser?"

The man turned one of the chairs around and sat on it, folding his arms across the back and studying her with bright, alert eyes. "Yeah. Let's talk. You ever play G.I Joe as a kid?"

Dar blinked. "What?"

The captain grinned at her. "Wanna get to play with more cool toys than your company could afford in twenty years?"

Oh… Dar groaned inwardly. *I've got a bad, bad feeling about this…..*

PART 5

KERRY SETTLED BACK IN HER SEAT AND WATCHED A LOADED BOAT DRIFT BY, WITH two giggling girls in the front and two necking teenagers in the back. She found herself wondering if they were all related, and it reminded her somehow of her much younger years.

They'd never gone to Disney World, but they had gone to a couple of smaller thrill parks up north, usually with some of her father's staff to keep an eye on them. Kerry remembered one such afternoon, in the fall, when the crisp air had made everything seem bright and fresh to her. She and Angie had shared a fried dough pastry covered in white powdered sugar, and she'd finally coaxed her sister to come with her on the tall roller coaster.

Angie hadn't enjoyed it at all, she recalled ruefully. She'd ridden the coaster again by herself, but somehow it wasn't the same and by the next year… Kerry dismissed the thought and shook her head, taking a sip of her beer instead.

Dar would go on roller coasters with her, and enjoy them, wouldn't she? "Dar?"

"Yeeeess?"

"How do you feel about thrill rides?"

"Yes." Her partner responded instantly. "They don't have enough of them here."

"Heh." Kerry took another sip of her beer and smirked. "We should try Universal next time. They've got some killer coasters."

“You got it.”

Just the answer she wanted to hear. Kerry exhaled in satisfaction, casting her eyes around their surroundings with an agreeable smile.

They were inside the Mexican pavilion, where the air was cool and dry, and the lighting a perpetual twilight. It was calm and peaceful, and the scent of Mexican spices filled the air. The restaurant was only half full, and they had a table in the corner with a good view of the ‘river’ all to themselves.

It was nice. Kerry crossed her denim covered ankles under the table, glad beyond words she was out of her suit and into the jeans and light t-shirt she was currently wearing.

She’d noticed a tendency in herself lately to have less and less affection for the formal business clothing they wore at the office, and at functions like this. Though she never had minded dressing up, and she was self aware enough to acknowledge the vanity of liking how she looked in the neatly tailored fabric, she’d found herself looking forward to shedding them at the end of the day in favor of the softer cottons and denim they both favored at home.

Kerry let her hand rest on her thigh, smoothing her thumb over the faded blue surface with an absent smile.

Across the table from her, similarly attired, Dar was studying the menu with half closed blue eyes. “Hey.” She interrupted her companion’s ruminations again.

“Mm?” Dar looked past the writing at her. “Are you as glad as I am that’s over?”

Kerry grinned wholeheartedly. “You bet, Dixiecup.” She lifted her beer, waited for Dar to do the same, then touched her glass to her partner’s. “Here’s to a sort of successful trade show.”

Dar took a long swallow before she set her mug down. “I think it was successful.” She tendered her opinion thoughtfully. “For the company. For us it was just one huge pain in the ass.”

“Except the dive.” Kerry reminded her. “And that first day. That was fun.”

“Uh huh.”

“And tonight.” Kerry reached across the table and fit her fingers around Dar’s, giving them a gentle squeeze. “And you know, last night was pretty cool too.”

A twinkle grew in Dar’s eyes.

“So really, it was just the sixteen whatever hours we had to spend in that hall that tanked.” Kerry concluded. “And since it’s tonight, and I know tonight’s gonna be great, to hell with it.” She glanced up as their waiter arrived, giving them both a smile. “Hi.”

“Buenas Noches, Senorita.” The boy greeted her cheerfully. “What can I get for you lovely ladies this evening?”

“Two of these, two of these, and one of this.” Dar pointed at her menu. “And two more of these in a few minutes.” She indicated the beer.

“Got it, thank you.” The waiter took the menu and disappeared.

Dar stretched in her chair, then slid down, extending her long legs under the table. She cradled her mug in her hands, sipping slowly at it as she watched the restaurant fill at a very leisurely pace. Few families, she noted, more couples who seemed to be enjoying the low light, and the pavilion’s romantic atmosphere.

She tilted her head slightly and let Kerry come into her line of sight, admiring the nice gilded tinge the warm illumination brought to her skin. Her partner’s attention was still on the river, so she had a few peaceful moments to simply look at her, and enjoy the view.

Kerry must have sensed it, one hand coming up to fiddle with her hair and riffle it back over her ear on the side facing Dar. It was an endearing bit of self consciousness, and Dar responded to it by dropping her hand beneath the table and finding Kerry’s knee to give a light squeeze.

Her partner turned her head and rested her chin on her fist. “Will you ride on the boat with me after dinner?” She asked.

“If we sit in the back seat.” Dar drawled. “Sure.”

Kerry grinned. “You know, I was just thinking about the last time we were here.”

“Mm.. that food festival was a blast.”

“I had so much fun.” Kerry said. “I hadn’t had that much fun with anyone for years, Dar. Years.” She flexed the fingers of her free hand in front of her, the light catching on the ring on her finger. They’d both suddenly found themselves wearing them, after keeping them on neck chains for so long, and neither of them had really discussed why yet.

Just one morning, she’d put hers on, and later on that day, when she’d been in a meeting with Dar she’d looked up across the conference table and caught the flash as she moved her papers. Weird. Synergistic in a way she didn’t quite understand, but somehow also very comforting.

Maybe they'd find time later to talk about it.

"Years? Me either." Dar replied. "I remember sitting at the Pub looking across the table at you halfway through dinner, and realizing I just never wanted to leave that day."

"Really?"

Dar nodded. "Remember when we were talking about IPv6?"

Kerry chuckled. "Yes."

"I think I fell in love with you right then." Dar smiled easily, laughing when she saw the blush creep up Kerry's neck. "No, that's not really true."

"No?"

"No." Dar rested her head against her fist. "I did that when I saw you the very first time, in that old office of yours." She admitted. "There I was, standing in that doorway, just staring at you like I'd just seen my first multi-partitioned disk array."

Kerry indulged in the memory willingly. "I remember that moment." She murmured. "I remember it being just such a lousy day… after Robert had told me what was going on, and with all those people looking at me.. depending on me to protect them." Her lips parted as a sigh trickled out. "And it was just a lousy day for me anyway.. I'd talked to my parents the night before, and they'd put all kinds of pressure on me to get out of Miami."

"Grr."

"Mm." The blond woman nodded wryly. "Then the whole office gang went to lunch that day, and invited me to go along. I really wanted to, but I stayed there with my carrots instead."

"And met me."

"And met you." Kerry agreed. "No matter how nasty that was, boy… let me tell you, I knew something happened to me the minute I picked my head up and looked into those baby blues. You were the only thing I thought about for the rest of that day." She reached over and tangled her fingers with Dar's again. "My heart jumped every time I saw an email from you come into my inbox."

Dar smiled at her.

Kerry smiled back, and they both dissolved into silent laughter. "We're a couple of moony saps, you know that?"

"Yeah." Dar admitted. "But I don't give a damn."

"Me, either." Kerry straightened up as the waiter returned, putting down the appetizers Dar had ordered them. She handed over her now empty mug, and settled her napkin on her lap neatly as she surveyed the tasty plate of nachos and other small Mexican treats. "Mm. Looks good."

Dar selected a morsel and nibbled it. "Couple things I forgot to tell you before we left."

Kerry looked up from a piled high nacho, caught halfway into a bite. Her eyebrows did the talking for her, rising up sharply in question.

"Alastair called."

"Ah." Kerry swallowed and wiped her lips with her napkin. "Is he mad?"

Dar shook her head. "No." She toyed with the tortilla in her fingers. "Well, he was, but after I talked to him for a while he chilled out. But.. um…"

Uh oh. Kerry could see the fidgets already starting. "What's up?"

Her partner set the chip down and leaned back, resting her hands on the chair arms. "I told him about the ship bid." She said, pausing when the waiter returned with two frosty mugs for them. He set the glasses down and gave them both inquiring looks.

"Everything okay here, ladies?"

"Just fine, thanks." Kerry almost sat on her hands to prevent herself from shooing him away. She waited for him to leave, then scooted her chair closer to Dar. "And?"

"He wants me… wants us, to personally do the bid."

Kerry blinked. She looked around at the restaurant, then focused back on her partner's angular face. "Yeeeah… and? That's a problem? We were going to do that anyway."

"Right." Dar agreed. "It's not a problem… but he pretty much told me he expects me to deliver the contract, no matter what."

Kerry sat back and drew one knee up, circling it with her arms as she puzzled the statement out. "Okay." She finally said. "And this is news, either? Dar, he always expects miracles from you." A crease formed across her brow. "You think it's going to be an issue?"

Dar took a sip of her beer. "Not really, no."

Her companion rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Okay, so what’s the problem, sweetheart??” She asked, in a soft voice. “If that’s not the problem, what is?”

“I got recruited.” The dark haired woman leaned closer, and lowered her voice.

“Again? Jesus! I thought we told that guy to back off, and Michelle said…” Kerry straightened indignantly.

“Not by Telegenics.”

“Oh.”

“By the army.”

Kerry’s jaw dropped slightly. “The army?” She repeated. “As in…the U.S Army? They want us to bid for something?”

With an expression a mix of consternation and embarrassment, Dar shook her head. “No. They want me.” She poked her thumb at her own chest. “As in… enlisting.”

“You?”

“Me.”

“In the Army?” The blond woman goggled at her. “Like.. boot camp and everything?”

“Uh huh.”

Kerry covered her eyes immediately . “Oh, my god.” She peeked through her fingers at her partner. “You have got to be kidding me.” She watched Dar shake her head solemnly. “What did you tell them? When did this happen, Dar? Where was I? I was with you most of the afternoon.. what did they do, follow you into the bathroom or something?”

Dar settled back again, at last allowing a wry chuckle to emerge. After she’d gotten over the shock of the whole damn thing, it had been sort of funny. “I told them no.” She exhaled. “But he was pretty insistent. Made me take his card, and said he’d be in touch. They’ve got some kind of project they’re looking for high level engineers for.”

“Jesus.”

“You were talking to the guys.” Dar went on. “Maybe I can talk him into an outsource. He talked like it was happening right now, though.” She mused.

“Ah.” Kerry picked up a chip and examined it, then munched it thoughtfully. She swallowed, washing down her mouthful with a sip of beer as she pondered. “Right now as in the same timing as the ship deal.”

Dar nodded.

"So that's the problem." The blond woman picked up another chip. "Was he pissed off when you said no?"

A shrug. "Damned if I cared about that… the hell if he thought I'd even consider it."

Kerry leaned over and offered Dar a nacho, smiling a little as her partner took it from her fingers with a delicate grace. "Of course not. Did he really expect you to just drop everything.. your job, your life.. and just join the Army? That's insane, Dar."

"You got that right." Dar licked her lips. "What in the hell would I say to my *father*?? He forgave me being a rebel, forgave me being gay, and forgave me becoming a yuppie. " She shuddered. "He'd never forgive me for *that*."

Kerry dissolved into snickers, covering her mouth hastily.

"Chase my butt down and spank me till I sang Dixie." Dar muttered, shaking her head. She leaned back as the waiter returned with a tray, setting down their main courses. "Never hear the end of it, for damn sure."

She watched Kerry drop her face into her hand, her shoulders shaking in silent laughter and after a moment, she relaxed and accepted the absurdity of it all. 'What a freaking day."

What a day. Kerry let her laughter run down, and then she picked her mug up and extended it, clinking it against Dar's. "Save it for tomorrow. Whatever happens, we'll just make it work, you and I." She let a smile emerge, looking right into Dar's eyes as she said the last few words. "We can do anything."

It was just what she wanted to hear. Dar felt a tension she hadn't even really been aware of slip from her shoulders as she responded to the toast, putting the new problems away for the time being. "Tonight's for us." She agreed quietly.

"For us." Kerry repeated, clinking her glass a third time. "To us."

A strolling guitarist strolled up behind them, strumming a wordlessly romantic tune as the river took yet another set of lovers anonymously downstream.

* * *

Kerry licked the last taste of chocolate off her lips as they strolled around the lake towards the park's entrance. The last firework had gone off overhead, and now the crowds were dispersing, the shops closing up and the park going quiet for the night.

She fit her hand into Dar's as they walked, enjoying the warm comfort as her partner's fingers closed around hers. "Too damn short a trip again."

"Mm." Dar had been humming under her breath. Now she turned her head towards Kerry. "Here, you mean?"

"Uh huh. I want a few more days to play at the water parks, and ride Space Mountain, and go to the Animal Kingdom… there's just so much we didn't get to do." Kerry griped mournfully. "We spent too much time being stressed and aggravated by those jerks."

"Well." Dar tipped her head back, regarding the few, thick clouds drifting over the stars. "We've still got tomorrow. We've got the car, and no schedule to stick to." She replied. "I have to get the official bid proposal from Mr. Skunk, but other than that, I'm all yours."

Kerry grinned in pure reaction. "Hmm… that's okay I guess."

"You guess?" Dar laughed.

"I want more." Her partner said. "I want to spend a week with you here just playing."

"Ahhh." Dar released Kerry's hand, and draped her arm over the smaller woman's shoulders instead. "That sounds pretty damn good to me, Kerrison. Tell you what. Let's put that on the schedule for a couple months from now."

Kerry pouted.

"Right after Thanksgiving. We'll come up here for two weeks, and do it right." Dar promised. "They'll have the Christmas lights up.. it's gorgeous."

"Yeah?" Kerry was willing to be persuaded.

"And not as hot."

Despite the evening's slight breeze, and her light clothing, Kerry was sweating like a pig, and she acknowledged that her wise, Floridian partner might have a point. "Wweeelll…"

"We can make the most of the time we have tomorrow." Dar continued. "We'll leave right from the park as they close… make it home by midnight or so. Okay?"

There was a note in Dar's voice that caught Kerry's ear. "Sure." She curled her arm around Dar's waist. "I was sort of kidding, y'know. I do want to spend time with you here, but I know we've got work to do." Despite the night's warmth, the contact felt good. "I was just teasing."

Dar grunted softly, but didn't answer.

“Christmastime will be really pretty.” Kerry fished a little. “Have you been here then before?”

A nod.

They rounded the edge of the World Showcase, and started through the passage towards the park entrance before Dar spoke up again. “I’m glad you like it here.” She ventured. “I used to think I was being.. ahm….” Her shoulders hunched a little in an embarrassed shrug. “Childish for liking it as much as I do.”

Kerry leaned against her, depending on Dar’s sense of direction to keep them both from heading off into a bush. She’d had three beers, and though she wasn’t drunk, there was a layer of pleasant fuzziness between her and the ground. “Shoot.” She gestured at the thinning crowd around them. “Half the people here don’t have kids as an excuse to be here, Dar. Everyone loves this place. It’s a cultural imperative.”

“Mm. Yeah.” Her companion sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Hang on.” Kerry steered them both towards a still open wagon. “I need some of that.” She pulled Dar to a halt outside the coffee booth and held up two fingers to the attendant. “You want some too, right?”

“Sure.” Dar merely draped herself over Kerry, resting her chin on the top of her partner’s head. “It’s been a long day.” Her eyes lifted to study the woman getting their coffee, noting the brief grin she gave the two of them while the cups were filling. “Bet it’s a longer day for you, huh?”

“Aren’t they all?” The attendant replied wryly. “I think the ones in summer last at least 48 hours.” She sprinkled some powdered chocolate on the top of their drinks and set them down. “But, on the other hand, it’s not so busy. So..”

“Yeah.” Kerry handed over some cash. “It’s got it’s trade offs. Mine included going on Test Track twice.” She grinned impishly. “Worth the sweat.”

“Yeah, but you’re not wearing polyester.” The woman grinned back. “But it could be worse – give me cart vending any day over being a character.” She said. “My friend just got done being Goofy for the day, and he was too tired to even drive home.”

“All relative.” Dar commented.

“Yeah.” The woman agreed. “This job’s pretty cool. I get to see people all day, not like my mom. She works in accounting over at the main building. All she sees is cubicle walls.” She leaned on the counter. “My partner, on the other hand, is really into being one of the landscaping people. Snip snip.”

Partner. Kerry had always liked that term, and remembered the first time Dar had referred to her that way with great fondness.

South Beach. Kerry gazed around her in mild bemusement, watching the crowds saunter past the small table she and Dar were sitting at. They drew looks in return, casually appraising and she found herself more than a little self conscious there in the midst of all the trendies and tourists.

Even the always collected Dar seemed a little wary, her pale blue eyes hidden behind silvered shades as she hitched one denim covered knee up and rested an elbow on it, her sleeveless polo exposing her muscular arms to the sun.

Kerry dusted a bit of pigeon down off her neatly pressed cotton short sleeved shirt and sat a little straighter. "You get down here much?" She inquired, still a little shy in their new relationship. "It's sort of fun."

"Eh." Dar fiddled with the spoon resting on her coffee plate. "Not really. It's okay, I guess. I used to hang out nearby, way back when." She gave the passing crowds a cursory glance.

"Used to?"

Dar's face scrunched up a bit. "In my wilder days." She explained. "When I first figured out what side of the street I was walking on."

Kerry rested her chin on her fist. "You mean when you figured out you were gay?"

The dark eyebrows twitched. "Ah, yeah."

"But not now?"

A sigh. "No. I'm not much into the whole gay scene." Dar said. "I keep a pretty low profile."

Was Dar as ambivalent about that as she sounded? Kerry wondered. She watched several more conventional couples go by, holding hands and laughing. It made her think about home, and Brian, and the times they'd just gone out together with a group of their friends somewhere.

It was different, when you were gay, wasn't it? In places like South Beach, you could get away with that. But not other places. Kerry felt a little pang of irrational loss, as she remembered just how normal she'd

felt in a restaurant or hanging out in the mall with Brian. If he'd put his arm around her, or they'd held hands, no one looked twice.

If she took Dar's hand, people would look twice, Kerry realized. Better they stay, as Dar had said, low profile. No sense in sticking out.

Ah well. She looked over and studied Dar's face instead, contenting herself with the knowledge that she'd found something very special here, regardless of how the rest of the world looked at it. So what if she never got to throw a bouquet?

"Hey! Dar!"

Kerry looked up to see a man and a woman approaching them. They were nicely dressed, and middle aged, and appeared pleased to see her companion.

"Hello, Marge; Charlie." Dar gestured towards the two empty chairs at their table. "Have a seat."

Kerry sat quietly as they came over and sat down, wondering briefly who they were.

"How are you, Dar? Haven't seen you in years. You haven't changed much." Charlie said, with an easy grin. "Has she, Marge?"

"Not at all." The woman agreed. "That should make you feel good, Charlie, since you taught her in high school."

Oh. Ugh. Teachers. Kerry folded her hands on the table and imagined them meeting some of hers back home.

Yikes. She could picture them all staring at Dar with those disapproving eyes, as she introduced her.. friend?

Hm. How did you go about introducing your significant other, if you were gay? As your girlfriend? Kerry's brow creased. Your lover, and have to die from embarrassment no matter how true it was?

"I'm doing damn fine, for a change." Dar answered. "Kerry, this is Charlie, my high school math teacher, and his wife Marge. Guys, this is Kerry Stuart."

"Hi." Kerry gave them both a polite smile.

"Kerry's my partner." Dar went on without missing a beat. "She's from Michigan."

Partner?? Caught by honest surprise, Kerry could only blink for a long moment, looking into the faces of these normal, ordinary middle aged people and wondering what on earth they were thinking of her.

Of them.

"Michigan, eh?" Charlie chuckled. "Boy, are you a long way from home. I've got a cousin in Detroit I've been trying to get to move here for twenty years."

"Where in Michigan, Kerry?" Marge asked. "Have you two been together long?"

And then again, Kerry let out the breath she'd been holding, sometimes you find acceptance in the places you least expect it. "No, not very long." She managed to get out. "And, um… Saugatuck, actually, but I.." Without really thinking, she found herself reaching out for, of all things, Dar's hand. "I think I'm a lot more at home here than I ever was there."

Dar's fingers closed over hers and gave them a squeeze, punctuating the statement quite nicely.

Partner. Kerry squeezed back, feeling her doubts dissolve into the late afternoon sunshine. Yeah.

"Ker?" Dar gave her a nudge. "Sleeping already?"

Kerry wound her arm around Dar's waist, and bumped her back. "Nope. C'mon, partner." She picked up her coffee and saluted the attendant with it. "Thanks. Have a great night." She added, as they turned to continue on their way. "I know I will."

Dar's laughter melded with the music, confirming the night's magic and leaving tomorrow's problems for yet another day.

* * *

It was the dawn of the day after that, as they headed off to work, once again back in Miami.

Dar whistled softly under her breath as she turned onto the causeway. The early morning sun was pouring through the tinted windows, and she was very glad she'd already put in her sunglasses. "How's your back feeling?" She asked her companion.

"Ugh." Kerry had her eyes closed against the glare. "I wish I didn't have clothes on."

Her partner made a small, snickering noise. "I could go for that." She agreed solemnly. "Told you not to fall asleep before dinner yesterday."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Kerry waved a hand at her, wincing as the motion caused a pang from her sunburned shoulders. "It was four o-clock, Dar. Jesus, the sun should have been down by then." She pointed at her companion. "And you could have woken me up, you little rat fink."

"Chitter." Dar made a face, baring her teeth. "I was out doing your shopping, remember?"

"Ermf." Kerry rested her chin on her fist and watched the palm trees go by as Dar skillfully negotiated the morning causeway traffic. "Eh, I had fun anyway." She conceded.

"Me, too." Dar drummed her fingers on the steering wheel lightly. "Damn, I'm tired though." She admitted. "Late night last night."

"Early morning this morning." Kerry countered. "Two hours sleep isn't much to start the day on." She poked Dar in the ribs. "Are we getting too old for all nighters?"

Dar turned into their office parking lot, dodging a delivery truck and scooting the Lexus into a spot near the front of the building. "Depends on what we're doing all night." She gave Kerry a saucy grin. "You could have slept on the way home."

Kerry popped the door open and slid carefully out, shrugging carefully into her jacket before she took hold of her briefcase by its handle and shut the door. She pushed her sunglasses higher on her nose as she circled the front of the car and joined Dar for the short walk to the building entrance.

Yeah, she could have slept. She agreed silently, falling in step next to the taller woman. But it had been more fun to force herself to come up with games to keep them both alert for the long, dark drive home in the small hours of the morning.

They'd meant to leave after dinner, but the lure of the parks had gotten the better of them and they'd ended up closing the place and stopping for ice cream on top of it. They had left after midnight, trading their night of fun for going to work mostly without any rest.

But it had been worth it, Kerry decided. So what if she'd need six cups of Cuban coffee to make it through lunch? She'd gotten the quality play time with Dar she'd craved, enough to hold her for a little while, anyway. "Morning, John." She greeted the security guard at the door.

“Morning, ma’ams.” The guard replied courteously. “Have a great day.”

“Do our best.” Dar muttered, taking her sunglasses off.

The building’s air conditioning was welcome as they entered and headed for the elevators. It was early, and the lobby was still quiet as they headed up, alone in the car as they rode to the fourteenth floor. Kerry stifled a yawn as the doors opened and she stood back to let Dar out first.

They walked down the hall in companionable silence, Dar giving her a pat on the side as they reached Kerry’s office. “Take it easy today.” The dark haired woman said. “If you feel like you need a nap, lock the door and tell Mayte to forward your phones to me.”

Kerry gave her boss an affectionate look. “Only if you promise to do the same.” She answered. “You’re the one who had to drive all night.” She slipped inside the outer door to her office and winked at Dar before she disappeared.

“Mmph.” Dar regarded the polished wood with a bemused grin, before she continued down the hallway to her own office in the corner. “Morning, Maria.’ She greeted her assistant, already at work behind her desk.

Maria looked up in mild surprise. “Buenas Dias, Dar.” She responded. “I did not expect you here today!”

Dar paused on her way to her inner door. “You didn’t?” She frowned. “I did say I’d be back after the trade show, didn’t I?”

“Si, si.” Maria agreed readily. “But I have this notice here that your airplane tickets were canceled, and so I thought perhaps you and Kerrisita were staying for more time.” She held up the slip of paper. “I know Kerrisita likes very much the Disney World.”

“Oh.” Dar relaxed. “Yeah, we got… “ Her nostrils flared slightly. “I mean, we decided to drive up instead of flying. We drove back last night.” She turned and pushed her door open. “Really late last night.”

“Would you like some cafecita, Dar?” Maria called after her knowingly.

“A bucket of it.” Dar dropped into her chair and gave her trackball a roll. “Maybe if I stick my head in and gargle, I’ll last through the sales conference call at ten.” She booted the machine under her desk and leaned back waiting for it to come up.

Pleas for coffee to the contrary, she really didn’t feel that bad. Dar mused, as she removed a folder from her briefcase and laid it open on her desk. Inside was the bid proposal, which she’d taken and stuffed away the prior morning after a brief meeting with Peter Quest.

It was a relatively hefty document, and now she opened the first page, creasing it back to hold it open and reviewing the cover page.

Her PC came up and bleated for her attention. Dar pulled her keyboard over and signed in, rattling in her thirty two character password without hesitation. The machine obediently logged in, but Dar drummed her fingers on the desk, recalling the conversations she'd had at the trade show regarding security.

She punched a button on her phone. After two rings, it answered.

"Computer Center, M… oh, hi boss." Mark's voice came through the phone over the ever present rattling of keys. "What's up? When'd you get back?"

"Couple hours ago." Dar replied. "Tell me again why we don't have biometric security yet?" She asked, opening her mail program and scanning the dark lines as they began to appear.

"Uh.."

"It occurred to me while I was sitting here completely wasted typing in my password that if I got smashed and gave it to someone, I could blow the entire company." Dar said. "Fix it."

"Uh."

"G'bye." Dar hung up the phone and propped her head up on her fist. Most everyone knew she'd been at the trade show, but she had a mailbox full of notes anyway and she clicked on her flagged column to sort them by urgency.

Then she selected all the urgent flagged ones and deleted them. "If you're stupid enough to send an urgent email to someone who has an out of office notification on, you're too stupid for me to answer you." Dar announced to the screen. "Next?" She clicked on the first non-flagged note and opened it, then turned her attention back to the opening page in the bid form.

Scanning the first few lines, she opened her desk drawer and removed the fish food, opening it and pinching out some flakes, then sprinkling them into her fighting fish tank on the far side of the desk. "How are you guys, huh?" She spared the fish a glance as they gobbled their breakfast. "Wonder what it would be like swimming in a tank full of you?"

The red fish blew a bubble at her. Dar gave it an indulgent grin, then went back to her papers. It wasn't the original fish, of course. She'd gone through two changes of them since that first visit to the pet store when she'd allowed herself to be coerced into giving them a home on her desk. But she'd gotten used to them and now she enjoyed having them there to give her something to look at between tasks.

She'd actually paused to look at a snake the last time they'd been in PetSmart, intrigued by it's colors, but had suffered herself to be dragged outside swiftly by Kerry before she could consider adding it to her desktop knick knacks.

Ah well. Dar glanced up at her screen and deleted the first message, going on to the second one before she continued reading the bid. Maybe she should start small, with a gecko. She pulled her keyboard over and hit reply, glancing at her screen as she typed a response to the mail while she continued to scan the bid contract.

The terms were pretty straightforward. Dar hit send, then studied the next mail for a second, before simply deleting it. "Nitbrain." She glanced up as the door opened, her nose twitching at the scent of fresh Cuban coffee. "Ah."

Maria brought the small, silver tray over and set it down, then placed the tiny china cup before Dar. She also put down a saucer on the edge of the desk, and balanced a small pot on top of it. "I brought the extra, Dar. They did not have the buckets."

"Thanks." Dar lifted the cup and sipped it. She eyed the tray, which also had a plate full of delicate, flaky pastries on it. "Those for me too?"

"Si, of course." Maria's eyes twinkled. "Did you have a good time, Dar? I saw Kerrisita downstairs and I think that you did."

Now what, Dar wondered, did she mean by that? She rocked back in her chair and sipped her coffee to give herself a moment to consider, studying Maria's face as she did so. Her assistant's expression was open and warm, however. "Sure." Dar answered. "We had a decent show, and Kerry and I got to spend some time out in the parks. How bad could it have been?"

Maria slid the plate of pastries over. "Everyone here was speaking of the interviews about you."

Dar indicated the chair across from her desk. "Were they? I know I kicked some booty that first day." She admitted, with a grin. "But I think it all worked out… did we look okay on TV?"

Her assistant grinned, and removed an envelope from under one arm, extending it towards Dar. "This was from the television program that was on from there. I watched it with my family. We were very proud of you and Kerrisita, Dar. You were wonderful."

Dar set her cup down and stood, reaching over and retrieving the envelope. She opened it and removed an 8 by 10 photo, setting it down on her desk to examine it. "Huh."

It was a shot of their booth, Kerry sitting at the console giving her presentation and caught in the act of looking right at the camera with an appealingly sweet intensity. Dar had been perched behind her, and in the shot, she was also looking right at the lens, her

arms folded and her attitude one of intimidating protection. "Don't I look scary." She mused.

"No, Dar, you look very pretty!" Maria objected.

"I was trying to be scary." Dar glanced up from the photo. "There were a couple people there who weren't friends." She was a little surprised that Maria hadn't heard. "The company who's been moving in on us in the Southeast… Telegenics?"

"Ah." Maria frowned. "I have heard their name, yes."

"It's run by Michelle Graver, and.. um.." Dar exhaled. "Shari."

Maria blinked in honest surprise. "No, Dar, not that woman?" She gasped. "I cannot believe it. Is it true? After this long, to have her come back and bother you?" She clasped her hands together. "Never have I disliked a person so as I did that woman."

Maria had just become her assistant, as Dar had just become a regional manager when Shari had come back into her life the first time. She had taken the brunt of Shari's caustic comments when she'd discovered who was integrating their account. "Yeah, well." Dar shrugged. "Kerry and I took care of them. But it got ugly a few times."

"Tch."

"Yeah." Dar studied the picture. "She got lucky. I thought Kerry was going to beat her over the head with a Pentium III." She looked up at Maria. "In a way, it almost felt good to see her."

Maria gazed at her. "Because you are happy now." She murmured.

"Mhmm." Dar nodded. "I am. Damned if it didn't burn her." A rakish grin appeared. "We're competing with them on this." She indicated the folder she was reading. "Something that came up during the show."

"A good thing?"

Dar shrugged. "Could be. Contract's probably worth twenty or thirty million, not a major one for us, but it's a foot in the door someplace we're not in right now." She flipped through the pages. "Do me a favor? Throw this on the photocopier and send a set up to legal, and one over to Jose's office."

"Si." Maria got up and accepted the folder. "It is good to have you back here, Dar. People were saying this week that things were too.. how you say it.. too much alike?" She ventured. "That you made things upside down, but that it was a good thing." She gave Dar a smile, and left the office, closing the door behind her.

Dar poured herself another small cup of coffee and took a sip from it. One finger reached out and tapped the photo a few times, and she found herself smiling at the image it presented. "Well." She finally sighed. "I don't know how good a thing it was, but I guess we'll be finding out."

However, remembering how it felt to rise to the challenge was stirring an interest in her she hadn't felt since she'd finished her network project. Doing the second generation of the technology was all right, but Dar hadn't found the same interest in it she had with the original.

Now this, on the other hand, this was brand new.

Dar captured a pastry and popped it into her mouth, chewing it with piratical gusto and blowing a few crumbs onto the surface of her desk.

* * *

Kerry finished scribbling her name for the nth time, running her eyes over the purchase order before she lifted it and tossed it into her outbox. She had her head resting on one hand, and now she straightened up a little, hissing slightly as her shirt pulled over her sunburned back. "Son of a biscuit."

Her phone rang. She checked the display, then pressed the button readily. "Hey, Col."

"Hey girl." Colleen replied. "You up for lunch?"

Lunch? Kerry glanced at her watch. "Sheesh.. didn't realize it was that late. Sure." She pushed the rest of the paper pile back into her inbox and eased herself to her feet. "Let's go downstairs. I don't really want to put my jacket on to go to the dining room."

"Works for me." Colleen agreed. "Meet you by the elevators?"

"You got it." Kerry hung up and stretched cautiously, then circled her desk and headed for the door. She passed Mayte busy at work, and drummed her fingers on her assistant's desk. "Going for lunch. MT. Hold the fort down."

"That I will for sure." Mayte answered. "Can I take what you finished?"

"Eh." Kerry leaned on her knuckles. "There isn't that much. I signed some of the outstanding PO's, and reviewed that integration report. You're welcome to whatever's there. I'm expecting a call from the LA office about some new circuits, and keep an ear out for Dar. She's in a conference call on steroids with the overseas groups."

"Will she need to take hold of you, Ms. Kerry?" Mayte asked.

Kerry's lips twitched slightly at the phrasing. "You never know." She said. "If she needs me, she'll probably SMS me, but she might need some of the statistics I've been working on for the past two weeks. They're on my desk, in the infrastructure folder. Okay?"

Mayte nodded and smiled, giving Kerry a little wave of her fingers as she left the office.

* * *

"Hey, Col." Kerry spotted her friend as she exited the elevator, joining her as they walked across the lobby to the cafeteria. "How's it going?"

"Busy." Colleen glanced at her. "You got some sunburn, eh?"

"Mm. Fell asleep in the sun yesterday like a tourist." Kerry admitted. "We were just decompressing after the trade show."

Colleen laughed. "Yeah, we saw the film from that, bucko… boy, did you two ever make the news. What got into Dar? She's been so laid back lately, it was a real shocker to see her come out swinging like that."

"Mm." Kerry took a tray and handed one to her companion. She smiled at the attendant, and reviewed her options. "Chef salad, please, and a large ice tea." That taken care of, she turned to Colleen while they waited for their orders. "I think Dar just took the opportunity to get the brand out there. You know." She half shrugged. "It's what the trade show's for, Col."

"Oh, I know." Colleen took her plate and nudged Kerry forward. "And a great job of it she did. Duks was all over lauding her up and down the hallways, he was."

They walked to a table up in the raised level of the café, which was mostly empty and by some unwritten convention generally reserved for those members of the upper floors who didn't like to eat in the upstairs dining room. Kerry set her tray down and eased into a chair, resting her elbows on the table top with a grimace.

"You did get burned, huh?" Colleen chuckled.

"Oh, yeah." Kerry took a sip of her ice tea, and reviewed her chef salad. It wasn't something she usually fancied, but the hot weather made the thought of hot food unpleasant, and the salad was a nice mix of greens and protein calculated to keep her alert through the afternoon. "Between that, and not getting any sleep last night, I'm in great shape today."

"Y'know, Kerry, there is such a thing as too much information." Her friend poked a fork at her.

"Hm?"

Colleen snickered at her. “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Kerry speared an egg slice and popped it into her mouth. “No.” She shook her head. “Anyway, aside from all that, it was a good trip. We may have gotten some leads on some new business.”

“Hey, Ker? Can I ask you a question?” The redhead lowered her voice. “About something I heard?”

Yeesh. “Um.. sure.” Kerry replied. “If I can answer it, I will.”

Colleen edged a bit closer. “Someone said one of those new rival companies causing us grief is run by some old flame of Dar’s. Is that true?”

Kerry felt a set of conflicting emotions surge through her. On one hand, she’d known Colleen for a long time – longer than she’d known Dar, for that matter. The redhead had been her neighbor in Kendall, and someone she’d spent a lot of time with, time she remembered fondly.

However, she hated gossip. Everyone knew she hated gossip. She didn’t want to indulge in gossip with Colleen, but she also didn’t want her friend to think she was evading the question.

She put her fork down and leaned on her forearms, pinning Colleen with a direct stare.

“Uh oh.” Colleen made a face. “I haven’t seen that puss in a while.”

Kerry paused, one eyebrow lifting as she allowed herself to be sidetracked. “What puss?”

“That ‘I’m gonna tell you what you’re gonna die of’ puss.” Her friend replied with a frank grin. “Sorry, Ker. Did I hit a sore spot?”

“Do I have a face like that?” Kerry rested her chin on her hand. “I know Dar does.”

“You do. It’s cuter, but it’s still ‘back off.’” Colleen admitted.

The blond woman went back to decimating her salad. “Well, yeah. I guess… you know how much I hate BS talk. Especially about her.”

“I know. Everyone knows.”

“It’s true.” Kerry said. “Telegenics is run by Michelle Graver, who I told you about.” She chewed a moment, then swallowed. “And her partner is someone called Shari Englewood, who once upon a time Dar was involved with.”

"Mm." Colleen grunted. "That kind of thing is always rough. Did you have a hard time with it?"

"Me?" Kerry sounded surprised. "Other than wanting to strangle both of them for harassing Dar? No. Why?" She picked up a carrot and munched it.

Colleen fiddled with her fork. "Well, I mean…" She glanced around, then shrugged one shoulder. "Doesn't the fact that there was someone before you make a difference to you, Ker? I know it did for me, the last boy I sent packing. We bumped into his former girlfriend at Quiznos, and after that.. out the door, boyo!"

Kerry frowned, her eyes shifting to one side as she considered the thought.

Did it matter to her? "Um.. no, actually, it doesn't make a difference to me at all, especially since I know Dar's never had a steady, happy long term relationship before ours." She replied honestly. "Why should the failures bother me any, except for feeling bad for Dar, I mean?"

Her friend leaned back and wiped her lips with her napkin, just watching Kerry in silence as she finished off her salad. There was little resemblance between the woman she shared a table with now, and the neighbor she'd first met right after Kerry had moved to Florida.

Kerry had always been fun to hang with. She was smart, and had a gently sly sense of humor, and generally had just seemed like she enjoyed living her life, despite the problems Colleen knew she was having with her family.

But meeting Dar had changed her profoundly, in Colleen's eyes. She remembered very clearly the night Kerry had come home from Disney the first time, so obviously lost in the throes of her first real love she'd worried that her friend would drown from it.

No one, Kerry had once told her, had ever loved her for her. Never. Not until she'd met Dar, and Colleen had been really sort of scared for her at the beginning with that. She'd been in so deep. "You two are really solid. That's cool." She commented mildly. "Listen, sorry if I stepped into it, Ker. You know I just care about you."

Kerry's shoulders relaxed under their silk covering. "Yeah, I know." She said. "Boy, we were both ticked off at them big time though. You know what we did?" Her expression turned impish.

"What?"

"You've been to EPCOT, right?" It was Kerry's turn to lower her voice.

"Sure."

“Living Seas? The big aquarium?”

“With the sea cows, sure.” Colleen agreed amiably.

“Dar and I went diving in it.”

The redhead leaned forward. “On purpose?”

Kerry chuckled, draining her ice tea glass. “Yes, on purpose.. it’s a program they have. Anyway, we went diving.. and one of the tank windows is in the restaurant.”

“Yeap.. I’ve been there. Nice view.” Colleen nodded.

“Yeah well.. Shari and Michelle were having dinner, and we scared the living poop out of them and made them spill all over themselves.” Kerry told her. “It was hilarious. We were laughing so hard we almost drowned.”

Colleen covered her eyes. “Ye gods and little fishes, Kerry. You could have been exiled for that!”

Her lunch companion grinned. “It was worth it. They were being such jackasses… you know, their company actually tried to recruit us?”

“You?”

“Both of us! They had no idea who we were!” Kerry replied. “And then Michelle tried to buy us off… it was just a mess.”

“Jesus, Kerry.” Colleen’s eyes widened. “You think they targeted us deliberately? Because of Dar? Is that why they went after our accounts?”

Kerry made a vague shushing motion with her hand, as several more people joined them. “I don’t know… no, I don’t think it was that. I think it’s just how big we are, and we’re a good target. If anything…” She hesitated. “If anything, I think they’re scared of Dar.”

“Huh.” Her friend exhaled, taking a sip of her drink. “Well, after that show this week, they fair well should be! Besides that, my friend, did you see yourself on television yet? I taped it.”

“Eurf.” Kerry grimaced.

“C’mon upstairs.” Colleen invited her, with a grin. “You didn’t see what Dar was doing behind you either, I’m thinking.”

“Uh oh.” Kerry got up, carrying her tray to the back table. “Tell me she was making faces.”

"Weeeeell…"

Kerry groaned again, and followed her out.

* * *

"All right, Javier." Dar was leaning back in her chair, her feet propped up on her desk. "How much is it gonna cost me?"

"Now, Dar…" The South American sales director laughed. "You know that I have never, never asked for more toys for us down here, have I?"

Dar had her eyes closed, as the very late afternoon light tinted her windows. "No."

"Bueno. Now, if we had this capacity available here, in Buenos Aries, I could do very good things with it. I have sold very well the systems you have given me, no?"

"Yes."

"So?"

Dar wiggled her toes, thinking in silence.

"Is it my fault that so many people saw your cable show?" Javier asked, after a pause. "I have had six enquires just today. People are very nervous about security."

"So they want to hire hackers?" Dar asked, bemusedly. "What exactly does that say about Brazil, Javier?"

"Tccha."

"I'll review it, see what we have available to put in there." Dar conceded. "We might have an installation I can divert over there, depends on the projections due next week."

The inner door to her office opened, revealing a very tired, very bedraggled looking Kerry. Dar waggled her fingers at her, giving her a wry look when Kerry trudged across the carpet to her desk and sat down on it, draping an arm over Dar's legs.

"Excellent! That is very good news, Dar. I will let my people know." Javier sounded smugly pleased. "So tell me, is every hacker in the world now trying to get in our gates? That was quite a braggadocio you made – I hope it does not come back to haunt you."

Dar leaned over and clicked her mouse, pulling up a monitoring screen and reviewing the results. She studied it briefly. "Eh." She eventually grunted. "Hits are up, but it's nothing

overly scary." She turned away from the screen, preferring to gaze at Kerry instead. "We only have the one big website that exposes us, and that's strictly outside the network."

"Really?" Javier murmured.

"Sure. Our entire class A's masked, so the first problem hackers have is finding us. We just don't have a lot of things hanging out there, and I've got four redundant pipes servicing the website with logic that detects DOS on any link and runs an automatic squelch on the inbound packets." Dar said. "So yeah, they could probably pick at some of the smaller accounts we have, but only the ones where we don't provide the infrastructure. The network itself's pretty locked down."

There was a respectful silence. Then one of the international sales managers cleared her throat. "Lovely. Can we have a side of chips with that, then, Dar?"

Dar chuckled. "I'm glad the show's having some positive spin. I'll try to make sure we don't get backlash if some little nerd creep gets lucky." She conceded. "Anything's possible, but Mark's been working on some new routines that incorporate some of the intelligent logic I'm using for the network upgrade, so we'll see."

Another bit of silence. "Have a pint of Guinness with that one." The same manager piped up. "Never mind the chips."

There was a round of laughter on the phone. Kerry moved her arm and started massaging her partner's bare feet, too tired to really concentrate on what was going on. Of course, the managers on the phone didn't understand one word in ten Dar was saying on the technology side either, but that wasn't really unusual.

"Listen, I'm outta here, folks." Dar said. "I got in from the show very late last night." She reached over and laid a hand on Kerry's thigh, stroking it lightly. "I've got the action items you all asked for – I'll let you know what my decisions are tomorrow."

She let the conference line go after a round of goodbyes, and focused her attention on the blond woman sitting on her desk. "You look toasted."

"Get the jam and butter, Sinbad." Kerry admitted. "I want you, a hot cup of tea, a shower, and our waterbed. Can you make that happen, boss?"

Dar removed her legs from the desk top and sat up, reaching down for her shoes. "You bet your crumbs I can, my little Yankee toast." She said. "How about we order in something light from the beach club, and go crash?"

Kerry toddled over to where Dar was sitting and collapsed over her, draping her arms over her partner's shoulders. "Lead me."

Dar managed to get to her feet, and turned Kerry's sprawl into a full body hug, careful not to squeeze the blond woman's sunburned shoulders. "C'mon." She picked up her briefcase and nudged Kerry towards the door. "I'm so fried I was about to agree to whatever they asked me on that damn call."

"They'd probably never have realized it." Kerry hooked her fingers inside the waistband of Dar's skirt as she followed her from the office. It was quiet outside – Maria had left a short time before, and the normal sounds of evening were starting to settle over the building. "Euu…they're shampooing the carpet tonight."

Dar's nose wrinkled, as the scent of wet, dirty, mildewy carpet wafted down the hallway. "Definitely time to leave." She punched the button for the elevator. "How'd your afternoon meeting go?"

"Ick." Kerry had her eyes closed, and she was leaning against Dar as they waited for the elevator. "I have some whacky problem going on in Vancouver we can't isolate. Two T1's that are supposed to be redundant, but one of them keeps tanking and the other one just sits there dumb and happy like a frog and refuses to pass traffic unless we bounce it."

"Uh huh." Dar mused, guiding her engaging limpet through the doors, and then punching the bottom floor button. "HSRP set right?'

"Duh."

Dar watched the floors count down. "Metrics checked?'

"Baaap. Try again."

"I'm trying to be helpful here, Kerrison."

"I know, but we've checked all that." The blond woman yawned. "Three times. I even had the vendor in to verify the configs."

The elevator reached it's destination, and opened to release them. "Why are you involved in that anyway?" Dar asked suddenly, as they crossed the lobby. "Since when does a VP Ops troubleshoot the WAN links?"

"Since it's been going on for four months and no one's fixed it yet." Kerry replied. "And because they figured if they brought it to me, I'd scratch my head over it for a while then take it to my boss the CIO who also should not be troubleshooting WAN links, and that was the best chance they had to resolve the problem."

"Hmph."

Kerry was glad to see the Lexus' looming bulk with its promise of comfortable, though overheated leather seats. She put her briefcase in the back and climbed into the passenger side, easing back gingerly as she closed the door. "Ow."

Dar glanced at her. "Aloe time for you." She remarked.

"Yeah." Kerry turned on her side and rested her head against the seat. Her eyes went to the console between them, however, as Dar's cell phone rang. "Want me to get that?"

"Sure." Dar had her hands full starting the car and getting the air conditioner running before they both melted.

"Hello?" Kerry opened the phone and listened. "Oh, yes. Hello, Mr. Quest." She gave Dar and look and received one in response. "No, she's here. Hang on."

Dar took the phone and hit the speaker, then set it down on the console as she put the Lexus in reverse. "Yes?"

"Hello, is that Dar Roberts?"

"Yes." Dar repeated, slightly louder. "You got me in transit, Peter. What can I do for you?" She asked. "I spent some time with your requirements today but I'm not done reviewing them."

"Yeah, well, the plan's changed." Quest said. "We have to pull out of New Zealand early, so we're going to do the finishing in the states."

"Ah." Dar felt a pang of disappointment. She'd been looking forward to visiting that part of the world. "And?"

"Port of Miami made me an offer. I'm taking two cargo piers for two months down there. I figured that would work for you, at least, if not the other two companies bidding."

"Peh." Kerry snorted softly. "We could practically swim there from our house."

"Matter of fact, that's right around the corner from our offices." Dar replied. "Won't those other guys think you're giving us an advantage?"

Quest laughed. "I'm sure they will. But you can handle the heat, or so I've heard." He cleared his throat. "We also moved the timetable up. The two ships'll be at the port in two weeks. Be ready, or don't bother."

He hung up, leaving a distinct echo in the car.

For a few minutes, they drove on in silence. Dar flipped the phone closed and curled her fingers around it, tapping the leather cover with her thumb while Kerry chewed the inside of her lip thoughtfully. Then they both started talking at the same time.

"There's something.."

"Something's not ri.."

"Ahem." Dar coughed slightly as they stopped and fell silent again.

"Hm." Kerry agreed, pursing her lips. "Did you do any background research on these guys?" She asked. "Want me to run our standard client query?"

Dar felt slightly embarrassed. "Yeah." She slowed down to make the turn into the ferry terminal. "I didn't get around to that. I um.." She paused, then scowled as she pulled into a lane. "Shit."

Kerry just circled Dar's wrist with her fingers and rubbed the back of her hand.

"Guess my brain was fried, after all." Her partner said. "I didn't even think of doing that, Ker."

"Neither did I, until right now. Don't sweat it." Kerry told her. "I'll kick it off from the house while we're waiting for dinner." She saw the muscles in Dar's jaw line relax a little. "Bummer about the trip though."

"Mm." Dar gazed through the windshield. "But it does give us an advantage." Her head turned, and she looked at Kerry. "And I'm going to take every inch of it."

Kerry patted her hand, and smiled. "Our turf." She agreed.

"Our turf." Dar repeated softly, her eyes narrowing. "Yeah."

* * *

There was a thing, Kerry discovered, as being too tired to even want to eat. She was curled up on the leather couch in the living room, Chino in a ball at her feet as she faded in and out as Dar rambled around the condo.

She wanted to just let go and zonk out. She could already feel that sense of disassociation she often got just before she fell asleep and the only thing that was keeping her from giving into it was the fact that she was listening to Dar talk to herself as they waited for their soup and half sandwiches to be delivered. "Dar." She finally uttered a protest. "Let it go."

The light scuff of bare feet against the marble answered her, coming closer along with the sense of Dar's presence until a warm knee bumped up against her elbow. Instead of opening her eyes, Kerry just reached out and wrapped her arm around Dar's leg, tucking her hand back under her arm and issuing a small, contented grunt.

Dar didn't speak. Instead, she claimed the edge of the couch and sat down next to Kerry, pressing against her body and draping an arm over her.

Ah. Delightful. Kerry wrapped her body around her partner's and sighed. One eye cracked open as Dar started rubbing her back with the tips of her fingers. "See? Now isn't this much better than you bitching at yourself?" She nibbled at Dar's thigh.

Dar made a noncommittal sound. "I wasn't really bitching." She protested. "I was just going over the balls I let drop in the last few weeks."

Kerry started biting the inside of her partner's leg, drawing a squawk of protest from her. "Bitch tomorrow." She said. "It's chill time." Her bites became kisses as Dar leaned over and enfolded her in a hug. She squiggled into a more comfortable position, emitting a happy gurgle as Dar laid her head down on her shoulder.

"If I fall asleep like this, I'm toast." Dar said, with a sigh. "I'm sorry, Ker. I get overtired and my brain goes into spin cycle."

"Yeah, I know."

"Maybe we should have just gone for some Frosted Flakes for dinner."

"Maybe." Kerry admitted. "But we didn't, and sure as Sunday drivers, the second we nod off they'll be knocking at the door."

"Mmph"

Kerry peered idly at the large screen television across the room. "Oh look." She said. "An iguana." Her brow creased. "What's it doing with it's tongue?" Dar shifted her chin and licked Kerry's ear, making her sneeze in surprise. "Nothing I couldn't do if I really worked at it."

"Oo."

With another gentle sigh, Dar put her head back down and a half closed her eyes, seemingly forgetting her previous self admonishment. Kerry reached up and fit her hand inside her partner's, pulling it close to her heart, taking the moment of quiet contemplation where she found it.

A brisk knock came at the door. Dar snorted in soft laughter, before she hauled herself to her feet and headed to answer it. Kerry remained where she was, wiggling her toes a

little against Chino's fur as she watched her partner admit the beach club's waiter with his tray, giving him a brief grin as he passed her to set it down on the dining room table.

"Gruff." Chino's head popped up as she belatedly sensed an intruder.

"Shh." Kerry admonished her. "It's just Carlos. Be nice, or you won't get a cookie."

The Labrador curled up and put her muzzle down on Kerry's ankle, keeping a brown eagle eye on Carlos as he neatly arranged their dinner on the table.

Dar signed the check and hustled the waiter out, turning and leaning against the door as she regarded Kerry's still curled up form. "Want me to bring it over?"

"Hm." The blond woman drummed her fingers on the leather, then she pushed herself upright with a sigh. "If it were anything but soup, I'd say yes." She pulled the first chair on the right side of the table out and sat in it, waiting for Dar to come over and take the one at the head next to her before she started sorting out the food. "So, what do you think that whole change of schedule thing means, Dar? It sure seemed abrupt to me."

Dar looked up from buttering a roll. "Can we talk about fishing?"

Kerry blinked in mild surprise, hesitating in the act of pouring herself a glass of juice. "Um.. okay."

Her partner shrugged a little. "You told me to drop it, remember?"

That's right, she had. Kerry finished pouring her drink and fell silent, opening up her container of soup and poking at its contents with her spoon. Her eyes burned and she lifted a hand to rub them, ending up resting her head on her hand as she made a half – hearted attempt at eating.

For a few minutes, it was so quiet the sound of the air conditioning cycling off and on was almost startling. Kerry could almost feel it as a physical thing between them and she wondered when it would start to become uncomfortable.

Her eyes burned again, and she rubbed them, setting down her spoon and finding little to interest her in the relatively inoffensive soup as her stomach rebelled at consuming it. "Well, crap." She broke the silence with a small sigh. "This is going nowhere."

The sudden feel of Dar's fingers running through her hair was indescribable. Kerry looked up from her plate to find bloodshot blue eyes looking back at her with gentle weariness.

"To hell with the food." Dar said, getting up and shoving the plate back. She held a hand out to Kerry invitingly. "Let's go to bed."

Kerry abandoned her noodle soup and stood up, taking Dar's hand and following her to the bedroom without any further thought. The room's soothing blue tones made her feel better almost at once, and she stood facing Dar as they set about undressing each other with the beginnings of a smile on her face.

Dar saw it. She unbuckled Kerry's belt with one hand, and laid the palm of other one on Kerry's cheek, rubbing her cheekbone with the edge of her thumb. The blond woman's eyelashes flickered, then she tilted her head up and returned Dar's gaze with one of her own.

It was amazing, that look. Dar wondered if Kerry really knew just how much of her feelings showed in it. "Sorry I'm being a cranky curmudgeon." She apologized. "I'm expecting that time of the month tomorrow."

The gentle upturn of Kerry's lips became a genuine smile. "Thought you said you never had PMS."

"You said I never have PMS." Her partner corrected. "I said I do, but no one ever notices the difference."

Kerry finished unbuttoning Dar's jeans, sliding them over her hips and letting them fall to the floor. She took a step forward, out of the shirt Dar had just finished unfastening her from and put her arms around Dar's waist. "You can be cranky, honey." She muttered. "If you don't mind me being completely wasted and way oversensitive to it."

Dar tossed Kerry's shorts into the corner and turned, easing them both down into the waterbed. She rolled over with Kerry still in her arms so they ended up in the middle, the warm surface enclosing them comfortably as she tugged the blanket up over them.

"Mm." Kerry had her eyes closed. "This feels great."

"Yeah, it does. Damn, I'm glad tomorrow's Saturday."

"Me, too."

They lay there together for a while, this time comfortable in the quiet surrounding them. Kerry began to surrender to the lethargy rolling over her, leaving her just enough energy to rhythmically trace the centerline of Dar's belly in time with the slow breathing under her touch.

A soft clank caused her to crack one eye open again. "Dar?"

"Mmhmn?"

"Did you hear that?"

“All I can hear is sheep.”

Kerry’s other eye opened. “Sheep?”

“Counting themselves to save me the trouble.”

Another soft clank sounded clearly from the living room, accompanied by a clatter. “Dar.”

Her partner selected the edge of the covers and neatly pulled them over Kerry’s ears, patting the tops of them solicitously. “Better?”

Kerry grasped the covers and pulled them down. “No, because it doesn’t keep me from wondering what the heck is going on in our living room.”

Dar pulled the covers back up. “Kerrison, use logic, wouldja?”

Kerry frowned.

“We left food on the table, and a Labrador in the living room. What do you think is happening?” The dark haired woman said. “It’s a puppy buffet.”

“Ew.” Kerry’ s nose wrinkled. “Dar, she’ll get sick.” With a groan, she rolled away from the center of the bed and started to climb out, only to be captured and pulled back into a tangle of arms and legs. “Dar!”

“Shh.” Dar wrapped her up in the covers and snuggled back down. “Relax. She’ll be fine. It’s just soup.”

Kerry heard distinct sounds of slurping. “She’s going to make a mess.”

“She’s got a tongue, she’ll clean it up.”

A laugh started to work it’s way through Kerry’s chest. “Honey… c’mon.” She tried to untangle herself. “That’s fine for my soup, but yours had clams in it – she’ll be chewing them for days.”

Dar refused to let go. “Chino! What are you doing, you bad girl!” She turned her head and lifted her voice, projecting it into the next room. “Stop that!”

She was rewarded by the clatter of toenails, and shortly thereafter a Labrador jaw was resting on the edge of the waterbed, innocent brown eyes gazing at her adoringly. “Chino. What were you doing?”

Their dog’s ears cocked, and she tilted her head to one side in question.

“Very nice.” Kerry sprawled over Dar’s body and removed a noodle from their pet’s black nose. “But you are so busted.”

“Gruff.” Chino licked her fingers happily, sneezing after a moment and ejecting a piece of clam onto the blankets just under Dar’s nose.

Dar observed the particle briefly, and then sighed. “Guess we better lock up the chow, huh?”

Kerry started to climb over her. “Stay, I’ll go.”

“Nu uh.” Dar rolled out of bed, taking Kerry with her as she rolled a little too far and lost her balance, ending them both up on the floor. “Gah!”

“Oh, Jesus.” Helplessly giggling, Kerry could only lay there, stark naked, as Chino licked her face with enthusiasm. “Chino, stop.” She saw Dar grab hold of the waterbed frame and pull herself upright. “Bah.. bah, honey, stop!”

Dar sat down on the carpet and took hold of the dog’s tail, hauling her backwards. “Chino! Stop that!”

“Groowf!” The Labrador turned her attentions to her taller owner.

“Your mommy only likes my tongue licking her.” Dar instructed the dog solemnly, shaking one long finger at her. “So you keep that big pink thing inside the teeth, hear me? Or else.”

Kerry snorted and rolled over, hiding her face in the curve of her arm.

Dar raked her fingers through her hair, surveying the jumble of bare limbs spread out before her. “This is turning into the kind of story other people tell about you when you’re drunk.” She mourned. “And I haven’t even had a sip.”

“Hehehehe.”

“Laugh it up, Yankee.”

Kerry pushed herself up from the floor and got to her feet, brushing bits of carpet lint off her bare skin. “C’mon.” She offered Dar a hand up. “At this rate, it’ll take both of us an hour to get the soup in the refrigerator and then maybe.. **maybe** .. we can get some sleep.”

“Or at least go to bed.” Dar released the dog and grabbed Kerry’s hand. “Lead on, McGruff.”

“Maybe I should get you a beer.”

“How about a milkshake?”

“Settle for some chocolate syrup?”

“Hmm.”

PART 6

KERRY LEANED ON THE KITCHEN COUNTER, WATCHING THE PALM TREE FRONDS outside wilt in the stifling heat as she waited for the water in a nearby pot to boil. The air conditioning puffed gently against her still slightly sore shoulder blades through a layer of soft cotton, and she moved a little to one side to avoid the pressure, but had little ambition otherwise to do much else.

It was nearly noon. They'd just woken up a half hour earlier, and having gotten through coffee and a handful of Advil for Dar's obligingly timely cramps they had settled in to enjoy a peaceful, lazy Saturday. It felt good to just be hanging out, here in their own space, without work or trade shows to intrude on it.

Kerry turned and surveyed the kitchen, taking in the touches she'd added over time to soften it's Spartan functionality. A set of imported cooking pots hanging over the stove here, a well oiled, interlaced wood chopping block there… she took pride in her ability to produce edible meals for them, and enjoyed having plenty of tools to do it with.

Also, the stainless steel refrigerator doors were now dotted with colorful magnets, brought back by both of them from various airports they'd either passed through or been stuck in, and the tiled backsplash displayed plates likewise acquired from all over. Kerry especially liked the one nearest the stove, a tacky hunting scene that featured a near perfect replica of their often naughty but much beloved pet, Chino. She ran a finger over it with a smile, then turned to dump a package of pasta into the now boiling water.

"Hey, Ker?" Dar's voice drifted in from the living room.

"In the kitchen." Kerry responded.

“Did I leave that damn folder in there?”

Kerry pushed away from the counter and turned in a circle, studying the available surfaces. “No.” She called back. “Thought you stuck it in your briefcase.” She wandered out of the kitchen and headed for the corner where they’d both thrown their laptop cases the previous night. “I’ll get it.”

Caught in the act of getting up from the couch, Dar collapsed back into it and curled up again. “Thanks.”

With a tug, Kerry retrieved the somewhat battered folder and crossed the living room, setting it down on the coffee table. She took a seat next to her partner’s feet, reaching over to tweak a toe under it’s pristine white cotton sock covering. “How’s the belly?”

Dar narrowed her eyes and growled.

“Hmm.. well, if it’s any consolation to you, I’m getting that kinda achy feeling myself.” Kerry admitted. “Which doesn’t really surprise me, because we’re usually right on time together.”

Dar growled again, but flexed her toes against Kerry’s thigh. “Least we’re both miserable at once.” She conceded. “You think that’s what made the past few days even more stressful than they were anyway?”

Hm. Kerry considered the question. She wasn’t often bothered by PMS either, though she did have a tendency to be just a bit more emotional a few days before. Add that to the stress of dealing with Dar’s first girlfriend and Michelle Graver, challenging them at every step? “Yeeeah, maybe.”

The socked feet flexed against her thigh again, and Kerry gave them a pat before she leaned forward and got to her feet. “Let me go get our lunch.”

Dar poked her with a toe as she eased past, and smiled at the pink tongue stuck out in her direction. Then she returned her attention to Quest’s requirements, wincing slightly as a cramp twisted her guts. With a soft grunt, she tossed aside the initial document which she’d already gone over, and drew out the set of technical specifications, easing down to put her head on the couch arm as she started to leaf through the pages.

She spotted several big problems straight off. The hulks Quest had gotten his hands on were old as the hills – two of them were steamships, for god’s sake, and the rest were retired passenger liners he’d dug out of mothballs somewhere.

That meant, she realized, they had zero infrastructure. Most had been built before computers, and the idiot was wanting to outfit them with the latest available technology. “Jesus.” Dar clucked under her breath and shook her head. “Jackass wants to put laser video in the Merrimac.”

“Did you say something, sweetie?” Kerry called from the kitchen.

“Nah.” Dar replied, lifting her head a little as she sniffed spicy pasta sauce in the air. “Just going over this stuff.” She went back to reading. Quest wanted a computerized hotel system, a point of sale, connection to the damn Internet, and – Dar had to look twice. Voice over IP telephony. “Jesus.” She repeated.

“No, just me and some noodles.” Kerry appeared at her side, bearing two steaming bowls. She set them down on the coffee table and resumed her perch at Dar’s feet. “Parmesan?’

“Uh huh.” Dar watched as a small snowstorm of freshly ground cheese settled on the surface of her pasta. “Are those little meatballs in there?”

“Yup.” Kerry dusted her own bowl with the cheese. “Last time I made sauce, I froze some.” She set the grater down and handed Dar a fork. “So what are you cussing about this time?”

Dar stabbed herself a forkful of pasta and lifted it towards her mouth, pausing as the utensil came into her close line of focus. She pulled it back a little and peered at the sauce covered bits, then she selected the last one on the fork’s tines and pulled it off, holding it up to examine it. “Kerrison?”

“Mm?” Kerry grunted around a mouthful.

“Why am I eating a disk drive?”

Kerry swallowed and wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Ah.” She reached over and pushed the bit of pasta towards Dar’s mouth. “My guys gave me a thank you basket for helping out at the con. It was full of nerd things, including a bag of nerd pasta shapes. I figured you were the perfect person to share it with.”

“Ah.” Dar ate the disk drive, and studied the forkful of pc’s left to consume. “Feels sorta cannibalistic, but all right.” She chewed the mouthful and went back to the report. One finger pointed at a paragraph, and she pushed it toward Kerry as she swallowed.

Kerry edged over on the couch and started reading. Her brow creased. “Dar, am I reading right – he only wants one set of cables run?”

“Uh huh.”

“Does he realize what that’s going to cost in equipment?”

“He wants it on a shoestring.”

Kerry slowly ate a mouthful of her lunch. She swallowed before she answered. “Dar, you couldn’t do that on Paul Bunyan’s shoestring.”

“Telegenics says they can.” Dar replied. “They told Quest fitting it into his budget was a no brainer.”

A snort answered the statement. “Obviously whoever told him that didn’t bother to use a brain then. Dar, you know damn well doing this right’s going to cost.”

Yes, she knew that. Dar worked her way through her lunch bowl, eying the familiar shapes all the while. “Well, let’s wait till we see the real deal.” She said. “Maybe it’s not as bad as the description seems to show.”

Kerry tapped the edge of her fork against her lip. “All right. Sounds like it’s all we can do.” She conceded. “Maybe when we lay the plans out, he’ll realize what it is he’s asking for, after all, it’s his job to try and get everything he can for as little as possible.”

“Eh.” Dar flipped to the next page. “His timeline’s impossible, too.” She frowned. “How long did he say it would take those ships to be hauled here?”

“Two weeks?” Kerry recalled. “Can they do it by then? Wonder why he had to pull out of New Zealand.. damn, I was looking forward to going there.”

Dar set her bowl down. “You know, that’s a damn good question.” She pulled her laptop over and rolled onto her back, putting the machine down on her stomach and typing on the keyboard. “Did he mention where in New Zealand the ships were at?”

“Auckland.” Kerry leaned over and watched the screen with interest. “You think he was lying?”

Dar keyed in a request, and waited, scanning the responses as they flicked across the monitor. “I think outfitting six ships means big bucks for somebody. Now why…” She drummed her fingers on the keys. “Why would ‘somebody’ throw away those kind of big bucks?”

Kerry rested her elbow on Dar’s knee and looked at the list of shipyards now displayed. There were only six, but though she racked her memory, she couldn’t recall Quest mentioning any of the names. What had he said? Just that the ships were somewhere in Auckland, being worked on.

Dar called up one of their info parsing agents and typed the names of the companies into them. “Now.” She paused as she got to the intelligent language question field. “How would you tell if a shipyard suddenly lost business?”

“Not stock.” Kerry mused, as Dar shook her head. “Layoffs?”

“Too soon.”

“Newspaper stories?”

Dar nodded. “Let’s see what that gets us.” She typed into the field. “Contract+/= canceled+/=loss+/=business (includes) shipping.” Then she hit enter, and watched the small running dog in the corner dash merrily away. “Okay. “ She half turned and set the laptop back down on the table. “So maybe that’ll answer your question from last night.” She put her head back down on the couch arm and picked up the report again.

Kerry extended a fork full of pasta towards her partner. “Maybe.” She agreed, smiling as Dar closed her teeth over the offering and removed it. “I’m going to throw the stuff in our overnight bags into the washing machine. Got anything else you need to go in?”

“Thought it was my turn to do that this week.” Dar gazed at her. “You did it last week.”

“Mm.. yes, it was your turn.” Kerry put a fingertip on her partner’s chin and lifted it slightly. “But it seems some little nerdy gremlin got all my office clothes dry cleaned for me when I wasn’t looking. I don’t suppose you have any idea how that happened, huh?”

Dar smiled charmingly at her.

“And somehow my car got mysteriously washed and waxed while we were gone. Any ideas?”

The charming smile grew wider.

“Uh huh. I thought so.” Kerry leaned over and gave her a kiss. “So I’m going to go grab your dirty clothes from the closet and get those suds going.” She pushed off Dar’s hip and stood, collecting the dishes from the table before she sauntered off towards the kitchen.

Dar let her hand fall on the forgotten papers, taking a moment to enjoy the simple feeling of warmth inside her left by the look of indulgent affection in Kerry’s eyes. It even eased the cramps some, or at least she convinced herself it did as she stretched out, then curled her body up again into the dark leather.

She took a moment to look around the living room, which for so long had just been ‘the condo’ to her. Plain white walls, and mostly monochromatic furniture had graced it since she’d moved in, providing her with a pleasant, if unremarkable place to throw her car keys at the days’ end, and lay her head down for those long tropical nights.

It had never been her home. But now it was their home, and from the colorful Mexican throw rug over the love seat to the framed photograph of them both on entertainment center it had become a part of her in a way she’d never thought it would.

That was why, she acknowledged in silence, she'd gotten so wired being around Shari. It had brought back to her memories of what her life had been like for so long, and had provided a reminder of just what she had to be thankful for now.

She never wanted to take that for granted. She never wanted Kerry to take it for granted either, though she'd never gotten the feeling that her partner felt that way. It was more an impression she got that Kerry considered their relationship a natural part of her life that she expected to remain that way forever.

Kerry had no doubts. Dar didn't have any doubts about Kerry, but the last week had made her wonder if she didn't still have some doubts about herself.

Which, frankly, sucked. She'd thought she'd gotten past that. It was aggravating to say the least feeling again those tiny darts of insecurity pricking at her.

Dar sighed. Maybe it had been PMS. Certainly today, now that she'd started, the doubts seemed to have vanished completely, replaced by a feeling of rock solid stability she'd become used to over the last year and more.

Kerry strolled across the tile in front of her, heading for the bedroom. "Crocodile Hunter marathon this afternoon.. you up for it?"

Dar grinned, releasing a happier sigh. "Sure." She hesitated. "Hey, Ker?"

"Yeeesss?" Kerry paused in the doorway, leaning back into the room.

"Thanks."

"For the laundry?" Kerry laughed. "You forgot the last time I did it I washed your whites with my burgundy sweatshirt and we both ended up pink in inappropriate places."

"I like my pink bra." Dar remarked mildly. "But thanks anyway. I don't' really feel like standing over the machine today."

Kerry winked. "I figured. No problem." She disappeared into the bedroom. "It'll be my turn soon enough. You can get me hot chocolate."

Chino wandered over and climbed up onto the couch, circling twice before she settled down at Dar's feet, resting her muzzle on Dar's ankle.

"It's a deal." Dar murmured. "Best deal going, matter of fact, right Chino?"

"Gruff."

* * *

Kerry heard the soft ding of mail arriving into her inbox. She swiveled around in her chair and rolled her trackball, glancing at the sender and the subject and stifling a curse. "Oh, pooters." She clicked on it anyway and read the text. "Crap, crap, crap."

Finishing, she sat back in her leather chair and frowned at the pc, sitting inoffensively on the center of her office desk. "I can't believe I forgot about the damn party tomorrow night." With a sigh, she hit the intercom button on the phone. "Dar?"

She released the button and waited, but after a minute there was no answer. She pressed the button again. "Dar?"

Still no answer. Kerry got up and circled her desk, emerging from her office on the second floor of the condo and starting down the staircase. She peeked over, but the living room was empty, Dar's laptop sitting mutely on the coffee table spinning its screen saver in lonely silence. "Hm."

She continued down the steps to the lower level, poking her head into Dar's office and finding an equally empty space. "Where are you, hmm?" She turned and realized Chino wasn't around either. "Ah." She headed for the patio, spotting a blond Labrador tail near the two person swing they'd hung out there.

"Hey." Kerry slid the door open and stepped out, grimacing slightly at the contrast between the cool dry air inside and the warm, languid sea breeze outside. "Listen, I fubar'd."

Dar looked up in surprise from the book she'd been reading. "You?"

"Me." Kerry walked over and joined her on the swing. "I.. um… committed us to a party tomorrow night that I completely forgot to tell you about." She studied her bare feet for a moment, before she glanced sideways at her partner. "Fubar."

Dar let the book close over her hand and studied her penitent appearing swingmate. "Hmmm… what kind of party? Don't tell me it's the condo association again."

"No."

"Goood.. I'd have to whip you with soggy Ramen noodles." The blue eyes twinkled gently. "Let me guess.. the church?"

Kerry nodded, watching the expression on Dar's face carefully. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Nah." Dar displayed her book cover. "Conversation there's gotta beat this. I've seen drier material about heuristic switching but not by much."

Relieved, Kerry rested her head against Dar's shoulder. "Remind me to get you some nice, trashy bodice rippers for your afternoon time outs, honey. You'll go blind reading this stuff." She tapped the book. "But I really am sorry it slipped my mind. I said yes right before we started talking about leaving early for the trade show and.. well…"

Dar put her arm around Kerry and pushed against the railing, rocking them both gently in the light breeze. She wasn't that fond of parties, but the church ones were pretty harmless, and she'd taken a liking to a few of the more regular members. "Maybe I'll even stop having cramps by then. Son of a bitch, I got it bad this month."

"Want to go for a walk? Maybe it'll help."

Dar tossed her book down and stood up, taking Kerry's hand as they opened the gate and walked down the steps into the small patio garden with Chino frisking happily at their heels. It was late afternoon, and the breeze from the sea had started to cool off the air a little, bringing the scent of the salt water with it.

They made their way down to the beach and turned to walk along it as the incoming tide chased their steps. Chino found a piece of driftwood and pounced on it, lifting it and returning to her owners with an air of excited triumph.

"Whatcha got?" Dar reached out and took the stick, examining it before she tossed it ahead of them. "Good girl!"

Chino raced after it, living up to her breed as she retrieved the stick and plowed back towards them.

Kerry was content to watch, her hand still tucked into Dar's as they walked along the mostly deserted beachfront. They got a glance or two, but most of the residents knew them and she returned the smiles and half waves of the few still laying on neatly toweled chaise lounges, soaking up the sun.

Dar swerved a little, taking them into the surf up to their calves. Chino bolted into the water, barking at it as the surf surged back at her.

"Chino, you silly dog." Kerry scolded their pet.

The Labrador bounded over to her and shook herself vigorously, showering both of them with cool sea water. "Gruff!"

"Bah." Dar shielded her face with her free hand. "Chino, you little…"

"Bitch?" Kerry supplied, with a chuckle. "Yes, she is, isn't she? G'wan, Chi.. get the stick!" She pointed to the shore. "Get it!"

Chino bounded away to retrieve her prize, leaving her owners to walk out of the surf in peace.

"She's so cute." Kerry sighed. "She gets away with everything, and she knows it." She added. "She has us wrapped right around her little paw."

Dar chuckled softly.

"Walking helping any?"

"No." Dar managed a wry grin. "But the two of you are keeping my mind otherwise occupied, so the end result is all right." She told her partner. "I feel better."

"Mm.. well, that's what your family's for. To make you feel better when you feel crummy." Kerry squeezed her hand around Dar's lightly. "So I'm glad we're doing our job."

Dar didn't answer, but her face lit up visibly at the words, and her step took on an extra swagger as they enjoyed the late afternoon sun. They passed the beach club, exchanging lazy waves with a few people seated outside and continued on along the south side of the island.

It was quieter on this end. They faced the terminal island where the cargo ships loaded up with containers, bound for South America and beyond. Dar shaded her eyes and then pointed to one side of the cargo area, a large, open space with several cranes standing slack and waiting for work. "Think that's where he's talking about."

Kerry reviewed the spot. "Dar, it's really twisted that these damn things are going to be almost in view of our bedroom."

Her partner chuckled softly. "Remind me to point that out in a loud voice if we bump into our friends during the process."

They watched a cargo cruiser move stiffly away from the dock, chugging out down the channel towards the cut, shepherded by two hard working tugs.

"I think…" Kerry mused, as they continued their walk, heading around the back side of the island. "I think we should throw a big party. Invite all our competitors over to break the ice, kinda, since we are the.. um.. hosts.. so to speak."

Dar eyed her. "Invite them all to our condo?"

"Uh huh."

"You really mean, invite Shari and Michelle to our condo so they can drool all over it and be jealous of our home life and good taste?"

"Uh huh."

Dar ruffled Kerry's hair with her free hand, feeling around on the crown of her head. "Careful, Yankee.. your horns are showing." She teased. "Michelle's got some class. I'm sure they live in a nice place."

Kerry solemnly stuck her tongue out. "Not as nice as ours." She said. "I looked up the address just to prove out my excruciatingly thorough WASP upbringing." Her green eyes glinted slightly. "But I was serious, Dar. If we're going to do this, I don't want to spend two weeks being miserable like we were in Orlando. Let's take the high road, and let them be jerks if they want to be."

Dar pondered in silence as they rounded the curve and started up the northern edge of the island, which bordered the cut. Watercraft were moving through the channel, even including two daredevil jet ski riders courting disaster as they wove through a stately parade of sailboats. Chino trotted along behind them, and now that the sun was starting a serious tilt towards the horizon a cooling breeze sprang up and made the walk far more pleasant.

"Well, let's see what happens." Dar finally concluded. "After all, they might not come down here. I'm gonna guess most of the bidders will send an engineering team, not executives in silk and pumps."

Kerry accepted the tacit victory with a gentle smile. "Bet you ten bucks they'll be here." She countered. "Because they know you will."

"We will." Dar corrected her. "I think Michelle respects you."

Kerry's face wrinkled up into an expression of distaste. "You know something, I sort of liked her, way back when. I thought she was pretty cool, the way she made that pick the first time, and even after she messed around with those snapshots and came to the office, she seemed pretty straightforward."

"Mm." Dar stepped over a piece of driftwood. Her cramps seemed to be easing after all, and she was finding the walk increasingly enjoyable. "Yeah, I didn't have a problem with her that first time. I wasn't crazy about her sending those photos to Alastair, but I figured she probably was pretty stung when I blew her off that night at her hotel."

A smile played around Kerry's lips. "The night you came over to my apartment." She murmured. "Ah, yes. I remember that night. I'm surprised I didn't stain that beige carpet green I was so freaking jealous."

Dar looked at her, caught in the middle of continuing her original thought. "You were?"

"Dar." Kerry laughed, rolling her eyes. "Oh, Jesus, please. Tell me you didn't see it written right over my face."

"Um." Her partner cleared her throat gently. "Actually, no.. I was too busy staring lustfully at the half naked, sweat covered woman on the carpet to notice what color she was."

Kerry looked at her, both eyebrows hiking up. Dar responded with a sexy grin, triggering a now far more rare heated blush that rapidly colored the blond woman's face. "Euhr… you do say the nicest things sometimes, honey." Kerry rubbed her cheek with one hand, and then she glanced up. "Really?"

"Really." Dar replied. "It was quite a feeling – after being hit on all night by someone I wasn't attracted to." She tucked Kerry's hand into the crook of her elbow. "Funny how I used to like playing that game. I was in a meeting the other month with a half dozen new reps from that consulting company we integrated .. didn't know me, didn't know about us.. they started that sniffing around crap and I called a break and went out and put this on." She raised her right hand, displaying her ring. "End of that problem."

Startled to have her unasked question answered in such an unexpected way, Kerry merely stayed silent for a few steps. Then she released a small puff of air, almost a laugh. "So that's why." She mused. "I remember you telling me once how you felt that people formed certain ideas about other people based on whether they had a ring on or not."

Dar nodded. "Yeah." She agreed. "I damn well wanted them to think that about me." She glanced at Kerry's hand tucked in hers, it's ring glinting softly in the sunlight, then she met Kerry's eyes. "Yeah."

"Me, too." The smile on Kerry's face left no doubt her feelings. "You know, Dar, we should do these little walk and talks more often."

A wry chuckle spilled from Dar's lips. "Sure beats cramps." She looked up. "Hey.. hey… Chino!!!"

"Oh no." Kerry's eyes widened. "No! C'mere, girl.."

Chino spotted a duck and bolted after it, spurring her owners into a mad dash after her, leaving laughter in the air behind them.

* * *

"Here you go." The short, curly haired man behind the makeshift bar handed Kerry a beer. "Careful, it's a little foamy."

"Thanks." Kerry inhaled some of the sharp tasting fizz before it poured over her hand and moved to one side out of the way of the crowd.

The church was mostly full, it's homey interior buzzing with low conversation and the occasional spurt of laughter. Kerry dodged around a few chatting groups and headed for the low couches near the back wall where Dar was lounging inside a circle of people they were more familiar with.

At least the party was casual. Kerry eased past a man in shorts so short she wondered why he really bothered and took the cushion next to her partner on the couch. "What'd I miss?"

"Oh, Lori and I were just filling Dar in on the latest church news, you know." A tall redhead told her. "This and that.. we keep trying to lure her in the choir."

Kerry settled against Dar's warm body. "She'd be good at it." She agreed, ignoring the mock glower from a pair of nearby baby blues. "You should see her singing in the shower. It's amazing."

"I'm sure we'd love to. Invite us over." Lori shot back, with a mischievous grin. "Right, Rachel?"

"Absolutely! Kerry, you little charmer! What a sweetie you are!" Her partner chortled. "When's the viewing?"

Kerry felt Dar start to snicker. "Well, I walked right into that one, didn't I?" She admitted, toasting them all with her beer. "Sorry ladies, I don't share." A reluctant grin appeared. "The view, or anything else." She bumped Dar with her elbow. "And you stop laughing!"

"Ahem." Dar cleared her throat. "Honestly, my work schedule just won't permit me getting involved in anything that regular." She told Rachel, the redhead who was also one of the principals in the choir. "And I don't commit to things I can't guarantee I'll do."

Rachel slouched in the easy chair across from them, swinging one denim covered leg over the arm of it. "Yeah, yeah. But all work no play…" She let the words trail off suggestively. "Workaholics are so uncool these days." She shook her finger at Dar.

An amused glint appeared. "I play." Dar replied in silken voice. "I just save all my playtime for one person." She turned her head and looked at Kerry, catching the quick grin and returning it.

Their attention was drawn by a sudden noise nearby and they all turned to see two women facing off against each other, hands grappling at cotton shirts and faces twisted in anger. "Oh crap." Lori rolled her eyes. "Here we go again." She lifted her voice. "Would you two cut it the hell out and grow up?"

"You keep the hell out of this, bitch!" One of the women yelled back at her.

“Who are you calling bitch, you ugly piece of shit?” Lori got up. “Take your fucking drama out of here, yeah?”

“Lor, sit down.” Rachel grabbed her by the back of her jeans and hauled her down into the chair. “Leave them alone.”

The short, dark haired woman glowered at the two arguing women, who were now ignoring her, busy with shoving each other around. “Assholes.”

“Hey, ladies.” David, one of the church workers hurried over. He was a middle aged man with salt and pepper hair, and a neatly trimmed beard. “C’mon, c’mon now.. it’s a party! Let’s be festive!”

Dar slid her arm around Kerry’s shoulders and idly watched the entertainment unfolding before her. The two women were on again, off again partners who always seemed to be arguing about something. Dar suspected they both had some real problems and were just using each other to keep their minds off them, but she’d never gotten interested enough in the situation to find out.

That sounded so damn callous, Dar acknowledged, but the two women were nasty to most, unpleasant to the rest, and quite probably deserved each other.

“Kiss my ass, fag.” The shorter of the two women snapped at David. “Just leave us alone.”

“Hey, c’mon now.” David held his hands out. “We don’t to get nasty.” He warned. “So let’s just calm down, okay?”

“Calm this.” The same woman shot him a bird.

Kerry looked at Dar. Dar looked back at Kerry. “Do we want to get involved in this?” Kerry asked.

“Well.” Dar set her bottle of Yoohoo down. “Either we get involved, or we find a different party. I’m not in the mood to listen to this much pointless cursing.” She got up and dusted her faded jeans off, stepping around Lori’s chair and heading towards the battleground with a resigned sigh.

Kerry got up and followed, trying not to see the anticipatory grins on the faces of their friends. She caught up to Dar as she reached the outskirts of the disturbance, which had now draw a small crowd.

The two women were short and heavy set, one with close cropped hair and the other with long braids threaded with beads. The short haired woman also had an eyebrow ring, and a beautiful tattoo of a parrot on one bare shoulder.

“Okay, people.” Dar stopped just short of them, putting her hands on her hips and inclining her head slightly to look down at them. “Do what the man says and take it outside.”

David sidled up to her immediately, more than pleased to find a ready ally. Kerry stopped just a step behind her partner, folding her arms over her chest and waiting to see what would happen next, satisfied to watch the two other women with a sharp eye.

Not that she was at all worried. Dar could more than take care of herself, of Kerry, of David, and probably of everyone in sight without breaking a sweat. In her red tank top, with her burnished tan and solid muscularity, she had presence that was undeniable.

The shorter of the two women turned to confront Dar. “Did someone ask you to get in our business?” She asked.

“Yes.” Dar replied in a calm voice. “ You did, by acting like a pair of rutting jackasses. So knock it off.”

“Or?” The woman asked, sarcastically. “You gonna beat me up?”

Kerry stepped forward, about to intervene. Dar beat her to it, though, and added a tiny bump to her shoulder.

“No. You’d enjoy it too much. I’m just going to cancel all your credit cards and get your driver’s licenses revoked if you don’t get the hell out of here and stop being such a pair of pitas.” Dar replied. “Scram.”

The short woman’s eyes narrowed, and she tensed, but after a second she just shrugged and turned away. “Whatever. Asshole.” She flicked her long nailed fingers as she sauntered off, pushing her way through the crowd as she headed towards the door.

Her partner glared at Dar as well. “You think you’re so hot. Why don’t you go back to your fancy island and leave the real people alone. We were here a long time before you were.”

“Okay.” Kerry finally got a word in edgewise. “So let me get this straight. You guys cuss and punch each other and mess up everyone’s fun here… and you’re mad because we don’t like to watch?”

“Stupid asshole.”

“Kerry Stuart.” Kerry corrected her mildly. “And if you’re that much into people watching you, why not join the theatre group? I think they’re doing MacBeth this summer.. sounds right up your alley.” She took a step forward, putting herself between

Dar and the other woman. “You know what I think? I think you just like to be the center of attention, so that’s why you always act out at these shindigs.”

“Oh yeah, sure.” The woman replied. “Kiss my ass.”

“Never in a million years.” Kerry took a swig of her beer. “I have better things to kiss.” She heard a faint sound come from Dar, and knew if she turned around she’d see very hiked eyebrows. “So now that the show’s over, why not go get a drink and be normal like the rest of us.”

“Great idea.” David chimed in. “C’mon folks, let’s get the music started again. She’s right. Show’s over.” He gave two men next to him a nudge, then signaled the woman standing near the stereo system to turn it up. “Enough, enough, okay? It’s a party. Everyone chill.”

Kerry turned and bumped Dar with her head, pushing her back towards the couch. “Gwan, you high falutin' rich chick, you.”

Dar chuckled under her breath, allowing herself to be herded back to the couch as the crowd slowly broke up and moved way. They settled back down together, giving Lori and Rachel a twinned roll of the eyes as a few others gathered around, watching them with casual interest. “What’s next?” Dar asked. “Unisex twister?”

Lori settled into a half unstuffed chair next to the couch. “You guys are too funny. Like Batman and Robin.” She accepted the cup Rachel handed to her, after a brief sojourn to the bar. “But those two and their little pod always had a problem with the two of you.. I’m not really sure why.”

“Our bank balances?” Kerry suggested, with a grimace. “Yeah, like we come in here in silk and pearls, flipping our minks.” She glanced down at her somewhat worn aviator pants, with their odd assortment of pockets, then indicated Dar’s faded jeans. “What’s up with that?”

Lori shrugged.

“I guess some of them figure.. “ Rachel hesitated. “You know, we’re always raising cash for the place, maybe they think if you have more, you should just give it over.”

Dar snorted. “We donate.” She lifted a hand. “They want more, they can come do my job and then they can take what they want. Screw that.”

“That’s right.” Kerry said. “We’ve never said no when David’s called us.”

“Hey!’ Rachel edged back a little. “I didn’t say that’s what we thought. I just said maybe that’s what they think, you know? I mean, your paycheck’s your own, yeah? Like all of

ours is." She shrugged. "Some people just get really jealous when they see someone who has stuff they don't."

"Give me a break." Dar picked up her Yoohoo and took a sip.

Kerry sucked at her beer, a look of wry cynicism crossing her face. "Isn't that the truth… I've had to deal with that since I was in frilly Pampers." She sighed. "But you know what, my family just has money. I earn mine."

Lori perched on the arm of the chair her partner was sitting in. "What exactly do you guys do, anyway?" She asked, tactfully steering the conversation down a different track. "Investment banking?"

Dar settled back and extended her legs out, crossing them at the ankles. "We're nerds." She explained briefly.

"Nerds?" Rachel laughed. "You're kidding me. Really?"

Kerry nodded. "Really. Just regular, ordinary, working nerds." She added. "Besides, we do our part here. I'm working with those kids every week, and Dar.. " She glanced at her partner, who smiled faintly. "Dar shows up and looks great, and doesn't get mad at me for dragging her in here all the time."

"Heh." The dark haired woman responded.

"You could join our community action group." Lori suggested. "We've got a lot of stuff planned for this year.. lobbying and all that. Bet you're good at it."

"Bet I'm not." Dar said. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Both women across from them looked uncomfortable at that, Kerry noticed. But it was the truth, and she knew Dar generally refused to sugarcoat her answers. "Honestly, our schedule doesn't permit either of us a lot of slack in doing organized things." Kerry said. "We never know when we might have to travel, or get stuck late taking care of a problem."

"Okay, just a suggestion." Lori said. "I'm getting another beer. Want one?" She asked Rachel.

"Sure."

Lori got up and left. Kerry used the slight pause to finish up her beer, and note that Dar had done the same with her Yoohoo. "Want another one?" She indicated the bottle. "Or something stronger?"

Dar fiddled with the bottle, then handed it over. "Nah. I'll stick to this. Thanks."

Kerry eased off the couch and gave her a pat on the knee as she planned a path through the growing crowd towards the bar.

Rachel waited for Kerry to vanish, then turned her attention back to the tall, dark haired woman on the couch. “Nerd, huh?”

Dar plucked at the seam of her denims. “Yeah.”

“Uh huh.”

* * *

“Know what I think?” Dar sat back, letting the car’s air conditioning cool her off.

Kerry was curled up in the passenger seat, looking tousled and somewhat aggravated. “What?”

“I think we need to find a new church.”

“Ungh.” Kerry rested her head against the leather seat back. “Tell you what. Give me tomorrow off, and I’ll find us a new church. How’s that?” She shifted, grimacing at the cramping that had manifested with aching suddenness, giving her an unwelcome, yet welcome excuse to leave the party.

Dar glanced at her in perfect sympathy. “Sweetheart, you can have the day off any time you want.” She replied. “I know your area’s covered.”

Kerry grimaced again. “You know what’s not covered?” She asked mournfully. “I forgot to stop and pick up supplies at Walgreen’s.” Her eyes met Dar’s. “And you know I can’t handle the kind you use.”

Dar put the car into reverse and commenced backing out. “Guess we’re going to the drugstore then.” She said. “S’all right. I need some stuff too. We’re low on Advil…”

“Ahhhh!!!” Kerry squeaked.

“And I need some batteries for my digital.” Her partner finished. “So put the seat back and relax, and we’ll get ourselves taken care of.”

Kerry took advantage of the offer, releasing the seat and tilting it back about halfway. She closed her eyes and left the driving to her partner, idly listening to the soft new age music coming from the speakers. “They really were kinda sucky today, huh?” She said. “I wonder why? We never had them act like that before. Did we do something I don’t remember?”

Dar was silent for a while, drumming her thumbs on the steering wheel as she made her way through the surface streets towards the drugstore. “I don’t know.” She finally muttered. “It just pisses me off that they act like we owe them something all the time.”

Did they? Kerry pondered the idea. “Well, most churches do assume their memberships will do stuff like bake cookies and put money in the plate, Dar.” She conceded. “I know ours did at home. Big time. Not that anyone ever said anything outright, but boy.. if you skipped a week, the looks you got.”

Dar made a rude noise.

“Well, you know, they have to raise money somehow.” Kerry felt herself in the odd position of defending a faith she often was at serious odds with. “They have to keep the place up, and pay the pastor, and do community programs.. the money has to come from somewhere.”

Dar pulled into the parking lot and parked in front of the drugstore. She set the parking brake, but left the car running. “Yeah, I know.” She opened the driver’s side door. “It’s not that part I mind. They do good stuff especially for those kids you mess with. It’s the other stuff they expect us to do.” She got out. “As if just because we’re gay, we have to be revolutionaries about it. Not my gig.”

Kerry watched in bemusement as her partner shut the door gently, and strode off towards the entrance to the Walgreen’s.

* * *

Dar waited in line, glancing at the items available for sale on the nearby racks out of boredom. She had her chosen items, obtained in quick order, but there was only one clerk working and several people ahead of her waiting to pay.

C’mon.. I’ve got melting ice cream here. Dar glared evilly at the line from behind her shades.

The clerk, unfortunately, was busy trying to understand the request of the first woman in line, who was attempting to obtain a specific type of cigarette using a language even Dar wasn’t familiar with. It was hard to say at this point, which one of them was the more frustrated.

Her eyes fell on a shelf about thigh level, and she examined the contents, a grudging smile slowly appearing as she reached down and selected one of the items. After a quick look around, she added it to her basket, then resumed looking around.

The woman ahead of her let out a deliberately audible sigh. “Jesus.”

The clerk glanced up at her, giving her an apologetic grimace, but slightly shrugging her shoulders. The foreign woman pulled out a piece of paper from her purse and unfolded it, showing it to the clerk with a bit of impatience. "Ma'am, we don't have those."

The woman questioned her in her own language.

"Ma'am, we don't have those." The clerk repeated, with commendable patience. She pointed at the picture in the paper and shook her head. The woman shook the paper at her, her voice rising.

"Jesus." The customer in front of Dar repeated. "What an idiot." With a disgusted look, she tossed her packages onto the counter and walked away, leaving the store with a slap at the sliding door on her way out. The man ahead of her did the same, shooting the clerk a bird as he followed suit.

At the same moment, the foreign woman grabbed back her paper and shoved it in her purse, storming off and walking quickly through the door on the heels of the other two.

That left the clerk staring after them, and Dar with no one ahead of her in line. Not one to look a gift tourist in the mouth, she stepped forward and began removing her choices from her basket, placing them down on the register counter.

"Why do people do that?" The clerk wondered, as she picked up the first item and scanned it. "Just come to a place and not know how to communicate?"

Dar studied her from behind her wraparound shades. "To give Americans a taste of what it's like to deal with them overseas?" She suggested mildly.

"Huh?" The girl frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You ever been in another country?" Dar inquired.

"No." The girl replied. "Why would I want to go to another country?"

"Doesn't matter. How much?" Dar indicated the register. She watched the total come up, and swiped her ATM card through the reader, punching in he code with an impatient motion. The machine hesitated, then regurgitated her receipt, which she snagged along with her purchases from the clerks' hands. "Thanks."

"Bye." Now bereft of customers, the clerk waggled her fingers at Dar. "Have a nice day."

* * *

Kerry had amused herself by trying to make up stories about the people she watched coming out of the store while waiting for Dar's return. The first man who had come out seemed to have gotten something he wasn't too sure about, based on how he kept looking

inside the bag he'd carried out as he walked to his car. She decided it was a choice between hair growth formula, some feminine products, or birth control.

She watched him until he got into his car, whereupon he drew something out of the bag and took a bite of it, skewing her theory.

She hoped.

The next two women who exited were apparently together, talking non-stop in Spanish as they walked right past the Lexus and got into a maroon station wagon right next to her. They started their car, and without breaking their stream of discussion, began to pull out.

Kerry's eyes widened as she realized the car's front wheels were turned sharply to the right, aiming the vehicle right for the passenger side door inches from her. Reacting instinctively, she leaned over and slammed her hand on the Lexus' horn, closing her eyes and sprawling half over Dar's seat as she waited for the crunch and impact.

After a moment's silence, however, she opened her eyes and peered over her shoulder. The maroon station wagon was gone, and as she straightened up and looked behind her, she spotted it pulling out into traffic with a squeal of tires.

A blue Jeep just barely missed sideswiping it. Kerry blew her hair out of her eyes and faced forward again, deciding the women had probably picked up either legal stimulants or prescription sedatives or maybe a combination of both.

Another customer stormed by the front of the Lexus, walking with short, furious steps. She banged into a trashcan mounted firmly on the sidewalk, and shoved it away from her with a curse audible even through the closed windows of the Lexus. She gave the can a vicious kick, before she continued on and around the corner of the store to the other side of the parking lot.

Didn't like her one hour photos? Kerry wondered. She had little time to consider it, because the woman was followed almost immediately by another, equally upset looking, who seemed almost in tears. She walked over to a small four door car near the entrance and spoke to the man inside it, showing him something she had in her hands.

The man grabbed it, then shoved her backwards, with an angry snarl. He pushed the car door open and headed for the door to the drugstore, leaving the woman behind. She looked unhappily at the car for a brief moment, then went around and got into the passenger side, pulling down the sunshade and peering anxiously into the mirror.

Now, what was the story there? Kerry wondered, but not for long because her peripheral vision was filled with an approaching figure that captured her attention fully as she turned her head to watch Dar walk over to her.

Just the sight of that angular face made her smile. Kerry could feel her facial muscles responding, and she watched Dar react and return the grin as she opened the door and slid inside bringing a puff of hot, moist air and the scent of the apricot scrub still lingering on her skin. "That didn't take long. Thanks for getting my stuff."

Dar handed her the bag. "No problem. Careful, there's a jug of.."

"Ice cream in here." Kerry finished, peering inside. "And.. what in the.. " She removed something from the bag and held it up, letting the plastic bag drop down to the floor between her hiking boots. "Dar, what is this?"

Dar was concentrating on removing the Lexus from the parking lot and keeping the body of the car intact while she did so. "Um… it's a hamster."

Kerry tapped the small, furry foot, and the stuffed animal started to dance to the tune of "Over There…" "It's a dancing hamster." She observed, dancing a little in her seat along with it. "It's a dancing hamster in a sailor suit, Dar."

"Yeah." Her partner peered fiercely through the windshield. "You were calling me a hamster the other day so.."

A giggle worked it's way out of Kerry's chest. She set the creature on her lap, and tapped it's foot again, watching it dance and squiggle in it's white outfit and hat. "Is this supposed to be you?"

Dar cleared her throat. "I thought you'd think it was cute."

"Hehehehehehehehe." The blond woman let out a long, low chortle. "Oh, you're so right, I do." She danced with her new little friend. "Wait till your dad sees it."

Dar turned her head and gave her a look over the tops of her sunglasses.

"I'm going to put this on my desk." Kerry decided.

"At work??" Dar's eyes nearly popped.

Kerry reached over and turned her head back forward, as the light turned green and they were free to proceed across to the causeway home. "Don't' be goofy. Of course not at work. At home."

Dar settled back in her seat, relieved. "Yeah, well.. I had some time to kill at the register. They were short handed."

"Though… it might be a great ice breaker at new client meetings…" Kerry mused.

Dar turned to stare at her again, only to find mischievous green eyes waiting in knowing silence. “You’re lucky I love you.” She mock growled.

Kerry’s smile softened and gentled. “Don’t I know how lucky I am.” She replied. “And I will find us a different church, Dar. I like belonging to something like that. It gives me a sense of community here. But not at the expense of your being comfortable with it.”

Dar fell silent, as she directed the car onto the ferry base. “Does it have to be a church?” She asked, as they pulled up to the cones. “Maybe we could just join a computer club or something?”

Kerry rested her chin on her fist. “We spend enough time with nerds.” She disagreed. “Hey.. how about a biker club?”

Dar covered her eyes with one hand.

“Vroom vroom.”

* * *

Now it was Kerry’s turn to be a couch potato, and she readily took advantage of it, tucking the light, worn childhood quilt she’d brought back from Michigan around her as she watched the late news. She had a cup of hot blackberry tea on the table nearby, and sufficient quantities of painkillers to render her acceptably comfortable, at least for the moment.

They had paused at the Island Market on the way home and gotten some fish filets, which Dar had insisted on cooking. Much to Kerry’s surprise, and also to her partner’s she suspected, the relatively simple broiling experiment had turned out very tasty and after that, and some of Dar’s newly purchased ice cream, the stresses from the party had finally dissipated.

“Nothing.” Dar looked up from her perch sprawled across the love seat. “I don’t get it. There’s nothing here.” She lifted a hand and let it drop, shaking her head at the screen of her laptop. “No mention, no little notes in the paper, nothing in the trades… a major contract falls through, and all you see is news about rugby.”

Kerry chuckled softly. “I don’t know, sweetie. I think I like those priorities for a change.” She took a sip of her tea. “Oh well. We’ll find out eventually what the deal is. Once we get to those ships, someone’ll talk. They always do, Dar.”

“Mmph.” Dar was rattling away at her keyboard.

Kerry returned her attention to the big screen television, where an overly earnest reporter was relating the day’s news in serious, emphatic tones. The shot cut away to a nighttime

scene, with flashing police lights, and after studying it for a minute, she frowned. “Hey, Dar? Look.”

“Mm?” Pale blue eyes flicked to her, then to the television. “What am I looking at?”

“Isn’t that the Walgreen’s? The one we were at today?”

Dar leaned on the love seat arm and peered at the screen. “I don’t.. hell, they all look alike to me, Kerry. Maybe it is. Why?”

“Shh.” Kerry turned the sound up to listen.

“Police are unsure of how the woman got left in the trunk, or who might have done this to her. She was taken to Jackson Memorial Hospital where she’s in critical condition.” The reporter on the scene drew back, showing a small, four door car parked on the side of the building, it’s trunk hanging open, having obviously been forced. “The car was rented, police say, by an unidentified man they are now looking for.”

“Huh.” Dar murmured. “Someone locked in a trunk? Lucky they didn’t croak in this heat.” She shook her head and went back to her laptop screen. “Wonder when it happened?”

“I don’t know.” Kerry leaned forward. “They can’t have found it that long ago.. it’s a live report. Oh, Dar.. I’d hate to think that poor woman was in that trunk when we were there!”

Dar looked up again, studying the car. “We weren’t on that side of the building.” She said. “Car looks a little familiar though…. But it’s a common rental type. Dime a dozen, Ker.”

“Yeah.” Something was niggling at Kerry’s memory, and she rested her chin on her fist as the news went on to another story. After a few minutes of trying to root it out, however, she gave up and tuned back in to the reporter. “Ah… gonna have rain tomorrow.” She chortled softly. “Sure you don’t want to spend the day inside with me watching it?”

“Mm.” Dar gave her a narrow-eyed look. “Temptress.”

Kerry gave her best impression of sultriness, aware that her Pooh t-shirt was probably skewing the impact just a trifle. “Actually, I’ve got a ton of stuff to do tomorrow. I want to get a hair-cut for starters, and my car’s due for service.”

“Thought you were going to relax?” Dar reminded her.

“I will.” Kerry said. “But I want to get something accomplished too, so I don’t feel so guilty thinking of you slaving away in the office stuck in your monkey suit.”

"Ahh… and I have to meet with all the international sales directors. They're in tomorrow." Dar reminded her. "So you can really pity me. Maria has a four hour block scheduled in the afternoon."

"Ew."

"Uh huh."

Kerry rolled over on to her back and watched Dar's profile as she worked on her machine. "I could pass on having a day off." She suggested. "You want some backup?"

"Nah." Dar glanced up at her, and grinned. "But thanks for the offer."

"Okay." Kerry wiggled her feet under their cotton covering. "But I'll make sure you've got something great to come home to."

The blue eyes twinkled. "Something other than you? What else you think I need?"

Kerry sighed happily.

"Besides, you're going to have to run the ball game with Quest." Dar continued dryly. "Don't thank me yet." She went back to her typing, listening to the soft chuckle as Kerry rolled back onto her side and the news switched over to sports.

"Okay." She reviewed her work for the last time, studying the presentation she'd put together for the meeting. "I think that'll work." She set the laptop down on the coffee table and stretched, reaching out to scratch Chino's head.

It was a completely ordinary Sunday night at home. They usually watched whatever was on either the Learning Channel, or Discovery, or a movie, then the news before getting together whatever they needed for work the next week and going to bed.

Comfortingly predictable. Dar regarded the shots of football players practicing in the hot sun with a touch of bemusement. "Y'know, they took us to see those guys do that once."

"That?" Kerry pointed. "You mean, summer practice?"

"Yeah." Dar said. "They used to take school kids on different field trips. See the zoo, that sort of thing. A rakish grin appeared. "Summer day, ninety degrees, no water anywhere. We all ran off and raided a McArthur Dairy milk truck that'd stopped to make a delivery. Nearly got tossed in jail."

Kerry started laughing.

"Haven't liked watching those guys play since."

* * *

Kerry whistled under her breath as she removed a last load of laundry from the washer and tossed it into the dryer. She set the machine and started it running, then took her basketful of already dried clothes and ambled back through the kitchen towards Dar's bedroom, closely followed by an attentive Chino.

She put the basket down on the edge of the waterbed and started sorting it's contents out. "You know what, Chino?" She addressed their pet. "Don't tell anyone, but sometimes I actually like doing this stuff."

"Gruff?"

Kerry opened Dar's underwear drawer and began to store neatly folded pairs inside it. She'd gotten two of them inside when the phone rang, and she reached across the dresser to pick up the portable resting there. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Ms. Stuart?" A man's voice asked. "This is Bob, from South Beach Lexus."

"Yup, it's me." Kerry agreed. "The buggy ready?"

"Not quite yet, ma'am, we really want to replace the break pads. You've been kinda tough on em."

Kerry frowned at the phone. "I have?"

"Well, they're showing a lot of wear.. we can let them go for a while but.."

"No – go ahead, by all means replace them." Kerry interrupted him. "I just didn't think I jammed them on that much.. guess I'll have to pay more attention to how I'm driving, huh?"

The man cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, you know, a lot of people have the same problem.. must be the traffic down here. Anyway, we'll get them changed out, and my guy's gonna deliver the car back over to you round dinnertime, if that's okay."

"Great." Kerry answered readily. "Sounds perfect. Thanks!" She put the phone down and went back to her folding, inspecting each item for possible holes before she tucked it away. Most of Dar's briefs were plain, and somewhat ordinary, but she did have a selection of whimsical ones most of which Kerry had purchased for her.

And of course, the red silk ones. Kerry smiled as she put those in the drawer, glancing at herself in the mirror as she finished. A hand lifted and riffled through her newly cut hair, and she gave the results an approving nod, pleased with her day so far.

The phone rang again, and she gave it a look of mild exasperation, before she picked up the receiver and answered it. “Hello?”

“Hi.” Dar’s voice responded. “You’re not answering your cell phone.”

Kerry sucked in breath. “Oops.. sorry. It’s upstairs charging.” She said. “And I’m downstairs playing with your undies. What’s up?”

“Ahh… glad I finally learned my lesson and don’t keep you on speaker.” Dar chuckled. “Listen, I had to put the afternoon session on delay. Transmax up in New York called, with a brand new project they just threw together – needing triple their current capacity. I need to quote it.”

“Hey, great.” Kerry smiled. “You’re not going to cause me a bottleneck up there, are you? I’ve got a lot of very touchy accounts up in those parts.”

“Would I do that to you?” Dar’s voice sounded relaxed and amused. “I may have to fly up there and meet with them, though, and I heard from Quest. He’s pulling together a meeting of all the bidders at the Intercontinental on Wednesday.”

Kerry nodded, even though her partner could not see her. “Well, you said I’d be spearheading that anyway.” She remarked. “So forward the info on to me, boss, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Already done.” Dar replied. “Looks like I’ll be late. We’re just going to start the sales meeting in an hour.”

“I’ll be waiting for you.” There was a momentary silence, bringing a knowing smile to Kerry’s face. “Give me a buzz before you leave, okay?”

“I will.” Dar answered softly. “See you later.”

Kerry put the phone down, her smile still lingering as she picked up her now empty basket and walked back through the living room, her mind busy with planning her strategy for Quest’s meeting. A bright flash on the television broke her concentration, however, and she turned to look at the afternoon news blurb. “Oh.” She paused, as they seemed to be continuing the news report from the previous night, now showing a picture of the man the police were looking for.

Kerry blinked, and then she simply stared at the picture, matching the somewhat blurry details with a memory from the previous day, from the car across from theirs, in the lazy afternoon sunlight of a summer day.

Was it the same jerk?

She squinted at the picture, which seemed to be from a passport. “Son of a bitch.” She whispered. “I think it is.”

* * *

“So.” The low, powerful voice rolled out over the room. “As you can see, the capacity will remain relatively constant across the board, throughout the international and national grids, but our focus is going to be on refining the bandwidth usage and streamlining demand service.”

A grid flashed onto the screen. “The net effect of that project will be for us to be able to add another fifty percent in capacity without increasing the hardware.” Dar paused and leaned on the lectern. “Any.. further.. questions?”

She let her eyes sweep the room, suspecting the edge in her voice was suppressing the raised hands at last. “All right. Thank you, folks. That’s all.” Dar stepped back, acknowledging the applause in the room with a curt nod before she shut down the screens and retired the lectern, glad the damn thing was finally over.

Finally.

Dar dropped down into her seat at the head of the presentation table, it’s cool leather closing around her as the noise level in the room rose. She picked up her glass of water and drained it, glad of the moisture for her dry, scratchy throat.

The crowd of sales directors was breaking up into clusters, all carrying printed hands outs of her presentation as they discussed the session. Dar was happy to be left relatively alone, isolated at the front of the room with just enough space between her and the rest of them that even the few eyeing her hadn’t gotten up the courage to approach.

Dar assumed a dour glare to reinforce the distance, exhausted from her two hour speech. It had gone over all right, she thought, but that, and the hour of questions after it had frazzled both her patience and her tolerance for occasionally stupid questions.

She did not want to entertain any more of them right now. Though the presentation room was an interior space and she could not see windows from where she was, she knew it was getting dark outside and the long day was nearing its end at last.

Jose finished off his conversation and headed her way. Dar fixed him with her glare, but the Sales VP ignored it and circled the table, taking a seat right next to her. “Good! It was very good, Dar.”

“Thanks.”

“We have too much people scared out there.” Jose went on, resting his silver silk covered elbows on the table. “Everybody was running like chickens. Now, they see we have a plan.”

“Uh huh.” Dar rested her elbow on the chair arm and propped her head up on it. “We have a plan.”

Jose looked at her. “What is wrong with you?”

Dar’s eyebrows hiked.

“You are acting like, you do not care.” Jose said. “These people, what you say to them, that matters how they do their job, Dar.”

“I know.” The dark haired woman agreed. “I do care. It’s just been a damn long day, Jose. It may be exciting to them, but to me, it’s a rehash of the same damn speech I’ve already given the board, given the international board, and given the lot of you down here. I’m tired of it.”

The Sales VP snorted. “You have no attention. It is just like my son. He looks at one thing, and then..” Jose snapped his fingers. “It is the old news, and something else he goes to find. You are like that.” He pointed at Dar. “Always, you have been like that.”

Dar tried to get mad at him, but didn’t find it in herself. She ended up just shrugging instead. “Yeah. And?”

Jose also shrugged. “Nothing!” He said. “I will tell you something however, Dar. Being married is good for you. I say so. My wife, she says so too. She told me she thinks you are not so much a bitch since then.”

“Thanks.” Dar drawled. “Your being married hasn’t made you less of an asshole. How’d she figure that?”

Jose took a breath to answer, a red line creeping up his neck as he lifted his hand to shake a finger at Dar. “What did you say? I am being here so nice to you, and what is this???” His voice rose in outrage, attracting attention from the crowd still chatting around them in the room.

Dar snickered at him. “Miss the old days, Jose?” She inquired in a velvet tone.

“Puta.” He growled, slapping his hand on the table. “There is the bitch I remember.”

“Oh yeah.” Dar leaned forward, pinning him intently with her eyes. “It’s in there. It just takes a lot more now to get it to show.” She got up and twitched her sleekly tailored jacket straight. “Gentlemen.” She gave the now watching salesmen a gracious nod. “Ladies.” She added, to the two women directors standing nearby. “Jose.” She tacked on

just for fun, as she stepped around the table and headed for the door. “Have a good night.”

“Wait, Dar!” One of the women directors hustled to catch up to her, the other woman close behind. “Can we steal a moment of your time?”

Dar actually growled at them. “You had three hours of my time.”

The women eased out of the conference room with her. “Just a few quick things.. while you’re walking?”

“Talk fast.” Dar headed for the elevator. “Stacy, I’ve said all I wanted to say for the night in there.” She hit the door button and headed into the car almost without a pause as her shoulders just barely cleared the opening.

The two women followed her hastily inside. “Isn’t about the presentation.” Stacy Allman said. “We wanted to talk to you about the ship contract.” She glanced at the other woman. “Brenda and I happened to be in the same bar as some old friends of yours, and we got an unintentional earful.”

Dar leaned against the wall as the car rose to the fourteenth floor. “Everybody got a damned earful.” She said. “I got nothing but the entire time I was up there.” She studied the other two women, who could have been twins in their conservative suits and stylish haircuts.

Stacy waited for the doors to open before she answered. “Dar, let us take you out for a drink.” She said, as they entered the quiet, half darkened floor. “You need to hear this, and the mausoleum’s really not the place, if you catch my drift.”

She caught it. Dar headed for her office, holding her outer door open before following the two saleswomen inside. She wasn’t especially close friends of either, but they were both relatively old timers and she’d had a somewhat common bond with the few women who had made the climb up the ladder with and around her.

Both were savvy. Stacy was from New York, and Brenda was from Los Angeles, and though both women were straight as boards, neither had ever shown the veiled aversion to Dar’s lifestyle she’d detected in others in the company. “I don’t know, people. It’s been a long damn day.”

“Cmon, Dar.” Stacy followed her into her inner office, pausing to look around as Dar continued to her desk and started to pack up her briefcase. “Huh. This place looks a little different.”

Dar’s head lifted, and she looked around her office in mild confusion, expecting to find the carpet had been replaced in her absence or a different color wall weave installed. But

the large space seemed much as she left it, so she glanced at Stacy to see what she was talking about. “What?”

“Listen, Dar, we won’t keep you all night.” Stacy dropped the subject and took a seat in front of Dar’s desk instead. “But I really think you need to hear what we heard. How about the lounge in the Hyatt… give me a half hour, huh?”

Dar considered the question, as her peripheral vision tracked Brenda examining the collection of photos on her wall credenza shelves. “All right.” She decided. “Go on. I’ll meet you there in ten minutes.”

“Cool.” Stacy got up. “Ten minutes, in the bar. Good deal, Dar. I think once we finish up, you’ll agree it wasn’t a waste of either your time or ours.”

Dar continued to stuff papers into her briefcase as the two left, only stopping when the door closed. She rested her knuckles on her desk and leaned her weight on them, then she grunted and straightened up, slapping one of the speed dial buttons on her phone almost without looking.

The phone only rang once before it was answered. “Hey, sweetie.”

Dar’s lips twitched. “You know, it could have been someone other than me calling from here.” She commented wryly.

“Not on our home number.” Kerry replied, a smile evident in her voice. “They’d have called on the cell.”

Eh. True. “You’re right. Shows how long a day it’s been.” Dar reached up and rubbed her left temple. “I’m done with the sales crap..”

“How’d it go?”

“All right, I guess.” Her partner replied. “But two of the directors caught me afterward.. apparently they’ve got some BS they overheard from our friends. Want to spill it to me offsite.”

Silence. Dar could almost imagine the look of skeptical surprise on Kerry’s face. “Yeah, seemed pretty stupid to me, but I’ve known the two of them for ten years. They’re not idiots.”

“Sounds pretty bizarre.”

“Anyway, I told them I’d meet them over at the Hyatt.” Dar said. “Shouldn’t take long. I’m sure we already heard most of it last week from the jackasses mouths.” She was aware of a pensive quiet from the phone. “You interested in joining us?”

Kerry chuckled, after a moment's hesitation. "I think you know me too well."

Dar smiled. "Hey, me and two straight women. What a party. Of course I'd invite you." She finished packing up her case. "Especially if you're in those cute overalls you were wearing the other day.. that'd shock all the Cubans at the Hyatt happy hour."

Kerry chuckled again, but this time the sound was entirely different. "Oh, the scandals you weave, Madame Roberts. No, you go meet your undercover friends, and get the dirt. I'll be here hanging out doing the domestic thing."

Dar's eyebrows lifted. "Domestic thing?"

"Baking cookies."

"Cookies?" Dar's ears perked up. "You're making fresh cookies?"

"The Food Network is dangerous." Kerry asserted. "But if you time it right, you might get some hot from the oven." She teased. "So don't get too dirty."

"They'll be lucky if I sit down." Dar said. "See you in a little bit, Ker."

"Okay – hey, listen. Remember that story from the news last night?" Kerry said. "The car at the drug store?"

"Yeah?" Dar's hand hovered over the button.

"We were there when they were. I saw the guy they're looking for. He was a creep."

It was the last thing she'd expected to hear. "Really?"

"Yeah." Kerry said. "But I'll tell you all about it when you get home. Go scoot and find your snitches."

"Okay. Yeah." Dar replied. "Strange timing, I guess. Be home soon." She released the line and shouldered her briefcase, turning off the desk lamp as she headed for the door.

* * *

Middle of the summer on a Monday made for a very slow night at the bar. Dar gave the greeter at the door a nod as she entered, sweeping her eyes around the sparsely occupied lounge until she spotted her two colleagues near one of the floor to ceiling plate glass windows.

Stacy waved at her. Dar headed in that direction, only to be intercepted by a hovering and obviously bored waiter. She stopped as the man looked inquiringly at her.

“Can I get you something, ma’am? We have chocolate martinis on special tonight.”

Much as the thought of a chocolate anything was intriguing her at the moment, Dar shook her head. “Jamaican coffee, please.” She indicated the small group of chairs near the window. “I’ll be over there.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

Dar continued on her way and took one of the seats opposite Stacy and Rhonda. They both had glasses in front of them, with enough half eaten fruit matter to indicate their alcoholic content. “All right. So what’s up?”

“Gee, Dar.. it’s great to see you too.” Stacy gave her a wry grin. “Been a while.”

Dar crossed her arms. “Half hour, didn’t you say?” She asked pointedly. “I didn’t come here to be social.” She accepted the steaming mug the waiter handed her, and took a cautious sip. The coffee was hot, and pungent with a touch of rum and Tia Maria.

“No, you never really were the social butterfly.’ Stacy acknowledged. “Though we had some pretty good times back in the old days, out on the road.”

“Eh.” Dar tilted her head slightly. “I still remember you ending up doing the tango with the chef at that Italian place in New Mexico.” She admitted. “They ever stop teasing you about it?”

Rhonda snickered.

“No.” Stacy laughed. “They haven’t. Trust you to remember that one, too. I think that was the first night I ever saw you drink something other than milk.” She added. “Though tough as that damn account was, we were all due it. What a hemorrhoid case that was.”

Ah, yes. Dar smiled faintly, and nodded. “Yeah, it was.” She agreed.

“Dar, is that the first place you banged heads with that Shari woman? I remember her from that account.. you fired her there, didn’t you?” Rhonda asked. “That’s why she was so familiar when she came into that bar.. I remember her pitching a fit in the building as security was throwing her out.”

“Yeah.” Stacy nodded. “I didn’t see her when she came in, but Rho did, and then when she and whatserface..”

“Michelle Graver.” Dar supplied evenly.

“Yeah, from Vista, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Stacy slowly twirled her straw as she sucked on it. “They sat down, and it wasn’t a minute until they were yelling at each other, and the first word I recognized was your name.”

Dar snorted. “Yeah, well.” She shrugged one shoulder. “Shari and I go a long way back.” She said. “So it wasn’t the first time we’d met. I had a decision I had to make and it could have gone either way, but she’d taken the piss out of me one time and I gave her the boot.”

“I remember.” Rhonda signaled the waiter, and indicated their near empty glasses. “Dar? You up for a second?”

Dar glanced at her cup, which was still half full. “I’m fine.”

“So, anyway.” Stacy retrieved a tortilla chip from the table and loaded it with salsa. “They didn’t know us from Adam’s housecat. They sat at the table behind us, and let me tell you, they took into each other like nothing.”

The waiter returned, putting down two fresh fruity looking drinks. “Anything else I can get you ladies? Some hors d'oeurves, maybe?” He picked up the basket of tortillas. “I’ll get some fresh chips here.. would you like to try one of our combo plates?”

“Sure.” Rhonda shooed him away. “Thanks.”

Dar slowly sipped her coffee, appreciating the slight burn as the alcohol hit her in the belly. For her, that night in New Mexico had been a great one. The sense of personal vindication had nearly sent her giddy, and she’d more than welcomed the chance to share a night out with her co-workers, though they’d never know just why their sullen and often dour regional tech manager had suddenly decided to be social.

She’d had fun. Gotten a little drunk, but not nearly as much as they had, and enjoyed the simple pleasure of sitting back and relaxing after a tough day of work. Even going back to her hotel room alone hadn’t bothered her, and she remembered spending time out on the room’s balcony looking out over the New Mexico desert being happy for a change.

Ah. Or she’d thought she’d been happy. Dar felt her cheeks move into a silent grin. Now she knew she’d just been satisfied because she’d had a much closer acquaintance with happy over the last couple of years. “So, they were fighting.”

“Like weasels.” Stacy agreed. “Graver was pissed off because of some plan of hers that’d gotten screwed up.. and I swear, I thought she said she’d offered you a job.”

”She did.” Dar acknowledged. “Her damn company recruited Kerry and I, matter of fact.”

Stacy goggled at her. “Really?”

“Had no clue who we were, but yeah.” The dark haired woman chuckled. “We were in the show room night before it opened getting our gear set and they thought we were staff geeks.”

Rhonda started laughing, covering her mouth hastily. “Oh, my god.”

“Wasn’t funny then, but I’m laughing now.” Dar admitted.

“Jesus.” Stacy shook her head. “So anyway, Dar… to get to the point of why we dragged you out here, and didn’t just share a cup of coffee in the lunchroom… the Shari woman said she’d gotten back some information on Kerry, and she told Graver they’d been going at everything the wrong way.”

Just hearing Kerry’s name triggered Dar’s baser instincts. The evening stopped being amusing, and she leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping noticeably. “Yeah?”

Stacy paused, studying Dar for a moment. “I just realized I’ve never met our VP of Operations.” She commented incongruously. “But I think I want to.”

Dar simply waited, her coffee forgotten.

Rhonda leaned forward. “What Shari said was that she had some dope on Kerry, and she told Graver to just leave the whole thing to her. She said if she could get to Kerry, then they didn’t have anything to worry about on this ship contract.”

“Dar?” Stacy uttered, into the quiet that fell. “Do you realize your eyes are actually really shooting sparks off? You’re going to set the carpet on fire. Just take it easy, okay?”

With a great deal of effort, Dar forced herself to ease back into the chair. Her heartbeat was a thunder in her ears, and she could feel twitching in her forearms as though her hands wanted to clench into fists. She took a short breath, and released it. “Bitch.” She enunciated precisely.

The waiter arrived with a plate of hot tidbits, which he put down, along with a fresh basket of chips. “Here you go, ladies.” He turned to Dar. “Are you finished there, ma’am? Would you like another?”

Dar handed him her coffee cup. “Bring me a tall glass of milk, please.”

The waiter blinked. “Milk?”

“Milk.” Dar repeated. “Cold milk.” She clarified, as he turned to go. After he left again, she turned back and steepled her fingers, peering at Stacy and Rhonda with half closed eyes.

“You’re really pissed.” Stacy murmured.

“Family trait.” Dar finally answered, as her heart started to settle down. “But thanks for telling me. Not that I think they’ve got anything Kerry wouldn’t do anything but laugh at, but it’s good to know.”

Rhonda took a mini-taco, and handed it over to Dar, along with a napkin. “That’s why we really didn’t want to say this in the office, Dar. It’s.. that woman’s got a grudge against you and it’s all personal. Even Graver said so. She said she was obsessed.”

Dar mechanically took the taco and examined it, before she took a bite, chewing without tasting it and swallowing it to get it out of her mouth. “Yeah.” She took the glass of milk from the attentive waiter and downed a mouthful. “She’s something.”

“So you think she was BS’ing?” Stacy said. “About Kerry?”

Dar waited for her guts to unclench. “Yes.” She replied evenly. “Shari always believes she’s knows the angles on everything. Always has.”

“Mm.” Rhonda nodded. “Yeah, seemed like it to me. Big mouth, all air.”

Stacy took a napkin and a potato puff. “Well, all I can say is I hope we wipe the floor with them. I’m really tired of their sales punks lording it over us every time we meet telling us all about the latest contract they stole from us.” She settled back in her seat. “Especially since they’re targeting three of my big ones up for renewal. I’m getting a lot of pressure to cut our costs, Dar.”

Dar peered into her milk. “I’m not going to play their game.” She said. “I’ve already said that. No contract gets signed that loses us money. I don’t care how many they think they can take.”

“We don’t have a lot of leverage.” Rhonda said, hesitantly. “I mean, I know our service can’t be beat, but..”

“But nothing.” Dar cut her off quietly. “All it’s going to take is one big screw up, which they can’t cover. So keep your shorts on, and don’t panic.”

Stacy exhaled. “Well, the trade show helped.” She conceded. “I have to admit, Dar, there were six of us in the regional office watching Tech TV, and I hope your ears were burning because we were cheering you on like gangbusters. You go girl.”

Dar relaxed a little and leaned back. After the first shock, her mind was now wrapping around and assimilating the information Stacy and Rhonda had given her, and with effort, separating it from the emotional charge.

“Hey, Dar?” Rhonda suddenly leaned forward.

“Yes?” Dar looked up and waited, finishing up her milk.

“Sorry if we got you angry.”

A half shrug moved the silk over Dar’s shoulder. “S’allright.”

Stacy swirled her drink in one hand. “You know you totally freaked out most of the sales force when that whole thing with you and Kerry came out. I remember we were at an incentive meeting, and everyone was just stunned.”

Dar shrugged again.

“What would you have done if Alastair hadn’t been cool with it?” Stacy asked curiously.

“Left.”

“Just like that?”

Dar snorted. “Yeah. Just like that.” She replied. “Now if you ladies don’t mind, I’m gonna go home and get out of this monkey suit.” She set her glass down and stood up, towering over them in the low lighting. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Sure you won’t have another, Dar?” Stacy held up her glass. “For old time’s sake?”

“No thanks.” Dar lifted a hand and waved briefly. “Night.”

Stacy watched her disappear, then lifted her glass. “There’s a woman who has something she wants to go home to.” She chuckled wryly. “Bless her heart.”

Rhonda nodded. “Glad we told her.” She summed up. “Telegenics won’t stand a chance now, the little bastards. She’ll take em out for sure.”

“For sure.” Stacy touched her glass to Rhonda's, and they both took a solemn drink.

PART 7

KERRY STUDIED HER NICELY CHILLED COOKIE DOUGH SERIOUSLY. "WHAT DO YOU think, Chino?" She asked, leaning both hands on the marble counter. "Do you think your mommy would settle for just plain, ordinary cookies?"

"Gruff."

"Mm.. no, I don't think so either." Kerry turned and went to one of the drawers, pulling it open and rummaging in it. "You know, I never, ever though I'd ever use that old Christmas gift of Aunt Eenie's, Chino, I really didn't. I just never did see myself wearing an apron, making batches of cookies for the kiddies."

"Gruff."

Kerry removed what she was looking for and took it back to the counter, opening a baggie and dumping out a pile of thin aluminum. "Hm." Her finger pushed aside several. "Christmas tree, no… Pumpkin.. no… four leaf clover.. no.. ah." She selected one and held it up. "That's the ticket."

Going back to her dough, she positioned the cutter and pressed it down. "So, here I am, Chino… standing in the kitchen, in an apron, making heart shaped cookies." She reviewed her work, removing the heart and placing in on the already buttered baking pan. "And I'm loving every minute of it. What's up with that?"

"Gruff."

"What's up with that?" Kerry repeated, in a much softer voice. "I don't think it's my biological clock ticking, do you, Chino?"

Chino whined and laid down, resting her chin on Kerry's foot.

"No, me either." Kerry chuckled. "You know what I think it is? I think it's just that I have so much love inside me for your mommy, that its always looking for a way to come out, and I guess this is one of the ways." She finished arranging her cookies and checked the oven, opening the door and sliding the tray inside. "You think your mommy knows that?"

Something in the look she'd seen in Dar's eyes that morning when they'd woken up together had bothered her. She almost thought she'd imagined it – but the more she thought about it the more she knew she hadn't, and it reminded her of the early days of their relationship when she'd sometimes catch a hint of what could almost be fear lurking in those pale baby blues.

She knew where it had come from. Kerry's eyes narrowed a little, as she rolled a ball of cookie dough between her fingers. It had come from that number one whore bitch Shari, who Kerry would have dearly loved to punch right in the nose.

"Oh yeah." She let out a half laugh. "That'd look great on Tech TV, Ker. You taking down a rival in a catfight in the middle of the convention floor." Kerry tossed the cookie dough ball at Chino's nose. The Labrador snapped it out of mid air and swallowed it, looking up hopefully for more. "Eh. Probably been the best ratings they'd had all year. No more, you little pig dog."

The dog sighed, warming Kerry's leg. With a smile, Kerry sat down on the floor next to her, and started petting her soft fur. She leaned back against the counter and savored a moment of quiet satisfaction, glad as well that her cramps had finally eased off and gone completely away.

Part of that was due to a new discovery of Dar's. Kerry laid her hand on her belly, feeling the residual heat from a small packet stuck to the outside of her underwear. It was like a portable heating pad, about four inches by two, right where the warmth could do the most good.

Just too cool. Kerry marveled. And it had lasted over twelve hours. "Technology's a fantastic thing, Chi. You hear all those people say how the good old days used to be? Not me. Give me the cutting edge any time." With a stifled yawn, she got up and wandered into the living room, going over to the sliding glass doors to peer out at the moon spattered sea.

Dar would be fine. Kerry leaned against the glass, watching her breath fog it slightly. She just need a few extra reminders of how much their relationship meant to both of them,

and just how wrong Shari had been all those years ago about everything she'd said to Dar.

Bitch. Kerry felt her own hands tense. "God, I hate her." She whispered, feeling the passion in the words. "She better stay home this time, Chino. Stay the hell in Orange County and away from Miami if she knows what's good for her."

"Grrr." Chino spotted something outside and let out a low growl.

"What is it, Chi?" Kerry shaded her eyes and looked, but all she could see was the moon reflecting off the sea, and a few palm fronds waving. "Or were you agreeing with me?" She lifted her head as the delicate scent of baking cookies wafted in from the kitchen. "Oo.. you smell that, girl? Let's go see how they're doing."

Chino followed her into the kitchen, but two steps inside the dog stopped and turned, frisking back out into the living room.

Kerry just grinned and kept going, peeking inside the stove as she kept one ear cocked for sounds from the other room. She heard the canine yodel of greeting, and only just prevented herself from repeating it. Then she figured what the heck, and did anyway, lifting her voice up in a weird counterpoint to Chino's. "AwwwrrrooooO!!!!!"

"What in the hell is that?" Dar answered, easing into the kitchen with a blond Labrador glued to her knee. "Is there a duck dying in here?" She'd taken her jacket off, and untucked her silk shirt, and now she sidled up behind Kerry and rested her chin on Kerry's shoulder, peering through the tinted glass of the oven.

"Quack." Kerry finished checking the cookie's progress. Then she turned around and faced Dar. Before her partner could step back, she lifted her hands up and gently caught her face, pulling it down to give her a nice, long, heartfelt kiss. "But I bet ducks don't do that."

"Not nearly as well as you do." Dar moved closer and slid her arms around Kerry. "Hi."

Kerry hugged her. "Hey, sweetie. Glad you're here." She felt Dar's chest move suddenly as she inhaled, and tightened her grip instinctively. "Eerrf. Chino and I were just talking about you."

Now Dar's body jerked again, for a different reason as a chuckle emerged. "Oh yeah? What'd she have to say about me?" She rested her forearms on Kerry's shoulders as they parted and looked at each other. "Was she complaining about my CD's again?"

"She was bitching that you were late, and she had to wait to get some cookies." Kerry let her hands rest casually on Dar's hips. "That didn't take long."

"I said a half hour." Dar glanced at the kitchen clock. "So what have you been up to, besides baking?" She reached up and ruffled Kerry's hair. "I like the snips." Her voice warmed with approval. "This looks really cute on you."

"Got my car done, got my hair done, got our laundry done, paid the bills…" Kerry ticked off her accomplishments. "Wrote you a poem." She finished, a trifle shyly, still unsure of her skills in that particular arena. "It's been a good day."

Poem? Dar felt a faint flush of surprised pleasure. Kerry had written some poems she'd shown her, sure – one had even been *about* her. "What kind of poem?" She didn't recall any that had been written *for* her, however, and the thought intrigued her.

Distracted her, in fact, from the disturbing revelations in the bar.

Kerry produced a grin. "Well, let's get our cookies and milk, and you can come read it. Decide for yourself what kind of poem it is." She tugged open the oven door and put a mitt on her hand, then pulled the tray out and set it on wooden holders she'd put earlier on the counter. "Mm."

Dar peered over her shoulder with deep interest. "Mm, is right." She sniffed delicately. "Are those hearts?"

Kerry nodded, gently easing them free of their baking sheet with a wafer thin spatula and putting them on a wire rack to cool. "Yep, they sure are." She felt Dar's warm breath on her ear and half turned, pressing her cheek against her partner's. "Just wanted to make sure you knew where those little chocolate chips came from."

"Kerry?"

"Mm?"

"It's too warm for it to be my birthday." Dar slid both arms around Kerry's body and simply held her, watching the cookies make their slow progress. "So why does it feel like it?"

Kerry carefully selected one of the smaller specimens and broke it in half, handing a chunk almost dripping with chocolate over her shoulder. "No reason." She took a careful bite, making an approving noise at the taste. "We should let these cool."

"Where's the fun in that?" Dar sucked in air to cool her stinging tongue. "You bring the rack, I'll get a jug of milk. Meet you on the couch."

Kerry was more than glad to oblige. She followed Dar into the living room, nearly tripping over a wildly tail wagging Chino and settled into the soft leather of the couch.

Dar dropped off the milk, but kept going towards the bedroom, unbuttoning her shirt as ducked through the door. "I'm going to take off this damn suit and put on something more comfortable."

"Naked works." Kerry commented, grinning when she heard the dry chuckle from the next room. "I like that suit on you, by the way. I think it really looks good." She selected a channel idly, turning the sound down as Dar returned in a pair of cotton shorts and a tank top. "On second thought, I like that outfit better."

Dar eased onto the couch, laying down on her side and extending her long legs along the leather surface. "Glad you had a better day than I did." She said. "I'm gonna have to go up to New York tomorrow night. That damn project is turning out to be a bigger hog than they admitted to at first."

"Boo hiss." Kerry patted her thigh, smiling as Dar inched over and settled her head on the spot. "Just overnight?" She riffled her fingers through the dark, soft hair now spilling over her bare leg.

"Yeah, I'll be back Wednesday, probably late."

Kerry picked up a cookie and broke it in half. "Okay, since I'll be downtown for that meeting, why don't I plan on picking you up at the airport then? We can do D and B's at the Dolphin for dinner."

"Mm." Dar made an agreeable noise, accepting her half of the cookie and taking a bite of it. "Listen. Stacy and Rhonda told me they overheard our two friends fighting in a bar after the trade show."

"They get pictures?"

"No." Dar rolled over and looked up at Kerry, watching the expression shift subtly on her face. "Ker, this wasn't a joke."

"I don't give a poot." Kerry said. "You know what I decided tonight? I decided they, and especially that bitch Shari had better the hell stay out of my way on this bid."

Dar blinked at her.

"I'm serious. I've had it with them. If they start up with me at that meeting on Wednesday, you'll be coming home to post my bail that night. I swear, Dar. I'm not going to put up with any shit from them anymore."

Dar gazed steadily at her. "Shari thinks she's got something on you that'll make you cave in to them."

Kerry's eyebrows almost hit the popcorn ceiling. "On me?"

"Yeah."

"Me?" The blond woman pointed a thumb at herself. "What in the hell do they think they can come up with on me that half the English speaking world hasn't seen for themselves on television or read in the Washington Post? That I'm gay? That I'm Republican? That I'm a budding hedonist? What?"

Dar shrugged. "I dunno, sweetheart. It didn't make a lick of sense to me when I heard it. I think she's just pissing lemonade."

"I'm going to make some lemonade and shove the pits right up her.." Kerry exhaled. "Oo.. Dar, sending me to this meeting may not be a good idea." She said. "I could lose us the bid right up front if they tick me off."

"Then you do." Dar replied. "Don't sweat it, Ker. Just go, listen, and blow them off if they come near you." She took another cookie from the rack and split it, handing Kerry her share.

Kerry ate the cookie slowly. "Are you telling me to just ignore them? Leave them alone?"

Dar nodded. "Don't let them get to you."

The pale blond brows contracted. "Paladar, do you find it just a little ironic that *you* are saying that to *me* ? After what we just went through with them? Are you going to take your own advice on that too?"

A shrug.

"I tell you what – I'll blow them off if you will. You stop letting what that whore bitch did to you chew you up inside, and I'll treat them like they were old buddies. Deal?" Kerry heard a sharper note in her voice than she'd really intended, and saw the flicker in Dar's eyes just before her partner looked briefly away. "Because I hate her so much on your behalf, it's the only way I could deal with it, Dar." She added, in a gentler tone.

Dar looked back up. "I don't want you hating people on my behalf."

"Tough."

A sigh. "Got milk?"

Kerry leaned over and gave her a chocolate tainted kiss instead. "Want to hear my poem?" She whispered. "Screw them. What ever's going to happen, will happen."

Dar eased her misgivings out of her mind, and set them aside for now. In one sense, Kerry was right. Whatever was going to happen, was going to happen. They would just

have to deal with it all one step at a time when it did. "Poem me, and pass the milk. You're right. Screw em."

Kerry's face creased into a happy grin, as she reached over to the table for her writing pad. "You got it, partner. You got it." She leaned over near Dar's ear. "Know what she must have found out about me?"

"What?"

Kerry whispered something, and nearly ended up with cookies all over her chest as Dar convulsed with laughter, and she chuckled evilly right along with her.

* * *

Kerry slung her sweat dampened towel around her neck, and inched her way out of the slim boxing gloves encasing her hands. She was still breathing a little hard from the end of her sparring lesson, and she shook her head with a tiny jerk to clear a few droplets of perspiration out of her eyes.

"Nice moves, Ker." Her sparring partner Rod gave her a light clout on the shoulder as he moved past. "Glad you're back."

'Thanks." Kerry grinned at him. "That was fun."

"Eh." The woman at the locker next to hers gave her a wry look, examining a large purple bruise across the back of one hand. "Mostly fun. How are you, Kerry? We missed you and the Taz last week."

The Taz. Kerry wrinkled her nose up at the nickname her partner had picked up from their kickboxing classmates. "We were up in Orlando." She explained. "Now, Dar's up in New York for a few days. She was sorry she was going to miss tonight too. She likes it."

"Well, we like it when you're here to occupy her." The woman grinned at Kerry. "Vacation?"

"Nah. A convention." Kerry stripped off her other glove and tossed it into her gear locker. Her head protector followed it, and the leather belt that protected her mid-section. "Phew… it's hot in here today." She wiped her face off with a corner of her towel, then grabbed her clothing bag. "I'm going to go shower off. I feel grungier than an old dishrag."

"Hey." Rod poked his head around the door of her locker. "We're doing beer and wings across the street. You up for it?"

Kerry only hesitated an instant before she nodded. "Sure. Cold beer sounds really good right now." She agreed. "See you over there? You too, Sal?"

“Right on.” The woman responded readily. “Tom’s got his new bike, and he’s dying to show it off. But I’m with Kerry – shower first.”

“So you can sit in the bar and sweat?” Rod laughed. “You girls are so…so…”

“Girly?” Kerry supplied, with a grin. “If that means we feel good and don’t stink, thanks!” She flicked him with her towel and headed for the women’s shower room at the gym with Sally at her heels. This class was full of new people, and she and Dar had made friends with quite a few of them.

Kerry liked them. They were a mixture of professionals and working class, mostly laid back, with a diverse range of interests including diving and bikes, two of her own current fascinations. The women were into fitness, but not aerobics, and the guys were more relaxed and laid back than the martial artists that tended to populate the more traditional classes.

Cool group. They accepted her and Dar with amiable good nature even after their relationship had become evident and most of them held a healthy respect for Dar’s fighting skills. “Ugh.” Kerry stripped out of her baggy pants and t-shirt, then stepped under the shower with a feeling of relief.

The water was delightfully lukewarm, and she let it course over her for a minute before she squeezed out a handful of soap from the wall dispenser and scrubbed her skin with it. “So what did we miss last week?” She asked Sally, who had joined her in the next shower cubicle. The spaces were separated by half walls, to give a modicum of privacy.

“John just went over high kicks again.” Sally responded. “He was in a bad mood. I think he lost big in that tourney he entered last weekend. You know how he gets.”

“Ah.” Kerry lathered her hair quickly and rinsed it, feeling one hundred percent better already. Her muscles were a little sore, and she was a little tired from the session, but she’d completed the rounds without taking any hard blows, and was pretty satisfied with herself all in all. “Yeah, he’s a little touchy about that, I know. Especially when his buddies show up here to watch the class.”

“Uh huh.” Sally said. “Rod thinks he picks the wimpiest student he has to spar with when they’re here.. you notice he *never* picks Taz.”

Kerry chuckled wryly. “Well, Dar’s not exactly a novice, and he knows it.” She explained, rinsing off one last time and grabbing her towel. “She teaches a class at our other gym near work. We’re just on break from that right now, and she wanted to learn something new.”

“Yeah, me too.” Sally admitted frankly, as she joined Kerry in dressing. “I got really tired of spinning. You ever try that?”

“Nuh huh.” Kerry pulled on her shorts and buttoned them, then donned a clean t-shirt from her bag. “The idea of riding and riding and riding and getting nowhere just isn’t my style.” She ran her brush through her hair, settling her newly cut locks into place. “I mean… we run every morning. We could get a treadmill and do it in the condo, in the nice air conditioning, but we don’t.”

Sally followed her out of the locker room and across the somewhat worn lobby of the boxing club they had their class in. “I kinda see what you mean… but sometimes it’s a lot safer to run on the treadmill in here, then on the streets, y’know?”

No, that was true. Kerry admitted, as they left the club and headed across the street to the small pub already leaking faint sounds of music into the humid air. It wasn’t something she and Dar had to worry about, and sometimes she did tend to forget not everyone lived on a private island where that kind of crime just didn’t exist.

Rod and three others from the class joined them as they approached, already having claimed a table outside under the ficus tree. The doors to the pub were wide open, as were the windows, since the place hadn’t had air conditioning any time Kerry had ever been by there.

Outside was cooler, even in the dead of summer. She sat down in one of the worn, wooden chairs and leaned back as the group settled in under the string of tacky colored globe lights hanging from the tree. The place smelled of the distinctive scent of vegetation all around, of fried food and spices, and Kerry considered it just about the perfect neighborhood dive she’d ever seen. There was even a very worn dart board nailed to the ficus, and for a quarter you could get three cracked darts to throw at it.

“Hey, honey!” Their regular waitress scooted over on spotting them, stopping in front of Kerry. “Usual?”

Kerry nodded, and stretched her legs out as the rest of the group made their orders. It had just gotten dark, and there was just enough breeze to keep the night from being uncomfortable. The waitress had just left when the rumbling pop of a motorcycle engine interrupted the night, and the roar grew as it came closer. “Ah.. guess that’s Tom.”

“You guessed it.” Rod agreed, hitching his knee up and slinging one long leg over the chair arm. He was tall and lanky, dark haired and relatively good looking in an understated kind of way. “Big ol Harley, and damn he wants everyone to know about it.”

Kerry snorted and shook her head.

The rider and bike arrived then, the noise precluding any further conversation until Tom turned the engine off and parked the big cycle, displaying it to various noises of appreciation. “Nice, huh?”

“Prettier than you are.” Rod called out, with a chortle. “Sure you can handle something that nice?”

“Kiss my ass, butthead.” Tom replied with a grin. “If you’re nice, I might let you touch it.” He half turned and glanced back at Kerry. “Whatcha think, Kerry? Nice, huh?” He indicated the bike, which was a monster in black and chrome with a custom painted gas tank full of incongruous tropical fish.

“Very.” Kerry agreed readily. “I like the soft tail. You didn’t opt for a VRSC?”

Tom walked over and sat down next to her, clasping his hands together. “Oh.. I think I’m in love with you. A girl who speaks my language.” He grinned at her. “You have one?”

“Not quite.” Kerry accepted her mug of ice cold draft beer and sipped it. “We were going for one. Went into the show room, and the guy there told Dar she’d have to buy what he was willing to sell her.” She licked her lips and sighed. “One ‘kiss my ass’ later, we headed over to the Honda dealership and the rest is history. I like my Shadow, though. It’s nice.”

The group laughed. Tom groaned, and slapped his head. “Kerry… Kerry… Kerry.. how could you?” He moaned. “Why didn’t you try a different dealership? I got mine in Daytona during bike week… it was like a religious experience.”

Kerry took a lazy swallow of her amber colored beer and shrugged one shoulder. “We use it down by the cabin in the keys. If we kept a Harley in the shed, we’d spend half our time writing police reports on it. So, it worked out for us. Maybe my next one’ll be a hog.”

Tom waggled his eyebrows at her. “Wanna go for a ride after we eat?”

“Sure.” Kerry agreed. “As long as you don’t have chili again.”

The gang laughed again, and Rod threw a corn chip at his buddy. “She gotcha.”

“Damn it, I like chili!” Tom whined. “Okay, here, at least get a picture of me with a good looking girl on my bike. I gotta have something to show the guys.” He gave Kerry a pleading look. “You mind?”

With a chuckle, Kerry set her beer down and got up, following Tom over to the slick machine and admiring it’s lines as she hopped up and gingerly settled herself on the back part of the seat. “Hm.”

Tom got on in front of her, and did a muscle dude pose, flexing his bicep for Kerry’s admiration. Obligingly, she leaned against him and pointed at the muscle, raising her eyebrows for the camera. “Psst.” She whispered. “I think Dar’s are sexier.”

Tom gave her a look over his shoulder. He was blond and football player style buff, and had a crew cut that was almost fifties in it's rigor. "Gee, thanks Ker." He muttered. "You really know how to make a guy feel great."

Kerry chuckled, and slid off the bike now that the flashes had stopped. She headed for the table, sidestepping the outstretched feet and reclaiming her chair with a sigh.

"Okay, okay." Tom finally joined them, after he carefully made sure his new bike wasn't going to fall over onto the sidewalk. "This rounds' on me, since I don't have to start paying on this thing for three months."

Whistles all round greeted his speech.

Kerry relaxed, looking forward to her cheeseburger with a sense of decadent pleasure. She felt sort of bad for Dar stuck in her hotel up in New York, but she was glad to get the chance to decompress before her scheduled meeting with Quest the next day.

She let her eyes wander as the group chattered about Tom's new bike, and found her gaze abruptly arrested by the sight of an unwelcome but familiar face. At the phone booth right in front of the dive, Shari was standing ostensibly making a call. "Oh… what are the odds of this being a coincidence?" She tensed, waiting for the confrontation she was sure would happen, but Shari finished her call, and turned and walked away without a backward glance.

"Huh." Kerry exhaled. "Hm. Maybe it was."

"Here's to my bike!" Tom said, raising his glass and extending it. "And to a bunch of good buddies!" He clinked his mug to theirs. "Just sorry Taz isn't here to see it."

Kerry tilted her mug towards him. "I'll drink to that sentiment. Me too."

Me too, she repeated silently, watching the now empty sidewalk with pensive eyes.

* * *

Dar trudged into her hotel room, tossing her jacket over the nearby chair and kicking out of her formal shoes even before she had the door properly closed. "Know what?" She addressed the empty room. "I'm about ready to go work someplace I can wear jeans every damn day."

She was tired, and aggravated, and here she was a near midnight after a very long, stressful day. "Stupid sons of bitches." She cursed, giving her room a glare. "I come all the way up here and the entire pack of jackasses don't have the start of their act together. Pain my ass, and a waste of my time."

Their client's team had just fallen apart trying to answer her questions. Everything she asked was either deferred to their VP Ops who was out of town, or met with an anxious, wide eyed stare of incomprehension.

Their CIO had been pretty much mortified, and offered to take Dar out to dinner to make up for the chaos. He'd turned out to be a vegetarian.

Dar had forced him into a steakhouse, sending a brief mental apology to her mother as she ordered hers rare and spent a desultory couple of hours making polite conversation about nothing significant at all while a pounding ache in her head slowly grew into what she suspected was the beginning of a migraine.

Aggravated wasn't the word for what she was. Disgusted, hurting, sick to her stomach, and just hellfire damned annoyed didn't even come close either.

With a sigh, she started unbuttoning the sleeves on her shirt, slowing as she approached the small table in the reasonably elegant room and spotted a basket on top of it. She didn't remember it being there earlier when she'd thrown her luggage into the room before heading for the client, but then the bottle of champagne resting with distinguished chilliness nearby hadn't been either. "Hm. What have we here?"

She glanced at the tag on the champagne. "Forget it, Stewie. You'll be lucky if I leave you an extra set of tin cans tomorrow." Her lip curled slightly at the sight of her erstwhile dining companion's name. "You can keep your damn fake French bubbly."

She tossed the card on to the table and watched it slide off the polished surface and waft towards the carpet with a supremely disinterested shrug.

Now, the basket. Gift from the management? Dar circled the table and cautiously investigated the unexpected offering. The basket was a nice, wicker one, with a top. She opened the top and peered inside, a smile appearing on her face when the first thing she saw was a packet of good hot chocolate. "So." She sat down and upturned the basket, spilling out it's contents.

Brownies. Cookies. The hot chocolate. Truffles. Dar poked her finger among them and stopped at the last item – a frilly little gauze bag filled with Hershey's kisses. She picked it up and cupped it in her hand, gazing at the silver wrapped treats with eyes that suddenly, unexpectedly, stung.

There was a card attached to the wicker. Dar opened it, already knowing what she'd find inside *Hope you're looking at this as you finish up business early and are watching the sun set over Manhattan. But I bet you ain't. Love, Kerry*

"Bet you're right." Dar answered, in a husky voice. "Wish to hell you were in that basket."

The quiet of the room settled around her as she sat there, her head resting on one hand and a bag of kisses cradled in the other. Finally she sighed and straightened up, opening the net and retrieving one of the candies. "C'mon, Dar. Get a grip. She can use a vacation from you with all this insecurity crap you've been pulling the last week." With a morose look, she popped a kiss into her mouth and chewed it.

Here, alone in her hotel room, she could just lean back and be as depressed as she wanted to.

Her eyes shifted. But it was hard to do that, when she was practically up to her earlobes in thoughtful presents from her beloved partner whose warm smile seemed to reflect off the packaging scattered over the table in front of her.

Even if it was midnight, and she had a migraine. Dar pulled the other chair over and put her feet up on it, leaning back as she consumed more of the kisses. Lacking milk, she reached over and snagged the bottle of champagne, untwisting it's top and popping it's cork in a smooth motion. She poured herself a glass and took a sip, letting her head rest against the back of the chair as she thought about Kerry.

Slowly, the tension eased from her shoulders. She knew Kerry was trying her hardest to be supportive, she only had to unfold the piece of paper in her wallet and reread yesterday's poem to see that. Chocolate chip cookies, her stuff all taken care of.. this… Dar exhaled, acknowledging the deep emotion in her guts the thought triggered in her.

Kerry cared so much about her. It was almost like she could feel her partner's presence, and if she closed her eyes, she could almost sense a pair of ghostly hands on her shoulders and the faint brush of Kerry's lips on the top of her head.

Tears came again, and Dar rested her head on her hand, letting her fingers slide forward to cover her eyes. "God damn it." She cursed at herself softly. "Would you fucking snap out of this already?"

It was ludicrous. It was frustrating. Dar wanted to just slap herself for feeling the way she did, for what she considered such a stupid reason.

For no reason, really. So what if she'd had to tangle with Shari? She'd gotten exactly what she wanted from the trade show, and they'd won, damn it! So what the hell was wrong with her??

I need to kick myself in the ass.

Disgusted, she shoved herself to her feet and went to her window, brushing aside the curtains to lean against the glass and stare out at the city. Behind the thick glass, the sounds were muted, and the garish lights and looming buildings seemed alien beyond their usual to her.

She'd never liked New York. The city had always seemed big, impersonal, nasty and dirty to her, without any of the exciting energy and pulse she'd heard its residents boast of. The streets were narrow, the buildings were overbearing and in some places dirty, and in the heat of the summer, the place stank to high heaven.

Exciting? Dar had driven past the financial district earlier, as the cabby proudly pointed out Wall Street to her. Peering down the rows of buildings, it had appeared nothing more than a huge, impersonal canyon about as picturesque as a bunch of shoeboxes set on end.

The change of subject was helping. Dar took several deep breaths, reassured by the order that seemed to be returning to her thoughts.

She spotted a man walking a dog across the street, and focused on that. He was a street person, she realized, wearing ragged clothing and carrying probably all his possessions on his back. Along side him a mixed breed shepherd dog trotted, his tail wagging proudly. He had a kerchief around his neck that probably cost as much as he owner's shirt, and as Dar watched them move past and studied the man's lifted head and jaunty step, she decided she deserved nothing but a first class butt kicking rather than chocolate baskets and pretty poems.

"Okay, Paladar." She addressed herself, moving back from the window and starting again to unbutton her sleeves. "That's enough. You're over it. Or else."

She slid her shirt off and tossed it over the chair with her jacket, sliding out of her skirt as she walked over to where her suitcase was resting, it's top neatly opened. She removed a pair of shorts and a t-shirt from it, changing into them and breathing in the scent of home as the soft folds settled over her.

"That's better." She took her sundry kit from the overnight bag and went into the bathroom, setting it onto the sink and removing her toothbrush and paste from it. She glanced at the paste and half chuckled, recognizing the flavor. "Grape." She held the paste up. "Thanks, Ker."

Her headache was easing a little, and to further that end, she swallowed a few Advil after she finished brushing her teeth.

Wandering back into the main room she sat down on the bed, flipping the television on more to provide some background noise than anything else. She found CNN and left it going, then she stretched out along the bed, laying down flat and watching the picture sideways.

Some of the CNN anchors, she'd discovered, looked better that way, and she wasn't tempted to try and read the scrolling marquee across the bottom of the screen. The news, however, always seemed to be the same thing. Trouble in the Middle East, typhoons in Tokyo, political wrangling in the US. Never changed.

Dar checked her watch, hesitantly wondering if it was too late to call home. The thought was only barely articulated when her cell phone, resting on the nightstand, went off with a low, rumbling buzz.

She rolled over a few times to get to the head of the bed, and grabbed the phone, glancing at the caller id as she flipped it open. “Hi.”

“Hey, sweetie.”

Dar realized as she listened that there was something about Kerry’s voice that did something to her when she heard it. It was a visceral reaction – she felt her body relax onto the bed, and the tension across her shoulders eased almost like magic. “Ahhh… Kerrison. Now that’s a sound for sore ears.”

Kerry laughed. “Did I wake you up?” She said. “I’m sorry if I did… I just got home and I just wanted to make sure you got there okay and everything was going fine.”

Dar’s eyebrows lifted. “You just got home?” She queried.

“Yeah.” Kerry sounded a trifle abashed. “We went to the pub after class and talked trash for a few hours. Tom got his new bike.” She cleared her throat. “And.. I.. um… did something I think you’re going to kill me for.”

Dar blinked, her eyes searching the arched ceiling. “You did?”

“Yeeahhh… but I’d rather tell you about it in person.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Dar’s brow furrowed. Kerry didn’t sound really worried about it, but… “You know I hate surprises.”

A soft, wry chuckle. “Honey, I know that. But humor me. Please?”

The tone reassured her. “Okay.” Dar sighed. “It’s been a bitch of a day. I’m torked.” She complained. “I hate New York.”

“Wish I was there.” Kerry admitted. “Rather than going to that damn meeting tomorrow. At least I have picking you up to look forward to.”

It made her smile, for a number of reasons. “Hey. Thanks for the basket.” She said. “It was nice to come in to after a lousy night.”

“Aww.” Kerry crooned softly. “Glad to hear that. How’s the sizing going? Did you straighten out what they need?”

Dar sighed. “No. They weren’t ready for me today. I’m going to have to really push tomorrow to get out of here on time. Maybe I should just take the morning flight out and forget about it.

“Dar.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Listen, just do what you can, and get on the plane. It’ll work out.” Kerry said. “At least they put you up in a nice place.”

Dar glanced around. “Yeah.” She shrugged. “It’s okay, but it’s lacking an amenity.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You.”

A low chuckle came through the phone. “See you tomorrow night, sweetheart. Try to take it easy, huh?”

“You too.” Dar smiled. “Night. Love you.”

“Love you too. G’night.”

Dar folded the phone shut and put it on her chest. Now what, she wondered, could Kerry have done?

That Dar would kill her for?

Dar sighed.

It was going to be a long twenty four hours.

* * *

The mid-morning sun was pouring with liquid fervor across the carpet, it’s edge creeping closer and closer to the desk set slightly offset, and at an angle to the door.

Its occupant looked up and studied it, as a puff of dust mingled with the molten light and reflected a dull glitter as the particles drifted towards the floor. “Memo. Get the cleaning crew in here with the vacuum twice a week.” Kerry shook her head and scribbled a note. “No wonder I’ve been sneezing.”

A buzz. “Hey, Kerry, I need a favor.”

Kerry put her cup down and regarded her phone warily. “Sure, Mark. What is it?” She asked, shifting a little and wincing in mild discomfort. “You’re set to come with me to the meeting, right?”

“I sure am, but um.. “ Mark cleared his throat. “Listen, I had to take one of my bikes into the shop last week and it’s ready. Can I catch a ride with you to the meeting, and you drop me off to pick it up after we’re done? If I wait till after we get back, they’ll be closed.”

“Oh, sure.” Kerry agreed readily. “No problem. You about ready to leave?”

“Yep.” Mark said. “Just putting my gear in the backpack. I’ve got the scanners and the drawing pad with me, but I gotta tell you, boss.. I ain’t big D when it comes to this stuff.”

“Is anyone?” Kerry smiled, tilting her head and glancing at the picture on her desk.

“Well.. you sure you don’t want one of the engineers to tag along?”

“Not for this session.” Kerry said. “For one thing, it’s just an intro. For another, I want someone with me who saw the whole circus in Orlando, and for a third thing, you know the political side of this. An engineer won’t.”

“Ppphhh…. Okay.” Mark responded. “Meet you downstairs?”

“Ten minutes.” Kerry agreed, releasing the line. She went back to her mail, clicking on the next in a succession of minor catastrophes. She sipped her herbal tea while she reviewed the note, shifting her gaze to one side briefly as she tried to recall the location of a resource which had probably been ancient when Dar had joined the company.

“Oh, hell.” She picked up her PDA and tapped the screen, typing in a short message. She hit send and waited, twirling the stylus in her fingers until she saw the light of an incoming reply flash. A smile creased her face, and she put the PDA down so she could type something into her pc’s message reply, then sent it on it’s way before she picked her pad back up. *Thanks… what are you doing?*

Having a damn boring breakfast. What are you doing?

Kerry grinned. *Getting ready to go to my meeting. I’m taking Mark.*

Good choice. Orange juice sucks here.

“Oh, sure. Drink it there, but not for me, huh?” Kerry scolded her PDA. *Are you having grits?*

!!!! Grits in Manhattan? You want me not to come back?

Oh, never. Kerry's thumb stroked the screen lightly. *Wish you were here right now.*

The reply took a little longer than before. *Me, too.*

Kerry exhaled. "Boy, what is it with us the past few days?" She murmured, sensing the emotion both in herself and in the responses she was getting. *Well, I'll be waiting at the airport tonight, so you better not be late coming back from that crazy apple.*

Ugh. I'll be there, Ker, but if these jackasses don't get their act together, I might have to stay over another night.

"Ugh is right." Kerry frowned. *Ew.*

(frown)

Kerry tapped her stylus against the screen thoughtfully. She knew Dar would avoid sticking around in New York if it was humanly possible, but she also knew her partner took her job responsibilities very seriously and if she said she had to stay, she did. *Let me know, okay? I hope you don't have to stay.*

You'll be the first to know. I am going to dump this bad omelette and go terrorize people. Good luck with the meeting.

Yeah. *You too. Talk to you later, Dixiecup.*

(grin) Later, Yankee.

The exchange made her feel pleasantly warm and fuzzy inside, though the lingering worry about Dar's state of mind was still there, lurking in the background. So far this morning, at least, her lover sounded her usual feisty self.

However. Kerry scribbled a brief paragraph onto the screen, reviewed it, then hit send, waiting expectantly until she saw the reply.

Saucy little wench. Say that again tonight.

"Heh. I will." Kerry put the PDA down and with a final glance at her own monitor, she set her trackball aside and stood up, carefully shrugging on her metallic bronze colored jacket over the gold silk shirt she'd chosen that morning.

It was a bit flashier than she usually preferred, but Kerry hadn't been brought up in a political rats nest for nothing. She knew how to dress to make an impact, and at this meeting, when she'd be the principal in stead of acting as Dar's trusted right hand, she had a bit of a different image to present.

She finished her tea, then slid the strap of her laptop case over her right shoulder and headed for the door, pausing briefly to check her reflection in the small mirror over the credenza.

It was a relatively sophisticated image that looked back at her. The new haircut framed her face a little differently, lengthening it just a touch, she thought. After a fluff of her bangs, she gave her image a grudging nod, then continued out the door. "Okay, Mayte. I'm outta here."

Her assistant looked up from her work. "Oh, Ms. Kerry. You look so pretty today." She exclaimed. "What a nice jacket!'

Not immune to flattery by any means, Kerry paused and grinned, showing off her outfit. "Like it? Dar said I needed something a little snazzier the last time we went shopping so…" She shrugged slightly.

"Did la jefa pick that one out? She has a good taste." Mayte said.

"Yes, she did." Kerry agreed. "And I like to think she does." She winked at Mayte. "I'm going to be offsite all afternoon if anyone's looking for me. I'll be at the Intercontinental at a prospective new business meeting."

"Si." Mayte nodded. "Ms. Mariana called for the employee meeting, and she said she would move it to next week. She is going to be off tomorrow for her birthday."

"Oh, yikes." Kerry's eyes widened. "How did we miss that? Can we get a cake in for Friday? Something big and decorated really crazy?" She made a mental note to remind Dar, also, who probably would eschew a card but possibly not something far more bizarre, like the spiny cactus she'd gotten Duks for his birthday last time.

"We can do that, sure." Mayte agreed confidently. "I will take care of it, Ms. Kerry. No problem."

With a wave of her fingers, Kerry slipped out the front entrance of her office and headed for the elevators. She felt a little nervous, both from the knowledge that their rivals would be there waiting for her and of the bid process itself.

That, she knew down pat. She'd gone on dozens of new business bids, most as Dar's second, but occasionally as the primary contact when her partner was occupied elsewhere. While her usual job was to come in after the contract had closed and make it all happen, she knew the delicate casting landing the deals took.

Dar was, in the terms of business, a closer. She didn't usually do the initial leg work, she left that to the sales directors and regional managers who worked with the new accounts.

Her job was to come in when the money talk got tough and lay down the bottom line of what they'd accept on a contract, and what they wouldn't.

Her word was law, even over the highest sales executives, and everyone knew only Alastair could, or would, overrule her and he never had.

Never.

Kerry was more than aware of that going into any new bid. She felt responsible for doing her job, of course, but she was also very conscious of being Dar's personal and professional representative. She knew people had expectations of her because of that, and she focused intently on living up to or surpassing them.

It was easy for people to think she did what she did because of her relationship with Dar. Kerry eyed the floor counter on the elevator, waiting for it to descend to the ground. People here at ILS no longer thought that – they were well aware of her capabilities.

But she knew she was going into a situation where their relationship was known better than they were, and so… Kerry sighed.

That got old real fast. She hoped she could just put Michelle in her place before the whole thing got started, and they could stick to business for a change. Maybe she'd get lucky, as Dar had said, and Telegenics would send engineers instead of highly annoying marketing heads whose faces made Kerry want to pick up a sledgehammer.

"Hey, boss." Mark greeted her as the doors opened. He had a nerd backpack slung over one shoulder and was dressed in a more reserved, formal suit than was usual for him. "Ready?"

"Ready." Kerry led the way towards the doors. "Let's go make waves."

* * *

Dar sat back in the thick, leather conference room chair and let her eyes travel around the table, just watching as the discussion moved from seat to seat. She rested her elbows on the chair arms and interlaced her fingers, trying the best she knew how not to either fidget or explode.

Clueless. "So what you're telling me." She finally interrupted the conversation. "Is that the developer can't control the resources his program needs to operate."

"Well.." The hitherto absent VP Ops, Jason Meyer sighed. "Not exactly, but there is a problem with the way the code's written."

“Problem?” Dar’s eyebrows lifted. “Given the test I just ran, they’ve offloaded all their processing to the servers, and it’s running everything across your WAN links to minimal clients. That’s not a problem, that’s a design disaster, Jason.”

“But, it’s an advantage, Dar.” Stewart Godson said. “Every time they make changes, they don’t have to alter the client, and it’s big bucks to us in savings. They just do what they need to do, and it’s taken care of.”

Dar exhaled silently. “I’m pretty conversant with the economies of the mainframe based distribution model, Stewart. It’s been around longer than I have.” She remarked dryly. “And I won’t even disagree with it, on a local scale. My support desk often wishes for the old days, when the users just flipped a switch and got a green screen. However.” She tapped her thumbs together. “GUI based applications are not meant to be pushed across the wide area network if you expect any kind of reasonable response time.”

“Well…”

“Did the vendor do any bandwidth testing?” Dar asked.

Godson shrugged. “He said he did, and that it had an acceptable result.”

Dar just looked at him for a long moment. “What did he define as acceptable?” She asked cautiously.

Godson looked at Meyer, who looked out the window. “Ah.. there’s a language barrier.” Stewart admitted. “The developer is German, and he doesn’t… um.. speak English.”

It was like being stuck in some bizarro Dilbert world. Dar rested her chin against her folded hands and found herself at an uncharacteristic loss for words. “Um.” She finally exhaled, with a slight shake of her head. “What exactly do you want me to do, here?”

The rest of the room’s occupants looked at each other, then focused on Godson. “Well, make it work.” He said. “You can, can’t you?”

“Sure.” Dar replied. “Got a million bucks for infrastructure upgrades?”

Godson actually gasped. “Of course not!”

Dar got up and started pacing, her body’s instincts finally getting the better of her. “Okay.” She lifted both hands and held them out slightly. “You have a new application, written by a firm over in Germany, which is designed to require four times the amount of bandwidth you currently have provisioned for.” She turned and leaned against the table. “So, gentlemen, you have one of three possible choices.” One hand lifted and indicated a finger. “You can scrap the application, make the developer fix it so it works right, or pay for expanding your network.”

Agitated, Godson got up. “Dar, we can’t do any of those. We’ve already paid for the program… it cost us over 10 million dollars! And it’s a good program.. it’ll raise our productivity ten fold!”

Dar just looked at him.

“But we don’t’ have a half a million dollars to put new circuits in. That’s why we called you. You’re our network administrator. Fix it!”

“Your network is based on a usage curve you signed off on.” Dar shot back. “We don’t have to fix it, Stewart. All we have to do is deliver what you paid for, which is the bandwidth you got right now.” She pointed at the CIO.

“Dar, put yourself in my shoes. What would you do?” The man replied, a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Fire myself.” Dar told him, bluntly.

The entire room save the two of them was frozen, everyone looking at their hands folded on the big wooden conference table. The morning sunlight entered into the room via a row of small windows near the top of the wall, but the effect was almost like that of a fishbowl.

Dar felt like one of her Siamese fighting fish, in fact. “So…”

“Can’t you do anything?” Godson muttered. “You guys are supposed to be the best.”

Patience. Dar took three or four breaths before she answered, mindful of the fact that she was, after all, at a client’s site. “Okay. I’ll fix it. Give me the damn source code.” She said. “But I’m warning you, I bill by the hour programming services and I ain’t cheap.”

Godson’s expression brightened, and he turned to his VP. “Can we do that?”

The VP shook his head. “No sir.” He cleared his throat. “We didn’t get the source code.”

Dar circled the table and sat down again in her seat. She propped her chin up on her fists and stared at the lot of them in patent disgust. “You paid ten million for an application and didn’t get source code?” She asked. “Please tell me you have a guarantee the developer will adapt the program to your specifications.”

Godson looked at Meyer.

“I think so.” The hapless VP Ops sighed. “I mean, yes…” He amended hastily as the tall, dark haired woman at the end of the table started to stand up. “Yes, they’ll rewrite whatever we need them to, only.. um.. they kind of have a little problem understanding what it is we need.”

Dar sat back down and leaned back, resuming her brooding posture. “You don’t have source code, you can’t communicate with your developer, you paid for something that doesn’t work on your existing infrastructure and you want me to fix it?”

“Well…” Godson leaned on his elbows. “I mean, who else can we go to, Dar? Really? Okay, so we maybe miscalculated a little, but this project is vital to the company. It has to happen.”

Dar remained quiet for a few minutes, considering her options. They were as few as Godson’s, really – she could walk out and tell them it was their problem not hers, but that meant a disaster for them, and they had a contract up for renewal next year with ILS.

She could force them to pay for new infrastructure, but the thought irked her given the fault really lay not with Godson or his clueless git of a VP Ops, but with the developer who sold them a bill of goods and was now probably laughing their German butts off over on the other side of the world. Also, they had a contract up for renewal, and Dar knew if she forced a half million dollars worth of gear down Godson’s throat, he’d just take it out of her when they were negotiating in twelve months.

So.

On the other hand, Dar reasoned, if she could pull this off, and fix Godson’s problem, she had his cojones in a blender when it came time for him to sign the dotted line in those same twelve months. The only problem with that was…

Shit. “Okay.” Dar finally said. That meant she had to stay. “Call your developer, and have him put a coder on a plane before COB today. When he gets here, he’s gonna do exactly what I tell him to do, and I’ll see if that, plus what I can squeeze out of the pipes, will get your Frankenstein walking.”

Godson looked so relieved, Dar suspected he’d need to change his underwear before leaving the room.

“But…” Meyer spoke up nervously. “His people only speak German.”

“I speak German.” Dar informed him wryly. “Just don’t tell them that, okay? Not until the little bugger gets here and pretends he doesn’t know what’s going on.” She casually took out her PDA and flipped the top open, frowning slightly as she started to scribble on it. After a second, she glanced up to see them all watching her. “Well?”

“Call him.” Godson slapped the table, pointing at his VP. “Get that guy here.. what’s his name, Gunther?”

“Hans.” Meyer opened his cell phone. “Okay, I’ll get him here. It’ll be tomorrow morning, though before he’s landed.”

"Fine." Dar muttered as she scribbled. "Tell you what. I'll bill THEM for having to teach the bastard how to write a decent application, how's that?"

For the first time, Godson chuckled. "Listen, Dar – I know this was a bitch of a thing to dump on you. But you know we really had no choice. You were the best option we had to salvage this… this.."

"Clusterfuck is the technical term we use." Dar leaned back, calculating the days. If the programmer got here tomorrow, and she was very, very lucky, maybe she'd get the hell out of here by the weekend.

Damn. She didn't want to stay here that long. She wanted to get to the airport, get on a plane, and just…

Her PDA chirped, and she glanced down, to see a hand drawn sad face appear on the screen. Then a second message appeared, and she clicked on it.

I am sitting here in this freaking oatmeal colored hotel conference room having to listen to freaking Michelle Graver go on and on about how wonderful her company is and how they're going to revolutionize Quest's business, and you tell me that??? Augguuhhh!!!!

Dar half listened to Meyer's conversation with the programmer as she answered.

Sorry, Ker. More complicated than I thought. I'll talk to you later about it. Might get out of here Friday night.

She sent the message. The PDA beeped almost immediately.

FRIDAY!!!!!!????????????????

"Dar?" Meyer called her name hesitantly, and waited for her to look up. "They can do it. The guy'll be on a flight that gets in here eight AM tomorrow. How's that?"

"Good." Dar nodded, then went back to her messaging. *I'm not happy about it either. I have to go get a couple spare pairs of clothes, and these bastards are going to cope with them being jeans and t-shirts.* She tapped the stylus a few times. *Sorry. Didn't mean to stick you with the crap. Or the crappy jerks from TM.*

"Here's the game plan." Dar looked up after she sent the last message. "We start with laying out the design changes tomorrow morning. I'll give our German friend a framework to start with, then I'll see what I can do with our existing infrastructure to maximize it. You may end up being a beta site."

"Okay." Godson nodded, a bit nervously. "Do we get a rebate for that?"

Dar stared at him, both eyebrows lifting.

"Just kidding." The CIO smiled weakly.

The PDA beeped. Dar's eyes dropped to it, scanning the message and gaining a faint twinkle as a ghost of a smile crossed her face.

I think Michelle and Shari got my silent mental message because they've been leaving me alone. My turn to lie like a fish is next, then we're all supposed to have lunch. If I throw chicken Kiev at them, will you fire me so I can fly to NY and be with you instead?

"Dar?"

"Hm?" Dar glanced across the table. "All set?" She realized the room had been watching her, and shrugged, holding up the PDA. "Telling my staff back in Miami not to expect me. I've got a couple of hot irons someone's having to cover." *BRB* She scrawled hastily, hitting send.

"Uh… yeah, we're set." Meyer agreed. "Is there… can we do anything until he gets here? Run some.. um.. tests, or…"

Dar shook her head. "No." She battled the urge to ignore the room and chat with Kerry instead, finding it disturbingly difficult to keep her concentration on the clients in front of her. "Just tell everyone to relax, that you know it's slower than molasses, but that it's being worked on." She stood up and slipped her PDA into her pocket. "And now, gentlemen, I'm going to make arrangements for the rest of my responsibilities while I'm working on this little problem of yours. I'll see you first thing in the morning."

They hastily scrambled to their feet and started yammering thanks and goodbyes as she strode across the room, heading for the door and the dubious freedom of the Manhattan streets.

Outside, she was hit with a blast of hot air, and all the sounds of a busy city that jarred on her sensitive ears. She ducked between two buildings to escape the worst of the sun and opened her PDA, leaning against the brick of the building as she started to write. Finishing, she hit send, then looked around her. "So." She unbuttoned the collar button on her shirt. "What in the hell do you do on a summer day in New York?"

With s sigh, she stepped out onto the sidewalk and began hunting for the proper spot to find a cab. "Guess I'll be finding out." She fixed an oncoming yellow victim with a direct stare, making eye contact with the driver and pulling him over to the curb apparently by the force of her own will. "Shit." She sighed, opening the back door. "Now I won't find out what she did for two whole damn days."

Bah.

* * *

Dar reviewed her options, once she'd changed out of her suit into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. There was, she had to grudgingly admit, a lot of things to do in New York, but most of them didn't really appeal to her.

Of course, she could stay in her hotel room and catch up on email. She gave her laptop a dour look, leaning over to check the screen. It was dark with new lines, some of them with red exclamation points next to them.

Dar read the first two, then impatiently shoved the laptop away, deciding to postpone the task until later. The senders idea of urgent didn't jive with hers, and she had other things she needed to be doing. With a grunt, she got up fro the bed and went to the small table, grabbing up one of the magazines there and dropping into the chair by the window.

Faintly, the sound of the city came through the glass. Dar turned her head and peered down at the street, but after a brief moment, she lost interest and went back to deciding what to do.

She flipped through the hotel guide restlessly, passing up coach rides in Central Park she'd have jumped at if Kerry was there, and the miles of shopping available to those who were in to that kind of thing. Fancy stores whose advertisements probably cost more than the average family made in a month. Dar's nostrils twitched, as she reflected on the fact that despite all her resources, her tastes really hadn't altered to high priced snootiness all that much.

Diamond bracelets? Well….

Dar occasionally enjoyed shopping, but usually when it was her and Kerry out for the day, getting stuff they needed, but also mixing it up with lunch, or a trip to the computer store, or something they both found interesting.

They liked a lot of the same things. Dar had always found that comforting. At first she'd wondered if Kerry was pretending to like things just because she wanted to make them seem more compatible, but after a while she realized they really did like the same stuff and in the cases when they didn't, she'd learned to read Kerry's facial expressions so accurately she knew in a single twitch of a muscle in her cheek what she was thinking.

That was so nice. Dar exhaled, and went back to her search for amusement. Maybe she could get Kerry a diamond bracelet. Would she like that?

She frowned, imagining Kerry's reaction. Her partner liked pretty things, but she often seemed unimpressed by expensive ones. In fact, the more inconsequential the gift Dar gave her, the more Kerry seemed to cherish it.

Hm.

She needed to do a little shopping for herself, but what she really wanted was some kind of….ah. Dar spread the magazine open and gazed at the advertisement, a quarter page near the back. It featured the picture of an aircraft carrier, and a grin spread across Dar's face as she read the details. "The Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum Yeah. Now that's more my style."

She checked the address. It was on the Hudson River, near mid-town, not all that far from her. Walking was an option. Taxies were an option. Dar considered carefully. Hm. But so was the subway. She drummed her fingers on the magazine, remembering her last sojourn underground.

Chicago, when they'd gotten stuck in the dark under the river, and she'd practically ran out of the station at the other end, nearly getting her and Kerry into a lot of trouble.

The clenching in her guts made her angry. "God damn it, not that too." She made her decision and got up, adding her wallet to her back pocket and sticking the room key in there as well. "Maybe I'll ride that damned thing until they throw me off."

Grabbing her sunglasses, Dar marched out of the room and closed the door behind her, heading for the elevator with a grimly determined look on her face.

She was losing patience with herself. Dar waited for the elevator to open on the bottom floor of the Hyatt, and then she crossed the lobby and exited the hotel's ornate and stately front door.

Outside, the heat slammed into her, but lacking her wool suit, Dar now shrugged it off as she would have back home. She slipped her sunglasses on and directed her attention to the building adjacent to her hotel. "Grand Central Station. Bet I can catch something there." She headed for the building, trotting up the steps and entering the wide, ornate doors.

Inside, she stopped, drawing to one side and blinking as she took in the vast, cavernous chamber that spread to all sides around her. The scale was immense, but more than that, there was an indefinable sense of history here that even Dar picked up on.

It was also beautiful. "Huh." Dar slowly walked forward, and started down the steps into the main hall. The ceiling curved overhead, painted in a deep blue, featured the signs of the zodiac and the stone walls seemed freshly scrubbed, their construction solid and imposing.

Slowly, she made her way down to the floor, looking around at the status boards listing trains leaving for points outside the city. People walked all around her, intent on getting to their destinations and she was forced to restrict her gawking lest she be bowled over by aggressively marching city residents.

Her PDA went off. Dar stepped to one side and pulled it out of her pocket, glancing down at the screen.

What's the word in Spanish for fornicating pig?

Dar looked around in reflex, clearing her throat before she removed the stylus and considered her answer. *As opposed to a pig that's just standing there eating?*

A man glanced at her as he hurried by, making eye contact as he looked over his sunglasses. Dar gave him a brief smile, then returned her attention to the PDA as it chirped.

Yes.

With a sigh, Dar shook her head. "Hope you aren't getting into that much trouble, sweetheart. *Fornicando puerco, but I'm hoping you're not putting that on a PowerPoint slide screen.*

She only had a moment to wait for the answer.

Oh, yeah. A hundred memorable quotations from the inimitable Dar Roberts, annotated. It's gonna be great!

Dar laughed in pure reflex. *Troublemaker.*

Just venting a little of my frustration with some help from my best friend. The fornicando puerco is finally done. My turn. Later. Love you.

Love you too. Dar leaned against the stair railing and smiled, letting her eyes linger over the words before she sent them and tucked the machine away. A small kiosk caught her eye and she dodged through the crowd, arriving at the souvenir stand without getting run over. The stand had an old photograph of the station, in black and white, with a striking series of sunbeams pouring through the upper windows.

Kerry would most certainly appreciate it. "I'll take one of these." She selected a poster tube and handed over the money for it to the dour, unlit cigar chomping man behind the desk.

"Sure ya don't want it in a nice frame, lady? Got a great bargain here on this one." He indicated an ornate, gilded monstrosity.

"No thanks." Dar politely refused. "I've got to carry it on the plane. This is easier."

"Whatever. Later. G'bye." The man turned to another customer, leaving Dar standing there with her poster in her hand slightly taken aback by the gruff attitude.

Collecting herself, Dar edged against one of the walls and peered around, finally spotting the entrance to the subway. She approached it, pausing a moment before she started down the steps.

The walls were all bright and cheery, but for every second she was on the stairs, Dar was aware of the fact that she was moving further and further under the ground. Her throat went dry, and she swallowed in reflex as she reached the first platform, and was faced with a number of posted signs laying out the different routes.

Dar stopped in front of a subway map, using the excuse of studying it to allow her heartbeat to settle. She could still see the steps up from where she was, and there was sufficient space around her. "Okay." She exhaled, focusing on the maze of colored lines in front of her. After a moment, her brow creased. "Jesus." She muttered. "I've seen spider webs less complicated than this."

The thought of a taxi suddenly became extremely appealing. Dar glanced over her head at the steel infrastructure, wincing a little as some train nearby rattled past and a gust of cold air blew against her. "What in the hell am I doing?"

Seeing if you have any guts at all left? Her inner voice mocked her.

With a scowl, she turned and walked to one of the token machines, studying it for a minute before she inserted a few bills and retrieved a square of cardboard for her troubles. She looked at it, then her expression brightened. "Hey. I can prove to Kerry I did this."

Looking around to find her route, Dar started off down a passageway, sidestepping a man playing a flute and two women selling bags of.. "Hm." She paused and purchased a bag of churros, taking one out to nibble on as she explored further into the maze.

Her selected route was the Times Square shuttle, since that appeared to let out reasonably close to the Intrepid museum, and more importantly, wasn't that far underground. Dar found the correct platform relatively easily, and leaned against the metal support, waiting for the train to arrive.

Okay, so far, so good. Dar glanced around her, then she walked down the platform to where a small set of steps seemed to lead downward. She peeked down them, spotting more signs leading to more platforms, leading to different trains, which seemed to run in every direction at many different levels.

The complexity and seeming random-ness unexpectedly intrigued her. It was almost as though some kids had taken six or seven of their individual train sets and threw them all together, pouring glue on top and hoping for the best.

Dar turned and surveyed the station she was standing on, taking in the tile mosaics, and the patchwork grid of the ceiling beams that crossed and re-crossed each other. The steel

members seemed old, almost ancient, though the station tiles appeared new, and the facility was well kept.

Hm.

The train arrived, in a clatter of wheels and a blast of musky air. Dar waited until the occupants had exited, and most of the people waiting to enter had gotten in. Then she stepped onto the train, appreciating the chill of the air conditioning as she selected a seat on one side, near the back and settled into it.

The train was about half filled. Dar studied her subway map, giving the doors an impatient look every few seconds when they obstinately refused to close. As the train sat there, a few latecomers jumped on, and one of them, a tall bronze skinned girl in black denim and leather took the seat next to Dar.

They studied each other for a minute. Then the girl lifted one of her leather boot encased feet and put it on her opposite knee. "Yo." She addressed Dar pleasantly. "You ain't from here, huh?"

Dar's eyebrows cocked slightly. Behind her sunglasses, she glanced down at herself, comparing her appearance to the appearance of the rest of the train's occupants.

Hm. Apparently New Yorkers in downtown Manhattan didn't dress like refugees from a Jimmy Buffet jamboree. Dar spared her tropical fish t-shirt, with it's half cropped sleeves with mild bemusement. "No." She allowed briefly.

"Yeah." The girl folded her arms over her chest. "That's what I figured. Cause us New Yorkers don't go round half naked like that, y'know."

Since the train wasn't moving, Dar decided conversation wouldn't hurt, and it would keep her mind off the butterflies in her stomach. "Why not?" She asked. "It's a hundred degrees outside."

"Just cause we don't." The girl responded readily. "I mean, you dress like that, you just asking for guys to come out, and be all like, touching you, and all that jazz. You know?"

Dar tilted her head and let her sunglasses drop down on her nose slightly, making actual eye contact with the women. "No, I don't." She drawled, hearing the touch of molasses enter her tone.

"Yo. You got some really cool eyes. I like that color." The woman complimented her. "They real?"

Dar blinked, her brows arching up. Then she realized what the woman meant. "Yeah." She pushed her sunglasses back up and leaned back. "What's with the train?" She changed the subject to one she figured the woman would know better than she did.

"This?" The woman pointed up over her head. "Oh, I don't know. They just do that sometimes. Just make em stop, bam. Like that."

Erf. Dar glanced at the still open door. Just then, though, the speakers crackled to life over their heads and a gravely voice intruded into the train.

There has been a power failure up the line and all the trains are stopped. Do not stand in the doorways. The trains can move at any time. Thank you.

It was like an omen. Dar figured. This was God's way of telling her to get the hell off the damn subway and go take a cab like any other self respecting Floridian would. She started to get up, but as she did, the doors whipped closed, and the train started moving unexpectedly, throwing her back into her seat. "Guess we're leaving now." She commented dryly.

"So." The girl edged nearer. "Where ya from, what's ya name?" She held out a hand. "I'm Scuzzy."

Dar eyed her in alarm. *It's a sixty second ride, Dar. Deal with it.* "Dar. I'm from Miami."

"Cool!" Scuzzy shook her hand firmly. "That's a cool name, and Miami's a cool place." She said.

"Thanks." Dar smiled briefly.

Abruptly, the train slowed and stopped again. Dar glanced outside, and saw nothing but black tunnel walls. Behind her glasses, she closed her eyes and tried not to think about how many tons of granite buildings were perched over her head, pressing down on tunnels she was sure were far too old based on the ones she'd seen in the station.

"Yo. You like hockey?"

Dar opened one eye. "What?"

"Me and my buds, we're going down to the ice rink and play killer hockey. You wanna come play? I can see you do somethin' with all them muscles you got."

Dar swore she heard creaking outside.

Subways, she realized, were looking like a bad, bad mistake.

* * *

"Fudge." Kerry glowered at her PDA. "Fudge, fudge, fudge."

“Something wrong, boss?” Mark whispered.

Kerry rocked back in her chair, shedding some of her fidgets. “Ah… Dar’s stuck in New York.” She sighed. “Maybe until Friday.”

Mark scribbled a few things on his pad, making a show of paying attention to Michelle Graver’s presentation. “Well, she’d a been wasted being here. Hell, you’re wasted being here. We coulda sent one of the sales interns to do this crap.”

“Mm.” Kerry had to agree. “It’s all a dog and pony show.” She checked her watch, wishing her turn was over and they at least had the minor entertainment of lunch to look forward to. “Oh well, it’s the start off session. I guess it was to be expected. I’m glad Dar’s not here.”

Totally not true.

“She’d be wigging.” Mark muttered wryly.

Totally true.

Kerry leaned on her elbow and pictured her partner’s restless attitude without any problem at all. Her PDA chirped and she glanced at it, reading Dar’s longer, more coherent message absorbedly. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She groused under her breath. “You’re gonna owe me for this, you little southern fried…”

“Uh… Kerry, did you say something?”

Kerry closed her PDA and dragged her attention back to Michelle. “Nope.” She sighed. “Isn’t it time for lunch, yet?”

Mark looked at his wrist. “It’s only eleven o-clock.”

Green eyes studied him from under half lowered lids. “I missed breakfast.” Kerry admitted. “I was in a rush this morning because I overslept.”

“Forgot the old alarm, huh?”

Kerry managed a wry grin. “My alarm’s in Manhattan.” She watched Mark’s face color a trifle. “You asked.”

“Sure did.” The MIS manager agreed ruefully. “TMI, boss. TMI.”

“Mm.” Kerry listened to the speech with one ear, hopeful she was detecting a sense of closing in Michelle’s voice. “Sorry about that. But it’s true. Dar’s better than any clock I’ve ever seen, and it’s really hard to hit her snooze button.” She rested her head on her

fist, her eyes traveling slightly as she saw a newcomer enter, walking quietly over to sit by Shari and lean close to talk to her.

Something familiar about the man made her frown, and she nudged Mark's arm slightly. "Who is that guy?"

Mark swiveled in his seat and looked. "Hey.. isn't that the guy from Tech TV? The one who was interviewing you and big D?"

Ah. No wonder he looked familiar. "Uh… huh." Kerry mused. "Now, isn't he cozy with the competition. Wonder what's up with that?" The man seemed very friendly with Shari, and as she watched, he took out a pad and a camera, put the camera on the table, and scribbled some notes on the pad. "Ohh… ho. What do you want to bet he's not asking for advice on home DSL routers?"

"So, in sum." Michelle cleared her throat. "We hope to show the kind of value any company looking to outsource their IT solutions has a right to expect." She rested her hands on the lectern. "We hope to open a new era in providing the types of services to all companies that only the largest, richest companies have been able to afford in the past." Her eyes wandered, apparently randomly, to Kerry's and held there for a moment, then moved on.

Kerry deliberately flipped open the top to her PDA and scribbled a note on it, then tapped send.

"Towards that end, I'm sure you'll be delighted to hear, Mr. Quest, we have invited a member of the distinguished technology press to join our bid team, and chronicle our progress, and how this challenge evolves into what I'm sure will be a great success for whoever wins it." Michelle went on, smiling easily and giving Shari a knowing look.

"Hm. Somehow I got the impression that Quest dude didn't want this whole thing publicized." Mark muttered under his breath. "He doesn't look real happy."

Kerry observed the forced smile on Quest's face. "No, he doesn't." She agreed, sending a last note on her PDA before she closed it up.

"Thank you for your patience and attention." Michelle surrendered the lectern at last, taking her notes and retreating around the side of it before she headed back to her seat to a smattering of applause.

"Ah. Yes." Peter Quest scratched his cheek, then stood up. "Ah, thank you, Ms. Graver. Now, ah, before we break for lunch, we have one final presentation." He half turned towards Kerry and raised his brows. "Ms.. ah, Stuart?"

Kerry stood up and gently pushed her chair in, then walked around to the lectern and rested her elbows on it, leaning forward and waiting until the room's pre-lunch

restlessness stilled and she had their attention. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” She allowed a faint, self deprecating smile to appear on her face, and took the time to make eye contact with those interested enough to be looking at her. “When I was asked to present a basic infrastructure outline here, I wasn’t notified of the three ring circus.”

A number of faces twitched, not expecting the gentle attack.

“If I had been, I’d have brought my performing SEAL and dancing hamster.” Kerry straightened up, to a sudden, surprised round of laughter. “Unfortunately for you all, I only have an IT infrastructure presentation, so I vote to plow through it so we can all have lunch, how’s that?”

Another round of laughter, and some applause. “You buying?” One of her competitors shouted.

“How about I cook?” Kerry shot back, with an engaging grin. “I’m told I make a killer PB and J.”

The crowd loosened up and perked up at the same time, exactly the response Kerry was going for. She waited for the laughter to peter out, and sorted her brief notes.

“Oh, sorry.” Michelle half stood, a sour sweet expression on her face. “Did you need the projector? I’m afraid we’re pretty connected to it.”

“Nah.” Kerry removed a small remote from her pocket. “What’s the point in being the richest kids on the block, if you don’t have the neatest toys?” She pressed a button. “We don’t need no stinking projector.” She waited for the thin laser wand to emerge from the back of her laptop, and raise up, opening the aperture and shooting a thin blue beam just over her shoulder. Kerry glanced back and adjusted the beam slightly, then triggered her presentation to start. “As I was saying….”

Behind her, a neatly drawn and notated network diagram appeared, starting with a core, and spreading out to the edge devices, all neatly encapsulated inside the outline of a ship.

Kerry turned and peered at it, then swiveled back around to the room. “We have a saying in the IT biz.” She said. “Parts is parts.” With a laser pointer she indicated first the core, then the remote devices. “Like in any network, best case practices dictate we treat this ship’s infrastructure just like we would any sound network. The biggest differences we see are the need for solid, absolute redundancy and the need to bolt every darn thing to the floor to keep it from pitching overboard.”

“And pay a premium for it.” Shari remarked.

“Well, that’s true.” Kerry agreed cheerfully. “We don’t generally give our clients blue light specials.” She smiled at Shari. “But I can see the incentive for that for companies with… fewer resources… than ours.” Her finger clicked on the button, and she waited

for the screen to paint with Dar's next drawing, an intricate schematic of the primary piece of equipment she intended to use for the bid. "To make a long story short, folks – this is what we intend on using. The design allows for all the functionality Mr. Quest specified. Our complete schematics will be put into his hands for review, and frankly, that's really all I have to say regarding our intentions."

She clicked through two more screens showing some general dimensions of the equipment Dar had chosen, then stopped on the last one, which showed a pretty graphic in several colors that illustrated the interconnected types of communication which would flow through the system.

"The bottom line, ladies and gentlemen." Kerry made eye contact again, pinning Quest last of all. "Is not who can do this the cheapest and easiest. Anyone can do that."

Shari snorted.

"Economy is a strong motive, Ms. Stuart." Quest reminded her.

Kerry lightly shrugged both shoulders at him. "In the end, Mr. Quest, you're the one who has to stand behind whatever decision you make." She said. "So you have to decide how much you're willing to risk in terms of reliability and protection. Because that's what this is going to come down to."

"B…"

"Parts is parts." Kerry reminded him. "We all know how to do this. Just because it's on a ship doesn't change anything. " She pointed at him. "But you're the one who has to face the rest of your company and your customers if what you buy doesn't hold up."

Quest fiddled with his pencil, clearly uncomfortable. "Yes, well, that's all fine. Are you done?"

Kerry clicked off her projector, and watched it fold neatly back against the spine of her laptop. "Yep, I sure am." She tucked the remote in her pocket and took her notes, which basically consisted of the words 'kiss my ass.' "Let's take a break, shall we?"

Everyone stirred, and started to rise. Kerry circled back around to her seat and pulled her laptop case up onto the chair, opening the top so she could slip her machine inside it's padded bay. The speech had been a trifle more aggressive than she'd planned, but after Michelle's pandering, she knew she had to make a mark and distinguish their plan as something different.

So she had. Kerry was very aware of the eyes on her as she put her gear up, and she carefully and deliberately slid the leather strap into it's buckle and fastened it before she looked up. "Okay." She half turned to face Mark. "Ready?"

“Whatever you say, boss.” Mark responded, already shouldering his own briefcase. His face showed that he was out of his depth and he knew it. “Lead on.”

Kerry only wished she could lead them both right on out of the hotel and down the street to a little sandwich shop Dar favored with little ambiance and great food. Instead, she knew they’d have to suffer through lunch at the hotel which would likely be robust with carefully shaped lettuce leaves and relatively tasteless.

Ah well.

They all filed out, and she and Mark politely waited as several of the other bidders hurried to follow Michelle and Shari and their reporter guest. After the last had gone on, she fell in step at the end, giving Quest a half nod as he picked up his notepad and prepared to join them.

“You know, Ms. Stuart.” Quest kept his voice down as they left the room. “I didn’t really appreciate your attitude up there.”

Kerry hooked her thumb through her laptop case strap. “Well, you know, Mr. Quest… you asked for competitive bids. I think you got what you asked for.” She regarded him briefly. “I’m not here to blow smoke up your tail. I think you know that.”

He didn’t answer for a few steps, as they watched the other bidders cluster around the reporter. “Where’s Ms. Roberts?” He asked. “I thought for sure she’d be here for this. She has some very significant competitors there.”

Kerry resisted the urge to pull out her PDA. “Dar? She’s working with a client of ours who has a major application issue they came to her to solve.” She related.

“So that’s more important than signing new business?”

A dry chuckle. “If you were the other client, how would you want me to answer that?” Kerry said, as she started down the steps towards the fountain bedecked luncheon restaurant. “Dar put time in on the design for your account. Now she’s left it in my hands. We’re both comfortable with that, I’m sorry if you aren’t.”

Slightly taken aback, Quest drew in a breath and edged slightly away from her. “Ms. Stuart..”

Kerry pointed suddenly at the reporter. “I thought you said you wanted to keep this quiet, Mr. Quest. How does that impact your plans?”

Quest fell pensively silent. “It was unexpected.” He admitted finally, as they reached the bottom of the steps. “But it’s all that geek talk. No one I care about will see it or give a damn.” He shrugged. “So if you want to spend all your time pissing on each other, Ms. Stuart, and giving them ratings – go for it. I’ve got more important things to do.”

Kerry watched him walk off, glad of the few moments quiet respite before they joined the others. “Know what?’ She remarked to her silent companion.

“What?” Mark made a vague clucking noise.

“You know that look Dar gets, the one where she sort of squints, and you think she’s going to bite someone?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I’m so understanding that look right now.”

Mark sighed. “Man, you guys do this all the time? I don’t think I could handle that. These guys suck.”

Kerry patted him on the back and had to silently, if ruefully agree as they reached the group and joined the rest of the nattily suited men and women in sitting down at two large, round tables. “You know what Dar would do?” She whispered behind her hand as they took chairs next to each other.

“Cheeseburger, fries and a shake.” Mark whispered back. “Somewhere else.”

Kerry took her napkin and popped it open, laying it across her lap with an easy grace as she reviewed the menu card placed on her plate. “Yeah.” She exhaled, finding herself directly across from Shari, who took pleasure in smiling fiercely at her. “Or she’d order a pizza.” She found herself smiling for a different reason. “Delivered to the table. But we can’t, so let’s just make the best of it.” She lifted her glass and sipped some cold water from it.

It was going to be a very, very long day.

PART 8

DAR EMERGED INTO THE SUNLIGHT ONCE AGAIN, AFTER HER SIXTY SECOND SUBWAY ride had drawn itself out to twenty minutes. She had, however, apparently made a friend, since Scuzzy showed no signs of continuing on her way as they exited together from what had appeared to Dar as a maze a minotaur would have run screaming in terror from.

Subway station? Dar glanced behind her at one of the many stairwells burping people up out of the ground. More like a nightmare from some science fiction writer's imagination.

The heat had gotten a little worse, or maybe she'd just gotten used to the cooler confines of the underground world.

"So, like, Dar. Where ya goin?" Scuzzy interrupted her thoughts. "Jus coming down to see the Square?"

"No. Here." Dar pulled the brochure out of her pocket and displayed it, turning slightly as she tried to orient herself in the busy street. Buildings rose on all sides, and the roads seemed to run together from all directions.

What the hell?

After a moment of blinking, she realized why the place looked so damn familiar. She'd never been here before that she could remember, and now she took a moment to just stand and look around.

Times Square. Dar cocked her head to one side, realizing she'd always considered the place to be more of a stage set than a real city street. Her gaze shifted.

Streets.

Whatever.

The marquees raced across the building fronts just like they did on television, and Dar tilted her head back to look up at the post she'd seen the ball drop from on countless New Years Eves. Then she chuckled and returned her attention to finding her way to the Hudson river.

"You like, into that stuff?" Scuzzy had kept right up with her. "Like, guns?" She handed back the brochure.

Dar stopped and looked at her.

"Hey!" The woman held up both hands. "It's cool! No problem! I'm into that show Gunsmoke too, you like that show? It's great!"

"No." Dar figured out what direction to go in and started walking. "My father was in the Navy." She checked the street numbers, and started down one with some confidence. She was mildly surprised when Scuzzy chose to join her, shambling down the sidewalk at her side. She gave the woman a speculative look.

"I figured I'd make sure you got there okay." Scuzzy explained. "Then I'm goin back to get the bus."

Dar stopped walking, forcing the girl to stop as well or else plow into her. She took off her sunglasses and looked her persistent companion up and down, then repeated the exercise on herself. She finally returned her stare to Scuzzy's face, and lifted both eyebrows meaningfully. "Thanks." She drawled. "But I'll get there okay."

Scuzzy studied her for a minute. "You tryin to tell me something?"

With a faint sigh, Dar returned her sunglasses to their perch on her nose and started walking again, shaking her head. A breeze picked up, puffing fitfully between the buildings and bringing to her the unmistakable scent of water. She glanced at the storefronts she was passing, intrigued by the variety of clubs whose identity changed at almost every stride. "Something for everyone, huh?" She remarked, passing a jazz club next to something she imagined catered to the Goth crowd.

"You say something?" Scuzzy peered at her. "Hey, you ever been here to the city?"

"Yeah, I've been here." Dar finally relented, edging over slightly so the woman could walk next to her and not plow into the trees planted incongruously in the center of the sidewalk. "I'm not really fond of it."

"Miami's kinda different, huh?"

Dar looked around her with a wry chuckle. "Like night and day. I wouldn't trade em for a million."

"No, huh?" The woman looked around. "Well, y'know, this used to be a really tough neighborhood." She said. "Times Square, man, you didn't want to come down around here. But they fixed it up pretty nice now."

Dar peered at the theatre they were passing, realizing she'd heard it's name half her life and never realized where the hell it was. "Bad neighborhood, huh?" She asked with interest.

"Oh, yeah, Absolutely." Scuzzy nodded. "Hookers lined up tits to ass back there, yeah?"

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely!"

It was hard to picture all those people in mink coats coming to see shows stepping around bums and drug dealers. Dar put the idea away for later study, and ducked to one side as a man walking a Dalmatian hurried by. Or maybe it was a Dalmatian walking the man, as the dog seemed far more relaxed than his owner. "You been here when it was?" She asked Scuzzy. "When it was a bad place?"

Scuzzy seemed delighted Dar was warming up to her. "Oh, sure." She made a dismissive gesture. "Me and my bro, we used to come down here all the time back then, cause we'd take the bus out to DC to visit my old man."

"Ah." Dar murmured. "Must have been scary."

"Nah. Just different." Scuzzy peered behind her in the direction of Times Square. "Lotta people usta live over there, y'know? Not no more. I dunno where they went now. The Park, maybe. You gotta have money to live over there now." Her nose wrinkled a bit. "Ritzy."

Dar was struck with an unexpected parallel. "Yeah." She agreed. "That happened down on South Beach, too."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. It used to be retirement hotels for all these older people. Twenty bucks a week, something like that.” Dar said. “Then they put all the money in there and now I think twenty bucks maybe gets you parking for the night. Maybe.”

Maybe. “Sucks sometimes.” Dar admitted. “You pay thirty bucks for a coke and a damn hot dog.”

“That’s right!” Scuzzy agreed heartily. “You got that right, yeah?” She kicked a rock, which rattled head of them and rambled through the wrought iron steps that lead down into someone’s basement. “So where did them old people go?”

Dar slowed, her head tipping to one side a little as she thought. “I don’t know.” She finally responded. “But I remember what it felt like when we lived on the Navy base, and they were talking about closing it.” A ghost of a memory floated into focus for her. “They wanted to sell the place to build a supermarket.”

“Oh, that’s cold.” Scuzzy patted her on the back. “So you lived with all those navy guys huh? That must have been cool.”

“Yeah, it was.” Dar shrugged the memories off. “So where are you going on a bus today, Scuzzy?” She asked, as they reached the end of the street and were faced with a four lane road separating them from the piers. To one side, Dar could see the distinctive shape of the Intrepid, and found a smile forming.

“No place.” Scuzzy shrugged. “Just get me a ticket and ride somewhere and back. I got laid off last week.”

Dar found herself snagged by one of the fits of recklessness that occasionally happened to her. “What do you do?” She asked, turning and leaning against a light pole. “That you got laid off for?”

Taken slightly aback, her erstwhile companion made a nervous motion with her hands. “Oh, you know, just office stuff. I was putting in traffic tickets, callin people. Anything they want me to do, but they got cut so's they had to let me off.”

“You worked for the police?” Dar clarified.

“Yeah, kinda.” Scuzzy seemed abashed. “So like, that’s why I don’t like people getting into trouble, you know?” She cleared her throat. “So whadda you do, Dar from Miami? Like what you get paid for?”

“I work with computers.” Dar removed her PDA from her pocket and opened the flap. She selected a square of white cardboard, then flipped it over and fished her pen out and scribbled on the back of it for a moment.

"Yeah?" Scuzzy perked right up. "Oh, man, you lucked out. I love computers. I got me a internet mail thing at the library last month and I love going to check that out."

Dar reviewed what she'd written, then held the card up, reverse side forward for Scuzzy to see. "Go there." She indicated the address on the back. "When you get there, give the guard at the desk this." She reversed the card, the ILS logo flashing briefly in the sunlight. "Tell them I said to hire you." She handed the card over.

Scuzzy looked at the card, then looked at Dar. "For real?" She asked, after a long moment. "Like, no shit? If I give them this thing, they're not gonna throw my ass out and call the cops?"

Dar chuckled. "No." She spent a brief instant of deliciously evil anticipation on just how much twitching she'd cause the company's staid Manhattan office. "They'll take care of you."

Scuzzy looked down at the card again, and turned it over. "Chief Information Officer." She lifted her eyes to Dar's face. "You get good money for that?"

"Yeah." Dar nodded. "But you'll do all right too."

"Yeah?" Now a touch of incredulity entered Scuzzy's tone. "You know somethin? I woke up today and I knew somethin' was gonna happen to me." She carefully tucked the card away in the pocket of her shirt and stuck her hand out. "This is all right."

Dar took it and gave it a shake. "See ya." She released Scuzzy's hand and turned as the light changed and gave her the opportunity to cross over to the pier.

"See yah." Scuzzy repeated, waiting until the tall figure had disappeared from sight into the pier's square frontage. "Ain't that a kick in the ass?" She removed the card and looked at it. "I'm gonna go get me a job, so screw you, momma, saying not to talk to nobody on the subway!"

Turning she sauntered back down the street, heading back towards Times Square.

* * *

Dar stopped before she went through the gates into the museum, taking a moment to enjoy the breeze off the water, and the sense that she'd emerged from the close confines of the city at least for a while. She found a bench and sat down on it, retrieving her PDA and opening it up.

To her surprise, a message she hadn't caught was waiting. She tapped on it.

Have I ever told you just how much I love you?

Dar blinked a few times, then rubbed the back of her hand over her eyes impatiently. *Matter of fact, you have. But I never get tired of hearing it.*

She could almost hear the sigh in Kerry's words when she responded.

I'm sitting at a table across from Shari and Michelle, suffering through an endive salad with the prospect of chicken breast over rice pilaf before me.

Ugh. Dar extended her legs into the sun and crossed them. *Well, I'm sitting near the Hudson River, and I just sent a vagabond over to the local office to get a job.*

(laugh) You call me a troublemaker?

Dar smiled in reflex. *Hey, I rode on the subway to get here.*

J *You did? No fair! I wasn't there to go with you!*

The lump in her throat was getting to her. Dar shifted on her bench, then rolled her stylus in her fingers before she answered. *No one was here to see me chicken out!*

L *But you didn't.*

True. *Yeah, specially since the damn thing got stuck three times with me on it. They don't like me.* Dar allowed. *Well, I'm going in to see the Intrepid, then maybe I'll find one of those hot dog stands and get sick to my stomach.*

(chuckle) Have one for me, since I'm suffering here with a raunchy vinaigrette. Hey – get a sailor hat so I can see my life sized hamster dance.

Oh, god. Dar started laughing, her humor restored. *All right. Take it easy and go grab a burger after the meeting. That's what I do.*

I will. Love you.

Dar felt as warm inside suddenly as she did outside. *Love you too.* She sent the message and stood up, stretching her back out before she headed off towards the aircraft carrier's impressive bulk.

Sailor hat, huh? Dar looked forward to some quality shopping, for more than just her partner. New York, she decided, was potentially looking up after all.

* * *

Lunch was a sour as the vinaigrette. Kerry wiped her lips on her napkin and returned it to its place on her lap. She hadn't even bothered with the chicken, it's dryness evident to her even through the thin, lemony sauce drizzled over it. She stuck to her ice tea instead, and

pacified her grumbling stomach with some of the rather benign rolls and butter the table had been graced with.

Long gone were the days, she mused, when she could be satisfied with a handful of carrots and some water. She still liked snacking on them, and had even gotten Dar to eat the little suckers, but they no longer provided a meal for her and neither did this collection of pretentious garden refuse and pseudo free ranging ancient fowl.

Bah. Kerry leaned back and nursed her tea. The small talk at the table was small indeed, and she only half listened to a discussion about an advance release of a new server operating system.

"Hey, Kerry?"

Kerry looked across the table at another of their rivals, though one of the more palatable ones she more or less got on well with. "Hey, Ross?"

"You guys stick to one system? I heard you were a uni-house."

"Nah." Kerry shook her head. "We have a little of everything, depending on the application. We support way too many different companies to stick to one system." She said. "Mainframes, minis, six flavors of Unix, the full range of Microsoft, some Novell, you name it."

"That must be a support nightmare." Ross Cunningfurth said, with an easy grin.

"Training's the biggest chunk of my budge." Kerry replied easily. "But it's worth it. We can leverage like crazy – I have six different major support centers that all fall back to each other."

"Six?"

Kerry spread one hand out in a faint shrug. "International."

"Shit." Ross just shook his head with a chuckle.

"Yeah, but how can you even think about giving personal service to your accounts, with that size operation?" Shari's tone was dismissive. "Just a bunch of cookie cutters."

Kerry debated on whether she wanted to engage in the debate. Before she could make a choice, Mark spoke up for almost the first time that afternoon.

"It's not that hard." The MIS manager said. "We got a system that profiles all the different accounts and systems, so whoever answers the phone gets the whole deal in a couple clicks." He shrugged. "What matters is you getting the call to someone who's got the right skill set. That's the trick."

“Exactly.’ Kerry picked up the threat neatly. “But you guys all know that. It’s not rocket science.” She added. “We save the rocket science for the solutions teams.”

Mark chuckled.

“So.. what’s the deal with that new system you guys are rolling on?” Ross asked. “Bud here was at the trade show, and he said something like Dar was teaching routers to think?”

Shari laughed in derision. “What a load of BS.”

Kerry looked across the table and caught Michelle’s eye. The shorter women looked away, then visibly sighed and nudged her partner. Shari gave her an outraged face, but Michelle lowered her chin and stared at her until she subsided.

“Dar’s working on a lot of new technology.” Kerry went on after the awkward break. “Most of which I can’t really go into, but it’s fair to say we’re being very aggressive in taking the limits out of our new hardware.”

“Yeah, I can imagine what you’re selling the government with our tax dollars to burn.” Shari stared steadily at Kerry. “How many millions was it for the Navy?”

Bitch. Kerry braced her elbow on the arm of her chair and rested her chin against it. “Well…” She finally addressed Shari directly. “Considering that the systems they were running before we went in there were written by Dar when she was fifteen years old, I just guess they thought they needed an upgrade.” A wicked twinkle entered her green eyes. “That has been a very successful contract for us. I’ve enjoyed working on it. It makes me feel good to know we’re providing the best to the people who defend our country.”

Shari rolled her eyes.

“Well, if we’re done.” Quest appeared, his hair disordered as though he’d been running his hands through it. “Let’s go get the rest of the meeting started. I’ve had some things crop up that need tending to”

Kerry gladly got to her feet and shoved her chair in, dropping her napkin on her mostly untouched plate. “Definitely would be my pleasure.” She motioned Mark to precede her, and evaded Ross’ hastened steps as they headed towards the door.

Outside, she touched Marks’ arm briefly. “Go on upstairs. I’m going to take a pit stop.” She indicated the restrooms.

"Okay." Mark agreed. "But you are coming back, right?" He asked, with a wry look. "I mean, you want me to call the center and have them broadcast a fake disaster so we can get out of here?"

Kerry narrowed her eyes. "Don't tempt me." She muttered, giving him a bump. "G'wan. Maybe Quest'll give us a break and make this short."

Mark took off towards the steps, and she turned after a moment and headed for the restroom door. She heard steps catching up to her, and felt the odd sensation of her hackles lifting as she imagined them to be Shari.

Her heart started pounding, and she got the same tingles in her guts that she did when they were sparring in kick boxing class, a response to challenge that made her fingers twitch in sudden reaction.

She reached forward and grabbed the door handle, pulling it open only to find not Shari, but Michelle behind her as she half turned to face her pursuer.

Maybe Michelle got the hint. She stepped back quickly and waited, watching Kerry with faintly alarmed eyes. "Sorry."

Kerry glanced past Michelle, and ascertained they were alone. "Where's your traveling jackass?" She asked directly. "Don't' you take her with you to critique the toilet paper?"

Michelle sighed, and edged past Kerry through the door she was still holding open. "I'm not going to answer that." She said. "We all have our issues."

"That's not an issue." Kerry followed her inside and headed for a stall. "That's a brain the size of a walnut and an ego the size of the glades." She closed the door with a snick. "And a lack of professionalism that makes you look like an idiot."

Michelle cleared her throat gently. "Gee, Kerry. Tell me how you really feel. Don't' hold back."

"Fuck it." Kerry snapped. "You two have been on my last nerve for a week. Grow the hell up, would you?"

Dead silence.

Kerry amused herself by flipping open her PDA and reading some of her saved messages from Dar, pithy sayings that often brought a smile to her face.

"Well. I see we really did piss you off." Michelle finally said, into all that silence. "The real Kerry Stuart emerges." She ran some water in the sink, as the outer walls echoed with a faint announcement. "Look, Shari feels like she's got a right to blow the gilt off of your reputation when she can. It's just business, remember?"

“Shari does it because she’s got a hard on for Dar.” Kerry replied evenly. “It has nothing to do with business, and we both know it.”

Michelle cleared her throat gently. “She does have a personal insight.” She remarked. “It’s valid.”

Kerry emerged, leaning against the stall door to face her adversary. “I have a personal insight too.” She reminded Michelle. “Want me to bring out in that meeting how you chased Dar and wanted to get into her skirt? Or how you tried to blackmail her by sending pictures of us to the corporate office? Or how..”

“Okay.” Michelle’s voice was sharp, and hard. “Let’s just relax a minute.”

Kerry waited, keeping her eyes fixed on the smaller woman. After a long moment, when neither of them said anything, she stepped forward. “You listen to me.” She said, her voice dropping a little. “You want this to be civilized? That’s fine with me. I want this to be civilized. I want this to be a tough bid, and the best deal wins. Can we leave all the personal bullshit out of it?”

Michelle shifted and leaned against the wall. “Is that why Dar skipped out? Get too hot for her?”

Kerry rolled her eyes. “Jesus” She threw up her hands. “I give up. Fine. Let it be a bitchfest. Just make sure you know how to duck when I start throwing.” She turned and headed for the door, but Michelle edged around her and put her back against it. “You really don’t want to get in my way, Michelle.”

“Okay – okay – okay.” Graver ran her hand through her hair, disordering it’s fair glossiness. “Listen, just like you have a vested interest, so do I. You may not like the methods, but I respect Shari’s skill at marketing, and she’s been a big part of the progress we made in the last year.”

Kerry put her hand on the door and started to push.

“Yeah, okay –she’s got a bug up her about Dar, but I think it’s mutual, right?” Michelle persisted. “She’s got a beef, and now she’s in a position to screw Dar over like Dar screwed her over way back when. It’s human.”

Kerry stopped pushing. “Michelle.” She said quietly. “Did she ever tell you why Dar screwed her over?”

The smaller woman cocked her head slightly. “Did she need a reason?”

“Dar always has a reason.” Kerry shoved past her, into the bright chaos of the hotel lobby. “You want this to be nasty?” She turned and regarded Michelle. “I can make it

nasty. Dar's just honest and straightforward." She smiled grimly. "I'm a politician's kid. Screw with me at your own risk."

It felt good to turn and just walk away then, sauntering across the lobby well aware of Michelle's eyes on her back. "Bitch, bitch bitch." She warbled under her breath, as she started up the steps to the second floor conference rooms. "Y'know, there are some days when I wish I'd taken my family's advice and become a teacher." She got to the top of the steps and turned, to see Michelle and Shari standing next to the restroom, obviously in a heated discussion. "Heh. But today isn't one of em." She tapped the railing, then continued on her way towards the conference room, whose doors were standing wide open.

And as she stepped across the threshold, every single light in the building blinked out, leaving the room, and the rest of the hotel, in total darkness.

* * *

There was just enough breeze for Dar to be able to sit in comfort, allowing the late afternoon sun to drench her with it's oddly pallid light. She had a delightfully intricate tour behind her, two bags of rampantly tourist flavored purchases next to her, and a bellyful of cherry vanilla ice cream.

Life was good.

The museum had charmed her and she was fairly sure her knick knack acquisitions were going to charm her family.

Her family. Dar had to stop and take a breath, releasing it slowly as she thought about how full of family her life was now. She'd gotten a sub model and a sweatshirt for her dad, and a space shuttle plus a t-shirt that said 'my husband is in the navy, and all I got was this t-shirt and a pail of seaweed' for her mom, and a bagful of god only knew what for Kerry. Even Chino had gotten a toy.

It was a radical change for her, having so many people to get things for. Dar removed the stuffed squeaky Apollo capsule she was sure Chino would tear apart in no time and examined it, squeezing it gently with her fingers and listening to the wheezily bright sound.

It certainly made shopping a lot more fun though. Dar grinned. She'd gotten herself a few things, but she'd extracted far more enjoyment in picking stuff out for everyone else, especially the bagful of items for her partner.

Silly things. But Dar was certain Kerry would love them, and that a good number of them would find their way into the office to perch in hopefully inconspicuous spots near her desk. The hours of exploration had restored her good humor, as had the moments of indulgence in old memories that the smell of brass and diesel had called up to her.

In fact… Dar pulled out her conspicuously silent PDA and opened it, scribbling a little note and sending it on it's way. She waited for a short while, but didn't get an answer, and figured Kerry was probably either busy with the meeting, or had fallen asleep at the meeting, but probably was doing just fine.

Dar decided she'd had a long enough rest, and after flexing her calves a few times, she stood up and arranged her shopping bags, then started back down towards the city and away from the docks. Now towards evening, the foot traffic was starting to pick up, and the harried looks of the people on the street were relaxing as the workday was ending.

Well, if she was stuck in New York, at least she'd had the afternoon off. Dar strolled down the sidewalk, pausing as a small bar caught her attention. After a moment's hesitation, she shrugged one shoulder and entered, finding a spot in a quiet area off to one side.

She eased onto one of the high stools and set her bags down by her feet, resting her forearms on the round wooden table as one of the waitresses scooted over to her. "Hi."

"What can I getcha?" The girl asked, putting down a small, square napkin next to Dar's elbow.

Milk? Dar glanced around the place, which oozed a tavern atmosphere she could almost feel coating her skin. Hm. Her eyes fell on the beer tap, and spotted a name she knew Kerry liked. "Ah, I'll take a Killian." She decided, looking over the chalkboard next to the bard. "And a plate of wings."

"No problem." The girl looked approvingly at her. "C'm righ up." She headed back towards the bar, leaving Dar to appreciate her surroundings more fully.

Bars generally weren't places she tended to hang out in. At least not by herself. Deferring to Kerry's fondness for good brew, she equably accompanied her partner into pubs and enjoyed them, but more for the company than for the alcohol.

A television was on above the bar, and she amused herself by watching the basketball game in progress, mildly surprised to find the players female. A news banner ran chattily under the picture, but she steadfastly ignored it until a familiar word caught her attention.

Miami.

Dar leaned forward and focused on the headline, gritting her teeth and squinting slightly to keep the words in focus.

It didn't take long. "Son of a bitch." She uttered, with feeling. "Why the hell didn't she call me?" Dar removed her cell phone from it's clip on her belt and hit a speed button, waiting for it to connect and then holding it to her ear.

It rang eight times before it was answered, and then the first sound that came down the line was a rattling noise and a seriously Midwestern sounding curse.

“God bless the milkman.. yes, hello?” Kerry growled into the phone, by her tone very obviously at the end of the chain tied to the ribbon tied to the end of her rope.

Dar waited a moment, then exhaled. “I love you.”

There was a few heartbeats of silence, then a soft grunt came down the line, and the sound Dar recognized as a body Kerry sized landing in the leather chair in her office.

“Jesus.” Kerry exhaled.

“No, just me.” Dar responded. “I just saw the headlines on the television. How’s it going there?”

“Well.” Kerry said. “Entire city has no power. Every single employee in this building is lighting candles of prayer to your image for having a diesel generator big enough to run the air plants. I have a headache the size of the Orange Bowl, and Bellsouth blew their backup power to one CO and a spike blew their OC on the other and we have no telecom in to the building.”

Dar covered her eyes in pure reaction. “Holy shit.”

“I was holding off calling you until I was absolutely positive the only thing you could do was pat me on my head.” Kerry sighed. “I have every critical thing we’ve got loaded on the sat links, but..”

“Jesus.”

“No. Just me.” Another sigh. “The one bright spot in my day was that piece of moose pooter meeting got canceled.”

The waitress returned, putting down her beer and giving her a bright smile. “Wings’ll be right up. K?”

Dar nodded, picking up the frosty mug of beer and taking a long swallow of it. “Ker..”

“Tell me you’re in a bar having a beer, and I might have to fly to New York just so I can bite your butt for that.”

Dar almost spit her mouthful of beer out across the table, but she managed somehow to swallow it instead. “Um…” She cleared her throat. “Want me on a plane back there?”

Kerry sighed very audibly. “Yes.” She replied in a quiet tone. “There is nothing in the world I want right now more than to have you here right next to me.”

Dar checked her watch, then reached for her PDA. “Gimme a minute.. let me get the flights….”

“Sweetheart, hold on.” Kerry said. “I have so many people pissed off at us down here, do we really need another client ticked off because you walked out?”

“Fuck them.” Dar was busy with her flight scheduling.

“Dar.”

“In addition to the fact that they all mean jack nothing to me next to you, Kerry, the rest of the company does take precedence over them.” Dar replied, reviewing her options. “You should have called me before now.”

“Yeah, I know.” Kerry’s tone now just sounded tired. “But I like to think I can actually do the job you pay me for sometimes.”

Dar paused in mid tap. She put her PDA down and concentrated on the phone exclusively. “Kerry, this has nothing to do with your competence. This is outside anyone’s scope.” She hesitated. “You just want me to butt out and let you handle it?”

There was a very long silence after that. Finally, on the heels of the faintest of sniffles, Kerry spoke up. “Professionally? Yes.”

Dar winced.

“Personally, no.” The blond woman went on quietly. “So what should I do? Can you give me some advice so I can make some kind of peace with myself?”

At least that put the problem into a perspective she could more easily deal with. Dar released a held breath, and ordered her thoughts, sipping her beer as she pondered the question. “Okay.” She said. “I’m assuming the big cluster is our lines being down.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m assuming you’ve already browbeaten and bullied everyone in Bellsouth you can get your hands on.”

“Mmph… yeah. Problem is, emergency services are priority, and we’re not.”

Which was true. “Okay.” Dar closed her eyes and thought. “The blown switch is out of our hands.. but the other CO’s just out of power?”

"Yeah."

"Send Mark to Home Depot and have him buy every big generator they've got, then just go in there and hijack the bank we're in and push power through it."

"They're not going to let us do that."

"Don't ask them." Dar said quietly. "Just show up, walk in, don't take no for an answer."

"They're going to think we're nuts."

"Yeah." Dar agreed. "But our customers are going to think we're miracle workers."

A soft rattling of keys came down the line, along with the ghost of another sniffle. "You were right." Kerry said, after the rattling stopped. "I should have called you before now." She admitted. "Damn."

Kerry had been doing everything humanly possible, Dar was sure. They'd been through enough crises together for her to trust her partner's judgment implicitly. But sometimes when Kerry encountered the unlikely and was under a lot of stress, thinking way outside the box wasn't her first instinct.

It was always Dar's first instinct. "It's okay, sweetheart." She tried for a faint joke. "S'why you pay me the big bucks, remember?"

A faint chuckle rewarded her.

"I wouldn't have called anyone either." Dar admitted. "Never have been able to do that. So… "

"Hello pot, Kettle here." Kerry sighed wryly. "Wanna get together for some macaroni and cheese?"

Dar relaxed a little, the knots in her guts easing slightly as she felt her heartbeat start to settle and cease it's painful pounding inside her skull. "Sounds delicious."

Kerry chuckled a little. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything." Dar responded. "I've got the flights in front of me. Offer's still open."

Kerry was very quiet for a bit, and Dar gave her the space to wrestle with her own conscience. At last, she grunted softly. "Tell you what, partner. If this doesn't work, I'll give you a call with your flight information, okay?"

A compromise. Dar accepted it reluctantly. "You know I'm going to be a mess all night, right?" She found herself saying anyway.

"I know." Her lover said. "But if it works, I'll take out a full page ad in the Herald and tell everyone what a smart and amazing person I have as my boss."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

At last, Kerry laughed, if only briefly. "Or maybe they'll get the power grid back online, Dar. Having the entire city down with no ac is putting more pressure on the powers that be than I ever could."

"Mmph."

"Call you back as soon as I know something." Kerry went on. "Promise."

"Okay." Dar sighed. "Hang in there, Ker."

"Love you."

"Love you too." Dar closed the phone reluctantly, thoughts running through her mind at a furious rate. She looked as a plate appeared in front of her, meeting the eyes of the waitress.

"Wings?" The girl said.

Wish I had a pair. Dar nodded in response, staring at the crispy golden items before her. With a sigh, she picked one up and turned it in her fingertips, completely uninterested now in everything except for the vanished voice on the other end of her disconnected phone.

* * *

Kerry forced herself not to tense up, concentrating on keeping her hands down at her sides and not balled up into fists. "Listen, Barry, you don't have a choice here." Already in her shirt sleeves in deference to the dank mugginess of the emergency lighting lit office, she resolutely refused to wipe the sweat off her face as she ordered her arguments.

The man she was speaking with, a tall, gangly station manager with a drooping moustache and desperate eyes slammed his hand on the desk. "Kerry, I can't do it." He repeated, for the nth time.

"You can." Kerry replied inflexibly. "Bottom line is, you have no choice." Her voice already had a slight rasp in it.

"If I let you do it, I have to let everyone. Do you know how many lines go through this building? To the financial district? Jesus, Kerry, do you think you're the only one who's down?"

“We have a contract.”

“THEY ALL DO!” Barry yelled, at the top of his voice in frustration. “Woman, you can’t understand what you’re asking.”

What would Dar do? Kerry took a breath. Dar would just yell louder, until the walls shook. But she couldn’t do that – it wasn’t really her style. “Barry, you have a contract with us to provide diversity. You didn’t. Are all those other companies paying you top dollar for that kind of insurance?”

He stared at her.

“We pay you to make sure.” Kerry inhaled and upped the volume just a little. “MAKE SURE.. that we never go down. NEVER. Not 99 percent, not 99.5 percent, not 99.9 percent. 100 percent, Barry. I can’t afford any less, and you god damn well know it.”

“You can’t just hook this stuff up to a generator.” He replied, after a long hesitation. “It just doesn’t work like that. You can’t fathom the complexity of this stuff, and I..”

Kerry walked right around his desk and grabbed him by the lapels, shocking them both. “I can’t fathom it?? I can’t fathom it? Who in the hell do you think you’re talking to, the operations vice president of Publix? Jesus Christ, Barry! I’ve got more complex technology sitting in my living room than you have in this place!”

His eyes widened. “Hey, now listen. Let go of me!”

Kerry did, but she didn’t step back. Dar’s words were ringing in her head like sea-bells and it was all she could do not to just keep shaking the man until he gave in to her. “Barry, use your head. Get me off your back. Just do it.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.” Kerry insisted.

“Kerry, for the sake of god, I can’t. It’ll be my job!”

Kerry leaned over him, wishing she had Dar’s presence. “You will.” She nailed him with a look right in the eyes. “Or it’ll be your job any way. I swear it.”

Would he believe her? Kerry forced herself to hold her gaze steady and cold, offering him no compromise. Her guts were clenching inside, and she only hoped it wasn’t showing.

He straightened up and took a breath to answer, only to release it partially as his shoulders slumped. “Kerry, it’s not that easy. C’mon now. You can’t just plug in one of those things to a damn generator. What if it blows the boards? Then what?”

Ah. Kerry felt the success, like that momentary give in a tug of war when you knew your team was about to break the grunting muddy stalemate, and start to move in the right direction. “Then you hand me a bill.” She agreed readily. “I’ll take responsibility for the decision.”

He leaned forward. “You know how much money you’re talking about?”

“Yes, I do.” She tilted her head just a little, and gentled her expression. “C’mon, Barry. Get rid of me. You know I have to do it.”

Barry relaxed in defeat. “What the hell.” He lifted both hands off his chair arms and let them drop. “I’m screwed anyway. I was the dumb bastard who forgot to schedule the maintenance on that freaking backup system.”

Kerry felt sweat roll down the back of her neck, and she spared a moment of tired sympathy for him. “Thanks, Barry. Let me get my guys rolling on this.” She hesitated. “You got anyone else that’s as big a pain in the ass as I am? I can see if we have enough power to share some.”

He shook his head after a second. “I wouldn’t know where to even start.”

“Okay.” Kerry turned and headed for the door, already reaching for her cell phone. She keyed the radio button on it. “Mark?”

“Yeah?” A slightly apprehensive voice answered.

“Go.” Kerry instructed, now at last wiping the sweat off her face with one hand. “Pull the truck around back. No sense in giving the news people something to shoot.” She looked around for the emergency exit, spotting it on the back of one wall in the gloom. It was hot and very stuffy inside the CO, and eerily empty of workers.

No sense, she had to agree. Why pay for techs to stand around and look at non functional equipment? With a deep sigh, she hit the door release and opened it, finding some mild relief in the cooler evening air that brushed against her.

Finding a broken piece of punchdown block handy, she blocked the door open with it and leaned against the back wall of the building, waiting for Mark and her crew to arrive. She kicked a bit of slate with one toe, glad she’d taken the time to change into jeans and a short sleeved shirt before coming.

Even that was too hot, but anything else risked compromising her ability to project her authority in a serious way, and Kerry wasn't that stupid. She let her eyes close for a minute, the stress of the long day weighing on her heavily.

Then the rumbling of the approaching motor jogged her into straightening up. She brushed off the fatigue and walked to meet Mark as he pulled up close to the building in the rented panel truck, putting the back of the vehicle next to the emergency door.

"Hey, boss." The MIS manager looked as ratty as Kerry felt. He opened the door and jumped out, circling the truck to open the back and let four other techs out into the muggy night air. "Sorry about the ride, guys."

"Shit." One of them rubbed his head. "Oh." He winced, spotting Kerry. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Shit about covers it." Kerry responded. "Okay." She peered into the truck. "Six. Good."

"All they had." Mark explained. "These are the big ones…most of the small ones were gone already. You know how people are. Lucky we're halfway through the season."

"Right." Kerry studied the machines. "How many to run the one switch inside, Mark?"

"Lemme check." Mark scooted inside the building, pulling out his flashlight as he ducked inside the door. "Holy crap, it's steaming in here!" He poked his head back out. "Hey… I'm not sure we can run those things even if we do juice em up. They'll overheat."

Shit. Kerry thumped against the truck, a sense of sick horror coming over her. "Find out what they'll need." She told Mark, to give her a moment to think.

Idiot. Of course they need cooling. She blinked a droplet of sweat from her eyes. Why hadn't she thought of that? Kerry let her head rest against the metal wall. Maybe she'd gotten too used to letting Dar do her thinking for her?

A draft of cool air blew into her face, and she looked inside the truck, sticking her hand into the dark bay. She stepped back and looked at the side, spotting the boast of an air conditioned truck bed. "You got a flash light?" She asked the tech nearest her.

"Um.. sure." The curly haired tech handed it over.

Kerry turned it on and flashed it over the interior of the truck, spotting the large air conditioning unit near the ceiling. "Okay." She saw Mark emerge. "What's the deal?"

He shrugged. "We can do it with one of these suckers." He indicated the generators. "No problem, but it won't stay up more than ten minutes, boss. I…" He hesitated. "I shoulda thought of that."

"Why? Even they didn't." Kerry exhaled, pointing inside. "At least, they never mentioned it. So maybe they figured we'd figure out a way around that, too."

"Yeah." Mark frowned.

"So we'll have to. Listen." Kerry pushed away from the truck. "Here's the plan. Mark – set these four up and get them going. Figure out what we need to connect them all in series, but use one at a time so we can keep them running longer. When one runs out of gas we switch to the second, but we can't drop any power."

"Uh…"

"When you figure out what you'll need for that, surge boxes or whatever, call me at Home Depot. I'll be there buying air conditioning duct and duct tape so we can run the truck all night and pipe some air in there." She pointed. "Okay? Thanks. Call me."

She turned and headed for her car, knowing she'd left slack jawed employees behind her. Reaching her Lexus, she popped the door locks and hopped inside, starting up the SUV and closing the door as the air conditioning promptly bathed her in a very welcome chill.

Would Mark figure that all out? Kerry wondered. If they didn't find a way to keep things going, it'd be useless. Dropping the lines every couple hours while they refilled the diesel just wasn't going to cut it. "One thing at a time, Ker." She reminded herself, putting the car in gear with a determined expression. "What was that Dar once said? Step at a time and you can eat an entire goat, tail and all?"

She turned the car onto the road carefully, since the signals were out along with everything else. The power outage had been so severe, the power company hadn't even been able to project a fix for it. Too much damage had been done to too much of the infrastructure when a freak collapse of a transfer station had sent power back the wrong way up the lines into the grid.

So, she had to come through here. They had to come through. There wasn't any choice – the pressure was building and she'd started getting more and more calls from their clients frustrated with lack of, or slowness of service to their vital resources.

A clog of traffic at an intersection forced her to stop, and she rested her forearms on her steering wheel as the crowd sorted itself out. A queasy roll of her stomach reminded her she hadn't stopped to have dinner, and though the last thing she felt like doing was eating she knew she was asking for trouble if she didn't.

She already had a stress headache. With a sigh, she let the brake up a little and crept forward, one hand fishing in her utility well until she found a bit of cellophane. Pulling the power bar out, she used her teeth to rip it open, and took a bite without taking her eyes off the road.

It wasn't satisfying, but it was banana nut, and it took the edge off. Kerry chewed at it as she got through the dark intersection, only having to honk four or five times to keep other cars from plowing into her SUV's dark blue sides. "Bah..bah.. Hey! You jerk! Watch it!"

The obviously rental Mustang squirted past her in a blare of horns.

Kerry felt her heart hammering in her chest, and she got past the intersection, heading towards the thankfully nearby hardware store. She got into the parking lot without further incident and headed into the store, regretfully trading the cool leather interior of her car for the heat outside.

The Home Depot was running on generator itself, and it was clammy inside. Kerry found it hard to breathe in, between the sawdust and the smell of generator oil, but she continued on, glancing down the aisles until she found the central air supply row. She paused in front of the compressed ducting and paused, realizing suddenly she had no idea how much to get.

"Jesus." Kerry slapped herself on the side of the head, unable to believe the stupidity of not measuring the distance first. "I should have had Dar just come back. I can't handle this."

But Dar wasn't there, so after a moment of mentally kicking herself Kerry leaned against the steel shelving and closed her eyes, trying to picture the unfamiliar confines of the telephone building. "Okay." She sighed. "How many Dar's can fit with arms outstretched between the truck and the switch, Kerry. C'mon. Think."

Dar was the easiest thing she could picture, and she knew her partner's outstretched arms were just over six feet across. Mentally, she positioned that tall, lanky frame, imagining her at the truck, then at the door, then inside, then across the aisle and around the corner, just Dar after Dar after Dar, until she was smiling and she had her answer. "Mm.. ten Dar's. Lucky me."

With seventy five feet of ducting to be safe, and four rolls of tape, Kerry loaded up her wagon and then checked her cell phone. It was stubbornly silent, so she pushed the cart over to the electrical section, and started browsing the different devices herself.

What would she need? The urge to call Dar and ask almost overtook her, but Kerry firmly closed her hand away from her cell phone and concentrated on the big boxes lining the shelves. Cables? They had those. Diesel? Mark had stopped for that too. Kerry's eyes roamed over the choices until it fell on a dust covered box on the bottom shelf labeled GAC Load Control Systems, a lonely looking item one of it's kind.

Crouching down, she tugged the box forward, releasing a cloud of ancient dust that nearly bowled her over. Stifling a sneeze, she peered at the lettering on the box, trying to make the technical terms fit concepts she was already familiar with. "Hm. Load balancing between two or more generators." She let her hands rest on the box. "Well, I

guess that's what we're doing." With a grunt, she lifted the item and put it on the cart with the rest, going to the front and hauling the flatbed after in a sweaty, dusty pony-like fashion. She was standing at the counter handing over her credit card when three or four men rushed in, dashing past the entrance and heading for the same aisle she just came out of.

Kerry turned back to the cashier as she was presented with a slip to sign, giving the exhausted looking clerk behind the desk an understanding smile. "Long day."

"Honey, you ain't kidding." The woman handed her card back.

"Damn it, they had one this afternoon." The men came back, obviously frustrated. "Jesus, those damn generators won't do us a lick of good if we can't connect em all in series and keep the power up…hey!" He stopped, staring at Kerry's cart. "She got one! She got it!'

Hey! Kerry echoed in mildly amazed silence. I guessed right! Whoa! "That's right. Excuse me, gentlemen." She pocketed her card and started to push her flatbed past them. "Things to do, power to generate, you know how it is."

"Damn! Hey, can we buy that off you? Pay you double for it!" The man in the lead caught up with her. "C'mon, lady…I really need that!"

"No thanks. Sorry. So do I." Kerry steered towards her car with a definite purpose.

"You even know what it is?" The man yelled in frustration.

Kerry stopped, turned and looked at him, one hand on her hip.

"Yeah, yeah, okay." The man waved a hand in disgust at her, shaking his head. "Five minutes too late."

"That's right." Kerry made a shooing motion at him. "Go find another Home Depot. Scoot." A rumble sounded over head, and she glanced up, dismayed to see storm clouds gathering. "Oh, great. Just what I need." She gave the cart a shove and headed for the Lexus. "Maybe I should have gotten a tent."

The thunder rumbled again, as though she was being laughed at.

* * *

Dar's cell phone rang as she entered the hotel lobby, and she found a quiet corner to drop into a leather chair and answer it. "Yeah?"

"Dar!" Alastair's voice belted through the phone. "Good grief, woman! Where are you!"

"New York." Dar answered. "Saving one of our client's asses. Why?"

“Do you know what’s going on down in Florida? Dar! We’ve got half the network down!”

The silent anchors of CNN faced Dar from the bar’s big television, the outline of a darkened Miami prominent in the background. “We’re page one on CNN. Of course I know what’s going on, Alastair.” She snapped. “Kerry’s handling it.”

“What???” Her boss almost squealed. “Dar! This is serious!”

“And I’m 2,000 miles away!” Dar yelled back, only in a soft tone, since three men at the bar had turned around to look at her. “What would you like me to do about it? Jesus, Alastair, calm down!”

“Calm down.” Alastair fumed. “I have an international board meeting in two hours, in case you forgot, Dar. “

Oops. “No kidding. Me too.” Dar replied calmly. “And?”

“Dar.”

She could hear the utter panicked frustration in his tone. “Alastair, it’s a power outage. Most of the crits are on the sat, and Kerry’s working on a plan to get more lines up. What is it you expect us to do? Change physics? All the money in the bank ain’t gonna cut any slack down there because they can’t get the damn hospitals working. Guess what? That’s first.”

There was a brief silence. “Kerry’s working on something?”

“Of course.” Dar injected as much impatience into her tone as she could. “I thought we’d gotten past that damned “I picked her for her looks’ thing. What’s wrong with you?”

Alastair sighed. “I’m not used to having to rely on anyone but you. That’s what’s wrong with me.”

“Get you something, ma’am?” A waitress came over to her.

Dar hesitated, debating on the answer, covering the microphone with her fingers. Then she half shrugged. “Got a chocolate milkshake handy?”

The woman smiled. “I can find one for ya. Be right back.”

“Well.” Dar spoke into the phone. “Get used to it.”

Alastair paused, taking an audible breath. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

What was it supposed to mean? Dar wondered bleakly. "I pay her for a reason." She finally said. "If I didn't think she could handle it, I'd have already headed back."

Her boss sighed. "Yeah, I know." He admitted. "Sorry, Dar. Backhanded compliment, really."

"Yeah." Dar agreed softly. "Look, she'll take care of it. Trust her."

"Since you do, I will." Alastair said. "Just got the jitters, Dar. Been a rough couple of months here. Last thing I need is bad press… what the blazes happened to the backup we're supposed to have down there?"

Dar explained the problem. "So, yeah, it's Bellsouth's issue. They screwed up. Doesn't help us."

"I'll get Ham on it." The ILS CEO stated, his voice now brisk and businesslike. "We can get some cash out of it, anyway. Keep me advised, willya, Dar?"

"I will." Dar promised. "See you on the conference call later."

"With good news." Alastair said.

"With news." Dar clarified. "Or else I'll be on a plane headed south. Guaranteed."

A more contented sigh. "Now I feel better." He replied. "Thanks, Dar. Talk to you soon."

Dar folded the cell phone up and clipped it to her pocket. She slid down in the leather chair, gazing up at the finely plastered ceiling until the waitress sauntered back over with her milkshake. "Thanks."

"Sure you don't want a shot in that?" The woman asked, with a sympathetic grin. "Looks like you could use it."

Dar stared at the glass for a long moment, then her eyes lifted to the waitresses. "No, thanks." She cradled the cold drink between her hands. "Just this for right now." She handed the woman her room key, then signed the resulting check presented to her from the handheld printer. "Appreciate it."

"Anytime, okay?" the woman smiled warmly at her. "Just ask for Angie." She gave Dar a wink, then went on to the next group of older, business suited men seated nearby.

The flirting didn't even register, really. Dar got up and headed for the elevator, hardly aware of the watching eyes.

* * *

Mark met her as she got out of the Lexus, his face a study in anxious consternation. "Kerry, listen, I tried like a son of bitch to figure out what that electrical stuff was but…"

"No problem. I got it." Kerry said briefly. "I'll need a hand with the stuff in the back. Got the generators set up?"

"Yeah, but.." Mark pointed at the now very overcast sky. "I don't know how good they're gonna be in that."

"No problem." Kerry replied again, with a grim smile. "I brought a tent. Let's go." She turned and headed for the back of the car, popping the hatch and pulling down the rear gate. "You guys, take that ducting and tape out and start stretching it. Need to go from the air unit inside the back of the truck all the way inside the building."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mark, you get the tent. I'll get this gizmo up and running and connected to the generators. Then we can fire them up and see what we got." Kerry finished briskly. "Any questions? Okay. Let's just do it. I want out of this damned sweatbox."

"You got it, boss." Mark pulled the canopy out and threw it over his shoulder, moving aside to let the two other techs get the ducting gear out. He followed Kerry over to the back door and watched as she dropped to one knee in front of the generators and started tearing the box of her gizmo open. "Whoa. Didn't know you knew the EE side, boss."

Kerry pulled aside the foam packing and removed the control unit, studying it closely. Four inputs in the back, four in the front, dials, gauges… Jesus. "Yeah, well.. you never know when the odd class in college comes home, huh?" She set the unit down and reached inside for the insulated plugs, connecting one end to each generator and the other end to the back of her unit.

Her hands were shaking. Kerry wiped the back of one across her forehead. "Hey, Mark?"

"Yeah?" Mark finished unrolling the tarp and walked over. "Need me?"

"Can you get my backpack from the car?" She fished in her jeans pocket and removed her keys, handing them over. "I need something from it."

"Ma'am… you want this on the floor or..??" One of the techs stuck his head out. "It's kinda wonky."

Kerry climbed to her feet and peered inside the building, getting a face full of stale air. "Let me see where the boards are.. ah." She stepped over the unrolled ducting and looked at the switch, squatting in damp silence in front of her. "Okay, there's the out-take up there, so the intake has to be back here." She indicated the fan. "So it should pump in right behind that."

“Run it up here?” The tech queried, touching the top of the unit. “It’s a hard bend.”

Damn it, yes, it was. Kerry looked over her head, taking the flashlight from the tech and examining the drop ceiling. “No, loop some tape over the crossbar, there.. see? Then kind of..”

“Cradle it, like this?” The tech wrapped a piece of tape around the duct and held it up. “Like that?”

“Perfect.” Kerry gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Just suspend it like that out the door, and then we’ll go right to the truck. We got enough duct?”

“Oh yeah.” The tech nodded. “Just right.”

Kerry managed a smile, before she escaped outside and went back to her work. The sun had long since set, and it was getting dark. She looked up as Mark came over with her pack, and set it down. “Thanks.” She dug out another power bar and ripped it open. “How’s the tent coming?”

“I’m a lot better at routers.” Mark said mournfully, gazing at the poles. “But I think I got it.”

Kerry looked up. “You better.” She muttered around her mouthful.

“What if we blow that thing up? These generators aren’t the greatest.” Mark commented, as he got a pole into the corner of the tarp and raised it. “That’s some bitching gear in there.”

“This thing’s got a power massager.” Kerry squinted in the gloom at the directions. She looked up as a warm light bathed her, then gave Mark an appreciative smile. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Mark was holding the flashlight in his teeth, and working the tarp with his hands. “You know how many times I hadta do this last time we moved one of the regionals? It sucked!”

Kerry got everything connected. With a slow exhale, she leaned over and pressed the starter on the first generator, holding her breath until the machine caught and came to life in a shockingly loud rumble. A low hum nearly made her jump out of her skin, until she looked down to see the gauges coming obediently to life on her gizmo. “Last one they had.” Her voice almost cracked. “Had to fight some guys for it.”

Mark peered over her shoulder at the dials, pointing his flash at them. “Wow.” He said in a respectful tone. “Man, you know your shit, let me tell you what.”

The irony made Kerry smile briefly. “Thanks.”

Another bright light suddenly interrupted them, and they looked up to find a television camera pointing it’s round, inquisitive eye at them followed by a reporter stumbling alongside almost losing his footing on the loose shale.

“Uh oh.” Mark muttered. “This ain't good.”

Kerry exhaled as the reporter headed her way. “Wanna be a Vice President for a day?”

“Nuh UH.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“Betcha wish Big D were here.”

The sweat in her eyes felt very much like tears. Kerry had to look down for a long moment and wipe the moisture away with her sleeve before she could pick her head back up and face the music.

Send in the Clowns would be about right.

* * *

It was dark in the hotel room. Dar was lying curled up on her side on the bed, her laptop open in front of her and her cell phone resting near her hand.

But the screensaver whirled unmolested, and the cell screen was dark. Dar merely lay there and watched the hypnotic pattern, waiting through what seemed to be the longest night of her life.

It was very quiet, and after a while she lifted her hand and let it drop on the keyboard, bringing the screen to life and exposing the network map she’d placed there. The lines leading into Miami were still mostly dark, and she felt a moment of intense shame as she hoped they stayed that way.

Not for Kerry’s sake. For her own, because if they didn’t come up, the phone would ring, soon, and she’d grab her bag and head for the airport and home.

Home.

But as she watched, there was a flicker in the lines, a slow ripple that went from red, to yellow, to green as she blinked and sat up, leaning forward to stare at it. The lights steadied and held, pulsing a healthy color that reflected brightly against the dark background.

She did it. A rogue burst of pride drove aside the gloom, and despite it all, Dar found herself smiling. *Unless the power came back but…* She checked a gauge. No, the office was still on generator. She released a held breath into a whirlpool of mixed emotions. "Good girl."

The phone rang. Dar looked at the caller id for a long moment before she answered it, cradling the phone next to her ear. "Hey."

A long, long, long sigh. "It worked." Kerry sounded lightheaded with relief. "Oh, my god, Dar. It worked. It worked. We're up."

Shoving aside her own ridiculous disappointment, Dar determined herself to rise to the occasion. "I knew you'd do it." She said. "Tell me how it went."

"Hang on, let me sit down." Kerry was almost out of breath. There was the sound of a car door shutting, then a brief rumble of an engine starting. "Oh god. Sorry. Had to get the AC on in here. I'm dying in this god damned heat."

Dar closed her eyes and just drank in the voice. "Must be like hell."

"Oh, honey… where do I start." Kerry sighed. "Shit, I have such a headache."

Dar's fingers twitched in pure reflex, a testament to her natural inclination to answer the comment with a gentle knead of Kerry's neck. "You take anything?"

Another sigh. "I want to eat first. Otherwise it gets me sick."

"You haven't had dinner?" Dar checked the clock.

"I didn't have lunch." Kerry admitted. "Just some of my bars. Anyway… they fought me tooth and nail, Dar. No way did they want me to do this, because everyone's up their butts wanting favors."

"I'm sure they were." Dar said. "Where are you now?"

"Outside the CO. Mark and the guys are cleaning up. We're leaving two techs here to keep filling the gas tanks."

Dar opened her PDA and tapped out a message, hitting send quickly. "Good idea."

"Thanks." Kerry said. "We kept running into obstacles, but everything worked out. I got the generators hooked up together, and we were just going to start the power…"

"Hooked them up together?"

“Yeah. I got a gizmo, a thing that let me connect all of them. You know.. I mean, you must know because you told me to get a bunch of generators, but I didn’t think about how to make them work together and I guess you assumed we’d know so..”

Dar’s eyes widened. “Shit.” She exhaled. “I didn’t even think of that, Ker. I just figured you might need more than one in case our stuff was on more than one switch.”

Kerry was silent for a little bit. “Oh.” She finally said. “Wow. Well, no… I got this thing to make them all work together, so we didn’t have to take the lines down to refill the gas or anything like that.”

“Go on.”

“So then I had to figure out how to keep the switch cool.” Kerry said. “I put some air conditioning duct from the switch out the door to the truck we rented… it had ac in the back.”

Dar rested her chin on her fist, a genuine smile appearing on her face. “Uh huh.”

Kerry cleared her throat. “So it was going great. Then the reporters showed up.” She let out an aggravated breath. “Dar, they treated us like a bunch of squirmy hooligans. Like I was cheating or something to get what I wanted.”

“Sweetheart, you were.” Dar told her. “But it’s okay. It’s what you get paid for.”

“That’s what I told him.” Kerry said. “He went away, but I think he’s coming back. Anyway, I got it all going, and plugged the switch in, and we all sort of just held our breath.”

“And it worked.”

“It worked.”

“Kerry?”

“Mm?”

“Outstanding job. You went over and above, and I really appreciate that. Well done. Very well done.” Dar said, meaning every word.

Kerry exhaled, and there was a soft sound as though she’d let her head rest against the glass window. “Thanks, boss.” She replied simply.

They were both quiet for a little while. Then Dar shifted the phone from one ear to the other. “I’m damn proud of you.”

A faint sniffle traveled down the cellular link. “Even though it meant you didn’t get to come riding to the rescue?” Kerry asked, making a wan joke.

“Yeah.”

Kerry made a small sound of contentment, but then she sighed again. “Know something?”

“What?”

“I was just thinking about something you once said to me. About how you felt when you got promoted, that time? And how you just went back home and it was like…”

“It ended up not meaning much, yeah.” Dar said. “What brought that up?”

“Uuugh. Because I just was sitting here thinking that after all this, after this crappy, disgusting, horrible day – all I have to go home to is a dark, hot house and an empty bed.”

Dar was caught speechless.

“I want a hug.” Kerry uttered. “I want you.” Then there was a rustle, and the sound of the car window opening. “Hang on, sweetie.” The sound of wind rushed in. “Hey, Mark…oh.. oh, yeah, um.. that would be great…yeah. Thanks! How… oh, that smells great. Thank you.”

Dar smiled faintly at her distorted reflection in the laptop screen. She waited for the sound of the outside to vanish as Kerry rolled up the window again, and heard the rustling of paper bags on the other side of the line.

“Did you have something to do with this, Paladar?”

“Me?” Dar inquired. “I’m sitting here in New York. What makes you think I had anything to do with having your dinner delivered?”

A very soft, knowing chuckle answered her. “The fact that my Wendy’s spicy chicken sandwich has no lettuce, and extra cheese on it, the frosty is large, and the baked potato has no bacon bits. Mark maybe could guess number two, but the other ones had your little fingerprints allll over them.”

Dar flexed her hand in front of her eyes, studying her fingerprints. Then she let her arm drop to the bed again. “Least I could do.” She conceded. “Since I’m not there to do it myself.”

“Wish you were.” Kerry’s voice was muffled as she chewed. “I can admit that now, since this crappy thing is over.”

“Wish I was too.” Dar echoed softly.

Kerry swallowed, and cleared her throat a little. “Are you okay?” She asked, in a gentle voice. “You sound really down.”

Was she? Dar stared at the screen, with it’s winking green lights. “Yeah, I’m all right.” She answered, after a brief pause. “Worried about you all night, that’s all.”

“Mm.”

“Least I have good news for the international board call in half an hour.” Dar made an effort to inject some normality into her tone.

“Call? I didn’t know you had one.” Kerry said.

“Yeah, I forgot too. Alastair reminded me.” Dar admitted. “It’s on my schedule … woulda binged me anyway. Give me something to do now that the crisis is over.”

Kerry seemed to absorb this in silence for a few heartbeats, chewing on her chicken sandwich in a thoughtfulness almost tangible through the phone. “Want some of my frostie?”

Dar chuckled.

“Want me to get on a plane and come to New York?” Kerry asked. “Not for business. Just to keep you company and get my hug?”

“You really have to ask?” Dar responded wistfully. “You know I’d love it. But you’ve got that damn bid, Ker. This won’t take me more than a day or so to straighten out. Then I’ll be back and you’ll get your hug.”

“Mm” Kerry grunted unhappily. “Hell with them.” She said. “Oh, crap. I was right. Here come those damn reporters again.”

“Ouch.”

“You think they’ll just stay there filming me if I eat my dinner inside the truck and refuse to open the door?”

Dar smiled. “Worth a try, sweetheart.” She said. “Guess I can go order room service now too.”

“Bad Dar.”

“Bad Kerry.” Dar responded promptly. “Two of a kind.”

Kerry laughed suddenly, a light, joyful sound that made Dar's tense neck muscles relax in an instant. "Oh, what a compliment that is. Okay, love of my life.. let me let you go get dinner, and I'll try not to strangle these reporters. Call you later?"

"Sure." Dar agreed. "I'll let you know what the board had to say about my genius VP Ops."

"Love you."

"Love you too. Later." Dar closed the phone, feeling better than she had all night. Good enough to make her get up and go to the desk, sitting down and flipping open the room service menu with an acceptable level of interest.

PART 9

KERRY TOOK HER TIME FINISHING HER DINNER. SHE HATED WOLFING HER FOOD, AND the cool air and warm leather settled her body down into something approaching comfort. The reporter was hovering outside, and she realized quickly after he'd arrived that it wasn't the local guy she'd first spoken to. Instead, she recognized the Tech TV reporter who'd been retained by Michelle and Shari and frankly Kerry was in a mood to keep him waiting well into the next century if the occasion called for it.

Her techs were sitting in the back of the rental truck munching their own dinners, with a hastily rigged light dangling over their heads plugged into her gizmo along with the power to the telecom gear.

Kerry eased the seat back a notch and propped her knee up against the door, picking up a square of neatly cut potato skin and taking a bite of it. It tasted of sour cream and cheese and love, a little salty and a touch sweet, this fast food manifestation of Dar's care for her.

Totally insignificant in substance, and yet that quiet thoughtfulness meant everything to her. Between that, and the words of praise Dar had showered over her, Kerry found herself well able to push aside the aggravations of the day, and watch the anxious pacing of the Tech TV reporter with a sense of contented amusement.

Near the wall, the generators hummed along, their low thrum audible to her through the closed window. The sun had set, and besides the small pool of light from their bulb, the surrounding areas were eerily dark and quiet. It reminded Kerry of the night of the storm, way back when she and Dar had first been getting to know each other.

That scary, magical day. Kerry smiled gently, remembering the moment she'd woken up on Dar's couch, lying there hardly breathing as she felt the soft folds of a blanket settle over her accompanied by Dar's distinctive presence.

Where…. Kerry waited for the soft scuff of bare footsteps to move away before she opened her eyes, her fingers reaching out to curl around the feather light covering draped over her. The couch leather had warmed to her body and she let herself indulge in a moment of perfect comfort.

Dar's house. She moved her head a little and looked around again at it. Her ears, though, were focused tightly on the kitchen where she knew Dar had gone, every sound she detected sending a prickle up and down her spine. After a moment's hesitation, she sat up and ran her hand through her hair, getting up and wrapping the blanket around her as she went towards the source of those sounds.

Just short of the kitchen she stopped, spotting Dar inside before the taller woman knew she was approaching.

God, she's gorgeous. Kerry's eyes drank in the lanky form in it's covering of thin cotton, her body reacting with a surge of sexual energy that almost shocked her.

Almost mortified her.

Almost. "What's going on?" Kerry continued on into the kitchen, reveling silently in the moment when Dar turned and met her eyes and a grin appeared, seeming to acknowledge the boundaries they both were knowingly skirting.

Dar pointed. "Tropical storm. Out of nowhere."

Kerry walked over to stand right next to her, leaning on the counter as she peered first out the window, then up at the television screen. Sure looked nasty.. too nasty for cabs to run, maybe? "What does that mean?'

The blue eyes casually met hers and held there, gaining the faintest of twinkles in their depths. "For one thing, it means you're stuck here."

Shucks. Kerry looked out at the pounding surf as Dar made a call, feeling a sense of deep affection for Mother Nature.

"I was right. Ferries are closed down." Dar concluded.

"Guess I should have left when I had the chance…"

The twinkle grew perceptibly.

"I just wanted to get the reports done, then I just sat down for a minute… sorry." Kerry concluded her apology. "How are you feeling?"

Dar's eyes dropped, and her expression took on a more somber cast. "Fine. Stuff worked great." Her hand lifted and ran through her dark hair. "Listen, I better get candles out."

Candles? "What can I do to help?"

Dar showed her the shutters. It didn't take long, then she was back in the kitchen watching Dar root around in a box full of hurricane supplies.

Including candles. "What else can I do?"

Cloth in her hands. What else could she do? Change into Dar's clothing. Holy cow. Is this really happening to me? "Makes sense. Be right back."

Herself in the mirror, in Dar's shirt, in Dar's house. Well, you know something Kerrison? If she's bringing candles, you've got to step up to the plate and do your part. "Bet she could use a home cooked meal." Kerry whispered to her reflection. "Make it good enough, maybe she'll ask you to come back."

Yeah.

Kerry chuckled softly, shaking her head at her former self with a sense of unreal bemusement. Love had caught her so by surprise, she'd been flattened by it before she even realized what was happening to her. And that had been a wonderful feeling, but she decided she liked the more seasoned, more faceted relationship she had with Dar now.

Though she would always cherish the look on Dar's face when she'd taken over her kitchen for that very first time. If she closed her eyes, she could still see that look in front of her, half amazed and half shy, the briefest glimpse of her soulmate soon to be.

Gorgeous.

Ah well. Kerry dusted off her fingers, and neatly wiped her lips with her lurid yellow napkin before tucking it, along with the rest of the wrappings, into her paper bag. She slurped up the last of her frosty and turned the car off, then popped the door and hopped out into the warm muggy night.

The reporter spotted her and headed her way. Kerry debated on ignoring him, then she altered her steps to intercept his path and halted when she met up with him, tilting her head to one side and waiting in silence.

"Ah, Ms. Stuart?" The man readily started the conversation. "We haven't really met but.."

"But you're Telegenics biographer." Kerry supplied. "Something you want from me? I think I said everything I had to say in the meeting this afternoon."

"No, um.. well.."

Kerry eyed the camera. "Is that running?"

"No, no." The man shook his head. "No, I wasn't really here to.."

"Watch us succeed?"

The man rocked back on his heels and held both hands up in front of him. "Whoa, take it easy, Ms. Stuart. You've got me all wrong."

Kerry folded her arms across her chest. "Okay." She was in a mood to be mildly benign. "What can I do for you, then?"

"First off, I'm Ben." He stuck his hand out. "And yeah, I know I'm working on that whole ship story and Telegenics being the underdog up and comer. Okay? Okay."

"Okay."

"But you know what?" Ben said. "The real story in that room today, and here tonight is you."

Kerry hiked an eyebrow at him.

Ben studied her, then grinned a little. "Flattery doesn't do you, huh?"

"Buddy.. the pond I come from, you wouldn't even register as a goldfish." Kerry told him. "So, if you don't mind – I'm going to close up shop here and go find myself a nice hot shower, and someplace relatively cool to sleep."

Ben laughed. "Oo.. now, Ms. Stuart, is that a way to treat the press?"

"No." Kerry's eyes twinkled slyly. "But I don't have anywhere to hide the body here, and it's too hot anyway. So you lucked out."

The reporter laughed. “Okay, I get the message.”

“Good. My can of spray paint’s in the back of my partner’s car. Hate to have to go get one just for you.”

Ben laughed harder. “Ms. Stuart, please. Tomorrow, when this crazy nuthouse city gets back to normal…”

“You mean it’s not?”

“When the power comes on.” Ben clarified. “Could you please sit down and let me interview you? I’ve gotten a really one sided perspective of the… well, the competition, and I’m seeing a different story here than what I was put on to start with.”

Hm. “Okay.” Kerry agreed. “Sure. If the power’s not on tomorrow, the meeting Quest called will be canceled anyway unless he wants to have it in our offices. So .. why not?” It would be a good opportunity to maybe put a screw in Michelle’s plan, and turn the tables a little. “Here’s my card.” She handed over one from her wallet. “Give me a call.”

Ben eagerly squirreled away the card. “Boy, that was easier than I thought it would be.”

Kerry gave him a wry look. “Good night.” She circled around him and went over to the truck, resting one hand on the edge of the deck. “How’s it looking, guys?”

“Lot better than it did when we started.” The younger of the techs noted. “Ma’am, you rock.”

Mark chuckled.

Kerry just grinned. “Well for the record, you all rock too, and not only I think that. Dar wanted me to tell everyone how much she appreciates the effort that was put in here tonight. She’s about to go into a board meeting, and you just made her evening a lot more pleasant.

“Wheew.” Mark whistled. “Hey, you should get the credit, Kerry. We just did the grunt work.”

“It’s all a team.” Kerry shook her head. “Mark, can you get some people to take turns watching this, and keeping the generators going all night?”

“Already done.” Mark rocked up and down on his heels. “I got twelve guys lined up, three guys every four hours. First bunch’s due here in like, ten minutes to take over from these guys so they can beat ass home.”

"Good." Kerry looked around into the dark areas surrounding them. "Do we need security?" She lowered her voice. "I can have Matt send some guys over from the office. It's going to be a long night."

"Yeah." Mark agreed. "Good idea."

Kerry stepped away a little and took out her cell phone, glad the ordeal was, for her, almost over. Then another thought occurred to her and she cursed silently, waiting for the line to connect. It did, and she spoke briefly to the security supervisor on duty, then disconnected and called another number.

"Hey, John? It's Kerry Stuart. How are… ah." Kerry could hear the chaos on the other end. "Ferries not running, huh?" She exhaled, listening to the man's exasperated tone. "Okay, well, thanks." She closed the phone and sighed. "Well, poo."

"What's up, boss?" Mark stuck his head around the corner of the truck. "No security?"

"No, they're on their way over." Kerry sighed. "But I just realized I have no way to get home. Our ferry system is down."

"Yow."

"Yeah. Maybe I'll go sleep on the beach… and poor Chino." Kerry frowned. "Rats, rats, rats and fruit bats."

Well, there was always a hotel. Kerry gave the side of the truck a slap. "C'mon, Mark. I'll drop you back by the office for your car. Sorry about the bike."

"Couldn't have given it to me anyway." Mark climbed down out of the back of the vehicle and joined her. "Garage doors won't open."

Hm. Kerry booted a rock out of her way as they headed for the Lexus. Power outages were much, MUCH more fun when Dar was around.

Otherwise, they were just one big pain in the poot.

* * *

A fire engine woke Dar up. She sat up in a confusion of dark strangeness, street lights splashing an unfamiliar pattern across the sheets covering her as she spent a moment remembering where she was. The howl of the siren peaked outside, then slowly faded, piercing through the closed windows effortlessly.

Other sounds intruded after it. A chugging rumble, followed by a crash of metal against metal, some garbage truck, maybe. Then the soft, far off sound of a jackhammer.

Another siren, blaring suddenly to life almost under the window, loud and frightening, and much slower to fade.

"Damn." Dar hiked herself up and leaned back against the headboard, raking her fingers through her hair to move it out of her eyes as she waited for her heartbeat to settle back down. The darkness outside reassured her she hadn't overslept her travel alarm, but now that she was wide awake she doubted she could take advantage of the remaining time to fall back asleep.

At least not without Kerry there. Dar reached for the television remote and shifted to a cross-legged position as she flipped the button on to check the news. They both enjoyed a morning cuddle, and slowly they'd adjusted their schedule to allow that, plus their runs, plus time to get ready for work without making it to the office too disgracefully late.

Sharing a shower helped. Dar grinned slightly. Though occasionally that backfired and threw their schedule off even more when they got the giggles and lost track of time while playing with each other. Natural now, but she could remember a time when Kerry had been far shyer, still unsure of herself and far from confident in her attractiveness at the very start of their relationship together.

> *"A beach party?" Kerry circled one denim covered knee with both arms and rested her chin on it. "I don't know, Col…." She glanced over at Dar, who was sprawled on the couch in Kerry's apartment, flipping through a Linux magazine. "We're sort of busy…"*
>
> *Dar looked up. "What kind of beach party?" She asked. "Laying on the sand getting fried, or something that involves volleyball and barbeques?"*
>
> *Colleen hesitated, a little doubtful of her friend's newest friend. "Ah… more to the second, I'm thinking."*
>
> *Dar looked at Kerry, raising her eyebrows inquisitively. "You up for it? I can do the beach."*
>
> *Kerry was silent for a minute, then she nodded. "Sure." She agreed. "Um… we'll bring the drinks?"*
>
> *"Great." Colleen patted the couch arm, then she got up and scooted out the door. "See you at Crandon, in two hours."*
>
> *The door closed. Kerry frowned slightly, then released her knee and straightened. "Okay, well..I think I have extra towels here.. "*
>
> *Dar got up and walked over to her, settling next to her on the loveseat. "You didn't sound really stoked about the party."*

"Um… no, it's fine. I like the beach." Kerry said. "Really." But there was a furrow in her brow that even Dar could clearly discern. "And the guys here at the complex are really nice." She got up. "We've had..um.. a few of these sort of parties." The window seemed to fascinate her, and she walked over to stare out of it, her back towards Dar.

"Uh huh." Dar studied her new partner. "Seem like a nice crowd. A little on the young, yuppie, gym addicted side, but all right." She watched Kerry's eyes shift briefly across the room to the mirror and her own reflection then back. A thought occurred to her. "You embarrassed to show off your new girlfriend?"

Kerry turned all the way around and looked at her, eyes widening perceptibly. "What?"

Dar shrugged.

"N..no!"

"So?"

"So… what?" Kerry answered hesitantly.

Dar felt an uncomfortable sense of awkwardness. "I just get the feeling…" She saw Kerry's hands tense. "That maybe you didn't want to go there."

"Oh." The blond woman walked back over and crouched next to Dar, resting a hand on her knee. "Well, no.. it's just that I've just never been much of a..um…" She exhaled. "You're right. Most of the folks that live here are really buff and into looks and I.."

"Don't want to upstage them?" Dar inquired mildly. "Doesn't surprise me. You're a lot nicer than I am."

Kerry lifted her eyes and stared at Dar, caught speechless for several very long moments. "What?"

"What what?" Dar responded.

*"What do you mean upstage?" Kerry added a short, hesitant laugh. "Maybe you upstage people. I don't. Her eyes dropped to the carpet and stayed there. "Maybe I don't want to embarrass *you*"*

It was like a door opening up into a sunlit field she'd never seen before, and Dar had to wonder just what Kerry saw when she looked at herself in the mirror.

*Well. Dar certainly knew what *she* saw when she looked at Kerry, and so rather than waste time on words, she slid off the couch and knelt beside Kerry, gently capturing her face in both hands and lifting it so their eyes made contact. "Kerry?"*

Those big, green eyes were so trusting. "Yes?"

"Don't be a jackass." Dar said, smiling in reflex at the expression on her lover's face. "You're everything I want in a woman. You care about anyone else's opinion?" The skin under her fingertips warmed as a blush colored Kerry's face, making her pale eyebrows stand out vividly. "Hm?"

Kerry remained frozen in place for the next several heartbeats. Then she hesitantly lifted her hands and let them rest on Dar's waist, leaning forward a little as a look of shy, wondering delight grew in her eyes. "Nu uh."

Dar drew her closer and kissed her. "So let's go to the beach." She whispered in one still pink ear. "And scandalize your neighbors."

Kerry didn't answer. She just put her arms around Dar and squeezed her as hard as she could, robbing Dar of breath, but delivering a message as loudly as yelling would have.

Boy. Dar enjoyed a moment of utter giddiness. Being in love sure was a lot more fun this time around.

Yeah, it sure was. Dar rested her chin on her fist. Being in love with Kerry had brought her more joy than she'd ever considered possible, and that, she acknowledged silently, was what was messing her up so badly right now.

What if it all vanished?

Dar knew there were no guarantees in life. She also knew that sometimes, bad things happened, just like that had to her mother when her father had been lost. But losing Daddy in that way had been totally different than if he'd just walked out of their lives.

She didn't expect that of Kerry. Her partner had proven to her more times than she could count her dedication to their relationship. But knowing that didn't stop her from being scared anyway, and Dar wasn't really sure of what to do about how she felt.

Well. She studied the screen, waiting for any news from home. It would probably pass, if she just chilled out for a while. She'd gotten past it at the very start of their relationship, after all. Her eyes followed the scrolling marquee, and she winced as it reported the power outage still continuing. "Crap."

With a grunt, she rolled over and retrieved her PDA from the nightstand, flipping it open and scanning the screen. Not unexpectedly, there were several notes waiting. She clicked on the first one.

Whine.

Dar, I haven't slept in my car since the night of my high school prom, and it was a heck of a lot cooler in Michigan than it is here. Can I come to New York?

K

Aw. Dar grimaced in sympathy, seeing the after midnight timestamp. She clicked on the second.

I want my Dar.

Is it selfish to want you to be here with me down by South Pointe at 2am? I am waiting to see if I can catch a ride over home. The HK staff says Chino is okay, but not a happy puppy.

K

Silently, Dar clicked on the third, posted shortly after the 2nd.

Oo. Have I told you lately how much I love your parents? They just rescued me. Sleep tight, sweetheart. I'll catch you in the morning.

K

Dar released a sigh of relief. Not that there was anything she could really do for Kerry, but knowing she was safe and sound in the hands of the two people she trusted more than any other in the world made her feel one hell of a lot better. She tapped the message and set up a reply, then scribed briefly o\n the screen.

Ker –

Tell mom and dad I say hi, and thanks for taking care of you. Board meeting went fine last night – hope your ears were burning because you were the chief topic of it.

Let me know what's going on with Quest. If the power's still out in the morning, you might want to extend him a gracious invitation to use our conference facilities.

I'm going to go work out. Damn noise around here woke me up. Hope you slept okay – talk to you in the morning.

D

Four am. Dar clicked off the television and regarded the clock. She got up and rummaged through the hotel's directory, flipping the pages until she found the one detailing the properties amenities. A soft snort sounded when she spotted the hours for the gym. "Nine to ten. When the hell during those hours do they expect anyone to be up there?"

So much for that idea. Dar went back over to the bed and sat down. Too early for breakfast, either. With a disgusted sigh, she laid back down and curled up on her side, tucking an arm around her pillow and attempting to relax.

I want my Dar.

Dar closed her eyes and ran the words over and over again in her mind with idle pleasure. Kerry had really done a great job, and after spending all night telling the board that, Dar had even let her own lingering disappointment fade to nothing, trading it for a glow of pride.

As it should be, her conscience reminded her blandly. She doesn't need you hovering over her every second, does she?

Dar exhaled. And she still didn't know what it was that Kerry had done. The thing that Dar wasn't going to like. The thing Kerry would not tell her unless it was in person.

A siren blared again, flashing red through her window.

* * *

Dark, sticky webs clung to her, wrapping her tighter and tighter in their embrace as a cruel laughter echoed around her.

She struggled, but the more she fought, the worse it got, until she could barely move at all and the heavy, stinking threads were starting to wrap around her face.

She screamed into the wind.

The laughter continued, and worse of all, she was starkly, achingly aware of being totally, utterly alone.

Bereft.

Figures approached her, and she was grabbed by rough hands, helpless and unable to break away or protect herself. She struggled anyway, desperately wrenching herself right and left to keep out of their clutches.

They just laughed all the harder.

But they stopped suddenly, and in all that silence, she heard the thunder of hoof beats.

Kerry jerked away, heart pounding, her eyes sweeping the darkness as she tried to place herself. A second later, she slumped back onto the compact bed, her eyes blinking at the splattering of moonlight making patterns across the sheets. "Jesus."

At the foot of the bed, Chino raised her head and whined, then curled back up again when Kerry showed no inclination to get up.

The boat rocked under her. Kerry tried to recall the fragments of her nightmare, but the details were swiftly fading, leaving her with only a vague, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. With a sigh, she pushed the light cover back and got up, circling the bed and making her way out of the small bedroom and into the galley of the Dixieland Yankee.

It was dark outside, but through the main cabin windows, she could see Andy and Ceci's boat resting in the next slip in the moonlight. Kerry took a small bottle of orange juice from the cooler and walked over to the table, slipping behind it and sitting down as she popped open the lid.

Four am. Her eyes found the travel clock. "Oh well." She spoke to Chino, as the Labrador appeared from the bedroom. "Two hours is better than nothing, huh, Chi?"

"Growf."

She propped her head up on one hand, hoping the nausea would subside and not force her to lose the few mouthfuls of juice and whatever else was left in her stomach. "Yeah, well… maybe you and I can go for a walk, huh? I don't think I want to go back to sleep right now."

Damn it.

Kerry pulled her PDA over and opened it, seeing the stutter of the message waiting flash. Her face creased into a grin as she saw the sender, and she tapped on the message to view it. After she absorbed the first paragraph, she paused and reread it.

Then she reread it again, as she sipped her orange juice, still grinning. The smile faded a little as she read the second paragraph, then evolved into a faint scowl as she read the third and checked the time stamp. “At four am? Dar!” She clicked over to a new message and scribed a quick note, then sent it.

You still there?

Moments later, the device flashed.

Yeah. Gym’s closed. You still up?

Kerry shifted her position, moving to the corner of the small couch and curling up into a ball with the moonlight coming over her shoulder . *Not still. I had a bad dream. It woke me up and gave me a stomach ache.* And a headache, and a pain in her chest. But no sense in freaking Dar out too much.

Where are you?

Funny, how plain text could take on a concerned tone without any embellishment. *On the Dixie. Mom and Dad are parked next to us.* Kerry scribbled.

Wish I was parked next to you.

Kerry felt her chest tighten further. *Wish you were too. I hate waking up from nightmares alone.*

I know.

Her last nightmare, months prior, had scared her so badly she’d woken up in tears, and Dar had insisted on holding her in her arms the rest of the night to allow Kerry to get back to sleep.

Not that she objected. Being in Dar’s embrace was very gentle on her soul.

But she hated nightmares. It wasn’t anything graphic, in fact, Kerry hadn’t even remembered what it had been about minutes after she’d woken, but the sheer emotional impact of it had shaken her.

Just like the one tonight had, only she didn’t have Dar’s warm presence to chase the ickies away. But this odd, disconnected conversation was making her feel better. *Glad you’re around to talk to, anyway.* She informed her partner. *I feel better already.*

Ker?

Yes?

I'll always be here.

Kerry stared at the words in silence, hearing the echo of them in her mind. *I know.* She wrote back. *You're the cornerstone of my life.*

The boat rocked softly under her, responding to the wake of an incoming vessel. Kerry tore her eyes from the screen to look outside, watching briefly as a huge sailing yacht cruised silently by, heading for the far end of the marina.

She looked back, but the screen was stubbornly silent. *Dar?*

I'm here. You just make me stop breathing when you write stuff like that sometimes.

Kerry smiled gently. *Are we a pair of loons, sitting here at four thirty am writing mushy love notes to each other or what?*

Yeah. (chuckle) But I think I can go back to bed now.

Funny. Kerry stifled a yawn. She'd just been thinking the same exact thing. The shadows from her dream had been chased away, and her stomach ache had eased. *Me, too.* She got up and headed for the bedroom, taking her PDA and her orange juice with her.

Inside the room, the moonlight flooded the bed, and Kerry crawled into its silver embrace. She fluffed up her pillow and settled down, curling onto her side and propping her PDA up where she could keep an eye on it. *I just took you to bed.* She informed her partner.

(laughing) Ultimate nerd- sleeping with palm pilots.

Kerry started chuckling, too. *Would that be your Indian name? Sleeps with Palm Pilots?*

Only if you're changing your name, Palm.

Chino trotted and jumped on the bed, giving Kerry an indignant look for her wanderlust, and for the bubbling laughter that was shaking the surface they were both laying on.

Thanks, sweetie. I needed the laugh. Kerry finally sent. *Me and Chi are going to try to crash.*

There was a pause before the answer came. *I am too. Glad you tagged me – it was getting to be a long night.*

Kerry let out a small breath, hearing so many levels in what Dar was saying, the written words far more expressive than her spoken ones would have been. For all it's plain text,

the messaging sometimes brought an intimacy that surprised her. *Yeah. Here too. Sleep good, okay? Wish good dreams at me.*

You bet. Night, Ker. Love you.

Love you too, Dixiecup. Night.

Kerry tucked her stylus away and put her head down, acknowledging the ache in her chest that missed her partner's presence. Though Dar had only been gone a few days, she felt a little anxious about her, sensing the rawness in their communication.

But there was laughter too, she argued silently. Dar was okay, just still a little shaken from their confrontation at the show.

A thought occurred to her. Maybe it was for the best that Dar was in New York, leaving Kerry to handle the ship bid. That kept her away from the source of her upset, and gave her a chance to settle it all out before she came back and got involved.

Yeah. Kerry felt better about things. She would take care of the deal, and take the stress off Dar's shoulders until it was time to get in there and just do it. Her partner was working on an intriguing problem, one that she was perfectly suited for, and if Dar could focus on that and resolve it, good things would happen.

She was sure of it. All she had to do was hold up her end of the deal, and keep Michelle and Shari focused on *her*. Dar had told her she had complete confidence in her, right? She'd spent a whole meeting tonight bragging about her, right?

So, Stuart, buck up and start living up to your billing. Kerry wriggled into a more comfortable position and closed her eyes. Shari and Michelle were convinced Dar was the key to winning their bid. It was up to her, then, to drop a smelly dead fish into their plans and force them to adapt to her style instead of her partners.

"I can do that." Kerry whispered, as the boat's gentle rock lulled her back towards sleep.

* * *

Love you too, Dixiecup.

Nicknames. Dar wrinkled her nose at the screen. In the time she'd known Kerry, she'd acquired more nicknames than in the previous thirty years of her life. Dixiecup. Tiger. Taz… She'd always hated people calling her names not her own, but that could have been because her prior monikers were never really that complimentary.

Ah well. Anything Kerry called her was all right, because no matter what the words were, there was always love behind it. So her partner could have called her Cheese Doodle, and she'd have accepted it.

Not that she was going to give Kerry any ideas in that regard, of course.

Dar felt twenty pounds lighter. She pulled the down filled quilt up over her shoulders and spared a glance at the alarm clock, making sure it was set to wake her up in time to get a shower before she had to go meet her German challenge.

She hoped Kerry wouldn't have any more nightmares. "Think good thoughts at her, eh?" Dar closed her eyes and concentrated on that, conjuring up images of some of the great times they'd had together, and focusing on the warmth and joy they shared.

In an instant, her body relaxed, and sleep crashed back over her.

* * *

Kerry walked out onto the back deck of the Dixie, leaning her weight on the railing as she regarded the start of what appeared to be a beautiful, if powerless, day. The sun was just rising, and the water took on a luminous sheen as a flock of birds wheeled overhead, looking for breakfast.

"Mm." She inhaled a breath of salt air, then climbed up the ladder to the flying bridge. Sitting down in Dar's usual seat, Kerry carefully set the switches, then turned the ignition for one of the big diesel engines that powered the boat. It rumbled to life immediately, and she adjusted the throttle to idle, letting the engine run to replenish the batteries inside the craft.

After a moment's listening, Kerry nodded in satisfaction and made her way down the ladder to join a frisking Chino waiting at the foot of it. "Hey, Chi." She greeted their pet. "How about some breakfast, hm? Want to have toast and coffee with me out here?"

"Rowf!"

"Okay, a banana, then." Kerry went back inside and eased into the small galley, setting a teapot on the burner and opening the refrigerator. She'd brought down some staples from the condo last night, and now she selected a cinnamon and raisin English muffin to pop into the toaster.

If Dar had been there, of course, she'd be hearing the tinkling of Frosted Flakes into a nearby bowl, along with the gentle, knowing bump of contact as Dar maneuvered around her in the tiny space. Thinking about that made Kerry smile as she took out two slices of cheese and a small tub of soft butter.

"Ah well." She took one of the mugs from its holder and set up the single cone of coffee over it, looking up as the boat rocked more than the light surf would have caused it to. Then a soft knock came at the door, accompanied by a shadow outside whose height betrayed its identify at once. "C'mon in, dad!"

“Growf!” Chino scrambled for the door as it opened, and Andrew Roberts ducked inside. The Labrador rushed over to him, wiggling in happiness as the tall man crouched to greet her.

“Hey, ya furball.” Andy rasped.

Kerry grinned at her father-in-law, who was dressed in his typical pair of shorts and sleeveless blue shirt, and barefoot as Dar would have been. “Morning.”

“Howdy there, kumquat.” Andy got up and ambled over, joining her at the galley’s small counter. “Ah see you’re up fore the gulls.”

“Mm.” Kerry finished her task and turned, opening the refrigerator again. “Want some OJ?” She offered him a container. “You’re up early too.”

Andy accepted the juice and set it down, opening it with intent, precise motions that were so Dar’s image it almost made Kerry chuckle. “Spent a lot of years getting mah butt kicked out of bed at oh dark thirty.” The retired sailor admitted. “Long habit.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry retrieved her now toasted muffin and placed it on a plate, waiting for it to cool before she buttered it. “So, what’s Dar’s excuse?” She asked. “Because she’s better than a rooster, let me tell you. Minute the sun starts coming up, bing bong.. she’s right there with it.”

“Always been like that.” Dar’s father asserted. “Even as a tot.”

Kerry placed a slice of cheese on each half of the muffin. “Can I get you some breakfast, dad? Since I’ve now been trained to get up at the crack of dawn despite my inclination otherwise?” She gave him a knowing grin. “Especially since I’m going to have to beg for a ride back to the other shore?’

Andrew snorted. “You ain't’ got to beg us for nothing, Kerry. It ain’t but a pleasure.” He eased into one of the comfortable chairs bolted to the deck. “But I’ll take one of them there round things if you got an extra around.”

Kerry popped another muffin into the toaster, and reached behind her for the teapot. She poured some hot water over the coffee grinds. “I haven’t looked at the news yet this morning… any word on power?”

Andy made a sound of disgust. “Fellers ain’t got no clue what they’re doing.”

That thought had occurred to Kerry quite a number of times the previous day too, as a matter of fact. “Well, I won’t argue with that. I just… “ Her cell phone rang. “Whoops. Scuse me.” She picked it up and opened it. “Kerry Stuart.”

“Morning, Kerry!” Alastair McLean’s voice was certainly a surprise. “How are you?”

Kerry blinked. “Um.. fine, sir.” She managed to get out. “How are you doing? It’s awfully early in Texas, isn’t it? Something wrong?” Unconsciously, she ran her fingers through her sleep disordered hair, even though her ultimate boss was a thousand miles away.

“Not at all!” The CEO said. “I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated your hard work yesterday in getting those circuits up. Brilliant job!”

Kerry made a face, pleased with the praise but a trifle embarrassed at the vehemence. “Well, you know, I had the best teacher.” She demurred. “And really, the generator idea wasn’t mine. It was Dar’s.”

Andy sucked at his orange juice, watching her with gently twinkling blue eyes.

“Well now, you know that just figures, doesn’t it?” Alastair said. “I’m so glad you two make such a good team.”

Kerry’s eyebrows jerked up. “Well, I think so.” She responded cautiously. “I mean, I’m glad Dar knows when she’s tied up helping another client, that I can fill in when something happens and make sure it all comes right.”

“Absolutely.” He replied. “Well, as I said, great job!”

“Thanks.”

There was a slight pause. “Ah, listen, while I have you on the line…”

Ah hah. Kerry leaned against the counter and cupped the phone to her ear as Andy’s muffin appeared and she tended to it. “Yes, sir?”

“Oh, Alastair, please. I can’t remember the last time Dar called me sir.” The CEO said. “If she ever did.” He added, in a mildly bemused undertone. “Listen, Kerry…I was talking with Dar last night, and you know.. hey, is she feeling okay?”

Kerry’s nostrils flared in surprised, and her eyes widened. “Ah.”

“I mean, you know it’s very hard to make that kind of call over the phone, but I’ve known her for a long time, and you know, she just didn’t sound right to me.”

Walking around the counter, Kerry handed Andy his muffin as she sat down next to him, trying to decide what to tell Alastair. “Well, I know she was really frustrated with that client.” She temporized. “She wanted to be back here by yesterday, but they weren’t prepared.. now she has to work with their programmer, so yeah, she was sorta pissed.”

Andy's eyes fastened on her face and his head cocked faintly to one side.

"That wasn't really…" The CEO hesitated. "But everything's all right otherwise? Her folks okay? You okay?"

It was amazingly personal, and Kerry realized at some level that Alastair's query went beyond business. Her prior dealings with the man had given her the impression he genuinely liked Dar, and she could hear a note of honest concern in his voice now. "Everyone's fine." She replied. "In fact, her dad's here right now." She watched Andrew's brow crease. "I think it's just that we had a tough time at that show, and this whole ship bid is really aggravating."

"Ah." Alastair said. "Telegenics, eh?"

"Yeah." Kerry said. "She also hates New York."

A low chuckle sounded through the phone. "I should have remembered that. Yes, you're right. Well, long as everything's okay, Kerry. Glad to hear it. You know Dar means a lot to me, right?"

"I know. She means a lot to me, too." The blond woman said quietly. "Thanks for asking."

"You take it easy today, you hear? Everything's up and hunky dory, and I just got a call from Caradyne, and they're happy as clams to be up. Wanted me to know it, so I thought I'd call and let you know it." Alastair said, in a brisker tone. "Tell you what.. how about I bring lunch in for everyone? I'll have Bea take care of it."

"If you can find someplace whose kitchen has power." Kerry reminded him. "That would be great."

"Ah." A sigh. "Well, everything's just another challenge. You call me if you need anything, all right, Kerry?"

"I will." Kerry promised. "Thanks." She folded the phone up and rested her elbows on her knees, hesitating a second before she turned and met Andrew's eyes. "Well, that was interesting."

"Yeap." Andy agreed slowly, drawing the word out. His grizzled eyebrows twitched. "Something goin on with mah kid?"

Kerry thought hard about what to answer, for a totally different reason than she had with Alastair. "She's okay." She reassured her father-in-law. "We just had to deal with someone who gave her a really hard time way back when, and it shook her up a little." She exhaled. "And I think, honestly.. she's a little restless with the company."

"Huh." Andrew took a bite of his muffin. "Someone mess with her?" He asked, deceptively casual.

She loved Andrew. Kerry felt a smile slowly tugging at her lips. He was forthright and honest, a proud man of unbending will whose adoration of his family was so absolute it touched the very soul. So she knew his question was meant to ferret out whether someone had hurt his beloved daughter, and if that was so, well then Andy was apt to see what he could do about it.

There was, she acknowledged, a violence to him that could not be denied. But then, Dar had that same dark thread running through her, though it was far more deeply hidden. "A long time ago." She told Andy. "When Dar was younger… it was someone she got involved with who didn't feel the way she did."

Andrew scowled immediately.

"Yeah, well, I can't understand it either, but anyway, she was pissed off, I was pissed off… it wasn't fun. Then they're part of this bid for the ship contract, so I'm sort of glad Dar's not here. At least from my perspective, I just get mad as hell and want to kick them."

"Huh." The big ex-sailor grunted again. "World's full of jackasses sometimes."

"Sometimes." Kerry agreed. "But then there's people like you, so it all balances out." She rested her hand on Andy's knee. "I guess it's time for me to go take a shower and get to work. At least I got some sleep, thanks to you and mom."

Andy got up and tousled her hair. "Tell you what, kumquat. Ah'll go light me some coals under that there boat, and wake up my pretty lady. You get your gear squared away, and c'mon over when you got a mind to."

Kerry watched him leave, then she stood up and went back to the galley, to take a gulp of her coffee and a bite of her own, now cool, muffin. She leaned on the counter for a moment, acknowledging the fringes of exhaustion still clinging to her from her lack of sleep.

For two cents she'd stay here and sack out. Kerry glanced over at her PDA, which chirped. "But I don't have two cents. So.." She trudged over and retrieved the instrument, glancing at it. A message from Mayte, already in the office.

Miss Kerry, Senor Quest has called, and is wanting to meet with you urgently.

"Kiss my ass." Kerry exhaled, a little knot of worry now twisting in her stomach from her conversation with Alastair. She sent a reply back, and put the PDA down, turning to make her way back into the tiny head for a hopefully refreshing enough to wake up shower.

She only hoped Dar's day was starting out better than her own.

* * *

The clock outside the hotel clicked to seven am, and as if on cue, the front doors swung open and disgorged a flood of people all heading purposefully out of the air conditioned lobby to somewhere else.

Dar took one look at the traffic in front of her hotel, and decided to walk instead. Accordingly, she turned and headed downtown, the early morning sun not yet oppressive as it splashed over her polo shirt and denims.

She'd settled for coffee and a banana for breakfast, after waking a bit later than she'd anticipated and rushing through a shower and dressing in some of the new clothing she'd purchased the previous day.

Shifting her briefcase on her shoulder, she lengthened her strides and picked her path through a slowly increasing stream of humanity, moving quickly to one side as a man walking a goat passed her going the other direction.

Dar kept moving, resisting the urge to turn and see if she'd really seen a hoofed mammal strolling down the sidewalks of Manhattan. After all, she'd seen llamas in San Diego and alligators in Miami. What were a few goats?

The foot traffic was also busy, everyone seeming to want to rush to work early on this Friday morning. Dar relaxed into her walk, though, glad of the opportunity to stretch her muscles out in lieu of a session in the hotel's gym.

She spent the time in the walk on deciding how to approach the problem facing her, knowing her first instinct – to simply run roughshod over the German coder – was probably not going to get her anything but a sense of personal satisfaction and a lot of long, screaming arguments.

Not that Dar really objected to long screaming arguments, but the longer the process took, the longer she had to stay here and put up with this noisy, crowded city that conspicuously lacked certain essentials such as her partner.

And she had decided, this morning while peeling her banana, that particular essential was something she intended to regain as soon as humanly possible. So that meant she had to take a different tack with the programmer and gain his cooperation, if she could.

At least she would try. There was always hours of screaming to fall back on. Dar's nose twitched as she caught the scent of strong coffee, and she decided to duck into a nearby shop to take advantage of it, escaping minutes later with a jolt of claustrophobia along with her steaming cup.

Twenty minutes later, she was outside the office building. She applied herself to the revolving door and entered, a flickering grin crossing her face as she caught the expressions of the flannel clad and sweating woman she shared the door pocket with. “Morning.”

The woman merely nodded, and continued on her way once they cleared the entrance. Dar adjusted the strap on her briefcase and followed her towards the elevators, which already had a cluster of waiting bodies in front of them despite the relatively early hour.

The thought of getting into one of those elevators surrounded by all of them made Dar’s guts churn unexpectedly. With a grimace, she looked around for an alternative path, spotting an out of the way door marked ‘Exit’ to the left of the bank of lifts.

Dar checked her watch, and found she still had twenty minutes before her eight –o-clock appointment. Accordingly, she bypassed the crowd and pushed open the door to the stairwell instead. A flight of concrete steps confronted her, along with a nose-tickling musty scent, but she started up anyway, trotting lightly on the treads to an internal rhythm.

Fifteen stories later, she emerged into a typically painted hallway and made her way between rows of weave cubicles into the conference room she’d commandeered the previous day. It was, as of yet, still empty and she set her briefcase down on the table as she leaned her arms against the wood surface, stretching her back muscles and flexing her legs,

Lousy scenery, she decided, but a nice workout, and no crowds. As she sat down, the outer door opened and Jason Meyer entered, the VP Ops presenting a slightly harried appearance as he spotted her across the room.

“Oh. Good morning, Dar.”

“Hi.” Dar responded. “Where’s our programmer?”

“On his way from the airport.” Meyer assured her. “My assistant picked him up.” He walked over, fussing with the pen in his hands nervously. “Listen, I’m glad I got a chance to talk to you before he gets here. There’s something you better know first.”

Dar sighed, and propped her chin up on her fist. “You know something?” She said. “If I had a buck for every time someone said that to me, I’d have retired years ago.”

Meyer sat down across from her. “This really isn’t funny.”

Dar gazed at him dourly. “I have to take my amusement where I find it. What’s the problem?”

“I don’t think this guy’s really going to be able to help you.” The man told her. He had sandy hair and now he scrubbed his hand through it, disordering the strands. “I talked to them when we first started up the servers… they know what the problem is. It would just take too much to fix it.”

“Too much what?”

“Time. Money.” Meyer admitted. “It means they have to rewrite their entire model.”

Dar studied his face. The man must have been in his mid forties. “Then why did you deploy it?” She asked. “If you knew this going in? To save your ass?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “We’re in a very competitive business, Ms. Roberts. This software gives us the edge.”

Mild, blue orbs looked back at him. “Not if it doesn’t run.” She answered. “Know what I think? I think you didn’t give a rats ass about the effect on your infrastructure, because you figured your boss would just ask me to take care of it for you.”

Now his look was watchful. “Well, you’ve got quite a reputation.” He deferred the question. “Let’s hope you can live up to it. Otherwise, I know a couple of companies who’d love to take your place here.”

Ah. Knives were out. Dar allowed a sexy grin to cross her face. “You mean, like the one you own ten percent stock in?” She queried.

“I don’t…”

“You do. And I’d be careful if I were you.” Dar drove the point home over his words. “We public officers have a big spotlight on us these days.” Her ears picked up approaching footsteps. “You made one bad choice already… want to risk a second?”

Meyer got up. “I’m not the one risking anything. You better be careful you don’t get in over your head.” He turned and walked out, using the back door to the conference room that lead down a short hallway to the executive offices. The door slammed shut behind him, leaving Dar in a momentary peace.

“Well, well.” Dar leaned back, letting the fingers of her right hand drum on the table. “Good thing I took the time to read that damn Wall Street Journal under my door this morning. Bastard probably didn’t know he was on page thirty two.”

Her PDA bleeped. Dar opened it and tapped the waiting message, hoping she still had a few seconds before she was interrupted again.

#%$%$%#$$!!!!!!!!!

Dar's eyebrows lifted. Cautiously, she tapped reply. *Anything I can do, Ker?*

(sigh) No. I'm okay. I just kicked my desk.

Why? Finally got over the color? Have it painted, babe. Dar joked, though she was a little concerned over the note. Kerry didn't usually assault her furniture without good reason.

I love the color. I just hate Peter Quest. He invited himself and that whole freaking circus here to our office, Dar! He didn't even wait to ask!

Dar frowned. *Jackass.*

Boy, you can say that again. I almost told him to get lost!

Which might have been what he'd been looking for. To see how far he could push them. *Did you make him wait?*

The sense of smoldering frustration was almost tangible in Kerry's answer. *Yeah. I told them they had to wait until after we had our corporate lunch delivered from Plano.*

Dar's eyebrows shot up. Lunch? *Alastair?*

Yeah. Thanks for letting me vent.

No problem. Dar scribbled back, glancing up as she heard the door latch start to work. *Gotta go. Wish me luck.*

Luck? Kerry's answer flashed back. *Honey, you're way too good to need luck. Give them heck for me, okay?*

Okay. Dar hit send as the door opened. She set the PDA down and took a deep breath, resting her elbows on the conference table and settling her posture as a young woman entered, followed by a tall, handsome man in pressed khakis carrying a briefcase not unlike hers.

The woman met Dar's eyes, and smiled briefly. "Okay, well, here we are. Hans, this is Dar Roberts from ILS, Ms. Roberts, this is Hans Erhard, and he's the chief programmer for Etecknics." With that, she stepped back. "Let us know if you need anything." She added, before she turned and left, closing the door behind her with a sharp snick of the latch.

Dar and the newcomer looked each other over in silence. Finally, Dar indicated the seat next to her, and lifted one eyebrow in invitation. The man agreeably walked over, putting his briefcase down and taking the chair, leaning on his elbows almost mimicking her position. "Hallo."

“Hi.” Dar responded. “How was your flight?”

He gazed at her in complete incomprehension, just a polite smile on his face.

Dar decided to break out of the ground rules. She amiably repeated the question in German, a little surprised to see the man’s eyes light up. She’d been sure after her conversation with Meyer, that he’d filled their guest in on their plans. But the reaction so far from Hans was one of a pretty blank slate.

Unexpected. Pleasant, but unexpected. Dar didn’t much like surprises.

“It was very good.” He answered in the same language. “Only too long. I am surprised to hear you speak my language, I thought no one on this side of the Atlantic spoke anything but English.” One hand extended over the table towards Dar. “And I am especially glad because I have heard so much about you, though I think we will not agree on very much regarding this problem.”

Dar took his hand and shook it, pleasantly surprised by his forthrightness. “Well, you never know.” She said. “Why don’t we start at the beginning, and see what we can make out of this mess.”

Hans inclined his head in agreement. “Yes, yes. But I think we should start with some coffee, since it is almost beer time for me right now. Is there somewhere here we can go?”

Well, this was starting out much better than she’d anticipated. Given the hostility she’d had from Meyer, the pleasant courtesy from Hans was duly appreciated, and she figured taking him out of the office to get some breakfast probably wasn’t a bad idea. If she could get his active cooperation, then maybe getting this resolved wouldn’t be as much of an uphill battle as she’d been afraid it would be. “Sure.” She stood up. “There’s a shop across the street. Let’s go over there, and you can start by telling me all about this little program of yours.”

“With my greatest pleasure.” Hans indicated that she precede him. “It is a project that I am very proud of, and never tire talking about, especially talking about it to a very respected colleague who has much to be proud of as well.”

Isn’t he charming. Dar noted wryly. *This might turn out all right.* “Ah.” She reached the outer door and opened it, stepping back to let him through. “Let’s just hope we can get both of these perfect products to work together.”

Hans chuckled as they walked to the elevator. “I did not claim my software was perfect, however.”

"Well, my network is." Dar issued a faintly teasing challenge. "But I'm sure we'll work something out." She watched his profile intently, but he only smiled easily and laughed. *Yeah. This just might turn out all right after all.*

* * *

Kerry had her hiking boots propped up on her desk, and a Styrofoam plate of Chinese food in her lap as the first rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. She turned her head and observed the gathering clouds, glad she was inside and cool and relatively comfortable.

With a sigh, she went back to her lunch, deftly picking up a mouthful of the spicy, nutty chicken with her chopsticks and getting it into her mouth without dropping saucy bits of rice over the front of her aqua blue polo shirt.

Casual was casual, but going into a meeting with three other companies and a client with a soy sauced stained shirt just wasn't something she really wanted to do, and the only extra shirt she had in the office was one of Dar's.

Conspicuously one of Dar's, in fact, a company polo from some show or other with her name on it.

Hm. Kerry pondered a sloppy bit of water chestnut, then regretfully put it safely between her teeth.

A soft knock came at the door. She pondered adopting a less casual posture, then shrugged. "C'mon in."

The door opened and Mayte entered, her slim form also encased in casual denim and cotton. She was carrying a sheaf of papers, and a shy grin crossed her face when she spotted her boss half sprawled over her desk. "Miss Kerry, I have the documents you asked for."

"Bring em over." Kerry waved her chopsticks at her. "Did you get lunch?"

"Si." Mayte put the papers down in Kerry's inbox. "I have it outside. That was very nice of the big office to do for us."

"Yeah." Kerry selected a piece of chicken and bit into it. "Is the conference room ready? I told Mark to make sure our visitors get tagged badges so we don't have to worry about them wandering around pressing their ears to the drywall." She glanced up. "Sit." She indicated the chair in front of her desk.

Mayte sat down, raising one hand to push her long, dark hair back behind her ear. "I think everything is ready, yes." She said. "My mother said some not so nice things about some of the people. Is this a bad thing that is happening here, Ms. Kerry?"

“Could you do me a favor?” Kerry asked.

“Of course.” Mayte answered instantly.

“Could you please just call me Kerry?” Her boss requested, giving her a hopeful look. “Otherwise I really feel like I’m trapped inside a bad Southern period movie.”

Mayte made a face.

“C’mon, it’s not that hard is it?” Kerry coaxed.

Her assistant smiled hesitantly. “No, it is not hard at all. I just feel that it disrespects you if I do that. You are my boss.”

‘Hm.” Her boss tapped her chopsticks together lightly. “Why do I think that particular argument might not really hold much water with me?” She inquired, a grave twinkle in her eyes.

Mayte blushed, a deep coral against her tanned skin, but didn’t answer.

Hm. Kerry decided to table the discussion for the moment. “Anyway, back to your original question. These people are part of the cruise ship bid that Dar and I have been working on. The man asking for the bid invited himself here to have the meeting, because we’re the only ones who have power, apparently. I don’t really mind.. in fact, Dar suggested I ask them, but I don’t like people just assuming things.”

“Si.” Mayte had recovered her composure, and now she nodded firmly.

“And… yes, we know two of the people who are bidding against us.” Kerry added, a trifle reluctantly. “One of them is a former client. The other… “ She exhaled. “Knows Dar from way back.”

Mayte blinked at her. “You do not like her.” She hazarded a guess.

Transparent as glass. Kerry sighed inwardly. “No.” She admitted. “But anyway, I’m hoping this meeting won’t be that long. We all presented a bid overview yesterday before the power outage started – I think he just wants to put the cards on the table, and ask for formal pricing.” She scooped up some rice and a bamboo shoot. “And with any luck, I won’t have to sleep on the water again tonight.”

“Pardon?”

“I slept on the boat.” Kerry clarified, taking a sip of her herbal tea. “After I had to find a way to get out there… I got lucky and Dar’s folks found me over on South Pointe.” She eyed Mayte. “How did you manage last night?”

“It was very hot.” Mayte confessed. “We went outside to the porch, we have screening there, and papa made us hamburgers on the hibachi.” She said. “We used candles and we slept outside. It was too hot inside.”

Jesus, you’re a lucky son of a biscuit, Kerrison. You have no idea. “Wow.” Kerry set her lunch down. “Yeah, I remember how hot it gets. Dar and I spent the night in the condo once without power.” Hot and edgy, with the storm raging around them and an even bigger one brewing inside them both. “What a night that was.”

“Papa went and got a generator very early today, when I told him what you did for the customers yesterday. He thinks you are very smart.” Mayte said. “It is much better for mama, too. She did not feel well at all.”

Kerry’s ears pricked up until she swore she felt the hair over them fluffing. “From the heat?” She asked casually.

“I think so.” Mayte replied. “She could not wait to come to work today.” A shy grin reappeared. “Me, either.”

“Well.” Kerry put her plate down and pulled her keyboard over. “If those losers don’t have the power back on by tonight, I’m authorizing all of you to stay here in the building overnight. I don’t want anyone getting sick, especially..” She gave Mayte a direct look. “Your mother.”

It took only a moment to type out the message. Kerry reread it a few times, anticipating the problems and objections to it, then she sent it, remembering to copy Dar visibly. “I know we don’t have cots or anything, but we do have showers downstairs.” She said. “And you and your mother can take over our offices.” She indicated Dar’s photo, sitting on the corner of her desk, then indicated her own chest.

Mayte’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, we can find other places…”

“Ah ah ah!” Kerry mock scowled at her until she subsided in meek silence. “It’s what Dar would want.” She continued in a softer voice. “Your mother means a lot to her, and I know she really appreciates all the support your mom’s given her over the years.”

“Si, I know…” Mayte admitted. “I remember when mama came home one time, after there was no air conditioning here.”

“Ick.”

”Si. But she was so upset, because la jefa had stayed here all night, working so hard to get it all fixed, and the next day she heard so many horrible things about her, it made her very angry.” Mayte said. “She said it was so unfair.”

Kerry shifted her position, crossing her boots and watching her screen fill with answers to her email, some marked with a red exclamation point. “Yeah.” She murmured. “But you know what, Mayte? That was the day Dar and I met.”

“Oh! I did not know that!”

A faint smile appeared on Kerry’s face. “I don’t think she remembers the air conditioning any more than I remember her intending on firing me.” She sighed and removed her feet from the desk, sitting up and draining her tea cup. A glance at her watch told her she was running low on time, but she paused to glance at her mail.

Protests. She’d expected that. People objecting to her opening up the offices, thinking more of propriety than of the simple but basic comforts the building could provide.

Then – “Ah.” Kerry clicked on one mail at the very end of the list and opened it.

From: Roberts, D.

To: Miami Users All

Cc: Stuart, K.

Damn good idea, Kerry.

D.

Past that mail, the objections petered out, replaced with acknowledgements, brief, and conspicuously without exclamation marks. Kerry clicked on the reply button and typed a brief, three word, eight letter response and sent it back to Dar alone, then got to her feet. “Okay. I’m going to that darn meeting. If anything blows up here, message me.”

“I will.” Mayte got up as well, and walked with her to the door. “M..” She paused, wrinkling her nose as Kerry cleared her throat. “Kerry, may I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Kerry put her hand on the door handle and leaned on it.

“This person who is coming here, who my mother does not like and you do not like… she did something bad to la jefa, is that not so?”

Kerry nodded briefly.

“Mama heard this woman talks bad about Dar, is that true too?” Mayte asked.

Green eyes took on a hint of steel. “Yes.”

Mayte nodded solemnly. “La jefa means much to my mother as well. She told me this time, if she hears people saying unkind things about her, she will go get the janitor’s broom, and make them fly with it.”

Kerry spared a moment to imagine her lover’s short, feisty administrative assistant chasing Shari down the hallway with a broom and unexpectedly burst out laughing. She leaned against the door and held her stomach, trying hard to catch her breath as the image played itself out over and over again in her mind.

Mayte blinked at her in alarm. “My mama is serious!”

“Oh.. I know.” Kerry slid down the wall and just kept laughing. “But now I gotta figure out how to bug the conference room so she can hear it all and crank the broom up!”

“But…” Mayte sounded very puzzled. “You want her to do this?”

Kerry finally let the laughter run down, and just sat there, one knee raised with her arm resting on it and looked up at her assistant. “Don’t worry about it, Mayte.” She finally exhaled. “Your mama won’t have to do a damn thing.”

“No?”

“No.” Kerry’s voice was quiet and serious now. “Because I’ll do it first.” She got to her feet and dusted herself off. “They’re on my turf now.” A breath later, she opened the door and went through it, heading for the conference center with a grimly determined air.

PART 10

THEY HAD TAKEN OVER THE ENTIRE CONFERENCE TABLE BY NOW. HANS HAD printouts spread out over half of it, and Dar had router and switch dumps littering the other half as she focused on the screen of her laptop. She was leaning on the table and had both legs wrapped around the legs of the chair she was sitting in, rocking back and forth a little as she tapped her mouse pad impatiently. "You're still sending too much data over, Hans."

"It is not!" Hans insisted. "Look, look here." He pushed a paper towards her. "See there? It is only what the program needs. Just that."

Dar pulled the paper over and studied it, one long finger tracing the code. Her brow furrowed, and then she pulled over the next page, her eyes flicking over the lines of text searching for something. "Eh…eh…"

"What?" Hans got up and came around to her side of the table, leaning on the wooden surface and peering over her shoulder. "There is nothing there."

"There." Dar tapped a line of code with the tip of her finger. "Look what you're doing here."

"Nothing!"

"You're sending the whole screen at once."

Hans leaned closer, almost touching Dar's arm as he peered at the paper. "And, so?"

“So it’s going as an unbroken string of linked packets and it grabs all the bandwidth.” Dar said. “You’re sending colors, Hans, as bits. You should be sending only vectors.”

He stared at the paper. “Plot it all? Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m not. You send vectors, it’s only four bits, I transmit that as a small packet.” Dar argued. “Change it. I’ll show you.”

Hans took the paper and sat down, frowning. “No. I cannot change it.”

“Give me that. I’ll change it.” Dar held her hand out. “Share your drive out.”

“No.” Hans refused. ‘You do not understand, Dar. If this changes, the whole program must change.”

Dar looked at him. “That’s right.”

“I am not changing my whole program. That is not what we agreed to.”

“You agreed to make it work for them. That’s what it’s gonna take.” Dar said.

“No, you must change your network, to allow them to work better.” Hans shook his head. “I am not at this time going to redo my entire program.”

Dar got up, in an almost explosive motion that sent the chair skittering back a few hops. She walked to the window and peered out of it. “Hans, it’ll work.”

“Pah.” Hans pushed a stack of papers out of his way. “It is much easier if you just give them more room.”

“They have to pay for it.”

Hans shrugged. “The world turns around on such things.”

Dar turned and leaned against the window. “Hans, cut the dirt. They contracted you for a working program. You gave them a big, smelly white elephant.”

“In no way!” He shot back, slapping his hand on the table. “This system works as designed! As designed! I will not change it!”

“You will.” Dar crossed the space between them and braced her arms on the table, leaning towards him. “Because I’m not going to ask my clients to pay more for bad programming.”

“You cannot say that!” Hans warned. “There is no way that I will…”

Dar moved suddenly, leaning much closer and lowering her voice. “Yes, you will.” She growled. “So get it into your head right now you’re going to make those changes. Do it, or I’ll call in their legal department and we can start drafting up a breech of contract filing.”

“You would not dare.”

“Sure I would.” Dar rasped. “So you’ll sit there, and make that change..” She pointed a finger at him. “Because you know damn well I’m right.”

“You are not!”

“I AM.” Dar’s voice built up to an impressive bark.

Hans glowered at her. Dar kept her eyes locked on his, refusing to let up. He shoved back from the table and threw his pencil down, then walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Dar straightened up with a reflective sniff, and resumed her seat. “Hm.” She crossed her ankles. “Forgotten how much I really like doing that.” She looked up as the door opened again, ready to resume her argument but put it on hold as Meyer walked in instead. “Hi.”

He gave her a slight nod. “Not going well, I see.”

Dar blinked mildly at him. “I think it’s going great.” She checked her watch. “Only took me four hours to figure out what the problem is. With any luck, I’ll be able to get him to fix it in less than a decade.”

Meyer rested his hands on the back of one tall chair and regarded her. “If you get the chance. I don’t think you will. I think you upset our friend Hans so much he’s leaving.” He smiled grimly at her. “So I guess your great discovery is a bust.”

Dar leaned back and laced her fingers behind her head. “Unfortunately for you, I think he’s got more integrity than that.” She remarked. “Not that you’d recognize it if you saw it.”

“Just who the hell do you think you are?” The VP asked, angrily. “You think you can come in here and mouth off like that to me? I’m your customer!”

The door opened again, and this time Stewart Godson walked in. “Well, hello you two.” He smiled, apparently oblivious to the dark thunderclouds hovering over the conference table. “How are things going? Made any progress? I see you’ve got a lot of paperwork here.”

“Excuse me, sir.” Meyer murmured, dodging past his boss and leaving the room.

Godson peered after him, then he turned and looked at Dar. “Did I interrupt something? I knew you two would get along if you just got to know each other a little bit. He’s not a bad sort, Dar.”

“He’s a scheming skunk who wants your job and has the skill set of a pickle.” Dar replied, with a light drawl. “Watch out for him, Stewart. He’ll sink you.”

“Oh, c’mon Dar.” Godson took the seat next to her. “You always think the worst of everyone, don’t you? He’s all right. He’s done some great work for us, and not only on this project.”

Dar wondered if her counterpart was really that oblivious. Finally she just shook her head. “Whatever.” She said. “All right, here’s the deal, Stewart.” She sat up and pushed the piece of paper over. “I found the problem.”

“Did you? Excellent!” Godson was delighted.

“Yeah. Only Hans is giving me a heartburn fixing it.” Dar said. “So I don’t know how far we’re gonna get.” She admitted. “Especially if your boy Meyer gets to him, since he’s got a reason to keep him stubborn.”

“What? Oh, really now, Dar. Let’s stop this talk.” Godson frowned. “He’s a valuable employee, and I don’t appreciate you tearing him down like that.” He said. “You wouldn’t talk like that about your next in line, would you?”

Dar folded her hands on the table, and took a breath. “No.” She replied evenly.

“Well, there then.”

“I wouldn’t talk like that about Kerry because she’s the very best at what she does.” Dar went on. “And because she’s proven herself to be a person of high skill and integrity. Can you say that about Meyer?”

Godson frowned.

“Do you trust him?”

“Well, I…”

Dar got up and roamed around the room. “Stewart, you’re my customer.” She stopped and gazed out the window again, blinking as she spotted Hans on the street below. He was pacing up and down, frustration evident in every line of his body. She exhaled, reluctantly censoring her words. “I don’t want to upset you. I just call them as I see them, sometimes.”

She watched his reflection in the window, his face folding into a pensive expression. Well, good. Maybe he'd think about it a little. In the meantime, that left her with her own problem down there on the street.

What if she couldn't talk Hans into it?

"Oh, I know that, Dar." Godson finally answered. "Listen, I'm the one who asked you to come here, remember? If I didn't respect your opinion, would I have done that?"

Dar felt a moment of almost dizzying doubt. What then? What if the programmer flat refused, and really did walk out?

"Dar?"

"Yeah." Dar swallowed before she turned back around. "Sorry. Just thinking." She returned to the table and sat back down. What would she do? Her eyes fell on Hans laptop, left invitingly close to hers. Could she take the code, and if he refused, just do it herself?

Godson clasped his hands together. "Well, look, Dar. Why not let me take you and Jason and Hans out to dinner tonight… hm? We could go down to the Italian place on the corner. How about it? You guys will be ready for a break by then, right?"

Would that be ethical? "Stewart, mind letting me look at the contract you have with these people?" Dar asked. "Just want to see what leverage we have."

He shrugged. "Well, sure, Dar… sure. Let me get legal to bring you up a copy. "

"Thanks." She nibbled the inside of her lip. "Let's hold on dinner until we know how far we're gonna get today."

"Fair enough." Godson stood up. "I'll leave you to it then… seems like you and Hans are getting nice and chummy!"

Okay. Dar finally decided. He's just an idiot. "Not really how I'd put it but…"

"Oh, sure, I saw you two.."

The door slammed open, smacking against the wall and making a resounding crack. Hans strode in, brushing past Godson and slamming his hands on the table in front of Dar. "This is what my decision is." He barked in German. "And if you do not like it, then it is just too bad!"

Godson's eyes turned to saucers. "Hey!..Ah…"

Dar leaned forward, and rested her chin on her fist. Her eyes narrowed a little, and she allowed a rakish grin to appear. “Talk.” She replied. “Or walk.”

Hans grabbed the paper they’d been discussing and shook it at her. “I will make one, ONE! Change in this. In just this one module, and then you will show me this big difference it will make. I will see it with my own eyes how this is the big problem you claim.”

Ahh. Gotcha. “All right.” Dar agreed. “One change.”

“And if it does not make anything better? Then?” Hans demanded. “What will you do? Because I will make no further changes.”

Was she confident in her own analysis? Dar felt uncharacteristically unsure.

“Well?” Hans barked.

Stewart Godson was looking from one of them to the other, his eyes wide and his jaw hanging. “Ah..” He stammered. “Now, let’s just everyone relax, okay?”

Dar exhaled. “If I’m wrong, I’ll give him the bandwidth.” She said, in an even tone. “How’s that?”

Hans drew back and studied her. Then he grunted eloquently. “Good.” He held his hand out to her. “We have a deal.”

Dar accepted his grip, and released it. She sat back as Hans flopped into his chair, almost pushing Stewart out of his way as he pulled his laptop over and started pecking at the keys with long, agile fingers. After a second, she looked up. “Rain check on dinner, Stewart?” She suggested, in English.

“Uh.. well, yes.” Godson lifted a hand and started to back away. “Glad you two.. uh.. got things settled. Listen, if you need anything, just give me a call, okay?”

“Sure.”

Godson left. Silence settled over the conference room again, punctuated by Hans’ typing, and the low, under the breath German muttering. Outside, faint sounds of the city filtered through the thick glass, but they were mostly obscured by the air conditioning cycling on.

Dar slowly let out a held breath, and picked up her PDA. She flipped it open and tapped a new message into being.

Ker?

A few seconds later, the message light stuttered.

Hey! How's it going?

Very good question. *All right. Think I found something. How's it going there?* She answered, then waited for a reply that seemed to take a while to come back.

Could be better. I just bumped into Michelle in the bathroom.

Dar winced. *You didn't drown her, did you?* This time the answer came back much faster.

I wish. I just want the day to be over. I'm trashed. Any idea when you'll be home?

Dar could sense the wistfulness in the words, subtly reassuring. *I'll know better tonight. Cross your fingers.*

(smile) Everything I have is crossed. I miss you.

Dar glanced furtively at Hans, but he was oblivious to her, his attention focused completely on his laptop screen with an intensity she recognized. She went back to her scribbling. *Same here. Call me when the meeting's over, okay?*

You got it. Love you.

Love you too. Dar folded the cover over the PDA and chewed on the back end of the stylus absently. Hans was working hard, but she found herself suddenly wondering to her own shock, if she shouldn't just open the pipes and have it over and done with.

What was going home worth?

Dar bit down on the stylus, lost in thought.

* * *

Kerry paused for a moment outside the conference room to gather her composure. Consciously, she relaxed her shoulders and straightened her spine, and then she worked the latch on the door and pushed it open.

Inside, ten people were already circling uneasily around the big oak conference table. They were dressed in typical business attire, the worse for wear given the heat outside, and they all looked up as Kerry entered and cross to the table.

"Afternoon." Kerry greeted them briefly. She laid her leather portfolio and her PDA down by the chair at the head of the table and walked over to the well stocked sideboard to get herself a glass of ice tea. Even with her back turned, she could sense eyes on her,

but she took her time pouring her drink, mixing a spoonful of honey into the glass and mixing it before she returned to the place she'd chose.

Her conference room, her chair. Kerry sat down and leaned on the chair arm, sipping her tea as she regarded the room. "Mr. Quest? Are we ready to start? I've got a full afternoon scheduled besides this." Of course, if Dar had been there, it would have been her chair. It was the one she always used in this room and if Kerry concentrated hard enough, she could almost convince herself she caught a hint of Dar's usual perfume lingering on the leather.

Looking like he smelled cabbage, Quest walked stiffly over to the other end of the table and sat down in the seat facing Kerry. "Thank you for allowing us to use your conference space, Ms. Stuart. I'm sure we all appreciate being out of the heat and sitting somewhere comfortable." He looked at the rest of the room's occupants. "Would you all like to take a seat? I don't really want to waste.. " His eyes flicked to Kerry's briefly. "Anyone's time."

"Fine." Michelle replied for all of them. She took a seat mid-way down the table, and Shari settled in next to her. They were both in smart, well cut business suits and despite the heat Michelle at least had managed to retain her air of crisp professionalism.

The representatives from the two other companies remaining in the bidding sat down across from them in the center, and Quest's two attendants joined him at the far end. Kerry took the opportunity to lean back in her chair and hike one denim covered knee up to rest against the table edge.

Shockingly unprofessional. She took a sip of her tea. But then, so was her techno-nerd t-shirt whose sleeves were rolled up two turns to reveal her biceps. "I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to ask me to host this for you." Kerry said. "It's been a tough couple days for all of us, I'm sure."

"Say that again." The man immediately to her right sighed.

Rickenback, his name was, Kerry remembered. His company was one of ILS's bigger competitors, while the man next to him, John Sellars, was from a small outsourcing firm in the Midwest. Both had engineers with them, and both were male. It made an interesting counterpoint to both the Telegenics team, and their own.

Half men, half women. Kerry wondered if Quest had deliberately picked it that way. He seemed odd and disconnected enough to have. "Tom, did you say your hotel didn't have power?"

"Yeah." Rickenback agreed. "Let me tell you, Kerry, you make like this swamp pit, but you can keep it." He gave her a wry look. "How in the hell do you deal with this heat all the time?"

“We stay inside.” Kerry waited for the chuckles to fade. “Drink a lot of this.” She held up her ice tea.

“And don’t wear much clothing.” Shari snarked.

Kerry ignored her. “Well, Mr. Quest? The floor is yours. If you need anything in the way of presentation material, let me know.” There was no point in antagonizing him any further, was there? “We’re all ears.”

Quest hesitated, then gave her a gracious nod before he got up and walked a little to one side, turning to face them. “Thank you all for coming out here.” He said. “I realize it was short notice, and I realize we’ve all had some personal challenges the past day or so. However, I have a project to get started, and I don’t have time to waste on waiting for things to smooth over.” He cleared his throat. “So.”

They all leaned forward towards him, except for Kerry. She remained relaxed in her chair, slowly sucking on her ice tea. The taste of raspberries and honey filled her mouth, and she let her peripheral vision take in the rest of the table as they waited for Quest to fill them in.

“I’ve heard a lot of talk the last two days.” Quest said. “I’ve heard proposals, and concepts, and mostly.. I’ve heard bullshit.”

Kerry’s eyebrow quirked, along with the corners of her lips.

“All I’ve heard is promises and hot air. All of you think you can do the job I need to get done. But all I’ve seen is paper and smoke.” Quest went on.

“Excuse me.” Shari started speaking. “What did you expect us to do, bring the technology with us and put it on your desk?”

It was, Kerry acknowledged, a surprisingly reasonable question. “Mr. Quest, you got proposals because that’s what you asked for.” She threw her own comment in. “Are you looking for a demonstration of the technology?”

“Yeah.” Tom Rickenback spoke up. “You called us down here to respond to your request for technical specifications… what exactly did you expect?”

Quest waited them out. He paced near the wall, past the sedately framed international certification certificates. “This is what I expect.” He turned and put his hands on his hips, brushing aside the khaki folds of his jacket. “I want to see you deliver. I have four ships I need to fit out for business in less than three months. I want each one of you to take one ship, and put your money where your mouths are.”

What? Kerry put her glass down.

“Whoever does the best job for the best price, gets the rest of our fleet.” Quest folded his arms across his chest. “Twelve ships.”

There was a conspicuous silence after he finished talking. The occupants of the table all looked at each other. Kerry finally broke the tension with a slight chuckle. “Okay, let me get this straight.” She said. “You basically want to get your four ships equipped for free, so you figure by tempting us with a contract you’ll get that to happen, because all of us are more than capable of putting a network just about anywhere.”

It even got a smirk out of Shari, she noticed. Michelle licked the tip of her index finger and made an unobtrusive swipe in the air, before she settled back in her seat and folded her own arms.

Quest shrugged. “You can look at it that way, if you like. But the offer is real, and it’s here on paper. So.” He walked over and removed four reams from his briefcase and slapped them down on the table. “Put up, or shut up, as they say. Either you’re in and interested, or you can take off now, and if you’re lucky get a flight out of this place.”

His assistant got up and lifted the papers, walking around to distribute them. He handed Kerry hers last, stopping a little short and forcing her to extend her arm for it. “Sorry.” He apologized, handing it over. “Here you go.”

Quest waited until they all had their copies. Then he closed his briefcase with a snick, and picked it up. “I’ll be at the Intercontinental.” He stated. “Have your signed copies delivered there by tomorrow if you’re going to participate.” He signaled to his assistants. “Thank you again, Ms. Stuart, for the use of your facilities. I’m sure everyone was a lot more comfortable here than they would have been at the hotel’s conference hall. There’s no AC there.”

“My pleasure.” Kerry murmured.

“Can’t believe you haven’t fixed that problem yet.” Shari commented. “Must be almost as frustrating as living with Dar.”

Instead of blushing, Kerry felt the odd sensation of a cold chill flushing through her body instead. She barely recognized the churning fury in time to take a strong hold of it, hearing the soft creak of leather as her frame reacted instinctively and tensed up.

She kept her eyes on the contract, forcing her hand to move and flip the first page over. After running her eyes over the first paragraph three times without reading it, she finally looked up, giving Shari a bland look. “You want me to snap my fingers and have the power come back on? Sure.” Kerry obligingly lifted her free hand and snapped her fingers. “Since you think every thing we do requires no effort.”

The lights flickered suddenly in the room, and everyone looked up, startled. Kerry straightened a little, cocking her head as she heard a low thrum, then a series of snaps, before the lights brightened again and steadied.

"What the hell was that?" Tom asked. "You forget to pay the diesel bill, Kerry?"

Kerry scratched her jaw in bemusement. "Not exactly." She said. "That was our generator kicking off. We're back on city power." She admitted. "So I guess you can go back to your hotels and get comfortable with Mr. Quest's reading matter."

Quest tilted his head in her direction. "I'm sure I'll be hearing from you all." He started to turn, then paused and met Kerry's gaze. "Thanks for fixing that little problem, Ms. Stuart. Good to see you living up to your reputation." He left the room, with his assistants trailing him as the rest of the people shuffled and started moving.

"Well." Tom eyed the contract. "Got a fax machine I can borrow, Kerry? Now that you fixed the power?" He managed a slight grin. "I don't mind stealing paper and a phone call from you since you'll have the home field advantage down here."

Kerry pressed the radio button on her cell phone. "Mayte?"

A moment later, her assistant answered. "Si?"

"Can you come down to the conference room please? I need something taken down to legal, and there are some people here who need to use the fax machine around the corner." Kerry put the document down, and rested her hands on the table.

"Yeah, he's right." Shari spoke up again. "We should get an advantage written in to make up for the bid being held down here. We have to get everything shipped in."

Kerry remained silent, her eyes dropping to her PDA as she opened it and started to scribe.

John Sellars spoke up, his voice quiet and gentle. "Good call on him getting those ships done, Kerry." He said. "Pretty slick, if you ask me. He knows he'll get all the bells and whistles, and we'll be fighting each other to cut costs."

"Mm." Kerry looked up from her screen as the door opened and her assistant entered. Mayte walked around the table and came to Kerry's side, keeping her eyes strictly on her boss. "Thanks Mayte." She held out the contract. "Can you tell them I need this reviewed for execution tomorrow? And show these gentlemen to the fax machine?"

"Of course." Mayte gave Kerry a smile. "Did you know we have the power on now? Everyone is cheering, except there were some people who I think really wanted to be sleeping in our office."

“Best news I had all day.” Kerry returned the smile. “Tom? You wanted to send a fax? Anyone else?”

“We make our own decisions.” Shari assured her. “We don’t need our asses covered by our lawyers.”

Tom stood up and hefted his bag. “Then you’re a bigger idiot than you sound like.” He told her briskly. “As well as being one of the biggest boors I’ve run across in a decade. Ma’am? After you.” He courteously indicated Mayte precede him. “Gentlemen.. ladies…” His eyes went to Shari. “Whatever. Have a great day.”

He left, with his associate. John Sellars and his assistant scuttled after him. “We’ll take you up on that fax, Kerry, thanks.” He gave her a half wave as they disappeared through the door.

That left Kerry with Michelle and Shari, a condition she had no intention of continuing. Accordingly, she picked up her cup. “Excuse me.”

Michelle half stood. “Kerry, wait.”

Her polite upbringing was sometimes very unfortunate. Kerry paused and waited, one eyebrow cocked in a reasonable imitation of her partner’s attitude.

“Can we take you to dinner?”

Kerry almost laughed. “You’re kidding, right?” She finally answered. “You think I’m into sitting listening to rude bullshit all night?”

Shari snorted. “You just can’t take it.” She waved a hand. “None of you people has a sense of humor.”

Kerry turned to leave. “Sorry. I’d rather have dinner with my dog.”

“Kerry. C’mon.” Michelle got up and intercepted her on the way to the door. “We’re going to have to deal with each other for this whole damn project. Let’s not start it off this way.”

Kerry stared at her, then pointedly at Shari, then back at Michelle.

“Besides, we’ve got something you might want to hear.” Michelle tilted her head to one side in acknowledgment. “You pick the place.”

On the verge of saying no, Kerry paused, remembering what Dar had said about Shari’s plans. Maybe she could get her to put her cards on the table now, and have it be over and done with. “Okay.” She decided. “My choice, huh?”

"Anywhere you want to go." Michelle assured her. "How bad could it be?"

Kerry grinned fiercely. *Bad as I want it to be.*

* * *

Dar bumped the door open with her elbow and proceeded inside. Hans was still hunched over his laptop cursing in German, and the sun was slanting inside the tinted windows to a far more radical degree. She set one cup down next to the programmer and went back to her own seat, settling into it and leaning back. "How's it going?"

"Like crap. Do you know how much I have to change in this just to do your foolish test?"

Dar sipped her cappuccino. "Want me to take a look at it?"

"No."

Programmers. Dar cheerfully acknowledged her own species. "Yeah, I'd give you the same answer." She admitted. "Keep your paws out of my code."

Hans glanced up at her briefly, then went back to his screen.

Dar pulled out her PDA and opened it, seeing the stuttering light. She tapped on Kerry's message.

> *Hi sweetie.*
>
> *Quest just chucked up strained peas on the conference table. He wants all of us to do one of his old ships and whoever comes in best value wins his fleet contract. I complimented him on getting his ships done for free, but I'm sending the contract down to legal now. Is it worth doing?*
>
> *K*
>
> *Oh, PS – I snapped my fingers and the power came on. I think your geek genes are leaking into me.*

Dar snickered. "Oh, that's rich." She shook her head. "Slimy bastard."

"Eh?" Hans glanced at her again.

"Another company." Dar started scribing. "My partner's handling it."

Ker –

My geek what? Glad the power's on. Least I know you'll be comfortable tonight while I sit here babysitting a cranky programmer – must be paybacks.

Quest is a slick operator. I wish I could say just drop it, but with the coverage Telegenics has started, we'd look like crap if we just gave up. So we'll suck it up and participate unless you find something in the contract you don't like.

Dar hesitated, then continued.

I think I found the problem up here. This guy's trying to fix it, then we'll test. If it's what I think it is, he'll have to rewrite half the program code. He's pissed off. I half want to just open the pipes even if it's not the problem and screw him. I want to go home.

D

She hit send, and then waited a little. However her PDA remained silent and she set it down on her leg, reasoning that Kerry might be busy. Bored, she pulled her laptop over and set it on her knees, minimizing the network sessions she had open and clicking to her personal storage files instead.

She had several folders there, but she opened her favorite one, which had pictures of Kerry, her family, and scenes of home in it. They were set in date order, and she occasionally amused herself by just letting her eyes linger over this visible record of their relationship.

One of ones she liked the best was the one that had caused Kerry the most problems when she went home that first thanksgiving. It was of the two of them, sitting on the couch together. Kerry had one leg slung over hers and they were leaning against each other, grinning at Colleen's camera.

She shifted her eyes to a second picture, of the two of them dressed for her high school reunion. She was standing behind Kerry in this one, her arms wrapped around her partner's bare middle. The sight of Kerry's mildly embarrassed expression at her skimpy gear always brought a smile to her face. But she looked adorable in her leather bikini, and Dar was always trying to find an excuse to have her wear it since then.

Maybe next Halloween.

She went on to a picture taken by her mother, of the two of them relaxing on the offshore island during one of their picnics. Kerry was curled up on her side, asleep in Dar's lap. They were both covered in sand and blown by the wind and the sea, and were totally zonked, but Dar liked the picture mainly for the smile of pure joy plainly visible on Kerry's face.

It was amazing to her to know she'd put that look there. Or the look in the next picture, a single picture of Kerry that she'd taken on the boat, just at sunset after they'd come up from diving and were resting before going in for dinner. With reddish gold light surrounding her, Kerry gazed not into the lens, but into Dar's eyes past it, a warm and gentle love fairly glowing from her.

Dar exhaled softly.

"Fizzing crap." Hans cursed. "All right. Are you ready to do this test?"

Dar flexed her fingers and maximized the network session, logging into her local routers and keying up the monitor. She set several parameters, then reviewed the results. "Okay." She rattled more keys. "Let me.. that's a test database you're using, right?"

"Of course."

"Okay… let me give you a subinterface.. hang on.." Dar quickly set up the port. "Change your default gateway to the .2."

Hans muttered something under his breath, but set to work on his computer anyway. "It is done."

Dar set up a graph of the existing port, and her new one, and arranged them side by side. "Okay, start up your database.. wait. You got someone on the other side who can hit it?'

Hans paused in mid key, then he looked up at Dar.

Dar didn't even wait for him to speak. She leaned over and picked up the phone, hitting some buttons. "Stewart? We need someone at a remote site to work with us. They'll have to have enough brain cells to change their application database source."

"Ah.. " Godson's voice trickled through the speakerphone. "I think I can find someone for that.. give me a few minutes, Dar. Okay?"

"Okay." Dar agreed, and hung up. She drummed her fingers on her keyboard, then retrieved the PDA that had slipped off her lap and opened it when it started flashing.

Ah. Note from Kerry. Dar tapped on it.

Hey Dardar.

Honey, no one wants you home more than me – but don't tank the Northeast, please? I'll come up and keep you company if it doesn't work. We can find some little Italian place and get drunk on Chianti and cheesecake.

Dar scowled.

Michelle and Shari want to take me out to dinner. I get to pick where. I'm going to take them to the place we go after kickboxing, and not give them a chance to change out of their suits. Think they'll refuse to talk to me after that?

Hope so.

Love you, K.

The scowl edged into a reluctant grin, which then faded out to a pensive stillness. She spent a moment thinking about Kerry spending the evening with Michelle and Shari, dive or no dive, and unexpectedly felt her blood start to boil.

The phone rang next to her elbow, and she had to tear herself back from a descent into furious jealously to answer it. "Yes?" Her voice came out a growl.

"Ah.. Dar?"

Dar cleared her throat. "Yes?" She repeated, in a more reasonable tone.

"I've got someone on the line from Tucson who'll work with you… ah, is that okay?" Godson said, a trifle hesitantly. "I've got him on the line, I can just conference him in."

Focus. Dar felt the muscles in her thighs twitch, a leaking of the nervous energy that suddenly filled her. "That's fine. Thanks." She heard a click, then background noise came on the line. "Hello?"

"Um.. hello?" A voice came through timidly. "This is Angie. Did you need me to do something?"

Dar had an overwhelming urge to just hang up and walk out, to go somewhere private and give Kerry a call and tell her…

Tell her what? That you don't trust her? Dar took in a slightly ragged breath. "Ah, yeah." She answered Angie. "We need you to open up your booking engine, but we need to you make some changes in the setup first. You know where that is?"

"Yes." The woman's voice became blessedly confident. "I sure do. What do you need me to change?"

Dar looked at Hans. "Settings?" She asked in German. "For the database?"

He gruffly gave them to her. Dar repeated them in English for Angie's benefit. While the girl in Tucson was making the changes, Dar half decided she was going to force the ports to show what she needed them to show, and the hell with it.

Get on a plane home, tonight. If she was coming in, Kerry would surely toss up the dinner and come get her, right?

Of course. Dar stared at the screen, unable to suppress the churning emotion.

"Okay, I'm done. Want me to open the program now?" Angie asked.

I don't care. Dar forced her attention to the screen. *I swear I don't care. I don't give a shit about any of this.* "Go ahead." She looked up as Hans got up and came to peer over her shoulder at the monitor. On it, she had the production port, which was saturated and blinking red, and the test port, a benign green.

"Now we will see that I am right." Hans stated calmly. "I am sure of it."

I don't care. But Dar called up the router config anyway, making sure the buffers were set to take advantage of the changes, and her priority lists were in place. She watched as the new port showed activity, the traffic statistics building as Angie started it up.

"Hey!" Angie's voice erupted through the phone.

The port stayed a placid green. Dar exhaled, her vindication meaningless at the moment.

"That was really fast!" The girl from Tucson blurted, in an amazed tone. "What the heck did you do?"

"Shit." Hans turned and walked away, taking a stack of printouts and throwing them against the wall with shocking violence. He got to the door and yanked it open, slamming it behind with such force the certificates on the wall jumped off and crashed to the floor.

"Hello?" Angie repeated. "Are you there?"

Dar laid her fingers on the keyboard, noticing now that they were shaking. "I'm here." She answered briefly. "We made some changes. Guess you can see the difference."

"Wow! I sure can!" Angie sounded very enthusiastic. "It used to take me twenty seconds to move from page one to page two on this database, and now I just clicked it, and it was right there! Fantastic!"

Dar measured the traffic. It had made a difference, no doubt. However, it was just one session, and she realized under full load, it would need more than that. It was a perfect opportunity for her to try out her new intelligent algorithms.

Damn it. But that meant she had to stay here. Just the thought made her want to scream in outrage.

“Are you going to do that with the real system?” Angie sounded excited. “Like, now?”

Dar’s cell phone rang. “Hold on.” She pressed the hold button and unclipped her cell, flipping it open and putting it to her ear without looking at the caller id. “Hello?”

“Hey, sweetie.”

The angry, buzzing bees in her head settled suddenly. “Hi.” Dar replied. “What’s up?”

“Did you get my note?”

Dar settled back in her seat, pushing her laptop back and out of her view. “Yeah.”

“Mm.” Kerry’s voice dropped a note. “You sound pissed. What’s wrong? Didn’t your idea work out?”

She’d only said three words. Could Kerry really tell how she felt based on that? Dar exhaled a little. “Matter of fact, it did.” She admitted. “But god damn it, to make it work in production, I need to throw my beta program in this fucking router after that god damn programmer fixes the whole fucking thing.”

Kerry was silent for a moment. “And… that means you can’t come home.” She ventured. “Is that what I’m hearing?”

“Fuck.”

“Sweetheart.”

Dar sighed heavily. “Sorry.” She muttered.

“How about I ask Col to stay by the house and hop up there?” Kerry asked. “I don’t’ need to be here for legal to review that stupid contract, and we can’t do anything after that until the ships get here. No brainer. Tell you want, I’ll make the reservations. What hotel are you again? The Marriott, right?”

“And miss dinner with Michelle and Shari?” Dar asked.

Kerry just laughed. “Oh, would I love to not only get them down to the burger shack, but stand their obnoxious pig fart butts up in the bargain. Maybe I’ll even call the guys and have them come harass the two of them.”

Dar picked at the seam along the inside of her knee. “Rather have you here than out with them, that’s for sure.” She finally said. “But I can’t ask you to..”

“Why not?” Kerry cut her off. “Do you know how many times you’ve dropped everything and gotten on a plane for me?”

Hm. True. Dar chewed the inside of her lip. She was saved from answering by the door slamming back open, as Hans reappeared and stomped across the carpet towards the table. “Hang on.” She told Kerry quietly. “You finished sulking yet?” She asked Hans in German. “Because frankly, I hate sore losers, and I’d really like you to grow the hell up and just do your damn job.”

“Oo.. that sounds nasty.” Kerry whispered into her ear. “I have no idea what you’re saying, but that language just sounds like you’re cursing.”

“I am.” Dar replied in English to her. “Well?” She barked at Hans.

Fuming, he sat down across from her and let his arms drop into his lap. His pale eyes smoldered as he met her gaze, his frustration written clearly across his face. “Damn you.” He finally said. “I would like to smack you right across the face.”

Dar leaned forward slightly, her own inner turmoil rising back to the surface. “Ohh… please try it.” She growled out in English. “I am so in the mood to kick your ass.”

“Okay. One flight to New York, coming right up.” Kerry said, briskly. “See you in a few hours, sweetie. Keep the sheets warm for me, will you?”

Dar jerked her attention back. “Kerry, you don’t’ have to..”

“Too late. It’s done.” Kerry cut her off again. “You’re stuck with me. Gotta go pack. Talk to you later, okay?”

“B..”

“Love you.” Kerry’s smile made it easily through the cellular connection. “Call me when you’re finished yelling.. I’ll be on the way home.”

“You must think much of yourself.” Hans said. “But I do not hit ladies.”

Torn between two conversations, Dar decided to abandon one of them. She half turned and focused on her cell phone. “Kerry…”

“Yeess?” Her partner’s voice warbled back at her. “Please don’t tell me not to come there, Dar. I really want to.” She added gently.

The words died on her lips. Dar swallowed, and felt a smile tugging at her lips instead. “See you soon.” She got out. “Thanks.”

“Okay. Love you. My flight’s at eight… so have the hot chocolate waiting, huh?”

"I will." Dar promised. "Bye." She closed the phone up and held it a minute, then she sat up and turned the chair around to face Hans.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Then Dar exhaled. "Listen." She said. "I don't like being wrong either." She said in German. "Can we please just get it done?"

Hans leaned forward. "If." He pointed one long finger at her. "You buy me an expensive dinner, I will consider it."

Her heart was settling back into it's normal rhythm, and her body was relaxing again, under a wave of lethargy that followed the easing emotion. "Sure." Dar agreed. "Buy you a whole damn side of beef if you want. Let's go." She stood up, surprised when her knees shook under her. "We can start with a beer."

"Ah." Hans shut down his laptop. "Now we are again speaking the same language. It will also help me drown my ego. Let us go, indeed."

Dar found herself smiling, through a sense of vague embarrassment. She felt very mixed up, and somewhat off balance, but all in all, she didn't really care.

Kerry was flying to New York.

That's what mattered.

* * *

Kerry leaned back in her chair and studied the hiking boots she once again had planted on her desk. She knew she had to get moving home shortly, but she took a moment to bask in the sense of pure happiness she felt knowing how her night was going to end.

She had no idea what was going on with her partner. But she knew stress when she heard it, and caution went out the window. Besides, Dar had, in fact, dropped the world several times on her behalf and paybacks in this case were certainly justified.

Now. Kerry folded her hands over her stomach and reviewed her altered agenda. She had to go home, of course, and pack. Colleen had already responded to her email and agreed to come over and sit with Chino, and she'd double checked her inbox to make sure all the creepies were chased out of it.

Not that it would have mattered if they hadn't been. Kerry eyed her ceiling thoughtfully. Her head turned as her door opened, and Mayte stuck her head inside. "Hey, Mayte. C'mon in."

"Kerry." Mayte almost trotted across the floor over to her desk. "They said at Legal it would be Monday for them to finish with their review."

“Good.” Kerry said. “Since I won’t be here tomorrow anyway.” A grin appeared.

“No?” Mayte watched her face closely. “Are you going to New York, maybe? I think you are.”

“How can you tell?” Kerry inquired, feeling the skin around her eyes crinkle up as her grin grew broader. “Yeah, I am. Tonight, as a matter of fact.” She added. “So, since I’ve got to get out of here and go pack, I declare the office closed. Go home.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” Kerry got up and closed her laptop case. “Power’s on, crisis is over, and I’ve got a plane to catch.”

“You are happy.” Mayte said, shyly.

Kerry lifted her eyes from her case. “Does it show?” She asked in a wry tone.

“Oh yes.”

“Well, I am.” Kerry finished latching the leather catch and hoisted the bag to her shoulder. “Dar’s having some problems with that programmer up there, so I’m going to go up and give her some moral support.” She explained. “Or that’s what my official story is. The truth is, I just miss her and I want to go up there.”

“That is so sweet.” Mayte said. “La jefa must miss you too.”

“Mm.” Kerry started for the door. “I know it sounds a little crazy, since she’s only been gone a few days, but…”

“No, not crazy.” Mayte opened the door for her. “It is beautiful.”

Kerry walked to the outer entrance and paused, leaning a hand on the wall and turning to face Mayte. “You know, it is.” She said. “People say all sorts of things about being in love, but you almost never hear anyone say just how beautiful it is when it happens to you.” With a faint shake of her head, she turned and left, heading for the elevator.

Mayte went to her desk and perched on the edge of it, jumping a little as her mother joined her unexpectedly from Kerry’s office. “Oh, mama!”

“It is me, yes. At last they have stopped calling for Dar’s office with the power and I will have some peace.” Maria said. “Where is Kerrisita going? Home I am hoping? She did not get much rest yesterday.”

“No, mama.” Mayte solemnly shook her head. “She is going to New York.”

“Ahhhh!” Maria smiled broadly. “It is about time! I was worried about poor Dar up there in that nasty place all by herself. I am glad Kerrisita is going to be with her.”

“Si.” Mayte agreed. “But mama, I think Kerry forgot something before she left. She was supposed to go with those women to a dinner, and she did not tell them she was going away.”

“Tcha.” Maria folded her hands. “Is this those two perras?”

“Mama!” The younger woman affected to be shocked. “What would papa say?”

Her mother expressed a sound very much like a sneeze. “I do not like those women, Mayte. They cause bad problems for us, and they were not nice to Kerrisita and Dar. I am glad there will be no nice dinner with them. They do not deserve it.”

Mayte merely blinked, giving the solemn pronouncement it’s just due.

Maria folded her arms over her chest. “Where was Kerrisita taking them?” She asked, almost as an afterthought.

“Tail of the Pig.” Her daughter supplied promptly.

“Como?”

“Si.” Mayte shrugged. “That is what Kerry said.”

Maria frowned. “I have not heard of this one. Have you?”

For an answer, Mayte circled her desk and sat down at her computer, accessing her screen with efficient fingers. “No, mama, but I am sure we can find it on the Internet. There is everything on the Internet.”

Obligingly, her mother followed her around and peered over her shoulder. After a moment, they both straightened right up. “Dios Mio.” Maria spluttered. “I do not think Kerrisita is going to THAT place, Mayte. She is very the open minded, but.. what are those two men doing?’

Mayte hastily clicked off it. “I think that is the wrong one, mama.” She continued hunting. “Here is one..oh.” She frowned. “That does not look nice at all, but it is not too far from here.”

Maria looked at the address. “That is near the place where they have their hat boxing lessons.”

“Kickboxing, mama.” Mayte murmured. “Do you think Kerry was going there? The other women were dressed so nice.”

Maria chuckled. “Come, Mayte. I have not yet had lunch. It is time for us to go get the burgers.” She headed for the hallway at a purposeful trot.

“But mama…”

“Vamanos!”

Mayte hurriedly locked her screen and grabbed her backpack, hoping mama wasn’t going to cause too much trouble. “I am too young to be arrested, I hope.” She lamented, flipping off the office light as she headed for the elevator.

* * *

Kerry whistled softly under her breath as she punched her door code in, and pushed the condo door open. “Hey Chi!” She eased inside. “How are you, sweetie?” She reached down to give her pet a hug. “Chi, you’re going to be very upset with me, because I’ve got to leave tonight but I promise you when I come back I’ll have your mommy with me. How’s that?”

“Growf!” Chino whirled around in a circle, her ears flying.

“That’s how I feel too.” Kerry confided, dropping her briefcase and jumping around in a circle herself. “Whoo!!!” She hopped up and down along with Chino, dancing across the floor with her. “Yeah baby.. I’m gonna go get your mommy.. you like that?”

“Groouf!” Chino bucked around Kerry and retrieved a stuffed toy, presenting it gleefully to her.

“Gimme that cow.” Kerry grabbed the toy and cocked her arm, waiting until Chino scrambled over near the dining room table before she let it fly, clapping when the dog caught it in mid-air. “Good girl! Good catch!” She chuckled, continuing on past the Labrador and opening the back door for her. “Go on.” She waited for Chino to go outside, then she leaned against the kitchen counter, glad the condo had already cooled down.

It felt very nice to be comfortable, and not sweaty. Kerry opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of ice tea, popping the top and taking a sip of it. Inside the box, containers of dry ice thoughtfully provided by the island staff had kept the contents acceptably chilled through the power outage They’d even left a covered plate of fruit, which she removed and uncovered, attracted by the big strawberry in the center.

“Mm.” Kerry glanced at the clock. It was only five thirty, and her flight was at eight. Still plenty of time. She figured to leave for the airport at six thirty, with only her overnight bag getting on the plane shouldn’t be a problem. “Okay.” She waited for Chino to come back in, then headed for the bedroom.

Chino accompanied her, but when she saw Kerry take out the leather overnighter, she gave her owner a pitiful look and went to go lay down on her bed. "Aww." Kerry put the bag on the waterbed. "You know what this is, don't you?"

Chino whined.

"Now, I told you I'd be bringing your mommy back. Don't I get points for that?" Kerry unzipped the bag and retrieved her traveling sundry kit, tucking it into one side. "Wish I could put you in here too, Chi… I bet mommy Dar would like to see you, huh??"

"Growf."

Kerry chuckled as she put three pairs of jeans into the bag, neatly folded, and added a few t-shirts and one long sleeve silk that refused to wrinkle just in case she needed something a little jazzy. A pair of leather flats along with it, then some socks and a handful of underwear. "There." She put her hands on her hips and reviewed her choices. "I think that'll do… unless Dar decides to take me to a Broadway show."

The thought rambled around in her head, bumping into her other random thoughts. Hm. Kerry wondered if Dar would like to go see a show… maybe she could find something really cool and entertaining to keep her restless partner occupied for a few hours. "And if we do.." She observed thoughtfully. "and it requires spiffy duds, well then, we'll go buy em." She snapped the catch on the bag handle. "Right, Chi?"

"Whine."

Kerry walked over and crouched down next to the dog bed. "Aw, c'mon, Chino… it's only a few days. Your mommy needs me." She stroked the Lab's soft head. "You know how important mommy Dar is to me, right?"

Chino wagged her tail.

"You know how much I love mommy Dar, right?" Kerry added, in a soft voice. "I can't wait till I get there, Chi. I can't wait till I see her, and I can give her a great big hug." She leaned over and hugged the dog. "Just like that.. and I'll give her one for you too, okay?"

"Grrr."

'You know what? I think we might have a good time in New York. Maybe we can go to Central Park, and take a carriage ride. " Kerry straightened a little. "I'd like that."

Stifling a yawn, she got up and headed back into the living room. Figuring the chances of being fed on an eight pm flight were slim and none, she decided to see what she could toss together for a quick dinner before she left. "C'mon, Chi.. come get food."

She gave the dog a bowl of mixed kibble with some shredded chicken and got herself a cup of yogurt, a banana, some peanut butter, and the rest of her ice tea. “Mm.” She surveyed her banquet. “But what I’m getting for dessert is worth it.”

Cheerfully, she took the items into the living room and settled on the couch, flipping the television on to the news as she put her feet up and popped the top off her yogurt.

Now, at last, she listened as the power outage and its restoration was explained. “Holy cow.” She muttered around a mouthful of vanilla yogurt. “Look at that thing.” A helicopter view of the Turkey Point nuclear plant showed the transformer building that had disintegrated, sending surges in all directions and causing the problem in the first place.

They’d been lucky. Only the transformer building had been affected by the explosion, as yet of unknown origin. Nothing had touched the nuclear part of the facility, but to say the authorities were nervous would be the biggest understatement of the fiscal year.

It was scary to think of what might have happened otherwise. Kerry felt a chill go down the back of her neck. “Tell you what, Chi.” She murmured to the Labrador, who had finished her dinner and was now hopping on the couch to curl up next to Kerry. “I know where I’d like to be if the world blows up.”

“Growf?”

“Mm.” Kerry removed the cell phone from her belt and speed dialed, tossing her head to move her hair out of the way before she pressed the phone to her ear. “Hey, sweetie.”

“Hey.” Dar’s voice sounded a half ton lighter than it had. “What’s up? You leaving?”

“Just about. I’m having a banana first.” Kerry told her. “Just wanted to know if you needed anything from here.”

“You.”

Kerry grinned at the ceiling. “Besides that.” She said. “More undies? Shirts? Anything? I got a little room in my bag.”

“Just you.”

Kerry wriggled on the couch. “Okay – I’m heading out to the airport. See you in a few hours.”

“I’ll be there.” Dar promised. “Hey.. what’d you tell the terrible twosome?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” A laugh. “You stood them up? Really?”

“Sure did.” Kerry agreed. “Fuck em. Hope they get run over by the guys on their bikes, and end up head over keister in Snake Creek canal.”

“Kerrison.” Dar laughed. “You little demon.”

“Yeah.” Kerry said. “Wait till you see my horns. You at dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“See you in a few, hon.”

Dar chuckled again. “Will do. See you later.”

Kerry folded her phone and hauled herself off the couch, grabbing her banana as she headed for the bedroom. “Little demon.” She repeated to herself, with a slight laugh. “Yeah, what a rebel I’m turning out to be… Dar, you don’t know the half of it.”

The sun twinkled placidly on her bag as she grabbed the handles, and headed on out.

* * *

They’d found their way down to Mulberry Street, and into what was, for Manhattan, a relatively spacious and great smelling Italian restaurant by the time the sun was going down.

Dar settled into a seat near the window, eyeing the colorfully decorated walls with a bemused expression. “My partner’d love this place.”

Hans flipped the menu over and then tossed it aside. “I will take your word for it. Do they have something with fish here?”

Dar investigated. “Yes. Grilled Salmon or snapper François.” She reported. “What’s your poison?”

“If I were French, that would be an excellent joke.” He replied. “I will have the snapper, and if they can please give me the noodles with just some olive oil. I do not like tomatoes.”

Dar leaned back and extended her legs, crossing them at the ankles under the table. She didn’t mind the restaurant, but already her body was twitching with impatience, willing the minutes to go by faster. “You still mad at me?” She inquired.

“Yes.” Hans said. “You have made me too much work.”

Dar merely grinned and played with her fork.

“Why could you not have said this when this program was being written?”

“I wasn’t asked.”

Hans made a face. “This client, yes? He is not so bright.” He grumbled.

The waiter breezed by and simply looked at Dar with a raised eyebrow. “Bier?” Dar guessed, getting a nod from Hans. “Two of whatever imported you have on tap, the appetizer sampler, one snapper with no sauce on the pasta, one veal the same way, and a side of olive oil.”

“Awright.” The waiter grunted, putting down a basket of bread and walking off.

“Very nice.” Hans chuckled wryly. “It is so wonderful to be here in the friendly United States.”

“This is Manhattan.” Dar advised him. “You’re lucky he didn’t throw the bread at you.” She took a piece and nibbled it. “Godson’s all right. He’s no technical genius, but he’s pretty good on the financial side. I thought it was his VP who pushed the project through.”

“Meyer?” Hans frowned. “He came late to the table on it. I think he has not been here that long.” He selected a bread stick and broke it in half, placing one half on the table and chewing the other. “He does not care for you.”

Dar shrugged. “Long line.” She watched the waiter as he returned and put down two frosty looking mugs, dribbling foam down their sides and onto the table. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” The waiter turned and left again.

“He’s got his own agenda.” Dar continued, taking a sip of her beer. “He’s part owner in a network provider. Slight conflict of interest.”

“Pah.” Hans snorted. “Yes, I thought he was something like a player.” He chewed his breadstick thoughtfully. “It could be he knew this was a problem, and did not want to change it.”

“Mm. Could be.” Dar agreed. “He kept telling me that we would just have to take care of the problem, because he didn’t think you would cooperate.”

“Me? I am a businessman.” Hans objected. “I keep to my contract, and the contract says yes, we will make this program work. I do not have to like it, and I do not have to be pleased with having to do so much work, but I am a fair man.” He took a gulp of beer and set the mug down. “If he says anything else, it is not true.”

Dar nodded slightly. The pieces were starting to come together, and she wasn't liking the picture the puzzle was making. "I don't think he counted on me speaking German."

"Well, I did not either." Hans chuckled abruptly. "To be honest. I have used this to my advantage in this situation many times. It is easier to just accept what is given, and not have to struggle to communicate." He leaned back. "But, when I arrived, and we spoke, I rearranged my plans, and so here we are."

"Here we are." Dar agreed. "And, for the record, I really didn't want to make you change your whole damn program."

"I am not." Hans replied in an unruffled tone. "I have sent the damn thing back in pieces to Germany, and six young healthy boys are right now sweating over changing it while I sit here having reasonably good beer and horrible service in the good old US."

Dar started laughing. "You fraud."

"I am not." He maintained a dignified air.

Dar's cell phone rang, interrupting their debate. She pulled it out and opened it. "Yeah?"

"Well, hello Dar!" Alastair answered. "How are things? Sounds busy there!"

"I'm in an Italian restaurant." She answered dryly. "So yeah, it is. Things are all right. We found the problem."

"Did you? Great!" Her boss said. "Not that I'm surprised. Listen, something's come up."

Damn. "Yeah?" Dar responded warily.

"Don't worry, it's not a disaster." Alastair chuckled. "Matter of fact, it's good news for a change. Bob Alexander just gave me a call. He's my opposite number for Allied Cruising."

"Ah."

"He's been watching the action around our little bid war. He's interested."

"In?" Dar inquired. "He want to buy out those little stinkers, and put me out of my misery with the whole damn thing?"

The CEO snorted. "Nothing that simple. He's been thinking about upgrading his fleet. Eighty seven ships. He says he's going to look hard at going with whoever wins the little one."

Dar blinked. “Holy crap.”

“Uh huh.” Alastair agreed smugly. “So those peanuts could turn into gold leaf peanut butter, lady. I knew the big boys were keeping an eye on this whole little circus, but Alexander sounds serious.”

“That’s a big contract.” Dar uttered. “Jesus, Alastair, that’s…”

“This quarter’s catch-up. Yep.” Her boss agreed. “And you know what? He called me because he thinks we’ve got a good chance to nail it. So do me a favor, huh? Nail it?”

As if it were that easy. Dar exhaled. “He just put the proposal out.. it’s down in legal being reviewed. Wants each company to do one ship, whichever comes out best value wins.”

“Yeap, Ham called me.” Alastair said. “After he finished calling Quest a skunk, and an ape, and a skunk ape, he cleared it. I had him send it back on down to Kerry’s office.”

“Okay.” Dar gathered her wits. “We’ll talk about it tonight then. She’s on her way here.”

Alastair made a small sound of surprise. “Is she? Thought you said you had everything squared away there.. more problems?”

“No.” Dar said. “I mean, we’ve got the problem here isolated, but it’ll take some work to fix it, but no – she’s just coming up to keep me company.” She knew the words sounded a trifle odd, but Alastair didn’t even miss a beat.

“Good for her. You two take in a show or something, willya? Hey! Wait a minute.. Bea! Bea!”

Dar pulled the phone away a little. giving Hans a mildly apologetic look as the waiter returned with their appetizer platter and set it down on the table, along with some small plates.

"Business is business." Hans half shrugged, taking a mozzarella triangle and putting it onto a plate for himself. “It is nice for me, yes? I left my cellular phone in Germany.”

Dar picked up a deep fried stick of something or other and took a cautious bite. She could hear the faint sound of the main office soothing music in her ear, and made a mental note to have someone hack into the phone switch and change it. After a minute, she checked her watch, wondering if Kerry was at the airport already, and if everything was all right with her flight, and if it was on time, and…

“Dar!” Alastair picked up the line. “Listen, I have in my hot little hands a pair of tickets to Radio City Music Hall. Can I send em up to you?”

Radio City Music Hall? Dar stared quizzically at the phone, ready to refuse. Then she paused. Well, redneck, maybe Kerry would like to go there, you think? "Ah.. sure." She replied. "Sure, Alastair. I'd love that."

"Great!" Her boss fairly chortled. "Bea's sending them now."

"Hi Dar!" Bea's voice filtered through. "Have a great time!"

"Thanks." Dar responded.

"Well, I'll let you get back to dinner, Dar. Talk to you later." Alastair said. "Say hi to Kerry for me."

"Okay." Dar listened to the click as the phone hung up. "I'll do that." She folded the cell up and clipped it back onto her belt. "I'll certainly do that."

"Everything well?" Hans inquired.

Dar picked up her beer and took a healthy swallow. "Yeah." She said. "Pretty much, and the rest will be good in a few hours."

"When this partner of yours gets here?" Hans hazarded.

Dar nodded.

"Hm. I see." The programmer helped himself to another appetizer. "I am much looking forward to meeting this partner of yours. I think my horizons will be very broadened."

Dar checked her watch again, and drummed her heels on the linoleum floor.

Night was getting longer every damn minute.

* * *

Kerry flipped through her magazine for the second time, glancing up as the flight attendant stopped at her side. "Hi."

"Hi. Can I get you anything? Another drink?" The man asked, with a smile.

"Faster airplane." Kerry requested seriously. "Can you ask the pilot?"

The flight attendant chuckled. "It won't be that long now. It's just a three hour flight."

"This plane's call sign isn't 'Minnow' is it?" Kerry joked. "I'll have another orange juice, sure." She handed back her glass, then leaned back as the attendant strolled up the mostly empty first class cabin towards the service area.

Three hours really wasn't long. But she'd been at the airport for an hour that had seemed like forever, and now she just wanted the ride to end. She wondered if Dar would be at the airport to meet her, since her statement about being around wasn't really specific, and there really wasn't any need for her to ride all the way out to meet the plane, was there?

No, not really. Kerry hitched her foot up over her knee and smoothed the denim fabric over it with her fingers. No real reason, but she hoped Dar was there anyway. Airports were noisy, depressing places and she really, really wanted to see that tall, lanky frame and those pretty blue eyes waiting for her when she cleared the gangway.

Selfish?

Yeah, maybe. Kerry accepted the new glass of juice and sipped at it. She'd had enough time for a beer and some appetizers at the Chili's to Go in the airport, but the selection on the plane wasn't enough to entice her further.

Ah. Kerry paused, waiting. The ghost of a pressure she'd thought she'd felt on her ears returned, and increased slightly. They were going down. She only barely resisted the urge to hop up and down in her seat to make the plane drop faster.

"Jesus, Kerry." She muttered to herself. "What is up with you? Dar's only been gone a couple days. You'd think you'd been away from her for six weeks." She wasted a little time trying to imagine that, being gone for six weeks from her partner, and immediately switched to thinking about something else just from the sheer discomfort of it.

And wasn't that strange? Two married people should be able to be separate from each other without going crazy, shouldn't they?

Kerry welcomed the popping in her ears like an old friend. Okay, so she was strange. She was strange, and weird, and through all of it she wanted to be down on the ground and walking out that ramp and falling into those arms.

Because Dar would be there.

For sure.

* * *

Dar leaned against the window, peering out into the taxiway area with enough intensity to hopefully force a large Boeing airplane into existence without further delay. Her breath fogged the glass and she backed off, wiping the moisture off with impatient fingers.

A small cart scooted across the concrete, and she leaned back in, watching it alertly as it parked itself under the jet way connected to the gate she was standing in. A man got out, and he pulled from the back of his belt a pair of reflective wands.

Ah. Good sign. Dar smiled happily. Her attention was caught her reflection in the glass and she drew back, blinking at the brilliant blue eyes sparkling back at her. “Look like a kid at Christmas.” She accused herself. “C’mon, knock it off.”

A soft whine heard in the darkness drew her attention and she peered out again as a number of other little buggies drew up near the jet way. Her undignified glee embarrassed her. What would Kerry think? They’d only been apart for a few days, and now…

Jesus. Dar forced herself to pull back as she spotted the nose of a large white aircraft meandering in. She walked back around in front of the gate agents pedestal and took a seat in the front row of chairs, folding her hands over one knee and affecting an air of unconcern.

The agents paid her little attention, being busy with paperwork. One turned and opened the jet way door, propping it wide with a metal stop before going back to checking something against his computer.

Dar watched the nose of the plane bounce to a halt, and heard the whine of the jet engines as the jet way moved out to meet it. Unaccountably, her heart started to pound, and she took several deep breaths to calm it without much success.

What if Kerry wasn’t on the plane?

The thought suddenly struck her, bringing a sense of shock that made the room fade out just a little. “Don’t’ be stupid.” She muttered aloud. “Of course she’s there, or she’d have called me.” Dar firmly crossed her arms over her chest and refused the look at the cell phone clipped to her belt. Instead, she fixed her eyes on the opening in the jet way.

Of course Kerry was there. Probably right in front, taking her bags down from the overhead, and trying politely not to get in anyone’s way.

Twitching her jeans straight, and running her hand through her hair as she took an impatient breath, waiting to get out.

Dar could almost see her if she closed her eyes, edging past the seats and heading for the door, head a little down.

She opened her eyes and stared at the empty opening, sensing motion approaching.

Hearing the scuff of soft soled shoes on the carpet, in a gentle rhythm she recognized, moments before the opening was filled with Kerry’s familiar sturdy form, her head already moving around as her eyes searched the space before her.

* * *

“Let me off this darn plane.” Kerry suppressed the urge to give the flight attendant a poke, and adjusted the shoulder strap on her carryon instead. They’d pulled up to the gate finally, and it seemed like forever to her before they moved the gangplank in and started to get the door open.

She was in front. Usually, she patiently waited her turn, and let everyone else go before her, but not tonight. She’d scooted up past the two other flyers in first class and claimed a spot near the exit, watching impatiently as the attendant worked the door lock and pushed the big door open.

Bounce bounce. Kerry waited for the man to move back, then headed for the opening without hesitation. She’d been watching out her window as they’d pulled up, and she’d sworn she’d seen Dar standing there waiting.

Just a brief glimpse, but that had been enough for her to recognize that tall figure, hands pressed firmly against the glass, watching out for Kerry’s arrival.

“Thanks! Have a great time in New York.” The flight attendant told her, as she whisked on by.

“Oh, I will.” Kerry promised, heading up the slanting ramp towards the terminal. It was musty smelling and rank inside, and she grimaced as she passed a dark spot in the carpet that stank to high heaven.

Hadn’t Dar said the city smelled? Well, here she was, and boy, did it. Kerry saw light at the end of the tunnel and came around the last bend in the jet way, clearing the threshold and looking around her.

Her eyes locked with pale blue ones at once. Dar was sitting not ten feet from the entrance, and Kerry let out a whoop as she bolted across the floor, dropping her bag and throwing her arms around her partner as Dar stood and took a step forward.

“Eeeeyow!!” Kerry let out a soft yodel. “Am I glad to see you!” She buried her face into Dar’s chest and wriggled.

Dar wrapped her arms around Kerry and lifted her off her feet, holding her tight without answering. The warmth of her body felt almost shocking, and before she knew it Kerry had a snug hold around her neck and was leaning up to kiss her.

Spectacle at the airport. Ah well. Worse they could do is toss them out and they were going anyway. Dar shrugged off the concern and responded, brushing her lips lightly across Kerry’s before she made a longer, sweeter contact.

It felt familiar and wonderful, and the tension coiled inside her body relaxed as if by magic as Kerry pulled her head back a little and looked up into Dar’s eyes again.

"Hey, sweetie." Kerry gazed at her with unmistakable adoration. "Are you ever a sight for sore eyes."

Dar grinned like an idiot. "Hey." She cleared her throat slightly. "Want to move out of the way of those folks?" She picked up Kerry's bag and shouldered it.

"Sure." Kerry wrapped her arm around Dar's waist as they moved down the aisle of seats, and away from the gate. She caught a look of disgust from one woman. "Something wrong?" She asked politely.

"Disgusting." The woman answered, drawing away.

"Thank you." Kerry replied graciously. "Have a great night. I know I will." She gave Dar a squeeze, and grinned unrepentantly as the woman hurried past and left them behind. "What a creep!"

"Her loss." Dar circled Kerry's shoulders with one arm and rested her cheek against her partner's soft, fair hair briefly. 'How was the flight?"

"Took forever." Kerry admitted. "I just wanted to get here. It was okay, I guess." She craned her head. "Oh, I like those… are they new?" She plucked at the waistband of Dar's jeans. "Very sexy."

"Mmhm." Dar felt herself relaxing at the casual banter. "Thanks…you hungry? We can stop for something…"

Kerry looked around. "Not in here, honey. I've seen scrungier airports, but not by much." She remarked. "Can we get something at the hotel? I've got a headache Bayer would pay for."

"You got it." Dar shifted her arm, switching the casual drape for a light grip on the back of Kerry's neck. She kneaded the tenseness there as they walked, producing a half grin at the little sounds of contentment it drew from her partner. "Long day?"

"Ungh." The blond woman exhaled. "Long couple of days, and with as little sleep as I got last night, I'm raisin toast."

"With cream cheese?" Dar nibbled her hair a little. "Glad you're here." She whispered, seeing the shift of muscle under skin as Kerry smiled.

"I'm glad I'm here too." Kerry leaned against her as they walked through the door to the outside, and were greeted with a sultry New York night. "Hm. Almost as muggy as home, but with much nastier scenery." She wrinkled her nose. "We taking a taxi?"

Dar spotted an alternative, a long, plush looking town car with a diffident looking driver leaning against the side. “Got a better idea.” She steered Kerry towards the car. “You go to Manhattan?” She asked the driver.

The man looked at them, head cocked to one side. “Do I go to Manhattan? Whaddaya think, this thing look like a tour bus? Sure I go to Manhattan. Where ya goin?”

“East side Marriott.” Dar felt slightly sheepish. “Sorry, it’s late.”

“You got it.” The man opened the door with a flourish, and removed Kerry’s bag from Dar’s shoulder. “Gwan, get in there. I got better places to be than LaGuardia, that’s for damn sure.”

Kerry scooted in first, and waited for Dar to join her and shut the door before she edged back across the seat and snuggled against her partner with a contented sigh. There was a faint scent of oregano and garlic clinging to Dar’s t-shirt, along with the touch of spice that was their mutual body wash. “You smell good.” She commented, resting her head against Dar’s shoulder. “Damn, I missed you. I thought I was going nuts… you’ve only been here a couple days, but I feel like it’s been forever.”

Dar was startled to have her own feelings articulated so precisely. “Yeah.” She uttered. “Just real stressful days, I guess.”

“Mm.” Kerry rubbed her thumb lightly over Dar’s belly. “You know, they really were. Just so much crap, and that damn power outage. Jesus.”

Dar watched the lights of the city flash by, the driver surprisingly silent up front. It was amazing how much friendlier New York looked from the inside of the car, with it’s present occupant wrapped around her. “Well, it’s over.” She said. “And who knows? Maybe we can have a little fun here.”

“I’m having fun now.” Kerry closed her eyes. “Dar?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re a little nuts, y’know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you care?”

“Hell no.” Dar said. “Do you?”

Kerry drew in a lungful of air infused with cotton, and spice and love. “Oh no.” She whispered, a smile pulling at the muscles of her face. “I’ll take crazy any day.”

They both fell silent, the restrained classical music becoming audible for the first time as the car raced towards a tunnel and the skyline of Manhattan spread out before them.

PART 11

KERRY FINISHED ADDING HER BATHROOM DOODADS TO THE SINK SHELF AS SHE listened to Dar ordering them something from room service. The hotel room was big and very nice, but she could really have cared less as long as it had Dar in it, a shower, and someplace for them to sleep.

Even the second thing wasn't really a requirement, if she was honest.

With a smile, Kerry ducked back into the main room, pausing to lean in the door way and watch Dar as she paced idly back and forth in front of the desk. It was hard to believe she was actually here, but she knew she was because the gnawing anxiety in her guts was gone, replaced by a quiet contentment she'd come to associate with being around her partner.

"Thanks." Dar put the phone done and turned. "Twenty minutes. Did you get Advil?"

Kerry held up the small bottle she'd taken from Dar's kit. She uncapped it and removed a couple of the brownish pills, crossing to the pitcher of water sitting on the side table and pouring herself a half glassful. "That's a nice looking bed there, Paladar."

"Mm." Dar came over to her. "Too big for one person, though." She said. "Had a tough time getting to sleep in it." She admitted.

"Guess we've got the solution to that problem." Kerry swallowed her pills, dropping her head forward as Dar's hands gently kneaded her neck. It felt incredibly good, and not just from the warmth. "Know what?"

“What?” Dar’s breath tickled the edge of her ear.

“My life just got really good again.” Kerry’s tone was quietly serious.

Dar leaned against Kerry’s back. “Mine too.” She replied. “I missed you.”

“I felt really lousy when I woke up this morning.” Kerry mused. “I’m glad I’m here.”

“So am I.” Dar sounded just as serious. “So.” She wanted to get this out of the way first, to untie that one knot of uncertainty deep in her guts so she could deal with whatever it was, and get past it. “Kerry.”

“So, Kerry what?” Her partner asked curiously.

“So. What is this thing you did that I’m going to kill you for?” Dar got the words out in a stolid rush, chasing the last one out of her mouth and clamping her jaws down after it.

Kerry turned, letting her hands rest on Dar’s hips as she looked up. “Huh?” She queried. “What did I do now?”

A wrinkle appeared in the skin above Dar’s eyes. “Ah… you.. said you.. the other day?”

“The other day.” Kerry’s gaze slid to one side, as she thought. Abruptly her expression cleared, then took on an immediate look of embarrassed chagrin. “Oh.” She lifted a hand and half covered her eyes. “Yeah, that.”

“That.” Dar repeated, reassured. If Kerry had forgotten all about the damn thing, how bad could it have been? “Which is… what?” She asked, a touch hesitant.

Kerry had completely forgotten ‘that’, and now she felt like an idiot. With a sigh, she took Dar’s hand and lead her over to the bed, sitting down and waiting for her partner to take a seat next to her. “You really are going to think I’m a nut.”

Dar’s eyes fastened on her partner’s expressive face intently. “I am?”

“Yeah.” Kerry rubbed her nose. “I think you are.”

Dar waited, but nothing more seemed forthcoming. “Well.” She cleared her throat gently. “Why don’t you give me a try and see? I mean….” She examined the blond woman. “You don’t usually do nutty things.”

Kerry took a deep breath, and looked Dar squarely in the eye. “I did this time.” She admitted. “I.. um… “ She took another breath. “I got a tattoo.”

Dar’s face remained very still for a long, long moment. Then she blinked several times. “You did?”

Watching her face anxiously, Kerry nodded. “Yep, I did.” She didn’t see the little signals she’d learned were disapproval from her partner, and it gave her the courage to continue on. “You know I’ve been sorta thinking about it…”

“I know.” Dar finally managed to get a few words out of her shocked throat.

“Anyway, after that night with the gang, I was talking to one of the guys about it and he said his friend was a great tattoo artist, so..” Kerry grimaced a bit, half shrugging one shoulder. “So I went to talk to him and I saw his stuff.”

“Nice?” Dar asked.

“Gorgeous.” Kerry admitted. “We got to talking, and I told him what my ideas were and he drew this thing and…” She let the words trail off, sneaking another look at Dar’s face. The pale blue eyes were focused on her face, a look of mild intrigue mixed with curiosity in them

Not disgust. Not disapproval. Kerry felt a little better. “I guess I decided to do it before I thought about it and chickened out.”

Dar absorbed this. Of all the possible things Kerry could have thought she was going to kill her for, this was by far the least of anything she could have imagined. Why would Kerry have thought she’d be upset anyway? “Ker, it’s your body.” She said. “You could paint it orange and I’d be fine with it.”

Kerry didn’t respond to that for a moment. She took Dar’s hands in hers and squeezed them, her eyes fastened on their tangled fingers. “I just thought it was a pretty radical thing for me to do.”

“Nah.” Dar disagreed. “If you’d gotten your face pierced, I might have freaked out. But tattoos… hell, I wanted one when I was a punk. Why not?” She watched a smile appear on Kerry’s face. “So.. um…” The green eyes lifted to hers. “You going to let me see it?”

Kerry nodded. “Sure.”

“Where’d you get it??

Slowly, Kerry released one hand and lifted it, tapping her chest lightly.

Dar winced. “That must have hurt.”

“Eh.” Kerry exhaled, responding to a gentle pressure on her shoulder and lying down on her back on the bed. “This is where I’m supposed to carry on the grand tradition and prove my womanhood by telling you it didn’t hurt, in fact, it felt great.”

"Ah." Dar brushed Kerry's hand aside and unbuttoned her shirt, reclining next to her as she started to pull the fabric back.

"But it's not true." The blond woman forced herself to relax, letting her arm fall to the bed and focusing on Dar's face as that warm touch brushed across the skin under her shirt. "It hurt like hell, and I betrayed tough chicks everywhere by screaming like a weasel when he did it."

Dar chuckled softly, finishing her unbuttoning and pulling aside the left side of Kerry's shirt, exposing her shoulder and chest. A flash of color met her eyes, and she leaned closer staring at this new and very different thing with intense curiosity.

Kerry held her breath.

"Wow." Dar murmured. "It's… beautiful." She edged a bit closer. "Is that a rope or.."

"No, it's a. .um… it's a snake." Kerry uttered softly. "You know, it's that Celtic thing, the one with it's tail in it's mouth?" She hesitated just an instant. "The one that means eternity?"

"Oh… yeah!" Dar now found the pattern. Each scale of the snake's body had been outlined and done in a different color, and the effect was truly striking. The snake was winding itself in and out of a darker pattern and Dar had to stare at it for several seconds before her mind resolved what the pattern was.

It was her name. Dar put the word 'eternity' and those letters together and slowly lifted her head to stare into Kerry's eyes.

After a moment of utter silence, Kerry managed a smile. "No offense, sweetheart, but I'm really glad you shortened it."

It was stunning. Dar felt short of breath. It was overwhelming. She blinked and felt the surprising sting of tears. Her head jerked a little, and the droplets scattered over Kerry's bare skin, trembling as Kerry drew in a shaky breath.

With a little sigh, Dar just buried her face into Kerry's belly, giving her mind a little space to absorb this most explicit of messages.

Well, I don't think she's mad. Kerry reached up and ran her fingers through the dark hair draping over her middle, scratching Dar's scalp with her fingertips. In truth, she'd forgotten completely about her anxiety over the damn thing, too, and the sudden stress after the long day was leaving her feeling totally wasted. But it had gone off rather better than she'd expected, so maybe not preparing for it was the way to go.

Anyway. “I know you know how I feel about you.” Kerry ventured. “So it’s not a big shocker, but…” She felt Dar exhale against her skin. “Now I want to find an excuse to wear a strapless gown.”

Dar’s body twitched as a tiny chuckle emerged.

Kerry stroked Dar’s hair gently, loving the feel of it against her skin. The pain, she decided now, had indeed been worth it, and her last doubt drifted away as Dar turned her head finally and their eyes met, and she saw the wonder there.

Yeah. Definitely worth it.

* * *

Dar woke mere seconds before the alarm went off and hastily silenced it before it could rattle its way across the nightstand. It was just dawn, and she spent a moment catching her breath from her abrupt wakening before she settled back down and resumed her position snuggling with Kerry.

A roll of thunder boomed over head, and a quick look verified the lash of rain across the hotel room window. Dar regarded the storm peacefully, however, since she was in a place right now that no weather could touch, regardless of the severity.

She didn’t even care that she was in New York. Dar tilted her head and studied Kerry’s profile, trying to remember when they’d fallen asleep last night. The last thing she could clearly recall was sharing a fudge brownie as they lay together watching the news, then….

Then she woke up, a minute ago, crashed in the middle of the big bed with Kerry wrapped around her in her usual way, with her head pillowed on Dar’s shoulder and one arm draped over her as though she was nothing but a big, animated body pillow.

Just how Dar liked it.

Curled up as she was, her new adornment wasn’t visible, but Dar found herself thinking about it anyway. Though still a bit red and not quite healed, she could see the tattoo was, in all truth, a beautiful design. The man who had done it was no question an artist.

Dar was no question flat on her back flabbergasted over it. The thought and emotion behind the tattoo filled her with such a sense of awe, and surprisingly, excitement she found her breathing speeding up again just thinking about it. She was totally thrilled by Kerry’s decision to decorate her body with this particular symbol and now she was halfway wondering…

Well, should she do it too?

Hm. Dar hadn't seriously thought about tattoos since she'd been in high school. Then she'd wanted.. what was it again? Oh, right. A dagger across her right bicep. She turned her head and regarded the spot introspectively. What could she put there or anywhere that would match what Kerry had come up with?

A picture of Kerry, maybe? Dar felt a tiny snort emerge as she imagined herself taking off her jacket in a high level meeting and revealing *that* with her usual short sleeve silk shirt to the world if she had it done on her arm. As valued as she knew she was to the company, Dar conceded that would cross the line for even the most liberal of the board, and though she really didn't care what they thought about her, it also would probably embarrass Kerry.

Okay, so not a picture of her. Then what? Or.. maybe she could put the picture somewhere else most people wouldn't see…

Kerry stirred, and Dar decided to put off her thoughts until later. She tilted her head to watch her partner as Kerry's eyes slowly blinked open and she took in her surroundings, a smile appearing on her face. "Morning."

"Uh huh." Kerry gave her a squeeze. "Boy, did I sleep like a rock." She admitted. "I don't think I moved since I crashed last night."

"Me either." Dar ran her fingers lightly through Kerry's sleep mussed hair, sorting the pale locks into their proper sides. "Did you look outside?"

Kerry lifted her head and peeked. "Eew." She resumed her prior position. "Perfect day to stay in bed. Unfortunately, we're not home to do it."

"Mmph." Dar laid her hand on Kerry's back, then started rubbing it, muffling a grin as her partner started to produce small purring noises. "Hey, Ker?"

"Uh?"

"I really love your tattoo."

Kerry rested her chin on Dar's breastbone, her green eyes sparkling happily. "You do? Really?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Kerry rolled over, stretching and arching her back before she peered at her new adornment. "I really was excited about doing it, but then when I got home, and saw it in the mirror… it was just scary."

"Scary?" Dar traced the outline of the design with her fingertip.

“Yeah. Like, oh my god, how could I have done this?” Kerry laid a hand on her stomach and gazed up at the ceiling. “I was worried about what you’d think, and if I should have talked to you about it first.”

Dar sat up in bed and gracefully half turned, extracting herself from the covers and settling cross-legged in the same motion. She rested her elbows on her knees and regarded Kerry seriously.

“I mean… I knew you wouldn’t hate it.. at least I think I knew that.. but..” Kerry put her hand on Dar’s knee. “I thought about how I’d feel if you just came home with one and hadn’t talked to me, and I didn’t like how I felt about that.”

“Ah.” Dar’s expression moderated to a more thoughtful one.

“Would you have talked to me first?” Kerry asked, curiously.

Dar rested her chin on her fist. “Not if I wanted it to be a surprise.” She said. “And believe me, you putting my name on your chest was definitely a surprise.”

“Hm. Hadn’t thought if it that way.”

“Anyway.” Dar leaned over and kissed the spot gently. “I love it.” She moved up and kissed Kerry’s lips next. “I love you.” She paused, nose to nose with her partner. “You think you could wear a strapless gown to Radio City Music Hall?”

The green eyes widened and brightened. “When?”

“Good question.” Dar chuckled. “I’ll know when the FedEx envelope gets here. Alastair’s sending us a pair of tickets he happened to have around.” She said. “Tonight maybe, or tomorrow… you interested? I have no clue what’s showing there.. guess we’d better check that first.”

Kerry sat up next to her. “Sure.” She agreed, with a grin. “So what’s on the agenda besides that today, boss?”

Dar studied the thick, white covers. “Guess I’ll call Hans… see if his six sturdy young Germans got anywhere with that code. If he did, I’m going to have to hold up my end of the deal and figure out how to get those damn algorithms working.”

“The beta ones?” Kerry asked, in surprise. “I thought you said the problem was on his end?”

Dar got up off the bed and paced over to the window, gazing out at the rain.

Kerry waited, hearing a screeching of tires on the street below and amusing herself with wondering if a naked woman standing at the hotel window had anything to do with it.

The dull gray light outside outlined Dar's body, so Kerry enjoyed the view, admiring the long, graceful lines of her partner's torso.

Finally, Dar turned back around, and leaned against the window sill. "It is his problem." She said. "But even if he fixes it, that won't be enough. We'll have to do the rest."

Kerry leaned back on her elbows, extending her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "Honey, you do realize you're mooning Manhattan, right?"

Dar's head inclined slightly and her brows creased. "What?"

"C'mere." Kerry crooked a finger at her. "Before someone takes a picture of you through that window and you end up on the NY Times front page."

Dar turned around, stared at the window, and then sheepishly retreated back towards the bed. She climbed across the covers and collapsed onto her side next to Kerry. "Sorry. Wasn't thinking." Her voice sounded disgusted. "Story of my life lately, it seems."

Kerry nudged her with her knee. "What's that supposed to mean? You haven't been noticeably less brilliant than usual any time in the near past that I know of." She consciously lightened her tone. "Have you? Did I miss something?"

Dar shrugged. "No. I've just felt out of it lately." She admitted. "Anyway, you want to have breakfast here, or go downstairs? It's not a bad little place." She changed the subject, one hand plucking idly at the covers.

"I'd rather stay here." Kerry reached out and took Dar's hand in hers. "Spend some time with you just hanging out, if I've got a choice. If you don't have to go meet that guy, I mean."

Dar appeared pleased with the answer. "Sounds great to me." She nodded. "I'll give Hans a call, you order?" She leaned over and snagged the menu, handing it to Kerry. "Then maybe we can check out that music hall. Not sure what got into Alastair on that one."

Kerry opened the menu and let her hand rest on a page of it. "He's a little worried about you." She told her partner quietly.

Alert blue eyes found hers suddenly. "Me?"

"He thought you sounded a little off the other day." Kerry explained. "He mentioned it to me when he called."

Dar frowned. "What did you tell him?"

"Not much." Her partner said, slowly. "Just that the trade show'd been stressful, and the cruise bid was a bitch. You know. The truth."

“But not all the truth.” Dar sighed, lowering herself back down and putting her chin on her wrists.

Kerry put a hand out and ruffled Dar’s dark hair. “Honey, I wasn’t going to go into your personal history with him. It’s none of his business.”

“Mmph.”

“Even though I kind of get the feeling he really, really does like you as a person.” Kerry went on. “And he does care about you.”

Dar peeked up at her. “I know he does.” She sighed. “I just didn’t realize I was coming off as something he needed to worry about.” She extended her hand and cupped Kerry’s knee, stroking the skin over it with her thumb. “It’s frustrating. I just want to kick myself.”

The fact that Dar was talking about it reassured Kerry immensely. “Well, that’s why I’m here. To give you and ear, to give you a hug, or just to give you someone to have dinner with.” She said. “Whatever you need, I’m here.”

Dar studied Kerry’s kneecap pensively. “I’m not used to being needy.”

“I know. It’s usually the other way around, and you’ve always been there for me when I’ve needed you. So.. just think of this as a minor payback.” Kerry coaxed her, encouraged when Dar inched closer and curled her hand around Kerry’s calf. She responded by leaning forward and sliding her hands up Dar’s arms, kneading the thick muscles there with small, gentle motions. “You’re in good hands, aren’t you?”

Dar’s shoulders relaxed and she cocked her head slightly. “The best.” She relented, giving in and squirming closer. “All right. But if I tell you to kick me in the ass, you better do it. Don’t pat me on the head.”

Kerry leaned over and kissed her. “You got it.” She promised. “Now, since you’ve entrusted me with the breakfast order, can I ask if you’re in the mood for sweet or salty?”

“Sweet.” Dar exhaled contentedly. “They have pretty good waffles.”

“Mm… would that be the strawberry covered Belgian ones, or the banana?” Kerry scratched the back of Dar’s neck with her fingertips and watched her close her eyes in reaction. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s in that bag over there?”

"What bag?"

"The one with the sailor hat sticking out on top."

One blue eye popped open and regarded her.

* * *

Rain or no rain, it was a gorgeous day. Dar finished rinsing the soap off her body and stepped out of the shower, bumping the translucent door closed behind her as she picked up a towel and headed for the sink.

A very wet and disheveled figure looked back at her from the mirror, but she smiled at it as she dried her arms, one ear cocked to listen to the soft humming coming from the other room. Having Kerry around was really making a difference, she realized. She was a lot more relaxed, and the thought of dickering with Hans over his application was now amusing her more than rubbing her temper raw.

The thought of introducing Hans to Kerry was also amusing her, though she wasn't sure her partner would appreciate being in a room where the other occupants were speaking a language she didn't know. "Ah." Dar addressed her reflection. "What the heck, she lives in Miami. She's used to it."

"Dar?" Kerry's voice drifted in. "You say something?"

Dar chuckled softly. "Nah – just talking to myself. Be out in a minute."

"Well you better… it's getting pretty boring out here by myself."

"Uh oh." Dar toweled her hair dry as she walked out of the steamy bathroom, not immediately spotting her target. "Ker?" She looked around, finding her blond partner in just her own towel standing near the desk leaning over her laptop. "Problem?"

"Eh?" Kerry turned her head. "No, no… I was just picking up my office mail." She perched on a corner of the desk. "What time do we have to meet at the client's, eleven, right?"

"Right." Dar draped the towel over her shoulders. "Anything interesting?"

Kerry skimmed over her mail. "Nah, nah, nah.. whoa." She leaned closer and clicked on one mail, her eyes tracking over the text. Abruptly she straightened. "Holy cow!"

"What?" Dar put her chin on Kerry's shoulder and peered at the screen. After a second, she put her hand on the desk and let out a snort. "Am I reading that right?" Her voice rose incredulously.

Kerry slid off the desk and sat down in the chair. “Oh, boy, I hope not.” She muttered. “Oh my gosh, what on earth went on there last night?”

“Only one way to find out.” Dar pulled her cell phone over and dialed the office number. It rang, then was answered. “Morning, Maria.”

A perceptible hesitation. “Oh, good morning, Dar. And how are you this morning?” Maria answered. “Did Kerrisita make it there all right?”

“Just fine, thanks.” Kerry answered for herself as Dar set the phone on speaker.

“That is wonderful.” Maria stated. “I am so glad.”

“And I was doing really great until I opened up my mail just now.” Kerry added. “Does Dar have one of these in hers too?”

Maria sighed. “Si.” She said. “It was not exactly so as they said it, but..”

“Maria, what the hell happened?” Dar interjected. “That damn email from Mariana said you assaulted someone?”

“Jesus.” Kerry muttered, covering her eyes with one hand.

“Jefa, it was not so.” Maria protested. “I did not hurt anyone! It was just that Mayte told me about those two women who were being so mean to you and Kerrisita, and how they were going to be at this restaurant to wait for Kerrisita, and so we went there to tell them she would not be coming.”

“Uh huh.” Dar grunted encouragingly. “And?”

“And that is all! We did not mean to cause such problems!” Her assistant stated. “Here we were doing something so nice, and they were so mean to us as well. They are bad people, Dar.”

“Okay.” Kerry leaned against Dar’s shoulder. “But um… what’s all this about charges, if all you did was tell them I stood them up?”

Maria cleared her throat delicately.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the thoughtfulness, Maria, honest, I do…” Kerry went on. “But they could have stagnated there all night for all I care. I wouldn’t have asked you to go out of your way to tell them anything.”

“Oh, si, Kerrisita, I know that.” Maria said. “It is just Mayte and I thought we would do this on our way home, since we had to go that way a little anyhow.”

“Maria.” Dar took the reins back. “Charges?”

“Jefa, they were very nasty to us. I just went to them and told them about Kerrisita’s trip, and they started saying such nasty things!” Maria replied in protest. “I could not get them to stop! All of the people in that little place were coming to find out what the matter was and so I thought these women would not like to be such a spectacle, so I would do something to keep them from being so loud.”

Dar and Kerry looked at each other. “Like… what?” Kerry ventured.

“I gave them something into their hands to take and make them stop what they were saying.” Maria said, almost audibly squaring her shoulders. “I took the plates of the dinner they had, and put them in their faces!”

“Oh, Jesus.” Kerry whispered.

Dar stared at the cell phone, momentarily speechless herself. “Ah.”

“And it was so hot, the things there, that Mayte was so courteous and kind to them she put the glasses of beer over their heads to cool them off.”

Dar wandered off towards the window, shaking her head as she covered her eyes with one hand. “Anyone get pictures?”

“Jefa?” Maria queried.

“Dar was just wondering if anyone got .. ah.. hurt, Maria. Are you okay? Is Mayte all right?” Kerry asked.

“Oh, si.” Maria sounded a little less stressed. “We are fine, si. My husband, he was very shocked to hear about what his senora and senorita did, but we went very fast home after that, Kerrisita. Yes, we are fine.”

“Well, good. Good.” Kerry pondered what to say next. “Now, ah.. it’s not that we don’t appreciate what you did, ah… but you know…”

“Kerrisita, we could not stay there and listen to those women. They were being so nasty about you, especially.” Maria said.

“Well, I know, but..”

“Hey, Maria.” Dar swooped in from the right and very gently clapped her hand over Kerry’s mouth. “You remember Eleana?”

“DFR!” Kerry nipped at her partner’s palm.

A moment's silence. "Si! Si, yes I do, Dar. Yes." Maria said. "Another very nasty person."

"Did Kerry ever tell you about us meeting her at dinner once?" Dar asked.

"Noo… I do not think so."

Dar released Kerry, who folded her arms over her chest and smirked, ducking her head in acknowledgement. "Remind her to tell you about that when she gets back, huh?" She slid one arm around Kerry's waist and tugged her closer. "Anyway, don't' worry about it. I'll take care of Mariana, and tell her to get legal to get this whole pile of bullshit thrown out."

"Si, Dar. Thank you." Maria's voice warmed several notches. "We did not mean to cause you trouble."

"You didn't." Dar stated firmly. "Specially if they were talking trash about Kerry. They're god damn lucky it was you and not me that was there, because if I'd been there, they'd have gotten a lot more than… what did they have, anyway?"

"The chili, jefa."

Kerry slowly dissolved into silent giggles, sagging against Dar's body and hiding her face in Dar's shoulder.

Dar cleared her throat. "Yeah, well.. waste of beans in my view." She drawled. "Anyway, Maria, thanks. Don't worry about the charges. It's all crap."

"Si. That is what the man who came to speak with us this morning also said." Maria agreed. "It is just so aggravating, no?"

"Yeah." Dar said. "Sorry you had to get involved."

"I am not." Her assistant said, surprisingly. "Dar, I have been watching you put your head out for other people for so many years now, and it is good to be standing up for you if I can do that."

Dar stared at the phone in silence for several heartbeats.

"Me, too." Mayte's voice chimed in.

Kerry wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and let her hand come to rest on Dar's belly. "Guys." She said. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Then you are not mad at us?" Mayte asked.

Kerry looked up at Dar's still profile, just the hint of trembling moisture on the lids of her eyes betraying her feelings. "No, we're not mad." She answered for them both. "But listen, you guys keep out of trouble while we're away, okay? We'll take care of that whole situation when we get back."

"All right." Maria agreed. "We will be good."

"Okay, we'll talk to you later." Kerry said. "Bye." She folded the phone shut, then let her head rest again on Dar's shoulder. "Holy sheep dip, Batman."

Dar cleared her throat. "Definitely unexpected." She agreed. "Damn, I wish I'd been there. I'd have paid a month's salary to see that chili go flying."

Kerry snickered. "Me too." She confessed. "I mean.. it's not really funny, Dar. You know how ratty that's going to make that next bid meeting for us?" She sighed. "Not that I'm much better than they are. I'm the one who blew them off."

"Ah." Dar shrugged. "They can kiss my ass. Let's worry about it when it happens."

With a frown, her partner scanned the rest of her mail, then shrugged as well. "Yeah, I guess that makes damn good sense." She pushed the laptop from her a little and turned back to her partner. "I ever told you how good you look in just a towel?"

Dar sat down in the big easy chair and tugged Kerry down with her onto her lap. She wrapped her arms around Kerry's towel covered body and hugged her. "Hey."

"Mm?"

"If it stops raining, want to go down to Central Park later and take a carriage ride with me?"

Kerry willingly allowed herself to be distracted. "The ones with the horses?"

"Uh huh."

It was a charmingly romantic idea, and Kerry liked it very much. "Maybe we could find one of those little cafes and have dinner?" She suggested. "I know Manhattan isn't your favorite place, but I bet we could have fun here."

Dar nipped Kerry's side gently through the terrycloth. She tilted her head up a little as Kerry's fingers laced through her damp hair and they kissed. She could taste the last hint of grape toothpaste on Kerry's lips as she explored them, savoring the gentle touch against her cheek as Kerry traced the skin on her face. "Bet we could have fun right in this here hotel room." She murmured.

"No bet." Kerry nuzzled her, then went back to kissing. "Noo.. bet."

* * *

The office building seemed quiet. Kerry walked along the hallway taking a quick glance right and left into hushed rooms and stilted, almost empty atriums. Everything was white and gray, and she found it profoundly depressing even by their own office's standards. "Least I have burgundy walls."

A woman working at a pristine white desk looked up as she passed, and Kerry got the impression of wide, alarmed blue eyes before the woman ducked her head again and went back to the pad she was writing on.

Another woman, in a severe gray wool suit stopped by the desk, tapping on it's surface with her pencil before moving on, brushing past Kerry and giving her jeans a very disapproving look. "Are you here to deliver something?" She asked, pausing briefly.

"No." Kerry replied, with a gentle smile. "I'm working on a computer problem."

The blue eyed woman at the desk furtively watched the exchange, her fingers fiddling with the pen she'd been writing with.

"Well, you should tell your company to dress their technicians better, then. It's a shame." The woman in the gray suit turned and walked away, shaking her head. "Terrible." She turned again. "What company is it?"

"ILS." Kerry supplied helpfully.

"Oh, really?" The woman put her hand on her hip. "Never mind then. One of your big bosses is here, and I'll just tell her that myself." She marched off in the direction of the conference room, her shoulders fairly twitching with indignation..

Silence closed down over them again. Kerry shook her head and started to turn away, but a hesitant motion from the girl at the desk made her pause. She waited, taking in the short, stylish rust colored hair and the tiny cross earrings with idle interest. "Hi."

"Sorry you're going to get in trouble." The girl said, in a soft voice. "She's in everybody's business."

"It's okay. I'm not worried." Kerry reassured her. "Is she your office manager?"

"Yeah. Hannah Meyer." She hesitated briefly. "So you're a computer tech, huh?"

A brief twinkle entered Kerry's green eyes. "No." She dug her business card from one of her back pockets and handed it over. "My name's Kerry."

"Shawna….oh." The girl studied the card, then looked up at Kerry. "You're a vice president? Really?" Her voice sounded a touch incredulous. "Wow. That's pretty wild." She eyed Kerry's stone washed crimson short sleeved shirt and button flies doubtfully. "I mean, like, Hannah's right kind of. You don't look the part at all.. you do look more like a tech person."

"Looks can be deceiving." Kerry advised. "What do you do?" She indicated the spotless white shiny surface of the desk, which contained the writing pad, a cup with two pens in it, and not much more.

"Oh, I.. um.. " Shawna shrugged one shoulder. "I coordinate meetings. You know, like, schedule the conference rooms and stuff like that." One fingertip rolled the pencil she'd been using. "I set up lunch, too, and bring in materials. Collate." The words seemed to trouble her briefly. "It's a good job, and it's a great office in here, really smart, you know? My parents really like me working here."

Kerry felt a very brief moment of resonance with this skewed reflection of one of her own life's possibilities. "My folks would have liked it for me too." She told Shawna. "But I'm glad I picked my own path." She added. "See you later."

She felt the eyes on her back all the way down the hall, until she turned the corner and pushed open the door to the break room.

* * *

Dar stretched, arching her back as she wandered down the wall of windows, peering out of them as the rain continued to roll down. She was alone in the conference room, since Hans was in a smaller private office talking with his programmers, and Kerry was off finding some coffee.

A surge of well being flooded her, and taking a quick look around, Dar took a bouncing step then inverted into a handstand, balancing her weight on her palms as she edged around in a small circle. "Heh heh heh." She chortled softly. "Haven't done this in a while."

Behind her, she heard the door suddenly open, and knew from the clicking of heels that it wasn't either Kerry or Hans. Caught in the act, so to speak, she decided to pretend walking on one's hands was a normal act and turned, spotting a short, somewhat squat figure in gray staring at her. "Yes?" She asked briskly. "You need something?"

Without a word, the figure retreated and slammed the door. Dar hastily let her body drop backwards and flipped up, landing a bit precariously on her heels, but rocking forward to catch her balance before she could fall back and smack herself silly.

With a soft, wry chuckle, she walked back over to the conference table, settling back into her chair and spinning around slowly in it.

* * *

Kerry gave the two men in the break room a cordial smile as she made her way to the coffee machine. “Afternoon.”

“Ah, Ms.. Stuart, right?” The older of the two came over to her. “Nice to see you again… but I wasn’t aware you were coming out here. Is the problem that complex?”

“Called in the reserves, looks like it to me.” His companion said. “Too much for them, I think.”

“No, Mr. Godson, it really isn’t.” Kerry set two cups down and started preparing them to order. “Or, well.. to be totally accurate, yes, it’s complex, but Dar is more than up to the task of fixing it. I was just in the area visiting another account and thought I’d stop in.” It was an innocuous enough lie, she thought, and one Godson would have difficulty proving one way or the other.

“Ah, well of course.” Godson nodded. “Are they making progress, I hope?”

The other man snorted softly. Kerry correctly deduced his identity and muffled a grimace. “You could say that. The programs being rewritten, and we’re just waiting for the new code to test it. I think we should have this little problem wrapped up by sunset.” She gave them both a smile. “Excuse me.” She picked up the coffee cups and walked past them, making sure she looked Meyer right in the eye as she did. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Disappoint?” Godson followed her eagerly. “Goodness gracious no! That’s fantastic news! Fabulous! See, I told you, Jason. You’re so doom and gloom!”

Kerry hid a grin, hearing the slight choking sound behind her.

* * *

“We ready?” Dar asked, as she leaned on one elbow and gave her touch pad a nudge.

“Not just yet.” Hans replied, busy at his own machine. “I am waiting for a last set of libraries.” He spared a quick glance up at Kerry, who was catching up on her mail in the seat next to Dar. “Did your companion have a nice flight?”

“Hm?” Dar brought her attention back from someplace. “Oh, it was fine.” She replied. “I’m going to set up some router policies while we’re waiting.” A softly melodic whistle escaped her as she set to work, her body shifting a little as she locked her legs up behind the chairs.

"Ah hah." Hans regarded her with mild bemusement. Dar's entire attitude seemed very different today, he'd noticed. She appeared relaxed and almost friendly, quite a contrast from the edgy, threatening restless woman he'd encountered yesterday.

Was it perhaps that she had been proven right? Hans pondered. That often did put himself in a good mood, just as being wrong often put him in a bad one.

"Hey, Dar. Check it out. Email from your mother." Kerry reached out and gave her partner's sleeve a tug.

Dar straightened. "My mother?" She turned and stared at Kerry. "You got my mother to touch a computer?" She leaned over and peered at Kerry's laptop in disbelief. "No way."

"Yes way." Kerry grinned. "It's not a computer, though. Bellsouth has these little email keypads… so I talked her into getting one." She opened the mail. "That way we wouldn't end up having to run down to the marina if she opened a SPAM virus."

"Mm… good thinking." Dar peered at the mail. "How come she didn't send me one?" She frowned.

"Possibly because you wouldn't know the recipe for jambalaya?" Kerry pointed out. "I don't know, maybe she did. Have you checked?"

Dar went back to her own machine, minimizing her network session and opening up her mail instead. She scanned the lines quickly, her eyes lighting up slightly as she spotted the new address. "Heh.. got one." She clicked on it, then blinked. "But not from mom."

Kerry grinned a little, watching her partner lean closer to the screen, her head cocking to one side as she read. "Hey, Dar?" She asked after a few seconds. "Did some woman in a gray suit come in here complaining about me?"

Dar slowly turned her head and looked at Kerry. "Huh?"

"Never mind." The blond woman waved her back to her screen. "Tell dad I say hi."

Hans looked between one and the other, grunting as an apparent enlightenment came to him. He pecked out a few keys, then pushed the machine back. "All right, my friend, it is time. Are you ready to try this child of ours?"

There was a long moment's silence.

"Dar?" Kerry reached over and touched her partner's leg, startling her a little from her intense concentration. "I think he's ready to test… you okay?"

"Um.. yeah, fine." Dar seemed a bit embarrassed. "Sorry." She turned to Hans and spoke to him in German. "Ready to go?"

"Yes. I am ready. I will warn you, we have not tested this fully. If we put this in now and it does not work, I cannot back it out, and they will be crashed. Do you understand this?"

Dar nodded. "Go for it."

Kerry's eyes flicked between them, not understanding the words, but seeing by the shifts in Dar's body posture that something was about to happen.

"Are you sure?" Hans asked. "Do you not want to tell these people what we are doing?"

"And give them a chance to say no?" Dar leaned on both elbows. "You're the big shot programmer who's always perfect. You have confidence in your stuff? I've got confidence in mine." She said. "So do it, or admit you blew it."

Hans frowned at her seriously. "That is not fair." He muttered. "But I will hold up my end. If it fails, I will point at you and shrug my shoulders." He attacked his keyboard with a furious rattle.

"Is he doing something?" Kerry asked.

"Putting the new program in." Dar told her, watching her screen intently.

"In the middle of a production day?" Kerry protested. "Dar!" She half stood, caught by surprise. "What if we take them down!"

Dar set her filters, and waited, her hands flexing lightly over the keyboard. "I'll risk it. I'm not missing out on a carriage ride and dinner with you for this bunch of nits." She looked at Hans. "Now?"

With a finishing clatter, Hans touched one last key and lifted his hands. "It is done."

Kerry settled slowly back in her seat, holding her breath and crossing everything she could that her trust in Dar's judgment wouldn't fail her.. fail both of them, in this most public of circumstances.

A few moments only, would tell.

* * *

Dar knew she was taking a huge risk. In fact, she knew having Hans replace the running program in the middle of the day was more than a risk, it was a shockingly disruptive action which she'd just ordered him to do.

However, what she'd told Kerry was absolutely true – she had no intention of sitting around in this glass box until after hours just to dump the program when it was least

inconvenient to Godson. He was inconveniencing her by having her be here, and she was doing him a favor. Besides, as her note from her father had reminded her –

Do it, and ask forgiveness later.

Dar opened her network session wide and watched both of her routers with a hawk like intensity. She saw the data stream abruptly stop, the packets trickling to absolutely nothing but management traffic. “Program’s restarting.”

“Yah.” Hans folded his arms across his chest. “All the sessions went to the bathroom.” He said. “They will not be happy, that is for sure.”

Kerry laid her hands on the table, drumming it’s surface softly with her thumbs. She could sense the building tension, and after a moment she pushed herself to her feet and went to stand behind Dar’s chair. She laid her hand on her partner’s back, giving the skin under the cotton shirt a little friendly scratch before she focused her attention on the screen in front of her.

Dar didn’t like to be hovered over, but Kerry felt some of the stiffness in her back relax at Kerry’s touch and knew she understood the gesture of support. She watched Dar’s fingers flicker over the keys, the gentle spatter of keystrokes almost rhythmic as the patterns were put in place waiting for the data stream to return. “Should it take that long to restore?” She muttered softly.

“I don’t know.” Dar replied. “Hans…” She added in German. “Do you have to restart the servers?”

“I should not have to.”

“Want to check? I don’t see sessions coming up.”

With an aggrieved sigh, the German programmer bent over his laptop again, just as the door opened and Jason Meyer entered.

“What’s going on? Did you take us down?” The VP Ops snapped. “I’ve got everyone in the building calling me.”

Dar barely glanced up. “You wanted it fixed ASAP.” She said. “We try to give the customer what they want.”

“Are you insane? How could you do that?” Meyer said. “It’s the middle of the business day! Stop whatever you’re doing right now!”

“Hans?” Dar ignored the red faced executive.

“Must you always be correct?” Hans replied in a disgusted tone. “They are coming up at this moment.”

Meyer advanced on them, and Kerry reacted instinctively to intercept him, circling Dar’s chair and putting herself between her partner and the approaching man. “Just give them a minute, Mr. Meyer. It’s almost done.”

“I am not going to give it a minute. This is totally irresponsible.” Meyer responded. “I demand you bring us back up, right now, Roberts!” He tried to move past Kerry but found his way blocked, and realized the space behind the table wasn’t big enough to go around her. “Get out of my way.”

“Mr. Meyer, please calm down.” Kerry stood her ground. “Just let them finish. I know it’s a disruption, but..”

“Get out of my way.” Meyer repeated, ignoring her words. “I’m not putting up with any more of this crap. Now move, or I’ll..” His eyes slid past her, over her shoulder as he cut off his words.

Kerry knew Dar must have stood up behind her. She could almost feel the bristling danger at her shoulder blades, but she kept her gaze focused forward and her tone even. “Mr. Meyer, you’ve been having this problem since you put in this program. Most of your people can’t work during the day anyway, and it’s so slow the rest of them are just so frustrated. Why not give us a chance to change all that? It’s worth ten minutes downtime.”

For a moment, she thought he was going to ignore her. But then he took a half step backwards, his face twitching. He addressed her again, though the shifting of his eyes indicated he was keeping something behind her in his peripheral vision.

“Ten minutes isn’t the question.” He said quietly. “The issue at hand here is the fact you did this without warning us. I don’t find that acceptable, Ms. Stuart. Do you?”

Kerry heard the chair squeak softly behind her, and relaxed just a trifle even though the man’s question was a valid one she had no good answer to. “Well, that’s something we can discuss once it’s fixed.” She conceded. “So why don’t we..”

“They’re up.” Dar’s voice cut in. “I’m resetting the filters now. Let’s see if we can make this warthog grow wings.”

Letting out an imperceptible sigh of relief, Kerry turned, finding her partner once again hunched over her laptop. She took a step forward and let her hand rest on Dar’s back again. “See? Less than ten minutes. More like five.”

Dar felt her heartbeat start to slow as she forced herself to concentrate on the screen. The adrenaline pumping through her body was threatening to make her hands shake, and she laid them firmly on the palm rest as she silently willed her algorithms to work.

Stubbornly, the stream seemed to be resisting them, giving her no real improvement. Stifling a curse, Dar studied the output, suddenly aware of the tense silence around her, and the expectations weighing heavily on her shoulders.

The heaviest of all being the light, gentle touch on her back.

"I doubt very much that anything's fixed." Meyer stated. "In fact, I doubt very much you people even know what you're doing."

"Dar?" Kerry uttered softly.

"I know." Her partner answered. "Give me a minute. I'm looking."

Her eyes spotted an error. With a twitch of her lips, she corrected it, then put the new configuration in place and watched the streams flicker back up, this time to a completely different rhythm. Dar let out a silent breath. The erratic spikes on her gauges dissipated, replaced by much lower, even flow, and the throughput level settled into a comfortingly green pulse.

"Well, unfortunately for you, but fortunately for your company Mr. Meyer, you're wrong." Kerry spoke up. "Could you please contact one of your remote offices, and let's see how it looks from there? It looks pretty good here."

Hans had gotten up, and now he circled the desk and planted himself over Dar's other shoulder, leaning down and peering at the screen with interest. "Bah." He grunted.

Meyer went to the phone on the conference table and hit a few buttons. After a brief ring, there was an answer. "Bob? This is Jason Meyer in New York."

There was a pause. "Oh.. ah, yes, yes, sir." Bob answered. "Is there something wrong?"

Meyer's head jerked back a little. "You tell me."

"Sir?"

With a frown, the VP Ops leaned closer to the phone. "Can you have someone connect to the system and tell me if you see a difference? Not that I expect you to, but we did something here and I'm just checking." He glanced up as Stewart Godson walked in. "It seems we were taken down without warning, sir."

"Eh?" Godson walked over. "We were? Didn't notice." He glanced curiously at the group at the head of the table. "What's going on here?"

“Check the system? Oh, okay, sir.” Bob answered. “Hang on.”

Kerry shifted her hand, draping her arm over Dar’s shoulder instead and moving a step closer, so her hip was brushing her partner’s sleeve. She wasn’t worried about the test – she knew from what she was looking at that Dar had done it, but she had to briefly wonder if the risk hadn’t damaged the relationship more than it needed to.

She wondered how Dar felt about it. She could see her reflection in the laptop screen, and for a second, the blue eyes lifted and their gazes met. Kerry grinned a little, and was rewarded with the flicker of a wink.

“I don’t think we’re going to be pleased at all with these results sir.” Meyer shook his head. “And the entire company was disrupted. You know what I think? I think we need to..”

“Sir?” Bob’s voice came back. “I don’t know what you did, but boy, it’s flying here. Wow. The entry people are all pretty excited.”

Dar folded her hands together and smirked. “You need that translated, Hans?” She asked the programmer. “It worked.”

Godson clapped his hands. “Wonderful! Bob, are you in Arizona?”

“Yes, yes.. ah, is that Mr. Godson? Yes sir, we are.” Bob sounded confused, but happy. “Are we a test group? I didn’t get that email.”

“NO one did.” Jason ground out through clenched teeth.

“Of course it worked.” Hans sniffed. “You are brilliant, I am brilliant, it is a wonder the room does not melt with the combined brilliance of us. Can we go have a beer now?”

Kerry felt her entire body relax, and she leaned against Dar quite unconsciously. “I have no idea what else he said, but I got the beer part. I’m up for it.”

“For lunch?” Dar did a subtle little dance of triumph in her seat, shifting her shoulders and bumping Kerry with the left one. “Stewart, can you put a note out to everyone, and let’s get a consensus before we close the books on this. I want to know that everyone’s happy.”

Godson was on his cell phone. “Hello, Harry? Yes.. yes, it’s Stewart… listen, I think I’ve got our performance problem cleared up.. want to give it a go? What?” He listened. “It did? You are? Fabulous! Great to hear… what did I do? Oh, well, you know, it was all a matter of just getting some of the kinks worked out.. you know, new system and all that.”

Dar snorted and rolled her eyes just a little.

"Well, thanks, Harry." Godson beamed. "Glad you feel that way, and I hope to continue to earn that respect from you. Listen, if you hear any other feedback, just let me know, hm?" He closed his phone and faced them. "Ladies and Gentlemen, so far so good. That was our CFO. He's been one of the biggest critics… he's in Boca Raton."

"We saved his ass." Dar translated for Hans. "Bet he gets a bonus out of it."

"Hah." Hans snorted.

"Well, I'm glad we could get the problem solved, Stewart." Dar continued in English. "Hans and I figured if we threw the change into production now, we'd know by the end of the day if there were any issues with it – if we did it off hours we'd have to wait till Monday to test."

Stewart nodded briskly. "Good plan. Well, Jason? Let's go take credit for this, shall we? I told you it'd all work out. You should have more faith, sometimes."

Meyer looked like he was unsuccessfully trying to swallow a peeled lemon. "Yes, sir." He eventually got out. "I guess you were right." He admitted. "But I think we need to discuss how we put together our outsourcing contracts, to make sure we have more control over what this process is." He turned and went to the door, pausing to wait for his boss. "I won't forget how it was accomplished, regardless of the result."

Godson chuckled. "Jason, lighten up." He waved at Dar as he left. "Had my girl send out a note, Dar. I'll let you know what we hear." He followed Jason out the door and closed it, leaving them in a moment of mutual, thoughtful silence.

* * *

The rain had finally stopped, and a pallid sunset was brushing the windows of Stewart Godson's office as Dar formally ended their visit. The executive was seated behind his desk, his hands behind his head, looking very pleased with himself, and consequently also pleased with Dar. "Well, Dar, I realize it was a tough spot, but it all worked out, didn't it?"

Dar aligned her forearms on the chairs precisely. "It did." She acknowledged. "Not the way we like to do things, but the bottom line is it got done and now you can move forward."

"You bet." Godson agreed. "Everyone I've heard from so far is very pleased, and I think now we can even find a way to really work with Hans' company if something like this comes up again. So, thanks, Dar. I owe you a big one."

There were times to gloat, and times when it was better just to be gracious. Dar didn't much like being gracious, and it was undeniably more fun to gloat, but she'd laboriously

gained a small sense of propriety over the years and didn't like to waste it. "Glad I was able to work it out for you, Stewart."

He waved a hand at her. "Never doubted it." Godson said. "I've had people come in here, pitching me deals to do what you do cheaper, but I know when my keister's in a pickle, you people have always come through for me. Means a lot."

"Well, Stewart, you know we value you very much as a customer." Dar went through the requisite dance steps stolidly. "So I hope we'll always be there to come through for you."

"Me too." Godson got up and paced a little. "But what in the world did you do to get old Jason so miffed at you? I got an earful the size of the Empire State after we left that room." He sat down on the edge of his desk and looked curiously at Dar. "He's really got a problem with what he views as your ethics."

"My ethics?" Dar indicated her chest with her thumb. "Stewart, the man's got stock in a competitor of mine, and he wanted us out so he could bring them in. He talks about *my* ethics?" She half shook her head. "You better watch out for him. He's after this office."

A furrow appeared over Godson's brow. "You really think so? He's a good guy, Dar. Very sharp."

Dar sighed. "Stewart, he's a rat. You don't have to believe me, but at least watch your back because I sure as hell don't want to be negotiating with him when our contract comes up for renewal. We won't have a chance."

Godson looked doubtful, but he nodded anyway. "Well, I'll keep it in mind." He answered diplomatically. "You know we all can't be as friendly working together as you and Ms. Stuart are."

Dar lifted an eyebrow.

"But then you girls usually are chummier than us fellas are." Stewart continued. "Anyway, don't let me hold you up, Dar. I know you've got things to do and more people to help. You flying out tonight?"

"No." Dar got up and extended a hand, gripping Godson's when he took it. "Us girls are going out for a romantic dinner together then heading for a show at Radio City Music Hall." She released his hand, watching his jaw drop as he processed her statement. "We're leaving tomorrow morning. But thanks for asking. Have a great day."

"Bu…" Godson half stood as Dar turned and walked to the door, his hand still outstretched. "Ah… bye?"

The door closed behind Dar's tall form, leaving the room far emptier without her vibrant presence. Godson let his hand drop to his knee and snorted, shaking his head slightly into all that silence.

* * *

Kerry stuck her hands in her pockets as she waited on the ground floor of the big office building. The tall granite walls reminded her a little of their office in Miami, but she found the slate gray even more impersonal and cold than the copper and bronze shades they used down south.

She was glad the weather had cleared, even though the hazy sun promised a muggy heat, at least they'd be able to go for their carriage ride and find someplace to have a nice, lazy dinner. The show that night was an opera, which neither of them were really partial to but Kerry didn't care. They had good seats, and Dar had promised to take her strapless gown shopping.

Life was very good. She exhaled. At least, her personal life was very good. Though they'd fixed the problem, she had gotten the feeling that there was trouble under the surface here and she knew for sure Meyer was going to be a thorn in their side from now on.

What would she have done in Dar's place, she wondered. Played it safe? Involved the client in the decision, and scheduled the testing based on their needs? Would that have been a better long term solution?

Kerry sighed, and leaned against the glass, watching the traffic go by outside. What Dar had told Godson about testing during business hours was quite accurate, in point of fact, and she knew it. But she also knew Dar's decision hadn't really been based on that at all – she'd simply wanted the problem over and done with because she had, in her view, better things to do.

From a business perspective, Kerry had issues with that. From a personal one, since she was the better thing, it was hard to argue with it since she really had no urge to spend the night sitting around in this building either.

Rats. Sometimes she really hated the duality of her work life.

Hans cleared his throat slightly, and leaned next to her on the glass, giving her a polite nod.

Kerry nodded back, and added a tentative smile.

"Kerry, yes?" Hans said.

"Right." Kerry answered. "You did a great job." She wasn't sure exactly how much he'd understand, but nice words never hurt anyone regardless of the language. "Thanks for working with Dar on getting it fixed."

He seemed to get the gist, because his face eased into a smile. "It was much pleasure." He stated carefully. "Your Dar has strong talent."

My Dar. Kerry reckoned he didn't actually mean that in the literal sense, but she was glad to accept the compliment anyway. "Thanks. Yes, she is very talented."

"Also of good taste." Hans commented, blinking placidly at her.

Kerry stared at him for a second before she realized he could possibly be referring to her. "Ah.. thanks." She replied, belatedly remembering the way she'd draped herself all over Dar in the conference room, totally without thinking about it. If Hans had picked up on it, maybe the Meyer and Godson had too, and..

Jesus. Kerry exhaled, her eyes flicking to the lobby elevators as she spotted Dar exiting from one and heading their way. Her partner appeared relaxed as she ambled across the marble floor, her characteristic slightly rolling walk almost succeeding in returning a smile to Kerry's face.

"We're outta here." Dar said, as she reached them, repeating the sentiment in German for Hans. "You ready for that beer now?" She asked Kerry, giving the back of her hair a little ruffle. "We've got time for that, before we have to go grab real clothes and head for culture world."

The touch reassured her. Kerry nodded agreement, indicating the door with one pointing finger. They walked outside, into the moist heat and started off down the sidewalk together.

"I think I embarrassed your girlfriend." Hans told Dar, in a bemused tone, after they'd walked about a half a block in relative peace.

Dar glanced at him. "She's not my girlfriend."

Hans colored visibly, a somewhat startling sight against his pale skin. "Then I have embarrassed myself and I must apologize." He said. "I assumed…"

"She's my wife." Dar draped an arm over Kerry's shoulders. "You're not embarrassed by that, right?" She asked Kerry in English.

Kerry shifted the strap on her briefcase, having suspecting she was being discussed. "By what?"

"Being married to me?" Dar repeated the question in German.

She almost stopped walking. “Did you get some hallucinogenic in that last cup of coffee? Of course not.” Kerry replied. “What made you ask *that*, you goofball?” She hooked a finger inside Dar’s belt loop and tugged it, to take any sting from her words. “Just because I don’t have my ‘I’m with her’ shirt on today?”

Dar chuckled. “Hans thought he embarrassed you back there.” She explained. “He assumed you were my girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

“So I corrected him.”

“Eh.” Kerry gave her a sheepish look. “Yeah, I was being a little obvious upstairs. Sorry about that. I wonder if those other guys noticed it too.. maybe that’s why Meyer was being so obnoxious.”

Dar cocked her head in a puzzled attitude. “Huh?”

“Oh wait, there’s my t-shirt.” Kerry pointed. “That one, right there.”

Dar peered at the window. “My girlfriend can beat up your girlfriend?” She asked, with a snort of laughter. “Jesus, Kerry.”

“Pick one. I’d rather be Kerry.” Her partner replied.

“Hang on.” Dar slowed down. “What did you mean about you upstairs?” She lowered her voice a little.

Dar hadn’t noticed? Kerry wondered, then conceded she hadn’t either. A bus roared past, spitting the scent of diesel. “Never mind.. We’ll talk about it later.” Kerry bumped her partner with her hip. “Where are we going?”

They stopped at a corner, and waited for the crossing light to change. Hans stuck his hands in his pockets and looked around, then turned inquiringly towards Dar. “Hotel bar is good for you?”

Dar had wandered towards a street cart, sniffing the air. “Yeah, that’s fine.” She called back over her shoulder. “Ker, want some nuts?” She walked over to the stand and examined it’s contents, pointing at the cinnamon covered pecans as she dug a few bills from her front jeans pocket.

Having had nothing since breakfast save several cups of coffee, Kerry found the nuts sounding pretty darn good. “Sure.” She joined her partner at the cart. As they paid for their purchases, a familiar voice trickled through the surrounding bustle and Kerry turned

to see Jason Meyer standing at a pay phone nearby arguing into it. She gave Dar a poke and jerked her head towards him.

Dar turned, putting a nut between her teeth as she looked inquiringly in the direction Kerry indicated. “Ah.” She grunted. “Jerk doesn’t even believe in cell phones? Now there’s a technologist.”

It was curious, Kerry knew. Cell phones had become so woven into society it seemed very odd to see a man who had any number of them, and an entire corporate PBX at his disposal using a street side pay phone in the middle of a Friday afternoon crowd in Manhattan.

Why?

“Look! I don’t care what you do! Just do it!” Meyer yelled, and then slammed down the phone. With a disgusted look he stalked off, hauling up as he came very close to crashing headlong into Hans. “Excuse me.”

He brushed past and kept going, apparently not recognizing the programmer. Hans stared after him, then looked at Dar and Kerry. He shrugged both shoulders and held his hands out in a universal message, which they returned in equal measure.

They rejoined Hans at the corner, and watched Meyer head back towards the entrance to his company’s building. He shoved rudely ahead of a woman carrying two boxes, and nearly knocked her down, but didn’t even look back as he let the door close behind him.

“What in the heck flew up his butt?” Kerry wondered. “You know, I talked to him a few months ago, Dar. He seemed fine, then. Wonder what happened?”

Dar chewed her nut and swallowed it. “Beats me.” She nudged Kerry in the direction of their hotel. “Who knows? Maybe I happened. He stepped on my last nerve the second I got there and I went off all over him.” She started across the street with Hans at her side, going with the flow of heavy foot traffic. “Maybe he’s just a jerk.”

“Huh.” Kerry followed her, idly nibbling her treat. “Maybe he’s related to Shari. Same kind of backwards jackassedness.”

Dar stopped short and looked at her. “Been talking to my father again, huh?” She drawled, giving Kerry a very playful grin. “That sounds damn bizarre in a Midwestern accent.”

“Heh.” Kerry chuckled under her breath. “I’ll become Southern yet. You wait and see.”

PART 12

KERRY GLANCED AT HERSELF IN THE MIRROR AND GRINNED IMPISHLY, ADJUSTING the strapless front of her dress with careful fingers. The one nice thing about New York was, if you wanted fast, stylish shopping, you had it in spades all around you. She and Dar had gotten in and out of the stores in under forty five minutes, and now she was reviewing the results.

"Nice." She complimented herself. The dress she'd found was a deep, forest green silk with a tiny embroidered pattern, classic and plain, reaching just down to her knees. It was sleek, and fit her curves nicely, and even the prospect of sitting through opera couldn't put a damper on her mood. "Hey, sweetie?"

"Yes?" Dar's voice floated out from the bathroom.

"How about we find us some place to dance after the show?" Kerry asked. "Really just go out and party.. I think we're due it, after your brilliant solving of the problem here."

Dar poked her head out of the bathroom. "You consider dancing with me a party?" She asked in a quizzical tone.

Kerry looked over at her. "You are not a bad dancer." She stated. "So don't give me that. C'mover here."

Obediently, Dar eased around the door jamb and came over to join Kerry in front of the mirror. She was dressed in a snazzy blue number an inch or two longer than Kerry's, but with much the same cut. "But sure, if you want to, I'm game." She picked up Kerry's brush and started brushing her partner's pale hair. "That looks really good on you."

Kerry turned her head and looked up. “Likewise, and thank you.” She smiled warmly. “Shall we go the opera, madame?”

Dar tossed the brush onto the dresser and gestured towards the door with a grand flourish. “After you.” She picked up the small clasp purse that held her wallet and electronics, and followed Kerry as she half walked, half danced towards the hallway.

“Heh.”

Kerry turned as they reached the elevator. “What’s so funny?”

Blue eyes blinked innocently. “Nothing.”

The doors opened. “Uh huh. Go on.” Kerry indicated the opening.

“Oh no. Ladies first.” Dar drawled. “Please.”

Kerry gave her a suspicious look, but she entered the brass and glass lined car and waited for her partner to join her before she pressed the button for the lobby. They started down, and halfway she found herself having to equalize her ears. “Oh, egh.”

“Mm.” Dar pressed her thumb behind her right earlobe. “I don’t like having to do this without getting wet.” She looked up just in time to see a very devilish expression on Kerry’s face. “What’s that look for?”

Kerry closed the distance between them and leaned against Dar as she laid a hand on her cheek and kissed her on the lips. “Mm.”

Dar forgot about being in a hotel elevator. She slid a hand around Kerry’s side and continued the kiss, allowing the passion to build between them even as the car slowed, and bumped gently to a halt.

They parted just as the doors did, and the echoing buzz of the crowd in the lobby filtered in. Kerry licked her lips and took a step back, taking a steadying breath before she dared look up again.

Dar’s face had a definite flush to it, and her eyes held a dark twinkle that came very close to making Kerry simply punch the button for their hotel floor and forget all about the damn opera. “Well. Made me forget all about my damn ears.” Dar commented. “Shall we?”

Kerry half reluctantly exited the elevator, giving the small group of people waiting to get on a polite smile. She waited for Dar to catch up to her, then they both continued on towards the door to the street. “Dar? Have you ever been to the opera?”

Dar simply laughed.

“I went a few times.” Kerry admitted, as they emerged into the warm night air. “I have to admit I missed the popcorn and Raisinettes.”

Dar led the way to the curb, bypassing the hard working door man who was busy getting cabs for people. She fixed her gaze on an oncoming yellow cab instead, making eye contact with the driver and seemingly drawing him to the curb obediently with the power of her will.

The door man gave her a respectful look and hurried over to open the cab door. “Ma’am?”

“Thank you.” Dar responded graciously, ducking inside the cab and scooting over as Kerry joined her. “Radio City Music Hall.” She instructed the driver.

“You got it!” The man responded cheerfully, pulling away from the curb and into the busy traffic flow with little regard to either oncoming cars or the lives of anyone in his own.

Kerry slid her hand into Dar’s and clasped it, settling happily back into her seat to watch the city go by. “Boy, I’m glad you got that problem cleared up. I’d hate to have been spending the night in that office.”

“Uhm.” Dar removed a small case from her purse and offered Kerry one of it’s contents. “Even though I took them down in the middle of the day? I saw you squirming over that.”

“Well..” Kerry selected a small candy and put it into her mouth, grimacing a moment later. “Flamingos on a shoestring, Dar.. you could have told me that was sour.”

Dar sucked on her candy contentedly. “Sour tangerine.” She agreed. “They had lemon, too.”

Kerry resolutely swallowed the offending bit of confection. “It wasn’t the choice I’d have made.’ She admitted. “But you know that. I tend to be… a little more conservative than you are.”

“Conservative.” Dar reached up and traced around Kerry’s tattoo, cheekily visible over the line of her dress. “Uh huh.”

“Mm.” The blond woman grinned a little. “But anyway, you’re right. I was squirming. I knew you’d make it come out right, but I really thought you were taking a big risk there.”

And she had been. Dar felt the warmth of Kerry’s fingers curled in hers, and felt herself at peace with her decision. “I’ve always been a risk taker.” She said. “And to be honest, I didn’t really want to spend any more time there myself. So it worked out.”

"Mm." Kerry found she wanted very much to just accept that answer, and not argue the subject. She often made very different decisions than Dar did as part of their daily work life, and they'd come to understand over the years that their approaches to things were, despite their obvious compatibility, different.

Which was okay. She often learned things from how Dar worked, and she knew sometimes Dar picked up a trick or two from her. Kerry put her head down against Dar's shoulder and fell silent, content to watch the bright lights of the city flash past as the cab driver wound his way through the heavy traffic.

Then they were there. Dar had already handed the driver his fare before Kerry could even so much as grab her wallet, and she reflected that in one area, preplanning, Dar really did have it all over her on a very consistent basis.

They got out and joined a stream of people heading for the doors. The range of dress was amazing, and Kerry found herself almost goggling at the sight of actual mink wrapped around several women's necks despite the summer heat. "Yikes. I'd croak."

Dar spotted a counter nearby. "Want a drink?" She offered.

"My turn." Kerry tapped her on the hip with her purse. "Get us some programs?"

Programs. Dar spotted a woman handing them out, and she headed in that direction. She waited to catch her eye, then accepted two of the handbills. "Thanks."

"No problem, ma'am.. can I see your tickets? Maybe I can direct you…" The usher asked helpfully. "It's a big place."

Dar tucked the bills under her arm and fished the tickets from her purse. "Yeah, sure." She handed them over. "That what you're looking for?"

The woman smiled. "Yes, ma'am, these are easy. Go right down front, and it's in the very middle of the row. Best seats in the house." She handed Dar back her tickets. "Enjoy the show!"

"Thanks." Dar studied the tickets in bemusement before tucking them back in her bag. She took the playbills and headed off, intercepting Kerry who was carrying two glasses of wine. "I'm told we have good seats." She informed her partner, trading a playbill for a glass.

"Oo." Kerry opened the booklet. "The Mikado – I'm trying to remember if I've..hm." She read the synopsis. "No, I've never seen this one."

Hearing her name made her look up, to see an older woman approaching them, waving one hand. Kerry had to rack her brains to place her, but fortunately she did just before the woman reached them. “Hello, Ms. Patrick.”

“Kerrison! How amazing it is to see you here! My gosh, it’s been years!” The woman blurted. She was perhaps in her fifties, with silver gray hair and a sophisticated sequined silver gown. “Are you living up here now?”

“No.” Kerry shook her head. “I live in Miami. I’m just in the city for a few days on business.” She half turned. “Ms. Patrick, this is Dar Roberts, my partner. Dar, Ms. Patrick was a professor of mine in college.”

“Nice to meet you.” Dar replied politely. “Professor of..?”

“Computer Science.” The woman supplied. “What kind of business, Kerrison? I know when you graduated you said you wanted to do something in management, but…”

And she’d been quite sure, Kerry suddenly recalled, that Kerry wouldn’t end up in anything like that at all. “I work for ILS.” She tasted a deep sense of pleasure in the words.

“Do you? How marvelous!” Ms. Patrick looked vaguely surprised. “In what area? I seem to remember you really liked design.”

“I’m the vice president of global operations.”

The woman blinked at her in silence for a long moment. “Oh.” She finally managed to get out. “Isn’t that lovely?”

“I think so.” Dar interjected. “Best vice president we’ve had in years.”

The woman looked up at her in puzzled silence for a moment, then a visible light bulb went on over her meticulously coifed head. “Oh my.. are you *that* Dar Roberts?”

Dar merely looked at her, refusing the dignify the question with the obvious answer.

Ms. Patrick backed away. “Well, isn’t that great.. nice to have seen you, Kerrison. Have a nice time at the show.”

Dar waited for the woman to disappear into the crowd, before she turned to her partner. “Enjoy that?”

“Uh huh.”

“Good.”

They took their drinks and headed into the main hall. Just inside the doors, after surrendering their tickets, they both had to stop and look around in frank wonder.

“Holy catfish.” Dar craned her neck and peered around at the vast, grand, art deco infrastructure. “This is gorgeous.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry agreed, blinking at the bright sunset themed colors, which reminded her unnervingly of Key West. “C’mon.” She took Dar’s arm and lead the way down the aisle.

They settled into their seats, and now that she didn’t have to worry about bumping into moth ball smelling matriarchs, Dar found herself free to take in the immensity of the theatre from it’s delicate stage arch to the sloping seating. It was an amazing place, and she found herself looking forward to watching whatever it was that was about to start going on.

The Mikado. Dar studied her program. Ah. Japanese intrigue. Maybe there would even be a sword fight. She stretched out her legs, pleased to be in the front row with all the extra room.

Life was good. She glanced aside at Kerry, who was merely sitting, her program in her lap, a benignly contented look on her face. “Quarter for your thoughts?”

Kerry chuckled, folding her hands over her stomach and exhaling. “I was just thinking about what my family would give to have front row center seats at Radio City.” She admitted. “Going to the theatre in Manhattan was the be all and end all of anyone’s social agenda where I came from.”

“Ah.” Dar wiggled her fingers. “Getting into the X rated movies for free was where I came from.” She responded, with a droll grin. “I got really good at picking the locks on the movie theatre back door.”

Kerry started laughing. “Do you realize the first X rated movie I ever saw was in your living room?” She whispered, catching the stern looks from their neighbors despite the fact that the show had not yet started. “Jesus, people.. chill out!”

“Well.” Dar leaned closer to her. “Would you be talking about X-rated movies in front of your family?”

Kerry hastily covered her eyes with one hand and bit her lip.

“Didn’t think so.”

A short time later, the house lights began to lower. Kerry tucked her fingers inside Dar’s once more, and settled down to watch, resolving to enjoy the moment, the night, and the sense of occasion, even if opera wasn’t her favorite thing on earth.

* * *

It seemed only a few minutes later when the lights were coming back up, and the show was over. “Wow.” Kerry murmured. “That was pretty cool.” She joined the audience in enthusiastic clapping. “What’d you think?”

“I liked it.” Dar agreed. “Funny story, catchy tunes.” She added. “And pretty girls. What more could you ask for?”

Kerry chuckled. “Hm.. with a lead girl character called Yum-Yum, I should have known you’d like it.”

Dar half turned and gave her a mock outraged look, putting one hand on her hip. “Kerrison!”

Green eyes batted their lashes at her with devastating Midwestern innocence. “Yes?”

“Let’s go get ice cream.” Dar stood up and extended her hand to her partner. “I think you need cooling off.”

Kerry accepted the aid, and was lifted gracefully to her feet by a smooth contraction of Dar’s arm. “Why thank you, ma’am. After you?”

They walked out hand in hand, going along with the slow flow of the audience as it filtered through the tall, beautiful entranceways and out into the lobby. There was a buzz of conversation, and Kerry found herself smiling as she took in a size crowd once very familiar to her. “Honey, I’m going to go use the restroom.. meet you by the bar, there?”

“Nah. I’ll go with you.” Dar laid a hand on her back as they edged through the press of bodies. “Know what?”

“You’re hungry.” Kerry replied without missing a beat. “I hear you growling back there even over this circus.” She jumped a little as Dar growled in her ear, ending the noise with a rumbling purr. “I’m fairly sure there’s at least one restaurant around this place.”

Dar chuckled, as she pushed the bathroom door open for both of them, extending her arm easily past Kerry’s body. “This was really nice.” She commented. “Remind me to send Alastair a box of cookies or something for it, will you?”

“Sure.” Kerry found herself a partition and entered. She idly listened to the conversations around her as she went about her business. She heard Dar’s low, vibrant voice exchange a mutual excuse me, and then a sharp, very New York accented tone complain bitterly about the quality of toilet paper.

Kerry pulled off a few sheets and examined it. “Hey, Dar?”

A soft throat clearing nearby. “Yes?”

“You see this here fancy napkins they put in here?” Kerry put as much of a drawl as she was capable of into her tone and was rewarded with a muffled snicker. “I’m going to take me some of these and put them on the table back home.”

“Okay, Forrest.” Dar replied through a rumble of laughter. “You do that.”

Kerry finished up and went to the sink, washing her hands while still chuckling under her breath. She wiped her fingers dry and turned to wait for Dar, exchanging glances with a tall redheaded woman also standing by waiting.

“That’s a gorgeous tattoo.” The woman commented, with a faint nod towards Kerry’s chest.

Kerry blinked, suffering a moment of bewilderment before she looked down at her shoulder and realized the woman was talking about her. “Oh. Thanks.” She murmured, peering back up with a bit of sheepish look. “Haven’t had it that long.”

“You have it done here?” The woman asked, turning her arm to display the point of her shoulder, which had a cobra on it. “I had this done last month.”

The cobra was nice, but Kerry noticed it lacked the vibrancy of her own decoration. “No, I had it done down in Miami.” She replied. “There’s a guy there who’s a really good artist.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” The woman leaned closer. “That’s very cool.” Her eyes studied the mark. “Who’s Dar?”

“That would be me.”

Kerry resisted the urge to look up and over her shoulder. The redhead didn’t, however, and she straightened up and took a step backwards when presented with Dar’s towering intimidation.

“Well, anyway, congrats on a nice tat.” The woman retreated further, grabbing a napkin off the counter before she left the bathroom, taking her somewhat disappointed looking cobra with her.

“Ready?” Kerry gave Dar a smile, as she led the way out of the bathroom with her sauntering lover behind her. “You know, that was nice.”

“What was, the TP? I’ll get you a double case of Charmin at Costco when we get back, okay? You can keep some in your desk drawer.”

"That lady liking my tattoo." Kerry said. "But I'll remember that offer. I don't know what the heck the facilities people were thinking last month but the stuff they changed to reminds me of grocery bags."

They walked outside, accepting the shock of going from icy chill to muggy heat as something natural. "What's your poison?" Dar asked. "I had Italian last night, but I'll do it again if you want."

Kerry licked her lips. "Mm… let's walk down a little bit and see what we find. I don't know if I'm in the mood for that."

The streets were busy around them in a way Miami never was. Their home town had no central downtown area, and was in no sense a walking city. It was far more a huge urban and suburban sprawl, extending up and down the coast for three counties made up of clusters of shopping surrounded by clusters of residential areas.

This was a nice change, really, Kerry thought. It reminded her a little of the trips she'd occasionally made to Chicago with her debating team, when they'd get away for the afternoon and roam the downtown near their hotel, finding anything that didn't smack to hell of home.

Like Garrett's popcorn. Kerry licked her lips in memory, even after all these years. Or the pieces of thick pizza they'd shared on the sidewalk, looking up at the huge, towering buildings. It had been very different than her few trips to Manhattan with her family, that's for sure.

Ah well.

Dar took her hand again as they strolled along, passing brightly lit store fronts and places that became suddenly familiar to them from television. "Hey, look." Kerry pointed. "That's where you always see people standing with signs looking like goofballs on the Today show."

"Uh huh." Dar agreed. "Isn't that where that huge Christmas tree goes?"

"And the ice skating rink, yeah." Her companion said. "Can you ice skate?"

Dar pondered the question briefly. "Yes." She finally admitted. "Chinese?" She directed Kerry's attention to a storefront one level up. "I could go for something spicy."

"Sounds pretty darn good to me." Kerry led the way over to the restaurant. They had just gotten seated when first hers, then Dar's pager went off. "Oh, pooh."

Dar removed her device from her purse and keyed it. "Ops center. Never good news."

Kerry sighed and lifted her cell phone, speed dialing and holding the device to her ear as she listened to Dar order for them both. “Hi, it’s Kerry Stuart.” She said as the line was answered. “What’s up?”

“Oh, hi ma’am.” The voice answered. “This is Jason. Sorry to bother you, but Mark said I should page out. We had a big forced entry attempt here a little while ago.”

Dar’s eye brow cocked up, as she caught the tinny sounding words from the phone Kerry was holding a little ways away from her ear.

“Successful?” Kerry asked.

“Ma’am.” Jason managed to sound politely scandalized. “If it had been, you’d be talking to Mark right now, not me, that’s for sure. No offense.”

Dar snorted softly.

“Does Mark have a culprit?” Kerry asked. “Any ideas, or..”

“He’s got some stuff he’s tracking down. He wanted me to tell you to tell the boss someone was trying to call her bluff.”

Dar’s eyes narrowed, and the planes of her face shifted into a dour expression.

“The boss knows.” Kerry said. “If he finds anything, tell him to call us.”

“Will do, ma’am.”

Kerry folded her phone up and tapped it on the table. “I don’t much like the sounds of that.”

Dar eased back in her seat, giving the waiter a nod as he delivered two chilled glasses of plum wine. She picked one up and sipped from it before she answered. “It was excessively stupid of me to make that damn claim.”

“Oh, well, that’s not what I meant…”

“Kerry, it was.” Dar interrupted her. “Regardless of whether it was true or not, pissing into an open fire hydrant is just plain idiotic. Mark’s going to be cleaning up after that for months.” She glared at her wine. “Bah.”

Kerry patted her partner on the leg. “It got us good press, sweetie. If Mark can keep them at bay, we can get even better press out of it. I have faith in him, and in your infrastructure.”

"Hmph." Dar looked mollified, however. "Maybe if he's got a lead on who they are, I can go back on them and nail em." She suggested. "That'd be fun."

"There you go." Kerry smiled at the waiter, who appeared with two bowls of steaming hot and sour soup. "Mm.. that smells great."

Dar had removed her PDA from her purse and was scribbling on it. Kerry watched her, as she picked up a spoon and sipped her soup. "Mark?"

"Yeah."

"You know what would be cool?"

"What?" Dar glanced at her.

"If we had software that could not only detect stuff like this, but proactively go out and find the jerks trying it and turn the tables on them." Kerry said. "Couldn't you write something like that, Dar?"

Dar tapped her stylus idly on the edge of her PDA. "I don't do coding anymore." She demurred. "I haven't even looked at some of the newer languages…"

"Sure you do." Kerry disagreed. "You write little things all the time. My dancing gopher, that program that keeps track of our expenses, that database thing Maria uses… those are all yours."

A half shrug. "That's just little stuff, like you said." But Dar's voice lacked real conviction.

"Wouldn't it be cool?" Kerry repeated. "That would be such a killer app, if you could just have it go out and snag these losers. Find a way through all those backdoor portals and all that masking stuff."

Dar's eyes went briefly unfocused. "Hm." She made a noise deep in her throat, low and thoughtful. "That would be cool." She admitted. "Might fit in with some of the heuristic stuff I was looking at… maybe I could take a look at what the structure might need…"

Ahh. Kerry smiled inwardly. Caught that mind, I think. "It would be awesome."

Dar scribbled several notes, then keyed something, and scribbled several more. Then she hit send and closed the device, folding her hands over it. "So." She turned her attention fully to Kerry. "What were we talking about… toilet paper, right?"

"Toilet paper, and tattoos." Kerry lifted her wine glass, and touched it to Dar's. "And pretty little girls named Yum-Yum."

Dar returned the toast, and they both took a sip. “You know..” Dar looked around. “New York’s not so bad after all.”

“Hear hear.” Kerry agreed, with a smile. “I’m glad I had a chance to play here with you.”

The blue eyes lit as a returning smile appeared. “Me, too.” She replied. “Ker, I really appreciate you coming up here. I… um..” Dar’s gaze dropped briefly, then lifted again. “I just really do.”

Kerry put her glass down and reached over to cover Dar’s hand with her own. “Any time, sweetie. It made me so happy to do it I about did somersaults in the airplane aisle.” She reassured her partner. “I loved being here.”

Dar lifted her glass again, and they touched rims, then impishly, she leaned much closer and twined her arm through Kerry’s. They drank from each other’s glass, and took advantage of the restaurant’s trendy dimness to share a kiss that lasted one heartbeat short of a scandal.

Ah well. Kerry reflected, as they parted and picked up their spoons. If anywhere on earth could handle that, it was New York.

It was big enough to handle just about anything.

* * *

It was well after midnight by the time they made it back to the hotel, crossing a much more conspicuously empty lobby and sidestepping an earnestly polishing housekeeper busy getting a purple stain out of the marble flooring.

Kerry peered at the stain, trying to imagine what could have caused it. Grape jelly? Grape wine? Eggplant parmesan?

“You coming?” Dar inquired, watching her with a bemused grin.

“Yup.. yup.. sorry.” Kerry hastened to join her. “What the heck do you think that is?”

Dar observed the stain. “Hair dye.” She dismissed the work and headed for the end of the lobby.

“Hair dye? Dar, it’s purple.” Kerry protested.

“You obviously haven’t been looking around too closely.” Dar remarked as she pressed the call button. “I’ve seen more pink and purple hair here than I’ve seen taxis outside.”

“Hm.” Kerry turned in a circle, shading her eyes and peering at the non-existent crowd. “You think I’d look good in purple hair?”

The doors opened. Dar circled Kerry's waist with one arm, then lifted her into the elevator. "No." She replied. "It'd clash with your eyes. C'mon."

"Hm."

They were alone in the elevator. Kerry waited for the doors to close before she peeked behind her, only to find pale blue eyes close by, as Dar kissed the sensitive spot where her neck sloped to her shoulders. Without a sound, she let her head drop back to rest against Dar's warm body, luxuriating in the surge of sensuality the touch brought on.

Just being around Dar made her feel sexy. It was amazing. She could be in a ratty old t-shirt with dirt from the little garden at the condo on her knees, but one look in those eyes, and pow.

Instant tingling gut shot. Kerry had been attracted to people before she'd met Dar, but this was different, and it had taken a bit of getting used to. At first it had almost shocked her, this demand of her body that overrode her conservative upbringing with effortless ease.

But eventually, she'd gotten used to it, and then, she'd found herself really enjoying the frank sexuality she and Dar shared.

It was nice. She tilted her head and they kissed, as Dar's arms slid around her and began a lazy tracing up and down her sides. It made her feel great.

The ride could have gone on a lot longer. But the car slowed at their floor soon enough, and Dar's hold shifted to her shoulders as the doors opened to let them out. Their floor was quiet and empty, and their steps on the carpet sounded loud as they went down the hallway and opened the door to their room.

It was equally cool and quiet inside. The drapes were pulled open to show the city lights, and there was a neat tray on the table containing a silver pot, two cups, and a small note. Dar walked over to pick the note up and examine it, while Kerry went to the window to look out.

"Hot chocolate. Compliments of the management." Dar mused. "Takes them three days to realize I'm here?"

Kerry chuckled, and shook her head. "Maybe they just want to stay on your good side."

"I have one?" Her partner asked mildly, as she wandered off towards the bathroom.

Kerry turned and watched her disappear. "Mmhm." She nodded to herself. "But that one's not bad either." She sat down on the edge of the windowsill and kicked her shoes off, wiggling her toes as they celebrated their freedom from the snug leather.

“Hm.” She got up and snagged the shoes, walking over to tuck them into the outer pocked on her overnight bag. She was a little tired, but not sleepy, and she straightened up in reflex as she heard Dar emerge again from the bathroom.

“What’re you up to?” Dar asked, coming up behind her.

“Getting naked. Unzip me?” Kerry let out a small sigh as Dar’s fingers touched the back of her neck, then slid down to unzip the back of her dress. “That was an awesome night.”

“Was?” Dar nibbled Kerry’s skin, ending up with her partner’s right earlobe between her teeth.

Kerry’s eyes closed in pure reflex. “Mmm.” Dar eased the dress off her, and she stepped out of it, turning around to circle Dar’s equally undressed body with her arms and indulge in a nice warm hug. There was still a hint of chocolate fudge on the lips she was kissing, and she felt Dar laugh softly as she gave them a lick. “Okay… so it’s been an awesome night so far, with every indication of getting even more awesome now.”

Dar’s touch eased over Kerry’s ribs, tickling them mischievously. “I had a great time so far too.” She informed her partner, swaying a little to a rhythm only her inner ear could apparently hear. “I even had fun dancing.”

“So I see.” Kerry let her hands rest on Dar’s hips, as she swayed along with her. “I don’t know why you always say you can’t dance… you’re a great dancer. You move.. like magic.” She eased closer and brushed up against Dar’s bare belly, putting a light kiss across the top of her breastbone.

“Magic?” The low voice purred. “Are you asking me to pull a rabbit out of somewhere, Kerrison?”

“Hmmm….” Kerry drew a line with her fingertips down the center of Dar’s body. “I can’t think of where you’d hide one, except…Ooo.”

Dar laced her fingers behind Kerry’s neck and tilted her head up, exploring her lips as she gently nudged them both towards the bed. She definitely had a size advantage, but Kerry wasn’t resisting, and in fact now had hold of her by the waist and was pulling her steadily forward.

They tumbled together into the neatly turned down sheets, pausing only to dig the small wrapped chocolates out from underneath them. Dar chucked them gently over her head. “Remind me to have a word with the front desk tomorrow.”

“Less poky snacks?” Kerry wriggled closer , sliding one thigh between Dar’s and cupping a hand around her breast. “They meant well.”

Dar didn't bother answering that. She let her fingertips trace lazy lines across Kerry's skin, feeling the muscles underneath shift and tense. Delicately, she kissed Kerry's new tattoo, her sensitive nose detecting just a hint of moisturizer and a strange, faintly spicy smell she figured must be the ink.

It was new, and different, but she decided she liked it. She turned her attention lower, nibbling down across the curve of Kerry's breast. The surface lifted under her touch as Kerry inhaled sharply, and Dar paused briefly just to lean forward and press her body lightly against her partner's, letting her skin slide over Kerry's skin.

Kerry arched up against her, wanting the contact. Dar was more than glad to oblige, rolling on her side and stroking the restlessly moving body shifting to wrap itself around hers.

God, that felt good.

Dar felt her own breathing speed up as she felt Kerry's teasing touch slid up her leg, a soft chuckle warm and knowing coming to her ears as her partner nibbled familiar spots and started a gentle, but insistent dance they both knew well.

She'd never been with anyone long enough before Kerry to let them get to know her. Being in bed with someone who was so intimately aware of what she liked and had a sweetly passionate interest in showing it was..

Well, it was a gift. Dar traced the outline of Kerry's face with her thumb, enjoying a lingering kiss and the rumbling little purr that escaped from her partner's throat. She felt a gentle pressure and gave with it, rolling onto her back to feel the cool sheets warm to her skin.

Kerry mock pounced on top of her, green eyes glinted with seductive glee. "Gotcha." She growled, ducking her head down to nip Dar's throat, working her way downward, pausing to nibble at a very sensitive spot. "Mine."

Dar felt s shiver ripple down her body, a mixture of passion and emotional reaction.

"Grr." Kerry rested her chin on Dar's breastbone for a second, her eyes fastened on her partner's, narrowing a little. "Mine." She repeated, with a grin.

The world shifted a little around her. "Body, heart and soul." Dar agreed, returning the smile. "Always have been."

Kerry's eyes simply lit up from within.

Then she repeated her nipping, surprising a low cough from Dar's chest. "Heh." Kerry claimed her property without further delay, hearing the echo of a gentle laugh as she pressed her body down, feeling the heat ignite between them.

Outside a siren howled past, accompanied by a crescendo of honking horns, seeming oddly appropriate to the moment.

* * *

Kerry woke the next morning to a splash of sunlight. She blinked the sleep from her eyes and glanced at the clock, stifling a curse as she saw the time. Then her brow cleared, and she relaxed, realizing it was Saturday and they didn't have to be up if they didn't want to be.

So she put her head back down, but tilted it a little so she could see Dar's face as her partner lay sleeping next to her. Even disheveled in bed, it was a nice sight to wake up to, and she spent a few minutes avidly studying the planed face next to her.

Completely relaxed, the little worried furrow she'd seen over Dar's eyes was at last erased, and she appeared to be at peace. A faint twitch moved across her cheek, and her eyes flickered briefly as well under their silken lids.

A dream, maybe? Kerry felt a warm pulse of affection stir within her as she watched in silence. Hope it's a good one. The faintest tug at the corners of her subject's lips allayed her concerns, though and she made a mental note to ask Dar what she'd been dreaming of when she woke up.

If she remembered, that is. Dar often didn't.

Kerry felt a little of the concern that had been gnawing at her guts ease, and as she lay there tallying up the last few days she felt pretty satisfied with where they both were.

Dar's problem was resolved. Not in the way she would have done it certainly, but it was resolved and much to the client's favor. Kerry mentally ticked that one off. Now, her problem with the cruise ship bid – well - that was still a big mess.

It would have been more useful if she'd stayed in Miami and worked on resolving some of the problems with it. Kerry knew that. Her walking out on Shari and Michelle, and the startling intervention of Mayte and Maria was going to make the entire situation worse, and she knew that also.

And yet, even knowing all that, she would not have changed her decision if she had the chance to go back and redo it. Kerry let her hand rest on Dar's stomach, her thumb idly smoothing over the baby fine down that covered her skin. She just didn't have any second thoughts.

A soft sound outside the room made her pick her head up again. Glancing up at Dar's still peaceful face, Kerry eased away from her partner and slid out from under the covers.

She grabbed the do not disturb flag and trotted to the door, only pausing when she had her hand on the door handle and was about to turn it.

She looked down at herself. “Jesus.” She muttered, hastening back to the chair and snagging her sleep shirt from it. She pulled it on over her head, then headed back towards the entrance.

The soft clanking that had alerted her repeated itself, and as she quickly ducked outside and stuck the placard in place, she spotted the housekeeping cart just one room away. “Whew.” Kerry shut the door again. “That was close.”

“What was?” Dar’s sleepy voice drifted over. “Where are you?”

“Right here.” Kerry went back to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. “I didn’t want the cleaning people to wake you up.”

Dar was lying on her back with her arms outstretched. She turned her head to look at the clock, then looked back over at Kerry with a wry expression.

“Well…” Kerry slid back under the covers and snuggled up against Dar’s left side, putting her head on her partner’s shoulder and hugging her. “I was trying to be quiet.”

“You were.” Dar enfolded her with both arms and exhaled happily. “Nice to sleep late for a change.”

“Considering what time we went to bed?” Kerry giggled. “Uh.. yeah.”

“Mm.” Dar’s eyes closed again. “I just had the craziest dream. You were dancing in a clown suit.”

Mental note. Kerry peered over the curve of her partner’s breast. Don’t ask Dar about dreams. “Um…”

“It was really cute.” Dar went on sleepily. “You had this hat on, and…” Her eyes opened and she looked over as Kerry covered her mouth with one hand. “Ermf?”

“I’ve never told you this.” Kerry blinked solemnly at her. “But I hate clowns.”

The dark eyebrows hiked up.

Kerry sat up and leaned over, removing her hand and giving Dar a kiss. “So keep your circus images behind closed doors, okay?” She pointed a finger at Dar playfully. “You want me to book our flights?”

“You hate clowns? Really?”

"Yes." The blond woman stretched out on her side. "Flights?"

Dar didn't immediately answer, prompting Kerry to look over at her in question.

"Yeah, I guess." The taller woman finally answered.

"You guess?"

Dar shrugged. "It's not so bad here, now that you're around."

Kerry drew a few little circles on the surface of Dar's skin. "Hm. I had fun last night… and there's a few places around here I'd like to see, like the Empire State building, but y'know honey…."

Dar sighed. "I know." She acknowledged. "But to be honest, there's a mess back there I just don't want to deal with."

Ah. Kerry mirrored the sigh. "I was just thinking about that before I got up." She confessed. "Crap, what a screwed up thing I did. You should smack me."

Dar's eyebrows contracted sharply.

"I don't want to deal with it either."

They were both silent for a little while, only the faint sounds of the city filtering through the window audible in the room. Then Dar curled her arm around Kerry's body, pulling her close as she gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "Tell you what."

"Mm?"

"I'll deal with the Mayte and Maria audition for Jerry Springer show…"

Kerry muffled a laugh against Dar's shoulder.

"You assemble the ops team for the bid."

"It's not fair for you to clean up my mess, Paladar." Kerry stated quietly.

"Life's not fair. I think I told you that once." Dar replied, with a touch of humor. "It'll be easier for me to do it , because I wasn't there."

"Mmph."

"Deal?"

A sigh. “Yeah.” Kerry reluctantly agreed. “And how about I book us on the last flight out, and we do the typical tacky tourist thing today.”

“What’s left of today.” Dar said. “Alright. Let’s do it.”

Compromise wasn’t always either exciting or perfect. Kerry thought. But if you had a pile of dog poop to carry, it sure made it easier if someone else carried half. She gave Dar another hug, and reconciled herself to scooper duty, hoping at least they’d remember to bring little plastic bags.

* * *

Dar poured herself a glass of juice, then returned to her desk and settled back into her leather chair. A thick printout in white was already in her inbox, and she lifted it out and plopped it down in front of her as her desktop hummed in the background, collecting her mail.

Security reports. Dar winced slightly as she started reading. “Damn, what a mucking little troublemaker I am.” She shook her head ruefully. “Aye, yi yi yi yah… Mark I owe you dinner at least for this one.” Her fingertip traced one intrusion attempt that had come perilously close to finding a crack, being turned aside at the very last second by the random roaming parser that dipped continually into the data stream and examined the traffic it found there. “Wow.”

The parser had been around since a twenty something year old bored ops manager had put it in place years back, and recently had to defend having it around taking up router CPU cycles. Dar hadn’t really expected to have her stubborn insistence in leaving her code in place vindicated so explicitly, but she was never one to look a gift goat in the ass either.

She opened a new mail window and typed rapidly. *Next time someone tells me we don’t need any of my old programs, they’re fired.* She reviewed it, then hit send and it went on it’s way to Mark’s inbox. With a satisfied grunt, she went back to reviewing the report.

A soft knock interrupted her a few minutes later, however. Dar put the page down and leaned on her elbows. “C’mon in.”

The door opened and Maria poked her head in. “Good morning, Dar.”

Dar leaned back in her chair and studied her assistant. “Morning.” She lifted a hand and curled a finger, beckoning Maria inside the office. “Siddown.”

Looking slightly apprehensive, Maria did so, taking a seat across from Dar in one of her comfortable visitors chairs. “Si?”

Dar steepled her fingers. “I have a meeting with Mariana in about an hour over your little incident last week.”

Maria sighed. “Dar, I am so sorry..”

“Shh.” Dar waved her off. “Don’t apologize. I only wish you’d gotten some pictures. The two of them were up to no good, and I’m happy Kerry didn’t end up there with them.”

“They were very nasty women, jefa.”

“I know.” Dar said. “The problem is, they’re also a huge honking pain in the ass, and it’s to their advantage to make us look as bad as possible.”

Maria sighed. “We should not have gone to that place. It was a wrong thing to do, Dar. Even if you do not say so.”

Her boss shrugged. “And I shouldn’t have challenged every hacker on the planet. But I did, and here we are.” Dar nudged the stack of papers. “So, what I want you to do is just let me handle it okay?”

“Jefa?” Maria looked confused.

Dar got up and paced around to the front of the desk, perching on the corner of it. “I’ll meet with Mariana, and take care of whatever bullshit she got handed. Kerry’s up to her ears in this damn bid, and I don’t want her bothered with it.”

“Okay, Dar, if you say so.” Maria still looked unsure. “But the policeman came to us on Friday, and I spoke with him. I think it is fine.” She said. “He said to me that what they were was some nuisance?”

Nuisance. Dar chuckled inwardly. “All right. Listen, I’m going to need to schedule a security meeting after lunch. Book the big conference room, and get all the ops department heads in there.”

“One o’clock?”

“That’s fine.” Dar nodded.

Maria started to get up, but then she paused. “Dar, I did not get to ask you – did this thing you were in New York for go all right?”

“It did.” Her boss answered.

“Was Kerrisita a good help for you?”

Dar’s blue eyes twinkled warmly. “Couldn’t have done it without her.”

Satisfied, Maria stood up and headed for the door. “Is good. Mayte will be very glad as well. She was very concerned that everything would go nicely.”

Dar went back to her seat and dropped into it, pulling her report back over to her. A motion on her screen caught her attention and she looked over, studying the security alert flashing.

Damn.

* * *

Kerry came around the corner of her office entrance and almost plowed into her administrative assistant. “Whoa!” She hauled up short and put a hand out to steady Mayte, who had fairly bounced off her. “Hey, Mayte.”

Mayte’s eyes widened. “Oh, Ms…” She hesitated. “Kerry. Hello. Good morning.” Her expression was a cross between apprehension and concern. “You are here so early.”

“C’mon inside. I want to hear all about our rock em sock em staff.” Kerry grinned, indicating her office door. “I’ve got a staff briefing at ten, but we’ve got some time to talk.”

Mayte followed her inside and closed the door, then came to stand a little awkwardly beside Kerry’s desk. “Kerry, my mother is very upset with us. She said for me to come to you and to apologize.”

Kerry put her tea mug down on her desk and came over to face her assistant. “Why?”

“Because we should not have confronted those ladies.”

“Ah.” Kerry folded her arms. “Well… I’d agree with you, except that.. .remember the story Dar said for you to ask me about?”

“Yes.” Mayte fastened her eyes on Kerry’s face.

“Once upon a time, back when Dar and I first started seeing each other…” Kerry turned and wandered over to the window, peering out. “and we were still keeping it secret from everyone… “

“Excepting my mama.”

Kerry chuckled. “Uher… yeah. Except for her. From everyone else, though.” She amended. “Mariana and Duks asked us out to dinner. We knew Mariana suspected what was going on, so we were trying really hard to pretend we were just friends at the restaurant.”

Mayte merely watched her, fascinated.

“Now that I look back, I doubt we were fooling anyone, but we were trying hard, and we thought we were doing pretty good.” Kerry turned and leaned against the glass. “Until one of Dar’s old girlfriends showed up and started needling her in front of all of us.”

“Oh, that is terrible!”

“Uh huh. It was.” Kerry agreed dryly. “Until I got up and pushed her in front of a tray full of Thai food and she ended up with eel guts up her nose while she swam on the floor in a puddle of peanut sauce.”

“Oh.” Mayte covered her mouth with one hand and tried not to laugh.

Kerry came back over to her. “So, they’re probably pretty lucky.” She admitted. “Because if I’d have been there, and they’d have started talking trash about Dar, I would have done a lot worse to them than dump chili down their shirts.”

“Really?”

Kerry’s face turned suddenly serious. “Yes.” She drew in a breath. “Dar means everything to me. If I wasn’t there to watch her back, I’m glad you two were.”

Mayte looked a touch overwhelmed at that. “Then… no matter what my mama says, I am glad too.” She replied softly. “It did not feel like a bad thing to me.”

“It wasn’t.” Kerry stepped closer, then impulsively held her arms out. “C’mere.” She enfolded Mayte in a hug, giving her a gentle pat on the back. “Don’t worry about anything. If they make more trouble, Dar will take care of them.” She released the girl, but clasped her shoulders. “You guys have nothing to worry about.”

Mayte was blushing furiously. “T.. thank you.”

“Okay.” Kerry gave her a pat on the arm, then let her go and perched on the edge of her desk. “Now, we’ve got a lot of work to do to get ready for this ship bid. I’m going to need some rush orders on equipment, I’ll need you to get a hold of Elaine and see what we can do to pressure the vendors.”

“I will call her right away.” Mayte replied softly. “Did… did the jefa’s thing in New York come out.. did you fix the problem there?”

Kerry smiled inwardly at the half nervous stutter. “Oh yeah.” She reassured Mayte. “Dar had it pretty much resolved before I even got there. I just added some moral support for a couple hours and then we spent some time out in the city.”

Mayte's brow puckered a little. "You left so quickly I thought…"

"That I was going to save the day?" Kerry went to her chair and sat down, giving her trackball a roll. "Nah. I just went to be with Dar. Sappily romantic, but true." She propped her chin in on her fist and gazed at her assistant. "Occupational hazard with us."

Mayte recovered her composure, and smiled. "I hope to be finding that out someday also." She said, as she escaped towards the door. "I will set up the meeting with accounting for this afternoon."

"Thanks." Kerry watched in mild bemusement as her assistant disappeared, then she shook her head and took a sip of her tea. She turned to her mail, and studied the newest ones, having cleared most of the weekend's backlog from home the prior day. "Ah."

She clicked on the one from the Port of Miami's agent and leaned on her elbow, studying the schematics the man had provided. There were four possible places for the four ships to come in at, and she had no idea which spot would be filled with the ship they'd be assigned.

And yet, waiting for that information before she ordered a working circuit was just idiotic. Kerry gazed at the scattered buildings, and pondered her choices. Four docks, four dock buildings, four choices of places to drop a line into. The agent did not know which dock would be assigned to which ship.

Well, poo. Kerry sent a note off to Quest, asking him which ship they'd be working on. If she had that, maybe she could gently nudge the port agent into assigning it a pier, and if that worked, then she could call Bellsouth and drop the circuit.

And, they'd need a satellite. Kerry sent a note off to Mark. They had a regular provider, but she didn't think they knew anything about marine satellites. However, they might know someone who did.

At least it was a start. They had their work cut out for them, though.

Something chittered at her elbow, making her jerk and look up to see Gopher Dar peeking out from behind her mail window. "Hey!" She chased it with her pointer, and caught it by the tail. "Aha! Gotcha!!!"

"Oooooo." The Gopher Dar flopped on it's back and squiggled, making her release the mouse button as she started laughing. Immediately, the creature bounced to it's feet and scurried away, wagging it's finger at her. "Oh, you are so damn twisted." She leaned closer, peering at the thing. "Hey. .what t-shirt is that?"

Gopher Dar sashayed across the screen now that he wasn't being molested. It had a tiny white t-shirt on, which bore the words 'Hackerz suck!' Kerry sighed, and watched it as it

pulled out a magnifying glass from it's non-existent shorts and started peering around her desktop.

Apparently Dar had her work cut out for her, too.

* * *

Kerry removed her sunglasses as she came to stand near the pier wall, gazing thoughtfully at the concrete structures around her. It was so hot, the pavement was giving off heat waves, and the place was pretty much deserted here in the noon time sun.

She walked to the edge of the fence and peered through it, spotting a maintenance man or two walking slowly down the empty docks. One was kneeling beside an iron tie cleat painting something on the concrete surface, another drove a forklift towards a stack of pallets with a low rumble.

"Hm." Kerry turned and walked to the front of the pier building, which consisted of a few glass doors, and a series of garage type roll entrances that went off into the distance. She checked her watch, then blew her already sweaty bangs off her head with a long breath and leaned against the wall to wait.

The humidity was almost overpowering. Kerry debated waiting in the Lexus, then spotted a Miami Dade truck trundling slowly her way and decided to give it a chance to be her port agent inside.

The truck creaked to a halt and the door opened, disgorging a tall, gray haired woman with a clipboard. She came around the end of the truck and approached Kerry. "Ms. Stuart?"

"That's me." Kerry agreed. "Are you Agnes?"

"Yes… thanks for coming over." The woman gestured towards the glass doors. "Let's go inside." She led the way over, opening the doors with a set of keys on her large ring. They went from the muggy heat to a frigid interior as she closed the doors behind them, locking the locks again before she went on. "Sorry – we get so many vagrants out here I've got to keep the doors closed or we'd find them under the floorboards."

"Ah." Kerry murmured, as they crossed a large open space, and went through two sliding glass doors into a larger room in the back.

"Okay, this is pretty typical of all four piers." The port agent said. "These are four older buildings we've decided to renovate for the next cruise season, so no one's using them. It'll be better than using the cargo piers anyway. There's no space back there, and we'd be moving you every other day."

“Okay.” Kerry nodded agreeably. “So this is where they put cruise liners normally? The passengers? Because one of the things we’re supposed to do is make it so they can check the passengers onboard while they’re in the waiting area, before they get on.”

The agent brightened. “Well, that’ll work great then. Yeah.” She led the way over to one side of the room. “Over here is where we usually put the boarding agents, and in here’s a small office I guess you guys could use. Otherwise, it’s pretty open.”

Kerry peered into the tiny room, which bore the scars of many years of administrative use. It was grungy, but it had a lockable door, and.. She peered under an overturned table. Wall jacks. “Okay.” She sighed. “Is there a telco closet?”

“Around the back here.” Agnes led her through two sliding doors she had to shove open by hand, and they emerged into a stifling hot interior garage. “This is where they put the luggage.” She explained. “So customs can get at it.”

“Ah.” Kerry grunted.

Agnes opened a closet at the back of the garage, and they peered in. On the back wall was a punch down block, and the rest of the room was ringed with power panels. There was one black case on the wall near the door, however, that looked a little familiar. Kerry unlatched it and folded the door open, spotting the mounting hardware inside for a network switch. “Ah.”

“That’s for the wiring in the building, but you’d have to put your own equipment in there.” Agnes said. “Now, the problem is, as I told you, we won’t know which ship is going into which pier until they get here.”

Kerry closed the switch case. “Why?” She asked. “I mean, you know they’re coming.. why not just assign them?”

“Wish we could.” Agnes waited for Kerry to leave the closet, then she closed the door. They walked back towards the main building. “But the port won’t, since they’ve never seen these, and they don’t trust the specs we were given. The drafts are really important, because the piers vary.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry could understand that, since she knew what a draft was, and knew there were places in some of the smaller islands she and Dar visited that the Dixieland Yankee had trouble getting into because of hers. “So that’ll be…”

“The day they get here. First one that shows up, will be assigned, and so on.”

Drat, drat, drat. Kerry sighed as she edged through the non-working doors and back into the air conditioning. “Okay.” She put her hands on her hips and studied the space again. “I can’t wait until then to drop circuits.”

"Yeah." Agnes seemed sympathetic. "I know, the other people that are doing this thing called, and they said the same thing."

"Really? So what are they going to do?" Kerry asked casually.

"Use cellular." The port agent replied. "Some kind of new process."

Some kind of untested, barely adequate process. Hm. "Well, I'd use that for one pc, but not for an office." Kerry decided. "Okay, I know what I need to do. Thanks for meeting me down here, Agnes. It's greatly appreciated."

The woman smiled at her. "Absolutely no problem – having four ships in here in the summer is a big windfall for the port – we'd be glad to do anything we can to make it good for you."

"Except pre-assign the piers." Kerry said wryly.

"Well…"

"It's okay." Kerry started for the front doors. "We'll manage it somehow."

She bid Agnes goodbye at the sidewalk, and crossed behind the port agents truck towards the small parking lot in front of the pier. Her Lexus huddled there in the heat, looking very blue and lonely, and she slid behind the wheel with a grimace as the hot leather hit the back of her legs. "Ugh."

She started the engine and got the air going, then leaned back and pulled out her PDA. She opened a new message and tapped out a directive, then paused, tapping the stylus on the edge of the device as she thought about what she was doing.

It wasn't really a risk, per se. It was an expense. The question was, should she incur the expense, and accept the cost in order to ensure she had the environment she needed to do the job? Kerry nibbled her lip, counting the days and knowing even if she put the order in today, assuring the delivery by the time the ships arrived was taking a chance.

But. She had leverage with Bellsouth. With a slight nod, she hit send on the message. Then she put the PDA down and shifted the car into reverse, backing out of her spot, then driving carefully out of the parking lot into the stream of eighteen wheel trucks delivering containers to the container loader docks at the far end of the port island.

She checked her watch again, then opened her cell phone and hit the speed dial. "Hey, sweetie."

"Hey." Dar's voice sounded relaxed. "Just got out of my meeting with Mariana."

"Ahah. How'd it go?" Kerry asked, making the turn onto Biscayne.

“I don’t think Telegenics lawyer likes me.”

Kerry chuckled low in her throat. “There’s a shocker. Listen, before you tell me more – I’m heading to the Bread Factory.. you want a sandwich?”

“Mm.. chicken curry.” Dar responded instantly. “And that spicy soup if they’ve got it.”

“Okay. Now.. what did the lawyer say?” Kerry navigated carefully through the traffic. “Are they really serious about pressing charges?”

“Not anymore.”

“Ah.. that’s good.”

“I basically told them since it was off company property, and off company hours, it wasn’t a company problem.”

Kerry blinked. “Um…”

“And if they wanted to pursue it on a personal basis, I’d welcome a suit that explained why his clients were trying to entice my partner out to convince her what a scumbag I was.”

“Ugh.” Kerry winced. “Hon, I don’t’ think that’s exactly what they were up to.”

A shrug could be heard distinctly through the phone. “Doesn’t matter. It was enough to scare him off. Besides, that was the subject matter that made our battling burritos dump the chili bowl, so…” Dar chuckled a little. “Anyway, one less thing to worry about. But listen.. “

Uh oh. “Yeah?”

“Maria just told me Mayte just told her that you got an invitation from Quest to a kick off reception at the port this Saturday.”

“Just me?” Kerry pulled into the small strip mall that held one of their favorite sandwich shops.

“You and a guest.”

“You and me, then.” Kerry sat back. “Okay, so here we go again. Can I hope maybe that Telegenics will send someone else to do the bid now that it’s on?” She got out of the car and headed for the restaurant. “I’ve just scoped out the port, Dar. It’s going to be a pain in the ass working here.”

"Uh huh. I figured."

"I'm dropping lines into all four possible spots we could be. I'll just cancel the ones that we don't need." Kerry said, holding her breath a little as she waited for her bosses reaction. Dar hated.. HATED wasting provisioning, and she knew it.

"Hm."

"Two chicken curry on croissants, provolone, nothing else, two spicy soups, one coffee." Kerry told the order taker, still listening to the pensive silence on the other end of the cell. "Hon, I had to. I couldn't risk not having it, and they won't tell us where they're putting the damn things until the last minute."

Dar sighed into the phone. "Yeah. I know. I just.."

"Hate wasting the money." Kerry handed over some cash. "I know."

Dar clucked her tongue a few times. "But you know what, this is your project." She finally, somewhat surprisingly, said. "So go for it. I've got hacker bees flying around my head like gnats, so that's what I'm going to concentrate on."

Kerry felt uncertain all of a sudden. "Okay." She said, slowly. "Are you sure you don't want to.."

"I'm sure." Dar sounded confident. "Kerry, my being involved is only going to make it tough on you, we both know it. In fact, why not take Mark to the reception?"

"Mark?"

"I'm the problem." Her partner said, in a reasonable tone.

Kerry frowned. "Can we talk about this later?" She asked. "I need to think about it."

A bit of silence. "Okay." Dar said. "Sure."

"It's not that I don't think you're right…" Kerry said in a rush. "I just… I want to talk to you about it."

"You don't want to take Mark?" Dar hazarded a guess. "If you want, I'll go with you, Ker, I was just trying to make things a little smoother."

"I know." Kerry relaxed a little. "It surprised me, that's all."

"Okay. See you in a bit?"

"Be right there." Kerry nodded. "Just getting the sandwiches. See you in a few minutes." She folded the phone and tucked it into her belt, waiting for her order while she tried to reassemble her thoughts.

Dar was right – she knew that. The core of their problem with Telegenics was the personal issue Shari had with her partner. But now, it might even be more than that given what had happened last week, so would Dar's stepping out really solve anything?

Or just make it worse? Kerry gazed off into the distance, facing her own insecurity with a grimace. The truth was, now she didn't want to face Shari and Michelle alone, and the reasons had nothing to do with business. She wanted Dar there, antagonist or not.

Despite her big ideas before she'd gone to New York, about how she was protecting Dar from having to be involved. Despite her confidence.

Damn.

"Here's your order, ma'am." The boy behind the counter handed her the bag courteously. "Have a nice day."

"Thanks." Kerry took the bag and headed out the door. "For the thought, anyway."

Damn, damn damn.

* * *

Dar edged past the rows of switches, ignoring the apprehensive looks of the on duty techs in the ops center. She dropped into a seat in the back row, at the master console that wasn't generally manned and keyed up some views, wrapping her hands together and resting her chin against them as she studied the results.

"Ma'am?" One of the techs got up and faced her. "Can we do something for you?"

"No." Dar gave him a baleful look. "Just siddown and leave me alone."

He did so quickly, burying his nose in the console without a backwards glance.

As though she could feel Kerry's wry look on her, Dar sighed. "Listen up, all of you."

Four heads turned timidly towards her.

"I'm not trying to be rude, okay?" Dar said. "I'm just working on something, and I know this place better than any of you do. So don't worry about it."

The techs relaxed. "Yes, ma'am." The one who'd approached her said. "We know that…we just wanted to help you if we could."

“Thanks.” Dar said. “Now siddown, and leave me alone.”

This time, the man grinned a little. “Yes ma’am.” He went back to his reports, and the rest of the techs did as well, but the atmosphere was definitely a little lighter.

Dar shook her head, and went back to her own display. She called up the network topology, and studied it intently. The main part of the attack had hit them in specific places. Not their external websites – those were bypassed entirely. This had hit them in their tier one interfaces, where the big circuits connected them both to the Internet, and to their global network.

That meant, Dar reasoned, someone had some pretty solid information on their infrastructure. She didn’t like the idea, but knew that it was almost impossible to prevent some information to leak out, and after all, the telcos were big companies with lots of people making generic wages who could be paid to punch up their provider account and read off circuits and patch points.

So.

If she was going to design a global threat solution, where would she put it? At the network core? Dar’s finger traced a few lines. No, because if the threat got that far, she was screwed. Her fingertip stopped over the exterior access ports. No, it would have to go between their infrastructure, and the outside circuits, and that meant a secure appliance.

However, she couldn’t put a bottleneck in the network. That would negate all the hard work she’d done over the last few years to remove the damn things. That meant that anything she put in place had to be able to parse all the data traffic, and yet, not impede its performance.

It was a huge puzzle. Dar gave the diagram a fond grin. She loved puzzles, and if she could solve this one, not only would she be in a position to solidify their network offering.. she’d also be off the hook for being the idiot who’d made them a target the size of Antarctica.

She pulled out her PDA and tapped a message open, addressing it to their hardware provider. She scribbled a note, then sent it off, her mind running over the possible approaches she could take on the thing’s programming.

It was exciting, thinking about something brand new. Designing the network had been fun too, but she really hadn’t created anything that hadn’t already been there, just designed the best possible one she could. This was something quite different.

“Ms. Roberts?”

The voice brought her out of her musing with a start. “Yes?” She glanced up sharply at the console tech.

“Sorry ma’am..” The man gave her an apologetic grin. “But you’re being looked for.” He pointed at the door.

Dar looked up to find Kerry in the doorway, holding a bag and grinning impishly. With a slightly sheepish look, she got up and circled the consoles, heading for her partner. “Ah.. thanks.” She joined Kerry at the door. “I’ll be back.”

As she left, she sent one last look back at the master console, then she grinned and let the door close.

Yeah. She’d be back.

PART 13

KERRY PEERED AT HER REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR AS SHE INSERTED A JADE earring in one ear. The color not only matched her eyes, it complimented the sea green dress she was wearing and she stepped back to assess the combination with a satisfied grunt.

"Something wrong?" Dar appeared at her shoulder, glancing curiously at her.

"No.. except that this is the second time this week we had to get gussied up." Her partner replied. "And it's not nearly as much fun as the first time was."

"Eh." Dar shrugged one shoulder. "The way I figure it, we'll go for a little while, then bow out. Nothing says we have to spend all night there."

Kerry inserted her other earring, nodding a little in agreement. She had a few butterflies in her stomach anyway, since it was going to be the first time she'd seen Michelle and Shari since she'd.. well, since she'd blown them off.

No other way to say it, really.

Blown them off, and triggered a food attack on them by her staff. Kerry almost chuckled. "Okay. " She said. "Then we can come back here - how about a swim in the pool when we get back? I bet we'll be all sweaty just from the drive up and back."

"Good for me." Dar finished putting her necklace on. "Do I need to bring my boxing gloves? Or you think they'll be civilized?"

Kerry indulged herself in a moment's fantasy of Dar in her black silk sheath clobbering their Telegenics competitors with the cute red boxing gloves she used for class. "Heh."

"Was that yes, or no?"

"That was me wishing they'd be uncivilized." Kerry admitted. "Ah well. Let's get going. Want me to drive?"

"Sure."

Kerry walked into the living room, shadowboxing as she walked. "Boom..boom...boom.." She paused as they reached the front door and cocked her head to one side. "Wouldn't it be cool if we had the motorcycle up here? I'd love to pull up on that."

Dar stopped. She leaned on the door and looked Kerry up and down. "Hon, think about that a minute and how you have to ride a bike." She said. "If you think I'm giving all of downtown Miami a view like that, you're nuts."

Kerry looked puzzled, then glanced down at herself. A snort emerged. "Oh." She muttered. "Yeah... I see your point."

Dar opened the door and gestured towards the outside. "Exhibitionists first."

"Nyahh."

* * *

Pier 12 appeared somberly festive as they walked up the flight of stairs into the port facility. Dar handed the white gloved receptionist their invitations and waited to be check off whatever list the woman had, then gave her a brief nod as they were allowed past.

A glance at the banners told her that Quest wasn't quite the expansive host he'd presented himself to be. It was clear that the cost of the party was being borne by the Port, which tied in with what Kerry had told her about them being glad of the business in an off time.

They rode the escalator up to the second level, where there were tables lining the walls filled with various edible items. A bar anchored each end of the room, and both were busy with well dressed schmoozers taking advantage of the free alcohol.

Dar spotted Michelle and Shari at the far one, and accordingly steered Kerry towards the nearer, reasoning there was no sense in getting into a fistfight before even getting a beer out of it.

Quest approached them just as they reached the bar, looking quite pleased with himself. "Good evening, ladies." He greeted them cordially. "Glad you could make it."

"Thanks. It was a nice thing for you to do." Kerry replied. "I realize we're all competing, but the goal of the project is to give you a solution you can use, and that we can implement." She said. "And besides, we're all adults, right?"

Dar handed her a cold beer, poured neatly into an acceptably chilled mug.

"Exactly." Quest agreed. "I'm very glad you have decided to take that view on it." He turned slightly and ordered a drink from the bar, then leaned on it and looked back at them. "Especially since one of our applicants has chosen to capture this process on film." He indicated behind them.

Kerry turned her head, to see a cameraman and an assistant over in the far corner. "Why did you let them?" She turned back to Quest. "I thought you wanted this to be low key."

The man shrugged. "Once it was out, it was out. No point in hiding it anymore." He said. "This way, we get some good press for free. What can I tell you?"

Practical. Dar silently agreed. "Look at it this way, Ker. One day you'll end up watching yourself on the Discovery channel."

"Travel Channel." Quest corrected her succinctly. "They've already signed the deal. My people love it."

Dar studied him. "Be a lot of pressure for Telegenics to win the bid then." She remarked casually. "Otherwise, makes for bad TV, doesn't it? No happy ending for the little guy."

"Doesn't it?" Quest tipped his drink towards her, then walked off in the direction of the camera crew.

Kerry strolled a little away from the bar, with Dar at her heels. They both stopped in a relatively empty spot, reviewing the room together. "Hm." Kerry said. "Why does this whole thing just get slimier and slimier every time we turn around?"

"Mildew." Dar edged away from the prominent salad bar. "Let's go see what they've got over there." She nudged Kerry towards the canapé table. Halfway there, she realized they'd been spotted by Michelle and Shari, but she just kept walking, one hand coming to rest on Kerry's back as they reached the line. "Ker?"

"I see them." Kerry observed the choices. "Oh, look, hon.. lots of little potential weapons. I bet those stuffed potato puffs fly really good."

"Contain yourself, Jesse James." Dar handed her a plate. "Maybe it'll be civil."

"Maybe our dog will learn to fly."

Dar offered her plate up to the uniformed attendant and watched as he placed several canapés on it. Her peripheral vision picked up their adversaries approaching and she took a moment to sort out her possible responses before she turned and made eye contact with them. "Evening." She decided on a gracious nod.

Kerry's shoulders squared visibly before she looked up. She merely returned the stares evenly, allowing Dar to do the communicating for the both of them.

"Evening.' Michelle responded, taking a breath to continue. But after a second, her jaw closed and she merely picked up a plate and continued down the line.

Shari glared at both of them. Dar lowered her head slightly, and her posture altered very subtly as an icy edge came into her eyes.

The camera man from the filming crew closed in, focusing on them tightly, and with a twitch of her lip, Shari also turned and went down the line, cutting in front of them and grabbing a plate of her own.

Kerry smiled pleasantly at the cameraman. "Hi."

"Hi!" The man returned her greeting cheerfully. "So, what do you think about the party?"

"It's been just charming so far." The blond woman said. "Hope it stays that way." She added, just loud enough for her voice to carry.

Neither of their adversaries turned, but both backs stiffened.

The man moved off to follow Shari and Michelle, followed by another man, who was talking into a recorder.

Kerry removed a generic puffy something from Dar's plate and popped it into her mouth, chewing with thoughtful vehemence. After a second, she stopped with a weird expression on her face, and hastily washed her mouthful down with a swallow of her beer. "What was that?"

"The establishment of primate dominance as a vestige of our biological lineage." Dar replied succinctly. "Or did you mean the spicy mushrooms and anchovies?" She added. "Thanks for trying it for me, by the way."

Kerry digested both pieces of information and wished she wasn't on the first. She took another swallow of beer to get the last of the taste from her mouth, and swallowed it. "Ook, ook."

"Me Jane, you Jane, you know how it is." Dar sounded more than amused. "Let's go talk to those guys from Cangen. I think that second one in the corduroy trousers used to work for us."

"Cords in summer?" Kerry muttered, as she followed her partner across the tile floor. "Bet he didn't work for us long."

* * *

Just her luck, it would be the bathroom again. Kerry found herself face to face with Michelle as she stepped up to the sink and leaned forward to wash her hands. The red haired woman was dressed in a caramel colored cocktail dress, which truthfully did not flatter her at all. "Hi."

"Hi." Michelle responded. "I've got to hand it to you, Kerry. You surprised me."

Kerry concentrated on washing her hands. "Did I?" She asked.

"Yes." Michelle leaned against the sink and waited for the other woman washing her hands to finish up and leave before she continued. "I thought you were civilized."

"Ah." Kerry straightened up and reached for a towel. "Well you know, most of the time I am." She faced the red haired woman squarely. "But you stomped all over my last nerve to such an extent, I just lost the ability to deal civilly with you. Isn't that a shame?" She tossed the balled up paper towel into the basket neatly, and walked past. "Good night."

"Kerry."

Michelle was, if nothing else, persistent to the core. Kerry debated a moment, then paused and waited. "Yes?"

"I know you think we hate you.."

"No." Kerry interrupted firmly. "I don't think that at all. I think your partner hates Dar, and you both will do anything to beat us. I don't mind competition - just don't put a friendly face on it. Be square."

Michelle folded her arms over her chest. "We can compete and not be enemies." She suggested. "I know there's an issue between Shari and Dar, no question. But you and I always got along."

"Until you starting playing dirty tricks."

Michelle's eyebrows arched. "Says the women who sent thugs from her office to attack me?"

The characterization of their staff just struck Kerry as sadly funny. "They didn't go there for that." She told Michelle. "They just wanted to let you know I wasn't coming."

"Your way of sending a message?" The other woman countered, with a touch of sarcasm.

"No." Kerry turned and opened the door. "I didn't send them. I would have just let you sit there and rot." She gave Michelle a last smile, and walked out.

Michelle stood for a moment in quiet thought, her eyebrows lifting. "Now that is a damn surprise." She murmured to herself. "I guess the old divide and conquer isn't flying anymore." With a shake of her head, she walked out of the bathroom and headed across the floor.

Kerry was ahead of her, angling towards the other side of the room where she suddenly spotted Dar and Shari facing off, the taller Dar's body language aggressive and exuding energy.

Michelle sighed gustily. "Oh, crap." She hastened her pace, then, just as suddenly, she slowed again. "You know what?" She said to the air. "To hell with it. If she's opened up her mouth again, let her take the consequences this time. I'm over it." With a nod, she turned on her mid height heels and headed back for the bar. "Chili once was once too many for this red head."

* * *

Kerry reached Dar's side just as she heard her partner say something she hoped wasn't related to Shari's biological origins. "Hey." She put a hand on Dar's side.

"Sorry, that's just bilgewash." Dar replied crisply, then glanced to one side. "Not you."

"Why is giving a customer a low cost solution bilgewash? Because it can be done cheaper than you can do it?" Shari countered.

"Because it doesn't work." Dar said. "Not long term. There isn't a piece of software out there that can't be hacked or modified without firmware backing it up."

"Oh, that's bull."

Dar refused to lose her temper. "No, it's not bull, it's just how technology is. Engineers know that." She exchanged a slight nod with her counterpart at another of the companies. "If you want to have real control of the process, you have to control it at a machine level."

"But hardware costs more." Shari argued.

"Failing costs more than whatever you pay to succeed." Dar said. "If you ignore that, you set up your clients for failure." She continued. "Here's an example. A client puts in production a new application, whose over wan link bandwidth had never been quantified."

“That’s not my problem as the network provider.” Shari said. “I sell a service, and a pipe.”

Dar’s blue eyes glinted with sharp glee. “That’s the difference between being a business partner, and a vendor. I don’t just sell pipes.”

“No.” Shari didn’t miss a beat, very aware of the cameraman focusing on them. “You sell insurance, at a premium.”

The man Dar had been talking with interjected a hand wave. “Yeah, but it’s like clean underwear. You don’t have a pair, boy, you end up needing em.” He said. “I don’t go for all the high priced goodies you do, Dar, but there has to be some ass covering. I don’t ever trust just one piece of anything to be the only solution.”

“Pithy way of putting it, Don.” Dar produced a grin.

“I’ve seen more software take a dump in my time than hardware, ma’am.” He shrugged unrepentantly. “I for one do not intend on pushing a lowball I can’t sleep at night over just to get a contract.”

The cameraman’s assistant winced a little at the language, but indicated his partner to keep filming.

“It’s got nothing to do with lowballing!” Shari broke in. “It has to do with not waving the latest and greatest and most expensive at people who don’t need it!”

“But why shouldn’t we offer the latest technology?” Kerry asked. “Isn’t that the whole point?” She frowned. “You all talk like using the best and the newest stuff available is a handicap. Hello? We’re in the technology business, folks. It changes every ten minutes. If all customers want is a canned, old solution – let them go to Best Buy.”

“Are you nuts?” Shari now addressed her directly. “People want the cheapest solution the fastest way possible. They don’t want to be cutting edge.”

“No, but we do.” Dar smoothly took back over. “You’ve got it all wrong, Shari, just like always. People don’t want the cheapest solution, they want the one that is most economical for them.”

Shari rolled her eyes. “Ah yes, Professor Roberts, who probably barely passed freshman English. I see the difference.”

“ILS doesn’t pay me to write essays.” Dar still maintained her composure. “But if you don’t know the difference between economical and cheap, that’ll explain things when those companies you sold bargain basement solutions to all fall apart and come crying to a real IT company for a solution.”

“You wish.”

“No, ILS does pay me for in depth analysis and trending. I don’t wish. I know.” Dar replied coolly.

The cameraman seemed totally engrossed in the exchange, sliding the lens back and forth between the talkers. He lingered on Dar. She noticed, and turned her head slightly to look right into the blank, black eye. She winked at it, and unexpectedly grinned. “Now remember. I’m the bad guy.”

The assistant grinned back at her, making an okay sign with his fingers.

Shari glanced around, but apparently did not find what she was looking for. “Well, we’ll find out which one of us has the right approach soon enough.” She said. “Excuse me.”

Dar watched her go, feeling a sense of vague personal triumph that she hadn’t let Shari’s jibes rattle her. Outwardly, anyway. She took a deep breath, feeling Kerry move just a little closer to her, her partner’s body heat gently toasting her left side.

Did Kerry sense how she felt? Dar let out her held breath slowly, only marginally paying attention to Don’s subject change to a new set of IEEE standards. The cameraman was still standing there, fussing with his gear, and the assistant took the opportunity to approach them.

“Well, that was a great piece of film.” The man said. “I think that was one of the best we’ve got so far… Ms. Roberts, mind of I ask you a few questions?”

“Well..”

“Just a few?” The man coaxed. “Let’s go over there where it’s a little quieter.”

“Go on, boss.” Kerry poked her a bit. “I’ll go get you a refill.” She captured Dar’s glass and plate.

Dar gave her a brief, uncertain look, then shrugged and indicated to the cameraman to lead on. “Can’t guarantee I’ll answer, but you can ask.”

Kerry waited for them to move off, before she headed back towards the tables, running her mind over what had just happened. Dar had won the exchange, she realized, and without getting mad in the process. She’d also impressed the television people, and used her charm on them to very good effect.

Wow. Kerry handed the bartender her empty glass. “Can I have an.. um.. “ Beer? Scotch? Something cocktailish to match Dar’s newly burnished image? She leaned forward and put her hands on the edge of the bar. “Do you have any milk?”

The bartender paused in the act of pouring a glass of wine and looked at her. “Milk?”

“Milk.”

He finished and handed the glass to a woman standing by waiting. “Uh.. yeah.. “ He fished around under the bar, then looked up again. “You sure you don’t want a.. um.. a Shirley Temple or something?”

“Milk.”

“I got some ginger ale?” The man offered with polite persistence.

“Milk.” Kerry repeated again. “Don’t make me go find a Farm Stores.”

“Okay.” The man gave up gracefully and produced the required chilled homogenized dairy product. “Here you go.” He handed it over. “I never argue woman wearing a snake on her chest.”

Kerry almost gave her snake a milk bath, but managed to regain control over her grip on the glass and retreated towards the food tables, intent on finding something appropriate to go with it.

* * *

Dar sat down at one of the small tables on the far side of the room and fiddled with a table tent as the camera assistant joined her.

He started off by extending his hand across to her. “First of all, I don’t think we actually met. I’m Derren Eschew.”

Dar warily took his hand and shook it. “People say bless you a lot to you don’t they?”

Derren chuckled good-naturedly. “Oh yeah.” He agreed. “Bless you, gesundheit, want a tissue, have a cough drop.. you name it I’ve heard it six million times since first grade.” He leaned back in his seat once they’d released their grasps. “You have a pretty unusual name too, don’t you?”

“Roberts?” Dar lifted a brow slightly. “In Miami, sure.”

“Hehheh.. I meant your first time.” Derren clarified. “Is it short for something?”

“I’ve never been short for anything.” His interviewee replied. “No. It’s just Dar.”

The man opened a small notepad and studied it’s contents. “You characterized yourself as the bad guy.” He looked up at her. “Why?”

Dar paused a bit before she answered, considering her words. “You’re framing Telegenics as the good guys.” She said. “So that makes me the bad guy.”

“Beeecausee… they’re a little, struggling company and you’re the IT giants?” Derren hazarded. “David and Goliath kinda thing?” He said. “They have worked incredibly hard to get an inroad into a very tough business, which you seem to own. Isn’t that right?”

Dar propped her chin up against her fist. “No.” She replied. “That’s not right. We only own the contracts we’ve won, and despite Telegenics opinion to the contrary we won those contracts by being the best choice for the companies who signed them.”

“But they’re going out and changing that.” Derren flipped a page and made a note.

“Are they?”

The man stopped writing and looked up. “You don’t think they are?”

Watchful blue eyes focused on him. “I think it’s a tight economy, and they’re taking advantage of companies looking for savings anywhere to tempt people with short term savings.” She stated quietly. “Whether it was the best choice for them remains to be seen.”

The man scribbled another note. “Naturally, you don’t think so.” He said.

“Naturally.” Dar agreed, with a flash of neat white teeth. She let her eyes drop to the table, then turned her head sideways as she sensed Kerry approaching. Her partner was carrying a glass and a plate, and as their eyes met, Kerry broke into a warm smile.

“Your company does a lot of work for the government.” Derren distracted her attention back. “Isn’t that right? Military work?”

Dar nodded.

“Bet you’re glad the don’t ask don’t tell policy doesn’t extend to contractors, huh?”

The question caught Dar by surprise, and she let potential answers percolate for a second or two while Kerry set the plate and glass down, and took a seat next to her. “Why?” She cocked her head. “Despite what you’ve been told, corporations, even big ones like mine, are sexless.”

Kerry came in right on the sexless. Her head jerked a little in startlement as she gave her partner a bemused look. “I leave to get you a drink, and I come back and you’re talking sex? I thought this was for the Travel Channel?”

Derren leaned on his elbow. “So working with a bunch of GI’s who would be glad to give you the boot doesn’t bother you?”

Kerry leaned towards him. “Does it bother you?” She asked. “Did you tell when asked or something?”

A guarded look crossed the man’s face, and he straightened up and moved back from the table. “Nah, I just wondered. Politics and contracts made strange bedfellows, I guess.” He got up and closed his notepad. “Nice talking to you, Ms. Roberts. Hope we get to do it again.” He held out a hand, and clasped Dar’s briefly. “Night.”

He walked off trailing the cameraman behind him.

Dar studied her glass. “You got me milk.” She commented.

“And cookies.” Kerry nudged the plate closer. “Are we having a good night here?”

“Damned if I know.” Dar took a sip of the milk. “Damned if I know, Kerry. There’s something just not clicking in this whole thing. I’m missing something.”

She drummed her fingers on the table. “Something.”

* * *

Kerry turned the page of the book she was reading, enjoying the cool breeze off the water as she swung idly back and forth in the swing chair. It was just past six and they’d left work early after a long, long week.

Fortunately, after the party Quest had left them all alone, and neither she nor Dar had heard anything more about the project all week long which had turned out to be a damn good thing.

Disasters tended to come in spurts. This week she’d had to deal with six of them, one for each day and two on Monday that had almost resulted in her being on an airplane to someplace boring and unpleasant.

But she’d worked it out in the end, and now she was blissfully enjoying the quiet decompression of sitting on the deck watching the sun’s light slowly fade.

Behind her, the glass door slid open, releasing a puff of chilled, garlic scented air along with Dar’s tanned and mostly bare body. “Hey.” Kerry lazily rolled her head to one side as Dar joined her on the swing chair, dressed in only a pair of soft cotton shorts and a colorful scarlet sports bra. “What are you up to?”

“About six and a quarter.” Dar put her feet up on the stone porch balustrade, flexing her toes against the warm surface. “Busy week.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry laid her book down and let her head rest against Dar’s shoulder. “I’m glad it’s over. Between my fubars and your hackers, I wanted to call FPL and have them take the power out again.” She leaned closer and sniffed Dar’s skin curiously. “Why do you smell like bubble gum?”

“I was playing ball with Chino and her new toy.” Dar displayed a clump of cream colored hair dusting her shorts. “It’s a giggle ball, and it smells weird.”

“A giggle ball?”

“Uh huh.” Dar said. “Like you.” She reached over and tickled her partner who obliged her by giggling and smacking her hand.

“Dar!” Kerry tried to tickle her back, but found her hands caught and gently held. “You punk.”

Dar released her, as she chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve been a punk all week. I’m driving the ops crew nuts. I think they wish I’d go back to yelling at people in meetings.”

“That’s not true. They love it.” Kerry said. “I heard them in the break room. You were the entire subject of conversation the last six times I went through there.” She added. “At least until they spotted me. Then it switched to soccer.”

“Soccer?” Dar sounded pleased nonetheless. “Yeah, I’ve been giving them some pointers as long as I’m taking over the console.” She wiggled her toes contentedly. “Been sort of fun.”

“They’re in awe of you, you know that, right?” Kerry smiled, rocking them both a little. “Hey, I’ve got an idea… you up for a night dive tonight?”

“Oo.” Dar’s eyes lit up. “Yeah!”

Ah. Kerry felt the stress of the week slip away from her. Warm air, warm water, the stars… “You’ll protect me from cuttlefish, right?”

“With my life.” Dar promised.

“I'll grab dinner, you grab the towels. Let’s go get deep.”

* * *

“C’mon, Chino.” Kerry herded their pet onto the back of the boat, watching her frisk around the space and busy herself smelling every square inch of it. After watching the dog for an indulgent minute, Kerry continued on into the boat’s cabin and put down her armful of supplies.

The potfull of spaghetti and meatballs she set on the small stove, putting the locking arm in place to keep the contents from becoming interior decorating when Dar started the boat moving. The wine she put in the small fridge to chill, along with the dessert, a six pack of yogurt, and some baby chocolate chugs.

The boat rocked lightly, announcing Dar's presence and a second later her partner joined her in the cabin. She dropped a mesh bag containing Kerry's gear on the deck, and tossed her own nearby. "We're outta here."

"Go go Gadget." Kerry went to stow the diving gear. "I'll get us loose."

Dar ducked outside and headed up to the controls while Kerry dodged the curious Chino and hopped onto the dock to untie the lines. The sun had just gone down, and the breeze had picked up, tossing her hair back as she jumped back on board. "Okay!"

The low rumble of the diesels started up, vibrating the deck beneath her feet. Chino barked in surprise, and backed up as the water churned behind them. Normally, Kerry would go up and join her partner as they motored out, but she knew if she did their pet would stand at the bottom of the ladder and bark, so she parked herself in one of the wood and fabric deck chairs instead. She was barefoot, and wearing a sleeveless muscle t-shirt, and now she completed her outfit by snagging one of Dar's baseball caps and putting it on backwards to keep her hair out of her eyes once the wind came up.

Chino went over to stand near the edge of the deck as they backed out into the quiet marina waterway, her tail wagging idly as she watched the other boats go past.

Kerry stretched her legs out and leaned back as the island slowly receded, the lingering bands of sunset still painting the sky to the west. It was warm, but with the breeze very comfortable. Kerry allowed herself a few more lazy moments, until they reached the buoy and Dar kicked the engines into higher gear. Then she pushed herself to her feet and got to work preparing their gear for the dive.

First, she got their bags out onto the deck without tripping over Chino, and pulled out the two sets of masks, folding snorkels, and fins. Those she set aside for last. Next, she pulled out their shortie wetsuits, since it was a night dive and they both tended to be chilled after a while without the warm sun around. "Hey, Dar?"

"Yeap?"

"Did you wash these?"

"Yeap." The answer came back promptly. "Found some new stuff in the dive shop last time I went. You like the smell?"

Kerry sniffed cautiously. “Smells like tangerines!” She yelled up. “I like it!” She set the neoprene suits down with a grunt of satisfaction. Then she went to the built in lockers and removed their BC’s and regulators, laying them out on the counter and going over them with a careful eye.

They were only doing a reef, and a somewhat shallow one at that, but Kerry had never bought into taking chances with their favorite sport. She checked all the o-rings and the clips that held their hoses down, and made sure the fittings didn’t have salt corrosion on them.

Satisfied, she opened the bottom cabinet and removed two tanks, lifting them with some effort onto the low bench on the side and bungee tying them in place as the boat shifted in the waves.

Tanks falling on your toes sucked. Kerry had two formerly broken ones to attest to that. She picked up Dar’s BC first and untied one tank, slipping the rig over the top and sliding it down by wiggling the straps against the snug fit. She relooped the bungee while she positioned the rig, tightening the tank clasp with a firm hand.

The boat shifted and rocked, making Chino bark in surprise again. The dog scrambled back next to Kerry and pressed against her legs, eyeing the spray coming over the bow with dubious eyes.

“It’s okay, Cheebles.” Kerry patted her on the head. “Mommy Dar just wants to get us where we’re going fast.” She reached over and picked up Dar’s regulator, then went back to her task.

She’d done it numerous times before, of course, but each time she went through the steps with meticulous care, always mindful that was Dar’s life she held in her hands as she made sure nothing was wrong.

Unlooping the bungee, she positioned the first stage over the tank valve and carefully seated it, checking the seal for salt crystals again before she tightened the bolt that held the two together.

Once that was done, she connected the low pressure hose to Dar’s PC inflator, cracked the tank value open, and inflated the vest. She stopped the air and listened, leaning close to hear over the roar of the engines. No hiss greeted her, and she released the air with a nod of approval. She picked up Dar’s regulator and fit the mouthpiece into her mouth, sucking a lungful of the compressed air before she clipped the hose to the vest and rebungy tied the tank.

So far, so good. Kerry secured Dar’s instrument console to the D-clip on the right hand side and prepared to repeat the entire process with her own gear.

Once finished, she took their masks and sat down with a tube of no fog, applying it as Chino curled up at her feet on the deck. It was a comforting and familiar task, and the smell of the sweet, salt air and the feel of the spray against her put her heart at ease as they headed into their own private world.

* * *

Dar popped up out of the water, reaching for the steps with one hand as she cleared the surface. She removed her regulator and gave Kerry a nod. “Okay, we’re tied off.” She said, licking her lips. “Nice down there. No current.”

Kerry was standing by in her gear, or more to the point, sitting by, since she was on the back deck with her flippers resting on the wooden diving deck next to the ladder. Chino was standing up on the inside of the wall, peering over at Dar as she wagged her tail.

“Cool.” Kerry prepared to stand up, readying her balance as she lifted herself plus forty pounds of assorted gear onto her fins. She put her regulator in her mouth and took a breath, then she put her hand over her mask and stepped out into the sea.

The water was pleasantly cool, and it quickly penetrated her shortie wetsuit and reduced some of the heat built up inside it. Kerry got her equilibrium settled and looked around, spotting Dar immediately nearby.

This was her favorite kind of night dive, when they descended while it was still a little light out. She could see shadows under her, and the outline of the reef, more comforting than going down in total darkness.

Dar pointed downward. Kerry nodded and let the air out of her vest, feeling her body settle deeper in the water as she changed from vertical to horizontal and headed down to the bottom.

Dar had picked one of their favorite reefs, with lots of undercuts and coral for critters to hide in. Kerry settled on her knees in the sand just clear of the coral and got her camera gear arranged, watching as ghostly schools of fish whisked around her and started to dissipate.

A big sea bass appeared, swimming idly through the reef pretending not to notice all the potential dinner candidates heading away from him. He swam closer to Kerry and she simply kept still and waited, her camera raised so she could look through the offset crosshair.

The bass seemed as curious about her as she was about him. He finned closer, tiny bits of iridescence reflecting the last of the light from the surface as he came within her easy reach.

Kerry cautiously closed the shutter button, wincing right along with the fish as the strobe went off and sent a brief silver flash of light everywhere. The bass gave her an insulted look and swam off, flicking his tail at her as he disappeared into the gloom.

Kerry felt pleased with the shot however, and she turned to find something else to take a picture of. As though in total cooperation with her effort, Dar swam into view a little above Kerry's head, outline against the pale surface of the water.

Another flash of silver secured the portrait.

Kerry pushed up off the bottom and finned towards the reef. It was getting darker, and now if she peeked under the coral ledges, she could see the beginnings of the eerie phosphorescence the night would bring out.

It was like a magic world, which hid itself from the night. Kerry decided to just experience the change, so she settled carefully down on the bottom again, folding her fins under her and getting herself cross legged somehow.

She focused the lens on the darkness of the overhang, aware from the corners of her eyes of Dar's nearby floating presence.

In the shadows, several bioluminescent fishlets suddenly appeared, nibbling at the pale scarlet polyps. Kerry captured it, then nearly lost her mind as the occupant of the dark hole, a green moray eel, came rushing out to confront her with open jaws.

Seated as she was, there was no way for her to get out of the way in time. However, just as she had started to unwind her body, she felt herself lifted up and away by a powerful yank on her gear, and the next thing she knew she was twenty feet away over another part of the reef.

In the gloom, she saw the eel retreat, not without giving her a vicious glare.

She let out her breath in a stream of bubbles, and looked over her shoulder into Dar's watching eyes. Kerry wiped the back of her hand over her mask, and nodded as her partner gave her a pat on the butt.

Dar held up two fingers, then indicated her own eyes, then indicated Kerry's. She shook one of the fingers at her in semi-mock remonstrance.

Yeah, she was right. Kerry nodded at her, accepting the scold. I'm in the ocean, not in an aquarium. These are wild animals. She got her composure back, and floated for a moment, then spotted more glowing coral and started towards it, more cautiously this time, as the last of the light faded and the darkness closed in around them.

* * *

“Ooohgh.” Dar finished putting their gear up and dropped down into a deck chair. “Nice dive.”

A perfect canopy of stars now covered the sky over them, obscured only in spots by drifting clouds. Kerry continued out from the cabin and put two plates down, taking her seat across from Dar with an equally contented grunt. “Killer.”

Dar leaned over and got hold of a strand of spaghetti between her teeth, slurping it in until it broke and left her with a smattering of sauce across her nose. “Whoops.”

Kerry lifted a glass of chilled wine and took a sip of it, swirling it’s tangy sweetness around in her mouth to cleanse it of the last of the saltiness. “Thanks again for saving me from Captain Eel, Dardar. Man, that scared the poop out of me.”

Dar chuckled, picking up her plate and propping it against her knees. “Me too.” She attacked the pasta with a fork, swirling a big mouthful and consuming it, her body demanding something to replenish the energy she’d just expended.

Kerry took another sip of wine instead, gazing out over the dark waves she’d recently been beneath. Looking at it from above, like this, it seemed almost insane to think about diving into it. It represented in a way, the totality of the unknown and yet she now always felt a connection to the sea she’d never had before she’d met Dar.

Far off, near the horizon, she spotted a darker shadow against the clouds. She watched it idly, then she squinted a little as it seemed to elongate. “Hey, sweetie? What is that?” She pointed.

Dar looked up from biting a meatball in half. “Uh?” Her eyes focused on where her partner was pointing. “Um..” She swallowed hastily and put her plate down, getting up and walking to the back of the boat. “Hah.”

“What’s funny?”

“What do you suppose the odds are of you and I happening to be out on our boat the very same time as Quest’s ships are making the turn for the cut?” Dar asked, in a very wry tone.

“Is that what they are?” Kerry joined her at the back of the boat, peering out into the darkness. “Really?”

“Four big ships being pulled by eight little ones.” Dar confirmed. “I don’t think it can be anything else.”

Kerry turned and regarded the opening to the cut, which was just to their south. “We’re going to get a good look at them, that’s for sure.”

Dar returned to the table, only just barely saving her spaghetti from a Labrador tongue. "Yep, we sure are." She settled back down and put her feet up. "Front row seats."

The line of ships crept slowly closer, their superstructures only sparsely lit, rolling slightly in the almost calm seas.

* * *

Dar kept the Dixie idling just past the turnoff into the port's pier area, getting as close to the last ship as she could without incurring the wrath of the circling pilot boats. There was a customs fast boat cruising around too, but Dar figured she'd be pegged as a bored rich boater with nothing better to do than sightsee rather than a potential threat or smuggler. "Which one, Ker?"

"I think it's that one." Kerry pointed at the ship aligned on the northeast side of the port. "Yeesh, they're big."

"That they are." Dar studied the vessels. They were all roughly the same size, but all four had different configurations. Two seemed to be taller and squatter, the remainder were longer and lower. Even in the dark, they all bore signs of having better times behind them, and she could see patches on patches of metal on the sides if the light from the streetlamps lining the harbor hit at a certain angle.

The one on the northeast, which Kerry had pegged as 'theirs' – that was one of the longer, lower ones. Dar steered a little closer, keeping a wary eye out for the authorities, her eyes measuring the length and breadth with automatic accuracy. "Damn thing must be a thousand feet long!"

"Lot of portholes." Kerry noted. "We're going to have to go distributed with fiber."

"Oh yeah." Dar agreed softly. The Dixieland Yankee slid a little sideways in the tide, and a stripe of moonlight splashed between her and the boat. It hit the water, and Dar leaned forward, her eyes catching a ripple on the surface that didn't look quite right. "Hey, Ker?"

"Yeah?"

"Check the bilge real quick, huh? Are we leaking something?"

Kerry scrambled across the deck and hopped over the back wall, leaning over and peering at the back of the boat. She held on with one hand and fished her mini flashlight off her belt with the other, keying it on and studying the spot where the engines were churning the water. "Can't tell." She yelled up at her partner. "You're breaking up the water too much."

Dar cut the engines, after looking around to make sure they weren't going to drift into anything immediately. "Look quick."

Kerry studied the water, then leaned way over and stuck her hand in, bringing it up and sniffing. Her nose wrinkled. "This stinks, but not of diesel."

"Okay, get up ." Dar started the engines up again and backed the boat away from the pier, getting to an angle against the moonlight again. She spotted what had worried her, a silvery film on the surface they'd just passed through that extended across the surface of the water behind them.

Carefully, Dar turned the boat and followed the oily stripe with her eyes. It went right past the boat and headed across the cut, fading out from her view as it reached the ship in the northeast dock. "Figures."

"What is it?" Kerry was at the bottom of the ladder, peering up.

"Should have thought of that first. It's one of them, leaking something." Dar pointed.

Kerry turned and looked, shading her eyes against the streetlamps. Now that her partner had pointed it out to her, she saw the line on the water, and in fact if she went to the side.. . "I can smell it." She called up. "Smells like kerosene."

Dar moved their boat sideways, out of the stain. One of the customs boats was now heading their way, apparently noting the odd maneuvers she'd been executing. "Shoulda just stayed out on the reef." She commented. "Better go grab the registration just in case, Ker."

The other boat pulled alongside and Dar set the Dixie into idle, keeping her hands on the controls as the customs officers grabbed hold of the railing. "Hi." She called down.

"You having a problem?" The man called up to her, apparently more concerned for her safety than suspicious.

"No.. I saw a slick, and thought I was causing it." Dar pointed. "But it's that tub over there."

The officer, shaded his eyes, then crouched. "Ah! Yeah." He nodded, then looked back up at her. "You just out for a ride?"

Kerry emerged, carefully locking Chino inside the cabin. "No, we were diving." She indicated their gear. "We live over there. We saw these big ships coming in, so we were curious."

The customs officer gave her a once over. "Well, don't be too curious. That's our job." He pushed off from the railing. "You folks have a good night."

“Night.” Kerry replied politely. “You too.”

The customs boat backed away, but placed itself conspicuously between the ship and the Dixieland Yankee. The officers on the rear of the boat watched them as Dar idled for a moment more, then swung the bow around and headed off towards the marina on the far side of the island.

Kerry climbed up onto the flying bridge and joined her partner. “That was weird.”

“Of course it was. Do normal things happen to you and me?” Dar asked, as she glanced behind her. “But in fairness, I don’t think oil leaks are their department.” She took the right fork around the island instead of the left, coming even with another of the ships as she moved slowly through the no wake area.

This was the first ship that had come in, and it was already tied up. There were several figures standing the deck leaning on the rails, looking at the sights. One waved at them.

Kerry waved back.

The figure stepped forward and exposed himself to her, laughing loudly.

Dar picked up the mic clipped to the console and switched on the Dixie’s PA system. “Throw it back, buddy. It’s too short.”

Kerry snickered, leaning against her partner and hiding her face in Dar’s shirt sleeve.

The man’s companions laughed as well, slapping the miscreant on the back and shoving him back against the wall. One of them then advanced to the rail, but backed up again as the Dixieland Yankee turned into the marina channel and started to disappear from view. “Hey girlies! C’mon back, yeah? I got me a big one!”

“You know what?” Kerry sniffed reflectively. “I sure hope Shari and Michelle get that one.”

Dar chuckled. “I’m sure ours won’t be much better. Old salts are old salts.”

“Hm. We could bring our own old salt with us.” Kerry mused. “He’s still on the payroll, and I bet he’d probably keep those guys off our backs.”

“Hm.”

They came around the south side of the island and entered the marina basin, slowing their already slow speed to just above idle. Most of the marina was empty – the owners moving their boats to a more comfortable climate during the summer along with themselves.

Dar angled towards their slip, putting the Dixie neatly into place as Kerry scooted down the ladder to jump ashore and tie them off. Her thoughts, however, were on Kerry's last suggestion. Not that she really thought they needed Dad around on their ship…

But wouldn't it be interesting if he were hanging around the others?

Dar shut down the diesels and leaned against the console, weighing the conflict of aiding their business goals at the expense of asking her father to be a part of something not quite…

Would he consider it dishonorable? Or just good strategy.

"Dar? You coming down from there or should I bring coffee up?"

Dar shut down the console and pocketed the keys, then started for the ladder, still pondering the question.

* * *

Kerry settled into her seat, glad of the very early morning quiet of the office on a rainy Monday morning. She had a meeting scheduled with Mark and the technical team for the bid in an hour, and she intended on using the time before then to square away the project and tie up a few loose ends.

"Hey, Mayte?" She pressed her intercom. "You there?"

"Yes! I am."

"Did we get the circuit completion on the pier?" Kerry asked. "I don't have anything here on it."

"I will check." Mayte promised. "They were saying on Friday that it would be done."

"Okay, thanks." Kerry set that problem aside. She pulled over a folder with requisitions for the project, and reviewed them. "Yikes.. is this just for the setup team?" She sighed, leafing through the pages. Money to establish an office at the pier and get that up and running, and provisioning for the gear to equip the office. "Damn, IT is expensive." She shook her head and signed the pages, closing the folder and tossing it into her out bin.

"Kerry?" Mayte's voice crackled in.

"Yeesss?" Kerry answered.

Her assistant laughed softly. "You sound so funny when you do that."

“Do I sound like Dar?” Kerry’s eyes twinkled.

“A little.” Mayte admitted. “Only not so big.”

Kerry’s eyebrow lifted.

“The circuits have come complete.” Mayte went on. “The Bellsouth man says it is terminated in the local office on Brickell – he needs to know from you which to patch here.”

“Tell him the Pier 10 one.” Kerry replied. “But hold on to the other ones – I might be able to rent them.” She hummed softly in satisfaction. “Okay, we’re good to go.” She typed a message to mark, then took a sip of her morning tea.

The door opened and Mayte slipped inside, coming over to her desk with a folder in her hands. “Good morning.”

“Morning!” Kerry pointed at her outbox. “Can you make sure that gets down to purchasing? We’re gonna need it.” She glanced at her assistant. “That’s a pretty shirt. I like it.”

Mayte blushed visibly. “Mama got it for me this weekend.” She fingered the silk shyly. “I think she was trying to make it up to me for getting me in so much trouble when you went to New York.” She hesitated. “Kerry, you were talking last week about going diving. Do you like that a lot?”

Kerry leaned back in her chair. “Absolutely.” She said. “In fact, Dar and I went on a night dive on Friday night… it was wonderful. I saw a moray eel.”

Mayte nodded seriously. “I think I would like to try that. Do you know where I could find out about it?”

“Sure. Matter of fact, you can borrow my study materials, to see if you like it. Remind me and I’ll bring them in tomorrow.” Her boss promised. “It’s a great sport… ah, did you tell your parents you wanted to do this?”

“No.” Mayte grinned a little. “I did not think they would like it. Mama is always worried the sharks will eat you and la jefa when you go.” She confided. “Have you seen a shark?”

“Sure.” Kerry said. “But it was in a tank at Disney World. Does that count?” She grinned at her assistant’s look of bewilderment. “Anyway, I'll bring the stuff in and you can read it. Really, it’s a lot of fun.”

“Thank you.” The girl said. “I will tell mama afterwards. Yes?”

“You learn fast.” Kerry winked. “Hey, maybe you can come out with us diving if you decide you like it. I think your mama trusts us to take care of you.”

Mayte’s eyes lit up. “I think so too!” She blurted. “Thank you!” Her gaze dropped to the folder in her hands. “This came for you.” She held it out. “I am sorry, I am taking up your time.”

Kerry took the folder, and watched in some bemusement as Mayte trotted for the door and escaped into the outer office. “Huh.” She put the folder down and opened it. “What got into her, I wonder?”

“You.”

Kerry nearly jumped out of her seat before she recognized the voice. “Jesus, Dar.” She looked over at the inner door. “You scared the poo out of me.” Her brow creased. “What do you mean, me?”

Her partner strolled over and took a seat on the edge of Kerry’s desk. “You haven’t noticed she has a crush on you yet?”

“Oh, she does not.” Kerry scoffed. “Get out of here. She’s a nice kid, and she loves working here. What, because she’s interested in diving, you think she’s got a crush on me?”

The corners of Dar’s eyes creased as a little grin appeared. “Okay, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Did those lines come in?”

“Yes.” Kerry nodded. “I was going to send Mark and a team there to get the office set up and facilities working. Did you want to go look at the ship?”

Dar got up and went to the window, looking out as she pressed her fingertips against the glass. “No.” She did a few vertical push ups. “I’ve got something I’m working on in ops. Maybe I’ll go over tonight, after the crowds take off.”

“Okay.”

“I just talked to Alastair.”

Kerry half turned to face her partner. “And?”

“The contracts this contract is tied into will either make or break the quarter, he thinks.”

Nothing like a little pressure. “Okay… but the quarter just started.”

“New business is down forty percent on the month.” Dar kept doing her push ups. “Alastair said people are waiting to see what happens with this one. It’s too public.”

“So we have to win it.” Kerry exhaled. “No options.”

Dar nodded. “I’ve got to go to ops.” She pushed away from the window. “Tell Mark I’m sure Telegenics and everyone else is going to be crawling over our people at the pier. Pick the right people to go down there. I don’t want a leak inside.”

“All right.” Kerry watched the door close behind her. “I’ll do that.” She added softly.

Things were getting serious. She figured it was only going to get uglier as they went along, and at the end? What if they just couldn’t put in a competitive bid? Would Dar agree to a money losing contract to secure the more lucrative one behind it? Kerry picked up her pen and chewed the end of it, thoughtfully.

PART 14

"Okay." Kerry removed her sunglasses as she entered the port building, looking around and spotting one of their security people near the back door. "Hey, John."

"Ms. Stuart." The man hurried over. "Glad you're here. There are some people over in the office causing a problem. The pier folks brought them over."

Kerry sighed, and stuck her glasses into the pocket of the red camp shirt she'd put on for her visit to the port. "Lead on." She gestured towards the back. The building was a lot more noisy than it had been on her previous visit, and she could hear the sounds of various power tools going as the infrastructure staff put together their temporary office.

They walked through the entryway and into the back hall. Kerry spotted Michelle Graver's distinctive figure in the doorway to their office, along with her camera people and she only just prevented herself from audibly growling. "What's going on here?" She asked instead, putting a sharp note into her voice.

Michelle turned, along with the cameraman, and the port agent. The port agent had the grace to look apologetic, but Michelle certainly didn't.

"We're just documenting the first of many instances of ILS's attempting to sabotage everyone else's efforts." Michelle said bluntly. "In this case, by taking all the spare pairs into the port, and preventing us from putting a circuit in." She advanced aggressively on Kerry, pointing her finger at her. "Didn't think we'd find out?"

Kerry waited for Michelle to stop walking, then she made the most of her few inch height advantage. “If you can the Joe Friday routine, I’ll rent you one of the lines. Otherwise, take yourself out of my administrative space, please. I have work to do.” She was very aware of the camera focused on her, and the wide eyed stares coming from her people inside the office, but she kept her even gaze on Michelle’s face. “And for the record, my forethought does not equal your sabotage. Now take off.”

“Forethought? No one knew what building we’d be in.” Michelle shot back.

“That’s right. So I had lines dropped in all of them.” Kerry replied. “Now, if you’re interested in that rental, we’ll talk price. If not, goodbye.”
”And help you recoup the cost you’ll have to charge the client? Over my dead body.” Michelle moved around her and motioned for the cameraman to follow her. “We’ll find another way.” She brushed by Kerry, coming very close to making physical contact before she got past and headed for the door. The port agent hurried after her, not without giving Kerry a frazzled look.

“Nice way to start the day.” Kerry exhaled, turning back to the office. “Brenda, give the other two piers a call. Offer them use of those lines for a pass through cost, with a two percent administrative charge for our carrying them and paying the bills.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Brenda went to a phone immediately, and dialed after consulting a small directory.

“Smooth, boss.” Mark commented. “Slick idea to trip them all up.”

Kerry sat down on the edge of one of the folding tables. “Wasn’t really the plan. I just needed to be sure we’d have a line on startup.. I had no idea they were short on pairs.” She admitted wryly. “Ah well. How are we doing here?”

Mark came over and sat next to her. “Pretty good. The line’s up to the office, and I just got the router in place. This room is crap for security, though.”

Kerry looked around and had to agree. The office was light plasterboard walls, and a single door with a simple bolt lock. No alarms, no reinforced panels, nothing. They were putting in six computers and the requisite network gear to support them, and aside from the need to protect corporate data, there was also the question of protecting the hardware itself from being walked off with. “Can we put a monitoring rig in here?”

“Sure.” Mark said. “But when it goes off, it’ll take us about twenty minutes too much to get down here before it all walks off. Not to mention, the line comes in to a public telco punch down.”

Ig. Worse and worse. “Okay, put a full security suite on the data.” Kerry sighed. “I’ll see what we can work up to put security out here. Otherwise we’ll have to make these boxes boot to the network, and keep everything at the office.”

Mark nodded. “See what I can do.” He got up and went back to work. Kerry remained where she was for a few minutes, watching the activity, then she got up and left the office to head over to the ship.

The port agent entered from the front just as she was heading up the escalator, and she paused at the top for the woman to catch up with her. “Hi.”

“Listen, I’m really sorry about that.” The port agent apologized. “I had no idea Ms. Graver was going to do that, or that she’d bring those men! What’s this all about?” The woman seemed very agitated. “The port didn’t bargain for anything like this!”

Where to start? Kerry decided no amount of explanation would really be adequate. “It’s business.” She explained shortly. “Just try to steer clear of it.”

The woman eyed her. “Was she right? Did you do that to stop those people from working?”

Kerry blinked. “That’s really none of your business.” She replied. “I’m telling you, don’t get caught up in this. It’s just going to be messy for the port if they try to get involved.”

The woman’s radio spluttered, and she listened intently. A man’s voice came through, sounding rather desperate, asking for her to come mediate another dispute on the next pier. “That might be easier said than done.” She told Kerry. “So far it seems like all you people want to bring here is trouble.” She turned and headed down the steps two at a time, talking into her radio.

“Yeesh.” With a shake of her head, Kerry went to the outside door and pushed it open, emerging into a blast of shimmering sunlight.

She had plenty of time to look at the ship in the daylight, as she walked along the endless outdoor passage that eventually got her to the gangway. The bottom was painted a dark blue, and the upper part was once apparently white – but now rust covered a good portion of the exterior and it was more a mottled yellowish gold color.

It looked sad, and worn, and she wondered again if all the work obviously needed to make it functional would be worth it. She ran a hand along the railing, the chipped paint spots feeling harsh and almost sharp against her fingers. The port showed it’s many years resting here on the waterfront – it’s concrete was pitted from wind and rain, and the walkway she was on had cracks both near the railing, and more ominously, near the wall.

Kerry eyed a large split as she walked past it, and reasoned that if it held legions of cruise ship passengers en mass, it probably was fit to hold her hundred and thirty five pounds – but she scooted past it anyway just to be sure.

There was a guard hanging around the end of the gangway, but he just nodded as Kerry showed him her corporate badge and went on gazing listlessly down the pier, watching men with forklifts move boxes around.

Kerry walked up the gangway and across the metal bridge leading onto the ship. The railing had been folded back, and she found herself on the outside deck, about mid way up the vessel.

She looked down, to find worn, salt scoured teak meeting her eyes – in some places so discolored it was almost impossible to see a grain. But it was teak nonetheless, she recognized it from her experience with the Dixie, and as she walked towards the inside doors, it oddly comforted her.

Inside the doors, her first impression was one of overwhelming mildew. She stopped short and stifled a sneeze, staring around her in disbelief. The interior of the ship was, to put it mildly, a wreck. She was standing in what was apparently the main reception area, and all she could see was broken, dusty furniture, a ceiling in pieces, some of it hanging down almost to the ground, and dozens of rotting wooden boxes.

The stench was disgusting. It got inside her throat and she could taste it on the back of her tongue, a tinge of bad sewage lingering on it's edges. "Ugh." Kerry swallowed hard, glad she hadn't stopped for lunch before coming over. After a moment, she got control of her stomach, and she then proceeded on, picking her way carefully through the debris. The interior of the ship seemed to be a total disaster, and it appeared to her that everything would have to be rebuilt to be used.

Which worked for her purposes, since she'd have to put cabling in ceilings and walls and that was always easier when they were being constructed. But she had to wonder yet again at Quest's purpose in refitting these old vessels. Surely it would take more money than the darn things were capable of recouping.

A man appeared, dressed in white overalls. He spotted Kerry and stopped, looking her up and down with frank appraisal. "You want something?" He asked, in an odd accent not quite German.

"IT contractor." Kerry responded briefly, holding up her identification.

The man grunted and turned his back on her, continuing on his way without a further word.

Kerry edged down a partially blocked hallway and almost collided with another white-jumpsuited body. "Oh, sorry."
"Hi there. Can I help you?" The body turned around, resolving into a slim, good looking man with curly blond hair. "Are you looking for something?"

Kerry stepped back a little. “Not really.” She said. “I’m from the IT contracting company. Just looking around to see what we’re going to have to do.”

The man scratched his nose. “Oh, okay.” He said. “It really looks worse than it is.” He turned and peered back the way she had come. “The old girl’s really got solid bones. It’s all cosmetic stuff out there.”

Kerry recalled the holes in the hull she’d seen, and reserved judgment. “Are you part of the ship’s staff?” She asked politely.

“I am!” He agreed. “I’m Tally Johnson, and I’m the captain’s personal assistant. And you are…?”

“Kerry Stuart.” Kerry supplied. “From ILS. Do you have a few minutes to show me those bones you mentioned?”

The man positively beamed. “I sure do. You’re the computer people, right? We heard we were going to get computers.” He started leading Kerry further inside the ship. “The captain’s not so sure about that, but I heard we’re even going to be able to get email. Is that true?”

Well, having a few friends in middling places was a good thing. Kerry decided she liked perky Mr. Johnson. “That’s a very good possibility, yes. We’re planning on a satellite, and a new charging system, maybe even VOIP telephones.”

Tally laughed. “Okay, you just went past me, Ms. Stuart..”

“Kerry, please.” Kerry gave him a charming smile. “Nah, it’s not that bad, just phones that run over the computer network. You don’t have anything like that now, right?”

“No way. We’ve got manual cash registers, and one old pc the purser used to use to make up the pax folis.”

Kerry chuckled. “Now you just went past me.” She said. ‘What’s a purser, and what's a pax?”

Tally led her into another, smaller hallway with stairs going up and down. The destruction did seem to be less. Tally headed for the stairs, holding his hand out to her. “The purser is the fellow who handles all the money, and the pax are the passengers.. c’mon. Let me show you the old lady from the bottom up.”

Kerry followed him, avoiding the railing and it’s thick coating of dust, and glad of her jeans and sturdy boots in negotiating the torn up carpet and broken steps. As the went down, the sounds of work, hammering and banging, increased and she had the sudden sensation of descending abruptly into another world.

* * *

The foreman checked off names at the gangway, glancing briefly at each worker as they came up to his desk. He eyed the next to last of them, a big guy wearing a sleeveless sweatshirt and very worn jeans. “Next?”

The man ambled up and presented a set of papers.

The foreman scanned them. “General work.” He read. “You got a seaman’s card?” He looked at the one presented, and nodded. “Service?”

“Navy.”

“What’d you do?”

“Little’a every damn thing.”

The foreman looked closely at the putative worker, noting the scars and the air of definitive but understated competence. “All right, Roberts. Just give this to the guy at the ramp, and have at it. Contract’s as long as the tubs are here. Understand?”

“Yeap.”

The foreman scribbled a note on a card and handed it over. “Here.” He fiddled with his pencil as the newcomer walked away, and then turned to the man sitting next to him. “Can’t believe some of the guys they’re passing through the security check, can you?”

The other man shook his head. “Want me to double check that one? I can have Alberto rerun him.”

“Nah.” The foreman made a rude hand gesture. “As long as he works, I don’t give a crap. We’ve had worse on the docks, and at least this guy showers.”

“And speaks English.” The second man pointed out.

The foreman snorted, as he waved forward the last applicant. “Yeah. Probably make him a supervisor just for that.”

* * *

Dar propped her laptop up a little more comfortably against her knee, and typed in another command. She was flat on her back underneath one of the racks, a pale blue cable extending from the jungle of equipment to the back of her machine.

The floor was cold against her skin, but she'd found a relatively all right piece of metal to rest her head against and at least for now, the odd position wasn't interfering with her ability to concentrate.

"Ms. Roberts?"

The techs, on the other hand… "Yeees?" Dar rumbled.

"Um.. can I run a cable out here for you? That looks really awkward."

Dar wiggled one foot. "What does, my typing style?"

"Well, the floor, ma'am. Can't really be comfortable, huh?"

Dar typed another command in, and reviewed it's effect. She scowled and reversed it, tapping the enter key with unnecessary force. "Have you ever tried it?" She glanced quickly at him, before returning her attention to her task. "Lying on the floor?"

There was a moment's silence, then a squeak as the tech moved in his leather chair. "Uh.. well, sure… we have to do that all the time under there. That's why I said we'd.. um.." He cleared his throat. "Ma'am, it's uncomfortable."

"Well, I like it." Dar informed him. "It's good for your back."

"It is?"

"Sure." Dar tried to ignore the annoying object between her shoulder blades, which she suspected was a screw from the rack extracted and never replaced. A pet peeve of hers as a matter of fact. "Better than my waterbed, as a matter of fact."

The two techs moved around, causing more squeaks. The younger of the two, crewcutted blond Dave, leaned his elbows on his knees and gazed over at Dar. "You like waterbeds? I tried one once, but it moved too much for me. I got sick."

"I have a semi-waveless." Dar answered, distracted as a readout gave her an answer she hadn't expected. She switched to another screen and checked a monitor she had running, then frowned again and tried something else. "Damn it."

"Is that one that don't move, ma'am?" Dave said. "At all?"

"Not really." Dar muttered, biting off a grimace as she mistyped a command and had to redo it. "Depends on what you're doing in it."

It took a few seconds for the utter silence to penetrate her concentration. Then Dar turned her head to see two shocked faces looking back at her, jaws hanging. She took a

moment to review her words, then felt her face shift into a grin. “Too much information, huh?”

Both techs nodded. “Way, way.” Dave managed to get out. “No offense, Ms Roberts.”

“None taken.” Dar replied graciously. “Didn’t mean to freak you out.”

They left her in peace for a while, shuffling and squeaking just out of her vision behind the racks and she took advantage of it to continue the slow process she’d started two hours prior.

She set the monitor running again and tried a new command, setting a complicated algorithm on one of their outside interfaces. The device accepted it, then began processing traffic with the instruction, causing her other screen to start spiking wildly. “Hm.”

“Ma’am?”

“Not you.” Dar typed a note to herself on yet another screen she had open, then she went back to the device and removed the command. “Just something I’m doing.”

“Uh.. it’s not like you freaked us out or anything.”

Dar stopped typing in mid motion, and turned her head again. “No?”

Dave had scooted his chair over a little towards her. “No, I mean…you’re really cool and all. We figured that out the last week or so.”

“Thanks.” A low beep interrupted this enlightening conversation. “Excuse me.” Dar pulled out her PDA and glanced at the screen. “Ah, heh.”

Hey sweetie. Bet you’ll never guess where I am!

Dar pulled out her stylus and scribbled a reply. *Can you top lying under a router rack being grilled about our waterbed activities by the ops staff?* She hit send, then waited patiently until she saw the light stutter on.

Uh…no. Not by a long shot. How did that happen?

Eh, good question. *Got myself into it somehow. Anyway, where are you?* Dar tapped. *Thought you were going to the ship?*

I’m in the morgue.

Dar stopped, blinked, and put her PDA down, pulling out her cell phone instead. She speed dialed Kerry's number, and kicked impatiently at the corner of the rack until the line was answered. "WHAT?"

Her partner delicately cleared her throat before answering. "Hi, honey."

"Where are you?" Dar dispensed with the niceties.

"Not nearly in as much trouble as you are, apparently." Kerry answered, with a wry chuckle. "I'm in the ship's morgue. Did you know they had morgues?" She asked. "As well as a whole other lot of strange places?"

"Uh… " Dar collected her composure, scattered in tiny shreds around her on the floor. "Well, I guess I did. I mean, they have to – what else are you gonna do if someone croaks on a cruise? Put em in the freezer?"

A sound something like cross between a clucking chicken and a sneeze came from the vicinity of the ops console. Dar ignored it. "That'd be gross."

"Sure would" Kerry said. "Now, tell me about our waterbed?" Her voice took on a slight echo, as though she'd cupped her hand around the phone. "You're not really talking to them about um…" A pause. "You know."

Dar glanced at the techs, who were pointedly not looking at her. "About what we do in bed? No." She admitted. "They wanted to do me a favor and I'm giving them a hard time. So – how's it look?"

Kerry sighed. "It's a mess." She replied. "Dar, we're going to have such a pain in my butt getting cabling in here. They're going to have to puncture solid steel firewalls."

"Ig."

"And it all has to be STP."

A sigh. "Yeah, I figured that. It is on the Navy ships." Dar said. "Though I think there's less interference running around a cruise ship than on one of those."

"You'd think." Kerry said. "I'm going to have the tech team come in here and start estimating for cable, but Jesus, Dar – they barely have telephones here! They still use handsets they plug into a live line!"

Dar winced. "It's going to be like cabling Grant's tomb." She said. "Okay, tell the guys to do it right. Find out every place they're gonna need anything,, and let's just get out the bad news first."

"Will do." Kerry said. "Hey, Dar?"

“Mm?” Dar shifted, crossing her ankles and gazing up at the bottom of the routers. “Did you know you can see the GBIC LEDs from underneath these things? They look like Christmas trees.”’

Silence. “Uh.. sweetheart, why didn’t you have those guys run a serial line for you?” Kerry asked. “Instead of you lying under the racks?”

“That’d be too easy.” Dar muttered, peeking at the techs. They peeked back at her, with nervous little grins. “So, what did you want?”

“Eh?”

“You said, ‘hey Dar.’”

“OH.” Kerry pondered a minute. “You distracted me… and I realized I wanted the waterbed with you in it. But that wasn’t what I was thinking about.. give me a second here.”

Dar watched the LEDs flicker over her head, idly daydreaming about the scent of clean linen while she listened to Kerry’s faint breaths on the other end of the circuit. “Glad I wore jeans today.” She commented. “Or this could have been really scandalous.”

Kerry muffled a snorted giggle. “You’re so bad. Okay, I remember now. I’ve been hearing music from the Hard Rock every time I go out on deck. You want to have dinner over there when you come out later?”

“Sure.” Dar replied, watching her monitor now. “But do you really need me to come out there? Sounds like you’ve got it all worked out. I could just pick you up.” She juggled the phone against her ear and typed a command. “How about it?”

Kerry didn’t answer for a bit, and when she did, her voice had changed, a touch of uncertainty entering it. “Yeah, I guess.” She said, slowly. “But don’t you want to see the place for yourself?”

“Not really. I trust you.”

“Dar, you said this was really important.”

Dar released her laptop and took hold of the phone again. “It is, and you’re really good at what you do, and I’m perfectly happy to leave it in your hands.. is there a problem with that?” She queried, unsure of what was going on with her partner. “Ker?”

A soft inhale sounded clearly down the line. “No, it’s not a problem at all.” Kerry answered, her voice warming. “Thank you for the vote of confidence.. I know how critical this is, and I’m glad you trust me to take care of it.”

Dar waited. Nothing else was forthcoming. “But?” She prompted.

A sigh.

“But you want me to look at it anyway?”

“You have much more maritime experience than I do.” Kerry explained, not bothering to confirm her guess directly. “This is a new world for me, and I want to make absolutely sure I size it right the first time. I would appreciate your insights, yes.”

Well, that was true enough, Dar had to admit to herself. Kerry knew enough about boats to get the Dixie out of dock, but there was no way around the fact that Dar had spent her childhood around big ships, and she just knew a lot more about their peculiarities. “Point made” She gave in gracefully. “Meet you there at six?”

“You’re on.” Kerry sounded much happier now. “I’ll meet you out by the front. Oh..” She cleared her throat. “By the way, I’m the Demon of the Dock, I’ll have you know.”

“You are?”

“I deliberately took all the pairs into the pier to keep everyone else out, and am now making a scandalous profit renting them.”

“Bwaahahhahaaha…” Dar started laughing, almost banging her head on the bottom of the rack. “If I stop and get you a pair of devil’s horns, will you wear them to dinner?”

“Pffft. Just for that, I’m going to stick you with my pitchfork.”

“Just for that, I’m going to grab your..”

“Dar, aren’t you in the ops center?” Kerry interrupted innocently.

“Ahem.”

“See you later. I have to go on the rest of my tour with my new friend Tally.” Kerry chuckled. “I get to see the crew mess next. They want to put internet in there.”

Dar chuckled as well. “Have fun.” She said. “See you later.” A moment after folding the phone closed, she glanced at the console. Both techs had their faces buried so far into their screens she feared they were absorbing the EF right through their skins.

Ah well. Dar went back to her router. So what were a few more scandalous stories, anyway.

* * *

It was twilight before Dar was walking across the concrete towards the pier building Kerry had specified. The heat had lessened a little, and there was a nice breeze coming in off the water.

Dar sucked in a lungful of it, and paused to look at what she could see of the ship. “Hm.” She rocked on her heels once or twice. “Now ain’t that a bucket of coasters being held together by paint chips.”

The flag clips on the bare, nearby poles clanked in agreement, as she continued on across the grass and up onto the building’s steps. As she got to the glass doors, one was opened, and she was studied suspiciously by a uniformed guard.

“Hi.” Dar produced her identification dutifully. “Can I come in?”

The man studied her badge, then looked at her carefully before he stepped back and opened the door, allowing her to enter. Dar walked past him and into the pier building, her nose wrinkling at the scent of incipient mildew overpowering the air conditioning.

The pier building had seen better days, she decided. The walls were covered in a layer of moderately fresh paint, but it was obvious this layer had been put down over many, many others, and the carpet underfoot did not have the luxury of any padding, the better to resist the persistent moisture.

It had a government feel to it. Dar rubbed her nose, stifling a sneeze. She quickly crossed the back room and stuck her head into the alcove where the office was, noting approvingly the locked door and even more approvingly the security guard sitting stolidly outside. “Hi, Don.”

The guard looked up from his book, surprised. “Oh.. Ms. Roberts.” He greeted her with a smile. “I didn’t think I’d see anyone else here tonight. They closed up the office about an hour ago.”

Dar walked over and inspected the door. “Open it?”

The guard got up quickly and did as she asked, unlocking the door and pushing it open. “There you go.”

Dar entered and flipped the lights on with a negligent motion of her hand. She prowled around the small space, examining the newly installed gear, then gave it her grunt of approval before she backed out and waved a hand at the guard. “Feel sorry for whoever has to work in there.”

Don wrinkled his nose. “Smells like three week old bread.” He agreed. “You just come here to check that out, ma’am? I coulda just told you over the phone.” He lifted his cell.

"Wasn't why I came." Dar headed towards the escalator that led up to the ship's boarding gangway. The moving stairs were turned off this late, but she made light work of trotting up them, pushing her way out the back door and getting her first good look at the bulk of the ship. "Jesus."

She stopped in her tracks and leaned against the metal rail, the ragged, paint chipped surface rough under her fingertips. Growing up on a naval base meant she'd seen her share and far more of old rusting hulks, ranging from fishing boats to destroyers. But the last vessel she'd seen in this condition was heading out to be sunk for an artificial reef.

Dar turned and hurried down the long walkway. Tied up or not, shallow water or not, having Kerry on board the damn thing gave her a hive and the faster she got her partner off the dangerous, and to her eyes listing vessel the happier she'd be.

As she reached the entrance to the ship, she spotted Kerry inside, heading her way. "What?" She turned as a man blocked her path, glowering at him until she realized he was just looking to see her ID. She held it up, then brushed past him as Kerry cleared the inner door and came out onto the deck to greet her. "Hey.

"Hey." Kerry gave her a more than cordial grin. "I was just coming out to find you. You're early."

Dar took her arm and backed up, until they were both safely on the metal gangway. Then she stopped. "Anyone else of ours on that thing? Hope not."

Kerry turned and looked, then swiveled back to face her partner. "Huh?"

"It's gonna sink."

"Oh, c'mon Dar. No it isn't." Kerry chuckled. "It's not really that bad inside. C'mon, let me show you around." She hooked a finger through Dar's belt loop and tugged.

"I'm not boarding that damn thing." Dar resisted the pull. "Did you see those holes? Look!" She pointed at the side of the ship, which did indeed sport several healthy sized gaps in it's metal sheathing. "I've seen bathtubs more seaworthy."

Kerry leaned back against the iron rail. "Hon, it made it across the ocean." She reminded her partner. "I'm sure it's okay sitting here in the Port of Miami… besides, it's only forty feet deep here…even if it did sink, I could sit on the pool deck up there and get a suntan while it was going down."

"Mmph."

"C'mon." Kerry gave her another tug. "It's really not that bad, Dar. Once you get used to all the chaos inside… I got a really nice tour of the ship, and honestly, it's better than I thought it would be."

"Uh huh." Dar allowed herself to be drawn towards the deck again. "And you have how many ships to judge this against?" She queried, with a wry grin. "How about letting me judge how scary this crate really is?"

"Okay, sailor girl." Kerry tolerantly lead the way across the deck to the inner door. "How's the office?"

"Annoying as usual." Dar paused inside to look around. The air of tattered, tired elegance reminded her of some of the old beach hotels she'd occasionally wander into in her youth, with much of the same scent of age and disappointment.

They were in the center of the ship, a large, somewhat open area that extended up several decks now obscured in scaffolding and torn old wallpaper. There were water stains on the walls under them, and the exposed girders were thick with rust. "Point one." Dar said. "Rain inside – bad thing." She indicated the girders.

Kerry peered at them. "Can't that be from the humidity or the sea air?"

"No." Her partner patted her on the back. "But that's all right, cause it means they need to rip all that drywall and plaster out, and that means we can get wiring in at a lower cost than if we have to pull it all."

"Hm.. yeah, I talked to the construction chief about that. He said they'd be ready in about a week to strip everything." Kerry agreed as they walked past worktables and through a propped open glass door at the back of the open area.

Inside that, Dar found another half destructed space. It had a few old desks, and the walls were covered in the typical grunge you often found in office buildings. "Back office?"

"Uh huh. Want to see where they suggested we put the computer systems?" Kerry took her hand and led her forward, shoving open a half stuck panel just wide enough to admit Kerry's slim form and then stepping back. "Here."

Dar gave her a suspicious look, then slowly poked her head in. After a moment, she drew it back out. "And the joke is…?" Her voice rose. "Kerry, you couldn't fit our dog in here, much less what we're going to have to run this thing on, and there's no air conditioning."

"Right. It's a linen closet." Kerry agreed. She peered inside at the room, a scant three feet by six feet not including the hot water pipes running along one wall. "I told them we could use this to store spare parts, but only if they stuck a wall mount AC unit with a drip drain on that long part."

"Good answer." Dar shook her head as she watched Kerry shove the door shut again. "They have no clue, do they?"

“Nope.” Kerry leaned against the door. “I told them we’re going to need this room instead.” She pointed at the larger space. “They freaked.”

Kerry walked across the floor, looking up as someone called her name from the outside entrance. “Oh, hi Tally.” She turned. “This is my boss, Dar Roberts. Dar, this is Tally. He’s been showing me around.” She gave her new buddy a grin. “And watching me shock the pooters out of the construction guys.”

“Hi.” Tally gave Dar a brief smile. “Um, Kerry.. listen, you really, really, really got the stripes mad. About this room here.” He indicated the space. “It’s the pursers office.”

Kerry perched on the corner of one sad old desk. “And?” She said.

“Ah.” Dar scratched her jaw. “Pursers kind of run everything, Ker.”

Tally turned on Dar with a grateful look. “You’ve been on ships?”

“Not this kind.” Dar managed a half grin. “But yeah… enough to know the politics.” She got up and put her hands on her hips. “But the problem is, Kerry’s right. We’ll need about this much space for the system your owner wants.”

Tally looked just aghast. “But the old system just fit under Drucilla’s desk there.” He pointed. “Honest!”

“Okay, let me give you some idea here.” Kerry stood up. “First, we’re going to put in two big switches about like this..” She spread her arms out to either side, then raised one and lowered the other. “And like this.”

Obviously lost, Tally merely nodded.

“And then, two racks of computer equipment about twice the width of a refrigerator and about that tall.” Kerry added. “And that doesn’t even include all the space for cables.”

Tally sighed, and sat on the desk. “I don’t know what we’re going to do. They won’t give up this space. I’ll tell you that right now. They’ve been talking about how it’s going to be redone for a month.” He looked around in a worried sort of way. “It’s the biggest office on the ship.”

Kerry paused in mid-step and peered around her. Then she looked at Dar.

“Okay.” Dar said. “Then we’ll give you the space this stuff’s going to need, and your people can tell us where they want us to put it. We can’t shrink any of it. It’s just the size it is.” She walked to the wall, glancing back to see another figure in the doorway. She took a marker from her pocket and drew an X. “The racks are from here.. “ She made

another mark. “To here. That’s for the servers. Then the network core is.. here.” She drew a large box on the wall. “To here.”

“Why do we need all that?” The newcomer asked.

“Oh, hi Drucilla.” Tally said.

“Your boss wants it.” Dar told her. “Add this for consoles and monitoring stations.. and you get this much space.” With a flourish, she drew on the rest of the back wall, then took six big steps into the center of the room. “Out to here.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Drucilla came into the room. “We don’t need all that! We work just fine with what we have, that NCR register system, and my machine.” She pointed at the drawing. “We don’t have room for all that! What’s it for, anyway?”

“Point of sale. Email. Computers for everyone. Interactive television. IP phones, and internet.” Kerry ticked off things on her fingers.

“On here?” The woman asked, in an incredulous tone. “You surely are joking.”

“Nope.” Dar went over to Kerry and leaned her arm on the smaller woman’s shoulder. “I’m not. We’ve been asked by your company to put that.” She indicated the wall. “In here. Now.. if you don’t want to give up this space, you need to get together and decide where you want it put.”

“Oh, my god.” The woman put her hand on her head. “This is insanity. I have to go.” She turned and left, with quick, agitated steps.

Kerry and Dar exchanged glances, then they both looked at Tally.

“Internet?” Tally’s eyebrows quirked up. “Really?”

“Now, here’s a guy with the right priorities.” Kerry chuckled wanly. “C’mon, Dar. Let me show you the rest of it.”

Dar stepped carefully over a piece of rotted, rolled up carpet as she followed them out, suspecting the rest of it was only going to roll rapidly down hill.

* * *

“So that’s it.” Kerry stood on the very back deck of the boat, alone with Dar after their tour. It was dark now, and the less than soothing cantaloupe colored lights of the pier lit everything around them and washed the stars almost clean out of the sky. “What do you think?”

Dar cautiously tested the railing before she leaned against it. “I think it’s going to be a Mongolian cluster fuck.” She replied, crossing her arms. “No matter how we do it. There isn’t enough space..” She ticked off a finger. “Enough cableways…” She ticked another finger. “Or enough patience in my body to deal with all these frustrated sea dogs who make my father look liberal.”

“Hm.” Kerry joined her at the rail, and looked over. The salt water lapped gently at the rusting metal, making little swirling sucking noises as it curled around a jagged edge. “So. What are you saying, that we don’t do it?”

Dar exhaled heavily.

“Dar, nothing says everything we do has to be easy.” Kerry poked her gently. “It’s a challenge. Isn’t that what you told me sometime forever ago?”

“Yeah, I know.” Dar grimaced wryly. “C’mon. Let’s go home.”

Kerry followed her as Dar led the way around the back of the ship towards the gangway. It was dark on the exterior – only a few of the windows lit from within here on the upper decks.

A boat moved past in the channel, and the ship rocked slightly in it’s wake. The creaks and groans from the old structure were not in any way comforting, and Kerry wondered in her heart if Dar wasn’t really right after all.

Was there a point to all this? Could Quest really be meaning to take these old hulks and put them back in service, with modern customers used to every sophistication to be found in ships like the one behind them in the first docking?

Kerry turned her head and regarded the behemoth. It was all glass and shiny metal, as far from their poor, rusting hull as could be. Four or five decks taller, and half again the width of the ship she was on, the differences were so striking she had to wonder in truth what the hell they were thinking.

She shook her head a little as they walked off the ship, giving the guard a nod as they traded the gentle motion of the ship for the stillness of the concrete walkway. “I don’t know.” Kerry pointed at the cracks she’d noticed on the way in. “I think that ship’s in better shape than this pier.”

Dar inspected the cracks, then walked to the railing and jumped up and down several times experimentally.

“Dar!” Kerry squawked.

Her partner chuckled, and moved on. “Relax.” She said. “There’s rebar all in there. It’s not going an..” Dar paused, and went to the rail again, leaning against it as she watched the pier below. “Ah.”

Kerry went to her side and peered past her shoulder. “Oh ho.” She recognized Shari’s form pacing on the concrete outside their ship. “Should we say something?”

“Nu uh.” Dar drew back into the shadows of the walkway and pulled Kerry with her. They stood in silence as their nemesis strolled along the side of the ship, examining it.

“Dar?” Kerry whispered.

“Mm?” Dar put an arm around her, resting her cheek against Kerry’s head.

“Does the fact I want to shove her in front of Majesty of the Seas over there mean I’m going to hell?” Kerry wondered. “What’s she up to, just checking the boat out?”

“Ship.” Her partner said. “Yeah, not much else she can do from down there. Hatch’s closed.” She pointed at the hull, which earlier had been breached by a loading hatch open and receiving goods. “Maybe she’s seeing what we got versus what they did?”

As if to confirm it, Shari reached the end of the pier, then she turned and wandered back, apparently losing interest in the vessel. Dar and Kerry turned and walked along even with her, unseen in the shadows until Shari passed the end of the ship and they were at the end of the walkway.

Shari stopped and looked back, putting her hands on her hips before shaking her head and continuing on down the pier towards the ship Telegenics had been assigned. By freak chance, it was in the slip right behind theirs, and Dar wondered suddenly if they hadn’t been spotted on the aft deck while they were talking.

But why would Shari bother to come out on the docks for that? Dar dismissed the idea, and steered Kerry back through the doors towards the escalator. It still wasn’t working, so they plodded down it in amiable silence, their footsteps alerting the guard stationed at the office below.

“Hello?” The guard came out into the area at the end of the escalator, one hand on his hip.

“Just us.” Dar waved a hand at him. “Roberts and Stuart, causing trouble as usual.”

The man’s hand dropped and he smiled, returning the wave. “Oh, hi ma’ams.” He said, obviously relieved. “Sorry, forgot you were up there.” He waited for them to get down to his level. “I’ve had some of the crew out there try to get in.. trying to get free phone calls, I guess.”

Kerry patted the guard on the shoulder as she walked past. “Hang in there.” She said. “We’ll get something set up a little better for you guys soon. This is pretty Antarctic.”

The man went back to his metal folding chair and sat down, picking up his book and opening it. “No problem, ma’am. We’ll survive.”

Dar and Kerry walked through the outer room towards the front doors, the silence of the big building broken only by their footsteps and the air conditioning units cycling on. “This is a pretty grungy place to have people go on a luxurious cruise ship, huh?” Kerry commented.

“Eh. No worse than most of the airport.” Dar shrugged, pushing open the outer door and holding it for Kerry to pass through.

It was very dark outside, and they both paused as several shadowy figures near the edge of the building stirred and looked their way as they came out. There were trees next to the pier doors, and the area apparently appealed to the homeless who were camped beneath them.

Kerry’s heartbeat picked up slightly, but the men merely turned back around and continued their conversation, not interested in them at all. She felt a little irritated at herself for the assumption of bad intent and acknowledged she had a way to go to erase her upbringing.

It was odd, those little unconscious biases that poked up from time to time. She liked to think of herself as a fair minded person, but she’d found that sometimes she just hadn’t had the right experiences to be able to take away things picked up from so many years of living in the family environment she had.

It bothered her. She’d realized when she’d worked with the girls at the church that their lives were to a large extent alien to hers and she wondered just how much in touch with them she’d really been.

“Ker?”

Dar’s voice startled her. Kerry looked quickly up, to find the scattered moonlight reflecting off Dar’s pale eyes. “Yeees?”

“You got quiet.”

“Just thinking.” Kerry sighed. “Long day.”

Dar stuck her hands in her pockets. “Well, I offered not to come down here.” She said. “Only made it longer, and I doubt I helped your plan any.”

All thoughts of equality and WASP sensibilities flew out of Kerry's head. She took hold of her partner's arm and stopped, pulling Dar to a halt as well. "Why do you keep saying stuff like that? Don't you want to be a part of this?"

They were only a few feet from their cars, Dar having parked right next to her in the now empty lot. It didn't seem to be a good place for a discussion, but going anywhere meant they'd have to separate, and Kerry really wanted to hear the answer to her question before they parted. "Dar?"

The tall figure twitched, a half shrug that ended in Dar lifting her free hand and letting it fall. "Honestly? No."

Kerry exhaled, caught a bit by surprise. She thought a moment on the answer, and then decided maybe she wasn't surprised after all. "Because of how tough the job on the ship is going to be?'

"No." Dar turned and went over to Kerry's car, leaning against it and crossing her legs at the ankles. "I just don't want any part of Telegenics." She studied the tarmac, most of it cracked and weed ridden.

Kerry joined her, leaning on the car right next to her partner, their shoulders brushing. "Oh." She murmured. "I thought you were kinda past that."

Dar shrugged.

Kerry really couldn't think of much to say after that. She kicked herself a little, for not spotting Dar's reluctance before and realized maybe she'd been deliberately blinkering herself from those not so subtle hints.

Finally, she sighed again. "Guess we'd better go home." She pulled her keys out and chirped the door to her car open. "Anyway, thanks for coming out and giving me your insights. They really did help."

Dar remained leaning against Kerry's car, watching her ease past from under half lowered eyelids.

Since the cars were parked next to each other, that meant Kerry had to pick her way carefully, placing her feet down between Dar's extended ones, brushing her lightly and putting a hand on her stomach for balance as she scooted by.

Dar reached out and captured the hand, holding it. She waited for Kerry to turn and face her, then blinked in surprise when the blond woman simply leaned against her, patting her side in silence. "I'm becoming a chickenshit." She murmured. "Sorry, Ker."

"It's all right." Kerry said, listening to the stuttering heartbeat under her ear. "Let's go home, and we can talk about it. I'm tired of the sauna, and my piggies hurt." She gave

Dar a quick hug, and pushed back, glad to see a faint grin in all the shadows crossing her partner's face. "Race you?"

"You're on." Dar unlocked her car, and they parted to head out towards home.

* * *

There were distinct advantages to working from home. Kerry leaned back in her chair and put her feet on her desk, propping her keyboard on her lap at a comfortable angle. Wasn't something she could do at work, at least not during business hours and she appreciated the difference as she peered at her screen and continued typing.

"How's the line working?" Dar entered, with her laptop. She took a seat on the small couch across from Kerry's desk and opened it. "I messed with it this morning." Chino ambled in after her and curled up on the carpet near Kerry's desk.

Kerry looked up. "Great. It's a heck of a lot faster since you put DSL in. I thought you had squirmies over the security with it, though."

"Eh." Dar had focused on her own machine. "I tested the IPSEC tunnel. It's all right, as much as any remote connection is." She replied. "And the surfing's a hell of a lot faster."

"That's for sure." Kerry watched her partner work for a moment, then spared another to wonder why she'd given up her comfortable sprawl on the couch downstairs for the smaller confines of Kerry's office. She really didn't think the need to ask about the circuit prompted it, since Dar seemed content now to sit quietly pecking at her keyboard.

Just wanted to be close? Kerry found herself smiling at the thought, since she'd been regretting the fact that her own laptop hadn't contained her needed files so she could move down into the living room.

They'd had a light dinner, then gone to the gym together but the subject of Dar's working on her project hadn't come up even once since they'd gotten home. There was something left to be said about it, though – and Kerry suspected that those words were behind this instinctive drive they both seemed to have to be in the same place at the same time so when the words came out, they'd be there to hear them.

Until then, though, she was happy just to continue working, typing out an initial assessment of the ship project for the team meeting she'd scheduled the next day while Dar persisted in her programming project. They worked together in a comfortable silence, broken only by the rattle of keystrokes and Chino's dreaming whines.

"Know what I wish?" Kerry asked idly, as she waited for the deck plans of the ship to insert into her document.

"Uh?" Dar grunted in question.

"Wish we were at the cabin. I feel like a midnight salt water swim."

Dar paused and looked up. "Hm." She shifted the laptop a little. "We could go in the pool." She offered. "Not as romantic, but there's no seaweed and sand, either."

Kerry tapped the enter key and continued typing. "Eeeeehhh…. It's not really private enough for what I had in mind." She heard Dar's keystrokes stop, and she waited a second before she looked over at her partner, to find sharply raised eyebrows and a slight grin facing her. "Don't you give me that look. It's your fault. You turned me into a hedonist."

Dar pointed a thumb at her own chest, and widened her eyes.

Kerry stuck her tongue out.

They both went back to working, but the faint grin remained on Dar's lips as she typed. After a few minutes, she paused again. "Know what I wish?"

"Does it involve hot fudge?" Kerry murmured, erasing a sentence, and drumming her fingers on her keyboard as she pondered a replacement.

"Heheh." Dar snickered softly. "Save that thought for later. No – what I was wishing for was that we could go back about three weeks and start over again."

Ah. Kerry wiggled her big toe. "Before Orlando?"

"Yeah."

Kerry added a paragraph, then paused again. "What do you think you would have done different?" She asked. "I mean, about the show or dealing with them or.." She kept her voice casual and her eyes on the screen, not wanting to stifle any revelations.

Dar was a little funny that way. If she said something, and you came back with 'what did you mean by that?' – she often stopped her train of thought and switched to something completely different. It was almost like on a personal level, she didn't deal with being challenged while she was trying to communicate something. Sort of like being half duplex, for a while.

Dar shifted her position, wriggling her shoulders into a more comfortable spot on the couch. "Keep my mouth shut a lot more for starters." She scrolled her touch pad with one finger and put her other hand behind her neck, stretching the muscles out with a grimace. "Handled the two of them better, maybe."

"Ah." Kerry ran the spell checker on her document. "I don't know, honey. I don't think most of that was us. They came into this whole thing gunning dirty."

“Mm. Well, I don’t think it’s going to get any better.” Her partner replied. “One of the reasons I don’t want to be involved.”

Kerry thought about it as she watched the check end. She scrolled up for another view of the report, scanning it lightly with her eyes. “Maybe you’re right.” She finally said. “Why don’t we just table it for a while.. let me get the whole process started, then you can see what you think.”

They both continued in silence for a little while. Dar reached down and scratched Chino’s belly, then at last tipped her head back and raised her eyes from the screen. “What I think is… that sounds a hell of a lot like what I said to you when you didn’t want to be the Vice President of Operations.”

Kerry looked over her shoulder and batted her eyelashes.

Dar smiled and shook her head.

“Dar, don’t worry about it.” The blond woman said. “We’ll just work it out.”

Chino woke up and flipped over, sneezing. She got up and went to Kerry’s side, standing up on her hind legs and giving Kerry a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, sweetie.” Kerry took hold of her muzzle and kissed her on the head. “I love getting kissies from you almost as much as I love getting kissies from your mommy Dar.”

A moment later, she found herself encircled by Dar’s arms. Teeth closed gently on her earlobe, and she could feel the intensity of the emotion behind the squeeze that nearly stopped her breathing.

“Damn, I love you.” Dar whispered.

Kerry reached up and cupped her partner’s face, pulling her forward a little and kissing her on the lips. She then pressed her cheek against Dar’s and exhaled, a low sound of contentment sounding deep in her throat. “Damn, I love you.” She said.

“Know what I think?” Dar reached over and pulled the wireless keyboard out of Kerry’s hands, setting it on the desk. “I think work’s over. Want to join me and a glass of champagne in the hot tub?”

Kerry abandoned her machine without a second’s thought. She swung her legs off the desk and stood up, hooking her fingers inside the waistband of Dar’s shorts and following her as she walked out of the office and started down the steps. Chino bustled past them, reaching the bottom landing and whirling around in a circle as she waited for them to catch up.

As they reached the dog, however, the phone rang. Dar glanced at the clock on the entertainment center, and her brows lifted. “Who the hell’s calling here now?”

“Only one way to find out.” Kerry went over to the side table and picked up the cordless phone, keying the answer button and putting it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, sis.” Kerry’s sister Angela’s voice replied. “Busy?”

Dar had cocked her head to listen. Now she gave Kerry a pat on the butt and pointed towards her own bedroom, mimicking stripping out of her clothing as she walked past.

“A little. What’s up?” Kerry gave her partner a thumbs up, then dropped into the couch. “How are you? How’s the munchkin?”

Angie cleared her throat. “Munchkin and I are fine.” She said, then hesitated. “But we’re kinda looking for a new place to live.”

Kerry blinked. “Huh?”

“Richard found out about Brian.” Angie said. “He filed for divorce.”

“He’s divorcing *you*?” Kerry sat straight up, her voice rising. “No shit.. really?”

Dar kept one ear on the conversation in the living room as she changed out of her t-shirt and shorts. She was halfway glad Kerry’s family had conveniently provided a distraction, to chase the subject they’d both been dancing around out of the way for a while.

It would be easier, she thought, if she knew herself what the hell her problem really was now. As Kerry had hinted, she’d thought she was past the bullshit. Kerry thought she was past the bullshit. So why was she doing everything in her power to avoid having to deal with the ship project?

Dar glowered at her reflection in the mirror. Stormy blue eyes were reflected back at her, and she scowled, feeling a mixture of frustration and impatience with herself. Could she really just toss the project off on Kerry’s shoulders, knowing how important it was, and how much Alastair was counting on her?

Could she really justify not trusting Kerry to handle it, on the other hand? Dar sighed. “Fuck.” She addressed herself. “I think you need a head enema.”

“Yeesh.” Kerry interrupted her self-chastisement. “Poor Angie!” She entered the bedroom and halted as Dar turned, her expression altering to one of sultry interest. “Hm. Maybe I should convince her to try something other than guys for a little while.”

Dar put one hand on her hip. “Oh, I’m sure that’d be a popular suggestion. Especially for Brian.” She said. “What happened?”

Kerry pulled her t-shirt off. “Angie thought she’d blown him off about Andy’s blood tests, but I guess he got suspicious. He had DNA tests done without her knowing.”

Dar snorted. “Nice!” She slipped behind Kerry and undid her bra, giving her a scratch between her tanned shoulderblades. “So she’s going back home?”

“No.” Kerry folded her bra and set it on the counter next to her already folded t-shirt. “Oh, my mother offered, sure, but Angie.. she wants to get out on her own.”

“With Brian?”

Kerry didn’t answer for a moment, then she turned and faced Dar. “She’s not sure.”

Dar cocked her head in question.

A shrug. “She said she doesn’t want it to be a case of.. he needs to take care of her now. She wants to do it on her own.” Kerry put her hands on Dar’s waist, rubbing her thumbs on the soft skin there. “Maybe I started a family trend. In any case, she was asking what the housing prices were like down here.”

“Ah.”

Kerry eased forward and brushed her lips over the curve of Dar’s breast. She felt Dar’s fingertips run up and down her back and it encouraged her to move closer, fitting her bare body to Dar’s and reveling in the sensual jolt it gave her. “Y’know.. water sounded good…”

“There’s water in that bed.” Dar suggested, kissing her neck.

“Just what I was thinking.” Kerry gladly gave up the idea of the hot tub, and started exploring Dar’s skin instead. “Mm.. maybe I should tell Angie..”

“Shh.” Dar bumped her towards the bed. “If we start telling the heteros, they’ll all want to be gay.” She tumbled with Kerry into the center of the bed, as they both chuckled.

* * *

“Hey, Col.” Kerry carried her tea cup into the break room and set it down. “What’s up?” She asked, waiting her turn at the hot water spigot.

“Same old, same old.” Her friend replied, with a grin. “Hey, any chance of you making it out to the beach this coming weekend? We’ve got a cue planned.”

Kerry dunked her teabag up and down a few times. “Hm.. let me get back you on that. Maybe. Hey listen – are there any units open in the complex?”

"Mine?" Colleen asked, in a mildly surprised tone. "Two, I think. Why?"

Kerry poured a little milk into her tea and put the bottle back in the refrigerator. "Might need one on short notice." She explained. "You going back to your office? I'll fill you in."

Colleen picked up her coffee mug and followed Kerry out into the hallway. She caught up with her friend a few steps down. "So, what's up?"

"My sister." Kerry said, with a wry grin. "Following my very bad example.. c'mon inside and I'll tell you all about it." She entered her office, toasting the newly arrived Mayte with her cup. "Morning!"

"Morning, Kerry." Mayte smiled at her, as she went to her desk and slid behind it.

Colleen trailed after Kerry as they both entered the inner office, and Kerry shut the door before going to her own desk and taking a seat. "I get this call last night." She said. "My family's hit the Enquirer again."

"Oh no." Colleen sat down across from her. "Now what? Is your nephew an alien?"

"Worse." Kerry sipped her tea. "A bastard, and his father found out about it." She watched Colleen's eyes widen in amazement. "Did I forget to tell you my sister had an affair with my ex-boyfriend?"

"Jesu." Colleen covered her face with one hand.

"Hm. Thought for sure I told you that one. Anyway, Richard found out and he's suing Angie for divorce. She was hinting about places down here so I figured…"

"I get the picture." Colleen held her hand up, palm out. "Let me talk to the landlord – see what he's got open. I know there's a one bedroom, but I'm thinking for her a two would be better, right? How's she going to survive – I thought you told me she's a housewife."

Kerry sighed, leaning back in her chair. "She is. She can do some light office work, though, and she's not stupid. She knows how to use a PC, do some bookkeeping, that sort of thing."

Colleen made a face.

"I know." The blond woman acknowledged the grimace. "Honestly, Col, she'd be better off going back to mom's house, but I'm not really the one to tell her that, you know?"

"Mm." The redhead nodded. "I know. Is she cut out for Miami?"

"Was I?"

"You didn't have a kid, and no skills." Colleen said, with blunt honesty. "Not that I'm knocking her looking for something new, eh? It's just that I think she doesn't realize you got where you are because you earned it."

Kerry looked around at her office, hand picked and hand decorated by Dar, filled with knick knacks and cute, yet mute symbols of their partnership. A brief grin crossed her face, as she sipped again at her tea. "True." She acknowledged. "But I think what she wants is to make it on her own, before she lets Brian come back into her life and it reverts to stodgy traditionalism."

A soft knock came at the door. "Yes?" Kerry raised her voice.

The door opened and Mayte stuck her head in. "Kerry, the conference room is booked for your meeting at nine, but Mr. Mark says to tell you he is running a little late. Something about a wipe-up."

"Uh oh." Kerry winced. "I think he means wipe out. That doesn't sound good. Okay – thanks Mayte. I'll start the meeting without him. Hope he's all right." She shook her head, and reviewed her page of mails, most of which were marked with red urgent flags. "Yeesh. What a way to start the day."

Colleen stood, and chuckled wryly. "Well, me friend, I'll be on my way to start my day, and hope it's not nearly so raucous as yours. I'll let you know what the landlord says." She waggled her fingers at Kerry and headed for the door.

"Bye Col." Kerry turned her attention to her inbox, clicking on the first red flag. It was a plea from marketing, on a new account. She leaned forward and studied it thoughtfully, then shifted her window over and clicked on their network diagram. When it came up, she typed in a circuit identifier and scanned the results.

Her fingers drummed lightly on the keyboard. "Marginal." She nibbled the inside of her lip. The new account wanted a guaranteed amount of bandwidth, and the minor pipe they were running on, an offshoot of the main network in a far out part of Oregon was approaching their self imposed saturation limit.

Should she agree, and hope for the best? Should she ask for a bandwidth increase? They wouldn't get any more money if she had to make a bigger pipe there, unless they could bag more business in the area.

After a moment's more drumming of her fingertips, Kerry went back to the mail program. She hit reply, and typed a response. "Okay, John. I'll go for the guarantee, but you guys better understand that's a very tight area. Nothing else goes in there for any existing customers and that pipe stays that size unless you book me more business."

She hit send, then sat back. After a second, she went into her sent mail file and selected the note she'd just delivered, forwarding a copy of it over to Dar. "Juuuuust in case."

Then she went on to the next note, another plea, another account, another decision to justify. Kerry found herself wondering how long it was before Dar had gotten tired of handling stuff like this? She'd developed a technique of scaring the hell out of everyone so much no one asked her for favors, and so she had a lot less of the kinds of emails to deal with than Kerry currently did.

Kerry was perceived as 'nice' – she knew it, and she knew that often played in her favor, but in cases like this, it often caused her to have to make calls she really shouldn't have to, just because people knew they could approach and ask her for it.

So – was Dar's way of operating really more efficient?

Hm. Kerry exhaled, then jumped as Gopher Dar appeared, chittering at her from behind her mail window. "Yow. You little stinker." She laughed, clicking at Gopher Dar with her mouse. Today her little pal had on a t-shirt and overalls, and was wearing a baseball cap with the letter K on it.

Gopher Dar shook his finger at her, then pulled out a placard, sashaying across Kerry's screen so she could read it. "Nerds Rule, huh?" She chuckled. "Dar, Dar, Dar."

"Yes?"

Kerry jumped again, despite herself. She turned and gave her boss a mock glare. "Wench."

Dar sauntered over. She was dressed in jeans again, and carrying a shoulder pouch full of various nerdy things. "I'm going to the main patch closet. If anyone's looking for me, tell em I've got my head up a router somewhere."

Kerry gazed affectionately at her. "You going to be lying on the floor all day again? Here." She pulled a small sheepskin pillow from her large desk drawer and handed it to Dar. "Park your buns on that."

Her partner accepted the fluffy thing, and held it up. "You want me to walk through the hallways carrying this?" She laughed. "Kerry, I don't need a duff muff."

"Well, tell them it's my muff." Kerry replied, with a twinkle. "Actually, it's for your head. It's not good for you to have your head on the cold concrete, honey. I don't want you getting sick."

Dar tucked the pillow under her arm and sketched a salute at Kerry, as she headed for the door. "Oh." She paused with the door half open. "Good decision on Oregon." Then she scooted through and shut the door after her, leaving Kerry in momentary silence.

“Thanks.” Kerry said to the closed door. “Nice hat on the gopher.” She added, with a grin as she spotted Gopher Dar now sleeping in the corner of her screen, the hat tilted over his eyes.

With a shake of her head she went back to work, checking her watch for the time. It was nearly eight, and she had to get through the rest of her red flags before she left for her meeting at nine, and for a minute she wished she were working with Dar on her project instead.

“Bad Kerry.” She resolutely clicked on the next mail.

* * *

It had been a very long time since Dar had wandered down to the first floor of their building and into the big central core telecom room. She propped the door open from long habit, looping a piece of old Ethernet cable tied around a conduit just for that purpose over the door handle and proceeding inside.

It was a far from glamorous place, concrete block walls lined with rack upon rack of circuit cards, cables, and routers. It also held two big UPS units to power the room if they lost outside electricity, it’s own air conditioning unit and a thankfully raised floor so she didn’t actually have to lie on concrete.

The walls were covered in steel conduit that lead to every other floor of the building, and there was a set of bright red pipes that indicated the lines coming in from outside. Those had tiny camera attachments to one side that allowed a fiber optic thread to penetrate the pipe at the top and give the security department visibility through the conduit to it’s terminus outside.

There were also cameras pointed towards them inside the patch room, a bit of extra insurance Dar had installed a year or so back. It never paid to take chances, and admittance to this particular room was restricted to four people inside the company, her being one of them.

Kerry and Mark being the other two, and the fourth key residing in Plano in the hands of the corporate security officer in case of disaster.

Dar set her bag down and ran her eyes over the racks to re-familiarize herself with the configuration. She’d supervised the original installation in this room, but it had been a while since she’d seen the hardware. She ran her fingers over the patch panels, peeking behind them to inspect the jacks.

Everything looked in order. Dar circled the room one more time, then she selected a spot on the floor and knelt, pulling out her laptop and a set of cables. She plugged the end of

the cable into one of the two master routers and sat down, leaning against the rack and putting Kerry's pillow behind her head to cushion it.

It added a bit of unexpected comfort, welcome considering the number of hours she suspected she'd be sitting here on the floor working. Dar smiled, taking an Ethernet cable from her bag and attaching the back of her laptop into the network with it. Kerry was so cool sometimes.

Okay, most of the time. In fact, there were times Dar did wonder what exactly she'd done in a past life to deserve meeting Kerry in this one.

Ah well. She booted up her laptop and pulled a can of Yoohoo from her bag, opening it and setting it at her side in direct violation of the strict no beverage rule she'd put in place for this room.

The screen came up, and she started up her analysis program, then booted the network monitor. She cracked her knuckles, then started typing, calling up the router configuration on one screen while she set the monitor running on another.

An alert flashed. Dar paused and looked at it, surprised. "What the…" She pulled up the monitor and made it full screen, her eyes flicking over the readouts. Her attention zeroed in on one escalating counter, and with a curse, she switched to the router screen and started typing like a demon.

"Son of a bleeping pissant hacker.. wait till I get you…"

PART 15

"YOU OKAY TO WALK FROM HERE, SAILOR BOY?" CECI PUT THE TRUCK IN PARK, AND peered across the bridge leading to the port. "Or you want me to drop you down inside?"

"Naw." Andy gathered up his hard hat and a small sack lying next to him on the seat. "This here's fine. Don't want them beagle brains wondering nothing." He paused to regard the line of old ships stretching out down the cut, plucking a seam on the nicely worn jeans covering his legs.

Ceci watched him, with a faint grin. "Well, go have fun then." She nudged his shoulder. "My husband the corporate spy."

Andy chuckled, turning his head and giving her a light kiss on the lips. "Just doing Dardar a favor." He opened the door and hopped out, giving the side of the truck a slap before he moved off down the sidewalk towards the bridge.

"Hm." Ceci leaned on the truck steering wheel, resting her chin on the top of it. "I'm not sure who did who a favor." She made a mental note. Her beloved husband had settled into retirement, but Ceci knew him well enough to know having something to do was coming as a definite relief.

The fact that it was a truly interesting, actually important task only made it all the better. Had Dar known that before she asked?

Well. Ceci mused. The apple didn't fall far from the tree, to quote a hoary old saying, and very probably her daughter had an inside insight into mentally hyperdriven restlessly active behavior that she just thankfully didn't.

In any case, Andy was excited as a kid with a new sling shot, and she found herself surprisingly grateful to Dar for making him that way. She looked around, spotting Bayside just to her right. Hm.

Maybe she could get Dar a present to say thank you. With a brisk nod, she put the truck in gear and made a swift u-turn, crossing six lanes of traffic with placid non-concern.

Andrew walked slowly down the pier, nodding briefly at the few men wandering in to start work along with him. "Lo." He greeted the foreman, who was standing near the gangway drinking cup of coffee.

"Hey there, ugly." The foreman responded, with an easy grin that stripped the insult of most of it's sting. "Listen, buddy. The folks inside gave me a good write up on you."

Andrew stopped at the edge of the gangway and leaned on the chain rope. "Yeap?" He replied. "That so?"

The man nodded. "That Norskie said it was nice to have someone who spoke English but kept their mouth shut for a change."

Andy chuckled. "Them fellers inside done chatter a bit, that's true." He allowed. "Didn't seem any too organized, though." He added offhandedly. "Lots of them boxes went all over the place."

The foreman sighed and shook his head. "Yeah, I know. I heard that." He frowned. "Problem is, the people who ordered all the stuff for the fixing up didn't palletize it."

"Yeap." Andy nodded.

"So we've got dishes mixed with plumbing fixtures. What a mess." He showed Andrew his clipboard, which held reams of receiving invoices. "Look at this. You're going to have an even bigger mess coming in today."

Since he so nicely offered, Andrew took the board and examined the papers. "Wall." He leaned on the chains again and pointed at one of the lines with a scarred finger. "See that there?"

"Yeah?" The man looked at the line warily. "What about it?"

"Way back when in the Navy, that there used to be called a source tick." Andy told him. "I ain't got a half clue what them boys back in the office do with it, but all them with the same number done belonged together."

The foreman looked around quickly. “Yeah?” He studied the number, then flipped a few pages, and looked at another invoice. “Son of a bitch! Look! Cups, saucers, and silverware.. all the same one!” His voice rose excitedly. “If we can get a couple of big magic markers we might make sense of this damn crap… hang on.. I’ll be right back… Ugly, you’re a genius!”

Andrew watched him hurry off. “Lord.” He moved on in search of a roach coach, spotting one outside the walkway. “What the hell these people being paid for I do wonder. Mah kid come in here and this whole basket’d been tossed head over keester by now.”

There was a small crowd around the wagon and he joined it, standing in line to wait his turn, then pointing mutely at the coffee and holding up an apple he’d taken from the back of the coach when he got to the front. The vendor handed him a steaming cup and took his proffered money, then moved on to the next guy in line as Andrew set the cup down and applied as much of everything he could to get it to stop tasting like watery coffee.

It was already warm, and he was sweating under his t-shirt, but as he walked over to stand near the gangway again and sipped his coffee, he felt good to be there anyway. He leaned against the huge cleat the ship was moored to and crossed his ankles, his military issue boots showing dark against the white concrete.

Two figures approached down the pier, attracting his attention. He remained in place, however, idly munching on his apple as the two women approached. They were talking as they walked, looking around but not really paying much attention to the men standing around on the pier.

As they came even with him, though, Andrew dropped his eyes to his cup, cocking his ears to listen instead.

“I’m telling you, Shari. It’s going to take three weeks to get the damn wireless gear in here, and even then the best I can hope for is maybe 2 megabit pipe to that rented office over there.”

“We are not giving those bitches one flat dime, Michelle.” The taller, older of the two women retorted. “I don’t care if we have to move the office here. Rent space in that damn Catholic trailer. I don’t give s shit. I’ve got other people working on screwing ILS, so I’m not going to sit here being screwed by them in the meantime.”

“Well, hell.” The shorter woman replied. “I say let’s bury the hatchet long enough to get a connection, for Pete’s sake. I need the access to the system, Shari! I can’t run the hardware part of this with a fucking tin can and a roll of string!”

"Fine." The taller woman stormed onto the gangway, brushing right by Andrew as she did so. "Do whatever the fuck you want. Go screw the little blond rat you're lusting for. Maybe that'll get you what you want."

The smaller woman stopped at the edge of the gangway. She glared at the other woman's retreating back, then glanced at Andrew.

"Mornin." Andrew tipped his coffee cup to her.

With a disgusted look, the woman turned and stalked off, her heels clattering loudly on the concrete. Andrew liberated an apple seed from the core he'd been nibbling and spit it after her, watching it bounce along the pier, skittering merrily in her wake.

* * *

"C'mere.. c'mere.." Dar was focused intently on the screen, her body arced forward and hunched over the laptop. She had three windows open, and she was running traces in all of them, using a fourth to scramble rapidly after the would be hacker as they probed the gateways into her network.

It was a tough balance, trying to follow the hacker around while at the same time, not revealing her presence, while at the same time running traces on him to find out where he was from.

Instinctively, she'd thrown up a zone around the router he was attacking, locking off the security to her login alone, and restricting all inbound traffic to reroute through her analyzer. So – there was no danger in letting him poke around, because there was literally no place for him to go.

And maybe she could learn something about what he was looking for if she let him keep looking. But the probes did not seem to have any particular intent – the hacker was looking for something.. anything, as though he was just opportunistically searching for any crevice he could.

Which, if she thought about it, made a peculiar kind of sense given the jerkwad challenge she'd tossed out there.

Without looking, Dar picked up the can of Yoohoo and took a swallow, then set it down quickly as her nemesis apparently decided to give up, and backed out of the gateway. "Ah ah ah…" Dar glanced at the trace, then chuckled wickedly. "Ah, gotcha."

She followed him back out, away from their hardened entry point, back through the backbone he'd come in on, back to his own front door.

He vanished, his IP disappearing behind a firewall, but before he did, Dar got one last bit of information from him she hadn't expected, an unusual port that she took a chance on, and went in after him with.

She never expected it to work, but the next thing she knew, she was in the raider's gateway router, a bland, innocent prompt facing her with a pound sign that rang alarm bells so loudly she had to look up to make sure she wasn't actually hearing them real time.

For a moment, she just sat there, fingertips resting on her keyboard, letting her heartbeat settle down.

Okay. Dar took a deep breath. From where she was, she could do damn near anything, far more in fact than the hacker could have done to her network if he'd gotten as far as she had.

It seemed a perfect opportunity – she could find out where this guy was from, what his motives were.. maybe turn the tables on him? He'd been pretty confident he'd get to her – now she could chase him down to his very desk and…

Paybacks? Dar drummed her fingers, feeling an instinct rising that she knew from long experience that she ignored at her own peril.

Carefully, she screen-capped where she was, then very deliberately, she clicked the "x" box on her command window and took herself out of the alien gateway.

If she could set up an trap, so could he, and the stakes were a lot higher for her if she was caught snooping inside someone else's network. If Mark had done it, well.. he was her security chief. But to have the CIO of ILS get caught red handed breaking in?

No. Much as her fingertips itched to do it, that open router with a pre-set enable password.. that was just too easy. While there was always a chance someone really was that stupid, Dar found herself growing just that much over the conservative line.

"Guess I'm really not that hotshot punk anymore." Dar announced to the blinking routers, which did not change their placid LED flashing for her. "Ah well." She sighed.

Then she sat back and pulled her bag over, taking a swig of her drink and pulling an apple out. She set it on her lap and pulled out her pocket knife, slicing the apple in half. With one eye on the monitors, she pulled out a tube of peanut butter and squeezed a blob onto the apple, taking a bite of it as she freed her other hand to type in a command.

Now. She could find out more about the hacker. She had a spoofed IP he'd been using, but the router she'd dropped into had a real one, and finding out who owned that was a relatively…

Dar blinked at the screen. A square was blinking in the center of her screen, with a simple, red heart in the middle of it, beating slightly.

Then a message appeared. *Okay, so it's not Gopher Dar, but it gets my thoughts across, right?*

Dar clicked on it, and answered back. *Definitely. Where are you?*

In my meeting. We're getting a price list together.

Dar watched her trace finish, then exhaled, her eyes narrowing. *Well, Telegenics just tried to send a hacker in here.*

Big surprise. Kerry's snort could almost be heard.

No, it wasn't, but it was definitely a two edged attack, Dar realized. If they were coming after her and, as she suspected, trying to lure her into a trap – what would happen if they realized she'd already laid one for them?

Hey, Dar?

Dar took another bite of her apple, and typed a one handed reply. *Yeah?*

Mark says his alert monitor is going bonkers and no one can get into the master router. You got any ideas what's up?

Oops. *Tell him to relax. I'm doing something.* Dar put the apple down and rattled the keys, resetting the router security and giving access back to the automated systems. *Better?*

A few seconds of silence, then… *He's not hyperventilating anymore. Must be. Can you take a break and come up just to hear the recap?*

Dar drained her YooHoo, looking thoughtfully at the question. *Yeah, Be right up.*

She needed to think about what she'd just seen, anyway.

* * *

"What did you think?" Kerry asked, as she and Dar walked down the hallway towards her office.

Dar glanced at her. "About your presentation skills, the plan, or how cute you look in that outfit?" She asked, with a rakish grin.

“What..” Kerry sighed in mock exasperation. “Am I going to do with you?” She shook her head, giving a wave to Mayte. “Get in here.” She added, pulling the door open and standing back to let Dar pass.

“Or?” Dar sauntered by, and waited for Kerry to close the door. “You going to spank me? Should have done it out in the hallway. That’d keep the rumor mill going for weeks.” She walked over to the small couch in the office and sat down, letting her elbows rest on her knees.

“You’re such a little devil sometimes.” Kerry walked over and sat down next to her, preferring the couch’s soft confines to her lonely desk chair. “And no, I meant the plan. I already know what you think about those other two things.” She nudged Dar’s shoulder.

Dar wiped a bit of router room dust off her fingertips. “I like it.”

Kerry waited. Nothing else followed. “And?”

“And?” Dar reached down and retied the shoelace on her boot. “I think you’ve come up with a solid proposal – the one question is gonna be the cost.”

“Well, sure.” Kerry agreed. “But you think the way it’s laid out, that’ll work?”

Dar leaned back and crossed her arms, giving her partner a sideways look. “Can I ask something?”

Kerry also sat back. “Sure.”

“You’ve done, easy, four dozen accounts without my help.” Dar said. “So why do you think you need it on this one?”

Hm. Kerry crossed her own arms and stared thoughtfully at the carpet, giving the question it’s due deliberation. Finally she just shrugged. “I don’t know.” The admission surprised her, possibly more than it did Dar. “Maybe because I know how important this is.”

“They’re all important.” Dar unfolded her arms and laid her right one over Kerry’s shoulders. “Just run with it, Ker. Don’t’ worry about what I think. Just do what you think’s right.”

Kerry’s index finger traced a light pattern on the denim covering Dar’s thigh. “Easy to say, harder to accomplish.” She smiled briefly. “So, anyway.. what were you doing in the closet?”

“I’ve never been in the closet.” Dar deadpanned, accepting the change of subject. “But I’m glad you asked. C'mere.” She got up and lead Kerry over to her desk, sliding into the

chair and giving Kerry's trackball a roll. "Maybe I'm nuts. But I think I got out of a trap by the skin of my teeth."

"You?" Kerry leaned on the desk next to her. "Trap set by who?"

Dar looked at her, and smiled grimly. "Someone who'd love to embarrass the hell out of us and plaster it all over the trade press. Look." She called up the screen on her own laptop, which she'd locked in the closet. It still had the screen captures she'd done on it, and her notes.

Kerry bent close, leaning on her elbows as she read, her lips moving slightly. She was aware of Dar's close presence, her breath warming the skin on the outside of Kerry's arm. "Wait, you got right in there?" She said. "Into that router? Holy pooters!"

"Uh huh." Dar rumbled softly.

"Wow. Bet you wanted to go right in there and smack em." Kerry mused. "I might have. How did you guess it was a trap? What if it wasn't? What if they're really that stupid?"

"Ker."

A sigh. "Yeah, I know. I just can't help it." Kerry flicked her fingernail against the monitor. "I can't even believe I'm suggesting that. I think my business ethics got chucked in the dumpster when it comes to those two erfing bitches." She gazed down at her desktop. "Maybe that's why I'm all off balance on this thing, Dar."

"Mm." Dar glanced up as Kerry's intercom went off.

"Kerry?" Mayte's voice broke in. "I have that Michelle Graver person on line one." Though polite, Mayte's voice had a definite tinge of disapproval to it, much like the one her mother's had when necessary.

"Am I in?" Kerry swiveled around and laid down flat on her back, her legs dangling off the edge of her desk. "I have to ponder that for a minute. Tell Michelle to hold on, hm?" She turned her head and gazed at Dar.

"Sure." Mayte clicked off.

"Is it unprofessional of me to just want to keep her waiting for the hell of it?"

"No." Dar rested her elbows on the desk and leaned forward, tilting her head and gently exploring Kerry's lips with her own. "On the other hand.." She kissed her again, this time for a longer period. "Making her wait for this is highly unprofessional."

“Oh.” Kerry folded her hands over her stomach and let her eyes flutter closed briefly, as Dar continued her extremely unprofessional behavior. “If someone walks in right now, I think we’d both deserve to be fired.” She finally said, with a small sigh.

“Probably.” Dar agreed. “But I’d have to fly Alastair in to fire us, and by the time he got here, something would break and he’d just be asking us to come back.”

Kerry’s eyes twinkled, but she made a face as she reached across to hit the intercom. “Okay, put her through, Mayte.”

“Okay.” Mayte responded. “But are you sure? I think the music is very enjoyable for her.”

Dar chuckled softly. “Mayte, you’re sounding more and more like your mother every day.” She added, watching Kerry’s eyes crinkle at the corners as she grinned.

“Thank you.” Mayte said. “Mama will like that you said that, I am sure.”

“Go ahead and connect her, Mayte.” Kerry said. “I wouldn’t condemn even Michelle to much more Muzak regurgitated Nine Inch Nails.”

Mayte clicked off, then after a second, a soft buzz replaced her. Kerry reached over an hit the answer button. “Operations, Stuart.” She addressed the ceiling.

“Hello, Kerry.” Michelle’s voice was a mixture of cordiality and veiled frustration. “Sorry to disturb you.”

Dar reached over and traced the edge of Kerry’s ear, watching it turn pink after a few seconds.

“Ah, no problem. What can I do for you?” Kerry gamely replied. “Or are you just calling to insult me a little more? It’s been a slow morning.” She ignored the tiny mewing sounds from very close to her ear.

An audible sigh came through the phone. “Actually, I’m calling you to eat crow, which I know you’ll enjoy, and ask how much you want for your blackmail circuit.”

Kerry wriggled a little on her back, doing a small victory dance. “To be honest, Michelle..”

“Oh yes, I know you’ll be that.”

The mewling had altered, growing deeper and into a low growl. Kerry glanced at her partner, not surprised to see the pale blue eyes narrowed into slits. Experimentally, she reached over and touched Dar’s lip, lifting it to inspect a well formed canine tooth just underneath.

Dar cocked an eyebrow at her, and stopped growling.

“Pass through cost plus five percent.” Kerry said. “Take it or leave it.” She drew a line up the center of Dar’s nose, watching her eyes cross as she tried to follow it, and smiled as she imagined she could hear Michelle’s teeth grinding together on the other end of the phone.

“Fine.” Michelle answered, clipping the word short. “What do you need to get it done?”

“A check and a circuit terminus.” Kerry replied. “Just have someone see Mark Polenti at our office in Pier 10 tomorrow, he’ll take care of it.”

“Fine.” Michelle said again. “Thanks. Bye.”

The line went dead. Kerry exhaled. “Well, boss – we made almost four percent profit on that insurance policy.. not bad, huh?”

“Brilliant.” Dar blew in her ear. “So brilliant, I’m going to leave this other little problem in your hands… because when I backed out of that router because I didn’t want the CIO of ILS to be caught hacking – I remembered I put an industrial spy in Telegenic’s camp. What happens if that comes out?”

Kerry eased herself upright, her back not particularly appreciating the hard surface of her desk. It gave her time to think about Dar’s question, and consider the impact of it. “Well.” She hopped off the desk and walked around in front of it. “How would it come out? It’s not like he’s not there, just doing a job, right?”

“Mm.”

“Shari never met him, I guess, or she’d be a long squashed mango on I-95 by now.” Kerry went on. “So unless he..”

“Hears them talking about us.” Dar got up and ran a hand through her hair. “and behaves like he usually does, we’re safe. Right?”

“Oh boy.”

Dar headed for the back door to the hall that connected their offices. “Worry about it when it happens.” She waved a hand at Kerry. “Meanwhile, I’m going to see if I can’t find a way to turn the tables on our little bucket of chum.”

Kerry sat down in her chair, the leather holding a hint of Dar’s scent which surrounded her as she leaned back. What would really happen, she wondered, if Andy was found out? Would it be viewed as a scandalous criminal act, or just a smart piece of business? It wasn’t as if , as she’d said to Dar, that Andrew had gotten the job on false pretenses.

He was qualified and more to do what they were paying him for. If he did the work, then what could anyone say, really?

Kerry felt the irony, though. She knew this was something her father would have done in a bare instant, and in fact, he'd readily approve of her tactics.

She grimaced.

That sure wasn't a nice feeling. Yet – Andrew hadn't seemed to object to the task either. He'd agreed readily and seemed to think it was a good idea.

So where was the 'right' in all this? Kerry opened her drawer and removed a piece of dried apricot from the bag there, putting it into her mouth and chewing it slowly. Was there any right?

Hm.

* * *

Kerry edged through the construction zone in the middle of the ship, and looked around. She spotted ILS's senior electrical contractor near the other end of the space, and hastened towards where he was standing, surrounded by ship staff. "Jack."

The man turned and saw her. "Ah. Ms. Stuart. Glad you're here." He waited for her to join him. "We seem to have a problem here."

Only here? Kerry allowed her public, diplomatic cloak to settle over her shoulders. "What seems to be the issue, guys?"

"Are you in charge of all this?" One of the men standing around asked her. "I am hearing this person say he needs to turn off power to several decks of the ship."

Kerry eyed him thoughtfully. "Well, sure." She said. "He has to do that to put in more power, and the cabling we need for the new computer systems. He can't do that with the power on."

"What are we supposed to do?" The man asked. "We live here. Would you like to be in this damn heat with no power?"

"I was, just a little while ago, matter of fact." Kerry said. "No, it's not pleasant. But it's the only way we can get the job done, so what do you think we're supposed to do? I'm sure Jack will work with you and shut down a section at a time, not all the decks and once." She turned. "Right?"

Jack hesitated, then nodded. "Right."

“But we’ve got jobs to do too.” The man continued arguing. “I have people to administer, services to fulfill.. I can’t be without power.”

“We can move you to someplace that has it.” Jack said.

“Certainly not! I have far too many important things in my office!” The man stated flatly.

Kerry folded her arms over her chest. “Okay.” She looked him right in the eye. “I understand.”

“Good.” The man smiled.

“Just give me your name, so I can go back to Mr. Quest, and tell him why we can’t proceed with his project.” Kerry smiled back at him. “I’m sure he’ll understand, too.”

The man blinked in shock, then stiffened. “I didn’t say you couldn’t proceed!”

“Sure you did. You said you can’t be without power. We have to turn the power off to go forward. So if you can’t be without power, and you won’t move to where power is, then we can’t go forward.”

The rest of the staff seemed content to watch, their eyes shifting between the man, and Kerry as though watching an exciting ping pong match. They all seemed to be deferring to the argumentative man, whose bearing indicated he was used to obedience and authority.

That was all right. So was Kerry, but in a different way. “So, can I have your name?” She asked gently. “Because Jack and I both have other things we could be doing if we’re not going to be able to start up here.”

“Right you are, ma’am.” Jack stuck his thumbs into his jeans pockets, and rocked on the heels of his work boots. “Plenty of projects lined up.”

“Unless maybe we could work something out with you – maybe we could have our guys move your stuff when we needed to.” Kerry read the man’s body language and decided giving him an out was a good idea. “We’d be glad to do that.”

Jack scowled.

The man snorted, and lifted a hand. “Fine.” He relented. “If you have to, you have to. But you must come to me before you turn off anything, so I can make sure nothing gets disrupted.”

“Sure.” Kerry said. “Jack, can you assign someone from your office to liase with…” She looked at the man questioningly.

“Pieter Oshousen.” The man supplied. “Staff Captain.” He gave them all a nod, then turned and walked off, his back stiff.

“Right.” Kerry watched as the rest of the staff dispersed also, their attitudes half amused and half disgruntled. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun.” She added, once they were gone. “It’s like being in a inhabited construction zone.”

“Got that right.” Jack sighed, scratching his head. “Where in the hell do we start? Every time I try to put a plan together, I keep running into these roadblocks.”

Kerry shook her head. “Yeah, I know. C’mon, I think I found us something we can use for a central core, since my first choice just isn’t going to fly.” She lead the way to the stairwell, and started down. “They don’t like this idea either, but it takes space away from passengers not crew, so at least they won’t stand in our way, and the overall ship management approved it.”

Jack snorted. “Figures.” He followed Kerry down the steps, and then though a series of doorways until she stopped in front of one. She pushed it open, and stood back, pointing inside. With a doubtful look, he stepped past her and entered the space. “Ah.”

Kerry entered after them. “Yeah.”

Jack turned around. “This is a cabin.”

“It is. But it’s an inside one, and they’ve actually given me two of them.” Kerry agreed. “This one, and the one next to it, which is through this connecting door.” She shoved the inner door open and looked through.

Both cabins had seen far, far better days. The carpet was an indiscriminate color, perhaps it had once been aqua, and the walls had peeling laminate of an equally grayish hue. There were no beds, but on one wall, a pull down bunk was clamped.

It smelled horrible.

“We’ll have to strip both rooms, but I think it’s workable, and this wall..” Kerry walked over and slapped the inner partition, near the bunk. “Backs onto the elevator shaft and all the conduit trackways.”

Jack looked measurably happier. “Eh? Do they? Now that’s workable.” He walked over to inspect the wall, then reached up to push at the ceiling. It gave under his touch, the panel lifting up and showering them both with debris best left undescribed. “Uh.. sorry.”

Kerry plucked her shirt out, scattering the grunk, and ran her fingers through her hair to send more flying. “No problem.” She responded. “Anything up there?”

Her companion flipped a flashlight up and peered into the space. “Lucked out.” He grunted. “Not a firewall. This is an easy punch.” He turned his head. “Good pick, ma’am. We can work with this.”

“Thanks. Now.” Kerry put her hands on her hips. “You can start laying cable in, while I get a general contractor in here to make this space livable. I can’t even put a rack in here until we put down a substrate and extra AC.”

“Yup.” The electrical contractor nodded. “I’ll get my fiber guy in here, and the cat five people. You pick where you want the access closets, or is that a fight too?”

Kerry sighed. “What do you think?”

“Need to know that, fore I can have the fiber feller quote the job.” Jack sounded apologetic. “I was going around the decks before you got here.. I thought I saw some electrical closets up there you could mount a switch or two in, and they can’t use em for storage.”

“Really? Show me.” Kerry followed him out the open door and down the hallway. Could she get that lucky? Electrical closets already had ventilation, and naturally they had power – could she get away with not having to fight the already hostile staff for yet more precious space?

They started up the forward stairs, wincing a little as their shoes stuck to the treads. Workmen dressed in ship jumpsuits brushed by them going the other direction without giving them a second glance, but just seeing them made Kerry suddenly wonder about something.

Andrew was in Shari and Michelle’s ship. What if they’d put someone in hers? How would she tell? She looked around at the workmen, all of whom looked more or less alike, and most seeming to look right through her in return. Well, she could request all their employment details and have checks run, but…

“Here.” Jack lead her off one of the stair landings into a side corridor, with cabins on either side. He found one unmarked door and yanked it open, to reveal a small, ill lit closet with a large breaker box and other electrical piping inside.

It was small and dirty, but Kerry pulled out a tape measure and found a relatively clear spot on one wall of the closet. “We can squeeze a half rack in here.” She said. “How many of these are there?”

“Two on each deck.”

Kerry snapped the tape measure shut. “Sold.” She tucked the tool away. “Put an extra one percent on your estimate, Jack. You solved a huge problem for me. To retrofit space for these things would have cost me a bundle.”

A big smile crossed the contractor's face. "Y'know, that's what I love about dealing with you. I never feel like it's always one of us taking, one giving, or turn around." He held a hand out. "Makes my life easier too – I've already got a lot of conduit up there I can use."

Kerry solemnly shook his hand. "Okay. Give me an eight strand fiber core to each closet, terminating in our snazzy cabin digs, and cat five runs to all the places on the blueprints. When can I expect a quote?"

Jack chuckled, as they went back down the hallway. "Tomorrow, maybe. Hey, one thing though – this electrical mostly isn't up to code. Not your gig, but the stuff I have to put in will be. What about the rest?"

Good question. She wondered if that had been part of Quest's plan, since the construction would have to pass local inspection at some point. "I don't know.. how about I put you together with their admin people. Maybe they'll let you quote it, if they don't have a contractor already."

"I'd appreciate that." He grinned at her.

Yeah, bet you would. Kerry muffled a smile. She liked Jack but she knew he knew where his best interests lay. However, it certainly wouldn't hurt her to have him get more business, and maybe he'd agree to adjust his costs if he could get a bigger volume.

Business was like that. You did a favor, sometimes you got a favor. Sometimes you didn't, but she'd learned that despite what Dar often said and did, you really could get more with honey than vinegar. "Okay, I'm off to go call Roberto. See you later, Jack." She waved at the contractor as they returned to the main deck.

"Oh, Ms. Stuart."

Kerry stopped, and turned as she saw the chief purser headed her way. In contrast to the hostility the day before, the woman now seemed anxious to be polite to her. Hm. Kerry waited for her to catch up and wondered if her fencing with the staff captain had gotten around. "Hi."

"Hi." The woman smiled at her. "Listen. I just wanted to apologize about yesterday. I know you're just here to get a job done, and I was totally out of line going off like that."

Uh huh. "No problem." Kerry replied. "I really do understand how strange it must be for you to have us come in here and just start doing things – we really don't know much about how you run everything." She shifted her body language, taking a more casual stance. "And now that I've been around the ship, I can see how tight everything is."

The woman relaxed into a bigger smile. “Wow, I’m glad you understand. I hear you found another spot for your stuff? Is it going to be okay?” She edged around a little. “Listen, we’ve got some coffee over in the mess, can I get you a cup?”

Well, when it came to gift horses, the heads were definitely better than the tails. “Sure.” Kerry agreed, allowing herself to be lead on by her new friend. “Maybe you can fill me in on how things work here, you know? So we can all get along better.”

“Ah. Glad to.” Drucilla seemed far more confident. “You just stick with me.”

Uh huh. Kerry produced a grin. Let’s see where this goes, because sometimes you just never know.

* * *

The condo was very quiet as Dar slipped inside, too quiet, until Chino came sliding out of the bedroom, barking a greeting at her. “Hey girl.” She set her briefcase down and knelt to greet the dog, ending up sitting on the floor with Chino climbing all over her. “Hey, hey hey..”

“Growf.”

“Hang on.” Dar managed to get to her feet and headed for the back door, followed by an ecstatically prancing Labrador. Chino stopped halfway, though, and looked back over her shoulder as though missing something.

“Yeah, I know. It’s just me.” Dar told her, opening the back door to the small garden. “Kerry’s not here.” She watched the dog trot outside, whisking through the evening sun still splashing through the trees. Kerry was at the ship, working on her project.

Dar had almost gone there too, but she stopped herself with a stern reminder that she’d turned the damned thing over to Kerry, and she needed to butt out already. So instead, she’d just gone home.

And here she was. Dar leaned against the door jam and surveyed the quiet kitchen. Usually she and Kerry came home together, but occasionally Kerry left before she did, and whenever she did, Dar always came home to something nice like dinner, or a waiting hot tub or..

But she had no idea when Kerry was coming back. A note sent earlier had gone unanswered, and so now Dar was at a bit of a loss. She removed her PDA and scribbled a second note, sending it on it’s way, before she turned and headed off towards the bedroom.

Inside, she paused a moment, tugging her shirt from her waistband and unbuttoning it before sitting down briefly to remove her boots. Then she removed the shirt and then her jeans, folding them both neatly and putting them on the dresser.

Chino bounded back in and came over to her, wriggling against her knees happily. Dar played with her for a few minutes, then she got up and retrieved a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, slipping into them before she went back out into the living room.

She could watch television. Dar studied the blank screen, then moved past it. She could go for a swim, or a walk with Chino, or go to the gym.

Or sit in the hot tub.

She went to the kitchen and closed the back door. She could do some work, or play with her models. With a sigh, Dar went to the refrigerator and got some milk, leaning against the counter to sip it as she considered all of her various options.

None of them really appealed to her, so she went into the living room and sat down at the dining room table, sorting through the basket of mail placed there by the island staff.

No bills, because they handled all theirs electronically. A few bits of junk mail, mostly related to software upgrades or offers of new computer hardware. Dar tossed all these to one side and pulled over a diving magazine which spurred a bit more interest.

She checked her PDA after a few minutes, finding it still silent, and then gave up on the mail. “Hell with it.” Dar tossed the magazine from her and got up. “Okay, Chino.. wanna come to the gym with me? You can help me lift weights, okay?”

“Gruff.”

“Okay.” Dar went and put on her sneakers, then headed for the back door, pausing only to scribble a note on the small white board just to one side of the refrigerator. She’d spend an hour or so at the gym, then see if Kerry was home and stop at the club for dinner for them on her way back.

Satisfied with her plan, Dar headed off down the path to the gym, with Chino trotting along after her. With the sun having set, the heat was dissipating and the breeze off the ocean was almost comfortable. She watched as Chino retrieved a tennis ball from somewhere and raced back to her with it. “Gimme that.”

She threw the slimy ball across the beach, and kept walking as Chino chased it down. Several tosses later, they were at the entrance to the gym, and Dar cheerfully ignored the glares from two other residents as she held the door open for Chino to trot past.

They’d had a problem with that since they’d started bringing the Labrador to the gym with them. At first, Dar had been delivered with six or seven letters of objection from the

condo association over her practice, then she'd even been served with an official summons from the Island's legal office over it.

Unfortunately for all of them, she had Aunt May's original copy of the bylaws, and no where in any of them did it say you could not bring dogs into the gym. It hadn't made her popular with a few people, but Chino was well behaved, and she'd won over most of the residents after a while. "C'mon, Chi."

Unlike Dar herself, apparently. She gave the other two residents a charming smile, then went inside the inner door that lead to the dressing rooms. Inside, she went to her assigned locker and opened it, removing a towel and a pair of weighted gloves, which she slipped over her hands and fastened.

They weren't that heavy, only two pounds each, but she found they gave just that little extra bit of punch to her workouts and she'd noticed a bit more definition appearing in the muscles of her upper arms from using them.

Or, well, she hadn't exactly noticed that. Dar went over to the weight bench and settled herself on it. Kerry had noticed, and commented on it in the shower the other day. Then, she'd just laughed, but now she had to sit here and acknowledge just how much she liked having Kerry notice things like that.

Total ego. Dar did a quick couple of sets with a relatively light barbell just to warm up. Total ego, and on the fringes a haunting insecurity she tried very hard to pretend didn't exist. She liked Kerry paying attention to her, and probably that was why she felt so out of sorts, having two messages ignored so far today.

Stupid, really. Dar got up and moved to a leg press station, sliding a pin into place and waiting for her body to settle into position before she started the exercise. Chino stood up and licked her arm, sliding up and down as she tried to keep her balance. "Chi, down." Dar muffled a chuckle. "Lie down."

Reluctantly, the dog obeyed, seating herself on the rubberized floor at Dar's side.

Kerry was probably busy doing what it was ILS paid her for, taking care of details, and putting her plan into effect with her typical detail oriented style. While it never matched her own, Dar appreciated her partner's very disciplined operating mode.

It matched her usual schedule in the gym. While Dar tended to wander from machine to machine, using whichever one struck her fancy at the moment, Kerry always followed one or two or three routines, studiously using all the machines in it until she either finished or exhausted herself.

Dar kept the image of her partner in her mind as she got up off the leg press and switched to an abdominal machine, laying flat on her back and taking hold of the handles before

she started her sit ups. She enjoyed the exercise, though this one was a little harder for her than it was for Kerry due to her longer torso.

For a while after they'd gotten together, Dar had strongly suspected that Kerry was doing gym work more to fit in with her lifestyle than because she really enjoyed it and it had made her feel a touch guilty even though she'd called Kerry on it more than once.

After all, Kerry had been forced into doing things she didn't really want to do for so long, was it fair that she escape from her family life only to feel obligated to change again to meet what she felt were Dar's expectations?

Except they really weren't her expectations. Dar didn't honestly care if Kerry worked out or not and she'd tried really hard to convince her of that until Kerry finally just told her she really liked it. Or, actually, she didn't fanatically enjoy it, but she very much liked the results so she was willing to put the work in to get them.

Dar paused to add a little more weight to the machine's resistance and continued her sets. That had finally made sense to Dar, at least, since taking control over her looks had been a big part of Kerry shrugging off her past.

Of course, now it meant that for the first time in a long time, *she* was concerned about what her body looked like, but it seemed a small enough price to pay for having found the most amazing love of her life.

Probably, though, Dar almost chuckled at herself, Kerry would tell her she didn't care what Dar looked like just as insistently as Dar had told her. Both of them probably wondered if they both really meant it, and neither wanted to find out for sure.

So her life was now complicated. Dar exhaled, and let her eyes close, her thoughts wandering elsewhere as her body went through the motions. But it was a nice kind of complication and she had no desire to get rid of it so hell with it all anyway.

Instead, she imagined herself underwater, in the peaceful blue of a dive doing lazy somersaults as Kerry floated nearby taking pictures of sea urchins. She loved watching Kerry take pictures because she'd get herself into the nuttiest positions doing it, usually standing on her head to get closer and tight focus on the tiny creatures.

Her hair would float around her head in a halo and she'd cross her ankles, her fins fluttering lightly to keep herself in position. Dar would sometimes get herself horizontal in the water and rest her chin on her clasped wrists, just hanging there and watching the show.

She could almost hear the bubbles of her own breathing.

So a warm, solid weight settling over her lower body nearly scared the shorts off her until she managed to get her eyes open and her hands untangled from the machine and found

Kerry sitting on top of her dressed out for the gym and looking amused. “Bah!” She yelped in surprise, dropping flat on her back again.

“Hi there.” Green eyes twinkled. “You didn’t wait for me, you punk!”

Dar blinked, trying to get her tongue to work properly after having bitten it. “Abu.” She cleared her throat. “Wait for you when? I had no idea you were coming home this fast.” She protested. “I thought you’d be later at the port.” Jerked so quickly out of her peaceful day dream, her body now didn’t know whether to jump or completely relax and she felt like hiccupping.

“I answered your last note.” Kerry replied. “I didn’t realize when I was in the bowels of the ship my signal was cut off. I got topside and saw I had messages from you.” She wiggled the fingers she had laying on Dar’s stomach, giving her a friendly scratch. “So I answered them right there on the gangway, and annoyed the heckies out of some really big guys trying to move wood onboard.”

“Oh.” Now that Kerry was here, and more than paying attention to her, Dar felt a little abashed. “No problem. I figured you got tied up in details. Thought I’d come over here for a while then grab us some dinner.” She looked around. “My PDA’s in the locker.”

“Details.” Kerry eased herself up and off her living bench. “Oh, my god did I get details. I got introduced into the world of people who live on ships.” She paused and adjusted one of her wristbands. “Please, please don’t tell me the Navy is like this, because if it is, I can’t believe your dad survived in it as long as he did.”

“Eh.” Dar watched as her partner went to the first machine, the bicep curl and sat down in it, carefully adjusting the weight stack before she fit her hands to the handles and began her exercise. “People. Politics. Can’t have one with out the other. You know that.”

“Hm.” Kerry grunted a little with the effort of bringing the weighted bar up. “More I see people, more I love Chino.”

“Gruff.” Chino trotted over and licked her knee.

Dar got up and decided she’d had enough of the crunches. She went over to the pull down machine and sat under the bar, sticking the pin into a fairly significant amount of iron plates. Fitting her hands over the handles of the bar, she carefully pulled it downward, wedging her knees under the supports as she tested out how her shoulder was feeling about the weight.

So far so good. Dar flexed her arms slowly and brought the bar down, glad the twinging ache had finally faded from her injury. It had taken a long time, though Kerry had probably been right in telling her it would have been shorter if she’d done the physical therapy she’d been told to.

“How’s that feel?” Kerry asked.

“Good.” Dar straightened her arms and let the weight up. She pulled it down again, a little faster this time.

“You look great when you sweat.”

Dar opened one eye and peered at the tricep machine. Kerry winked at her, and stuck her tongue out. “Everything going alright at the pier?”

“Yeah, it’s coming together.” Kerry straightened her arms out, forcing the machine lever down. “You find the hacker?”

Dar grunted, and released a little snort. “No, but if he comes back, he’ll have a surprise waiting.” She said. “But I spent some time in our gateways today and I gotta admit, Ker. I’m a little worried.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Kerry sighed. “Well, to be honest, I’m a little worried about how I’m going to pull off this project competitively, so we’re even.”

They were both silent for a few minutes, concentrating on their respective exercises. Finally, Dar let her bar up and sighed. “Know what I think?”

“What?”

“Ice cream.” Dar got up from her bench and picked her towel up, extending a hand towards Kerry. “We can finish this later.”

Kerry got up and took her hand without hesitation. “You’re on. Let’s go.” She followed Dar out the door, not giving the room a single backward glance.

* * *

Ice cream actually turned into dinner out on the beach club’s ocean facing deck. A nice breeze had come up, and it was very comfortable sitting outside with a lightly fluttering hurricane candle on the table and the prospect of dessert yet to come before them.

Kerry let her head rest against one of the roof supports, her eyes lazily taking in the waving palm fronds down the beach. “I don’t know, honey.” She said. “Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise. If you hadn’t issued that challenge, you’d have never found the weaknesses you just told me about.”

“Maybe we.. maybe I should have been looking for them before now.” Dar was also leaning against the wall supports, one long leg slung over the chair arm.

“Dar, you’re the chief information officer of the company. I think a lot of other people, like Mark, should have been looking for this stuff. Not you.” Kerry replied honestly. “It’s ridiculous that you need to be sitting on the floor in some closet trapping hackers, you know?”

A slightly stronger breeze made itself felt, whipping their hair around a little. Some sea grape leaves blew across the tile floor, one of them ending up on Kerry’s foot. She reached down and picked it up, twirling it in her fingers. “Kinda windy.”

Dar leaned to one side and looked out at the sea, spotting whitecaps. One eyebrow hiked up. “Don’t tell me another damn storm snuck up on us.” She checked her PDA, but there were no ominous looking messages on it.

“Mm.” A slightly dreamy smile crossed Kerry’s face. “Oh, man, I’d love it if it did.”

That made Dar smile back, a frank grin of appreciation that lightened her entire face. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was.” Kerry impulsively reached across the table and fit her hand into Dar’s. “Want to go down to the cabin this weekend?”

Without even thinking, Dar nodded agreement. “Yeah.”

“I have a meeting on Friday afternoon. How about we do this…” Kerry’s mind raced over the details, thinking about their dual schedules. “How about we ride together Friday morning, and I get a ride over to the port – then you can pick me up and..vroom.”

“Absolutely.” Dar agreed instantly. “We can stop for dinner on the road somewhere and watch the sunset.”

Kerry glanced at her watch and sighed mournfully. “It’s only Tuesday.”

Dar’s cell went off before she could suggest something crazy like going after dinner. She took it out and checked the caller id. “Uh oh.” She opened it. “Yeah, Mark. What’s up?”

“You in the building, boss?”

Dar glanced around her. “Me? No. I’m home. Why?”

“Shit. Someone’s messing around in here and I thought it was you.. looked like what was going on this afternoon.” The MIS manager cursed. “Okay, thanks.. lemme get back to you. Hey.. you like.. locked that door, right?”

Dar's gaze went inward briefly, as she carefully traced her actions from the afternoon. "Yes." She said briefly. "I went up to a meeting on 14, then came back down and did a few more scans. I left the closet around four. Shouldn't have been any access after that."

"Gotcha. Bye." Mark hung up hastily, cutting off a yell in the background, and the sound of a buzzer going off.

Dar looked at her cell, looked at Kerry, and then they both got up and headed for the condo at a run.

* * *

Dar could hear the beeping of the alerts as she cleared the doorway into her office and put her hands on her desk, vaulting over it to land near her chair on the other side. "Son of a bitch!"

Kerry forced herself to slow down enough to close the door behind them, making sure not to slam it on Chino's tail as the Labrador bounded in after her, tongue lolling out. She hesitated, then grabbed her briefcase from the dining room table where she'd left it, carrying it into Dar's study and taking possession of the couch inside.

As she hit the leather, it started raining, and for a brief second she had a flashback, startling and vivid, of the first time she'd been in the room. But it only lasted that one second, because then she was yanking her laptop out of it's case and opening it, waiting impatiently for the machine to boot up. "What's going on?"

"Fuck if I know." Dar's fingers were nothing but a blur on the keyboard. "Something's loose in the network…Jesus Christ I hope I didn't do something stupid and leave something open today."

"The door?' Kerry was rapidly logging in.

"No.. no, that I know I shut. Something in the router.. I was doing those changes so damn fast.." Dar's brow was knit in a furrow. "When I was talking to you, when Mark was seeing the blocks."

"Oh." Kerry called up her network monitor and keyed it, sitting there for a minute as it started registering and lines began blinking red across the screen. "Holy cow." She looked quickly at Dar, seeing the tension scrawled across her face.

Dar hesitated, her fingertips flexing above the keys, undecided on what to do. She hated not understanding what was happening – far as she could tell random data was flooding the network and she could not find the source of it.

She could shut everything down, and by definition that should stop the flood, but it also would take down everyone and everything using their network including the remote monitoring consoles.

Kerry watched the emotions cross her partner's face, and decided she should do something more productive. She started up her analyzer and grabbed the main switch, opening up the data stream and focusing her attention on what it was showing her.

A lot of garbage. Kerry flipped to her filters and cut off the standard network traffic, keying back to see what was left. "Dar."

"Uh?' Dar looked up from setting accounting parsers in place.

"It's not coming from outside."

"What?" Dar got up and sprawled on the couch arm to peer over Kerry's shoulder.

"It's coming from inside the office." Kerry traced a line with her finger. "Look. Here… I don't know what that is."

Dar blinked slowly, exhaling a little. "Neither do I." She admitted. "Worm? Better tell Mark."

Kerry hit enter on the text message she'd already been composing. "Done… Dar, what would put out that kind of traffic? It's all TCP unicast."

Dar slid back into her seat and continued her scanning, slamming filters into place on interface after interface, attempting to staunch the flow of traffic. "Son of a son of a son of a…"

Kerry got up and peered over her shoulder this time, her machine telling her nothing new other than the traffic was continuing to build. "That must be pretty damn close to the core, Dar… you want me to start shutting down the building floor by floor?"

"Might have to." Dar felt herself starting to sweat. She could imagine the calls beginning to come in to the ops center, and speculated on how long it would take before her phone, and Kerry's, started ringing. "What if it's directly in the core?" She applied another access lists, reviewing the results. "God damn it, where is this thing!!!!"

Kerry slowly backed off, then went to her laptop, acting on a hunch. "What switch is the conference center in, Dar?"

"Conference center? Ten. Why?"

"Let's just say I smell rotten fish." Kerry logged into the switch and checked the top traffic port. One switch, out of twenty seven in the building. What were the odds? "Dar."

Dar scrambled out of her chair and nearly crawled into the seat next to Kerry, her eyes avidly searching the screen. “Bingo. Shut the damn thing off.”

Kerry rapidly disabled the port, as Dar jumped up onto her desk and swung the monitor towards her, watching the read-outs in tense silence. The signals jumped for a moment more, then slowly settled down to a more even keel.

Dar slapped the desk, and turned her head towards Kerry. “Talk to me.”

“Okay.” Kerry felt her heart rate slow down, though her fingers were still shaking a little. “Inside the office.”

“Yeah.”

“Security audit just completely two weeks ago, and it was clean. No new hires since then.”

“Right.”

Kerry got up and went over to sit in Dar’s chair, folding her hands together on the desk. “I think this is my fault.” She paused, then looked right up into Dar’s eyes. “Because I’m the jerk who had four competitors sitting in our conference center with laptops and gear, and didn’t ask for a security scan afterward.”

Dar’s face remained absolutely still for a very long instant. Then she slowly released her breath, her shoulders relaxing as she leaned on one elbow. “Quest’s meeting.”

Kerry nodded.

“There was a lot going on then, Kerry.”

“Don’t make excuses for me.” The blond woman replied. “There is no excuse for that, Dar, and we both know it.” She watched her partner’s expression carefully, a little surprised to see the strong planes relax, and a faint, almost sheepish smile cross her lips. “Don’t we?”

Dar traced a random pattern on her desk surface with her finger. “I’d like to agree with you.” She finally said, in a quiet voice. “Except that I’m finding it hard to forget what you were being distracted by the most.”

Mm. Kerry nibbled the inside of her lip. “Well.”

Dar’s cell phone rang. She picked it up and opened it. “Yeah?”

"Did you do that? You stopped it? What was it? Where is it? What 'd you do??" Mark's words spilled out so fast and so loud Dar almost dropped her phone. "C'mon, Boss! Don't tell me it just stopped, please???"

Without answering, Dar just handed the phone over to Kerry. "Have him find whatever it is, and secure it. We'll do an analysis tomorrow."

Kerry took the phone as she watched Dar get up and wander out of the study into the living room. "Hi, Mark." She finally sighed. "I.. um.. found the problem. It's in the number ten switch, blade six, port thirty."

Rattling keys. "It's disabled!"

"Well, yes."

"That's the big conference room. I'll get some techs down there. What ya think –the projector system go nuts again?" Mark's voice sounded utterly relieved. "Son of a hoota… that scared the crap out of me. I thought we were getting slammed."

"We were." Kerry hardly knew how to feel inside. "I think we might have gotten something planted on us during that meeting we had here in the blackout. Remember?"

Silence. "Oh, man!" Mark nearly howled. "I had that on my schedule… I had a damn sticky note here to check… oh, crap. Crap. I'll go check it myself. Crap. Sorry, Kerry."

"S'allright."

"Call you right back." Mark hung up the line, still obviously very upset.

Kerry folded the phone shut and sat there for a moment. She heard a sound and looked up to see Dar standing in the doorway, leaning against one edge of it in almost the same pose she'd seen her in the very first time they'd met. "Did you ever think we'd come to a point where we both needed to quit?" She asked.

Dar pushed off the doorjamb and came over, flopping down in the couch and patting the seat next to her. Kerry got up and settled onto the cool leather, hitching one leg up over Dar's left knee. "You thought it was your fault, I thought it was my fault, Mark thinks it's his fault… the hell with it, Dar. Let's just all go open a taco stand down on Card Sound road."

"You like tacos?"

Kerry leaned against her partner. "Not particularly. I like fajitas better but taco stand sounded easier and more fun."

"Would we have to get a Chihuahua?"

“No, but Chino would have to wear a hat.” Kerry appreciated the quiet humor very much. She was upset at herself, but like Dar she was finding it very hard to regret her choices and so indulging in their light banter at least distracted her mind. “You think she’d like wearing a hat?”

“Sure.” Dar leaned closer and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t beat yourself up, Ker.”

Kerry sighed.

“Did I ever tell you about how I found out about the outage the night you ended up coming over and helping me fix it?”

More banter. Kerry gave in and snuggled up. “The night we kissed?”

“Uh huh.”

“Mm.. only thing I remember about that whole thing is opening the door, seeing you in your pajamas, and forgetting what my name was.”

Dar chuckled softly. “Well, the ops center called me, and told me the whole damn network was down. You know what I said to them?”

“What?”

“No problem, guys. Just go on home.”

“Oh, you did not.” Kerry started laughing, despite herself. “C’mon, Dar. I know you’re trying to make me feel better, but really.”

“Really.” Dar went nose to nose with her. “I told them to go home, no sense in them sticking around if everything was down, right? Made sense to me at the time.”

“Really?" Kerry tried to imagine that, and just started laughing again. “Oh my god.”

Dar gave her a hug. “Let’s wait to see what Mark finds, and instead of beating ourselves up, figure out how we’re gonna get even.”

Would they? Kerry wondered seriously if they should. Oh well. Tomorrow’d be yet another day.

PART 16

HEY UGLY!"

Andrew looked up from the crate he was methodically ripping apart, correctly assuming the voice was addressing him. "Yeap?"

The supervisor hurried over to him. "Hey listen… remember that thing you told me about those invoices? You got any more tricks like that?"

Andrew leaned on his crate and considered the man, eyeing him with shrewd thoughtfulness. "Maybe. You got something better for me to do than mess with these here boxes?"

The man chewed his lip. "Well, I could… I'd hate to lose you out here because you're the only guy I got who doesn't bitch all the time, but I could do like a half day here, and half day in the office, how about that?"

"They got coffee inside there?"

The man chuckled. "Sure."

"All right." Andy nodded. "Saw them big trucks coming in this morning."

"No kidding. All that damn high tech crap with ten thousand little pieces and no manifest. C'mon." The supervisor motioned him to follow. "Let's see what we can do so it doesn't become a cluster."

Andrew followed him willingly, leaving behind his crate full of bolts and nuts and emerging from the dockside warehouse into the sun. It was early yet on Wednesday morning, but he was passing glad to get out of the noisy, chaotic building with an opportunity to do something more interesting.

Not that he'd never unpacked boxes. He'd unpacked more boxes than Dar had brain cells but the action had limited opportunity for mental exercise though it did provide plenty of physical work.

They went into the trailer being used as an office. It was small and only barely cooled by an overworked wall air conditioner, and the four men sitting at old, scarred wood desks inside it were sweating as they worked.

"Hey, Brady.. gimme that file." The supervisor held a hand out, and when the tattered manila object was put in it, he promptly turned and gave it to Andy. "There.. see what you can do with that stuff. Most of it's Greek to me. I know carpet, hammers, machine parts.. this stuff's just garbage."

Andy opened the folder and studied the first page. "Wall." He sniffed reflectively. "Mah kid's one of them geek types. I think ah can figger this stuff out."

"Yeah?" The supervisor sounded interested. "He want a job?"

Pale blue eyes looked up over the papers at him. "She's got one already, thanks for askin." Andy moved over to a chair near the side of the trailer, sitting down and putting the folder on his knees. What he had here, he realized after studying the papers for some minutes, was all the stuff he'd heard Dar and Kerry talking about putting in their ship. So it was a sure bet the two people working against his kids had come up with their own list and here it was. "First off." He looked over at the supervisor. "Better make up some copies so I can mark on em."

"Right over there." Brady, the heavyset paymaster pointed at a paneled wall without looking up.

Andrew got up and went around the wall, finding a copy machine there. With a satisfied grunt, he set the stack of papers down on the top sorter, and punched first the number 2, then copy.

The super poked his head around. "Listen, I cleared off the end of the table in there – you can use that to work on, okay?"

"All right."

"Great!" The man disappeared, leaving Andy to stand and watch the copier do it's work. He bounced up and down on his heels a few times, whistling softly under his breath until he heard the door slam open.

“Where the hell is that asshole?” A woman’s voice rasped.

Andy’s eyebrow quirked as he recognized one of the two targets he’d heard the previous day.

“Pardon me?” Brady asked, in a bored voice. “You’ll have to be more specific, lady. There’s a lot of assholes around here.”

“Heh.” Andy chuckled silently. “Ain’t that the damn truth.”

“Don’t give me that.. oh, there you are. Where’s our gear?”

There was a scrape, and a thump as the door to the trailer’s bathroom was closed, and heavy boots crossed the floor. “We’re working on it, ma’am. I got my best guy sorting all the deliveries right now.”

Andy’s eyes twinkled wryly, and he shook his head. “Lord.”

“That doesn’t help me. I need to know what’s here and what’s not.” The voice snapped back. “We don’t have time to waste on your stupidity.”

Andrew took his pile of copied papers and sorted them into two piles. He looked up as the super came around the corner. “Sounds like someone’s got a bee in their buttocks.” He drawled softly.

“Jesus.” The super rolled his eyes. “You think you can get me a list of all this stuff?”

“Yeap.” Andy allowed. “Bout an hour, something like that.”

“Great.” The man ducked back out. “Ma’am, we’ll have something for you in about an hour. We just got the invoices in now.”

“You’d better, or else your company’s going to explain to me why you can’t even keep truck deliveries straight.” The voice faded, then vanished, as the outside door slammed shut.

“What a bitch.” Brady snorted. “Sounds like she needs a good screwing.”

“You can have her. Not my type.” The super also left, closing the door more gently behind him.

Andy went to the small window and looked out it, spotting the stocky form of the bigger woman retreating from the trailer. He watched her disappear into the pier building, then he returned to his task, picking up the stacks of papers and going back into the main room.

The other men in the room eyed him, then went back to their work as he took a seat at the end of a long banquet table. He set the papers down and picked up a pencil lying on the table, examining the first page thoughtfully.

When Dar had taken an interest in technology, he'd made a point of going out and reading up on the stuff she'd decided to make her living from. Most of it wasn't that much different from some things he'd encountered in the Navy, but it had it's own language.

Since he'd retired, he'd taken the opportunity to delve a little deeper into the subject, and he felt he was almost at a point where he could at least have a somewhat all right discussion with his kid about it. So when he looked at the pages and pages of parts, at least the names and descriptions were somewhat familiar to him.

It seemed like they'd been shipped without any mind to what went with what though. Andy scratched his head and frowned. He knew the names, but had to admit that the functions of each of the gizmos were somewhat foggy, and he really had no way of guessing which part went with the next except by actually guessing.

Darn it.

"Wall." With a shake of his head he started sorting out the bits by the maker, figuring at least if he put all the ones from the same place together it was a start.

"That's a mess, yeah?" Brady looked over at him. "What a bunch of maroons shipping that stuff."

"Yeap." Andrew scribbled some notes down. "Pain in mah butt, tell you that. Don't know what them folks was thinking."

Brady got up and looked over his shoulder. "Weren't." He commented briefly. "You got a background in this sort of thing? Thought you were just a loader."

"Done some stuff." Andy answered. "Spent thirty years in the Navy, had to learn something."

"Wow." Brady's attitude altered abruptly. "Really? Were you out on the ships?"

Pale blue eyes peeked up at him. "That is what the Navy does." He replied. "But ah tell ya what, someone be this disorganized on a carrier, they'd be pitched overboard or sent shoreside fastern' you could spit at em."

"Yeah." The paymaster agreed. "They don't seem to know what they're doing, you know? Like everyone's doing their own thing, and nobody's coordinating. Then you get those bitches like that one coming in here and thinking they own the joint."

“Woman did have her an attitude.” Andy nodded. “Ain’t a way to get things done.”

“Yeah.” Brady said again. “Maybe we should stop jumping when she barks. That way she’ll back off.”

“Could be.” The ex seal agreed mildly. “I sure wouldn’t be saluting her, that’s for damn sure.”

Brady wandered off, going over to the other table and leaning over to talk to two of the men sitting there working. Andy peeked over at him, then put his head back down with a smile, continuing his sorting.

* * *

Dar pushed the door to the computer center opened with a stiff armed motion, almost hitting one of the techs on his way out. “Sorry.”

The tech jumped out of the way and stammered an apology of his own, then slunk out past her as she walked on by. Dar went past the MIS command desk and headed for Mark’s office, where she could hear voices already raised in excited conversation. “Hey.”

Mark’s head jerked up as she entered. “Oh.. hey, boss.” He greeted her. “Check this out!’

Dar obligingly circled his desk and focused her attention on the small, silver gray box sitting on top of it. “I’m checking. What is it?”

Mark turned it over, and displayed a circuit board. “Integrated unit. Plugged into our extra port for the projector down there, and get this.” He slid a small panel aside. “Cellular”

Dar peered at it. “No kidding?”

“No shit. “ Mark said. “They dialed in and activated it – sent the worm in over the cell link, then had it refocus out the network port. If Kerry hadn’t found it… Jesus.”

Dar picked up the device and studied it closely. “Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty sophisticated.” Mark’s assistant, the lanky Peter spoke up. “I checked it out on the web last night. That’s like… black bag stuff.”

“Mm.” Dar nodded agreement. “It sure is.” She looked up. “So, tell me why we didn’t catch a rogue MAC on the network?”

Peter stuck his hands in his pockets. Mark cleared his throat.

“Will you excuse us, please/” Dar looked at Peter. “And close the door on your way out.”

The tall man escaped gratefully, shutting the door and leaving them alone in the office.

Mark gave her a look that could easily have been one of Chinos, when caught stealing cookies from the closet. “It’s not an excuse.” He temporized. “But it’s that damn projector.. we’ve had it fixed like six times in the last four weeks.”

“And?”

“So the guy told me last time, he thought it was the MAC blocking that was making it freak out.” Mark admitted.

“So you turned it off.”

“For that port, yeah.” The MIS chief agreed. “It fixed the problem.”

Dar folded her arms, then she walked over to Mark’s office window and looked out. “That’s a breech of our security policy.” She remarked quietly, keeping her eyes focused outward as there was no answer behind her. “Here I have Kerry beating herself up for not asking for a scan, and the fact is the room was left deliberately wide open.”

Mark shifted in his chair, the leather squeaking softly. “You… want my resignation?” He asked, in a somber voice. “It was my screwup, Dar. I took the security off that port, not one of my guys.”

Dar found a small boat to watch, as it skittered across the water. “What I’m more interested in right now is who knew you did it, other than you and the projector tech.”

Mark remained silent for a few moments. “I don’t know, boss. I didn’t tell anyone here.”

Dar turned and leaned against the window. “So – then either someone here just happened to see the change in the switch and got bought… or we have a problem with a vendor, because whoever put that..” She pointed viciously at the device. “Sure knew it.”

Mark relaxed just a trifle. “You think it was one of those Telegenics goons, right?”

Did she? It was tempting to. They were in the room, that was in the room, and no doubt about it, they had a motive. And yet… “That’s more tech than Shari’s capable of, and damn it, I think Michelle’s too ethical for it.”

“Huh.”

"But you never know. Let's start hunting." Dar decided. She headed for the door, stopping as she reached it and turning. "No, I don't want your damn resignation. I screwed up, Kerry screwed up, you screwed up… that's it. We've exhausted our once in a blue moon big time. No more screwups."

She walked out and shut the door behind her, leaving a slightly stunned Mark sitting at his desk in silence. After a moment the door cracked open again and Peter stuck his head warily inside. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Mark finally let his held breath out. "I think so. She's just really pissed." His brow creased. "I think."

"You think?"

"Yeah." Mark rested his chin on his fist. "But I can't really tell who she's more pissed at, the joker who stuck this on the network, or herself."

Peter looked confused, then he slowly withdrew his head and shut the door again, leaving Mark to ponder the question alone.

* * *

"Kerry?" Mayte stuck her head around the corner of the door. "I have a fax for you."

Kerry looked up from her pile of paperwork, one blond eyebrow cocking. "Nifty. I needed more paper on my desk. Bring it over."

Mayte walked into the office and put the thick stack of paper down. "It is from the port, but I do not understand what this is."

Kerry glanced at the cover sheet, and saw a somewhat crude rendition of a seal scrawled on the page. "Ah." She tossed side her current list of ordering and pulled the stack over. "I do, and boy, we sure did nail down which of her folks Dar gets her doodling from." She flipped through the pages, leaning a little closer to study the details. "Ah." She repeated softly. "Interesting."

"Kerry?"

Kerry looked up again. "Sorry, Mayte.. was there something else you needed from me?"

Her assistant fiddled with her hands, then she sat down in Kerry's visitor chair. "Is it all right if I ask you something that is a little personal for me?"

Uh oh. "Sure." Kerry pushed aside the fax and focused her attention. "What's up?"

“Did you… I am sorry, this is very embarrassing, but.. did you know right away when you were liking la jefa?”

Liking? “Um.. well, not really.” Kerry replied very slowly. “If.. I mean, Mayte, are you asking me when I knew I was in love with Dar?”

Mayte turned brick red, even under her already well tanned skin. “Si.” She answered in a whisper.

“Boy, that’s a tough question.” Kerry frowned. “Because we came together in such an odd way.. with work and all. But.. you know, I will tell you this. I felt something in here.. ‘ Kerry touched her chest. “From the very minute I set eyes on her. I just didn’t know what that something was for a while.”

Mayte nodded slowly. “That does make very much sense.”

“Are you.. uh.. “ The blond woman hesitated. “Someone you’re interested in?” She finally asked, a touch awkwardly, then they both looked up as Kerry’s inner office door opened and Dar entered.

The blue eyes flicked to both women, and Dar paused. “Sorry. Didn’t meant to interrupt.” She said, retracing her steps.

“No no.. I was just leaving.” Mayte jumped up and raced out, closing the door quickly behind her.

Dar looked at the door, then looked at Kerry. Both eyebrows shot up.

“Beats me.” Kerry shook her head. “She was just asking me about how to know when you’re in love.”

“Uh oh.” Dar advanced again. “Someone catch her eye? Maria hasn’t said anything to me, at any rate.”

“I got the feeling yes.” Kerry pushed the fax over towards her. “Look what Dad sent… and did you talk to Mark? He gave me a rundown on the thing he found.. holy cow, Dar.”

Dar flipped through the pages, then looked up at Kerry. “What did you tell her?”

Green eyes blinked in confusion. “Huh? What did I tell who?”

“Mayte.”

“About what?”

Dar glanced out the window. “About how you know when you’re in love.” She peeked back at Kerry’s face, with a half abashed grin. “Or did I interrupt that part?”

“Oh.” Kerry leaned back. “Yeah, I think you sorta did.” She pondered, twiddling her thumbs together. “Probably a good thing… I don’t think my going into racing heartbeats and sweating palms would do anything for our professional rapport.”

“Probably not.” Dar’s face eased into a smile.

“Though I did tell her I knew the second I met you.” Kerry smiled back. “I’m not sure why she ran out of here like that, though.” She idly stifled a yawn. “Was it something I said?”

Dar took a seat on the edge of Kerry’s desk, regarding her with a faintly amused expression.

“Stop it.” Kerry punched her in the leg. “Don’t start with that crush stuff again, Dar. The last thing on earth she’d be asking me if she really had a crush was the question she just asked. Right?”

The taller woman shrugged one shoulder.

Kerry made a face. “You really think so?”

“I really do.” Dar replied. “But I don’t think you’ve got much to worry about – she knows you’re taken.”

Now it was Kerry’s eyes that twinkled. “Now that’s the truth.” She leaned her head back against her leather chair. “I’m looking forward to class tonight… you going to be out of your meeting in time?”

Dar had been studying the fax. Now she dropped it lightly onto Kerry’s desk and stood. “Yep.” She indicated the papers. “Not sure what that gets us, besides what they’re paying for the standard gear. Nice of dad to send it though. Wonder why he had them?”

“Yeah.” Kerry twiddled her thumbs. “At least I know we’re paying less than they are. Volume has to count for something, eh?” She pushed the fax with her index finger. “What did you think of that thing Mark found?”

Dar had wandered over to the window and was gazing outside. “Slick.”

Kerry waited, but Dar offered nothing else on the subject. “Okay.” She leaned forward and went back to her mail, recognizing a rebuff when she felt one. “Guess I’ll leave that in your ballpark. Mine’s busy.” She put her head down and concentrated on the screen, trying not to become hyper aware of the figure standing behind her.

She knew Dar was looking at her, though. She could feel it, feel the impact of those blue eyes on the back of her head even before she heard the soft rustle of fabric as Dar turned. She heard the light scuff of her footsteps against the carpet, and against her will, she found herself straining to figure out if they were coming closer or leaving.

"I really don't know what to think." Dar's voice sounded unexpectedly loud in the office.

Kerry continued typing. "Well, I'm sure you'll handle it."

Dar resumed her perch on Kerry's desk, making it very difficult to continue to ignore her. Kerry tried, but after a moment she felt a nudge against her shoulder, and it was either look up, or really escalate her miffed feelings into a fight.

Did she want a fight? Kerry swiveled a little and rested her chin on her fist, gazing up at her partner. No. She never really did want to fight, it was just that sometimes their differences pushed them in opposite directions until they clashed. "Yees?"

"Was I being a bitch?" Dar asked.

Kerry shrugged one shoulder.

"I wasn't trying to be." The dark haired woman admitted. "That thing Mark found's got me confused."

"Why?"

Kerry's phone rang, and she gave it an evil look. She hit her intercom button. "Mayte, can you get that please? I'm in an important meeting right now."

"Si, of course." Mayte answered back promptly, then clicked off.

Kerry returned her attention to her partner. "What's confusing you, honey? Was it more than you expected it to be? Mark showed me the details.. it was pretty sophisticated."

Dar sighed. "It was pretty sophisticated." She admitted, running her fingers through her hair in some distraction. "Ker, I know you want to think it was Shari and Michelle, but I.."

"You don't' think so? Really? C'mon, Dar.. who else could it be?" Kerry almost laughed. "I mean, let's be real. We have our worst enemies right here in the building, I leave them unsupervised for a half hour, and a couple days later we get hit with an internal probe." She put a hand on Dar's leg. "Honey."

Her partner exhaled. "So now you know why I didn't want to talk about it." She got up and headed for her office, shaking her head. "Just forget it. Yeah, it was probably them."

"B.." Kerry got up and chased after her. "Dar! Wait a minute…" She caught up to her at the inner door and gently took hold of her arm. "Hey..hey…hey.."

Dar stopped, but there was a perceptible pause before she turned, and when she did, her expression was dour. "What?"

As their relationship progressed, Kerry had learned bit by bit just what worked with Dar and what didn't. She had no idea what the heck was going on with her, but she knew enough to know that attempting to placate her at this point would do exactly jack squat. "Okay."

"Okay what?" Dar repeated, but in a slightly modified tone.

"Okay, we've both already cycled this month, and it's not a full moon. So let's blow this office and get some lunch." Kerry said. "Somewhere outside this building."

Dar hesitated, then she wrinkled her nose up and clucked her tongue. "I'm in a really pissy mood. You don't want to have lunch with me. Maybe I should just go to the corner and get a hot dog." She said. "Last person I want to wrangle with is you."

Kerry bumped her gently. "C'mon." She replied softly. "We'll talk about the new fish tank." She looked up into Dar's eyes, watching the strong planes of her partner's face shift a little as some of the storm clouds faded. "I'm sorry if I rubbed you the wrong way.. I didn't mean to."

Dar scowled, but it was one of her more engaging ones. "S'allright. I didn't mean to be a touchy whiny ass this morning." She eased closer, exhaling as her body relaxed. "Lunch sounds great. You can try and talk me into those boxing crabs." She gave Kerry a gentle pat on the side. "Let me go close my machine down, and we can take off."

Kerry stepped back and watched as she left, her own body relaxing from the tension she always felt in the times when they disagreed. "Thank god it doesn't happen often." She turned and went back to her desk, hitting her intercom button as she sat down. "Mayte? Was that anything critical? C'mon in."

After a moment, the outer door opened, and Mayte poked her head in, then entered, crossing over to Kerry's desk. "It was Mr. Jose. He has a gigantic problem with something in Los Angeles." She handed over a piece of paper with some notes. "I wrote down what it is he said, but he wants to talk to you."

Kerry reviewed the notes. "Well, he's going to have to wait until after lunch." She decided. "Dar's in a mood, and I'm going to work on getting her out of it. Let him know I'll be up to his office when I get back."

Mayte blinked at her. "Si." She agreed softly. "I will do that. And thank you before, Kerry, for your advice. It is appreciated."

“No problem.” Kerry smiled. “Good luck.”

Mayte smiled back, then left.

Kerry leaned back and studied the closed door. “Nah.’ She shook her head. “It’s not me.” With a click, she locked her computer screen, and headed off to wrangle fish.

* * *

“Oh, shit!”

It was like something exploding against her head. One moment she was spinning into a defensive kick block, the next the world was turning over around her and the floor was coming up way to fast, at a very wrong angle.

“Ker!” Dar dropped her hands and bolted, ducking under the arm of her startled sparring partner. Kerry’s body had barely hit the mat before she was dropping to a knee at her side, reaching for the arm Kerry had curled around her head.

“Jesus! I’m really sorry!” Kerry’s sparring partner also knelt, looking mortified. “Man, I didn’t meant to kick you like that!”

“Ow.. not your fault.” Kerry hissed. “I stepped into it.. damn.. that hurt.” She half rolled back over, recognizing the arms closing around her. “I’m used to someone taller.”

“Easy.” Dar pulled her hand away. “Let me see.”

“Ahh.. Dr. Dar.” Kerry turned her head slightly, her face only half visible under her foam protective gear. “I think his boot..”

“Got you right in the eye.” Dar winced.

Several other students gathered around, with concerned expressions. The teacher came over, crouching down next to them with a frown. “What happened?”

Dar eased the head protector off, pushing Kerry’s sweaty blond locks back to reveal an angry, red patch starting above her right eyebrow and extending across her eye to her cheek bone The eye itself was closed, moisture leaking from the inside corner. “Oh, boy.”

Kerry reached up, then let her hand fall when Dar gently took hold of her face. “We were going through that new roundhouse kick, and I turned the wrong way.” She said. “Ow.”

‘That’s gonna bruise.” One of the other students said, in a sympathetic voice. “You should get some ice on it.”

“Yeah.” The instructor agreed. “I think you should, too.” He glanced across the training room. “We are done here, anyway, I was about to call practice.”

“Me, three.” Dar responded promptly. “C’mon, Ker.”

Not really wanting to be picked up and carried, Kerry carefully rolled onto her side, then got her knees under her. She was glad of Dar’s steadying hand, though, because when she tried to open her eye, the stinging tears made her promptly shut it again.

It hurt like hell. She got to her feet, with Dar’s hands firmly grasping her wrist and upper arm and stood a moment, getting her balance. “Jesus, that hurts.”

Dar made a small noise, which Kerry recognized immediately. She took a deep breath and steadied herself, straightening up and giving her partner a pat on the side. “Okay, give me a second to catch my breath, then we can head for the icebox.”

“I think we should detour.” Dar said, tilting Kerry’s head up to the light, and looking at the forming bruise. “I’d like Dr. Steve to take a look at that.”

“Dar..”

“That’s a very good idea.” Don, the instructor interjected. “I think Dar is right. You should go, also, because it worries me that someone should get hurt in my class.”

“God, I’m so sorry.” Kerry’s sparring partner repeated. “Kerry, I don’t think you moved wrong, I think I did. I was supposed to go right.”

Kerry felt a headache coming on, and her eye was stinging badly now. She didn’t want to have to go to the doctor, but she didn’t want to stand there arguing either. “Okay.” She nodded. “Let’s go.” She let Dar guide her to the locker room, and sat quietly as her partner unlaced her gloves and removed them.

“That’s gonna hurt.” Dar muttered. “Son of a bitch.”

“He didn’t do it on purpose, hon.” Kerry felt the headache getting worse, and she didn’t object when Dar took her by the shoulders and eased her up onto her feet, so she could strip the workout gear off her body. “I’m going to have a black eye, aren’t I?”

Dar cupped her face in both hands. “Oh yeah.” She informed her regretfully. “Can you open that eye?” She watched as a sliver of very bloodshot white and a bit of green appeared. “Can you see?”

Kerry closed her other eye and blinked a few times, then nodded. “Yeah, it just hurts.” She reassured Dar. “I think I just need a cold compress.” She paused. “Or maybe the old fashioned cure.. a chilled piece of roast beef.”

Dar managed a short laugh. “I think it’s supposed to be raw sirloin.” She tossed Kerry’s gear into her locker, and handed her a t-shirt. “Slip that on. Let me get this junk off me.”

Kerry eased the shirt over her head as Dar stripped out of her own gear and rid herself of her sweat drenched shirt, pulling a gray heather tank top over her sports bra. “Hey, Dar?”

Dar turned and faced her. “Hm?”

“You’re really sexy when you’re grubby. How do you do that?”

Her partner looked carefully around, then back at her. “Are you trying to distract me from taking you to the doctor?”

“Me?” Kerry eased her small duffel over her shoulder. “Would I do that? No. I was just making an observation.” She meekly followed Dar from the locker room, tangling her fingers in the waistband of her partner’s shorts as the throbbing in her head intensified.

Maybe going to the doctor wasn’t a bad idea after all.

* * *

“Look up, kiddo.”

Kerry did her best, squinting at Dr. Steve through her half open eye, now puffy with swelling and very tender.

Dr. Steve clucked his tongue. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do with you kids. Can’t you take up something like bowling? What’s all this chop socky stuff, anyway?”

“It’s more fun than bowling.” Kerry protested faintly. “Honest. I don’t usually get my noggin kicked.”

She was lying on her back on the examining table, still fully clothed against the mostly darkened office’s chill. Dar was huddled on a stool next to the foot of the table, her arms leaning on the leather as she watched Dr. Steve like a hawk.

“Uh huh. Likely story.” The doctor said. “Except I’ve been patching up old blue eyes down there since she was a tot and she still don’t have the sense to take up croquet after all these years.” He touched the side of Kerry’s face gently. “Well, chipmunk, you’ve got a real nice bruise there, but it doesn’t look like anything’s permanently broken.”

“Mmph.” Kerry grunted in some relief. “My head hurts.”

“I’m sure it does.” Dr. Steve chuckled. “You were lucky you had you some styrofoam over your face, or you’d have broken that cute little nose, I’m thinking. As it is, you just

need a bag of ice, and some TLC." He turned and looked at Dar. "You'll take care of that, right?"

Dar propped her chin up on her fist, and managed a half grin. "Yeah, I think I can handle that."

"You think?" Kerry nudged her with one knee. "Tell you what, you can walk around with me at work and explain why I look like I had a run in with the Ultimate fighting squad tomorrow. Otherwise I'll have to wear a sign around my neck."

"Sugar, if you still got that headache, stay out of that office tomorrow." Dr. Steve advised. "You didn't break anything, but if you hang around in there getting your blood pressure up, it'll just make for a worse bruise." He leaned on the table with both hands and studied Kerry. "Speaking of which, let me get a check on that little old thing."

Kerry tried to relax her body fully as she waited for him to come back with the pressure cuff, not really worried, but not really confident either. She'd been watching herself lately, making sure she laid off the salt, and avoiding too much caffeine, but she wasn't sure the recent aggravation wouldn't show up on Dr. Steve's annoyingly accurate cuff meter.

She'd been borderline on her last examination, much better than before she'd gone on vacation, but still not in a range either the doctor or she felt comfortable with for a normal baseline. Now, after having to go through the stress of the bid, she was sure it was going to be at least as bad.

Hopefully not worse. With a little sigh, she glanced down at Dar. The taller woman was looking back at her with a wry sympathy, and they exchanged brief grins.

She felt Dar's fingers curl around her lower leg, and a gentle stroking start up on the inside of her knee. A surprising tension eased from her, and she watched in almost benign regard as the cuff was fitted around her arm and the tension increased.

It tightened further, held, then relaxed after a few seconds. "Very nice." Dr. Steve pronounced. "You've been being a good girl, I see."

Faintly surprised, Kerry managed a nod. "Trying to." She agreed. "Glad it's working."

The doctor patted her shoulder comfortingly. "You keep it up, Kerry. I don't want to have to be your whiny old doctor too frequently." He turned and glanced at Dar. "Okay, take this little prizefighter home and put her to bed."

Dar unwound her long legs from the stool and stood up, visibly relieved. "Don't worry, I will." She promised. "Anything we can do for that except ice?"

“Nope.” Dr. Steve turned and studied the X-ray he had taken of Kerry’s skull, reviewing it one last time. He ran a finger over the bony ridge around Kerry’s eye and leaned closer. “It’s fine, honey. Just a black eye that’s gonna drive her nuts for a few days.”

Dar sighed.

“I’ll live.” Kerry sat up and hopped off the table. “Hey, I’ve never had a black eye before. Have you?” She asked her partner.

“Yes.” Both Dar and Dr. Steve answered at once. Dar gave her old family friend a slit eyed look, but then just chuckled and shook her head.

“This scrappy little thing had more fights as a tyke than a Chihuahua in a pack of Dobermans.” Dr. Steve said. “Wasn’t a week she wasn’t in here with something or other.. broken arm, broken ankle.. cracked skull, you name it. Ran out of lollipops one week when she’d been here three times.”

Dar put her hands on her hips. “C’mon. I wasn’t that bad.”

“Honey, your files are right in there.” Dr. Steve pointed. “I don’t make this stuff up.”

Kerry put her arms around Dar and gave her a hug. “C’mon. You can tell me all about your fearless battles while I put that steak on my eye.”

Dar returned the hug, kissing the top of Kerry’s head affectionately, then pausing in mild embarrassment as Dr. Steve chuckled and shook his head. After a moment’s frown, she shrugged one shoulder and hugged Kerry again, patting her back gently. “How about we get that steak cooked, and use my gel pack instead. It’s less messy, and Chino won’t be trying to eat it off your face.”

“Okay.” Kerry agreed. “Whatever you say, babe. You’re in charge.”

Dr. Steve walked them out to the front room, where the lights were mostly out and the building silent. When they reached the door, Dar clapped her old friend on the arm. “Thanks for meeting us. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime, Dar.” The doctor patted her on the back, and carefully ruffled Kerry’s hair. “You take care of her, okay?”

“Always.” Kerry answered before Dar could. “Thanks, Dr. Steve.” She released her partner, and gave their doctor a brief hug. “Take care.”

“You too, Kerry.” The older man responded, holding the door open for them. “Drive safe, eh?”

“I will.” Dar promised, as they walked out into the tropical night, and headed for home.

* * *

Not long after, Kerry found herself laying on their leather couch, the promised gel pack draped over the side of her face as she listened to Dar accept their dinner delivery at the door. Her head was still hurting, but the pain had at least reached a plateau and the rest of her body was far more comfortable, nestled into the plush surface nicely warmed to her skin.

She'd never had a black eye before, and from her brief glimpse in the mirror before Dar pointedly steered her towards the couch, she'd certainly started off with a doozy of one. The bruise extended all around her eye and halfway across her cheekbone and it was a little scary looking.

She wasn't looking forward to explaining it to everyone. It reminded her suddenly of a classmate of hers in college, who'd gotten involved in some chancy business her boyfriend was doing and went crossways of him

Sarah, her name had been, Kerry recalled. She'd come to class one day with a huge black eye, and explained it away with a laugh as an accident when she'd been taking something out of the refrigerator.

No one had believed her. Everyone thought the boyfriend had beaten her up. Kerry sighed, and shrugged a shoulder. At least everyone knew she did martial arts, so it would be more embarrassing than anything else especially since she didn't have a criminally inclined boyfriend.

"All right." Dar settled next to her on the edge of the couch, setting something down on the table. "How's it feeling?"

Just an endearingly overprotective spouse. "Ucky." Kerry responded honestly. "Dar, I look like a poster child for the anti-boxing league." She reached up to touch the ice pack. "Freaky."

"Nah." Dar unwrapped their dinner.

"Yes, I do." Kerry draped one hand over her partner's thigh. "What'd you get?"

"Open up and you'll find out."

Obediently, Kerry opened her mouth and waited, biting down instinctively when something was placed inside it. She chewed and swallowed, then smiled. "Mm. Orange chicken." She was happy to taste a favorite of hers.

"Yeah, I figured it would be easier for you to chew than a sirloin." Dar touched the side of Kerry's face gently. "You said it was a little sore here."

“Mm.” Kerry moved her jaw from side to side slightly. “Yeah, it is. What else you got?”

Dar lifted the cool pack momentarily, then set it back down a little to one side. Despite her casual dismissal, the bruise did look horrific, and the green eye under the compress was swollen almost shut. “Green beans and chipotle polenta.”

“Ah, Spicy grits.” Kerry started to ease up onto her elbow. “My favorite.”

“Lie down.” Dar took hold of her shoulders and pressed her back down. “Let that ice pack do its thing.” She waited until Kerry complied, then went back to arranging the plates. There was no real easy way for her to accomplish her task of getting her ailing partner fed, but then, she was never much into doing things the easy way anyway, so improvisation was in order.

Carefully, she lifted the plate up, then hoisted herself up and over Kerry’s legs to settle between her partner and the back of the couch.

“Mm.” Agreeably, Kerry squirmed over a little, giving Dar more space as she felt the plate settle on her stomach.

“There.” Dar propped her head up on her hand, working the fork with the other as she selected a piece of chicken. “How’s that?” She rumbled, right into Kerry’s nearby ear.

Kerry merely grinned as a response. She’d taken some Advil and she had her ice pack, but there was something about having Dar this close that beat both of those hollow. She accepted the chicken, then sighed. “I still can’t believe I was that stupid.”

“Ker.”

“Well, I was.”

“He moved wrong, you didn’t.” Dar argued.

“You’re just saying that.” Kerry picked up a green bean and nibbled it. “You didn’t even see it happen, did you?”

Dar scowled.

“See?”

“I know you didn’t do it wrong.” Dar stubbornly insisted. “That guy’s a nitwad. He’s got the reflexes of a Gumby.” She grumbled. “I should have kicked his ass in the last round, and maybe..”

“Dar, Dar, Dar.” Kerry tapped her partner on the head. “Stop that.” She dropped her hand to Dar’s neck and kneaded the back of it. “Tell me about how you ended up in Dr. Steve’s office so much, huh? Take my mind off this?”

Dar offered her a forkful of polenta. “I scrapped.” She admitted briefly. “I fought with anything that got in my way and it didn’t matter how much bigger than me they were.” Her eyebrows twitched a little. “And I was a little accident prone.”

“You?”

“Uh huh.”

“I find that very hard to believe. You’re disgustingly graceful.”

Dar chuckled wryly. “Now, most of the time, sure.” She said. “But I grew six inches between sixth grade and seventh. I gave myself concussions just getting in and out of the damn truck.” She offered another green bean. “Wasn’t pretty.”

“Hm.” Kerry regarded the long body fitted against hers. “I guess sometimes short has its moments. I think the most I grew in any year was about… an inch, maybe.” She reached up and traced Dar’s cheekbone. “But I bet you were pretty anyway.”

Dar shook her head negatively.

“Yes.” A thumb traced across the well shaped lips. “I’ve seen pictures, Dar. Don’t give me that icky face.”’ Kerry remembered one in particular, a full length shot of Dar at thirteen or fourteen, in shorts and a dirt covered t-shirt, long dark hair half obscuring her face, but not the sharp blue eyes peeking out or the hesitant half grin that surely identified the camera holder as her father.

Gorgeous. Even then, Dar’s face had been distinctively unique and the smudge of mud across her cheek only amplified the character of it.

“Kerry?” Dar whispered into her ear. “Hello? Earth to Kerry?”

“Sorry honey.” Kerry felt the pounding in her head beginning to subside. “I just so absolutely love you I can’t help drifting off into dreamy hazes sometimes.” She turned her head so her unobscured eye could meet her partner’s.

Dar was blinking at her, an expression of somewhat puzzled pleasure on her face. “Really?”

Kerry traced her fingertips over Dar’s lips again, and nodded. “Thanks for taking care of me.” She felt a smile tug at her mouth. “And I think you’re right. He did go the wrong way. I just wish I could have stopped in time so I didn’t hit his foot.”

Dar lifted the ice pack, and leaned forward, brushing her lips over the injured area before she replaced the gel again. "I'll kick his ass next week for it" She promised solemnly. "And then I'll teach you how to duck."

Kerry exhaled in satisfaction, putting her accident behind her for the moment. "Hey. I've got an idea." She burred softly. "How about I wear a patch over my eye tomorrow.. kinda like a pirate?"

Dar chuckled soundlessly.

"Arrrr…. Avast ye mateys!"

* * *

Dar dropped into her seat, glancing at the clock on the wall in some mild embarrassment. She shook her head, then leaned forward and hit the intercom. "Maria, what the hell's on my schedule today?"

"Uno momento, Dar. I will be right there." Maria answered promptly.

"Hope it wasn't anything that started at eight." Dar remarked to the empty office. Both she and Kerry had fallen asleep together on the couch, and woken abruptly at eight, realizing they'd forgotten any kind of alarm.

Kerry's ice pack was a sloshy warmish pack by then, and it had slipped down off her face, revealing a still swollen and tender area underneath. Her eye was mostly closed, and Dar didn't have much trouble in convincing her to stay home and relax once she'd seen her reflection in the mirror.

So here she was at just past nine, trying to collect the scattered threads of her day after it's late start and hoping she hadn't missed anything really critical. Dar folded her hands as Maria entered, carrying a pad of paper, and gave her assistant a wry grin. "Morning."

"Good morning, Dar." Maria sat down. "Is Kerrisita all right? Mayte said that she would not be here today."

Dar sighed. "We had an accident at kickboxing class last night. Kerry got bopped in the head, so I made her stay home. It's not that bad, but she looks like she was beaned in the eye with a baseball."

"Dios Mio!" Maria exclaimed. "That poor thing!"

"Yeah." Her boss agreed. "Wish I was…" She paused awkwardly. "Anyway, what's on the schedule? Did I miss something already this morning?"

Maria smiled at her, and looked down at her pad. “Ah, no, no. There is a meeting after lunch today, with the gentleman from AT and T, and a conference call for you at four for the international.”

Rats. Dar sighed again. The four o’clock international call tended to last forever, and she… “Okay.” She cut off her thoughts abruptly, reminding herself she was actually a corporate officer here. “Thanks, Maria.. let me get to work in the damn inbox. Tell Mayte to forward any calls for Kerry over here to me.”

“Yes, I surely will.” Maria stood up. “Would you like some coffee, Dar?”

“Do I look like I need it?” Dar replied with rakish grin. “Yeah, sure.”

“I will be right back.” The older woman said. “While you are getting your things ready.”

Dar watched her leave, then she gave her trackball a spin, bringing up her inbox in the hope it would keep her occupied and not wishing she was at home.

One note caught her eye, and she opened it, scanning the contents quickly. Her fingers drummed lightly on the keys, then she hit reply and answered.

Hoping Kerry would forgive her for it.

* * *

There were a lot of things Kerry knew she could be doing. However, she was curled up in their waterbed with the blinds drawn, listening to an audio book playing softly in the CD player instead. Her eye was still swollen shut, and trying to read anything, much less her laptop screen just wasn’t working for her.

So she’d retired to their bedroom instead, keeping her laptop nearby for mail purposes, but simply laying there in the comfortable air conditioning with her other eye closed as well.

It felt good to just chill out. Kerry felt a little guilty as well, but not enough for her to get up and do anything about it.

Chino came over and rested her jaw on the edge of the waterbed, snuffling at Kerry’s slack hand until she reached over to scratch the Labrador’s head. She licked Kerry’s fingers, then hopped up onto the waterbed, making the surface move as she picked a spot and curled up against her owner’s body.

Kerry sighed contentedly, taking in a breath and catching Dar’s scent, still clinging to the pillow her arm was wrapped around. She was a little surprised when the phone rang, but reached over and snagged it, cradling it between her shoulder and ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, Ker!” Colleen’s voice sounded through the phone. “You there?”

“Um.” Kerry cleared her throat. “You called my home number, and I answered, didn’t I?”

“Ah, heh. Yeah.” Her friend said. “So, what’s the deal? I heard you got hurt?”

Kerry snorted softly into the phone. “Yeah… I was a klutz last night in kickboxing class. The guy I was sparring with slipped and kicked me in the head.”

“Oh, Jesus!” Colleen blurted. “So it was some guy? Not Dar?”

“Dar?” Kerry chuckled. “Of course not. She’s got more control than the damn instructor.” She paused. “Why?”

“Well, that makes more sense.” Colleen replied. “No, it was just how I heard it – for some reason it sounded like it was Dar who’d been involved.. boy, she must have been pissed.”

“To put it mildly.” Kerry felt her brow crinkle as she reviewed her friend’s words. “She took me to the doctor, had my head x-rayed, cursed the dumbass who clocked me, and then rocked me to sleep on the couch last night… I can only imagine what she’d have done if it’d been her.”

“Aw.” Colleen’s smile could clearly be heard through the phone. “She’s such a sweetie.”

Kerry relaxed. “Yeah.” She sighed. “So, anyway, I’ve got this black eye and I can’t hardly read a screen. Dar made me stay home with it.”

“Darn right.” Colleen stated. “You need anything? I’ve got to go pick up my car so I’m leaving early… I could stop by.”

“Nah, I’m fine.” Kerry reassured her. “Listen, do me a favor? Make sure whoever’s talking about what happened gets the story straight… if Dar hears people thinking it’s her, she’s going to have a heart attack.”

“No problem, girl.” Her friend said. “You leave it to me.”

Kerry sighed. “God damn it.”

“What?”

Her temper flared. “Why in the hell would anyone think she’d done it? That really pisses me off.”

The phone crackled a little, as though Colleen had shifted or moved. “Hey, hey, relax.” She said, in a lower tone. “Listen, I don’t think anyone though it was on **purpose**, Kerry. Just an accident, you know?”

“Bullshit.” Kerry rolled over and scowled at the ceiling.

“Kerry.” Colleen replied. “Would you take it easy? Honest, no one was mean. It was just.. I don’t know, I guess people thought it was kind of funny that..”

“FUNNY?” Kerry growled. “There is nothing funny at all about it. Even if it had been Dar, it wouldn’t have been funny. People getting hurt is funny? Me getting hurt is funny? Wow. Nice.”

There was no answer for a few seconds, then Colleen sighed. “That’s not what I meant.”

Kerry plucked at the soft down comforter draped over the bed. “Yeah, I know. It’s not your fault.” She admitted. “I just really hate when people talk bull, especially about her.”

Colleen cleared her throat, then chuckled. “Well, I do know that, Kerry me lass. That’s how I knew you were falling for her way back when. You nearly took me head off when I dared to call her a rude name.”

Had she? Kerry studied the plaster ceiling, a faint smile tugging at her lips. Yeah, she had. Even at the very beginning, after she and Dar had bumped heads just once or twice, she’d started defending her. Many of her co-workers had thought, and probably still did, that she was just sucking up.

Maybe even she thought that, back then, or maybe it was just survival. But the instinct to protect Dar had kicked in very, very early. “Yeah.” She said. “Sorry, Col. It’s just a button of mine.” She continued. “And it really hurts, especially after how sweet Dar was last night.. I felt like I was being swaddled in silk. Don’t even get me started on this morning.”

“No problem, girl.” Colleen sounded happier. “Listen, let me go finish up a report I’ve got due.. I’ll give you a buzz later, okay?”

“Sure.” Kerry agreed. “Thanks for calling, Col.” She hung up the phone, her relaxed mood gone despite her reassuring words to her friend. “Man, that does really piss me off.” She reached over to scratch Chino’s ears. “Why do people do that, Chi? Why can’t they just be nice?”

“Growf.” Chino licked her fingers and snuggled closer again.

Kerry regarded the ceiling for a few moments more, then she reached over and hit the speakerphone, dialing Dar’s private office number without looking. It was answered after two rings. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Dar’s voice sounded reasonably chipper. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a grumpy warthog.” Kerry said. “What’s going on there?”

A soft creaking came through the phone, surely Dar taking a seat in her leather chair and leaning back. “I’m going to be interviewed in about a half hour.” She said. “Mark’s still trying to track that damn device down, we’ve been hit by a dozen more attacks, and we’re out of milk in the cafeteria.” She paused. “So, how’s your day been so far?”

Poised on the verge of spilling her concerns, Kerry hesitated, hearing the stress in her partner’s voice. “Boring.” She said instead. “I can’t really use my laptop, so me and Chi are just lying in bed, listening to Modern Trends in Network Design.”

“Ah. Light reading.” Dar chuckled softly under her breath. “You could go watch Animal Planet… how’s your headache?”

“Better.” Kerry felt slightly foolish at bothering her busy partner. “Listen, sorry to interrupt.. I was just.. um… “ She paused. “Anyway, why are you being interviewed?”

“Ah.” Dar grunted, a wry disgust very evident in her tone. “Fallout from that god damn Telegenics glory hunting with Discovery Channel or whoever the hell that is. Now this woman from the Washington Post wants to talk to me.”

“Oo. Make sure she takes a pretty picture for the front page.” Kerry teased. “Given what they usually have to put up, getting their hands on you will be a definitely pleasant change.

“Pfft.” Dar made a rude noise.

“Same to you.” Kerry replied. “Hey, let me let you get back to work. I’m going to laze around here for a while, then maybe catch some sun outside on the porch.” She stretched a little. “Talk to you later?”

“Absolutely.” Dar answered warmly. “And you weren’t bothering me. I’m glad you called.”

Kerry smiled as she hung up the line, but the smile faded after a moment and she rolled up out of bed and sat on the edge of it, leaning her elbows on her knees. After she stared at the floor a minute with her good eye, she pushed herself to her feet and trudged into the bathroom.

She didn’t really want to look in the mirror, but she did anyway, watching her face twist into a grimace as she examined her reflection. Around her eye, almost in a perfect circle, was a dark, mottled bruise that would have almost been comical if it hadn’t hurt as much as it did.

Her eye was puffy and half closed, but that at least was an improvement over what it had been last night. With a sigh, Kerry used the restroom, then she wandered into the living room as Chino jumped off the couch and joined her.

Now that she was stirred up, the thought of lying in bed was almost intolerable. Instead, Kerry went into the kitchen and put up some herbal tea, stifling a yawn as she opened the refrigerator to find herself something to nibble on.

Removing a bottle of juice, she poured herself a glass and replaced it, turning in surprise when she heard a soft knock at the door. "Now, who the heck could that be?" She asked, following Chino into the living room as the Labrador bounded ahead to guard the door for her. "Oh, pooters. Must have forgotten to tell Clemente not to come in today."

She went to the door and opened it, not bothering to check the peep hole first. "Oh." She blinked in surprised, finding not the stocky hospitality manager but Ceci outside. "Hi."

"Hi." Ceci had her hands behind her back, and was looking quite diffident. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." Kerry backed up and let her past. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone… but you're always welcome."

"Mmhm." The diminutive woman strolled past. "Remember that after you find out why I'm here."

"Uh oh." Kerry half chuckled. "Want some tea?"

Dar's mother nodded. "Love some. Nice shiner you have there." She came closer and examined Kerry's face. "Don't' supposed I can talk you two into croquet or something equally benign instead, huh?"

"Ah. So you know all about what happened, huh?"

"Mmhm."

"Dar send you here?" Kerry hazarded.

"Mmhm." Ceci nodded. "Me being the only mother she knows in the area, yes. She asked me to come over here and practice my non-existent maternal skills on you." She gave Kerry a wry grin. "So why not let me get the tea, and you rest your head so I can say I tried. Hm?"

Kerry walked over to the couch and sat down, extended her legs along the it's length. "Sure." She agreed amiably. 'I'll get her back later."

Ceci gave her a big thumbs up, then disappeared into the kitchen.

"You little stinker wench." Kerry addressed the ceiling. "I will get you later. Just wait." She reached for the remote control and flipped on the television, picking a channel at random and settling back to watch.

Ah well. It could be worse. Kerry eyed the door to the kitchen It could be **my** mother.

* * *

The reporter entered behind Maria, and followed her over to Dar's desk. She was a tall, poised black woman with striking good looks, and she met Dar's firm handshake with one of her own before she took the proffered seat.

"Thanks, Maria." Dar returned to her chair and dropped into it. "So, Ms. Cruickshank, what is it you'd like to talk about?" She leaned back and steepled her fingers, watching the reporter as she settled herself in her chair and took out a notepad.

Notepad. Dar's eyebrow twitched. The last few times she'd been interviewed, it'd been with at the very least, a tape recorder. It was interesting that the reporter had chosen to stick with the basics in the local headquarters of one of the most highly technical companies in the world.

"What would I like to talk about?" The reporter repeated, in a quietly cordial tone. "Well, Ms. Roberts, as you may know, some of my colleagues are working very hard to make a documentary about Peter Quest's effort to re-establish American cruising." She studied her pad, then looked up at Dar. "Everyone keeps trying to cast you as the bad guy."

Dar smiled cheerfully at her.

"Are you the bad guy?" The woman asked. "From the research I've done, your image wanders from Cruella DeVil, to Joan of Arc, depending on the time of day and phase of the moon or who I've talked to." She leaned forward a little. "So what's the real scoop?"

Joan of Arc??? Dar's eyes widened a trifle. "I'm not sure there is a scoop." She replied. "I'm just here to do a job. I don't employ any bizarre tactics, just decent business sense, and the time I invest in acquainting myself with the newest in technology."

Cruickshank scribbled a note. "Well, let me tell you what I've got here on you, and then you can tell me if you still think you're not a news item." She flipped a page over. "You're a Florida native."

"Mm." Dar gave an agreeable grunt. "That's pretty newsworthy, I guess."

The reporter smiled. "So I hear. You grew up on Navy bases, right?"

Dar nodded.

"You've only worked for one company, that being this one, and you joined ILS when you were… fifteen?"

Dar nodded again. "I think that makes me more boring than scoop." She remarked. "I never saw any reason to change companies – I just kept changing jobs within this one."

The reporter made another note. "Do you like your job?" She studied Dar's face. "The one you have now, I mean?"

For a moment, Dar almost considered answering honestly, then she reviewed the issue and realized there were some things even she couldn't get away with. "Most of the time, yes." She finally responded. "I can do without publicity seeking monkeys trying to make me look bad every couple of hours, but in general, yeah. I like what I do."

Cruickshank looked intrigued. "Is that what you consider your competitors? Publicity seeking monkeys?"

"Well." Dar met her gaze squarely. "I can tell you I've never asked a news crew to hang off my ass during any of my business deals. I've also never rigged a convention for failure so I could come in and save the day to make press, or tried to bug my rivals."

The reporter straightened up and looked really intrigued. "Some people would say that's just smart competition."

"Some people are morons." Dar replied. "I find it easier just to be very good at what I do, and save the fun and games for the weekends."

They looked at each other for a moment, then the reporter grinned. "You know what, Ms. Roberts?"

Dar raised her eyebrows in question.

"You're my kind of bad guy." The black woman told her. "Can I buy you lunch?"

Dar was peculiar about lunch. She liked to either grab something at her desk, or, if Kerry was there and not busy, have lunch with her. It was a chance to wind down for a few minutes in either case and de-stress in the middle of the day.

However, since Kerry wasn't here, and this was at least an opportunity to make an impression other than dark awful on the whole ship project, Dar decided she'd make an exception. "Sure." She agreed. "You'll get out easy. The rest of your bunch has to spend whole days with my competition."

The woman chuckled. “Now, as a professional journalist, I have to keep neutral, Ms. Roberts, so I certainly can’t pass along to you any of the comments of my colleagues.” She paused, and let the words simply saunter off with their meaning fully intact. “But I’m sure we can find something else to discuss.”

Dar checked the time on the computer screen. “Probably, but it needs to be now, because I’ve got conferences starting in an hour and a half.” She got up, pausing only to type a quick message and send it. “What’s your poison?”

“Anything.” The reporter responded promptly.

Dar looked up, with a devilish grin. She watched the woman wince.

“Oh, I should not have said that.” Cruickshank mourned. “I just know I’m going to end up regretting it. The one thing everyone agrees on is that you have a very twisted sense of humor.”

“Nah.” Dar gestured towards the door. “Most people think I don’t have one at all.” She locked her PC and came around the desk. “There’s a sushi place next door that’s fast and something less than noisy.”

“Phew.” The reporter followed her out. “I decided to try a little place near my hotel yesterday and boy did I end up regretting it. I think the grease inside was older than I am.”

Dar held the door, then went out after her. “Sounds like a place I’d love.” She cheerfully stated, giving Maria a brief wave. “Lunch.”

Maria waved back, then cleared her throat a bit. “Dar, by any chance did you speak with…”

“Yes, she’s fine, she doesn’t need anything, she wishes she were here, and I sent my mother over to keep her company.” Dar rattled off on her way to the outer door. “But if you want to send her chocolate ice cream, go for it.”

Maria covered her mouth to stifle a laugh, as she watched them leave. She shook her head, then turned to flip through her phone directory until she found the number she was looking for. Just as she was about to dial, the outer door opened again and Mayte slipped inside. “Bueno. I am glad you are here. Please pay attention, so you know the next time what to do, yes?”

Mayte came around the desk and knelt down, watching obediently. “Mama, Kerry’s comemadre Colleen just came to the office, and said to tell everyone who is talking that Kerry did not get hit by Dar. Did you know that?”

Maria stopped in mid dial, and clicked the phone off. “Did I know that it was not so? I never once even thought that it was. Was there people saying that?”

“She said that there were, but I did not hear anything like that.” Mayte said. “People do not say such things to me, I think, because they are afraid you will hit them.”

“Good.” Maria nodded briskly. “I will send a note to Conchita and Rose, and those others so whatever they are saying, they will stop. I have got them good chained.”

“Trained, mama.” Mayte murmured. “But I am glad it is not true. I would not like to think Kerry could get hurt that way.”

Maria leaned on her desk. “I will tell you something. Dar may be many, many things and some people may think she is tough, and mean, and would do something like that. But I know in my heart that before she would do any little thing to hurt Kerry, she would faster jump off the building.”

Mayte nodded. “I think so too.” She hesitated. “But mama, I did hear something that really bothered me just before. Some people are saying that they are going to break up, and they have heard Kerry talk about leaving. Do you think that’s true?”

Maria turned in her chair and stared at her daughter. “Como?” She said, astonished. “They told you that? Who told you that?”

Mayte shook her head. “No, they did not tell me, mama, I heard. It was in the bathroom. They did not know I was there.” She explained. “One was the woman who works over near the little room with all the books here, and the other I did not know.”

Maria was quiet for a brief time, as she pondered what to do. “Mayte, no, I do not think that is true at all.” She finally said. “But we must find out who is saying these things, and why they are saying them.”

“Okay.” Her daughter agreed. “Then we can throw food at them, yes?”

“Tch.” Maria gave her a look. “That was not funny.”

“Mama, yes it was.” Mayte told her. “Kerry said it was very funny. She is so sad there are no pictures.” She got to her feet. “But, yes, we should find out who is being so mean, and make them stop it. I know it would hurt Kerry very much if she heard someone say that. I think she really is very devoted.”

“Si.” Her mother agreed. “First, let me do this thing I want to show you. Have you gone for lunch yet?”

Mayte fidgeted a little. “I was going to meet someone for lunch, Mama.”

Maria looked at her, then made a clucking sound. Mayte blushed, and shrugged. "It is not that person with the pins again, is it?"

Mayte shook her head.

"Dios Mio." Maria dialed the phone. "Please god, that you find someone nice like Kerrisita who I don't have to worry about being a pincushion."

Mayte sighed. "It would be nice if Kerry were twins." She admitted mournfully.

Her mother paused, and gave her a look.

"Don't you think so?"

"Dios Mio." Maria glanced at the ceiling, then looked down as the phone was answered. "Hello, Senor Clemente? Si, this is Maria. Yes, I have something I need for you to do for me."

* * *

Andrew looked up as the door slammed, recognizing one of the two women in charge of the computers. She stopped and looked around, then headed determinedly towards him. Since he was the only one left in the trailer, it wasn't unexpected, so he turned and faced her, waiting in neutral silence.

"I'm looking for the crew chief." The woman said, stopping in front of him.

Andrew rotated his head and looked round the small trailer. "He ain't here." He drawled politely.

"I can see that. Where is he? I need to speak to him right now." Shari snapped.

"Wall." Andrew sniffed. "I do believe he said he was goin to get him some lunch."

Shari looked at her watch. "When?"

"Bout half hour past."

Visibly disgusted, Shari turned and regarded the trailer. "Did he say where?" She turned again and stared at Andrew. "With all this going on, how could he have just left?"

"He was hungry?" Mild, blue eyes blinked back at her. "Feller's entitled to have him some lunch."

"Not on my dime." The woman paused. "Did I meet you somewhere before? Or are you just from around here?"

A corner of Andrew's lip twitched. "Ah do believe we have never met. I surely would have remembered it."

"Whatever." Shari turned and headed for the door. "When he gets back, you tell him to call me. Otherwise, I can arrange for him to find another job." She turned, pausing on the steps out. "Sure you can remember all that?"

"Ah do believe I can." Andy said. "If that there feller does come back, ah will surely tell him."

Halfway out the door, Shari stopped. "If?"

Andy got up and stretched, his hands touching the roof of the trailer as he shook the kinks out of his tall frame. "Yeap. He done took all that there paperwork with him, and ah figure he probly headed back to his office or something."

"Shit." Shari slammed the door and stomped down the steps, making the wall of the trailer shake.

Andrew lowered his arms and chuckled, half turning as the back door opened and the supervisor returned, wiping his hands off on the tails of his shirt.

"Hey, did I hear that woman in here?" The super asked.

"Yeap." Andy nodded. "I done told her you took off for the day."

The super started laughing. "You did?" He walked over and slapped Andrew on the back. "Damn, I like you Ugly. I'm gonna give you a damn raise." He went to his desk and looked out the window. "There she blows.. I mean goes.. what'd she want, anyway?"

Andrew returned to his sorting task, making marks on a sheet of paper. "Ah do not know." He answered honestly. "Just wanted to talk to you."

"Ahhh.. it'll wait." The super sat down at his desk. "Last thing she asked me to do was submit one of her orders six times. What kind of bullshit was that? Must be nuts."

Andy's eyebrow lifted. One thing he was fairly sure of, was that whatever the woman did, it was for a purpose, and the purpose was probably something he wasn't going to like.

Just like he didn't like the woman herself.

* * *

“What?” Kerry frowned, listening to Mark’s voice on the cell phone. “Tell me this again?” She glanced up as Ceci re-entered the living room. “They said what?”

“It’s a crock, boss.” Mark sounded more than peeved. “Son of a bitches.. I called them to find out a ship status on the order, and they told me it was on hold because they were out of stock.”

Kerry’s one good eye narrowed. “You didn’t see that when you placed it the other day?”

“Nope. I had a seven day delivery quoted.” Mark said. “So I called our rep, and he said there wasn’t anything he could do – out of stock is out of stock… but he could get us hooked up through a distribution channel provider.”

“At list price.” Kerry said.

“Yeah.”

“Problems?” Ceci sat down on the love seat and picked up her teacup, sipping it as she watched Kerry’s face. It’s usual good humor had vanished, and the gentle planes had hardened into a much sterner profile.

“Bastards.” Kerry murmured. “Mark, that can’t be an accident. We’re all using the same gear. Someone got to someone.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mark agreed readily. “But the rep won’t budge. Said someone above him released the shipment – some big customer apparently.”

Kerry folded her arm over her stomach and stared past the glass doors. “We’re big customers, Mark.”

“That’s what I told him. And told him. And told him.” Her MIS manager said. “I don’t think there was squat he could do, Kerry. I even asked to talk to his boss, and got told he was out of the country.”

“Pfft.” Kerry snorted in derision.

‘So what do you want to do? Go with the distribution order? Maybe we can shave off some costs somewhere else..?”

Kerry exhaled, wondering really what her options were. If they lost the advantage their discount gave them, could she make it up somewhere else? The project was so important – could she risk it?

What would Dar do?

Kerry turned her head and focused her vision on the picture just to one side of the television, the one where Dar was looking right at the camera, and seemingly right into her eyes.

Hm.

"Mark?"

"Still here, boss." Mark spoke through the ever-present rattling of keys. "You got any great ideas? I was even surfing around our inventory to see if we can pull from stock, but we just don't have enough units for the full order."

"Call that jerk back up, and tell him that I said if he doesn't shake that order loose, we're going with another vendor's gear."

Silence. "Um.. okay." Mark hesitated.

"Company wide."

Longer silence. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope." Kerry said. "They want to lose a top tier partner? Fine. I'll get two other infrastructure companies in here giving me bids by the weekend, and believe me, my friend, they'll be more than happy not only to give us better prices, but tell the press all about it as loud as they can."

More silence.

"You want me to call him?" Kerry asked.

"No, I'll do it." Mark recovered hastily. "No problem – matter of fact, I'd enjoy the heck out of it. Lemme call you back after I talk to him, okay?"

"Okay."

Kerry folded the phone up and laid it on her stomach, letting out a long breath before she glanced over at Ceci. "Sometimes, you just have to be a bitch."

Ceci leaned on the arm of the love seat, her gray eyes wryly twinkling. "Kerry, don't take this the wrong way, but you'd have to channel the Wicked Witch of the West with terminal PMS to come off as a really good bitch. You're just too cute."

Her guts still churning in side, Kerry nevertheless managed a wry grin. "Yeah. I know. Dar says the same thing." She admitted. "Even my getting a tattoo really doesn't up the intimidation factor."

"You?" Ceci sat up. "Got a tattoo?"

"I sure did." Kerry got up off the couch and walked over, crouching next to her mother-in-law and pulling her t-shirt down off one shoulder. "See?" She watched the puzzled, then charmed expression cross Ceci's face and smiled as their eyes met again.

"What did Dar say when she saw that?" Ceci asked. "It's absolutely gorgeous, by the way. You found a great artist."

"Mm." Kerry relived the warmth of the moment. "She didn't say much. But she liked it." She got up and plopped back down onto the couch.

"I bet she did." Ceci said. "What made you decide to get that done? I never figured you for the pain loving type." She settled back in the love seat and tucked her bare feet up under her, leaning on the arm as she watched Kerry squirm around on the couch.

"Well." Kerry stretched out, resting her head on the thickly padded arm. "I'm not. I hate needles almost as much as Dar does."

"That's saying something." Ceci commented wryly. "I always timed her checkups for when Andy was home, because he was the only one who could hold her down long enough for them to inoculate her."

Kerry spared a moment to imagine that. Her partner had a considerable amount of strength, and she could easily imagine her terrorizing the nurses. "Well, considering what happened to her in the hospital that one time, I can't say I really blame her. I know I was an adult when I had my one horror show and how it affected me, so.." She glanced up at Ceci, who now had a pensive look on her face. "Anyway, it was when Dar was in New York. I finished boxing class, and I guess that, plus talking with the guys, plus the smell of a new Harley.. I don't know. I think I just went nuts for the night."

"Ah." The older woman nodded.

They were both quiet for a brief time. Then Kerry sighed. "It was just something I wanted to do." She said. "And you know, I was worried about what Dar would say."

"About that?" Ceci's eyebrows popped up like a surprised meerkat.

"About me doing it." Kerry turned and grabbed her cell phone again as it rang. "Yes?" She answered it, pushing her disordered hair out of the way. "Hey Mark. What's up? Did you get through to that guy?"

Mark sounded as though he was out of the office for a change, traffic sounding behind him instead of the usual humming bustle of the MIS center. "I did, boss. He's gonna call me back." He told her. "He was not a happy guy."

"I'm not a happy gal." Kerry retorted. "So we're even – did he really think he'd just get away with that game that easily?"

"I dunno." Mark sighed. "I'm just grabbing something for lunch – I passed DR heading to the sushi place with that reporter – glad she wasn't there when this hit the fan."

Mm. Sushi. Kerry stifled a grin, recalling the little place she'd found, which had been there for years and escaped Dar's notice somehow. It was small, but the service was good and they had a table in the back where the little waitresses always recognized them. "That reporter's connected with the ship bid." She told Mark. "Guess they didn't antagonize Dar too badly, if she's eating with them."

"Yeah." Mark agreed. "She looked nice enough – not like that scruffy guy who came in here last time." A siren blared. "Well, soon I hear back on our order, I'll give you buzz, okay? I'm almost to pizza."

"Right." Kerry agreed. "Have a good pizza, Mark." She hung up, and felt her nostrils twitch just a trifle as she acknowledged a brief pang thinking about Dar having lunch with another women. It was extremely unclassy, and stupid, and pointless, so she just waited it out and after a second it passed and she could mentally roll her eyes at herself.

If there was one thing she knew she could trust completely, it was Dar in that regards. Heck, Dar had turned away offers even before they were barely friends, much less involved with each other. She was steadfast and honest, and it bothered Kerry to even have the littlest of reactions to the thought of anything otherwise.

Ah well. She released a long sigh, and dismissed the thought. "So anyway, that's how I ended up with a tattoo."

Ceci had been quietly watching her. "Did Dar mind you doing it? I don't really think she'd object.. I know she really wanted one when she was younger, but her father and her own dislike of the apparatus dissuaded her."

"No." Kerry shook her head. "I don't think she minded at all. She thinks it's kind of.. um.. " She blushed slightly. "Well.."

"Well, it's her name on your chest." The gray eyes twinkled. "So I'm sure it's quite sexy."

"Yeah." Kerry's blush deepened, and she scrubbed one hand over her cheek. "But it's not just that, I think… I think it means something else, too."

Ceci pursed her lips. "I think it means for her the kind of permanence she was always looking for." Dar's mother spoke up unexpectedly. "I didn't understand that for such a long time."

Kerry nodded, a lump rising in her throat. “That’s what I wanted it to mean.” She could hear the husky note in her voice, and she stopped speaking, to let it clear.

Ceci fiddled with her cup, as the silence lengthened. “Want more?” She offered. “I’d offer to bake cookies, but we both know how that’s going to turn out.”

Kerry smiled. ‘Sure. How about you get some tea, and I’ll bake the cookies? I’ve got a black eye, not a broken leg.” She got up from the couch, suddenly wanting something to do. “Besides, I know they won’t go to waste later on if we have extra.”

“Eh.” Ceci amiably joined her. “That’s for sure.”

“Hey, any chance of Dad stopping by after work?”

“With cookies in the offing? I couldn’t twist his arm even if I could reach it.”

Kerry chuckled, putting aside her worries for now. There would be time enough to worry about them later.

PART 17

"OKAY. SO NOW I HAVE SOME QUESTIONS." PAT CRUICKSHANK SAID, AS THE waitress set down two tiny cups of tea. "You ready?"

Dar was in the back corner seat, one arm spread along the bench back and her legs extended almost into the aisle imperiling the service. "You can ask." She said. "No guarantee I'll answer." She picked up the small cup and set it down in front of her, applying a packet of sugar to its contents before daring a sip.

"Question one." The reporter went on gamely. "How come you go to a sushi restaurant, and don't order any sushi?"

Dar's eyebrow quirked. "Any raw sushi, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"I've swam in the water they pull those fish out of." Dar replied, with a brief flash of white teeth. "Take mine cooked, thanks."

The woman across from her pondered that, then made a face. "Do you have any idea what you've just done for my love of raw tuna?"

"You asked." Dar said. "So let me ask you something."

Cruickshank looked slightly dubious. "Okay."

"What's your angle in this? Just an opposing viewpoint?" Dar watched the reporters face without seeming to, propping her head up with one hand. "I'm fed up with the games, and that includes the scruffy little reporters they keep sending to bother my staff."

The black woman looked down at herself, then back at Dar, her eyebrow lifting. “You talking to me?” She indicated her chest with her thumb.

Dar’s lips twitched. “Your predecessors” She clarified.

“Well.” The reporter folded her hands on her pad. “Yes, it’s an opposing viewpoint, and that’s useful for the story.”

“Ah.” Dar felt faintly disappointed. She’d been hoping the filming team had started to see through Michelle and Shari’s façade of noble underdog-ness. “Yeah, I guess someone has to interview Goliath, and get his perspective.”

Cruickshank chuckled a little. She glanced up as the waitress returned, bringing them plates of various pieces of sushi. “Thanks.” She looked at her tuna, and then looked at Dar.

Dar popped a piece of well cooked egg on rice into her mouth, and winked.

The reporter left her plate for a moment, and concentrated on her table mate. “But you know, I had to pull all kinds of background video and all that on you for the story, since you were cast as this big old villain, and all the stuff I could dig up just showed you as this lady knight in shining armor saving everyone’s behind on national television.”

Dar chewed her sushi and kept a straight face. “There’s film of me eating kittens, but they won’t release it to the press. Too disturbing.”

Another chuckle. “No way, because if it existed, trust me, those gals at Telegenics would have already had it up on a poster.” Cruickshank disagreed. “So here I was, having to reconcile what I was seeing with what I was hearing. I decided to come and see for myself.”

“Uh huh.” Dar munched steadily through her meal. “Better eat that before it swims off.”

The reporter gave her a mock evil look, but picked up her chopsticks and bravely doused the fish in soy sauce, then took a bite of it.

Dar took the opportunity to remove her PDA and glance at it, then flip it open to scribe a short note on it, before she sent it out. She laid the unit down on the table, and picked up another piece of sushi. “I’m not the one you should be talking to.”

The reporter blinked. “Excuse me?”

Dar swallowed. “I’m not in charge of this project. The only reason Telegenics is focusing on me is personal reasons on their part. It’s not my bid.”

Cruickshank put her chopsticks down. “It’s not?” She asked. “I don’t understand. I thought…”

Dar managed a mildly amused expression. “I’m the CIO of the company. I do actually have more important things to do than baby-sit what is, on our level, a midrange contract being handled by our VP Ops. Who has, by the way, done more than a dozen of them this year already.”

“That would be… Kerry Stuart?” The reporter said. “Is you operations vice president, right?”

Dar nodded.

“And…”

“And my partner.” It didn’t even give her a twinge to say it, just a sweetness that she could taste on the tip of her tongue as the words rolled off it. “So, if you want a real perspective on the bid, you need to interview her.”

The reporter scribbled a note, and then sniffed reflectively. She went back to her lunch plate and took another bite of sushi before she continued her questioning. “All right. I’ll do that.” She said. “You’re very open about your relationship, aren’t you?”

“No point in being anything else.” Dar answered.

“Does that bother your co-workers?” The reporter asked, glancing up at her. “Must be a little awkward sometimes.”

Was it? Dar neatly bit a piece of shrimp in half and chewed it. “Not anymore.” She shrugged. “At the beginning, it took a while for everyone to get used to it, but now... eh.” She picked up a rice grain and ate it. “Biggest problem Kerry has now is all the people who hang around her trying to get her to get me to do things because they’re too chickenshit to ask.”

Cruickshank burst out laughing. “Oh, that puts a different perspective on it... you know, my colleagues asked your counterparts about that, and they said they just treated each other as business associates at work.”

“That explains a lot.” Dar drawled. “I don’t stop loving Kerry while we’re in the office, why would act like I did?” The words came out almost in a rush, and after she said them, she found herself somewhat shocked that she had.

The reporter was a little surprised also, but she covered it up by writing several more notes. “Well, they seem to think it’s more professional.” She said. “What do you think about that? Do you think they’re right? After all, there are a lot of people who have to deal with you both on a daily basis, and maybe they don’t feel that comfortable knowing what your relationship is.”

Ah. Good question, Dar admitted to herself. In fact, this woman was full of surprisingly good questions. “I think at first a lot of people had a big problem with it.” She answered honestly. “But then, ninety percent of the company had a big problem with me to begin

with. I think having Kerry as a buffer has far more helped than hurt. We..." She paused. "We tried to keep it out of the office at first, but you know how offices are. Every time we passed in the hallway, it would make the weekly newsprint."

"Uh huh." The black women nodded in complete understanding. "I work in an office with forty other thirty and forty somethings and believe me, there's always drama everywhere. That's why I asked." She said. "Because my boss got involved with one of our top reporters, and for a month, it *was* the news."

Dar chuckled under her breath.

"And it was hard, you know?" The reporter went on. "Everyone was tiptoeing around the subject, and it made life real hard for a while."

Dar grasped her last piece of sushi between her chopsticks and neatly positioned it, then dunked one end into her soy sauce. "You break up after that?" She asked casually, glancing up at her tablemate as she took a bite.

The woman's expression confirmed her guess in a heartbeat.

"So yeah, eventually everyone got over it." Dar continued, breaking the silence. "Now we only get the odd remark from clients in the bible belt." She finished her lunch and took a sip of the now cooled tea, picking up her PDA as it beeped.

"You know what, you are just too damn sharp, Ms. Roberts." The reporter sighed, after a few more stunned moments. "Here I thought I was being so slick and you just see right through it."

Hey sweetie! Are you sucking up more fame again?

Dar smiled, and scribbled a reply. *That's me, Fame-Sucker. How's your head?*

There was a brief pause, before the answer came. *Spinning from your mother's jokes about how much chocolate I put in to your chocolate chip cookies. Other than that, I'm fine.*

Ah. Dar just kept herself from licking her lips. *Well, I'm going to keep that afternoon conference call short tonight. I don't think my reporter friend will be sticking around much longer. She might want to talk to you tomorrow or sometime though.*

Is she nice?

Dar glanced at her lunch companion, who was taking advantage of her tapping to finish her own lunch. *Very nice, and pretty sharp. Not like the last one.*

Kerry's rolled eyes were almost visible in the reply. *About time. I figured she must be okay if you had lunch with her.*

Dar read that response twice, then hit reply. *Eh. Slim pickings since you're not here.*

☺ *No, I'm here baking with your mom. Why don't you get hold of Dad, and bring him home with you?*

Dad, cookies, Kerry... maybe she'd stop for flowers... Dar paused her thought, and then rewound it. Maybe she'd stop for a bottle of wine. *You're on. See you later – don't burn yourself.*

Heh heh. Yes, mommy Dar. Have a cup of tea for me.

Dar closed her PDA and slipped it into her pocket, leaning back again as her table companion finished up her lunch and wiped her lips. "Sorry if I shook you up a little. If it's any consolation, I've been there." Dar told her, with a faint grin.

"You certainly did shake me up." Cruickshank agreed ruefully. "Or was that a very clever way to get me to stop asking questions?"

Dar's eyes twinkled. "Maybe it was just a way to get enough time to finish eating."

The woman held one hand up. "Okay, touché." She looked up as the waitress came over, and neatly plucked the check from the woman's hands. "I'll take that, thanks."

Dar poured herself another cup of tea, drinking it slowly as the reporter settled their bill. It hadn't been a bad interview, she thought, but it hadn't really given the woman anything concrete to use either.

Had it?

She frowned, having the distinct feeling suddenly that she'd gotten more personal than she'd intended. What if the reporter chose to slant the story that way, and it ended up as part of the show?

Kerry wouldn't like that, Dar was pretty sure. She'd had to face the press with that front and center more than she'd ever wanted to, and hated every moment of it. Maybe she should have discussed the whole thing with Kerry before agreeing to the interview?

But how was she to know the reporter was going to ask that stuff?

"Well." Cruickshank folded her credit card receipt and put it neatly into her wallet. "Okay, so I have to talk to Kerry Stuart about the ships, but one of the things that most caught my eye about the information I gathered was the way your company responds to a crisis."

Eh? Dar watched the train she'd thought they were riding on take a siding. She raised a polite eyebrow in question, but remained silent.

"The most spectacular thing I saw was the ATM outage on the East Coast." The reporter said. "Played out on national television. I'd like to talk to you about how that all went down, if you don't mind."

That seemed harmless enough. “Sure.” Dar got up. “I’ve got about forty five more minutes.”

“I’ll try to make them count.” Cruickshank promised. “Is there some place we can pick up a cup of coffee on the way back? I’m still on west coast time.”

“We have some inside the office.” Dar led the way out of the restaurant, giving a casual wave at two of the marketing regional managers who had just sat down to eat. “Unless you’d like to try Cuban coffee.”

“Cuban coffee? Okay, sure. How bad could it be?”

Dar grinned evilly, and pushed her way out the door.

* * *

“Well?” Kerry angled the phone against her ear as she mixed items into a mixing bowl. “What’s the scoop? She’d given Mark three hours to hear back from their vendor, and her patience was wearing thin. “Listen, if he won’t talk to you, Mark, I know who he can talk to.”

“Relax, Kerry. He just called.” Mark sounded much happier. “He’s pissed. Really, really pissed, but they put the order through. He said he’s in a lot of hot water.”

“Tell him he could be in boiling. I was going to sic Dar on him.” Kerry informed her MIS chief. “Can you imagine what she’d have said?”

“Um... yeah.” Mark chuckled wanly. “Actually, I can. But whatever, he caved. So we’re cool. I was just gonna call you.”

Kerry felt her shoulders relax. Despite her fierce words, she knew damn well they didn’t have time to spec out a new vendor’s gear and if their current partner hadn’t given in, she really didn’t have much of a backup plan to replace them.

Dar, of course, was in reserve, but Kerry really hated to pull that hat out unless she really had to. It made her feel like she wasn’t capable of doing her own job, if she had to go running to her partner for help all the time.

She felt good that she’d been able to resolve this problem by herself. “Okay, so when can we expect delivery?”

“Monday.” Mark sounded a touch smug. “I think you scared the crap out of them. Maybe they went and bought those units at distribution, and just resold em to us at our price.”

Kerry chuckled. “Whatever it takes.” She said. “We’ve given them so much business; they’ve got nothing really to gripe about.” She pulled out a baking tray and set the fish fillets she’d just coated onto it’s already lightly oiled surface. “Okay, thanks, Mark. I’m

going to set up a touch point meeting tomorrow afternoon for the whole team, just so we can see where we're at."

"Gotcha."

"See you tomorrow."

Mark almost hung up, and then paused. "Hey, Kerry?"

"Mm?"

"Are you feeling better?"

Kerry blinked her bad eye, which had pretty much opened fully during the course of the day. The swelling had gone down, and now it was merely tender to the touch. "I feel a lot better, thanks." She told Mark. "At least I can see out of both eyes now, and I just look like half a raccoon."

"Cool deal." The MIS manager replied. "I was wondering because I just saw big D, and she looked real antsy so I was hoping it wasn't because you were feeling bad."

"Ah." Kerry pondered. "Well, we're having a family get together tonight."

"Oh. Um..."

"I'm cooking."

"Oh!" Mark's tone altered to one of understanding. "Cool! Hey, have a great time, okay?"

"Thanks, we will." Kerry now hung up, and set the phone down. She scattered a handful of crushed pistachio nuts over the filets, then covered them and set them in the refrigerator.

She was alone now, Ceci having headed back to her boat home to pick up a few things for the dinner. Chino was curled up on her bed in the corner of the kitchen, and Kerry had a soft New Age CD playing in the living room player.

It was quiet, and peaceful, and it smelled like recently baked cookies. Kerry leaned against the counter and gazed out at the pretty, sunlit ocean and indulged in a brief moment of mindless observation.

Then she went to the refrigerator and removed a bottle of ice tea, going to the sliding door and opening it and slipping outside into the warm air. It smelled like warm sand and salt outside and she sat down in their swinging chair with a sense of satisfaction.

Chino had scuttled out after her, and she stood up on her hind legs and put her front ones on the porch rail, gazing out at the sea with an intelligent expression.

“You like that, Chi?” Kerry sucked slowly at her ice tea, swinging back and forth in the chair. “Want to go for a walk on the beach?” She asked. “Just you and me? We can find some sticks for you to bring back to mommy Dar, how about it?”

“Growf.” The dog dropped down and came over to her, licking her knee affectionately and sitting down next to the swing chair, her tail sweeping the stone tiles rhythmically.

“You’re so cute.” Kerry scratched the dog’s soft ears. “You know what, Chi? We’re going to the cabin this weekend. How do you like that?”

The tail swept faster, as the Labrador recognized a word she knew.

“You like the cabin, right? I like the cabin too. I think I like it better than even this place.” Kerry confided. “How about I teach you to ride on the back of the motorcycle, hm? Would you like that? Your ears all flying back?” She tugged one ear.

“Growf!” Chino wiggled her entire body back and forth.

Kerry chuckled. The sun was already behind the line of the condos, so the porch was in shade. A cool breeze came up off the water, and she squirmed into a more comfortable position, and exhaled in contentment.

Okay, so where I am at the moment? She let her eyes follow a lazy white cloud as it drifted overhead. I’ve got my project going, the equipment’s ordered, my people are in place, the wiring is going. I’m doing good.

She nodded once or twice.

It’s a good plan. I know the technology works. So the only question left is – how do I price it so that it comes in under what that bitching lowballing Michelle comes up with? “I know she’s going to lie, Chi.”

“Rowf?”

“She’s going to low ball that bid, sure as I’m sitting here just like she did everything else. But I don’t want to fall into that game.”

“Rr.” Chino rested her chin on Kerry’s knee.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do about that.” Kerry told her pet seriously. “I want to win this one, Chi. I really do.” She ruffled the dog’s fur, then she let her head rest back against the chair, simply enjoying the lazy moment.

* * *

Dar opened the door to the condo, poking her head inside and listening to a surprising lack of sound. “Ker?”

When she wasn't answered, she entered and stood aside to let her father come in behind her, then shut the door and glanced around curiously. "Maybe she took Chino for a walk."

"Fuzzball likes that." Andrew allowed.

With a faint shake of her head, Dar ducked into her study and dropped her laptop case off, then went towards the kitchen. She paused as she spotted a Labrador tail outside on the porch, and changed direction. "Ah. Maybe not."

She slid the door open and looked out, then emerged onto the porch with a grin as Chino scrambled up to greet her. Kerry was sleeping soundly on the swinging chair and only slowly stirred as she heard the noise their pet was making. "Uh?"

"Hey." Dar managed to get past the canine roadblock and sat down on the chair next to her partner.

"Oh... bwah." Kerry blinked herself awake, her hands reaching out instinctively to wrap themselves around Dar. "I fell asleep."

"Really?"

"Uh huh." Kerry stifled a yawn, and then rested her head against Dar's shoulder. "I didn't mean to do that. I was just going to relax for a minute, then take Chi for a walk on the beach." She gave her partner a little hug. "But I guess waking up to find you here is a pretty good substitute."

"You guess?" Dar reached over and tilted Kerry's head up a little to study her injured eye. The swelling had gone down quite a bit, returning a more normal shape to her face and the bruise seemed a little less lurid. Two pale green pupils looked back at her, rather than the morning's one, and she smiled in reaction. "I missed you today."

Kerry grinned, her eyes lighting up from within. "How did your meetings go?"

"Pretty good." Dar leaned back and braced her foot against the rail, rocking them both gently. "Hacking calmed down today. I only saw three attempts, and they were all pretty lame."

"Think you scared them off yesterday?"

"Maybe." Dar said. "Dad's inside. Mom go back to the boat?"

Kerry nodded. "Guess we should go inside and be sociable, now that you've woken me up and all." She nudged Dar affectionately. "I need to go put some water on my face... I could go right back to sleep."

"C'mon." Dar stood, lifting her up at the same time. "That's a cute apron. I like the pocket."

Kerry looked down at herself. “Ah.” She studied the position of the single, centered pouch, featuring a saucy looking hamster. “I wonder why, Hamster Dar?”

Dar pushed the sliding door open and entered the cool of the condo, where her father had taken over the loveseat with Chino in adoring attention. “Look what I found outside.”

Andrew looked up. “Hi there, kumquat.” He greeted Kerry. “Spiffy looking battle wound you got there.” He got up and came over to meet them, peering curiously at Kerry’s face. “How in this earth did a feller kick you in there with all that stuff you put on your head?”

“Just bad timing.” Kerry released her partner. “The toe of his boot caught me right in the gap here.” She touched the front of her face. “It happened so fast, all I knew was one minute I was turning, the next I was on the mat. Boom.”

“Wall.” Andy turned her face to the light a little. “Ain’t a patch on what Dardar there used to get. Should be all fixed up in no time.” He patted her cheek gently.

“That’s what I hear.” Kerry grinned, ducking past him and heading for the downstairs bedroom. “Be right back.”

Andrew settled back down on the couch, and Dar took a seat across from him on the larger one. “Been a hell of a week.” Dar said, with a grimace. “How’s it going on your end of things?”

“Wall now.” Andrew spread both long arms out across the leather surface, and extended his legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Ah do believe I have been of some use to you ladies during this here week.”

“Yeah?” Dar half grinned.

Kerry poked her head out of the bedroom. “Yeah?”

“Yeap.” Andy looked pleased with himself. “Soon as you come on out here, kumquat, I’ll tell all about it.”

Hm. Kerry patted her face dry. Maybe it’d been a better day than even she realized.

* * *

Half an hour later, the fish were in the oven, Ceci had returned with a bucket of vegetables and dip to snack on, and they were all sharing a beer as the few lines of sunset peeking between the condos painted the beach outside a coral pink.

Dar was sprawled in one corner of the couch, with Kerry next to her. One of Kerry’s legs was slung over hers, and she was happy to sit there and listen to the conversation as she slowly sipped at her drink.

It was times like this when she understood the measure of change she'd experienced in the last few years. Aside from having a partner, someone to share her everyday life with, she'd also regained a family that had been lost to her.

It was almost as though she were a completely different person sometimes. Not inside, because Dar knew she herself hadn't changed any, but outside, where other people saw her. Instead of being a loner, mysterious and threatening, she had become someone who even her co-workers treated as one of the corporate family now.

As though falling in love had made her much more understandable to them.

This was odd, because it had made her much less understandable to herself, sometimes. Dar gazed quietly at the tan thigh covering hers, half smiling as she slid her fingers over Kerry's skin and savored its warmth.

Kerry flexed her leg in response, rubbing the inside her heel against Dar's calf, while she kept on talking, explaining what she'd been doing on the ship.

"So, we finally got everyone to agree to what we wanted to do and give us space." Kerry said. "But I tell you, it wasn't easy."

"Naw." Andrew shook his head. "Nobody likes to give up a nickels worth of space on board one of them there things, kumquat. Every squinch is worth the earth." He said. "Though them folks should count their blessings... worst I saw in there was five bodies bunking up together and them's with their own bathroom."

"Oo." Ceci chewed on a celery stick. "Luxury." She poked Andrew in the ribs. "More than six inches of drawer space and I bet they don't hot bunk."

Kerry paused, looking at them. Then she turned and looked Dar questioningly.

"Remind me to take you on a tour of an aircraft carrier next time we're near one." Dar told her.

"O…kay." Kerry amiably returned her attention to her in-laws. "So you're saying they've got it pretty good, compared to what sailors in the service have, right?"

Andrew shrugged one shoulder. "Get used to anything." He commented.

"Yes." Ceci interpreted. "The first time Andy took me to see where he lived on a ship; I nearly just took a header overboard. Twelve stories up. Horrific."

"Wasn't that bad."

"Oh, yes it was. Nobody was more relieved when you got your officer's promotion than I was."

"Was it that bad?" Kerry whispered to her partner.

Dar pondered the question, as she watched her parents playfully arguing across from her. “To be honest.” She whispered back. “It was the one single thing I knew would keep me out of ship duty.”

“Really?”

Dar nodded. “A rack is a six inch foam mattress, with a space underneath to store your stuff. It’s got a curtain across it so you can sleep in the daytime, and they’re stacked three atop each other.”

Kerry’s eyes widened.

“Hot bunking is two guys or three sharing the same bunk in turn.”

Kerry’s eyes nearly came out of her head.

“Hey, beats a foxhole.” Dar grinned slightly. “And the food’s a lot better.”

“Brr.” The blond woman shuddered. “Well, to hear those guys talk, you’d think I was trying to take away their Christmas presents. But we worked it out.”

“Yeap.” Andrew nodded. “Heard them hollerin about the same thing over on the boat I’m at. Don’t think they worked out the same deal you did... they were still hollerin this morning.”

“Heh.” Kerry smirked a little.

“Them women running that thing don’t know much about getting folks to co-operate.” The big ex-seal continued. “All they do is run to and back making a lot of noise.” He folded his arms over his chest. “Ah do not like them.”

Dar sighed inwardly. She hadn’t expected her father to like them, and it made her wonder how once upon a time, she had.

Youthful dementia?

“They’re not too fond of us.” Kerry said. “I thought Michelle was going to chuck up a kidney when she had to call and ask me for that circuit.” She leaned back against Dar. “Thanks for sending those pricing lists over, by the way.”

Dar wrapped her arm around Kerry’s waist and rested her chin against her partner’s shoulder. “We know for sure they’re paying more than we are.” She agreed.

Andrew shifted and took a swig of his beer before he answered. “Wall now, something funny’s going on there.” He said. “Either them women are just nuttier than a squirrel, or I don’t know what. They put that damn order in six times, and not one body there can figure out why.”

Dar cocked her head in confusion. “Huh?”

Kerry's eyes narrowed. "Six times?"

"Yeap."

"Must be some kind of mistake." Dar said. "How did you know? You got six copies of the invoice?"

Her father nodded. "We figured first it was one big truckload of that stuff you all use, but I was sorting the pages, and they just kept..." He made a rotating gesture with one hand. "Didn't make much sense."

"Oh no." Kerry said. "It makes perfect sense."

Everyone looked at her. Dar blew gently in her ear. "It does?"

Kerry turned her head, and her eyes almost went crossed. She blinked. "I got a call today from our infrastructure supplier. Seems that all the stuff we need, suddenly went out of stock."

Dar's eyebrows hiked right up.

"Do tell?" Andy murmured. "Wall then."

"Hmph." Ceci felt she understood enough of the conversation to contribute at least a token noise of disgusted agreement. She had no idea really of what was being discussed, but the expressions on both Kerry's and Dar's faces clued her into the fact that neither was happy.

"So you think…" Dar paused.

"Do you seriously think it was coincidence?" Kerry replied.

"No." Dar shook her head. "So what's the plan?"

Kerry felt that little tingle inside whenever she had to put her business skills out on display for Dar's perusal. She was good and she knew it, but she also knew Dar was more than good and no matter how long she worked with her, she never got over that little internal squiggle. "I had Mark call them, and tell them either they coughed up our order, or we'd switch vendors companywide."

Dar's eyes widened a little, more white showing around the deep blue centers.

Andrew whistled.

"My." Ceci murmured. "For some reason I'm getting the feeling that meant more to them than me threatening the same thing to Publix."

Dar cleared her throat. "And?"

“They caved. It’s on the way.” Kerry replied matter-of-factly. She exhaled in satisfaction. “And now that I know who paid those little buggers off… I almost wish they hadn’t.”

Dar digested the information briefly, and then smiled. “Nice.” She gave Kerry a squeeze. “But what did you have in mind if they said no?” Threats aside, specing brand new gear they had no experience with in that time frame wasn’t a realistic solution and she knew Kerry knew that.

“Oh, I was going to throw you at them.” Kerry assured her. “I was just seeing what they were made of, and it turned out to be Swiss cheese.” She patted her partner’s muscular leg. “So it turned out okay, but now – now that makes sense, Dar. Don’t you think? That has to be why they did it.”

“Unless it’s a mistake.” Ceci commented mildly. “Someone hit the fax key too many times.”

There was a brief moment of relative silence. “That could be.” Dar said slowly. “But – given what Kerry said about the vendor’s reaction, I’d have to say it’s not a mistake. If it was, they’d have just called and corrected it. I’m sure when they got the PO six times, someone said something.”

“Well...” Kerry rolled her eyes.

“True enough, Dardar.” Andy said. “Someone surely did say something, but someone was told to mind their own business.”

So. Dar felt angry, but more comfortable with this bit of business behind the back stabbed ness. The cellular transmitter was beyond Shari, but this kind of bullshit certainly wasn’t. “Better keep an eye on that shipment.” She warned Kerry.

“Ah surely will.” Andy replied, with a half grin. “Since them fellers picked me to be in charge of that there part.”

“Heh.” Kerry picked up Dar’s hand and kissed its knuckles, then got up and headed for the kitchen. “A tisket a tasket two bitches in a basket...” She warbled as she disappeared.

Dar chuckled, and shook her head. “Damn, this just gets screwier and screwier.” She sighed. “You having fun there, dad?”

Her mother laughed.

Andrew gave a dignified sniff. “Ah do like to think ah am providing a useful service.” He said. “And it surely is a good thing to know that general civilians are a damn sight dumber than most of the people I done worked with in blue and white suits.”

They all laughed, and Dar relaxed into the couch again, letting the tensions of the day seep from her. Things were looking up, she decided. She’d had a good interview, Kerry

had handled a sticky problem with panache, and her father was having a kicking good time making trouble for her adversaries.

Life was good.

“Hey, Dar?” Kerry called from the kitchen. “Can I get a hand with all this?”

Life was very good. Dar launched herself off the couch and headed for the scent of baking fish and cookies. Things were working out nicely all round.

She only hoped it kept on going that way.

* * *

“Morning Mayte!” Kerry felt herself to be in a more than usual cheerful mood, and it showed as she sauntered across her outer office. “Did I miss any disasters yesterday?”

Mayte looked up in surprise. “No, not that they told me about.” She replied. “Are you feeling better today?”

Kerry stopped at her inner door and looked back at her assistant. “Other than looking like an outclassed prizefighter, I feel great.” She indicated her eye, which still sported a distinct bruise. “But Dar says I have to start wearing a helmet in practice from now on.”

Mayte laughed. “Like a football one?”

“Exactly.” Kerry agreed. “Dar’s mom and dad were over last night, and they were goofing around with me, trying to figure out how to build one so I won’t just keel right over with it on.” She chuckled. “They’re so funny. Mom kept trying to convince me to switch to Tai Chi.”

“They are very nice people.”

“Very.” Kerry said. “And it’s so funny, because they’re a blast to hang out with. I could never imagine ever being that comfortable with any of my family. Drinking beer with my father? Good lord.” She gave her head a little shake. “Anyway, so it was quiet here?”

“Si.” Mayte nodded.

“Figured it was, if Dar went out for lunch.” Kerry turned to enter her office. “Can you schedule me a project meeting for ten? I want to make sure we’re all on track.”

“Sure.”

Kerry turned. “And if anyone wants to meet with me tomorrow, it has to be early. I’m taking off out of here a little early to go down south.”

Mayte cocked her head slightly in question.

“I need some time out at the cabin.” Kerry grinned. “So nothing past 3pm, okay?”

“I will make sure.” Mayte scribbled a note on her pad, and turned to her email as Kerry disappeared into her office. After a moment, she looked up, with a wryly impish expression, as she heard a delighted laugh coming from behind the door.

* * *

“Clear my schedule.” Dar paused just in front of Maria’s desk. “I’m going to be in the closet all day.”

Maria paused in mid type and looked up at her boss. “Como?” She peered at Dar with interest. “I did not think you were one to be in a closet, Dar?”

For a moment, Dar simply stared at her, and then she broke in to a frank grin, letting out a burst of laughter. “Oh, hell, you got that right Maria.” She chuckled. “I never even knew what the term meant until after I left college and picked up a gay magazine in an airport somewhere.”

Maria also chuckled. “You have always been right in the front of everything about how you are. It is a nice thing. I do not like people who make themselves different in their face from what is real.”

Dar considered that for a minute, and then she nodded. “I don’t like those kinds of people either. I think that’s one of the things I always appreciated the most about you.”

The older woman’s eyes lit up.

Dar smiled, and turned to head for her office, opening her door and entering before Maria could really collect herself to answer. She walked over to her desk and set her laptop case down, then sat down in her chair and let her hands rest on her thighs.

She was in a very good mood for once. They’d had a wonderful time last night, and this morning she’d woken early – lying quietly before dawn thinking of her security project while she held Kerry in her arms. Somewhere in all that, weather from the peace or the simple pleasure she’d suddenly had a breakthrough in the design.

A piece had fallen into place that she’d been missing, and now she had a new direction to go in the intricate programming latticework she was painstakingly putting together.

With a pleased chuckle, she took out her laptop and opened it, spurning her desktop since she knew she had to take the fledgling program down to the closet to test it out. She rubbed her hands together and waited for the machine to boot, and then she tilted back in her chair and set the laptop on its namesake.

After another moment, she put her booted feet up on her desk and relaxed, glad beyond measure that she’d found yet another excuse to wear jeans in the office. She flexed her fingers, and started typing, humming slightly under her breath as the lines of code seemed to flow effortlessly.

* * *

“I love it.” Kerry circled the new addition to her office, a weighted boxing dummy in the front corner where a big empty spot had been previously. Originally, a work group desk had been there, but Kerry had it removed when she decided meetings would be held in meeting rooms and she hadn’t really found anything to replace it with.

Hanging around its neck was a pair of boxing gloves, which she took off and slid her hands into. The figure had a bland, wide eye face and a business suited body, and she jabbed at it playfully, socking it in the nose and making it rock back and forth. “God, I just love it.”

The door opened and Mayte poked her head in. “Did you say something?”

Kerry turned and held up her gloved fists. “This is spectacular.” She pronounced. “Who did it? I know it wasn’t Dar... she can’t keep a secret from me for beans anymore.”

Her assistant blushed. “It was me.” Mayte confessed. “Mama said for you to get chocolate, but I think this will be more useful, no?”

Kerry boxed at her with both hands, jiving a little with her body at the same time. “Mayte, you rock.” She said. “I absolutely love this.” She pointed a fist at the younger woman. “But I’m absolutely positive I’m not going to let you pay for it. I know what these cost.”

“You do?” Mayte made a wry face.

“Almost got one for Dar.” Kerry winked at her. “So either you cough up the receipt, or I’ll just start stuffing bills in your purse until you scream for mercy.”

Mayte appeared exquisitely pleased, but she shyly shook her head anyway. “Please, Kerry – you have done so much for me. It is a gift to me to be able to do something for you in return.”

Kerry planted her fists on her hips, or at least as nearly as she could wearing boxing gloves. “Mayte…”

“Please?” Mayte begged. “It really was not so much. My uncle is the boxing instructor for our YMCA. He helped me to get it.”

“Hm…..” Kerry produced a mock scowl, then relented, and let a chuckle escape instead. “Oh, all right.” She moved forward. “C’mere.”

Mayte entered the office and shut the door, walking over to Kerry and smiling as she was enveloped in a hug. “It is better than chocolate, right?”

“Well, chocolate’s pretty good.” Kerry gave her a last hug and stepped back. “But this lasts longer, and it can be just as much fun.” She tapped her gloves together. “You want to try it?”

Mayte indicated her chest with her thumb. “Me?”

Kerry slid off the gloves and offered them. “Sure.”

“Oh, no no.” Mayte grimaced wryly, holding her hands up in a warding off gesture. “Please, Kerry, if my mother ever knew I even put those on, she would go crazy!”

Kerry looked at the gloves, and then looked down at herself, before returning her gaze to Mayte’s face. “Just what exactly does she think boxing turns you into?” She queried. “I’m not a candidate for a freak show... or at least I wasn’t the last time I checked.”

Her assistant turned a deep shade of coral. “No... no.. it is not that.” She said. “It is just not what is considered proper in my culture.”

Kerry had to laugh. “Mayte, it’s not considered proper where I come from either. I have to admit – if my mother ever saw me put these on, she’d just keel right over and we’d have to call 911.” She winked at Mayte. “But you know what?”

“You do it anyhow.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry tied the gloves together and hung them back over the dummy’s neck. “So if you ever get the urge… go for it.” She headed back for her desk. “I wont’ tell anyone.”

Mayte gazed at the dummy, and then she grinned. “Okay.” She sidled back towards the other door herself. “I am glad you like it.” She disappeared, closing the door and leaving Kerry in peaceful silence.

“Oh, I really do.” Kerry grabbed her mug. “I really, really do.” She walked towards the door, punching at the air in the direction of the dummy all the way.

* * *

Dar raised her head at the knock on the door, a little surprised since she’d given instructions not to be bothered. “Yeah?”

Mark entered, and crossed the floor to sit down opposite her. “Hey, DR.”

“Hi.” Dar cracked her knuckles. “I’m in the middle of spawning an app. Is this important?”

Mark blinked in surprise. “Oh, sorry.” He started to get up. “No, it’s just about that thing in the conference center... didn’t realize you were coding.” He paused. “Man, been a long time since I’ve had to say that, huh?”

Dar's lips twitched, and then curled into a grin. "Yeah." She waved him back down. "But I can take a break."

Mark sat back down. "Good news and bad news." He paused. "Bad news first?"

"Always."

"It's an unreleased beta rig from Taiwan."

Dar scowled. "So no tracing the purchaser, is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah." Mark nodded. "I contacted the place it was built at... they've been going nuts because it's missing, and man, they were crawling all over my ass right through the phone trying to find out how I got it." He said. "If they were Star Trek fans, I'd have had them beaming right onto my desk hands grabbing for sure."

"Ah."

'They want it back, big time."

"Uh huh?" Dar steepled her fingertips. "Bad enough to give us an exclusive license on it?"

Mark grinned like the pirate he was. "Man, you are so psychic." He sighed admiringly. "That's the good news. They want to do a deal with us. One of their guys is heading over here."

Dar sighed. "Doesn't help us figure out who it was." She nibbled the inside of her lip. "And if it wasn't who everyone thinks it was, then it could be someone who's on the inside here."

Mark frowned. "An employee?"

Dar nodded. "Yeah."

"That would suck."

Dar drummed her fingertips on her keyboard. "Yeah."

* * *

Kerry tucked her notepad under her arm and prepared to leave the conference room. Her team was still milling around, discussing some of the items they had pending, but it had been a good meeting and she was pleased with their progress.

Mark walked over and perched on the edge of the conference table. "Did you hear from the wiring guy?"

"This morning." Kerry nodded. "He's started, but he says it's like trying to wire inside the New York subway system. Tough going."

"I bet." The MIS manager nodded. "Hey, that shiner doesn't look that bad. The way DR was talking yesterday, I thought your eyeball was hanging out of your face."

Kerry winced at the visual. "The way she was treating me I thought the same thing." She admitted. "She's such a nanny sometimes... you'd never expect it of her." She indicated the door. "C'mon. I've got lunch lined up and it's about that time."

They walked together out of the conference room and down the hall towards the elevators. The tenth floor was somewhat more crowded than the fourteenth, and they had to dodge a stream of bodies, some of whom paused to greet them briefly.

"Hey, Kerry." One of Eleanor's assistants waved. "How's the head?"

Kerry paused and turned, stepping out of the path of traffic for a moment. "Ah, it's not too bad." She indicated her eye. "Just embarrassing, really."

"Yeah." The woman looked sympathetically at her. "Hey, Joyce and I are heading down for lunch... you want to join us?"

Kerry smiled and started to edge away. "Thanks, but I've got a date… catch me some other time." She continued towards the elevators, then paused seeing the crush of bodies around them waiting to go downstairs.

"Oh yeah, reclaiming your territory." The woman called after her. "Gotcha. No problem, Kerry."

What? "Heck with that." Kerry turned and pushed open the stairwell door, starting up the steps at a brisk clip. About at the twelfth floor, she heard footsteps coming down the other way, and looked up to find Mariana headed in her direction. "Hey there."

"Morning, Kerry!" The Personnel VP greeted her warmly. "How's the eye?"

Kerry stopped in mid motion and gave her a look. "Was it such a slow news day yesterday that my darn eye had to be the center of *everyone's* conversation?"

Mark had slowed down behind her and was now standing with a martyred look on his face. "I told you sending that email out was a bad idea." He said to Mariana.

Kerry turned. "Email?"

Mariana nibbled a fingernail. "Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time." She mused. "Maria thought so."

"Maria?" Kerry repeated the name, and then she held up both hands. "Excuse me. Could someone please rent me a clue here?"

“Whoops... I’m late for a meeting.” Mariana skirted Kerry and skipped off down the stairs. “Catch you up later, Kerry... okay?” She waggled her fingers and popped through the door on the next landing, leaving Kerry to turn slowly and look at Mark.

Mark hesitated, and then managed a weak grin. “I’ll forward you a copy. It was no big deal, Kerry. It was just that everyone was kinda talking about how something had happened to you and she just aum…”

“Talking?”

Mark prudently didn’t answer, seeing that one blond eyebrow lift up sharply, uncannily like Dar’s did when she wasn’t pleased about something.

“Colleen mentioned that too. Isn’t everyone over using us as discussion fodder by now?” Kerry’s voice deepened a little in anger. “She told me people thought Dar did this.” She pointed at her face. “Is that true?’

Mark looked suddenly way out of his depth.

“Screw you all.” Kerry turned and abruptly left him standing there, taking the rest of the steps two at a time until she reached the fourteenth floor and shoved her way through the door, slamming it behind her.

Mark released a breath after a few moments. “Shit.” He climbed slowly after his boss.

* * *

Dar relaxed in the lobby, sucking at the straw in her smoothie as she waited for Kerry to join her for lunch. The lobby was a little busy, some visitors for sales moving across from the entrance and spotted easily by the look of gawking tourists they had as they looked up at the towering atrium.

She leaned against the wall, crossing her ankles and letting her thoughts wander briefly, going over the design she’d left sitting on her laptop up in her office. Most of a module was finished, and almost ready for testing, and Dar found herself looking forward to the trial with a giddy sense of anticipation.

If it worked…

Well, it would not work at first. No program did. Dar acknowledged, mentally preparing herself for it. But if she tweaked it, and got the logic right, and it worked….

It would be an amazing breakthrough, ironically spurred by her own lack of good judgment.

Life was just so funny that way sometimes. Dar idly let her eyes wander over the lobby, and then she straightened up a little as she spotted Kerry coming off the elevators.

Uh oh. Kerry never threw her arms around or otherwise projected her anger, but in her very body posture Dar could always tell when she was pissed off. Her hands would clench up, and her head would tilt forward a little, along with the point of her jaw.

She was pissed off now. Flicking her mind over the events of the morning, Dar decided it wasn't anything she'd done that had caused it, so she pushed off from the wall to go meet her ticked off lover and see what she could do about fixing whatever was making her so mad.

Kerry spotted her approaching, and her body language altered, some of the aggravated tension dissipating as she changed course and headed for Dar, a reluctant grin starting to shape her lips as they met near the center of the large space. "Hi." She greeted her partner. "Sorry I'm late."

"Hi." Dar gracefully circled her and gestured towards the outside doors. "No problem. I just got down here myself. C'mon." She draped her arm casually over Kerry's shoulders as they started off, and immediately felt the stiffness in them relax. Okay. So she knew for sure it wasn't her Kerry was annoyed at.

Direct, or non-direct? "How'd your meeting go?" She decided on non-direct for now.

Kerry sighed. "It went fine. The project's on track, though John's having some problems in the wiring. I might have to run down there tomorrow and see if I can smooth things out for him."

"Cool." Dar replied. "My program's close to test state."

Kerry perked up a little. "Yeah? That was fast... you said the other day you were a little stuck." She circled Dar's waist with her right arm and bumped her hip lightly. "What changed?"

"You inspired me this morning." Dar told her, as they walked out the front door and into the heat of the day.

"Me?"

"Yup." Dar bleeped open the doors of her car and steered Kerry towards it.

"I thought we were walking?"

Dar opened the passenger side door, and indicated the inviting leather seat inside. "I feel like wings."

"Wings?" Kerry nevertheless climbed inside, reaching over to open Dar's door. "Are we going to Bayside?"

"We are." Dar got in and started the Lexus, adjusting the air ducts to dump a larger volume of cold air into her lap. "I'm not in the mood for Cuban, and I had my fill of sushi yesterday."

"Mmph." Kerry settled back in her seat and watched the heat simmer off the tarmac as Dar pulled out of the parking lot. "Well, if we eat at Hooters, you can bet there won't be useless little catty do-nothings from our office sitting at the next table at least."

Hm. Dar made the turn onto Biscayne Boulevard and watched her partner out of the corner of her eye. "Y'know, Ker… you shouldn't let all that bullshit bother you so much."

"I know." Kerry acknowledged readily. "But it does. I can't help it."

The traffic was light, and Dar made quick work of the drive up from the office to the trendy shopping mall, diving under the parking garage to find a spot somewhere out of the sun near the entrance. They got out and she locked the door, joining Kerry for the short walk into the mall's confines. "So what was it this time?" She finally asked. "I didn't hear any chatter today, and I usually do, from Maria."

Figures. Kerry paused to window shop, spotting a pretty dress in a nearby window. "Oh, everyone's just buzzing about my war wound." She muttered. "Mariana felt the need to put a damned email out about it."

Dar peered at the dress. "You'd look good in that." She pointed out.

"Mm. I like it." Kerry said, before she turned to continue down the walk. "Why should anyone care about what I do in my off hours, Dar?"

Dar shrugged. "It's human nature." She said. "What'd they all think, I clocked you?" She watched Kerry's reaction, the sudden shift of her features and turn of her head giving her the answer before her partner even spoke. "Figures." She chuckled wryly. "If I'd have tried that move it would have gone right over your head, and you would have slapped me in the ass on the way around."

Kerry's entire face twitched. "You know something?" She stopped and faced Dar. "You know why I was so pissed about all that?"

"Because they're idiots?" Dar offered.

"Because I didn't want you to hear all of it and feel bad that people thought that." Kerry put her hand on Dar's belly, giving her a little scratch. "It really bothered me."

Dar bumped her towards the sidewalk again. They walked together along the shops, pausing to peek inside the windows from time to time. Kerry paused to plaster herself against one pane of glass, spotting a Ski-Doo inside. "Oooo… you know, Dar, that's just like a..."

"Motorcycle for the water." Dar agreed, with a grin. "Much as I hate to dodge them on the water, they're a lot of fun." She paused, watching Kerry's face intently. "Want to get a couple for the cabin?"

“Mmm….” Sorely tempted, Kerry unstuck her nose from the window. “Let’s think about it.” She took Dar’s arm and they strolled on, passing a Sharper Image and by common consent not even peeking inside. They had to get back from lunch at a reasonable hour, and if they went inside there, not only would they not get back, but they’d end up spending a fortune on enticingly useful but less than critical items to boot.

Shopping together was always dangerous but fun, Kerry had found. They both tended to trigger spending splurges in each other, and when they were together, it just got ridiculous sometimes. It wasn’t as if they couldn’t afford it, but really, did they need more colorful wooden parrots for the house?

Or hand painted ceramic dog bowls?

“Hey look.” Dar pointed. “Hermit crabs.”

Kerry kept walking, making sure she had a tight hold of Dar’s arm. “No.”

“But they’re cute... look, they painted their shells.” Dar walked backwards, peering at the vendor stand. “And they have little coconut shell houses… it’d look great on your desk.”

“Nonononono…” Kerry pulled harder. “Wings... wings, c’mon, forget the crabs.”

Dar chuckled, turning around and steering Kerry up the escalator. They dodged a few confused tourists at the top trying to take the up stairs down, and circled the upper deck to end up at the door to Hooters.

Kerry was right about one thing; Dar had to agree as she followed the blond woman to an empty table near the window. No one, absolutely no one, would either expect to see them here, nor be found dead eating lunch there themselves because of what people would say about it.

“Hi!” A pretty, red haired girl in criminally short shorts and a cutoff white t-shirt approached. “How are you guys?”

“Hi, Cheryl.” Kerry greeted her with a smile. “How’s the classes?”

“Driving me nuts.” The woman shook her head wryly. “I have three advanced biochemistry labs this semester, and every time I see a plate of wings, I keep expecting them to twitch. You want the usual?”

“Sure.” Dar settled on her stool and hooked her feet into the rungs. Aside from the visuals, which she wasn’t too proud to admit to enjoying – she liked the restaurant because it lacked the usual lunchtime crowds more common near their building.

“So.” Kerry fiddled with the table tent. “Did I overreact to all the BS talk?”

Dar rested her chin on one fist. “Did Mari really put out an email?”

"Yeah. It wasn't… I mean, she didn't get into any details, she just said I got nicked by the guy I was sparring with in karate class."

"It's not karate." Dar frowned.

"No, but it was worded cleverly." Kerry admitted. "I don't know, the more I think about it, the more I think I really did just blow up for nothing." She sighed. "At Mark, who didn't deserve it."

"Tell him." Dar suggested. "He knows you did it for a good cause."

Pale green eyes lifted and studied her, as a gentle smile appeared on Kerry's face. "What makes a difference for me is that you know I did it for a good cause."

Cheryl chose that moment to return, setting down a pitcher of ice tea and a couple of glasses, along with plates and a new roll of paper towels. "So, what's up with you guys?" She asked. "I saw a couple of your techie guys here yesterday... they said they were working down at the port?"

"Yep." Kerry answered, while Dar busied herself pouring them some tea. "We're working on those ships over there." She pointed, even though not much of the port could be seen except the top decks. "Our guys ended up here? Oo… wait till I tease them." She chuckled.

"Uh huh... and you're going to explain knowing that… how?" Dar handed her a glass, and winked at Cheryl.

Cheryl winked back and sauntered off to get their wings.

"You and your logic." Kerry felt a lot more relaxed now. The worst of it, she realized, had been how afraid she'd been of Dar finding out about the rumors. Now it seemed like Dar just thought they were stupid, so she was free to feel the same way.

Did she?

Kerry sighed, wishing she did, and could dismiss it. But she didn't, and it still ticked her off, and now she just had to decide what she was going to do about it. Then a thought occurred to her, a memory of earlier that day. "Reclaim my territory?" She asked aloud, giving Dar a puzzled look.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just something someone…said..." Kerry's voice slowed, and trailed off. She sighed again. "Just more crap."

Dar reached over and ruffled her hair. "Thanks for your outrage on my behalf, Ker. But the only opinion in that building that means jack to me is yours." She gave Kerry a smile, and then her eyes slipped past her partner as a motion caught them. "Son of a biscuit."

“Now what?” Kerry turned her head, almost chucking her ice tea when she spotted what Dar was looking at. Shari and Michelle, along with a very smug looking Peter Quest had just seated themselves at an outside table. “Oh, poop.”

“I don’t think they can see us.” Dar observed. “Let’s see how much I can offer Cheryl to do a Maria.”

“Oh god.” Kerry covered her eyes.

“Or maybe just listen in.” Dar continued, in a softer, more calculating voice. “After all, last place they’d expect to find the competition would be here, eh?”

“Mm.” Kerry felt a tickle of apprehension in her guts. Or maybe it was just the thrill of it all. “Last place they’d think of.”

But at what point, she wondered, did they just become what Shari and Michelle were? Were they already? Kerry picked up her tea and took a sip. “I’d rather we just ate.” She finally said, looking Dar in the eye. “And just ignore them.”

Cheryl came back and put down two plates of crisply hot wings in front of them. “Here you go guys... anything else right now?”

Dar selected a wing, and saluted Cheryl with it. “Nope... we’re just fine.”

Kerry picked up a wing of her own, and waited for the waitress to leave before she spoke. “Thanks.”

Dar winked, and munched on her wing, apparently unconcerned. “Your wish is my command.” She announced. “Besides, the best we could find out is what we already know.”

Kerry took a bite, satisfied with the answer. At least for now.

PART 18

KERRY LEANED BACK IN HER CHAIR, BALANCING HER KEYBOARD ON HER LAP AS SHE typed out a spurt of emails dealing with two of the minor projects she was supervising along with the ship one. In the time since she'd gotten back from lunch with Dar, she'd gotten a lot done as well as felt her earlier aggravation dissipate.

She had noticed, recently, that Dar's presence tended to do that to her. It wasn't anything her partner did or said, particularly – but if she was angry or upset, hanging around Dar just made her feel better. Even when she was hurting; if she had a headache or a bellyache, she'd curl up with her head in Dar's lap and it would all just go away.

Why was that? She wondered idly. It had been really noticeable that afternoon when she'd come down for lunch. She'd been steaming as she stepped off the elevator – but when she spotted Dar heading her way, her blood pressure had dropped and the knots in her gut had eased the minute they came together.

Ah well. Kerry shook her head a bit, and went back to her typing. Certainly, Dar wasn't around to make her feel warm and fuzzy right now. Her partner was stuck in the downstairs closet again, testing her new program.

Which reminded her. She hit the button for a new message and addressed it to Mark.

> *Hey – Dar's testing some new code downstairs. So if you see freaky things, it might be her.*

She hesitated a minute, then continued.

Sorry I went off today. I should be used to the talk by now, but when it comes to Dar, I never am. Thanks for letting me know about it.

K

She hit send.

A small box popped up in one corner. *Hey.*

Kerry grinned. *Hey.*

Do we have marshmallows at home?

Marshmallows? Kerry nibbled her lower lip thoughtfully. Marshmallows had never been a particular favorite of hers, since she found them relatively tasteless and preferred to squander her calories on something more appropriate such as chocolate. *I don't think so.. why?*

There was a faint pause before the answer, and then it popped up. *I want rice crispy treats.*

A new message popped into her inbox. Kerry clicked on it while she considered what she should respond to that request with.

Hey, Kerry –

No problem, I know big D's A number 1 on your list. Thanks for telling me she's down in the dungeon – I haven't seen anything yet but with her you never do until it's too late.

Oh, that's not really true. Kerry shook her head back and forth. Sometimes she's just very, very obvious.

Anyway, sorry all that stuff got dredged up. People just talk shit because it's how they make themselves feel better about not being you guys.

Kerry read that last bit a few times, then shrugged. Personally, she just viewed the talk as venal human nature. It was easy for her to rationalize it that way, but far more difficult for her to ignore it when it was directed at Dar, and not at her. For herself – she'd been talked about since she was old enough to realize what that meant.

She keyed the instant message box and typed a reply. *If you swing by Publix on the way home, I'll make you some.* She hit enter, and then typed another message. *I hear they're really good when you dip them in hot fudge.*

The answer came back immediately. *Why not? You are.*

"Yerk." Kerry muffled a squeak. *You are such a punk. They could be random logging this, y'know!*

And?

Yeah, and? What are they going to find out, we're lovers? Whoohoo.. news flash.. call Panic Seven. Kerry wrinkled her nose and grinned again in acknowledgment. *How's it going?*

Good. You?

Kerry reviewed her inbox and sighed. There were a number of mails backed up waiting her attention, and she knew she had to plow through them if she wanted any chance of getting out of the office early the next day. *Eh. I'll be here a while.*

Surprisingly, an answer came right back again. *Me too. How about we meet for a romantic dinner over a pile of cat five later on?*

She simply regarded the note for a while, a fond look crossing her face. *I love you.* She typed back, hesitating, and then just hitting send. Really, was there anything that needed to be added to that? She clicked back on her mail and continued to type, justifying for the nth time why new computers had to be budgeted for and not just plucked out of a non-existent it genie bag.

"Keeeeeeerrrrry."

She jumped, and then looked at her screen. Gopher Dar was back, peeking around her email program and waving. "Oh, my god, she got it to talk! C'mere, you little rascal." Her mouse pointer chased after the critter, and she poked him in the tail a few times. "Aggghhh.. gotcha!"

Far from being disturbed, Gopher Dar turned and waggled his behind at her, then somersaulted over and ended up sitting down. "I llooooooooovvvvvvveeeee youooo……" He warbled. "Youurrreee the best!"

"Oh, my god." Kerry repeated, biting her lower lip. "You are so amazing sometimes." She continued, in a softer voice.

Her office door opened, and Mayte poked her head in. "Did you call for me, Kerry?"

"Shh." Kerry admonished Gopher Dar. "No, I was just talking to myself." She directed her attention to Mayte. "Sorry – I'm trying to get some of this mail cleared up. Did you need me for something?"

Her assistant entered and walked over to her visitor chairs, sitting down on the left hand side one. "I have a little question for you." Mayte said. "I really want to understand more

about what we are doing so much of the time. Could I ask you which class I can take? In my school, we did a lot with software, and programs. We did not do so much with the networks."

Ah. Career advice. Kerry gladly turned her attention from her mail, though reluctantly from Gopher Dar, and focused on Mayte's slim form. "Well, I can fully appreciate how you feel, Mayte. I had some experience with infrastructure before I started here, but it's been a learning curve for me too. The best person to really ask about that is Dar. She's the expert."

Gopher Dar chittered softly. Kerry clicked on him. "You hush."

"Excuse me?" Mayte gave her a puzzled look.

"C'mere." Kerry motioned for her to come around the desk. "Want to see something really cute?"

Mayte willingly got up and circled the desk, peering over Kerry's shoulder. "What is that?" She asked, as Kerry chased the little critter around the screen. "Oh, look! Que Linda!"

"This is Gopher Dar." Kerry pinned him down by the tail, and watched his tiny feet scrabble. "He was talking a minute ago."

Mayte gave her boss a faintly skeptical look. "Si?" She asked. "But what is it? Where does it come from?"

Gopher Dar sashayed across the screen, doing a little dance. He had on a tank top and shorts, and incongruous rubber boots today. "Keeeeerrrrry…" He warbled.

"Oh!" Mayte covered her mouth.

"He comes from Dar." Kerry explained. "It's a program of hers that she works on when she's not doing anything else, and every so often she sends this little guy over here to interact with me."

Mayte leaned a little closer. "Wow."

Gopher Dar waved at her. Then he did another little dance.

"He really cheers me up most of the time. "Kerry smiled. "And it's an amazing program – it's different every time. She puts different clothes on him; he does different things… her talent as a programmer is amazing."

"He is blushing." Mayte noted, with a grin. "So cute."

“So, anyway… as I was saying, Dar’s the expert on what makes this place tick. But I think she’d agree that you should take a basic class on networking fundamentals to start with, and get the terminology down.” Kerry flipped over to a different screen, and called up a browser window. “We’ve got classes internally... here. Look at this set first.” She pointed.

“Ooooo...” Gopher Dar warbled approvingly. “Gooooooddd.”

They both started laughing. “Kerry, that is so adorable.” Mayte said. “And it is nothing serious – it is just for fun, yes?”

“Sure.” But Kerry suddenly wasn’t so sure about that. Gopher Dar had started making more and more frequent appearances lately, and she wondered if working with the little guy wasn’t Dar’s way of exercising her programming chops to ease her growing restlessness. “Is that not clever, or what?”

“Absolutely.” Mayte agreed. “I wish I had one! It is like a little friend. I think my cousin found a little cat program something like this, but it was not nearly so smart. It went to sleep, and it made a purr, and that kind of thing.”

“I’ve seen that.” Kerry said. “They have a puppy, too. But nothing like Gopher Dar.”

Gopher Dar had lain down on his side, and was simply gazing out at her. Kerry resisted the urge to reach out and scratch his nose. “So. Does that answer your question about classes?’

“Si, yes it does.” Mayte eased out from behind Kerry’s chair and came to stand in front of the desk again. “I will look at that website and sign up for one today. Is it all right if I make it at the end of the day, and go after we are done here?”

“Sure.” Kerry agreed. “But think about it –sometimes people do class better in the morning.” She paused, and a wry grin appeared. “Not that I was one of those people, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know.” Mayte agreed mournfully. “Mama has to pull me out of my bed in the morning. So I think the afternoon is better.” She turned to go. “Thank you, Kerry, and also for showing me your very cute friend. It is a very good program.”

“I think so.” Kerry gazed affectionately at the little creature. “I work on him a little sometimes… every once in a while I send him back over to bother Dar. She gets a kick out of it.” She looked up. “But I’m not in her league when it comes to that.”

“She is very talented.” Mayte smiled. “You are very lucky, I think.”

"I'm very lucky, I know." Kerry gave her a little wave, as she left. "I do know that for sure." She returned her attention reluctantly to her mail, almost hoping that Gopher Dar would come up with something else to distract her.

Which sucked, actually, since she had to get her damn mail done. Kerry frowned, focusing on the next page of complaints.

Hey, Ker?

Ah. An even more welcome distraction. *Yes, Gopher Mom?*

You tied to that desk?

Kerry drummed her fingertips on her keyboard. *You got a network connection for my laptop down there? Say yes and I'll go keep you company in your pile of cat five.*

Gopher Dar got up and started scooting around the corner of her screen, beckoning her to follow. Kerry clicked on him, waiting for the message to come back.

C'mon. I've got a nice dusty piece of concrete with your name on it right next to me.

Ah, it just didn't get any more romantic than that. Kerry closed her mail and stood up. *Be right there.* She typed into the screen, before she closed down the desktop and grabbed her brief case. "But you know." She remarked to the empty office. "Only love struck nitwits with zero sense would trade a nice comfortable leather chair for a piece of dusty concrete."

She shouldered her laptop. "One nitwit, en route." Kerry headed for the door, giving her new boxing dummy a wink as she scooted out of the room.

* * *

The soft sounds of new age echoed against the concrete walls, interrupted erratically by the patter of keystrokes on two keyboards.

Dar was seated on the ground between two tall racks, her long legs extended under them as she leaned back against a third. Kerry had taken a position right next to her, sitting cross-legged on the hard concrete with her laptop balanced on her knees.

Neither of them was talking. Both of them were concentrating on what they were doing, and yet the atmosphere in the small room was one of total, absorbed, contentment.

Kerry clicked send on her mail, and reviewed her inbox. The stack of messages she'd needed to take care of had decreased by over half in a surprisingly short amount of time, and she was beginning to see the light at the end of her email tunnel. "Know something? We should work down here more often."

Dar finished typing a line, and grunted. “Uh huh.” She compiled the program she’d just finished, and opened a run window, starting the program and watching the results as it executed. “Ahhhh…”

Kerry rested her cheek against Dar’s shoulder and peered at the screen. “Working now?”

“Uh huh.” Her partner agreed. “Hang on to your socks. I’m gonna run it against the backup router.” She clicked over to a different screen and pulled it to one side, adjusting a monitoring parameter until she was satisfied with it. “Okay.”

It was fun and interesting watching Dar work. Kerry waited for her to start the program again, and then switched her attention to the monitor. The gauges jumped and fluttered, indicating *something* was going on, but it was hard to tell what effect the program was having.

So, she remained quiet and waited for Dar to comment on it. She’d been acceptably competent at the programming she’d done in school, but it had never been a passion of hers, and this was not only complex, it was cryptic in a way that only Dar could be.

“Eh.” Dar folded her arms and regarded the screen.

“Is it doing what you want it to?” Kerry hazarded.

“No.” Her partner replied. “But it’s doing something useful, which I hadn’t anticipated.”

“Hm. Is that good or bad?”

Dar rested her head against Kerry’s. “I don’t know yet. Give it a few minutes.” She studied the screen. “See here?” She pointed with one long finger. “I wanted it to analyze the headers and determine multiple instances of same sender, but what it’s actually doing is logging out of sequence packets.”

Kerry looked at the screen, then at her partner. “That’s useful?”

Dar nodded. “Yeah, because that’s a symptom sometimes of a dictionary attack – something just throwing guesses at the router and masking its own IP.”

“Ah hah.” Kerry murmured approvingly. “So that’s progress.”

“Mm. At least it’s not crapping out every six seconds now.” Dar agreed. “How’s your mail coming?”

Kerry snuggled a little closer. “Fine.” She said. “I knocked out a lot of it… its really nice and peaceful down here... I can see why you decided to do the test this way.”

“Mmhm.” Dar nuzzled her hair a little. “And it’s perfect now.”

Aww. Kerry figured if she had a tail, it’d be wiggling big time. Ridiculous really, since they were sitting on a dirty concrete floor surrounded by humming network gear in a room that stank of damp stone and electrons.

But who cared? “So, what’s next?”

Dar left her program running, while she called up her coding screen and made a few corrections. “Take another baby step, that’s what.” She cleared her throat a little, and continued pecking away.

“Mm.” Kerry shifted and set her laptop aside. “I’m going to get a soda... interested?” She waited for Dar to nod, and then she got up and stretched, reaching down to ruffle her partner’s dark hair. “Be right back.” She stepped carefully over the cables on the floor and pulled the door open, escaping from the small room into the hallway that led to the lobby.

It was after five, and the building was quieting down. The café on the ground floor was closed, and the cleaning people were beginning to pop out like night owls, starting the task of scouring the place. Kerry walked across the mostly empty lobby towards the ground floor break room, giving the guard a wave as she passed his desk.

“Hey, Ms. Stuart.” The man waved back. “You still here? Thought you were gone for the day – Michael passed by your office and said it was closed up.”

“Nope.” Kerry shook her head. “I’m working on a project in the main telco room.” She pointed back the way she’d come from. “Probably be there a while yet. Was someone looking for me?”

“Yeah.’ The guard said. “Matter of fact – a lady came to the front guard desk over there and wanted to talk to you. That’s why Michael went up.” He got up and met Kerry as she slowed down. “Here. She left a card.”

Kerry took it, cocking her head a little in puzzlement over the name. It wasn’t one she recognized, and she certainly had no idea what a real estate agent would want with her. “Um... okay.” She half shrugged, and stuck the cardboard slip into her back pocket. “Thanks... I don’t think I’m in the market for what she’s selling, but who knows?”

The guard shrugged also. “Have no idea, ma’am.” He cleared his throat. “Ah, do you know if Ms. Roberts is here too? I saw her car still outside, but her office is closed up.”

“She’s here.” Kerry turned to continue her task. “We’re working together on this project. You need her?”

“No ma’am.” The man shook his head. “Is that the security zone in the inside corridor?”

“Yep.” Kerry started to walk off. “We’ll be there if you need us.” She continued across the marble tile floor and into the inner hallway, pushing open the non-descript door and crossing from public splendor to linoleum tiled plainness in the space of a step.

It reminded her of the ship, a little. The difference between the passenger areas and the crew. Kerry stopped in front of the big soda machine, reviewing her choices. “Ah.” She popped some coins in, and selected a button, waiting for the bottle to drop before she applied more coins, and made a second choice.

The bottle rattled down, and she opened the bottom flap to retrieve Dar’s Yoohoo and her own root beer. Whistling softly under her breath, she headed back out to the lobby.

* * *

Dar had set her laptop down, and she was now walking around, stretching her body out and easing the stiffness from sitting on the ground for so long. Above her head, the cable ladders stretched to either side, bearing their weight of multicolor strands.

Experimentally, Dar reached up and grasped the ladder bars, pulling her body up and letting the metal take the weight of her body for a short time.

Satisfied the structure wasn’t going to collapse, she took a better hold, then lifted herself up again and got her legs up over the top of the ladder, hooking them securely through the rungs.

Then she released her arms and hung down, letting her spine relax. “Ahh.” She let her hands dangle as she flexed them, feeling the soft pops as her vertebra eased into place. It felt good, and was something she hadn’t done in a long, long time.

Since the weekend she’d spent in this very room upgrading every piece of equipment in it, in fact. Dar swung back and forth a little, enjoying the motion and the memories. She’d just been a tech then, before she’d decided to move into management.

Looking back along that curve now, Dar found herself wondering a little if that move had been the right one after all. Here she was, years later, right back in this closet doing something she could have easily paid an entire roomful of programmers to do instead of getting involved.

So why was she doing it? Just to have something to do and stay out of Kerry’s way? Dar grimaced. Oh that was an attractive thought. Maybe she’d let herself be promoted past her competency, like she was always accusing Jose of.

Ah, Dar. She sighed at herself. You can’t really complain, can you? After all, if you’d stayed a grunt, chances are you’d never have met Kerry, right?

No, probably not. Dar swung back and forth a little more, and thought about how much more she'd gotten done after Kerry had joined her today. She'd been less restless, and more focused, and suddenly it occurred to her that the more she separated herself from her partner and her projects, the antsier she tended to be.

It was so obvious, once she'd thought of it that she almost slapped herself on the head. "Damn." In her efforts to distance herself from Kerry's efforts, and let her partner fly on her own – was she sending herself down the stupid path?

Didn't they really work better as a team?

Didn't they?

The outer door opened, and she was graced with the sight of her lover from an interesting perspective. "Hi."

"What are you doing?" Kerry walked in, let the door shut, and set the sodas down before she came over to where Dar was hanging like a bat. "You have no idea how funny you look."

"Just stretching." Dar said. "It's good for your back." She reached out and gave Kerry a poke in the belly. "Join me?"

Kerry studied her, and grinned. "If you say so, honey. I'll take your word for it. Last time I did that, I fell out of a tree and my mother nearly had me hogtied for a month for it." She admitted. "Wasn't a pretty sight."

Dar reached up and caught hold of the bars, reversing her position and letting herself down onto the ground again upright. She reached around Kerry to pick up her Yoohoo bottle, ending up in an intentional hug as Kerry bumped up against her. "You're always a pretty sight."

The blond woman wrapped her arms around Dar and gave her a powerful squeeze. "And you're the best thing my ego's ever, ever had." She sighed. "Dear god, you make me feel ten feet tall sometimes, Dar."

Dar nodded a little to herself, and accepted the fact that her judgment had been off. It happened sometimes, but in this case, she had an idea of what to do to correct it.

"Mm." Kerry hesitated. "Dar…"

"I think I like it when we work together." Dar commented casually. "Even when we're not on the same project. I like having you here."

Unexpected, but startlingly identical to the words that were running through Kerry's mind as well. "Wow." She murmured. "I was about to say the same thing." She let her

hands rest on Dar's waist. "You know something? I think that's why I've been so rattled over this ship project." She looked up. "Dar, I don't need you holding my hand on it..." A sigh. "But I want you there… I want us to beat them. Not just me."

"All right." Dar leaned her forearms on Kerry's shoulders and touched her forehead to her partner's. "And I want you guiding me on this security package. I need your judgment."

The concrete and steel suddenly became magic, framing the moment indelibly. Kerry felt an impish grin forming on her lips, smothered a moment later when Dar kissed them.

She sincerely hoped there weren't any cameras.

* * *

"Urgf." Kerry took a breath, and continued her sit ups, the roll of thunder percolating into the island's gym. Behind her, she could hear the soft clank as Dar did leg presses, and she resisted the temptation to move from her current exercise to that one.

Sit ups were definitely not her favorite things. They made her back ache, for one thing, and since she was now using an incline board, they were just plain hard to do.

Still, she kept them up, resolutely closing her eyes and concentrating on the positive results she knew she'd get by completing her self imposed sets.

The rain outside had canceled their morning run, and they'd decided on a work out to replace it – possibly suffering from some mutual guilt brought on by consuming an entire baking pan full of Kerry's promised rice crispy treats the night before.

With fudge. Kerry blinked her eyes open, scattering a fine mist of sweat as she regarded the stolidly boring ceiling. She let her back rest against the padded surface, breathing deeply as she waited for the burning ache to dissipate from the muscles that lined the front of her stomach.

"Ker?"

"Uh?" She grunted.

"You okay?"

"Just resting." Kerry extended her arms over her head and stretched her body out. Her bare legs were hooked around supports at the end of the board holding her in place, and she flexed her thighs a little, watching the skin tighten and relax.

"Thought you didn't like doing those." Dar commented.

“I don’t.” Her partner readily admitted. “But I do like having a six pack.” She patted her belly. “Do you know how horrified my family would be if I told them I did?”

Dar merely chuckled.

“When I went home the first time.” Kerry said. “I took my shirt off in front of my sister, and she started teasing me about being She Ra. You remember She Ra, Dar?”

“Bwahshahahaha.”

“Uh huh. I used to have a plastic sword, and everything.” Kerry chuckled. “Until my parents found it and threw it out.”

They both stopped chuckling. Dar cleared her throat. “I think… I first started to be aware of the way I looked when I was around thirteen or fourteen or so.”

“Mm?” Kerry took another breath, and started in on her sit ups again. “Puberty?’ She grunted.

Dar got up and went to the free weights, picking up a triceps bar and starting some curls as she walked over to be nearer to Kerry. “Yeah. Killer growth spurt.” She said. “I grew... almost five inches in a year and my whole metabolism went nuts.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry agreed in sympathy.

“I started eating like a horse... and I figured if I didn’t working out, it was all gonna stay on me like it was on a lot of my classmates.” Dar related. “So I did.”

“Sensible decision.”

“Yeah.” Dar chuckled. “Except I went to the base gym, and worked out with the all the guys. I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to use the same weights they were using, and my mother walked in on me one day while I was dressing and nearly had a fit at what I looked like.”

Kerry snickered, but kept crunching.

“Hey, I thought it looked good.” Dar mused. “And the guys all sure respected me.”

“I bet.” Kerry finished her second set and pulled herself off the board, escaping gratefully to the lat pull down machine. It was angled perfectly so that she could see Dar while she was doing the exercise, and she studied her partner’s body as she started the new routine.

Dar had definitely grown into her height. Her shoulders were broad, and rounded with muscle, and that extended down her arms to corded wrists that were currently tensed as

she did her curls. Yet, her skin fitted over her body in supple curves, never giving the impression of a bodybuilder's starkly ripped muscularity at all.

Kerry liked that. She liked the impression of strength Dar had, without looking at all masculine and she'd consciously or unconsciously pattered her own aspirations in the same direction. She'd first started noticing a difference a few months into their relationship, before she'd moved in permanently with Dar.

It had all started with a shirt. She'd been dressing for work one day, half in the dark of a very early morning when she'd pulled on a silk blouse she hadn't worn in several weeks and found the sleeves binding uncomfortably around her upper arms and shoulders.

"Huh?" Kerry turned to the mirror in her bedroom and flipped the light on, giving herself a puzzled look in the reflection. Sure enough, the fabric was pulled taut over her upper body, the length draping down over her half bared torso still unbuttoned.

"Great." She sighed, apprehensively reaching for the lowest button, and matching it with its hole on the other side. To her mild surprise, it mated easily around her waist, easing her sudden fear that her recent change of habits had added more pounds to her frame than she'd realized. "So... what the heck?"

With a touch of impatience, she stripped the shirt off, and let it fall to the dresser, studying her body in the mirror with a very critical eye. What she saw surprised her, and she straightened up a little, squaring newly broadened shoulders and holding her arms out a way, turning them a little as she flexed her muscles.

Holy pooters. Kerry exhaled. Under her skin she could now see visible power, bunching and moving in the lamplight as she shifted. Her shoulders had gained a cap of sinew over them and she could see the beginning shadow of an arch that extended from the points of them to her neck.

It felt very strange, and for a moment, she felt a little scared of the changes. She'd kept an image of herself in her head for so long, hammered in by her parents that this shift was almost as intimidating as the twenty pounds she'd carried home after her first year in Miami.

That had merely ended up being embarrassing. This… Kerry spread her arms out fully, and almost shook her head at the new shape of her outline, the widened shoulders giving her body a very pleasing taper she hadn't really anticipated.

"Wow." She finally said, letting her hands drop to her sides. "You know, I think I like this." She met her own reflection's eyes and grinned, a touch hesitantly. "Wonder if Dar's noticed?"

A wink of dawn light peeked through the blinds and she put her hands on her hips, turning her attention to the problem of dressing for work. She walked back to her closet

and reviewed her options. The skirt she'd intended on wearing hung there mutely, but she pondered now what top she could put on to go with it.

Long sleeved, staid garments looked back at her, and she frowned. Then her eye fell on a simple, tailored linen shirt with crisp lines and a conservative cut right up to the point where it became sleeveless. "Hm." Kerry removed it from its hanger and slipped it on, the whispered chill of the air conditioning feeling slightly illicit on her bare shoulders.

It fit neatly, and she put on her skirt, tucking the ends of the shirt into the waistband and buttoning it. She buckled the slim leather belt, then removed her linen jacket from its hanger and put it on. Facing the mirror she observed the effect.

Businesslike and conservative. Kerry gave herself a brief nod, and then she let the jacked slip off her shoulders and looked again.

A grin appeared. She put the jacket back on and headed off to work.

"What's so funny?" Dar inquired, pausing in her curls. "Am I making faces again?"

Kerry chuckled. "No, I was just thinking of something." She stood up and let the pull down bar return to its resting position. "Hey, let me ask you a question." She let her arms rest against her thighs.

"Hmm?" Dar cocked her head in inquiry, the muscles in her arms jumping as she brought the weighted bar up.

"Do you think I look too butch?'

Dar paused in her upswing, the bar ending up pressed against her breastbone. Her nostrils flared, and she made a small snorting sound, attempting to stifle a laugh.

Kerry put her hands on her hips. "What was that supposed to mean?" She cocked an eyebrow at her partner.

Hastily, Dar put down the barbell and walked over, wiping her hands on the towel she had tucked into her shorts. She cupped Kerry's chin and tilted her head up, regarding her with serious affection. "You don't look at all butch."

"I don't?"

"No."

"Not even with these?" Kerry lifted her arm and tensed her biceps.

"No."

“Really?”

“Really.” Dar said. “Just incredibly sexy.” She paused. “Why? Do you want to look more butch?” She asked curiously.

Kerry shook her head. “No, not really.” She said. “I was just remembering something someone told me right after I first move down here, about not falling into the typical gay routine of becoming a .. um…” Her face scrunched a little. “Um..”

“Baby butch?” Dar inquired. “Well, I don’t know... you looked great as a Revolutionary.” She chuckled softly, giving Kerry a pat on the cheek. “But I love the way you look, no matter what it is, Ker. You know that.”

“Mm.”

Dar gave her a one armed hug, and then she went over to the incline board, and took Kerry’s place on it. She adjusted the length, and then settled herself in to start her own set of sit ups – the motion relaxed and easy.

Kerry watched her a moment, then sighed enviously and got up on the stair climber. “What do you think... another twenty minutes? We should leave a little early in this weather.”

“Yeah. Sounds about right.” Dar had her arms crossed over her chest, and was moving up and down steadily. “You said you had to go over to the pier today?”

Kerry increased her pace. “Yep.”

“How about we go there, and then take off.” Dar said. “If you drive, I can get the revisions done on my program, and I won’t feel guilty all damn weekend.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They were both quiet for a few minutes, concentrating on their exercising. Finally after several sets, Dar let herself down on the board and gazed up at the ceiling, sweat dripping liberally across her body. “Hey, Ker?”

An equally dewy blond head lifted. “Hm?”

“Any time you want to quit this and become couch potatoes, just drop me an email, yeah?’

Kerry managed a wry chuckle, as she straightened on her machine and took a swig from the water bottle hung by her wrist. “You got it, baby. You got it.”

They both started laughing, the noise echoing softly off the ceiling of the gym.

* * *

"All right." Dar motioned Mark to follow her into her office. "Let's see what you've got." She walked across the carpet and changed direction at the last minute, going to the small worktable in the corner of her office instead. "Here."

Mark followed her, and put a cardboard box on the desk. "Sorry to grab you so early, DR, but I heard you were taking off today so I figured I'd better do it when I could."

"No problem." Dar perched on one of the two stools behind the worktable. She opened the top of the box and peered curiously inside, reaching in to remove the cellular gadget along with several other miscellaneous bits of hardware.

"Going down south?" Mark asked.

"Yep." Dar set the cell unit down and leaned forward, removing the battery pack and examining the inside surface. "We're taking off after lunch. I'm going with Ker down to the boats, and then we're outta here for the weekend."

"Ah." Mark picked up a second bit of technology and showed it to Dar. "This is the remote interface. I took it apart. It's got a circuit card in it to mask its internal id."

"Huh." Dar took it.

"So, I guess after all that crap you guys needed some time out?"

Dar glanced up. "Not really... we just decided to go down. Why?"

Mark looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Just some stuff I heard." He knew better than to dissemble in front of the ILS CIO. He could get away with it with Kerry on occasion, but those icy blue eyes lanced right through him as Dar's expression changed.

"Now what?" With a look of disgust, Dar dropped the part on the table. "C'mon, spill it. What bullshit are they passing around this time?"

Mark studied the table, wondering for the nth time how he let himself get into situations like this one. Stolid loyalty to Dar? Maybe. "People are saying you guys are having problems."

"Problems?" Dar's tone sounded honestly puzzled. "Mark, we always have problems. Our whole damn job is nothing but problems."

Mark looked up. "No, not here." He took a breath. "Like, between you." He watched Dar's face, feeling a sense of weird relief at the expression of mild confusion that appeared there. "It made like, no sense to me, you know?"

Dar crossed her arms over her chest. “Is this…” She fished for an explanation. “Having something to do with her black eye? I’d heard rumors some idiots think I did that.”

Dar’s reaction wasn’t what he’d been expecting. Mark fingered the piece of gear again. “No, um… it was more like that Kerry’s mad at you and thinking about moving out.” He said. “And that, yeah, I guess you guys were fighting, and that’s how she got a black eye.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Well yeah, I know.” Mark said. “I don’t know where this crap comes from.”

Dar sighed, tossing the bit of technology from her. Then she paused and considered what she was feeling. Impatience, annoyance… “Maybe we should put on a boxing exhibition.” She remarked, with wry humor. “Or... I know. We’ll put on a kissing exhibition in the lobby. How’s that? Think anyone’ll catch a clue we’re not breaking up?”

Mark blushed a little. “Um...”

“I just don’t get it.” Dar gazed thoughtfully at the other side of her office. “We’ve both been hurt before… hell, we’ve spent weeks in slings since Kerry’s started working here. Why all this crap now?” She rested her elbows on the table and shook her head. “Hope Ker doesn’t hear all of it.”

“Me either.” The MIS manager said. “She’s got a mean temper.”

The words made Dar smile a little. “Anyway.” She picked up the cellular device. “Talk to me about this thing. When are its owners coming after it?

Mark gathered his wits and accepted the change of subject. He’d half expected Dar to fly off the handle, or react in some way, and the almost benign indifference she was exhibiting puzzled him. It wasn’t as though he thought the rumors were true – after all, he interacted with his two bosses on a daily basis, and neither of them was great at hiding even minor spats.

Kerry got all nervous when they were disagreeing. She was restless as hell in meetings and she lost her usual even tempered patience when dealing with the staff or the daily problems they often faced. Luckily it never lasted that long, but it was easy to spot.

“I think they’ll be here Monday.” He told Dar. “But the basics are - it’s a remotely accessed cell device.”

“I got that far on my own.” Dar cocked an eyebrow at him.

Now Dar, on the other hand, she'd pull back into her shell, glaring and snapping at everyone. Nobody liked dealing with her when she was like that, but Mark could also remember that nobody had much liked dealing with Dar even when she wasn't like that most of the time before Kerry had entered her life.

So, he knew usually when they were squabbling. Just looking at Dar's relaxed body posture reassured him that nothing like that was going on, so now he considered her previous words and wondered himself, yeah, why now?

Why now? "It doesn't ring like a cell; it just picks up and makes a data link." Mark went on. "It's got a processor chip inside with a couple of pretty squiggy routines burned to ROM."

"DOS?"

"Yeah." Mark nodded. "Subnet scan, mini-sniffer, and that. It's pretty sophisticated." He picked it up and looked at it. "I was trying to think of what the hell legitimate purpose it had for those guys developing it."

Dar snorted.

"Yeah, I got that too."

"No wonder they're coming out here." The tall, dark haired woman got up off the stool. "What you're telling me is that this thing was designed to bust networks from the inside."

"Yeah." Mark agreed. "Pretty much. The slickest thing is, it pops up on the network, listens for a real MAC address, and then spoofs it, so if you have MAC security turned on, it bypasses."

"Hm." Dar juggled the device. "What about these things?" She pointed at the smaller pieces of technology, as she turned her hand and checked her watch. Almost lunchtime. "Anything to tie them back to who planted the damn things?

Mark got up and paced around a bit. "Boss, you sure this isn't from those Telegenics guys? I mean, the time's right, you know? I checked with the projector people, and the tech they sent out here is a guy who's worked for them for like twenty years. He's pretty clean."

Dar put the phone down and leaned back. "It's not them."

"Boss… c'mon. They were the only ones in there from outside the company in weeks." Mark coaxed. "I know it sucks to think they got one over on us, but chasing the cleaning people kinda sucks too."

Dar crossed her arms and visited a dour glare on him.

"Y'know, it does." After so many years, he knew pretty much what he could get away with. "If we know it's them, maybe we can do a jive on the guys coming over here, and get them to spill."

"It's not them." Dar repeated stubbornly. "I don't give a damn how much sense it makes, I'm telling you it's not them. Find another possibility." Part of her acknowledged that Mark was right – believing it was Shari and Michelle burned her guts. But another part of her, the instinctive part that understood people at a base level that was telling her that someone smarter than either of them was behind it.

Was it just wishful thinking? Dar got up and went to her desk, dropping into her chair and putting her booted feet up on it. She was dressed down, glad of the excuse of the pier visit to be wearing her broken in jeans and short topped hiking boots.

"Okay." Mark gave in gracefully and collected his techno-bits. "I'll see what else I can find out." He started to back away towards the door. "Sorry about all the talk and crap."

"Not your fault." Dar picked up her keyboard and put it on her lap. "Just tell everyone from me they're full of shit."

"Will do, boss." Mark disappeared and closed the door behind him.

Dar pecked out a few words, and then paused. She half turned in her chair, as the inner door slammed open and Kerry stormed in, green eyes snapping, hands half clenched, to all intents and purposes a thunderstorm halfway to happening. "Hi."

"Stupid mother mphfing sons of pooters." Kerry spat out. "Do you want to know what kind of horse manure I've had to listen to for the last twenty minutes?"

Kerry was adorable when she was mad, just so long as it wasn't Dar she was mad at. "Let me guess." Dar put her keyboard down. "I hit you. We're breaking up, you're moving out, and maybe... the sky is falling?"

"Augh." Her partner sat herself down on Dar's desk. "I am so pissed."

"I can see that."

"Aren't you?" Kerry frowned. "Dar, this is bullshit!"

Was she? Dar leaned an elbow on Kerry's leg, and wondered about that. "It's bullshit." She agreed. "And I know it's not true, so while I'm aggravated that people are wasting their time, I'm not going to waste mine by blowing my top."

"I know it's not true also." Kerry growled. "But I want to boot these people, Dar. They have no right to talk about us like that. It's insubordination."

True enough. “Do we know who it is?”

Kerry got up and paced around Dar’s desk, still visibly upset. “No one. Everyone.” She groused. “It’s cowardly! No one has the guts to stay something to my face, it’s all damned whispers, or they heard from so and so or...”

Dar rounded the desk and intercepted Kerry, laying her hands on her partner’s shoulders. “Ker, take it easy.

“I’m not going to take it easy.” Kerry shot back. “I’m sick and tired of people just… just…” She let the words trail off. “Heck!” She pulled a square of cardboard from her pocket and tossed it on Dar’s desk. “See that? Some freaking real estate agent was just in my office, saying she heard I was looking for a place.”

Dar’s eyebrows lifted.

“Augh!!!” Kerry balled her fists up fully and shook both of them. “Dar, I am so pissed!!!!!!”

“Shh.” Dar put her arms around Kerry and hugged her. “Take it easy.”

“Grrrr!!!

“We’ll figure out what’s going on.”

Kerry allowed herself to collapse against Dar’s warm body. Her entire insides were tensed in knots, and her anger had really no place to go. “God damn it.” She felt the knots ease, as Dar’s hands rubbed her back. “Someone’s trying to get between us, Dar. You realize that, right?”

“Yes.”

Kerry took in a breath. “And you’re not upset?”

Dar heard the catch in her voice. “Of course I am.”

“You’re just not freaking out.” Her partner exhaled. “Like I am.” She leaned against Dar and let her breathing settle. “Sorry.” She felt the gentle pressure as Dar kissed the top of her head, and suddenly felt very tired as the anger drained away.

Jerks.

Just…. Jerks.

* * *

Kerry was still unsettled as they walked across the parking lot towards the ship buildings. She'd considered putting out a scathing memo, but Dar had convinced her not to, reasoning with her that making a big deal out of the whole thing would just cause more talk.

She knew that was true, but she didn't have to like it. Kerry booted a small rock across the parking lot, glad of her heavily tinted sunglasses protecting her eyes against the glare. The late afternoon thunderstorms hadn't built up yet, and the sun was beating down them as they walked, making even her light cotton shirt feel like it weighed a ton.

"You all right?" Dar asked.

"Yeah." Kerry replied. "Just thinking."

They both stepped over a parking bumper in unison, and then continued on. Dar looked between the buildings to where the ships were moored, seeing a great deal of activity around them. Cranes had been set up as well, and men were working all over the place. She could hear rivet guns working, and the sound of saws and sledge hammers, beating away at the aged metal hulls.

There was a scent of ozone in the air, from the welding torches being used, and as they moved closer, they could hear the rough voices of the workers calling out. Kerry resolutely pushed her lingering frazzles back and turned her attention to the project, hoping their wiring team had been able to make some progress. "Looks like a mess."

"Mm." Dar stepped around a jagged pothole in the road and produced her identification as they approached the door to the pier building. The guard barely looked at it, and then just stepped to one side so they could walk inside.

"Warm and fuzzy." Kerry muttered.

"Right there with you." Her partner agreed, taking off her sunglasses as they entered the building's gloom. She could hear raised voices from the back office, and headed in that direction with Kerry at her heels. They rounded the corner and saw two men at the door to the office, facing off against their security guard and the office manager Kerry had assigned to the building. "What's going on here?" Dar asked crisply.

The two men turned, and the two ILS employees' faces brightened when they spotted Dar and Kerry. "Ma'am, I'm glad you're here." The guard addressed Dar. "These gentlemen are demanding we give them access to our switches in here."

Kerry removed her sunglasses, and gave the men a direct stare. "This should be good. For what?"

The two men appeared caught slightly off guard. “We had a report someone in this office was trying to hack in to the ports network.” The man nearest Dar said. “We need to check it out.”

Dar looked him up and down. “Buddy, if I was hacking into your network, you’d never know it.” She said. “You don’t get access to anything. You have a problem with that, have your boss call me.” Digging in her wallet, she pulled out a business card and handed it to the man. “Now, excuse us.”

The man looked at her card, and then gave Dar a dour look. “Lady, we don’t need your permission to go anywhere on this port. I was just being nice. I’m going to stop being nice now.”

“I’m going to call the police now.” Dar replied. “Since this space has been bought and paid for, and isn’t part of the port for the time being.”

Kerry removed her cell phone and dialed it, content to let her partner exercise her kickass gene. “Hello, yes. Can I speak to someone about intruders on my property?”

The man pointed Dar’s card at her. “I’ll go get our security, and be right back. Don’t go anywhere, lady.” He brushed past Kerry and walked out, followed by his silent companion.

Kerry waited for him to turn the corner, and then she folded her phone shut. “Hm.”

Dar edged past the guard and headed into the office. “I’ll check the damn thing. With my luck, it’s in a loop and the bastards think it’s trying to attack them.” She headed for a nearby workstation, sitting down in front of it and keying in her own login.

“Hi, Cheryl.” Kerry stuck her phone back on her belt. “So, other than the goon squad visiting, how are things going?”

The office manager had perched on the corner of one of the staid gray laminate desks they’d stocked the office with. She was a good looking woman of perhaps forty, with ginger colored hair and gray eyes. Dressed in jeans and a neatly pressed, floral shirt, she appeared comfortable if a bit harried. “Oh, well... actually, things are going pretty good, ma’am.”

“Ahem.”

Cheryl smiled slightly. “Sorry, Kerry.” She cleared her throat. “The wiring guys have been killing themselves to get work done. They’ve turned off most of the AC inside the ship and the other vendors have been giving us a very hard time.”

Kerry entered the office and leaned against the wall. “Deliberately?”

"No, I don't think so. It's just very close quarters, and everyone wants to get their part done and get out of there. We're fighting with the electrical and air conditioning people right now."

"Ah."

Dar half listened to the conversation, as she poked around inside the switch they'd installed in the office. The inoffensive green box was mounted in a rack near the back of the room, with a locked door and sides around it. Dar scanned the contents of it, then abandoned the relatively un-intelligent device and switched to their router instead. "I don't know what the hell those guys are talking about. We're not even touching their network."

She checked the router's interfaces just to be sure. The piece of gear had been a spare in their office, and only two of the interfaces were in use, but she investigated the others to make sure they were properly turned off, and that no one had plugged something into them they shouldn't have.

Everything appeared clean. Dar got up and went to the rack, opening its door with the universal key she kept on her ring. She checked the cables on the front then went around to the back and stuck her head inside the cabinet, a warm gust of vented air blowing against her face carrying the distinct scent of electrons to her.

"Anything?" Kerry peeked in the front and peered between the switch and the router at her, the edges of the gear framing her sea green eyes.

"Nah."

"Should we call the cops, Dar? I don't think those guys are going to take no for an answer again, even from you." The blond woman lowered her voice. "I really don't want to be involved in a dockside brawl."

Dar rested her chin on the switch. "We could call my dad. Then you could just watch a dockside brawl instead of be in one." She removed her head from the cabinet and closed the door, locking it carefully. Walking around to the front, she extracted Kerry from the rack and shut the front panel as well. "Now that I'm sure we're clean, maybe I'll be nice and let them look. But don't count on it."

"Huh." Kerry leaned against the rack. "What would make them think something was coming from here, then?"

Good question. Dar bit the inside of her lip gently. "Did we have the circuit pinned down right into here?"

"Yes." Kerry nodded. "I could have had it into the central telco closet, but I elected to pay the extra bucks and have them drop it directly into this room." She pointed to a sedate, locked, gray box on the wall. "There."

"Nice." Dar said approvingly.

"Kerry, we did get this today." Cheryl came over and offered Kerry a fax. "It's the pre-order shipping list for the network gear."

Kerry studied the paper. "Good." She said. "Do we have a completion yet from the wiring guys?"

"No." Cheryl shook her head. "And my problem is, if this stuff shows up before they're done, we're going to have to find someplace to store it all. I don't think it'll fit in here."

Kerry looked around at the interior of the somewhat dingy office. She'd had a cleaning service come in, but the walls really needed a coat of paint in stead of the scrubbing they'd done, and she could still smell the sharp scent of new office carpet underfoot. "We'll need some place to set the gear up before it goes on the ship, too."

"Yes."

That meant she had to rent more space. More expenses to charge against the project, which was already expensive and she was under pressure to deliver a price to Quest that was bare minimum. Kerry sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

Footsteps made them all look up, but it was only John, the wiring contractor who entered. "Afternoon!" He noticed Dar near the rack and gave her a wry grin. "Should have put in ten percent just for aggravation. My god, those people are a ratchety bunch."

"The ship people?" Kerry was mildly surprised. "I thought we ironed things out with them?"

"Ah." John went to the small refrigerator in the back of the office and removed a soda, popping it open and taking a swallow. "It's the engine guys. They get their pusses into everything in there – want to know what I'm doing, where I'm doing it, what kind of cable… for the love of god, what part of shielded twisted pair are they not getting? Damn chief engineer made me give him a sample this morning."

Dar and Kerry exchanged looks. "Well, after we arm wrestle the pier people; we can go talk to the captain." Kerry said, with a sigh.

"Good idea." Her partner agreed. "Ah, here comes the goon squad now." She watched through the open office door as a group of men rounded the corner and headed in their direction. The two men they'd chased out earlier were in the lead, with three other men, big guys in jackets, coming after them.

“What the hell’s up with that?” John wondered. “Who are those guys?”

Kerry moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Dar, in front of the network rack. If she stopped to think about it, the entire situation was almost sublime in its ridiculousness. Intelligent human beings did not put their bodies on the line for enterprise switches, no matter how expensive they were.

Dar folded her arms, and fixed the men with a cool, blue glare.

On the other hand, Kerry smiled inwardly; smart guys didn’t mess with Dar, either. Watching the group approach, she had to acknowledge that she could almost smell the stupidity in the air.

Her nose wrinkled, and she hoped Andrew had gotten her note.

* * *

The scent of acrid, hot oil attracted Andrew’s attention as he crossed over the gangway into the ship. He stopped midway and leaned over the rail, peering down at the green water with a frown. The surface appeared clear, but the smell continued, and he stepped back off the gangway to walk along the edge of the pier.

With all the construction going on around, there were chemicals and stinks everywhere. But to someone who had spent as much time as Andrew had on ships, certain smells always meant trouble, and diesel oil was one of them.

He walked along the ship, pausing to look down between the hull and the water, until he was halfway down. Then his eyes caught a parti-color reflection on the surface that caught the sun in a bad way. The smell was much stronger, and as he knelt down and examined the slick, he also heard a faint grinding sound from inside the ship.

“Wall.” Andy sat down on the concrete and let his legs dangle over the side. “That does not sound like any good thing.”

The surface of the water was shiny with oil, and the slight current was taking the slick forward of the ship, heading out the cut and towards the sea. Boats discharging into the ocean weren’t a rare thing, but he knew cruise ships were watched closely, and fined if they were found doing it.

He kicked his boots against the seawall, regarding the slick. If he looked all the way down the channel, he could see the oily reflection extending past the ship he was working on, past the space between the piers, and on towards the ship Dar and Kerry were taking care of.

Andrew's brow creased a little. He pushed himself to his feet and walked towards the other ship. The sun revealed the slick extending to the rear of it, as he'd suspected, but as he closed in on the other vessel, he could see that an oily residue seemed to be seeping from it, as well.

Midway between the ships, Andrew stopped and put his hands on his denim clad hips. Several workmen passing by looked at him, but none spoke. He stood there regarding the water, considering his options. "If I saw this here stuff, sure a hell everyone else did too."

"Hey, Ugly!"

Andrew turned, to see the supervisor near the gangway of his ship. He pondered a moment longer, then turned and headed towards the man, ambling along with deceptive speed until he caught him up. "Lo."

"Hey, what the heck are you doing out there, looking for fish?" The supervisor asked. "I thought you were supposed to be checking in that new order."

Andrew leaned on the gangway railing. "This here ship and that one down yonder are leaking oil." He said. "Them uniforms gonna bust someone up for that?"

The supervisor jumped off the gangway and went to the side of the pier, looking over. "Shit." He glanced both ways. "I told those guys…. Man, if the environmental people see this, they're going to pitch a fit."

Andrew's pale blue eyes rested briefly on the supervisor's face, then drifted off again to the water. "Yeap." He agreed. "Them gov'mint types too."

"Nah." The other man shook his head. "They got that paid off… but if one of those mangrove huggers see it… well, crap. Let me go make a phone call. You go get that box unloaded before those damn women show up again."

Andrew watched him walk off. "Huh." He slowly started across the gangway again. "Paid off them gov'mint types, didja?" His pocket started beeping, and he stopped, tugging the cell phone out of his pocket and opening it.

Rather than ringing, it was displaying a symbol he'd never seen before. After a moment's thought, he punched the buttons over the flashing icon, and was rewarded by text scrolling across the phone's screen. "What'n the hell is…" The words penetrated, and he turned around, heading off the gangway as he stuffed the phone back into his pocket. "Ah swear them little girls get into more hellfire trouble than a Humvee full of wet swabs."

"Hey!"

Andrew heard the hail, but paid it no mind. He broke into a loping run, picking up the pace as he headed for the port buildings.

* * *

‘All right, lady. I don’t know what you think the rules are here, but let me just let you in on a little secret.” The biggest of the port security men addressed Dar. “You don’t own this place. We do. So step aside and let this guy do his job, okay?”

Dar didn’t budge. “No.” She stated flatly. “I don’t own this place, but I own this gear, and you’re not touching it.”

“We are going to touch it, and you’re going to just move aside and let us.” The security chief stepped towards the equipment in question, clearly expecting both Dar and Kerry to move aside. Cheryl was already standing near the wall away from them, and the security guard from ILS was behind them.

“Kiss my ass.” Dar suggested. “And make sure your lawyer’s on speed dial.”

The security officers shifted, and looked at their leader. Dar was standing in front of the equipment rack, leaning against it in fact, and showed no signs of moving. Kerry was standing next to her, also clearly challenging their authority with her hands balled into fists and planted on her hips.

“C’mon, we need to get this done.” The port technician said.

“I don’t really see what your point is.” Kerry said. “There’s no attack coming from here.”

“Not according to this.” The tech held up a sheaf of papers. “There’s a probe coming from this location, and frankly, I don’t give shit what you think my point is. I think we should call the cops and just have you thrown out and shut down. This is a security area.”

“Is that what you want, lady?” The security chief asked Dar, as he stopped with in reach of her. “Why not just move, make it easy for all of us?” He suggested. “Because the fact is, this is government area, and I can throw your asses out of here if I want to.”

“You can try.” Dar warned, in a soft voice.

“Excuse me.” Kerry finally felt her interjection would be appropriate. “I tell you what. We’ll let you look at our equipment...”

Dar gave her an outraged look. “Kerrison.”

Kerry reached out without looking and put a hand on her partner’s back. “If you can explain to me how it can be affecting your systems when there are no wires connecting us to you?” Kerry finished.

The security officials turned and looked at the technicians.

“Can you explain that?” Kerry gave Dar’s back a little scratch, feeling the shift as her partner relaxed a trifle.

The security chief turned to the port tech. “Can you?”

“Sure they’d say there’s no connection.” The port tech laughed. “They’re not stupid.” He held up the papers. “This trace shows as coming from this location. Can you explain that?”

Kerry stepped forward and reached out for the papers. “Let me see them.”

“No way.” The tech jerked them back.

The security officer turned to Kerry. “Can’t you just let him look?” He asked. “It’s almost quitting time, lady. I don’t want to be filling out paperwork all night, y’know?”

“No.” Dar reasserted herself. “This is a secure network. Nothing goes on it that isn’t our hardware.”

“Okay, then you’re admitting to hacking us. That’s pretty clear. So get them out of here, and let’s do what we need to do.” The tech said. “We’re wasting time.”

“Our time.” Dar said. “But if you throw us out of this room, you’ll be wasting more than that. Your boss better be ready for a very expensive lesson.” Instead of standing back, she now advanced on both the tech and the security guy. “And your boss, if you decide to put a finger on anyone.” She warned the bigger man. “Because I don’t give a damn what rules and what regulations this damn piss poor port runs under, I guarantee if I go high enough up in the chain around here, someone’s going to get FIRED.” Her voice rose with each word until the last one was a shouted bark. “Now get the hell out of here!”

Kerry planted herself squarely behind her partner, her heart beating fast as she hoped the men would back off. Not that she doubted Dar’s threats were real – after all, she knew darn well they were in the right – but the men looked like they were used to getting their way, and she didn’t want to see her lover hurt.

“Wall.” A new voice interrupted the chaos briefly. The men turned as Andrew slipped into the room, ducking around the desk to end up next to Dar. “What’s all the hollering about, Dardar?”

Kerry relaxed against the rack, reassured now they weren’t going to get bruised in any way. The ILS security guard, apparently emboldened by the new arrival, also came around the desk and stood facing the bad guys as well.

Cheryl slipped around and came up next to her, wide eyed. “Jesus.” She whispered. “What in the heck’s going on around here?”

Good question. Kerry observed the bristling antagonism in the room, and felt compelled to try and circumvent it again, though her first attempt had been a dismal failure. “Okay, folks.” She edged around Andrew’s bulk and got in front of him. “Tell you what. This is going nowhere. How about you show me what makes you think anything’s coming from here, and if it’s our stuff, we’ll let you look at this end.”

Dar actually growled, low and deep in her throat. Kerry decided to pretend she didn’t hear it, and waited for the technician to answer. “It’s the best deal you’ll get. Otherwise, I think we’re really talking police here, because without seeing that, I agree with Dar. You’re not getting access to our corporate systems. No way.”

The security chief decided to take control now. “Give me that.” He reached over and grabbed the papers from the tech, who squawked in protest. Shuffling them, he handed them over to Kerry, holding out a hand to stop the tech from advancing. “Stop it. I’m not missing my beer because of you.”

Kerry glanced at the trace, her eyes flicking over the details as she moved closer to Dar. “Here.” Dar put a hand on her shoulder and read the page as well. “What do you think?”

Dar’s brow creased. The trace without a doubt contained one of their addresses, but… she leaned closer. “That’s not our router.” She indicated the resolved name. “Someone’s spoofing us.”

“Oh, sure.”

“It’s an MCI router.” Kerry told him. “The building’s lit with Bellsouth. You should know that.”

The tech grabbed the paper back and looked at it. “No way.”

Dar shifted her position and now leaned her arm on Kerry’s shoulder. “Sorry. She’s right.”

“Someone making trouble for you all?” Andy asked.

The security chief now appeared impatient and bored, rather than impatient and menacing. “Okay, so it’s not them. Let’s get out of here, and you can figure out who it is, right?” He edged away from Dar. “Sorry about that, but you know security’s a touchy subject around here. We got a lot of merchandise going through the port.”

“Uh huh.” Dar snorted. She reached over and grabbed the papers back. “Give me that. I’ve got a lot better chance of finding the damn pirate than you do.” Inside, she was rattled. Seeing their own IP structure in the trace had mad her heart race, just long enough to make her lightheaded before she realized the source wasn’t inside their network.

Someone was taking a lot of time and effort to cause trouble, all right. Question was, who? Was it hackers still trying to embarrass her, or … well, hell, what were the chances some hacker would pick this particular target?

"You can't have that – it's restricted information." The tech protested.

"Yeah, well, she sure looks like she can do more with it than you can, buddy. Move." The security chief knew when to cut his losses, surprisingly. "Next time you call us, try to have your act together, huh?" He and his men herded the techs out of the office.

Dar folded the paper in her hand in half, sharpening the crease with intense, precise motions. She waited for the men to all leave and disappear around the corner before she half turned to look at the rest of the people in the room. "Hi, dad." She murmured. "Was I yelling loud enough for you to hear me outside?"

"Naw." Andy retrieved his cell phone and held it up. "Kumquat sent me a note thing."

Kerry sat down on the edge of the desk. "What the heck was that?" She looked up at Dar. "Can you trace it, from those notes?"

"I don't know." Dar half shrugged. "But I guess I'll find out." She added. "I'm sure someone was trying to make it look like we're doing something wrong."

Kerry's eyes darkened, and she narrowed them. "Oh, I can't imagine anyone would want to do that." She replied sarcastically. "But Dar, who says they won't try it again? This location's so vulnerable."

Cheryl sidled up, with a worried look on her face. "She's right about that." She gave the security guard an apologetic look. "No offense, Charles, but you wouldn't have stopped those guys if they'd charged in here."

The guard didn't look embarrassed. "No, ma'am.' He agreed. "But I would have called the police. We're not bouncers." He looked at Dar and Kerry. "Ah, not that…"

"Why not? I've got a black eye... maybe we moonlight." Kerry remarked dryly.

Andrew chuckled under his breath. Dar gave him a look, then folded the paper into quarters and stuck it in her back pocket. She walked past them to the rack, circling it as she considered her options. The box on the wall was connected to their gear by a set of conduits running through the drop ceiling.

Dar walked over and grabbed a chair, dragging it behind her until it was behind the rack. She climbed up onto it and punched the ceiling panel up, shoving it up and into the framing as she stuck her head up into the dark space.

The rest of the room's occupants looked at each other. Cheryl gave Kerry a slight shrug, and then she went back to her desk and sat down. The security guard sidled back out to his station in the hallway, leaving Kerry and Andrew standing in the center of the space.

"Long as there ain't no more hollering, I'm going to get back to mah work." Andrew said. "Them fellers don't much like when folks wander off."

"Thanks for coming over, dad." Kerry told him. "I just wasn't sure what was going to happen."

"No problem, kumquat." Andy told her. "You find anything up there, Dar?"

"Dustbunnies with fangs." Dar sneezed. "Thanks for asking." She looked down for a moment. "Thanks for coming over to make sure we weren't in trouble, too."

Andrew patted her leg. "No problem, squirt. See y'all later." He headed for the door, giving Cheryl a brief nod as he passed her. "Lo."

"Hi." The office worker waggled her fingers at him. "Bye."

Dar put her head back up into the ceiling, her eyes tracing the conduit. It moved in an unbroken curve from where it dropped down to her rack, up through the drop panel, was bracketed to the concrete true ceiling, and then dropped back down through the panel to the box on the wall.

No taps, no junction boxes. Dar felt better. She tugged the ceiling panel back into place, then pulled her way along the drop ceiling as she balanced on the chair, it's wheels squeaking in protest.

"Dar!" Kerry popped up off the desk and grabbed hold of the chair back as it threatened to squirt out from under her partner. "Careful!"

"Ah, with any luck, I'll fall on my head." Dar now carefully examined the box on the wall, unlatching it and swinging it open. Inside was an ordinary T1 CSU, with no other lines except the one they were using on it. With a satisfied grunt, she closed and latched it. "Put a lock on that." She ordered Cheryl, as she turned and hopped off the chair. "No one goes near it, no one touches it, no one does anything do that unless I'm standing here watching. Got me?"

"Yes, ma'am." Cheryl nodded.

Dar dusted her hands off, her eyes falling on Kerry as she reached for the chair to move it back. Her partner had her fingers resting on the rack, a look of quiet pensiveness on her face.

Sensing the attention, Kerry looked up. “Maybe we should stick around here this weekend?” She suggested.

Perhaps they should. Dar acknowledged silently. There was too much going on, too many loose ends for them to just take off out of town, really. She could see the agreement with that in Kerry’s posture, the slight relaxing of her shoulder muscles that almost, but did not quite seem like a slump. “No.” She was surprised to hear herself saying. “We’ve got a line at the cabin and our cell phones. C’mon.” She tapped Kerry on the arm and pointed to the door. “Let’s go onboard, and get moving.”

Without further argument, Kerry simply nodded, and headed for the door. Dar followed her, wondering if that decision, too, wouldn’t come back to bite her in a bad, bad way.

Kerry half turned as she caught up with her, and smiled, a sparkle entering her eyes. Dar returned the smile, and decided the risk was more than worth the reward.

She was sure of it.

PART 19

C'MON, CHI.. IN YOU GO." DAR HELD THE DOOR TO THE CABIN OPEN, ALLOWING THE rest of her family to enter before she stepped over the threshold and followed them inside.

It was dark, close to ten pm, and later than either of them had expected them to arrive after traffic and a stop at a tiki hut intervened. But it had been a nice drive even so, and Dar didn't regret it as she detoured towards the wall switches.

Ah. She turned the lamps on and gazed around appreciatively. *Definitely worth the trip.*

Kerry dropped her overnight bag on the couch as she headed for the cabin's kitchen, putting the bags she was carrying down on the stone countertop just inside the door. She whistled softly under her breath as she put away the supplies they'd picked up, listening to Dar ramble around putting on the air conditioning and flipping on the lights.

It felt very good to be here. Kerry opened the cabinet after she finished, taking out a coffee filter and going about the task of putting them up a little coffee after the long drive. The cabin was now finished, and she leaned on the counter as the hot beverage brewed, looking out over the interior with a sense of pleasure.

The living area had a long couch against the wall, it's ends curving around to make a huge seating pit across from a wood enclosed television set. The furniture was overstuffed and comfortable, butter soft green leather that blended with the stone floors and wooden walls.

There were woven richly colored carpets scattered around, and in one corner a large round dog bed that Chino was busy scratching and snuffling at. On the walls were a few pictures, one piece of Dar's mother's art, and some of Kerry's photography.

Overall, the impression was one of a richly appointed, if very small, hunting lodge, except it had no tacky animal heads on the wall and there was a distinct lack of testosterone.

Kerry turned around in the room she was in. The kitchen had it's stone countertops, a polished and cool granite, which framed the gas stove and brushed stainless refrigerator, and blue shutters that closed over the window above the sink.

Rustic. Except that there were wireless access points mounted sedately on the walls near the ceiling, the television was a flat plasma display, and the entire cabin was hooked up to a remote monitoring system that could have let her turn on the air and the coffee from the car on the way up if she'd really put her mind to it.

But she hadn't. Kerry smiled as Dar appeared from the bedroom, having already traded her jeans and crisp cotton blouse for a pair of shorts and an old, ratty t-shirt. "Know what?"

Dar walked over and leaned on the other side of the counter from her. "You're glad we're here." She said. "So am I."

Yes, she was glad. Kerry sighed happily. It felt so calm and peaceful here in the cabin, with the sound of the ocean audible through the sliding doors that opened onto their big porch. Which was a little funny, because their condo on the island was equally quiet, and had an equally close relationship to the sea – and yet, she always felt different when she was here. "I am very happy to be here, yes." She said. "But what I was going to say was, how about a bowl of designer popcorn, and a movie?"

"You don't need to ask me twice." Dar replied instantly. "Tell you what, I'll fix the coffee up while you go change."

"You don't need to ask me twice." Kerry repeated, doing a little dance as she exited the kitchen, bumping hips with Dar on her way to the bedroom. "Pick something gory."

"Only if you promise not to use that red candid apple stuff on the popcorn." Dar took her place in the kitchen, taking down a set of mugs and putting them down on the counter. "Gave me night mares the last time."

Kerry chuckled as she entered their bedroom, smiling as she bypassed the neatly made waterbed and the mahogany dressers that held the clothing they now left at the cabin all the time. They'd picked ocean colors for the bedroom – blues and greens, with the odd punch of color, fiery orange and red, as though tropical fish had made an unexpected appearance. Over the floor to ceiling windows on both sides were stained glass panels, throwing warm bars of color when the sun slanted through them.

She loved this room. Kerry unfastened her jeans and slipped out of them, folding them neatly and putting them on the shelf inside the closet. She put her hiking boots next to them, and then removed her shirt, hanging it up as she traded it for a shirt of Dar's, which hung down halfway to her kneecaps.

Chino trotted in to find her, tail wagging as she spotted Kerry and rushed over to bump her knees. "Hi, sweetie.. did mommy Dar send you in here after me?"

"Growf."

"Okay, well here I am." Kerry reached down to pat the dog's head. "Are you glad we're here too?"

Chino wagged her tail even more furiously. The Labrador enjoyed the cabin almost as much as her owners did, her favorite activity chasing the crabs down the beach just outside.

Kerry gave the soft ears one more scratch, then she patted her leg and headed back out into the living room. Dar was just emerging from the kitchen with the coffee cups, and she paused to put them down on the counter as Kerry passed her. "Ker?"

Willingly, Kerry detoured, swinging around and coming nose to nose with her partner. "Yes?"

Dar leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. Then she rubbed noses with her. "I love you." She rested her forehead against Kerry's. "Do you care if it rains tomorrow?"

"Hell no."

"Me either."

Kerry leaned in for another kiss, then she reluctantly backed off and ducked into the kitchen. "How do you feel about milk chocolate and caramel?" She asked, removing a package of popping corn from the refrigerator.

One of Dar's eyebrows waggled. "Lose the corn, shortie." She drawled, in her sexiest voice.

Kerry started laughing.

"Wasn't the reaction I was going for." Dar complained.

"I know." The blond woman got the corn in the popper. "But I was just imagining the godawful mess."

"Harumph." Dar took a sip of her coffee.

Kerry looked at her, then left her corn to pop as she climbed up onto the counter and leaned across it, capturing Dar's lips just as she managed to swallow. "You can drizzle

me whenever you want, my love." She leaned even closer, whispering in Dar's ear. "But caramel hardens in really, really awkward places."

Now it was Dar's turn to laugh, almost making her spill her coffee.

Satisfied with the reaction, Kerry got down off the counter and retrieved the small containers of sweets, sticking them in the microwave to heat up as the corn started popping in the popper. "You know, I'd love it if it rained tomorrow. I would absolutely adore a day to just lay around and be a complete bum."

"You can do that if it's sunny." Dar walked around the counter, handing Kerry her coffee.

"Nah. If it's sunny, I just have to be outside messing around on the beach, or in the water, or on the bike…" Kerry demurred. "I feel so guilty being a couch potato when it's pretty out."

"Eh." Dar had no such problem, having learned to take her slothdom where she found it. "Well, if it's nice out, I'll fish for dinner. How's that?"

Hm. Kerry removed the corn from the popper, putting into the huge round bowl obtained specifically for the purpose. She drizzled her additives over it and tossed the corn. "I think that sounds spectacular." She looked over her shoulder at Dar and grinned.

Dar grinned back. They took the corn and the coffee and curled up together on the couch. Kerry leaned back and felt the aggravation of the week dissolve as Dar wrapped both arms around her. Even the tension of the ship, where the wiring had slipped behind schedule eased into that place she reserved for things she had limited control over.

John was going as fast as he could. The conditions in the ship were hellacious, there was intermittent power, and no air, and even Dar had come off the vessel shaking her head.

Kerry could not change the conditions. All she could do is press John to meet his commitment, because time was running short and she had a deadline herself.

Here, she could release all that, putting it aside until Monday. Even in the condo, that was hard to do because all she needed was to walk outside and she could see the ship from there. In the cabin, there was only peace, the sea, and the warmth of Dar's body pressing against hers.

She picked up a popcorn and offered it to Dar, who accepted it, licking the chocolate drizzle off her fingers as she took it between her teeth. "Can I ask you something?" She looked away from the opening credits of the bare chested hack and slasher her beloved partner had selected and peered back over her shoulder.

"Sure." Dar opened her mouth and poked her tongue out, looking inquiringly at the bowl.

Kerry placed another corn on the pink appendage and watched it disappear. "I was a lot more pissed off about all the bullpoop talk at the office than you were."

“Was that a question?”

“Erm.. no. I guess I was just…” Kerry paused. “I guess you’re just used to it, huh?”

Dar’s hold tightened. “No.” She gazed reflectively past Kerry’s shoulder. “I just knew none of it was true, so I didn’t care.”

Kerry’s brow creased.

“The last time I heard stuff like that, it was.” Her partner clarified quietly. “And the time before that, and etc.” Her shoulders moved in a faint shrug. “All I felt was just this sense of relief, honestly. As long as you know the truth, nothing else matters.”

There were faint reflections in the depths of Dar’s eyes. Kerry disregarded the movie and the popcorn, half turning to lay her hand gently on Dar’s cheek. “Nothing else does matter.” She said. “I never thought about that, you know? About how it was before for you.”

“Mm.” Dar blinked peacefully at her. “It sucked.” She said. “Especially the last time. Everyone took a..” She paused a second. “certain glee in our very, very public breakup.”

Kerry rubbed the side of her thumb against Dar’s skin. “Well, if I’d been there..”

“If you’d been there, it’d have been a moot point.”

“Okay, well, if I’d been there and we hadn’t been together…” Kerry restarted.

“You think that’s really likely??”

Kerry shifted her hand to cover Dar’s mouth. “Let me finish my over the top declaration, please.” She scolded. “If I’d been there, and we hadn’t been together, and we were just friends, I would have taken the biggest mallet I could find and gone around whacking all those bastards on the head like moles.” She removed her hand and leaned closer. “Do you believe that?”

“Oh yeah.” Dar agreed instantly. “You have the staff scared spitless. They’d rather spill gossip to me than dare to tell you about it.”

Kerry’s eyebrow cocked. “Really?”

“Really.” Dar kissed her. “So yes, Kerrison, I believe that with all my heart.”

“Oo.” Kerry nibbled a piece of corn. “I feel like such a mercenary.” She let her head rest against her partner’s. “Grr. You bring out the beast in me.”

Dar eyed her, a grin surfacing immediately. “I’d buy that a lot faster if you didn’t have that cute smile, Ker.”

Kerry solemnly stuck her tongue out, then licked Dar’s nose with it.

Dar reveled in their closeness, feeling a simple happiness not only in having Kerry in her arms, but in being here in this place that was so much a part of both of them. The troubles at work niggled at the very periphery of her conscience, but she ignored that, leaving the potential issues for the daylight.

Tonight didn't belong to work, it belonged to them. Dar poked her tongue out for another popcorn, and they settled in to watch the mayhem.

* * *

As it happened, it rained the next day. Kerry was in her glory, lounging in her pajamas on the couch watching luridly violent, yet curiously satisfying cartoons. Dar was stretched out facing her, the length of the furniture explicitly planned for so that they both could relax on it at the same time.

"Mm." Kerry wiggled her toes against her partner's, grinning as Dar responded. While purchasing leather furniture didn't usually involve measuring for footsies, in their case they'd decided to make everything in the cabin fit them to a T.

Even the chairs outside on the porch did. Hers was a little smaller, with a shorter seat, and Dar's had a length that fit her long legs perfectly. Precious, perhaps, and a bit pretentious, but as Dar had said at the time, they could afford it and it lasted longer than an ice cream cone.

At least they hadn't had the towels embroidered with Hers and Hers. "Find anything yet?" Kerry asked.

"Nope." Dar had her laptop balanced on her thighs. "So far, nada. That MCI router exists, but they swear nothing in it's got our IP."

"Uh huh." Kerry put her head down on the plush leather couch arm. "You they're covering up, or just clueless?"

"Eh. Let me threaten more people. I'll let you know."

Sounded like a fine idea to Kerry. She stifled a yawn as she watched the animated characters thrash and dance their way across the screen, reminded suddenly of her little friend Gopher Dar. "Are you messing with that program a lot more?"

Dar's fingers stopped moving, and she peered at Kerry over the top of her laptop screen. "That program." She repeated. "You mean.." She made a face, and chattered.

"Yeah."

Dar continued typing for a bit in silence, thinking about the question.

"I thought maybe you were getting a little bored." Kerry suggested. "So you were using that to keep yourself interested."

"No." Her partner shook her head. "Actually, I think I've just been lonely."

Kerry rolled over and looked at her in surprise.

"That's my way of hanging out with you when we're both busy." Dar had most of her concentration focused on her screen, and was unaware of Kerry's rapt attention. "I'd be sitting in my office.. c'mon, you bastard… and I'd be on this stupid, pointless conference call wishing I was out on the boat with you instead – and all of a sudden some new idea for the damn thing would occur to me. New t-shirt, new dance.. I finally got the vocal program working the other day…"

"I noticed." Kerry replied quietly, now understanding the message it had conveyed.

"Anyway, it's more interesting than listening to people bicker about their budgets."

Kerry studied her partner's angular face, watching the pale eyes flick over the screen with restless energy. "Dar?"

"Hm?" Dar looked up.

"Do you… not like what you're doing now?"

Dar's brow creased. She thought for a moment, then cleared her throat a little. "I don't know, really. It's not so bad most of the time."

Kerry got to her knees and scrambled forward, sprawling over Dar's legs to get closer to her. "You liked what you were doing before though, right?"

Dar shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"I took your job."

The dark haired woman chuckled easily. "No you didn't. I horse wrangled you into the position over your protest, if I recall correctly." She set the laptop aside. "Besides, you do it better than I did."

Kerry crawled up further. "That's not the point, Dar." She objected. "Not if you're not happy because of it."

"Happy?" Dar took hold of her and pulled her up further, until Kerry was half lying on top of her, their limbs tangled in a warm mess. "I have never in my life been happier."

Kerry rested her chin on Dar's shoulder. "That's not what I.."

"I know. But it's the truth." Dar nuzzled her hair.

Perplexed, Kerry fell silent, not really sure of what to say next anyway. Maybe, as Dar had hinted, it was time for her to change, and move on to do something else. The thought

made her anxious, though, and she had to admit if only privately that the last thing she wanted from a professional standpoint is for Dar to leave the company.

Maybe they should both leave. Kerry liked that idea better. They'd talked around the idea of forming their own business for the longest time – maybe it was really time to get off their butts and do something about it.

She put her arm over Dar's stomach and squiggled down between her and the couch, liking the view from this end better anyway. She thought for a bit about her own job, and whether or not she liked it as much as she had when she'd started.

It was okay, she finally decided. The one big problem with it was that it never really allowed a sense of completion of anything. It was always one situation after another, after another, after another. There was never really any time when she could sit back and feel satisfied with where she, and by extension, the company, was.

Would that ever change? Kerry doubted it. She was about to mention her revelation to Dar, when her cell phone rang, as though punctuating her thoughts with eerie precision. With a sigh, she took the instrument Dar handed her, and opened it. "Hello?"

"Ms. Stuart?"

You called my cell phone. Who else did you expect to be answering it, my dog? "Yes?"

"This is Justin in operations, ma'am." The voice replied. "I'm sorry to bother you on the weekend, but I had note in the log about a file transfer on the financial lines?"

Kerry glanced up at Dar, who was now listening. "Yes. Is it happening again?"

"Well, I'm not sure, ma'am. I'm just seeing a lot of traffic on that line, and it's sort of unusual for a Saturday, you know?"

Dar picked up her laptop as Kerry straightened to give her room.

"Yes, I understand." Kerry said. "Okay, we'll take a look at it, Justin. Thanks for calling me. Did anyone from the bank contact you?"

The tech sounded surprised at the question. "On a Saturday? No, ma'am. They sure didn't." He said. "I've notified my boss, and he's checking it out too, but he thought maybe you'd be interested in hearing it also."

Dar switched off the program she'd been using and opened up her network systems instead. "Got that right."

"He's spot on." Kerry told the tech. "Thanks for calling me, and let me know if anything changes, okay?"

"Yes ma'am, I sure will." Justin promised.

Kerry hung up and squirmed around so she could see the laptop screen. “I am getting really freaking annoyed at all this crap, Dar.”

“Mm. Sorry.” Dar was typing quickly. “My stupid fault.” She accessed the circuit in question and reviewed it. “Damn it, he’s right.” She sighed. “Same crap as before.. I’m going to just cut it off.”

“Don’t you want to try and trace it?”

Dar’s fingers hesitated. “I don’t think we can risk it.” She admitted. “I don’t know what this is, Ker. It’s too dangerous on the bank lines.” She typed in another command. “I’ll grab what I can, then dump the connection.”

Kerry watched in silence as she completed the action, and the activity in the monitors fell to normal levels. “Why didn’t Mark do that?” She asked, curiously. “Was he trying to track it down?”

Good question. Dar keyed up her messaging program and typed in a question, then hit send. She reviewed the logs of the router, checking the address sources still held in it’s memory. “Hm.” She frowned and reviewed them again, then copied and pasted them to her desktop. “Ker?”

“Yeah?” Kerry peered at them. The list of addresses were mostly of no interest to her, save one. “Isn’t that one of ours? Is that you.. or maybe Mark coming in remote?”

Dar checked her laptop’s configuration. “Nope.. not me.” She probed further. “I don’t think it’s Mark.”

“Another spoof?” Kerry leaned even closer. “But wait, that’s from..”

“Inside our network.” Dar completed the sentence unhappily. “Now I hope it’s Mark.. it’s gone already.” She searched, but found no trace of the offending station. Her machine beeped, and an answer came back from Mark.

I was trying to get a dump. Got a partial.

Dar typed back a question.

No, that’s not me, I’m on the protected security range. Mark typed back. *That’s one of the pool addy’s.*

“Shit.” Dar sighed again. She typed back. *Then we need to find out why one of those pool addresses was inside the bank router. Because it’s one of the sources of that data parse.*

The screen was briefly silent. *That sucks.*

“No kidding.” Kerry felt a sick sensation in her guts. “Someone inside the company is doing this? Is that what we’re looking at, Dar?”

"Maybe."

Well, ulterior motives didn't usually show up on the security checks. Kerry thought back over the recent new hires in their division. "Dar, we haven't hired anyone for three months. Are you saying someone might have been here for that long, just lying low?"

"Doubt it." Dar put a series of controls in place. "If it's a pool, it might not be from IT." She debated a moment, then exhaled. "I'm going to put my program in all the border routers."

Kerry winced. "Is it ready?"

"No. But it's better than nothing." Dar called up the utility and started transferring it from her laptop to the remote devices. "Worst it'll do is crash the whole net."

"Dar…"

"I know, hon, but we've got very few options." Dar replied gently. "I'll take responsibility for it."

"That's not my issue." Kerry protested. "It's just really hard to fathom having to explain to a zillion customers that they're down because you crashed us."

Dar chuckled without humor. "I'll take the calls if it happens." She finished transferring the program to the first router, then activated it. "I built the network, I can wreck it, I guess."

Kerry hid her face in Dar's shirt. "Can you program it to scream if it crashes? At least we'll get warning…"

"Hopefully…" Dar finished her work. "Okay, it's in the number one pair." She monitored the devices with some anxiety, despite the confidence she had in her own skills. You just never did know when something you never anticipated would interact with a program, and send everything all to hell. "I think it's okay."

Kerry peeked at the screen. The gauges were steady, but with the same odd flutter she'd seen the last time Dar's program had run. "Can you dump the warnings here?"

Dar drummed her fingers. "Yeah, I better. Ops has nothing set up to receive them." She keyed in the programming change carefully. "Okay… let me get that on the rest of them."

Dar!

"Whoops.. shoulda warned him." Dar glanced at the message. *Sorry. I'm putting my new code in.*

Hey, that address was from inside the office! The server issued it at 2pm. I'm calling security to find out who's in.

Kerry reached across Dar's forearms to type on the keyboard. *I want to see that list! KS*

Dar glanced at her, a grin twitching at her lips. "Should I get the mallet?"

"This is not funny." Kerry growled. "Dar, if someone inside the office is responsible for that, we need to call the police."

"I know." Dar answered. "Let's just find out what's really going on before we jump to conclusions though." She typed further. "Not that there's any legitimate reason for anyone in our office to be in that router, but I do like to have the facts."

"Grr."

"Then we can whack em."

Kerry put her head down on Dar's shoulder to wait, watching the screen with impatient eyes. Someone inside. Her eyes narrowed. Didn't that just suck.

* * *

Andrew put down the crowbar he'd just been using, and lifted the cover off the crate in front of him. The hold of the ship was thick with workers despite it being a weekend, and he was careful to prop the cover up against the bulkhead out of the way.

It was hot in the hold, and he had to pause to wipe the sweat off his brow, glad he'd picked a tank top to wear to work. The sky was getting overcast and the breeze had dropped, promising rain later but doing nothing to dispel the mugginess.

He hadn't expected to be called in today. The supervisor had been a touch mad at him for running off the previous day, and Andy had half expected the man to punish him by giving him a few days off without any pay.

That would have been just fine, from his view. There was a nice big ocean right out there waiting for them to be driving over it, and sitting the helm of their boat was a sight nicer than unpacking boxes inside a old metal sauna box.

But the super had gotten a call, and everyone'd been told to come in the next day. So here he was. A quick look over the side of the ship had confirmed that the ship was still leaking oil, and he was pondering what do about it after Ceci had nearly scared most of the fish out of the harbor when she'd heard about it.

Sometimes, he did forget his wife was one of them environmental types. Andrew scratched his jaw, then shook his head, scattering a few droplets of sweat over the box. Ah well. He'd figure something out.

With a low, melodious whistle, he picked up a shipping invoice and then peered inside the crate, glancing at the sheet for confirmation. The box was alleged to contain boxes for cash registers, and as he pulled aside a thick wad of cardboard stuffing, the corner of stacked gray boxes were revealed. "Yeap."

A yell outside the ship made him look up, and he heard the sound of air brakes releasing and catching just outside. “Now what?” He muttered, going to the hatchway and looking out.

An 18 wheel truck was parked outside, it’s driver arguing with one of the guards. Andrew glanced inside, watching the crew around him gathering around the coffee pot for a break. He stepped out onto the gangway instead, and crossed over to the road to listen in.

The trucker was a big man, tall, wearing cowboy boots and a big buckle belt with a hat to match, as much a stereotype as Andrew had seen recently round these here parts. Feller even had highway patrol sunglasses on.

“Listen, buddy.” The trucker pointed past the guard. “There ain’t no gate down there big enough to pull this rig in. I just need to go over there, so get outta my way, okay?”

The guard shook his head. “Sorry, buster. My boss said no one goes through here to that pier, period.”

“What’s the big deal? It’s just a damn road.”

“Not to that pier. They don’t want no one going through this pier, to that pier, for deliveries. Forget it.” The guard dismissed him. “So just take off.”

“This stuff’s got a rush delivery!”

The guard, a young man in his mid twenties, smirked. “Aw. Guess they’re just out of luck.” He said. “Rush? Forget it. I don’t care.” The guard said. “My boss said no one, that means no one.”

No deliveries to Dar’s boat, huh? Andrew ambled closer, leaning against a stone post near the truck. “Now, that don’t make much sense.” He drawled. “Feller’s just looking to pull on through.”

The guard looked at him. “Shut up, old man. Get back in there to work. No one asked your opinion.”

No one, least of all Andrew, expected what happened next. The trucker, standing within arm’s reach of the guard, dropped his clipboard and lashed out, slugging the man across the face with one gloved fist, and sending him sprawling to the ground. “Know what I hate worse than a piss ass little punk?” The man growled. “It’s a piss ass little punk disrespecting people.”

Andrew snorted, covering his mouth with on hand.

The trucker stomped back towards his rig, grabbing his clipboard on the way, shaking his head and muttering as he walked. “Ain’t got the balls to stop me going where I want to go, that’s for damn sure.”

The guard got to his feet, and wiped a bit of mixed blood and spit from his face, then removed the baton from the ring on his belt and took of after the trucker. "Son of a.."

"Wall, now." Andrew shoved away from the stone pylon and intercepted the guard in two long strides, catching him by the arm and swinging him around. "Son, don't be a jackass."

"Let the fuck go of me!" The guard squalled, lashing at Andrew with the baton. "I'll kick your ass!"

"Boy, don't you do that." Andrew warned, reacting out of instincts honed during many years of experience.

The trucker turned, to see his erstwhile attacker being bent into a pretzel as Andrew put him in a restraint hold and lifted him off his feet. He put his hands on his hips and just watched, as the uniformed man was shaken like a rat, bits of his guardly accoutrements bouncing off the pavement and rolling under the truck.

"Ah told you, don't be a jackass." Andy told him firmly. "That there feller's just going to drive that truck over you and make you flatter than a pancake."

"Let go of me!" The man struggled, to no avail.

Andrew walked over to the waterside with him, and held him threateningly over the edge of the pier. "Ya'll like salt?" He inquired. "No? Then just shut your mouth up." He looked over at the trucker, who had climbed inside his rig and started the engine. "Now, don't you be speeding on this here dock, young feller." He cautioned the driver, getting a grin in return.

The trucker honked his air horn in appreciation, giving Andrew a big thumbs up as he drove past the ship towards the next pier.

Andy waited for the truck to clear their space, then he released the guard, giving him a healthy shove across the dock to prevent any errant stupidity.

The guard caught his balance, and turned, starting back towards Andrew with an angry expression on his face. "You are in so much trouble, old man."

"Ah am not in any trouble, son." Andrew merely sat down on the pylon and waited for him, relaxed and calm. He made eye contact with the guard and held it steadily as the man advanced on him, years of facing danger lending a sheen of ice to his composure. "But surely you will be." He added, in a soft tone.

The guard slowed as he approached, and then halted uncertainly. Then he backed off, sticking his baton back into his belt. "I'm not going to bother with you."

Andrew smiled.

“I'll just get my boss to get your ass fired.” The guard gathered the shreds of his dignity and stalked off towards the small guard house, leaving Andrew in peace on the side of the dock.

Thunder rolled over head, making him look up at the sky. “Ah do think ah just like trouble.” He remarked. “Lord knows mah kid got that from some damn place, after all.” After a brief moment, the ex-seal got up and headed back across the gangway, chuckling softly under his breath.

* * *

Dar reached over and picked up her cup of coffee, taking a sip before she offered it to Kerry. They were still squished together on the couch, after an hour of tense work on the laptop had at least given them a measure of security over the situation.

“How long does it take security to figure out who is in that building?” Kerry groused, handing the cup back after taking a swallow. “What did they do, call out the dogs to sniff the Xerox supply rooms?”

Dar watched her gauges, her fingers twitching above the keys. “It’s a big building.”

“Not that big.” Kerry listened to the thunder, and then she returned her head to Dar’s shoulder. “You know, it’s a pity we can’t work like this all the time.”

“From the cabin, or from this couch together.” Dar asked.

“Yes.”

“I have a couch in my office.”

“It’s not as comfortable as this one is.” Kerry objected, reaching over to type in a few lines, and hit enter. “And there is just no way I could wear my jammies there, Dar.”

Dar cocked her head and regarded Kerry’s dress, which featured adorable little cart-wheeling piglets all over it. It consisted of a nightshirt that was just barely legal, but also had a pair of bottoms Kerry seldom wore. “I could post a policy change just for you.”

“Uh huh. I can just picture me running meetings like this.”

Dar chuckled. “Not a goddamn thing would get done.” She said. “Ah.. here we go. All right.. now that’s looking better.” She was at last satisfied with how her program was behaving. “Okay, I think it won’t crash now.”

“Phew.”

Dar now switched to her mail, clicking on a late arrival. “Here’s the trace Mark got.” She reviewed the results. “Encrypted.”

“Can you un-encrypt it?” Kerry asked. “I can’t even read the header.”

"Hm." Her partner drummed her fingers on the keyboard. "Not without the.." She hesitated. "Let's wait to see if Mark finds the machine it was coming from. It'll be easier with the key. I might be able to crack the encryption, but it would take me forever."

Kerry typed on the keyboard. *Mark – what is taking so long for the security report?*

Dar slipped her arm over Kerry's shoulders, and rubbed her back gently. "This is going to be a big issue. I better warn Alistair."

Freaking all of sales and marketing is here! Mark's answer came back, brimming with disgust. *The whole damn floor is packed with them, and they've been sucking DHCP addresses all morning.*

"Oh. Crap." Kerry sighed. "That sucks."

Dar considered the screen. "Maybe… maybe it doesn't." She said slowly. "I wonder how many new people they've brought on in the last month."

"They turnover like.." Kerry started to say, then her voice trailed off. "But Dar, whoever did this was technically very savvy."

"Uh huh. Where better in our company to hide then, hm? Last place I'd look for a nerd is in those groups." Dar's tone was grim. "And you know what else?"

Kerry stared at the screen, then up at Dar. "They're all around the presentation rooms."

"Exactly."

Exactly.

* * *

Kerry gunned the engine of her bike, looking both ways before she eased out onto the still damp road and headed south. The sun had reluctantly made an appearance on it's journey to the west, and she decided it was a good time to buzz off down to the market and get something for dinner.

The roads were still wet, and she was careful to keep her speed down. Being dumped on her butt on the road wasn't something she was willing to experience, even if Dar had patiently taught her how to right the bike if she did get overturned.

It wasn't easy, even though she was stronger than most women her size. Kerry shifted gears and headed through a green light, one of the few traffic stops in the general vicinity. The quiet nature of the town was one of the things she liked most about it, and even now on the weekend, there was little traffic to impede her passage.

The market was just up on the right hand side, a low, wooden building with sun-faded paint and crushed shell pathways leading from the scrubby little parking lot. Kerry pulled

in to a shady spot near the door and shut the bike's engine off, swinging her leg over the seat and removing her helmet.

She tucked the safety gear under it's bungee and headed for the doors, the still damp breeze brushing over her bare shoulders. Pushing the left door open, she entered the pleasant chill of the air conditioning and removed her sunglasses, tucking them by one earpiece into a belt loop. "Hi, Bill."

The man behind the meat counter looked up, then waved. "Hi there, neighbor." He greeted Kerry amiably. "Didn't know you were down here this weekend.. thought the rain would keep anyone up north."

"We came down on Friday night." Kerry picked up a basket and started browsing up and down the aisles. "But it looks like it's clearing up now. How's Martha?"

"Oh, she'd doing fine." The market manager said. "Hey listen, I just got some fresh snapper in.. you want a couple pieces?"

Snapper. Kerry cocked her head slightly. Both she and Dar were quite fond of fresh fish, and a nice broiled filet sounded pretty good to her. "Sure." She agreed, detouring to the vegetable section and selecting a couple of Yukon gold potatoes, some green beans, and two ears of white corn.

Considering, she then also added a quart of strawberries, and carried the lot of it up to the counter. She could have gotten stuff for tomorrow also, but she preferred to let whimsy control what she picked, rather than planning things out too far in advance. "Wow, that does look nice." She complimented the fish.

"A cook'd know that." The manager chuckled. "And I know you're the cook in that house."

Kerry accepted the brown wrapped bundle with a slight grin. "I guess Dar's only buying ice cream, milk, chocolate bars and bananas sort of clues that in, huh?" She handed over her credit card. "But I like cooking. It's fun."

"Me too." Bill pushed the credit card receipt her way for signature. "I get kidded about it by the boys, though. You know how it is."

Kerry signed her name in a neat script hand and gave it back to him. "Well, not really." She admitted. "Usually girls are expected to know how, and to like cooking." Her face creased into a smile. "I've never had anyone look crosswise at me for **that**. For other things…" She waggled a hand.

"Like that pretty tattoo?" Bill asked, with a grin of his own. "It's new, yeah?"

"Yeah." Kerry glanced down at the half visible mark, peeking out from around her tank top strap. "I got it a few weeks back. Like it?"

Bill leaned closer, raising his glasses slightly to get a better look. “Nice work.” He complimented her. “I’ve got a pair of dolphins, myself, but it’d take a pair of speedos I die before wearing to show em to the world.”

Kerry chuckled. “That was my second choice of locations.” She picked up her packages and the keys to the motorcycle. “But I think I really wanted people to be able to see it.” Her eyes strayed to the mark, and the letters of Dar’s name visible there for a moment, before she turned and headed back towards the doors. “Have a great day, Bill.”

“You too, Kerry.” The manager replied, sitting back down on his stool. “Drive careful now, it’s wet out.”

Kerry lifted a hand in acknowledgement as she slipped through the door, reaching hastily for her sunglasses as the glare outside made her blink.

“Excuse me… are you Kerry Stuart?”

Kerry pulled up short and turned, finding herself the focus of a well dressed black woman, and a man with a camera. The woman didn’t look unfriendly, but the light was on the camera, and Kerry hadn’t grown up in a spotlight for nothing. “Yes.” She answered slowly. “Can I ask why you want to know?”

“Great. We found you.” The woman smiled. “We’re doing filming as part of the special on the new American Cruise line project, and I’d like to ask you some questions.”

Kerry squared her shoulders, shifting her packages carefully to one arm. “Our office is in Miami. Is there some reason you came looking for me here?” She kept her voice even, but there was little warmth in it.

The reporter looked warily at her. “Well, someone tipped me off you might be down here… so I thought I’d take a chance. Since the other teams are up at the port working, it seemed a little… unusual… that you’d leave the city.”

Anger started to bubble inside Kerry’s stomach. “Well, I guess you just wasted a trip then. I’ve got nothing to say at the moment. It’s my time off.” She turned and headed for her bike, her ears catching the whine of the camera behind her.

“Wait…” The reporter came after her. “Ms. Roberts talked to us.”

Kerry put her packages into the small storage area in the back of the bike and got on it, shifting it over it’s center of balance and putting up the kickstand. “In the office.” She started the engine, and revved it, the low throaty roar making speech momentarily impossible.

“You don’t think it says something about your company, to have you down here on vacation while everyone else is working?” The reporter queried. “Maybe my source was right after all.”

Kerry put her helmet on. “The only thing it says about our company is that we trust our staff to do what we pay them to.” She backed the bike and prepared to leave the lot. “Excuse me.” She tried not to look directly at the camera, the blank gray eye following her every move.

“Is Ms. Roberts down here too? Maybe I can talk to her.” The reporter persisted. “Maybe she can explain it to me, since you’re unwilling to.”

Answering didn’t seem wise. Kerry gunned her engine and headed out onto the road, shifting through first and into second gear as she glanced behind her to see if the woman was following. She was caught between outrage and worry, wondering briefly if she should have played the reporters game and just talked to her for a few minutes.

Dar had, as she’d noted.

Ah well. Kerry shifted into third gear and picked up speed, anxious to get back to the cabin and get the bike under cover before the woman could find out where they lived. Would she knock on the door? The thought made her angry, and she felt somewhat invaded by the idea.

This was a haven for them. To have the reporter come here and shove herself into this part of her world bothered Kerry more than she liked to acknowledge, and she resented it hugely. She leaned into the turn that would take her towards home, and found a moment of utter panic as she felt the bike start to slide out from under her.

Her body reacted uncertainly, not used to the motion and she leaned back the other way out of pure instinct. For a second, it was riding the line, the tire skidding against the wet pavement for an eternity before the traction caught again and she brought the motorcycle back under control.

“Jesus.” Kerry felt her heart pounding in her chest, as she slowed down, ready to make the turn into their driveway. To her surprise, Dar was out in the yard heading for the road, and she jumped the fence as Kerry pulled to a stop in the soft gravel. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Dar joined her, laying a hand on Kerry’s arm. “What’s up? You okay?”

“Yeah. Almost laid the bike down.” Kerry admitted. “Let’s get it in the shed. I had a very unpleasant encounter with your friend from the filming people at the market.”

Dar blinked. “My friend?”

“The reporter?” Kerry got off the bike and started pushing it towards the shed.

“How’d she find you down here?” Dar helped, getting her hands between Kerry’s. “What the hell did she want?” Her voice sharpened.

Kerry got the door to the shed open, and they pushed the motorcycle inside. She pulled the door closed, just as the sound of tires on the road sounded loud in their ears. They

both stood together and listened as the car slowed down outside, then, after a long and still moment, drove on past. “Son of a bitch.”

Dar’s jaw tightened. “They get you on camera?” She asked, as Kerry moved to take the bags from the back of the bike.

“Yeah.” Kerry turned, letting her sunglasses slide down a little and peeking at Dar over them. “Don’t worry, though. There’s no way anyone’s going to believe Roger Stuart’s kid is riding a bike down in the sticks with a tattoo on her chest. I’ll just say someone was impersonating me.”

Dar’s lips tensed, then relaxed into a faint grin.

“What are we going to do if she shows up here?” Kerry went on, with a grimace. “It won’t take much, Dar. We’re in the local phone book. All she has to do is look and she’ll have the address.”

“Not to mention my car’s outside.” Dar remarked dryly. “Let’s worry about it when it happens. Did she say what angle she was after?”

“Oh yeah.” Kerry picked up the parcel, and nudged Dar towards the door. “ILS snooty sloths snuggle while minions slave away.” She sighed. “And I joked about it, but I think I just sunk my image big time.”

“Hell with em.” Dar led her back towards the cabin. “If they show up here, I’ll just toss them in the salt. Besides, we are working.” She peeked inside a bag. “Mm… strawberries.”

Kerry allowed herself to be distracted as they walked over to the cabin, and slipped inside. She had a distinct feeling, though, that the reporter wasn’t going to give up that easily, or be dissuaded by even Dar’s rejection.

Not to mention what it all would look like to anyone viewing the film.

Kerry sighed. *Muskrats.*

* * *

They were both surprised when the rest of the afternoon proved peaceful and reporter-less. Kerry retreated into the kitchen to make dinner, while Dar huddled with her laptop, obsessing over the results of her program.

“Hey, with this filming stuff.” Kerry positioned the snapper filets on the broiling pan, dusting them with her jealously guarded mixture of spices. “Don’t they have to get our approval to show any of it? I mean, it’s not a news program, right?”

Dar stretched, lifting her arms over her head and popping her shoulder joints. “Good question.” She said. “I should probably send a note to legal and ask, huh?”

"Might be a good idea." Kerry put a final swipe of herbed oil on the fish, and prepared to put them in the broiler. She glanced up as Dar entered the kitchen, circling around her and settling her arms around Kerry's waist and observing as she put dinner up.

"Mm." Kerry leaned back a little, savoring the solid warmth of her partner's body. She felt Dar rest her chin on the top of her head and they simply stood together for a bit in silence, swaying lightly to some far off music only their souls could hear.

"Keeeeerrrrry." Dar warbled, in a high tone that mimicked her gopher's. "I llooooooooovvveee you."

Kerry felt like she was going to dissolve into a puddle of blond goo. She wondered briefly if her tattoo would float on top, or merely color it. Slowly, she turned within the circle of Dar's arms and looked up at her. "Can I tell you something?"

"Could I stop you?" Dar leaned forward a little to rub noses with her.

Kerry tilted her head and they kissed, as her arms slid up and clasped around Dar's neck. She caught Dar's lower lip between her teeth and then released her with a soft chuckle. "Well, Paladar, as a matter of fact, yes, you could." She drawled softly. "Just like that, in fact."

Dar chuckled along with her, lifting a hand up to brush Kerry's cheek. "You're so easy to distract sometimes."

Kerry leaned into the touch, pressing her body against her partner's. "Depends on the distraction." She smiled. "But what I was going to say before I was so pleasantly lead off course was…" Her eyes gentled and warmed. "You're the best part of my life."

"I am?" A charmed look appeared on the taller woman's face. "Even better than ice cream?"

"Much better."

"Aw." Dar hugged her, tucking Kerry's head against her shoulder and giving her a healthy squeeze. "Likewise, sweetheart."

Kerry closed her eyes, and exhaled, welcoming the sweet affection in Dar's tone. After all the chaos of work and the aggravation of meeting the reporter – she wanted this.

Needed it. She slid her arms around Dar's waist and returned the hug, and then ran her hands along her partner's spine giving her a light massage. "I looooooooovvve you too." She warbled softly. "My little gopher."

Dar snickered.

They walked into the living room with their arms wrapped around each other, and got halfway across it before they heard a knock on the door. After sharing a dour look, Dar removed her hold and dusted her hands together. "I'll go take care of this. Stay here."

Kerry debated briefly, and then uncharacteristically obeyed, flopping down on the couch and extending her legs along it's length as she watched Dar stalk towards the back door.

She didn't envy the reporter, if that was who it was. Dar could, and often was, rude and nasty when she felt the need to be and being on the receiving end of that was really just no fun. Not that Kerry herself knew that from personal knowledge – even when she and her beloved partner disagreed, Dar never went past blunt with her.

In fact, Kerry knew she herself had been by far the nastier of the two of them when they'd first met. She wiggled her toes reflectively, her ears cocked as Dar opened the door.

"Yes?" Dar peered out into the late afternoon sunshine, her body blocking the door open just to her shoulder width.

"Well, hello there, Ms. Roberts. Remember me?" The reporter smiled at her.

"Yes." Dar responded. "Anything else you need? No?" She started to close the door.

"Wait.. wait. I really need to talk to you." The woman put her hand out to keep the door from shutting. "Please?"

Dar stared steadily at her. "I'm not on the clock." She let her eyes drift past the woman, but the camera and it's operator were nowhere in sight. After a moment, she focused back on the intruder.

"Well, no.. but I'm here, and you're here, so.." The reporter persisted. "It'll only take a minute, really."

It all sounded so reasonable. Unfortunately, Dar wasn't feeling very reasonable at the moment. "No." She stated. "I don't appreciate people who invade my private life. So I'd get my hand off the door if I were you, unless you want a broken wrist out of this."

The woman took a step back. "Now, I don't really think we're invading…"

"Did I give you my address here?" Dar asked pointedly.

"Well, no, but.."

"Did you ask if you could do an interview with me during off hours?"

"That's not the point, here…"

"It's exactly the point." Dar started closing the door again. "And damned unprofessional if you ask me. I think I need to make a call to your production office on Monday."

The reporter put her hand out again. "Whoa whoa… wait a minute, are you the same person I interviewed a few days ago? What happened?"

“You screwed up.” Dar pulled her head in and pushed the door closed, getting her weight behind it just in case the reporter got any stupid ideas to stop her. “Jerk.” She started to walk away, only to stop when a knock came at the door again.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at Kerry. Kerry shrugged sheepishly. Dar narrowed her eyes and turned, going back to the door and yanking it open. She drew back her other hand near her ear and curled her fingers into a fist, cocking it meaningfully. “I am not playing games with you.”

The reporter stopped in mid speech and blinked at Dar in surprise. “Are you going to hit me?” She asked in an incredulous tone.

“Yes.” Dar said.

“You’re crazy.”

“No, I’ve just had my privacy invaded and it’s ticking me off.” Dar narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t get it. You were just the friendliest thing in your office. What’s up with that?” The woman said.

“I’m not in my office.”

Kerry got up and walked over, standing behind the door out of sight and pressing her back against it as she listened.

“Okay, so, how does it hurt to talk to me for a minute?” The reporter said. “What’s the big deal? We had lunch, remember? C’mon.”

“If you want to discuss something, call me during working hours.” Dar kept her patience with great effort.

“Or is it that you’re with your girlfriend now?”

Dar merely stepped away from the door, and allowed Kerry to slam it shut for her. She loudly threw the deadbolt, then turned her back, waiting for Kerry to join her before they mad their way towards the couch again.

“If she knocks again, I’m going to go Republican on her.” Kerry commented. “You actually had lunch with this person?”

“That’s what happens when you leave me to my own devices for a meal.” Dar paused, glancing over her shoulder. “Now I better to hell send legal a note. I can just picture how we’ll come off in their little script.”

Erg. Kerry trudged back into the kitchen. “Should we have been less rude??” She asked.

Dar picked up her laptop and brought it over to the counter, setting it down and seating herself on one of the wooden stools. She rested her head on one fist and studied the screen. “Screw it.”

Kerry turned on a front burner and set a pan over it, putting a little peanut oil and butter in the bottom. As it heated, she removed a colander of green beans from the sink and set it down next to her, grabbing her wooden stirring spoon as she listened to Dar type.

“She was a lot nicer at lunch.”

“Uh huh.” The green beans were sacrificed into the pan, releasing the scent of spices and garlic as Kerry stirred them. “Like she was on your side?”

Pale blue eyes peeked over the laptop screen at her. “Yeah.”

Kerry’s lips quirked slightly.

“Did I get scammed?”

Kerry flipped the beans in the pan expertly, remembering the lectures of her childhood. The press, she’d been taught, were not ever, ever your friends and they never were on your side. “Well..” She hesitated, not wanting to insult her lover. “Dar, I’m sure she’s very slick. Probably, she might have fooled me too.”

Dar sighed. “I thought she was nice.” She admitted. “She did say a lot of things… well, anyway, I guess I took her at face value.” She saw a mail arrive, and clicked on it.

> *Hey Boss –*
>
> *Got the list, here it is, but everyone and their mamma is on it. You want me to pull their security scans? I sorted em by hire date, but there’s no one in there less than three months. I don’t know what the hell’s going on.*
>
> *Mark*

“I don’t know what’s going on either.” Dar admitted, with a sigh. “You know what, Ker? I really don’t know what the hell’s going on. I’m losing it.”

Prudently, Kerry merely murmured in sympathy, as she finished the beans and turned off the fire. She got two plates ready, opening up the broiler and retrieving her snapper filets. “I’m not sure I know what’s up myself.” She said, sliding a filet off onto one of the plates and adding some beans along with a baked potato and half a corn to it.

Dar sat there swinging her legs for a minute, and then she got up and came around into the kitchen, reaching around Kerry to take possession of the plates. “Mmm.”

They walked into the living room and sat down next to each other on the couch as Dar set the plates on the burled mahogany coffee table. Knee to knee, they picked up implements

of food destruction. “Oh, hang on.” Kerry put hers down and got up again, walking back into the kitchen to get them both a drink.

Dar used her fork to separate a bit of fish and tasted it. “Mm.” She waited for Kerry to return and sit down again. “Good stuff.”

Kerry bumped shoulders with her. They ate quietly, both apparently lost in deep thought.

* * *

Andrew slung his tool belt over one broad shoulder and headed off the ship. The sun was blotted out by dark clouds, and there was a heavy smell of rain in the air, even the usually calm waters of the cut picking up a little chop that washed against the hulls of the ships lined up against the pier.

He was halfway across the open space when the door to the guard hut opened and a man emerged, heading in his direction with a distinct sense of purpose. Given the man’s bad taste in suits, and the badge holder hanging from his belt Andrew reckoned he might be his guard friend’s boss, but he waited until the man was obviously intersecting him before he turned his head and made eye contact.

“Hold up there.” The man lifted a hand. “You Roberts?”

Andy slowed, then halted as he came even with the man. “Yeap.”

The man had thick, slicked back dark hair and a trimmed moustache, a bad complexion, and watery gray eyes. They now fastened on Andrew’s face with a cold, stern glitter. “I understand from my man you caused some trouble today, mister.”

Behind him, Andrew could see the punk guard, peeking out from behind the shutters in the little guard shack. He shifted his gaze to the man in front of him. “Do ah look like a feller who’d cause trouble?”

The security manager looked him up and down. “That’s no answer.”

“Young feller there was fixing to get hisself run over by a truck.” Andrew said. “Ah just stopped him.”

The other man looked down the pier to where Dar’s ship was, then he looked back at Andrew. “I had orders not to let any trucks through there. How do you want me to explain why one went through? I’m not taking the heat for it, buddy. I’ll get your ass fired.”

Andrew shrugged. “Ain't made no sense to me. What in hell’s the difference if a truck goes on down there?” He figured if he was going to get fired, might as well get any information he could first.

“Doesn’t have to make sense to you. I got my orders…” The man turned as a yell sounded over the docks. “Shit. Now there’s the one giving the orders. You stay here, let me see what they want done with you.”

Andrew looked over the man’s shoulder to see Shari approaching, an angry look on her face. “Wall.” He exhaled. “Don’t that figure. That there woman’s more trouble than a hemorrhoid in a bucket.”

The man swung around and gave Andrew a startled look, an almost smile twitching at his lips. Then he went to intercept his unwelcome visitor.

Andrew hesitated, then he ambled after him catching up as they met Shari halfway across the dock.

“I just got a call, saying you let a delivery go through. I told you no trucks! What’s wrong with you, are you stupid?” Shari yelled at him.

“Wait a minute, lady…” The security chief held a hand up.

“I’m not waiting for anything. I gave a direct order.” Shari overrode him. “I want your bosses name, right now. I’m not putting up with any more of this horse crap.” She pulled out her cell phone. “Give me his number.”

“Just hold on a minute…” The security chief looked around as Andrew shifted. “Roberts, I told you to stay back there.” He said. “Damn it!” He returned his attention to Shari. “Now look, lady. It wasn’t my fault. This guy here got in the way of my guy doing his job and… lady?”

Shari had stopped in mid motion, and was looking at Andrew with a suddenly suspicious expression. She closed her phone. “Roberts?” She asked, gritting her teeth.

Ah well. Busted. Andrew produced a wicked grin.

The security chief looked from one to the other of them. “You know this guy?” He asked Shari. “He’s the one who distracted my guy and let that truck through.”

“I just bet he did.” Shari’s eyes narrowed.

“Sir!” The young guard was calling, from the gate. A group of men and women were standing there, looking impatient. “Sir, you need to come here, please, sir!”

If anything, the chief looked relieved. He edged past Shari and headed for the gate, with a muttered apology leaving the two of them facing each other.

“Didn’t realize Dar had a brother.” Shari snorted, in a disgusted tone. “But now it all makes sense. Let me get that damn stupid supervisor on the phone and get you out of here first.”

One of Andrew's grizzled eyebrows hiked up. "She don't." He rasped. "Save yer breath. I'm leaving." He shifted his work belt to his other shoulder and started to walk around Shari.

"Oh no, you're not just waltzing out of here. I'm calling the police." Shari reached out to take hold of his arm. "Have you arrest.." Shari stopped as a hand far larger than hers closed around her wrist and removed her grip. "Let go of me."

Andy stared steadily at her. "If you had any smarts, woman, you would count yerself lucky to just turn round and walk away from here." His voice was soft, but firm. "Mah daughter is real special to me and ah do not take kindly to folks who done messed with her."

"D.." Shari's eyes widened. "Oh shit."

Andrew grinned again, narrowing his eyes.

"Captain! Captain! Get over here!" Shari yelled out in panic. "Help!"

Andrew looked over her shoulder, and saw the guards fully engaged with the new visitors, who were pushing their way onto the pier and forcing the two watchmen back. He released her arm, and wiped his fingers off on his jeans as Shari backed away from him.

She swung around, and spotted the guards busy with the gate, and then she headed for the guard shack, leaving Andrew behind without looking again at him.

"Have a nice day." Andrew drawled, as he headed for the gates. As he got closer, he could hear the people arguing with the guards, and the word 'oil spill' echoed out of the babbling. "Uh oh" He edged carefully around the man in front, a tall, gray haired tower of indignation and escaped out into the front of the pier.

A pickup truck was waiting for him, conveniently enough. He opened the door and tossed his tool belt behind the seat, sliding in next to Ceci and shutting the door after him. "Just got me fired."

"Really?" His wife inquired.

"Yeap. That there woman figgered out where she done knew me from fin'ly." Andy allowed. "But ah think them folks right there are gonna be more trouble than me."

Ceci peered past him. "Ah. The EPA." She nodded solemnly.

"You figger?"

"I sent them." Cecilia gave the chaos a supremely satisfied look as she put the truck in gear. "C'mon, sailor boy. Now that we've caused this much trouble, let's go paint the town red. It's Saturday night."

Andrew stretched his arm across the seat, and leaned back, as they drove away from the port. He wasn't sure Dar would like the results of the day, but he also knew sometimes you just had to take what you got.

Life sometimes did give ya lemons. Smart fellers learned to take a shining to lemonade.

* * *

By the time the last rays of sunset were pouring through the windows, strawberries were at hand and problems set aside for another day. Kerry settled onto the two person bench swing with Dar and pushed gently against the porch support, moving them back and forth.

The surface of the sea lapped invitingly in front of them, bringing a soft swishing roar and the faint tinkle of shells being moved under the waves. "Wanna swim with me tonight?"

Dar blew gently into her ear, then leaned over to nibbled the edge of it. "Sure." She breathed, barely audible. "We can do that too."

Kerry allowed a low, throaty chuckle to knowingly emerge.

The air was almost blue with twilight, warm and rich with moisture but lacking the oppressive heat of the day. Seagulls were circling lazily over the water, several landing on the dock which usually held the Dixieland Yankee when they came in by water.

It was quiet, and very peaceful. Kerry leaned against Dar, accepting the berry her partner was holding out before her lips. "It turned out pretty tonight."

"Mmhm." Dar settled the bowl of fruit in her lap and extended her arm across Kerry's shoulders. There were still clouds across the horizon, but they only served to make the sunset glorious. It was pretty indeed, and now all the more so when she considered how their relationship had opened her eyes to the beauty of the world around her.

She'd always found the ocean pleasing, and enjoyed being at the shore in the salt breeze. But she'd never really just sat and watched a sunset until Kerry had come into her life.

> *The office was quiet, most of it's inhabitants already gone home for the day. Dar packed up her laptop and got ready to leave herself, hesitating without really knowing why after she put her case on her desk.*
>
> *Just another day, right? Nothing to really hang out here for.*
>
> *Dar drummed her fingers on the desk, then she bowed to the inevitable and headed for the back corridor, intending on simply saying goodnight to her new assistant. It was only the polite thing to do, after all, and Kerry made a point of poking her head in every morning to say hello so…*

She walked down the corridor and paused beside the door to Kerry's office, aware of the gentle tickle of anticipation in her stomach. It had been a long time since she'd felt that, and the speeding up of her heartbeat as she thought about those kind, green eyes looking back at her.

She knocked, but there was no answer. Dar felt an immense bit of disappointment, surprised to find herself hurt that Kerry had left without saying goodnight.

Piqued, she opened the door anyway, her mood brightening when she spotted Kerry's briefcase on her chair. She entered the office and circled the desk, her sensitive nose picking up the scent of Kerry's perfume with ease.

There was a cup on the desk, and as she brushed her fingers over the side of it, she found it still a quarter full with warm tea. So, Kerry couldn't be far off, could she? Dar headed for the front door and slipped out of it, looking both ways down the empty corridor.

Right? Left? Dar went left, then turned left at the major intersection that went to the elevators, crossing past them to the other side of the building. Then she paused, and pondered. To one side was marketing, to the other, accounting.

A cleaning woman pulled a garbage bin past her, giving Dar a polite smile as she stood there in the middle of the hallway. "Jefa."

Dar focused on her. "Did you just come up on this floor?" She asked, in Spanish.

"No." The woman shook her head. "I have just finished this side. Did you need something done for you?"

Dar looked around carefully, her voice lowering a little. "Did you see a blond woman, about this high…" She held her hand up at shoulder level. "Around in there?"

The woman also looked around before she answered. "Si, she is out on the patio over there, but she told me to say nothing!"

Ah. "Thanks." Dar headed off down the corridor, arriving at the sturdy glass and steel doors that blocked off the west side viewing platform. Looking through them, she spotted Kerry at once, leaning against the railing and just looking out into space. "What on earth's she doing?"

She pressed her nose against the glass and watched as the breeze blew Kerry's pale hair back and fluttered her silk blouse tight against her body. The tickle in her guts became a burn, and she felt a little short of breath as she shoved the door open against the wind and emerged onto the patio. "Hi."

Kerry turned. Her expression altered from surprised to muted delight in an instant, and she smiled as Dar walked over to her. "Oh, hi."

"Whatcha doing?" Dar leaned on the railing next to her. Her eyes casually met Kerry's and held there, as the sunset gilded her profile.

"Um.. not much." Kerry laughed softly. "Just watching the sun go down." She indicated the orange orb, which was painting the western sky every shade of bad sherbet imaginable. "It's so pretty from up here, isn't it?"

"Absolutely." Dar said, a moment before she took her eyes from Kerry's face, and glanced at the horizon. To her surprise, the view was more interesting than she'd imagined, and she stood there in silence as the shifting rays constantly changed the vista as thy watched.

Kerry leaned against the rail next to her, their shoulders almost touching.

Dar wondered if she yelled loud enough, would the world would stop turning so she could enjoy the moment just a little longer? It certainly beat the quiet, lonely drive home.

"Um.. did you… need me for something?" Kerry asked suddenly, hesitating over the words. "I… I mean, were you looking, uh, or were you just…"

Uh oh. Dar felt totally at a loss. Make up a lie? Not answer? Glib answer? Jump over the railing? "I was just." She finally got out, clamping her jaw shut after that with an audible click.

Kerry looked at her, a tentative grin appearing as she returned her gaze to the sun. She cleared her throat after a moment. "You know, the pre-registration for the networking convention opens up tonight. I was thinking of heading down there early to get my paperwork done." Her eyes moved back to Dar's face. "Are you interested?"

A smile formed on Dar's face, as the sun slipped reluctantly under the horizon. "Absolutely."

Ah, sunsets. Dar smiled at the memory, wondering why it had taken her so long to appreciate them.

Possibly because the sun never set over the water where she'd been living. They'd deliberately picked the west side of the island when they'd bought the cabin to address just that subject. Kerry loved sunsets over the water and though it made it more difficult to reach the cabin since they had to go round the key, it was worth it.

The breeze carried a brief wisp of citronella to them from the candle burning near the post and for a brief moment Dar found herself wishing intensely that every day could end just like this.

Ludicrous, she knew. Dar sighed, and picked up another berry. Besides, if they were all like this, how could moments like now be special? She rested her head against Kerry's.

"You know something?" Kerry continued her gentle rocking. "When I was a kid, I used to go down to the lake near my house and just sit there, watching the sun go down. It wasn't nice like this is, but there always was that little peaceful time when it was happening where everything sort of stood still."

"Mm."

"I wondered for a long time if I would ever have anyone to share that time with." Kerry went on in a soft voice. "I was so completely alone surrounded by all those people and my family."

Unsure of what to say to that, Dar took a safe compromise, and reached out to clasp Kerry's hand, twining her fingers with her partner's.

Kerry exhaled, shaking her head slightly. "I am so blessed."

Dar absorbed the words, finding them even warmer than the residual sunlight. "We." She put in a slight correction. "Are so blessed."

"Mm." Kerry selected a berry and bit into it. "That we are." She agreed.

They shared a few more berries, and Dar even threw one over to a gull bold enough to traverse the space between the dock and their porch. The bird picked up the offering suspiciously, then bolted it down with a raucous squawk. "Everyone's a critic." The dark haired woman commented.

"I don't think they usually eat strawberries, do they? I thought they eat like.. dead fish and tormented baby turtles and things." Kerry split a huge berry in half and offered Dar a portion, smiling when it was taken from her fingers and the juice licked off them in the bargain. "Know what I want to do tonight?"

Ah. Easy question. Dar shifted and half turned, curling her arm around Kerry and kissing her on the lips, tasting the sweet tang of the strawberries as their tongues met. "Yes."

"Hm.. .I could have meant Scrabble." Kerry whispered, her fingertips tracing the side of Dar's face with a light touch.

"Or Twister." Dar teased, kissing her again.

"We could combine the two and I could stick letters on you with peanut butter."

"Ooo.. romance." Dar slid off the bench and rose to her feet, holding out a hand to Kerry. "Mix that with some fudge and we could infringe on Reese's patents."

"Oo." Kerry mimicked. "Now doesn't that sound sexy." She got up and put her hand in Dar's, muffling a giggle as she was wrapped up in a pair of long arms and hustled towards the doors to the cabin. "Honey, you can infringe my patent any time you want."

Dar held the door open and they eased past Chino, trading the languid warmth for the pleasant chill of the inside of the cabin. She put the bowl of berries down and concentrated on Kerry, running her thumbs down her collarbone before lacing her fingers behind her neck.

Kerry moved closer, slipping her hands under Dar's t-shirt and sliding it up to expose most of her torso. She angled her head and nibbled the curve of one breast, while she reached around to unhook her partner's bra.

Dar slowly moved them both in a rambling arc, heading for the bedroom. She unbuttoned Kerry's shorts and they both laughed softly as the garment obligingly dropped around the blond woman's ankles, nearly tripping her.

She stepped out of them as Dar eased her shirt up over her head and tossed it on top of the shorts, then ducked her head as Kerry removed the t-shirt she was wearing and tossed it even further.

They went through the doorway into the bedroom in each other's arms, Kerry depending on Dar's navigation skills to keep them on course as she lost herself in a moment of passionate head rush. She concentrated on the warm skin under her lips and fingertips instead.

Dar did a good steering job, and a moment later they tumbled into the waterbed. She rolled over onto her back and felt Kerry's thigh slip between hers, their bodies pressing against each other. The surface flexed under them, as Dar ran her hands up Kerry's sides and eased her fingers between them to cup her partner's breasts.

"Grrrwow." Kerry responded, biting her earlobe gently. She nibbled Dar's pulse point, then worked her way up over the curve of her jaw to her lips. She indulged in a leisurely kiss as she stroked her fingers lightly down Dar's torso, tracing the bumps and ripples of bone and muscle that shifted under her touch.

The best part, Dar always found, was the look in Kerry's eyes when they were being intimate. There was such a mixture of desire and joy there, passionate yet loving – it made making love the sweetest of confirmations. She let one hand drop down to Kerry's bare hip, her thumb running over the line of her pelvis before sliding lower to tickle the inside of her thigh.

The lips exploring hers parted slightly, a gust of air escaping as Kerry exhaled, then drew in a deeper, faster breath. Her body shifted as Dar tickled her again, and they rolled over onto their sides as they slid against each other.

Lying down, her height disadvantage didn't matter. Kerry felt her guts igniting as Dar teasingly explored her and she reciprocated, working her way down her lover's long body as Dar placed a series of tiny bites across the back of her neck.

Tingles went everywhere over her.

Her hands went everywhere over Dar.

As she felt warm breath heat the skin over her navel, and heard Dar's heartbeat hammering in her ear, the rest of the world could have separated and spun off into it's own orbit and she wouldn't have given not one little spit.

PART 20

"So, what do you think?" Kerry was glad the clouds had finally cleared out, exposing a half circle of brilliant stars for her appreciation. "Bear?"

"Hm." Dar gazed up at the sky speculatively. "More like a pig."

"Pig? C'mon." A wave rippled under them, and they rode it atop the rugged canvas float tied off to the dock. It rested at water level and let the ocean wash over them, but prevented them from being tugged out to sea at night, which could ruin the day of even the most avid of ocean lovers.

The sea was warm, and only lightly choppy, bucking them up and down every few minutes in a pleasant rhythm. Dar was lying on her back with her ankles crossed, and Kerry had chosen a spot at right angles to her, using Dar's belly as an opportune pillow.

"How can that be a pig? It's standing up on it's hind legs. Describe to me the last time you saw a pig do THAT."

Dar sighed. "Well, it's a really fat bear then. Look at it's belly." She described an arc. "Must have eaten all the pigs."

"Hm." Now it was Kerry's turn to ponder. "Maybe it's getting ready to hibernate."

"Eh." Dar pointed at a different set of stars. "I think that looks like a horse." She paused. "With a cart behind it."

Kerry looked. Then she rotated her head to look again. Then she turned and pressed her cheek against Dar's stomach, peering up at her partner. "When was that optometrists appointment, again?"

The dark haired woman solemnly stuck her tongue out. She flexed her body, making the raft ripple and bringing a wash of seawater over them complete with a floating chunk of fragrant seaweed. Dar batted the weed overboard, and exhaled, closing her eyes for a moment.

It was extremely peaceful, Kerry acknowledged, if you could block out from your mind the knowledge that they were floating over thirty or forty feet of water filled with all kinds of critters. Most harmless, a few not, and the truth was she'd never grown to be as comfortable as Dar was at night in the sea.

But the raft helped a lot, and having Dar there made up the difference, so she was able to relax and enjoy the pretty sky overhead after their swim. "I'm glad it rained today, but I'm even gladder it cleared up." Kerry said. "It's so pretty to look up at the sky like this."

Dar draped an arm over Kerry's body, the edge of her thumb rubbing gently across the fabric over her ribcage. "It is." She agreed. "I could do this every night."

Kerry's eyes flickered briefly closed, then they opened again. "Me too." But not in Miami, she silently added. While their condo was most certainly right on the water, the thought of floating in the sea that close to the port made her grimace.

Dar cleared her throat gently, and took a breath to speak, but then hesitated when the sound of an approaching boat engine caught their ears.

They lifted their heads and looked north, spotting running lights not that far offshore and heading in more or less their direction.

"Would it be outstandingly paranoid of me to wonder who's out there?" Kerry said.

"Mm."

Dar patted Kerry on the stomach and slid out from under her as she sat up. Shading her eyes, she studied the oncoming boat with a frown. It was small, about half the size of theirs, and appeared to be a low profile model, without the flying bridge a fishing vessel would have.

Sport boat, at night, wandering around in the Florida Straits. Either he was lost, or… Dar rolled over and off the raft, entering the water without much noise and taking hold of the edge of the float. "Ker.."

"Yeah, yeah." Kerry slid over the side and joined her, peering at the boat over the pontoons that ringed the canvas surface. The water, though warm, was not as warm as the air, and after the long swim and the fact that she'd half dried out made her feel more than a little chilled. "It could just be a party boat."

“Sure.” Dar agreed. “Even better reason for us not to be up their lounging in our swim suits.” She remarked dryly. “I’m not in the mood to be yelling kiss my ass in three languages tonight.”

Kerry edged closer to her, pressing her shoulder against her partner’s as they floated there side by side. The boat meandered around in a circle for a few minutes, then approached the shore again, heading directly for their dock. They got close enough for her to see there were three people on board, but it was too dark to see any details beyond that.

Since that meant it was also too dark for the people on the boat to see them, it was a workable trade off. Kerry let her chin rest against the pontoon, the scent of seawater and plastic coming strongly to her nose. “Doesn’t sound like a party.” She murmured under her breath.

“Nu uh.” Dar agreed, sinking lower in the water until it just covered her mouth. She tugged Kerry down a little, her partner’s pale head far more visible in the low light than her own. “Sure doesn’t.”

Kerry slid an arm around Dar’s torso, glad of the warmth as she pressed against the taller woman. “What in the hell are they looking for?” She whispered into a now conveniently close ear.

“Trouble.”

“You really think so?”

Kerry was answered when a bright spotlight erupted from the small boat, throwing a powerful beam of light to explore the dock and the approach up to their cabin. She drew in a breath in a mixture of shock and anger, releasing the air in a stream of bubbles as she ducked lower in the water.

Dar moved lower as well, only her pale blue eyes now showing above the surface, narrowed and glinting in the faint light. The boat moved closer, circling around the raft – it’s inhabitants paying the floating canvas little attention.

“Ahh, for a spear gun.” Dar lifted her mouth clear of the water for a brief moment.

“Ahh, for a bazooka borrowed from your father with live rounds.” Kerry uttered back. “Jesus Christ, Dar… who in the heck do these jerks think they are?”

“More to the point, do they realize they’re about to trespass?”

They watched the boat approach the dock and pull alongside, one of the figures jumping out to tie a rope to one of the stanchions.

“C’mon.” Dar released the raft and started towards them, using a stealthy breast stroke to move herself through the water.

"Wh.." Kerry looked around, then shook her head and followed, trying to make as little noise as possible. She wasn't as efficient a swimmer as Dar was, but all the practice she'd gotten since moving to Florida stood her to good stead as she kept up in the mild surf.

A mask and snorkel would have made her life easier. Errant little waves tended to end up splashing her in the mouth, and she kept spitting out sea water, but after a few minutes they were approaching the dock. The other two people had gotten out, and all three were now creeping up the wooden gangway towards the cabin.

Bastards. Kerry felt a flush of anger sweep through her, taking the chill away and replacing it with a fierce heat. The outlines of the three didn't, though, look familiar to her, though she could see two were men, and one was a woman. "Think it's the reporters?" She caught up to Dar as they reached the outer edge of the dock and grabbed on.

"Dunno." Dar pulled herself along the dock until she was just across from the boat, craning her head to see where they intruders were. "Not sure I care."

The tone in her partner's voice alerted Kerry at once. "What are we going to do? Confront them?"

For an answer, Dar swam over to the boat and reached up to grasp the railing, pulling herself up and over the side in a brief moment of starlit muscularity.

"Uh oh." Kerry grabbed hold of the wooden ladder fastened to the side of the dock and got up on the bottom rung, peering over the edge of the boat to see what her partner was doing. "Dar!" She whispered urgently.

For a moment nothing happened, then a dark head appeared over the side, and Kerry saw the boat start to drift away from the dock. "Oh ho." She chuckled low in her throat. "Bad girl."

The craft bobbed closer to her, as the outgoing tide took it gently from it's berth. As it passed, Dar stepped onto the side and then onto the ladder, holding something in her hand. She released the wood and dropped into the water next to Kerry, jerking her arm down as she fell.

The boat's engine suddenly roared to life and it veered crazily off, heading southeast at a rapid clip.

They heard a yell from the shore, and Dar swung to the inside of the ladder, grabbing Kerry and tugging her under the dock, a grin visible even in the dim light.

"You are so bad." Kerry snickered, watching the boat disappear into the surf. "God, Dar.. what's going to happen to that thing? Someone could get hurt!"

"Nah." Dar nestled her jaw up next to Kerry's ear. "They were about to switch to the other tank. Not much gas left." They both looked up as footsteps pounded on the top of

the pier, accompanied by curses. “Now.” She uttered softly. “Do we rise up out of the sea and kick their asses, or what?”

Kerry listened to the voices over her head. “It’s the reporter, isn’t it?” She uttered back.

“I think so, yeah.”

Strategy. It was tough to work that out while you were stuck under a dock in the presence of curious night fish nibbling your heels. If they remained quiet, then the culprits had no one to blame but themselves, and nothing to say about Dar or Kerry.

If they confronted the trio, then their complicity in the boat’s startling disappearance would be clear, and they would have to deal with the publicity, not to mention calling the police.

It was late on a Saturday night, and Kerry didn’t want to spend the rest of the night calling the Marathon County police and explaining the whole shebang.

On the other hand, she really wanted to kick that reporter in the shins. “I think we should go kick their asses.” She finally said, hearing the nascent panic in the voices over her head.

Dar merely began swimming to the other side of the pier, tugging Kerry along with her to the ladder on the opposite side. She went first, climbing up to the top of the wooden platform and waiting for Kerry to join her as they stood behind the three intruders.

“Son of a bitch, that ain’t stopping.” One said. “We better go call the Coast Guard or something… what kinda idiot were you to leave the engine on, Virgil!”

“I didn’t!” The other man replied in an exasperated tone. “I told you that ten times already!” He half turned. “Look, Ms. Cruickshank, why don’t you just go over there and sit down while we figure out where we’re going to go to get a phone and..”

“You could use ours.” Dar interrupted this engaging drama, pitching her voice low and projecting it across the dock.

All three intruders jumped, and turned to find Dar’s tall form standing menacingly behind them, with Kerry a shorter, more visibly irritated counterpoint to her right. The two swimsuited figures were outlined in starlight and threw oddly large shadows across the dock to spill over them.

“Oh.. uh.. hi.” The reporter summoned a weak smile from somewhere.

“You might as well use it before I call the cops.” Dar went on. “And then you can explain to them why you’re trespassing on private property.”

Pat Cruickshank stepped forward. “Okay, okay – just hang on. I can explain this.”

Kerry actually just laughed. “So can I.” She said, folding her arms across her chest. “And you know, maybe we should call the local paper, too. I’d love to see this on the front page.”

Dar glanced at her in some surprise.

“Now, hold on.” Pat said. “Tell you what. Let’s go up there and we can talk while these bozos figure out how to get their boat back.”

“I’m going to call the police.” Dar turned and headed for the cabin. “And trust me… I’ll press charges.” She called back over her shoulder.

“Shit.” Virgil sounded panicky. “Man, I told you we shouldn’t have done this.”

The reporter turned to Kerry. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

Kerry looked at her, looked at the darkness around them, peered off at the rapidly disappearing boat, then looked back at the reporter. Both her eyebrows hiked up. “Okay.” She said. “I’m game. Explain to me how three people sneaking up in a boat to a private dock, then creeping towards our house is something other than what it looks like.” She spread her hands out in a questioning manner. “I’m waiting.”

Cruickshank hesitated, looking at the two guys with her.

“Okay, never mind. I’m over it.” Kerry went to the end of the dock and reached under a bit of rock, removing a small key and opening a locked, watertight box. She lifted the radio receiver inside and keyed it. “Coast Guard, Coast Guard, this is Dixieland Yankee portside, over.”

“Wait.” The reporter came over to her and lowered her voice. “Listen, I know you’ve got a right to be pissed off. But would you please just let me explain? This isn’t against you. I’m just trying to get some information that will let me work in your favor.”

Kerry merely eyed her. “Coast Guard, Coast Guard, come in.” She repeated into the mic.

“Please?”

“Dixieland Yankee portside, go head.” A man’s voice erupted from the radio. “This is Cutter Avalon.”

“Avalon, we have a pleasure craft underway without anyone aboard just southeast of us.” Kerry unkeyed the radio. “You’ve got whatever time it takes for the cops to get here. Don’t waste it.” She said.

“Yankee, we copy, we see it. “ The guard officer sounded exasperated. “Good gravy.”

“We have the boat operators here.” Kerry informed him. “Over.”

"Thanks, Yankee. We'll get back with you." The radio fell silent. Kerry put the mic inside and locked the box, then she turned and headed for the cabin, without another word.

After an awkward moment of indecision, the reporter ran after her.

* * *

Dar entered the cabin shaking her head and muttering under her breath, slamming the door behind her as she evaded Chino's curious snuffling and headed for the phone. Then she hesitated and stopped, putting her hands on her hips. "Chino, if I call the cops, what do you bet it'll be two hours before they get here."

"Gruff." Chino seemed in total agreement.

After a moment's indecision, Dar headed for the bedroom instead, figuring putting on some kind of clothes was probably a good strategic idea before re-confronting their unwelcome guests. She pulled a shirt and shorts from the dresser and stripped out of her swimsuit on her way into the bathroom, grabbing a towel and drying herself off before she changed.

She glanced cursorily into the mirror. "Ugh." One hand reached up to remove a string of purple seaweed from her neck, and dropped it into the waste basket. "Can't believe I didn't feel that." Pulling on her clothes, she ran her fingers through her wet hair and turned, hearing footsteps impact the porch outside.

A single set, and to Dar's ears, a distinctive pattern. She was not surprised when the back door opened and Kerry walked in, her face twitching a little and a stormy look in her eyes. Her hands were half balled into fists, but despite all that, she looked amazingly sexy and Dar couldn't help grinning at her.

"What?" Kerry caught the grin. "Did you call the cops already? I got the Coast Guard."

"Not yet." Dar bumped her towards the bedroom. "Go change. I assume our reporter friend is right behind you? I'll take care of her."

Kerry exhaled, but headed towards the inner door. She paused and turned as she reached it. "Was I doing something funny when I came in? You were grinning."

The door opened abruptly, preventing an answer. So Dar merely looked her partner up and down, and waggled her eyebrows, before she turned to face Pat Cruickshank.

Kerry sniffed. "Ah..hah." She entered the bedroom and shut the door behind her, ears straining as she heard Dar's low rumble start up. "Stupid idiotic son of.." she paused at her reflection in the mirror. Then she sighed. "Dar, you could have told me this damn thing was semi transparent wet."

At least it had been comfortingly dark outside. Kerry quickly removed the unexpectedly risqué suit and replaced it with a pair of worn denim short overalls, tucking a sedate white t-shirt into them before she buckled one strap over her shoulder.

Impatiently, she flicked her fingers through her hair, and then she turned and marched back into the living room.

* * *

"Look, I know you're pissed off and maybe you have a right to be." Pat was saying.

"Maybe?" Dar paused in mid motion. She was in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of milk.

"This isn't what it looks like." The reporter came over and faced her over the counter. "Look, Ms. Roberts, I thought we had an understanding."

Dar gave herself a moment's thought while she drank her glass down, the only sound in the cabin outside Kerry's rustling in the bedroom her swallowing. She finally put her glass down, just as her partner emerged and braced her arms on the counter. "My understanding is that I am a public officer of a public company, and I perform my public duties during working hours."

"Well, sure.."

"This is not a working hour." Dar cut her off. "I'm not sure why you don't understand that. I am off the clock. Out of the office. On vacation. Not answering my email. What OTHER.." She slammed her hands down on the counter, with a smack. "Way do I have to phrase that so it makes sense to you?"

"But this is not just a working hours story!" The reporter shot back. "This is about people, it's about people who are in this situation, trying to make something happen. You think everyone else is just taking the weekend off?"

"I don't care." Dar replied evenly. "It's not my problem what anyone else does." She pointed at the reporter. "Why is it a problem to anyone else what I do?"

"Okay, look." The reporter eyed Kerry warily as the shorter woman strode past her into the kitchen, taking the milk jug from Dar's side and drinking directly from the opening. "It's my job to tell the story in this special. Now, I don't mind telling stories, and I don't mind making them up when they're not interesting enough for me." Her attitude was more direct now. "But I also don't like being fed a tale, and you know, I think I'm being fed a tale."

"Okay." Kerry put the milk jug down. "But that doesn't explain why you're here."

Pat looked at her. "Honey, its you two who are feeding me the tale."

Dar looked at Kerry, Kerry looked back at Dar. They both looked across the counter at the reporter. “What?” Dar’s brow creased. “I haven’t told you anything.” She glanced at Kerry. “Have you?”

“Um.. no, I’ve only cursed at her so far.” Kerry shook her head. “What are you talking about?” She asked the black woman.

“Oh, don’t play that game with me.” Cruickshank said. “You are two smart cookies, and it’s way too late to pretend you don’t know what’s going on.” She put her hands on her hips. “So let’s drop the act, okay?”

Dar picked up her glass, poured more milk into it, and then wandered out of the kitchen shaking her head. She walked right past the reporter and went over to the couch, dropping into it and extending her legs out across it’s surface. “What do you think, Ker?”

“What do I think?” Kerry put the milk back into the refrigerator. “I think she got stung by a bunch of jelly fish. Want me to call 911? Hallucinations’ll be next.” She leaned on the counter. “Lady, you’re nuts.”

“I’m nuts?” The reporter’s eyes widened.

“We have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.” Kerry told her in a confidential tone.

Cruickshank looked from one to the other. She pointed at Dar. “ You told me from your perspective this whole bid was just business. Right?”

“Right.” Dar acknowledged.

“So, then tell me, Ms. Roberts, how professional it is that your father’s been working at the Telegenic’s ship, causing trouble?”

Uh oh. Dar outwardly refused to react, not even to let her eyes flicker over to where Kerry was standing. “My father?” She mused. “My father’s a retired naval officer who takes odd jobs on the waterfront to keep busy.” She said. “I find it hard to believe he was causing trouble.”

Kerry had to strain not to smile, despite the shock of the words.

“And he just so happened to take one there?” The reporter asked sarcastically. “Just like your.. “She turned and looked at Kerry. “assistant just happened to attack your competition at a restaurant?” A snort. “Give me a break.” She said. “This is all about personal issues, and you’ve got as many as anyone else does.”

“Actually.” Kerry chose her words carefully. “Your friends at Telegenics were trying to get me to come out with them, so they could attack my partner here.” She circled the counter. “I got called out of town.. on business.” Her smile was icy. “And my assistant was being courteous in letting them know I wasn’t going to make it.”

"With a chili bowl? I think an email would have been enough." Cruickshank shot back.

Kerry half shrugged. "Your friends were.. very professionally… sitting in a hamburger shack dissing us at the top of their voices. My assistant took exception to that. I don't blame her."

"Honey, that ain't how I heard it."

"My assistant is eighteen years old, and she was with her mother." The blond woman sat down on one of the counter stools. "I believe what they told me." She shrugged slightly. "But for that matter, if Dar and I did react in any way, it was because they were pushing us to the wall."

The reporter looked around the cabin. "I just don't believe that. You know what I think? I think they're right. All those people are up there working their butts off to make this happen, and you two are here in your…love shack."

She turned and walked to the door. "Call the cops. See if I care." Her voice was now cutting. "But let me tell you, **ladies** – I know exactly how I'm going to play this story, and for you… it's not going to be pretty."

Cruickshank turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

There was a brief silence in the cabin, as the two partners regarded each other. Finally, Dar shifted her position, rolling onto her side and propping her head up on her hand. "Love shack." She mused. "I like it."

Kerry rubbed her eyes. "Dar, this is not funny."

"No." Dar agreed. "But what in the hell are you going to do, Ker? Dad was doing exactly what she claimed, and we're here." One shoulder shrugged. "And the battling burritos did what they did. It's all in the spin, and she's got the turntable."

"Nice." The blond woman trudged over and sat down on the couch next to Dar. She let her hands fall slackly between her knees and extended her bare feet across the carpet. "So, now what?"

Now what. Good question. Dar really had no idea now what. "I just don't get what the big deal is about us being up here. It's not like you and I are running the cables." She temporized. "What's that all about?"

Kerry pondered. "They're control freaks, so they think everyone else should be too?" She thought a moment more. "And, well, you know, hon…. I can remember projects where you were a little like that too."

She peeked at Dar to gauge a reaction, but got a mildly bemused expression in return.

"I know." Her partner nodded agreeably. 'But I got over it. You helped me, matter of fact. I sniffed around one of yours one time too many, and you told me what I was going to die of."

Kerry's head dropped forward a little. "I did no such thing."

Dar's lips quirked. "Well, not in those words, no." She admitted. "But you did."

"I did?" Kerry thought back, trying to recall the momentous occasion. Had she really told Dar to back off? Then the memory surfaced, and she exhaled, picturing a scene in Dar's office with her pushing a set of colored project folders across her bosses desk. *One of us really needs to own these, Dar.*

Dar had cocked her head to one side, she remembered, and then casually pushed them back across the desk with a smile.

No, not quite in those words. "Okay, you got me." Kerry admitted. "But I don't get why it matters to them. After all, if we're slacking off, isn't that better for their side?"

"Mm."

"And, she told me she had information that would be to our advantage." Kerry suddenly remembered. "Was that just to get inside this place and have her say? I don't get it , Dar. This isn't adding up."

"No." Dar curled her body around Kerry's and wrapped an arm around her for good measure. "I thought that woman had a more balanced viewpoint. Something happened." She said. "Either she bought into Michelle and Shari's pitch, or something else happened that made her turn around. I know she was probably playing me at lunch, but I really…"

"Hrm."

"Really. I didn't get that vibe." Dar shook her head. "I got the feeling she was trying to find the other half of the story."

Kerry sighed. "Wonder how dad got outted? Maybe in retrospect that wasn't the smartest thing we ever did, asking him to go in there."

"Eh." Dar turned her head as her cell phone rang. "That's probably him. I'll ask." She picked it up and answered it, surprised to see the office's caller id instead. "Uh oh." She flipped it open. "Yes?"

"Oh, Ms. Roberts? Good.. this is the security desk." The voice answered, sounding relieved. "Listen, I have the security guy at the pier on the line, he needs to speak to you." There was a click, then a another line was connected.

"Hello?" Dar ventured.

"Uh.. oh, hi, Is this Ms. Roberts?"

"Yes."

"This is Steven at the pier, ma'am. We've been trying to call Ms. Stuart, and there's no answer. "

Dar looked inquiringly at Kerry, who sat up and peered around like a startled meerkat searching out her cell phone. "She's here. What's the problem? You need to talk to her?"

"No, well.. it's not.. " The guard seemed unsure. "It's the port, ma'am. They're going nuts here. There's television cameras and all kinds of stuff all over the place, and I think they're asking everyone to leave."

"Huh?" Kerry took the phone. 'Steven, this is Kerry. What's happening? Was there an accident?"

"No, ma'am, But some kind of government people are here, and boy, they've got this place lit up like a Christmas tree for sure. I think they're looking at the ships. Something's wrong, I guess. They won't tell us anything."

Kerry held the phone out a little, and lifted her free hand in question.

Dar was at a loss. "Okay, well…" She rubbed her jaw.

"Did they make all the workers leave the ships, Steve?" Kerry asked. "Are our contractors still there?"

"No, oh, wait. Hang on." The sound went muffled, then came back. "Ma'am, one of my guys just came in to relieve me and he said he heard it's an environmental thing.'

"Environmental." Kerry repeated. "Okay, but are they asking you to leave the pier?"

"No, ma'am, apparently what some of these people want is for the boats to leave the pier." The guard now sounded much more sure of himself. "It's not about us at all."

"Phew." Dar exhaled. "At last, something that has nothing to do with us, for a change."

"Yeah." Kerry agreed. "Okay, Steve, you guys just sit tight near the office, okay? If they make everyone get out, give me a call." She paused, "Wait, give Dar a call because my cell phone's AWOL at the moment."

"Okay, ma'am, will do." Steve replied. "Sorry to bother you."

Kerry hung up the cell phone, which she handed to her partner. Then she got up and started roaming around the cabin, searching for her own. "Where in the dickens did I put that thing, Dar? I know I had it when we got here."

"Sounds like Quest's got a real problem on his hands." Dar put the phone down and rolled to her feet, joining in the search for the missing cell. "Something he can't blame us for."

"For a change." Kerry paused, then slapped herself on the head. "Damn it, I left it in on the bike." She groaned in disgust. "Be right back." She disappeared through the front door, with Chino chasing after her.

A knock came at the back door. Dar scrubbed the fingers of one hand through her hair and went to answer it, wondering if it would be their reporter's boatmen, the coast guard, the cops, or the National Enquirer. Nothing would have surprised her at this rate.

She opened the door. "Yes?"

"Okay, listen." Pat Cruickshank said. "Can we start over?"

Well, almost nothing.

* * *

Problems for them tending to be rated by the number of pots of coffee they required while solving. Kerry pressed the button to start pot number two, while she listened with half an ear to what Dar was saying in the living room.

"Let me get this straight." Dar rubbed her temples. "You came down here because Shari and Michelle convinced you that we were trying to screw up your filming project by deliberately making them look bad."

"Right."

"And we didn't do anything to change that idea."

"No."

Dar folded her hands and rested her chin on her clasped fingers. "So why are you here? Just write your story. They're struggling good guys, we're monolithic bad guys trying to squash them.. makes for great television. Go for it."

Pat got up and paced. "You know, you know… I really want to go for that." She used her hands when she talked for the first time, her fists clenching and unclenching. "It's a great story, you're right. Make great television. Just what my boss was looking for."

Dar's ears pricked. "Your boss."

Kerry brought the new pot of coffee in, setting it down on the tray quietly and taking a seat next to her partner.

"My boss. Really wants this show." Pat agreed. "Something new, you know? Yeah, it's travel related, but it's also got a big human angle, and people like that."

“Mm.” Dar nodded. “But?”

“But.” The reporter repeated softly. “But you know… “ She turned and faced them. “Sweet as this story is, the good guys in it aren’t the people I want my boss to see.” Hesitating, she finally shrugged and went to the seat across from the couch, sitting down on it. “You’re not the only ones with a personal agenda here.”

Kerry blinked, positive she was missing something. A quick glance at Dar’s profile clued her in to the fact that her partner wasn’t.

Dar’s head lifted, the entire expression on it shifting from bewilderment to understanding from one breath to another. “You want your boss to see how we work.” She indicated Kerry and herself.

Pat nodded. “Yeah.” She said. “Because let me tell you, those other two have tried their damnedest to convince me that you two are as dysfunctional as they are, and believe me, they’re a pair of head cases together.”

“Dysfunctional?” Kerry frowned, then turned her head to face Dar. “We never malfunction, do we?”

A wicked twinkle appeared in Dar’s very blue eyes. “Not that you’ve ever mentioned to me, no.” She drawled. “And I’ve got no complaints.”

Kerry looked puzzled for an instant, then she reached over and tweaked Dar’s nose. “Wench.” She shook her head and faced Pat again. “I don’t understand how they’d give you that impression.”

Pat’s lips twitched. “Whole lot of talk.” She concurred. “Especially that Shari. She’s got a lot to say about you… “ She looked at Dar. “And it sure isn’t complimentary.”

“That’s just because Dar keeps kicking her butt every time they square off.” Kerry snorted. “Shari should learn better business tactics.”

The reporter leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “It’s not business she’s talking about.”

“Ah.” Dar chuckled shortly. “Let me guess – Shari’s painting me as a half unstable megalomaniac with twisted personal issues stemming from my upbringing.”

“What?” Kerry barked.

“Who beats her girlfriend.” Pat added crisply.

Dar just snorted. Kerry gave an excellent impression of boiling teakettle without stirring a muscle as Chino trotted over and pushed her head against her shorter mother’s knees. “Boy, does she have her lines crossed.” The dark haired woman shook her head. “I’m not the Tasmanian devil in this relationship.”

“I’m gonna cross her lines.” Kerry got out from between clenched teeth. “Has she really been telling people that?”

“Well, she had me half buying it, and to be honest, that’s the real reason I came down here.” The reporter admitted. “You can act however you want in the office, but like you said, this is not your office, and it’s off the clock.” She looked around. “And this ain’t no movie set.”

Dar scratched her nose and produced a brief smile. “No, it’s not.”

“Dar, do you think that’s where all that crap in the office came from?” Kerry turned and looked at her. “From Shari? Is that possible, that she fed all that BS to someone inside?”

“That would be the obvious choice.” Dar sat forward and started pouring herself another cup of coffee. She very gently nudged Kerry’s bare foot with her own. “But you never can tell. Could be the other way around.”

“Ah. Yeah.”

“Problems inside your office?” Pat asked alertly.

“Just more of the usual chatter.” Kerry shrugged it off. “We had a good laugh about it.”

Dar stirred her coffee around counterclockwise just hearing that characterization of her partner’s reaction. “So.” She set the spoon down and took a sip. “What are you going to do?” Her eyes lifted and met Pat’s. “Now that you’ve achieved your goal and interviewed us today.”

Dar’s cell phone chose to ring at that moment. With a faint sigh, she leaned over and picked it up, then answered it. “Yeah?”

“Hey boss.” Mark’s voice sounded aggravated. “Listen, I traced down the IP we saw, and it was one of the Marketing bullpen machines. Could have been any of ten people using it.”

“Okay. Get me full scans on those ten.” Dar replied quietly. “And put traces on them.”

A pause. “All the way?”

“Yes.”

“You got it.” Mark said. “Hey, you know what? It’s been a lot cooler around here since you put that stuff on the big pipes. I haven’t had nearly as many alerts.”

Inwardly, Dar smirked. “And you’re surprised?”

The MIS manager chuckled. “Nah. I knew you hadn’t lost your touch. We’ve only got one little bastard who keeps trying. I’m keeping an eye on it though.”

“Good work. Keep me in the loop.” Dar said, and then she hung up. “Well?” She turned her attention back to the avidly listening reporter. “Decided what your angle’s going to be or what?” Leaning casually back, she stretched one arm across the back of the couch and sipped her coffee, watching Pat over the rim of the cup.

Kerry decided to settle back herself, ending up by design in the curl of Dar’s arm, and with one hand resting lightly on her partner’s thigh. She recognized Dar’s fencing mode, and figured it would be better all around for her to stay out of the match until she could get more fully clued in on what was going on.

“Well, not yet, no.” Pat said. “It’s kind of a tough situation, you know? I mean, if Telegenics wins that bid, it’s going to be real hard for me to slant my story any way except for what everyone’s expecting. We need to have our viewers happy about who comes out on top.”

“Well.” Kerry pursed her lips. “Y’know, with two sets of dykes in the mix, you probably need to recruit some heteros or you’re going to be upsetting most of your viewers no matter what if either of us comes out on top.”

That caused a bit of a silence. Dar prudently stuck her nose in her cup and slurped up some coffee, as the reporter merely goggled at Kerry briefly.

“It’s true.” The blond woman said, with a slight shrug.

“Maybe they should back a dark horse.” Dar mused. “Knock those lousy lezzies off their pedestal – that’d make a good story, don’cha think, Ker?”

“Mm. I wouldn’t watch it, but… sure.”

Pat shifted uncomfortably. “Are you making fun of me?” She asked, with a slight hesitation. “We don’t practice discrimination in our telecasts.” She got up. “So that part of your lifestyle never came into the picture.”

Kerry got up also, neatly drawing her attention. “How can’t it? She asked. “You’ve got Shari and Michelle, who are very out, and Dar and I, who are also very out. We’re competing for the same prize, and we’re in a dog fight with all the dirty tricks stops pulled out.” She cocked her head to one side. “How do you intend on portraying that without mentioning our sexual orientation?”

“Well, of course we were going to mention it but…”

“We could always arrange for a jello wrestling match.” Dar launched herself from the couch and prowled over to the back window, watching outside and bracing both hands on the window. “That’d get ratings.”

“Wrestling.” Kerry looked thoughtful. “I’d go for that.”

"Wait a minute. This isn't supposed to be about you all fighting each other.. well, not like that.." Pat protested.

Dar turned. "Either you go the personal route, or you don't." She leaned against the window. "If you take that path, you have to deal with the dirty parts. You want your boss to see how we mix living and working? Then you have to show how Shari and Michelle don't well, and that means you have the Dueling Dykes show."

"But.."

"She's right." Kerry picked the ball up effortlessly. "Mention why you were here, and you have to go over why Shari talks about Dar the way she does. It's not for business reasons."

Pat looked cornered. "Wait a minute…"

"Tell you what." Dar swiped the ball back. "Invite your boss to dinner with us. Save the drama, and stick with the business line on your program. You'll end up with happier sponsors for it."

Kerry chuckled. "At the least."

Pat looked at them both uncertainly. "But the people angle…"

"Find another people angle." Dar pressed her. "Think about it." She turned and opened the back door, gesturing towards it with one hand. "Your boat's ready. I think the coasties even left your drivers intact."

Slowly, Pat walked towards the door, watching them both until she was in the doorway with her hand on the sill. She took a breath to say something, then she merely shook her head and walked out, without looking back.

Dar swung the door shut. She and Kerry regarded each other for a brief moment, then both sighed at once. "This is gonna be a mess if she doesn't take that advice."

Kerry joined her. "You got that right." She agreed. "But… I think it's a mess anyway." She exhaled. "I think we really did mess this one up, Dar."

Dar put an arm around her shoulders. "I think you may be right, Ker." She admitted. "I think we made some bad choices. But we can't change that now, so let's just make the best of it we can."

"Break out the mops."

"Yeap."

* * *

The morning sun rose gently over South Pointe Marina, gilding the forest of pristine white fiberglass that graced it's many slips. Towards one side of the marina, in an area relatively uncrowded in the summer a sixty foot Bertram yacht rode peacefully within it's dock, rocking back and forth slightly as a tall, broad shouldered figure paced across it's stern deck.

Andrew whistled softly under his breath as he worked, laying out a new set of white cotton lines for the big boat in orderly loops. His hands worked the rope with almost unconscious skill, fingers half twisting the lines to release the kinks in their new fabric.

It was Sunday, the weather was fine, he had work to do on his boat, and Ceci had promised him a hamburger for breakfast. Life, he reflected silently, just did not ever get any better than this. Especially given where his life had been so short a time ago – he had no doubt at all this was just a gift from God he had no expectation or explanation for.

Coulda been a reward, he acknowledged, for the years he'd spent in Hell already. Or it coulda been a nod from the feller upstairs over them lives he'd saved getting into all that trouble.

Andy perched on the side wall of the boat and blinked into the sunlight. Maybe it wasn't any of those things, though. Maybe it was just dumb luck, and the catchback he'd gotten for pouring his heart into fatherhood, since if it hadn't been for Dar, all what he had now would just be some damn dream.

He exhaled contentedly. Turned out a damn good kid, after all that. It irked him, a little, that he'd gotten taken out of the ship job. Being Dar's little bit of trouble inside there had been a good thing, and now, them women could be getting up to all kinds of no good without anyone to keep an eye on them.

Not a good thing. Andrew sighed. He hated half finished missions.

The cell phone clipped to the wooden cabinet near the door buzzed, surprising him. He dropped the rope and walked over to the door, picking up the device and opening it's lid. ""Lo?"

"Hey, Ugly! Where the hell are you?"

Andrew studied the phone receiver as though it had morphed into a wholly unexpected weasel. "This here Bradley?" He queried.

"Sure is! Where are you, man? I told you I wanted everyone working today."

"Wall." Andy crossed his arms and leaned against the cabinet. "Them folks told me not to come back yesterday." He said. "They talk to you?" He added curiously. "They were pretty fussed up last night."

Ceci emerged from the boat's cabin and cocked her head curiously. "Who's that?" She was carrying a plate containing a cheeseburger, surrounded by a veritable cornucopia of vegetables and fruit bits. She put it down near Andrew's elbow and leaned next to him.

"Feller thinks he's my boss." One of her husband's grizzled eyebrows waggled, as he covered the receiver with the palm of one large hand. "Ain't figgered he isn't yet." Carefully removing the burger from it's nest of healthiness, he nudged aside a carrot curl threatening to contaminate his breakfast and then bit into it.

"Ah, the mental midget who made your first petty officer look like Einstein. Gotcha." Ceci walked over to the canvas bucket chair on their back deck and seated herself, resting her head against the wooden seat back and contentedly absorbing the early morning sunlight. "Anyone ever tell him that whole Christian Sunday is the day of rest stuff? Only thing in the whole rigmarole that ever made any sense to me."

Andrew reached over to tweak a bit of her hair. "Yeap, ah am still here." He spoke into the phone. "Did you talk to them folks? Got their shorts in a big old twist yesterday."

"Yeah, yeah.. I talked to them." The supervisor sounded dismissive. "Listen, that lady was just spouting some crazy stuff, and yeah, she doesn't want you around here but I got a spot on that other boat behind this one and I really need you to help me out."

"That big blue one with the patches on one side?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, whatever. The one behind this one."

Dar's boat. Andrew took another bite of hamburger and chewed it thoughtfully. "Hm."

"C'mon, buddy. I figured you could use the cash, right?" The supervisor sounded a touch desperate. "My guy over there walked out this morning, said he'd gotten a better offer. Tell you what.. I'll give you a buck an hour raise."

Forty bucks a week. Andrew mused. Well, it'd pay the phone hook up fee for the month, at any rate. "All right." He agreed. "But I got to finish what I'm doing here right now, so it'll be a bit." He told the man. "Then ah will be over there."

Ceci stuck her tongue out.

"Okay, but not too long, huh?" Bradley said. "This place is a mess. Wait till you hear what happened last night after you left with the government people. It's chaos."

'"Yeap." Andrew agreed. "I do believe the gov'mint usually does cause that. Bye." He hung up the phone and set it on the counter. "Seems like some body done hired this guys' feller off that boat Dar's working on."

"Oh, really?" Ceci regarded him, a mildly sardonic look appearing on her face. "I wonder if I can guess who that might have been, hm? My goddess, those women are a pair of hairless Mexican cats." She frowned. "Can they be that desperate, or are they just that pissed off about you?"

“Beats me.” Andy finished his breakfast, licking a bit of juice off his thumb. “That was damn good hamburger, ma’am.” He complimented his wife. “Do you want your part of this here MRE?” He handed over the plate of plant matter.

Ceci took a tomato slice and bit into it. “You only wish you ever got these in those.” She retorted. “So you’re going to go work on Dar’s boat now? Doesn’t really help much to know what those women are up to.”

Andrew shrugged. “Do the best ah am able to.” He said. “Sides, got me a one US dollar an hour raise out of it.”

“Oo. You’re taking me to dinner on your paycheck this week, sailor boy.” Ceci laughed. “And we’re not ending up in that chicken wing place, either.” She got up and slid her arms around him, giving his solidness a fierce hug. “I’m glad you’re helping out the kids. I think this one’s throwing them out of whack a little.”

“Ah’m sure they’re having themselves a good time down south.” Andrew said. “Without none of this here stuff to bother them.” He gave her a return hug, then ducked his head an surprised her with a kiss, even though they were standing in what was now broad daylight on the back of the boat.

After a moment, they parted, and Andrew looked down at his wife, his eyes twinkling in the sun. Ceci reached up and stroked his face gently, her fingertips tracing the scars that, though faded, still crossed his skin. “I was looking forward to spending the day with you.” She admitted.

“Yeap.” Andrew kissed her again. “Me too.” He said. “But I told that man I had something to take care of before I went over there.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeap.”

“Well then.” Ceci smiled. “What are we standing out here for then? Unless you want to shock the neighbors.” She paused. “Again.”

“Nope.” Andrew courteously opened the door, then followed her inside.

* * *

“Augh!” Kerry reached for the Frisbee, flying high over her head and knew she was going down. She took a quick breath as she hit the water, then kicked for the surface, her head breaking the waves as she looked around for the bright pink disk. “Darn it, Dar!” She struck out for the toy, swimming quickly towards it before the thing got pulled out to sea.

“Not my fault you’re short.” Dar bobbed up and down in the surf, not far offshore on the far side of the dock near the cabin. It was fairly shallow there, not like the deep draft

they'd had dredged for the Dixie, and the surf was almost calm, perfect for playing Frisbee in.

Well, almost perfect. Dar watched Kerry reach the disk and grab it, turning to swim back far enough for her to stand up and throw it back. Chino was racing along the shore barking, frustrated that her owners were somewhat beyond her reach.

"C'mon, Chi!" Kerry got to where she could stand up, and tossed the disk back to her partner. "Come swim."

"Gruff!" Chino bounded halfway in up to her chest, then bolted away as a wave came chasing after her.

"Goofy dog." The blond woman shook the wet hair out of her eyes, then set herself as Dar threw the Frisbee back. It was a little high, but not nearly as much as last time and she made a grab for it, pulling it out of the air despite the drag of the water against her body as she moved. "Hah!"

Dar grinned. Kerry always approached the playful sports they engaged in with a healthy dose of competitiveness, which at first had surprised her. Then, when she'd learned more about her partner, she'd come to realize that Kerry had been forced to fight for recognition at every turn in her life, where standing out had never been a problem for Dar.

It wasn't as though she wasn't competitive herself, in business of course she was. But in her personal life, she'd never really had to do what she often kidded Kerry was fighting for kibble.

No siblings. No competition. Dar saw the disk headed her way and she lunged through the water after it, uncoiling her body and jumping clear of the surface as she snatched it just before it went sailing on a trajectory that would have taken it under the dock. "Wench!"

"Work for it!" Kerry yelled back, clearly enjoying herself. "Teach you to call me short, huh!"

"If I have to go diving under that dock, you're gonna be more than short, ya little chipmunk!" Dar let fly with the Frisbee, chortling as her partner had to scramble for it, bouncing through the waves and kicking up spray as she went for the intercept.

"I'll chipmunk you." Kerry grabbed the Frisbee, and then, instead of tossing it back just headed in Dar's direction, rambling through the water like a miniature freight train. "You're toast!"

Run? Dar considered the effort of escaping from her partner's nefarious intentions, and weight it against the pleasure of suffering them. She grinned, and as Kerry came within range, she dove right towards her, disappearing beneath the waves and colliding with Kerry's legs as she tried unsuccessfully to stop in time.

Way overbalanced, Kerry let out a yelp and tumbled over, landing mostly on Dar and grabbing at her as they wrestled half in and half out of the water. “You.. you…”

Dar got a hold around Kerry’s middle and then got her legs under her, standing up and hauling the blond woman out of the water like a sack of oats. “Yeeeesss?” She purred into Kerry’s ear. “Me what?”

Kerry paused to catch her breath from her run through the waves. “You… punk.” She slapped Dar on the thigh. “You tricked me.”

“Into charging at me like a rhino?” Dar laughed. “Uh.. okay, honey. If you say so.”

“Bah.” Kerry let her head rest against Dar’s chest. “Where’s the Frisbee?”

“Didn’t you have it?” Dar looked around. “Oh.. rats.” She spotted the disk floating under the dock. “You stay here, cuttlefish. I’ll get it.” She released Kerry and headed for the pier, diving under the water as she got close to it.

Neither of them was really fond of swimming right under the wooden surface, since several large sea bass had taken up residence and they loved to nibble intruding humans. At night, the fish were sleeping, but during the day… Dar blinked her eyes open quickly in the salt water, then just as quickly closed them. She surfaced and located the disk, swimming over to it and grabbing it just as something bit her foot. “Yeow! Bastard!” She kicked out in reflex, then kicked with her other foot just for good measure. She felt a spongy impact, then she turned and headed out from under the pier.

Kerry was already at the edge of the wood reaching for her. “The fish?”

“God, I hope so.” Dar felt a sharp sting where she’d been bitten. “Ow.”

“Sorry.” Kerry took hold of her arm and started heading for the shore. “I should have kept track of the damn thing.”

“Residential hazard.” Dar winced, as she hopped out of the water, grateful for Kerry’s supportive arm around her waist. “I should have known better…”

“Should have just let the silly thing float off. We have a dozen of them.” Kerry muttered as they got on shore, and sat down in the sand together. She scooted down a little and lifted Dar’s foot up, setting it on her thigh to look at it. “Let me see.”

“Ah ah ah. We don’t let plastic into the ocean ecology.” Dar peered at her foot, which was covered with an alarming amount of blood. “Wow.” She fended off Chino, who snuffled around them anxiously.

“Yikes. We better go inside and clean this off.” Kerry leaned closer. The fish had really chomped down on her foot, making a semi-circle of punctures which were liberally leaking blood. “I don’t think it’s deep, but..”

“But it hurts.” Dar observed. “Stings like hell.”

Kerry gently wiped the blood away and bent over, kissing the spot. “Let’s go. We’ve got some peroxide in the cabin.”

Dar cautiously withdrew her foot from Kerry’s clutches. “It doesn’t hurt **that** bad.”

“Baby.”

“Well, it doesn’t.”

“C’mon, big baby.” Kerry got to her feet and offered her partner a hand up. “Those are puncture wounds, and a very good friend of mine taught me that those have to be cleaned out really well.”

“Yeah.. well, you shouldn’t always listen to your friends.” Dar accepted the aid, hopping along the sand over to where the porch steps were. “Look, it’s stopped bleeding.”

“C’mon.”

“Kerry!”

“C’mon, chicken little. What if that was a barracuda?” Kerry took a firm hold on her reluctant incipient damsel in distress and tugged her towards the house. “Bet we’ve got mercurochrome, too.”

“Whine.”

Kerry opened the door. “Was that you, or Cheebles?”

* * *

In the end, Dar gave in gracefully to the attention, lying down on the couch with her injured foot in Kerry’ lap as her partner tended to it. The cleaning hurt, as she’d expected, but it was offset by the look of gentle concern on Kerry’s face, and the obvious care she was taking to do the job right.

The punctures were deep. “I know you were kidding about the barracuda.” Dar kept her eyes closed, the better not to see the holes in her foot. “But you might be on to something there.”

Kerry looked up from her task, holding up the cotton swab she’d been using the clean out the punctures. “You really think so?”

“Too narrow a jaw to be the bass.” Dar said. “Besides, it’s much more macha to say I got bit by a 'cuda than by a poky old sea bass.”

Kerry chuckled softly, giving Dar's ankle a little pat. "You realize this means I'm driving home, right?" She painted the top row of punctures with some lurid mercurochrome, admiring the well formed, powerful arch under her hands. "You have such pretty feet."

Dar chortled. "I do not."

"Yes, you do." Kerry traced a line across the side of one. "Have you ever worn toenail polish?"

Dar was quiet for a moment. "Are you suggesting I should?" She wiggled her toes, then wished she hadn't, as the injury protested. "Have you?"

"Me?" Kerry finished the top, and then she shifted to do the punctures on the bottom of Dar's foot, scattered across it's ball. "Oh no. The idea if my wearing open shoes in public… I think I'd have had them cut off if I'd tried it. I wasn't even allowed to use anything other than clear or a light pink fingernail polish."

"Did you want to?"

"Yeah." Kerry smiled as she worked. "Bright, flame red." She painted a somewhat deeper puncture. "Oo.. Dar, that's a bad one."

"Ow.' Her partner sighed. "Well, you could now."

"Could now what?"

"Wear bright red nail polish."

Kerry looked up and over her shoulder at her partner, a quizzical expression on her face. "Do I look like a red nail polish kind of girl to you?" She asked. "I said back **then**, Dar. Now I just don't consider myself a red toenail type."

Dar studied her back for a moment, wondering about toenail polish among other things. She could honestly say wearing polish of any kind on her feet wasn't something that had ever crossed her mind, since taking her boots off to find that would have caused her merciless kidding probably right up until this very day. "Well." She considered. "I think a nice sea green would be pretty on you."

"Mmhm." Kerry agreed absentmindedly. "Probably. You would look good in coral."

"I would?"

"Yeah."

Dar considered further. "Kerry?"

"Uh?"

"Why are we having this discussion?"

Her partner shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m sitting here playing with your feet, so I guess the thought just came to me. I remember it was the topic of conversation regularly when I was in college.” She finished the last bite mark. “There.” She studied her handiwork. “I’m going to put a bandage on this. You shouldn’t walk on it.”

“I’m not walking on it.” Dar agreed, wriggling into a more comfortable spot on the couch.

“I meant after you get up.” Kerry gently set the foot aside and rose, heading towards the bathroom.

Dar folded her hands across her stomach and relaxed, sure that the worst of the tending was over. The injury now stung more than anything due to the cleaning, and she felt confident that it wasn’t anything serious.

She still felt a little stupid, though, that she’d been bitten by a fish underneath her own dock. Dar wiggled her toes speculatively. Maybe she could tell people she’d been bitten by an alligator. That sounded more interesting.

Not to mention, heroic. Maybe Kerry would say she’d rescued her from it.

“What’s so funny?” Kerry came back with a roll of gauze bandage and proceeded to mummify Dar’s foot with it.

“Nothing.” Dar squashed the temptation. “Just wondering what cock and bull story I’m going to come up with for people at the office tomorrow to explain why I’m limping.”

“Well.” Kerry said. “You could tell them I got revenge for you hitting me by stomping you with a stiletto heel.” She suggested.

“Um…

“Or I could tell everyone you saved me from a vicious barracuda.” Kerry continued on without hesitation. “There I was, swimming innocently, not realizing a barracuda was about to bite my ass, when…you jumped in and saved me at the last minute.”

“Hm.”

“Like that one better?”

“You tell good stories.” Dar chuckled. “Even if they are completely fabricated.”

Kerry finished her bandage, and patted Dar’s calf. “Not completely. You’d have done it if it’d really been after me, right?”

“Right.” Dar agreed almost without thinking. “Anyone trying to bite your ass has to go through me to get there, No question.” She reached over and snagged a finger into the waistband of Kerry’s shorts. “C’mere.”

Kerry gladly leaned back, stretching her body out next to Dar's on the couch. "Know what I wish?"

"What?"

"I wish we weren't going back tonight."

Dar pondered the thought. "Okay." She agreed. "We won't."

Her partner laughed shortly. "Stop teasing me. You know we have to go into work tomorrow, Dar."'

"I'm not teasing." Dar replied. "I had this cabin installed with the gear I did for the specific purpose of us working down here from it. So let's do it. We can log in from here, and probably get three times the amount of work done. If we need to conference, we can finally put that god damned expensive teleconferencing center I paid for to work at the office."

Kerry turned over so she was facing Dar. "You're serious."

"As a heart attack."

Should they? Kerry thought about what she had on her schedule. The ops meeting, sure, and fallout from the weekend which had to be handled by conference call anyway. No clients, and the executive committee meeting wasn't until mid-week.

Hm. "Okay." She sounded surprised even to herself. "Why not? You don't have anything that needs face time tomorrow?"

"Nope. Just more work on my program." Dar confirmed. "Absolutely I'll get more done from here on that, without someone sticking their heads in my office every five minutes." She liked the idea more and more every passing second. "And, then I don't have to make up a no shit I was barracuda story."'

Kerry had to admit to feeling a little bit apprehensive, only because she knew what the view would be from their co-workers if they both didn't show for work tomorrow. Then she thought about that for a minute, and decided the hell with it. They talked about them bullshit anyway, might as well be doing what they wanted.

Besides, Dar was probably right. She got more done when she was not in the office as well, and she had several prospective client write ups she hadn't had a chance to do the last week that really needed to get taken care of.

Or was that just more self-justification? "What about the ship?" She asked. "You think it's going to be a public relations nightmare with them finding out Dad was working on it, and all that? If we don't show up for work on top of that, it could be a problem, Dar."

“Hell with it.” Dar replied obstinately. “What if it’s a problem? What if the media comes to interview me on it, Ker? What am I going to say, I didn’t know?”

“Ah. Good point.”

“I think it’s a good idea to let that blow over a little.” Dar decided. “In fact, I think the less we get involved in the whole press nightmare the better right now. Let’s let out work stand for itself. Get the job done, then they can make what they want of it. The more we play into this, the worse it gets.”

Kerry was quiet for a moment, and then she sighed. “We’re really good at talking ourselves into things, aren’t we?”

Dar had to smile. “Yeah.” She sounded a touch sheepish.

“But maybe you’re right.” Kerry went on. “We’ve been playing right into their hands, haven’t we? Reacting like we have, and getting all into the spotlight. Maybe it’s time to lay low and just get the job done, like you said.”

Dar kissed the top of her head. “We could even paint each other’s toenails.” She suggested. “No one has to know.”’

Now it was Kerry’s turn to smile. “Renegade. Only if I can paint yours freaking scarlet.” She relaxed against the leather, though, her entire body reacting to the knowledge that there would be no late night drive home ahead of her at least tonight.

And, who knew? Dar was really a very good strategist, and maybe this would turn out to be another one of her brilliant solutions. It had happened before, and she’d never regretted trusting her partner’s instincts yet. “You up for an omelet?’

“Only if the deceased baby chickens don’t touch anything resembling a green pepper.”

“You’re on.

PART 21

COFFEE AND A HACKER FOR BREAKFAST. DAR RATTLED THE KEYS ON HER KEYboard, her eyes flicking rapidly over the large LCD screen in her cabin office. "Yum yum." She murmured, watching the attempts at entry into their systems.

It was quiet inside the cabin, save the rattling of her keys, and a similar, softer counterpoint from the next office over. Outside, the breeze stirred the tree branches, and leaves pattered fitfully against the window, but the warm wind didn't penetrate the walls, and it was cool enough inside for Dar to be wearing a pair of sedate, yet fluffy lambskin booties, one of them cradling her injured foot carefully.

They were perched on her desktop at the moment, and she leaned back in her leather chair, flexing her hands as she pondered her next course of action. The hacker wasn't that effective, and she didn't really think he was any danger, but it was the persistence behind the effort that had caught her eye.

It was almost a robotic sequence. A probe on each port, using each service, over and over and over again. Was it mechanical, or some idiot sitting there typing the same thing over and over? Dar leaned towards it being a script, but someone was behind the script, and she wanted to know what they were up to.

She probed the inbound connection cautiously, capturing some packets and examining them with a knowledgeable eye. The originating IP was spoofed, that she was pretty sure of. Last time she checked, Wal-Mart wasn't a spawning ground of insurgency, though she did appreciate the ghoulish humor.

Chino pattered in, jumping up and placing her paws squarely on the chair arm, licking Dar's arm with enthusiasm. "Hey Chi." She greeted the animal with an affectionate grin. "What are you up to? You want to help me watch this loser?"

"Growf." The Lab inched forward, nuzzling Dar's neck as she wagged her tail.

Dar put her arm around the dog and scratched her around the neck, typing one handed on her keyboard. "So what do you think, Chi? You like it here?" She asked. "Want to live here all the time?"

"Growf!"

"Sounded like yes to me." Dar drummed her fingers on the keys, watching the persistent signal hammering on her virtual front doorstep. "Look at that guy, would you? Just spewing over and over and over again.. what in the hell's he trying to do?"

Chino decided Dar's ear would be tasty, and she licked it, making her owner emit a muffled chuckle.

Her mail chimed, and Dar spared an eye for it, clicking over to her inbox and reviewing the newly arrived message. It was from Mariana, and she opened it curiously.

> *Dar –*
>
> *Heard you were playing hooky today. What's up?*
>
> *Mari.*

Well, now wasn't that refreshingly straightforward. Dar hit reply and typed a response.

> *Why? Everyone freaking out? If you want to know the truth, I got bitten by a barracuda last night and didn't feel like lying about it all day long to everyone who saw me.*
>
> *D*

"What do you think, Chino? Everyone freaking?" Dar gave the dog a kiss on the top of her head.

"Freaking about what?" Kerry responded, entering Dar's office and putting a cup of gently steaming, milky tea down on the desk. She had a pair of shorts and a sports bra on, along with a mostly relaxed expression. "The budgets? I told you that you scared them all last week."

"Nah, us." Dar picked up the cup and sipped it. "Thanks. How's the ship coming?"

Kerry perched on the edge of Dar's custom built, cherrywood desk – twin to the one in her own office next door. "Not good." She admitted. "I just talked to John, and he's having a very tough time, Dar. He's only about half done."

Dar grimaced.

Kerry hesitated. “Any suggestions?” She asked. “I’ve spoken to the people on the ship, and there’s not much they can do, they tell me. Everyone’s fighting for space and time there. We’re all under the gun.” She played with one of Chino’s silky ears. “Apparently all the ships are. Someone lit a fire under them on Friday, and the schedules have all been pushed up.”

“Yeah?” Dar frowned. “You know, we didn’t hear from Dad last night. I wonder if he saw any of that?”

“I wonder what happened with him that the reporter knew about him.” Kerry added, both eyebrows hiking up. “I wonder why he didn’t call?”

Dar reached over and picked up the cabin phone, hitting one of the speed dial buttons. It rang several times, but there was no answer and it switched over to voice mail. “Huh.” She waited for the beep. “Hi dad. Gimme a call when you get a chance. Thanks.”

“Try mom?”

“Ehm.” Dar dialed another number, the slip phone at her parent’s boat. It rang several times too, and again, went to a polite, mechanical voice mail. “What the heck’s going on up there?” She frowned, waiting again. “Hey mom, it’s Dar.” She paused. “Boy, that was redundant. Anyway, give us a call when you get back. Thanks.”

She put the phone back down and looked at Chino, who had decided her half standing, half lolling position on Dar’s shoulder was the pinnacle of comfort. “Anyway, so they’re behind? Can he put more guys on the job?”

“Honestly, Dar, I don’t think it’d help.” Kerry said. “It’s space they don’t have. He’s trying to put our cabling in the same place the electricians are running new wiring, and the air conditioning people are putting in new ducting.”

“Huh. Yeah. I remember doing a favor for one of my dad’s skippers.” Dar said. “Wanted cat five run from the bridge to his cabin so he could monitor everything from there… damn guy had me doing it the same time they were replacing the comms. What a mess.”

Kerry repressed a smile. “My little cable monkey.” She glanced at Dar’s screen. “What’s all that about?”

“Ah.” Dar put her keyboard down and shifted, lifting one leg off the desk and sliding it around Kerry to trap her. “Some jackass hacker not worth five cents.” She scoffed. “Idiot’s just beating his head against our outer firewall.”

Kerry looked at the monitor window. “Why?”

“No clue.” Dar laced her fingers behind her head and leaned back. “Just to annoy me, probably.”

"Or distract you." Kerry murmured. "It's almost like whatever that is – is just trying to draw attention to itself."

Dar sat up and looked at the screen, and then she looked at Kerry. "A diversion?"

"Do I need to get out of your way?" Kerry hazarded. "But yeah, it seems like that to me. Someone hammering on the front door screaming obscenities at you."

Shit. Dar's mind raced. She's right.

Kerry gently slipped from between Dar's long legs, and removed Chino from her perch. "Well, let me.."

Dar reached out and put a hand on her wrist. "Tell John to reverse his usual route. Have him pull the cable from the jack end. That'll clear the closets, and when he's done there and ready to do the core installs, the other guys'll be out of his way."

Kerry opened her mouth, then shut it again. A rueful grin appeared. "Should we switch projects?" She pondered. "Maybe some fresh eyes do help."

"Maybe." Dar had to agree. "G'wan. Maybe we can alternate. I'm going to go chase down your idea – though why the hell it didn't occur to me before I can't begin to figure out."

"Ditto." Kerry turned to leave. "How's the foot?

"Hurts." Dar grunted, as she pulled her keyboard back onto her lap. "Maybe I'll go spear fishing later and get that little bastard."

Kerry paused briefly in the doorway to watch her partner, then she ducked through and swung around into her own office where a cup of tea already awaited her. She sat down behind her desk and picked up her cell phone, glancing at her screen as she keyed in John's number.

More mail. She clicked on it as she waited for her contractor to answer, running her eyes over the new arrivals.

"Hello?"

"Hi, John." Kerry scanned a note from the marketing department. "Listen, Dar had a good idea."

"We could use one." The wiring man grunted.

Kerry told him the plan. "Anyway, it can't hurt, and it'll get you out of the middle of that mess for a while. What do you think?" She clicked on her next mail.

Hey Ker –

Listen, remember when all those weird rumors were going around about you and Dar? I thought it was just random chatter, but I had a potty encounter today and I'm not sure!

"Yeah, it's worth a try." John said. "All right, I'll pull my guys out. At least they got some new foreman on the loading dock, and I'm finally getting all my stuff. "

"Yeah?" Kerry was completely distracted by Colleen's mail.

"Yeah, here's a coincidence – his name's Roberts, just like Dar's." John chuckled. "Maybe it's in the name. Anyway, I'll give you a call back later."

"Okay."

I was in the necessary doing the necessary when I heard someone come in. She did a stall check, but I was I the end one and she missed me.. and then she made a cell call to someone and I heard her talking about trying to mess the company up!

This girlie said she'd started telling everyone you two'd had a big fight this weekend out here, and she was going to do worse! Well, let me tell you I came out of that necessary like the Queen Mary!

"Oh, my god." Kerry murmured.

She ran out – I tried to follow after her, but I got caught up at the door by two of those bloody secretaries trying to get out their bra straps while talking about some television program. I didn't recognize her, but it was right outside Marketing.

So – watch your back, my friend! I'll try to find the little bugger again.

C

Kerry forwarded the mail to Dar, then after a moment, hit reply.

Col –

We stayed down here to concentrate on our projects and not be distracted by jerks! Dar got bit by a fish, and neither of us felt like driving back yesterday. Maybe we'll stay down here for a week. I got more done already this morning than I did the last half of last week.

Can you get a description of this person? We had a security breach…

Kerry paused, and backspaced.

We had a problem this weekend and we narrowed it down to Marketing, but they were all in, so we couldn't pin it down. Maybe it was the same person. Let me know.

K

"Damn it, damn it." Kerry drummed her fingers on the keyboard, then she made a decision and forwarded the message again, this time to Mariana, along with a request to forward the personnel files of anyone who was in the building over the weekend.

It meant a lot of work, and a lot of crosschecking. Kerry took a sip of her tea, the smooth cherry taste of the green tea leaves soothing her. "But I will find you." She promised the tale teller. "I will find you, and baby, I will make sure you regret ever putting one step into that marble lobby."

She took another sip. "That, I promise.

* * *

Dar sat there, arms folded, hands tucked under her armpits and stared at the network overview she had up on her screen. The picture showed their entire infrastructure, routers and switches winking a reassuring green at her as she tried to figure out where to look next.

Kerry's remark about a distraction had rang bells with her, but if it was, then what was it distracting her from? Everything else looked normal.

She turned her eyes to a different window, running results from her new program. Every ten seconds, the system reported back to her from each router she had it installed in, a constant running monitor of the traffic it was seeing.

It was rough, and the monitor only a command line, but Dar couldn't help but feel a sting of pride as she watched it go. She knew it had a long way to run before it could be really used in production, but eventually – with a properly written front end and a ton more robustness – this would be a killer app for them to put on the market.

Even now, with just the barest of kernels running, it was bringing back scraps of information from what it was seeing out there that gave Dar insight into what was going on around them.

It was exciting, in a visceral way to her. But she was also frustrated right now because there was a piece missing here, and she couldn't find it. The hacker was still hammering at the front gates, but Dar had scanned each of the border routers, and she could find no other stealthy attempts anywhere on the outside of the network.

Was it just coincidence then? Kerry's suggestion had made bedrock sense when she'd heard it, but… Dar unfolded one arm and gave her trackball a spin, her brows knit

together over her eyes. She rocked forward and braced her elbow on the desk, leaning her head against it as she got closer to the screen.

A message box appeared, nearly startling her half to death. She glanced to one side, then straightened and pulled the keyboard back over to answer Mariana's hail.

Hey.

The HR VP answered quickly.

You got bitten by a BARRACUDA?

Dar's somewhat ghoulish humor surfaced.

Family reunion. What can I tell you?

She could almost hear the laughter on the other end of the connection, and had to smile herself.

You got kicked out of the barracuda family when you married Kerry, my friend, and you know it!

Eh, that was the truth.

Yeah, well, I was chasing a Frisbee at the time. At least I didn't get nipped by a goldfish for it.

Her eyes flicked to the monitor, taking in a few minutes of reports and not seeing anything remarkable.

Damn it. She turned her attention back to the instant message box. *So is everyone freaking out?*

There was a hesitation before Mari answered.

Just a little surprise at our level, but I heard talk going around, so I thought I'd better ask. Now that Kerry's sent me the scoop, and the possible culprit, I'll get on it and see what I can find out.

Huh? Dar felt suddenly lost. "Hey, Ker?" She called out. "C'mere."

"Hang on." Her partner replied from the next room. "I'm reconciling a purchase order."

Dar reread the message, then just shrugged.

Okay. Have fun. She ventured, figuring it was a safe answer and that she could get clarification from Kerry later. *We may be down here for a few days. I'm getting more done without people barging in my office every five minutes.*

Mari's response surprised her a little. *Dar, take whatever time you need, okay? Let me handle the crap in the office.*

"What's up, sweetie." Kerry ambled in and put her arms around Dar, giving her a quick hug. "More problems?"

Dar scrolled back up in her message box and pointed. "What is she talking about?" She asked, just as the screen underneath, her monitor, began to spit out lines in black on white letters, instead of white on black. "Whoops.. hold it."

Kerry slid in behind Dar and watched over her shoulder as she typed rapidly. She could see where Dar was going in the system, but she was hitting keys so fast Kerry couldn't read quickly enough to get a sense of what she was doing once she got there.

And then, just as quickly as she'd started, she stopped, fingertips resting lightly on the keys. The monitor appeared normal again. "What was that?" Kerry asked.

"Good question." Dar murmured. "For a minute, it looked like something…" Her brow creased and she leaned forward a little. "Maybe the damn program just stumbled. God knows, there's a lot of rough code in there."

Kerry put her hands on Dar's shoulders. She could felt he tension beneath her fingers, and out of habit she started a gentle massage. "What did it seem to be reporting?" She asked. "Was it an attack, or…"

Dar propped her head up on one hand and used the other to scroll the mouse. "No, not… well, it looks like it thought it's libraries were being accessed. But that's just a dud error.. there's nothing touching them."

"Mm." Kerry knocked a little of the rust off her own programming memories. "Sort of like.. someone was also using them? Or… something opened the files?"

"Yeah." Dar agreed readily. "But nothing's accessing them. Nothing we have even knows the program's there."

"Hm." Kerry kept up her massage. "False reading?"

"Must be."

They both studied the screen in silence for a few minutes. Then Kerry cleared her throat. "Colleen overheard some slimy nitball in the bathroom talking to someone on cell about screwing us over."

Dar straightened and turned her head to look up at Kerry. "What?"

"Mm." The blond woman nodded. "Spreading rumors. So I have Mari sending me all the personnel files of the scumbags in marketing."

One of Dar's eyebrows quirked. "Why not just get the one who did it?"

“Colleen didn’t recognize her, and she lost her outside in the hallway.” Kerry informed her regretfully. “Anyway… so that’s what’s going on. Can I go finish my paperwork now?”

Dar tilted her head and kissed the back of Kerry’s hand, still resting on her shoulder. “Sure.” She said. “Sorry I dragged you over here.”

Kerry returned the kiss and planted one on the top of Dar’s head. “No problem.” She gave Dar a last hug, then turned and made her way out of the office, leaving behind a faint scent of apricot.

Dar sighed, and refocused her attention on the screen. The alert was now well and over, an no trace was left of the disturbance that had sent her monitor off the scale. She was satisfied with the possibility that it had been a false alarm, but something niggled at the back of her head anyway.

She went over the log in the router that had triggered the alarm. No attacks had been detected from the outside, and she confirmed again that no unusual traffic had been seen. The only thing in the logs themselves was a…

Huh. Dar cocked her head. Tftp requests weren’t uncommon. They had servers that routinely copied the configurations and logs of the devices for safekeeping, but Dar knew something about that which made this one log entry catch her eye.

She checked her watch. It was seventeen minutes past eleven. She’d written that little collection program way back when in the days when she’d supervised the ops center. One of her own peculiarities, generated by her years growing up on a military base, dictated that her timed requests always went off on even fractions of the hour.

Eleven, eleven ten, twenty, thirty… but this request was seventeen minutes after the hour.

So. Dar examined the entry, and found it coming from one of the administrative servers. Cracking her knuckles, she called up a terminal program and accessed the server, her eyes narrowing slightly as she started her hunt.

* * *

Andy walked across the pier and up the gangway into his new ship. This one was just as threadbare and full of rusty bolts as the other one, but he felt much more affectionate towards it in any case and gave the side a pat as he walked inside.

The hold was full of boxes, as the last one had been. He noticed one difference, however. On one side of the storage area several pallets were set, neatly laden with boxes of assorted sizes, shrink wrapped, and tagged with invoices. They seemed to be behind a bunch of boxes, though, almost half hidden.

The orderliness of the stack appealed to him. Andrew walked over and scanned the shipping invoices with a knowledgeable eye, catching sight of a familiar company name on the top. “Huh.” He studied the paper, noting the ‘K. Stuart’ referenced on one side. “I do believe I know that little kumquat.”

Unlike the deliveries for the women on the other boat, this here pile had an order to it that had Andrew nodding as he reviewed the list of contents. “Ah do not know which of this here is a leg bone, and which is a foot bone, but I figure this here stack probably makes a whole skeleton and don’t that make sense?”

“Hey, you there.”

Andrew turned, to find a scruffy, sweatshirted man headed his way with a clipboard. He waited for the man to arrive, surprised when the clipboard was held out to him. “What’s this here for?’

“You’re Roberts, right?” The man said.

Andrew allowed that he was.

“Great. The man said you’d be in here to take over for that joker. Here’s the lading list, and this is the stuff we’re expecting in today. Just get it unpacked and moved wherever you can find a place for it, okay?”

Andrew looked down at the clipboard. “Y’all want me to take charge of this here job?”

“Sure, right. Didn’t he tell you?” The man seemed impatient. “C’mon, we’re behind a day already, and everyone’s screaming at me.” He pointed to the stacks of boxes in front of Kerry’s pallets. “Start with this bunch first – get it out of the way. Guys are in the break room, just go grab em when you’re ready, which is like now, right?”

“Right.”

“Great. Bye.”

The man left at an almost run. Andrew regarded his back a moment, then shook his head. “Hell of a crazy damn place this is.” He turned and went to the center of the hold, turning in a slow circle, and looking for a suitable place to start.

“Bloody hell.”

Andrew turned, but the comment wasn’t directed apparently at him. Two men in coveralls were walking from a just opened hatch towards a stairwell. They didn’t look happy.

“Now we’ve got to get that leak fixed, damn.” One said. “I thought they’d gotten that covered.”

The other shrugged. “Didn’t give em enough, probably. Always the same. Well, they can say what they want, that hole isn’t getting plugged any time soon, not by me.”

The two men disappeared into the stairwell, closing the door behind them. Andrew filed the information away for later study, and headed for the break room to find some bodies to shift them boxes like the feller asked.

But of course he’d start with Kerry’s first.

* * *

“Couldn’t find anything, hm?” Kerry asked.

“Program put out the tftp request out of sequence.” Dar folded her hands over her stomach. She was lying flat on her back on the padded bench outside on their porch, with her head cradled comfortably in Kerry’s lap. “Can’t find any reason why.” She added. “And it’s driving me insane.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry leaned back, one hand idly riffling through Dar’s hair. “Could it just be a fluke?”

Dar wiggled her injured foot, which she was putting in the sun for some mysterious and possibly imaginary medical benefit. “I’d rather not think so.”

Kerry eyed her, a tiny, knowing grin on her face. “Because it’s your program?”

One blue orb appeared, sparkling in the sunlight, and its attendant brow hiked up. “What are you saying? That I’m a snob when it comes to my own work?”

“Mm.” Kerry traced the eyebrow with her fingertip, admiring its fine arch. “You’re a perfectionist.” She remarked, smoothing the thin hairs down lovingly.

For a half second, Dar almost looked like she was going to be insulted, then her face relaxed into a grin. “Well, I picked you, so I guess I am.”

A charmed smile appeared on Kerry’s face. “I love you too, honey, but I’m not anywhere near perfect.” She trailed her fingers over Dar’s lips, chuckling a little as they were caught and nibbled.

“To me you are.” Dar answered simply. “So get over it.”

Get over it. Kerry marveled again at just how fortunate she was in life. No matter what troubles they were facing at work, what they had together was, in a word, priceless and she knew it. She’d seen enough of the world to know that the synergy she and Dar shared wasn’t common and needed to be cherished, protected, and nurtured.

They needed these moments. Certainly, Kerry savored them, her ego enjoying the gentle burnishing from Dar’s regard. “Well, takes one to know one.” She sorted Dar’s bangs,

running her fingers through them and moving them out of her eyes. “Can I interest you in a shrimp salad sub for lunch? I have a conference call scheduled for an hour from now.”

“Mm.” Dar licked her lips. “It’s your shrimp salad, right? Not that mealy mess the store sells?”

“Mine.” Kerry smiled. “With real, identifiable shrimp in it, not mushy shrimplets. That all right?”

Dar nodded, closing her eyes and exhaling in contentment.

It only lasted an instant, before her cell phone rang. Dar scrunched her face up in annoyance, but unclipped the phone from her pocket and opened it. “Yes?”

“Roberts, is that you?” Peter Quest sounded harried and upset.

Dar debated on denying it, then sighed. “Yes.”

“All right, that’s everyone.” Quest said, a little more briskly. “I’ve got you all on the phone, so I only have to say this once.”

Dar held the phone so Kerry could hear it, half lifting one hand as Kerry looked at her in question. “All right.”

There were soft murmurs in the background, and Dar thought she recognized Michelle’s voice in there somewhere.

“Here’s the situation.” Quest said. “Some asshole called the EPA, who came down and inspected the waterfront. We haven’t done anything wrong, but the bleeding heart fish lovers think they see gas leaking, so they’re forcing the port’s hand.”

“Think?” Kerry mouthed. “They’ve been leaking since they got here.”

Dar put a finger over her lips.

“We’ve got until Friday. The ships have to be finished then.”

Kerry’s eyes popped wide open and so did Dar’s. “No way!” Kerry whispered. “Dar, that’s impossible!”

Dar nodded. “Quest, that’s insanity.”

Two male voices grunted agreement, then Michelle spoke. “It’s a lot more possible for those of us who are actually here, thanks.”

Kerry grimaced and made a rude gesture at the phone.

“I don’t care.” Quest dismissed them all. “That’s the bottom line. Finish by Friday, and turn in your bids. If you can’t do it, fine, but you leave everything in place on board the ships and just walk out.”

“Wait a minute!” Mike Eldridge protested. “You can’t just ask us to leave all that equipment if we’re not going to bid. That’s..”

“Then shut up and finish, because that’s my deal.” Quest cut him off. “And I’ll have my security people enforce it. Now, I have to get off this phone and go deal with some whining liberal, so you’ve got four and a half days. I suggest you get moving, or get leaving. Good bye.”

Dar stared at the now dead cell phone for a long moment. “Son of a bitch.”

“Shit.” Kerry’s eyes flicked to the horizon, going unfocused as she thought about the suddenly mountainous obstacles before them. “Dar, there’s no way.”

“Did the infrastructure come in yet?”

“It was due yesterday, but..” Kerry hesitated. “No, wait – I had a note this morning from the shipping company that it was coming in this afternoon.”

Dar had her eyes closed again. “Okay.” She paused. “Call John. Tell him to bring in however many guys he can get a hold of.”

“You can’t be serious.. there’s no way to..”

“Kerrison.” Dar looked at her.

“Dar, c’mon now..”

“Hey.” Dar reached up and cupped the side of Kerry’s face, drawing her chin down a touch so their eyes were forced to meet.

“Darrrr… .” A thousand arguments died before the look in those blue eyes.

“Kerrison Stuart.”

A sudden flash of a cold rainy night in North Carolina formed in Kerry’s mind, and she heard Dar’s voice all over again in a cool, angry bark when she’d protested the impossible. This time there was no anger, just a gentle firmness just as effective in it’s own way. “Sorry.” She leaned against Dar’s hand a little. “Go on.”

Dar understood the doubt she saw. “We don’t know we can’t do it, because we haven’t tried yet.” The dark haired woman stated. “So I vote we try, and if we fail we do, but it won’t be because we quit.”

Kerry also knew the tasks ahead of them, and she knew, no matter how much Dar willed it otherwise, they did not have the time to do what Quest was asking.

But – hey. Dar was right, they had to try. Neither of them were quitters. "Okay, boss." Kerry smiled again. "Guess we better get moving, huh?"

"After lunch." Dar said. "I'll call Mark and have him send everyone we have over there. We'll over run the damn boat with nerds, and maybe everyone in our way'll just run screaming."

Kerry cocked her head to one side. "You don't want to leave right now?"

"No."

"Um. Okay."

Dar resettled her hands over her stomach. "Ker?"

"Mm?"

"Trust me."

Kerry covered Dar's hands with one of her own. "Trust you? I trust you with my life, my soul, and everything that I am, Dar. It's not a matter of trusting you, I just want to know what you're up to."

A blue eye appeared again. "When I figure that out, you will."

"Oh."

"Mm."

* * *

"Hey there old man."

Andrew looked up from his bottle of pop to find the cowboy trucker heading his way. "Wall. Howdy there, young feller." He drawled, exchanging an amused look with the man. In truth, they were probably pretty close in age, and the trucker chuckled as he extended a hand.

"Wanted to c'mover and say hello after the other day." The trucker said. "I was halfway outta the state, when a company rig broke down and they turned me back. More stuff for this place."

Andrew looked around the dock, where there were trucks and men unloading everywhere. The pace on the pier had picked up incredibly, and he could almost sense panic from the workers around him. "Wonder what got em all in a hustle?"

The trucker looked surprised. "Didncha hear? Gov'mint tossing them outta here end of the week."

“Yeah?” Andy said. “Heard something like, but I didn’t figure they’d really do it.”

“Well, if they ain’t, no one’s told my boss. We got ten more trucks headed this way right now.” The man said. “Hope you all got room for it.”

Ten trucks worth? Two for each ship more than likely. Andrew shook his head. The below decks area of the ship was a mess for sure, and just trying to keep it all straight had taken most of his day so far. “What you got now?” He asked. “Stuff for this one?” He pointed at the ship.

Obligingly, the trucker handed over his manifest. “You get nailed for messing with that little sissy boy the other day?”

“Naw.” Andrew studied the papers, noting again Kerry’s name on one side. “Got me moved over to this here tub.” He indicated the ship with a motion of his head. “This here all for us?” He asked, flipping through to the last few pages and catching sight of something else. A tiny grin appeared on his face.

The trucker took back the manifest and examined it. “Far as I can tell, yeah.” He agreed. “Where do you want it?”

“Right over there.” Andy indicated a spot on the dock. “I’ll have them boys move it all inside after.”

“You got it.” The trucker agreed. “Man, they got those people all riled up. What a mess.” He watched as a group of ship personnel gathered near the stern of the vessel, along with a couple of suits all pointing and looking at the water behind the ship. “Well, let me get going. Be right back.”

“Yeap.” Andrew finished up his pop and stood there in the shade, considering what to do next. A motion caught his eye and he half turned, surprised to see Ceci pulling up to the curb in the truck. He tossed the pop bottle in the trash and jogged over, leaning down to rest his elbows on the window sill and peer inside. “Hey there.”

“Hi.” Ceci reached and handed him something. “You forgot this, and our child has been trying to get hold of us.”

“Aw, hell.” Andrew took the phone. “You call her?”

“No.” Ceci glanced past him at the chaos on the dock. “I’d have to admit to causing this if I did.”

“Cec…”

“Yes, I know. Our relationship is quantum leaps past what it was, Andy, but I’d still rather you did it.” The slim, fair haired woman said. “Uh oh.. I better go. That guy knows me.” She set a pair of wraparound sunglasses on her nose, and ducked behind Andrew’s bulk.

“Lord.” Andy started dialing.

“You knew you married a leftist radical.”

“Yeap, I surely did.”

“Well, it could have been worse, Andy.”

“Yeap. Dar coulda joined t’Army.”

“Pffft!”

* * *

Kerry leaned back in the driver’s seat of the Lexus, watching the somewhat boring bushes go by as they headed north. Next to her in the passenger seat, Dar was rattling away on her keyboard, pausing impatiently as she waited for her keystrokes to catch up with her over the cellular modem link. “What on earth did we do before cell modems?”

“Got lots of speeding tickets.” Dar answered absently.

“Did you?” Kerry adjusted the sun visor to block out the blast of golden light from the west.

“Uh huh.” Her partner admitted. “For a while I almost gave up living in my place and thought about bunking at the office. There was space under my desk.”

“Hm. Is that why you have a couch in your office now?”

Dar chuckled. “Yes, but not if you ask the majority of the small minded.” She eased her leg straight, wincing a little as she banged her foot against the center console. “The sordid events everyone was convinced took place on that couch were legendary.”

“Legendary?”

“Uh huh.”

“How legendary?”

Dar paused in mid type, her eyes shifting from her laptop to Kerry’s profile. She could see the curve of her partner’s jaw line, and the slight bunching and relaxing of the muscles there that meant the question wasn’t frivolous. “Um…” She tapped the side of her thumb against the wrist rest. “They were all fictional, Ker.” She said. “The only person who’s ever slept on that couch besides me is you.”

“Oh.”

Dar muffled a grin of her own and went back to typing.

Kerry's face tensed into a sheepish grin, as she glanced at Dar. "Boy, do I have a green streak a mile wide, or what?" She sighed. "You know, I never really suspected that about myself until I met you."

"Well, given all the stories you've heard about me in that office, I can't say I blame you for wondering." Dar admitted. "But I have to admit that my reputation in that area was way overrated." She said. "I think it was easier for me to let everyone think I was out there having a wild and crazy time rather than them knowing the truth."

Kerry thought back to her days in Miami before she'd met Dar. She'd had, she'd thought, a reasonable social life with her friends from the office, and near her apartment. They'd gone bowling, seen movies, played around at Dave and Busters – it hadn't been bad.

Except. "Nights are a lot more fun now."

Dar raised both eyebrows at her.

"No, I mean… I was always busy during the day." Kerry explained, changing lanes to go around a very slow gasoline tanker. "Or around dinner, with the gang. But then I went home."

"Mm. Dar grunted. "Did your couch have torrid tales?" She asked, a little surprised at the fact that not only was it the first time she'd asked, it was the first time she'd wondered.

Kerry pushed her sunglasses higher up on her nose. "You inaugurated that couch." She replied straightforwardly. "I don't think I did anything more risqué than eat crackers and cheese on it before that."

"Ah."

They were both silent for a while, immersed in their own thoughts while Dar continued pecking away on her keyboard. Outside the SUV, the scrub brush and occasional crab shack slowly gave way to ticky tacky tourist outposts that beckoned the unwary with deals on seashells and cheap t-shirts.

Kerry passed the first few miles of them, then she pulled into one of the next parking lots. "Drink break. Want something?"

Dar put the laptop on the seat behind her. "Stretch my legs." She responded. "I've got a cramp."

"You going to go out there in your little booties?" Kerry asked.

"Sure. They're not white socks with black sandals. No one'll think I'm a tourist." Dar opened the door and hopped carefully out. The bite on her foot was quite painful and somewhat swollen, and she had to limp to keep her weight off it. "At least not a Florida tourist."

"No, they'll just think you're from New Zealand." Kerry got out on her side and closed the door, then jogged over to Dar's side as they walked towards the mini-mart. "How's the foot doing?"

"Sucks." Dar grunted.

Kerry gave her a sympathetic rub on the back as they reached the door and entered. The mini mart was very mini, and not much of a mart, featuring a lonely coffee burner with a pot of burned coffee in it, a single refrigerator with Coke bottles, a rack of gum and bags of 1 day old doughnuts on the counter.

Without exchanging even a glance, Kerry veered to the refrigerator case and grabbed two bottles of coke while Dar carefully skirted the doughnuts and examined the sparse choices of packaged snacks.

"Hi there ladies." The proprietor of the mart appeared from a tiny back room. "Can I get you something? We got a special on these doughnuts." He nudged one of the bags forward. "They're pretty good."

"No thanks." Dar responded briefly. "We… um.." She paused as Kerry plunked two bottles of coke and two packages of Snowballs on the counter along with a five dollar bill. "have what we need."

The door opened and let in a blast of warm air and sunlight, along with a tall, burly figure. The newcomer paused as the door closed, revealing an intimidating biker image complete with mirrored shades.

The mart owner regarded him warily. "Howdy."

The man, however, was far more interested in Dar and Kerry. He pulled off his sunglasses. "Hey guys! What's the odds, huh?"

"Hey, Tom!" Kerry smiled. "You here on your bike? Dar hasn't seen it yet."

"Sure am. How's the eye?" Their fellow kickboxing student asked her. "What brings you guys down here?" He tossed a five dollar bill down on the counter. "Pump two."

They walked outside together, and crossed the broken tarmac parking lot to where the gas pumps were. Tom's new Harley was huddling there in the sunlight, and drew an admiring whistle from Dar. "Nice." She complimented him. "I love the fish."

"Me too." Tom agreed, opening the gas tank and inserting the filler. "Some of the guys though they were too wussy, but you know what? Chicks dig it."

Well, it was hard to argue on that since both she and Kerry were undeniably chicks, and they both did like them. "Great paint job… how is it to ride?" Dar said. "I rented one a few months back and liked how it handled, but it wasn't that long distance."

“I remember that.” Kerry murmured.

“Oh, it’s great.” Tom told her readily. “I thought it was gonna be a little tough on my..uh…”

“Buns.” Kerry supplied.

“Yeah, those too. But it’s been cool.” The man said. “Sure you don’t wanna trade up to one, Ker?”

“Hm.” Kerry regarded the big bike wistfully. “They sure are cool.” Her eyes went to Dar’s face. “They just really pissed us off when we went to go buy one.” She saw the faintest twitch at the corner of her partner’s mouth, and sighed as she leaned against the pump.

“Well, you should go get one at bike week, like I did.” Tom said. “Hey, speaking of, how’d the tat come out, Ker? Didja go through with it?”

Kerry obligingly unbuttoned and pulled down the shoulder of her short sleeve cotton shirt, exposing the tattoo. “I did.” She confirmed. “And you were so lying to me, Tom. It hurt like crazy. I think I made the poor guy deaf from my screaming.”

Tom examined the tattoo, and then gave Kerry a very respectful look. “Well.. uh.. mine was on my arm.” He flexed his bicep, displaying a beautiful parrot. “I think it’d hurt a lot more right on your.. uh..” His eyes dropped to Kerry’s tattoo, then averted, as he blushed slightly. “ You know what I mean.”

Dar reached around Kerry’s shoulder and encircled her with both arms as she re-buttoned her shirt. “We know what you mean.” She said. “And I’ll keep that in mind when I go get mine done.”

Kerry turned and looked up at Dar in surprise.

“Anyway, hey, I’m glad I ran into you guys.” Tom said. “Something sorta weird happened on Friday, and I don’t really know what to make of it.” He put the gas nozzle back in the pump and closed the gas cap. “I was at the bar and some women came up to me.”

“That was weird?” Dar was aware of Kerry’s intense regard, but she merely laid her arm over her partner’s shoulders and addressed Tom instead. “Why? You’re not that bad looking.”

Tom scratched his nose. “Well, this was kinda serious, you know? One of them said they were some kind of reporter or something, and they were asking questions about you guys, or mostly Kerry, really.”

It stopped being funny, and Kerry stopped thinking about tattoos, no matter how startled she was. “What?” She turned around and faced Tom. “Questions about me?”

Tom had the grace to look both abashed and embarrassed. “Um.. about you and me, matter of fact.”

“You and me what?” Kerry spluttered. “You and me in kickboxing class, or drinking beer together?” She was aware suddenly of Dar’s close presence behind her, and felt the warmth of her partner’s hands as Dar put them on her shoulders.

“They had… you remember when I showed you the bike?” Tom seemed a little uneasy. “And we kinda.. you took that picture with me?”

Kerry’s eyes narrowed. “Yes.”

“I guess I was showing it to the guys at the bar, and I guess…” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I got it blowed up and one of the copies sorta disappeared.”

Dar snorted softly, but didn’t make any comment.

“Jesus.” Kerry exhaled. “Where did the reporters say they were from? Was it the Travel Channel?

Tom shook his head. “No, uh.. the Herald, you know? Some kind of story they were doing about the port, and some ships.. and I guess about you.”

“And they have that picture, right?” Kerry covered her eyes.

“I guess. They mentioned it, so..” Tom shrugged sheepishly. “I mean, no one thought much about it, Kerry.. I knew it kinda went walking, but you know, it was a rocking picture, so..”

“Uh oh.” Dar said. “How bad was this photo?”

“Me and Tom on the bike.” Kerry still had her eyes covered. “With me posing as a biker chick.”

Dar sorted through that, and didn’t find anything altogether that dangerous in it. “Okay.” She said slowly. “So.. when was this?”

“When you were in New York.” Kerry sighed.

“Uh huh. Same night you got this?” Dar indicated the tattoo.

Kerry nodded.

“It wasn’t anything!” Tom spoke up suddenly. “All Kerry was doing is giving me an ego shot on the damn bike.. we didn’t do nothing!”

Dar looked at him. “I know that.” She said. “Question is, what is it they’re looking to illustrate using it?”

Kerry put her hands on her hips and stared disgustedly at the broken tarmac. “I’ve had it.” She finally said, turning and heading for the Lexus. “I’m quitting and becoming an itinerant poet. Then maybe no one will give a crap what I do.” She opened the door and got in, slamming it behind her.

That left Dar and Tom facing each other across the Harley. Dar sighed, and produced a brief smile. “It’s been a rough couple weeks.” She said. “Last thing we needed is to drive back to town and be greeted with a front page story.”

Tom stuck his hands into the pockets on his jeans. “Dar, I’m real sorry.”

“Wasn’t anything you did.” Dar shrugged. “What did you tell the reporters, anyway?”

“Not much.” He admitted. “I just couldn’t get what they were after, so they kinda just left when I wouldn’t tell them me and Kerry had been.. um… like, hanging out together or whatever.”

“Yeah.” Dar pushed her sunglasses up on her nose. “Well, thanks, Tom. Nice bike. Don’t worry about the picture, okay?” She lifted a hand to wave goodbye and headed for the car. Circling the back of it, she got in the passenger side and closed the door, half turning in the seat to face the huddled, silent Kerry. “Hey.”

Kerry sniffled, and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “I’m so sick of this.”

Dar leaned further over the center console, and gently gripped Kerry’s forearm. “Ker?”

Kerry sniffled again. “Yeah?”

“I’m sick of it too.”

Kerry took off her sunglasses and looked at Dar with tear moistened eyes. “I know it’s chickenshit.”

Dar shook her head. “Just human.” She slid her grip down to clasp Kerry’s hand, then drew the hand up to kiss its knuckles. “Let’s just go do what we need to do, then we can sit down and decide where we go from here.”

Kerry looked at her hand, now pressed gently against Dar’s cheek. She gave the fingers clasping hers a squeeze, and exhaled, nodding a little in answer.

“Want me to drive now?” Dar asked. “I can try it left footed.”

“No.” Kerry gathered her wits. “Just open my coke for me, and gimme a Snowball. I’ll live.” She started the car and put it in gear. “Dar, what are we going to do if that does end up on the front page of the Herald?”

“Won’t.” Dar was busy ripping cellophane with her teeth. “You’re not a communist sympathizer. You might make the Business page though.” She removed the soft, fluffy pastry form it’s constriction and handed it over. “And if it does, we just deal with it.”

Kerry bit into the marshmallow top, tearing it apart ruthlessly. “How’s ILS going to deal with their VP ops being a biker chick?”

“About like they did with their VP Ops being a gay redneck.” Dar took a sip of Coke. “We’ll all cope.”

Yeah. Kerry settled into her seat, gazing ahead into the slowly fading sunlight. “Know what I’m going to do if it happens?”

“What?”

“Frame a copy and send it to my mother.”

“Ouch.”

* * *

It was dinnertime before they pulled into the driveway. Kerry parked the Lexus and opened the door, sliding off the leather seat to the ground and stretching her back out. “Ugh.”

“C’mon, Chino.” Dar got out on the other side and opened the back door, allowing the Labrador to jump to the ground. She shouldered her laptop and waited for Kerry to join her, then she limped up the steps to the front door of the condo.

They had debated stopping at the port. Chino had tipped the balance, since neither of them wanted to leave their pet in the car while they checked on things and bringing her onboard the ship just wasn’t an option.

Dar keyed the door open and entered, waiting for Kerry to pass her by and then shutting the door. “You want to change, and we’ll run over there?”

Kerry dropped her briefcase and overnight bag on the love seat. “You want to hear the politically correct corporately responsible answer or the truth?”

“Me either.” Dar limped past her and went into the bedroom. “Is there really a point? We’re both fond of saying we can trust our people, aren’t we?”

Kerry trudged into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, removing a bottle of juice and pouring herself a glass. “Good point.” She called back into the living room. “How about we commit to being there early tomorrow morning. We can assess what’s going on, and decide what we want to do.”

“Uh.”

Kerry took a sip of juice, and cocked her head. “Did you say something?”

“Uh.”

Drawn by this odd utterance, Kerry left the kitchen and entered the living room, finding her beloved soulmate sprawled on the couch regarding her injured foot with a frown. "What's wrong?"

"That." Dar pointed.

Kerry walked over and sat down, cradling Dar's foot in her lap and examining it closely. "Oh." She grimaced. "Ow."

The foot was swollen and an angry red color. Dar folded her arms across her chest and glared at it. "Stupid god damned fish."

"Let me go get the antiseptic." Kerry took hold of Dar's ankle when she started to pull the injured extremity away. "Or we could go see Dr. Steve."

Dar sighed, but returned her leg to it's former position. Kerry slipped into the bathroom and returned, setting the antiseptic bottle and cotton balls down as she prepared to tender first aid. Chino came over and started to help, licking Dar's face thoroughly with a serious expression.

"That's it, Chi. You keep mommy Dar busy while I do this."

Dar reached over the dog and picked up the mail on the coffee table, laying it on her stomach and flipping through it to distract herself. A Hammacher Schlemmer catalog caught her eye, and she opened it, browsing the pages idly. "Want a pair of space socks?"

Kerry tweaked one of Dar's toes. "No, honey, I don't." She wiped around the fish bite carefully with her swab.

"Automatic vacuum cleaner?"

"For?" Kerry looked around. "We have a cleaning service, remember?"

Dar sighed. "How about a train set?"

"You just like buying toys." Kerry peered at the bites on the bottom of her partner's foot. "Dar, these really do look bad."

"Great."

"I don't know if Dr. Steve was a horrible idea." Kerry went on, with a slightly apologetic tone. "I know you don't like to, but I'd hate to see these really get infected, you know?"

"I've had my tetanus."

It was one of the few things they consistently fought about. Kerry privately admitted. Dar hated doctors, and Kerry both sympathized, and understood why she did. In fact, she

wasn't fond of either thing herself, though in Dr. Steve she'd finally found a doctor she not only trusted, but liked. "Dar."

"Okay."

Kerry paused in mid breath, taken aback by the unexpected capitulation. She looked at Dar in surprise.

Dar shrugged a little. "It really hurts." She admitted. "And you're right – I don't want it to get worse if I have to spend the next week in hiking boots on the deck of some damn half assed cruise ship." She said. "So, if you want to give Steve a call, I'll go feed Chino."

Kerry gave the long leg wrapped around her a gentle pat. "For being such a good girl, I'll take you out to dinner after he's done. How's that?"

Dar produced a charming smile. "Only if you promise to never, ever, ever tell anyone I was either good, or voluntarily went to the doctor."

"Deal."

Kerry got up and edged between the couch and the coffee table, leaning over to give Dar a kiss on the lips. She stayed there almost long enough to get a crick in her back, then straightened up and headed for the phone.

Dar ruffled Chino's fur with one hand, and laid the other across her stomach. Aside from her foot really hurting, she also found herself completely unwilling to argue with Kerry, especially since she knew Kerry was right and she was only arguing because that's what she always did.

She felt a little adrift. She could feel changes coming, and the thought more excited her than frightened. But first, they did have this damn bid to get through, so she decided to focus on that for now. In the meantime, she would go and get her foot fixed up, and keep Kerry from getting any more stressed than she already was.

"You hungry, Chi? You want some dinner?" Dar swung her legs over the side of the couch and got up, going to the kitchen with a very attentive Labrador now glued to her knee. "Let's go get you fed."

"Growf."

* * *

Dr. Steve shook his head as he examined Dar's foot. "Munchkin, between the two of you, I swear I should just tie you up in hammocks for a month and not let you outside for a minute."

"Long as it's the same hammock." Dar replied benignly, her eyes closed and her hands folded over her stomach. "I'm cool with it."

Kerry was loitering behind the examination table, leaning on her elbows. "Count me in too."

"Tch, tch. You wild children." The doctor finished his work and turned around to face Dar. "Honey, I'm going to have to give you a shot of antibiotic."

"Okay."

"Now, I don't want to hear all that guff about…" Dr. Steve paused. "Scuse me?"

Dar shrugged. "Go ahead. Anything to make that damn foot feel better."

Her doctor and old family friend put his hands on his hips. "Who in the hell are you?" He asked. "You ain't no Dar Roberts I know." He looked over at Kerry. "You get her drunk before you brought her in here?"

"Nope." Kerry idly played with a bit of Dar's hair. "Hasn't had a drop.. though that'll change when we get done." She gave the lock a tug, and was rewarded by Dar turning her head and peering up at her. "Dar's just come to her senses, right honey?"

"Right." Dar kept her eyes on Kerry while Dr. Steve prepared the shot, sense notwithstanding she never had liked to watch large pieces of sharp steel enter her body and didn't figure on starting any time soon, or now for that matter.

She could sense the doctor's approach. Kerry must have sensed it too, because she slid her hand forward and cupped Dar's cheek, a welcome warmth in the cool air of the office. Dar let herself get lost in the soft green eyes regarding her, and she didn't even feel the prick of the needle.

"Okay, there you go." Dr. Steve wiped the area with a bit of cotton. "I'm gonna give you a prescription, too, you little rugrat. Wish you knew for sure what kind of fishie that was." He patted Dar's leg. "But you should be okay, long as you don't aggravate things."

Obligingly, Dar sat up and swung her legs off the table, leaning her weight on her hands as she watched Dr. Steve potter about at his table writing her prescription. He was dressed in a short sleeve plaid shirt and Bermuda shorts, and hadn't bothered to assume his white coat or any propriety for his after hours patients. "Did you look at Kerry's eye?"

Dr. Steve looked over his shoulder. "C'mere, Kerry."

Kerry walked over to him and stood in the light, as he tilted her face a little towards him and studied her.

"I'd say her eye was green." Dr. Steve announced. "Just like the other one." He grinned at Kerry, who grinned back. "No headaches or anything from it, young lady?"

"No.." Kerry hesitated. "Well, not from that anyway. We've had a tough week."

His eyebrow rose. “It’s Monday.”

“Exactly.”

Dr. Steve patted her cheek. “Well, you take it easy, okay? Nothing in that crazy world of yours is worth getting sick over.”

“You got that right.” Dar limped over and laid a hand on Kerry’s shoulder. “So, take this stuff, and what else? Don’t tell me to stay off it, Steve. I’ve got a damn ship I have to be crawling over the next couple of days.”

Dr. Steve frowned at her. “Honey, how do d’you expect that thing to heal if you’re stomping all over with it? Any shoe you put on there’s gonna hurt.” He pointed out. “Less you want to go barefoot, like you used to.”

“Still does.” Kerry teased gently. “But I’d never let her do it on that dock.”

Dar sighed. “I’ll figure something out.” She took the prescription. “Thanks. Sorry to pull you out from dinner.” She stuck the paper into her pocket as the doctor lead them to the back door, opening it so they could get out.

“No worries, rugrat.” Dr. Steve patted her on the back and headed for his open topped Jeep. “You take care.” He said. “And keep off that foot!”

Dar got into the car, this time Kerry’s smaller blue one, and shut the door. She waited for her partner to get in on the driver’s side and gave her a look. “I can’t not go.”

Kerry started the car, then leaned on the steering wheel and regarded her. “Didn’t you just agree with him that the job isn’t worth your health?”

Blue eyes blinked unrepentantly. “No.”

“No??”

“I agreed the job wasn’t worth YOUR health.”

“Jesus.”

“Not hardly.” Dar set her sunglasses onto her nose. “C’mon. We’ll figure out something.”

“Yeah.” Kerry put the car in gear, and pulled out of the driveway heading towards the beach. “I’m sure we will.”

* * *

They ended up going by the port anyway. It was near nine o’clock, but the piers were bustling with activity and Kerry had to steer around several groups of hurrying workmen as she edged her way towards their ship. The air was full of the sound of heavy

machinery moving, the clank of cranes, the hoot of warning klaxons as huge pieces of steel swung overhead and the ever-present hiss of welding torches. “Looks busy.” She commented.

“Very.” Dar agreed, peering out the open passenger side window. “Are those protestors?”

“Yeah.” Kerry nodded. “Looks like it.”

“Hmph.”

Kerry parked near their terminal, and got out, watching with some slight anxiety as Dar hopped out on her side and shut the door. “You going to be okay?”

“Fine.” Dar put cautious pressure on her foot, and immediately regretted it. “Ow.”

“Want to stay with the car, and let me run in?” Kerry circled the Lexus and came to Dar’s side, resting her hand on Dar’s arm.

“No.” Dar stubbornly started towards the pier, limping heavily. “C’mon, let’s get this over with.”

Kerry followed her, trotting to catch up, then walking along at Dar’s side. For once, she didn’t have to stretch to keep up, and halfway there she put her hand on Dar’s back, giving the surface a gentle rub with the edge of her thumb.

“That jerk at the restaurant aggravated me.” Dar said, out of the blue.

“Yeah, me too.” Kerry agreed.

“He had no right to take it out on that waitress.” Dar continued. “It wasn’t her fault he split his pants.”

“Too true.”

“I wanted to kick him.”

Kerry patted Dar’s back. “I know, honey, and I know you couldn’t because your foot’s hurt.” She sympathized. “Anyway, I’m sure the karma will come back and bite him in the butt someday.”

“Hmph.”

Kerry chuckled. “You’re such a crusader. I love that about you.”

“Me?” Dar hobbled up the steps to the terminal and headed for the doors. “I’m nothing of the sort. I just hate jerks.”

Kerry swatted her on the butt as she held the door open and let Dar enter ahead of her, glad when the somewhat clammy but welcome chill of the air conditioning beat back the

mugginess of the evening air. The interior of the room was far more active than it had been previously, and they both paused in surprise as the chaos resolved itself. “Holy pooters.”

The inside of the big terminal had been transformed from a dank, empty space to a bustle of activity, filled from back to front with people and gear they both recognized as belonging to ILS. “Well.” Dar exhaled, and started forward, lifting a hand to wave as people began to recognize her. “We did call up the troops.”

“Hey boss.” Mark appeared from literally nowhere, carrying a spool of cable and a switch on one shoulder. “How’s the goldfish nip?”

“Fine.. what’s going on in here?” Dar asked, looking around. Boxes and boxes of gear were stacked against the walls, most unpacked with humming and blinking boxes propped up on every available surface. “Mark, the network goes inside the ship, yeah?”

“Lemme get rid of this.” Mark trotted over and divested himself of his load, handing it off to a harried looking tech. “A ton of our stuff came in, but they ain’t got no space for it yet.”

“Ah.” Kerry walked over to a carton and examined the packing slip. “Yeah, I was expecting this today. Good.” She looked over at Mark. “Guess they came through after all, no matter where they got it from.”

Mark nodded. “Yeah, I talked to our guy today, just checking on stuff. He’s still torked.”

“Too bad.” Kerry put her hands on her hips. “So, you brought it all in here?”

“Nu uh.” The MIS manager shook his head. “I got told it was coming in here, and that I was supposed to do something useful with it.”

Dar cocked her head. “Who in the hell had the balls to tell you that?”

Kerry was already smiling, half covering her face with one hand.

“Your dad.” Mark cheerfully supplied. “I figured I’d better listen to him.”

“My dad.” Dar appeared to have developed a headache, from the way she was rubbing her temples. “Okay, fine. So you are… ?”

“Setting up, burning in, and testing the network here.” Mark said. “Configuring it after that, so when they do have someplace to put it, we’ll be ready.”

Dar absorbed that, then nodded. “Makes sense.” She said. “John around?”

Mark pointed towards the entrance to the ship mutely. He watched Dar limp off, then turned to Kerry. “Hey.. um… I got something kinda skanky to show you.”

Kerry tore her own eyes from her partner's retreating back, and focused on him. "Skanky?"

She followed Mark over to a pallet, which was covered with a gray, dusty tarp. Mark took hold of one end of it and pulled it free, exposing a stack of boxes. "Dar's old man dropped this over here too. Said it was delivered to us by accident, but we should just keep it hidden."

Kerry looked at the packing slip. The receiving name was Telegenics. "This isn't ours."

"Yeah, I know." Mark agreed. "It's the same stuff we ordered, but its for those jerkwads down on the other ship." He pointed. "Got three more pallets full."

"The four orders."

"Yeah."

Kerry walked to each pallet, and examined the labels. They were all identical. Proof of Telegenic's duplicity… or was it? Could that have been done by accident? "Mark, did you ever ask the goofball if they questioned those four orders?"

Mark walked over and leaned an elbow on the boxes. "Yeah, I did. He told me he was told to shut up and mind his own business, and just deliver what was ordered."

And didn't that just sound like Shari? Kerry slowly let out a held breath. "Well well." She flicked her fingers against the cardboard, suddenly aware that she held the fate of the bids in her hands, at least the Telegenics one. There was no way for them to get replacement gear for anything less than truly exorbitant prices if this batch went missing, chiefly because they themselves dried up the channel.

What goes around, comes around. Wasn't that the saying? Didn't it serve Shari and Michelle right to have this happen after what they'd tried to do?

It was just good, hard business sense for Kerry to keep these pallets right here, under cover, maybe filing a mis-delivery with the carrier that would take several weeks to resolve, right?

Absolutely.

"You have a really funny look on your face, chief." Mark commented.

"My morals are having a cat fight with my conscience." Kerry let her hand fall. She turned and spotted a cluster of people near the office. "Now what?" She started towards the group, leaving the pallets behind for the time being.

Mark stood by and watched, until one of the techs came up next to him. "Hey." The tech said. "You show her these boxes?"

"Yeah." Mark nodded.

“What do you think she’s gonna do with em?”

Mark scratched his neck. “I dunno.” He admitted. “C’mon, we’ve got shit to do.” He headed back towards the piled gear, shaking his head a little.

* * *

Dar limped up the gangway, wincing a little at both the pain in her foot and the glaring spotlights surrounding the pier. She could hear men cursing ahead of her, and suddenly in the rumble of sound she caught a familiar drawl.

She stopped at the top of the gangway, unable to go further due to the cram of boxes, people, gear, and packing material stuffed in the entrance. Briefly she paused, looking for a way around it, then she shrugged and tipped her head back a little. “Dad!” She let out a yell.

One hundred percent of the men inside the hold were men, and a statistically significant portion of them were fathers. However, only one answered. “Dardar, that you?” Andrew yelled back. “Careful of that there mess, will ya?”

“What in the hell is all this crap?” Dar pushed against a box. “You building an ark in there?”

Abruptly a box moved, then disappeared, allowing Andrew to stick his grizzled head into the hole it left. “Lord, I will tell you there are more stupid human beings inside this here boat than I met in all mah years in the Navy.”

Dar leaned against the boxes. “What are you doing here?”

“Long tale, young lady.” Her father said. “Anyhow, them folks are trying to get all this here new stuff up one bitty elevator and it ain’t flying.” He said. “You get them boxes inside? That’s all your stuff, ain’t it?”

“Yeah.” Dar said. “My people are setting it all up and getting it ready.”

“Yeap.” Andy nodded again. “Folks seem like they know what’s up inside there.”

“Of course.” Dar felt a prickle of pride. “Hey, why don’t you put some of this packing crap out on the pier? You’d have more room.”

Her father gave her a look. “Cause them there folks..” He pointed at a sextet of jacketed individuals watching the ship. “Do not want no garbage exiting this here vessel.”

“Ah..” Dar exhaled. “EPA?”

“Yeap.”

“How in the hell did they get into all this?” Dar wondered.

Andy cleared his throat. Dar looked at him. They exchanged knowing glances. Dar scrubbed her face with one hand, and mildly resented this additional complication to an already complex and morally questionable series of actions. “Christ.”

“Well.” Andy sighed. “Them boats are leaking.”

“I know.” Dar leaned against the side of the ship entrance. “But there are so many questionable things involved with this circus right now, if that gets out… I don’t know.” She shifted her weight off her injured foot. “It’s a mess.”

Andrew was watching her like a hawk. “Something hurting you?”

“I got my foot bit by a fish.” Dar answered absently, her mind churning over the possibilities.

“How in the hell did that happen?”

“Long damn story.” Dar turned and put her hands on the gangway railing. “All right, let’s just do what we can, and make the best of it.” She looked over her shoulder at him. “Thanks for watching out for us.”

Andy regarded her. “You going inside there? Let you know when a body can move inside this place.”

Dar nodded. “You need anything? Drinks or whatever? I saw our catering truck outside.”

Andy grinned.

“I’ll take care of it.” Dar turned and made her way back down the ramp, wondering what possibly could happen next to screw up a situation already so screwed up it defied explanation.

Then she figured she’d better stop wondering in case it happened.

PART 22

KERRY STOOD INSIDE THE SMALL OFFICE, SURROUNDED BY BUSY PEOPLE. SHE HAD taken a cup of cold water, and she was slowly sipping it as she listened to the many conversational threads around her.

But her mind wasn't really on the business in the room. She rolled the cold, almost tasteless water around in her mouth and swallowed it, feeling the chill slide down her throat and into her stomach.

"Kerry?" Elaine walked over, holding some papers. "Can you just look at this? I think it's all right, but.."

Kerry took the pages and held them in front of her, eyes scanning the typed print without comprehension for at least a minute. Then she sighed and handed them back. "Hold on to this, would you? I need to go take care of something, and I'll check it when I get back."

"Uh.. sure." Elaine watched her leave, a puzzled look on her face.

Kerry exited the building on the side near the ship, showing her identification badge to the guard who waved her past wearily without really looking. Given the number of people there must have been traipsing in and out, she could hardly really blame him, but the lack of security bothered her anyway.

Ah well. She'd take care of that when she got back. Orienting herself, Kerry headed down the pier, walking past the tall cranes, the small groups of arguing men and the ever-present forklifts zipping everywhere.

It seemed like the pier went on forever, giving her far too much time to think about what she was doing. Doubts pecked at her like hungry pigeons, but she kept herself moving across the pavement resisting the urge to stop and go back and…

What was Dar going to say if she asked her? Would she say not to look a gift horse in the mouth? After all, they hadn't arranged for Michelle and Shari's gear to be delivered to their dock, now had they? For sure, for absolute sure, if the positions had been reversed, Kerry knew the most she'd ever see of her stuff was a box floating past heading out to sea.

But she wasn't Michelle, and she wasn't Shari. Kerry crossed the line between the two piers. She wasn't Dar. What had she just been saying? What comes around goes around?

Well. She squared her shoulders and edged between two tall stacks of steel, walking into the floodlights around the other ship and spotting two familiar figures standing near the gangway.

Two cameramen bracketed them, and it was obvious that Shari was busy holding court for them. She was making grand gestures, and as Kerry came closer, her words started to become comprehensible.

Well, she could hear them anyway.

"So, gentlemen, you see the obstacles we must surmount." Shari said. "We've faced sabotage, dirty business tactics, and espionage. Didn't think you'd be in for that in a simple story about cruise ships, now did you?"

Kerry slowed as she approached, coming up behind the cameramen.

"But we'll prevail." Shari spoke confidently. "No matter what ILS throws in our path, we'll get over it. Their dirty dealing will bury them, mark my words."

Kerry paused, half in and half out of the shadows.

"We're the ones putting in the time, we're the ones here making sure the job gets done." Shari pointed towards the other ship. "Not them. You won't catch them here, getting their hands dirty, that's for sure. Go on, go ask! See where they are right now!"

"No need." Kerry stepped forward into the light, laying her hands on the gangway railing. The cameras swiveled to focus on her, and she let the silence extend a moment before she spoke again.

She'd caught them all by surprise, no doubt. Even Shari seemed to be tongue tied for the time being. She let her eyes wander over all of them, hesitating again, even now.

"Come to ask for help, or forgiveness?" Shari found her tongue, and a smirk.

Kerry was very aware of the round, blank eyes turned on her. A faint smile appeared on her face, and she exhaled, surrendering to her own nature with only the faintest of sighs.

"Neither." She said quietly. "Some of your equipment was delivered over by us by mistake. If you send a forklift, I'll have it loaded."

Caught flatfooted, Shari could only stare at her. Michelle, however, circled the gangway and approached Kerry. "My mistake?" She questioned suspiciously.

"Apparently." Kerry agreed. "The four orders you placed for network gear to try and dry up the channel arrived with ours. Good luck trying to return it." And with that, she turned and simply walked off, not looking behind her to see if anyone was following.

* * *

"Where did she go?" Dar asked, resisting the urge to pace around the inside of the building.

"That way, ma'am." The guard pointed down the pier. "Just a few minutes ago, in fact. "

Dar went to the door and peered out, shading her eyes from the glaring spotlights. She could see several figures moving between the two ships, but none of them resolved into her partner's familiar form. Why would Kerry go there?

What was she up to?

"Hey, Dar?" Mark walked over, wiping his brow. "I think we got everything unpacked… you think we can hijack a piece of the line in here so I can download configs?"

Dar blinked, spotting Kerry's distinctive outline appear from between two stacks, heading back towards the terminal with a determined stride. Her body language was a mixture of anger and ferocity, her head held high, but hands balled into fists at her side.

"Dar?"

Dar pushed the door open and limped back outside, heading across the concrete on a path calculated to intercept her partner. She watched Kerry's eyes suddenly track to her, and the alternation in her body's posture that now added a touch of apprehension to her attitude.

"Hey." Dar slowed to a halt as they met. "Where'd you go?"

Kerry looked up at her. "To do something you're probably going to think I'm an idiot for."

Dar felt her heart speed up a bit. "Last time you said that, you got a tattoo and it wasn't so bad." She ventured. "You want to go inside and talk about it?" She hesitantly put a hand on Kerry's shoulder. "I didn't know where you went.. I just came back and you were gone. The guard said…"

Kerry stared past her for a second. "Did Mark show you the boxes?"

Dar fell silent for a second. “Uh.. “

“Okay. C’mon.”

They walked inside the building, and Dar silently allowed Kerry to lead her into the back section of the terminal, in the shadows, where she could now see several pallets of boxes under tarps. “What…”

Kerry walked over and lifted the tarp, pointing at the label. She waited for Dar to lean close to read it, aware of not a few set of eyes watching them.

Dar straightened up, and put her hand on the boxes. “Well. Son of a bitch.”

“Mm.”

“So.. “ Dar looked around, then back at Kerry. “You went to tell them it was here, right?”

Kerry’s shoulders relaxed suddenly, and she leaned against the stack. “Yeah.”

Puzzled, Dar shifted her hand from the box to Kerry’s shoulder, giving her a comforting little pat. “So, what’s the problem, sweetheart?”

Kerry scrubbed her face with one hand. “Your father said… I mean, it’s a big competitive advantage, you know, Dar? I mean, we keep this, and they’re dead in the water.”

“Kerry!”

They both turned around and looked, to find several people including one with a still camera in the front doorway. Mark was nearby, waving at them with a dour expression.

“Ker, we keep this, and it’s grand theft.” Dar captured Kerry’s attention, gently turning her head so their eyes met again. “I may be one to take any advantage, but I draw the line in some places, y’know? That includes putting either of us or the company in danger of criminal action.”

Kerry looked at her for a long moment, then abruptly sagged against Dar, laying her head to rest on her partner’s shoulder. Then she straightened and touched Dar’s side with one hand. “I need to go sit down. Can you go see what that’s all about?”

“Sure.” Dar murmured. “There’s a chair over there. Let me get rid of whatever this is, and I’ll be right back, okay?”

Kerry gave her a brief, but genuine smile, and then she turned and walked over to where a chair was half hidden behind the boxes. She sat down in it and rested her elbows on her knees, gazing at the dirty carpet with pensive eyes.

Dar paused indecisively, considering ignoring the crowd at the door.

Kerry apparently sensed that, because she looked up, and managed a wry grin, raising one hand and flicking her fingers at Dar in the direction of the door.

Reassured, Dar turned and started a somewhat dignified marching limp towards the entrance, gathering an annoyed attitude around her until by the time she got there, people were taking tiny steps backwards and gaining looks of alarm.

“Something I can do for you folks?” Dar asked, stopping in front of them and adopting as aggressive a posture as she was currently capable of.

“Hi.” The woman nearest her took the lead. “My name is Elecia Rodriguez, and I’m a reporter for the Miami Herald.”

“Good for you.” Dar gave her no quarter.

“I’d like to speak with Kerry Stuart, please.” The woman apparently had faced down unwilling participants before, and her tone didn’t alter a whit.

“She’s busy.”

“She’s sitting over there, not looking busy at all. Can I speak with her please?” The reporter replied calmly. “It’s really in her best interests.”

“No.” Dar answered back, just as calmly. “It’s in her best interests to just be left alone right now.”

The reporter locked eyes with Dar. They stared each other down for a few minutes. The woman was about Dar’s height, and roughly her size, and Dar wondered for a minute if she was going to make a rush past her towards her quarry.

Several ILS security guards edged up around them, apparently having the same thoughts. Dar relaxed a bit, reassured that the reporter would surely not be stupid enough to risk that major of a scene no matter how juicy the story she was following was.

“Ms. Roberts, you really do want your side of the story presented here.” Rodriguez finally said. “I appreciate that there’s a lot going on, and you’ve got no reason to either want or trust the press at this point but we’re not part of Mr. Quest’s circus. We’re local, and you’re the local team. Get my drift?”

Dar paused, hearing a thread of sincerity in the statement. The woman was also being neither overbearing, nor craven, instead she was just being very straightforward and suddenly Dar remembered where she knew the reporter’s name from. “That was a nice story you did on the behind the scenes of the sports industry down here.” She said. “I liked it.”

Caught a little off guard, the woman produced a slight smile, and her body posture altered a bit. “Thanks. You have no idea how much my company hated me for it though. We lost comp tickets to almost every game in town.”

Hm. “All right.” Dar paused to think. “If you can rest your laurels a few minutes, I’ll see if Kerry’s willing to chat with you.” She pointed towards the catering table. “Help yourselves.”

The reporter didn’t really react, but the three men she had with her, including the camera man, lit up like Christmas trees at the sight of free food. Rodriguez regarded them with a tolerant look, then nodded at Dar. “Fair enough, and at least it’s air conditioned in here. Take your time while I feed my starving wolves.”

Dar gave them all a last, brief regard, then she turned and retreated back towards the shadows.

“Nice.’ The cameraman complimented his colleague. “Didn’t think we were going to get anything there for a minute.”

“Me either.” Rodriguez sighed, as she lead the way past the watchful guards. “But I’ve done this long enough to know when you’re dealing with someone that smart, just drop all the bullshit and let them make the choice.”

“Way different than those other guys.” The man agreed.

“Way different.” Rodriguez agreed. “This is going to be a good one.”

* * *

Dar crouched next to Kerry’s chair, positioning her body so she was blocking the view of anyone watching them. She put a hand on Kerry’s knee and squeezed it gently. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Kerry responded readily.

“You doing okay?”

“My brain hurts.”

Dar chuckled wanly. “My foot hurts. We’re even.”

Kerry reached up to ruffle her partner’s hair. “So.”

“So.”

“You let the vandals in at the gates, I see.”

Dar nodded. “It’s a reporter from the Herald.” She confirmed. “She wants to talk to you.”

“Ah.” Kerry sniffed reflectively. “Interview with a rebel biker chick on tap, I guess?”

Was it? Dar suddenly gave in to the discomfort of leaning on her injured foot and sat down instead, pulling her legs up crosswise under her. “I’m not sure.” She countered.

"Sounded like it was a tie in with this whole deal, but I've seen some of the stuff this one's written and it's pretty even handed."

"Hm."

"Yeah, I thought the other reporter was all right too, I know." Dar admitted. "But I've actually read her articles. She does business angles, and she managed to take sides with Janet Reno and hasn't been ridden out on rails yet."

"Ah." Kerry leaned on her elbows again, her head resting against Dar's, not caring who was looking or not. "I feel really unbalanced right now. I'm not sure talking to a reporter is a good idea."

"Okay." Dar accepted that readily. "I just told her I would ask you." She wrapped her hand around Kerry's leg, stroking her calf gently. She could feel tension there, a rapid flexing and releasing that paid testament to her partner's rattled state. "Want something to drink?"

Kerry twirled a bit of Dar's hair around one finger, remaining silent. She tuned out the rest of the room, and just concentrated on the touch of Dar's hand around her leg, and the scent of hickory smoke that lightly clung to her from where they'd had dinner.

It was hard for her to say, really, why she was so shook up. After all, she'd acted on her conscience, and she'd turned out to be dead on right, even in Dar's eyes. So, what was her problem? "Dar?"

"Hm?" Dar seemed quite willing to sit there as long as she was required, completely ignoring the room at her back.

""Why am I so freaked out?"

"I don't know, Ker." Dar replied honestly. "You did the right thing."

"I know I did." The blond woman whispered.

Dar leaned her chin against Kerry's knee. "Were you freaked out by my father wanting to ditch the stuff?"

Kerry was thoughtfully silent.

"He's not much into playing by the rules." Dar said, after a slight hesitation. "I mean – I guess I mean he's willing to go to any length for what he thinks is the greater good."

"Yeah." Kerry nodded. "Maybe that's it." She admitted. "I knew he wanted to do that for us. But it was just…it was…"

"Wrong." Dar supplied.

"Yeah."

The dark haired woman shrugged a little. “Shari and Michelle would have agreed with him in a heartbeat.”

Kerry lifted her head and gazed into Dar’s eyes, visibly more collected. “Oh, I know.” She said. “Hey, listen.” She hesitated.

“Want me to arrange to give them this stuff while you go talk to the reporter?” Dar suggested.

“You’re reading my mind again.” Kerry lifted her hand and rubbed a smudge of dust from the bridge of Dar’s nose. “Do you know half the room is watching us?”

“And?”

“I don’t care either.” Kerry relaxed at last, leaning back in the chair and extending her legs out past Dar’s knee. “Okay. I’ll go wrangle with the Herald, and you can smirk and make Michelle feel like an idiot while you turn over these boxes. Here she comes.”

Dar patted her leg, and got to her feet, catching her balance against the boxes and straightening up as she spotted Michelle’s short figure headed in her direction. “Didn’t bring her entourage.”

Kerry also got up and headed off, giving Dar a gentle slap on the butt as she went by. “Of course not. No fun in being filmed eating crow.”

No, of course not. Dar squared her shoulders and waited as Michelle approached, wrestling a deadpan look on her face. “Evening.”

Michelle stopped, glancing past her at Kerry’s retreating back. “She drops the bombshell, you get to bask in the stink?”

Dar leaned against the boxes. “The only stink around here is coming from you.” She replied bluntly. “Where’s your box mover? Or are you planning on dragging them back yourself?”

“Don’t hold back, Dar. Tell me how you really feel.” Michelle countered. “Don’t for a minute think I don’t know the timing on that little reveal was exquisitely planned.”

Dar merely rolled her eyes, and stepped back, pulling the tarp off the first set of boxes. “You’re wasting my time. Here.”

Michelle stepped forward and examined the shipping label. She pulled a set of papers out from under her arm and carefully cross checked them, ignoring Dar’s lounging presence. Finally, she turned her head and looked up. “Trust me when I tell you there’ll be an inquiry on how this shipment ended up in your hands. You better hope your lawyers are up to it.”

"Sure." Dar smiled at her. "They'll be glad to stand up and explain why three false and one true order of yours got dropped off by a trucker here who didn't want to take it down to you because he got called an asshole one too many times. No problem."

Michelle turned around fully. "You know something?"

"Pretty much everything, thanks."

"You're a real asshole."

Dar watched Michelle retreat back towards the door, her entire body seeming to shoot off disgusted anger. "Takes one to know one." She called after the shorter woman. "Better hurry up and get this out of here before I charge you rent!"

At the door, Michelle turned and glared murderously at her.

Dar released a wicked laugh. "You want me to be an asshole? You don't know what you're asking for. Now get those men in here or I'll have the stevedores pack it up and send it back."

Michelle exited and slammed the door behind her. Unfortunately, it was held open by an air compressed automatic closer, and it ended up bouncing back open and smacking her in the rear. She lunged forward, going headlong into two men with a hand cart who had been approaching outside.

The men leaped back, startled, and made a grab for her, but missed and Michelle fell to her knees between them. They helped her up hurriedly, backing off as soon as she was on her feet and dusting their hands off.

Dar chuckled happily, then sighed. "Damn, where's a camera when you need one?"

* * *

Kerry took a moment to compose herself before she entered the lighted area around the food table, and approached the reporters. She ran her fingers through her hair and settled it a bit, and then she walked over to the small group and made eye contact with the woman reporter. "Hi."

The woman got caught in mid swallow. Her eyes widened a little, then she finished her mouthful and set her cup down. "Hi." She extended her hand. "Elecia Rodriguez."

"Kerry Stuart." Kerry grasped her hand and shook it. "You wanted to speak to me?" Her tone was soft, and slightly husky and she resisted the urge to clear her throat.

"Ah, yes, I did. Thanks." The reporter collected herself. "Is there someplace we can sit down? Not that I mind the ambiance out here, it sure beats standing outside, but.."

“There some chairs over there.” Kerry pointed to an unused corner of the terminal, then paused as she heard Dar’s voice raise up and send echoes to the rafters. Conversation abruptly cut off in the room.

The reporters turned and stared, then Elecia looked back at Kerry. “You sure have one heck of a situation here, don’t you?” They all stood listening, but the yell wasn’t repeated, and voices started up again around them.

Kerry led them over to the seats and took one, sitting down and crossing her ankles demurely as she tucked her feet under her chair. It was a ridiculous bit of modesty given that she was in faded jeans and scuffed sneakers, but old habits really did die hard sometimes after all. “What can I do for you, Ms. Rodriguez?”

The reporter sat down and composed herself, removing a pad from her back pocket and a pen from behind her ear. “Okay.” She eyed Kerry thoughtfully. “Where do I start with you, Ms. Stuart?”

One of Kerry’s blond brows rose. “Excuse me?”

The reporter studied her pad. “There are about ten thousand questions I’d like to ask you, starting with what was it like growing up in Roger Stuart’s house, to what is it like getting a tattoo, but I guess I’d have to settle with starting somewhere, and where I’ll start is, what exactly are you trying to accomplish with this business here?”

Of all the questions she could have been faced with, at least this one was relatively easy to answer. “We’re trying to install and configure a computer network for this ship outside of here, to demonstrate our ability to provide those services across Mr. Quest’s fleet and give him the most competitive bid so he’ll choose us to do that.”

Rodriguez nodded. “Okay.” She scribbled a note. “So let me ask you this. Do you do this sort of thing a lot?”

Puzzled, Kerry frowned a little. “Sure.” She said. “It’s what we do. It’s what I do, for ILS. Integrate and assist in acquiring new business, among other things.”

The reporter scribbled another note. “Fair enough.” She said. “So, Ms. Stuart, is this process always like a three ring circus? You must have a very entertaining job.”

Kerry sighed. “No, it’s not.” She said. “Most of the time it’s a pretty dry, refined process. Someone contacts me, or our sales department gets a lead, and we do an analysis, then present possible solutions and a price tag. There’s some bargaining, then either we get a contract, or we don’t.”

“Uh huh.” The woman mused. “That’s pretty much what I thought.” She said. “So, tell me about this feud, between yourselves, and the folks at Telegenics. Where did that come from? I understand business rivalries, but this seems to go beyond that. True?”

“Well…”

“Here.” The reporter removed a folder, and opened it. “I’ve had my ear chewed off by the people on the other side of that pier all afternoon. They’re wanting to bury you in the worst way.” She showed Kerry not one, but three pictures.

One was the biker chick, which she expected. The other two were of her and Dar, one at a restaurant down by the beach, the other… in the pool at Disney, kissing

Kerry inspected the photos. “And?” She gave the reporter an inquiring look. “You want me to rate them, or pick the one for you to use in your story?” She asked. “What exactly does any of this have to do with the business we’re doing here?”

“Now, that’s exactly what I wanted to know, Ms. Stuart. “ The reporter said. “It doesn’t have anything to do with anything here, and that’s why I wanted to talk to you. See, your company has been a part of our community for a long time now, and it’s done it’s share of good works, some crappy works too, but it’s done it’s part in employing a lot of folks in these parts.”

“That’s true.” Kerry agreed quietly. “We try to be good corporate citizens.”

“So, then what’s behind it all?” Rodriguez asked, shifting a little closer. “You’re not unknown to us, Ms. Stuart. My paper’s been aware of who you are since you came in to ILS.”

Kerry merely watched her face, aware at the periphery of her senses that Dar was nearby, and also watching.

“We’ve chosen, or should I say, my managers have chosen not to focus on you, because your company is pretty darn low key. You just do what you do, and pay your taxes, and frankly, bring the city a lot more than you take from it.” The woman flipped a page. “So, in sum, when some outside folks start gunning for one of our own, we take exception to it, and we want to know why.”

“Why.” Kerry mused. “You sure you really want to know why?”

Rodriguez’s face suddenly shifted into a faint, mischievous grin. “No. I bet I don’t.” She said. “But we got sent this picture, of you on the bike.” She held up the picture. “Now that struck everyone as something that was very, very interesting, because not many vice presidents of international corporations get their picture taken like that.”

“I bet.”

“Are you a hell raiser, Ms. Stuart?”

Now it was Kerry’s turn to grin, and she did, a smile of genuine amusement that lit up her eyes. “Sometimes.”

“Tell me a story, then. What’s going on here?” The reporter said, poising her pen over the page. “Tell me Goliath’s side of the story.”

Kerry was aware of Dar's watchful eyes, and she knew if she turned her head to the left, she'd see her partner in the shadows standing by, there if she needed her. "Okay." She agreed. "I'm a little short for Goliath, but I'll do the best I can."

"I'm sure you've got help if you need it." The reporter didn't look at Dar. "I'm not looking to get my butt kicked. Will that happen?"

Kerry smiled. "Depends."

"Thought you'd say that." Rodriguez chuckled. "I'll take my chances."

* * *

They ended up in the small office, since everyone had migrated outside to have some dinner and relax. Kerry was seated in one of the comfortably innocuous office chairs they'd supplied, leaned all the way back with one sneaker resting on her opposite knee.

The reporter had taken a seat across from her, using one of the desks to lean on in her writing, and they both had cups of coffee courtesy of Dar, who had briefly disappeared after deciding Kerry wasn't in any imminent danger.

"All right, Ms. Stuart."

"Kerry." Kerry interrupted. "I hate being called Ms. Stuart."

The reporter scribbled a note. "Okay, Kerry." She continued agreeably. "So, you were approached in Orlando by Mr. Quest, right?"

"Actually, Dar was stalked by Mr. Quest." Kerry clarified. "He hunted her down in the lobby of the hotel and approached her with the idea."

"Stalked is a pretty strong term."

"Well." Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "What would you call it if someone had pictures made of you and then went searching through a hotel to find you?"

"Hm."

"At any rate, he pitched his idea to Dar, and she turned him down."

"Why?" Rodriguez asked.

Good question, Kerry reflected. "I think, because she was wary of how he approached her. It seemed to be something that was outside the normal way businesses approach each other." She explained. "It almost seemed underhanded."

"Hm." The reporter tapped her pen against her jaw. "So what made her reconsider?"

Another very good question, and one Kerry was fairly sure she couldn't answer honestly. "She thought about it, and we talked, and it seemed like it might be a good opportunity to at least get a foothold into an industry we weren't a part of."

Rodriguez nodded, and scribbled a note. "That makes sense." She said. "So it had nothing to do with the fact that Telegenics was also one of the bidders?"

Truth? Kerry acted on impulse. "Sure it had something to do with it." She answered back. "We wanted an opportunity to go head to head with them, after some of the claims they'd been making, and also, after they approached our staff at the trade show to try and offer them jobs."

"Uh huh." The woman grunted. "Telegenics claims that never happened."

Kerry chuckled. "Sure it did." She replied. "The problem is, they forgot to brief their technical manager and he had no idea who he was recruiting." She went on. "When we got to the trade show late the night of the setup day, we found out there was no setup crew on duty. So Dar and I helped our staff to set up our booth, and we were two of the potential recruits."

The reporter looked at her, a half grin on her face. "You're kidding."

Solemnly, Kerry shook her head. "They were telling us how we should join their company instead of working for a faceless corporation where their bosses were sitting somewhere sipping caviar and lounging in limos. My guys thought it was pretty darn funny."

"I bet they did." Rodriguez got up and walked around the small office, stretching her arms over her head. "Did that really tick you off?"

"Getting recruited? We laughed." Kerry replied. "But to us, it was one more indication of the fact that Telegenics was coming after us in a very personal way, and neither of us really caught on to why until we left that night and saw Michelle and Shari coming into the building."

The reporter turned. "You didn't know before then they were part of it?" She sounded incredulous.

"No, we didn't." Kerry answered honestly. "Ms. Rodriguez.."

"Elecia."

Kerry smiled. "Elecia, we have a lot of competitors. We do business analysis on them, sure, but we don't go hunting for people who might be holding a grudge in their offices." She glanced past the woman towards the door, where Dar's head was now peering around the corner. "Hey." She bit her tongue on the 'sweetie'.

"John needs to meet with you." Dar said. "Sorry to interrupt."

"Any way I can chat with you for a few minutes while that's going on, Ms. Roberts?" The reporter interrupted smoothly. "I think we're at a logical holding point here."

Kerry got up, relinquishing her chair to her partner with a flourish. "Be my guest. Let me go see what John's… well, I won't say problem because I know what his problem is, but what he wants." She eased past Dar's body, stuck in the doorway, and gave her a pat on the side as she squeezed by.

Dar hesitated briefly, then she limped into the room and took Kerry's chair, rubbing her thumbs on the arms still warm with her body heat. "Well?"

Elecia sat back down at the desk and studied her for a moment. "Thanks for taking the time to talk, Ms. Roberts."

Dar nodded briefly at her and waited.

"Anyone ever tell you that you two are real opposites?"

A brow quirked. "It's been mentioned once or twice." Dar allowed.

"Okay." The reporter gathered her notes. "Kerry was just telling me that after first declining to participate in Mr. Quest's bid, you changed your mind."

"Right."

The reporter waited, but nothing more was apparently forthcoming. "You have a history with the two gals from Telegenics, don't you?"

Dar half shrugged. "Yes." She agreed. "Michelle was the IT director of a company I worked a contract negotiation for a year or so back, and I've known Shari for many years."

'That sounds so civilized." Rodriguez said. "And yet, from what those gals say, this bid had been anything but. What's your take on that?"

Dar steepled her fingers and rested the edges of them against her lips. She was very aware that this article would end up being a high profile one in the Herald. Granted, the Miami Herald was not the Washington Post, nor was it the New York Times, but in it's own way it was a respected dispenser of local news and she knew whatever the article ended up being, it would be seen by the board of directors who paid their salaries.

So. How to present utter chaos? "It's been a difficult bid so far." Dar answered slowly. "There were a number of things that contributed to that, most of which did not involve any of us or our respective past histories. For instance." She ticked off a finger. "The movement of the project unexpected from New Zealand to Miami, and the speeding up of the timeline. That put a focus on us that would not have existed there."

"Because you're local."

“Exactly.” Dar agreed. “Second, the putting of the project into the spotlight by the involvement of the Travel Channel and their filming crew. That added a lot of the circus.”

“True.”

“Third, the confusion over the intervention of the EPA, which further truncated the timeline, and turned the bid into something of a frantic horse race.”

“Also true.” The reporter nodded. “But that’s not what I meant, and I think you know that.”

Ah. “Is this article having to do with business or gossip?” Dar countered, looking directly at her. “To be honest, sure. We’ve all been behaving like contestants for a trip to Jerry Springer, but the bottom line is, we need to get this job done and whoever does it right wins the prize.”

The reporter’s eyes glinted a trifle. “So, you’re not saying the controversy between the four of you is the real story? It’s their opinion that the discord is what is preventing both of you from being able to effectively compete.”

Dar remained silent for a moment, then she shook her head. “Far as I’m concerned, we’re effectively competing. If they let this distract them to the point they aren’t, that’s not my problem.”

Rodriguez scribbled a few notes, and then she looked up again. “Tell me about your father working on the docks. Deliberate?”

Dar allowed a few seconds to pass before she answered. “Sure.” She said. “I asked him to get a job down here to keep an eye on things.”

“Ah. Did he?”

“He did. He’s the one who discovered that Telegenics had placed four copies of their networking gear order, to keep anyone else from getting equipment on time unless they wanted to pay through the nose.”

The reporter’s eyebrows rose. “Did they?”

“Mm.” Dar nodded. “Fortunately for us, we had more clout than most, and we forced an order through.”

“For that matter, according to them, you all bought up all the circuits to force them to do the same.” Rodriguez countered. “Sounds like a tit for tat.”

“Except we didn’t.” Dar half smiled. “Kerry was just hedging her bets, since they wouldn’t assign a pier to any of the ships.”

“So you say.”

"So it is."

The reporter scribbled some more notes. "Did your father sabotage them?"

Dar chuckled. "My father's a retired underwater demo man. He's not subtle. If he'd really sabotaged them the damn boat'd be on the bottom of Government Cut." She scoffed. "If anything, he probably did them good by organizing that chaos."

"Mm." Rodriguez nodded. "The pier supervisor said the same thing. He doesn't have a high opinion of Telegenics, matter of fact." She swiveled to face Dar. "So, I'd have to say most of the points on this are on your side, Ms. Roberts."

Dar held both hands out in a plaintive gesture.

Kerry re-entered the office and ambled over to Dar's side, sitting down on the desktop and exhaling heavily. "He's finished pulling cable, Dar."

"That's bad?" Her partner queried.

"They closed the walls up after they pulled all the wires, and he's not sure if anything got clipped or nicked. He suspects some of it might have been, so we need to test before he can go any further."

"Ah." Dar nodded. "Mark's got some network guys here. Send em in."

"I did." Kerry acknowledged. "But here's the issue – the electricians need to turn the power off, and it'll be off all night and part of tomorrow. We're dead in the water while that's going on."

"Shit." Dar rubbed her temple. "Can we install the switches?"

"In the dark?"

"We have flashlights."

Kerry leaned closer to her. "Dar, that's a construction zone, there's no air conditioning, and they're going to be using welding torches in the same spaces we're putting switches into. Do you want to risk it?"

The reporter was sitting in silence, watching them in fascination.

Dar considered. "Yes, I want to risk it." She replied. "If we have the switches in place, already configured, and the lines are tested then when the power goes back on we can bring up the core. Otherwise, we're two days behind and if something's screwed, we've got no time to fix it."

Kerry took her turn at consideration. "Okay, but we need to find out where the electrical crews are, and put our people in after they're finished in each closet."

"Good plan." Dar agreed.

"Right." Kerry got up and left, scrubbing her hair with the fingers of one hand as she disappeared.

Dar returned her attention to the reporter. "Where were we?"

"My question to you now is – why are you here?" Rodriguez asked. "Why aren't you in an ivory tower somewhere, eating quiche and wearing a silk suit? CIO's and vice presidents are not supposed to do the work they pay other people to do."

Dar was momentarily silent, having no real answer ready to hand. In general terms, the reporter was right, and she knew it. "I have good people, and they do a good job."

"But?"

A shrug.

"Or does it really all come down to a very personal conflict after all?"

And of course, the reporter was damn right about that too. "It's just how we do things." Dar demurred. "Stick around, and I'll prove it."

Elecia smiled, biting the end of her pen.

* * *

"Okay, we got the pipe up." Mark had his head bent over his laptop, fingers pecking away industriously. "Let me bring these puppies online."

Dar was leaning against one wall, watching the activity. "We're going to need to put full security on this room tonight." She remarked. "I wouldn't put it past our friends down the pier to try and break in her to make some trouble."

"Psht." Mark made a disparaging noise. "Hey boss…" He half turned and looked at Dar. "Did you do a special config for this, or should I just use the standard?"

"Standard." Dar answered briefly. "We can customize it when it's on the ship." She looked around for Kerry, but the blond woman was no where to be seen, and the reporter had disappeared as well. "How much more do we have to do?"

Mark turned all the way around to face her. "Dar, like, seriously, you don't have to hang out here. We're fine." He said. "We've just got the setup to finish, and some cleaning."

Dar had the grace to look slightly abashed. "I know." She admitted. "I just felt a little bad about wrangling everyone over here last minute."

The MIS manager relaxed. “No prob.” He said. “To tell you the truth, all the guy’s have been pretty curious about what’s going on over here, and they think the ship’s way cool.”

“It’s a wreck.”

“Yeah, but it’s something new and different, y’know?”

Dar did, indeed, know. “Yeah.” She removed her PDA from her pack pocket and flipped it open, tapping out a message as Mark went back to work.

Hey. Where are you?

The machine remained silent. Dar scowled. Then she gave up and limped back to the office, feeling more than just a touch useless out in the busy hall. She took a seat at the desk and slapped the keyboard of one of the office computers, logging in with her login and drumming her fingers while she waited for the system to authenticate her.

It presented her with her standard desktop and she opened up a programming session, starting up her network monitor as she waited for the first program to finish booting. Once she’d gotten things set up to her satisfaction, she put the keyboard on her lap and leaned back in the office chair, getting comfortable as she moved the windows around a little to better see them.

For a moment, she let her eyes linger over the network monitor, studying the readouts intently. Everything appeared relatively normal, the one alert showing indicating to her that eight new devices had been added to the network in the last hour.

“Knew that, thanks.” Dar dismissed the alert. She logged into the routers and studied her program’s results, calling up the program itself on the second screen and preparing to work on it.

What did she want it to do next? Dar hesitated, her fingertips resting on the keys. Something Kerry had said to her before she’d started on the project came to mind, and she thought about how she’d have the program extend itself outside their network and chase down hackers.

That brought her breakfast to mind, and Dar set aside the program briefly as she went to a third screen and checked for activity at their gateway. All was quiet, apparently her hacker friend had either given up or just gotten bored and found something else to occupy his or her time.

His or her. Dar suspected it was his, since most hackers she’d ever known had been guys. She’d never been really sure if it was just a social thing, or a hormonal one, and she never really thought too hard about what that had said about her.

With a sigh, she typed a few lines into her program, then stopped and closed it. She switched to the network monitors instead, and started browsing them, drilling down a few levels to examine the traffic flows in and out of their core network.

Given the hour, it looked pretty normal. Dar clicked and pointed, shifting the monitor from their outer boundary to the inner workings of the main office, drilling down to a department level. "Let's see. Duks must be working his guys overtime tonight."

She clicked on a message icon, and typed in a note.

Hey, and you call me a slave driver.

Dar chuckled slightly and went back to her browsing, checking the density of the traffic going to and from the accounting mini-computers and the saturation of the pipe into Houston where the reporting all flowed. It seemed busy, and she racked her brains trying to think if there was a deadline she'd forgotten about.

Budgets? No, not for another month, and the quarter didn't close for nearly two.

Her screen blinked, and she looked at it, seeing the message that had come back from Duks.

I? Here I sit alone in my office with just a dust bunny under my desk. Where are you? I was by your office this evening but you were not there.

Dar blinked at the message. Then she removed her cell from it's clip at her belt and opened it, dialing Duks phone number rapidly. Her thighs jerked under the keyboard as she waited for him to answer, sending it bouncing slightly as her nerves jangled a howling warning. "Duks?"

"Ah, Dar." Duks sounded completely calm. "How are you?"

"Just listen to me." Dar said . "I'm in the network, and I see a ton of traffic on your servers. Are you running something?"

Dead silence. Then – "I am not."

"Can you check your running jobs?"

A rattle of keys sounded clearly through the phone. Dar waited, knowing if she had to she could have logged into a session herself and checked them but also knowing Duks would know most intimately what belonged in the system and what did not.

"Paladar, we have a problem."

Dar licked her lips. "Okay." She responded. "What do you want me to do? I can isolate that box, Duks."

"Please do so."

Dar's hands moved in a blur, cutting off the multiple network accesses to the minis. It also cut off her access, of course, but in her mind, that wasn't important. "Okay, done."

“I am going to the computer room now. I will call you from there.” Duks voice was quiet, and very, very serious. “Please do not as of yet contact anyone.”

“Okay.” Dar agreed softly. She closed the cell, and left it folded on her leg, while she opened up the monitor screen to it’s fullest size and stared at it, focusing on small surges here, and there, flickers of pale green against the normal green, completely ordinary to any eyes including hers.

A flashing alert caught her eye, and she clicked over to her router program, blinking at the screen as she red the cryptic results emerging from her own coding. Another warning about being accessed, and Dar almost clicked it closed, before she caught a second line behind it, a routine access listing for a remote router, that bore an IP not her own.

She dove after it, going to the router in question and scoping it out immediately, finding the session and capturing the address before it could disappear. Then she deleted the session and locked the router down, allowing only her own login to access it.

Breathing a little faster, she ducked out of that router and into the core, searching for the offending IP. Her heart started to speed up as she located it, racing to trace it before it disappeared. She grabbed the mac address and pasted it into a note pad, then searched it out.

“Ah.” She captured the port and pasted that also, then redid the trace. As she’d expected, the address was now gone, but she had the port.

If she had the port, she knew what was on the other end of it. Grimly, Dar opened up her network documentation and re-pasted the port number into the search field, then hit enter.

Her cell phone rang. She answered it one handed, while she stared at the screen. “Yes?”

“This is Louis.”

Dar inhaled, making her nostrils flare in reaction. “Yes.”

“Some person has been attempting to remove the records in this system that pertain to our customer accounting.” Duks stated flatly. “The login who has run these reports belongs to my department, from the senior auditing unit.”

Dar waited, but the line was silent. “And you did not ask them to do this?”

“I did not.” Duks confirmed. “I am contacting security, and I would appreciate that you send to me what data you saw that spurred you to contact me.”

“I will.” Dar replied quietly. “I may have another problem.”

Duks sighed. “Paladar, please. One disaster at a time is all my heart can handle.” He exhaled. “I will call you back after I speak with Able Jacobs.”

"Okay." Dar let him hang up, satisfied at least that Duks had the situation under control. It would do no one any good for her to get involved in it – Duks was harsher on his own staff and security than she could ever be and she knew finding a data thief inside his department would send her old friend into a overdrive rage.

Now. To her other problem. Dar studied the screen again. The request for her program files had come from a pc on the fourteenth floor, just down the hall from her own office. It was, she recalled, a spare work room that also held two manual fax machines and a copier, and was occasionally used for visitors who needed access to a PC for various reasons.

Dar quickly dialed the phone again. She listened to the ring, then exhaled when it was answered.

"Operations, Rosie speaking."

"Hi Rosie." Dar said. "It's Dar Roberts."

The woman's voice definitely perked up. "Oh, hi, Ms. Roberts! What can I do for you?"

Kerry had her admirers in the office, and so, Dar acknowledged, did she. Rosie was one of them. "I have something I need you to do." She said. "You know the computer in the printer room, on 14 near my office?"

"Oh! Yes, ma'am, I sure do." Rosie assured her.

"Okay." Dar said. "I want you to go upstairs, and listen closely, okay?"

"Yes!"

Dar would have rolled her eyes if it had been a less serious occasion. "Rosie, this is very serious." She told the woman. "Someone just tried to access something from that PC that they shouldn't have." She heard the intake of breath on the other end. "So what I want you to do is to take a couple of plastic bags, and go down there. Put the keyboard and mouse in a bag, and take that, the PC and monitor, and take it back to ops with you, okay?"

"Right away, ma'am." Rosie acknowledged. "Do you want me to call security?"

Dar sighed. "They're busy with something else right now, and I'm not sure exactly what was going on with this pc. So just secure it, and I'll pick it up from you later."

"I'm on it." Rosie said.

Dar hung up, tapping the cell phone against her chin. Her PDA went off at that moment, almost scaring her out of her wits, and she just barely kept from tossing the cell phone across the room. She pulled the PDA out and examined it.

Sorry, sweetie.. I was downstairs on the ship. What's up?

Dar wondered where to start. *Is the reporter still with you?* She asked. *A couple things just went down I'd rather not expose to the Herald in this lifetime.*

The PDA was briefly silent, then it stutter flashed. *Be right there.*

Dar nodded a little, and then she opened her cell phone again, and dialed. She waited. "Hi. This is Dar Roberts. I need a list of everyone who is logged into the building right now, and everyone who entered and exited within the last twenty five minutes."

* * *

They parked right in front of the office and walked side by side to the door. They passed together through the electronic portals, getting a nervous nod from the security guard on duty.

"Evening, ma'ams."

"Evening." Dar greeted him briefly for them both. She followed Kerry across the huge lobby to the elevators and they both went inside. "Jesus."

"Not how I wanted the night to end." Kerry confirmed, punching the button for the tenth floor. "But at least you stopped them, Dar."

"By pure god damned luck."

"Honey, whatever works." Kerry sighed. "I'm just glad you were there."

Dar stared morosely at the closed elevator doors until the conveyance stopped, and they were admitted to the tenth floor. She followed Kerry out and to the right, heading for the operations center.

"Just goes to show you how much we need your program." Kerry went on, with a touch of hesitance. "And you."

Dar paused with her hand on the door latch of the ops center, and cocked her head to one side. "You really mean that?"

Kerry looked right back at her. "If you mean personally, I'm going to kick your ass for even asking."

An unexpected smile appeared on Dar's face. "I love it when you talk to me like that." She opened the door and indicated Kerry should precede her, the wide open portal preventing the blond woman from framing a suitable answer.

Kerry stuck her tongue out instead, and walked into the room, where the console operator was already standing up to greet them. "Hi, Rosie."

Dar followed her inside, and gave the woman a nod as well. " Got the pc?"

“Right there, ma’am.” Rosie pointed towards a worktable on one side of the operations desk. “I went right out and grabbed it after you called me.”

Dar walked over to examine their prize. The operator had certainly taken her words literally, and the computer, it’s mouse, keyboard, and assorted cables were neatly wrapped in enough plastic baggage to cover half the room they were presently standing in. Duct tape secured it, and she suspected it would take the sharp end of her Leatherman tool to free the poor captive. “Okay.”

“Did you see anyone around there when you were getting it, Rosie?” Kerry asked. “Anyone in the hall or anything like that?”

“No, ma’am.” Rosie shook her head. She was twenty something, a middling height, middling hair color kind of woman who often reminded Kerry irresistibly of a cocker spaniel. “There shouldn’t be anyone up there this time of night, and it was empty as a graveyard when I was there.”

Dar checked her watch, and decided to leave the wrapped PC where it was. She limped over to the big console desk and picked up the phone, dialing Duks’ extension. “You there?”

“I am here.” Duks answered. “Are you here?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now that this important piece of business is concluded, would you come to my office?”

“Right.” Dar put the phone down. “Ker, let me go talk to Louis. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Kerry took a breath, then merely folded her arms. “Okay.” She agreed. “I’m going to go upstairs and see what I can sniff out.”

“Good idea.” Dar winked at her, as she made her way to the door and bumped it open with an elbow. She limped out and the door closed behind her, leaving Kerry by herself with the console operator.

“Ms. Stuart?”

“Hm?” Kerry had wandered over to examine the PC in it’s wrapping.

“How come Ms. Robert’s is limping? Something happen to her?” Rosie asked.

Kerry turned her head to regard the operator, whose round, innocent eyes gazed back at her with a marked lack of guile. “Matter of fact, she got that saving me from a barracuda, Rosie.”

If possible, Rosie's eyes became a lot rounder and a lot bigger. "No kidding!?"

"No kidding. "Kerry turned all the way around and faced her. "There we were, in the ocean, right?"

"Right."

Kerry waved her hands, mimicking a swimming motion. "I was swimming with our dog, and we swam under the dock. I felt something brush against me, then all of a sudden Dar jumped in, picked me up out of the way, and kicked a barracuda that was about to bite me right in the mouth!"

"Wow!"

"Yeah, but she got bitten for her troubles, so you know." Kerry went on blithely. "But it was very brave of her."

"Sure was!" Rosie agreed fervently. "Wow.. were you scared?"

Kerry stuck her hands in her pockets. "Didn't have time to be."

"Wow." The operator repeated. "That's amazing."

"Dar usually is also." Kerry went to the door. "Well, I'm going to go check out our offices. I'll be right back." She left the ops center and closed the door, pausing outside to grin, and grunt contentedly. "If you don't like the rumors about you, my father always said, start some you do like."

She walked down the hall towards the stairwell. "Bet you never thought you'd ever use any of **his** advice willingly, huh, Ker?" With a slight shake of her head, she pushed the door into the stairwell open and started up the four flights to their offices.

* * *

Dar entered Duks' outer office, crossing the soft carpet and opening his inner door to an office the pretty much mirrored hers. "Evening."

Duks was behind his desk, leaning back with folded arms. He watched Dar as she took a seat opposite him. "How is your fish bite?"

"Eh."

"I see that you are favoring it."

"Hurts like hell." Dar allowed. "I went and got an antibiotic shot, but I've been running around on it all night."

"And I have made it worse." Duks said.

Dar shrugged.

"We have narrowed this down to four possibilities, Dar." Duks dispensed with the chit chat. "Tomorrow, I will call all of those four in to this office, and we will find out which it is."

Dar cocked her head to one side. "You mean, none of the four were here when it happened?"

"No. The job was set to run at this time." The Finance VP said. "I am thinking someone imagined no one would be here to see it and remark on it." He laced his big fingers together and studied them. "It is hard to believe from any of these people. They have worked for me for many years."

Dar knew what he meant. You liked to trust the people who worked for you, but she'd found out the hard way over the years that loyalty really didn't generally exist. "That's rough." She said. "You sure it's one of them?"

He shrugged. "They are the only ones who know this login. It is the one we use to enable the reports to select from all four databases."

Hm. "Logins and passwords can be obtained." Dar reminded him.

"Dar, what can I say to that? Perhaps it was me, then!" He stood up and paced behind his desk. "Is it not bad enough I have to find my most trusted staff is possibly a thief!"

"Hey." Dar held up a hand. "I'm just bringing it up, because it's true." She said. "How many times have we been in Mari's office over one person giving someone else their password?"

Duks dropped into his seat with a disgusted sigh. Then he looked at Dar squarely. "And what of you? Have you done so, my friend?"

Dar didn't even hesitate. "Kerry has all my logins, and I have hers." She replied easily. "Take it easy, Louis. Wait until you talk to these guys, and go with your gut."

"Thank you, Dr. Ruth." Duks gave her a droll look. "It is just infuriating."

Yes, it was. Dar silently agreed. "Least we stopped it." She fell back on Kerry's conclusion. "I'm not reall…" She paused, as a far off yell penetrated the walls of the office. "Shit." Dar bolted from her seat and headed for the door at a dead run, no trace of a limp remaining.

Caught in shock for a brief moment, Duks closed his jaw on an exclamation and got up to run after her.

* * *

Dar tore through the empty hallways, circling the fourteenth floor around the central elevator stack. She could hear scuffling ahead of her and she sped up, hurtling around the last corner into the corridor that held her office.

Ahead of her, in the semi darkness, she could see two figures wrestling, only one of which was familiar. "Kerry!" She let out a yell.

"Son of a bitch!" Kerry barked back. "Get this piece…ow!"

Dar reached the fight and didn't even slow down. She plowed right into both struggling figures, gently shoving Kerry back out of the way towards one wall as she took the person she was fighting with up against the other one.

"Let go of me!" The stranger yelped. "Hey!"

"Go to hell!" Dar said. "You're lucky I don't open the window and toss your ass out."

"Oh yeah, I'm scared."

The two had been evenly matched in size, but Dar used her size advantage to pin Kerry's adversary against the paneling, resisting the urge to shake the woman like a terrier with a rat. "Hold still or I'll break your damn arm." She growled. "Ker, you okay?"

"Yeah." Kerry closed in behind her and put a hand on Dar's back. "I found this little creep in your office."

"My office?" Dar pressed harder. "Get the lights on."

"Dar, they're controlled by computer." Kerry reminded her.

"You're an IT professional." Dar gritted her teeth. "So go hack them."

"Yeesh. Okay." Kerry ducked into Dar's office, disappearing from view.

Her captive began to struggle, attempting to throw Dar off her. "Let me go, or you'll be sorry!"

Dar wasn't sure what was more painful, the cliché or the ache in her foot. The woman got an arm free and swatted at her. Dar blocked the blow with her forearm, then she grabbed hold of the other woman's shirt and swung around, slamming her adversary against the opposite wall.

"Bitch! You're so going to regret this!" The woman growled, grappling with Dar and trying to kick her.

"Not as much as you're going to regret this, or I'm going to enjoy it." Dar wrenched her arm free and took a step back, setting her self before she let loose with a right cross. It smacked into the woman's jaw, bouncing her head against the wall and knocking her out.

Dar simply released her and allowed her to slid down the wall to the ground. She shook her hand and flexed the fingers, silence once again settling over the darkened hall. "Ker?" She called out, wanting very badly to have the lights come on so she could see if she knew the woman.

"Hang on." Kerry's voice drifted in from her office. "I hacked into the wrong subroutine. Give me a minute."

"Hm." Dar glanced around. "What'd you hit, the music system?"

"Plumbing."

Dar winced. "Oh boy." She leaned against the opposite wall as Duks appeared from the darkness to stand next to her. "It's gonna be a long night."

* * *

"Ah." Kerry rattled a few more keystrokes in, and was rewarded by a flood of light that made her wince. She straightened up from Maria's desk and stepped around it, heading for the door to the hallway. Rounding it, she hastened to Dar's side and they stood together looking down at the intruder.

It was a woman, slightly taller than Kerry, with a lithe build and short cropped dark hair, dressed in a non-descript Dickies shirt and trousers, with well worn work shoes.

"Know her?" Dar asked.

"Um.. no." the blond woman replied. "She's not the usual night gal on this floor."

"Considering the night gal is a night guy, no." Dar agreed. "I don't recognize her either."

"Hm." Kerry rubbed her jaw. "That's a cleaning staff uniform."

"Uh huh." Dar agreed. "Please don't tell me she was cleaning my office."

Kerry snorted. "Maybe, if she was cleaning your desk drawers from the inside, with a flashlight." She looked around. "Where did Duks go?"

"Calling the cleaning supervisor." Dar said. "They've got some explaining to do."

They certainly did. Kerry folded her arms over her chest. "What do we do with her? She's going to come around any minute Dar."

"Call security, I guess." Her partner responded. "I don't want to tie her up… but we don't know what she's going to do when she comes around, either." She leaned against the wall with one hand, pondering their options. "You okay?" She asked suddenly, looking at Kerry in some concern.

"More or less." Kerry murmured. "You want to duct tape her?"

Dar grimaced. “I’m probably bucking a lawsuit as it is for clocking the little bastard. I’d rather not have cruel and unusual punishment added to it.”

“Huh?”

“You ever had to remove duct tape from any part of your body?”

“No.” Kerry shook her head, then paused. “Have you?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. How about we lock her in the cleaning closet?” Kerry suggested. “Seems appropriate, and it’s close by.” She pointed to one in a series of identical doorways. “I don’t really want to wrestle any more tonight. I think I pulled something in my back.”

“Huh.” Dar tried the door and found it open. She pushed it inward, and flipped the lights on, finding nothing more exotic than a mop bucket and a stack of cleaning cloths. There was room in the closet for a cleaning cart, but the cart was missing, presumably elsewhere in the building performing it’s intended function. “Good idea. Give me a hand.”

They dragged the woman’s limp body into the closet, laying her down on the tile floor and backing out, pulling the door shut behind them. Dar fished in her pocket and retrieved her keyset, trying the master key on the door and grunting when it turned to a locked position with a satisfying snick. “There.”

“Ugh.” Kerry leaned against the wall, wincing as she stretched out her lower back muscles.

“Is that the less part of the more?” Dar limped over to her. “You scared me half to death.”

Kerry shifted and leaned against Dar instead. “My knight in shining armor.” She said. “Boy, was I glad to hear you calling my name. I grabbed her, and she got away from me.”

“Ah.”

“I ran after her and got the back of her shirt in the hallway, and next thing I knew, I felt like I was in a wrestling exhibition.”

Duks emerged from a side hallway and walked towards them. “Ah.” He looked around. “Did our little friend escape?”

“We put her in the closet.” Kerry pointed. “Is the supervisor coming up?”

“He is, indeed.” Duks reported. “Especially since he informed me that there should be no person on this floor at this time. I have been told they start cleaning on this floor, and work downwards.”

Dar nodded. “Makes sense, since I usually see them before I leave.”

“Yeah.” Kerry agreed.

A hammering from behind the closet door startled all of them. “Let me outta here!” A voice emerged, outraged. “You little bastards! You can’t do this to me!”

“Shut up.” Duks hammered back. “Or we shall leave you and go get ourselves a beer.”

“Count me in.” Kerry added. “I was in the copy room when I heard a noise coming from your office. I went in, and there she was, rooting through everything. Who in the hell is this, Dar?”

Dar exchanged glances with Duks. “Should we call the cops?”

The Finance VP pondered this. “Let us wait to see what the cleaning supervisor has to say. He said he.. ah.” Duks nodded, and looked past them. “Here he is now.”

They all turned as a tall, slim man with salt and pepper hair joined them. “Ma’ams, sir.” The newcomer said. “I do not understand what is going on here. I signed off on this floor two hours ago.”

The hammering started on the inside of the door again. “Bastards!”

The cleaning supervisor started, and took a step back away from the door. “What is this in my closet?”

“Someone in one of your uniforms.” Dar informed him. “A woman.”

“I have no women on staff this evening.” The supervisor protested. “Certainly, I do not keep them on this late. It is not safe. I take care of my girls. They go home no later than eight pm.” He pointed down the hallway, where a cleaning cart was approaching, being pushed by an older man. “See? There is Carlos. He is my man here tonight.”

Carlos spotted all of them outside the cleaning closet and stopped, looking puzzled. “Senor?” He asked hesitantly. “Hay un problemo?”

Duks stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “I think perhaps we need to call the police then.” He admitted. “If this person is not part of your staff, then it is an intruder, and the authorities must be notified.”

“You don’t want to do that!” The woman’s voice inside the closet was muffled. “I’m warning you!”

Kerry put a hand on Dar’s arm. “Maybe we should talk to her.” She suggested. “The way she’s acting is very strange, Dar. I’d expect someone to either be scared poopless, or else be asking for a lawyer.”

Dar considered the thought, and had to concede her partner had a point. The woman's actions had been strange, and maybe there was something to be learned from her. "Okay." She addressed the cleaning supervisor. "I'm going to assume this person just stole one of your uniforms, and maybe someone's ID. I'll find out, and let you know."

The man nodded. "It is good." He motioned Carlos to move the cart in the other direction. "Vamanos."

"Senor?" The older man was sadly at sea. "Como?"

The supervisor took him by the arm and led him off, leaving Duks, Dar and Kerry in the hallway facing the closet door. "Well?" Dar held her key up. "Do we?"

Duks shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Ker?"

Kerry also shrugged, lifting her hands slightly.

"Hey, you in there." Dar banged on the door. "If I open this, so we can talk, you cool it or you're gonna hit the dirt again, got me?"

"Ah." Duks exhaled gently. "That is the Dar I know."

"You better open this door!" The woman replied through the wood. "Don't worry, I'll talk. I'm not into physical abuse like you are."

Dar shook her head and stuck the key in the lock, turning it and shoving the door open. She spread her arms out and flexed her knees a little, wondering if their erstwhile captive was going to come out swinging.

As it happened, she didn't. The woman walked warily out, giving Dar a dour, suspicious look. "Hope you've got a good lawyer."

"You too." Kerry advised her. "Especially since you attacked me while trespassing."

"I didn't attack you." The woman scoffed.

"Yes, you did." Kerry responded evenly. "After I surprised you in the act of burgling Dar's office. So if I were you, unless you want to have this discussion with a police officer, I would start cooperating."

The woman studied her, then flicked her eyes to the rest of them. "This isn't what you think." She remarked, reaching into her back pocket, halting when Dar reacted. "Take it easy." She cautioned, removing her wallet and opening it. "Here. See?"

She held out a card.

Dar took it, and glanced at it. "Military intelligence." She repeated slowly. "Interesting."

“My father always claimed that was an oxymoron.” Kerry murmured.

It wasn’t the reaction the woman had clearly been expecting. “I don’t think you quite understand what’s going on here.” She said. “You’re the subject of an investigation.”

“Let’s go inside.” Dar indicated the outer door to her office. “Louis, maybe we have an answer to your issue as well.”

“Perhaps we do.” Duks agreed. “Perhaps we do.”

The woman looked from one of them to the other. “Do you understand that this is a serious situation?”

“Do you understand that we quite probably issued your paycheck on this very past Friday?” Duks retorted. “Do not threaten us with the government. We know as better. Now, please go inside, or else, as Dar says, we shall call the police.”

“Yeah.” Dar agreed. “Wait, let me ask you one thing.” She addressed the woman. “Are you from the Army?”

The woman looked warily at her. “Yes.”

Dar’s eyes narrowed, and she snorted softly, as she closed the door behind them.

PART 23

DAR TOOK A SEAT BEHIND HER DESK, AND KERRY PERCHED ON THE EDGE OF IT. Duks sat in one visitor chair, and their unwelcome guest elected to remain standing.

"Okay." Dar said. "Explain to me why I have a member of military intelligence breaking and entering in my office."

The woman smirked. "It's really simple." She said. "My boss assigned me to break in here and blow your reputation for security wide open." She spread her arms and turned. "And I did."

"Why?" Kerry said.

"What?"

"Why did your boss ask you to do that?"

"Hey, I don't question my orders. " The woman held a hand up. "I just do what I'm told. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a report to file, and believe me I'm going to enjoy it." She looked at Dar. "You made all kinds of claims, lady, and you run all kinds of things for the US Government. It really pisses me off that you're so full of shit."

"Now, wait a minute.. "Kerry started to stand up.

"Oh, don't bother." The woman waved her off. "Please, let's not even get into this little conflict of interest perversion the two of you have going here."

Dar's eyes narrowed slightly. "I'd watch it if I were you."

The woman snorted. “If you cooperate, and you’re very lucky, my boss might consider just getting all the government’s contracts cut quietly, and not blast it all over the papers. “ She looked at Dar. “*I* wouldn’t because I think you stink. But he might, because he thinks you could be useful to us.”

“Does he?” Kerry said. She turned to her partner. “Dar…” Her voice trailed off as the pale blue eyes pinned hers, and she read Dar’s expression. She quietly turned back around and folded her arms, watching the intruder in silence.

“I think he’s nuts.” The woman stated frankly. “But he’s the boss.” She held up a cell phone. “And now I can call him and tell him what I found.” She started dialing, the smirk plastered seemingly permanently on her face. “And believe me, you’re gonna pay for hitting me.”

Dar had her fingertips steepled, and she regarded the woman with a surprisingly benign expression. “Kerry?”

“Hm.” Kerry glanced at her.

“Call the police.” Dar said. “Tell them we’ve caught someone breaking and entering in the office. Tell security what’s going on, and have them send a couple of officers up here.”

The woman stopped dialing and stared at Dar. “What?”

Kerry picked up the phone and dialed.

“You didn’t quite catch what I said, did you?” The woman asked Dar. “My boss wants to keep this quiet.”

“I don’t.” Dar replied. “If you legitimately blew our security, then I want it out in the open.”

Duks stared at her, his eyebrows lifting. “Ah, Dar…”

“We’re a public company, Duks.”

“Of course, I do know that.” The VP of Finance said.

“She’s here. She had a password into the system or else someone left the machine logged in. It’s legit. I’m not hiding it.” Dar stated flatly.

Duks subsided, with a thoughtful look.

“Thanks.” Kerry finished speaking into the phone. She depressed the hook, then dialed again. “John?” Kerry Stuart. I need a few of your guys up in Dar’s office right away, please.”

"Matter of fact…" Dar went on. "When you're done with that, Ker, put a call in to corporate communications. We'll need a press release."

The intruder slowly let her hand drop, with the cell phone in it. "You're not serious."

"Sure." Dar half shrugged. "Don't worry. I'm sure your boss will be glad to explain to the press why you're here, and we'll be glad to explain how we found you, and how you were stopped from committing theft of proprietary technology that had nothing to do with security on any government account."

The woman's expression switched to wary. "I don' t know what you're talking about."

"Don't you ?" Dar inquired. "Well, then you've got no problem when the police take your fingerprints and match them against what's on the keyboard of the machine I confiscated from our Xerox room." She got up and circled her desk, advancing on the woman. "You want to play in the big leagues? Fine. Tell your boss Captain Mousser he can come down to Dade County jail and bail your ass out."

There was a soft knock on the door. Kerry crossed over and opened it, standing aside to admit two of their night security guards. Unlike the day guards, the night men tended to be a little more serious, and these two, she knew, were off duty police officers. "Gentlemen – I found this person inside this office. The cleaning supervisor confirms she does not work for them. We've called Metro-Dade."

"All right, ma'am." The guards took up positions on either side of the intruder.

"Better call your boss now." Dar advised the woman. "I'm not sure what you'll be able to do once the police get here."

"How did you know his name?" The woman asked. "I didn't tell you that."

Kerry had been wondering the same thing herself.

Dar merely smiled. "Guess we all have our little secrets, don't we, Lieutenant?" She commented. "It's going to be interesting watching him.. and you.. explain why you were investigating government account security in a building that doesn't house any of it, of course."

The woman looked around the room. "This is.."

"The government systems are handled through our Houston office." Kerry told her quietly. "The Miami ops center handles commercial accounts. Surely you knew that, right?"

Dar folded her arms as she watched their unwelcome intruder. The woman half turned and dialed an number, keeping her face averted and covering the mouthpiece of her phone with one hand. It was still a bad situation, she knew. There had been a breech, and there was no real way for her to whitewash it, save by the few details she'd already thrown forth.

Well, that, and the fact that the woman had not been successful in obtaining anything while she, Dar, had been watching. No telling how long she'd been at it, and no telling what she'd sucked down when Dar hadn't been looking, since she wasn't apt to spend her evenings browsing the network.

Kerry sidled over to her side of the desk and eyed her, the blond woman's back turned to the room and her expression open and very emotive.

Dar scrunched up her own face into a wry half grin in response, and both her shoulders moved slightly upward.

"We are so screwed." Kerry mouthed silently.

Dar nodded, keeping the same expression.

Surprisingly, Kerry now shrugged in return. "Oh well." She mimed.

Equally surprisingly, Dar understood the sentiment, and agreed with it. In the corner of her mind, a tiny bit of her ego was soothed by the knowledge that the breech, when it had come, hadn't come through her network. It had come, as security cracks often did, through the human end of the equation.

"Check the logs." She uttered softly. "Find out who logged into that workstation today."

Kerry nodded and slipped off the desk, crouching behind it and pulling Dar's keyboard over to her. After a moment, she knelt instead and rattled the keys, focusing her attention on the screen instead of the rest of the room.

The woman turned around and approached Dar, pausing when the security guards intercepted her with quiet, yet distinct intent. She held the cell phone out. "My boss wants to speak to you."

Dar let her wait while she considered the request. Then she got up and came around the desk, taking the phone and perching on the corner of the wooden surface to talk into it. "Yes, Captain?'

Kerry looked up from the monitor. "Dar?" She interrupted gently. "Marketing admin, four pm, logoff twenty one hundred plus."

Dar's nostrils flared.

"That is an odd location for that resource." Duks commented. "Perhaps I should call Eleanor."

Dar blocked them out for a moment to listen to the phone. "What was that?"

"I said, Ms. Roberts, my intention was not to blow you out of the water." Captain Mousser stated.

“Not what your puppy dog said.” Dar replied. “Get your story straight.”

The man sighed audibly into the phone. “She’s just a kid, and she doesn’t understand complex politics. It was easier to just tell her that, Anyway, listen..”

“I’m not going to listen, Captain.” Dar said, in an annoyed tone. “You decided to send some half assed kid in here to do god knows what, and she got caught. My bad for not running my own building services crew. Your bad for not doing your homework. So now we’ll just let the press decide which one of us is the bigger asshole.”

“Roberts, will you chill out?” The Captain hissed. “You’re making this into a big deal, and it doesn’t have to be!”

“You don’t think trying to steal proprietary code is a big deal? I do!” Dar snapped back. “I don’t give a rats ass what your intent was, Captain! Figure out how you’re going to defend that!”

There was a moment’s silence. “Hey, that was just opportunistic.” The Captain finally said. “She had a chance to go grab it so.. you can’t blame me! We’ve been trying to find a back door into that place for a week, and…”

“Mister, you are so screwed.” Dar was merciless, though inwardly relieved she’d solved at least one mystery. “I’d get my ass down to Dade County jail if I were you, and bring cash. They don’t take credit cards or government PO’s.” She got up and limped back around the desk, pausing to look out the windows at the moonlit sea.

Pressing a hand against the glass, she suddenly wished more than anything she was out there. A sigh fogged the window, and she looked up to catch the reflection of Kerry’s sea green eyes gazing out at as well. Their glances met, and held.

“Roberts! Roberts! Jesus! You want this on page one?? Really?” The Captain’s voice rose. “C’mon! Get real!”

Dar turned and sat down. “I’d rather that, then have you holding some bullshit piece of nothing over my head. Get it out in the open, and we’ll deal with it.” Her mind was already busy with figuring out how to explain the whole damn thing.

To the press. To Alastair. God. To the board.

What a mess. She closed her eyes and welcomed the casual touch of Kerry’s hand on her shoulder. The blond woman didn’t say a word, but the silent support was obvious. “So if you’re done wasting my time, I’ve got a press release to arrange.” She spoke into the phone.

“Roberts.” Mousser sighed. “Look, you have something to offer. Your skills are something I really, really want to add to the team I have supporting the country. Don’t you care about your country? Don’t you want to help it out?”

“I do my part providing civilian jobs, thanks.” Dar said. “Are we done?”

“C’mon, Roberts.. you’re not a communist.” The Captain coaxed. “Uncle Sam’s Army wants you.”

“I’m gay.” Dar stated the obvious.

“We can work around that.”

Kerry’s eyes nearly came out of her head as she listened.

Dar glared at the phone. “I’m a Navy brat.” She added. “And my dad’s a retired SEAL.”

Silence. “Okay, that’s a problem.” The Captain admitted. “But listen, can we chalk this one up to patriotism? Let my girl out of there, and we keep this between us.”

Dar’s phone rang. Kerry answered it. “Okay, thanks.” She looked at Dar. “Police are downstairs.”

Dar hesitated, considering their options. Duks chose that moment to come around the desk and lean close to her. He put a hand over the cell and caught her eye.

“This is not the explanation for our other problem, my friend. If you can avoid the publicity, do so.” He murmured under his breath. “We have much bigger issues to deal with right now.”

Dar hated swallowing her pride, but she hated making stupid mistakes even more. She gave Duks a brief nod, then lifted the phone back up. “All right.” She snarled. “But you’re gonna have to come up with some damn good assurances that your light bulb here isn’t going to open her mouth to half the earth, since she’s so proud of what she did.”

The Captain chuckled. “Leave that to me.” He sounded much more sure of himself now. “Now… can we talk about that little program of yours?”

Dar looked up at the ceiling. “No.” She said. “Right now, I have to get the cops out of my lobby.”

“Then give my soldier her phone back. I’ll be in touch with you tomorrow.” The captain answered smugly. “Don’t worry, Roberts. This is going to end up being good for both of us.”

Dar shook her head and threw the phone back to it’s owner. Now she had the police to deal with. What the hell was she going to tell them?”

“Let me go downstairs.” Kerry patted her on the back. “I’ll handle the cops, Dar. Don’t worry about it.” She circled the desk and headed for the door before Dar could stop her, not that she had any intention of trying.

"Okay." Dar turned to the two security guards. "Escort this person out of the building. Take her picture before you do, and I want to know how and where she got the cleaning department identification card."

"Ma'am." The nearer guard took hold of the intruder's arm. "Should we file an internal report on this?"

"Bet your ass you should." Dar replied instantly. "Get her out of here."

The lieutenant's smirk had returned, but it wasn't as brazen as it had been to begin with. She had closed her phone and put it away, and wasn't resisting the grip of the guard. She gave Dar a not well muffled look of triumph as she was led off, but remained silent.

That left Duks and Dar alone in the office. Dar rested her chin on her fist and regarded her friend, who gazed back with an equally serious expression. "We're in trouble." Dar said.

"Yes." Duks agreed. "And the big problem is, if it turns out my people were compromised then that is something that will be very difficult to hide. If it comes out, then this will as well."

"I know." Dar felt very tired. "Let's schedule an executive meeting first thing in the morning. We all need to talk."

"Yes. We do." The big VP agreed. "This is a time for teamwork."

The ultimate in non-team players let out a long, aggrieved sigh. "It's time for something." She muttered. "Right now, I'm thinking maybe a beer."

"Perhaps two." Duks agreed solemnly. "After you, madame."

Dar logged Kerry out of her pc, and shut it off. She flipped the lights down as they left, shaking her head all the way to the elevator.

* * *

It was after midnight as they trudged back up the steps to the condo, Dar leaning against the wall as Kerry keyed in the lock and opened the door. Chino corkscrewed up to greet them, and Kerry distracted the dog long enough for Dar to slip inside and closed the door behind her.

"Ugh." Dar limped across the living room and headed for the bedroom, holding a boot in one hand. "Ker, can you check in the mailbox to see if they dropped off those drugs?'

"Sure." Kerry gave Chino a kiss on the head, and then she ducked back outside to look for the bag. It was hanging neatly on the hook under their mailbox, so she grabbed it and scooted back inside. "It's here, hon."

"Yippee." Dar's voice floated in from the bedroom. "Y'know, I used to look back on all those long nights and stressful deadlines with some kind of half-assed affection." She limped back in, now dressed in just a t-shirt and her underwear. "What drug was I on?"

Kerry handed her the bag. "Why don't you sit down, and I'll grab us some hot chocolate after I change." She suggested. "I need to decompress for a while. My head's spinning."

"Go change." Dar bumped her towards the bedroom. "I'll crank up the drinks." She continued on into the kitchen and set the bag down on the counter, leaving it there while she retrieved a glass from the cupboard and squirted herself some milk.

Her foot was killing her. The long evening encased in her boot had rubbed the injury raw, and her sock had been covered in blood when she'd taken the shoe off. She perched on a stool and added a handful of Advil to the antibiotics, swallowing them all with the help of a mouthful of her milk.

Chino trotted in and sniffed at her foot, giving it a sympathetic lick. Dar regarded the dog with a wry grin, and then she got off the stool and retrieved the microwavable pitcher they used for their late night hot toddies.

She filled it with milk, and added the appropriate squirts of chocolate syrup, swirling the liquid around once or twice before she slapped the lid on and gave it a vigorous shake. She pulled open the lid and considered the contents, and, satisfied with the consistency, she put it in the microwave and started it heating.

Seating herself back on the stool, she swung her legs back and forth a few times, idly tracing a long, thin white scar crossing her right kneecap. Free of her shoe, her injured foot was beginning to stop throbbing, and she wiggled the toes of it experimentally.

Ick. They felt swollen. She brought the foot up to rest on her knee and examined it, scowling at the red, puffy skin and the achingly tender area that covered the top of her foot and part of the bottom of it. It hurt. Her head hurt. Her shoulders hurt from the tension of the night, and she wished…

What did she wish?

Dar found herself too tired to focus on the big picture, and resorted to a short term goal instead. She wished she was tucked in bed with Kerry, a cup of hot chocolate, and successfully kicked in Advil. There, that was doable, wasn't it?

Kerry entered the kitchen wearing a knee length t-shirt. "For a day that started out really cool, it sure ended disgusting, didn't it?"

"Uh huh." Dar agreed mournfully. "I want to go back to yesterday."

Kerry came over and leaned against her, rubbing Dar's back with the tips of her fingers. "Did you take your drugs?"

"Uh huh."

"Tired?"

"Ugh." Dar closed her eyes and let her head rest against Kerry's. "I can just see waking up tomorrow's gonna suck."

"Uh huh." Kerry glanced up as the microwave beeped. "I smell hot chocolate." She eased past Dar and removed two mugs from the cabinet, setting them down on the counter and leaning up to retrieve the pot. "Let's worry about tomorrow, tomorrow."

Oo, mental synergy. Dar snaked an arm around Kerry and held her gently, nuzzling her arm as she attempted to pour the hot chocolate out. "Thanks for taking care of the police, by the way."

"No problem." Kerry managed to get the beverage into the cups despite the distraction. "They were very understanding, once I explained about how big a company we are, and how many new hires we have, and how it was natural for someone to get lost on the wrong floor and wander into the wrong office and be discovered accidentally by me."

Dar sipped her chocolate. "You're kidding, right?"

"No." Kerry took her elbow. "C'mon, let's go curl up on the couch. I had all the time in the world, like the thirty seconds it takes the elevator to go from fourteen to one, to come up with that story. I thought I did pretty good."

"Hell of a lot better than I'd have done." Dar agreed, willingly allowing herself to be towed couchward. She settled next to Kerry on the soft leather, and eased her foot up onto the table.

Kerry used the remote to start a quiet CD, and turn a seascape on the television screen. The lights were low in the room, and she exhaled as she allowed the peace of the moment to descend on her. The chocolate was sweet on her tongue and she could feel the warmth traveling down into her stomach, easing the slight unsettlement from a shared dozen ill-advised spicy chicken wings.

"Ker?"

"Mm?"

"Love you."

Thoughts of chicken wings flew out the window. "I never get tired of hearing that." Kerry admitted. "Love you too."

Dar draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders. "You know something?"

"Nope." Kerry leaned back and put her feet up next to Dar's. "My brain's a cheap plastic colander at the moment."

“Ah.” Dar turned her head and nipped Kerry’s earlobe. “I knew this yellow stuff reminded me of something.” She puffed a bit of Kerry’s hair up with a short breath.

“Spaghetti?” Kerry suggested.

“Corn silk.”

“Hm. I don’t like corn silk.”

Dar pulled back a little. “You don’t?”

Kerry shook her head. “No. It makes me itch.” She explained. “Every time I get us fresh corn I have to have someone in the store husk it for me. Otherwise I end up scratching my arms raw after I finish digging the suckers out of those honky wooden bins.”

“Hm.” Dar took a sip of her chocolate. “Learn something new every day.”

“Too bad, too, because I love corn, and I love the smell of it when it’s fresh.” Kerry went on, a touch mournfully. “Especially the white corn.”

Dar considered. “You could wear gloves.”

“Oh, Dar. Can you imagine me shopping in Publix in white gloves up to my armpits?”

“I saw someone shopping last year in a mink.”

“Real?”

“Dead.” Dar clarified, then paused. “Oh, I see what you mean.. yeah, I think it was real.”

“Ugh. That’s so un-PC.” Kerry shook her head. She reflected a moment more. “We’re babbling like idiots, aren’t we?”

“Not really.” Dar exhaled, half closing her eyes. “Everything you’ve said so far makes sense.” She put her cup down and put her arm to better use around Kerry. “And you were right. That story you told the cops was a good one.”

“Mm.” Kerry got rid of her cup and half turned, snuggling into Dar’s embrace. “To hell with the cops. You tell me a story.”

Both of Dar’s eyebrows lifted, and her blue eyes widened. “What?”

“Tell me a story.” Kerry repeated. “C’mon, I know you know some.”

Dar searched through her memories, hoping her partner wasn’t expecting a once upon a time kind of tale since she’d been reading things other than Jack and Jill since she’d been a pre-schooler, and Andrew had never subscribed to Mother Goose.

Did she know any stories, suitable for Kerry’s adorable ears? “Wanna hear about my tenth birthday?”

‘Sure.” Kerry pressed her ear against Dar’s chest, listening to her heartbeat. It had that odd little echo beat, from the anomaly she had in her chest, a rhythm Kerry had become quite fond of.

“Okay.” Dar said. “When I was ten years old, we moved away from Florida to Virginia because that’s where my dad was stationed for a while.”

“Mm. I can’t picture you in Virginia.”

“Neither could I” Dar agreed. “I missed my friends on the base something awful, and I hated the new school I was in. They made us wear uniforms.”

Kerry cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I know. Military brat, doesn’t like uniforms.” Dar acknowledged. “It was a skirt, Ker. What can I tell you?”

Kerry’s nose wrinkled. “Pleated?”

“Yes.”

“Uuuugh.”

“Anyway, since I didn’t know squat about skirts, I put the damn thing on backwards.” Dar said. “And wore it to school that way.” A faint, self deprecating smile appeared. “No one noticed until lunchtime, but then some pissass rich girls cornered me in the cafeteria and started teasing me.”

“Kids are so cruel, sometimes.” Kerry agreed softly. “Most of them steered clear of us, but there was always talk, and they were always careful to make sure I heard it.”

“Mm.. well, they were all mostly older girls, and I guess they figured I was safe to make fun of.” Dar mused. “I’d promised my dad I wouldn’t make trouble in school, that I’d give it a while until I got used to everything.”

“Ah.”

“First time I ever broke a promise to him.”

“Mm.” Kerry nodded gently against Dar’s body.

“I took hold of the biggest of them…”

“Bigger than you?” Kerry interrupted.

“Yeah.’ Dar agreed. “I didn’t hit my growth spurt until I was.. I think twelve or thirteen. Anyway, I grabbed the biggest one and just tossed her over onto the ground and ripped her skirt off.”

“Oh gosh.” Kerry covered her eyes.

“Then I asked her which one of us was more ridiculous looking.” Dar half smiled in memory. “She was crying, the other kids were laughing.. then the principal showed up.” She chuckled. “He told me I was going to get a spanking. I told him…”

Kerry giggled.

“My dad was going to kick his ass.” Dar finished. “So we all ended up in the principal’s office, and they called in the girl’s parents, and my parents, and it was quite the circus in there since it turns out the girl’s mother was an old acquaintance of my mother’s, but not a fondly remembered one.”

“Oh, my god. Did you end up in jail?”

“No.” Dar shook her head. “We ended up in Dairy Queen.” She said “We’d both been suspended for two days, and I was just so pissed off. I told them I’d rather go to reform school than stay there with those stuck up pieces of…”

“Would you really have?” Kerry asked. “Rather been in reform school? Dar, you’re not a criminal.”

“I would have fit in better there.” Dar replied honestly. “And my father said just to give him a little time, and he’d fix it so we could go back home.”

“Did he?”

Dar nodded. “I found out later he gave up a big promotion and a job he really wanted for it.” She said. “But when I asked him about that, he just said his family and us being happy was more important to him than what he did.”

Kerry pondered that for a minute. “There’s a moral to this story isn’t there?”

Dar hugged her. “Maybe.” She exhaled. “Or maybe I’m just being nostalgic. That jackass who broke into the office tonight reminded me of that girl.”

Kerry shifted and raised her head, kissing her partner on the lips. “Your father’s a smartie.” She rubbed noses with Dar. “And I like stories with a moral.” She gave Dar a hug back, burying her face into the side of her partner’s neck, and biting her gently.

“Oo.”

“Mm.”

“What was that about morals?”

Kerry just chuckled.

* * *

Dar spent a good while after she woke before dawn just relaxing in the darkness, her eyes mostly closed as she listened to the soft cycling on the air conditioner. It was comfortable in the bedroom, the conditioner putting enough chill into the air to make the warm waterbed surface under them feel good and there was a sense of peace in the townhouse that was very appealing.

It certainly was appealing to Dar, who was perfectly content to lie there and enjoy it as she pondered the coming day.

"Meatballs." Kerry muttered, under her breath. "Banana compote."

Dar's eyebrow twitched and she turned her head slightly to get a better view of her still sleeping yet surprisingly chatty partner. "Ker?" She whispered.

"Pencils don't do it." Kerry insisted.

Instantly, Dar's mind was alive with possibilities and she tried to figure out what Kerry was dreaming of. Pencils? Meatballs? What was banana compote, anyway? "Keeeerrry…" She warbled softly. "I looooooovvveee you."

Very slowly, a green orb appeared, focusing on her and visible in the low light from the clock. "I thought I heard a gopher."

"Hi."

Kerry rolled over onto her left side and snuggled back up to her partner. "Honey, you can wake me up saying you love me any day of the week." She uttered. "But did you have to do it before sunrise?"

"What were you dreaming about?"

"I wasn't." Kerry shook her head, then paused. "Why? Was I babbling again."

Dar chuckled.

"Y'know, Dar… I never used to talk in my sleep before I met you." Kerry complained. "I'm sure my brother and sister would have mentioned it."

"How do you know?" Dar asked, reasonably. "You guys didn't sleep in the same bed, didja?"

Kerry's face scrunched up. "Eeeewww…. Dar! No!" She poked the taller woman in the ribs. "But Angie and I went to camp together." She explained. "I never would have lived it down if I talked in my sleep. What was I saying?"

"Gettysburg Address."

Kerry chewed on her lip. “Can’t believe I actually remember that. Must be subliminal.” She shook her head and closed her eyes.

Dar put her arm around Kerry and exhaled. “You were actually talking about meatballs and bananas.”

Kerry opened one eye again. “Together?” She asked, a touch hesitantly. “Hmm. Maybe I was dreaming I was pregnant.”

Dar considered the question. “Something you aspire to?” She queried cautiously, her mind flashing back to a certain dream she’d had near the beginning of their relationship.

“Not unless you’re volunteering to make me that way.”

Dar’s eyes widened slightly. “I think we need to go back to sleep.”

“Good idea.” Kerry gave her a pat on the belly.

Dar pulled the covers up and tucked them around Kerry’s shoulders. They had at least an hour before it was time to get up, and she intended on using every minute of the time productively. Peace settled back down over the room after a moment.

It didn’t last that long. “Ker?”

“Mm?”

“You know I can’t really make you pregnant, right”

“Sure you could.” Kerry gave her another comforting pat. “You can do anything you put your mind to. I have total confidence in you.”

Silence fell for another brief moment. Then Dar cleared her throat gently. “That old Christian school of yours was a little light on science, huh?”

Kerry chuckled throatily, her shoulder shaking. “You know, I do remember what I was dreaming about.” She admitted. “I was organizing a pot luck for our office.”

“Ah. That’s where the pencils came in.” Dar mused.

“No one knew what to bring. No one had any idea of what the heck was going on.. it was like a teacher’s workday in Idiotville.” The blond woman complained. “I’m glad you woke me up. I was just getting to the point where I was going to start…”

“Throwing food?” Her partner suggested. “Seems to be a standard practice in our circle.”

“Ahem.”

They both chuckled. Then Kerry sighed. “Well, I’m up now.” She lamented. “You?”

“Yeah.”

“How about we have a biscuit on the porch and watch the sun rise, then go over to the gym?” Kerry said. “I grabbed a new flavor coffee at the market the other day and I’ve been meaning to try it.”

It sounded pretty appealing to Dar, who gave up on her snoozing plans with only a faint regret. She reached over and turned on the bedside lamp, which produced a soft glow calculated not to shock the eyeballs. Kerry had selected the appliance, replacing a somewhat brighter one that had been a holdover from Aunt May’s day. “Go go go.”

Kerry waited for Dar to roll up out of the waterbed before she followed suit, rubbing her bare arms as the chill air hit them. She grabbed the shirt Dar tossed her out of mid air and slipped into it, then briefly wished for a pair of slippers as she followed Dar out of the room.

Chino was already waiting at the back door, tail wagging gently as they entered the kitchen. Dar detoured to let the Labrador out, and she paused on the steps to watch the pre-dawn stars twinkle in the soon to be lightening sky.

The air was warm and full of moisture, and the scent of salt water and grass was thick in it. Dar sucked in a lungful, almost able to taste the richness on the back of her tongue as a breeze brushed over her body. She could remember air like this as part of her world from the time she was old enough to recognize anything, and she spared a brief moment of nostalgia for a time when all it would have meant was another lazy summer day full of thunderstorms and dust, and maybe some coconuts to break open.

With a faint sigh, she turned and leaned on the door jamb, watching Kerry as she measured coffee from a lidded container into their coffee machine. Despite the faded shirt and sleep disheveled hair, or maybe because of it, she found herself smiling at the sight.

“So.” Kerry leaned on the counter and watched the water start to percolate through the grinds. “We’ve got an executive meeting at nine. What’s the angle you’re going to put on that, Dar?”

“Shh.” Dar circled her and kissed her on the back of the neck. “I don’t want to talk about angles until we’re in the car on the way there.”

Kerry turned her head and peered up at her partner. “Just trying to mentally prepare.” She protested mildly. “It’s going to be a free for all, y’know.”

“I know.” Dar rested her chin on Kerry’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll just take it as it comes. Now..” She bumped her lightly. “What was that about sunrise and a cookie?”

“A biscuit.” Kerry bumped her back with a tolerant grin. “I think I have some whole wheat crackers we could try.”

Dar snorted.

“Yeah, okay. Grab the banana nut cakes from the fridge and I’ll get the coffee.” Kerry acknowledged. “And I’ll figure out something safe to talk to you about.”

Dar paused in the middle of removing a package of muffins, and looked at her. “That’s not what I..”

Kerry raised her eyebrows.

“Ker, it’s going to be an entire day of that crap. Any reason to start it early?” Dar asked plaintively.

“Yes.” Kerry looked back at her seriously. “I want to be ready for it, and I want a comfort level with how you feel about all this stuff before we go in there. It would make me feel a lot better.”

Dar blinked. “Oh.”

“You asked.” The blond woman shrugged slightly, a faint twitch starting at the corners of her mouth. “But I like being able to answer you honestly, and not have either of us freak out, you know that?”

On the verge of slightly freaking out, Dar relaxed, instead. “Yeah.” She agreed. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.” She put the muffins down and removed a package of whipped cream cheese, setting it down as well. “Story of my life lately.”

“That’s the second time you said that recently.” Kerry poured the now finished coffee into a carafe and snagged two cups. “C’mon.” She led the way to the sliding glass doors to their porch and paused, as Dar reached past her to unlock them and push them open.

They walked outside and settled down at the table, the sound of the surf now more audible as a fairly strong breeze fluttered their shirts against their bodies. “Oo.” Kerry set her burden down and walked to the balcony, enjoying the fresh air.

Dar took a seat at the table and poured out two cups of the coffee, fixing Kerry’s and setting it next to the other chair. She removed a muffin from the container and cut it in half, studiously covering both the flat surfaces with cream cheese.

Kerry came over and sat down, taking her cup and sipping at it. “Thank you.”

Pale blue eyes flicked up and regarded her. “You’re welcome.” She handed Kerry half the muffin and took the other half for herself. “You know something?”

Kerry nibbled at her muffin. “You have no clue what you’re going to do in that meeting.” She stated, eyes twinkling very gently. “I figured that out while we were walking out here.. because if you did know what you were going to do, you’d have said it already instead of pushing me off since yesterday.”

Dar took a bite of her muffin, more than a little disconcerted. “Um..”

“Am I wrong? It’s okay if I am. I was just..” Kerry half shrugged. “You know.” She slid one foot under the table and rubbed Dar’s with it. “I don’t want to rattle you, hon. I just feel rattled myself, and I hate that.”

Dar, of course, hated it also. She wasn’t really feeling rattled as much as she was feeling like she was not in control of whatever was going on, which she hated even more. Things were happening that surprised her, and knocked her off guard, and it was difficult to keep having to adjust her inner plans to account for totally bizarre…

Off balance. It struck a chord somewhere, and suddenly Dar remembered exactly why she hated feeling that way, and exactly when she’d been taunted about her reaction to it. “Huh.”

“Dar?”

Everything had conspired lately against her… but was it just the vagaries of fate, or did she detect a subtle, long fingernailed hand behind it?

“Hello, Dar??” Kerry reached over and curled her fingers around Dar’s wrist. “Earth calling?”

Dar cocked her head to one side. “I was just remembering something.” She murmured. “Anyway, yeah, I think you’re right, Ker. I mean.. I know basically what we’re gonna do.” She leaned her elbows on the table and nibbled her way around the edge of her muffin. “We’re gonna cancel that meeting.”

“Uh?” Kerry got caught in mid-sip. “What?”

“You and I are just going to concentrate on the ship.” Dar said firmly. “We’ve got a project to complete, and the rest of the stuff going on can wait. Duks can handle his security breach, and our security department can handle the cleaning staff.”

Kerry rested her chin on her fist. “Um… okay.”

“It’s a distraction.” Dar looked her right in the eye. “Someone’s trying very hard to keep you, and I, off balance, and not concentrating on this project.” She bit her muffin in half, and watched crumbs litter the table. “We’re not going to let them do that any more.”

Mental whiplash was no kinder than the physical kind, Kerry discovered. She studied her partner for a minute, then merely shook her head. “Whatever you say, boss.” She replied. “So, you want me to send a note to..”

“The battling burritos, yes.” Dar sounded much more decisive now. “Tell them we’ll be at the ship all day, and nothing short of a hurricane better interrupt us.” She sliced the other muffin in half and adorned it, then nudged Kerry’s hand. “C’mon.. we’ve got crunches to do, treadmills to pound… start chewing.”

Obediently, Kerry did, glad at least that some sort of direction seemed to be coming back into her partner's attitude. Whether that direction was going to take them both right off the road into the water, she didn't know, but heck.

Life was short. Enjoy the cream cheese while you could.

* * *

Kerry crossed the baked, white concrete between the terminal and the ship, glad she'd put her sunglasses on as the sun reflected off the pale surface unmercifully. She was dressed in a pair of well broken in jeans, work boots, and a plain red pocketed t-shirt and she blended in with the thick crowd of workers clustering around the ship entry in a state of controlled panic.

She had left Dar in the terminal, her partner intent on taking control of their office and everything that was processing through it. Unable to put her own boots on because of the swelling of her injured foot, Dar had reluctantly agreed to let Kerry take charge onboard, and work with the install team.

Kerry knew, of course, that beach sandals or no, Dar would eventually break the rules and ramble after her, but for now she proceeded on the assumption that everything would be up to her to coordinate. They had a lot to do, and she felt relatively focused and ready for it. "Morning, guys."

Two of her IT techs turned, hearing her voice. "Morning, ma'am!" The both chorused. "Wow, what a mess, huh?"

"You got it." Kerry paused, seeing what appeared to be a logjam at the top of the gangway. "What's going on in there?"

"Oh.. " The taller of the two, a slim dark haired man named Carlos, grinned. "There's this guy up there who's yelling because we keep getting our stuff before he gets his. The man in charge inside I think likes us."

"The big guy?" Kerry hazarded a guess, holding a hand up over her own head.

"Si." Carlos nodded. "He sent up all the cabling patches to the main floor just now, and this other guy was waiting for some plugs and he had a fit."

"You know who that big guy is, don't you?" Green eyes twinkled.

"No." Carlos shook his head, and his companion did also. They were both fairly new hires, juniors in Mark's expansive department.

"C'mon." Kerry led the way up the gangway, nudging past a few construction workers with quiet apologies. At the top she managed to squeeze past a man in a hard hat with a bristling red beard, ignoring his glare as she hopped onto the deck to see what was going on.

Carlos and his friend followed her, standing cautiously behind her as they got clear of the hatch.

“Ah do not care.” Andy was standing, with his arms crossed over his broad chest, legs spread in front of a stack of boxes. “These here boxes go in whatever the hell order ah want them to.”

Facing him was a lean man in an electrician’s union t-shirt, with a tool belt and a bad attitude. “Listen buddy, I’m gonna kick your ass if you don’t cough up my stuff, unnerstand?”

Andy just looked at him and smiled. “We ain’t got no time here for fun.”

“You think it’s funny?” The man advanced aggressively.

“Ah think you’re an ass.” Andy pointed at the narrow stairwell with one thumb. “So get your silly ass up them stairs fore I toss it overboard. Your damn stuff went up half an hour ago.”

The man glared at him, but headed for the door. “You ain't’ seen the last of me. That’s for sure.”

The logjam broke and men started across the deck again, milling around and heading for various boxes and crates. Kerry scooted through them and headed for Andrew instead, cautiously followed by her techs. “Hey! Morning!”

Andy turned at the familiar voice. “Wall! Morning there, kumquat.” He produced a grin for her. “You’re an early bird.”

Without hesitation, and despite all the commotion, Kerry walked up and gave him a big hug. “Boy, I’m glad you’re here.” She remarked. “Are you causing trouble taking care of us?”

Her father in law chuckled, a low, rumbling sound.

Kerry turned to the wide eyed techs. “Guys, this is Andrew Roberts.” She explained. “Dar’s daddy.” She clarified, after a second. “Dad, this is Carlos and Jason, who work for us.”

“Howdy.” Andrew greeted them amiably.

“Hi.” Carlos responded.

“Hello.” Jason added, from his safe position behind Kerry. “Nice to meet you.”

Kerry couldn’t decide if the two were more intimidated by Andrew’s size, or the fact that he was Dar’s father. She gave them a tolerant grin, and pointed. “Go on upstairs.. I’ll meet you up there.” She waited for them to retreat, then turned back to Andy. “Having fun?”

Andy looked around, then back at her. “Little bit.” He acknowledged. “My kid here?”

“Yep.. in the building.” Kerry pointed over her shoulder. “We’ve got a lot of work to do today.”

“You get all that stuff settled up last night?” Andrew asked curiously. “Sounded like a rat in a teakettle all what was going on.”

How would a rat get into a teakettle? Kerry wondered. “More or less.” She said. “What’s going on in here today? Seems like a lot of people are pissed off.”

“Wall.” Her father in law folded his arms again. “Folks don’t like to naturally take turns, see, and in this here little box, ain’t no way anything gets done unless folks do.” He walked over and kicked a pallet. “Problem was, feller who was in here fore I was just let all this stuff show up any the hell way, and it was a big old mess.”

Kerry looked around, realizing the cargo space was far more organized than it had been the last time she’d seen it. Pallets were lined up against the walls in orderly rows, each with a label on them, and men with pallet jacks were moving them out in a regular sequence. “Ah!”

“Folks don’t like waiting.” Andy shrugged.

“Especially when you put all our stuff first? Kerry elbowed him gently in the side.

Blue eyes blinked innocently at her. “Ain't mah fault all them gizmos of yours come in labeled and regular, when the rest of this here gunk we got to rip open to see what it is.” He protested mildly. “I just get that there easy stuff out mah way first, that’s all.”

“Ahh!” Kerry put a hand over her chest. “My anally retentive labeling system. At last, someone appreciates it!” She smiled broadly. “I’m vindicated!”

Andrew chuckled. “Ah do like it.” He agreed. “Bout good enough for the Navy.”

Kerry took that as the compliment it obviously was, and grinned. “Thanks.” She said. “Okay, I’m going to get working… if you need anything, I’ll be upstairs, and Dar’s over there terrorizing everyone in case you hear yelling coming from the shore side area.”

Andrew patted her on the back and sent her on her way. He waited for her to disappear up the stairs, before he returned his attention to the loading dock, observing the orderly movement with a judicious eye. “Hey, you all.” He called over to two men standing near the far wall. “Watch this here thing. I’ll be right back.”

He walked across the gangway and down to the dock, ambling across the open space with a deceptive stride. Two forklifts dodged him, and he sped up a little as he made his way up the walk to the back of the terminal.

Ducking inside the door, he looked quickly around. It was almost as full of frenetic, yet purposeful motion as the ship hold, only here the bodies rushing around were covered in polo shirts and pressed chinos and the smell was of copper and new plastic rather than sump oil.

It was cool in here, too. Andrew appreciated that. He'd spent enough time in his life in places were air conditioning was unheard of to appreciate it now that he could pretty much have it at will. After a career spent in the military, he'd discovered that directing his own life, and his own comfort was actually a pretty damn nice thing.

Ah. His eyes found what they were looking for. On the far side of the large room there was a large desk like area, raised up a foot or so, giving it a commanding view of the entire space.

Dar had taken it over, and was perched on a stool behind the counter, her laptop on one side of her and a pad of paper in front, her head bent over it as she wrote. Andrew found himself smiling at the sight, gazing at his daughter fondly as the head propped on one fist echoed a much earlier mental image he had of her.

He remembered watching her sit at the counter in their tiny kitchen down south in just such a pose, pouring over a comic book or a new magazine as she waited for them to have dinner. The look of absorption hadn't changed, or the rapid flicking as her eyes scanned across her subject with an intense focus he'd recognized as something he'd seen in himself, on occasion.

It had always made him feel good, that echo. Andy knew he wasn't a stupid man, but he knew as well he wasn't no scientist and he'd taken a lot of pride in his daughters accomplishments specially knowing he'd contributed to a bit of it in his own way.

Mah kid. He smiled, watching Dar shift restlessly as she wrote, recognizing the fidgets as well.

"All right." Dar finished writing, and straightened, ripping the top sheet off the pad of paper and handing it to a waiting tech. "Get these units together, and get em on a flatbed. We'll start at the top of the ship and work down."

"Not from the bottom first, ma'am?" The tech queried. "Wouldn't it be easier?"

Dar leaned on her arms and pinned him with a cool, blue stare. "You think it's gonna be easier to carry those things up eleven flights of metal stairs now, or this afternoon?"

The tech looked at the list, then at Dar. "Oh." He scratches his jaw sheepishly. "Sorry, yeah. You're right.. no elevators in there, huh?"

"No."

"Gotcha..on the way, ma'am." The tech trotted off with his list.

Dar shook her head and went back to her pad, then paused and turned her head, as though sensing her father's eyes on her. "Hey." She put her pencil down as she spotted him.

"Hey there, Dardar." Andrew came over and rested his forearms on the desk. "How are ya?"

Dar drummed her thumbs on the bad faux wood formica. "Wanting this damn circus to be over. How's it going in there?"

"Not bad." Her father said. "Saw Kerry go on up in there. She all right with them guys?" He expressed a little doubt. "Got some roughneck types up in them spaces up a ways."

Dar frowned. "My guys?" She asked incredulously. "Dad, most of them won't even cough hard in her presence."

"Naw.. them contractors." Andrew shook his head. "Lectricans and what all." He glanced around. "Not these here fellers. I figure they ain't most of em dangerous as bugs."

No, probably not. Dar glanced at the back door. "Well." She drummed the table again. "There's always a chance, I guess, but she's got some of the techs with her, and I'm not gonna be the one to tell her she can't be in there."

"Heh." Andrew chuckled shortly. "Well, I'll keep an earbug out." He turned and looked around. "How's your laig?"

"Ick." Dar answered honestly. "Thanks for asking."

Andrew gave her arm a pat. "We'll get this thing done, Dardar. Don't you worry." He turned and headed for the back door, threading his way through the techs who all turned and looked after him.

Dar exhaled. She pulled her PDA out and tapped out a message, then unclipped her cell phone as it rang and checked the caller ID.

Duks.

With a sigh, she answered it.

* * *

"Okay, let's start with the number one room." Kerry threaded her way through the hall, dodging rolls of carpet and stacks of steel supports. The two techs followed obediently after her, carrying the first of their heavy pieces of gear between them.

The hallways flickered with intermittent power, and they were full of workers all trying to get their part of the job done at the same time and mostly in the same space. Tempers were hot, the air was hotter, and Kerry already felt sweat making her t-shirt cling to her torso.

Not a nice feeling. Kerry had never enjoyed sweating, though she didn't mind it in small doses, as when she was in the gym, or if they were outside on the beach. But she liked the opportunity to be limited and have copious amounts of some kind of water at close hand.

At first, she'd thought she was being just too preppy about it, and for a while after they'd moved in together, she hadn't said anything about it one way or another to Dar, until she realized one morning that it was so muggy outside the windows in the town house were completely fogged over.

"Ugh." Kerry pressed her hands against the sliding glass doors, feeling the chill of them against her skin. "I'm sweating already."

Dar walked up behind her and looked over her shoulder at the misty scene. "Ah. Summer."

Well, Kerry told herself, buck up. It's only an hour, and you can't show your northern stripes yet. She straightened up a little and pushed off from the window. "Time's a wasting." She started for the door, only to be brought up short as Dar caught her around the waist with one long arm. "Urf?"

"You want to go running in that?" Dar queried.

Kerry peeked up at her. "Um… there's a choice?"

Dar leaned her arms on Kerry's shoulders and gazed into her eyes. "Sure." She said. "There's no rule that says we have to do anything we don't want to do, Ker."

"I thought you liked running."

"I like fitting into my clothes." Dar replied frankly. "Only idiots like spending the morning in air thick enough to make soup from, running in circles."

"Ah." Kerry felt better. "So you don't like sweating that much?"

"I don't like sweating at all." Her new partner grinned. "Or didn't the 65 degree constant AC in here tip you off to that?" She indicated the windows. "How about we go swimming instead?"

"Swimming?"

Dar nodded. "The big pool's great for laps."

Cool water and Dar in a bathing suit. Hm. "You don't think I'm a wuss?" She demurred. "Or a pathetic snowbird?"

Dar snickered. "We could start the morning off right and skinny dip."

"C'mon." Kerry turned her back on the fogged window, feeling much friendlier to the humidity all of a sudden. "Race you to the pool."

“Ma’am?”

Kerry looked up and wiped the smile off her face, along with a healthy dose of perspiration from her forehead. “Sorry. What?”

“We have to take this up stairs, right?” The man asked. “Like, by walking?”

Kerry gave him a sympathetic look, as they edged past stacks of metal poles. “Unfortunately, yeah.” She said. “I’ll give you guys a hand going up with it.” She offered. “I know it’s heavy.”

The nearer tech released one hand off the switch and waved it at her. “Oh, no..no, that’s okay, ma’am. We’re fine! Honest.”

“Yeah.” The other tech grunted. “We can handle this.”

Kerry gave them both a dubious look, and kept her comments to herself. She led the way to the wide, center stair case and started up it, turning to keep an eye on the two techs with their burden as they trudged upward.

The steps had been stripped of carpet, and were a treacherous combination of cracked wood and treading strips. Kerry could feel her boots sticking to them a little, and she kept her eyes on the ground trying to spot dangerous items like upward facing nails.

She was fairly sure her thick soled shoes would stand up to it, but given the accumulated grime in the stairwell, a puncture could possibly indeed be life threatening.

A new frame had been welded in place for a handrail, but the top was still just open metal studded with bolts. Kerry was very cautious in taking hold of it, and as she climbed upward, the light started dimming so she retrieved her flashlight from her back pocket and turned it on. “Careful.” She warned. “I think they’re welding up here.”

“Great.” One of the techs muttered.

Kerry paused on the landing, as her PDA chirped. “Okay, let’s break for a rest here a second.” She stepped to one side of the landing and flipped the device open, as the techs let the switch rest on the steps. They were sweating, and breathing hard, and Kerry debated as to whether she should call them on their macho.

Hey. Watch out for the tradesmen in there. Dad says they look like a rough bunch.

Kerry regarded the note quietly. What exactly was Dar saying? That she was in danger, or were they in danger of getting knocked on the head and the switch swiped? She tapped out just that question and waited, keeping one eye on the techs.

He couldn’t give a rats ass about the guys or the switch.

Ah. Kerry looked around, but they were alone in the stairwell, and though she could hear workmen above them, so far everyone she'd seen had completely ignored her. *I'll keep my eyes open.* She assured her partner. *You're gonna need to send me more little macho boys, though. Mine are giving out already.*

She closed the device and put it away. "Ready?" She asked the techs. "Sure you don't want me to grab a corner of that?"

The techs hesitated, then moved over to allow her to join them on one side of the switch. Kerry took hold of a curved bit of metal and they lifted together, then started slowly up the stairs.

* * *

"So, what's the story." Dar pressed the cell phone against one ear, as she reviewed a list of newly uncrated equipment. "John, did we get a case of fiber patch?" She called out. "If we did, find it!"

"Will do.." The addressed tech trotted off in search.

"I have just finished interviewing my four senior auditors." Duks said. "Three of them, I have no doubt about. They were as puzzled as to what was going on as I was."

"Uh huh." Dar scanned the list again. "And the fourth?"

"The fourth one has admitted to being the person who started that activity last night." Duks answered calmly. "I have terminated them, and begun legal proceedings."

Dar blinked. "You did.. they did?" She blurted. "Just like that?"

"Just so." Duks agreed. "It was Adriene Blatklo, and she was unrepentant. Apparently there was some money involved in asking for the information." The Finance VP said. "She has retained a lawyer already, and apparently believes we will not pursue the matter."

"Hell with that."

Duks snorted. "You may say that again, my friend. I got off the phone with Hamilton before I called you. At any rate, apparently that hole is closed, and have you heard anything more from our obnoxious friend from last night?"

"No."

"Excellent." Duks said. "I will say this, Adriene rather arrogantly informed me that I should not be surprised if she was the only one to be approached. Apparently our freeze on salaries is rather well known in the outside at the moment."

"Great." Dar sighed. "Well, I can't worry about that right now, Louis. I've got a project to bring in."

“I will let you get to it then.” Duks said. “Have you spoken with Alastair?”

“No.” Dar made a note on the page. “You want to call him? I’m busy.” She glanced at her PDA, which had started to flash.

There was a significant pause, then Duks cleared his throat. “Of course. It is my department, after all.”

“Great. Tell him I say hi.” Dar said. “Talk to you later.” She hung up firmly, and set the cell phone down, then picked up her PDA and flipped it open. She read Kerry’s note and answered it, then reviewed the response. “Uh huh.”

Bodies she had plenty of. “Mark!”

Mark swerved and headed across the room to where she was sitting. “Yes, boss?” He leaned his arms on the counter. “Like your cubby here.”

“Kerry needs help inside.” Dar said. “Get a half dozen guys and send them up to the deck eleven closet.” She directed. “I don’t want to hear she was lugging that damn gear around, got me?”

Mark grinned. “Do I get to tell her that?”

“NO.” Dar glared at him.

“Ma’am.” John trotted up with a box. “Here’s the fiber patches.. should I bring them to Ms. Stuart?”

“Yes.” Dar pointed to the door, then turned her eyes back on Mark. “Have you sent those guys yet?”

“I’m going.” Mark backed off. “Hey you want some coffee or something?”

Dar’s eyes narrowed. “ You insinuating I need some?”

The MIS chief grinned. “I’m outta here, boss. You sound like the good old days.” He turned and headed towards a group of technicians clustered around some boxes, grabbing some by the arm and calling others over.

Dar leaned back on her stool and pondered that, then she returned her attention to the list of items. Kerry had done a very good job of ordering, and it looked like nothing had been left off the list. Most of their gear was in, and things were progressing fairly well.

She tapped a pencil on the counter and tried to figure out what to do next.

* * *

The eleventh deck was mostly dark. As they walked up the last step, Kerry flashed her light around, peering down the hallway towards where their wiring closet was. On one end of the floor, the far end, electricians were working inside a panel, sparks flying as they welded something into place. “Hm. This is going to be fun.”

“It’s creepy in here.” The shorter tech commented.

“Yeah, it is.” Kerry agreed. “Okay, let’s get this thing mounted and plugged in.” She led the way down the hall, her powerful light bobbing up and down with her steps and outlining the closed, silent cabin doors. The scent had changed up here, from old mildew to new carpeting over old mildew, interspersed with fresh paint.

It was an improvement, but at the back of her tongue, Kerry could still taste the age and decay, and she suspected it would stay that way until some decent air conditioning could dry the air out a little. At least this high up, most of the diesel stench had dissipated.

As she walked, Kerry tried to imagine sailing on the ship to some place, her world bounded by the walls and the deep blue sea around them. It was hard; even though she’d spent time out on the Dixie, this was something else entirely.

This would be more like cruising in a slightly seedy, somewhat rundown hotel with a new coat of paint on it. Kerry had decided she would be interested in taking a cruise with Dar, but not on something like this. She’d found a sailboat cruise company in a magazine the other day and had already started planning. “Okay, watch it.” She carefully stepped over a roll of carpet remnants left in the dark hallway.

“Urf.” The tech in front grunted.

“Want to put it down a minute?” Kerry asked.

“No, we’re good.”

Men. Kerry sighed, though she suspected Dar would have given the same answer. She continued down the hall, becoming more and more aware of the darkness around them as they left the semi-lit stairwell behind. There were creaks all around as well, and a soft groaning somewhere as the ship shifted in it’s berth.

They reached the cross corridor that held their wiring closet, and she turned into it, the partially opened door moving inward as she pushed.

“Ayah!”

Kerry nearly hit her head on the roof as she jumped, the yell from inside the dark closet scaring her silly. “Yow!” She yelped, backing into the techs, who dropped the switch on the deck with a solid thump. Since they, and the hundred pound item were behind her, she was trapped near the door and she teetered for balance as she heard a clatter behind it. “Holy..”

The door yanked open and a large figure appeared. Faced with no retreat, Kerry flashed her light at it, her free hand lifting into an automatic defensive posture in front of her. Dar's warning rang in her mind and she felt a moment of panic, before her light illuminated the man's t-shirt and she recognized the name of their own cable vendor. "Oh."

"Jesus, lady!" The man said. "You scared the crap out of me!" He glared at Kerry. "I coulda been on a ladder in there, y'know!"

"Sorry." Kerry collected herself. "We're just trying to get this equipment in." She explained. "They told us the cabling was ready."

The man snorted. "Yeah, sure." He brushed by them. "Next time, watch it!"

Kerry peered after him, watching his back retreat into the darkness. "Hm." She shook her head and tapped her flashlight against her palm. "Remind me to talk to his boss."

The techs wiped sweating palms on their jeans and took hold of the switch again. "Sounded like we woke him up." The taller of them commented. "Not like we were sneaking down the hall, you know?"

"Exactly." Kerry turned and shoved the door open, entering the wiring closet and standing aside to let the men enter after her. If the hallway was stuffy, the closet was stifling, and held a hint of plastic and copper as well as old sweat and the faint scent of beer.

Not entirely pleasant. "Let's see what we've got here." Kerry motioned for them to block the door open with the switch as she studied the interior. Most of the small space was taken up by two tall racks, bolted to the deck and reaching to the ceiling. In one, panels full of network jacks winked in her flashlight beam. The other was empty, waiting for their equipment. "This is such fun to do in the dark." Kerry sighed. "Jesus.. okay, let me get over here." She went around the corner of the rack and tried to get into an angle that would allow her to put the light to good use. "Why don't you.. ow!"

"Ma'am?" Carlos leaned towards her anxiously.

Kerry flexed her hand, which she injudiciously had put into the sharp angle of the rack. A sting alerted her, and she turned the flashlight on her palm, which was now stained with blood. "Ugh." The slice was shallow, but long, like a two inch paper cut. "Figures. Watch out for this cross support guys, it's sharp."

"Ow." Carlos murmured sympathetically. "Bet that hurts."

It did. "Nah." Kerry stepped up to her macha. "Heck, if I could get a tattoo, what's this little old thing?"

The two techs stopped in the act of moving the switch into place. " You got a tattoo?" Carlos inquired. "Wow. I went with my cousin when he got his, and he screamed like a…um.." He gave Kerry a sheepish look. "Girl."'

"That's okay. So did I." Kerry smiled at them. "What do you think, here?" She indicated a spot in the rack.

"Yeah, that would be good." The techs picked up the switch and started to angle it into the rack. "Damn this thing weighs a ton."

Kerry watched them struggling. "Hang on." She wormed her way into the rack itself and knelt. "Here, set it on my knee, and then you can swivel it." She instructed, patting the denim covered surface. "Otherwise you don't have enough space to really..yeah." She grunted a little as the weight of the device came down on her leg.

"Got it.. Carlos, push it in further." The other tech urged. "Yeah.. no, wait."

Kerry edged back against the back of the rack as the switch nearly pinned her in place. Her elbow knocked against something, and she heard the rattle of glass behind her, accompanied by the scent of stale beer. "Ah." She felt sweat running down her body, and her nose tickled from the dust. "How's it going guys?"

"Gotta get the rack nuts in." Carlos muttered. "One's in.. wait.. oh, shit. I dropped it."

"I got another one, here." His colleague handed it over. "Hurry up before we smush Ms. Stuart, and get our asses kicked into the bay."

Kerry smiled, as she took hold of the device with both hands and tried to keep it steady. It was a dead weight, and it was making her leg ache. She tried not to think about the ten others they had to install and leaned her head against the cool steel, blinking salty sweat from her eyes.

"Okay, got it… get that into place and I'll screw it in." Carlos said. "You okay, ma'am?"

"Just fine. Thanks." Kerry assured him. She felt the weight come off her knee as the switch was screwed into place. "Now I'm doing much better. You got it?"

"Got it." Carlos assured her. "You can come out of there now, ma'am."

Kerry eased up off her knees, then realized with the switch bolted into place, she was trapped inside the rack. "Oh, Jesus." She sighed. "Hang on.. I need to climb up over the top of this thing." Her PDA beeped and she paused in the middle of getting a foothold on the side of the rack to open it.

I sent some help. They there yet?

Kerry looked around the cramped room. *No, sweetie, and there's no room in here for them. I'm trapped inside a rack myself at the moment.*

The PDA stuttered a response almost instantly. *WHAT?*

"Uh oh." Kerry put the PDA away and concentrated on escaping from her metal prison. She got a foot up on the support brace that had cut her and eased herself up and over the switch, catching sight of the two techs caught between wanting to help her and not wanting to be insubordinate. "I could use a hand, guys. If I fall on my head on the floor Dar's not gonna like it."

The techs jumped forward, unblocking the door and allowing it to swing shut as they reached for Kerry's hand. Her flashlight slipped from her sweaty fingers and dropped on the floor, turning itself off and putting them all in total darkness.

Everyone froze. "Um.. "

Kerry sighed. "Find it." She eased back into the rack and pulled her PDA out, turning it on and using the meager light from the screen to give them as much help as possible. "This would be funny if it wasn't just so ridiculous."

More sweat rolled down her face as she waited for the flashlight to be found. "This is the glamorous part of our jobs, huh?"

Carlos laughed hesitantly. "Yes, ma'am…I think I got it." He said. "Oh, I think it broke."

Of course. Kerry rested her head against the rack. "Please try to fix it. If I have to call for help to get out of here, I'm never going to hear the end of it."

Her cell phone rang at that moment, and she opened it, not even having to glance at the caller id. "Hi."

"You're stuck in a rack?"

"In the dark, in a closet, with a broken flashlight. But we're fixing it." Kerry informed her partner. "We'll be fine. Really."

"I'm sending my father to get you."

Kerry sighed. "Dar…" She protested. "We got the switch installed. We're fine. Honestly. Right guys?"

"Right.' The two chorused obediently. "Hey." Carlos yelped suddenly. "Something just crawled on me!"

Kerry's eyes opened wide. "Uh.."

"Still okay?" Dar's voice sounded wry. "I heard that. Better hope it's only a roach."

"Urk." Kerry instinctively lifted her hand to the neck of her shirt, and twisted it a little, tightening the fabric around her throat in case something fell on her head and thought a

journey inside her clothing would be a fun idea. “Don’t suppose dad has a nice big flashlight, huh?”

A loud bang sounded overhead, and the walls shook a little, producing a rattle of somethings falling onto the floor.

“What was that?” Dar asked.

“I don’t know.” Kerry started looking for another way out, feeling around cautiously. “Hon, can I get back to you?”

“Okay. Hang tight.” Dar said, briskly. “Bye.”

Kerry clipped the phone to her belt. “Any luck?” She asked. “How about getting the door open?”

“Ma’am, I’m trying.” The other tech said unhappily. “It’s locked from the outside. There’s no lock on this knob.” He rattled the door, obviously yanking on it. “Do you hear that?”

“What?” Kerry asked.

“That noise.”

They all listened, and Kerry now could hear a sound of water burbling. “Water.” She concluded. “This is a ship. That can’t be good in any sense.” She put the thought of bugs aside and started climbing over the switch again, by feel alone. “Watch out!”

“Ma’am! What are you doing!” Carlos asked nervously. “Please be careful, you can… oh! Oh!”

Kerry felt her balance slipping and she made a grab for the railing, the sweat on her hands making her lose her grip. “Yeow!” She swung over the top of the switch and slammed against it, knocking herself sideways and tumbling over the support rail. “Look out!”

“Ma’am! Kerry!” Carlos made a grab for her, but he wasn’t even close, and Kerry landed hard on her side knocking him back against the wall. “Oh!”

“Oof.” Kerry felt the breath go out of her and she only barely kept her head from smacking the floor. The sound of water got louder, and she could suddenly smell something unpleasant over the scent of carpet and mildew and new electronics. “Uh oh.”

“Uh.” The sound of scrambling. “I think we better get off the floor.”

Kerry sighed. “Can I go back to my ivory tower now?” She shoved herself up off the ground just as the stench of sewage flooded the closet and all they could do was hold their noses and hope for the best.

“Well, ma’am.” Carlos sighed. “It hardly can’t get worse than this, can it?”

If Kerry could have found his mouth in the dark, she would have covered it. As it was, she just crossed her fingers, and hoped she had a spare pair of boots somewhere in the car.

PART 24

DAR POPPED THE BACK DOOR OPEN AND HEADED THROUGH IT, POWERING PAST THE guard without so much as a glance in his direction. She pushed her sunglasses further up her nose as the glare hit her eyes, feeling the sharp blast of heat as the sun poured over her.

In the shimmering heat, the old ship looked scroungier than ever. But Dar saw a crew of men gathering around her hull, armed with five gallon jugs of marine paint, and she suspected the old hull was about to take on new colors.

She strode past the forklifts, hopping onto the gangway and making her way up into the ship, trying not to limp too badly and hoping no one dropped anything significant on her mostly unprotected feet.

It wasn't smart to go into a construction area with beach sandals on, but Kerry needed something, and that made the risk irrelevant.

Looking right and left as she entered the storage hold, she headed for the stairs slipping between two moving pallets just in time to keep herself from being smashed flat.

"Hey!" The man moving the pallet yelled. "Watch out, you crazy woman!"

Dar lifted a bare arm and waved at him, as she started up the steps. The heat already was oppressive, and she was glad she'd picked a tank top to wear with her jeans as she felt the hot air against her shoulders. Two men coming down squeezed past her on the steps, muttering under their breaths, shaking their heads.

"We ain't never gonna get this done. That guy down there fucked us up big time."

“I’m gonna kick his ass.” The other man replied. “I don’t care how big he is.”

Dar paused as she turned the corner landing, and then she shrugged and kept on going, figuring if the big guy he was talking about was the one she was related to, he could more than take care of himself. She rounded the turn and continued on up, taking the steps at a rhythmic trot.

Her foot hurt, but she put that in the back of her mind and concentrated on avoiding broken corners on the steps that might send her sprawling headlong It got darker as she went up, until she arrived on the open deck, where the doors were thrown open to get some kind of breeze inside the stifling interior.

Abruptly, Dar felt slightly horrified that she’d sent Kerry in here with the team. What had she been thinking? It was a hell hole in here! Aggravated, she increased her pace across the deck, moving inside and heading for the double wide stairwell that lead to the upper decks.

People were coming down the stairs, rubbing their eyes and complaining. Dar became aware of a taint in the air, a stench that made her nose wrinkle in reaction. Sewage, but worse, old sewage that smelled like lots of dead things had reconstituted themselves and were now invading the inside of the ship. “Oh, gross.”

Stifling the urge to hold her nose, Dar started up the steps, blinking a little as the fumes made her eyes water. She rounded the first landing and kept moving upward, the dimness and the smell getting worse every second.

“Gag.” Dar muttered, getting a sympathetic look from two female crew members who were hurrying in the other direction. “What died?” She asked, pausing to call after them.

“Some stupid person put something down one of the toilets.” The woman nearest to her stopped and explained. “It blew up the pipes. I tell you, these people who work on this ship are stupider than most of our passengers ever were.”

Well acquainted with cranky marine heads, Dar winced. “Great.” She turned and started up the steps again, hoping silently it hadn’t been one of her people that had done it. None of them were stupid, but sometimes when you were under stress, you did things out of habit. That included something as mundane as crumpling up something and tossing into the toilet, forgetting the difference between a water gravity flush system and the vacuum tubes most often uses on ships and planes.

You stop up water pressure, and you probably overflow your toilet. Annoying and messy, but not really catastrophic. Dar took another flight and tugged her flashlight from it’s holder on her belt, turning it on. Stop up an air pressure pipe, and what resulted was a blow out, usually in the middle of a wall somewhere, where the term ‘shit hitting the fan’ came to a new, pungent, and occasionally dangerous meaning.

“Ah, the romance of the sea.” Dar heard voices a level higher than she presently was, and she redoubled her speed again, powering up onto the landing of the eleventh deck in time to hear someone blaspheme his mother in virulent Spanish.

She rounded the corner of the stairwell to find a dark hallway full of machinery, men, and a growing sludge advancing across the new carpet. Some of the men she recognized as hers. “All right folks.” She intoned briskly. “What’s going on here?”

Half the crowd turned, obviously relieved to see her. “Ms. Roberts!’ The closest said. “They won’t let us go any further.”

Two of the ship personnel were blocking the passage, shoving the others back impatiently. “Go back.” The taller one of the two said. “You cannot go here. Something is broken.”

Dar edged through her staff, most of them backing to allow her through as much as they could in the crowded space. “Some of our people are in that hallway.” She told the crewman. “We need to go get them.”

“There is a broken pipe.” The crewman shook his head. “It is dangerous. They must purge the system first.”

“Let’s get outta here.” One of the other tradesmen said, in a disgusted tone. “It stinks, and I don’t give a crap if this stupid job gets finished or not.” He turned and pushed his way out, followed by two others.

Dar heard a hammering down the hall. “Okay, look.”

“You must leave, now.” The crewman told her brusquely.

The hammering got louder. Dar stepped up to the crewman and tipped her head down slightly, glaring at him. “Mister, I am going down that hallway. You can move aside, or I can go through you. Your choice.”

The man stared at her. “What?”

Dar took a step even closer. “Move.” She barked. “Now!”

“You cannot..”

Dar shoved him without hesitation, keeping her motions short and hard. The man stumbled back and looked at her in shock, then exchanged looks with his companion and got out of the way.

“You are crazy! “ The crewman said. “But if you want to go there and get hurt? Fine! Go! It will be your fault!”

Dar strode past him, with the techs in tow. As they moved down the hall, the stench grew, and the sound of hissing, escaping air got louder and louder. “Kerry!”

“Over there, ma’am!” One of the techs pointed. “That’s the door.”

Two others approached it with alacrity. “We’ll knock it down, Ms. Roberts. Just give us a minute.”

Dar paused. “Ker! Get back!” She pointed to the door with utter authority, and shone her flashlight on it. “You two, get over there, keep an eye on that pipe.”

“Dar!” Kerry’s voice came through the partition.

“Yeah!” Dar yelled back. “Hang on!”

Footsteps sounded coming towards them down the hall. “All right you people. Back off! This is a closed area!” An authoritative voice said. They turned to see a uniformed officer heading their way. “Move it!”

“Kiss my ass.” Dar challenged him. “I get my people out of here, we’ll leave. Not before then, I don’t care how much crap’s going to come out of that pipe.”

“You listen to me!” The man came up to them. “I’m the staff captain of this vessel!”

“And I’m the chief information officer of this company.” Dar growled right back. “I could buy you and this whole piece of crap shrimp boat for petty cash so take your stripes and your attitude and beat it, pinhead!” She looked at the two techs. “Do it!”

“You cannot..”

“Watch me!” Dar shot back.

“One… two.. “ The two techs turned their shoulders to the door.

The staff captain clenched his fists and glared. Dar glared right back at him. “You..” He started.

“Am in charge here.” Dar completed the sentence.

“Paladar Katherine Roberts, you better not be out there in that damned sewage with your foot!” Kerry yelled at the top of her voice, nearly making the door metal rattle.

The techs all looked at Dar as a momentary silence fell.

Dar cleared her throat. “Do it.” She instructed the techs. “Before I get my ass in real trouble.”

The techs charged the door without any further hesitation, slamming into the panel and crashing it inward. They stumbled inside as it opened easier than they expected, and there was a jumble of moving bodies in two flashlight streams.

A low rumble started up to their right, as the techs stumbled out of the closet and into the hallway, Kerry squished among them.

“You must get out of here. Now.” The officer’s voice was now more urgent than angry. “Please!”

Dar grabbed hold of Kerry’s arm, and she ducked from behind a tall, sweating body. “Hey.” She checked her over, best as she was able in the very dim light. “ You alright?”

“Hey! Dar! Are you crazy!” Kerry started tugging at her. “You gotta get out of here before you get sick!”

“Let’s all get out of here.” Dar pointed down the hall. “C’mon!”

The rumble grew abruptly into a roar, and out of pure instinct Dar grabbed Kerry and slammed her against the wall just as a blast of hot, fetid air and worse came down the passage, splatting full into the staff captain and knocking him back against the far bulkhead.

Then the hiss disappeared, and silence descended.

“Oh, Jesu.” One of the techs nearly threw up.

“Oh. Gross.” Kerry muttered. “This is about the most disgusting…”

“Yeah.” Dar inched towards the light, staying as far away from the sodden staff captain as she could. “It sure is.”

“Ug, ug, ug.” Kerry stifled a gag. “Dar, I’m gonna lose it.”

Jaws clamped shut, Dar merely nodded, and nudged her faster. “Walk.” She got out from between clenched teeth. Ahead of them, the hallway was blocked suddenly by a lot of bodies, men in jumpsuits yelling in a Nordic language.

A bell started to ring. The crowd of jumpsuited men shoved past them, ignoring everything in their haste to get down the corridor, carrying tool boxes and thick hoses. “What happened to you?” One asked the staff captain. “Ah, you got shot, eh? Should be used to it.”

“Oooohh..” Kerry uttered under her breath. “Get me outtaa here…” She squeezed past the men and they got to the stairs, where the air was no cleaner. “Dar, I’m losing it.”

“Hang on.. “ Dar got an arm around her, ignoring her own rebelling stomach. “Over here.” She moved to the far end of the stairs, bypassing the men running up past them, all in ship jumpsuits. “Down, down down.. baby.”

“How’s your foot? Did you get it in that..um..”

"I have no idea." Dar steered her down another flight of steps. "Let's wait till we get outside.. hey." The sharp scent of blood reached her nose. "Did you get hurt?"

Kerry held up a clenched fist. "Cut. Nothing major."

They reached the main deck landing and headed for the doors, getting outside just as all the power inside was cut, and the ship was plunged into darkness behind them.

"Ugh." Kerry went right to the railing and hung over it, willing a breeze to come up from the southwest and not from behind her. Her stomach was twisting in knots, the smell from inside the ship still in her lungs, and clinging to her clothing.

She closed her eyes.

"Let me see." Dar took her hand and gently opened it, studying the slice on her palm. "Ouch."

It wasn't working. "Dar." Kerry whispered. "I'm going to throw up."

"Aim down." Dar circled her wrist with gentle fingers and pressed against the inside of it.

Kerry opened one eye, to see the waters of Government Cut far below her. "Down?"

"Down."

Kerry watched the wavelets ripple past the ship, bumping into the hull. A bird flew lazily past, and then unexpectedly, plunged into the water after a fish.

She took a breath, then a second, filled with clean salty air, and felt the nausea subside. She released a breath, and looked over at Dar. "I think I'm okay." She took another few lungs full of air, then glanced down at the deck, to study her partner's exposed feet.

The sandals were covered, almost up to the edge of the bottom, with an oily brown guck, but Dar's tanned skin was unmarked. Kerry's shoulders relaxed a little. "You escaped the crap monster."

Dar looked down. "Oh. Yeah." She murmured. "So I did." She turned Kerry around and examined her carefully. "So did you." She noted. "Except..er.." She glanced at a long, dark stain down the side of one leg.

"New rack crud." Kerry sighed. "I had to climb out of it."

Dar frowned.

"In the dark, in a room with roaches flying all over it, and poop flowing on the floor. Dar, that was **not** covered in my infrastructure classes." Kerry leaned against the railing, exhausted. "But at least we got the damn thing in."

Dar turned and leaned as well, looking back at the ship. Contractors were pouring out of it and heading for the upper gangway off, shaking their heads, while inside, bells were still ringing and alarms going off. “One down.” She agreed with a sigh. “Seven to go.”

It wasn’t a very auspicious start.

* * *

Kerry left her boots outside the terminal, and in fact, crossed through it an out the front door heading for the Lexus. She suspected she remembered they had a pair of spare clothing in the back, and she fully intended on changing into it to get rid of the sewer scent she was convinced still clung to her shirt.

As she crossed to the parking lot, a small pickup swerved towards her and pulled up along side. “Hi.” Ceci waved, tipping her sunglasses down. “How’s it going?”

Kerry walked over and leaned against the doorjamb. “You really want to know?”

Her mother in law grimaced. “Andy called me. Said they got thrown out of the boat while some repairs were on. I brought him some lunch.” She said. “Tough day?”

“Ugh. Yes.” Kerry agreed. “We’re so behind schedule now, and we don’t know when they’re going to let us back on the ship.”

Ceci leaned on the seat back. “Kerry, can I ask you a question?”

Hm. “Sure.”

“You.. and Dar. You’re corporate officers.”

“Yes.” Kerry nodded.

“Maybe it’s different here in Miami, but where I come from, corporate officers don’t do what you’re doing.” Ceci said bluntly. “They manage.”

“I know.”

“So?”

Kerry let her hands rest on the window frame, feeling the heat of the metal sting her cut hand. “Usually we do manage.” She admitted. “Usually, someone else does this, but this job… Alastair asked Dar to handle it personally.”

“Ah.”

“There’s a lot behind it.” Kerry explained. “So here we are.”

“We.”

Kerry smiled.

Ceci reached over and patted her hand. “Good luck.” She said. “How’s Dar doing?”

How was Dar doing? Kerry thought back to the last sight she’d had of her partner, pacing back and forth in the terminal unable to do anything constructive. “She’s a little freaked because of the wait.”

The older woman chuckled wryly. “That’s nothing new.” She advised Kerry. “She absolutely positively hates waiting for anything.”

Hm. True, and that reminded Kerry. “I know.. in fact, maybe lunch is a good idea. I’ll get her out of here for an hour or so until they reopen the ship.” She tapped the window. “Thanks for the idea!”

Ceci pushed her sunglasses down and waved, waiting for Kerry to step back before she continued driving out of the parking lot.

Lunch. Kerry continued over to the Lexus and keyed the lock open. She pulled the back door latch and peered inside, snagging her gym bag and tugging it over. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.” She unzipped it and rummaged through it’s contents.

“Okay, good.” A pair of jeans landed on the seat, shortly followed by a shirt. She tended to keep changes of clothing for after work, as did Dar, since neither really wanted to get back into business clothing after working out.

Kerry reviewed her options, and fingered the shirt, which was a sleeveless muscle T. “Hm. Not quite the image I was looking to project…” She peered at the jeans. “And these are reeeally old ones… but at least it’s clean.” She pushed the jeans and shirt back in the bag, which already held her sneakers. Then she dug in the back of the car to see if she had anything for Dar stowed away anywhere.

“Hm.” She pulled out a few neatly folded bits of cotton. Workout shorts and a sports bra. “Much as I’d personally love her to change into this, I don’t think it’s going to work.” Kerry regretfully put the items back, and shouldered her gym bag. Maybe, she considered, they could grab something at the mall when they went for lunch.

With that cheerful thought, she closed and locked the door and headed back for the terminal. Halfway back, she paused to let traffic go by, appreciating the intense light of the sun and the stiff ocean breeze. Being locked in the dark, with the bugs and the stench in that place had been hellacious, and for a moment she’d gained an understanding of Dar’s aversion to closed in places.

It had gotten a little freaky in there, with her techs panicking a little, and the sound of those pipes so close by. Hearing Dar’s voice had been…

She ran her hands through her hair. She really wasn’t the type of person who freaked out easily, Kerry knew. She’d handled some intense situations in the past few years, from

being locked up in a damn psycho ward, to being trapped inside a burning hospital, to jumping in the raging ocean.

She was cool with it. But being in a dark room with roaches and crap? Kerry shuddered. That had freaked her out completely, and just when she'd been at the point where she'd started to tear at the door with her fingernails, there had been Dar's voice.

Instant no-freak.

Sweetest sound in the world. Kerry ran her fingers through her hair again, and shifted her shoulders, feeling the sun warm her skin. Despite the fact it had made her nuts to think of Dar standing out there in sewage, and that reminded her to get their shoes rinsed off.

Preferably by a fire hose spouting industrial disinfectant.

Kerry proceeded across the road and trotted up the steps to the terminal. She entered the building and headed right to the restrooms, ducking inside the women's side not surprised to find it empty. One thing about being in IT – you generally didn't have to wait on the bathroom if you were female.

Certainly, it was better than it was in the past, but still, she and Dar were in the vast minority in the building at the moment.

Kerry entered the handicapped stall and hung her workout bag on the hook, shedding her jeans and shirt and tossing them over the door. Briefly, she wished she could shower as well, but after a cautious sniff at the skin on her arm, decided a change would have to be good enough.

Rooting in the bag, she found fresh underclothes as well, and traded off, stuffing the others into a side pocket. "Okay." She removed the jeans from her bag and pulled them on, leaving the buttons unbuttoned. She then pulled the shirt over her head and tucked it in, fastening the jeans over it.

The waistband was a little loose, which surprised her a bit. She dug in the bag, but she hadn't stuck a belt in there. "Hm.." She turned and faced the mirror, checking the image with critical eyes. She touched her cheek, deciding her face looked a little thinner than it had been also. Was it the stress? Kerry knew they hadn't been exercising more than usual, so probably it was the tension she'd been under lately.

Oh well. She met her own eyes, seeing a gravely wry twinkle there. "Guess I'll have to have an extra milkshake for lunch then. " She stuffed her other clothes into the bag and grabbed her sneakers, unlocking the door to the stall and heading back out.

Emerging into the hall, she spotted Dar back at her podium, pecking at her laptop keyboard with one hand while leaning her head on the other. Dar's head lifted as she approached, and the blue eyes turned her way, looking her up and down as a rakish grin appeared.

Kerry set the bag down and leaned on the counter to put her sneakers on. “Something wrong?”

“With you? Noo.” Dar said. “But we’ve got a big problem, Ker.”

Leaving the laces of the first sneaker untied, Kerry straightened. “What’s up?”

“They’re not going to let anyone back on board for at least twenty four hours.” Dar told her. “They’ve got the EPA in there now. Needs disinfecting before they’ll clear us to go back in.”

“But.. wait.” Kerry leaned on the counter. “I thought it was only that one deck?”

“Bacteria.” Dar replied succinctly. “Got in the air system, or so they’re afraid of.”

Kerry closed her eyes. “Oh god.” She stifled a reflex cough. “Can we get our lungs fumigated?”

Dar patted her hand. “I think we’re okay.” She said. “You feel better now?”

Kerry frowned. “Well, yeah, but what are we going to do, Dar? We didn’t have enough time to install and test as it was.. we lose a whole day… Jesus.”

“I know.” Her partner acknowledged. “Pulling more people won’t help.”

“No.” Kerry exhaled heavily.

The outer door slammed, and they both turned to see Peter Quest enter, spot them, and head in their direction with angry strides.

“Hm.” Kerry took the opportunity to put her other sneaker on, tying the laces as Quest arrived.

“Roberts, I just got out of a meeting with the inspectors.” Quest said. “Can you explain to me why they informed me the blockage that caused this entire mess was some of **your** equipment?”

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. “My equipment?” Dar pointed at her own chest. “Quest, look around you. My gear’s bigger than a breadbox. How in the hell could it have caused a clog anywhere?”

Quest did, indeed, look around. Then he looked back at Dar. “I don’t know, they just said it was IT stuff. There’s a meeting in ten minutes outside with the ship’s officers. I want you to be there, and explain what the hell’s going on.”

“Do you.. um.. have the IT stuff?” Kerry interjected. “Might be hard to explain otherwise.”

"We have it." Quest said, grimly. "The EPA will be there to show what it was, and you'd better be too. If it turns out this is your fault, you're gonna pay." He turned and walked off, half turning as he did to point at Dar. "Big time."

Kerry stared at his back, and then turned her attention to Dar. "Now what?" She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Dar, I swear, this whole damn job is cursed."

Dar rubbed her temples, giving her head a tiny shake. "Guess you better call John." She sighed. "Since I know it's not our gear, the only thing left is his."

Kerry blew out a breath in a sputter. "So much for lunch." She pulled out her cell phone. "Damn it."

Dar got up. "Can I treat you to a Jamaican patty and a bottle of guava juice?" She asked. "Roach coach just pulled up outside."

Kerry paused. "Hang on, John." She covered the mic. "Dar, don't say roach and lunch in the same sentence to me for the next month, okay?"

Dar patted her on the shoulder, and limped off towards the door.

Damn it.

* * *

They met on the dockside shortly thereafter. Kerry sucked down the last droplets of her guava juice and dropped the empty container in the garbage outside the terminal door as she followed Dar across the sun bleached concrete.

A semi-circle of people were already out there, she spotted John's tall form and Quest, and several people she didn't know, along with the camera crew, which she did. They all looked up as Dar and Kerry joined them, the strangers appearing a bit skeptical as they were introduced.

"Well, fine." A tall, thin man with an EPA badge said. "I was hoping.. well, anyway. Here is what caused the accident." He held out a cardboard box, and opened the flaps. A waft of sewer smell drifted out, and the group only cautiously peered inside.

A grayish brown ball covered in gunk rested on the bottom of the box, a tangle of what Kerry identified as shielded cat 5 cable, along with a snarl of the white cording that came in it to separate the strands. She looked up at their cable contractor. "John?"

The big man stepped forward and took the box, examining it's contents. "Well, it's the stuff we're using, yeah." He admitted. "Looks like scrap."

The camera man focused in on him, gaining himself a suspicious glare from the contractor.

"What does that mean?" Quest asked.

John looked at him. “It’s ends left over after we finish a run. Got it all over the place, way we’ve been working.” He explained.

“So one of your people did this? Dropped it in a toilet?” Quest asked, sharply.

John snorted. “I doubt it. Coulda been anyone, stuff’s all over the place.”

“That’s true.” Kerry agreed quietly, watching the EPA man from the corner of her eye. “That pipe was down the hall from one of our wiring closets, which was open.”

“But.” The EPA man objected. “It makes no sense for anyone to be carrying it around except for one of your workmen, does it?” He addressed John. “I mean, one of the other contractors would be carrying some of their supplies, tape, or electrical wire, or that sort of thing.”

John shrugged. “Why would anyone be hauling a handful of that crap around?” He asked. “But I don’t got anyone stupid enough to drop a ball of it in the toilet. Cigarettes, maybe, but not that.”

Dar advanced and took the box. She looked at the ball of wire, noting it’s egg shape, and the tight wrapping around it’s middle that showed shredding from it’s travel through the pipes. With a grunt, she handed it back. “Could have been anyone.” She said. “Or, who knows? Maybe one of John’s guys left it on a sink somewhere and it got knocked into a bowl.”

Quest snorted.

The inspector took the box back. He regarded the ball for a moment, then shrugged one shoulder. “That could be.” He conceded. “We’d thought maybe someone’d done it on purpose, but you know, what you just said makes a lot of sense. I can see it.”

Dar studiously did not look at the camera. “All those guys are working up there. I can’t see someone doing this so they’d get covered in cr.. sewage.”

“Huh. Damn straight.” John said.

Quest sniffed. “Maybe.” He grudgingly conceded. “But now what? You’re holding up my whole project in there!” He turned his aggressiveness on the EPA inspector. “So it was an accident, like Roberts said. When can we get back in there?”

“Twenty four hours, Mr. Quest. As I told you. Accident or not, you’ve got bio-organisms in there, and they have to be fogged and sanitized. You don’t want to get sued for getting people sick, do you?” The EPA man warned.

The camera swiveled to focus on Quest. From the look on his face, he was trapped and he knew it. “Of course not.” He said. “But I want to get these guys back in there not a moment past 24 hours. Can you guarantee me that?”

The camera moved back to the EPA man, who straightened a little. “Ah..”

“Or is it going to be one of those government things, were 24 hours passes, and you all go out to play golf?” Quest pressed him. “I’m all for safety. I’ll put this in your hands, but I need to know you’re not going to screw me over for it.”

Put on the defensive, the EPA man took a step back. “Well, in general, I suppose we can..”

“No general.” Quest insisted. “I need to know. A lot of money’s riding on this. You want to be responsible for that?”

“Of course not.” The EPA man said. “Very well, we.. I will guarantee you can be back inside that vessel after the 24 hour decontamination process is complete.”

“Okay.” Quest seemed satisfied, holding his hand out for the man to shake. “We’ve got a deal then. I’ll have these docks cleared.”

The EPA men made a quick getaway, escaping the sun as they ducked through the gate and left the pier area.

John turned to Dar and put his hands on his hips. “Well, we lucked out. We’d just finished the last room when they rang the bell.” He told her. “So…”

“Good work, John.” Kerry congratulated him quietly.

“So what are you going to do, Roberts?” Quest interrupted. “I can’t change the deadline.” He turned and look at the ship. “This thing’ll never be ready.”

Privately, Dar agreed completely. But she was aware of the focus on her, as the round, blank camera eye swept across them. “Well, Peter – I can’t speak for your other contractors here, but my view is – we’ll wait for the ban to be lifted, and do the best we can.”

“Hmph.” Quest made a grunting noise.

“We’ve gone to the wall on this project, and I’m not ready to drop it now.” Dar continued. “If we run out of time, we run out of time, but we’re going to be in there until the clock goes off.”

Kerry folded her arms, content to let her partner shine in the artificial halogen spotlight.

“Bad luck.” The cameraman commented quietly.

“Just another in a long series of challenges.” Dar gave him a brisk nod. “Excuse us, we’re going to see about securing the gear in there.” She touched Kerry on the shoulder and turned, to head back towards the terminal. John followed, and behind them they heard Quest and his entourage trooping back off down the pier.

Dar opened the door for them. “Jesus.”

“That man figured to nail us with that thing, Dar!” John griped, as he passed in front of her, followed by Kerry. “All my guys in there busting their tails and I get that?”

Dar entered behind them. “John.” She paused, waiting for him to turn. “Did you take a good look at that wire plug” She asked. “That wasn’t a bunch of scrap. That was tied up to be a bundle like that.”

Kerry leaned on the wall with one hand. “What are you saying, Dar?”

Puzzled, John nodded his head. “Yeah. What are you saying? Someone did it on purpose after all?”

Dar glanced around, noting the techs still moving about the room. She waved them over towards the back corner, and waited for them to follow her over. “After everything we’ve had to go through on this, I find it very hard to believe something like this happened naturally.” She stated as they reached the back wall. “John, I’m not saying for a second it was one of your guys, but I don’t think it dropped off a sink either. Can you ask all of them if they might have left a ball of the damn stuff anywhere?”

The contractor scrubbed his jaw, then nodded. “Sure, Dar. I’ll ask em, but we were out of that area since near eight am. Doubt any of em would remember.. some of the guys have gone home already, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Kerry blinked. “None of your guys was up there recently?”

“No.” John shook his head positively. “My super keeps a close eye on em. Nice guys, good wire pullers, but they’re lazier than hound dogs in summer most of the time.”

“Huh.” Kerry nibbled on the inside of her lip. “Someone wearing your company shirt was in that wiring closet when we got there.”

Dar folded her arms and leaned against the wall, her head nodding slightly.

“Yeah?” John sounded honestly surprised.

“He was in there… we surprised him when we came in.” Kerry said. “He was kinda rude.” She added. “I had a mental note to talk to you about it. He was a tall guy, with brown hair, kind of curly, and he hadn’t shaved recently.”

John exhaled. “Could be half of em.” He admitted. “Okay, let me gather em up and talk to em. See if any of em remember seeing you, I won’t say why.” He said. “Still doesn’t mean he did nothing.”

“No, of course not.” Kerry agreed. “But maybe he can confirm how the wire got near those pipes.”

John grunted and nodded, then he turned and walked across the room, heading for the front doors.

Kerry leaned against the wall next to Dar. “You really think it was on purpose?”

Dar nodded. “Yeah.” She said. “Scraps are one thing, but that was wrapped so that it would fit down the pipe.” She leaned against Kerry’s shoulder. “It’s just too coincidental a timing, Ker.”

Was it? Kerry pondered. “Or are we just getting paranoid?”

Dar studied the far wall briefly, then chuckled. “Just because I’m paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get us.” She pushed herself upright and laid an arm over Kerry’s shoulders. “C’mon. Let’s go sit down and figure out where we go from here now that we lost an entire day from our schedule.”

Kerry circled Dar’s waist with her arm as they walked, both of them slowing as they spotted their erstwhile friend reporter Cruickshank near the door, complete with a few of her camera people. “Oh, poot.”

The reporter came forward. “Hello, ladies.” She greeted them. “Now that the stakes have risen again, care to share a few words with me?”

Aware of the camera’s red light turning on, and focusing on them, Dar didn’t so much as twitch, or remove her arm from Kerry’s shoulders. “Sure.” She replied amiably. “We’ve got plenty of time right now.”

The television light turned on, framing them in silver. In the shadows beyond them, the techs paused, gathering to watch curiously as the reporter closed in, and opened her note pad. “Great. Tom, give me about sixty seconds, and then roll, all right?”

“Right.”

Dar noticed the Herald reporter arriving too, taking a seat on one of the folding tables back out of the way and just watching.

One dark eyebrow curved up, and Dar’s brow puckered in thought.

“All right, Ms. Roberts.” Cruickshank began. “Now we have a situation where all of a sudden, you’re the underdogs. How does that make you feel?”

Dar exchanged looks with Kerry. Then she looked back at the camera. “I’m not sure we haven’t always been the underdog in this.” She commented, with an easy smile. “Are you?”

Cruickshank looked up from her pad, pausing for a reflective moment. “Interesting question.”

“Isn’t it?” Kerry murmured.

* * *

"Okay, so now what?" Kerry sat on a desk, swinging her feet a little. It was late afternoon, and the chaos had finally settled down. Cruickshank had left, the reporter had left, and she and Dar were alone in the small office.

Dar was lying on her back on the spare desk against the wall. "Let's take everyone out to dinner." She replied, her eyes closed. "Do some team building for the hell it's going to be from tomorrow on."

Kerry studied her denim covered knees. "Okay." She said. "Someplace around here? Hard Rock, maybe? Or Bubba Gumps?"

"Hooters."

"Dar."

A blue eye opened. "Too politically incorrect, huh?"

"It's one thing for us to go to lunch there." Kerry said. "But taking the staff? Hon, there's two or three women in the team out there. How comfortable would that be for them?"

"Mmph." Dar grunted. "Yeah, I get you. Call Hard Rock. See if they have that side room available. What do we have, thirty?" Privately she doubted anyone on their staff would really mind, or kick up a fuss, but you never knew with people.

It didn't pay to take a chance, and she was a little abashed that Kerry had found it necessary to remind her of that. "Sorry.. I was just in the mood for chicken wings." She added sheepishly.

"And a nice cold draft beer, yeah. But I'm sure we can get that somewhere else." Kerry got up and sat down in the desk chair instead, calling up a browser. She typed the restaurant's site in and got back a list of addresses, from which she selected the Bayside one. Pulling out her cell phone, she dialed the number. "Did you say thirty?" She paused and held her hand over the mic. "With us?"

"Yeah." Dar nodded. "Twenty nine, something like that. Just say thirty."

"Gotcha." Kerry cleared her throat gently. "Hello, I'd like to speak to someone who can help me with a group reservation." She listened. "For thirty people." Listened again. "That's what I thought. I'll hold. Thanks."

Outside, their team was still getting gear ready for installation, soft clanks and thunks audible along with a low buzz of casual chatter. Despite the problems with the ship, the atmosphere was one of efficient industry, and walking through the crowd Dar hadn't heard any griping at all.

Nice. Dar waited to hear Kerry say the words “You do? Okay, I’d like to reserve it.” before she swung herself up off the desk and ambled towards the door. Sticking her head out, she observed the activity, then she sauntered out into the center of the large room and stood there, putting her hands on her hips.

She didn’t need to say anything. One by one, the techs all stopped what they were doing and focused on her, the chatter in the room subsiding to nothing in about thirty seconds. Dar waited a few seconds more, then she cleared her throat. “All right folks. You know what the story is. We’re dead in the water until tomorrow, and then we’re way behind the eight ball.”

Thirty sets of eyes were pinned on her. “Better we bust our ass tomorrow than have to hang out in there today.” Mark commented. “Man, that stunk.”

The two techs who’d been with Kerry nodded their heads vigorously. “Yeah, and working in the dark, that sucked too!”

Dar waited until silence fell again, then she resumed speaking. “It’s going to be a tough couple of days. There’ll be company support here while we’re doing it, but before we start, I’d like you all to come over to the Hard Rock and be our guest for dinner tonight.”

She could feel the shock in the room, as she flicked her eyes over the faces and caught the reactions. Surprise, certainly, and then muted delight. Dar smiled at them. “So get this stuff locked down, and we’ll head on over. Okay/”

“Yes ma’am.” Mark responded quickly. “You don’t need to ask us twice.. right guys?”

“Yeah.” “Heck yeah.” “For sure!”

Satisfied, Dar lifted her hand in acknowledgement and then walked back towards the office. She discovered Kerry finished with her call inside, sprawled in the desk chair, spinning it idly. “We all set?”

“Uh huh.” Kerry agreed. “We got the back room, and they’re throwing in dessert free as long as everyone orders an entrée.”

“No problem.” Dar caught the back of the chair and stopped her partner’s revolutions. “Not with this bunch. They're not the ice tea and carrot appetizer crowd.”

Kerry gazed up at her with a wry expression. “Dar, I used to be one of the ice tea and carrot appetizer crowd.”

“Nah.” Dar looked fondly down at her. “You were a poser.”

“A poser???”

“A poser.” Dar leaned on the chair back. “I knew that the first time we had dinner together.”

Kerry's face crinkled up into a grin. "Rats. Outted by a slab of cheesecake and a chicken wing."

Dar gently scratched the top of Kerry's head with her fingertips. "Did you check with the office? Everything calm there?"

Kerry gave the trackball on the desk a roll, exposing her email inbox when the screen saver cleared. "Couple of things. Three of those leads we got out of your hacker challenge turned into requests for pricing." She pointed. "Not really huge accounts, but look.. this one's in an area we haven't been involved in yet."

"Hm." Dar studied the screen.

"I'm assigning someone to put together a design." Kerry said. "And I got a note from our friends in New York… " She clicked over. "They're opening another office in Hong Kong. They want pricing for infrastructure."

"Yeah?" Dar sounded quite surprised. "You got a note from Meyer?"

Kerry cocked her head. "Um.. no, matter of fact. Hang on." She rolled back a page. "Here.. new name. Ellen Durst. Maybe he got an assistant?" She scrolled through the message, until she reached the sig line. "Oh. No, I guess she's the VP now."

"Huh." Dar sniffed. "Hope Stewart didn't get booted. We're in deep kimchee if he did."

"Would she be asking us for pricing if Meyer took his place?"

Dar perched on the desk, getting her weight off her injured foot. "We're their current vendor." She mused. "So stands to reason… I don't know, let's find out." She pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number. "Hi. Stewart Godson, please."

Kerry leaned an elbow on the desk and watched Dar's face as she waited. She put her other hand on her partner's knee, rubbing gently in a circle with her thumb. It would be chilly in the restaurant, she suddenly remembered. They'd have to stop and get Dar something with more sleeves.

"Yes, thanks. It's Dar Roberts, from ILS." Dar supplied the secretary who intercepted the call. Now, either she'd be put off, or..

"One moment, ma'am, I'll put you right through." The secretary came back on the line, then bland hold music replaced her for a second, before a click sounded and a voice came through.

"Hello, there, Dar!"

Dar exhaled in relief. "Afternoon, Stewart." She glanced at Kerry, who gave her a thumbs up.

"What do I owe the pleasure of a call to?" Godson asked. "I was about to close up shop here and get on home… don't tell me we've got problems!"

"No.. no, not at all." Dar reassured him. "I just…" She hesitated. "Just was wondering how things were doing, with your program. It's been a week, now."

"Oh!" Godson cleared his throat, and apparently sat back in his chair based on the squeaks coming through the phone. "Everything's great! You have no idea how happy everyone is… it's been wonderful. First week in a month I've been able to get anything done without getting a phone call every ten minutes complaining." He said. "So rest assured, everything looks great from this end. How's it with you?"

Dar blinked. "Me? Oh, it's just been a typical week here, you know, Stewart." She replied. "Usual problems, usual weather.. the odd pile of crap hitting the.. um.. fan." A smile appeared, as she watched Kerry first cover her eyes, then throw the back of her arm across them in a very theatrical gesture. "Glad things are going well… listen, Kerry tells me you're putting a new office in over in the Far East?"

"Yep." Godson sounded very, very smug. "Business has increased so much, partially due to my new system, I might add, that we're branching out. Good stuff huh? Oh!" He ended the sentence with an exclamation. "Hey! You remember that guy of mine, Jason?"

Ah. "Sure." Dar drawled.

"You know that fella up and left last Friday? No notice at all, just picked up his papers and walked out.. said he had a better offer. What do you know? You were right! Shoulda listened to you right then, Dar!"

Kerry's eyes widened, and she leaned forward a little as she listened. "Holy pooters!" She mouthed.

"Ahhh… yeah, he was a stinker." Dar remarked, her eyebrows hiked up to her hairline. "Any idea where he went? Not that I care."

"Nah." Godson said. "Didn't ask, he didn't tell, good riddance! I took a page from your book and decided maybe a gal would work better for me in there, and you know, it's been a week but Ellen's just been crackerjack. Good people! Matter of fact, can't wait for her to meet you. We were talking about you just yesterday."

Dar relaxed, one nagging problem taken off her conscience. "Well, that's good to hear, Stewart. Glad you got someone in there who we can work with. I wasn't looking forward to renegotiating our contract with Mr. Meyer.. hope whoever he went to work for fully appreciates.. his.. ah.. style."

Godson chuckled. "Ellen's sharp, and would you know? She's a fan of yours. So you've got no worries, right? Anyhoo, time for me to head off to the little missus. Anything else you need to talk about, Dar?"

"Nope, just checking in. We'll get you those prices by end of the week, Stewart. Good luck on the new space, and congratulations."

"Thanks!" Godson replied with an audible grin. "Life's good! Take care, Dar! Give Ms. Stuart my hellos too, willya? Bye!"

Dar folded the phone up and tossed it, reversing her hand and grabbing it out of mid air as it fell. "Well, that's good news." She said. "I really thought we were going to get bit in the ass by my cantankerousness this time. Guess we got lucky."

Kerry patted her on the leg. "We have to sometimes." She got up, leaning over to log out of the computer. "Wonder where they little bugger went? Hope it's not to another of our customers."

Dar shrugged, getting up off the desk and waiting as Kerry turned the PC off. "I'll do a search later, see if he joined another public company." She put her hand on her partner's back as they walked out of the office, flipping the lights and closing the door behind them.

* * *

Kerry put her mug down and leaned back, chuckling a little at Mark's joke from across the table. She was on her second beer, and her plate held the remnants of a relatively decent rack of spare ribs scattered over it. Dar was sprawled in the chair next to her, long legs extended under the table as she nodded in agreement to what the MIS manager was saying.

"I remember that." Dar said. "The entire building was overrun by red ants, and everyone ended up sitting on top of the network racks to get away from them." She reminisced. "Damned glad I missed that one."

Everyone chuckled.

"Yeah, you'd just gotten kicked up stairs." Mark said. "We sure missed you."

Kerry watched her partner from the corner of her eye, seeing the look of muted glee appear in her eyes, as her lips twitched into a grin. "I bet you did." She leaned on her chair arm. "There's nothing as comforting to have on a tough project as this thing." She indicated Dar with her thumb. "I can attest to that."

"Thing?" Dar leaned on her own chair arm and gave Kerry a raised eyebrow look.

"Ms. Roberts?" One of the techs spoke up shyly. "Is it true the fellow in charge on the boat is your father?"

Dar tore her attention from her partner, and picked up her glass of wine for a sip. "It's true." She said. "Some of you guys have met him before."

"Absolutely." Mark agreed. "He's a great guy, and he tells the funniest st…"

Dar looked at him.

“Stories about boats.” Mark redirected his speech. “Really funny.”

Nervous grins all around. “I think some of those contractors are scared of him.” The first tech commented. “I heard them talking about him when they were out in back of the building using the pay phones.”

Dar felt a little uncertain, unused to talking about her family in front of her staff. “Well, he doesn’t take much crap.”

“Gee.” Mark took a swallow of his beer. “Wonder who that sounds like.”

The table full of techs chuckled again, this time a little less nervously when Dar joined in, lifting a hand in silent self deprecation. “Yeah, I come by it honestly.” She assented. “But he’s also retired Navy… he was a SEAL… that takes it to a different level sometimes.”

“A SEAL?” One of the techs whistled. “Wow.”

“That’s pretty cool.” Another said. “I was in for six years. Those guys are tough.”

“I was helping check off those switches that came in yesterday.” One of the female techs spoke up shyly. “I was a little creeped out with those guys in there. They were making all kinds of comments, but then he came into the loading area and shut them all up.” She looked over at Dar. “That was really cool.”

Dar smiled.

“Dad’s got a lot of old fashioned chivalry in him.” Kerry spoke up. “One of those guys who’s totally not embarrassed to open doors for women, or give them seats on a bus, you know?”

The men all looked a little embarrassed, themselves. “I, um..” The tech next to Mark cleared his throat. “Don’t think girls like that stuff anymore. It’s like, chauvinism, isn’t it?”

Everyone looked at Kerry, to see what her answer would be. She took a sip of her beer, giving herself a moment to think about it. “Hm.” She pondered the complex ideas behind the question. “Opening a door for someone really isn’t anything but courtesy. I think… “

“I open doors for you.” Dar commented.

“I think it depends how you were brought up.” The woman tech spoke up suddenly. “It’s like, your parents teach you one way or the other. My mother was a big time radical feminist, and she always said it was condescending when men treated her like that.”

“Yeah, my mom said the same thing.” Mark agreed. “You open a door for her, she’d slam it in your face.”

Everyone chuckled. “Well, I come from a very traditional family.’ Kerry said. “Though I think my father would have paid someone to be chivalrous for him if he could have gotten away with it. We were always treated like ladies, and let me tell you.. it gave me a hive.”

Everyone peeked at Dar next. “My mother’s a pagan.” She supplied agreeably.

Silence. Everyone looked at Dar in surprise, except Kerry. “Well, she is.” Dar shrugged. “She’s about as non traditional as you can get.. but she loves when my dad does stuff like that for her.”

“Really?” Mark asked.

“Yeah.” Dar drained her wine glass and set it on the table. “But then, my dad doesn’t do it for show. It’s just how he is.”

“And just how you are.” Kerry gave her partner a fond look. “Daddy’s girl.”

Dar blushed slightly, almost invisibly in the reddish lamp light. Her eyebrows twitched, and she glanced at the rest of the table before looking back at Kerry.

“Well, my old man didn’t give me anything but a hairy back.” Mark broke the little silence, drawing attention back to himself. “And probably a bum ticker.” He added. “So it’s a crap shoot.. but like, you really can’t win because if you do nice stuff like that, you got a fifty-fifty shot at best the girl likes it, you know?”

Two of the guy techs nodded. “Yeah.” One said. “My girlfriend is like this independent chick, yeah? She’s pre-law, works in a woman lawyer’s office, pro abortion, all that stuff.. and I find out last week she really wants to get married, stop working, and have kids.”

“Oh, god.” The taller, blond female tech covered her eyes. “My husband hinted to me last night he’d like to have kids.”

“So let him, Barb.” Dar drawled. “He can stay home and take care of em.”

Everyone laughed. Barb leaned forward, resting an elbow on the table. “That’s really something women in our industry have to deal with , that you guys don’t.” She said. “I’ve been turned down for jobs because I might start breeding. You know, that sucks. If you’re a guy, that doesn’t happen.”

“Hey, we breed.” Mark protested. “I’ve had to give plenty of guys time off to go take care of their kids.”

“Three months?” Barb asked him.

“Well…”

“It’s hard enough to keep even in this business as it is, being female.” Barb said. “Nobody thinks women belong in technical fields, even today.” Her eyes tracked briefly to Dar and Kerry. “I have to tell you, you guys were the reason I even applied here.”

“We take flack.” Kerry responded quietly. “There are a lot of people out there that don’t think Dar and I should be doing what we’re doing, and it takes a lot more effort to get past that than you think.”

Mark looked between them. “You guys are making me feel like a jerk, just because I got a Y in the big ol’ choromo-dice throw.” He protested. “Hey, it’s not our fault! I hire most the women who apply to us. There just really, really few and far between!”

Barb leaned back, and nodded. “Mark, I know that. You should see the looks I get from other women when I tell them what I do. You’d think I was telling them I was a car mechanic.”

Dar chuckled wryly. “Well, given what my other choice of profession was, my family’s very glad I picked this one.” She said. “But I’d have made a lousy sailor anyway.”

Mark leaned back. “No offense, DR, but that would have been a big waste of brain cells.”

“Yeah.” Barb agreed. “That’s for sure.”

Dar shrugged modestly.

Someone approached, and cleared their throat gently. Dar looked up to see their reporter friend Elecia standing there, hands behind her back and a diffident expression on her face. “Ah. Evening.”

“Hi.” The woman said. “I know you probably think I’m stalking you all, but I happened to be having dinner over there.” She pointed to a corner of the restaurant. “Mind if I ask your group here a few questions?”

Dar studied her briefly, then shrugged and turned back to the table. “You guys mind talking to a reporter?”

Various reactions, ranging from wariness to outright alarm faced her.

“Hey, relax.” The reporter chuckled. “I’m from the Herald, not Panic Seven.” She said. “I’m doing a story on the work you all are doing at the pier, and I just had a few questions about some of the things you were talking about.”

Kerry still had her doubts. She knew Dar respected the woman, but after their experiences of the past few weeks, no reporter seemed trustworthy to her, if any ever had. “You know, Ms Rodriguez, these folks have worked really hard the past few days, and they’re going to have to work even harder in the next few. Is it really fair to disturb them during a moment of peace, here?”

Rodriguez studied her. “You know what being a reporter is like, Ms. Stuart? “ She responded conversationally. “It’s like being addicted to everything. You never have enough. You always want more, more, more… every question brings up another question.”

Kerry merely waited, giving the woman her best incomprehensible stare.

The reporter looked at Dar, who folded her hands over her stomach and refrained from comment. Then Rodriguez shrugged. “No, it’s not fair, and my husband’s going to kick my ass since it’s the first time I’ve seen him all week.” She turned to the table. “Some other time, ladies and gents. Good luck, by the way.”

With that, she turned and left, walking down the small flight of steps and sliding into a half hidden banquette table near the window.

Everyone was silent for a few moments, then Carlos, who’d been in the closet with her that day, cleared his throat a little. “Thanks, Kerry.” He murmured. “This whole news and filming stuff is kinda getting old.”

“Tell me about it.” Kerry sympathized. “We’ve had these people in our faces for weeks.” She glanced after the reporter, then looked at Dar. “You want to go talk to her?”

“Nope.” Dar seemed content to stay right where she was. “I hear a hot brownie sundae calling my name.” She tapped her thumbs against each other, and looked around the table. “Anyone else interested?”

The atmosphere relaxed, and everyone leaned back, sharing dessert menus as the serving staff cleared the table of their dinner plates. Kerry waited for the buzz of conversation to rise, and then she leaned closer to Dar. “Was that a mistake?”

Pale blue eyes turned her way, warmed from within as they met hers. “For them? No.” Dar answered.

“For us?” Kerry persisted.

Dar shrugged. “Nah.”

Kerry frowned. Dar reached over and smoothed the furrow in her brow with her thumb, then she ruffled Kerry’s hair.

Oh well. Kerry silently exhaled. Just another pass of the dice.

* * *

Dar entered her outer office, empty at this early hour of the morning, and slipped into her own space closing the door behind her. The windows that surrounded the room showed the pearlescent light of dawn, and she set a Styrofoam cup of coffee down on her desk as she dropped into her chair and nudged the power switch on her desktop.

Nothing could happen on board the ship until after lunch. So she decided to come in to the office and get caught up on things there, before she joined Kerry out at the pier.

While she waited for her PC to boot, she pulled her inbox over and began sorting through its contents. Security reports were on top, and she set those aside for reading. A two page single spaced incident report followed, and this she studied, resting her head on one hand as she read.

Their security department had been thorough. The Army ringer hadn't stolen a uniform at all – and now Dar wished she'd shown the woman to their services manager. She'd worked for him, after all, applying for a job the day after Dar had gotten back from Orlando, and passing their mandatory background check.

Of course. She'd gotten herself assigned to the swing shift, starting at noon, and working until eight. Who would notice if she stayed a little later? How many nights did she prowl the hallways, looking for tidbits?

And for that matter, Dar wondered, why search her office? She looked around the big room. There was nothing, absolutely nothing in the office worth searching for. Her desk she kept locked, but only when she was doing evaluations. Otherwise, the most scintillating item in her desk drawer was a handful of Hershey's kisses, deposited regularly there by Kerry.

Dar hated paper. She never printed anything out if she could help it, and everything she did was kept locked up tight in her system shares on the network. The Army brat could have riffled through her office for hours and not found anything more interesting than the half done sketch of Kerry on her notepad, laying face up in the shallow drawer at the desk's center.

So, what was she looking for?

Dar reviewed the report again, and couldn't find anything really to fault in it. Outside of requiring the cleaning company to do the same government level security scan they did on their own new hires…

Well. With a faint shake of her head, Dar turned and opened her mail program. If that's what they had to do, then that's what they had to do. She typed up a request to security, and copied the cleaning vendor's president on it.

Then she went back to looking at the reports. Eleanor had turned in a terse, one page missive, reluctantly admitting to the identify of the marketing admin who'd logged into the spare PC. It was an older woman, Mary Hingtanton, who had been with ILS for fifteen years, and was close to retirement.

Why had she been logged on there? According to Eleanor it had been breathtakingly, stupidly, simple. She'd been ordering lunch for the senior managers, and forgotten the order. She'd logged onto the network to get it from her mailbox, and then forgotten to log off.

True?

It was very plausible. Dar knew Mary, who was a fluffy, elderly woman with a heart of gold. She didn't really suspect Mary of being the Army's accomplice, but it all seemed just so..pat. Dar grumbled under her breath and swallowed gulp of her café con leche.

Could it have just been opportunistic, as Mouser had said? Dar didn't want to believe it. The coincidence was just too strong for her to buy into the notion that the little runt had just gotten lucky.

With a sigh, she turned back to her mail, and composed a note to Eleanor.

> *Eleanor –*
>
> *I'm sure Mary didn't do any of this on purpose. Try to find out if she saw anyone else in the break room while she was doing it. I just don't buy it all happening by happy accident.*
>
> *We're still looking for someone who logged in by your area on Saturday. Anyone in your group griping?*
>
> *Dar*

"She's gonna love that." Dar murmured. Then she turned back to the reports and scanned the next one, from Duks. Again, she shook her head. Coincidence, that someone had gotten to one of his people with an offer they couldn't refuse, at this very moment?

It all seemed just so unlikely. Dar wanted to find the pattern behind it, the one thread that would link it all together and make it make sense, because right now, it just wasn't.

The Army people, the auditors, the mystery person in marketing, cellular devices…hackers.. Dar briefly covered her eyes, the chaos making her head spin. Then she rubbed her eyes and settled down to answer her mail, deciding to do something about something she did understand instead.

* * *

It wasn't often that Kerry could watch the sun rising on a weekday through the sliding glass doors to the townhouse. She was sprawled on the couch, the newspaper open in her hands and a steaming cup of hot tea nearby as the warm, golden light spread across the room.

The crew wouldn't be in until nine at the pier, so that had given her a while to relax after Dar left and treat herself to a leisurely morning instead of their usual busy slate of things to do. They'd decided to skip the gym, since Dar's foot was really bothering her, and Kerry hadn't felt like going alone, so here she was browsing the front page with plenty of time before she had to leave.

It felt sort of good not to be rushing around. She didn't mind their usual schedule, but after all the malarkey going on around the pier and around the office, it was nice to simply relax for one morning. She scanned the headlines, taking a moment to read about a prehistoric site discovered during a construction dig, then switching over to a story covering some new additions to the airport.

She'd really been wondering if she was going to show up in the business section, but nothing was there from their friend the reporter, and in fact, no mention was made about the pier at all, which surprised her a lot. She'd expected to see it splashed everywhere – after all, it was summer and there weren't any hurricanes brewing. Why wasn't the story being covered?

"Hm." Kerry made a note to give their reporter friend a call. Maybe she could mend a fence from last night, and get a little information while she was doing it. In the mean time, she lifted her cup and sipped the contents, enjoying the blackberry tea and the rich taste of the honey she'd sweetened it with.

Chino was curled up on the end of the couch just past her feet, very happy with the fact that Kerry was keeping her company. Kerry patted her on the leg with her bare toes, as she turned to the important part of the paper, the comics.

What would it be like, she wondered suddenly, if she could do this every day? Not read the paper, but relax at home and not have to go to work? Kerry pondered Dogbert's image while she considered the thought. "Hm." She poked her lower lip out a little. "It would be fun, for about two days, Chi."

"Growf?"

"Yeah, about two days, then I'd go postal." Kerry shook her head and went back to the cartoons. Dar had once said to her that she didn't care if Kerry wanted to stay home and what was it? Sell seashell futures? Or write poetry, or whatever.

But she knew, aside from how she would feel having Dar support her, that living an isolated life out here just wasn't in her cards. She was a social creature, and she liked the interaction with her co-workers and friends on a daily basis.

In fact, she wondered if even Dar would now choose a less interactive lifestyle, though her partner was far more a loner than she was. She suspected Dar had gotten used to having people around her and that she'd miss it if she made a change.

Wouldn't she? Kerry let the paper fold down onto her chest and gazed past it, at the sunlight catching dust motes in the air. Or had Dar sacrificed her natural comfort in isolation as a trade off for their relationship, deferring to Kerry's more social wishes?

Hm. Kerry now wondered if she should worry about that. Would it all get to be too much for Dar, one of these days? Or would her partner just consider it a worthwhile price? "Well, I could ask her." She murmured. "Or would she freak out if I asked her?"

No, she decided after a moment, Dar would not freak out to be asked, and she resolved to do so in the very near future. With a slight nod, she picked up the paper and went back to her reading.

Only to put the paper down as her cell phone rang. With a tolerant look, she picked it up and answered it, without glancing at the caller ID. “Kerry Stuart.”

“Mm. Formal.” Dar rumbled softly. “I like it.”

Kerry wiggled her toes. “Hey.” She wondered, as she had before, if Dar was in some weird way psychic, since she always seemed to call when Kerry was thinking the hardest about her. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Kerry repeated. “So..”

“Just wanted to call you.” Dar said. “Maria called in sick just now, and it’s too quiet here.”

Kerry looked around. “It’s pretty quiet here too.” She said. “Chi’s sleeping on the couch, and I’m reading the funnies. Did you get your stuff done?”

“Pretty much. I’m going to go over and talk to Duks in a few minutes, find out what happened with his auditor. Mark’s meeting with the guys who invented that cellular thing today.”

“Yeah?” Kerry stretched her legs out, arching her back a little. “You want to stay there and talk with them? That was a pretty wild gizmo.”

After a moment’s silence, Dar grunted. “No… Mark knows what to ask.” She said. “I just wish we could tie any part of this together.. I can’t figure out how any of it’s connected.”

“You mean all the stuff that’s happened the last two weeks?”

“Yeah.”

Kerry considered. “What if it isn’t?” She suggested.

“You mean we have twelve different security issues in two weeks and none of them have anything to do with each other?” Dar’s voice rose at the end of the statement, gaining a touch of incredulity.

“Well?” Kerry smiled. “Hon, if you can’t see a connection, maybe it’s not there.”

Dar sighed audibly.

“Did that Army guy contact you?” Kerry asked.

“Left a message yesterday.” Dar said. “I was going to call him just before I left… give me a reason not to talk long.”

“Good plan.” Kerry said. “Hey, look at it this way. He obviously is interested in the new stuff you’re working on. Why not sell it to him?”

Dar grunted. “It’s not ready.”

“So tell him that.”

“I don’t want to sell it to him.” Dar replied. “He broke into our office. Why should I give him what he wants?” She asked plaintively.

Kerry sighed. “Because he’s willing to pay for it, and if this ship thing goes down the tubes like you and I both expect it to, we need something to fill the gap, Dar.”

“Hmph.”

“Think about it.”

“The ship thing’ll work out.” Dar argued. “It’s just going to be a bitch.”

Kerry stared pensively at the ceiling. “We’ll get it working, Dar.. but I looked at the numbers yesterday, and given what our costs are, there’s no way we’re gong to put in the lowest bid.”

“We could fudge that.”

“And do the same thing Telegenics does?” Kerry replied somewhat sharply. “No thanks, Dar. If we win, I want it to be a legit win, not a lowball.”

Dar was silent for a brief moment, then she chuckled. “Okay, I’ll talk to the dogface.” She said. “We’ll work something out. Need anything from here?”

“You.”

“Besides that.”

Kerry considered. “My projects portfolio, matter of fact. It’s in my top desk drawer.”

“You got it. See you in a bit, Ker.”

“See you.” Kerry folded the phone closed and laid it on her stomach. She let the paper drop to the coffee table and closed her eyes, allowing her thoughts to drift pensively, focusing on what Dar had said, and what she hadn’t.

* * *

Dar limped down the hallway that connected her office to Kerry's, and popped the door open to her partner's office. It was quiet inside, as she'd expected, and she went directly to the desk and sat down behind it.

Unlike her own, Kerry's desk had a judicious amount of personal items on it. Where she just had her fighting fish and her inbox, Kerry had several small ceramic animals, some trinkets she'd picked up on their vacations, and pictures.

The largest one was an unapologetic, completely non-business related shot of Dar, and she gave it a brief glances as she rolled back to open the drawer. A second was of the two of them together on the back of the Dixie, and third was them, and her parents on the pier.

The pictures were positioned so Kerry could glance up from her monitor and look at them and Dar had often seen her do just that – as though she were giving her mind a time out and focusing on the things she felt were most important in her life.

Dar did that too, but she kept the photos on the screen s of her pc and laptop, rather than out on her desk.

Why? Dar retrieved the slim, leather portfolio from the drawer and paused, leaning her forearms on the desk blotter as she regarded the pictures. Did Kerry think she was embarrassed , and didn't want to be that public about their relationship?

With a slight frown, Dar started to push herself to her feet, pausing when the outer door opened and Mayte entered. "Ah." She watched the young woman's body jerk in surprise. "Sorry. Morning."

"Oh! Ms. Dar!" Mayte blurted. "I did not expect you to be in here!"

Dar held up the portfolio. "Just getting something for Kerry. How's your mom feeling?"

Mayte approached, viewing Dar with a touch of trepidation. "It is the flu, I think." She said mournfully. "Which of course means my papa and I will probably also get it. Poor mama!"

Flu. Ick. "She need anything?" Dar asked. "If she does, or if you need to go get stuff for her, take off. That's an order."

Mayte smiled shyly. "I think she is fine for now, thank you." She replied. "But I will tell her you said that – it will make her very happy to hear. She felt bad about staying home today."

"Why?" Dar started to limp around the desk. "We have sick time for a reason. Tell her to take any time she needs off.. no one needs to be in here when they're feeling crappy."

Mayte looked at her injured foot, then she looked at Dar's face, blinking innocently. "Si, I will tell her that."

“I don’t count.” Dar muttered, heading for the door.

“Ms. Dar, did you for really save Kerry from a shark?”

Dar stopped in mid motion, turning with one hand on the door latch. “Huh?”

“They were talking in the break room just now.” Mayte blushed a little. “About that you saved Kerry from a shark, and that is how you got your foot hurt.”

A shark?? Dar looked down at her foot in reflex. “Um..”

“That is a very brave thing.” Mayte said. “Was it a very big shark?”

Well. Dar looked at the respectful, almost worshipful expression on Mayte’s face. Theoretically it could have been a shark, I guess. “Happened too fast.” She temporized. “I couldn’t really see that well how big it was.”

“Wow.” Mayte smiled.

Dar opened the door. “If you need us, we’ll be at the pier.” She decided a change of subject was needed. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Mayte nodded. “I hope you have good luck there today.”

“Me too.” Dar edged through the doorway and waved the portfolio in goodbye as she closed the door behind her.

Shark. She shook her head as she headed back to her office. Well, at least it was positive for a change, but she couldn’t help but wonder how the story had gotten so out of whack.

Maybe Kerry would know.

* * *

Kerry became aware of her cell phone ringing again, and she opened her eyes, her mind struggling to reconcile the change in the light outside as she flipped the phone open. “Hello?” She cleared her throat of it’s huskiness, a sense of disorientation coming over her.

“Hey. Where are you?” Dar asked. “Here somewhere?”

Kerry half rolled over and spotted the clock on the entertainment center. “Oh, shit.” It read 9:30.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Her partner chuckled. “Thought I didn’t see your car in the lot.”

“Jesus.. I fell back asleep on the couch.” Kerry got up, swinging her legs down to the ground. “Give me ten minutes and I’ll be on my way over.” She scrubbed her hand over her face, trying to get some alertness back. “I can’t believe I did that. Holy Moses.”

"Ker, relax."

"Teach you to leave me here alone." Kerry stood and headed for the bathroom. "I've got to splash some cold water on my face. Hang on."

"KERRISON!"

Kerry paused. "Yes?"

"Would you chill, please? Take your time. There isn't jack squat going on here yet." Dar laughed. "If you fell asleep, you probably needed it. Stop freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out." Kerry trudged into the bathroom and glared at her rumpled reflection. "I just hate being a dumb ass!"

"You're not a dumb ass."

Kerry sighed. "Okay. Let me get my act together and get out of here. I'll see you in a little while." She hung up and turned, tossing the cell phone onto the water bed before she filled the sink with water and cupped her hands in it, splashing a large quantity onto her face. "Jesus." She pulled a soft, fluffy blue towel from the bar and patted herself dry.

She felt a little dazed, and she realized she'd been in a deep sleep when Dar had called. At the edges of her memory, she thought she detected hints of a bizarre dream, but nothing concrete popped into her mind's eye and she didn't have any residual discomfort, as though it had been a nightmare.

Okay. She ran her fingers through her hair, slightly damp from the water. Dar said nothing was going on, so she had time to get down a cup of coffee, and maybe not feel like such a space case. Accordingly, she headed for the kitchen, pausing to let Chino out as she went to the coffee maker.

While she waited for the water to drip, she pulled down the flat screen and keyed up her mailbox, reviewing the new items in silence as the kitchen filled with the scent of freshly brewed coffee. Dar liked to listen to her mail read by the device, but Kerry preferred to review it visually, even though the small keyboard was awkward to use.

She just didn't like ordering around a machine. It felt weird.

She opened the first mail, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand, then cursed as she heard her cell phone go off again. "Son of a biscuit." She bolted for the bedroom, racing around the couch and diving into the waterbed as she scrambled to grab the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, sis." Her sister Angie's voice answered her.

"Hey." Kerry rolled over onto her side. "What's up? You okay?"

“Not really. Me and Andrew are outta here.” Angie told her. “Got anything you think we could move into fast down there? I thought about Virginia, with those college friends of mine, but it’s just too weird.”

Kerry scratched d her ear, thinking hard. “I talked to my old apartment complex. They’ve got a two bedroom.. is Brian coming too?’

Silence. “I don’t know.” Angie answered unhappily.

Jesus. “Okay, well, it’s a nice complex, and the manager said he’s got two units he can rent on short notice. You could use that until you guys.. until you figure out what you want to do.” Kerry said. “I can set it all up for you if you want me to.”

“Is it a nice place?”

Kerry pondered. “I lived there.” She said. “Yeah, it’s upscale, a lot of professionals live there. It’s gated, and there’s a lot of child development places around.” She wondered, suddenly, if Angie expected her to invite them to live with her and Dar.

God. She hoped not, for a number of very selfish reasons.

“That sounds okay.” Angie responded, after a long sigh. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“I did.” Kerry reminded her.

“You’re you.” Her sister shot back. “And you don’t have a baby.”

Kerry caught the omission. “Is he keeping..” Andrew had an older sister, a cute little girl she had very vague memories of.

“Yes.” Angie said. “He… well, Andrew isn’t his son, you know?”

“Bastard.”

“Well, yeah.” A faint attempt at wan humor came across. “That’s the problem.” She said. “And maybe I’m being gloomy or… Bri may surprise me and come too. He didn’t say no, just that he had to work some stuff out.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.” Angie murmured. “Sorry, didn’t mean to land this on you, Ker. I know you must be busy.”

Kerry smoothed her hand over the rumpled bed linen. “Actually, I’m at home at the moment. I.. well, anyway, whatever I can do to help, Ang. Just let me know, and I’ll make arrangements. You driving down?”

“I don’t know yet.” Her sister said. “I’d hate to make that drive with the baby. I’m going to wait a day or two and see what’s up with Brian. Maybe we’ll fly down and get a car somewhere when we’re there.. are you sick or something?”

“No… I just had.. um.. something to take care of. I’m leaving for work in a little while.. but listen, keep me in the loop, okay?”

“I will.” Angie sounded relieved. “It’s a good feeling to know we’ve got a place to go to when we get there. Do you think Brian will have a problem getting a job? He’s doing really well with the law firm.” She asked. “I figure I can find something to do part time.”

Brian had made junior partner, and Kerry felt pretty sure he’d be all right. If he decided to join Angie, of course. She found it hard to believe he’d just abandon her. It wasn’t the Brian she remembered from her years growing up with him. He’d lived in his older brother’s shadow, but he’d retained a core of decency she didn’t think.. or didn’t want to think, had disappeared. “I think you’ll be fine.” She reassured her sister. “Don’t worry, sis. It’ll work out.”

Angie sighed again. “My other choice is moving home.”

Absolutely a zero choice, no chance option for her. “Hm.” Kerry murmured. “Well, it’s a big house, Ang, and it’s just mom in it now.”

“I know.” Angie said quietly. “She wants me to go live there, but Ker.. I can’t. I can’t take those oh, so Christian pitying eyes on me twenty four seven.”

“Yeah.” Kerry nodded. “I hear you.”

“I knew you would understand.”

Kerry did, with an internal sympathy that hit right in her guts. “I do. So just relax, talk to Bri, and make the best decision you can, Ang. We’ll work things out if and when you get here.”

“Thanks, Kerry.” Angie replied warmly. “I love you.”

“Love you too, sis. Talk to you later.” Kerry hung up, then quickly rolled off the waterbed just in case her body got any ideas of repeating it’s earlier trick. She juggled the cell phone in her hand as she went back to the kitchen, deep in thought.

Sometimes, she reflected soberly, it took someone else's misfortune to jog you to the reality of your own lack of it.

Hm.

PART 25

KERRY SHOULDERED HER BRIEFCASE AND PICKED UP THE BAG FROM ATLANTA Bread Factory as she hopped out of her car. The sky had gotten cloudy overhead, and there was a bit of a rumble far off, but the breeze had picked up and it's coolness was welcome.

She felt a bit conspicuous, to be honest, crossing the parking lot at nearly eleven instead of nine. However, the men working around the front of the terminal merely looked up at her, then went back to what they were doing, and the light stream of people coming down the steps from the terminal didn't give her a second glance.

Okay, so it was conspicuous mostly in her own mind. After all, even her own staff would probably assume she'd come from the office and no one would question her anyway. Definitely not with Dar there. She remembered once in a staff meeting when someone.. had it been Jose? Yeah. Jose had questioned her being ten minutes late and Dar had turned to him and said..

Kerry had to muffle a smile. Well, it hadn't been nice, and it had been typical Dar, and Jose had gotten mad. But he'd never asked her about being late ever again. She'd felt a little awkward about it then, and she'd told Dar that.

Dar had told her to get over it. So she had, but she was still aware of how people felt.

Kerry pushed her sunglasses up on the bridge of her nose and mounted the two steps up to the entranceway, slowing a little as the door opened and the security guard stood back to allow her inside. "Morning." She murmured.

“Morning, ma’am..” The guard replied. “Ms. Roberts asked me to tell you she was in the back when you came in.” He informed her promptly. “And that she’s looking for you.”

“Thanks.” Kerry removed her glasses and stuck them into pocket of the light cotton blouse she was wearing, unbuttoned over a plain, green t-shirt. Inside most of the techs were waiting around, relaxing and sitting on top of the switches they had yet to install. “Hey guys.”

Several of the techs turned, and waved. “Morning, ma’am!” One called out. “Just got here in time, beat the rain, huh?”

“Looks like it.” Kerry kept moving, crossing the front part of the terminal and heading for the office.

Near one wall, stacks of new boxes were being opened, revealing servers and rack mount kits, that would be their next task once the infrastructure was in place. Kerry was frankly more worried about that than the network gear since they would be installing new systems almost everywhere on the ship.

“Hey.” Mark intercepted her. “We’re still on track for after lunch… they figure 1pm they’ll let us start going back on board. I was going to have my guys take in the gear, then Randy’s team was gonna haul up the new boxes.. do you know if they got the racks put in?”

Kerry paused. “Hang on, let me get my file.” She led him to the back office, Inside, several of their administrative people were busy at work, and at the back, spare desk, Dar was huddled over her laptop pecking away furiously. “”Hey, boss.”

Dar looked up. “Hey.” She leaned back and waited for Kerry to come over. “Good morning.” Her eyes twinkled, as Kerry stuck her tongue out. “Raining outside yet?”

“Not yet.” Kerry sat on the edge of the desk and put her lunch bag down. “Did you bring my folio? I need to check something for Mark.”

Dar produced the folio and handed it over. “What’s this?” She tapped the bag with one finger, sniffing delicately at the brown surface and waggling her eyebrows.

“Lunch.” Kerry opened her folder and checked the schedule, running her finger along one line on the topmost document. “According to this, Mark, we got the server racks in Monday.” She announced. “So we’re set to go.”

“Great.” Mark nodded. “You know what the bitch is going to be?”

“Which one?” Dar and Kerry answered at the same time. They exchanged glances, and grins.

“Getting the user stuff out.” Mark proceeded on gamely. “I don’t think most of those places are ready for it.. he offices and the bars and stuff.”

Kerry sighed. “Probably not. We’d better stage everything in here, like we’re doing with the infrastructure, and wait for each space to be finished.”

“Man.” Mark shook his head.

“I know.” Kerry acknowledged the impossibility of it all. ““We have three days. Assuming we get the network in today, and the servers mounted.. that only leaves two days to get all the end units in, programmed and running.”

Dar whistled softly under her breath as she typed.

“Do you know something we don’t?” Kerry closed her folio and eyed her partner. “Or are you being cheerful for some other reason?”

“Hm." Dar stopped whistling. “Maybe I just like a challenge?” She looked up.

“Dar, this isn’t a challenge, it’s a nightmare.” Kerry chuckled. “C’mon now.”

Dar leaned back, lacing her fingers behind her head. “Depends on how you look at it.” She disagreed. “Sure, there’s a lot of work involved, and sure, we have a ridiculous amount of time to do it in, but the fact is, Kerry, that’s all we have, so we just have to turn it around and look at it in a positive light.”

Kerry blinked at her. “Huh?”

“If we do this, no matter if we get the bid or not, we win.” Dar told her, in a quiet voice. “Because we’ll have done something everyone here thinks can’t be done.”

Mark nodded. “Yeah.” He agreed. “But on the other hand, boss, everyone expects the impossible because you’re here, and you always get whatever it is we need to do done.”

Kerry crossed her arms and also nodded. “He’s right.”

Dar looked from one to the other. “He is?”

“Of course.” Kerry said. “There’s not one person in this building who thinks you’re not going to make this happen, Dar.”

“Okay.” Dar rocked back a little. “So why are the two of you so gloomy then?”

Kerry and Mark exchanged looks. “Did we just talk ourselves into a corner?” Kerry asked, with a slightly incredulous tone.

“Um.. yeah.” Mark agreed sheepishly. “I think we did.”

Dar spread her arms out to either side. “Pick one, folks. Either you believe this non-existent mojo I have to create miracles, or you don’t.”

Mark started backpedaling out of the office. “”I’d never dis Dar’s mojo.” He said, just before disappearing out the door. “Never!”

Dar looked at Kerry, one eyebrow lifting.

“Honey, I’d never dis your mojo either, but that has nothing to do with this project.” Kerry smiled charmingly at her, her grin broadening as she watched the visible blush rise up Dar’s neck. “Anyway, I guess we’ll just go like heck, and let the chips fall where they may. I’m a little more concerned about having all these contractors in spaces we’re putting gear in until we get the people on the ship around to use it.”

“They’ve got security.” Dar commented. “Once that stuff’s down, they’ll be responsible for it.”

“Doesn’t help us if it gets stolen and we don’t have it to demo.”

“Hm. Good point.”

“We’ll think of something.” Kerry opened her portfolio again and studied the contents.

“Mm.” Dar turned her attention to the paper bag, now that the other people in the office had stopped peeking at her and grinning. She removed the contents, flattening the bag and setting the wrapped sandwiches on top of it.

“Okay, I’ll be back.” Kerry hopped off the desk and headed for the door. “Watch my sandwich for me, will you?” She vanished into the hallway, bouncing a little to the music trickling in from the setup area.

“Sure.” Dar sat back and observed the wrapped item. “Does it do tricks?” She called after her partner, ignoring the muffled snickers from the other workers in the room.

After a second, Kerry’s head popped back around the doorframe. “I’ve got a trick I’d love to show you.. it involves a water balloon and an underwear waistband. Want to see it?”

Dar scratched her nose, and made a wry face.

“Didn’t think so.” Kerry disappeared again.

Dar chuckled and went back to her laptop, nudging aside the lunch bag for the time being. She lifted her head as she heard muffled giggles, and gave the rest of the room a droll look. “Something wrong?”

“No, ma’am.” The closest of the workers shook her head. “Not a darn thing.”

“Good.” Dar leaned back and propped her knee up against the desk edge, pulling the laptop onto it’s namesake. Her programming screen was up, and she was working on cleaning up some of the code from her new application.

"Ms. Roberts?"

Dar looked up. "Yes, Edith?"

"I heard yesterday that you wrestled a shark in the ocean, and saved Kerry from being eaten by it." Edith turned around in her chair. "Is that true?"

Dar found herself the center of attention. "Um.."

"And that's how you hurt your foot, right?" One of the other women chimed in. "I heard you kicked it right in the teeth!"

Dar looked at her foot and then back up at the room. "Well…um.."

"Man, that must have been scary." Edith shook her head. "Now I know why I don't go in the ocean!" She turned back to her desk.

"You can say that again." The woman next to her tsked.

"Well, now, hold on." Dar rallied to the defense of her favorite environment. "The ocean's a wonderful place to go. I've been diving in it since I was four, and I hardly ever get so much as a nick."

Everyone looked at her foot, then up at her face.

"This was at the shore!" Dar protested. "We were twenty feet from the beach! Last time I saw a shark when I was under was.. um.. " She considered. "Last month."

"Brr!" Edith went back to her pc. "All I can say is, Kerry's one lucky woman."

Dar focused her attention back on her screen, the last few words ringing in her ears. They made her smile.

* * *

"Okay." Kerry crouched down in front of the row of boxes. Balanced on the tops of them were six large rack mount servers, their LED's flickering promisingly. "So, we've got the two main servers up, the accounting system and the point of sale system. Right?"

"Right." Randy Escobar squatted down next to her. "I hooked 'em up on that switch there, and tried them out, but I think some of them need to be on different networks."

Kerry got up and looked behind the servers. "You plugged in all the network cards?"

"Yeah. Wanted to make sure all of them worked."

"Okay." Kerry nodded. "We can deal with the nitty details later. Long as the hardware is up… are those thirty six gig drives?"

“Raid five, yeah.” Randy agreed. “And the backup device’ll hook up to this server here.” He patted the first large machine. “Decent system.. these are the new dual processor models.”

Kerry examined the back of the machines, then walked around and examined the front of them. “Okay, so here’s the plan.” She said. “Mark’s group is going to get the backbone in, then patch everything.”

“What a mess…”

“Yeah.. a lot of cable.” Kerry agreed. “While they’re patching, I want you to get these mounted and plugged into everything.”

“Do they have AC in there?” Barry asked. “Cause if they don’t, Kerry, you know these suckers’ll be up for about ten minutes and then they’ll shut down.”

Oh, crap. Kerry rested her arm on the server. “You know, I don’t know.” She had to admit. “Let me think about this a minute.” She consulted her schedule. The air conditioning was in process along with their cabling and the electricity. Did the ducting get finished before they all got kicked off? “Well, plan on installing then at any rate. Let me find out what’s going on with the AC vendor.”

“Sorry, Kerry.” Barry looked apologetic.

“Not your fault. I should have remembered that.” Kerry got up and headed towards the back door. She could see several vendor crew chiefs assembled outside, and she angled her steps towards them. Halfway there, she stopped and stood, as another idea occurred to her. “I bet the air conditioning’s the last thing we’re gonna get.” She mused. “So…”

“Hey, Ker?” Mark came up behind her with a sheaf of paperwork.

“Mark, how many spare portable AC units do we have?” Kerry turned and faced him.

“Huh?”

“Portable AC units. I know we’ve got them for the communications center since Dar bought them after the last AC outage in the building.”

Mark thought a moment. “Um.. six, I think.”

“Great.” Kerry nodded. “Send someone with a truck to the office. Get all six, and have them back here ASAP.” She directed. “Make sure they remember the drain hoses… I remember us having to use that one in accounting once and it costing me a replacement in Duks office.”

“Um.. okay.” Mark handed her the sheaf of papers. “Here’s all the packing slips. I guess the bean counters need them.” He trotted off, leaving Kerry in relative solitude.

She looked down at the papers. “Yeah.” She tucked them carefully into her folio. “They will. When I get done with them.” With a sigh, she walked over to the windows and peered out at the ship, noting the heavy clouds gathering over it.

And didn’t that just encapsulate the entire project, too.

* * *

“Kerry?”

“Yeah?” Kerry turned from where she was seated on a box, watching the rain come down.

Mark took the box next to her. “Crappy weather.”

Kerry kicked her heels lightly against the cardboard. “You came all the way across the room to say that?” She gave him a curious look.

“No… I was gonna say, I’ve still got those tarps we used over at Bellsouth. You think we could put them up between here and that ramp and not get soaked?”

Kerry observed the downpour, which suddenly seemed to be driving sideways instead of up and down. “Nope.” She pulled one knee up and circled it with both arms. “I think we’re going to get soaked no matter what. Got a change of clothes?”

“Everyone does.” Mark replied succinctly. “After yesterday.”

Kerry chuckled softly. “Yeah, I sure was glad I did.” She admitted. “That was about the guckiest situation I’ve ever been in.”

Mark was quiet for a few moments, his eyes following the rain. “Those guys you were with yesterday are really rocking high on you.”

Kerry rested her chin on her knee. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yeah.” The MIS manager agreed. “I mean, like… I tell all kinds of BS stories about the old days, and DR and all that, you know? But these guys, most of the young ones, they just don’t get it.”

One of Kerry’s eyebrows hiked. “Hm. So us ancient types have to teach them?” She guessed. “Oo.. I can hear my joints creaking now.”

Mark laughed. “No, that’s not what I meant…”

Kerry rested her cheek on her knee, watching him and waiting for the explanation.

“It’s… I can tell people until I’m green in the face how cool you guys are and all that, but they don’t really get it until they get like… ah..” Mark paused.

“Up close and personal?” Kerry suggested.

“Something like that, yeah.”

Kerry reflected on her experience the prior day. She hadn’t intended on providing a quality work moment for her staff, but she wasn’t stupid enough to disregard a good result when it happened. “I didn’t do that much.” She commented.

“Not what I heard.” Mark said. “Carlos told me you climbed up inside that rack and hauled the switch and all that.”

“Hm.”

“And everybody cracked the hell up when you yelled at DR through that door.” Mark said.

“Well!” Kerry got up, and checked her watch, seeing it was near to 1 pm. “The woman has open cuts in her foot! She scared the bejesus out of me!”

Mark also got up, joining her at the window. “I know.. it’s just like… well, like Carlos came back and you know what he said? He said you sounded just like his brother and sister in law. Or just like me and Barbara.”

“We are.” Kerry glanced at him.

“Well, yeah, I know that. But he didn’t.” Mark explained carefully. “That guy was really not into gay people, you know? He wasn’t really a phobe or whatever, but his family’s really conservative.”

“So’s mine.” But Kerry smiled at him. “Thanks. I’m glad to hear that – usually what I’ve discovered is when folks realize gay people are just as stupid and goofy as straight people, they chill out.” She leaned against the glass. “Just about time for us to get moving.”

Mark turned and put his fingers between his teeth, letting out a shrill, piercing whistle. “All right, people! Let’s get ready to move out!” He waved a hand. “Two guys to every box, and somebody get over her with an umbrella for the boss!”

Kerry turned. “Hey!”

A crowd of techs moved towards them, but behind them Kerry caught sight of Cruickshank and her filming team. Just as she was about to cut through the stream of people and intercept them, she saw Dar neatly slip in from the side corridor and stop them cold.

Satisfied, she turned and pushed the doors open, allowing the thundering roar of the storm to enter the building along with a huge gust of warm, wet air. She could see the guards drawing aside on the gangway, and already some of the workers were starting to trickle warily back on board. Chief among them, she noted, was Andrew.

“You guys ready?” Kerry called back over her shoulder. “If we run fast enough, we’ll get there before the damn rain soaks through those cardboard boxes.”

Techs were hoisting the heavy switch cartons between them, and gathering at the door behind her. An air of almost excitement seemed to be building, as the techs not carrying boxes slung tool belts on their shoulders and others carried smaller boxes of patch cables.

Carlos came up behind Kerry, holding a handful of plastic. “Hey.. um.. “ He held it out. “I don’t have an umbrella, but I got an extra one of these, if you want it.”

Kerry took the bright red rain slicker. “Thanks, Carlos.” She gave him a warm smile in return. “You’d think after living her a few years I’d know to carry one of these in the summer.”

“How’s your hand doing?” He glanced behind him, as though to judge how close they were to moving out of the building. “I did that once, cut my hand on that crossbeam. Hurt like crazy.”

Kerry held up her hand, neatly wrapped in a symmetrically perfect criss-cross of gauze bandage, taped into place by two evenly spaced strips of bright orange tape. “It stung a lot yesterday, but as you can see, I can’t move it a lot today so it’s been fine.” She curled her hand into a fist and punched the air. “I feel like a boxer.”

Carlos grinned, and held up his own hands. “You box?” He asked, making a few passes. “Someone said you did.”

“Kickbox.” Kerry agreed.

“Me too.”

Hm. Kerry judged they were about ready to go. She pondered asking Carlos what his views were on gorgeous brunettes with blue eyes, just to see if they had that in common too, then decided the freak out factor was about six points too high for the occasion. “Hey, we can compare technique later. “She said instead. “Okay, everyone ready?”

“Ready.” Mark agreed. “You want to put that jacket on?”

“Yeah, in a…” Kerry blinked as the jacket was taken from her hands and shaken open, then held for her to climb into. “Um..”

“Um?” Dar’s voice sounded amused. “Put it on, or you can’t go out to play, Kerrison.”

“Wench.” Kerry muttered, getting into the jacket. “Did you…ah.” She spotted the reporters right behind Dar. “Are we the sound bite today?”

Cruikshank poked her head forward. “Matter of fact, you are.” She agreed cheerfully. “We’re gonna stick with you guys today, since you’re the ones behind the gun. Mind?”

Kerry accepted the unobtrusive pat on the butt from her partner as she fastened the rain slicker. “Nope.” She turned to the door. “Okay, let’s go, guys!” She headed out into the rain, followed by a veritable cavalcade of nerds, lugging nearly a thousand pounds of gear out into the deluge.

Dar held the door for them, waving Cruickshank and her crew out after them with a flourish. “G'wan. That’s where all the action is.”

“Oh, you bet.” The reporter pulled her rain hood up and trotted outside happily. “You know, Ms. Roberts, this is turning out to be just a hum dinger of a tale, isn’t it?” She smiled back at Dar. “You coming too?”

Dar cocked her head to one side. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything.” She said, watching as the reporters turned and hurried after her crew, who were pelting as fast as they could towards the gangway. There were a few other contractors straggling that way, but a big group of them were under the overhang on the building side, unwilling to get wet.

“Hey!” Dar yelled at them. “What’s the matter with you? You a bunch of girls or something?”’

The contractors whirled to stare at her.

“Get your ass over there and start working!” Dar barked. “Move it!”

“Hey! Fuck you!” One of the men yelled back.

“You don’t have anything I’d even want to take a picture of, much less touch.” Dar retorted. “C’mon, you pansy ass – move it!”

The man started in her direction, but someone, apparently his supervisor hauled him back and shoved him towards the ship instead. “I’m gonna kick your ass for that, bitch!” The man threatened.

Dar recognized his voice as one of the men she’d passed in the stairwell the previous day, threatening the same thing only with someone else. She just laughed. “Bet you don’t.” She remarked, to the still falling rain. “Cause either my dad or my girlfriend’ll knock you silly.”

She waited for the crowd at the gangway to clear, the last of their group gaining entrance and the contractors following, before she let the door shut and strolled out into the rain, tilting her head up and enjoying the warm blast of water. She opened her mouth and caught some on her tongue, convinced she could almost taste the clouds on it.

“Paladar!”

Whoops. “Yeah, dad?” Dar shook her head, now completely drenched with rain.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Her father was standing inside the ship, with his hands on his hips.

Dar held her arms out, as she gained the gangway and started up it. “Enjoying the sunshine?”

“Lord, you have lost your mind.” Her father pulled her inside. “Did them drugs Steve gave you make your head turn over?”

Dar just chuckled, and shook her head. She gave her father a pat on the back and headed for the steps, shaking her body like a dog to scatter the raindrops everywhere as she followed the sound of many stomping feet ahead of her.

* * *

It still smelled. Kerry strolled conspicuously closer to the big open doors on the main deck, braving the rain splatter to clear her lungs. It wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been the previous day, though, and she could see carpet cleaners working very hard on the central staircase to remove the lingering stench.

She stayed near the door anyway. It gave her the best perspective of the activity going on around the main part of the ship, and she could direct the various teams of her technicians as they criss-crossed the hallways. “Mark, did you check the server room?”

Mark paused in mid step. “Was it doing tricks, boss?”

“I meant for AC and power.” Kerry gave him a droll look.

“Oh. Right.” Mark reversed his course. “Hang on.”

Kerry intercepted him. “Nah – go on. I’ll check it.” She regretfully gave up her spot near the door and crossed the round atrium, going to the far side of the steps and trotting up them to the next landing. She turned into the hallway and glanced at the cabin numbers as she walked, then stopped in front of the inside cabin she’d taken over for their new systems.

The door was open. She unlatched it and pushed it inward, reaching in a flipping on the lights inside. What had once been a small, inside stateroom had been stripped out entirely to it’s bare walls and rebuilt as a miniature, but functional IT space.

One side was lined with floor to ceiling racks, that were bolted to the deck. In the first one, a switch was mounted, already spilling brightly colored cables from its front to several jacks. Opposite the racks were two long worktables, with chairs that sported rubber leg bumpers instead of wheels. Awkward to move around, Kerry had learned, but necessary so that they didn’t roll and crash into things when the ship was in rough waters.

She’d had experience with that on the Dixie. There, everything inside could be locked down, or tied up so nothing went flying during those infrequent times they were out in bad weather. Even the bed had what she’d joked to Dar were seat belts.

In here, there were no seat belts. But corners were padded, and the racks all had locking sides and doors and felt quite sturdy as she tugged on them.

However, there was no AC in the room. The overhead lights were on, but that was it. Kerry felt sweat starting to run under her shirt just being inside for a few minutes and she knew the servers would survive for a shorter time than she would in the heat.

Well, muskrats. Kerry put her hands on her hips. She really didn't want to have to haul the big portable units in, but it was looking like she wasn't going to have much of a choice.

"Oh, hello there Ms. Stuart."

Kerry turned to find their reporter friend behind her. "Hi."

The Herald reporter slipped inside and stood next to her. "Is this profound?" She queried. "The way you're looking at it makes me think so."

Kerry took a step back and leaned on the worktable. "No.. well, I mean – it's where our system servers are going to be, so I guess it's profound in that sense. But actually it's just giving me a hive at the moment because the AC's not on in here."

The reporter looked around. "That's true." She agreed. "Does that matter?"

"Sure." Kerry said. "We can't run the servers like this. They overheat."

"Ahhh." The woman murmured. "The other ships are pretty far ahead of you." She told Kerry. "They've mostly got their whatever those are up and running."

"Ah well." Kerry produced a mild grin. "We'll get there."

"Without AC?"

"We'll bring in our own." Kerry unclipped a walkie talkie from her belt. "Dar? You there?"

"Yeeees." Dar's voice came back after a brief pause.

"Can you send the ice boxes up to the server room? It's hotter than melted cheese whiz up here." Kerry spoke into the device crisply. "The switch is mounted, so I'm going to tell Barry to get moving."

"On the way." Dar signed off with a click.

"Barry?" Kerry switched channels on the radio. "This is Kerry, you on?"

"Right here, Kerry." Barry replied. "You ready for us?'

Kerry sighed, looking around. “Well, you can mount them in here, anyway. I’m having the portable air units brought up.”

“Okay, be right there.”

Kerry clicked off, and returned the radio to her belt. Between the radio, her cell, and her PDA, she’d briefly contemplated finding a tool belt to wear but one look at the devilish expression on Dar’s face when she suggested it put visions of bright pink leather in her mind and she dropped the idea. “Okay.”

The reporter leaned back against the worktable. “So, you bring in your own air conditioning units. I take it these aren’t the window things you see on old houses in these parts, right?”

Kerry nodded. “They’re rolling portable units, which vent the hot air back up into the plenum.” She tapped the ceiling, pushing up a panel. “And, since we used to have a bathroom in here, we can stick the drain hose.. let me see.. “ She investigated a capped pipe in the corner, removing a pair of pliers from her back pocket and wrestling it off. “Yep. There.”

“Hm.”

Kerry turned. “We do have an advantage, being local.” She said. “We have all the resources of our office here to work with, and of course, we know the area.”

“And the weather.” The reporter chuckled.

“And the weather.” Kerry agreed. She went behind the racks, squeezing between them and the wall, inspecting the railings that connected them.

“Not much space back there.”

“No.” Kerry agreed. “I compromised between needing air circulation space and needing to be able to extend the servers out on their rails. It’s pretty tight in here.”

“Let me ask you something, Ms. Stuart.” The reporter said. “What exactly are the ramifications for you if you don’t succeed here?”

Kerry leaned on the back rails, peering through the smoky gray door at her. “Me personally?”

The reporter walked over and peered through the door back, leaning a hand on either side of the opening. “You personally.” She said. “The rest of these companies, they’ve got technical people here, or people with a vested interest in this prospective contract. You could have sent someone else in here. Why didn’t you?”

Everyone seemed to be asking that. Kerry wondered if she and Dar shouldn’t have been asking that a little more strongly themselves.

“Is it that you didn’t feel like you could trust anyone to do it?” The reporter persisted.

“No.” Kerry “That’s not it at all. I send teams all over the country to do this.”

“Exactly.” The woman nodded.

What could she say, really? That they’d promised Alastair they’d do it? That would just make him look bad. That they wanted to beat Michelle and Shari? That would just make them look bad. Having no really coherent response, Kerry fell back on nerdiness instead. “You know, the fact of the matter is that both Dar and I happen to buy into to a certain theory of management, that sort of requires both of us to keep our hands in and really know the nuts and bolts of what we do.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Kerry smiled. “Its not like I really do enjoy kneeling here on dubiously clean floors getting iron filing dust up my nose. Honest.”

“Interesting.” The reporter smiled back. “I think that might explain a lot about the things I’ve heard from many of your clients.”

Kerry finished her inspection, and squeezed back around the edge of the rack, dusting her hands off on her jeans. “Maybe that’s why we’ve been as successful as we have.” She suggested. “When you get to the management level Dar and I are at, you tend to lose touch with the day to day. It’s a real tough thing to not let that happen, because we’re so busy it’s hard to put aside the time to read the tech journals, and preview the new gear, and think outside the box. But we do.”

The reporter clapped. “Beautiful quote.” She complimented Kerry. “Ever think of going into politics?”

Kerry was saved from having to answer by the arrival of Barry, walking backwards and bumping the doorframe with his shoulders. “Hang on a second, let me prop that open.” She got to the door and pushed it as far as it would go, then pressed her back against the wall. ”C’mon in.”

“Thanks..” Barry backed cautiously inside, wincing as he scraped the backs of his hands on the doorway. “Whoa.. they don’t do wide loads in here, huh?”

Kerry sucked in a breath as the server, a long, wide, flat form factor designed to be put inside the rack skimmed by her right at button fly level. Very different from a desktop PC, the server was all stainless steel and weighed a ton.

“Put 'em on that desk.” Barry grunted. “We gotta install the rails.”

A second pair of techs followed them in, with a second server, and there was a third set who waited patiently outside the door. Kerry stood back and merely watched, unable to do much to either help or hinder the process at the moment.

Beside her, the reporter leaned over and studied the server now resting on the table. “Big.”

“Commercial grade.” Kerry agreed. “Quad processors, four gig of main memory and five 36 gig drives in a RAID 5 array.”

The reporter looked at her. “I should have guessed you were bilingual.” She remarked pleasantly.

“Ugh.” The second group of carriers carefully edged out of the room, making space for the third to come in. “Man, it’s hot in here.”

“Man, it’s small in here.” The third set worked their way in, and took up the remaining space on the table with their load. “Is every place on this thing so cramped?”

“Pretty much.” Kerry said. “Space is definitely at a premium. This used to be a passenger cabin.”

“I’m surprised they let you take it.” The reporter said. “It’s lost revenue for them.”

“They had no choice.” Kerry said. “I told them either I took a passenger cabin, or they gave me their crew lounge. Guess which they picked?”

The techs chuckled. The reporter crossed her arms, but she smiled. “Well, that’s been a problem on all four ships, really. I think.. “ She looked around. “Yeah, I think definitely you got the most space out of them. The ship behind you has this stuff squeezed into something I suspect might have been a washroom.”

“I think the satellite people are here.” Barry said, over his shoulder. “They’re..uh.. “ His eyes flicked to the reporter. “Having a discussion with Ms. Roberts.”

Uh oh. “Problems?”

“Well..” Barry opened the box of rails and pulled one out, checking it to see if it was right or left handed. “Uh… I don’t really know.” He chickened out. “It’s all that WAN stuff.”

“Uh huh.” Kerry removed herself from being a doorstop. “I’ll go see if I can clarify the WAN stuff.” She sighed. “The AC units are on their way up… please remind the guys to put the drain line in. I don’t really want to have to swim upstream later to get back here.”

“Will do.” Barry agreed cheerfully. “Be glad to see them.” He wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Kerry started out, glancing to one side as the reporter joined her. “Don’t you want to see them mount the server?” She asked politely.

“Oh sure.” The reporter agreed. “That’s my leadoff tagline. ‘mounting servers in a sweaty ex-bedroom.’ No. I’ll go with you.”

Figures. Kerry sighed. Just figures.

* * *

The top deck of the ship was accessed at the top of the stairwells through a set of wooden doors with round, glass portholes. The surrounding walls were metal, with rust markings on them and evidence of many rounds of steel plate patching.

It creaked up here. Dar could also feel the slight motion of the ship as it rocked in it's berth, the wind from the storm shoving against the sides of the relatively narrow vessel. At sea, she could only imagine what it would be like, and was personally determined not to find out.

She peered out the porthole, and spotted the techs outside, standing in the rain and surrounding a huge pile of gear.

Dar reasoned that Cruickshank and her boys wouldn't follow them out into the rain, and as she looked behind her she was pleased to note her reasoning was correct. Already wet, she didn't mind the warm rain in the slightest, as she headed across the open top deck towards the stanchions they were trying to mount the communications gear on.

She hadn't been up top before. The small swimming pool, drained for resurfacing, appeared sad and full of cracks, it's concrete very discolored and crumbling. Around it, an old turf surface was unraveling, part of it taken up and in the process so of being replaced.

On one side was a bar, with worn wooden stools bolted to the deck, and on the other a tiny bandstand with two, low, cracked steps leading up to it.

Shabby. Like the rest of the ship was. However, Dar could see there was a stack of new teak wood under tarps nearby, and the cracked pieces were being replaced. Eventually, she supposed, it would be presentable.

Not now.

They stopped under the metal structure, and looked up. "See?" The man nearest Dar pointed. "That's all we got to connect it to. I'm telling ya, it's gonna blow overboard first time they crank this tub up."

Dar hopped up onto part of the structure and examined the beam in question. It was rustier than a sixty eight Chevy and even she could see the popped rivets, and crumbling slivers of steel coming off the beam. "How much does that thing weigh?"

"Bout a hundred fifty, sixty pounds." The man advised her.

Dar reached up and curled her hands around the beam, then pulled herself up onto it, grabbing hold of the supports reaching up from it and bouncing up and down on the beam. "Any shavings?"

The satellite techs scurried out of the way, watching her with wide eyes. “What in the hell are you doing?” The tall man asked.

“I weigh as much as that damn satellite. You see anything moving?” Dar swung back and forth on the side supports, throwing her body to either side with as much violence as she could muster.

“Hey! Be careful, lady! It’s slippery up there! You’re gonna kill yourself!”

“Nah.” Dar, however, was mindful of how unstable her sandals were. “I’ve been running around on spars since I was in short pants.” She hopped up and down again. “I say you put it up here.” She grabbed hold of the edge of the beam and slipped off, dangling by her hands for a second before she dropped lightly to the deck.

“I don’t know.” The man shook his head. “That thing’s going to cut loose if there’s any stress.”

Dar walked to the side of the beam. “So put strapping in, and make sure your contracts cut to that they pay for new equipment every time it falls over. Guarantee the metal gets replaced in a week.” She patted the steel.

The satellite contractors gazed unhappily at the metal, shading their eyes from the falling rain. “I don’t know.” The supervisor finally said. “I guess we could mount it, then see what happens. Did they even run the cabling?”

One of the other techs wrestled a rusted cover off a box mounted on the side of the beam. “Yeah.” He peered inside. “Looks like it.. yeah, there’s the coax.”

Dar came around behind him and looked as well. “My contractor did that. Let me know if it doesn’t work. He’s still here.”

The supervisor gave her a friendlier look. “ You a gymnast?”

“No.” Dar became aware of the camera crew, focusing on her from the safety of the overhang. “How long is this gonna take you?”

“Couple hours.”

Dar glanced up. “Hope it stops raining”

The tech shrugged. “Stuff’s waterproof.” He indicated their surroundings. “Kinda has to be.”

“We’re not.”

“Huh. Yeah.” The sat technician scratched his head, and glanced over his shoulder. “What’s with the camera?”

"Don't ask." Dar deliberately turned her back on it. "Your guys putting in the control gear for this thing in the communications room?" The rain had now drenched her through, and her shirt was sticking to her body. On the other hand, at least she wasn't sweating.

"The geek guys are doing that." The tech told her. "We don't touch that crap."

Figures. "Okay." Dar pushed away from the steel support. "I'll leave you to it then."

The man looked up. "You sure you want us to do this?" He queried. "Lady, I'm not kidding. I think it's gonna come down."

Possibly. But Dar needed the satellite up so she could start the applications they'd been contracted for. "Tell you what." She said. "I'll go tell the ship they need to put metal stabilizers on this thing, if you get your part of it started. Deal? They can solder the angle irons on here, and not touch your gear." She tapped the side of the metal beam.

The tech studied the area, then nodded. "Okay." He agreed. "Deal. But you sure you can talk for those guys? I don't want no trouble."

Dar allocated a grin to him, her eyes twinkling in the rain. "I'm sure." She said. "See you inside." She turned and headed back towards the doorway leading inside, seeing not only the camera crew now there, but a tousled blond head peeking out at her.

She could almost see the exasperated look in her partner's eyes, as she strolled towards her with unhurried strides. As she got to the door and it opened, she shook herself vigorously, scattering rain drops everywhere, including onto the cameramen who scrambled back away from her with puppy sounding yelps. "Don't you folks have something better to do than stand here blocking the door?" She asked sternly.

"Can I ask, Ms. Roberts, what you were doing out there?" Cruickshank asked, almost breathlessly. "I can't tell you what that looked like."

Dar cocked her head to one side. "What did it look like?" She inquired. "I was just discussing the mounting points for our satellite system." She gave Kerry a sideways glance, then she brushed by the reporters. "Excuse me, I've got other things to attend to."

"Hi." Kerry greeted her. "Everything all right out there?"

"Peachy." Dar steered her partner towards the stairwell, ignoring the gaggle of press around them. "They're going to get the dish up, but it's going to take a while. How's the servers going?"

"They're going." Kerry answered.

They hit the top of the stairs and started down, taking the steps two at a time and leaving the press momentarily behind. As they got to the eleventh deck, Dar abruptly turned left and scooted down a hallway, with Kerry at her heels.

They paused, and listened. The sound of thundering footsteps continuing down the steps made them both smile. "Okay." Dar ran her fingers through her wet hair, pushing it back off her forehead. "Problem was, the stanchion they're mounting to's rotten as a six week old apple."

"Ah." Kerry nodded. "And that explains you climbing all over it like a monkey."

"Eh." Dar shrugged. "Made good film, I bet."

Kerry cleared her throat. "Actually sweetheart, your shirt's transparent." She delicately plucked the wet fabric off her partner's skin. "That made even better film. I almost stabbed the camera guy when his tongue came out of his mouth."

Dar looked down at herself, then up at Kerry. "Really?" She asked curiously.

"Really." Kerry examined the pale green, very light cotton fabric, which was still, indeed, very see through and left nothing to anyone's imagination in regards to Dar's physique. "I think you need to change."

Dar looked both ways down the corridor, then simply removed her shirt, standing there in the hallway in her bra as she wrung the garment out onto the plastic protecting the new carpet on the floor. "Huh. Maybe that's why those guys warmed up to me out there."

"Dar." Kerry looked nervously in the direction of some voices.

"Hm?"

"If that camera crew comes round that corner, I'm going to go insane and we'll never hear the end of this."."

"Oh, relax." Dar started to walk the other way, towards the communications office. "It's just a bra. I saw a billboard with some chick wearing one twenty feet high coming off Brickell this morning." She continued to wring the shirt out, her shoulders bunching and flexing as she squeezed as much water out as possible.

Kerry decided to simply enjoy the show, and she only just kept herself from walking backwards to watch. "Is that beam going to cause us a problem?"

"Maybe." Dar finished twisting the shirt to within an inch of its textile life. "I told them to put some extra strapping up. That whole top superstructures a piece of crap, I figure the entire damn smokestack'll fall over before the dish will."

"Oh. That's not good." Kerry paused with her hand on the door latch to the communications room, waiting for Dar to put her damp shirt back on. "How long do you really think it's going to last?"

"Past this week, I don't really care." Dar tugged the clammy fabric on. "Still see through?"

Kerry studied her. “Not… no, it’s okay.” She said. “But you’re dripping all over the floor from those jeans.”

“They’ll cope. It’s a ship. They should be used to water.” Dar jerked her jaw at the door. “Open.” She hesitated, giving Kerry a look. “I know that’s not a good long term answer. But between you and me, I don’t honestly think this is a long term ship.”

“You think there’s a scam in here somewhere.” It was not really a question.

Dar nodded. “I think there’s something. Too many things just don’t make sense.” She flicked her fingers through her bangs once more, then focused on the entrance.

Kerry opened the door, nodding slightly in confirmation. She followed Dar inside the communications office in somber, yet attentive silence.

* * *

“Hey, Kerry.. you on?”

Kerry unclipped her radio and answered it. “Yup. What’s going on, Mark?’

“My guys say we’re ready to light up the network. You okay with that?”

Kerry frowned at the radio. “Of course I am.” She replied. “Since when does someone need my approval to push the on switch around here?”

The radio crackled. “Ahem… ah, just trying to be PC, boss. That’s all.” Mark replied meekly.

“PC my gopher’s eyeball.” Kerry told him. “Turn the suckers on.” She clicked off and went to the base of the ladder, peering up. “Jesus.”

Dar, up on the ladder with the satellite techs, her head poked halfway up into the plenum, looked down at her. “Problem?”

“People being weird.” Kerry said. “They’re going to turn the switches on.”

“Cool.” Dar resumed her inspection, edging a step higher and flashing her light into the space. “Did you find the problem?” She directed her words to the sat tech up inside the ceiling, sweating and cursing under his breath.

“Not yet.” The man replied shortly. “Fucking cable’s so tight in here I can’t see it.”

Obligingly, Dar went up one more step, this time onto the top of the ladder, and extended her arm to direct her powerful flash over to where the guy was working. She could feel the ladder moving a little uncertainly under her and she gripped the ceiling supports with one hand. “Ker?”

“On it.” Kerry replied.

The ladder moved a bit more, then stabilized. Dar felt a hand curl around her ankle, and she relaxed. “Thanks.”

“Son of a bitch.” The tech muttered.

Reasoning the curse wasn’t directed at her, Dar craned her neck to see if she could see what the problem was. “Ah hah.” She saw the junction box installed on top of the cable access point immediately.

“Stupid electricians. What a bunch of freaking morons.” The tech sighed, wiping droplets of sweat out of his eyes. “Now what are we gonna do? There’s not even clearance to plug in.”

Dar leaned forward and examined the box, acutely aware suddenly of Kerry’s thumb gently rubbing against her skin. It was a very warm feeling, despite the heat in the room, and she took a moment to take a breath before she peeked around the electrical piping that was blocking the way.

It was infuriating. The contractor had, to her eyes almost deliberately, ran his conduit and junction box right up against where the coax terminated, making their connection pretty damn near unusable. “Crap.”

“Yeah.” The sat tech snorted. “So now what?”

“Now we have to get those bastards back in here to redo it.” Dar said.

The tech laughed. “You don’t really think they’re gonna do that.”

“Not willingly.” Dar carefully backed off the top step. “But let me see what I can do.” She emerged from the ceiling, moving down another step and receiving a pat on her calf as Kerry got out of her way. She got down to ground level, and rested her elbow on one of the steps of the ladder. “We’ve got a problem.”

“So I gathered.” Kerry said. “What can I do?”

Dar eyed her thoughtfully. “I think this is my gig.” She said.

“Your gig?”

“I have to go find the electrical contractor and scream at him until he moves some conduit.” Dar said. “I will probably have to threaten legal action, and I might need to go find whoever owns the company and shake him by the neck until he piddles on the floor.”

Kerry studied her quietly, then sniffed. “Your gig.” She agreed. “I’m going to go down to the server room and see how they’re doing in there.”

Dar looked around. The communications room was a bit of a shambles, with wires hanging out everywhere. A crew technician was sitting in a chair near the back of the

room just watching them, arms crossed over his jumpsuited chest, and the only neat looking space was their rack full of routers and gear.

What a mess. Dar steered Kerry out the door and into the hallway, walking with her towards the central staircase that would take them down. It was hot, and they both wiped their foreheads at the same time, causing them to chuckle a little.

“Dar. I have to ask you something.” Kerry plucked the sweat dampened cotton of her shirt away from her skin. “Because everyone is asking me this. Your mother asked, the reporters asked… so I’m going to ask you.”

“Mm? Is this like the last personal question you asked me?” Dar inquired. “If it is, I want to know why my mother was involved.”

Kerry bumped her, shoulder to shoulder. “You’re such a brat sometimes. Have I ever told you that?”

“Once or twice.” Dar allowed.

“No. What I was going to ask, that everyone is asking is.. why in the hell you and I are here.”

“Ah.” Dar sighed. “Yeah, while I had my head stuck up in that ceiling I thought about that, too. You know..” She stared pensively at the wall. “I wish I had a decent answer for that right now, Ker. All I know is that I just have a bad feeling that if we weren’t, a lot f this stuff wouldn’t get done, and we’d end up having to explain why.”

Kerry considered that, as they turned the corner and started down the steps. “So, we don’t trust our staff to get it done.”

“No.” Dar confusingly agreed. “We don’t. But that’s not their fault. This is out of scope.”

With a tiny shake of her head, Kerry let her hand run down the center banister, this high up already finished out with a new brass top piece. “I’ve been insisting to everyone that’s not the deal.”

“Hm.”

“So now you tell me it is.”

“Well, it is for me, Ker. It doesn’t have to be for you.” Dar protested mildly, as they walked down the steps in perfect synch. “You could be here…to um… “

“Take care of you.” Kerry smiled a little. “Make sure you keep dry, keep out of sewage, bring you your lunch…”

“Tell me when my shirt’s see-through.” Dar spotted John on the next level. “Hey, John!”

The wiring contractor whirled, spotted her, and trotted over. “Been looking for you two!” He said. “Listen, I got my guys together last night, and found the fella who bumped into Ms. Stuart, here.”

“Yeah?” Dar was faintly surprised, that someone had actually admitted to it.

“Yeah, it was Steve.” John nodded. “Good old boy, but lazier than a dog. He was taken a nap in side that closet when you all came up there.”

Kerry put her hands on her hips. “He told you that?”

John shrugged. “I don’t hire Rhodes scholars.” He said. “Anyway, he said he didn’t put no balls of cable anywhere, but what he did see was some guy walking around picking up scraps outside near where he was.”’

“Really.” Dar folded her arms.

“Yeah, and he said the guy didn’t look like a contractor. He had long sleeves on.” John said. “Now, gotta tell you, Dar.. he could be talking out his ass, but seems to be it’d be easier for him to just keep his trap shut than come up with some wild ass tale like that.”

“Unless he was trying to put the blame on someone else.” Kerry said.

The contractor shrugged. “Yeah, could be, but he ain’t a storyteller. He’d have just said one of my other guys, or an electrician or a ship guy did it. Not make up some fella in long sleeves.”

“Long sleeves.” Dar mused. “Yeah, that would be unusual…well, anyway, thanks John. Listen, do you know the name of the electrical sub?”

John snorted. “Johnson. Those sons of bitches.”

Sons of bitches. Yeah, Dar recalled using them for something at the office once that had denigrated into a lawsuit, if she wasn’t mistaken. “Figures Quest picked them. Lousiest jerks in the business.”

“You know it.” John agreed. “You need something from them?”

“Go look in the comm. room.” Dar said. “Let me go see what I can get out of them.” With a sigh, she collected Kerry with a tug on her sleeve and started down the steps again. “Damn, damn, damn. That’s not good news.”

Kerry just put her hand on Dar’s back, and scratched it lightly with her fingertips. A flash of motion coming at them from below made her pull up and grab the back of Dar’s shirt, slowing her partner just in time to keep them both from plowing into Peter Quest hurrying in the other direction.

“Ah.” Quest paused, spotting them. “I was looking for you.” He folded his arms. “So. How are things going?”

“Fine.” Kerry answered. “We’re making a lot of progress.”

“You are?” Quest seemed a little astonished. “I mean, I’m sure you are. But with everything and all the hold ups, I’m sure you’re far behind the other ships. Is there any point to going on?”

If Dar and Kerry had been dogs, both their ears and their hackles would have lifted and made quite a spectacle there in the middle of the stairwell. “I dunno.” Dar finally answered. “I’ll let you know on Friday.”

“We may surprise you.” Kerry added, with a gentle smile.

“Everything has to work.” Quest warned. “My people have already started reviewing the systems on the other ships. They know what they’re doing.”

“So do we.” Dar replied calmly.

Quest looked at them, then he went around them and continued up the steps, shaking his head.

Dar and Kerry stood quietly for a moment, then they turned and looked at each other. “You know what I’m thinking, Kerrison?” Dar asked. “Aside from the fact that our lunch is sitting on the desk in that office, and I’m going to need to rethink my approach on the electricians?”

“Mmhm.” Kerry took her arm, and they continued downward. “I think you’re thinking about long sleeves.”

Dar glanced behind them. “Yeah.”

“Well, so am I.” Kerry felt herself getting angry. “So am I.”

* * *

The storm kept on keeping on, drumming against the windows with boring repetition. A low rumble of thunder now joined it, and the light had dimmed so much outside it felt close to evening.

Dar leaned back in her borrowed desk chair, her forearm over her eyes as she put her cell phone down on her chest. “Jesus.”

Kerry looked up from the desk she was sitting at, licking a croissant crumb off her lip before she spoke. “No luck?”

“No luck.” Dar confirmed. “I’m getting nowhere with that bastard.” She sighed. “He told me to go talk to our lawyer.”

“Ew.”

"Which I can do, but it's not going to get that conduit moved and he knows it."

Kerry got up and carried Dar's sandwich over with her. She sat down on the desk her partner had absconded with, and unwrapped her lunch, offering her a neatly cut half. "Here."

Dar stuck out her lower lip in a pout. "I'm mad."

Kerry broke off a corner of her sandwich and presented it to the lip. "Have some lunch."

Dar accepted the tidbit and munched a little on Kerry's fingertips in the bargain. "So now what do we do?" She swallowed. "I'm gonna end up having to pay a god damned electrician to come in here and move that thing, aren't I?"

More expenses. "Well, do we have a choice?"

"Sure." Dar leaned to one side and put her head down on Kerry's leg, despite the wide open door. "We can blow this joint and go out on a sunset cruise. How about it?"

Kerry produced a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh. "Honey, don't tease me like that." She smoothed one of Dar's dark brows with her index finger. "Should I call the guy we use at the office? The electrician, I mean?"

Dar reluctantly lifted her head and reached over for the rest of her sandwich. "I guess." She took a bite. "He's pretty good, and maybe he'll do us a favor this one time." She glanced up at Kerry. "Especially if you ask him. He likes you."'

Kerry's brow twitched. "Oh, I don't think he specially likes me."

"Yes, he does."

"Dar."

"He does." Dar insisted, with a slight grin. "He asked Maria, way back when, if you were available."

The blond woman blushed, scrunching her face up and covering it with one hand as she turned a bright reddish pink color. "Don't' tell me that."

Dar chuckled. "Why? He's not bad looking."

"I know. But now I have to go ask him to do a favor, and I'm going to feel so weird." Kerry explained. "What …ah.. what did Maria tell him?"

"Hm.. let me think." Dar chewed on her sandwich, apparently pondering the question. "How detailed.. hm.."'

Kerry closed her eyes. "God."

“I think she just said no.” Her boss relented, nudging Kerry’s knee with her elbow. “C’mon, this is Maria. Do you really think she’d chatter away about us in front of some scrungy guy in carpenter’s pants?”

“I didn’t think she’d dump chili on someone.” Kerry looked mollified, however, and she continued eating her sandwich, swinging her legs a little. She glanced at Dar after a quiet moment. “How’s your foot feeling?”

Dar studied her injured foot, encased in a pair of light sneakers as a grudging compromise between her preferred sandals and the boots Kerry had really wanted her to put on for protection. “It.. “She wiggled her toes. “It’s okay.”

“Hm.”

“How’s your hand?” Dar tried some misdirection.

Kerry wiggled her fingers. “It’s.. okay.” She mimicked, raising an eyebrow. “Tell you what. How about you take those wet sneakers off for a while and I’ll see what I can do to get my electrician friend over here to solve your problem. How’s that?”

Dar put her head back down on Kerry’s leg and exhaled, warming her skin even through the thick denim. “I love you.” She announced, with casual honesty. “Whatever you want to do, sounds great to me.”

Caught a little off guard, Kerry put her sandwich down and took a moment to catch her breath. She gazed down into Dar’s eyes and found herself lost in them. She reached out and gently cupped Dar’s cheek, the intensity broken only when the sound of a few staff members approaching made them straighten up and sent Dar back into her slouched position in the chair.

Dar took a bite of her sandwich, chewing it in silence.

“Oh, there you are.” Edith came in, spotting Dar in the chair. “The catering company wants to know what time we want dinner brought in.”

“What are they bringing?” Dar asked casually. “Please don’t tell me pizza again.”

“Oriental smorgasbord.”

The mixed cultural metaphor almost made Kerry do a mental double take. But her brain was really too busy dealing with hormones, and the sweet flush of emotion brought on by Dar’s unexpected romanticism. She knew she was still blushing, and so she was glad she had her back to the staff and it was tough for her to remember she was in a professional situation and they were both crossing lines it probably wasn’t that wise to.

Did she care? She suspected strongly that Dar didn’t. One glance at the devilish little grin on her partner’s face told her that. What about the staff? Kerry collected herself and half turned, peeking at the two women who had just entered.

Neither appeared to notice anything out of the ordinary.

Hm. “How about six, and nine.” Kerry suggested. “You know how it is with Chinese.”

Edith chuckled. “That’s not a bad idea.” She took the suggestion seriously. “Especially if you all are going to be working on this stuff all night. What if we had them refresh it every couple hours?”

“Sure.” Dar finished up her half sandwich. “Make sure they bring in more cases of water, too. It’s hot as hell in there.” She settled back in her seat and cocked her head at Kerry. “Right?”

“Right.” Kerry nearly had to sit on her hands. “Do we know where all those reporters are, by the way? I know Cruickshank is with Mark, but I haven’t seen our friend from the Herald.”

“She went over to the other ship.” Edith supplied helpfully. “I heard her talking to one of the security guards on her way out… she seems pretty nice.”

“Hm.” Kerry had her doubts.

“I’ll message Mark and find out what they’re up to.” Dar told her. “Any word from the server bunch?”

Kerry got up and went back to the other desk. She sat down and picked up her radio, keying it and pausing briefly to compose her thoughts before she spoke. Her eyes wandered a little, meeting a pair of blue ones across the office, and after a second, she unkeyed the radio and let it drop to her lap, completely distracted.

Jesus.

Dar stuck her tongue out a little, just the tip of it. Then she pulled her laptop over and focused her attention on it, leaving Kerry to communicate in peace. As it happened, she had an email from the Army bastard, so it gave her a good excuse to stick her nose into her screen and read it.

“Ah.. Mark. You there?”

She could hear the slight huskiness in Kerry’s voice, and it made her smile. Which was a good thing, because the email certainly wasn’t making her do anything of the sort. Damn Army bastard. “No, I won’t be available for a meeting tomorrow. Or the next day. Or next week.” She grumbled under her breath.

“Right here, boss.” Mark replied. “What’s up?”

“How’s it going up stairs?” Kerry watched Dar scowl, her eyes narrowing as she started to rattle out a response to whatever she was reading.

“Great!”

Kerry turned her eyes to the radio, shaking it a little. “What?”

“Great.” Mark repeated. “We made some really cool friends!”

Huh? “Want to.. ah, explain that?” Cool friends? Last time she’d been inside the ship it had been filled with hot, somewhat ill-smelling workers who were mostly cursing and giving them dark looks. What the hell had Mark done, had a crate of rum craned in to the pool deck?

“Sure.” The MIS manager sounded very cheerful. “We only needed one of those ac units in the server space.. so we loaned the other one out to the bridge on the ship. They’re like, loving us to death right now.”

“Oh.. really.”

“No kidding.” Mark said. “Man, I thought those guys up there never smiled. I was way wrong. I think the big guy with all the stripes just invited me to become a part of his family.”

Ahhhh. “I see.” Kerry had to smile, and she heard a soft, reluctant chuckle from Dar’s direction. “How are the servers doing? Barry get them up yet?”

“Eh.” Mark made a verbal shrug. “He was muttering something about active directory when I was up there a minute ago. Least we lost our shutterbugs.”

Uh oh. “We did?”

“Yeah.. they filmed the boxes coming up, then took off.”

Well, that could be a good thing, or a bad thing. With the luck they’d been having so far, Kerry wasn’t betting on a good thing. “Okay.” She sighed. “Let me know if anything else happens. I’ve got to go see a man about a pipe.”

Silence. “Uh..”

“Literally.”

“Right. Later, boss.”

Kerry put the radio down, and switched to her PDA. She opened it and scanned through her phone book listings, selecting one and then dialing it on her cell phone. “Dar?”

“Uh?”

“Please invent a gizmo that gets mail, lets me talk, and keeps track of my addresses at the same time.” Kerry cleared her throat. “Hello, Pete? Hi. It’s Kerry Stuart, from ILS?”

"Before or after I change the nature of Internet hacking for you?" Dar inquired, one brow hiking up.

Kerry gave her a sweetly loving look, and a wink.

Dar snorted, and shook her head, going back to her mail but not before catching Edith peeking at her with an almost amazed expression. "Problem?" She asked, raising both eyebrows now.

"No, ma'am." Edith turned around and went back to whatever it was she was doing.

Dar suspected she was well and truly blowing her image. Ah well. She suspected she might grow to like the new image better anyway. It seemed more fun. She opened her next mail, and, with a sigh, started to answer it.

* * *

Kerry found a spot near the window and amused herself by watching a bird trying very hard to fly against the rain. It was a seagull, and she reckoned it really should have known better yet there it was, flapping and flapping and going absolutely no where against the stiff wind.

She felt a certain kinship with it. Her cell phone rang and she answered it, hoping it was decent news. "Kerry Stuart."

"Well, hi there, Kerry, it's Pete."

Ah. Fifty-fifty chance. "Hi, Pete." Kerry responded. "Am I going to get lucky today?'

The man laughed. "Oh, ain't that a loaded question. Ah, yeah, listen, I got one of my guys, Guillermo, and he's gonna come over there and help you out. Be about a half hour, he's just finishing up some stuff in your building right now."

Well, what do you know. "Great." Kerry responded. "I don't think it'll take him long. Pete.. it's just a junction box. In fact, if he just moves it, lets us run an extension line down, and puts it right back, that's fine too."

"Whatever you need him to do, Kerry, you go ahead and ask him. I told him to just do whatever you say." Pete told her. "Okay?"

"More than okay. Definitely you came through for us, Pete. I owe you one." Kerry winced a little as she said it, wishing her partner had kept Pete's romantic inquiries to herself. "These guys here are completely unprofessional."

"Johnson? Yeah." Pete made a clucking sound of professional censure. "I've had to come in and clean up a lot of their jobs. I think they got in some legal trouble with the city.. surprised they're out there."

"Trust Quest to hire the very best." Kerry muttered. "Well, anyway.."

“Hey, listen.” Pete said, suddenly. “You don’t own me nothing, Kerry. Your boss stood up for me plenty when some of them others wanted to bring in their relatives and what ever to work your place. Consider it a payback.”

Kerry smiled at her reflection in the window. Then she glanced up to find Dar’s slouched form in the same reflection. “Well, you know, she stands by people who stand by her.”

“You got that right.” Pete agreed. “Anyway, I’ll try to drop by in a little bit, make sure everything’s okay. See you later.”

See you later. She turned and got up, walking over to where Dar was sitting and dropping a hand to her partner’s shoulder. “We’re all set.”

Bright blue eyes flicked up to study her. “Yeah?”

“He’s sending a guy over.” Kerry confirmed, with a smile.

“All right. Good job.” Dar complimented her. “So what’ s next?” She set her laptop aside and gave Kerry her full attention. “Networks’ in, right?”

“Right.” Kerry said.

“Servers in?”

“Eh.” Kerry waggled her hand. “I hear there’s some integration issues.”

“When isn’t there?” Dar asked rhetorically. “I swear, even when they pre-load those damn things, just looking at them the wrong way on boot blows a driver.”

“Mm.” Servers were something she was, in fact, more familiar with than her partner. Since the company she’d come from had been primarily an applications developer, Kerry had spent a lot of time working with the intricacies of the devices, and their attendant operating systems. “Well, I’ll go take a look at them and see what the deal is.”

“And then?” Dar glanced at the rain. “Can we start moving all the rest of this mess in?”

“I don’t know.. from what I saw on my last walk through there, I don’t..”

Dar got up from her seat. “C’mon. Let’s go take inventory of where we are.” She started off towards the door, latching on to Kerry’s sleeve and pulling her along. “If we can’t install today, I want to get everyone back in here, and just line all that stuff up.”

“Okay.” Kerry amiably allowed herself to be towed across the carpet. “Are we going to stop for an umbrella, or are you going to thrill and shock the staff when we get there?”

Dar stopped. “Hm.” She glanced down at her now dry t-shirt, and then looked at Kerry.

“Nope. Can’t borrow my shirt.” Kerry shook her head solemnly.

“Hah. You always take mine.” Dar protested.

“Dar.” Kerry stood back, indicated herself, then looking pointedly at Dar. “How silly do you want to look with my shirt on, honey?”

“Hm.” Dar looked speculatively at her, as though considering the question in due seriousness. “It’d just look like a crop top.” She held her hand just below her rib cage. “Aren’t those trendy now?”

“Oh, that’ll help.” Kerry started laughing. “I can see explaining it to Mari now.. you fashion slave, you.”

“Well, it’s better than my wet see through act.” Dar sighed, and looked around. “Damn it, I forgot to bring my bag in from outside, too. I had a change in there.” She gave the room an annoyed glare. “Remind me to have them bring over a couple cases of those tacky t-shirts Jose ordered for the trade show.”

“We should make our own departmental ones.” Kerry said. “With Gopher Dar on them.”

Dar looked at her, brow arching sharply.

“Well.” Kerry turned around and surveyed the big room. Instead of stacks of network gear, now the techs were stolidly pulling computers and the touch screen point of sale systems out of their boxes. Bits of shredded Styrofoam were drifting around on the carpet, and the scent of new computers was very sharp in the air. “How about we help unpack things, until the rain slows down.”

Dar’s expressive face scrunched into an engaging scowl.

“Okay. Want to maybe work on budgets?” Kerry tried a different route. “Or, hey… you can help me put together the pricing for those guys in New York.”

Dar put her hands on her hips, exhaling noisily.

“Want to run away and join the circus?” Kerry mimed carrying a backpack. “We could train elephants.”

Finally, Dar started chuckling. “Sorry.” She sighed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me today. I’ve been antsy as a turkey in November.” She leaned back against the glass and stuck her hands into her pockets. “I just want this whole damn thing to be over with. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of this stinking building, and that rust bucket outside, and this damn rain.”

Kerry chose a spot next to her and claimed it, leaning back also and hooking her thumbs into her belt loops. “Want to go back to the office? I’m sure you could get stuff done there.”

‘Trying to get rid of me?”

"No, hon. I'm just trying to make you a little happier." Kerry pressed her shoulder against Dar's. "Since you won't run away to the circus with me." She turned her head and looked outside. "Or, to hell with it. Let's just get wet. I like you in a see through shirt. Hell with the rest of the staff."

Dar's shoulders relaxed, and she chuckled again but this time with a far more casual tone. "Nah." She said. "Give me a minute, and we can go cut up some cardboard. My damn jeans are still damp and I don't really want that to get any worse."

Kerry patted one of her partner's thighs, and grunted. "Yeah, they sure are." She said. "I hope you don't catch cold, in the air conditioning in this place."

Dar grimaced. "Me, too." She said. "That would suck."

"Mm. But I'd get to make you chicken soup." Kerry found a typically silvered lining in the thought. "And you'd get a chance to stay home and work on your new model."

The both reflected on that, the rain drumming at their backs against the glass. Finally, Dar straightened up and removed her hands from her pockets. "Okay."

"Over it?"

"Yeah." Dar headed for the stack of PC boxes with a determined, if limping stride.

Kerry jogged to catch up, as a crack of thunder rattled the air behind her

* * *

The rain finally stopped near sunset. Dar and Kerry went out onto the dock, and met a group of the techs including Barry and Mark as they came off the ship. They stood in the middle of the open space, with the still damp air moving over them.

"How's it going?" Kerry asked, first off.

"Okay." Barry shrugged. "I mean, the boxes are coming up, but we knew they would."

Dar's eyebrows lifted skeptically

"We can't really do much until we get the end units in, though." Mark added. "And start testing all that interfacing crap out." He hefted his backpack. "I wanted to keep going, but they've got some kind of special stuff going on tonight. They chased us off."

Kerry put her hands on her hips. "Wait, that wasn't supposed to happen."

"No." Barry pointed down the dock. "But they're all doing it. I heard them talking."

They turned and looked where he was pointing, seeing streams of workers coming off the next ship down. Loud, yet indistinguishable voices rang out as the men poured through the gates, some shooting rude hand gestures at the ships.

“Damn.” Kerry exhaled. “That sucks. If we could just keep going, we’d just about catch up from yesterday.”

Barry nodded. “I don’t want to hang out in there, but you’re right, Kerry. Things went really good today.” He glanced at Mark. “Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Did the electrician take care of that connection?” Kerry asked Mark. “I saw him pass the back doors.”

“Yep.” Mark appeared pleased. “Not just that, but he did a bunch of other stuff for us. Good guy. He’s from the office, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Dar murmured, her brow furrowed in thought. “What did they say this special thing was?”

The techs were quiet. “I don’t think they really exactly said.” Barry admitted. “Some.. nautical thing or something?”

Dar headed for the gangway. “I’m going to go talk to the captain. See what I can find out about the.. nautical.. thing.” She called back over her shoulder. “Stay here. Don’t let anyone leave yet.”

They all watched her head up the ramp before Mark shook his head. “That captain guy was okay with us, but man, he was not messing with wanting us all out of there. Hope he doesn’t chew her head off. He looked like he could be a bastard.”

“Not if he knows what’s good for him.” Kerry excused herself and started after Dar. “Besides, Dar’s a nautical sort of person too.. maybe they’ll hit it off.”

Barry shook his head. The other techs remained prudently silent. “Didn’t DR say for everyone to stay here?” The server manager asked.

Everyone with the exception of the now missing Kerry rolled their eyes and headed for the terminal building.

“She did, I heard her.” Barry protested, following them. “Won’t she get mad?”

“Man.” Mark held the door for the group. “You deserve to be an MCSE.”

“What?”

PART 26

DESPITE THE LINGERING STENCH, AND THE CLUTTER OF TOOLS AND MATERIALS everywhere, Dar found the ship much more appealing with most of the workers off of it. Now that twilight was in the offing the oppressive heat had dissipated and as she strode through the central atrium she could see signs that all the work were having some kind of effect at least.

The floors had been mostly redone, and bright rounds of carpet were inlaid between circles of newly polished marble. The railings had been resurfaced with a new coating of brass and the curved reception desks sported handsome teak inlays.

Dar started up the center steps, feeling just a touch better about the project. Their systems were in, the staff was working well, all she needed was to keep the momentum going. She looked around as she climbed upward, seeing only one or two of the workmen heading quietly in the other direction.

By the time she reached the deck where the ship's bridge was, she was quite alone. All the hammering and noise of construction had stopped and as she walked along the plastic covered carpet Dar could see a slow, grudging veneer of modernity creeping over the aged surfaces.

It was like an eighty year old woman getting a radical face lift.

That threw Dar's mind onto a different track, and she pondered over it as she walked down the long corridor that would eventually take her to the front of the ship, and the bridge. Eleanor had revealed to them all at their last meeting that she was taking a few weeks off to go get herself 'done.'

Everyone had accepted this, and congratulated her, except for Dar, who had been a bit puzzled as to why the woman would want to spend ten or fifteen thousand dollars to have invasive surgery just to look like someone had stretched saran wrap over her face.

She just didn't get it. So then, Eleanor had, with some justified exasperated snarkiness reminded her that as the youngest person in the room, she'd just please shut up until it was her turn to be ancient.

So that brought her to thinking about what she'd do when she did become ancient. Would she take Eleanor's route and get 'done'? Outside her immediate laughter at the thought, she'd found a touch of insecurity in wondering if Kerry would want her to.. would want them to try to hang on to youth with tenacious claws right up until they qualified for Medicare.

Logically, she didn't think so. Dar continued down the corridor, glancing ahead to where the walls started to narrow as she approached the front of the ship. But you never knew, really, how people would change over the years. Maybe Kerry's thoughts would change. Maybe hers would.

Dar's nose wrinkled in displeasure.

She didn't really think hers would. Just the thought of her parents reaction to her getting a facelift was enough to make her run in the other direction, hollering like a banshee. But, she decided, as she got to the end of the hall and faced the door to the bridge. If Kerry decided she wanted to do something like that, and it was important to her..

Well, then, she'd at least think about it.

Dar tested the door latch, finding it locked. She knocked on it lightly, rapping her knuckles against the metal surface.

Hopefully, neither of them would turn into vain harridans as they got older though. Dar sighed, and knocked again. Hopefully they'd just enjoy a long life together and take life's changes as they came.

The door opened, and she was faced with a man in a starched white uniform and a very unfortunate toupee. "Yes?" He asked, in a gruff tone.

"I'd like to speak with the captain, please." Dar decided to mind her manners., at least for now.

The man glared briefly at her, then, surprisingly, he backed up and opened the door all the way. "Come in."

Dar availed herself of the permission, and stepped inside. The bridge was relatively small, but probably twenty degrees cooler than the hallway and there were several men inside enjoying that fact. They turned and looked at her as she entered, watching her curiously.

Dar returned the attention, picking out the oldest guy with the most stuff on his sleeves and walking over to him. “Captain?”

He was, perhaps, sixty years old, with silver gray hair and shrewd eyes. “Yes?” He responded politely. “What can I do for you, madame?”

Madame? “I’d like to discuss your plans for this evening.’ Dar said.

Several of the other men chuckled, as the captain raised his eyebrows at her. “I am sorry, madame, do I know you?” He inquired. “I do not believe we have met.”

“We haven’t.” Dar turned and pointed at the air conditioning unit. “But I own that.”

The smiles disappeared from the officers faces, to be replaced by apprehension.

“So, can we talk?” Dar turned again to the captain, easing her words with a smile. “I solved a problem for you, maybe you can do the same for me.”

The captain looked doubtful, but he stood and gestured towards a small office at the rear of the bridge. “By all means.” He waited for her to precede him. “But it will have to be done quickly, as we are preparing to remove the gangways and you must be off the ship.”

The door to the bridge opened as they got to the office, and the staff captain entered. He took one look at Dar and his eyes started to emit sparks, but she stepped past him and the captain closed the door to the office before he could speak.

Probably a good thing. Dar found herself inside a closet just about smaller than the head in the Dixie. The captain seated himself behind his desk, and she took the rickety chair in front of it, turning it around and sitting on it with her arms resting on the back.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. The captain steepled his fingers. “Madame, I don’t know what it is you think I can do for you, but please, be quick in asking.” He said. “We have little time.”

Dar glanced around. “We’re the ones with little time, Captain. You’ve got plenty of it, since you’re not going anywhere.”

A faint smile crossed his face. “But you are wrong. We are going somewhere. We are leaving, casting the lines, and removing ourselves from this port.”

Dar blinked. “Now?”

“Exactly now.” The man nodded. “So as you can see, we really cannot help you. I would.. “ He cleared his throat. “Like to thank you with all my heart for the loan of your piece of machinery. It has made it so comfortable for us today.”

“I thought you weren’t leaving until Friday.” Dar tapped her thumbs on the chair. “So this is over? The renovations?”

The captain lifted his hand. “Not exactly. We are leaving, yes.” He admitted. “But we will be coming back, it is just that the government people, the.. “ He cleared his throat again. “They insist we move away so they can examine the water. The damage, or so they say.”

“Ah.”

“Is that all?” The captain asked. “I do really have many things to do.”

Damn, damn, damn. Dar thought fast. “What would it take to get you to let us go with you.” She asked. “My crew.”

The man blinked at her. “It is impossible.”

“Why?”

“You are not authorized to sail on the vessel.” The captain spluttered. “I cannot be responsible for how many of you to be on the ship… it’s insanity.”

Dar leaned forward a trifle, her eyes narrowing a bit and the more feral part of her personality flexing it’s paws and extending sharp claws just the tiniest amount. “What would it take, Captain.” She held his gaze with hers. “Name your price.”

For a moment, he merely looked at her. “You insult me, madame.” He responded stiffly, then hesitated just enough. “I do not even know who you are.”

Dar removed her wallet, opened it, and retrieved one of her business cards. She tossed it on his desk. “That’s who I am.” She fished in the wallet and removed something else. “And I’m not a stranger to the water.” She tossed over a small square of well laminated cardboard, her captains license with it’s surprisingly hoary issuing date.

The man picked both up and examined them.

“Look.” Dar said. “That blowout yesterday put us behind. I just need the time to catch up. My people need to get things onto this ship, put them in places, and make sure the work. It’s better for us to do it without the rest of the circus onboard, and I’m willing to pay for the privilege.”

The captain tapped both cards on his desk. “All right.” He said. “I will accept your offer, but this is what I want.” He slapped his hand on the desktop. “You cannot buy me, woman. I am not for sale.”

Dar waited.

“But my people on this ship, they have been screwed by these people. We have had nothing but canned garbage since we have gotten here.” He stood. “You bring on to this ship a meal, some good drinks, some comforts for my crew, you can stay.”

It was absurd. Dar almost felt like crying. It was like finding a clean spot in the middle of a garbage heap. “No problem.” She managed to say. “Give me an hour.”

“An hour?”

“An hour.” Dar stood also and extended her hand. “Deal?”

The captain reached over and took her hand, squeezing it powerfully. “We have a deal.” He said. “You have how many people?”

“Thirty… one.” Dar mentally counted. “You?”

“Two hundred.”

“Done deal.” Dar released his hand. “See you in an hour.” She turned and opened the door, drawing it back and gracefully gesturing him to go first. Then she followed him outside and headed for the door, not forgetting to give the staff captain a smile as she passed.

* * *

“We’re going to what?” Kerry stared at Dar’s back, as she trotted past on the stairwell. “Dar!” She turned and bolted after her partner, catching up to her and grabbing the back of her jeans. “Whoa!”

Dar halted and turned around. “Yeees?” Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “C’mon, Ker. You wanted to ride on the thing, didn’cha?”

“Are you serious?” Kerry asked. “The ship’s really leaving?”

Dar nodded. “EPA’s asking them to move so they can review the water.” She explained. “So they’re taking off, that’s why they kicked everyone out.” Tugging Kerry’s belt loop, she started to move down the steps again. “I got the captain to agree to let us stay on, but we’ve got a ton of prep to do and only an hour left to do it in.”

“So, we’re going.”

Dar gave her a sideways glance. “We’re going.”

“On the ship.”

Dar stopped. “Ker, you need a cup of espresso or something?” She asked curiously. “You’re not usually this slow.”

Kerry gave her a poke. “YOU are the woman who chased me down on this thing the first day and wanted to carry me off over your shoulder because you were afraid it would sink. Now you want to sail on it???”

Had she done that? Dar frowned, then her brows lifted. She had. “Well, they’ve had time to stuff silly putty in the holes.” She temporized. “Anyway, they’re not going that far.”

They both started down the steps together. “All the staff?” Kerry asked.

“Yeah.” Dar nodded again. “But the price was, I’ve got to get the catering guys in here and feed the crew.” She pulled out her cell. “Hope they’re up for it.”

“The crew?”

“The caterers.” Dar punched a number in. “Get our guys ready to start moving everything in sight onto the ship. Just dump it in the hold and we’ll hump it upstairs later.”

“Hm.” Kerry skipped a few steps to keep up with Dar’s powerful strides. “Think your dad wants to come along? I think he can carry a few pc’s in each hand.”

“He might have left already.”

They got to the bottom of the steps and entered the shipping hold, stopping as the spotted Andrew seated on a crate, kicking his heels against it. “Guess not.” Dar said. “Hi, dad.”

“Howdy, Dardar.” Andrew greeted her amiably. “Whatcha up to?”

“Hey dad.” Kerry went right up to him and put her hands on his knees. “Guess what?”

“Wall.” Andy considered. “I guess that this here boat’s fixing to leave.” He said. “Heard them kicking over those mules back there.” He thrust his thumb over his shoulder. “Thought they were staying till Friday.”

“They’re making them leave to check the oil leak.” Dar explained.

“Ah.” Her father nodded. “Figgured.”

“Was that mom’s idea too?”

Andrew scratches his jaw, and gave his daughter a mildly sheepish look. “Ah do not believe she had anything to do with that this time.” He said. “So you all going home?”

“Nope.” Kerry smiled. “We’re going on the ship.”

Andrew stared at her, then looked past her to where Dar was lounging against the wall. “Ya’ll are joshin me.”

Dar shook her head. “No. We’re behind the rest of them. This was the only way we could catch up. All of us are going.” She watched her father’s face. “Wanna come with us?”

“Hell yes.” Andrew snorted. “If you think I’m letting you kids out on this here crate by yourselfs you have lost your minds.”

Kerry leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re so sweet.” She grinned, then headed for the gangway. “I’ll get the guys going, Dar. I’m glad they all brought a change today.”

Dar’s cell phone rang, and she answered it. “Steven?” She listened. “Yeah, it’s Dar Roberts. Listen, I’ve got a very big job for you, I’ll pay premium for it, but it’s got to happen in less than an hour.” She listened again. “I am nuts, but I want it anyway.”

Andrew pulled out his own phone and studied it, then selected a sequence of numbers with studied precision.

“Okay, here’s what it is.” Dar said. “I need a class A dinner, the works, with alcohol, for two hundred and fifty people, delivered to the pier.”

“Cec?” Andy spoke into the phone. “You ain’t gonna believe this here.”

“Steven, don’t give me bullshit. Either you can do it, or I’ll find someone who can.” Dar was perfectly well aware of the fact that she couldn’t find a caterer in under an hour and she knew their regular guy knew that as well. “Hell, I’ll get Hooters to cater it if you can’t. They’re close, and I bet their serving staff’s cuter than yours.”

“Yeap, ah surely am.” Andrew half listened to Dar. “Ain’t no way… huh?”

“Okay.” Dar felt relieved. “Don’t skimp, Steve. Some of these guys have been living on Spam for three weeks. They deserve it.”

“Cec..”

“Tell me about it. I’ve been kicking a timeclock in the ass all week.” Dar argued. “Look…”

“Now, you just hold on there a minute, ma’am!” Andrew sounded slightly exasperated. “Ah don’t..”

“Full bar. Not that jug wine crap you brought to the office.”

“Ceci, you cannot just walk in this here place.”

“Mine? I don’t… wait… yeah, make sure you have Corona, and a case of limes. We set?”

“Yes, ma’am, ah will be here.” Andrew sighed, and closed his cell phone.

“Thanks.” Dar folded her phone, at the same time as her father did. They looked at each other. “This is gonna be a circus. We’re going to end up with Kentucky Fried Chicken and a keg of Budweiser.”

“Your mama’s headed this way.” Andrew said. “So ah do hope that there chicken comes with them little cartons of cole slaw of she’s gonna starve to death.”

Dar chuckled wearily, limping over to the crate and taking a seat next to her father. “Wonder when the dancing bear shows up.” Kerry could more than handle getting the troops together, she reasoned. No sense in both of them stirring up trouble.

Andrew chuckled softly. “You figure t’get this all squared away tonight?”

Dar exhaled. “Well, we’ll get further than we would if we didn’t try it.” She admitted. “There’s still so much construction going on it’s hard to say how far we’ll get, but.. hey. Gotta try.”

“Damn straight.” Her father agreed.

“Speak for yourself.” Dar answered dryly.

Andrew looked at her, then he chuckled again. “How’s that foot?” He nudged Dar’s calf.

“Eh.” Dar regarded her sneaker encased extremity. “I think it’s getting better. Hurts less.” She glanced out the open gangway door, where she could already see a cluster of people and boxes starting to head their way at a double march. “You wouldn’t believe the crazy ass stories those people came up with as to how it happened, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm.” Dar shook her head. “I tell one person I got bit by a fish running after a frisbee at the cabin, and the last I heard I’d gotten it saving Kerry from a shark.”

Andrew laughed. “Jungle talking. Always does it.”

"Jesus."

Kerry jogged up the gangway and into the hold. "Okay, everyone's with the program." She announced. "And would you believe it, Dar? They're all excited as kids." She came over to where they were sitting. "I told them they had to work all night, and go out on this tub and it was like I'd announced the quarter bonuses." She rested her hand on Dar's thigh. "Just weird."

"For them it's an adventure." Dar smiled.

"For us it's an adventure too." Kerry retorted. "Dar, do you know how much work we have to do tonight?"

Dar nodded. "I know." She circled Kerry's waist with her left arm.

"Ah can help." Andrew offered. "I got me some books on all these things you brought in here."

"On our stuff?" Kerry asked.

"Yeap."

"And you read them??" Dar looked at her father. "Jesus, dad… six pages and I'm snoozing with those damn things."

Andrew waggled his hand, and managed a lopsided grin.

"Well, that's probably more experience than some people we've hired." Kerry headed for the gangway as the first load of gear started up it. "C'mon guys.. we don't want the ship to sail without us, right?"

"Right." The chorus of voices answered her.

Dar sat back and watched as the line of people and boxes started to stream onto the ship. Eyes moved in her direction, and she saw the hesitant grins appear before the techs went to drop their boxes off near the far wall and head back for the next load. "You guys ready for this?" She asked.

"You bet, ma'am." Carlos replied, with a bright smile. "This is gonna be cool."

Oh yeah. Dar found herself smiling back, almost unconsciously. Cool. It was going to be a mess. It was going to be annoying, and aggravating, and frustrating….

"Ah do believe that feller might be correct." Her father commented. "Ah do like this sorta mess to get fixed up."

And very possibly her angle to success. "You got it." Dar got up off the crate and gathered up her energy. "Let's do this thing." She walked to the edge of the gangway and looked out, craning her head around and peering down at the ship Telegenics was outfitting.

She spotted Michelle and Shari on the dock, talking with Quest. Shari was moving her arms a lot, and even from where she was, Dar could sense the heated nature of the discussion.

Would they notice the steady stream of equipment heading to her ship? Dar started down the gangway. "Be right back." She called over her shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Kerry yelled after her.

"To make some trouble." Dar replied, hopping off the end of the ramp and heading down the dock. "Keep my crate warm!"

"Uh oh." Kerry drummed her fingers against the rusted steel plate. Torn, she half turned as one of the techs called out to her, asking a question. She stared at him, then held up one finger. "Hold that thought."

"Ma'am?" The tech queried, watching as his boss disappeared down the ramp at a high rate of scamper. "Hey.. where's she going?"

"T'where she belongs." Andrew got up and went over to him. "Here, put that thing there, and that other box sideways, son. Ain't no way that's gonna fit otherwise."

"Uh.."

Andrew cocked an eyebrow at him. "Y'all ain't' gonna make me mad, are you?"

"No, sir." The tech scurried to do as he'd been told.

"Damn straight." Andrew leaned against the wall, with a satisfied expression.

* * *

"Dar!" Kerry scrambled off the gangway just as another group of techs reached it. She pointed up, then went after the dark haired woman, catching up to her a few strides across the pavement. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar replied. "Thought I told you to keep my crate warm."

"You seriously thought I was going to stay there?" Kerry asked incredulously.

“Not really, no.” Dar admitted.

“Well, okay then.” Kerry settled down at her side and they walked along the pier towards their erstwhile enemies. She’d started putting Quest into that category lately, and based on the glare he gave them as they walked up, she suspected she was dead on right. “Evening.” She greeted them cordially.

“Ms. Stuart.” Quest responded, in a brief tone.

Dar strolled around them and stopped to their east, forcing them to turn to keep her in view. “Another challenge you tossed us, Mr. Quest?” She asked. ‘At this rate, I figure the bomb squad to show up next.”

Surprisingly, Michelle chimed right in. “Just exactly what I was saying. You can’t expect to keep changing the rules, and have us pay for it.”

“Right.” Shari said.

“They aren’t my rules!” Quest lifted his hands. “I can’t do anything about these damn government people! I told you that.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Shari asked, her hand indicating Dar and Kerry as well as herself and Michelle. “You get in government trouble, and we have to pay for it? Hell no.”

Dar and Kerry exchanged somewhat bemused glances.

Behind them all, the techs had started toting in cartloads of monitors, terminals, and boxes of the various accoutrements computers require.

“Ah.. that’s right.” Kerry spoke up. “Mr. Quest, we really can’t be expected to be penalized because of all these external factors. It’s not fair.”

“Right.” Michelle agreed.

Having nothing else to add to the conversation, Dar decided to just fold her arms across her chest and listen.

“Well, I can’t be held responsible either!” Quest argued. “A deal is a deal. You want the contract? Then fulfill your part of the deal.”

He turned and stalked off, heading for the gate in the fence that would take him outside of the pier area. Outside the wire, three men were waiting, and as Dar looked at them, one turned away and almost triggered a sense of familiarity in her.

“Well.” Michelle exhaled. “So much for that.” She eyed Dar and Kerry. “Not that it would have helped you much anyway. Bad luck, huh?”

Dar shrugged one shoulder. “Happens.”

Shari looked at her. “What drugs are you on today?”

Kerry felt herself bristle, and wondered if it was a visible reaction. Did her hair fluff out like a cats, maybe? Certainly, Michelle edged away from her, so something must have shown.

“Drugs?” Dar asked. “Tetracycline, why?” She unfolded her arms and stuck her hands in her pockets instead. Curiously, Shari’s taunting didn’t even bother her in the slightest.

“Because for someone who’s going to lose big, you’re too damn relaxed.” Shari said bluntly. “Give up already? Going through the motions, Dar?”

From the corner of her eye, Dar watched as Mark led a group of six other techs out the door to the terminal, steering a huge flatbed covered in gear. “Yeah, maybe.” She drawled. “Can’t fight fate all the time, can ya?’

Kerry patted her arm comfortingly.

“Well.” Michelle ran a hand through her hair. “Not like we can say much at the moment either. I can’t believe they made us stop work. It’s just not fair.”

Shari snorted. “At least we know no one’s getting an advantage.” She looked at Dar pointedly.

Dar produced one of her best, most innocent smiles, as the last of the gear trundled past behind their backs and went up the gangway. “Nope.”

“Doesn’t that bug you?” Shari persisted. “Not having an angle?”

Michelle took Shari by the arm and simply turned and started walking. “Come on. I’m not listening to this crap again.” She sounded angry. “I’ve had enough already.”

“Hey!” Shari protested, pulling on her hand.

“Either come with me, or stay here and act like a jackass, again.” Michelle turned and spat at her. “Make up your mind.” She released Shari’s arm and started marching for the gate again.

Shari looked at her, then turned and looked at Dar and Kerry.

Never one not to take an advantage when she saw it, Dar draped an arm over Kerry's shoulders and gave her a kiss on the head. She winked at Shari, and smiled.

Without a further word, Shari turned and followed Michelle.

"Mm." Kerry grunted contentedly. "Nice."

"Yeah." Dar turned them both around and pointed. "Nice timing. I don't' think they even noticed us taking half the domestic inventory of Computers R Us on board."

"Couldn't care less about that part." Kerry put her arms around Dar and hugged her tightly.

Puzzled, but not unhappy, Dar returned the hug. "You want to grab our bags?" She asked. "Might as well get on there and make sure it's all getting to the right places."

"Sure." Kerry released her, and patted her side. "I'll have the security guys clear the front doors for the caterers, too. I bet they'll come in here on screaming tires."

"Bet you're right." Dar lifted her hand and waved as Kerry made tracks for the terminal. She fondly watched her partner's determined little swagger, then she retreated back to the ship's gangway and climbed up it, noting the angle had increased a little as the tide came in.

The sun had come out too, and it was preparing to grace them with a decently photogenic sunset. Dar gazed benevolently at it, as she ducked inside the hold and found her father organizing the troops. Around them, the ship's crew went about their tasks, giving the techs skeptical looks, but staying out of their way as they dogged down hatches and prepared the ship for sea.

Dar knew those sounds. She'd gotten to sail one or two times on Andy's ships, illicit adventures where the crew would hide her when they went out for a day cruise, or when the ship was repositioning from one pier to the other. The scent of diesel was the same, and the sounds of metal doors being rolled closed and locked was the same.

She wondered if her father found it as nostalgic.

"Hey. You there." Andrew suddenly raised his voice. "Get that box out from that doorway, son. Doors gonna close there and make that a pancake."

"Yes, sir." The tech in question started tugging the box out of the way. "Sorry, I thought this was open space."

"Ain't no open space on a ship." Andy said. "Every little inch's got someone's claim on it."

Dar walked over and joined him, watching the boxes line up against the back wall. “Lot of stuff.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Her father agreed. “Y’know I can remember when the most techno thing we had on one of these here things was a water fountain.” He reminisced. “And wasn’t that a six day wonder when they put that in.”

“I remember that.” Dar recalled, with some surprise. “I brought you a bag of shirts from mom that day. I remember wondering why everyone was staring at that damn fountain like it was a television set.”

Andrew chuckled. “Cause sucking that there stuff from the commode sink just was not a whole lot of fun, Dardar.” He reminded her. “Not everybody liked getting a drink from the hose, neither, like you did.”

Dar licked her lips in memory, and produced a grin. “I ever tell you about the first time Kerry took a drink of hose water?”

“Heh.” Andrew glanced around at the cramped ship hold. “ You know what, Dar?”

“What?”

“It’s a hell of a lot better to be the skipper of the damn boat.” He said. “I would not go back to doing this if they paid me all the dollar bills in the Navy.”

“Hm.” Dar remembered those stolid seamen who suffered the cramped spaces and shared their hoarded candy bars with the scruffy child she’d been. “I’m damn glad you’ll never have to.”

Andrew looked at her. Then he chuckled. “Darn good thing you went after them computer things, ain’t it? Or we’d all be having crackers and peanut butter stew down there in Stiltsville.” He clapped her on the shoulder. “Got all the stuff you all need?”

Dar nodded.

“Got a pair of jammies?”

“We don’t’ wear them.” Dar replied absently, then she shot her father a look as the silence lengthened. “Hey, you asked.”

Andrew pointed at the techs. “Got some pills for them fellers?”

Dar peered at them. “Dad, we’re just going offshore.”

Andrew lifted his grizzled eyebrows.

“I’ll go get some.” Dar sighed, and headed for the gangway. “No sense in wasting good roast beef.”

* * *

Kerry had to admit she felt a little excited. She was standing outside the terminal, checking her watch as she bounced from foot to foot waiting for the caterers. It was close to the time they were supposed to depart, and she didn’t want to either miss the ship or miss the dinner. ‘C’mon.. c’mon…”

From where she was standing, she could see the bridge that connected the port to the rest of Miami. At this time of night, in this time of the year, it was probably the only major roadway in the vicinity bare of traffic. But that helped Kerry’s mental state because she knew she’d see the big catering truck before it got anywhere near the terminal.

If she looked behind her, she could now see lights beginning to come on aboard the ship. Dar had their bags inside, and she’d heard rumors that they were being assigned cabins. From the few she’d stuck her head into over the past weeks, Kerry was pretty sure she’d rather sleep on the deck. The musty smell, and the grungy interior hadn’t seemed appealing in the least but she did appreciate the ship’s attempt at hospitality.

Ah. Her eyes caught a white panel truck cresting the rise and heading in her direction. Unfortunately her peripheral vision also caught Michelle Graver approaching obviously intent on talking to her. “Pig farts.” She composed her expression, and half turned, giving the oncoming woman an inquiring look. “Hello again.”

“Hi.” Michelle mounted the two low steps to the foundation Kerry was standing on and approached her. “Listen, can we talk?”

Kerry watched the truck out of the corner of her eye. “Uh.. yeah, sure.. we’re about to tie things up here but..” She drew a breath in. “I’ve got a minute.”

Michelle faced her. “Look, you’re screwed.”

The truck parked right across from where they were standing, and the doors flew open, allowing two sweating men to jump out and run for the back. “What do you mean?” Kerry asked, edging over a little so Michelle was forced to turn her back completely to the truck to talk to her.

“C’mon, Kerry. You’re not stupid. You were behind a day, and now with this.. there’s no guarantee when they’ll let the ships back into port.” Michelle said.

Kerry watched what appeared to be an entire football team worth of men pour out of the back of the truck, dragging carts and a whole lot of other things out after them. “And?” She cocked her head slightly. “Forgive me, Michelle, but shouldn’t you be kicking back a beer at that? Why talk to me about it.”

Michelle sighed. “Look.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “None of the other bidders are friends of yours.”

“Ah.. you are?” Both of Kerry’s very blond eyebrows lifted.

“No. But they aren’t either. You don’t get anything out of them getting the contract.” Michelle said. “On the other hand, if we get it, and you help us get it, maybe you will get something.”

The wind was fortunately blowing from behind them. It carried the noise of the catering men setting up away, and almost left them in a sound vacuum. Probably a good thing considering Kerry felt like her sense of moral outrage was caterwauling at the top of it’s imaginary lungs.

“What exactly are you offering here?” Kerry asked warily.

“This doesn’t have to be a losing situation for you.” Her rival said. “You know you can’t win the bid, hell, I bet you can’t even get all your systems working by Friday. It’s not your fault.”

“Michelle, please cut to the chase.” Kerry spotted a line of perspiring caterers headed her way, pushing laden carts. “What exactly do you want from me?”

“Join with us.” Michelle said. “You and Dar, and your team. Help us win the bid, and we’ll cut a deal with you. There’s enough business on this account for both of us.”

Kerry looked over at the ships, then at Michelle. “From this guy? C’mon, Michelle. We both know there ‘s something sourer than lemons about this whole thing.”

“Not from him.” Michelle moved a step closer. “From the rest of the industry. We both know who’s watching.”

Ah. Kerry backed up a few paces and took hold of the door handle, pulling it open as the first of the caterers carts clattered up the cement handicapped incline. She half turned to look back at Michelle. “You’re serious?”

Encouraged, Michelle moved closer to her, giving the carts a brief look. “Serious as a heart attack. You’ve proved yourselves. You’re a tough adversary, everyone knows it, hell they have it on film. And for the record, I did check that shipment and it did get delivered her by a clueless trucker. So thank you.”

“Careful.” Kerry cautioned a rushing caterer. “Back there, that’s right. Out that door.” She indicated the back of the terminal.

“What do you say, Kerry?” Michelle asked.

"Whoops." Kerry put a hand out and steadied one of the women, who gave her a brief nod of thanks. "Let me talk to Dar." She finally responded to Michelle. "I'll tell her what you said, and see what she thinks."

"Can't make up your own mind?" Michelle almost laughed. "Funny, I didn't have you pegged as a bottom."

Kerry's brow creased momentarily. "Dar's my boss." She said. "It's her decision, Michelle. You do realize a chief information officer does outrank a VP, right?"

Michelle just shook her head.

"Anyway, I've got things to do, so I'll have to bid you a good night." Kerry prepared to follow the cavalcade of catering. "Enjoy your night off."

Michelle reached for the door. "What's with all the food?" She asked, since Kerry seemed to be genially ignoring her jibes.

"Dar's hungry." Kerry shrugged and smiled. "Gotta go." She pulled the door shut and locked it, then waggled her fingers at Michelle before she turned and headed for the back door.

Well, she would talk to Dar, and she would tell her what Michelle said. And then, probably, they both would get a good laugh out of it and maybe share a beer.

Okay, maybe not share one. Kerry liked her beer, and if she wasn't mistaken, the last big cart they'd taken through had a distinctive tinkle of bottles in it. She checked quickly into their office, and found it empty. She locked the door and went to the back, where she could now see dockworkers preparing to let the ship loose from it's moorings. "Uh oh.. not without me you don't."

She shoved the back door open and headed for the gangway. At the top of it she saw the last of the catering carts vanishing, and behind them, she spotted Andrew directing traffic.

Just as she was scooting across the pier, she heard a rattle of the fence behind her. Turning, she spotted Ceci on the other side of the locked gate. "Hey!"

"Let me in there!" Her mother in law yelled.

Kerry veered, and got to the gate as she spotted two big security men heading their way. She quickly threw the latch and opened it, letting Ceci in as the men started to yell. "Oh oh."

“Oh, please. I’ve seen more dangerous things than those kids swimming by the boat in the morning.” Ceci replied with a touch of testiness. “What is this crazy nonsense about all of you going out on that thing?”’

Kerry took her arm and headed towards the ship. “Can we argue about this onboard? I don’t want to tangle with those guys no matter how not dangerous they look.”

“Hey! You there! Stop!” The guards broke into a run. “Hold it!”

Kerry broke into a run too, with Ceci right behind her. It was a fairly long stretch of pavement, but they had a shorter distance than the guards and a better angle to the ship.

“Just how I wanted my evening to start.” Ceci yelled.

Kerry sucked in a lungful of humid air and just ran faster. She could hear the pounding steps of the guards closing in on them, and she pulled Ceci up by the arm and pushed her ahead, towards the ship. “Go go!”

They reached the gangway and bolted up it, as Andrew stepped to the edge of the opening and peered out. “What’s all that there noise?”

“Us.” Kerry scrambled past him, hauling Ceci with her. “The damn punky fake police are after us.”

“Hey!” The guard nearest the ship yelled. “Stop!” He pointed at them. “That’s an illegal intruder! Stop!” He skidded to a halt as Andrew unclipped the gangway and it swayed. “Hey! Put that back! Hold it! I’m warning you!”

“S’allright, relax!” Andrew uncoiled a rope tied off to the gangway and hooked it security to a crane hoist dangling nearby. He put his fingers between his teeth and let out a sharp whistle, and after that no one could hear anything because the crane started up and began to hoist the gangway off and away from the ship’s side.

“Hey!’ The guard mimed, waving his arms. “Stop! Stop! I’ll call the police!!”

Andrew waved amiably back at him, then stepped back and cleared the opening. “All right, young fellers. G’wan and close this here.” He indicated the hatch.

Ceci backed up against the wall, and Kerry joined her, to stay out of the way. “You know something?”

“What?” Kerry asked, wiping the sweat off her forehead. Her heart was racing, and she felt a little shaky from the unexpected chase, even though she didn’t really think the guards were any physical danger to them.

“I’ve never seen this from this side.”

The crewmen unsurprisingly obeyed, working the various wheels and levers as a counterbalanced steel door slowly moved down and slammed into place with a grinding shudder.

Kerry felt her ears pop, just a little. Now that the outside was closed off, she could smell the scent of diesel and oil much more strongly, and as she watched the crewman mutter something into an aged phone set she felt the rumble of the engines as they engaged. "So.. what do you think?"

"Hate it." Ceci went over to Andrew and put a hand on his arm. :"Hey sailor boy."

Kerry's nose wrinkled, and she wiped her forehead off again. "Yeah, me too." She sighed. "I'm going to go find Dar." She viewed the milling caterers. "I think.. wait." She turned and found one of the crewmen edging past. "Excuse me."

The man looked at her warily. "Yes?"

"This stuff's all for the crew. Where can they put it? Is there a kitchen near the main dining room so.. uh.." Kerry watched in bemusement as they were surrounded by crew instantly. "So they can keep it warm for you?"

"For us?" The man asked. "You're kidding, right?"

The crewmembers started peeking into the trays on the cart, whispering to each other in muted excitement.

"Uh.. no." Kerry shook her head. "So, is there a place?"

"Sure." The man said. "C'mon, we'll take them to the elevator." He motioned for the caterers to follow him. "Taki taki.. let's go."

"Elevator?" Kerry queried. "They told us it wasn't working."

"Not for anyone but crew." The man cheerfully explained. "Sorry!" He started off, leading the carts with many willing assistants. "Hey, is that alcohol?" He rattled the biggest cabinet. "All right!"

Kerry put her hands on her hips, then she looked over at Andrew. The big ex-seal shrugged, and half grinned at her. "You know something, that's not very god damned funny." She said. "I had people lifting hundred pound switches up those stairs."

Andrew blinked at her in some mild surprise. The crewman also turned and looked at her.

“I’ Kerry pointed at her own chest. “Paid for all that. So you can take your crew only rules and stuff it up your butt, buddy.” She pointed at the crewman, whose eyes widened. “You better rethink that attitude right now!”

“Hey! Hey.. relax, okay? It’s not my rule!” The crewman stammered, backing off. “You can come on the elevator, okay? Take it easy.”

Kerry glared at him, then caught motion in her side vision and turned her head to see Dar rambling down the last few steps in the stairwell. “Hey.”

Dar walked right through the crowd, expecting it to part. It did. “What’s going on?” She asked, giving everyone a dirty look. “Did all the food get here?”

One of the caterers came up to her. “Yes, ma’am.” The man said, handing her a list. “It wasn’t easy, Ms, Roberts.”

“Or cheap.” Dar reviewed the bill, then handed it to Kerry. “ Why were you yelling?”

“Did you know there was an elevator?” Kerry asked. “A working one?” ‘

“No.” Dar looked at the nearest crewman. “Is there?”

The man nodded.

“Then get this stuff up stairs.” Dar directed. “And let our people all know where it is so they can get the rest of your new computer gear in place.”

The man nodded again.

“Scoot.” Kerry nudged him. They watched the crowd start to sort itself out, and the now chastened crewman directed the carts towards a double set of doors at the end of the cargo hold. “Jesus.”

Andrew cleared his throat. “Ah do not think they meant to be bad fellers.”

“Oh, bull hockey, Andy. They certainly did. I know you seamen – if you don’t have twenty voyages under you you’re not worth a navy bean.” Ceci snorted. “Please!”

Andrew managed a relatively sheepish look.

“You okay?” Dar took the opportunity to attend to more important matters. “Got our space squared away. Want to go see it?” She gave her parents a look. “They’ve got a room for you guys too.”

“Bigger than a twenty four inch rack?” Ceci asked drolly. “Oh, be still my beating heart. I thought we’d camp out on the fantail.” She indicated the stairwell. “Let’s go watch this

thing try to get out of the channel. That could be as entertaining as seeing Jerry Springer in Judge Judy's court."

Kerry squared her shoulders and let the tension flow out of her as she followed Dar towards the door. There would be time, later, she hoped when she could sit down and talk to her partner about what Michelle had said. For now, just the thought of changing her clothes, and relaxing for a little while was very appealing.

"You okay?" Dar asked again, lowering her voice.

Kerry exhaled. "Yeah." She put a hand on Dar's back. "I think I just need a protein bar."

"How about a roast beef sandwich?"

"That'll do." Kerry felt Dar's arm settle over her shoulders, bringing a very welcome comfort despite the humid air. "Matter of fact, yeah, let's go up on the deck. I want to wave."

"At the port?" Dar asked, puzzled.

Kerry merely chuckled, and kept on climbing.

* * *

The central atrium was a bit of a mess. Dar and Kerry stopped as they got through the stairway door, watching as their entire group was scrambling around trying to get the computer equipment in some kind of distribution order.

Everyone was sweating. The air inside had started to move around sluggishly, and by the strong scent of musky, musty mildew Kerry deduced that the long absent air conditioning had been turned on. It wasn't helping much yet, however.

Mark spotted them and came over, his polo shirt grimy with sweat and dust. "Wow. Just made it, huh? I saw you run on with the chow." He grinned wearily at Kerry.

"You know me and chow." Kerry acknowledged with a droll grin of her own. "Everyone okay?"

"Wiped, but okay." Mark said. "We're gonna get this stuff sorted out, then everyone's gonna take a break and die for a half hour or something. John dragged his dad's cooler on with the gear." He pointed. "It's got ice and drinks in it."

"Good idea." Dar complimented him. "I ordered food for either five hundred normal people or two hundred fifty sailors and us." She said. "They're taking it to one of the big dining rooms.. let's get set up, let everyone relax and maybe go take a shower, then get dinner."

Mark nodded.

“Everyone should get a room.” Kerry chimed in.

“Except you and me. We’re sharing.” Dar reminded her.

“Shucks.” Kerry gave her a kindly ‘duh’ look, then returned her attention to Mark. “Let everyone chill out and get food. We can plan to start up again after that.”

“Right.” Mark plucked his filthy shirt. “So much for that light blue collar reputation IT has.” He remarked.

“Wasn’t what they advertised in my school either.” Kerry took Dar’s hand and they circled the atrium, exiting out the doors onto the deck outside. A breeze caught them, welcome even with it’s humidity as they walked over to the railing and stood there, side by side, watching the pier very slowly recede.

The sun was setting. This far from the highway, there was no sense of the hectic scramble to get home that would be going on in the city, and over the engines they could hear the call of sea birds coaxing them out, away from the land, out to the sea.

Kerry looked down the pier, to where Michelle and Shari’s ship was also moving out, preparing to follow them down the channel. There was a large cluster of people on the pier, and she wondered if the guards that chased them was part of it.

Would they get in trouble for letting Ceci on? Kerry figured they wouldn’t get in any more trouble than they would for staying aboard with the rest of their staff anyway. “It’s going to be a nice sunset.”

“Yeah.” Dar leaned on the railing, after cautiously shaking it to test it’s strength. “Ah. There’s our little friends.” She mused. “Shari and Michelle. Left at the dock as usual.”

Kerry peered down at the pavement. “Wave at them, honey.” She lifted a hand and waggled it.

Dar gave her a look, but complied. “Why?”

Kerry watched intently, and smiled as she saw Michelle point at them, grabbing hold of Shari’s arm and turning her towards the ship. “Hi there, you two little piles of horse manure.” She crooned. “Hasta la vista, cucarachas.”

Dar snickered. “Don’t hold back, Ker. It’ll give you a hemorrhoid.”

Shari pulled free and ran towards the ship, pointing and turning around to yell at the group behind her. This far away, all they could see was the motion, and the frustration in the woman's gestures.

Dar stood up, to make sure she was recognizable. She lifted her arm and waved cheerily at them again, then let her elbow rest on Kerry's shoulder. "I think they're a little perturbed, Ker."

Shari turned, and found Quest in the crowd. She pointed at him, yelled something, then turned and pointed at Dar's ship.

Quest made a hand gesture, then he turned his back to Shari and started towards the gates of the pier, where a group of people had gathered.

"I think they're pooping stalactites, honey." Kerry responded. "Michelle just tried to get us to give up the bid and help them win it instead."

"What?"

The film crew pushed out of the crowd and rushed up to Michelle and Shari, Cruickshank in the lead. Shari turned around and shoved her away, then she picked up a piece of pier iron and threw it at the retreating ship.

"Mmhm." Kerry leaned on the railing, almost smiling when she felt Dar's hand immediately settle on her back, her thumb snagging the back belt loop of her jeans to keep her steady. "She figures we can't win, so why not help them, and they'd toss us a few bones afterward."

Dar made a snorting noise.

"I told her I'd talk to you and see what you said." Kerry continued. "She accused me of being a bottom."

Dar started laughing, ending up sliding down the railing to sit on the deck holding her hands over her stomach as she continued to crack up. "Bwahahahahahahh!"

"Dar, get up." Kerry tugged at her sleeve, muffling a laugh herself. "Oh, hurry.. I think ..look!"

Dar grabbed the railing and pulled herself up, turning around to peer at the port. She could see Shari now facing off against Michelle, pointing at her with vicious, sharp motions, the redness of her face visible even from where she was standing.

"Wonder what that's about?" Kerry leaned on the rail next to her, shoulders touching.

Dar merely watched, a gently bemused expression on her face. “Think her head’s going to explode?” She asked.

“Oh, I hope so.” Kerry replied. “Did you know they’re not sure when they’re going to let the ships back into the port?”

“Really?” Dar said. “No, I hadn’t heard that.. thought they were just coming in.. oh, wait. They couldn’t.” She changed thoughts. “EPA wouldn’t work at night. They need time in the morning.”

“Yeah.”

“So, we scooped all of them.” Dar laughed. “Son of a bitch. All I wanted was to catch up.. we could end up ahead of the game.”

“Yep.” Kerry leaned her head against Dar’s shoulder. “Oh.. look!” She pointed.

Dar craned her neck, where the crowd of people around Shari suddenly convulsed, and chaos ensued. “Think her head exploded.” She observed. “Either that, or she started hauling off on those guards. Or Michelle.”

“Mm. Good. That’ll make them forget about us.” Kerry said. “Guess I owe her a thank you.”

“Don’t stretch it.” Dar warned. “She’s probably telling them we’re terrorists.”

Kerry snorted softly. “Wouldn’t it be something if she went off on Michelle? Sometimes I think.. you know, I think she projects onto you all the crappy stuff inside herself, Dar.”

Dar fell silent, her eyes turning from the pier to her partner’s profile.

“People do that, you know.” Kerry added quietly.

There was another long moment of silence, and then Dar shifted, leaning over and giving Kerry a kiss on the cheek. “Yes they do, don’t they.”

“Yep.” Kerry agreed. “C’mon. Show me our barracks for the night.” She linked her arm with Dar’s, but they both stood there watching the dock recede and the chaos with it. “We don’t get to do this on our boat.” She observed, steering the conversation downstream a little.

“No. I have to steer, that requires looking forward.” Dar agreed. “I’d love to watch the sunset with you while we go out, but crashing into a billion bucks worth of motor yachts would just ruin my day.”

“Mmm.. true. But it’s kind of nice.” Kerry smiled. “The view, I mean.”

Dar drank in the reddening sunlight, watching the glow outline the buildings on the horizon. “Kinda.”

Kerry looked down at the churning water, now a somewhat frightening pea soup color from the engines wash. “Ew.” She looked at the pier, spotting a group of men in identical dark windbreakers heading for the breakfront, along with some people in regular clothes carrying what looked like equipment. “That the government people?”

“I think so.”

“Did mom really call them?” Kerry asked.

“Uh huh.” Dar turned and gestured to the door. “We can probably watch the rest of the sunset from our cabin.”

“We have window?” Kerry was surprised. “I mean, a porthole?”

Dar grinned. “C’mon.”

“Cool.” Kerry obediently followed her inside, and across the atrium to the stairwell. “I’m still pissed off about those elevators.”

“I know. C’mon.” Dar started up the steps. “Look at it this way.. at least we get a workout from it.”

“Hm.” Kerry glanced behind her, satisfied at the progress the team was apparently making in organization. “I ever mention how much I hate the stairstepper?”

Dar chuckled and kept on climbing.

* * *

Dar’s cell phone rang as they pushed open the door to the room they’d been assigned. She stood aside to let Kerry go in, and opened it. “Yeah?”

“Ms. Roberts!”

Ah, the Herald. “Yes?” Dar drawled. “What can I do for you?”

“You’re on the ship.” The reporter almost laughed. “Aren’t you?”

“We are.” Dar confirmed, entering the cabin and closing the door behind her. “With our team, and our gear, and we’re getting a lot done. I’m quite pleased, from a business perspective.” She smiled. “Anything else?”

“A lot of people are pretty damn ticked off at you.” The reporter said. “They’re saying dirty tricks.”

“Dirty tricks?” Dar’s brows contracted. “What’s dirty about it? I negotiated with the captain of the ship and got what I wanted. Not my fault they didn’t.”

“Quest told them they couldn’t!”

Dar chuckled. “I never asked him if I could.”

Another laugh. “Damn it, you should have taken me with you.” The reporter replied. “What a story. See you when you get back.”

Dar closed the phone and stood near the door, watching Kerry explore their cabin.

It was definitely old. The place had the air of a patrician, yet far outdated and well worn quality hotel. The fabrics were faded, the teak floors were water stained, and in need of a refinishing, and the wall bore peeling gilt paper on it that almost visibly exuded detritus into the room.

Yet, it had a certain rakish charm. There was a reasonable sized bed in it, with clean, if threadbare linens and a tiny sitting area with two chairs and a low table.

A cramped bathroom was near the door, but near the back were sliding glass panels that led out to what Dar considered to be the saving grace of the thing. A balcony with a view of some wide open spaces, and promised some air movement if nothing else.

Kerry had discovered this, and pushed the doors open, sticking her head out with a grunt of approval. She ducked back inside and faced Dar. “This isn’t nearly as bad as I expected.” She admitted. “I thought we’d might be sleeping on the floor, and wasn’t looking forward to it.”

“Me either.” Dar sat down on the bed and patted a space next to her. Kerry came over and agreeably occupied it and they sat quietly for a minute, absorbing the rumble of the ships engines and the motion that was quite different from their boat.

“The ship moves.” Kerry noted.

“It does.” Dar concurred.

The sea breeze came in the open balcony doors and refreshed the stale air inside the room. Kerry lowered herself down until she was lying flat on the bed and let her hands drop to her sides. It felt good to be sitting still for a bit after the long day, and despite the fact that the night promised to be even longer she was glad she was here. “We’re going to do this thing, Dar.”

Dar lay down next to her and folded her hands over her stomach. “We’re going to do this thing.” She confirmed. “Come low tides or high seas we’re going to.”

“They’re going to be telling stories about this in the office for the next twenty years, you do realize that.” Kerry crossed her ankles, noting the water stains on the ceiling.

“Yeah.” Dar eyed her. “And speaking of that, have you heard the latest one about me?”

Kerry’s green eyes narrowed, and she turned her head to face Dar. “No. What?” She growled. “So help me, Dar, one of these days I’m going to catch one of these people spreading all this crap and I’m..”

Dar put her hand over Kerry’s mouth. “I saved your life from a cute blond woman eating shark.”’

“Murph?” Kerry looked very surprised.

“Yes.” Dar removed her hand. “So, now.. I’m wondering, Kerrison.. since I only told Mariana what happened, and I told her the truth, Frisbee and all… exactly how the office would have gotten that idea.” She rolled over and propped her head up on one hand, looking at Kerry inquiringly.

After a brief nibble on the inside of her lip, Kerry gently traced the outline of Dar’s jaw with her fingertip. “I didn’t say anything about a shark.”

The blue eyes took on a twinkle that lent a distinct sweetness to Dar’s expression. “Punk.”

Kerry grinned impishly. “Hey, who better to spread stories about you than me?” She said. “At least then I get to like what I hear.” She tweaked Dar’s nose. “Isn’t it nice to her nice things for a change?”

Dar grinned. “Yeah.” She said. “Shocked the hell out of me, but yeah, it was nice. Even though it was an out and out lie.”

“Weelll.” Kerry waggled her hand. “It could have been true.” She ran her fingers though Dar’s bangs. “Does that bathroomette over there have a shower in it?”

“Uh huh.”

“Big enough for both of us?”

“No.”

“Wanna try it anyway?”

Dar reached over and pulled Kerry into an embrace, rolling over so they ended up in a pile in the center of the bed. “Love to.” She kissed Kerry on the lips, tasting a dusting of sea salt on them. “Know what else we never get to do while we’re under way?”

Kerry chuckled, a deep, rich sound from her gut that fairly drooled sensuality. Then she paused thoughtfully. “How thick are these walls?”

Dar kissed her again. “I don’t care.” She ran her hand under Kerry’s shirt and cupped her breast. “Least it’ll get their minds of sharks.”

Too true. Kerry surrendered to the enticing passion of it, the wound up tension in her easing as a tension of a different kind entirely spooled up to take its place far more pleasantly. The shabby nature of the room became irrelevant as she focused instead on the warm smoothness of Dar’s skin and the gentle touch that was gliding over her body. So what if they had to work all night, if the night started off like this?

PART 27

BY THE TIME THEY CLIMBED DOWN THE FORWARD STAIRCASE AND APPROACHED THE dining room, it was well into twilight and the air conditioning had finally started making inroads into cooling the ship down. Dar felt comfortable in her short sleeved shirt and jeans, and after their improbably shared shower she felt refreshed and ready to take on the night.

Trotting along beside her. Kerry appeared to have recovered her energy as well and was in a good frame of mind as they crossed the threshold and entered the dining hall. Instead of jeans, she'd chosen a pair of carpenter's pants complete with a hammer loop that Dar found almost too cute for words.

A buzz of sound made them both look up, and they realized they were joining a larger crowd than anticipated, in surroundings that almost upheld the ship's tarnished glamour.

Dar slowed, and looked around, mildly surprised. The huge room was in better condition than she'd expected, its ceiling reaching up through two decks and the back wall entirely made of glass windows that showed a nice view of the receding Port of Miami behind them.

The carpet was new, apparently freshly installed, and the tables were covered with linen and neatly set with silverware. Along the back side of the room a large buffet line had been set up, and behind that the caterers were busy setting up to serve the food they'd brought with them.

The room was filling up with crew, most of them fairly young, all of them dressed casually and the atmosphere was relaxed and far more friendly than it had been up until

now. They had been treated with courtesy while they were onboard, but the crew had made it obvious that they were encroaching on their space.

The ILS staff were in small clusters, mingling warily with the crew and attracting the attention of the women especially. Dar nudged Kerry as Mark was surrounded by a pair of blonds and brunette. “Think we should rescue him?”

Kerry chuckled. They started walking towards the small group, but then they were spotted and the ILS team started heading towards them at the same time.

It was interesting. Kerry watched the eyes of the crew follow the techs, detecting a touch of envy there. In a way, she could almost see a parallel between the two groups – like the ship employees, her techs had their own hierarchy and like the officers of the ship, her team looked to their leadership for direction, protection, and reassurance.

The big difference of course was that the ship’s senior officers were all men. She and Dar were decidedly all women.

“Everyone get settled all right?” Dar stopped on the last step down into the hall, waiting as all the techs gathered around her.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Mark answered for them. “It’s pretty cool. We all got windows.” He sounded agreeably surprised. “But man, those bathrooms are tiny! If you had your family with you, showers would freaking take all morning.”

Dar looked at him, and cocked an eyebrow. She glanced at Kerry, who studiously gazed off into the distance. “Ahem. Right.” She cleared her throat.

“Anyway, it’s all cool.” Mark assured her.

“Good.” Dar put her hands on her hips. “Here’s the plan.” She said. “Everyone get a good dinner, relax, and then we start distribution.”

“We’ve got everything lined up in the lobby.” Mark agreed.

“Atrium.”

They turned to see Kerry’s old friend Talley standing there. He coughed and blinked self deprecatingly. “It’s the atrium. We don’t have a lobby.” He explained. “We don’t have bathrooms, we have heads, and we don’t have rooms, they’re cabins or quarters.”

Some of the crew had drifted over, and were listening.

“Okay, the atrium.” Mark amiably corrected himself, then returned his attention to Dar. “We unboxed everything before we went and changed.”

“Um.. excuse me.” Talley interrupted again. “Can I ask a question?”

Dar leveled her gaze at him. “Sure. Shoot.” She said. “But if you want to have a jargon contest, I’m willing to bet I can beat you at it, especially since I grew up on a Navy base and know more names for the gear on one of these damn things than you have short hairs.”

Talley blinked at her. “Uh.”

“You had a question?” Dar pressed him, raising both eyebrows meaningfully.

“Dar.” Kerry bumped her gently. “What is it, Talley? Dar’s just grumpy because she hasn’t been fed.” She ignored the outraged look from her partner.

Encouraged, Talley turned to her instead. “What is all that stuff for?” He asked. “It looks like a CompUSA warehouse in there.”

Kerry laughed softly. “Well, it’s for you.” She said. “It’s new computers for the ship.”

The crew glanced at each other. “For real?” One of the women asked. “Even at reception? We’ve used manual manifests for twenty years. You’re saying we’re getting one of those too?”

Kerry nodded. “That’s what they asked for.” She said. “A lot of things will change.”

“Wow.” Talley murmured.

A clatter of footsteps behind them made Dar turn, to see the ship’s officers entering the hall. Unsurprisingly, her father was accompanying them, with Ceci strolling along beside him with a very droll expression on her face. “Hi.” Dar issued a general greeting as they stopped on the top landing with them.

The captain paused, regarding her briefly before producing a thin lipped smile. “Ms. Roberts, good evening.” He replied. “I see you have kept your end of the bargain.”

Dar glanced at the food line, and the rapidly being set up bar, and half shrugged. “It’s not the Waldorf, but it beats McNuggets.” She ignored the glare from the staff captain. “Shall we?”

The captain gestured towards the buffet graciously. “Please.” He said. “You have met my officers, I take it? Some of them, anyway?” His eyes fell on the staff captain, and a faintly amused twinkle entered them. “And you also know, I believe, ah..” He glanced at Andrew. “Commander..”

“Oh yeah, we’ve met.” Dar drawled.

“Heh.” Her father snickered. “Yeap. A few times.”

Ceci rolled her eyes. “Obvious who genetically contributed to that sense of humor.” She observed. “Can we eat now? I hear cole slaw calling my name.”

They walked down the steps and into the room. The crew quickly separated to let the officers proceed unhindered, but as they approached the food line, several of them shyly joined up again. “Sir, may we take your plates?” One asked the captain respectfully.

“Certainly.” The captain nodded. “We will be using that table, there.” He pointed to one a little aside, with conspicuously finer service on it. “Please have a bottle of red wine, and a bottle of vodka taken there.”

“Sir.” The man who had spoken ducked his head, then turned and walked purposefully towards the bar.

Mark approached Dar. “Uh… boss?”

“Don’t you even think about it.” Dar thrust her thumb over her shoulder. “Get in line, all of you.”

The techs scuttled over obediently, muffling grins as they joined the growing string of bodies waiting to hit the chow.

Kerry craned her neck, then turned to Mark. “Tell you what.. I’ll grab your roast beef if you find a couple of bottles of Corona.” She offered. “Deal?”

“Deal.” Mark headed off towards the bar, with a grin.

“We brought on a case.” Dar eyed her partner.

“Not taking any chances.” Kerry put her hands behind her back and rocked up and down on her heels a little. “I know at least our part of this crowd.”

“Mm.” The line started moving, as the captain finished perusing his choices, and Dar ran her eyes over the buffet critically. Given the short notice, the caterers had actually done pretty well. Besides the roast beef, they’d gotten hold of a roast pig, several turkey breasts that were being carved, some legs of lamb, what looked like pans of broiled white fish of some kind, pans of lasagna, some miscellaneous parmagiana, and tubs of assorted vegetables.

There were also mashed potatoes. Dar licked her lips in satisfaction, and nodded. She was hungry, and she knew Kerry was also, since neither of them had brought along any protein bars to snack on and they’d just used up quite a bit of energy with each other.

“My goddess, is that asparagus?” Ceci remarked. “Honestly I thought I was going to have to troll for seaweed.”

Kerry chuckled. “Mom.”

“Well, I did. I’ve been on ships visiting where they thought meatballs were a vegetable because they had chopped parsley in them.”

“I see lots of vegetables.” Kerry observed. “Look – there’s carrots.” She looked again. “Or maybe they’re sweet potatoes.”

“Long as they aren’t barbequed pig livers.” Her mother in law sniffed. “So, are you feeling better now?”

Kerry took a plate and handed one to Ceci, Dar having similarly equipped herself and Andrew. “Huh? Oh..” She cleared her throat. “Yeah, I had a chance to relax for a while up in our cabin.” She virtuously placed a piece of bright green broccoli on her plate. “Sorry I was so grumpy before.”

“I’ve got Mark’s beef.” Dar turned her head to advise Kerry. She had two plates, and was dexterously juggling them while adding items, something Kerry wouldn’t have dreamed of trying.

“Okay. Thanks.” Kerry bumped her gently with one shoulder. “Careful.”

Dar chuckled and continued her balancing act.

Ceci piled her own plate with flora. “Well, to be perfectly honest, Kerry, if I’d found out I’d been lugging hundreds of pounds of gear up a set of metal stairs when there was a perfectly good elevator to ride instead, grumpy would have been the least of what I’d been.”

Mildly vindicated, Kerry merely grunted, as she served herself a little of everything, saving space for a few grape tomatoes before she followed Dar towards a nearby table. She took a seat next to her partner, who neatly delivered Mark’s plate in front of him before she settled gracefully into her chair, setting her own plate down at the same time.

Ceci sat down next to Andrew, eyeing his plateful of meat and potatoes with wry resignation. “Thought they had peas.”

“Ah do believe they did.” Her husband allowed. “Did you want some of them?”

Ceci sliced off a bit of asparagus and bit into it. Of all the differences she had with Andy, this one usually caused the most need for workarounds in their daily lives. In the years he was in the Navy, she really hadn’t had to worry about it since he ate in the mess, or was

aboard ship, and she pretty much was left to her own vegetarian devices and could cook as she wished.

Or not.

So, of course, she'd been chagrined when her daughter, who after all had more experience eating her cooking than the Navy's, turned out to hate vegetables just as much as her father did.

Genetic? Ceci seriously doubted it, but there were two plates on the table, pretty much identically laden and neither her husband nor her child had ever seemed to suffer physically because of it. Kerry, on the other hand, was much more vegetable friendly and in fact she kept cutting off bits of her flora and depositing it on Dar's plate when Dar wasn't looking.

Dar, of course, carefully navigated around the intruding bits of color. Ceci could have told Kerry that was a lost cause, since she'd tried it along with every other trick she could come up with. However, she noticed Kerry kept at it, and eventually Dar ate one of the chunks just to get it out of her way.

Hm.

Maybe she just hadn't tried hard enough. Ah well.

The boat moved gently under them, and slowly the line cleared the buffet and the low rumble of conversation started up around the room. The bar was getting good action, and everyone seemed happy with the food selection.

Some of the ILS techs had mixed in with the crew, and Ceci watched the reactions as the two very different groups mixed. Given their ages were pretty close, she figured they'd be able to find something to talk about, especially since though the crew had been on the ship for a while, they weren't quite seafarers in the sense that Andy's shipmates had been.

They were still a little civ. "Hey, Andy?"

"Yes, ma'am?" Her husband peered at her.

"We should go on a cruise."

One grizzled eyebrow rose. "We live on a boat." He said. "Ya'll want to go o a bigger one?"

"Mm." Ceci nodded. "One of those huge floating monstrosities where they put mints on your pillow and you can play golf on the top deck."

Andy winced.

Well, maybe not. Ceci went back to her vegetables. Or maybe she could find one where they'd let you fish off the fantail. Andy'd like that.

Now that everyone was seated, the captain stood up at his place and tapped his knife against his water glass. The room quieted, and all eyes went to him. "I am glad we have this opportunity to enjoy a good meal together." He said. "You all have been working very hard, and it is good that we have seen progress, and that we have an evening free of the sound of jackhammers, yes?"

The crew clapped immediately, but said nothing.

"So get a good rest tonight. Our guests will be unfortunately working, but I am thinking they do not make as much noise as the metalworkers, is this not true?" The captain looked at Dar.

Dar was glad she'd just taken a sip of beer to clear her mouth out. She swallowed it quickly. "We can make noise if we have to." She said. "But we generally don't."

"Excellent." The captain turned around. "And let us hope the government finishes their investigation quickly, as we cannot return to port until they do." He sniffed. "How ever long that will take. So enjoy this meal as best you can."

Dar blinked, and looked at Kerry.

The captain sat down, and picked up his wine glass, sipping from it with a calm expression.

Ceci scratched her jaw. "I hope I didn't just throw us into a bad Flying Dutchman nightmare."

"Yikes." Kerry covered her eyes. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Wall." Andy continued plowing his way through his dinner. "Ain't life just one little kick ass after t'other."

Wasn't it just? Dar almost started laughing. Wasn't it just.

* * *

Kerry leaned against the granite fountain in the center of the atrium, checking off items on her clipboard. It was very quiet around her, since it was well after midnight and her team was all out delivering gear to various parts of the ship.

She could hear the faint slap of water against the outside of the hull, and she could feel the motion under her legs, but the silence around her otherwise leant a timelessness to the moment.

The ship creaked, a little. Metal plates under long strain from holding back the water protested the surge of the waves, an old woman of the sea indeed very apparent to Kerry as she stood in her solitude.

The crew had vanished after dinner. To their quarters, or to some other place on the ship, she figured, someplace they weren't welcome. Which was fine with her, since they had a lot of work to accomplish and it was much easier without everyone underfoot.

And yet, the emptiness gave the ship a ghostly quality she wasn't entirely comfortable with. Another creak made her look quickly around, and then she mentally slapped herself for being over-imaginative. "Okay." She spoke aloud. "So that takes care of all the pc's. Now we have the POS systems to do. Right?"

"Right."

Kerry jumped, unable to stop herself in time even though her ears readily recognized the voice. "Yow."

Dar sauntered down the central steps, brushing her hands off against her dust besmirched jeans. "We are talking."

"Ah." Kerry put a neat check on her checklist. "Got the satellite going, huh?"

"Yeap." Dar seemed very satisfied with herself. "Took some persuasion, but we got it going. They're surfing the web up there."

"Oh really." Kerry said. "Bet that's a new experience for them."

"Mm." The dark haired woman leaned against the marble column next to Kerry. "It's slower than hell, but it's something." She peered at Kerry's list. "Not bad… all the pc's out there?"

"Yep."

"Hm." Dar pulled out her PDA and keyed it on, watching as it's wireless card picked up the signal from one of the devices she'd installed. She started her analyzer and observed the results. "Servers are up."

"Finally." Kerry groused. "Have I mentioned lately how much I hate picky whiny server OS's?"

"No."

“I hate picky whiny server OS’s.”

“Hm.”

“Can’t you write a better one?” Kerry asked, tucking her clipboard under her arm and giving Dar an inquiring look.

Dar’s eyes opened up wide. “ME?” She asked. “I haven’t finished writing your network security robot yet.” She bumped Kerry with her shoulder. “Why don’t you write one?”

“Uh uh.” Kerry thumped her back against the column. “I’ll stick to messing with your gopher, thanks.”

Dar snickered.

Kerry looked at her. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.” Dar agreed. “But anyone else around probably doesn’t.”

Kerry peered around the vast emptiness of the atrium. “There’s no one here. But even if there was, I bet no one would ever question me about your gopher, Dar.”

Dar snickered again.

“Dar.”

Slowly, Dar slid down to the ground, snickers evolving into almost silly giggles.

Kerry only hoped the tech team wouldn’t come back for their next assignment for a few minutes. She slid down next to her partner and stuck her legs out, tapping her pen against her thigh as she waited patiently. “Dar.”

“Ahh. Sorry.” Dar stifled a last chuckle. “It’s just too damn late.”

After midnight, in fact. Way too damn late. Kerry slid over and pressed her shoulder against Dar’s. “Want to stop for tonight? We can put out the POS systems tomorrow.”

It was very tempting. Dar was tired. She knew Kerry was tired, and she suspected the rest of the crew was equally tired though none of them would admit it in front of their bosses. Could they risk waiting? They didn’t know when the ship was coming back in, and while they were out here, they had the advantage.

But it was also true that the later they worked, the more tired they’d be, and the more mistakes they’d make. Now that all the computers were delivered, really the major part of

the work was done and the delivery of the dumb POS terminals could be performed early in the morning, couldn't it?

Dar gazed at the dark sky visible in the windows on either side of her. She acknowledged silently that her decision was being influenced by her own desire to break off, but as she looked up and saw the first of the techs coming back, weary and dust covered, she bowed to her gut inclination and gave Kerry a brief, decisive nod. "Let's can it."

"I love you." Kerry rested her cheek against Dar's shoulder. "Have I told you that lately?"

If she needed an exclamation point to that decision, well, she'd gotten it. Dar clasped her hands together and rubbed a bit of adhesive off her index finger as she waited for the crew to finish trudging up to them. "Time to take a break, folks."

Mutely delighted eyes fastened on her. The crew looked exhausted, and to top it off the ship had started moving a lot more, pitching a little and rolling from side to side. More than a few faces were a touch green. "Boss, those are magic words." Mark said. "But hey, we got a ton of stuff done tonight. All that's left is to dump those things out there and run them up."

Dar nodded. "Right. So we do that in the morning." She said. "Go and get some rest."

"Everyone did a great job." Kerry added. "You guys are superstars."

Their eyes brightened, despite the late hour. "IT was pretty cool." Carlos said. "Especially with everybody out of our way.. man, I was tired of tripping all over those guys with the welders."

"Yeah." Several nearby techs agreed. "We should work at night all the time."

"Hey!" Mark objected. "Speak for yourself, dude! Some of us have a life!"

Everyone started chuckle. Dar got up and extended her hand down to Kerry, hauling her up as well. "I don't know what the story's going to be tomorrow, if we're going back in, or what. So let's meet here at nine, and play it by ear."

"You got it, DR." Mark was covered in IT grunge and dust. "Man, I wouldn't care if that bed were a plank, I'd sleep on it right now."

"Hell yeah."

The group dispersed, heading off towards their assigned cabins. Dar and Kerry strolled along behind them, taking their time in mounting the stairs and climbing up to the level where their relatively palatial digs were located.

“Wonder where your folks were all night?” Kerry commented, as she nudged the door open and they went inside. “I didn’t see them after dinner.”

“Maybe they went to bed.” Dar suggested.

“They went to sleep that early?” Kerry seemed skeptical.

“I didn’t say that.”

Kerry turned from where she was peering out the closed balcony door. “Oh, this is one of those ‘think of that and go blind’ things, isn’t it?” She slid the door open and walked outside, surprised at the force of the wind. “Whoa.”

Dar joined her, the balmy night air now tasting only of sea salt and a whiff of diesel. As they leaned on the balcony, the moon came out and painted a stripe across the tossing waves, showing up whitecaps as the ship ploughed through them. “Hm.”

“Rough.” Kerry noted, grabbing hold of the rail as the ship pitched sideways. “Dar, you didn’t..”

“In my bag.” Dar said. “You feeling it?”

“No.” The blond woman said. “Just a precaution. The one time I got really seasick was on the Staten Island Ferry.”

Dar looked at her. “You’re kidding.”

Kerry shook her head solemnly. “Calm day, barely any waves, Statue of Liberty in the background, me sick as a dog over the railing. Pathetic.”

Dar chuckled. “Figures.” She poked Kerry and pointed back inside. “C’mon. View from our aft deck’s better, and it’s hot out here.” She herded her partner back inside, where the air conditioning had grudgingly reduced the humidity and provided a relatively comfortable temperature for sleeping.

Around them, on this upper deck, they could really hear the creaking. Kerry listened for a moment as the ship rolled and groaned, and then she turned to Dar. “Is this thing going to fall apart? It sure sounds like it.”

Dar peeled her t-shirt off, examining the stripe where her sleeve had been. “Nah.” She turned the shirt inside out, and then folded it neatly, setting it to one side. “It’ll last… at least another night or two.” She removed her jeans and did the same thing to them, rolling her socks up in a ball an setting them on top of the folded clothing. “Now.”

“Now.” Kerry had been leaning back enjoying the show. “Shower?”

"Mm."

"Bed?"

"Mmhm." Dar extended her hand. "Get the duds off, Yankee. Been a long day."

Yes, it had. Kerry agreed, pulling off her shirt. But now it was over.

Dar winked at her.

Well, almost over. Kerry shed her jeans and joined her partner at the door to the incredibly small bathroom. "If the ship rolls over, does the shower go sideways?"

Dar turned on the shower and pulled her inside.

"Just a question."

* * *

She was riding a horse. Kerry could feel the motion under her, and the exhilaration rush of wind against her face. She was sitting in the front of a big, strangely crude saddle with the security of a warm body behind her and a strong arm looped around her middle.

A long, long road stretched out before her, seemingly without any end she could see, and on either side, a beautiful forest spread out with no signs of human habitation.

It was beautiful.

She was filled with a simple happiness that wanted nothing else but the warm sunshine and the two sets of laughter rising up into it.

Then the horse bucked.

Kerry's eyes popped open, dragged from a sunny day into pitch blackness with whiplash suddenness. The ship moved violently under her again, and tossed her up off the bed and back onto it. "Dar?" She yelped.

"Yes." Dar sounded tolerably awake.

Kerry grabbed hold of the edge of the bed as the ship tilted alarmingly to the right. "Is this normal?"

For an answer, Dar wrapped one long arm around her and a leg for good measure, pulling her closer. "Well, it's open water."

The creaking had grown quite ominous, and they could hear thunder rolling outside. The pitch of the vessel had become pronounced, and the cabin was moving sharply from side to side as the ship rolled in the waves.

“Ah.” Kerry swallowed audibly.

Dar lifted her head and peered through the darkness. “You okay?”

“Uh, sure.” Kerry said, inhaling sharply as the ship tilted to one side again.

“Sure about that?”

Her partner swallowed again. “Well, possibly not.”

“Hang on.” Dar carefully disentangled herself from both the bedclothes and Kerry’s grip and eased off the bed, grabbing hold of the bathroom door latch as she was almost pitched right back down next to the blond woman. “Whoa!”

“Whoa.” Kerry repeated in a subdued voice. She clamped her jaws shut after that, and tried not to think about how her stomach felt.

Dar hit the light switch. Nothing happened. She hit it again, then in a fit of unreasoning technical mindlessness, flipped it back and forth rapidly. “God damn it.”

“Mmph.” Kerry wasn’t inclined to add anything useful. She was just glad that if the lights weren’t working, at least the AC still was. The thought of the room being clammy and warm and… “Ohgodthatwasstupid.”

“Ker?”

“Mmprh.”

Dar felt along the wall until she found the desk, cursing as she almost tripped over her backpack, fallen to the floor in the pitching. “Ouch.”

“Ermp?”

Dar dropped to her knees and unlatched the pack, yelping as a rolling motion knocked her off balance and sent her tumbling across the carpet to land near the bed. “Son of ..” With a growl, she crawled back and grabbed the pack, sitting down on the rug with her legs sprawled out.

That seemed to solve the motion problem for the moment. Dar untied the top flap and dug inside the bag, yelping a little as she poked herself with a pair of diagonal cutters. “Damn dykes.”

Silence. Then Kerry cleared her throat. “What did we do now?’

“Not us.” Dar dug further, and discovered a small vial. With a satisfied grunt, she drew it out.

“You have some other damn dykes in your backpack? Wow.”

“Hah, hah.” Dar scooted over to the bedside and reached out, searching for Kerry’s hand. “I have something for you.” She blinked as warm fingers curled around her wrist, a little startling in the darkness despite her knowing how close Kerry was to her. “Think you can swallow a pill?”

“Gimme a minute.” Kerry muttered.

Dar waited, pressing her back against the bed and grabbing hold of the frame as the ship moved up and down again.

Kerry made a small groaning noise.

“Easy.” Dar grimaced in sympathy. She’d been relatively lucky so far in life with her experiences of seasickness, but the few times she’d suffered from it had convinced her never to travel with out medication for it. “Ready?”

“Nuh uh.”

Dar frowned. “Need some water?” She felt the grip on her wrist tighten, and Kerry’s forehead came to rest against her shoulder. “Hon, if you can get this down, it’ll help. I promise.”

Kerry merely stayed there for a moment, then she exhaled, warming Dar’s skin. “Move.”

“You’re not going to throw up.”

“Dar, move.”

Dar grabbed the bottle of water and got up onto the bed, hauling Kerry up to a sitting position mostly by feel. “Breathe.” She felt her partner’s body jerk, and she steeled herself to deal with being thrown up on, but Kerry’s jaws locked shut and she could feel the tension in the muscles of them as she laid her hand along her cheek. “It’s okay. Just do what you need to do, Ker.”

For a long set of pitching rolls, Kerry just stayed where she was. Then the ship settled a little, and as it did, she straightened up. “I think you got ten seconds.” She inhaled sharply. “But don’t hold me to that.”

Dar felt out Kerry's lips, and put the seasickness pill against them, feeling them part as Kerry trustingly accepted it. Then she applied the squirt nozzle of her water bottle to the same place, and squeezed gently. "Incoming."

Kerry made a somewhat strangling noise, making Dar wince and close her eyes, despite the darkness. Then she heard the sound of over-exaggerated swallowing. "Please." Dar addressed the ship. "Stay fucking still, okay?"

"Gurph." Kerry protested faintly.

"Not you." Her partner growled. "This godforsaken piece of rusted metal held together with duct tape and old piss we're floating in."

A shudder went through the vessel. Dar growled again, almost as though a battle of wills was being conducted.

Kerry reasoned the thought alone was ridiculous.

But the ship, as many had before, bowed to Dar's will and cruised along peacefully for a time, until Kerry finally relaxed and slumped against Dar's body. "Ugh."

Dar stroked her arm gently, leaning back and easing Kerry with her until they were both half reclining. Wind blew rain against the balcony doors, startling them, but the ship's course remained, at least for now, relatively steady. "Hmph."

Kerry wasn't ready to unlock her jaws just yet. The queasy feeling, though it had subsided, was out there on the fringes and threatening to recur at any moment. Throwing up now would not only be extremely yucky, it would also eject the medicine Dar had given her and if there were two things she didn't want to do, those were them.

Dar seemed to sense that. She shifted her grip and gave Kerry a comforting light rub on her belly. "Just take nice, deep breaths."

Kerry tried a few. "You've gone through this before?" She guessed. "I can't believe it."

"Mm. A few times." Dar admitted. "First time I took the Dixie out was one of them, matter of fact. That damn thing's a bitch to drive when you're tossing your cookies, let me tell ya."

Kerry chuckled faintly. "You're just saying that to make me feel better." She accused.

"Nuh uh."

"Yes, you are."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Feeling better?"

Kerry could barely see the outline of Dar's face in the dim light from the window, but her imagination filled in the angles and planes without effort. "Yes." She let her head rest against Dar's collarbone. "Oh, that sucked."

"Mm."

"What time is it?" Kerry asked. "Were we sleeping long? I didn't think it was raining before we went to bed."

"It wasn't." Dar confirmed, reaching over and picking up her cell phone. It showed no signal, which she expected, but also provided her with a clock. "Four am."

"Ugh." Kerry winced. "Two hours. No wonder I feel like something a cow stepped on."

Dar wondered if the ship was going to begin pitching again. Being out here in the dark, not knowing where they were heading didn't exactly make her comfortable and the fact that parts of the ship seemed to not be working well made it all the worse. "Wonder what the deal with the lights is."

"AC's on." Kerry commented.

"Hm. Yeah." Dar felt the ship roll a bit, and she glanced at Kerry. In the faint light, she could see the pale lashes fluttering a little, but her partner's body remained relaxed. Not surprising, since the industrial strength pill she'd given her usually knocked Dar out in fairly short order. "Doing okay?"

"Uh huh." Kerry closed her eyes. The sick feeling seemed to be receding further, and she was getting sleepy again. The ship started to move, but the motion was slower and less violent now, and rather than make her queasy, it seemed to be relaxing her.

Weird.

Dar cradled Kerry against her, finding a smile somewhere as Kerry snuggled up willingly. She let her fingers comb through the disheveled blond hair and knew a moment of ridiculous contentment despite the circumstances.

Thunder cracked outside. As though in signal, the ship started pitching again, but one quick look confirmed that Kerry was now safely asleep and oblivious to it. Dar braced her bare feet against the wall and the bed frame to keep them in place and hoped sincerely the damn captain was steering them out of the storm instead of into it.

* * *

It was still dark, it was still raining, and it was still rocking like a hammock when Kerry woke again, in a fuzzy disorientation that had her blinking her eyes a few times before she could make them focus on the gray shadows surrounding her.

How long had she been asleep? Beneath her ear, she could hear Dar's heartbeat, steady and even and she remained still so she wouldn't wake her partner up. After a few seconds staring at the inside of the cabin, she let her eyes close again and tried to compose herself back to sleep.

Problem was, now she could hear all the creaking around her again. Outside the cabin in the hall, she could also detect the sounds of someone moving around, crashing against the walls as the ship moved restlessly in the waves.

Despite the size of the ship, it felt very fragile, it's bones screaming and complaining as the sea pressed in on all sides.

Paradoxically, however, here in the loose circle of Dar's arms Kerry felt completely safe, regardless of the ominous clatter around her. The ship could fall apart, she mused, and as long as she and Dar were together she was sure they'd come through it just fine.

How did she know that? Kerry didn't really understand how, but she knew at some deep level that it was true. She'd known it since they'd been trapped in that hospital together, when Dar had brought them both out from under the collapsed wall refusing to allow mere concrete and metal to stop her.

At the time, she'd been stunned and overwhelmed, in pain and a state of high anxiety over what was going to happen to them as well as what might have happened to their friends and family. But one thing she hadn't been was afraid though she hadn't realized that until much later.

Kerry listened to the noise in the hallways, a muffled drone slowly resolving itself into a pair of voices, male ones, obviously upset. One had a heavy accent, and she couldn't understand a word of what was being said, but the other had a clearer, sharper tone.

"Bloody bastard, I'm not hiding you no more!" The voice said. "No wonder you had to shut the bitch up.. she probly got sick of you as I am!"

Kerry's eyes opened. She glanced up at Dar, to find the faint glitter of her partner's eyes looking back at her. "You hear that?"

Dar nodded.

"Shaudup." The other voice growled. "Put you inna trunk and toss you over."

Kerry's nostrils flared. "Oh no." She whispered.

"What?"

"We're in a bad television movie."

Dar chuckled soundlessly. "Probably drunk." She uttered softly.

A loud crack made them both jump, then something impacted against the outside of their door, followed by the sound of a violent scuffle.

They both sighed simultaneously. "Excuse me." Dar disentangled herself and got out of bed, heading for the door as she pulled her t-shirt somewhat decorously around her. She slapped at the light on her way, grunting when it stubbornly refused to produce anything but a sodden click.

Kerry hesitated, then scrambled out from the sheets and followed, getting behind Dar as she yanked the cabin door open and glared out into the dimly lit corridor.

Two figures were struggling, having swung across the hall and slammed into the door across from them. Far down the corridor, there was a sound of a second door opening as well.

"Hey!" Dar let out a bark. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

The two men stopped fighting, and turned, staring at her. "What are you doing here?" The smaller of the two demanding. "What are you doing on this ship? Get out!" He advanced on her. He was burly, and had had a rough, scraggly beard along with an un-pretty face.

Dar straightened to her full height, easily eight or nine inches over his, and braced her arms on the doorframe, not backing down an inch. "Buddy, if you know what's good for you, just stop." She warned him. "Who the hell are you, and what are *you* doing up here?"

The other man stayed back in the shadows, wiping a sleeve across his mouth, but saying nothing.

"Estavan."

The men turned at the sound of the captain's voice. He was standing at the end of the corridor, near an almost hidden panel half obstructed by his body. "Captain." The smaller man backed off, and half ducked his head. "I found these women here!"

Kerry was now peeking out from behind Dar. Her eyes fell on the other man, who was starting to edge his way back down the corridor. Something familiar in his profile caught

her attention, and she leaned forward a little, sliding her arm across Dar's back to keep her balance.

He was taller than his companion, and thinner, but he had an air of general seediness that reminded her of the backwater carnival workers she'd occasionally see when the church yearly fundraiser was on up in Michigan.

Which reminded her of something she hadn't thought about in years.

The man caught her looking at him, and scowled, ducking his head and heading off at a more rapid pace, half shielding his face with one arm despite the darkness making him nearly invisible anyway. Kerry watched him go with a very thoughtful expression.

"You did not find anything here but trouble, Estavan. Please go to your quarters, or take yourself down to the engine room where you belong. Do not bother our guests, or myself with your noise any longer." The captain stated firmly.

"But captain.."

"Go." The captain let his voice raise slightly.

"Aye." The man turned and trudged off after his erstwhile adversary, disappearing into the darkness as he turned the corner.

The captain glanced at them. "My apologies. He is my senior engineer, and has been on this ship a very long time. He does not like strangeness and changes." He turned to go back through the portal. Then he paused, and turned, peering back at them curiously. "They did not assign your private quarters?"

Dar looked him right in the eye. "We don't need them."

Surprisingly, he merely sniffed, and nodded. "Very well. Good night."

"Captain." Kerry spoke up. "Are they lights not working for any particular reason?"

The captain reached out and flipped a switch in the hallway, apparently surprised when nothing happened. He flipped the switch a few times, much as Dar had done earlier, then grunted and shook his head. "I will find out. They are functional where the officer's quarters are." He turned and disappeared through the portal, which closed behind him with a definite snick.

There was a sign on the door, but it was too far for them to read and too dark in any case. Crew only, Dar suspected. With a sigh, she glanced down at Kerry's head, which was tucked under her arm. "Bed?"

“What, and miss all the excitement around here?” Kerry asked in a whimsical tone. “Dar, did you see that other guy?” She pulled back as Dar turned, and they shut the door, leaving the darkened hallway behind them. “The one he was fighting with?”

“No, not really.” Dar said. “I was too worried the little skunk in front of me might start grabbing.”

“Hm.” Kerry latched on to the back of Dar’s shirt and followed her back to bed. “Yeah, he looked stupid enough.. scary considering he’s the ship’s engineer.”

“Explains a lot.” Dar muttered.

They collapsed into the mussed bedclothes again and sorted themselves, the sheets and the pillows out. Dar stretched her body out and rolled half onto her side, as Kerry did the same, both of them facing towards the balcony windows. Dar wrapped an arm around Kerry’s middle and they put their heads down at roughly the same time.

It was briefly quiet, and the sound of rain lashing against the window sounded very loud.

“That guy’s bothering me.” Kerry spoke up suddenly.

“Hm?”

“That other guy. I’ve seen him before, and I’m trying to remember where.” The blond woman explained.

“Um.. not to be a smartass, but maybe it was here on this ship we’ve been working on for days?” Dar suggested. “Chances are, you’ve seen him, Ker.”

“Mm.. yeah, I know.. but..” Kerry exhaled. “He was acting really funny.. sneaking away like that when he saw me looking at him.”

“Sneaking?” Dar asked. “Did he really?”

“Yeah. He put his hand over his face and walked off.”

Now, that was a little strange. “Well.” Dar mused. “Maybe he buys into that ‘looking at gay people causes blindness’ theory.”

“Dar.” Kerry snickered. “But yeah, you’re probably right. I probably saw him on here.. maybe down in the loading bay.” She settled down, enjoying the warmth of Dar’s body tucked up behind her. “Or on the dock. But what do you think they were talking about?”

Dar shrugged. “Sounded like they were just talking BS to me.” She admitted candidly. “Guys do that.”

“Girls do it too.” Kerry agreed. “Yeah, maybe.” She pondered further. “The captain didn’t seem whacked out at all about us.”

Dar chuckled.

Kerry turned her head and peered at her partner. “Does that mean I need to send my gaydar back into Sears for retuning AGAIN?” She asked. “Jesus, I feel so clueless sometimes.”

“No.” Dar gave her a little squeeze. “It’s just that I think it’s more accepted on these kind of ships than maybe what we’re used to. I saw some of the guys up near the bridge having a little party when I was working on the sat dish.”

“Oh.”

“I looked at them, they looked at me, we all sort of went, yeah..” Dar lifted her hand and waggled it.

“I get the picture.” Kerry in fact did, and it made her smile. Gay women and gay men were so different at so many levels, sometimes. She’d talked to some of the people at their church about that, and found to her bemusement she often knew less about other gay people than she’d imagined. “Oh well. It’ll come to me.” She finally decided. “Where I’ve seen him.”

“Uh huh.” Dar pulled her a little closer. “After all this, I’m gonna be toast tomorrow.”

“Me too.”

Finally, it really was quiet. Even the rain found something else to hit other than their windows.

* * *

Morning found them out at sea, with gray skies surrounding them and the water a sullen dark blue. Dar leaned on the balcony railing and looked down, noting the whitecaps ruffling the surface and the forbidding appearance of a world she usually found so welcoming.

Maybe seeing it from a higher perspective did that. When they were on the Dixie, the surface of the water was mere feet away, and she always felt far more a part of it than she did now, towering so far above.

The sound of the cabin door closing behind her made her turn, and she leaned on her elbows as Kerry crossed the interior and emerged on the balcony next to her, carrying two steaming cups. “Ah.” Dar observed. “You found coffee.”

“I found coffee.” Kerry handed her one. “I found the crew mess, actually. It was pretty empty.” She peered at the sky. “So much for that sailors rise at dawn thing.”

Dar chuckled, sipping cautiously at the beverage. It wasn’t good, and it wasn’t bad, the mediocre norm of bland hotel coffee, but it was hot and caffeinated, and that really was what counted. “It was probably quite a party last night. Did you happen to bump into the caterers?”

Kerry joined her at the rail, the wind ruffling her blond hair. “Matter of fact I did. They’re slightly freaking.”

“I bet.”

“I told them to just try to reuse the stuff they brought as much as they can, and put out little buffets for our folks at least. But I hope this doesn’t last long.”

“Me too.” Dar agreed. “I just want the whole damn thing to be over.”

Kerry studied her over the rim of her coffee cup. “You really do, don’t you?”

Dar nodded.

Kerry slowly took a sip and swallowed it. “Know what I want?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Dar gave a half shake of her head. “What?”

“Nothing.” Kerry leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the lips. “I have everything I need right here.”

“Aw.” A charmed smile appeared on Dar’s face. “You say the nicest things to me.” She returned the kiss, easing back to look into Kerry’s eyes and finding the most pleasant mix of passion and affection there. “So.”

“So.” Kerry recalled the time with some regret. “Guess we better go get our job done, huh?” She let her hand rest against Dar’s hip. “Get those POS machines out, then we can certify the system.”

“And after that…”

“After that, it just is what it is.” Kerry finished for her. “C’mon.”

They left their cabin together, and walked down the empty hallway, seeing no one until they were halfway down the stairwell where they bumped into Mark. “Morning.” Dar greeted him. “Sleep okay?”

Mark stifled a yawn. “I’m not a great sailor.” He admitted. “Man, I’m freaking lucky I ran into your dad last night boss. He fixed me up.”

“Hm.” Kerry dropped down the steps two at a time. “Must be a family trait.”

Several other techs came out of the hallway on the next landing and joined them heading down. Most still looked tired, a few still looked a little green around the edges. The ship wasn’t moving nearly as badly as it had been the night before, but there was still a perceptible rocking and everyone held on to the handrails with the exception of Dar.

They entered the atrium, which appeared to be as they’d left it, boxes neatly stacked near the walls and machines lined up in rows awaiting deployment. A few of the boxes had tumbled across the floor during the night, but otherwise everything seemed undamaged.

“All right.” Mark cracked his knuckles. “Let’s check out the plan, dudes.” He walked over to where a blueprint had been tacked up on one side of the elevator stack, which was still taped off and out of service. The print had deck plans of the ship along it’s length, and there were blue and red dots to indicate where the equipment went.

Dar drew Kerry to one side and they listened quietly, allowing Mark to do his job without interference. Kerry looked around, noting the lack of crew. “It’s so quiet.” She whispered.

Dar nodded in agreement. “Not much for them to do I guess.” She uttered, then paused as Talley appeared from behind the front desk and headed their way. She nudged Kerry, who turned and spotted him. “Here comes your buddy.”

“My buddy?” Kerry gave her a poke. “Hi.” She greeted Talley.

“Hi.” The young man gave her a brief smile. “Did you guys hear the news?’

Uh oh. “No.. what’s up?” Kerry asked. “Don’t’ tell me we’re being hijacked to Cuba. If we are, I’m swimming home.”

That got a smile from Talley. “No.. they cleared the port. We’re headed back.” He glanced at the techs. “So if you guys need to finish stuff, you probably better do it fast. From what I hear, the builders are on the docks waiting to jump on soon as we tie up.”

Dar frankly didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed. “Short vacation for you all, I guess.” She commented.

Talley snorted. “It’s all a big crock anyway.” He said. “We all know the truth. Soon as Quest finishes with his scamming, they’re going to scuttle her, and we’ll all be dumped somewhere. So give me a break.”

Dar and Kerry exchanged startled glances. “You know that for sure?” Dar asked. “He’s putting a lot of money into these ships.”

Talley stared at her. “You’re joking right?” He asked. “You don’t think he’s laid a dime out yet, do you? Everything’s contingent on all you people finishing. He hasn’t risked a cent.. and he won’t!” The man put his hands on his hips. “He’s just playing you people to the hilt, and you all fell for it.”

Kerry was aware of some of the techs listening surreptitiously. “Don’t sell us short.” She looked directly at him. “You don’t’ think we haven’t thought about that?”

Talley looked around, then at her. His expression was plainly skeptical.

“Maybe we’re playing him.” Kerry suggested. “Maybe we’re using this project to advertise ourselves to the real ship companies who are watching… ever think of that?”

‘Besides.” Dar interjected. “Think about it.. what if he’s looking to get these hunks of junk bought by one of those real ship companies… you might want to clean up your acts.”

Talley looked warily at them. “They won’t touch her.” He indicated the ship. “She’ll end up in a scrap heap. We all know it.”

Dar shrugged. “You don’t know it until it happens.” She shook her head. “So I wouldn’t try to sink her yet.”

The man stiffened, looking around quickly before he stared intently at Dar. “Where did you hear that?” He hissed. “Did they tell your old man? Those…” The sound of a door slamming filtered into the atrium, causing Talley to turn and look. With a last glance at Dar, he headed towards the sound, breaking into a trot as he disappeared behind the front desk again.

“What in the hell..” Kerry blurted. “Dar, did you he..” She stopped, her lips stilled by Dar’s fingertips.

“I heard it.” Dar murmured. “Stay here. Let’s get this damn equipment out. I’ll go find Dad and see if he’s got any idea what’s really going on.”

Kerry frowned, a protest bubbling up. Dar cocked an eyebrow at her, and she squinted, triggering a rakish grin from her partner in return. “Okay.” She reluctantly agreed. “But if you’re gone more than fifteen minutes, I’m coming after you.”

Dar ruffled her hair. “Deal.” She pushed away from the staircase and headed towards the front of the ship, reasoning the bridge would be a good place to start looking for both her father and the truth.

Kerry watched her disappear, and then she turned her attention back to the group of techs. They all were carefully looking ahead, not at her, but she knew at least some of them would have heard Talley's conversation.

She reviewed their response, and decided it wasn't something to worry about at the moment. Or at least, it was something to worry about, but it had to take it's rightful place after the other things she had to worry about.

"Boss, you got anything to add?" Mark asked. "We're gonna start on the bottom floor and work up for a change."

"Sounds good to me." Kerry moved towards the lines of equipment. "Don't know if you all heard, but we're headed back into port, and we've got to really get moving with this stuff. I want to certify it before we tie the ship up."

The techs started moving faster, a buzz of noise arising as they reacted to Kerry's statement. "Man, that's sorta too bad." Carlos said. "Those guys on the ship were gonna invite us to a party tonight."

Kerry eyed him. "They were?"

Carlos nodded. "Yeah.. they got a bar downstairs." He explained. "That's where they all went last night." He picked up one of the POS systems, then appeared at a loss as to how to juggle it's attendant printer and assorted cables.

Kerry resolved the problem for him by picking them up. "C'mon." She said. "There's sixty of these things. If we go in pairs, it's only four trips for each team, and we're done." She started towards the steps, glancing at the chart on the way. "And see? You'll get to see the crew's bar anyway. That's where we're going."

Carlos trotted after her, carrying his armful of POS station. They went to the stairs and started down, going past the last passenger floor and entering the crew spaces. It was still quiet, and their footsteps sounded very loud on the linoleum, Carlos' sneakers even squeaking a little where Kerry's hiking boots merely scuffed.

On either side of the wall, aged bulletin boards carried notices and announcements, and lining the inside of one long space was a map of the ship, marked off into cryptic zones. To either side, doors marched past, labeled with chipped and peeling name plates.

They continued on down the hall towards the front of the ship, going down another half staircase and then down a narrower corridor. Ahead of them was a steel, gray door without a nameplate that had a very worn handle and a chipped and scarred surface that had been painted over many, many times. "That it?" Kerry asked.

Carlos nodded. “They showed me last night.” He explained. “So I could find it again. They seemed pretty nice about it.” He added. “We got to talking about computers and stuff.”

Of course. Kerry tucked the printer under her arm and reached out to grasp the door handle, turning it and pulling the door open. She stood back to let Carlos enter, then realized the room was occupied. She followed him inside and looked around, spotting perhaps twenty crewmen in various states of repose around the room, all of them turning to look at them. “Hi.”

Two men were at the pool table. They straightened and turned, looking her over brazenly. One of the men sitting on a threadbare couch near the wall whistled.

Oh boy. Kerry continued across the room towards the small bar. Her shoulder blades itched, feeling the eyes on her and she was glad she’d put on a relatively staid blue t-shirt instead of anything more revealing.

Carlos put the POS system down and went behind the bar, oblivious to the men around them as he searched for a place to plug it in while Kerry concentrated on connecting the receipt printer. She removed a small screwdriver from her back pocket and connected the cables, aware of some motion around her and the fact that several people were coming closer.

Carlos looked up. “Oh, hey.” He remarked casually. “So how are you guys? Did you have a good party last night?”

One of the men slipped onto the barstool next to where Kerry was standing. “You shoulda come.” He answered. “And brung your lady friend here. Hey honey, what’s your name?”

Kerry didn’t even look up. “Eleanor Roosevelt.” She finished tightening the screws on the cable.

“Sokay if I call you El?” The man didn’t miss a beat.

“Hey, chill out man. That’s my boss.” Carlos protested. “Don’t talk like that.”

“You work for a woman?” The man laughed, and his friends joined in.

“Sure.” Carlos responded, cheerfully unruffled.

The man leaned on the counter, and tried to get Kerry’s attention. “Hey, can I buy you a drink? C’mon, look up beautiful.” He tapped on the surface, right next to Kerry’s arm.

Kerry obliged, straightening up. The man sitting next to her was around her age, with short, cropped dark hair and honey colored eyes. He wasn’t unattractive, and there was a

brazen sensuality about him that she suspected some women might be attracted to. "Thanks." She tried the polite route first. "But I really don't drink anything but orange juice before dinner."

The two pool players came closer, leaning on their sticks. None of them seemed threatening, but they were definitely interested in her. Kerry accepted the flattery of the notion, but she didn't much care for the assumption that she'd welcome it.

Belatedly, Carlos seemed to realize things were sliding into the uncool zone. He stepped around the bar and came to Kerry's side, a little unsure of what to do next.

"We've got some orange juice." The man said. "We'll just add a little something to it.. how about it? We can get the music going here, start the party early."

"Sounds good to me." One of the pool players said.

"Well, not to us." Kerry added a touch of firmness to her tone. "We've got work to do. So, have fun with your party, gentlemen." She pocketed her screwdriver and started to move away from the bar. "C'mon, Carlos." She was suddenly aware that the room had no windows, and only the one door visible, and the walls seemed to close in on her as more bodies started to move her way.

"Yes, ma'am." Carlos stepped back out of her way and turned to follow Kerry.

"Pussy." The man at the bar laughed.

"Hey, c'mon.. what's the rush?" The brazen pool player moved to get in Kerry's way. "We've got time before we hit port.. and I like my ladies a little on the spicy side."

"Really?" Kerry didn't even stop to think. She planted her left leg and half turned, whipping her right up in a roundhouse kick that took the pool cue out of his hands and sent it clattering to the ground.

"Hey!" The man yelped, and lifted his now empty fingers. "What the hell!"

The man came off the barstool. Kerry lifted her hands up into a defensive posture, curling her fingers into fists.

"Dudes, you should like back off." Carlos advised them. "She's like a black belt kickboxer."

Kerry's brows jerked up.

The men looked at Carlos, who looked back at them with devastating earnestness. "No shit." He added. "She's got like a hundred trophies."

Kerry almost laughed, biting the inside of her lip as the men backed off a little, watching her warily. She relaxed her pose and started towards the door again, this time unimpeded. “Gentlemen. Have a nice day.” She called back over her shoulder, as she opened the door and saw the blessed light of the empty corridor ahead of her.

Carlos followed her out and pushed the door shut behind them. “Was that okay?” He asked. “I didn’t know those guys were such ass..er..”

Kerry stopped and turned, putting her hands on her hips and regarding him with mildly twinkling green eyes. ‘Trophies?”

He shrugged sheepishly.

“C’mon.” Kerry turned and headed for the stairs up. “Dar has trophies, y’know.” She made a mental note to find something nice to do for the unexpectedly resourceful Carlos.

“Yeah?”

“And she really is a black belt. I’m just a blue.”

“Yeah???”

“Yeah.” Kerry got to the top of the steps and continued up the hallway. Her knees were shaking, and she made a mental note to warn the other female techs to watch out for trouble. The ship chose that moment to roll to one side, and she was caught off balance, her shoulder smacking into the wall as the floor pitched under her.

Carlos hit the paneling next to her, and they hung on, waiting for the ship to steady and right itself. Kerry became suddenly aware of the fact they were below the waterline, and just as suddenly, she wondered where Dar was.

A low rumble sounded, along with the hooting of horns.

She could see a flashing light down the corridor. The ship was still listing. “Carlos?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Run.”

“Ma’am?”

Kerry grabbed his arm, and started for the stairs.

PART 28

"WHAT'S.. UH.. GOING ON?" CARLOS YELPED, AS THEY SLID TO ONE SIDE ON THE steps and nearly toppled over them. "This isn't normal, right?"

"Right." Kerry grabbed the railing and hauled herself upward with fierce determination. "C'mon.. just keep going up." She grabbed a door handle at the top of the steps and hauled at it, sent sprawling as it opened abruptly and swung inward. "Yah!"

"Hey!" Carlos grabbed at her. ""'Hey!"

Kerry scrambled to her feet and got her balance just as the ship decided to assist her and rolled back in the other direction. She and Carlos went catapulting through the door and across the hallway, slamming together into the wall as the door behind them slammed with a huge bang. "Son of a.."

"Hey!" Carlos grabbed for a handhold as the ship continued on it's roll and went in the other direction. "Whhoooaa!!!

Kerry started up the tilting corridor, gripping the railing along the wall tightly. "C'mon.." She halted suddenly as a luggage cart broke free of it's bindings and careened across the hall, nearly crashing into them. "Jesus." She fended it off with some difficulty, then continued to the next doorway that led into the main stairwell.

The tilt made the lunge across the hall almost impossible, but she got hold of the doorframe with her finger tips and pulled herself inside. "Hurry up!" She called back to Carlos. "We've got to get out of here!"

“Yahhh!” Carlos had leaped after her, but missed the hold on the door and was now sliding back towards the opposite wall. “Go on.. I’ll catch up!”

Kerry didn’t even think twice. She turned and headed back, hanging on to the frame and extending her arm out across the slanting floor. “Here!”

Carlos gathered himself and shoved off from the wall, only to have the ship tilt suddenly back to center. He was unable to stop his momentum, and he plowed right into Kerry, taking them both to the ground near the bottom step. “Oh!”

Kerry landed on her back, her hands reaching out to grab hold of anything she could in preparation for the next motion of the vessel. Carlos ended up sprawled over her, his head thumping against the riser as he pinned her to the ground. “Oof!”

“Ow.” Carlos winced.

Kerry glanced at the curve of his ear, inches from her nose. She cleared her throat gently. “No offense, Carlos, but this is definitely not my idea of fun.”

“I am so sorry, ma’am.” Carlos rolled off her quickly, his face a brick red.

Kerry sat up cautiously, but the ship remained steady. Far above them, she thought she could hear laughter, and the sound of tinkling glass, and she wondered how many things had broken during the bizarre tilting. “Okay.” She got up, grimacing as she felt her shoulder pop back into place, an uneasy sensation she’d been prone to since she’d dislocated it in the hospital.

It wasn’t exactly painful, but there was motion in the joint she didn’t have in her other arm, and remembering how that felt when it came all the way out always made her inwardly cringe.

“Are you okay?” Carlos asked hesitantly. “I didn’t hurt you or anything, did I?”

“No. I’m fine.” Kerry started up the stairs. “Let’s go find out what the hell’s going on.” She took the steps two at a time, rounding the landing and looking up ahead of her as she started to hear voices, along with the sound of rhythmic footsteps heading in their direction.

Could have been anyone, really. But there was something about the pace and the weight of them that struck a chord of instant recognition with her. She turned the corner on the stairs and had to stop short, as Dar came flying down towards them with fine disregard for her own safety. ‘Hey!” Kerry got her hands out in front of her, ready to jump aside if the dark haired woman couldn’t stop in time.

You really didn’t want Dar plowing into you. She was solid as a rock and with any momentum, you could end up easily on your butt with no effort at all. “Whoa!”

Dar bounced to a halt, taking in both of them with quick, darting looks. “You all right?” She asked crisply. “Mark said you went down to the bottom deck.”

“We’re fine.. just a little shook up.” Kerry nodded. “You?’

Dar waggled a foot. “Banged my damned toes on a door.” She admitted. “Bastards.”

“Your toes?” Kerry took her arm and they started up the steps once again.

“Damn crew.. thought it was funny.”

Uh oh. Kerry could sense the prickling of her partner’s pride, never a wise thing to ruffle. At least in public, at any rate, and she sometimes realized she was treading a fine line even in private with Dar on that. She certainly could be silly at times, and she had a great sense of humor but she really didn’t like being made fun of.

Even by Kerry. “Bastards.” She agreed with Dar’s sentiment. “It’s not funny.. someone might have gotten hurt. We had guys all over the ship carrying heavy stuff.”

“Yeah.” Carlos spoke up somewhat timidly. “I’m sure glad we got that machine installed before that happened.”

“Me too.” Kerry gave him a smile.

“Hey, maybe those jerks ended up against the wall in there, huh?” Carlos went on. “They sure deserved it.”

Dar stopped walking and turned to look at Kerry, one eyebrow lifting. “Jerks?”

“Later.” Kerry urged her forward. “Let’s see if we lost anything.”

Visibly reluctant, Dar peered down the steps before she grudgingly followed Kerry back up. She suspected there was more to it than just a tossed off ‘later’, but Kerry appeared completely undamaged so whatever it was couldn’t have been too bad.

Could it? Dar exhaled, and kept climbing. Her foot, well on it’s way to healing, now was throbbing painfully again and her temper was heading towards the ragged side. She kept that in mind and bit her tongue as she caught up to Kerry, suppressing her desire to find out what the ‘later’ was right now.

No sense in taking it out on Kerry, was there? She put her hand on her partner’s back as they walked up the last set of steps into the atrium, and relaxed a trifle as she felt Kerry lean back into the touch.

Several of the techs were standing in a group, and Mark was just coming down from the next floor up. All of them looked shaken, and they turned in relief as they heard her approach. “Everyone all right?” Dar asked.

“So far.” Mark was sucking on the side of his thumb. “Got my hand caught in a freaking door, that’s the worst I heard so far.” He surveyed the chaos in front of them. “Crap.”

The gear that had been so nicely lined up was now tumbled everywhere, some leaning against the glass wall to the outside, some upside down near the stairs, and the parts that went with them were strewn about haphazardly.

“What the hell happened?” Mark asked. “I thought I heard Shelley Winters singing there for a second.”

Kerry walked over and knelt by one of the machines, tipping it back over and checking the screen for damage. “Yeah, me too.” She called back over her shoulder. “Those must have been some waves.”

Dar put her hands on her hips and frowned, glancing aside as some of the crew appeared behind the reception desk, obviously amused. “Something funny?” She inquired of them.

They didn’t answer, but they didn’t leave either.

Dar’s eyes narrowed. The door from one of the offices opened and the staff captain appeared, smirking as he watched the techs clean up the mess in the atrium.

A thought occurred to her. “Son of a bitch.”

Kerry glanced up. “What?” She got up and walked over. “Not that I thought you were addressing me, hon… but you’ve got the most bizarre expression on your face.”

Dar waited for the staff captain to stroll over. “Morning.”

“Good morning, Ms. Roberts.” The man smiled charmingly at her. “Are you having a good day so far today? I see you have some disarray here. So sad.”

Kerry just barely held herself back from stomping on the man’s foot with her hiking boot. The sudden desire for violence surprised her, but somehow the reaction didn’t seem overly wrong. “The ship nearly turned over. What did you expect would happen? I’m sure you have things in a mess places too.”

The crew behind the desk laughed.

“Not at all, Ms. Stuart.” The staff captain replied. “You should really be more careful with all your machines, yes?” He walked past them and laughed, as the techs struggled to right the gear. “Perhaps we will hit more high seas.”

The techs looked around apprehensively, some of them grabbing hold of railings as though expecting the ship to tilt again. This amused the crew, more of whom had appeared behind the desk, and the laughter rang across the atrium.

Kerry put her hands on her hips. “You know something, Paladar?” She turned her partner. “There’s something not right about this whole thing.”

Dar gave her a wry look, but was spared from answering as Andrew appeared and crossed the atrium to where they were standing. “Hi, Dad.”

The big ex-SEAL was chuckling. “You all right, Dardar? See everything got knocked puss over kiester up here.”

“Look out, here she goes again!” The staff captain suddenly yelled.

The techs all scrambled around, trying to hold on to something and their gear at the same time, while they looked around frantically to see which way the ship was going to tilt next.

Now the crew was clustered in the hall, and they all broke up laughing.

Kerry let out a breath. “Dar..”

Dar turned to Andrew. “Stability test?”

Andrew was also chuckling. “Yeap.. it surely was that.” He glanced at his daughter. “Figgered they’d play a little seaman’s joke on ya’ll.”

Dar’s expression didn’t change. “It wasn’t funny.” She looked her father in the eye, her voice quiet. “Especially if you knew about it and didn’t tell me.”

“A joke?” Kerry repeated. “My god.. people could have been seriously hurt!”

Andrew blinked at them. “Wasn’t really that bad..” He started to protest.

“That bad?” Dar’s voice rose now, taking on an edge. She pointed at the gear. “Those weigh sixty pounds. If Kerry had been carrying one when they pulled this stupid little prank she could have broken her neck!”

The rage was very evident, and Andrew was caught completely flat footed by it.

“Jesus Christ. What the hell is wrong with you people?” Dar was talking directly to him. “You think this is some kind of game?” Now she turned and pinned the staff captain with a hard stare. “Mister, you better have a nice bank account, because every piece of broken

plastic's going to be taken out of it." She headed right for him. "You think it's funny? You all think it's funny?" She let her eyes sweep the crew, who had stopped laughing.

The techs stayed very still, even Mark, kneeling at the side of one of the machines merely kept his head down and waited.

Just then, footsteps sounded on the steps above, and they all looked up to see two of the techs easing slowly down the stairs, supporting a third. "Oh man.. glad we made it down here." One of them said in obvious relief. "I think Darcy's leg's broken."

There was a moment of silence. Then Dar turned towards Andrew. "Funny." She commented briefly, before she headed towards the stairs. "Okay, get him down here. I'll go find out how long it'll be until we get to port."

Mark shook off his paralysis and got up, hastening over to help the injured Darcy along with a couple other of the techs. "Easy, dude.. just relax."

Kerry exhaled. "Jesus Christ." She murmured, gathering her wits. "What in the hell were they thinking." She turned and looked at Andrew, who was still standing there in something of a stunned silence. "That was really supposed to be a joke?"

Andrew's face took on an expression Kerry had seen but a very few times on his daughters. It was the one she got when she knew she'd done something outstandingly stupid and it was a look that always touched Kerry's heart.

This time was no exception. She took a step closer to her father in law and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure they didn't really mean to hurt anyone." At least, she sincerely hoped not.

"Scuse me." Andrew murmured, before he turned and headed off in the direction Dar had gone.

Kerry watched him go, and then she exhaled heavily before she walked over to where the injured tech was, assembling a plan as she walked. "All right." She said. "I don't' think that's going to happen again. So let's get the rest of these things where they belong, so at least we get that much done." She knelt next to Darcy, who was biting his lip in an attempt not to cry. "And don't' you worry. We're going to get you some help if Dar has to get a helicopter out here with it."

Darcy managed a faint grin. He was a dark skinned Cuban with a faint moustache and dark, curly hair. Kerry knew he had a talent for working with servers and he knew lots of really bad jokes. She put a hand on his uninjured leg and returned his grin. "Just try to take it easy. It hurts more otherwise."

"Yeah." Darcy managed to get out. "You broke your leg too? Sound like you know." He looked down the length of his leg, visibly twisted around the knee under his thick jeans.

“Dislocated my shoulder.” Kerry said. “When I was in that hospital explosion.. if you remember that.”

Several techs made sympathetic noises. “That hurts.” One of them said. “My brother had that happen. He screamed like a..um..”

Everyone chuckled nervously.

“I did too.” Kerry admitted. “When Dar had to put it back in place.”

Wide eyes looked at her.

“In the dark, under a collapsed ceiling, in a building on fire.” Kerry went on. “So you know..” She patted Darcy’s leg. “Things could always be worse.”

“All right.” Mark stood up. “C’mon, you guys. Lets get this stuff moving. You three stay here, with Darcy, all right? Get him some water or something.” He looked at the crew, now standing in silence behind the desk. “From our catering guys. At least we know where it’s from.”

“I’ll stay here.” Kerry told him.

Mark looked at her. “This sucks.”

“I know.”

“This just totally freaking sucks.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mark led the techs out again, arms full of hastily righted machines. Kerry waited a moment, then she sat down on the cold floor, crossing her legs up under her and leaning her elbows on her knees. She stared at the marble with unseeing eyes, trying to absorb all that had just happened.

“So. Uh. That burning building.. that was scary, huh?” Darcy asked.

Kerry looked up at him. “Yeah.” She said. “Want to hear about it?’ She reasoned anything that would take his mind off his leg would help.

“Sure.”

Kerry straightened up and ordered her thoughts, pulling up her memories of that far off, terrifying night. There was something just faintly familiar about the act, some chord the

looks in the eyes of the techs struck in her as she got ready to tell her story that almost made her pause.

Almost. Kerry shrugged the feeling off. “Well, it all started with a baby..”

* * *

Dar headed down the hallway towards the bridge, feeling her temper simmering as it hadn’t for a long, long time. She was mad at a lot of things, the stupidity of the prank, the possibility of Kerry being injured, her father’s complicity…

Gah. She stiff armed the door to the bridge open and walked inside, her eyes sweeping right and left in search of the captain.

Two of the officers turned to look at her, startled. “Yes?” One said. “What is it you want?”

“Ah.” Dar spotted the captain in his tiny office. “Found it. Thanks.” She headed for the room. “All right, mister.” She shoved the door open. “What in the hell do you think you were doing?”

The captain, who had been leaning on his desk with both hands, straightened up and stared at her in utter shock. “Pardon?” He snorted. “What is the meaning of this, you bursting into my office?”

“What’s the meaning?” Dar went right up to the edge of the desk and pointed at him. “I’ll tell you what the meaning is, captain. The meaning is I’m going to sue your sorry ass for deliberately endangering my staff.” She let her voice build to a bark. “Got it?”

The man’s jaw actually dropped.

Dar turned. “But that’s not why I’m here.” She glared out at the horizon. “How long until this piece of junk gets into port? I’ve got someone that needs medical help.”

“Ah.. one hour. But Ms. Roberts..” The captain started around his desk.

“Don’t bother.” Dar snapped. “Save the sanctimonious crap for someone who gives a damn about your stripes. Just radio ahead and tell them to have that gangway ready when we get there.” She turned and walked out, slamming his door behind her and leaving him inside.

The entire bridge staff was staring at her in slack jawed disbelief, but Dar didn’t barely see them. She continued on through the bridge and out the door, pulling up short as she almost crashed into staff captain outside.

Maybe her stare warned him. He stepped out of her way and let her go past, then turned to watch her leave. “You really should work on that sense of humor, Ms. Roberts.”

Dar didn’t even bother to answer. She turned the corner of the corridor and headed down the damn steps again, tired of the ship, tired of running up and down stairwells, and very, very tired of obnoxious ship officers with bad hair and worse manners.

Spotting daylight, she got off the stairs at the eighth deck and went out onto the exterior promenade, which circled the ship and gave access to the fresh air. She gripped the railing and stared over it, her guts still churning with anger she had no focus to release on.

Moving around seemed like a good idea. She turned and started to walk down the promenade deck, the wind buffeting her as the ship rocked slightly in the waves. The deck was empty, only the lifeboats swung over her head in creaky counterpoint to the ship’s motion.

Bloody bastards. Dar felt like throwing up. She’d been safe enough when the ship tilted over, having just come back into the atrium and close enough to the stairwell to just grab hold of the railing and hang on. But the thought of Kerry being down in the lower decks, with all that gear, and all those guys…

Okay. Dar stopped and stood near the rail again, gripping it lightly with her hands. Just relax a second, yahoo. Nothing happened. She exhaled. Nothing happened to Kerry, anyway, except for..

Except for the ‘later’.

Dar leaned her head against the metal cross brace, staring bleakly out across the sea.

* * *

“What happened?” Ceci knelt down next to Kerry, giving the injured tech a concerned look.

Kerry had just handed him a glass of water and some Advil, all she had to offer for what was surely a tremendously painful injury. “He was carrying one of the terminals when the ship tipped over.. he fell down the stairs.” She gave Darcy a sympathetic look.

He grimaced back at her.

“Ow.” Ceci grimaced too. “I was busy being green in my bunk. That little roller coaster seems to have fixed me up permanently.. what happened? Have you seen Andy?”

Ergh. “Well.” Kerry exhaled. “Apparently the ship was doing some tests.. that they sort of forgot to tell us about.”

Ceci's brows both lowered. "Forgot?" She snorted.

Kerry half shrugged. "Anyway, looks like only Darcy here got hurt." She said. "Dar's upstairs yelling at the captain and finding out how long it'll take us to get back."

"Hm." Ceci pursed her lips. "Sorry I'm not there watching.. nothing like a little deserved tongue lashing to perk up the morning." She shook her head. "Unbelievable.. someone could have gotten killed." She glanced at Kerry. "Bet she's pissed."

Kerry nodded. "Very." She agreed. "So was I… but I think she's more pissed at Dad than she is at the guys running the boat."

"Andy?" Ceci frowned. "But w.." She stopped. "He knew?"

Kerry nodded again, unhappily. "Dar went off on him big time."

"Did she? Good." Ceci announced firmly. "Let me tell you I've had my fill of that brotherhood of the sea nonsense.. and if he knew, and didn't tell her it was going to happen, he deserves a spanking."

Well, that was probably true. Kerry acknowledged. But she also knew Andrew felt a kinship with these travelers, ratty though they were, that she probably would never understand. "I know." She said. "But I've been at the other end of that tongue lashing and it's no fun."

"So have I." Ceci commented. "But in my case, the real surprise was what it was like when she wasn't mad." She got up. "Let me go find my husband." With a pat on Kerry's shoulder, she wandered off, heading for the stairwell.

Kerry wrapped her arms around her knees and fought the desire to go with her.

* * *

Andrew paused at the doorway, looking out. He waited for a bit, but Dar didn't seem disposed to move, so after a few moments he gathered his wits about him and pushed the door open.

The warm air blew against his face, a feeling so familiar it raised ghosts that had no place on this ramshackle cruise ship. He dismissed them, needing a clear mind to deal with the trauma ahead of him.

He had seen Dar mad, on many occasions. She had a temper, hell, she had *his* temper and he knew to an intimate degree of what that anger felt like inside. He'd seen her stand her ground fearlessly in front of situations she damn well should have run from, and

though he valued his daughters safety above all else, he knew where that courage came from and couldn't fault her for it.

But he also had never had that anger turned on him before and he wasn't really sure what to do about it. So, as he always had in all kinds of bad situations before, he just stepped up to it and walked over to where Dar was standing.

As he came even with her, and put his hands on the rail, she turned her head and looked at him. The few things he'd thought about saying died on his lips, and he just stood there looking into those stormy eyes.

He'd seen them before, matter of fact. In a mirror some, but also framed in Dar's gentler profile every time he'd turned his back on his family and climbed up that gangway to go back to sea.

Specially that last time. There really weren't no words to say that meant anything faced with that, was there?

So he didn't say any. He just reached over and put his hand on Dar's shoulder, his fingers closing over the bone and muscle he'd given her there.

Dar looked away. Then she exhaled and pushed away from the railing. "I've got work to do." She said, briefly, before she eased out from under his grip and headed back towards the doors to the interior.

"Dar." Andrew called after her.

Dar raised one hand, but didn't turn around. "It's all right." She said, before she pulled the door open and went inside.

Andy leaned back against the railing and folded his arms across his broad chest, turning his head slightly as Ceci wandered up to him from the direction of the front of the ship. "You fixing to yell at me too?" He asked testily.

His wife rubbed her nose, suppressing a wry smile. "She should have kicked your ass, not yelled at you for that, Andrew."

"Ah did not do anything."

"Exactly." Ceci said, seriously. "You should have. You know better."

Andy scowled.

Odd, to be on this side of the fence. Ceci mused. "Well, just let her be for a little while. Let Kerry work on her and turn her back into a pile of goo, then you can give it another try."

Her husband eyed her.

"Or go kick the captain's ass." Ceci suggested. "And by the way, I'm feeling much better. Thanks for asking."

He sighed. "Hellfire day all round."

"Mm." Ceci relented and put her arm around him. "And it's just starting, too."

* * *

Kerry turned her head towards the hall just before Dar appeared in it. Some of the techs were straggling back in as well, and the atrium was becoming somewhat crowded. And yet, when Dar lifted her head and sought Kerry's eyes for that moment it was as though they were the only two people in the entire place.

"Excuse me." Kerry got up and threaded her way through the crowd. "Hey." She reached Dar's side and walked right into her personal space, ignoring the room full of employees and wrapping her arms around Dar's waist.

Dar, unsurprisingly, stopped walking and returned the gesture, circling Kerry's shoulders. "Hey." She responded quietly. "We'll be in port in an hour."

"Darcy's doing okay. He's just in a lot of pain.. I gave him what I had, but it's not helping much." Kerry said. "Did you see the captain?"

"Yeah."

Kerry waited, but nothing more seemed forthcoming. "Did you see Dad?"

"Yeah." Dar rested her chin against Kerry's head. "Did all the stuff go out?"

Kerry nodded. "Most of it. They just came back and got the last round. Then we're done. You want to test it?"

"No."

"C'mon." Kerry nudged her towards the steps. "Let's just get it over with."

"To hell with all of them. I hope the damn ship sinks in the harbor."

"C'mon."

"Jackasses."

Kerry really couldn't argue with that. "Okay, I really want to just get you alone in a dark room. Humor me?"

That got her a smile. Only a tiny, grudging one, but a smile. It was a start.

* * *

Kerry pecked at the keyboard, sparing a glance every few seconds to her silent partner. Dar was standing in front of the server racks, leaning her hands against them and staring into the blinking LED's with an expression of dour anger. "Well."

Dar grunted.

"At least we know the rack mounts all work right." Kerry commented softly. "You know, Dar.."

"Fuck them."

Kerry exhaled, and continued typing, shaking her head a little. "Okay, the POS server's up." She got up and walked over to where Dar was standing, putting a hand on her back and giving it a little, friendly rub. "C'mon, sweetie."

Dar glared at the rack a few seconds, then she turned abruptly and slammed her fist into the back of the door, a sudden surge of violence that caught Kerry totally by surprise.

She pulled back, uncertain of what was going on. "Dar?"

"How." Dar growled. "Could they be that stupid." She pulled back away from the door and studied the healthy dent her fist had made in the metal. "Son of a.."

Kerry acted before she thought it through. She jumped forward and grabbed hold of Dar's arm before she could send it doorward again and held it, wrapping both hands around her partner's wrist. "Hey! Hey! Hey!"

Dar turned and glared at her, but after only a few seconds, her expression softened, and she leaned back against the wall with a thump. "Pah."

Reassured, Kerry moved up next to her and let Dar's hand rest on her shoulder. "Honey, take it easy, please. I know you're really upset, but beating up the ship isn't going to help." She put both palms flat against Dar's belly and looked up into her stormy eyes. "Take it easy."

Dar drew in an unhappy breath. "I'm just so pissed."

“I know.” Kerry crooked her fingers and leaned forward. “Believe me, I’m mad too, Dar. It wasn’t bad enough I had some creeps hitting on me in the bar, but then to have… Dar?”

“Hitting on you?” Dar’s mental train jumped tracks without any effort at all and continued merrily along it’s way. “Is that the ‘later? Why the hell didn’t you say something.. I could have..”

The agitation was wearing on her nerves. “Dar.” Kerry repeated, pushing her very gently against the wall. “Would you please chill? You’re giving me a stomach ache.”

Dar sighed. One hand lifted and scrubbed at her face. “Let me go sit down.” She circled Kerry and took a seat in the one utilitarian chair next to the racks, letting her elbows rest on her knees. “Sorry, Ker.”

Kerry knelt beside her. “It really wasn’t that big a deal.” She explained gently. “Just a couple guys who thought any girl would fall for their greasily masculine charms.” She clasped Dar’s hand with her own. “Carlos was with me, and I ended up kicking a pool cue halfway out the window. Nothing big.”

Dar looked up through shaggy bangs at her. “Pool cue?”

“Uh huh. I kicked it out of the guy’s hand.”

“Ah.”

Dar’s fingers were chilled. Kerry lifted them and pressed them against her cheek to warm them, her thumb running over the faint swelling on the knuckles from where she’d punched the door. “Hey.”

“Mm?” Dar now seemed exhausted, rather than angry. “Can we just go home now? If we jump overboard as they get to the mouth of the cut, we could swim to the condo in about ten minutes.”

Kerry wished she knew what was really going on with her partner. The violent mood swings were beginning to scare her more than just a little. “Sure.” She combed her fingers through Dar’s hair, encouraged by the way her shoulders relaxed at the touch. “Can I get you a drink or something?”

“Do I look like I need one?” The touch of wry humor was very welcome.

“Yeah.” Kerry told her. “You really do.”

Dar exhaled heavily. “I can’t figure out if I’m more pissed at the jackass captain, the smartass crew, my father, or myself.”

Kerry kept up her riffling. “You? What’d you do?” She asked. “Or is this whole.. tipping over thing a tradition of the sea you knew about and forgot to tell me?”

“No.. well, I don’t know, it might be.” Dar admitted. “Hazing at sea is. I knew that. I just didn’t figure on them pulling a stunt like that on a trip like this.”

“Were you a haze-ee at some point?”

“No.”

“Everyone was scared of your dad?”

A faint smile. “Something like that.” Dar sighed. “But you know what, he knows better too. I can’t believe he didn’t tip me off they were up to something. Damn, that hurts.”

‘Hon.” Kerry murmured sympathetically.

“I feel like such a jackass.” Dar said, suddenly. “Letting that happen to all of you.”

Ahh. “Sweetheart, its not your fault.”

“It is.”

“No, it isn’t.” Kerry was gently insistent. “Don’t take that on yourself. You couldn’t know what that captain was going to do, and if Dad lost his mind and didn’t tell you.. that’s not your fault. That’s his fault.”

Dar gazed ahead of her. “Ow.”

“You know he didn’t mean to hurt you. Or me. Or any of the guys.” Kerry said. “Dar, he didn’t even know where we were before it happened. Maybe he didn’t think it would be that bad.”

“Peh.”

Kerry leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. “Honey, I love you more than life. Please don’t chew yourself out like this.”

Under this onslaught of mushdom, Dar really had very little defense. As much as she really wanted to stay upset and angry, it was impossible in the face of Kerry’s solicitous endearments. She let her forehead rest against Kerry’s and gave into it, releasing the fury still churning inside her. “Eh.” She uttered. “What would I do without you?”

“You’ll never find out, so who cares?”

That produced a genuine, charmed smile on Dar's part. They stayed like that, just touching each other, listening to the creak of the deck plates until finally Dar cleared her throat slightly. "Guess we'd better get this done, huh?"

"Before the server guys come trooping in here and find us snuggling? Uh, yeah." Kerry gave her another kiss on the forehead, before they both straightened up and Dar faced the terminal. She reached over and typed in a few commands, opened her mouth to say something…

And the lights went out.

Kerry slumped against her, and just started laughing.

* * *

"How much time do we have left?" Kerry asked, typing away as Dar sat on the floor near the rack's UPS systems.

They had propped the door to the hallway open, and some small amount of light was creeping in, bending in some mysterious way around the corner from the stairwell. Enough to outline Dar's profile, and cast a silvery dull shadow across the keyboard Kerry was working on, but not enough to really be useful for anything other than dispelling claustrophobia.

"Um." Dar poked her flashlight around the front of the panel. "About fifteen minutes." She announced. "Glad you spec'd out sixty minute runtime models."

"Me, too." Kerry wiped the sweat out of her eyes, then dried her hand off on her jeans leg before continuing to peck away. "You know something?"

"Hm? No. What?" Dar seemed content to sit on the linoleum floor with her legs pulled up crossed under her.

"I'm so wanting a glass of cold raspberry ice tea, our couch, and a pair of gym shorts right now."

Dar reached over and patted Kerry's leg sympathetically. "How's it going?'

"Almost done." The blond woman said. "I just used the demo database we used for the proof of concept on it, Dar. There's no real point in customizing it, is there?"

"Not really." Dar replied. "Well, you might want to put their name on the front screen."

"How about I put S/S Jackass of the Seas, instead?"

Dar chuckled, and scratched her chin. "I dunno, Ker."

“You could do an animated jackass, right? Couldn’t you have it sort of bucking around the screen while we do the demo?” Kerry mused, as she set up the screens. “I know you could.. this stuff’s in VB.”

Dar scooted over and peeked at what Kerry was doing. The monitor she was in front of was plugged, like the servers, into the UPS and it seemed hard to believe she’d actually finish before the power was drained to the point they had to shut everything down.

“We should almost be in port.” Kerry said.

“Almost.”

“Want to go check if we are?”

“No.”

Kerry kept typing, but a smile appeared on her face. Now that Dar had stopped being furious, she’d subsided into a quiet peacefulness, not really helping Kerry in what she was doing, but not hindering it either. “Do you think you should call an ambulance?’

“Mark did.” Dar replied. “It’s waiting for us on the pier.” She held up her PDA, which was stuttering gently. “They’re done putting the machines out, not that it does one damn bit of good without any power.”

“Okay.” Kerry stopped typing. “I’m done.”

Dar leaned an elbow on her thigh and peered at the screen. “Nice.”

“Pointless.”

“Pointless, but nice.”

Kerry saved the configuration, and then sat back. “It’s done.” She looked around. “We’re done. Dar, we did this.”

“Yep, we did.”

“Everything’s installed, the servers are up, the pc’s are out… the network works. We did it.”

Dar swiveled around and extended her legs out, letting her head drop back onto Kerry’s thigh. “Uh huh.” She agreed idly. “We did finish it all. Freaking incredible.”

Kerry patted her on the shoulder. “Let’s go congratulate our troops. No matter what happens, they came through for us, didn’t they?”

‘They sure did.” Dar sat up, letting out a sigh as she pushed herself to her feet and held her hand out for Kerry to grab on. “Let’s do it.” She kept hold of Kerry’s hand as they left the server room, walking together down the darkened hallway towards the stairs. “Know something?”

“You’ve had enough of ships for a while?” Kerry hazarded a guess. “When we first started this thing, I was going to suggest a cruise but now….”

“Mm.”

“I mean, our boat’s nice. I like it.”

“Glad to hear that.” Dar commented. “I was thinking maybe we could take a ride up the Eastern Seaboard, just check stuff out, see the coast.” She swung their linked hands a little. “Visit New England.. how about it?’

Kerry was momentarily speechless. Dar wasn’t talking about a week vacation, she realized. She was talking about something far more extended. Far more, and though the suddenness of the request shocked her, the fact that she had an eager agreement on the tip of her tongue surprised her even more.

“Just something to think about.” Dar added, a touch awkwardly. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to dump that idea on you right now. Anyway.. we should figure out how we’re going to do this proof of..”

Kerry squeezed her hand, and stopped walking. “Yes.”

Dar stopped also, and looked at her. “Yes?”

“Yes. Wherever you go, I go.” Kerry said. “Wherever you want to be, that’s where I want to be, just so long as wherever we go, we go together.” She felt an enormous sense of peace after she said it, and it was nice just to stand there and absorb the look of absolute delight on Dar’s face on hearing it.

Just let the future happen. She wasn’t going to worry about it. “C’mon.” She started down the stairs towards the atrium, where she could hear a buzz of voices. “We’re done. Let’s get everyone and get the hell off this thing.”

Dar didn’t answer. She merely followed, a rakish grin on her face.

* * *

All the techs were gathered in the atrium, with their overnight bags at their feet. Darcy was laying in the center of it, propped up on a pile of folded blankets with two pillows under his injured leg and a set of solicitous attendants nearby.

They all turned around and looked as Dar and Kerry approached, most scooting around so they could face their bosses as the two came to a halt near the center of the atrium. Dar looked around at the darkened space, then at the techs, then she lifted both hands in exasperated appeal.

A soft chuckle answered her.

"How's the leg?" Dar asked Darcy.

"Well." The tech said. "It hurts, but I think it may just be cracked or something, cause it doesn't' hurt as bad as my arm did when I broke *that*."

Dar rubbed her elbow in far off memory. "Yeah, that's pretty memorable." She agreed. "Well we're almost back home, so just take it easy." She produced a grin for the injured tech, who bravely grinned right back at her.

Kerry leaned back against the central marble column, very content to let Dar be the focus of attention. Of the two of them, she was very aware that Dar was the more charismatic. Heck, she'd fallen under that magnetic spell the moment she set eyes on the woman after all, hadn't she?

"Okay, folks." Dar paused, considering thoughtfully. ""We'll be back in port shortly. I want everyone to get their stuff, and get the hell off this damn thing as fast as you can. We've got medical waiting to get Darcy off, but after that, just grab and run."

Everyone nodded, but said nothing.

"I want you all to know how much we appreciate you being here." Dar went on. "No matter what happens with this contract, we completed the task we were asked to complete and nothing can change that."

Kerry smiled, but remained quiet as well.

"So I want all of you to take next week of, on us."

Everyone's eyes widened, including Kerry's. She turned and looked at her partner in some surprise. Dar had put her hands behind her back, and was rocking back and forth a bit, pleased at the response to her announcement.

"I think you all deserve it after the last few days." Dar went on. "So take off, have a blast, and don't think about this damn ship, okay?" She half turned to Kerry. "Remind me to send a note to Mari." She added under her breath.

"I'll send it." Kerry murmured back. "I only wish we were included on that." She admitted. "Boy, a week off sounds good right now… that was a nice touch, hon."

“Thanks.” Dar glanced out the windows, where the port of Miami was beginning to come into view. “Let’s get ready to move out. I’m not too damn happy with the hospitality on this junk barge.”

A couple of the techs got up and went over to the pile of cardboard boxes they’d taken the equipment out of, now neatly flattened and stacked near one wall. “Should we take these, ma’am?” One of the techs turned back to Dar. “Are we going to have to take all this stuff back out again?’

“Leave it.” Dar said. “They’re just getting one big bill for this, no matter how they decide to award the contract.”

“But I thought..” Kerry nudged her.

“I don’t give a damn what he said.” Dar replied. “He’ll get a bill, and I’ll toss it to legal. Let them handle it.”

“Hm.”

“Ham’ll love it.” Dar wandered over to the glass wall and looked out as they passed the island they lived on. “Sure you don’t want to just jump?”

Kerry joined her. “Don’t tempt me.”

Dar continued watching the scenery pass. In the windows reflection, she caught sight of her parents entering the atrium, but she resolutely kept her back turned and pretended she hadn’t seen them.

She wasn’t really mad anymore, but now she felt very awkward about the whole thing.

Kerry nudged her. “Dar?” She whispered. “The captain’s heading for you.”

Another mental train derailment. Dar turned the other direction and spotted the officer, who was indeed headed directly her way. “What do you think.. toss him overboard?”

Kerry patted her arm sympathetically. “I want to go home with you today.. not bail you out.”

Dar rolled her eyes, but assumed a mild expression as the captain came up to them. She held back a greeting, however, and waited for him to speak his peace instead.

“Ms. Roberts.” The captain said. “I owe you a very big apology.”

Wasn’t what she’d expected. “Mm.” Dar responded noncommittally.

“Along with some small drills, we had expected that stability test this morning.” The captain continued. “I had instructed my staff to inform you of it. They did not.”

Ah. “Now that’s what I’d call insubordination.” Dar commented.

The captain nodded. “So it was. I am sorry your employee was injured. Of course, we will take responsibility for his medical expenses.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “Please understand… there was no harm intended for any of you.”

Dar allowed herself to be mollified. She’d halfway liked the old salt, and had been very disappointed to think he’d deliberately put any of them in danger. “On your part, no.” She wasn’t ready to let him all the way off the hook, however. “I think your staff feels otherwise.” One hand sketched the air around them. “Was the power going off another.. ‘oversight’?”

The captain remained relatively unruffled. “I wish it was, since I was in my cabin shaving when it went off.” He said. “We managed to burn out our transformer. It’s very old. My engineer’s one of the few men in the world still able to sort it out, but it will take time.”

“How much time?” Kerry asked. “We have to demonstrate this system to your owners… and we need power to do that.”

The captain shrugged. “Impossible to tell. We need parts, and those are not easily obtained. We will do our best, however.” He gave them both a nod then turned and walked off, circling around the techs seated on the floor and heading forward towards the reception desk.

“Hmph.” Kerry put her hands on her hips. “Dar, if they don’t fix that power, we can’t prove our concept.”

“I know.”

“Can we run a huge extension cord from the pier?” Kerry asked. “Or something?”

“Let’s worry about that when the time comes.” Dar took a seat on one of the low benches that ringed the atrium. She noted her parents had done the same nearby, and now she raised a casual hand and waved at them.

Kerry stood by a moment, and then she clasped Dar’s shoulder with one hand. “I’m going to go get our stuff. Be right back.”

“Sure that’s safe?” Dar asked.

“Dar, please.” Kerry chuckled. “Just make sure they don’t tip the boat over again, okay?”

"Okay." Dar stifled the urge to follow her, and merely watched as she walked through the crowd of techs on her way towards their cabin. They all looked at her too, and Carlos approached her shyly. Kerry paused, then glanced back over her shoulder with humorously accusing look, before she lifted a hand and nodded, and walked on with the young man following her.

Heh. Dar only had a momentary reprieve however, as her father got up and walked over, sitting down next to her on the bench. It creaked a little under his weight. Dar took a breath to speak, and then let it trickle through her lips.

"Paladar Katherine." Andrew said.

"Yeah?" Dar had laid her hands on her knees, and now she studied them, her eye catching on the subtle sparkle of the ring on one finger.

"That was a damn fool thing to do, and ah was a damn fool not to cotton to it."

"S'allright." Dar exhaled. "I don't really think they were out to kill us. Just embarrass us." She leaned back against the wall. "Bunch of jackasses."

"Well." Her father folded his hands together. "Ah do not think most of them folks wanted to do bad by you all. Ah do think most of them cottoned to you." He said. "Few bad apples."

Dar shrugged.

Andrew was quiet for a bit, as they both watched the activity in the room. "Been on this side of the fence a damn long time."

"I know."

"Didn't matter. Ah should have tracked you down and told you." Her father said quietly. "Instead of being one of them jackasses."

Dar turned her head and studied his profile. "You can't be a jackass."

Andy's eyebrow cocked and he peered back at her with patent skepticism. "Ah most certainly can be, young lady."

"Nah." Dar disagreed. "You're my dad." She said. "If you're a jackass, that make me a jackass too. You calling me a jackass?'

Andy's lips twitched. "You ain't no jackass." He said. "You're a damn smartass, though."

Dar chuckled wearily.

"You get all the stuff done you need to?" Andy asked. "Fellers worked hard enough all night. Helped them carry some of them big boxes around."

Dar hiked one boot up and rested it on her opposite knee. "We got everything in. Problem is, we can't prove any of it works without power." She said. "I've about decided the whole damn project is just one big curse.. with my name on it."

Andrew tapped the back of his hand against her thigh. "It'll work out. Always does."

Would it? For one of the few times in her career, Dar had to admit that she really didn't think it would this time. And, for the first time, she had to admit to herself that she honestly really didn't care. She would hammer right to the end to get it done, get it right, get it proven, because her personal honor demanded that. But if it ended up that ILS lost the contract – well – then they did.

She realized at that moment that unlike every other project before, she had already decided not to 'make this one happen'.

Dar wondered if she should call Alastair and warn him. She owed him that.

Didn't she?

* * *

Kerry found she was damn glad to get back on solid ground again, though part of her inner ear was insisting that the pier concrete was still shifting underfoot. She was standing out in the hot sun near the ship, watching as her techs unloaded their gear and themselves, Darcy already having been transported out by a waiting ambulance.

Down the pier, the other ships were also tying up, and the amount of activity around their gangways was roughly three or four times what it was around their own. She spotted Michelle and Shari down there at the next ship, and despite their lack of power onboard, she was glad their part of the task was at last over.

Unlike her rivals, she could now snag Dar and go off to get some lunch, then sit back and wait for the power to come back on so they could sign off on the system and be done with it. Kerry would, of course, have to work on presenting the official bid for the project, but that was just paperwork and it could be done in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt with her feet up in her home office.

"Hey, Kerry?" Mark detoured towards her. "We're all gonna go over to Bayside for some eats.. you up for it?"

"Maybe.. where are you guys going?" Kerry asked.

“Hooters.” Mark had the grace to at least blush. “I know it’s all sexist and corny and stuff but you know they really do m..”

“Make killer chicken wings. Yeah.” Kerry chuckled. “Let me see what Dar wants to do. Maybe we’ll meet you over there.” The irony of it poked her in the butt, and she had to laugh at herself as Mark trotted off to help with a couple of large tool boxes.

She spotted the Herald reported headed her way though, and so she stifled the giggles and assumed what she hoped was a professional expression as the woman came up to her. “Well, good morning.”

“Good morning to you too, Ms. Stuart.” The reporter greeted her with a smile. “I’m guessing it’s a much better morning for you than for most.”

Kerry had a flash of completely inappropriate memory of Dar, their cabin, and a comment about sea motion from the previous night and couldn’t quite repress a blush. “Ah.. yeah, probably.” She agreed. “We got a lot done last night, and now, pending some electricity, we’re ready to show off the results.”

“Really? You finished?” The reporter exclaimed. “Everything?”

“We did.” Kerry agreed. “We put out the point of sale systems this morning, and I finished the server configuration just before we made port. I’m very pleased with how everything turned out.”

“I bet you are.” Eleana said. “That was a pretty slick maneuver you pulled off… getting aboard. I don’t think Mr. Quest really approved.”

Kerry shrugged one shoulder as she watched the gangway. “You know, I think Mr. Quest really wants to have his cake and eat it too. He wants to control every aspect of this contract bid, and yet he keeps telling us we have to be creative and deal with all the setbacks as best we may. “

“Hm.” The reporter made a note on her pad. “You know, that’s a darn good point.”

“Well, we were creative, and we did what we had to do to complete this project.” Kerry concluded. “So I would hope he has nothing to complain about.”

“Hm.. and now the ship has no power, is that what you said?” The reporter glanced up. “Convenient glitch.”

Kerry had bee thinking that very thing not that long ago. “Well, according to the captain, they blew the transformer. He’s got someone working on it.” She looked towards the gangway as the rude little engineer appeared, furtively peering out and motioning for one of the crew on the dock to come over.

A bit of sunlight hit him, outlining his face, and suddenly Kerry knew where she'd seen him before. "Oh." She inhaled in surprise.

"Excuse me?" Elena gazed at her in puzzlement.

Was it really the same guy? Kerry focused her peripheral vision on him and tried hard to recall that fleeting glance she'd had outside the drugstore. The man started berating the dockworker, and with that, she was sure. It was that same twisted face, the same sneering expression.

"Ms. Stuart?"

"Sorry." Kerry collected her wits. "I was just thinking about something."

"What's going to happen if they don't get power on? You do have to demonstrate those gizmos, don't' you?" The reporter asked.

"We'll come up with something." Kerry assured her absently. "If Dar has to hire three hundred hamsters and make an interlocking power wheel, we'll get it done."

The reporter started laughing. "Oh, that's a quote." She said. "You know they had a big meeting last night, the rest of the companies bidding and Quest."

Kerry forced her attention back to the woman. "No, I didn't." She said. "What happened?"

"Don't know. They didn't invite me in, and no one's talking." The reporter said, cheerfully. "I was hoping you'd find out, and let me in on it too." She looked around, then started backing up. "Matter of fact, I think I see an interview opportunity right now… catch up with you later, Ms. Stuart."

Kerry turned towards the ship. The little engineer had disappeared back inside, and now she trotted over to the gangway and climbed up it, edging past a few workers coming the other direction. She entered the ship's hold and looked around, but the man was no where to be seen.

Andrew was, however. He walked over to meet Kerry, his overnight bag slung over one shoulder. "Hey there."

"Hi, dad." Kerry greeted him absently. "Hey, did you see a little guy… kinda scruffy looking in here a minute ago?"

"Wall." Andrew considered. "I think I know what feller you mean. He's the engine guy on here."

"Right." Kerry turned and faced him.

“Believe that feller went off to get the lights on. Said he’s expecting a part or something.” Andy said. “That’s what you all need, right?”

Right. Kerry took a step back and leaned against the wall of the ship. “Yeah.” She agreed. “Guess he’s the one who knows what to do, huh?”

“Yeap.” Andy said. “Talked to him a little bit. Old timer.”

“He looks a little creepy.” Kerry remarked.

Her father-in-law shrugged. “S’allright feller, I guess. Been with this here ship for most twenty years.” He moved closer to Kerry, clearing the way for a flood of electricians and other craftsmen to pile onboard, cursing and shoving.

“Stupid assholes.” One man said. “How in the hell do they expect us to do shit with no power? What a bunch of..”

“Ahh. Shut up.” His companion said. “Who the hell cares? They’re paying us.”

Kerry shook her head. “You know, they’re right. What the heck are they doing to do in the dark, dad?” She asked. “Darn if this entire thing just makes less and less sense the longer it goes on.” Her eyes flicked to the stairs, where a familiar figure was fighting their way down against the tide. “Ah. Good.”

Dar emerged from the stairwell and spotted them. She walked over, shoving her way through the line of workers in complete disregard to the complaints and outrage she left behind her. “You two ready to get out of here? I saw mom get off before.”

“Waiting for you, sweetie.” Kerry told her, setting aside her new revelation for later. “The guys are all going over to Hooters for lunch. You up for it?”

Andrew snickered. Dar cocked her eyebrow at Kerry. “Hooters, huh?”

Kerry shrugged sheepishly.

“You hungry?” Dar asked Andrew. “I’m not sure mom can get anything but celery sticks and French fries there, but..”

“Naw. We’ll head on back home.” Andy responded. “Catch up with you all later.” He gave Dar a pat on the arm, gave Kerry a wink, and ducked under the edge of the shell opening that held the gangway.

“Hooters?” Dar grinned.

“Okay, okay. You win. You were right. Can we go eat now?” Kerry asked. “And, there’s something I need to talk to you about.. but not until we get away from here.”

Dar appeared intrigued, but she refrained from questioning Kerry and instead steered her towards the gangway. They worked their way down past the line of workers and walked together across the pier, both glad to leave the ship, it’s hot chaos, and the busy dock behind them.

They passed through the gates and across the short stretch of grass between the terminals, glad of the shade from the palm trees as they headed for the parking lot. “Should we find Quest and talk to him?” Kerry asked suddenly.

“Want an honest answer?”

“I don’t want to either, Dar, but I think we should.”

“Well, you’re probably right.” Dar amiably agreed. “But it’s a moot point, because the little bugsucker’s headed this way right now.” She jerked her head slightly to the right. “So hustle up your good manners, because mine took a hike and I just might kick him in the groin rather than speak to him.”

“Gotcha.” Kerry slowed her pace and turned, coming to a halt as Peter Quest intercepted them. He was wearing a sweat stained polo and chinos, and he had a very harried expression on his face. “Good morning, Mr. Quest.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” Quest asked.

Kerry decided to take the question at face value. “To get some lunch. Would you like some?” She answered politely.

“What about your project?” He asked. “Giving up?”

“Finished.” Dar supplied dryly.

“What?”

“We’re done.” Kerry confirmed. “We just need for them to get power back on the ship to demonstrate it to you, and we can close the book on it. You’ll have my financial bid paperwork shortly thereafter.”

Quest looked honestly stunned. “You mean it? He asked. “ You really did finish?”

“We did.”

Quest started laughing. He backed away from them, and then turned and jogged off, still laughing. He waved a hand at them as he went back through the gates, then turned and moved in the direction of Michelle and Shari's ship.

Kerry turned and faced Dar. "If you at any point figure out what the hell's going on here, you will tell me, right?"

Dar tipped down her sunglasses and peered after Quest. "Uh.. sure." She said. "But you know what, I'm gonna enjoy showing off that system to that bastard. Maybe he'll invite the rest of those jackasses to come see it too."

Kerry bit her lip, her conscience wrestling with her desire to take the project out on top.

"Ker?"

Kerry leaned against the palm tree they were standing under. "Yeah?"

"What's up?" Dar rested her hand against the trunk. "You all right?"

Should she even tell Dar? If she did, Dar would be as responsible for this decision as she was. Did Kerry want that? Wouldn't it be better to just keep it to herself, and so, have total control over it?

"Kerry?" Dar moved closer, and her voice dropped in concern.

Did she really want to lie to Dar? Kerry tipped her head up and met her partner's eyes. No. She didn't want lies between them. It wasn't how she'd decided she wanted them to live their lives together. "That guy." She said. "That little nasty guy… the one we saw in the hall last night?"

Dar cocked her head. "The engineer?"

Kerry nodded. "Remember I said I knew him from somewhere?"

"Yeah."

"He's the guy from the drugstore. That guy, with the car, and the woman in the trunk?"

Dar's jaw dropped. "Are you sure?" She put a hand on Kerry's shoulder. "That was the guy?"

"I'm.. " Kerry exhaled. "Dar, I really think it was. Am I absolutely positive? It was dark, and I just saw him for a minute or so.. but I think it was him."

Dar removed her sunglasses and studied Kerry seriously. "He goes off the ship, we'll never get power. Not in time. Not after what I heard about him."

"I know."

They looked at each other. "What are we going to do?" Kerry finally asked.

Dar nibbled the inside of her lip briefly. "We're going to go to lunch." She said. "This guy's not going anywhere. Let's just think it through and then we'll decide."

Kerry thought a moment, then nodded. "All right. That sounds good."

They turned and continued walking towards the parking lot, getting to their car just as a group of people came out of Michelle and Shari's terminal, arguing. They paused to watch them.

"Ah." Kerry murmured. "Guess we found out where our little friend Jason from New York went."

Dar watched Quest apparently make a final point, then walk off, leaving Michelle and Shari standing there with the newcomer, and the Army captain, and the Travel Channel filming crew. "Know what I think?"

"Hm?"

"Everything just went to hell." Dar opened the doors. "So let's go to lunch, and maybe they'll all have sunk on that thing before we get back."

Kerry climbed into the car and almost appreciated the hot leather as it eased the suddenly tense muscles in the back of her neck. Just when she was convinced things couldn't possibly get any worse…

"Hey Ker?"

"Uh?"

"Love you."

Kerry smiled, reaching across the console to give Dar's arm a squeeze.

Hell with em.

Just straight to hell with em.

PART 29

In the end, they decided against Hooters. Dar suggested a quieter spot, so they could just sit and digest everything that had happened, and so they ended up at the little Thai place near the office in one of the back booths that afforded the most privacy.

Kerry leaned back against the banquette seat, and relaxed a little in the cool air and dim lighting. “Good choice.” She half turned sideways and rested her elbow on the table, propping her head up against her fist. “Wow.” She let out a breath. “I’m wiped.”

Dar folded her hands together and rested her chin on them. Kerry did look tired, she realized, and her eyes were a bit bloodshot. “Been a long week.”

“I vote we sleep in tomorrow.” Kerry picked up her iced coffee and took a sip. “How’s your foot feeling?’

“Eh.” Dar waggled a hand.

“Mm. That about covers how I feel too.” Kerry gave their waitress a smile as she put down a steaming plate of curried shrimp in front of her. “Thanks.”

The woman put down Dar’s meal and then a bowl of fragrant brown rice, giving them both warm smiles before she backed off and left them to eat in peace. “Much as I appreciate Hooters.” Kerry said. “I’m a lot happier to be here.” She scooped some rice onto her plate, and mixed it with some curry sauce.

"Me, too." Dar turned and motioned to the waitress. "Can we get a couple of glasses of the plum?" She asked. "Thanks."

Kerry checked her watch. "Isn't it a little early for that?" She teased gently. "Last time I had alcohol with you this early was when you got cleared at the heart institute."

"We can handle it." Dar smiled, remembering that morning with utter clarity. "We went to work after that."

"Oo yeah. I remember twirling around in my chair for a while counting the seagulls when we got back. I was about as useful as a pig with a PDA."

"So was I, but it had nothing to do with the damn champagne." Dar picked up a bit of chicken and ate it. "I was just in there thinking.. 'man, what can I do to make her hug me again'"

"You were not!"

The waitress put down two glasses of plum wine. Dar lifted hers and toasted Kerry. "I sure as hell was. It's a damn good thing I turned not to have a heart problem, because mine was flopping around like a beached fish that whole day."

Kerry picked up her glass and touched her partner's with it. "Well, I don't know what mine was doing, because you'd already stolen it and had it somewhere in your desk drawer, I think." She took a sip of the cold wine, enjoying the sweetness against her tongue and the warmth as it traveled down into her stomach. "We're such a couple of hopeless mushballs, you know that?"

"Yes, I do know that." Dar settled down to her lunch. "But I think I like it that way."

"You think?"

"Mmhm."

They munched away in a companionable silence for a little while, having learned through experience that eating their food while it was still hot was worth forgoing the pleasure of talking to each other while they were consuming it. Kerry, especially, tended to go off on verbal tangents and since her upbringing would not allow her to chew while speaking, she often ended up with a plateful of chilly ingredients at the end of her meal.

Besides, it gave them a chance to think, and Kerry used that to think about the ship's engineer. There was no question in her mind that she was going to call the police, but she knew the unspoken question between her and Dar was when she was going to make the call.

Now? If they took the man off the ship, chances were they'd never get to test their solution, and by default, they'd lose the bid.

Kerry knew it was more important to bring the man to justice than for them to win the bid. But she also had enough of her shining altruism knocked off to know that one more day of freedom wasn't going to make a material difference to anyone and she really had no desire to shoot herself, Dar, and the company in the foot by turning him in before he got the power back on.

She took another sip of wine, allowing it to relax her, and continued working on her plate oblivious of the blue eyes watching her from across the table.

Dar was right. It had been a very long week, and now here at the end of it, she was really feeling the strain. The usual stress of her job combined with the stress of actually doing the nuts and bolts of it, combined with the emotional overload of dealing with all the bullhockey had left her feeling like she'd been run over by one of the eighteen wheel trucks busy delivering to the ships.

She really just wanted to go home.

"Ker?"

Ah well. Kerry looked up to find Dar gazing back at her, chin propped up on one fist. "Yeees?"

"Listen." Dar cleared her throat slightly. "My foot's killing me, and I've got a headache that could drop Godzilla. You mind if we just go back to our place and wait for them to call us when the juice is on?"

Kerry blinked in surprise. "Um.. w.. uh, sure." She stuttered. "Yeah, sure. That makes sense. No reason for us to stand around the pier, right? We'd probably only end up being the subject or more snitty video."

"Yup." Dar drained her wineglass.

"Good idea, Dar." Kerry felt a distinct sense of relief. "Especially if you're not feeling well." She added. "We have to take care of you. Last thing we need is for you to get a bad infection or something."

"Mm. Yeah." Dar worked on clearing her plate. "Maybe we can just hang out in the hot tub for a little while. That might help."

Oo. The thought of the warm water, a cold ice tea, and Dar next to her perked Kerry up considerably. It also did nice things for her mentally, and she finished her last bit of rice with a touch of impatience. "Sounds great." She wiped her lips. "You going to tell Mark to give us a call?"

Dar had already signaled for the bill. “Sure.” She agreed amiably. “Bet Chino will be glad to see us.”

“Cheebles.” Kerry grinned in reaction. “Yeah, bet she will.” She found herself looking forward to crossing their threshold and getting out of the heat of the day into the placid chill of the condo’s interior. She scooted out from behind the table and followed Dar up to the cashier’s booth, leaning against the taller woman’s shoulder as Dar paid the lunch bill.

She’d gotten past giving her grief about that. Now they generally took turns, since all their joint income was deposited, appropriately, into a joint account. Didn’t really matter then, did it?

They walked out into a blast of sunlight, pulling down sunglasses over their eyes and heading quickly for the car.

* * *

Kerry tossed the mail down on the table as they crossed the living room, stifling a yawn as she did so. “We get a lot of junk mail.” She noted. “Hey Cheebles, honey.. c’mere.” She sat down on one of the dining room chairs and greeted their pet, who was dancing from paw to paw in excitement. “C’mere sweetie… I love you. Yeah.”

Dar paused at the door to the bedroom, then ducked inside to rid herself of her hiking boots and their overnight bag, tossing both into the closet with benign disregard. Wiggling her toes against the cool floor, she then unbuttoned her jeans and folded them neatly, tucking them into a wash pile and adding her shirt to them a moment later.

“Dar?”

“Huh?” Dar called back. “I’m getting undressed.”

A blond head poked itself around the door microseconds later. “Ooo… can I watch?”

Dar turned and put her hands on her hips, giving her partner a droll look. “Yankee hedonist.”

“Dixie nerd.” Kerry slipped around the door and joined her in the closet, pulling her shirt over her head and folding it over so it could join Dar’s in the laundry bag. She was about to unbuckle her belt when Dar’s hands slipped around her and pulled her close and she abandoned her undressing for some skin on skin contact instead.

“Ungh.” A small sound escaped her as Dar’s fingers traveled gently up her spine, kneading the knots she could feel herself along it. She closed her eyes and wrapped her

arms around Dar, breathing in her scent and reveling in the heat of her body against the cool of the air conditioning. “You are walking wonderful.”

Dar wrapped her arms around Kerry and lifted her up a little, tilting backwards until she felt Kerry’s back relax. Then she let her down and gave her a hug, ruffling the hair on the back of her head as she gave her a kiss on the top of it.

Kerry felt awash in affection. It was a very nice feeling, and she smiled giddily into the skin near Dar’s collarbone. “Boy, that feels great.” She said. “Glad we came home.”

Dar steered her out of the closet and drew her over to the waterbed. She released Kerry’s hand and dropped down onto the bed’s surface, rolling onto her back and regarding her partner with half lidded eyes. “I’m glad too.”

Kerry unbuckled her belt and slid off her pants. She started to fold them, then found them yanked from her grasp and tossed against the far wall. “Hey.”

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

Jesus. Even after all this time, it made her go weak in the knees. Kerry climbed into bed to prevent herself collapsing into it and took a spot next to Dar in the hollow her weight made in the surface. “Okay. I’m here.”

“Know what I was thinking?” Dar rolled half onto her side and traced a teasing line down Kerry’s belly.

Thinking was probably down on her list of things to be doing at the moment. Kerry reached over and threaded her fingers through Dar’s hair, pulling her gently closer and kissing her.

“Ah. Reading my mind.” Dar chuckled. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

It felt amazingly good to be right where she was. The linen was clean, and smelled of sun and sea air. The room was cool and dark, and Dar’s lips were nibbling along the edge of her jaw as her hands stroked Kerry’s skin.

Something occurred to her, however. “Hey.” She whispered. “What about your foot? Shouldn’t we take care of it?”

“It’s fine.” Dar growled softly into her ear.

Oo. “Oh.” Kerry laid her hand along Dar’s cheek. “Was there really something wrong before?”

“No.”

"You just wanted to come here?"

"I just wanted to take you home." Dar kissed her on the lips. "And take care of you."

"Of me?"

"Of you." Dar enfolded Kerry in her arms.

Oh. Kerry smiled giddily for a completely different reason. "Thanks." She rolled over and snuggled up to Dar, letting her body press against her partners. "I'm not sure what brought that on, but I'm not complaining."

Dar dismissed the bid without much further thought, assigning it to that category of problems that she had limited control over. Whatever happened now happened, and she wasn't going to waste time worrying about it when she had something more concrete to worry about wrapped up in her arms right here.

This mattered.

She slid her hands under Kerry's bra strap and released it, smothering a faint chuckle as Kerry tickled her returning the favor.

Kerry's hand touched her hip, fingertips sliding under the fabric of her underwear and easing it down. Then her hand stilled, and Dar heard a faint sniffle.

She eased back a bit, cupping Kerry's cheek and finding the faint dampness of tears sparkling in her eyelashes. "You all right?"

Tired green eyes peered back at her. "Perfect."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Kerry turned her head and kissed Dar's palm, and then let her touch slip lower, giving over her body to the passion building in it.

Everything else would wait.

* * *

They ended up passing on the hot tub. Kerry was laying on the couch, one bare knee propping up her diary as she wrote in it when Dar came back from the kitchen folding her cell phone up. "Nothing yet?" The blond woman asked, as she reached out to scratch Chino's ears.

"Nothing yet." Her partner confirmed. "And I just spoke to Alastair."

Kerry nibbled the end of her pen. “Yeah?”

Dar dropped down onto the couch near Kerry’s socked feet. “Yeah. I told him what’s going on.” She paused. “Well, I told him a little of what’s going on. He knows we completed our part of the deal, and that we’ve had a ton of challenges.”

“What does he think?”

Dar slouched down and put her feet up on the coffee table. “He doesn’t understand why this has been such a tough case.”

Kerry put her diary down on her chest and stared at Dar.

“Told you I didn’t get into details.” Dar idly plucked at the toe of Kerry’s sock. “But I thought I owed him a heads up.”

Kerry studied her partner’s expression, which seemed quite relaxed, almost mellow. “Is he worried?”

“Eh.” Dar grunted. “I hinted to him that it might not be a good idea to hang so much off this one. He said it wasn’t Quest he was concerned with.”

“The other guys.”

“Mm.”

“Well.” Kerry pressed her foot against Dar’s thigh, pushing gently against her. “All we can do is our best, Dar. I think we’ve done that.”

“Have we?”

“Yes.” Kerry sounded quite positive. “Outside maybe me not accepting a dinner invitation here and there, I don’t think there’s anything I would have changed in terms of business decisions. Would you?”

Dar gazed across the living room, staring pensively at the far wall with it’s neatly framed pictures. “Besides socking Quest in the kisser when I first met him, no, probably not.” She admitted. “You’re right, Ker. We did a good job.”

“We did.” Kerry agreed. “We pulled together the bid requirements, implemented them, and achieved our goals within the time limit, despite having to practically FedEx ourselves to hell and back doing it. I say that’s pretty damn good, Dar.”

Dar draped her arm over Kerry’s legs and patted her knee. “Know something?”

“What?” Kerry favored her with an indulgent grin.

“You really did a hell of a job the last few weeks.” Dar responded seriously. “From taking care of that power outage, to setting up the pier, to working with the guys to get everything set. Very well done.”

Kerry smiled even more broadly. “Thanks, boss.”

Dar returned the smile. “I watch you do your job, and it makes me damn proud.”

The blond woman’s nostrils flared a bit, and she shifted, visibly a bit surprised. “Gee, honey.” She murmured. “It really wasn’t that spectacular, y’know.”

The cell phone rang. Dar glanced at it, debating with herself on chucking it across the room. Then she sighed and opened it, checking the caller id and finding Mark’s name there. “Hell.”

“O?” Mark ventured.

Dar’s inner child whined, not wanting to go back to work. “Yes, hello.” She sighed. “They make any progress?”

“Um.. no, listen, Dar.. I think we’ve got, like a big problem here.”

Another one? “And that would be?” Dar gave Kerry a warning look.

“That engineer guy, the one everyone was talking up? He took off.” Mark said. “They can’t find him, and nothing’s getting done here.”

Oh, crap. “When did this happen?” Dar covered the speaker of her cell with her fingertips. “Your fugitive ditched us.

Kerry sat up abruptly, putting her diary aside. “What?”

Mark sounded half disgusted and half embarrassed. “Beats me.. I just heard a couple of them come through here yelling about ten minutes ago. I guess they thought he was getting some parts or something. They’re pretty pissed.. that captain guy actually came off the ship and was looking around.”

Dar took a breath, held it briefly, then let it trickle out of her lips. “Okay.” She finally intoned crisply. “We’ll be right there. See what we can do.”

Kerry swung her legs off the couch and stood up, reciting several carefully enunciated curses that certainly would have surprised her Midwestern family as she headed for the bedroom and presentable clothing.

“Thanks.. see ya.” Mark had the grace to sound apologetic. “I know this sucks, boss.”

"Yeah, it does." Dar stood up and examined her reflection, then shrugged and sat back down, picking up a sneaker from where it had migrated half under the couch. "But that's the breaks. See you in a few, Mark." She closed the phone and dropped it on the table, then concentrated on putting on her shoes. "No, Chino.. you can't help me. Thanks anyway." She nudged the Labrador out of the way, getting a wet kiss on the nose in return.

"You going to wear that?" Kerry queried from the doorway.

"Uh huh."

"Dar."

"What?" Dar got the other sneaker on and carefully tightened the laces around her still tender foot. "There aren't any holes in it, are there?" She glanced down at her ragged and cropped coveralls.

"Huckleberry Roberts." Kerry sat down on the loveseat and pulled on a boot, her legs now covered by sedate denim. "Put some pants on, will you?"

"But I already have my shoes on." Dar frowned. "C'mon. I don't give a crap. It's a damn shipyard."

Kerry gave her a plaintive look, but merely shook her head and continued tightening her laces. It wasn't that Dar looked bad, on the contrary, the faded shorts overalls were groin stunningly adorable on her, to Kerry's eyes.

It was just that they were going to work, after all. She spared another glance at her partner, who was once again sprawled on the couch. Oh well. If anyone could carry off being an outraged executive in cutoffs, it would be Dar. "Okay, let's go." She stood up and ran her fingers through her hair. "You think he's really gone?" She asked, suddenly, looking up into Dar's eyes.

Dar pursed her lips briefly, then she put her hand on Kerry's shoulder and turned towards the door. "Let's go find out." She suggested. "He could have taken off any time before now, Ker."

"But he didn't." Kerry sighed, as she reached for the door latch. "God damn it, I don't want that on my conscience for the rest of my life now." She walked down the steps and headed for the car. "I'll drive."

"Okay." Dar gave the now woebegone Chino a sympathetic look as she closed the door. "Be good, Chi… we'll be back soon. Promise."

"Whine."

Know exactly what you mean. Dar locked the door and followed Kerry's footprints to the Lexus, getting into the passenger side of the already running car. She settled her sunglasses onto her nose and closed her eyes as she began the familiar process of considering their options.

If, of course, they still had any.

* * *

The terminal was in chaos. Now that a good percentage of the IT people had left, the crew had wandered in out of the heat and into the air conditioning and had taken over most of the big room near the back. Most were sitting on the ground with their backs to the walls, some had cards out, and some were merely sleeping, oblivious to the commotion around them.

Mark was behind the desk on the raised platform, and he looked up as the door opened for the nth time, on this instance revealing finally the outlines he was waiting for.

He started around the edge of the platform, then halted, gazing in bemusement at Dar's more than casual outfit. "Hey boss." He continued on regardless. "Glad you're here."

"I'm not." Dar told him. "You send everyone else home?"

"Sure." Mark said. "No sense keeping them here."

"All right." Dar looked around the room, giving her head a little shake. "Let's go find our friend the captain and see what the hell he's doing about this cluster." She headed for the back door, clearly expecting them to follow her.

They did. "Hey." Mark whispered. "She wear that just to tweak these guys?"

"Don't go there." Kerry held up a hand.

"Okay." He cleared his throat. "Missed you guys at lunch."

Kerry glanced at a sleeping lump of humanity, and realized there were three heads in a variegated tangle of sheeting. "Uh.. we did Thai." She murmured, an eyebrow lifting. "Then we swung by home."

"Ah." Mark murmured.

"Wish we were still there."

Mark looked at her in surprise.

Dar hit the back door and powered through it, angling across the bleached white concrete towards the gangway at the side of the ship. There was little activity around the opening, unlike in previous days. In fact, only a few workers sat around the ground near the ramp, most giving her cursory looks and then double takes as they approached.

Okay. So wearing cutoffs that short was a stupid idea. Dar marched up the metal ramp and into the ship, putting that thought firmly behind her. The heat inside the ship immediately vindicated her choice, however, and she heard the grunts of displeasure from her companions as they started up the steps.

It was dark, it was stinky, and she was over it.

Over it, over the project, over the ship, over it's crew, over the heat, over Quest, and about to go over the top. Just finish it, Alastair had said?

Well, all righty then. She would.

* * *

They didn't have far to go, this time. They could hear the yelling in the atrium as they climbed up the stairs to the seventh deck. Dar headed for the sound, her sneakers giving her stride a touch more bounce than it usually had as she strode through the archway and rounded the center column.

Kerry kept right on her heels, already feeling a touch breathless from the oppressive heat and the fast climb. She hoped whatever Dar had in mind to do she'd do quickly, so they could get the hell out of the ship and back outside where at least there was a little bit of a breeze.

"Are you telling me you don't have a single person on this damn ship that can get it working!!" Peter Quest was facing off against the captain, his arms flailing in time with his words. "What kind of bullshit is that!"

For once, Kerry found herself in total agreement with the man.

"Come now, Mr. Quest." The captain, however, remained calm. "You knew when you purchased these vessels, that they were old and their technology out of date. That was no secret to anyone, else why would have gotten them so cheaply?"

Abruptly, Kerry found herself switching sides, as she agreed with the captain wholeheartedly too!

"That's not the point!" Quest argued. "You're responsible for keeping the damn things running! That was the deal I made with your prior owners."

The captain shrugged. “You made the deal with them. Not with me. Or my crew. They are not indentured slaves, Mr. Quest. If they decide to leave, they leave.”

Dar had pulled up near the circular stairway, and now she stood quietly listening. Kerry was glad to join her, putting one hand on the relatively cool brass railing and easing her foot up onto the first step. She was a little surprised that her partner had put a hold on all that angry energy, but she understood that this conversation they were listening to would probably dictate what Dar would do next.

“You have to get this ship running.” Quest stated. “Get one of the engineers off those other ships.”

Ah. Good idea. Kerry complimented him silently.

“Yes, we are attempting that.” The captain agreed. “But they also are busy, and in any case, our electrical systems are not like the others.”

Figures. Kerry sighed.

“Bloody hell!” Quest barked.

“Something like.” The captain seemed unperturbed, despite the fact that he was in full uniform and it was stained horribly with sweat. “My prior company purchased the electrical systems for this vessel from a remainder shipyard in Romania, and they were.. how shall I say.. made in with a horseshoe.”

Quest’s eyes seemed about to bug out. Dar took the opportunity to move closer and join in the conversation. “You mean shoehorn.” She said.

“Yes.”

“Ms. Roberts.” Quest almost seemed glad of her presence. “Maybe you can offer some helpful suggestions on how to resolve this.”

“Me?” Dar’s eyebrow cocked. “I’m an IT executive, Mr. Quest. What makes you think I have any suggestions, helpful or otherwise, on how to get forty year old diesel electric turbine converters working?”

“Because your reputation depends on it.” Quest responded. “If you don’t show me the goods, it’s as good as you not doing it.” He held up a hand. “Don’t bother whining to me abut how unfair it all is. I’ve heard it all before.”

Kerry rested her chin on the railing and simply listened.

Dar put her hands on her hips, but her expression was thoughtful rather than pissed off. “Know what I think?” She asked.

Both men looked at her in question.

“I think you’re a horses ass.” Dar remarked. “And you’re not worth my standing here sweating. I couldn’t give a damn if you get this piece of floating garbage working or not.” She exhaled. “I’ll send a bill for my time, my gear, and my removal costs to your headquarters Monday morning. Until then, Mr. Quest, you can most cordially kiss my ass.”

With that, she turned and started heading back to the stairs, extending a hand towards Kerry as she did so. “C’mon, Kerrison.”

Kerry knew her eyes must have been the size of tennis balls by Dar’s expression. She straightened up and started to move towards her, ears still ringing with what she realized was the end of the project, and quite possibly, the end of their tenure at ILS.

No matter what their history, Alastair couldn’t stand by this time. Even she realized that.

“Ms. Roberts!” Quest spluttered finally. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Dar turned her head, expression still quite mild. “Nope.” She clapped a hand on Kerry’s shoulder. “I’ve had enough. Enough of your games, enough of the press, enough of the bullshit, enough of the shady dealings going on around this port. Enough. I did what you asked. It’s not my problem if you can’t produce enough power to see the results. That’s your problem, mister.”

“My problem!” Quest said. “The hell it is! You have to prove you finished, or you don’t make the terms of the deal, Roberts!”

“Your problem.” Dar confirmed, half turning. “ You’re the one who didn’t fulfill the terms of the contract, Quest. Maybe you should read it. You agreed to provide sufficient physical plant for the installation.” Dar gestured at the ship. “ You didn’t.”

“He didn’t!” Quest pointed at the captain. “I had nothing to do with it!”

“I didn’t sign a contract with the captain, Mr. Quest.” Kerry spoke up for the first time. “I signed it with you.” A loophole. Had Dar found really found one? “Dar’s right. It’s not our responsibility to make sure the ship works. It’s yours.”

The captain chuckled.

Quest took a step back, his expression almost stunned.

“So.” Dar said. “When you’ve got your act together, give us a call. I seriously doubt you will.” She added. “And, Quest? You might be able to bluster and bullshit the rest of these

people about what you're going to get from them, but I've got a legal department the size of Alaska you're not going to enjoy dealing with."

It was a good exit speech, and Dar took advantage of it. She nudged Kerry towards the door and followed, refusing to wait for whatever lame retort she was sure Quest would come up with.

"You'll look like a fool on television!" Quest shouted. "How about that!"

Lamer than she'd expected. Dar merely shook her head and ducked around the stairwell door, hustling Kerry in front of her. "Jackass."

"You're amazing." Kerry told her. "Have I told you that lately?"

"Am I?" Dar wiped a sheen of sweat off her brow. "It's just all bullshit, Kerry. Smoke and mirrors. This whole damn thing hasn't been anything but smoke and mirrors since the moment it started. I just can't figure out who the hell wins by it."

"Quest?" Kerry suggested. "He gets systems for his ships."

"Yeah, but it's all cosmetic, Ker." Dar finally put her finger on what had been bothering her. "They're not upgrading the engines or the mechanics. What the hell are they doing to do with them when they're done? They can't keep them in service."

"Huh." Kerry skipped off the last step and headed through the hold, now silent and empty. "But.. all this upgrading and all the… wait." She murmured. "You're right.. it's paint, and carpet, and us and wall sconces. Not plumbing or…"

"Yeah." Dar nodded, as they reached the gangway and started outside, glad of the moderately cooler breeze. "Just what exactly is the whole point here?"

A blast of light hit them, and Dar threw up her arm instinctively to block it. "Hey!"

Kerry stopped behind her, shading her eyes as she stared at the cluster of people on the pier, surrounding the filming crew who had them pinned in a pair of movie lights as they came down off the ship. "What the heck?"

Dar continued walking slowly down the ramp, blinking against the powerful lights as she reached the pier concrete. "What is all this?" She asked, her eyes finding Cruickshank in the crowd. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"No, we sure don't." Cruickshank told her, cheerfully. "Now, Ms. Roberts, we understand you've completed your install, is that right?"

Dar eyed her warily. "Right."

“But the ship has no power, so you can’t demonstrate it, right?”

‘That’s right.”

“So, here we finally come down to it.” The reporter said. “Everything that’s gone on for the past few weeks comes down to this. You’re the only ones finished, it’s near sunset, everyone else is killing themselves to get done and now you have to find a way to overcome this one last huge obstacle, and bring it home. Right?”

Dar cocked her head. “No.”

“No?” Cruikshank said. “C’mon, Ms. Roberts. This is where we see that famous never say die, win at all costs reputation of yours. We’re all waiting for it. How are you going to pull this one out?” She asked. “This story has become your story. How you got involved, how you fenced with your rivals, how you overcame all the roadblocks. So, what’s the plan?”

Dar slowly removed her sunglasses, hanging from one ear from her hip pocket. She settled them onto her nose, blocking the harsh light along with the sun. It gave her a moment to think, and a moment to regret thinking because what her mind was coming up with.

“Two hundred extension cords and a fifty pounds of gerbils.” Kerry spoke up unexpectedly. “So, if you’ll excuse us, we’ve got exercise wheels to put together. Dar?” She took her partner by the elbow. “We better make sure the plans for those haven’t gotten out.”

Dar kept her silence, allowing Kerry to lead her off through the crowd. She was aware of the rattle of the camera as it turned to follow them, but for once Cruickshank had been caught speechless. They managed to get to the gate and through it before they heard footsteps behind them, and Dar had the presence of mind to slam the gate behind her, hearing it lock. “Ker?”

“Eighty pounds of gerbils? We should really over engineer it a bit just in case. Way our luck’s been running.” Kerry muttered. “You know something? You know what I just realized, Dar?”

“We’re being played.”

Kerry turned her head and looked at Dar. “You knew?”

“I just figured it out.” Her partner admitted. “But it’s the only thing that makes sense. We’re being played. We all are, Shari and Michelle included. This is a scam, Ker.”

“I’m not so sure it is.” Kerry took hold of her forearm and slowed down. “I think..”

"Hey!"

They both turned, to see Michelle headed towards them at a jog. From another direction, the Army guy was approaching them. From yet a third direction, Cruickshank and her team had managed to get around the gate and were headed their way.

Kerry exhaled. "We can outrun them."

"Sure. But it won't help." Dar replied. "We're going to have to come up with a plan."

"No gerbils?"

"No gerbils."

"But I thought you told Quest it was his problem?" Kerry said. "Why can't we just tell people that?"

They could, Dar privately acknowledged. But it was obvious that everyone here was expecting her not to, they were expecting to see a miracle. Her famous resourcefulness. That ILS magic. Alastair expected it. The reporters did.

Hell, Michelle and Shari probably did too.

So what the hell was she going to do? She felt very off balance having to think about coming up with a plan that fixed something that really wasn't her fault or responsibility. It would play right into Quest's hands, for one thing.

For another thing….

"Dar?" Kerry lowered her voice. "Do you think Dad would know someone who could fix this?"

Ah. Then again, there was a reason beyond the obvious Kerry was where she was. "Tell you what." Dar said. "You call and ask him, and I'll keep these guys busy. Okay?"

"Got it." Kerry gave her a pat on the side and escaped, angling away from the oncoming crowd towards the terminal. Despite the suspicions that had suddenly erupted in her mind, she focused on this new plan anyway. If it turned out to be what she'd thought…

Well, they'd look good, at any rate.

* * *

The office was a definite refuge. Kerry slowly moved the cell phone around in a circle as she waited for Andrew to call her back. It was quiet in the room; she'd shut the door for

some privacy, and the only sound was the hum of the computers and the cycling of the central air.

She wondered how Dar was getting on out there with the press and their adversaries. Dar could easily handle anything this lot was likely to throw at her, but Kerry was bothered with a niggling sense that both she and her partner were missing out on one major clue in this whole crazy scene.

A soft chime caught her attention, and she swiveled around to review the screen on the pc next to her. Her mail inbox was up, and a new message was blinking placidly on the top line of it. Kerry clicked on it, seeing the name of their chief of security in the send column.

Inside, she found a terse recap of the breach from the other night, that had allowed the army woman to gain access to their systems. Kerry reviewed it, decided there was nothing new there she didn't know, then clicked on the attachment.

Another standard process, current background checks on the cleaning staff, the cleaning supervisor, and last but not least, their invasive little friend.

Curious, Kerry opened the last one and reviewed it. After a moment, she leaned forward and stared at the screen, her brow creasing over her fair eyebrows. "What the.." She read the first section again, and then went back up to make sure the name on the report was right.

She had expected the report to outline the woman's military background, of course. They wouldn't pull any records besides that from the government, but that would be there, plus any outstanding police activity.

But this report didn't show anything of the kind. There was no mention of the military at all. Kerry sat back. "Well, I know she's on the creepy side of the service.. but sheesh." She gazed in puzzlement at the report. According to what she was looking at, the woman was no more an Army officer than Kerry was.

In fact, it was hard to say what she was, aside from the fact that she'd gone to college for drama.

Drama?

Kerry scrolled down the report to where it listed clubs and affiliations. Thespians and Kiwanis. Could the security department have made a mistake? She scrolled back up and looked at the photograph pulled from the woman's driver's license record, and compared it to the shot they'd taken that night.

Well, given the usual horrendousness of government photos, it was the same woman. So, was her military career just completely obscured by it's secretive nature, or…

Or was it much simpler. Kerry clicked on the mail and forwarded it, typing in an address and a short, but very polite request. She sent it on it's way and closed the attachment. "Lets see where that gets us." She decided, then on a whim, opened another new message, this time to the security chief. "And, while we're at it, let's check out her boss."

She sent that request as well, and then settled back in her seat, moderately satisfied. "Something stinks like a three day dead mackerel here, and darned if I'm not going to find out what it is."

* * *

Dar and Michelle sat on the steps of the terminal, while the filming crew waited in the shade nearby. "So." Dar examined her kneecap. "What can I do for you?"

"Decided on civility for a change?" Michelle asked.

Dar chuckled mildly. "You come over here to ask me for something, and start off by insulting me. Ever consider maybe that's why you never get anywhere?"

Michelle sighed. "You bring out the bitch in me, Dar. What can I say?" She said. "You bring out the bitch in everyone."

"Not everyone."

"Ah, that's right." Michelle shifted and extended her short legs, crossing them at the ankle. She'd finally given up on the power suits, and was wearing crisply pressed black chinos that were sadly covered in dust and pier grime. "Your little missus. How could I forget? You do know everyone thinks she's just a pretty ornament of yours."

Dar realized Michelle was trying to piss her off. She wasn't sure exactly why, but she was determined not to let her succeed. It wasn't easy, however. "Yeah, most people do think that." She agreed. "Until they either get slam dunked by her or she saves their ass."

"Mmph." The red-haired woman grunted.

Dar waited a moment more, then retrieved a weed from between the cracks in the cement slabs and plucked its leaves contentedly. "So, let me ask again. What do you want?"

"I want to make a deal."

"Call Monty Hall. Maybe he'll let you squeeze by without a candle up your ass." Dar suggested. "Michelle, no deals. We're down to the last day of this damn charade… just let it play out."

Michelle appeared to consider this. She circled her knee with both arms and gazed out across the dusty parking lot. “I can’t just let it play out. I’m not going to be able to finish this thing without help. Your help.”

“My help?” Dar’s voice rose incredulously.

Michelle sighed. “It’s a bitch being so damn wonderful, isn’t it?”

“What in the hell do you need my help for?”

The red-haired woman half turned, her expression acknowledging the irony of the situation. “We can’t get that damn satellite working. The idiots who installed it have been at it for four days, and they’re just clueless. Their bosses are clueless. The people on the other end of the satellite are clueless. It just won’t work.”

Dar’s eyebrows crawled up her forehead to lodge somewhere near her hairline. “And you think I can?” She asked, with a slight chuckle.

“Yup. I do.” Michelle confirmed. “You got yours going. No one else has gotten that far yet.”

“No one?” Dar looked around the port, at the stolidly perched ships around it. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope. We had a big meeting last night. Don’t ask me why anyone thought it would be a good idea to get forty people who really disliked each other, and who’d been sitting in the hot sun all day in a room without gags, but we did.” Michelle reported. “With the cameras. Could only have been better television if you’d been there, trust me.”

Dar scratched her ear, momentarily at a loss. “Okay.” She let her hand rest on her knee. “So, you want me to come fix your satellite, so you can..”

“Finish. Beat you. Leave. Get the hell out of this mudbowl. Yes.” Michelle nodded. “Don’t worry. You’ll get full credit for it with the TV people. Starring role, they’ll get you on camera saving our asses. Great stuff.”

Dar got up and dusted her legs off. She was aware of the close scrutiny of the television people, and she suspected she was being filmed by the busy cameraman.

“C’mon Dar. I know there's an innate sense of fairness in there somewhere.” Michelle also got up. “You know this has been the worst of the worst. You know you can’t beat our pricing, because whatever it takes to get this bid, I’ll do it. You can lowball me, but everyone’s gonna know you did, because we all know how much it cost you to pull off that stunt yesterday, and all the rest of the bull crap this whole week. At least you come out of it with great press for being the hero. What do you say?”

"What do I say?" Dar repeated. A motion caught her attention, and she looked up to see Kerry exiting from the terminal, pausing, spotting her, and breaking into a jog in their direction. Something about her expression made Dar wait, and as she came closer she could see those green eyes snapping with indignation. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh?" Michelle looked up at her, puzzled, then she realized what Dar was staring at. She got up just as Kerry reached them. "Ah."

"Those piece of shit mother pluckers." Kerry stated as she came to a halt.

Dar blinked. "Um.."

Kerry turned and pointed at the television crew. "It's all been a fake, Dar."

"What?" Dar and Michelle both spoke at once.

"We're in a bloody twisted farce of Candid Camera." Kerry said. "It's all the television people. They're behind it. They're paying Quest off big time and that guy from the Army? He's an actor!"

"What?"

"He's an actor, Dar. So is that crazy woman I found in your office." Kerry said. "I just got a note from Gerry Easton.. he checked them out for me. They're no more Army officers than Chino is."

Dar put a hand on Kerry's shoulder. She could feel her partner's entire body shaking with outrage. "Are you saying this whole damn thing was staged?"

"Yes." Kerry said. "That's exactly what I'm saying. Those people were hired to break into our office and make a scene, Dar. That's why they didn't really know what went on there, and they couldn't explain what they were after."

Dar appeared thoughtful. "Huh."

Michelle grabbed her head with both hands. "Wait. Wait, Wait. This is nuts." She said. "This bid is real, those freaking ships are real…c'mon, now., Kerry."

Something clicked. "No." Dar put her hands on her hips. "It's not nuts. It explains a lot."

Michelle was still holding her head. "Well, maestro, then explain it to me, because I just don't get any of this at all."

Dar made a decision. She tapped Michelle on the shoulder. "C'mon." She said. "Let's go back into our office here, and have a chat. In private." She turned and headed back for the terminal, a still bristling Kerry at her side.

After a moment, Michelle followed, catching up to them on the steps and not looking back at the cameras even once.

* * *

"Okay, show me." Dar circled Kerry's desk chair and perched on the edge of the desk itself. "I've been kicking myself trying to figure out why nothing's been adding up."

Michelle took a seat at the next desk, and watched attentively.

"Here." Kerry clicked on her mail, then got up and got out of Dar's way as she slid into the mildly squeaking chair. She traded places, perching on the desk as her partner moved the mouse impatiently, scrolling through the long, and somewhat detailed messages. "Bloody little pissant buggers."

Michelle snorted softly. "You Midwestern repressed types."

"I got over that." Kerry replied, folding her arms over her chest. "I can't believe this crap. Didn't you pick up on the slimy fakeness – you guys have been in bed with those camera people for weeks."

"Damn." Dar shook her head.

"Well." Michelle crossed one leg over the other. "You know, Dar. I didn't really expect to find out that you're the nice one of your little partnership."

"Toldja." Dar muttered.

"Told her what?" Kerry asked. "Look, I'm sorry. It's been a lousy month, and a lousy week, and a lousy day. Finding this out at the end of it just sucks."

Dar reached over and patted Kerry's thigh. "Easy, Ker."

"Okay, so let me get this straight." Michelle changed course. "You're telling me that you think this whole deal is one big made for television melodrama?' Her tone was incredulous. "You do realize how insane that sounds, right?'

Dar sent the mail to the printer. "Yeah." She turned and leaned back. "Problem is, Ker's right. That Army captain who was hanging out with you all this morning's a fake. Got his security records right here."

"What was he doing here this morning?" Kerry suddenly asked.

Michelle drummed her fingers on the chair arm, the nails clattering softly against the padding. "He said he was evaluating the technology we were all using, on behalf of the

government." She admitted. "Sounded like something the military might do. After all, we all pretty high tech."

Dar snorted.

Michelle got up and peered over her shoulder. "Pardon me for being nosy."

Dar handed her the sheet from the printer. "Don't strain your eyes. Here."

"I have a headache." Kerry sighed. "Dar, I'm going to get a soda. You want?"

"Sure."

Kerry slid between the chairs and headed for the door, fishing coins from her front pocket as she left. Dar rummaged around in her mailbox for a few minutes, leaving Michelle to read the report in peace. She read Gerry's answer, hearing her old friend's gruff voice quite clearly in the words and reflecting that Gerry really had handled her coming out to him a lot better than she'd anticipated.

He'd seemed somewhat disappointed, but, she realized, it wasn't so much in her as in the fact that she and Gerry's son would never be getting married to each other. That touched Dar, because Gerry had always treated her like an adopted daughter, and when they'd been at odds over the Navy base she'd really felt it.

Even more so than with Chuckie.

Ah well. "So."

"So." Michelle wrinkled her nose. "Well, frankly, that actually does suck, Dar. Your Kerrison was right. This guy's fake as a perfect nose on South Beach." She tossed the report on the desk. "But I don't get it. You knew about him before this.. what's up with that?"

"You didn't think it was a little odd for him to show up?"

Michelle shrugged both shoulders, and made a face. "Given what we've had here the past week, with the EPA, and Customs, the police, immigration, the Coast Guard.. no, frankly. I didn't think it was strange at all, or at least, no stranger than anything else that's gone on here."

Michelle did have a point there, Dar had to concede. "He showed up at that damn show in Orlando." She paused, considering her words. "I thought he'd picked up on that security seminar I did."

Michelle snorted in mild amusement.

Dar got up and paced around the small office, restlessly wishing Kerry would return. “He wanted to buy out some new technology I was working on.”

“What a surprise.”

Dar turned. “He ended up getting someone to sneak inside our office, pretending to be a cleaning person.”

The red-haired woman laughed, covering her eyes. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No.” Dar went to the equipment rack and studied the machinery mounted in it. “Tried to put some pressure on us with that, saying it showed lack of security for the government..”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Well, not if there’s no government traffic going through the Miami office, no.” Dar remarked dryly as she turned and crossed her arms. “Apparently he forgot to do his homework. Anyway… I got him to back off, but the whole thing just didn’t make any sense.”

“Still doesn’t” Michelle got up and prowled after Dar. “I just can’t believe this whole thing’s a setup. It’s just impossible.”

Dar settled back against the desk and ticked off points on her fingers. “You have four ships.” She said. “All of them are wrecks.”

“Yeah, but, they’re being fixed over.” Michelle objected.

“Only on the surface.” Dar leaned forward a little. “Think about it. New carpet, new paint, new wallpaper.. same old engines, same old machinery, same old crappy plumbing.”

“Heard you had a problem with that.” Michelle smirked.

Dar looked at her.

“Okay.” Michelle held up a hand. “I get your point… so, they’re only doing cosmetic changes. So what?”

“So what?” Dar’s voice rose in incredulity. “What the hell do you think they’re going to do with the damn things when they’re finished with the frills? They can’t sail them in the US. They don’t meet maritime code, much less public health! They’ve got kettles in the kitchens older than I am!”

Michelle appeared puzzled. She folded her own arms. “You know that for sure?”

Dar rolled her eyes.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Navy brat.” The other woman said. “Okay, well, maybe Quest was going to do that next.. maybe he got funding to do the cosmetics first.”

The door opened and Kerry returned, bearing several bottles. One she handed over to Dar. “Cruickshank is outside, wanting to know where you two were. I kicked her out of the building.”

Dar examined her offering with interest. “Double fudge Yoohoo?”

“What?” Michelle started forward. “Hey, you shouldn’t piss that woman off.. you know she’s got all our asses on tape and she can… what the hell’s wrong with you, Stuart? You lost your mind or the vestiges of common sense you used to have?”

“Both are intact thanks, but then, I guess we weren’t being paid off by them so I have less to lose by being a meanie.” Kerry replied evenly.

Michelle stopped on the way to the door and looked at her. “Who told you that?” She demanded.

Kerry merely smiled, and took a sip of her soda.

“It’s not a payoff.” Michelle told her stiffly. “It’s an all access fee.”

Dar started laughing, almost spitting a mouthful of her delightfully chocolate beverage across the room.

“It is.” Michelle insisted. “They wanted twenty four hour access to us, well, they got it. But at a price.”

Kerry patted Dar on the back. “Easy, hon.” She was chuckling herself, though. “I guess that explains why we’re behind in this whole scheme… we’ve been chasing her ass away from us from day one.”

“Hey, it’s subsidizing the work.” The red-haired woman said. “It’s going to make *MY* bid pretty damn unbeatable, so you can stop laughing now, wonderkinder.” She headed for the door again, shaking her head.

Dar wiped her eyes. “Michelle, you ass. The bid’s a fake. What the hell difference does it make what your numbers are? You don’t get it. You’re not going to get a contract. There is no deal. It’s all for television!”

Michelle paused with her hand on the door latch. “You don’t know that.”

“We do, and you know it too. You’re not stupid.” Kerry said. “C’mon, Michelle. You called me on my common sense… where’s yours?”

Their erstwhile adversary stood in silence for a bit, her eyes flicking between them as she considered.

Dar and Kerry waited side by side, sipping their drinks and obvious in the solidarity of their partnership. “How is that?” Kerry inquired, indicating the bottle.

Dar offered her a taste, tipping the beverage to her lips.

“Mm.” Kerry considered. “Definitely chocolatier than the regular kind.”

“I like it.”

Michelle turned fully and leaned her back against the door. “You know something? You two are obnoxiously goopy.”

“Kiss my ass.” Dar replied pleasantly. “At least we don’t act like two biddies at a cockfight.”

Even Kerry blinked. “Pithy, sweetheart.” She bumped shoulders with Dar. “Very pithy.”

Dar shrugged. “Are we done posturing? You want to work with us to end this without everyone looking like jackasses, or do you want to leave?” She asked Michelle. “Pick one. But make it fast.”

Michelle definitely looked both tempted and very frustrated. It was an odd mixture on her face. “Why in the hell should I trust you?” She suddenly asked. “You could be just looking to screw me over.”

Ah. Good question. Dar took a mouthful of her soda, rolling it around a minute before she swallowed it.

“After all, wouldn’t it be to your advantage to have me suddenly back out of my deal?” Michelle asked shrewdly. “What if you’re the one who’s scamming, this time, and you’ve just fed me a lot of BS?”

Kerry put her drink down and walked over to Michelle. “Sure, we could be doing that.” She agreed, stopping just short of the other woman. “I could have made up that email, and we could be lying.” She put her hands on her hips. “But you know what, Michelle? We aren’t.”

“So you say.”

Kerry tilted her head and gazed down at her, enjoying the experience with a good deal of guilty pleasure. “Think about it. If what we’re saying is true, then the only purpose of what Quest did is to make all of us look like fools.”

It was apparent that the notion had occurred to Michelle, and her face twisted into a wry grimace. “That’s one interpretation of what could happen.” She answered. “However, hypothetically speaking, if this crazy story you came up with were true.. what do you intend on doing about it?”

Gotcha. Kerry smiled at her, with a touch of genuine warmth.

“And why would you want my cooperation?” Michelle added cannily.

“Because those television people made us the story.” Dar interjected from her spot across the room. “So if we’re going to get out of this without looking like crap, we’ve got to do it together.”

Michelle gave her a look of patent disbelief.

“Trust us.” Kerry said, catching her eye and holding it.

“You’ve got to be kidding”

“Trust us.” The blond woman repeated. “Or we’ll both end up screwed and you know it.”

Michelle studied those clear green eyes for a long moment. Then she turned and opened the door. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, I’d start looking for a plan b.” She left, and closed the door after her without looking back.

Kerry returned to Dar’s side and sat on the desk, kicking her feet out idly. “Do we have a plan b?”

Dar drained her bottle of Yoohoo. “Ker, we don’t even have a plan a yet.”

“Ah.”

“This changes every damn thing.”

“Yeah.”

“God damn it.”

* * *

They went outside, finding a place in the shade in front of the terminal where a stone bench and table were perched. Dar took a seat on the unevenly slanted bench and rested her elbows on her knees, gazing thoughtfully back at the ship as Kerry joined her.

For a little while, they just sat there together, watching the foot traffic pass in front of them. There was a slight breeze, enough for the heat to be not unbearable, and the soft sound of nearby crickets was almost soothing.

Kerry shifted a little, bringing her shoulder into contact with Dar's. She propped her chin up on her fists and rocked back and forth a trifle, swaying them both.

Dar turned her head, and then leaned over and gave Kerry a kiss on the top of her shoulder.

Kerry smiled, and rested her head against Dar's.

"Did you hear from dad?" Dar asked, after a few more quiet minutes.

"Not yet, no." Kerry replied. "But it was kind of a bizarre request, so maybe he can't find anyone."

"Maybe." Dar agreed. "Should we call him and tell him to stop looking?"

Kerry was quiet for a few breaths. "Well, I guess." She said. "There really is no point in doing this anymore. Is there? Can we just.. go home? What are we going to do, Dar?"

Dar stuck her lower lip out, then scrunched her face into a wry expression. "That's what I've been sitting here trying to figure out."

"Hm. Yeah, me too."

"I just have really no idea how to turn this around. What the hell are we going to do?" Dar asked. "Do we just call Quest over and say forget it? Call the press? Call the Marines? How do we get out of this without looking like total idiots?"

Kerry watched a snail make it's leisurely way across the concrete between her boots. "Well, we could play along with it."

"Bah."

"Yeah, my feelings too, but you did ask." The blond woman said. "I mean, if we did play along, and we got all our stuff done and all that, what's the worst that could happen? The television show would just show us doing what we do."

"Mmph." Dar grunted.

Kerry waited, but the look of stubborn disagreement didn't fade for her partner's face. She exhaled, understanding the emotion behind it. "Okay, so, what does blowing them out of the water get us?"

"Immense personal satisfaction." Dar replied in a decisive tone.

Kerry sighed. "Aside from that."

Dar was quiet for a minute, then she shifted. "It lets us turn the tables and not let it be seen that they pulled one over on us completely." She said. "Think about it, Ker. Here they all are, laughing their asses off at us behind our backs."

"Hm."

"So, does it look better for us to have them figured out, and play them in the end rather than be the ones who have to stand there like jackasses when they decide to reveal themselves?" Dar asked. "I think I'd feel a lot better about how this comes out, regardless of how it comes out, if I can salvage at least a little of my dignity."

Dar was right. Kerry could feel it, and she found herself nodding in agreement even before her partner stopped talking. "Okay, so where do we start?" She asked. "I don't think we should just come out and tell them we're on to them. Or should we?"

From a personal standpoint, Dar liked that idea. It meant the entire ordeal would be effectively over, and they could just go home. She really wanted that to happen, because frankly, the project was seriously getting on her nerves.

Unfortunately, Kerry did have a point, and she didn't think just blowing them out of the water was a good strategic idea either. Also, it didn't really satisfy her need for some revenge on Mr. Quest and his personal circus.

Ah well. "No, I don't think we should just spill their little story." Dar said. "Let's think about it a minute.. what's the purpose of what they did? To get a good piece of television, right?"

Kerry shrugged. "I suppose. Though a show about a bunch of geeks running wiring.. I gotta wonder what demographic that's aimed at, hon."

"Eh." Dar looked around. "Miami, sun, fun, bare-chested sailors, lesbians… probably be a hit." She remarked in a droll tone. "But the point is, they're hoping to get a fight to the finish, right? All of us going full out until midnight – maybe even a couple more cat fights along the way."

"Probably."

"So what if we all just cooperate and work together instead? Help each other to finish, so that everyone ends in a tie?"

Kerry looked at her. "Sweetheart, you know I love you with all my heart, but do you think you can really get all these people to do that?"

Dar shrugged. "I dunno. Haven't tried yet."

"Yeesh." Kerry rested her head against Dar's shoulder again. "Well, I guess we can give it a try… but if Michelle blows us off, that kind of blows that up, right?"

"Right. However." Dar nudged her.

Kerry looked up, and saw Michelle and Shari headed in their direction. "You think they're going to cooperate with us?"

Dar studied the oncoming women. "Possibly." She got up and ran her hands through her hair, then let them fall to rest on her hips as she waited for their adversaries to arrive.

Kerry got up and came to her side, but her cell phone rang as she did so. She opened it, and glanced at the caller ID. "It's dad." She murmured, before she answered it. "Hi, dad."

"Hello there, kumquat." Andrew answered. "You all doing all right?"

Kerry eyed the oncoming devilishly dykish duo. "Oh, fine, dad.. you? Have any luck?"

"Ah do believe I might have." Andrew sounded pleased with himself. "Got me a feller used to hang around on subs with me and he's willing to poke an eyeball at that damn thing."

"Great." Kerry said. "Are you coming over here?"

"Yeap, that we are. You by that concrete pillbox of yours?"

Kerry chuckled. "We're here. See you in a bit." She closed the phone hastily and cleared her throat, wondering what would be left on the steps when he got there, if anything could be judged by the look on Shari's face as she headed for Dar.

Left of Shari, of course.

"Well?" Dar asked, as Michelle and Shari stopped in front of them. She noted Shari's skeptical expression, but realized suddenly that other than that, the sight of her old lover no longer held the slightest emotional charge for her.

It was an interesting revelation, given the circumstances. It was seldom that Dar actually got to experience a moment of personal growth when it happened, but she was actually glad she'd gotten a chance to this time.

"Michelle's convinced this bullshit story of yours is true." Shari said, bluntly. "I think she's nuts, and I think you're a fucking liar." Like Michelle, she'd given up on business formal, but she'd opted for a canvas colored outfit that didn't show the dust quite as much.

"And you're here because?" Dar inquired.

"If you think I'm going to let you rob us of this bid, you're dead wrong, Dar." Shari warned. "I don't know what your game is this time, but I'm going to sink you, no matter what it is." She advanced and stuck a finger out, pointing it at Dar's chest. "You are not going to bullshit me or intimidate her. Got me!"

Dar waited for the shout to fade. She cocked her head to one side. "And you're here because?" She repeated mildly, allowing a hint of a smile to cross her lips.

Kerry folded her arms to prevent the temptation to whack Shari from getting the better of her.

"You're not listening to me." Shari took a step closer and this time, poked her finger right into Dar's chest.

"You're not saying anything intelligible." Dar replied. "But if you don't want to end up in Jackson, take that finger back."

Michelle sighed.

"You don't scare me." Shari scoffed, leaving her hand where it was.

"That's your problem." Dar reached up and fastened her fingers around Shari's wrist. "I should scare you." She tightened down suddenly, the tendons on her arm jumping.

"Jesus." Michelle started forward, only to have Kerry put a hand out and stop her.

Shari tried to pull her hand back, but found it wouldn't budge. The skin on it was starting to turn red, and as Dar's grip clenched down further, the veins popped out on it.

"Let me the fuck go." Shari yanked her arm back. It got her nowhere, but off balance. Dar's body didn't even quiver- her half extended arm stayed still as iron, the curve of her biceps very visible under her tanned skin.

Now, Dar stepped closer and pinned her with both icy eyes. "Now you listen to me." She growled softly. "You want to cut the crap? Fine. Cut the crap, Shari. Either you want to

cooperate with me, or you don't. If you don't, get out of here. If you do, then shut up, and just start being a part of the solution instead of a windbag excuse for a person that you are." She released Shari's arm and stepped back, and then she waited. "Choose. Now."

Kerry let her hand drop, and returned it to it's place across her chest as she waited also. There was nothing she could add to the situation, no words of wisdom that could help, or in fact, any words at all that could do anything productive, though she could come up with some that would probably degrade the confrontation to a fistfight.

Disconcertingly, she really wanted it to become a fistfight. She really wanted to punch Shari, and wipe that obnoxious look right off her face. It shocked her, a little.

Shari stared at her hand, which was still an angry red, with vivid marks where Dar's fingers had been. She looked back up at Dar's face, which was still and watchful and as serious as a heart attack.

"Just think." Kerry found herself speaking up anyway. "If what we're saying is right, and you cooperate with us, we all end up winning. If you don't.." She shrugged a little. "We'll win anyway."

Shari really looked like she was sucking a lemon. "What if you're lying?" She addressed Kerry, no longer looking at Dar at all. "How in the hell can I be sure you're not just taking us for a ride?"

Kerry smiled at her. "You can't. You just have to either trust us, or not. But if you look at the facts, I think you can see the truth. You're not stupid."

Michelle's nose wrinkled, and she rubbed her face with one hand.

Shari flexed her hand, then let it drop to her side. "All right." She finally said, in a quiet tone. "You're right. I'm not stupid, and I've been saying something's stank around here for a while now. I just thought it was you." She regarded Dar coldly. "But over the last day, I've started thinking something smells even worse than you do, and if I have to put up with you to find out what it is and kick it's ass, then I will."

A frosty silence fell. Kerry broke it by leaning over and sniffing Dar's neck delicately. "Different strokes for different folks, I guess. I love the way you smell." She remarked.

Dar puffed a bit of air into Kerry's bangs. "Thanks." She took a breath, letting her jangling nerves relax a bit. "Now that all the bullshit's over, I suggest we go somewhere not out in a public parking lot and figure out where we go from here."

"Good idea." Michelle finally chimed in. "Nothing South of the Mason Dixon is neutral territory, so why don't we go find an anonymous dive with enough table space to have a meeting at." She faced Dar. "I'd ask your other half to pick a spot, but the last time sucked."

Kerry had the grace to look mildly abashed. She clasped her hands behind her back, and gazed off into the sunlight.

Dar remained silent for a moment. “Not smart to go far.” She commented. “I know a place about ten minutes from here. It’s quiet, and there’s space to work.”

Shari looked suspicious, but Michelle nodded. “Sounds all right.” She agreed. “Directions?”

“Just follow us.” Dar laid a hand on Kerry’s back. “It’s our place.”

“Ah.” Michelle murmured. “Isn’t this just one of life’s bowls of cherries?” She took Shari’s arm as they followed. “And what kinds of pits are we getting ourselves into, hm?”

Shari snorted, but kept her mouth shut.

PART 30

"So." KERRY GLANCED SIDEWAYS AT HER BELOVED, IF SOMETIMES OBSCURE PARTNER. "This was a good idea, right?"

Dar looked into the rearview mirror, to where Shari and Michelle's car was parked right behind hers on the ferry. "I have no idea." She admitted. "It's just… Ker, if we're going to really do this, cooperate with them, I think we need to get all the bullshit out of the way first."

Kerry groaned. "Haven't we been getting bullshit since Orlando?"

The ferry rocked under them a bit as it traversed Government Cut. Dar tapped her thumbs on the steering wheel of the Lexus and watched the choppy water ahead of them. "Yeah, I know." She sighed. "But listen."

"I'm listening." Kerry tucked her legs up under her and leaned on the center console, resting her head against Dar's shoulder. She only just kept herself from checking the rearview, where she was sure her comfy position was being noticed behind them.

Dar nuzzled Kerry's hair, nibbling at a few strands, and planting a kiss on the top of her head.

Kerry waited for a few seconds, then she cleared her throat. "I'm listening." She repeated.

"Huh?"

"Dar."

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” Dar said. “The way I see it, the only chance we’ve got to turn this thing around is to take away their big ending.”

“Huh?”

“They want this big penultimate finish, right?” Dar stopped speaking, as she felt Kerry’s breath against her ear. “Ker?”

“Yeees?”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Every word, hon.” Kerry reassured her. “They want a big finish. You’re right. They figure we’ll dog and cat fight to the very end, scrabbling to get everything done.”

“Right.”

“So we’re… going to do what?” Kerry asked, as the ferry nosed up to it’s dock and the ramp started to lower. “I mean, we are done, right? So do we win by default?’

Dar let her head lean against her partner’s. “No, because we haven’t shown Quest anything.”

“So?”

Reluctantly, Dar straightened up. “Time to roll.” She put the Lexus in gear and steered it carefully up the ramp and through the solicitous water spray that removed the salt from the front of the vehicle. “Let’s see how it goes with them.” She said. “I’ve got a sort of idea, but it’s still raw at the moment.”

“I like raw.” Kerry remained where she was, even though the car was now in motion. “Tell me what you’re thinking, Dar. I hate having to sit there wondering what’s going on.”

Thus prompted, Dar cleared her throat. “Michelle told me they can’t figure out how to get their satellite up. She wanted to pay me to do it.”

Kerry started giggling.

“Yeah, it was pretty funny.” Dar chuckled along with her. “But it gave me an idea.. what if we all decided to help each other?”

“Um.”

"We've got no power. She's got no satellite. From what I hear, Mike's network backbone won't come up. Instead of fighting, what if we all worked together?" Dar asked. She turned into the complex that held their condo, rolling down the window and pointing at a visitor's spot as she headed for her own.

"You mean.. make it a tie?" Kerry's brow creased. "How does that work out, Dar? Who wins?"

"No one." Dar turned off the engine. "Kerry, remember this is all a farce. Who really loses is the television people. They're the ones driving this."

"Hm." Kerry opened the passenger door and hopped out. "Okay. Yeah, I lost track of that. I'm still in that 'win the bid' mode." She waited for Dar to come around the side of the car, and then they both waited as Shari and Michelle came up the drive to where they were standing. "Go for it." She added, softly. "I'll be in there hanging with you."

Dar put a hand on Kerry's back, her thumb rubbing the blond woman's shoulder blade. "I'm counting on that." She straightened a little as their two adversaries approached.

"Okay." Michelle said, briefly. "We're here."

"Inside." Dar turned and headed for the steps. Kerry stepped back and gestured Michelle and Shari forward politely, following them as they all trooped up to the door.

Dar coded it open, and walked inside, pushing the door back to allow the rest of them to enter. "Watch out for the dog." She cautioned, as Chino bounded up to greet them.

"Ugh." Shari backed up rapidly. "I'm not into dogs."

Ah. Now doesn't that just figure? Kerry continued inside the condo and sat down on the loveseat, allowing Chino to squirm around and greet her. "C'mere Cheebles… who's my sweetie?" She ruffled the Labrador's ears.

Dar closed the door and stood there a moment, apparently trying to decide what of her few social skills she'd try to engage next. "Siddown." She compromised between practicality and grudging politeness. "I'll put some coffee on."

Michelle and Shari took a moment to look around, before they took spots on the couch next to each other.

It wasn't a comfortable moment. Kerry could seldom remember being so uncomfortable in her own living room, in fact. She sat back and regarded the two women, watching their eyes roam around the space in wary curiosity.

They'd worked very hard to keep the entire situation out of their personal space, and now they'd brought it right into the center of their private world and Kerry suddenly realized she hadn't been prepared for it. "So."

"So." Michelle rose to the social occasion. "Nice place." She peered at the walls. "Someone takes decent shots."

"That would be me." Kerry sprawled out a bit on the loveseat. "Thanks." She responded graciously. "I like our cabin down south better, though. Less busy." She smiled. "But the view's nice here."

Shari looked like she'd swallowed a lemon. She edged back as Chino wandered over to investigate her, jumping as the dog sat down and barked. "What does it want?"

"Relax." Michelle advised her. "I don't think those kind bite."

"All dogs bite." Kerry cheerfully contradicted her. "But Chino's pretty peaceful, unless you piss her off."

"Like you?" Michelle inquired, with a smile.

Kerry considered that. "Something like it." She agreed. "Yeah. We can both be bitches when we have to be."

Shari got up and moved away from where Chino was sitting. She circled the room, examining the art, and the pictures on the entertainment center. "Guess old Dar is lucky you took her in." She commented, giving Kerry a bitingly sarcastic smile over her shoulder. "Nice of you."

Curiously, Kerry didn't find herself getting angry. She lifted her hand and rotated her finger in a circle. "Other way round." She disagreed. "This is Dar's place."

"Not any more." Dar entered from the kitchen. "You own half." She barely spared Shari a glance as she perched on the arm of the loveseat. The scent of brewing coffee wafted into the living room, attesting to her kitchen industry. "CIO's of multinational corporations don't live in two room rentals."

Shari turned and regarded her. "Oh, right. I forgot you weren't white trash anymore."

Dar's eyes narrowed. "Go to hell."

Michelle sighed audibly. "Okay, tell you what." She put on a voice very much like that of a game show hostess. "Dar, I'm sure.. in fact, I'd bet on the fact that you have some boxing gloves somewhere in a closet here."

Dar's brow creased. "And?"

“Get them.” Michelle stood up. “Because we’re going to have you two put them on and just get this adolescent whore bitch issue between you out and over with because I AM OVER IT!” She yelled the last three words at full volume. “GROW THE FUCK UP ALREADY!”

Silence fell when she was done. Chino sneezed, and trotted over to press herself against Kerry’s leg.

Shari remained where she was, staring at Michelle in shock.

Kerry slowly turned and studied Dar, looking her over from head to foot. “Well.” She finally broke the silence. “I think Dar’s about as grown up as she’s going to get in this lifetime, so I guess I’d better go get the gloves.” She patted her lover’s knee. “This won’t take long, sweetie.” Her impish grin took any sting from the words. “Try to aim away from the big screen, okay?”

Dar shifted and took a seat on the couch next to Kerry. “Nah.” She extended her legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Michelle’s right. Let’s be grown ups for a change.” She tipped her head back to look at Shari. “So, sit down and let’s save the insults for later.”

Kerry got up. “I’ll grab the coffee.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Shari stubbornly remained standing for a bit, examining the pictures on the shelves. Then she went back to the long couch and sat back down. “All right.” She didn’t look at Michelle. “Let’s get this over with. What’s your scam, Dar? Just lay it out.”

“Okay.” Dar extended one long arm along the back of the loveseat. “Here’s the deal. None of us is finished with this god damned charade.”

“Not what I heard.” Shari interrupted, but in a mild tone. “Michelle said you were done.”

“We are.” Dar agreed. “But we can’t demo anything because we have no power.”

Shari nodded. “Bad luck.”

Dar shrugged. “Bad luck? At this point, knowing what I know.. I’d be surprised if it was any kind of luck. My guess is someone on the ship was paid off to throw a wrench in.”

Michelle got up, a restless energy emerging. “You really think so?”

“I do.” Dar stroked Chino’s fur. “I think the goal was, to keep everyone even to the very end, then have it be a horse race to finish.”

Michelle paced around, pausing at the entertainment center to look at the pictures also. "Quest." She turned. "He told us explicitly not to ask or try to stay on the ships when they left. Did he tell you?"

"No." Dar shook her head. "Never said a word."

"Wait.." Shari leaned forward. "What did you have to give up to stay on?"

"Dinner." Dar replied.

"What?" Michelle turned and stared at her.

"Dinner." Kerry returned from the kitchen, bearing a tray with a coffee pot, cups, and a plate of cookies. She set the tray down on the table and knelt next to it, fixing cups for herself and Dar. "That's all they wanted. A good meal, and some alcohol."

Shari sat back, ignoring the coffee service. "Mike said he could have sworn someone cut his fiber." She said.

"And Albert told one of my guys they were making great progress until someone broke into a container and stole some switches." Michelle added. "Holy hell."

"Mm." Kerry handed Dar her cup and sat down next to her. "It's been like that. One step forward, two steps back."

"And all of it with those damn cameras…" Michelle added. "You could really be on to something, Dar."

"Gee, thanks." Dar replied. "Glad those several billion brain cells ILS pays a premium for turned out to be good for something after all."

Shari fell silent. She edged forward and took a cup, keeping her attention on the coffee as she poured herself some.

Michelle tapped her thumbs together pensively. "Okay." She finally said. "So let's put the cards on the table. I thought it was a little strange that the filming people latched onto us, but I wasn't about to turn away that kind of publicity. They wanted angles, I gave them angles. They wanted controversy, I gave them that, too."

Shari snorted a little.

"So now we're caught." Michelle got up and walked over to where Dar and Kerry were sitting. "Either we blow you off and play their game, and look like idiots when they reveal everything, or we cooperate with you in some unknown plan of yours that might, or might not be on the level."

"Not only that." Dar smiled. "You're going to help us get the rest of them onboard too."

Michelle put her hands on her hips. "Maybe Kerry should get those gloves." She remarked. "I've got a black belt."

"I've got a shotgun." Kerry replied. "So why don't we table the issue, and hear what Dar's got in mind, because frankly, I've had it up to here with being manipulated." She held a hand up near her forehead.

Shari snorted again, and shook her head.

Michelle turned and selected a sugar cube, placing it between her teeth and crunching it. "All right." She agreed. "Let's hear it."

Dar leaned back, and smiled.

* * *

"You are insane." Shari said. "I always knew that, but you've just proved it. How in the hell are we supposed to pull this off?"

Dar had left the cozy sanctuary of the loveseat and was pacing back and forth near the sliding glass doors. "The filming people are expecting a showdown." She repeated for the third time. "That's what they've based this whole deal on. David and Goliath. A battle for the bid, with Quest dangling either carrots or daggers over our heads."

"Yeah. So?"

"So, what we want to do is turn the story around and make it what we want. Not what they want." Dar said.

"Do we?" Michelle was munching on some pretzels Kerry had brought out. "Wouldn't it be easier just to play along with them? If it's all bogus, who cares?"

"Sure." Kerry had taken over the loveseat, and was laying across it, with her feet up. "It would be a hell of a lot easier even if we just all left the pier, and let them wander around looking for us and wondering where we all are."

"Now, I like that idea." Shari said.

"Actually, so do I." Michelle agreed. "I bet they're looking for us now. Wonder if anyone saw us leaving together."

Dar inspected the late afternoon sunlight gilding the water outside. Was it a better idea to do as Kerry said? It got them out of the situation, and hell, she didn't even have to go

back out there. The idea of Quest and the television team standing there bewildered actually really did appeal to her.

Hm.

"Yeah." Dar leaned on the glass. "But it really doesn't get us any satisfaction, does it?" She turned and faced them, her hands behind her back. "After what Quest put us through, don't you want to see him get his?"

Michelle leaned back. "You want to hear the absolute truth?" She said. "Sure. I'd like to see him dumped into the ocean off that pier, and wave bye bye as he floats out to sea."

Dar crossed the room and perched on the arm of the loveseat. "So then the plan is, we get everyone together." She ticked a finger off. "We find out what needs to be done, and do it." She ticked another finger off. "We coordinate it so we all finish at the same time."

"Okay." Shari folded her arms. "So let's say we do that. We all finish. Then what? How does that get back at Quest?"

"He's counting on there being one winner, and the rest losers. If we all win, he has to pay for all four jobs." Kerry said, quietly. "And that has nothing to do with the filming. That's in the contract."

Shari looked at Michelle. Michelle looked at Shari. Both of them made identical thoughtful grunts.

"And, if we all work together, the filming people don't get their story. That means.. " Kerry smiled. "I bet Quest doesn't get the publicity he was banking on."

"Exactly." Dar ruffled Kerry's hair, bemused by the fact that her partner had picked up on her plan without even knowing the details beforehand. Kerry looked up at her, lifting her eyebrows slightly. Dar grinned, and winked. "Nice summation."

"Thanks." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "Do I get a cookie for that?"

"Absolutely." Dar got up and headed for the kitchen, glad to be out of the intense scrutiny at least for a moment. She figured it would take a while for Michelle and Shari to decide what to do, so she took her time rummaging in the cupboard for just the perfect cookie to bring Kerry.

She had a lot to choose from. Dar gazed at the selection Orange Milanos? Traditional chocolate chip? Some grahams and milk?

"Hon?" Kerry appeared at her elbow and circled her waist with both arms. "Whatcha doing?"

“Picking cookies for you.” Dar replied. “Did you give our guests some space?”

“Uh huh.” Kerry said. “I sent them out onto the porch. You think they’ll go for it?” She rubbed her cheek against Dar’s shoulder blade and exhaled, enjoying the pleasure of the feel of Dar’s body within her grasp.

Dar selected a bag of key lime, white chocolate, and macadamia nut cookies. She closed the cabinet and turned within Kerry’s arms, draping her own over her partner’s shoulders. “I don’t know.” She said. “Still a lot of hard feelings there.”

“Mm.”

“I was tempted to just go with your idea.”

Kerry chuckled softly. “As I was saying it, so was I.”

Dar gave her a quick hug, then stepped back. “Milk.” She said. “How about we go sit on the couch and make a spectacle of ourselves when they come back in.”

“How about I hide a dog biscuit in the couch where Shari was sitting and watch the fun when she comes back?”

“You’re a rascal sometimes, you know that?”

“Bet your pooters I am.”

* * *

“This is insane.” Shari shook her head.

“I know.” Michelle agreed. She leaned on the railing and gazed out over the water. “But we knew something was going on. You’ve been saying that all week. It was just all too over the top.”

Shari nodded. “I thought she was at the bottom of it all, Still not sure if she’s not somehow..”

Michelle sighed and dropped her head.

“Look, I know you think I’m off my rocker when it comes to Dar. Maybe I am.” Shari turned and looked at her. “But you don’t know her like I do and..”

“Stop.” Michelle held a hand up. “Shari, lets be honest. Do you really think the person inside that million dollar bit of concrete is the same person you knew in college?”

Shari turned and looked back through the glass doors. Inside, she could see Dar walking back in from the kitchen with Kerry next to her, their arms draped around each other.

She tried to remember, really, what Dar had been like back then. Awkward and rough around the edges, definitely. Almost anti-social and cocky as all get out. Sexy, in a very primal way that had appealed to Shari back then, but with an overwhelming complexity of character she had no idea what to do with.

Some things hadn't changed. Dar still had that earthy sensuality about her, but the awkwardness of youth had been replaced with a rock solid self confidence and while she suspected Dar still wasn't a social butterfly she handled herself in a far different way now than she had back then.

Back then, Dar's blunt honesty had scared Shari. She'd been faced with the potential deepening of a relationship she didn't really know if she'd wanted at all, and her reaction had been…

Okay, she knew she'd been harsh. What she hadn't expected was to have that be it. The end. Dar had walked out, and she'd never come back. Shari had tried to call her a few times, but never gotten an answer, and eventually, she just found someone else to go with, and tried to forget.

The next time they'd met, she was being fired and she'd taken away the knowledge that one thoughtless brush off on her part had come back to bite her in the ass when she'd least expected it. She'd been so sure Dar would never amount to anything, hadn't she?

Well.

"I think she's the same person, yeah." Shari finally said. "I just have no idea who that person was now way back then."

Michelle pondered that, as she peered through the glass. Kerry was wrapped up in Dar's arms on the couch, and was indulgently feeding her cookies and milk. It was insanely precious. It was sappy. It was disgustingly romantic.

She sighed. Damn, Kerry was one lucky woman. "Okay. So what the hell are we going to do?"

"We go with them." Shari said, bluntly. "Because we have no real goddamn choice, and you know it. At least if we play into what Dar's up to, we come off looking like we have at least six brain cells between us."

"True." Michelle agreed ruefully. "I hate looking like an idiot. And you know what? That goddamn Cruickshank played us like a pair of first class ones. I think she really had the hots for her." Michelle pointed at Dar.

Shari rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t everyone? Jesus Christ I am so tired of hearing every walking dick on that damn port talk about her. You’d think they’d caught a clue already she’s gay and given the hell up.”

“Mm. Well, let’s go and get this rolling.” Michelle tabled the discussion. “I think we need to have a frank discussion with our new colleagues and put a few truths on the table. I don’t mind working this charade with them, but I want to know exactly where we stand first.”

“Right.” Shari agreed. “Let’s clear the air.”

Michelle stopped in mid-step and turned. “Does that mean you’re going to cut out the bitch for a while? I think if you do, she will.”

“Me? You’re the one who offered to put gloves on in there.” Shari snorted. “And do yourself a favor and don’t’ wave that belt of yours in front of her. She’s got a couple of her own and she didn’t learn to fight in a gym.”

Michelle shrugged. “She doesn’t scare me.” She started to pull the sliding glass door open. “Now.. on the other hand, Stuart I wouldn’t turn my back on.” She cut the last word off as she stepped inside and gave Dar and Kerry a brief smile. “All right. We’re in.”

“Good.” Dar licked a few crumbs off her lips. “Then let’s get back to the pier. We don’t have that much time.”

“Fine.” Michelle looked at Kerry. “Why don’t’ you ride with me, and Shari can ride with Dar, and hopefully, when we get to the pier, everyone will be alive and capable of working together.”

Kerry felt Dar’s entire body tense. She sorted through her possible polite responses, discarded them, and went on to the rude ones.

Dar forestalled her, however. “All right.” She gave Kerry a pat on the thigh. “Let’s go.” There was only a touch of resignation in her tone. “Get this over with.”

Kerry got up reluctantly, wondering if she could figure out a way to sneak Chino into Dar’s car.

Just in case.

* * *

If it was going to happen, at least it was happening on her turf. Dar settled her sunglasses onto her nose as she started up the car, watching Kerry reluctantly enter the passenger side of Michelle’s rental.

Kerry did not like it. Every line in her body explicitly spoke about how much she didn't like it. Dar found it a little funny, and more than a little comforting to see her partner's visible agitation on her behalf, and it formed a warm, friendly sensation in the pit of her stomach.

The passenger door to the Lexus opened, and Shari climbed in warily, closing the door with the same reluctance as Kerry had displayed only a moment ago.

In that moment, Dar realized something. She realized that Shari was more intimidated by their being in the same space than she was, and once she'd realized that, everything changed. She relaxed into the leather of the driver's seat and put the SUV in gear, backing it out carefully and turning for the outer road and the ferry. "So."

Shari glanced at her, then looked back out the side window. "So." She repeated. "Looks like you got what you wanted."

Dar turned into the ferry dock, and pulled up in line to wait for the next boat. "That was the goal." She leaned her knee against the door and rested her arm on it.

Shari made a small, rude noise. "You know something, you really are an asshole."

Ah, at least the beating around the bush would stop now. "Sometimes." Dar agreed. "When I have to be." She finally turned and regarded Shari through her dark lenses. "But you knew that."

"I knew that." Shari confirmed. "When do you intend on letting blondie in on your little secret?"

Dar chuckled. "Kerry saw that side of me first." She said. "She was a part of a consolidation I did."

"Guess she slept with you, so she kept her job, hm? Pity you didn't give me that option." Shari replied caustically. "I'd have given you a roll to avoid that round of resumes."

Dar regarded a seagull circling around the security kiosk, searching for dropped tidbits. "Kerry was worth keeping." She finally said. "You weren't."

"Fuck you too."

It only made her smile. "You're assuming it was personal. The fact is." Dar faced her, tipping the sunglasses down to expose her eyes. "I needed more marketing bullshit artists about as much as I needed a case of the hives."

The ferry pulled in, and Dar put the Lexus into drive, as the ramp started down.

“You’re so full of shit. Business decision? Give me a break, Dar.” Shari replied heatedly. “You enjoyed every damn minute of canning me.”

Dar steered the car onto the ferry, taking the last position on the first lane. She set the parking break to give herself a moment to collect her thoughts. “Sure I did.” She answered. “But the fact is, your position was redundant.”

“Bullshit.”

Dar shrugged.

“You just fired me because I blew off your little declaration of love.” Shari said. “So don’t pull that crap with me, Dar. Lucky for little Stuart she was more receptive.”

Strangely, it didn’t even hurt anymore. “Know what your problem is, Shari?” Dar lazily watched as the next line of cars filled up, her brows lifting as Michelle’s rental pulled in even with them and parked, despite the fact that they’d been right behind Dar, and should have been at the front of the next line.

How had Kerry arranged **that?**.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.” Shari answered sarcastically.

“You’re a bigger asshole than I am.” Dar lifted a hand and waved at Kerry, who waggled her fingers back, then circled her thumb and first finger in an OK gesture and raised her eyebrows. Dar made the same gesture, then twitched her head slightly in Shari’s direction, and switched to a lifted middle finger instead.

Kerry started laughing, inaudible behind the glass.

“Well, I’ve.. “ Shari started.

“You’ve been trying to get me back since then. Give it up.” Dar advised her. “I don’t give a shit. There’s nothing you can do to me, including take over fucking ILS that I would give two cents for.” She turned and faced her again. “Do you understand me?”

Shari stared at her. “No.” She said. “I never understood you. You’re from god damned Mars.”

Dar was unable to stop from producing a wicked smile. “That must make you from Uranus.” She drawled pleasantly. “Are we done now?”

Shari glared at her in silence.

* * *

"So." Michelle sniffed reflectively. "Hard as we tried to kill each other, here we are."

"Here we are." Kerry agreed. "In the middle of the biggest piece of horse poop I think I've ever seen in my life."

Michelle digested that. "You know what? That's true." She agreed. "I've been part of some really screwed up deals before, but this one's in a class by itself."

And that was definitely the truth. Kerry ordered her thoughts and tried not to give in to the urge to open the car door and climb into Dar's Lexus instead. She could see Dar's shoulders from where she was, and they seemed relatively relaxed.

She hoped things were going okay. It was so hard for her to judge where Dar's head space was right now.

"And, your little tricks didn't make it any easier." Michelle added.

"My tricks?" Kerry looked at her. "I don't know what you're talking about.. unless you mean Andy." She said. "And that wasn't a trick. It was just insurance."

Michelle laughed. "Okay. So – let's just say you putting a ringer into the loading crew was… insurance."

"He did a good job, didn't he?" Kerry countered.

"That's not the point.:" Michelle sounded a bit testy now.

"It is the point. He did exactly what they were paying him to do." Kerry said. "And while he was there, he found out about your dirty tricks for us."

"My dirty tricks?"

"What are you calling putting in duplicate orders?" Kerry asked. "And what are you calling trying to prevent deliveries to our ship?"

Michelle studied the passing cargo yards. "That was strategy."

Kerry snorted. "Strategy my ass."

"Insurance my ass." Michelle countered. "Shall we count that as even?"

Should they? Kerry allowed that the two tricks pretty much counteracted each other. "All right. Fair enough." She decided. "What about all the rumors being spread around our office?"

Michelle shrugged. "Shari's idea."

"Why?"

"She figured she could knock Dar off balance if she caused trouble between you two."

Kerry felt herself getting a little lightheaded with anger. Her breathing quickened, and she felt her hands start to twitch, the fingers of them curling unconsciously into fists as they rested on her denim clad thighs. "That's something I'll never write off." She stated quietly.

Michelle looked at her, in some surprise. "Just talk. You must get that."

Kerry took a breath, and then released it. "Oh, sure, we do." She said. "But it's not the talk. It was the intent." Slowly, she turned and rested her elbow on the console between the seats, looking directly into Michelle's eyes. "I couldn't give a damn about this business. About this bid, or about you."

Michelle blinked

"But if you or she ever do anything ever again that's meant to try and destroy our relationship, I'll come after you, and they'll have to arrest me to stop me." Kerry's voice was dead serious. "Am I coming through loud and clear here?"

"You're threatening me?" Michelle sounded incredulous.

"Yes." Kerry answered. "And it's not idle."

"You realize how that sounds, don't you?"

Kerry nodded. "If you think I'm crazy, you're right. I am." She said. "Dar means that much to me."

Michelle cocked her head, her eyes searching Kerry's face with a new interest. "You know something? That's the one thing we really didn't count on." She said. "And I should have. All along, I wanted to believe that you were just like we were."

It was Kerry's turn to look surprised.

"Two dykes, with a common business motive." Michelle clarified. "Who also like hot sex." She added. "But that's not what you two are about at all."

"Um.. well, actually.." Kerry found herself blushing.

Michelle pursed her lips. "I apologize for the scuttlebutt. That was dirty."

Progress, at last. "Thanks." Kerry said.

Michelle was quiet for a second. “Now you can apologize to me for bugging our offices,”

“Huh?”

“Stealing our client list?”

Kerry cocked her head in puzzlement. “We didn’t.” She spluttered. “I thought you did that to us!”

They both folded their arms and stared at each other.

* * *

They had, apparently, run out of insults and for a few minutes the ride across the water was quiet. If she looked to her left, Dar could see the ships squatting at their piers, and she wondered what they’d find when they got there.

Chaos? Definitely. Her cell phone rang, and she checked the id before she answered it. “Hi, dad.”

“’Lo there, Dardar.” Her father answered. “Got us some good news.”

“Yeah?”

“Feller here, he got the juice on.”

Ah. Dar gazed at the oncoming ferry dock. “Great.” She said. “I’m on my way over.”

“See ya.” Andrew hung up, with a soft echo of voices fading as his did.

Dar folded her phone up and set it on the center console. She hit the window switch and opened her window, leaning her elbow on the sill as Kerry did the same. “Dad.” She said briefly. “They’re good to go.”

“Ah.” Kerry said. “Does that change our plan?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Kerry pulled her head back inside the car. “See you in a few.”

Dar closed the window and leaned back. She pondered a moment, then she turned her head and looked at Shari. “We have power.”

Shari looked back at her warily. “So does that mean the deal’s off? You kept us distracted long enough to get what you wanted, I guess.”

“No.” Dar shook her head. “Doesn’t change anything.” A faint, quirky smile appeared. “I just wanted you to know if I really wanted to end this right now…” Pale blue eyes peeked from behind the wraparound shades. “I could.”

Shari folded her arms over her chest. “Fuck you.”

Dar’s smile spread into a charming Cheshire imitation. “Had you chance once. I’ve developed a sense of taste since then.”

Shari’s face twitched.

“At any rate.” Dar relented, deciding there was just so much fun she could stand at any particular moment. “That’s one boat we don’t have to worry about completing. We can concentrate on the other three.” She watched through the window as the ferry docked, glad of her sunglasses as they turned and faced almost due west.

Shari stared at the angular profile, at a loss on how to counter the mixture of cool business and sarcasm Dar was putting out. What else could she say that she hadn’t already? For a month she’d been digging at Dar, poking and prodding and savaging her every chance she got.

It had gotten her exactly no where. For all the time she’d spent with the reporters, smearing Dar’s character, her reputation, and anything else she could think of – here she was at the end of the god damned project and the bitch had still come out on top.

What the hell?

What the freaking hell? She suddenly realized that even if Dar lost the bid, lost the publicity, and lost the business, she’d still come out on top because her god damned son of a bitch charisma would just make everyone not give a flying crap.

God damn it.

God DAMN it.

She glared at Dar, who remained immune to her scathing thoughts, apparently relaxed and content with whatever was going through her mind, her fingers drumming lightly against the steering wheel. One finger held a ring, and for the first time she looked at it, close enough to see the details.

It was a beautiful piece of jewelry that screamed expensive, but in a refined and understated way. Purchased, she was sure, by the well bred Midwestern bitch in the next car who had certainly been born with several silver spoons shoved up her ass.

She'd tried very hard to sell Cruickshank on the idea that Kerry was sleeping with Dar for her career. On the surface, it made perfect sense. But watching Dar's little bedmate work over the last few weeks made even Shari grudgingly accept that if she wanted to go anywhere else, she could.

Work anywhere else. Live anywhere else. Sleep with anyone else.

Then she'd tried to convince the reporter that Dar was a little psycho, who possessively dominated the smaller woman and abused her.

Why? That was what Cruickshank had asked.

Because Dar was a psycho. Shari had seen enough of her as a young woman to know that. She had a cold, vicious side to her that had scared the crap out of a lot people when they'd gone to school together. Raised on a military base, poor, anti-social…

Dar started whistling softly under her breath, a gently melodic sound that broke Shari's mental conversation with herself. She had her head turned away from Shari, and in the reflection from the window her expression was visible as she looked over at the other car.

Something had changed. Shari shifted and turned the other way, staring out her own window as the ferry ramp started to lower. Or maybe Dar had simply grown up and out of her past.

Maybe the reporter had been right. Shari had thought she was simply stupid.

Now she was faced with the realization that there was no way she was going to beat Dar. Not in any realm. So. Screw it. Time to get out of this piece of shit situation with anything she could. "Dar."

"Yes?" Dar turned her head, her pale eyes safely hidden behind her shades.

"Truce." Shari held up a hand. "I'm over it. If this is going to happen, let's just have it happen, and get it over with." She worked at keeping any sarcasm or sting out of her voice.

Dar started the Lexus, remaining silent for the length of time it took her to release the parking brake and put the car into gear. The offer of a truce didn't fool her any, she knew all Shari wanted was to avoid any more of her wit until she was far enough away to pitch a grenade at her.

But, Dar believed in taking whatever advantage was offered to her, and having some peace and quiet would definitely be an advantage. "All right." She said. "Truce."

Shari seemed a little surprised, but she shrugged it off and leaned back as they rolled off the ferry.

It remained to be seen, of course, just how long it would last.

* * *

"So, what was that all about?" Michelle asked, as Kerry rolled the window back up. "Or do you two talk in code regularly just to piss people off?"

Kerry leaned back in her seat, stifling a yawn. "Oh, sure. We talk in code. Sometimes Dar builds a fire on her desk and sends me smoke signals, if she's really bored."

Michelle eyed her suspiciously. Kerry had extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles, and she didn't appear to be considering being any more forthcoming than that. The blond woman's eyes were hidden behind silvered sunglasses and it was very hard for Michelle to tell exactly what it was she was up to.

Maybe she'd be better off not knowing. She decided to return to their prior conversation instead. "So. You didn't put someone inside our company. That what you're saying?"

"Wasn't us." Kerry agreed. "Now. You tell me about anything you might have left behind in our offices, after that meeting."

Michelle started the car, her brow furrowed. "Excuse me?"

So. Had Dar been right all along? "We found something inserted into our network after you all left. A piece of spying technology."

"Really?" Michelle sounded fascinated. "What'd it get for.. whoever it was?"

A smile. "Nothing." Kerry chuckled. "Dar found it."

"Wasn't us."

Kerry nodded. "Dar didn't figure it was.. she said it was too sophisticated." Zing. "But with everything happening all at the same time, it was a tough call."

They followed Dar's Lexus off the ferry and started towards the pier. "Well, after we found out about your little trick with Dar's father, believe me, lots of things occurred to me to get back at you." Michelle admitted frankly.

"Like getting our pier supervisor to quit?"

"Huh?" Michelle darted a look at her. "I said occurred. I didn't say I did any of them."

Was Michelle telling the truth? Kerry had a feeling she was.

“And after that phone line scam.” Michelle added suddenly. “Not to mention that bait and switch ploy at what you jokingly called a restaurant.”

Kerry sighed, lifting one hand and propping her head up with it, her elbow resting against the car window sill. “It’s pointless for me to bother saying neither of those were planned, isn’t it?”

Michelle snorted. “You’re seriously expecting me to believe you didn’t take up four telephone lines on purpose?”

“No, I did.” Kerry said, jumping a little as a cab nearly cut them off. “I just didn’t know they were the last pairs out of that CO. I put them in every terminal because those bastards wouldn’t assign any specific one to a specific ship.”

Michelle thought about that for a few minutes. “Hmph.”

“Sorry.” Kerry said. “Honestly, at this point, if I’d done it to screw you, I’d just say so. What’s the point in not?”

“Hmph.” Michelle wrinkled her nose. “So you’re telling me you and Blackbeard the pirate over there are total innocents? C’mon.”

Kerry’s lips quirked. “We’re not.” She admitted. “

“Hah.”

“We scared the crap out of you both in the Living Seas.”

Michelle almost stopped the car. “What??”

“Dar and I were diving in the tank.”

Luckily, a red light was at hand. Michelle turned and stared at her. “Are you serious?”

Kerry nodded. “Yeah.” She said. “But other than that, honestly, Michelle – we haven’t done a damn thing to you. That’s what pissed me off so much.. because all you’ve been doing since we met in Orlando is coming after us with a hatchet.”

Michelle jumped as a car behind them honked impatiently. She started forward, visibly rattled. She remained silent for a while, then abruptly cursed. “You have no idea what that caused.”

Kerry eyed her warily.

“You have no damn idea.”

* * *

Kerry trotted across the tarmac to where Dar's car was, pulling up short as the driver's side door opened and her partner emerged. "Hi." She studied the taller woman's body language with a touch of anxiety, but relaxed when it was obvious that Dar was.

"Hi." Dar shut the door behind her. Shari had already left the car, and was headed across the lot to where Michelle was standing, waiting to go inside the administration building. "How'd it go?"

"How'd it go?" Kerry asked at the same time.

Dar muffled a chuckle, and ran her fingers through her hair. "Me first. It sucked."

"Hm."

"We halfway agreed on a truce at the end, but I think she just wanted me to shut up." Dar admitted. "You?"

"Bitchfest." Kerry joined Dar as she started to walk towards the building. "Hard to read, really. I think you were right though."

Dar glanced at her. "I was?"

"Yeah. You said you didn't think they were behind a lot of the stuff at the office, and I think that's true." Kerry admitted.

"They were behind the crap talk."

"Well, that figures." The blond woman wrinkled her nose. "But not the cell thing, or Duk's little defector, apparently." She walked a few steps, regarding her scuffed sneakers soberly. "What did they hope to achieve by the crap talk, anyway? I didn't really get that."

Good question. Dar moved a little closer as they walked. "I, um.." Don't know? Not true, since she certainly did know. "Shari was trying to cause problems between you and me."

Kerry did a little shrug and nod movement. "Duh." She uttered. "You figured that."

"She figured if she could break us up, I'd be distracted enough to forget about the bid." Dar added.

"Is she really that stupid?"

Dar had to smile. "Yeah." She said.

"I mean, I always knew she was an idiot." Kerry added. "But apparently she's lost even more brain cells over the years."

That was, Dar realized, a not too obscure compliment. "Weeell…" She put her hand on Kerry's back as they walked up the steps to the admin building. "I can't say I was much of a catch back then."

"Bull poodles."

Dar chuckled.

"Dar, I've seen pictures. If I'd met you in college, you'd have saved me a week of gender orientation hell on South Beach, let me tell you." Kerry paused before the closed door.

"Thanks. I think." Her partner said. "I guess from her viewpoint there was a certain logic to it." She exhaled, frowning a little.

"You mean, if something had caused a problem between us?" Kerry asked gently.

Dar nodded.

Kerry kicked at the concrete with the toe of her sneaker, then looked up. "I can't speak for you, sweetheart, but it would take one hell of a lot more than some bullshit talk for me." She said. "Because even the thought of that makes me want to start crying."

Dar stepped forward and put her arms around Kerry, hugging her. "Me too." She whispered into Kerry's ear. 'I'd rather die than lose you.'

Kerry inhaled softly, dismissing the world around her as she buried her face into Dar's shirt. After a moment, though, she pulled her head back and smiled. "Can we continue this discussion later?"

"Sure." Dar released her and stepped back, glancing around with a faintly embarrassed look. "My luck they got that on camera somehow."

Kerry chuckled, giving her a pat on the side. "I hope so."

Dar graciously opened the door, and stood back to let Kerry enter. As she followed her partner through the outer lobby to the room where Quest had set up his base of operations, she took a moment to consider what she'd have thought of Kerry if they'd met earlier.

Would Kerry have been her type? Did she even know what her type was back then? Dar didn't think she had. Shari had attracted her more because of her domineering personality than her looks, and Kerry wouldn't have had that kind of attitude back then.

Or now, for that matter. Kerry wasn't shy, but she did have an air of gentle reserve in public that often made people assume she was until they really knew her.

She also had a wicked sense of humor that still sometimes caught Dar by surprise.

Kerry was, she realized, completely different than anyone else she'd ever gone out with, as well as being completely different than Dar herself.

Opposites attract maybe? Then what the hell had she been doing with all those other high class Type A's she'd been going with? Wasting time waiting for the chance to walk in that scruffy little IT manager's office, apparently.

"Dar?" Kerry was standing near the door, hands on her hips, looking at her. "Hello… earth to Dar?"

"Sorry. Just thinking." Dar reached for the handle. "C'mon.. let's get this started." She was a trifle surprised that Michelle and Shari hadn't waited for them, but on second thought..

Maybe she wasn't.

They entered the room, only to find pandemonium inside. Not that they weren't used to chaos around this project, Kerry mused, but groups of people standing around apparently randomly yelling at each other was new even for them.

Quest wasn't there. The other bid teams management was, though, and no one seemed happy. The two other bid teams seemed to be yelling at each other, and Michelle and Shari were trying to make them stop. Dar observed the waving arms for a moment, then put her powerful lungs to good use. "HEY!"

Mike turned and pointed at her. "You son of a bitch!" He yelled at the top of his voice.

Everyone else stopped, and shut up, as the words rang in echo for a moment.

"Wrong gender, and if you talk about my mother like that again, I'll pull your cock off." Dar replied, in a normal tone. "Assuming I could get a grip on it."

"You screwed us all over!" Mike dropped his volume considerably.

Kerry perched on one of the tables, crossing her arms over her chest. "Oh, this should be good." She said. "Wonder what we did now?"

"Okay, hold on." Michelle gamely stepped in. "Just everyone take it easy. There's stuff…"

"You shut up too!" The man whirled on her. "You're just as bad!"

“Hey!” Shari frowned. “Chill out! We didn’t do jack to you.”

Kerry got back up and wandered around the office, spotting some ship diagrams on the back wall and going over to study them. Where was Quest, she wondered? This close to the deadline, she’d have expected him to be crawling all over them, not to mention his filming crew.

So, where was he?

“Okay, if everyone’s done venting hot air, shut up and listen.” Dar’s voice overrode the muttering.

Ah. Nothing like her partner’s own brand of diplomacy. Kerry idly opened the top of a cookie jar sitting on the desk and looked inside. Not surprisingly, it appeared empty. “Y’know, there’s nothing in the world more useless than an empty cookie jar, and that just nails this stupid project to a T.””

“You say something?” Michelle asked her, turning at the sound of her voice.

“Me? No.” Kerry muffled a grin. She closed the jar.

“I’m not listening to crap from you!” Mike said. “Quest told us what you did!”

Kerry turned. “He did?” She inquired.

“Yes.” The man turned and looked at her. “He told us all about you buying off the workers, and sabotaging us.”

Oh, Jesus. Kerry was about to answer, when she felt her cell phone start to go off. She unclipped it from her belt and glanced at it, frowning when it just showed a couple of half numbers. That ran a half bell in her head.

“Get real.” Dar answered for her. “We didn’t do anything to anyone. Let me clue you in on what’s really going on here.”

The cell phone rattled again, and Kerry lifted it to her ear, hearing a sort of popping noise. She studied it in puzzlement, racking her brains to remember where she’d see the device behave in a similar fashion before. Was it in the office? No…

“Like we’d believe you?” Mike responded sarcastically.

“Okay, now hold on.” Shari threw her bra into the ring. “I realize this might be tough to swallow, but you really should listen to what Dar has to say.”

“What??” Both of the other bid teams turned to face Shari. “Have you lost your mind? You told us yesterday she wasn’t anything but a lying twofaced bitch!” Mike spluttered. “Now you’re pitching her bull?”

“Shari’s right.” Michelle stepped up to the plate. “We’ve got some new information. Remember information? It’s the stuff you use to make decisions?”

“Holy crap.” Kerry whispered. “What in the heck..” She started looking around, peering curiously at the items on the desk until she focused once again on the cookie jar. It was set on top of a bookcase behind the desk chair, with an unobstructed line of sight of the whole room. “Huh.”

“Give me a freaking break! I’m not interested in a pack of bullshit!”

She squinted at the front of it, then turned. “Dar?”

Dar looked around, raising an eyebrow at her.

Kerry faced away from the jar, pointed her thumb at herself, then lifted her right hand and made a shutter snapping motion with her index finger and thumb.

Dar’s eyes widened slightly.

“What?” Michelle watched them, her glance going back and forth. “This is no time for charades, guys.”

“Well, you know, you just never can please everyone now can ya!?” Kerry spread her arms wide abruptly, taking a step back as she did so. Her elbow hit the cookie jar and it smacked against the wall, then bounced off and fell from the bookshelf, hitting the linoleum floor and breaking into several large pieces. “Whoops.”

Michelle stepped over and looked at the debris. “Pronghorn antelope in a china shop?” She suggested wryly, then her eyes focused on something. “Whoa… hold on. What’s that?” She leaned over to get a closer look at the pottery shards.

Kerry curled her finger at the rest of the room. She pointed down at the jar shards, then held her finger to her lips. Dar joined her immediately, almost bouncing across the room as the others more reluctantly followed.

Buried in the shards was a small web cam mechanism, with gears and pullies intended to allow it to be controlled remotely. The ornate design in the front of the jar bore a small hole which the lens had previously been subtly poking through.

The lens was now facing down, and as they watched the pullies moved feebly, trying to refocus it. The radio control affecting it made Kerry’s cell phone pop again, and she held it up. “Picks up the weirdest things.”

“Remote?” Michelle mouthed, her ginger eyebrows lifting.

Kerry nodded.

Mike knelt down and picked up a shard, moving the cam gingerly with one fingertip. Shari stood back, crossing her arms with a thoughtful expression. She looked around the room more carefully, her eyes searching the corners looking for something.

“So, what’s the deal?” Mike looked up at Dar. “What are we missing here?”

The attitude had changed so quickly it almost gave Dar whiplash. However given what Kerry had found she had no doubt there were microphones to go with it. “Tell ya what.” She said. “Let’s take a walk outside, and get some fresh air. “

“Good idea.” Shari instantly agreed. “It’s getting stuffy in here. Air conditioning’s out again, probably.” She added. “We can catch a breeze near the water.” She headed for the door with a determined expression. “Coming?”

They all filed out after her into the lobby, which was somewhat conspicuously empty. The closing of the outside door echoed after they left, falling into silence for a brief moment.

Then footsteps rang out and several people rushed across the lobby, entering the office with rapid steps and muffled curses.

* * *

They found a place to sit down on the seawall, overlooking the cargo channel on the far side of port. Nothing was around but a few hopeful seagulls, who flapped off in disgust when they discovered there was no sandwich crusts to be had.

The wind was blowing across the pier with some force, blowing offshore and conveniently taking their words out over the water for them. “Okay.” Dar rested her elbows on her knees. “Just do me a favor and listen until I stop talking, then you can tell me how full of crap I am. Deal?”

Mike grunted.

Dar laid it out for them, in crisp sentences. Kerry merely sat quietly next to her, watching the faces of the two men as well as Michelle and Shari as they listened. No one really wanted to believe her, Kerry could tell. After all, realizing they’d all been played like banjos wasn’t the most pleasant thing going, now was it?

Dar finished her briefing. “So that’s what we’ve got. The last piece you saw yourselves, with that damn camera. I’m sure they had tape running too.. nice scene we were having.”

Mike stared off into the distance, then shook his head. “Well, shit.” He muttered. “I wish to hell I could say you’re just full of crap, Dar.. but to be honest, something hasn’t been adding up. Graham and I were talking about that yesterday.” He indicated the fourth bid member, who so far hadn’t made peep one.

Shari nodded. “We noticed, too.” She admitted. “There was just too much insanity.” Her eyes flicked to Dar’s face, then away. “Even considering everything.”

Mike held a hand up. “But you brought those filming people in.” He objected. “So is this your scam?”

Interesting question. Kerry unconsciously leaned against Dar’s shoulder as she waited for the answer. There was just something amazingly comforting about the solidity of her partner’s presence and she just barely kept herself from putting her head down on that self same shoulder as they sat there.

Michelle stepped up. “The television people contacted me.” She said. “Seemed like a good deal at the time, so I said sure. Free publicity? TV exposure with no outlay? Anyone would have said yes.” She pointed at them all. “You all would have. Even you two.”

“Probably.” Kerry graciously agreed.

“But you bought their line hook and sinker.” Mike reminded her. “They played you good.”

Michelle shrugged. “Just as good as Quest played us all.”

“Excuse me.” Graham spoke up at last. “What is it we intend to do about this?” He asked. “It is almost end of the day. We are not complete in these projects, and it is all apparently to no purpose.”

Now, here was the tough part. Dar glanced at Kerry, and raised her brows slightly, the invitation implicit in the motion.

Good nerd, bad nerd? “Well, we had an idea.” Kerry gamely went forward. “We thought that.. this whole thing was apparently designed to get on film a knock down drag out fight to the finish, right?”

“Yeah.” Shari agreed. “Preferably with the good guys winning.”

“Define good guys.” Mike muttered.

“So, what if no one wins?” Kerry asked. “What if it’s a tie? What if we all join together and level the playing field, and just make sure everyone finishes successfully.”

Momentary silence. “What the hell would that do?” Mike asked.

“Screw them over.” Shari said, bluntly.

Graham rubbed his face with one hand. “You are telling me that we should help each other? Why should we trust you?” He indicated both sets of women. “Why should we trust any of you? You’ve been cat-fighting each other for weeks. Now you are standing here, and you want us all to work together? It’s insanity!”

Kerry glanced past them, to the admin building. She spotted Cruickshank emerging with Quest, both of them looking around. “Uh oh.”

Dar focused on what she was looking at. “We’re out of time.” She said. “Listen – I don’t really give a crap if you trust us or not. The fact is, we’re done.”

“But powerless.” Michelle interrupted her.

“No.” Dar shook her head. “We have power. I could have just grabbed the jackass over there and been done with this if I wanted to.” She stood up as Quest discovered them. “So here’s the plan. We go to our areas, and whatever you need done, call me. If you had your crews bought out from under you, I’ll send people. Got a technical problem – we’ll find a way to fix it. We’ve got two hours.”

They only had seconds to decide. Quest and Cruickshank were headed their way.

“Call you.” Mike looked like his head was going to explode. “This is nuts, Dar.”

“Lose or tie. Pick one, but do it now.” Dar said, as she already started to edge away from the group.

“We’re in.” Michelle said, briskly. “Expect my call about our satellite.”

“All right.” Mike scowled. “I’ll need techs.” He backed off and checked his watch, then turned and hurried off, breaking into a jog towards the pier his ship was in.

Graham stuck his hands in his pockets. “Not sure you can help us.” He commented mildly. “We’re short a bit of gear.. supplier ran out.”

Kerry cleared her throat, loudly. “Hey, Michelle?”

Michelle, halfway turned around to beat a hasty retreat, turned back around to face him. “Call me.” She lifted a hand, and then turned again, heading off in the opposite direction.

Dar and Kerry were left alone, to face the music. Kerry suspected it would be an exceptionally tuneless polka, and she decided maybe retreat was a better option. “C’mon, Dar. We’ve got stuff to do.” She took hold of her partner’s arm and started tugging.

“Roberts!” Quest yelled.

“Ms. Roberts.” Cruickshank moved to intercept them. “Wait… I’ve got some questions for you!”

“Dar, we better get out of here. Anything we say could blow it.” Kerry uttered.

“Right.” Dar lifted a hand. “Sorry.. we’ve got work to do.” She turned and urged Kerry ahead of her, heading down the strip of grass the bordered the seawall.

“Stop! Roberts! Get back here!” Quest called. “Stop!”

“Glad the wind’s so noisy.” Kerry broke into a trot, then a jog. “Did you hear anything?”

“Nope.” Dar loped next to her. “Not a damn thing.”

“Me either.”

“Roberts! God damn it! STOP!”

Don’t like it when someone else takes charge, eh? Dar smiled grimly as she let the echoes fade behind her. Well buddy, get used to it.

* * *

Kerry was standing in the raised middle platform, central figure in a sea of milling techs. The front doors to the pier building were locked, though she thought she’d seen one of the camera crews loitering around outside a moment ago. “Okay folks.. listen up.”

There was a palpable air of anticipation in the room. Mark leaned on the counter she was standing behind, a look of almost smug triumph on his face. “It took a lot of busting ass, but damn if we didn’t do it, huh boss?”

Yikes. Kerry now faced a completely different dilemma. They’d pushed their team to the limit, and the guys and gals hadn’t disappointed them. Now she had to tell them that basically, their efforts had been for pretty much naught. “Guys, I’ve got something a little difficult to explain here.”

Her team settled down and looked up at her trustingly. Kerry had a moment of flashback, to the day she’d stood in front of a very different team for a very different reason, with much the same looks directed back at her.

Then, she’d saved them from unemployment, and in the process saved herself from going back to a life of oppression at home. This time? Well, this time, she just had to tell them she’d led them down a slightly crooked path. Not really so bad, was it?

“First off, I want to thank you all for all the killer work you’ve done over the past week.” Kerry said. “I appreciate it, Dar appreciates it, and not least, the company appreciates it. You made it all happen.”

Everyone grinned.

“However.” Kerry leaned on the counter, giving them all a very wry look. “There were some things going on here that we didn’t know about.”

“Uh oh.” Mark said.

“So, the bottom line is, now that we’ve gotten our stuff done, we need to help everyone else get theirs done too.”

Everyone stared at her, jaws dropping open a little. It would have been comical, if Kerry wasn’t so conscious of the minutes ticking away. “Guys, please just trust me on this one. I’ll explain later, but we’re almost out of time. I need to split up some teams, and send you all over to the other ships.”

Mark covered his eyes with one hand. “Ohmyfriggengod.”

“Holy crap.” Carlos blurted. “We’re going to help them now?”

“Yep.” Kerry shifted a few pieces of paper. “Once we all finish, I can tell you the rest of the story. It’s quite a story. But Dar wanted me to let you all know – despite what we’re going to have to do, the only real winners in this entire shebang are standing right here in this room.”

The techs fell silent, the buzz in the room dying out as they absorbed the compliment.

“We are the best. We proved that.” Kerry went on. “Now, we have to take it a step further, and take this project to a different level. So.” She exhaled. “Let’s get going. Grab yourselves a pop, and your gear, and I’ll call out names in a minute.”

The techs stirred, and started moving. Mark waited for some space to clear, then he propped his chin up on his fist. “Um… Kerry?”

“I know.” Kerry held a hand up. “Just go with it, Mark. The whole thing’s a farce.”

“Huh?”

“It’s fake. It’s a whitewash. It’s not real. The ships aren’t going to sail anywhere.. it was just one big charade for the cameras.”

“No shit?”

"Ma'am?"

Kerry turned, to find their security guard standing there. "Yes?"

"Those people at the door are not taking no for an answer." The guard pointed. "They're starting to get real mad." Past him, Kerry could see the filming crew, Cruickshank, Quest, and others all clustered near the door, banging on it. "Yikes."

"Whoa." Mark blinked.

"Take this list, get these guys over to the ship in slot 12." Kerry handed Mark a piece of paper. "Hurry.. and whatever happens, tell everyone not to say anything to anyone about what we're doing. Just keep quiet."

"Huh?"

"Mark, we've been in the dark for weeks. Now it's our turn to pull one over on these people." Kerry told him. "Got me?"

Mark hesitated, then grinned sheepishly. "Not a clue, boss, but if you say shut up, no problem." He took the paper and scanned it. "Okay!" His voice rose. "Following names, get your asses over here!"

Right. Kerry ran a hand through her hair. "Okay." She faced the guard. "Let me just get a mouthful of something and I'll go take care of those guys. They say what they want?"

"Ms. Roberts." The guard supplied promptly.

"Well, there you go. She's not here." Kerry gratefully accepted a bottle of grape soda from Carlos. "Thank you." She took a sip of the cold beverage and considered what she was going to tell the reporters. A grin crossed her face, and she chuckled a little. "You want a story? All right. I'll give you one."

She stepped down from the platform and headed for the door. "Time for you to chase **YOUR** tails."

PART 31

DAR DUCKED BEHIND A CONTAINER, WATCHING AS ONE OF THE FILMING CREWS hurried past her towards the entrance to Michelle and Shari's pier building. She slunk out after them and waited for them to pass the crew gangway, then she scooted up the metal walk and into the ship's hold.

It was dingy, smelly, and as ratty looking as theirs was, only it was painted slate gray inside rather than the worn blue she was used to and there seemed to be a few less rust stains on the steel plate walls.

Other than that, same old, same old. A few crewmembers were morosely shoving boxes around, and they glanced at her as she entered. After a moment's interest, they returned to their tasks, apparently having seen enough.

Hm. Should she be insulted or grateful? Grateful, she decided, with a nod, as she edged past two men carrying a large crate that gave off a scent of burnished copper.

What would happen to them, Dar wondered. If this entire thing was a farce, then all their hopes would have been raised for nothing. She paused inside the door and looked at the crewmen, seeing something in their attitude that made her realize that they'd never been fooled at all.

They'd known all along. In fact, Dar remembered, some of the crew on her own ship had even told her, but she'd been too focused to really listen.

Damn. When she sat back and looked at it, how much if this farce had been there in front of her all along? How much of her attention had been distracted to the point where she'd almost missed it all?

Ah well. Dar knew she had to shrug it off, since there was no way to go back and change it. At least now she did know what was going on, and was doing something about it. Better late than never?

Something like that.

She reasoned that the bridge, and the mounting point for the satellite system would be in relatively the same place as their was, and so she started up the steps two at a time. On the way up, she passed a few more of the crew, who brushed by her without much interest and kept going.

Nice guys. Dar gained the main deck and left the crew stairwell, crossing through a propped open watertight door and entering the atrium. Unlike her ship, this one seemed to be a little better condition and the crew on this deck were busy polishing the brass railings and doing other cleaning chores.

One of the women behind the reception desk looked up as Dar headed for the main stairs. "Well, hello there." She called out, in an almost cheerful tone. "You're new."

Dar gave her a brief smile and a half wave.

"Smashing shorts!"

Ah. Ugh. "Thanks." Dar wished for the stair landing, wanting to be out of the woman's line of sight. Kerry'd told her not to wear the damn shorts, and Kerry'd been right, as she usually was. How could she really expect anyone to take her seriously when she dressed like a half assed redneck?

Jesus. Dar sighed as she rounded the stairs and headed upward. I really do need to get the hell out of here. My head's on so screwed up I'm going to sink the god damned company if I don't. With that somewhat daunting thought on her mind, she jogged up the steps, dodging several officers strolling in the other direction.

The hallways were empty up on the top deck, though. She headed down one long, long corridor freshly laid with carpet, shaking her head at the seemingly pointless expense. Ahead of her, she spotted the locked door that on her ship lead to the bridge and she headed for it, wondering if banging on it hard enough would eventually gain her entry.

Fortunately, she didn't have to. As she came with in a body length of it, the door opened and Michelle's head appeared. "Ah." The red haired woman spotted her. "Just who I was about to go looking for. Kerry said you were heading here."

Not exactly what Kerry had thought, regardless of what she'd said, Dar reckoned. "Here I am." She agreed. "Let's get going. The damn reporters are crawling all over the pier."

"I know I saw them." Michelle held the door open. "This way."

Dar followed her through the senior officer's hallway, noticing that this ship, at least, had retained quite a bit of it's glitzy interior. The walls were paneled in wood here, and the carpet was new, and expensive looking.

They stopped in front of a door, which Michelle shoved open. Inside was the cramped communications center, this room pretty much identical to the one on Dar's vessel. She entered, ducking around a rack of satellite gear to find two men standing in front of the console, frustration apparent in their faces.

"God damn it, Steve… I've already tried that."

"Yeah, but did you get those guys on the phone with you? They said they had a fix for this." The shorter of the two men retorted. "I think they're full of crap, but if you don't have them do it, they won't admit they're wrong.'

Dar took a moment to examine the equipment, as she listened to them argue. It was more or less the same as what she was using on the other ship, but there seemed to her to be too much of it. She turned and regarded Michelle with a single cocked eyebrow. "Three routers?" She asked, lowering her voice.

Michelle held her hand up. "We paid to have a network design engineer come in here and give us the definitive solution. That's what he gave us." She edged away from the two men, and motioned Dar to follow her.

Amiably, Dar did. "He gave you cat crap on a stick." Dar advised her. "Let me guess.. did he work for the hardware vendor?"

Michelle nodded.

"And you didn't catch on to him wanting to sell pointless hardware to you?"

Michelle sighed. "Sometimes you have to trust the experts." She looked pointedly at Dar. "Like now, for instance. So since we're short on time, mind rolling out your brain cells and dusting that possibly redundant hardware with them?"

"Kennel your puppies." Dar returned the banter, and turned, standing back and waiting for Michelle to clear the riffraff out of the way. She spotted a laptop and went over to it, flipping it open and reviewing the screen, as well as the cable that connected the back of it to the equipment rack.

“Hey.” One of the men finally noticed the scruffy vagabond in their midst. “Can I help you?”

Michelle took him by the arm. “Not even if I bought you an Einstein injection, kiddo. Take your buddy and just to find some ice cream somewhere, hum?”

“But.. ma’am..” Steve protested, pointing at Dar who had already oozed into position in front of the gear and was pecking at the laptop contentedly. “Who is that?”

“Shoo.” Michelle gave him a gentle push towards the door to the communications room.

“But..”

“Shoo.”

Dar smiled, as she got to work, getting into the configuration of the equipment and studying what it was supposed to be doing. She typed a command and reviewed the results, frowning and shaking her head a little. “Jesus.”

Michelle had taken a position up around the corner of the rack, where she could watch without standing on top of Dar. “That doesn’t sound good.” She glanced at the small porthole in the room. “And we’re running out of time.”

“Well.” Dar stepped back and looked at the rack. “I could spend a few hours untangling that configuration.”

“We don’t have a few hours.”

“I know.” Dar reached for the cables in the rear of the rack and started ripping them out in handfuls. “So I guess I’ll do it the easy way.”

Michelle covered her eyes. “Oh crap.” She sighed. “It took that guy four days to put that stuff in.”

Dar snorted, finishing ripping out the cabling and ending her destructive activity, only to dive into the laptop with a piratical chuckle as she reset everything to it’s defaults. “Look at it this way. It wasn’t working.”

Michelle sat on the edge of one of the desks, rubbing the back of her neck. “Yeah, that’s true.” She muttered. “Story of my life lately. Nothing’s working.”

With her back turned, Dar was sure her widening eyes were hidden from view. She hoped against hope that Michelle’s comment wasn’t the beginning of a sensitive chat, because she knew that definitely was not her forte.

At all.

So she kept her nose in the screen, starting the configuration of the main unit as she tried to assemble a new design on the fly and crossed her fingers she wasn't going to have to call Kerry for help.

* * *

"Hi." Kerry slipped through the front door and closed it behind her, facing the reporters with a neatly dredged up pleasant smile. "What can I do for you folks?"

Cruickshank was caught by surprise. She'd been banging on the door and had turned away to come up with some better method of getting attention, and hadn't expected Kerry to emerge. "Well.. ah, yes. Ms. Stuart. Right."

"That's me." Kerry agreed.

"Well, thanks for the offer, but we're really looking for your boss." Cruickshank said.

"Really? Me too."

"What?"

"Me, too." Kerry drew the woman aside and lowered her voice. "She's missing. I can't find her. After we got back from being at sea, she disappeared."

It was the last thing the reporter expected. "But.. I saw her with you not twenty minutes ago!"

Kerry didn't miss a beat. "That was after we got back." She said. "Anyway, if you find her, can you let me know? The hyperbaric thermoelectric generator she built is giving us a little problem.. I think it needs adjusting."

"The what?"

"Well, we had to get power somehow." Kerry told her. "Dar didn't want to wait for the ship to fix it.. we're coming up on a deadline here."

Cruickshank collected herself. "Uh.. okay. So, let me make sure I'm understanding you right here… you mean to tell me Ms. Roberts.."

"Please, call her Dar. She hates formality."

"Uh huh.. okay. So you're telling me Dar built this.. uh.. this power generator from.. from what, exactly?"

“Oh, odds and ends.” Kerry said. “Yes, she just finished it, and we tried it out.. fried a few things, but we seem to have it settled down now.. but like I said, it’s acting weird and I really want her to look at it. “ She turned and pointed at the ship, which now, in the coming sunset, had a few lights shining in windows. As they watched, one sputtered out. “See? I don’t dare put the computer system on that.. might blow up.”

“Uh.. okay, right.” The reporter said. “So, if this works out, does.. I mean, you’ll win, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay.. well, that’s very exciting!” Cruickshank said. “I mean, it could be over.. listen, can we get some film of this.. uh.. whatever it is? How long will it take Dar to fix it? Could it be in the next ten minutes or something like that?”

Gotcha. “Well, it’s hard to say.” Kerry confided. “We have to find Dar first… and you know, that’s a propriety piece of hardware. I’m not sure she’d want it filmed.. but maybe you can ask her.”

The reporter was already backing away. “Ah.. yeah, I’ll do that.. listen, I’m going to go.. uh, talk to someone. I’ll keep my eye out for her, okay?” She turned and rushed off, nearly shoving the two cameramen ahead of her.

Kerry waggled her fingers amiably. “Bye.” She checked her watch, wondering how long it would be before Quest and his scumbags made an attempt on her hyperbaric thermoelectric generator. “Hm. Wonder if they have any of that old plumbing around still.”

She ducked back into the building and shut the door, giving the guard a wink.

* * *

The communications room had gotten relatively quiet. One of the officers had come in a time or two, but after glaring at Dar’s back with completely no effect, they’d left the two IT professionals in peace to muck with the cables to their hearts content.

At least one of them, anyway. Dar paused to study her screen, one hand lifting to riffle her bangs back off her forehead before she continued to type.

“Well?” Michelle asked, for the nth time.

“Artesian.” Dar replied.

“Very funny.”

Dar looked up over the screen of the laptop. “Michelle, I’m doing this as fast as I can. You’re not making it any faster if I have to stop and be inane with you every sixty seconds.”

The shorter woman released a disgusted breath. She checked her watch, then got up and wandered over to the porthole, staring out it and turning her back on Dar.

In that peaceful silence, Dar got back to work. She left the laptop for a moment and went to the rack, connecting a cable to the back of one piece of equipment and running it through the side of the rack to a second, plugging it in with a decisive snick.

After waiting to see the lights near the cable ports go from dark, to yellow, to green, she returned to the laptop and sat down behind it, cracking her knuckles before she got back to work on the keyboard. It wasn’t that configuring the units was that difficult, after all, she’d done it plenty of times before – but trying to integrate the devices into a satellite system just different enough from the one she was using was presenting it’s own set of unique challenges.

Dar frowned and tried another setting. “Hmph.”

“You say something?” Michelle turned.

“Nope.” Dar went over to look at the satellite gear, turning it on and watching the oscilloscope waver and settle into a pattern. “Where’s the dish mounted?” She asked.

Michelle looked at her. “How would I know?”

Dar put her hands on her hips.

“Listen, not all of us are egghead tech huggers, okay?” Michelle replied to the implied derision. “I leave the technical installations to the experts. I don’t ask my air conditioning repairman to let me inspect his filters either.”

Egghead tech hugger. Dar liked that. It had a nice ring to it. “Ever consider the reason I’m as successful at what I do as I am might be the fact that I invest myself in the technology?” She went back to the laptop without waiting for an answer, coding in a second option.

Stubbornly, the device refused to cooperate with her, and the results didn’t change.

Damn it.

Dar pulled out her PDA and tapped a message into it, then sent it. She continued on to a different area of the configuration, setting up some secondary sections to her satisfaction before she saved the configuration just in case.

You never knew when something might happen that could wipe your work out after all, and… Dar looked up as the lights went completely out, plunging the room into darkness relieved only by the fading light from the porthole.

The rack went silent as well. “Nice.” Dar commented. “

“Shit.”

“Careful what you ask for.”

* * *

Kerry read the PDA message twice before she rapidly shook her head and made a weird noise of astonishment. “I can’t believe I’m reading this.” She sat down at one of the desks in their small office and logged on, waiting for the network to validate her account as she tapped her thumbs on the desktop.

“What’s up, boss?” Mark entered. “You get rid of the spooks?”

“Yeah.” Kerry opened a console window up and logged into Dar’s shares back in the office. She browed through them until she found what she wanted, then opened the text file and viewed it. “I can honestly say I never thought I’d have to do this.”

“What?” Mark eyed her curiously.

Kerry copied the contents of the file into a notepad file on the machine’s desktop where she was logged in, then transferred the file via the infrared port on the side of the system to her PDA. “Dar forgot how to do something.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” Kerry attached the text file to her reply message, and sent it back to her partner. “Sometimes she has these small flashes of plain old ordinary humanity and I’m never really expecting them.”

Mark chuckled. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I remember one time we were working in the ops center late, and Dar’d gone downstairs to get some cables or crap like that. I had to get some ends, so I went down after her and when I got to the door, I heard this freaking cursing like crazy inside. I walked in and Dar was on her back on the ground and I couldn’t figure out what was going on.”

“Tripped?” Kerry asked, with a knowing grin.

“Yeah.. fell right on her butt. Man, she was pissed.” Mark agreed. “Cause, like, she’s pretty graceful normally, you know?”

"I know."

"So I was like.. do I laugh.. commiserate.. offer her a hand up.." Mark shook his head. "Close the door and pretend I wasn't there? There wasn't any good choices."

"Yeah." Kerry said. "I never really know what to do either. I usually just end up kissing her."

Mark's jaw clicked shut. "Uh.." He said, after a moment's silence. "Wasn't really an option."

Kerry's cell phone rang, saving her from having to recover from her mild faux pas. She answered it, wryly scrubbing her now blushing face. "Hello?"

"This is Shari."

Ugh. "Hi."

"Michelle told me to turn over some of our spares to Graham." Shari said shortly. "Which I'm willing to do."

Bet you're not. Kerry mentally stuck her tongue out at the phone. "Okay, that's great." She said. "But what do I have to do with this?"

"You're supposed to have the answer to everything." Shari said. "So here's the problem. They have no way of getting the stuff over to their ship, because all the pier people have vanished, they have no carts, and the three people he has left over there have bad backs."

Kerry stared at the wall, her jaw working a little as words struggled to exit through her clenched teeth.

"Uh oh." Mark was watching her in fascination. "Should I get the baseball bat?"

Kerry cleared her throat. "Why don't you help them take it over?" She suggested mildly.

"We're busy."

You. Are. Such. An. Asshole. Kerry mentally articulated the words, and almost duplicated the effort audibly. "Okay. I'll take care of it." She said. "Thanks." She hung up the cell phone, snicking it shut with a vicious click. "Stupid hairball piece of sea cow moosemeat."

Mark looked at her, his eyebrows hiking up. "Evil, boss. Evil."

"Bah."

Kerry opened the cell again, and dialed a number. She waited, then started speaking when it was answered. “Hi dad. Listen. Do you have the truck here?” She waited. “Can you bring it over here? I have to pick something up over at the next ship, and drop it off somewhere.” She waited again. “Thanks.. I really appreciate it.” A smile. “You rock, dad.”

She closed the phone. “You know something? People suck.”

“Yeah, but other people don’t.” Mark suggested. “Was that big D’s pop? He’s cool.”

Kerry got up. “He’s more than cool.” She said. “He’s the father I always wished I had.” She paused, a little surprised the words had come out. “So anyway.. we’re going to go pick up some switches, and bring them over across the port to that other pier. Okay?”

“Want some help?” Mark suggested. “Not that the big guy couldn’t just pick up that whole ship and put it in his shoulder, but y’know, we got guys to do that stuff for you.” He followed Kerry out the door. “Kerry?”

Kerry held up two fingers as she headed for the front door.

“Right.” Mark turned. “Hey, Carlos! Get over here.” He motioned to the tech. “We got a gig, dude. Move it!”

“Yeah?” Carlos didn’t seem upset by the command. “It’s better than hanging out here.. where we going?”

“With the boss.”

“Oh. Cool.” The younger tech grinned. “Poquito boss, yeah?’

“Yeah.”

“Bueno.”

They walked outside and joined Kerry, who was standing on the curbside rocking up and down on her heels. Sunset had begun in earnest and the light was growing golden, as a relatively cool breeze came up off the water and ruffled their hair.

“Getting late.” Mark remarked.

Kerry gazed at the sky. “Can’t spin fast enough for me.” She admitted. “It’ll be nice to get to the end of this particular day.” She caught sight of Andrew’s truck heading haphazardly in their direction. “Okay, so here’s the deal. We have to go get some switches from that ship over there.. and bring them to that one across the way. Speed counts.. we don’t really have much time.”

“There goes those reporters again.” Carlos pointed. “They’re going to that other ship too.. hey, and there’s people all running around over there.”

Kerry looked, and sure enough, there was a lot of activity around the gangway. She tipped her head back and shaded her eyes, as she noticed something else. “It’s pretty dark over there.” She commented. “I wonder..”

Her PDA beeped. She pulled it out and looked at it.

I’m stuck in a dark room with a bunch of wires, bad carpet, and Michelle.

Kerry quickly tapped out a message as Andrew pulled up in front of the pier.

I’m about to get in the back of dad’s truck. Want to trade?

“Howdy there, Kerry.” Andrew said. “You all want a hitch?”

Kerry vaulted into the bed of the pickup, finding herself a handhold as Mark and Carlos joined her. “Go for it, Dad.”

“Sure you’re hanging on back there?’

“Go.”

The truck moved, starting into a 180 degree turn that aimed to take out a large patch of gravel and grass as Kerry hung on for dear life.

She hoped one of them remembered a flashlight.

* * *

The darkness continued, and Dar lifted her arm to wipe the sweat off her forehead as she stood in the middle of it. “Okay.”

“Okay what?” Michelle asked.

“Okay this is not getting us anywhere.” Dar reached over, and by touch identified the piece of equipment she’d been working on. She pulled screwdriver from her back pocket and using just her fingers and a mental image she unscrewed the rack mounts and yanked the piece of gear loose.

“What are you doing?”

“Making progress. “Dar grunted, as she hoisted the router clear of the rack. “I’m going back to the office.” She tucked the laptop under one arm, and the router under the other.

“With that? No way!”

Dar moved past her in the darkness. “Michelle, I can’t configure this in the dark with no power. If you can figure me out a way to do that, we’ll stay here. Otherwise, hasta banana, cucaracha.” She pulled the door open and headed out into the pitch black corridors with Michelle’s scrambling form right behind her.

“Hey!”

Dar just kept going. She reasoned she was making enough noise to warn anyone ahead of her to get out of the way, and she was moving with enough force that if Michelle was dumb enough to grab hold of her, she’d end up flat on her ass or dragging behind.

They were running out of time. “Why don’t you go find out why the lights are off?” Dar suggested bluntly. “You’re not going to help me with this thing.”

“How do I know you’re not sabotaging it?” Michelle countered.

“Would you know anyway, even with a damn searchlight focused on me?” Dar shot back. “I could be programming this thing to send packets to the moon for all you know.” She spotted a bit of light and headed for it, turning the corner and getting to the stairs with a sense of relief.

“I’ll get Shari to find out what’s up.” Michelle stubbornly stuck to Dar’s heels, flipping open her cell phone as she trotted down the steps after her. “Hey. You know what’s going on?” She spoke into the phone. “Well, find out. Let me know.” She closed the device up and put it back into her pocket.

“Maybe they forgot to pay the bill.” Dar tucked the router under her arm.

“What bill.. my bill?”

“The electric bill.”

“Very funny.” Michelle skipped a few steps to catch up. “Why don’t you just leave that here.. maybe we can just forget the whole thing.”

Dar reached the main deck, and headed for the upper gangway. “Forget it.” She emerged into the sunlight and strode across the teak surface, hopping up onto the metal walkway with determined strides.

“Dar!” Michelle yelled in frustration. “Now, stop!”

Dar glanced at the pier below, spotting the filming crew wheeling to focus on this new noise above them. She waved at Cruickshank as she passed over her head, then she broke into a run along the concrete walkway.

“Hey! Hey!” Michelle yelped, caught unprepared by Dar’s escape. “Get back here! That’s our router! Hey! Hey! Stop!” She chased after Dar belatedly. “Roberts! Hey!” She started running, pounding down the pathway as fast as she could.

Below them, the camera people rapidly swung the lens up to capture the action, Cruickshank barely getting her jaw closed in time to bring the microphone up to her lips to talk. “A new development is just breaking here.. it looks like the ILS team has taken something from the Telegenics team!”

“Roberts! Damn you!” Michelle howled. “Get back here! Have you lost your mind?”

Heh. Dar spotted a familiar automotive profile heading towards the pier and she almost stopped, then thought better of it when she glimpsed the furious expression on Michelle’s face. The absurdity of the entire situation suddenly became clear to her, and it almost made her double up laughing.

“Roberts!”

So what the hell, she might as well have some fun. Dar turned gracefully and ran backwards, sticking her tongue out at Michelle before she turned around again and picked up speed.

“BITCH!”

“Hard to say what’s really going on ..oh!” The reporter jumped back out of the way as a small pickup truck roared through the gates and headed straight for her. “Now what?’ She glanced between the truck and the walkway, torn as to what to report on.

The truck skidded to a halt and Kerry launched herself out of the back, with Carlos and Mark right behind her. “Excuse me.” She gave the reporter a halfheartedly polite smile, motioning the techs towards the gangway. “Let’s go people. We’ve got gear to move.”

“Hey! Roberts!”

Kerry heard the yell, and only just kept herself from turning to look.

“Ms. Stuart.. can you tell us what’s going on here?”

“Nope.” Kerry ran up the slanted metal platform. “C’mon guys…” She had no idea what Dar was up to, but she knew they only had limited time to get things moving so her partner’s shenanigans would have to wait till later.

Right now, she had a switch to pick up from a bitch. And speaking of…

Shari appeared at the top of the ramp at the last second, and Kerry only had a heartbeat to stop. Being covetous of her heartbeats, she decided not to, and instead plowed right into the taller woman knocking her head over keester into the darkness of the hold.

Ah. Kerry felt a sense of personal satisfaction she hadn't quite anticipated. Loving every minute of it. Her body tingled with the release of energy and she stepped down into the warm space, aware of the techs who had stopped short behind her. "Oops. Sorry." She apologized. "Didn't see you there."

Shari leaned back on her hands and just glared.

* * *

"Roberts, damn you!!!" Michelle let out a bawl of frustration. "Stop!"

Dar knew Michelle couldn't catch her. She got to the end of the walkway and shoved the door open with her shoulder, trading the humid late afternoon air for the cold briskness of conditioned dryness. She started down the stairs, rambling down them at a breakneck pace as she heard the door open again behind her.

She could hear Michelle cursing, too. Dar got to the bottom of the steps and emerged into the open space of the terminal, spotting a table set up near a wall that conveniently had a power outlet underneath it. She dropped the router onto the table and put the laptop next to it, then she knelt to plug it in.

Michelle was coming up behind her. Dar got the plug in and stood, turning and quickly finding her center of balance just in case the small red headed woman decided to do something really silly like try to kick her. "Ah ah ah." Dar held both hands up in warning.

Michelle kept going, reaching out to grab Dar's shirt. "I've had about enough of you, god damn it!" She suddenly found herself stopped, her fingers inches from their target as Dar simply used her longer reach to good advantage.

She grabbed Dar's arm with both hands and yanked at it. Under her fingers, the muscles bunched and stiffened as Dar's hand closed on the fabric of her shirt, and Michelle looked up and past her knuckles to find ice cold blue eyes regarding her.

The humor was gone. The light coming in the window flickered off the tanned planes of Dar's face and accentuated the slight flaring of her nostrils.

Psycho, Shari had said. Michelle had dismissed the charge, but right now, right here, she wondered. "What the hell was that about!" She finally asked, dropping her hands from Dar's arm. "You lost your mind?"

"Hey." Dar shoved her back gently. "I needed light. Chill out." She turned and opened the laptop, reconnecting it to the router which was gently blinking at her from it's place

on the table. Her heartbeat was still a little fast, and her knees shivered reaction as the adrenaline seeped out.

Michelle was no threat. Dar knew that. No matter how many belts or how many wisecracks the woman had in her, there was no doubt in Dar's mind that she could kick her butt.

Hell, there was no doubt in Dar's mind that Kerry could kick her butt, and in fact, if Kerry had come in the room while Michelle was pawing at her, she had no doubt she'd have been picking up armfuls of pissed off Midwestern Republican and hauling her off before the Telegenics president ended up dumped head first into a garbage can.

Ahrg. How freaking professional. Dar now felt embarrassment overcoming her anger. "Okay." Now let me try this again." She said, glad at least that Kerry hadn't witnessed the childish standoff. What would she have thought?

* * *

Kerry stepped around the still supine Shari. "Where's the boxes. We don't have much time." She glanced behind her as Mark turned on his flashlight and shone it around the hold. "There?"

"Bitch."

Kerry leaned close to the stack of boxes. "Yeah, here it is. C'mon, guys." She started hauling at a box. "Carlos, give me a hand, okay?"

"Ma'am! Ma'am!" Carlos scurried warily past Shari, who was slowly getting to her feet and rubbing her back. "Let us get that.. it's heavy!"

Mark quickly joined him. "Yeah.. hey, boss.. why don't you wait outside for us, huh?"

Kerry ignored them and held up her end of the box, as they edged it out of the stack and headed for the gangway. "Careful, guys." She warned. "All kinds of obstacles around here."

"You should know." Shari snorted. "Sure you don't know why the lights are out? According to the guys upstairs they went out while your precious partner was playing with something."

"Hm.. well, yes, I can see that." Kerry grunted. "I've had that happen once or twice, but honestly.. I don't think Dar did for the ship quite what she does for me. Scuse me. You're going to get stepped on."

Mark clucked like a duck, but kept walking backwards as they got the switch out of the ship. "Hey, look out."

Cruickshank thrust a microphone into his face. “What are you doing?”

Mark looked at her, looked at the box, and looked back at her. “Lady, this thing weighs a ton. Could ya move, please?”

“But this is the second piece of equipment your company has taken from the Telegenics ship.. what’s going on?” The reporter persisted. “What are you doing?”

“Dropping this.” Mark grunted, hauling backwards and just pushing the woman out of the way. “Hey, Mr. Roberts? Can you give a hand here?” He called out.

“Roberts?” Cruickshank turned, and spotted a new victim. “This gets even thicker.. over there boys! Get the shot on him, on that guy. On.. oh! Yeh! Hey!!! Stop!! Stop!!! That’s expensive! Hey!!!!!”

* * *

Dar studied the screen briefly, scowling. “Huh. Is that how I did that?” She muttered, then shook her head and copied in the configuration, reviewing the results with bemusement. “Guess it was.”

Michelle had taken a seat on the table and was just watching her with a dour expression.

“Okay.” Dar reviewed the configuration again, then she looked up. “What’s the deal with the power?”

“Is that ready?” Michelle asked.

Dar nodded.

Michelle opened her cell phone and dialed. There was apparently no answer, and she gave the phone an annoyed look before she got up. “Stay here. I’ll go find out.”

Dar’s brows hiked. “Not afraid I’m going to run out the door with this?” She inquired. “Sure you don’t want to chain me to the table first?”

Michelle gave her a withering stare. “You’d enjoy it too much.” She stalked out, brushing past two of her workers as they entered shaking their heads and laughing.

Dar didn’t really want to just stay where she was, but she really didn’t want to go back out into the muggy heat either. She compromised by pulling out her PDA and tapping out a message to Kerry on it, hitting send before she wandered over to the doors and peered through the glass at the lower part of the pier.

Her father's truck sped past. Dar blinked, seeing Kerry, along with Mark and Carlos hanging on for dear life surrounding a crate in the back. "Whoa." She leaned against the glass, watching them go. Kerry had the straps holding the crate down in one hand, with her legs braced and her free hand up in the air, and she looked very much like she was riding a bucking bronco.

Cute. But dangerous. Dar frowned. She watched until the truck was out of site, then she turned and went back to her table, drumming her fingers on the surface of it. She'd been there only for a few seconds when the two guys that had come in from outside approached her, eyeing her warily.

She eyed them back. "Yeah?"

The taller one folded his arms over his chest. "So, you're that big shot everyone's talking about?"

Dar looked him up and down. "Probably."

"You the one who said no body could break into your network?" The shorter one blurted. "You're that super nerd chick?'

Unsure of whether to be flattered or insulted, Dar settled on annoyed instead. "Yeah. Who's asking?"

"Man, you sure don't look like it." The two men walked away, shaking their heads again.

Huh? Dar quickly looked down at herself, half expecting to see paint or worse splashed across her ragged denim outfit or a rip in an unexpected place.

However, she looked reasonably acceptable so.. who knew?" Thanks." Dar called after them, spotting Michelle and Shari entering from the back door and dismissing the two men without further thought. "So what's the story?"

"Somehow." Michelle paused, placing a delicate emphasis on the word. "The main electrical panel seems to have blown a fuse. They're apparently…" She paused again, and grimaced. "Replacing it."

"All right." Dar ran her hand through her hair. "I'll go put this back in so it'll come up when the power does. I still have to work a few things out with it once that happens." She closed the laptop and unplugged it, tossing the cable to one side. "Thing we've got to be careful of is not tipping off the damn filming people."

"Little late for that." Shari remarked dryly. "Your father just tossed one of their camera rigs into the water. Hope you've got a nice size bank account to go with that condo."

The back door from the pier opened, and the filming team entered, for the first time looking really, really pissed off. Two of the men were dripping wet, and a third was carrying what was obviously a very soggy piece of expensive filming gear.

"Hm." Dar picked up the router. "My guess is, time for us to go."

"Don't want to face the music?" Shari taunted.

Dar tucked the router under her arm and started walking towards the steps.

"Ms. Roberts!" Cruickshank spotted her. "Hold on just one minute, please!"

Dar just kept right on walking, but the room wasn't that big and the reporter caught up to her as she reached the stairs. "Excuse me a minute." Cruickshank said. "Can we talk?"

"Nope." Dar started up the stairs. "I don't have anything to say."

"What? You're turning this project up side down, and you have nothing to say?" The woman sounded angry. "You owe us some answers!"

"No, I don't." Dar didn't even turn around. "Except to say… how do you like being on the dark side for a change?" She rounded the stairway and headed up the second flight. "Michelle? You coming?" She yelled down over her shoulder.

"What?" Cruickshank spluttered. "Dark side of what? Where are you going? What are you doing?"

Quest entered downstairs, his voice echoing across the hall as he crossed it down below. "All right, Graver. It's time to pay up or shut up."

Cruickshank stopped, torn between following Dar and going to see what was going on. "Oh."

Dar stopped also, cocking her head to listen. Where she was standing they couldn't really see her, and she reasoned it was as good a time as any to get some dirt.

"Pay up? It's not sundown yet." Michelle's voice came back. "Come talk to me when it's dark out."

"I'm not waiting." Quest said. "I want what you promised me, NOW!"

"Screw you, ya little.." Shari burst in. "I'll tell you what I'm gonna give you!"

"Uh oh." The reporter reversed her direction and started downward. "Damn you, Roberts.. I don't' have a camera for this!" She cursed. "What am I supposed to do?"

“Take notes.” Dar started down after her.

* * *

“Ms. Stuart?” Carlos had one foot wedged between the crate and the lift gate and both his hands clenching the strapping with all his strength. “I have to say to you, that you for sure make this job very exciting.”

“Um.. thanks.” Kerry nearly pitched overboard as Andrew took a curve in the road on their way across the port. “Actually.. I really didn’t expect IT to be quite this.. uh..”

“Whacked?” Mark supplied.

“Yeah.” Kerry squinted into the wind, her blond hair whipping wildly around her head. She realized her PDA was buzzing in her pocket, but faced with the choice of reading the message or possibly being tossed out of the back of the truck, she regretfully decided the note would have to wait.

Bummer, because she was fairly sure it was Dar.

“Hey, Kerry?” Mark inched closer. “That was pretty cool, you knocking whatserface on her ass.”

“I enjoyed it.” Kerry admitted. “I’ve just had enough. Honestly. This has just gone over the top for me.”

“Yeah.” Mark nodded. “This is not cool. I mean.. actually doing it with you guys was cool, but the whole thing sucked otherwise.”

“Yeah.” Carlos agreed. “What he said.”

They pulled up into the pier across from theirs and bumped to a halt at the ship’s gangway. Graham was standing there waiting, with three men at his side.

Also at his side was the Miami Herald reporter.

Kerry jumped out of the truck and opened the gate, as Andrew emerged and ambled around to join her. Graham and his crew crossed the pier with the reporter following them, as Mark and Carlos started loosening the straps that held the crates down. “Hi.” Kerry addressed Graham. “This what you need?”

Graham jumped nimbly into the back of the truck and examined the packing slip on the outside of the casing, leaning close to read it and rubbing some grease off with his thumb. After a moment, he straightened up. “It is.” He seemed pleased. “Fellows, give a hand here. We may not be dead in the water after all.” He looked up at Kerry, with a puzzled smile. “I thought this was coming from your other friends… did you have extras?”

“No. It’s theirs.” Kerry said. “I’m just your local FedEx gal.”

The reporter leaned on the side of the truck. “Mind if I ask what’s going on here?”

They all turned and looked at her. Kerry leaned closer. “Are you really sure you want to know?” She asked in a confidential tone. “Or have you figured out yet that the stink around here isn’t from the fish in the channel?”

Elena’s eyes twinkled. “Do tell?” She said. “Because all of a sudden, everyone around here who was more than willing to yap at me all day long clammed up.”

Graham’s men hauled the boxes off the back of the truck and started lugging them inside. He lifted a hand and waved it in Kerry’s direction as he followed them, tactfully leaving her with the reporter out on the pier.

Kerry found herself in a mild dilemma. She knew it would all have to come out sooner or later, but if she told the reporter now, they all still looked like prize jackasses for falling for Quest’s game. If she didn’t let the reporter in on it, though, there was a chance Dar’s instrumental part in exposing the hoax would be overlooked.

Hm. “Want a ride over to the other side of the port?” Kerry offered.

Elena looked at the truck, then at her. She grinned wholeheartedly and hopped up into the bed, giving Andrew a slap on the shoulder. “Stoke em up, Commander. I got a feeling this sucker’s gonna get me either a Pulitzer or another career.”

Kerry got into the back of the truck and settled herself on the wheel well, her booted feet braced against the ribbed bottom of the bed. She spread her arms to either side along the warm metal and gazed steadily at the reporter.

Elena removed a camera from the bag slung over her shoulder and focused it, taking a shot of Kerry just before the truck started to move. “So. “She hastily put the device away and hung on. “What’s the scoop?”

Kerry had pulled her PDA out and was reading it. “Hold that thought.” She said. “It just went from one scoop to a hot fudge sundae.” She got up, balancing carefully and knocked on the window to the cab, sliding it open as Andrew slowed the truck. “ The other ship, Dad. I think it’s all coming down there.”

“Ya’ll know what?” Andrew replied. “Ah do believe this here whole damn thing’s gonna owe all of us a case of damn beer fore it’s over.”

Kerry sat down and braced herself, blinking against the dust in the humid air. “Hell, dad.. if we can just finish this stupid thing, I’m buying.”

The truck rambled over a speed bump and they all bounced.

* * *

"We had a deal." Quest said.

"Yeah, we had a deal… you were supposed to make sure we had the best of everything." Michelle snapped at him. "So where is it?"

Quest spread his arms and turned. "You had the ship in the best condition, the best port, and the best loading crew. I did what I said I would. So now, it's time for you to give me what you owe me." He held his hand up. "I'm out of time on this farce… I want my check. Now."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit nothing. You failed." Quest accused. "You dropped the ball, you little lesbo freak."

Dar stopped just short of entering the room, letting her hand fall against the corner wall that separated the stairs from the open area. Cruickshank stopped with her, and they both listened with remarkably similar expressions.

"What the.." The reporter whispered.

"Hm." Dar pressed against the wall, kneeling down to let the router and laptop rest on the floor before she stood up again and flexed her fingers. "That wasn't part of your script?"

Cruickshank gave her a quick, almost furtive look. "My script?'

Dar snorted softly.

"Wait a minute…we've got some issues with your 'keeping your bargain.' Michelle argued. "In fact, after what I learned today, I don't think we owe you a damn dime." She paused. "You clueless breeder."

"What?"

"Yeah, you're the one who didn't keep up his end of the bargain." Shari pointed at Quest. "You were supposed to keep ILS in the dumpster, and screw them over. What happened to that?"

Cruickshank's jaw dropped. Dar's eyebrows lifted.

"What?" Michelle turned and stared at her partner.

“Insurance, baby.” Shari smiled. “I always take out extra.”

“Without telling me?” Michelle asked sharply. “This was my deal, remember? Who asked you to get involved in it?” She rounded angrily on Shari. “What the hell do you think you were doing making side deals without my knowledge?’

“Ooh.” Cruickshank murmured. “Second though.. glad no camera. Fugly.”

Dar found herself silently agreeing. The last thing on earth she’d ever want to get captured on film would be her and Kerry arguing. “No kidding.” She muttered back.

“Give me a break. Someone has to look out for our money, because you sure as hell don’t.” Shari scoffed.

Dar chose that moment to emerge, circling the end of the stairwell and stalking across the scruffy gray carpet towards the group of arguing people. After a moment, she heard the reporter scurrying out after her and they both arrived at roughly the same moment that Michelle whirled and was about to let her partner have it. “Excuse me.” Dar correctly interpreted the smaller woman’s body language.

Michelle cut off in mid breath and turned, her expression altering. “Thought you went to the ship.”

Shari smirked at Dar. “Finally getting a real clue, redneck?’

“Roberts.” Quest greeted her stiffly.

Dar halted and let her hands rest on her hips. She studied the three jackasses standing in front of her as she considered her options, a faint, yet unpleasant smile crossing her face.

Her options scattered as Michelle grabbed Shari by the arm and pulled her towards the small office in the back of the terminal. Shari looked like she wanted to protest, but then shrugged and went along, the two of them disappearing into the office as Michelle slammed the door closed.

That left Dar, Quest, and Cruickshank standing there in a dour circle looking at each other. “Okay.” Dar finally said. “So now we know you never intended a level playing field.”

Quest shrugged uncomfortably. “You said you were open to challenges.”

Dar chuckled mirthlessly. “You never said you were open to being paid off. I could have afforded more than they could. You should have shopped around.” She gave the reporter a sideways look. “Sure that wasn’t part of your script?’

Cruickshank and Quest exchanged wary glances.

What now? Dar wondered. Everything seemed to be shifting and skewing, leaving her with only a few clear options at this point. Should she blow it all right now? Somehow doing it here, with no one else present didn't suit her sense of strategy.

"Okay." Cruickshank took over. "Well, we've got a new twist here, it seems, Mr. Quest. You've been playing both ends against the middle. Interesting angle." She motioned the filming crew over, who had apparently just finished getting themselves a new camera. "Let's get some of this on screen."

Quest turned and just left. He didn't say a word, he didn't even look back at them. He just walked out of the building and let the door close behind him.

That left Dar to face the cameras, so naturally her cell phone rang. She glanced at the caller id, then opened it. "Afternoon, Alastair."

"Hello there, Dar." Her boss sounded relaxed and cheerful. "How's it going?"

The outer door opened and Kerry slipped inside, spotting her and heading over followed closely by the Herald reporter. The filming crew were approaching from the other side. She could hear shouting from inside the office Michelle and Shari had disappeared into.

It was almost sunset.

"Well." Dar sighed. "Alastair… about the only thing I can tell you right now is that we're at about one hundred percent suckage."

"Ah." Alastair cleared his throat. "That's bad, isn't it?"

"It's… awful."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Ah. Well, is it going to get better?" Alastair asked. "We've got a board meeting on Monday, y'know."

"What's up?" Kerry mouthed, giving the approaching film crew a worried look. 'Where is everyone?"

"Dar?"

If you have a plan, Dar, stick with it. Dar heard the echo of a younger Alastair's advice way back when, at a time where the then VP of Operations had given advice to a new

regional tech manager. "Yeah, Alastair. I'm here. Listen, we've got some stuff to do. I'll give you a buzz back when we're done."

"Ah. Okay.. right." Her boss said. "I know you'll take care of things. You always do."

Dar folded the phone and started backing up. "C'mon, Ker. Help me install a router, huh?"

Kerry gave the reporters a startled look, but followed. Eleana kept right at her heels, a determined expression on her face.

"Wait, wait. Come back here." Cruickshank called after them crossly. "Don't make me chase you down. C'mon now."

"We've got something we have to do." Dar told her. "Maybe later."

Dar picked up the router and laptop from where she'd left it, and they started up the steps.

"What exactly do you have to do in this ship?" Cruickshank called after her. "Break something else?"

They kept going. 'What are you doing?" Elena asked casually. "Sabotage?"

Dar held up the router. "Bringing their circuit up."

"What?"

"It's complicated." Kerry sighed. "And it's only getting worse…. Where's Shari and Michelle??"

"Fighting."

"Jesus."

* * *

"What the fuck?" Michelle whirled as soon as the door closed and faced her partner. "What is going on here?"

"I'm protecting my investment." Shari told her coolly. "Don't look so shocked. You'd have done it if you'd thought of it. That jackass was asking to be paid off."

Michelle went to one of the desk and stood next to it, her hands on the back of the chair and her back to the room. "No, I wouldn't have."

“Bullshit.” Shari said. “You cut a deal for this place, remember? What was that, miss white shoes?”

“I paid for an advantage for us.” Michelle said, through almost clenched teeth. “Not a wrecking ball for them. Don’t you get the point, Shari? Did you ever get the point? I wanted to win. Not beat them.”

“Give me a break.” Shari rolled her eyes. “Take your morals and flush them. Beating them was the only way we were going to win you fool. We had to smash them into the ground, or else this whole thing was just stupid bullshit.”

Michelle sat down in the chair and rested her elbows on her knees. “But we didn’t.”

“Well, if that fucker out there had..”

“He did.” Michelle cut her off. “They bribed the loading crew. Paid off the foreman. Paid off the electricians and plumbers, and put a dozen road blocks in their way.”

“Not enough.”

Michelle laughed bitterly. “No.” She shook her head. “Just be honest for once. They’re just better than we are. Hell, they’re better than anyone is. They’re fucking unbelievable. You know I just watched Dar sit down and do in twenty minutes what it took that stupid guy we paid ten fucking GRAND to do in FOUR GOD DAMN DAYS!!!” She stood up, her voice rising in frustration. “Jesus! Do you know what you set them up for? If this gets out, and that freaking reporter knows despite everything we tried to do, all the money we paid, all the crap you arranged for at god knows what price and despite all that they fucking did it all ANYWAY?? And then helped US??? DO you know what that will look like?”

Shari shrugged, and looked away.

Michelle sat back down. “So, brain trust. What do you suggest we do now?”

Shari walked over and sat down on one of the tables against the wall. Shoved against one corner was the telecommunications gear, and there were a few computers scattered around haphazardly. “Fuck if I know.” She admitted. “Only reason I said anything about the payoff was to get Quest to shut up.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Go to hell.”

“Already there, thanks.”

There was a brief moment of silence. “You two have fun up there in the dark?” Shari asked, in a sarcastic tone.

“No.” Michelle seemed to tired to even be insulted.

“C’mon, you miss an opportunity to grab a little from a good looking woman? No way.”

“Shut up and go to hell.” Michelle said.

“Thought we were already there.” Shari taunted her. “I don’t know, up there in the dark.. I’d have taken a shot at it.” She leaned back on her hands. “What’s the worst she could do? She was a good kisser, way back when.”

Michelle stared ahead of her. “You were right, by the way.”

“What?”

“There was something in that tank at the restaurant.”

Shari got up an walked over to her. “You have fucking lost your mind, you know that? What the hell made you think of that now?”

“It was them.” Michelle looked up, with a quiet, almost tired look. “They were diving in the tank and they deliberately tried to scare the shit out of us.”

“Who…wait.” Shari held her hand up. “ You mean Dar?”

“Both of them. They dive.” The red haired woman said. “Kerry told me about it.” She paused, a trifle awkwardly. “So, if it means anything at this point, I’m sorry. I was wrong.”

Shari seemed for once to be at a loss. “Shit.” She murmured. “So I guess I wasn’t a sicko fixated on Dar then, huh?”

One of Michelle’s ginger eyebrows quirked. “No. You are fixated on her.” She replied evenly. “But you were right, it was her in that tank, and they did screw with us.”

“And caused us to break up. Nice.” Shari said. “Fucking thanks, Dar. You did it again, you stinking whore bitch.”

Michelle shrugged this time. “Well, that’s what you were trying to do to them. I guess it’s just some kind of half assed justice.”

“Fuck that.”

“Whatever.”

“Fuck you too.” Shari walked out, and slammed the door behind her.

Michelle leaned back in the desk chair and put her feet up on the desk. She let her head rest back against the fabric and stared at the gray wall, wishing more than anything that she was back home and out on a sailboat somewhere.

The door opened, and one of the techs came in, stopping short when he saw here there. “Oh, sorry ma’am.” He apologized. “I just need to get my kit.”

“For what?” Michelle asked

The tech seemed taken aback. “Uh.. well, the power just came on, and our stuff’s coming up so.. I mean, you want us to like, test it right?”

Michelle stared at him. “It’s up?”

He nodded. “Yeah.. the server guys were pretty surprised…the pipe’s up. They didn’t think that was gonna happen any time this century, no offense, ma’am.”

“Yeah. I know. I didn’t think so either, but I had.. “ Michelle exhaled. “Someone came over and worked on it. They got the power back on, you said?”

The tech nodded. “Talk about down to the wire. We don’t got but like fifteen more minutes before the deadline.”

Michelle got up and motioned to him. “Get your stuff. Let’s get this project closed.” She walked out the door and into the terminal, thinking so hard she walked right past the cameras bright lights, and didn’t hear Shari’s voice talking to them.

PART 32

"OKAY, OKAY OKAY." ELENA CHASED THEM DOWN THE GANGWAY. "LET ME GET THIS straight."

"That's your first mistake." Kerry muttered. "Nothing in this is straight."

"Especially us." Dar remarked, muffling a grin.

"Dar."

"You are telling me that this entire thing, all these boats and all you guys, this whole thing, all of it.. is one huge Alan Funt stunt?" The Herald reporter sounded utterly incredulous. "Are you insane?"

"We've wondered that over the last few weeks." Kerry admitted. "But no, we're not kidding. It really is a made for television multiple Mongolian cluster poot."

Elena grabbed hold of Kerry's arm and hauled her to a stop. Kerry turned around, and Dar, sensing there was no motion at her back, also stopped and turned.

Seeing her partner being accosted, she marched back in the other direction.

"Easy, slugger." Elena held her free hand up to Dar. "Now you two listen to me." She added. "Do you realize the scoop you just handed over? How amazing a story that is? So I have to be sure it's true, because when I phone this one in, my editor's underwear's going to spin round three times and knit itself into a bootie."

Kerry was impressed with the colorful speech. “Sure, we know that.” She answered. “After all, you looked out for us locals, stands to reason we’d return the favor, right?”

The reporter looked from Dar to Kerry. “It’s really true?”

Dar nodded.

“So.. what’s your plan then.. what are you guys doing?” Elena asked. “You just fixed something on their ship, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. I..”

“Dar.” Kerry reached past the reporter and grabbed hold of her partner’s arm. “Look.”

They looked over the railing to the pier. Shari was leading the filming crew out, heading for the ship with a determined expression. Quest appeared from the left and hurried over to her, meeting the group of them at the end of the gangway. “What’s going on here?”

“What’s going on here?” Shari turned to Quest. “You gave us a challenge, and we beat it. Now it’s time to show it off to you, and let the world see what we can really do.”

“Dar!” Kerry’s jaw dropped. “You just fixed it for them, and now that…”

The reporter rested her hands on the railing. “So, I guess she’s not in on the TV plan?”

“She is.” Dar experienced a sour taste on the back of her tongue. “But I guess she decided to take the low road. Damn.”

“Stop her.” Kerry urged. “C’mon, Dar.. you can’t let her take the credit for what you did!”

“Whoa.” Elena was behind her, snapping pictures.

“Dar!”

Should she just let them do what they wanted? No, Dar supposed she really couldn’t. With a disgusted sigh she edged past Kerry and the reporter and headed back down the walkway towards the ship. “I’m probably going to have to jump down off this thing too. That should make some good video.”

Below, Shari marched up the gangway, the camera crew following her. Quest waited at the end of the gangway, watching them go by with a bemused expression on his face. “Guess this is the ending you were looking for.” He remarked to Cruickshank as she passed.

“Well.. I’ll take it.” The reporter said. “We’ll need to go to the others after this and get some reaction shots.. don’t tell anyone until we do. I want to see their faces.”

Dar growled softly. “See this, you little.. “ She picked a spot near the end of the walkway and put her hands on the rail.

Kerry measured the distance from the second floor walkway to the ground and sped up, her hands reaching out to grab hold of Dar and prevent a possible vault over the railing to the ground. “Oh, bububhhh.. w..”

Dar stopped unexpectedly. Kerry crashed into her. “Hey!”

“Shh.” Dar pointed. Now, closer to the ship, they spotted Michelle in the gangway entrance, standing with her hands on her hips blocking the way.

“Can I ask what’s going on here?” Michelle called out.

Shari stopped, and regarded her warily. “We’re going to show Mr. Quest our results.”

Kerry wedged herself in behind Dar, who was leaning her elbows on the railing. She rested her chin on her partner’s shoulder and watched intently. “Here’s where you prove yourself fish or foul, Michelle.” She whispered.

“Mm.”

“What results?” Michelle asked.

“The system.” Shari looked at her like she was crazy. “I know it’s done. Rafael came and told me. So let’s go and show it off.” She smiled, clearly expecting Michelle to join in. “Let’s get Mr. Quest in there, show him what he’s paying for, and then.. I’ll buy a round for everyone!”

The cameramen cheered. “You’re on.” Cruickshank agreed, with a smile.

“C’mon.” Shari moved forward and put her hand on Michelle’s arm. “We’ve been working like idiots for weeks for this.. let’s go enjoy it.”

Michelle moved her arm out from under the touch. “Sorry.” She addressed the others. “Rafael was wrong. We’re not ready.” She looked at Quest. “So, I guess you can come back later. Or we’ll call you.”

“Ah.” Kerry breathed into Dar’s ear. “Unexpectedly piscean.”

“Mm.”

“What?” Shari barked. “Are you serious?”

Michelle's expression remained mild. "Sure am." She laid a hand on either side of the gangway railing, providing a diminutive, but effective roadblock. "After all the hard work, I'd hate to see us fall flat on our faces trying to show it off, hm? Give us a little more time." She told them. "Then we'll be ready."

Cruickshank seemed a little suspicious. "You sure you're not holding back on us? I heard some of your guys say you were good to go also."

"Yeah." Shari said. "Look, it doesn't have to be perfect.. it's almost sundown. Let's get this over with, Michelle." She lowered her voice and gave Michelle a meaningful look. "We both want that."

The redhead merely held her ground. "Nope. Sorry." She said. "I designed this, and I'll say when it's ready. Not Rafael, not Julio, and not George Barfing Washington. Me. I say it's not ready. Everyone got that?"

"Oo." Kerry leaned on Dar's shoulder. "About time that side of her showed up."

"I didn't know she had a side like that." Dar mused.

Quest finally shrugged. "As you wish." He turned and started to walk away. "Just bear in mind, I have finite patience, and we have an agreement to conclude."

"Yeah." Cruickshank recouped the situation. "Let's talk about that deal, shall we?" She motioned the camera forward. The big lights came on, washing the side of the ship in bland silver, blanking out the golden sun. "You paid off Mr. Quest to help you win the bid. Is that it?'

"Yohoho." Elena chortled softly. "Arr.. there be pirates around here, matey."

Shari turned. "That's right." She replied boldly. "The name of the game is winning, Ms. Cruickshank. That's what we do. We win." She added. "Now, excuse us. I need to talk to my… partner." She moved further up the gangway, forcing Michelle to step back.

"But, wait." The reporter said. "I'm not finished with you two."

"You're finished." Shari said. She walked off into the ship, taking Michelle by the arm and guiding her inside without any visible protest from the red haired woman. They disappeared into the dark inside of the hold, leaving the reporters outside.

Cruickshank put the microphone down, and the lights went off. She turned and looked at the lead cameraman. "What do you think?"

"I think she's lying." The man said, promptly. "I think she's in cahoots with those other guys."

"Who, Graver?"

The man nodded. "Yeah. Something's fishy. You said you saw that other woman bringing in some of their equipment? And we saw that other stuff being taken away in that truck."

"Hm. And we thought we were being so subtle." Kerry lamented softly.

"Well, I think you're right." Cruickshank said. "Something ain't gelling here. We've got all the ramp up film we need to make this story, and now when we're getting to the critical point – they're backing off."

"Right." The cameraman nodded. "Hey, you think maybe those other guys paid them off? They've got the dough."

Cruickshank tapped the mic against her thigh. "Maybe." She said. "Let me go talk to the boss. We've put too much cash into this ourselves to lose out due to some monkey business."

"Ook Ook." Dar hooted softly.

They watched the crew leave, crossing the pier and walking right under the walkway they were standing on. After they disappeared, Dar and Kerry straightened up and looked at each other.

Then they looked at the reporter.

"Okay." Eleana said. "So, what's the endgame here, folks? What are you going to get out of this whole shebang? That's what I want to know. What's the goal?"

It was a very good question. "To go home." Kerry answered. "We've been wasting our time here for weeks, spending god only knows how much money on this project, putting sweat and tears into it, and for what?"

"Hm." The reporter said. "Couldn't you go and get Quest, and take him to your ship, and have them show you guys as the ones that finished everything? Wouldn't that get you something? Good press? Yes?"

"We could." Dar agreed, turning to lead the way down the walk to a stairwell in the corner between their ship and this one. "Yeah, we could."

"So.. why don't you?"

Dar was silent for a few steps, turning her head to watch Kerry's expression from the corner of her eye. The blond woman was gazing ahead of them with gentle patience,

waiting for her to answer for both of them. “What do you think, Ker? Should we just go do it?”

Kerry turned and looked at her, cocking her head a little. “No.” She said. “I don’t want to give those television people what they want. You said it the last time, Dar. The only way we win in this thing, is to take away their goal, not go for ours.”

“So, let me understand this.” Eleana said. “You’re deliberately forfeiting all this fun television notoriety, and wasting all those dollars, just to piss off the filming company for arranging all this?”

Dar considered that. “Something along those lines.” She agreed. “The thing is, I don’t like being played. Neither does Kerry.”

“No one does.” Kerry interjected. “Michelle doesn’t. Shari’s..”

“Just an asshole.” Dar completed the sentence. “So we told the rest of the teams what was up, and promised we’d help everyone finish on time. That gets their projects paid for by Quest.”

“And by everyone finishing at the same time, cooperating like kids in the schoolyard, there’s no drama.” Elena said.

“Not even dyke drama. Yes.” Kerry agreed.

“D’you feel like idiots that they got so far with it before you figured it out?”

Dar chuckled softly. “Yeah.”

They walked down the stairs and headed for the terminal building. “So, why do you think Michelle Graver went along with the plan back there?” Elena asked. “Or was she telling the truth, and they’re not ready?”

“They’re ready.” Dar said.

“You know that for sure?”

“I brought their systems up.” Dar reached for the door handle and pulled the door open, standing back to allow them to enter. “So if Michelle chose to say otherwise, all I can assume is that she just decided to stand by her word.”

“Ah huh.” Elena entered, scribbling notes as she walked. “That surprise you?”

“Oh yeah.” Both Dar and Kerry answered at the same time.

The terminal was mostly empty, just a few techs were sitting around, kicking their heels and waiting for something to happen. 'Hey, Ms. Roberts..'' One of them, standing by the counter with a cell phone in his hand spotted them. "We're gonna do pizza.. you in?"

The casual nature of the question charmed Dar to the core. "Sure." She agreed, reminded irresistibly of a much younger time in her life when she'd done what the tech did and lived on pizza and takeout Chinese. "Dominos?

The man nodded. "Yeah.

"Thin and crispy, half vegetarian half meat lovers, extra cheese." Kerry supplied succinctly. "And dots. Two cokes."

"You got it, " The man grinned at her.

Dar walked over to him, tugging her wallet out of her pocket. She removed a card and tossed it on the counter. "Put it on that." She instructed. "Tell them they get a ten percent bonus if they get it here and I don't confuse the cheese with a box of rubber bands."

Elena chuckled, putting her pad down by her side as she stood next to Kerry. " You two are characters, you know that?" She said. "My boss told me this morning after I let him on some of what was going on, that he wants me to make this a banner story, front page in the business section, in three parts."

"Yeah?" Kerry said. "Is that good?"

The reporter chuckled. "He doesn't know the half of it. Wait till I call him." She said. "Mind if I use your office back there, to do that?"

Kerry glanced at the back of the room, which was echoingly empty. "No, go a head." She agreed, watching as the reporter walked away from her. She waited a moment, then she headed across the carpet to join Dar, who was sitting on the counter. "Sheesh."

"Long day." Dar agreed, with a sigh. "But it's almost over, sweetheart."

Kerry smiled at the endearment. "Know what? I've really enjoyed working on this with you. Despite everything."

Dar ruffled her hair. "Likewise."

They looked up as the front door opened, and Cruickshank entered, with an unexpected Jason Meyer strolling in with her.

"Ah." Kerry exhaled. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Oh yeah." Dar muttered. "Big time."

The two newcomers stopped in front of them. “We need to speak to you.” Meyer said, with little trace of his former attitude in New York. “Can we have some privacy?”

Dar’s eyebrow arched. “Sure.” She slid off the counter and gestured towards the office. “After you.”

Cruickshank also stood back. “Sir?” She addressed Meyer. “Please.”

Sir? Kerry felt the situation tilt radically, and she was suddenly reminded of the test on the ship. Was this another test?

Or what?

* * *

“What the hell was that all about?” Shari rounded angrily on Michelle. “You know damn well this thing’s ready.”

“It’s not.”

“Bullshit!” Shari said. “What kind of game are you playing now, Michelle?”

“Fuck you.” Michelle enunciated the words carefully. “Like I told Cookie Puss, this is my design, and I say when it’s ready. Not the techs, and not you.” She pulled away and started for the elevator.

“Yeah? How much did she pay you off with?” Shari yelled after. “Or did she promise you a three way?”

Michelle turned at the doorway and looked back at her. “You know what? If she asked me, I would.” She turned and disappeared into the hall.

“Would what?” Shari shouted.

A door slammed, echoing in the hold.

“Doesn’t make any god damned sense!” Frustrated, Shari picked up a discarded tube of cardboard and threw it across the hold, bouncing it off the wall. The heat, and the dirt were getting to her, and she went to the edge of the gangway to get a breath of air.

She hated this place. The stink and the noise of the shipyard made her stomach churn, and as she looked out over the cracked pavement, even the color of the faded building made her sick.

Her attention focused on the gate that separated the pier area from the street. A tall figure had walked to it, opened the lock and entered, and she recognized him immediately as Andrew Roberts. “Asshole.” She muttered, as the big man ambled across the concrete.

How had she missed that, when she’d first seen him? His bastard kid looked just like him, so how hadn’t she figured it out? Same body carriage, same eyes, same kiss my ass attitude. She knew Andrew had been in the Navy, and from what she’d been able to decipher from her brief time with Dar she figured he’d been in some kind of special forces.

Well, he looked like it. He was wearing a tank top, and even though he was no youngster, he had an impressive muscularity that reminded her more than a bit of his daughters. As she watched, a short, furtive figure emerged from the shadows and intercepted him, the little man’s attitude one of craven beseechment.

Andrew halted and looked at him, cocking his head in a listening motion.

Shari squinted a little, looking at the little creep as well. He seemed familiar to her, but she couldn’t think of where from. She walked out onto the gangway and headed towards them, but they saw her approaching and both turned and walked away.

She stopped. “Aw, what in the hell am I doing?” With a sigh of disgust, she turned around and started for the terminal building, with it’s musty if efficient air conditioning.

Halfway there, she stopped, and turned around again. Both Andrew and the other man had disappeared beneath the gantries next to the other ship, but there weren’t many places they could have gone. With a sudden narrowing of her eyes, Shari followed them.

* * *

Mark wiped the sweat from his eyes, surveying the work they’d just completed. “Skanky racks.” He commented.

“Yeah.” The tech from ship three answered. “Cheapos.” He put a hand on one stanchion and shook it, demonstrating the relative flimsiness. “Sucks, but they’re squeezing every penny out of this.”

“Uh huh.” Mark flipped the switches on the equipment and watched as the lights began to dance. The fans sounded almost deafening in the small space. “Loud suckers.”

“Glad I don’t have to listen to em.” His companion agreed. “Where the hell did they come from? Johnny said they were hung up in customs coming in.”

“We got them from Telegenics.” Mark said.

“No SHIT?”

“Yeah.”

“What the F?”

Mark shrugged. “They had extra. My boss kicked them in the ass and made them cough it up.”

“Whoa!”

The equipment finished flashing and settled down to a more sedate blinking of its many lights. Mark began methodically plugging cables into the front of the device, following some obscure format known probably only to him.

The tech joined him, and they inserted RJ45 jacks without speaking for a while. Halfway through, the tech cleared his throat. “So, what’s it like working for them?”

“Kickass.” Mark replied briefly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How long you worked there?”

“Ten years.” Mark answered. “You hear bullshit, bullshit, bullshit about ILS, but for IT jobs, it rocks. You get the best gear, the best new stuff, and cool bosses.”

“Huh.”

“When was the last time you brought a firmware bug to your CIO and they fixed it?”

The tech blinked at him.

“In fucking credible.” Mark went back to plugging in cables. He looked up as the door to the small wiring closet opened, revealing Carlos. “Yeah? You done?”

“This is the last one.” Carlos pointed at the machine Mark was working on. “Had some bad fiber patch upstairs, but Manny came over with the terminator and fixed it.”

“Cool.” Mark nodded. “You hear how it was going next door?”

“Manny said he took care of them. Whoever put that backbone in was sucking.” Carlos reported. “He had to re-terminate all the strands. It took him a long time.”

“Man, I’m glad we didn’t go with those guys.” Mark muttered. “They were pitching Kerry and telling her they could do it for half price, but what bullshit.”

“But isn’t the whole deal to do this as cheap as possible?” The tech standing next to him queried. “I thought that was the gag, to get the whole contract. Lowball. Right?”

Mark sighed. “Yeah.” He admitted. “That was the whole point, but you know, Kerry just can’t do it. We threw that around when she was looking at the vendor bids.. and it wasn’t cool to compromise on that stuff. We lose contracts all the time cause of that.”

Everyone was silent for a bit. Carlos was leaning in the doorway, scrubbing his hands and working a splinter out of the palm since their was no room in front of the switch for more than two people to plug things into it.

“So, is that cool?” The tech finally asked. “I mean, that’s why Telegenics is so big now, right?”

Mark was quiet for a few moments, gazing at the switch as he thought. “For business? I think it’s not really that cool.” He finally said. “But for me, yeah, it’s cool because I like to feel cool about stuff I put my name on. I don’t put my name on crap, and neither does she.”

“Huhh.” The tech went back to plugging.

“This whole thing is getting so crazy.” Carlos picked up the conversational ball. “I really can’t figure out what is going on.”

Mark snorted. “Join the club.”

“Yeah.”

* * *

The reporter was nowhere to be found. Kerry looked around the small office, then shrugged and closed the door behind her as she followed Dar and the two newcomers into the room. Maybe Elena had stepped outside instead of into the close, somewhat depressing space, and she could hardly have blamed her.

Dar took a seat on the top of one of the desks, trading the comfort of the desk chairs for the advantage of height as she faced Meyer and Cruickshank. She braced a casual foot on he chair though, and rested her forearm on her knee.

What role should she play? Kerry wondered, knowing she had only seconds to decide. Sometimes she and Dar swapped positions, and she took the lead, but she sensed that this would not be a good place to do that. Certainly, their two visitors were focused on her partner…

Hmm.

Kerry took a seat in the desk chair next to where Dar was sitting, and leaned back, resting her elbows on the chair arms and crossing her legs at the ankles. “So.” She addressed the two. “What’s this all about?”

They looked at Dar.

Dar remained silent, one brow lifted slightly.

“We don’t really have the time to play around here.” Kerry continued. “And I think you’ve wasted more than enough people’s time, effort, and money already. So, if you’ve got something to say, go ahead.” She read Dar’s body posture from the corner of her eye, and exhaled, figuring she’d guessed right.

Dar lifted her arm and draped it over the back of the chair Kerry was seated in, her fingers casually brushing her partner’s pale hair.

“Well.” Meyer took the lead on his part. “First of all, I guess you can figure out that I’m not quite who I presented myself to be the last time we met.” He leaned back against one of the desks, resting his weight on both hands. Cruickshank stood by quietly, her hands folded in front of her.

Dar considered the words. “Are you more or less of an asshole than you were pretending to be?” She asked bluntly.

Meyer chuckled. “Well, depends who you ask.” He conceded. “Let me explain.”

“Should I take notes?” Kerry inquired. “Because this scorecard’s getting big enough to be mounted above the bleachers in Pro Player Stadium.”

Meyer looked at her, but didn’t respond, He licked his lips and paused a moment, then fastened his eyes back on Dar. “My name is, surprisingly, Jason Meyer. But I’m not an IT executive, though for a few months, I did play one on television.” He smiled at Dar. “That’s confidential, since the rest of the folks in New York didn’t know they were on candid camera.”

Dar just looked at him.

“It’s a reality concept we’re pitching called “Fooled Ya!” Cruickshank supplied quietly. “That was our pilot program.” She added. “I’m not a newspaper reporter, either.”

“Right.” Meyer agreed. “Deal was, I’d get hired on, see how far I could take it. Fake credentials, fake background, fake previous employers.. how much could I push it? Well, I pushed it to the limit, and just when I was about to take it over the top, you showed up.”

Kerry leaned forward. “You risked a major corporation, and the jobs of thousands of people for a game show?”

Meyer shrugged. “They hired me.” He said. “They took a risk, and so did we, and thanks to your interference, my risk didn’t pan out.”

“My interference?” Dar sounded incredulous. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He shrugged again. “You blew my ending.” He said. “But interacting with you gave me the idea for this project, and I was able to sell it to my money people. But this time, you’re not going to do it again.” He stated. “So let’s start talking money, and drop all the other bullshit because as you pointed out, Ms. Stuart, we don’t have time to play around.”

He slapped his hand on the desk. “Cards on the table time, Roberts. Either we’re both going to walk out of here winning, or we’re both going to walk out of here losing, and trust me, baby, you’re gonna lose more than I will.”

Dar folded her arms. She eyed the two of them with a dourly shrewd expression. “All right. What’s your deal?” She asked. “What exactly do you want?”

Meyer smiled. “That’s the answer I wanted to hear. So listen up.”

* * *

“Okay, we’re done.” Mark dusted his hands off. “C’mon, Carlos. Let’s go. I bet they got pizza left back there.”

“You got it.” Carlos pushed off from the doorway and stood back as Mark left the room. “So, is this ship okay now?”

“Dunno.” Mark turned back. “Is it?” He asked the tech.

The tech was connected to the new equipment via a laptop, and he merely gave Mark a thumbs up rather than be distracted from what he was doing.

“Good deal. Later.” Mark was satisfied. He joined Carlos and they walked along the hallway, turning sideways as several of the crew passed in the other direction. “Y’know, I feel kinda sorry for these guys.”

Carlos looked behind him. “Those guys?” He jerked a thumb at the crew. “Or the guys in the wiring room?”

“The ship guys.” Mark said. “Cause if big D is right, and this is all a scam, it sucks for them, you know?”

Carlos was quiet for a few steps. “I am sorry.” He said. “But after they did what they do to us with the ship I do not feel sorry for them. Ms. Kerry could have been very hurt, and one of us did get so.”

Mark frowned. “Yeah, I know.” He said. “That did really suck. If Kerry’d gotten hurt, Big D would have gone apeshit.”

“She was very pissed off.” Carlos agreed. “She even yelled at her papa.”

“Uh huh.” Mark thought about that as they walked. “Her pop’s cool.”

“Si.”

“He’s crazy about both of em. Did you know he was MIA for like, years? They thought he was dead.”

Carlos blinked. “Really? I did not know that… how sad.”

“Yeah. Big D’s been through a lot of stuff in the last few.” Mark lead the way down the gangway to the pier, and headed to the fence gate. “But she’s good people.”

“Oh yes, I think so too.” Carlos nodded. He looked around. “So is this it? Are we done now?”

Mark certainly hoped so. It was getting late, he was tired as hell, and it was Friday. He was looking forward to leaving the pier, getting a shower and a cold beer, and moving on to whatever it was they were going to do next.

Hopefully, it would have nothing to hell to do with boats. Maybe Dar would push out development of the new router thing she’d written. That would be a couple of development cycles at least, and working on Dar’s stuff was always a kick.

It worked, even when it was only half baked and undocumented. He was still finding little scripts and programs of hers every time he rummaged around in the systems, nothing huge, but just scrappy bits of code that kept stuff running in the background with little fanfare.

Kind of like Dar, sometimes. “Yeah, I think we’re done.” Mark said. “Let’s go find the boss, and wrap this whole damn thing up.”

“You know what I think?” Carlos said. “I think we should get together, and we should take our bosses out because they have been so nice to us. You think we could?”

Mark was briefly silent, as they crossed the roadway and entered the huge, now empty, parking lot that separated the two sides of the port. The sun was going down, and the breeze was now cooler, drying the sweat on the back of his neck as he walked.

Taking Dar out was tough. Her view was, she was the boss, and she made the big bucks. So she paid the dinner check. Mark knew it well, because he'd tried it often enough even with something as cheap as a freaking pizza.

But, who knew? Maybe they'd pull it off this time. Maybe he could grab the waiter before they sat down and give them a credit card. "Sure. We can try." He answered Carlos, as they walked up the steps to the terminal behind their ship. "What the heck.. worst she could do is whack me one."

Carlos opened the door and they entered, getting several steps into the room before they both stopped and stared.

A huge crowd was gathered, surrounding a television screen on a cart. While they watched, several camera men roamed back and forth, shooting them.

"What the hell?" Mark spluttered. "What's going on?"

"Shh." One of the crowd hushed him.

Mark sidestepped around until he could see the television, blinking as he recognized Dar's distinctive figure on it.

A moment more, and he recognized the room she was in as the back office not fifty feet from where he was standing and as the picture shifted awkwardly, Kerry came into focus as well.

But what the hell was going on?

More importantly, did Dar know what was going on? It looked like she was being interviewed, but with the door closed, did she have any idea that everyone was listening in?

The huge crowd blocked any approach to the back office door, but Mark knew that crowd wouldn't have stopped Dar, and it sure as hell wasn't going to stop him. "C'mon." He grabbed Carlos' arm.

* * *

"What exactly do you want?" Kerry asked.

"Nothing much." Meyer replied. "Except a nice, suspenseful, dramatic ending that will suck ratings and pay off for my backers."

"Like what?" Kerry persisted. "Mr. Meyer, in case you hadn't noticed we're IT. Last time I checked, nerds weren't hip and trendy media darlings."

"Exactly. That's why this story turned out so interesting." The man said. "Because frankly, if you'd told me a bunch of geeks and a dirty shipyard would make good television before I was on this project, I'd have kicked your sorry asses right out of my office."

"And?" Dar asked.

"And I've found there's drama in all this in very unexpected places." Meyer said. "Big drama in those old ships and the people on them, big drama in the idea of four companies going head to head to win something, and big drama in everyone fighting like cats and dogs, stabbing each other in the back at every turn. Lady, I couldn't have hired a top flight scriptwriter to make up something sassier than this has been."

"So what do you want from us?" Kerry asked, again. "If you've got such a great story here, I mean."

Meyer smiled at her. "We know what you're doing." He said. "

"Do you?" Dar smiled back at him.

"Oh yes. Your friends at Telegenics were very emotive and detailed in relating your little plan to scotch my ending." Meyer said. "I know you've been helping the other ships to finish, and I know you coerced Telegenics into giving up some of their spare equipment for those other guys."

"Coerced?" Kerry gave him a puzzled look. "They offered."

"Ms. Stuart, please." Meyer gave her a condescending smile.

"And?" Dar asked again. "So you're right. We're not playing your game. We'll all finish dead even, present our bills, and go home."

Cruickshank had positioned herself carefully, standing to one side of her apparent boss and at an angle, so she could look at both Dar and Kerry. She kept her hands folded in front of her, her fingers moving restlessly as though playing with worry beads.

The motion caught Kerry's attention, and she watched the reporter from the corner of her eye. The conversation so far had seemed to her to be mostly just hot air. It was as though Meyer were merely spouting off for the record, as though…

Kerry's eyes narrowed.

"No, no you won't." Meyer said. "I've learned a number of things about you in the last few months, Roberts. At first I thought you were just a high priced jackass."

“Half right.” Dar drawled. “Which half depends on who you ask.”

“But you’re not.” Meyer strolled closer to her. “And that’s the only reason I’m here, Roberts. Because I know you can deliver what I’m asking for.”

Dar’s eyebrows lifted.

“And I won’t waste either of our time playing to your sense of fairness.”

“My sense of fairness?” Dar chuckled. “I’m not the one who sweated my tail off trying to rig the contest here, Jason.”

Kerry felt a slight buzz at her belt. Distracted, she glanced at her cell phone, but the vibration didn’t continue. She lifted it and examined the device, a tickle of familiarity tugging at her memory about it.

“Most of the people here.. they just didn’t get what I was after.” Meyer said. “They didn’t feel what I felt, about how this story could really be a groundbreaker.”

“I’m not sure why you think anyone would care.” Dar finally got up, pacing around the chair and twisting to loosen a kink in her back. “I sure don’t.”

Meyer looped both hands around one knee. “Let me lay it on the line for you.”

“Here’s a first for this project.” Kerry muttered, leaving her phone for the moment and concentrating on the scene before her.

Meyer ignored her. “It’s really simple. There’s a lot of money being put into this deal, money I’m not prepared to either risk or lose.” He moved a little closer, facing off against Dar. “So here’s the deal. You play ball with me, and I give you one million US dollars. In cash.”

A small silence followed his words. Then Dar shifted a little. “I think you know that’s not a big figure for ILS.” She half shrugged. “That’s the coffee budget for the year.”

He smiled. “I think you know I’m not offering it to your company.” Meyer replied. “And even someone who makes what you do, has desires that could take care of, now couldn’t it?”

Kerry’s phone buzzed a little again, but she ignored it, her attention fixed on her partner’s profile. She could hear her own heartbeat thundering in her ears as she strained to listen for Dar’s answer, uneasily aware that for one of the rare times in their relationship, she really didn’t know what that answer would be.

Fortunately, she didn’t have long to wait.

Dar's eyes glinted gently. "You can't buy me." She said, with a quiet smile. "Even if I only had my last paycheck in the bank, I'd still tell you to kiss my ass."

Meyer didn't even look at Kerry. It was as though she wasn't even there. He nodded a few times, giving Dar a wry look. "I thought you'd say that. So.. here's the real deal." He leaned forward. "The one you can't say no to."

* * *

Shari walked past the back doors to the pier building, giving the guards with their noses plastered to the glass a puzzled frown as she passed them. What in the hell were they looking at? Free freak show, maybe? She gave her quarry a quick glance, then dismissed the windows and hurried on so as not to lose them. Probably wasn't interesting anyway… probably just staring at Psycho Bitch's legs.

Well, to hell with them. She paused behind a stack of pallets as Andrew and the little guy stopped just short of the gangway. It appeared to her that they were arguing, or at least, the larger man was lecturing, and didn't that just figure?

Only thing you get out of a jackass is another jackass. Andrew's vicious attitude towards her left a nasty sting, and she'd decided if he was doing something shady, well, she'd just find a way to screw him over it, just like she had his pissant offspring.

"Let's play nice, huh? Let's end up even. Fuck that." Shari muttered, as she edged around the stack of pallets and skulked over to the next one, trying to stay out of sight and yet get close enough to listen. She'd agreed to hear Dar out only to see what the bitch was up to, and she'd figured Michelle was after the same thing, but after that last piece of crap..

Fucking Michelle. All she wanted was to be part of their little clique. She should have realized that since Orlando, with all that breakfast and dinner bullshit. She'd finally cut that out after they'd gotten stood up in that grunge pit.

Blew up the whole glamour, Shari'd thought. But apparently she'd been wrong, since it was pretty clear that all Michelle wanted now was to suck up and probably get a job with them.

Asshole.

She watched the two men walk up onto the gangway and enter the ship, and after a moment to let them get past the rusted iron, she followed.

It was quiet now – most of the dock workers had left, and the ships were sitting placidly in their piers with just a soft sound of clanking coming from them.

Shari walked up the gangway and paused in the entrance, looking around the somewhat dark interior. She didn't see anyone, so she continued on and prowled inside the hold. Some boxes were stacked against the back wall, and she searched around them, but they were apparently towels or something equally boring.

There was no sign of the two men. She searched further, sticking her head warily into a small cul de sac before she reluctantly headed for the stairs. She'd gotten up two steps when she heard voices behind her, and she stopped, listening intently.

"Mister, ah am telling you that you can not hide yerself in this here boat no more." Andrew's voice rumbled through the silence, almost making the dust motes on the stair railing dance.

"You listen. We go soon, and no more BS." Another voice answered, equally deep, but with an odd accent. "What you think you did here, to bring someone to touch my ship? I should kill you."

Andrew just laughed. It was an odd, out of place sound, and listening to it Shari could hear a clear echo of Dar.

"Little feller, ah am not going to mess with what you just said. Either you go tell the man upstairs you got you some trouble, or ah will."

"I come to you for help, because you know the sea and this is how you treat me?" The other man said, indignantly. "You are no sailor."

"Git." Andrew's voice sounded more stern. "Or ah'll pick yer ass up and tote you up there."

The voices faded, amid a few clanging, metallic sounds.

Shari popped out of the stairwell and followed the noise, ducking her head around a metal doorway and spotting two small staff elevators. One was just closing. "Damn."

Was it worth following them? Hell, whatever the dumpy guy was probably something stupid like smuggling Cuban goddamn cigars. Not worth her time.

Shari drummed her fingers on the metal. No, that wasn't worth her time but maybe she could cause some damage on her own. Wouldn't it be a kick if the bitch sisters went to demo their wonderful crap and it died?

With a smile, she went back to the stairwell and started up it.

* * *

The memory came back to Kerry with a startling fury. She reached over without thinking and took hold of Dar's wrist, her fingers tightening on the bones under the skin.

Dar looked at her, and an eyebrow quirked.

About to speak, Meyer paused. "Something wrong?"

How to let Dar know? Kerry wished they really had the psychic connection she sometimes wondered about. There was nothing she could say that would clue her partner in, without also cluing in the other two.

Or was that a bad thing?

"You okay?" Dar half turned, her voice dropping in concern.

What what what what.. oh. "I just remembered something." Kerry said. "What we were talking about when you were hanging up side down in the closet."

Dar blinked, her face caught between puzzlement, and the obvious notion that Kerry had lost her mind. Then her gaze shifted slightly, moving past Kerry, before it came back and focused again. "And how this is different than that was?"

I love you. "Yes."

"Ah." Dar nodded. "Yeah." She turned back to Meyer. "You were saying?"

"I was saying this." Meyer gave her an odd look, but continued. "The bottom line is, I want my company to come out ahead. You want your company to come out ahead. We all know this ship deal's a scam, right?"

"Right." Kerry murmured, trying not to look at Cruickshank.

"My brother's on the board of directors of the biggest cruise line on earth." Meyer said. "So what I'm prepared to put on the table is an assurance that ILS will get that nice, big, lucrative juicy contract that we all know you're lusting over, and that we all know you know is the only possible gain out of this."

"And?" Dar folded her arms over her chest.

"And, what you need to deliver to me is you taking the checkered flag. Is that so hard?"

"So, let me get this right." Kerry said. "You want to film us showing Quest our system, and 'winning' the bid."

"Exactly."

“And for that, you guarantee ILS that big contract?’

“Exactly.”

“Mr. Meyer, if we ‘win’ this ‘bid’, we’ll get that contract anyway.” Kerry remarked simply. “In fact, even if we do nothing, we’ll probably get that contract because the fact is, we’re the best at what we do and everybody knows it.”

Meyer stared at her. Dar bumped her gently with her shoulder, a grin tugging at the corners of her lips. “Got anything else? Because frankly, it’s beer time.” Kerry added. “And we’re done here.”

Cruickshank edged a little closer, then went still again.

“Not everyone in your company shares your confidence, I’m afraid.” Meyer said. “Like your board of directors. They’ll take a bird in the hand and leave you two in the bushes. Want to see?”

“Sure.” Dar felt a jolt of unease.

“No problem.” Meyer put his cell on the desk and dialed a number, the sound of the tones echoing softly in the room.

* * *

“Holy shit.” Mark had paused, halfway through the crowd. He’d gotten close enough to the screen to hear the last thing said, and everyone went quiet, to hear what would happen next.

He’d never get across in time. He knew it. Damned if he wanted to stand there and watch Dar get shafted though. He knew the board well enough to know if they were offered that much bucks, they’d toss Dar to the wolves.

He thought Dar knew that too, though you couldn’t tell it from her face.

Man. This was gonna suck.

“What’s happening?” Carlos whispered.

“Serious suckage.” Mark uttered back. “Where the hell’s their power cords.. I’d love to yank them out of the.. Jesus, is that a UPS?”

“Yeah.”

“Guess they’re smarter than they look.” Mark realized glumly. He could start yelling and cause a scene, but he was stuck at the moment, not sure what to do. He didn’t want his

boss and friend to be embarrassed on tape, but on the other hand, breaking the crowd up wouldn't look great either.

"Can we do something?" Carlos asked. "I know where is the power and the lights. They are using the UPS for their cameras, but that television is coming from the wall over there."

Mark's eyes brightened. "Great. C'mon."

"The power door, it is for sure locked."

Mark smiled. "Buddy, that's the last thing you need to worry about with me around. Lead. Go. Move." He nudged Carlos, who started worming his way through the back of the crowd.

"Hello?"

Mark stopped and grabbed Carlos. "Too late."

"What?"

Slowly, Mark turned towards the screen, recognizing the voice that had just echoed slightly in the room.

* * *

Kerry felt like her entire midsection was tied in square knots. She had a sick feeling that Meyer had trumped them, and now it would give him, the bastard, exactly the ending he'd been looking for.

They'd fallen for it. They'd been suckered.

Muskrats! Stupid, neutered, pissant muskrats!

"Hello?" A voice answered the cell phone. "Hello?"

"Ah, Mr. Maclean." Meyer said. "This is Jason Meyer. Remember me?"

"Absolutely! Sure do." Alastair replied. "Was just discussing what you told me with some of my colleagues. In fact. They're pretty darn excited."

Kerry looked at Dar, wondering how she could keep that stolid an expression when she, more than anyone, knew what the score was here. Her partner's half smile, and look of mild unconcern hadn't budged an inch. Dar was no actor, could she really think the board would back her?

Kerry knew the board. Some of them were okay. Some she even liked, and Alastair had a special place in her heart because she sensed in him a genuine caring for Dar that went past their business relationship. She suspected, in a way, that the CEO had gone out of his way to guide Dar as she was developing her skills and provided some needed support to her when things got tough.

But money was money, and business was business. Kerry eased closer so their shoulders made contact and just hoped it was over fast.

"Good to hear. Listen.. I've pretty much gotten that deal sealed up here, but I've run into a roadblock, maybe you can help me with it." Meyer said. "In fact, I'm sure you can."

"Sure." Alastair agreed cheerfully. "What do you need?"

Meyer looked across at his adversary, and smiled. "Well, here's the problem. We're about done here. Your team's done a great job, and they finished first. Great job!"

Alastair chuckled.

"I told your folks here all I need is for them to let me get that on film, and the contract's yours." Meyer continued. "And they turned me down."

"Eh?"

"Seems they made a deal with the other folks here not to win." Jason continued. "So they're turning down my offer. Now.. you can fix that, right?"

"Well, I'm sure I can, but.."

"Now, I don't have time to waste on phone calls or meetings. It's sundown. Deal's done. Can you fix this, Mr. Mclean? I'm sure you can. Give me your word right now, and I'll consider it done."

Dar felt her throat go dry, and she was glad she wasn't speaking. Alastair would think she'd lost her mind, along with her better business judgment.

This was it. She'd crossed the line. Dar drew in a breath, and wanly wished only that Kerry wasn't there to have to witness this.

"Mr. McLean? Can I get your promise?" He gazed across at Dar with a look of quiet triumph.

Kerry put her arm around Dar's waist. To hell with the cameras.

There was a long moment's silence, then Alastair's voice came through the crackling connection with uncommon clarity. "Well, Mr. Meyer, no you can't."

Drawing in a breath to speak, Meyer halted. “What?”

Dar’s lips twitched, just slightly.

“Fraid I can’t give you that promise.” Alastair did sound regretful.

“Why the hell not?”

“Folks on the scene there made a decision.” The CEO of ILS stated. “I respect that.”

Meyer stared at the phone in utter disbelief. “Wait, you’re telling me that I’m offering you a golden deal, and you’re not going to take it because some idiot here who works for you, and who obviously doesn’t have your company’s best interests in mind said otherwise?”

Alastair’s voice dropped into a cold, startling crispness in a heartbeat. “You know something, mister? That idiot’s been with me a long time. Never could get her to do anything she didn’t want to do, but you know what? It’s always for a damn good reason.”

“Well, what about your board? I’m sure they don’t’ feel the same way.” Meyer rallied desperately, his eyes darting to Cruickshank.

“Have a great day, Jason. Sorry things didn’t work out.” Alastair said, just before he hung up, sending a solid click down the line.

A tenuous silence fell. Meyer looked up, finally, and met Dar’s eyes.

Dar found a smile somewhere that she really wasn’t feeling. She produced it anyway, just to watch Meyer grind his teeth in reaction, as she felt Kerry relax against her in relief.

The silence lengthened as nobody seemed to be sure what to do next. Then Dar caught the faint hint of light reflecting off something moving in the frame of Cruickshank’s oversized sunglasses, and with a determined look, started towards her.

* * *

Mark stood in the middle of the crowd, a grin on his face. The people around him were stirring and conversation buzzed louder, as the camera people stood in silence, now unsure of what to cover.

“That was…” Carlos hesitated. “Who was that, was that the big boss, yes?”

“Yeah.” Mark saw a loosening in the throng, and took the opportunity to start moving towards the office door. “C’mon.”

“He did a good thing.” Carlos followed him.

“Buddy, you don’t know.” Mark edged past two tall men craning their necks to watch the television. Abruptly the picture cut off, fading to a glum black and the chatter level rose in reaction. They were halfway to the office door when it abruptly opened.

“Send me a bill for the damn camera!” A low voice carried out into the hall. “I’ll pay the postage from hell, which is where you both belong!”

“Roberts!” A man’s outraged voice answered. “Come back!”

“Kiss my ass!” Dar walked out, her brisk stride slowly turning to a dead stop as she spotted the crowd turning to stare at her. Both eyebrows jerked up in surprise. “What the hell’s this?”

One of the camera people brushed by her and headed for the office. Another woman joined him, while the group near the television started to turn and gravitate towards Dar.

Quest appeared from somewhere, and shoved through the throng, also headed towards Dar and the newly arrived Kerry.

Mark beat everyone to it. He plowed his way through the confusion and got to his bosses side, planting himself between them, and the buzzing multitudes. “Hey.” He hesitated, not really sure what to say next. “Aum…”

“Hey.” Dar glanced past him. “Were we the evening news?”

“Yeah.” Mark admitted. “I tried to get back there to clue you, but it was like a zoo out here.”

Dar glanced at the crowd. “So I see.” She murmured. “We knew it was being filmed but..”

“Yeah.”

“Son of a..” Kerry exhaled. “Did you hear Alastair? I’m flying to Texas and giving him a hug soon as we leave here.” She raked a thatch of blond hair from her eyes. “I can’t even think of any good curse words to apply to this whole thing. Jesus!”

Quest shouldered through to them. “All right, Roberts.”

“Dar!” Michelle appeared from god only knew where. Pleasantly enough, there was no sign of Shari, for which Dar was very grateful. The last thing on earth she wanted to deal with right now was her ex-lover.

Kerry seemed to sense it, because she eased closer, linking her arm through Dar's in an unconscious gesture. "Unreal!" She shook her head. "What a pair of jerkwads!"

Of course, the first thing on earth she wanted to deal with was her current one. Dar leaned against Kerry gratefully, wishing she had a bottle of Advil and a gallon of chocolate milk to go with her.

"Ah, Dar.. " Graham appeared, and the fourth bid manager was right behind him. "That was quite spectacular."

Dar was still shaking inside. The sudden win had honestly surprised her, and she felt quite adrift at the moment, needing to ground herself in a world that had tilted half on its side again. "Thanks." She muttered. "Crock of BS ending to a crock of BS project."

"You can say that again." Graham agreed fervently.

"Roberts." Quest pushed forward. "Just what's going on here?" He looked around. "What's up with all of you being here? Given up, have you?"

Dar gathered her wits. She motioned Michelle, Graham, and Mike to join her, and then faced Quest. "We're done." She announced quietly. "We all finished your requirements."

"No." He shook his head. "No way. You can't have."

"Yes." Dar replied.

"You can't have." The man insisted. "I don't' believe it."

"You're right." Graham said. "Left to our own devices, given your interference, we could not have." He rocked on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back.

"My interference?" Quest gave him a mock surprised look. "What do I have to do with it? I just want my project finished."

"But lucky for us, we had Dar here." Michelle continued the thought blithely. "And between us all, we managed. We're done."

"Are you sure?" Quest asked doubtfully. "Really finished? Really?"

"We're sure." Michelle told him with confidence. "We all worked together."

Quest looked at Michelle. "You double crossed me." He accused. "You made a deal with her!"

Michelle smiled. "Why, yes, I did." She agreed. "And you know, I enjoyed it."

“You double crossed us!” Mike pointed at Quest. “You brought us in here to compete for your bogus contract, and the only thing you really wanted was a piece of crap television show!” His voice rose. “So believe me, mister, you’re not only getting my bill for the project, you’re also getting a bill for my time, my people’s time, my aggravation, my companies cell phone charges, and the bloody parking ticket the bastards just gave me outside this damn building!”

Even Dar was impressed by the outburst. “Hmp.” She said. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Yeah.” Michelle nodded.

“Quite.” Graham said. “Except I didn’t get a parking ticket.”

“You’re a fraud, mister.” Kerry pointed at him.

A soft hooting was heard from outside. Quest’s head jerked up, and a not so nice smile pulled at his lips. “Well, it seems that the truth is… I’m not the fraud here.” Quest said. “And you’ve all just made a pretty big mistake.”

“You can say that again.” Michelle commented. “Many of them. Meeting you was the first.”

Surprisingly, Quest laughed. He slowly started to back towards the rear entrance to the terminal. “You all think you’re so smart. You don’t know jack.” He gestured at Michelle. “And you’re the biggest fool.. but all of you are idiots.”

“We’re not the idiot, buddy!” Mike accused.

“She!” Quest pointed at Kerry. “She said it right in front of you! None of you even got it!

“Huh?” Kerry looked at Dar. “What did I say?”

Dar was as bewildered as everyone else. “No idea.” She murmured. “Said when?” She asked in a louder tone.

“At the meeting!” Quest crowed. “I thought we were sunk right then, but none of you caught on. Not even you.” He looked at Kerry. “You were dead right. I wanted these ships done, and I wanted them done for free. And you all did it!”

“The meeting?” Kerry said. “At the office!”

“What do you mean, we.. what are you talking about, Quest! You were in it with the television people! It was never about the ships!” Michelle shouted in frustration. “You told me that!”

He reached the back door, just as ship horns sounded outside again. “I lied!” He laughed. “And you all just lost, big time!” He pointed at them. “Fools!”

“No we didn’t.” Dar said. “You’re getting a bill, buddy. Trust me.” She started towards the back door, Kerry at her heels.

“Four of em.” Michelle confirmed. “And maybe a lawsuit for your little scam.”

Quest smiled again. “It wasn’t a scam.” He told them. “The contract was real.” He glanced behind him, then turned back, obviously enjoying the moment. “I got exactly what I wanted.”

“Those ships aren’t taking on passengers ever again.” Dar said. “Don’t tell me any different. I saw those engines.”

“Not as ships, no.” Quest agreed. “But they’re not going to be cruise ships. They’re going to be hotels.” He opened the door. “In Europe. Hasta la vista, my little friends. Next stop for me is Barcelona, and you can chase my ass with paper all the way if you want.”

He ducked out the door and shoved it closed, then bolted across the pier towards the ship.

“Where the.. hey!” Dar ran across the carpeted floor, followed by the others. “Quest!!!”

They reached the back door in time to see Quest jumping aboard the ship, crossing a narrow plank that had taken the place of the metal gangway. The ropes tying the ship to the dock were already off, and they could hear the engines whining as they got up to speed.

“You thought you were screwing me!” The man yelled back. “You gave me exactly what I wanted! Thank you! Thank you! Assholes!” He shot them a bird, and then vanished into the darkness of the hold.

“Quest!” Michelle yelled at the top of her lungs. “Get back here!”

A crewman tossed the plank clear, and stood back from the shell door as the ship moved away, pushing off from the pier with a groaning creak of its old steel bones. He lifted a hand and waved lazily at her, then disappeared as the door ground shut, sealing with a metallic clang audible from where they were standing.

In shock, they watched the ships move off, unable to do anything but stare.

Saucily, the ship let off it’s horn again, in a ‘shave and a haircut’ pattern, as it jaunted slowly down the cut and out towards the open sea. The water chopped gently against the hulls, and a breeze had risen, puffing out a tattered American flag which had been run up the mast on the ship Dar and Kerry had worked on.

“Son. Of. A. Bitch.” Michelle clipped the words off tightly.

Dar put her hands on her hips, truly at a loss. She turned her head and looked at Kerry, who was looking back at her with a completely stunned expression. “He got us.” She said, simply.

“He got us.” Kerry repeated. “Jesus P. Fish.”

“That too.” Dar covered her eyes, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Floating hotels?” Kerry said. “That’s why the public spaces got fixed…”

“And not the engines.” Dar looked over as the other door slammed open, and Meyer appeared, with Cruickshank at his heels. They gave her a dark look, but the chaos distracted them and they focused on the rest of the crowd instead.

“What happened?” Meyer asked brusquely. “What’s going on?”

“What’d we miss?” Cruickshank added. “Where are they going? Is this another gag? What’s the deal?”

They looked at each other. Kerry cleared her throat. “You missed your perfect ending.” She advised them.

“What?” Meyer yelped. “What ending? What? Where?” He spun and looked around. “What in the hell’s going on?? You mean he tricked us? That bastard!”

“Irony, thy name is Travel Channel.” Kerry uttered under her breath, finding the humor in the situation somewhere. A motion caught her attention, and she spotted Andrew walking across the pier towards them, his hands in his jeans pockets and a bemused expression on his scarred face.

Did he know? Kerry wondered. She hoped not. Misery did like company after all, didn’t it?

Michelle exhaled heavily. “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle.” She finally said. “Never thought I’d find a situation that warranted that old hoary saying, but damn it if this one doesn’t.”

Dar stared at the retreating ships, still mostly in shock. “Ook, ook.” She agreed wryly. “Ook, ook, ook.”

* * *

Kerry walked outside the terminal and waited on the edge of the steps for Dar to come out after her. Twilight was on them, and the glaring light of the day had faded to a placid purple, returning the temperature to one of almost comfort.

Almost.

The other bid managers had come out ahead of her, and gone to their cars. They were heading over to Snappers, in Bayside to sit down and talk it all out, but she was glad she had a few minutes here to try to clear her mind and consider what they'd gone through already today.

Ludicrous insanity, was what it was. Kerry rubbed the back of her head, which was pounding with an annoying ache, and wished she'd remembered to stick some Advil in the glove compartment. Maybe Dar had some.. "Oh. There you are."

"Here I am." Dar agreed, putting a hand on her back. "C'mon, let's go. I need a good stiff drink."

"I think we all do." Kerry started down the steps with her. "You don't have any aspirin, do you?"

"In the car, yeah." Dar said. "Dad's going to meet us at the front there, and tag along." She added. "I think I owe him a beer, among other things." She nibbled the inside of her lip, lapsing into a pensive silence as they walked across the tarmac to the car.

Kerry was glad to slide into the leather seat of the Lexus and lean back, the residual warmth of the sun soaking through her shoulderblades and offering a kind of relief. "Ugh."

"You okay?" Dar asked, as she turned the key and started the engine.

"Tired." Kerry admitted. "Whacked out."

"Me too." Dar said. "Wish we could just go home."

Kerry laid her hand on Dar's thigh, rubbing her thumb on the rough surface lightly. "Me, too." She echoed. "Thank the lord it's Friday."

"After what we just went through, it would have been Friday no matter what day we ended on." Dar pulled out of the parking spot and headed for the pier building, where Andrew was standing and waiting. "I'm so looking forward to a few days off." She glanced at Kerry. "You have anything in mind for tomorrow?"

"You and me in the waterbed all day, naked." Kerry said, as they pulled up and Andrew opened the back door. "That okay with you?"

Dar managed a rakish grin. “Dare you to say that again.” She drawled, as Andy closed the door and settled into the back seat.

Pale lashes fluttered tiredly at her. “Dare me?”

Dar cleared her throat. “Hi, Dad.”

“Lo, Dardar.” Andy replied amiably. “Hell of an end to this here thing.”

Dar snorted. “Did you know they were going to do that? Pull out?”

“Wall.” Andy shifted, stretching across the back seat and leaning back on the door. “I knew they were fixing to leave, can’t miss it when them diesels fire up. But you said they’d be leaving round sundown anyhow, so I figured that was it.”

“They skunked us.” Kerry half turned and peered at him over the headrest.

“Yeap.” The ex-seal gave her a wry look. “Ah did not see that one coming.” He admitted. “I figgred it was what you said it was, with them television people. Got to give them sailors credit, they kept their pie holes closed up.”

“Maybe they didn’t know.” Kerry suggested. “Not the big guys, I mean, but the worker bees. The ones I talked to seemed to be pretty darn puzzled as to what the heck was going on.”

“Yeap, that could be.” Andy agreed. “Navy was like that. Don’t know, don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t get yer ass in the way.”

Dar chuckled. “You always knew what was going on.” She disagreed.

“Wall, I had me a monkey with their eyeballs inside them machines, now didn’t I?” Andy reached over and ruffled Dar’s hair. “But I sure fire know something about this here situation that you all do not.”

“What’s that, Dad?” Kerry glanced curiously at him. “About the ship, you mean?”

Dar concentrated on merging onto the bridge that would take them over to Bayside. She was tired, and she knew her reflexes were suffering because of that, but the traffic was thankfully light and she eased into the left hand lane with little trouble.

“About that ship. “Andrew sounded surprisingly smug. “It done sailed with the number of folks it spected to, but there’s one that ain’t there they’re gonna miss, and one that’s there they sure fire ain’t.”

“Huh?”

Dar glanced in the rearview. “What are you talking about, Dad?”

“Ah turned over that little engine feller to the police.” Andy said. “He told me bout that thing he did to a lady he did meet. You were right, kumquat.”

Kerry’s eyes lit up. “Yeah?” She exhaled. “Wow.. boy, I feel a lot better now. I thought he got away with the whole thing.. why’d he come back?”

“Ship guy.” Andy shrugged. “Anyhoo, them folks ain’t gonna appreciate taking on that big old bag of wind woman you all did not care for in his spot, I will tell you that.”

Dar very nearly braked to a halt in the middle of the causeway. “WHAT?”

Kerry got up on her knees and gripped the seat back, goggling at her father-in-law. “Shari went on that ship???” She squeaked. “You have got to be kidding me!!!”

Andy grinned, his blue eyes twinkling back at her. “Ah do not think she planned that, zactly.” He allowed. “She was fixing to make some more trouble for you all, and ah did not see the value in troubling her to tell her that there ship was leaving.”

Dar clapped a hand to her head. “Oh my god.” She laughed helplessly, steering into the turn lane for Bayside almost at the last minute. “Dad, they’re going straight across the ocean.”

“Ah do realize that, Dardar.” Her father agreed equably. “Woman always seemed to be like she need a rest of some kind. All that hollering and fussing and all.”

“Heh.” Kerry turned and sat down, a big grin on her face. “Who cares about Quest? That just made *my* day.” She chortled. “Hope she ends up with crackers and water swabbing the decks for her passage.” She wriggled in her seat, doing a little dance to some unheard tune.

Dar just kept laughing, shaking her head as she pulled into a parking spot near the stairs. “Know what I want to know?” She asked as they got out. “Which one of us gets to tell Michelle?”

Kerry snickered, in a very uninhibited way. She walked around to the back of the Lexus and made a squeezing gesture, nodding when Dar popped the hatch for her. She reached inside and pulled Dar’s briefcase over, tugging open the front flap and digging inside for the bottle of Advil Dar usually kept there.

Her mind was on Andy’s news, though. She imagined Shari finding herself stuck on board, and raising hell. She imagined the captain ignoring her.. no, worse. She imagined the captain just locking her out of the control room and letting the rest of the crew laugh at her.

It was a very satisfying image. She wondered if Shari would whine all the way to Barcelona. “Hey, Dar?”

“Hm.?” Dar leaned against the back hatch next to her. “Can’t find it?”

“No, I’ve got it.” Kerry fished out the bottle and opened it, shaking out a few pills and pocketing them before she tossed the bottle back in. She closed the hatch and they all started walking towards the mall. “So, what happens now?”

“Now we have dinner.” Dar replied promptly. “Fish okay by you, Dad?”

“Long as they’re cooked, Dardar.”

“Not exactly what I meant.” Kerry demurred. “But I guess that’ll do for now.”

Dar ambled down the half flight of steps and they crossed into the plaza, moving single file through the press of Friday evening shoppers. She knew she hadn’t answered the question Kerry had posed, but she also knew she didn’t really have an intelligent answer, so she was glad her partner had accepted the deferral.

What now? Who knew? It wasn’t like there was a section in any business plan she’d ever done that covered the situation they’d just suffered through. They’d figure out something, she supposed, just like she supposed she’d be a while explaining to Alastair the next week exactly what had happened.

Along with everything else she had to explain. Dar set the somber thought aside, and draped an arm over Kerry’s shoulder as they entered the outdoor restaurant and spotted the others.

Waterside, with a light breeze, it was reasonably bearable. They took a seat at the large table along with the rest, and for a long moment everyone just stared at each other.

A waiter appeared, and gazed inquiringly at the newcomers. “Whatever imported draft you’ve got.” Kerry made a circling motion with her hand including all of them. “And I’d like a glass of water, too, please.”

“Sure.” The man disappeared.

“Thanks, Ker.” Dar extended her legs under the table and folded her hands over her stomach.

“Figured you’d save the milk for dessert.” Kerry replied, and then turned her attention to the rest of the table. “So. Here we are.”

“Here we are.” Graham agreed, and then glanced around. “Well most of us.” He added. “Where’s your boorish partner?” He asked Michelle.

Michelle shrugged. “I have no idea.” She replied briefly. “Haven’t seen her since before the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey circus started over at their corral.” She jerked her head towards Dar and Kerry.

“Well, no loss.” Mike said, bluntly.

Andrew cleared his throat.

“Sorry, but it’s true.” Mike misinterpreted the sound. “I know it’s no a gentlemanly thing to say, but if that witch drowned in the channel I’d clap. What an asshole.”

Michelle pursed her lips, and her nails tapped each other as she steepled her hands before her chin. “Well, we’re all assholes at one time or another.” She said, diplomatically. “And we all have different ways of doing things.”

Curiously, Kerry felt herself smiling when she heard Michelle say that, and she was pleasantly surprised when the red-haired woman refused to bow to the majority and joined in with the bashing. That took character, which she hadn’t frankly figured Michelle to have.

And it was true, really. They could all be assholes when they wanted to be, herself included. She debated telling Michelle where Shari was, then figured it could wait for later. Michelle didn’t seem too concerned, anyway.

Very different from what she’d be acting in a similar circumstance, that’s for sure. “Well, we figure they have to dock somewhere.” Kerry steered the conversation to something more productive. “Maybe our international office can track them down.”

“Is it worth it?” Graham asked. “I know it’s a lot of money in gear, but I have to be honest, Kerry – I don’t know if it’s worth the recovery costs. I may just have to write this one off as a deal gone bad. Not going to make my people happy, but.. what to do?”

“You mean, just let them get away with it?” Kerry queried, a mildly astonished look on her face.

Graham shrugged.

“Not all of us can afford that.” Michelle said.

“Can any of us really afford it?” Mike asked, suddenly. “I don’t mean financially, either.”

Everyone pondered that, then as if in some accord, they all turned and looked over at Dar, who had been amusing herself by folding her linen napkin into the shape of a rabbit.

Sensing the lack of conversation, Dar looked up, her hands pausing in mid-motion. "What?" She asked, with a frown.

"What's your plan, ace?" Mike asked. "How are you going to pull the rabbit out of your ear this time?"

Dar looked down at her napkin rabbit, then she merely shrugged. "Maybe I'm not." She pulled one end of the fabric and the bunny disappeared, becoming a mundane flat panel again. "Maybe we just lose this one." She looked up as the waiter approached, and accepted an icy mug of beer from him.

After taking a sip, she gave the silent crowd another shrug, and didn't say anything more.

* * *

Ah. Cool air, no sweat, freshly showered, clean clothes.

Being home was like a small side trip to Heaven. Dar extended her arms across the surface of the waterbed and just absorbed the blessed silence, broken only by the snuffling of a Labrador nose and Kerry's soft humming from the kitchen.

"Hey, sweetie?" Kerry called in.

"Ungh?" Dar could managed only a grunt in response.

"Hot chocolate, or ice cream?" Kerry's voice answered, from much closer.

"Yes." Dar replied, keeping her eyes closed.

With a soft chuckle, Kerry came over and sat down next to her, making the bed wiggle. She ran her fingers through Dar's hair, riffling the dark locks and smoothing them back from her partner's forehead. There was a crease there, and she rubbed her thumb against it, the motion getting a flickering of long, dark lashes as two pale blue orbs peeked out and studied her. "Tired?"

"Very." Dar admitted. "You?"

"Urrrgh." Kerry managed a grin. "I'm just so glad to be home."

Home. Dar grinned back. "I'm glad to be alone with you."

"Growfy."

"And you too, Cheebles." Kerry laughed. "Ahghr." She rolled over and put her head down on Dar's stomach, gazing up at the ceiling through half closed eyes. "I've got hot chocolate brewing, and the ice cream's in the fridge getting spoonable."

Dar sniffed. “So I smell.” She laid her arm over Kerry’s middle. “I think I would have rather had dinner with the crew.”

Kerry covered Dar’s hand with her own, and interlaced their fingers. “I think I would have rather had dinner with just you.” She said. “I’m so wiped, Dar… I feel like my brain’s in a spin cycle somewhere.”

Dar’s expression softened, and she turned her head to study the blond woman resting next to her. “How’s your head?”

“Still hurts.” Kerry admitted. “Or maybe, it hurts again. I think it was okay for a little while there.”

“I think I should be getting you the hot chocolate instead of the other way around.” Dar was glad of something to distract her thoughts from the bid, even if the something was her beloved partner’s discomfort. “Want a neck rub?”

Kerry didn’t even dissemble. She rolled over and exhaled blissfully as Dar’s powerful hands began their work at the points of her shoulders and started towards her neck. She could feel the warmth of Dar’s skin under her thin t-shirt, and hear the steady beat of her heart, and all of a sudden she felt like crying.

“Ker?”

“Ungh?”

“You okay?”

Kerry swallowed. “Just tired.” She mumbled. “It’s been a frustrating couple of weeks.”

Dar understood exactly what she meant. Instead of continuing the neck rub, she hauled Kerry gently up and enfolded her in a hug. “Damn frustrating. But I’m very selfishly glad you were there with me for it.”

Now, Kerry did start crying for a completely different reason. Or maybe it was the same reason, it was hard to tell. It was a relief, and it lightened her spirits, as she returned Dar’s hug and they both started laughing, there in the middle of the bed.

Finally Kerry sniffled. “I’m glad too.” She said.

Dar exhaled, the outside edge of her thumb idly tracing Kerry’s ear. “I think I’m going to give us a week off too. How’s that sound?”

“Can we do that?” Kerry asked, after a moment.

“I don’t care. I’m going to.” Dar replied. “I need a time out.”

Kerry tilted her head a little so she could see her partner’s profile. The low light in the bedroom didn’t reveal much, but she realized that Dar probably looked as tired as she felt. If it had been stressful for her, what had it meant for Dar, who had to deal with all the emotional stress along with it?

“Sounds cool.” Kerry gave her a gentle squeeze. “I’m there… in fact, how about we go down to the cabin?”

“Mm.” Dar grunted approvingly.

They were both silent for a little while, communicating through gentle touches and hugs. Sometimes, Kerry found, that worked best with Dar, and she felt the tension in her partner relaxing as she clasped her hand, and placed a few light kisses on the back of it.

Love really was useful for a lot of things that you couldn’t duplicate with drugs or other chemical assistance, she decided. It was free, and it was healthy, and you probably wouldn’t end up on the cover of the Enquirer because of it.

Kerry considered that thought briefly, then gave it a wry grin. Well, maybe you could, but only if you were famous.

“I will have to call Alastair on Monday.” Dar remarked.

“I’m going to send him a basket on Monday.” Kerry said. “What’s that brand of Scotch he likes, again?” She asked. “Because you know, it would have been real easy for him to have promised Meyer the world. He wouldn’t have even had to dis you doing it.. he could have just said he’d take care of it. But he didn’t.”

“He didn’t.” Dar agreed. “He trusted me.”

“Yup.”

Dar sighed. “And I didn’t deserve it, this time.”

Kerry rolled her eyes. “Oh, bullshit, Dar.”

A shrug. “Hon, I didn’t.” Dar said. “He trusts me because he’s had good reason to before. This time he didn’t, and I know, it and you know it. I blew off the company, I was blowing off my job, and the only reason we were ahead at that moment was pure stupid luck.”

Kerry squirmed up so that her head was even with Dar’s, but she kept her limbs draped over her partner’s body. “Do you really believe that’s true?”

“Umhm.” Dar nodded. “You should too, because it could have been a massive mess you’d have had to clean up after.”

“Think I’d have cared?”

Dar turned her head and regarded Kerry. One eyebrow lifted. “You damn well should care.”

“I don’t.”

Kerry’s cheerful disregard surprised Dar a lot, especially since she remembered their discussion on the Disney bus not that long ago, when Kerry had worried about not abandoning her responsibilities in trade for a day of fun.

What changed? “Seems to me.” Dar commented, deciding to find out. “I remember being chastised about playing in a water park instead of working in the recent past.”

Kerry’s expressive face crinkled into a wry expression. “Busted.” She admitted. “But that was a long time ago.”

“Two weeks!”

“This project lasted half a lifetime. A lot can change in half a lifetime.” Kerry protested. “I got a whole different perspective, Dar. I got over it. I got over myself, maybe.” She finished, in a softer tone. “So many people were asking me what the hell I was doing running around on the pier hauling cable.. maybe I got around to asking myself that.”

“Hm.” Dar made a small, thoughtful sound.

“I think we both need a time out, so we can figure out what our roles really are again.” Kerry concluded quietly. “Maybe we an rewrite them so they make more sense.”

“Hm.” Dar repeated her thoughtful sound, this time ending it on a slightly higher note that meant approval.

“They didn’t make much sense the past few weeks.”

“Nu-uh.” Dar agreed. “You’re right.” She reached over to gently push aside a bit of Kerry’s pale hair, which had been obscuring one eye. The skin around it creased as Kerry smiled, and Dar continued on to trace her lips with the tip of one finger. “They didn’t make much sense.”

“But we make sense.” Kerry murmured, catching Dar’s fingers between her teeth, and then releasing it. “So we’ll work it out, won’t we?”

Dar leaned over and kissed her.

Kerry took that as a yes, and returned the gesture, taking a leisurely amount of time about it. She took a breath, and felt her body press against Dar's as her partner did the same. Her headache began to fade as they lay there intertwined in each other's arms and she nestled her head down on Dar's shoulder and just soaked it all in.

Dar stroked her face, and it was like drinking something warm on a cold day, a feeling of inner warmth that started inside, and spread through her, erasing the lingering shreds of the day still clinging to her. "Mm."

"Mm." Dar echoed the sound.

"Days can be tough as they want as long as they end like this." Kerry leaned over and pressed her lips against Dar's cheek. "That's the only thing we had no one else did, y'know?"

Dar smiled, and nodded. "Uh huh."

"That and your sublime articulate-ness." Kerry kidded her. "I don't know what I'd do without that."

Dar pouted, batting her dark lashes and giving Kerry a mock wounded expression.

"Much less what I'd do without you." Gentle green eyes gazed over at her, as a smile crossed Kerry's face. She smoothed her thumb over the pout, as it dissolved into a sweet, returning smile. "God, I love you so much."

Dar let her forehead rest against her partner's as she pondered the ironies of her life. Then she tilted her head slightly and indulged herself in a long kiss, rolling a little onto her back and taking Kerry with her until they ended up nose to nose with Kerry on top.

Waterbeds really had it all over regular beds for that sort of thing. Kerry was sprawled over her and it was merely cozy, instead of being anywhere close to suffocating. "Love you too." Dar said, lifting her head up and nipping Kerry's nose with her lips.

"Mm." Now it was Kerry's turn to resort to non verbalization.

Dar cleared her throat gently. "Know what I just realized, though?"

"What?" Kerry answered.

"We lost track of that Herald reporter."

Kerry nibbled her lower lip, her brow contracting a little. "Yeah? Oh.. Yeah. I know." She slipped one hand under Dar's shirt. "I looked for her when we went into the office, but she wasn't around. You figure she left? I didn't see her afterward, either."

Dar nuzzled Kerry's nearby ear, nibbling on the lobe of it before she answered. "Maybe we'll have to find out by reading Business Monday." She whispered into Kerry's ear.

"If she left before the ships did, we better call her and make sure she doesn't look like a nitwit." Kerry whispered back.

"We'd probably come off looking pretty good if we didn't."

"Until she had to retract the story." Kerry gave her partner a little smack on the hip. 'Bad Dar. "

A low, throaty chuckle made her ear vibrate.

"C'mon. Let's go get our goodies." Kerry said. "We can't worry about Herald reporters right now." She gave Dar a quick kiss, and rolled out of the waterbed, hauling Dar with her. "There's ice cream to be had, and mucho BS to be forgotten."

Dar willingly followed, more than ready to throw the recent past right out the sliding glass doors and not look back.

PART 33

THE WORLD INTRUDED ITSELF INTO HER DREAMS, PLEASANT AND FORMLESS THINGS OF warmth and seashore that she allowed to slip free and be replaced with the comforting feel of Dar's body pressed against hers and the sound of the air conditioning compressor cycling on and off.

Ah. It was nice to wake up with someone, that's for sure. Kerry slowly let her eyes drift open, taking in the sunlight as her gaze fell to the bedside clock. Muffling a curse she started to bolt upright, only to be held in place by Dar's arm. "Augh!" She squawked.

"Saturday." Dar's voice enunciated clearly, from about an inch away from her ear.

"Buh." Kerry slumped back down into the bed, closing her eyes and willing her heartbeat to stop trying to give her a nosebleed. "Son of a bitch."

Dar settled back down behind her, one arm still clamped firmly around Kerry's middle. "Had a feeling you were going to jump."

"Urgh." Kerry moaned. "My head's spinning." She said. "I hate waking up like that."

Dar kissed the back of her neck.

"Now, waking up like **that**, on the other hand…" Kerry purred. "Is another story."

"Are we waking up?" Dar queried. "It's not that late."

Kerry eyed the placidly gleaming clock, which was edging past ten am. For them, it was late, and Dar knew that, since they generally got up around six am. Even on weekends, it was rare when they stayed in bed past eight. "Where's Chino?"

"Already let her out."

"Ah." Kerry pondered that. "How long have you been up?"

"A little while." Dar admitted. "I was just enjoying laying here being a bum."

Kerry rolled over onto her back, gaining an appealing view of her partner's profile. Shaggy, dark locks spilled everywhere out of control, prompting Kerry to rake them into a little better order with one hand. "You need a haircut."

"How about a Mohawk??" Dar suggested amiably. "That'd spark up the Monday morning meeting, huh?"

Kerry studied her, then she lifted a few thick thatches of hair up over Dar's head and reviewed the results. She released the hair, then ruffled it. "No."

"No, huh?"

"No." Kerry shook her head positively. "Do you know how much paperwork that'd cost us, with me having to fill out personnel incidents every ten minutes because I bitch slapped someone for commenting on your hair?"

"Hm."

"Mariana would flip out."

"Oh well." Dar conceded. "I guess it's just a trim again, then. Everything else I've ever tried with this mop has pretty much ended up looking like I stuck my thumb into a 110 socket."

"It's so wavy." Kerry agreed, fluffing out Dar's bangs. "I like it."

Dar smiled. "Glad you do." She said. "Like the color?"

"Sure."

"Don't want me to change it?"

Kerry's brows hiked sharply. "To what?" She asked. "Green?"

"Hm."

"No, it's pretty. I like it this color." Kerry added seriously. "It makes your eyes stand out."

"They're like funny little blue marbles. They'd stick out anyway." Dar drawled.

"You're so funny." Kerry chuckled.

Dar grinned at her.

Kerry grinned back. "I guess we're up now, huh?" She mused. "I haven't slept this late in forever." She stifled a yawn, and stretched her body out, exhaling with a slight chuckle as Dar traced a teasing line up the center of her stomach. "Ooo."

"I was never a late sleeper." Dar admitted.

"I never was supposed to be." Kerry wriggled a little closer. "Even on weekends, you weren't allowed to slothabed in my father's house, that's for sure." She picked up Dar's hand and examined it, running her fingers along the palm. "So when I moved down here, boy, did I love weekends."

"But you don't sleep late on weekends." Dar objected. "Don't you want to?"

A faint smile crossed Kerry's face. "Well.. I thought about that the other week." She said. "I guess the thing is, I love my life so much now, sleeping seems like a waste of time." She looked up at Dar. "It's much more fun to be awake."

Dar's face lit up, visible even with the sunlight pouring through the blinds. She held her hand out to Kerry. "So lets go live, then. I think someone's FedExing coffee."

They scrambled out of bed, and were joined by a frisking Chino as they walked into the living room and were dappled with yet more sunlight pouring in the sliding glass doors. "Oo.. pretty day." Kerry ducked into the laundry room and snagged two long t-shirts, tossing one to Dar as she pulled the other over her head.

Dar opened the back door for Chino, then she wandered over and started messing with the coffee machine. "Know what I want?"

Kerry closed her eyes and put one finger against her forehead. "Uhmm….. scrambled eggs on cinnamon toast?" She opened the refrigerator and started removing objects from it. "Am I close?"

"Heh." Her partner snorted. "That, and you, but what I was going to say is that I want one of those spiffy automatic coffee makers we saw at the trade show. The one with the little cartridges?" Dar held her thumb and finger up about two inches apart.

"The one cup thing with all the choices?" Kerry asked. "Ooo.. yeah, that had good coffee. Can we get it plumbed in here? What about one for the cabin? Do they come in colors?"

Dar started chuckling, as she pressed the button to start the coffee brewing. "I'll check."

"I think a blue one for here.. and a green one for the cabin would be cool." Kerry set out a handful of eggs, and retrieved her favorite grill pan from the hanging rack just over the stove. "Grab me some OJ?"

"Sure." Dar opened the door and removed the specified bottle, setting it on the counter and retrieving two glasses to put down next to it. Her shoulder bumped the LCD screen mounted to the cabinet, and she glanced up at it as it turned on and blinked at her.

Nothing was on the screen, so she nudged it aside and poured out the juice, handing Kerry hers and leaning against the counter to consume her own.

Orange juice was all right, she decided as she watched Kerry neatly crack her eggs. Apple juice was better, and she really preferred white grape juice, but both were too sweet for Kerry's tastes in the morning, so she accepted the orange beverage as well.

Life was full of compromises. Kerry got up early on weekends to make her breakfast, she had orange juice, they both took a step towards the middle and each other and maybe in the process discovered what had been hard and fast rules really weren't.

Maybe that was why she was now willing to let this one go. Dar pondered the thought. Let this bid go, and just recoup what she could instead of going after Quest and moving heaven and earth to get him.. to stop him.. to make him pay for playing her for a fool.

"Honey?" Kerry glanced over. "Stop making bubbles in your juice. It sounds weird."

"Sorry." Dar finished the beverage and set the glass down. "Why don't I.. whoops." A blinking light on the screen had caught her attention. "Huh.. he hasn't done that in a while." She reached over and clicked the light, since they'd turned off the voice commands to keep the system from responding whenever they talked to each other. "Alastair."

"Oh?"

The picture box opened, revealing Alastair's face. He was in his home office, she was surprised to note, and then she realized it was Saturday in Houston as well as in Miami. "Morning, Alastair."

"Morning Dar!"

"Hi, Alastair." Kerry called out, keeping her attention firmly on her frying pan. "I owe you a bottle of something very expensive."

"Ah.." Alastair peered around, not able to see Kerry who was out of camera shot. "Well, thanks, Kerry.. ah.. did I do something to deserve it?"

"Yes." Kerry responded, but didn't go further.

Dar realized Alastair didn't, in fact, know that they knew what he'd said the day before. "You probably don't know it, but your conversation with Mr. Meyer yesterday was being broadcast to an audience of hundreds." She told him. "Including Kerry and myself."

Alastair blinked, then turned a bit red. "Ah. Well." He cleared his throat. "Y'know, I thought about that after, and Dar, I hope you didn't think I meant you were an idiot when I.."

Dar chuckled and waved a hand. "Thanks for standing by us, Alastair." She overrode him. "Made my day."

"Ahah. Yes, well." Her boss seemed abashed. "Well, the fellow was a stinker, you know, Dar? Make my hackles go from the start, and he got me at a bad time."

"Meeting?" Dar hazarded.

"Eh? No." Alastair said. "Caught my thumb in the car door."

"Ow. Sorry."

Alastair went silent for a moment, apparently absorbing the last bit of news. "Thought you might call me last night to give the scoop." He said, casually.

Now it was Dar's turn to feel abashed. "Yeah, sorry." She muttered. "We got home late."

"Yes? So what happened?" Alastair asked, curiously. "Been on my mind all night."

Oh. Ugh. Dar took a seat on one of the stools and hooked her feet on the rungs. "Well, nothing good, to be honest." She admitted. "After you blew off Meyer, I found out he'd staged the whole damn thing and everyone and their grandfather was watching it outside the office we were in."

"Tch."

"So then Quest showed up."

"He's quite an interesting fellow." Alastair remarked. "Did you know his father was a ringmaster in the circus?"

Kerry snorted softly. "Well, now doesn't **that** explain a few things."

"Eh?"

"How did you know that, Alastair?" Dar asked. "You know this guy?"

"Believe it or not, the wife does." Her boss admitted. "Fifth cousin's third uncle's stepson, or something like that. Called me up once and asked me to give him a job. Had no skills, no prospects.. had to turn him down, unfortunately." He added. "Realized it was the same chap just the other day."

Kerry turned her head and looked at Dar.

"Interesting." Dar said. "Well, he showed up, we told him we were all finished, and the bastard took off and ran."

"Eh?"

Dar clasped her hands between her knees and looked at her boss. "He took his ships, and left. Apparently it was him who was scamming all of us, including Meyer. He did it to get the upgrades.. he's selling the damn things to some hotel consortium over in the EU."

Alastair's jaw dropped. Literally.

Kerry peeked around into camera range. "That was kind of how we felt, too."

"Buh." The ILS CEO spluttered. "Good god, Dar! He took us? For all that?"

Dar nodded.

"And we.. you.. we.. just let him go?"

Dar's brows quirked. "Alastair, I love the company, and you, but standing in the way of a forty thousand ton ship ain't my idea of how to go."

"B.."

"We're going to track them down over in Europe." Kerry cut in. "I'm sure legal can do something."

"All the good that'll do.. Jesus, it'll cost twice what we spent.." The CEO's voice trailed off. "My god."

"Everyone was in the same boat." Dar muttered. "He just scammed us, Alastair. I knew it was some kind of rig, but one inside another one.. " She ended up just shrugging uncomfortably.

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch." Alastair finally said, after staring at her in silence for a few seconds. "I'll be a son of a bitch." He seemed at a loss. "Ah, well.. you know, funny thing there, Dar.. but that Meyer fellow called me back last night. Didn't say boo about all that!"

Kerry finished the eggs, and scooted them neatly onto the pieces of toast she had ready. "Jerk." She muttered under her breath. "Wonder what he wanted?"

"Really?" Dar shifted, leaning back against the counter.

Alastair now seemed a touch embarrassed. "He apologized, you know." He said. "Said he'd been under some horrible pressure, you know the story."

"Uh huh."

Alastair watched her face, as though judging something. "Say, listen, Dar."

"Here it comes." But Dar half smiled, a touch of wryness in her expression. "What did he want, Alastair?"

Kerry picked up a piece of toast and walked over, handing it to Dar as she leaned on the counter next to her. It occurred to her that both she and her partner were wearing almost nothing, and that they were talking to their big boss, and how inappropriate it all was, but after all.. he had called them, hadn't he?'

"Ah." Alastair glanced at her. "Well, listen, he told me he's going to try to salvage something out of this whole mess, and I guess we all are, huh?"

"Mm." Dar grunted.

"So he wants to do a little wrap up with you, and the rest of those fellows, just to see what they can come up with." The CEO said. "And hey, he did say you'd scooped em.. be good for us, huh?"

Ugh. "I don't want to give him a damn thing." Dar said.

"Well, Dar…"

"Did you tell him I'd do it?"

"Me?" Alastair pointed at his own chest. "Lady, were you not listening to that phone call? I gave off trying to tell you to do things ten years ago. I just.. well, I just told him I'd ask, that's all."

"He's a skunk, Alastair." Kerry chimed in.

Dar glowered at the camera.

"Be some kind of offset, y'know, when I have to tell the board about this fiasco." Her boss reminded her, gently. "Not gonna be fun, Dar."

No. That was true enough. "I know." Dar said. "And I wish I could tell you I have a magic answer to how we're going to recoup that money, but honestly, Alastair, I can't."

"Ah."

Damn it. Dar sighed. "Guess some good publicity won't hurt." She conceded. "I'll try to come off as intelligent as possible given I was taken in just like the rest of them were."

Alastair looked marginally happier. "Well, good decision, Dar." He said. "And hey.. I'm sure we'll come up with something to tell the board.. won't we?" He gave her a wry look. "He's going to call you tomorrow. See what you can get out of it, huh?"

"Okay." Dar conceded. "Do my best."

"Always do, Dar. Always do." Alastair gave her a more sympathetic look. "You two have a great day, huh?"

"You too, Alastair." Kerry said. "Sorry we couldn't make it come out better."

Alastair waved a hand at them, then the picture went off, leaving the kitchen in silence. Dar sighed, and started chewing on her egg sandwich. "Wasn't as bad as I expected." She said.

The nonchalance didn't fool Kerry a bit. She gave her partner a one armed hug, and a kiss on the cheek. "We'll make it look good. After all, we did save all their butts, didn't we?"

"Bah."

Kerry gave her another, longer hug.

* * *

Dar lay sprawled across the couch, ostensibly reading a magazine. It was a diving magazine, and she usually enjoyed them, glad of a chance just to kick back and read about someone else's obsession for a while.

In fact, they usually gave her ideas for vacations, and she'd pondered asking Kerry if she wanted to do one of the live aboard dive cruises in some exotic place more than once. Fiji, maybe. Or Palau. It was just one more in a list of things she wanted to do with her partner, and she'd come to realize that at some level her growing dissatisfaction with work was related to her resenting their not being able to just go and do stuff like that.

Dar flipped the page, and gazed at an inquisitive seal, caught in mid bark. She'd always wanted to dive with animals, but somehow, her trips over to the other coast had never seemed to have enough extra time for that.

A soft sound made her look up and over at Kerry, who was draped over the loveseat doing absolutely nothing but relaxing. She had her hands folded over her stomach, and her eyes closed and she appeared supremely contented to be doing nothing more than occupying a comfortable spot just near enough to Dar for her to touch if she reached out.

Dar reached out and stroked Kerry's hair with her fingertips.

A green pupil appeared and peered curiously at her. "Susan B. Anthony dollar for your thoughts?" Kerry said. "Magazine boring?"

Dar lifted one shoulder expressively. "My head's just wandering." She said. "I keep reading the same paragraph over and over again. I'm over it."

Kerry flopped over onto her side so she could see Dar better. "Something bothering you?"

Dar didn't answer.

Kerry waited, her head resting on the loveseat arm as she reached down and gave Chino's head a pat. She already knew the answer, and in fact, she was pretty sure she knew the answer behind the answer, because she was bothered by it too.

"Pah." Dar set the magazine down. "I'm gonna go take Chino for a walk."

Chino jumped up and came over to her, tail wagging as she recognized the word. She nudged Dar's knees as she stood, and followed her to the door, then out and down the steps as they left the condo.

Kerry considered joining them, but then she reconsidered, reckoning that her partner needed a little space. Dar usually signaled that pretty clearly, and usually it took the form of her going out onto the beach to wander a little by herself.

In the early days of their relationship, that would have intimidated Kerry a little. Even later on, she'd felt a sense of apprehension when Dar had taken up one of her funks, and it had taken her a long time before she'd come to understand that when it happened, it wasn't that Dar was mad at her.

Most often, Dar was mad at Dar, and she knew if Kerry was around, she couldn't be mad at herself for long because Kerry would nibble away at her mood until it evaporated. Sometimes, Dar just needed to stew a little, Kerry had learned, and when she was ready to be humored, she'd show back up and find a spot somewhere near where Kerry was.

So Kerry decided to stay where she was now, and she picked up Dar's discarded diving magazine and began to flip through it. "Oo." She murmured. "Palau. Man.. look at those fish." She read the article with more than a touch of envy. "How in the heck do these people all take off weeks and weeks to go out on those boats? Don't' they work?"

It wasn't as though the people in the picture were retired vacationers, either. They were all around her age. "Hmph." She shook her head and turned the page. "Man, I wish we could do that. For like two or three weeks, just to out there and see everything… that would be so cool."

So why didn't they? A reasonable internal voice asked. "Because we both work for the same place, and we can't be gone at the same time." Kerry lectured herself absently. "And you know, that's really getting to be major suckage."

She turned another page, and absorbed an ad for a new kind of wetsuit. It was cool looking, and Kerry tried to imagine herself wearing it. "Hm."

They didn't wear wetsuits much, but as she'd noted in Disney World, they did have the advantage of making you look sort of sexy, in a Sea Hunt kind of way. Maybe she'd get one of these, for night dives they did off the back of their boat, on long summer nights not that far away.

Kerry flipped the page back and studied the dive charter again. Okay, so the people in it got away for three weeks. Her lips twitched. She could do it anytime, and had a custom yacht to do it off of. What was the whining for again?

Sometimes it was easy to fall into the trap of that whole greener pastures thing, and you lost sight of the lawn you were sitting on.

Not that anyone wanted to sit on a Florida lawn anyway, of course. Kerry had discovered the hard way that what had been a pleasant, soft, green fuzzy carpet up north was a frightening, sharp bladed, spikey, mostly sand and ant ridden patch of flora down here.

Kerry put the magazine down and closed her eyes again, letting her thoughts continue to wander. It felt like she had a lot of extra fragments in her head, making it difficult to concentrate on anything and rather than strain to pay attention, she just chucked it all instead.

* * *

Dar walked down to the east end of the island, where there was a small spit of land that jutted out. She sat down on a patch of sand, curling her toes into the grainy warmth as she gazed out over the sea.

Chino trotted over, and deposited a turtle on her foot. She sat down and looked expectantly at Dar, who made a grab for the animal as it scrabbled upside down, it's tiny feet waving in the air. "Hey, Chino. That's not a toy."

"Growf." Chino nosed the turtle, obviously hoping Dar would toss it for her to retrieve.

"C'mon." Dar examined the creature and found it unhurt. It was a fresh water one, though, so she knew it hadn't swum up out of the very nearby Atlantic ocean. "Were you someone's pet?" She asked it. "I had a turtle just like you once."

Chino sniffed at the turtle, who pulled it's head in.

"He doesn't like you, Chi." Dar smiled. "I don't think Brownie would have liked you either. She hated cats."

Carefully, Dar put the turtle down under a piece of driftwood. She had no idea if the animal could survive out on the beach, but she wasn't sure he'd survive if she took him home, either.

This bit of business taken care of, she returned her eyes to the sea, one hand absently scratching Chino's neck. She wondered where the ships were by now, probably many miles out to sea. Were the crews partying?

Had Quest told them what their fate was?

Were they all laughing at the four companies they'd duped, left back in Miami?

Had the Captain, whom Dar had taken a liking to, thrown Shari overboard yet?

So many questions.

So many open issues.

That's what was really bothering her, Dar realized. Well, that and the fact that she'd been made to look like a bloody idiot in front of her boss, her partner, and god knows how many other people.

She fished a shell out of the sand and examined it's cracked, ridged edge. It had a dry feeling from the salt and the sand dust and she smelled it, detecting the faint, buttery scent she remembered well from her childhood.

She had, briefly, collected shells. They were interesting, and she'd spent hours finning up and down the beach shoreline, half in and half out of the surf as the sea alternately tugged and pushed her, teaching her the rhythm of it's heartbeat.

Most of her friends had no use for them. Her father had no use for them, except for the mahogany olive she'd found once, an old soldier of the sea that he'd taken from her and kept in his uniform pocket for god only knew how many years.

After a while, she'd been at a loss as to what to do with them, so on a whim, one morning, she'd gathered them all up, all their colors and varied shapes, and presented them to her mother as a gift, suspecting she'd quietly eject them into a hole in the backyard at the very first opportunity.

To her bemusement, Ceci had absolutely loved them. The textures and patterns had really captured her artist's eye and she'd spent hours arranging and studying them on mats in the little corner she'd set up to paint in.

Confused the hell out of Dar, but it was the best reaction she'd ever gotten from a gift, so she wasn't about to question it.

People surprised you sometimes. Shari had surprised her, and after that experience, Dar had tried very hard not to let anyone surprise her ever again.

Kerry sometimes did, but that was okay. Kerry only surprised her in good ways, she'd never yet surprised her in a bad way even when she herself thought she might be, like with the tattoo.

Dar sighed, and rested her chin on her forearm. The one thing Shari had accused her of that she knew hit home with a vengeance was the fact that she never gave in. She always had to win. Always had to pull one out of her hat.

She could never take losing. Wasn't that what Shari had said? She couldn't take it because that would prove she was just another loser like all the rest of her friends.

Shari excepted, of course.

So, she was going to prove Shari wrong this time. Dar tossed the shell into the water. She was going to lose gracefully, take what credit she was due for doing a decent job, and move on. No pulling rabbits out of anywhere, no last minute heroics, no making it happen.

"Right Chi?"

Chino trotted back over to her and re-deposited the turtle in her lap. "Growf." She nudged Dar's hand impatiently.

With a sigh, Dar collected the animal and stood up, brushing sand grains off her leg. "Okay. Let's take it back to mommy Kerry, and see what she says about keeping it." She told the dog, as they started back towards the condo.

The sun was starting to slant down towards the west, and the breeze off the water made it very comfortable. Even the heat wasn't that overbearing, though Dar stifled a yawn as she walked, kicking bits of beach detritus ahead of her as she wandered.

Then her steps slowed and she came to a halt, her brow creased.

Chino stopped, came back and grabbed the edge of Dar's shirt in her teeth, tugging in the direction of home.

Slowly, Dar gave in to the motion, starting to walk again, but this time with an extremely thoughtful expression on her face.

* * *

The condo was very quiet when Dar entered, and her eyes went to the love seat where Kerry was now curled up on her side, fast asleep.

She closed the door carefully and edged across the living room, trying not to make any sound as she settled down on the floor next to Kerry, just watching the slow, even motion of her breathing.

Chino ruined all her stealthy work by clattering over, though, and poking a cold wet nose right into the hollow of Kerry's eye socket.

"Chi!" Dar made a grab for the dog, but it was too late and Kerry jerked awake, her eyes nearly coming out of her head. "Damn it. Sorry, Ker."

"Yow!" Kerry coughed. "What in the hell was that? I felt like a raw meatball hit my face!"

Dar pointed at Chino's black nose.

"Jesus." Kerry hauled herself half upright. "That's twice today." She rubbed her face with one hand. "Boy, I must have been more tired than I thought."

Dar released Chino and leaned back against the couch. "Sorry about that… why don't you go back to sleep? Not like we've got a lot planned for this afternoon." She tipped her head back and regarded Kerry. "Ker?"

"What on earth do you have in your hand?" Kerry was leaning forward, staring at Dar's closed fingers with intense fascination. "Is that alive?"

Dar brought her hand over and opened it, revealing the turtle. "Yes, it is."

"Ooo." Kerry crooned at it. "It's so cute!"

The turtle cautiously extended it's head, and scrabbled at Dar's skin with it's four small feet. "Chino found it on the beach." Dar explained. "It's a freshwater… I used to have one when I was a kid."

"How'd it get here?" Kerry looked up from petting the animal on the head with the tip of her finger. "It didn't swim the cut, did it?"

"Nah. Probably some kid got it, and let it go." Dar replied. "I was going to leave it, but Chi kept bringing it back to me, so.."

"So.. we're going to PetSmart." Kerry concluded, with a grin. "Rocking. I've always loved turtles."

"Tortuga." Dar pronounced, rolling the R sound a little. "Yeah, we can bring Chino. She loves PetSmart."

"She loves the toy aisle." Kerry sat up. "Okay, let me go throw water on my face, and we can go get Senor Tortuga a house."

"Can we get a hermit crab to keep him company?" Dar asked ingeniously.

Kerry paused, and leaned an elbow on Dar's shoulder. "Tell you what." She whispered, confidentially. "I'll get you a hermit crab, if you tell me what we're going to do to fix this whole stupid mess."

They were pretty much nose to nose. "Are we doing something?" Dar asked, quietly.

"There is no way." Kerry leaned forward and gently kissed her on the lips. "That I'll believe you don't have some plan, some way, some amazing solution to keep you, and I from looking like jackasses in front of that camera tomorrow."

"No way?"

Kerry rested her forehead against her partners. "Dar, one of the things I admire most about you is the fact that you never give up. You never back off, you never quit, and you never, ever lose." She said. "That's what caught my eye about you from the moment we met."

Dar watched the turtle march across her palm, averting her eyes from her partners briefly. "Some people might not think that's a positive trait."

"Some people might not." Kerry readily agreed. "Anyone who has to compete with you, in fact. But I don't, and I love it."

Ah. An unexpected revelation. "You do?"

"I do."

"You love me being a bitch?" Dar questioned. "Because that's what I am when I do that," Her eyes searched Kerry's at a very short distance almost making both of them crossed. "I'm not sure that's really desirable in a long term relationship, is it?"

And, there it was. Kerry found herself speechless as she stared at her partner.

Dar gave her a tiny shrug, her lips pressed together tightly.

"Y'know." Kerry finally found her voice. "I grew up having to hide who I really was and I didn't half realize just how mind obliterating that was until I met you."

Dar blinked, looking unsure and a little apprehensive.

Kerry stroked Dar's cheek gently. "Please don't tell me you think you have to change for me to keep on loving you. Please." She paused, swallowing. "Don't tell me that."

Dar hadn't expected this conversation to happen just like this, just so soon, or hit so hard. Her heart was pounding so fast she could see the flashes from the beats as afterimages in her eyes, and her tongue felt three sizes too big for her mouth.

But here it was, and there was no point in holding it back any more. "Well." Dar took a breath. "Everyone in my life's always told me the reason I pushed everyone away from me was because I was who I was." She took another breath. "So I'd rather change that than take a chance on losing you."

Kerry glanced at the turtle, who had settle down into the palm of Dar's hand. "Don't change." She whispered, looking back up into her partner's eyes. "Don't change a damn thing, Dar. I love every single thing about you."

"Everything?" Dar sensed the directness in Kerry's rapt attention.

"Everything."

"Everything?"

A touch of sweetly amused exasperation entered Kerry's tone. "Honey, I fell in love with you when you were in the act of firing my ass. How much more everything do you need?"

Hm. Dar thought about that. "Am I being a stupid insecure jackass again?'

"No." Kerry leaned forward and kissed her again. "We both have questions sometimes. We just have to remember to ask them and not keep quiet."

Sure. Easy for her to say. Dar felt a lot better, though. She still felt like an insecure jackass, but it was hard to be too hard on herself when Kerry's lashes were fluttering against her skin and they were eyeball to eyeball over a turtle.

"Feel better now?" Kerry gave her a kiss on the nose.

"Eh." A sly twinkle appeared in the blue eyes so close to hers. "I get a hermit crab?" Dar said.

"With a painted house." Kerry promised. "But you have to spill the plan, remember."

Ah, the plan. Well, Kerry's faith in her notwithstanding….Dar kissed her. "Well, I don't' have a plan." She admitted. "But I do have an idea, so we'll see how far it goes."

Kerry grinned. "I knew it." She did a little seated dance on the couch. "You know what I'm hoping?" She asked, as she got up and started around the end of the couch towards the bedroom. "I'm hoping you found some way to pull a bathtub stopper on those things and they're now stuck in place bailing to beat the band."

Dar got to her feet and looked around for something appropriate to deposit their new pet in. "Hey Ker? Where'd you store that old fish tank of yours?"

"You didn't comment on that." Kerry called in from the bathroom. "It's in the closet there, bottom shelf."

Dar retrieved the tank and set it on the dining room table. She placed the turtle inside, then went into the kitchen to find it something to eat. "Actually, I'm counting on them making it in one piece." She called back, taking out a piece of lettuce and a few shreds of carrots.

"Really?"

Dar chuckled softly. "Really." She carried the vegetation back to the tank and put it down next to their new resident. "There you go, buddy."

The turtle seemed a bit overwhelmed by it's new environment, his feet scrabbling against the glass. But the lettuce attracted him and he munched a bit of it. Dar watched him for a moment, and then she retreated into her study, sitting down behind her computer and giving the trackball a whirl.

Her desktop came up, with it's background of an underwater scene. Dar opened her mail program, briefly reviewing some new entries. One made her frown, and she opened it, scanning the contents before she hit reply. "Kiss my ass." She hit send, shaking her head. "Brainless gitwads."

"Did you say something?" Kerry entered, pulling a clean t-shirt over her head.

"Not to you." Dar fished in the small wooden box near her monitor, and removed a business card. She opened a new mail and typed in an address from it. She paused to think, resting her chin against her laced fingers as she considered what it was she wanted to say.

Kerry settled on the couch, tucking her feet up under her. "Can we get dad to sink them?"

Dar chuckled.

"You know he could."

"We probably could get them stopped." Dar flexed her fingers, then started typing. "Hold on a minute, I'm thinking in German."

German? Kerry's ears perked up. "Hans?"

"Ja."

Hm.

* * *

"You have gone out of your head." Hans voice sounded remarkably clear, given it was issuing forth from a continent away. "Do you know what time it is here?"

"You called me." Dar reminded him dryly.

"Do **I** know what time it is?" Hans asked, not missing a beat. "How could I know when I get these very strange emails in the middle of the night."

Dar gave her trackball a whirl, studying the information on her screen. "So you're sure it's Hundemann?"

"As sure as anything in this business can be sure." Hans said. "My sources are respectable, and it seems they have quietly bought two hotel lines recently."

"Ah." Dar scrolled down. "They're pretty big."

"They are not Marriott Corporation, but yes." Hans agreed. "And so?"

And so. Dar reviewed the corporate data, her eyes searching for connections between the bland points. Hundemann's had picked up properties that were mostly older, mostly converted chateaus, castles, country mansions, you name it.

They were modestly successful. Customers liked them, and they'd gotten on the hotel A lists, pushing their theme of the grandeur of yesteryear.

That made the ships fit in with their corporate plan, all right. "Okay." Dar mused slowly. "This is the pitch. You listening?"

"Most surely, I am listening." Hans replied.

Dar felt her mind going a mile a minute. It was a feeling that had been familiar to her for a long time, but not so much recently. She'd almost forgotten how much she liked it. "I'm sure they already have a management system."

"They do. One of my competitors."

"So what we have to do is sell them yours, riding on my pipes."

Hans was silent for a long moment. "We have to do that?" He finally queried. "Why?"

"You don't want to sell your system?"

"I do." Hans protested. "But what advantage can we offer to these people? You cannot be thinking of going cheaper than my competitor. I will not allow it."

Interesting reverse psychology, Dar considered. "No, not for this guy." She reluctantly agreed. "He goes for quality, which is why he should go for us."

Hans laughed, but there was no mocking in it. "You know, I agree!" He said. "In fact, that is exactly how I will what you call pitch to him. He should buy my system and your hardware because it is simply the best, and that is all there is to that. It is good. I will call them."

"Great." Dar paused to take a breath.

"I can go back to sleep now, yes?" Hans asked pointedly.

"Sure." Dar said.

"Then a good night to you, Dar. Please give my regards to your delightful wife."

"Thanks. Night.' Dar hung up the phone, not entire satisfied with the conversation. "Hm."

"So, what was that all about?" Kerry asked. "Did he go for whatever it was you were asking?"

Dar scowled. "Not sure." She half shrugged. "I think he did, but not with the urgency I really wanted." She sighed. "Well, we could just hint that we've got something in the works."

Kerry frowned. "I hate vague hints." She said. "Almost as much as I hate not knowing the plan."

Blue eyes blinked guiltily at her. "Sorry." Dar murmured. "C'mere."

Kerry got up and circled the desk, peering at Dar's screen. "Okay. I'm here."

"I asked Hans to find out who was in a position to acquire those four ships, and do something intelligent with them. After he made jokes about half the companies in Europe, he came up with three." Dar clicked on a window. "I ran analysis on them, and we came up with two that have balance sheets so bad they couldn't buy a Happy Meal, and this one." She pointed at the screen she'd been reading.

"Ah."

"They own a lot old time, classy places."

Kerry grunted. "And you think they're after the ships?" She glanced at her partner. "Why them, and not Starwood, or one of the big multinationals from this side of the pond?"

Why, indeed? Dar found herself in the position of trying to explain a hunch, one of those intuitive decisions she often made and seldom regretted. Kerry had been one of them. "Just feels like a European company is in this." She said. "So anyway, I wanted Hans to pitch his distributed management system, over a network we'd provide."

"Why?"

"Why??" Dar gave her a look.

"No.. um.." Kerry held a hand up. "I know why, but I guess I mean, why us? What does this get us?"

Dar clicked on a page. "They have two hundred locations." She said. "What it gets us is a major European backbone, which we don't have right now, as a growth platform. It also gets us a foothold in the services sector, which we also don't have, and last but not least… " One more click. "It recoups all our investment in that ship as well as locks our competitors out."

It nearly took Kerry's breath away. "Whoa."

"Mm." Dar grunted. "If Hans can pull it off." She said. "He didn't sound too enthusiastic about it.. but we'll see."

"Couldn't we.." Kerry paused. "We've got programmers, Dar. We could do our own system."

"We could." Her partner agreed. "But it'd take years, which we don't have."

"Hm."

"And, if this is Hundemann, they're pretty fiercely Euro centric."

"Ah. We need Hans to front us." Kerry nodded. "It's a great idea, Dar."

Dar leaned her head against her fist. "Wish I'd thought of it a little sooner." She admitted. "Wonder if any of the rest of them caught on? We could be in a race and not even know it."

Kerry's cell phone rang, startling them both. She reached for it, flipping it open as a glance showed her an unfamiliar number. "Hello?"

"You bitch."

The voice was loud enough for Dar to hear it, and it brought her upright and reaching for the phone. "Give me that."

"Ah ah ah." Kerry scrambled out of reach. "Excuse me, there's no one here by that name." She responded into the phone in a pleasant tone. "You must have the wrong number. Goodbye." She closed the cell. "I don't remember giving her my cell phone number.. did you?"

Dar glared at the device, her eyes narrowing.

"Just kidding." Kerry assured her. "That was a marine line.. guess she's still stuck out there, huh?"

The cell rang again. Dar imperiously held out her hand, palm up. "Give me that thing."

Kerry hesitated, then she meekly handed it over.

Dar opened it. "Yes." She answered, in a silken tone.

"Don't' you fucking hang up again on me, you bitch."

"Different bitch." Dar replied. "And I'll hang up any time I like, so unless you've got something even slightly intelligent to say, goodbye."

Kerry snuggled up to her, wrapping herself around Dar's tall body and angling her head to listen. "You know something." She murmured. "She's the first person including my father I hate enough to wish something bad happens to her."

"I am going to fucking sue your ass!" Shari screamed into the phone.

"For?" Dar responded mildly.

"I'm stuck on this piece of shit ship!"

"And that's my fault.. how?"

Silence.

"Did I ask you come aboard it? Did I ask you to start playing around with the IT systems in an attempt to screw with us? Did I make you so stupid it's a wonder you can breath and blink at the same time?" Dar went on. "Sorry to have to inject reality not to mention logic into the conversation, but frankly, you screwed yourself, which is what you should have been doing all along so as not to give the rest of us migraines."

"Ooo." Kerry wriggled.

"You.." There was a hiss of interference. "This is all your doing! I know it! You've been trying to fuck me over ever since I dumped you!"

"Stop blaming me, Shari." Dar's voice suddenly went very serious. "You want someone to blame for your troubles, look in a mirror. I don't need to screw you over. I've got everything. You mean nothing to me."

Silence.

"So stop wasting my time." Dar finished quietly.

The line went dead. Dar looked at the phone, then she closed it and let it drop onto the surface of her desk. She looked down at Kerry, who was still wrapped around her. "Well."

Kerry hugged her.

Dar exhaled. "You know something? I actually feel sorry for her."

"I don't." Green eyes peered wryly up. "And you shouldn't either. You were so totally right, Dar. Whatever happened to her.. she did to herself."

"Mm."

"Not that she'll ever buy that." Kerry acknowledged.

"No. It'll always be my fault." Dar sighed. "Damn it."

Kerry sniffed. "Well." She concluded. "If that's the case, I hope they're in hundred foot seas every second they're out there, and run out of Dramamine."

"Ker."

"Sorry, hon. If she's determined to hate you, I'll just return the favor. I was never into that two wrongs rigmarole." The blond woman stated stubbornly. "At least not where you're concerned." She added hastily, seeing Dar's hiked eyebrows.

"Not very Christian." Dar remarked diplomatically.

"Neither am I." Kerry smiled, with a touch of bittersweetness. "But seriously, Dar. I don't think there's anything you can do for her. I think she's talked herself into believing you're out to get her, and she probably doesn't realize she has a thing for you."

Dar blinked. "What?"

"Don't you remember? In North Carolina? She tried to get you to go out with her." Kerry poked Dar in the ribs. "I think she liked what she saw, and figured she could pick up from way back when."

"Except I wasn't interested." Dar murmured. "I blew her off."

"So.. you switched places."

"And she was determined to bring me down, just like she thinks I was determined to do that to her." Dar sat down on the desk, releasing a breath in sudden understanding. "Holy crap."

"Crap, anyway." Kerry smoothed the unruly dark hair off her partner's forehead.

Dar stared off past her, through the window. "One of us has to stop this, then." She said. "And I think it has to be me."

Kerry absorbed that thoughtfully, but made no comment.

* * *

Ceci stood behind the captain's seat, her hair being whipped back as they traveled across the dark sea. She felt a bit like a dog out for a car ride, except there were no traffic lights anywhere and Andy was actually driving in a straight line. "Why are we doing this, again?"

"Dardar done asked."

Ceci digested this for a moment. "And if she asked, you'd jump off a building?"

"Pends on what I was supposed to squish down at the bottom of it."

His wife chuckled dryly. "You'd enjoy squishing whatever it was."

"Probly."

Ceci leaned against him. "How long till we get there?"

Andrew checked the watch strapped to his wrist. "Bout two hours." He concluded. "Got some buddies of mine slowing things down."

"Hm." Ceci flexed her fingers. "How about some hot chocolate?" She tugged on her husband's ear. "You up for that, sailor boy?"

"Yeap." Andy nodded positively. "That'd be real nice."

"Be right back." Ceci made her way to the ladder and carefully climbed down it, trading the warm, if whipping wind for the peace of the boat's cabin. She waited for a particularly sharp pitching to stop, then walked over to the small kitchen and slipped behind the counter.

She wasn't much of a cook, and never pretended to be. Neither was Andy. They both subsisted on a mish mash of burgers and vegetable curries, with a lot of fresh fruit and what seemed to her an inordinate amount of peanut butter.

But she could manage hot chocolate just fine, knowing to make it with just the right amount of chocolate syrup and milk, added to a judicious application of microwaves. She did so now, and took a seat on the weighted base stool to wait for it to finish heating.

The drone of the big diesel engines was almost inaudible inside, which always surprised her. She'd gotten used to the motion now, and in fact, the rocking of the boat even in dock put her to sleep like a baby, but every once in a while she'd look around and slap herself when she realized that after all she'd gone through in her life, here she was now with it all.

Hilarious, really. Ceci leaned on the counter, listening to the whirring of the microwave heating up the chocolate. She could almost imagine running into a very early version of herself now, and informing that rebellious freak show that she'd end up married to a sailor and owning a motor yacht anchored off South Beach.

She was pretty sure she'd have run screaming. Now, she just peacefully observed their neat, teak inlaid living space and stuck her tongue out at her younger self. At least her family still disowned her, right? That had to count for something, to those crabby little memories.

Both their families had disowned them. She'd once broached the subject of trying to reconnect with his family to Andy, but he'd just shook his head without even a moment's hesitation.

Ah well. She'd reconnected with Dar, and that would have to be enough familial reconciliation for her for this lifetime, at least.

The ship rocked a little again, and she turned to peer out the porthole. It was getting very dark out there, and she was still really wondering what Dar was thinking when she asked them to come. It worried her a little, because insofar as she understood her daughter, she didn't understand this.

The radio crackled softly, whispers from hidden travelers on the sea like they were, talking into the silence.

* * *

"Ready?" Kerry glanced at her reflection in the mirror, twitching a bit of blond hair into place. "You realize they won't recognize us, right? After we spent the last week in rags?" She surveyed her silver blue linen sheath as she shrugged into her gunmetal gray jacket.

"Probably not." Dar appeared in the mirror's reflection behind her. She was dressed in a black business suit jacket and skirt, with a burgundy silk shirt. "You look gorgeous." She complimented her partner, giving her an approving smile as she twitched the shoulders straight on Kerry's jacket.

Kerry straightened in reflex, glancing in the mirror to meet Dar's eyes. "Thanks." She smiled. "So do you."

"Hm.. this old thing?" Dar held her arms out, giving her suit a droll look.

"What's in it." Kerry turned around and traced a line down the front of her partner's neck. "Did I say anything about the packaging?" Her fingertip disappeared inside the collar of Dar's shirt. "Any word from Hans?"

"Nope." Dar reached past Kerry and selected a pair of earrings, fastening them into her lobes. "Not a word."

Kerry applied a bit of perfume to her wrists, and rubbed them together. "Well."

"It's Sunday." Dar shrugged. "Can't really expect much on the weekend." She picked up Kerry's arm by the wrist and rubbed the inside of it against the side of her neck. "Mm." She growled softly. "I like that."

Kerry almost sneezed, the sudden seduction sending confusing signals across her body. "It's new." She responded in bemusement.

"It's you." Dar relented, releasing her arm and giving her a pat on the shoulder. "We ready for our close-ups, Ms De Mille?"

Kerry rolled her eyes. "What are you going to do, since we haven't heard from Hans?"

"Bullshit." Dar replied amiably.

"Really?"

"Yup. C'mon."

Kerry followed Dar out the door and into the purple twilight of a summer evening. They walked together down the path and over to Dar's car. "You know where we're going?" Kerry asked. "I don't think I ever heard of the place."

"Ivan Tors?" Dar chuckled softly. "Yeah, I've been there."

"Really?" Kerry got into the Lexus and settled into the leather seat. "I thought your mom said you were too feisty for baby commercials."

Dar closed the door and started the car. "I was." She backed the Lexus out of it's parking spot, leaving Kerry's smaller blue one sitting in lonely isolation. "But they used to film Flipper there, and we went on a school field trip to check it out."

Kerry leaned an elbow on the center console. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Dar shook her head. "They were doing some movie or something there when we were by… had the big tank filled up with water and I jumped in."

"Oh my gosh."

"Hey, it was hot." Dar turned onto the main road of the island. "Pissed off a lot of people, let me tell ya, but one of the guys doing the shots wanted me to stick around."

Kerry's eyes twinkled. "Ah. A gentleman of discerning tastes."

Dar smiled, but didn't answer. She pulled up and directly onto the ferry, which was just about ready to cast off. Rolling into place, she set the parking brake and relaxed. As she

looked off towards the west, towards a still crimson line near the horizon, she could sense an ending coming and was glad of it.

"So you're going to bullshit?" Kerry changed the subject, watching her partner's fingers tap restlessly on the steering wheel. "What part do you want me to take up? How we're working to incorporate our international partners?"

"Mm. I like that." Dar gave her an approving grin.

Kerry leaned back, watching the shoreline go past as the ferry crossed the cut. The last light was fading from the sky and she enjoyed the faint puffs of magenta still outlining the western clouds. "We driving down to the cabin tomorrow or taking the Dixie?"

Dar didn't answer for a few minutes, her brow tensing a little. Then she shrugged. "Let's take the Dixie. We can run down to Key West one of the days for fun if we want."

"Ooo.. I like that idea." Kerry found herself really looking forward to it. "I really do." She added, in a softer tone. "And you know, we can get some stuff done from there, Dar. I've got so much catch-up to do."

Dar eyed her.

"I just really like the idea of working from there." Kerry caught the look, and blushed a little. "I got so much more done that one day."

Dar casually reached over and took Kerry's hand in hers. They both sat in silence as the ferry made a lazy u-turn in the channel and started to nose up to the landside ferry base. Then Dar turned her head and looked at Kerry. "I want to put together this deal." She sounded slightly surprised. "With Hans."

"Do you?" Kerry asked.

Dar nodded. "We can really make a move in Europe with this." She said. "We've got a lot of services contracts over there, but almost no infrastructure. That's why the international calls give me such a hive. They have no clue what I do."

"I think it's a great idea."

"Which one?" Dar half grinned.

"All of them. I like the idea of you expanding our business there." Kerry replied. "And to be honest, I think I need to pull back from that side of it a little. I need to get our house in order. There's been way too much suckage in the last few months."

They both studied each other as the ferry docked, and the ramp started to come down. "I was seriously considering quitting last week." Dar finally said.

"I know."

Dar started up the Lexus. "I'm not going to quit on a failure." She shifted her hands to the wheel, watching impatiently as the ferry deck hands began to direct traffic off the boat. "I'm just not going to do that."

Kerry settled back as they started up the ramp, nodding a little to herself. "I like that answer." She said. "It reminds me of something my father said, once."

Dar barely kept from driving off the edge of the ferry base. "What?"

Kerry folded her arms. "He said, ‘Kerrison, if you ever go out in public and do something, you better do it right. If it lands on the page one of the Washington Post, you'll spend a year in the back room washing dishes.'"

Dar blinked. "Did I just say that?" She asked, in an outraged tone.

"No." Kerry nudged her. "Drive straight, hon.. they wont' believe us if we say we missed it because you drove off the causeway." She waited until they were underway again. "But his point was the same thing – when you do something, you should do it right, or don't do it."

"Oh. Okay." The dark haired woman drummed her fingers on the wheel. "Yeah, I guess it is the same general idea, isn't it?" She paused, then glanced at Kerry. "Did you listen to him?"

Kerry merely nodded, her expression shifting to one of quiet introspection. "One of the few times." She added, after a moment. "So I'm right there with you, Dar. I don't fail in public. Not if I can help it."

"Mmhm."

They traded the causeway for the highway, and headed north.

* * *

"Why aren't we moving?" Quest asked, as soon as the captain cleared the doorway. "We've been sitting here for an hour!"

The captain gave him a brief smile. "That is right." He agreed. "And we will be sitting possibly for some hours more. There is a defect in the engine."

Quest threw his hands up. "This piece of crap boat."

"Ship." The captain corrected him. "Mr. Quest, I am sorry if this disturbs you. However, we are outside the waters of the United States, and so you perhaps should just go and relax while we attend to this problem. I did warn you we could have some difficulties."

"Yeah, yeah." Quest grumbled. "I just want to be out of here. I can taste a decent glass of beer the closer we get to the other side."

The captain shrugged both shoulders. "I do sympathize." He said. "We too, are looking for some relief from the lives we've been forced to live these last few months." He walked over to the window in the dining room, peering out into the darkness. "I am looking forward to going home."

Quest snorted. "Hey, at least you had a break. I can't believe you conned Roberts into buying the whole damn ship dinner." He said. "Very slick."

The captain did not turn. "I think the lady was glad to do it."

"Lady?" Quest guffawed. "Get real."

"I rather liked Ms. Roberts." The older man twitched his jacket straight. "At any rate, I must return to the bridge. If there is further developments, I will inform you." He walked to the door and slipped through it, not giving Quest a chance to intercept him.

"Prick." Quest curled his lip. "You'll be going home all right, old man. I know they'll kick your ass right off this tub as soon as the check's signed." He put his feet up against the chair next to him and pushed back, rocking slowly in the rhythm of the ship's motion.

A shadow caught his eye, and he looked over towards the big entrance to see Shari entering. "What do you want?" He asked sharply. "I thought I told you to stay upstairs and stop aggravating everyone."

"Go screw yourself." Shari told him bluntly. "You don't tell me anything, you piece of shit."

"You better watch your mouth." Quest pointed at her. "You forget I can have you charged with being a stowaway. That's big time trouble for a skuzzy dyke without any passport."

Shari sat down near the window. "Don't threaten me. I finally bought my way into that comm. office upstairs and got a phone call out." She told him, with a sneer. "So my passport's no longer an issue. You better hope you make this stupid trip worth my while, or maybe I'll charge you with kidnapping."

"Like anyone would kidnap you." Quest laughed. "What a piece of shit you are. Is there anyone in this thing you didn't screw over? Your partner? Roberts? Me? The media? Meyer? You were sleeping with everyone."

"Look who's talking." Shari taunted him right back. "If you switched sides any more times you'd have split yourself in half, you horse's ass."

Quest started laughing. "I was right. We're two of a kind." He announced, with a cheerful grin. "Maybe if you're not too obnoxious on the crossing, I'll let you come work for me when I sign my contract with the new owners."

"Don't even think it." Shari growled. "I don't work for anyone."

"Yeah, you sure didn't do much for your little girlfriend. Bet she wishes she'd hooked up with your old flame."

"Screw you."

Quest laughed again. "Better think twice. I think you burned your bridges with your friend."

Shari lapsed into a sullen stare at him.

"Who knows? Maybe you lucked out getting stuck on board." Quest went on, with a smirk. "Wouldn't you like a new start? I don't' think you're leaving behind anything worth going back to."

One of the crew entered, and paused awkwardly. "Uh.. excuse me."

"Yeah? What?" Quest seemed glad of a new victim. "What's your name again, Weenie?"

"Talley." The man said. "The staff captain asked me to tell you that dinner is being served in the officer's mess."

"Tell them I said to bring it to me here." Quest told him.

Shari got up. "If you're so stupid you'd give those people a chance to poison the plate they're bringing you, I don't want to be here to see it." She looked at Talley. "Where's the place it's being served?"

Talley gave her a mildly accepting look, and indicated the stairs. "Down there. I'll show you." He said. "And I'll pass along your message, sir."

Shari followed the young man down the stairs. "How do you like working for a jackass like that?"

Talley glanced at her, then shrugged. "He's a clueless breeder. They're all the same. He'll get tired of the whole thing when we get to where we're going, and take off."

"Think so?" Shari asked.

Talley smirked. "I think he'll be lucky he's not hanging over the railing the rest of the crossing after I tell the staff he's got to bring him his dinner."

Shari chuckled dryly, but her thoughts kept going back to what Quest had said.

What, really, did she have to go back to?

Nothing.

But what if she could turn it all around, and make a deal with the new owners of the ships? Shari's eyes glinted. She could pull her own miracle out of her ass this time, and screw the rest of them. She'd show up Dar, and she'd prove who was the real driving force behind Telegenics.

Yeah.

* * *

Dar paused just inside the back door to the studio to let her eyes wander over the space, trying to remember what it had looked like the last time she'd been there. After a moment, she shook her head and followed Kerry across to where a long table was set up against one wall.

Everything seemed to be painted black. Behind the table was a set of doors, one larger than the other, with a heavy seal and what looked like a police light mounted over it. It was flashing red, throwing annoying blurps of light around the room.

"Ah." Graham was already there, and he walked over to them as they approached. He was dressed in a well fitted, conservative gray suit and appeared to be the successful businessman he in reality was. "We were taking bets whether we'd see you two here tonight."

"Us, miss a party?" Kerry said. "Never. Besides, I don't know about you, but I needed some closure out of this thing."

"I agree." Michelle joined them. "They're doing individual interviews first." She indicated the door. "And they've catered us. Go have some television food. Guarantee that doesn't happen to any of us often."

Dar touched Kerry's back lightly. "I'll grab you a coke." She ducked away and headed for the table, leaving Kerry to fence with their rivals.

"Nice outfit." Michelle complimented her.

"Thanks, you too." Kerry replied, with automatic graciousness. "We got a call from your partner."

"So did I." Michelle didn't miss a beat. "Did you arrange all that?"

Graham was merely watching them, his eyes flicking from Kerry to Michelle with interest.

"Sad to say, no." Kerry said. "We were as surprised as you probably were."

"I wasn't."

Kerry's eyebrows twitched. "You weren't?"

"No. I mean.." Michelle backed up hastily as she saw Kerry's expression change. "What I meant was, I wasn't surprised when I found out she'd gone on your ship to try and screw you over. Not that I knew she had."

"Ah."

"Don't start throwing things at me." Michelle warned, with a wary grin. "This suit costs a fortune to dry clean."

Kerry had to grin a little at that, lifting a hand and half shrugging to acknowledge the jibe. "We're just a bunch of radicals at ILS, what can I tell you? I do have to admit I wasn't expecting our admin staff to turn into culinary terrorists." She glanced aside as Dar returned with two cups. "Thanks."

"So, have you decided what you will tell them, Dar?" Graham asked, with a remarkable lack of artifice. "That's what we were discussing before you arrived. What lies we came up with."

Dar shrugged. "More or less." She turned to Michelle. "You going to tell them about Shari?"

The smaller woman's face scrunched up. "I'm on the fence."

Just then the red light went off, and they all turned as the big door opened. A slim, blond woman with a pony tail and a huge clipboard looked out. "Okay, we're about ready to start. Everyone here?"

The front door shoved open, and a sweating Mike joined them, a look of overbearing aggravation on his face. "Traffic sucks." He announced crisply. "Sorry."

The pony-tailed woman looked at her clipboard. "Are you Mike?" She asked. "You're first."

"Figures." Mike dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief. "This won't take long. Keep a beer cold for me." He edged past them and approached the woman, tugging the sleeves straight on his chocolate brown business suit.

The door closed behind him, and after a few moments, the red light went on. The rest of them lapsed into a pensive silence, standing in the middle of the depressingly dark stage.

* * *

Shari joined her new friend Talley at a formica table, setting down her tray with it's dish of god only knew what and glass of chemical punch and taking a seat. The crew mostly ignored her, and chattered to each other as they relaxed together.

Most were young, but some weren't, and there was a real mix of nationalities. In fact, Shari discovered, Talley was one of the very few Americans aboard.

"We don't like hard work." Talley explained, when asked about that. He selected a piece of mystery meat from the stew and ate it. "Americans don't like working seven days a week with no time off, and crappy salary."

"I doubt anyone does." Shari offered, reasonably. "So why do it?"

"Travel." Talley said. "Different place every day, different people." He took a sip of the pseudo juice. "They give you room and board.. such as it is, so you can save money and put it away if you want to, or buy yourself stuff at every port, if you want to."

It almost sounded appealing. "No attachments." Shari mentioned.

"Exactly." Talley nodded. "Which is why I think this whole hotel thing sucks so bad."

"Yeah." A young, willowy woman sat down next to him. "It's nasty."

"So you don't think it's a good idea?" Shari asked.

Both young people shrugged. "It's better than scuttling the ships, I guess." Talley said. "And we get to keep our jobs, which is more than the deck and engine guys got. They're pissed."

"They're weird." The girl said, her Australian accent rolling the words out. "But they'll go off and find some other bucket of bolts to cruise round in, you know it."

"Rather than working for.. what was that.." Shari fished gingerly.

"Hundermann, yeah." Talley supplied promptly. "I guess they'll be okay. Pretty good benefits."

Hundermann. "Yeah, those guys."

"For me, it's good." The girl said. "I've been wanting to move shoreside, and get in with these people, they've got a lot of good properties all over the continent."

"Hm." Talley nodded. "I guess. I'll just miss being at sea."

"Join the Navy." Shari suggested. "I hear the food's better."

The two looked at their plates, and then at her, and then at each other. Talley sighed. "Boy, I miss those IT guys. They really knew how to lay it on." He lamented. "It was nice to be treated like human beings for a change, wasn't it, Mandy?"

"It was." The girl agreed. "I liked that lot. Clever boys, and handsome girls. Wish they'd stayed on, and I'm terribly mad at you all for letting them be tricked like that, with Staff."

Talley had the grace to look guilty.

Shari bit her tongue to keep from giving her opinion of Dar and her staff. She needed information right now more than the satisfaction that savaging the old bitch would give her. "So.. Hundermann.. they a big outfit?"

Talley turned to her in relief. "Pretty big, for over there I guess. They've got a lot of unique places all around.. castles and stuff like that. Exclusive."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe we'll get staying privileges." Mandy elbowed him. "Do a tour on time off and stay in a castle, I'd like that."

"I think they're going to do up each ship in a different era, or culture or something." Talley said. "Sounds pretty cool."

It did, actually. Shari felt a grudging appreciation for the idea.

"So.. are you part of Mr. Quest's company?" Talley suddenly asked. "I thought you were, but if you don't know about the new people.."

Crap. "Nah. I'm from one of the other ships." Shari said. "I was just bringing something on this one when you all just up and left. I got stuck here."

"Oh!" Mandy looked concerned. "My gosh.. are you staying on the crossing? Don't you have clothes or anything? That's horrid!"

"Yeah, well, that's the breaks." Shari got up, picking up her mostly untouched tray. "Thanks for the company. See you later." She deposited the congealing food onto a dish cart and strode purposefully for the door, an idea growing in her mind that made her smile.

* * *

Dar had tired of standing around bullshitting, and she'd hunted around the big, empty stage until she located a few old folding chairs stacked against one wall. She called the others over, and they set up the chairs in a circle, near enough to the long table to replenish themselves from it when they wanted.

"Excuse me, we didn't rent those." The girl behind the long table cautioned them.

"You should have." Dar told her. "Just be glad we didn't come over there and sit in your table."

The girl subsided, reseating herself meekly behind the catering.

Kerry tucked her feet under her chair and let her hands rest on her knees. The big room was well air conditioned, at least, and with any luck they'd be done soon and they could get out of here. Her social gene prodded her, and she cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. "How about we all go grab some dinner and end this project on a civilized note?"

"You, civilized, and dinner scares me." Michelle said, but with a smile. "But I'll risk it. Graham?"

"Surely." Graham placidly answered. "My company is already sending hit men after me and I doubt I will survive Monday, so why not get a dinner out of it at the least? Perhaps we can all pass around resumes."

"Ah, yes." Michelle winced. "Isn't that the truth? Not all of us have as understanding an upper management as you do, Dar. That was a pretty impressive performance by your CEO." She took a sip of ice tea. ‘You have him very well trained."

"Alastair's not trained." Kerry hastily spoke up as she sensed the stiffening of Dar's body next to her. "He just trusts Dar implicitly."

"Hm."

"That is what I have heard." Graham said. "In fact, to be perfectly frank, Dar, it's quite advantageous to your boss that your preferences are so explicit as otherwise many would assume something quite salacious between the two of you."

"They have." Dar shrugged. "He and I joke about it sometimes." She pulled her PDA out and checked it, then returned it to her purse with a sigh.

The rotating light went off, and the door opened. Mike came out, looking as though he'd drunk sour lemonade.

"Ah.. Graham?" The pony tailed girl asked, peering politely at them. "You're next, please."

Mike came over and took the chair Graham vacated, sitting down in it with a creak of protesting metal. "Hope you've got a cup on." He advised Graham.

Graham paused, made a face, then continued on, shaking his head as he walked through the door.

"Do they make cups for women?" Mike asked. "Cause I think there's a Wal-Mart nearby if you want to run out and get some."

Dar, Kerry, and Michelle exchanged looks. Kerry cleared her throat gently. "Are they wearing cups?" She indicated the now closed door.

"I'm wearing pointy shoes." Michelle displayed her fashionable stilettos. "This could be fun."

* * *

Shari browsed the screen, searching out details. She'd found Hundemann's website easily enough, once she'd paid off the communications officer to give up his laptop for a few minutes. The man hadn't wanted to, and after she'd taken a quick look at his browser history, she could see why.

No wonder they'd liked Dar. She gave them freaking internet. None of the others had done it, and they sure hadn't, since that would have cost money she wasn't about to spend on this shitball bid. "Wonder if they even had any clue how badly they'd have lost this." She shook her head.

Hundemann's site was boring as hell. She scrolled through pages and pages of bullshit, maps, site plans, and marketing crap so bland even she couldn't get through it. The one thing that didn't seem to be there was a contact number and address.

Figures. Shari kept hunting.

"Madame."

"Here." Shari held out another twenty dollar bill without looking. "Go away."

The bill was removed from her fingers, and a moment later, the door closed. Shari drummed her fingers on the keyboard, then thought of something else, and opened up a search page. "Don't want riff raff to call you, huh? Well, you issue stock, so you've got to have an address somewhere, baby. C'mon."

She ran a search against public companies, and found nothing. Then she tried against the SEC database, and finally, finally, there was something. She scanned the results, and leaned forward. "Ah hah." The company's officers were listed, most of whom were not familiar to her.

"Sir Melton Gilberthwait." Shari rolled her eyes. "Oh, give me a break. Sounds like a cartoon character from Rocky and Bullwinkle." She pulled out a pen and wrote it down nevertheless, and copied down the telephone number beside it. "Okay, old boy. I'll just give you a ring, and see if I can't make you a deal you can't say no to."

She checked her watch. "Well your office hours say six am, so I hope that's not bullshit like the rest of your website is." She put the piece of paper away, and closed the browser. With a glance at the door, she then walked over to the rack of computer equipment and looked at it.

A smoked glass door obscured the contents, and on the front was taped a sign off sheet verifying that the gear behind the door was operational.

It listed all the components. Shari scanned it, not really recognizing most of the individual pieces of machinery, but knowing the major parts from things Michelle had said. It was expensive stuff, and she had fought tooth and nail with Michelle to get her to order the cheaper components she'd found on the internet instead of the kind Dar had used.

Michelle had flat refused. She should have known right then it was all bullshit. It had nothing to do with competing with ILS, and everything to do with impressing Dar. And Michelle had said **she** was fixated? What a blind fucker she'd turned out to be.

Shari got to the end of the list, and the signature line where ILS's installer had guaranteed the install.

The name was familiar – a firmly scrawled D. Roberts. Shari stared at the name for a long time, her lip curling up into an unconscious snarl. She reached out and her fingers tensed against the paper, on the verge of crumpling it.

Then she dropped her hand, and just spat on it instead. "I am going to beat you." She told the page. "And you are never, ever going to forget it."

* * *

Dar walked up and down the cracked sidewalk outside the studio. It was getting late, and the traffic in front of the building had settled down to a steady trickle, the orange streetlamps bathing everything in an annoying color that strained her eyes to look at it.

She checked her PDA again, finding nothing in the in box. Hell, Hans was probably out at the local pub.. Dar checked her watch. No, Hans was probably sleeping, without a care in the world for her anxieties on this side of the planet.

She could bullshit the television producers, but there was a warning bell ringing in the back of her head that reminded her that Meyer was the type who'd pick up the phone and call the Europeans to find out if she was lying or not.

That.. she didn't want to deal with. Dar paced down the walk, dodging past two women jogging as she tried to work off some of her nervous energy. It wasn't easy. She really felt like doing some sparring, and she felt bad about having left Kerry inside making small talk.

She stopped near a bus bench, and leaned against the telephone pole next to it.

What could she do? Dar sorted through her options. Maybe she could tell half truths, and just gloss over any specifics. Say they were working on a deal, which was true. Say she was working with a transcontinental partner…which was almost true since she had no real agreement with Hans.

But she was aware that this was going to be filmed, and that meant it could come back and bite her in the ass big time, if everything fell through or worse, if Hans found some European partner and they cut her out of it. She would look like an idiot.

Dar hated looking like an idiot. It might even be said that she'd made up the story just to make the company look good, and since that would affect the stock, there could be legal issues for her with that.

She was, as she found herself being reminded recently, a corporate officer and they were a public company.

"Hey lady."

Dar turned, to find an old woman taking a seat on the bench next to her. "Yes?"

"Is this the G bus?" The woman peered at Dar fuzzily, squinting through a pair of glasses with lenses at least a half an inch thick.

Dar straightened and looked around, spotting a sign tacked to the telephone pole. It bore a legend that probably required most of Dar's years of schooling to decipher and went a long way to explain why so few residents bothered using the transit system. "Yeah." She finally said. "Where are you going?"

"Hallandale."

Of course. "Yeah, that's the bus." Dar agreed.

"Good. Now if the stupid thing comes, it'll be a good thing. Are you waiting for the bus? You could sell that nice jacket and take a taxi, y'know."

Dar had to smile. "No, I'm not waiting for the bus."

"So why are you standing there? Go home!" The woman scolded her. "It's late! Does your mother know you're out here?"

Dar's jaw dropped a little, and she clicked it shut. "She does."

"She should be ashamed. Go on home, young lady."

Bemused and defeated, Dar left the safety of her telephone pole and escaped back down the sidewalk towards the studio. She got back to the door without any clearer idea of what she was going to do, but she was glad enough to trade the muggy night heat for the cold blandness inside.

Kerry looked up as she entered, and gave her a wry smile. She was sitting with Mike and Graham, and apparently Michelle was now undergoing the grilling.

Of course, Kerry was depending on her too. Dar felt the added weight on her shoulders. She didn't want to disappoint Kerry, or Alastair, or the board, or the company or her parents…

Jesus. Dar went back to her seat and dropped into it, feeling silently overwhelmed.

Kerry reached casually over and circled Dar's arm with her fingers, rubbing gently with the edge of her thumb. "Graham just told me they're being pretty brutal in there."

Dar lifted her brows.

"I think we should just keep our cool, and relax."

Sure, easy for you to say. Dar scowled silently.

"Actually I think we should tell them we bought the ships." Kerry continued blandly. "You know I had that budget I had to use or lose for this quarter."

Graham snorted wearily.

"Tell them your dad is going to re-commission them as a coastal defense."

Mike rolled his eyes, but laughed anyway.

A grudging smile appeared on Dar's face, as she looked into her partner's eyes. "He'd make a damn good Admiral" She said, understanding the banter for what it was. "Think you could keep a straight face if I pulled that on them?"

"No." Kerry admitted, with a grin. "But I'm sure you'll think of something, and if not.. we can just start kissing each other. That should distract them."

Both men started laughing, mostly at Dar's expression. Finally, Dar started laughing too, because with the tension she was feeling, she needed to do something.

As Kerry had said, she'd figure out something. Dar took Kerry's hand in hers and squeezed it. And if not, well then, Plan B had it's merits, too.

* * *

Shari dug more bills out of her wallet, glad like hell she'd stopped at the bank before she'd headed for the pier that day. She'd figured the last minute crap was going to cost, and she knew better than to trust in the altruism of her staff or the good will of the dock workers.

None of that, of course, would have been figured into the bid. She hadn't even been sure she was going to tell Michelle about it if she'd paid anyone off, though she knew her erstwhile partner had no real moral objection to the practice.

It was just get it done, that was all. That's what they'd decided to do when they'd gone into this whole rigmarole – to do whatever it took to win the contract. Shari counted out her money. To win the contract and beat ILS.

She thought Michelle was on the program with her on that. Things had been going great for them, right up until fucking Orlando. They'd had it all planned out – starting with making a star appearance at the convention.

Then Dar had shown up, and it all started going wrong.

Just like always.

She tucked half the money away in her jeans pocket and folded the other half, glancing at the scrap of paper with the Hundemann's contact name. "Well, not this time." She informed the scribbling. "Now, where's that little Ruskie?"

She opened the door to the communications office, but found it surprisingly empty. Every other time she'd come in she'd found the communications officer hunkered down over his

desk but this time the padded gray seat was barren, and she wasn't nearly one to look a gift horse in the mouth when it presented itself.

With a grin, she slipped inside and locked the door behind her, pocketing the folded twenties she'd tucked inside her right hand. No sense in wasting her resources, eh? She sat down at the console table and picked up the phone, pausing to straighten out the small bit of paper before she composed herself to dial.

She checked her watch. Only quarter to four am in Europe, and she suspected her call would go unanswered. If it was a business number, though, she could leave a message and at least make some contact. She cracked her knuckles and paused briefly, considering what to say.

Despite the fact that it went against most of her personality, marketing was what she'd chosen to specialize in. She thought about what might make a good 'hook' for the possibly stuffy, probably stuck up continentals on the other end of the phone.

Should she be aggressive? That was her normal mode and the mode she knew her rival felt most comfortable with as well. The only difference was, she admitted privately to herself, she'd never quite gotten that switch to sexy charm that Dar did so well, the one that could turn a frothing adversary into a drooling ape in roughly ten seconds.

She definitely hadn't had that when they'd been dating. Shari had been shocked to find herself snared by it long afterward.

So, possibly not aggressive with the Euros. She turned her thoughts to something more productive. Her few contacts with overseas vendors had taught her they didn't really appreciate that American style approach, at least not very often.

Respectful. Shari nodded grudgingly, then she dialed the number, and waited, listening to the foreign sounding buzz in her ear.

* * *

The door light went off, and it opened so quickly afterward that it was obvious Michelle had started out before the session was over. One look at her face confirmed it, and if sparks really could fly from someone's eyes, the painted walls of the studio would have gone up in an instant.

"Uh oh." Kerry brushed a speck of dust from her sleeve. "That doesn't look good."

"Hm." Dar stood up as Michelle approached. "Problem?"

"Multiple sessions of triple digit jackassedness." Michelle replied succinctly. "Good luck. Dar. For once, I hope to hell you take your reputation to the absolute limit and eunuch

those people." She sat down in the chair Dar had just vacated and sat back, one toe tapping on the concrete floor in agitation.

"Hm." Dar shifted a little, unsure of whether to plant her hands on her hips or cross her arms to punctuate the statement.

"Ms.. uh.. Roberts?" The girl with the pony tail interrupted her dilemma.

Dar glanced over at her.

"Could you come with me, please?"

Dar put one hand on Kerry's shoulder, already sensing the motion as her partner went to stand up. "Depends." She replied.

"Ma'am?"

"I said, it depends." Dar repeated. "Tell your friends inside there I have no intention of coming out with an expression like Michelle's here. So if that's what they intend, forget it."

The girl stared at her. "Ma'am?" She peered behind her. "Do you want to be in this show?"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"No." Dar began to wonder if the echoes in the big room were affecting the girl's hearing. "I don't want to be in this thing. So go tell those guys either be civil or I'm outta here. Got me?"

The girl disappeared, though before she left she gave Dar a look usually reserved for the mentally deficient. The door closed behind her, but the light remained off, and the room fell back into uncomfortable silence.

"So." Dar addressed Michelle. "What's the deal?"

Michelle's lips were twitching slightly. "You only get away with that because you're really the one they want to get, you know that, right?"

"Sure."

"Dar, you're not going in there by yourself." Kerry interrupted.

"Listen, everyone else only had one representative." Dar told her, giving her shoulder a little squeeze. "If there are asses to be kicked, I can handle that."

"That's not the point." The blond woman got up. "This was my contract."

And so it was. Dar inclined her head in concession. "True." She said. "Let's see what our little friend comes back and says."

"They actually asked me where Shari was." Michelle supplied. "I didn't tell them. It seemed to piss them off." She eyed Dar dourly. "You.." She paused. "Okay, let me be honest. We screwed them over for their little happy ending, so now the deal is, scandal in corporate America. Get the drift?"

Dar cocked her head a little. "No."

"They went after some pretty dirty details." Mike spoke up finally. "Brought up a deal that went south for us, two bloody years ago."

"Skeletons, yes." Graham nodded. "Fortunately, most of ours are fairly benign."

Kerry scratched her jaw. "Hon." She patted Dar on the side. "I don't think we have any skeletons left that aren't either tattooed on my chest or were featured on national television at least twice." She looked at the rest of them. "Really."

"Hmph." Michelle snorted.

Graham pursed his lips and shrugged.

"You've got a skeleton tattooed on your chest?" Mike asked ingeniously.

"Let's go." Dar decided she was over it. "C'mon." She took Kerry by the arm and started for the inner door. "Let's get this over with."

* * *

The phone answered on what seemed like the thirtieth ring. "Hundemann Incorporated." A cultured voice echoed lightly through the phone. "How may I help you?"

Well, at least it wasn't a cleaning woman. Or at least, she didn't think so. "Good morning." Shari replied. "I know it's very early there, and I apologize for calling at this hour."

"Not a problem." The voice sounded a touch warmer. "We're quite used to calls at all hours."

Oh, really? Shari found that interesting. "Ah huh."

"The hostel business is round the clock, as it were." The woman clarified. "How may I forward your inquiry?"

"Of course." Shari said. "I was hoping to speak with Sir Melton Gilberthwaite? I completely understand if he's not available, perhaps I can leave word for him with an assistant?'

"Please hold one moment. I will see who's in at that location." The operator sounded almost cheerful. "I think they had a Far East meeting today, so let me just check."

A soft classical tune began playing in her ear, and Shari sat back, wondering if luck wasn't coming her way at last.

* * *

"Look, I don't know what the hell's going on, but I've got a schedule I need to keep." The woman with the pony tail was saying. "We've got this studio booked in an hour for an night shoot with MTV."

Meyer gave her a look. "All right, hold your tits, sister. I'll get this straightened out." He brushed passed her and stalked towards the door. "Pain the ass little.." He stopped short, nearly crashing into Dar as she came through the door with Kerry right behind her. "Oh."

"Oh." Dar didn't even slow down. She came right up to him and poked him in the chest. "Oh, you've got about ten minutes of my time to wrap up your game, Meyer, because I'm not wasting one more minute more than that on you."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Meyer backed up a step. "Just who do you.."

"You know who I think I am." Dar didn't let up. "So go over there, and put up or shut up." She gave him a shove for good measure, aware of Kerry's close presence at her back. "Ten minutes!"

Meyer was caught off balance, and so he gave way, turning and moving back towards the filming area. "Fine." He tossed back over his shoulder. "Go with her. She'll get you ready."

Dar studied the space. Inside a ring of lights and two cameras on dollies were two high directors chairs in a dark fabric. It was all very stark and utilitarian, and to her eyes, profoundly depressing. "Hmph." She ignored Pony Tail and ducked between the two cameras, whose operators were staring at her in fascination. "Think you could spare a few dollars for fresh bed sheets for this?" She pointed at the backdrop, which had several tears held together with gaffers tape.

Meyer just looked at her, then went back to studying a piece of paper, murmuring to a slim, gray haired woman standing next to him.

"Okay.. ah." Pony Tail hurried over. "Let's just get you .. uh.. both.. uh.. ready."

Dar took a seat and leaned her elbows on the chair arms. "I'm ready."

"Me too." Kerry hopped up onto the next chair.

Pony Tail stopped short. "Do you want us to.. "She made some vague hand gestures towards their heads. "Um. We usually want to do a little hair, a little makeup.."

"No, we're fine." Kerry responded, in a kind tone. "But thanks anyway. If we crack the lenses, I'll give you a credit card."

The girl shrugged, and walked off, shaking her head.

The two cameramen started to fiddle with their controls, making the cameras bob up and down like some odd animals, moving in and out on where Dar and Kerry were sitting. Dar put up with the show for a minute, then cleared her throat. "Meyer? Nine minutes."

Meyer's head jerked up. "Wh… oh, shit." He glared at Pony Tail. "You didn't say you were ready." He folded the piece of paper and straightened his jacket before he walked over to them, sitting down in a chair tucked up against where the cameras were.

"They wouldn't let me do anything." Pony Tail shrugged. "But that works for me, because if you get out of here on time, I can go get some tacos before Gloria Estefan shows up." She signaled to one of the camera guys, who adjusted some lights and focused them on Dar and Kerry.

"Forgot my sunglasses." Kerry lamented.

"Please be quiet." Meyer instructed. "I'm going to start asking questions. I'll address you by name, and I expect the person I'm addressing to answer me."

Dar chuckled softly under her breath.

Meyer looked up. "Excuse me? Did you say something, Ms. Roberts?"

"Nope." Dar interlaced her fingers. "But I will. So let's get started."

Meyer gave her an unpleasant smile. "Hope you remember you said that, Ms. Roberts. Very well. Jenna, give me a clapper please, and we'll go."

His assistant moved around in front of him and held a cliché quality film clapboard before the camera. "ILS takedown, first pass." She said in an unemotional voice. "Action."

* * *

"Thank you for holding." The woman's voice came back. "One moment, all right? Someone in that office can speak with you now."

"Thanks." Shari glanced at the door, which had just issued some suspicious rattling sounds as though the handle were being tried. She drummed the fingers of her free hand on the desk, and hoped it wouldn't take as long for the next secretary to answer. Last thing she needed them to hear was a bunch of those ship jerks yelling.

The line buzzed softly, then, thankfully was answered. "Good Morning, executive operations. This is Patricia. Can I help you?'

The door rattled again. "Good morning." Shari half turned away from the door. "Yes, if it's possible, I would like to speak with Sir Melton Gilberthwaite?"

"Sir Melton's on a conference call at the moment." The woman answered promptly. "May I enquire as to what this is about?'

Hm. Good question. "It's a business matter." Shari said. "I was referred to him in regards to one of his properties.. to possibly provide some services."

"Ah." Patricia cleared her throat. "I see. Well, I can't say when he'll be done. Perhaps you could leave your name and a contact number?"

Damn, damn, damn. Shari glared at the phone in frustration. Not only didn't she know what telephone line the damn thing was connected to, she had no idea how long she'd have possession of it. "I'm between locations at the moment." She temporized. "Could you maybe give me an idea of when I might try back?"

"Difficult to tell." The woman responded. "And there's someone waiting to speak with him here in the office. Perhaps two hours? He should have a few moments free before he breaks for breakfast."

Shari made a face, her fingers tensing on the paper. "That could be difficult." She sighed. "Thanks for letting me know – can I leave my name with you, at least?"

"Of course." Patricia replied, then hesitated. "Oh, wait. I hear them taking a quick breather. Maybe I can squeeze you in. Hang on." She put Shari on hold, leaving her to listen once again to transatlantic classical tunes.

"C'mon.. c'mon." Shari glanced over her shoulder, hearing now a definite rattle, and the sound of upset voices outside. "Shut up you assholes… there's no one you need to call this late and your porn sites'll wait a few minutes."

Vivaldi played on in her ear unrelentingly.

* * *

Meyer cleared his throat slightly. "Ms. Roberts."

"That's my name." Dar responded promptly. "Next question?"

Meyer waved his hand. "Cut." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "Ms. Roberts, can you cut the bullshit, please?"

"Why? You won't." Dar twiddled her thumbs. "Six minutes." She caught a glimpse of Pony Tail out of the corner of her eye, smirking at Meyer. "Want your quote or not?"

The man sat back. "Roll." He rotated his finger in the air, waiting for the belated clap of the board as Pony Tail hurried back over and snapped it. "Ms. Roberts, you're company's down thirty percent on contract renewals, your outlooking business is lousy, and you've just spent a million dollars on a paper boat you can't even use to take pot shots at. What do you tell your stockholders, Monday morning?"

Dar had seriously been expecting a personal attack, and now she had to stop and consider what kind of answer she could give to a legitimate business one.

And it was legitimate, they all knew it. Even Kerry knew it. Dar could feel the sudden, small shifts of her partner's body close by, Kerry's unconscious fight or flight reflexes surging into action.

So here she was, right down to it. No more time to bullshit, no more time to wonder what the hell to do, just time to put on display why Alastair paid her as much as he did.

And why was that, exactly? Dar shrugged caution off to the winds. Hell, if she was going to go down, might as well go down in the biggest ass fireworks display she could come up with. "Me?" She inquired mildly. "I'm not going to tell them anything."

Meyer leaned forward, his eyes glinting.

"It's not my job to tell them anything." Dar cut him off before he could get another dig in. "My job is to take the company and it's clients into the future of technology with confidence and competence, and that, Mr. Meyer, is exactly what I do."

Nice sound bite. Kerry complimented her partner silently.

"That doesn't answer that question, Ms. Roberts." Meyer replied mildly. "Because no matter who tells them, that answer comes from you. So, again, what is it you're going to say to justify what you did?"

Okay, so Meyer was pretty good. "Do I have to justify it?" Dar asked.

"Of course you do." Meyer answered, in that same, calm tone. "You're an officer in a publicly held company."

"Exactly. So what if my explanation breaks the confidentiality clause that office holds me to?" Dar delicately pulled out her thinnest, sharpest rapier and probed with it. "Surely you can't expect me to do that."

Warily, Mayer edged back. "Are you saying there is something you're holding back?"

"Am I?"

The man shifted, as though he wanted to get up and approach Dar. Dar merely smiled charmingly at him. There was doubt in his expression now, a frustrated wondering what Dar was up to. She knew she couldn't fence with him for long, but it was nice to have this one moment of sweet and very perceptible victory.

"You are, and I think you might want to let us in on it, because you might not get another chance, from what I hear." Meyer answered, with a triumphant smile of his own. "So, I'll ask one more time, Ms. Roberts, what do you say to the people who trusted you with their money as to how you just squandered it?"

Ball. Her court. Shit.

Dar was very aware of Kerry's eyes on her, as well as the cameras, and suddenly she just relaxed and let the anxiety go. "What do I say? I say to them, count your dividends, ladies and gents. That million I tossed onto the table bought me back a deal from the new owners for a hundred times that, at least."

Oh. God. Kerry listened to the outright lie and fought to keep her face from reacting.

"Oh really." Meyer said. "Interesting, since I have it on great authority he doesn't deal with Yankees."

Dar's eyes twinkled gently. "I ain't no Yankee." She drawled.

"And we have many, many transatlantic partners." Kerry chimed in for the first time. "One of the great advantages we bring to our clients."

Without missing a beat, Meyer pulled out his cell phone.

* * *

"Hello? Yes, one moment please. I was able to get Sir Milton for you." The secretary sounded somewhat smug and pleased with herself. "It's only for a moment, though."

"Perfect, that's all I need." Shari assured her. "Honest."

The line clicked through, and she heard a deep throat clearing. "Hello?" She ventured.

"Yes? Hello? What is this?" A gruff voice barked at her. "Who's speaking?"

"Good morning, sir.. thanks for taking a moment to chat with me." Shari got out quickly. "My names…" Her head jerked up as the door slammed inward, and the captain appeared with the communications engineer right behind him. "Ah, just a second…"

"Get that." The captain pointed at the phone. "You men, take hold of her, and quickly."

"Wait!" Shari got up and started to back away, but the engineer was too fast for her. He grabbed the phone, it's end issuing broken snatches of puzzled outrage. "Wait! NO! Stop!"

The engineer slammed the phone down, shoving her away and cursing at her in Russian.

"Get away from me." Shari warned the two big seaman who now headed for her. "Don't you touch me!" She hit the wall with her back, but in the small space, she had no where to go and they grabbed her arms with rough familiarity. "Stop it!"

"Shut up, woman." The captain ordered. "Or I will have them gag you. It is your choice."

"I'll have the law on you!" Shari screamed.

"Idiot!" The captain shouted back. "Is it not obvious that here, I **am** the law?" He looked at the men. "Take her down to the tender shell dock."

Shari realized in a state of shock that she was no longer in control of her own destiny. The two men lifted her up between them, their expressionless faces not even registering her as they stared past her and shoved her out the door. She didn't even think of struggling, feeling the strength in the hands the gripped her, and for the first time, a whitewash of fear came over her.

Oh my god. "All I did was use the damn phone!" She suddenly called back over her shoulder. "I'll pay for it! Jesus!"

The captain had already disappeared, leaving the communications engineer to watch them go, a big grin on his face. He lifted his hand and waved at her, then slowly let his fingers close until only one was uplifted.

"God damn it!" Shari disappeared down the stairs between her captors, heading downward.

"Stupid bitch." The engineer commented, with a shake of his head.

"Loud, as well." The captain reappeared. "It is good you came to get me, Igor. Now we will rid ourselves of this noisy piece of garbage, eh?"

"Eh." The engineer nodded.

* * *

"What in the hell was that?" Sir Milton stared at the phone in outrage, tossing it from him onto the small table. "Patricia, what nonsense is this? Nothing on that line but a bunch of gibberish."

"Sorry, sir. It was a lady." The woman hurried over and replaced the phone. "Something about a business matter .. she wouldn't leave a name."

"Pah. Someone trying to sue me for paternity again, more likely. Don't trust women further than you can throw them, Patricia."

"Of course not, sir." The aide gave him a brief smile. "Would you like some tea? I have some ready for you."

"Damn straight I do, and who's that out there?" The older man barked. "I see a shadow! Hello!"

"Oh, sir.. it's just someone wanting a bit of your time, I told him he had to wait f.. oh, sir, please, do wait outside.."

Sir Milton slapped his hand on the table. "Quiet, girl." He ordered, peering through the shadows. "Ah!" He straightened a little in surprise as the newcomer became visible. "Bloody hell, it's you!"

"It is." The visitor clasped his hands behind his back, and ducked his head as Patricia hurried past. "I know that you did not expect me." He said. "But I have something you will be interested in, that I promise."

Patricia paused at the doorway. "I'm terribly sorry sir." She said. "Do you know this person? He didn't say so, or I would have brought him in before now. "

Sir Milton snorted. "Know him? Bugger's my godson. Sit down you damn idiot and if she brings you tea, you drink it, hear me? No bloody arguments."

The visitor circled the small table and took a seat, folding his hands over one knee and issuing a polite smile. "Tea would be good, yes."

"Tea, Patricia. Tea." Sir Milton made a motion with one hand. "Now, what's this all about? Haven't seen you in a dog's age and here you are just like a bad pence turning up in my pocket again."

"You will not think so when I am done speaking."

"You say."

"I do say."

* * *

"I said, let me go you apes!" Shari knew it was probably futile, but she struggled anyway, figuring that if she threw them all down the god damn stairs at least she'd have the pleasure of landing on the fuckers. Her arms ached where the men gripped her, and as she fought against them the pain went from an ache to an outright searing. "God damn it!!!"

Stolidly, the two men dragged her down the last flight of steps and into the dark, cold loading area she'd first come down to the ship in. All the sea doors were closed tightly, but the creaking of the metal around them and the motion attested to the rising seas just beyond the steel walls. "Uh." One man indicated a door at the far side of the hold and they dragged her over to it. Pushing it open.

Inside, it smelled strongly of diesel, rust, and the sea. "STOP!!!" Shari yelled desperately. "Help! Help!!!"

The second man pulled the door closed behind them and they started down a last flight of metal stairs, their boots and her curses echoing in the stairwell.

After the last step was a platform, facing yet another hatch, this one dripping with more grease and covered in more rust than even the ones up on the deck above. A series of letters and numbers were painted on the inside of the hatch, and the first man used his free hand to lift up the receiver of a pristine, incongruous beige phone mounted firmly on the wall. He dialed a number. "Open 12." He muttered briefly after it was answered, then hung up.

Shari paused to catch her breath, her throat aching from the screams. It was quiet for a moment, then a loud boom almost scared her senseless, and she jerked back as the hydraulic lifting mechanism began to open the hatch.

It groaned in protest, and after it slid upward about a foot, the scent of the sea washed strongly in along with a bit of the ocean itself as a wave came up over the edge of the

door. "Oh my god." Shari stared at it, the liquid pooling down in a grate and disappearing.

The wind blasted in a moment later as the door continued to rise, whipping them with sea water. Shari found herself being held tight, as she stared out the hatch at a very dark, very rolling sea.

There was nothing past the dim light the ship threw off. Just a faint suggestion of white ruffling, and a hint of what might have been cloud shadows to differentiate between the sky and the water.

The two men gazed impassively out at it, obviously unimpressed. "Gonna see fish." One commented jerking Shari's arm. "Betta keep y'mouth shut."

Shari felt her throat close, and for once she took someone's advice without commenting on it. They weren't really going to throw her out, were they?

A door opened to her right, and she looked quickly, to see a small, oval door folding in towards her, as the captain stepped over the sill and joined them. He turned and closed the portal after him, dogging the locks shut on what was obviously a watertight entryway. "Gentlemen." He greeted the two sailors, who both nodded respectfully but kept hold of Shari.

The captain went to the open hatch, stepping lightly on the edge and leaning out into the salt spray. He appeared to enjoy it, turning his head from side to side and then shaking it to rid it of it's moisture. He stepped back and glanced at Shari. "A fine night to be on the sea. As you shall find out shortly."

"You can't put me out there." Shari kept her voice even, with a great deal of effort.

"Of course I can." The captain replied, with a smile. "I am the master of the ship. These men will do whatever I ask of them, and we are in international waters."

Shari just looked at him.

"You are a stowaway. You have no papers. You have no identification." The man went on. "I have no obligation to carry you in my vessel, save that obligation that one has to any decent creature out here. However, you are no decent creature, and so, I will have you off my ship."

"There are laws." Shari managed to get out.

"Yes, there are." The captain agreed. "But you will be in no position to argue them." He stepped to one side. "Bring her here." He sniffed reflectively. "You might want to kick your shoes off."

Frozen in disbelief, Shari could only stare at him as she was dragged forward to the opening, a scream erupting only when she was shoved roughly out the hatch into the dark sea beyond.

* * *

"I'm sure you won't mind if I just check up on your brilliant maneuvering, right?" Meyer held the phone up to his ear, as Pony Tail hurried to attach a small microphone to it. "Getting this?" He asked over his shoulder.

"Got it, sir." The man behind the sound console replied. "Got it all."

Dar had never considered herself to possess any acting skills whatsoever, and she knew the only thing keeping her from blowing everything was that she was too shocked to react. She let the knowledge of what Meyer was doing slip past her, and cocked her head, studying the mechanism of the camera instead.

There was nothing she could do. She leaned her elbow on the arm of the chair and propped her head up on her fist, resisting the urge to whistle aimlessly. She didn't dare so much as look at Kerry, and she could only imagine what facial expression her partner had.

Benign interest would have described it. Kerry leaned back in her chair and rested her elbows on the arms, appearing as relaxed as one could in front of two cameras. She'd had more practice than Dar had, and one of the first thing she'd learned as a young girl was how to not let the press know when they'd gotten to her.

They were about to be busted on camera. Kerry reconciled herself to that, and didn't regret, even so, the course Dar had taken to get them where they were. If this was how it ended, then it was, and the worst thing that could possibly come out of this was…

"Hello, yes. I need to speak immediately with Sir Melton Gilberthwaite." Meyer said. "It's Jason Meyer. Urgent. Put him on the phone."

Pretentious jackass. Kerry wrinkled her nose. "I'm pretty sure Sir Melton doesn't appreciate being summoned, Mr. Meyer."

Meyer looked at her, but didn't reply.

Dar tipped her head back and studied the overhead lights. They hung from a bare, metal bar grid suspended from the ceiling, and it occurred to her that the stage, like the entire project, was just one big facade in the service of someone else's view of reality.

"I don't care. Put him on the phone." Meyer insisted. "I told you, this is urgent. I'm filming, and I need to speak with him at once."

Maybe they would get lucky. Dar pondered. Maybe Sir Melton would tell Meyer to kiss his ass.

"Thank you. Sir Melton? This is Jason Meyer."

Ah well. Dar tilted her head back to level and regarded Meyer. It had been a good old college try, right? Least she went out with a boom, instead of a whimper.

"That's right. Glad you remember me. Listen, I was just speaking with someone who says they're a new business partner of yours, and I just wa.. excuse me?"

Dar's ear twitched.

"No, no, um… no it's ILS, and th.." Meyer listened, his face turning pale even as Dar watched. "Well, I'm very sorry, but.. well, no, you see.. oh, uh.. I'm glad you've made a deal bu… sir? Sir? Hello?"

Kerry sensed a mole whacking in the process of occurring. Her hand twitched, as though reaching for a mallet. "Something wrong, Mr. Meyer?" She asked politely. "Would you like some water? You look a little funny."

Meyer folded his phone up and stared at it, then he let it drop to his knee and looked over at them. "Well, Ms. Roberts." He glanced at Kerry. "Ms. Stuart." He added, after a pause. "Congratulations."

"Thank you." Dar replied graciously.

"Your reputation is assuredly deserved. Since this challenge had ended up no win situation, the best you should have been able to come out with is a reasonable loss, and yet, you come out with a win." Meyer was now looking at them with wry, bittersweet admiration. "How did you do that?"

And, Dar realized, he'd gotten his ending, despite her and everything else. Oh well. She was in no position to whine about it. "We're the best." She produced what she hoped was a sexy, confident smile. "What else do you need to know?"

Apparently it was, and apparently it was more than enough. "Cut." Meyer lifted his hand, and let it drop. "Boy, that's going to be an editing nightmare. "He said. "But you gave me what I wanted, Ms. Roberts." He added. "Nice little bit of suspense at the end and everything, and a surprise. Studio'll love it."

Dar got up and brushed herself off. "Glad everyone walks away happy." She muttered. "Ker?"

"Right behind you." Kerry edged around the two men who had come forward to start taking away the set pieces. "Excuse us."

They walked together to the door and went through it, closing it behind them before they stopped and looked at each other. "How **did** we do that?" Kerry uttered, under her breath, giving the rest of the group a little smile as they got up and headed over.

Dar blinked wide, blue eyes at her, then jerked a little as her PDA went off. She studied the message, then smiled, and tucked it back away. "Well, we are the best." She told her partner. "And sometimes, we're just the luckiest." She put an arm around Kerry's shoulders and relaxed. "It's over, people."

"How'd you do?" Michelle asked.

"Bout like you'd expect." Kerry smiled charmingly at her. "Tell you what, let's go to dinner. We'll tell you all about it."

"Why.." Michelle gave her a wary look. "Do I get the feeling you're going to enjoy that a lot more than I am?"

"We're buying." Dar added. "C'mon." They led the way towards the outer door, where a small group of people had just entered and were looking around. They all wore leather jackets and gloomy expressions except for the woman in the center, who was dressed like a native and who had apparently been there before. "Excuse us."

"Sorry." The woman drew her group aside. "We're just doing a video here now."

"Good luck." Kerry smiled as she pushed the door open. "Make sure they give you chairs."

"Um.. thanks. I will." The woman gave them a very strange look, as the door closed and they were outside again in the warm humid air.

It was over. Dar felt about ten pounds lighter. It was over, and they'd won. Lucky or not, it didn't matter.

Oh, yeah.

* * *

Shari flailed her arms as she toppled out over the edge of the doorway, seeing a flash of white that abruptly turned into something big and hard and painful just before she should have felt the water's icy sting instead. "Yahhh!" She yelped in disoriented pain. "Ah! Ah!"

Confused, she rolled over, finding herself lying on a rough, sandpaper feeling surface, hurting like hell. Standing over her was a small, blond woman she half recognized, who

was snickering at her in a very unkind way. "Wh.." She struggled up onto one elbow and stared back at the ship, where the captain was in the opening waving at her. "What the f.."

"My American friends say to this.. "The captain yelled. "PSYCHE." He ducked inside after one last wave and the door ground it's way tiredly shut.

The blond woman snickered again. "He does have the damnedest sense of humor." She turned her head. "We out of here, sailor boy?"

"Yeap."

Shari felt her throat go dry again, and she shaded her eyes as she looked up at the top level of the boat. A shadowy figure was up there, driving, and she knew suddenly who it was.

Oh shit. Now she wished she was back on the god damned cruise ship headed for Hell again. She was screwed. She was totally, completely screwed. "Fuck."

"Occasionally." The woman sat down in a deck chair and tucked one leg up under her. "You might want to give it a try sometime."

Shari stared at her.

"Just think. It's how Dar got here." Ceci continued. "How bad could it be, really, hm?"

It was all just too much. Shari put her head back on the deck and just stared up at the clouds, not even caring where they were going or why.

* * *

The moon had come out from behind the summer clouds at last, here in the wee early hours of the morning. Kerry gazed up at it lovingly, letting it's silver light soak into her eyes as the hot water of the Jacuzzi soaked into her bare body.

A soft clink nearby made her roll her head to one side, spotting Dar emerging from the condo carrying a champagne bottle and two glasses in one hand and a basket of strawberries in the other.

She was also naked, and as far as sensory pleasures went, Kerry figured she was pretty much on terminal overload at the moment. "Hey, sweetheart." She greeted Dar warmly.

"Hm?" Dar stepped into the hot tub and settled next to her, putting her treats down on the verge. "What can I do for you, beautiful?" She inquired, facing Kerry and giving her a rakish grin. "Now that we've gotten to the end of the project from Hell?"

It was so nice to see Dar in a truly good mood. Kerry smiled back at her, lifting one hand from the water and laying it across her partner's cheek without saying a word.

Dar seemed to understand. She reached back and picked up the glasses with one hand, pouring bubbly into them and then passing one to Kerry. They clinked their rims together and took mutual sips. "To winning." She said, with a wry twinkle in her eyes. "Even when it surprises us."

"To us." Kerry answered. "Because winning is pointless and empty unless you have someone to share it with."

"Mm." Dar squirmed closer until they were pressed against each other. She tipped her head back against the padded bumper and gazed up at the stars. "What an end to this day."

"Uh huh." Kerry sipped slowly at her champagne, enjoying the tickle of the bubbles going down that matched the tickle of the bubbles from the water jets around her. "I'm unbelievably glad it's over with, but I have to be honest and tell you I never expected it to come together the way it did."

Dar set her glass down and chuckled. "Anyone who could ever have expected this obviously spends a lot of time consuming illicit pharmaceuticals." She observed. "And since the most wild thing I've ever seen you swallow was orange flavored Children's Tylenol, I'm not surprised you were surprised."

Kerry's face relaxed into a broad grin. "Ain't' that the truth." She admitted. "As far as vices go, I'm pretty lightweight."

Dar selected a powdered sugar dusted berry and offered it to her. "Do I count?"

"As a vice?" Kerry's eyes twinkled as she chewed her berry. "Oooo.. yeah, I think you do."

"Heh heh heh." Dar tossed a berry into the air and caught it in her teeth. "Good." She leaned over and waited for Kerry to bite the half sticking out of her mouth, then they both bit down at once and ended up pretty much in a lip lock.

Strawberry flavored, at that. "Mm." Dar straightened up and waggled her eyebrows. "Much more fun than drugs."

"Cheaper, too." Kerry agreed.

"Hey." Dar spread her arms out and indicated their surroundings. "This ain't the YMCA, Yankee. You insinuating I'm cheap?"

"No." Kerry placed a gentle kiss on her partner's shoulder. "You're priceless." She gazed up at Dar with utter seriousness. "Not to mention definitely one of a kind."

Dar blushed, and blinked a little, at the switch in attitude. "Um."

"And you're all mine." Kerry whispered, giving the shoulder near her lips a small bite, just to break the mood again. "Love you."

Wide, blue eyes gazed back at her.

Kerry winked, and smiled.

After a second, Dar grinned back and slid down a bit into the water, giving the impression of a tail wiggling puppy totally at odds with her stature. "You're awesome."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. You really are." Dar put her arm across Kerry's shoulders, and hugged her. Then she picked up her glass and touched it against Kerry's again.

"Mm. " Kerry stretched her legs out into the flow and leaned her head against Dar's shoulder. "You know, I thought those guys were going to be more pissed off than they were." She said. "Even Michelle was just sort of resigned about it."

Dar took a swallow of her champagne and licked her lips thoughtfully. "Want to offer her a job?"

"Gurk." Kerry almost ended up snorting her bubbly.

"Hey, they were trying to offer us jobs the last month." Dar said, reasonably. "She's not bad, and I'd rather have her on our team than heading up another attempt at screwing us over."

"That was Shari."

"The brains behind that was Michelle, and she's in a place where she wants to win for a change." Dar disagreed.

Kerry considered that while she drained her glass. She gently rolled the edge of the flute against her lower lip for a moment, and then shrugged. "Okay." She said. "At least then, if you and I decide to take off and go our own way, there'll be someone there who can make me feel like I'm not leaving the company totally tanked with. "

Dar regarded her in some surprise. "Wasn't thinking of that really… but you have a point."

Kerry nodded, holding her glass out. "Fill her up, Dixie. I'm in the mood to get a little silly tonight."

Dar obliged. "Feels good not to have to worry about this damn project, doesn't it?'

"You bet." Kerry leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "Feels very, very good." She murmured. "Very, very nice not to feel stressed to the point my guts ache."

Dar gazed off at the horizon, sipping the rest of her champagne as she watched the stars twinkle overhead. "It's going to be nice working from the cabin next week" She commented casually.

"Oh yeah."

"Maybe I can figure out a way to make that a more frequent arrangement."

Kerry opened her eyes and lifted her glass, taking a sip from it. "Maybe you can." She agreed quietly. "You hear from the folks yet?"

Dar nodded. "They're due into South Pointe in about an hour."

Kerry waited, but nothing more seemed to be forthcoming. "And?"

"Said they'd talk to me about it after they got back."

"Ah." Kerry drained her glass again and set it down. "Hope your mother kicked her ass to kingdom come."

"Huh?" Dar's cell phone rang, and she lifted it off the verge and opened it. "Ah." She held it to her ear. "Morning, Hans."

"Are you not sleeping?" Hans answered. "I will call later, if that is not the case."

Dar chuckled. "Kerry and I are in the hot tub. Don't bother calling later. What's up?"

"Ahem." The German cleared his throat. "You will need to come here so that this wonderful deal of ours can be signed. Perhaps after next week."

"Sure." Dar agreed. "Thanks for telling me you were part of the family over there, by the way."

Hans chuckled now. "We do not show all our cards, even to our friends." He said. "We were very fortunate that I moved when I did, you must realize. He was committed to say yes to whatever persons figured out the deal and asked him first."

"Really?" Dar glanced at Kerry, who had squirmed up to listen. "Risky, especially since he doesn't like Americans that much." She considered switching to English, then figured she'd just fill the blond woman afterward.

"He is not a stupid man. He knows who put the machines inside those ships. I have to say, however, that he was not so disappointed to find who my partner in this was."

"Ah."

"He seems to think that I have stepped up in the world, in fact."

Dar laughed. "Well, he hasn't met me yet." She remarked. "But I'm glad it worked out. Remind me to tell you what I went through tonight over this when we get together to sign it."

"I will do so. But before that can occur, there must be something straightened between us." Hans' voice became more serious. "There is something that before I did not tell you."

Dar's eyebrow quirked. "Yeah?"

"It is a matter of a piece of technology." Hans said. "A piece of cellular technology that you perhaps found inside of your office, at one time."

It was easily the last thing she expected to hear. "He's asking me about the gadget Mark found in the conference room." She murmured to Kerry. "I think he knows something about it."

"Really?" Kerry inched closer. "How?"

"What about it?" Dar responded in German. "How did you hear about that?"

Hans cleared his throat. "I caused it to be put there."

Dar's jaw dropped. "You did?" She managed to get out in something other than a squeak.

"What?" Kerry nearly crawled up Dar's body.

"I did." Hans confirmed. "It was not simple, you understand, to acquire the thing, and I am saying it was brilliant even for myself to arrange to be put there."

Several things jumped to Dar's lips, and she stifled them. "Why?" She kept her voice even.

"Ah heh." Hans seemed a little embarrassed. "To satisfy the little kicking that you gave to me, yes?" He admitted. "I could not let that go unanswered."

Dar put her glass down and raised her hand to cover her eyes instead. "Son of a bitch."

"What???" Kerry hissed. "What in the heck's going ofuf…mmph." She got the message, and subsided, her lips tingling from the kiss. Dar's free hand dropped under the water and she felt the pressure of it against her hip, her body responding to the touch immediately.

"It was clever, yes?" Hans said. "An intriguing machine, to be sure."

"Except I found it." Dar gathered her wits. "Before it could do anything, so your little trick didn't quite work." Absently, she traced a line up Kerry's side and across her ribs.

"Ah, no."

"And the guys who own the thing are signing a development deal with us."

"Is that not always the case with you?" Hans sounded wryly humorous. "I am convinced if you fell into a puddle of mud you would get some free facials from it." He said. "But at any difference, if it does matter to you I am sorry if that caused you any difficulties."

Dar exhaled. "Hans, trust me when I tell you of all the crap I've had to deal with in the last month, that was the least of it. Glad you told me."

"I feel much better now. I will go have a beer." Hans replied.

"For breakfast?"

"It is better for you than is coffee. I will be in touch in some days to make plans. Good night."

Dar closed the phone and set it down. She looked at Kerry, who was crouched over her, chin resting on Dar's breastbone. "One more mystery solved." She informed her. "Seems like.."

Kerry's hands slid down Dar's body. "Know what?" She lifted her head up a little and kissed her partner. "I've got another mystery I'd rather talk about right now."

"Oh. Don't you want to hear..mph." Dar felt the bubbling water between them disappear, replaced by Kerry's body pressing against hers. "Guess not." Kerry's thigh slipped between hers and she felt the blond woman's arm circle around her, pulling her even closer.

"No." Kerry kissed her again. "Tomorrow." She felt Dar's arms close around her. The pressure made her hiccup a little, and she accepted a touch of dizziness as the champagne worked into her bloodstream. "Or maybe Monday." She added, hearing Dar's soft chuckle in her ear. "What I want right now is you."

"Got me." Dar whispered. "C'mere."

Oh yeah. Kerry went willingly, losing all sense of her surroundings as Dar's touch became intimate, and the pressure of the water jets blasted against her suddenly very sensitive skin. Lovely way to end the day.

Lovely.

* * *

The lights of the city came into view on the horizon, twinkling gently and throwing a soft glow onto the overhead clouds. Ceci lifted her wine glass and sipped from it, enjoying the breeze the boat's speed was affording her at the moment.

It would slack down soon, when Andy entered the shipping channel but the up side to that was that they'd pull into their home marina soon after and rid themselves of their unwelcome guest. They'd hardly spoken a word to each other since leaving the cruise ship behind, and Ceci had refused to offer her even so much as a glass of water on top of it.

Dar had asked them to retrieve the wench, she hadn't said they needed to offer her hospitality, and Ceci was damned if she was going to attempt to be nice after all the crap the woman had pulled on her daughters.

Who-a. Ceci's eyeballs widened, and she hastily took a gulp of wine. Let's not take this whole maternal thing too far, hm?

"How much longer do we have to go?" Shari asked, in a subdued voice.

Ceci craned her neck and viewed the horizon. "About an hour." She decided. "Depends on whether or not my husband is in the mood for playing chicken with those freighters over there."

Shari looked up at the flying bridge, then returned her attention to the water. "Why did you bother doing that?" She asked suddenly. "Going all the way out there?'

"Dar asked us to." Ceci replied simply.

"Why?" The younger woman asked. "What the hell was she after this time?"

Ceci had pondered that very question herself, but didn't see any need to expose that fact. "You'll have to ask her that." She replied. "Of course, there's always the possibility she just did it because it was a decent thing for her to do."

Shari snorted.

"In which case, you've got her father to thank for that trait, cause it certainly didn't come from me." Ceci smiled humorlessly. "I'd have let you go right to the bottom, which I think was a hundred fathoms there."

Shari looked at her in surprise.

"I am not idiot tolerant." Ceci explained. "And someone who keeps banging their heads against a concrete sidewalk is a total idiot in my book."

Shari looked away. "I don't expect you to understand."

Ceci laughed. "See? You are an idiot." She said. "I raised her." She added, in a amused tone. "Of course I understand. You're the one who doesn't."

Shari looked towards the shore, as though wishing it would come closer faster.

"Listen." Ceci leaned on one chair arm. "I'll give you some free advice, and maybe it'll be worth the time it'll take for me to say it. You can't win."

Shari looked sharply at her. "Bull."

Ceci shook her head seriously. "You can't, because the harder you push, the harder she pushes back, and if you keep pushing, trust me kid, you're the one who is going to end up being knocked over." She held up a finger as Shari started to speak. "She gets that from him." A thumb pointed up towards the bridge. "There just is no losing in either of them."

Shari looked off into the distance and didn't answer.

Ah well. Ceci got up and stretched, setting down her cup and going over to the ladder to climb up it. She joined Andrew at the helm and sat down next to him, leaving the sulky obnoxi-tude down below. "Almost there? I want to jet clean the back deck."

"Heh." Andrew chuckled softly. "Ah do not get why Dar done that."

Ceci shrugged lightly. "Just wanted to do the right thing, maybe? She does that sometimes, you know."

Her husband looked at her, his pale blue eyes glinting softly in the reflection from the instruments. "Ain't that the truth." He said. "Howsomever, I could throw this here boat into a 360 and I figure we'd lose that trash off the back deck right quick."

Ceci put her arm around him. "No twirling, sailor boy. Just put this thing in the garage. It's getting late." She said. "Let's discharge our cargo and see if any of the neighbors are up for a nightcap."

"Sounds all right t'me." Andrew agreed. "Sooner's better, though." He grinned a little, and gunned the big engines. "I don't' figure to wait for them slow boats."

"Uh oh." Ceci took a firmer hold. "Glad I battened down the hatches inside."

"You want to give a warn to that there woman?" Andy asked.

"Nope."

"Heh."

* * *

Kerry pushed lazily against the post the hammock was anchored to, her eyes closed as she listened to the conference call going on in her ear bud. It was the weekly general administration meeting, which she usually chaired since operations tended to be in the center of whatever was going on.

Today though, she was merely listening as Jose rambled on about sales projections and Eleanor kept throwing in her two cents worth.

"Hey, Kerry?" Duks broke into the buzz. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here." Kerry replied, rocking herself in a gentle rhythm.

"Your entire department is empty, you do know that right?" Jose said. "If something stops working I don't know what in the hell we're going to do."

"I know." Kerry said. "We gave everyone the week off who worked the project."

"Including yourselves." Eleanor sniped mildly.

"Yup."

"I have heard through the grapevine." Duks regained the conversational ball. "That there is a large contract to come out of that calamity."

Silence. Kerry smiled into the warm salt air. "Of course." She said. "What'd you think Dar was doing it for, exercise?"

Everyone chuckled, after a moment's awkward silence. "So we got one over on Telegenics, huh?" Jose said. "That is a pleasant change."

"Oh, I think Dar locked that one up for you too." Kerry reached over and retrieved her mug, sucking a mouthful of fragrant iced tea from it through a straw. "I don't' think they'll be bothering us much anymore."

Silence again. "Did you guys go amok with a Gatling gun or something?" Eleanor asked.

"Long story." Kerry replied. "But you might want to prepare your people out there, Jose. Dar's going to move back into new business acquisitions."

"Eh?"

Kerry could well imagine the looks of consternation going around the table. She sucked another mouthful of tea contentedly, and was glad she wasn't there. "I'm going to be working on restructuring the back end of things. We need some changes."

"Uh."

The porch floorboards creaked, and Kerry felt warm fingers take hold of her bare toes, tweaking them.

"All right… ah, that's a little sudden, isn't it?" Eleanor hazarded. "But, then again, it's your department."

"Yup." Kerry agreed. "It is. Anything else, guys? I have another meeting to go to." She opened one eye and studied the mischievous expression on Dar's face. "And I think I'm late for it."

The sound of shifting furniture came through the line. "No, I think that's it." Jose said. "So, you are really going to just call in for this whole week? Must be very nice."

Kerry reached out and hooked a finger into the ragged pocket on Dar's shorts. "Don't like it? Find another set of ops management." She told Jose bluntly.

Dar leaned over and pressed her head against Kerry's so she could hear the bud also.

"Hey! I wasn't saying anything!" Jose protested. "Take it easy already. Jesu."

"I'm sure we'll adjust." Mariana broke in. "After all, we do all of our international calls remotely. This isn't anything different."

Kerry tweaked Dar's earlobe. "Exactly." She said. "You'll just have to cope with it because we have a life to live and that's just how it's going to be." She pressed her hand against Dar's stomach, suspended over her when she thought she heard purring and felt the vibration that confirmed it.

"Um.. okay." Eleanor said. "More info than we needed, but whatever floats your boat, mmhm? Long as you keep producing, that is." She added. "But that's the same rule for all of us, isn't it?"

"Eh." Jose grunted. "C'mon, let's go do lunch." He said. "We're done here."

"Bye, Kerry." Eleanor added. "Thanks for the good news about the project."

"Bye." Kerry clicked the phone off and turned her attention fully to her partner. "Hi."

"They sound miffed." Dar carefully tumbled her way into the double size hammock, ending up next to Kerry. "Were they?"'

"I don't care." Kerry exhaled. "I think I realized something, Dar, over the past few weeks." She said. "Remember the argument we had at Disney?"

"We had an argument?"

"In the bus."

Dar went over her memories of the recent past. "That wasn't an argument."

Kerry offered her a sip of ice tea. "It was, because I was putting work ahead of us, and you damn well should have called me on it."

"Ker."

"We've only got one life." Kerry turned her head and regarded her partner. "We have to live every minute of it."

"Ah." Dar curled her fingers around Kerry's and squeezed them. "Might not be the best thing for our careers."

"Don't give a damn."

Dar leaned over and kissed her. "Then it probably won't matter." She answered. "But I don't care if it does either because I've learned something over the past few weeks too."

"Have you?" Kerry murmured.

"Yes." Dar touched her nose to Kerry's. "There is no other shoe." She tilted her head and kissed Kerry again. "And I want to live every second of this life all the way with you."

It was a truly sweet moment for both of them, and they paused to enjoy it, indulging in a long kiss as the tide rolled in against the rocks and sand nearby.

In the distance, a ship's bell rang.

"Ah, sounds like the fish boat's in." Kerry smiled and held up her cell phone, offering Dar an ear bud. "Want to sit in on my projections meeting?"

"Sure." Dar snuggled closer, fitting the bud into place. "Come with me to England next week?"

"Oh, you bet your buns I will." Kerry chuckled, as she dialed the phone.

"Sounds like we've got a plan"

"Sounds like we do."

A crab raced past, waving it's arms with Chino in hot pursuit, wishing it had gotten the email about the plan, and hoping like hell it didn't involve any puppies.

THE END

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