

## Fair Winds and Following Seas

A bit of early morning sunlight slanted sideways across the concrete sidewalk, bringing out the vivid color in the feathers of a chicken making its way off the street into the thickly tufted grass yard. It pecked at the ground and turned its head in startled attention at the crunch of tires nearby.

“Choo choo.” Two women emerged from a sedate blue sedan that had just parked in the parking lot, the younger of them making a shooping gesture at the chicken as they walked up to the front door. “Mama, I think those chickens live around here somewhere.”

“Si.” The older woman agreed. “I think it is in the side there, by the wall.” She withdrew a key from her large purse and inserted it, turning the lock and pushing the door open. “Mayte, please go turn the alarm down.”

“Yes, mama.” Mayte went quickly behind the reception desk and opened a knee height box, bending down to key in a code into the pad inside.

Maria closed the door behind her, throwing the deadbolt into place before she went into the first floor kitchen and turned the light and then the power to the coffee machine on. “It is nice here so early, yes?” She regarded the machine with satisfaction. “This big one is enough for all the new people.”

“Well..” Mayte stuck her head inside and made a face. “Just today when there is so much to do it is, mama, but not always.” She withdrew and then she ran up the wide, wooden steps to the second level, pausing to turn on lights as she went up.

“I will turn on the Weather Channel.” Maria called after her.

“Okay mama!” Mayte crossed the long hallway at the top of the stairs into an office set in the short side of the building, which was built on a rectangle with an empty space in the center. “They only say the same thing again and again though.” She added mournfully.

It was unnaturally quiet in the office, with no one else there yet. Mayte went to her desk and sat down behind it, turning on her PC. The hum broke the silence and after a moment she got up and went back in the hall, going down a small way into a second kitchen which held an espresso coffee maker, a hot water dispenser, and a refrigerator.

The counters were full of supplies and condiments, and there were cabinets above them with pasted and scrawled labels identifying what was inside.

She took a cup from the small dishwasher under the counter and got a teabag from the drawer, letting hot water run over it as she glanced out the window.

The trees were moving in the wind outside, and she could see a few clouds in the sky, scant evidence of the storm offshore headed their way. As she let the tea steep, she heard the bell ring downstairs, and the door open, her mother greeting their receptionist who was usually the first one in.

A male voice was also heard, their security director Carlos, and Mayte knew that now everyone would start pouring in, aware of the need to get everything taken care of early before the weather turned bad. They knew automatically – no one had to call them just like no one had to tell her and Maria to arrive when they did.

They knew their bosses expected it.

She took her tea and went back to her office, as the bell rang again, and she could hear, dimly the sound of the television on the first level floating upstairs, quickly covered by the sound of multiple voices.

Mayte put her tea down on her desk to cool a little, and went out again and across the hallway to the large double offices on the other side. She opened the double door and propped both sides open, going inside and turning on the lights.

Inside was the small reception area, where Zoe the admin would soon be sitting, and behind that two doors that led into the two corner offices that were just now peaceful, the morning light blocked by shutters on the big windows on the outer wall.

Very different. Though both had desks and built in shelves on the wall, the office on the right had a collaboration table surrounded by chairs, and the desk had folders scattered over it along with a group of photos, a collection of squish balls and several small stuffed animals.

In the corner stood a boxing dummy, with a pair of gloves tied by their laces hung over its shoulders.

The office on the left was, in comparison, nearly empty. Its desk was glass and steel, with movable surfaces and to one side near the window was a drafting table covered in diagrams. A plush leather couch was against one wall, and on the shelves were a teddy bear, several large seashells and a water stained wooden box.

Mayte went to the windows in both and opened the shutters, flooding the room with light as she turned and left the doors ajar, exiting into the reception area just as Zoe came trotting in. "Buenas dias!"

"Buenas dias, Mayte." Zoe returned the greeting. "It will be a busy Monday for sure!"

"For sure."

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"Si." Maria spoke into the phone, standing behind her desk facing the handful of people inside. "Yes, he must arrange for this, yes? We do not have people to make up the shutters."

"Landlord's job." Carlos grunted. He was a tall man, with a very muscular body and dark, thick hair. "We shouldn't have to mess with it."

"Sure is." Mark Polenti, their operations director agreed. "Wait till the big Kahuna gets here if they keep stalling. She's gonna kick their asses."

"I think we need to get everyone to move their things away from the windows." Mayte was sitting on her mother's desk, her long, slim legs encased in denim. "Just to get started?"

"That's gonna be a mess." Mark said. "With everybody crammed into every square inch in this place, there's a lotta stuff."

"True that." Carlos agreed. "Can't believe we're out of space already. Heard Colleen say they're gonna start putting desks in the hallways."

"Yes, you will please come here right away." Maria stated firmly into the phone. "No more talk about it." She put the phone into its cradle, making a small noise like an annoyed cat sneeze. "Do I not know that they are busy? What does that matter? They still must come here and fix the shutters."

"Should I call the landlord mama?" Mayte suggested. "I think he is not here but he should tell them."

Maria's phone rang and she picked it up. "Buenas dias, this is Roberts Automation, Maria speaking." She paused to listen. "Yes, yes, the meeting is for today, but there is..." She paused again. "We have to make ready for the hurricane."

"Someone's not from around here." Carlos chuckled under his breath. "Who doesn't know about the damn storm? All that's been on the television for a week." He said. "I'm gonna go turn on the Weather Channel in the conference room up here." He turned and started out of the room, turning into the hallway and disappearing.

"We can serve it to everyone's desktop." Mark followed him out. "Don't want to miss an advisory."

"Where's.. ah. Here you are." Colleen stuck her head inside the office. "Maria?"

"Si?" Maria put her hand over the receiver.

"I'm going to run the payroll cycle. I don't want to risk waiting."

"Si, this is good." Maria nodded in agreement. "Also, the payments."

"Got it." Colleen disappeared.

Zoe replaced her. "The UPS, they are here with some envelopes." She said, in her soft and somewhat indistinct voice. "It is downstairs in the big conference room."

"Shoo." Maria waved them off. "Get them for me if you please. I am explaining the weather to this person in New York."

"I'll bring them back to you mama." Mayte hopped off the desk and they all filed out and down the stairs, as the door opened up again and a crowd of polo shirted figures entered, calling greetings up the steps as they filed in.

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The parking lot in front of the doughnut shop was unusually packed for this early on a Monday morning. Every spot was taken, and there was a line out the door along with a stream of people emerging with stacks of boxes.

In a spot near the door a sport truck was parked, engine idling, a short, blond woman seated inside keeping an eye on the rearview mirror. Inside, the radio was playing a weather report on a local station, and in the cab of the truck were two large Labrador retrievers sitting upright with alert ears.

A battered flatbed truck pulled in and double parked, a man in a white tank top jumping out and getting in line. "Oh, that's gonna be a fight." The blond woman said, shaking her head a little. "C'mon Dar, hurry up before we have to call the cops."

"Growf." The cream colored lab barked gruffly.

"I know, Cheebles." The woman reached back and gave the dog a pat, as the second dog agreeably licked her arm. "Almost done." She straightened the cuff on her cotton tshirt, and then folded her hands and put them in her denim covered lap. "We have to get some treats."

Both dogs cocked their heads, ears perking.

"No, not for you." The door behind her swung open and she smiled, rolling down the window on her side of the car as her partner emerged, carrying a stack of doughnut boxes, several bags, and two cups balanced on top of everything swerving to avoid the people in line as she made her way over.

"Here." Dar handed a steaming cup of coffee to her. "Crazy in there." She put the stack of boxes and bags into a cabinet in the back of the truck and closed it, then went around to the driver's side and got in, levering her tall frame into the seat and shoving a pair of sunglasses over her eyes. "Nuts."

Like her partner, Dar was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, her dark hair pulled back into a tail. She boosted the air conditioning a little, as Kerry rolled the window shut and blocked out the steamy late summer air.

She put her own cup into the holder on her side of the cab and started the engine. "Look at that jackass." She indicated the double parked truck. "He's going to get his ass kicked by the squad of angry grandmas in there picking up their bake sale goodies."

Kerry took a sip of her coffee and set the cup into a holder in center console, hiking one boot up and setting it on her knee. "Thanks for going in there on our behalf." She said. "I'm sure the staff are going to appreciate the thought."

"Gonna be a long day." Dar put the truck in gear and carefully pulled out, crossing several lanes of traffic to a left hand turn lane with fluid grace. "Damned hurricane."

"Aw." Kerry regarded the swaying tree branches with a brief grin. "I'm kinda fond of them, Dar. I'll never forget my first one." She glanced sideways at Dar's profile. "Even if that was only a tropical storm."

Dar smiled, looking both ways before turning despite the green turn arrow. "It's a pain in the ass because we've got so damn much going on." She said. "We were supposed to meet that commercial real estate agent this afternoon to see the building she found us."

"I checked it online. Not sure it'd have done us much good. Looks like a run down tire shop." Kerry sighed. "We're going to have to start putting people in hotel rooms at this rate." She sipped her coffee. "Or start turning down contracts. Do we want to do that?"

"Not for that reason." Dar said, as they turned down the street the office was on. "Lets have Maria call some of the long stay hotels near here, see if we can get a three month deal."

"Could be worse problems than having more work than space or people." Kerry said.

"Could be worse." Dar parked the truck in the lot. "Looks like everyone's here already. Glad we got lots of doughnuts."

She got out and opened the cab door. Both dogs jumped out and shook themselves, then followed them closely as they walked up the path towards the building.

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Dar stood by Zoe's desk, her arms folded over her chest. "Listen, putting shutters on this place is not my damned responsibility." She said, in a loud bark. "I don't give a damn if he's in Cozumel. Get someone over here or it's going to be your damn building getting wiped out and my lawyer filing a lawsuit!!"

Zoe was sitting quietly nearby, her head nodding a little in emphasis at Dar's words. On the desk in front of her was a plate with a few crumbs on it, and she licked a little bit of sugar off her thumb as Dar hung up the phone in irritation. "They will not help us." She said, softly.

"Has no clue what to do." Dar agreed in disgust. "Must be his boyfriend of the month he picked up off the beach." She reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose. "No point in trying to find someone in the area they're all booked up doing it."

"Yes." Zoe agreed. "Would you like a coffee, Ms Dar?" She suggested. "Or a milk?"

"Not right now." Dar exhaled. She drummed her long fingers on her arm for a moment, then she hit the speaker button on the phone again and dialed. "Let me try something else." It rang twice, then was picked up.

"Lo." A deep, gruff voice answered. "That you, Dardar?"

"Hey Dad." Dar said. "Got the boat all tied up?"

"Yeap." Andrew Roberts said. "Hows it your side there?"

"Sucks." Dar said. "You know of anyone around who wants to make a few bucks putting up shutters on this place?" She asked. "The idiot landlord is on vacation and the guy subbing for him has the brains of a hamster."

Andy pondered in silence for a bit. "Ah might." He said. "Lemme call round and we'll see."

"Thanks dad." Dar said. "I'm going to keep on their asses but any help would be great." She said. "Later." She hung up the phone. "Cross your fingers." She told Zoe. "He'll either show up with a few old buddies, or a construction battalion. If you hear a tank pulling up yell."

"Yes I will, Ms. Dar." Zoe took this in calmly. "Would you like a milk now?"

"Sure." Dar said. "Bring it over to Ker's office." She circled the desk and went over to the right hand side door, opening it and going inside.

Kerry was standing at her desk with Mayte, going over a paper checklist. She glanced up as Dar entered. "Any luck? I heard you yelling."

"Gave up. Called dad." Dar said, succinctly. "Told Zoe to yell if anyone rappels into the courtyard." She went over to the desk and perched on the end of it. "I don't think moving the gear into the hall is going to do jack squat."

Mark entered, and closed the door behind him. "Backups are done." He said, briefly. "Col's got all the payments out, and we just transmitted the AP invoices." He sat down in one of Kerry's visitor chairs. "So that's all right, but the problem is.."

"The problem is, if this place takes a direct hit, we're out of commission until it's sorted and that'll kill us." Kerry said. "None of us expected we'd end up as successful as we did and we outgrew ourselves. I know."

"And I have a compile due to be transferred to the DOD by the end of the day." Dar exhaled. "We should have found a bunker."

"We shoulda, but we didn't, yet." Mark made a face. "The support guys.. Dar, I can throw up a VPN to the telecom system and we can put them on a bus up to Melbourne. We've got the secure storage facility up there."

Dar nodded. "They'd end up with more space probably. They're crammed in there like sardines." She said. "Start calling around for a bus. Make sure it's got a rig for wheelchairs."

"Got it." Mark got up and pulled his phone out. "At least this is tourist central. Bus should not be a problem." He walked out, and closed the door behind him.

"Ugh." Kerry said. "Let me get this buttoned up, Dar. You go compile." She gave her partner a nudge. "Lets get as much done as we can before things really start going to hell."

"Start?" Dar got up and headed for the connecting door between their offices. "Lets hope we don't end up working out of shipping containers."

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Dar propped her head up on her hand and studied her screen, idly moving her trackball in a circle with her thumb. The large, high resolution monitor displayed an intricate diagram, and she selected, then zoomed in on a section to review it.

A spatter of rain hit the window and she glanced over her shoulder, looking over the foliage dense neighborhood where branches were tossing in the wind.

After a minute, it faded, and the motion slowed, the clouds overhead visibly in motion as they moved aside and a bit of sun came through.

Squall. Dar shook her head and went back to her screen, making an adjustment and then saving the file, compressing it and adding it to a folder sitting on her desktop. Squall, and a rain band.

Hurricanes were peculiar things. The center of tropical cyclone was still far offshore, sucking heat energy from the warm waters of the Atlantic and putting a twist in the atmosphere that gathered bands of low pressure around it.

Those bands extended out far from the center and swirled over water and land, bringing bursts of rain and wind and then dying off as though no storm was out there at all, making preparing for one sometimes frustrating and occasionally dangerous when gusts of wind took panels and wood out of your hands.

This one, right now, had 90 mile per hour winds and at a category 2 status. But all the weather stations and NOAA were saying it was going to strengthen, and by the time it hit the nearby Gulf stream current it could be a category 5, with 150 mile per hour winds and very dangerous.

Very dangerous Hurricane Bob, with his cheerful, friendly name.

The problem with hurricanes though, was that they were predictably unpredictable. Everyone said it could strengthen, could hit the Miami area, could cause hideous damage and it very well might do just that.

Dar glanced at the ticker running at the bottom of her monitor as a flashing icon indicated it was time for the 2pm update from the National Weather Service. She sat back to wait for the scrawl, with its anticipated bad news.

Or it well might do nothing of the kind.

It could hit the Gulf Stream, and veer off. It could fall apart because it sucked dry air into itself. It could stop and just spin offshore, dumping rain over the area for a week bringing a flood threat more than wind. An eyewall replacement cycle could take it from a Category 5, to a Category 2 again overnight and end up just being annoying.

You really just never knew.

Dar got up and hopped up and down a few times, shaking out her arms and wandering over to the window to look out. On the streets nearby, she could see trucks and cars with plywood strapped to their roofs, storefronts with hurricane panels being put on their windows, and people carrying cases of water.

Water, cans of evaporated milk, tins of Vienna sausages, spam, and spaghetti. Small camp stoves to boil water. Batteries, and battery powered fans. Like taking part in a bug out event in slow motion as everyone stopped everything and watched the big buzz saw approach.

She felt more than a little frustrated. She could hear, even through the glass, the sound of hammers in the distance, and the faint whirring scream of a drill. "Damn it."

"You say something, hon?" Kerry entered from the door between their offices. "Maria just made coffee." She put a cup down on Dar's desk and came over to the window, reaching out to give her partner a light scratch on the back as she joined her.

"I said, damn it." Dar repeated. "As in, damn it, I hate having to depend on someone to get something done and they aren't doing it!" She slapped both hands against the sills on either side of the window. "Really pisses me off."

Kerry half turned and sat down on the window sill, which had a thick base and a cushion designed specifically for that purpose. "I know." She said. "We talked about buying the building, remember?" She put a hand on Dar's leg, feeling the powerful muscles jumping under her touch.

"We did." Dar turned and sat next to her, putting her back to the weather. "But we said we're outgrowing it, so did it make sense?"

"At the time, it didn't." Kerry agreed. "Then we found out there really isn't any open office space around here that works for us." She said. "And building your own office building takes a hell of a lot of time."

Dar made a face. "Grrrrr."

"No one expected this little venture of ours to go like it did, honey." Kerry patted her arm, then leaned over and put her head on Dar's shoulder. "I mean, we planned the whole thing over drinks and coconut shrimp. I figured it'd be you, me, and a half dozen other people and we could work out of our boat if we had to."

Dar's tall body shook a little as she laughed silently.

"Was not expecting to be talking to you about buying office buildings in their entirety just yet."

"No, I know." Dar put her arms around Kerry and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "I wasn't either. This just caught us by surprise."

There was a light tap on the outer door. "C'mon in." Dar called out.

Neither moved as the door opened, their relationship taken for granted by all and certainly by Maria who entered and smiled at them. "I have I think some good news."

"Awesome." Kerry pronounced. "We could use some."

Maria came over to the window. She had a clipboard with papers on it. "I have heard from Manuel." She said. "He has two things he wants to come to show, even with the storm." She displayed the clipboard to them, turning so the light from the window fell on the pages. "You see?"

Kerry took the board and reviewed it. "Oh." She said. "Is this... what is this?"

"It is a house, here." Maria pointed. "He says, it will need a fix." She said. "But it is separate, you see here the wall? And it has the thing here for the boat."

Dar craned her head to look at it. "Ah. That's Hunter's Point." She looked at the sketchy diagram. "It's that kind of corner lot, near the park." She regarded it with interest. "It's for sale?"

"Si." Maria handed her the paper. "Manuel said he also was very surprised." She said. "And he also found this, not so good I think." She handed Kerry the other paper. "It is the property next door."

"Next door to.. " Kerry took the paper. "Oh!" She glanced to her right in reflex. "The lot next door? That run down.. whatever it was?" She got up and went to the other window, looking out. "We don't want to buy that, do we?"

"Manuel thinks it would not be good, no." Maria admitted. "But he sent it because it was here."

A thick hedge separated the land their office building was on with the lot next door. There were two buildings on it, overgrown and long unused, at least part of it used by the homeless population as a shelter. "Well.." She half turned as Maria joined her. "I guess we can ask what they want for it anyway."

"There is a lot of work." Maria concluded. "It will need to be built up as a new thing." She said. "Manuel will come here, but I have told him I do not think we will have time to look at this today."

Dar got up and went to her desk, bringing up her screen. "I'm done with this." She said. "I can go over and look at this place." She held up the paper, then put it down on the desk. "It's probably in worse shape than the place next door is but I'd like to see it."

"You know it, Dar?" Kerry asked.

"Of it, yeah." Dar addressed the package, and sent it over their secure mail system. "It's a nice size piece of land, not like most of the places off the water." She straightened up and folded the paper, sticking it into the back pocket of her jeans. "Surprised it's on the market to be honest."

Kerry turned around. "Well hon, we could buy both and hope the storm wipes everything clear for us to start over again with them." She said, in a wry tone. "Would be our luck."

Dar chuckled. "It would be."

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"Mama, there is a truck here." Mayte popped her head into Maria's office. "I think it is Dar's papa."

Maria bolted alertly around her desk and trotted over to join her daughter, as they went to the bay window overlooking the front of the building.

As Mayte had said, a large panel truck was parked now in front, somewhat blocking the street outside. A half dozen men were jumping out of it, all dressed in coveralls and a moment later, Andrew Roberts appeared from around the corner, holding a roll of paper in one big hand.

"This is good." Maria said, in a satisfied tone.

There was a load of wood in the back of the truck, and along the sides were lashed two extension ladders. As the two women watched, the new arrivals started unloading the material onto the lawn, one of them pausing to speak to Andy, now standing with his arms folded over his broad chest, a ball cap covering his grizzled dark crew cut.

He was in faded jeans and a short sleeved cotton shirt, and like the six men wore heavy, worn combat boots.

Dar emerged from the front door and came over to them, and even at this distance, the family resemblance between her and Andrew was evident as they stood side by side settled into the same stance.

"Dar's papa is so nice." Mayte said, after a silent moment.

"Si." Maria smiled. "He is a very nice man, and now he is taking care of this problem for us. So we must now go and finish the preparations." She turned and shoed her daughter. "Vamanos."

They went back into the hallway, where there were now folding tables set up on the inside walls covered in plastic bags, and technicians were piling computers and gear onto them, pushing rolling carts off the elevator at the end of the passage.

"Get everything up onto the second floor here." Mark was calling out. "We need more bags!"

"I got em." A wheelchair sped down the hall with a tow headed man in it, his legs missing below the knee. He was wearing a blue polo with the company logo on the chest, and tied off khaki carpenter pants with tools emerging from all the pockets.

There was a large box of outdoor garbage bags on his lap.

"Thanks Scotty." Mark grabbed the box as he wheeled by and set it on a nearby table, ripping the top open and starting to pull out the black bags. "Soon as we get this done, we can get you guys on the bus and upstate."

"No problem. Chuck is in the demark, putting bags over the punchdowns." The man in the wheelchair said. "One sweet thing about not owning no home is not having to deal with all this crap."

Mark snorted. "No kidding. My wife's running around looking for a hose to empty the pool with right now."

Scott turned in his chair and unhooked a sack hanging from the back of it, lifting it up over his head and setting it down in his lap. He opened the top and started removing a stack of boxes. "Got all the little NAS off the dudes downstairs."

"They still working?"

Scott nodded. "Got something they gotta do they said."

"They do." Mark moved along the tables, ripping bags out of the box and draping them. "Project deadline's COB today for that sim framework. They don't give a crap about hurricanes."

"No, my dear, banks don't either." Colleen came sweeping by with a cart carrying document storage boxes. "Never a dull moment around here, let me just say!"

The sound of a hammer drill suddenly thundered, loud and very nearby. "Sweet." Mark said. "Now we're getting somewhere." He headed for the stairs. "Wish the damned generator install hadn't been late."

"Fuckers probably sold it to a higher bidder." Scott called after him.

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Dar got out of her truck, pausing to lean against it to wait for their real estate agent to park and join her. She studied the wall in front of the truck, old and weather worn and she suspected made of coral. It was higher than she was tall, and there was a set of wrought iron gates in it, locked with a thick wrapped chain and lock.

Manuel arrived at her side and twitched his linen jacket straight. "Buenas dias, senora." He said. "Thank you for meeting me today, I know it's hectic."

"Buenas dias." Dar responded amiably. "Yeah, it's a mess. But I was surprised to hear this was on the market so it peaked my interest."

Diaz nodded. "And I as well. I was really surprised to see the listing. My secretary saw it, and brought it to my attention this morning when we got in." He gestured to the side of the gate, where a smaller entry stood. "I met with the selling agent and got the key."

"Old place." Dar followed him to the smaller gate and stood while he unlocked it and pulled it open with some effort. "Someone living here?"

"No no." Manuel went through and held the gate open, then let it swing shut behind them. "Not for a very long time I'm told." He paused, and regarded the open space before them. "At least they keep a gardener on."

There was a long, deep lawn in front of them, the wall stretching on either side and then down the property line until it disappeared into a thick line of trees. "Could play soccer on this damn thing." Dar commented.

"You could put in tennis courts, a little golf course.. sure." Manuel said. "Plenty of space. You could even build another house on it."

"Mm."

They started walking down the driveway, a surface made of paver stones that were old, and dirty gray black, partially obscured by dirt. They might once have been white, Dar considered, glancing to either side as they neared the tree line. "Plenty private."

"Of that, it's certain." Diaz agreed. "It's a little point, not too common around here. Most of the other houses are side by side."

They followed the path as it entered the trees, and now the pavers turned a stained deep brown as the canopy closed over them, a band of mature trunks and thickly leaved branches with a scattering of broken and tumbled stone benches underneath them.

They passed a collapsed pagoda, and a wrought iron table covered in green moss, then the driveway bent to the left and they emerged into another cleared space, this one far less empty.

"Huh." Dar stopped, and put her hands on her hips, regarding the view.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Manuel eyed her with wary hope.

The house on the lot was a three story structure, with a porch on the lower level extending all around it and steps up to the front door. There were windows on the second level with shutters over them, and the third seemed to have just portholes that were covered now with dirty wood.

It had an old fashioned air about the architecture, but the structure seemed relatively sound, and the posts holding up the porch roof were straight and all present. "Could be worse." Dar commented, briefly. "At least it's standing."

"Well, it needs a lot of updating." Manuel acknowledged. "The agent said they did a bit of work before they listed it, but he said he knew it was a fixer upper."

"No kidding."

They climbed up onto the porch and he unlocked the front door, opening it and standing back to let her enter. "I mean, the structure is okay, but there's nothing modern in it." He explained. "Needs electrical, aircon, plumbing, nothing's to code, you understand?"

Dar paused inside the front door and looked around. The house was utterly empty, but smelled faintly of old wood and a bit of new paint. "Yeah, I get it." She commented. There was a staircase going up on either side of the entry, and the ceiling was high giving a general air of space.

It was dim inside, and very stuffy. "No power?" Dar guessed.

"No." Manuel shook his head. "The power, water, all of that's shut down for a long time. I told them they'd need to be certified for mold and spores. You'll need a twenty ton unit to cool this thing down, and there's no insulation anywhere."

"Lot of work." Dar concluded. "Permitting'll take forever."

"No kidding." Manuel repeated. "This is gonna make a general contractor a happy, rich man." He looked around the inside. "But there's some good structure here. It's very open. Not like some of the little boxes in boxes they build today."

"That is true."

Past the entry there were doors and they were open. They walked through them into a large room that filled the width of the house, with another set of double doors in the back that led into another room the same size.

At the back of that were floor to ceiling windows and those looked out onto the water, overlooking a multilevel pool area, with a large, battered, very empty pool.

Dar walked to the windows and looked out. The edge of the property was uneven and jagged, a seawall made of rocks surrounded the edge and a long stone dock extended out into Biscayne Bay.

Most of the grounds were overgrown with weeds and the deck itself was cracked and worn. There were double doors that opened out and she pushed them open, grimacing a little at the creak of the worn and warped wood as it scraped over the stone.

A breeze ruffled the waters and blew against her and she walked out onto the deck, past the empty pool, and then turned around to look at the house.

Manuel, following at her heels watched her attentively. "You like this." He stated confidently.

"I do." Dar admitted, with a faint smile. "Damn it's a mess, it'd be cheaper to build it from scratch probably, and the last thing I need in my life right now is a renovation project. But I do like it." She turned back around and took in a breath of the sea air.

"Not a good time to look at this type of property." Manuel said, a touch mournfully as a ragged line of clouds started moving overhead in another squall. "But I can say, this will not be on the market long. I think someone will buy it quickly, and make a guest house, or a hotel out of it. Could pay nicely for that."

"Well, not until the hurricane's over. You can't close with insurance under an active watch or warning." Dar said, in a practical tone. "And this is gonna need a big windstorm rider."

"That is so." Manuel edged back towards the doors as it started raining. "How about we go inside and I can show you what they're asking?"

Dar took out her cellphone and took some pictures of the outside, then ducked inside as the rain started coming down in a sheet. "No harm in looking." She took some pictures of the dining room, then went to a door on one side and pushed it open to reveal a hallway into a very large kitchen. "Talks cheap, right?"

Manuel smiled, following her into the space and removing a folder from underneath one arm.

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Kerry perched on the edge of the folding table, raising a hand to wipe a sheen of perspiration off her face and push her hair back out of her eyes. "Whoow." She looked down the hallway, now lit with the overhead fluorescents as half the windows were covered in plywood.

The tables were full, packed with gear, and swathed in heavy black plastic. Underneath the tables were waterproof crates full of personal effects, and supplies and as she watched, Scott wheeled out of the elevator, his arms shoving the wheel rims of his chair powerfully as he pulled a laden cart behind him.

The once homeless veteran, now a senior in the tech support department, had turned out to be one of their best workers. He was good on the phone with customers, was a tenacious troubleshooter, and his quirky attitude and humor kept things lively in the support bullpen.

Kerry gave a tip of her mental hat to her partner, who'd hired him. "That the last load, Scott?"

"Freakin hope so." Scott twisted in the chair and unhooked the cart, then pivoted around to start stacking the contents in a yet uncovered watertight case.

His wheelchair had been hacked. Kerry considered that was the best description of it.

There were no handles to push it from behind, instead, a metal grid was fastened to it with hooks and bungee cords for carrying gear, and the wheels themselves looked more like bicycle tires, turned by rims with nubs, and hand brakes so Scott could stop and turn, lift up onto the rear wheels and spin in a circle.

He lived in an equally hacked motor home parked in the parking lot of the gym just down the block, where he spent his free time working out and doing some IT favors for the management there in exchange for them letting him plug in his RV to an outside outlet.

His salary could have easily gotten him into an apartment but he had no interest, retreating to his compact, disability friendly haven with its satellite TV and no one to bother him. His old friends had moved on, and Kerry didn't know if he'd found new ones, but he seemed content, and the other techs all liked him.

"Miss Kerry?" Zoe appeared at her elbow. "The bus has come outside."

Kerry hoisted herself up off the table and went to the window, spotting a big blue passenger bus now parked on the side of the building. The driver was opening the lower storage for it, and Mark had gone out to talk to him. "Did we get hotel rooms?"

"Yes." Zoe came over next to her and regarded the bus. "Ms Maria has made it so there will be a meal waiting when they get there also."

“Great.” Kerry went to the stairs and dropped down them two at a time, moving past the receptionists desk and into the lower hallway. She walked across to the far side and then down the long side hallway until she came to the support desk bullpen. “Hey guys.”

There were two dozen techs inside, both male and female, and they turned as she entered and straightened to focus on her. They were all dressed in company polos and jeans, most were finishing up wrapping cables and putting headsets in plastic bags.

“The bus is here.” Kerry announced. “So grab your bags and get them loaded up. We’ve got hotel rooms and dinner waiting for you up there in Melbourne.”

“Hot damn.” Keela hoisted her backpack onto her back. “Jimmy, you got this?”

Jimmy was on the phone, and he half turned, giving her a thumbs up. Then he went back to his call, his eyes flicking over the screen of the PC in front of him.

“They’re going to have to wait tonight until we get the rig up.” Mark had come in behind her. “Jesus we need more people.”

Kerry regarded him wryly. “If the Melbourne thing works out, maybe we can keep a group up there permanently. You think we can do some recruiting while we’re in the area?”

“Mmm.. good idea.” Mark disappeared out of the room.

“Where is.. ah there you are.” Ceci Roberts appeared, dodging the stream of outgoing techs and joining Kerry near the back of the room. “Now I remembered all over again why this whole hurricane thing sucked.”

Kerry smiled at her mother in law. “Yeah, I used to read about those parties and thought wow, that might be kind of fun.”

“It’s not fun.”

“It’s not fun.” Kerry echoed. “It’s a lot of work, and it’s causing us a lot of trouble.”

Ceci nodded. She and Kerry were roughly the same height, and they both had pale hair, and slim builds. Most people who met them assumed they were related by blood rather than marriage. “Where’s my kid?”

“Househunting.” Kerry inspected the phone queue, gave Jimmy a pat on the back, and then she led the way back out into the hallway. “Want some tea?”

“Househunting in the middle of a hurricane warning. Nice.” Ceci followed her. “I’d love some tea. I was about to go find some pizza for Andy and the boys.”

They went to the first floor kitchen, where there were now stacks of water in bottles against the wall along with packages of toilet paper. Kerry went to the hot water dispenser and retrieved two cups, adding some tea bags. “He saved our asses. The landlord is out of the country and whoever he had filling in for him is worth about as much as these tea bags once we’re done with them.”

“He said.” Ceci was looking at the bulletin board on the wall, pulling her cell phone out of her pocket to dial a number. “Since our prep consisted of parking the boat, and the shutters at your place out there are electric I think he was feeling a little left out of all the nonsense to be honest.”

“Thank goodness.” Kerry handed her one of the cups. “We have so much in flight, it’s crazy. I think Dar just finished one project and sent it off, and we’ve got two more due by the end of the week. If we get a hit here, I’ve got no idea how we’re going to make those deadlines.”

“Too successful for your own good.” Ceci remarked.

“That could be true.” Kerry admitted. “But at least, with those closed contracts it puts enough in the bank for us to expand.” She glanced to her right. “That plot of land next door’s open.”

Ceci’s pale eyebrows hiked up. “That swamp? Kerry it would take five years to clear that land and redo it.”

"I know." Kerry nodded. "But it's the only reasonably sized lot in the area. Otherwise, we need to move out of the city, either way south, or way north."

"Ew."

"Yeah." Kerry said. "I like it here." She exhaled. "What a mess. When we signed the contract on this place, we figured we'd have growth space for a couple years."

Her mother in law chuckled.

"And with all our government contracts, we have to work with secure space. It's not like I can just put people anywhere." Kerry took a sip of her tea. "They're really excited about that new rig Dar's designing, but I think she'd going to end up finishing the programming in some bunker in the hills."

"Big?"

"Massive." Kerry said, frankly. "She did a demo for them three weeks ago and I swear they nearly pissed their starched uniform pants." She glanced around and lowered her voice. "I had to come up with a lot of vague, weird language to file our patent on it."

"That's pretty damn exciting actually." Ceci followed her as they went out into the hallway, hearing the sound of drills and hammers from outside. "Let me get this pizza ordered." She said. "Where's Dar out looking, by the way? Nearby?"

"Some place called Hunter's Point." Kerry said. "I was going to google it."

Ceci paused in mid dial. "Huh." She said. "I can't believe the old man put that up for sale. He even told a bunch of those big money boys who wanted to buy it to kiss his ass."

"Now I really want to google it." Kerry led the way up to her office. "Let's add enough pizza for everyone." She suggested. "You can even share yours with Scott."

"Yes, nice having another vegetarian around."

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Dar sat in her truck, both doors open to let a cross breeze through the cab as Manuel sorted through a folder of papers. "So wait, old man Hunter died?"

Manuel nodded. "Si, yes." He said. "Perhaps four months ago? They took some time to sort out the will and he's granddaughter inherited this place." He handed her a sheet. "She very much wants to sell it."

Dar nodded. "That explains it. I know he was holding onto this place like a tick." She regarded the piece of paper, full of dense typing. "Developers tried to have it off him for years... that's why I was surprised it was on the market. He was notorious for telling everyone to drop dead."

Manuel was nodding. "That is what I also heard." He said. "He was a very harsh man, they said. But this property was paid off totally, no one could affect it." He glanced around. "We have the exclusive listing. My uncle did some paperwork for the gentleman in the past."

"All profit then. Good deal for the grandkid." She lifted her head and regarded the property and it's stone wall. "Soon as someone hears this is on the market it's going to be a bidding war."

"Si."

Dar smiled briefly. "Tell the kid I'll pay what she's asking, in cash, soon as the title can close, as is."

Manuel frowned. "Ms Roberts, that is not a good deal." He protested gently. "There is a lot of work that is needed here." He gestured vaguely at the property. "The codes have changed, it needs a new electrical service..."

"Pointless unless we can close on it." Dar said. "See if the kid really wants to sell it as fast as she said. She may not, may wait to see if someone ups it." She handed the paper back. "I know what this piece of land's worth to a guesthouse. Give it a try."

"Bueno, I will." Manuel nodded. "I will call her right now, and lets see what it is she has to say to me." He got out of the truck and walked over to the gates, taking out his phone and turning his back to Dar.

Dar leaned back in her seat and pulled out her phone, opening up her texting app and typing in a quick message to Kerry. She sent it, then paused and expectantly watched the screen.

A moment later it lit up. "Hey." She answered it, turning and propping one booted foot up against the door jamb. "Figured you'd call me."

"Honey, do you really want to make that decision today?" Kerry's tone, though, was humorous. "I know you hate to sleep on things but Jesus."

"I like it." Dar said. "You will too." She added confidently. "But the deal is, if it gets around this is on the market Marriott'll drive the price past anything we can do."

"Ah, a now or never thing."

"Something like that, yeah. The old guy who owned this thing was a jackass. Sounds like the kid that inherited wants no part of that." Dar watched as Manuel paced back and forth, one hand on the phone, one waving in a typical Latin motion.

"Got room for a garden?" Kerry asked.

Dar regarded the gates. "Got room for you to plant a crop of wheat and add a flock of sheep to keep the grass short." She said. "Probably have to rebuild the house from the ground up hasn't been touched since the 40's." She admitted. "No power, no AC..."

"Flush toilets?"

Dar pondered. "I didn't check that." She said. "But I also don't see any outhouses."

Kerry chuckled. "Okay, well hon, I've got the bus being loaded here and a pizza truck just drove up so let me know what happens, okay?"

Dar smiled. "I'll get back there in a few minutes." She promised. "Want me to grab you some sushi?"

"Mm."

"Got it." Dar said. "See ya." She hung up and slid the phone back into her pocket as Manuel got into the passenger side of the truck and ran his fingers through his thick, black hair. "And?"

"It is very interesting." Manuel said. "The young lady, Ms Gardner, did not want to speak to me at the beginning. She did not like my voice."

Dar regarded him with a slight frown. "Didn't like your voice?" She repeated.

"But, I did get to say your offer." Manuel went on, holding a hand up. "So there is no problem there. In fact, she found that very interesting and she is coming here right now to meet you." He glanced at her. "I hope that is all right. I know it is a very busy day."

"Well." Dar pondered. It was more or less what she'd hoped, best case, would happen and therefore somewhat stunning to her that it had. "If she didn't like your voice without meeting you I'm gonna guess this is going to be fast one way or the other." She glanced at her watch. "Hope she's close. I've got sushi to acquire."

"She said ten minutes." Manuel sat back in the seat, taking out his handkerchief and mopping the sweat off his brow as Dar boosted the AC a little. "But yes, my wife is right now at Sedanos. It is no doubt a loco day."

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Kerry leaned over the phone on her desk, trying to block out the sound of the hammer drill behind her. "Sorry, John. They're putting up shutters." She said. "It's a little crazy here today."

"No kidding!" The voice on the other end of the phone said. "You're the only one who answered your damn phone down there. It's nuts! How can you expect to get business done?"

“Well.” Kerry sighed, pressing the receiver against her ear. “You know, hurricanes are a thing. No one enjoys them but you can’t really pretend they’re not there.” She glanced towards the door to her office, where Zoe and Mayte were standing conversing. “Pain in the behind, actually.”

“So move?” John suggested. “Nobody says you have to park your office down there. Customers don’t care about what you all have to deal with. We just want results.”

“We talked about it.” Kerry kept her tone even. “But most places have something they have to worry about. Tornados, or floods, or earthquakes or whatnot. The difference with hurricanes is you see them coming.”

“And they take a hell of a lot more time away from doing business.” John said firmly. “I’m telling you, Kerry – don’t get me wrong. I like you, I like Dar, I like what you’ve done for us but now you’re telling me I might not have my build by Friday because you might be closed?”

“The problem is John, we don’t know. This thing could veer off and do nothing.” Kerry said. “We’re moving some of our teams out of the area, and Mark’s working on standing up a cloud instance of our code base so we can have the programmers work remotely. We could have no impact at all – but we also could have the building blown apart if we take a direct hit here, and I thought it was only responsible of me to let you know the whole story.”

There was a brief silence. “Yeah, no I get it.” John said, in a grumpy tone. “And I do appreciate the transparency, Kerry. I just need to make my checkpoints. This is a big deal for us.”

“John, I will give you my word we will do everything we can to keep you on schedule.” Kerry said. “It’s a big deal for us, too.”

John grunted softly. “Fair enough.” He conceded. “Good luck, huh? I usually don’t pay attention to that tropical stuff but I signed up for the alerts this time. Crossing my fingers it goes and hits Cuba.”

“Crossing my fingers it just blows apart and goes nowhere.” Kerry said. “Thanks John. I’ll be in touch.”

She hung up the phone and sat back, reaching up with one hand to push the thick, pale hair out of her eyes. “What’s the news, ladies?” She called out to Mayte and Zoe. “Bus take off?”

Mayte came forward with her clipboard, and Zoe trailed after her. It was now dark in the office, the windows covered with plywood and Kerry leaned over to turn on the desk lamp.

“The bus has left, yes.” Mayte said. “The accounting people have finished their work, and Ms Colleen has let them go home to prepare for themselves.” She reported. “Mr Mark has not come back from the other building yet.”

“He’s competing with everyone trying to find space I guess.” Kerry sighed. “Okay, whoever is done with their prep here, including you two..” She eyed them. “Go on home and get your stuff done. Did we set up the phone dial in system?”

Zoe nodded. “We have the code.” She said, in her soft voice. “We can put in the message, and everybody knows to call and find out.”

“Okay.” Kerry stood up behind her desk and stretched. “Let me go call Dar and find out where the hell she is, and then we can wrap this up.” She walked to the door of the office with them and looked up and down the hallway.

It was much quieter inside now, the doors to the individual offices were closed, the tables in the hall were covered in their plastic tarps.

Andrew Roberts was standing at the far end of the passage, his arms folded over his chest, two of the men he’d brought with him positioning a large sheet of plywood over the window at the end. He spotted Kerry and headed her way, his t-shirt covered in wood shavings and dark with sweat.

“We owe you big, Dad.” Kerry met him halfway.

“Wa’ll.” Andrew looked around with a dubious expression. “Ain’t the best. But it’s what could be done. This here place should have them shutters like ovah on the island does.”

"It's true." Kerry said. "Landlord didn't want to spend the money. Now I'm going to write that into our lease renewal and whatever it cost for you to do this I'm deducting from our rent this month." She put her hands on her hips. "Should have done it the first time, but who knew?"

Andrew chuckled.

"I mean, who knew this was going to take off like it did? We were just worried about having a few desks to sit at to make sales calls the first few months."

"Need more space now." Her father in law agreed. "Aint much room round here."

Kerry turned as she heard familiar steps on the stairs. "Ah." She smiled as Dar appeared at the top of the landing, a paper bag in her hand. "There you are."

"Here I am." Dar agreed. "Hi dad."

"Hey rugrat." Andrew greeted her amiably.

"How'd the property thing go?" Kerry asked, reaching for the bag. "Good?"

"Interesting."

"Uh oh." Kerry bumped her towards the kitchen. "Tell me while I chow."

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It was a mango tango roll. Kerry chewed a piece of it, while she watched Dar assemble herself a cup of coffee and sit down across from her at one of the small tables in the break room. "So?"

Dar called up the pictures she'd taken and handed her phone over. Kerry thumbed through them. "Holy freaking crap." She blurted, putting down the chopsticks. "That's bigger than my parent's house."

"Probably." Dar agreed. "Definitely more property."

"Woah." Kerry looked up. "How old is it?"

"Ninety forties, I guess." Dar said. "Like I said, no AC, no power right now.. it's a crap ton of redo."

Kerry looked at the next picture, taken from the back of the house looking out over the water. "Nice view." She reviewed the panorama. "And a dock for the boat."

"Uh huh."

"Dog's'll love it."

"Without a doubt." Dar agreed. "Like I said, you could plant acres of corn there, and a herd of cows."

"Unbelievable amount of land.. how in the hell did they hold onto it that long? You could park a whole Sandals on that corner." Kerry shook her head. "Okay, I get why you bit." She handed the phone back and picked up her chopsticks, expertly selecting another section of sushi and putting it between her teeth. "I like it."

"I knew you would." Dar set the phone down and sat back, cradling her coffee cup in her hands. "The old man who owned it was a notorious asshole. His great great something was an original settler in the area back in the day when it was mostly mangrove and scrub and Henry Flagler was building his railroad to bring all his rich friends south for the winter."

"Uh huh."

"He wouldn't sell the land just because he didn't want to see the place torn down. He didn't even live in it. It just sat here." Dar went on. "Drove the county crazy. You know how much taxes they could have made on that land?"

Kerry chortled softly under her breath. "Oh yeah, I can imagine."

"Anyway, he's gone. Died a few months back. His granddaughter inherited the place." Dar said. "Twenty something kid. Can't sell it fast enough."

Kerry chewed and swallowed, studying her partner's face. "That's bad?" She watched Dar's eyes narrow. "You talk to her?"

Dar nodded.

"You don't like her." Kerry said, in a tone of certainty.

"I don't like her." Dar said. "She lives in California."

Kerry consumed another piece of sushi. "Well, a lot of people do, Dar." She said, mildly. "it's not a crime, at least last I heard."

"She's an arrogant bitch." Dar said. "She's in the entertainment business or something along those lines out there."

Kerry sucked on the tip of her chopstick. "Family?" She guessed and watched her partner definitely shake her head back and forth.

"Total breeder." Dar said, succinctly. "And a complete racist anti immigrant asshole." She added, unexpectedly.

In the midst of taking another bite of her food, Kerry stopped in mid motion, the sushi halfway to her mouth, her light green eyes opening wide in surprise. "The kid?" She said, in some astonishment. "From California?"

"The kid, from California." Her partner confirmed. "Apparently that's why she can't stand South Florida. Can't deal with all the people from other places."

Kerry's blond eyebrows knit together, her face contracting in puzzlement. "Dar." She said. "I've been to California. It used to be part of Mexico. There's a lot of people there from other places."

Dar shrugged and took a sip of her coffee. "Kicked Manuel out of my truck." She said. "Had a complete flagpole up her ass until I started talking and she realized I really wasn't Latin myself." She regarded Kerry dourly. "Which she I guess assumed because my agent is Latin and I've got a tan."

"Holy bananas." Kerry put the sushi down. "Did you withdraw your offer?" She asked. "Or.. I mean, I'm sure she backed out when she realized you were gay." She paused. "You told her that, right?"

"I did. Didn't care." Dar shook her head. "All she cared about after that was did I have the cash and the fact I wasn't.. wasn't from someplace else." She swallowed some coffee. "Said I was the first person who'd made an offer who wasn't a Latin man and she wanted nothing more than to screw them all by selling it to me."

Kerry blinked. "Wow." She finally said. "Isn't that a little young to be so.. um.. "

"Hate filled? You'd think." Dar acknowledged. "I wanted to kick her ass right into Biscayne Bay." She exhaled. "Matter of fact, when she found out I was married to another woman she thought that was awesomely hilarious."

"Awesomely hilarious." Kerry repeated, propping her chin on her fist and she gazed across the table at Dar. "So we're buying it?" She ventured. "Or are you going to front the offer to some lawyer for Hilton named Juan?" She suggested. "Because in the asshole Olympics I've seen you score gold, hon. Chickie from Malibu is not in your class, y'know?"

Dar smiled, finally, and chuckled a little. "Yeah, I don't know. She just .. maybe it was all the stuff going on today she rubbed me the wrong way with all that crap." She shrugged a little. "I said we'd go forward with it – hell, I sent it all to Richard for all I know the stupid bitch doesn't even have clear title."

"Well." Kerry mused. "She should like him at least."

"And, since we're under a hurricane watch.. or is it warning already?" Dar said. "It's got to wait for insurance clearance anyway. So who knows." She nodded at the plate. "Finish your lunch. I'm gonna go see what else I can wrap up before all hell breaks loose here." She stood up. "Bus gone?"

Kerry nodded. "Mark's still looking for secure server space." She said, before picking up a piece of the sushi roll. "I've been pushing off a call from Washington all day."

“Great.”

“We decided to only code that local, hon.” Kerry reminded her. “Twenty twenty hindsight...”

“Twenty twenty hindsight we needed seeing eye dogs.” Dar agreed mournfully. “So let me go find ours and see what I can do to help get us out of this mess.”

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By evening the winds were picking up and the staff was winding down. Kerry walked through the lower floor, sticking her head into all the offices to make sure no one was left, the rooms as buttoned up as they could be, windows covered in plywood and everything off the floor.

Hurricanes were tricky things. The winds were dangerous, sure, but even more so if the storm came over the bay it would generate a storm surge that would pick up the waters not far from where they were and push what amounted to a slow motion tidal wave over the land.

Flooding caused more damage than wind, sometimes with them and where they were just off the bay, meant it was quite possible the building would suffer both and they would have one hell of a mess to deal with.

She got to the server room and walked inside, the sound of the water chilled racks and stacks of equipment providing a ferocious low pitched hum.

Dar was inside, arms folded, talking to Mark. Neither looked happy.

“Not a damn thing.” Mark said. “They couldn’t even spare two racks.” He looked sweaty and there were smudges of dirt across his skin and his face. “I don’t see any way of keeping this stuff up, Dar. I say our best bet is to move it to the very top of the racks and hope for the best.”

“Or take it home.” Dar said. “That place I live in’s built like a brick shithouse.”

“it is.” Kerry joined them. “And now that the island’s got generators, there’s a chance you could actually run these things.” She regarded the racks. “But hon, we’re not going to get chilled brine cooling there in a day.”

“No.” Dar mused. “But if the power’s out here, it’s not going to matter.” She looked up at the ceiling. “We can’t send copies of the code home with the programmers. It’s secure.” She shook her head. “We’re going to have to shut down the system and just secure it here, I think.”

Mark nodded. “Figured that.” He exhaled. “Once this is over, we can see about secured space.. maybe one of the government centers?”

“No.” Dar shook her head. “I don’t want to give up control over the code until we hand it over. Call me crazy.”

“Never do that.” Mark grinned briefly. “That new AI stuff you’re doing is freakazoid coolness.”

“Yeah. Which is why leaving it here worries me.” Kerry spoke up. “Maybe we should take it to our place, Dar. At least you’d have your hands on it there.”

“Mm.”

Carlos popped inside, turning a little sideways to let his big frame clear the door. “I jiggled around the inputs, and I got this whole level up on the UPS circuit.” He said. “For the cams, I mean, and it’ll keep the link up for maybe 48 hours.”

“Good job.” Mark said. “Least we’ll be able to see what’s going on here.”

“Yeah, but we can’t do much if someone breaks in.” Carlos said. “And for sure the cops won’t. They won’t dispatch during the storm.” He cleared his throat. “So I thought... listen, how those guys boarded this place up, it’s a hell of a lot safe than my apartment. I can stay here.”

Dar drew breath as though to protest, then paused thoughtfully. “On the second level you mean.” She clarified.

"Yeah, in the corner there. I figured if we close all the doors, it'd be okay." Carlos nodded. "We got enough supplies.. we got water here, and I've got enough protein powder to last me a week." He grinned briefly. "Two of my buddies wanted to hang out too. They're east and had to evac. It's better here than one of those shelters."

He looked around at their faces. "What do ya think?"

Kerry glanced at Dar in silent deferral.

"Not a bad idea is what I think." Dar said, after a long pause. "Since you volunteered." She added. "I wouldn't have asked anyone to."

Carlos smiled. "Figured I should before you did." He gave her a sideways look, as Mark started to laugh and then a moment later they all did.

"Busted." Dar admitted, sticking her hands in her jeans pockets. "That secure code base has me spooked, I won't lie. It'll make me feel a lot better to have someone here."

Her security director gave her a thumbs up. "We got you covered, boss." Carlos assured her. "I'll go text my buds to bring over our camping gear. If we couldn't talk you into this, we were going to stay in the gym but their roof's kinda iffy."

Dar smiled in acknowledgment and looked over at Mark. "How's the five PM?"

"Hundred and ten." Mark said. "Going through an eyewall replacement cycle, so that means it's going to boof up overnight." He glanced around. "I might talk Barb into coming over here. Those military buds of Big A did not mess around."

"They never do." Kerry asserted. "I've gotten a whole new appreciation for the military since I've known Dar."

Mayte entered the room, carrying several small waterproof cases in her hands. "Here we go." She set them down on the worktable in the server room. "I have gotten satellite telephones so we can talk to each other if the regular phones have a problem." She regarded the boxes. "Like last time."

"Good job, Mayte." Kerry went over to examine the boxes. "This is great. I hadn't even thought of that. I forgot the last time we lost power and cell towers all over the place."

"Awesome sauce!" Carlos agreed. "I can keep one here, so I can let you know what's going on after it's done."

They sorted out the boxes. "I think we're as ready as we're gonna be." Mark said. "I've gotta stop for some evaporated milk on the way home. Barb couldn't find any." He looked over at Dar and Kerry. "You going home?"

Dar hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah, you're right. We've done all we can." She admitted. "Did the bus get to where it was going?"

"They're up and running." Mark said, briskly. "They've got calls online, and it's all good for now." He paused. "Unless the hurricane decides to jack up north. That would kinda suck."

"It could." Dar said. "Sometimes these things are just mother nature's middle finger, y'know?"

"Oh, I know." Mark agreed mournfully. "But I also know the more prepared you are, the less you need to be. I told the bus company to stay with em. If it looks like it does a hockey stick we just bring em back down the west coast."

"Good plan." Kerry grinned.

They walked out of the server room and locked the door behind them, stifling the hum as they made one last pass around the lower floor. The receptionist's desk had been packed up and set on top of the conference table in the conference room, and as they came to the foot of the stairs, two Labradors came trotting down to greet them.

"You ready to go home guys?" Kerry sat down on the stairs as the two animals climbed all over her, smacking her with their tails. "Oof."

"Hey." Carlos said suddenly. "What about Scott's buggy?" He asked. "It's in the back of the lot by the gym.. against those trees so I guess it's got some shelter but my buds just texted me about it." He held up his phone. "Want to know if we wanted to do anything about it."

Kerry looked at Mark. "Did he say anything before he left?"

"He said screw it. If it gets blown apart he'll just get another one." Mark reported. "He didn't seem like he cared too much but you know Scott. He's pretty random."

"Well." Kerry mused. "Yeah he's pretty live in the moment. I guess that's understandable."

"That was a lot of work though." Dar said. "How about I pull it into the middle area with my truck. It's more sheltered than the parking lot." She pointed to the center of the square building, which served as a picnic area for lunch, and had small tables scattered around that had now been brought inside. "I can back it in through the loading dock."

Mark glanced at his watch. "That'd work." He said. "And it won't much time."

"Won't take long at all." Carlos said. "I'll go run down there and get it ready to go if you pull around." He put his satellite phone down on the conference table and opened the front door, holding it against the gusting wind. "Yeah, it's time."

Dar got her keys out. "Ker..."

"I'll stay here with the kids." Kerry said. "And get the back gates open." She added. "It's a good idea. I know he said he didn't care, but if we can make it any safer, we should, and protect his stuff too."

"We should." Mark agreed. "Good thought."

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Dar backed up the truck to the front of the modified trailer, as Carlos and his friends lifted up the tongue and slid it over the ball hitch. She felt it thump into place, and the frame of the truck shift, watching in her rear view mirror as the four men put the chains in place.

The lot of the gym was mostly empty, only two cars were in it, parked close to the building and as she waited she saw the back door open up and a man and a woman emerge, obviously employees. They saw the work around the trailer and came over.

"Hey." The man recognized Dar. "Oh, hi, Ms. Roberts." He smiled at her. "Julie said someone was back here, didn't know it was you." He glanced at the trailer. "That can't be really safe."

"Hey Roberto. We sent Scott up north with the support team." Dar explained. "So we're gonna pull his rig over to our building."

"Oh, that's a great idea. Over in that middle empty part you have?" Julie asked, nodding as Dar did. "We're just locking up and heading home. What a mess, huh?" She looked around the parking lot which was already full of fallen branches. "I hate hurricanes."

"Yeah, I used to think they were cool, you know, hurricane parties and all that when I came here for college. Didn't have to worry about anything and it was great when classes were canceled." Roberto agreed. "Now I'm in the real world."

The four men had finished hooking up the trailer and securing the chains and now they jumped into the bed of Dar's truck, making it rock. "Yeah. Real world for sure." Dar said. "Good luck, folks. Hope it passes us by."

"You too!" The two waved and got out of the way, as Dar put the truck into gear and cautiously started forward, mindful of both the heavy trailer and her four passengers.

Regardless of how Scott thought of his little shelter, it was the right thing to do, and Dar felt a sense of contentment as she navigated the parking lot, then turned onto the road that would take them back to their building.

The unasked for kindness of Carlos and his friends, seated in her truck bed laughing together in her rear view mirror brought a little peace to her at the end of this anything but peaceful day.

It smoothed her ruffled feathers, she realized, from her interaction with Hunter's grandkid. She'd walked away from that feeling kind of.. Dar considered. Kind of slimy.

She was a realist, and she understood that it took all types of people to make up the world, and she had been and was willing to deal with all kinds to achieve her purposes – and her current purpose was to acquire that property she'd kind of fallen in love with and felt at a gut level Kerry would be happy in.

So it was worth dealing with some slime. If they could get the deal done, it would be worth it. She knew it, in that way she sometimes did when the logic wasn't always so obvious on the surface and she was enough a pirate to want to steal it out from under everyone just on general principal.

Dar smiled just a little at her reflection in the rear view mirror, meeting her own eyes in it, their light crystal blue in contrast to her dark hair and tan.

Then she focused on the road, as they reached the back side of their building and Kerry pushed the gates open to let them inside.

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"We just made it." Kerry leaned back in the passenger seat of the truck. "Holy crap that would have been a mess if we hadn't."

Dar shrugged slightly. "We would have ended up staying in the office." She said. "But I'm glad we got to the ferry in time."

Kerry idly stroked Chino's head, which was sticking out between the seats. "I think I'm going to like not being reliant on a boat to get home." She remarked, as the ferry undocked and started the slow churn towards the island they lived on. "Aside from the rest of it."

"Mm." Dar grunted agreement. "Yeah."

"No neighbors. No condo association." Kerry mused. "The more I think about it, the more I'm liking the idea." She stifled a yawn. "Crossing my fingers your gamble pays off."

Dar reached over and took Kerry's hand in hers, squeezing it gently. "Do my best to make it happen." She promised. "But lets get past this damn storm first."

Kerry chuckled wryly. "Fair."

The cut was full of ruffled white waves, and as the ferry approached the island dock they could see the trees moving in fitful bends, the ground already showing evidence of downed fronds. Palms were designed for that, though. The branches were meant to give with the wind, and the trunk was smooth to let the force of it pass unrestricted.

Coconuts, though.. a gardner in a maintenance cart was moving quickly along the line of the trees, picking up fallen branches and nuts, and stopping to use a pole with a hook to pull down those that looked perilous.

The other two ferries were already in their maintenance bays, with lines securing them, and the ramp had been stripped of its usual lines and guides, the landing looking very bare as this last ferry slowly nosed into place.

"Looks like it's really starting up." Kerry noted, as Dar started the trucks engine. "Is that thing moving faster?"

"Lets check the eight o clock intermediary." Dar said. "The outer bands were pretty spread out. But if it's moving faster that's maybe not good either."

"Faster is bad?" Kerry asked. "I thought the weather guy was saying the other day faster was better?"

"Well, Andrew was a speedy little buzz saw, but it came with embedded tornadoes that laid waste to most of South Miami." Dar exhaled. "Two or three more recent ones weren't as powerful, but they just sat there off shore in weak steering and spun and spun and dumped rain and storm surge across all three counties."

"Bad either way." Kerry remarked.

"Bad either way." Dar agreed. "Depends on the steering currents too and that stalled front. Could pick it up and haul it north and end up slamming into the Outer Banks, or hell, New York."

"All around pain in the ass." Kerry concluded. "How did I ever think tropical storms were fun?" She glanced at Dar, with a faintly impish grin. "Oh. Right. I got stuck with you in my first."

Dar smiled easily. "I can see where that would skew your viewpoint." She said. "Back in that day it wasn't such a stressball though. Had more options." She added. "Miami was just one of many."

"Mm." Kerry waved casually at the dockhands as they moved from the ferry deck onto the shore, just as a squall came over and nearly whited out the truck's windshield before Dar got the wipers on high. "After hearing it a half dozen times today from customers.. would we consider relocating the company, Dar?"

"No." Dar turned onto the perimeter road, feeling the wind push against the sides of the vehicle. She glanced at Kerry, who was watching her with hiked eyebrows. "We'll find a more redundant, foolproof way to run operations." She clarified. "I've got a list the length of my arm of all the crap I should have done when we started taking on clients and didn't."

"We didn't." Kerry protested mildly. "I was there."

"Okay, we didn't. We were too busy getting to our vacation." Dar responded bluntly. "And that's fine, because we both agreed to all of that." She conceded. "I remember myself clearing saying I didn't give a crap I was going rafting."

"But we're paying for it now." Kerry nodded. "I know."

"I know you know." Dar sighed. "I just feel idiotic for not seeing where it was all going."

"We could have not done it." Kerry reasoned. "We could have just stopped, then, and taken a few months, take our vacation and actually planned this company instead of going headfirst down into it. But we didn't." She shrugged slightly. "Hon, we are who we are, we did what we did, and we're in it. No point in kicking yourself. It's done"

"Yeah it is." Dar pulled into the parking garaged attached to the building their condo was in, and parked next to Kerry's SUV. "Dad said he parked his truck down by the marina and he and mom are down there just making sure everything's secured."

"Slip comes with a spot." Kerry noted. "C'mon kids." She clucked her tongue and opened the door to let the two dogs out of the cab. "Lets get you all settled before it really starts to be weather."

They went up the steps to the entrance, where the windows were already covered with mechanized shutters, only the door itself left unencumbered by them. Dar keyed the lock and pushed the door open, and the dogs rushed inside with their usual enthusiasm.

Inside the condo was atypically dark, the windows covered and the air with an extra sting of chill. Stacked near the opening to the kitchen were cases of water and pet food.

The dogs went to the kitchen door and looked over their shoulders at Kerry expectantly, as she came in behind them and opened it to let them out into the walled garden. She peered outside as they bounded down the steps, watching the whitecaps building offshore.

Curtains of rain were sweeping across the surface, and she could see waves already coming up to wash against the seawall that bounded the beach, sloshing over it and spattering the coral walk that bordered the edge. The wind was gusting, and it disordered her hair as she watched the dogs explore their little domain, oblivious to the rain.

Behind her she heard the television come on, already tuned to the weather channel. She ducked back inside and regarded the kitchen, which unlike its usual state had supplies and oddities stacked up on the counters much like the office had.

Cans of sterno, in case the gas line the stove and oven, along with the hot water heater were on went out to ensure the all important morning coffee. Powdered creamer for same. Packets of hot cereal and cold cereal, cans of beans and franks, a large cooler standing open waiting for a load of ice.

All in case the generators failed. Kerry hoped they didn't, remembering the steamy mugginess without the AC. Then she felt a little embarrassed at the thought, knowing herself to be one of the very privileged when others were huddled in shelters.

"Everything looks pretty squared away." Dar appeared in the doorway. "I'm going to shower off all this gunk from the storage room." She regarded the smudges on her arms. "But before I do, we got anything in the fridge or should I go scavenge?"

Kerry pondered the question. "I've got those chicken breasts I should use and some pasta. I'll do chicken parm it won't take long."

"Sure?" Dar came over and bumped her a little. "Been a long ass day."

"Rather than you having to fight the rest of the island for whatever avocados are left or sandwiches from the café." Kerry smiled. "Let's go shower off, and then chill." She hooked her index finger into one of Dar's belt loops and started out of the kitchen, tugging her along.

Dar went willingly, following her out and through the living room across into the large bedroom suite that held their waterbed. In here, too, it was dark and the inside shutters that covered the windows were closed and Kerry flipped on the lamp as she released her.

She sat down on the bench in front of the bed and took off her hiking boots, pulling off her socks and stuffing them inside. Then she stood and unbuckled her worn leather belt and pulled her shirt out from the waistband of her jeans.

Kerry had gone into the bathroom, and from the half open door Dar could hear the shower start up, and she could already feel the faint sting of the water pressure against her skin as she removed her jeans, walking over to the closet and tossing them into the laundry basket inside, followed by the rest of her clothes.

Then she went into the bathroom and opened the glass door, releasing a gust of steam. "Ahh."

"Ahh." Kerry repeated, returning from adding her clothes to the basket and joining her inside. "Damn this feels good."

"I like this shower head." Dar remarked, glancing up to where the multiple socketed device spread a drenching rain over the entire length of the shower. "I'm glad we had it put in."

"Me too." Kerry handed her a scrubbie and took one for herself, squeezing out a glob of apricot scented gel on it. She started washing her arms. "Remind me next time not to put pieces of tape on my skin when I'm sealing up boxes."

Dar came over to inspect. "Absolutely not with duct tape." She said. "What were you thinking?"

"Wasn't. Just wanted to get the damn boxes sealed up so they could put them on the tables." Kerry grimaced at a line of adhesive. "Did you ever hear from the landlord?"

"Nope." Dar said. "But he said he was going rafting in Costa Rica, and we know what that's like." She took some shampoo and started washing Kerry's hair. "He's probably going to get out of whatever river he's on and his phone's going to explode."

"We know what that's like." Kerry echoed. She scrubbed at a stain on Dar's skin across her ribcage along one side. "How in the hell did you get ink under your shirt?"

"Carrying a printer sideways." Dar said absently. "Don't ever do that."

"Ah.. so that's what that big blotch on the floor was."

"Yeah. Lucky it was an inkjet not a laser. That toner never comes out."

Kerry started chuckling a little, as she watched the shower carry slightly raspberry tinted suds towards the drain in the stone tiled floor. "We have the most romantic conversations, you know that?"

"Hey we could be talking about those asics in the new gaming controller." Dar didn't miss a beat. "I think that might really turn out interesting." She finished washing her own hair, as Kerry rinsed herself off. "I got a call from someone who wants to talk to me about the framework."

"Hm." Kerry put the scrubbie on it's hook. "How'd they know?"

"Patent filing." Dar said, briefly. "At least, that's what they claimed." She acknowledged wryly.

Kerry turned off the water and pushed the door open. "They from some big company you think?" She asked. "They might just be fishing."

"Could be." Dar wrapped a bath sheet around her and handed one to Kerry. "But I don't know. I think I kind of would want one of the big guys to buy the licensing for it. I don't know that I want to touch retail."

"We don't." Kerry shook her head. "I totally am on the page with you there." She ran a brush through her short hair and watched as Dar combed out her longer locks. "But if they're big enough, I want to be sure you get royalties on the patent, Dar."

"We get royalties." Dar remarked. "Half my brain belongs to you remember."

Kerry leaned over and kissed her shoulder. "Well, as you said before, lets get past the storm first, and our other customers screaming at us, and whatever we have to deal with that office, and then we can worry about making money off your brain."

She put the brush down and gave Dar a pat on the behind, before she emerged back into their bedroom and traded her towel for a tshirt and shorts, walking barefoot back through the living room. She spared a glance for the television, with it's now familiar buzz saw shaped satellite view as the track and cone now seemed centered pretty much on downtown Miami.

"Ew." She grimaced. "This is not going to be good." She went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, removing the chicken and putting it on the counter, and then retrieving her pans and utensils. "Noooot good at all."

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Dar was sprawled in one of the easy chairs, one leg slung over the arm of it, a diving magazine propped up on her knee as she browsed the pages.

She could hear the squalls lashing against the shutters, the wind coming and going, blowing gusts that spattered against the surface before going quiet again.

Hurricanes were large, spinning disks, and the squalls were the outer arms of them, extending hundreds of miles from the center or eye of the storm. They were freaks of meteorological nature, low pressure centers that acquired rotation, like tornados on a grand scale that sucked up energy from warm water, hence why summer was their general season.

As the central pressure of the storm dropped, the wind speed increased around the eye and what you ended up with was a giant circle of ratty weather with a middle that could blow buildings apart. Even with the storm still a hundred miles out to sea, disruptive winds would shut down airports and make driving large vehicles difficult.

Dar glanced up at the television, where the buzz saw, now shown in infrared, was inching closer. "St. Thomas is getting slammed."

"Are they?" Kerry came in with two large cups, handing Dar one. "Wow that looks nasty."

"Hundred and fifteen." Dar said. "And the eye hasn't hit the Gulfstream yet." She watched the screen. "Dar, why do weather people do that? Stand out in the rain, I mean? Look at that guy in Key West."

It was dark in the picture, and the man was standing right near the well known marker that showed the southernmost point in the continental United States, in case his audience weren't aware of where Key West was. He had a television light on him, which showed the marker, and his face, and his Helly Hanson rain gear, and the rain that reflected in the camera light but not much more.

Occasionally the camera would pan up to a palm tree, which was swaying in the wind.

"Why do they do that." Dar started laughing a little bit. "Because weather events which take days and provide this much anticipation and entertainment are a god send to the cable news industry, Kerrison." She regarded the screen with wry fondness. "They never made that big a deal of them before Andrew, and then everyone was really just kind of meh."

"Meh?"

"Hadn't been a storm in South Florida for like twenty years before that." Dar explained. "No one paid any attention. I remember... what was his name... Brian Norcross running around screaming like a damn banshee trying to convince everyone this thing was going to be a monster and no one listening."

"Oh, crap." Kerry was surprised.

"Finally everyone realized and by then it was too late. Wasn't any plywood or supplies left and people ended up surviving in their bathtubs under their mattresses as their windows blew in and their roofs blew off."

Kerry sat there, cup in hand forgotten, her eye wide open as she stared at her partner.

"They'd allowed the codes to degrade, all kinds of shenanigans. That's why a lot of those areas in South Miami got blown apart." Dar continued. "So the next time they didn't make that mistake again. Now, we have tax holidays for hurricane supplies and when we hear there's something brewing everyone makes a mad dash to top up their stores."

Kerry glanced at the kitchen. "And buys water and Vienna sausages."

"Uh huh." Dar nodded. "It's why the supplies are so damn random – you never know with these things." She went back to flipping the pages of her magazine. "Here's one. Two week all included livaboard dive vacation, Truk Lagoon. What do you think?"

"We'll be boarded by two headed pirates from the lost city of Atlantis." Kerry responded. "And cause an international scandal by finding, and domesticating a giant sea squid who turns out to speak Dutch." She took a sip of her hot chocolate and wiggled her eyebrows.

Dar chuckled, toasting her with her own cup.

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Kerry folded her arms and looked out the small window in the door that opened up to the garden. They had left the shutters off it, so they could see outside but at this hour, before dawn there really wasn't much to see.

Behind her, she could hear Dar crunching her morning cereal. "Are we in for a whole day of this?" She indicated the window.

"Uh huh." Dar mumbled. "If it keeps on this track, we'll be on the dirty side."

Kerry turned and looked at her.

"Right hand side of the forward motion." Dar clarified, lifting her bowl and drinking from the side of it. "I should call down to the marina and find out when my folks are going to head up here." She went over to the sink and rinsed the bowl out, along with the spoon she'd used.

"Guess I'll get some work done while I can then." Kerry sighed. "Let me go throw some ratty clothes on and see if I can finish those contracts before I start getting calls." She added. "Mayte forwarded my desk phone and yours."

“Yay.” Dar wiped the milk moustache off her lips with a paper towel. She went over to the land line phone on the small credenza near the door and picked up the receiver, dialing the number of the slip Ceci and Andy’s boat was docked in.

Kerry went through the living room, dodging the two dogs who were tussling over a tug toy and trotted up the stairs to the condo’s second level. There was an office there that was hers, a guest bedroom, and the second master suite where she’d once stored her things when she’d first moved in with Dar.

That was long past. She still occasionally sat on the second level patio to read or have a cup of tea, but their possessions were mingled in the big walk in closet downstairs and now the upstairs suite only held the overnight bags belonging to Dar’s parents.

The laundry room was there though, and she went in and opened the dryer, pulling out a pair of pair of cargo pants and a tshirt to trade her nightshirt for. She tossed the shirt into the hamper near the washing machine and went into her office.

Like their bedroom downstairs, this was at the front of the condo. Kerry sat down behind her desk and gave her trackball a whirl, bringing up the screen and leaning forward as her large monitor resolved her desktop. Despite the early hour, her mail was already dark with new entries.

“Here we go.” Kerry grimaced, as she opened the first of them. “C’mon people, I know this storms’ on CNN. Give me a break here.”

“Ker?”

“Yes?” Kerry lifted her voice as she heard Dar’s hail from downstairs.

“Want another cup of coffee?”

“I love you.” Kerry responded.

“On the way.” Dar called back, her voice retreating as she went back to the kitchen.

Kerry returned her attention to the mail, and started a reply to it.

*Good morning Erin. Our offices are closed today due to the hurricane, but we have some staff on duty, so the calls are being covered by a team up in Melbourne, Florida. If your staff is getting long wait times, let me look into it and see what I can do.*

*Kerry R.*

“I can only imagine what Dar’s inbox looks like.” Kerry picked up her phone and opened a text message to Mark.

*Hey, Technodyne is complaining they’re waiting forever for the desk to pick up. I know it’s early – what’s the status up there?”*

A moment later, the text came back.

*Hey Kerry. Let me buzz them and find out.*

Kerry put her phone down and went back to her inbox, scanning the headers quickly to identify what burning fires she needed to look at first. On an ordinary day she might have one or two, but she’d also shut down early the previous day to help finish buttoning up the office.

Her phone buzzed and she glanced down at it. Then she shook her head and went back to her original email, opening a second reply.

*Hey Erin – just got off the line with that team and they asked me to ask your group to hold off calling them for weather status. It’s what’s jamming the lines up. I think maybe they don’t realize they’re upstate now and know pretty much the same as the Weather Channel.*

*Thanks – Kerry.*

People were so weird.

Kerry put her mail aside for a minute, then she half turned and set up her wall mounted monitor to show the metrics screen Dar had written for them. It showed the status of the systems in the office, their cloud based phones, project progress, and had a ticker on the bottom that now held the hurricane updates but most often carried tech news.

Since all the storm had brought was rain, and a little wind, everything looked relatively normal except for the high call rate into the support desk, and the low number of calls to the rest of their departments because no one save Carlos was in the office.

There wasn't really that much to monitor, yet, but Dar had built the program anyway, amusing herself by creating a screen that also measured the health of everything inside their building and linked to the security cameras.

Occasionally, Gopher Dar would appear, and ramble through the metrics, tapping on graphs and chattering before disappearing out the other side of the screen.

"Okay." Kerry looked up as she heard steps on the stairs and paused as Dar entered with a large mug and two dogs at her heels. "Ahhh... thank you."

"Airport's closed." Dar set the cup down. "Ports are closed." She reported. "Anything blowing up?" The dogs climbed up onto the couch against the wall and lay down, tails idly thumping.

"Not really, not yet." Kerry said. "Phones are hot, because everyone is calling support to ask about the damn storm."

Dar stared at her in bewilderment. "What?"

"I think they just know where we're located." Kerry chuckled. "And it's the out of towners. At least our local clients are not bothering us." She cradled the cup in her hands, savoring the contrast of the warmth of it against the chill of the air conditioning.

Dar's dark brows knit together. "People are weird." She echoed Kerry's previous thought. "I'll be downstairs working on the sim control matrix. I promised Scott we'd have a cleanup revision out to him by today." She turned and went back out.

Kerry glanced at the couch, as the two dogs lifted their heads and watched her retreat. Then they both turned to look at her. "Go on." She told them. "I know damn well whose dogs you are." She adored both of their pets and enjoyed interacting with them but there was no doubt who they regarded as their pack leader.

The two Labs seemed to consider for a moment, then Mocha hopped down off the couch and trotted out after Dar, while Chino put her head down on the couch arm and settled her paws comfortably crossed, issuing an almost human sigh.

Kerry rested her chin on her fist, wondering as she had a few times before just how intelligent the animals were. Did they communicate with each other? Was there a dog language, perhaps in a sound level she couldn't hear? Did they discuss the daily happenings at the condo, and decide things like which one should go sleep where, and who should watch the back patio to bark at the birds?

Did they critique their meals?

Her email pinged softly as another message came in, and she reluctantly left off imagining the thought bubble world of her pets and went back to her screen, finding a list of orders in progress whose delivery was now put in doubt. "Ah crap."

Chino opened one eye and regarded her, then twitched her nose and closed her eye again.

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Dar had just finished setting up the screens the way she liked them when her phone rang. She glanced at it, didn't recognize the caller ID, and debated letting it go to voice mail. Then reluctantly she answered it. "Hello?"

There was a long moment of silence, then a man's voice emerged. "Ah.. can I speak please to Dar Roberts?"

"Speaking." Dar answered briefly.

"Ah, yes, hello. This is Michael Hengraves. I left you a message the other day? About your patent." The man said. "Do you have a minute to talk? I know it's early."

Dar considered the question. "A few minutes. It's a busy day." She finally said. "You spend your day watching patent filings?" She asked.

"I don't. My staff does." Hengrave said, in a mild tone. "I represent a group of clients who invest in new technology. They provide funding to bring revolutionary products to market. So we watch patent filings to see if there's something out there that could be interesting to them."

"Well." Dar leaned back in her chair. "A lot of patents never go anywhere. They're just filed to protect ideas."

"We know." Hengrave said. "We've been doing this for a while and we've had a few successes, and some failures, and some.. " He paused, and she could hear the faint shrug in his tone "Some that are just treading water."

"So what's interesting about mine?" Dar asked.

"One of the lines in it, one of the descriptions." He answered promptly. "But I'm not really qualified to talk about the technical side of it. I have a partner who is, I just wanted to know if you were interested in, at least, having a discussion about potential commercial uses for it."

Dar considered. "Any of those investors actually produced anything?"

Hengrave chuckled a little. "If you mean, did they build the widgets, the answer is no. They acquire the intellectual property, so to speak, the idea, and they broker it to companies who can."

"For instance?"

He hesitated. "Not sure I understand the question."

"Give me an example of one of your successes." Dar said, keeping her tone very mild. "I've been in the tech industry a while. Something I may have heard of?"

"Oh. Ah. Hold on a moment." The line went mute, and then he returned. "Can I call you back? I just had another urgent call come in."

"Sure." Dar said, relatively certain he wouldn't. "Take your time, and have that example when you do." She heard the line go dead and she put the phone down, chuckling softly under her breath. "Hasbro potty trainer, probably." She returned her attention to her screens.

There were two, large and vivid, attached to a docking station she currently had her laptop connected to. One held the framework design program, with its multiple windows and intricate circuit tracings and the other her programming software with its endless lines of code.

She spent some time re-reading the last block of instructions, turning to glance at the window in her office when the branches outside hit the glass. They had left the shutters off this one as well, and Dar smiled a little, remembering that first, almost insignificant storm when she and Kerry had looked out of it together.

She turned back to the screen and reached out to her trackball, laying her fingertips on it and moving the cursor to select a section of code.

It was almost done. There was just some cleanup work to be done on the control surfaces, and now she made the adjustments, tiny snippets of code that ran the training simulator and its mechanicals.

It wasn't as cool as the AI methodology she'd just submitted the patent for, but this was a bread and butter contract and a billable milestone. A big one, on a project that had wavered on the edge of being cancelled three times now, subject to government budget infighting.

The code itself was stored in their offices, in a secure server her machine was connecting to, encrypted and segregated from the rest of their systems, the programmers working on parts of it only allowed to check out specific sections.

With her being the only exception. Dar had the master encryption key for the repository, and access to all of it. She had the responsibility of being the check on the check, reviewing all the sections as they were worked on before she allowed them into the golden copy.

Her programmers were good people. They'd passed security checks. She liked them. Dar studied a line, then she went in and made a slight syntax change. But this would have her name on it and in so far as any software could be perfect she wanted it to be.

A touch obsessive. Dar owned that and recognized there was a downside.

In a corner of her screen was the network communications app they used to quick chat and now it popped up. She clicked on it, seeing it was from Carlos.

*Good morning. So far just rain here.*

She typed back.

*Here too. Still have power?*

Carlos had probably just woken, he and his buddies having set up cots on the second level, bringing supplies and a small gas stove into the break room there. For a brief moment, Dar almost regretted them not staying as well.

*Yeah – hey the landlord stopped by! His plane was the last one to land at MIA he said and he was kinda blubbering all over the place. I told him to expect a big bill for all the work and materials and all that stuff and asked him for a copy of his hurricane insurance on the building.*

Dar pondered that. "We probably should have asked him for that before now." She remarked aloud.

*He said he gave that to Kerry with the rest of the paperwork might want to check?*

"We might want to check." Dar touched the intercom on her desk. "Hey Ker?"

"Yes, oh love of my life?"

Dar smiled. "We're sure they've got a windstorm rider on that damn building?"

There was a pause on the other end. "Don't they have to? I mean, it's required isn't it?"

"For a mortgage, yes." Dar agreed. "But y'know, this is Miami."

"Let me check. I've got the paperwork scanned in. Let you know."

Dar put her hands on her keyboard.

*Kerry's checking. Not that we can do anything about it now if they don't, and really, regardless, if the place takes a direct hit it's not going to matter.*

Carlos paused before he answered.

*I guess we just find someplace else?*

They would, and now, Dar took a moment to think about what Kerry had asked her on the way across on the ferry. If the worst happened, and they did have to move the company, would she keep it here? So far trying to handle the expansion of the company in the area they'd picked had been tough.

Coconut Grove wasn't built for that, really. Dar sat back and considered. It wasn't, but it was funky and cute, and a nice place to come to work every day. There were shops and cafes to walk to, and it was right down the road from the water.

She liked it. She'd liked it when she'd lived here back in the day, and though sections had changed, the streets with their differentiated houses, overhanging trees, and just general air of old Florida appealed to her.

*Yep we'll find somewhere else. We'll figure it out.*

Dar typed back to Carlos, because that, at least, was true. They'd figure it out. She didn't really want to go back into a business park, like ILS had been in, or move inland where it would be mostly strip shopping malls and traffic.

Kerry had meant, though, would they move the company outside Miami and no, Dar didn't think that was in the cards. For sentimental reasons, sure, but it meant relocating everyone who wanted to stay with them and that was a huge disruption that went past just her fondness for her hometown.

No. Dar went back to her screen, with a little nod. They would just learn from this experience, as she had in her past, and build ways to make it not matter that they were based in the middle of Crazytown.

A small alert flashed. She touched the intercom again. "Hurricane warning's up at the 8am, hon." She told Kerry. "We're centerline in the cone."

"Great." Kerry responded. "He's got a rider, for what that's worth, Dar. Hey, they're evacuating the beach. Do they evacuate here?"

"No." Dar told her. "They know we're a bunch of rich assholes that won't listen anyway, or have bought here as investment property." She said. "And these things are bunkers."

"Okey doke." Kerry clicked off.

Dar returned her focus to her screen, making another small change, and committing it. She reviewed the last sections of code that had been checked in, and went over the wiremap and flow one more time. "Well." She closed the repository and sealed it with the encryption key. "That's as good as it's gonna get for now."

She extracted a visible diagram and published it to an encrypted share for the team to review, and felt a sense of relief that she could mark this closed before the uncertainty of the storm coming overhead.

She moved to her mail program and opened up a note to her project contact in Colorado, attaching the milestone validation and a link to the published schema and sent the note off.

By the time they'd reviewed it, she reasoned, it would be a week or so and at least they'd know the worst of what the situation would be here. She opened another mail this time internal and sent a brief, congratulatory note to her team for getting all the segments in by the deadline, then she stood up.

Mocha looked up at her from his spot on the couch, tail wagging gently.

Dar went over and sat next to him, scratching him behind his ears. "You ready for this, buddy?" She asked. "It's going to be loud and scary, and you're still just a baby boy."

"Gruff." Mocha responded, rolling over and wriggling on his back, rubbing his nose on her leg. "Arouf."

"Is it time for a cookie?" Dar laughed, as the dog tried to lift his ears upside down. "I think it is. Lets go get one." She got up and followed Mocha out of the office and into the living room, pausing to watch the television as the storm inched closer.

Like a slow motion train wreck. Dar shook her head and moved on.

\*\*

Kerry ran her eyes over a mostly completed page, reviewing the answers she'd given to the request for proposal from a potential new client.

On the surface, it wasn't a complex request. They were looking to open up three satellite offices in the South Florida area, but needed to keep costs down and be highly flexible in the work environment. They weren't fond of the idea of having the staff work from home.

Home office was in Augusta, Georgia. The new locations were an attempt to make inroads in a new segment of their business, the nature of which was somewhat vague, but which apparently was sales related and required the employees to pitch face to face to new customers.

Kerry tapped her fingertips lightly on the keys of her keyboard, rereading the page. She'd given the standard answers to the standard questions, but as she read them, the whole thing felt a bit stale to her. There was nothing new or special about the proposal.

Sometimes, she reminded herself, a banana was just a banana. There were only so many ways to configure computing devices, connectivity, and desk space. But one of the things Dar had said she wanted to come out of their company was for their solutions to be, if not totally out of the box, at least have components that showed they thought that way.

So was there something different here? Kerry exhaled, and her eyes narrowed a little bit. Reading between the lines she sort of got the impression that the company wasn't that confident in their ability to home run whatever it was they were going to be peddling.

Hence, the request for flexibility and low cost. By definition, it made it lower risk.

Having the teams work from home would be both, but they'd written specifically into the request their strong desire to have the teams be collocated for supervision and management.

One team in each county, meant they couldn't share a common space, so three rental offices, with three sets of connectivity, three build outs, and three installations of hardware and aside from putting them in a tent on the lawn at Bayside that meant there were limits.

They wanted the offices to be client facing, so that meant more limits, because it meant Class A office space for 20 people per office.

Ugh.

Kerry leaned back in her chair, studying the screen and faintly shaking her head. Then her mail dinged and she glanced over at the other screen briefly, seeing an advertisement come in trying to sell her a motor home. "Boy did that rental put me on a list."

She reached over to delete it, then paused. She opened the mail and studied the colorful pictures, remembering the cross country convenience of having their little home away from home with them. "Hm." Her mind, thrown unexpectedly on a completely different track, pondered.

What if?

She pulled a pad over and took a pencil, scribbling some notes. What if she proposed a single, industrial space as a home base, for back office, and three traveling, tricked out motor homes to sell their proposals to clients?

Weird and radical, and possibly just laugh inducing from the prospective client. Kerry discarded her almost finished proposal and started a new one.

But definitely out of the box.

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More rain. More wind.

The shutters made the usually open and sun lit condo like a bunker. Dar peered out of the small window in the back door, watching the ruffled waters of the Atlantic churn past the seawall. Behind her, she could hear the sounds of a press briefing on the television, by this time the storm having taken over all the local programming.

Not that she watched much on television in any case. Usually either it was Animal Planet or Discovery, or Cartoon Network.

That was an option now, but she was reluctant to turn away from the reporting, even though she knew it would be hours and hours before the storm's main event would take place. Literally, as she had thought earlier, like watching a slow motion train wreck in process and just as impossible to look away from.

"They opened a pet shelter this time." Kerry noted, as she entered the kitchen behind her. "I can only imagine what that's like."

"Like the humane society on a bad day." Dar agreed. "But it's damn good they did with all the people who didn't evacuate last time because they couldn't take their pets." She watched a bird get blown backwards across the back area, landing in a flurry of ruffled and bewildered feathers.

"Very true." Kerry came over and looked out the window past Dar's shoulder. "Your folks still down at their boat?" "They're socializing at the marina." Dar bit off a grin. "You know my mother. She's enjoying herself."

Kerry merely chuckled. She moved over to the fridge and looked inside, pondering her choices for lunch. "How do we feel about the generators?" She asked. "Should I use this chicken now, Dar? I can do some stir fry or fajitas in case we do end up losing power."

"Good idea." Dar said. "I know they tested the damn things, and with the Belcher tanks they've got fuel who knows?" She looked over at the television. "I think the storm surge is going to come right over us." She said. "I hope it doesn't trash the slips."

Kerry paused, a package of chicken breasts in her hand. "You think the Dixie's going to be okay?"

Dar made a face. "I secured the deck. Dad helped me." She said. "And if anyone knows how to do that it's him."

"True." Kerry drummed her fingers on the counter, then retrieved her wok from its hook. "I heard a couple of our neighbors in the market saying they'd wished they'd had their boats taken up state or into one of the covered Marinas in Lauderdale."

"They were full."

"That's what they said." Kerry agreed. "And it was too late to have them taken any further."

"It is what it is." Dar turned. "I finished the drop and sent it over." She leaned against the refrigerator with one shoulder, folding her arms across her chest. "I'm debating on whether I should start setting up the delivery for Broward County or not."

"I'm pretty sure that's one you can hold off on for a few days hon." Kerry got out her chef's knife, its long, silver surface reflecting the light. "I was just listening to the county manager up there on the TV and they're more worried about the fact they can't get the drainage canal gates open."

"Hm."

"They're probably going to offer everyone west of I-75 a canoe."

Dar chuckled. "Well, let me do the setup for them and maybe I'll reach out and offer to redo their control software while I'm at it." She winked at Kerry, and then she wandered back out, idly pushing the sleeves of her long sleeve T-shirt up over her elbows.

"Don't offer to go out there today." Kerry called after her, glancing to her left as her partner's place was taken by two dogs, who seated themselves with hopeful eyes on her, tails sweeping across the stone floor. "Oh. You think I'm cooking for you, little pirates?"

"Gruff." Chino barked softly.

"Not with Szechuan peppercorns, my dear." Kerry informed them. She finished cutting up the chicken and deposited it in a bowl, sliding the cutting board over into the sink for washing along with her knife and trading it for a smaller one of both for the vegetables.

Bamboo shoots, and miniature corn, and snow peas. She assembled the rest of the ingredients and turned the fire on under the wok, waiting for it to heat up.

On the television in the living room a man was standing, covered in a yellow rain jacket, on the edge of some dock somewhere with the obligatory palm tree behind him while rain blew sideways against his head.

The palm tree was swaying in the wind, and the waves were crashing up against the dock, the water washing over the concrete and running across to where he was standing.

A can, driven by the wind, blew across behind the man and the camera turned to focus on it as it rolled off the edge of the pier and into the water.

The camera pulled back and then the picture was framed in a square panel in a newsroom, and you could see two other anchors seated half turned to watch it, with concerned expressions.

It was replaced with a radar view of the storm, the outer fringes now sweeping over land and soon would cover most of the area they lived in.

“Conditions will now start deteriorating.” The anchor was intoning, in a serious voice. “Everyone should rush all their preparations to completion. Get off the roads and into secure shelter.”

On the bottom of the screen, a ticker was running, listing off all the shelters that were open and had space to evacuate to, and what now was closed, like the airports and seaports, and government offices. Kerry walked over and glanced out of the window that faced due east, right into the oncoming storm.

Was it really smart for them all to stay here? She went back to the stove and poured some peanut oil into the wok, adding a spicy red pepper mix with it. Dar had weathered big storms here, and seemed confident, and Andrew had agreed, once he’d done his own inspection of the place.

But Christ, they were right on the edge here. Kerry stirred in the chicken, giving her head a little shake. Literally on the edge, if the storm track was about to come right up Government Cut, the channel on the left side of the island that led to the port and Biscayne Bay.

True, they were not the only ones staying. Ceci had commented, in some amusement, that it was the most expensive hurricane shelter in the state and better attended than most and she’d reported that the management of the commercial center had stocked up on damned near everything.

And well, they were here. Kerry mentally shrugged. No matter what happened it probably wouldn’t end up either as uncomfortable or dangerous as their last vacation so what the heck.

What the heck.

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Once she’d gotten back to her desk, Dar found she really didn’t have an urge to sit down behind it, going over to the window and looking out over the front of the house instead.

This view was far less dramatic than the one from the kitchen, showing the common front area of the group of condos of which one was theirs. She could see the steps that led downward to the ground, and the slope of the tarmac that went under to the parking.

Rain was drenching everything. The plants that lined the front walks were beaten by it, and the pointsetta bush near the steps seemed to have shed its pink blossoms. She could see one on the sidewalk, looking a bit like a deflated balloon.

Past the access road, she was looking across at the tree lined golf course set in the center of the island, the subtle nets that were strung between the branches taken down in deference to the storm and not likely to be needed to catch errant golf balls.

They were relatively new, as were the trees. A resident had sued the developers the previous year after a shanked ball had hit him in the back and Dar had laughed over seeing the story in the little local rag.

It was an unchallenging nine hole course and no one took it seriously. Dar had always regarded it as more a welcome patch of green that wouldn’t be developed since she’d never tried the game but a few avid players had moved in and now hearing the whack of balls being smacked was fairly common.

For her, mostly on the weekends as she and Kerry left early and arrived home late. Now she studied the carefully groomed and cropped green lawn and watched as several men in a golf cart sped across it collecting some left behind tools.

Her phone rang, and she reluctantly turned and went to pick it up, glancing at the caller ID and answering it. "Dar Roberts."

"Hey! Dar!" A man's excited voice came blurring out and made her hold the phone slightly away from her head. "I got that link.. holy cow!"

Dar sat down behind the desk. "That didn't take long." She ventured. "I just sent it over Scott. Figured I would before.."

"Yeah yeah!" He interrupted. "So listen, I sent it to the team and they loaded it up into the simulator and they're running it now."

Dar's eyebrows hiked. "Now?" She glanced at her watch. "You all are in full gear today."

"Anyway." Scott exhaled in audible satisfaction. "I was able to update the nabobs on the morning call, and they're pacified for now." He said. "Great way to start the week, you know? So thanks for that, Dar."

"Well." Dar was a bit nonplussed. "I'm certainly glad we could make the checkpoint. I had some doubts since we have all this weather going on down here."

"Weather?"

Dar's dark brows contracted. "The category five hurricane about to hit Florida?" She ventured, in a quizzical tone. "I'm sure the news up there gave it a brief mention?"

"Oh, news. I don't watch it." Scott said. "You know we're buried here in the mountain. Half the time when I leave I have no idea what time it even is." He admitted. "Anyway, it's just rain, right? How bad could it be? I was a little surprised when you said it might be a problem for delivery."

"Well." She said. "The last cat five that hit this area caused, I think... 28 billion in damages, took out a naval base and made part of the county unlivable for a year." She paused. "Had nearly a hundred and seventy mile per hour winds. Enough to peel the roofs off houses."

"Oh." Scott sounded truly surprised. "Does that happen often?" He sounded astonished. "I mean, we have snowstorms here but my goodness why do you live there?"

"Because we don't have snowstorms here and most of the time we don't have hurricanes either." Dar said. "Anyway, let me know what the team thinks about the new algorithm. I made some adjustments based on their notes from our last meeting."

"For sure!" Scott said. "Thanks again, Dar. I'll probably be in touch later, after they run it for a few cycles. We should know if they have any big notes by then. Better plan on heading up here if it passes the smoke test." He warned. "They've been holding off the bigwigs on this thing but the pressures getting crunchy again."

"Figured." Dar responded. "Let me know what the team thinks."

"Will do." Scott agreed. "Good luck with the storm thing." He added. "I should probably go look it up and see what that's all about I guess." He chuckled. "Later!"

Dar put her phone down and studied it in some bemusement. Then she shook her head and turned her attention to her screens, pondering a moment before she called up another project into her programming tool, leaning against the desk to inspect it.

Not the county one. This schema was completely different, a cryptic assembly of hardware instructions she now contentedly started to fiddle with, setting up a preview on her other screen, and glancing from one to the other to watch the effect her changes were having.

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Kerry watched Dar watch the rain out the back window. "Hey hon." She put down the magazine she'd been reading. "How about we put on some ponchos and take the cart out."

Dar turned. "Go out in the rain?"

"See what's going on." Kerry agreed. "Go see what your folks are getting into, see if the market's still open. It's not that windy out right now."

"Isn't that exactly what the news yonks are telling everyone not to do?" Dar, however, looked both entertained and interested.

"No one listens. You saw that guy who was wind surfing." Kerry countered. "Every time you see that reporter in the slicker on the pier there's someone strolling along behind them."

"That windsurfer got blown into the side of a building." Dar reminded her. "But yeah, sure. Let's go around the perimeter road." She went to the hall closet and opened the door, poking her head inside. "I brought the foul weather gear in from the boat."

Kerry got up and joined her. "Ah ah ah." She turned and held her hand up to the two dogs, who had come rushing over.

"Oh let them come." Dar handed her a dark green rain jacket. "They're water dogs."

They donned the waterproof gear and pulled the hoods up. "Wear these." Dar handed Kerry a pair of water shoes. "They're grippy."

"And neoprene." Kerry followed her out of the front door, with the dogs frisking behind her and they walked down the steps and into the lower level parking where their cars were, along with their cart.

Mocha and Chino jumped into the back of it, well used to the conveyance and Kerry put up the back gate behind them.

The cart was modified. It had four seats and a cargo bed, which had wooden braces with leather covered pads on them and a thick mat for the dogs. There was a metal water dish clamped to one of the supports and two leashes and collars were looped and fastened near it, though seldom used.

A squall had recently passed through, and they were in a lull between them, so there was only a spattering of rain and gusts of wind as Dar guided the cart out of the parking depot and up onto the road. She looked both ways, then turned left and started along the edge of the golf course.

"See?" Kerry pointed in the distance where other carts could be seen. "People are still out and about."

"Good time for a break anyway." Dar agreed. "Plenty of time to be locked inside."

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The marina was a surprisingly busy place. Dar parked the cart on one side of the building that housed the facility among a scattering of other vehicles and they went under the overhang that fronted the docks.

The dockmasters were all there, in their white shirts and blue shorts, with blue rain jackets on as they talked to the thirty or so boat owners who were gathered around.

A table was against the outer wall, with what appeared to be chilled dispensers full of lemonade and something pinkish in them, and servers were roaming around with trays offering cold canapes.

"So this is how we cater a hurricane party here?" Kerry commented dryly. "There's your folks." She indicated the easily spotted Andrew Roberts near the edge of the patio. "I'll get us a drink."

A television was tucked inside a wooden framing, showing the National Weather Service broadcast, and next to it, inside the service window Dar saw two of the marine workers watching a large radar.

"It's gonna be nasty." Dockmaster Jack was saying as she came up next to a small group of other residents. "Oh, hey there Ms. Roberts. Your slip's all secure."

"Yeah, my father said." Dar agreed briefly. "We just came down to see what was going on."

"Like everyone else." A man standing there, hands in the pockets of his Bermuda shorts said. "I'm already bored to death watching the Weather Channel."

Kerry came over with two cups full of the pinkish liquid. "Here." She offered Dar one. "Cranberry."

Besides the man in the Bermuda shorts, the rest of the gathering had fallen silent, most were watching Dar and Kerry with at best noncommittal expressions.

They had never really been that popular. Not, at least, once Kerry had moved in with Dar and their lifestyle had become known, and it had become common to see them around the island together along with their sometimes boisterous dogs.

Most had pretended they were sisters or cousins right up until the time Dar had casually kissed her in the middle of the formal dining room, flipping off the shocked watchers as they just as casually strolled out.

But they were uniformly polite to everyone and so far, they'd avoided any unpleasant clashes. Their impending departure had become known and subtly celebrated until everyone had encountered Andrew and Ceci and realized, belatedly, what the term out of the frying pan into the fire meant.

Certainly not everyone felt that way. Many were part time residents and really did not care one way or the other. Some, that certain percentage, were gay or gay friendly and made that known to them as well. But there was a core of conservatism that lately had become louder and some of the men in the room at the moment were part of that.

Dar took a sip of her cranberry fizzy drink and let her elbow rest on Kerry's shoulder, enjoying the faint twitch of some lips.

A squall swept through suddenly, and they all herded over near the wall of the building to avoid the sideways rain that spattered over everything. Mocha and Chino had trotted out onto the dock, and now they came back over, shaking themselves violently and adding that spray to the rest of it.

"Water's already coming over the seawall on the east side." Jack said. "They're bringing in a truck with sandbags just to throw them on the back side of that thing for safety's sake." He looked at Dar. "I know your back yard's right up against the edge there."

Kerry took a small fruit tart from the tray held out to her by one of the servers and handed it to Dar, then took one for herself, struck suddenly by the difference between the understated competence of the team around them and what they'd seen by their office.

There was a plan. A plan that was not only thoughtful, but executed by professionals with no sense of panic, or lack of preparedness here. Kerry had the sense that though the storm was dangerous, and everyone was worried, that they would weather it because the ground they were on had been thoroughly prepared.

Why wasn't everything like that? Kerry nibbled the fruit tart. Was it just a question of money? "Yeah, we saw the water coming over into the swale there, up to the inner gates by our place." She said. "What's the thought on the new generators?"

"Manufacturer's got a team here. They're going to stay through the storm with us." Jack said, with quiet confidence. "So if it conks out, won't be for lack of attention. They ran feeder lines over from the Belcher docks so we've got plenty of fuel available."

Jamlet, the server, had paused to listen. "Yeah, we've got around a hundred of us on the hotel side who volunteered to stay on duty here." He told them. "Safer here than my place in Cutler Ridge." He offered the tray to the three other men who were standing around Jack. "We're all bunking out over at the mansion. They brought in cots and all that."

Jack nodded. "Marina staff has a full shift on base for the duration too." He said. "All of us were glad to be over here, not dealing with all the crap landside." He turned his head and looked out over the marina. "Everything's as locked down as we can make it."

"We'll be fine." One of the men standing by said. "I'm just worried about surge lifting up the docks. That eye's vicious looking." He indicated the television. "There's a lot of boats in the marina."

“True.” Jack agreed, with a rueful smile. “I was a little surprised. I thought more would be heading out and over to the Med, but not so much this year.”

“Staying away from going out there.” The man said, shortly. “Too much chaos. I’ll spend my money in the Keys this year or go out to Belize.”

Andrew and Ceci came over to join the small group. “Hey kiddos.” Ceci greeted them. “Run out of problems to solve?”

“Taking a break from them.” Kerry smiled. “You never run out in our business.”

“Aint’ that true.” Andy pronounced. “Lo, all you all.” He added to the group. “Had me a chit chat with that there Coast Guard captain just came by and he said they closed up all the inlets.”

Some of the men eyed him with a mixture of resentment and wariness, but others smiled appreciatively and nodded, accepting his authority in all things maritime related.

“It was nice to see Larry again.” Ceci remarked, with a smile. “We should do a barbeque for him and his crew after this is over.”

“Could play us some baseball out on that green patch in the middle.” Andy agreed solemnly.

The squall intensified, and as if by common accord all of them edged inside the marina building itself, which housed the business office and the dock shop where they offered boat supplies and fishing gear for sale. It was luridly fluorescent lit inside, the windows covered with mechanical shutters.

There was a large desk in the center, and past that, mostly darkened, was the command center with its weather radars and radio gear. The sound of marine frequencies drifted into the store from it, the harbor masters using headsets and boom mics as they responded to queries.

It smelled of plastic and fabric, and Jack pulled the doors closed after everyone had crowded inside, and they watched in silence as the squall brought rain in such a heavy curtain that they no longer could see the boat slips or even the sidewalk past the edge of the patio.

“Whoof.” Jack muttered.

The wind suddenly produced a deep howling sound and the doors rattled a little, and through the rain they saw palm fronds whipping by on the ground, rolling towards the water, and the contents of the table outside were pulled along to join them.

“Sorry.” One of the marina staff stuck his head inside from the command center. “We saw that one coming but it got here too fast to warn ya.”

“Wall.” Andy eyed the door. “Once this here lets up we should get us back ova’ to that there house.” He said. “Ain’t gonna get better from here until this thing’s done.”

“Gruff.” Chino was sitting next to Dar’s leg and now she let out a small bark of protest.

“Yeah, that’s nasty.” Jack was standing against the wall between the store and the command center. “We just got a call from some commercial fishing boats that wanted to dock in here.” He shook his head. “No way. I’ve seen the gear on those things get loose and take out a crane.”

“Some of them are coming in and just dropping anchor in the bay.” One of the residents said. “Hope they don’t end up in anyone’s backyard.”

“Ton of hulls coming up from the Keys.” Dar commented. “I heard that on the news this morning, John.” She looked at the resident, a man who’d always been friendly and once he’d found out Andrew’s Naval background even more so having served himself. “Bet a lot of folks are just tying up in the mangroves.”

He nodded. “Everyone realized over the weekend this was going to blow up.” He pointed at the screen. “If I’d have known, I’d have taken a flight up to Long Island but my wife’s got two cats and a poodle here she won’t leave.”

"We know what that's like." Kerry indicated the two wet Labradors. "Just as glad the whole family's here." She indicated Dar's parents.

The man next to him stepped around Kerry to lean on the counter, looking into the command center at the radars. "Well, I'm going to get out of here." He pulled the hood up on his jacket and fastened the flap at his throat. "Since I can't get my family all taken care of."

He pushed past Jack and went to the door, shoving it open and walking out into the squall, the wind yanking the glass door outward and letting in a blast of rain.

"Jamlet, can you.." Jack started away from the wall.

Jamlet put his tray down quickly and went over to grab the door, shielding his eyes from the rain with his other hand. He leaned back to pull it shut, but his shoes slipped out from under him on the wet concrete and he ended up flat on his back on the ground.

There was a moment of silence, then two of the dockmasters rushed for the door to help. They were beaten to the opening by Andy, who got his hand on Jamlets' belt as he tried to get up and hauled him to his feet, putting him gently behind him as he got a grip on the door and hauled it shut. "Easy there."

"Oh!" Jamlet grimaced. "Oh man that hurt." He reached for his back. "I hit the sill." He limped to one side of the store. "Thanks Mr. Roberts."

"All right." Jack looked around with a touch of nervousness. "We should probably get everyone out of here and home and shut down. We need to get the shutters over the doors."

Kerry had dodged between the stirring residents and gone to Jamlets' side. "You okay?" She asked. "You hit pretty hard."

He was gingerly moving his legs in a slight marching motion. "I think so." He said. "Teach me to volunteer, huh?" He gave Kerry a wry grin. "Glad the boss isn't here."

The rain, just as abruptly, slackened, and the wind died down outside, and the view went from almost white out conditions to a soggy view once again of the marina. "Lets go." John said. "While we can." He started herding his friends out.

"Good idea." Ceci sidled up next to her husband. "The idiot meter's going up again." She added. "Wayne's pissed off because they wouldn't let his cousin bring in the boat he just bought at the boat show. Stupid thing is 72 feet long and they don't have space, but does he care?"

"Ah." Dar was waiting for the crowd at the door to ease. "What did he want them to do, kick someone else out? He's that kind of asshole."

"Yes." Ceci said. "Us, actually. Not that the slip we're in could handle that size, but it didn't matter."

Dar swung around and stared at her mother.

"Don't worry kiddo." Ceci patted her arm. "Your father handled it." She smiled without much humor. "These Sir Buckalots talk a good game, but really they've got the backbone of a slinky dog toy."

The store had emptied, and now Jack came over to them. "You guys are almost residents anyway." He said, speaking frankly. "So even if Mr. Roberts hadn't said he was going to kick the crap out of him, we wouldn't have moved you." He assured them. "Just so you know."

Andrew chuckled silently.

"Dingleberries." Ceci sighed. "I swear I'm going to paint a pentagram on the outside wall of that place once we move in here."

"Gruff." Chino barked softly again, standing up and going over to the door, and then looking back over her shoulder. Mocha got up and joined her, his tail wagging gently.

“Ugh.” Kerry shook herself and went to the door. “Glad we missed that little scene.” She eyed her father in law, who winked. “He’s a jerk, but I bet he took you threatening him better than he would if Dar had done it.”

“Probably.” Andrew assented, zipping up his rain jacket. “But I do swear people are just jackass sometimes.”

“Most times.” Jack remarked. “But I didn’t say that out loud.” He added. “Anyway, we’ll keep an eye on your two boats, clan Roberts, and hope this thing passes over fast.” He held the door for them as they went out, going around the corner of the building to where their cart awaited.

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“Ugh. That’s a job done.” Kerry went into the laundry room and threw the two large and now muddy colored towels into the washing machine. “Amazing how much dirt can get on two dogs between the driveway and the door.”

“They were chasing a squirrel.” Dar leaned into the doorway. “And given all the rain, the mud’s not totally a shocker.”

Kerry started the machine going. “Well, let me get these cleaned before something tragic happens and we have to live with the smell of wet muddy towel in the house.” She wiped her hands off and joined Dar in the entrance to the room. “I have meatballs defrosting for dinner.”

“Yum.”

“You say that to everything.”

“You don’t make me salads.” Dar countered, with a charming smile.

“And I have some eggplant parm for your mom.” Kerry felt a sense of satisfaction at this inadvertent result in her casual planning. “So let me go see if anything blew up in my email while we were out.” She bumped gently against her partner and went past.

Dar retreated back into her office, aware of the faint sounds of her parents upstairs in the second master suite. She went behind her desk and triggered the lift to raise it up to standing height, resting an elbow on it as she unlocked her desktop.

At the same time, her phone rang. With a sigh, she answered it without looking at the caller ID. “Dar Roberts.”

“Hello, Ms Roberts. It is Manuel.”

Slightly surprised, Dar adjusted the phone against her ear. “Hey Manuel. Didn’t expect to hear from you today. I thought you were busy with your duplex in Hialeah.”

“Si, yes.” Her real estate agent agreed. “But I have just gotten a call from Ms Hunter about the property we discussed yesterday. You did not give her your phone number?”

“No.” Dar said, briefly. “Never occurred to me to and she didn’t ask.” She glanced up as Chino came trotting in, jumping up on the leather couch and curling up on one end, with her head resting on the stuffed arm. “Why?”

“Because the young lady demanded of me that I give it to her.” Manuel said. “And I did not, though it made her very upset with me.”

“Well, good.” Dar said. “Is that what you wanted to discuss?”

“No.” He said, with a slight chuckle. “Not at all. It is this – she wishes to accept your offer.”

“Yeah, she said she would probably do that.” Dar said. “I sent the paperwork over to my lawyer. But we both know we can’t close on anything without insurance and I can’t get that until the storm’s over.”

“The young lady does not seem to understand this law.” Manuel said. “And... forgive me, Ms Roberts, was it your intention to pay on cash basis for this?”

Dar was briefly silent. “Yes.” She answered, slowly. “I did say that. I figured it would grease the skids for her to say yes. No bank process bullshit, as long as she has clear title.”

"Si, that is what I thought." He said. "If you are not looking to secure a mortgage, you can purchase this property, yes? Without signed insurance coverage." He paused. "I do not recommend this, Ms. Roberts, is understood yes? To purchase a property at this time, with this storm coming, and not insure it would be very stupid."

"O... K... " Dar knew she had a very confused look on her face. "We're on the same page there, Manny. That would be stupid."

"Si. But this young lady has said, if we do not complete the transaction today, she will sell it to some other person who is willing also to close very soon." He paused again. "So I felt it would be good for me to speak to you about it."

What the what? Dar shifted and gave her trackball a spin, more to do something than anything else. "Why in the hell would a couple of days matter?" She wondered out loud. "Does she hate the place that much?"

Manuel cleared his throat. "I do not know, Ms. Roberts. But I can say this, it could be.. "He hesitated. "If this person does in fact have clear title, it is possible there is no financing on it. She maybe owns this outright?"

"Could be." Dar said. "So?"

"Perhaps it is she who does not have insurance, and at this time, cannot obtain it." He said, in a practical tone. "And so she is removing her risk."

"Hmph." Dar made a low noise in her throat.

"Not so stupid, in this view." Manuel said, in an almost apologetic way. "Because let us say, if the worst thing happens and the property is destroyed, it is of much, much less value."

"Would be." Dar agreed. "Okay, Manny, I need to talk to my lawyer, and I need to talk to Kerry. Let me call you back in around a half hour. That work?"

"Si, that works very well." He sounded relieved. "I hope you understand, Ms. Roberts. I am not looking to push you to do this. I feel it is unwise, and a very big risk. But I did think you would want to know about it."

"You're right on." Dar said. "I did want to know." She paused. "Even if I really didn't want to know. You know?"

"Si."

"Talk to you later." Dar hung up the line and put the phone down, making a face as she met her reflection's eyes off the monitor. "Ker!" She let out a yell. "Got a problem!!"

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"Dar, that's crazy." Richard Edgerton enunciated into the phone, with an audible sigh chasing the words. "Not only is it crazy because of the weather, it's just plain crazy. That woman is just looking to put a scam on you."

"Don't disagree." Dar said. "Can she do it? Does she have the standing?"

Her lawyer sighed. "She has clear title." He admitted reluctantly. "The report came back about twenty minutes ago." He said. "But something else came back too, and that's even more dangerous."

Kerry, Ceci and Andrew were sitting on the couch in Dar's office, listening. They all had remarkably similar skeptical looks on their faces given the vastly different faces involved.

"That is?" Dar was seated behind her desk, leaning back in her chair, one knee braced against the edge of her desk. "Thing built on a super fund site or something?" She guessed. "Or an old Indian burial ground?"

"No." Richard chuckled faintly. "But it is on the register of historic places." He said. "Which means, you can't materially change that building."

"Ho boy." Ceci muttered, rolling her eyes.

Dar considered that. "What if it gets flattened in the storm?"

Richard was briefly silent. "I'd have to check on what the regulation would be on that." He admitted. "But it does mean there are limits to what you can do with any renovation. Maybe she knows that limits her choices in selling as well."

"Old man prob'ly got that done on purpose." Andrew said, stretching his long legs out along the floor and crossing his ankles. "Grunty cuss. "

"Did you know him, Dad?" Dar asked. "I heard of him, but we never met."

Andrew nodded. "Met him a few times doing this and that." He said. "Didn't like nobody telling him what to do." He cleared his throat. "Had him an open hand. Gave food, and whatnot to them that needed it. See him sometimes downtown, just pulling along a cart with him and handing bags out to fellers."

Kerry, who had been watching Dar's face, smiled a bit, and leaned back into the soft leather of the couch. "You just engaged Dar's Robin Hood gene." She remarked, but in a mild voice. "For what it's worth – I think we should do it." She paused as everyone looked at her in some surprise. "Yes, I think she's trying like hell to dump this place, but I think we should risk it."

Dar regarded her with interest. "You do?"

"Yeah, I do." Kerry folded her arms. "I say we tell this chick we'll sign, but take fifteen percent off the offer since we're assuming the risk." She said. "Take it or leave it."

"Throw in we know about the historic designation." Richard suggested, sounding interested. "Let her know we know that limits its marketability."

"Does it though?" Dar asked, one dark brow lifting skeptically. "Yes, I know it's on the whatever, but this is Miami." She reminded them. "Throw enough money at it and some big suit could change that."

"Does she know that?" Richard asked. "You said she's from the west coast. Doesn't like it here."

Ceci chuckled.

"Old man'd like it." Andrew spoke up briefly.

"That place isn't bad looking." Ceci said. "From the pictures I saw. It's a nice structure. Sort of reminds me of the frontage at Viscaya." She eyed Kerry. "What the hell you two are going to do with all that space though I've got no idea."

"Yeah." Kerry chuckled. "It's way too huge for us. But I liked the idea of having all that space outside the house. We've been looking all over the area and we've seen some nice places, but they're all up crammed together. This isn't."

"I'm assuming you're going to move on this, Dar?" Richard said. "I agree with Kerry. Lets get her to discount for our assuming all this risk and getting her a fast sale. If she agrees, I'll set up the wire."

Dar nodded. "Okay." She said. "I'll call Manny back. Let's see where it goes." She said. "Thanks Richard. I'll let you know." She hung up the phone and regarded her family. "Crazy day."

Kerry got up. "Dinner's ready." She said. "So make your call and lets go eat." She glanced outside the window, where another squall was washing the surface with rain. "Then we can go watch more Weather Channel."

"Ugh." Ceci exhaled. "I'm tired of that one guy's haircut. It's making me crazy."

"With the pointy spikes?" Kerry led the way out of the office.

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"Where is it now?" Dar returned to the living room, after a brief view out the back window.

"Eye's reforming." Ceci remarked, watching the television. "Just our luck its going to be built back up right before it hits." She observed, as the radar pictured the huge, circular storm inching closer. The round eye, which had been razor sharp earlier, was now obscured with clouds.

“Going over the gulfstream.” Dar said. “Look at those bands.” She regarded the thick lines. “What was the last reading? 163?”

The faint smell of garlic and tomato sauce lingered in the air, and there was a pot of French pressed coffee on the table. The two dogs were wandering around, sniffing here and there uneasily.

“They know.” Dar observed, watching them. “Air pressure’s changing.”

“I can feel it in my sinuses.” Ceci agreed. “I think the last dropsonde reported what.. 901? That’s insane.” She looked around. “As insane as we are to be sitting here right in its path, by the way.”

“Mm.”

“Too late to do anything now.” Her mother concluded. “My sister called earlier. I told her we were going to turn the boat into the storm and drive right through it.”

Dar laughed. “She was worried?”

Ceci chortled. “Who, Candy? No.” She shook her head. “She was taking one for the family team. Someone had to call and ask since they know we live here. I didn’t expect Charles to do it.” She went over to the couch and sat down, pouring herself a cup of the coffee.

Dar had been perched on the back of one of the leather chairs. Now she let herself slide backwards and landed on her back on the seat of it, her head hanging down and her legs dangling off where she’d been sitting. She folded her hands over her stomach and regarded the ceiling, kicking her socked feet idly. “Maybe we should have gone somewhere.”

“Where?” Ceci asked. “You know how these things are. Go one place, think your safe, the stupid thing turns and you end up in it’s path again. We’d have had to go to Colorado and the last time you went that direction turned out a little nutty you know?”

“No, I know.” Dar assented. “Or you do all this dramatic stuff and the thing dies.” She glanced to one side, as Chino came over and regarded her upside down posture with a puzzled expression. “Hey Chi.”

The dog licked her face.

They could hear Andrew and Kerry talking in the kitchen, and the faint sounds of dishes clinking. A soft howling penetrated the walls, and far off, crashing waves thundered.

Dar pulled her phone out of her pocket and typed onto the screen, then paused to wait for an answer. “Power’s still on at the office.”

“Surprising.” Ceci said. “I think they said a hundred thousand were out already?”

“Something like that.” Dar agreed. “No, Carlos says so far so good.” She announced, in a surprised tone. “He says there’s some street flooding, and branches down, but nothing else.”

Kerry and Andrew returned at that moment, and Kerry put down a plate on the table next to the coffee that had some cookies on it. She regarded Dar’s posture with some amusement. “Honey, are you that bored?”

Dar put her hands down, then pressed her body up into a handstand before she turned around and folded herself back into a seated position on the chair right side up. “It slowed down.” She agreed mournfully. “Went from ten to six miles per hour. “

Kerry poured a cup of coffee and picked up a cookie and handed it to her, then got her own. She sat down in the chair next to Dar’s and exhaled. “Yeah, the beach is getting pounded. Even those reporters got the heck out of there.”

It was dark outside. Kerry wasn’t really sure if that was better or worse – when it was daylight you could see out the small windows and on the television the windswept areas, the frothing seas, but now at night all you could do was listen to the sounds of wind thrumming against the walls.

“Do hurricanes always come at night?” She asked, suddenly. “Or is it just a fifty fifty chance?”

“Just chance.” Andrew said. “Tho that one that done come through here last time came during the night.”

“The one that’s named for you?” Ceci snickered.

“That is not mah fault.”

Dar checked her watch. “Guess Manny never heard back from our friend in California. Maybe she didn’t like the deal.” She shrugged slightly. “Which is fine.” She added. “I was willing to leave that one to fate.”

“Maybe she decided to hang onto it and continue to taunt everyone.” Kerry suggested. “You know, put advertisements on billboards offering it for sale and then telling everyone no?”

“Maybe.” Dar munched on her cookie, taking a sip of coffee to wash it down. “I just don’t get the attitude. Is that still a thing? Did I just miss out on that because I grew up here?” She glanced at her partner, and then at her parents, who were exchanging looks themselves. “Or am I just oblivious?”

“Well.” Ceci cleared her throat. “It’s probably true that you’re the only one in the room who didn’t grow up surrounded by that attitude, Dar.”

“Yeap.” Andrew nodded. “That is for sure the truth. Mah family did not care for anybody that did not look the same as we did.” He said, then looked at Dar. “Most folks feel that way.”

Dar was silent, blinking a few times. “What?”

“It’s true.” Kerry reached over to put her hand on Dar’s arm, rubbing the skin there lightly with the edge of her thumb. “You know my family.” She said. “You knew my father. You remember Karl?” She paused, thoughtfully. “Until I went to school, and then moved down here, I lived in a bubble.”

“There are still a lot of people, even here, some who live right on this island, who think immigration’s a terrible idea, Dar.” Ceci said. “They feel free to share that with me, because they assume I’m one of them.” She paused. “And aside from a quirk in the brain, I would have been. My siblings are.”

Dar set her cup down. “But everyone here – everyone, even your family were immigrants once.” She said. “That’s the whole point of the country isn’t it? Everyone came from somewhere else?”

“It’s true.” Kerry said. “I took a class on this whole thing when I was in college. After I got over the whole shock of the whole evolution thing.” She gave her partner a wry look, and her eyes twinkled. “I was interested, because I thought, well, maybe some of this weird stuff we do has to do with that, you know?”

“Tribalism?” Ceci nodded. “I was watching a documentary on that the other week. No idea how they got funded to make it. Seemed radical, even for me.”

“It all has to do with survival.” Kerry said. “If you accept evolution, and that we evolved as primates, given what we see with groups of gorillas and chimpanzees then the groups we evolved into were small tribes who depended on each other to survive.”

“What does that have to do with immigration?” Dar asked, cautiously.

“Let me get to it.” Kerry held a hand up. “Maybe by the time I’m done that stupid storm will finally be here. Anyway.” She said. “So the idea is, your group is everything. Your mother and father, brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, all that, they form an organization around you that’s safe.”

She paused. “Everything outside that, is an enemy.” She said. “Everyone who isn’t us, is them, and they are competitors for land, and resources, and food and if they have it, we don’t.”

Dar closed her eyes and gave her head a little shake, then opened them again. “We aren’t hunter gatherers in Africa anymore.” She pointed out. “We’re smarter than that now. Aren’t we?”

“Ain’t been near long enough.” Andrew commented briefly. “S’what war’s all about, Dardar. You got what I want so I’m gonna take it.” He put his hands behind his head. “We ain’t much but critters yet. I seen it up close.” His lips twitched a little bit. “From both sides.”

Dar looked thoughtful.

“So on top of that we have a natural, inborn instinct to trust people who look like we do, and act like we do.” Kerry said. “And even though intellectually it doesn’t make sense, we want that. We want everyone around us to think like we do, and believe like we do, and people who don’t make us uncomfortable and honestly, since it’s below our thinking minds we don’t really even know why most of the time. “

“Can’t fight what’s in the gut.” Andy summarized. “Aint up here.” He tapped his head. “Ah think about folks I grew up with. Sweet folks, give you their shirts, last bite of food from their houses long as you’re the right color, go to the right church.”

“I really never thought of anything like that.” Dar admitted. “It just seems so stupid to me.” She said. “I’ve seen the contributions people make and read some history.. I mean, we’re all one species.” She concluded. “Whatever differences we have are just cosmetic, aren’t they?”

Ceci smiled. “As a radical anarchist parent, you make me very proud, Dar.” She pronounced. “Even though honestly we didn’t subvert you on purpose.”

Dar looked from her parents to Kerry and back. “Aren’t they? People are all people?” She lifted one hand. “Biologically I mean. I realize we all have cultural differences. We speak different languages. We have different color skin and hair and all that, but at the cellular level. We’re all homo sapiens sapiens.”

Kerry nodded, with a faint smile. “Which is why bias and prejudice is universal. We really are all the same, underneath. There’s no one anywhere who doesn’t feel, deep inside, that their way of thinking, their tribe, isn’t the only best kind.”

Dar frowned. “So she’s not the weirdo, I am?” She mused. “Or is she just honest.”

There was an awkward silence. “I think.” Kerry finally said, a little slowly. “It surprised me that she would actually say what she said, out loud. Because I know, in my family that is what all of them thought.” She paused. “It was accepted, you know what I mean? But no one ever said it, not that way.”

“Your pastor was pretty clear.” Ceci remarked dryly.

“About our being gay you mean.” Kerry acknowledged. “Yeah that’s true. I felt when we were there the last time that everyone felt like they could say stuff like that where as when I was a kid, it wasn’t like that.”

“No.” Ceci said. “There were always code words. But I remember hearing conversations about someone Candy was going out with at one time and they grounded her because he was Puerto Rican.” She paused thoughtfully. “I think that might have been when I decided to take off.”

“Hmph.” Dar grunted softly. “Never thought about it.”

“No, because we.” Ceci indicated herself and then Andrew. “Well, for one thing we were so different from each other where would you start? One week you’d go to a Southern Baptist Sunday school and the monster truck races the next I’d take you to a coven after your oil painting lesson?”

Kerry started laughing, covering her eyes with one hand.

“So we decided to just see what you wanted to do and let you do it.” Ceci concluded, with a grin. “It was a lot easier on everyone.”

“Get ourselves out of the way.” Andrew agreed. “Sure didn’t want you to get any of what my family gave me.” He added. “But don’t you worry about that there gal, Dar. Life’ll learn her one way or t’other.” He got up. “Going to go close up that window back there I hear it rattling.”

“Ugh.” Kerry half turned and looked at the television. “I vote we go to bed and maybe this thing’ll be done when we wake up.”

“Great idea.” Ceci stood up. “Lets just hope for the best.”

She and Andrew retreated up the stairs and Kerry turned back around. “Shall we?”

Dar was sitting, with a thoughtful expression on her face. Then she gave herself a little shake and nodded, putting her hands on the chair arms and pushing herself upright. "Let's imagine tomorrow as a better day." She held out a hand and Kerry clasped it. "All the waiting is making me nuts."

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"Ker."

Kerry came abruptly out from a vague, beach involved dream to unusual sounds and Dar's hand shaking her shoulder. "Huh.. uh?" She grunted, rolling over onto her back. "Wh.." She blinked, bringing her partner's face into focus. "What's going on?"

"Eye's coming ashore." Dar said, briefly. "All kinds of I don't know what are banging into the walls."

"Oh!" Kerry felt a jolt of adrenaline chase the sleep back. "Are we okay?"

"So far." Dar rolled out of the other side of the bed and started pulling on a pair of worn jeans and a tshirt.

"What tim..oh." Kerry sat up and braced her hands on the rail of the water bed, as the clock swam into focus.

"Power's still on." She said, after her brain acknowledged the four am led's. "That's good at least."

A loud bang jerked her right up to her feet and she looked quickly around to see Dar paused in the act of putting her shirt on, head cocked to listen. "Where the hell are the.." She sensed movement to her right and looked towards the wall. "There they are."

Mocha and Chino were sitting up in their beds, tongues lolling, ears pricked up.

In general, storms did not bother them. Both had grown up from puppies in Florida, and half the year thunderstorms were a daily event but the loud bangs were disturbing and their brows were both furrowed.

Kerry pulled on her cargo pants and a tshirt, and patted her leg for the dogs to join her as she made her way out of their bedroom suite into the living room.

Dar was putting on the television, and they were both aware of a howling sound that penetrated the walls and was growing louder. "Wish we could see outside."

Kerry went past her, rubbing her eyes with one hand. "I'll get some coffee on." She jerked as another loud bang sounded, this time an impact against the shutters covering the window. "Hope that's just coconuts." She went into the kitchen where a nightlight was glowing gently golden.

"Hope so." Dar was flicking through the channels. "Cable's down." She said. "Guess its over the air or nothing. Old school." She switched signal inputs and picked one of the local stations, somewhat jerkily as the signal pixelated in and out. "Oh wow."

Kerry popped back into the living room as she heard stirring upstairs. "What?"

"Looks like they're in a bunker." Dar indicated the screen.

The reporters were in polo shirts and pants, around a wooden table in a square room that looked completely unlike a television studio. "Looks like a conference room." Kerry said. "Hey, good morning." She greeted Andrew and Ceci. "Looks like the fun's starting."

"Been." Andrew said, briefly. "Ah been listening to the radio I got. Wind's ripped down them cranes in the port and blew out windows in some of them buildings already."

Dar watched the screen, which showed a lurid radar of thick dense circular clouds around a distinct ring that was just about to their east. "Probably ILS's." She said, after a pause for thought. "Glad I didn't have to worry about that this time."

"Was that your problem?" Ceci asked, curiously

"Everything was her problem." Kerry answered for her. "Mostly because no one else had the common sense of a seagull in that place."

"Not until you got there." Dar folded her arms and smiled briefly.

The wind around them was a steady, ceaseless howling noise that vibrated through the walls and floor, and the two dogs were trotting around the living room, for once without their tails wagging.

"Wow." Ceci had curled up against one arm of the sofa. "That's a mess."

Andrew had an earplug in one ear, and a wire from it was trailing down his tall body to one of his multitude of front pants pockets. "Power's out most places." He reported. "Big old mess in the airport. Tore up one of them big hangars and put bits of airplanes all over."

"That airports a mess anyway and always has been." Ceci said. "Its been under construction for fifty years. They probably won't notice."

The television team was just reporting the power outages, showing a map of the lower half of the state, where large blocks were shaded red.

"Roof just came off that there coast guard station cross the way." Andrew said, in a calm voice. "Damn good thing they sent them cutters off out of here."

The reporters looked scared. There were computers scattered on the table and screens leaning against the wall, and the lighting in the room was irregularly dimming and brightening.

"Cell signal's out." Kerry was inspecting her phone. "I'm guessing our internet is out too." She shut the phone off and tossed it onto the table next to the couch.

"Probably." Dar said. "It's a separate circuit but with all that power out there's no way that POP is up."

"Hey, we still have air conditioning." Ceci got up and went into the kitchen, where the coffee machine was just finishing up its task. "I think they just said that stations running on generator."

"They did."

Kerry went to go sit next to Dar, and both Chino and Mocha came over to press against them. "Does it seem surreal to anyone other than me to be sitting here watching this as that thing is about to hit us?"

The howling got louder, and Kerry felt her ears pop. "Oh!" She swallowed in reflex.

Dar glanced at the shutters covering the sliding glass doors on the patio, then she walked over and looked more closely at them. "Holy crap."

Andrew was at her side instantly, pulling a flashlight from one of his pockets and shining it where he could see Dar was looking. "What?"

"It's pulling the metal outward." Dar pointed. "The wind, I mean."

"Maybe you two should get the hell away from that glass then?" Ceci said, sharply. "I know you both can swim like fish but getting your asses sucked out into the Atlantic ocean is not how I want this morning to go."

"They're bolted into the concrete." Dar said but she backed away from the windows and turned, heading off into her office instead. "Hope that inside window's as protected as I thought it was."

Andrew had crouched down and was examining the outside floor, where the shutters had bolts extending into slots in the tile. The wind pressure was pulling the panels out, but the depth of the bolts so far seemed to be sufficient and he stood up with a satisfied grunt.

"Andy."

"Ahm gonna get me some coffee." Her husband ambled into the kitchen. "Figure that'll hold."

"I sure hope so." Kerry put her arms around Chino and Mocha. "We realized the other day we don't have any inside rooms." She said. "There are windows in all of them."

"There are." Ceci agreed. "Even the laundry room upstairs has one." She glanced over head. "When was the last time you had the roof inspected?"

The droning increased, and now the vibrations were palpable, and then they could all hear, closer and more ominous, the sounds of the structure they were in creaking around them.

Kerry exhaled. "I don't know the answer to that question." She admitted as Dar reappeared. "Do you?"

Dar paused in the act of dusting her hands off on her jeans. "Do I what?" She asked, after a moment's silence. "The window's in a deep sill. Seems okay." She said. "But I'm going to close the panel anyway soon as the wind drops." She watched Kerry's brow crease. "Once the eyewall passes."

"I was just asking when the last time was the roof was checked." Ceci eyed her daughter. "I know you both have been pretty busy."

Dar came over and sat down next to Kerry. "The association is supposed to take care of that." She said. "They do the whole complex at once since it's connected."

"Sure they do?" Ceci asked.

"They certify it and it's their master insurance policy." Dar said, dryly. "So they're motivated to."

"Ah." Her mother nodded, looking a bit relieved. "It's always better when someone's bank account is on the line." She looked up as Andy returned and sat down on the couch next to her. "The walls are creaking." She said. "I wasn't sure concrete block could do that."

Dar got up and walked to the wall between the patio and the kitchen, and put her hands against it, ignoring the roaring of the wind outside.

A flicker made her turn her head to one side, and she saw the picture go out on the television, going from the inside of the room to a fuzzy gray blankness. Over the speakers, though, she heard a muted scream and a crash. "These walls are moving." Dar commented. "I guess theirs are too?"

"The WALLS are moving?" Kerry asked, sharply.

"Get away from them?" Ceci suggested. "In fact, maybe we should go into your office there, in the front? It's the furthest away from the ocean." She got up and grabbed a handful of Andrew's shirt sleeve to tug him along. "C'mon, people!"

Dar backed away from the wall, flexing her hands, and almost tripped over Chino who had come up behind her. "WH..oh!" She hopped once or twice, then got her balance and joined Kerry as she circled the leather chair and they headed for the office.

They heard something rattle against the wall on the outside and then, a moment later, a cracking sound somewhere nearby.

"That's probably that tree." Dar said, after a moment.

"Maybe close that panel?" Ceci suggested, pointing at the window. "Not wait?"

"I don't think the mechanism is strong enough to pull against the wind." Dar responded, in a calm tone. "That's why I want to wait for the wall to come past, we'll be inside the eye."

Andrew went to Dar's desk and pulled the radio he had in his pocket out, setting it onto the surface and removing the plug from his ear, then the end from the device.

Radio crackling emerged from it's front speaker, clipped and slightly garbled.

"Navy station." Andrew said, briefly. "Got them updates from NOAA too."

"They transmitting from that bunker down south of Card Sound?" Dar asked.

"Yeap."

The radio had a stream of non stop content, the voices changing every few minutes as different sources checked in. Most of it made sense only to Andrew, who knew the jargon, but they heard when the storm's eye came ashore.

Heard on the radio, and then around them as the wind sound became so loud they all flinched and the walls around them shuddered in motion.

Andrew went over and closed the door, and the two dogs crawled up onto the couch, whining, ears pinned down to their heads. He came back over and sat down next to Ceci, and clasped his hands.

"Storm surge, twelve feet." The radio reported. "Structure collapse reported mid beach, twelfth street."

"Twelve feet. Holy bananas." Kerry muttered. "I hope like hell everyone really evacuated off Miami Beach."

The long, narrow stretch of land to their north was a barrier island that, extending all up the coastline, bordered the mainland on the other side of the intercoastal waterway. On the south end, though, it stood between the Atlantic ocean and Biscayne Bay.

Fisher Island was the very southern tip of it, separated from South Beach by a manmade channel called Government Cut that had been built to allow cargo ships access to the mouth of the Miami River.

"Twelve feet is going to come up over the wall outside." Dar said.

"It's going to take out the parking garage too." Kerry said.

"They closed them doors on the outside." Andrew spoke up. "Heard em when we got back."

A loud crash sounded outside, and then they felt a deep thrumming through the floor. Bangs and cracks followed and Kerry wrapped her arms around the shivering Mocha, his pale eyes wide and round and his nostrils flaring. "Easy honey."

"Twenty twenty hindsight." Ceci said, after a moment of silence when even the radio seemed to be pausing to catch it's breath. "This was stupid."

Andrew snorted a faint chuckle. "Got too big."

Dar was next to Kerry on the other end of the couch, her arm curled around the apprehensive looking Chino. "Yeah. This was dumb." She admitted. "Lets not do this again."

"Shelter in place. Shelter in place." The radio burst out. "We have one hundred seventy knots at the buoy."

The roaring built and built and after a minute Dar lifted her hands to cover her ears, with a grimace, as the thumps and bangs got louder and louder and went on for what felt like forever. Kerry put her free arm around Dar's waist and hugged her close as they huddled there, just enduring it.

Felt like it was never going to stop. Felt like hours, and the noise was brutal and exhausting, the unexpected bangs making everyone jump.

And then like a knife cutting bread the howl abruptly faded.

Everyone opened their eyes and looked around in question. Then Dar got up off the couch and went to the window, triggering the controls that would close the mechanical shutter on the outside. There was a crack, then a whine, then the panel folded out and over the window, seating itself into the latch and bolts with a very audible crunch.

"Are we in the eye?" Kerry got up. "We must be, right?"

"Yeap." Andy said. "Got the back side of it coming."

"But that means the edge is probably over the office." Kerry said. "Holy shit, Dar. That buildings never going to hold up in this." She said. "It's going to be..." She paused. "I wish we hadn't had Carlos and his friends stay there."

Dar turned. "Too late now." She said. "Let's take a walk around and upstairs. See if we see any damage before the backside hits us." She paused, shaking her head. "I'm damn glad all our support guys are up in Melbourne. Wish we'd sent the whole damn company on that bus."

"Me too. I'm worried about Mayte and Maria and Zoe and..." Kerry exhaled. "About everyone." She glanced at the radio on the desk. "I'm glad Mayte got those sat phones."

"Smart young lady." Andy said. "S'good idea to check out what we can." He indicated the door. "No sense fussing about stuff outside. Can't get there."

Kerry was closest to the door and she got to it and opened it, peering cautiously into the living room where the television screen was still on, but the picture had returned, and the reporters were all seated around the table, most with headsets on, two with microphones.

They looked completely freaked out. Kerry felt a certain sympathy as she went past the couch, leaning over to turn on the lights so they could see better.

Andrew and Dar went up the stairs. Ceci joined her as she went along the walls and then into the kitchen, a little surprised that despite all the chaos outside, everything inside seemed pretty much as it was before they went to bed. "Hm."

"A little water here." Ceci observed, inspecting the inside of the kitchen door that led down to the garden. "Got forced in under the sill, I guess." She went over to the roll of paper towels sitting on the counter and unrolled a few, returning to drop them on the tile floor.

Kerry was checking the windows. "Dry here." She reported. "I'm going to check the patio." She went back out and turned on the dining room lights. The sliding glass doors were in one piece, and she could see past them, to the patio floor that was awash with water, the metal shutters folded across the front of the space visibly dented.

There was a gap in them, she realized, when she studied the small gray patch that puzzled her until she realized it was after six am, and the sun was coming up somewhere. "Those are bent."

Ceci came over to stand next to her, shading her eyes and peering out. "All sorts of who knows what blowing against them." She agreed. "Coconuts, chairs, small yachts, microwaves from people who didn't have the sense to lock their boats down.."

Kerry chuckled a little bit. "Must be a mess."

The wind was only gusting now, and rattling the shutters, sending spatters of rain to hit the tile of the patio and the edge of the jacuzzi, covered and secured, outside.

"Gruff." Chino came over to stand next to them, looking out.

"Crazy that the power's still on." Ceci remarked. "Coffee?"

"Might as well."

\*\*

Andrew was standing on the set of drawers that he'd dragged along the carpet underneath the hatch that gave access into the crawlspace above the ceiling. "Hey Dardar?"

"Hang on." Dar's voice sounded muffled. "I'm checking the laundry."

Andy grunted, shining the beam from his flashlight into the space, relieved at least not to see any slivers of outside light that might indicate a gap they had to worry about. The ceiling itself was unstained, and he hadn't seen any evidence of damage, but the sounds he'd heard of shattering tiles made him leery.

Dar appeared. "Seems okay." She said. "I checked the vent, there's water inside it. So probably from the hot air escape."

"Yeap." Andrew nodded. "This here looks all right. You want to take a peek?"

Dar hoisted herself up onto the chest of drawers next to him, feeling the furniture wobble a bit under their joined weight. "We should hurry up before that starts again." She put her hand on her father's shoulder and looked past his arm as he lifted the hatch up again and directed the light against the inside of the roof.

The crawlspace was full of insulation, and the roof was sprayed with it, covering the surface. But it was intact, and she saw no evidence of any waterstain. "It's metal." She said. "Not sure I mentioned that. Metal frame and metal overlay, with felt and wood over that, and a rubber seal."

Andrew looked at her. "Do tell." He said, with some interest. "That is somelike they do in the military."

Dar nodded. "It's a bunker." She agreed. "I wasn't kidding. In order for them to get anyone to insure this place since it's sits on its ass at the edge of the damn Atlantic they had to."

She jumped down to the ground, and dusted her hands off. "I smell coffee."

Andy set the hatch back down and shut his flashlight off, sliding into one of the pockets in his military style work pants. He merely stepped down off the chest of drawers and then he turned. "Give a hand with this here."

Dar helped him move the chest back over to the wall. "That was pretty scary." She said. "I can only imagine what its like everywhere else."

"Yeap." Andy clapped her on the back. "Lets go get us a biscuit and some joe before that all starts up again."

"I think we have doughnuts not biscuits."

"That's all right too."

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Kerry lost track of what time it was. With the shutters down, and the howling seemingly never ending, it was just hour after hour of listening to Andy's radio, all of them huddled in Dar's office.

They had thirty minutes of respite, before the wind came back, in the opposite direction. Long enough to get cups of coffee, and some trail bars, along with the doughnuts they'd brought back from the market the night before.

Power was still on, and it seemed a little surreal for the inside of the condo to be warmly lit with the task lights on Dar's desk as though nothing were going on outside at all.

It felt real, and yet unreal at the same time. Kerry remembered being in this same office, but with no power, the stuffiness of the inside air uncomfortable, but without the incessant howling outside since the winds in that older storm had been only half at most what they were now.

The intermittent bangs and crunching sounds made it impossible to do anything needing concentration, even Dar had abandoned her desk and was sitting on the floor between Chino and Mocha, leaning against the couch.

She had her forearms resting on her knees, twiddling her thumbs idly. "Wish I had a deck of cards."

"Knew we forgot something." Ceci said. "We have one on the boat."

"Last time I saw a deck of cards was playing Solitaire on my desktop." Kerry admitted. "Cards were not an item in my past."

Ceci eyed her. "Your father didn't play poker with the boys?" She asked, in a mildly disbelieving tone. "Really?"

"Oh no. Gambling wasn't done in his house." Kerry said. "He thought that was an absolute sin against God. Not to mention, there was just no way he was going to have that surface in some article with all the campaign claptrap he used about purity and clean living and whatever."

"Huh." Andy grunted. "Don't that figure."

"Peculiar religious hypocrisy." Ceci said. "One of the reasons I ran from Christianity." She idly played with one of Mocha's dark, silky ears. "It's just an excuse to self righteously frame your bias in a way that makes you feel virtuous."

"Asshole justification." Dar said.

"That's what I said." Her mother smirked briefly. "Admittedly, religion was mostly window dressing in the hallowed halls of my growing up, but nothing quite gave me a thrill more than announcing my paganism in company in the living room."

"Christianity ain't got nothing to do with Jesus Christ nowadays." Andy said. "All them folks better hope he ain't really coming back here cause they're gonna get their butts whipped."

Kerry chuckled a little, flinching as a bang came from the shutter covered large window behind them. "I like belonging to a family of anarchists." She said. "I remember a time when I thought I was the only one in the world." She tilted her head and regarded her partner. "Then I met you."

Dar grinned, then she propped her head up against one fist. "Is this thing ever going to end?" She asked plaintively, glancing over at her father. "Feels like it's been over us for eight hours."

"Almost, Dardar." Andy patted her shoulder. "Offshore drop's down sixty."

And then, in time, the wind died down, at least enough so that it no longer was thrumming the shutters and the howling had muted. They could still hear rain hitting the aluminum, but it was more in spurts and it seemed, at last, that the worst was over.

Dar looked at her watch. Then she got up and went to the door of the office, opening it and looking out into the living room. "Okay."

"Eye just gone over the airport." Andy said, standing up as well and collecting his radio, stuffing it into his thigh pocket. "Turned some north. Going all up the palmetto, seems like."

"Went right across the center of the city." Kerry said, as they all went into the living room, where the television was still on, the reporters were still in their conference room, a screen hung on the wall behind them showing the radar view.

"Everything Andrew didn't do." Dar said. "Let me see if I can look out the back door." She went into the kitchen, almost getting thumped into the door itself as the two dogs eagerly clustered behind her. "Hang on, mutts." She warned. "I've got no idea what the hell's out there."

Kerry and Andrew grabbed the two animals and moved them back, as Dar triggered the window shutter. It whined and groaned, but stayed in place. "Hm."

"Bent." Andy grunted.

"Probably." Dar unlocked the door and cautiously pushed against it, feeling resistance as the seal around the edge of the door gave way with a faint sucking sound and she took in a breath of water logged air as she leaned her weight against the panel.

Warm and salt tinged wind blew into her face, and wet as she pushed harder, getting the door open enough to stick her head out and look around.

The door was blocked by palm fronds and debris. One was across the back of it, and Dar hesitated, seeing the thick spines. "Ker, give me that pair of gloves in the drawer willya?"

"Hang on." Kerry fished the leather work gloves out of the miscellaneous drawer and handed them over. "Here you go. What's out there?"

"A lot of junk." Dar got the gloves on and gingerly eased the frond back, shoving it aside sufficiently to push the door open enough for her to get her body sideways through the opening and out onto the small porch at the top of the stairs.

She looked around for a long moment. "Holy crap."

"That doesn't sound good." Kerry poked her head out and peered past her elbow. "Whoa." She said. "Is that the Atlantic ocean there right below us?"

The little walled garden at the bottom of the steps appeared as though a junkyard had been emptied into it, debris covered the ground and plants were uprooted and most washed away, at least half of the space covered in water.

Dar took a step further and allowed the rest of them to ease out behind her, as she took a few steps down. The gates that had been in the wall were gone, waves were lapping past the opening and the seawall that had been past it was no longer there.

“Gruff.” Chino had come out and was standing behind Kerry, emitting sounds of doggy astonishment.

Dar turned around and looked up at the wall of the condo, which looked like it had been painted over with Army camouflage paint. “What the hell?”

Ceci had walked down the steps and she turned to look at what Dar was looking at. “That’s actually sort of attractive.” She commented. “Must have been from all the branches and trees hitting the wall. Look, there’s a pile of branches on the ground there.”

Chino and Mocha descended warily, staring around at what was usually their neatly kept playground. The winds were still gusting, but they were between squalls and between the shredded gray clouds whipping overhead there was even a very brief splotch of sky.

“Careful kids.” Kerry went down to join Ceci, and they picked their way through the debris to look at the water surging through the gates, bringing a white foam and both flotsam and jetsam as waves rolled up to where they were standing. “Holy crap the whole beach is gone.”

“Some mess.” Andy stated. “All that there wall’s down.” He made his way over to where the gates had been, the surf soaking his boots and pants as he got to the edge and looked around it. “Mah lord!”

Everyone hurried over to join him. “What?” Ceci said, grimacing a little as the water washed up against her knees. “What is it, And..” She stopped talking, as she got to where she could see past him. “Whoa.”

“Oh wow.” Kerry whispered. “Is that water up over the streets there?”

The rock ingress that lined Government Cut was completely gone, and past it, what had been the southern end of Miami Beach showed buildings with floors caved in, glass blown out, the marina was a wreckage of collapsed and capsized boats.

In the middle of the cut was a large fishing vessel, turned sideways and half sunk, only the bow protruding up from the waves that were rolling, lashing across the opening no longer restrained by the seawalls that had once protected the channel.

Water lapped up to the wall they were standing behind, fully eight to ten feet of land was missing, and what was once a beach and path could no longer be seen.

“Is that ..” Kerry started to ask.

Andrew went past where the gates had been and slogged into the surf, the wind blowing against him and plastering his tshirt and cargo pants against his body. He looked to his right, then he paused, and extended his hand into the surf surging around him. “Wall’s still here.”

Dar had edged out after him and gotten around the curve of the wall, looking past it. All along the beachfront she could see waves breaking, some rolling up past where the pools were and swamping them.

“Mah god.” Andy came up next to her and put his hands on his hips. “Some damn mess.”

“Yeah.” Dar exhaled. “Well, we should probably make sure the rest of this place is in one piece, then break out the sat phones. It’s maybe clear enough to use them.”

“Probably not.” Andy glanced up, as another squall came over, and they were suddenly drenched in rain. “Got nother name here they’re gonna retire I figure.”

“Oh yeah.”

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Dar entered the kitchen, ruffling her hair dry with a fluffy light blue towel. Behind her in the living room the television was on, the local station now evacuated out of their conference room and back in the more familiar confines of their studio.

Chino followed her inside, then sat down next to her bowl and barked.

Dar paused and regarded her, then she looked over at the clock in the microwave. "Oh." She said. "Sorry Cheeb. I guess there was so much going on we forgot about that." She draped the towel around her shoulders and then went over to pick up the two steel dog food dishes near the wall.

It all seemed so weirdly normal, surrounded by surreal lack of anything being that at all. She filled the dishes, the sound of the food hitting the metal attracting Mocha from where he'd been sleeping on the couch.

He trotted in and sat next to Chino, tag wagging happily. Chino turned her head and licked his ear.

Dar chuckled, watching them. Their fur was damp, and she could smell the wetness of it, but they had towels spread out on the tiles to sop up most of the rain and sea water they'd brought back in as the squalls returned.

"Looks like everything's pretty much intact, at least from the inside." Kerry entered from the living room, running her fingers through her hair, a dry terry cloth short sleeve hoodie having replaced the t-shirt she'd been wearing. She was barefoot, and had traded her wet jeans for a dry pair of cargo shorts.

"Yeah, we should leave the shutters in place though." Dar put the food bowls down and stepped back out of the way as they were engulfed. "Dad checked the crawlspace again. Still dry."

Kerry came over to stand next to her. "You sure were right about this being a bunker." She told her partner. "I saw what those winds did to South Pointe."

"Lower profile." Dar said. "The way they built these, with all those angles there's not much surface for the wind to grab." She nodded in satisfaction. "They just said the winds are down to a hundred twenty."

"Still bad."

"Still bad." Dar agreed. She took a glass from the cabinet and opened the refrigerator, dispensing milk into it. "No one really knows though. They can't get out to do any visuals yet." She set the glass down and then retrieved a jar of peanut butter and opened it.

"Should we consume our cans of beanie weenies?" Kerry mused. "Can't think of any other opportunity for it."

"No." Dar was busy spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread. "What they usually do is collect any of the canned goods no one uses after the season and donate them to Camillus House or one of those things." She folded the bread in half and took a bite from it. "I'm fine with this."

Kerry settled for a bottle of ice tea and a container of yogurt. She followed Dar into the living room and sat down on the couch next to her, as they watched the news reports.

"Front's going to pick that up and take it back out over the Atlantic." Dar predicted. "They just put up hurricane warnings up the coast."

A ticker was scrolling across the bottom of the screen, providing them with snippets of information in a repetitive loop. "Numbers to call." Kerry said, thoughtfully. "Could we call any of them right now Dar?" She asked. "Since they took out all the old copper, I mean?"

"No." Dar chewed her sandwich. "One of the reasons I was so against that." She frowned. "No internet, no voip, no digital, no phones."

"Good thing Maybe got those damn sat phones for sure." Kerry said. "Maybe we should have one all the time?"

"Maybe I'm going to order an Inmarsat dish as a backhaul."

"Twelve foot storm surge." Kerry diverted her attention back to the ticker. "Does that mean a twelve foot high wall of water, Dar?"

“Something like that.”

Kerry was silent for a moment. “Twelve feet high? That’s what washed across our back area there?” Her voice was hollow with disbelief. “Twelve feet?”

Dar nodded. “That’s where all that debris is from. Probably when it sucked back out it took the gates with it.” She confirmed. “Good thing this place held up. We would have had our asses pulled out into the ocean. Probably be halfway to Nassau by now.”

Kerry stared at her in silence, eyes wide.

Dar glanced at her. “Didn’t happen, right?” She took a sip of her milk. “No point in freaking out about it.” She watched Kerry’s face, and it almost made her smile, so vivid and evident were the emotions crossing it. “Wasn’t half as scary as going down that river was.”

“But we chose to do that.” Kerry said, after a long pause.

“We chose to do this.” Dar half shrugged. “All relative risk.”

Kerry gave her body a shake, and then she went back to peeling the cover off her yogurt. “I’m glad I didn’t know there was a twelve foot high wall of water going to come across this damn place.” She admitted. “Mother nature does not mess around.”

“Mother nature does not.” Dar confirmed. “What is that, is that from the television station?” She indicated the screen. “Yeah, it must be.” She said. “They’re in Kendall.”

“Where I used to live.” Kerry said. “Holy crap.”

The wind was still whipping, and trees were in motion as the camera panned around. It was being hand held, there were spots of water collecting on the lens.

Then it tilted down and showed a lake, water lapping against the feet of the camera holder, standing on some platform.

“He’s standing on the top of the station mobile van.” Dar said, after a moment.

It was the parking lot of an office plaza, but all that could be seen was water, washing out any landmarks save the tops of some trucks parked nearby. Then the camera turned around to show the building the station was broadcasting from, a three story building with a parking garage, on the roof of which was a square, bunker like structure they could just see the top of a satellite dish sticking out of.

Long cables were running from the camera, up a flight of concrete stairs to a second level door, propped open, and filled with stunned faces also just looking around. The sound cut in now, and they could hear the loud rumble of a generator nearby, and far off the sound of a siren.

Kerry paused in mid spoonful. “My entire apartment would have been flooded.” She said, after a moment. “Our parking lot used to flood in a bad rain. I can’t even imagine.”

“If that’s what its like in Kendall.” Dar said. “And they were in the fringes.”

Kerry put her yogurt down. “What are we going to be left with at the office, Dar? What are we going to do?”

Dar folded her arms, regarding the screen with somber concern. “Well.” She said, after a pause. “Lets see what contacts we can make as soon as the weather clears. Find out what’s going on.”

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Kerry eased the front door to the condo open and peered outside. “Looks like a Christmas tree blood bath happened out here.” She pushed the door open, gently kicking the branches covering the steps out of her way.

She pulled the hood on her jacket up as she felt rain splatter against her face, and started down towards the ground level driveway that angled one way towards the road, and the other under the building where they had their cars parked. “Don’t try opening the gate, Dar.” She called out. “It’s flooded.”

"Figured." Dar emerged, with both dogs on their seldom used leashes. "Got your camera?"

"Got." Kerry removed one hand with her digital camera in it, then waited as Dar got herself untangled and picked her way carefully down to join her.

It was still overcast. Rain was still intermittent. Winds were still gusting. But the gaps in all that had been slowly increasing, and now they were going to see what there was to be seen on this, the more protected side of the facility.

Kerry turned the camera on and took some pictures. The front of the condo was covered in broken branches, coconuts, metal debris, wood debris, pieces of net from the tennis courts, and paper. The walls were scuffed with green, but not as wildly as the back was, and the gates that protected the walk up to their front door were intact.

Dar pushed the gate opened and they emerged onto the path, looking both directions warily.

There was water everywhere. Across the path, where the golf course was, a lake now stood, the wind making rough waves in it as it spread through the trees as far as they could see.

And the trees were mostly either leaning over, or on the ground, as though a giant hand had flattened them, branches sticking up out of the water, many laying across the road.

"Which way you want to walk?" Kerry asked. "Towards the cut, or towards the marina?"

"Towards the cut." Dar said. "Maybe the sat phone'll connect." She handed one of the leashes to Kerry and pulled a phone out of her pocket, checking the display. "It sees the bird." She remarked. "Let me try Mark." She said. "He lives down south. Might be clear enough there now."

They turned and walked slowly along the road, as Dar fiddled with the handheld device. She tried dialing Mark, but though the phone seemed to be reaching out, there was no answer. "He might still be inside."

"Yeah, he's a smart guy." Kerry said. "Try Carlos."

Dar dialed, but again, got no answer. "I guess it's too early." She said. "I just wish I knew what was going on." She juggled the phone, then put it back in her pocket.

They could hear the rumble of generators in the distance. But otherwise, aside from the wind, there was almost no sound. Dar looked over at the golf lake. "Birds are gone." She said. "I remember that from the last big one. They know and they all disappear."

"I noticed the ducks weren't around." Kerry said. "I wonder where the peacocks are? Where would they all go?"

"I think Clemente puts them in a compound." Dar paused as they reached a bend in the road and could see past it, to where the ferry ramp was. "Oh wow." She said. "Is that a .. I think that's a pilot boat." She studied the wreckage piled up against the ramp, the boat turned on it's side. "Must have broken loose."

They walked closer to the edge of the island, as the wind gusted fitfully against them, fluttering their jackets against their bodies.

"Gruff." Chino barked softly.

"Hope no one was on it." Kerry shaded her eyes as she peered across the cut at the end of South Beach. "Jesus. The whole damn beach is gone – is that sand up on the sun deck there?"

She could see two figures inching along on what was the second floor of the nearest building, looking down at the ocean, surveying the damage much as she and Dar were. Kerry was sure there were more people starting to get out and look around, despite the news saying not to.

Very human, to be curious. Kerry was surprised they hadn't met any of their neighbors yet in fact. "Think everyone else went the other way?" She asked Dar.

"Probably."

Dar kept walking, until they were on the concrete pad that led to the ramp for the ferry. The security shelter was closed up tight and empty and the ground around it was littered with shards from the barrel tiles that had come off it's roof.

She got to where she could see up the shipping channel, past the berths that had once held some decrepit old cruise ships towards the turning basin and the line of buildings that edged the waterfront of the city.

"Trees down all along the causeway." Kerry said. "There's a truck in the water over there, near the Star Island turnoff." She took out her camera and started taking some pictures, using the digital zoom to get a better look. "Oh, hell, the whole road into Star Island's gone."

"South Pointe Marina's a mess." Dar said. "Glad mom and dad at least weren't there." She shook her head, the hazy light and mist obscuring the scene, but the toppled sails and capsized hulls were evident even from where she stood.

They heard the sound of tires crunching on gravel and they turned, to see one of the island golf carts coming towards them, with two men in rain gear in it.

"They're going to yell at us, Dar." Kerry said, taking a picture of the cart as it approached.

"They're going to try." Dar smiled briefly and without much humor. "If they whip out a bullhorn I'm going to shove it up their asses."

Kerry stuffed the camera into her pocket and took the leashes of the two dogs from Dar as her partner turned to face the two men.

Dar had a particular way of standing when she was facing confrontation and now she fell into that posture, her weight over her center of balance and her hands resting half open at her sides as she positioned herself between the cart and Kerry.

Kerry really didn't think the men were any threat. They were both sweating under their rubber rain gear and they looked more flustered than angry. She recognized them as security, but one of the many that spent time in roving patrols rather than at the ferry dock.

"Ms Roberts!" The driver said. "Oh Ms Roberts!"

"Yeeeessss." Dar rumbled a response, eyes narrowing.

"Great. Glad we found you." The man said. "Mr Lou said if we could find you, to ask you to come over to the command center." He jumped out of the cart and came over to them, pushing the hood back off his head. "Everything okay at your house?"

Kerry watched Dar's freight train of attitude get abruptly derailed, and she relaxed. "Everything's fine." She assured the man. "What's going on? Is there a problem?"

She drew his attention to give Dar a chance to take her hackles down and muffled a smile as her partner eased over to her side, hands now in her pockets.

The man nodded vigorously. "They got some stuff not working and Mr Lou, he knows Ms Roberts knows all about that stuff. So will you come with us?" He looked from Kerry to Dar. "We were headed your way when we saw you out walking. George recognized the pups."

"Um. Sure." Dar glanced around. "Give us a ride back to our place, and we'll drop off the dogs." She said. "How's the other side of the island?"

"What a mess!" The other guard said. "Surge threw a manatee up onto the Beach club porch! Some of the guys were trying to get it back into the water when we left there."

"Oh my goodness." Kerry got into the back seat of the cart with the dogs, while Dar stood on the back gate. "Dar, hang on!"

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Ten minutes later, after dropping off the dogs and giving Dar a chance to grab a backpack they were in the back seat of the cart heading up the road towards the marina. As they went past the other condos, a few residents were visible, most taking pictures of their homes, and the damage all around them.

Two men had crossed the road and were standing on a slight rise, looking at the lake that now filled the center of the island.

"Those are those golfers." George said, half turning in his seat to face Dar and Kerry. He was a man in his mid forties, with thinning brown hair and a stocky build. "Ruined their fun for a while huh, Sam?"

"They're gonna have to pump that out." Sam shook his head. "Just glad this rain's mostly done."

No sooner than he'd said it, a squall came over and swept across the road, drenching the cart, and George cursed as he scrabbled to get his hood up and hauled the plastic rain guard down. "Ya had to say that didn'tcha?" He yelped.

Dar blinked the rain out of her eyes, glad they were alone on the road as the cart careened from one side of it to the other, nearly going through a deep puddle. "Yew."

"You didn't pack our scuba gear in there did you?" Kerry uttered, under her breath. "We might need it."

"On the boat." Dar muttered back. "I was going to bring it back to the house, but figured hell, if anything happened we were due for new gear anyway."

"Mm."

"Sorry about that, ma'am." Sam said. "Here we go, hang on."

Dar had her hand clamped around the roof support post and her other arm wrapped around Kerry, and it still almost wasn't enough to keep them from sliding off the seat as the cart turned sharply and went up a narrower path towards what looked like a huge thicket of downed trees.

"What th.." Kerry paused. "Oh wow." She said. "That whole ring is down."

The command post for security was a thick, squat building artfully hidden in foliage that was now toppled everywhere, exposing the concrete block structure and blocking the path save a small gap that Sam was aiming for. Inside the ring of destruction was a small parking lot, and two cars that were parked in it were buried under fallen branches.

The building windows were covered in shutters, and the shed to one side of it had been blown open, tools and supplies scattered across the area randomly. The tall radio tower that had been on the roof was over in one corner, wrapped around a tree trunk whose top half had fallen over.

One corner of the overhang roof near the door was hanging down, but the building seemed intact aside from that.

Sam and George got out and they joined them, hurrying over to the door as another squall came through. The front surface of the door was dented, and the light fixture outside was bent aside and destroyed, glass from it littering the ground.

Going from the windy, damp, warm outside into the ice box chill inside was a shock. Kerry almost flinched, and now she was glad they had their rain coats on as she blinked her eyes against the cold, dry air.

Inside the building there was a lot going on. There was a desk near the door that under normal conditions some administrative person would have been seated, attending to visitors.

Now, it's surface had been cleared, it's contents behind it wrapped in black garbage bags, and the top of the desk was covered in various types of food along with jugs of things to drink, and stacked on the side of the furniture was boxes of paper cups, plates and plastic silverware.

Behind that there was one big room, with consoles along every wall of it, desks and monitors but most of the stations were empty and the monitors were either dark or full of fuzzy nothing.

To the right was an office, and that's where most of the noise was coming from. Sam and George had turned and headed into it, pushing open a partly closed door that released a din of voices outwards towards them along with the strong smell of coffee.

"Wasn't figuring this to go this way." Dar commented, as they stood there somewhat awkwardly. She had her backpack on her back. "Let me go see if this phone's any good yet." She pulled the sat phone from her pocket and turned, going back outside.

Short attention span, gets bored easily. Kerry went over to the espresso maker near the wall and picked up a small paper cup, pressing the buttons required to obtain a shot. "Lou!" She called out, as the machine grumbled and sputtered, steam wisping from it.

A moment later, a tall man with a crew cut and surprisingly large ears stuck his head out into the room. "What was that? Oh!" He came all the way out into the room. "Oh, hey! Uh.."

"Kerry." Kerry supplied amiably. "Dar's outside trying to make a phone call. What is it you need her to look at? We've got a lot of stuff going on."

"No, yes, Kerry, I know.. sorry." Lou Rogers came over to her. "Sorry about that. I didn't realize George and Sam brought you back with them. They just said they found you." He said. "Our big system, you know, the one that runs all the cameras and all that stuff? It won't turn on."

"Okay." Kerry nodded. "I'm going to assume it has power."

"What?" Lou said. "Oh! Yes, of course it does. We checked the outlet, it can run the teapot, so we know there's juice there but it keeps stopping at some screen. Could you.. or could she look at it? They didn't keep any of our IT people island side they sent them all off."

He was looking at her with an anxious expression. "I know there's so much to take care of, but it's hard for us not to be able to see all our cameras, you know? We have to send patrols out and the place is a mess."

"Where is it?" Kerry asked, taking a sip of her espresso. "Sure we'll take a look, but next time, take my advice and keep a nerd around." She said. "You always need them."

"It's over in there." Lou pointed at a closed door in the back. "That's where all our IT stuff is. Door's unlocked." He glanced behind him. "We're going to rig up an antenna for the radio..so.."

"Go on. I'll take Dar in there when she comes back." Kerry reassured him, watching him gratefully escape back into the big office past the door. She shook her head, standing there quietly drinking the hot, fragrant dark roasted and finely ground coffee.

A moment later, the door opened and Dar reappeared, with a frown on her face.

"No luck?" Kerry read the body language effortlessly. "C'mere, lets see if you can fix their system. Then we'll steal a cart and go check out our boat. Sound like a plan?"

"Mm. Coffee." Dar observed her cup. "That what they're paying us? Sure. Where is whatever it is? No answer yet on these damn phones."

Kerry led the way over to the closed door and pushed it open with one shoulder, the very familiar sound of technology escaping at once and washing over her like sea foam.

No matter the size or content, they all looked and sounded alike. The smell of cabling, forced air, metal and components being cooled, and the sound of fans pushing hot air out of densely packed gear with a particular, peculiar scent of ions.

The pitch of the noise was known to both of them.

This room had two rows of racks on either side of an open aisle, and the doors were open on several of them, with keyboards and monitors pulled out keeping them propped open.

Dar, predictably, went one by one and pushed the keyboards back into place, then closed and latched the rack doors as they went down the aisle to the workbench at the back, which had a single console and a thick, padded chair.

Kerry waited for her partner to shrug off her backpack and sit down. "Let me get you a cup of this, hon."

Dar paused, and turned. "Kerrison."

"Yes?" Kerry's brows quirked a little, as she took in Dar's surprisingly stern look.

"You are as much a computer professional as I am." Dar said. "Why the hell would you be running around getting me coffee?"

"Aw." Kerry went over and ruffled her hair. "Because there's only one chair, my love." She said. "And I know how to quantify and qualify my tools and make sure they're applied in the best use case." She leaned over and gave Dar a kiss on the forehead. "Go fix."

She bumped Dar towards the table, then she turned, chuckling, and went out of the IT room and back to the coffee maker.

Dar did surprise her sometimes, with things like that. Though they were both aware of their relative subject matter expertise, and level of nerdiness her partner sometimes seemed to think – or at least – often vocally expressed – the notion that they were total equals.

Socially, yes. Kerry busied herself with the espresso maker. They were partners. But Dar's aptitude for technology was at a genius level and hers was not. Though she had a significant knowledge base of her own, and she had far stronger pure business skills than Dar did, there was one true master nerd in the family and she wasn't it.

Her technical skills were acquired. She'd gone through school and gained knowledge the old fashioned way, and built on that as she'd built her career. Dar's were far more innate. She had a synergy with how things worked and how to make them work that was absolutely instinctual.

She'd watched Dar problem solve sometimes. Dar had done something, or drawn a solution to something, or typed something and Kerry had asked her how she'd known to do whatever it was and the answer was almost always just a look at her with knit brows.

Dar didn't know how she knew. She didn't know, and that was why Kerry had realized, that they'd left ILS in such a pickle when they had because though Dar had documented what she did as thoroughly as any human being could have, with full integrity it hadn't helped.

Hadn't helped because she could not document, could not mentor, could not teach anyone how to do what she did because she didn't know herself how to frame that information and it was so natural to her that she didn't understand why everyone else didn't think the same way.

Kerry picked up both Dar's cup and her second, and made her way back to the room, bumping the door open with her hip. She let the door close behind her and went over to the worktable, setting down the coffee at Dar's elbow.

There was a screen there, and Dar was reviewing it, her hands draped in a relaxed pose over the keyboard. "Take a power hit or something?" Kerry suggested. "Or maybe a bad hard drive?"

"No..well, I don't know." Dar said. "I don't think so. Its more like.. some change or something got done and then it restarted and barfed." She indicated the screen. "It's all compiling and missing link errors."

Kerry sat down, as Dar picked up her cup and took a sip. "Can you undo whatever it was?"

"Well." Dar regarded the screen. "It would be easier if I knew what it was." She said. "But yeah, let me script a routine to go find all the changed files in the last twenty four hours and see if there were backup copies made." She shook her head and started typing. "Nice of them to leave this logged in as root for me."

Kerry covered her eyes with one hand and snorted in soft laughter. "Maybe I should pitch them a deal to take over their IT."

Dar stopped typing, and looked at her, both eyebrows lifting nearly up to her hairline.

“Too soon?”

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Dar had taken off her raincoat, and draped it over the padded office chair. It was chilly in the room, but the damp squeak of the jacket had gotten on her nerves and she'd decided the tradeoff was worth it.

The problem she was working on wasn't that complicated. The system itself was a Linux variant, one she was tolerably familiar with, and the file structure wasn't overly obscure.

Whoever had tried to do whatever they had tried to do had made a mess of it. Dar had to wonder why anyone would want to change anything right before a humongous hurricane came over but since there weren't any IT people around there was no one she could ask that question of.

Part of her was sort of questioning why the hell she was even doing this. Dar reviewed the results of her script, comparing it to a scratch file she'd built. The island management weren't friends of hers, and she was trying to move off it anyway.

Some jackass would probably walk in any minute and demand to know what she was doing here. Dar could almost hear the blustering horn honking in her head as she wrote another script to rewrite the backup files back to original and copy the new ones to a different directory.

Probably some dipshit old buddy of Jim's, who would then throw her, and Kerry out of the security building where at least then they could be on their way towards doing something more personally meaningful. “Jackass.” She spoke aloud, giving the screen a little slit eyed glare.

On the other hand, she would probably get a little bit of warning because he would have to get past Kerry, who had gone back out to try and find out the status of the rest of the island and try her own sat phone.

She finished typing, reviewed her results, and then shrugged. She restarted the system and leaned back in the chair, folding her arms and watching it as it booted back up.

Idly she looked around, approving the orderly cable trays and neatly tied bundles of cable, some of which came into the room from large, round penetrations on both ends of the room. She got up and went over to one of the racks in the back, peering inside at the equipment.

Lots of blinking lights. She studied the machines, opening up one rack to stick her head inside.

Someone had done a good job. She approved the neatness. She closed the door and wandered back to the console, leaning on the back of the chair and peering at the screen.

The lines of code crept along as the machine went through it's startup sequence, then it began to assemble itself for some kind of use. “Well. That's farther than it got the last time.” Dar said, encouragingly. “C'mon, buddy. Get your act together so I can go do something else.”

She watched the green text scroll across the black screen, the monitor's edges covered in bits of old tape, and dark with the fingerprints of a thousand nerds whose hands had recently left a pizza.

It was always pizza. Dar could even imagine she could smell the distinctive scent of old, cold pizza congealing on cardboard and only just kept herself from looking around to find it.

In their new office there was occasionally pizza, but more often burritos from the taqueria that had opened up on the next block. You could eat both with one hand, she mused, but at least with burritos you didn't end up with large greasy pieces of cardboard hanging around.

“Ah.” Dar regarded the computer screen. “The crap you think if while waiting for Linux to boot.” She leaned closer. “Finish damn you!!”

The system obligingly finished its work and presented a login screen to her, and since Dar had no login, she considered her job done. She peeled her jacket off the back of the chair and shrugged into it, then she turned and made her way to the door, turning the latch and pulling it open.

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Kerry crossed her legs at the ankle as she leaned against the wall, ostensibly watching the television mounted to one side of her.

What she was actually doing was listening to the argument inside the office, which didn't seem particularly confidential, and was certainly loud, collecting tidbits of information that could end up valuable at the most or mildly amusing to relate to Dar at the least.

She had her cup of coffee in one hand, and her other hand tucked into her cargo pants pocket, and her right ear twitched as she heard someone slam their hand on a table.

"God damn it, we don't have enough people here to run those kind of patrols!" A loud, exasperated male voice echoed into the outer room.

"Larry, look." Another male voice interrupted. "It's not anyone's fault the surveillance system isn't working. We're bloody lucky that's the only thing down right now."

"No one's fault. My ass!" The first voice said. "Someone was screwing around with it. Those things don't just break themselves."

Well, actually. Kerry suppressed a smile. Sometimes they did. Sometimes what seemed like cosmic rays from space would send a system sideways.

In this case, though, given what Dar had found, she had to admit in the private silence of her own mind that Loud Mouth was probably right. She cleared her throat, and glanced up as the front door opened and a tall, slim man entered, shoving a rubber rain hood back off his head. "Hey Miguel."

The man looked very surprised to see her. "Well, hello there Kerry." He undid the catches on his rain gear. "Something wrong? I mean.." He glanced around. "Aside from the obvious?" He acknowledged with a grimace. "Everything okay at your place?"

"Fine." Kerry said. "We lost a lot of beach and it's a mess on the ocean side, but everything else's intact as long as the garage didn't flood."

Miguel took off his raincoat and put it on a peg near the door, then he went over to the table full of snacks, rubbing his hands. "Cold pizza for breakfast. Nice." He sighed. "Marina's a mess." He looked over at her. "Some of the floating docks came up out of the water and slammed into the boathouse."

"Wow." Kerry said, after a brief pause.

"I think your canoe's okay." He picked up a piece of stone cold pepperoni and started to walk over, looking to his left as he did, and coming to a halt. "Oh. Hah." He said. "Stupid thing started working again! Hey LOU!!!" He let out a yell. "Your pictures are back!"

"What?" The loud voiced man's voice got a lot louder, as he, and then a handful of others came pouring out behind him, almost plowing into Kerry as she hastily moved out of the way. "Where... what happened?" He went into the command alcove. "Oh shit look!"

Sam came over to stand next to Kerry, folding his arms over his chest. "Where's Ms. Roberts?" He asked, in a low tone. "She do that?"

"I'm sure she did." Kerry replied, watching as the men all clustered into the area, tuning screens as two of them pulled out chairs and sat down to work. "I mean, that's what you asked us over here for right?"

The door to the IT room opened and Dar ambled out, glancing at the group of men. "Nice."

“Good job, honey.” Kerry complimented her. “Sam, want to give us a ride around to the marina before they ask us to fix something else? I’m going to have to start charging by the hour for her.”

“Sure.” Sam said. “But you know, he shoulda at least say thank you.” He gave his boss’s back a sour look. “I mean, that’s not nice, you know?”

“Don’t care.” Dar poked Kerry towards the door. “C’mon.”

They moved away from the alcove but their motion caught the eye of Lou, who had gotten out of the way of the technicians. “Hey! Hey!” He came bustling out. “Oh hey.. I didn’t see you here! Sam! Why didn’t you tell me these ladies were still out here?”

“I did.” Sam said.

Lou rubbed his hands together. “Well, thanks so much for coming over here. I guess our problems sorted themselves out, but I really appreciate it.” He said. “Can I get you some coffee? We’ve got a pan of breakfast burritos over there, in the slow cooker.”

Kerry lifted her coffee cup. “We’re good thanks.”

“Lou, Ms Roberts fixed your stuff.” Sam interrupted, pointing at the IT room. “You should offer her more than a burrito.”

Lou looked at him, then at Dar, in surprise. “You did?” He said. “Oh!” He looked around. “How did you.. um.. Hey can you come into my office for a second?” He sidled back out of the way. “I just want to ask you.. um.. “

Dar looked at Kerry, who sighed and shook her head. “I’ll go wait in the cart. C’mon Sam.” Kerry said. “Make it short explanation please, Maestro.” She pointed to the door. “Scoot.”

Dar followed Lou into his office, and he closed the door behind her.

The office, a large space with a worktable in the front, a bulletin board on one wall, a white board on the other, and in the back, a big, plain desk covered in papers.

Stuff was everywhere. Blueprints, and plans, and on the wall, a mounted television playing the same local channel they’d had on at the condo. “Cable’s down.” Dar remarked. “That, internet, and phones.”

“It’s a mess.” Lou agreed. “But hey listen.. what was wrong with that thing?” He asked. “It went down halfway through the storm, and we were going nuts. I couldn’t see anything that was going on, and couldn’t send any of my guys. All we had was the radios.”

“Someone tried to upgrade it.” Dar said, in a straightforward way. “Not really sure why anyone would try it. I rolled it back.”

Lou sat down on his desk and looked at her. He was a big man, who’d spent two years as a professional football player with the Dolphins and he had on a bush shirt with large pockets and work cargos in dark blue. “Huh?”

Dar sorted through the words, sorting out of there was a simpler way to answer. “You got anyone on your staff here who likes to play around with computers?” She countered. “Someone was on the system playing around. Probably trying to make it do more things. Probably didn’t mean to tank it.”

Lou frowned, then he shook his head emphatically. “I got two guys who take care of the cameras and all that stuff. I sent both of them off the island yesterday on the last staff ferry.” He said. “None of the rest of us knows a damn thing about it.”

“Well.” Dar put her hands on the back of one of the worktable chairs and glanced down idly at the blueprints. “All I can tell you is what I found. The program stopped working because something made changes to it and made it stop working. Didn’t get that way by itself.”

“You know, I said that myself.” Lou nodded vigorously “I mean, I don’t know anything about this computer stuff. I’m a physical security guy. But this stuff lets us do more with less people, you know? Budgets are always so tight around here.”

Dar cocked her head to one side a little. "Really?" That surprised her, since she'd never had the impression the operational staff ever lacked for funding, given the yearly fees they all paid and the price of the real estate.

"Talking out of turn." Lou stood up and waved his hand at her. "Anyway. Thanks very much for coming over here, ma'am. It really helped us out." He looked at Dar, then looked away. "I know you and the big cheese don't see eye to eye and all that, but my guys all say you and your friend are good people."

"Glad to help." Dar wasn't sure to be amused, or disgusted, or just throw up her mental hands in a whatever shrug. "Might want to put a note out to your whole team that you know someone tried to do something and not to do it again." She suggested. "Just be vague."

"That's about all I can be." Lou said, with a wry smile. "Thanks."

Dar escaped from the office, going past the group of security guards now contentedly doing whatever it was they did with their camera systems, oblivious of her passage. She slipped out the door and closed it behind her, finding that it had once again stopped raining, at least for the moment.

Miguel was outside, with a bit of pizza still clutched in one hand. talking to Sam and Kerry who were seated in the cart. Kerry had one booted foot propped up against the dashboard, and she had both hands wrapped around her knee, head tilted slightly in a listening posture.

As Dar angled towards them, though, Kerry turned her head and their eyes met, a wiggle of an eyebrow and the slightest hint of an eyeroll telling her all she needed to know about the subject matter.

She increased her pace and the two guards broke off the conversation. "That's that." She got into the back seat of the cart and folded her long legs into a somewhat comfortable position.

"See you later, Miguel." Kerry gave the other guard a slight wave. "Hope things work out."

"Thanks Kerry." Miguel stepped back and away from the cart as they turned around and started back out along the road.

"Miguel thinks our boat's fine." Kerry had half turned in her seat to address her partner, putting her elbow on the seat back. "But there's a lot of damage." She concluded. "But looking at the other condos on the way here seems like they held up pretty well."

"Yes." Sam agreed. "All the places I saw, except the beach and the marina, and .. well, we can't get around to where the maintenance docks are. A bunch of trees are down across the road there. But anyway the houses all look okay."

"You said they were bunkers." Kerry said to Dar. "You weren't kidding."

They came around the curve in the road that arched along the side of the island where the protected marina was built in. Along the way they could already see a lot of trees down, and near the road the flash of a white hull of a boat that had been thrown up onto land.

Like on their side of the island, much of the edge of the land of the island was gone, sucked into the ocean along with bushes and trees that had been planted there. Flotsam and jetsam was everywhere, and a huge pile of sea wrack was stuck in the small square cutout usually frequented by manatees.

Sam steered the cart around a fallen tree, both Dar and Kerry hastily grabbing hold of the seat supports as they bumped and trundled over the branches and debris before they could get back onto the road, and as they emerged behind a thicket of flattened bushes they could now see the marina.

"Holy crap." Dar uttered.

Kerry just let out a soft whistle. At least a dozen large, expensive yachts were in pieces, half sunk in the water, or lying on their side, and two rows of docks they had been tied up to were exploded into thousands of shards, a dumpsters worth lying on the roof of the marina building itself.

Along the marina past that there was debris and wrack, the docks themselves awash with ocean waters and their lines pulling the boats askew.

"Yeah. A mess." Sam agreed. "Glad all those guys ended up bunking at the mansion. They were going to stay down here, y'know? But they heard they were doing a cookout up there since that's where the chefs were bunked so they went up there to get in on that."

Dar peered past Sam's head, as they got closer and caught sight of both the Dixie and her parent's boat, tucked into slips along the most protected side of the marina apparently intact. Unlike most of the boats, theirs had been moored nose to tail with their backs to the wind.

Most of the slips sat sideways to the onshore winds and the craft had taken the brunt of their force. Dar could see some debris on the back decks of the Dixie, and it seemed like the radio antenna was bent, but her lines were in place and the dock structure alongside was in one piece.

Her father's expert preparation, no doubt. "Looks like they both made it, Ker." Dar pointed at the boats. "And they're in slips we can get out of." She added, shading her eyes as she looked at the entrance to the marina. "Barely."

"Yeah the rest of these, it's gonna be a while." Sam agreed. "You want me to let you off or take you back to your place now that you seen this?" He had pulled the cart to a halt, and was leaning his elbows on the steering wheel. "Cause I don't want to be round here when some of them other fellows start showing up to see their stuff."

"Back to our place I think." Kerry said. "We've got things to get sorted out, too."

Sam nodded and turned the cart around, starting back the other way just as a couple of men in rain gear appeared near the edge of the marina building, half its roof caved in from the impact of the docks hitting it. "Just in time."

He sped off, as a shout sounded out behind them.

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More people were out on the road, some wandering over to the lake that was the golf course and looking at it, when they came back around the curve of the island to where Dar and Kerry's condo was.

"A lot of people stayed out here." Kerry commented.

"Sure." Sam nodded. "Anyone who didn't fly out did. Why stay in some janked out shelter if you could stay here? In your own place with your own stuff?" He carefully steered the cart around a deep puddle in the road. "My wife convinced me to go to one of those shelters last time. Some high school gym, you know? Ceiling leaked, smelled like old socks.. just a mess."

"Can't imagine staying in my high school gym." Dar said. "That would end up a Mad Max scenario."

Kerry chuckled wryly, having once been in Dar's high school gym. "So is your wife here with you?"

"Hell no. I divorced her. No idea where the hell she is in this one." Sam said cheerfully. "It was just me, and when they asked me to stay here? That's different. I knew we'd be all right here, and no leaking roofs."

Kerry looked over her shoulder at Dar. "Oh." She said. "Uh.. sorry."

"Don't be!" Sam said. "We never really got along. Not even sure why I married her." He slowed down as they approached the turn in and the slight rise that would then slope down to the parking garage and the path up to their doorstep. "Hang on!"

Both Dar and Kerry grabbed hold of the roof support bars and Dar braced her feet out as the cart turned and went up over the slight bump and between the gates of the concrete half wall that bordered the complex.

A moment later a huge blob of water was heading their way, coming at them from near the path to the door. It hit the oncoming cart and since the plastic sides were rolled up in deference to the mugginess it drenched all of them.

"Hey!" Sam yelled, as the cart nearly went out of control.

"Oh crap!" Kerry got her hands up in time to intercept the water before it hit her face. She swayed as the cart veered to one side but was grabbed by the shoulders from behind and steadied. "Whoa!"

“Dad” Dar let out a bellow. “Hey!”

Sam got the cart to a halt, blinking the muddy water out of his eyes, and shaking his drenched hair. “What in the world was that all about?”

From the slope to the understructure parking, Andrew Roberts appeared, dressed in cargo shorts and a tank top, damp from the rain and wearing knee high fishing boots. In one hand he was holding the handle of a very large bucket. “Sorry bout that.”

Kerry got out and shook herself off. “What are you doing, dad?”

“Bailin.” Andrew said, coming over to them. “Wanted to get that door opened, see what the underneath looks like.”

“Oh.” Sam was wiping his face. “Yeah, there’s supposed to be drainage but Lou figured it’s all full right now.”

Dar walked over and saw that the slope to the garage, which had been flooded to the level of the road when they’d left was now half emptied. She glanced at her father, who’d come over to stand next to her. “Both our boats look good.”

Andrew nodded. “Figured it might be like that.”

“About a dozen of the ones tied into the floating dock got trashed.” Dar said. “Two of them ended up upside down on the beach.”

Andrew clucked his tongue. “I done told them people. Didn’t figure to listen to someone who knew something about boats.”

Dar chuckled, a touch maliciously.

Kerry had trotted up into the house and returned with a towel, which she handed to Sam who showed no inclination to get back in his cart and leave. “I’m going to try my phone again.” She went over, and out into the roadway.

Sam walked over to join Dar and Andrew. “You made a dent in that, Mr. Roberts.” He remarked. “Had someone stop me on the way over here and ask me to find a pump for them. I didn’t think about suggesting they try a bucket.”

Dar stifled a laugh, and Andrew didn’t bother to. “Lemme get back to it.” Dar’s father said, shaking his head. “Aint nothing to do anyhow but watch them weather people.” He picked up the bucket and went back down the slope into the water.

“Yeah, cables all down, and internet’s all down.” Sam started backing away towards the cart. “Let me get out of the way and back to work. Anyway, thanks for coming to help out, Ms Roberts. I know Lou really appreciated having all those screens back on it sure helps us.”

“My pleasure.” Dar lied amiably, giving him a little wave as he backed the cart up and turned it around. She stepped backwards up onto the stairs as another wave of water came up from the garage, leaning against the railing and putting her hands into her pockets.

It was still overcast, and the air was so thick with water it might well have been raining. She could feel the sweat gathering under her shirt, and the wind only brought a sheen of moisture to her face.

After a moment of random thought, she took her hands out of her pockets and removed her shirt, pulling it off over her head and starting the process of wringing it out while she waited for Kerry to return. That didn’t make the air any less muggy, but exposing her skin to the breeze helped make it a little more comfortable.

She could still hear the sound of trees being whipped by the wind, and it howled as it came through the buildings. But the clouds overhead, moving fast, were not as dark and there was a sense that the storm was passing. Dar wondered where the eye was, and if it had dissipated any.

She wondered if Melbourne, where they'd sent their team, was safe. The last angle she'd seen on the path of the storm was moving it south of the town but you never knew.

You never knew. Their whole office could be gone. Everything she and Kerry had built up in the last half year could be gone. That they had been so lightly touched so far was mostly a matter of luck. Dar twisted the fabric in her hands, watching the droplets land on the tile steps.

Luck. When she'd decided to move into May's old place she'd never considered hurricane security. It had just been a cool place to live away from people that had a great view. What it would be like to sit in it while a monster storm came over head never crossed her mind.

Now she knew. Dar draped the damp shirt over her shoulder and went down the steps.

"Paladar, what the hell are you doing?"

Dar paused as her father came up the slope with another bucket of water. "Going to see if Kerry's having any luck with the phone." She answered. "Why?"

"With half your damn clothes on?"

Dar spread her arms in a gesture of inquiry. "No worse than a bathing suit." She said. "It's too sticky."

"Here then." Andrew tossed the bucket's contents at her unexpectedly. "Cool yer self."

"Yah!" Dar tried to dodge but there wasn't space to, and a moment later she was wet through. She pulled her shirt off her shoulder and stretched it out, spinning it between her hands and then heading her father's way. "C'mere!"

"Oh ho ho!" Andrew bounded backwards as she approached, snapping the shirt with audible cracks in the air.

"Don't you get saucy there, young lady!" He ducked the makeshift whip as Dar jumped into the puddle with both feet, sending a splash of water over him. "Gimme that!"

Dar got in a hit on his leg, ducking as he scooped up a bucketful of water and slung it in her direction and plunging sideways through the puddle. She sent another splash heading his way by hopping up and down and a moment later they were in a full out water fight.

Kerry heard the commotion and folded up her mostly useless phone, trotting across the street and into the driveway arriving just in time to get smacked in the face with a torrent of warm muddy water. "Blah!!!!" She let out a squawk, as the chaos now turned into laughter.

She wiped the water out of her eyes and put her hands on her hips as Andrew and Dar sloshed out of the puddle, both completely soaked. Andy was still carrying the bucket, Dar had her shirt in her hand, wrapped around her fist in a ball.

They had almost identical grins on their faces.

"What in the hell's going on here?" Kerry asked, spitting a bit of debris from her mouth from the water.

"We were just messin round." Andy said, glancing behind him. "Ahm gonna open up that there door, Dar. Aint enough water left to drown much."

"Yeah, I think I soaked up a good bit of it." Kerry regarded her now wet through body. "I guess it doesn't really matter now if it starts raining again?"

"Not much, no." Dar started idly twisting the shirt in her hands, watching the water drain from it.

The door to the condo opened and Ceci peered cautiously out. "Ah." She emerged and closed the door quickly to keep the dogs from escaping. She looked from her husband to her daughter and chuckled dryly. "I see things never change."

"The boats are okay, mom." Kerry told her. "There's a lot of damage around, but I didn't see anything really catastrophic."

"Not to us." Dar remarked. "Not sure some other boat owners would agree."

"They're starting to get pictures in from the rest of Miami." Ceci told them. "I think we were lucky. I just saw one where all the windows in the Intercontinental hotel were blown out and one of the interchange overpasses collapsed."

"No luck?" Dar asked Kerry.

"Can't even get a signal now." Kerry told her. "Said whatever the sat equivalent is of all circuits are busy."

"Crap."

Andy had retrieved a manual crank from a box near the garage door and inserted it. He cautiously started rotating it, applying pressure when it resisted. He braced his booted feet apart and pulled harder, the muscles standing out under the skin of his bare arms.

Dar had half turned and was watching. "Hang on." She said, handing her shirt to Kerry. "Hold that for a minute wouldja?"

"Sure." Kerry took the wet item, silently laughing. "But there's only room for one of you to haul on that crank, hon."

Dar looked over her shoulder at her partner dryly. "It's the seals."

"It's A SEAL." Kerry amiably agreed, pointing at Andy, glancing up to where Ceci was now sitting on the small bench outside the front door, holding her sides laughing. "C'mon, it wasn't that funny."

"Nnnno." Dar whined, looking around the driveway. "The seals on the DOOR." She went over to the box where the crank had been. "I need a crowbar." She said. "Which are all of course inside the damned garage."

Andrew had stopped trying to turn the crank, and was now standing, holding it, looking at the door speculatively. "Ah do believe you are correct there, Dardar." He let the crank drop onto the ground at the top of the slope and started off down the driveway. "Lemme see what I can find round here."

"I'll go too." Ceci trotted down the steps. "Goddess I'm tired of that damn weatherman." She caught up to Andy and tucked her hand inside the crook of his elbow.

Kerry watched them disappear around the corner, then she returned her attention to her partner, who was smiling a little, eyes slightly unfocused. "You and your dad are so funny."

Dar looked up, the blue of her eyes looking surprisingly vivid in the overcast, gray light. "Kinda stupid." She half shrugged, looking a touch embarrassed. "We used to have hose fights in the yard when we lived down south. Drove the neighbors nuts."

"Kind of beautiful actually." Kerry disagreed. "You realize I never even got invited to play golf with my father? He wouldn't so much as play catch football with Mike for the press." She shook out Dar's wet shirt and hung it over the stairway railing. "I don't think I ever even saw him in a t-shirt."

"Muppet." Dar said, succinctly. "Why have kids if you're not going to have some fun with them given what a pain in the ass they are?"

Kerry laughed, leaning against the railing and folding her arms across her chest. "Having a water fight definitely would not have been his idea of fun." She said. She glanced up at the entrance. "I guess we should go back inside and see what the television is showing. Maybe we'll see something of Coconut Grove."

Dar looked around. "Yeah, there's not much else we can do out here. Saw what we needed to see for now I guess. When we get this door open, we can take the carts out." She fished the sat phone out of her pocket and turned it over, watching some water run out of its folds. "Hope these are waterproof."

Kerry chuckled.

"If we stay outside, more chance for the team to get hold of us." Dar concluded. "Worse comes to worse, we can take the boat out and go over to the shoreline there. See if we can dock close enough to get to the office." She looked up at the sky. "We'll either beat the coast guard out or get our asses chased down by them."

Kerry exhaled. "I'm thinking about how much email I'm eventually going to have to look at." She said. "How many pissed off clients to deal with."

"It's a storm, Ker."

"They don't care, Dar."

Dar sighed, and folded her arms over her most bare torso. Her skin was spackled with storm debris, bits of wood and dirt washed down into the puddle. There was a leaf plastered along her ribcage and tucked into the waistband of her cargo pants a twig was poking out.

Kerry went over to her and removed it, twirling the twig in her fingertips. "I'm worried about our people." She said, after a long pause. "I'm worried if they're safe, and I'm worried that if something's going to happen to our company it'll affect all of them."

Dar regarded her somberly. "What about us?"

"Not worried about us." Kerry said. "At least.. I mean, Dar, there's any of a hundred companies who'd hire either of us in a heartbeat. And, we have a lot of personal resources."

"True." Dar agreed. "And worse comes to worse..." She winked at Kerry. "We can live on my little island and I'll fish for our dinner." She smiled. "Cause that's all I need in life." She added casually. "You."

Caught offguard, Kerry blinked a few times as her mental train ran off the tracks and ended up floating in a lake somewhere.

"Let's worry about things when then happen." Dar said. "And before we do that, let's go take a damn shower because I think I have a pollywog in my underwear."

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The condo had partially at least returned somewhat to its usual internal view. Kerry had gotten the shutters on the kitchen window and the door open, and cleared the debris off the backyard steps, and Dar was outside on the patio working on the bent panels protecting the outside.

Chino and Mocha were seated inside the sliding glass doors, watching her intently. Behind them, the television was showing loop after loop of storm wreckage and destruction, and if Kerry concentrated she could hear helicopters outside now that the winds had mostly died down.

"Power is out throughout most of South Florida." A reporter was saying. "Pumping stations are down, and there's a boil water order in effect."

Kerry stood in the doorway to the kitchen, a pot of chili on the stove behind her softly bubbling away as she watched the scenes flash on the screen. An airborne view of the Port of Miami, just west of them, showed multiple cargo loading cranes toppled into the channel.

The docks that would normally have cargo and cruise ships, were, of course, empty. PortMiami had closed before the storm and every ship had run from it, going south and west into the Gulf of Mexico.

"The storm surge, measured at over a dozen feet high, picked up containers and they're now in the water on either side of the terminal." The reporter said. "Palm and Star Islands are completely cut off. The surge washed over and destroyed the causeways onto those man made islands."

"What a mess." Kerry shook her head.

"Parts of MacArthur and Venetian Causeways are underwater, and the police are advising everyone to please stay off the roads. I am going to repeat that. Please stay off the roads, and do not try to travel away from your homes unless you are in need of emergency medical assistance."

It wouldn't stop people. Kerry knew it, the reporter knew it, and the police surely knew it. There were people out right now, she was sure, who were driving around looking at what there was to be looked at. After all, wasn't that what she and Dar had done?

People wanted to see what was going on. With no power, and no internet, no cell service, no way of surfing around to see what was being said, the only real way to know was to go look. So they would. She was almost sure that aside from random drivers, there were people out taking drone movies, and soon, there would be boats on the waterways.

She felt bad for the police. They were people. They had families, and those families had also been in danger, and were possibly in homes that were damaged or somewhere unsafe, and yet they had just showed the command center in West Dade where all of them were showing up there.

Reporting for work when perhaps their own homes were destroyed.

The reporters at the television station, there in their flooded out building, were showing up. At the staging yard on the edge of the Everglades in Sunrise, Florida Power and Light's linemen were gathering.

"The eye of Hurricane Bob has moved off the coast, and is now going northeast as it gets caught up in the flow of the frontal boundary." The reporter said. "The edge of the eyewall has just missed to the south Port Canaveral, and hurricane watches and warnings are now going up along the southeastern seaboard."

A flood of new light made Kerry turn her head, to see the metal shutters peeling jerkily and reluctantly back from the edge of the patio, with some strenuous encouragement by Dar. She went to the sliding glass and slid one panel open, allowing the dogs to scoot past her. "Nice job, hon."

Dar dusted her hands off as she finished shoving the shutters back into their side pockets. "We're going to have to have those replaced. Bent as hell." She turned and put her hands, encased in leather gloves, on the railing of the patio wall, looking out over the still roughly churning ocean.

At that moment, however, the clouds parted just a bit, and a wan, pallid bit of sun came through, splashing the dark green and white ruffled surface with a emerald sparkle and as if in signal of it, a muffled burble sounded from the thigh pocket of Dar's cargo pants.

'Here we go.' Dar fished it out. "Ready or not."

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"Aint nobody else answering." The voice echoed a bit, the sound of wind behind it. "So I figured since you people were the most east, maybe it was clear."

"About right, Scott." Dar said. "Glad everyone's safe there."

"Yeah, on generator, noisy as hell." Scott replied. "Had to hump my ass up the stairs to the roof here to use this thing since they can't power the elevators on it. Cheap jackasses."

Dar was momentarily silent, her mind busy imagining their tech in his wheelchair effectively hopping up the emergency steps. "Ah."

"Everything's flooded around the building. So anyway." Scott said. "Everybody on the damned planet is calling this number to find out whats going on down by the office. You know anything?"

"Not yet." Dar admitted. "As you figured out, no one else is answering their phones yet. We can see a lot of damage everywhere from here but no pictures yet on the television from Coconut Grove."

"Figures."

"So you can tell anyone who's calling that we're still evaluating the storm damage." Dar said, briefly. "I'm probably going to have to go over there by boat and check it out."

"Figures." Scott repeated. "Anyway that cloud phone thing worked out at least. No problems there. Stupid things ringing off the hook downstairs I better get back there." He paused. "Only thing we can't call from that thing is these stupid sat phones."

Dar frowned. "You should have been able to..." She paused. "Oh crap. We probably didn't turn on the codes for them to allow the dial out." She sighed. "Damn it."

Scott laughed a trifle. "Better for you." He said. "Otherwise someone'd have some bright idea to forward calls to you from this thing and it'd never stop."

Dar chuckled a little herself. "That's true." She admitted. "Anyway, thanks for taking the time and hassle to get a line out, Scott. Glad everyone's okay, just keep things going best you can there. I'll see what I can do on this end to figure out what's going on."

"Roger that." Scott sounded relatively content. "Bye."

He hung up the line and Dar did the same. She put the phone back into her pocket and regarded Kerry, who was standing next to her listening. "Well, at least they're okay up there."

"I can only imagine the calls they're getting." Kerry grimaced slightly. "Twenty twenty hindsight, I should have sent an admin with them to field all that cruft."

"Twenty twenty." Dar agreed. "Anyway, lets see if Dad's had any success in finding a crowbar to open up that door." She went past Kerry and slid the doors open, crossing from the fitfully windswept moist heat of the patio into the chill interior of the condo.

Kerry followed, sliding the door shut as Mocha and Chino came over to investigate, a little puzzled and doggily concerned about all the uproar in their normally sedate home.

They all went to the front door and Dar opened it, just as they heard a loud bang very near by.

Kerry grabbed Dar's arm. "What the hell was that?" She asked. "Was that a gunshot?"

"Hope not." Dar paused, blocking the door with her knee. "Chino, Mocha, stay!"

Kerry went and opened the nearby hall closet, ducking her head inside and flipping on the light. She reached over and grabbed the shotgun from it's rack on the wall and swung back around the door frame, pausing to check it's load.

Then she cradled it in the crook of her arm as Dar cautiously eased her body around the front door and peered outside. "Dad?"

Andrew came up the slope and craned his neck to look up. "Yeap?"

"Was that you?" Dar asked. "That noise?"

"Yeap."

Dar paused. "Did you shoot the door?" She asked, in a puzzled tone.

Andrew came a few steps further and planted his hands on his hips. "Did I what?" He asked. "Why in the hell would I do that?"

Dar came out onto the landing. "Heard what sounded like a gunshot." She explained to her father. "Thought maybe you shot the door in frustration."

"Say what?" Her father said, his voice lifting.

"I would have." Dar said. "That's why Kerry's the gun owner." She moved aside as Kerry appeared, having put the shotgun back in its rack. "Any luck?"

Ceci entered the gate, a small digital camera in one hand. "I got some great shots." She said, in a satisfied tone. "I think I'll start a new set of paintings. Start with all the mourners over there at the golf lake." She grinned. "Call the first one Disaster Strikes the Senseless Rich. What do you think?"

"I think it's going to be a hit." Kerry went down the steps to join her mother in law, coming around to see the screen of the camera as Ceci displayed her shots. "Ceci Roberts, the Irony Series."

"Hehehhe." Ceci chortled. "I like that. Nice ring to it." She flipped through the pictures. "I really shouldn't laugh, because it's a goddess awful mess. But no one here's hurting."

Dar went down the slope to where there was a handle poking out of the remaining puddle. "What is that?"

"Sledge hammer." Andrew went over and picked it back up, bringing the head of it out of the water, and moving further down the line of the door. "Ah figure I can give it a few good bangs here."

"Yeah, I want to get the carts out." Dar said. "Get over to the marina, and get the boat over to see what's going on shoreside."

Andrew looked over his shoulder at her. "No word from them all?"

"Just from Scott, up north." Dar said. "Nothing yet from anyone else." She watched as her father selected another spot and swing the sledge hammer, producing another sharp report as the head of it hit the frame of the protective roller door.

She went over to the manual crank and inserted it, applying pressure first in one direction and then the other as Andy kept up his pounding, making the door shift jerkily up and down in it's tracks.

Ceci regarded them as she stood next to Kerry. "Single minded." She commented.

"Always." Kerry watched her partner with an affectionate smile. "Door has no idea what it's up against."

A helicopter rattled overhead and they both looked up, to see a large Coast Guard chopper heading due west, it's large rotors shimmering in the gray light. Kerry pulled out her phone again and opened it. "Might as well give this a try again."

"I'm going to see what's on the news." Ceci walked up the steps to the condo. "They were showing the airport before we left. I think I saw at least one of the jet things across the runway."

"Ugh."

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"Got it." Dar poked her head inside the kitchen, where Kerry was setting down a double bowl of kibble for the seated and waiting Labradors. "Finally."

"Good job, honey." Kerry straightened and looked over at her, then started to laugh a little. "You need another shower."

"Muggy as hell out there." Dar glanced down at her sweat drenched shirt and wood debris stained skin. "But we got the door open. Sort of."

"Sort of?" Kerry got out a glass and went to the refrigerator, opening it to dispense milk into it. She handed it to Dar.

"Ended up taking it out of the track completely and bending it flat against the wall." Dar informed her. "Really at the end it was just me and dad shoving." She took a swallow of the milk and winked at Kerry. "Good to do something not involving a keyboard for a change."

"No damage inside?"

"Just some debris, and the puddle that we let in." Dar said. "Cars are fine. Dad took one of the carts out to go see if his truck survived."

"Well. Not much we can do with the cars anyway right now, with that ramp the way it is." Kerry said. "I think your idea with the boat is probably our best bet right now." She looked out the window at the still gray skies, though the trees outside that were standing were now only fitfully waving.

"I'm going to get dry." Dar took her milk with her and disappeared back into their bedroom.

Chino was standing at the back door, and now she turned her head and barked gruffly.

"Are you done?" Kerry went over and opened the door, checking her watch and then following the dogs down the steps into the wreck of their back garden. She moved away from the walls a little and went down nearer to the outer gate, where ocean was still surging, washing sea foam and debris up into the yard.

She opened the sat phone, and to her surprise it rang. She quickly answered it. "Kerry."

"Poquito boss!"

Kerry felt a sense of relief. "Mark! It's great to hear your voice."

"I can hear the ocean in the background there." Mark said. "What a bleeping fricken mess." He went on without waiting for her to answer. "I just got this stupid phone to work. Nothing else is. We don't have power, cable, phones, nothing."

Kerry glanced at her surroundings. "We have generators." She said. "But no cable, or net or anything." She added. "Cellulars all down everywhere I hear." She paused. "Our place here made it through okay. The back wall got taken over by ocean, but everything else is fine."

"My house made it, but I lost part of the roof." Mark said. "It was the part over the bedrooms. We're camped in the kitchen but we're lucky. Did you see those pictures of Doral?"

"I did." Kerry said. "That whole area's flooded. Did you see the airport?"

"Hell yes!" Mark said. "Someone said it's going to be closed for who knows how long, and that whole interchange collapsed at Golden Glades."

Kerry looked out the gate over the ruffled surface of the ocean. "The channel's full of who knows what." She said. "We could see it from here. The cargo cranes are all toppled over." She walked down to the water edge. "South Beach is a mess."

"I got a pair of solar panels here. We saw a little bit of the coverage." Mark said. "This ain't gonna be a quick fix, boss."

"No." Kerry murmured.

Mark was silent for a moment. "It was scary as crap." He finally said. "Barb's really freaked out. When the roof went, I was wishing I'd taken her and stayed with the guys at the office." He paused. "I haven't heard from anyone else yet. There are trees down everywhere here. I'm going to take my bike out and see how far I get."

"Mark, be careful." Kerry warned. "We're just running around here with golf carts and it's dangerous."

"No, I know." Mark said. "But I'm worried about the guys. Carlos and his buds."

They were both briefly silent again.

"Yeah, me too, and the rest of the staff." Kerry sighed. "I think we're going to take the boat out and see if we can get over to the shore there, by the end of the waterfront."

"They're telling people to stay home." Mark observed. "Not that anyone's gonna do it."

Kerry chuckled briefly. "Dar figures even if the docks are gone down there she can get us close enough to swim in."

Mark made a small sound of protest. "And you're telling ME to be careful?" He asked, in a quizzical tone. "Jesus, Kerry. There's like whole National Guard things being sent here."

"And?" Kerry said, watching a seagull appear, skimming over the new shoreline. "On a list of what they're going to care about, where would a small IT services company end up, Mark? They're going to be focused on hospitals and facility."

"Ouch."

"Just the truth." Kerry turned, spotting Mocha chasing something over near the back wall to the house. "Besides, you know Dar. The eye barely cleared us and she was out fixing the island camera systems and annoying the neighbors. She's not going to hang around waiting for the National Guard."

Chino came over and sat down next to her, observing the wake coming into the yard and depositing luridly purple seaweed at the dog's feet. She bent her head and sniffed at it, then she stood up and gingerly walked into the water.

"Chino, stop." Kerry said. "Anyway Mark, I'm going to keep trying to get hold of Maria and Mayte. They're over near the airport."

"I'll let you know what I find." Mark promised. "We're pretty far south but I might be able to get up around there using 27." He paused thoughtfully. "Might want to pack an inflatable kayak past that though."

"Be careful!"

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"It's kinda late." Kerry observed, as they drove carefully around the edge of the marina, heading towards the protected side. Near the front, where the most damage was, a number of men were out, some with cameras and others just standing by.

"Yeah." Dar agreed. "But we can probably get over there and back before it gets all the way dark." She aimed the cart around the back of the marina building, detouring around two fallen trees and one of the island pickup trucks that was serving as a workspace for the five or six marina staff standing around it.

Dockmaster Jack was one of them. Spotting them he took a step back from the truck and waved, and they slowed down as he walked over. "Hey there."

"Hi Jack." Dar said. "What a mess, huh?"

"What a mess." Jack agreed. "I told the chiefs those floating docks were going to be a humongous bad idea, but they didn't want to pay to sink pilings like we did on the perimeter." He looked at the marina building. "Total loss. They're going to have to rebuild the whole thing."

The entire roof of it was caved in, a further collapse since they'd been there before. The storage shed behind the building had been deconstructed, and two of the four walls were lying on the ground, the contents of the shed scattered all along the back part of the path.

Jack shook his head. "Weather station's gone, radio sets... Jesus." He looked around at them. "And everyone coming over here to chew us. I think you and your folks did all right."

"We did. We came over to check it out earlier, and dad was here before." Dar agreed. "Matter of fact, we were going to take a ride out over across Biscayne Bay."

Jack blinked. "Now?"

"We've got some people over there we're concerned about, who stayed in our office." Kerry explained. "We can't get hold of anyone."

"Oh, I don't know." Jack seemed taken aback. "It's dangerous out there. Currents are crazy, and there's so much debris.. I'd hate to have you all get through the storm fine then crack your hull." He said, as the winds rose again and he indicated the sky. "Honest, I would wait."

It was good advice. Kerry knew that. She also knew they weren't going to take it. "Thanks Jack, we'll be careful." She could feel Dar's body shifting, the twitch of the muscles in her hands as she gripped the wheel of the cart and the faint jumping of the muscle just over her kneecap indicating her impatience. "We've got some pretty solid gear onboard and Dar's a great driver."

"Oh I know, I've seen you come in." Jack said. "Well, like I said, take care." He stepped back from the cart, and gave them a little wave as he rejoined the rest of the staff standing by the truck.

"Are we being .. um..."

"Stupid?" Dar hit the pedal and started the cart along the path, having to take the time to dodge debris every few feet. "No more than we usually are." She grimaced as they bumped over a bit of aluminum decking. "I can't cope with more sitting in our living room watching endless loops of helicopter footage."

Kerry chuckled briefly. "Fair point."

"Besides, we're taking my father." Dar concluded, as she edged the cart along the far side of the marina, where the seawall had protected the two slips that were aligned alongside it, the furthest from the marina. "We'll be fine."

Two slips on the very end of the inlet, tricky to maneuver into, tucked into the curve of the protective stone wall with lines only on their port side.

Dar found a place to park the cart and she removed the fob from it, in case anyone got the idea they'd like to borrow the vehicle. She lifted a backpack from the back of it and joined Kerry as they carefully made their way along the plaswood surface towards the boats.

Andrew was visible on the bow of theirs, which was tied up in front of his own. He was coiling a line expertly in both hands, watching idly as they approached. "Lo there." He greeted them amiably.

"Hi dad." Dar stepped from the edge of the battered dock onto the gunwale of the boat and then onto the deck with easy grace. "Amazing nothing's broken." She inspected the space.

"Just that there whippy." Andrew indicated the antenna. "Back here got washed out. Got me a coconut out of that there corner of it but the sump took care of the water." He looked around the back of the boat. "Nothing cracked, and it's dry down there in the engine well."

Dar nodded. "Lets get this party started." She said. "I don't really want to be dodging bits of someone's backyard barbeque in the dark." She slid the backpack onto her shoulder and started up the ladder to the flying bridge.

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Kerry heard the dual inboard engines start up, and she left off checking the interior of the cabin to return to the back deck. She looked over the aft well wall where the engine wash was bubbling up debris, and then to the starboard side where bits of wood and chunks of foam were floating.

Andrew stepped up onto the gunwale and walked along the side of the boat to the bow, kneeling to untie the ropes that were holding them to the dock.

Kerry did the same for the aft cleat and felt the boat shift and start to drift away from the pylings. She looked up at the flying bridge, watching Dar standing at the controls, legs braced as her hands worked the throttles.

Out of habit she went to the radio console, opening up the teak hatch and taking out the hand held transmitter before she paused in thought. Normally, she would call the dockmaster, and clear them out.

Did the dockmaster even have a handheld radio to hear it?

Would the dockmaster even for one moment give a damn?

Kerry put the transmitter back into its clip and closed the hatch.

"What'cha doin there, kumquat?" Andy came back from his task and joined her. "Everything shipshape in there?"

"Yeah, it's all okay I think." Kerry said. "I was going to call in our leaving, but I don't think it matters."

"Naw." Andrew shook his head. Then he went over to the side of the boat and watched as they drifted towards the wreckage of the floating dock and the first of the overturned yachts lying on its side. It was mostly under water and the fully fitted out cooking pit it had on its deck was hanging half bent across its port railing.

The Dixie's direction gently changed, moving backwards in the water at almost idle as Dar nudged the big boat past the damaged craft, sliding it also past her parent's on their port side.

Andrew watched calmly as they came within a foot of his boat's fiberglass hull, standing there with his hands in his pockets.

"She's pretty damn good at this." Kerry commented from her place next to him. "She brings this thing into those little marinas down south and everyone's usually going 'how in the hell?'"

He chuckled. "One thing mah kid did not get from me." He readily admitted. He drew in a satisfied breath of the warm, damp air as they cleared the second slip and Dar started to swing the boat around almost within it's own length.

"I'm going to go grab my camera." Kerry said, as they completed the maneuver and headed cautiously for the entrance to the marina basin. "I'm totally sure I'm going to need it."

"Aint no doubt." Andy glanced up at the flying bridge. "Good job there, Dardar."

Dar smiled, but didn't turn, her attention focused on avoiding the sunken structures and nudging the floating debris out of their way. She did glance to her left as they approached the edge of the protective sea wall, spotting the dockmaster on the far side of the destroyed marina building watching them go out.

She took one hand off the throttles and waved, and Jack waved back. Then she moved past the last overturned boat and reached the opening, feeling the chop of the water start to jostle the hull.

The channel water was rough and churning as she edged out into it, and the wind hit them, pushing against the boat and making the guy wires stabilizing the flying bridge sing. Dar reached over to turn on the marine radio out of long habit, settling into the captain's chair as her eyes flicked over to the digital sonar screen and the depth gauge.

The marina let out onto the southern side of the island, into Norris Cut, and she turned west from there, moving very cautiously along the coast of the island. The wind was sharp enough to make her blink, and she wished she'd remembered to bring her sunglasses with her as it felt like particles of salt were being driven into her eyeballs.

Along the edge of the channel she could see trees by the hundreds down, the entire south side of the island had been laid bare and much of the landscaping was in the water forcing her out a little to avoid it. Ahead of her was the causeway, and beyond that the heart of the city and the mouth of the Miami River.

The storm surge had gone pretty much right up the river's path. This far away Dar couldn't see what damage there was yet, but one thing was obvious and that was there was no power anywhere. The only lights showing were the channel markers winking red and green on either side of her.

It felt lonely. The Dixie was the only vessel moving in her sight, and the sound of the diesel engines rumbled softly underfoot as the boat rocked in the chop as she went at a dead slow speed, keeping one eye on the waters ahead of her and the other on the sonar.

Would suck to run into something. Dar had no intention of being a sound bite on WPLG, some stupid nitwit out for a joyride that had to be towed in by the coast guard after running aground or into sunken debris.

She only hoped Kerry would forgive her for the motion.

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Kerry looped the strap of her camera over her head and made her way back out onto the deck, glad of the bit of ginger candy she was sucking on.

She'd gotten more used to the motion of the boat over the years. Especially when they went out for some diving, and they had to anchor in place, the back and forth, up and down rocking had become familiar, and she'd developed reasonably steady sea legs in moving around on deck.

Still. She swallowed some of the ginger flavor. The channel was far rougher than usual.

Andy was sitting in one of the comfortable back chairs, watching the passing scenery with interest, and Kerry took the other seat, taking off her lens cap and testing her focus.

There was a pile of debris along the southern coast of the island they were passing and she zoomed in on it and took a picture of it, then paused, trying to determine what it was. A small boat, probably.

They passed another and she lifted her head up from the eyepiece. "That's a car." She pointed.

“Yeah.” Andy agreed. “Probably came up off the front there.” He pointed at the approaching coastline. “Road’s all washed out.” He extended his long legs along the deck, crossing his worn military boots at the ankle.

Was there someone in it? Kerry hesitated, then refocused, but it was impossible to tell. Should they stop? She looked at the angle and then slowly lowered the camera. The water covered the entire cab, lapping over the top of the vehicle. “Hope it was empty.”

“Probably.” Andy said. “Tho.” He added, thoughtfully. “Some fellas do live inside their cars in that city there.” He sniffed and folded his hands over his stomach. “Probably went into them shelters.”

Unexpectedly, Kerry’s phone rang. “Ah.” She rapidly put the cap back on and dug the phone out of her pocket, opening it up. “This is Kerry.”

“Kerry!”

“Hey Col.” Kerry felt a sense of relief hearing the familiar voice. “Great to hear from you. How’d it go?”

“Oh my goodness gracious I’m digging a cellar to get into for the next time.” Colleen said, in an exasperated tone. “We’re swamped up to the second floor here, girl. That your generator rumbling?”

“Um. No.” Kerry said. “We’re on the boat, heading to see what’s up at the office.”

For a moment there was dead silence.

“Col?”

“Of course you’re on the boat heading for the office.” Colleen was half laughing and half groaning. “Have you seen the news? Are you out of your ever loving?” She protested. “Kerry for the love of God!”

Kerry glanced at Andrew. “What?” She asked. “I saw the stuff on the tv, sure. What does that have to do with anything? We left Carlos and some of his guys at the office. We want to make sure they’re okay.” She said. “We did all right out on the island.”

Why was Colleen so surprised? Kerry wondered. When Dar had suggested this idea, it had sounded eminently logical, and both Andrew and Ceci had nodded in agreement as well. Was it so surprising they’d want to do this?

“Figured you would. That place is a bunker.” Colleen said. “Well, you just be careful. I heard there’s all kinds of flooding down near the water there, and buildings damaged. The bridge over to the port came down.”

Kerry glanced to her right and shifted. “Yeah, we’re passing it right now. No kidding.” She stared at the spans, one whole side twisted and tumbled into the water. “Wow.” She added. “No, Dar’s being careful. We have sonar onboard, and her dad’s with us.”

“Ah.” Colleen said. “Well, with no power, no phones, no internet, no nothing – soon as the water goes down here I think we should shift ourselves up to the north, with the support folks. You think?”

“Yeah. Not sure we’re going to have any other choice.” Kerry said. “I talked to Scott. They did fine up there.”

“Righty ho. Let me know how it all works out, now that it’s clear enough for these lovely phones to work.” Colleen said. “Thank the lord Mayte thought of it.” She paused. “You hear from her yet?”

“No.” Kerry said. “We’re worried about that too. Not her, or Maria. I heard from Mark.”

“Well. This one just started now, after the clouds cleared up a bit. Give it some time.” Colleen advised. “Let me go get the candles out. Going to be a hot steamy night.”

Kerry hung up the phone, and sighed. “This is such a mess.”

Andrew had gotten up and now mounted the gunwhale and started up along the port side towards the front deck of the boat.

After a moment, Kerry got up and followed him, holding onto the railing as they hit some chop. She jerked as the boat’s horn sounded lightly, and she looked up to find Dar standing at the controls, peering at them.

“Careful, people.” Dar’s voice sounded on the intercom, echoing softly over the engines.

Andy half turned and gave her a thumbs up, as he took up a position on the front of the boat, standing with his legs braced and his arms folded, surveying the waters they were crossing through.

Kerry stayed where the cabin arched up to the bridge on the port side, where there were grab bars fastened into the fiberglass and she could lean against it. She took out her camera and took some shots, then, as the boat wallowed a little in the cross current, she decided more ginger was required.

Returning back to the back deck, she opened the door and went into the cabin, which was blessedly free of wind and comfortably cool. She put the camera down on the galley table and went past it into the compact bedroom with its queen size bed and maximized storage space.

On the countertop there was a soft fabric bag and she grabbed it, fishing inside for another of the candies, leaning back against the wall as the boat rocked.

The intercom crackled. “Hey Ker?”

Kerry went to the wall and pressed the response button. “Aye Aye, captain.”

Dar’s deep, warm chuckle came through the speaker. “You think we have a pair of sunglasses down there?”

Kerry blinked. “Is the weather gotten that much better in the two minutes I’ve been down here?” She asked in a puzzled tone. “Really?”

“No.” Her partner said. “Spray’s getting in my eyes.”

“Oh!” Kerry said. “Yeah, let me look around for some and I’ll bring them up. Want some coffee?”

“Absolutely.”

Kerry went back up the steps into the main part of the cabin and detoured into the galley, flipping on the coffee machine as she hunted in the various drawers for glasses. She found a pair of wrap around Oakleys and stuffed them in her thigh pocket, then got some coffee going.

It occurred to her, then, that they had satellite access onboard and she turned and removed the seldom used controls from the drawer and turned on the bulkhead mounted television.

“Poor signal.” Kerry sighed and just turned the mute on and went back to getting the coffee sorted. The satellite was subject to rain fade and never that reliable in any case, and they usually only relied on it for some random CNN watching and the weather.

She poured the coffee into a thermos, added cream and sugar from the small fridge into it after checking the date on the cream, and capped it. Then she put the strap of the thermos around her neck and went back outside.

Behind the boat the twin prop wash from their engines was frothing the water and the air was full of the smell of rain, of sea water, and a touch of diesel. Kerry climbed up the steps to the flying bridge, and joined Dar standing behind the console.

The bridge was mostly white fiberglass, in deference to its exposure to the weather. There was the console that Dar used to drive the boat, which had a circular wheel with hydrolic steering controls down to the large inboard engines, and the twin throttles that fed them fuel.

That was at the front of the bridge, with plastic flaps Dar had rolled up to allow her a good view of the front of the boat and the water around it. Behind the bridge were fiberglass seats and teak tables on either side, where the boat’s guests could sit and socialize while keeping the driver company.

Kerry had never actually used them. When she was on the bridge and keeping Dar company she would sit in the second pilot’s seat next to her, and slowly over time had learned all the controls and gauges that covered the space.

She had never, actually driven the boat anywhere. She certainly had started up the engines, and had a good working knowledge of the dials and switches but she knew that the casual ease with which Dar handled the large vessel was deceptive.

"I love you." Dar accepted the offered cup, and ducked her head briefly for Kerry to put the sunglasses around her ears. "Damn salt water." She put the cup in its gimballed holder and adjusted the throttles, increasing the speed of the boat a trifle. "We're in deep water here."

They were moving past the channel that went under the collapsed bridge, and directly in front of them was the mouth of the Miami river and the city buildings on either side of it. A little further west and Dar would turn south, and go along the coastline towards the Grove.

Ahead of them, the triangle of manufactured land that was Brickell Key showed stunning damage. Two of the condo apartment towers were missing parts of most floors, and the hotel on the south end had collapsed onto itself.

Now that they could see the buildings a little better, they could see the damage. Windows were blown out everywhere – drapes and tattered blinds were lashing in the wind, and the storm surge had come up over the seawall and debris had been pulled back out into the water as far as they eye could see.

"Wow." Kerry said, after a pause.

Dar sighed. "Look." She pointed to the southwest.

Kerry counted. "Oh, that's all of the tenth floor blown out." Her eyes went wide. "Jesus, Dar, I hope no one was in there." She said, as they turned to go south, and passed by what had once been their daily commute endpoint. The tall glass building that was ILS's Southeast headquarters had taken a lot of visible damage.

"I'm sure they did." Dar took a sip of coffee. "The only idiot who would have stayed in that place keeping things running doesn't work for them anymore."

Kerry gave her a sideways look. "Idiot, and idiot staff." She corrected her. "Because, my love, if you'd have stayed, all of us would have."

There were no people yet visible, that close to the water. As they went by the buildings, they could see between them streets full of water, debris, trees, concrete, piles of roof tiles, flooded cars.. Kerry went back down and got her camera, then returned and started taking some random pictures.

That area had been evacuated, mostly. Kerry knew that in the midst of that, there were people who had refused to go, ignored the mandatory evacuation, hid from the police, from the county officials patrolling the streets before the storm struck getting people out.

The radio crackled, making them both jump. "Coast Guard, Coast Guard." A voice said. "Anyone out there?"

Dar looked at Kerry, who picked up the radio mic, and held it. "We're not the coast guard." Dar said, after a pause. "Let see if they answer."

"I was waiting." Kerry replied. "But I can't.. I mean, they must be somewhere out of this area, Dar. We haven't seen another boat on the water."

"Just us." Dar agreed, as they started through the South channel, and approached Rickenbacker Causeway. "That seems to have made it." She indicated the concrete and steel pylons of the bridge, which were visibly intact. "Tore up the toll plaza though."

Kerry went to the side of the bridge and peered across the water at the roadway. "There's a truck parked across it too." She said. "Boy this is going to creepy after dark."

The bridge itself was empty. They passed under it.

"Coast Guard, Coast Guard, do you copy?" The voice on the radio repeated, as Andy climbed up onto the bridge and settled in one of the tables behind the bridge. "Hello? Is anyone out there?"

Kerry sighed, and lifted the mic, then held off when she heard the channel open again.

"Calling station, this is Coast Guard Ops."

With a satisfied grunt, Kerry put the mic back down.

"Thanks Coast Guard. This is Crandon Beach I just want to report.. well, there's a tanker here on the beach." The voice said. "It's leaking oil all over the place, and we can smell diesel everywhere." It added. "It's huge."

"Roger that, Crandon." The coast guard answered. "We'll put it on the list."

"Someone going to come look at it?"

"Not right now, Crandon. We have to bring all the craft back into the area."

"Explains why we didn't see any of them." Kerry remarked. "Coast Guard, I mean. Or hear them on the radio."

"Went up to Virginia." Andrew supplied. "Captain that stopped by said they were all going out." He paused thoughtfully. "Might have ended up better going to Orleans, turns out."

Dar adjusted the throttles a little, as they cleared the bridge, and moved along the flooded coastline. "Oh crap that's right. Damn storm is heading right that way." She paused. "Where'd they send Navy, dad?"

"South."

"Gitmo?"

"Yeap."

Dar shook her head a little. "Bet that was popular." She increased the speed of the boat, now that they were clear of the bridges, and solidly in what seemed to be a clear channel. "See if I can make up some time."

"Aint nobody round to stop ya." Andrew concluded. "Let's go."

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Dar was starting to doubt her decision to start off so late in the day as they rounded the bulk of Dinner Key and through the shallow channel that fronted the part of the coastline near where their office was.

The sky was still very cloudy, and the light was dimming to a dusky hue, and they had passed cluster after cluster of shattered docks in the large marina at Dinner Key.

Now, as they came closer to the much smaller set of docks at the Coconut Grove sailing club, they found the wooden structures perilously destructed, most of the planks cracked or missing and the pylons at almost right angles to the waves.

No boats were in the dock. All of them, smaller craft, had been lifted out and were stored in the nearby concrete shelters, which seemed to be relatively intact.

Dar backed the engines down to dead slow, and the roar settled into a low rumble as she held the boat against the current while Andy and Kerry went onto the bow to look around.

She could see trees down. The sailing club had a parking lot, and a road behind it, and past that was the back entrance to their office. There were so many trees around the place though, she couldn't see past them.

Kerry turned around on the bow and looked up at her, the faint shrug working through her body visible.

Dar regarded the scene, then she triggered the anchor, hearing the harsh rumble as the chain unrolled in the hull and released the heavy iron hook into the water.

Watching the sonar, she saw the anchor hit bottom, and gently backed the engines a bit as she angled the boat across one of the pylons, catching the anchor on the debris to hold the Dixie in place. Once she was sure it was snagged, she put the engines into idle and waited as the current realigned the boat.

It stayed in place. With a grunt, Dar shut down the engines and then the air was filled with the rush of wind through the debris and the creak of building parts moving when they should not have been. She paused to see if anything was going to happen, then she shrugged and went down the ladder to the back deck.

"What a mess." Kerry came around the corner of the gunwhale and joined her, stuffing her camera back into her pocket. "Can't see anything. Can you see the place from up top?"

"Nope." Dar went to the side of the boat and regarded the water. "Guess we'll have to.." She paused in mid word, as Andrew put his hands on the railing and hoisted himself over it, going boots first into the water. "Dad."

"He just did it before you could." Kerry remarked wryly. "But I think you were right not getting any closer. I could see a bunch of stuff in the water just ahead of us there." She went to Dar's side as they watched Andrew pop to the surface, shaking the water out of his eyes. "Careful, dad!"

Andrew turned like an otter in the water and regarded her with a grin, then he turned again and started swimming towards the wreckage of the dock, using a sweeping underwater stroke.

Dar went up the side of the boat to the bow to keep him in sight, walking across the deck of the gently rocking craft as she looked up and down the coastline, wrack filled and silent.

She spotted something. "Dad!"

Andrew paused in mid stroke and turned, eyes scanning.

"Snake!" Dar pointed to his right.

"Got it." Andrew drew one hand up, the bulk of a large knife tucked into his fingers as he tread water watching the snake skim towards him, its rounded head about six inches off the surface.

But the snake veered off and went past him, intent on some target that wasn't a large human being blocking his way. Andrew turned to watch it go, then he restored the knife to its sheath under the water and continued to swim towards the shore.

"Hm." Dar said.

"Hm." Kerry echoed.

Dar went to the back deck and picked up the backpack she'd put on the boat. She opened up one of the encasements and removed a large dry bag from it, putting the backpack inside the drybag and closing the top of it.

Kerry had grabbed one of the smaller bags and dropped her camera and her sat phone into it.

Dar went and opened the hatch in the back deck that would allow them to walk onto the fantail, where there was a ladder that could be extended into the water.

"Did you bring the keys?" Kerry asked. "I don't really want to come back here to find out someone stole our boat, hon."

Dar paused, regarding her. "Maybe you should stay here?" She suggested. "The gun's in the cabin, right?" She added. "Because that's a damn good point. Even if I take the startup key, if someone lets the anchor loose this thing is heading for Havana with that current."

"We don't want that to happen." Kerry said, somberly. "But I don't really want to not go with you either." She pondered. "Why not stay here and let Dad explore?"

Dar considered that, leaning both hands against the back wall of the deck. "I could." She admitted.

"But you don't want to." Kerry concluded.

"I think I should go." Dar said. "I know dad's got mad skills but still."

They looked at each other for a long, silent moment. Then Kerry nodded. "Okay." She agreed. "I'll keep trying the phones." She put the small dry bag down, and watched Dar as she slid the straps of the dry bag over her shoulders and then entered the water. "Want some fins?"

Dar grabbed the edge of the fantail, judging the current. "Yep."

Kerry went and retrieved a set of them from the storage and came over to hand one and then the other to her as her partner fit them over her boots and tightened the straps. "Be careful, hon."

"I will." Dar promised. Then she released the boat and started towards the shore, the ripple from her fins stirring the surface behind her.

The water was cold after being in the heat for the ride over, and Dar briefly regretted not putting on a wetsuit for the swim into the dock. She approached the broken spars cautiously, just spotting Andrew pulling himself up onto the edge of the pier.

It was easy enough to make headway against even the brisk current with her fins, and she edged around the first broken pylon, moving aside the wood planks hanging crazily off of it as she got between the two destroyed piers.

At least there were no upended boats to get over. Most of the debris there was furniture from the deck of the sailing club, for some reason left out, and now jumbled just below the surface as she approached the shore.

Something moved and she went vertical in the water, her hands coming up defensively until she realized the small object that had emerged from the water was the head of a turtle. "Jesus, buddy."

The turtle swam past, seeming a bit confused as it sought something to haul itself up onto. It was a small animal, about the size of a salad plate and after a brief pause Dar swam after it, and grabbed hold of its shell.

It's small legs churned in the water, trying to get away from her, but she went shoreward again to the seawall that Andrew had climbed up onto, dragging the turtle with her until she reached the concrete wall. "Hang on." She put one hand on the wall and hoisted the turtle up with the other, placing him on the surface of the dock and out of the ocean wash.

The turtle scrambled away from her, as Dar gave her fins a kick and pulled herself up, turning around and sitting down on the concrete facing the boat. She gazed across at the Dixie, spotting Kerry on the flying bridge, watching her.

She lifted her hand and waved, and her partner waved back. With a contented grunt, Dar removed the fins from her boots and set them down on the ground, then she stood up, dripping seawater everywhere and feeling quite soggy in her cotton twill pants and shirt.

With the humidity, she'd never dry. Dar sighed and skirted the fins, leaving them on the edge of the wall as she tramped across the sailing club deck, stepping over a fallen palm tree and a pile of twisted aluminum which had once been part of a patio awning.

She walked along the side of the club, whose windows were covered in plywood and whose back door had, incongruously, two large refrigerators placed across it.

It was quiet. A loose piece of plywood swung in the wind, slamming fitfully against the wall. She walked along the sidewalk to the front of the club, towards the road it sat on. It was, once, lined with tall, graceful palm trees but now they were all collapsed, two of them on top of cars that had been left in the room, and a third having taken down the electrical and phone cables hanging from a pole that had snapped in half.

In the near distance, a car alarm was going off. She could also hear, on the wind, the sound of generators.

She climbed over one of the palm trees and ducked under a second, squeezing between two cars in the road and across the sidewalk on the other side. Beyond that was a gravel yard, with a boat lift, and past that a coral wall, old and discolored, that ran along the back of the property their office sat on.

Her father was nowhere in sight. The office sat in a commercial area, and there were no houses nearby, the block had been deserted when they'd left the previous day. Dar walked past the coral wall and could see the back of the office.

She could see the angle of the roof, and the loading dock, and she went between the heavy ficus trees across the back, emerging across the delivery tarmac to get a good view of the building.

There was no building debris on the ground, which she considered a good sign. She walked up the steps onto the loading dock and then circled the wall and headed along it towards the front on the footpath that circled the office between the line of trees and the structure.

The window boards were all still in place. She thought for a moment how much they likely owed her father for that. Along the left hand side, trees were down everywhere and as she reached the corner, one of the huge ficus there was uprooted entirely and blocked the whole road.

She heard Andrew's voice, and as she came around the corner she saw him, and Carlos on the porch talking. The big muscular guard seemed none the worse for wear, though he was in a tank top and shorts. He spotted her and waved.

"Hey boss!"

Dar climbed up onto the porch, noting that above her head, even the company sign was still firmly bolted into place. "Hey."

"We've been trying to call you all." Carlos held up the sat phone. "It just won't get a line out. Keeps saying it's busy, busy busy." He half turned. "The place did all right! I was listening on the radio, and other places got trashed. My apartment's roof's gone."

"Wow." Dar said. "Glad you were here then?"

"Glad I was here, and my buds too." Carlos nodded. "No power though. It's kind of a mess inside, some of the skylights blew out and we got rained on, and when the storm hit.. holy damn.. wave came right up and came right through up to the windows on the first floor. See?"

They looked at the wall, which had waterstains and debris along it.

"We set up a grill in the middle there." Carlos said. "That did pretty good, and Scott's bus lived." He turned and pushed the door open behind him. "Wanna scout it out? I figured you would show up here.. Pete heard boat engines off in the distance."

"That was us. Kerry's guarding the Dixie." Dar agreed. "Let me see how bad it is in here, and then try to give her a call."

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"We're by the edge of the water, near the office." Kerry was saying into the phone. "Dar and her dad went onshore to check things out. I'm guarding the boat."

"Guarding the boat?" Ceci asked, in a somewhat surprised tone.

"Well." Kerry glanced to one side. "It's pretty creepy out here and it's getting dark. I've got the shotgun out and loaded. Dar didn't want to take a chance of anything happening to the Dixie and stranding us."

"Oh. That makes sense." Her mother in law agreed. "Is it tied up at the dock there?"

"Nothing left of the dock here." Kerry said. "Or not much, anyway. Just a lot of broken pylons. The whole Dinner Key marina is trashed."

"Saw that on the news." Ceci said. "Some of the flooding is going down, but they got nothing on the power yet. National Guard is starting to do some searching."

"I heard the helicopters."

"They had to ground them. Wind's too heavy." Ceci reported. "So far they say about a hundred people dead, and a couple thousand in the hospital, but no idea what percentage of reality that is."

Kerry sighed. She was sitting on the bridge of the Dixie, in the chair Dar usually used, and she had the floodlight lit pointing at the edge of the land where Dar and Andy had climbed out as darkness was starting to fall. "Yeah." She said. "And I haven't heard from any of our other folks. I tried calling Mayte and Maria, no answer."

"It's probably still the weather." Ceci said, in a consoling tone. "Hopefully you all make it back here soon before it's too graveyard dark."

Kerry grimaced a little at the term. "It's creepy out here. I'll sure give you that." She admitted. "Postapocalyptic, actually." She thought she saw some motion, and shifted, one hand dropping casually down to rest on the stock of the shotgun on the seat next to her.

"People are starting to gather in the streets here." Ceci said. "Catering'll probably show up any minute."

Kerry chuckled a little bit. "Okay, let me turn on some more lights here. I thought I saw someone heading this way." She said. "Talk to you in a bit." She hung up the satellite phone, then, pausing a moment she consulted a small list on the back and tried dialing Mayte's line again.

Just a busy signal. With a sigh, she canceled the call, and then she got up and went to the searchlight, turning it slightly. She was rewarded with the sight of two tall figures coming from between the boathouse and the downed trees.

Dar was slightly in the lead, and she could now see that her partner was sans the dry bag she'd taken with her and watching her body language carefully, Kerry calculated that the news at least was not entirely horrible.

She wished she could take the boat closer or that Dixie carried a small punt as some of the other large pleasure craft did, but she did what she could, starting up the engines as they entered the water, Dar pausing to retrieve the fins she'd left on the dock.

She went down the ladder and went to the back deck, going through the hatch and tipping the dive ladder into the water as the two swimmers approached and came around the stern to where she was standing. She had the back deck lit, and a couple of towels ready, and she backed up a step out of the way as Andrew pulled himself up. "Hey dad."

"Lo Kumquat." Andy cleared out of the way for Dar to climb up after him. "Them kids in there are all okay."

Kerry felt a sense of relief. "Glad to hear that."

"Office is a mess." Dar said, as she took the towel being handed to her. "Roof's in one piece, but the pressure sucked out two of the skylights and there's water damage everywhere."

"Ah."

Dar sat down on the edge of the platform wall, wiping her face. "Whole lower floor got flooded up the ceiling." She said briefly. "I think we're going to have to replace all the walls and the flooring." She looked at Kerry. "No idea when we can get back in there really and work."

Andrew had gone up onto the back deck and taken off the heavy cotton shirt he'd been wearing, draping it over one of the equipment prongs and wrapping the towel around his neck. "Some mess." He agreed. "Carpet's going to come on out of there and the plaster off them walls."

Kerry considered, folding her arms. "Once they have power back on we can see where to start." She concluded. "I'm just glad Carlos and his friends are safe. That's what matters." She exhaled. "I only wish I could get hold of Maria or Mayte."

"Carlos says he couldn't get his phone to work either. I left him mine." Dar said. "And some of the supplies I brought with me. They were putting up a pot of chili outside when we left." She stood up. "Let me just change and I'll pull the anchor. We were starting to see some folks roaming around down there when we came through to the pier."

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It was quiet, and absolutely deserted as Dar carefully maneuvered the Dixie back into her slip in the marina. The floodlights were on, outlining the overturned boats and destroyed docks, but they brought the only sound with them, the low rumble of the twin inboard engines.

Andy was standing on the bow, hands braced on the railing. Kerry was on the back deck, one foot up on the gunwale waiting to hop off to tie them up.

It was full dark. The air was a little drier, but fitful gusts of wind were still coming through and Dar felt them stir her hair and she lifted one hand off the controls for long enough to put it back behind her ears, glad they were back inside the marina.

The water level had dropped, Dar noticed, tide was out and had taken some of the flooding with it. She could see the edge of the island once more in dry air, where there had been high water levels before they'd left and near the seawall she was approaching a land crab scurried off out of the way.

She put the engines in neutral and let the boat drift a little, coming past her parent's craft as the current nudged her towards the dock. The marina building was dark and deserted and she figured everyone was finally getting a little rest.

She was glad they might now as well. She was tired, and the salt tinged wind had her eyes burning a little and her lips chapped, and she felt more than a little depressed about what they'd seen.

Onshore, she saw motion and looked up into the shadows to see their cart coming down off the ridge towards them, with her mother driving it.

It made her smile. She felt the edge of the boat gently impact the rubber bumpers, and she cut the engines as Kerry jumped to the dock and wrapped the aft rope around the nearby cleat. "We're back." She commented to nobody, making a note of the diesel levels and the charge of the batteries.

Once the engines were stilled, she could then hear the far off rumble of the island generators, and the creak of the pylons as Kerry tightened the forward line, and the boat went still. She turned off the controls and turned, making her way down the ladder as Andrew came around from the bow.

"Glad them boys ended up okay." He said, as they joined Kerry on the dock. "Figure we should go on back there tomorrow and get stuff on out of there."

"Because of the water damage?" Kerry asked, as they started up the dock towards the oncoming cart.

"Looters." Andrew said, briefly. "Won't take long."

Dar nodded. "Yeah." She said. "I mean, those are all big guys." She added. "But it gets pretty dangerous pretty fast."

Kerry pondered that as she trailed along in Dar's footsteps. "Wow." She finally said as they reached the golf cart. "Here I was picturing people helping each other."

"There's some of that too." Dar conceded. "They'll send the national guard in, and all that but everyone's pretty fast to take advantage at a time like this. Especially downtown where all the evacuations were."

"That sucks." Kerry said.

"It does." Dar slid into the back seat and exhaled. "What's up here, mom?"

"Not a damn thing." Ceci supplied amiably. "They announced a buffet up at the mansion for everyone. I thought it would be fun to go over there and see what that was all about." She said. "Those uniformed manbots came around with what looked like a mimeographed paper for all the things they were doing."

"Sure, why not." Dar said. "Faster than cooking up our beanie weenies."

"Sounds good to me, too." Kerry said. "It's a mess by the office." She added. "But everyone's all right."

"Suspected it would be." Ceci said. "There's a lot of trees around there. A lot of damage?"

"Water." Andrew supplied. "Them vents got sucked up out the roof."

"Ew."

"We're going to have to put in new carpets and drywall." Dar sighed. "I gotta figure out where we're going to work from. Where's the storm now?"

"Haven't looked in an hour or so." Ceci said. "I've been driving around annoying the neighbors."

"Why d'you want to do that for?" Andrew asked, eyeing his wife. "Aint crazy enough today?"

"Why not?" Ceci navigated a large puddle in the road as they headed towards the looming bulk of the Vanderbilt Mansion. "After all, you got to enrage the entire boating populace of this island of misfit toys and swim ashore in downtown Miami."

Kerry muffled a smile, and felt Dar move a little as she silently laughed. "They should all be glad they're here." Kerry said. "Mainland's a real mess not to mention no power."

"Exactly." Ceci steered around a downed tree and they pulled up through the entrance to the mansion where a cluster of haphazardly parked carts blocked any further progress. "They need to shut the duck up and realize how lucky they are."

They found a spot for the cart and got out, making their way through the crowd of vehicles to the front steps. There were still covers over the windows, but the lights were on inside and as they approached the doors a puff of chilled air hit them.

Chilled air and the scent of wood soap and Sterno. The terrazzo floors were covered with rubber mats, far different than the woolen rugs that were usually there and unlike its usual pristine and sedate décor there were boxes and carts against the walls and the stairwells had cases of water on their landings.

Inside the lower lobby there were island staff in jeans and tshirts, with some trays of plastic cups filled with what seemed to be wine and one of them spotted them and came over to offer them some. "Roberts family! Welcome."

"Hey Juan." Dar picked up a cup of white wine and handed it over to Kerry and then took one for herself. "Everything survive here okay?"

"This place?" Juan looked around. "Heck yeah. Old man Vanderbilt knew what he was doing." He said. "Water came up over the pool and was up the back stairs out there." He pointed over his shoulder. "But they had all that covered and it went back down again. But whoa, it left a shark in the pool."

"The swimming pool?" Kerry asked. "A shark? What are they going to do with it?"

Juan nodded. "Grounds too soggy to bring over the boat lift to get it out. No idea what they're gonna do." He pointed to the dining room, past a pair of tall wooden doors. "There's some food set up in there, it's kinda pick your own today. They just put out what they had, you know?"

"Maybe they got some ritz crackers then." Andrew said. "C'mon you all."

They went into the large dining room, which usually had tables set up in an elegant pattern, with crisp white linen and china. Now the tables were bare, exposing their plywood reality and one side of the room had been cleared to allow a long row of banquet style supports filled with chafing dishes.

Scattered at various tables were groups of their neighbors and there was a buzz of conversation in the air. The overhead speakers which usually had refined classical music playing were silent, but there was a large television on a cart near the back wall, with a cable running from it through the door, one of the local stations on the air.

The plates were Chinet heavy paperware, and the silverware was plastic. Kerry picked up some of both and moved down the line. There were various manufactured salads, potato and carrot, and some plain lettuce shredded into chunks with plastic jugs of dressing nearby.

Completely unlike what was usually served in the room. Kerry smiled to herself, having eaten there occasionally with Dar, neither of them particularly fond of the place and its staid pretensions preferring either the beach club or the trattoria near the docks.

She regarded the lettuce, then she kept moving, choosing some Salisbury steaks and mac and cheese, and two grape tomatoes to add a colorful touch.

"Mm." Dar sounded pleased with the choices. "This is not too bad."

"I think they have chocolate pudding on the other side hon." Kerry said, as she half turned and scanned the room, selecting a table near some of their more amiable neighbors. "I'll be over at that second one there." She pointed.

"Be there in a minute."

Kerry walked over to the table and set down her plate and cup, giving the woman nearest to her a brief nod. "Hey Jalinta."

The dark haired and deeply tanned woman nodded back. "Everything is okay at your house?" She asked, in south American tinged speech. "My husband is stuck in El Salvador. He is very upset he missed this." She had a bowl of rice and beans, and a piece of chicken on her plate.

"Everything's fine." Kerry sat down. "I wouldn't have minded missing this. That was pretty scary last night."

"Si." Jalinta nodded. "It was. How are your doggies?" She squeezed a bit of lime over her rice.

"Oh, they're fine." Kerry smiled. "They've got no idea what happened in our backyard though. What a mess." She glanced up as Dar came over to sit down next to her. Andrew and Ceci were still at the buffet line, having a conversation with two men standing at the end of it.

"I was watching on the television the damage." Jalinta said, lowering her voice a little. "It is terrible." She shook her head solemnly. "Very terrible. At the airport, many airplanes are upside down."

"We were over near Coconut Grove. It is." Kerry agreed. "Huge amount of clean up they're going to do." She fork cut a piece of her Salisbury steak and ate it. "Where is.. " She looked up at the television. "Ah, okay. Wow."

"It is huge." Jalinta followed her gaze. "They are running away in North Carolina." She paused, mixing her rice and her beans. "You said you were in the city?" She asked. "I know they said we cannot get off the island."

"We took our boat." Kerry explained briefly. "Our office is near the water, we wanted to see how bad it was." She was aware she was getting a side look with more than a tinge of disbelief. "Yeah, it was a little chancy, but Dar's a good captain and Andy's retired Navy. It went fine."

Andrew and Ceci arrived and took seats at their table. "Lo." Andrew greeted Jalinta, before he tucked into the cheeseburger on his plate. "Them fellers want me to give them a hand tomorrow." He told Dar and Kerry. "Told them has to be sun up cause we got things to get done."

"At least they asked nicely." Ceci regarded her plate full of miscellaneous non animal food items with relative content. "Best thing I've had here yet." She announced. "They should cater natural disasters more often."

Clemente, the manager of resident services came across the room and took a seat at their table. "Hello there." He said. "We are arranging for deliveries of supplies. What can we get for you?"

All four of them regarded Clemente in silence for a moment. "I think we're okay." Dar finally said, pausing in her decimation of a hot dog. "We've got supplies in the house. Water still okay?"

Clemente nodded. "We have a treatment plant on the west side of the island." He said. "So we are fine. You have everything you need? If you do not, we will have our staff coming by in the morning and please tell them." He patted the table. "Please enjoy your dinners."

He got up and went to the next table, one of his minions scurrying over to join him with a pad and pen.

"So the kids are all okay?" Ceci asked, as they were left in relative peace. "Glad to hear that. I was a little doubtful about leaving them there, so close to the bay."

"Carlos and his gang came through fine, yeah." Kerry said. "And we've heard from Colleen, Mark and Scott up in Melbourne." She said. "Nothing from Mayte or Maria though, and I'm really getting concerned about them." She forked up some of her mac and cheese. "We go back tomorrow."

Dar nodded. "I have to figure out where we're going to put the code repository and where we can get people back to work on in." She picked up a potato chip, dunked it in some ketchup and ate it. "No way to know when they can even get power back there, much less the rest of it."

Kerry nodded. "You think Melbourne?" She asked. "We can probably get space up there where the call center guys are."

"Maybe." Dar said. "Problem is, all our folks are here and we've got no idea what's going on with them." She pondered the last bit of her hot dog. "This is a mess."

"Why not bring your stuff back here." Ceci suggested. "We have power and AC." She said. "You could rent one or two of those cottages around the corner. String some cable between them." She picked up a pickle and bit into it. "Bring all the nerds here and really drive them crazy."

"That's not a bad idea." Kerry said, after a brief pause. She put her fork down and got up. "Let me go put a bug in Clemente's ear and grab them." She pushed her chair in and went after the services manager, who was now a few tables away.

"I'm pretty sure those cottages don't have enough power to run our gear." Dar said. "But we can arrange for temporary runs." She glanced at her mother. "But you're right it's going to drive these people nuts, and if power stays off on the mainland, all the big shots are going to want to stay here."

"Screw em. We get there first." Ceci smiled. Andy just chuckled and shook his grizzled dark head, leaning back to pick up a cup off one of the trays being passed nearby.

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It felt amazingly good to lay down in bed, in the cool comfort of their home with the knowledge that no storm was going to interrupt their night's rest. Kerry stifled a yawn and stretched, feeling the water bed's surface shift under her.

Outside in the living room she could hear the drone of the television, but she had no desire to go and look at it, see the scenes of destruction played over and over again.

It reminded her, a little, of what it had been like after the terrorist attack on 9/11. Those same images in a neverending loop, until you just got exhausted from it.

Now that it was dark, there was no new news, really. Just a recap of the day, the starting of – not recovery, but a sense that a reckoning was still being taken, that a corner had not yet been turned.

There were two hundred and fifty known dead people, but everyone knew there were more, buried under rubble or washed out to sea. Some of the hospitals were in trouble – their generators weren't functioning and shelters were overrun with people escaping from the ruins of their homes.

The pictures drove home to her, in a very sobering way, just how lucky she and Dar were, and what exactly their means had provided for them.

But tomorrow they would be out early, in the heat and the mess, she knew she had a long day of sweating and labor ahead of her.

Dar came into the room, closing the sat phone in her hand up and plugging it into the charging cable on the table next to the bed. Then she sat down on the bed and then lay back, stretching her arms out across the shifting surface. "That was Mark."

"How's things with him?"

"They're okay. He's going to take his bike and meet us at the office tomorrow." Dar said. "He thinks the idea of using this place here is pretty good, except we don't have comms."

"No, but nothing really does around here."

"True." Dar agreed. "If we can get the core programmers here and working locally, it gives us time to get something set up further upstate though."

"That's just the repository Dar." Kerry said. "My problem is, the rest of our systems have to talk to the world. I can't get anything else going. We can't order or pay bills or any of that." She turned her head and looked at her partner. "So we need to get that part somewhere we can reach it."

Dar nodded. "Agreed." She said. "We have payroll on Friday."

Kerry put her hands behind her head and regarding the ceiling. "One thing I'm not worried about paying is the rent on that building, because I'll be damned, you know? Not after what we had to do to board it up."

"Could be the least of our problems." Dar rolled onto her side and propped her head up on one fist. "What are the chances that landlord's going to have the resources to start fixing that place before his insurance pays?"

Kerry grimaced.

"Ah well." Dar rolled over and got up. "Let me go shut off that damn TV. I'm tired of listening to it."

Kerry rolled off the other side of the bed and followed her, wanting a hot cup of tea to end the night with. She diverted into the kitchen while Dar went to find the remote, and started some hot water going as she casually glanced out the window in the kitchen.

It was very dark. She went over and opened the door to the back yard and walked out onto the top of the steps as the moon emerged from the clouds and spread a silver blanket over the ocean very near by.

The water level had dropped. It was once more beyond the wall outside their yard, and she could see the edge of the seawall above the waves again. There were still some rollers coming in, but the surface of the water had calmed, and only had normal ruffles of white offshore.

She could smell strongly the salt, and the tang of seaweed lining the shoreline and the pungent scent of bruised vegetation.

Chino came out on the steps behind her, tail waving idly. Then Mocha bustled past and ran down the steps, eliciting a bark of objection from the older Lab.

"No crabs!" Kerry called out. She heard the kettle chime behind her and she returned to the kitchen, leaving the door open for the dogs to return. She found Dar getting herself a glass of milk, and they stood together in silence for a few minutes.

Dar rinsed her glass and put it in the rack to dry and then she turned and folded her arms. "Remind me to load our gear onto the boat tomorrow."

Kerry's brows creased.

"Our dive gear." Dar clarified. "I just realized while I was standing here that trying to swim to the boat with our server rig isn't a great idea."

Kerry's brows creased even further. "So... you're going to take it underwater?"

Dar looked at her. "I'm going to see what we need to do to bring Dixie into a dock there, hon." She said. "C'mon."

Kerry chuckled a little in embarrassment. "Sorry. It's late and I'm exhausted." She went to the door and whistled. "Lets go, kids!" She called out. "We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

Dar came up behind her and encircled her with both arms, as they watched the dogs make their way back to the steps, noses pinned to the ground. "We'll figure it out." She concluded. "We always do."

"We always do."

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The next morning brought clearer skies, a stiff onshore wind to ruffle the waters, and more activity around the marina as everyone adjusted to the new disaster shaped reality and started to get on with recovering things.

Kerry walked in and out of the early morning sun with a coffee cup in either hand, moving along the dock that bordered the marina and towards the Dixie. She had on hiking boots and cargo pants, and a tank top with a light cotton shirt over it in deference to the sun.

Dar was on the back deck stowing their diving gear and she looked up as she heard Kerry's footsteps, walking to the edge of the boat and reaching over to take one of the two cups as Kerry stepped onto the gunwale and then down onto the deck. "Busy?"

"Busy." Kerry confirmed. "And your dad's the most popular man on this side of the island it seems. He's over near the tent they set up next to the marina building giving advice to everyone."

Dar chuckled as she took a sip of the coffee. "People are idiots. He offered to tell them how to secure these damn boats before the storm got here. You think anyone listened?"

"You did."

"He's my father." Dar said. "Of course I did and anyway he did most of it himself." Dar moved over and sat down in one of the deck chairs. "I think that's everything." She indicated the boxes on the deck. "Carlos said they managed to get a generator going."

"From where?"

"Didn't ask." Dar said, briefly. "He said two or three of our staff just showed up."

Kerry sat down in the other deck chair. "For work?" She hazarded. "Or breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Okay we should probably get going then." Kerry said. "Let me finish this and go get Dad."

Dar extended her long legs out and crossed them at the ankles. She was wearing neoprene booties and light cotton pants over her bathing suit, her shoulders bared to the sun. She sipped her coffee while watching the breeze ruffle the water, appreciating the moments of peace before what she reckoned would be a very busy day.

There was no power at all on the mainland all the way up to Palm Beach. Some emergency locations, hospitals and the emergency management stations had it from generators, but large areas were blocked off by flooding and downed trees.

The national guard was starting to slowly move in. She could hear helicopters in the distance.

The storm was inching its way up the east coast, now a category 4. It was skirting the edge of the Carolinas and there was flooding there, as the hurricane had slowed down, pumping rain inland as the weather team raced to cover it.

Leaving the devastation in South Florida behind, as they often did. The only silver lining to that in Dar's view was that she was relatively sure it was distracting her major government customers for the moment and that might give her a chance to get things sorted out.

With all the destruction it seemed crazy to be worried about that but she was. The weight of the commitments she'd made to deliver that contract felt heavy on her shoulders, and so, in a funny way she was thankful Hurricane Bob was on his way right up the coast towards them, a big, dangerous storm people in those parts were not used to dealing with.

Dar sighed. She watched a seagull come drifting in, coasting into the marina as though surveying the upended boats, pausing in mid air, and then diving down to pick up a bit of debris in the water.

She watched it float for a moment, then she got up and climbed the ladder to the flying bridge and went to the controls, setting her cup down into one of the gimbaled holders.

Across the marina she could see Kerry talking to Andrew near the tent, and then she spotted the marina manager heading down the dock towards the Dixie.

She delayed starting the engines and went back down the ladder instead, coming to the side of the boat as he reached it. "Morning Jack."

"Hey Ms Roberts." The dockmaster said. "You off to the Grove again?"

"We are." Dar said. "Bringing some supplies to our staff there, and seeing what we're going to have to do to get things done."

Jack nodded. "Can I ask you for a favor?" He said. "I got about ten guys who could really help us out here but John said even the work barges won't be moving for a couple days. Could they catch a ride back with you?"

"Won't be till late." Dar said. "But if they can get down to sailing club marina down there, sure."

"Great." Jack said. "They can't come out until later anyway. Most of them have stuff to do at their own places, you know? But I offered them a hot shower and AC." He winked.

Dar chuckled in reflex. "Yup. That'd do it." She agreed. "I could probably rent the head in this boat by the minute once we're parked down there. Sun'll be out all day and it's going to be steamy." She looked past Jack to see Kerry and Andrew coming towards them, and behind them there were three men following. "Hey."

Jack turned and then put one hand out onto the pylon. "Morning."

"Hey Dardar." Andrew said. "You go on out, and I'm gonna follow you along there." He pointed at the boat behind Dar's. "Give these here fellers a ride ovah to the Coast Guard station."

"Sounds good." Dar said. "I'm going to park by the same spot we did yesterday and do a quick look under there to see if we can get closer."

"Yeap." Her father nodded. "Keep your ears on." He motioned the three men past the boat and they followed him, giving Dar and Kerry, and then Jack, polite nods.

"Do we know those guys?" Kerry asked, in a low tone.

"They work for one of the residents." Jack said, after the men had all boarded the boat behind them. "They seem a little..." He made a face.

"Spooky?" Dar asked, with a faint smile. "As in, maybe they have an ID somewhere?"

"Yeah." Jack said. "They're definitely military or something. The guy they work for is a retired something or other from the government. They're nice. I like them, but they always have that look, you know?"

"They remind me of secret service." Kerry said. "So I get why they get along with dad." She circled Dar and went into the cabin of the Dixie. "I'm going to rearrange the boxes in here, Dar. In case you hit some waves."

Jack looked at Dar with a puzzled expression.

"Kerry's family's involved in the government." Dar explained. "Her mom's a senator."

"Really?" Jack sounded surprised. "Oh wait, now I remember someone saying that sometime... from Michigan, right?"

"Right."

"Anyway, you all be careful and thanks for the favor, Ms Roberts. I'll tell those guys to be down by the sailing club before it gets dark." Jack lifted his hand. "Want me to let you loose?"

"Let me get the engines on first." Dar said. She went up to the bridge and settled into the captain's seat, starting up the inboards as she heard Andrew do the same behind her. "Call us on the radio if you need anything, Jack!" She called over the side of the boat.

Jack waved, and went over to the forward ropes, untying them and tossing them onto the deck. "They just got the marina radio going." He yelled back. "Heard there were some idiots near Star on jetskis. Watch out for em!"

Dar lifted her hand in response, as he walked past towards the larger boat behind them, and she nudged the engines into gear as they drifted away from the dock.

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Dar tightened the strap on her gear and eased into the water, using the ladder to lower herself into the green blue depths that surrounded the boat. She was wearing a dive skin, in deference to the potential wreckage under water and she pulled on a pair of gloves and fastened the wrist holds to keep them in place.

Kerry was on the deck, on the sat phone, watching her. "I hear ya Coll. I just got off the phone with the team upstate and they got hold of some office footprint next to them."

"Be right back." Dar told her, before she submerged her head and let herself sink under the surface, the cool water penetrating her dive skin as she adjusted her gear, tightening the tank a bit and rerouting her regulator as she looked around.

What was left of the club marina was a mess.

Literally a mess. The structure of the dock was collapsed in on itself and as she swam slowly under the water, exhaling bubbles, fish darted in all directions away from her, then drifted back as they explored this new world they now inhabited.

The visibility underwater was limited. The storm had churned up the bottom and it was hard to see much. Dar went ahead cautiously, unsure of what she was going to encounter, unable to clearly see details until she was almost within reach of things.

The pylons that had supported the aluminum walkways were skewed and in some cases, split in half. The walkways themselves were twisted into a maze of wreckage that, though interesting if diving for pleasure, were nothing but obstructions right now.

The Dixie was anchored about fifty feet offshore. Dar could feel the current pulling against her as she made her way towards the rock lined shore, searching for a path that would allow the boat closer to land. Her bubbles sounded loud in her ears as she paused, then reached out to tug on a bit of debris.

It moved a bit and she tugged harder, pulling a stretch of aluminum decking towards her and away from a set of still intact pylons.

She measured the space with her eyes, then she finned to the surface, emerging with her head out of the water as she moved in a circle.

The Dixie was drifting about thirty feet away and as she tipped her head up she spotted Kerry on the bridge with a set of binoculars, keeping her in view. She waved, then went back under the water.

Well, it would get them a bit closer. Turning with her back to the boat, she regarded the narrow wedge of relatively clear space. If she brought the Dixie in here, they could tie up to the pylon at the top end, which was partially extruding into the open air.

She swam over to it, and shoved against it, then grabbed hold of it and tugged, to judge it's general permanence. It didn't budge in either direction so she grunted in satisfaction, then turned and nearly levitated out of the water as she found herself face to face with a massive grouper.

A burst of bubbles came out of her regulator along with an audible squawk and she instinctively tucked her hands under her arms, moving back away from the large fish as it watched her with one of it's large, round eyes, opening it's wide jaw as it swam easily against the current.

She got her back against a piece of aluminum debris and put her hand on the hilt of the dive knife strapped across her chest as the big fish, easily three hundred pounds sauntered past, inspecting the wreckage as smaller fish darted around.

Grouper generally weren't dangerous. However, they had big jaws and sharp teeth and Dar didn't want to take any chances. She waited for it to disappear into the murky distance before she went over to the pylon and removed a safety sausage from a clip on her gear, inflating it and tying it off.

The sausage was a bright orange tube, meant to bob to the surface and mark a position. After it was tied firmly in place, she heard the hoot of the Dixie's horn as Kerry spotted it.

Then she went to the other edge of the open space and deployed a second sausage, which would give her a target when she was steering the Dixie in.

She checked one more time the wreckage, pulling some out of the way of the passage and looking for anything that might get caught up into the boat's engines before she made her way back to the Dixie's anchor line, barely visible in the murky gloom.

She swam under the boat, seeing the edge of the dive ladder moving in the current ahead of her. She grabbed it and swung around under it, then paused with her head still submerged to remove her fins and fit their straps around her wrists.

The boat was moving with the waves, and she waited a moment for the ladder to come a bit deeper before she got her booties onto the bottom step and lifted herself up out of the water as the chop lifted the aft of the boat upward.

Kerry was standing in the dive well, already reaching out to grab her tank yoke. "I saw the markers come up."

"Yeah. I heard the horn." Dar climbed up and moved into the well alongside her, shoving her mask down around her neck and leaning forward to toss her fins into the back deck. "Not much space, but it's a little better."

"Our team thinks so." Kerry told her. "They're dragging debris out to try and make a plank for us pirates to walk." She moved aside as Dar slid her tank into the clamps and released the straps off her rig attached to it. "Carlos said they spotted the Dixie coming in."

"Yeah?" Dar stood up and walked over to the edge of the well, peering around the side of the boat to where she could now also see the sausage bobbing at the surface. Past it were a half dozen figures on shore, two of them carrying over what looked like a door. "Huh."

"Colleen's picked up two of her people, and one of the receptionists and she's on her way upstate. Took her almost three hours to get gas and that was only by bribing the station owner." Kerry went on, as she shut off the air in Dar's tank and secured it. "I told her of course to expense it."

"The gas or the bribe?" Dar found the whole thing a little surreally funny. She stood still as Kerry came over with the fresh water hose and rinsed her off, blinking at the faintly chlorine scent. "Thanks."

"No problem hon." Kerry finished with the hose and then handed Dar over a fluffy towel. "Not that you really need this with the breeze and that sun you'll be dry in a minute."

Dar dried her head with the towel, and then unzipped her dive skin and pulled it down to her waist, tying the arms off to keep it in place. "Okay let me move the boat in. We can tie off to that structure where the marker is. It's pretty secure." She headed for the ladder. "Keep your eyes out I'm gonna pull up the anchor."

"Yup." Kerry got up onto the side of the boat and walked up to the bow, as she felt the rumble and heard the anchor chain retracting and the Dixie started drifting in the current.

The engines caught a moment later and she could feel the motion as they moved towards the shore, the breeze fluttering her shirt against her body.

There was a small crowd onshore. Carlos was there and two of their programmers, and as she watched one of Carlos' gym buddies crawled out along the split edge of the dock, dragging along a piece of wood and wedging it in place.

It occurred to her, just for a moment, that doing this on their own was probably a little strange. There were probably people somewhere on shore, watching this bunch of nerds with flotsam and jetsam and a pleasure yacht thinking what in the actual hell were they doing?

Probably most everyone else were watching the battery powered televisions or walking out to find gas for their generators or waiting for help to show up, based on what she'd seen on the screen before they'd left. The sound of a helicopter in the distance made her wonder how long it would be before someone told someone about them and they'd end up a feature.

With a smile, she shrugged, and then waved at the gang ashore, holding up the coiled forward rope and preparing to throw it over.

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"Get that barrel." Carlos said, pointing towards what had been the bar area of the sailing club. "If we put that in the water there, we can prop this board on it."

"Got it." His buddy replied, dusting his hands off and climbing up the beach to the ruined pool deck. He skirted the debris filled pool and went behind the collapsed bar to where barrels of soda syrup were lying on their side. He pushed one, and heard it slosh inside. "Jerry, gimme a hand this one's full."

His lifting partner climbed up the deck to join him and they wrestled the barrel loose of the debris, hoisting it up and over the bar then walking with it back down towards the water.

The big Bertram yacht was tied off to the part of the dock that was still in one piece, and they had managed to get wood planks and pieces of table in place to get almost all the way out to it.

One of Carlos' bosses was standing on the shore, clothes dripping wet from the swim in, and the other was standing on the side of the boat holding one of the planks in place while the computer kid nailed it. "You know what, Mickey?"

"What?" Mickey went into the water up to his knees and got the barrel wedged in place.

"Glad we came down here instead of staying by that apartment. I bet those guys are still stuck on the second floor sweating their asses off."

"Yeah. This is okay." Mickey agreed. "Nice breeze and a little workout." He straightened up and nodded. "That'll hold up." He turned and watched the other computer guy get out on the planks, as the woman on the boat started bringing boxes out. "Lets go see what that is."

They walked over to the edge of the twisted end of the dock and joined Carlos and the blond woman he was talking to. "Think that'll be okay."

Carlos nodded vigorously. "Yeah, so Kerry, we got a lot of stuff cleared out and onto the delivery dock at the office. Mick and Jerry were awesome." He said. "And some other people just showed up there too.. they said they knew you."

"Knew me?" Kerry asked. "Boy, that could be either good or bad." She said. "Were they customers or.."

Carlos shook his head. "Didn't stop to talk to them since we saw the boat coming in. We cleared a path up to the office from here. We were trying to find a flatbed cart but we figured we could get some stuff up by carrying it anyway."

Kerry ran her fingers through her drying hair. "Well, we've got a bunch of supplies. Dar's dad'll be by in a little while he had to run some people over to the coast guard station." She said. "Lets go see if we can scrounge up something to move this stuff with since we're going to need that to move gear back down here."

She half turned. "Dar!" She let out a yell. "I'm going up to the office!"

Dar waved.

Kerry started climbing up off the wrecked dock, and they followed, leaving the others to stack boxes on the edge of the shore.

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The heat was oppressive once they got a block inland and Dar could feel the sweat gathering as they crossed the parking lot of the club and entered the back of their building.

Piled on the loading dock were stacks of soaked paneling and boxes, the large garbage container already full of stripped up carpet. "Wow." Dar said, as she walked alongside Arthur and Elvis, the two programmers. "Lot of stuff got done."

"Nothing else to do." Arthur said. "My dad was here and helped us. He was tired of watching the news."

"Know how he felt." Dar agreed, as they walked up the concrete stairs to the propped open back door.

Inside it was dark and quiet. The building was surrounded by trees, and though they had been thinned by the wind it made the inside gloomy. Dar felt the lack of the usual sound of air conditioning, and the ever present humming of electronic equipment that had been a part of her normality for as long as she could remember.

It smelled musty. The floorboards creaked as they walked down the hall, the doors on either side flung wide open and the windows facing outward open as well. What breeze there was came through it, bringing the smell of mud and garbage steaming in the sun.

The door to the server space was open, but it was dark and silent inside and Dar walked past it. Ahead of her she could hear Kerry's voice and as she passed the downstairs kitchen she could smell coffee brewing.

She paused.

"Camp stove." Carlos read her mind. "Want some java?"

"Not yet." Dar continued on, looking from side to side and frankly wondering where to start.

Not where to start cleaning up, because they had gotten a start on that. Ripping up the carpet to keep it from molding and throwing away all the things that the flooding had ruined. Dar stopped and reversed her steps, going into the server room and pulling her flashlight from her pocket.

It smelled like wet concrete in the room. She'd only spent a moment inspecting it the previous day, and now she took a little more time to look around, checking the floor with her hand. "Dry."

Carlos had come in behind her. "Yeah, water didn't come in here." He agreed. "Cause of this raised thing. I think it might have gone under it?"

Dar stood and handed him the flashlight, then she took the tile puller from the wall and knelt again, getting the suction cups in place and yanking a tile free. She set it aside and held her hand out for the light. "Lets see what this looks like."

Carlos handed her the light and then knelt next to her as she lowered her head to look under the floor and shone the light around.

She came up in a swift motion that made Carlos hop backwards. "What?" He said. "Is it bad?"

"Eyes."

Carlos stood up and looked around, finding a bit of conduit and taking hold of it. "What kind of eyes?" He asked. "Like... alligator?"

Dar picked up the tile puller and moved over a few feet.

"Are you going to pull that floor up?" Carlos said. "Should I get.. I dunno, a knife? Or a hammer or something?"

"Wasn't that big." Dar set the cups and yanked the second tile up, moving quickly aside as a moving thing sped past her, claws scrambling on the tiles as it skirted Carlos' powerful leg and bolted out the door. "Hmph."

“Whatin the hell was that?” Carlos went to the door and looked out. “Watch out everyone! Some kinda animal’s out here!”

Dar shone the light down under the floor where the eyes had been, then knelt, inspecting the multicolor cabling that ran in a number of directions. It was covered in mud and gunk, and there were leaves and debris coating it, but the strands themselves seemed to be intact.

She grunted in satisfaction and put the second tile back down then went over to the first, laying down on the floor and looking beneath it.

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Kerry looked around quickly hearing Carlo’s warning, glad they’d left the dogs behind today. “What kind of animal?” She asked, coming out of the conference room where everyone had gathered. Outside the door was the reception desk, which was covered in paper cups and gallon jugs of Publix water.

Carlos’ two friends came out after her, and their two visitors followed.

Two ILS employees in fact, security guards Celeste and Jerry, dressed in jeans and polos. They lived nearby in the Grove. “Maybe it’s a cat.” Celeste suggested. “I thought I saw one outside, and there’s dogs running loose everywhere.”

But there was no sign of anything moving. “Could have gone anywhere.” Kerry said. “Okay, so, Celeste you were saying?”

The young guard was peering around in the nearby offices. “Jerry and I live on the same block here.” She said. “We have ficus down everywhere. You can’t get a car through, but anyway, they closed the building up and sent everyone home before the storm hit.”

“Makes sense.” Kerry said. “Dar was saying no one stupid enough to stay there in that kind of storm still worked for ILS.”

Both of them looked at her, a little uncertainly.

“Meaning us.” Kerry motioned to her chest, and vaguely over her shoulder.

“Oh! Right.” Celeste laughed. “No that’s true. It’s not the same since you all left. We miss you.” She said. “We were all saying that before they sent us all home.”

Jerry nodded.

“You guys worked at the old place?” Carlos asked.

“We did.” Celeste said. “We’re security guards.”

“Me too.” Carlos grinned.

“Well, the building’s a mess. Dar and I went past it on the waterside yesterday on the way down here. Windows blown out all over the place.” Kerry paused, as she heard a helicopter rattle overhead, and as that faded, she could hear in the distance the sound of a motorcycle.

“We saw on the news.” Jerry said, with a grimace. “No way we’re going back to work in there any time soon.” He put his hands in his pockets. “So we said, hey, since we’re in the neighborhood, why not come down here and say hello.”

“That’s cool.” Carlos told them. “Want to help us around here?” He asked, after exchanging the briefest of looks with Kerry. “You can share our pizza.”

“Sure!” As though they were just waiting to be asked, which they obviously were, they joined Carlos and his friends as they went back to sorting through the debris.

Kerry watched them and put her hands in her pockets, smiling a little to herself. Then she turned and trotted up the steps to the second level.

Here, the damage was a lot less evident. The skylights were covered with garbage bags and tape, the walls were stained with rainwater, but the water that had come in had run down the stairs and through the floor and while the offices on either side of the hall were damp with humidity they were mostly intact.

She walked into the end of the hall, pausing to look into Maria's office. It stirred a pang of worry and she felt that tightening in her chest as she went through their outer office and through into her own.

Here the windows were all flung wide open and a steady breeze was coming through, and she went to the window and looked out it at the sodden destruction all around.

On the ground beneath the window were the boards that had covered them, and she could hear the sound of a power drill nearby as Arthur's father moved along the outside, removing more.

Depressing. Kerry acknowledged the knot of anxiety she felt as she looked out over what had been their quaint and laid back neighborhood, where now trees were down everywhere and the streets were debris covered and deserted.

This time of day, she usually would be going out for a walk down the street to get a cup of yogurt and get the local gossip at the café, whose roof she could see partially caved in. Dar would usually be in her office next door working at her workstation.

She could hear in her memory the quiet under her breath whistling and the soft rattle of keys. It was so odd to hear nothing but creaking and silence, and to feel muggy heat where there was always the chill of air conditioning.

She took a breath and could smell the salt tang of the sea, and the scent of bruised foliage on the walls next to where she was standing, and the faint smell of wood polish from the floors that here, in their offices hadn't been covered with carpet.

Here there had only been scatter rugs to keep the dogs from slipping, and those had been packed up as well, and she folded her arms, pondering if she should spend any time putting things back. Without any power it seemed futile, but she felt inside a desire to do it anyway.

She could hear the motorcycle getting closer now and she returned to the window and put her hands on the sill to look out and down the street, as the machine itself came into view and she recognized it and it's rider. "Mark!" She let out a yell and a wave as he came coasting into the parking lot in front.

He parked and took his helmet off, giving her wave in response as he headed for the front door standing open downstairs. As he disappeared from her sight, two bicycles came into view, the sound of their spokes audible to her from where she stood.

"Ms. Kerry!" They spotted her and called out. "Hello!"

Angela their receptionist, and one of Colleen's data entry clerks. Both girls pulled their bikes up next to where Mark was parked, and she returned their wave as they headed as well towards the door.

Why? Kerry wondered, as she backed away from the window, turning and regarding the room, cleared of all breakables and her desktop clear of any technology, stored in pelican cases just outside the door.

She detoured through Dar's office as she headed back to go downstairs and greet them. Why, with no power, and no communications, why come here? She thought about that as she left through Dar's door into their outer office, missing the sunny presence of Zoe.

Zoe, with her soft, lisping speech, who would at this time of day have been very busy with phone calls and opening the mail. Her desk was empty, her phone packed into the cases. Kerry wondered how Zoe had fared, and remembered she lived out where Maria and Mayte did.

Whole area still flooded, she'd heard. With a sigh, she headed for the stairs, the empty upper level now seeming a little creepy to her.

The sound of the newcomers now seemed loud as they all gathered near the conference room. Mark's deep voice mixed with Carlos, and Angela's lighter tones, and then Dar's distinctive speech, clear and crisp and just with that touch of music in it.

That hint of an accent that shaped a voice that was practical and pragmatic and utterly confident even when Dar herself wasn't feeling any of those things.

Kerry started down the steps and then gasped suddenly, as something came moving at her. "Yow!" She let out a yelp, jerking to a halt as she found herself facing off a large striped cat who also stopped short and hissed at her.

Predictably, Dar came bounding up onto the landing and nearly ran into the cat, who turned hastily and lifted a fully claw extended paw and hissed again.

"Hey!" Dar barked at it indignantly, coming up onto the balls of her feet and lifting both hands up in a defensive posture. "What the hell!" She glared at the cat. "Who are you hissing at you little.."

The cat put its ears flat back onto its head and closed one eye as it squinted up at her, one paw still lifted up, but the claws now retracted.

The rest of the assembled crowd came pouring around the corner hearing the commotion and Angela let out a squeak. "Oh it's Rudy!" She came forward, kneeling down and extending a hand towards the animal. "C'mere, Rudy! You must be starving!"

Dar turned in place and looked at her, both hands coming down to rest on her hips. "Rudy?"

The cat skirted Dar as widely as it could and scuttled over to where the receptionist was kneeling, accepting a head scratch. "He lives outside." Angela explained. "I feed him ham croquetas in the morning. I was worried about him, you know? I mean, he's an outside cat but still."

Kerry continued down the steps until she reached Dar's side, one step up. She rested her elbow on Dar's shoulder and regarded the cat with a bemused expression. "Is that what was under the server room floor?"

"I think so." Dar said. "It got out of there too fast for us to see it. But it was about that size." She sniffed reflectively. "Glad we didn't bring the dogs with us today. That would have been a circus."

"Mm." Kerry agreed. "Hey Mark."

"Hey Ker." Mark had shrugged out of his riding jacket in deference to the muggy heat. "This place looks better than our house does." He said. "Riding in, didn't look too bad."

"Considering how close we are to the water? No." Dar agreed. "Storm surge drained out. It's all coral edge around here, like out on the beach islands."

"No place for the water to stay." Arthur said. "That's what it looks like anyhow. Gets worse the further west you go here."

"Two of the server guys are headed in here." Mark said. "We can unrack the gear and use those pelicans up on the second level if we unpack the stuff in them now."

The rest of the group looked at him with interest. "So there's a plan?" Elvis asked. "Where are we taking the servers? Im guessing we're going where they go." He indicated Arthur and himself.

"There's a plan." Dar confirmed. "Repository's going over onto the island we live on. We got space there."

There was a moment of contemplative silence. "Oh, sweet." Arthur said. "That's where they've got all the generators right? I heard about it."

"Sweet." Elvis agreed. "Lan party at Dar's. Rockstar."

Arthur hit himself in the head. "So that's why we had to build a bridge to the boat." He said. "Not to get the water here to get the servers there."

"We're going to get to go on the boat?" Elvis seemed absolutely delighted. "This is turning out to be a lot better than I figured it would."

Dar and Kerry exchanged looks. "So now that the plans in work." Kerry said. "Mark, how do you feel about you and I taking a ride west to see if we can find out how Mayte and Maria are doing."

"Right on with that." Mark agreed. "Let me just get the server guys going when they get here, and we can take off. I don't know if my motor's gonna survive all that water, but we'll get further than a car would."

"Okay gang." Carlos said. "Lets go get those cases unpacked. It's nice an breezy up there now they got the wood off the windows."

"See?" Angela had Rudy the cat in her arms and was following them. "I told you to stick around here, Rudy. This place always has it together. No matter what's going on."

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Dar draped her shirt over the seat in the conference room, leaving her in a teal blue tank top with tropical fish on it and her cargo shorts.

Upstairs she could hear the thumps and scrapes as the team got things unpacked. Down the hall, she could hear the server techs talking, laughing, the sounds of cables being thrown out to their length down the hall and then recoiled.

Everyone was, she thought, just glad to have something to focus on that wasn't the Weather Channel.

She walked over to the jalousie cranks and worked them. "Thanks Jerry!" She called out, as the last piece of wood was removed off the windows, and they were able to open to allow in the breeze.

"Like my son said." Jerry leaned against the windows on the other side, peering in at her. "He figured if any place had things moving it would be here."

Dar grinned briefly. "He's a damn good coder." She told him. "We were lucky that day you had him stop by with his skateboard."

Jerry nodded. "Yeah, you know – we talked about it, his mom and I. Didn't figure all that gaming stuff would go anywhere and then he showed me his first pay stub from here." He started laughing. "I felt like an idiot, waiting so long to push him."

"Tech's like that." Dar agreed. "it's this generations industrial revolution."

The carpenter nodded again. "Different world." He said, briefly. "Still a place for people like me." He indicated his tool belt. "Definitely now a place for people like him." He said. "But not everyone's got a place, just like they didn't back in the day, those that drove horse buggys and the like."

"No." Dar said, after a thoughtful pause. "Techs like that too. It takes us places some people can't follow." She ran her finger along the edge of the louvered glass. "But you can't stop inventing stuff. That's not what we are, as a species."

"Hang on." Jerry seated the drill in one of the pockets of his work belt and walked around and into the entrance, then entered the conference room. "Mind if I grab a drink?" He said, then did as Dar waved a hand at the table which was covered in bags of chips, bags of granola bars, gallon jugs of warm ice tea, and other items. "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"No." Dar sat down and was drawing on a large pad of graph paper, with their company name and logo on it. "Have at it."

Jerry sat down in one of the chairs and stretched his feet out, his work boots covered in grass and mud and speckled with paint and glue. "You hired that boy in the chair."

Dar glanced up at him. "Scott?"

He nodded. "Why?" He asked. "What you pay, you can hire anyone. Why that kid off the street?"

Dar considered the question, as she sketched out a design diagram for how she wanted the servers set up once they got the mess of them over to the island. "Because he's a good tech." She finally said. "What I've gotten out of screwing around with this stuff the amount of time I have is that you gotta have a specific set of skills to do it."

Jerry just waited for her to continue.

"Logical common sense is probably the rarest of them." Dar said. "He has it. I didn't care what his other issues were. I wanted that skill." She looked up at him. "Was it also a decent human thing to do? Sure." She said. "But if he'd been a lousy tech I wouldn't have done it."

"Huh." He nodded. "Arthur said that." He said. "And I wondered."

She twirled the pen she'd been using between her fingers. "It's a quirk in the brain." She said. "This.. whole tech thing. I realized that, at some point." She shrugged casually. "So I recognize it when I see it. You want that, in what we do."

Jerry smiled and lifted his cup of warm ice tea in her direction.

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"Hear me?"

Kerry adjusted the ear bud. "Yep." She settled her boots on the foot pegs of the motorcycle. "Lets go." She said, tightening the strap a little bit on the helmet she was wearing.

Mark nodded, and throttled forward, sweeping up the ramp and onto the interchange. "I'm gonna see if we can get off at 25<sup>th</sup> and go west." He said. "I heard 36<sup>th</sup>'s a mess."

His voice was slightly crackly, fed through the Bluetooth radios between their two helmets removing the communication challenges the motorcycle's engine caused.

There was little traffic, unusual in the daylight. Mark gunned the bike's engine as they crossed over the Interstate, and headed west, finding light poles down, and debris scattered everywhere. Boxes and palm fronds were littered over the surface of the highway, making navigation delicate.

A few National Guard trucks were moving along in the commuter lane, and two Florida Power and Light trucks in tandem were going the opposite direction they were, heading for the city center.

It was still windy. The trees that weren't blown down, or missing fronds were swaying hard, some streaming sideways as the high pressure gradient that follows a storm like Bob took hold.

Kerry could feel the wind's shove against her, exposed as they were on the back of the bike and she was very content that the far more experienced rider Mark was in control instead of her, especially as he evaded the debris on the road crossing between lanes.

"You guys leave your bikes down south?" Mark asked, as though reading her mind. "Any idea what went on down there?"

"We did." Kerry said. "They're locked up in the shed behind the cabin so if that ended up okay so did they." She watched as they crossed over stretches of glinting water and half submerged houses. "Something to worry about later."

She looked to her right as they passed the huge complex that was Jackson Memorial Hospital, where there were lights on, and a row of large generator trucks lined up outside. "Looks like they're okay."

"Only trauma center we got. They better be." Mark said.

The only public non profit hospital as well, a teaching center and part of the University of Miami medical program. It was a vast complex, bounded by the highway on the east side and, with typical puckyish Miami synchronicity the Federal court and jail complex on the west.

"Wow, check those boats out." Mark commented, as they crossed over the Miami River. "Some of them ended up in the court parking lot."

The storm surge must have been crazy, coming up the waterway. Kerry could see the glint of sun on flood waters extending on either side of the river, and collapsed buildings in the river itself, the bridges in an up position on either side.

It had funneled the surge up from the Bay and the boats that had lined the edge of the river had been thrown inland, the restaurants and shops both upscale and down ripped and in some cases collapsed into the water. A boatyard was in pieces, the aluminum panels littering the shore.

Once they were past the government and civic centers, she could see houses destroyed under the freeway, a brief glimpse of raw wood, a stretch of street blocked by a huge tree down, the flashing lights of a police SUV.

"Glad 836 goes all the way out west." Mark said. "No way could you get through there on the ground."

"No." Kerry agreed, as she spotted a group of people standing up to their knees in the water. "My old apartment complex used to flood in a regular rain. I can't even imagine what it's like today."

"That place in Kendall?" Mark asked. "Oh yeah, you said you were on the first floor." He crossed into the next lane to avoid a downed light pole, collapsed into the right hand passage with a piece of metal debris wrapped around it. "It must be a freak show here at night."

"Must be. It was for us coming back in with the boat last night through the channel." Kerry said. "Pitch black until we got near home. Dar had the lights blasting just in case someone was out there paddling around."

Mark laughed a little. "When Dar told me she was going to take the boat out and like, make a landing out on the edge of the bay to offload our ops to that place I cracked up."

Kerry chuckled a little. "I pissed off you don't want to know how many people by reserving the big cottage out there to move that stuff and our coders to. Dar's mother was laughing her ass off."

"They gonna like living there?" Mark sounded skeptical. "Her parents I mean?"

"Oh yeah." Kerry said. "To know they're going to just make everyone crazy every minute between the pagan stuff and Dad's working on machinery in the front yard?" She said. "Dad can't wait to invite his buddies over for a cookout." She could feel Mark laughing through her grip around him and had to laugh a little herself.

There were some there, she reckoned, that were going to look back with nostalgia on the days when the most disruptive thing coming from the Roberts family was she and Dar throwing balls for dogs on the golf course and kissing in the dining room.

The road they were on was elevated, and ran from Interstate 95 to State Road 826, and aside from themselves, several power trucks, several police cars, and a file of National Guard trucks it was empty. Kerry leaned a little to the right as they came up to the airport, which the road skirted on the south side.

The field was awash and empty. Most of the facilities were on the north side of the field, so all they could really see was several planes upside down off in the distance, and a glimpse of a damaged roof in the nearest concourse and the twisted spray of metal that had been a jetway.

There were trucks out on the field, driving back and forth. "Inspecting." Kerry said "They want to open. I heard that on the news this morning."

"Sure." Mark said. "Fastest way to get supplies in." He risked a quick glance. "Wow the tower's a mess."

Kerry looked, and her body jerked a little upright when she saw the tall structure, missing half it's roof, all of it's windows, with cables and lines hanging down on the outside just barely visible. A blue tarp was flapping out of one window. "Whoof."

"Wonder how they're gonna work that out." Mark said. "ILS still does the tech for them."

"Glad I'm not going to get that call." Kerry said. "I can just hear the governor screaming."

They were both silent for a moment. Then Kerry shook her head. "Just keep going. Don't think about it."

Mark got in the right hand lane as they passed the end of the airport, going over the bridge and heading north. All the airport parks on the right hand side were flooded, and the office buildings were missing roofs, some crushed under fallen trees and lamp posts.

Kerry thought she saw someone on the roof of one of them, and a camping tent. But they were moving too fast and she exhaled, feeling a sense of sober adjustment. One office park, all glass, had literally come apart in the wind, all of the windows blown out.

Desks and debris were hanging out of them, curtains swaying crazily in the wind, papers fluttering out all over the ground.

"We got kinda lucky." Mark said, after a long pause. "Y'know?"

"We did." Kerry acknowledged. "This is a mess."

"Lot of these places aint gonna make it back."

"Yeah." Kerry shook her helmet covered head a little, as they started down the exit to ground level. "Are we going to even be able to get through there?"

"Good question." Mark slowed as they reached the bottom of the ramp. The lights were out, and to the right, they could see a few cars trying to make their way around the fallen trees and collapsed electrical poles. "Lets see how far we can get. They live off 90<sup>th</sup> and something I think."

He cautiously turned left and kept his feet off the foot pegs, ready to stop and brace the big bike as they moved through the intersection and under the highway. Ahead, there were power lines down across the road, and in the distance, they could see a tractor trailer overturned and blocking the road.

In some exasperation, the government had told, instructed, begged people not to leave home. To stay off the roads. But in each direction they looked they could see stragglers out, cars inching through water, human nature to see what was going on far more powerful than any instruction.

And after all, here they were themselves. Kerry let her own legs down off the pegs in case they had to stop short, as Mark kept to the inside edge of the road, near the median. The outer edge was deeply flooded.

Here, at ground level they could really understand the level of damage. Storefronts were boarded up, but roof damage was visible, pieces of tar shingled surface flopping off down the sides of the buildings and overhangs ripped off and collapsed.

The street signs were blown down. The light poles and traffic signals were all on the ground, and Mark was gingerly crossing over the downed lines with little bumps that made them both flinch. In the distance they could hear helicopters and the rumble of generators.

The buzz of a chain saw.

To the right, the echo of a crying child, and angry shouts in more than one language.

All around they could smell wet vegetation, stagnant water, a waft of garbage, and somewhere off in the distance, someone was cooking bacon.

She kept thinking she saw motion, and then, she realized she had. There were people moving around in the fringes, in the strip malls on either side of the road, wading in water. Some were carrying boxes.

"Weird." Mark concluded, after a long pause of them just moving down the street, slowly. "Kinda Mad Maxy."

"Kinda." Kerry agreed. "Dar said after that last big hurricane it got pretty elemental pretty fast."

"It did." He said. "My dad ended up sitting on a futon chair in front of what was left of our house with a gun in his lap and a tiki torch."

"Oh boy." Kerry muttered. "Lets hope this gets sorted out fast."

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Dar was seated in the conference room with her pad at her elbow, listening to one of the two server techs who had been working on securing the gear. "Thanks Mike." She said. "So we're ready to pull them from the rack and put them in the case?"

"Bout as much as we can be." Mike agreed. "Everything looks like it's all secured. Far as I can tell nothing got super wet, and nothing smells like it got burned out."

Dar nodded. "All we can do here." She said. "We'll have to wait until we can power them up to really know."

"Right."

"Jose, we have all the network gear to bring this stuff up?" Dar asked one of their handful of network techs who had recently arrived, surprisingly, on the back of a horse. She could smell the animal on him, not entirely unpleasant.

The animal was tied in the central open space, contentedly cropping grass on the far side, a bucket of water nearby resting in the shade.

"I'm gonna unrack the top of in there and take that, and one of the forty eight porters." Jose said. "We got cables, no problem. But I'm gonna need the appliance for dot1x and its not gonna like not seeing the cloud."

Dar regarded him in silence for a bit. "Take it." She said. "We'll spin it up and see what we get. If we have to I'll crack into the switches and remove the config."

Jose nodded, seeming unsurprised. "Okay. Let me go get started." He got up and went through the door, with Mike right behind him.

"We're done unpacking." Carlos appeared in the doorway. "I had my guys bring those cases down to the server room." He came inside and took a cup, pouring it full of warm ice tea. He sat down and exhaled, his skin glistening with sweat. "We all going to go over to the island?"

Dar was fiddling with her pen, turning it in her long fingers. "The high value is the repository in those servers." She said, reflectively. "But we have all kinds of hardware here, and I think if we all abandon this place it'll get looted in a heartbeat."

Carlos was nodding as Dar had been talking. "Zactly what I was thinking." He said. "My buddies said they're all up to stay here, and Micky said he's going to go get some hardware just in case. You know?"

Dar regarded him. "Hardware like the shotgun Kerry has back on the boat." She clarified.

"Yeah." Carlos said, briefly. "So we figure we'll lock everything up tight down on the bottom level, and park ourselves up on the second floor outside your office in that open space. It didn't get any water, and we got a good view." He paused. "Those two people from your old place want to stick around too."

Dar smiled briefly. "They're good people." She acknowledged. "I was sorry to leave them behind."

"Not as sorry as they were from what they said." Carlos smiled gently back at her. "But hey, we can use them right now so all's cool, right?"

"Absolutely." Dar said. "Wouldn't surprise me if more folks don't show up here from there." She said. "Anyone does, they're welcome to share whatever we've got here. If they want to help out, let em. I'll pay everyone our rate for it."

She got up. "Let's go walk the upstairs." She said. "I'm making a list of what we need to get done." She picked up her pad and they walked out of the conference room and up the steps to the second level.

Now, with the boards off all the windows, light was flooding in and Dar paused and entered one of the inside offices to go to the windows and look down at the central area in the middle of the square structure.

There were branches and debris everywhere and in the middle of it all was Scott's trailer home looking basically untouched. It had a pile of leaves on the top of it, but the outside was undented and right now the folding back grid was providing a surface for a charcoal grill.

“Protected.” Carlos commented briefly. “But you figured it would be.”

“I did. Wasn’t sure about the storm surge though.” Dar turned and made her way out of the office and into the hallway, crossing over and going to stand in the area outside her and Kerry’s offices. This was an angular corner, the largest space that had Zoe’s outer area on one side, and Maria and Mayte’s offices on the other.

There was a skylight overhead, and it was covered now with a blue tarp, tacked into place. The floor under it was stained from the rain, but now dry. With all the windows in all the rooms open, a cross breeze was moving through and though it was warm, it wasn’t horrible.

Dar went through Zoe’s area and paused. “I would see if we can close off the back stairs, and make the main set there the only way up.” She pronounced. “Hang out here.” She turned to regard the admin desks, now with their compliment of equipment back on their surface.

It looked like it was just waiting for Zoe’s presence, and with all the sunlight she had to remind herself again that while Zoe’s presence would be welcome, there wasn’t much the admin could do with any of it without electrical power.

Carlos had leaned against the wall, with his brawny arms folded. “Yeah, the doors are pretty solid. It was more secure when we had all the boards on the windows though.” He admitted. “But it’s a lot easier to breathe in here with em off.”

“True.” Dar went into her office, which, like Zoe’s had been restored to it’s apparent functional use. She walked over and put her pad down on her adjustable workspace. The surface was set to allow work while standing, and she decided she’d stay here and use it that way.

The windows were wide open, and she could smell the sea on the onshore wind as it gusted in and ruffled the tank top she was wearing bringing with it the sound of generators somewhere in the distance and a siren.

Her desktop machine had been set back up on her desk, it’s monitor neatly centered for her, all the cables carefully arranged and managed.

Useless, certainly. But the precision made Dar smile just from the respect it showed because those techs who had arranged the machine knew her attention to detail and didn’t want to fail to show her they knew she’d note it.

And of course, she had noted it. Dar went to the desk and sat down in the chair behind it, regarding Carlos who had taken up a pose against the door sill. “Wish we could get a truck size generator and just run things here.” She admitted. “What a pain in the ass.”

Carlos came over and sat down on the couch against the wall, since Dar had no visitor chairs in her office. “Could we have?”

“They were all rented anywhere in the area by the time I looked.” Dar said. “Lesson learned for next time. Either we get a generator truck or we have a big one installed, like they did out on the island.” She folded her arms, the sun coming in the window splashing across her shoulders, catching the inky darkness of her tattoo.

The squeak of rubber against the wooden floors sounded outside and then Arthur was in the doorway. “Another boat just got here.” He reported. “And some cops. They yelled at us.” He added. “They’re probably going to come up here they saw where we ran off to.”

With a sigh, Dar stood up. “The boat’s probably my dad.” She said. “Let’s go see what’s going on now.” She motioned the two to join her. “Cops probably think we’re pirates.”

“Yo ho yo ho!” Carlos rumbled. “Maybe we are!”

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“What do you think?” Kerry was standing on the sidewalk, her helmet in her hand, as they regarded the scene ahead of them. The road had three lanes, and all three were blocked by a cascade of fallen trees, as well as stretches of murky looking water.

“Lets try going behind that mall.” Mark suggested, pointing to their right. “Gets us in the right direction, anyway.”

Kerry regarded the path. "We're going to have to walk for a little bit. Too much stuff in the way." She started forward, stepping over a fallen stopsign as Mark came along behind her pushing the bike.

"Yeah." Mark eased the tires over the sign and then up and over the median. They sloshed through ankle high water and then off the road and through a half flooded parking lot. "Keep to the edge over there. Not sure what's in all that."

Kerry agreeably shifted her path to the left, threading between a car turned on its side and a garbage dumpster. There were branches and bits of construction debris everywhere, but the parking lot was tilted to the east, sloped to the backs of the stores in the strip mall and their loading docks.

It left the west edge where they were making their way along relatively dry and for several minutes they walked along in silence.

Then a loud sound made them both stop in mid motion. Mark pushed the bike up next to where Kerry was standing and they saw two men coming out of the back of one of the stores, carrying some boxes. They jumped into the water and waded towards a pile of material on the northern side of the mall.

Mark got back on the bike and started the engine, the sound of it echoing sharply. The two men dropped the boxes and started wading faster, glancing behind them.

"Maybe we should stay on this thing." Mark said, after a brief pause. "Kinda like when you're walking around in the glades y'know? Make noise. Scares the snakes."

"Well, maybe they..." Kerry regarded the door the men had come out of. "No, they're probably not getting things to survive with at the Verizon store." She resumed her seat on the bike and they started forward slowly, watching out for the men who had disappeared behind one of the docks.

Mark shook his head and they wound their way through the loading area and squeezed between two turned over dumpsters, thankfully empty into an alleyway that ran behind the mall.

There was around a foot of water in it. They took it slowly to keep the wake from swamping the bike's engine until they emerged into one of the smaller streets behind.

Here the larger roads split from commercial buildings to residential, and as they rumbled carefully through the flooded ground they could hear and see people on either side of them out and about, and the sound of chain saws was audible.

They could smell cooking, the pungent scent of garlic and charcoal, and the cries of children. A dog barked, and somewhere in the distance they could hear someone hammering.

"What street is that?" Mark asked.

"Can't tell." Kerry could see where the street signs had been, but they were either blown off somewhere or under the deep water just to the north of them. "Look at those houses."

They were blown apart, as though a tornado had touched down and possibly it had. To the right, they saw a man dragging a mattress out of a home that was missing a roof, hauling it over and laying it on top of a half submerged car.

A little further up the street, in a less flooded area someone had piled a stack of ruined furniture, and put a pack of plastic water bottles on top.

A dog was swimming past a car covered up to its windows with black water. It reached a place where it could stand and it paused, shaking itself and looking around in a bewildered way. It was panting, and looked both unhappy and exhausted.

In reflex, Kerry wanted to help it. Her intellect calmly reminded her that she was riding on a motorcycle and they were trying to find missing friends, but all that didn't keep her from wanting to stop and do.. something. She felt in a pocket. Did she have a snack to give it?

The dog shook itself again, then it sat down in the shallow spot and looked around.

Holy shit. Kerry heard the words ring inside her own head. "Is it like this where you live, Mark?" She mournfully resisted the urge to give the dog the caramel candy she'd found and looked away from it as they rumbled past.

"Not this bad." Mark said. "It's a lot more flooded here. We mostly had wind and stuff by us." He gunned the engine a little as they moved onto a less wet part of the road. "All the area we're in was rebuilt after Andrew. New codes."

There were trees down everywhere. The big ficus with their shallow roots had been uplifted and sprawled across yards and roads, where the taller, slim palms were upright, though missing most of their fronds and there were dented surfaces from all the coconuts in flight.

Palms were native. Their barks were smooth and gave nothing for the wind to catch against, and they were flexible. Their fronds were designed to rip free.

The centerline of the road was the least flooded, sloping to either side where the water got deeper and then extended into the side roads as far as they could see.

Ahead of them, Kerry saw a boy towing a pool raft behind him in the floodwaters, picking up coconuts as he went. He had thick, black hair and beautiful coffee colored skin and he grinned at them as they passed and waved, clearly unintimidated by all the flooding and destruction.

Mark reacted to Kerry's pat on his side and slowed the bike to a stop. "Hey!" He greeted the boy, who sloshed over to them. "Whatcha doin?" He braced both legs out to steady their balance and Kerry did the same.

The boy admired the bike for a long minute before answering. "That's a nice one, man." He said. "I got some nuts for my ma to make fish curry." He indicated the raft. "What' choo doin?"

"We're trying to find some friends of ours. Their house is in this area." Kerry responded. "Do you live around here?"

He nodded. "Three blocks that way." He jerked his head to his right. "Don't got a roof, but ma got a grill set up on the porch an it's dry." He said. "It's bad, all back in there. There's some people died, an stuff."

"Wow. Sorry to hear that."

He shrugged. "One guy, we didn't like him. He made ma mad so we don't care." He said, then looked around. "I lost my dog you seen him?" He asked, standing with one hip cocked as though being up to his thighs was completely natural.

Kerry removed her helmet, freeing her pale hair and letting the breeze dry some of the sweat in it. "Is he brown and white?" She asked. "There was a dog swimming in that next street back there." She said. "He seemed kinda lost. He was about this big." She extended her arms.

The kid's eyes lit up. "Yeah?" He took a grip on the rope tied to his makeshift raft. "Lemme go see." He sloshed off in the direction of the corner, letting out a whistle between his teeth. "Yo! Coco!"

They watched him go. "That's cool." Mark finally said, as they turned back around and continued their journey. "Bet his mom does a good fish curry."

"Yeah." Kerry put her helmet back on. "Seems to be taking it all in stride, I guess."

They made it another three blocks before they found a street sign. "Lets try and go south from here." Mark navigated carefully around a stop light sitting in the middle of the road amidst a pile of cables and they found themselves on a two lane street, full of downed trees.

There were strip malls on either side, and flooding everywhere. One gas station had it's awning collapsed over the pumps and they could smell gasoline on the air.

Mark turned and they went south along the road, slowing where there were puddles that extended across the road, some splashing up over their boots. "Okay there, I think that's 96<sup>th</sup>." He said, after a few minutes silence. "Should be just west from there."

They slowly approached the intersection, which had a bus overturned in it, seemingly deserted. Mark steered around the bus and they had a view along the road, which had a median that was the only dry part. "Okay, I'm gonna have to go up on that." He said. "This thing ain't gonna make it through that water there."

"You want to stay here, and I'll walk down?" Kerry asked.

Mark stopped, braced his boots, and then took off his helmet to turn and look at her.

Kerry also removed her helmet hastily, afraid she was missing something. "What?"

"What?" He said. "What what? As in what the what? You want me to hang out here and let you go into who the hell knows what?"

Kerry regarded him. "What do you think's going to happen? I'm not that short. I'm not going to drown in that water, Mark. It's only up to my knees."

They both then paused, and then chuckled. "C'mon, lets see how far we can get." Mark put his helmet back on and started up the bike's engine and then he cautiously gunned it up onto the median that split the road in two. A

head, they could see a pair of fallen trees and past that, there was some activity going on. "You see those trucks.. are those trucks past there?" Mark said. "I think they're army or something."

"Something." Kerry agreed. "National Guard maybe... and I see some flashing lights." She held on as they bumped over the swamped, grassy median, weaving around the posts and slim, planted trees most of which were lying on their side.

They got to the fallen trees and then had to stop. Mark parked the bike and they got off. He set his helmet down on the seat and then started breaking off branches to make space for them to pass.

Kerry took hold of a larger branch, and started tugging on it. She was standing in water up to her ankles, and the tree moved a little, sliding sideways and allowing her to see past it. "Ah." She paused, regarding the scene.

In the next large intersection there were, in fact, several national guard trucks and a tarp shelter. From the back of one of the trucks, water was being handed out to a line of people standing there, and blockades had been set up to prevent further progress along the road.

The flooding past it seemed extensive. Where the trucks were it was up over the tires, and past it, along the roads and a corner lot it was easily double.

"Holy crap." Mark had cleared enough room to come stand next to her. "Well, we're gonna have to stop here anyway."

"We are." Kerry admitted. "Let's go see what's going on."

They walked together, Mark guiding the bike through the water until they were across from the little encampment. They took off their helmets and shrugged out of their jackets, glad to be rid of them as even the hot breeze now felt cool. "Downside to bikes." Mark said.

"No kidding." Kerry riffled her sweat soaked hair, appreciating the feel of the air against her scalp. She followed Mark as they walked off the end of the median and into the flooded roadway, grimacing as the hot, dank water soaked into the leather of her hiking boots and the cargo pants she was wearing.

There was a crowd gathered around the trucks and a buzz of conversation. The national guard had set up a platform of boxes under the tent, so they were able to be dryshod and the tarps kept the sun off a long table with radio equipment and papers on it.

The guardsmen and women working under it looked hot, and sweaty and most had wet uniforms up to their thighs. The young man sitting on the front box talking to the crowd had sweat rolling off his face and there was a general air of grumpiness visible.

One of the guardsmen was standing a little ways off, up to his knees in water, a satellite phone to his ear. "Look!" He said suddenly, audibly to them. "These people want to go into that area, and they're pissed!" He had a clear Southern accent.

Mark and Kerry eased through the crowd and paused. Kerry looked at the scenario, trying to decide where she might find some indication of who to ask questions of.

"Look, you can't go past here." The young man at the front of the platform was saying. "Ma'am, it's dangerous, and there's all kinds of chemicals and all in the water, you can't go."

The woman speaking to him was repeating what she said in Spanish. It was relatively obvious the young man had no idea what she was saying. Kerry herself could only catch a word or two. "Any idea what she's saying?" She asked Mark.

"Her house is back there." Mark pointed. "She was in Orlando when the storm hit and she just got back here driving."

"See if you can translate for them." Kerry nudged him. "Yelling's not going to help anyone."

"Got it." Mark eased between the crowd and the edge of the platform. "Hola." He said. "Dime. Dime." He patted his chest. "Les dire."

Kerry went closer to the guardsman, as people started to raise their voices, anxiety and some anger audible. "What's the situation?" She asked him, quietly. "Hi, my name's Kerry."

His shoulders relaxed in some relief, responding to both the clarity of her voice, and the calmness she was projecting. "Ma'am, are you a resident around here? These folks are trying to get back into the area, and it's just dangerous, you know?"

"I'm not actually but I have some staff who live here that I'm trying to find." Kerry said, as another of the guard came over and started trying to answer the now shouting questions Mark was doing his best to translate. "Where are you from?"

"Alabama." The young man said. "We just got here. Been driving most the night." He removed his cap and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "I don't speak the language here I guess."

"I don't much either." Kerry nodded in sympathy. "My father in law's from Alabama." She smiled at him. "I thought I recognized the accent."

The guard got up and offered her a hand. "Ma'am, c'mon up here out of that water." He said. "Where is it your friends live at?"

Kerry accepted the help and stepped up onto the boxes, following him over under the tarp to the table that held a street map. The group of guardsmen glanced at her as she came up, then went back to their work, accepting her presence without comment.

She studied the map, with her guard friend at her elbow. "Here, this is where they live." She indicated a set of streets. "I haven't heard from them, and I'm really worried about them."

An older guardsman had been talking to someone at the rear of the tarp and came over, listening to her. "That area's busted up pretty bad, ma'am." He said. "Most of the houses there are under water to the first floor." He glanced at the truck handing out water. "We can't go further neither."

"Sir, these people just won't be reasoned with." One of the men came over from the front of the platform. "Even with that fella's help.. is he a friend of yours, ma'am? I thought you came up together."

"He's a friend, yes." Kerry agreed. "So what's being done for the people back there? I'm sure they need help, right?"

"Ma'am, there's nothing we can do right now." The older guard told her, with some exasperation, but not without sympathy. "We can't drive our trucks back in there, and we're not medics or nothing like that. They just sent us here with these tents, and some water."

Kerry paused thoughtfully, folding her arms over her chest. "Are they going to send in helicopters? I know you can't do anything, but is someone doing something?"

The man shrugged. "Our radios just talk to other folks like us." He indicated the set. "What's Miami-Dade doing? We got no idea." He said. "I heard they were setting up a command center downtown? Something like that. They just loaded us up with tarps, and some rope, and a whole bunch of water and told us to get out here as far as we could. So we did."

"Absolutely you did." Kerry said. "Well, let me go see what I can do." She walked over to the edge of the tent and went back into the sun, pulling out her sat phone and patiently pecking at the small keyboard. She glanced up as Mark came over to her. "Cluster."

"Cluster." He agreed. "I get why everyone's upset but like, what are these guys supposed to do? They can't drain shit."

"They can't." Kerry said. "Hang on." She listened to the odd buzz that was the sat phone's ring and then it was picked up. "Dar?"

"Hi." Dar said. "What's up?" She said. "Make it kinda fast cause Dad's explaining to the cops we're not burglars."

"Ah."

"I'm gonna have to go over and get my captain's license before they haul us off." Dar concluded. "Get anywhere out there?"

"We got near their neighborhood but it's a nightmare here." Kerry said succinctly. "There's some guard trucks but it's all flooded and no one has any way further. No plan to that they know of."

"Not good."

"No, and.." Kerry paused as she heard her name called. "Hang on."

"Kerry! Kerry!" A slightly slurred, latin inflected voice cut through the clamor and Kerry and Mark turned to see Zoe splashing her way through the water towards them, arms extended.

"Just found Zoe." Kerry said into the phone. "Let me call you back." She shut the phone in time to hop off the platform and accept the hug as Zoe reached them. "Zoe! Wow I'm glad to see you!"

"Oh Kerry." Zoe looked exhausted, terrified, and overwhelmed. "I am so glad you are here." She paused, and then looked at Mark. "And you too!"

Mark just chuckled.

"Kerry it is terrible." Zoe said. "The road where Maria's house is, and Mayte's, is so flood and no one can get to it. I think people are hurt there." She said. "My house is destroyed."

"Is your family okay?" Kerry asked. "Where are they?"

"They went out to the shelter, and we are all okay." Zoe said. "But Mayte and Maria and Tomas were not there." She drew a breath. "Have you call them?"

"We've tried. They haven't answered, so that's why we came out here to see if we could find you all." Kerry said. "Now we have to figure out how we're going to go do that, because I didn't bring any scuba gear with me."

"I am just glad you are here." Zoe told her. "My mama said you would do something." She said. "I tell her everything about all what you do and she says you are better than the government."

Kerry looked around the woebegone scene, somewhat at a loss to know what to do in order to live up to that expectation.

"Too bad we don't have a couple jetskis." Mark said, mournfully. "That'd do it." He said. "Better than my bike, anyway."

Kerry thought about that. "Too small really." She said. "But you know..." She glanced behind her at the national guard troops. "I wonder." She turned around and got back up onto the platform, looking for and finding her young friend. "Hey.."

"Oh, hello ma'am. Saw you found one of your friends." The boy said. "Sorry there's not much else we can do for you here."

"Well.." She eyed him. "You gig?"

Surprised, he blinked. "Uh.. I mean, sure." He said, glancing around. "But I tell you ma'am, I wouldn't be eating anything out of these here waters. No telling what's in there."

"Oh gosh no." Kerry said. "But I wonder if there are any guys around here we could call on the radio who have airboats." she suggested. "I bet they could get in there to help people, and we're out here kinda close to the glades, huh?"

He thought about it a moment. Then he nodded. "Done got a good idea there. Let me hook in the captain." He turned and trotted over to where the older man was talking to an agitated gray haired women.

"Okay." Kerry said, rejoining them. "Lets see where that gets us." She turned to Zoe. "Any other shelters around here they could have gone to? We can check those in the meantime." Her eyes went around the street scene. "I don't think there's much else we can do here."

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"Sorry folks." The police officer accepted the cup of coffee being offered to him by Angela. "You have to admit, it's not what we expect to see, in all this kind of mess." He added. "Thank you, ma'am."

Angela smiled at him. "No problem, we've got plenty." She said. "The bosses make sure we're taken care of, y'know."

"I can see that." He smiled back at her. "That why you came to work?"

"Honestly?" Angela said, glancing around. "I knew they'd have their act together here. I didn't want to stay at home listening to everyone complain." She said. "There's no power, but things are getting done, you know?"

"That sure is true." The officer agreed, looking around at the conference room. There were boxes of supplies, most of which had been transferred off the boats that morning, and two long chests full of ice. "Too bad you don't have a generator here."

"We got one, we're just saving it for night. Everyone's going nuts trying to get gas for theirs." Carlos said. "I heard that, and no power anywhere so not much gas around."

"And Port Everglades closed." The officer nodded. "Yeah, there's that."

There were two other officers with him, and now they were all seated at the table in the conference room taking advantage of a moment to rest and consume coffee and some cookies, a selection of vanilla and chocolate oreos.

They were dressed in blue camo coveralls and knee high rubber boots, and they were stained with sweat and water, and dried mud, and they seemed quite content to be sitting down in the conference room even without air conditioning.

"We just got a call from someone saying there were people looting along the shore here." The second officer spoke up. "And you know, that's kinda what it looked like." He added. "With that ramp and all you made."

"It's true." Carlos said. "I told the boss that some old busybody'd call ya." He was straddling a folding chair, his muscular arms folded over it's back. "People aint got enough to worry about they're calling the cops."

"Well." The first officer, whose breast bore a patch with the name Cruz on it. "Been a lot of reports of looting and all that already today. People getting out, breaking into stores and grabbing tv's and stuff." He dunked a cookie into his coffee and popped it in his mouth. "People take advantage, you know? We see that all the time."

Dar entered with a folder and took a seat at the head of the table. "Here's all the paperwork." She offered it to them. "For some reason, someone here thought someday someone would want to see physical copies of something we always keep in digital that we can't access right now."

She rested her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together, then she reached out and took one of the chocolate oreos and regarded it with a skeptical blue eye. She twisted the cookie apart and consumed the bare half.

The first officer took the folder and opened it. "Thank you, Ms Roberts." He said. "I really appreciate the cooperation." He scanned through the papers, while the other two sat there quietly having their coffee and cookies. "Okay, this looks pretty straightforward."

Angela returned and set down a steaming mug in front of Dar. "We're fixing up some tuna fish sandwiches and Fritos in the break room."

"Yum." Dar removed the top off another cookie and ate it, then put the two non eaten halves with their double crème together. "Kerry said they got out to the edge of Doral." She told Carlos. "Flooded to hell after that." She dunked the joined cookie into the milk and held it there for a few seconds before she removed it and put the whole thing into her mouth.

"Heard on the radio." Carlos said. "Least we can run that off that UPS. Aint much good for nothing else right now." He rocked back and forth on the chair.

Andy entered, pulling off a pair of hide gloves. His hair was wet and there was a faintly briny scent about him. "Lo there." He removed a plastic covered packet from his back pocket and put it down next to Cruz's elbow "Got that off mah boat."

Cruz glanced at the packet, then he closed the folder and pushed it back towards Dar. "Here you go ma'am. That's all right sir." He picked up the damp plastic and offered it back. "I've seen enough for my report." He took a sip of his coffee. "Now I need to tell you, this is not going to be a really safe area after dark."

Carlos smiled. "Yeah, it was a little creepstastic last night." He agreed. "But we got a plan to bunker in." He told them. "And the boss here's going to take some of the gang with her over to where they live."

"Got some fellers coming ovah here." Andy said. "It'll be all right." He sat down next to Dar and folded his hands across his stomach. "That there case's ready to go, Dardar."

"Your crew is always welcome here to share what we got." Dar addressed the officer. "We've got some sat phones."

"Ah got me a spare shortwave ahm gonna hook up to that big old battery fore we go." Andy added. "They can call the boat on it. These phones aint hardly worth nothing."

Cruz snorted in a bit of laughter. "You people are pretty self sufficient." He told them. "Everyone else I saw this morning, walking through the streets was either running from me with a box or asking me for a handout."

He leaned back in the chair, apparently loathe to surrender it. "That's what I hate about these storms. Everyone comes out after looking to take advantage, taking whatever they can get. You're supposed to have three days of food and water in your house you know?"

"Some folks don't have the cash." Carlos said, bluntly.

"They can go to a shelter." Cruz shook his head. "I don't buy people can't afford it. I went to Costco and got two cases of canned stuff for my house, and it was twenty bucks. Hey, it's junk like spaghettios, but it'll feed my kids." His jaw jutted forward a little. "My wife made the biggest pot she had of rice and beans. That probably cost two bucks."

"Wall." Andy said. "Folks are like that." He remarked, in a mild tone. "Wanting to blame folks for e'vrything."

Cruz got up and motioned to his two companions. "That's the truth, but not here. I'll mark you all as friendlies and let the patrols know about your two boats out there." He grinned a little. "And they can stop by for cookies if they're around."

He winked at Angela, who had come in with some plates, setting them down on the table. She offered him one, but he declined, and they left with casual waves and words.

"Well, that turned out better than I expected." Dar admitted after they'd passed beyond hearing. "I wasn't much looking forward to dealing with you and I frog marched down to Miami Dade jail."

Andy laughed. "You evah been?"

"To the jail?" Dar asked. "Yes." She paused. "Busting someone else out of it." She conceded, as everyone swung around and gave her an interested look. "And they're actually a customer now. Got a new computer system going in." She added. "Anyway."

"Yeap." Her father agreed. "Got them an attitude ah seen a time or two, them boys." He picked up the hide gloves, and flexed one big, scarred hand. "Glad they moved on."

"They weren't gonna mess with us." Carlos said, confidently. "They know better."

"Hm." Andy grunted. "Anyhow, lets get a move on that there box of yours." He got up and headed for the conference room door.

Dar stood up and pulled her sat phone out. "Let me go see what Ker's up to." She walked around the table. "Be right back." She ducked outside the front door and into the sunlight, walking away from the structure and into an open area before she tried turning on the phone.

This was a pain in the ass. She recalled the phone number that Kerry had been carrying and dialed it. "When the hell are they going to get the damn cell towers back up?"

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"How about you stay here?" Mark asked. "Me and Zoe'll see if we can go south a little and get to the Palmetto shelter. Maybe you can help these guys?"

Kerry pondered, regarding the shelter. In the short time they'd been standing there twenty or thirty more people had shown up including a man with a child holding a broken arm.

The guardsmen were trying to help. One man was kneeling next to the child with a first aid kit, another was going around the crowd handing out plastic bottles of water.

Everyone was standing in knee high water, and Kerry could smell the muddy tang of it. She had retreated back to the median near where they'd left the bike, and was for the moment dry shod. "Yeah I guess."

Zoe would be more use to Mark when searching in the shelters as she was a native Spanish speaker. Kerry herself only understand and spoke a handful of words in the language but in truth she had no real desire to stay here, in the sun, with the muggy heat and the rising mosquitos around her.

But it was also true if they had to divide and conquer it was likely her that was going to encourage anything positive out of this particular situation. "Okay, you guys get going." She concluded. "Let me.. " She paused as the phone in her pocket buzzed. "Ah."

She recognized the number that had originally been Dars and had been handed off to Carlos. "Hello?"

"Hey."

There was something that Dar's voice did to her, Kerry half turned and focused on a clump of dead brush poking up out of the water. "Hey." She responded. "You're not calling me from the joint, are you?"

Dar chuckled, a low deep sound of amusement that was both wry and relaxed. "How's it going there?" She said. "I was trying to remember if we had any way of contacting any of dad's friends who could help but god damn it there's no signal anywhere."

"That's why I told them to try the radio." Kerry agreed. "No, nothing much here. Mark and Zoe are going to go check out Palmetto shelter, see if they were seen or heard of there." She watched the men on the platform huddle in a small group around the older man with the sat phone. "Dar I hate to think of Mayte and Maria out there in some trashed house, in trouble. You know?"

"Is there something you can do?"

Kerry thought about that for a long moment, both of them silent and comfortable with it. "Crap I should be able to, shouldn't I?"

"Ker." Dar said, in a reasonable tone. "I know it's kinda normal for us to pull rabbits out of our asses, but there are limits, y'know?"

"That sounds so damn reasonable, except I think about what we did in New York, and you saving that raft, and I'm sitting out here in this gross swamp wondering why I don't have a drone and a paddleboard with me."

Dar started laughing softly. "You gonna drive the drone while you're on the paddleboard?" She asked. "Tricky." She said. "Let me see if I can get the... oh crap. That's right. All I have to drive is a yacht."

"I know. I'm being a dork." Kerry chuckled along with her. "Let me see if they're making any progress with the radio. I don't know what else to do, Dar. We can't go any further west with the bike." She ran her fingers through her hair, pushing it back off her forehead. "Maybe I'll have Mark check that one shelter, then bring Zoe back to where her family is."

The faint sound of buffeting wind came through the phone as Dar turned and faced into the breeze in front of the office. "Let me think a minute."

Kerry was content to wait for that, watching a lizard appear on one of the nearby fallen trees, jerking its head up and down. She glanced to the side as Mark came up next to her, and raised one brow at him.

"They called the Red Cross for that kid." Mark said. "They're gonna maybe bring a chopper for him." He paused. "You talking to Dar?"

Kerry nodded. "Go on to Palmetto." She said. "I'm waiting to see if Dar has something else for me to try."

Mark nodded back. "Okay, we'll call if we find anything." He motioned Zoe to come over to the bike, and then handed her the helmet Kerry had been wearing. "Buzz me if you need me."

Kerry raised a hand in response as he started the bike's engine, and Zoe timidly got herself arranged on the rear seat. She took a few steps away as Mark turned the machine around, and started carefully back along the ridge they'd come in on.

They had brought the young child, a dark haired boy, up onto the platform, and he was sitting on a box, his arm in a roughly made splint held on with white gauze that was stained rust with blood. His face was twisted in pain, and an older woman crouched next to him, bracing his arm on her knee.

"What about."

Dar's voice almost startled her. Kerry returned her wandering attention to the phone. "What about what, hon?"

"I know it's out of the way, but why not try to get out to US 27 and come into Sweetwater from the other side?" Dar suggested. "Get up on the Turnpike and off at Okeechobee road."

Kerry's brow creased a little. "Won't that be even more flooded?"

"Canals all drain out that way across the Everglades." Dar said. "Sweetwater's in a dip between the city and the swamp." She said. "And you might find some folks with boats out there that'll be useful." She added, almost as an afterthought. "Some of those.."

"Places out off 41. Yeah." Kerry completed the thought. "The tourist places, where you can take rides out. Dar, that's a good idea."

"Well, it's something." Dar said. "Don't spend too much time out in the sticks there. It's lunchtime."

"I'm going to call Mark." Kerry said, decisively. "If they haven't gotten down to the shelter by now I'll have him drop Zoe off and we'll go out that way." She felt a sense of mild relief. "Thanks hon."

"No problem." Dar said. "I gotta go. They're starting to haul the servers out." She paused. "Be careful, okay?"

"Will do." Kerry said. "Any word from Colleen?"

"They're almost up there." Dar said. "She checked in about ten minutes ago."

Kerry hung up the phone and then dialed Mark's number. The sat phone buzzed, but there was no answer and she assumed they were underway and couldn't pick up. She closed the phone and put it in her pocket, and then she turned around and started for the platform.

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"Okay stop it there a minute." Dar stepped back to consider their progress. They had gotten the rolling cart through the office yard and across the street, and were now trying to maneuver it across the destroyed pool deck of the sailing club.

"Crap it's hot." Carlos wiped his forearm across his forehead.

"It is." Dar felt the sweat rolling down her back, and was glad of the tank top. She straightened up and shook her hands out, tired from the effort of carrying the case down a set of four broken, coral stairs. "This is the hard part." She regarded the rough terrain they had ahead of them.

"Yeah, at least over there we could roll it." Arthur had taken his shirt off and it was hanging from the back of his belt. "We sure that ramp is going to hold up for this? I'd hate to have it sink after all that work." He sat down on an upturned bench and took a drink of water from the bottle in his shorts pocket.

Dar walked past him to the beachfront, where the Dixie was tied up, and where Andrew's boat was anchored behind it, both boats shining white in the sun. She went over to the ramp they'd built and walked onto it, flexing her knees a little and regarding the sense of flex.

It was actually going to be a real bitch to maneuver the whole rig onto the boat. Dar folded her arms and took in a breath of salt tinged air. Ahead of her, past the boats, she could see a dozen watercraft in the distance, three of which had flashing blue lights on them.

The chop had come down in the bay, she was relieved to see. It was light and ruffled, and the Dixie was only rocking a little bit against her lines, but still, her hull was thumping against the inflated pontoons they'd draped over her side.

"Need a beach lander." Andy came up next to her. "Some bitch." He concluded.

"Like the ferry, with a ramp." Dar agreed. "Well, we don't have one so lets just do this." She walked along the makeshift platform, testing it's sturdiness. It was relatively stable under her weight, but Dar knew the case they were shepherding was a lot heavier.

She walked up next to the Dixie and stood there a minute, looking at the deck. "Tricky." She turned and motioned Carlos over, and watched both him and Andy come along the ramp, keeping an eye on the stability of the path. "Meh."

"What's the plan, boss?" Carlos asked. He'd also taken off his shirt. "You think we can make it down this?"

Dar looked at her father. "You've got a hell of a lot more experience loading things on boats than I do."

Andy looked at the Dixie, then at the makeshift ramp, then at the case full of high tech servers. He snorted a short laugh and shook his head. "Some bitch."

"Is what it is." Dar extended her hands in a light shrug.

"Wall." Andy kicked the pylon with one booted foot. "Aint gonna find out standing heah." He hopped up and down on the planking. "Be some easier if that back deck was other way round." He eyed his daughter meaningfully.

"Got it." Dar agreeably untied the aft line and stepped onboard. "Get ready, and I'll turn her around."

Andy untied the forward line and tossed it onboard, then he motioned Carlos back towards the shore where the rest of the staff were seated, sweating and waiting. "C'mon, boy." He directed. "Lets get this heah done fore ever'body melts."

"Right on, sir." Carlos headed after him, turning his head as the sound of the Dixie's engines firing rumbled behind him, spotting Dar up on the flying bridge, standing behind the controls. "Worst comes to worst we can all jump in."

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It was stifling under the tent, but it was at least out of the sun and Kerry ignored the pungent smell of heated canvas as she climbed up out of the water and onto the wooden platform.

The young guard she'd befriended turned and saw her approaching. The rest of the group he was with looked up as well, but went back to leaning over a map on the makeshift plywood desk after a moment.

"Oh, there you are, ma'am." The guard said. "I thought you'd done gone off."

"My friends did." Kerry agreed. "They're going to look for our other friends at the Palmetto shelter." She put her hands into the pockets of her cargo pants. "What's your name?"

"Billy." He answered promptly. "Harris."

"I'm Kerry." Kerry offered. "So did they... I mean, are you all going to stay out here or..?"

Billy sighed, taking off his camo hat and wiping the sweat off his brow. "We don't know." He admitted. "I hear they're bringing in more supplies, but my cap'n there said the more they bring stuff in here the more people'll show up."

"Probably true." Kerry said. "And they'd have to bring in some kind of shelter,, you can't stay here. The mosquitos will eat you all alive at night."

"I done told him that." Billy nodded his head wisely. "They need to get us one of those big bus things at least. With a big old battery like a RV, you know?"

"I do know. I've driven one." Kerry smiled, her ears pricked to listen into the conversation around the table. It wasn't particularly low pitched. "I went on vacation in the Grand Canyon, and we drove there from here in one of them. It was cool."

"Lets just pack up and get out of here." The older man was saying. "We can't do anything useful. These people are just going to keep showing up wanting more than we got."

"He's right, sir." One of the women dressed in camo gear said. "We should be doing search and rescue, that's what we're trained for. Go over back into the city."

Billy had also heard the conversation. "Just when we done setting up." He sighed.

Kerry studied the crowd. "But these people need help too." She objected, quietly. "Someone has to."

"Can't go no further." Billy said. "You see that water there."

They heard the sound of the chopper approaching, and two of the other guard called out to Billy as they moved away from the tent and started to clear a space. "Gotta go." He said. "You can stay up here until we're ready to pack. I know the cap'n don't mind."

Kerry did, in fact, remain where she was as she watched the guards, now grown to a group of six, push the crowd back gently as they made an open circle around the injured boy. She sensed motion to her right and turned her head to see the captain standing next to her. "Is there enough space?"

"Drop a basket." The man said. "Listen, Ms..." His brows lifted.

"Roberts." Kerry supplied.

"Ms Roberts, there's not much you can do here. We're not having any luck contacting anyone around the area who can help, and we don't got the gear to go no further in the wet there."

"Yes, I can see that." Kerry agreed readily. "We need some punts, or something. I'm hoping my friends got to a shelter. Everything back there looks like it's sunk." She glanced at the name patch on his chest, which said Dodge, J.

The captain was nodding his head as she spoke. "That's right." He said, then hesitated. "Billy done said you had family back where we come from." He looked briefly around with studied casualness. "I know some Roberts where I come from."

Kerry wasn't entirely sure where this was going. "My father in law's family still lives back there." She said. "His siblings.. well, his brothers. His sister moved to one of the cities not that long ago."

"He wouldn't be one of old Duke's boys, now would he?" The captain's gray, steady eyes watched her face, with a slight, noncommittal smile on his face.

"Yes, he is." Kerry said. "He hasn't lived there in a long while though. He.."

"Went for the navy." The man now smiled more easily. "I do know the family, we go back a ways." He stopped speaking, as the helicopter came to hover over the open space around the boy. "Let me go make sure this goes right."

He went to the edge of the platform, clapping one hand to his head to hold his hat in place as the downdraft from the rotors flattened everything underneath it.

"That poor kiddie." The young woman had come to stand next to her. "We're going to find a lot more, for sure." She was roughly Kerry's height, and had curly auburn hair. "Command said they already knew they'd need to send the dogs in."

"Dogs?" Kerry asked.

"Cadaver dogs." The woman said, placidly. "Best thing to search with. I mean.. " She hastily corrected herself. "Not at first, they'll send in the rescue dogs first. I mean.. I know you're looking for some friends and all that."

Kerry felt at that moment, both nauseous and lightheaded as she considered the potential result of her search and she felt the muscles in her jaw tighten.

"That was a crappy thing to say. Sorry." The woman said. "I've just done this before."

"No, I know." Kerry said. "It's all right."

The captain came back over, and the sound of the helicopter began to fade away, the boy being hoisted up in the rescue basket with his tiny, terrified mother with him. "That's done." He said. "Betty, lets see about getting us packed up here. Ms. Roberts can come with us. She's family."

"Yes, sir." Betty produced a brief grin, then she went back to the makeshift table and hauled a crate out from under it, putting it on top and starting to pile things from the tabletop into it.

"I'd probably better stay here and wait for my friends to come back." Kerry said. "But thank you very much for the offer."

The captain smiled at her. "Ma'am, we can't leave you out here in this mess." He said. "We're not gonna go that far, just up into Doral and meet up with our main unit. Them friends of yours can get there easier than back here."

And that, Kerry acknowledged, was true. She really had no desire to stay out in the open, in the mud and flooded area, with a gathering crowd that was now getting a bit more agitated since all the water had been disbursed and there seemed to be nothing else forthcoming from the trucks.

She didn't feel really in danger of anything, but she also didn't think she could get anything useful done by standing around in water up to her knees either and the water level didn't seem to be going down any.

A loud and angry yell distracted both of them, and the captain turned and his hand dropped to the holstered firearm on his belt.

Two of the men in the crowd were grappling with one of the guard, who was trying to pick up empty boxes and put them back on the truck. Two of the other guardsmen started towards them and then a bunch more of the crowd surged forward, reaching out and grabbing for the boxes.

"They're empty!" The captain called out. "Stop! Stop it! There's nothing left!"

The voices were rough and mostly Hispanic, with a few interjections of the sounds Kerry knew was Creole. She felt at a loss and helpless, and without anything else to offer she went to the table and started helping Betty pack up.

"That's gonna end in a bad way." Betty said. "Lets get going." She picked up one end of the box and Kerry grabbed the other end, and they moved the crate off the table as one of the guards picked up the piece of plywood and lifted it over his head, throwing it into the back of the truck.

"Fall back!" The captain yelled. "Get in the truck. We're moving out. Jack, leave them the damn boxes they're empty and these idiots don't speak enough English to understand me."

Kerry hastened along the edge of the platform with her burden and then stepped down off it into several inches of now stinking mud between the platform and the truck. She helped Betty lift it up and slide it into place, then before she could react herself she was grabbed around the waist and lifted up into the truck herself.

Three soldiers vaulted into the back of the truck after her, and the captain let out a whistle. "Jack, get rolling. Go east! C'mon!"

Kerry caught her balance as the truck jerked into motion and Billy landed next to her on the bench that served as a seat on either side of the middle cargo area. "Where are we going?"

"Southcom." Billy said. "Hope it's not flooded too."

Southcom. Southcom. "Oh, okay. I know where that is." Kerry felt a sense of relief. "I'll just call my friends when we get there. It's probably a better path for them to pick me up anyway." She braced her mud covered boots against the floor of the truck and held on.

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Dar stood at the controls, her head turned to look over her shoulder as she popped the engines in and out of idle to keep the Dixie in place as the team literally manhandled the large pelican case down off the dock and onto the wooden ramps they'd built.

There were seven people there working on the case, Carlos and his two buddies providing the real horsepower with their bodybuilder physiques glistening with sweat in the sun.

Arthur and Elvis, the two programmers were there, but they were both slight and slim and mostly of use in climbing around the case to keep it straight on track. Celeste their old security guard from ILS was helping them, and Andrew was in the water, directing the action.

Dar felt a little unsettled, torn between wanting to be down there working with her team at this difficult task, and knowing she was without a doubt the person who needed to be driving the Dixie here in the tight quarters of the half destroyed dock.

"All right. Bring that there end ovah here." Andy was hanging with one hand off the makeshift dock, pointing with his hand where to bring the edge of the case. "Watch out ovah there don't step on that there edge."

"Got it." Arthur had caught his balance as he almost fell off the other side of the repurposed aluminum door. He inched around the edge of the case and tugged it forward, swinging the front end around to where Andy had indicated. "Here?"

"Push." Carlos told the nearer of his two buddies. "Yeah, get it ... yeah." They shoved the case along the planking towards the end of the ramp, where the Dixie was idling just out of reach.

“Dar!” Andy now turned his head towards the boat, and raised the volume over the engines.

“Yeah?” Dar answered, craning her neck so she could see her father’s dark head at the waterline. “What?”

“Back on in here.” Andy said. “Squitch by squitch now!”

“Easy for you to say.” Dar shifted into reverse, one hand toggling the two throttles that controlled the big inboard engines as the Dixie eased towards the shore. The current was pulling against the bow and it was hard to keep the big boat straight as she slowly approached the dock.

The rumble of the engines covered the sound of wood cracking, but Andy heard it and he turned quickly in the water, looking back and forth. “Hey!” He let out a call of warning. “Y’all look out there!” He shifted his grip as the wood planking moved, the pylon under them cracking and collapsing under the weight of the case. “Oh lord.”

“Whoa!!!” Carlos let out a yell of alarm, as the case started to tip, leaning over on one side towards where Andy was hanging on. “Grab it! Hey! Look out! Watch out!”

Dar heard the commotion and leaned to one side to look along the port side of the boat. “Oh crap.” She saw the case shift and start to slide towards the water as the planks tilted and twisted while the team tried to grab hold of it.

“Dad! Move!” Dar hollered, her hands freezing on the controls until she saw her father’s tall form disappear under the surface of the water and then she gunned the engines, swinging the back end of the boat around and under the edge of the dock as the case turned and tumbled with everyone scrabbling for it. “Let it go!!!”

“But..” Arthur protested.

“Let it GO!” Dar bellowed, only barely keeping the back end of the boat from collapsing the makeshift ramp.

Carlos released the handle but lost his balance and went into the water, and the rest of the helpers scrambled for hand and footholds as they let go, reeling to keep their balance. Celeste sat down abruptly and grabbed the edge of the door.

The big case hesitated, and then fell off the ramp in a rush and onto the back deck of the Dixie, tipping sideways and then back as it hit the diving well and tilted towards the surface of the ocean. “Oh crap.” Dar muttered.

“Wasn’t what I wanted.”

Her mind was already going through the steps of dropping the anchor and whether she’d refilled her dive tanks but a second later, Andy emerged from the water and launched himself up and over the gunwale, grabbing hold of the edge of the case and hauling it backwards to keep it in place.

A ragged cheer came from the team watching on shore.

Andy braced his boots against the lip on the back deck and leaned forward a little, booting the dive ladder into the water. “C’mon here, boy!” He yelled to Carlos.

Carlos was swimming through the water, keeping clear of the engine wash. “Okay?” He eyed the churn of the diesels warily.

“C’mon.” Dar called out. “Just grab the ladder!”

Carlos swam forward and did, hanging on as Dar shifted out of idle and the Dixie surged forward, bringing her stern away from the rocks on the shore that had been washed with her engine outflow they’d been so close. The edge of the hull brushed the dock and made it sway crazily, nearly throwing the team on it into the water.

“Crap.” Dar adjusted the throttles. She got the bow out and ahead of the dock and they were clear, so she put the engines back into idle. “Carlos! Get on!” She yelled, watching as the boat drifted out a little from the shore and into the bay.

“Oh boy!” Carlos climbed up the ladder and into the well, getting his weight against the case as he helped Andy tip it onto its end. “Holy crap, pops!” He said. “That was nutz!”

“Yeap.” Andy agreed, looking around. “Need me some rope.” He muttered. “Put you a dent in this here fiberglass, Dardar!” He called out, as Dar maneuvered the Dixie back around to bring her bow to the shore again.

“I’m going to drop the anchor and give you a hand.” Dar announced, just as she hit the switch to do just that. She felt the rumbled as the heavy device dropped from its housing and plunged into the lightly chopped water and then pulled taut as it hit the bottom and the Dixie swung against the current and held.

Dar waited until she was sure the boat wasn’t going anywhere, and then she turned and went to the ladder, putting her hands on the railing and letting her body weight take her downward in a tumbling rush that ended with her boots on the deck.

“Get me a rope.” Andy directed, as he and Carlos kept their grip on the case, keeping it tilted towards the cabin. “Tie this here thing here.”

Dar reached into the deck box and removed a coil of rope. “Lets get everyone onboard and see if we can get it out of the well and onto the deck.” She tossed the rope out to uncoil it and then fed the end of it through the handle on the case, tying it into a neat knot. “It’s waterproof but I don’t want to test having it ride back with my prop wash a foot up over it.”

She ran the rope over the edge of the well to a deck cleat and secured it.

“Stay there.” Andy told Carlos as he released his hold and went to the box, removing another rope and repeating the tie down on the other side. “All right.”

Carlos cautiously let go of the case and then straightened up. “Whooof.”

Dar came over to inspect the case. It was tilted on one edge, the ropes holding it against the low wall that separated the diving well from the back deck and she could see the dent her father had mentioned where the edge of the case must have impacted when it fell.

“Nice catch, boss.” Carlos commented.

“I was lucky I didn’t take out the dock with you all on it.” Dar responded, with a brief wry grin. “Okay, let me get her back in there and give Kerry a call to see if she’s on her way back here. Lets get this thing back to the island before something else happens.”

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“You’re where?” Dar’s voice came through the phone with a full compliment of disbelief attached. “At the what?”

“Long story.” Kerry said. “I couldn’t get hold of Mark and the guard was pulling out. They offered me a ride and it was that or stay in the middle of that flooded area with a lot of pissed off people.” She glanced around. “Would have ended up being just as useless.”

“Holy crap.” Dar said. “Let me see what we can do to come get you.”

“I’m fine. This whole place is crawling with National Guard.” Kerry said. “They’ve got power here at least, and I got a hot cup of coffee.” She added. “I tried to call Mark again but he’s not picking up.”

“These sat phones suck.”

“Well hon.” Kerry took a sip of her coffee, standing as she was in shade of a large block concrete building that sprawled along a flooded street. “A lot of things suck right now.”

The front grassy area was covered in water, but it was not enough to stop the military trucks who were driving in and out and parked all along the main drive into it. There were men and women moving in all directions, most carrying boxes and crates, sloshing through the shallow flooding.

The building had a large wall on the outside, and a guarded gate and the front door she was standing near was six feet above the water, up a set of cracked and weathered concrete steps. “Anyway, just wanted to let you know where I was. I’m going to see if I can talk anyone into giving me a ride back down there and keep trying to get hold of Mark.”

Dar sighed unhappily.

“Go on and get those servers over to the island.” Kerry suggested. “I’m pretty sure I can get someone here to ride me down there. They have to be patrolling there too, right? Might as well have one of us doing something useful since I utterly tanked at finding out about our people.”

“You found Zoe.”

Kerry cleared her throat. “She found me, hon.”

“You were in the right place.”

Kerry gave the sat phone an affectionate look.

There was a deep rumble of generators behind her, and she could hear the air handlers cycling on, cooling down the building. There were more guard trucks arriving every few minutes and in the distance on the other side of the building she could hear a helicopter firing up. “They’re using this as a staging area. Sorry about the noise.”

“Figures.” Dar said. “Are you sure it’s okay Ker? I hate thinking of you stuck out there alone.”

Kerry smiled. “Hon, I’m in the middle of like a thousand soldiers. I’m fine.” She said. “I’ll meet you back at the office. Give you a call when I get there, and you can come pick me up.”

“Hmph.”

Dar didn’t like the idea. Kerry knew from the tone of the grunt. But she also knew their options were very limited.

“Okay? I know you want to get our satellite office going.” She paused. “Even without an actual satellite.”

“Yeah, okay.” Dar finally said, with an audible sigh. “Anyway we managed to get the case onto the back deck but it took a fall in the process. No idea if the damn things’ll work when we get them powered up.” She said. “If they don’t I’m going to just head back over there with the gang and we’ll meet you.”

“Deal.” Kerry said. “Drive safe, hon.” She said. “Let me get off, I see a call coming in. Maybe it’s Mark.”

“Okay. Call me if he’s got any issues.”

“Will do.” Kerry hung up the line and took the incoming one. “Hello?”

“Colleen here.” Her friend and their finance director said. “We just got up here to the space and glad I am to have air conditioning and power back I will tell you that.”

“Hey Col,” Kerry smiled. “Glad you got there. Everyone okay?”

“Fine as rain.” Colleen said. “We’re going to get things set up, and then turn our admin phones on. You want anything forwarded or should we just take your messages, you and Dar?”

“Messages.” Kerry answered at once. “Otherwise it’s just going to be a mess, because these sat phones only randomly work.”

“Got it, and will do.” Colleen said. “How’s it going at the office?”

Kerry glanced around at her surroundings. “They got the servers on the Dixie. Jesus only knows if they’re going to work.” She said. “Dar’s on her way back to the house with them now.”

“Good luck then lassie.” Colleen said. “Give all me regards and I’ll have my fingers crossed they at least get the cellular towers back up there.”

Kerry hung up and pondered the controls of the phone, then she dialed Mark’s number again. It rang several times, but again, there wasn’t any answer.

She cursed under her breath and then shut the phone down and put it into her pocket, going back inside the huge building and out of the heat.

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Dar regarded the back deck of the Dixie for a long moment, rubbing the edge of her thumb over the keypad on her phone. She was standing on the dock, still feeling a touch indecisive about what to do next.

Carlos and his buddies had gone back up to the office, using the hose near the loading dock to rinse the salt water off their skin.

The programmers were on the boat, sitting in the deck chairs, sucking down bottles of ice tea from the Dixie's compact kitchen and Angela had just come over the rise with a basket along with Celeste.

Andy had just swum over to his own boat and hoisted himself up onto the back deck of it. He was making the vessel ready to go, and Dar lifted her hand to give him a wave as he appeared at the side facing her.

"Okay." She turned as the approaching women got to the ramp. "All aboard." She said. "Let's see if we can get the gear up and running and the office set up before Kerry gets back."

"Right you are, boss." Angela looked pleased. "Glad I can be a help, you know? I was hoping I'd get to go with you because I just talked to my cousin and it's a mess back where I live for sure."

Dar waved her forward. "G'wan get on." She said. "You too, Celeste. Once we set up the gear, I could use some security around. It's secure data."

"Right you are Ms. Roberts." Celeste looked pleased to be asked. "I'd be glad to. There's nothing at all we can do over at the ILS office. Jerry went over there and it's blocked off due to all that damage. No one's allowed inside. He came back and told us and he's going to help out Carlos."

Dar nodded, and followed them over to the hastily braced end of the dock and then onto the deck of the Dixie, pausing only to untie the ropes holding the boat to the shore.

As Dar stepped onto the deck she felt the boat move and start drifting and she quickly dodged around her passengers and got to the ladder up to the bridge. She climbed up and went to the controls, perching on the edge of the captain's seat as she pressed the starters for the engines.

The inboards caught and started up and she reversed the boat back from the shore, feeling the rocking of the bay chop as they moved in reverse until she had enough clearance to swing the bow around and face the east. Ahead of them, Andy was already underway, moving cautiously through the debris field and into the channel.

"Can we come up there?"

Dar looked at the ladder. "Sure." She called down. "Better do it now before I have to maneuver."

Arthur and Elvis came climbing up immediately and came over to the console, looking at the controls with avid curiosity.

"This is a nice boat." Arthur said, promptly.

"Thanks." Dar checked the depth sounder and looked at the bottom outline, as she turned the Dixie out from the shore and into the marked channel ahead of them. There were dozens of boats out on the water now, mostly police and military, but a few pleasure craft out to see the damage.

The breeze picked up as she gave the engines a little nudge, and then they were crossing the bay in Andy's wake, heading back across the water towards the shipping channel.

"What's all the stuff down there?" Elvis asked, pointing at the lower deck. "The tanks and all that?"

"Scuba." Arthur answered for her. "It's cool you have your own stuff. Me and my dad are certified, but we rent ours all the time."

"We go out on the weekends sometimes." Dar said. "Or when we go down to our place in the Keys. Faster if you have everything. There's a compressor at the marina, and down by our cabin."

"That's cool." Elvis said. "My dad has a Skidoo. We take it out sometimes. "

"What's he doing with it right now?" Dar asked, thoughtfully.

"Riding around looking at all the storm stuff. He brought some animals out of the flooding already." Elvis said. "I bet he's the most popular guy in the neighborhood right now." He paused, considering. "Bet he's raking it in too. Buck a ride or something."

"Wish I had a couple of them." Dar said. "Kerry's out west trying to get over to where Maria and Mayte live. It's all flooded. She can't get past the turnpike and twelfth and apparently the national guard showed up with tents and trucks."

"Need some airboats." Arthur said. "That's what my dad said before. He saw on the news all those people were floating around on wood debris and stuff. Cars all flooded, houses all flooded, what a huge ass mess."

"They live out there in Sweetwater." Arthur said. "Mayte showed me pictures of her house. It's nice. All full of flowers and things in the front and a garden."

"We've been out there. It's a nice neighborhood." Dar agreed, adjusting the throttles a little as they went past the bridge. "We can't get hold of them."

"That's what Mark said. Hope they find a way out there." Arthur said. "That whole area got trashed. Did they stay in their house or go to a shelter?"

"We don't know." Dar admitted. "I think they said they were going to stay in their house, but crazy as it got.. not sure I would have."

Arthur blinked at her. "But you did."

Well, that was true enough. Dar adjusted one of the throttles and peered at the depth finder. "We figured it would be as safe as anywhere. You'll see when you get there."

They turned into the shipping channel, on the cargo side that would take them up along Terminal island, and then across the short channel that separated it from the island and Dar picked up the speed a little, keeping a sharp eye on the depth gauge.

The engines roar made more conversation difficult, and so the two programmers went over to the table behind the console and sat down, content to watch the passing scenery as the drone of the engine rose around them.

After a few minutes, Dar glanced back at them and half to almost chuckle, seeing the two fast asleep in the padded chairs.

Her radio crackled. "Dixie Dixie. C'mon back." Her father's low, growly voice emerged.

She lifted the transmitter. "Dixie. Go ahead."

"Got me an idea. Pull up into the service bay at the front there when we get by." Andy said. "Got them a boat lift." He added. "Haul that big old box up out to the dock."

"Roger that." Dar agreed at once. "Great idea." She said. "Not sure if the cart can handle the weight. I probably need to bring the truck around."

"Yeap." Andy agreed. "Ce'pt some of them roads on there are still blocked up."

The radio crackled. "I heard that." Ceci's voice interrupted. "Where are your keys? I'll drive that thing over the backs of these wingnuts here still arguing about that flooded golf course."

Dar chuckled in reflex, glad they had set up the marine radios which were proving far more reliable than any other technology so far. "In the stone dish on the kitchen counter." She said. "We're still about twenty, thirty minutes out from docking."

"That'll give me enough time to stop by club and grab some box lunches they claim they have ready." Ceci sounded satisfied. "Be there in a jiff and oh by the way, they got amateur hour TV rolling from the security building. Funniest thing you ever saw, got a camera pointed at the radar and everything on an in house channel."

"Nice."

“Lord.”

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Kerry walked down the hallway, it's surface covered in nondescript gray weave carpet that matched the mostly nondescript gray walls except where a large irregular blob of scrubbed dark gray stain covered the ground.

She identified it without effort as a toner explosion, and noted the wall socket nearby at the height you would need one to be for a copier.

Like all the government buildings she'd ever been in, this one smelled of linoleum polish and bureaucracy, and again like places she could remember since childhood she heard the sound of an old fashioned telephone ringing somewhere along with the clatter of a typewriter.

Randomly, she wondered if someone wasn't just playing that into the PA system somewhere, an MP3 track like one of Halloween noises. “Government background soundtrack.” She said, under her breath, as she turned a corner and went into the large open conference room where the national guard leadership were camping.

Here there were televisions on rolling carts, and several on the wall, a bank of wired telephones, a lot of men and women in fatigues, and against the wall, boxes of water.

There were people walking in and out in army and navy uniforms as well, and Kerry could see her new friends from the edge of Doral over near one corner where there were folding tables set up in a large square and laptops where information was, she supposed, being collected.

“There you are.” Billy saw her and trotted over. “So hey listen, where did you say your friends lived?”

Kerry promptly provided Maria's address, and followed him over to where the woman who had been at the table in the tent was typing into a keyboard.

The woman looked up and gave her a brief smile of welcome. “Nice to be back in the AC.”

“It is.” Kerry didn't deny it. She sat down on a folding chair next to the table as Billy took a seat behind one of the laptops and starting typing into it.

“Stupid system is slow as hell.” He commented.

Kerry wisely kept her mouth shut and did not offer an opinion, as the last thing in the world she wanted to get entangled with at this moment was a government computer system that possibly needed some kind of technical adjustment.

And then the nerd kicked in. “I guess you guys are using satellites.” She remarked casually. “They are slow.”

Billy glanced at her, and then other woman did too. “You know something about it?” He asked.

“More than I want to right now.” Kerry admitted. “But at least you have satellite backhaul. Everyone else is kinda stuck.” She leaned back in her folding chair and took a drink of her coffee. “Wish we'd thought to have a dish put on the roof.”

“Okay.” Billy went back to his screen. “That area's totally underwater.” He wiggled aside in his seat and turned the screen so she could see it. “See here? It's about five to six feet of water.”

“Holy crap.” Kerry said. “That's like a swimming pool.”

“It is.” The woman agreed. “That's why we had to get out of there. Ain't nothing we could do.”

Kerry regarded the screen, then she looked at the two young soldiers. “So what are they going to do?” She asked. “I mean.. there are people there trapped, aren't there? I saw video of people sitting on top of their roofs.”

Billy shrugged. “Wait for the water t'go down.” He said. “I heard the Cajun Navy's coming over but it'll take time for that.” He said. “Some places, I guess they can bring choppers in like we did for that boy but not with all them trees.”

The woman nodded. "They're getting some pole skiffs from Orlando." She said. "Maybe down here by tomorrow." She could see Kerry staring at her, and her expression became a bit defensive. "We brought supplies. No one expected the whole place to be drowned."

"S'right." Billy agreed. "Got us lots of tarps and duct tape and all that." He said. "We though it would be mostly stuff blown down, like a tornado."

Kerry held a hand up. "Yes, of course, sorry about that." She apologized. "I'm just worried about my friends." She said. "Let me go try and.. " She paused. "Figure out what to do." She got up. "Thanks, I really appreciate the info."

She walked through the room and headed for the door, aware in her peripheral vision of the captain trotting after her.

\*\*

Andy already had his boat tied up to the maintenance dock by the time Dar was starting to maneuver into the narrow channel.

Two of the ferries were tied up there, relatively unscathed, but the third docking area, where the third of the three of them would usually have been empty. Andy had tied up at the front of that space, leaving the rear part of it, with it's hoist, for Dar.

The hoist was mostly used for the fast boats and outboards the marina staff used to get around the outside of the island waters, to do light maintenance, and if someone needed to make a fast run across the channel without using the ferries.

As Dar eased in, she saw the dockmaster, Jack, and two of the marina staff come out of the hut near the end of the dock area, wiping their hands with some paper towels. The dockmaster lifted his hand and waved casually at her, indicating the cleats on the pier nearby.

Jack walked over to the side of Andy's boat as he stepped off, and they started to speak with each other. The other staff waited on the pier for Dar to come alongside.

"Can we help with anything?" Arthur asked, coming over to stand next to the controls.

"There's rope on the front deck there." Dar indicated with a tilt of her jaw. "If you want, go grab it and toss it to the guy on shore."

Arthur retreated down the ladder, with Elvis right behind him and then he climbed up onto the side walkway and made his way along the cabin to the front of the boat.

Dar positioned the Dixie up against the pier and waited for the lines to be secured, and then she shut the engines down, climbing down the ladder and arriving at the deck as the door to the cabin opened and the rest of her passengers appeared. "Okay. Lets see what we can do with this thing."

"We're here?" Angela asked.

"More or less." Dar replied, stepping up onto the gunwale. "We stopped here to get the servers hoisted off." She crossed to the dock as Jack and Andy came over to her. "Think we can do it?" She asked, as Arthur and Elvis climbed up after her.

"Hi, Ms Roberts." Jack said. "Whatcha got there?" He regarded the large, long case on the back deck. "Looks like a coffin."

"Big box of IT gear." Dar said. "We have to get it over to the cottages. We rented the big one near the club."

"Oh yeah." Jack said. "I heard all about that. Got in ahead of some other folks and they were roaring." He glanced past her. "Get the lift down to get that box up, willya Pete?" He said. "They should be done clearing the roadway so's Mrs. R can get you all's truck over." He added as an aside to Dar and Andy. "S'how I knew you were heading in here."

"Sure." Pete unhitched the cradling gear and stepped onto the dock. "You ladies want to get inside there, or up on the pier? I don't want you to get hit with nothing." He was a tall, well built man with a silver gray crew cut, and tattoos up the length of one arm.

"Probably need all of us to move it. It's heavy." Arthur said. "Took all of us to get it down to the boat and then it almost fell in the water."

Pete nudged the case, then bent over and gave it a shove. "Oh boy." He straightened up. "Thanks for warning me. Jose, go grab the rest of the gang inside there wouldja, if they're done with the tree?"

"Sure." Jose hopped ashore and jogged over towards the shack.

"Had a tree come down across the driveway." Jack explained to Dar and Andy. "We were in the middle of chain sawing it into chunks and moving it out of the way."

"They have a lot of customers for the rest of those villas?" Dar asked. "I didn't figure they would, since we didn't have much damage that I could see." She frowned a little. "Thought they'd be glad of some income for the thing."

Jack snorted a little. "Not folks here, folks on the mainland who want to sleep on those fancy sheets." He said. "Friends of friends, you know what I mean?" He eyed her. "The mayor's a buddy of someone out here, and he wanted some place for the feds to stay since he wants them to give us lots of money."

"Jackassery." Andy commented briefly.

"Pretty much." Jack said. "Like all the rest of it. I've had about up to my eyebrows with it this past week." He put his hands on his hips and exhaled, visibly frustrated. "One guy was giving me a hard time for coming over to get lunch."

"One of them folks with their boats sunk?"

"You got it." Jack nodded at Andy. "I told him one more hour of it soaking ain't gonna matter."

Dar grinned wryly. "Then we show up." She indicated the Dixie.

"You have never been a problem." Jack said, bluntly. "You and your family are nothing but good people, and there's no one on staff here'll say otherwise." He indicated the group of men who had come trooping around the corner of the shack heading towards the dock. "Glad to help you out here."

A moment later, Dar's truck came pulling around on the service road and crunched to a halt near the lift, the driver side window down and Ceci's silver blond head poking into view. Andy went over to the car and leaned against it, catching his wife up on the details.

Dar glanced around her, at the service docks that seemed mostly intact. "Doesn't look too bad back here."

"No." Jack agreed. "No one wants to live on this side. Got views of the cargo ships going in and out mostly. They all want to live on the east end, and the south. South got the worst of it."

"I saw."

"Hey." Jack looked at her. "True you fixed the cams? I heard that in the mess there." He indicated the shack. "Sam said you went in there and sorted them out."

"That shouldn't surprise anyone." Angela spoke up. "Everyone knows Ms. Roberts is a computer genius."

Dar frowned. "Someone tried to mess around with it." She half shrugged. "I just rolled it back. Wasn't that complicated."

"That's not what he said, but sure." Jack grinned at her. "They're just glad they don't have to foot patrol in the heat and I don't blame em. Some of those guys were working all night and they just let them come over for some chow about an hour ago."

Dar put her hands in her pockets, cocking her head slightly to one side. "Why not just feed everyone up at the mansion? It's not like its fancy food. It was something like hamburgers and mac and cheese."

"No mingling." Jack said, briefly. "You know how it is."

"Give me a damn break." Dar said. "We're in the middle of a natural disaster they should grow the hell up." She turned and stepped back onto the deck of the Dixie, climbing down onto the back deck and walking over to help Pete lift the edge of the box to slide one of the canvas lift straps under it.

Jack watched for a moment, a faint, wry smile on his face. Then he hitched his belt up and stepped onto the deck of the Dixie, pulling a pair of worn leather gloves out of his back pocket and fitting them onto his hands. "Move over guys."

"Hold on there." Andy ambled over to join them. "Cec, back that there truck up around ovah theah." He got down into the deck and wiped his hands on his cargo shorts. "Least ah didn't hear no parts moving round."

"Let the cradle down!" Pete called up to the dock. "Need more slack."

"Want me to drive that back around, Mrs. R?" Arthur asked Ceci. "My dad's got a truck like this one." He added. "it's a pig to turn around."

"Sure kid, have at it." Ceci willingly opened the door to the vehicle and hopped out. "Angela, lets go see if we can find a drink in there these guys are gonna need it." She led the way over to the nearby shack. "How'd you do?"

"It's a mess." Angela said. "Glad I'm here." She said. "Specially over here, though they had a nice little setup at the office and with Carlos around I wasn't worried about being over there."

"I just bet." Ceci chuckled. "And who's this?" She asked, as Celeste joined them.

"Hello, Mrs Roberts." Celeste said. "You don't remember me. I work security at the ILS building. I remember when they brought that cake in you did for Kerry. I'm Celeste Cruz."

"Well." Ceci regarded her. "Welcome back then! C'mon." She led the way forward. "The more the merrier."

\*\*

Kerry was already at the door before the captain caught up with her and she slowed reluctantly as he called out her name. "Oh, hey." She took a step back from pushing the outer door open and turned. "Something wrong?" She asked. "I didn't leave anything back there I don't think."

"Oh no! Nothing's wrong. Just wanted to see if there was anything we could do for you." Captain Dodge said. "My name's Jerry, by the way." He held out a hand. "Don't think we proper met back there."

Kerry returned the grip. "I'm just going out there to use the phone." She held up the device. "Get hold of my friends and have them come pick me up."

"Where's home? Where you trying to get to?" He pushed the door open and they went outside into the hazy sun and nearly breathtaking humidity. "Whoa." He took off his glasses and rubbed them with his shirt. "Fogged that right up."

"Yeah, it's crazy hot." Kerry picked up the sound, faintly, of angry voices some distance off. "Anyway, our office is over in Coconut Grove." She told him. "That's where we're all gathered." She explained. "I live out on Fisher Island, though. Near the Coast Guard station."

The name meant nothing to him, and he just nodded. "So you all went to that big shelter, right? The basketball stadium? Why don't you let me get you a ride back down there. Meet your friends." He said. "East, we got plenty of patrols."

"If someone's going that way, I'd love a ride." Kerry said. "Figure out what to do next to find our people out there in Sweetwater." She stuck her hands in her pockets. "Go find someone with a jet ski maybe."

"I got ya." He smiled at her. "You hang on here a minute and make your phone call. I'll see what we can cook up." He said. "Did they do a lookup for ya inside?"

Kerry nodded. "No record of them, but their house is definitely in the flood zone." She admitted. "I hope they just went to a shelter."

"Sit tight." The captain went back inside the building, releasing a puff of cold, dry air into the heat that almost drew her back after him.

She sighed, though, and went over to stand under the overhang, one edge of it ripped and damaged but providing a bit of shade as she got out the sat phone and tried Mark again.

No answer. She folded the phone and crossed her arms, gazing across the mud and water covered yard as she breathed in the moist, warm air. She could feel the sweat gathering under her shirt and she was aware of being a little hungry and more than a little frustrated.

She suspected the captain would get her a ride. Which was great, but it didn't help her find Mark or Zoe, and she wondered if they were back where she'd last seen them, hunting for her. Should she ask the nice Jerry if he'd arrange to have her taken back there?

No. Kerry reluctantly sighed. The guard was here to help people, not escort her around South Florida searching for a guy on a motorcycle. "We should have stuck together." She admitted aloud. "We're so damn used to cellphones working."

The loud voices grew louder, and she saw figures behind two parked trucks. Since nothing was coming to mind, she walked in the direction of the sound and came up next to one of the trucks seeing three men behind it facing off against one other man with his hands spread out to either side of him.

Definitely a situation to avoid and so naturally Kerry stayed right where she was and listened, all ready to stick her nose in when the opportunity presented.

The three were soldiers, in muddy fatigues with sweatstains across their backs and down each side. The single man facing them was in jeans and a tshirt, with a thatch of thick black hair and a lean rangy body.

"Look, I just want to talk to someone." The black haired man was saying. "Don't be such douchebags."

Kerry turned and leaned casually against the truck, wincing a little as the heat of the metal hood penetrated the light material of her shirt. She remained there though, crossing her ankles as she punched in another number into the phone and held it up to her ear.

"We told you, get the hell out of here buddy." One of the soldiers said. "We don't want your kind mooching around."

"My kind?" The man repeated. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Who the hell do you think you are, you plastic ass GI Joe."

The phone rang through to the message service. "Mark, give me a call." Kerry said quietly into the phone. "I'm not where you left me."

"Shut the fuck up."

"Get your hands up, jackass. Let's see who's plastic. I'll put this plastic right up your ass."

Kerry folded up the phone and pushed off the side of the truck, turning and coming around the other end and stopping short as she came upon the group of them. "Oh!" She called out loudly. "What on earth's going on here!"

One of the soldiers had his fist wrapped in the dark haired man's shirt, and his other fist drawn back, a second soldier had his sidearm drawn, and the third had just been moving to grab the black haired man's arm.

They all froze at her exclamation and the man closest to her spun around, throwing his hands up in surprise as the rest just turned their heads.

"Sorry!" Kerry gave them all a smile. "Didn't mean to interrupt anything..." She put the sat phone in her back pocket. "You all okay?"

The soldiers were young. The dark haired man was too, maybe early twenties. One of the soldiers still had peach fuzz. Kerry felt slightly ancient as she strolled forward towards them, putting her hands into her front pockets in a casual move.

"Oh. Uh." The closest soldier to her let his hands drop. "Sorry, ma'am. Are you.. " He looked around, clearly surprised to find her there. "Um.."

The other soldier somewhat furtively put his gun away, and the third released the dark haired man, giving him a shove backwards. "We're just taking care of a trespasser ma'am. We're fine here, thanks." The soldier said, gruffly. "No problem."

"Get out of here." The second soldier told the dark haired man. "Clear out, and stay off the base." He took a step towards the man again.

"Hold on." Kerry said. "He's not doing anything." She said. "Why not go back inside and get some of the fresh coffee they just finished up making in there?" She suggested. "It's hot." She added, with a gentle grin. "I was just in there. They've got sandwiches too."

They were all taller than she was. They were full of bravado, and young aggression and at least in the case of the soldiers were hot and irritated and probably in no mood to deal with some strange chick who obviously wasn't part of the guard.

But Kerry drew in a breath and studied all of them with a direct stare, her eyebrow lifting, a veneer of confident command exuding from her she'd learned mostly from watching Dar.

Who hadn't had to learn it from anyone, since it came as naturally to her as breathing and Kerry knew well there'd have been a lot less hesitation if it had been her partner here with her supremely macha attitude and the truly surprising level of raw aggression she could produce.

For a minute, it was a true tossup. She could see the twitch, almost smell the testosterone flare. "Go on." She told them with quiet confidence. "We've got enough to deal with, don't we?"

"Can't do anything out here anyway." The man nearest her said, with a faint shrug. "Lets get a drink and get out of this damn sun."

They left, not without giving the black haired man, and Kerry, stares before they trooped off and around the truck, one of them hitching up his fatigue pants with a jerk.

Kerry watched them go, then she turned back towards the dark haired man. "Hi."

He was staring frankly at her. "What the hell are you? Some sergeant major or something?" He was a little scruffy, and he had a few small scars on his hands, a deeply tanned skin and an angular face with a pointed chin. His eyes were a surprising hazel.

"Random nerd." Kerry told him solemnly. "Did you need something from these guys or were you just messing with them?"

He was only an inch or two taller than she was, but he had a wiry toughness evident under the soft cotton of his shirt. "I came here to see if these jerks wanted to rent my ride." He said. "Didn't even get far enough to talk about it."

Kerry looked past him. "What kind of ride? You got a swamp buggy or something?"

"You don't think I brought it close enough for them to just grab, do you?" The man snorted. "Got it around the corner." He paused. "It's an airboat. " He added. "Not that I expect you to know what that is."

"Ah, you never know." Kerry smiled at him. "Matter of fact, it's music to my ears." She said. "They might not be interested but I certainly am."

"You are." He eyed her doubtfully. "What the hell does a sergeant major want with something like that? I just came here because I saw some of those dodos walking through the water half a mile over cause no one thought to bring any boats with them."

"Friends of mine are missing south of here. I want to go find them." Kerry said. "I was going to see if I could get out to Tamiami and find someone who had an airboat and what do you know? Here you are."

He tilted his head a little to the left. "Why not have the GI Joes find em?"

"They don't have boats." Kerry smiled briefly. She felt the sun beating down and it was giving her a headache. "Yes or no? You for hire?" She asked. "What's your price?"

He looked around and then back at her. "Thousand bucks." He sent the words at her like a slingshot, with an arrogant little jerk of his chin.

"Done."

"I don't take credit cards."

Kerry smiled again, as charmingly as she was capable of. "I've got cash." She said. "Let's go." She pointed back the way he'd come, towards the gates. "Before some captain comes back and makes me go in a Humvee." She added. "What's your name?"

"Joe. What's yours?" He countered, caught between outrage and grumpy delight.

"Kerry." She herded him towards the gate.

"Sergeant major Kerry." He turned and headed down the street with her at his heels. "Weird ass day just got a little weirder."

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Dar regarded the long, somewhat now battered case seated in the back of her truck. One side had a dent in it, from where the box had fallen into the back of the Dixie, and she pondered if she should open up the case and inspect it, before they spent more energy on getting it to the other side of the island.

Then she shrugged. "We're this far." She turned and leaned her back against the sun warmed truck side, feeling the heat penetrate the sweat soaked shirt she had on.

The team was seated at a picnic bench nearby, having some actually iced tea. They were chatting with the dockmaster team, and now that the sun was angling to the west, an onshore breeze had come up and it felt good against her skin.

Andy came over to her. "What'cha think?" He jerked his head in the direction of the box.

"I think they're probably dead as a doornail." Dar acknowledged. "That stuff isn't meant to be dropped off the side of a building and do anything useful afterward."

"Wall." Andy's expression was philosophical.

"Is what it is." Dar said. "What a pain in the ass."

Her father chuckled a little. "Yeap." He said. "This whole thing is."

It was. Dar paused, then glanced sideways at him. "You think we should move out somewhere else?" She asked. "Midwest or something?"

Andy shrugged. "Got tornados there." He said. "Fires out by the west. Floods in some places. Always something." He concluded. "Least you see these here things coming."

"True." Dar said. "Next time we'll have a better plan. We didn't think about any of this after we started up."

He patted her on the back. "S'all right Dardar. All happened so quick." He said. "That there ten watt bulb you got for a landlord didn't think of nothing and he's had the building for years." He paused reflectively. "Y'never do think these things'll come right at you."

No, it was true. They all came into the area, and you expected them to turn north, or turn south or get ripped apart by having to come up over Cuba, whose mountainous terrain served as an effective though somewhat unintentional barrier.

Even when they came closer, even when the cones started including your area, because they were so fickle, and so erratic, no one every really though they'd be ground zero.

And yet, here they were. Dar sighed, and straightened up. "Well, might as well know the worst." She waved at the seated team. "Lets get this over to the cottage."

Jack had just finished a sandwich, and he wiped his hands off and stood up. "We'll give everyone who wont fit in that truck a ride over on the cart." He offered. "That metal must be burning hot by now, No one wants to sit back in the back there."

"Thanks." Dar opened the driver's side door then paused, cocking one eyebrow at Ceci.

"Don't give me a look, kiddo." Her mother said. "You certainly did not get those long legs from me." She shook a finger at Dar. "Not my fault."

Dar adjusted the seat all the way back and got in. "Uh huh."

Andy got in next to her, and Ceci climbed into the back seat, along with Angela. The rest of the group got into the golf cart and a moment later, the odd little parade was bumping across the debris strewn pathway towards the newly re-opened tarmac road.

There were landscaping teams out, dressed in long sleeved, bright green shirts rendered almost black with sweat, with wide brimmed hats. They were moving branches and debris to the side of the road, dragging newly cut pieces of stump along as well.

It looked like brutal, exhausting work and Dar was glad enough to be in the air conditioned truck, navigating carefully around them as she made her way onto the main road and headed towards the club. "Jack said they were kicking up about us renting the cottage?"

"Your mama had some words with them. " Andrew said, solemnly.

"Jerks." Ceci confirmed. "But glad we asked for it yesterday. Wouldn't have had a chance today. They got the rest of them parceled out to all their buddies."

"Hmph." Dar made a low noise in her throat.

"You know what you sound like when you do that?" Ceci said. "Kermit the frog."

"I do not."

"You do."

Andy chuckled.

Dar focused her attention on the road, which curved around the end of the island heading back along the route that would take them past their house. They were just coming past the ferry dock when her sat phone rang.

Without looking, she fished the phone out and answered it. "Dar."

"Hey, it's Mark."

Dar nodded in reaction "Hey, what's up."

"What's up is we got no idea where Kerry is. She's not where we left her." Mark said. "The guard was here, and trucks and everything with a tent and now they're all gone!"

"I know." Dar said. "She was trying to call you. She went with them to the big Southcom facility in Doral, off 41<sup>st</sup>." She steered around two golf carts that were moving in the opposite direction, shiny models with addresses on them that marked them as residents, not workers. "She said she was going to try and keep calling you."

"Oh! Great." Mark said. "Thanks – I know where that is." He sounded relieved. "I'll go find her."

"Any luck with Maria's family?"

"Nothing. They haven't seen them. Zoe and I checked three shelters, then I left her back at the one her family's at. She's going to try and get a ride over to the office to be with everyone else." Mark said. "Those shelters are a mess. Just loud and screaming kids and ugh."

"Well." Dar pulled into the turnoff that would take them over to the area where there were cottages and villas to rent. "Better than a house with no roof."

"True that." Mark agreed. "I'll call ya when we hook up. I don't know why these phones are being so damn flaky."

They arrived in front of the cottages and as they did, they saw in the putting green to one side of the rentals a helicopter landing. It was sleek, and dark green and anonymous, and two men in guayaberas got out, ducking under the rotating blades and shielding their face from the downdraft.

"That would be handy." Dar regarded the helicopter. "Faster than the Dixie."

Andy studied the craft. "I could maybe fly that." He announced. "I done a course on it." He added. "While back though."

"Can't have changed much." Dar observed.

"No." Ceci told them. "Stop it. Both of you."

They got out of the truck as the golf cart pulled up alongside, and a moment later, as they were walking across the emptied central patio the island's hospitality manager spotted them and hurried over. "Ah! Ms Roberts. Good you are here."

They all halted in the middle of the patio. In the center was a fountain, now empty, and around it stone benches that looked relatively untouched. One was tipped over, but the rest were firmly in place, with only a stain of brownish debris to show where water had washed over the area.

There were cottages and villas on all sides of the central area, two of them larger with steps leading up to them and patios, and some smaller units that were original to the place, then side paths to another area behind them that held a circle of newer villas that had more recently been built.

"Hi, Clemente." Dar greeted the man. "We've got the.."

"Yes, yes I know." Clemente said. "Of course we know, and we have moved the furniture in the living room aside for you to bring in your things to work." He indicated the steps up to the biggest of the cottages. "May I show you?"

They trooped up the patio steps and the manager pushed open the wood front door, which stuck a little. "It has swollen up." Clemente apologized. "From the water."

"Sure."

Inside was a large, square room, with an elegant wooden table in the center. A couch had been moved to against the wall, and two lamp tables had as well, leaving as much of the stone coral floor open as was practical. "It is okay?"

Dar nodded. "Good as it's going to get." She said. "We can put the rack in the corner there." She pointed to the far side of the room where there was an empty space. "It's fine, Clemente. We'll get set up best we can." She turned. "I've got four folks who'll be staying here too."

"Si." Clemente nodded. "Come, I will show you the bedrooms." He indicated a back hallway. "And now that you are here, I will tell the electricians." He hustled over towards the back of the cottage, and the two programmers and Angela and Celeste followed him.

Dar walked over and looked into the small kitchen. "This'll do."

It was refreshingly cold inside. They had taken out all the carpets, though Dar wasn't sure if it was because of their presence, or to remove water from them. The cottage had two bathrooms and the kitchen, and three bedrooms along with the large living space.

"We can have two more people here." Angela came back out. "Are you taking another trip back there Ms R?" She asked Dar. "Maybe more folks are there now."

Dar nodded. "Gotta go pick up Kerry." She agreed. "I'll see who else is around, but lets get that box in here first." She said. "This going to be okay for you all?"

Arthur just laughed.

"This is pretty nice." Celeste spoke up. "And oh my gosh that air conditioning feels so good." She sighed happily. "We can bring in those supplies from the boat, if we can borrow one of those carts."

"You can take my truck." Dar said. "Lets get things going."

She went outside with the rest of them and they gathered around the back of the truck, unlatching the tailgate of the truck and letting it down. "Now."

The case was lying on it's side, it's weight more than enough to keep it in place.

Elvis took a mover's dolly the marine group had loaned them and put it on the ground. "This is gonna be tough." He said. "If we miss that thing it's gonna hurt."

"How are we going to get it up those steps?" Angela asked. "Maybe we should get some help? That thing's a ton weight." She said. "Wish we'd brought old Carlos with us!"

"Let me go get some fellers." Andy said. "Stay put." He walked off towards the path between the cottages, and the rest of them looked over at Dar in question.

"Lets see if we can find some boards." Dar said. "We'll make a ramp." She pointed towards the road, where the landscapers were still dragging debris around. "See what we can find. "

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Kerry sloshed along as they walked west from the military base of operations, towards the Everglades. Joe was splashing ahead of her, reaching out to grab and break the idle twig as they went deeper into the flooded area here at the industrial end of the street.

"How did you make out in the storm?" Kerry asked, catching up to him. "Your house, I mean."

"Don't live in a house." He said. "I live outside." He glanced at her, a crooked smile appearing. "I know where there's some limestone caves, you know? Little ones. I just ducked into one of em."

Kerry was impressed. "Wow." She said. "That's gutsy."

He shrugged. "S'what the problem is with everyone in these parts. It's all of it swamp. All of it floodplain, you know?" He said. "You build against it, she comes." He indicated the sky vaguely. "Stupid." He led her around a stretch of trees. "Here we go."

Tucked into a gap between a thick patch of sawgrass was an ungainly creation, two rickety seats on top of a flat bottomed, broad beamed platform, and behind the seats was a eight foot high screen of rusted metal poles that formed a protective grid.

Behind the grid there was a large vertical propeller, and attached to that was a gas engine. Under the seats was a weathered wood box and the floor of the platform had a hand hammered look as though the metal of it had been repurposed.

It was stupendously weird looking. Kerry, however, thought it looked great. "Nice."

"Built it myself." Joe told her, with a proud expression. "I hunt with it. Bring back skins and game." He walked up onto the boat and went to the back of it, yanking a pole with a long spike on the end of it out of the ground.

"C'mon up."

Kerry climbed up onto the boat, glad to have her boots out of the murky, mucky, pungent mud. The boat shifted under her and she put her hand on the back on one of the chairs to hold herself steady as Joe knelt beside the engine and started it up.

It rumbled to life. Joe listened to it for a minute, then he reached over and engaged a clutch and the propeller started turning. He quickly got up and sat in the left hand seat, taking hold of the rudders as the boat started to move. "Siddown."

Kerry did, without complaint. The breeze picked up as they headed west, the propeller driving the boat through the flooded grass and out over where the water covered the road. The sound of the engine prevented easy conversation, so she spent some time looking around as they turned along a deeply flooded road and went south.

"Twenty seven." Joe said, raising his voice. "Underwater all the way to Tamiami."

There weren't any people out here. The depth of the floodwaters was, Kerry reasoned about five feet or so, but as she looked between the trees she could see houses buried up to their first floors and cars completely covered. Overhead, she spotted some birds circling.

"Buzzards." Joe noted her glance. "Lotta dead stuff around." He said. "Cows. Some horses." He paused. "People."

"Yeah." Kerry said, briefly. On the wind they were heading into she could smell a hint of decay, the distinctive scent of death mixed with the smell of water and foliage. It made her tense up inside, and as it did, the thought that being out here with a very random and unknown man was probably not the smartest thing she'd ever done.

She felt she had a good instinct for people. She knew, in fact, that she had a finer talent for judging intent than Dar did, and Dar had told her that on more than one occasion. She was the one who made the business deals, evaluating customers and deciding if they were the kind of customer who would end up being a good investment and long term partner.

So was it smart to be riding on a rickety airboat along the edge of the Everglades with someone she didn't know? Kerry's lips twitched. Dar would have. It was a good cause. She wanted to find Maria and Mayte, and make sure they were safe. The mission was one she knew her partner would have accepted.

It probably wasn't smart, but then again, it didn't really matter now did it? Because after all, here she was.

Here she was, driven by that innate risk taking part of her that raised its head sometimes utterly unexpectedly, surprising her colleagues, their customers, and occasionally herself.

She settled back into the rusty seat and kicked a bit of the mud off the bottom of her boots, letting her hands rest on her knees. The sun glinted off her wedding band and she rubbed her thumb against the bottom of it, finding obscure comfort in the warmth and the solid feel of the metal.

To the right, there was a line of trees and behind that she could see swamped grass for as far as she could focus. Every so often they would go past a flooded house, and on the left, a continuous flash of them as they came even with blocks interspersed with wooded areas.

It seemed desolate. Joe fished under his seat into the box and pulled out a headset that he crammed onto his head then pulled out a second for her and handed it over. "Put that on."

Kerry took it and glanced at it, then pulled it on over her ears. The headset, ear muffs actually, blocked out the sound of the engine though they were a little loose and not that comfortable. "Thanks." She said, after a moment. "That was making my ears itch inside."

"Loud." Joe agreed. "Gonna turn up there, see what we can find out for ya." He pointed ahead of them, to where a huge stand of trees had collapsed, and were lying across the road bed they were traveling over. "S'close to where you said."

Kerry straightened up in her chair and braced her boots on the floor of the airboat, taking in a breath and then releasing it.

If they found them, if they were okay, it would make for good end to the day.

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Dar wiped the sweat out of her eyes and paused to catch her breath. They had the case on its end, on the dolly and part of the way to the cottage entrance.

Jack had his guys bring over two pieces of three by twelve long enough to get up the steps and they were propped against them now, waiting for their arrival.

"Holy crap" Elvis was leaning against the case. "This is crazy hard."

"Almost there." Dar said. "But something just occurred to me." She left her spot and went up the makeshift ramp to the door, standing against it and measuring its height against hers.

"Oh crap." Arthur muttered. "Don't tell me it's too big."

Dar came back over to the case and stood next to it. "I think it'll just fit." She said. "Otherwise we'll have to take it around the back and around the jacuzzi through the patio."

"Everything's a bitch." Elvis said, mournfully.

"Sometimes." Dar put her shoulder against the case. "C'mon." She and the two programmers started pushing the case towards the steps.

It was difficult. The ground was uneven, and covered in gravel. But it was at least even and they made good progress until they had the dolly lined up against the planks. Dar then took a step back and regarded the case.

"That's gonna fall on top of us if we try pushing it up there." Arthur said. "I bet you."

Dar exhaled. "We'll put a rope on the top of it, and someone'll pull while the rest of us push." She decided. "I've got some rope back in the boat. One of you take the cart back and go grab it. It's in the box in the back."

"No problem." Elvis trotted off.

Dar went over to one of the stone benches in the center of the square and sat down on it, the white stone warm but not unpleasantly so. She let her boot slide forward as Arthur came over and sat down next to her.

The square was quiet, at least for now.

The two men from the helicopter had been visible going in and out of the cottage across from theirs, and Clemente's crew was just coming out of the front door of it, their arms full of cleaning supplies.

As Dar watched them, one of the island's peacocks appeared, looking warily around. "Ah." She said. "Wondered what happened to them. I hadn't heard them screaming the past couple of days."

Arthur looked at the cleaning ladies, then at her, with a strange expression on his face. "Um... what?"

"What what?" Dar asked, then she pointed at the bird. "That. Island has a dozen of them."

"Oh! What are they?" The young programmer studied the bird. "Big ass freaking thing."

"It's a peacock."

"Yeah?" He looked at the bird with interest. It was stepping around the patio, randomly pecking at the ground.

"Boy peacock or girl peacock?"

"Peacocks are boys." Dar said, dryly.

Arthur looked at her, one of his eyebrows hiking up. "That's right out there."

"I didn't name them. The girls are called peahens."

They watched the peacock, apparently satisfied by the now empty courtyard, spread its feathers out into an array, strutting around in a circle. It paused for a moment, then let out one of its high pitched cries.

"That's annoying." Arthur said. "You put up with that?"

"Not around our place. We have dogs." Dar said, with a smile. "But yeah the first time I heard one of them let off I thought someone was screaming for help. Wondered what the hell kind of place I'd gotten into."

"This is pretty ritzy." Arthur looked around. "I mean, you can see it's money here, you know?"

"It is." Dar admitted.

Arthur was silent for a moment. "I didn't figure this was your style." He said. "I mean I knew you lived here but I didn't think..." He paused. "You're not really the Gucci type."

"I'm not." Dar smiled briefly. "I inherited the place here from an aunt. It's not really... anyway that's why Ker and I are looking for another place near the office."

She glanced past the case, to where the two men from the helicopter had reappeared, and were covertly watching them. "They don't much like me here." Her lips twitched. "Though I'm not really sure what they hate more, my redneck background, the fact that I'm gay, or my dogs."

Arthur regarded her with a bemused expression in silence for a long moment. "Fuck them?" He finally opined. "Like why the hell should they care? I remember when I started working for you when Kerry told me about you guys I was kinda weirded, but after a week it was like – a nothingburger."

Dar chuckled. "A lot of the people we started the company with already knew." She said, putting her hands behind her head and crossing her ankles. "Some of the other owners here are just jerks." She added. "Just like anywhere else."

"Like everywhere. I have people call me a geek all the time." Arthur said. "Cause I like computers and comic books and gaming. They don't know me." He studied one of his sneakers. "Making fun of me, because I don't like to play football."

"I don't like to play football either." Dar said, in a reasonable tone.

"You're a girl, you don't have to." Arthur told her. "If you're a boy, and you don't like to play football, everyone thinks you're gay."

Dar folded her arms thoughtfully. "Well, if you're a girl and you do like to play football, they think you're gay." She said. "I'm not really sure what that says about football." She concluded. "But anyway I never liked it. I'm not really a team player."

Arthur started laughing unexpectedly. "I never liked it because I'd rather be in the air conditioning with a keyboard. He admitted. "I only liked to do skateboarding outside." He kicked his heels against the gravel. "But it's cool. I've got a bunch of friends who like the stuff I do now."

Dar glanced at him. "You found your tribe." She said. "I get it." She indicated the surroundings with one hand in an idle circle. "I don't care about this place or the morons who live here. I'm giving this place to my folks so if they had an issue with me just wait."

Arthur started laughing again.

"Juuuust wait." Dar repeated, with a wry grin. "My mother's already got plans to invite her coven over to have some midnight thing in the middle of the golf course."

Arthur held his hands over his stomach and laughed without restraint.

"Only thing good about the place is it's built like a brick shithouse. We didn't even lose a shingle." She lifted her hand and exchanged a wave with one of the young maids who worked for Clemente. "Hey Juanita"

"Hola Ms Roberts." The young woman said. "Who is your friend?" She gave the shirtless and now somewhat sunburned Arthur a smile. "Buenas Dias, senior."

"Hi." Arthur returned the greeting with a somewhat embarrassed grin. "I'm Arthur."

"He's going to be staying in the big cottage. He works for me." Dar told her. "Trying to get some work done, since our office on the mainland has no power."

"Si, of course." Juanita said. "We will take very good care of them, Ms. Roberts. What can I put in the kitchen?" She inquired. "Coffee, yes?"

"Coke, Doritoes, and Snickers bars to start." Dar informed her. "Try to stock it with some pop tarts too."

"Pop tarts!" Arthur sat up. "Now I want one!"

The golf cart from Dar's unit came bouncing back into the courtyard, fully loaded. Elvis got out, along with Andy, Jack the dockmaster, two of his men, and Chino. Andy had a coiled hank of rope on his shoulder. Chino came trotting over to Dar and jumped up into her lap, tail wagging enthusiastically.

"Oof. Chino." Dar got her arms around the large animal and gave her a hug. "I missed you too. Now get down." She told the dog, who obediently hopped off. "Did you leave Mocha behind?" She asked, as Chino wriggled between her knees and cocked her ears in response.

"He's busy guarding the back yard." Andy told her. "Them folks are doing some cleanup back there."

"Hi Chino." Arthur greeted the Lab. "Did you get scared in the storm?"

"Not really." Dar gave the dog's tail a tug. "They didn't like all the noise but they did all right."

"Okay here we go." Jack and the two other dock workers were surrounding the case. Dar got up to join them, as Arthur took the rope from Andy and climbed up the steps to reach out and tie it onto the top handle. "Almost there, guys, almost there."

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They slowed as they reached the thick pile of trees and Joe maneuvered the airboat around the end of them, going through a thick patch of half submerged logs as the bottom of the vessel scraped over debris. The throttled down engine muted to a low rumble in response, as they went forward cautiously.

Kerry missed the breeze of the travel, the heat of the sun and the moisture of the humid air gathering around her like she'd walked into a spa. But she put that aside and stood, keeping hold of the back of the seat as she watched the horizon.

They moved from a patch of trees and onto a street, where houses were half buried in water.

It was quiet. The sound of their engine was the only noise. She could not hear anyone nearby, no shouts or yells, or babies crying. No sound of generators.

They passed by a car that was almost fully submerged, and as they did, both she and Joe spotted at the same time that someone was inside it.

Kerry drew in a breath. "Oh.. did you see..."

"I saw it." Joe steered the airboat in closer, and slowed, then he turned and focused forward again. "Nothing to help there." He said. "Got a lot of that I figure."

The figure inside the car was upside down. There were fingers sticking out of the gapped window, and they were dark purple, and stiff. Kerry felt a chill ripple across her body and she slowly let her breath trickle out. There were flies buzzing around the hand.

"Don't know what they were thinking, sitting there."

"Storm surge came in too fast, maybe." Kerry watched over her shoulder as they moved past. "Should we tell someone?"

Joe looked at her. "Who?" He asked, with a faint shrug. "Family's either not there or gone." He focused his attention on the path ahead. "Cops can't do nothing. Plenty of time later for cleaning all that up."

"I guess you have a point there." Kerry took out her cell phone though, and opened her note program, taking down the address of where they'd seen the car with its gruesome contents. "Anyway."

She slid the phone back into her back pocket, firmly directing her thoughts away from the possibility that she might find the same when they got to Mayte and Maria's house. "This is pretty horrible." She commented, as they went past an entire block that seemed deserted.

"It's bad." Joe agreed. "They knew it would be. My brother said that's why they didn't say to leave until last minute. No place for all them people to go."

Was that true? "I thought it was because they weren't sure where the storm was going."

Joe gave her what could only be described as a look of pity. "Come on, lady."

"Or they were betting it was going to turn." Kerry finished, but with a doubtful tone in her voice.

"You don't know much about the government." Her driver stated, slowing the boat down a bit, shading his eyes with one hand as he peered ahead. "They stink."

Kerry took a breath, then just smiled grimly. "Sometimes." She agreed, moving up closer to him and peering ahead. "What do you see?"

"Hear it." He abruptly cut off the engine and let them drift, the sound of water lapping everywhere and crickets surrounding them. Then she could hear it too, the far off rumbling of an engine of some kind, and the sharp retort of a hammer striking. "No idea what's that about." He said.

"Well, whoever's making all that noise isn't dead at least." Kerry replied. "Let's go find out."

He started up the engine again and then they lurched forward as the fan spun into gear, pushing them forward into the humid air as the sun slanted in from behind them casting their shadows forward across the flooded road.

A duck fluttered out of their way, a big white and black Muscovy with a red nose patch who honked at them in outrage as it settled back into the water.

As they moved closer to the sound there were houses now that showed some signs of life, and several had people sitting on top of the roof. One man had spread out a tarp over the roof and was tapping nails into it to hold it down, and there was a woman next to him, hugging herself.

There was a cat swimming across a yard. It did not look happy. It swam past a car that had a man standing on top of it, looking around with an air of exasperation. "Hey!" He called out and waved at them.

"Later!" Joe held a hand up.

Kerry felt sorry for the man, who stood looking after them with his hands planted onto his hips. But she wanted to find out how her friends were doing, so she remained silent as they came to a T in the road and Joe paused. "Which way?"

Kerry looked right and then left. The street signs were no where to be seen. She'd only been to Maria's twice, and both times Dar had driven and on both occasions they'd come from the east, not from the west like they were now.

"To the right there." She said, after a long pause. "Right, and then left." She added, following some instinct tugging her in that way.

Joe nodded, and steered the boat in that direction, glancing behind him and then back forward as he navigated the turn and as they cleared it they could see a large group of people standing in the floodwaters half a block away around an RV turned on it's side.

Two men were pushing a door, floating on the surface of the water, and on the door there was a huddled figure, writhing in what seemed to be pain.

"Whoa." Joe slowed their forward motion.

The people in the group closest to where they were had turned, and started gesturing to them, waving, beckoning them closer with definite urgency.

"That don't look good." Joe stated.

Kerry was occupied, her eyes scanning the crowd intently. "My friend's house is just past there." She said. "Two houses down on the left." She added. "Lets see what's going on here."

"No choice. They're gonna stop us." Joe turned off the big fan engine and let them drift forward. "Hey!" He called out. "Watch out, stand back yo!"

The man nearest him yelled back in Spanish.

"You speak that?" Joe asked Kerry. "Your friends live here, figure you do."

"I don't." Kerry admitted. "And I..". She straightened up. "Okay, over there." She pointed, spotting Mayte's slim form climbing up onto the roof of a car parked in a nearby flooded front yard. "Mayte!" She lifted her voice in a clear bellow. "Mayte!"

Mayte saw her and a moment later recognized her and let out a scream of acknowledgement. She scrambled off the roof of the car and plunged into the water, and started wading towards them.

Now five or six people were heading in their direction, all raising their voices, all urgent, all in Spanish, the men pushing the door guiding it towards them, another woman pointing at the figure on it emphatically.

Kerry glanced sideways at Joe. "How many people can you take on this thing?"

He was somewhat nervously toggling the engine start trigger, a worn and dirt smudged push button on the end of an actual piece of a tree stick lashed to the side of the seat. "Three more, maybe." He said. "Six including you and me tops."

"Can you get to her?" Kerry indicated Mayte.

Joe looked at her, at first in a little surprise, then with a faint, crooked grin. "Sure." He started the engine with an expression of relief, and started forward moving into the crowd of people who reeled to get out of his way. "Move out!" He yelled. "Move it!"

No one took him seriously at first, one of them reaching out to grab the edge of the airboat but Joe gunned the engine and shoved the man backwards and he fell into the water, turning and scrambling away from them with a shout of incoherent outrage.

The woman pointed at the figure on the door and yelled.

Kerry went to the front of the boat and braced her boots on the edge around the roughly square deck, reaching out with one hand as Mayte got to them and offering her a hand up. "Hurry." She said. "C'mon!"

Mayte grabbed her hand and was yanked upward out of the water with a powerful surge. "Oh Kerry!" She gasped. "Oh it is so good to see you here.." She sucked in a shuddering gasp. "They are up in the house, and my papa is so sick. Please we need help."

"Steady. Hold on" Kerry pulled her back away from the edge and gave her a hug. "Keep going towards that second house." She directed Joe. "Don't let those people take hold of this thing."

Joe gave her a one handed, somewhat mock salute. "Right you are, sergeant major." He increased the speed. "And here I had ya pegged as a bleeding heart liberal." He added in an approving tone. "Freakin good surprise. Hang on." He moved away from the crowd and headed east.

Kerry grabbed a one handed hold of the seat and kept her other around Mayte's upper arm. "Now what's going on?" She asked. "What happened?"

"Dios mio where do I start." Mayte said, and then she looked past Kerry. "Thank you so much for coming here!" She told Joe. "They told us no one could come help us, they had a helicopter come over here this morning." She took a breath. "And I could not use those phones!"

"I know." Kerry told her. "What's wrong with your dad?" She asked, as they came around a fallen ficus tree and into the front yard of the house she knew Mayte and Maria lived in. "Maria!" Kerry spotted a familiar face at the second floor window. "We're here!"

Joe glanced behind them, and then up at the window. "This is gonna be a mess."

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"Omg." Arthur sprawled across the couch pushed against the wall. "I'm dead." His shorts were sweatstained, and there were red marks and bruises along his bare torso. "That was crazy." He spread out his arms along the surface of the stiff fabric. "I thought for sure that thing was going to tip over."

"Like right on top of Dar." Angela agreed. "Would not have been good!"

"Good thing pops was here." Arthur agreed, his eyes closed. "Cause none of us were gonna stop that thing falling over."

The elegant room, it's center stripped bare of carpet, it's high corniced ceilings and bejeweled chandelier looked a bit odd, with them all scattered inside of it with their grubby, sweat stained selves, the overhead lights reflecting off the polished stone floor.

Dar was standing next to the upright case, the top edge just clearing the ceiling, the bottom still resting on the dolly that she had one booted foot propped up on. "Well, it's in here." She removed her sunglasses and stuck them through one of her beltloops and then raked the disheveled dark hair back out of her eyes. "Good job, people."

"We just yelled." Angela said. "And got out of the way." She went over to one of the tables pushed against the wall and leaned against it. "What a task!"

"Yeap." Andy was working the latches on the far side of the case. "Lets see what we got here." His dark green t-shirt was almost black with sweat, as were the fatigue pants he was wearing tucked into worn military boots that matched Dar's. "See if it was all worth something."

"Right." Dar twisted the fastenings on the other side, and unlatched them, then leaned over to do the ones at the bottom of the case. "I didn't hear anything rattling around when we were moving it. That's a good sign."

The door to the cottage opened and the housekeeping staff came in, two of them carrying boxes that alternately clinked and tinged as they walked.

Ceci was behind them and she pushed the door closed after them. "We're back!" She announced. "And as I was coming around I saw them using some crowbars on the ferry lift."

"That'd be nice." Dar said. "I'd rather take the truck back to get Kerry than the Dixie and then have to steal a car if I have to go chasing after her."

"Did that boy not find her with that motorcycle?" Andy demanded. "What in the world were they thinking?" He planted his hands on his hips in one of his daughter's favorite poses. "Gov'mint's got all kinds of trucks and what not out there helping people."

"Didn't stop us now did it?" Dar shook her head. "Kerry's got a mind of her own." She said. "Hopefully by now Mark hooked up with her at Southcom and they're on their way back."

"That's a sweet bike." Elvis was sitting on the stone floor, laying down flat on the cool surface. The air inside the cottage was dry and chilled and now that the door was closed, the residual moisture from the outside was rapidly being dealt with. "Wish I had one."

"Okay, take it off." Dar straightened up and grabbed one of the front handles, as Andy grabbed the other and they wrestled the cover off the case, stepping forward with it so they could remove it and see inside.

"Let'r go, Dardar." Andy took the case front and leaned it up against the nearby wall as Dar started to inspect the rack full of hardware inside.

Elvis and Arthur sat up to watch. "That one plates broken." Arthur commented, pointing at the facing of one of the servers, which was hanging down sideways. "Is that just the LED panel?"

The case had been built with a framework designed to allow machines to be fastened securely inside, and the framework had done it's job keeping the systems relatively in one piece. The front of the one had cracked, and there was a dent in the railing on the right hand side.

"Yeah, just the LED's." Dar inspected the panel, and then she tapped it back into place with a rap of her knuckles. "Everything else looks okay."

"Might have knocked some DIMMS loose." Elvis said, pulling his legs up under him crossed. He pushed his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose and leaned forward. "Hope they locked the hard drives down before they powered off."

"Mark's got an encrypted blob backed up for all of them." Arthur said.

"Don't help, since we aint got no internet here." Elvis said. "Do we?" He asked Dar. "I mean, they got power and everything here I guess."

"Well." Dar said. "No real way to tell until we can plug this thing in." She said. "And no, we don't have any internet out here. Circuits go through the usual suspects and they're still down." She glanced around. "Where the hell is the thirty amp service I asked for?"

"They're bringing in cabling from the pool back there." Ceci supplied. "They're trying to figure out how to bring it inside without having to leave a door open." She stuck her hands into the pockets of her painters pants. "I told them to knock a window pane out but it wasn't a popular idea."

"Can't they..." Dar looked up at the ceiling, and then at the doors to the pool area. "I guess drilling a hole in the wall isn't gonna be popular either."

Andy chuckled softly. "Got me a big old bit on mah drill'd get through that there wall." He offered.

Dar went to the window and peered out of it. "I'm sure that'll make me even more popular with the management." She said. "If possible."

Ceci rocked up and down on her heels. "Kiddo, I think you managed to piss off more people with this little stunt than I woulda believed possible." She said. "Talk about panties in a wad."

"Why?" Dar glanced over her shoulder at her mother, with a puzzled expression. "What the hell is the problem with everyone? We rented this place. I didn't steal it." She turned and put her hands on her hips. "What's their beef?"

"Ah. This is the only comfortable place to live in three counties." Ceci promptly supplied. "I mean, literally. They have all the hoi palloi helicoptering in here to sightsee and the best the mayor of Miami can offer them is a spare mat in the back room of the command center."

"Mother." Dar said. "People are dead, and houses are blown up all up and down the coast. Who the fuck cares what politicians are sleeping on?"

"They do." Ceci said. "And if we want them to give us lots of money to recover and help people, I get that it matters to the folks in charge here."

"I don't." Dar said. "Because half the condos on this high priced Alcatraz are investment property and empty. They should farm those out if they want to house their buddies from DC." She walked across the living room of the cottage and entered the small kitchen.

Ceci tapped her chin with one fingertip. "Now that's a fine idea."

Inside Juanita and her colleagues were stocking the refrigerator, and setting up a coffee service. "Do not pay attention to them, Ms Dar." Juanita said. "Mr Clemente said he would take you and your friends over the other people any day."

Dar smiled briefly. "He's a good guy." She said. "He's been one of the best things about living here since I moved in." She told the housekeepers. "We're going to mess this place up, tell ya that in advance."

"No problem." Juanita said. "Do the young men and ladies have luggage? Manuel can go get it for them." She offered. "They seem very nice."

Dar paused in the act of opening a can of orange Crush. "Oh crap." She said. "Thanks for mentioning it. I totally lost track of the fact none of them has anything with them." She took the can and went into the living room. "All right folks, listen up."

"Can I listen from here?" Elvis asked.

"Sure." Dar said. "We've got a little time until they get those cables in here. So lets go over to our local market and get you all some supplies." She said. "They don't have a huge choice but it's something."

Arthur opened one eye and looked at her. "Oh." He said. "You mean like clothes and stuff." He said, after a moments puzzled pause.

Dar nodded. "They've got laundry service but you'll need something to wear while what you gots being washed. I've caused enough problems without everyone running around naked."

The team chuckled with some tinge of embarrassment.

"All golf shirts and khakis, huh?" Angela asked, in a mournful tone. "I shoulda packed a bag, but who knew we'd end up here?"

Andy came in from the back patio. "Figured it out." He said. "But they got some fellers out there want to talk to you, Dardar." He said. "Said they got some deal or something or somesuch."

"Great." Dar sighed. "More bullshit."

But Andy shook his head. "Don't think so." He said. "Ah hear you all want to go riding out to the shop? C'mon Cec." He said. "Ah could do me with a snack." He said. "Been all right with what they done got over theah."

"They have greasy cheeseburgers and ketchup." Ceci translated. "Instead of carefully selected minced sirloin patties with dijon aioli." She waved at the rest of them. "Everyone in the cart! Lets go invade." She snickered in evident enjoyment.

"Try not to have too much fun." Dar said, dryly. "I'll meet you over there."

The gang gathered and they trooped out the front door, while Dar took her time, drinking down her Crush before she crumpled the can and dropped it into the tiny, mostly useless trash can in the corner of the room.

She paused in front of the mirror and regarded her reflection, then just chuckled wryly before she went to the back door, figuring if she had already pissed off the world, facing it in a ratty tank top and cargo shorts probably wouldn't make it any worse.

She pushed the door open and went out into the stifling heat, shutting the door behind her and walking out onto the pool deck of the cottage. It was bare of any adornment, all of the chairs and tables and niceties having been stored away for the duration of the storm.

The pool had been half drained, and then filled with storm surge, and was now murky and, surprisingly, had a duck floating around in it. Dar hadn't figured on using it to swim in but she hadn't expected the duck either and it quacked at her as she walked around the edge, fluttering it's wings and tucking them back against it's sides. "Everyone's a critic."

"Squonk." The duck quacked again, complacently.

On the far side of the deck there were two electricians wrestling with a spool of heavy black cabling and nearby watching them were the two strangers from the helicopter. They were in the shade provided by the thick privacy hedges, which hadn't suffered much from the storm.

Figures. Dar exhaled, then skirted the pool and approached them. "Can I help you gentlemen with something?" She asked, in a brisk tone. "My father said you wanted to speak to me."

The nearer one, slightly older, thick black hair short and cut neatly around his head, nodded. "Ms. Roberts? My name is Alex Redondo." He held out a hand to her. "This is John Delacruz, my associate."

Dar took his hand and returned a firm grip. Then she just lifted an eyebrow and waited.

"We heard you're in the computer business." Redondo said, in a straightforward way. "One of the security directors told us. He said you fixed something for him, said you were a real whiz."

Dar's brow remained raised, as her mental train went off the track and headed off on an unexpected highway. "Well." She paused briefly. "Whether or not I'm a whiz depends on who you talk to, but yes, in fact, I run a computer consulting company."

He nodded. "We need some help. The security guy said to ask you."

"Me." Dar felt a certain sense of the absurd surfacing. "I'm kind of up to my neck in my own crap right now."

Redondo nodded again. "I get it. Everyone is." He said. "But I think we can maybe help each other out. Here's the deal..." He paused, and looked around.

Dar needed no assistance in interpreting the look. "Want to go inside?" She offered. "It's air conditioned." She added wryly.

Both men smiled in response. They followed her around the pool and into the cottage. The second man, Delacruz, glanced at the rack as he walked in. "That's a box of gear." He commented. "That what you all were bringing off that boat?"

"Yep." Dar agreed. "So what's your pitch?" She waited for Redondo to close the door to the patio and join them in the center of the bare room. "As you can see, we're pretty busy trying to get something done here."

"Us too." Alex said. "Here's what it is."

\*\*

The water was halfway up to the window. Kerry was standing on the deck of the airboat, shading her eyes as she looked up at Maria. "We've got to get you guys out of here." She said, aware of the noise of the crowd behind them.

Mayte was standing behind her. "The whole house is flooded." She said. "It is terrible." She said to Joe. "Thank you for coming with this machine."

"Don't thank me." Joe said. "Thank her. She's paying for it." He looked behind them. The crowd had started to drift over, heading past the submerged cars and trees. "But if you all don't hurry up all that cash ain't gonna do anyone no good."

"Kerrisita he cannot come." Maria was saying. "His leg is I think broken."

"Oh crap." Kerry muttered.

"When the water came, he went to run downstairs to get some things." Mayte told her. "Mama tried to stop him but the water was too hard."

"Si." Maria said. "We put some things around it, to keep it still but he is in so much pain." She said. "And there is blood too."

Kerry looked over her shoulder, then she turned and went to the edge of the deck, stepping off it and plunging into the water to wade towards the open front door to the house. "C'mon Mayte. Lets see if we can get him down the stairs." She said. "Joe, just be ready to move it."

"You got it, Sarge." Joe kicked open the gear box under the seats and leaned over to pull out a worn shotgun from it, breaking it open to look inside, and then closing the mechanism again before settling it into the cradle of his right arm against his chest. "Don't be slow."

Inside there were things floating and it was hot, the stench of standing water making Kerry's nose wrinkle. The flood was up to her chest and she was glad to get to the steps and get out of it, hauling herself upward by grabbing the banister.

There were pictures floating off past the steps, and on the far side of the first floor she could see the light of the outside penetrating from a half bent opening.

"The wind pushed inside." Mayte was at her heels. "I was so scared." She added. "We thought... we are so far from the water, yes? We thought it would be okay to stay. Mama didn't want to leave our house behind."

"We'll get you guys out of here." Kerry told her, projecting as much quiet confidence as she could. "I get it, Mayte. We didn't want to leave our place either and there were some scary times during the storm."

"Is it okay by your house?"

They got to the top of the stairs. "Yeah, we're fine." Kerry said, after a brief pause to take in the blown out windows and gap in the roof. "We found Zoe, too, and we heard from the guys we sent north and Colleen, and some of the staff showed up earlier at the office."

They went down the hall and met Maria as she was coming out of what was the master bedroom. Inside, her husband and Mayte's father Tomas was lying on the bed, his face very pale and covered in a sheen of sweat.

"I'm really glad we found you." Kerry said, after a slight pause. "I can't wait to tell Dar." She continued. "But right now lets see how we can get Tomas out of here."

\*\*

It was a compound fracture.

Kerry knew very little about the subject, but just looking at the blue, swollen, bloodstained skin on Tomas' leg nearly made her sick to her stomach so she could hardly imagine how Tomas himself and his family felt about it. "Oh boy." She muttered, under her breath.

"Kerry, if we leave here.." Mayte was kneeling next to her. "They will come.. come inside and take our things. We saw that already."

"She is right." Tomas said, wanly.

Kerry glanced around the bedroom. There was a beautiful wood cabinet against the wall, and on the dresser was scattered a collection of mementos.

"We came here with so little." Maria murmured, as though reading her mind.

"Well." Kerry exhaled. "Things are just things. What's important right now is that we get Tomas to the hospital." She was at a loss, though, as to just how they were going to do that. "Can you stand up?" She asked. "If we help you? If you can get to the stairs..."

"I know." Mayte stood up. "I have a blow up thing in my room, let me get it. You can sit on that." She trotted out, and Maria took her place.

"It sounds so silly." Maria said. "But you know, Kerrisita, we have worked hard for the things we have, and we do care about them."

"It's not silly, and I get it." Kerry told her, trying to figure a way to give Tomas some leverage to stand. "But you can't stay here, Maria." She braced her knee against the edge of the bed and extended her arm. "Let me help you try to sit up."

"Si of course not." Maria murmured. "Let me help also."

Tomas said something to her in Spanish. Then he took Kerry's hand and she leaned back, flexing her arm and pulling him up towards her. He managed to sit up, bracing other hand against the bed as he slid his good leg off it and onto the floor.

He paused, his face white, as he muttered a soft curse under his breath. "Un momento." He said. "My head is going around."

"No worry. Take your time." Kerry patted him on the shoulder. "We'll get through this."

"It is amazing you found us." Maria said. "With this machine outside." She added. "What is that?"

"It's called an airboat." Kerry stood up and went to the window, peering outside. "It's something they use a lot in the Everglades. Dar took me on one once, when I wanted to see what the Everglades were."

Hilarious moment, in retrospect. It had at least been in winter, and a gorgeous day with clear, vivid blue skies and pleasantly mid-sixties temperatures and so the ride out into the 1.5 million acre boggy swamp that made the southwestern tip of Florida uninhabitable was far more comfortable than she was right now.

There was a wild beauty to it, just like wild open space anywhere had a spacious peace and grandeur inherent to them when you could turn off the boat's engine and spend a moment just listening to lack of humanity around you.

She remembered the musky scent of brackish water, and the sight of a hawk or perhaps a falcon hunting overhead, and the audible thrum of the winter breeze against her ears.

Joe had tied off the airboat on the lamppost that stood outside the door and he was standing on the far side of the boat, peering behind them. "Okay?" Kerry asked him, holding one thumb up in question.

Joe turned and looked at her, and she saw the shotgun cradled in his arm. He lifted his free hand. "For now." He said. "They seen this." He lifted the gun up and lowered it. "But don't take too long." He warned. "I aint' sticking around if they all start coming at us aint' got enough shells for that."

"Got it." Kerry pulled her head back inside and went back over to the bed. Behind her, outside the door she could hear Mayte working on something. "Okay?" She studied Tomas. "How about we get you up and you can lean on me."

"It will be too much." Tomas shook his head. "I am too big."

"We'll get it done." Kerry disagreed. "I'm stronger than I look, honest." She stood in front of him and extended both hands to him. "Maria, help him on that side." She directed. "Lets get you moving and before you know it you'll be out on the boat and we'll be on the way to help."

Tomas seemed doubtful, but he took her hands and she leaned back, hoping they weren't gong to end up crashing right back down onto the bed as he struggled to get upright on one leg.

Maria anxiously grabbed his arm on the side with his bad leg and urged him upward.

"Mayte!" Kerry called out. "Give us a hand here!"

"I am coming!" Mayte's voice accompanied an odd, rustling, squeaking sound and then she appeared in the doorway, rushing over to take hold of her father's arm just at the moment when Kerry was sure they were going to lose control.

Her assistance literally tipped the balance and then Tomas was upright, if shaking. Kerry released one and got one of his arms over her shoulders. "Get on that side Mayte." She directed. "Maria, move that chair out of the way."

"Si." Maria went to move the small, low stool that had been tucked against the bed and she dragged it out of the way, it's weighted base thumping a little bit against the carpeted floor.

Mayte got up against her father on the other side, and they all paused a moment to take a breath.

Kerry studied the path to the door, as she considered their next move, and it occurred to her that it was a good thing both women were used to taking her direction without much question because she really was making it up as she went along.

Briefly, she wished Dar was with her. Everyone carried their own internal troubleshooting toolbox and in truth Dar was like having the worlds most capable multi tool in the box with you and it came with a self guided high quality intelligence with it.

Super useful. Utterly dependable. You needed a computer thing solved? No problem. You needed a mechanical thing solved? No problem. You needed something lifted off a high shelf? Really no problem.

Kerry sighed and dismissed the internal conversation since it was pointless. Dar wasn't there, and so she had to carry on. "Okay." She said. "Lets get over to the door, then let me go in front and we get through sideways." She instructed. "Just take it slow, Tomas."

"Kerry, this is so amazing." Mayte commented. "All of the things outside, no one knows anything, no one knows where to go or what to do, and you are here."

"Yes." Tomas added, before Kerry could demur. "God bless you."

Kerry smiled briefly in response. "I am, for sure, blessed." She said, after a pause. "But I will be even more so if we can get out of here and make you feel better." She could see the pallor in the older man's face, and sweat was rolling down all of their faces. "So let's go."

They started inching towards the door. Kerry, being on the side of Tomas that his bad leg was, felt the strain as she took his weight on her shoulders, trying to be very careful not to jostle the injury as she moved.

As they turned to get through the door and she sidled through it she saw a large, brightly colored object on the ground. "Wha...oh." She said. "That what you were blowing up, Mayte?"

"Yes," Mayte answered from behind her. "I got it at a surviving show."

It was a.. kayak? Kerry nudged it a bit out of her way. An inflatable kayak in distress orange. "For this you mean?"

"Si." Mayte said. "Scott said I should." She said. "He knows about that like Dar's papa."

"Good advice." Kerry got around the kayak. "Here, Tomas, rest against the bannister." Outside the open door, she could hear Joe yelling. "Let me see what's going on out there, then we'll get you into the kayak and float you on out."

She made sure his grip was sturdy on the railing before she ducked under his arm, grabbed the kayak and hauled it up and over the landing, letting it slide down the bannister and into the water that covered the lower level.

Squeezing past it she entered the water herself and moved down the stairs, grimacing a little as the warm, wet, stale smelling flood soaked her. "Be right back."

\*\*

"So we have this new technology." Alex said, now seated on the couch, a mildly cool Coke in his hand. "It's a high speed ground based satellite and it fits in the space of a minivan." He held his hands out the full width of his arms. "Totally portable."

"Be freaking useful right now." Dar acknowledged.

"It would." John agreed. "We know it, freaking priceless because between the damage and the power, it's gonna be who knows how long before they get full cell or anything back."

"Lot of towers down." Dar agreed. "There's a repeater on the island here, but it doesn't do crap without the rest of it." She tilted her head with some interest. "What kind of technology is it?"

Alex took a sip of his coke. "It's what the military uses, you know? But it's different targets, LEO, and it doesn't use the same channels they do so right now they're kinda open." He said. "It's a classified frequency but they classed it as experimental."

"If it's classified, how is it you can use it?"

"I'm attached to the naval research lab." John said, in an offhand way. "I have a license for it."

Dar's eyebrows lifted.

"It's legal." Alex said, quickly. "We've got a grant, to try and develop a commercial use for it. You know?" He said. "So when this all happened, I said to John, hey... " He said. "I bet we can figure a way to get this up and get commercial with it." He paused. "So here we are."

Dar folded her arms. "What do you need me for?" She asked. "You could get whatever price you asked for right now. You've got a whole damned island full of deep pockets jenseing for Internet."

"We do." Delgado smiled at her. "Problem is, we have the gear, and I know how to operate it, and John here knows how to bring up the service, but all that gets us is an internet connected minivan. Which is great, but limited. We want to sell this to everyone."

"Ah." Dar said. "You need a way to parcel it out."

"Exactly."

Trivial for her, in reality. "I might have the gear for that." She allowed, in a thoughtful tone. "Or where to find it, anyway."

"Sam said, if anyone on this island did, it would be you, or you'd be able to get it." Alex said. "But we got a limited timeframe, cause we need to sell this package and get our money before they get everything else running again." He said. "I'm not pretending to any altruism here. I want seed money to prove this out as a new gig and these people here will pay anything for their convenience."

Dar found this comfortingly clear. "Got it." She said. "I want it to bring up my business." She said. "I'll hook you up and manage it as my cut." She said, in a decisive tone. "How's that?"

Alex smiled at her. "Man, I was hoping you were going to say that." He said. "My question is, can you really do it?" He asked her. "No offense. I have no idea who the hell you are and you're not my idea of some geeky cable brain."

He regarded the tall, mudstained, windblown, half clad woman leaning against the ornate French desk in the corner. "I've known a few of those in my time."

"I mean, you're obviously IT related." John pointed to the rack. "But I've never heard of your company." He sounded a bit apologetic. "Sorry."

Dar pondered the response, mostly feeling amused and not really offended. "I have no idea who you are either." She reminded them. "We try to stay low key." She added. "You'll just have to take my word for it when I tell you I can do what you're asking, and..." She casually shrugged. "And it'll be pretty apparent whether or not I can when I do it."

"Good point." John said. "Same with us."

"True." Alex said. "When can we start?"

"Where's your minivan?" Dar asked. "And how did you get it here?"

"Over by the club." John said. "In the parking lot behind that big building. I didn't get it here, it was here. Some guy had contracted us to look at it to bring in some soccer game or something for a party."

"What?"

"Yeah, I don't know. I was just hoping he'd have lots of rich friends we could talk to about it to be honest. I guess he couldn't get some game? He's from Spain." John said. "We got over here, and found out he took off to get away from the storm."

Dar straightened up. "Lets go take a look." She said, briefly closing her eyes and picturing the layout of the island. "See what you got."

They got up from the couch. "You need anything to review it?"

"No. Just the eyeballs." Dar put her sunglasses on as they went out the door and back into the muggy heat. "Lets hope someone's got a spool of cat six somewhere."

\*\*

"We weren't going to open." The cashier told Ceci. "I mean, who'd be buying logo tshirts, right?"

"Glad we could provide you some sales." Ceci told her, leaning against the counter as the staff roamed the store, picking out shirts and shorts. "Andy's next door."

"People were complaining about the limited menu." Cherise lamented. "Canned veggies. How did they think we were going to get a fresh delivery this morning?"

"People are entitled idiots." Ceci said. "Literally more money than sense." She glanced around. "Hey, is the storage for the spa open? Maybe I can get a big dispenser of body wash and shampoo for the cottage."

"Let me check for you, Mrs. R." Cherise said, promptly. "That's a great idea." She trotted out, leaving them in grand isolation in the store.

Ceci was enjoying living here more than she had thought she would. The pretentious nitwittery provided her a never ending parade of entertainment as well as opportunity to shock and offend her neighbors that living on a boat often didn't.

The island staff loved her and Andy, and were obvious about it, where there was a slight formality in the way they treated Dar and Kerry. Gay cooties, Ceci had decided, were a thing and evident where she and her husband were accepted completely.

Despite the fact they were actually far more radical and potentially more annoying. Idiots. Ceci picked up a wicker basket and went over to the candy section, sweeping a good selection of the contents into the basket before she moved along to see what else she could grab.

A thought occurred to her. The island had a certain amount of supplies available. The comment about the fresh vegetables made her wonder what would happen when that ran out?

She was not personally worried. They had two boats, and both Dar and Andy were proficient fishers and she liked a nice seaweed salad herself.

Would the island go high society apocalyptic? The thought of millionaires in golf cart raiding parties made her smile. Would they end up with sandbags and a machine gun on the front porch? She made a mental note to entertain Andy with the idea later on and turned, as the kids came up with their arms and baskets full. "Ready? I have them coughing up a gallon each of soap and shampoo."

"This is pretty cool." Arthur seemed pleased. "They even have underwear and stuff."

"Sure." Ceci started piling it all on the counter, as Cherise came back in from the back entrance. "Not like you can just run to Walgreens if you stain your tights whities."

"Let me start writing this down." Cherise said, pulling over a yellow lined pad to her and selecting one of the company branded pens from a cup behind the countertop. "Our POS is not working." She added, in explanation. "I guess they shut it down for the storm."

"Surprised they haven't popped by to ask Dar to fix it." Ceci said. "Okay, grab one of those carry on bags each, kids. As she gets this down, pack em up and you'll get a party favor to take home with you."

"Mrs R, you're the best." Angela said. "I got some pads and pens and stuff, to write stuff down for when we get the office back up. I can't think about what our voice mail looks like." She said. "I bet it's full up twice."

"At least." Ceci agreed. "Pads and pencils. Takes me back to the old days."

Celeste was behind her. "Thanks for letting me be a part of this." She said to Ceci, keeping her voice low. "It definitely started out being a much sadder day."

"No problem kiddo." Ceci relaxed against the counter again. "Glad you stopped by. I know my kids miss the folks back at the old place. Dar wished she could start up with all of em, but give her time." She smiled grimly. "Stupid nitwits."

"Oh, they regret it there." Celeste said, promptly. "Pretty much every day there's something that happens that wouldn't have." She paused. "They just had a big bunch of layoffs, before the storm hit. I don't know what's going to happen now We're all afraid they're just going to close that office."

"What.. that huge glass monstrosity?" Ceci said, astonished. "Wasn't that the center of the world of something or other?"

Celeste nodded solemnly.

"Okay, that's it." Cherise announced. "Thanks you all. Mrs R, they put the big jugs into your cart outside. Randy said if they need anything else to let him know."

Ceci scrawled her signature across the hand written pad of items. "Thanks." She said. "C'mon, troops. I can smell dead cow being seared out there." She waved the staff ahead of her. "Lets see if they have any lettuce and tomatoes so we can split the difference."

\*\*

Kerry waded outside and shoved a floating palm frond out of the way to allow her to see what was going on. Joe was standing on the far edge of the airboat, his shotgun cocked and resting it's butt on his hip as he yelled at a small crowd of people on the other side.

"There are people trapped!" One of the crowd said. "C'mon, man!"

Kerry got to the edge of the boat. "Just me Joe." She called out, boosting herself up and onto the deck, it's surface rocking under her weight. She got to her feet and came over to him. "What' going on?"

"What do you think?" Joe asked. "They want this boat and ain't none of them got near the bucks you do." He said. "Get back from there, buddy!" He added, angling the gun. "Don't come no closer."

"Listen, our friend is stuck in his house and we have to get him out." The nearest man said. He was standing in the chest high water, his tshirt soaked in mud and a kerchief tied around his head. "Stop screwing around here, man."

"There's someone trapped here too." Kerry told him, gesturing behind her at the house. "We need to get him to the hospital."

The man stared at her. "In there?" He pointed at the house. "We didn't hear anyone in there." He said. "We went to all the houses around here. No one answered."

Hard to tell really if he was accusing them of lying or excusing the group of ignoring someone in need. Kerry acknowledged it really didn't matter. "There's someone there, he's hurt, and we're going to get him help."

"There's people in there. I seen em." Joe added, briefly. "Maybe they didn't like the looks of ya." He suggested. "Thought you were gonna take their stuff."

"We're neighbors!" The man shot back, angrily. "They know us!"

Joe shrugged insolently. "I wouldn't let some of my neighbors in my place. Don't blame em."

Kerry glanced behind her. "Well, we're wasting time here." She said. "I'm sorry about your friend, but we're going to take care of the injured man in there first." She said. "So please get out of the way since I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

Joe was nodding in agreement. "The guard'll get here eventually." He said, as the little knot of people reluctantly retreated, frequently looking back at them. "Or it'll dry out. They should have stuff to eat in there if they stayed." He muttered. "Not be scrounging so fast."

"Maybe they stored it all on the first floor." Kerry commented. "I don't think anyone expected this." She indicated the flooding. "They thought about the wind and all that stuff not so much about the place being four feet under water."

"Could be true." Joe agreed. "I heard them talking it all up. We knew though." He said. "Everyone by me found a place to hole up, off the ground. But we're used to the wet."

"Well. They didn't and we were lucky." She went back to the other edge of the boat. "Anyway, let me get Tomas out here before they come back."

"You figure they will?" Joe was watching them. "They don't look like tough guys."

"Yeah I do, since there's more of them than us, and it's hot and they're pissed off." Kerry jumped off the boat and back into the water. "And because people suck sometimes, you know?"

Joe chuckled briefly. "Heard that, Sergeant major." He said. "Okay, get your buddies and lets get the hell out of here."

Kerry was totally on board with that idea. The heat and the neverending seeping, dank smelling wet were getting to her, and she plowed ahead through the floodwaters, stumbling a little as her foot struck some obstructions in the yard.

She almost fell, only the fallen tree saved her as she grabbed one of the branches, feeling the whole thing shift under her weight before it swayed backwards and pulled her upright again.

"Okay guys let.. oh." She came around the edge of the downed tree and in view of the front door to find Tomas already sitting in the kayak with his leg awkwardly propped on the side of it, the front part of it framed in the open doorway. "Wow. Great job guys!"

Tomas looked like he was all in, though. His face was white as a sheet and Maria had hold of one of his hands, her face frightened. There was fresh blood on his leg and the bandage that was wrapped around it was now soaked. He was visibly biting the inside of his lip.

Mayte was behind them. "It was not so good, Kerry. Papa fell down the stairs." She explained. "It was just a lucky thing the raft was there and he went down on top of it."

"Oh, Kerrisita." Maria looked overwhelmed, as Kerry waded into the house. "This is a horrible thing." She looked around the lower level of the house and then firmly turned her head and looked outside instead.

"Oh boy." Kerry got hold of the edge of the boat and started towing it back out towards the boat. "Yeah, it's a mess, Maria. But at least we're getting out of here now." She said. "Lets get you to the hospital fast as we can. Hang in there, Tomas." She said. "Easy.. it's.. there's a lot of stuff on the ground here."

"Oh." Mayte gripped the back end of the raft. "It is the rocks from the front, I think." She said. "Mama's little garden." She said. "The drinking fountain for the birds."

Now Kerry remembered, a vague picture in her head of the neat front yard, and it's mango tree shaded rock garden with it's stone bench and the table for dominos. "Careful." She gently steered the kayak around the tree into view from the airboat. "Easy around that corner."

"Whoa." Joe had put his gun down on the tackle box and come over to the near side. "That's a mess." He indicated the injury. "You were not kidding there sarge." He looked at the bloody fabric. "Broken."

"Yes." Kerry pulled the raft over and came to a halt next to him. "What's the best way... I don't think he can get up on there." She looked at the edge of the boat, about a foot higher than the edge of the kayak. "Can we..." She paused. "What if we..."

She fell silent for a moment, then she watched the edge of the deck dip down as Joe knelt on it and touched the front of the kayak.

"Pull the whole thing up on the deck." Joe said. "We can try it anyhow. Lemme get a rope on the front of that. Hang on." He went over to pick up a coil of rope near the chairs and then he paused and looked out past the other side of the boat. "Oh, crap."

Kerry turned her head and looked through the metal cage that wrapped around the engine fan. "Ah." She said. "Figured they'd be back." She spotted the group of men, now augmented by several more, heading back in their direction now with at least two guys wearing camo t-shirts.

They had sticks in their hands. It could have been to help them walk in the flood, but Kerry wasn't going to take the risk and she figured Joe wasn't in the mood to either. "Well, hell." She sighed. "That's not good."

"What is going on?" Mayte had worked her way around to Kerry's side. "Oh, those are the men who live down on the side of the block." She said. "They make noise with their cars all the time."

"Are they friends of your folks?" Kerry asked her. "Maybe we've got it wrong and they'll help us get him onboard."

The younger woman looked past the edge of the boat, and then shook her head. "My papa does not like them, no." Mayte said. "We are friends with some of the families on this side of the block, but they went to the shelter."

"So they're probly jacktards like we thought. Got it." Joe said. "Lemme get the engine going." He quickly returned to the edge and handed Kerry the rope. "Tie that on, yeah? Maybe we can pull the thing behind us if we haveta." He took his seat and pressed the starter on the engine, the sound of the huge fan spinning up filling the air.

"Mayte get up there." Kerry boosted herself onto the edge of the boat, getting the bow of the kayak between her knees as she laced the rope through an eyehole on the point of it and tied a knot in it. "Get your mom up there too."

Mayte climbed up onto the boat and stood up, coming over to where Kerry was sitting. "Can we... oh if we stand here..." She knelt. "Mama, come here and see if you can sit so we can bring the front on the top of this."

Joe came over. "Better hurry." He said. "I'm not stopping to argue with these shitheads." He took hold of the rope "Help her up here and lets get this onboard."

Kerry scrambled over to the edge of the airboat and braced her boots, extending her hands to Maria. "C'mon." She said. "Lets get out of here, Maria, before we get into something I can't get us out of."

"Dios Mio." Maria was in tears. "Oh no, this is so terrible."

"It is." Kerry gripped her hands and hauled up with all her strength. "But we'll get through it."

"Get on!" Joe yelled. "C'mon c'mon!" He pushed Mayte ahead of him. "Get this and pull!" He put the end of the rope into her hands. "I gotta steer!"

Kerry managed to pull Maria onto the deck, both of them tumbling to the ground as Mayte wrapped the rope around her hands and tried to keep it taut. "Oh I don't think I can hold this..." She yelled in alarm, her feet skidding on the deck as she was pulled towards the water. "Oh!"

Kerry got to her feet and got her hands around the rope. "Maria, stay there!" She yelled. "Stay on the side there and lean towards the water!" She glanced over her shoulder at the approaching group, who were yelling words being blown right back over their shoulders by the draft from the engine.

"I gotta back out of here!" Joe yelled. "I'm not letting them get their hands on this so hold the hell on to that rope!" He shifted the engine into gear and the airboat fan sent a wash of water backwards as it started into motion.

"No, wait.." Kerry yelled. "Let me..." She jumped over and took hold of the front of the kayak as the airboat lumbered into a turn. "Hold on Tomas! Hold on to the side!"

Maria let out a yell of alarm. She reached out and grabbed hold of Tomas' good leg, leaning over the edge of the boat and making it dip down as Kerry bent her knees and tried to will the edge of the airboat to further dip so she could pull the front of the kayak up onto the edge of the deck.

“Mama!” Mayte lunged forward and grabbed hold of her mother’s belt, and the weight of the three women was enough to send the edge of the boat low enough for the front of the kayak to slide up onto it.

“Mayte, grab this and pull!” Kerry scabbled backwards, grabbing onto the chair with one hand as she hauled the kayak with the other. “Pull!”

Mayte and Maria grabbed the kayak as it swayed and they all pulled, as the airboat swiveled in place and backed away from the house.

Kerry went to her knees and reached out to grab the other side of the kayak, trying hard to avoid slamming against Tomas’ injured leg as the edge of the boat lifted up and lifted him with it, out of the water

“Oh!” A moan escaped him, as the inflated raft flexed under his body and he almost slid backwards into the water. “Oh! Oh!”

“Crap!” Kerry leaped off the boat and into the water, and got her shoulder under him. “Pull!” She yelled. “Hurry!” She could see the crowd approaching and hear Joe yelling something at her, but the sound of the engine overwhelmed the sense of what he was saying.

Kerry felt the boat moving and she grabbed hold of the edge of it, grimacing as she felt herself pulled over some underwater obstacle, something that felt like branches slamming against her legs. She tightened her grip and pulled herself forward, setting her shoulders against the side of the kayak.

She heard Mayte yell, and then a moment later the kayak moved onto the airboat and she pulled herself up onto the edge of it and out of the water just in time to avoid being scraped off and impaled by a broken off lightpost.

It caught the edge of her shirt though and a moment later she was being throttled by it, her breathing cut off abruptly. She heard Mayte cry out but there was no time to find out why as she was being dragged along the edge of the deck.

Gagging, she twisted to one side and ducked her head as she felt the shirt fabric rip. She grabbed the edge of the engine casing and turned, as the shirt was pulled off her body and left behind, the boat now moving faster and past the group of men.

The branches whipped against her bare skin and the boat moved past, leaving a stinging burn across her shoulders, the noise of it’s engines deafening as she pressed against the cage around the blades for balance.

Ow. She ducked as they moved through another set of downed tree branches and turned, warding off a thick patch of leaves as she looked anxiously over at where Mayte and Maria were huddled over the kayak and Tomas, Mayte staring at her with one hand outstretched in protest, her eyes wide in shock.

At least he was onboard. Kerry reached up to rub her throat, and coughed, taking a moment to catch her breath. “That wasn’t fun.”

“Oh Kerry! Are you okay?” Mayte gasped. “Your shirt is gone!”

“Better the shirt than my neck.” She hauled herself to her feet. “Get the hell out of here.” She got up next to Joe, who was maneuvering through the debris, going through what had been Maria and Tomas’ front yard and was now mostly.. She looked to either side. Mostly just destroyed trash.

Behind them, she saw the group still yelling, one of them waving a piece of cloth in their direction. She could see the anger and frustration in their faces, but in that moment, found she didn’t have it in her to care.

“Hell yeah.” Joe glanced at her. “They were yelling something about the cops, no way I wanted to stick around for that.” He paused. “That was kinda badass. You weren’t keeping those bucks in that shirt pocket were ya?” He asked. “Cause I aint going back for that unless you were.”

Kerry’s lips twitched slightly. “No.” She ignored the knowledge she was dressed from the waist up in just a bra and pretended she had Dar’s complete lack of body consciousness instead. “But they’re wet. Hope you don’t mind that.”

“No problem.” He concluded. “Where you want to take this guy? I can’t get to Jackson in this thing.”

Kerry thought about that. "Any place you know nearby.... No, probably not, huh?"

"Probably not" Joe agreed. "Not with that. You got a dog bite or something, maybe." He steered the boat back out and onto the main roadway again, heading north. "He's gonna lose that leg or worse you don't find a fix for it."

Kerry glanced past him, hoping Maria and Mayte hadn't heard him. "Go back to the base." She said. "Back where you found me. I can get some help there."

"From the Guard?" He looked dubious. "Not from those dudes you told off." He disagreed. "Though I dunno, they may like you better with your shirt off."

Kerry folded her arms over her chest, a brief, wry smile appearing on her face. "They might." She agreed mildly. "But at least there, I knew my sat phone worked and there might even be a guy on a motorcycle looking for me." She said. "I can give you your fee, and maybe someone else wants to hire you."

Joe looked sideways at her. "Kinda too bad, sergeant major." He said. "Don't think I'll find anybody like you there again."

"Probably not."

\*\*

Dar examined the gear stuffed in the back of the van thoughtfully. It was an expensive rig, and it smelled like machine oil and new electronics, planted into the back of a Mercedes cargo van that had been stripped of any interior except for the carpet.

"So we figured we could hook up to maybe a wireless access point or something and do a trial." Alex was saying. "I picked up a few of those Linksys ones at the Best Buy before we came out here."

Dar pulled herself around the back of the rig and examined the connections to it. "Made for a cable plant."

"Mostly." John agreed. "Military, you. Know? All if it shielded and stuff." He was sitting in the passenger seat, and Alex was in the driver's seat, both of them hanging over the back of their chairs watching Dar.

Dar studied the console. She reached over and flipped on the power, watching the lights and dials illuminate and the small integrated sine wave meter spin up. Over her head, she heard the dish power up, the roof of the van reinforced with a steel frame.

"So .." Alex got up and came in to the back, sitting down in a small wooden stool next to the gear. He opened a hatch and folded it down, revealing a keyboard. "Let me get a signal... John, can you get the dish aligned?" He typed in a few commands.

John came over and with an apologetic look, edged past Dar to the back of the rig. He crouched down, his knees popping and cracking. "Ugh" He adjusted the settings "Getting too old for this stuff."

Dar watched the readout's change, and the graph go from random patterns to a squared regularity. "That was fast."

Alex glanced at her. "You know that stuff?"

Dar smiled. "I know a little of everything." She said. "Enough to know what a pain in the ass aiming a satellite is." She qualified. "That was a fast connection."

"it's got a digital preset." John said. "And they're LEO, so they're a lot closer... there." He said. "Go ahead, Alex."

"See here I.." Alex found himself gently moved away from the keyboard as Dar took it over, examining the screen. "It's.."

"Unix." Dar finished for him. "Sco, I think." She added, pecking out a few commands. "Yeah." She said. "So lets see what this thing can do."

Alex and John exchanged looks. "Were you ...er.. in the military?" John asked. "Or something?"

"Or something." Dar finished inspecting the machine's configuration. "This is relatively simple." She stated. "But it's meant to hook up to something else. Not just be an internet terminal." She looked at them. "I don't care, but did you walk out of a base with this?"

"No."

"Yes."

Alex glared at his partner. "What in the hell are you saying? You want to get us both in trouble? No we didn't walk out of no place with this thing!"

"Yes we did." John repeated. "Drop the BS, Alex. Don't bother. It's not worth it and she said she doesn't care."

"And you believe that?" Alex seemed disgusted. "You're the one who said not to get my hopes up..what the hell changed your mind so fast?"

"What changed my mind was I just realized who the hell this is. Remember I said the name seemed a little familiar to me?" John asked. "You worked for ILS." He addressed Dar. "Right?"

"I did." Dar was busy with the keyboard. "Now I own my own consulting company. Worked out a lot better for me all around." She concluded. "But yeah, I don't care. One less thing for them to ask me to mess around with." She called up a configuration and reviewed it. "You might as well make some cash on this now. Once everyone realizes the market for this type of thing they won't be able to make enough of them."

"Exactly." John said. "Cats out of the bag, you know? Key is this has access to that satellite net."

"It does." Dar ran some tests. "That's always been the bottleneck. This is pretty damn good speed and capacity." She glanced at them. "Hell I'd buy one if you had them in production."

John smiled easily, and after a moment, Alex joined him in rather a bit more forced way.

She finished her work. "This'll work. I'll have to write drivers to let me hook up a router to it. Drive this thing over as close as you can get it to the security shack."

"The security shack?"

Dar nodded. "It's the only place they got any decent cabling out to the rest of the island. That's where all the cameras feed into." She leaned one arm on her knee. "They'll be serving lunch in there. You want to sell your stuff? Sit down at one of the tables and just start talking."

"For real?" Alex said.

"For real. Tell them it'll take about six or seven hours to get things set up and sell them per device access so they don't start putting their damn kid's gaming toys on it." She told him. "I've got to get a router and get some cabling in place, but that'll give me plenty of time to get it done."

"Just like that." Alex half shook his head.

"Just like that." Dar squirmed out of the back of the van and stood up moving away from it as she felt her phone start to buzz in her pocket. "Scuse me." She pulled out the sat phone and opened it. "Yeah?"

"It's Mark." Mark said, sounding more than a little frustrated. "So I'm out here at Southcom."

"You find Kerry?"

"No. She ran off with some guy on an airboat."

Dar stopped in mid motion and stared right ahead of her. "What?"

"You heard me." Mark said. "I talked to some guy here... she was here, no question. Some of these guys were around looking for her in fact." He said, pausing for a rush of noise to go by. "Some guy came around with an airboat and she took off with him. About an hour and a half ago."

"Well. Shit." Dar said, after a brief pause.

"She borrowed your one track mind I think." Mark said, in an almost apologetic tone. "She was really worried about the burritos."

"Yeah, now I'm really worried about her and the burritos." Dar exhaled. "Okay, stay there for now. Let me try to ... figure something out."

"Roger that." Mark said. "I'm gonna offer to help them fix something. Maybe they'll give me some ice water." He sighed. "Lemme know what you find out, k?"

"Sure." Dar said, closing the phone. "Soon as I find out something." She tapped the phone against her leg, then she opened it up again and dialed. She listened to it ring, then she disconnected, and dialed again.

\*\*

Kerry crouched down next to Tomas. "It's a really good thing we got you on this raft." She told him, resting her elbow on the edge of the kayak. "I know you're really hurting, but it would be a lot worse sitting on the deck."

He managed a faint, brief smile, his hands clenched on the edge of the raft.

"We will get you help soon." Maria told him, patting his arm. "It is fine, Tomas. It is better, we can get a doctor. Jesu knows how long it would take them to get to us for help."

"They don't have this kind of gear." Kerry told them. "Not even one of these." She indicated the inflatable. "They brought a lot of trucks and tents. Things to help people if they had holes in their roofs, that kind of thing."

"I did not think this is how we would use it." Mayte was sitting next to the kayak, her back against the supports of the second chair. "Kerry, I feel so bad about your shirt."

"Don't." Kerry said. "Given how much time I spent in that water I was probably going to throw it out when I got home anyway. Or used it as a dog toy." She exhaled, aware of the sun blanketing her mostly bare body, and glad she had a reasonable tan.

The breeze felt good against her skin, and riffing through her hair, drying the sweat damp discomfort. "I'm glad it ripped and I didn't." She glanced at her watch. "And I'm super glad we found you guys."

"I was so mad at the phones." Mayte said mournfully. "We could get nothing. I was trying to see what I could do to get to help, or get to call to you." She glanced up at Joe, who was focused on the flooded roadway they were coursing over. "This is amazing."

Kerry did cop to feeling a certain bit of internal satisfaction. It would have been easier for her to stay at the office, helping Dar out, helping organize, or hell, even cooking hamburgers and relying on the government to do their job. Much easier.

However she, of all people, knew just how far to trust the government.

"If there is anyone who could find us, it would be Kerrisita." Maria said, blinking a little in the sunlight. "You and Dar will not be stopped."

"Si." Tomas nodded a tiny bit.

Well, that was sort of true. Kerry stood up and stretched out her knees, sticking her hands into her pockets and fluffing out the fabric of her cargo pants to try and get them to dry, sighing a little inwardly at the squishiness of her boots.

She was glad, at least, she was wearing one of her solid colored bras, which was almost like a bathing suit top and wasn't really too different than the gear she typically worked out in and she only wished they would stop going through clouds of insects as they intermittently bounced off her abs.

It would have been funny, in any other circumstance. If she couldn't see the strained pain on Tomas' face, and the bloodstained bandage around his leg propped awkwardly on the edge of the raft.

"I told them to go find the guys who run these out in the glades." Kerry said to Joe, after a long period of silence. "I told them to get on the short wave radio and see if they could get hold of anyone."

"Who, those military guys?" He asked.

"Not the ones you talked to. The ones I was talking to before you got to Southcom." She responded. "It's the first thing I thought of, you know? These airboats."

"What'd they say?"

"They thought it was a good idea. Those guys I talked to. They're from Alabama." She explained. "One of them catches frogs and things, so he got it."

Joe nodded. "Gigger."

"Yes."

He glanced at her. "What do you know about giggering, sergeant major? You're not a backwoods chick." He steered the airboat a little to the west, going around one of the highway islands the top of which was barely visible in the floodwaters.

"Definitely not." Kerry readily agreed. "I'm a WASP from Michigan and if I want frog's legs I'll go to the nearest fancy French restaurant and order them." She paused thoughtfully. "But I know what it is."

"Giggering?" Mayte looked up at her. "What is it?"

"Frog catching, Mayte." Kerry briefly smiled. "You take a pole with a sharp fork on the end of it and go out at night and catch frogs in the swamp."

Mayte stared at her. "You have done this?"

Joe started laughing.

"No."

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"So what are we doing?" Arthur looked around the inside of the cottage. "Did they.. oh yeah, they got the power in." He went over to the tall case and around the back of it, where a thick coil of black cable was now resting. "Lets see what we got."

"Great." Celeste came over to help him.

They uncoiled the cable and stretched it around the corner of the case, as Elvis reached up and unlatched the side of the case, pulling it open.

Inside attached to the inner frame that the machines were racked in was an industrial power switch with a heavy twist lock plug in it and they connected the power to the plug and then stepped back.

"Wait." Elvis said. "How do we know it's the right power?" He said, as Arthur was about to engage the switch at the end of the strip. "What if it's wrong?"

Arthur studied the cable. "How in the hell can you tell?" He said, then he shrugged. "It's got a fuse in it." He hit the switch and jerked his hand back as it lit up.

They all waited and watched the light. It stayed on. "I don't smell burnt toast." Elvis observed. "Guess it's okay." He examined the stack of servers. "Let me pick one that's not like super urgent though to turn on."

"Crap." Arthur said. "You know what we don't have?"

Elvis paused. "Keyboard and monitor." He sighed. "I'm sure the boss has one."

"Has one what?" Ceci came over from the kitchen, where she'd been storing some supplies.

"We need a computer monitor and a keyboard." Arthur explained. "So we can see whats going on with these things. We got power."

"They didn't bring a KVM?" Elvis frowned. "I thought I saw one in there. Didn't I?"

Ceci studied the case. "Not my circus." She said. "Let me go get one of my monkeys." She turned and headed for the door, almost colliding with Andrew as he entered. "Turn around, sailor boy. We need our kid."

Andrew hauled up. "Ya'll got..." He saw the cable. "Yeap, they done got that done." He took a step back and held the door open. "Ah do not know where Dar went off to but I expect we can find her."

"Stay here kids. We'll be back." Ceci sailed through the door and it closed after them.

The four of them sort of looked at each other. "We can let them boot." Arthur decided, pressing the start button on the machines one after the other. "See if we hear post beeps."

"And see blinkies." Elvis agreed, crouching down to look at the switch at the bottom of the rack the servers were plugged into. "That'll tell us something."

"Something." Arthur agreed, as he finished hitting the power buttons and then sat back to observe the results. "That'll take a while." He decided. "I'm gonna finish putting that stuff up." He went from the living room back into one of the bedrooms.

Inside there were two full size beds, with fluffy, luxurious bedding over thick mattresses. They were at right angles to each other, and between them were wood cabinets whose surfaces glowed with polish.

On the other side of the room was a door into a bathroom. Arthur fished inside the bag from the store and took out the supplies inside, bringing them into the bathroom and putting them down on one of the two sets of brass shelves.

He glanced around at the fixtures, which were all gleaming metal, and the surfaces, which were all glowing marble with the exception of the sink stand, which was teak. It smelled of polish and pine scent, and there wasn't even a bit of a stain in the perfectly even grout between the tiles.

The bathroom had an old fashioned claw foot tub in it, but the tub had been fitted with brass piping and an arching showerhead that he figured had to spray the hell out of the tiles every time someone used it.

A sound made him turn, and he took a step back as one of the staff entered, with some bottles in her hand. "Oh, sorry señor." The maid stopped. "I have some things here."

"No problem!" Arthur backed into the sink to let her pass. "This place is rich, huh?"

The housekeeper smiled, and arranged the bottles onto a crystal glass shelf next to the tub. "Si, it is. Very much so." She said. "We take very good care of it here."

"Oh yeah." Arthur nodded. "Theres not a spec of dust around." He said. "It's really nice."

The girl finished and turned. "It is nice for you to see that. Most guests who stay here pay no attention."

"They're used to it." Arthur guessed.

"Si, because they are here mostly to look at the houses, to buy one." The girl explained. "It is nothing special to them, you understand?"

"I get it." Arthur said, looking up and past her as Elvis entered. "It's swank. But it's cool, and it's sweet our boss brought us over here."

"For sure, we lucked out." Elvis joined him at the door to the bathroom. "Super slick idea to come out to the office, dude." He said. "But I can't see the chiefs hanging out here. It's like if Dar started driving a Ferrari."

They backed out to let the housekeeper get out of the bathroom. "I got the scoop on that." Arthur said, as he went back over to the bed and starting taking the polo shirts out. "She inherited that place she got over here"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I seen pictures of their place down in the keys. Way more like I pictured their place." Arthur examined the shirts, and removed the neatly pinned tags from them, tiny little brass safety pins he set aside on the dresser. "All stone and beach and stuff." He said. "And a place to dock the boat."

"That' boat's nice." Elvis said. "Wish I had one like that."

"You see the way she drives it? That was nuts, with the case." Arthur said. "I thought we were all gonna be jumping in to grab that case and it wouldn't have done no good. Woulda been dead, and we'd still be over there sweating."

"But we ain't." Elvis piled his clothes up and took out a bag of the chocolate covered pretzels, opening them and offering the bag to Arthur. "Lets see what those boxes are doing. We may need one of Mark's server guys if those things don't boot up."

"We might."

They walked back into the living area, where Celeste and Angela were busy setting out office supplies on the dining room table, which had been pushed up against the far wall with the chairs arranged around the three accessible sides.

A stack of lined yellow pads, and island logo pens, and file folders, and a big, heavy package of white copier paper to go with the all in one printer copier that was sitting on the floor nearby.

"We brought some of these." Elvis reached into the case and removed two desk phones. "Not sure what we can do with em though." He regarded the devices. "Lets run some cable around to that table, huh? We can put them out there."

"Need some internet juice." Arthur concluded. "What I hear though, that aint' happening any time soon." He went over to the case and ducked down, reaching in and pulling out a spool of thin cabling. "I heard on the radio the place where all the circuits come in is all chewed up."

"We got our DB here." Elvis said. "We got that and the lappies. We can work."

"If these things do." Arthur started unrolling the cable. "Guess we'll find out."

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Dar folded her arms over her chest and regarded the cabling plant. To one side, two of the island engineers stood, the door to the plant held in their hands as they watched her in expectant silence.

The large casing they were standing near held a huge tangle of stiff, dusty coaxial cabling with lables mostly rubbed off that was connected into a central hub covered in cobwebs.

A lizard peeked out from behind one of the junctures, tilting it's head at the unexpected light.

The minivan was parked nearby, it's engine turned off, it's doors slid open and it's windows rolled down.

It was hot, and Dar was suddenly aware of the sound of crickets, which had been missing. It distracted her focus, already not at it's best since most of her brain was off somewhere imagining the many situations her partner could have gotten herself into by now.

Kerry was, she well knew, a sensible, thoughtful person who had a good core of common sense, and did not lightly take unconsidered chances. Of the two of them, she was the one who was apt to want to stop, and think, and discuss before doing something.

So some dude with an airboat stops by. Dar really only had her own self to blame for it, because after all who had come up with the bright idea of finding an airboat? Had she not told Kerry, in fact, that was exactly what she'd needed to find?

Why yes, she had. She'd even told her where she'd most likely find one but she had thought, not unreasonably, that Kerry would have gone with Mark to some place like Tigertails and hired them.

Not hook up with some rando by herself.

Her immediate instinct, tugging hard, was to head off to the mainland and go and find out. It was very difficult to look at the tangle of coaxial cabling and make her brain try to engineer this whole thing about internet that she now really no longer cared about.

Logic alone held her there, the fact that while she could get on the Dixie and run over to the shore, once there, she had no way to get anywhere unless she called Mark back over and she wanted him to stay where he was in case Kerry came back there.

Even if she was able to obtain a vehicle, Kerry was now out on an airboat which meant she was going places neither Mark on his motorcycle nor she in a typical car could follow.

She needed either an amphibious truck, or an airboat herself, or... Dar considered. Where was the nearest.... She glanced up at Sam, who was standing by. "Anyone out here have a jetski?"

"Um." Sam stared at her, then at the cable, obviously trying to put her question together with the problem they were reviewing. "Uh.. I mean sure I guess some of the residents do... I think .. is it Chambers? Has one he keeps on the back of his boat."

"So whats the plan?" John asked, coming up behind her. "Boy were you right. We got bites so fast it's nuts. We're gonna make a mint."

Dar cleared her throat. She briefly closed her eyes and forced her mind to focus on the question. "So this cabling goes from here out to all the camera sites." She said. "Problem is it's all coax." She studied the panel. "With converters on both ends we can make it carry IP."

"Do we have that?"

Sam cleared his throat. "Well, like I was telling Dar here." He said. "We had this project we were going to do to make these cameras all be internet cameras?" He looked from one to the other. "Anyway, we had this bunch of stuff sent over but the company who we contracted to do it flaked out."

Dar eyed him. "That seems to happen a lot."

"Cheapest bid." Sam acknowledged, with a half shrug. "So we got all this stuff in the warehouse and it's been sitting there for months. Maybe you can use some of it?" He eyed John. "My boss is gonna wanna get money for that though." He warned. "That stuff wasn't cheap."

"Well..." John hesitated. "We didn't plan on any of that..."

"Add the cost of each of them into the cost of the package." Dar said, in a dismissive tone, before anyone could say anything. "Individually it's peanuts." She exhaled. "Okay lets look at what that is, and I'll see if it'll do what we need. Then I need to get over to my office and pick up some gear to put in the middle of it."

John nodded. "Sounds good." He said. "Or well, it sounds like at least there's a chance it'll work." He said. "Lets go look at the stuff... but I got one question." He said. "Who's going to go connect up the ends on the far side?"

"You." Dar told him. "Move." She pointed to the cart. "I need to get this done. I've got other things to take care of I gotta get to." She pulled out her phone and dialed a number, listening as it rang but wasn't answered. She disconnected, and redialed, following the men as the engineers leaned the cover over the cables.

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The sound of the engine made speaking difficult, and so they had all gone silent as the airboat cruised along the flooded roadway heading north.

Kerry could see on the horizon, where she thought they had come from, and so she was already thinking ahead to what she would do and what she would say once they arrived back at the staging area.

Would the group she'd been with still be there? If they weren't, what would her strategy be? Just find the first person she could and get them to help?

Maybe do that anyway, and not waste time looking for the crew from Alabama? It should be straightforward enough, since after all she was bringing Tomas to them, not asking them to go find him. That was it. She would search out the first soldier she saw, and then, only if that didn't pan out would she try to find the others.

She nodded a little to herself, satisfied with this internal dialog. It was a habit of hers, making up little scenarios in her head and working out how she'd deal with them, thinking about what she'd say, and how she'd say it, so when she was in the moment she had a plan.

Totally opposite of what Dar did. Kerry smiled briefly. Dar just dealt with everything in the moment, and she never or only very seldom made an attempt to prepare at all, content to allow her experience and intelligence produce whatever it did.

Which definitely could be at times surprising, because Dar would just say whatever she had on her mind and there were times when Kerry had to spend a moment with her level setting so they didn't go at cross purposes with each other unintentionally.

So now, she cleared her throat a little, holding onto the rickety seat with one hand as the wind blew hard against her and wished the ride was over, and the help achieved, and Tomas, poor Tomas whose face was white as a sheet and was in a cold sweat was getting the attention he needed.

Kerry felt helpless, despite knowing she was literally doing all she could to get him where he needed to be, and she kept going back to thinking about if she should have tried to contact someone or do something to make it happen faster.

Could she? Tomas was just one of she was sure thousands who needed assistance. She glanced over at him, and at Maria, who was sitting on the deck holding his hand, her face reflecting utter worry and misery.

She exhaled. Well, they were almost there, so no point in thinking about it.

"Okay, hang on." Joe called out. "We're gonna turn east."

Maybe, who was leaning against the cowl around the engine fan leaned forward and took hold of the kayak, her young face solemn but stolid. She looked up as Kerry knelt beside her, grabbing hold of the raft with one hand and the seat with the other.

"Go on, Joe." Kerry said. "We're hanging."

The airboat tilted and Kerry leaned back, her fingers wrapped tight around the rubber tie down on the edge of the kayak as gravity pulled against them. Her knees were braced on the slightly corrugated surface of the deck and for a moment she thought she felt things starting to slide off.

"Hang on." She told Maybe.

"Si, I have it." Maybe took hold of the edge of the fan cowl with one hand and pulled alongside Kerry. "Thank you Kerry. You are amazing."

They pulled the kayak back the inch or so it had slid and then the airboat had completed its turn and they were heading up the street towards the staging area, towards the flooded field where she had first boarded the boat with Joe.

"Get you far as I can." Joe said, briefly. "Gonna pull up near that tree up there. Don't want to get stuck."

Kerry got to her feet. "I'm going to get off and go get some help." She told him "I don't want to try dragging him off the deck it's just going to make things worse."

"Gonna charge you for waiting then." Joe eyed her. "Just like a taxi, you know?"

Kerry looked right back at him, their eyes almost level, as she put her hands on her hips, one eyebrow hiking up. She drew in a breath, her body flexing with it, and then just held her tongue, letting her facial expression speak for her instead.

Finally, he smiled just a little. "Just kidding sergeant major." He relented. "Just don't take too long cause I gotta go find me some more suckers, y'know?"

"If these guys are smart, they'll hook up with you once I talk to them." Kerry told him. "But believe me I am not going to waste a minute getting people over here to help him. He's really in pain."

Joe nodded. "That leg's a bitch." He throttled down the engine as they approached a tree laying sideways across the road, it's branches extending out. "G'wan." He reversed the clutch, and the airboat slowed abruptly cutting the breeze to nothing as the boat bumped up against one of the branches.

"Okay." Kerry went to the front and jumped off, back into the water. "I'm going to go get some help. You guys stay here." She sloshed through the warm, murky water and got around the edge of the boat. "Hang in there Tomas, I'll bring back a medic."

"Kerrisita." Maria said. "Should you go like that?" She asked. "Let Mayte or I should..."

"Nah." Kerry smiled easily. "It'll help me get attention fast. Don't worry about it." She assured them, with more apparent self confidence than she actually possessed. "Be right back." She turned and evaded the branches, getting around the fallen tree and starting up to where the road emerged from the floodwaters.

There was a long, awkward pause. Then Joe went to the box and removed a rope, going over to tie the edge of the airboat to one of the branches. He glanced over his shoulder. "So.. is she a friend of yours?"

"Kerrisita is our boss." Maria stated, briefly.

"But she is also a good friend." Mayte added, after a pause. "And very smart."

"She's your boss." Joe repeated, once he'd done tying the knot and turning, folding his arms over his chest. "What do you all do?" He asked. "Are you like... a wilderness trek adventure tour seller or something?" He hazarded a guess. "Or real estate or." He glanced over where Kerry had just disappeared. "Or a gym?"

"No." Mayte said. "We do computers."

His dark eyebrows drew sharply together and he stared at her. "Say what?"

"We do computers." Mayte repeated. "We do programs and make things with computers and things like that." She got up and reached into the back pocket of her jeans, removing a slim billfold. She took out a somewhat soggy card and handed it to him. "That is us."

Joe took the card and looked at it. Then he handed it back. "Well." He half shrugged. "Guess everyone always needs computers, huh?" He sat down on the edge of his seat and looked at them. "But I aint never had a boss like that, tell you what."

\*\*

Mark removed his head from inside the cabinet. "You can smell it." He told the man dressed in camo behind him. "It's burned out."

"Well, crap." The man said. "All we did was plug it in."

Mark took a small flashlight out of his pocket and put his head back inside the console, turning on the light and inspecting it. "What's the power feed for that strip?" He asked, his voice muffled. "110 or 220?"

"220."

"Yeah." Mark emerged again. "This is set to 110. The power supply. It's got a switch." He pointed at the side of the device. "You gotta tell it if it's 220." He clicked the switch, and the display changed. "Must be old as. Most of them auto now."

"Fuck." The man exhaled in frustration. "Why the hell would they even..."

"Have 220 here?" Mark guessed. "Dunno, man." He turned off the flashlight and put it back in his pocket. "You got a spare supply? I could replace it for ya."

The man paused and thought. "Y'know, let me check. Hey listen man, thanks for helping out. I'll be right back." He trotted off.

Mark leaned against a nearby table and picked up the coffee cup he'd brought over, taking a sip from it, content to wait and see if they had something he could work with, happy to be inside the air conditioned building, following Dar's instructions.

Dar could have told him to get out there and ride around everywhere looking for that damn airboat with Kerry on it, and he would have. But Dar, despite being impulsive and off the rails sometimes, had a crap ton of brain cells in her head and she mostly kept things making sense.

She could have also told him to go find something that floated. Find his own airboat, or a skidoo, or steal a paddleboard. He'd thought about it. But even a jetski wouldn't be much good in all the debris, the engine would suck in all kinds of crap.

Paddleboard might be okay but effing useless except to sightsee.

Really, the airboat was the only solution, and so naturally Kerry had walked out there and found one sitting there waiting and had taken it. That part, made total sense. Why the thing had been there when she'd looked for it – that was just the Juju that surrounded them.

Total Juju. Crap happened to and around them that was like you could write a reality television show about. Mark sipped his coffee and savored the cool air, feeling even a little bit chilly as his sweat soaked shirt dried around him. So sure, there'd been an airboat when Kerry'd needed one.

Probably had Crocodile Dundee on it, and a taco stand in the back.

"Hey ... oh there is he is." The camo covered guy returned, with a short, stocky gal also in camo, with techie written all over her even without the cable hanging around her neck. "Hey... what's your name?"

"Mark." Mark put his cup down and amiably extended his hand to the techie gal. "Hey."

"He said you know how to fix this?" The gal cut out all the niceties, though she did shake his hand briefly. He could feel the dry stickiness of tape residue on her fingers.

"Yeah." Mark agreed. "Blew the power supply. You got one? I can put it in. Needs a 1200 watter."

"Awesome." The gal said. "C'mon with me. You said your name was Mark?" She watched him nod. "Mark what? Where did you come from? You just show up here?" She shot questions at him as they walked. "I'm Chris Ringer. Technology support."

"Mark Polenti." Mark said. "I come from Kendall. But yeah, I was around here looking for someone, who was around here, and might come back. My boss said to hang out and wait." He said. "So I came in here and volunteered."

Chris gave him a weird side eyed look then she paused and switched to a thoughtful expression. "Hey, is that your bike outside?"

"Uh huh."

"That's a nice bike." Chris said, as they wound through long, badly carpeted corridors that smelled of old rubber and mimeograph ink. "Not much good in the swamp though."

"Not much." Mark agreed. "But good to move around down trees."

"Heard that."

They stopped in front of a set of double wooden doors, flung wide open. Inside was a room full of what seemed like random technology, some which looked new, some, Mark reckoned, was older than he was.

Inside there were probably a dozen men and women, all rummaging through boxes and cases. Cables and pieces of gear were scattered everywhere, and to one side a pile of circuit boards were teetering, a piece of plastic bubble wrap draped over them.

"Johnson!" Chris let out a bellow.

“Sir!” A tall, lanky man in camo came out from behind a packing case. “I mean.. ma’am!”

Chris made a sound somewhere between a pig’s snort and an eyerolling exasperated grunt. “I need those power supplies we were looking at. Where did we shove them?” She asked. “The fricken thing in the comms room got blowed up and needs replacing.”

“Oh!” Johnson, a blond man that looked so young Mark had to seriously wonder if he was legal or not came over. He had wide, green eyes and an unfledged look to him, all arms and gangly legs and sleeves that ended long before his wrist bones. “I think we put them over in the back there, m’am.”

“This is Mark. Show him where.. you’ll know what you’re looking for right?” Chris asked him. “That thing in that room is what they need to start entering stuff. We can’t use the big system. The connection sucks.”

“Got it.” Mark said. “It’s a local server database and you need those systems to point to it.” He said, giving the gangly Johnson a pat on the elbow. “Show me the rack, dude. Let me see if I can find one that’ll work.”

Chris looked relieved. “Great. Someone just rando shows up here who actually knows what the fuck is going on. That’s worth the coffee and I’ll get you a chit for the hot dog cart they’re fixing to roll on in here.” She gave him a brief grin. “Welcome to the guard, Mark.”

“Anytime.” Mark steered Johnson ahead of him. “So..whats your first name?”

“Steve.” He supplied. “Who are you?” He asked, after a brief pause.

“Long story. Just show me the pile.”

\*\*

Dar eased her head around the palm fronds, their spikes catching her hair as she tried to avoid having them poke her in the eye.

Most people would not have suspected that palm trees, those elegant and well known landmarks of the tropics actually had three to four inch spikes on their floofy looking fronds and were a bit of a metaphor for the often creepy danger that rode under Miami’s flashy and beach filled reputation.

Dar had gotten one right through the center of her hand once, while trying to retrieve a likely looking coconut to open. Put her off the damn things for a long time.

Set in the crown of the palm tree, in the center of where the fronds all met was a casing carefully hidden inside a covering of palm trunk colored plastic, which she cautiously poked a screw driver into the base of, getting the blade of the driver into a small slot and then twisting it.

The casing didn’t budge. With a sigh, she left the screwdriver in place and retrieved a pocket knife from her cargo shorts, opening its blade up one handed and easing closer to use it to pry along the place where the base met the covering.

Inside the casing behind the plastic, she could see a camera inside. As she pried a little harder she heard a cracking sound, and then the top was tilting up as the screwdriver fell out of place and tumbled down the length of the palm tree. “Crap.”

She hastily stabbed the knife into the tree bark and pushed open the casing, exposing the camera inside. It was covered in cobwebs, and the lens was cracked. Dar examined it for a moment, and then she reached in and yanked it free of its housing.

It came away with such ease it nearly made her reel back off the ladder and she grabbed hastily at the palm fronds to keep from falling down.

After her balance stabilized, she glanced around, then inspected the back of the camera. She put it down and then removed a piece of gear from her thigh pocket, turning it around to look at the connections. “Seems simple enough.”

She twisted the connector off the back of the camera and connected the cable into the device instead, then took the small jumper and put it where the original cable had been. It fit. But would it work? With a slight shrug, Dar climbed down the ladder to where a roll of cable was sitting and sat down on it.

She unrolled a length of the cable and removed another tool from another pocket, setting it down again when she sighed, and looked up to see where she'd left her knife sticking in the bark. "Damn it." She got back up, climbed back up the ladder, yanked the knife out of the bark and got back down again.

Using the knife to strip the end of the cable she then closed it and put it in her pocket before she maneuvered the ends of the bare, thin, copper strands into a plastic connector, muttering under her breath as she sorted the colors.

She used the tool to crimp the connector around the cable and then she stood up, looping the cable and then wedging the loop in place in one of the jagged trunk husks that surrounded the palm. With a satisfied nod, she then turned the spool of cable on its side and kicked it towards the cottage, watching the cable unroll as she walked behind it.

This might get them at least some access. How useful she had no idea. She walked up the steps, lifting the spool up and rolling it across the porch until it bumped up against the outside of the building, hearing voices indistinctly inside and looking forward to escaping inside from the heat.

First things first. Might as well see what damage the servers had taken, to see if any of this was even worth her time.

Dar pushed open the door and entered the cottage, surprised to hear the distinct sounds of both server fans and keyboard clicking. "It come up?" She asked, in surprise, closing the door behind her. "All of them? Or just... what's the deal?"

"Uh huh." Arthur was sitting on the couch, legs extended, his laptop on his lap with a cable extended from it over to the case. "Auth and services are up, and the database is just running an internal self check."

"Huh." Dar planted her hands on her hips. "Nice."

On the ground in front of the server case was a monitor and a keyboard on the floor, their cables draped behind them. "Your pop brought that over from your place." Elvis entered the room with his own laptop, a coil of ethernet cable in his other hand. "I got everything up to console and put the keys in so they'd boot."

Another cable was running across the floor to the table against the window, where Angela was seated using another laptop, pecking at the keys. A phone was in front of her, and it too was cabled to the switch mounted in the bottom of the rack. "The note system is working." She reported to Dar. "I'm trying to keep track of everything for Ms Maria."

"Unreal everything survived." Dar muttered. "Guess we had to have some luck, huh?"

"Checking the repository." Arthur said, briefly. "Problem's going to be we can't synch it out to anything." He said, mournfully. "I mean, the build stuff is all here, and we can work local like you said, but man it feels weird not to be able to look stuff up."

"I'm working on that matter of fact." Dar reported. "I gotta run back to the office and grab a router and see if I can get something going. We need anything else here? I'm gonna grab the spare switch there too."

Both Arthur and Elvis looked up at her with interest. "Yeah?" Elvis sat down in one of the plush chairs on the far side of the living room, putting down his laptop and then standing back up to run the cable back across the floor towards the rack. "I think we're okay for now, for gear."

"Yeah." Dar paused. "So since you all have this well in hand, let me go grab the boat and head back over." She said, feeling a sudden sense of relief. "Good job, people." She added. "We're gonna get there."

"Would you like me to take the cart for you over to the marina?" Celeste asked, a touch diffidently. "Your parents have the other one and they were going to get something." She had been organizing the pads and supplies on the table.

"I would." Dar patted her pockets. "Matter of fact, c'mon with me I could use a hand carrying stuff out."

Celeste smiled in response. "Yes ma'am."

Dar eyed her. "Yeah, I got the engine fob. But let me get rid of some of this stuff first." She dug out the crimper and set it down, and put down the screwdriver next to it on the table. "Be back soon as I can."

Elvis and Arthur watched her and Celeste leave. "Wonder what's up with that connection? I mean like where's it coming from?" Arthur asked. "Was that.." He got up and went to the window, opening it and looking outside. "Yeah, there's a spool of cable out here." He shaded his eyes. "Going over to a tree. What the what?"

"Just mess with the code." Elvis arranged himself on the chair. "Don't think about it."

"Yeah, if she's hooking us up to a palm tree and we get internet, it's all cool." Arthur closed the window and resumed his seat. "Toss me a peanut butter cup wouldja?"

\*\*

Kerry was glad enough to get out onto dry land again and she made quick progress down the road towards the gates of the staging facility. Heading east, she now had the sun warm on her back and her skin felt tight and a bit tender, and she suspected aloe was somewhere in her future.

Which was fine. If that was the most she got scolded for by Dar along with the aloe, she'd take it.

Not much had happened since she'd been there last, there were more trucks parked in the lot, and two trucks were pulling satellite rigs behind them, but now that the sun was bent westward, at least the heat was dissipating a little bit and a breeze had come up, with a welcome stirring of the humid air.

She was spotted as she cleared the last downed tree and one of the gate guards came out and came around the gate, one hand resting on his sidearm as she continued to approach.

C'mon dude. Kerry felt a moment of wry irritation. How dangerous do I really look here in cargo pants and my underwear?

That thought seemed to occur to the guard as well, as he dropped his hand down to his thigh and then held up his other hand palm out towards her. "Ma'am?" He asked, in a questioning tone. "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"Hi." Kerry said, in a brisk tone. "I have some friends back there behind the turn in the road, where it's still flooded, and one of them has a badly broken leg. I need some help." She stopped a few feet short of him. "Can you help me please?"

He reacted immediately to the entreaty in her tone. "Oh yes.. oh yes, ma'am, absolutely." He turned and waved at the gate. "Need a medic!!" He yelled, then turned back to her. "Would you.. ah.. "

"I'd love a t-shirt if you have one and a cup of coffee." Kerry said. "But first off, I need to get my friend helped." She pulled her phone out of her pocket. "And let me see if I can get hold of some people while that's coming."

Three soldiers came running out of the gates, one of them with a kit slung over one shoulder. "What's the... oh, are you hurt ma'am?" The medic in the lead asked her. "I see you're a little sunburned... you got some heat stroke?"

"No." Kerry said. "Back there, I have a friend who's got a broken leg. He got hurt in his house. He needs help very badly." She turned and waved them on. "I think you're going to need a stretcher."

The guard had run back to the guard station and stepped inside. Now he came back out and came trotting back over to her. "Here you go ma'am." He said. "Can't help with coffee, but I had a shirt in the shack there." He held out his hand with a mottled green cotton wad of fabric. "Probably big on ya but it'll get ya out of the sun at least."

"I'll get a stretcher." The second medic said. "Go on and see what we got here Jase. It's good, at least we can help someone instead of just hanging around here doin nothing."

"Yeah gotya." Jase the medic answered. "Show me where we're goin, ma'am. We'll get it taken care of."

Kerry pulled the shirt over her head. It smelled of sun and bleach and a little bit of machine oil and she totally could not have cared less. "Thank you very much." She told the guard. "Lets go." She turned and headed back along the road, with the other two medics at her heels. "Really glad to see you guys."

"Glad you found us." The medic with the case told her. "Where'd they get hurt?"

"Sweetwater." Kerry said. "Their house is flooded up to the second floor."

"We saw pictures." The other medic said. "We asked when we were going down there, but they don't have no place set up for us yet." He was walking half leaned over with the weight of the medical kit in one hand. "Damn it's hot."

"It is." Kerry led the way into the water and towards the tree. "Hang on guys! We're coming!"

"Feel bad for folks, y'know?" The medic told her. "Seen some bad stuff down in the city."

They splashed around the tree and came within view of the airboat.

"Hey lookit that!" The second medic said. "That's the ticket, man. That's what we need." He had dark skin and short, buzzcut hair. "More of those, right? C'mon lets go check that out."

Both medics now outpaced Kerry and the one with the kit set it down on the edge of the boat and went to work, focused on Tomas. "Easy man, we'll take care of you." The first medic told him. "What's your name?" He stayed in the hip deep water while the second medic climbed up onto the deck. "Excuse me, m'am"

Maria slid back out of his way. "Gracias, gracias. Thank you so much for coming." She said. "He feels so bad with it." She watched the medics with an expression of relief.

"We'll take care of him, don't worry." Jase reassured her. "I been deployed twice. I know what to do here." He was ripping open packages while the second medic put on a stethoscope and started rinsing Tomas' leg off with sterile water. "Lets get all that dirt offa there."

Joe came over to the edge of the boat next to Kerry. "Fast." He nodded at her approvingly. "Even got you a shirt. Nice work, sergeant major. Wasn't even ten minutes." He eyed her. "Ready to pay me?" He asked. "I got places to go, y'know? Want to get back to my place before it gets dark."

Kerry unbuttoned the back pocket of her cargo pants and pulled out a sheaf of folded bills. She sorted through them and kept half, then handed him the other half. "There ya go." She exhaled. "I'll be glad to see home myself tonight."

With a look of patent disbelief, Joe took the bills, counted them quickly, then folded them and put them into the front pocket of his jeans. "You actually were walking around with a wad of cash in your pocket? Are you for real? Do you know what dudes do finding chicks like that?"

Kerry folded her arms, keeping one eye on the medics, who were carefully examining Tomas' leg, and had their kit broken open and spread out on the deck. "So why didn't you?" She finally asked, turning to look at him. "I told you I had cash."

Joe looked at her in silence for a very long moment. "Did you want me to?" He asked, finally, in a doubtful yet puzzled tone. "You don't seem like that kind of weirdo."

"No." Kerry smiled faintly. "I just took a chance. You seemed like a stand up guy." She continued. "I work with people a lot. You get to recognize whats in their head."

He folded his arms, a lopsided smile appearing on his face. "You are kinda weird." He concluded. "But I seen worse I guess."

They were talking low enough not to be overheard, but the focus was in any case on Tomas. Maria had his hand in hers, and Mayte was kneeling next to the raft, answering the medics.

It had been a chance. Kerry acknowledged it. But standing here, seeing Tomas getting care, she felt it had been a worthwhile chance, because it had the outcome she'd wanted it to. "I wanted to get help for my friends." She added, almost as an afterthought. "And you had exactly what I needed."

Would Dar have done it?

Or would Dar have just bought the damn airboat from him and drove it herself?

"Well. If you're a weirdo, at least you got cash." Joe finally concluded. "So I guess it worked out okay."

Kerry smiled. "Win win?" She said, looking up at Joe. "You could stick around. I bet these guys could find something for you to do." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "And those buildings have air conditioning."

"Nah." Joe shook his head slightly. "They had their chance. I'm gonna go back around where that house was I bet some of them folks there'll pay me."

"Be careful they don't try to take your boat." Kerry said, in a serious tone.

"You didn't like their heads?" Joe eyed her. "I should take you back out to the swamp. My mama'd like you she's into all that stuff."

"Like I said." Kerry glanced at the small crowd. "You get to know what people's intent is. Just be careful."

"Huh."

"Okay." The dark skinned medic said. "Got that splint on you, sir, and we're gonna lift you up and get you on our stretcher here. Then we'll take you inside. We got a triage room set up." He motioned to the other medic. "This here raft, that was a great idea."

"My daughter." Tomas said, proudly, though somewhat faintly, gesturing at Mayte. "And too, la jefa Kerry."

Both medics turned to look at Kerry.

The sound of splashing interrupted them, and Kerry turned her head to see several bodies coming around the fallen tree, and after a blink they became slightly familiar to her. "Billy!" She called out, recognizing the figure in the lead. "Hey!"

"Hey yeah! There ya are!" Billy came plowing through the water. "You found you a airboat!" He said. "These your buddies? You were looking for?" He pointed at the deck. "Hi there you all."

The others behind him came over, two of them going to where the medics were getting ready to shift Tomas over to the stretcher. "What happ.. oh man look at his leg." One of them said. "Easy now there buddy. We'll get you to the clinic."

"Captain was looking for you. We wondered where you went off to." Billy concluded. "Should have figured you got it done." He had taken off his camo overshirt and was just in a t-shirt, as they all were, and sweatstained from neck to waist, his pants liberally mud spattered and dark gray.

Joe was watching this in silence.

"Thanks." Kerry said. "Billy, this is Joe. It's his airboat." She indicated the vehicle. "Joe, this is Billy from Alabama. I bumped into him out where the flooding was and his squad gave me a ride back here."

"Hey man." Billy held a hand out. "This your rig huh? You hunt with it?"

"Yeah." Joe eyed him with some suspicion. "You hunt?"

"Sure." Billy smiled easily. "I got me a flat bottom, and just before we came out here I was catfishing off it." He said. "This is nice. Can I come up there?"

Joe thawed visibly. "Sure." He took a step back to allow Billy to climb onboard. "Watch out for the stick."

One of the other guard came over to stand next to Kerry, the short woman who had been gathering papers in the tent. "Some guy came looking for you." She said. "So we were trying to figure out where you went, then the gate said you went off with that guy."

"Guy on a motorcycle?" Kerry guessed. "The guy who showed up?"

The woman nodded. "You know him I guess." She said. "Sweet bike."

"He works for me." Kerry felt relieved. "I was hoping he'd show up here. Now I can get back to my office before a whole posse shows up looking for me." She pulled out her phone and dialed Mark's number, regarding the phone as it rang and rang but wasn't answered. "Jesus these things are worthless."

"They are." The woman agreed, taking a step back and tugging Kerry's shirt. "Lets get out of their way, got enough people there picking that guy up."

Kerry put the phone back in her pocket. "He's probably inside the building." She moved back to allow the gang to gently get Tomas situated on the stretcher. "Stupid things made to be used in hurricanes that don't work inside or in the rain.. Jesus!"

The woman laughed. "Yeah." The woman agreed again. "Hot as stink all sure he'd go inside. I think he was with the technical people or something I saw him going into one of the kit rooms with a cable or a piece of gear."

"Definitely Mark if I had any doubt at all." Kerry chuckled. "Glad he's here."

The woman regarded the crowd around the stretcher. "Family?" She asked Kerry finally, in a mild tone.

"No, the two ladies work for my company." Kerry said. "Hey guys, Mark's here." She called out. "Hes over where we're heading to."

Mayte looked up as they got off the deck, the stretcher carried by four of the guard as the medics packed up their kit. "Here?" She looked around. "That is so great. We are all almost together."

"Coming close." Kerry turned. "Joe, you sure you don't want to stick around? I bet Billy can introduce you to his captain, who'd love to talk to you about your boat." She said. "Right Billy?"

"For sure." Billy agreed immediately. "C'mon, Joey. Lets go get you a drink and we can talk to the cap. We were looking for something like that out there, like Kerry told us to. We just didn't have a way to find ya."

"We can pull this in." Two of the remaining guard said. "Will ya give us a ride later?"

Joe paused, then nodded. "Sure." He said. "So far I done well out of hanging with the sergeant major here. Coffee sounds good." He locked the engine and joined them as they waited for the stretcher to pass ahead of them, and then trooped after. "Leave it tied here." He told the guards. "Don't want to scrape the bottom. I took the key. Needs some gas anyhow."

"We got that." Billy said. "Whole tanker full."

"Sweet."

\*\*

Dar set the sat phone on the flying bridge console, reflecting again on how frustrating the device was. Just as she thought that, though, it rang and she picked it up and answered it. "Yeah?"

"Dar!"

"Hey Colleen." Dar was disappointed. "What's up?" She asked. "Everyone doing all right up there?"

"Can hardly hear ya." Their finance director said. "Are you on the boat again?"

"Headed back over to the office. I'm working on getting us back online." Dar said, adjusting the throttle of the Dixie. Behind her, seated at the table was Celeste, a cup of tea in her hand, her blond hair streaming in the wind. "How's it there?"

"Well, that's why I'm calling. I tried calling Kerry first, no answer."

"Long story." Dar said. "She's trying to help out Maria and Mayte." She said. "So's Mark. They found Zoe."

"Righto, yep I heard that. Well here's the thing - we got the phones working and switched on the lines from Miami and let me tell you, it's been... well, I hired two people on the spot to just sit here at a table answering the lines and taking notes."

"Jesus."

"He called too, dontcha know?" Colleen said. "Wanted to know about some circuit you promised him for yesterday."

Dar had to chuckle a little, however wryly. "What in the hell do these people expect? They not watching the news?" She sighed. "Im doing everything I can." She looked around at the waterway. "I'm literally sitting here trying to figure out where to steal a truck to go get things moving. Gimme a break."

"Sure. That's what we're telling everyone who's calling but some of them don't want that from me, and want to talk to the either one of you. Can I give the nabobs, you know who I mean, this number?" Colleen said. "It's a handful. Probably five or six."

"Government?" Dar guessed. "We delivered our last checkpoint to them before the storm hit."

"And they paid for it." Colleen told her. "I was just running the reports, their payment hit the account so that's good news at least. But they've been the hottest trying to get you, said something about coming to find you themselves."

"Like we need more random military showing up here." Dar sighed. "Yeah, give them this number. No guarantee it'll work, but it's all we got for now. In maybe.. " She studied the horizon, adjusting the throttles to send the Dixie along the coastline. "Maybe two or three hours I might have more access. Might."

"And we've got a ton of calls coming in." Colleen said. "Can we do this, can we do that, this emergency, that emergency, you know how it goes. If we could answer some of them, we can triple our budgets for the year."

"Colleen."

"What do you want? I am the financial person around here." Colleen sounded unrepentant. "People standing at the door with money in their hands I have to tell you about." She said. "And that lawyer was looking for you. Said it was something important."

"Richard?"

"We have more than one?"

Dar chuckled again. "Okay. Yeah, sure, give out this number to everyone. What the hell."

"Thank you m'dear." Colleen said. "I will do that, but will let them know its not a definite connection. Let me know what the status is with the gals, would you? People here are asking. Everyone who is calling from the staff down there I told to drive up here. I've got some additional space."

"Thanks Colleen." Dar said. "We'll get through this." She said, after a pause. "I'll let you know soon as I hear from Kerry."

"Sure. And let me know what to tell Jesus about his circuit." Colleen said. "Something about Mary and Instagram was it?"

"Bye." Dar hung up, still laughing.

\*\*

Carlos was waiting on shore when Dar nudged the bow of the Dixie into the sailing club's dock. The somewhat ramshackle pier they'd built and then almost destroyed had been bolstered, and, with doors and pieces of wood now presented a reasonably sturdy ramp.

"There's a rope on the front there." Dar told Celeste. "Toss it to Carlos. I don't want to hit that thing again."

"Sure." Celeste climbed down the ladder to the deck and moved quickly along the side of the boat to the lines coiled on the bow.

"Hey boss." Carlos walked down the ramp and held his hands out, catching the rope as it was thrown to him. "Looks good, huh?" He gestured at the dock.

"Nice job." Dar cut the engines and let the Dixie settle against the dock. "Where'd you get all that wood?"

"Came off the windows." Carlos finished tying up the lines. "We figured we might as well use it, and Arthur's dad brought over those telephone poles from down the road."

Dar climbed down and then stepped over from the boat to the dock, surprised at the sturdy feel of the platform. "Feels pretty good." She exhaled. "I gotta grab some gear from the store room. Mark's out at Southcom."

"He said. He called me before." Carlos nodded. "He said Kerry found some boat or something?"

"Or something." Dar agreed wryly. "I'm hoping the both of them get back there in one piece." She led the way up the ramp to the shore. The sailing club was still deserted and in a shambles, and none of the properties along the shore showed any life either.

They crossed the road and went up the walk to the office, and Dar saw all the windows flung wide open, furniture that had been soaked by the rain out in the yard drying in the sun. "You guys are really kicking ass."

Carlos smiled. "Wasn't just me and my buds." He said. "There's like a two dozen people here now."

Dar eyed him. "Our people?"

"Our people, your people, some of the people from the café... randos... we're like the community center." Carlos reported. "Everyone brought over stuff to share out, and stuff that was in freezers. We figured we might as well grill it before it goes bad."

"Good point."

Inside the office, it was hot, but with the windows open and the evening breeze coming onshore it wasn't as stifling as it had been and Dar could hear voices, and the sound of a radio playing news. The inner doors to the courtyard in the middle of the square building were all open and a light gust of wind brought the scent of charcoal inside.

"So what is it you need?" Carlos asked. "I coulda got it ready for ya."

"Not sure what we had in storage. I know Mark sent out a bunch of gear ahead of the storm." Dar told him. "I need some switches and a router. Hope one of them got left."

She glanced outside as they walked along the hallway and then she paused and stopped. "Huh." She went and stuck her head out the door. "Hey, people."

There were a dozen figures outside. The owners of the café down the street were there, standing next to a small wagon full of boxes. Celeste's colleague Jerry was loading charcoal into the grill, and two more people from ILS, one of the accounting admins and a cleaning supervisor were there, getting hot dogs set up to grill.

Carlos' two buddies were wrestling a table into place. Two of their LAN technicians were carrying boxes over to the picnic area, and one of Colleen's data entry clerks was there, opening a bag of chips.

Everyone turned at her voice. Celeste squeezed out from behind her and went over to the two newcomers, greeting them as they stood there a little uncertainly, watching Dar approach.

"Hello there, Dar." The café owner came over. "Thought we'd empty out the freezer. Carol said she saw you guys were down here. Not much else is going on. Most everything else down here's empty except Charline at the bar."

"The shack?" Dar asked, glancing past him as though she could see the little dive bar from where they were, which she could not. "She come down and open up, Dan?"

"Sure. Whiskey doesn't go bad." Dan said, in a practical tone. "Only crowd in town's down there. I left a big box of muffins with her. Figure they gotta soak it up with something." He observed Jerry now lighting the grill. "How'd you do out on the island?"

"Fine." Dar said. "Had a lot of surge come over, but it's got good drainage. House is fine." She said. "You?"

"Tree's down in the yard and we lost part of the roof over the living room." Dan shook his head a bit. "Seen pictures of out west. Don't make sense, does it? You live right on the beach don't you?"

"We do." Dar agreed. "But there's seawalls and everything's two layers of concrete and all that. Went over pretty fast, and we've got generators out there."

"We heard on the news." Dan nodded. "If I were you I'd be glad it's on an island. I already heard of looting and whatnot going on down here and that'd be a big old target. Is it true you even got a stock of gas? Stations here are hard up with everyone trying to fill their generators."

"Belcher's right out there." Dar said. "So yeah."

"We got us a generator, and some gas, but we figured we'd leave it for tonight and run some lights off it." Carlos had returned. "Dar, those cops came back before. We gave em some burgers."

Dar pondered that briefly, wondering if she should just take all the staff on the boat and back to the island with her. "I don't know if I want to leave you all out here."

Dan nodded. "Gets dark around here at night with no power. I told Charline to shut herself down once the sun's gone."

"We'll be fine." Carlos said. "We got my buds, and four guys who know pops said they'd be here around sundown and they didn't look like they were anyone to mess around with."

Dar still felt a little doubtful. She put her hands in her pockets and looked around at the middle section. The debris and fallen branches had been moved out of it, and the area tidied up. Near one side, Scott's campervan squatted stolidly, it's exterior slightly dented but otherwise intact.

"Honest, boss." Carlos seemed to read her thoughts. "We're good. We had the windows open up on the second level, and all the doors and stuff locked down here. Nobody bothered us."

"Hey Manuel." She deferred the thoughts as the maintenance supervisor from ILS came over. "How are you?"

He was a middle aged man, in worn jeans and a guyabera, wearing scuffed leather cowboy boots and a bandana wrapped around his head to soak up the sweat. "Buenas dias, Dar." He said. "It's so nice to see you. I came over to see if Maria was here, my wife was worried about her and Mayte."

Dar exhaled. "Yeah, we're worried too. Kerry and Mark are out in South Miami trying to find them." She said. "I'm hoping we hear from them soon." She glanced past him. "Hey Sandy. You hear from Duks?"

The admin, who Dar had last seen before she'd left ILS came shyly forward. "Hi Ms Roberts." She said. "I have not heard from him, no. He had gone to Texas last week. But when Manuel said he was going to come here, I thought I would come too I hope you don't mind."

"Nah." Dar said. "We'll share what we got. You're more than welcome to hang out."

"More people from the old place?" Carlos grinned briefly. "Hey the more the merrier. How's the servers coming?"

Dar dragged her attention back to the task at hand. "We got them up." She answered, briefly. "The kids are working on them but we need comms."

A ragged cheer rose, from the watchers who had all edged closer to listen to her.

One of the two LAN techs came out with a box on his shoulder and put it down on the picnic table, pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow on his shirt sleeve. "Arthur and El?" He asked. "Sweet."

Dar nodded "So now I need to get some gear. I hooked up with some guys and a satellite over on the island." She explained. "Colleen got the main phones forwarded to the cloud lines they're using and they're getting swamped with calls."

"Our customers?" The other LAN tech asked.

"Our customers and apparently a bunch of folks who want to be our customers." Dar reported. "They're gonna forward the really annoying ones to me."

"Sweet." Carlos said. "With all the broken crap around, figures they want you to go fix it, right?"

Dar sighed and put her hands on her hips. "I think we need to get fixed first." She said. "We can't even talk to each other reliably. Not sure I want to deal with trying to sort out everyone else's problems."

Carlos scratched his stubbled jaw thoughtfully. "Probably be some good money in it."

"That's what Colleen said." Dar glanced around. "Hey Bill. You got a minute? I need something from the storage room."

"Sure." Bill came over at once. "Whacha looking for, boss?" He dusted his hands off on his jeans. "We didn't pack enough gear with the box for ya? I put what Mark said to in there."

"Didn't figure I'd need a big router." Dar said. "We got anything here left?"

"Let me go check." Bill said. "C'mon Ray. I saw some boxes in the back of the telecom room maybe one of them's a router." The two techs trotted off, one of them pulling a flashlight out from his back pocket.

Dar's phone rang. "Hang on." She pulled it out and glanced at it, feeling a prickle of relief. "Ker?" She spoke into the phone. "That you?"

"Hey hon."

Kerry's voice was full of satellite artifacts but Dar could not have cared less. She moved out into the open in the center of the space. "Where are you? You okay?"

"I found Maria." Kerry said. "She and Mayte and Tomas were in their house, Tomas has a broken leg. They're flooded out."

"Stop." Dar said.

"What?"

"Where are you, and are you okay?" Dar asked again. "Mark told me you went off somewhere and it scared the crap out of me."

There was a very brief pause, and a faint sound that might have been a tiny laugh. "Sorry sweetheart." Kerry said. "I'm fine. We're at Southcom. My airboat for hire got us back here and the national guard just carried Tomas into their triage room. Mark's here too."

"Okay." Dar relaxed a little, then paused. "You hired an airboat in the middle of Doral?"

"I hired an airboat owner that happened to show up here at the base." Kerry confirmed. "He was being hassled by the guard so I took advantage of them not knowing what the hell an airboat was and got it done."

"Ker."

"Honey, I learned my end justifies the means from you." Kerry said, in a firm, yet kind tone. "So don't even." She added. "Anyway, the whole first floor of their house was flooded, Dar. I think it's going to be a big loss."

"Poor Maria." Dar said, after a moment. "She doing okay?" She added. "I do care about her, just not as much as I do about you." She concluded in a milder tone. "You know?"

"I know." Kerry responded. "But they really needed help, Dar. I had to go."

"I would have too." Dar admitted, with a smile. "I'm glad you found them."

"I know. I was trying to decide if you would have dealt with the guy or just bought the boat." Kerry told her.

"Would have depended on the attitude."

"His or yours?" Kerry said, with a slight chuckle. "But at least they're not trapped in their house anymore." She said. "How's it going there?"

"How's it going here." Dar regarded the gathering crowd around the grill as the sun dipped past the buildings and threw the area into shadow. "It's okay. We got the servers up. Now I'm looking for a router." She kicked a bit of grass with her boot. "Colleen said a bunch of people are trying to call us."

"I bet they are." Kerry sorted through the information. "Why are you looking for a router? I thought you had the gear packed in the case?"

"Long story." Dar said. "So you coming back here? I'll wait for you."

"Yeah. Let me go see what's going on with Tomas, and what the plan is. I'm hoping they're going to take him over to Jackson or Baptist." Kerry said. "Then me and Mark'll head over assuming I can find Mark."

"What?"

"He's fixing things somewhere in this fifties bunker." Kerry said. "I can see his bike from where I am so I know he's around. Is Colleen doing okay up there?"

"Fine." Dar said. "Said a lot of people are calling looking for help." She said. "She gave some of the government people this sat phone number in case they wanted to try calling but no one has yet." She paused and considered. "Or they did, and the stupid thing didn't work."

"Yeah, frustrating. Maybe's really pissed off about these phones." Kerry told her. "Okay, let me go see what the deal is, and find Mark, and get over there. I can tell you I cannot wait to see our shower."

Dar smiled. "Can't wait to see you." She remarked casually. "And you can help me connect our ritzy cottage full of nerds into a palm tree when we get back."

"What?"

"Long story."

"Okay hon." Kerry chuckled. "Talk to you in a bit."

"Mm." Dar grunted a response, but closed the phone and regarded it briefly before she shoved it into her pocket and turned to regard the courtyard again, letting the sounds and the smells wash over her. She exhaled, and the tension leached out of her body, allowing her to enjoy the slight breeze that had come with the end of the day, bringing the scent of the bay to her.

In the distance, she could hear hammering. At the very edge of her awareness, a siren echoed softly, and the sound of a helicopter, and she could hear the radio inside very softly.

She walked back over to the barbeque. "Good news." She told the assembled. "Kerry found Maria and Maybe."

"Awesome!" Carlos responded instantly. "They okay?"

"Oh that's great!" Celeste echoed him. "Is their house all right?"

"Glad to hear it." Don was breaking down the boxes he'd brought, folding them into flat squares.

"Tomas, her husband got hurt and the house is a mess." Dar said, briefly. "But Kerry got them out of there and they're at the national guard assembly point in Doral. She's getting them medical help." She concluded. "Broken leg, apparently."

"Oh wow." Carlos murmured. "Good thing she found them huh?" He said. "Figure Kerry would get it done. She does not mess around."

"True." Dar smiled briefly.

"That sucks about the house." Don said. "She lives out near Sweetwater, doesn't she?"

Dar nodded. She remembered Maria's house. It was a two level stucco with a barrel tile roof, every bit of the inside carefully and proudly arranged to display to the family and friends they loved to entertain there. Tomas, she recalled, played the guitar and in the echo of her memory, she could hear him playing a Spanish tune through the sound of Spanish language with the scent of saffron all around.

"I saw the helicopter shots out there." Don shook his head. "They don't think it's going to drain out for days and days."

"Well." Dar said. "They're in good hands now." She concluded. "Ker's going to make sure they're okay, then head back here."

"Glad that all got worked out. I was kinda worried about those guys going out there." Carlos told Dar, in an undertone. "Specially since its late."

"Yeah, me too." Dar said.

Bill came out of the building with another box on his shoulder, and he brought it over to where Dar was standing. "This what you need, boss?" He upended the box on the table and opened it up to allow her to peer inside. "This is the only thing that wasn't a switch in the room."

Dar reached in to ease the piece of equipment out and inspected it. "Nope." She sighed. "I was afraid of that. I think we sent the two I thought we had in the bus with the tech team to keep them dry." She drummed her fingers on the useless equipment. "This is a phone gateway. Wrong code."

Celeste was regarding the equipment with a slight frown. "Oh." She said, her expression clearing. "I remember now where I'd see those kind of machines. In the closet on the bottom floor of the office." She said. "I remember you being in there one time, Ms Roberts."

She looked at Dar, who was looking at her with a thoughtful expression, one dark eyebrow slightly lifted. "Right?"

"Right." Dar said, slowly. "That's exactly the piece of equipment I need. One of the big platinum colored ones in that room, matter of fact."

"Any place around we can get one? Or get the guys to bring the one up state back?" Carlos suggested. "Probably not something you can get in BestBuy, huh?"

"No." Dar said. "Definitely not in BestBuy." She pondered. "Wonder if they have any over where Kerry and Mark are." She said. "Government building has to have something there." She said. "Maybe we could borrow one." She took out her phone again. "Get the burgers going. Maybe we can swap them for hardware."

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The sun was setting in the west, and that cast long shadows down along the street that Southcom was situated on, the day's oppressive heat finally lifting a little as a light breeze stirred the shredded branches and leaves and fluttered the flags on their poles outside.

Kerry walked across the staging yard from the gate where she'd gone to get satellite signal. As she dodged between the trucks and headed towards the door to the building, she replayed the conversation she'd just had in her head, glad at the very least she'd been able to have it.

Would have been better, she thought, in person. She wanted a hug, and she suspected Dar did as well, the worry in her partner's tone and relief had been palpable. But she felt a lot better for having spoken to her, and savored the raw, blunt honesty that was Dar at her most transparent.

She paused outside a moment to just stop and think about it, closing her eyes and imagining having Dar here with her. She could almost hear her voice and feel her casual touch, and she felt her entire body relax and the tension ease out of her.

It felt good, even though it was all in her head. She mentally reached out and imagined a hug between them and convinced herself she could even hear the low chuckle of Dar's response and the gentle scratch of Dar's fingertips on the back of her neck.

So real, it made her nape prickle. She opened her eyes and blinked, shaking her head a bit to clear the images out of it. "Well. That was interesting."

She trotted up the steps and entered the building, walking past the wide, long desk that was surrounded by people in uniform, dealing with stacks of paper. In the distance, she could hear the once pervasive and now rather odd sound of a phone ringing.

Not an electronic buzz, or a beep, but an actual phone bell, a mechanical construct inside a large plastic analog phone with a clapper that resulted from putting a device on the end of two pieces of copper wire attached to a battery that still had some charge in it firing off.

Amazing technology, in it's time. Millions of pairs of copper wires extended into homes and businesses all over the world that connected everyone together and were now mostly replaced with something else that was easier to deploy, cheaper, faster, more pervasive...

Less resilient. More subject to outages. More complicated. Dar had taken apart an old Western Digital phone just a month or so ago, putting the parts on her desk and inviting everyone in to see it. Huge and clunky and stunningly simple next to most of what they worked with and yet, here, now, she was listening to them ring in the background, the only modern communications that were consistently working.

At least until the central office batteries ran out. Kerry wondered how many people realized their old Princess house phones were powered from those random squat buildings whose location had also mandated your fate on getting DSL service or not?

"You're too far from the central office." Which really meant the twisted wires that powered your phones were too long to allow digital services – something the inventor of the phone never even imagined – to be sent over them because even the most complex of their part of technology often boiled down to relatively simple physics.

"Kerry!"

Kerry stopped and turned around, as Captain Dodge caught her up. "Oh, hi." She greeted him.

"My goodness, you all gave us a scare." He told her. "Betty told me you found your friends." He indicated a nearby set of doors. "Buy you a cup?"

Kerry really didn't want to engage. She wanted to find the triage center, and find out what was going on with Tomas. However. "Sure." She followed him into the mess. "Maybe you could help me find where they took them after we catch up?"

"Sure." He led the way over to a table with large commercial coffee dispensers and stacks of Styrofoam cups. "So Betty said you found you one of them boats?" He glanced over his shoulder at her. "How'd that happen?"

"He found us actually. He was talking to the gate guards when I went outside to use my phone." Kerry took the cup of steaming coffee and moved aside to add some creamer to it. The air inside the building was chilly, a little shocking after spending the prior few hours in the steamy heat, and she was glad to take a sip of the hot beverage. "He was looking for someone to hire him. So I did."

The captain chuckled, shaking his head.

"The gate guards didn't know what he had to offer. They were chasing him out." Kerry continued. "So I was lucky I was in the right place at the right time." She followed the captain over to a small metal table. "And I had cash."

Now the captain chuckled again. "Local boy?" He asked.

"Yeah. Kerry agreed. "He uses the boat for hunting." She exhaled. "He lives on the other side of 27 I think ." She concluded. "So how's it going here?"

The captain sniffed reflectively. "It's a mess." He admitted, with appealing candor. "For all the prep we thought we did, we did it for the wrong stuff. You know?"

"I know." Kerry commiserated. "Happens all the time in technology. You work up a solution to a problem and then the problem changes out from under you." She paused. "You know, over near Tamiami Trail, there are probably a lot of people like Joe who have airboats. Why not go hire them?"

"Hire the boats?"

"Hire the people." Kerry said. "That was the problem, you know? I think the guys at the gate felt like Joe should have volunteered to help. It's been my experience that people would rather make money." She took another sip of her coffee. "Know what I mean?"

Dodge regarded her thoughtfully. "We don't carry around cash." He said. "And I don't think we'd be wanting to get into it with the locals if y'know what I mean." He said. "Now you want to go find your friends? You need a ride somewhere?" He said. "We're gonna go over to get the airport rolling."

"To get supplies in, yeah, I heard that on the radio this morning." Kerry said.

"To get the president in." Dodge replied, in a deadpan tone. "But we're hoping he's bringing some water and suchlike along too."

They got up, and Kerry carried her coffee cup along as she followed the captain out the door of the mess and down the depressingly carpeted hallway. The smell of machine oil was ever more pungent, and Kerry could feel a headache coming on.

It had been a long day. She was tired, and sunburned, and aware that there were things pending her attention that were stacking up.

She wanted a hot shower, and a bowl of hot, spicy Thai soup, and Dar.

Dodge turned right and went down another hallway, this one full of boxes and rolling cases, all in dark gray mottled colors, all with indecipherable stickers and duct tape residue all over them

"Like a damn traveling circus." Dodge commented, jerking his head at the cases.

"Like a traveling band, actually. Reminds me of a concert I went to last year." Kerry said. "They were in a hotel we were staying at and saw them unloading."

He chuckled.

Walking down the corridor Kerry could hear the sounds of work going on around her and as she passed one set of flung open double doors the smell changed from machinery to electronics, and she glanced inside then halted as her name was called out.

Ah. Kerry turned around and went back. "Hold on." She said. "Think I just found my guy with a bike." She poked her head inside the room just as Mark got up from the floor where he'd been sitting. "Hey!" She greeted him. "What's up?"

"Hey!" He looked relieved to see her. "Man am I glad you got back here."

"So's Dar." Kerry agreed, exchanging a knowing, wry look with him. "What are you doing?" She looked past him at the encased server, it's side cover off and insides exposed.

"You know this guy?" Dodge had come in behind her. "Oh wait a second now... I remember you." He looked at Mark with some interest. "How'd you get all in here?" He put his hands on his hips.

"Long story." Mark told him. "I was just doing these guys a favor while I was waiting on the boss lady here to get back."

Kerry chuckled dryly. "What happened?" She indicated the server.

“Plugged a one ten into two twenty.” Mark said, succinctly. “I just swapped their power supplies out.” He said. “You find the burritos?”

“I did. Tomas has a broken leg. I brought them all back here.” Kerry said. “I want to go see how they’re doing, then we can head to the office. Dar’s there, something about needing a router, and getting our gear online.” She finished the update. “You done?”

“Done.” Mark said. “I told them to boot it up and see if it comes online.” He closed a pocket tool and put it back into his pocket. “Where’d you get the T?” He followed Kerry as they went out the door again and continued down the hall.

“Long story.” Kerry said, scrubbing her fingers through her pale hair, and wishing for that shower.

Dodge led them out a door into the growing twilight, where the heat had finally moderated and a breeze coming between the buildings blew over them. There was a short, neatly trimmed sidewalk between the building they had been in and the next one and at the other end of that was another anonymous door.

“Should be in here.” Their escort swiped his badge on the reader and the door unlocked, and then they were inside a large, high ceilinged space full of warehouse style ambiance and many different areas being staged for action.

On the far side, near a pair of long, wide doors to the outside currently closed there was a section blocked off with high, pale sheeted walls, which were bordered with rolling cases that had liberally splashed on them a white square and red cross symbol.

Over the top of the sheets were snaked, wide tubes that led to a truck nearby with a large pumping system on a flatbed thrumming with engine noise. “Air scrubber.” Dodge supplied, raising his voice to be heard. “That gang over there’s mine.”

There were trucks and trailers parked in neat rows and a lot of voices surrounded them, along with the sound of cases being moved and doors being slammed, mixed with the rumble of the air scrubber and the overhead noise of fans extracting hot air from the upper part of the building.

“They usually stage choppers in here.” Dodge commented.

“Where’d they put them?” Mark asked, looking around. “They’d be freaking useful.”

Dodge glanced at him. “Flew them out ahead of the storm. Didn’t want to risk trashing em.” He went to the edge of the white sheeted area and stopped in front of a desk. “Jackson, you got the list of folks in there?” He held out his hand.

“Sir.” The man behind the desk handed over a clipboard. “Got like six of em now. Three people just drove on up in an old car just now.”

“Gonna get worse from here.”

Kerry saw an opportunity and she slid past him, motioning Mark after her as she went inside the medical area, looking around at the beds and stretchers. The hanging dividers mocked up an approximation of a hospital emergency ward, and it was hard to see past all the sheeting

“Over there, Ker.” Mark clasped her elbow and moved in the direction of a portable monitoring desk, set up against one flexible wall. “I see Mayte.” He stopped to let a uniformed man pass pushing a cart with bandages on it past them. “We giving that guy the slip?”

Kerry suppressed a smile. “He’s busy.” She said. “I’m sure he’s glad to be rid of us.” She led the way over to the sheeted off area around a bed. “Hey guys.”

Mayte and Maria turned around and spotted her. “Oh! Kerry! We are glad you are here.” She glanced past her. “And here is Mark!”

Mark poked his head around Kerry’s shoulder. “Heya.” He waved at them. “How’s it going?”

Tomas was lying on a padded and adjustable medical stretcher, with two of the medics leaning over him, and tubes from two different IV bags already attached to his arms. His leg was stretched out and covered in bandages, and a splint had been applied.

His eyes were closed, but his face looked more relaxed than it had since Kerry had seen him yet today. "They give him some painkillers?"

"Si." Mayte agreed. "But the think we should go to the hospital." She said. "They are finding out how to bring him there." She explained. "They told us it was a very good thing you found us."

"Si." Maria echoed her. "They said that, Kerrisita. They have already given Tomas some medicines to make him feel better for now. You see? He is not so pale anymore." She looked back over at her husband, an expression of tired relief on her face.

Kerry took a pause for a moment of internal bemusement, as she sought for a way to defer the praise, and then wondered why she'd want to.

Was it embarrassing, a little? To be branded as some half baked heroic? Kerry thought about what she'd done, then shook her head just slightly. No, nothing really heroic here, just taking advantage of the circumstances she'd found achieve her goal and being lucky.

"Good job, boss." Mark casually clapped her on the shoulder. "I told Barb this morning if I was ever up the creek I'd want you and Dar coming after me." He concluded. "You just don't stop." He clarified, as everyone looked at him in some surprise. "You know?"

Well. Kerry managed a brief grin. "C'mon guys." She said. "I knew you were out there, and I saw the flooding. What was I supposed to do?" She said, in a slightly exasperated voice. "Of course I had to come find you. You guys are family to us."

One of the hanging dividers moved aside and a bespectacled man in a khaki shirt and dark blue slacks entered. "Okay, we've got a transport all set up for you folks over to Jackson, but I'm gonna warn you, there's gonna be a wait over there it's kind crazy right now."

Maria nodded. "I am sure many people are hurt."

"That, and they had some issues with their emergency generators. So they've got limited intake ability." The man said. "So you'll just have to be patient."

"Any option other than Jackson?" Kerry spoke up.

The man glanced at her, glanced at Tomas, and then back at her. "It's the public option, ma'am." He said, after a brief pause. "They're a good trauma hospital."

"They're the only trauma hospital." Mark commented. "My uncle works there."

"How about Baptist?" Kerry walked over to the administrator, her hands in her pockets. "I'd really like to get them taken care of." She watched his face as he hesitated, looking around with a touch of embarrassment. "I'll guarantee the cost." She added, almost as an afterthought.

He gave her a look, as though taking in her disheveled appearance in some doubt.

"Don't worry." Kerry smiled at him. "I'm good for it. Just get it set up and let me worry about getting them admitted. I'd do it myself, but all I got here is a motorcycle and we're not gonna fit." She kept her tone gentle and friendly and he visibly thawed.

"Okay, ma'am." He said. "Let me tell the driver. We'll get you folks going. I'll be right back." He took himself and his clipboard and disappeared back behind the flap.

The medic who was adjusting Tomas' IV glanced over her shoulder at Kerry. "That was a blessing you just did." She said, bluntly. "I was over at Jackson about an hour past and it's a mess."

"Kerrisita." Maria protested, getting up from the bedside chair and coming over. "It is okay now, we could wait for this. We did not bring our cards and things out with us from the house."

"Psst." Kerry shushed her. "C'mon. Lets get this done. Mark, you can follow us and we can go on from there." She said. "It'll be a longer drive but end up less time."

"Righto, boss." Mark wasn't fazed. "Just lets get going before they find more stuff for me to mess with." He said. "I thought they were thinking of inducting me and it's not my scene."

Kerry glanced past the hanging partition, where a truck was driving in with flashing lights. "Yeah." She stepped back to let the medics raise the stretcher Tomas was on. "Just glad Dar's not here. We'd be hip deep in something by now."

"True that."

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"Put that other torch over here." Carlos' voice sounded out of the darkness, and a moment later Dar heard the sound of a lighter being clicked, and then saw the kindling of a tiki torch being lit nearby. "Yeah, that's it."

The central space inside the building's structure was full of firelight and shadows, and the scent of grilling. Dar was seated on one of the picnic tables a little in the open, listening to the chatter around her as the now round dozen residents of the building settled down with paper plates.

She was no closer to finding a router she could readily use. The voice gateway had been loaded onto the Dixie along with a box of spare internal parts and she had a half formed plan of what she was going to try with them when she got back there, and had a little access to download some router code.

"We might have the image for that release train on the disk." Bill came over and sat next to her, his plate full of very recently grilled steak. He set down the plate and took a drink from a bottle clipped to his belt. "But I dunno. I think that box was for those guys down in Kendall."

"The school?"

Bill nodded. "I had it on my list of setups but not until next week. Their building ain't scheduled to be done before then." He picked up a piece of steak in his fingers and bit into it, chewing thoughtfully. "Wonder how they made out? That thing was just getting drywall when we were down there last."

Dar thought about that. It was a small technology school, who'd contracted them to put in systems for their inaugural class scheduled for September.

Would they even still be around? Or was all that gear they'd purchased now just a big, useless expense? She exhaled. No real idea what any of their customers were going to end up at least here locally. Maybe they really needed to think about all those people calling Colleen.

"Steak sandy, Dar?" Carlos appeared next to her with a paper plate. "We got those loaves of Cuban bread from Don and they toasted up pretty good."

Dar took the plate. "Thanks. Smells great." She compressed the sandwich between her fingers, two pieces of grilled bread cut from the loaf, with the steak slapped between them, the scent of mojo and pepper, and the sharp tang of lemon rising from it.

She took a bite and chewed slowly.

Around them, it was very dark, and as the sun set, the sound of sirens had blossomed. Carlos and his buddies had closed the back gates to the maintenance area, and just a few minutes ago two tall, burly men had showed up with automatic rifles slung casually over their shoulders.

They were dressed in worn camo, and combat boots, maybe in their mid forties, accepting plates of steak with brief, appreciative grins.

Dar had no idea what their names were. Soon, she would get up and introduce herself and find out, since the small bit of information they had supplied was that they were buddies of Andy's.

She suspected the smell of the grilling might draw in people in the area, maybe some of the police, the national guard.. or maybe the transients who lived on the streets and the men and women who had been seen looting. In the darkness it was hard to say what was going to happen and so she was glad they were here.

She still felt uneasy about leaving them in the building. There were no lights in the streets anywhere around, and though she knew Carlos was preparing to start up the generator, and that would power the fans they had, and recharge the batteries on everything else – she knew that too, that sound and the lights would also make them obvious.

The steak sandwich was hot, and tasty, and she was glad the bread absorbed the juice from it as she ate it, listening to the rumbling thrum and catching the scent of the burning oil in the torches that served a dual purpose.

Light, of course. But they were also full of citronella, a deeply pungent scent that drove off the mosquitoes that were already breeding in the thousand and thousands of pools and flooded areas all around them. They'd gotten rid of any buckets and basins of floodwater around the office, but she knew the buzzing whine of the insects would soon start to be heard. It reminded her, in fact, to take a jug of the citronella and finishing her sandwich, she folded her paper plate into quarters, sliding it into the plastic garbage bag before setting off to do just that.

She walked through the shadows and into the office, where the generator was now providing power to two lamps near the reception desk. It made the desk, the small kitchen and the conference room reasonably visible, but the long hallways and the stairs were thrown into darkness.

Dar walked up the stairs to the second level. It was stuffy and warm and she paused a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dimness, standing quietly before moving down the hallway and into the storage room near the end of it.

With the door open, she found there was enough dim light for her to see the outline of the shelves, and she went to the back shelf and picked up one of the containers of oil, turning to face the door just as a large figure filled it and blocked her passage.

Dar stiffened and got a grip on the gallon of oil, getting her balance up over the balls of her feet as she drew in breath to challenge the intruder.

"Hey hey!" The figure said, holding it's hands out. "Sorry about that ma'am. It's Jerry. I'm a friend of your pa's."

Dar could see the outline of gray light behind him and she relaxed. "Not funny."

"No, sorry." The man said. "I just wanted to intro myself and Tucker to ya, thought you might need some help to carry stuff." He backed out into the hallway as Dar moved forward and then emerged after him. "Didn't mean to startle ya."

"No problem." Dar said. "Thanks for stopping by. I get a little worried leaving these guys alone here."

"Well you should." Jerry said, blinking at her in a relaxed kind of way. He stood there in the darkness, apparently comfortable with the shadows. "There's some unfriendlies around here." He stated, after a pause. "They know you got computers and stuff here, you know?"

"We sent most of it upstate in a bus." Dar said. "Except the servers, which I sent to my house."

Jerry chuckled. "Heard that." He said. "But they don't know it. Figure they come in to look round, see if there's stuff they can take and sell."

Dar glanced around. "Really no."

"Really no." Jerry agreed. "But you got food and stuff. Andy knows the noise and the light and fire and all will bring em in." He said. "Got two of our buddies'll be by here too. They're doing a roam around."

Dar studied him, his square, cropped hair profile visible to her. "Goes south fast, huh?" She asked, after a pause. "The people to jackass ratio?"

Jerry smiled, bringing a surprisingly sweet expression to his face. "Never north. Don't take much to show it. Saw me a dozen fellas just before sundown hassling up some folks who were trying to get in to see their store, see what's left of it."

Dar thought about that. "Yeah I noticed all the cops disappeared before it got dark."

Jerry nodded. "Don't blame them, you know? They told ev'rybody to stay in after dark, put that curfew up, try to keep people out of trouble. Aint got enough of them to guard everywhere." He shifted the gun hanging over his shoulder a little. "Always pays to be ready to roll your own. You know?"

"Yeah. I kinda do." Dar now also smiled. "It's not deadly, but we're always ready to get things done for ourselves here too."

He nodded. "I seen your boys there putting in that dock. Who does that?" He laughed a little. "Who does that? People who got to get things done, using what they got, like boats. That's who does that." He glanced around. "That's what I told Andy before. He taught you good."

Dar's lips twitched a little. "I'm sure he appreciated that." She said. "Thanks for helping us out by the way. I do like having you all around here. Makes me feel better about the place."

He smiled again. "You going somewhere with that?" He asked, indicating the jug.

"Back to the boat." Dar said. "I'm going to need to put a few torches in my backyard once I get back there." She started down the hallway. "Didn't want to forget it."

She got to the stairs where it was lighter, and descended into the pool of lamps at the bottom. "Hope that generator lasts all night."

"We got some gas in my truck." Jerry said. "Mind if I walk with you to the water with that?" His tone was mild and studiously polite. "Just in case?"

Dar hesitated.

"I figure you could deal with stuff. But no need to take a chance when you don't need to, and two's insurance." Jerry added, placidly. In the light, she could see there were scars on his face, and on the hand resting casually on the top of the gun there was a missing finger.

"Sure." Dar indicated the door. "Lets go." She led the way out the door to the building and they walked together down the dark sidewalk and then onto the path that would take them around the side of the building towards the water.

\*\*

Kerry glanced around the emergency waiting room at the hospital, which was mostly empty. Tomas had been taken into the triage area in the back and Maria had gone with him. She and Mark and Mayte had taken over one corner of the room, three chairs and a small table against one wall.

On the table there were three cups, all gently steaming from the beverage station just to the left of them. There had been a choice of coffee or tea, and a worker had replaced the coffee dispenser just after they'd arrived so at least they were comfortingly fresh.

Powdered cream though. Kerry had avoided it, and was sipping her coffee in it's pretty much natural state.

Mark had just returned from the vending machine, and now he opened his hands and put his booty down on the table. "You figure a hospital would have something better, but there ya go."

Three OHenry bars, three packages of peanut butter crackers, three bags of sun chips. "Hey, they have sun chips." Kerry observed. "It could be worse."

"Could be. It took my credit card. I don't have any small bills on me." Mark picked up a candy bar and stripped the plastic covering off it. "Only some twenties I got out of the ATM before the storm."

"Me too." Kerry picked up the bag of sun chips. "But, I'm glad we're here."

"Yes, mama is very glad." Mayte spoke up as she retrieved a package of chips for herself. "I hope they finish soon though I am very tired." She admitted. "I did not sleep at all last night it was so scary and I was so worried about papa."

"Hear that." Mark said, stifling a yawn. "Who could sleep in all the craziness?" He glanced around the room. "It shouldn't take too long, right? Not too many people in here."

There were about three others, one older man reading a magazine, dressed in neatly pressed slacks and a short sleeved dress shirt, and two women, one younger one older, the older of whom was knitting something held on top of a bag.

Occasionally, they were giving their small group sideways looks and Kerry felt she wasn't imagining that the looks were more than a little judgemental.

It was cool inside, and it smelled like a hospital, that mixture of disinfectant and wax. Kerry felt tired herself, her body sore and slightly uncomfortable with sunburn, conscious of the mud stained pants she was wearing and the worn borrowed tshirt.

Mayte was in a tshirt and jeans, the lower half of her legs with a stained ring of debris and partially dry sneakers.

Kerry munched on her sun chips in quiet reflection. "I'm going to finish this and go outside and see if I can try Dar again." She said. "Let her know what's going on."

"Surprised she's not here already." Mark said. "Oh wait, she doesn't know we're coming here to Baptist does she."

"She might figure we'd have come here." Kerry said, in a reflective tone. "And I know there's a bunch of people there at the office who have cars, so they'd ride her out here." She mused. "I feel bad knowing she's waiting on us though."

"She doesn't care." Mark said. "About waiting, I mean." He added after both women looked at him in surprise. "You know."

"No, well.." Kerry cleared her throat a little. She was spared the further elaboration as one of the hospital workers came out and looked around, and those in the waiting room looked up and back at her in question.

Kerry was hoping the woman was looking for them, and she watched the body language as she turned and headed in their direction. "Ah."

The woman came up to them. Mayte stood up. "How is my papa?" She asked at once. "Is he feeling okay?"

"You must be Mayte." The woman said. "Hello, my. Name is Rita, and I'm a hospital admitting manager." She glanced at Kerry and Mark in question. "Are you relatives?"

Mark looked at Kerry, one of his dark eyebrows lifting a little.

"My name's Kerry Roberts." Kerry said. "I'm the co owner of the business that Mayte and her mother work for." She said. "This is Mark Polenti, he's a director of our company." She concluded. "How is Tomas doing?"

The administrator eyed her thoughtfully. "Okay, well, he has a badly broken leg as I think you all know." She said. "And he's got an infection – probably from the storm water."

Kerry nodded. "We had to get him out of his house. It was flooded."

"So we'd like to get him admitted." The woman concluded.

Kerry sat back in her chair, crossing her ankles and folding her arms. "I'm glad to hear that." She could see the hesitation in the woman's attitude. "Baptist is in network for us."

The woman's attitude brightened at once. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. There didn't seem to be any.. ah.. " She glanced around. "How about we go talk in my office? Maybe I could get some clarifying details from you, given you probably know them."

Kerry stood up. "Why don't you guys stay here and finish your chips?" She suggested. "I've got our policy number and all that with me."

Mark looked relieved. Maybe a bit uncertain.

Kerry just smiled and gestured for the woman to guide them as she followed her across the waiting room. The woman paused to swipe her badge on a lock and then passed inside, holding the door for Kerry to follow her in.

They walked down a hallway that didn't seem too busy, given all the circumstances. Two rooms had lights on and doors closed, the others were standing open and were dark inside.

The woman led the way to a small office on the right hand side and went inside. "Thank you for understanding." She said, as she closed the door behind Kerry and went behind her desk. "The patient wasn't sure what his situation was, and his wife is a little upset."

"Easier to talk to someone not related." Kerry sat down, and kept her tone mild.

"Exactly." The administrator said, with a nod. "It's not that we wouldn't have taken care of him regardless." She said, giving Kerry a direct look. "Let's not have any misunderstanding. We're a hospital."

Kerry nodded. "But you're not the public option." She said. "I get it."

"Yes. We're expecting a lot of patients to start hitting us, and we know we'll get our share of.. " She hesitated. "Anyway, they told us to push back as long as we could back to Jackson."

"That's why I had Tomas sent here." Kerry said, calmly. "Because I knew he was covered and he'd get good care right away. We pay a lot for our medical insurance. We care about our people and I don't personally trust the government's charity."

The woman studied her for a minute, then she smiled. "Thanks for the honesty, Ms Roberts." She said. "So let me get the details, and we'll get Tomas admitted so we can care for him. He wasn't sure he was.. or, well, I think he was a little embarrassed to be covered under his wife's insurance."

Kerry pulled her wallet out from her back pocket and removed a card from it and handed it over to her. "There's the details." She said, then removing a second card and putting it down. "And if they deny anything, put it on that."

The woman's expression went from satisfied to a subtle, obvious appreciation. "You have some truly fortunate employees." She remarked. "I'll let the doctor know." She smiled at Kerry. "Would you like a cappuccino?" She paused a finger on her intercom button. "It's been a long day."

"Sure." Kerry folded her arms, her brief smile acknowledging the irony.

"How about a shower, and a pair of scrubs?"

\*\*

It was dark near the water. They walked in silence side by side across the walk and through the destruction that was left behind the storm at the sailing club.

Dar could hear the water, waves pushing up against the seawall and making the Dixie rock in her mooring, the boat's white hull visible against the darkness of the sea.

The moon was fitfully present, zipping behind clouds that were strung out across the sky, the horizon dark with them. "Rain." Jerry said, briefly.

"Like we need it." Dar could smell it on the wind though, and the breeze that ruffled her hair felt damp. She led the way down the steps to the dock and looked both ways before she walked out onto the makeshift platform the team had assembled.

"You walk like Andy." Jerry observed, as he followed in her footsteps. "That little rocky bounce."

She did, she knew. She'd been told before, but she wasn't entirely sure why other than she knew she shared her father's tall, lanky build, the long bones in their arms and legs giving them a similar profile. "Always have." She said briefly.

They approached the boat, and Dar reached out to take hold of the railing. "Careful. She's really moving."

Jerry chuckled.

"Yeah, sorry." Dar stepped onboard as the boat rocked towards her and went with the motion. "I forget sometimes who the hell I'm talking to." She walked along the back deck and opened the gear box. "Here, give me the oil."

He handed over the jug. "You all thinking of heading out before it rains?"

"Not without Kerry." Dar closed the box and turned. "Speaking of, let me try my phone." She sat down on the back wall and removed the sat phone from her pocket. Jerry sat down in one of the deck chairs and extended his legs, crossing them at the ankles.

Dar dialed Kerry's sat phone number and listened to it ring, almost ready to hang up when it surprised her by being answered. "Hey."

"Hey!" Kerry sounded a bit out of breath. "Sorry I kind of thought you were trying to call me so I ran outside."

Dar's eyebrows knotted. "Um.."

"Just one of those feelings. We're at Baptist." Kerry exhaled and then the sounds of the background faded a little. "Let me get away from the emergency entrance. Three ambulances just pulled up."

"Ah huh."

"But Mark followed us on his bike, and we're almost done." Kerry concluded. "I got Tomas admitted here, and they're about to move him to a hospital room."

"Great." Dar said. "So you'll be heading back here soon?"

"We will." Kerry said. "What's going on there?"

"I'm on the boat. It's going to rain." Dar said. "The gang is kinda hunkering down." She paused. "What's Maria and Mayte going to do?"

"I got them space in the residential hotel next to the hospital. They share the generators, and they use the rooms to house the doctors that work there." Kerry reported. "All good."

"Rock star." Dar smiled.

"Well hon." Kerry said. "It comes down to cash, you know? It's kinda gross to say it, but if I hadn't been here with my WASP privilege and my credit card they'd still be... I don't know where." The frown was audible in her voice. "I don't regret it but..."

"They'd still be in their house." Dar said. "Probably in real trouble."

"I know." Kerry sighed. "Anyway, I'm going to run back inside and see if they have him moved." Behind her voice there was a low rumble. "Ugh."

Dar heard the same far off sound in her own ears. "Try to get out of there before the rain starts. With that and no lights that's not going to be a fun ride, and neither's taking the boat back across the channel."

"Did you find a router?" Kerry asked. "For the palm tree, or whatever it is that's going on there?"

"No. Well..". Dar half turned and looked across the bay, whose surface was ruffling with choppy whitecaps. "I found something I can maybe hack and use. We sent all our spare up with the bus." She said. "I'm guessing those satellite guys are standing outside the cottage wondering where the hell I am."

Kerry sniffed reflectively. "So what... you mean, we have the servers up, and you found those guys out there with a satellite? To get that connected?"

"Something like that. They were trying to demo it, and.. anyway. I told them I could rig up something to let them sell it to the whole island if they let me hook up the stack." Dar explained. "We've got commits for this Friday. The guys were working on the code."

A softly echoing voice, and the sound of a siren came through the phone as Kerry thought, and Dar let the silence lengthen between them. The wind freshened, and it fluttered the fabric of her tank top against her, brushing her shoulders with a damp pressure.

Damn she wished the day was over.

"Why not go back over there and hook that up?" Kerry suggested after another long moment. "Then come back? I can only imagine a thousand antsy rich nitwits dancing on the dock waiting on being able to post their house pictures."

"Screw them."

"And our guys trying to do updates." Kerry said. "And you'll get something done, and not just be pacing around cursing under your breath at me."

Dar drew a breath to protest, then just chuckled a little.

"G'wan hon. It'll give you something to do while we finish up here. Then I'll wait for the storm to come over before we head back. Safer for everyone." She said, in a gentle, practical tone. "They've offered me coffee, a shower, and a pair of surgical scrubs here. I'm fine."

About to protest, the tone made Dar pause and consider, probing the idea and realizing it quite appealed to her. "Damn good idea." She admitted. "All right, I'll head back and see what I can do for the link. Make sure you and Mark aren't going to be rolling around in sideways rain."

"We will." Kerry assured her. "Talk to you soon."

"Mm." Dar closed the phone. Then she turned to Jerry who was still parked in the back deck chair, observing the land side approach to the boat. "Wanna go for a ride?"

Jerry eyed her with interest. "In this?"

Dar nodded.

"Psh. Sure." He grinned briefly. "Want me to untie your lines?"

"Yeah." Dar slid the phone into her pocket and climbed up the ladder to the flying bridge and pulling the starter fob for the boat out. She slid it in place and pressed the starter button, hearing the reassuring sound of the big diesels rumbling to life under the deck.

The boat started to drift back from the dock and a moment later Jerry was climbing up to come stand by the bridge, one hand on the railing and the other resting on his machine gun. "Let'r go." He pronounced briefly. "Nothing like feeling the water under ya."

Dar settled into place behind the controls and let the boat move with the current, gently swinging the bow around and nudging the engines into gear. "That's true." She agreed, easing the Dixie away from the shore and sending her out into the bay.

The channel buoys were rocking in the chop, and a spatter of rain started impacting the Plexiglas shield around the bridge as she increased speed and the boat moved from a slow wallow into crisp motion, the bow cutting through the waves.

She flicked on the running lights, but kept the spotlights off, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness that stretched on either side of them now, the coastline that would and should be brilliant with illumination dark and anonymous.

Ahead she could see the edge of the bay islands, equally dark, and far off, the lonely string of emergency lights that outlined the bridge over to the port. Only on the far northeastern edge of her vision was a blur of light on the horizon that was the coast guard base, and the place she lived.

“Know what I like?” Jerry asked, after ten minutes of utter silence.

“What?”

“Boat captain who knows what’s up.” He went over and sat down in the other console chair, relaxing as they sped across the water. “Andy said you got him that big old thing he has.”

“Well.” Dar considered that, adjusting the throttle a little. “I had some cash come to me, and figured it’d be better put to let him get what he wanted with it.” She reflected. “Found money, you know?”

Jerry nodded his head in a steady, continuous, positive way. “He put in time. Good to see things come to him.” He concluded. “Scales came right on that one for a change.”

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“Here.” Kerry’s new friend the hospital administrator gave her a handful of fabric and a bottle. “it’s what we use to have patients scrub up for surgery so it doesn’t smell great but it gets the job done.” She pointed towards a door. “Shower’s in there. I’d get to it quick, I just saw another couple of flashing lights outside.”

Just the shower would have been great, but Kerry took the offered supplies and ducked into the room indicated, which was a large, square space with tiled floors and a drain on one side.

A showerhead and spray was fixed to the wall over the drain, and a curtain could be pulled around it, and on the other side of that was a toilet and sink.

Spare and utilitarian and blessed as all heck. Kerry got out of her borrowed shirt and mud caked pants, grimacing a little at her sunburned reflection. She set the stack of cloth near the sink and took the bottle over to the shower, turning it on and waiting for it to go from cool to lukewarm.

First she rinsed herself off, the chlorine smell of the water comfortingly now familiar to her. Then she took the bottle of soap and used it to wash her hair, feeling a sense of relief as she scrubbed out the mud and dirt and it swirled away down the drain.

The soap – smelled like.. Kerry sniffed it. It smelled like weak dish washer detergent, actually. Not overwhelmingly antiseptic, but it produced a small lather and left behind a feeling of clean and really what more could she ask for? It reminded her of the biodegradable soap they’d taken with them on their rafting adventure.

And, given the who knows what she’d been wading around in all day, the fact it was a hospital scrub was probably not that bad a thing. Kerry shut the thought out, and applied more soap, as the water warmed to a temperature enough to actually relax her.

On the other side of the door she could hear activity, so she quickly washed the gunk off her skin, and then turned off the water and shook herself before she went over to the sink and retrieved the slightly stiff linen towel she’d been given.

She already felt a thousand times better, even given the sunburn as she gingerly patted her skin dry. She dressed in the scrubs, and then, feeling a prickle of memory, glanced at her reflection as she remembered the last time she’d been in anything like them.

She studied the eyes in the mirror and it felt like ten thousand lifetimes ago. She’d changed so much from that overwhelmed young woman it was hard to even remember what had been in her head then, aside from that moment of profound and utter relief when Dar had come through that door.

After she’d about konked her with a chair. She’d been mad and scared and truthfully in a panic right up until that moment and then almost unable to stand as all that adrenaline vanished in a puff of relief at the efficiency of Dar’s reflexes.

She hadn't expected a rescue. In the darkest part of that day it had occurred to her that having her locked away might end up being a relief to Dar. That she was a complication that after the first excitement of their relationship might become unwanted.

That had then just gotten her angry and the anger had gotten her past the fear and really all she'd wanted more than anything was to whack the superior expression off that damn nurses face and somehow get out of there, get to a phone to call a taxi -believing at that moment all she had to depend on was herself.

She'd grown up a little, right then, in a screw the family I'm my own person sort of way. So she'd figured it was up to her to get herself out of the mess she was in.

Kerry smiled a little. She just hadn't known Dar well enough yet then to assume she'd show up there or to understand that the one thing she really could depend on no matter what was on her new lover's ability to find a way to solve a problem. Her focus on a goal was one big ass train going straight downhill and you better be on the train or get out of the way.

So of course Dar had flown in a military jet across the country and broken into a hospital to find her. When you said it in your head it was so damn unlikely. When she thought about it even now it seemed outlandish, and yet if you reviewed the individual steps and choices Dar had made, given what her options were and who she knew it all made logical sense and so, of course.

Computers had told Dar where she was because of course they had. Circumstance had put her in the presence of a fighter pilot who liked her just at the right time. Luck had provided a reason for the hospital to desperately want her there, just like luck had provided Joe and his boat to Kerry when she'd really wanted them.

Just like random guys with portable satellites showed up when Dar needed them to. Kerry smiled. Luck. Or whatever. She had once told Dar she'd suspected she'd long term paid off Murphy, because while the damndest things happened to them, the damndest things resolved them.

Dar had just chortled under her breath.

Mark had commented that he'd been surprised the airboat hadn't had an espresso machine, and they had spent a half hour talking about what it would have taken to plumb it for water and how much battery power it would take to run it.

Kerry ran the plastic comb in her little pile through her hair and folded her clothes, putting them into the plastic pull string bag she'd been given for that purpose. She pulled on the nubby bottomed socks and picked up her things, glancing around out of habit to make sure she hadn't left anything.

Then she unlocked the door and went through it, pausing as two men pushing a stretcher wheeled past, a young woman lying on it with a splinted arm. She slipped the strings of the bag around her shoulders backpack style and quickly went through the emergency room and out into the waiting area.

Mark was camping in their chosen corner, a new supply of vending items on the table in front of him. He waved at her as she came over, and sat down. The room was fuller now, about half of the chairs had people in them. "Yo." He greeted her.

"Hey." Kerry unslung her bag and put it down on the chair next to her. "Buh, that feels better." She ran her fingers through her drying, short cut hair. "Whoof."

"Yeah, until people start coming over and asking you stuff cause you look like you work here." Mark said, unruffled. "Cause you do."

"I know." Kerry leaned back in the chair. "But I don't care. It's worth it. Jesus it feels so good not to smell like swamp." She hiked one nubby socked foot up and put it on her knee. "Burritos go upstairs?"

"Yeah." Mark said. "They came out and said they were moving Tomas. I told them to go and do whatever they needed to, and we were going to hang here until it stopped raining." He had a laptop out and was pecking into it. "You talk to the boss?"

"I did. I told her to go home." Kerry studied the choices of junk food with some interest. "She sounded antsy. You know Dar."

Mark nodded. "I called Barbara. She's cool – a bunch of our neighbors got together and they're grilling under a tarp they put up and Marco, my back neighbor has a big ass generator going." He continued to type into his keyboard. "I'm fine to be out here long as I don't end up sleeping in aircon. That I can't cop to."

Kerry chuckled softly.

"I heard samba in the background. Leave it to the Brazilians to start a party." Mark continued. "I told her to save me some churrasco."

Kerry paused and looked at him. "You called her?" She asked, in a puzzled tone. "Did you leave a satphone out there?"

"Landline." Mark explained succinctly. "Had to almost fistfight the ATT guy who came by and wanted to swap it out for fiber and VOIP. Told him don't touch my fucking POTS or I'd run his ass over with my Harley." He shook his head. "LECS."

"Dar once told me, LECS lie like fish." Kerry leaned over and snagged a package of peanut butter crackers. "I had no idea on earth what she was talking about until the first time I had to drop managed service into a customer's facility."

"Uh huh."

"Then I got it, but I was like, where the hell did she get that saying from?" Kerry opened the package and took out one of the crackers, a round item with slightly crumbly certainly unfresh peanut flavored filling between it's surfaces. "So I went down the uncle of all Internet ratholes and finally decided what she meant was they were bad liars as in she could see right through them."

"Uh huh."

The door to the emergency room opened and a man and women entered, looking around in apprehension. They were both drenched, and had mud spatters all over their clothing, and they were dark haired, with brown skin.

The hospital security guard intercepted them.

Kerry watched, as the woman spoke to him, visibly upset. The guard listened, then he gestured to some empty chairs in the waiting area, half turning to indicate one of the staff who was taking information on a clip board.

Looking relieved, the woman guided the man to a seat and he half lowered, half fell into it, one arm clamped across the other as though in pain.

The door opened again, and the guard turned, as a young man entered. He was tall and good looking, wearing jeans and a Tommy Bahama shirt, his hand wrapped in a towel. He walked past the guard without even acknowledging him, and went to the admitting desk.

The nurse behind it looked up, and tilted her head in inquiry. He held out his hand and unwrapped a piece of the towel, and Kerry could see blood staining the fabric.

The nurse got up and motioned to him. She looked past into the waiting room, then badged the door open into the triage area and stood back as he went in ahead of her. With another look at the room, she followed him and let the door close.

The door that led into the inner corridors of the hospital opened and Mayte appeared, hurrying over to them. She looked relieved, and much happier. "Oh Kerry, that is so cute." She said. "It's so nice they gave you those things."

Kerry just smiled past the irony. "How's your dad doing?" She diverted the discussion. "He get all settled upstairs?"

"Yes." Mayte nodded. "They are taking such good care of him. Mama is so happy he feels better." She said. "We are going to go now to the place next door and take a rest." She exhaled. "So terrible today."

"You guys go do that." Kerry said. "We're just waiting for it to stop raining. I'm glad you guys are in better place for sure. I feel like it's okay to go home now."

"Kerry you are so kind." Mayte looked at her with an overwhelmingly grateful look. "I don't know what will happen tomorrow, but at least tonight we will sleep." The young woman looked as exhausted as that made her sound and she reached over to pick up a Hershey bar. "If it's okay I will take this for a snack."

"Hang in there mighty Mayte." Mark said. "You guys'll get through this. We got ya." He closed the lid on his laptop and stood up. "I'm gonna get some coffee before that machine runs out. You want, poquito boss?"

"I do." Kerry said. "And he's right." She told Mayte as Mark went over to the vending area. "We'll all get through this." She patted her arm. "Go on and get some rest, and tell your mom I said she should go to. Don't worry about us."

"Okay." Mayte smiled, at last. "We will try to call you tomorrow and tell you what is happening." She got up and slid the chocolate bar into her shirt pocket. "Good night."

"Night." Kerry waved at her, and watched her go, disappearing into the swinging doors that led into the inner part of the hospital.

Outside the rain was coming down in earnest, a sheet of white blocking the view out the window of the entrance and the parking lot, past the overhang that Mark had parked his bike under. Kerry took another cracker out of her package and nibbled on it, wishing she, too, was at the end of her day.

\*\*

The marina was busier than Dar imagined it would be, as they rounded the seawall and she shifted into idle, letting her forward motion take them towards the dock in a drift.

In the far two boat basins there were temporary work lights lit on mobile pedestals, and there were men wrestling a lift into place over one of the sunken boats, despite the now significant rain coming down.

Dar had her rain jacket on, it's softly rubberized length coming down halfway to her knees, it's surface beaded with water that was a mixture of fresh and salt, as they had plowed through a wind driven spray coming around the south side of the island.

On the near side dock, against the seawall, a marina dockhand was waiting for her in a bright yellow slicker as she came in behind her parent's boat into the second parallel slip.

Jerry had climbed down and was on the back deck, his machine gun stowed inside the gear box and a hooded windbreaker protecting him from the rain. He had their aft line in one hand as he waited, the low rumble of the engines muted.

Dar eased against the pylons, bringing the Dixie to rest against the rubber bumper and keeping the boat in place as Jerry tossed the line to the dockhand and he tied them up to the cleat. Then she cut the engines and shut the controls down, turning off the marine radio that had just been crackling with local traffic.

She climbed down the ladder. "Hey Pitar."

"Evening, Ms Roberts." The dockhand greeted her, having retrieved her bow line. "Welcome back."

Jerry had wrestled the router box out of the cabin and shifted it up to his shoulder, stepping up onto the sidewall. "Look out there, buddy." He warned Pitar, who moved out of the way as he stepped over to the dock. "This thing's a boat anchor."

"They're heavy." Dar retrieved the gallon of citronella and followed him off. "Pitar, can you fill her please?"

"Sure." The dockhand agreed amiably. "Just finished your old man's." He indicated the larger boat ahead of them. "He's been back and forth to the coast guard base like five times."

"Hm." Dar eyed the boat.

"Best don't ask." Jerry advised. "Where do we go now?"

"Probably true." Dar admitted, pulling the hood up on her jacket. "I radioed ahead and ask them to meet us." She indicated the rain washed landscape. "There's a road back there, somewhere."

"Nice."

They made their way up the dock and past the ruined marina building, passing the temporary facility behind it to find Arthur behind the wheel of their golf cart. He had the plastic sides rolled down, and was watching for them as he turned on the cart lights as they came into view.

"Yo." He greeted them as Jerry got the box into the back seat and Dar slid into the front. "People are seriously looking for you." He announced. "They been by our little crib a dozen times."

"I bet." Dar said, getting the plastic back into place. "Go by my place, then the cottage. I need to get a PROM programmer and my toolkit." She blinked the raindrops out of her eyes. "How's it going here?"

"I like this place." Arthur announced, as he turned the cart and sent it barreling along the path, weaving in and around several other parked carts and piles of debris. "People come by sort of rando and give you cupcakes." He leaned forward to see better. "We were just working on that database parse."

"Jerry, this is Arthur." Dar belatedly made introductions. "He's one of our programmers." She said. "Jerry's a friend of my dad's."

"Hey." Arthur looked in the small silvered plastic mirror.

"Yo." Jerry responded, his muscular arm draped over the router box. "Sup?"

Dar used the next ten minutes of relative silence to turn her attention to the router, her eyes watching in an unfocused kind of way through the plastic shield as they navigated their way around the island.

There was debris in the road that Arthur kept running over, the rain and the infrequent emergency street lights keeping him from really seeing where he was going.

"Stop." Dar said, after one jarring bounce nearly shook the router in its box off the seat, Jerry scabbling after it. She waited for the cart to halt. "Trade places." She got out of the cart and went around the front of it, passing Arthur who obediently settled into the passenger seat.

Dar got behind the wheel and released the parking brake, then she started the cart forward, focusing intently on the path as she steered the cart around the branches and other debris scattered across it. She knew the way better, of course, but there was also enough filtered light for her to see the larger items and not drive over them.

They came around the west side of the island and joined the main road that would take them past the ferry landing and around to where their condo was, and as they passed the ramp there was yet more light and round the clock work being done.

Pressure, she was sure, from the residents who wanted a way off the island. She had to admit she'd appreciate having that herself, as having her truck handy when Kerry was in need of a pickup would be a big bonus. The rain slacked a little, and she could see the flare of a welding torch.

A rumble of thunder sounded. Dar ignored it as she drove through the entrance to where they lived and pitched down the ramp to the garage.

The door was closed, not unreasonably. Dar halted and fished inside her shorts for her keychain, finding it and triggering the lifting gate.

"That didn't get flooded?" Jerry asked, with interest.

"It did. Sort of." Dar drove inside. "It drained through here, but the door was stuck with the pressure outside." She parked the cart and got out, walking across the garage and past both her car and Kerry's to the storage cabinets on the inside wall.

Jerry got out and roamed around the space, inspecting the drains in the concrete floor and the foundation. "Solid." He concluded, as Arthur remained in the cart, his legs extended and crossed at the ankles. "Somebody knew what they were at here."

"Like a bunker." Arthur agreed. "That's what pops said." He added. "You see the stuff on the TV, where houses got blown all up and stuff, and it's pretty cool out here."

Dar opened the storage cabinet and regarded the inside of it, a collection of tools both household and technical, separated into shelves and bins, neat and in complete order. She lifted a case up and put it on the floor then opened a deep drawer and removed a second case, picking up both and carrying them back to the cart.

"That box what those guys need?" Arthur asked, pointing behind him at the router. "They said you were getting something."

"Not really." Dar regarded her choices reflectively. "It's the right thing, but the wrong kind of thing." She said. "Like it is, I can't use it for what they need it for."

Arthur turned all the way around, resting his elbow on the seat and looking at her with interest. "You gonna fix it?"

Dar glanced up, with a faint grin. "I'm going to hack it." She admitted. "Void every warrantee this hundred thousand dollar useless piece of iron ever had." She went back to the cabinet and picked up a magnifying mirror and light, and closed the doors.

"Oh, sweet." Arthur said, with enthusiasm. "Pirate class with Dar. I'm in!"

"Hundred thousand in that box?" Jerry went back and got into the cart as Dar resumed her seat behind the wheel. "I almost dropped it in the water coming off the boat." He studied the item with a bit more respect as they backed up out of the garage and the rain slammed around them. "But then again, they got toilet seats they pay that for where I been."

Dar chuckled a little, triggering the door to close as she got up and out of the ramp, and swung the cart around to head for the cottage.

\*\*

"You know what just occurred to me?" Mark came back over to where Kerry was seated, flipping through a year old People magazine.

"That we're going to break curfew when we do finally get out of here?" Kerry answered without looking up.

"No."

"That snickers and peanut butter crackers are kind of craptastic for dinner?"

Mark sat back down. "I want a cheeseburger." He admitted. "I can't cruise around on a Hershey bar anymore."

Kerry tossed the magazine on the table and shifted in her chair, leaning on the arm of it and facing him. "They must have a cafeteria in here somewhere. Want to go find it?" She suggested. "It's probably a bad cafeteria but maybe they'll have French fries."

"I'm down." Mark agreed.

They got up and pushed open the swinging doors that separated the emergency room from the rest of the hospital, and went down the hallway, a long and wide passage with doors and entrances spattered along either side.

Soft sounds of echos, and beeps of equipment were present, and there was a lot of activity despite the growing lateness of the hour. There were gurneys lined against the walls stripped of their coverings, and twice the passed people pushing carts full of bandages and supplies going in the other direction.

They were unnoticed and unaccosted until they reached a crossroads, and then a security guard behind a desk looked up and waved. "Hey." He said. "Where's your badge?" He addressed Kerry sternly.

"Left it in my office. Sorry about that." Kerry responded calmly. "Just getting a sandwich." She indicated a sign, pointing to the promised, much wanted cafeteria.

"Well, get it on." The man said. "No time to be messing around!" He went back to studying a monitor, now ignoring them once his message had been delivered.

"Nice." Mark complimented her as they headed for the entrance to the café.

"Dar taught me that." Kerry went past him as he pushed the door open for her. "Pretend like you belong wherever you are and people just go with it." She said. "It's easier." She glanced around the cafeteria, which had probably two dozen people in it, and three in line ahead of them. "We lucked out."

"They have cheeseburgers." Mark said, in satisfaction.

Kerry chose a chef's salad and a cup of soup, both looking acceptably appetizing as she put them on a tray and moved it along the metal railings. "Do you have an.. yes. Tea please." She asked the woman behind the counter. "Thank you."

"No problem honey." The woman responded warmly. "You're new huh? Where'd you work?"

Kerry returned the smile. "I don't." She said. "I just borrowed these." She picked up her tray and went to the cashier, fishing her slim billfold out of the back pocket of the scrubs. "This, and whatever it is he's got." She indicated Mark.

"He gonna get a drink?" The man asked.

"Large coke." Kerry said, handing over a bill. "Meet you at the table, Mark." She took her change and her tray and went out into the eating area, picking a table against the wall and removing her choices to it before ridding herself of the tray.

Now that they were in the cafeteria, and she was sitting down, she was aware of how hungry she really was. She removed the covering of her salad and took a spoonful of the chicken tortilla soup, finding it acceptably spicy and warm.

Mark joined her, setting his plate down. "This ain't bad."

"It's not." Kerry forked up a mixture of her salad. It had a slightly spiced slightly sharp tasting dressing and the lettuce was still almost crisp and she munched it, and it's chopped protein in some satisfaction. "I'd have rather had sushi, but not in a hospital cafeteria."

Mark stopped in mid chew, one eyebrow lifting.

"I can't chow down on a lot of heavy stuff late at night." Kerry explained. "It messes up my stomach." She took another spoonful of her soup. "Not like Dar. She literally could eat a tin can and her body would deal with it."

"Typical programmer." Mark pronounced. "You see what those guys eat?"

"See? Who signs the invoices for their snack bin?" Kerry chortled a little. "Hey listen I tried getting them to eat healthier they just brought in bags of Starbursts."

"And Reeses peanut butter cups."

"Reeses peanut butter covered Christmas trees in ten pound bags, thanks." Kerry waved her fork drolly.

Mark chuckled. "Hey the cook said he was just outside and it's slowing down." He reported. "Maybe this'll work out timing wise, if we can head out after we're done here."

"Great." Kerry swallowed, and then took a sip of her tea. "Just gives me enough time to think up what lies I'm going to tell the cops when we get stopped along the way."

"Tell them you're Gloria Estefan's cat's doc?"

"Actually that might work."

\*\*

It had in fact stopped raining by the time they went back to the emergency room, and stuck their heads outside the sliding doors that were the entrance.

Outside, the halon lights outlined trees moving in a rustling breeze, and debris and leaves tumbling across the tarmac but the sheets of rain were gone and when Kerry took a step outside and looked up, she could see brief patches of night sky between the clouds.

"Make a run for it?" Mark suggested. "Guy at the desk said it's gonna rain again later."

The waiting room still had a dozen people in it, some the same as had been there since much earlier that day. Some had flipped chairs around to make uncomfortable beds, and were curled into them, in one corner there were two children on the floor, wrapped in towels.

The woman and her husband were still there. He was slumped sideways in the chair, his eyes closed.

"Make a run for it." Kerry slipped her string bag on her back and followed Mark outside.

She'd resumed her hiking boots, and having eaten her budding headache was subsiding and she settled the riding helmet on her head feeling nothing much more than anticipation of the ending of the day.

"Let's get to the office." She told Mark. "I'll call Dar from there." She was looking forward to it, checking in with the staff settling in for the night, maybe sharing a cup of spiked coffee with them while she waited for her marine pickup. "Worse comes to worse we can hang out there if it starts raining again."

"Sounds like a plan." Mark started up the engine on the motorcycle and gunned it a little, the loud and distinct rumble filling the overhang. "Long night for those people back there." He adjusted his microphone. "Feel bad for those kids."

"Yeah." Kerry said, briefly. "Seems like they're in there a long time." She wondered silently what the holdup was and hoped it was just that more urgently ill people were being taken first. "Probably good for me to get out there before I start trying to fix all of them."

"You said it, I didn't."

She took hold of Mark as the bike started to move, and then they were out from under the overhang and on their way.

The rain had freshened the air, and it seemed a bit cooler, but the roads were now filled with puddles and Mark had to take great care in navigating slowly through them. Once they were away from the hospital grounds, the lights were also out, making it all the more chancy.

"I'm gonna get up on the highway soon as I can." Mark said, into her ear. "Less water." He was waiting at a dark stop light, edging into the intersection and watching both ways before he moved out and turned left. "Two blocks east and we can get onto a main road."

"Sounds like a plan." Kerry agreed as they went under a large tree that shed residual raindrops on them as its branches were stirred by the wind. A bit of movement caught her attention and she looked to her right as they went through an intersection.

Down the side road, she could see shadows in motion. "Ah."

Mark gunned the engine and they went through the intersection at speed, getting past the side street and weaving between two large puddles caught in the bike's headlamp. "Hang on." He warned. "Some stuff up ahead."

Kerry shifted so she could see over his shoulder, and squinted, trying to determine what it was the headlight was reflecting back at them. "It's.. I think it's a truck stuck." She said. "It's blocking the road.. yeah."

A panel truck, its hazard lights flashing dimly, water up to its fenders and beyond that they could see a tree in the road.

"Yeah." Mark glanced to either side of them. "I gotta go around. Hang on."

He turned right at the next corner and slowed, the water coming up over the bottoms of his wheels as they went along a side street, the sound of the motorcycle loud in the surrounding darkness.

\*\*

The large dining room table had been moved to the back of the living room of the cottage, and covered with a flattened cardboard box.

On top of the box, next to cans of soda and a silver bowl full of candy bars was a disassembled voice router, its top case on the floor under the table, and its insides glinting in the light from the chandelier, the cards and chips inside it reflecting gold and silver and surprisingly pretty.

Dar was seated on a stool next to the end of the table, her laptop still closed on the corner edge of it, while she set up a selection of tools and a small monitor.

"Here they come again." Arthur had glanced out the window as he came back in the room, flopping down on the couch and picking up his laptop. "Like thirty minutes is going to make something change."

"It might." Dar finished laying out her cables, routing them across the table and off the back edge down to the power strip on the floor, using the twist ties they had been coiled with to make the lines neat and tidy in automatic motions.

She didn't look up as the door opened, focusing instead on plugging in the firmware burner and checking that its LED came on.

It had been a long while since she'd had to use it. Dar dusted her hands off and straightened up on her stool, hoping she remembered enough of the process not to irretrievably blow something up. "Now what?" She asked. "I told you this was going to take some time."

"I know." John agreed. "It's just if I'm in here they won't come after me asking when its going to be ready." He picked up a can of soda and took a seat on one of the rolling cases. "Couple of those guys are getting kinda hooty."

"They do get that way." Dar opened her laptop and pecked at the keyboard for a moment. "Kinda what have you done for me lately jackass of the week."

John chuckled a little. "Alex is over at that mansion place trying to buy em drinks and keep em calm." He opened the soda can and started drinking from the can. "At least I told him, if we have to be stuck someplace, this isn't bad."

"Right?" Arthur said, from his couch. "Hey El – you got a copy of that compiler?"

"I have it." Dar muttered. "I'll copy it to the utility directory."

John sipped on his soda for a few moments in silence. Then he got up and came over to look at what Dar was doing. "Using that coax plant was a pretty slick idea." He said. "Specially with those guys having those gizmos."

"Thanks. We just got lucky on that one." Dar moved over a little to inspect the inside of the router. "This was the closest thing I had to what we need." She commented. "But it's not that close."

She opened her laptop and connected it to the ethernet cable draped between the coke cans, then connected a USB cable from the laptop to the router and turned it on.

"Holy crap." John stared at the thing emitting a surprisingly loud roar. "Sounds like.."

"An airplane taking off. Yeah." Dar agreed. "It'll settle down after a while." She started up a terminal screen and watched the gear boot up. "You get everyone signed up?"

John snorted briefly. "You kidding?" After a moment, he got up and walked over to the rack full of gear, examining it, as he sipped his soda.

The door opened again and Ceci entered. "Hi there."

"Hey Mrs R." Elvis came into the room and sat down cross legged in front of the server stack. He picked up his laptop and put it on his lap, hunching over it.

Ceci made her way over to where Dar was seated. "Your father wanted me to tell you he's on his way back here with Celeste, and a bunch of guys you were supposed to give a ride back here to for Jack." She said. "He had to go out and make one last run to the Coast Guard station. He said."

Dar blinked. "Oh crap that's right." She said, after a brief pause. "I forgot all about them."

Ceci nodded. "He figured." She said. "He stopped by the office to drop Jerry off, and found those guys waiting. Said he felt like a Metrobus."

Dar paused and picked up a small set of alligator clips. "No sign of Mark and Kerry, I take it?"

"Not that he said, no." Ceci said. "They probably did the smart thing and just camped out at the hospital. That's a long, dark haul to make in the postapocalyptic wilds of west Miami." She regarded the bowl of candy, walking over and selecting a Jolly Rancher. "Anyway, they got the generator going out there and he said three more folks turned up so it's quite the party."

Three more people. "More of our employees?" Dar asked.

"He didn't say." Her mother responded. "Could be a few of our lot, could be some of your ex employees, could be more of his special forces friends, could be the cops. Hard to tell what we'll find when we get there tomorrow." She observed. "Could be some random political types looking for handouts."

"Could be." Dar focused her attention to the laptop, as the router quieted down and lines of code spilled across the screen. "Anyway with that many out there I can't just bring them all here. Not enough space."

"Were you thinking of that?" Ceci asked. "As in, we haven't pissed off enough people here?"

Dar paused and looked up, regarding her mother with intent focus.

Ceci waited, remembering that look from their joint past. Now though, she understood there was an utter lack of impatience or malice in it, and she had finally realized sometime in the last year that the attention was more positive than negative.

"Just feels off, to leave them out there." Dar finally said. "In the dark, with all those empty streets around them. I know dad has his friends there watching out, and I know they all volunteered but still."

Ceci nodded. "And here we are in the center of all the nitwit jerk-tard stuffiness in the Northern Hemisphere." She said. "I want to share it with every vagrant in downtown Miami."

Dar chuckled.

"I do." Her mother repeated. "I grew up with people that had more money than sense, Dar. It's what struck me so forcefully about your father, when I met him. He had far more sense than money. I had no idea, scatterbrained young nitwit that I was, how rare that really is."

"Some of these people are not that bad." Dar smiled.

"A lot of them are." Ceci said, unrepentantly. "Unlike you, I actually talk to them." She glanced around at the inside of the cottage. "But y'know what?" She looked back at Dar. "I'm glad you grew up not giving a damn about money."

Dar considered that, thinking back to her childhood. "Yeah." She said briefly. "I didn't care."

"You didn't."

She hadn't. She remembered happiness being a sticky twilight, breathing in the scent of just past rain and sneezing out a gnat. "Kerry always tells me I won the early life lottery." She commented in a casual tone. "She'd have traded her childhood for mine in a heartbeat."

Ceci wasn't entirely sure what to say about that, but it sounded positive and so she issued an encouraging grunt. "All in all I think we all ended up all right." She concluded cautiously. "I mean.. "She circled her finger to indicate their surroundings. "We're here."

"We are." Dar studied the router, now humming softly as the lines of text stopped scrolling and went still, the cursor blinking there, waiting for her. "So before I haul half of downtown Miami out here let me try and make this work so no one'll notice."

Ceci took that for the dismissal it was, and perched herself on a stool where she could lean against the wall and watch what Dar was doing from a slight distance.

\*\*

"This is a mess." Mark had stopped the bike again, and they were in a crossroads with water spreading in either direction away from them. Ahead of them was murky darkness, downed limbs, and in the distance, a brief glimmer of flashlights.

"It's a mess." Kerry agreed. "Go back the way we came? Maybe go out west and then north?"

"Let me try that street up there." Mark pointed ahead of them. "It doesn't look that deep."

"In the movies those are famous last words." Kerry felt the bike start to move, and they were making their way through the water at a slow speed, the engine rumbling softly. Mark had wrapped his exhaust pipe with an extender so the end was elevated, but by his boots the flood was sloshing dangerously close to the spark plugs.

He gunned it a little, and they swerved through the impenetrably dark water, sending a ripple outward ahead of them that disappeared in the headlamp.

"Stay near the center island." Kerry suggested.

"Yeah." Mark muttered. "Hang on."

The wash of the lamp picked up a little of the path, and as they went past a stopsign and into the next intersection, Mark abruptly came to a halt. "Oh crap."

One of the poles that had supported the street light on the corner was down in the street, blocking their way. It's concrete bulk was sprawled diagonally across the intersection, only the top visible.

"That sucks." Mark released an exasperated sigh. "If we could get past this, we can get to that next street there, and it's just a half block to the onramp of the freeway."

Kerry looked to the right, where the base of the pole was completely submerged in deep water, that extended into the darkness and people's yards, covering the backs of cars that were just visible to her. To the left, she could see a tree down, and just past that, there was some motion in the darkness.

She looked behind them. On the edge of the road was a bus shelter. "Hey." She said. "If we took that bench and put it over there, could you ride the bike over it?"

Mark took off his helmet and turned around to look where she was pointing. "That thing probably weighs a ton." He said. "I guess we could try to drag it?" He looked and sounded doubtful. "Could I get the bike over it? Crap I don't know."

"Got a better idea?"

Mark looked around them in the darkness. He lifted his hands and they got off the bike and sloshed through the flooded street over to the shelter, which was skewed sideways and half collapsed. It was aluminum, but beneath it was a bench made of wooden slats and concrete supports, and it was cocked to one side jutting into the street.

Kerry pushed aside one of the aluminum walls, and it bent crazily under her touch, the plastic shield that formed it's protective surface cracked and separated. It moved as she pushed it though, and Mark stepped around behind her and put his hip against the back of the bench, leaning his bodyweight against it.

Grudgingly, it shifted. "Gonna take a while." Mark gave it another shove.

"Let me help." Kerry went to stand next to him and together they pushed against the end of the bench. When it moved it's length they went to the other side and got that into motion.

Kerry could feel the debris and rocks under her boots, and was grateful she had them on, as the dank water soaked into the scrubs and leached up past her knees. "Wish I had jeans on."

Mark, who did, remained wisely silent. They wrestled the bench across two lanes of the roadway and approached the crossroad, the water getting more shallow as they neared where the bike had been left standing. "Know what?"

Kerry leaned against the end of the bench. "What?"

"Still need a ramp." Mark said, in an apologetic tone. "On both ends."

Kerry stopped, and regarded the bench. "That's what we'll use this back for." She tapped it. "Rip it off, put it on one side, get the bike up onto the bench, over the post, and then take it and put it on the other side and get it back down."

Mark looked thoughtfully at the back of the bench.

"You do have a wrench in that kit somewhere right?" Kerry eyed him. "Cause these boards are bolted onto this thing." She touched the back of the bench, her fingertips running over the indented bolt that held the boards to the backing.

Mark pulled a small flashlight from his jacket pocket and turned it on, shining it on the bolt. "Might as well check before we waste our time." He commented, crouching and measuring the bolt against his knuckle. "Hang on." He turned and made his way across the drowned island to where the motorcycle was standing.

Kerry was glad enough to take a little rest, flexing her hands and looking around as the moon came out from behind the clouds and provided a little silver reflection, glancing off branches and debris and as she turned slowly, off a pair of eyes not that far off.

She stopped and stared. "Oh crap." She let out a yell. "Mark, there's an alligator here!" Without thinking further she climbed up onto the bench and out of the water, keeping the yellow eyes drifting closer in view. "Shit."

Behind her, she heard the sounds of boots hauling through the water and a moment later Mark was up on the bench with her. "Where?" He asked, swinging a large wrench in his other hand. "Where is it?"

Kerry grabbed the flashlight from him and shone it out into the gloom. "It was right there." She pointed at the spot, which was now empty of staring yellow eyes but not of a ripple of motion. "I sure as hell wasn't thinking about alligators in all this."

"Florida." Mark said, briefly. "Lets get this over there. I got a wrench." He held up the tool. "It's adjustable. Should work."

They both watched the water intently in silence for a minute, as Kerry played the flashlight's beam across the surface. The water ripple settled and became still and then all they could hear was far off sirens and then the sound of mosquitoes.

"Right." Kerry got down. "Lets get this over with before it comes back and decides to see if we're a good snack."

"We're kinda big for them." Mark climbed down as well and they both started shoving the bench into the crossroads, the water getting a bit shallower as they got it into place with one end against the concrete pole lying in the road.

"Our feet aren't." Kerry turned and started messing with the flashlight again. "You wrench, I'll keep watch." She stepped up onto the concrete pole and walked along it, relieved to have her body parts up and away from any hidden alligator jaws.

The pole was square, and around eighteen inches wide on all sides, and she was comfortable moving along it until she reached where it had cracked and part of it went off at a rightish angle and disappeared into the murky depths.

“Woot.” Mark knelt on the bench and leaned over the top of it, feeling the bolt with his fingers as he fitted the wrench into place and adjusted it. “Let’s hope they haven’t painted over this a dozen times.” He braced his weight against the wrench and hauled on it. “Crap.”

Kerry half turned and flashed the light back at him. “What?”

“Probably put this in place with a pneumatic gun.” Mark straddled the top of the bench and braced one boot on the stanchion, trapping the wrench against it with his knee while he wiped his hands and then took a better grip on the tool.

“Probably.” Kerry returned her attention to the swamp around them. “Be careful.”

“Be something.” Mark muttered. “My old man would be laughing his ass off at me.”

Kerry inspected some motion in the water a little ways away, squinting as she thought she saw something poke up above the surface.

“Eyeball?”

“For what?” She asked, belatedly.

“Using this wrench.” Mark grunted. “Social climbing jackass with a wood pole up his behind.”

Kerry decided the lump wasn’t, in fact an eyeball and continued her scanning. “Well, I sympathize.” She responded. “I know what that’s like, but I wouldn’t have heard about this from my father because his head would have exploded long before with all the shenanigans I get into.”

A loud crack sounded, and she turned hastily, to see Mark tumbling off the bench backwards, the wrench waving in one hand. “Mark!” She raced back over to the bench, but not in time to grab him before he ended up splashing into the water.

“Ugh.” He got to his knees dripping. “Well, it moved.” He stood up and shook himself, then went back to the bolt. “Maybe you were right. We should have gone back.”

Kerry stuffed the flashlight into her pocket. “I’ll help. C’mon.” She went over and took the wrench as he removed the bolt he’d already loosened, and got the tool attached to the bolt on the other side of the spar.

“Counterclockwise, right?”

“Counterclockwise is left.” Mark said, as he worked the nut off the bolt.

Kerry got her shoulder up under the wrench and pushed away from the ground, using the strength of her legs as she straightened them. The bolt grudgingly gave way with much less theatrics than the other had with Mark, and she quickly twisted the nut off.

Mark took the wrench to work on the bottom bolt on his side. “Didn’t mean to get all literal on you.” He said, after a moment. “With the directions.”

Kerry chuckled dryly. “You forget who I live with.” She dusted her hands off, and then knocked the board loose from the back of the bench and lifted it clear, swinging around and bringing it over to where the pole was submerged.

She wedged it into the mud under the water and propped the end on the pole, before she returned to the bench to help with the second. But Mark had worked out the twisting and already had the board free, and he stepped over the pole to put the board in place next to the first.

“Okay.” He regarded their work. “I’m gonna walk it up and onto that thing.” He indicated the bench. “Grab the boards when it’s on there?”

“Got it.” Kerry said. “I’ll hold this end down while you’re doing that.” She regarded the bike. “Think this is going to work?”

“Hope it does.” Mark said. “I lay this thing down, it’s gonna hurt.”

Kerry sighed and stood by, waiting for him to start up the bike and move it up the makeshift ramp. "No matter what happens, let's not tell anyone about this huh?"

Mark chuckled wryly and put the bike in low gear, cautiously releasing the hand brake and making it creep upward. "No problem, poquito boss. Noooo problem."

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"Any luck?" John had the sense to stay at a distance, hands behind his back, rocking up and down a little on his heels. "It's getting kinda late." He added, in an apologetic tone.

"Dude, shut up." Arthur said, without looking at him, his hands holding two very thin wires in place as Dar studied the circuit board, a soldering iron held lightly in one hand. "You're watching brain surgery."

Dar smiled briefly, then leaned over the router and lowered the iron, gently feeding in solder with her other hand and she laid down a new path across the glittering circuits.

Elvis was seated on the couch with his laptop somewhat forgotten in his lap, watching with interest. Ceci was perched on her stool behind the table, content to observe.

This wasn't ever something she'd seen Dar do. The programming part, yes. Endless typing on keyboards and drawing diagrams with branches and boxes on them, yes. This? No. She knew better than to ask questions though, more so than hapless John.

"Okay." Dar pulled her hands back and then put the soldering iron down on its holder, pausing to regard the solder on the board and then reaching back and plugging the power cable into its socket. "Lets see what that did." She listened to the airplane sound of the router for a moment and then she moved around from behind the table and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" John glanced at the router. "Is it done?"

"Going to make a phone call." Dar brushed past him and out the door before he could ask anything else, closing it behind her as she walked away from the cottage and into the open space beyond. She was about to open her phone to call when it rang.

She answered it. "Hey."

"Ugh."

Dar grimaced. "What's up?"

"So we left the hospital." Kerry said. "And we made it onto the highway, and we made it all the way down here to US 1 and we got to UM."

"Okay." Dar said. "And?"

"And there's a roadblock." Kerry said. "They won't let us down into Coconut Grove. They say it's too dangerous."

Dar looked around. "So what are they suggesting you do?" She asked. "Go back to Baptist?" She added. "Did you explain where you're trying to go?"

"Oh yes." Kerry said. "If they weren't convinced I was nuts before that, they are now. I told them there were a dozen people camping at our commercial office near the waterfront and we were going to get picked up by a yacht."

"It's true." Dar said, in a reasonable tone. "Not sure why they think you'd lie about that."

"Honey." Kerry sighed. "It's late, and these guys are not in a really reasonable mood."

"Well, can't help that I guess." Dar closed her eyes and searched her memory. "Okay. So what direction will they let you go?"

"What do you mean?"

One of Dar's blue eyes opened up. "Kerry, they aren't expecting you to stay there at the roadblock. They won't let you go to the office, where will they let you go?"

"Oh." Kerry fell briefly silent. "Well, I don't know. I didn't ask him that." She admitted. "I was just pissed off so I just walked away and came over here to call you."

"Okay. So see if they'll let you go south on US 1, and then turn and go east on Hardee." Dar instructed. "Go as far east as you can, and you'll eventually run into the coast. Once you do that, call me and I'll be heading over there." She said. "Pick you guys up."

Kerry's eyebrows contracted. "Just... anywhere?"

"Hon, I have no idea what the coastline looks like out there." Dar said. "Find someplace you think I can get the Dixie into." She added. "Or, like you suggested, go back out west and hang out at Baptist until the morning. Could be they've got the ramp fixed by then and I can get the truck off."

It would be safer, Kerry acknowledged, for them to just go back, and wait for daylight. Safer for her and Mark, and safer for Dar, who wouldn't have to pilot the Dixie over in unknown area. She considered a moment longer, then remembered the flooding and the bus bench. Or would it?

"What's the boss saying?" Mark was seated on the bike, arms folded on the handlebars, keeping an eye on the police barricade.

"Wants us to go east and find a spot to have her pick us up." Kerry said. "Or go back where we were."

Mark eyed her thoughtfully. "Go east where? Hardee?" He asked. "That's how I come to work. We can actually pick up Main past Douglas and get closer to the office." He glanced at the police, who were drinking coffee nearby, now having decided they were mostly harmless.

"Unless there's another roadblock." Kerry mused.

"Bet there isn't." Mark said. "They won't watch every street." He straightened up. "Going up US1 woulda been easier, but we can still get there. Good deal."

"Okay." Kerry decided. "Dar, we're going to try to go east. I'll call you when we get somewhere useful."

"Okay. Be careful." Dar reminded her. "I'm gonna try to wrap up here."

Kerry hung up the phone and went over to the bike, resuming her place on the back of it. "Lets give it a try." She said. "Damn it I wish I'd brought that shotgun." She said. "It feels so exposed on this thing."

Mark started the bike and gave her a look over his shoulder. "No offense, I'm kinda glad I don't have that up behind my ear." He gave the police a genial wave and turned the bike around, heading back south along US 1.

The cops waved back, visibly contented that their jobs had been successfully done.

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Dar went back into the cottage, sliding the sat phone into her pocket. In her short absence her father had arrived and was standing near the table, peering over Arthur's shoulder at the inside of the router.

"Lo." He greeted Dar.

"How's Kerry doing?" Ceci asked, from her perch in the corner.

"She and Mark got stopped by a roadblock. They're trying a different path." Dar said, coming over to the table and looking down at her laptop. It was mostly black screen and she reviewed the writing on it. "I'm going to have to go over there and grab them from the coast."

"Better ah do that." Andy concluded. "That there bike aint' gonna fit on the back deck of yours." He went on. "Got a ramp thing fit out for gear by ours."

"On your boat?" Dar glanced up at him.

"Yeap. Moving stuff." Andy said, briefly. "Where they trying to get?"

"Not sure. They're south of UM. They're going east and then they're gonna call me." Dar typed into the keyboard and reviewed the results. "Well. That's a step forward."

Arthur looked at the screen. "Is that the bus?" He asked, pointing at a set of cryptic readouts. "There?"

"Yeah." Dar reviewed the inside of the router. "Now those ports can talk to these ports and all I have to do is hack the operating system and recompile it to make it happen." She sat down and started typing. "Won't be line rate, but it won't matter."

"Wicked." Arthur pronounced. "I'm going to go set up the repository to sync." He left the table and went back to the couch, picking up his laptop and putting his sock covered feet on the ornate coffee table in front of it.

The door opened again and a large man entered. "Where the hell.. there you are you little bastard."

John stood up from where he'd been sitting in the corner. "Oh, Ricardo. Hi." He said. "We're making progress here and I.."

The big man walked over and grabbed John by the front of his shirt, yanking him upright. He was tall and well built, with a thick, muscular neck and frame that advertised many hours spent in a gym and the potential of a drawer full of Speedos.

"Oh lord." Andrew muttered under his breath. "Ah done ask you, is this needed right now?"

"I told you I am done with your bullshit!" Ricardo yelled, shaking him. "You promised me a connection! Where is it?"

Andrew turned and headed towards the two of them, while Arthur and Elvis stood up uncertainly, glancing at Dar for direction.

Dar finished typing and stood up herself, sucking in a breath. "Hey!" She let out a short, sharp bellow. "Stop that, ya peanut brained git!"

Ricardo turned and stared at her. "You talking to me? Who the fuck are you?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Dar yelled right back at him. "I rented this place and didn't give you permission to walk your ass inside it."

John reached up to uncurl his fingers off his shirt front. "That's the person who's trying to get this thing to work Ricardo." He said. "I wouldn't piss her off if I were you."

Ricardo released him and shoved him backwards, then he turned and headed in Dar's direction only to find himself blocked by Andrew's tall form in a sudden, yet very deliberate motion.

"Get out of my way." He said, in an irritated voice, stopping when Andrew ducked his head a little to stare him in the eye.

"Ah do not care for people yelling at mah child." Andrew said, in a very mild tone. "Ya'll will adjust your attitude, or ah will escort you out the door." He folded his hands in front of him and stood quietly, his body filling the gap between the chairs and the table.

"That a threat?"

"Statement of purpose." Ceci spoke up from her corner. "You'll get a lot more out of this crowd with honey than with bullshit. Just saying." She had her fingers interlaced around her knee and she regarded Ricardo with a bland expression. "Over the top macho ain't gonna get you much either, since he's a retired Navy Seal and she's gay."

Ricardo stared past Andrew's elbow at her.

"I'm a pagan priestess." Ceci remarked, with a smile. "Whadda you got, Mr. 305 and a half?"

"Thanks dad." Dar went back to her seat and continued pecking at her keyboard. "Thanks mom." She regarded the results, and sniffed reflectively. "We should put the table against that door."

Ricardo was now watching them all with a faint wariness. He took a step backwards. "Who are you people?" He fell back on his original question. "You some shyster like this guy?"

"We're the Troublemakers." Ceci responded. "Cecilia and Andrew, and the little tyke at the table over there is Dar." She said. "We live here."

"Okay." Ricardo drew the word out a little. "Ricardo Montalucio. I live here. I just moved here last month and now this happened. My business relies on being able to get online, understand?"

"Got it." Dar said, restarting the router again. "Like everyone else. Believe me buddy, I'm doing what I can to get this going."

Ceci cleared her throat. "Look, they're doing some scientific mish mash thingamabob there to get this dude's random moneymaker to give everyone a link to the Internet. If you can't help them do that, leave it alone. Being an asshole is not going to speed up the process."

"She's right." Dar watched the device boot up. "If being an asshole sped up this process it'd have been done for a hour already because I'm a damn good asshole." She glanced over at him. "So unless you're a Cisco ASIC design engineer and can do this better than I can, go find something useful to do."

She went back to the laptop and sat down, calling up another screen.

For a long moment, Ricardo looked from one to the other of them, his face expressionless. "All right." He finally said, in an abrupt sort of way. "You like empanadas? My wife just finished making some of those and some pandebonos."

"Yum." Dar didn't look up from her keyboard. "Columbian?"

"From Bogota." Ricardo confirmed. "Send me one of these boys, we'll bring them back."

"I'll go." Elvis stood up and stretched. "My knees are killing me anyway." He said. "I could use a walkabout." He followed Ricardo out the door and after a moment, John ran after them.

"That went a lot better than I expected." Ceci remarked.

"Lord." Andrew exhaled, shaking his head and returning his attention to the router on the table. "Ah do not know why folks can't start off reasonable and end up jackass instead of the other way round."

Dar chuckled shortly. "Okay." She said. "Now let me get that image off the repository. Arthur plug me back in wouldja?"

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Mark slowed down as they got to an intersection, and turned left across oncoming traffic which thankfully was light. "Here's Cabellero, and the next corner there is Hardee." He spoke into the microphone in his helmet. "Let's see where this gets us."

They moved along the road, which quickly moved from commercial once they were a few blocks off the main US 1 roadway and into residential. "Oh boy." Mark muttered. "Trees."

Lots of them. Mark throttled down and moved ahead cautiously, as the roadway ahead showed full of debris. On either side were houses, but here, at least, the flooding if there had been seemed to have receded. There were trees down across the yards and roadways, and branches but some had already been dragged aside, and they made slow but steady progress.

Around them the sound of generators was significant. Through the branches and debris there was flashes of light, and in some cases, the house windows showed lit from within.

Twice, they passed groups of people in a yard, and in many places, the dim lights showed the blue of tarps in place over damaged roofs.

The houses on either side were of good size, and Kerry noted the cars they were driving past were newer models, with a lot of SUV's and sedans. "Nice area." She suggested.

"Barb and I looked here." Mark said. "We actually found a place down off Douglas but we decided to wait until after hurricane season to see about buying." He added. "Glad we did, now."

"No kidding." Kerry muttered.

"Gonna go by there in daylight. Maybe if they took a lot of damage we'll get a deal."

"Well, that's one way to look at it." Kerry chuckled a little. "Okay what's that up there?"

"Roundabout." Mark said. "I'm gonna go across the middle of it." He gripped the handlebars a little more tightly and sent the bike over the ground in the center of the road, feeling the vibration as the wheels went over rocks and random debris. "Urf."

They got through the intersection then went along another several blocks, until they came to a T shaped crossroads that had a wall along one side. "Left, huh?" Kerry suggested. "Will that take us down closer to the office?"

"Should. I think this.. it's hard to tell in the dark." Mark said, a little uncertainly. "Street signs are missing." He proceeded north along the wall. "I think I usually turned the street before this. Its not... well, it's going the right direction anyway."

It was very dark now, the roadway lined on both sides with trees. "Yeah, here's Douglas." Mark said, with a tone of relief. "Yeah here we go. Now we've just got to get up to Main, and then take Main down to the office."

That seemed the best plan. Kerry nodded. "Yeah, that's the ticket. Better for us to catch a ride from someplace we already know, and we've got people there." She said. "Maybe we'll just crash there. It's getting late."

"Makes sense. Got people, and food, and guys with guns there." Mark agreed, as, a few minutes later they reached a stretch of the road that was clear of debris. "There's Main up there." He sped up and headed for the corner, the light of the bike showing at last a clear path.

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"Storm's hitting right up the Potomac." Andrew announced, returning to the cottage via the back door of it. "Figure maybe a category 3." He stepped aside and held the door open, allowing a gust of warm, wet air to enter. "Them people are all fussed up there."

"Good." Dar said absently. "Keep them all from calling me." She glanced up, as a low rumble of thunder made itself heard. "Crap. Again?" She frowned. "I thought high pressure was supposed to come in after one of those things."

Ceci came in, pushing back the hood of a violently purple rain jacket. "Just was over at the mansion. Weather's being sucked up in back of Bob." She said. "Expecting a couple inches of rain, like anyone needs that right now." She reported. "Extending that long front that's pulling it up the coast."

"What a mess." Dar looked down to check her watch. "And if it's raining those damn phones won't work either." She got up. "Give me that long cable there, Arthur. Lets see if this thing'll do anything useful before I have to head out again."

Arthur went over and picked up a coil of cable laying inside the door to the pool area. The door itself was cracked open to allow the cable to enter, and at the other end of it was John's minivan, parked on the coral deck. He came over to the table, uncoiling the cable as he went and laying it down between the couch and the table. "We should tape that."

"Let's see if it works first." Dar typed in a configuration and studied the results. "Then worry about taping it."

Arthur handed her the end of the cable and she plugged it into one of the ports she'd hijacked. The router considered the cable for a short period, then acknowledged what it's purpose was meant for and enabled itself. Dar watched the counters increment, watching for errors.

Then she changed screens and, got up, going over to unplug her laptop from their rack and then walk back over to plug the end into another port on the router.

That port came up rather more quickly, and Dar cleared her screen and then refreshed it, watching the configuration change.

She checked the router's logs.

Then she opened up a browser and waited, agreeably surprised when it brought up a website. "Huh."

"Working?" Arthur asked, with interest.

Dar picked up her laptop and turned it around, displaying the screen. "Something's working." She felt a sense of relief, and then put the laptop back down. "Now, before everyone comes back, let's get some work done." She disconnected the second port from her laptop and then reversed her steps, plugging the cable back into the rack. "Let me reset the routing."

She went back to the router and then opened a session from it, to the rack, and started typing.

"Rockstar." Arthur said. "That's like some deeply underground hackity hackstar there, chief."

Dar chuckled softly under her breath. "That was easier than doing it in a submarine tell you that."

Arthur paused and looked at her, as though trying to judge the relative mock level of the statement. Then he just shook his head. "I think I hear a cart outside." He got up and went to the front door, unlocking it and cautiously letting it open, keeping one foot behind it to block it if needed. "Oh hey." He then stepped back and opened the door, as Elvis entered carrying a large, tin foil container.

"Keep it open." Elvis advised, as he moved across the floor and went into the kitchen with the container. "I think that guy's like a restaurant owner or something."

Ricardo was back, with John at his heels. He was carrying a drink container and a stack of cups, and John had a stack of plates and another foil covered dish. "Okay." Ricardo said. "So we got what I promised here, now what about you?" He set the container down on the table. "That's some hot chocolate."

He jerked his jaw at Dar in an aggressive way. "Hey?" He said. "You delivering the goods or what?"

Abruptly a rapid sequence of beeps cut through the room, odd and discordant and from multiple sources including the two laptops sitting on the coffee table, a rapidly incrementing series of chimes and blurps that filled the room along with strident bongs coming from the rack.

It made Andy jump, and he quickly looked from one machine to the other, before he turned to look over at Dar in question. "Hey, Dardar. What all's that?"

"What the hell?" Elvis had come in from the kitchen with a double handful of empanada. "What is that noise?"

Arthur was already diving past him to the couch. "Dingdongs. That's the mail server." He said. "Dar got it working. It's up. That's our mail coming in. It's synching." He squirmed forward and pulled his laptop over. "Lemme turn the freaking sound off before it makes me deaf."

Dar finished typing the last few characters of something she was doing and hit enter. "Spoiler alert." She remarked blandly. "Its working."

She turned to regard Ricardo. "Congratulations. Your bringing the grub did the trick. Good job." She left her keyboard and went to the front window, that was also cracked open to allow the input of the cable from the palm tree to enter.

"Wait.. you're serious?" John rushed past to the back door and stuck his head out of it. "Hey! Alex! Alex!!!" He yelled out the open portal. "Hey!" He squirmed out the patio door and disappeared into the rain. "Alex!!!"

Dar snaked the cable over to the router and plugged it into one final port on the back of it, then she went around to her laptop and made a final configuration change. "Okay." She said. "It's done." She said. "Dad, you ready to head out to the mainland?"

"That's it?" Ceci said. "Really?" She said. "What's actually going on?" She asked, making a gesture around the room. "With all the digital music bombs?"

"One of the servers in that case is our mail server." Dar explained. "I wrote it." She added, as an aside. "When it saw the internet, it lifted it's electronic hand up and said yo, here I am. Send it. As in, all the mail that's out there been waiting for us since it all went down after the storm." She gestured at her laptop, which was still dinging like mad. "I use a caching service so I don't have to change the MX records."

Ceci regarded her. "Sure." She nodded firmly. "Absolutely. That makes all the sense."

Ricardo had a radio strapped to his waist and he was talking into a headset and mouthpiece attached to one ear. "That's what I said, idiot. Plug in that cable and get to fucking work!" He turned to them. "Thanks." He said. "That was worth the food. I'll be back. I want to talk to you people about something." He left in a rush, slamming the front door behind him.

"Can't wait." Dar felt an almost giddy sense of relief. Not so much that she'd made the router work, but that the task was done and now she could focus all her attention on getting Kerry home. "Let's get out of here before the bastard figures out he's got a quarter point nothing bandwidth and wants me to change the laws of physics."

The sound of the rain outside felt like it was drumming on the back of her head, as she thought about the roads and the dark and the possibilities, and finished up her typing, already thinking ahead to the boat, and the trip and the water.

She turned off the sound on the laptop, having no intention at all at opening up the mail screen and looking at it.

Elvis came over to Dar with a plate and handed it to her. "These are pretty good." He said. "I'm not sure they're worth the internet, but it's better than that chicken they had in the big place tonight."

Dar picked up one of the hand held pastries and took a bite of it. Her eyebrows lifted. "Mm." She made a noise of surprised approval. "That is good."

"Spicy." Elvis agreed. "They got some cheese ones in there, Mrs. R."

"My lucky day." Ceci hopped off her stool and went into the kitchen, where Celeste and Angela were camping, Angela industriously pecking at the keyboard of her laptop. A cable was trailing off the side of the table and running out into the living room from it.

She went to the foil container and lifted the lid on it, seeing the neatly stacked treats inside. "That man had a clue." She selected one and broke it in half. "Ah, there we are."

"Is cheese vegetarian?" Angela asked, after a brief pause.

"No." Ceci took a bite. "But I really like it, and no animal gave it's life to allow me to enjoy it."

Celeste pondered that. "What about eggs?"

"Is now the time for us to get into a philosophical discussion about how I feel about the status of non fertilized embryos?"

"Probably not." Celeste blushed a little. "I'm too tired for that really." She said. "Boy it's been a day." Her pale hair was still wet from the rain, and her face was windd and sunburned. "Glad I got a ride back here though. It was pretty creepy at the office."

"I can imagine." Ceci said. "You'll have more to do here now that whatever it is my kid did is done."

"We'll have plenty to do tomorrow." Angela agreed. "I've got all these emails to look at. Holy Moses." She shook her head. "It's gonna take me days. But we got a phone we can plug in."

"Wait for the morning." Ceci said. "I can only imagine the inane calls now."

The kitchen was small, but complete. It had a slimline refrigerator, a stove, microwave, and pantry and the table that was built into the bay window to allow a view of the garden. It was polished and clean, and elegant.

Ceci didn't much care for it. She stood, leaning against one of the carefully crafted and sealed tile counters, munching on her cheese empanada, trying to decide if she wanted to go out on the boat again. It had, she acknowledged, been a long ass day.

"All right." Andrew stuck his head in the kitchen. "We all's going around." He announced. "Ain't gonna be long out there I figure."

"Be careful." Ceci warned, turning around and going back to the foil case. "Here, take one of these. It's almost hamburgerish." She offered Andy a caramel colored pastry. "I don't know what that jackass does, but whoever cooked these knew their business."

Andy took the item and cautiously took a bite of it, chewing warily. "That's some good." He pronounced. "Gimme another one of them."

"Here, wait." Ceci fished inside the pantry. "Morons have a little picnic basket in here. We might as well use it." She filled up the basket with some of the treats, and a few napkins, and handed it to him. "Here. Dar probably expended a couple grands worth of brain cells on that gizmo we should enjoy the pay for it."

Andy took the basket with a brief grin, then left. The door to the cottage opened and closed, and then the place was filled again with the sounds of the servers humming, and the soft rattle of keyboards.

Ceci got herself another cheese empanada.

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"This is a mess." Mark said, huddled against a half knocked over tree. "Fuckin rain."

Kerry had her arms folded over her chest, wet through. She was leaning against the tree trunk herself, a rivulet of rain running down off her nose. "Glad it's summer." She remarked. "At least it's warm rain."

Mark exhaled, leaning his head against a cracked branch.

Kerry regarded the rain, which was barely visible in the pitch darkness, except as a vague, dense motion ahead of them. The tree was against a coral rock wall that ran alongside the road, dark and equally anonymous, it's surface scuffed and in places darkened with moss.

A rumble of thunder rolled overhead, and then, sudden and startling, a blast of lightning that outlined the street in violent silver.

"Shit." Mark eyed the clouds. "Maybe we should get away from this tree."

"And go where?" Kerry asked.

Mark just made a face, acknowledging the dilemma.

Lightning flared again, and Kerry caught sight, a distance away, of a gate in the wall. "Lets see if we can get in there." She suggested. "Maybe there's an overhang we can get under." She ducked out from under the tree and into the rain, holding one arm above her head to shed some rain.

Mark looked doubtful, but he pushed his motorcycle out into the road and followed her, grimacing as the rain hit him full force. "Maybe we were better of where we were." He muttered, but kept pushing, through a growing flow of water that was coming up over his boots.

He couldn't even tell what road they were on anymore. A turn off he'd though would lead them to Main Highway and the office had ended up dodging unexpectedly east, and they had ended up on this turn off with the wall on one side, and nothing but trees on the other.

No idea where they were. He thought they were going north now, but whether it was the rain or the dark he couldn't for the life of him remember seeing this route before. Maybe it was all the fallen trees? Without any lights and nothing to use for a directional beacon it was...

Mark exhaled. It was scary. He was scared, and tired, and seriously regretting leaving Baptist where at least there it was cool and dry and they had coffee. He felt his nape hairs lift and ducked his head as another lightning flash outlined the clouds.

Kerry was just moving steadily ahead of him, a greenish white blur in the rain and then a moment later, the world lit up again with lightning. He saw the gate she'd spotted, and as the thunder rumbled loudly overhead, they turned to the right towards it.

It was an old gate, wrought iron, two halves that came together in the center and were wrapped with a stout chain, and as they came up next to it, a very visible lock. "Crap." Mark parked the bike and took out his flashlight, turning it on and playing it on the lock. "We could maybe tie the bike to this and yank it open." He looked over his shoulder. "Not much runway."

The gate was at the corner of a bend in the road, and right across from it was a huge ficus tree uprooted and sprawled across the road, blocking it.

Kerry took a step back. "We could climb over this." She remarked. "But that's abandoning your bike and I'm guessing you don't want to do that."

"Not unless I got no choice." Mark said. "These things are expensive, Ker."

"Yeah, I know." Kerry went to the other side of the gate where she'd spotted an indentation. "Hang on let me..." She paused. "Oh, wait now here's something."

Mark sloshed over to her. "What is ... oh. Well, that's not really big enough for both of us." He looked at the small alcove. "You want to just hang out in there?..." He paused. "I mean, no sense in both of us standing out in the rain."

"There's a smaller gate in here. Let me see your light." Kerry held her hand out behind her, and when Mark gave over the flash she brought it around in front of her to look at something set into the wall. "Hang on... this isn't locked." She rattled something and then took a step back into the rain. "Ah hah."

Mark peered over her shoulder. "Oh." He said. "I might be able to get the bike through that but..." He looked past the open small gate. "Is there a point? This looks like a park." He took a step back and regarded the gates, looking at either side of them. "No plaque, but maybe one of the old private ones down here."

Kerry shrugged. "Better than nothing? Maybe there'll be a shelter we can hang out under. Like... you know, where a barbeque might be or something. And if this is going along the coast, and we can get near the water, I can call Dar for a pick up soon as it stops raining."

Thunder rumbled over their heads. "Sounds good to me." Mark said. "Let me get the bike before it floats off that rain's getting wicked." He went back into the rain and got the bike up off its kickstand, pushing it over to the alcove and angling the handlebars as Kerry pushed the gate all the way open and held it for him.

It was a tight squeeze but he shoved the motorcycle through the gate and kicked it closed behind him as Kerry got out of the way. "Lead on."

Holding the flashlight, Kerry moved across the water covered ground, angling over to where there was a gravel outline in front of the big gates. "Over here." She called back, and then started forward along the outline of the roadway.

A blast of lightning gave her a quick look at the path ahead, and she could see lots of trees. Some were lying down across their path. She thought she saw what looked like a square structure to the left further on though, and she hastened towards it as the rain started to come down even harder.

Ugh.

The wind came up and blew hard against her, almost stopping her in her tracks and she paused. "I think we're heading towards the water."

"Don't walk into it." Mark warned. "The water I mean. Feels like Bob turned around and came back."

Kerry inhaled. Was that possible? Hurricanes were at the very least, fickle. But she didn't think any of the potential scenarios had included that one in it, and surely Dar would have said something if it had. She took a breath of air again. "I can smell saltwater."

Mark sniffed. "I just smell rain." He shrugged. "But I'm a native. It just smells like air to me."

Ah, yes. Kerry wiped the rain out of her eye and then she pointed. "I thought I saw a building over there. Lets try that." She took hold of one of the handlebars and helped Mark push, glad at least they had relatively solid gravel under their boots. "Watch out for that block there.. not sure what that is."

"No telling." Mark grunted. "Hibachi maybe. We could see some homeless or something in here." He glanced around. "Now I do wish you'd brought that gun with ya. Since we're trespassing and all that stuff."

"Hopefully everyone's inside hiding from the rain." Kerry held the flashlight with her other hand and they put their heads down and just moved as fast as they could, the thunder and lightning worsening. "And if not maybe they'll take pity on us."

The square structure loomed up in front of them and to their relief it had a covered porch. They got the bike up onto the raised concrete pad, both of them relaxing at the same time at the abrupt stopping of the deluge. Mark went over to the door and tried it cautiously. "What do you think?"

"What do I think?" Kerry came over with the light and turned the knob, pushing against the door as it grudgingly opened. "I think it's better than nothing." She drew in a breath, and found it full of the smell of wood and gasoline, and the rich scent of...

Well she wasn't sure what it was, at least it wasn't that unpleasant. She stepped inside and shone the flashlight around, finding what appeared to be a garden shed. In one corner there were various grass cutting type of machinery and lined up against the wall several cans of gasoline.

There were shelves on the opposite wall full of dusty cans and buckets, and in the back of the shed was a large square space with shoulder high walls. In front of that was a low bench. "Well." Kerry closed the door, shutting out the thunder of the rain. "It's empty and it's dry."

Mark nodded. "Good call boss." He said. "We can wait it out here at least." He took off his riding jacket and hung it up on a nail in the wall. "Whoa that was nasty."

Kerry went over and sat down on the low bench. It was a relief to get out of the rain, despite the shelter's warm and stuffy atmosphere. "Maybe leave that door open." She said. "Get some air in here." She rubbed her nose in reflex, imagining the dusty air tickling it.

Mark went over and opened the door, blocking it with a bucket he found near the wall. "Hope the wind doesn't send the rain in here." He said. "I don't want to mess up whoever this is floor." He looked around the room. "Oh hey wait a minute... I think I see something useful over there."

He walked over to the shelves and inspected their contents, as Kerry shone the light in that direction. "I think this is a.. yeah." He worked at something and then light flared, outlining his dripping form. "A camping light." He pronounced with some satisfaction. "My old man has a half dozen of these."

"Nice." Kerry remarked. "One of the oil ones? Yeah, I smell it." She shut the flashlight off to save its battery and extended her boots, letting her head rest against the wooden half wall. "Boy it's been a long day."

"No kidding." Mark sat down on a box, and leaned his back against the wall of the shed. "Maybe we can get a nap in waiting for the rain."

Kerry closed her eyes. "Sounds great to me."

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"This here's a big old mess." Andy said. "Ah swear."

Dar was driving the golf cart, and now she was leaning her arms on the steering wheel, the plastic sides rattling in the downpour all around them.

Ahead of them was the dock, and there were still work lights on, but their glare was obscured by the rain and they were swinging wildly in the wind. Tied to the pylons, the boats in the marina were in dipping motion, even the protected waters choppy with froth.

"It's a mess." Dar agreed, with a sigh. "One step forward, two steps back. Been the story of my life this week." She studied the dock, deciding whether they should run for it, and get onboard and get moving.

She was thinking about Kerry. About where she was, and where hopefully she was sheltered, protected from the storm that was currently lashing the palm trees that had not fallen in the previous weather, but were now bending as though Bob had, in fact, turned back on himself.

"Wall." Andy said, after a long pause, where they both regarded the marina in silence.

"Let me see how far I can get out there." Dar turned on the cart and took a bumpy path across downed limbs past piles of rubble down to the lower level of the marina. The dock was narrow, but she maneuvered slowly past the half sunk boats towards the far end.

Tied up alongside, both the Dixie and her parents boat were rocking in the choppy wake, rain sheeting off their fiberglass hulls.

Andy had never named his boat. He'd been content to take possession of the vessel with just it's hull number, and that was that. It was longer than the Dixie, and a little wider, and now had a ramp braced across it's back deck to facilitate loading and unloading from the dock.

Dar parked the cart near the wall, and for a moment the thunder softened a little, as they were in a bit of shelter. "You get that thing started, I'll untie us?"

Andrew looked at her, one of his grizzled eyebrows hiking up. "How bout you steer." He suggested. "Figure we'll get on out of here faster with all that mess." He indicated the wrack filled marina. "I done close to poked a hole in that thing last time I parked it."

Dar smiled, silently accepting the unspoken compliment. "Sure." She took the fob and stuck it in her pocket, then she unzipped the plastic and ducked out into the rain, grimacing a little as it lashed against her and she drew in a breath half air and half mist.

Rich and pungent and a mixture of the ozone smell of the water falling and the sharp crispness of the nearby sea as she crossed the dock and reached out for the railing of the boat, stepping over and onto the wooden surface of the ramp clamped onto the deck.

She wasted no time in climbing up to the flying bridge, a little different from hers, a little newer, with a Plexiglas housing around it to keep the rain off that she gratefully ducked into.

Below, in the flickering light of the work lamps in motion she saw her father untie the bow, and then head to the aft as she settled behind the console and got the engines started. Dual inboards like hers, but almost twice the power, and she could feel the rumbling difference transmitted to her through her feet on the deck.

She'd driven the bigger boat a few times before. It wasn't as maneuverable as the Dixie due to it's greater size but she tapped the throttles with confidence as they drifted away from the dock. Ahead of her, where the marina building had once stood she spotted one of the dockmasters, drawn out by the sound of the engines and watching her.

She lifted a hand up and waved at him, as he stood there in the rain, peering out from under his thick rubber hood. It was impossible to see his features but after a moment, as if in resignation, he lifted his hand and waved back, and then he turned and went back under the series of tarps that had been set up to shelter the material being used.

Andrew climbed up to join her and sat down in the second chair behind the console, folding his hands in his lap as he hooked his military boots on the stainless steel footrest, peering out from under his rain hood. "Ah do like this here night riding."

Dar gave him a quick, sideways glance as she gently eased the boat out backwards, past the Dixie's berth. "This?" She indicated the rain with her elbow, her tone one of mild disbelief.

"Sure." Her father replied, amiably. "It's just wet. Least it's warm."

“That is true.” Dar reached the open space in front of the marina entrance and swung the aft around, for a moment facing directly into the open gap, and watching the tide racing in before she shifted into forward and headed out into the channel. “I dunno. I’d rather just take a swim in the pool.”

Andrew chuckled.

It was very dark as she turned out into the channel, relying on the markers and the depth sounder for a backup as they moved past the island and its halo of lights.

The headwind was fierce. Dar could feel it shoving against the hull and it thrummed the Plexiglas cowl behind which they were standing. She turned off the floodlights and left the running beams on only, letting her eyes adjust to the shadows as they left the island behind.

“Ya’ll want you some night eyes?” Her father asked, after a minute or so.

“You have some?” Dar wasn’t surprised, when he opened a drawer in the console and withdrew a set of goggles, handing them over to her. She slid them on one handed and adjusted the fit, blinking a few times as the world adjusted from grays to oddly outlined flashes and almost colors.

After a minute of that, Dar removed the goggles and handed them back. “Too weird. I’m fine” She resumed her attention to the channel, judging the current and adding a little power to the engines, glad to feel the counter to the fast running current. “Tide’s coming out.”

“C’n feel it.” Andy agreed, as he put the goggles back in the drawer. “Figure they all made it to the office?”

“That’s where I’m going to start.” Dar said. “At least I can tie up there.”

“C’n find us a truck.”

“Find?”

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There was a point, Kerry found, when you were so tired you really could sleep sitting up on a wooden bench in a stuffy shack, with only the random puff of damp air to cool you down.

Even dressed in sopping wet medical scrubs and wet hiking boots.

Not entirely a deep or particularly restful sleep, one of napping, and waking and napping again, shifting a little to attain a bit more comfort or relieve a cramp – but now at least she wasn’t dripping water on the concrete floor.

In a moment of waking, she regarded the dim and flickering light, coating the inside of the shed in mellow gold, the rumble of thunder from the outside and the pattering rattle of rain against the windows and the overhang.

Mark was curled up on a bag of.. gardening soil? Mulch? Kerry could barely see it and figured it didn’t much matter any more than the provenance of her bench did. It had been a long day, and at least for now this little shed provided all the shelter they could have reasonably asked for given everything.

She let her eyes close again, listening to the rain outside. As long as she could hear it, she knew they were in a holding pattern. There was no way for her to communicate, no way for her to let Dar know where she was, and no way for them to move on.

It gave her a sense of.. a moment of lack of anxiety. An internal acknowledgement that it was okay to just sit here, under a solid roof, waiting for the world outside to change so she could move on and do something else. The only worry she had was the worry of worry itself – knowing that out there, somewhere, Dar was wondering where she was.

Was she still on the island? Waiting for the rain to stop? Kerry smiled, sitting there with her eyes closed. No. Rain was meaningless to Dar. Not rain, not dark, not rough or strange waters, the only thing that would prevent her from searching is the fact she had no idea where to go.

So probably, Dar had gone or was going to the office. Just like Kerry had intended on doing. Just like they'd discussed, so at least, there was a starting point and when the rain stopped or the day came whichever first, that's where they'd head.

Until then?

A soft sound made her open one eye, to see the sleek, wet form of a small animal scoot through the door and then stop, clearly not expecting to find other living creatures inside. She opened her other eye. "Hey there little guy."

It was a cat. There was no collar on it, and it was covered in thick muddy colored hair plastered all over it's body whose ultimate color she could only guess at.

With a sneeze, the cat shook itself and sat down, shaking it's paws one at a time and sending tiny spatters of mud across the floor.

Kerry watched it, and after a minute the cat moved over to near the door, but enough inside to be out of the rain. It sat down again and then tucked it's paws under it, watching her in return with inscrutable eyes.

Okay. Well. Kerry closed her eyes again. If that was the... she paused in mid thought, as the sound of running footsteps drifted in on the breeze, not that close, but not far away either. She sighed, and opened her eyes, listening.

Near the door, the cat had also heard, and turned it's round head, it's pointed ears twitching.

Someone, possibly, trying to get out of the rain just like they had been. Kerry wondered if the faint light from their lamp would draw them over to the shed, or was the heavy downpour enough of an obscuring factor?

She reluctantly shook herself fully awake and stood up, watching the cat back away from her warily, scooting into the empty square space behind where she'd been sitting. She went to the door and stuck her head out, looking past the bike parked against the wall to the open space beyond.

Trees and debris and a curtain of rain were all she could see. The footsteps had faded. Then motion caught her attention and she looked over towards the gates they'd entered from, and saw four or five moving bodies, and now those footsteps echoed. "Ah."

"What's up?" Mark scrambled to his feet and came up next to her. "What's going on?"

"People." Kerry pointed at them. They were running past between the trees but then, one of them looked over and saw the shed and the light and yelled out. "Ah, crap."

"Hey, probably just looking for shelter." Mark said, reasonably. "We got space in here sorta." He glanced around. "Well, maybe not."

Kerry took a step back and looked around the shed, walking over and taking down a hoe from one of the hooks then leaning against it. "Let's hope they're friendly."

"Why wouldn't they be?" Mark asked. "I mean, we're in a park."

"We're in something, behind a locked gate." Kerry reminded him. "Maybe it's a historical grounds?"

"Huh." Mark opened the door all the way and squared himself into the entrance. "One way to find out. Hey!" He lifted his voice and gave the oncoming men a brief wave. "Hello?"

The nearest newcomer hauled up as he reached the overhang. "What the hell you doin in here boy?"

Mark stood his ground. "Staying out of the rain. What does it look like?" He, perhaps consciously, had deepened his tone, and braced his hands on either side of the doorframe. "The hell is your problem?"

"You're trespassing, is my problem." The man came up under the overhang. "This is private property." He was dressed in a rain slicker, dark green, and a pair of rubberized pants with rubber boots, and was tall and well built. His face was bearded.

His dress wasn't a uniform, but he had a large, long flashlight gripped in one hand and there was plenty of room in the rain jacket for a more deadly weapon.

Kerry figured a bit of dialog couldn't hurt. She came up behind Mark, still holding her hoe, and peered past his shoulder. "We didn't mean to." She said. "It was just washing us off our bike." She indicated the motorcycle. "Sorry about that."

The sudden intrusion of her lighter, female voice made him take a step back. His attitude visibly changed. "Well, how'd you get in here?" He asked, glancing at the bike. "Somebody called us, said they saw people up by the wall."

Two other men came up behind the first, all dressed in the green rubber raincoats. "John went to check the house, Robby. Make sure no one got in." One of them said. "All kinds of trash out in the streets you never know what you got here."

Robby, the tall bearded man, made room for them to come in out of the rain behind him onto the porch and for a moment it was a silent, uncomfortable standoff.

"We came in the gate." Kerry provided, in a mild tone. "We were trying to ride back along the road and the rain was too hard."

The silence lengthened. "That's a nice bike." One of the other men commented, after it had gone on what seemed like a very long time.

"Thanks." Mark responded. "Not great in the middle of this though." He indicated the rain. "We were just trying to get somewhere. The cops stopped us up near the U."

A fourth man came up. "All clear by the house." He reported. "Looks like it's just these folks."

"The gate was locked." Robby said, eyeing them doubtfully. "I had to unlock it to get in."

"Maybe we were just lucky." Kerry responded. "It was open. I'm no locksmith." She smiled at him. "I run an IT shop."

Mark edged aside to let Kerry ease past him, recognizing the fact that she presented a more sympathetic figure. Even in the middle of the night and the middle of a deluge, guys were guys and even in damp hospital scrubs, Kerry was an attractive woman. "That's where we were going." He added. "Back to our shop down in the Grove."

Two of the men had flashlights on and the combined glow of them outlined the concrete porch as they pointed the beams down at the ground, after they briefly outlined Kerry's figure. The three that had arrived later all looked at Robby, who was, apparently their leader.

"Yeah, okay." Robby said, after a pause. "I don't blame you none. I'd have tucked out of the rain if I could, too." He glanced around. "It's just people get in here, y'know? Homeless and all that and mess around with the place and the old man, he didn't cotton to that."

Old man. Kerry frowned suddenly. "Sorry to ask this." She said. "Would you mind telling me where we actually are? I'm not from around here." She added, as an aside. "I've never been this far south in the Grove area."

One of the others laughed a little bit. "No you sure ain't. Where you from?" John asked. "You talk like a Northerner."

"Michigan." Kerry replied. "Little place called Saugatuck up on the lake."

They all clustered closer, to get out of the downpour. "Well, ma'am." Robby said. "You all are in a little place called Hunter's Point." He paused. "Sure you never heard of it." He added. "Figures in the history round here way back though."

Kerry blinked. "Hunter's Point." She repeated. "Are you kidding me?"

Robby looked surprised. "You have heard of it? Yeah, this is old man Hunter's place." He said. "He done passed, a bit ago we've been keeping it all tight like he'd want it." He added. "My dad used to keep the grounds here. Old man treated him right."

Kerry leaned back against the doorframe of the shed. "I've heard of it." She agreed. "It's really nice of you to keep an eye on it.. for his.. family?" She ventured. "Someone was telling me now his daughter..or maybe..."

"Yeah." Robby said, briefly. "Something like that." He said. "But I think he'd be all right with you all staying here in shelter. He wouldn't mind ya, not you being up from Michigan. He had him a place up there, off one of them lakes."

"Old man'd be all right with it." John agreed, in a quietly assured voice. "He'd a liked that there bike I tell ya." He took a step back and studied the Harley. "He woulda."

Robby nodded. "Stick here." He told them. "Lot of trees and stuff down and no lights." He motioned for the rest of them to leave. "We'll be back in the morning and open the gates up again so you can get out of here."

"Thanks." Kerry put her hands into her pockets, as she watched them leave, quickly disappearing into the curtain of rain that had turned the ground near the shed into a long stretch of racing off water. "Well."

"Kinda jerky jerks." Mark commented. "I went to high school with guys like that. Guys on the football team who beat up nerds in the locker room." He leaned back against the doorframe. "Never saw the internet coming."

"No one really did back then. But hey, they liked your bike." Kerry turned and made her way back inside the shed, going to the center of the room and standing there in thoughtful silence.

Mark went back to his sack of garden matter and sat down. "Glad they chilled out." He sighed. "They liked my bike, but I think they liked you more." He chuckled. "Ma'am."

Kerry smiled briefly. "Wonder what they would have said if I'd told them there is a slightly more than zero chance I actually half own this place." She looked around the inside of the shed, seeing it now with a odd shifting of perception.

"Say what?" Mark sat there, legs splayed, hands propped against the sacking. "This place???"

Kerry went over and sat down again on her bench. "You know we've been looking for a new house." She said. "Before the storm hit, Dar came over to look at a place called Hunter's Point, it was for sale." She looked around. "Has to be this place right? Couldn't be two of them."

Mark continued staring at her. "You guys bought this?" He seemed unable to process it. "Man, I've heard stories about this place my whole life. The whole thing with him refusing to use the property, and being a pissant to the county and holy crap? This? It's a historical something isn't it?"

"Something, yeah. Well. We tried to." Kerry said. "It was all happening before Bob came through. There was a bunch of legal stuff and I don't know if it all went through or what happened. Probably not, now that I think about it but isn't it funny we ended up here?"

"That's wild."

"It is. Now I really wish it was morning so I could see the place." Kerry drummed her heels on the floor. "Dar said she thought I'd like it." She said. "She did. She said it was big enough for me to have a herd of cows on the property."

"You want a herd of cows?"

"No." Kerry chuckled. "I asked her if there was room for a garden."

"Huh." Mark shook his head a little. "That's crazy. But now I wish it was light too I wanna see it."

Kerry checked her watch. "That and Dixie's coffee maker." She muttered. "C'mon sun."

"No freaking kidding."

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They could hear the office before they saw it, once Dar had shut down the engines and they were tied to the makeshift dock.

The sailing club was still in its woebegone state, it was obvious no one had done anything to it, no bit of debris had been moved, save the flotsam and jetsam they had used to create their footpath.

The building next door, a high-priced restaurant, had been swept clean by the storm surge and was equally abandoned, so when they could hear the sounds of salsa music echoing out of the rainy darkness it was relatively simple to guess where it was coming from.

“What the world?” Andy finished tying up the boat and straightened up, planting his hands on his hips.

Dar pulled her rain hood up. “Lets go find out.” She was glad to have the gear on, despite the muggy heat as the rain drove against them, the choppy water rocking the boat against the pier and she ducked her head a little as they headed into the wind onto the shore.

They got onto the tree strewn pathway and climbed up through the debris on the back of the club. A broken shutter flapped in the wind, smacking against the concrete wall.

Past the club they climbed back down onto the roadway and then crossed the road between the shoreline and where the office was, and now in conjunction with the music, they could see the low gleam of lamps inside the windows on the lower floor.

Dar searched the front of the building as they approached the doorway, feeling a sense of disappointment when she didn't spot Mark's bike. “Damn it.” She'd been hoping it was just the rain keeping them in radio silence. “They're probably under an overpass somewhere.”

“With that bike? Something like it.” Andrew said. “Shoulda set them up with a Humvee.”

Dar eyed him. “We have any?”

They turned the corner and approached the front door, and then halted as a dark figure blocked their path, along with the sound of a gun being cocked.

“Yo boy.” Andy started forward again. “What're you all doing out heah?”

“Hey.” The figure stepped back and pushed the door open for them. “Had some trouble before. Mick and Garvy are round the back.” He lifted a hand. “Hey there, ma'am. Got a little party going on inside.”

“So I hear.” Now in the reflection Dar recognized Jerry, tucked into a sheltered spot near the door with a large thermos nearby. “Carlos in there?”

“Big boy? Sure.” Jerry settled back onto his perch, shifting his gun into the crook of his arm. “They'll be glad to see ya.”

They entered the hallway and turned the corner and stopped in surprise at the crowd of people clustered around long folding tables. “What the heck?” Dar muttered. “Who are all these people?”

Andy was staring past her. “Ah'm sure ah do not know.”

Carlos spotted them. “Hey guys!” He yelled a greeting over the music. “C'mon over!” He gestured to someone standing in the doorway to the small downstairs kitchen. “Hey turn it down a little. The boss is here.”

There were at least forty people in the hallway. There were big fans on either end of the long corridor and damp, cool air was being pulled in from outside and circulated around the folding tables that held all sorts of miscellaneous food and drink on them.

There was a hotpot, three coolers full of ice, a slow cooker, all with cables dangling over the side of the table and a long extension cord running down the hall and out the loading dock door. The music quieted a little, and now the sound of a generator was clearly heard from that direction.

Dar was halfway down the tables before she realized she did know some of the people. Aside from Carlos and his buddies, and Celeste's co workers from ILS, two of Scott's old friends were there, and their landlord. The folks who she didn't know were looking at her with deep interest and Dar figured if she didn't know them, apparently they knew about her.

"Hi." She offered a general greeting.

"Lo." Andrew added, from just behind her. "You all having a party?"

"Hey Dar, hey Mr. R." Carlos was seated on a duct taped stool holding a plastic cup of what looked like beer. "We got stuff left from the grill. Ya hungry?"

"No, we got some stuff back at the house." Dar said. "We got the internet up over there."

"Yeah?" Carlos said. "We heard from the cops they might have some cell service up here tomorrow, maybe tomorrow night."

Their landlord came over. "Hey guys. Sorry about what happened before the storm."

"Ya'll should be." Andrew said, sternly. "This here's a responsibility you done had."

"Didn't even know it was happening." The young gay man shrugged a little bit. "Soon as I heard, I did what I could but they said you already took care of it." He explained. "And you did a great job! I saw some of those other places on the way in here. Holy moly."

"Still a lot of damage." Dar said. "The skylights all leaked."

He nodded. "Carlos told me when I got here. I went and looked." He said. "I'll have an appraiser come over. I have a guy who works with us."

"Hey, what's up with Kerry?" Carlos spoke up. "They making it down here? Must be if you guys are here. But that weather's crap."

Andrew circled the table and went over to two of his buddies, who were relaxing on a table near the end of the hallway.

"Glad those guys were here." Carlos said, coming over to stand next to Dar. "We had about a dozen thug types come around when we were grilling. Said they were the neighborhood protection squad." He cleared his throat. "We put a guard on the front after that."

"Nice."

"Yeah they ran like crazy when big A's buds came around the corner with those machine guns. It was kinda funny, but it wouldn't have been, you know what I mean?" He glanced around at the crowd, most of whom had gone back to their casual conversation. "I don't mind a little scrapping but it wasn't really the time or the place for it."

"No." Dar settled onto one of the stools near the wall. "So what was their pitch?" She folded her arms over her chest. "I mean, what were they going to protect you from? A truck of their buddies?" She asked. "Or were they offering to sell you stuff they poached?"

"Said no cops were around, so we were sitting ducks." Carlos said. "I was just getting done saying hey, we just fed us some cops when the spooks came up behind me rattling their triggers." He said. "That one guy, Hank? He's a scary dude."

"Most of my father's friends are a little out there." Dar admitted with a brief smile. "I've had them around so long I don't notice it anymore."

Carlos regarded her. "Your pop's a little scary." He said. "Come to that, boss, no offense but you're a little scary so that don't surprise me you thinking that's normal." He glanced behind him. "But I think these guys are sort of enjoying this whole thing a little."

Dar regarded the three men at the end of the table. "Yeah, could be." She exhaled. "Anyway, I was hoping Kerry and Mark would be back here by now. They got stuck at the checkpoint at the U about two hours ago or so."

"That's not that far." Carlos looked at his watch. "So where the hell are they?"

"Wasn't raining then." Dar said. "Figure they're under some shelter waiting for it to stop." She pondered that. "But after what you just told me, now I'm wondering how many of those gangs are out there."

"Poof." Carlos looked a little concerned. "If they were at the U two hours ago... man, that's only like fifteen minutes from here unless they ran into debris or that stuff. It's pretty dark out there too." He put down his cup. "Maybe we should go look for them."

"Yeah." Dar drew the word out slowly. "I was hoping they'd get ramp fixed so I could bring the truck over but they're not done yet."

"Hey Dardar?" Andrew came over. "We got us a Humvee. Ya'll wanna go out and find them two?"

"You got a hummer?" Carlos looked impressed.

"Tch." Andy grunted. "None of that candy assed stuff, a real one."

A Humvee! "Absolutely." Dar felt a sense of relief. "I know roughly which way they were going to take. But I know Mark's not going to want to leave that bike."

"Got us a trailer hitched up'll take care of that." Andy clapped her on the shoulder. "Lets go. Hank was using it to haul his landscaping stuff round."

"Problem solved." Carlos said. "I'm gonna go see if those cops are out there still. Let them know we're looking for some people." He motioned one of his buddies over. "C'mon, lets go for a walk, get your Gore Tex on." He headed towards the door, reaching for one of the large raincoats hanging on a door edge nearby.

"Lord. Wall, that can't do harm anyhow." Andy pulled his hood up again as Hank came over, giving Dar a big grin, and a thumbs up. "C'mon, boy. Lets us go hunting round here."

Hank was a stocky man of middle height, and the distinctive scar of a cleft palate. His eyes were deep set and he had one earlobe stretched out with a round bone earring. "Yo, junior." He greeted Dar. "How's it?"

He had a lisp and a scar on his neck and there was a little crazy around the edges of his smile, and Dar had known him since childhood. "Hey Hank." She returned the greeting. "How are ya?"

"Having me some fun." Hank told her, with a twinkle in his eye. He patted the stock of the automatic rifle slung over his shoulder. "Lets go find ya friends."

Dar was glad enough to follow her father and Hank out, moving from the faintly stuffy and slightly beer scented air inside back out into the rain, relieved to be doing something to find Kerry instead of just waiting around.

Waiting, and having stilted and uncomfortable conversations with their landlord and the homeless military vets who had been Scott's erstwhile family and clashed with her more than once and were now sheltering inside her office.

She shook her head and then she looked up as an engine fired to see a camo painted Humvee parked in front of the office with an equipment trailer hitched up behind it. It was an older model, with some battered panels and bent fenders, and a ramming grid mounted on the front.

There was a machine gun on the roof, covered in a heavy tarp, and the exhausts were piped up with snorkles that tipped up over the roof of the vehicle. "That'll do." Andy said, with satisfaction.

"Found it at a auction." Hank was behind the wheel, warming up the engine. "Spent a year fixin it up." He added. "Aint great on gas, but pulls the hell out of my stuff and people leave it alone." He settled into the seat. "I got a job to cut them up some trees at Bayside tomorrow."

Dar got in the back behind the driver's seat, glancing up at the hatch that would allow someone to stand and fire the gun. "That thing have bullets?"

"Sure." Hank waited for Andy to slid into the passenger front seat and close the door. "Almost put a water cannon up there but it leaked all over the place. Pain in my ass." The floor of the truck was bare steel, dented and scuffed and now almost completely covered in mud.

"Nice." Dar complimented him, and meant it.

He put the truck into gear. "Where' we going, junior?"

"Do not call her that." Andrew frowned.

"She don't care." Hank asserted. "Hey?"

"Head south on Main." Dar felt the vibration of the engine all the way through the frame of the military truck. Now that her eyes had adjusted she could see the belted armament container under the gun and tucked into slings behind both seats were handguns.

It was a little like being inside a Mad Max movie, only it was raining and they were in Miami instead of some desert somewhere. "They let you roam around with that up there?" She returned her attention to the machine gun.

"Today? Sure." Hank started out along the road, running the Humvee over the road bumps with a jarring motion. "Don't usually. Scares the civs." He looked both ways. "Cops where I live know I'm crazy they leave me alone."

Dar wasn't really sure the National Guard or the cops would appreciate the blatant arms, regardless of what was going on around them, but as it was dark as the inside of a gorilla's butt and there were roaming gangs of curiously weenie racketeers she supposed it would be all right.

The musty smell of canvas and gun oil called up memories of her childhood and she relaxed against the hard seat, bracing her boots on the floor as the truck rumbled through the dark streets and they got to the main street in the Grove, the eponymous Main.

Very different from her life now but there was a part of her that remembered those times with a deep fondness, a brief glimpse of a might have been and a childhood spent in a world apart from what she knew now. She glanced up into the oversized rearview mirror and met Hank's eyes, and smiled.

He smiled back, and winked at her.

They turned left and they started through the town, and as they went from the business area into the southern parts Dar now saw in fact, groups of figures around, mostly under the overhangs of buildings staying out of the rain.

"What'd them cops say?" Andy asked, after a few quiet moments.

Hank shrugged. "Came for food." He said. "Said they'd picked up couple dozen looters and ran em up to the jail and ran out some dudes selling water for twenty bucks a jug." He slowed down as they came to an intersection with no lights and some surprising but light cross traffic.

The cars on the road were going along slowly, most had more than one person in them. "Sightseers." Hank commented. "Jackass."

"Maybe." Andy watched them move past. "Out looking for something that's sure."

"Maybe they're just enjoying the air conditioning." Dar remarked dryly from the back seat. "Maybe we should close down the office and send all those people home." She added. "Are we idiots back there in the middle of a blacked out city?"

"Think goin home's safer for em?" Andy glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Don't think so, Dardar. Least they got folks around em and cops stopping by." He looked out the window as they passed a group of men huddled under an overhang. "Back in the back there, no tellin."

The group of men turned their heads and watched them go by, one of them pointing at the truck as they all took a step back more firmly against the building wall.

"That's probably true." Dar admitted. "Look at some of these streets. You can't even see a hundred feet through all the down trees and light poles." She knew there were houses back behind them, and once in a while she could see the brief glimpse of a lamp.

"I like that place you got back there." Hank chimed in. "Once you close off that gate on the back it's pretty good to keep critters out."

"Cept that damn cat." Andy chuckled.

"People critters. Its like a little fort, with that place in the middle."

Dar thought about that, as they moved through the intersection, realizing that Hank was right. The office was a four sides around the middle open space and it was a little fort like in that regard.

Though the windows were all jalousie and it wasn't really defensible to any serious attack, still, there were only two real entrances, the loading dock and the front door. Totally unintended but there it was. "You got a point there." She said.

"Yeap." Andy had a flashlight and he now had one hand extended into the rain with the light in it and he was sweeping the side streets as they rolled through the darkness, leaving the stores and commercial streets behind and entered a shadowy maze of downed trees.

The rain increased, thundering on the roof of the Humvee, and a mist of it blew in the windows, dusting Dar's face with it. She blinked it out of her eyes and took in the richly mineral scent, licking some droplets of it off her lips. "Turn down along Monroe towards the water."

Hank obeyed turning left off the main road and down a treelined street where trees had been blown down in all directions, and some work had been done to clear a few trunks out of the way. The Humvee went off the road and around the debris with relative ease, and through the rain they could smell the scent of newly cut wood.

"Somboddy been through here with a chainsaw." Andrew observed. "You think they went down here, Dar?"

"I told Kerry to get to the coast." Dar said, absently. "Find someplace with a dock I could get the Dixie into." She shifted and stuck her head out of the window, ignoring the rain. "There aren't that many places... most of that stretch past here is residential."

"Well, we can't get past this." Hank pulled the truck to a halt, as they came up on a huge ficus tree, turned on it's side and blocking the entire throughway. Someone had been working at it, there were chunks of it missing, but a backhoe was parked in the rain nearby, the cab covered in a tarp.

"They couldn't either." Dar remarked. "Let's try the next street."

"Could they all be tucked up near that school?" Andrew asked. "Maybe didn't get down this far."

"Could be." Dar agreed. "Might have tried coming down Hardee."

"Lets buzz by Sacred Heart first. They got that old fashioned carport thing." Hank suggested. "Maybe they went under that." He turned the truck around and went back up the road, turning back onto Main and continuing down into a heavy wash of rain.

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She'd woken up too much. Kerry regarded the darkness outside, watching the rain fall through the partially opened door. Mark had fallen back to sleep, curled up on his sack full of mulch but the brief interaction they'd had with the erstwhile guardians of the property now had her mind going too much for her to sleep.

And she wished she had something to drink.

And she wished it would stop raining, so she could go outside and try to call Dar.

She tipped her head back and looked up at the ceiling of the shed. It was wooden, but even in the low light she could see the pale strips of hurricane strapping, and the walls were concrete block. No matter the condition of the rest of the property this, at least had been built to current code.

The floor her boots were resting against was also concrete, and it had a slight decline to it, into the center where she could see the outline of a drain.

So they could wash the place down, she figured. But why would they want to do that in a garden shed? It's where she'd expect to find dirt, after all.

She got up off the bench and stretched her body out, turning to regard the space with a bit more curiosity, putting her hands on the half wall she'd been sitting against and looking over it into the square portion behind it.

It was concrete floored as well, the same faintly slanted surface and in the center of it, another drain. She looked down on the inside of the wall, surprised to find a bin fastened to the inside of it.

Agreeably glad to find a little something to engage her restless brain she walked around the half wall and into the other space and went over to the bin, leaning closer to examine it. It was a thick plastic, and in the corner there was a second, this one with a hole in the bottom.

Kerry straightened up and frowned, planting her hands on her hips and she studied the bins. Then she turned around and looked at the rest of the space, realizing that there was another door in the outer wall, with a split top and bottom that could be swung outward.

It seemed well fastened, and not much used, but as she touched the surface she wondered, a faint flicker of memory from their recent vacation surfacing.

Was it a stable? She turned around in a circle and regarded the clean, silent space. There was room, she thought, room enough for a horse to be kept in the square space and the bins maybe were where they kept it's food. She looked at the second bin. Maybe kept it's water in there.

A horse. Kerry regarded the door, then she walked over to the half wall and realized there were eyebolts on both sides of the opening, where something could have been strung up to block entrance into it and figured yeah.

A horse. But a horse in the middle of Coconut Grove?

Well. Kerry leaned on the half wall and looked at the rest of the space. Definitely full of gardening tools and implements there was no doubt of it's purpose, but the cabinets and shelves that ringed the walls really could be used for anything.

Why not for a small stable? She smiled faintly, and wondered if Dar had seen the little shack. The thought of a horse living there in the past would have made her smile. She thought back to the day Dar had visited the place and faintly shook her head. No, she hadn't mentioned it.

But then, why would they have spent time looking at a garden shed? On that day, with the storm bearing down on them and all that going on? Surely the broker had merely mentioned it, maybe pointed at it as they made their way up to the house.

The house. Kerry looked off into the distance, wondering what condition the house was in, that they might be responsible for. Were they now obligated for a money pit the size of Biscayne Bay?

Along with everything else? She knew half their projects would be canceled, who knows how many customers would back out, be wiped out, no longer calling, or making preparations they'd done for jobs now nothing but unfunded expense.

Now the thought that they'd gambled on buying property on the cusp of disaster seemed the most idiotic of things they could possibly have done.

Kerry sighed. Why hadn't they thought of that? About what would happen if they had to do things like rebuild the office, and not have customers and they needed that funding to keep the company afloat while things got back together?

What if that stupid landlord ran out on them and they never heard from him again? What if they were left holding that bag? She thought about that for a moment. Well, what if that happened? They would just have to find some other place to park.

Just like they'd spun up out of nothing, maybe they'd have to do it again. Kerry went around the half wall and over to the door, pushing it all the way open and emerging onto the overhung porch.

It was still raining. But the incessant downpour seemed to have eased somewhat and she could see the path they had come up from the road on, and how it curved along the trees and disappeared again into the darkness. She glanced at her watch. "Jesus. Is it only eleven?"

Her clothes at least were now dry. She could smell the faintly antiseptic scent from them, and standing out in the slight breeze felt good.

The darkness drew her, now that she knew where she was, and it was almost impossible for her not to emerge out into the rain, and start exploring the property as idiotic as she knew an idea that was.

There were a lot of trees. She sighed. So that wall they'd been driving along was part of the place too. Did that mean they'd be able to let the dogs roam at will all over? "Oh my god they'll love that." She spent a moment imagining their pets racing around.

It was obvious, too, that one thing they would have here was privacy. She turned and measured the distance to the outer wall, and then she shaded her eyes and tried to peer through the trees to where she assumed the house was. Real privacy.

Shutting their door gained them that where they lived now, but she was always conscious of their condo's shared construction no matter how well built the walls and this.... Dar had been right. She could keep a herd of sheep to crop the grass here and no one would know.

They could, actually, keep a horse in the little stable.

Would Dar like that? Kerry knew there were horse ranches not that far away and wondered how difficult it would be to figure out how to buy one and would it like living here?

Huh.

Kerry looked around at the expansive grounds. Now that she was seeing them it seemed impossible obtaining them could have happened so easily and she acknowledged that these grandiose thoughts of buying horses and potential herds of sheep were ridiculous.

But fun to think of. She folded her arms and leaned back against the wall of the shed. More entertaining than thinking of the whole company going down the tubes anyway.

Reluctantly, she turned and went back inside the shed and sat down on the bench, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees, checking the face of her watch and willing the time to pass faster.

Through the faint sounds of rain coming through the door, she then heard footsteps, coming her way.

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"This here's a big old mess." Andy said, reflectively. "Maybe them kids figured they weren't gonna get down this way and went on back."

"That would make sense." Dar agreed. They were standing outside the Humvee in their rain gear, where Main Highway met some of the feeder streets that angled off to the west and where a huge ficus tree had collapsed to block the way in both directions.

And the streets going right angles to it were flooded, so deeply none of them thought a motorcycle would have been easily gotten through it.

A ficus, and three light poles, and an overturned eighteen wheel truck whose sides were gashed open and evidence around it that the gashes had been pried open further and items removed.

"Too bad." Hank said. "This was getting fun." He said, in a mournful tone.

Dar wouldn't really characterize it quite that way. She tugged her hood up a bit more, looking around and trying to figure out what their next steps should be.

Go back to the office? That was probably the smartest thing to do.

But wait. She blinked and squinted a little, willing the gray shadows to resolve in the distance around the back of where the tree had emerged.

"What'cha looking at, Dardar?" Andy came up behind her and looked over her shoulder.

"Can we get through there?" She pointed at the corner of the road, where the tree's roots had come up and exposed a large hole. Behind it there seemed to be a bit of a gap. "Back in that corner there, between that concrete light pole and the bench?"

"Sure." Hank got back behind the wheel and started up the engine, while they scrambled in behind him. "Gonna be tough to make that turn with the trailer but we'll give 'er a try." He put the truck in gear and rumbled over the divider in the road, running right over a collapsed street sign.

"Got to remember not to back your ass up doing that." Hank commented, as they went down the other side of the median and heard the harsh clanging as the trailer bumped over after them. "Get all mashed up in the transaxel."

"Yeap." Andy had his flashlight out and he was focusing it on the gap. "Got you a car blocking that on t'other side, ah can see it."

"Not fer long."

Dar debated closing her eyes, then she just grabbed hold of the rigid framework of her seat and looked sideways out the open window as the truck rammed through the gap she'd seen, the front bumper ripping apart one of the branches.

The truck tipped onto it's side as they ran over the bench and she was glad of her grip as they almost went over enough to take on water through the window on Andy's side. He had one hand latched onto the gap where the gun was fastened and looked completely unfazed by motion.

They were over the bench in a moment and righted themselves, landing back upright with a jarring bang as they got through the open space and dragged the trailer behind them.

Dar resisted the impulse to look behind them, focusing on the path ahead instead as the front windshield repelled the rain and gave her a reasonable view. "No way they came through here."

"No way." Andy agreed, as they plowed into a deep flow of water and it sloshed over the floorboards. "Be up over the engine in that there thing."

They got through and ended up past the crossroads, and found flooding in all directions. "Well. Damn." Dar sighed. "Lets see if it gets any better off to the west."

"Sure." Hank cheerfully put the truck into a lower gear and they lurched forwards. "Getting the inside washed fer free here. All good, y'all, all good."

There were no people around, not unreasonably. Between the rain and the flooding, and the residential streets the opportunity for looting would be less lucrative. "Probably focused around that truck back there. Wonder what was in it?" Dar said.

"Beer." Andy responded. "Had it a Budweiser picture on it." He added. "Probl'y still half full I reckon."

Hank chuckled. "Hey it's not that bad." He said. "You a beer fan, junior?"

"Not really." Dar answered absently. "Kerry's the alcohol expert in the house. I'll drink what's put in front of me." She watched the wake from the truck roll out in front of them. "But I've never really been a drinker." She glanced to her left. "Hang on, can we go down that way?"

Hank looked at her in the rearview. "East? You said go west."

"Yeah, I know. Lets just go down that way for a minute."

With a shrug, Hank turned the wheel and hauled on it, changing direction and then running the Humvee up and over the center island that was covered in water. "Hang on."

The street she'd spotted was overhung with trees and full of debris. But as they bumped up over the curb and down again and plowed through the flooded area and down the lane after a minute the water subsided. "Goin up a little."

Dar nodded. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Seemed like it was higher there."

"Big old mess." Andy fell back on his original complaint. "Lord it's gonna take a age to get this sorted out."

It was full of fallen branches and on either side, dark and abandoned houses with no sign of any life at all and Dar hoped that it was because their owners had prudently sheltered elsewhere.

The road angled a little to the northeast, and then out of the gloom the houses disappeared and with a faint curve they were going alongside a wall.

Andy shone his flashlight on it. It was at least eight feet tall, and old, coral construction that was no longer allowed. "Looks like the base of that there cabin of yours down south." He commented. "Lot of that down these parts from back when."

Dar stared at it for a minute. "Oh." She said, after a brief, surprised pause. "Crap this must be Hunters Point." She stuck her head out of the passenger side window into the rain. "Didn't realize we were.... Huh." The whole issue of the Point and the deal bubbled up in her memory. "No idea what happened with that."

Andrew was now also looking at it with far more interest. "Do tell."

Hank slowed his roll, looking through the front windshield at the barrier. "That the crazy guy place?"

"Yeap." Andy agreed. "Sure is." He regarded it. "Nice big old wall. Ah do like that."

"Ain't nobody down here for sure. Been empty for years." Hank supplied. "You think maybe they... he looked down the wall. "No place to hunker down." He glanced at Andy, then at Dar. "Turn around?"

"There's some gates up ahead. Lets see if they're open." Dar leaned on the window sill. "If they saw the flooding and turned down here, they might have gone in, especially if Kerry realized where she was."

"Yeap." Andy nodded in satisfaction. He turned to look at Hank, who was looking at them with a puzzled expression. "Dar went and bought her the place."

"Tried to." Dar demurred. "No idea how that worked out. Richard never called me back before the storm hit."

Hank brought the truck to a halt. "Say what?" He said in a tone of utter disbelief. "Y'all bought crazytown? For real?" He asked. "Didn't think the old man'd ever sell to nobody!"

"Died." Andy gave him a poke. "G'wan and drive ovah to them gates."

"Jesus P Fish." Hank shook his head and put the truck back into gear, gunning the engine and sending them trundling forward, the trailer bumping and clanking along behind them as the road went dry and the sound of the tires went from a slosh to an almost sizzle. "Ya'll are nuts."

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"Gate's locked." Dar peered through them, looking into the darkness. Despite the rain behind her she thought she could hear voices ahead. "Dad, check that little door over there. That's how we got in when we were here."

Obligingly, Andrew pulled his hood up and went over to the side of the gates, turning on his flashlight and examining the other entrance.

"Get out the way, junior." Hank was standing on the running board of the truck, his lights blaring past Dar to illuminate the area beyond the gates. "Ain but take a minute, knock those suckers down."

Dar was looking at the chain. "How about breaking this?" She said. "If I do own this thing, I don't want to have to worry about replacing the damn gates."

Hank came over and looked at it. "Oh yeah. No problem. Hang on." He went back to the front of the truck, where an industrial winch was bolted, and unlocked it, bringing over a hook. "Gimme that."

"Locked up here Dardar." Andrew came back. "That'll do." He added a moment later, as Hank clipped the hook into the chain wrapped around the gates and went back to the truck. "You all get out of there."

Dar and Andy obediently backed off, going over to the smaller entryway and getting out of the rain as Hank put the Humvee into reverse.

Dar peered through the iron grate in the smaller door, watching the shadows and glare of the headlights play out.

"Y'all think she's in there." Andy said, after a long moment of silence.

"I do" Dar answered in a tone of calm certainty. "I'm not into any of that mental garbage but I know what this feels like." She admitted. "Its like a string pulling me."

Andy chuckled. "Ah don't know nothing bout that, Dardar, but I can smell on the ground here that motorcycle likely came through." He indicated the small space. "Scuffed them up some leather and somesuch on the edge there."

Dar inhaled a little, now realizing she could smell the faintest hint of gasoline and oil. "Here?" She touched the mark on the wall.

"Yeap."

"Here we go!" Hank yelled from outside, and threw the Humvee into reverse, the trailer bumping up and over the median behind him. "Watch it! Gotta back up it jammed the damn winch."

"Lord." Andy looked out at the truck as it pulled the cable taut and they could hear the whine of the winch motor. "Wish we just had us a bolt cutter."

Dar started to chuckle then she turned as she heard a yell coming from inside the compound. "Uh oh." She turned and peered through the grate, seeing dark, running bodies in motion, several heading for them. "Oh boy."

"Lord." Andy stepped out into the rain. "Hurry it up!" He circled fist in the air. "Got comp'ny!"

A group of the shadows split off and headed to the left and she heard more yells, the words in them cut off by the rain and the wind, but then a lighter tone cut through it and she grabbed the smaller door and shook it hard, leaning back to pull against it with her weight as she recognized the sound.

It stayed firmly locked, and so she abandoned it, darting out into the rain and turning to regard the wall. Eight feet? Nine? Didn't matter.

She hiked up the sleeves on her jacket and took two long steps, crouching and then leaping up to catch the top of the concrete and coral surface and hoping she'd get a purchase on it. The top had a bit of an edge, and she gripped hard, hoping now that it would hold and not send her flying back flat on her ass.

It held. She hauled herself upward and swung her body up onto the top of the wall with a grunt.

"Dar!" Andy yelled from behind her. "Hang on a... "

Too late. Dar was up and pressing her body over before the echo of her father's startled yell faded, adrenaline pumping through her as she let herself drop to the ground, grimacing a little as the distance jarred her bones and nearly sent her sprawling in the sodden, slippery leaves.

She heard the crackling twang as the chain broke, and the roar of the truck's engine, but now she heard urgency in the yells and what she thought was the sound of a gun.

Then she took off running.

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"Now what?" Kerry got up and got to the door, hearing now more than one person running and the sound of an engine not that far off. "Mark!"

"Huh?" Mark's head jerked upright, and he blinked. "Wh.. what's going on?"

"No idea." Kerry said. "Someone's... I think there's lights by the gates..." She walked out of the shed and looked that way, seeing headlights. "Yeah.. not sure..."

Mark was at her shoulder, rubbing his eyes. "What the hell's that all about?"

Now the footsteps were heading in their direction, and they could see a half dozen men running towards them. "Those guys are armed." Mark said. "Same guys as before?"

"No way to tell." Kerry took a step back into the shed and looked around. "Anything here to... huh."

"Yeah I just came back down on wish you'd brought that gun." Mark retreated at her heels and closed the door behind him. "There's nothing but.. oh, well, a bucket. Or that wheelbarrow."

"Or a hoe." Kerry took one off the wall and examined it. "Too bad it's not a scythe."

Mark looked at her. "You know how to use a scythe, boss?"

"Hell no." Kerry hefted the hoe in her hand. "I can't barely use a potting shovel. But it sounds good." She handed him the hoe and took a rake for herself, and they turned as the door was flung open and the rain came inside along with the thick, pungent scent of rubber. "Hey!"

"Get out!" The man, a stranger, yelled. "We got trouble here! Go on! Go up by the house! Fore you get hurt!"

"What's going on?" Kerry asked. "Is someone coming in the gates?"

"Get out!" The man came forward and two more came in after him. "Get hold of these people and get them up by the house. We don't got time to be arguing with them."

"Hey wait a minute." Mark protested, as two of them grabbed him by the arm, one taking the hoe out of his hands and tossing it in the corner. "Hey stop! Hold on guys!"

The first one, tall and bearded, and drenched, went for Kerry. Instinctively, she took a step back and swung the rake across her body, whacking him in the hand with it. "Hey!" She let out a yell. "Stop it! Leave us alone!"

"You're gonna get hurt!" The man shook his hand, sucking in a breath. "Damn you lady, we just want to get you someplace safe! We got some yahoos in a damn army truck breaking down the gates now come on!" He dodged her rake and grabbed her arm, then he turned and without much effort he hauled her up and over his shoulder. "John! Get him and let's go!"

Startled speechless, Kerry found herself half upside down, the breath knocked out of her. She scabbled for a hold on the slick raincoat and dropped the rake. "Stop! Ow! Hold it! Let me down!"

"We should go with em, Ker." Mark held his hands up and hastened to the door. "Who knows what that all is."

"Mark." Kerry half growled under her breath. "What are the odds, if people showed up at the gates here, in an army truck that we don't know them?" She twisted as they went through the doorway and then they were in the rain and a rumble sounded overhead. "STOP IT!"

Off in the distance she could hear a high pitched whine and the rumble of a heavy engine.

"They'se breaking the gates!" A man's voice shouted nearby. "Get the shotgun! Hurry!"

"I'm goin up to the house!" The man carrying her yelled. "Those f'n cops ain't worth shit they're scared to come down here."

"F'n army truck with a machine gun I don't blame them!" One of the men hauling Mark along bawled back. "Move move! 'C'mon! We gotta get under cover where we can hold em off!"

The man carrying Kerry started to run and then she was just hanging on for dear life as they threaded between heavy trees and over rough ground. "Buddy!" She finally caught her breath. "Let me down so I can talk to those guys."

"Crazy woman!" The man said. "Just shut up and we'll be there in a minute."

He was traveling up hill now, and outpaced the two with Mark, going off on a side path. "Lemme get up onto the... oh crap someone;s coming."

Kerry could hear the racing footsteps heading their way. "Oh boy."

"Shit." The man said. "C'mon, one more minute and I'll be there..."

Kerry couldn't see behind her and yet she didn't really need to. "Stop and let me down or we're both going to get hurt." She yanked on his hood. "Dude, stop!"

"John, I'm there!" He ignored her, letting out a bellow. "Go in the back!"

With a deep breath Kerry suddenly arched her body, yanking herself to one side as hard as she could, as she caught her boot against a tree and shoved away from it with every ounce of effort she could muster, struggling to get herself free from his grip.

He was going uphill and lost his balance. "Shit!" He yelled, and with a truly heroic effort he twisted in mid air and landed on the side Kerry wasn't on, releasing her to roll free and thump hard against a tree stump to one side of the path. "What in the hell you do that for you.."

He scrambled around and got to his feet and turned and was hit by a freight train coming from the dark, from between the trees, traveling at speed that didn't even slow down an instant before it plowed into him, lifting his body up and sending it into a deep hollow between the trees full of mud and leaves.

He sprawled there and then there was the sound of an engine nearby and the headlights outlined them in stark blue light and he looked up through it at the tall figure facing him with half clenched fists dressed in rain gear that obscured all other detail.

"That's why I did that." Kerry pulled herself upright with one of the tree roots sticking out. "Oof."

Dar abandoned the seated man once she realized he was done resisting and then went over to her, offering a hand up. "You okay?" She asked anxiously, shoving her hood back and ignoring the rain. "Wow I'm glad to see you."

"Wow I'm glad to see you too." Kerry heaved a sigh of relief as she gave her a hug. "I was in that shed just wishing you'd show up and here you are."

Dar returned the hug, a smile creasing her face. "Glad we came out to find you."

The rest of the crowd was catching up, and in a moment Mark was there, dusting off his shirt as he stepped up next to them. "Pops is here." He said. "Y' know, you were so right on about that, Ker." He added, in a matter of fact tone. "They do have a machine gun though. Not sure where that came from."

Dar felt her heartbeat settle down, and the goosebumps eased under her rain gear, all the adrenaline releasing and making her knees shake. She was glad to have Kerry leaning against her and for a long moment she rested her chin on Kerry's head and gently scratched her back.

"Well, you know Dad. Doesn't surprise me." Kerry responded. "They're lucky that's all they had, and I was able to stop that big ox before they holed up in some bunker and we were under siege from my own family." She exhaled, shaking her head. "Make this night a lot longer than it's already been and it's been at least two days already."

"All right you boys just stand up over theah." Hank was behind him, and the sound of an automatic rifle being cocked was clearly heard. "No body don't touch nobody and we'all will be just fine."

"You kids all right?" Andrew appeared from between the trees, a handgun in one hand, muzzle pointed skyward. "Fellers here got some candy assed ideas they're police or something." He glared at the small crowd of now cowed guardians. "Running round here like that. Mah god."

"We're fine, Dad." Kerry answered for both of them.

The man who had been carrying Kerry hadn't gotten up. He was still on the ground, his arms propped behind him. "Who in hell are you people?" He finally asked. "You are trespassing on private property, you know that?"

"Are we?" Kerry looked up at Dar.

"Possibly." Her partner responded. "Possibly not." She hunched her shoulders as the rain started coming down harder. "How about we go under some shelter and sort it all out." She pointed at the bulk of the building ahead of them, all flashes of concrete and shadows in the headlights.

“Scoot.” Hank gestured with the muzzle of his gun at the dour looking men. “C’mon, c’mon. Don’t make me itchy.”

They made their way down a small set of steps and to a protected entrance, in awkward silence, followed by the two armed veterans then Mark, then last, Dar and Kerry still arm in arm.

“Found a place you can get the boat in, hon.” Kerry said, as they stepped across an inset granite threshold and through a narrow passage, feeling Dar chuckle through her hold on her. “How crazy is it we ended up here?”

“For us? Not crazy at all.”

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The back entrance let them directly into a huge old fashioned kitchen, with a long, weathered table in the middle and built in, old style wooden cabinets around the walls. There were several soapstone sinks and on one end of the kitchen, a cast iron wood burning stove.

There was evidence of recent habitation. There were stacks of water against the far wall, and several coolers were lined up next to them, along with some containers of powdered milk and sugar. On the counter near the stove was a large battery charger unit, and that had a single thing plugged into it, a coffeepot.

It had high ceilings. In her first somewhat startled, fragmented view of it, Kerry got a sense of space and age, and whitewashed walls and she could smell a hint of woodsmoke and stone and the weathered wood, a halfhearted veneer of cleanser over the top of it.

The walls themselves had no adornment. There wasn’t any sign of any personal touch in it, just the big room and it’s anonymous history. Kerry was reminded, vaguely, of an old church she’d once toured, built from native rock and abandoned by it’s congregation, solid and yet somewhat sad.

There was a battery lantern in the corner and after they all entered and filed in, one of the men turned the lamp up and they could finally all see each other in more than just silver splashed lightning and the headlamps of the Humvee.

It was an oddly assorted group. The guardians of the property were in their dark rain jackets so alike they seemed almost a uniform, with rain pants and boots, all in their twenties or thirties, most bearded, all of them husky and athletic and staring at the intruders with dour resentment.

Kerry was still in her now again drenched scrubs and her hiking boots. She ran her fingers through her hair to halfheartedly sort it, aware that she now had mud all up and down her body turning it’s color a dark brown and adding a woody hint to the scrubs scent.

She removed a sodden leaf from her neck and looked at it, twirling it idly into her fingers before she put it into her pocket.

Mark had on his riding jacket, which he quickly stripped off now that they were inside and laid it over one of the benches near the wall. His shirt was spattered with rain and dirt underneath, it’s pale khaki looking almost camouflage itself.

He turned and then went to stand behind Kerry, pushing his glasses up onto his nose and then sticking his hands into his pockets in a stolid, understated support.

Dar was wearing her Helly Hansen poncho, with its hood pushed back, her dark hair wet and tangled and yet framing her angular features with stark precision.

Both Andy and Hank were in military raingear, in a dappled shadowy camo and stained, worn boots, the dimly golden light picking out the scars on their faces and glinting off the intent focus of their eyes.

Andy had put away his pistol, but Hank had his gun slung over his shoulder and cradled in both hands, and he stood with his back against the wall near the door watching them all, mostly in shadows this far from the lamp.

They all stared at each other, then Dar drew in and released a breath and took charge. She unzipped the throat fastening on her poncho and pulled it off, shaking the drops of rain off and then putting it on the bench next to Mark’s jacket.

"All right." She turned and said. "I'll start." She planted her hands on her hips.

"Hey wait a minute." John spoke up, cutting her off. "You were here the other day with the old man's grandkid." He studied her. "I saw you with her, and some other guy."

Dar nodded. "I was." She said. "My name's Dar Roberts." She paused. "This is my partner, Kerry." She indicated the shorter blond woman at her side. "This is my father, Andrew, and our friends Hank and Mark." She angled her head in their direction. "Now who the hell are you?"

John was watching her. "You buy this place?" He asked. "Cause I know that little bitch wanted bad to sell it."

"Maybe." Kerry spoke up briefly.

"What does that mean?" He looked at her, then at Dar.

"Exactly what it sounds like. We might have. We signed the deal, and our lawyer was working on it, but then the storm hit and I haven't heard from him yet." Dar said. "So yeah, maybe we..." She indicated Kerry and herself. "Own the place. Maybe we don't."

The guardians all looked at each other. "Shit." John said. "She really did it."

"Bitch." One of the others muttered the word softly under his breath. "He shoulda cut her out. He knew she'd sell soon as he was cold."

"So maybe you all are the ones trespassin'." Andy spoke up. "So suppose you all speak up on who you are fore ah do call me some cops and have you hauled off on outta here."

"Cops won't come here." John said. "We called em when you were breaking the gates. Told us to fuck off."

"You all would be surprised what might show up here if we done the callin'." Andy's tone was mild, and faintly humorous.

"Or we just shoot ya and dig a hole for ya." Hank suggested. "Got me a little bobcat I could use for it." He smiled at them with a gentle, dreamy expression on his face.

Kerry gently reached over and tugged Dar's sleeve. She jerked her head toward the door, and they walked together back out of the kitchen and into the rear entranceway, leaving all the men to stand there watching each other.

"What's up?" Dar inquired.

"So." Kerry folded her arms, waiting for her partner to half turn and focus on her. "These guys used to work for Mr. Hunter." She explained. "We met them after Mark and I took shelter here when it was raining like crazy. We found that small gate open."

Dar nodded. "Okay... so..." She glanced behind them at the kitchen door. "What was all the running around over?"

"Well." Kerry cleared her throat gently. "Someone broke down their front gates with an armored truck. Until then they were just fine with us hanging out in their garden shed and we were just waiting for the rain to stop to call you."

"Ah."

"So maybe don't be so hard on them." Kerry bumped her head against Dar's arm. "I think they were his homies. They're kind of like Hunter's point park rangers."

Dar laughed faintly. "Rangers?"

"They were trying to force us to safety." Kerry clarified. "From you and Dad." She added. "And Hank."

Dar laughed a little harder, reaching up to cover her face with one hand.

"Of course, I knew it had to be you. Who else would know exactly where I was and show up in a Humvee?"

"It's Hank's gardening truck." Dar scrubbed her fingers through her wet hair. "It's got a trailer we figured we'd use to haul Mark's bike on. But anyway I heard you yell and I..". She glanced past Kerry and then back to meet her eyes. "Didn't stop to think."

"No, but I'm glad." Kerry replied soberly. "Glad you guys came." She rested her head against Dar's shoulder. "I was sitting there really wanting you to be here and then you were." She let her eyes close a moment. "It's been a long ass day."

Dar kissed the top of her head, mud and leaves irrelevant. "It has. Let's go wrap it up."

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"He called her Minnie." John was seated on a chair backwards, his hands clasped together as he leaned his elbows on his knees. "Minneola, her whole name was. She was full blood Seminole."

They'd turned on the coffee pot and made some coffee, as the storm outside put down a curtain of rain so thick you couldn't see anything past it.

The guardians had put what they had on the table, and they were all seated around it, working their way through some cake doughnuts and Fritos. Doug, the man who had carried Kerry, was sitting on a box near the stove.

"He was crazy about her." John picked up his cup and cradled it in his hands. "She knew how to do everything, y'know? She could cook, and make pretty shirts, just all kinds of stuff. My dad told me when he lived here, when he was a kid she had a horse and she would ride it all bareback and everything."

"Folks round here didn't much care for Indians back then." Doug spoke up. "That's what the old man used to say. But he didn't care."

"Didn't care." John agreed. "My pop said he'd get a gun out and like to shoot anyone who had nothing to say about her, little Minnie." He looked up at his unusual audience. "Sounds crazy."

"Not really." Kerry said, at the same time as Andy did. Hank laughed, giving the side of his gun a pat and the men in green raincoats just looked at each other uncomfortably. "Wonder how he felt about food fights." She added. "So far he sounds like a pretty good guy."

Mark chuckled at that, extending his legs out and crossing his ankles.

"Anyway, she gave him two boys and a girl." John continued. "They all grew up here. Old man had money.. not really sure how he got some of it, but they always did all right. Kids grew up though and went off, didn't want to live here."

"Went to Colorado, one of them, and the other two to Cali." Another of them said. "Left the old man and Minnie here by themselves in this big old place."

"He didn't care. He liked it." John objected. "Told everyone else to get lost and leave them alone." He added. "Then Minnie got killed one night. She was just out near the water, watching some birds like she did sometimes and some drunk asshole in a big ass sailboat came past and shot her in the head."

Kerry's eyes widened. "What?" Her voice sharpened.

"Yeah, it was stupid." Doug said. "Just stupid. Bunch of jerks just bought them a boat and took it out in the Bay and were shooting pelicans." He frowned. "Said she looked like a pelican, in her little shawl and all that, down by the water."

"Some bitch." Andy pronounced the words with precision. "Hope the law got them."

"Rich guys." John said. "Bought their way out of it. Paid the judge. You know how it is." He half shrugged. "People like that don't pay."

Kerry turned and looked at Dar who had straightened up and put her cup down on the table.

Thunder rolled over head, and lightning flashed outside.

"Anyway, old man was never the same after that." John said. "We felt bad, y'know? I always liked this place, we hung out here. Camped near the far wall down south on the edge of the property. We took care of things. You know, after work and all that."

"Old man treated us good." One of the others said. "We'd come sing carols for him on the holidays, like that." He said. "Then one night we came here, just near dark, and there were fire engines and I don't know what else all over the place."

"Someone called the cops I guess." John said. "He was lying on the ground, you know? Just fell down and died. Poor old guy. They took him off, then a few weeks later, she showed up waving some papers around talking crap about everything."

Kerry stood up and walked around in a circle, looking at the kitchen. "Why?" She asked. "It's a gorgeous property. There's nothing like it anywhere around here."

John shrugged. "Found out she couldn't do nothing with it, I guess." He looked at her, then at Dar. "Ya'll know that, right?" There was a touch of malice in his tone. "You can't turn it into no hotel or nothin."

"They told us." Dar got up and started looking around as well. "Last thing in the world I want to do is own a damn hotel."

"You want to go buy it anyhow?" Doug asked, in a puzzled tone. "Well, you all showed up in a car with a machine gun so maybe you're crazier than the old man was."

Dar walked to the doors in the back of the kitchen and pushed them open, swinging, heavy wooden doors covered in material that felt worn against her fingertips. "He wouldn't ever sell to anyone." She commented. "That's what you said, wasn't it, Dad?"

"Yeap." Andy agreed. "Gov'mint wanted to buy the place once ah heard bout it. Make it into a VA home or somethin. Wouldn't let em." He regarded the men, who had turned to look at him. "Probly woud'a ended up something else anyhow, bein the gov'mint."

"Possht." Hank made a rude noise. "End up some tin bar jock strap's gym locker."

That seemed to go over well with the guardians. They exchanged glances, and faint smiles, and resettled themselves, their postures relaxing.

One of them got up and went to the coffee pot, the old fashioned perculator kind and triggered the dispenser into his cup, sending the scent of slightly chicory scented steam into the room, and Doug went over to pick up two cookies, juggling them in one hand.

"Yeah, no, he sure enough didn't trust the government." Doug said. "Specially not the locals, not these days." He put a cookie into his mouth and bit down on it. "Scams, you know?"

"Yeap."

"Fought like nuts to get this place named historic, so no one else could do nothin with it." John nodded. "They just done that, maybe four months back." He paused thoughtfully. "Maybe that's why he kicked off finally. Figured it'd be okay after that."

"Coulda." Doug nodded. "Didn't want nobody to ruin it up." He looked sideways at them. "Fancy it up."

"Hope he liked cabling and wet dogs." Dar went through the door, letting it shut behind her as she walked down the long hall, emerging out into the large, long high ceilinged space in the center of the house.

The kitchen was in the back of the house. The hallway had long lines of cabinets and then another set of doors that closed that all in from the space she was in now.

She heard the door open and close behind her, and waited, not bothering to turn to see who'd followed her out. "Damn storm." She commented briefly.

"Damn storm." Kerry echoed, coming to stand next to her. "Looks like it made it through though." She flicked on the flashlight she'd had hung around her wrist, and shone it in all directions. "This place is huge."

"It is." Dar had her hands in her pockets, and she turned around in the circle. The lightning and gray skies from outside reflected through the windows, facing the water, that had survived the hurricane seemingly untouched. "Wonder if those guys boarded it up."

"Bet they did." Kerry walked towards front of the house that faced the water, the large space with its vaulted ceilings and bowed, full length windows. "Wow."

It was hard, really to absorb the sense of space inside the place. It was three floors, but in the center it was open and vast, full of angles and shadows, the lightning only adding to the sense of presence and mystery. "Dar, we could play tennis in this room."

"Why would we play tennis? Neither of us like it." Dar asked, in a reasonable tone. "Handball maybe."

"Those ceilings are high enough for it." Kerry laughed a little bit. "Jesus."

"Are we crazy?" Dar asked. "This is twice the size of our whole office building. You and I could actually live in the Dixie. Why the hell did we even think this was a good idea?" She asked. "Did I think, since you never even saw it." She corrected herself.

"We've always been a little crazy." Kerry took a step forward and looked around. "But you know what, Dar? I think I like this place."

"Thought you would." Dar admitted. "When I walked in here in my head I just said, Kerry's going to love this." She put her hands in her pockets and rocked up and down on the balls of her feet.

"It's way too big, and the property's insane, and it's going to be so much work and it's so expensive and you know what? I still hope it went through." Kerry walked forward to look out the windows, imagining herself sitting there, watching the sunrise through them, having a cup of tea. "I want to live here with you."

"Do you?"

"I do." She turned to find Dar watching her, a gentle, charmed smile on her face. "I'd like to have met the old man, and Minnie." She walked back and held her hands out, which Dar reached out and grasped. "This place is amazing."

Dar lifted one of her hands up and kissed Kerry's knuckles in a movement of casual gallantry. "Timing sucks." She said. "We don't even know how many customers we're going to end up keeping. We could end up half bankrupt. Or all bankrupt. Then what?"

Kerry studied her. "Then we sell your brain, a cell at a time." She decided. "That should take care of that."

"Kerry."

Kerry chuckled. "Hon, I'm sorry. I'm just too tired right now to stress out." She admitted. "I just want to go home and get in bed with you. Hell, I'd settle for the Dixie's cabin right now." She paused, thoughtfully. "Hell, I'd settle for the window seat in your office."

"Not with that party going on, and unfortunately, we brought Dad's boat." Dar pulled her closer and wrapped her arms around her. "We figured we'd have to get Mark's bike aboard and he has a ramp on the back."

"A ramp?"

"I didn't ask, you shouldn't either."

"Should I ask about the machine gun?" Kerry wondered. "That was kinda radical even for him."

Dar chuckled softly. "It's real." She admitted. "There's a magazine of rounds in there under it."

"Of course it's real. I assumed it was."

Kerry studied the inside of the big room, really finding no details other than a vague sense of pale walls, and a staircase moving up into the shadows. "Wish I could see more of what everything looks like." She murmured. "But I do like that kitchen." She said. "It's so big, and that one corner is just right for that inside garden I've been wanting to try."

Dar nodded. "I liked this place because it's not a square box like all the other square boxes around here." She mused. "And the space and the trees. It smelled good. There's mangos around somewhere, and citrus." She added. "And boarded up or not, there's no water in here. He knew what he was doing in building it."

"Well, we don't know that." Kerry objected mildly. "But I don't hear anything dripping." She reached around Dar and flashed her light along the floor in both directions. "Seems dry."

"And it had an awesome view." Dar concluded looking over Kerry's shoulder, as lightning lit up the emptied pool, and the stained stone wall, and beyond it the algae streaked dock. "I bet we could end up petting a manatee out there before breakfast."

"I think I'd like to pet a manatee. Or at least, share my banana yogurt with one." Kerry leaned against her. "The dogs are going to love this place."

"Oh yeah." Dar exhaled, in some contentment. "The structure of this place is solid. Who'd want to make a hotel out of it?" She wondered. "I liked the way it looked." As she said it, there was a faint creak around them as the downpour seemed to ease. "Sorta felt like a castle."

"Are these all stone floors?" Kerry looked down, examining the surface her boots were on. "As in actual stone? Not tile?"

"They are." Dar scuffed her toe on it. "Upper floors are hardwood." She said. "It's all real, old timey solid stuff."

"Which is going to be such a party to work around making this livable for us." Kerry said. "But kinda fun too, I think."

"Master bedroom's got the same view as this." Dar indicated the floor to ceiling windows. "We'll work it all out."

Kerry turned off her flashlight and closed her eyes, feeling Dar's breathing moving against her and the shift of her jaw as she pondered there in thoughtful silence. "Well, Dardar, should we say screw the rain, and just head back?" She suggested. "I get the feeling this isn't ending anytime soon."

"Yup." Dar patted her on the back. "Lets go and get this over with. I want a shower, and some hot milk and another day." She paused. "Did I tell you I got the internet up?"

Kerry started silently laughing. "Oh god. On second thought, lets just stay here." She moaned. "I don't want to see my email."

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It was awkwardly silent after the two women left the kitchen, and the men remained, the six guardians in their foul weather gear and the two veterans holding the room with effortless attitude. Mark sat at the table with his head propped on his hand, looking from one group to the other, patently a part of neither, his tribe having left the room.

Finally, Doug cleared his throat. "So... " He said. "Who are you people, for real?"

"We done told you that." Andy said.

"Yeah, I know you said your names." Doug acknowledged. "But who the hell are you?"

Hank chuckled, more of a low giggle. "We're the redneck inquisition." He said. "Nobody never specs us."

That even made Andy smile. He took a seat at the table, hiking his combat boot up onto his knee and letting his hands rest on it. "Wall." He considered. "Hank here and mahself spent us some time in the Navy." He paused, and cocked one eyebrow up as he looked at them. "And from time to time I do me some side work for the gov'mint."

"So that's why you have a machine gun mounted Humvee?" John hazarded.

"Nah, that's mine." Hank said. "I built it. 's a hobby." He leaned against the wall, cradling his rifle. "I use the truck to pull my landscaping stuff. I do freelance."

"Oh." Doug relaxed a little. "So what about them." He indicated the door to the inside of the house.

"Them are mah children." Andy said, in a flat tone. "Have yourself a care about what you say about those young ladies."

"They own the company we work for." Mark spoke up. "Roberts Automation." He added. "Our offices are down by Peacock Park."

John looked thoughtfully at him. "Hang on." He said. "That the big, square building down near the water?" He asked. "Somebody was asking the other week what went on there." He looked at Doug. "Remember that?"

Doug slowly nodded his head. "Yeah... I do. Now what was it..." He looked away. "Christ it seems like it's a month ago... oh yeah. Yeah, somebody said they knew someone got a job there and wanted to know what it was." He looked between Andy and Mark.

"Computers." Andy concluded, succinctly. "And they all do some side work for the gov'mint too." He winked at Mark. "But mostly they mess round with that information stuff."

Mark folded his hands. "We do. We do systems consulting and technology solutions." He glanced at Andy. "And we're a contractor for the Department of Defense." He returned his attention to the six men. "And hey, listen. You don't have to worry about this place if Dar bought it."

They regarded him with skeptical silence.

"Seriously." Mark said. "She'd keep it the way it is just to piss off the whole city of Miami." He stood up and put his hands in his pockets. "She'd have a good time doing it."

Andy chuckled. "Stubborn a little."

"Wonder where that came from." Hank drawled.

"Boy's right." Andy put his hands behind his head. "Kids are looking for a new place to live, and Dar done said she looked at this one right before that storm came in and liked it." He said. "Ah do like it. Reminds me a little bit of Viscaya down the way there."

"Got some good plants in there." Hank opined. "Finely put sea grapes back in and yanked all those pines out." He tilted his grizzled head thoughtfully "Hey Andy, you think they'se gonna need a landscaper here?"

"All them things you took out driving in here? Ahm sure they will." Andy eyed him. "Got enough space here to put in all kinds of whatnot."

"We could put a still in." Hank said, thoughtfully. "Wet enough for us to grow some cane here. You still got your old family recipe, Andy? He asked, winking. "S'trendy down here now. We could make us some good money with it."

"Lord." Andy rolled his eyes.

The kitchen door opened again and Dar and Kerry came back inside, coming to stand near the table. "Not going to stop raining." Dar pronounced. "We might as well stop waiting for it to."

"You all ready to get on outta here, Dardar?" Andy stood up, reading his daughter's body language without effort. "We can get that buggy backed on up. Figured your bike'd fit on the trailer." He added as an aside to Mark.

"You guys rock." Mark stood. "Yeah, riding in this'd be a nightmare. We heading to the office? I can crash in my office. I got a go bag in there I left just in case." He said. "Man I'll be glad to park it for the night."

"We'll be back when we find out what the deal is with the place." Dar told the green clad men. "Did you board the windows up?"

John nodded. "My dad's in construction. We had plenty of wood."

They were all looking at Dar with expressions and emotion she readily understood, having been a leader of people now for long enough. "Thank you." She said. "I'm sorry about all the chaos when we got here. We didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

Kerry silently gave her a pat on the back.

"Lady." Doug eyed her, then rubbed his chest. "I gotta tell you I haven't got hit like that since I was a linebacker in high school." He admitted. "We didn't mean anyone no harm. We thought you all were trouble."

"We are." Kerry grinned briefly.

Dar smiled, draping one arm over Kerry's shoulders. "If you hang around and keep an eye on things, either way, we'll take care of you all. I can't imagine what those windows would have been like if you hadn't protected them." She said. "Probably won't know for a couple days what the deal is with the title."

Doug nodded. "We don't want nothing." He replied, unexpectedly. "We'll do it for him, until they chase us off." But now he smiled a little in obvious relief. "Hope it works out though. I think the old man'd like you folks."

"Yeah." John started laughing. "He would. You'd be right on up his alley. Specially with that machine gun."

"Let's go." Andy said, pointing at the back door. "C'mon, Henry. Gonna have to untangle that cable. Think you dragged in a tree or something with ya." He followed Hank out the door, and they filed after him.

"We'll help." Doug pulled his hood up. "Might as well end the night up the right way." He said, as the rest of the guardians quickly joined him. "Well, that sure didn't go where I thought it would." He added, with a faint shake of his head.

"Hell no." John went to hold the door. "Heeeeeeeelllllll no."

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It was still raining when they got to the office, the upper windows showing dim glows of lanterns inside. They could hear the sound of the generator rumbling softly over the rain hitting the street as Hank pulled the Humvee with it's cargo of motorbike and passengers into the parking lot.

Kerry was seated in the middle of the back seat, leaning against Dar, her eyes closed. When they came to a halt she opened one eye and looked through the front seats, past the string of bullets through the muddy window. "Home sweet home."

"Glad to see the place, gotta admit that." Mark agreed. "Shit, I'm tired."

Kerry, who'd gotten in a fifteen minute nap, nodded. She waited for Dar to open the door and get out, and she scooted over and followed her, closing the door and trudging after her partner as they went up the sidewalk towards the front door.

It was quiet, and late, and yet there was still a guard at the door, who lifted a hand and passed them on having recognized them. "Lo." Andy said. "They quiet down in there?"

"Yeah." The guard nodded. "I just been out here a hour. All them extras went on home. Just them that blongs in there now. That guy what owns the building said he'd be back tomorrow to talk with you all."

"Good." Andy held the door for them and then followed them inside, closing the door and the incessant rain behind them as they moved into the stuffy shadow filled hallway that was now, quite abandoned.

"Yeah, can't wait for what he has to say." Kerry grumbled. "Probably going to tell me he's going to let some cousin of his fix the place."

"Mm." Dar muttered under her breath.

A floorboard creaked over their head, and Andy glanced up to the top of the stairs where a solar charged lantern was hanging. He lifted his hand and the armed figure at the top of the steps waved back.

Dar moved into the central hallway, and glanced down it. The strings of tables were still there, but they had been tidied up, things that were leftover were packed neatly away, the coolers had covers on them, only the faintest scent of grill smoke evident.

She was glad to see the clean up. She went to the door to the central open space and put her head out it, looking around the rain drenched but equally tidy picnic tables and listened to the sound of drops hitting the aluminum camper parked in the center.

Mark sighed. "I'm gonna go crash in my office." He said. "Don't even care of it's hot." He swung to the left and climbed up the steps to the second floor, exchanging a brief wave with the man on guard. "Hey Pete."

"Yo." Pete was resuming a seat on the couch at the top of the steps, where sometimes visitors would sit waiting to talk to Kerry or Dar, and he extended his legs out along the wooden floor and crossed his boots at the ankle. "Glad they found you guys."

Behind him was a fan, and it was plugged into a long cable that ran down the stairs and disappeared into the shadows. It provided a light breeze, and there was a second one at the far end of the corridor. It was stuffy, but bearable.

"Me too." Mark said. "I just want to park my ass on a chair and sack out."

"Heard ya." Pete smiled. "Gals put soap and all that in the shower room if you want." He said. "Water's not hot but this is Flooreida, and it aint cold neither."

Mark chuckled and walked past him down the hall and into his office, which was dark and quiet and blessedly free of weird guys and rain. "I can shower in the morning." He muttered under his breath. "Been freaking showering all damn day long."

He went to the cabinet and opened it, removing a leather bag from inside and gratefully, blessedly, exchanged his soaked and resoaked and soaked again clothes for dry, putting the wet versions over the cabinet door to drip dry over the wooden floor.

His desk was near the window, and he went over to open the window wide, getting a faint breeze full of dampness to stir the air. Then he circled his desk and went over to the couch against the wall, dropping onto it and laying down with a sigh of utter relief. "Beats a stable. What a day."

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Kerry used the restroom and then wandered back into the central hall, where Dar was standing, arms crossed, talking to Hank. "You up to driving home, hon?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Dar had taken off her rain gear, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. "Dad's taking a look around." She explained. "I was just thanking Hank for coming out with us."

"Naw. It was fuuuun." Hank produced a smile that was unrestrained and real. "Reminds me of old times, with your dad." He rocked up and down. "Didn't figure we'd end up ending up though where we done."

"No, well.." Dar shrugged a little bit. "We were all going in the same direction. Had to end up somewhere."

"I was surprised I was where I was." Kerry said, folding her arms over her chest. "When those guys told me it was Hunter's I was like.. what the hell? But then I realized where it was and it sort of did make sense... did you realize where we were heading, Dar?"

"Didn't even think about it." Dar shook her head. "But when I saw the wall there..." She hesitated. "I figured that kind of coincidence usually doesn't pass us up." She looked down the hallway, then back at Kerry, one eyebrow quirked a little bit.

Kerry looked back at her, trying to work out the expression on Dar's face, concluding that it was possible coincidence wasn't quite the word her partner had meant.

"That place there is sweet, I tell you what though. Hardwood hammock and all that stuff." Hank carried on, ignoring the silent communication.

"A what?" Kerry asked, putting the question away for later.

"Hardwood hammock." Hank said. "Old timey stuff from round here. Limestone wibbly wobblies and native trees and all that stuff." He nodded his head. "Got your holes and gullies and all that. Ferns, y'know?"

Kerry regarded him, as he strolled off, whistling a little under his breath. "I have to look that up." She said, after a brief pause. "Now that Thor, god of the internets has gotten that going back at the house." She gently elbowed Dar's ribs. "Is that hammock, as in Matheson Hammock?"

"Yeah, it is actually." Dar responded, after pausing to think. "It's all about the limestone substructure of the area, and something called the Miami Rock Ridge."

"The only ridge I've seen in Miami is the Dade County landfill." Kerry said. "What kind of ridge are we talking about here?"

"Not that kind of ridge." Dar stifled a yawn. "I know where there are some near here. We can go see them the next time we head over to the new place."

Kerry took a breath of the damp, slightly musty air. "Hon. It's still crazy raining out there. Why don't we just crash upstairs and wait it out?"

"Wouldn't you rather spend the night in our air conditioned bedroom?"

"Of course I would." Kerry said. "If our air conditioned bedroom wasn't on an island and I'd have to get wet all over again to get on a boat, to eventually get to it on." She nudged her gently. "C'mon. It's been a long day for both of us."

Dar regarded her thoughtfully, not immediately rejecting the idea. She had no real desire to go back out into the rain either, risking the slick crudely made ramp in the dark to get back on her parent's boat. They could both end up going headfirst into Biscayne Bay.

Navigating the bay back to the marina at the island wasn't going to be a picnic either. The marina was probably closed, and they'd have to tie themselves up, and then there was the rainy ride back to the condo.

Meh.

But she was sticky and covered in mud and hot. She didn't want to sweat all night up in their office, with just a faint cross breeze, only to have to get up in the morning and deal with the staff.

Kerry just stood and waited. She could read what Dar was thinking, pretty much, from the expression on her face and she knew it went parallel with what she herself was thinking. But she kept her thoughts to herself because after all it was Dar who was going to have to pilot them back to the island.

In the dark, in the rain.

It had been a long day for both of them. If she was tired, she could only imagine how Dar felt and she at least had the advantage of having a nap. They could get a shower in the large bathroom upstairs and she was pretty sure there was a box of company tshirts they could change into up in the cabinet next to Zoe's desk.

It wouldn't be that bad. Would it?

"Nope. Lets go." Dar decided abruptly, catching sight of Andy's tall figure coming down the hall. "Ready to go, dad?" She called out. "Rain's not gonna get any better."

"Hell yes." Her father agreed. "C'mon." He walked past them to the receptionist stand, and retrieved his raincoat, as both of them followed. "Done about had enough for one day in this here retirement." He shook his head. "Lord."

Dar put on her jacket and Kerry detoured into the conference room to grab a poncho she slid over her head. "Would have been nice to have this with me tonight." Kerry commented. "Jesus I'm tired of this damn weather. Didn't they say it was going to be clear after that damn thing hit?"

"Ran into that front." Dar responded, briefly. "No telling with these things."

Without looking back they went out the door and into the rain, Andy flicking on his flashlight as he led the way down the sidewalk and then turned to go around the side of the building.

Everything around seemed dark and empty. At this time of night Kerry expected it to be quiet, but still lit, always with a few people strolling along the street, or sitting at one of the cafes whose front porches were shadowed and full of debris.

The only light anywhere was the faint hint of amber glows from the windows of their own building, the flickers of candles and the generator run floodlight whose blue glare flickered from inside the open square of the building and lit the back loading dock.

Kerry reached out and took Dar's hand in hers and felt Dar's long fingers curl around hers.

They walked past their building and down the lane towards the sailing club and the water, feeling the rain beat against their backs driven by the offshore wind coming from the northwest. Past the debris still in the road, and the downed trees, and the sodden masses of garbage that stank.

She was glad of the wind then, driving past them, as they crossed the road and went through the parking lot of the club, climbing over two telephone poles lying over several cars and ducking under the power lines laying across everything, from the towers that had collapsed on either side of the building.

She could see the bay, and the white mass that was Andy's boat bobbling in the waves, and in the moment she was glad they were leaving the dark city behind and that soon, in maybe a half hour, maybe forty five minutes, she'd be able to stand in her own lit, cool home and be comfortable.

Like no one behind her could. Super glad that Dar hadn't taken her suggestion. She glanced at the inky black water on either side of the ramp, its surface full of sea wrack, and floating wooden debris.

"Careful there." Andy directed the light on the slick deck. "Aint no time to be swimming."

"Want to do me a favor?" Dar asked, as they edged along the makeshift ramp that extended out towards the boat.

"Pot of coffee?" Kerry reached out to grab the railing of the boat, as Andy crossed from the ramp to the deck, and she felt the boat move under his weight. "And I bet I can find some ice cream in there."

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It had taken over an hour. The weather, and the uncertainty of navigating in the pitch darkness had made Dar cautious, and it was well after midnight when they came around the south side of the island and approached the entrance to the marina.

It was, as she had expected, quiet and empty of dockhands. But the work lights were on and it was a relief to be able to see clearly, and she gently nudged the big boat into its slip past her own against the outer seawall dock glad at least that the rain had slackened, if not stopped.

To her right on the console was a thermos and she picked it up and took a swallow of the strong coffee inside, then set it down before she let the boat drift lightly against the bolsters, waiting to see her father step off and take the ropes before she shut down the engines.

"We're tied." Kerry called up from the aft pylon.

Dar shut everything down and made her way down the ladder from the flying bridge, with one hand on the ladder and the other gripping the thermos, glad the steps had a roughened surface on them as rain dripped into her eyes.

She joined them on land and they made their way up the dock and along the side of the temporary marina tent, it's roof flapping in the wind and rain rolling off it's slanted surface.

Then they were at the cart, and this time Andy took the wheel, motioning Dar to get in behind him. "You done all the drivin today Dardar. Take me a turn."

Dar got in the back seat and extended her legs sideways as Kerry zipped the plastic shield down and they started off along the service path around the back of the destroyed marina building.

Everything here was also silent and seemingly abandoned, the difference was there were periodic lights along the road, some temporary, and through the trees real lights were seen from the buildings and townhouses that ringed the island.

"Is that a helicopter on the golf course?" Kerry commented.

"That's a helicopter on the golf course." Dar concluded. "I guess they managed to drain the damn thing." She regarded the outline. "Private."

"Them people live here, aint' surprising." Andy said.

"You live here, dad." Kerry reminded him. "And we do too for now."

"Aint' what I meant."

"Well." Dar shifted a little, half turning to watch the aircraft as they went by. "Maybe I should learn to fly one of those things. Hell of a lot faster to get around with than a couple of motor yachts." She looked at Kerry, who had turned around in the front seat to look at her. "What?" She asked. "If Alastair can fly a plane, I could."

"Too many damn trees for them things." Andy steered around a pile of debris in the road. "Too many trees, and too much wind, them pilots for the coast guard were saying."

"Yeah." Dar thought about what it had been like piloting the boat and imagined trying to do that in the air. "That's a point."

As they came around the curve in the road, they could see there was, despite the late hour, activity going on in the section of housing where they lived. "Now what?" Dar reversed her position, sliding to one side so she could see past Kerry. "That the bunch next to ours?"

There were dozens of dark cars parked in the road along the wall that divided the homes from the road and the interior of the island including its golf course. Two of them had been pulled up next to the entrance gates and there were figures standing around both, and on either side of the entrance bright floodlights were positioned, glaring out into the night.

Some of them heard the cart approaching and two men turned to look at them as Andy steered the cart, slowing it down before he turned into the opening that led into their section of the townhomes. "Cars got on here somehow. Figure maybe them ferries are running?"

"Hope so. That'd be great if we could take the truck off tomorrow." Dar said. "That makeshift dock back there is starting to fall apart. I could feel it when we were crossing before." She shifted back around as they arrived home, and the cart came to a halt.

The front lights were on, and as they got out and climbed up the slope from the parking area to the stairs the door opened and Ceci poked her head out. Spotting them, she emerged all the way and got the door closed before the barking dogs behind her could squeeze out. "Ah hah!"

"Lo." Andy waved, as they climbed up the steps. "Got a fuss going on ovah there?" He indicated the next section.

"Spooks." Ceci informed them. "I figure the governor's probably moving his cocker spaniel in." She added, in a wryly amused tone. "So how'd it all go?"

"Long ass day." Andy concluded, as they went inside, to be greeted by Mocha and Chino and thoroughly sniffed. "Get out the way, furballs."

"Do I want to know why you're wearing hospital scrubs?" Ceci asked Kerry, as she pulled off her poncho and left it hanging on the door to the closet set in the underside of the stairs. "Where the Samhain were you the whole day?"

"Long story." Kerry sighed, taking in a breath of the cold, dry air and savoring the chill of it against her skin. "It's been one of those days that were about a week long."

"Meet you in the shower?" Dar gave her a nudge. "I'll fill in the details."

Kerry didn't argue. She went into the ground floor master suite and into the large bathroom, already pulling the scrubs up over her head and ridding her body of their damp mustiness. She watched the cool air lift goosebumps on her skin, and went into the shower to turn it on.

She fancied she could still smell the antiseptic smell of the hospital soap and was happy to step under the hot water in its drenching stream and pick up one of their sea sponges, putting some of their preferred wash on it and scrubbing her skin with it.

The heat picked up the scent of the soap and filled the shower with it and Kerry smiled, hearing over the sound of the shower Dar's voice as she moved in her direction. "Know what?" She asked, as her partner entered the room.

"You're glad we decided not to stay at the office." Dar stated amiably. "Cause I sure am." She joined Kerry in the shower and took over the sponge. "Yikes you did get sunburned."

"I did." Kerry agreed, contentedly washing the grit out of her hair. "Did I tell you I ended up losing my shirt escaping from a mob?" She said. "In that bag I had there's a national guard t-shirt I conned out of someone while Mark was fixing a database server."

Dar paused, and looked over Kerry's shoulder so they could make eye contact. "What and what now?"

"I told you this day was a week long." Kerry sighed. "Jesus."

"Save it for tomorrow." Dar put her arms around her as they stood under the drenching spray together. "We can go over it at breakfast."

Kerry smiled, savoring the lack of rain, lack of heat, lack of confounding issues to deal with in this moment of utter comfort of the soul. "Tomorrow's another day." She agreed. "And no way can it be as crazy as today was."

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The following morning presented them with a wan, grudging sunlight and a fitful wind, but Kerry got her sunglasses in place and decided she would for sure, take it. She hiked up one socked foot and put it on her bare knee as she regarded the fruffy looking ocean from her vantage point on their porch.

She was wearing a white tank top and cargo shorts, and on the table was a tube of aloe she'd just finished applying to her sunburned arms.

The sliding door behind her opened and Dar joined her, taking the second chair and leaning her elbows on the chair arms. "Well." She regarded the scenery with a skeptical eye, watching the clouds drift closer over the water.

"At least it's not raining." Kerry amiably asserted. "Just muggy as all hell."

"At least it's not raining." Dar agreed. She was wearing a thin teal colored tshirt with a faded werewolf picture, and ragged denim shorts. "Yet." She studied the water. "Tides up over the seawall again." She observed the rolling waves that were once again sloshing past their garden gates and into the backyard.

It attracted the attention of Chino and Mocha, who rushed excitedly at the water, barking, stopping only at the gates that Andy had wrestled back into position.

"Mm." Dar stretched, extending her long legs out along the tile and crossing her bare feet. "That press conference we just watched. Damn."

"Damn. That governor's a jerk, and I usually don't like him, but you could see it in his face. Where the hell do you start?" Kerry said. "Literally. Even that guy from FPL." She said. "And they're not getting the time of day from the feds."

"Can't. They're dealing with flooding all over DC. No one has time for us." Dar had a cup of coffee in her hands and was sipping from it. "And they were making fun of us for getting all crazy over the storm that now went right up their asses."

"I know. My mother called asking for advice." Kerry said, in a dry tone.

"Leave?" Dar's dark brows went up. "As in, go back to Michigan?"

“Yes.” Kerry rolled her head to one side and regarded her partner. “She’s in Michigan. She wanted advice for her staff that’s still in DC.”

“They should leave too?”

“Dar, some people just can’t get up and leave like that. They have families and parents and kids and dogs and things they have to deal with.” Kerry told her. “Look at how many people here stayed put? Look at Maria and Mayte, for Christ’s sake.”

“Mm.” Dar eyed her. “So what’d you tell her?”

Kerry’s lips quirked a little. “To tell them to get the hell out of there.” She admitted. “Everyone who could, just drive west and if they’re stuck there I gave her a list of survival items.” She took a sip of her own coffee. “At least it’s not as hot there, and the storms just a Cat 3.”

“Just. For them, that’s a nightmare. Codes aren’t up to it.” Dar said. “And those guys from NOAA think it’s going to curve up and hit New York as a Cat 1.” She said. “At least we don’t need to worry about flooded subways.”

“Or about subways.” Kerry mused. “Our one elevated train got blown over. Think anyone will notice?”

“The metrogonowhere? No.” Dar said. “But at least they’re getting the mobile towers on the edge of the county up.”

“Take forever to get them up in the downtown.” Kerry sighed. “Did you see all the power cables draped over everything near the office? All that area’s going to have to be redone, they said.”

“Ugh.”

They remained silent for a few moments. “So what’s the plan?” Kerry asked. “Go to the cottage and see whats in our inbox? Or did you run the cable from... from our security camera into the house?” She spoke with some slight doubt. “Is that what you said? They’re doing coax to ethernet? You have a MoCA adapter for it?”

Mocha came over and barked, sitting down and tilting his head at her.

“Not you.” Kerry chuckled.

“Yeah, they were going to convert the whole island to it, and it got put on a backburner. Lets go to the cottage and see what’s up there, see if anything’s blown up...” Dar paused. “See what has blown up in our email and then maybe we can... well, crap. I don’t know what the hell we should do then. Does it make sense to go back to the office?”

Kerry exhaled. “I feel like I want to, but for what?” She asked. “I mean... what are we going to do there? Doesn’t it make more sense to stay in contact here?” She watched the waves come in. “Yesterday kicked my ass.” She admitted. “I’m still wiped.”

Dar reached over and patted her leg. “Lets hang out here. We can call the office on the marine radio and make sure nothing’s going sideways. There’s not much we can do there anyway. We might see if any more of the programmers showed up and send Dad over to get them.”

“Sounds good.” Kerry picked up Dar’s hand and clasped it, savoring the warmth despite the humidity, against the soreness from the previous day. “I’m going to grab some Advil first.” She said. “Why don’t you run that cable, and I’ll walk over and stretch out some of these kinks?”

“I think I have a long enough run.” Dar mused. “Yeah, okay. I’ll run it inside and then I can hang a wireless unit off it tonight.” She decided. “Though with all the wingnuts on the island using it, not sure it’s worth my time or effort.”

Kerry thought about that. “Is it even worth using at the cottage?”

Dar smiled a little. “That’s my router it’s going through there. I reserved bandwidth for us.” She said. “That’s what they paid for my brain cells.” She winked at Kerry and stood up. “Maybe Richard’s sent an email about our new property.”

“Ugh, that could go either way.”

“It could.”

They walked inside, to be greeted by Chino and Mocha, tails waving in almost unison. It was quiet otherwise – Andy and Ceci had headed off to the beach club to see ‘what was going on’. Kerry rather thought that her mother in law was just out to rouse the rabble, a favorite hobby.

It was cool and comfortable inside the living room. The television was on, and the tired looking local newscasters were settling behind their desks, none of them in anything but polo shirts, and the weather forecaster with a two day stubble.

A ticker scrolled at the bottom of the screen. How many people had no power. Where the flooding was worst. Repeated appeals to stay off the roads. Where shelters were open. Where water was available. What the governor was doing. What FPL was doing.

“You know...” Kerry paused to watch the screen for a moment. “We’re lucky ass people.”

Dar had gone to the closet under the stairs and ducked inside, the sounds of her rooting around emerging into the living room as Chino poked her head inside behind her. “We are.” She emerged with a coil of black cable around one arm, neatly tied. “I have a two hundred foot ethernet cable. Bet we’re the only one on this island with one in their house.”

Kerry went over and bumped into her, wrapping her arms around Dar and giving her a hug. “Yeah, for that too.” She said. “Don’t take long. I can’t wait for us to share the bad news in our inboxes with each other.”

“Mm.”

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Kerry trotted down the steps of the condo with Mocha at her heels, and started out along the road at a brisk pace leaving the golf cart behind her as she stretched out her abused muscles from the previous day.

Ahead of her, and to her left she could see the makeshift guard station at the next condo section entrance, and she made no bones about looking curiously at it as she approached. “Now, what do you think that’s all about, Mochie?” She asked the brown dog. “You think it’s spooks, like grandma said?”

“Growf.” Mocha sneezed.

Some VIP, no doubt. Kerry knew political goons when she saw them, and after studying the men as she neared them, she decided they weren’t national level goons, but instead, a more local variety.

The governor? Perhaps. The state capital where the governor usually hung out was in Tallahassee, which was, as Dar often said, a lot closer to Georgia than Miami, a matter of some hundred and fifty miles versus four hundred eighty.

It would make sense for the governor to, if he had to stay locally while examining the damage, get a place where he could at least have power and air conditioning. She didn’t grudge him that, having enjoyed very much chilling out in her kitchen that morning comfortably cool while her muffin toasted.

The guards were watching her, and after a moment of internal debate, she angled her way towards them right up the driveway, removing her sunglasses as she reached the barrier and the two guards straightened up, watching her with benign interest.

“Hi.” She came to a halt, and signaled Mocha to do the same. The Labrador took a seat next to her, his tongue lolling.

“Hello, ma’am.” The nearer one responded with civil respect. “Can I help you with something?”

“What’s all this?” Kerry asked, straightforwardly, gesturing at the blockade.

The man looked at her awkwardly. “Well ma’am.. we have a dignitary visiting and this is controlled access.” He said. “Do you live here?”

"I do." Kerry said. "Right over there." She pointed behind and to the side of where they were standing. "Who is it?" She asked, in a tone that clearly expected to be answered. "That their helicopter sitting on the green?"

"Um.. we can't really say." The second man spoke up.

"C'mon guys, I'm not the Miami Herald." Kerry said. "I'll just use my binoculars from our patio. We all have the same outside view." She said. "Or bump into whoever it is over breakfast in the Mansion." She grinned easily at them.

Both guards relaxed a little, glancing around behind them.

"She's right." The first man said. "It's John Beringar. He works for the governor." He explained. "He and his team are staying here, so they can evaluate all the damage."

Kerry nodded. "Makes sense." She said. "I spent all day over in the city yesterday. No one wants to stay there."

"No ma'am." The second guard came closer, nodding at her. "Got to say I was happier than a clam to get sent out here. First night since the storm I got any sleep."

"True that." The first one said. "So, what's your name, ma'am?"

"Kerry." Kerry extended a hand. "We're in unit 4A." She said. "Not many owners are residents in that area, but we're full time. If you need anything, just ring the bell." She said. "We own an IT company, and my father in law's a retired Navy seal. Sometimes we're useful."

She winked at them, and then put her sunglasses back on before she turned and started back down towards the road, giving a cluck of her tongue for Mocha to follow.

"Huh." The first guard looked at the second guard. "Wasn't how I expected that to go."

"Seems like a nice lady." The second said. "Not like some of the folks around here." He glanced around.

"Remember what number she said. Never know when these guys need something last minute, you know?" He advised. "Specially IT stuff. Everyone's always forgetting something."

"Cables and stuff. Yeah absolutely."

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Dar got the ladder positioned against the wall that separated their buildings' entrance from the street and climbed up to the top of it, brushing aside the shredded hydrangea vines drooping over the wall and around the light pedestal.

She set down the converter and roll of cable on the top of the wall, then removed a screwdriver from her pocket and started removing the cover off the light mounted on one of the elevated posts.

It was a long metal tap screw, and once she'd seated her driver tip inside and her hands began twisting it, she looked over the wall to find something to occupy her attention while the task was in progress.

Across the road, she could see a team of men running a pump, which was draining the last of the storm caused lake over the golf course, a long corrugated flexible pipe extending back out to one of the inside drains near the edge of the grass.

The helicopter was gone, but on either side of the pump team Dar could see maintenance trucks with crews at work. Dar watched a golf cart pull up to one of them, and then she had to turn her attention back to the cover that was coming loose.

She pulled it aside and peered into the casement, where a camera was now exposed, it's dome relatively unscathed. Inside it a three hundred and sixty degree camera was positioned under a light overhead, hidden in the fixture.

Dar regarded it, trying to remember if she had always known there was a camera looking at their front door, and the entrance, and decided she probably had.

Were they elsewhere though? Thoughtfully, she straightened up and searched the area, thinking about where it was lit up at night.

“Hey! Hey Ms. Roberts!”

Dar looked down to find Lou, in his golf cart, at the entrance. “Hey.” She leaned her elbows on the wall. “What’s up?”

“Listen, I wanted to let you know, they got the ramp working.” Lou reported. “I know your dad was asking about it. So if you need to, we got the ferries working. They’re kinda slow, because there’s a lot of stuff in the channel, but they’re going.”

“Nice.” Dar nodded “Yeah, that’s great news, Lou. Thanks for letting me know.” She said. “How’s it going beside that? I see they cleared the course.”

Lou swung sideways in his cart and leaned his elbow on the steering wheel. He was dressed in a cotton polo shirt already discolored with sweat stains and khaki golf shorts. “Not so bad. You really helped us out fixing that system, I gotta tell ya.” He said. “Sorry I wasn’t appreciative the other day on it, there was just so much stuff going on.”

“No problem.” Dar half smiled. “Glad it worked out, and this thing too.” She indicated the adapter. “Win win, you got these things installed.”

Lou grinned. “You betcha.” He nodded vigorously. “That new camera system is a lot better, and the cams are great, hi def and all that. Is that what you’re doing? Putting that thing in there and connecting up to the club?”

Dar nodded. “Closest one to the house.” She said, casually. “I think, right?” She asked.

Lou paused thoughtfully, and eyed her.

“Y’know, I can hack in and find out for myself.” Dar smiled in a completely different way. “And given the bullshit I have to take from the other residents, might turn out messy for everyone.” She warned. “Except me.”

“No no!” Lou waved his hands at her. “I was just trying to think about where they are. Honest, they weren’t that stupid, you know? Like most of the residents have lawyers on retainer they got nothing to do but file suit about stuff like that.”

Dar chuckled. “I wouldn’t bother with a lawyer.”

“No, listen.” Lou got up and came over to the wall. “You’re not somebody I want to mess with, straight out. Even Jim didn’t want to mix it up with you, and he said we were smart to get you to help with the cams, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Dar relented, her eyes twinkling a little. “He doesn’t like me, but he knows I’m good at what I do.”

He put his closed fist, knuckles first against the wall. “They got them out on the beach, to watch the frontage, and once the wall meets up with the common area, they’re all over there.” He said, in a serious tone. “Nothing in the back, nothing facing the windows or nothing like that. Only this one here, at the door.” He inclined his head towards the half disassembled light fixture. “Okay?”

Was it true? Dar decided she would take the time, later on, to check one of the lights in the back and for now she just accepted the pitch.

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’m going to run this along the walk and up to the stairs, then in the window there. That’s my office.” She pointed. “Can I get the landscaping team not to cut it please?”

Lou had pulled a small notepad out of his pocket, and now he scribbled on it. “I’ll let em know.” He promised. “Hey, one more thing. We’re only running the ferries in daylight, you understand? It’s too dangerous at night.”

“Got it.” Dar lifted her hand and waved a goodbye, as he went back to his cart and returned the wave, then rumbled off back towards the maintenance trucks. “Probably less dangerous if we stay home.” She remarked dryly, then went back to connecting up the converter to the post.

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"Hey, it's Kerry!"

Kerry closed the door to the cottage behind her, already pleased to leave behind the muggy heat and enter the crisp, clean smelling villa. "Hey guys."

"You got sunburned." Angela observed, coming in from the kitchen with a plate of croissants. "You get breakfast? They just brought some stuff in here for us."

The staff all looked freshly scrubbed, and were dressed in their island merchandise. They seemed relaxed and happy, the two programmers seated on the floor with their laptops on their laps, pecking away.

"Boy do we have voice mails." Angela sat down at the dining table, where her laptop and a pad of paper were sitting. "Me and Cel here are trying to sort them out for you." One of the voip phones was on the table next to her, a cable running from it over to the server rack.

"I can only imagine." Kerry then realized she'd forgotten something. "Hold that thought." She unclipped the radio from her pocket and picked it up to her lips. "Dardar, you there?"

There was silence for a long moment. Then a crackle. "Go ahead Ker."

"You almost ready to join us? If you are, could you bring my laptop with yours?" Kerry asked. "I forgot to grab my backpack."

"No problem." Dar responded. "See ya in a little."

Kerry unkeyed the radio and clipped it back on. "Is there another one of those phones?"

"Two of them." Angela agreed. "We had the phones forwarded but it got crazy. Have them going back to voice mail for now."

Elvis had scrambled to his feet and was fishing in the case. "Hang on." He pulled out another phone and cable. "Where do you want to park, chief?"

"Table's fine here in the corner." Kerry took possession of the end chair, and watched as Elvis unrolled the cable and brought the phone over, it's lights already starting to cycle as he plugged it in. "I want to call Baptist, and see how Tomas is doing."

Celeste was seated next to Angela, busy with pages of notes, and she glanced up as though feeling Kerry's eyes on her and grinned briefly.

Kerry winked at her. "Okay, where do we start?" She asked. "Give me the pissed off ones first, might as well get that started and out of the way." She leaned on her elbows. "How are you all doing? Everyone sleep okay?"

"Are you kidding?" Arthur had his head down. "That freaking bed's awesome."

Elvis just nodded in agreement.

"It was nice." Celeste said, after clearing her throat a little. "And the shower's really nice too."

"We lucked out." Arthur concluded. "Like, seriously. I was watching the news before and there is no doubt we are here and sitting super pretty." He finished typing something and then studied the results. "Okay I just checked that back in. Dar's gotta look at it."

He looked over his shoulder at Kerry. "The Fed's want to get their mittens on her." He said. "That guy, Scott? He even sent us emails all frantic."

"Well, he'll have to wait another half hour." Kerry said. "I can hardly wait to see all the exclamation points in my inbox."

"Pooh." Elvis resumed his seat. "The guys upstate sent us some pictures of their rig up there. Pretty nice." He said. "We all going to go up to Melbourne? I have a couple of cousins near there."

"Maybe." Kerry said. "Colleen was looking for space."

"How far is that from Disney World?" Arthur asked. "Someone said like an hour?" He looked around at Kerry. "That might be cool."

"Hm. I like Disney World." Kerry admitted. "How would your dad react to you moving?"

Arthur laughed. "He's wanted me to move out forever. But he and mom would move to Cocoa. They're like from the nineteen fifties space world anyway."

Kerry got up. "Okay let me get some coffee before I start calling." She went into the kitchen and found a large coffee dispenser, like one you'd find in a convention, and a huge basket full of snacks. With a slight smile, she fished amongst them and found a granola bar, sliding it into her pocket before she retrieved a heavy porcelain coffee mug.

She took the coffee back to the table and picked up the receiver, checking her relatively useless cell phone for the number to the hospital.

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Dar closed the door to the condo and went down the stairs with Chino in close attendance. It was even hazier out now, and the air had so much moisture in it she almost felt like she was in a steam bath. But at least there was a breeze coming off the water, and as she started walking, it cooled down a bit.

She'd swapped her werewolf shirt out for a navy sleeveless tee with their company logo on the back in steel gray, and traded a pocketful of hand tools for the backpack on her back that had both her laptop in it and Kerry's.

At the edge of the drive way she paused, then looked up at the sky. Then she retreated back down the slope into their parking area and put the backpack in the back of her truck, holding the door so Chino could jump in after it. "G'wan girl."

She got behind the wheel and started the engine, letting it idle for a moment as it hesitated a bit. A few feeds of gas later it steadied, and she put it into reverse and backed out.

The maintenance trucks were gone, and the pumping rig had been pulled out and set alongside the road, it's motor turned off. There were three SUVs camped in front of the next residential entry though, and as she put the truck into gear to move forward, five or six khaki clothed men moved towards them along with a short, dark haired man in a bush hat and jeans.

He was young and lithely built and had a slightly aggressive walk, and one of the men walking with him opened the door to one of the SUV's in a respectful gesture. He paused before getting into the car, gesturing with a sharp, impatient motion towards the gate.

A young woman, carrying a briefcase and a raincoat over her arm hastened from the opening and crossed to the car. She had curly red hair and glasses, and she circled the SUV to get in on the other side.

"What do you think, Chi? That Mister Helicopter?" Dar commented, as she accelerated past them. "Seems like a jackass that might land a helicopter on putting green."

"Growf." Chino was seated behind her, looking out the window.

"Yeah, I think so too." Dar maneuvered the truck around the SUV's, and headed off towards the club, while the group of them went off in the other direction, towards the ferry ramp. "Well, good riddance for now anyway." She got back on the road proper and continued around the bend.

Landscaping crews were hard at work on either side, dragging debris off to flatbed carts and Dar lifted a hand off the wheel and waved at them, then she slowed and rolled down the window as she came even with the supervisor. "Hola, Jorge."

"Buenas Dias, Senora Dar." The man came over, greeting her with a relaxed smile. "¿Todo está bien con tu casa?"

"Si." She nodded. "Hay un cable que atraviesa el patio delantero. Intenta no cortarlo?" Lou or no Lou, it never hurt to do something yourself, and no telling when the security chief would remember to take the pad out of his pocket and recall her ask.

“¡No hay problema!” He reassured her. “¿Ves a tu nuevo vecino? Del Gobierno.” He cast a skeptical eye past her, down the road, then he touched both fingertips under his eyes, and then pointed them back towards the entrance to the condos.”

“Yeah, got it.” Dar winked. “Glad you all made it through all right. Let me know if you need anything.”

Jorge smiled at her. “Have a nice day, Ms. Dar. We will watch for your cable.” He backed away and went back to the crew, who had paused to lean on their long handled tools and she rolled up the window and drove on.

She spotted the outline of their golf cart near the front entrance of the mansion and she detoured over to park next to it, seeing her parents standing on the steps talking to a couple of other residents. “Hang out here, Chi.” She rolled the back window open and got out. “Keep an eye on the car, okay?”

Chino stuck her head out of the window and sniffed the air, then put her chin down on the window sill and watched Dar walk along the green and brown stained walkway towards the steps.

The large building had fared well. It’s windows had been covered during the storm, and the outside of the mustard colored facade had only scuffs and marks on it from flying debris. It was built out of stone, and though she could see the mark where the storm surge had rolled over it, there wasn’t much obvious visible damage.

It was built up on a small rise, it’s ocean frontage sloping down to the beach, and on this side, steps that went down to ground level raised the main entrance up and concrete channels on either side took rainwater off into the island’s drainage system.

It was a three story building and though a completely different style it reminded her suddenly of the Hunter house they’d sheltered in the previous night.

Andy and Ceci had spotted her and they were half turned, waiting for her to climb up the steps to where they were standing. Dar recognized the two men standing next to them as two of her less annoying neighbors. “Good morning.” She greeted them all, as she reached the top step.

“More rain coming.” Andy remarked. “Ahm gonna go put the tarps up and start the pumps on them boats.”

“Thanks.” Dar said. “Hey Bob, Rene.”

“Morning.” The two other residents nodded amiably. “How’s it going?” Rene asked.

“Ramps up.” Dar said, briefly. “Daylight runs only.”

“Hot damn.” Ceci remarked. “I wanted to go run some dead traffic lights and watch Miami Beach try to handle four way stops.”

“Hey that’s great news.” Rene looked surprised. “They told us it wouldn’t be until dinnertime, didn’t they Bob?”

Bob looked annoyed. “Bastards.” He grunted and shook his head. “I knew that ass hat was lying. Probably getting paid on the side to reserve space on the ferry.” He glanced behind them at the door to the mansion. “Everyone wants off.”

“Yeah not all of us have a boat docked.” Rene said. “Like you all do.”

Bob eased from between them and headed for the steps. “I’m going to grab my car. See what the office looks like.”

“Wait up.” Rene followed him. “Thanks Dar!” He called over his shoulder. “Man I was wondering what I was going to do the rest of the day. I’m bored crazy watching the news.”

“No problem.” Dar watched them go, then turned to her parents. “Anything new here? I’m heading over to the cottage.”

Andy had his arms folded. “That is some good news there Dardar.” He said. “Want you to swap buggies? Ah’ll drop on over to the shop.” He said. “For that word gets out and we got a big old line waiting.”

“I’m game.” Ceci agreed. “Lets get out of here before the story spreads around that you hacked the ramp to get it working.” She eyed her daughter. “You didn’t, did you?” She asked, after a brief pause.

"No." Dar fished the keys to the truck out of her pocket and offered them, taking the fob for the cart in return. "I bumped into Lou. He told me." She said. "Let me get my backpack and the dog from the truck." She added. "Anything going on in there?"

"Usual griping." Ceci led the way down the steps. "Though what the hell people have to gripe about on this island I can't fathom. No one out here should be bitching about anything. Did you see West Miami the news?"

"I saw."

"Everyone's whining they can't get cable television here, and no phones." Ceci said. "Oh and they're all pissed off at whatshisface your satellite guy because it's slow."

Dar rolled her eyes, as they reached the truck and she opened the back door. "C'mon, Chi." She grabbed the backpack and hoisted it over one shoulder as Chino jumped down, tail waving. "Glad I went through all that effort."

"Well, he charged them like five hundred bucks apiece for it, kid." Ceci informed her. "And I saw someone trying to use it. They got a point."

"He oversold the bandwidth he claimed he had." Dar concluded. "Moron. But what are they trying to use it for? It worked fine for mail."

"Streaming video I think. Some program on HBO." Ceci said promptly. "And one of them wanted to live stream their kids quinces to some relatives in Jersey."

Dar paused in mid motion and tilted her sunglasses down, exposing her blue eyes and sharply raised eyebrows.

"No, huh?" Her mother smiled. "Yeah, I recognize that look." She lifted a hand and went around the other side of the truck to get into the passenger seat. "Have fun, and good luck. We'll stop by the beach club and bring the gang some supplies."

"Lord." Andy sighed and shook his head. "You heard yet from that lawyer?"

"Not yet." Dar pushed her sunglasses back into place. "Let me go see if that's in my inbox. Let us know if they need anything out there dad."

"Ah will do that."

Chino was already in the back of the golf cart waiting for her, and Dar got in the front, turning the cart around and heading along the road towards the path that would take her between the mansion and the club, and the cottages they used as high priced hotel rooms.

She passed by the oceanfront side of the mansion and turned down cobblestone lined accessway beside it, carefully avoiding a peacock and then went between the buildings.

"Growf!" Chino barked at the peacock, who turned and spread his tail, shaking it at her.

"Sh." Dar remonstrated the dog. "Don't make it start screaming. That's all I need." She sent the cart into the grass around the animal as it shook it's feathers again, clicking it's beak in a triumphant sort of way.

"Growwwffr." Chino rumbled softly.

"Stop." Dar muttered. Pulling around the back of the cottage she saw the satellite rig, it's dish extended and pointed towards the horizon and from behind the partially opened double doors to the van she could hear loud voices.

She strode towards the door as Chino scrambled to follow her, hiking boots crunching on the gravel outside .

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Kerry put the phone receiver down and scribbled a note on her pad. "That's the most urgent of the non locals." She said. "Where's my, where's my, where's my."

"At least the support desk is up." Angela commented. "Nobody's got nothing to say about that."

"No, that was a good call to move them upstate." Kerry checked the list she had in one hand and looked back and forth from the pad. "Damn I'm glad we hadn't taken on any twenty four seven yet though."

The other phone rang, and Angela picked it up. "Roberts Automation, good morning. How can I help you?" She listened, then started to write on her pad. "That's right. Okay."

Kerry picked up her phone and dialed a number. After a minute, it was picked up. "Hey Col."

"Oh my god!"

Kerry blinked and stared at the phone. "Colleen?"

"You are all back up? It's back?" Colleen asked. "You're on the inside line! And holy Mary the mail's back up!"

Kerry glanced around the cottage. "Well, no." She demurred. "It's kinda complicated. So how's it going up there? We're still bunked out over here on the island but we've got some comms up on satellite."

"Well, we're surviving." Colleen said. "I was able to talk to the landlords here in this co-op, and they've got some space they can offer us, but if you're that close to getting things back up there..."

"No no no." Kerry said. "So, right now me, Angela, Arthur and Elvis, and Celeste are here in one of the billion dollar rental cottages near the Vanderbilt Mansion with a rack of servers and cables everywhere."

Colleen digested this. "Do I know Celeste?"

"Sort of. You do since she was ILS security." Kerry soldiered on. "Jerry from the day door is back at the office."

"Ah heh. So should I add them to the books then?" Colleen took it all in stride. "How's Maria? I heard all about you running about there and all that. You do know you ended up on CNN, right?"

"Yeah, I'll get their information and you can... what?" Kerry halted. "Wait, what?" She repeated. "Okay hold on first things first – yes, Maria and Mayte are fine, and Tomas is in Baptist. He's got a broken leg and broken ribs, but he's stable."

Colleen was chuckling.

"That's not really funny, Col."

"No, it's not, and I'm glad they're fine, but it was a great surprise to us all to look up on the television and see you yelling at the National Guard without your shirt on, I'll tell you that." Colleen told her. "I guess you didn't see the cameraman there at the army headquarters."

Kerry was silent for a long moment, casting her mind back. "Totally didn't." She admitted. "I was focused on getting help for Tomas." She sighed. "No idea there was a camera crew around."

"Oh for sure." Colleen agreed. "And to give em credit, it took a couple hours before I got the call after they figured out who you were." She said. "One of the army guys there was interviewed, and spilled your name. Probably a fine thing you were out of pocket but we got some great press out of it."

"Jesus." Kerry rubbed her temples with one hand. "We don't have cable out here." She explained. "Only local feed and it's just weather." She looked up and across at Angela who was still taking notes on the phone. "Angela is picking up the office admin line but I don't think anyone's found it yet who isn't a customer."

"Good thing." Colleen said. "We can keep it like that. I don't mind lying my behind off all the day long here. I can't answer any of those broken PC calls at any rate." She said. "But would be a nice thing to have some of the technobobs up here for interested parties to talk to."

"Good idea." Kerry decided. "Let me get hold of Mark and send him and his wife up there. I owe it to him after yesterday. If he can grab some of the business analysts that showed up at the office they can be a lot more useful there than here."

"Perfection, my dear. We'll hold the fort until then, and watch out for more of your adventures on international news." Colleen teased. "And don't forget to send me the info for our new staff, and I'm glad I can now get hold of you all when needed."

"Thanks Col. Talk to you soon." Kerry put the phone down. "Ho boy. Got a feeling theres not going to be enough coffee for this day."

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"This is a mess." Ceci observed, as they turned out of the ferry terminal and onto MacArthur causeway. "That whole road is gone, Andy."

"Yeap." Her husband agreed, glancing to the right as they moved past one of the man made islands in the middle of the bay that held a dense cluster of very expensive homes.

There was a single road that connected the causeway to it, and that road was, as Ceci noted, missing an entire center span rendering it impassible. "What do you think they're doing over there? Do they have generators like Poshtown does?"

"Done took them people out of these here." Andy pronounced, as they went past Palm and Hibiscus Islands, whose inbound road was still intact, and guarded by several National Guard trucks with a tent shelter set up, it's sides flapping in the moist breeze. "Ain't nobody out there. Heard that on the radio."

Radio meant the short wave radio on the condo's porch, with it's antenna extended up the wall in defiance, she was sure, of multiple resident covenants but it provided a base station for Andy to listen in on the local military and marine channels, and was tied to the handheld radio he had clipped to his belt.

Where had he gotten them? They all knew better than to ask. It was comforting to be able to use them to communicate and there was no doubt it made them a lot more looped in to what was officially going on than anyone else on that island.

Both the security and marine departments knew about it. Andy's callsign was Frogman. Ceci found it delightfully hilarious in a time when everyone really needed a good chuckle now and again.

There was a smaller rig at the office. "Got to show them folks how to use that rig." Andy commented, as though reading her mind. "Tried calling them fore we left ain't nobody answered."

"Well, they could be sleeping." Ceci leaned her elbow on the padded rest on the door and watched the scenery roll by. "Goddess, Andy – look at those buildings." She murmured. "How the heck did everything out on that island stay intact?"

"Smart folks." He said. "Kept everything low, angled to the wind." He glanced up at the approaching skyline. "Them big old things ain't nothing but sails to the wind. All kinds of grab to it." He pointed at one of the tall buildings, twisted sideways visibly in it's structure, with windows blown out and it's lower deck, formerly parking, collapsed into the bay. "See that there?"

"I see ten thousand insurance adjusters running as fast as they can towards California is what I see."

Andy chuckled. They came to the end of the causeway, which though the walls on either side had large gaps, was still relatively intact, but the intersection past it was now blocked by a National Guard roadblock preventing access. "All right now."

"Much easier with a boat." Ceci observed, as they pulled up to the blockade and Andy rolled down his window. "Though I did see some police boats chasing dorks on waverunners this morning on the local news."

"Kids." Andy leaned out the window. "'Lo there."

Two guardsmen and one guardwoman had come over to them. They apparently didn't expect trouble to be coming from the direction they'd arrived from, as they seemed relaxed and Ceci noted they were unarmed. One of them had a cup in his hand, and another was wiping some crumbs from his lips.

Interrupted breakfast, she suspected. She smiled back at the guard who glanced inside the cab. He was blond and freckled, and she suspected not from around these parts. "Hi."

"Were you on Miami Beach, sir?" One of the guards asked Andy. "They're trying to keep everyone off there. It's dangerous and there's a lot of damage."

"Nope." Andy said. "We got a place out on that big island on the end there." He vaguely indicated behind him. "Got them their ferry working."

"Oh!" The guard looked behind them. "Oh! They didn't tell us it was open. I've had like six or seven people try to get down here to the terminal already this morning. All het up." He said. "I'll let my CO know.. but.. do you have ID with that address for when you come back? They're keeping this whole thing restricted."

The woman guard nodded. "They have us on all the causeways, all the way up the coast."

"Well." Ceci said. "The plates on this truck have an address out there." She allowed. "We live on a boat." She indicated herself, and then Andrew. "And while we're going to live there, we haven't changed our addresses yet on our driver's license."

"Ah got this." Andy pulled a card from his spare, worn, leather billfold and handed it over.

The guardsman looked at it, then looked at Andy, then looked back at the card. Then he handed it back. "That'll likely do, sir." He grinned briefly. "I think I heard your name mentioned last night. You were doing some transport to and from the coastie base."

"Ah did some of that." Andy allowed. "Now you all want to let us on out of here? We got us an office down the road to get over to."

The guardsman motioned to the men near the barricade pumping his fist at them. "No problem sir, ma'am." He took a step back. "Just be careful if you're going south. They had some trouble down there last night."

Andy closed the truck window. "Ah do not like the sound of that."

Ceci gave the guards a little wave as they moved past. "Depends on if we suffered from the trouble or caused it." She remarked in a mild tone. "Could go either way, really."

"Lord."

"At least we know our child wasn't involved." She patted his arm. "Cause we both know what side of that we'd be on then."

"Wall. It was all quiet when we left there." Andy said. "Probly wasn't nothing to do with us anyhow."

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Dar came around the van to find her two hapless co conspirators standing with their backs to the doors, and three men facing them all with angry faces and accusatory finger shaking in progress.

Why were people so jackass? Dar wondered. She removed her sunglasses and came up next to the two satellite vendors, sliding the glasses by their earpiece into the front of her shorts pocket. "Hey."

The voices had cut off at her presence. Chino sat down next to Dar's leg, sniffing suspiciously.

"Oh, hey." John seemed, if anything, glad to see her. Or glad for an interruption, at any rate. "How are ya?" He glanced at the three fuming men. "Maybe she can help us with this problem."

Dar sighed. "If I had a buck for every time someone said that to me I'd own this damn island." She paused, then waited for someone to enlighten her. After a long silent moment, she looked at John. "So what's the problem? Aside from the fact you've got a lot of people using a little bandwidth."

"So you know about this?" One of the men asked.

“Yes.” Dar responded quickly. “Look. I’m not getting into the physics of this with you all. What is it exactly that you’re having a problem doing and I can just tell you if there’s anything we can do to fix it, or if you’re just going to have to wait for some other connection.”

Alex had disappeared into the back of the van and now he came out with an armful of folding stools, that he flipped open and set down on the gravel. “Here, sit down.” He perched himself on the edge of the van floor. “Take a load off.”

The three men and Dar took a seat, the nearest man wiping his forearm across his sweat covered head. “Okay.” He had a vaguely midwestern accent, and he looked like he’d spent some time in the boxing ring, from the crooked profile of his nose and his bull neck.

The two other men were underlings. They sat there and just watched their boss.

“What do you mean, some other connection?” The boss asked, diverted. “Like what?”

Dar cleared her throat. “Reason why there’s no TV and no internet on this island is that the other end of the long cable coming out here is connected to something that’s got no power.” She said. “You want a definitive end to the dealing with satellite issue? Fix that. Go waste your energy and money or influence or whatever you got in getting AT and T to get their asses back up.”

The man looked thoughtfully at her.

“Everyone is using the only route they got to get anything out anywhere, a satellite.” Dar went on. “We’re using this, but everyone on the damn mainland needs all the space up there and that includes the military and the government and guess who gets priority? They do.” She said. “And before you ask, no it can’t get any faster. Every single bit’s being sent up to space and back.”

John was just nodding along like the dog in the back of a car, on a long highway ride.

“It’s a freaking miracle this thing’s working at all.” Dar concluded. “So I’m gonna ask you again, what is your particular problem?”

“I’m a GC. Your governor’s an old family friend.” The man said, shortly. “I’ve got probably a million people over there who need repairs and emergency construction on their houses, their roofs, the sidewalks.. and I can’t do shit about it, because I got no way to get pictures or orders for material or anything else outta here.”

“Hm.” Dar grunted thoughtfully.

“Can’t send pictures. Been trying to send one all morning.” The man continued. “I thought by paying this guy, I’d get what I needed.”

“David Barrow.” He added, finally, extending a hand out to her. “And you are?”

Dar reached over to meet his hand with her own. “Dar Roberts.” She provided. “Okay. How much stuff do you need to send up right now?” She released his hand. “You got it on a laptop? Or a drive? Bring it here.” She instructed. “Someone’s gotta do something. It’s a crap show out there. I saw the news.”

“How much stuff? No idea.” He turned to his minions. “You know that? How much?” He asked. “These are my IT guys.” He explained as an aside. “I don’t do that. I don’t touch those computers. I just yell and pay the bills.”

“It’s a lot.” The shorter of the two said. “Not sure how much.”

“It’s not on a drive. It’s in a big database.” The second offered. “So the guys in the field they get the reports together and we have to send them to our processor in Canada. They place orders.” He watched Dar warily. “We got a server back at the house. We got it here this morning.”

“I’ve got a server in that cottage.” Dar responded amiably. “Lucky for me all I’m sending up is the equivalent of text files. Just code.” She stood up. “Find out how much and get the IP of the server you’re using and bring it here to me and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Can you do something?” David asked, his tone skeptical.

Dar looked briefly at him. "Bring it or don't. Your choice." She patted her leg. "C'mon, Chi." She turned and went around the van, going to the double doors that led to the living room of the cottage and opening them to slip inside.

"Well?" David looked at them. "This worth my time?" He asked. "Or should I just fly one of you guys out to Atlanta like we talked about?"

The two IT techs looked at each other, then at him. "Yeah. It's worth your time." The taller one said. "Cause I know who that is." He glanced aside. "You do too, Eddy."

"I sure do." The shorter one nodded. "Lets go see if we can export that send file and get it on a drive." He stood up. "Or maybe...get the transfer site config and get back here. Maybe we can do an IP to IP transfer if she'll go for that."

David regarded them. "Do I know who this is?" He asked, aggrievedly.

"No. It's an IT thing." The shorter one said. "It's okay boss. It's legit." He pulled at the neck of his shirt, blinking some sweat out of his eyes. "You going to stay here? Can we take the cart back?" They both started moving towards the path, looking over their shoulder at him in question.

"Go on." David pointed at the cart. "Make it fast."

"We will."

The two techs disappeared, leaving David by the van with John and Alex. He looked at them. "So what's the deal?" He asked. "You know whoever that was? What's her story?"

"We don't know." John said. "Just someone they told us to talk to here after the storm. They said she could help us get the satellite up."

"She did." Alex confirmed. "She figured out how to take stuff from this van and make it go to all the houses, and got some gear that made it all work." He half turned and looked towards the cottage. "They got a whole IT rig in there with some guys working on it."

"Yeah?" David looked at the door with interest. "Let me go see if I can find out what the deal is with them." He winked at them. "Might be useful for the governor, y'know?" He made his way around the van and went towards the door.

John stuck his hands in his pockets. "He's gonna regret doing that."

"Hell, at least he's not here yelling at us." Alex fanned himself with a brochure. "Tell you what. Lets go hide in that villa they gave us, and just put a sign here saying to go ask her for help."

John turned and stared at him.

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Kerry looked up as the door opened, her ears picking up the ticky tacky noise of dog toenails on the ceramic tiles outside. "Hey hon." She greeted Dar, who entered behind Chino and closed the door. Mocha came rambling out of one of the bedrooms and greeted them.

"How's it going here?" Dar came over and took the chair next to her. "Mom and Dad took the truck over to the office."

Kerry indicated the pad she'd been writing on. "Those are the top five in order of urgency." She said. "You need to call the Pentagon, by the way."

"Do I?" Dar had swung the backpack off her back and was fishing inside it, pulling out both laptops and putting them on the table. "Aren't they swimming in Bob? What do they want me to do about that? Reroute him via Alaska?"

The sound of laughter made Dar looked up, with a faintly puzzled expression.

"Don't give them any ideas." Kerry pulled her machine over. "Got a couple more ethernet cables, El?"

"Scott from Colorado sent me like twelve emails." Elvis was rooting inside the crate. "Some thing you sent him before the storm?"

Dar looked up from plugging in the power for both laptops. "Latest build of the DOD rig." She said. "Is that what the Pentagon wants to talk to me about?" She asked. "They ran it in sim that day before. They were talking about me coming up to demo it."

"Again?" Kerry was still scribbling notes. "Hon, you promised John Deland his checkpoint tomorrow." She looked up at her partner. "He says he knows, he's seen the news, and he doesn't care. Either we make the deadline or he's canceling."

Dar clicked the network cable Elvis was holding out to her into place. "Fuck him."

"Totally not interested." Kerry responded calmly. "You're my one and only." She grinned briefly at the chuckles in the room. "Anyway you should at least call him and give him some kind of status."

"Wait." Dar paused and straightened up. "Is tomorrow Friday?"

"Today is Thursday, so yes." Kerry got up. "Let me get you some coffee." She said. "Restart your brain." She got out of the way of Elvis running a final cable and went back into the kitchen to retrieve a second ceramic cup and fixed coffee to Dar's preference.

Behind her, she could hear the laptops booting up and after the previous day's extreme efforts she found herself glad to contemplate nothing crazier than wading through days of email.

She was a little sore, the sunburn a little uncomfortable under her light cotton clothes, her shoulders stiff from all the shenanigans on the airboat. "Hey Dar?" She called out. "I ended up on CNN again."

She carried the cup back into the main room, now full of keyboard clicking as the two programmers got down to work and Angela making notes into her laptop. Dar was looking at her screen and now she glanced up at Kerry over the top of it. "You hear me?"

"I heard." Dar turned her screen around so Kerry could see it. "You certainly did." She pointed at the picture displayed on it as large as the screen was. "Nice."

"Oh my god." Kerry set the cup down and stared at the screen. "Local business owner rescues staff. Jesus." She reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "What the hell."

Dar took a sip of her coffee. "Well, that's what happened, Ker." She remarked mildly. "They interviewed Mayte." She added. "Sit down and read it. Let me see where John's framework is." She pulled the pad and the phone Kerry had been using over.

The back door to the cottage opened, and they all looked up as David Barrow entered, blinking in relief at the air conditioning inside. He paused and looked around at them and there was a moment of silence.

Then Elvis finished something on his keyboard. "Hey Dar, I finished the modules for the State Department. I think you need to look at them though they're in the repo."

Dar picked up the phone. "Pentagon first." She said. "Buddy, if you want to sightsee, go somewhere else." She directed that at David. "We got a lot going on here."

"Who is that?" Kerry whispered.

"Governor's contractor." Dar responded. "Wants me to push some data through for him so they can start supply." She dialed the phone.

Kerry got up and went over to the newcomer. "Hi." She extended a hand. "Kerry." She waited for him to somewhat hesitantly take her hand. "What can we do to help?"

"Who are you people?"

"Long story. Want some coffee?"

\*\*

Ceci was craning her neck this way and that, looking around as they moved cautiously along the main road heading for the office. She'd seen pictures of the damage, but this was her first chance to see it in person and it nearly took her breath away. "Oh, Andy."

"Yeap."

As they approached the office, there was a block full of buildings that were now closed off with police barricades, and along one street a fire truck was parked. The smell of burning came through the air conditioning of the truck.

On the next street, a National Guard truck stood idling. "Ah do not like the looks of that." Andy commented, seeing two Humvees pull up.

"We still have a couple blocks." Ceci looked past him out the window. "Was that on fire?"

"Ah do think so."

Along the street were piled stacks of debris and turned onto its side was a beat up van, with smoke stains all up and down its dirty tan exterior. "Oh boy." Ceci muttered. "Why the hell didn't they radio us?"

Andy made a face, scrunching up his scarred lips and raising his eyebrows, with a small shake of his head. "Better get on out of here." He noted the guards turning to watch them and sped up, going through the next major intersection and then turning left onto the street the office was on.

For a moment it was nerve-racking, then they got far enough down the road to see the front of the building and its distinctive porch which seemed all intact.

Sign was intact over the front. Ceci relaxed. "Seems okay."

"Bike's gone." Andrew observed. "Either that boy took off early or they brought it back up into the office." He pulled the truck up into the parking lot in front of the office and turned off the engine, opening the door and letting in the humid, warm air.

"Let's go find out." Ceci got out and shut the door, her nose wrinkling as the smell of mold and decay came to it. She glanced to one side at the pile of dank debris. "I'm guessing there's no waste pickup?"

"Pohugh." Andy made a low, disgusted demurrer. "Saw that whole yard of them trucks up to the doors yet in water." He studied the piles of trash, surrounded by flies that were visible in the hazy mist. "Can't even burn it."

"Burning wet garbage? No please this is bad enough." Ceci regarded the office frontage. The trees around the building had shed leaves and branches, which had been dragged to the pile, and she could see scuffs against the concrete siding but otherwise the squat, old-fashioned bulwark of the square structure seemed to have taken little harm. "Compared to everything else around here, doesn't look bad."

"Trees helped." Andy said. "All of 'em up so close to the walls, and good height for it."

"Like a seawall." Ceci observed. "All the wind blew against those things and didn't hit the walls."

Andy looked at her thoughtfully. "Could be, there." He agreed. "Water came up ovah heah, but it's up a little." He pointed at the front of the building. "Edge on to it. Went right by. Took down that line of trees down that way."

Ceci could see it, and in her mind she could imagine what it must have looked like when a wall of water, frothy and dark, came through and swept over the ground, up to the level of the windows of the building. "Good thing you put those boards up."

It had been scary, out on the island, but they hadn't seen what was happening and really didn't understand the impact until it was over and they could look outside. She suspected it had been the same here, only without power, and she acknowledged a new respect for Carlos and the others who had decided to stay here.

But then, she mused, both Carlos and the team, and she and the family had done better through the storm despite where they'd been than poor Maria and Mayte had, safe inland. "Hm."

"Big old mess." Andy fell back on his favorite description. "Lets go hear what done went on."

They walked together up the green stained sidewalk, getting up to the steps before the door to the office opened a little bit and Carlos looked warily out. His face brightened immediately on seeing them, and he opened up fully, turning to call out behind him. "Hey! Cavalry's here!"

Ceci laughed in pure utter reflex. "Oh boy." She walked up the steps, as Carlos backed up and the smell of cooking bacon and green peppers floated out. "Can't wait to hear why we're being called the cavalry. The one person in the family who likes horses isn't even here."

\*\*

Mark was sitting on the picnic table outside, his arm outstretched on his knee, covered in a bandage. "We didn't know what the hell was going on." He told Andy. "After you guys left, we all crashed. Then at three am, all hell broke loose outside."

Carlos was nodding. "Sounded like fireworks on fourth of July." He said. "I thought... hey maybe they're fixing the power and those are transformers, y'know?"

"Wishful thinking." Ceci said.

"Kinda." Carlo's big, rugged face creased into an unexpected grin. "We ran the fans off the generator but man, it's hot." He turned and pointed to one corner of the inner yard. "We set up a sun shower over there. Didn't trust the water inside."

"Yeah, anyway, I hauled ass downstairs to see what the deal was." Mark said. "Hank was at the door, and Pete had just come over from the back and we could hear people running and yelling outside, and guns going off." He paused. "I mean, we know they were now, but then we had no idea."

"We had no idea." Carlos pointed at himself and Mark. "Those guys knew what it was." He indicated Pete. "They were trying to haul us back inside."

Pete glanced over with a look of mild amusement. "You kids are nuts."

Ceci was seated on the table, just listening. Along with Scott's RV, Mark's big bike was parked somewhat haphazardly, and two other cars were a little ways away next to Hank's rigged up Humvee, with it's owner sprawled asleep in the front.

"That is a big old mess." Andy concluded, but in a mild tone.

"Big one!" Carlos agreed. "Whole road out the front was full of guys with sticks and I don't know what else. Guard was chasing them, or maybe it was the cops. Too dark to see what the deal was." He had a cut on his head, and a splotch of dark crimson on his jeans. "I went out to see better."

"Good lord, boy." Andy gave him a severe stare.

"I knew he was going to say that." Carlos said to Mark. "Next thing we knew the whole crowd of whoever it was came hauling up to us wanting to get inside the building." He said. "We were not going along with that."

Ceci covered her eyes with one hand.

"Yeah that's true." Mark said. "I guess they didn't know maybe who all was still in here. Hank and Pete'd put the trucks and my bike in the back." He explained. "Maybe they thought it was empty and they could hide inside."

"Just a bunch of jerks." Carlos said. "Anyway Hank started shooting off his revolver and then stuff got wild." He said. "He was just trying to scare them back, y'know? Keep them out of the hallway until we could get back inside and close the door."

"It got a littttle crazy." Pete admitted. "There were about two dozen perps and a dozen who knows what chasin em."

"Wow." Ceci muttered.

"So then the Guard caught up to everything and came over and started putting people on the ground." Mark said. "And they grabbed us, and then we got lucky because the guy in charge of the Guard was one of the guys that was at the Doral place when I was in there messing with their servers."

"So in all that he recognized you?" Ceci asked, her voice raising. "Seriously in the dark and all that?"

Mark shrugged a little, with a half raised hand. "He said he did! They had me up against the wall of the building then one of them said to hold on, he knew who I was."

Pete was grilling the bacon, and had a pan of scrambled eggs and peppers heating up. He glanced over at the table. "It was nuts between the cops yelling in Spanish and the Guard cursing and the perps crying like babies." He said. "So the Guard came in after they dragged all the perps off and turns out they know you, Big A."

Andy looked surprised. "Me?"

"They do." Carlos said, nodding. "They're from Alabama, or somewhere around there. They were the guys who we bumped into out west. Kerry made friends with them."

"Oh boy." Ceci muttered. "This is getting weirder by the minute."

Andy frowned, perplexed. "Ah don't know me any Guard from Alabama." He said. "And ah aint been back there for more'n a minute for a damn long time."

All the chatter had woken Hank up and he peered over at them, opening one eye. "Knows the family, Andy." He said. "Some of them are from those parts." He closed his eye again and pulled his cap down over his face, wriggling a little to get a bit more comfortable.

"Wall." Andy's brows creased. "That could be."

"So what were the guys who they were chasing doing?" Ceci redirected the conversation. "I mean, just running around shooting off guns in the rain or what?"

"Building down the road – they broke into it." Carlos said. "They started up a fire to make some.. I don't know to cook or something and it caught the building on fire. They tried to put it out but it just got out of control and then someone saw it and called the cops."

"And the cops called the Guard, I guess." Mark concluded. "Anyway, it all got settled down and we went back to sleep. Figured we'd let you all know this morning after breakfast, but here you are."

"Here we are." Ceci agreed. "And we've got supplies in the back of the truck but honestly, people, I think we need to get you all out of here. This is not good."

Carlos shrugged a little. "My apartment's trashed." He said. "It's way more put together here."

"So's our house." Mark agreed. "It was actually not that bad sleeping on the couch in my office last night." He went over and accepted a paper plate with some eggs and bacon on it. "Thanks Pete."

"He's got a point." Pete remarked. "Nothing around here's worth shit. At least here it's close enough to the water to get a breeze and there's entertainment around." He winked at them. "Haven't had this much fun since I mustered out."

Ceci glanced aside at her husband, who was listening thoughtfully, head slightly tilted to one side. The rest of the occupants of the office were emerging, drawn by the smell of the bacon and the sunshine. She recognized now five or six new faces, staff, who waved at her in greeting.

She waved back. "Well." She conceded. "It's a sturdy building."

"It is." Carlos agreed. "That's what the Guard was saying when they were around, you know? Like a fort."

"Lord." Andy stood up. "Let me go get on the radio." He headed for the inner door.

"That load in the truck all for us?" Carlos asked. "We'll go hump it in."

"It is." Ceci said. "Most of it's camping gear. There's a.. well, it seemed like a whole squad of Coast Guard out by us and Andy stopped by there and loaded up before we came over."

"Sweet." Carlos looked up as his two lifter buddies came over, with three more Ceci didn't recognize. "Hey guys."

"Morning." The cute, curly haired one said. "So Joe, from the gym said we could go in there, but it's skanky." He said. "Could we move the plates and stuff over here? Set up in the corner there?" He pointed at one corner of the open space, where a concrete pad lined up along the short side of the building. "Better to sweat in the sun than smell that carpet."

Carlos eyed Ceci. "Think the bosses would go for that?"

"Sure." Ceci said, without hesitation. "The more big friendly guys like you around, the better." She got up, dusting her hands off. "In fact, if you unload the truck, I'll drive it over and you can use it to move stuff."

"Hot damn." The cute, curly haired man said. "Gonna be a great day!"

\*\*

Kerry sat down at the small, linen covered kitchen table with David, intent on giving Dar the time to deal with her current slate of questions before loading her up with more.

Dar was brilliant. But she was also single tracked and having multiple things pull her in different directions didn't end with good results and so Kerry tried to draw off the distractions to let her focus. "So." She said, as David sipped appreciatively at the excellent coffee in it's ceramic cup. "What can I tell you about us?"

He relaxed a little. "Glad to be out of that heat." He said. "Jesus it's hot here."

"It is. Took me a while to get used to it." Kerry accepted the redirection. "I'm from Michigan." She added, casually.

"You sound like it." He said. "My families all in Chicago." He said. "Anyway. So my guys are going to bring over the stuff we need to get sent to the main office. You think that'll happen?"

Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "Did Dar say it would?"

He shrugged a little. "Said she'd try. What does that mean?"

"It means she'll try." Kerry said, dryly. "But generally Dar does achieve whatever it is she's trying to do so if she agreed to try it, it'll probably be fine." She smiled at him. "If it was just not going to happen she'd have just told you that."

David nodded thoughtfully. "So who are you people?" He reverted to his original question.

"Who are we people. Well." Kerry settled back in her seat. "We are, as in, Dar and I are the owners of Roberts Automation, and that's an IT services company." She paused. "Which you I am sure have never heard of."

"Truth."

"We do custom services for companies. Strictly B2B. So if you're a company who wants to do something like roll out new technology, you call us, and we evaluate what your choices are, recommend one, and help you roll it out. Or.." She cleared her throat a little. "Or if you have a need for custom software, to do something that you cant get off the shelf, and you need it fast and need it to work..."

"Not like the tax website."

Kerry chuckled. "If you need it to work, we do that as well."

"But for small stuff. Because you just got what... six people here?" David was now watching her with a shrewd expression.

"We have actually around a hundred and fifty employees." Kerry smiled at his surprised look. "I sent our support groups upstate so they could keep answering phones for us and our accounting director is there too. But Dar and I live here." She indicated vaguely the island around them. "So we brought our main server stack and some of our programmers over to keep working since we have power here."

"That rig in there."

"That rig in there." Kerry confirmed. "We loaded it onto the deck of our boat and brought it over a few days ago." David looked at her, his head dropping forward a little bit, one eyebrow lifting up.

Kerry smiled at him, lifting her coffee cup in a mock toast. "We sell being a non traditional option. Everyone can do IT, you know? We try to assume whatever we're asked is out of the box." She said. "And yes, we do a lot of work with smaller companies but we also have government contracts both local and federal."

"Interesting." He mused. "My company's kinda like that too. I don't build buildings or houses or stuff like that. We come in when they need stuff fast, and no screwing around. You know?" He eyed Kerry. "Get around the ... sometimes the government's way of doing things takes too much time."

Kerry did understand. "My parents worked in the federal government."

"So you get it." David now smiled more confidently at her. "So anyway, I got a call to come down here and get things moving to help the guard and everyone put on temporary roofs and fix things. You know."

"Got it."

"I didn't figure on not being able to talk to nobody, or send emails." David said. "Like I said outside, I don't get into all the IT stuff. I just give orders to people. I don't like the IT stuff. I don't understand it. I thought we'd at least be able to use the.. what do you call them? The cell phone things."

"Mifi's." Kerry supplied. "Yeah, we didn't expect it all either. Don't feel bad. We had satellite phones.. " She held up hers. "But you know, they don't really work well."

"No ma'am they don't. The governor's guy I'm here with tossed his in the water this morning."

"They don't. It's true. We have a marine radio relay set up to talk to our office, but Dar was really glad when those guys with the satellite came to her because at least it meant we could do some small, basic things." Kerry said. "But with everyone using it, it's kinda pitiful."

He leaned on the table and regarded her. "So what's she going to do for us?"

"Mm.." Kerry pondered the question. "Probably prioritize the traffic. Dedicate some bandwidth to you to get the data through."

He looked blankly at her.

"Grease the skids for you." Kerry translated, with a small grin. "VIP pass."

Immediately, his expression cleared. "Now that I understand." He leaned back and took a long swallow of the coffee. "Now you're talking my language." He put the cup down. "She can do that?"

"Oh yes." Kerry said. She got up and refilled her cup, and raised her eyebrows towards his. He nodded, and she put her cup down and took his, setting it down next to the dispenser as she picked up the plate of breakfast pastries and offered him one. "So, where are you guys starting in all that?"

He took a pastry. "Mayor's neighborhood." He took a bite. "Got someplace you're interested in?"

Kerry sat back down. "I might have." She put the plate down on the table. "Let me find out what it's going to take to get a real connection back up here, and maybe we can do a little business together."

He smiled at her, an expression of calculating predation and startling transparency on his face. "Governor's gonna really appreciate that."

Governor's going to probably have to get in line. Kerry thought, with an internal, wry sigh. "Here we go again."

\*\*

Dar shifted her position on the chair, glancing outside the window at the breeze lashing the storm battered plants outside. "Scott." She took a breath to continue the argument. "Listen..."

"No no no no.. I know what you're going to say." Scott cut her off. "We'll send a jet for you. Ever take a ride in a fighter?"

"Yes."

"It's great, you'll love.. wait. What?"

"Long story." Dar said. "What's the rush, Scott? What can't wait until after the weekend? By then things should be a little better here..." She looked around the cottage, briefly distracted by yet more mail coming into her inbox. "We've been working on this for six months."

"I can't talk to you about why it's a rush." Scott said. "I mean, like, I can't. You know?" He said. "But honest to crapazoid, it is. You gotta come up here, and show the big guy what it does, and let us go beta on it."

"Haven't they all evacuated? All up in the hills somewhere? Scott, no one's even in DC this week."

"You need to come here." He said. "Here to Cheyanne." He paused. "So, we're going to send a jet for you. What time is it, ten? Can you get to the airport by noon?"

Something on the screen caught Dar's attention and she swiveled in the chair she was sitting in, reaching over to open a page. "Hold on." She focused on the screen, reading rapidly for a long minute, aware of Scott's breathing on the other end of the phone. "Okay..." She murmured. "What the..."

"Okay? Great. See you here by two, our time. Thanks Dar. You won't regret it, I swear to you. This is gonna be big." Scott hung up the phone as Dar was drawing in her breath to answer him, leaving her with nothing but a slightly digital sounding dial tone in her ear.

"Wait." She said, then stopped, her shoulders relaxing as she put the phone back into its cradle. "Shit. I didn't mean to say okay to you ya little..."

"Problems, boss?" Angela asked, from across the table. "You don't look so hot."

"Just got some unexpected news." Dar muttered. "Very unexpected." She hesitated, torn between the email on her screen and the terminal screen open behind it, cursor blinking, waiting on her input.

Kerry came back in the front door, closing it behind her. "Hey." She came over and sat down next to Dar. "What's up hon? I think I got rid of our new friend for a while." She eyed her. "You okay? You have a funny look on your face."

For an answer, Dar turned her laptop screen around so it was facing her partner, and gestured at it. "Here. While I was reading that, I committed to flying to Colorado in two hours."

Kerry's eyes slowly lifted up past the top of the laptop screen, deferring her attention from the email for a moment. "What?" She asked, in a startled tone. "Fly to Colorado? Like... as in right now?"

"Read it." Dar pointed at the screen. "It'll give me a few minutes to figure out what the hell I'm going to tell John Deland about his deadline for tomorrow."

She folded her hands and watched Kerry read, as her pale brows slowly drew together and she moved, almost unconsciously, closer to the laptop screen until she paused and looked up at Dar, her green eyes round and wide.

"Dar is this ... does this say what I think it does?" Kerry's voice rose in consternation. "Did he... the landlord signed the title to the building over to us?" She reread the email. "Is that what this says? Is he serious? Is he for real?"

"Apparently." Dar felt obscurely comforted by a reaction almost a mirror image of her own. "Doesn't have the money to fix it. He was carrying only the minimum insurance." She regarded her hands, long fingers calmly clasped. "I guess he was just over it."

"Son of an ice cream sundae." Kerry went back and read it again. "Dar, this is insane!"

"Mm." Dar nodded. "Who does that? Nobody does that." She agreed mournfully. "Except people who know us, I guess." She reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Didn't need to read that in the middle of a half dozen customers yelling at my ass."

"He's moving to Costa Rica with his boyfriend." Kerry sat back. "Holy shit."

"Now I hope that deal didn't go through. We don't have the cash to do both these places." Dar rolled her head to one side and regarded Kerry. "Though we could sell that office, I guess. With the land it's on it's worth something."

"Instead of fixing it." Kerry murmured. "But where are we going to go, Dar? We have jobs we have to do. We can't just move everyone... can we?"

Dar shrugged faintly. "We moved them there."

"That was before a hurricane blew apart most of the class A office space in three counties." Kerry reminded her. "Shit I better call Coleen and see how much space they've really got up there." She gave her head a little shake. "Son of a biscuit."

"Graham cracker."

It made Kerry smile, despite the shock that was still lifting her nape hairs. "Well, okay. That was unexpected." She turned the laptop around again to face Dar. "So, you said you have to fly to Colorado? To Cheyanne mountain?"

Dar nodded.

Kerry's brow creased again. "All at once? That's a sudden hair on fire?" She asked. "Why? What's so urgent? They know what's going on down here. We've been working that project for months."

"They won't tell me."

In the act of opening her own laptop, Kerry paused and stared at her partner. "Excuse me?"

"They won't tell me why they want me to fly there, but they're sending a plane for me. In two hours." Dar said. "So now I've got to get a ride over to the airport and hope to hell they're open and they let me in."

Kerry was still staring at her. "What the hell is going on, Dar?"

"So I guess I'll take my laptop with me and work on John's framework on the way." Dar soldiered on doggedly. "Unless they really are sending a fighter jet for me." She shook her head and pulled her laptop closer. "Can't open one of these in that back seat."

"A f..." Kerry paused.

"Yeah... told him been there done that." Dar pecked at her keyboard. "Arthur, are the modules all linked for Dect Pharma?"

"Yeah." Arthur answered from his position on the couch. "I put the new libraries up there. They said they all compiled." He shifted the laptop on his lap. "But that stuff is a little weirdo."

"A little." Dar muttered. "Where is that... there it is." She focused on the screen, fingers moving rapidly over the keys. "C'mere you.."

Kerry shut the laptop. "Okay.." She stood up. "I'll go back to the house and pack a bag for you and pick up my car so I can drive you to the airport." She said. "You stay here and get as much done for him as you can before I get back."

Dar glanced up at her. "Thanks Ker." She said. "Sorry for the chaos."

"No problem, maestro." She walked behind Dar, putting her hands on her shoulders and squeezing them. "Angela, call Colleen for me would you please?"

"Sure." Angela put pen to pad, and waited. "Whatcha want her to do?"

"Tell her to see what she can work out to house the whole company up there." Kerry said. "Tell her to think of it as picking up the whole building and moving it up there, and add in what it's going to cost to house everyone in the area until we get settled."

"You got it."

"I'll be back." The bizarre events of the last few minutes just made her shake her head, as she went around the table and to the door, picking up the golf cart fob on her way. "Lock the door when I leave. You guys don't need distractions right now."

"Gotcha!" Angela followed her. "Gonna be one of those days!"

"Already is."

\*\*

Ceci perched on the picnic table, watching the activity in the center of the complex. It was hot, and sticky, and uncomfortable, and the gym kids had all taken off their shirts as they went back and forth setting up things to their satisfaction on the far end of the space.

They were covered in sweat, but seemed happy with the results, and two of them were using wood debris they'd dragged in from the parking lot to build a rack for the bars they'd brought to sit on.

"I don't know, Andy. Is this really a good idea?" She asked her husband, who arrived, taking off a pair of worn leather gloves and leaning against the table near her. "What happened last night is scary." She clarified. "I don't think it's safe for these kids to be here. I know they're houses are all messed up, but we should find a different place for them."

Andy regarded the weightlifters, and the Humvee parked in the center of the square. "Wasn't too good." He admitted. "Easy to get all wrong, in that dark, with guns round." He folded his arms over his chest. "Ev'erbody getting all het up."

"Do you think those guys were trying to hurt people?" Ceci asked. "The ones who set that building on fire?"

"Ah don't." Andy said. "Think they just didn't have no place to go to, and that there building let them in." He studied the lifters. "Ah went over there and looked round some. Bottom level there had a shop in it."

"The sandwich shop, yes." Ceci agreed. "That had a grill."

"Done had."

"So they were just looking to... were they cooking in there?"

"Seems like." Andy agreed. "Probly didn't mean nothing." He shrugged. "Found me a fella holed up near by there saw it all. Just folks lived in one of those camps down the road there."

"Homeless guys?"

"Yeap. Got them out of the rain, fella said. Thinks those cops came down too hard for it."

Ceci could imagine it. It had been a gas grill, and had gotten out of hand, maybe with people using it who, like her, had no idea how to cook over an open flame. "I can see it." She said. "After all, we have this grill back here." She indicated the now quiet area.

There was a propane tank connected to it, and two more standing by, and she wondered briefly where it had come from. Then she figured it was probably better not to ask. "But we put it outside, on the concrete." She noted, the grill seated in the open, a big plastic tarp folded nearby to cover it when they were done for the day.

"Aint nobody here without good sense." Andy said. "But ah don't know you're right, Cec. Coulda gone bad here, even with Pete and them round." He studied the open space. "Figure something out."

Mark's bike was gone, he'd headed off towards home and now some of the staff who'd showed up were busy inside the building, it's windows all thrown wide open to the languid air. A half dozen more had appeared after breakfast, including two more of Dar's programmers.

“Ahm goin to go try and raise up them kids.” Andy decided. “See if that radio’s connecting up now.” He walked back into the building and along the hallway down to the room on the end, a small utility space that had a large window that faced east.

It was open, and he could smell the salt water as the breeze shifted a little, rustling the dead leaves outside. He could hear the sound of flapping tarps and hammers, and an echo of incoherent shouts somewhere in the distance and had to concede that the area even with guards wasn’t that safe.

Inside the room was a battered table with a radio set on it, and a long coaxial cable that went out the open window and up the wall outside to an antenna fastened to the wall and extending up to the top of the second floor.

Attached to the radio was a battery, and he checked the charge before he turned on the radio and sat down on the wooden stool in front of it, putting down his gloves and reaching out to tune the dials.

An earlier attempt to contact the island had been unsuccessful, though it had been hard to say at the time if it had been technical issues or just Dar and Kerry being busy.

After an adjustment to the frequencies, he picked up the mic. “Lo! Lo there you all.” He paused. “Lo! You all listening?” He released the transmitter and waited.

After a moments silence a bit of crackling emerged. “Go ahead, Dad.” Kerry’s voice responded, and behind it he could hear the distant sound of a helicopter. “What’s up? I’m just heading back to the house.”

“Wa’II.” Andy said. “They all had a dust up here last night.” He reported. “Evry’body’s all right, but Cec don’t like the idea of keeping folks ovah here. Thinks maybe we should get them all outta here, and let that boy handle the fixin.”

There was a pause. “Well.” Kerry’s tone sounded like a mix between resignation and amusement. “Actually.. there’s a complication.”

Uh oh. Andy had known his daughter in law long enough by now to read her verbal cues, always more subtle and nuanced than Dar’s. “What’s the story, kumquat?” He asked. “Ah thought that landlord be back today to get hisself sorted out. Aint showed up yet though.”

“He signed over the property to us.” Kerry responded. “We now own the place.”

Andy stared at the radio. “Say what?” He managed, after a pause. “You all mean that boy done ran off?” He knew a moment of honest shock and surprise. “For real?”

“Yeah. For real. He had title to it, I guess. Didn’t have the money to fix anything, so he cut his losses and left us on the hook for it.” Kerry said. “And oh by the way, we’re going to be on our way to the airport in a few minutes. Dar’s got to fly to Colorado.”

“Scuse me?”

Kerry’s voice now held resigned humor. “Anyway, I have to get her bag packed. I’ll stop on the way back and fill you guys all in. But we kinda should try to keep the place in one piece.”

Andy looked around the inside of the room, at a loss for words. Finally he picked up the mic. “Roger that.” He said into it, in an almost mechanical way. “Talk at ya later.”

He put the mic down and stood up, then reached over and turned off the radio to save the battery before he walked out into the hallway and looked down it. Overhead he could hear the sound of people walking around upstairs, and the scrape of chairs against the now bare floors.

He could smell mold, and debris from the outside, and the dusty scent of canvas and plastic from the materials they sealed the roof vents with.

He could hear the laughter upstairs of the workers, and it sounded so relaxed and carefree. “Some bitch.” He pronounced audibly. “Some damn bitch.”

Pete came out of the first level washroom, wiping his hands on a paper towel. "Sup?" He paused. "You look like a eel bit ya."

Andy put his hands on his hips. "Fella what owns this place done ran out on us."

"That punk haired little scoot?" Pete came over. "Wasn't worth much anyhow. You all had to board up this place your own self you said."

"Ah know that. Figured they'd come in here and fix it up after we done that, but the little bastard just handed over the keys and took off."

Pete stared at him, eyes widened. "No shit." He finally spluttered. "Left this all up to you all?" He made a vague gesture around the lower floor. "All this fixin? All that mess? For real?"

"Seems like." Andy shook his head and exhaled in disgust. "Swear to the Lord, ain't a situation we don't get all up into."

Pete folded the paper towel neatly into a square and shoved it into his back pocket. "Well, buddy, we better go round up some more of our old friends then, cause more stuff like last night's gonna take more than me and old Hank."

"Lord."

"Specially if you own this thing now. Don't want it to be set on fire."

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"So that's that." Kerry dropped a leather overnight bag on the dresser. "As if things weren't complicated enough, now we have crazytown happening at what suddenly is our property. Jesus."

She was talking specifically to herself, the condo otherwise quiet, only the sound of the air conditioning plant cycling in the background.

"This is nuts." She continued, as she sorted through the drawers and selected underwear and socks she then neatly tucked into the bag. "Totally nuts."

She went into the closet and grabbed two of Dar's favored short sleeve silk shirts and two pairs of jeans and returned, folding them and adding them as well.

For dealing with the government, especially the military, her partner always preferred to dress down. Kerry wasn't sure that really made sense but she didn't argue with it, and considering it was actually coming into fall where she was going she added a light sweater as well.

She ducked into the bathroom and opened one of the cabinets, pulling out a small bag and sorting out travel bottles worth of body wash and shampoo and a fresh scrubbie and tossing in a little bottle of Advil that was Dar's concession to medical necessities.

She pulled out her phone and opened it, checking the calendar in the mostly useless device, glad to see that neither of them were close to cycling. "One small blessing." She muttered and shoved the phone into her back pocket again.

She brought the small bag out into the bedroom and put it in the overnight bag, pausing a moment thoughtfully, before she went back out into the main part of the condo and into the kitchen, opening up the refrigerator and pulling open one of the small partitions.

Inside were a supply of Hershey's kisses. She removed a handful of them, their tightly foil wrapped surface cold against her skin as she returned and added them into the bathroom kit before she zipped up the whole thing and dusted her hands off.

"Okay." She brought the bag into the living room and dropped it onto the coffee table, pausing to stand thoughtfully for a moment in silence as she considered if there was something else she needed to do before going back to the cottage.

Checking her watch, she decided she had time for a cup of tea and she went into the kitchen to put up some water for it, pausing to glance out the kitchen window at the partly cloudy weather outside.

It was breezy, and past the battered outside wall of the garden she spotted two men working, removing debris from the edge of the water where rollers were still coming up and surging past the gates.

They would need to rebuild the beach, she'd heard one of the other residents saying. Have a barge come out and pump sand in from offshore to rebuild the edge of the island and Kerry recalled them sounding impatient about it, as though that was the most important thing in the world to get done.

Here they were, she shook her head a little, sitting out here with all the comforts in the world, with power and air conditioning, people to get them pretty much whatever they wanted, without worrying about dark nights and people looting their homes.

She remembered talking to Maria and Mayte earlier. Tomas was resting comfortably, and the hospital had operated on his broken leg, and given him antibiotics.

Maria told her all about how grateful they were to be in the little residential hotel next to the hospital, and how there was even a little Cuban cafeteria open in the lobby where they'd had cafecita and pastelitos and how lucky they felt when they saw what was going on elsewhere.

Mayte had told her about how the Miami Herald had found them, and interviewed them and hoped she hadn't minded too much about it.

The water pot hooted gently, and she poured the water over her loose tea ball, the scent of the green leaves with their faintly seaweed tainted steam rising to her nose.

She hadn't minded. Kerry watched the tea steep. Even if she'd had, she wouldn't have told them that of course, but she really hadn't, since it wasn't as if they hadn't told the truth, and frankly if she was going to have her picture on CNN, she'd much rather be for doing something laudable.

She wondered if someone had chased down what her mother's view of it was. A faint smile twitched on Kerry's face, as she removed the tea ball and added a drizzle of local orange blossom honey to the tea, imagining her reaction to the picture of her daughter, in a pair of drenched cargo shorts and a sports bra, streaked with mud, yelling at the National Guard.

She lifted the cup and took a sip, swallowing it around a grin. Once they had decent access, she was looking forward to watching the clip, and wondered if one of the mails in her box she hadn't had any time to look at was from Angie who surely would have seen it.

She wondered what her father would have said. Kerry stared out over the water. "He'd have taken the good press." She decided, with a wry grimace. "Probably wouldn't have mentioned Maria's family are immigrants though."

Or maybe he would have. Kerry felt she could grant that posthumous reasonable doubt.

She took the cup into the living room and sat down on the couch, extending her legs out and crossing her ankles, stretching out muscles sore from the previous day, taking the moment of quiet to consider what direction her plans were going to take next.

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Dar studied the screen in front of her. "Pain in the ass not having those damn double screens here." She scribbled a note on one of the pads Angela had passed over to her. "I'm never going to be able to read these stupid notes."

"Yeah, sucks." Arthur agreed. "Could we go get them?" He looked up and over at her. "That ride on the boat was fun."

"Fun." Elvis agreed. "All right, Dar, I finished that recompile and checked it back in."

"All right." Dar paused. "Hey maybe we can ask my parents to bring them back." She said. "Hang on." She unclipped the radio from her belt. "Ker? Ker, you there?" She paused to listen, clicking the transmit button impatiently. "Ker?"

"Go ahead. All done packing here. I was just having some tea." Kerry's voice answered a moment later. "Had to grab the radio off the counter."

"Did you get ahold of dad?" Dar scrolled down the page and reviewed the code on her screen. "If he's coming back can he throw the screens in the programmer's cubes into the truck? We need the eyeball space here."

"Sure, I can ask." Kerry responded. "I just got done telling him about the landlord. He might have stopped cursing by now." She said. "They had some kind of kerfuffle there last night with the police. Everyone's fine." She hastened to say. "But it sounded like it shook them up."

"Huh." Dar diverted her attention. "That doesn't sound good." She said. "Maybe we should head over there."

"I told them I'd stop by on the way back from taking you to the airport to get all the details." Kerry reassured her. "Anyway, let me see if I can raise them again about the screens, then I'll be over to pick you up."

"Okay." Dar went back to checking the code. "This isn't going to be done in time, Ker." She added, in an almost mutter.

"Keep working at it. We can talk about it when I get there, to see what to tell John." Kerry told her. "See you in a bit."

Dar put the radio down and concentrated on the programming in front of her. "All right lets see how that works out."

A knock came at the front door, and Celeste hopped up to go answer it. "Hello?"

"Um." There were two young men in polo shirts standing outside. "We have some data here that can maybe get sent?"

"Let 'em in." Dar called out, her sensitive ears catching the voices. She half turned as the door opened and the two techs entered. "You got it on a drive? Bring it over here." She held out one hand to them. "C'mon, don't just stand there. I've got a dozen things to do."

The nearer tech came over and unzipped a case, removing a hard drive in a housing and offering it up to her. "Here it is. It's pretty big."

Dar inspected the connection to the drive. "USB." She stood up and went over to the rack. "We got anything here I can plug this into that's not secure?" She examined the stack of servers. "No."

"Spare lappie?" Elvis suggested. "Got one in the bottom of that case."

"Good idea." Dar went to the case and opened it, fishing a laptop out and bringing it over to where the router sat on it's small table, whirring away, it's fan causing the linen covering the table to flutter.

"So, what are you guys doing here?" The tech who'd handed her the drive asked, hesitantly.

"Coding stuff." Arthur muttered. "What the hell does it look like we're doing here, dude?"

"Hey I was just asking."

Dar got the drive connected and quickly examined the contents. "Hmph." She grunted. "That's gonna take a while." She plugged the laptop directly into the router and attached the hanging configuration cable to it, resting the laptop itself on top of the bulky device.

It was taking time out from her work, and now she was regretting even getting involved in the situation, regretting deciding to step in and do this guy a favor. With an irritated sound, she opened up a configuration window and examined what was going on inside the router.

"Is that what's running everything?" The tech asked.

“Dude, sit down.” Elvis pointed at a chair. “Don’t bother her.”

It made Dar smile, safe enough as her back was to the room. There had been a period, naturally, of skeptical wariness when she’d first hired on her new programmers, not the least of which had been her own internal doubt on whether she was really suited for the work anymore.

She’d never really left it, always dabbling a little bit in the craft with her gopher and the monitoring programs that were, probably, still in use at ILS somewhere. But she hadn’t focused on it like she was now, and projects hadn’t depended on her coding skills like they did now.

So as a way to start, she’d thrown the code of the business systems they were running Roberts Automation on up into their newly born repository and invited them all to have at it in terms of fixing problems and suggesting improvements.

Because, she knew these folks she’d hired knew who she was, because she knew she’d been known in the industry for long enough and had been public enough but never in this arena. That wasn’t what she’d been in the business mags for. Wasn’t even what she’d mostly ever done for ILS.

That had ended well. She’d gotten a budding respect from them out of it, had used the app framework to develop a programming design guide for the group, and with the participation of her new team shined up the old pile of code and added features and functions that surprised and delighted the rest of the company in the bargain.

Now the programmers were stuck to her like ticks, and felt an almost hilarious sense of possession, and it did, in fact, make her smile as she stood there, her fingers moving over the keyboard.

She set up some configuration and put it in place, then went back to the laptop’s interface and checked the drive’s contents. “This text file the end point?”

“Yes.” Both techs had sat down on the couch and they answered almost together. “We’re just curious y’know. We do this too.” The second one told Elvis. “I mean, IT.”

Dar studied the text file. “You FTP this file?” She half turned and looked at them, her eyebrows hiked.

“The thing it’s going to is a dBASE 4 datastore.” The nearer tech told her. “We’re lucky it has an ethernet bus.”

Dar blinked at them, both her eyes widening. “dBase FOUR?”

He nodded. “It was written by the bosses uncle or something to do building site management back in the day. They never updated it. He says it still works, leave it alone.” He shrugged a little. “Which, I kinda get. My grandpop worked for the phone company, back in the day.”

“Oookay.” Dar turned back around and opened a terminal program, cutting and pasting the config into place and watching the session connect. “You do this all manually?”

“Filezilla.”

“That what’s on the other end of it?”

“Yeah, it puts the file in a directory, then the box picks it up and sucks it in. It’s just a CSV with embedded links to the pictures.” The tech got up and came over, curiously peering over her shoulder at the laptop. “Oh. Yeah there it is, that’s the right screen there.”

In another window, Dar opened the file she was getting ready to send. “Thought you all just got here?” She closed the file and started the transfer, watching the small text pinwheel whirl. “That’s a lot of data.”

The tech remained silent, and after a moment, Dar looked at him. He was a good looking kid, with tightly curled brown hair and a dark skin. “How’d you get it in so little time?”

“We don’t ask that stuff.” He finally said. “Boss got it where he got it, you know? From the governor.”

“Okay.” Dar responded mildly. “It’s on it’s way.” She waited as he peeked at the screen, then backed off and went back over to the couch to sit down. “Probably take about an hour.”

“Awesome.”

She turned back to the screen and re-opened the file in another session, running her eyes over the data which seemed to mostly be names and addresses. Curiously, she selected one of the embedded pictures and opened it, finding a hi res picture of a nice looking home inside.

Thoughtfully she closed the windows, and then went back to her seat, pulling it up to the table and putting her attention back on her programming. “We should have my dad throw the gamer chairs in the truck while he’s at it.” She muttered. “Take this stupid furniture out of here.”

“Sweet.”

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“You’re going to what?” Ceci looked up from pouring luke warm ice tea into a cup. “Wait.. what?”

Andy came in and sat down at the conference table, propping his head up one one fist. “We got us a big old mess here.” He said. “Aint gonna be nobody to come fix this place if it gets wrecked.”

Ceci put the jug down and sat down in the seat next to him. The windows were wide open in the room and a slight breeze was coming in, but the leather chairs felt clammy and they were both sweating. “No, I get that.” She said. “That landlord turned out to be the exact turd I thought he was. Got it.” She held up a hand. “But do we need to turn this place into a fortress?”

“Ah do think so.” Her husband replied in a mild tone. “Ah sent out Hank and Pete to round up a few more fellers for it.” He said. “Specially if these here folks are goin to stick round here.”

Well, that made sense. Ceci paused. No, really none of it made any sense at all, but in the world that revolved around her daughter and her daughter in law that was relatively normal. They literally lived, she was convinced, in a bizarre vortex of what the hell.

She looked around the conference room. “Well.” She concluded. “I’ve wanted to redo this place. It’s too damn dark.” She decided. “Even if we have to sell cupcakes to finance it.”

Andy pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Ah’d like me a cupcake.”

“Of course you would.” Ceci got up. “Okay, well, I’m going to grab a pad and start taking down ideas on what we need to get done to get this place back in order.” She decided. “And stick my head out on the street and see if anyone’s out there selling cupcakes.”

Andy grinned as she purposefully walked out, reaching out to take the cup of warm tea she’d left behind and taking a sip from it.

The conference room was right next to the front door, and that was also wide open, to get as much of a cross breeze through as possible, the generator being saved for the evening to run the fans that made the building habitable.

It wasn’t horribly uncomfortable. He’d been in much worse places, in worse situations and here he could go around in a tank top and not have thirty pounds of gear strapped on him.

Even the stress of the landlord abandoning them was relative. It meant they now could do what they wanted with the place, and though there was a ton of money involved, there was nothing around here unfixable.

A flicker of shadow caught his attention and he looked up and through the doorway as a slight figure entered, peering around with wide eyes. “Lo there.” He called out. “That you all, Zoe?”

Zoe reacted to his voice with a relieved sound, and a smile. “Oh, Mr Andy!” She said. “I am so glad to find someone here.”

“Plenty of folks round.” Andy told her. “You all doing okay?”

Zoe sat down on the chair Ceci had so recently vacated. “Our house is gone.” She said. “It fell into pieces. We just went from the shelter to there to see it.” She added, sadly. “My mama says, at least all of us is alive.”

"Wall." Andy consciously gentled his voice. "That's a true thing, Zoe. Aint' nothing nowhere as important as your family." He said. "Building's just a thing. Ya'll can always fix a thing. Can't always fix people."

Zoe nodded. "Yes. But they told us, it will be a long time before anything can be done." She said. "So my papa said, I should come here to see if there was something I can do, because the shelter is so..." She made a face. "There are people there who are not so good." She hesitated. "They are angry, and mean."

"Mean to you all?" Andy asked, quietly. Zoe had a cleft lip, like Hank, and the surgery to fix it had left her face a little twisted and disfigured, and given her a faint lisp to her speech.

She had wavy light brown hair and pretty almost purple eyes and now she was wearing shorts and a company logo tshirt and she had on her back a backpack that had a little stuffed kitty keychain hanging from it.

Zoe nodded. "My brother got in a fight last night. He got hurt." She said. "So many people there."

"Kind of a big old mess here." Andy remarked, a touch apologetically. "Got no power, and the roof got some wet."

"Kerry said yesterday." Zoe agreed. "But there are good people here." She said. "You are here, and Mr. Carlos is here. My papa said, it would be okay."

Well. Andy regarded her. Maybe Kerry would want to take her over to the island later on, with the two programmers. "Yeap." He just said. "Lets go see what we all can get into." He got up and finished the tea, crumpling and putting the cup into a garbage bag. "Ah think mah wife's out there counting carpets."

Zoe followed, calling out happily as she spotted Carlos down the hall, with now more familiar faces newly arrived, a buzz of conversation filling the space.

Lord. Andy sighed internally. What ain't gonna happen next.

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Kerry pulled up to the curb in the arrivals level at Miami International Airport, pausing to regard the building as she put her car in park. "Jesus, Dar. Are you sure this is open?"

The front of the airport was completely covered in metal shutters, and halfway down the concourse the overhang that sheltered the outside entrance had collapsed, twisted metal structure draped all down the street and blocking all but the leftmost lane.

Past that was nothing but wreckage – the far end of the terminal invisible. Part of the parking complex, which filled the inside of the departure and arrival loop had collapsed, and between some of the debris cars left parked in the lot could be seen.

There were four police cars, and three military SUV's parked in front of the one visible entrance, and that was it. The rest of the landscape was barren and empty, save bits of debris being blown about by the wind.

"Well." Dar seemed a bit nonplussed. She had the overnight bag at her feet and now she took off her sunglasses to study the wreckage. "Its not open for commercial flights, no." She conceded. "That's what the radio said, anyway. " She indicated the AM station playing in the car. "So I guess it makes sense...."

"Can they even land an airplane here?"

"Governor's buddy showed up."

"Maybe they drove."

Dar regarded her with a hint of skepticism.

"Yeah, okay, that's a long drive. Lets get you inside." Kerry shook her head a bit, then she opened her door and slid out of the SUV, glancing around to see if there was anyone to talk to about leaving it parked there.

Literally no one. She'd been to this airport dozens of times and never seen it this empty, not even when dropping Dar off for a 5 am flight. "Holy bananas, Dar."

"Holy bananas, Ker." Dar checked her watch, then got out of the passenger side and shut the door, slinging the bag's strap over her shoulder. "C'mon. Lets see if anyone's inside."

They walked together along the debris covered sidewalk, the wind howling a little through the struts of the collapsed overhang. "What a mess." Dar studied the luggage check in station, busted into a thousand pieces scattered over the sidewalk.

She picked up a bit of the check in station. "Plywood." She dropped it to the ground. "At least it's not pressboard."

"It's a mess." Kerry agreed. "Pressboard? Dar that wouldn't last fifteen minutes in this climate."

"Never stopped them before."

They went to the closed sliding door and it stayed closed as they reached it. Dar shaded her eyes with her hand and pressed against the surface, peering inside. "Lights are off."

Kerry sidestepped a foot or so and knocked on the other door. "You sure he said this airport, Dar?"

Dar studied the dark interior, searching for any motion. "No I'm not sure, matter of fact. He said the airport." She muttered. "Then he hung up. But if they were sending any reasonable sized plane it would have to be to here."

"Or Lauderdale."

"It's a bigger mess than this is. This is inland at least." Dar said. "Wait, there's someone in there."

Kerry knocked again, wrapping her keys around her hand to add a staccato tang to the sound. "Hope he knows who you are. I'm not really in the mood to be hopping the airfield fence today."

"He doesn't know who I am we're going to just turn around and go home." Dar stepped back as the figure inside came to the door and peered at her suspiciously. "Not really in the mood to be arguing with a rentacop today." It was a tall man in a security guard uniform, and he looked from one to the other of them for a long moment.

"What do you think he's thinking, Dar?" Kerry stepped back as well, and slid her hands into her front pockets. "We're some dumb chicks who are lost?"

She saw the man reach for his belt and for a brief moment she felt a tingle of alarm, but it was just to retrieve a ring of keys and she relaxed as he took his time hunting through them.

"We'll find out in a minute." Dar slid her sunglasses back on and glanced around, lifting her head a little, sniffing reflectively. "That's jet fuel." She concluded, after a moment.

"What is?"

"That smell." Dar rocked up and down on her heels.

"Well." Kerry remained facing the door, watching the guard. "Its an airport. Is that unusual?"

"In a closed airport?"

Kerry paused and gave her a sideways look, watching a brief grin and a wink appear on Dar's face. Then she resumed watching the guard, who was now fitting a key into the inside of the door and twisting it. After a moment it clicked, but didn't move.

The guard got his fingers into the crack between the doors and hauled at them, causing them to open with a scream of objecting metal tracks. "Fuck."

A gust of air puffed out at them, full of mildewed carpet and musky, sweating security guard. Highly unpleasant. "Hello?" Kerry asked, in a mild tone. "Sorry to cause you so much trouble."

The man got between the doors, wedging his body sideways and shoving against them with both hands. They opened all the way up and he turned to look at them. "Well? Whatcha want?" He asked, impatiently. "Airport's closed!"

“Yes, we realize that.” Dar stepped forward, and almost instinctively, the man stepped back. “I was asked to come over here and meet a military plane.” She said. “Is there anyone from the Department of Defense I could talk to inside?”

It totally wasn't what he was expecting, Kerry evaluated, and so, he had no idea what to say to Dar to that question. Her partner was a half a head taller than the guard, and was staring at him with that peculiar intensity that she well remembered from that very first moment she'd faced in the doorway of her small office.

“Well..” He glanced around. “I don't know nothing about that.”

“Did a plane from Colorado just land here, by any chance?” Dar persisted. “Probably either Air Force, or Naval aviation?”

The guard got out of the way and gestured inside. “C'mon in and look around, ladies. I got no idea what you're talking about but sure. C'mon. Least you smell good.” He gave in with surprising grace. “There's some guys in the back, in the office. Maybe they can tell you.”

“You can head back.” Dar suggested to Kerry, as they edged through the door. “I'll...”

“You can't call me. Lets find out if you're going anywhere and save us both the trouble.” Kerry put a hand on her hip and nudged her forward. “Otherwise I won't be able to think straight.”

Dar grinned, a little, but shifted the strap on her bag and started after the guard, who was trudging through the gloom inside heading down the concourse towards a bit of illumination coming from somewhere inside.

Somewhere something was leaking. Dar could hear water hitting the polished concrete floor and the inside of the building smelled about what you would expect a huge public space to smell like without air conditioning for days when it required that to keep mold spores at bay through pure humidity control.

South Florida was a swamp. Both because it was, most of it being at or only slightly above sea level, but also because it had a true tropical, humid climate that had more in common with the Bahamas and the other islands of the Caribbean basin than the rest of the continental US.

Everything was air conditioned. It was the only thing that allowed people who worked and lived in the area to wear anything but bathing suits and as they slogged through the musty, humid air Dar was already missing the at least slight air movement of the outdoors.

“Mess in here.” The guard muttered. “Stupid assholes turning off all the air to save them a buck.”

They would probably have to have every surface mold spore extracted, and so, a false economy. Kerry concluded as she walked alongside Dar's taller form. Or maybe, probably, they'd just turn all the air plants on and let them run for a few days and spray a lot of air freshener.

Probably. Kerry could almost taste the bacteria on her tongue.

“Much damage?” Dar asked as they went between the dark check in counters and along the concourse.

“Yeah. Everything from G down's screwed.” The guard said, cheering up a little at the opportunity to share bad news. “Like, really screwed, y'know? Shutters got ripped off and the windows blew in. Whole thing's a wreck.”

“Wow.”

“Least in D, here, the entrance is in the curve. Backside of it got wiped out though.” The guard said. “And forget the sky bridges. Stupid idiot managers were supposed to drive them against the terminal wall but they didn't. What a god damned mess that is. Wrecked half of airside.”

“You can drive an air bridge?” Kerry asked, distracted. “Really?”

“Sure.” The guard told her. “Just the front part, right? Where the plane goes. You can drive it back so it's flat to the wall mostly.”

“Huh.” Kerry said. “Seems like a crazy thing to forget.”

"In a rush. Everyone wanted outta here. Now the all want to get back in." The guard shook his head, muttering under his breath as he stumped along ahead of them. "Can't blame em I guess. Glad I was in the ride out crew got me a cot and everything."

Miami International Airport was U shaped, with terminals that wrapped around the parking lot in the center and the D gates were on the north side, the G, H, and J gates were on the south end and the storm had come in almost right over it.

Like most airports it had started life as a military airfield, Wrigley, and through construction and reconstruction morphed into a large, sprawling facility that handled both passenger and cargo traffic and was the primary US gateway to South America.

They walked past the security stations, all packed up and covered in plastic and beyond that Dar could now see the light was coming from the American Airline VIP club in what, in operation, would be the secured area. The stores on either side were shut tight with rolling doors and on either side the boarding gates still had shutters in place giving the entire facility a dark, dank atmosphere.

However, as they walked closer to the club the air around them stirred and moderated, and by the time they got to the entrance, you could feel the air conditioning and the guard pulled at his shirt as they walked inside. "That's better." He muttered. "Lemme find somebody for you to talk to."

Inside the Admiral's Club, the space had been taken over as a control center for the airport staff. There was power inside, and the coffee makers were going full force to service the dozens of men with papers and clipboards scattered across the small courtesy tables.

The smell of the coffee and pizza were prevalent, with a tinge of old cold doughnut on its fringes. Where there would be a little buffet set out for the airlines' guests, boxes and bags of warehouse store bought sugar and creamer and paper plates were stacked.

The men closest to the door looked up as they entered, and they attracted attention immediately. A tall, silver haired man in a guyabera came over to them, glancing at the guard before focusing on Dar and Kerry with a look of perplexed concern.

"Hi." Kerry short circuited him. "We know you're busy here, so let's just ask our question and get on our way. Have you had a military plane land here recently? We're supposed to meet them."

Dar made one of her little grunting noises that were half amusement and half satisfaction. She wrapped her fingers around her overnight back strap, content to let Kerry do the talking, while she glanced around the room and tried to reconcile her own memories of it as a passenger with the somewhat organized chaos she saw now.

"Hel...lo." The man said. "I'm not really sure..."

"No, I get it." Kerry smiled at him. "We're just interrupting you – sorry about that but you know what it's like working with the government. They just tell you to go somewhere and here we are." She added. "Should we talk to flight operations maybe?"

"The.. airport's closed." The man finally said. "So I'm not sure..."

"Would they stop a department of defense flight from landing?" Dar spoke up for the first time. "Assuming the field is cleared for them to do so safely?"

The silver haired man half turned and focused on her. "Department of defense?" He repeated. "Okay well, that's a different story. Come with me, ladies." He turned his head. "Miguel, I'll be back. Let me take these folks over to control."

"Si." The man he'd been talking to nodded. "I'll keep going with this." He pointed at a clipboard full of dirty papers.

Their guard friend waved at them. "Good excuse for coffee. Good luck."

They exited the club and went along a corridor that got progressively warmer and mustier, until the silver haired man turned and swiped his card on a large metal door, pausing until it blinked green before he pushed the door open.

Inside it seemed metallic and the air dropped back down to a dank chill. The floor switched from carpet to linoleum tile, and the walls to painted concrete block, with a thick layer of off green that anyone having gone to public school would likely recognize.

Sounds echoed, and their steps were squeaky distinct, though the floor had a section in the middle where the wax had worn down and was scuffed.

Delivery carts were lined up against the walls, mostly empty. A few with supplies stacked on them, including tape and bags of bags, and some folded tarps.

"Thanks for taking the time to take us where we need to go." Kerry spoke up after a moment. "I know it must be crazy."

"Well." The man led the way down a long hallway, with anonymous metal doors with cryptic identification blocks next to them on either side. "Yeah, it's a mess, but to be honest, administering this facility's a mess at the best of times. So it's all relative." He glanced around at her. "My name's Steven Hillingdon, by the way. I'm in charge of the civil side of this place."

"Where to start, huh?" Kerry sympathized.

"Where to start." He paused at one door, and swiped his card again. "Hope you don't mind the stairs...." Here he paused and looked at both of them in question, finely distinct eyebrows lifting just slightly.

"Sorry." Kerry said. "Kerry and Dar Roberts." She indicated herself, and then her partner. "We run an IT consulting company that does business with the government and they don't view a major hurricane as a travel impediment."

"Got it." Hillingdon stepped back and pulled the door open. "Hey if the government is sending a plane here, it must be important. They know what kind of a mess this place is in, but on the flipside, they've got hardware that can deal with the mess."

"Third floor." He indicated the steps. "Sorry about that, but they have the elevators turned off. Not sure if it's more power savings or the fact we don't have to have the firemen in here if someone gets stuck."

"No problem." Dar started up the steps. "Least there's no carpet in here to get wet."

"That is the truth. Certainly stinks on the public side."

"Certainly does."

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"All right." Andy stood on the landing in the center of the open central space of the building. Hank's Humvee was back, and now Pete's Wrangler was parked next to it, it's shortwave whip antenna with its frowny face topper waving gently in the breeze. "Get this here mission all started up now."

Carlos emerged behind him and came up to the edge of the concrete slab. "Whole deal's changed, huh Pops?" He remarked. "Crazy crazy just got even mo crazy. Now we got skin in the game here for sure."

"Some bitch changed all the right." Andy agreed. "Aint gonna have no more of that all mess from last night round here." He sniffed reflectively. "Nobody's going to get no ideas when we're done with it."

"Little punk."

Andy glanced at him. "That landlord?"

Carlos nodded. "He never did crap for us." He said bluntly. "So you know, I'm glad it went down that way, even if it's a mess for the bosses to handle." He folded his brawny arms over his chest. "We'll figure it out, even if we gotta go barter for stuff."

Andy smiled, just a little. "Ain't no doubt." He agreed. Along with Hank and Pete, there were now eight more men in their mid thirties and forties in the central area, all in worn jeans or camo pants and faded t-shirts and ballcaps, all a bit battered by life looking.

As Andy himself was.

They were enjoying relaxing near the Humvee, laughter and trash talking echoing a little over the tattered grass, one of them pointing over at the lifting area now with obvious approval.

"Buddies of yours, Pops?" Carlos asked, in a casual tone. "You got a lot of em."

"Wall." Andy thought about that. "Most folks who done served ah at least'll chit chat with cause we got that in common." He said. "Got good and bad like ev'rywhere else. But these all boys are good nuff for me to let near my kids."

"Uh huh." Carlos mused. "Pops, you know they can kinda kick ass themselves, right?"

"Still mah kids." Andy was unrepentant. "But yes ah do know that. Dar done took one of them boy scouts down by the Hunter place last night." He chuckled a little. "Tackled him so hard his damn ears near came off."

Carlos could imagine it. He knew his boss had a temper, and wasn't shy about being physical. "Guess we know where that comes from." He grinned as Andy gave him a side eyed look. "Hey, total respect! Between you and her it's an honor to be allowed to be security around here."

Andy smiled briefly. "Dar done grew up where being able to scrap was normal." He said. "Ah never did tell her she got a pass for being a girl."

No, Carlos thought to himself, getting an unexpected insight. "Hey did they get that place?" He asked, after a brief pause. "Holy crap if they've got to mess around with that, too???"

"Ah do not know, but I spect it's likely cause they do get into every damn situation." Andy sighed. "Lord it don't never end."

"Hey."

Andy and Carlos both turned, to find one of Scott's ex friends standing there, hands in pockets. He wasn't the same man who'd showed up the other day.

"Lo" Andy responded. "If y'all are lookin for that wheel chair man, he's not round."

"No, I know where Wheels is." The man said, with a slight shake of his head. He had curly black hair and a scar across the side of his face that twisted it just a little. "Joe was here. Said maybe you were looking for some help around here or whatever."

Andy turned all the way around and studied him for a long moment. Carlos just remained silent, withholding judgement or deferring it. "What you got a mind to do?" He finally asked.

"I can do construction." The man responded. "Y'all gonna need new walls up in there. I do that." He said. "And I might know where to get my hands on some stuff to do it with." He added. "If you got some way to move it."

Carlo's eyebrows lifted. "You do drywall?"

"That's lathe backed." The man jerked his head towards the building. "Gonna need to be taped and jointed. Yeah." He said. "I do that." He said. "Before you ask me why I don't just make everyone out there no offer, it's because you done what you done for Wheels."

"Scott." Carlos corrected him. "We don't call him that here."

"C'mon inside." Andy decided. "Lets have us a cup of joe and chit chat." He gestured towards the door. "See if we can make us a deal."

"Always use a cup of joe."

\*\*

Kerry slid her sunglasses back over her eyes as she emerged from the dark tomb of the closed airport into the murky sunlight, gratified to find her car right where she left it tucked against the curb.

In normal times, there was no doubt she'd be running around chasing a tow truck for it, but today it just sat there, behind the government and military vehicles, unmolested and unremarked.

There was still no one anywhere around, but her ears detected the sound of jet engines warming up from the field on the other side of the terminal and she hoped Dar was sitting comfortably inside along with her two friendly young pilots.

They were from the Midwest and utterly wowed by the destruction, taking picture after picture of the airfield she'd gotten a good look at from the operations center inside.

Jetways had been ripped right off the building and were strewn all over the semicircle of tarmac she could see, blocking any access to the building and forcing the military transport that had been sent for her partner to park on the far side of the taxi path.

It was a Embraer jet, but converted to military use, and it was blocky and a bit ugly but Dar had been assured it had been kitted out with regular seats and she wasn't going to be stuck sitting on strap webbing or on top of a cargo box.

Dar wouldn't have cared. Kerry got into her car and almost envied that escape from their current reality into what was a vaster normality once you got out of the South Florida area.

She started the SUV and then paused, regarding the wrecked upper level blocking her path. "Well, hell." She did a three point turn and went down the wrong way, down the inbound road to the terminal, hoping she didn't encounter either police or a truck until she reached a place she could hop the curb to an egress lane.

She got to a point where she could see the field and paused, pulling over near the edge of the road so she could watch the one small moving point making its careful way around the debris on the field towards the runway. It waited, as a larger plane, also military, but gigantic in size landed and reversed its engines, the deep rumble vibrating loud and itchy inside Kerry's ears.

The smaller plane scooted over to the end of the runway and paused, heat wash visible to Kerry's eyes from its jet engines.

The large cargo plane trundled past coming back from the far end of the runway and moved towards a pair of large hangars that were the busiest section of the airport, full of mottled green colored trucks.

Kerry's eyes shifted to the smaller plane as it started to move, rapidly coming up to speed and then unexpectedly launching itself up into the air and arching around, its engines thundering in a somewhat scary to watch maneuver.

Kerry closed her window and smiled, guessing her partner was enjoying the ride. She put the car back into drive and cautiously edged her way out of the airport, moving past collapsed light poles as she got around the far end of the terminal.

The parking lot tool booths, she noted, were completely wrecked. "What a mess." She pulled into the lane that promised an exit to the eastbound highways, and as she did she saw in her rearview mirror two airport pickup trucks moving along slowly, lights flashing.

It was going to be a long time, she realized, until the airport was ready to handle commercial traffic. It was one thing to clear the runways enough for emergency transport, and something else entirely to have a facility that was capable of handling normal people.

She shook her head and got up the ramp to the highway, merging into the very sparse traffic at midday with the sense of having a unique experience that wasn't particularly wanted.

After a few minutes of driving in silence, she turned on the radio, tuned to a local station. Instead of random pop music, it was an audio version of the local news she'd been watching on television, in fact, one of the local television stations being simulcast.

“Yick.” Kerry turned it off, exhausted from all the constant bad news.

Once she was down on street level again she paused at the corner where she normally would have turned left to go to the office, and pondered, freed from having to make an instant decision by the lack of traffic. She resisted temptation to drive down to Hunter’s Point and headed left.

They had gotten most of the biggest debris dragged out of the main street, and she was able to move along despite the frequent puddles with relatively good speed, but she was able to look right and left at what had been a familiar landscape now turned horror show.

Most of the buildings and stores still had shutters and boards up. Any external signage was gone, and a lot of the large trees that had lined the streets were now collapsed over them, blocking the side streets and in some cases leaning against buildings.

In front of where there had been a small sandwich shop there was now a handmade cart, with people gathered around it, and she recognized the woman behind it with her hibachi grill as the owner of the sandwich store.

Instinctively, Kerry pulled over and hopped out, reaching back to make sure she had her wallet in her pocket as she closed the door and headed over to the cart. “Sasha!” She called out, as she stepped over a pile of branches and between two debris covered cars.

The bronze skinned woman waved at her. “Hello Kerry!” She was standing behind the cart, a fan in one hand, waving the smoke from the hibachi. “How are you in all this crazy time?”

Four men were sitting on the hood of one of the wrecked cars nearby, munching on sandwiches evidently purchased from Sasha’s cart. A fifth was waiting for his order, strips of meat grilling for it on the grill.

It smelled really good. Sasha was Vietnamese, she and her brother brought to the US when they were small children, making their living with the small shop that sold pho and bahn mi sandwiches and was a favorite place of the staff.

On the cart, aside from the hibachi on its sturdy metal platform were containers of pickled vegetables and beneath it on the lower shelf a plastic container of baguettes.

“How am I.” Kerry looked up and down the street, with its wreckage. “How’s anyone?” She asked. “I see you got set up though.”

“Just like in Saigon.” Sasha smiled at her, eyes twinkling. “Right on the street. And anyway, all the freezer unfroze in the store I must do something with it. Might as well sell sandwiches!” She said. “Maybe tomorrow I can do a pot of pho. Kiki is seeing if he can do the noodle for it.”

“I’ll take one.” Kerry said at once. “Matter of fact, give me three, since my parents in law are at the office and I’m headed over there.”

“One with the vegetables then.” Sasha said. “Carlos was here before, with some of his gorillas.” She opened a container and removed a handful of meat strips, laying them expertly out on the grill. “He told me all the stuff that went on last night.”

“The fire and the police and all that?” Kerry glanced down the road. “Crazy.”

“Crazy.” Sasha split open a baguette and loaded it down with meat and vegetables, adding a squeeze of sauce and some sliced cucumber to the top before she handed it over to the waiting man. “Here you go.”

“Looks great.” The man took it, sniffing appreciably. “What kind of food is this?” He was dressed in a gymbaera and cutoff denim shorts, with hiking boots and a straw hat. He took a bite of the sandwich. “Mmm.”

“It’s from Vietnam.” Kerry supplied, as Sasha was busy flipping the meat on the grill. “It’s great. Really fresh, and the taste is amazing.”

The man chewed thoughtfully. “Vietnam.” He said, after he swallowed. “Huh. Interesting.” He lifted the sandwich and wandered off, heading back down the street.

Both Kerry and Sasha watched him go. "He is not from here." Sasha commented. "Probably a reporter taking pictures of all the damage."

"Probably." Kerry agreed. "There's a lot to take pictures of. I was just over at the airport and wow." She watched Sasha assembling the sandwiches. "How'd your shop end up?"

"Not so bad." Sasha replied. "Water came in, but the roof held up okay, just a little leak in the back where the storage is. If we had power.." She glanced up. "We could open, you know?"

"Us too." Kerry commiserated. "If you end up with anything left, c'mon down. I've got about a dozen people living in the building there." She took possession of the three sandwiches, and handed over a bill. "They didn't make out as well as you did with the store."

"Carlos said." The small woman responded. "Don't worry, I know where my customers are. I said I would be over there tomorrow morning." She winked at Kerry. "We get through this, all of us. Even with all the bad things. We know each other, we help each other."

Kerry grinned and retreated with her armful of baguettes. As she went back to the car, though, she had to wonder if that was really the truth. Places like Sashas – she could see her using her cart and selling her sandwiches until power came back and business picked up but the rest?

The rest of the places on Main? Kerry set the wrapped sandwiches down and started the SUV up. How many would just stay abandoned and destroyed? How many people would do what their landlord had done, and just walked away not wanting to bother with the hassle of rebuilding?

Kerry started forward, thoughtfully regarding the mess on either side. Maybe Dar's thought of just selling the property had merit. Maybe moving the company upstate made sense, so they could service the rest of their clamoring customers who didn't want to hear about rebuilding or lack of power.

Angry, impatient customers who wanted what they wanted, and didn't want to hear excuses, and had no tolerance for natural disasters.

Kerry glanced to her left as she drove carefully through the four way stops and darkened streetlights, most hanging from wires that had snapped in the storm. She could see the street where the fire had happened, the building blackened and crumbling, and the sidewalk covered in burned out debris.

There were some police officers standing outside, and a SUV with a fire department insignia. She noticed that the groups of onlookers she'd seen the day before were now gone.

Pulling down the street the office was on, she could see some of the tree debris had been dragged into a pile, and the large puddles had drained off, only providing a small splash as her tires went through them. She parked in front of the office and as she opened the door she could hear music and the noise of hammering coming from inside.

The pile of garbage, she noted, was gone from next to the building. She picked up the sandwiches and headed for the door, which was standing wide open as were all the windows to let the breeze what there was of it, go through and why the sound of music was so loud.

Stepping inside, Kerry could hear voices, unfamiliar drawling male ones, and some more familiar to her along with Ceci's crisp commentary.

"Oh, Ms Kerry!" Zoe appeared from the stairs, trotting down them. "Hello!"

"Hey Zoe!" Kerry took off her sunglasses and slid the ear of them into the collar of her shirt. "Where is everyone?" She looked both ways, but the hallway was otherwise empty. "I didn't know you were here."

"Yes I am glad to be here." Zoe said. "We are doing a lot of things. Papa Andy is outside and there are a lot of people there too." She said. "They said you would be coming.. it is true, they made this building our building?"

Kerry sighed. "It's true all right."

"This is good." Zoe said, surprisingly. "Maria was saying just the last week it would be a good thing if this was ours because we would take care of it properly."

That was true. Kerry smiled back at her assistant. That was true but was it really their business to do that? How distracting would it be to have to handle their own facilities? Where did that fit in the budget, a budget now blown to hell by the storm?

Zoe didn't seem to sense any reluctance. "Would you come see? Already they are making preparations to fix things." She pointed at the door to the central compound. "So many people!"

"Sure." Kerry shifted her grip on the sandwiches. "Let's go find out what's going on." She started for the interior door, catching the scent of newly cut wood drifting on the wind.

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"You doing all right back there ma'am?"

"Just fine." Dar responded, her legs sprawled out across the floor of the plane, her laptop on her lap. The power cable from it was running across the steel to a generator bolted to the surface behind the cockpit, and the sound of the engines inside the plane was reasonably tolerable.

It was an odd configuration. Behind the nose of the plane, where the pilots were and a locked compartment behind them that wasn't used now, but held a lot of electronic gear in it was a row of plush, leather first class airplane seats, four in total, and behind that a large expanse of nothing but empty steel.

It suited Dar just fine. The seats were as comfortable as the ones in a private jet, and there was plenty of leg room and if she'd wanted to get up and do cartwheels there was space for that too.

She didn't. She was comfortable enough to be able to concentrate on her screen, working out the intricate frameworks for the new program to evaluate products for her small pharma client. It seemed like an obvious thing, a database of all the drugs and ingredients they used, but she'd folded in some of the proprietary AI potential from her networking program to allow them to analyze what things they had they could use for other uses.

Off brand, they called it. Something beyond Dar's experience and knowledge, but important to them, and something they were convinced would give them the edge in sales, and one they wanted urgently because times had recently been tough for them.

This was a gamble. Dar reviewed the structure of the database and scrolled back, looking at the logic. A gamble that was putting pressure on John Deland who had called her out of the blue, a friend of a friend of someone she'd known at ILS who now had to prove to some new CEO why the expense.

She got it. She understood why he was pissed off, and if she'd been in his shoes, she'd have been just as cranky, saying just the same things about why she didn't care what anyone's local problems were, she had a delivery she'd been promised.

So here she was, in a military jet, on her way to talk to yet another demanding customer, trying to work out a knotty bug in this last set of programming before they could hand it over.

Her life was weird. Dar changed a bit of the programming, and recompiled it, then ran the sequence again to watch it fail, in a completely different way. "Crap." She muttered under her breath, reverting the change and drumming her fingertips along the edge of the keyboard.

What the hell was it? Why was this one sequence so screwed up?

"Hey Ma'am, want a Coke?"

"Sure." Dar took the bit of code and focused the screen on it.

The co pilot had climbed out of his seat and ducked into a tiny compartment behind the cockpit, returning with a familiar red can in each hand. He handed Dar one and then sat down in the chair across from her with the other, opening it and taking a sip.

"Thanks." Dar paused to open the can and joined him. "So. What'd you think of all the damage?" She decided a moment of distraction might get her brain cells realigned and turned her eyes from the screen to the pilot.

He was young, probably in his mid twenties, and had a stiff crew cut of dark hair, which matched the dark brown eyes. There was a little bit of stubble on his square jaw and he seemed, Dar thought, like a great model for a GI Joe.

"Man, that was crazy." He responded. "Only thing I ever seen like that is bombed out places in the Middle East, you know? In flight vids." He took another swallow of soda. "I didn't realize hurricanes were like that, you know?"

"They're like that." Dar responded, mildly. "Like a tornado, only bigger, slower moving, and comes with a wall of water from the ocean."

"Crazy." The co pilot got up. "Let me go let Josh stretch his legs." He said. "Hey, if you need the use the head, there's one right there in that corner, behind the door." He pointed. "It's kinda small, so watch your head."

"Thanks." Dar watched him go back to the cockpit and waited a moment, to see if the other pilot was going to come out to distract her before she returned her eyes to the screen, reviewing the code while she let her mind linger briefly on the words they'd just exchanged.

She'd seen the pictures of the damage, and the pilot had circled the city before they'd headed out over the Gulf of Mexico towards the west, and now something the man had said niggled at her.

That it was like bomb damage. Dar looked at the screen without reading it. A result that happened from two very different sources, completely different applications of energy that had nonetheless ended up producing an end stage that was apparently the same.

Two different paths bisecting.

She blinked a few times, just breathing quietly, her hands still over the keyboard. Then, thoughtfully, she selected a section of the code, and then deleted it, typing in a replacement statement and linking it, referring back to an earlier section of the program and adding a line.

Two different paths, two different instances, and where to determine where they bisect?

She recompiled, and reran the program, and this time the code finished without complaint. Dar saved the framework with a tag, and then picked up the soda and took a swallow of it. Not failing, of course, didn't mean it worked.

It just meant it didn't stop. She regarded the screen. But it was some kind of progress and that was more than she'd had ten minutes ago. Dar considered the segment, pondering a way to test the logic, with the small set of test data she had.

The pilot of the plane came out and used the head, as she retrieved and reviewed the data stacks, and then he came over and sat down in one of the seats. "So." He kept his voice low. "You're the one who wrote that new sim, aren't you?"

Distracted, Dar glanced at him. "Yeah." She said, after a blank moment. "You've seen it?"

The pilot, a cherubic looking youngster with curly blond hair, nodded. "I got to go in it. I was a tester for the mock, you know?" He said. "It was freaking amazing. It was like I was there. I've been in simulators before, we all have, but this was like it was real. How did you do that?"

Dar hesitated. "Well.."

"Was it the helmet? The things.. " The pilot touched his face, near his temples. "Hey, I realize you can't really talk about it. I was just so... it was cool, and I was glad I had a chance to try it. So congrats." He got up and went hurriedly back to the cockpit, where the sound of radio communications were crackling.

Dar stared after him, wondering what in the hell she was flying into.

Wondering what in the hell they'd done.

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"Ms Kerry, the police are here." Zoe stuck her head into Kerry's office. "Would you like to speak with them?"

Kerry was sitting in the window seat at the back of her office, allowing the light outside to provide enough visibility for her to read a pad of notes she was working on. "Not really." She responded, shifting the pad against her upraised knee. "Any idea what they want?"

"No." Zoe admitted. "I will go ask them." She disappeared, and a moment later her footsteps echoed on the wooden, now carpet less steps.

The police were here. Kerry ran her eyes over the notes, the grid lined pad neatly capturing her regular well shaped script. Four projects, cancelled. She read them, and shook her head slightly. Were the police going to bring her more problems?

Or did they want cookies?

She didn't need any more problems. Four cancelled projects, and a half dozen out of area customers who were fuming because progress on theirs had slowed down or stopped, even though it had only been for.... Kerry's brows creased.

Had it only been a week? Less than a week?

Jesus. The languid breeze stirred her hair, and Kerry glanced out the window, towards the water. She caught some motion by the sailing club, and as she watched, two men came around the corner of the storm wracked building, one of them carrying a clipboard.

Denim shirts and hiking boots, and one had gloves tucked into their belt in the small of his back. Contractors? Insurance adjusters? Kerry watched them circle the building, stepping over all the junk and trash and damage, walking past the collapsed electrical poles draped across roof crushed cars.

She welcomed the distraction, from this grim accounting of their fortunes. She had been light with it with Dar – they joked about her selling off brain cells but the understanding that all these people around them were depending on them weighed on her.

Dar was much more likely to take it as it came. "We'll figure it out." Was her view on most things, focused on real time problem solving and giving up as pointless what ifs.

In most cases, that was astounding and priceless. Dar's ability to be wholly in the moment, her instinctive understanding of details and potential really, truly was the baseline of their success. She could make it happen, whatever it was that 'it' was that Kerry needed her to.

She could go to Dar, and say she needed a flying pig. And Dar would start figuring out where on the pig the wings needed to be, to properly support it in flight. Dar didn't care why Kerry needed a flying pig.

She, on the other hand, wanted a plan, and direction and scope and structure and that was why she did what she did and took that ability and focus it into something that had a business wrapped around it.

So looking at the pad, it was a little bit of a lonely escarpment to be sitting on, here in this musty and warm office because she couldn't share the burden with her staff and even if Dar were there, Dar would just shrug and... "We'll figure it out."

Dar would bring her a chocolate chip cookie, and a kiss. The transition of their lives had brought out the aspects of her personality that had been stuffed down under that need to be the master of her environment and had allowed her sometimes surprisingly random nature to come to the surface.

Kerry loved that. But she also got that it meant her responsibilities had changed as well and therefore here she was, writing down all their problems and thinking of ways to work around them, or in the worst case, replace business they'd now lost.

She shifted her eyes back outside, wanting the distraction.

One of the men, she noted, was taking pictures and they were slowly making their way around to the dockside and it's shambles.

What would they think of the makeshift plank dock, she wondered suddenly. Should she go over there and talk to them about it? Now that the ferry was running she really didn't think they'd need to use it anymore but you never knew, in situations like this.

She got up and closed her pad, walking over to her desk and opening her drawer to put it inside, along with her fountain pen.

Her desktop was clean save her teacup, though a cart with her PC desktop was near the wall waiting for someone to restore it.

She decided she would do that when she got back, and picked up the cup, taking it back to the upstairs kitchenette and using a gallon jug of water standing on the counter to rinse it out with.

The water was still on, but as Carlos said, it smelled weird. There were no boil water orders for their particular area there but given the general state of chaos Kerry agreed with the rest that it didn't pay to take chances so they were using their stock of Publix water for anything they would end up ingesting.

Given her experience at the hospital the previous day, she had no intention of doing anything that would generate another trip and so she set the cup in the drainer and put the jug down, wiping her hands on a paper towel before she turned and went back into the hallway to head to the back stairs.

She would go out and find the sailing club inspectors, and make sure they understood what the planks were for and how they got there and who'd done it. Kerry nodded to herself, mentally checking off that internal note.

Then she remembered Zoe and the police, and realized she couldn't really leave her hanging with them.

"Ugh." She turned around and went to the front stairs, rambling down them and listening for her assistant's voice as she headed for the receptionists desk, the conference rooms and their open front door.

She caught a flash of dark blue outside and went out into the sun, where she found two officers standing there casually talking to Zoe in Spanish. "Hi there." She drew their attention. "What's up?"

"Hello, ma'am. Are you the manager here?" One of them asked.

"This is.. " the second backed up and looked up at the sign. "A business, right?"

The two policemen were almost like twins. They both were middling height, with black, cropped hair and tanned skin, cleanshaven and wearing sunglasses. They were probably in their low or mid thirties, and they had that distinctive Miami accent Kerry knew well.

"It's a business." She agreed. "Roberts Automation. I'm the co-owner." She stuck her hands in her front pockets. "What can we do for our friends at the City of Miami Police department?" She asked, tilting her head in friendly inquiry.

City police, not the county police, and not the state police she'd seen parked at the airport. Different politics, and these were their actual local cops, as Coconut Grove was a part of the city.

"Ms. Kerry they were asking about the trouble we had last night." Zoe supplied. "I was going to get Papa Andy to tell them." She said. "Should I go get him?"

"Depends." Kerry regarded the police, retaining her friendly demeanor. "What is it you all want to know? Wasn't our trouble, actually. We were just in the way." She explained. "Some of our security staff were here."

She paused, watching them watch her. "Want to come inside and sit down? It's not much cooler in there but we have a conference room inside the door here and you're welcome to come in."

They were sweating. The uniforms were short sleeved, but the fabric they were made of was thick and they were wearing a tshirt underneath along with their heavy duty belt holding cuffs and guns and other blocky things Kerry wasn't familiar with.

"That'd be great, ma'am." The first one agreed. "My lieutenant just asked us to come down and ask about what happened."

"C'mon inside." Kerry gestured to the door. "Zoe, can you go get Carlos? He saw everything." She stepped back to let Zoe dart inside, and the cops followed. "Want some cold water? We got a chest of ice." She led them into the conference room.

"That's very nice of you." The slightly taller of the two said. "Oh, hey.. you guys are really prepared huh?"

The room had been tidied up and organized. It was where they had centralized their supply storage, and on one side of the room were folding tables stocked with boxes of snacks, crackers and ramen noodle soup, bags of chips and pretzels.

Cases of paper plates and cups, two big cases of powdered cream and sugar for beverages. Stocked in one corner were three big bags of Cuban bread.

Along the short side of the room against the wall were cases of water, both gallon jugs and bottles and underneath the jalousie windows open to the front was a long ice chest that Kerry went over to and opened. She pulled out three bottles of water and handed one each to the cops, then sat down with one for herself.

Gratefully, they opened the water and sat down, wiping their foreheads. "Thanks." The one closest to her took a swallow of the water. "We appreciate the hospitality."

Kerry smiled at them, taking a sip of her own water. "Law enforcement is always welcome here." She stated mildly. "We had a bunch of folks from Miami-Dade here a day or so ago."

"Yeah? What were they here for?" The cop sitting a little further away asked. "This isn't their territory."

Kerry sipped at her water thoughtfully. "Why were they here." She mused. "It was after the storm, and I guess... you know, I don't know really." She responded honestly. "I'm not sure they said why they were here."

The two cops exchanged glances.

"And we were kinda busy sorting ourselves out here, you know how it was." Kerry added, with an apologetic expression. "Checking damage and all that."

"Oh, sure." The nearer cop nodded. "No problem, we get it. Everything was crazy."

"It was." Kerry hiked up the fabric of her pants and propped her knee up against the table, leaning back a little in the office chair. "I'm sure it was triple crazy for you guys."

Both cops relaxed just a little bit. "Oh yeah. I live in Sweetwater. What a mess." One said.

Carlos entered, with Zoe at his heels. "Hey boss." He looked at Kerry, then at the cops. "What's up?"

"Sit." Kerry offered. "C'mon in, Zoe." She indicated the other seat on the far side of hers. "These officers were asking about what happened last night. Can you fill them in?" She asked. "I figured it was better for them to hear it from the source."

Carlos regarded the officers for a long moment, then he shrugged and pulled a chair out, sitting down in it and folding his muscular arms over his chest.

"Sure." He agreed. "Whatcha want to know?" He asked. "We were all sleeping when all hell broke loose." He added, when they hesitated. "Like the first thing we knew were bangs and stuff."

"Who's we?" The second cop asked. "You all just camping here? I saw the camper in the middle there through the door."

"Carlos is, and some of his security guard friends, and a few other of our staff whose homes were not really habitable." Kerry spoke up. "We took some roof damage, water came in, but it's pretty whole in all."

One of the cops took out a small pad and a pen, and nodded. "You get a good look at the guys that busted up that store?" He looked up at Carlos, the pen poised to write. "They from around here? You know them?"

Carlos took his time about answering, his eyes shifting off to one side as he considered. "I didn't see any of em." He finally said. "It was dark, they were all running around... cops were all running around.... National guard was all running around... all we wanted was to stay the hell out of it."

The cop nodded again, scribbling. "Did they seem like.. was it.. did it look organized to you?" He asked. "You know what I mean." He added, when Carlos hesitated again. "Were they talking to each other outside?"

"You mean like, was it a gang?" Kerry spoke up. "I thought you had all those guys." She said. "I mean, as in, they were arrested."

The cop looked over at her. "Jurisdiction got screwed up and they all got let go." He said, briefly. "So now we gotta start at square one." He said. "What about it?" He looked back at Carlos. "They local? I know you got some drifters and bums around here. I chased a bunch of them a couple weeks back."

Carlos shook his head. "Just a bunch of guys in dark clothes all wet." He said. "Just a big mess."

"Lo there." Andy's tall frame filled the doorway and he ambled in the room. "What do you all want?" He took a seat in the chair at the end of the table and rested one hand on the table, looking steadily at the cops with an expression that reminded Kerry irresistibly of her partner.

A forthright, raw challenge, very much like Dar might do when she wanted to knock whoever she was dealing with off their balance, and that same claiming of space in the room.

It surprised her a little, because her father in law was usually on the friendly side with anyone in uniform, having that background. Kerry felt there was something going on she wasn't quite clued to.

"My father in law, Andrew Roberts." She introduced him. "They're interested in the brouhaha last night, dad."

"Aint' that interesting." Andy responded. "Thought you all had it wrapped up." He glanced at Carlos. "Y'all did say they took all them folks off."

"They let em go apparently." Carlos told him. "Paperwork problem." He leaned back, visibly content to let Andy take the lead in dealing with the police.

"That so." Andy regarded the cops. "Do tell."

"Were you here, sir?" The cop asked.

"Ah was not." Andy said. "Howsomever ah did take a little bit of time today to go over and see what all went on ovah by that burned out place and ah will tell you ah do not think them fellers meant no harm."

The cop nearest looked steadily at him. "What makes you say that, sir?"

"They were just some homeless fellers." Andy said. "Vet'rans, some of em."

"We do have some around here." Kerry spoke up, into the awkward pause that followed. "We hired one in fact." She added, in a mild tone. "What makes you think it was a gang? I haven't seen that around here, at least before the storm."

The nearer cop tapped his pen on his pad. "We heard about maybe some gangs or maybe militia down here." He said. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you folks?"

Oh. Kerry was a bit nonplussed, since viewed objectively, given armed men and armed military vehicles, she might in fact know something about that. She exchanged glances with Andy, who was regarding her with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"We're a computer company." Kerry finally said, indicating herself, and Zoe. "Do we look like a militia to you?" She asked, with just a touch of amused disbelief in her tone, watching the cops carefully. "I'll admit to being a registered gun owner, and my mother's a senator but...."

Ah. She saw the minute reaction, and the wariness. "If my father in law said those guys were just poor homeless folks, chances are that's what they were. Everyone's just trying to keep themselves above water here, you know?"

Andy cleared his throat. "Ain't nobody no half ass militia down here." He added, in a dismissive tone. "Folks got guns round here, they know what to do with em." He stopped speaking and waited.

"Are you one of those people, sir?"

"Ah am." Andy smiled without much humor. "Done made mah livin with em for a good long while."

The cop closed his pad up and put it in his pocket. "Let me give you folks a little advice." He said. "This isn't a war zone. We're not going to tolerate any of that."

Kerry put her bottle down. "Buddy." She leaned forward and folded her hands on the table. "You need to go have a conversation with the national guard, and whoever the cops who were here were last night. If there's anyone out there who thinks they're in a warzone, it's them. Not us."

She stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go tell our neighbors who put up a dock in their marina and call the governor." She took the bottle and dropped it into the trash can near the door, and then kept going, feeling confident Andy could handle the fallout. "I'll be back. C'mon Zoe."

Zoe scrambled after her. "Oh my goodness Ms Kerry!"

"What?" Kerry led the way around the corner and headed for the back door.

"The police, they didn't like that!"

Kerry chuckled. "Well, we ARE the troublemakers they think we are, Zoe. The point was to let them know we're better friends than enemies." She pushed the back door open and emerged onto the loading dock, heading for the concrete steps down to the ground. "They should go find someone else to mess with."

"Oh!" Zoe trotted after her. "Would they do that?"

"For everyone's sake I sure hope so."

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Scott was waiting for her when they landed. Dar could see him behind the doors, a tall, thin, blond crew cutted man with horn rimmed classic nerd glasses and wide, astonished looking dark grey eyes.

Well. Here we go. Dar shouldered her overnight bag and adjusted the backpack on her back that held her laptop as she followed the pilots down the metal, green gray steps onto a sun drenched tarmac brushed with a pleasantly dry breeze.

"This way, ma'am." The pilot indicated a painted walkway with a stick figure on it and they made their way between carts and other planes towards the single level bunker looking building that had government literally painted all over it.

It was faintly nostalgic to Dar, growing up where she had. She knew when the door opened it would smell like wax and old paper and as she followed the pilots inside it didn't disappoint as they stepped from concrete to dark green speckled linoleum that gleamed with a dull shine.

Still it was better than the airport she'd left and at least this one was fully powered and functional with a sense of sedate normality as they went past a row of doors that emitted a low buzz of conversation and somewhere, faintly, the sound of someone transmitting Morse code.

"Okay, uh... so here's the admin office." The pilot paused, a bit awkwardly. "I guess you need to.."

"Someone's here to meet me." Dar interrupted him. "Thanks for the ride." She turned and went through the door with its shiny lever handle and into the room with the windows she'd seen from outside. "Scott!"

The tall man turned and scooted her way. "There you are!"

"Here I am." Dar said. "Hope this isn't going to take long because I've got a lot to do back in Florida."

"No no, you should be back on a plane tomorrow night." Scott hustled ahead of her and gestured for her to follow. "C'mon, I got a car right outside. Team's waiting for you back at the base. We got a slot with the bigwigs tomorrow morning."

He exhaled as he held the outside door open. "I got you overnight at the lodge right near the base. Hope that's okay. You said you liked it last time."

Dar waited until they were inside the big, unmarked SUV with the doors closed before she responded. "What the hell is going on?"

"Huh?" Scott put the SUV in gear and pulled out of the parking lot. "You know what's going on. It's the sim. See what we did, Dar, we took the update you sent us, and.. well, you'll see." He pulled out onto the road and accelerated. "Can't wait to show you."

Dar sighed. "How long a drive is this?"

"Bout twenty minutes." Scott reached up and pulled a pair of sunglasses out of a compartment, and slid them on over his regular glasses. "I've have a nice flight?"

"Yeah, it was fine." Dar left her backpack between her hiking boots, studying the sturdy, mountainous landscape around them. "You don't want to tell me now what you all did? Save some time?"

"No." Scott said. "I can't, actually. We have to be behind the wall." He gave Dar an apologetic look. "Sorry, Dar. It's the regs."

Dar looked around the car. "Is this bugged?"

"Got it from the motor pool. Coulda been." Scott said, then glanced furtively at her. "Would you know something like that? Could you check?"

Dar rolled her head to one side and regarded him. "Not without a spectrum analyzer and I didn't bring one with me." She returned her gaze to the passing scenery, reconciled to having to wait yet more time to find out what the story was here.

Idly she took out her cell phone, suddenly remembering it's presence and turned it on.

"So it's pretty bad there huh?"

The phone powered on, and after a moment where it seemed to stare in bewildered confusion at a functional cellular signal, it attached itself. "It's a mess." Dar flipped it to silence mode as the phone started to pick up messages. "A lot of damage, and no power in half the state."

"Yeah I was watching the news today." Scott wriggled into a more comfortable position as they paused at a light. "Did you see what happened to DC? Two feet of flood water!" He said. "The whole place is crazy freaked out. Pentagon's a mess!"

"It's always a mess." Dar thumbed through the messages.

"You been there?"

"I helped rebuild it after 9/11." Dar remarked in an offhand tone. "There's a punchdown block there I left some of my blood on."

"No kidding?" Scott seemed amazed. "Really?"

"No kidding." Most of the phone messages were either people she already spoken to or numbers she didn't recognize. She called up the phone number of the reception desk and dialed it, putting the phone to her ear and listening.

"Roberts Automation, how can I help you?" Angela's crisp and slightly nasal voice answered. "Oh, is that you Dar?" She said, after a pause. "You came up on the caller id!"

"It is." Dar said. "Kerry back yet?"

"No ma'am." Angela said promptly. "I think she went to the office. She said she was going to the office, and you know she always does what she says she's going to do." Their receptionist said. "Should I go try and use the radio thing at your place? I can try that."

"No, I'll see if I can dial the sat phone." Dar said. "If she calls in, just let her know I got here and I'm on the way to the base." She said. "Oh.. ask Arthur and Elvis if they made any progress."

"I don't think so. They went to get hamburgers. They said maybe it would give them inspiration."

Dar smiled slightly. "When they get back, tell them I did. Soon as I get internet I'll upload it." She said. "It might solve the problem. Have them recompile the whole assembly after I do and run the metrics on it."

There was a faint sound of scribbling on the other end. "Got it." Angela said. "I'll tell them, boss!"

"Okay great." Dar said. "Talk to you later." She hung up the phone and watched the horizon, going back over in her head the programming she'd worked on during the flight.

Then she glanced at her phone, and then fished inside her backpack for her laptop, pulling it out and opening it. "What do we have, ten more minutes? Let me see if I can get something useful done out of them."

"Um."

"Try not to go over a lot of bumps."

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Dar could feel the warmth of her laptop through the leather of the backpack it was in pressing against her back. Her overnight bag was slung over her shoulder, and she twisted a little to keep it from hitting people as she followed Scott down the long hallway.

"It was pretty empty in here for a while." Scott said, as they turned and started down a side corridor. "Then they moved a bunch of psyops groups in here and some of the cyber guys."

"Uh huh."

"Here we go." Scott opened a door and held it, waiting for Dar to enter before he followed her inside.

It was an office suite, like a thousand other office suites Dar had entered, except most of those hadn't been buried inside a mountain. The air smelled dry and sterile, and she blinked a few times as they passed a shabby looking conference room and a small kitchenette.

At the end of the hall there was another door, and when it opened the smell of leather came out and inside was a classier conference room, with new looking leather chairs producing the scent.

"Okay in here... did you say you needed some internet?" Scott asked as he scurried in ahead of her. "I got a cable around here.. hang on." He looked around the room. "Oh hold on it's in that credenza..."

"I got done what I needed to." Dar waved her hand slightly. She dropped her bag against the wall and put her backpack on the table. "So what's the plan?"

"Let me get the guys and we can do a rundown." Scott said. "Want some coffee? It's down the hall on the right.. and then we can talk about.. the team wanted to take you out to dinner tonight. Hope that's okay?"

"Sure. Thanks." Dar watched him leave. She removed her laptop and put it on the table, and then she went back out into the hallway and found the coffee machine in the empty break room.

Kerry had switched theirs over to the single cup variety. Here there was a commercial Bunn dispenser like you might find in a hotel kitchen, and she dispensed a reasonably fresh smelling cup and mixed some cream and sugar into it.

It was very quiet in the office suite. Dar wondered if it was just a set of offices set to one side where they brought untrusted visitors to. She took a sip of the coffee and studied the room, then walked over to the slimline refrigerator and opened the door.

Inside there were the usual things you find inside corporate refrigerators mostly soft sided lunch boxes and bottles of condiment. Dar picked up one and checked the date on it, then put the bottle back and closed the door with a satisfied grunt.

She took the cup with her and went back down the hall, peering curiously into the rooms on either side of it on her way back to the rear conference room. Most had either desks or cubicles in them, and the desks were cluttered with the usual assortment of personal droppings you'd expect to see there.

A lot of trouble to go through just to fake out some random nerd. Dar decided the office space was legit, and she went back to the chair she'd selected and stood in front of it, opening up her laptop and starting it up again. She watched it while she fished inside her pack for her power cable, unraveling it and ducking her head under the table to look for the expected surge strip nailed to the underneath.

She plugged in the supply and then connected her laptop, allowing it to charge as she folded her arms over her chest and waited, rocking up and down on the balls of her feet a little.

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"Is that.. hey, the repo updated." Elvis pounced on his laptop as the soft chime of an alert sounded, pushing aside the plate on the table holding the remains of his lunch. "Lets see whats up there." He rubbed his fingers together and started pecking at the keys.

"Man, I hope she fixed that stuff." Arthur stretched his legs out on the carpet from his seat with his back against the couch. "What the hell did she do, hack the taxi to send it?"

"Phone." Elvis said briefly. "She rigged it with a Bluetooth PAN." He glanced at Arthur. "You ever hack a taxi?"

"Sure. Last time we were in New York with Dar." Arthur pronounced. "Had a fricken USB port in the back of it with all that stupid ad shit. Lame."

"Lame." Elvis typed, then he looked up. "What did you do to it?"

"Rerouted it and looped some cartoon porno." Arthur sniffed reflectively, studying his screen. "Cracked Dar up."

"Hahahahaha." Elvis attached to the repository and scanned the contents, the big storage segmented into all of their project scopes, the interface all ASCII on black screen, a cryptic command line that nevertheless clearly indicated to him the new files in yellow outlined letters.

Almost a hundred of them, all stamped with Dar's login and the date. He ran the script to recompile the code and waited, whistling under his breath as he watched the small asterisk spin in place, occasionally dancing from one side to the other.

Pure Dar. He wagged his head in time with the bouncing asterisk. Dar knew she would herself watch the spinning, and wonder in the back of her head if it was caught in a loop. The bouncing was a routine to reassure the watcher something useful was going on.

It was that, or waste the processing cycles to print out the compile to the screen. Not Dar's style. She hated wasting anything in her code, and it was crazy clean and almost too sharp.

Non obvious. Everything lean and spare, like Dar herself was.

It had a lot of discipline to it, and they had all had to learn to adapt to that kind of work style because after all, Dar was the boss and she knew her shit.

"Well, it built this time anyhow!" Elvis said, after the program finished it's shenanigans, coming up with an ascii screen report of it's processes. "Let me see if it'll take the test program."

"What'd she do?" Arthur crawled over and looked over his shoulder. "Hold on, check the output. That crap's been erroring out for three weeks I've been over it with a fricken microscope."

“Lemme check.” Elvis switched to a debug screen and read out a file, his eyes and Arthur’s eyes twitching in almost unison as they scanned down the lines of code. “What the hell?” He frowned, his eyebrows twisting together. “What is this thing doing now in there... in the object loop routine?”

Arthur reached over and traced a line of text with his fingertip. “What is that?” He said. “What did she do there?”

“Crap that doesn’t make any sense.” Elvis said. “Look at the linked logic there, and those libraries.. how is that even working?”

“Weird.” Arthur returned his attention to laptop. “Hey maybe it isn’t? Run the test suite. Maybe she’s messing with us.” He pulled his legs up crossed under him, his straight brown hair falling into his eyes. “She coulda rigged it so it turns into a picture of a elephant or something or makes that crazy hamster show up.”

“It’s a gopher. But I dunno. That guy was pretty pissed off I don’t think she’d waste our time on it.” Elvis said, as he gathered the testing suite and set up the framework for it, linking a set of test data the pharma customer had provided them. “Hey, what if the data’s crap? You think maybe that’s why it’s not working?”

Arthur looked at him, with a thoughtful expression. “You mean like on purpose? Like the guy gave us bullshit so it wouldn’t work?”

Elvis shrugged. “People suck?” He suggested, as he started up the test. “People suck, but also, people can be dumb as shit, you know?”

Arthur shook his head. “Dar woulda caught it.” He said confidently. “She’s psychic that way.”

“Yeah.” Elvis exhaled as he watched the test run. “Well, it got farther than it did the last time so far.” He observed, wiggling his feet. “Lets see where this goes. Maybe it’ll go all the way.”

Arthur chortled a little, typing on his keyboard. “That’ll be sweet.”

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Dar heard the group of them coming towards the room, the scuff and rumble of footsteps on the carpet and the opening and closing of the hallway door. She stood up, lifting her eyes to watch the entrance as shadows fell across the sill.

Scott came in, and waved behind him. “Cmon guys.”

There were six of them. All male, all clean cut. All relatively young, one or two around her age and they settled in to the chairs on the other side of the table as far from her as they could.

Dar smiled inwardly, and remained silent, studying each of them in casual turn.

She knew they were watching her, from their peripheral vision, no one making direct eye contact. Did she know any of them? Maybe she’d traded emails.

Maybe not.

Scott came over and ran his hand through his short hair. “Okay, so lets get started.” He said, then half turned. “I guess I should introduce everyone... we’ve probably all been on conference calls together though.”

“Probably.” Dar agreed. She looked over at the group directly. “Hi, I’m Dar.”

That got her a few smiles, and she smiled back, relaxing a little and uncrossing her arms. “So.” She took the focus of the room. “Why am I here?”

“What’s that, Dar?” Scott recovered himself.

Dar looked at him, aware he had to tilt his head up to meet her eyes. “Where I live just got hit by a category five plus hurricane that took out most of the City of Miami including where our offices are.” She said. “I’ve got a list of crap to deal with taller than I am.”

“Well, I know but...”

"Why am I here?" Dar cut him off. "Stop the bullshit, we're inside your hallowed halls now. I don't need social niceties. Why the hell did you drag me out here?"

Now her peripheral vision was put to good use and she saw the smirks and one or two faint nods from the gang at the end of the table.

"Ah.." Scott was taken aback. "Well, it's just.."

"Spill it." Dar let her voice lift a little in volume.

Scott caved. "Okay okay.." He waved his hands and took a step back. "Take it easy!" He retreated a few chairs and sat down. "So here's the deal. That last update you sent us, when we put it in the rig, and piped in... well it'd be easier to show..."

Dar held up one hand, then brought up both, and made a come hither gesture with them, sharply impatient. "Keep talking." She ordered. "Just spit it out, Scott. What did you do with the code?"

He took a breath. "So the biggest problem we'd been having with it was it just wasn't real enough, you know?" He leaned forward on the table, resting his arms on it. "We talked about it. Even when we put the 4K content in there. Anyway... the last update you did... it did something."

Dar leaned against the table. "Go on." Her voice had lowered and sharpened with interest. "What'd it do?"

"It like.. the timing changed... or .. look, I don't know." Scott said. "But when we put the rig on, it was like we were there. It scared the pants off me." He said. "So whatever you did, that did that. So we need to know... we want to know.. what that was."

Dar regarded him for a long minute. Then she sat down in the chair and sat back, hiking up one knee against the table's edge. "Couldn't you just ask me that on the damn phone?" She asked, cocking her head to one side in question. "What the hell?" She lifted her hands in a plaintive gesture, palms up.

"Dar you don't get it."

She nodded at once. "Yeah, you're right, I don't." She agreed readily. "Yes, the last compile was different. I had an idea when I was at home getting ready for the storm.. well, that doesn't really matter." She stopped. "But I could have laid that out for you in a text file."

"We should show her." One of the men at the other end of the table spoke up. "So when she's in there tomorrow with the generals money guy showing off our new training system, she'll get it." He nodded at Dar when she turned her head to look at him. "I'm Jacko, we've talked on the phone."

"Hi." Dar responded. "Yes we have."

Jacko was the technical project lead, a rough and ready looking man with a birthmark extending from one ear down his jaw. He had a slightly husky voice, and very thin lips. He nodded at Dar, his eyes closing and opening a few times before he went on.

"Whatever that thing is you did... it changed the whole way that rig works and basically ensured all of us are going to end up getting bumped three grades and be famous in a good way." Jacko said, calmly. "So it's a big deal."

"It's a big deal." Scott repeated firmly. "Like a really big deal. The brass is really excited about it." He nodded emphatically a few times.

Dar studied them all for a long moment, then she stood back up. "Show me." She said briefly. "Then we can whiteboard it." She watched them all scramble to their feet, excited and eager, filing without hesitation out the door.

What had she done? Dar wondered, as she followed them, followed Scott who seemed relieved, motioning her forward. What had she changed? She remembered writing the code... but in the chaos and craziness of that moment it was hard to remember the inspiration for what she'd done outside a notion of something that would increase the line rate performance.

Efficiency.

Not quantum mechanics.

"Can't wait for you to see this, Dar." Scott unlocked a door midway down the hall, pushing it open and releasing the smell of electronics and neoprene in a puff of inward air. "You really hit it out the park."

Dar took in a breath of cold laboratory air. "Can't wait."

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Kerry walked out into the central space of the building, finding it lit with citronella torches on all sides, and the grill being started up on the concrete pad near the door. She paused and looked around, trying to absorb all of the activity that had taken place during the day.

The bodybuilders were down near the back wall, taking advantage of the slightly cooler twilight and the onshore breeze to work out, along with a couple of the veterans who had showed up to help secure the area.

Behind where the barbells had been placed, there was a path leading to the loading dock and here there was now a solid barrier, blocking off the access that had allowed Dar to drive Scott's RV into the center area.

Andy's crew had installed a set of swinging gates, closed with a heavy brace that looked like a railway tie and the top and bottom of the gates appeared to be made from cut up telephone poles the team had inventively scrounged from the area nearby.

Well. Kerry reasoned. Its not like they weren't going to be replaced anyway, and shouldn't those old wooden poles really be concrete anyway?

They should.

The front porch area had also been reinforced, turning it from a rather oddly casual actual porch to something more like a guard station, and Pete's buddy Randy was setting up inside it, making himself comfortable to keep watch.

Inside the central area now, on the other side of it, were stacks of construction material all covered in tarps, lined up against the inner wall of the long side of the office. Next to them a pop up tent was pitched, and there was a lanky figure sprawled in a canvas chair in front of it.

Kerry remembered him, from the startup of the company. One of the gang of homeless vets who'd harassed them, and now apparently had turned up with building skills and material looking to be some paid labor.

Sure, why not? His name was Mike, and he'd also brought the tent and all his worldly possessions inside it and decided not to be a jerk to everyone. So sure. Kerry shook her head a little. Life moves on.

There were ten veterans around in the mix now. All of them extremely respectful to her, though they treated the security guards and Carlo's friends with casual camaraderie and considered them all part of one big...

Gang? Squad? Troop? Kerry considered. Company? "Team." She finally decided, speaking the word aloud.

Zoe came out behind her with a tray, with Pete and Hank right behind her. "Slow down there!" Hank called out. "Lemme get the table set up!"

Kerry turned to watch them, as Hank got the folding table open and hustled around in front of Zoe to put it in place so the girl could set the tray down as Pete got busy starting up the grill. On the tray were various shish kebabs and hamburgers, and under some plastic wrap were leftover sandwiches.

Pete lifted a large stock pot up and onto the end of the grill, and peeled off a corner of the tin foil topping it. "That's gonna be a nice chili." He glanced up. "You sticking around tonight, ma'am?"

Thus addressed, Kerry came over to the pot and examined the contents, whose warming was generating a deep, spicy, beefy scent. "For a while, anyway." She winked at him. "I'm fond of chili."

"Knew you had good taste." He winked back. "Lemme go get the rice cooker." He wound his way through the makeshift kitchen area and went back inside the building.

Hank was helping Zoe sort out the kabobs. "Best way to use bits and stuff." He commented. "Specially that rabbit food they left us, right there, little sister?"

"Si." Zoe agreed, smiling at him shyly. "It will be a good dinner."

Andy and Ceci came through the door at that moment and joined them. "Any word from our kid?" Ceci asked Kerry. "I figure she'd have called someone to say she got somewhere."

"Nothing yet." Kerry said. "I tried to raise the island but I don't think we left anyone there who knows how to use those radios."

"Nope." Andy agreed. "Ah do not believe we did." He looked around. "Time to take us a run back there ah do think, see all what's going on."

"Sounds good to me." Ceci agreed. "I'm done with sweating and the smell of days old garbage if you are."

If Dar hadn't been able to get through to her sat phone, her partner would have certainly called the VOIP line at the island. Kerry nodded a little, wanting to get that reassurance. "Good idea."

It was a good idea.

And yet, there was something oddly appealing in this collection of colleagues and friends and vagrants off the street that made her want to stay, and join them in the eclectic dinner and the tale trading that she knew would follow.

Well, with the ferry.. "Crap if we do want to go back we should scoot." Kerry remembered suddenly. "They said they won't run it at night."

"Hell." Andy turned around. "Hank, we all are headin off. You all done right here?"

"We're fine, chief." Hank waggled an elbow at him. "Anybody heads this way tonight's just asking for a blastin." He cocked his head to one side in a listening attitude. "Hey, I think that motorcycle fella's comin back. I recognize that engine."

Kerry was sad to miss the chili, but figured there would be some left for breakfast. She followed Zoe inside, into the conference room where her assistant was picking up some paper plates. "Zoe, you sure you want to stay here? We can find room for you over by us."

Zoe was already shaking her head no. "Oh no, Ms. Kerry, it will be fine. I have put my things up where the office is, and we are going to play dominoes after we finish the dinner." She said. "There are so many nice people here. I am so glad I came over."

They could now hear the sound of the motorcycle coming closer, pulling into the parking lot in front. "That does sound like Mark." Kerry said. "Okay, as long as you're okay with staying here. I know Carlos and the guys will take good care of you."

Zoe beamed. "They are so nice." She said. "All of Mr Andy's friends, and especially Hank." She touched her lip. "He is just like me! Did you see?"

"I did!" Kerry patted her shoulder. "Okay, let's see what Mark's up to. I would have thought he'd had enough of our chaos yesterday, you know?" She handed Zoe the stack of paper plates, then she went to the door and through the hall to the front door, where Andy was standing.

"Hey Mr. R." Mark's voice floated in from the outside. "You met my wife Barbara, haven't you?"

What the what? Kerry went to the door and poked her head outside. "Hey Mark." She greeted him. "Hey Barb." She added, giving his spouse a smile. "You guys come over to just sightsee?"

"Nope." Mark removed a pair of packed bags slung over his bike. "We decided our neighborhood was getting dicey. Barb thought at least here, we got peeps." He told her. "And they got fans here." He shrugged. "It really wasn't that bad here last night, once we got here and out of the cray cray."

"Got more'n that." Andy took his keys from his pocket. "C'mon, Cec. Lets get to getting and see what all them folks did back by the house." He glanced at Kerry. "We'll tell them folks to keep that boat runnin till you get there." He added. "Not all dark for a bit yet."

"I'll be right behind you dad." Kerry assured him, as she walked out and stood next to the bike. "I talked to Colleen this morning, up in Melbourne. They've got space there." She said. "I thought maybe you guys would like to go hang out there? She said she could use technical management. They have people calling with work for us."

Mark looked surprised. "Yeah?"

"That would be awesome." Barbara said. "Thanks Kerry. I'm a little over the chaos, and it's going to be months before anyone'll come and do anything about our houses. That's what our neighbor told us today – and he's with FEMA."

Barbara was a tall woman with curly brown hair and freckles, now dressed in a tank top and leggings under the leather riding jacket she had taken off and slung over the bike.

Kerry had met her at company parties and get togethers for years, and knew she had a high level bank job. "They've got AC and high speed internet." She reminded them. "And the hotel she found has room service."

"Sold." Barb said firmly. "Can we head up there tomorrow?"

"Hey." Mark said. "What are we supposed to do with the house?" He asked his wife. "Just leave everything there?"

"We can have Gus watch it for us. He'd do that." Barb said. "I'm sure Kerry would appreciate you booking more business to replace all the stuff I'm sure got canceled down here, and it'll give me a chance to work remote into our offices."

Kerry gave them a thumbs up. "Chili's on." She pointed at the door. "Zoe's there too, Mark. The shelter her family's in was getting crazy." She backed towards her car. "I gotta go or I'll miss the ferry. Think about it tonight. If you guys want to go, head on up. Colleen's expecting you."

"Rockstar!" Barb returned the thumbs up. "Kerry, you're the bomb. We'll get ourselves sorted out tomorrow and get going. Thank you! Thank you!"

Kerry waved at them as she got to the car and walked around it to the driver's side, opening the door and sliding inside into the hot interior, with it's pungent smell of warm leather and the faintest trace of Dar's perfume.

She paused a moment, watching Mark and his wife go inside the building, after pausing to look at the built out structure they'd reinforced the porch with. She started the engine and turned up the air a bit, then put the SUV into drive and headed out.

She thought about the day, as she drove up the main street towards the route that would take her home and felt in contrast to the previous one, it had ended with far less drama, and far more progress and she hadn't ended up on cable news again.

As she headed for MacArthur Causeway, she saw National Guard troops assembling at Bayfront Park, apparently using Bayside shopping center as a command point. Looking through the downed trees, she could see the shops, windows boarded up and the grounds scoured as though someone had scrubbed them with a bristle brush.

Two large trucks were parked sideways across the road that lead out to the Port, blocking it and when she got to the turn to go east, she could see the same large trucks and a roadblock stopping progress out to the beach as well.

There was a line of cars ahead of her, and she craned her neck, but didn't see her in laws in it. "Lucky!" She settled back in her seat and relaxed, watching as several cars ahead of her were turned around amidst raucous horn blaring and flipping off and yells of incoherent rage.

Then it was her turn. She put the window down as the National Guardsman approached, his mottled camo uniform almost black with sweat. "Hi." She greeted him with a mild smile. "Long day?" She added, with more than a note of sympathy in her voice.

The guardsman looked at her with a moment of wry gratitude. "Yes, ma'am, it has been." He said. "Can I ask where you're going?"

"Home." Kerry proffered her driver's license. "Sorry everyone's being such a jerk to you."

He flashed his light on the license and then handed it back to her. "Thank you, Ms Roberts." He had a quietly educated, uninflected voice. "I really appreciate that, especially at the end of a really crappy day."

"Anything I need to be worried about?" Kerry leaned her arm on the window edge.

The man smiled. "Not where you're going, no, ma'am. We've just had a lot of folks trying to get out to South Beach and not wanting to take no for an answer. Don't even know why. It's all a wreck out there."

"It is. There's storm wrack all on South Point and that marina's a mess." Kerry agreed. "And they lost a lot of beach."

"Just people being curious I guess." The guard shook his head a little. "Got nothing better to do.. or maybe they want to go out there to see what they can find if you.. ah..know what I mean."

"Looting you mean?"

"You know it. Lot of pricey real estate out on this causeway."

Well, it was true. Kerry pondered for a mitigating factor and then had to stop, since she really couldn't... or could she? "Maybe they work out there?" She finally suggested. "We had a lot people show up at our offices, because it was such a mess where they lived."

The guard cocked his head to one side and took his time thinking about that, in no rush to move on to the car behind Kerry's. "It could be some." He concluded at last. "But I got my orders, no one goes past here who doesn't live past her, or has official business."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, even given the water moat we're behind." Kerry told him. "But please let our deckhands through or we'll be in real trouble."

He laughed. "No they're picking them up with the work boat off the edge of Bayside here." He pointed to his left. "You're all good, ma'am. Let me go talk to this guy behind you yelling." He took a step back and put his fingers between his teeth, letting out a whistle. "Open the gates for this one!" He pointed at Kerry's SUV. "Resident!"

Kerry wished she had a cold drink to leave with him. But she didn't, so she just gave him a little wave, rolled up the car window and moved along the road through the opening the other guards made to let her pass.

It was empty and quiet on the causeway, and as she passed the man made islands she could see some small amount of marine activity around them, boats circling the edges, some pleasure some with the flashing lights of law enforcement.

It was expensive real estate. The houses on those islands were hugely expensive, built individually on squeezed in lots unlike the condos they had out on the island she lived on. But Kerry was thinking of those people she'd seen the previous day, out where Maria lived.

Those were houses, with families, who valued their homes just as much as ... well, probably more than some of the people out on these ones, because much of this property was investment, or second homes, or a nice place on the water to spend some time in winter.

Kerry wasn't either naïve or stupid. She had been born and grown up in privilege and now she lived that way with a home on a private island, and a cabin in the Keys. And now she owned an office building and who knew? Maybe a historic homesite in Coconut Grove.

She understood, in a politically savvy way that this gave her stupendous advantages and she understood completely she could take credit for almost none of it.

For their business success? Yes, that she could say she had a hand in. But even that came with the understanding that they'd gotten breaks due to Dar's past others hadn't. Kerry was fine with all that. It was what it was. She could not go back and change her past.

Wouldn't, really, even if she could as it had all led to her being the person she was and in this moment, she really liked the person she'd grown into and she appreciated the life they lead and the advantages they had. She would never pretend otherwise.

But she did question, here in the privacy of her leather seated luxury SUV that she'd just pulled onto the ferry ramp to her private island home on – she did question if it all always had to be all about how much money you had and who you knew.

"Just made it." The deck hand waved at her. "They told us you were coming, we held the last one for you, Ms Kerry."

"Thanks Juan." Kerry pulled the car onto the ferry. "I really appreciate that – though I had cot reserved for me in our office building back there in the Grove." She said. "No power, but a nice pot of chili and some dominos going on."

"Hahaha." Juan secured the chocks behind her wheels. "Oh nah, I'm looking forward to getting to the bunkhouse over there tonight and get some sweet, sweet AC. I stayed at home last night. Phwwooo." He mimed wiping sweat off his brow and flinging it on the deck. "Not tonight!"

Kerry left the windows open and turned the engine off, taking in the briskening ocean breeze as the ferry pulled away from the dock and started across the channel.

In the ferry cab, Juan had joined five or six others, the workers from the terminal now going back over to the island and glad to be doing so. They would get a bunk and a meal in the marine mess, and Kerry felt they considered themselves lucky.

Lucky, like Arthur had said he felt that morning. Lucky to be comfortable and taken care of, and in that sense, privileged. Maria had said when she called her, that she felt lucky, because so many others were suffering so much, and yet she was so thankful that Kerry had made sure she was taken care of.

So was it all about wealth and connections? Or what you did with them? Did you have an obligation to use what advantages you had in the service of others? Kerry regarded the darkening skyline, outlined in the fading twilight. No, you really had no obligation aside from whatever one you created for yourself.

With a faint shake of her head, Kerry retired the subject as insoluble and turned her attention to the challenges of the day instead, remembering an entire inbox she hadn't even had a chance to look at. "Ugh." She propped her head up with one elbow perched on the edge of the window.

But maybe there would be one in there from Dar. Her eyebrow quirked. "I'll sort newest to oldest." She told her reflection in the side mirror. "Probably makes more sense anyway. They only get angrier and might as well start with the worst of them first."

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The lab was a clutter of cables and racks and rolling small tables with monitors plopped on top of them and connectors draped over and down to the floor.

On one side of the room, a single rack was filled with server gear, humming loudly in that sound range that seemed geared to annoy the human ear and there were multiple air conditioning vents overhead cooling the room to a dampish chill.

It was familiar in the extreme to Dar, but she itched to tidy it up, knowing the lab in their own office would never in a million years look like such of a mess.

She couldn't stand loose cables and tangles of fiber, or stuff draped over things haphazardly.

Everyone in the company knew that. Techs carefully coiled up cables into perfectly spherical rounds, fastened by tabs of Velcro and all of the racks, test area or not, had meticulously routed connections with just the right bend radius to ensure the problem free passage of packets without any pinched or kinked impediments.

"So." Scott rubbed his hands as he bumped a cart forward. "Jocko, you got the connections done there?"

"Almost."

Dar pushed the mess aside in her head and focused on the gear instead, resting on the rolling cart in a pile of gleaming mechanical objects.

On the cart was a helmet, looking like a cross between a flight helmet a pilot might use and a infantry helmet you might see on the ground. It was steel blue, and it had long cables coming out of the back of it, and it was sitting on what looked like a set of football shoulder pads.

Dar came over, leaving her backpack behind near one of the rolling tables and picked up the helmet, turning it around and peering inside.

It was padded, and the surface was covered in metal leads, and she nodded slightly. "Looks like they're staying put now."

"Huh?" Scott peered at her. "Oh, the contacts. Yeah." He said. "That last thing you did with the little gimble really got them solid. Haven't had one come off since."

One of the techs came over. "Can I get this ready for ya?" He indicated the helmet. "We've been using the hell out of it."

Dar handed him the helmet, then she half turned and hooked one of the rolling stools scattered over the lab with her foot and pulled it over, sitting down on it. "Let me make it easier on you." She remarked, since the tech was on the shorter side, a little shorter than Kerry in fact.

"Ah, we got a step stool over there." The tech smiled though, as he worked. "I'm used to dealing with you tall people. I don't even mind being called Shorty. Better than what my brothers called me."

The other techs settled on stools around the lab, watching in anticipation.

Dar watched as the helmet was swabbed with alcohol wipes, the sharp, antiseptic scent rising to her nose. She'd worn it before naturally, since the prototype had been developed in her own office, and almost everyone on her team had taken a turn in putting it on and suffering the initial testing cycles.

Given her a headache, mostly. Dar had left the testing to her younger programmers, the gamers, who fully enjoyed the experience no matter how weird the programming got and concentrated on tuning the hardware level controls and interfaces for it.

Arthur kept trying to convince her to let him write an RPG for it, oblivious to the top secret proprietary technology they'd had to very carefully file a patent on, seeing potential in it no matter that most of the testing data had resulted in purple triangles and block figures lurching around.

"Okay, it's ready." Jocko was standing at the rack full of matte black computing gear, with no labels on the exterior, a compute stack Dar and Elvis had built in their small lab from carefully sourced components. "Ready?"

The tech next to her put the helmet down, and then picked up the shoulder pads. "Let me get these on you." He stepped around behind Dar and settled them onto her, adjusting them a little. "Confused hell out of the guys out a West Point when we asked for a bunch of these I tell ya."

"I bet." Dar let her hands rest on her knees. "But they work." She shifted her shoulders a little as he adjusted the platform, and then waited as he stepped to the side and picked up the helmet. She held her head still as it came down over her and muffled her hearing.

“They sure do, and talk about a bargain.” Scott’s voice sounded slightly garbled. “Cheaper than those control surfaces even.”

The helmet felt snug and compressed her temples. It was heavy, and uncomfortable until the tech clicked in the support onto the shoulder pads and then those took most of the weight and spread it out. She could feel the faint chill of the contacts as they touched her skin and waited, as they ran the startup routine.

She could hear the faint rustling as the bone conducting rings turned on and the odd sensation, almost an itch but not as the leads activated, able to send and receive electrical signals through her skin, into her nervous system underneath it.

“Ready?” Scott asked.

Dar lifted her hands in a half shrug. “Sure?”

“Okay, closing the visor.” The tech reached around and slid the flexible glass cover over the front, blocking her vision. “Start ‘er up.”

“Starting.” Jocko’s voice confirmed.

For a moment, it was just dark and she could hear the techs around her shifting around, the squeaks of wheels under the stools, the rustle of fabric. She could smell the electrical smell of the room, that mixture of offgassing plastic and heated metal that was so typical of high technology.

She took a breath of it, relaxing her body as she heard the whisper of the startup crackling through the bone conductance pads and felt the padded edge of the visor as it pressed against her skin and blocked out all the surrounding light.

Then suddenly she was somewhere else. A leafy forest erupted around her, as crisply clear in her vision as reality would have been, and as she took a breath, the smell of wood and moss and outside air was present. It almost made her jump, and she did feel herself tense as she tried to reconcile the change.

She could hear the sound of the branches over her head, and a bird. Slowly she turned her head and the vision rotated, clearly, with no pixellation, as real as any sense memory she could think of. It was completely immersive, and as she looked in all directions, it was hard to take in.

She looked down, and found herself sitting on a fallen tree, in army style fatigues, in a body outline not quite her own, the hands of it resting on scuffed knees and as she flexed her hands, she watched them move in her vision. “Huh.”

“It’s something isn’t it?” Scott’s voice intruded, excited. “You see what we mean? It’s different, right?”

It was different. Dar couldn’t precisely define what the quality of the difference was except to think inside her own head that it was more real. “Yeah.” She answered, after a pause. “It is.”

“What’d you do?” Jocko asked. “We were all wondering, you know? Ever since we got the drop. Then we couldn’t ask you.”

“Yeah I know. The hurricane. What did I do? Interesting question.” She stood up off the stool and took a short step forward, knowing she had cables behind her, and saw booted feet move on a thickly pine needle strewn ground. “It’s different all right.”

The clarity of the world was the equal of what she’d see with the helmet off, Dar realized. It was more than high definition. The rendering was realtime quality. “There’s no lag.” She lifted her hand and moved it, then moved it back. “That’s the difference.”

“Huh?” Scott moved closer. “What does that mean?”

What did it mean? The sim was designed to take a video scenario and build a reasonably realistic three dimensional world out of it, using subcutaneous reactions to allow the user to experience a virtual reality. They had programmed in the ability to produce appropriate sounds and scents delivered through the electrical leads, and Dar had felt it had been reasonably successful.

But as she looked around in this mock world now, rather than being aware of it being projected around her, she felt like she was actually in that place. There was a clarity and response to the surroundings that was different, a quantum leap difference that changed the experience in a way she hadn't anticipated.

A sound made Dar turn her head, and she looked into the forested distance, trying to decide if it was something she'd heard in the sim, or in the room around her and couldn't. "Turn it off." She finally said, recognizing the distraction and the urge to try and explore the experience.

The world disappeared and it was dark, just long enough for the tech to unlatch and move the visor up and out of her way.

Dar blinked, and felt a moment of dissociation that was quite disconcerting. "So." She sat there, thinking for a long moment. "What did I do. What I did was streamline the rendering pipeline mechanics."

Jocko was watching her, his eyes a little squinty. "Is that... like a routine, or..?"

"It's all machine code." Dar shook her head a little, conscious of the helmet still on her, the contacts now warmed to her skin temperature. "Sort of the layer below the programming. That's the tuning I was working on." She finally looked up at them. "So yes. It's more realistic because it's more efficient. There's no lag in what your eyes see in the sim and what your brain perceives is going on."

"Okay." Scott sat down on a rolling stool and rolled over to face her. "So this is great. It's gonna knock their socks off tomorrow. Woo hoo. All that stuff." He leaned his elbows on his knees and stared intently at her. "Here's the pitch. We take this, and we make it so we can interface with all kinds of stuff so we can train people and make em know what it's really like before they do it."

Dar regarded him. "What kind of stuff?"

"Military stuff."

"You already have sims for that." Dar said, after a moment, her brows creasing. "You have mock tanks and airplanes and whatever. I've seen them."

"No, not that..." Scott paused. "Let's go talk a minute. I can't say it here." He looked at the tech behind Dar. "Take that off and put it away."

Dar felt the helmet lift up off her. She waited for the pads to come off as well, then she stood up and followed Scott out of the room. The rest of the techs stayed behind and she was conscious of the silence as they walked down the hallway and then he swiped a card to enter a room.

A small conference room, with a round table and two chairs. When the door closed behind them, Dar felt the air compress around them and she was aware of a sense of pressure against her eardrums, soundproofing giving them privacy.

"Okay." Scott sat down, his expression now more shrewd than bland or good natured. "You're a civ. I get it, but you grew up around the military so I know you know the deal with us."

Dar sat down and remained silent, because in fact she had no idea what he was talking about. She just raised her eyebrow to encourage him to continue as she folded her hands on the table before her.

"It's not about the mechanical stuff. We can train that." Scott said, after a brief pause. "Like you said we got sims. We can put someone in a tank and teach them how to make it go. That's not a big deal we've been doing it for years, and really most of the time we got the real things to train with we don't need sims for that."

Dar nodded, after a moment, as apparently, he was waiting for some reaction from her.

"It's the mental stuff we want to train. What it's like to pull the trigger and hit someone. What it looks like when a missile launcher blows up someone twenty feet from you." He went on. "We got tons of cam footage of guys in battle, you know? That's where that view you got is from."

He paused again and looked at her. "It's a great way to give people experience, you get me?" He waited, expectantly. "You do get it, right?"

Dar stared back at him. "You want people to know how it feels to kill someone before they have to do it." She finally said, enunciating her words clearly. "Feel it in here." She reached up and tapped her chest. "Not just watch the video."

Slowly he nodded, looking a bit relieved. "I knew you'd get it." He said. "It's all about lethality. We want to extend the contacts so you can hold a gun and feel it, and a knife, and rig it up so you can walk around with it. That's the pitch. A way to get recruits experience without them being out there having to pull the trigger the first time."

Well. It made sense. "Okay." Dar said slowly.

"Okay you can do it?" Scott asked eagerly. "You can do that, and make it be like the helmet is?"

Could she? Dar took a breath and let it out. "I have to check how that integration came together." She temporized. "Might need more processing horsepower." Her fingertips twitched, and she felt a surge of curiosity as to what the hell her code had gone and done. "We can try it, sure."

Scott sat back, and smiled. "It's gonna be awesome." He said, with a sigh of contentment. "I told my boss it was gonna boot the both of us upstairs and it's gonna be worth the bonus I told him we'd give you when you did it."

Dar smiled briefly. "Lets let me do it first." She said. "Who are we demonstrating this for tomorrow?" She asked, knowing Kerry would ask when she called her and told her whatever it was she was going to tell her given she didn't really know for sure what the hell she'd actually done yet.

"DOD." Scott said. "Guy in charge has a new guy who thinks he knows technology." He seemed skeptical. "Got all up in my shorts about bringing in a civilian third party to do the programming."

"Ah."

"I'm gonna enjoy introducing him to you."

Oh boy. "Sounds like fun." Dar now sat back herself. "I'll try not to get us into too much trouble."

Scott now seemed more relaxed, and almost cocky. He drummed his fingers on the table. "You like steak, right? I remember you liking steak. There's a good steakhouse down the road. I think we're due a steak and a whisky. You up for that?"

"Sure."

"Great. Lets get the team, and head out. Then I can drop you by the lodge." Scott got up and stretched, then clapped his hands together. "This is gonna be great." He walked over and released the door lock, opening it and sticking his head outside. "Hiii youuuuu!!!!" He let out a bellow. "Chow!"

Dar got up. "Let me go grab my backpack." She said. "I'm gonna need it."

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The steak house was a one off. A place that had been there for a hundred years, and wasn't a chain. It had a smoke tinged ceiling and a long, long wooden bar and the tables were full of almost all men around them.

Dar checked her watch, as they sat with a round of drinks, waiting for their appetizers to arrive. "Be right back." She got up and made her way between the tables, aware of the glances that followed her as she went outside and left the murmur of conversation behind.

Outside it was just dark, and she went over to the post and rails that, she supposed, at one time they'd tied horses to and perched on it as she took out her cell phone from her pocket, opening it and dialing the main number for the office.

She was surprised, but glad when it was Kerry who answered. "Hey." She responded, to her partner's speech.

"Hey hon!" Kerry's tone altered from business like to delight. "Wow I was just about to try calling you. How was your flight?"

"Fine." Dar said. "I'm out at dinner with the project team."

“And?”

“And, something I did the day before the storm, when I sent them that version update did something unexpected.” Dar said, reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose. “They are over the moon about it. Want me to extend it further. We’ve got a demo to the brass in the morning.”

Kerry paused a moment to absorb that. “That sounds great.” She said. “Doesn’t it?”

“If I knew what I actually did? Sure.”

Kerry chuckled. “Oh hon.”

“Yeah anyway. I’m going to unpack what I sent tonight and see if I can figure it out. They do like it though, so at least there’s that.” Dar said, in a wryly bemused tone. “How’s it going there?”

“How’s it going here. Well, your father and his friends have turned our office into Fort Knox.” Kerry told her. “And the guys said to tell you whatever it is you did on the way to the airport worked and they sent the results out to the pharmacy company.”

Dar frowned. “I should have checked it first.”

“Hon.”

Dar exhaled. “I know. I’m impossible.” She acknowledged. “But they know better.”

“But you weren’t here, and we got calls from them all afternoon.” Kerry said, gently. “If it’s not right, it can be fixed, but at least they have something to work with. Arthur said he talked to their support guy before they went to dinner and they sounded okay.”

“Mm.” Dar made a low, grunting noise.

“And it’s nice to at least make someone happy. Aside from Mark’s wife, who’s over the moon about them going up to Melbourne.” Kerry went on. “Maybe you can call John tomorrow and check in with him.”

“I’ll check the repo tonight after I get done with this dinner.” Dar said. “It’s nice to be able to pick up a phone and do something reasonable like talk to you with it for a change I’ll tell you that.”

Kerry chuckled. “I was going to call you, then go home and shower and just have a cup of tea on the patio. I’ve been here plowing through my email since I got back over to the island.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Most of the yelling you already know about.” Kerry told her briskly. “I did get a surprise note from Anabelle Squash at the county – she wants to talk on Monday.” She said. “Maybe she can use some of the material we bought for the ten other jobs we just lost due to this thing.”

Dar listened to a soft whir of wings nearby, and wondered if it was a bat. “We’ll figure it out.” She said, after a moment of mutual silence. “Anyway, they said I’d be on a plane home tomorrow after the demo. So hang in there and we’ll work it out.”

“I know.” Kerry responded. “We always do.”

“We do.” Dar felt better, just with the exchange. “Let me go get through this dinner before those guys have a couple more rounds of bourbon.”

“You don’t like bourbon.”

“I’m not drinking it.” Dar acknowledged. “So that works out. My contribution to the festivities is a Kahlua milkshake with Nutella sprinkles.” She listened to Kerry’s laugh, echoing softly into her ear. “That change I made... it’s pretty cool, Ker.”

“It is, huh?”

“If I can figure out what the hell I did, it’s got promise for the gaming platform.” Dar said. “Could be interesting.”

"You'll figure it out." Kerry echoed her earlier statement. "But do me a favor and don't tell your coders about it until after they finish what's on their plate now? They'll never do anything else."

Dar chuckled. "True." She said. "All right. Night Ker. I'll buzz you in the morning, let you know how it goes."

"Got it. Good night, my love." Kerry responded. "See you tomorrow night."

They hung up, and Dar spent a moment regarding the rising moon over the mountains, tapping the edge of her phone against her jaw. Then she slid the phone into her pocket and made her way back to the door of the restaurant.

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It was dark, the sun still behind the horizon as well as obscured by some clouds that were barely just visible. Kerry reached the southeasternmost part of the island, just before the arc of the marina and paused, slowing down in her run to taken in the small whitecaps rolling against the seawall.

She was in a tank and cotton shorts, with dark purple weights wrapped around her wrists and ankles complete with carefully applied reflective strips because with all the golf carts whipping around, you never knew.

She stood, breathing easily, one sneakered foot braced against a coral upthrust, the onshore breeze smelling richly salty and because it was coming from the northeast, free of the scent of sewage from the treatment plant over on Virginia Key.

It must have seemed like a great idea, back in the day, to find the easternmost point of the easternmost island on the far end of a causeway to plop one of your main sewage treatment plants on, there where a dump out into the Atlantic ocean was so handy.

Around it was a public park, and a beach, and walking trails and there in the middle, easily seen on satellite, sat the Central treatment plant with its settling tanks and chemical pools and when they got a huge surge of rain down the pipes it would roll over all of it and into the sea.

Kerry wondered how much had been sucked out from the storm surge. Dar had commented they weren't going anywhere near the ocean in the area until sometime next year.

Ironic in the extreme, since she was pretty sure that if someone could buy the key, move the plant, and then develop the land with multimillion dollar homes they would sell like hotcakes until someone dug a pool into their back yard and ended up into one of the tanks they would have buried to get rid of them.

And there was that smell, and the untreated sewage that would flow over and into the sea.

Constant irritant not only to their neighbors here on her island, but all the way up South Beach when the current was running close to shore and they had to close all the beaches.

Ah well. She stretched her back out and flexed her hands, turning to skirt the marina on her round of the track the followed the shoreline, taking care to watch the edge of it as much of the gravel had been sucked out to sea and there was still debris uncollected around it.

"Ms Kerry!"

Kerry hauled up and turned, spotting the white shirt and khaki shorts in the gloom. "Hey." She turned back around and waited, a smile appearing as she recognized one of her favorite of the staff heading her way.

One of the beach club waiters arrived at her side, carrying a tray with a china cup on it, and a leather wineskin over his shoulder. "I thought I saw you out here."

"You did." Kerry smiled at him. "When did you get here, Carlos?"

"Just last night." Carlos put a twist of lemon into the cup and then expertly poured a stream of steaming espresso from the wineskin, the scent of it rising between them. "We got lucky, you know? My family. We stayed by my mama down in the Gables and the house is okay, just no power."

"I'm glad to hear that." Kerry accepted the cup, and took a sip of the hot, pungent, strong beverage. "Boy that tastes good. I can never make it right at home."

"It takes a special pot, you know?" Carlos said. "And the motion, in the wrist?" He made a sinuous, mixing gesture. "It's very nice to just come back and do normal things like that. I was cutting up a tree yesterday and all my hands have blisters." He chattered along confidently. "But I got to the fire station and could use their desk phone to call in and they said to come here."

"It's been busy." Kerry agreed. "We've been busy."

"Oh yes, I have heard. Everyone is talking about you guys and la boats and the little van and everything." He nodded emphatically. "And did you know the governor and all of those people are staying by you?" He asked. "They were in the club for dinner last night."

"Kinda dorky?" Kerry hazarded a guess, from his expression.

"Not so nice." He agreed wryly. "One of them, a large man, bothered Alecia and wouldn't leave her alone. Robert finally took her away from it."

Alecia, one of the hostesses, a tall and very elegant chestnut haired woman with beautifully chiseled cheekbones and a gentile, gracious manner. "Wow. Sorry to hear that." Kerry murmured. "As if there isn't enough tough stuff going on."

"Its true." Carlos filled up her coffee cup a second time. "I mean, you know." He said. "It's like that here? The men think we're here for them." He paused. "And sometimes the ladies too, and we're used to it but he was too rough about it."

"Drunk?"

"I don't think so, no." Carlos paused thoughtfully. "Just crude, you know?"

Kerry sighed. "I know. Probably a good thing my parents in law got back late and didn't go over there. That would have shown up in the weekly rag and given more work to our lawyer."

"It's true." Carlos said again. "I said you know, if Papa Roberts was here, he would have kicked that man right into his cojones and they would have popped up right out his mouth, it's very sure."

Kerry stifled a laugh, almost spitting out her coffee.

Carlos chuckled as well. "Anyway, I just wanted to say good morning and bring some of this coffee. Now I will go back and get ready for the golf men to come for breakfast." He winked at her, and turned, retreating back towards the club with his wineskin full of espresso, and her empty cup.

Kerry regarded his lithe figure as he trotted up the steps to the outside patio, where a coworker was busy setting up tables in the pre dawn murk. The chat had made her feel a little sad inside, given the way he just accepted the ill treatment as part of the job.

Why did it have to be like that? "Why do people have to be jerks?" She mused aloud. "Because they can, Kerry. Because everyone says it's just how it is."

Having the convenience of espresso on her morning run was a familiar comfort. She appreciated the attention, and the taste of the strong coffee with it's hint of lemon tang on the edges felt full and rich in her mouth but...

Ah well. "Can't change that today." She turned and started back down the path to the marina, picking up her pace as she headed for the edge of the shore, her soles moving from the pavers to the gravel with a soft rhythmic crunch.

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Kerry sat at the dining room table, her half finished cup of tea in front of her along with a plate with half a banana muffin on it. She was freshly showered, and now dressed in a company polo shirt and dark green shorts and light green socks, ready for the day.

The television was on, and she was watching the early news, the just post dawn sky slowly lightening outside in a sedate pink glow.

She hiked up one knee against the edge of the table and took a sip of the tea, watching the helicopter shots of still flooded neighborhoods, shelters packed with uncomfortable looking people, and then, towards the end of the segment, almost as an offhand comment, a shot of the White House lawn where trees were down.

She'd seen that shot of the tree about two dozen times now. It didn't really surprise her, usually when a storm came through there were a few iconic shots that represented to the world what it was like to be there.

She remembered one where a kiteboarder, giving the onshore winds a try, had been slammed face first into the side of a beachfront motel and my god, she'd seen that so many times it had made her scream. It had become a meme on the internet and she still occasionally saw it in some facepalm memorial.

Then there'd been another storm in the islands, that had flooded an airport. That islands only airport, a small field near the ocean.

Every time they talked about that storm, there was that one shot of that one flooded airport, with the field covered in water and light posts sticking out of the waves, and a gull floating in the choppy waters. She could see it now in her mind, it's beak opening and closing in bemusement.

So now this storm, Hurricane Bob, who had ripped through Florida and caused who only knew how much damage to homes and businesses, and lives – would be remembered by a shot of a tree lying across the steps of the White House with a helicopter hovering over it.

Watching the national news, she realized the country had moved on from what had happened here where she was. It was more interesting to see the amazing sight of water in the streets of DC, congresspeople wading in the streets in their suits and the flag on the mall in tatters because no one remembered to take it down in all the chaos. That was new and different, and not just oh Florida again.

She shook her head, picking up the half muffin with it's layer of peanut butter and taking a bite of it. Even the local reporter seemed to acknowledge it, making a somewhat snarky comment as they came back to news of the area, the ticker below the anchor scrolling off it's never ending messages of shelters, and, a new thing, personal messages.

Personal messages, because communicating was so damn hard right now. The TV station had offered to accept messages from anyone, to anyone, and put it on their ticker so that people could try to find each other and discover if friends and family were okay.

It irritated Kerry. It made her think there should be something they could do in order to... well not to fix the problems because she realized there were things like flooded buildings that really were beyond their control but maybe they could come up with a plan, a way to do things so next time...

The next time. In a week, it would all just be frustration and anger, and people yelling and no one would think about what they would do differently next time. Just what they could do now to go back to normal and then it would be lost in a flood of politicians bluster and promises.

Well, maybe they could come up with some ideas and maybe after a while, someone would be interested.

Kerry finished her muffin and dusted off her fingertips, the sunlight coming in the sliding glass windows from the patio reflecting off the ring on her finger. She got up and picked up the plate and cup, taking it into the kitchen and rinsing them before she put them into the drying rack.

It was quiet in the condo. Andrew and Ceci had headed off some time ago, deciding to have breakfast at the mansion and then check on their boat, leaving Kerry to get herself ready for the day and whatever that had in store for her.

She could rummage around and figure out how to get the connection in the condo working, but she got up and picked up her backpack instead, slinging it over one shoulder and clicking her tongue.

Chino and Mocha came running, tails wagging. "Ready to go to the cottage, kids?" She asked them. "Lets go see how our friends are doing there this morning, okay? She said. "Lets get some work done!"

"Gruff!" Chino was the first to the front door and when Kerry opened it, she ran out and Mocha almost knocked Kerry over following her.

"Hey!" Kerry closed the door and went down the steps, walking over and down into the parking garage and throwing her pack into the passenger seat of the golf cart.

Chino and Mocha both jumped into the back, making the cart rock, as she turned the fob and released the brake. "Hang on you guys."

Both dogs sat down, pressing up against the back of the seat as she backed up and then swung the cart around and sent it up the slope to the road, pulling again to a halt when a string of cars came past heading towards the ferry dock in a parade of shiny well waxed gleam.

She was glad of the pause as it gave her time to retrieve her sunglasses from the storage box and put them on, relieved to cut the early morning sun as she waited for the line of posh cars to end.

There was a lot of them. Kerry looked up and down the road as car after car went past, until she finally saw the last of them, a black sedan with heavily tinted windows and surprisingly plain hubcaps she knew at once for security.

"Oh." She leaned back as it went by, then pressed the gas pedal down. "Probably the governor's buddy. Or maybe the governor himself." She turned left and went along the now empty road, glancing to her right as she caught motion to see a large crowd of land scape gardeners busy at work on the golf course.

Really? Kerry could have thought of a thousand other things it would have been better for those men to be doing rather than cleaning up that little 9 hole course but she focused her attention on steering around the clumps of gathered debris at the edge of the road and not running into anything.

Behind her, Mocha had laid down and Chino was still sitting, absorbing the breeze from their passage as they traveled around the edge of the course. There was a strong onshore wind this morning and it was almost comfortable despite the heat.

Kerry pulled the cart into one of the small lots to one side of the cottages and got out, grabbing her pack as the dogs joined her, following her closely as she walked across the sidewalks and into the back yard of the cottage, where the satellite van was parked.

All was quiet.

Kerry walked to the double French doors and opened one of them, hearing voices already inside. "Good morning, team."

"Hey boss!" Angela was just coming into the living room area, carrying a tray of coffee. "Oh boy, I could get used to those beds let me tell ya!"

"They're comfortable." Celeste agreed. She was seated at the table, working on a pile of message pads.

Arthur and Elvis were already on the couch, busy with their keyboards. They had plastic bottles of Coke on the table next to them and a pile of cookies and they both looked contented as clams.

They were morning people, or at least, working for the company they had become that way more or less the same way Kerry had. She offered flexible hours, and while many of the staff took advantage of it, especially those who had to work around childcare and school classes, most of the people who worked right around Dar showed up when she did.

Just like Kerry did. Just like she always had, since she'd started working for Dar way back when, and she'd check for her bosses' SUV in the lot when she pulled in, always glad when she beat her.

Well, at least until they started living together and it really made no difference. But there was something about Dar that made people want to step up and meet her mark. Kerry had felt that herself from day one, and though she knew being in love with her partner was a factor, that didn't change that inner expectation.

Besides, Dar was usually mellow in the morning and her staff had learned that was sometimes the best time to approach her. "You get any feedback from the Pharma guys?" Kerry asked, as she put her pack down and started getting out her laptop. "Dar was asking."

Arthur glanced up and over at her. "That guy that works for them, Tony? He said he was going to call us in the morning today. They were doing some tests."

"Good." Kerry said. "Did those files all get transferred from our friend of the friend of the governor?"

"They did." Elvis said. "They said they'd be back."

"I'm sure they will." Kerry plugged in her machine and opened it. "Since we're the only game in town right now." She sat down to wait for the machine to present to her a desktop in some useful format. "We hear from Colleen yet today?"

"Not yet." Angela said. "It's kinda early."

Eight am. "Not really." Kerry demurred.

"No." Celeste was smiling, a little, as she sat sorting pink slips of notepaper. "We always knew the day had started when Ms Roberts came in the door. Especially on Mondays." She said. "I had the early shift."

"I remember." Kerry leaned on her elbows. "It was always better to get into that mausoleum early and avoid the crowd at the elevators." She paused. "And you got the first crack at the pastalitos, of course."

Celeste chuckled. "They held yours apart." She glanced over at Kerry. "There was always a separate box, didn't you know?"

Kerry blinked and laughed a little. "I didn't."

"Maria took care of you guys. She knew those café people and she made sure they had what you liked every morning." Celeste reported. "Even if they ran out for everyone else. That and the plate lunches." She continued her sorting. "Especially the chicken imperial."

"Dar does like that." Kerry admitted. "I make it at home, but it doesn't taste the same."

Celeste nodded. "I do too. Whenever she was out, I knew I could score for lunch." She got up and brought the slips over to Kerry. "Okay, so... I think these are current customers, and these are people asking for you." She put them down. "These are some who are asking for Dar, and these.. I don't know what these are."

Kerry picked up the last pile and started going through them. "Those are sometimes the most interesting." She said. "Lets see what we've got here." She said. "Angela, see if you can get Colleen on the phone. Lets get someone up there to call those currents."

"Right you are, boss."

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Dar walked quietly down the hall, mindful of the very pre dawn stillness of the hotel around her. Far off, she could just hear the faintest sound of the rattle of dishes, guessing that somewhere in some part of it some night room service waiter was bringing around a nightcap.

Or, perhaps, bringing an East Coaster like her some coffee and cereal in what was for them the middle of the night. She rode the elevator down and went into one of the more public areas, crossing an empty hall to the hotel gym.

Open 24 hours, and with her keycard, it was. Dar pushed the door open and entered, letting it close behind her and she took in a breath of chlorinated air from a swimming pool and the scent of spindle grease from the rows of exercise machines.

Both appealing, but Dar's target was in the back of the high ceilinged room, a climbing wall that spread across the entire back of the facility, and one she remembered from the last time she'd stayed there. She'd woken again early, typically, and ended up so engrossed by the wall she almost missed her morning meeting.

Now she faced it again with a feeling of pleasure, and sauntered over to the stand that held a block of chalk, covering her hands with it before she approached the climbing rig.

She wanted one, and had pondered the idea of putting one somewhere... maybe on the inner courtyard of their building? Attaching it to the outside of the condo would be giving too much free entertainment to her neighbors.

Dar studied the hand grips and reached up as far as she could, taking a firm grab on one of the holds and pulling herself up enough to get a foothold under her. Would that be worse than giving that much entertainment to her staff?

She frowned a bit, then shifted to another set of holds, working her way steadily upward.

A thought occurred to her. "I could build a whole jungle gym at that new place." She murmured. That would be cool." She pictured it in her head, a wooden and steel structure out in the thickly wooded area surrounding the house, quiet and private.

She could make it modular, so she could move it around and change it.

She got to the top of the section and considered, wondering if she should go down and then up in another area. She could see the grips she'd end up on not all that far away and without much thinking about it, she coiled her body and released the handholds she had, shoving away with her legs and reaching out to the new ones.

Halfway there, it did occur to her exactly how idiotic the motion was but by then it was too late and all she could do was hope her grip would hold and not drop her to the floor twenty feet below.

She felt the rubber touch her fingers and she clenched them instinctively as her body collided with the wall and she swung wildly for a moment, convinced she wasn't going to hold on. Then her feet caught on two of the protrusions below her and she was able to adjust her grip.

After a moment to regain her composure, Dar started down and around this new section, one that jutted out a bit and provided her more of a challenge.

Near the floor she reached an outcrop and let herself hang from it, stretching her body out for a long moment before she released her hands and dropped the short distance, taking a deep breath.

"Lady, you are crazy."

Dar turned to find a young man in a tank top and cotton shorts nearby, with a towel around his neck. He was lithe and muscular, with curly black hair and a neatly trimmed beard and moustache. "Am I?"

"Jumping like that with no rope?" The man said, his voice rising. "With no one in here? Yeah, you are crazy."

Dar shrugged a little bit. "Seemed like fun at the time." She turned and regarded the next section of wall, which curved up and was, apparently, the most advanced part. The top part of it was higher, and the handholds seemed further apart.

"You gonna put a harness on for that and use the belay?"

Dar half turned. "No."

The young man came over to her. "You're going to freestyle that?" He said. "I'm gonna call 911 so they can get ready for it."

It felt like a challenge. Dar felt the prickle of it tingle her arms. "I'll be fine." She reassured the man. "Don't you have something else to do?"

"With a crazy lady here about to go break her neck? No I don't!" The man said, cheerfully. "G'wan Tarzan. Have at it."

Dar blinked mildly at him, then she walked over and put more chalk on her hands and went towards the wall, taking the last steps at a faster pace and ending with a leap in the air, catching two handholds as high as she could and pulling herself up.

“No no no... I was just...” The man yelled from below. “Crazy lady stop that!”

But it was fun. Dar got a foothold then swarmed up the wall, her body now used to the activity and well awake and it reminded her suddenly of the wall she’d climbed back on the rafting trip. That same feeling of motion and challenge.

She hadn’t enjoyed it then, because of the terror of the situation they’d been in but she enjoyed it now, making her way hand over hand up the side of the artificial cliff until she reached the top and then worked her way meticulously around the promontory to the other side.

She paused there, and glanced down, to find her new friend watching her with his hands clenched in his hair in such patent horror it nearly made her laugh and lose her grip.

She looked down, and wondered for a brief moment what it would be like just to let go and plummet, to land on the ground like she remembered doing on that cliff. She dreamed about it sometimes, that fall, and the tumbling in mid air, and the landing like she’d had springs in her boots.

Almost. Dar imagined herself doing it, hearing the scream in her head from the guy at the base of the wall and feeling the jar of the landing all the way up into her hips.

It would be fun. As long as she actually landed on her feet and not on her head and end up getting dragged off to the emergency room.

Dar sighed. Ah well. She had a demonstration to do that was important, and so she maneuvered her way to another hold and started down the angle, depending now on the grip of her fingers to hold her against the tug of gravity.

She could feel the strain across her back, and was glad she’d spent the time she had over the last few months in the gym doing pull ups as she spent a bit more time in climbing around whatever she could find to climb on.

Halfway down the angle straightened and it became a more conventional descent, and she ended it with a calmly sedate hop at the very bottom, turning and dusting her hands off as she turned to face her watcher. “Tolja.”

“You a pro?” The man was now just chuckling.

“I’m an IT geek.” Dar told him. “Excuse me. I got a pool calling my name.” She indicated the water in the distance.

“No, seriously.”

“I’m an IT geek.” Dar repeated. “I just like climbing. Do you climb?” She indicated the wall behind them. “It’s fun, right?”

He hesitated. “Naw, I don’t mess with that.” He said. “But hey, I gotta get to work. Don’t let me hold you up.” He backed away and gave her a brief wave, then headed towards a nondescript door in the back of the gym.

Dar watched him for a moment, head cocked slightly in mild puzzlement, since his attitude had changed so quickly and for no reason she knew of.

Unless he didn’t like IT people? Dar gave a light shrug. Possible. Sometimes people didn’t, assuming they were either rude or jerks or snort laughing stereotypes. She made her way over to the pool and pulled the tshirt off over her head and setting it on one of the brown wooden stands and adding her shorts to it.

She took off her sneakers and went to the edge of the pool in her swimsuit, stepping off and going headfirst into the water, already anticipating the cool bite against her skin.

After the climb it felt good, and she swam with lazy strokes end to end in the pool for a half hour, until all the tension had wound it’s way out of her and she ended the last lap on her back, floating until her fingertips touched the wall.

Over her head the ceiling was tall and in the east corner of it she could see the dawn rising, the light coming up over the mountains through the smoked glass panels.

She lay there just breathing for a minute, feeling the water advance and retreat over her body as she inhaled and exhaled, feeling a sense of animal comfort. Coffee, she decided, rolling in the water like a seal and gliding over to the steps.

There were towels in a shelving unit and she took one as she got out, drying herself off as she started to hear more motion around the gym, and saw two or three bodies claiming rowing machines and a treadmill. Idly ruffling her hair dry she walked over to where she'd left her tshirt and shorts, now spotting her morning's friend standing behind one of the counters.

He was facing another man, who was taller and thicker, with the air of a football coach about him. He had a finger in the smaller man's face and was talking fiercely, though keeping his voice low and glancing briefly around at the customers.

Now why, Dar wondered, was the morning being started off by someone being an asshole? She pulled on her shirt and shorts over her still damp one piece suit and sat down to resume her sneakers. The smaller man was answering, his hands coming up in a placating gesture, but that only seemed to make the other man point harder.

No one in their right mind would get involved with what was obviously an employer and employee issue, and yet when Dar stood up and started walking it was in that direction.

What was it Kerry called it? Her paladin gene? This stupid instinct to mix it up in business she had no business being involved in that got her into trouble almost every time. Dar slung the towel around her neck as she approached the counter.

As they caught sight of her in their peripheral vision, both men stopped talking and the taller one turned coming over and putting his hands on the counter as she arrived. "Good morning, ma'am. How can I help you?" He asked, in a quiet tone.

Dar could see, in her own peripheral vision the smaller man standing there, looking off to one side, visibly steaming. "Can I talk to you a minute?" She asked mildly. "Somewhere a little more private?"

"Of course." He looked slightly surprised but stepped back and gestured towards the far end of the gym. "Lets go to the lounge. I think they've just brought orange juice in."

Dar followed him over to a small section of the floor that had been partitioned off with potted plants and dimmed lighting, where there were comfortable chairs and on one side, a juice bar that was just getting set up. It smelled of aromatherapy and lemon and was empty of guests.

The man walked over and picked up two glasses of juice from a tray on the counter and came back over to her, offering her one. "Now, how can I help you?"

All sweet consideration and peaches and cream. Dar took the glass. "Thanks." She said. "So I came in here pretty early, and the gentleman behind the counter out there was the only one here."

"Oh,yes?" He looked politely interested. "Seth. He's our morning setup man." He said. "He's always got some story to tell, mostly to avoid doing work."

"Well." Dar paused. "What I was going to tell you was, I was climbing up around on your wall there, and I think I startled him." She kept her own voice bland and mild. "Swinging around like a monkey, you know."

As she had spoken, she saw his face change and go from politely interested to actually interested. "Oh really?"

"Yeah, and the thing is, he tried to stop me and I didn't want him to get in trouble on my behalf, if you know what I mean, because I didn't listen to him." Dar regarded him intently. "I don't take direction well."

"Huh.. yeah, he was telling me about that. I wasn't sure .." The man paused. "You were climbing up the wall? He said you were doing it without any safety ropes and all that. That was true?"

Dar nodded, smiling at him, her pale eyes twinkling a little bit. "So I get it was dangerous." She said. "Wasn't his fault I did it anyway." She admitted. "All in all, he took it pretty well."

He was silent for a minute, glancing past her, then back to meet her eyes. "Ms..." He hesitated.

"Roberts." Dar supplied. "Dar Roberts. I was staying in the lodge overnight."

"Ms Roberts, that's a decent thing you just did." He said. "I was just ripping him a new one for not finishing the setup this morning and thought he was just making up some bullshit... excuse me." His face flushed. "I'm sorry, some nonsense like he always does."

"Story teller?" Dar asked, casually.

"Never stops." The man said. "Always making up stuff and messing with the guests.. makes em laugh, but man." He said. "Anyway, I'm glad this time it was legit, and I'll go tell him what you said. You didn't have to. Most don't care."

"No problem. But you know, you might want to leverage that."

About to turn away, he looked back. "Excuse me?"

"Guy makes people laugh... you must have classes and things here right? It's a public gym isn't it? Not just for the hotel?" She drained her glass and set it down. "They have a gal at a gym I go to who makes up all kinds of stuff and teaches classes. Everyone loves em, cause it keeps them from thinking about running in place or whatever they're doing you know?"

"Yeah?"

"They pay extra for her classes." Dar winked at him, and put the glass down on the counter. "Just a thought." She waved and headed off towards the door, shaking her head just slightly bemoaning the frequent lack of imagination people had.

Ah well. She dismissed the event and left the gym, walking through the hallways towards the elevator that would take her up to her room, where she would shower, dress, and head over to the mountain.

They would deliver their demo, she would talk to the brass. With any luck they'd end early and she could head back to the airport and home.

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There was an air of nervous expectation in the room as Dar entered with Scott, the techs already there, Jocko already heads down in the keyboard making sure everything was ready.

They were in the big conference room this time. Dar had presented in it before, and it had somewhat weathered leather seats and wood panel walls, and the smell of wax and cleaner recently applied.

She set her overnight bag near the wall and her backpack next to it, seeing no need now to have her laptop out and in use. She'd spent the evening last night scouring through the code and she thought she knew what had happened with her change.

She had no intention of explaining it. No one in the room would understand her. Dar had spent some time as she'd eaten breakfast thinking of what she was going to say to Scott and then found he was far too nervous to listen to it anyway.

All he'd wanted to talk about was who would be there, and that she had to 'be nice' to him.

Dar forbore to point out that she felt it was up to him to be nice to her, but she went to the neatly set up service in the corner and got herself a cup of jasmine tea and sat down with it. She felt relaxed and comfortable in her jeans and short sleeved shirt and now merely waited to see what was going to happen.

"Okay." Jocko finally looked up. "It's as ready as it's gonna be." He looked at Dar. "Want to check it?"

"No." Dar responded mildly. "Totally trust you know what you're doing." She took a sip of her tea, wishing they'd get on with it. It was already ten minutes after when they were supposed to have started, and she hoped that didn't mean it was going to be one of those days.

Scott was sweating. "They'll be here soon." He assured her. "Mary called me from the desk, and said they were coming down."

"It's your party." Dar said. "I'm just here for the chips and dip."

That made Jocko smile, and his shoulders relaxed. "These guys can be tough." He told her, as though excusing Scott's nerves. "But you're probably used to that."

"Yes, I am." Dar smiled back at him, with just a hint of a wink. "Listen, you have a good product here and you know what you're pitching. Just relax, and let it fly." She counseled them like she would her own team. "Let your work speak for itself."

"Easy for you to say." Scott sighed and went over to fuss with the cups again.

"It's my work, so sure it is." Dar folded her hands on the table. "It'll be fine, people. Even if it doesn't work or if it craps out everyone expects technology to do that. Relax."

Jocko made a face at her.

"I'll do the talking if it goes south." Dar almost laughed. "There's no one walking through that door who's going to rattle my ass."

"You don't know this guy." Scott muttered under his breath at her.

"He doesn't know me." Dar responded crisply. "Let him bring it. I can handle whatever he pulls."

That, at least, did relax them a little and they talked amongst themselves until the door lever shifted and the door pushed open into the room, and two men entered.

One was the brass who was running the program. Dar knew him relatively well. The second was a tall, ginger haired man with a thin face and very sharp gray eyes, dressed in civilian clothes she didn't know at all.

Know the man himself. She knew the type though, and had a sudden urge to kick him in the front of his pressed linen kneecaps. But she remained seated, unfolding her hands and picking up her cup of tea to take a sip of it as the military men around her snapped to attention.

"Where are.. there you are, Peterson." The brass came over to him. "Are you ready? We don't have much time for this." He glanced at the table. "Hello, Roberts. Good to see you."

"Hey Charlie." Dar responded casually. "Who's your friend?"

If she'd started tap dancing it could not have gotten a more startled response from the room and she enjoyed it. "And you should make some time. These guys have worked their asses off for this."

Charles Boots paused and regarded her for a moment. "Oh, sorry." He turned to the ginger haired man. "I forgot you never met. This is Robert Haribee, from the budget oversight office." He motioned the man forward. "Rob, this is Dar Roberts. She's the one who's cooking up this thing."

"Nice to meet you." Dar waited for the man to come over before she stood up and extended a hand to him, expecting and getting the faint reaction as he wasn't expecting her to be taller than he was. "My company's developing this on your behalf, yes."

He gripped her hand hard, which made her smile, and then released her. "Pleasure." He said, shortly. "So are we ready to do this?"

Dar sat back down and met Jocko's eyes, giving him a nod. "Which one of you wants to put the rig on?" She asked crisply. "Want to cut to the chase, Mr. Haribee? Siddown on the end there if you do."

He absolutely just stared at her for a long, blank moment, and Dar spent that time pondering in her own head what he was thinking, deciding it was either probably who the hell was this woman, or do these people not know who I am, or are you fucking kidding me?

She sketched him in her imagination, and added the thought bubble, feeling her face tense a little as she suppressed a smile, enjoying the mild taunting, a favorite strategy of hers to keep others off balance and keep them from predicting what she was thinking herself.

Would he turn and leave? Tell her to fuck off? Yell at Charlie? Or take the challenge.

Abruptly, he turned and went to the chair at the end of the table and sat. "Okay." He said. "Let's do it." He said. "Should I take my jacket off?"

Ah. Dar was pleased. Nice. "Great choice." She complimented him. "Nothing like getting the facts firsthand."

"If you would sir." Jocko said, moving the rig cart forward. "It'll fit better." He added as the ginger haired man stripped off his sports coat and tossed it onto a nearby stand. "Okay, I'm just going to get this on you. Let me know if it pinches."

Charlie sat down next to Dar. "You have balls the size of the eye of a great white whale." He uttered under his breath at her. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Everyone on the planet." Dar leaned back in her seat and cupped her hands around her tea. "Except my partner, who knows better."

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"So lets see if this works." Kerry got into the passenger seat of Dar's truck, with Andy driving it, and settled back, pushing her sunglasses up onto her nose. "Oh boy, what a day."

"If they all don't touch that pole we put up on the roof, it'll be all good." Her father in law put the truck into gear and they headed for the ferry. "Ah think I got that there dish focused all right."

"It'll be nice to have contact with the office. It's making me nervous, thinking of all those guys over there." Kerry watched the road go by, passing two work crews moving downed trees.

"Me too." Andy admitted. "Ah do think it would be a right thing to bring all them folks ovah here." He pulled into the ferry launch area, and waited, as two cars bumped carefully onto the car ferry ahead of them. "You all said Dar done good with that program thing?"

"She said the demo went very well." Kerry affirmed. "She was going to meet with some suit or something afterward and said she'd try to call again before they took her back to the base and get her on some transport back here."

"Some good." Andy put the truck in park, leaning back and folding his brawny arms across her chest. "Ah do not know how long this here area's going to be like this though."

"No me either." Kerry sighed. "I don't know. I'm going to try and talk Dar into moving the operation up to mid state. At least until they sort out things down here. We can't do business like this. It's nuts."

"Big old mess."

"Big old mess." Kerry echoed him. "I mean, I talked to people today, they need help, they need our services but without any connection and no power? Dad, we can't do this." She exhaled. "I have a pads worth of people willing to give me business and I can't take it."

Andy thought about that in silence as the ferry casted off and headed shoreward. "Aint' good." He concluded.

"No." Kerry murmured. "It's not good. I know everyone is being so good, and showing up at the office and doing what they can to clean it up but that's not going to let us survive as a business." She propped her head on her fist, leaning her elbow on the window jam.

The ferry parked at the far end, and they rolled off, going up the ramp and turning left onto the causeway. It was devoid of other cars, and far off on the end where it emerged onto Miami Beach Kerry could see flashing lights and the sun reflecting off camo trucks.

It was hot and hazy and with only some fitful breeze to stir the air and she was guiltily glad of the air conditioning in the truck, happy to enjoy it until they reached the office. "If we get the point to point link up, then at least if Dar calls they can relay it."

"Yeap." Andy nodded. "That or ah can teach one of them boys to use that radio." He said. "Ceci kept one of them little units."

"It's not that hard. I don't know what their problem is." Kerry muttered. "I mean, we're a technology company for god's sake. Just because it's analog technology it's not like it's from another planet."

Andy chuckled. "Them kids are busy in that place."

"And surely, your friends know how to use radios." Kerry said. "I mean, c'mon?"

"They do." He agreed with her. "More fun to go round and build sniper nests than yappin on the squawk like a big old chicken." He sniffed reflectively. "Never liked that."

Kerry paused in thought. "Really?"

"Didn't like hearin mah voice."

Her brows knit and she half turned to regard him, willingly distracted from the sun baked tarmac. "I love listening to you talk." She objected, after a moment's pause. "I always have."

They pulled up to the line of cars waiting to go through the roadblock and Andy gave her a sideways look, his grizzled eyebrows quirked slightly. "Say what?" He said. "Ah talk like a hick from the backwoods, which is what ah am."

Kerry regarded him and smiled. "Exactly."

"Scuse me?"

"Exactly. You don't pretend to be anything other than what you are." Kerry said, after a brief pause.

The barrier lifted and Andy was distracted by having to drive past it.

"When I first met Dar." Kerry seemed to realize there was more explanation needed. "What struck me about her was that she was so honest. It was really strange at first, you know? All my life I'd lived in a family and in an environment where everyone around me was all...part of a game."

Andy grunted.

"You had to think about what people said because it never really was what it sounded like." Kerry clarified. "There was always some kind of agenda."

"Dar ain't no innocent, rally." Andy said, as he paused before turning left to go south.

"Oh no, that's not what I meant at all. Dar has all kinds of strategy in that head and it's always light years past where anyone's expecting. But when she says something, it's just what it means. There's no hidden message."

"Ah." Andy grunted thoughtfully.

Kerry smiled. "At the beginning, I would ask her, what did you mean by that, Dar? And she would look at me with this weird expression like maybe she'd accidentally answered in a foreign language or something and she'd say, 'What do you mean what do I mean?'"

"She tells you straight." Andy said. "That is a true thing." He nodded. "No messin round."

"It's why people didn't and still don't really like dealing with her. She never lets people down easy, you know? You ask a question and you better the hell want to hear the answer because that's what you're getting." She gazed out the window, a fond smile on her face. "It's a relief."

"Relief?"

"A relief. I can ask her something like, hey, what do you think about me dying my hair purple?" Kerry said. "And she'll said, Kerry, you'd look really stupid with purple hair. I never have to worry about what she's thinking. It comes right out."

"Ain't no games."

"Ain't no games." Kerry echoed him. "You always know where you stand." She said. "So when I met you, I knew where that came from because that's exactly what you're like too."

He smiled, just a little. "Got my ass in trouble mor'n once." He demurred. "And Dar too, growing up."

"But it's such a blessing."

He digested that as he drove for a moment. "Ya'll really want to make your hair purple?" He finally asked, tentatively.

"No. I'm a faux anarchist. It was radical for me not to have bangs." Kerry reassured him. "Did you not see my family's reaction to my tattoo?"

"Ah do remember that." Andy chuckled, as he pulled into the street where their office was, dodging the still rotting piles of garbage, and cars that had been swept into the fronts of buildings by the storm surge.

They went past a national guard truck parked along the side of the road and two more behind it, then into the front of where their building was and into their parking lot.

All of the debris had been moved out of the yard, and the trees that had been down, or dropped limbs were trimmed back and looked relatively tidy. They parked and got out. "Lemme go get some of them boys." Andy said, settling a ball cap on his head. "Get this dish from the back here."

He headed towards the front door, which was standing open and Kerry could hear the sound of a saw going from inside. She stood out by the truck for a moment studying the building, and then she drew in a breath and exhaled, feeling the sweat starting as she walked up the path.

The porch, with its guard post seemed unscathed, and the post itself was empty though there was a folded blanket inside it, and a water pot. Running from it under the door was a electrical cord and Kerry stepped over it carefully as she went inside.

Unlike the previous day, when it had mostly smelled musty and moldy, today the inside smelled like freshly cut wood and as she looked down the hall she saw two sawhorses set up and caught the scent of bleach. There were four men standing at the end of the passage studying some paper.

Did she know them? Kerry scooted through and went out the back door into the central space, deferring the question for later. On the back porch, she stopped and looked around, a little startled at the activity.

Half the area had been turned into a construction workshop. They were using Hank's Humvee as a work platform and the single gas grill had turned into an outdoor kitchen, with no less than three larger grills in a semi circle including one that was set up as a wok.

"Ah! Hello, Kerry." Sasha popped up behind her and put down a cooler. "How are you? The kids invited me to move my kitchen here. Okay?"

"Um. Sure." Kerry sidestepped out of the way. "Must be safer for you here than in the street, right?"

"You got it, and got me customers here always hungry." The Vietnamese woman agreed. "It was good, you know, with the army but they told me I shouldn't be out there early, late, nothing I might get kilt. You know? They were good, they were nice, liked my sandwiches, but not around at night."

"Got it." Kerry stuck her hands in the pockets of her shorts. "So what's been going on around here, Sasha?"

"Here?" Sasha paused in the midst of removing a bag of chopped meat from her cooler. "You got the only good stuff going on the whole area. Guys are here fixing things. Everything else on the block is dead as a fish." She put the bag on the makeshift worktable. "Nobody's coming back here, anytime soon."

No. Kerry had got that feeling, as they walked from the parking lot into the building. The atmosphere of desolation and destruction were sombering. "Yeah, I talked to the insurance adjusters when they were out by the sailing club. They said the owners were just looking to cut losses and sell."

"Oh yes?" Sasha perked up and looked around at her. "Maybe I buy. My brother can bring his fishing boat here." She looked speculatively at the back of the facility, where beyond it was the road and then the club. "Make a restaurant."

"That would be awesome." Kerry said, after a startled moment. "No one really used that sailing club anyway. Dar thought they were laundering money through it."

There was a knock against the doorframe behind them, and Kerry turned to find a National Guard lieutenant there, his regulation green cover in hand. She studied his face, but didn't recognize him. "Hi there."

"Hello, ma'am." Thus recognized, the lieutenant came forward. The patch on his chest said "Galahad" and Kerry got a sudden mental image of him on a horse with a sword. "My captain told me to come in here and have a chat with you all."

He was probably in his mid thirties, and had a rusty red crew cut. "Sure." Kerry said. "What can we do for you lieutenant?"

"So, we were looking for a place to set up a command point. He thought maybe we could ask you if we could set up in your parking lot out there." Galahad pointed vaguely over his shoulder. "You're a little in the corner here, it's kind of a good spot."

National Guard camping in the front yard? "Would you be here all the time? As in, at night?"

He nodded. "Yes ma'am, we've got a generator with us. They asked us to patrol down here, there's been a lot of criminal activity, with people breaking in and stuff."

"Absolutely you can take over the parking lot." Kerry said, easily and at once. "As you can see, I have a number of staff taking shelter here, and it would ease my mind to have you and your team around."

Unexpectedly, he smiled, a wholehearted and genuine grin that creased his sunburned face and almost made Kerry blush. "That's awful nice of you, ma'am. We saw you all had a generator and all that here yourselves, and it kinda felt like it was a safe place for us to be too."

"What all we got goin on here?" Andy arrived from his inspection. "Lo there." He greeted the guardsman politely, as he came up to stand next to Kerry.

"Lieutenant Galahad, my father in law, Andrew Roberts." Kerry made introductions. "The lieutenant wants to set up camp in our parking lot, Dad." She explained. "We seem to be strategic."

A darkly humorous expression appeared on Andy's face. "Do tell."

The guardsman took that at face value. "My captain asked me to come ovah here and ask if we could put our trucks and our tents over in that lot there, sir." He said. "We been asked to set up a command post. Patrol down here, and make sure folks don't get all crazy." He tilted his head a bit. "Crazier than has been, I mean."

"Ah see." Andy said. "That all right with you, kumquat?"

"Definitely." Kerry said. "The more guys guarding my peeps the better." She winked at the guardsman. "Will you tell them where to put things, dad?"

"Surely." With a casual gesture, he indicated the entrance. "Lets get you boys all settled out there."

"You bet. Thank you ma'am." The guard lieutenant said to Kerry, with a courteous duck of his head. "We really appreciate it." He put his hat back onto his head and adjusted it absolutely straight, then followed Andrew out and back through the building hall.

Kerry regarded them, then turned and regarded Sasha. "That is good, right?" She asked. "Having the National Guard outside?"

"More customers." Sasha said, nodding briskly. "Yes, very good. Soldiers always hungry." She went back to her bag of chopped meat and opened what appeared to be an art portfolio leaning against the table, removing a plastic cutting board and a neatly wrapped packages of knives.

"You'll be a franchise by the time we're done here." Kerry abandoned her to the grill. She walked along the outside edge of the central space, heading towards the Humvee, and it's makeshift woodshop. "Hell we might end up a dozen franchises ourselves."

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"Boy it's hot, isn't it sir?"

Andy regarded the shorter man. "Always is round here." He said. "That part of there, where you all want to set up?" He pointed at the south end of the parking lot, where it angled to run along the side street. "Need to leave this here bit clear."

"Where that driveway is?" Lieutenant Galahad said. "That where you all are putting your cars at night? That's smart, sir. Don't leave nothing out here in the dark."

"Had them some trouble the other night." Andy agreed. "Got some of mah old Navy buddies bunking in there." He eyed the guardsman carefully. "Fellers who can take care of themselves." He clarified. "Don't mess round."

The lieutenant nodded solemnly. "Yes, that's what my captain said, sir. He said he saw some veterans around here, and talked to one of them, named Pete last night." He glanced over his shoulder at the building. "Its your building, isn't it sir? Has your name on it, and all."

"Ain't." Andy said. "B'longs to mah kids." He added. "Weren't going to let it get torn down, kids got a lot built into it."

They walked together across the lot, towards the front street where two large guard trucks were idling, the back of one of them revealing a lashed down generator, and a dozen already sweating uniformed figures. The lieutenant lifted his hand and pumped his fist, and they paused as the trucks rumbled into gear and pulled into the lot.

"Totally get it." Galahad said, with a satisfied expression. "We got to take care of our own, right sir?" He walked over to the lead truck as it arrived near the front edge of the lot, and guards piled out of the back of it, moving into the shade from the few still standing trees.

Andy watched them with a faintly furrowed brow, as the lieutenant pointed and indicated directions, outlining with the edge of one hand the entrance to the path that led through into the center of the building with care. The second truck arrived, and one of the doors opened, letting an older man emerge, dusting his dark cap off on the leg of his uniform pants before he set it on his head.

Andy stayed where he was, just watching. "That there's brass." He commented to himself. "Don't change no matter what the service."

The older man talked to the lieutenant for a minute, then he turned and headed towards where he was standing. Behind him, the soldiers started removing wood planks and boxes of supplies, quickly starting to cover the open ground.

It was steamy hot and overhead there were clouds starting to gather on the fringe of the sky, and as he stood there waiting for the guard brass to make his way over, Andy saw a large open back truck with a battered city logo pull up next to one of the garbage piles.

Six men jumped out, all dark skinned, all drenched, pulling on thick canvas and leather gloves as they approached the pile. One of them pointed towards the busy guardsmen, then waved at the piles and yelled an order. As he watched, they started loading the garbage, dripping and stinking, into the back of the truck.

"Good, they done got here." The captain walked up, looking over his shoulder and watching the truck as well. "Bout time." He held a hand out to Andy. "Ah do believe your name is Roberts." He said. "Jerry Dodge.. My family comes from the same part of Alabama as yours ah do think, down by Ozark."

"That's right." Andy took his hand and they gripped and released. "You all the feller that helped out one of mah kids t'other day, out west of here?"

The man smiled. "I sure am." He agreed with confident good cheer. "Spunky young lady. Might have figured she'd lead me on back here to this place." He indicated the office building behind where they were standing.

"Recognized the name. Figured had to be the same's she told me."

"Yeap." Andy said. "Glad to have you all round here."

"Glad to have you all at our backs." Dodge said, frankly. "Gotta say we've been doing more policing than rescuing in these here parts. Didn't realize it was like that." He reviewed the setup, taking Andrew's silence for agreement. "Anyway let me go get us all set. Have time for some coffee later?"

"A'hm sure."

Dodge gave him a brisk nod, and headed back over to the trucks, and the busy soldiers. Andy exhaled as he watched him retreat, making a pensive noise with his lips. "Ah do believe." He said, to no one in particular. "That man views his hometown a sight better than ah do."

He turned and headed back to the office, silently shaking his head.

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"All right, in here." Haribee pointed at a door, and then stiffarmed it open, moving inside and holding the door for her to enter.

Dar followed him inside the room and went to the table as he closed the door behind her and blocked out the noise of the hallway beyond, where rooms full of some kind of training were going on.

It was lunchtime and she was hungry. She took a seat behind the table and hoped this conversation was going to be brief, and that whoever was driving her back to the air base knew where a Wendy's was.

Now that the demo was over, and apparently a success, her mind was moving on and moving back to the challenges they faced back in Florida and she wasn't much really in the mood to listen to some bs lecture from some government lackey.

Maybe he sensed that. Haribee slid into the chair opposite her and leaned on his elbows, all his air of detached aloofness for the moment a least gone. "Okay." He said. "That was something."

Dar put her arms along the soft, leather chair arms and interlaced her fingers, cocking her head slightly to one side in a listening attitude, deciding the statement didn't require a response and more was to come.

She knew he'd been impressed. One look at his face when they took the helmet off had been enough to show that and even Scott had relaxed along with the rest of the techs in the room when he had turned and stared at them all in silent, evident, astonishment.

Now he was watching her with a sense of barely held interest and eagerness totally at odds with his original attitude and so Dar wondered what it was that was on his mind.

"Know what I think?" Haribee said abruptly.

"I'm about to." Dar responded, in a dry tone.

For whatever reason, that made him smile. "I think you surprised the hell out of me. That was all those gadget heads claimed it was. Congrats. That doesn't happen often around here." He said, briskly. "I'm more used to looking at loads of crap duct taped together with vague promises."

Dar nodded. "Tech's like that. Sometimes you can get away with it."

"Yeah?" He eyed her. "So when was the last time you did that?" He waited, seeing her smile. "Don't answer. You don't have to. I had my office find out who the hell you were when they said you were flying in here for this. I figured it was either they wanted someone to explain it to me, or someone to take the blame if it flopped."

"True."

"You have an interesting file on you. A lot of people in a lot of places have crossed paths and come away with all kinds of opinions that mostly boil down to you being a damned useful person if something needs to get done, so long as you agree it needs to get done."

Dar nodded again, avoiding looking at her watch. "Fair assessment."

"It doesn't mention that much about the fact you're some kind of engineering genius." He continued. "You have to go to the US Patent office for that."

Really nothing to respond to for that, so Dar didn't. She just sat there in silence.

"You don't talk much."

She cleared her throat a little. "I haven't had any need to yet. You've only asked me one question and then told me not to answer it." Her eyes watched him alertly. "Glad you liked the demo. Assume that means it'll continue to be funded, great news for me. Anything else you want?"

"Uh huh." He laced his fingers together. "All prickles and edges. That's what someone said, and they were right. Lucky for me I don't care about that."

"Okay." Dar agreed amiably.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sure this'll do whatever it is these yokels are planning for it. Train new troops? Okay whatever. Makes good press. No issues for me. Budget's not even that significant." He said. "But when I'm not running around collecting a paycheck for giving my opinion on government spending in the real world I fund businesses." He paused. "Specifically, high tech startups."

Dar waited.

"I know a market when I see one." He said, slowly. "That gizmo, shined up and put out there, is a gaming gold plated winner. You must know that." He said. "You do, don't you?"

"The thought." Dar leaned back in the chair and regarded him. "Had occurred to me, yes." She acknowledged. "In that, it would be interesting to see if someone wanted to market it. Easier for me to sell it to one of the big console makers."

"Why?" He asked. "Why lose out on all that money? For what, for royalties? Two bucks on every game? When you have it all? C'mon." He said. "It'll take years for any of those guys to adapt this to their system. They're too big. Got too much invested in their own platforms."

This was actually going in a direction Dar was totally not expecting. She hadn't bothered to research who would be at the demo, because at the time to her it hadn't really mattered. She'd been in the presence of government oversight hacks before.

True though, she also acknowledged silently, there hadn't been much time or access to data for her to check anything in the last couple of days. So she pondered his speech a moment, considering the statement carefully, evaluating the potential truth in it.

There was truth, she decided. This was someone who knew what he was talking about in the same crisp, confident way that very often she herself did and knowing it in herself, she could see it in him. Was it the whole truth? Partial truth?

Extremely good acting?

“Possibly.” Dar finally agreed. “But it also means I don’t have to invest in marketing and manufacturing, which is something my small company doesn’t do, along with mass market distribution.” She said. “We do custom solutions.”

She paused then, an eyebrow twitching up, waiting to see where that would lead.

He nodded in brisk comprehension. “You’re right on with that. So lets not waste time, either mine or yours. We’ve both got better places to be than a moldy conference room in some government rockpile.”

He wrapped his hands together firmly and met her eyes. “So here’s the pitch.” He said. “Let me bring this all together. I know people in both marketing and manufacturing. I’ll build a shell company that we can use as an umbrella to make this thing.”

Really unexpected. Dar drew in a somber breath and regarded him.

“We can’t waste time. This is going to be hot.”

He was probably right. Dar had considered that herself after seeing the demo, had mentioned it to Kerry in their conversation. “Probably.” She acknowledged. “But we have a lot of things on our plate right now.”

“Like?” he asked. “This?” He indicated the room vaguely.

“No. My office just got hit with a category five hurricane.” She responded dryly. “It’s in South Florida.”

“Move it.” Haribee said, at once. “You don’t want to put anything like that down in that cesspit anyway. No talent down there, it’s got lousy weather issues, lousy local politics. Only plus is no state income tax. Wait to retire there.” He pronounced crisply. “Move it here. Plenty of good office space, a lot of talent coming out of the colleges, and..” He studied Dar with intent, impersonal regard. “You look like you enjoy the active outdoors. I love it here for that.”

Dar thought about her encounter with the climbing wall that morning. “It’s nice.” She agreed. “And I have a major customer nearby.” She looked around the room. “I’ll think about it on the way home. I have to discuss it with my partner.”

“Call them.”

Feeling a bit like she was in a new car showroom, she smiled briefly. “I can’t.” She shrugged a little. “There’s no cell service in half the state. That’s why Scott was having a nervous breakdown setting this up.” She opened one hand and made a come hither gesture at him with two fingers. “Gimme a number I can call you on and we’ll talk.”

He didn’t want to. He wanted to close the deal. She could see it in the lines of his athletic body and the shifting motion and she held herself still and calm, projecting an air of take it or leave it at him with what she hoped was the right mix of interest and caution.

It didn’t really matter, in the long run. She wasn’t going to commit to anything with him without discussing it with Kerry no matter how much prospective cash was on the table.

Maybe he knew that. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a very thin billfold, removing a card from it and tossing it over the table at her. “Don’t waste time.” He said. “I’d like to pull this together fast for a next Christmas campaign.”

“All right.” Dar picked up the card. “Maybe I can send a team to work out here when I get back. They’d probably like the break from heat and rain, and they can get Scott’s checkpoints nailed down.” She paused. “And start up this new project.”

Haribee grinned. "That's the ticket." He slapped the table with his hand and stood up. "Today's been a worthwhile day for me, Roberts. Thank you. I don't get many." He turned with no further speech and left the room at a brisk walk, leaving behind the faint scent of linen and men's cologne.

Dar glanced at the card, then stuck it in her back pocket with a faint shake of her head. "Oh boy." She muttered, into the empty room. "Has been a day hasn't it."

She contemplated going in search of Scott, but just as that thought made her stand up, the door opened and he entered, an expression of enormous relief on his face, a bubbly jubilation showing in his motions.

"He's really happy." Scott said, apparently feeling he had no need to identify the he. "Thanks Dar. It was great." He flopped down into the chair Haribee had just vacated. "I was kind of surprised, you know? That he wanted to get into the rig. That was bold of you to ask him."

"Fastest way." Dar folded her arms. "Seemed like a sharp guy. Figured it was easier to show than tell."

"He's a.." Scott paused. "He's tough. One of those guys whose the smartest guy in the room all the time. If he wants your opinion he'll give you one. That kind."

"Mm." Dar's pale eyes twinkled just a little. "I've been accused of being that kind myself y'know." She said, but in a mild tone. "So maybe it takes one to know one."

Scott took a breath, then stopped, looking uncertainly at her.

"You all would have done fine without me." Dar reassured him. "All he needed to do was see it. Glad he thought it was worthwhile and he's not going to cut your funding." She started over to grab her bag. "Can I get a ride back now? I'm sure ten thousand things have gone to crap back home while I've been out here enjoying having electricity and internet."

"Take you myself." Scott said. "I called the base, they said they've got something going that direction in about two hours. Time for lunch?" He added, in a hopeful tone. "Got a little place on the way that's got great barbeque."

"Sure." Dar got her backpack on and slid the strap of her overnight bag over her shoulder. "Lead on."

"No definitely, he's happy." Scott opened the door for her and followed her outside into one of the many, similar hallways with their cryptic wall plates and school color painted walls. "He greenlit us to go forward. The team's over the moon!"

They walked down the long passageway and out the front entrance to the big facility, emerging into a beautiful early autumn day that featured clear blue skies and dry, sweet smelling air. "Nice day." Dar commented as they walked across the pavement towards the parking.

"Yeah it is. Too bad you can't stay a few days, gonna be great weather over the weekend." Scott pulled his keys out of his pocket. "My buddies are trying to get me out to do Pikes Peak. Now that we got good news, I might be talked into it."

Dar got into the passenger seat of his SUV and set her bag and backpack down between her feet. "Lot of folks do stuff outdoors here I guess."

"Sure. We've got a little of everything here. Hiking, fishing, rafting, hunting, you name it." He glanced at her, as he paused before turning out onto the main road. "Skiing, kayaking, you know." He turned and headed off down the road. "Rock climbing."

Dar spent a brief moment thinking about that. "That lodge has a climbing wall in their gym."

"Oh it does. A lot of folks belong to that place. They have tournaments sometimes. It's a great wall." Scott responded at once. "Did you try it?"

"Yeah." Dar murmured. "I noticed it the last time I was here so I gave it a go this morning." She regarded the passing scenery. "Pretty entertaining."

"Guess there's not a lot of that down by you?" Scott hazarded.

"No mountains, no. I suppose some gyms have walls." Dar said. "Mostly water sports down there. Deep sea fishing, surfing, wave boarding, diving, that kind of thing." She paused thoughtfully. "I spend a lot of time in or on the water. I'm a scuba diver."

"Oh yeah?" Scott said, in a surprised tone. "You have a boat?"

"I do." Dar folded her arms over her chest. "Matter of fact that's what I used to get our server stack back up and running after the storm came through. Brought them over to where I live, where there were generators and a satellite truck."

"Wow." Scott glanced quickly at her, then at the road. "On a boat? That sounds crazy."

"It was." Dar regarded the scenery out the window, and the towering mountains in the distance. "But you do what you need to do in that kind of circumstance."

They were both silent as Scott turned and headed off on a side road heading north. "What was that like, being in that storm really?" He asked suddenly. "I saw the news reports, but most of what they were showing from when it happened just looked like a big wet mess."

"It was a big wet mess. But it also came with hundred and sixty knot winds." Dar related. "It's a gigantic tornado, just slow. It's coming at you at maybe ten, maybe six, maybe 20 miles per hour and you see it coming for days. It's literally like being in a slow motion train wreck."

"Oh, Lord!"

"Then when it finally gets to you there's a lot of wind, it's loud." Dar continued. "Things are breaking and getting thrown around all over the place, then if you're in direct path, you get into the eye and the wind stops and it's very low pressure. You feel your ears pop and all that."

Scott was just looking sideways at her now, the whites of his eyes visible.

"And then the wind starts coming from the other direction when you come out of the eye, and it's loud and full of banging and roaring again. Can last for an hour, maybe more coming right over you. If you're lucky you're in a place that's built for it." She sighed. "If not you can get your roof pulled off and the walls blown out around you, or twelve feet of water blast through your yard."

"Why in the hell did you stay there?" Scott spluttered. "If you can see it coming, why not just leave?"

Why? That really was a damn good question. So many of her neighbors hadn't. But some had. They'd all of them, all of the people who lived on that island had the choice, the means, the ability to just leave and go somewhere else, and watch, from afar.

She and Kerry could have taken the programming team and come here. She could have challenged the programmers to wall climbing efforts after they'd finished coding for the day. They could have taken hikes, and just watched CNN like the rest of the country had.

Her parents could have taken their boat, with its oversized engines and gone pretty much anywhere.

Why had they stayed? It hadn't even been a question in her mind if she was going to until they were in the middle of it and they all realized just how ridiculous it was that they hadn't.

"Good question." Dar finally said, as they pulled into the lot of a wood and stone building, that featured a long shed behind it full of split logs and a steady flume of smoke curling from a large pit in the back corner. "I don't really know."

"Seems crazy!" Scott reached ahead of her to open the door to the restaurant. "I saw those news interviews. My goodness! People wading through the water, all those people dead! They should have all left!"

Dar sighed. "It's not that simple." She followed him over to the ordering counter. "Some people can't. The shelters can't handle their needs. Some want to stay with their pets."

"Pets?"

"Dogs and cats, and potbelly pigs and goldfish and whatever." Dar glanced at the board. "Rack of ribs and a root beer." She turned to Scott. "Some have no cars, no way of getting anywhere." She paused. "I, apparently, am just a stubborn idiot who decided to stay in my house on an island on the edge of the Atlantic."

"My goodness."

They took their trays and claimed a wooden benched table, with simple wooden poles holding up rolls of paper towels and squeeze bottles full of four different kinds of barbeque sauce. Scott promptly picked up two of them and squirted them in tandem on his chicken.

He was humming under his breath. "First time in weeks I can eat in peace and not have a stomach ache." He said. "Damn I'm glad we're past that."

Dar picked up a rib and took a bite, finding it well cooked and tasty, even without the lurid mixture of sauces that Scott was now also applying to his French fries. "Those guys really hassling you?"

He put down the sauce and picked up a drumstick, twisting it free of the half chicken he'd ordered. "You don't get much chance, in our area, to get on a project that gets you in the spotlight, y'know? Well, sure, y'now." He took a bite of the chicken and chewed it. "If he'd tanked it, and he could have, we'd all go back to the grind and carry that. You know, there goes that guy that was on that stupid killed dead project."

Dar did know. "Yeah, I get it." She said. "I'm glad it worked out the way it did. It was a win for us too, now we can start on the next set of deliverables."

Scott looked around, but it was early, and there weren't many other people in the place yet. "Might go even faster. I got a call from my boss not ten minutes after we were done in there. They want to show this off for the quarterly video show. I gotta make a speech."

He grinned, almost maniacally at her. "I can't wait to send a copy to my mom."

If they did end up moving some folks out here, Dar decided as she toasted him with her rib and a wink. She would pitch the takeover of the whole team as an outsource. Would they want to leave the military and come work for her?

She finished the rib and took a sip of her root beer. Perhaps they would.

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Kerry tipped her head back and watched as one of the LAN techs, wearing a harness, stretched his arms up as high as they would go and pushed the dish they'd brought up near the top of the metal pole strapped to the side of the building.

"We're going to have to ground that to earth." Another of the LAN techs said, standing next to Kerry. "Lightning hits it and it'll end up right in the server room."

"We don't want that." Kerry murmured. "Though right now there aren't any servers in there or anything else really."

"No ma'am, just the racks. We got everything else out of there, but there's a lot of copper in the floor still and if someone was in there it'd light em up."

"Well, that's what that second line is, the ground, so we should be covered." She paused. "Miguel, be careful!"

"Yes ma'am." Miguel called down, as he kept the dish at the desired height while he tightened the bolts on it's fastening down with a wrench. "I'm tied in good here!"

The harness around him was running up and over the peak of the shallow angled roof and down the other side, running along the wall to the ground where Carlos had it wrapped around his back, legs braced wide, just chilling in the sun.

There was a tall ladder braced against the roof nearby that Miguel had used to climb up, a sliding extension model that had construction stains all over it.

“Okay got it tight.” Miguel called down. “I’m gonna throw the cable down.” He stuck the wrench in his back pocket and edged over along the tile roof, covered in half round ceramic sections to where the coil of thickly rubber coated strands were lying.

He nudged them with his foot, holding onto the pole with one hand to keep his balance, and then booted the coil off the roof, sending it tumbling down the inner side of the building. Then he went over to a second coil, this one of bare metal, and booted that off as well. “There’s the ground!”

“Got it!” The second LAN tech yelled up. “I’m gonna run it into that window.”

Pete was now smoothing the ground along the pole. “I got this.” He said. “Found a railway spike we can use for it. I’ll weld it.”

“How’s the roof look, Miguel?” Kerry shaded her eyes and watched him. “Still look okay up there?”

Miguel was being lit by the westering sun, half in golden light and he went up several steps to the peak and stood there with a foot braced on either side, looking around. “There’s still those couple broken tiles.” He reported back after a minute. “Looks okay otherwise. New skylights look good.”

“Good job!” Carlos called out, from his position. “You all done?”

“I’m gonna hang out here in case we need to adjust the dish.” Miguel called back, and sat down on the peak to let his legs sprawl out along the slope. “Gonna be a nice sunset, with those clouds.”

Kerry glanced at her watch, then turned around from her spot on the back loading dock and walked inside the passage that would bring her back inside the central open space, past the sturdy wooden gates that had been made from scrounged wood and provided a blockade to anyone trying to enter.

Inside the courtyard had taken on something of the air of .. Kerry pondered. She remembered going to a carnival when she’d been much younger, and stumbling on the area behind the attractions that the workers had set up their living space in.

Some RV’s, some trailers, some tents, a line with laundry hanging, campfire with a greasy grill over it with sausages. She could hear and smell it now, and this collection of known and unknown taking shelter reminded her strongly of that moment.

The far wall was lined with six tents now, from the one that had been there previously. Two teardrop trailers were parked just to one side of the makeshift gymnasium, and a dozen men were cleaning up the area used to cut wood and framing as the shadows started to take over the space.

She walked along the north wall, where if she turned she would just be able to see the pole in the northeast corner sticking up over the trees and up the steps to the concrete slab that held the outdoor kitchen and the doorway to enter the building.

Inside the door the second LAN technician came out of one of the storage rooms with a small switch and a phone tucked under one arm and headed across the hall.

Kerry paused and looked around. It already was a little brighter inside, with the replacement of the two big skylights over the stairwells, that no longer had black tarps pasted over them. Now the holes in the roof were filled with square, sturdy aluminum and glass coverings, the inside edge showing fresh caulking still needing paint.

She could smell the freshness of it. The tang of uncovered wood and the chemical scent of the caulk and as she walked along the hall, the surface of the floors were shades lighter, a sanding machine standing now silent in the corner near the stairs.

“Y’know.” One of the veterans, whose name she’d heard but forgotten came over, wrapping a cable around one arm. “You should leave these floors alone.”

Kerry regarded him. “Not sand them?” She asked.

He shook his head. “Sand n’reseal em.” He gazed at the wood. “Don’t put no carpet back on it. Nice grain.”

Kerry studied the floor. "Would it sound stupid to you for me to say I can't because I have dogs here that would slide on it?"

He didn't answer for a long minute, finishing up the coiling of the cable as he thought about that, and she waited. Finally he cleared his throat. "No that don't sound stupid." He said. "Just never something I'd think of right off." He regarded her with bright, hazel eyes. "It's just pretty wood."

"Its beautiful." Kerry agreed, with a smile. "Maybe we can put down a central piece of carpet and leave both sides natural."

"Jute maybe." He replied thoughtfully. "Natural and could be inset like. Look nice too."

Jute. "I'll look into that." Kerry spotted the LAN tech pop his head out into the hallway and wave at her, at the same time memory belatedly surfaced. "Thanks Jerry." She said. "It's a great idea."

He lifted his hand in acknowledgement and moved off, slinging the cable he'd finished coiling over the sanding machine and walking out the door into the central area. Kerry stood in the empty hall for a moment, and then she walked along it to the inside room where the radio was.

Inside, the LAN tech was adjusting the phone precisely on top of the switch, and he turned as he heard Kerry enter. "I powered up the switch and its booting." He went over to the window and began to route the cable down the wall.

"Thanks Mike." Kerry regarded the device. "No way we nailed the point to point on the first go though. That's a long distance."

"It is." Mike agreed. "But its pointed in the right general direction anyway." He tacked down the last bit of cable. "Let me get my laptop and see if I can ping the other side." He trotted out. "Get that to start anyway."

Kerry went to the window and leaned on the sill, the air from the courtyard brushing against her, a warm humid mixture of construction and humanity and the sharp bite of the spices Sasha was using in her wok.

Across the way she could see Andy standing in the shade of the building, arms crossed, talking to Pete, who had his welding helmet on with the shield tipped up, the welding wand clasped in one hand as it cooled.

A brief breeze brought her the scent of it, the odd, spicy smell of the welding and from beyond that a hint of the sea.

"Okay, let me connect up." Mike returned and put a laptop down on the table, plugging a console cable into the switch and sitting down. "Is Ms. Roberts coming back soon?"

"On her way right now." Kerry said. "I'm about to head out to the airport to get her." Kerry remained leaning on the windowsill. "You need her for something?"

"No ma'am, Mark was just asking before he left." Mike started typing into the keyboard. "What IP... oh there it is." He rattled the soft touch keys. "Wait it needs a gateway, so let me just..."

The phone ringing startled them both, and Kerry actually jumped, turning in startlement. "What the..."

They stared at the phone, which continued to ring, until Kerry finally reached over and picked it up. "Hello?" She answered tentatively. "Kerry here."

"Ah hah!" A voice said in triumph. "They were right how bout that!"

"Hey Angela." Kerry gathered her wits. "I guess it's working?"

"Holy crap." Mike regarded his screen. "Yeah, it's pinging clean!" He glanced at the window. "That's a freaking miracle."

"No kidding." Kerry muttered.

"The kids saw something in something register or something." Angela told her. "And they said the thing you put up was probably up, and they were right!" Their receptionist sounded triumphantly pleased. "So this is great! We can talk to you guys!"

"I guess you can." Kerry and Mike exchanged bemused looks. "Well that's great. How's it going over there? I was about to head out to the airport to pick up Dar."

"Oh great!" Angela responded. "Now what did that remind me of... what?" She muffled the receiver briefly. "Oh right! Sure, so that guy came back here, you know? The guy from yesterday? With the thing, whatever it was, the boss did?"

Kerry stared at the phone in bewilderment. "Um... what?"

"That guy. The big guy, with the attitude."

"That entire island is full of big guys with attitude."

"Yeah, sure, but it was that one guy and he sent those kids over, and the boss did something for them with that box."

"Oh. The governor's guy." Kerry said. "What did he want?"

"Dunno, said he wanted to talk to the boss. I told him she was out of town." Angela said. "He started cursing at me, and Mrs. R ran him out of here." She said. "But she said he said he was gonna come back. Anyway, we also heard from the drug guy, and they want to talk to you."

Kerry sighed. "Okay, do me a favor and call the Pharma guys back, and tell them I'll call them as soon as I get back from the airport." She checked her watch again. "I gotta go. Glad this thing's working, give it a ring if anything else happens and hopefully someone'll hear it and answer."

"No problem. What about the governor's guy?"

"Tell him next time it's lucky it's only my mother in law chasing him not my mother the Senator." Kerry said, firmly. "We'll talk to him when we get back there."

"Got it. See ya later, Kerry."

Kerry put the phone down. "What number is this phone?" She asked. "Please don't tell me it's mine."

"No no no...It's a spare." Mike reassured her. "I configured it to use the one we had in the server room. Nobody knows it except HPE and Centurylink. The guys probably just saw it register in the online portal and told her which one it was. It's a dial in direct, though. You can call it."

"More importantly, you all can dial out from it." Kerry said.

He nodded briskly. "Oh yeah, for sure now that it sees the portal. You know, maybe I can talk to Mayte and we can add a survivable gateway here for the next time this crazy stuff happens."

Kerry regarded him. "That's not a bad idea." She said, after a long pause. "But I'm pretty sure we have a long list of things to make better for next time like alternate power sources and a satellite dish on the roof."

Mike looked at her. "Mark was saying maybe we'd all move, like up to Melbourne or... wherever. You think we will?" He asked. "I know he and Barb headed up to that office the support team's at."

"We'll do what we have to in order to keep the business moving forward. I don't know..." Kerry hesitated. "I'm not sure what we'll do long term because I know Dar's pretty attached to this area."

He nodded again. "I'm kind of a nomad, doesn't matter to me but I know a lot of folks here have a lot of family around and kids in school and all that stuff."

"Yeah, I know." Kerry sighed. "Okay, let me figure all that out when we get back. I don't want Dar hanging around at that airport too long someone'll grab her and she'll be rewiring that control tower if I don't pick her up."

Mike was scribbling something on a pad. "This UPS battery here'll last to power this switch until they boot the generator." He said. "And that'll recharge it then. Sound okay?" He looked up at Kerry. "We took over the tech support room and moved the desks around. Those cots Mr R brought over were great."

Kerry rested her hands on the back of the chair he was sitting on. "Is your family okay, Mike? I think I missed asking you yesterday."

He smiled at her. "My family's in Iowa. So yeah I'm sure they're fine." He said. "It's just me here, I moved down cause I was going out with a girl who ended up going out with someone else."

He scratched his nose, which had freckles over the surface of the skin. "I actually live in a duplex in Doral. It did fine, but man it's boring when you aint got nothing to do but look at the paint peel, you know?"

"Got it." Kerry said. "I was by myself when I moved down here at first too. I would have probably cleaned my apartment six dozen times by now if I was still where I was then." She said. "Anyway, I'll be back in an hour. Tell anyone looking for me where I went."

"Yes, ma'am." He responded cheerfully. "We got some Korean barbeque on tap for tonight. One of Carlo's buddy's a cook at Shizo's down on Brickell. He got here this morning and hooked up with Sasha." He got up, leaving the phone with it's small display sitting on top of the switch. "He brought a barrel of kimchee with him."

"Oh boy." Kerry followed him out of the room and into the hall. "Glad we got the National Guard at the front door."

She went outside and down the front sidewalk, the view towards the main street now blocked by tents and trucks all painted Army green along with the buzzing rumble of a large, truck mounted generator.

The Guard had made sure there was a clear path from the front of the parking lot out to the street, but she noticed that they had also planted a small tent on the far side of the driveway as though including that path under their watch.

Kerry got into the driver's seat of the truck and moved it up so she could reach the pedals, starting up the engine and backing out of the lot, half of which was filled with cars from staff along with a few rusty and broken down beaters parked alongside them.

The street, she noted as she pulled out past the Guard encampment had been cleared of garbage, and the soldiers had set up barriers around their tents and trucks and had mounted a watch.

The young man standing there, rifle in hand, waved at her as she turned.

Kerry waved back, then she paused and rolled down the window, leaning her arm on the warm surface as he walked over. "Hi."

"Hello, ma'am." The soldier greeted her, his crew cut under a green peaked cap, and his eyes hidden behind sunglasses as hers were. "You going for the day?"

"No." Kerry said. "I'm going over to the airport to pick someone up. Are you all... "

"We're going to be here all night." The soldier told her. "We took down all the license plates back in that lot there, so they'll be let in if they come and go. No problem ma'am, and we know to clear anyone else with the folks inside. All good."

"Thanks."

The guard glanced around. "Would you like one of us to go with you ma'am? To the airport? There's some dangerous roads between here and there, though you look like you've got good clearance with this vehicle."

Kerry smiled briefly. "I think I'll be okay, long as I get on with it before it gets dark. See you in a bit." She said. "I think they're cooking barbeque in there." She indicated the office building. "I'm sure you all are invited."

"We smell it, ma'am." The soldier grinned. "Don't you worry." He gave her a thumbs up, and Kerry returned it, then she rolled up the window and started out along the street, heading for the highway.

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The cargo flight landed with a jarring bounce, and Dar cautiously opened one eye as she heard the big engines going into reverse, ready for the noisy, bouncing flight to end.

"Sorry about that." The pilot in the seat ahead of her said. "We're pretty heavy."

"No problem." Dar opened her other eye and watched the airfield flash past out the front window of the C-17 Globemaster, just glad to be on the ground again.

She was the fourth person in a four person cockpit, the two pilots busy ahead of her and the loadmaster relaxed in his seat, waiting to start the process of unloading the full load of relief supplies behind them.

It had been a rough ride, and cramped, the spare seat not really intended for someone of her height and she was looking forward to standing up and getting out of it, though she had found the inside of the cockpit interesting and had somewhat enjoyed watching the process of flying the plane.

But now it was nearing sunset. The big cargo craft taxied off the long runway and rumbled towards one of the huge hangars, where lines of trucks were standing by and two large portable pole lights were already on to light the area for work.

"Where are we staying overnight?" The co pilot asked. "Not in a tent are we? It's ninty some degrees out there still and it's almost night."

"They got power in there." The pilot pointed at the airport. "Ops told me they got bunks for us and a mess." He steered the big plane up to a mark on the pavement, and then shut down the engines. "There we go. Hope it wasn't too bad a ride for you, ma'am."

"Nah." Dar unbuckled the four point harness holding her to the seat. "I've had worse. That was a lot of rough weather though."

"Out flow from that damn storm." The pilot shook his head. "Big mess."

"Big mess." The co pilot agreed, as the loadmaster unbuckled and got up, moving from the cockpit as he pushed the door open and into the cargo area. "They still don't have power here and I heard they may not for weeks!" He said. "Jesus!"

Ugh. "Probably not." Dar got up and ducked through the door, climbing down the steel stairs that dropped to the bottom of the deck and gave access to the entrance hatch.

With the engines off it was already getting hot, and she retrieved her overnight bag and laptop from bin near the door and waited for the pilot to come down to open it up. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem." The pilot came over to stand next to her. "Charlie, run the checklists willya?" He called up over his shoulder. "I'm gonna let our passenger out."

"Doin it." The co pilot called from the cockpit. "Look out, back door's cranking."

There was a lot of noise around them suddenly, the cargo hatch at the rear of the plane opening up and it's ramp grinding groundward, and the door near the cockpit opening up with a crinkly pop that came with a rush of damp, hot, Jet A scented air.

The pilot swung the door downwards extending the steps built into it and walked it down to the ground, pulling sunglasses out from his pocket and putting them on as he peered into the setting sunlight. "Nice sky."

Dar climbed down after him and followed as he walked along a marked path along the planes parking position, exchanging nods with the technicians and unloaders who were coming to swarm over the C-17.

"You expecting to be met here, ma'am?" The pilot asked, as the sound of a helicopter landing came clattering past them. "They're not really operating."

"Yes, and I know." Dar said. "I have someone picking me up."

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad you weren’t expecting a taxi or something. I was here overnight day before yesterday and nothing’s working around here.”

“That’s true.” Dar waited for him to open the door that would let them into the concourse and off the tarmac, returning to the utilitarian hallways she’d left through. “I’ve got it from here.” Dar said. “Thanks again.” She shouldered her bag and took a turn down another hallway, heading towards the civilian part of the airport.

“B..w..” The pilot stopped, then he shrugged. “Okay, g’bye.” He waved. “Guess you know what you’re doing.” He shook his head and went in the opposite direction, pushing open the door to a ready room and letting it swing closed behind him.

Dar ignored the comment. She let her sense of direction take over and maneuvered through the winding halls, passing offices and people in uniforms with an air of determination that made them quickly step out of her way and not ask her any questions.

She got through the last door and then she was back in the darkness of the airport proper.

Still full of mold and mildew and what she thought might have been a rat scuttling along as she went through the silent security tables in the gloom and headed for the front doors to the terminal, hearing the sound of leaks dripping on the floor just in time to slow down and not slip and fall on her ass.

The water on the floor felt slimy, and smelled worse, and Dar put a hand out to keep her balance as she moved from the floor to the carpet and then walked along the wall full of boarded up windows until she came to one of the sliding glass sets of entrance doors.

They were locked. Setting her overnight bag down on the terrazzo, she listened to the whining clunks as the activators in the floor pads tried to open the doors, separating them in the center just slightly.

Hm. She got her fingertips around the edge of one of the sliding doors, hauling back on it and pulling it partly open, setting off an alarm. “Crap.” She winced at the loud siren making her ears buzz, unable to budge the glass any further.

“Stop! Hold it right there!” A loud, male voice sounded at a distance behind her. “Stop! Hey! Who are you?”

“Nope, not today.” Dar squeezed through the partial opening with a determined grunt, yanking her bag along after her as she emerged into the overcast dusk, ignoring the running footsteps and the yells behind her as she got to the curb and away from the front of the building.

She looked up and down the drop off area, dirty concrete lit in lurid orange pink and full of powerless shadows, the lane in front of her crowded with emergency trucks and vans and the military.

There was really no reason for her to confidently expect Kerry to be there but at the end of the drive, behind the parked government cars and security vehicles, engine idling, there was her truck and she turned and headed for it, with a grin of relief.

“Stop!” Behind her, she heard the crack of the door opening all the way and leather soled shoes against the concrete. “Hey!”

Kerry put the truck in gear and came rocketing forward, nearly sideswiping one of the security vans as she intercepted her partner’s path and rode the wheels up onto the pavement, turning on the high beam lights to blast them into the eyes of the chasing guards.

Dar reached the truck and opened the door as the guards came to a halt, throwing their hands up and yelling in outrage. “Just go.” She told Kerry as she slid in. “Not going back inside that building tonight for me.”

“No problem hon.” Kerry put hammer down and rumbled over the road divider, making the guards dodge out of her way as she headed down the wrong way entry. “It’s been that kind of day. Hang on.”

“Hanging.” Dar grabbed the door strap as they zoomed down the onramp, hoping they weren’t going to come face to face with a squad of National Guard coming in the opposite direction. She held her breath until they reached the bottom of the ramp.

Kerry stolidly went up and over the divider again as she had the day before and they bumped down onto the luggage level and a clear path out of the airport. "At least it was clear yesterday." She swerved around the cars and trucks parked there for safety, and then onto the exit road leading east.

"Oh yeah." Dar turned and shoved her bag into the back seat. "Good job."

"Good job picking this truck instead of a sports car, hon." Kerry changed lanes and headed off onto 836. She waited until she was on the highway, then glanced to her right. "How was the flight?"

"About as good as jump seat in a cargo plane would be." Dar shifted the seat backwards and extended her legs. "What's up here?"

Kerry exhaled. "What isn't? Well, most nothing is actually except we got the point to point link up just before I came out to pick you up."

"Nice." Dar said. "Good work. That's a long throw." She rested her head against her fist. "Got an email I managed to read over night from the guys at Pharma. They want to talk about the contract."

"They called the cottage." Kerry said. "I figured whatever it was could wait for you to get back. Didn't sound promising."

"No." Dar sighed. "I should have checked that code. They probably want to cancel."

Kerry reached over to pat her on the leg. "Is what it is, hon. Everyone did the best they could, and if that guy doesn't get what we're going through here he's not worth it as a customer." She glanced to the left as they crossed over I-95, spotting a rolling blockade full of police lights and sirens stopping traffic. "Uh oh."

"That's not for us is it?" Dar eyed it drolly. "I didn't figure they could get that in place in that short a time."

"And on the wrong highway. No. Probably some government derp." Kerry said. "Which reminds me, your friend from the other night wants more favors."

"Jackass."

"Your mother went after him. He was being mean to the staff."

Dar covered her eyes.

"Toldja it's been one of those days." Kerry had to smile regardless. "But you said the demo went well?" She watched Dar out of her peripheral vision, seeing her shift and half turn, watching her body language and seeing the hint of a grin tugging at the corners of her lips. "How well?"

"It went well." Dar agreed. "I stuck the helmet on the government bean counter's head."

"Oh Dar." Kerry started laughing. "Was that nice?"

"Hey he liked it." Dar chuckled. "More to the point, he greenlit them moving forward." She said. "So that contract's safe, at least."

"Yes!" Kerry danced a little in her seat.

"Even more to the point, he's an angel investor. Interested in taking the concept and putting it into a gaming rig." She watched Kerry's head turn to look at her, jaw dropping slightly. "Ah ah ah. Eyes on the road. Even if we're the only ones on it."

Kerry jerked her attention back to the highway. "Holy bananas, Dar!" She blurted. "Are you serious?"

"I am. Lets wait till we stop so I can tell you all the gory details without risking us running off the road." Dar exhaled as she watched the darkness creeping over the landscape, tiny islands of light springing up in isolated spots and oddly, one section of the highway lights coming on for about a block length. "Any chance of a kahlua milkshake?"

Kerry moved right to the offramp that would take them down to ground level. "Well. It's possible by the time we get back to the office, they'll be making and selling kahlua milkshakes, so you could be in luck."

“Huh?”

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It was almost dark, the low, lingering dusk of the subtropics that threw everything into shadows by the time they got back to the street where the office was.

“What the hell?” Dar sat up as they turned the corner.

“Oh.” Kerry observed the sulphur lights illuminating the National Guard camp. “My friends from the other day needed a place to set up station. I figured having the guard outside our door wasn’t a bad thing.”

“Does the guard know not to mess with my dad and his friends?” Dar asked, in a quizzical tone. “That could get exciting. Not in a good way.”

“Yes they do.” Kerry reassured her. “They’re being very nice and asked permission to park in our lot which we all know they had no real reason to need.”

“True.”

They pulled into the parking lot, pausing as Kerry rolled down the window and waved at the guard, the same tow headed man who’d been there when she’d left. He waved back, and gave them both an easy grin and a thumbs up.

“Well.” Dar sat back and folded her arms as they pulled past the encampment and into the back half of the lot.

“Okay.”

The office building had lights showing in multiple windows, and as they parked and opened the door, the sound of generators rumbled in counterpoint to some far off thunder.

There was a brief snatch of music on the air, and the onshore breeze also brought the smell of spices and cooking meat. “Something smells good.” Dar commented. “Are we stuck here tonight? The ferry probably stopped running.”

“I’ll call over there when we get inside.” Kerry said. “I have no idea what the rules are today, since a whole crapload of some kind of brass went off the island this morning. I don’t figure they’ll force the governor to sleep in a shelter but hey. You never know.”

They walked side by side up the sidewalk. “They clean up here?” Dar looked around. “That big pile of debris is gone.”

“They did. I guess they started that part going here in the city.”

The door to the office was open to allow the breeze in, and there was a cat seated on the steps, watching them solemnly as they approached. The lights were on at the receptionist’s desk, and in the conference room and as they entered the office, they could hear many voices through the open center door into the courtyard.

Kerry glanced at Dar, who looked slightly bewildered. “There’s a lot of people here, hon. Don’t freak out.”

“Our people?” Dar asked, a trifle uncertainly.

“Our people, some people we know that aren’t our people, some people we know from the area, some people I don’t know, but I think your dad does, and some people who just showed up to work on the office.” Kerry told her. “Like I said, it’s been a day.”

“Um.”

“Just go with it. One of them is Sasha, and she brought her kitchen.” Kerry gently nudged her. “And I’m hungry.”

“Um...”

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They ended up carrying sturdy Chinnet paper plates upstairs and into Dar’s office, along with cups of Thai iced coffee. “Put those down here.” Dar said. “Lemme go get a light.”

Kerry set her plate and cup down on Dar's desk and then she went over to the window, opening up the shutters that had blown shut from a random gust of wind. It allowed a breeze to come in and she sat down on the bench seat to look outside for a moment and enjoy that.

Outside she could see the darkness of the remaining trees in the back of the building, curling around the corner where her and Dar's offices were in the northeast angle, and past those, the half hidden street that went east to the sailing club and then the bay.

It was quiet, now. She could hear the sound of the generators, both theirs and the National Guards, but it was nearer the front of the building and here at the back she could hear the sound of small waves against the seawall and faint clinks of rigging, somewhere.

A boat, riding at anchor?

Might be.

Kerry turned at the sound of Dar's footsteps and watched her come back in with a roughly teardrop shaped candle casting a warm golden glow up to highlight her face. "That's a nice candle."

Dar came over and set it down on the windowsill. It had a glass roundel that blocked the wind, and lit up the small area nicely. "It's a hurricane candle." She pronounced. "Appropriate."

"Is it really?" Kerry inspected it, while Dar went over and retrieved their dinner, bringing the plates over and then returning for the cups. "It's designed specifically for hurricanes?"

"Not really, no." Dar handed her a cup and then sat down next to her, extending her legs across the floor and crossing her ankles. "But the sides keep the breeze from blowing the candle out." She took a forkful of the spicy scented mixture on her plate and chewed it. "Mm." She said, after a pause. "That's good."

"Sasha was talking about buying the sailing club and turning it into a restaurant." Kerry told her. "I thought that sounded like a great idea. She really can cook."

"She can." Dar said, glancing over her shoulder out the window towards the shore. "That'd be kind of awesome actually."

"I told her that." Kerry agreed. "Meantime, I told her she's welcome to hang out here."

"Ready made customers, with the Guard here."

"That's what she said."

Dar ate a few more forkfuls. "I'm still a little weirded out by how full of people this building is. I'm not sure I get it." She admitted. "I mean... I'm glad, stuff's getting fixed but.." She looked over her other shoulder at the inside of the building and shook her head.

"It's weird." Kerry agreed.

"It's weird."

"I talked to Zoe today, about it. You know, I wasn't really that cool with her hanging out here overnight. But she told me something interesting."

"Mm?" Dar continued chewing, reasoning more was forthcoming. She leaned back against the windowsill and watched Kerry's expression in the candlelight, seeing some tired introspection there. "This is her tribe." She guessed after a moment's quiet pause.

Kerry looked up, a trifle startled, their eyes meeting. "She didn't say that but..." She paused. "She meant that I think. Yeah. I mean, she has .. she only has work in common with some of the people here and nothing in common with some of the people here but she feels safe."

Dar chewed for a minute in reflective silence. "Well." She took a sip of the iced coffee and swallowed the spicy Korean pork mixture. "Carlos and his gang are here, and Dad and his guys. Not really surprising. It's safer here than almost anywhere, and now we got the guard over there."

"True, but it wasn't that." Kerry forked up some of the barbeque. "She said at the shelter, everyone was just angry. Just bitching, you know?"

"Well." Dar moved her shoulders in a slight shrug. "It's understandable."

"Yeah sure, I would be too. But here they're not. It's not comfortable, but everyone is just sort of...I don't know. It feels like safe shelter to them." Kerry said. "I'm flattered. I mean, people just show up here with useful skills and building materials and start rebuilding our walls, you know?"

"I'm sure they're expecting to get paid." Dar's eyes twinkled a little. "Let's not get crazy altruistic."

"No, I know." Kerry chuckled softly. "I don't know. It just touched me, seeing that." She said, in a wistful tone. "I talked to Maria this morning, from the cottage." She continued, in a brisker voice. "Tomas is doing well. Now her worry is, if they release him, what she's going to do. They can't live in that house."

"Not with him in a cast in any case." Dar said. "Can we send them up to Melbourne?"

"She doesn't want to go. I asked her. She's got a lot of family down here, and they've been visiting, but they're all in shelters."

"Hm. So I guess going to Colorado would be out then." Dar mused. "She could set up the satellite office they asked me for when I was there."

"What?" Kerry cocked her head a little to one side, intrigued rather than startled. "By the base?"

Dar cleared her throat a little. "The angel investor lives there. He suggested we move the company there. Said it had good office space and a good local workforce." She set her now empty plate down and hiked a knee up, lacing her fingers together around it. "Thinks he can pull together the resources to launch this thing and market it in time for next Christmas."

Kerry studied her face intently. "Would you actually do that?"

"Would we actually do that?" Dar countered. "This is our company not mine."

Kerry put her hand out and touched Dar's arm. "Didn't mean it that way." She said. "I was just remembering asking you if we'd consider moving and you were right away, like no way."

It was odd, and intensely intimate, this candlelit conversation, as though the darkness provided an unseen clarity.

"I know I said that. But was that me just being an asshole?" Dar asked, moving her head in silent conciliation. "What makes sense, Ker? If this guy can deliver what he says he can, that takes this to a whole other level."

Did that matter to them? Kerry put her plate down on top of Dar's and set her ice coffee down next to it. "That must have been some change you made." She shifted the conversation slightly. "We should look at what all our options are, sweetheart. If that's the right thing to do, we'll know."

Dar smiled in response, her body relaxing. "It was one of those things where after I found it I was like..." She bit her lower lip a little. "Huh. It's a new way of addressing hardware."

Kerry's brows lifted.

"I'm not sure what made me write it that way but.. I mean, it seemed obvious once I saw it." Dar said. "It's really cool. Arthur and Elvis are going to lose their minds when they try the new code." She looked up at Kerry, peering at her from between some slightly overlong hair obscuring her eyes, and grinned briefly. "Guess I got lucky typing away there on my keyboard waiting for Armegeddon."

"The hell with them \*I\* want to try it." Kerry laughed. "Maybe this damn storm did someone some good." She lifted Dar's hand up and kissed the knuckles. "Good job, hon, and you know it's not luck."

They both paused, as the sound of yelling voices echoed softly through the air. "Tell me someone isn't causing trouble." Kerry sighed, exasperated. "Jesus Christ."

"Around here with that platoon outside?" Dar stood up and pulled Kerry up with her. "C'mon, let's see what the hell's going on."

\*\*

Everyone had heard both the shouting and the rhythmic steps on the stairs as Dar and Kerry came rambling down them, causing a jam up around the receptionist's desk that fronted the front door as no one could figure out how to move forward and get out of the way at the same time.

Caught at the back of it, Dar paused, leaning her elbow on Kerry's shoulder as Carlos and his crew sorted themselves out and pushed through the entry.

"Lord." Andrew was standing near the stairs.

"What do you figure, Dad?" Dar asked, as the crowd cleared and they were able to move forward.

"Ah do not know." Andy skulked ahead of them to the door and through it, and they both noticed the automatic in a holster at the small of his back. "But ah supposed we're fixing to find out."

"People would have to be nuts to cause a problem around here." Kerry commented as they went out into the night, finding the space between the front of the building and the National Guard camp empty and quiet.

The sounds were coming from past the military camp, and it occurred to her that there really was no reason for them to even be getting involved.

"Why the hell are we out here?" Dar conveniently read her mind and spoke her thoughts aloud, putting her hand on Kerry's back as they sped up to catch up to the rest of the gang already streaming towards the noise. "Do we not think the National Guard can handle a street mob?"

"We don't know that it's a mob." Kerry said, in a reasonable tone. "And I agree with you, but here we are." She could now see the soldiers up near the edge of the road, and past it, in the shadows a reasonably large crowd of people. "Oh. Okay. Maybe it is a mob." She conceded.

"Maybe it is." Dar said. "It's better I guess to know what the hells going on." She and Kerry caught up to the line of people who had emerged from her office, and saw Hank and Pete come up behind the ranks of them, rifles cradled in their arms.

"C'mon." Dar took Kerry's hand and started forward, firmly pushing people aside as they made their way through the crowd. "Let's figure this out before someone gets shot."

"Right with you hon." Kerry was glad enough to follow her partner through the path that hastily opened, and they ended up right next to Carlos who had gotten to the front of the gang. "Hey."

"Hey." Carlos was, now, just standing and watching, as the crowd surged against the line of soldiers. "Glad those guys are here. That's a lot of people."

"What do they want?" Dar asked, aware of her father coming up next to her. "Any idea what's up, Dad?"

They were just at the back end of the guard camp, where the halo of their lights spread but all the attention was focused on what looked to Dar like about a hundred people who were in the road in front of the camp, some of them carrying torches.

"Are those tiki torches?" Kerry murmured. "Someone do a run on Pier 1 before the storm?"

"Home Depot carries those." Dar was using her height to advantage, studying the crowd. "In the garden area. I can smell the citronella they're burning." She moved forward a few steps to get a better look.

The group of people were a mixed lot, from what she could see but mostly men, and mostly in shorts or jeans and tank tops, some of them carrying backpacks and coolers, and all of them angry. They were yelling at the guards in angry Spanish.

"Let me go see what's going on." Dar started forward and after a second Kerry caught up with her, and they walked up the road past the perimeter of the National Guard camp along the entrance way to their parking lot, aware from the sound of footsteps behind them they were not alone and that their little gang was behind them.

Expected. Kerry could sense the crowd's agitation, and as they came up to the crossroads where their parking lot turned into the road, the guard captain came out and started speaking to the group as one of the sentries hurried over to meet them.

"Oh, hang on ladies, hold up there." The sentry said. "Just hold off back of the road there. Don't want you to get mixed up in this."

"It's our parking lot." Dar moved past him. "We want to know what's going on here."

Kerry gave the sentry a brief, sympathetic smile as she scooted past him, and her cadre of ill assorted weightlifters, nerds and armed veterans followed. "We'll be fine." She reassured the man. "Really."

Dar walked past the barrier fence that had been thrown up around the encampment and crossed over to where the captain was standing, a bullhorn in one fist. On either side of him were young, slightly overwhelmed looking guards, their automatic rifles held ready in front of them.

She identified one problem immediately, in that the crowd was yelling in Spanish, and the captain wasn't getting even a word of it. He was telling them over and over again in Southern inflected English to disperse, and move away from the camp, and most of the crowd wasn't getting any of that in return.

She slid past the right guard and tapped him on the shoulder.

He jumped, jerking around and the guard with the gun whirled and took a step back in surprise. "Who..." He then glanced past Dar, and saw Kerry standing there with her hands behind her back, a bemusedly humorous expression on her face. "Oh, ah.."

Dar offered a hand. "Hi. I'm Dar." She gestured behind her thumb. "I think you know my partner Kerry."

The captain turned fully around and focused on her, blinking a little in surprise. "Oh right! Sure! Of course I couldn't really see ya... ah, ladies you probably don't want to be mixing up in this here."

"Mind if I help you out with these people?" Dar didn't wait for him to connect the dots. "They're asking for water and ice." She held up a hand to the crowd who'd been edging closer. "Hold on, let me talk to him." She added, in Spanish.

The captain recovered his composure. "Right.. okay, ma'am I can understand that, but see, we don't have any water, or ice here." He said. "I've been trying to tell them, if they need provisions they need to go on up to that downtown location near to the seaport." He made a vague gesture northward. "We can't do nothing for them."

Dar held her hand out for the bullhorn. "Gimme."

After a pause, he handed it to her. Dar half turned, bringing the bullhorn up to her lips. "These guys are just soldiers. They don't have supplies." She told the crowd in Spanish. "Place with water and ice, is Bayside."

The nearest of the crowd, a tall, grizzle haired man with a ripped tshirt rolled and tied around his head like a headband threw his hands up. "What do you mean? We were downtown they told us to come here!"

Dar repeated that in English to the captain.

The captain shook his head. "I don't know anything about that, but take a look." He turned and spread his arms out, indicating the camp. "We got some tarps, sandbags, and tents. That's it. We had a truck full of water but they told us to send it over to Bayside."

"They sent all their water to Bayside." Dar told the man, who had now come up next to her.

He cursed. "We have nothing." He told her, in Spanish. "The water is out in Doral, where we live. Not even so that we can boil it. Nobody thought that would happen. We have chlorine to treat it, you know?"

"Sure." Dar agreed quietly.

“Evaporated milk for the babies, we can’t use it.” The man looked at her, his eyes a little on the desperate side. “Cup of soups, rice, nothing.”

Kerry had eased up on the other side of Dar and was listening in silence, guessing what was going on by her partner’s body language. After a moment, Carlos came up and joined them.

“They need water.” Dar turned to the captain. “They have busted pipes or something where they live. They’ve got no water left.”

The captain nodded. “I get that. I don’t have any.”

Kerry cleared her throat. “Could we call over to Bayside and see if there’s some there before we send these folks over again? It must be super frustrating to go back and forth.” She had her hands in her front pockets and her tone was mild.

The trick with Kerry was, Dar pondered, she always sounded so kind and reasonable you just wanted to agree with her because to disagree with that kind, interested, sincere engagement by definition made you unreasonable and feel like a jerky jerk.

And the captain looked like he wanted to disagree, wanted to tell her, and Dar, and all the people standing there this was not his problem, and go back to having his dinner or whatever it was he’d been doing.

But he was also a smart man, and the words had time to be absorbed and reason won. “Why, sure.” He responded. “We can do that, sure. That’s a good idea, Ms Kerry.”

Kerry smiled at him.

“Jackson, give them folks up to the north a call on the radio wouldja?” The captain directed a tow headed woman standing nearby. “Find out if they got any supplies left.”

“Yes, sir.” The woman trotted off.

“They’re calling over there to see if they have water.” Carlos told the nearest of the crowd, in Spanish. “My bosses gotcha.” He added, confidently. “Don’t worry about it.”

“This is how we get into this stuff isn’t it?” Kerry shifted her hands from her pockets to behind her back, clasping them together and rocking a little on the balls of her feet.

“Yes.” Dar agreed. “What are we going to do if they don’t have any?” She turned her head and regarded her partner. “Now that we’re in it?”

Kerry eyed her in silence.

“Run a hose from our building?”

“We’re not sure our water is any good, Dar.” Kerry replied, in a mild tone. “They’re boiling it to drink and cook.”

“That’s smart.” The captain nodded at her. “Can’t be too careful, with all the pressure loss.”

“They had loads of water in the Cargomaster I flew back here on.” Dar told the captain, half turning to face him. “Over at the airport. They were unloading it.”

The soldiers around him were still alert, rifles cradled, watching the crowd who had stopped agitating for a moment, waiting to hear about the water.

“Ten, twelve pallets of it.” Dar continued. “So you could send someone out there to pick some up.”

“May be so.” The man agreed. “But likely it’s marked for someplace though. Seems like everyone’s looking for supplies.” He glanced around and then back at her. “Not Like you all are, with the boiling. I bet your folks have antiseptic tabs, too.” He looked pointedly at the crowd. “I been over in there. You all were prepared.”

“No, I think..” Dar turned. “Is the water bad, or off?” She asked in Spanish.

“It is off.” The man answered readily. “No pressure, nothing.”

"That's what I thought." Dar turned to the captain. "It's off totally. They can't boil or chemical it. Probably a busted main."

"Well." He said, with a tiny shrug. "You're supposed to have a three day supply, y'know."

Kerry sighed. She'd heard that a lot lately, not only from the soldiers but on the television from frustrated government spokesmen, repeated by the television anchors. "Gallon jugs." She murmured.

"Yes, that's right." The captain nodded at her. "Big old jugs, like they sell in the supermarket. We stock up on em every year, round these times. We don't get many storms, but when one comes it's a big old mess in our parts." He looked past Dar. "Aint' that right, Mr. Roberts?"

"Ain't be there for a long time." Andy replied. "What alls we're gonna do here for these folks?" He asked. "They got kids at home."

Hank came up behind him, cradling his gun, silent and listening.

"Sir." The tow haired Jackson came back. "They're all out sure enough in Bayside, and supply said the load that came in on the plane is heading up to Aventura."

Aventura. Kerry had a sudden flash of memory of a three story shopping mall, and her first outing with Dar. It had been white, and full of high end stores, and replete with the scent of many perfumeries and the distinct scent of expensive clothes.

"Well, that's too bad then." He turned. "Sorry about that, all. They just don't have any, and we don't either. Maybe the next load, coming in tomorrow morning."

Kerry thought about what they had in the office, and kept silent, knowing their couple cases of sixteen ounce water bottles wouldn't do much. "What are they supposed to do?"

"Wait." He gave her a small, brief twist of his lips. "Close the gates up, we're done here." He turned and walked back into the camp, as the guards rolled shut a hastily erected chain link fence gate that now also had a line of soldiers behind it, holding guns.

"Asshole." Andy called after him.

Both Kerry and Dar grimaced, as the man turned to stare at him. "Okay." Dar turned and faced the man and the crowd. "They don't have anything to give out. None of the water that came in today came here, and Bayside's out, like they told you."

"Jesus." The man looked exhausted, his face hollow. "No one will help us."

The crowd murmured, at a loss.

"Can't you go to a shelter?" Carlos asked. "There's three of them over that way."

"They are full." The man answered simply. "We went too late. Everything's too late."

Kerry tugged Dar's sleeve. "Can they try the big base on the north side of Doral?" She asked. "The one where I was? I bet they have water. They had piles of stuff there, Dar."

"Southcom?" Dar mused. "They probably wouldn't be amused if a crowd showed up there."

"How bout I rev up the Vee and take some of them over there and see." Hank offered. "Can't hurt to ask, can it? You'll go with us, huh Andy? Them boys'll listen to you."

"I'll go along to translate." Carlos immediately agreed. "That's a good idea, head over there with maybe that guy, and the other one there, and find out." He said. "And Mr. R's right. That guy could give a shit and he's an asshole."

"Be right back." Hank turned and trotted off towards the building, holding his rifle in both hands. "See if Zo wants to go." He called back over his shoulder. "Nother translator."

Dar turned. "So." She walked over to the crowd. "Some of my guys want to ride over to Southcom down on 41<sup>st</sup> and see if they've got anything there. You up for that? They can take a couple people." She asked him in Spanish. "Then if they've got some, everyone can go over there."

Two of the nearest men had come closer and were listening to her. "You think they have some?"

"They might." Dar said. "We don't know, but there isn't any here."

"Why not try?" The first of the men said. "Yes I will go. Of course. Why not?" He held his hand out. "I am Henry." He said. "This is Juan, and Maikel, my friends and neighbors." He clasped Dar's hand firmly. "Thank you for helping us out."

Kerry put her hands back into her pockets, wondering if sending a Humvee with a roof mounted machine gun full of armed veterans and desperate residents was really the best idea on the table. She glanced at Andy, who had turned his back on the guard camp and folded his bare arms over his chest. "Pissed you off, huh dad?"

"Some bitch." Andy frowned. "Ah do not care for that don't give a shit attitude." He said. "S'what they get paid for, this kinda thing."

"It's a humanitarian mission." Kerry said. "Yes, I get it."

"Don't matter if them people are being jackass. Got their homes wrecked, family's hurting." Andy glowered out at the crowd. "How'd he like it if it was his kids not eatin?"

Well." Kerry cleared her throat a little. "I understand what they are saying, about why didn't these folks prepare, you know? Why didn't they have jugs of water and things like that but of course, it doesn't matter. They need help."

"Xactly."

Kerry smiled. "Dar gets her crusader gene from you."

Andy turned around and faced her. "Say what?"

A loud horn sounded behind them and they both turned to see the Humvee headed their way, with Hank at the wheel, and just visible, Zoe in the passenger seat, eyes wide as baseballs. Behind it, Hank was hauling his landscaping trailer, empty of anything but some coils of rope.

"That'll do it." Andy stepped forward. "C'mon boy." He tapped Carlos on the shoulder. "Lets go find us some jugs." He got into the front of the Humvee next to Zoe, and Carlos piled into the back with Henry and Juan, as the crowd cleared out of the way to let them get out onto the road.

Dar took a step back as well, ending up next to Kerry who slid her fingers into the back of her partner's shorts. "Should we.."

"No." Kerry said, firmly. "They've got a better chance of not having anything weird happen if we're not there." She waved at the truck as it trundled off. "Lets go get more kim chee." She started backwards, tugging Dar with her. "And just be glad your mother isn't here."

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It was warm and sticky inside the office. Dar perched on the window seat and took advantage of the breeze coming off the water, listening to Kerry in her own office talking to two of their techs. The hurricane candle was flickering sedately on her desk, providing an amber glow.

It had been a very long day. She really wanted to just go home and get comfortable and not worry about finding water for people or what to do with mad customers and irate government contractors, when it would be more fun to think about the AI rig and it's potential.

She wriggled her shoulderblades, getting them into a more comfortable spot against the window frame and watched the clouds gathering, covering the moon and casting the exterior into utter darkness, that she could nevertheless pick out dim outlines in.

“Um... uh...Dar?”

Dar looked up and over at the door to the inside of the office. “Over here.” She responded. “Catching a breeze.”

“Oh, there ya are.” Their LAN tech entered. “There’s a phone call for you?” He said, tentatively. “I think it’s your mom.” He added. “Well, I mean, yeah, it’s your mom. I mean, she said so.”

“Ho boy.” Dar got up and followed him down the hall, dodging multiple sawhorses with plasterboard on them and buckets tucked neatly underneath. They arrived in the room where the radio had been installed, and now there was an IP phone there, it’s receiver off hook. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” The tech grinned and went on further down to where the techs had taken over the support office and shifted it around to become a bunkroom, using the military cots and gauzy mosquito netting along with desk panels to make cozily weird post apocalyptic tech nests for themselves.

Nerd camp. Despite the need for it, the setup had made Dar laugh every time she poked her head in, and now the moreso because she’d caught the addition of a network cable snaking out under the door of the radio room from the new switch over into that doorway as well.

She suspected if she logged in and inspected the switch she would find a wireless access point on the other end of the cable, giving the techs the comfort of running their phones off it and getting their personal mail and that made her a little annoyed she hadn’t thought of running one herself.

Oh well. They were not going to be there much longer.

Dar sat down and picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Ah, Dar.”

“Hi mom.” Dar rested her head against one fist. “What’s up?”

“The governor’s moron won’t leave us alone. He has this file he wants sent, and won’t take no again from me.” Ceci told her promptly. “I told him you’re not here, which is visually evident since you’re not a midget living in that big black rolling case but he doesn’t care.”

“Well, I’m not there, so he can just...” Dar said. “Wait, hang on.” She put the phone down and went back down to her office, picking up her backpack and bringing it back with her to the room.

She set the pack down and sat down, pulling out her laptop and putting it on the table. “Where the hell is my cable.” She rummaged inside the sack. “Damn it.”

“You asking me?” Ceci’s voice emerged tinnily from the receiver. “There’s a pile of cables here not sure what you want done with them.”

Dar glanced up, and put the phone on speaker. “No, sorry. Talking to myself. Did he leave the file?”

“No.”

“Is he there banging on the door? If he is tell him to give you the file and have Arthur stick it into a laptop and mount it.” Dar watched her machine boot. “I can get to that router from here and send it. It’s late enough for the rest of them to have keeled over in their bad wine.”

Ceci chuckled softly. “Hold on. He’s probably walking around in a circle outside cursing and checking his watch. Let me go see.”

She put the phone on hold and a crinkly stuttering musical tone emerged from the speaker.

“That’s gross.” Dar logged into her machine and connected it to the switch on the desk, rattling impatiently on the keyboard. She connected to the island and rummaged around in the router, tweaking some settings and applying them, grunting in approval when the music smoothed out.

Then she idly went through the logs, applying a packet filter to them and reviewing the traffic with an impersonal curiosity at the results.

"They should encrypt DNS queries." She remarked. "I wonder if all those yonks out there know how much of their web surfing could be splashed all over the Herald just from some rando nerd like me messing in the network."

The music cut off. "Dar?"

"Right here where you left me." Dar acknowledged. "Counting the porn sites."

"Okay, our friend the governor's friend is hustling back to his bodega. He's going to send either Thing 1 or Thing 2 back over with the file."

"Yay."

"How's it going over there?"

Dar studied the small digital screen of the phone. "Do you really want to know?" She queried. "Did they tell you they have the national guard camped in front of the door?"

"Your father did say." Ceci chuckled. "He doesn't really care for them." She conceded. "They're from back home, he said, and apparently they're prouder of that than he is."

"Well." Dar exhaled. "A bunch of people showed up and they wouldn't give them the time of day so now he really doesn't like them."

"Uh oh."

"He and Hank took off in that Humvee and headed over to Doral to find water."

There was a brief silence. "For the guard?"

"For the people." Dar rested her chin on her fist. "Hey, the government liked my program."

"Hold on. Is your father going to get into trouble?" Her mother asked. "Trouble as in you're going to have to go bail him out?"

"No, we didn't go with them." Dar reassured her. "I'm sure they'll be back with a load of water, along with two dozen pizzas and a case of beer, none the worse for wear. Unlike if we'd gone, where we'd have ended up having to modify a Martian spaceship and I'd be calling you from the moon."

Another silence. "Well, Paladar, that is actually pretty likely the truth. So they liked your thing huh?" Ceci asked. "Is that the artificial insemination program you all were talking about?"

Dar started laughing.

"Was that funny?"

"They probably would have really liked that. Artificial intelligence. Yeah." Dar said. "Project's moving forward. So at least we'll get paid for it."

"Oh well that is good news." Her mother said. "The kids here can't wait to try whatever it is you did after hearing it went well. They need a helmet? They keep talking about a helmet."

"I have it here." Dar said. "Tell them I'll bring it back with me and they can run it tomorrow." She shifted a little. "How's it going there? People still yelling?"

"Wait, I hear the minions coming hold on."

The hold music came back and Dar got up, walking across the hall and into the server room and opening a metal cabinet mounted on the wall. Inside was a large square case and she lifted it out and took it with her back into the radio room, setting it down on the floor before she resumed her seat.

There was still hold music playing, and in the distance she could hear a soft rumble of thunder. The breeze coming in the window brought with it the far off smell of rain, and sea, and the air was so full of moisture she could almost feel it condensing on her tongue.

It had grown mostly quiet outside, though if she concentrated she could faintly hear the sound of voices in the central open space behind her, across the hallway and through all the open windows and beyond that the sound of crickets in the sawgrass outside.

She could hear the faint creaks and pops of the building shifting a little around her and she imagined she could hear the light scratch of Kerry's pen as she sat at her desk, writing.

"Okay!"

Dar jumped, as the phone music stopped and Ceci's voice came through the speaker. "He got the file?"

"The kids have it, and it's in the laptop, and the laptop is sitting here." Her mother dutifully reported. "Everyone is standing here, expecting you to do something to turn it into a circus clown or I don't know what." She said. "Hey listen, they also told me they're running the ferry all night tonight, because the government people are still out there."

"That's great news." Dar remoted into the other laptop and examined the thumb drive in the port. "Twice the size of the last one." She frowned. "It's going to take forever." She set up the transfer then she paused, and as she had the other time, she pulled up a file editor and glanced at the file.

Names, names and addresses, and brief descriptions of damages and .. Dar studied the records in silence for a long minute, scanning the list of them. "Hang on." She got up and left the radio room, walking down the hallway and back to her office and through it, through the interconnecting door into Kerry's.

"Hey hon." Kerry was seated behind her desk, a candle planted on it's surface, writing on a pad in the candlelight. "Where were you? I wondered where you went."

"They're running the ferry all night. Want to wrap it up here after Dad gets back and go home?" Dar perched on the edge of her partner's desk. "I was just talking to my mother. That jackass contractor has another file of names for me to send."

"Sure I do." Kerry sat back in her chair. "So that guy's back huh?" She said. "You don't want to do it?" She looked up at Dar, watching the faint candlelight outline her profile. "Just because he's a jerk? At least that other guy brought decent empanadas."

"I saw all the names he's sending. Whole list is from the Gables, Miami Beach, Aventura, Doral.. every high rent district." Dar said, bluntly. "There's no names on there from North Miami or Sweetwater or any place else."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Why wouldn't there be damage reports there?" Dar asked. "There has to be thousands of claims.. you saw those houses out by Maria's."

"I'm sure there are. But that guy?" Kerry gave her partner a wry look. "He's there to take care of the people who donate big to the politicians, Dar. He's taking care of who he's taking care of. C' mon." She put one hand on Dar's knee. "Everyone else has to wait for the adjusters to get here, if their insurance company even bothers to send them and doesn't just write the state off."

Dar looked at her.

"You saw the damage. This storm's going to run every private insurance company out of here. They can't pay all those claims, and I was talking to Zoe before. There are a lot people who fully own those homes and didn't have insurance."

Dar folded her arms. "That's incredibly unfair." She stated flatly. "Those people don't have third homes to fly off to."

Kerry nodded. "You're absolutely right." She agreed at once. "But if you're thinking of not sending that file, or sending it to Taiwan, it won't change what he's doing. He'll just send it some other way and the same people will get the same special treatment because that's kinda how it works."

Dar's eyes narrowed dourly, but she remained silent because she knew, and she knew Kerry knew, that Kerry was right.

As though in acknowledgment of that, Kerry leaned forward, using her other hand to give Dar a pat on the calf. "He's a jerk, hon, but the planet's full of them, y'know?"

"I don't like it." Dar finally said. She stood up off the desk and ruffled Kerry's hair, then headed back out and towards the radio room, muttering under her breath as she walked.

Kerry put the pen she'd been writing with between her fingers and studied the empty doorway, taking the time to just sit and feel the intense love she felt for Dar in that moment.

It wasn't that Dar wasn't a realist, she was. She knew perfectly well how the world worked. Kerry had perhaps a bit more cynical worldview caused by her upbringing, but not by much. Dar just really didn't like blatantly visibly unfairness and she championed the underdog as naturally as breathing.

But of course, Dar had never in her life considered herself in any sense an underdog in any situation. Her assumption, always, was that she would achieve whatever it was she was after and any roadblocks she had to move out of her way were just incidental problems to be solved. She never took any of them personally.

With a faint smile, Kerry stood up and went to the door, crossing the hall and rambling down the steps to the first floor. She paused to look outside, peering past the guard camp in hopes she would see the returning Humvee, hopefully with its trailer of water.

Instead, she saw a single, lone guard soldier coming towards her, a young crewcutted man with a rifle slung over his back. Kerry went out onto the porch and stood there, waiting for him.

"Hello, ma'am?"

"Yep." Kerry smiled briefly at him. "What's up?"

"Ma'am, there's a person who's asking to come back in here. Says she knows you all, but she's got no ID or nothin." The soldier reported. "My lieutenant said to hold her there. Maybe one of those locals just trying to get past us."

Kerry shrugged slightly. "Sure, lets go see who it is." She motioned him in the direction of the camp. "If they're asking for me, chances are it's legit."

She walked alongside the soldier down the path and across the front part of the parking lot, where Dar's truck was parked, as a gust of damp, cooler air rustled the trees on either side. "Rain again."

"Yes, ma'am." The soldier said, a touch mournfully. "That's what they told us."

"Well, it cools the air off."

They walked along the barrier the soldiers had put up and into the pools of light from the generator serviced pole fixtures and as they did Kerry heard her name being called.

Startled, she looked up and past the soldier and shaded her eyes from the light. Standing just outside the National Guard camp was a slim figure, dressed in a tshirt and jeans, a sturdy backpack on her back, who was now waving at her.

"Mayte!" Kerry yelled in response. "Is that the person?" She asked the soldier. "She definitely belongs here."

"Yes ma'am." The man said. "I guess so if you know her." His voice sounded doubtful.

Kerry reached the gate and found Mayte there being blocked by two armed soldiers that she herself walked past without hesitation. "What are you doing here?" She opened her arms and they exchanged hugs. "How's your dad? They were putting that walking cast on this morning when I talked to mom."

Mayte looked at her, then looked at the guards, hesitating.

"C'mon." Kerry easily interpreted the look. "And guys.." She addressed the guards, who were watching her with furtive, sideways looks. "If someone asks for us by name, just let them past. I've got another dozen people out there I haven't heard from."

Without waiting for an answer Kerry steered Mayte back along the road and left the soldiers behind. "Sorry they stopped you. They're a little clueless." She said. "They're from Alabama and nothing here makes much sense to them."

"Ah, Si." Mayte relaxed. "They talked like Dar's papa."

"Same part of the world he's from."

"So yes." Mayte continued. "Mama is still at the hotel next to the hospital, but I thought I would go out and see what I could do about our house you know?"

"Sure." Kerry said. "But can you even get over there? I saw a news report it was still flooded in those parts." They reached the door and she ushered Mayte through and into the building. "As you can see, things are pretty weird in here too."

Mayte glanced up and down. "Oh, it is not so bad in here." She sounded surprised. "Is it new already?"

"Sort of." Kerry pointed at the central door. "I can explain better out there." She walked out onto the porch and a paused. Around a small hibachi about a dozen people were gathered, one of them strumming a guitar.

"Some people in the area are doing some work for us." She indicated the construction area, and the sawhorses, with their stacks of plywood and plaster lathe nearby.

Mayte stopped and looked around. "Oo!" She made a surprised exclamation. "Do we know these people?"

"We do now." Kerry said cheerfully. "So anyway, you were saying about your house?"

"I cannot get there." Mayte turned to face her. "I tried to go, but they have fenced off the whole neighborhood. I found one of my neighbors, he said all the people were taken out."

Kerry nodded. "Makes sense."

Mayte stuck her hands in her jeans pockets. "And then I .." She glanced around and then back at Kerry. "There is nothing to do at the hotel. You just can watch the TV all the time and it's depressing." She confessed. "So I told mama I was going to try to come here."

Kerry's pale brow lifted. "She was okay with that?"

"No." Mayte grinned ruefully. "She was not okay at all, but I am here." She rushed on. "Papa is doing fine, and they are treating him and mama very nicely. I told mama it would be better if I came here and tried to help you."

"That's kind of what everyone's said so far." Her boss admitted. "I even had a few of the folks from ILS show up and we put them to work. Celeste is over at the island helping my mother in law hold the fort down there. Arthur and Elvis are on the island coding."

Mayte's eyes widened. "Wow."

"Zoe and Carlos are out with my father in law and some of his friends trying to find water for those people out there." Kerry continued. "I just sent Mark and his wife up to Melbourne so you're in good company. But it's not too comfortable here, Mayte. We do have some generator power but no AC."

"That is fine, Kerry." Mayte smiled. "It is better than all my family, who are in the shelters. It is not good there. I knew if I came here, then one of my aunts would come and stay by mama and use that room. The rest of them are full and it will be better for her, you know?"

"Got it."

Footsteps sounded on the floorboards behind them and Kerry turned her head, to see Dar emerging from the hallway. "Hey hon, look who's here."

Dar came forward, dusting her hands off, a look of satisfaction on her face. "Hey Mayte." She greeted the younger woman. "Come over to join the gang?"

"Hello Dar." Mayte responded. "Si, I did. I cannot believe all the things going on here." She looked around the yard. "Mama was right. She said at least if I came to here things would be happening." She half turned again. "You said Zoe was .. what was Zoe doing?"

"There's a crowd of folks outside who need water." Kerry said. "So.. the national guard didn't have any, and we thought maybe there would be some over in Doral. So they took a truck there to see if they could bring some back. There's some water pipes broken nearby I guess."

Mayte regarded her with a bemused look.

"Yes, the national guard should be doing that." Kerry didn't miss a beat. "We shouldn't even be involved but here we are."

"Here we are." Mayte agreed. "We are always finding the trouble."

"Lets introduce you to everyone." Kerry clapped her on the back. "Since you'll be in charge when we leave." She hooked a finger through the belt loop on Dar's jeans. "C'mon."

"Do I want to be in charge of things?" Mayte asked, doubtfully. "I am not really sure what is going on."

"Neither are we. Just roll with it."

"Ay yi."

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Dar heard the sound of the Humvee returning, the rumble of the engine drifting in through the window as she stood standing in Maria's office looking out into the night. "Ker?"

"You called?" Kerry entered behind her, wiping her hands off on a neatly torn piece of paper towel. "What's going on?"

Dar pointed, and obligingly Kerry came up next to her, standing side by side as she looked out across the parking lot. "They're back."

Past the halon lights of the National Guard, past the front of the lot where a scattering of their cars were parked, the headlamps of the oncoming vehicle were visible, and as the Humvee came slowly to a halt near the entrance to the lot they could see the trailer behind it was piled high with boxes.

"Good job, guys." Kerry smiled, giving Dar a rub on her back. "Should we go meet them and give them a hand?"

"Is it safe for us to do that? Shouldn't we stay here in case the crowd suddenly turns into zombie Figment dragons?" Dar asked, in a serious, concerned tone. "Or a tidal wave comes up?"

Kerry eyed her in silence.

"Tinkerbelle shows up and turns them all into giant schnauzers?"

"Dar." Kerry covered her eyes with one hand, her shoulders shaking.

"Sorry. I'm tired, and hot, and its been a long, weird day." Dar admitted. "If Tinkerbelle did show up I'd pay her to twinkle us into our bedroom."

Kerry gave her a comforting arm squeeze, and kissed her on the shoulder as they sucked in the faint, slightly damply cool air coming in the window.

They watched as the crowd, who had settled down to wait across the street from the guard enclosure, got up and approached the truck, as Carlo's distinctive, dark, crop haired head came poking up out of the top hatch.

"Hey lookie there." Pete had come up behind them and was peering past Kerry's elbow. "Looks like a successful mission." He sounded satisfied. "Hot damn. Now we can close up the shop and get some shuteye."

"It does look that way." Dar acknowledged. "Kerry and I were just keeping our distance so it stays chill."

Pete laughed. "You all do attract the weirds." He turned. "I'm gonna go help em out, then we can get that rig back in the gates."

"We do attract the weirds." Kerry said. "C'mon then, Dar. I just finished making some leftover nachos."

"Mm. Nachos."

Kerry glanced at Maria's desk. "Oh, wait, let me grab this. Mayte was looking for it." She picked up a slim leather portfolio tucked neatly into the organizer on the desk. "She must not have seen it under there."

"Maria's little black book?" Dar mused. "Woulda thought she'd taken it with her."

"She took a copy home." Kerry assured her. "But she didn't grab it on our way out of the house naturally and she gave Mayte a list of things she wanted done now that she's here."

"Sounds like Maria." Dar smiled gently. "Glad she's got the time to think of that stuff."

"C'mon." Kerry took hold of Dar's elbow and guided her back out into the hall and down to the small second floor kitchen, where there was a shallow bowl on the counter, gently steaming. "Three different kinds of barbecued meats and leftover taco cheese."

"Mm." Dar inspected the dish, and picked up a chip, which had a beefy, cheesy blanket over it. "Did you just get bored?"

"It's almost eleven PM. I just got hungry." Kerry took a chip herself and went over to stand near the window, facing the same direction as Maria's office did. She watched idly out the open panes as Andrew got out of the truck and came around to one side, Hank joining him.

It all looked orderly and calm. Kerry heard Zoe's piping voice, and then she saw Carlos duck down, and come back up holding her admin by the waist, boosting her up and sitting her on the roof of the trunk near the machine gun. "Zoe's taking all this really well."

"What, nerdy armegeddon?" Dar was content to stay where she was, enjoying the snack. "Does she have a choice?"

"Well.. sometimes your dad's friends take a little bit of adjusting to. Zoe just took it in stride."

"Sure." Dar went to the tiny refrigerator, opening it up and taking out a can of soda put in to cool down while they powered a little of the office from the generator outside. "I think she likes Hank."

Kerry remained thoughtfully silent for a minute. "Likes as in likes? Or likes as in..."

"She think's its cool there's someone else here who's like she is." Dar clarified. "Probably not many people around her like that, you know?" She said. "And he's funny."

"He is funny, and a little random." Kerry mused. "I think he acts crazier than he is?" Her voice lifted a little in question, and she turned, to see Dar watching her, munching in silence, one eyebrow slightly raised. "Or maybe not."

"He's a good guy." Dar relented. "Dad wouldn't bring him around if he wasn't."

"No, I know that." Kerry turned from the window. "Lets get our stuff, and get ready to head home, soon as Dad's done there. Okay?" She picked up the dish and they made their way back to their offices, sharing from it.

It was damp, and warm inside, and Kerry was happy to pick up her backpack and zip it up, glancing over at the desk to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She slid it onto her shoulders and went over to douse the candle still burning, blowing it out gently.

It smelled of wintergreen, and she vaguely remembered them getting a few boxes of them at some after Christmas sale sometime, to add to the hurricane kit as a bit of random fun.

She went to the door between her and Dar's office and stuck her head inside, watching Dar in the act of picking up her notepad and putting it into her pack. "Any word from Richard, Dar?"

"No." Dar said. "I put my phone on the AP they have down the hall and picked up messages. Nothing." She looked up thoughtfully at Kerry. "Not sure how I feel about that. I forwarded all that crap about this building to him."

"Hope he's okay."

Dar slung her back over her shoulder, and then gestured to the door. They walked together outside and Dar snagged the nacho bowl before they went out into the hall. "I'm sure he's fine. It's possible he tried to call the office, tried to call my cell, didn't get an answer and didn't want to leave a message."

"True." Kerry said. "Give me that, let me.."

"Ah ah ah. I got it." Dar walked down to the kitchenette and came back a minute later, sans dish. She licked her lips and winked at Kerry. "You should make that again."

"Not sure I can get that mixture of leftovers again hon but I'll try."

They walked down the steps, past the little nest that Pete had vacated near the top of them and down through the lower hall to the closed front door. Kerry pushed it open and they paused, but the front porch guard station was also empty. "Guess they went over to see what was going on."

They walked across the dark frontage to the front of the lot, and Dar opened the back door on the truck to toss her bag inside. She then opened the driver's side door and paused, regarding Kerry who had opened the passenger side and was looking over her shoulder at the group near the road."

"C'mon." Dar closed the door and started over, holding out her hand and clasping Kerry's as she joined her.

"Should be safe enough unless a unicorn or something shows up."

"Don't invoke things." Kerry mock protested. "You know, when I was at Hunter's Point I was thinking about getting you a horse if we lived there."

Dar was briefly silent. "A horse?"

"You know, four legs? Large pointed head?"

"What made you think of that?" Dar seemed slightly bewildered yet charmed. "There's room there but.. is that going to go with the herd of sheep?"

Kerry chuckled. "No, the shed we took shelter in had a old horse stall in it." She linked arms with Dar as they got to the front of the lot and stopped, watching the organized process as Carlos directed the crowd in Spanish.

The trailer held a lot of boxes, and next to it Andy was stacking one heavy box, and two lighter ones, then stepping back as some of the crowd came over to claim them, some with wheeled moving dollies, others just hefting the boxes to their shoulders and retreating.

Retreating where? Kerry wondered. They walked away, off to the south, down Main Highway and, she supposed to whatever transport that had brought them there, parked down the road past where the police had blocked it. They'd seen that coming in.

Hank was on the back of the trailer, shifting the boxes forward as Andy portioned them out, and the two men who had gone with them were helping him, with brief, frequent, satisfied nods.

"What's in there?" Kerry whispered.

"Big box is four gallon jugs of water. Little ones are MRE's." Dar responded. "At least, that's what Carlos is telling them it is."

"Wow."

"How big a horse could we keep in there?" Dar suddenly asked.

Kerry stared at her in some bewilderment. "What? Oh!" She bit off a laugh. "It was the size of a one car garage. Does that tell you?"

"Oh!" Zoe spotted them. "Ms Kerry! Ms Dar!" She scrambled down from the roof of the Humvee and popped out the side door. "It was so wonderful!" Then she looked past Kerry and let out a squeal. "Mayte!!!" She ran past them to greet her friend and they burst into a rapid tumbling of Spanish chatter.

Behind their barricade, several of the National Guard were watching them, but seemed unwilling to either help or hinder what they were doing. There was no sign of the guard captain, but the tow headed lieutenant who had come in to ask for space was seated on the hood of a truck nearby.

Hard to tell from their expressions what they were thinking. Kerry resisted the urge to go over and find out. She stayed next to Dar, hooking her thumbs into her shorts front pockets as Dar rested her elbow on her shoulder. The crowd's attitude had shifted now from angry despair to calm, waiting their turn to come up to the trailer.

"This was so the right thing to do Dar." Kerry said, after a moment of silence. "Why wouldn't they want to do it? Why did we have to?"

Dar shrugged. "Hey Zoe." She turned and addressed the two younger women. "How'd it go out there? Where'd you get all this stuff from?"

"Oh!" Zoe came over with Mayte right behind her. "It was very good." She said. "We went to where you told us to, Ms Kerry, to the big place near the airport. There were many many people there." She said. "And Papa Andy went to the gate and explained what we needed, and they let us in right away and gave us all those boxes."

"Just like that?" Kerry asked.

"Si." Zoe nodded. "Just like you said they would do so." She said. "They were very happy to have us to come get them I think? There are so many things there it was nice for us to come and take some for them." She added. "They were thanking Papa Andy over and over again."

"Sure." Dar rolled with it. "I think a lot of people maybe can't go to where the supplies are, and they're waiting for them to come to them."

"Si." Mayte now spoke up. "That is exactly what they were saying at the hotel where we were. The floods are so bad, and flooded the cars, and all the things."

Now the trailer was almost empty, just the boxes left for the two men who had gone with them, and those men were standing next to Andy and Hank, shaking hands, with Carlos rapidly translating in both directions. The men took hold of their boxes and hoisted them to their shoulders, their body posture triumphant and proud.

"They are so happy." Zoe said. "To be able to take this back to their family."

Dar watched them go, and as they crossed in front of the national guard, both of them made a very American rude gesture with one hand, before they went out of sight and out of the light into the shadows.

"Wall." Andy stepped down off the trailer. "That there was a good old night."

"Good job, Dad." Dar said, in a mild tone. "Ready to go home?"

"Ah am." He pulled off a pair of worn leather gloves and stuck them into the back of his waistband. "Get this here inside before anybody else done come and wants something."

"That was good." Carlos also looked quite satisfied. "Those guys out in Doral were pretty cool, too. They were all like, oh, you need some water and meals? No problem! C'mon in!" He said. "So I don't know what that jackass in there's problem was." He pointed to the guard camp. "They told us if they'd known we needed water and stuff, they'd have sent a truck."

"They were right grateful." Hank assented. "They liked my rig." He patted the side of the Humvee. "I asked them what the jack was wrong with these guys here but they didn't know em."

"Nice." Pete materialized on the other side of him, stepping around and over the trailer hitch. "Gimme the keys if you're gonna yap out here. Let me pull this thing inside." He held out his hand and without comment Hank handed over the small animal skull keychain he kept the starter key for the vehicle on.

Pete got behind the wheel and they all stepped away from the truck, as he started up the engine and headed it down the driveway towards the office.

"C'mon." Andy pointed after him and they all strolled along in the truck's wake, until they reached the front row of parking spots where Dar's truck was waiting. There, Andy, Dar and Kerry paused, and the rest hesitated.

"Good job, people." Dar leaned on the hood of her truck. "I know for sure those people appreciated what you did like crazy tonight."

"It was good." Carlos agreed, with a smile. "Pissed off the guard guys though." He didn't seem regretful. "And I'm glad those people got what they needed and not an ass kicking cause they coulda."

"True that." Hank said.

Kerry turned and pulled the small portfolio from her back pocket. "Here Mayte, I found your mom's book in her desk." She handed over the item. "We'll be back in the morning."

"Maybe tomorrow we'll have cell back." Carlos said. "Maybe more folks'll show up."

"I will see if I can use that phone to contact everyone." Mayte held up the book. "That is what mama told me to do first, check off who we know about. She has that in here, all the people, with all the other things she keeps, the vendors and the phone numbers and everything."

"Old school." Carlos smiled. "C'mon guys, let's go inside before it starts raining again." He patted the hood of the truck. "See you guys tomorrow."

They got in the truck and watched as the oddly assorted gang move off towards the building, a faint burst of laughter coming back to them on the breeze through the open window on the passenger side of the car. Dar started up the engine and adjusted the seat, with a sigh.

"Another very strange day." Kerry said. "But I'm glad that all worked out, dad."

Andrew had stretched his long frame out across the second seat in the truck, draping one arm over the back. "Wall." He paused. "Ah am some glad it did my own self." He watched out the window as Dar drove past the guard camp. "Ah do spect we'll have us some tussle with them folks though."

"Maybe they'll realize we saved them a lot of trouble." Kerry half turned and leaned on the back of her seat. "We did, y'know? Those guys were all kinds of pissed off and we fixed that."

"Dad called him an asshole in front of his men." Dar pronounced, as she turned onto the main road and headed north. "He heard you."

"Yeap. Meant him to." Andrew said, unrepentantly. "Folks should not spect to not have jackassery made a note of, and that man was some fool and ah do not care for no fools."

Kerry regarded him. "Well, he did give me a ride." She said, in an almost apologetic tone. "But yeah, even when he was out there near where Mayte and Maria live, he didn't really have any helpful vibes. He wanted to get out of there."

"Jackass."

"Well, they didn't have anything that would help, Dad."

"Same story." Andy said. "Ain't got, ain't got. Kerry, we didn't got nothing neither, but we went and got. All that man could find was excuses." He frowned. "That bit got mah mad up."

"Yeah, I know." Kerry leaned her head against the headrest, watching Dar's profile as she drove. "But you know, I think everyone they send here does want to help. Most of the time either they have no clue what's going on or they're not prepared for what this place is, you know?"

“Jackassery.”

Dar turned right and drove up to the checkpoint, now seemingly built up a bit more with a sturdy barrier that closed the causeway except for a space large enough to allow one vehicle and there were now tents set up with air handling units stretching out and supply trucks parked nearby.

She opened her window and pulled out her wallet, waiting for the guard to come over. “Feels like Checkpoint Charlie.”

The soldier walked over to the car. “Can I help you ma’am?”

Dar handed over her license. “Going home.”

He glanced at it, then handed it back. “We just had a VIP movement there, ma’am, go on, but you might get held up at the terminal.” He stepped back and motioned at the tented control area near the blockade. “Have a good night.”

“A VIP movement.” Dar drove through the opening and out onto the causeway. “Guess the governor’s back.”

“Gov’mint.” Andy pronounced dourly. “All them movements gen’rilly involve a head or somesuch kind been mah experience.”

“Hope it’s just that.” Kerry remarked. “That’s usually what they say when they’re moving around the President.” She sniffed reflectively. “As if we really need that Ringling Brothers scenario right now.”

Dar gave her a sideways look.

“Sure hope he doesn’t have my mother with him.”

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Kerry stood at the kitchen window, looking out over their small backyard and garden, past the seawall and out over the Atlantic ocean.

Today it was a mild, lightly ruffled green, and the sun was just over the horizon bathing the outside of the condo with warm pink light.

In the garden, the wrought iron gates had been wrestled open, and a large rolling landscaping dumpster was standing inside, with four busily working gardeners picking up debris and dead foliage from the space and clearing out all the coconuts and sea wrack the storm had brought in.

A soft ding distracted her and she went over to the toaster, removing two corn English muffins from it, setting them down and applying a round sausage patty and piece of swiss cheese to them before she picked up the wooden tray they were on.

She maneuvered through the living room and went into Dar’s office, setting the tray down on the desk and then walking over to the window.

On the couch nearby was a wood file, and around the bottom of the window was a thin layer of whiteish gray dust. Dar was hanging over the back of the couch routing a cable over the edge of the sill from the outside.

The room held the scent and humidity of the warm air outside, and as Kerry watched, her beloved partner seated the cable into a newly cut trough in the wooden window sill then slid the window shut.

The condo’s alarm system issued a satisfied sounding beep as the window seated, and Dar reached up to close the locks that would keep it in place. “There.”

“Nice job, sweetie.” Kerry gave her a little scratch on the back.

“Thank you.” Dar got up and backed away from the couch, routing the cable around to the small table next to the window that now had a small switch on top of it. “If the kids at the office can keep their phones online, why can’t we?”

Kerry chuckled. “Eat your muffin. It’ll get cold.”

Dar sat down behind her desk and picked up a half of the muffin, munching it. Sitting on the desk was a capped thermos, and now she picked it up to wash down her mouthful, propping up one bare knee as she leaned back.

Kerry took a seat on the couch with her own breakfast. "So."

"So." Dar paused in her chewing. "Is it Saturday?"

"It's Saturday." Kerry confirmed. "Does that mean something?"

"Not really." Dar's expression shifted slightly. "Except it defers calling Pharma." She regarded her quiescent computer at her elbow. "Guessing maybe the answer to that is in my inbox."

"Might be." Kerry agreed. "Worse case, he's canceled our contract. What's best case?" She asked, after a brief pause. "As long as we're talking about it."

"Best case?" Dar looked slightly intrigued. "You mean, if lightning struck twice and I did something unexpected on that plane flight and revolutionized the pharmaceutical industry without planning to?"

Kerry nodded as she chewed.

"Can we not think about that?"

Kerry shrugged expressively.

Dar leaned over and turned on her computer. Then she got up and went over to the small table, coiling up the cable from outside neatly, fastening it with a piece of Velcro, and plugging it into the switch. She then picked up a rounded square almost white piece of equipment and set it on top of the switch, connecting an ethernet cable from the side of it into the front of the now blinking front panel.

The access point started blinking, as if in sympathy.

Dar went back to her chair and sat down. "We can bring over a phone from the cottage." She said. "Keep everything in here so when our service comes back up I don't have to screw around with rewiring everything." She eyed Kerry. "You mind?"

"Do I mind what?"

"Not having connection upstairs?"

"Oh." Kerry paused. "I'll just bring my laptop in the living room hon. Signal'll reach from here."

"Or work from my couch." Dar smiled.

"Or work from your couch." Kerry got up and collected the platter. "I'm going to go run over and grab one of those phones so we can just take some time to sort things out from here." She said. "Want more coffee?"

Dar held out the thermos. "If you're making some."

"I am. Probably we'll need it when the investigative team returns." Kerry took the thermos and went back out through the living room, it's interior unusual quiet due to the lack of the two dogs that were usually running around in it.

Andrew and Ceci had taken them out for a tour of the island. Kerry could only imagine what stories they were going to come back with, and she resisted the urge to turn on the television to the island channel to pre-empt the tales.

\*\*

Dar regarded her inbox, trying to consider a sorting model that would produce anything other than bold faced exclamation points.

When everything was urgent, nothing was. A well known corollary for anyone who had ever done anything in the realm of operational systems and Dar certainly had. In the world of prioritization, you had to start somewhere. Even in situations where everything seemed like it was the most important thing.

Which, when you had customers, was everyone. There was no one sending her emails that though their work, or their request, or their deliverable was less important than anyone else. No one was dropping her a note just to say hey.

Dar finally decided to sort by non company email to top, then by date, then exclude repeat senders same subject. This produced one long page of things for her attention, and she grunted in satisfaction as she adjusted her chair, then she paused.

She got up and went around the desk, studying it.

"What's wrong?" Kerry entered, carrying her backpack. "Not working?" She ventured, watching Dar's profile. "Not working the way you want it to?"

Dar grinned briefly. "I want to stand up." She admitted. "I got used to that desk in the office." She shoed Kerry ahead of her. "G'wan, go grab the phone. I'll get some boxes or something."

"Gardner's are outside. Maybe they have some crates." Kerry stood in her way long enough for them to gently collide, then remained as Dar turned the gesture into a hug. She took a breath full of the clean smell of Dar's cotton shirt and the hint of their soap. "Wish it really was Saturday."

"As in, hey lets go out on the boat for a dive Saturday?" Dar kissed the top of her head, and rocked them both back and forth a little. "Yeah me too. I was thinking about what it would be like if we could take a ride down to the cabin, check that out."

"Too much to do." Kerry said, in a mournful tone. "But thanks for reminding me I have to call the management people down there and see if we've got something left to check." She disengaged reluctantly and slid the other strap of her backpack onto her shoulders. "If we stay here today, maybe we can compromise with a sunset from the hot tub."

"Mmhum." Dar made an agreeable noise. "You're on." She walked Kerry to the door and opened it, then watched her go down the stairs and turn into the parking garage under the condo. "Oh hey wait Ker." She called. "Hang on."

She went out and down the steps into the underground space. "Take that helmet over." She said, going over to the truck and opening the back door to it. "The kids want to test that code change." She hauled the rugged case out and walked over to the cart.

Kerry leaned on the awning supports. "I want to see it." She said. "They have everything they need there to hook it up?" She watched Dar nod. "Vroom." She waggled her eyebrows as Dar got out of the way, and then she slid behind the cart's steering wheel and turned it on. "I bet it's cool."

"It's cool." Dar assured her. "Tell them to use the explorer sim with high res."

Kerry grinned, giving her a little wave as she backed the cart and then sent it up the ramp, giving the horn a little beep beep on the way.

\*\*

The door to the cottage came flying open as Kerry put the parking break on, with Arthur and Elvis almost colliding in the opening as they fought to get outside.

"She's got it!"

"You got it!"

Arthur won the struggle and bolted for the back of the cart and grabbed the handle of the case, yanking it off the back of the cart and grunting as it hit him in the knees. "Ouch."

"Hey, take it easy." Kerry laughed, as she got out of the cart. "It's not going anywhere."

"No, but we've been talking to Scott and he won't shut up about the sim." Elvis told her, as he moved out of the doorway to let Arthur carry the case inside. "A bunch of people have been here already this morning looking for you."

"Me?" Kerry followed them inside. "Morning!"

"Hey Kerry!" Angela was already seated at the table, pads and pens and folders of paper surrounding her and her laptop, it's cable running down the table leg and across the floor. "Boy we've been busy!"

Celeste was in the corner amidst a pile of cables, sorting them and coiling them up, and she looked up and waved as Kerry came inside and set her backpack down. "The governor was here, looking for you, ma'am." She said, as though this happened to Kerry every day.

"What did he want? Did that file not go through? Dar said it did." Kerry paused by the table.

"He didn't say anything about that." Elvis looked up from the case he was kneeling next to. "He and some goon showed up and just said they wanted to talk to you."

"Nice."

"Want some coffee? They just refilled." Angela told her. "They brought over some fancy waffles for breakfast. They were great."

"They were great." Arthur agreed. "They had that Nutella stuff in them."

Kerry winced a little. "For breakfast?" Then she shook herself. "What am I saying? I'm the one who makes chocolate chip pancakes at my house." She paused. "I just came over here actually to pick up a phone. Dar got our place connected."

"No problem." Celeste got up and went to the gear cabinet. "The guys have been teaching me about all this stuff. It's pretty cool." She picked up one of the IP phones and a round of cable to go with it. "Do you need a power adapter?"

"No, Dar has a POE switch." Kerry accepted the device, which she slid into her backpack along with the cable. "Thanks – easier for us to be able get calls transferred there and not have you folks having to take all the messages." She paused, then pulled the phone out of the bag and checked the sticker on the bottom.

"One of the spares from accounting." Elvis supplied, without prompting.

"Great." Kerry put the phone back in the bag. "We ran payables before the storm and no one on the face of the planet is calling our accounts receivable department this week." She zipped up the bag. "Now. Lets see what this revolution Dar created is all about."

Arthur grinned, as he pulled out the helmet and a incongruous set of football shoulderpads. "Sweet."

Elvis was busy with his laptop, periodically glancing up at the rack of servers. "Glad like crazy we have this here and not up in the cloud." He remarked. "Wouldn't want to try this over that satellite."

Kerry went over and sat down on the couch, resting her elbows on her knees as she watched the two programmers setting up the rig. "They're really excited about it huh?"

"Man." Elvis shook his head, typing furiously. "I can't wait to see it."

"Me either." Arthur agreed, connecting up the cables into the helmet. "Who gets to go first?" He looked up at Elvis, and then after a beat of somewhat awkward silence, they both looked over at Kerry. "You want to go first, Kerry?"

Kerry was charmed. "Tell you what. I'll go last. Then it'll be fresh in my head when I go report back." She suggested. "Go ahead and flip for it."

Elvis grinned, but shook his head. "He's the gamer." He indicated Arthur. "Get in, bro. Lets see what this thing can do."

\*\*

Dar typed contentedly, her body relaxed behind the somewhat makeshift arrangement she'd made of her desk, with a set of wooden boards and some concrete blocks between them, some construction flotsam and jetsam agreeably if somewhat confusedly provided to her by the landscaping team.

She had lifted her screen up to standing height using two blocks and two boards, and put a lower shelf in to hold her keyboard and her chair was pushed back against the wall out of the way.

The mail wasn't as horrific as she'd imagined. She'd answered at least a dozen that were just customers and random people she knew sending notes of concern, asking how they were doing, how had their house held up, and that sort of question.

A note from Alastair, checking in, and one from Hamilton Baird of a similar nature.

She clicked on the next one, from Gerry Easton.

*Dar! Need to talk to you about that thing we talked about before you went on your own! Know you've got a mess down there, but call me!*

Dar pondered that. "That thing we talked about." She lifted her hands up and spread them. "Sure, Gerry. When I get a phone that works I'll call you." She typed out the same into the response and sent it on its way then went on to the next message.

A knock at the door to the condo made her look up and across her desk in irritation. Who in the hell would be knocking at her door?

Guest Services maybe.

With a sigh, she headed around the desk and out of her office, crossing the living room and going to the entryway and opening the door. She pulled it inward and looked out, finding a man in his mid forties or so, with short, neatly cut black hair with a sprinkling of silver at the temples standing there.

He had a Rolex watch, and was wearing leather boots.

New resident? "Hi." Dar greeted him.

The man studied her briefly. "I'm looking for Dar Roberts."

"Congrats. You found me." Dar stuck her hands in her pockets. Not new resident, sadly. Random rich friend of someone who didn't like her? Someone who knew the sleazy contractor who wanted his own files sent somewhere?

Maybe someone renting a nearby condo who wanted a cup of sugar?

No, Dar mused sadly, not asking for her by name. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Jason Billings." The man said. "I'm the director for communications for the State of Florida."

Definitely not cup of sugar. "Okay." Dar took a step backwards, and gestured. "Want to come inside?"

He followed her in and she shut the door. "What can I do for the state of Florida?" Dar asked, indicating one of the plush leather chairs. She took a seat in the other and waited for him to join her. "I assume you're here with the governor? We saw the police blockade when we came home last night."

"I am." Billings agreed. "The governor's brought a group of specialists down here to see what can be done to start recovery operations. I'm sure you appreciate the need for that."

Dar nodded. "I do." She said. "It's a mess."

"It's a mess. That's a good way to describe it, and a lot of it's my mess, because the biggest issue we have is no one can communicate. Most of the cellular towers are still down, most of the power is still out, no one can talk to anyone else because we're all using different radio frequencies..."

"Reminds me of 9/11." Dar said, as he paused. "We didn't learn much." She said. "At least after Andrew, we made people build decently, at least for a few years."

He regarded her quietly. "No one likes to spend money on infrastructure. It's boring and never wins you points with the voters. No one cares if they have redundant power and underground cabling when it's time to vote."

"Until they're in this kind of situation."

"Even then. People are mad while they have no power, and they're flooded, but soon as the power's back on, and the ground's dry they're out there hustling to scam their insurance company and laughing at the government." Billings stated, flatly. "You can't even make people keep three days of beanie weenies in their house for an emergency."

"Some do."

"The ones who don't, yell the loudest about what crap we all are." He said, bluntly. "Sorry, not a fan of the unprepared public."

Dar merely nodded, assuming there was no advantage to her in telling him off. "So what can I do for you?" She repeated her request. "I've got some beanie weenies in the closet."

He sighed, and leaned back in the chair. "Sorry about that, Ms Roberts. I spent the whole damn day out there yesterday with the governor and got my ass handed to me every two miles." He paused. "My father's best golfing buddy 's Alastair McLean."

Dar started laughing in pure reflex. "I just got an email from him asking how things were going. I should have known he was involved somewhere in this." She relaxed, though, since if that was the source of his information on her, at least he knew why he was here.

At least he was not going to be a jackass to her.

He nodded. "So let me not waste your time. We need someone to help us get communications going here, and build a plan to put things back together so it works better the next time. I want to give you a contract as a consultant to help me."

Dar blinked, startled silent for a long moment.

"I heard what you did in New York, from Uncle Al." He said, after the silence had gone on long enough to be uncomfortable. "The whole story. So at least this time, I promised him you'll get paid for it."

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Kerry was absolutely silent for a very long minute after the sim ended, trying to absorb it. Finally she pushed the eye shield up and looked at the eagerly waiting young men, who had with great effort stifled their reaction waiting for hers. "Holy shit."

"Ha Ha!" Elvis danced as he sat on the couch. "I thought you were gonna say that!"

"That is super rad." Arthur pronounced, nodding in a grave, but emphatic sort of way. "I mean, that's like I want to just crawl in that thing and live in it kind of awesome." He glanced at the server, then back at her. "It's gonna rock the world."

"Oh yeah." Elvis agreed. "Can't wait for Dar to come over here and show us what she did."

Kerry sat back in the chair she was in, that she'd sat down hard in as the reality of the virtual world she'd gone into had become breathtakingly overwhelming. "Swear to God I could smell the forest we were in."

"Programming." Arthur nodded. "We put that in the last sprint. But not the .." He waved his hands around incoherently. "That thing. That new thing."

"So cool." Elvis eyed Kerry. "You ready to come out of it?"

Kerry smiled and gestured him forward, suspecting her two employees were going to get exactly zero sleep and spend the night exploring this new facet of their project. "Much as I'd love to look around more, damn, I've got stuff to do."

She held still as Elvis undid the catches that locked the helmet to the pads and lifted it clear of her head, allowing sound and the air of the room to hit her senses and skin with an almost audible pop and she imagined she could still hear the sounds of birds and crickets that just didn't exist here in the cottage around her.

Wow.

"Cel, you want to try it?" Arthur half turned. "It's so cool."

Elvis lifted the pads off her shoulders and Kerry stood up, taking a step away from the chair and turning.

"It really grabs your head, doesn't it?" Elvis asked, watching her. "You keep thinking about it after it's over."

"You do." Kerry had to agree. "It plays over again in your mind." She glanced over at Celeste, who was hesitating. "It's okay." She said. "Though I should have you sign all our NDA paperwork." She half turned. "Can you print out a set, Angela?"

"Sure." Angela pecked at her keyboard. "None of that helmet stuff for me. Last time I tried it I threw up for an hour." She glanced up at the programmers. "Not that you asked or nothing."

"What does that mean?" Celeste asked. "The paperwork?"

It occurred to Kerry she'd been assuming without thinking that Celeste might want to remain and be a part of Roberts Automation, and not go back to ILS. Which seemed pretty arrogant, now that she sounded that out in her head.

Kerry felt a bit sheepish. "Sorry about that." She said. "I should probably back up a step. I know you stopped by just to hang out, but I had Colleen put you on our payroll. You want to come work for us?"

Celeste blinked at her. "Seriously?"

"Toldja." Arthur rolled his eyes.

"I don't do any of this stuff." Celeste explained her reaction. "And honest.. with those guys you have there, you don't need me and Frank for security."

"Right now, we have no idea what we need." Kerry said, frankly. "You want to be here? We need people who can just pitch in and do anything."

Celeste looked down at the pieces of cable in her hands. Then she looked back up at Kerry. "That wasn't why I came." She said. "I just wanted to feel like I was doing something useful."

Kerry nodded. "I have an entire building of people over on the edge of Coconut Grove who showed up there because they wanted to do something useful. I don't even know who some of them are, but if you want to stay, you've got a spot. Your choice."

Arthur looked at Kerry from between his shaggy bangs. "Sure she wants to stay." He said, with a somewhat bewildered expression. "You want to right?"

Celeste was momentarily silent, considering. "I do." She said, in almost a tone of surprise. "I'd like to learn how to do some of this stuff. I think it would be more fun and a lot more interesting than guarding a glass door."

Elvis chortled, shaking his head. "We can write a bot to do that."

"Great. That's settled then." Kerry said. "So now on to the NDA. It's to protect some of the special things we're working on. It means you can see them, but you're not allowed to tell anyone about them." She added. "I signed one."

Elvis chortled again. "Dar didn't."

"Well." Kerry eyed him. "She's the one who's inventing them. Wouldn't be much point."

"Is there a point to you signing?" Arthur asked. "I mean..."

"Not really, it just set a good example." Kerry admitted. "Dar makes a point of never being a good example." She grinned, putting her hands on her hips, and the two programmers laughed along with her.

"Cool. I'm in." Celeste put the cables down and came over to the table, where Angela was now collating a set of printed papers from the small printer. "I mean, who even knows what's going to happen around here right? Seems like a good time to get a new set of skills."

A time of change. Kerry suddenly flashed back in her mind to the night she'd hit submit to send her resume to Dar where it had seemed the same to her. No idea what was going to happen, and a great time to get a new set of skills.

A mental dialog that had been complete logical fabrication, even in the silence of her own mind, because if Dar had offered her a job flipping pancakes in the executive grill she'd have taken it.

Maybe Celeste wanted that kind of change too. "Well then, welcome." She said. "Let me get this phone back to the house and see what trouble my other half's getting into, while you enjoy our little contraption there. Which is.." She exhaled, with a shake of her head. "Freaking amazing."

"Freaking amazing." Elvis repeated with satisfaction. "We're gonna be on a billboard."

"In Times Square." Arthur confirmed. "Like right above that ticker thing."

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Dar closed the door, pausing to shake her head in some bemusement before she retreated to the kitchen and obtained a glass of milk. She stood at the window looking out as she sipped it, watching the gardening team finishing up their work cleaning out the debris from the yard.

Outside the gate, another team of men were wrestling large limestone rocks from a golf cart, wading into the water and placing them to begin the replacement of the sandy beach that had been stripped out by the storm.

The men were working hard, and sweating.

Standing there watching, Dar reflected for a moment on what it would feel like to be one of them. She could remember long days working around their housing on base, cleaning out tree branches and shrubs, sweating in the tropical summer heat.

Hosing off at the end of the day, looking around with a sense of accomplishment, even though she'd known, and her father had known, that the trees and the brush would be back with a vengeance in a crazy short time. But the house had looked tidy and squared away and that satisfied something inside her sometimes quirky mind and she remembered liking it.

Her mother had liked it. It had been one of the few things they'd agreed on, and after a cleanup Ceci would often have planted out some colorful flowers in the brick planters in the front of the house to add a bright note.

Dar remembered seeing Andy come home afterward and seeing him pause in the driveway to appreciate the work, his head nodding in almost unconscious approval.

She took a sip of the milk, and remembered that moment of contentment, of the knowledge of a job well done. With a slight clearing of her throat, she put the glass down and went to the door, opening it and rambling down the steps.

The gardeners spotted her and paused, turning and straightening up as she approached, waiting warily as the supervisor edged in front of them, coming between her and the rest of the group. "Good morning." He greeted her politely.

"Hi." Dar came to a halt.

"Is there something wrong, senora?" The man said.

Dar recognized him as one of the men who maintained the golf course. "Nothing." She said, in Spanish. "You guys just did a kick ass job out here, and I wanted to say thank you." She looked around at the yard, which was now completely free of debris, and almost scoured looking, waiting for some new plants. "It was a real mess."

He relaxed a little. "Everything is a big mess." He agreed, with a brief smile. "So much to be done."

"My father says that every five minutes." Dar acknowledged.

"But it gives us work. We are hoping for good overtime." The man continued. "And right now, we need every moment of it."

He paused, and looked at Dar.

It took a second, but she caught the clue. "If you want to come by here when you're done, we could use some extra work here." She offered. "Cash basis."

All of the men, who had been standing by, leaning on rakes, staring off into the distance now looked at her, and smiled in unfeigned, knowing appreciation.

"Make my partner happy to have her garden back." Dar continued. "So just let me know."

"Of course." The supervisor said. "We were going to put some plants in around the big house tonight but maybe..."

"Hundred an hour?" Dar offered, her hands in her pockets. "If you get us the really nice plants, two hundred."

"We will be here." The man promised, at once. "It will look very nice, for sure."

Dar gave them a thumbs up, and then she made her way back to the steps, trotting up them as her ears caught the sound of the front door opening, all the way on the other side of the house.

She slipped inside and closed the kitchen door, as Kerry came into the kitchen from the other direction. "And?" Dar asked, seeing that faint, almost wondering, smile and the faint shake of Kerry's head. "Like it?"

"Dar." Kerry came over and put her hands on Dar's stomach, leaning forward and stretching up to kiss her. "That was like nothing I have ever seen."

Dar put her arms around Kerry and returned the kiss. "It's cool." She confirmed. "Glad you liked it."

"I did. The kids are over the moon with it." Kerry reached up and cleared a wisp of hair out of Dar's eyes. "So thank you, my dearest love, for being the genius you are."

Dar's face twitched a little, an almost grimace. "No need for that. It was just an off chance." She demurred. "Anything else going on there?" She changed the subject. "Did you trip over the government nerd on your way up the steps? He was just here asking me to take over the restoral effort on behalf of the State of Florida."

"Abu... what?" Kerry felt well and truly distracted. "Wait.. what?" She looked behind herself and then back. "No I didn't see anyone... wait, he asked you to what?"

"Want some milk?"

"Dar, hold on. Did you say the state wants to ... what do they want you to do?"

"I want some chocolate pudding." Dar placidly responded. "Can you make chocolate pudding?"

"Of course I.. wait a minute hold on." Kerry started laughing helplessly. "DAR!" She gripped Dar's arms and shook her insistently. "Dar Dar Dar!"

"Yes?" Dar chuckled in reaction. She rested her arms on Kerry's shoulders and gazed at her. "Turns out the guy who runs comms for Florida's father is an old buddy of Alastair's." She explained. "He wants to hire me as a consultant to help them get their act together."

Kerry stared her, brow fully knitted, in a long moment of perplexed comprehension.

"Yeah, no. As in I told him no." Dar responded to the unsaid words. "I'm not going to do that. Been there, done that, not going to spend my time yelling on behalf of the governor. I have better things to do." She leaned forward and kissed Kerry again. "Like that, and getting some chocolate pudding."

"That will just end up being thankless." Kerry slid her arms up and circled Dar's neck with them. "Just like the last time, no matter what they say."

Dar nodded. "Agreed." She casually wrapped her arms around Kerry. "That's in fact what I told the guy, along with how much of my own chaos I have to sort out here. That's a full time mind suck."

"It is."

Dar made a low, grunting sound of approval, nodding her head a little bit.

"Good decision, hon. Kerry gave her a quick hug, then released her. "Nothing much going on over at the cottage. I brought a phone back."

"I feel it." Dar patted the backpack on her back.

"Which I'm going to plug in, and see if I can give Maria a call. I'm going to try and talk her into taking Tomas upstate. Colleen got space in one of the residential resorts there and there's room."

Dar turned her around and started guiding her back to her office. "Don't forget my pudding."

"Dar."

"You said you could make it."

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"You know what I should have done?" Dar finished typing and looked up, as Kerry entered. "I should have bought out that damn satellite scamster."

"To get all the bandwidth?"

"To get all the bandwidth." Dar confirmed. "What a pain in the ass."

Kerry perched on the edge of the desk, watching Dar type for a minute. "Mind taking a break? I think I'd like you to try and convince Maria."

"Won't go, huh?"

"They're releasing Tomas tomorrow." Kerry obliquely acknowledged. "I told her to see if they can keep on staying at the hotel there, but she says they have so many people who need rooms she doesn't think they can."

"He needs medical care." Dar stopped typing, and leaned on her makeshift keyboard shelf. "What does she want to do, try to go back home? I thought you said Mayte tried that yesterday." She focused on Kerry. "I heard on the news this morning they're looking at having to pump out some areas."

"They don't want to leave home."

"They can't live in their home, Ker. That makes no sense."

Kerry nodded. "I know, but you've known her longer, and sometimes that pragmatic logic comes better from you than from me."

Dar considered that in silence, then nodded. "Okay." She moved around the back of the desk. "Trade. Just got an email from Richard, g'wan and read it."

"What does he say?"

"Don't know. Haven't read it yet." Dar walked along the cable laid neatly on the floor and followed it out into the living room to the comfortable chair and low table Kerry had dragged over to work from.

Kerry waited for her to move past then she took Dar's place behind the desk, standing in the makeshift cockpit her partner had constructed, all full of the scent of concrete block and wood. It was workable though, and now she stood there quietly, looking at the big, slightly curved monitor full of gray on black text.

*Hey Dar!*

*No luck getting in touch with you! Been trying for days. But I guess it's as much of a mess down there as I see on the news. Want you to know that storm even blew down a tree in my front yard so I can't even imagine what it was like to be where you are.*

*I did see in the news that your island did well, and it's where all the fancy people are staying so at least there's that. Glad that you and Kerry and your folks did all right, or I assume you did all right based on what I know.*

*So on to business.*

*I sure hope that property did well in the storm, because I hate to tell you, but it's yours.*

Kerry paused, and took a breath, surprised by the surge of happy excitement at the words. She took a breath to yell the news to Dar, then paused as she heard her partner's low voice outside the door, already on the phone, apparently talking to Maria.

She went back to the note instead.

*Hate to tell you, because I saw what the damage was down there, and if that's damaged, because of it's historical status you have no way to restore it and since it is protected, if it was damaged, you're responsible for it and we might be looking at a lawsuit over it because you didn't protect it.*

*I've reached out to them on your behalf, and I have a call later today with their legal department and I'll let you know how that goes, but if you have any intel for me on what the status is down there send it over. They are not happy at all with the way the transfer of ownership was done, and there could be trouble there too.*

*On a happier note, I got your text about the office building and started working on that. That's a more interesting problem because it's free and clear of encumbrance to my surprise, and based on the location, that's a valuable piece of property.*

*First thing I checked was the property taxes, and got a pleasant surprise in that they have a grandfather clause from way back and at least you lucked out there and are covered. I've reached out to the insurance company as well on your behalf and got that rolling for you.*

*Between you and me, there's a lot of panic in those insurance guys. So whatever you do to improve the facility, put up tarps, whatever you need there, keep every damn receipt!*

"Have we kept any receipts?" Kerry mused. "Hm."

*I hope the team down there did all right. Let me know when you get a phone hooked up to something so we can talk real time, and I'll have some info back from the Historical Society later on today. Be safe!*

*Richard.*

Kerry reread the note again, finding it a little hard to suppress the urge to immediately get Dar and get in the truck and drive over to Hunter's Point, and get a look at it in daylight. Take a camera, and get some pictures, and send them over to Richard.

They had so much else to worry about.

Dar appeared in the door to her office, leaning against the jam. "Doesn't want to go." She said, briefly. "How's the news from Richard?"

"We have a new home." Kerry pronounced. "Which we may or may not be able to do anything with and might be served a lawsuit over but here we are."

"Figured."

“Richard wants all our receipts for what we did for the office.”

“Did we keep receipts?”

Kerry was just nodding as Dar’s question echoed her own thoughts. “He wants to call you.” She concluded. “Let’s send him back the phone number here, so we can get all the details.” She retreated from behind the desk. “Have you said anything to him about the AI rig?”

“Not yet.” Dar remained where she was. “Know what I want to do?” She asked, after a brief pause where they simply looked at each other.

“Yup. Let me get the keys to the truck.”

“We can stop by the office on the way back.” Dar theorized. “Maybe there’s some receipts there.”

“Maybe.” Kerry headed past her out into the living room. “Maybe there’s a Walgreens open where I can get a package of pudding mix. I don’t have any gelatine here, Dar.”

“Came in number 10 cans back in the day.” Dar suggested, following her.

“Along with the peanut butter?”

“Yep.”

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The drive down to the Point was uneventful, except for groups of residents in the streets, some with children’s red wagons or shopping carts being pulled behind them that had multiplied in the areas between the turnoff to the beach and the southern parts of Coconut Grove.

There weren’t many signs of troops, or police in the area. Dar paused at a four way stop under useless street lights to tip her sunglasses down and regard their surroundings. “Not getting any better.”

“Really not.” Kerry had to agree.

Dar drove through the intersection and continued along the road, which here had a lot of debris on it’s surface, and in two places, fallen trees, blocking their progress.

Slowing, she looked around, vaguely remembering the area from the other night. Now it was full daylight, though, and she could see better. “We went through there, I think.” She pointed at a corner of the crossroads, and a small gap between fallen power poles and a fence.

“With the Humvee?” Kerry’s voice lifted a little in skepticism. “Oh boy.” She took a grip on the grab handle over her door. “That must have been a blast at night in the rain.”

“Yeah it was idiotic. So here we go.” Dar directed the truck to the sidewalk and up onto it, squeezing past the bus bench and along the fallen tree blocking the road. “Then we saw that wall and I figured out where we were.” She rocked down back onto the road and then they were going alongside the mentioned stone structure.

It was visibly old, and built of limestone and coral, some parts of it painted with graffiti and the occasional crater where someone had veered off the road and crashed into it, and the corner of it they passed then ran east out of sight behind a lot of trees.

“Does that go all the way to the water?” Kerry wondered.

“No idea.” Dar muttered. “But I suspect we’ll find out soon enough.” She indicated the gates at the bend just in front of them. “There’s the entrance.”

They parked in front of the gates, up on the sidewalk and out of the roadway and met in front of the truck, pausing to regard the tall wrought iron portal newly re-wrapped with a thick, sturdy metal linked chain.

Dar put her hands in her pockets. “It’s a..” She paused. “It’s kinda over the top.” She concluded, a touch sheepishly. “Y’think?”

Kerry stood next to her, arms folded over her chest. "It's totally over the top." She concluded readily. "C'mon. Let's see if that smaller door is open because I'm not sure I want to have to break in again."

"I jumped over the wall." Dar offered up. "Didn't have time for all that chain stuff. So if it's locked I can pull the truck over next to the wall and we can hop over that way."

"Let's hope we don't have to." Kerry patted her on the back. "All we have to show we own this place is an email from some lawyer and I don't really want to have that conversation with the Miami police department today, my love."

"No, me either." Dar followed Kerry over to the small alcove. "We were in here that night, and my dad was saying he could smell the gas from Mark's motorcycle."

Kerry paused and turned around and looked at her. "What?" She twisted around and reviewed the alcove. "We just pushed the bike through here. It wasn't in here that long."

"Yeah. I know but he said he could." Dar agreed. "But it didn't really matter because I knew you were here." She edged past Kerry and started to examine the small gate, with its locking mechanism. "And anyway, it made sense." She took hold of the gate and then yanked it towards her.

"B.." Kerry paused. "Oh, with that thing." She waved vaguely at the side of her head.

"Yeah." Dar gave her a sideways look then she winked one eye. "That thing."

Then she shoved the door outward and it opened, swinging with a protest of rusty hinges, giving them free access into the property. Dar looked out over the entryway. "Let's snoop." On either side of them, the wall ran along the edge of the road to the left and the right past their vision.

"Let's." Kerry looked around avidly, glancing down the length of the wall that bordered the road, trying to fit in the sunlit view with her memories of the previous night.

Then it had seemed all darkness and formless shadows. The daylight revealed it to be full of tattered plants and ground cover, somewhat wild looking, a row of scrub pines running along the length of the wall but set back from it about the width of their truck.

The entry gates guarded a path leading away from them made from old inlaid pavers, and easily seen were the marks from the Humvee laying down rubber and shoving pieces of rock out of the way, and in some places the pavers themselves were broken. "That'll need to be fixed." Kerry remarked.

"Yeah, that truck's a brute." Dar touched one of the broken pavers with the toe of her boot. "Couldn't really see any of this that night. Just looked like gravel."

The paver path led forward through a stand of trees and as they entered the stand they paused. "Manuel thought this was kind of a shame, it blocked the view of the house." Dar said, as they stood together for a long moment, just looking around.

"What did Hank call this?" Kerry asked. "A hammock?"

The area was thick with trees, some with red, peeling bark, and others with white, forming a lacy canopy and swaying in the light breeze. The branches that had covered the ground the other night were gone, and through the leaves they could see a rambling, variable ground.

Under the trees they could see ferns. "Hank mentioned ferns." Kerry remarked. "It's..." She looked around. "Interesting." She said. "Different."

"Natural." Dar gestured to the path and they started walking up along it. There were many places where it was overgrown with weeds, and black with dirt and algae but it appeared mostly intact and someone had kept the edge moderately trimmed.

Two or three minutes walk and they passed a side branch. "That's where the shed was." Kerry remembered, pointing. "Where we ran to get out of the rain." She turned off onto it and Dar caught up to her, their footsteps making a soft, scuffing sound on the ground. "It's so quiet."

"Probably not when life's normal." Dar took in a breath. "You can smell the water." She remarked as they walked down the path and under the tree canopy, where now the shed could clearly be seen. It was also built of stone, with a tarpaper paneled roof.

In the light, it was water and weather stained, and the boards creaked as they took the two steps up onto the overhung porch where they'd parked Mark's bike. As at that time, the door was open and Kerry pushed it ahead of her and they went inside.

It smelled of gasoline and mulch, and old wood, just as it had. "That's what I thought was a horse thing." Kerry pointed to the side. "Tell me if I was right"

Dar went right over to the area and inspected it, going around the half wall and standing in the center. "Oh yeah." She concluded immediately. "It's even got feed bins, there. Cracked and useless, but that's the only thing they could be." She went over to the outside door and examined it.

With a tug, she drew back the sliding latch on the top half of the door and opened it, peering outside. "Nice out here on this side. There's a ramp." She noted. "And a trail, I think."

Kerry came over immediately and peered out. "Where?"

"There." Dar pointed. "You can see the rocks lining it." She closed the top and latched it. "Cool." She regarded the inside of the horse stall. "Yeah, I can imagine a horse in here. Maybe they left it out, and let it roam around. Plenty of space." She glanced back out of the half wall. "You all were in here?"

"We were." Kerry confirmed. "There's an oil lamp there. Mark lit it. We were just glad to be out of the rain." She gave the railing an affectionate pat. "It's a nice shed."

"It is." Dar nodded. "C'mon. Lets go check out the house."

They walked out, closing the door behind them and went up the path again to the main roadway. "Mostly dried out." Dar said, as they walked along. On either side of the roadway was a grassy sward, before it merged into trees again. "Damn good thing those guys kept mowing the lawn."

"No kidding." Kerry shaded her eyes. "Are we going uphill? It felt like we were, going towards the house."

"Yes." Dar agreed. "I think its built up on a limestone ridge. We had to go up those steps and there are those levels going down to the water." She looked between the trees, to her right. "Is that a... I think I see water over there."

They detoured off the road and across the grass, and into the thickly forested area beyond it, finding a path among the trees and rock outcroppings until they halted at a roundish depression in the rocks filled with water, here under the trees shaded a murky dark amber.

Dar went to the edge and knelt, sticking her hand in and cupping the water, bringing it back up to her lips and sticking her tongue cautiously in it. She mouthed the results, a surprised look on her face. "Thought that would be brackish at best. It's fresh."

Kerry came over. "Maybe he built it as a pond and filled it? It's nice, with all the trees hanging over it." She suggested. "I could imagine myself on a bench over there, reading a book." She pointed to the one side of the pond, where there was some clear space and it was now speckled with green and amber sunlight. "I like it."

"You know who else is going to like it?" Dar stood and shook the water droplets off her fingertips. "Our dogs."

"They like water." Kerry agreed, wryly. "You know, now that I think about it, it would be nice to sit out here and work when it's a little cooler. Can you cover this area with Wifi?"

Dar chuckled softly. "Sure."

They went back along the ridge to the road and continued on around the bend to the right, and then to the left that finally gave them a view of the house. The back of it, including the access to the kitchen they used had a sloping ground leading up to it, with a sparse scattering of trees and they stopped to regard the view facing them.

The architecture was .. It was utilitarian and functional. There were no embellishments, just square lines and straightforward building techniques and most of the walls were built with the same stone technique as the outer ring wall was.

"I'm glad there are no gargoyles, Dar." Kerry said, after a long pause. "No weird embellishments anywhere." She looked around. "I guess the rangers aren't on duty today."

"Guess not." Dar said. "I guess we have to figure out what they're really all about. Maybe they cleared out after that night, Ker."

"Mm. Didn't read them that way, but maybe."

They walked up the steps to the kitchen door and tried it, but it, in fact was locked. They backed off from the concrete porch and it's sloping ramp that went down to another squared off pad where things could be delivered, and walked along the back of the house to where the porch started on the left hand side.

There was a small set of steps up, and an entryway that was worn by time and footsteps, up onto the broad, wooden porch that went along the side of the house and here, in the light they could see the plant and algae stains on the walls and floors.

It was empty, but Kerry could easily imagine it with a table or two, and some comfortable chairs to sit on. The boards of the porch gave a little under their weight and as they moved forward, lizards flew in every direction and there was a scent of old wood and dirt and recent wetness around.

Halfway to the front of the house the view on their left cleared of the last of the trees and the Bay appeared, a mostly chopless vista with a few boats on the horizon, and a fresh breeze came up off the water and made it almost pleasant in the shade.

There were tall, paned windows along the wall, and as they passed one Kerry looked to her right, into the inside of the house. She paused and went to the window, putting her hands on the sill and peering at the interior. She was looking at the hall with its stairwell up to the second level and it's high ceilings all painted in the same bland, off white.

Dar came up next to her, and watched over her shoulder. "Big inside."

"It's like a blank canvas." Kerry answered, after a long pause. "Dar, did he live in it like this? It's just a big white box inside. She said. "Unless that kid came and emptied this place all out. What do you think?"

"Could have. We can ask the rangers." Dar suggested. "I noticed that too, seemed like someone had come in, and repainted to get it sold. I mentioned that to Manuel. He thought so too." She paused. "So how would you restore that?"

"How would you?" Kerry mused. "I mean, if you don't have any of the original stuff, would there be a point? Have someone create replicas? I've been in historical houses. The fascination is seeing the actual things people lived with in those times."

"No one really wants to live in a museum of fake antiquities." Dar stated, somewhat bluntly. "I don't."

"Do we have a choice if we go for this?"

"There's always choices." Dar concluded. "C'mon."

They walked around to what was, in fact, the front of the house, which overlooked the deeply sunken pool, and the multilayered deck and the stone steps going down to the coral and wood dock.

Because the house was on a point, and this was the curve of it, their horizon was mostly open water across Biscayne Bay, facing Key Biscayne. "They didn't get the full storm surge here." Dar said, after a moment's silence. "the Key took the brunt."

They walked down the steps to the pool. It was half full of green, murky water and the deck was covered in debris. "That'll take some work." Kerry mused. "Lets see what the dock's like."

There was an air of neglect here that wasn't as apparent in the rest of the property. Dar led the way carefully across to the edge of the stone verge. Another stretch of steps led downward to the dock level, but these had broken edges, and were covered in algae.

The dock itself seemed in battered, if okay condition. There was rust and from where they were standing, they could smell the acrid richness of seaweed and the salt from the sea.

Kerry enjoyed the breeze, content to stay where she was as Dar navigated her way down the steps to inspect the docks safety. She could see several boats out in the channel, but they were far away enough that their engines were inaudible, and she could only hear the wash and slap of the tide against the rock wall.

She looked down, thoughtfully. Then she turned and looked up at the house, it's lower level at least ten or twelve feet higher than where she was standing.

"Looks all right." Dar climbed back up to stand next to her, dusting her hands off. "Literally just rock. Only thing its good for is parking the boat if we want to and tying up. There's some iron cleats sunk into it." She glanced across the channel. "Have to pick up gas over at the marina there."

"A little shorter run down to the cabin." There was a stone bench at the edge of the deck, and Kerry went over and sat down on it. "It's a lot of work though." She removed a small camera from her pocket. "Was it like this back here when you looked at it, Dar?" She took some shots of the exterior.

Dar joined her, and they watched as two boats came cruising by, one with the blue flashing lights that indicated some kind of officialdom. The other was a sturdy work boat, a cabin cruiser with a heavy set of visible radar and a half dozen men in khakis and golf shirts onboard. "No water in the pool." She conceded. "But yeah, looks pretty much the same. "

The boats slowed and then the one with the light started circling, while the other puttered around in a roughly square pattern. "What do you figure, Dar? Are they looking for a sunken boat or something?"

"They're sounding." Dar watched them. "So they're looking for something."

"Something like a body something?"

"No, not with a depth sounder." Dar leaned back and folded her arms. "Maybe someone dropped something there. It's too far off to be a car or that sort of thing." She paused thoughtfully. "Sunken boat maybe."

"Mm."

They turned and regarded the outdoor space. It was, aside from the stone platforms, devoid of any decoration. There were no plaster fountains, or dolphins or anything. Just... "Like inside." Dar said. "An empty slate. I wonder if there's anything existing that show what this place looked like when he was living here?" She wondered. "Maybe we can research it once the libraries open up again. Might be in the Main library off Brickell. They have a big Florida history section."

"Is this going to be crazy, Dar?" Kerry asked, suddenly. "What if we can't do anything at all here? What if we can't even put in air conditioning?" She kicked her heels gently against the rock. "I guess we can..." She fell silent.

"We can build a tent platform and put a tent up." Dar said. "And get a swamp cooler."

"Dar."

"Let's see what the actual historical designation is." Dar smiled gently. "Is it the house, or is it this homestead? There's land enough here to build whatever we want if we can't live in that big thing." She patted Kerry's knee. "Relax until we know."

Kerry shifted and regarded her with interest. "Explain that a little."

"What was declared historic? His house? The pool? The dock? Or the entire property?" Dar said. "That'll outline what can be done. Are they trying to protect the biology, or is it the house and what's around it?"

"Huh."

Dar gestured. "There's nothing particularly historically interesting here, Ker. Old man Hunter was a character, but he wasn't anyone who was taught about, or did something that was notable. He just owned this place, and was a cantankerous bastard. What is it they want to save?"

"Huh." Kerry repeated. "I figured he was famous, as in, I could go down to the Herald and do research on him kind of famous." She admitted. "I had a note to do that before the entire half of the state got pressure washed and I haven't had time to use our three bits a second access to look at anything."

"Far as I know, he was just known for annoying the local tax collector and anyone who wanted to develop this point." Dar stood up. "Let's keep exploring. Maybe we'll find a treasure map." She said. "Maybe we can build a high tech tree house over in those woods."

Kerry amiably followed her, as Dar picked her way across the debris strewn deck and past the green, murky pool. They left the water behind and walked around to the south of the house, walking along a path of crushed shells bordered by old, scuffed half pavers.

It gave their footsteps a gentle crunch, a bit like breakfast cereal, and the path led away from the bay and into a thick stand of trees, winding between two ridges of moss and fern covered rock. It was odd, and uneven, and there were dips and trenches all along the ground, with moss covered trees full of feathery red bark and thick leaves, only a little stripped from the recent storm.

"You know what this reminds me of, Dar?" Kerry said, suddenly, stopping and looking at the trench to her right. "Weirdly, but a little?"

"Coral."

Kerry turned. "It does, doesn't it? Its like a reef, but above ground." She turned around in a circle. "What is this?" She asked. "I don't think I've ever seen nature like this anywhere."

Dar went over to one of the ridges and sat down on it. "It's part of the Miami rock ridge." She slid her boots out and studied them. "It's a line of topology that goes from the top of the keys up to the county line. There are only tiny bits of it left showing in places here in the east. Wainright Park has some of them. I remember seeing it when I was there for some picnic or something."

Kerry sat down next to her. "It's a little jungle like." She touched one of the ferns. "It makes most of the land sort of..."

"Unuseable unless you flatten the ridge, grind it down to the ground like they have done to the rest of it around here. It's limestone." Dar rubbed her thumb against the rock. "And.. at one time it really was part of the ocean floor, in the past." She looked around at the quiet surroundings. "If I scraped the top of this, we'd find sea fossils."

"I remember flying over the Everglades, coming into Miami." Kerry said, thoughtfully. "It was a sunny day, and I could see down into the water and there were these ridges, you could see them. I thought they looked a little reef like." She looked around. "If this was covered in water, like the glades is, it would kind of be like that."

"It would. So Miami rock ridge was what it sounds like, it was a ridge. It's about... twelve to fifteen feet above sea level." Dar said. "So the house there, it's built on top of the ridge. He left the rest of it..." She looked around, and then up at the canopy, visibly shredded and thinned by the storm. "Natural, I guess."

Kerry got up and wandered further on the path. "You said there were mangos here." She paused, looking up at a tree. "And.. avocados?"

"And gumbo limbos, but I don't think you make gumbo from them." Dar smiled. "This is old Florida. This is what it was, before all the development." She concluded. "Just swamp and plants and nature."

It was hard to imagine. Kerry turned around in a circle again, then she climbed up onto the limestone ridge and walked along it, stepping over a small gap that held a thick puff of ferns. "I think this is cool." She concluded. "I like it, Dar. It's really kind of unique."

"Reminds me of some places down south I used to camp in, when I was small." Dar agreed, with a smile. "All gone now. I drove through the area when I was doing that work down there. Condos." She leaned back against a tree pole, a tall pine with horizontal branches, mostly stripped, several broken.

"What are these?" Kerry had found a small, green leaved bush tucked behind a line of the red barked trees. "Baby oranges? Do they grow up to be big oranges?" She looked enchanted. "Fresh squeezed orange juice from our own tree in the morning?"

Dar hopped up onto the ridge and walked over to her, peering past her at it. She started laughing.

"What's funny?"

"Those are kumquats."

Kerry stared at the small, round fruits on the bush. "THOSE are kumquats?"

"Those are kumquats." Dar searched among the leaves. "Careful, it's got thorns." She found a mostly ripe one and removed it from its stem. Then she took a bite of it, and handed the rest over to Kerry.

"You eat the skin?" Kerry watched her chew and nod. Then she put the half fruit into her mouth and bit down. Immediately, she regretted it. "Oh crap Dar." She mouthed, caught between wanting to spit it out and her ingrained manners. "it's SOUR!"

With a grimace she swallowed the tart, tangy substance and breathed in, getting an intense wash of citrus across the back of her throat. It made her eyes tear, and she half turned, giving Dar an outraged look.

Her partner was standing there innocently, licking her lips. "They're great on pizza."

"You're toast." Kerry bolted for her.

"They're not bad on toast, either."

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"You know what?" Dar climbed back into the truck, still perched on the sidewalk. "People were told to have three days supply of things in their house. That's what I heard every damn person say."

"It's been three days." Kerry closed the door on the passenger side, twirling a reddish leaf, newly fallen, between her fingers. "So now what. Is that what you mean?"

"That's what I mean." Dar started the engine, and reached up to take her sunglasses from their holder, sliding them over her eyes. "You know what we need?"

"Combuses." Kerry smiled briefly. "Oh lord I remember those showing up." She paused, suddenly, as Dar rocked the truck down off the sidewalk and onto the road, turning around and heading back north along the street.

"Huh."

"Huh?"

"No, was just thinking of something." Kerry murmured. "They need to start getting things open again, Dar." She turned on the truck's radio, where one of the never ending, circular, pervasive status reports was underway. All the television stations were simulcasting to the radio channels and just like you could not get anything but local news on the local channels, the same went for the radio.

No music today. Hadn't been since the storm. "Hard to believe I miss repetitive top 40." Kerry leaned back in her seat, as they listened to the update. "But I do."

"Portable kitchens. Food trucks. Why can't they?" Dar asked.

"Probably no one thought of it." Kerry exhaled. "Which is a damn shame, because let me tell ya, they could be roaming around all over the place making an absolute killing right now." She propped her head up on one hand, her elbow leaning on the car jamb. "Why didn't Sasha think about that?"

“Sasha’s probably kitting out Scott’s Airstream right now to go mobile.” Dar found a side street and turned down it. “Lets see if there’s a route that doesn’t involve me going up on the sidewalk.” She went west a block and turned north again, down a street that was filled with branches, but no full trees.

This was the edge of the business district, and the houses here were very small, and old, and battered. Most had chain link fences around them, and there was visible damage everywhere, and most of the yards had people out living in them, not inside the homes.

Some had tarps up for shelter, some had put up tents, one had just taken six or seven large umbrellas and a folding chair and made do.

The scent of charcoal burning was everywhere.

It was midday, and hot and hazy, and yet there were children laughing somewhere, and the sound of Latin music competing with the powerful thumping of electronic jams so loud they could clearly hear them through the rolled up windows.

A man was pushing a cart down the road coming in the opposite direction, and loaded on top of it was random wooden debris, and some pieces of aluminum siding. He gave them a cheerful wave as they maneuvered by, and Kerry returned the wave.

“Some life around.” Dar commented mildly.

“Making it happen, like we are at the office.” Kerry agreed. “That’s good to see, you know? It seems like there was less flooding here.”

“Was.”

Kerry looked thoughtfully at the neighborhood they were rolling through. “Is this all really on top of that ridge thing you were talking about?”

Dar was silent for a few minutes. “Actually, I think it is.” She sounded slightly surprised. “Which makes sense I guess. We had surge, but not much flooding by the office and in that area.” She considered. “Which reminds me I guess we should see if our lamented landlord had flood insurance.”

“Wouldn’t he have to?”

“Not necessarily.”

“This is one of those Florida things right? Because this whole state practically is flat as a pancake. Everyone should have to have flood insurance, Dar. We have it at the condo.”

“Sure. It’s an island. We have it at the cabin too.” Dar readily agreed. “But both the island and our cabin are in an official flood zone. If you’re not, you don’t have to buy flood insurance.”

“That office is a block from the water.”

“But you have to go down four steps and it slopes to the parking lot.” Dar turned back onto the main road. “I never thought about it until right now. Our first floor can see the roof of the sailing club.”

“Wait. You mean our office is on this thing too?” Kerry sounded incredulous.

“Or built on top of a trash pit. Could go either way around here.”

Kerry pondered this as they navigated Main Highway, which now had a lot of cars on it, moving slowly through the lightless four way stops. “I think I’m getting to really be fond of this Miami rock ridge, Dar.” She mused. “Even though I literally just heard about it.”

Dar chuckled.

“So I’m guessing where Maria lives isn’t on this ridge.” Kerry said, then paused, her eyes opening wider. “Hell, it’s in a hollow behind it, isn’t it?” She said. “I mean, if there’s a ridge, by definition what’s not that is in a valley, right?”

“Apparently. Though honestly it’s not something I ever really paid much attention to.” Dar admitted. “I’m not really into geology I just knew about the ridge because of a report I had to do for...” She paused. “High school biology maybe? Something about frogs.”

“Frogs?” Kerry frowned, distracted. “What do frogs have to do with it?”

“Habitat. They live in the water and on land. Ask my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“My mother. She had to go and kick the principal around because they thought I copied it from the Encyclopedia Britannica and my father was deployed at the time.” Dar replied absently, as she studied the street they were moving slowly along. “Yeah, all dry here.”

They slowed to turn into the parking lot, and the national guardsman on duty moved out of the way to let them through. He lifted a hand in brief acknowledgement, nodding when Dar returned the gesture.

“Seems okay.” Kerry hazarded. “Maybe they figured we really did them a favor?”

“Maybe.”

Dar parked the truck and they got out, and as they walked towards the front door to the office, Kerry appreciated the slight rise to the ground, and the uneven cast to it with new eyes. She hadn’t really thought about it at all, but now she could see it, and the dip and trench in front of it that she always figured was on purpose.

Was it? She resolved to find some material on it once things had gotten more normal and caught up to Dar, slipping her arm through her partners and clasping her hand.

They walked up the steps to the fortified porch and through the open door, where the sounds of some kind of sports reporting was echoing.

Everyone was in the central space, the office itself was absolutely empty. There was no work going on in the lower hall, and the upper hall was silent. “Its Saturday here, I guess.” Dar remarked.

“Good.” Kerry nodded. “Everyone deserves a break. Even us.”

They walked through the hallway and out the back door and paused on the threshold, watching the activity outside.

Sasha was seated in a director’s chair behind the now four grills and one portable cooktop next to a refrigerated case that had a cable running from it to a square black box nearby that had a quadrangle of spread panels pointing up at the sun. “Hey hey!” She greeted them cheerfully.

“Solar panels?” Kerry pointed. “Are those solar panels on that UPS?”

“My brother brought them.” Sasha confirmed. “He’s looking at that club there.” She made a vague gesture towards the water. “Tear it all down, a mess! But he likes the dock, yes? He has his boat tied up to it.” She said. “One of those boys, he said you had a phone call, Kerry.”

“Not surprising. Was it from the island? I don’t think we gave many people that number.” Kerry said. “Nevermind, let me go up there and see what that’s all about. I’ll just dial back from the caller ID.” She turned and went back into the building, trotting up the steps.

She went down the hall and into the room they’d put the radio in, where the phone was still sitting, squat and innocent on top of the white square switch. She sat down at the table and looked around, checking in vain hope for a message pad.

No. She then addressed the phone, calling up the history and seeing the last caller.

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The inner yard was busy. Beyond the barbeque pad, and the Airstream parked next to it there was a group of mixed veterans and bodybuilders, with a few nerds thrown in playing baseball. It was a very short field, and there was more crap talking and laughter than serious play, but it sounded like fun.

Against the far wall, where there were now ten tents set up, some of the construction workers were seated on wooden stools, listening to a radio that was issuing the noise they'd heard, which Dar now translated as a soccer game.

Zoe and Mayte were seated, on a pair of camp chairs watching the ball game, a pitcher of something between them. Hank was nearby on the back of his Humvee, fixing something.

Pete was under one of the trees in a low slung beach chair, a ball cap over his eyes.

Dar had a brief flash of memory, of a much younger time when they'd lived on the base down south and weekends had sometimes been a little like this, small pockets of people just relaxing and enjoying some time off, but together in a community.

A community. She thoughtfully examined that notion.

"That soldier was here." Sasha spoke up after a short silence. "Looking for you I think maybe. His whole bunch was here buying breakfast from me."

"He's pissed at my father." Dar came over to examine the solar panels. "I bet he wants to talk about that." She concluded. "This is a great idea." She indicated the panels. "We should get more."

"Stupid man then." The short woman concluded. "But I gave him a sandwich. He liked it." She regarded the panels. "You want? No problem. Let me tell my brother. He said he was going to get a big bunch sent to here from Vietnam."

"He could make a killing." Dar stood up. "We should get solar panels on the damn roof." She looked up at the building, turning slowly. "I bet we have enough footprint." She looked at Sasha. "You just take everything for granted."

Sasha smiled, ruefully. "Yes yes. You think the power, the air conditioning always there." She looked around. "But we're doing pretty good here, you know?"

"Yeah." Dar exhaled. "Well, let me go find out what the army wants." She turned and walked back through the building and out the front door.

A gentle puff of warm air hit her face as she went along the sidewalk and she was conscious of the sun as it striped her body coming through the remaining branches of the trees around the office.

The storm had stripped them. It made her think of what they looked like in winter, when the dry season brought to Miami what small changes there were to indicate the passing of the year. Cooler, drier weather, with a few days that were downright brisk.

What would be spring, or early fall anywhere else, and what made Miamians bring out sweaters and in the most extreme cold days, furs from yesteryear smelling of mothballs. It only lasted, perhaps, two days, and then it was back to seventies and eighties but at least it was drier, and comfortable to be outside.

When you could walk to your car, for example, and not be sweating by the time you got inside.

The leaves were all over the ground covering the walk, and she could hear the faint crunching her hiking boots made as she walked over them, crossing over the small dip that the sidewalk bridged on its way to the parking lot glad despite the heat that she was wearing jeans and a collared shirt for this unexpected visit.

The captain was likely going to be a jerk. She was likely going to end up being an asshole to him, and she was self aware enough to know that was more effective when you were not distracting things with animal physical presence.

Which she had. Dar wasn't blind to that.

Dar understood that she really had no responsibility over what her father had said. He was his own man, and had his own views and she would no more have told him to hold them off than he would in the reverse.

Besides, she agreed with the sentiment. The guy had been a jerk to the crowd, no matter how nice he'd been to Kerry. She settled her attitude around her and went to the gate of the encampment, ready to deal with whatever was presented.

The guard recognized her, and willingly went to go find his captain at her polite request, apparently glad enough to get out of the sun that was baking the tarmac covered area.

Dar remained near the entrance, gazing idly around at the camp. The guard soldiers were all busy, moving around and mostly stocking boxes from a large 18 wheel truck into the back of smaller vehicles. Everyone was sweating, their uniforms dark with moisture.

It all seemed orderly, no one even gave her a sideways look and Dar relaxed a little, shifting her thoughts to the property they'd just come from, pondering the possibilities of just how much trouble and heartache they'd opened themselves up for there.

Probably a lot. The more she'd looked at the house the more she'd started to realize there were going to be issues with the two of them trying to use it in the short or even the long term, with the legal entanglements that probably now existed around it.

And yet. Dar thought about the trees, and the pond, and all that space and she couldn't do anything but smile. Just walking around there had made her happy, and while she never would have considered buying a horse, the idea that KERRY had made her even more happy.

She imagined, for a moment, coming there to the shed and finding a horse in it, and felt her face break into a grin. What kind of horse, she wondered, figuring without question it would be a pretty one with a soft, prickly nose.

"Ma'am?"

Dar jumped a little and turned, to find the guard who'd gone off standing there. "Hi." She focused on him. "We ready?"

"Yep, c'mon with me." The man gestured and turned, and headed off, clearly expecting Dar to follow him which she promptly did

There was a medic tent set up, and as she passed, she could see two people inside, with civilian clothes on, and talking to one of the mechanics were a couple of police officers, in dusty beige.

Dar was ushered into a tent at the back of the encampment, and as she entered the plastic lined door she could feel a puff of – not cold, but cooler air. At the back of the tent was a table, and on either side were smaller ones covered in what looked like radio gear.

The captain was behind the table, and now he looked up at her.

"My staff told me you were looking for me." Dar said. "What can I do for you?" She removed the sunglasses she was wearing and tucked them into the collarline of her shirt and stood there waiting for his response.

"I was." The captain said. "Sit down."

For a moment, Dar paused, as though considering remaining standing, and then she took a seat on the folding visitor chair he'd put in front of his makeshift desk. To one side of it, there was a corrugated hose about a foot in diameter, and that was producing the cooler air and the pretention of it made her lip twitch.

She folded her hands, interlacing her fingers and stared at him, until he looked away.

"I just want to get something clear between us." He said. "About all this high and mighty stuff."

Dar remained staring at him, and he avoided her eyes. "You and I have had about two minutes of conversation and none of it was anything other than random Spanish translation about water." She said, in a deliberate tone. "Is this about last night?"

"We have a mission here. It doesn't involve pandering to unprepared residents." The captain said, flatly.

"Okay." Dar responded in a mild tone. "No one forced you to pander to anyone. We did it ourselves because we could. Seems to me like that should satisfy all around."

He stood. Dar remained in her seat. "I have done all I can do to help you. You had no reason to call my brass and get them involved."

Dar's brows creased at once and she felt her face tense into an expression of bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

"No, I don't excuse you." The man was furious. "Telling my bosses we're a bunch of hicks? That we don't know what we're doing? Bold words, coming from the likes of you." He leaned forward. "Maybe I should tell all them people what you are."

Dar's brow remained creased. "What I am?" She asked, in a puzzled tone. "Those people, in the building there?" She pointed at the office. "You going to tell them I'm gay? They know." She now was wondering what the actual hell was going on. "Why would they care?"

"That you all, you bleeding hearts, you're the granddaughter of a Grand Dragon." He said. "They know that? They think you're all lets be fair and equal?" He lifted his hands up. "Preaching all that be good to your neighbor mish mash?"

Dar stood up. Then she put her hands on his fake desk and leaned forward, making him abruptly straighten to move back rather than go nose to nose with her. "They wouldn't care any more than I do about some guy I never met who my dad turned his back on when he was sixteen." She stated. "Or did you think I didn't know?" She leveled her eyes at him. "That the game?? Shame me on it?"

"Well makes all that lefty spouting a lie, don't it?" He said, after a long pause, his anger replaced with sudden uncertainty. "Wasn't sure your old man told you.. I heard he didn't get on with his pa." His head jerked. "But you know what I'm talking about. You don't believe all that we're all the same bs. No way you do, not coming from where we come from."

Dar stared at him for a long moment. "Do I believe we're all the same?" She finally said. "No. We're all different. But what color we are, or where we were born or who we sleep with doesn't matter in what we bring to the table as an individual."

He stared at her, visibly working that out.

Dar helped him out. "Bigotry is stupid and a waste of time." She clarified. "Exceptional people come from everywhere."

"A hundred generations of my family thinks that's bs." He said, bluntly. "And there's a lot more of us, than of you, thank the Lord."

"My father was right." Dar sighed. "You are an asshole, and what's worse, you're a stupid one." She removed her sunglasses from the neckline of her shirt and shook her head. "I'll do us both a favor and not tell him we had this conversation. But for the record." She put her sunglasses on. "I didn't call anyone about anything last night."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"I didn't." Dar repeated. "But now I just might." She turned and went to the door, thrusting the flap open and nearly bowling over a young guardsman standing just outside as she strode towards the gate.

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Kerry put the phone down and sat back, picking up the pen on the desk and twiddling it between her fingers. "Hm." She pondered the scribbling she'd scrawled down, then paused as she heard the distinctive sound of Dar climbing the stairs at the end of the hall.

Always at a jog trot, not enough weight to be one of the guys, but with a power and energy she immediately recognized. She got up and went to the door, sticking her head out as Dar reached the top of the steps and started her way.

She was pissed. Kerry emerged all the way out into the hallway, preparing herself to deal with whatever it was that had ticked her partner off. "What's up?"

"Stupid moron." Dar came to a halt, her nostrils flaring a little bit. "I'm going to kick their asses out of our parking lot."

Kerry reached out and put a hand on Dar's stomach. "Hold on. What happened?" She asked. "I thought it was Dad he was mad at. Isn't he? Let him be, Dar. If he dumb enough to mess with him he'll end up with his head planted in his ass on the corner out there."

Dar took a breath and released it. "Someone called that moron's boss and told him he was being an ass."

"Good for them. He was." Kerry nodded. "Why is that a problem?"

"He thinks it was me."

Kerry hooked a finger into one of Dar's belt loops. "Lets get some coffee." She suggested, and they retreated to kitchenette. "Does he think it was you because of what dad said?" She took out two cups, puzzling at the situation while Dar leaned against the wall, arms folded. "And I mean, who cares?"

She poured coffee into the cups, looking back over her shoulder at her glowering companion. "What on earth did he say to get you so upset?" She handed Dar a cup, waiting for her to take it before picking up her own.

"He wanted to know how the grand daughter of a Grand Wizard got off calling him a bigot."

Kerry paused in mid sip, absolutely still, staring at Dar over the rim of her cup in utter silence for a long moment. Then she put the cup down on the small table covered in carefully clipped and wrapped bags of potato chips and pretzels. "He fucking said what?"

The reaction seemed to mollify Dar. "I told him I didn't call anyone, but now I might have to." She took a swallow of the coffee, giving her shoulders a little shake as though settling ruffled feathers. "And he threw it at me like he was going to tell everyone and it would matter."

"He actually said that?" Kerry leaned forward against the table, still incredulous.

"He actually said that."

"What did you answer for that?" Kerry straightened up and put her hands on her hips. "Did you tell him.. what did you tell him?"

"I told him my father was right. He was an asshole, and what's more, he was a stupid one." Dar dutifully reported. "Its just bullshit. Ticked me off." She started investigating the bags. "Oh... Fritos." She unclipped it and removed a handful of the chips, crunching one contentedly. "What was the call?"

Kerry sat down on the nearby stool. "Hold on, let me finish being seeing red level mad. " She said. "Of all the completely idiotic things for that bozo to pull out of his ass. What a piece of trash." She felt almost lightheaded, looking up at Dar who was standing next to the table, watching her with bemused concern. "What an absolute piece of trash."

Dar put down her coffee and came around behind Kerry, putting her hands on her shoulders. "Total." She remarked, briefly. "When he first started hinting he was going to spill something about me I thought it was that I was gay." She said. "And I was like, yeah, they know."

That brought a short, almost barking laugh from Kerry. "Our staff you mean?"

"Everyone around here."

"Yeah, no one's asked me if we're sisters in a while." Kerry leaned back against her. "Jesus, that's so... I mean, why would it even matter, Dar? He's your grandfather. You never even met him. You can't change who he was."

"I can't change being gay." Dar replied simply. "Wouldn't want to." She wrapped her arms around Kerry. "But I guess from his world view, blood matters."

"It doesn't." Kerry said, softly. "But my father believed the same kinds of things. He wrapped fancy language around it, but it was all about that." She mused. "All about hate, all about how everyone who wasn't exactly you or your kind were bad, were evil."

"Were going to hell." Dar finished for her.

"That too." Kerry said. "But you know, that was never part of the dialog, Dar. We were never pitched that going to hell line, we were just told we'd be thrown out of the family and when all you know is your family, that's even more terrifying than hell."

"Didn't want to be an outcast."

"No." Kerry paused, and then she twisted around in her seat to look up at Dar. "Did you ever feel like that, Dar?" She watched that strong profile shift a little, as her partner thought. "Like you didn't want to be the outsider? Wanted just to be... normal?"

Normal, meaning conventional. Not gay. Traditional. A Christmas card that had a man, and a woman, kids, a pious, solemn engraving with a clear, undisputed place in the world.

She met Dar's eyes, knowing the truth even before her partner spoke.

"Me??" Dar smiled suddenly and engagingly, a roguish twinkle appearing in her eyes as she shook her head. "Nah. I was always the outsider, Ker." She looked fondly down at her. "The most normal thing I ever did was marry you."

Utter truth, and Dar both lived that truth and was totally comfortable with it. She enjoyed being a unicorn, albeit that her unicorn manifestation would have a pirate patch over one eye and go around biting people on the ass.

Kerry had endured a different history. She was glad, though, that Dar didn't have to carry that burden and reckoned she, herself, would come to that lived truth eventually.

"Heh." Kerry released her anger. "What a derp that guy turned out to be." She concluded. "We should kick them out of our parking lot. Being there might give us a bad name." She added, then moved on. "So the call. The call was one of my prospects, telling me they were going to kill their project for now. I don't blame them, it was a sales gig."

"Don't blame them either."

"They did like my pitch though." Kerry said. "It was a weird one.. you know, they wanted to open up a sales office that could service all three counties but not have to have their sales people travel."

"Eh?"

"Anyway." Kerry went on. "I pitched we set them up with a back office in Miramar, and then three traveling tricked out mobile homes, bring the sales pitch to the customer but with a sat service so their people could work."

Dar was momentarily silent. "Wow." She said then, her eyebrows lifting. "That's a great idea, Ker."

"I know." Kerry grinned. "They would have gone for it. But..." She lifted one hand and made a vague gesture.

"Anyway I'll have to call the mobile rental agency and cancel the hold I'd put on three of them. Bummer." She leaned against Dar again. "So that's zero clients except for the government that's going to be any net new. Maybe that Colorado office really does need to spin up, huh?" She exhaled. "If we want to keep making payroll."

Dar was silent for a long minute. "I'll send Mark out there." She said. "And call that agency, but don't cancel them. Have them deliver those things here."

"Here?"

"Here, and have them set up service for them. We'll use them to let people live in them while things are getting done here, and Maria and Tomas can use one." Dar said. "They can't live in that house, but they can live in there and go back and forth."

"Holy crap why didn't I think of that?" Kerry exhaled. "I didn't even remember about that pitch until they called me."

"Call them." Dar gave her a bump. "Fast, because everyone in South Florida's going to be thinking of that if they already haven't."

"On it." Kerry hopped up off the stool and strode out of the kitchenette, leaving Dar to finish her coffee and a handful of Fritos.

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Dar was standing talking to Carlos in the courtyard, the long shadows of early evening striping it when the sudden vibration against her hip made her jump and let out a faint squawk.

"What?" Carlos whirled, clearly expecting trouble, jerked out of absorbing the tale of Dar's interaction with the guard captain. "What's wrong?" He searched the area quickly.

"My damn phone." Dar dug her cell phone out and inspected it. "Holy crap I have signal."

"What?" Carlos turned and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Hey everybody! Cell's back!" He turned back. "Lemme go get mine... I left it upstairs." He moved quickly towards the door. "Progress!" He yelled, lifting both hands into the air and shaking them.

Dar nodded, as she watched her phone sync it's messages, with a somewhat wan, but apparently sufficient two bars of radio power. She turned to see Kerry sprinting out of the door and held the phone up, spreading out her other hand in question. "Look!"

"Wasn't expecting that!" Kerry agreed, her own phone in her hand. "Wow!"

"Mixed blessing." Dar inspected the message counter. "There's one from Richard. Let me call him and see how it went with those lawyers." She selected the number and hit the dial. "Call Colleen and tell her the lines are up again."

Kerry glanced up, actually in the act of doing that very thing, but Dar had half turned and covered her other ear, as the crowd in the courtyard started coming together chattering, everyone checking their phones.

She sat down on one of the camp chairs as the phone was answered. "Hey Col!"

"O.. wh.. oh!" Colleen responded. "It's you!" She sounded immensely surprised. "They said there wasn't going to be phones down there for another week! We were just talking about that, me and Mr Mark here."

"Not sure where the signal's back, but we've got some here at the office now." Kerry told her. "Not surprising since we're not that far from city center." She stretched her feet out. "How's it going? You all at the hotel today?"

"Calls are going fine, and so far, the customers are happy." Colleen reported. "We've got the place set up pretty nicely, but I have to say the team misses being back there."

"Do they?"

"They do." Colleen confirmed. "Even though it's a mess there, and we're comfortable here, it's not home." She paused to listen to something. "No that's right, Mark, we haven't had time to really look around much, but still."

Kerry pondered that. "Well, they can't really do much here... even if we've got some cell back and there's a generator around the corner powering some stuff in the office and we have..." She glanced to her left. "Some solar panels."

Colleen laughed. "Surprised Dar hasn't fixed up a hydro engine over there by now. Any way I think the folks here have been talking to the folks down there and they've got a case of the FOMO's." She admitted. "Had two of them ask me yesterday before we left that office when we could go back."

"Huh." Kerry said. "Let me talk to Dar. It's so crazy here, Col. And we have no real way to keep the phones up – I don't know how stable or permanent this cell signal is..."

"I told them it'd be a couple weeks at least." Colleen reassured her. "So don't you worry, there, madame they're not going to start a caravan just yet. I just wanted you to know how they felt, and now if the phones are back .. oh wait you said you didn't have city power yet."

"No. So our company is being run from a shoestring out on that island that could honestly go down any minute. If I was going to do a caravan I'd do it in the other direction." Kerry sighed. "Col, we can hold on like this for a little while but there's a ton we can't do."

"Hold on." Colleen said. "Mark wants a word."

Kerry waited for the phone to be transferred, glancing aside to watch as Dar paced slowly back and forth, under one of the trees. The gathering twilight in the courtyard and the rich, vivid orange of the sun still visible on the roof marked the end of the day, and in that she could also feel a cooler breeze coming from the water not far away.

She was surprised to find herself feeling comfortable, sitting there.

"Hey poquito boss."

"Hey Mark." Kerry focused her attention on the phone. "What's up? You guys doing okay up there?"

"Barbara's super happy. She's got a desk all set up in our office and an internet connection, and air conditioning. Her company's happy with us." Mark said. "I've mostly just been grabbing calls since I got here."

"People bitching?"

"Some." Mark admitted. "Got some calls from those guys in Brazil wanting to know what was going on. They were supposed to kick off on Monday." He paused. "Wasn't really sure what to tell them."

Kerry closed her eyes. "What is it they need... oh, that was the new support team, wasn't it. They were supposed to onboard this past week."

"Yeah. We told the sourcing op to hold on because of the storm... I tried to call them to find out if they still have those guys lined up but I couldn't reach em, like anyone else down there." Mark confirmed. "Maybe now that you're back up though..."

"Crap." Kerry exhaled. "Okay let me review the scope for them and see what options we have."

"Sorry boss."

"Not your fault!"

"No, I know." Mark said. "We just had a lot of stuff going on."

"Yeah."

"I can try to find some folks up here?" Mark ventured. "We can just set them up in the office where the rest of the team is, y'know? I think .. maybe not here in Melbourne but maybe closer over in Orlando we can find some people with that skill set, the cloud guys."

Kerry pondered that. "Damn, I'm torn. It's a great idea, but we went through a great round with that team from here, and I thought they were a really good fit for the customer. It's going to take weeks to get back to that point with new people."

"Well.."

"No, I know. Do it." Kerry gently cut him off. "At least, get that in motion, and either way lets get an area set up for them up there."

"Got it." Mark sounded more confident. "And I'll call that guy back on Monday and tell him we've got a plan." He added. "We'll figure it out."

"Dar's going to call you and talk to you about a startup office in Colorado." Kerry said. "Its all tied up with that new advance they made with the AI platform she's doing for the DOD."

Mark was momentarily silent. "Wow." He said, finally. "They want us to open an office there for that?"

"No, she'll explain it. Someone else is interested in using it for something else." Kerry said. "it's kind of..." She hesitated. "Um..."

"On the Q. Got it." Mark cut her off this time. "Did you like it when you got to try it? I heard you did, the kids down there won't shut up about it."

"I did." Kerry drew in a breath and exhaled. "it is really something else." She confirmed. "I get what the big deal is."

"Cool. Here lemme give you back to Colleen. It's awesome you guys are back online. We'll try to hold the fort down from here, Kerry. Don't stress."

"Was I stressing?"

"Sounded like."

She consciously cleared her throat a little, acknowledging there were people in her immediate circle who now knew her well enough to know that, just from her speech. "I'll do my best, Mark. We just found out this morning it turns out we did get that property we ended up with."

"Ooooh boy."

"Yeah, like we needed that complication. Anyway, get some rest, and tell Col I'll call her tomorrow. Just wanted to let you all know we had some service back."

She hung up, and let the phone rest against her thigh, idly watching the groups of people standing around in random groups, checking phones, or talking on them.

It was strange. When they'd been so cut off, it seemed like they had time to deal with whatever it was that was happening and now that she knew they weren't, she felt like she was now aware of time ticking, of things left undone.

Of people's expectations they were maybe going to let down.

Dar came over to her and sat down in the camp chair next to her, clasping her phone in her hands. "Considering taking a weed whacker and going to find the closest cell tower and sabotage it."

Kerry eyed her, eyebrows raised.

"Historical society legal team is driving down and wants to meet at the Point tomorrow." Dar informed her. "Apparently we're legally responsible for any changes that were made to the property since they received the affidavit."

"Dar, that's ridiculous. We just took ownership."

"Richard agrees, which is why he's on his way here bringing another legal buddy of his to help us." Dar sighed. "He seems to think these people are kinda on the wingnut side."

"Great."

"On the other hand." Dar continued, extending her hand out between their chairs. "It's the end of the day, it's Saturday night, and I'd like to take you home and go to bed with you."

Kerry took her hand. "You're on." She forcibly dismissed the anxiety that had started to crash over her. "Lets go. Tomorrow's another day."

"Tomorrow is." Dar stood and pulled her up, leading her away from the cockpit, and towards the door, leaving the busy courtyard behind them.

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The breeze off the water was acceptably cool, enough to make the warmth of the hot tub both comforting and comfortable as Kerry stretched her legs out and relaxed against the smooth side wall, glad to simply wait for Dar to finish pouring out some wine from her seat next to her.

The sky ahead of her was dark and the Atlantic Ocean just the rush and rumble of waves, and below the patio in the garden she could hear the muffled clanks and rumble of speech of the men working in the glare of the outside lights, invisible past the edge of the patio half wall.

Dar handed her a glass of wine, and leaned back at her side. "There."

"Where did your mom say they were going?" Kerry asked, after a sip of the chilled pale beverage.

"Fort Lauderdale." Dar supplied. "Something to do with the Coast Guard. I didn't really ask for details." She tipped her head back against the edge of the tub and regarded the invisibly cloudy sky. "They said they'll be back on Monday."

Kerry nodded. "So the storm is now rolling over New York." She mused. "But its only a Cat 1." She said. "Or is it just really a Northeaster?" She asked. "I saw there's flooding in Manhattan. I'm pretty sure we were walking in some of those tunnels they were showing."

"We were."

"Glad we're not there now." Kerry concluded. "Based on that news report, it's more chaotic there than it ended up being here."

"Me too." Dar slid closer and pressed her shoulder against Kerry's. "I can imagine all those tunnels filled with water."

Kerry pondered that. "Can rats swim?" She asked. "Because that would be terrible, wouldn't it? There's a hell of a lot of them down there."

Dar turned her head and looked at Kerry. "if they can't, they'll probably just take over the subway cars and ride uptown." She said. "But yeah, I think they swim. The ones here do." She took a sip of her wine, and exhaled. "What a day."

The sound of the bubble jets was soothing, and the smell of the chlorinated water familiar. There was a pot of soup warming on the stove inside for their dinner, and the promise of a peaceful night ahead of them.

Somewhere, off to the east, thunder was rumbling, but it was far away, as was the lightning on the horizon. Chino and Mocha were curled up on the couch inside and for the first time in days, it seemed okay to just sit back and chill.

It was awesome to just have it be quiet, and sort of normal. Kerry wiggled her toes, feeling the jets against the bottom of her feet, and then she set her glass down and rested her head against Dar's conveniently nearby shoulder.

"Surprised we ended up having signal here." Dar remarked idly.

Kerry eyed her. "I'm not." She said. "A, we have power, B, the governor's here, and C, money talks."

"Well that's all true."

"Too bad it's just voice service." Kerry said. "I mean, it's better than nothing, but it would be great not to have to deal with that satellite any more."

"Yeah I'm sure they cut off data because they've only got one tin can and one string up." Dar slid down and enjoyed the jets pounding against her back. "Better than nothing though."

It was. Kerry finished the wine in her glass and floated quietly for a few minutes, and then she pushed herself up and swung her legs over the side of the tub. "I'm going to make sure the soups not bubbling over." She slid down to the tile and picked up one of the two towels nearby, draping it around her swimsuited body.

She slid the glass doors open and went inside, feeling the brush of the chill air against her skin. She crossed into the kitchen and took the cover off the soup, picking up a wooden spoon and stirring it experimentally. "Looks good."

She turned on the convection oven to toast the bread standing by and started a pot of tea going, then she went over into the bedroom to exchange her suit for a worn tshirt, ruffling her hair dry with the towel.

Chino lifted her head and watched her as she returned, ears perked. Mocha was dreaming, his front paws twitching and soft grunting yelps coming from between his lips. "Hey kids." Kerry said to them, as she went by. "It's nice to have a quiet night, huh?"

"Growf." Chino barked gruffly.

She went back to the kitchen and studied the toasting bread, then glanced out the window to watch the gardeners at work below, outlined in the glare of a pair of worklights on poles on either side of the open gate to the beach and the wall mounted lights from their home.

It seemed like they were almost done. Kerry had been charmed to see the improvement, even more so when Dar had diffidently admitted to her machination of it.

Plants in the yard – frivolous and in the long run of things, unimportant. Yet the orderliness of it did in fact make her feel better regardless of how insignificant it was in the broader view and thinking of Dar pausing in her work to meticulously arrange for it made her smile.

She heard the glass door slide open and looked to the left as Dar's tall form appeared in the opening to the kitchen. "You know what?"

"What?" Dar tucked her towel in and folded her arms across her chest, leaning one shoulder against the doorjam.

"You are the best." Kerry came over, stretching up and giving her a kiss on the lips. "I love you."

Dar responded with a pleased smile, and she returned the kiss. "Back at ya, Ker." She paused, letting her forehead rest against Kerry's. "No matter the craziness of the world, we got this."

"We do."

Dar kissed her again. "Let me go change. We've got a night to ourselves and I'm damned if I'm not going to enjoy it. "

Kerry gave her a pat on the hip and sent her on her way, and then turned back to finishing up the preparation of their light meal.

\*\*

"Everything going okay there, Mayte?" Kerry sprawled on the couch in Dar's office, aware of the sound of kitchen door opening and the hustle of toenails on the floor outside.

"Yes, it is quiet." Mayte reported. "Some people came by here, and they were looking for you and Dar. I took down their information and sent a note over."

"Hm."

"They said it was important. Something about your new house."

"Oh boy." Kerry sighed. "Well, it can wait for Monday. Nothing's going on there tonight or tomorrow I can tell you that."

"Si, I told them, but that made them upset. So I asked them what they wanted, you know?" Mayte said. "To see if I could help them but they said it was private." She sniffed audibly. "I think they didn't want any help."

"Some scam, probably." Kerry stifled a yawn. "Okay, thanks Mayte. Everyone comfortable there? Those soldiers didn't cause any problems did they?"

"Oh no. They have not come here." Her assistant assured her. "Zoe told me that Hank has told her they were told to stay away from us."

Kerry had mixed feelings about that. She didn't really want to have an antagonistic relationship with a large group of armed people, but on the other hand, they were being led by a jerk and probably some of them were of the same mind and she didn't really want them around her people either.

"Good." She said, briskly. "Just so you know, they kind of had a mix up with Dar earlier."

Mayte chuckled a little. "Si, we heard about that. Some of them told us because they could hear it, and we know the boss of them is mad at us because we helped those poor people. Carlos called them some names." She said. "And Hank was telling everyone about how these people should not be bothering Dar because she will kick them."

Kerry took a breath to dismiss the idea, then paused. "Well, that's true." She admitted finally. "But they shouldn't bother Dar for a lot of other reasons. Or any of us. We did the right thing."

"Yes, we did that. Zoe was telling everyone all about it and she told the news person who was here too."

"News person?" Instinctively, Kerry leaned over and looked out the door towards the television, where the governor was holding what appeared to be a press conference.

"Si, they came here because they heard about the water. Someone told them." Mayte said. "I think I am becoming good with talking to reporters."

Kerry could well imagine it. "Okay, I can't wait to see where that ends up. But you all stay clear of the soldiers. We don't need any more trouble."

"Okay, no problem." Mayte said. "We will leave them alone but some of them are upset, because they liked very much the food from Sasha and I think they will come here anyhow." She told her boss. "Some of them are not bad, I think so?"

"I'm sure that's true, Mayte. Just be careful." Kerry told her. "And hey, I have a surprise for you all tomorrow that I hope's going to work out, and maybe after that we can convince the soldiers to move along."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. I'm going to wait to see if it works out before I say anything." Kerry smiled. "I don't want to get anyone's hopes up. But I think it will really help." She said. "And, by the way, we do have cell signal out here. So if these phones go down, you can reach us that way."

Behind Mayte, Kerry could hear the sound of music. A guitar, maybe, and the wooden noise of mallets hitting something and once again, she felt a tiny bit of envy at what seemed both interesting and kind of fun, if physically uncomfortable experience happening out there.

"No problem, and everyone is very glad they can use their phones now." Mayte told her. "I was talking to Mama before, and Zoe was able to talk to her sister. It makes everyone feel better, you know? To know things are okay."

"Like I do right now." Kerry smiled. "Okay, you guys go have fun, and we'll see you tomorrow. We have to go by our new place, and then we'll be over there and maybe we'll have some good news for you." She paused. "And your parents."

"Oh yes?" Mayte repeated the question, which was now audibly a curious question. "Mama told me the doctors said yes, they will let Papa go out of the hospital tomorrow. I told her it would be good for her and papa to go out to where Colleen and Mark are, but she won't listen to me." She added mournfully.

"No, me or Dar either." Kerry commiserated with her. "Your mom's a stubborn woman. But we'll see what we can do for them and cross your fingers it all works out."

"Okay Kerry, have a good night." Mayte said. "We will see you tomorrow."

Kerry hung up the phone, then she got up and went into the living room just as the kitchen door opened and Dar came back in, with both dogs in attendance. "They done?"

"Done." Dar came over, and extended a hand to her. Between her fingers was a flower, and Kerry leaned over and sniffed it delicately, with a smile. "Looks a lot better than it did this morning."

"I bet." Kerry took the flower and then she walked over to one of the bookcases, selecting a large book and opening it. "Lets see." She settled the flower between the pages and closed the book. "Remember I put that at Chapter 4, will you?"

She put the Modern History of Computing back on the shelf. "We attracted news attention again, according to Mayte. Someone came by about the whole water thing."

"Nice." Dar rolled her eyes. "Wish I knew who kept poking that bear." She muttered. "Didn't think there were that many people around that night watching."

Kerry watched Chino noisily lapping water from her bowl. "And some random dudes came by looking for us about something to do with the Point." She looked up to see Dar making a face. "Yeah, I know – I told Mayte to just leave it all alone and go to bed."

"Great idea." Dar took her by the shoulders and turned her towards their bedroom. "Lets go do that."

"Lets." Kerry allowed herself to be nudged towards the room, where she could see through the door the waiting comfort of bed and the cool tones of the walls.

She could already smell the scent of clean linen, and the wood of the new corner dresser they'd recently put in and from behind them the lingering hint of lemongrass from the soup they'd shared.

Dar pulled her t-shirt off over her head and paused to fold it neatly, setting it down on the dresser, her tall body outlined in the dim lamplight.

Kerry took off her own shirt and detoured into the bathroom, half turning to check if the sunburn she'd gotten the other day had faded. "Hah."

Dar slid in behind her. "No peeling." She observed. "Nice." She ran her hands over Kerry's shoulderblades, and then gently kissed the back of her neck. "Wonder what happened to your pilot. Think he hung around with those guys out west?"

Kerry turned and slid her arms around Dar's waist. "Depends how much they offered." She looked up and studied the pale blue eyes watching her. "I hope they treated him good. He did us a good thing, bitching all the way through it. "

"He did." Dar kissed her, then reached out to shut off the bathroom light as she backed towards the bed, her arms draped around Kerry's shoulders. "Bitching or not."

They paused by the edge of the bed and kissed again, standing there in a light embrace that shifted as they started exploring each other and thoughts of airboats and their troubles evaporated.

They slid into bed, and Dar untangled one arm long enough to reach out to turn off the light, plunging the bedroom into darkness save only the faint stripes of moonlight coming in through the not quite shuttered closed windows.

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The next morning dawned bright and with only a scattering of clouds in the sky. The air was full of moisture and even the early morning sun shimmered against it.

Dar was putting their backpacks into the truck when she heard the crunch of footsteps on the drive behind her and stepped back to see who was coming.

"Morning." The stocky, middle aged man coming towards her said, shortly.

Oh great. Dar turned and waited. "Morning, Jim." She responded just as shortly. "You just get back?" She added, not really thrilled with having the island's developer coming at her so early on a Sunday morning. Their relationship, always strained, had been positively negative the last few months.

He nodded, coming to a halt at the bottom of the driveway. "Landed about an hour ago." He glanced around, then back at her. "God damned mess." He concluded briefly. "Airports a wreck."

Warily Dar came forward, detecting a note of reluctant cordiality she hadn't expected. "It is." She agreed. "We did pretty well out here though. No doubt at all your people knew what they were doing." She offered the compliment at face value, and in fairness because it was utterly true.

His body posture shifted, and he relaxed visibly. "Yeah, team did a good job. Only place in the tri county that was prepared and got through it." He paused. "Don't want to keep you. Just wanted to stop by and say thanks for helping the team out, that first day there, and with the cabling and everything."

"No problem. Was glad to do it, and it helped me out too, that last part." Dar responded easily. "More or less my usual line of work."

"I know that's your area." Jim said. "And I know we don't see eye to eye a lot, but I wanted to come over here first thing and tell you how much I appreciated you doing it."

Dar paused a moment, honestly quite surprised at the stolid sincerity in the man's tone. "You're welcome." She responded.

He nodded again. "Anyway, let you get on your way. Thanks again, and give your family my regards." He lifted a hand and turned, jogging back up the slope towards the road.

Kerry had emerged onto the porch as he left and now she was standing on the top of the steps, hands on the balustrade, looking down at the entrance to the parking. "What the hell was that?"

Dar spread her hands out. "He came to thank me for fixing his cameras." She said. "And I guess, for setting up the sat."

Kerry reached behind her to open the door again, allowing Chino and Mocha to emerge and bustle past her down the steps to where Dar was standing. "Well okay then." She closed the door and locked it. "That's some way to start the morning."

"Maybe it's a sign." Dar put her sunglasses on and went around to the driver's side of the truck. "At least it's a positive one."

Kerry opened the back door to let the dogs jump in, then got in the passenger side, holding up her other hand with her fingers crossed.

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Dar was about to park the truck up onto the sidewalk in front of the gates but realized as she got close the gates were actually unlocked, the large chain and padlock missing. "Huh." She pulled the truck to a halt and popped the door open. "Be right back."

She walked over to the gates and pulled them open one leaf at a time outward, noting the marks in the wrought iron and the bent portion from their visit the other night. Then she went back to the truck and climbed back into the driver's seat. "Maybe it's a sign."

Kerry had her camera out, and she idly took a picture of the open steel portal. "Someone expecting us?" She wondered, as they slowly pulled through and onto the paver lined path beyond. "Should I get out and close them?"

Dar pulled the truck to a halt and looked around for a long minute, but the area was devoid of any obvious life. "Yeah." She said. "They're blocking the sidewalk. Hate to have someone do a header into them those suckers are heavy."

Kerry got out and went back to the gates, pushing closed first one, and then the other. She looked around for the chain and lock, but it was nowhere to be found. "Huh." She echoed Dar's earlier comment, returning to the truck and climbing back inside. "Lock's gone."

"I saw." Dar had been watching in the rear view mirror. "Maybe Richard called ahead."

Kerry checked her phone. "No signal here." She announced. "Who would he call? A bird? Maybe the eagle scouts just figured they'd see who showed up if they left them open."

"Doubtful." Dar put the truck in gear and they trundled slowly on. "What do you think, kids?" She asked the two dogs, who both had their heads stuck between the front seats and were peering around with great interest, their pink tongues hanging out and dripping saliva on the console.

"Growf." Chino pronounced, pulling her head back and then going over to the side window to peer intently through the glass. "Growf!"

They drove through the trees and past the garden shack, along the dirt and algae covered pavers and through the second wooded area until they could see the house ahead of them. "Ah hah." Dar pointed. "That's who opened the gate."

Parked near the entrance to the garden was Hank's Humvee, with it's trailer, it's flatbed loaded with what looked like cases of water.

"Well at least he left the gates in one piece this time." Kerry observed. "Wonder why he's here?"

Dar shrugged. "I think he said that night he wants to be our gardener." She mused. "Maybe he's rethinking that with all this foliage?"

They stopped near the Humvee and opened the doors, Kerry pulling open the back door to allow the two now wildly curious and excited Labradors to jump out. "Here we go, guys."

"Growf!" Chino looked around, then went nose down and started sniffing the area. Chino spotted a squirrel, and galloped off towards it, ears flapping.

Kerry came around to the front of the truck to join Dar and they watched the two dogs race around in a frenzy of discovery for a minute. "This must be so cool for them." She observed. "They've never been any place like this."

"Whole new world." Dar draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders. "C'mon. Lets go see if we can find Hank."

They walked past the Humvee and then onto the stone pathway that led through the delivery area, and then past the empty garden to where there were steps that led up to the kitchen. There was no sign of anyone, but when they mounted the steps up they could see the kitchen door was open.

"Mysteriuser and mysteriuser." Kerry remarked.

"Mm."

Dar pushed the door all the way open and they entered. Inside was a passageway, in the same wood paneled white washed motif they had seen elsewhere in the house. To the right was the entrance to the kitchen and they turned into it.

It was quiet, and clean and empty, all the evidence of coffee makers and supplies removed, and the area carefully dusted off. Light streamed in from the tall, bubble glassed windows, providing a mild and diffused visibility.

The kitchen was large and it was obvious that it was intended to be a workspace. There were built in storage shelves, all wood, all custom, all in the same bland whitewash color. The long table on the inside of the room was butcher block.

"That table is expensive." Kerry remarked, as she roamed around the space.

"Is it? It's pretty." Dar studied it. "I like it."

"Me too."

The light fell on the table from the windows. Around it were the short, mid height square wood stools they'd sat on and she briefly imagined a group of people there preparing some large amount of food.

A workspace, Kerry found herself thinking again, like the kitchen had been in her parents house. Not meant to have the family sit in. "Did he have big parties? Seems like he meant to."

Dar had her hands behind her back, and she'd been standing in the center of the room, looking around with interested curiosity. "Like a hotel kitchen or something."

“Something.”

They moved from the kitchen back into the hallway, which then widened into a double width space lined on either side with built in cabinets.

Kerry paused and took hold of the iron handles of one and tugged it open. It moved reluctantly, the wooden doors stiff and a little swollen from the humidity. Inside were shelves of a good depth, but they were completely empty and their surface had no markings on it.

“Painted these to sell the place?” Dar observed, over her shoulder. “Doesn’t smell fresh.”

“No.” Kerry thoughtfully closed the cabinet.

They walked on to the end of the hall, where swinging doors opened up into the large spaces beyond. Here, today, in the light they were almost overwhelming in their bland, high ceilinged reach, and they walked out into the room at the back first.

There was nothing really architecturally graceful about the house. Kerry walked across the stone floor, whose surface was matte and had a grain to it. It was built square, the windows tall and well fitted, and let in a lot of light but the lines had no curve to them, and there were no moldings anywhere.

Just good, solid workmanship.

She went to the doors at the back and opened them, finding a set of doors to the outside.

“We came in that way.” Dar came up behind her. “I thought it was the front door, but it’s not really,”

“No.” Kerry looked around. “Well, maybe it is. It’s an entry foyer. You come in and then can go right upstairs, or into the room here. I guess this was the living room.” She glanced behind her. “Yeah, there’s a fireplace.”

The staircases on either side of the end of the room were the only pop of color, the treads a warm, honey colored wood, and the bannisters an inky black wrought iron. “What’s the upstairs look like?” Kerry paused, next to one of them.

“A lot of empty rooms.” Dar said, after a moment’s pause. “We were a little short on time. I just skated through them.”

“Ah.” Kerry started up the steps. “Well, since Richard and gang aren’t here yet, lets take some time to look.”

They got to the landing, and found a narrower set of steps continuing to the third floor. Kerry glanced at them, then proceeded along the corridor, poking her head into the doorways. There were two large inside rooms in the center. “These’d make good offices.”

“No windows.” Dar made a mild protest. “I think there are some on the third floor, with portholes. I think I like natural light better when I’m working.”

“Yeah, me too.” Kerry closed the door to one of the inside rooms and they walked on, then turned into an inside hallway that had medium sized rooms on the outside that when they were opened up, proved to be what were meant to be bedrooms.

All empty. All with the same whitewashed wood paneling. Here they had wooden floors though, that matched the stair treads. There were no closets, and the wood had been removed from the windows outside to allow the light to come in. “I see what you meant by lots of rooms.” Kerry remarked.

“Mm.” Dar made a sound of agreement. “I like the floors.”

“We’re going to have to put in ten thousand rubber backed scatter rugs.” Kerry concluded. “But I think the stone floors downstairs are not slidey enough to need them.”

They walked along the hallway and found, at the end, a corner that turned into a hallway that went the width of the house, that had a large entry with double doors in the center of it. The inside of the wall had more of the cabinets.

Kerry opened one. "Oh. A walk in closet?" She sounded surprised. "A walk in cabinet?"

It was a large space meant for storage, and on either side of the inside wall of the space there were brackets that held old, belled, glass lamps. The walls of the space were lined with shelving, and the edges of the shelves had a wrought iron bar that allowed a wood and iron ladder to slide along it to give access to the higher ones.

"Nice." Dar said. "The master suite's on the other side here."

Kerry closed the cabinet and then stood back as Dar opened the double doors opposite, allowing a blast of light to illuminate the inside hall from the floor to ceiling windows inside. "Oh wow."

Like everything else, it was completely empty, but the room spread across the width of the side of the house facing the water, and here, unlike the bubbled glass on the first floor, the glass was clear and they had an unimpeded view of the water, and the curve of the point.

The sun outside was pouring in the glass in a slanted wash of light, and here the floor was a beautifully inlaid pattern of light and dark wood boards.

The view of the blues and greens of the bay, with its lightly fluffy chop was stunning. Kerry could easily imagine waking up to it.

"Nice, huh?" Dar commented, rocking up and down on the balls of her feet.

"Very." Kerry turned and gave her a hug. "It's amazing."

Dar smiled. "Yeah, seeing this kind of sealed the deal for me." She admitted. "That and just... all the space."

Kerry released her, and went across the room to another doorway and looked inside. "Well, they had indoor plumbing." She eased inside the large bathroom, which had a big, square stone lined bathtub inside it, and cast iron piping.

A stone shelf sat under a bare wall, with spaces and pipes for a big sink.

There was an alcove off to the inside, and she looked inside, to find more cast iron piping, standing ready. "Does it go to a septic system, Dar?"

Dar regarded the unfinished bathroom, apparently waiting for it's toilet and sinks. "Given when they built this, it was either that, or..." She glanced over towards the water. "Have to have this place really checked out. Can't be that far from city sewer hookup."

Kerry turned and leaned against the door to the toilet area, folding her arms. "Would chickie boo have removed the fittings Dar? Or did they maybe just..." She trailed off. "Seems weird."

"Seems weird." Dar agreed. "Maybe they were in a really bad shape, and she had them pulled out." She suggested. "Or cracked, the porcelain."

"Yeah, that could be." Kerry nodded. "Anyway, I'm glad to see there's piping so at least we know it's possible." She said. "This is a big room." She regarded the bathroom, which had some built in cabinets in the wall and along that wall a long stone bench to sit on.

"it is." Dar studied the bathtub. "Now I'm wondering if we're going to be able to do anything as simple as putting a shower in."

"Oh." Kerry regarded the space. "Hm."

"Mm."

They walked back out into the bedroom and then they looked out of the window at the battered, weathered pool deck and it's algae and mold covered surface. "Oh Dar." Kerry sighed. "This is going to be such a pain in the ass."

"It is." Dar agreed mournfully. "Cmon. Let me show you the rooms upstairs and we can go find Hank. Hopefully, Richard's here too and the wingnuts. Lets get all the bad news on the table at the same time."

"Happy Sunday."

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"it's a great piece of land." Richard Edgerton was seated in the back seat of Dar's truck. "I mean, seriously. I checked out the satellite shot of it when you told me about the place, Dar, and to find this size property in this area relatively undeveloped... my goodness."

"We haven't even explored all of it." Kerry said. "Though by now probably the dogs have."

Both dogs were laying down in the grass, in the shade, visibly wet and in Chino's case, covered in mud that turned her cream colored coat almost brindle. Both had their tongues lolling, but if there was a look of contented delight that could be expressed by a canine, they had them.

Dar had the air conditioning in the truck running and she and Kerry were half turned in their seats in the front to face Richard. He was dressed in a short sleeved khaki shirt and slacks and loafers, with sunglasses perched on the top of his head.

Richard checked his watch. "The historical - or as I referred to them to my buddy yesterday as the hysterical society people should be here in the next couple of minutes. Jason is over at the county government building, seeing what documentation he can dig up on this place."

"Are they hysterical?" Kerry asked. "Or just passionate."

Their lawyer grinned briefly at her. "I should be used to pedantic people, shouldn't I? I'm a lawyer, and a son of a lawyer, and a grandson of a lawyer. My whole family's either in the legal trade, or college professors." He chuckled. "Anyway, I just found these folks very impenetrable, in their area of expertise."

"Ah." Dar grunted. "Not sure there's much for them to get excited about here."

"Well, that's their point, you know? That everything just gets wiped clean like it did in the thirties, and there's no respect for the past." Richard said.

"It got wiped clean in the thirties because it literally was wiped clean. Big ass storm came in and scoured the whole area." Dar said. "Wasn't anyone's fault."

"Anyway." Richard said. "They are livid, and I mean livid, that apparently the young lady who sold you this place did like that storm and wiped out everything in the house and threw it all away." He added. "Her view was, it's hers, and she's got the right to do what she likes with it."

"You spoke to her?" Dar asked.

"Of course I did." Richard nodded agreeably. "I mean, I did the paperwork on the deal. She was glad enough to talk to me about it." He added. "She said it was nothing but a mess, and she had a company come in and just empty it all out, bout a month ago, before she put it on the market."

"Well, I can see the point." Kerry said. "Did she even know about the historical designation?"

Richard nodded briskly. "Sure, she did. Didn't care." He said. "She told me it was just a government scam and she was sure you'd figure a way around it."

"She's an ass."

"Well, Dar, from a strictly financial, hardheaded viewpoint, I get it." Richard told her. "She thought the old man had done that just to screw her over, and she was determined she was going to get what she could out of the place before everyone figured it out." He paused. "Which she did, with you all."

"No wonder she took the deal, no questions asked." Kerry mused. "Dar, you must have been like an angel sent from heaven to her."

"She really didn't have much respect for the old man. Got nothing against you two, by the way. Said she wished you well with it." Richard said. "So at any rate, those folks from the historical society are just fit to be tied. I did talk them off the edge of trying to hold you responsible, though. Thanks to the timestamps on the pictures you sent me from here before the storm, it's clear who was the culprit."

Kerry leaned back against the window. "So where do we go from here? Does it make sense to try and recreate what was inside that house? If they just use modern materials – how is that even interesting?"

"Well, here they are, so we can ask them." Richard pointed out the passenger window, to where a light green Prius was pulling up behind them on the path. "Try not to get all crazy with them. I just got them talking like adults with me."

He opened the door and slid out.

"That doesn't sound promising." Dar put her sunglasses on and shut the car off, popping the driver side door open. "What do you bet me our dogs growl at them."

Kerry chuckled briefly as she got out on the passenger side and shut the door, putting her hands into her front pockets as they waited for the three people in the car to sort themselves out and join them. "Let's be positive, Dar. Maybe we'll get lucky."

The three people got out and walked over. Two men, one tall and bearded, with a little stoop to his walk, a second shorter, and the third a woman with frizzy brown hair and huge eyeglasses. The men were dressed in cotton twill pants and tucked collared shirts, and the woman had on an ankle length skirt of many colors and a peasant blouse.

Dar came around the truck to stand next to Kerry, content to allow Richard to move forward and greet the newcomers and handle the pleasantries. They were standing in the shade and it was tolerably breezy, the leaves on the trees all around them rustling.

Kerry allowed her attention to wander a bit, spotting several butterflies amongst the bushes nearby. They were yellow and blue, and some red, and they flicked in and out of the beams of sunlight coming down through the trees.

"So, folks. Let me introduce you all to these ladies, Dar and Kerry Roberts, who are the new owners of the property." Richard was leading them over, and Kerry felt Dar's elbow come to rest on her shoulder as they neared. "This is John Siward, Larry Rogers, and Mitsie Higglebotham."

"Hi." Kerry answered. "Nice to meet you." She added, as Dar remained silent next to her. "Thanks for taking the time to come down here on a Sunday."

The taller man nodded at her. "Can we go inside and take a look around?" He pushed his glasses up on his nose. They had a bit of fog on them from the heat. "We kind of understand what happened here but we want to see for ourselves what the situation is."

"Sure." Kerry gestured to the kitchen door, which they'd left standing open. "After you."

The man nodded jerkily at her. "Thank you." He gave Dar a sideways glance, but Dar merely kept her position, eyes hidden behind her dark shades. "Excuse us." He muttered, nervously.

Kerry waited for them all to pass by, then she gently poked her partner in the ribs. "Stop that."

"Me?" But Dar smiled, taking her elbow of Kerry's shoulder and sliding her arm around them instead, as they started following the group back up the path to the back door.

Chino alertly watched them move off. Then she stood up, shook herself vigorously sending bits of bark and leaves flying in at least a six foot radius. She ended the shake with a wiggle of her tail, then trotted after them, with Mocha a belated moment after.

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Dar opened the door to the pool and deck and walked out into the breeze from the water. Behind her, she could hear the discussion continuing but the stuffiness inside the house had started to get to her and she halfway seriously considered just jumping off into the water.

The bay water, not the green, algae covered storm leavings in what could be, if given the opportunity, a nice pool. There was only about four feet of the murky sludge and Dar wasn't really in the mood to break an ankle.

She went down the layered steps past the pool and over to the edge of the point, then she sat down on the grass covered rock ground and dangled her legs over the Bay, listening to the swirl and rush of the water against the land.

To her left, there were trees and foliage to the edge of the water, blocking any view in either direction. To her right, the point sloped around to the south giving her a view of the far off shore of Key Biscayne across the channel.

To the south there were more houses, but she couldn't see them, and there were more to the north, but she couldn't see those either.

There was sea wrack under her boots, but not that much, and the water itself smelled briny and rich, and she really did feel like leaving the contentious historical arguments behind. She wished they had the Dixie there, with her store of diving gear as she had a sudden urge to slip a mask on and explore the dock.

She felt a little bad about leaving Kerry to hold up their end of the argument, but she figured she'd been very close to telling them all to just kiss her ass, and that wouldn't really have done anything positive for anyone.

She heard doggy toenails behind her and turned to find Chino and Mocha trotting towards her, looking ridiculously pleased that they had discovered her sitting there. "Hey guys."

They collided with her, and Mocha rubbed his face on her back, bringing the smell of damp dog fur and mud with him. "Are you having fun?"

Their tails were wagging, but that, she knew didn't really mean that much since they were typically wagging constantly, reflecting the mild, happy disposition of their breed. Chino sat down and regarded the water, lifting her nose up and sniffing the breeze.

They did like the place, Dar decided. It was large and had endless ground and trees and plants and animals to explore and there was a naturalness about it that appealed, she felt, to them the same way it appealed to her.

She turned around and looked up at the house, its entrance elevated over the deck and allowed herself to feel the irritated annoyance at the stubborn, intractable attitude of the people from the society, who seemingly could only see the situation from one point of view.

Theirs.

Chino licked her ear, and she glanced at the dog, almost getting another lick right on her eyeball. It made her laugh in reflex, and she reached over to give the animal a scratch behind her ears. "Thanks Chi."

Mocha stretched out on the ground next to her and put his head on her leg, watching a seagull as it coasted above the water, searching for fish.

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"You haven't really answered my question. " Kerry said, for the tenth time. "Do you have records of what this property looked like so it could be restored?"

She was sitting behind the kitchen worktable, on one of the square stools, her legs extended out and her arms crossed over her chest. "I don't think we're going to get anywhere arguing about how this happened. We weren't here. We have nothing to do with it."

Richard Edgerton nodded. "Exactly."

The woman from the society, Mitzi, looked frustrated. "You really don't understand." She said. "We had very little contact with Mr. Hunter before he passed. We'd just started to collect information about his life, and the property."

Richard took a breath to answer, but Kerry stood up. "You don't understand." She let her voice lift, and take on an edge. "It does not matter how we got here. What matters is, can it be restored or not." She put her hands on the table and leaned forward. "So either put your documentation down on this table, or get the hell off my land."

There was a small silence when she finished talking, as everyone stared at her.

“Not kidding.” Kerry added, crisply. “I appreciate the frustration here, but I have to deal in the world of reality. And that world says if you want me to do something you have to give me data to do it with.”

“Well, you have to get it from his family!” Mitsi stated. “That’s not our responsibility!”

Richard leaned back against the kitchen counter, folding his hands. “His family states they have no documentation on anything to do with the property.” He said. “I asked.”

“Someone has to know.” Mitsi said. “You have to find them. I can only tell you what the rules of the society are.”

“Then I guess we have to find a legal route to have those rules revoked.” Kerry said, calmly.

Just then, there were footsteps in the back passage, and then a tall figure appeared in the doorway, stopping short and looking at them in somewhat startled surprise. “Oh.”

It was one of the rangers they’d encountered the previous visit. He had smears of mud and foliage all over him and was wearing a tool belt. “Sorry I..” Then his eyes fell on Kerry and he relaxed a little. “Oh it’s you.”

“It’s me.” Kerry agreed. “Hi John. Sorry for the unexpected intrusion.” She said. “These are some folks from the historical registry, and our lawyer, Richard Edgerton.”

Richard lifted a hand and waved it.

“Oh, hi.” John gave the historical trio a brief glance. “Didn’t mean to interrupt. We were just working on some of the plants... that fella that came with you dropped by and brought us some water. Nice guy.”

Kerry smiled. “Yes, Hank’s a great guy.”

“I’ll just come back later.” John started to move backwards.

“Hold on.” Kerry said. “You might be able to answer a question for all of us, matter of fact.” She moved around the table and went over him.

“Sure.” He halted in the doorway and waited, furtively brushing the bits of bark and moss off his arms. “If I can?”

Where to start? Kerry studied him. “We’re having an argument, because these good folks here issued a registry for this place based on it’s historical value.”

John paused, then nodded, with a faintly confused look. “Okay.”

Kerry paused herself to consider how to ask the next question. “When Mr. Hunter passed away, what was done to this place? What did his daughter do, in terms of, moving things in and out, furniture, that sort of thing.”

The three people from the historical society listened with interest. “Who is this?” Mitzi asked. “Does he work for the property?”

Kerry held up one hand. “Let him answer.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” John said. “She came in, sent a big company in here to clean up. We worked with em. Lot of stuff got dragged off.”

“What about from the house, here.” Kerry asked. “Did they take any pictures? What it looked like before they cleaned up?”

“Here?” John seemed surprised. “No need to do much here, ma’am.” He looked around. “Wasn’t nothing in here. Old man never lived in the big house here.” He gestured to the kitchen. “Used this, just a bit, but Minnie didn’t care for it, my dad said.”

Kerry stared at him. “What? He didn’t live in the house?”

Mitzi came over. “That’s crazy. He built it, didn’t he?”

John nodded. "Oh yeah, he built it. Him and maybe... I don't know.. ten other guys. They built it themselves, for sure. He just never lived in here. Nobody did. That's why there ain't nothing here, nothing upstairs, neither. Didn't even put fixtures in."

Kerry held a hand up again. "Wait." She said. "You mean it just looked like this?" She gestured vaguely around. "Just empty rooms?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded. "They came in and swept, you know? Mopped the floors and put some paint up on one wall that had some stains and all, but cept that, it's always just been empty." He looked around a moment. "The cleaning, y'know... that was stuff on the grounds. Busted up stuff, and a couple old cars and stuff."

Kerry looked at Mitzi. "No one came here to see what was being registered?"

Mitzi was just stunned silent. She turned and looked at her two companions, who just looked back at her, wide eyed.

John looked at all of them. "You want to see where he lived? Him and Minnie?" He asked, turning to Kerry. "I guess it's yours now, but we hid it from that kid. Didn't want her to send them to clean that place out."

Kerry blinked. "Of course we would." She said, after a pause. "Lead on."

"Sure." John gestured towards the back hallway. "C'mon." He walked out, and they followed.

\*\*

Dar noted the boat was back. She observed the lightly scuffed work boat come around the edge of the point and return to the area she'd seen them searching in the last time, motoring slowly around in a circle over a specific location.

There were divers onboard this time, and Dar watched with interest as they prepared to go overboard, feeling just a bit envious of them. She could see now that they were closer, she could see this wasn't a police boat, and there were three men aside from the captain and the divers who were dressed in business casual.

"Gruff." Chino's ears cocked, as the boat dropped it's anchor, and a short time later, the engines cut off as boat swung into the line of the current and they pushed a dive ladder overboard.

"Wonder what they're looking for, Chi." Dar kicked her boots idly against the seawall.

The divers rolled over backwards into the water and went under, a faint flush of white foamy bubbles coming to the surface in their wake.

The men on the boat stood there talking, and after a minute, Dar saw them point at the edge of the shoreline, on the other side of the pool deck from where she was seated. Curious, she got to her feet and dusted herself off, then she walked down the edge of the seawall towards where they were working.

She reached the edge of the point, the dogs at her heels, and watched as one of the divers came up, holding on to the dive ladder as he took off his mask and spoke to one of the men.

Then one of the other men looked up and spotted her.

Dar folded her arms as she watched that man, tap the shoulder of a second and point at her, and then the third man gestured for the diver to come up on deck, then knelt and banged a dive weight against the dive ladder still extending into the water.

"I sure hope that's not a box of cocaine and I'm now a witness, Chi." Dar muttered, as it became obvious the men were intending on cutting short their dive and moving in her direction. "Maybe I should have stayed inside." She sighed. "What do you think? Six guys versus me and two dogs?"

"Gruff." Chino sat down at her side and watched the boat.

Well, it was broad daylight. Dar reasoned. And if they got really saucy, she could .. She paused thoughtfully. Well, she could do something.

The boat's engines turned over and a minute later the bow was headed in her direction. With a sigh, Dar sat down on the seawall and put an arm around the dog on either side of her and waited, as the boat came close and then turned so it's starboard side was even with where she was. "Hi." She called out.

"Hey!" One of the men was leaning on the railing. "How'd you get in there!" He pointed at the land.

Dar cleared her throat. "I bought the property." She yelled back. "Came with a set of keys."

That seemed to cause a huge splurt of excitement, and all three of the business casual guys were now at the railing, while the diver's were on the other side, pulling off their gear. "You what?" The first man yelled. "For serious? You the owner there? For real?"

Dar nodded.

They exchanged a lot of inaudible, yet visually excited conversation between the three men. The boat's captain just leaned on his console, watching the tide, and the distance of the boat from the shore.

"Hey, can we come talk to you?" The first man finally yelled at her, cupping his hands. "Can we ask you something?"

"This could end very badly." Dar told the dogs. "But what the hell." She lifted her voice. "Dock over there!" She pointed at the boat dock to one side. "I'll meet you down there." She got up and started for the pier, as the boat curled around in a circle and headed in the same direction, in a slow, rolling rumble.

\*\*

They walked along one of the paths through the foliage, going south from the house in a direction Kerry didn't recall her and Dar exploring yet. There were tall trees and rock ridges on either side of the track and the ground was well worn as though many had used it in the past.

"Not very attractive, the planting." Mitzi commented. "It would be a lovely garden, if you took all those rocks out."

Kerry, who was behind John, saw his back stiffen and she saw his hand close into a fist.

Interesting.

"This is actually part of the Miami Rock Ridge, and a hardwood hammock." Kerry commented casually. "It's part of an endangered ecosystem." She had turned her head towards Mitzi when she said it, and when she turned to face forward again she saw John looking over his shoulder at her, with a huge grin on his face.

"Oh." Mitzi murmured. "Like the Everglades, I guess."

"Nothing like the Everglades." John muttered, but not loud enough for her to hear.

Kerry heard, though. "We realized the other day that our offices over north in the Grove were on a piece of it also." She told him. "It made a lot of what we saw, with what areas were flooded make sense."

"Yes, ma'am." John agreed. "It's special."

"I really like it." Kerry said, raising her voice a little to make sure the others could hear her. "And Dar loves it. She grew up down south where there was some of it, and now it's gone."

"Thought she was born in these parts." John glanced back at her. "Talks like it."

They walked between a thick stand of pines, half of which were leaned over against each other and one which was lying down completely with it's roots sticking up in the air. "Wind." John commented, briefly. "We were going to work on replanting that one next."

The path crossed a circular area, with a stone firepit in the center, made from carefully fitted rocks, whose interior was stained a deep black from long use. John led them to the right after that, and they walked along ground that was littered with dead leaves towards a gap that was blocked by a gate made of what looked like twisted vines.

John pushed it open and walked through and then they were in a small clearing, and on the other side of the clearing was a hut.

It was made of wood, its walls covered in tree bark, and had a thatched roof, and to one side of it was a wooden rack that was about six feet high, and half falling down. The hut itself seemed intact, though there were patches of thatch laying on the ground nearby.

"It's in here." John went to the door of the hut and pushed the bead curtain that formed its door aside. "Go on."

Kerry slid past him and entered, walking into the hut far enough to let the rest of them follow her and then stopping and just standing there, turning her head and looking around at a completely unexpected interior.

It was the size, really, of a one car garage, only square. On one side there were two wooden platforms, with wool covered mattresses on them, and tucked around them were beautifully knit blankets with still bright colors in them.

Next to the platforms were stools constructed from wood sticks, their seats padded with more brightly knit wool covered pillows, and on the walls were pieces of string art, like spiderwebs made from tiny colored pebbles strung on some kind of twine.

The walls were wood planking, well fitted, the joints caulked with a lighter colored substance. The roof was held up with sturdy posts and the vertical ones had hooks set in them that held up bags and sacks in both cloth and some hair colored animal skin.

Near the beds was a table, full of writing implements and stacks of paper, and two lines of colored ink. On the top sheet of paper, Kerry could see an illustrated bird, in watercolor. "Oh wow." She murmured, briefly imagining Ceci's delight on seeing all of it. "Look at that!"

"The man who owned this property lived in here?" One of the two men who had accompanied Mitzi said, in a disbelieving voice. "In this century?"

There were gas lanterns hanging on hooks, and a small gas stove on the other side of the room, with a set of tin pots and a wooden box with some worn lettering on it.

"This is where he lived." John confirmed. "He liked it. He spent a lot of time drawing the plants and birds and things." He looked around. "This is where he lived with Minnie." He said. "There's a path outside, goes over to a spring. He would sit out there all the time."

"I've seen it." Kerry murmured. "This is beautiful." She walked over and went behind the table, finding a wicker chair there with a comfortable looking set of pillows on it, and imagined him sitting there, painting.

The top sheet had dust over it, but even through it she could see the clarity of bird's form, and its pert, intent eye looking at her. She glanced up over it at John, who was watching her with a bright eyes, and a smile. "He was a good artist."

"He was really into nature." John nodded solemnly. "We got one from him, of a squirrel he gave my dad in our house on the wall."

She looked at Mitzi. "You found your history. Here it is." She gestured around at the hut. "Isn't this amazing?"

There was a brief, awkward silence. Then the taller of the two men removed his glasses, and cleaned them on the tail of his shirt. "Okay." He looked up and over at Kerry. "Lets go sit down and talk. We need to make a deal."

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Dar walked down the stone steps to the dock, noting it was high tide, and the water was only a foot or so from the bottom of the pier. She stood there with her hands in her pockets, watching the workboat make its way in and as it closed with her, she pointed at the cast iron cleat sunk into the stone and extended one hand for them to toss a rope ashore.

The captain gave her a little wave of understanding and called back to one of the two divers, who was standing on the deck in his wetsuit, the top portion peeled down off his shoulders and hanging behind him.

The diver went to the sidewall and got up onto it, walking up to the bow and picking up a coiled line. He waited for the captain to maneuver close, and then threw it shoreward.

Dar caught it, and got a wrap around the cleat, pulling it in as the boat approached and tying it off with casual expertise as the hull bumped against the pier.

The diver stepped off the aft as the captain tweaked the engines and brought the back end in, and then he tied the aft rope to a second cleat.

Two of the men in business casual scrambled off the boat onto the pier and came over to her. Dar knew at once they were in technology.

They had that nerdly engineer look though no one had a pocket protector. The men all wore glasses, and they had expensive watches on their wrists. "Hi there." She greeted them amiably. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

One of the extended his hand readily, with a card in it. "Hi! Thanks for letting us land!" He said. "Specially out of the blue like this.. we won't take much of your time we just have a few questions for you." He took a breath. "I'm Charles Depant, and this is Joe Evers, and we work for a company you probably never heard of called Level 3."

Dar glanced at the card, then back up at him. She slid the card into her pocket and extended a hand to him. "Dar Roberts." She pronounced. "And I have heard of your company." She added, with a wry anticlimax, as they both reacted to her name.

They both just stared at her for a long, silent minute, with a shocked reaction somewhere between startled and delighted.

Dar looked from one to the other. "So that's going to make this conversation a lot shorter, right?" She asked, with a brief grin. "Cuts out a lot of explanation."

"Oh boy yes." Charles finally spluttered. "I had no idea... I mean...I have to admit you are the very last person on the planet I expected to meet on this dock today." He belatedly took her hand and shook it, then relinquished it for Joe to do the same.

"What he said." Joe just nodded. He was taller than his companion, and had a long, somewhat mournful face. "But yeah, that sure makes this a shorter ask." He said. "So damn I'm glad it was, and regardless, it's nice to meet you finally."

Dar nodded. "Back at you. So now what's the story here?" She asked. "What's on the bottom there, fiber?"

The captain shut off his engine and sat back in his chair, and the two divers found a shady seat and were drinking cans of energy drink, idly listening.

"We got two trunks down there. They go into the NAP. NAP's got ten feet of water flooding it and we can't get near there. We want to bring the trunks up on shore, and we need an easement to our Biscayne South ring, it's about a block west." Charles said, launching right into it. "Of the front of the property, I mean. Cross the road."

"Where does it go now?" Dar asked. "Along the coast?" She glanced to her left.

Charles nodded, then rushed on. "All the way north, then west. No one was able to get any utility grant on this bit of land here, so it lands about a mile up." He said. "But the onshoring path there's totally trashed. Snapped the trunk, picked the darn sealed repeater up out of the water and it ended up wrapped around the Metromover pylon. Whole thing has to be replaced, and we've got to rerun everything."

He paused. The boat captain, who'd been listening, just shook his head and said something to the divers, who also laughed. "You'd save us a ton of time and money letting us bring it along here."

The Level 3 guys looked at Dar expectantly.

Dar turned and looked at the seawall thoughtfully. "Buried?"

"Sure." Charles nodded. "My predecessor one back tried to get this done here, trench, relandscape, the whole nine yards but the owner wouldn't even talk to him. Didn't want any part of it – not for any price."

"Yeah I bet." Dar murmured. "Tell you what. Put in a ring splitter and give me a couple line rate 10G ports off it, and you got a deal." She put her hands in her pockets and cocked her head, one eyebrow lifting as she tossed the metaphorical ball into their court.

Charles eyed her. "No easement tax?"

Dar shook her head. "Getting service in here'll be more than worth it to me."

"We'd have to bring power down." Joe said. "Have to be two trenches for that."

"Even better. I'll take a tap off that while you're at it. Can you bring in a 440 line from the street?" Dar responded. "Not much service of any kind out here." She glanced around at the house. "We just bought it, about a week ago." She explained. "Right before the storm came through."

"Bold." Joe said, solemnly.

"Got a good deal on it." Dar shrugged.

Charles stuck his hand out again. "Put her there, Ms Roberts." He said. "We'll be able to get the whole government service back up in a month shorter time than we promised. You'll be a hero." He said. "I'll be a hero. We'll get to stay in a hotel with air conditioning. Hot damn my life just got a half ton better."

Dar shook his hand, but grimaced. "Leave my name out of it, wouldja?" She asked. "I've got them asking for favors already and I don't have time to mess with them."

"Oh sure, no problem." Joe turned around. "Hey, Gus – we can bring it onshore here! Grab some measurements and I'll radio home base."

The third business casual man gave him a thumbs up, and a big grin, grabbing an over the shoulder bag made of canvas with a company name blazoned on it, and hustling over to the side of the boat. "Nice." He stepped up onto the dock. "I knew today was going to be lucky. I told you, didn't I?"

"You told us." Joe agreed. "Over stale Rice Krispies and powdered milk at breakfast."

Dar took a step back to let him past and leaned against the seawall. "There are dogs up there."

The third man stopped, and looked back at her.

"Labrador Retrievers." She reassured him. "Just don't let them knock you over."

Relieved, he continued up the steps at a trot, and after a slightly awkward pause, Charles and Joe followed him, leaving Dar behind on the dock.

The captain and divers looked at her with some interest. "You one of these techy people?" The boat captain asked. "Seems like you understand their jabberwocky."

Dar came over to the side of the dock. "These fun to drive?" She asked, pointing at the work boat. "What are those, two seventies?" She looked at the engines. "Twenty one feet? What's the draft?"

The captain leaned on the side of the boat. "What the hell are you?" He asked bluntly.

"Boat handler." One of the divers said. "You saw her tie up the bow." He looked up and winked at Dar. "Bet you dive."

Dar's eyes took on a twinkle. "Matter of fact I do."

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Kerry led them back to the house, and the kitchen, and as they reached the steps to the back door Hank caught up to them and followed them inside without any invitation. "Hey Hank."

"Hi there." Hank returned the greeting. He was in a work coverall in blue camouflage, and with his worn military boots, scarred face and the visible handgun in its holster in the small of his back it was obvious he both startled and discomfited everyone who didn't know him.

Kerry was glad of his presence. "Glad you're here." She told him. "This is Hank, he's a friend of the family." She indicated the work stools around the table. "Sit."

John had stayed behind.

The society group settled on one side of the table, while Kerry, Hank and Richard took the stools along the wall on the other side, the two men flanking Kerry who put her elbows on the table, folded her hands together and pinned her gaze on the taller of the two society men. "You were saying?"

Larry Rogers, the taller man, cleared his throat. "Let me put the cards on the table." He said. "This property has been of interest to many for a long time. It's large, it's in a valuable spot in the county, it could be worth a lot of money."

Kerry deliberately misunderstood him. "What does that have to do with it's historical significance?" She asked. "That's what we're here talking about, aren't we?"

"Of course." Mitzi said.

"No." Larry shook his head.

Hank giggled softly under his breath.

Mitzi looked at Larry. "What are you talking about?" She asked. Their third companion just kept his mouth shut, his elbows tucked close to his sides, elbows resting on his knees.

Rogers hesitated briefly. "It's a question of the value." He said. "Look we want all of us to come out ahead on this, don't we? There's some potential for this to be very lucrative if we work together on this place."

Kerry sat back, straightening up. "I'm not sure I understand. From my perspective, what I want is to be able to live on the land. That's coming out ahead for me. What do you mean by lucrative?"

A little more confidently, he nodded. "I get it. Look you bought this place as is." He glanced around. "As is, it's not worth a hill of beans.. We can't draw people in to look at anything here because there isn't much."

"Draw people in?"

"That's where the money is, Ms Roberts." Rogers was a little condescending. "No one wants to come see empty structures and mud huts. We need to make this place an 19<sup>th</sup> century Florida showplace. Fix up the house. Put in period looking furniture. Make a beautiful garden. Put in a café on the water. You see?"

"Turn it into Fairchild Gardens?" Kerry's brows lifted.

"Sure."

"Larry, no." Mitzi seemed scandalized. "This isn't a theme park!"

"Of course it is." He eyed her. "Lets cut out the sanctity of our history, Mitz. That went out the window when they expected us to make a profit." He looked back at Kerry. "We're not protecting things just to protect them and leave them mouldering. This place could make a good pitch. It's a good location, and we could do a deal with the local hotels to push it."

"But there's nothing really historical here but that hut." Kerry said, slowly. "Or are you suggesting that we create an old Florida fantasyland here for people to come see?"

Rogers nodded. "That's what I am suggesting." He said. "No one's going to want to come to just see that hut. But we can pitch you some funding to fix the place up, put in gardens, and facilities, bring in services - we can rig the commercial codes. Then we set up packages, and most of the profits come to us until all that's paid back."

Kerry regarded him somberly.

"You really don't have a choice." Rogers said. "You can't do anything with this place. That's why we were told to issue the certification."

"Were told?" Richard spoke up, quietly.

Mitzi and the other man, John, were staring at Larry.

Larry nodded. "C'mon people." He said. "This is just a black hole, from a monetary perspective. No one could buy it and develop it. But if we did what we were asked.." He stared at them. "And we were asked... and make it historical we could make money from it. Us.." He indicated the three of them. "And the government of the county, who needs those taxes."

Richard took a breath to speak, but without looking Kerry reached over and covered his hand with her own. "No, we're not going to do that." She remarked, in a calm tone. "I'm not going to live in a theme park, we're not going to bastardize this beautiful place for tourists."

"You really don't have a choice." Larry told her. "Look I know it's a shock and all.."

"There's always a choice." Kerry cut him off gently. "So you can leave now, and we can continue this discussion through legal briefs."

Richard nodded in satisfaction. "Glad I was here to hear that." He said, in a pleasant tone. "Saves some time."

With a shrug, Larry stood up. "It'll cost you a lot of money, and you're going to lose in the end. Suit yourself." He turned and left the kitchen, heading down the hallway. In a moment they heard the door open and close.

Mitzi looked across the table, with a stunned face. She looked at the other man, then back at Kerry. "I'm sorry." She finally said, as she stood up. "For what it's worth, I thought that little place was fascinating and I..."

Her words trailed off. "Come on, John." She tapped him on the shoulder. "Lets go."

The other man stood, and finally spoke. "You know, Larry's right." He said, with a twisted little grimace. "His uncle's a county commissioner."

The two of them just left, without further comment and for a long moment it was silent in the shadowed, warm, whitewashed kitchen.

Kerry smiled briefly. "Well that was fun. I should have probably told them just how little it matters to me that they know a politician." She sighed. "Given my mother's a senator."

"And I'm a lawyer." Richard said.

"And I'm a crazy man with a gun." Hank piped up. "And they really ain't had to deal with the real powerhouses of the family yet cause Dar could probably get up into their computers and make em forget this here spot ever was."

"That 's actually true." Kerry admitted, with a wry grin "But don't suggest it to her yet." She turned her head and looked at Hank. "So why are you really here?"

"Found us a primo spot to put a still in." Hank supplied at once. "Got them boys real interested in Andy's family recipe from that last little run up here."

Kerry gave him a thumbs up.

"Should we go find Dar and fill her in?" Richard sighed. "I think I heard those dogs barking out there somewhere." He stood up and dusted his hands off. "This is going to be one hell of a mess."

"We should." Kerry also stood up, gently nudging the stool back and out of her way. It was going to be trouble, and it was probably going to be expensive, and yet, it was good to know the worst of it. "We'll start doing stuff here anyway. I don't really give a crap about those guys."

Hank chuckled.

"You know, Kerry.. " Richard began. "Maybe let me do some research first?"

Kerry shook her head and led them out of the house. "Really no point. Dar's not going to go for that plan no matter what research you do, so we might as well just move on."

They walked outside. The historical society's car was gone, and as they went around the side of the house towards the water they spotted Dar and the two dogs coming back towards them.

"Did it rain while we were in there?" Richard asked, in a puzzled tone. "Dar's soaking wet."

"So are the dogs." Kerry remarked. "Not sure I even want to ask."

Dar met them at the corner of the pool deck and was in fact completely drenched, her cotton shirt and shorts plastered to her body. "Found out who those guys in the boat are." She announced. "You work things out with those guys?"

"Told them to get off my land." Kerry said, putting her hands in her pockets. "Who were the guys?"

"Level 3."

"Oh really?" Kerry's eyebrows rose.

"Really." Dar casually folded her arms over her chest, the sunlight sparkling on the water droplets on her tanned skin. "So are we in deep legal crap with them?" She asked Richard. "Cause I just told L3 they could trench from the edge of the water there to the road." She looked from Richard to Kerry. "Twice. But I figured buried cables weren't going to be much of an issue. Are they?"

"Probably." Richard mournfully agreed. "You might want to ask Kerry what their deal was. I'm still shaking my head." He said. "Anyplace around we can get a sandwich? I need to see if I can find some signal and see how my buddy's doing at the archives."

Dar reached up to run her fingers through her wet hair. "Lets go back to the office. Got food and signal there." She said. "You can tell me what happened and I can tell you what Level 3's going to do here."

"Deal." Kerry paused. "Do I get to hear why you're soaking wet?"

"That's a whole other story."

"Do I want to hear it?"

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The wet dogs, wet human and Kerry drove back north along the coast with Richard following them in his rental car. Kerry could smell the rich, mineral tang of sea water so she wasn't surprised to hear they'd ended up diving in and hey, it was a hot day so why not?

"So, they wanted to show me where the junction box was in the bay, so we moved the boat out to take a look at it." Dar was saying. "I went over the side with a mask and a tank to check it out, and the dogs freaked out."

"Thought you were drowning?" Kerry guessed, easily picturing their loyal pets jumping to the rescue. "Are you heros, kids?" She glanced back in the back of the truck, where both damp dogs were lying down on the leather seat, tongues lolling. "You'd think they'd be used to that from the cabin."

"Growf." Chino barked in response.

Dar glanced in the rearview mirror at her. "No idea. They ended up swimming out to where we were and we had to drag their furry asses back onboard before they went paddling after a pelican."

Kerry chuckled. "So they're bringing their main line onshore across our property?" She asked. "And you traded that for a big pipe and power?"

"Uh huh."

"You're such a rock star."

Dar eyed her as they paused at a four way stop. "Ker, that took exactly zero brain cells to agree to." She drawled. "C'mon." She directed the car forward. "Key point to that being, they have emergency power for that interlock and it puts us on the priority grid."

"Underground."

"Underground." Dar agreed. "What do you think about putting solar panels on the roof of the house? That's a big surface."

"Not sure those society folks would appreciate that. But I like the idea." Kerry mused. "I like the idea a lot. We should do that at the office too. What about.. " She glanced reflectively behind them. "Could we put up a windmill?"

"Oh that'd be popular." Dar laughed.

Kerry chuckled as well. "Can you believe that historical guy pulled that though?" She shook her head and exhaled. "That kid was kinda right about it being a scam."

"This is Miami. Of course I can believe that. You always have to suspect a scam when local politics is involved. Google Miami rapid transit if you don't believe me." Dar answered calmly. "But now I want to go back and see that little house."

"Huh." Kerry frowned, her arms folded over her chest. "This could be a huge mess, Dar."

"Let Richard worry about it." Dar advised. "Meanwhile, lets see if your RV's showed up yet and figure out what we're going to do with them." She got in the right hand lane so they could turn onto the street that their office was on.

"Not much I can do anyway." Kerry sighed. "It is what it is, Dar. And they actually thought we'd go along with that plan."

Dar just laughed again.

"Wait till they hear about our bootleg hooch."

"That might actually be more historical than you think."

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There was a conspicuous lack of the National Guard camp when they turned and saw the office, and the entrance to the parking lot was open and unimpeded.

"Well." Kerry hitched one knee up. "At least we have room now for the RV's."

Dar picked a spot near the three large vehicles speckled in tree shaded sunlight, looking sleek and clean. "Have to admit I'm glad the National Guard is gone." She glanced at the front half of the parking lot. "At least they left it clean."

"Me too. I wasn't really looking forward to another confrontation today." Kerry opened her door. "Let me go see if you have any dry clothing upstairs."

Dar got out and opened the back door for the dogs to jump down. "It's sunny. I'll dry." She riffled her fingers through her hair to put it in some kind of order. "There are the guys who dropped those things off." She pointed with her elbow at two men in gray shirts and black pants, talking to Carlos and Mayte.

They walked over to the four of them, the dogs trotting at their heels, and a moment later Richard caught up to them after parking nearby.

"Signal." He held up his phone. "I was able to get hold of Jason. He managed to get some info for us, he's headed over here right now."

They met up with the RV delivery men, and Carlos and Mayte.

The deliveryman nearest was already holding out his hand. "One of you Kerry Roberts?"

"That'd be me." Kerry returned his clasp. "This is my partner, Dar, and our lawyer Richard Edgerton." She half turned. "How's it going here today, people?"

"Guard left." Carlos jerked his square jaw towards the lot. "Didn't say anything to me, but I think some of their guys talked to Sasha cause they came over to get breakfast."

"Yeah we saw." Kerry said.

"Good riddance." Dar added.

"So, Ms Roberts, we have your three RV's here." The RV deliverer said. "I set up every other day service for em, including fuel. Just remember to turn em over to charge the batteries." He glanced around. "Don't suppose you'll be getting a power hookup any time soon.. but we'll pump out the washrooms and restock supplies, and of course fill up the gas tanks."

"Thank you." Kerry smiled. "You all must be really busy."

"BPpproffff." The man made a noise. "You're lucky you had these reserved. We're all out as of tonight, most of them on long term rental. Had to hire a half dozen guys to do service. Boss said, it was an ill wind that blew nobody good and it sure did good for us."

"I signed the papers for them, Kerry." Mayte spoke up. "They are very nice."

The RV men waved and left, walking over to a beat up looking open topped Jeep and getting into it.

"Sasha inside?" Dar asked, waiting for Carlos to nod. "C'mon Richard. Let me get you a sandwich." She pointed to the office, and they started walking over towards it.

"Change your shirt!" Kerry yelled after her. She saw Dar lift a hand in response, then turned her attention back to her two staff. "What a day." She said. "So, now these RV's. C'mon."

"Was it raining at your new house?" Mayte asked. "It did not rain here."

"No." Kerry said. "Dar jumped into Biscayne Bay to look at something." She glanced at her two employees, who were nodding as though this was an unsurprising statement. "Our lives being what they are, it turns out there's a major subsea communications cable just off our dock that's now going to be routed over our property and provide us with both electricity and internet."

Both Carlos and Mayte nodded again. "That's awesome." Carlos said. "Maybe we should move the office over there until it's done here." He suggested. "Sounds big enough."

"Hm." Kerry made a thoughtful sound. "Yeah, there's plenty of space all right."

They walked over to the three large vehicles, parked at the front of the lot, their noses pointing at the building. Kerry went to the first one and opened the door. "They should all be the same." She walked up the steps into the RV.

It had a plush seat for driving, which reminded her of the one she and Dar had driven across country. Behind it though, was a space that was designed somewhat for business. It had two slide outs, and a table that folded out and down, with cabinets behind it for storage and a folding wall that separated the section from anything aft of it.

Kerry went over and opened the folding door to look behind it.

There was a bathroom on the left, and on the right, a compact kitchenette with a mini fridge. Past that, two small sofas facing each other as part of another slide out and in the very back a bunk room with two lower single bunks and two upper bunks that were folded up out of the way.

It was utilitarian, but it smelled new and clean. Kerry turned inside the bunk room and faced them. "So."

Carlos was standing behind Mayte, his hands braced against the entry door to the bunk room. "What was the idea here, boss?" He asked. "Those guys said you grabbed these before the storm."

She turned and faced them, leaning against the edge of the folding door. "I did. It was part of a pitch to a client." Kerry said. "That's now on hold, but I had these reserved, so here we are." She looked at Mayte. "You think your mom and dad would be able to use one of these?"

Mayte blinked, then she looked around and behind them, then back at Kerry. "To stay in here?" She asked. "Oh yes!" She nodded vigorously. "They could manage it, yes I think so."

Kerry looked past her at Carlos, who was smiling back at her, a deep, kind smile that made his dark eyes twinkle with understanding. She winked at him.

“How about I drive this thing over to the hospital with ya and pick em up?” He said. “That work, Mayte? We gonna be able to pitch it to em, or do we need to bring Dar with us?”

“Oh no, no I think it will be okay.” Mayte broke into a relieved grin. “It is perfect, you know? If they must go to the house, they can go and see, but it is safe. Kerry, it’s amazing.” She added. “What a good thing to think of!”

Kerry smiled. “It was Dar’s idea.” She demurred. “Having them sent here. That out of the box brain of hers didn’t take more than five seconds to bring it up.” Her eyes went to Carlos. “Her idea was, one for Maria, and two split for some people here so they can get some comfortable rest.”

Carlos nodded confidently. “I figured, girls and guys?” He suggested. “One bus for each I mean.”

“There are more boys than girls.” Mayte informed him. “That is not fair.”

“Most of the guys are cool with their tents.” Carlos disagreed. “Probably won’t want to bunk here unless I force em to.”

Kerry chuckled. “Okay, I’ll leave it to you guys to sort this out. Let me go find Dar and see what trouble she’s gotten into in the ten minutes we’ve been talking to each other.” She hopped out of the RV and headed for the building, hearing the rumble of rock music as she neared the door.

As she mounted the steps to the porch, a puff of warm but not hot air came out of the open door, and it had the smell of Korean barbeque and charcoal on it. “Hope Richard likes spicy.” She remarked as she entered the main hall and paused, glancing around.

The conference room was on her left, and she noticed the supplies had multiplied and branched out, now including soap and cases of toilet paper along with the boxes of chips and peanut butter and cookies. On the opposite side of the hall was a second, smaller conference room but that had been left empty, but had it’s windows and door open to aid in ventilation.

She walked past the reception desk, it’s surface empty and clean, and then took a look in either direction, where the walls had gotten an initial coat of plaster, and she could smell the slightly musky scent of that along with freshly cut wood.

She crossed the hall and went out the back door into the central courtyard, where she realized the sound of music wasn’t coming from a radio, but from four men and one woman standing near the weight lifting benches playing instruments and singing.

There were fifty people seated in the grass listening. Kerry counted perhaps thirty that she knew.

Dar was standing on the cooking platform next to Sasha and Richard was seated on one of the coolers, eating a sandwich.

Kerry walked over to them, as a song ended and everyone clapped. “Mayte thinks the RV’s going to work out. I told her and Carlos to drive over to the hospital in one of them.” She reported. “They’re basic inside, but there’s decent space for a couple people.”

“Good deal.” Dar had taken off her sunglasses and tucked them into the collar of her shirt. “Tell Ker what the guard told you, Sasha.” She prompted. “Before the concert starts up again.”

Sasha was seated on her padded wooden stool from her shop. “Nice boys.” She said. “Some of those kids. They sent the whole bunch of them out to the Everglades. Didn’t want to go.” She opined. “Rather stay here where it’s dry, and no mosquitos.”

“I can imagine.” Kerry glanced up at the canopy that had been put up over the grilling area, providing a nice pocket of shade. To the left, a solar powered fan gave them a breeze. “Well, I’m guessing they can do more to help out there than hanging around here.”

"Some big shots came and sent them, they said." Sasha said. "Everybody's sure it was this one." She pointed her thumb at Dar. "They said Dar told their big man she'd do it." She studied Dar with one raised eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I did say that." Dar mildly agreed. "But I didn't do anything." She added. "By the time I got home the hot tub was more interesting than assholes."

"Let them think you did." Kerry patted her on the back. "Having people be scared shitless of you is great leverage sometimes, honey."

Dar rolled her eyes, a puckish grin appearing. "Anything for you." She said. "Let's just hope he doesn't decide to show up here tonight and make trouble."

"Ah, don't think so." Sasha waved off the suggestion with one hand. "Maybe they come to have barbeque." She winked at Dar. "Maybe so."

"I know they were good customers Sasha, but I'm kind of glad they're gone." Kerry said. "Hopefully they can help out some people out there like they were supposed to here, and are too busy to haul their asses back across the county to mess with us."

"No problem. Got more people come by here anyhow." Sasha pointed at the central area. "Band from the bar. They made her close today, too much trouble down there."

The band was taking a break, and everyone was just taking it easy, relaxing in the grass, absorbing the sun that was pouring down from the partly cloudy sky.

Dar had been standing there, arms folded, watching the audience break up into smaller groups, sharing a cooler of beverage cans and bags of chip.

Now she turned to face Sasha. "Did you say your brother was bringing in a ship's worth of solar panels?" She asked suddenly. "Containers of them?"

Sasha eyed her. "You want talk to him?" She suggested shrewdly. "You buy them, put them here? Good for solar. Nothing blocking." She got up and pointed in all directions. "No big buildings, right on east coast."

"Yeah." Dar agreed. "Here, and on our new place. Same angled roof surface and sun exposure."

"Now Dar." Richard swallowed hastily. "Hold on there, not sure you can do that, with that society agreement."

"Don't care." Dar told him. "Figuring that out's your job. We're going to move out there and start working on the place, and when you need us to come testify, call." She nodded a few times. "Be right back." She took her sunglasses out and put them on and stepped off the concrete pad and into the sun, heading towards the group.

Richard looked at Kerry, who had her hands clasped behind her back and was rocking a little bit on the balls of her feet. "That's really not a good idea."

"Oh yes, I know, and actually Dar knows that too." Kerry agreed readily. "But we're going to do it anyway. We talked about it on the way back here. She figures, with what that skanky guy said, there's money and politics wrapped around it and at some point, someone's going to want something we can trade it all off for."

"Like what?" Richard took a bite of his sandwich and chewed.

"Technical services. Consulting." Kerry supplied promptly. "How to get around having your internet sniffed." She winked at him. "Our promise not to call random people in the government we know and cause trouble for them or have Dar figure out how to route all their political donations to PETA."

Richard chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed. "Can she do that?" He watched Kerry nod, her eyes twinkling a little. "Well, that gives me something to work with anyway." He shook his head, but with a smile. "You two certainly keep me busy these days."

"Funny, Dad says that too." Kerry smiled back. "I think he went off somewhere on the boat to get away from our crazy for a day."

Her cell phone rang. "Excuse me." Kerry removed it from her pocket and walked to the end of the concrete before she opened it. "Kerry here."

"Ker!" Mark's voice had a faint echo to it. "Wanted to give you an update on the Brazil issue."

Brazil issue? "Oh! Right." Kerry said. "Sorry, we're having an exciting day down here with our new place. What's up?"

Mark exhaled.

"Not good, huh?" She guessed.

"Well, there are folks up here who speak Portuguese, and there are folks up here who do high tech." Mark said. "Problem is I'm having some trouble finding both in one person."

"Mm."

"Not saying I can't do it eventually. I found two guys." Mark said. "But not in time for tomorrow morning." He admitted. "And we need to kit them out with an image for that client.. it's going to take me at least another week for it."

"Be easier if we could do it here." Kerry concluded.

"Hella."

Kerry pondered that. "I can't see that happening, Mark." She concluded regretfully. "I mean, I'm sitting here thinking – what if I can find the resources here, and get them over, and set up one of the RV's with a satellite dish we don't have to get them connectivity, and use some of the PC's from the office."

"Uh huh."

"Still don't think we can do that before 9am tomorrow morning." Kerry sighed. "Finding the resources being the hard part, because I have Dar for the second and the PC LAN team here for the last."

"I can keep trying." Mark said. "What RV's are those?" He asked, belatedly. "I saw on the news they were talking about getting FEMA trailers down there."

"We have three commercial RV's." Kerry said. "Long story. But anyway let me talk to Dar and see if she has any other ideas. She's been batting a thousand so far this weekend."

Mark chuckled softly. "Since I've known her." He said. "But anyway, I'll call the guy tomorrow morning and tell him we're going to have to delay the start. I don't want to bullshit him. He's a good guy. Colleen said she'd call with me so the guy knows we're trying."

"Okay." Kerry said, after a brief pause. "Not really much in the way of options right now. Let's see what he says. Maybe he'll agree to hold off a week." Even saying it made her grimace, despite the fact that Kerry realistically knew that a natural disaster was something just outside their control.

Natural disaster was, yes. Response to natural disaster was something they had to get better at, and she was fully conscious that they had done a piss poor job of planning for bad things to happen. All of those customers who'd been calling them had every right to be angry.

"Not fun." Mark said, mournfully.

Kerry exhaled. "A lot of opportunity for learned lessons." She agreed. "Let me know when you call him – no matter what he says, Dar and I will call him afterward and apologize."

"You got it." He hesitated. "Things there okay?"

Kerry turned around, scanning the area. Dar was over talking to the brown haired bearded man with the guitar slung over his back that she now, in fact, recognized from the small bar down the street. She thought about the challenges with the property, and the customers, and smiled. "Things are good here, yeah." She told him. "We'll get through all this Mark and we'll end up better for it."

“Barb said the same thing to me at breakfast this morning.” Mark admitted. “Anyway, talk to you later. We’re going to take a ride up to see Cape Canaveral. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Kerry closed her phone and turned it in her hands as she pondered, watching the shadows start to lengthen. She walked back over and sat down on the bench next to Richard, still chewing his way through his sandwich. “Crazy world.”

He wiped his lips. “Tell you what, Kerry.” He said. “We’re only given one life to each of us. Might as well be as interesting as it can be, you know?”

“Yes, yes.” Sasha nodded vigorously. “Take everything and use it. No worries.”

Which, Kerry reflected, was what Dar would say if she put it to her. “Yep.” She extended her legs in front of her. “We’ll figure it out.” She shrugged off the worry for the time being. “It is what it is.”

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Pete walked around the internal courtyard, pausing every ten feet or so to light the tiki torches planted in the ground near the walls. The smell of citronella was strong, and mixed with the scent of charcoal and cooking food, and the odd crosspoint of toasting marshmallows from the small hibachi near the camping area.

It was just getting dark, the sky in the east was already black, and the last streaks of light with their mellow pink and purple tints in the west were fading.

Kerry perched on the hood of Hank’s Humvee, arms braced behind her as she listened to the circle of the staff around the front of the vehicle talk about the day.

Carlos and Mayte were still out delivering the RV.

Hank had the driver’s seat of his rig tipped back and he was napping, his hat over his face, his clothing almost black with soil and debris from his long day working at the Point.

Several large racks of ribs were in the largest of the barbecues and they smelled amazing. There was a pot of baked beans on the smaller grill gently bubbling and there was a plastic square container of cole slaw waiting nearby.

Where, Kerry wondered idly, had the ribs come from? There was no supermarkets open anywhere, and no restaurants, and yet, there seemed to be an endless supply of fresh food here.

Where the hell was it coming from?

Zoe came over with a pitcher of ice tea, and offered her a refill of the cup she had clasped in one hand. “Miss Kerry, I have to tell you, Mayte was so excited to see the truck houses.” She confided, filling the cup. “She said we could stay in one of them.”

“All true.” Kerry smiled. “You guys deserve it. I think Carlos and some of his friends are going to use the other one.”

Zoe nodded.

“Zoe.” Kerry leaned closer to her. “Where are we getting all our supplies from?”

For a moment, her admin looked puzzled, her brows drawing together. Then Kerry held up her cup in question. “Oh!” She said. “You mean, the foods and things.”

“The foods and things. Yeah.” Kerry said. “I know some things must have come from Sasha but not those ribs?” She pointed out. “And I saw all the stuff stacked in the conference room.”

“I think some of the people who came here, brought the things they had.” Zoe said. “And some of the people who are Papa Andy’s friends brought us some cases of things, I think they had been frozen? So now we have to cook them.”

Kerry eyebrow quirked up a little bit.

Zoe waited, watching her expectantly. “It smells good yes?” She finally asked.

"Smells great." Kerry acknowledged. "Barbeque is something I've never been able to cook. Never really had the time."

"No me either." Zoe leaned against the Humvee. "My papa has a box, you know? For the lechon. That takes many hours also, and we only do it for special times. It is nice here, to get to try different things."

A movement caught Kerry's attention and she glanced to her right as Dar came through the door into the office, her hair slicked back and damp, and wearing a blue company t-shirt a little too big for her, its sleeves rolled up to expose her biceps.

A moment later she came around the side of the Humvee and joined them. "Hey people."

"Feel better?" Kerry asked.

"I felt fine before really." Dar protested. "But since the shower's up there, and I got the water filter installed, I thought might as well." She leaned against the car. "At least we're getting use out of that box of sample shirts that sales guy sent us."

Kerry could smell the clean, sharp scent of soap, and the newness of the cotton of the tshirt. "He did a pretty good job." She observed, studying the dark blue material. The company logo was embroidered on the upper left chest, and a larger image was printed on the back.

"He did." Dar exhaled, idly looking out over the yard. "And the water doesn't smell like chemicals anymore."

Kerry reached over to untangle a bit of her hair from the shirt collar. "Where did we get a water filter?"

Dar shrugged. "It was on the worktable upstairs."

"I think someone brought it this morning." Zoe supplied. "I saw it when I was answering the telephone, it was sitting there. I think Carlos said he was going to see if someone could fix it."

Dar winked at her. "Someone did." She said. "I remembered I had my toolkit in that cabinet in my office. Had the right size wrench for it."

Of course she had. Kerry had to smile. "You know, this is nice." She indicated the central area. "A little medieval, but nice."

The band members had finished playing another set and were seated around the hibachi, where not only marshmallows but a bottle was being passed. Everyone looked relaxed, and there was some laughter on the light breeze that drifted across the grass.

"It is." Dar said, musingly, after a thoughtful pause.

"Yes." Zoe nodded. "Maybe said it would be good for us, and it is true." She hesitated. "It feels nice to be here." She felt the pitcher. "I will go see if there is more tea. Would you like some, Ms Dar?"

"Sure."

Zoe trotted off to the large coolers, two of which now had cables running from them to the large battery pack that was connected to the solar panels.

"I feel like staying here tonight."

"You think we should stick around?"

They both spoke at the exact same time, pausing, and then laughing. "You've been wanting to hang out here all week." Dar said. "But yeah, with the guard gone, I'm twitching a little. We should stick around." She concluded, watching the ring around the hibachi. "I'll go in and send an email to the guys over on the island, let them know."

"Works for me." Kerry rested her elbows on her knees and clasped her hands together. "Now I wish I'd thrown one of our overnight bags into the truck though."

"Check out the conference room." Dar said, dryly. "Most of what we need is probably in there."

Kerry leaned over and whispered. "Where is all that stuff coming from, Dar?" She watched the shadows shift as Dar frowned. "Should we ask?"

"Where do you think it's coming from?" Dar whispered back. "You think they're raiding the Costco down the road?"

"I don't know!" Kerry hissed. "What do we do if the cops show up here if they did?"

Dar considered. "Offer them barbeque and beer." She concluded. "No one's going to much care about a couple of boxes of toothpaste and some toilet paper, Ker." Her expression became thoughtful. "Wonder if they managed to pickup a big can of peanut butter."

"It's kind of illegal."

Dar nodded. "It is, and I wouldn't have agreed to it if they'd asked me, but I'm not going to call the cops and try to have them involved in it either.." She said, in a practical tone. "For all we know someone went out and bought the stuff. It's not like we pay minimum wage."

Kerry thought about that. "Well that's true." She mused. "Let me ask Mayte when she gets back." She slid forward and got off the hood of the Humvee, landing with a little thump on the ground. "Let me go check out those supplies. I'll send the mail out of the guys. Enjoy the music." She leaned up and gave Dar a kiss on the lips. "Be right back."

She walked around the truck and went into the office, going across the hall and into the front conference room, noting that Pete had started setting up his guard post nest on the porch. That made her pause for a moment. Was he twitchy too?

Better safe than sorry. Kerry turned her attention to the supplies, moving boxes around and peering into them, taking out bottles and tubes and putting them onto the table as she sorted through what was there. She examined the boxes, but they were plain brown boxes, there was no tags or labels on them, though they did seem to be the kind of thing you'd find in a warehouse store.

Basic, but functional and she took her selections and put them into a small, empty box while she put everything else back into place.

She picked up the box and went upstairs with it, vaguely aware she could hear the sound of the barbeque being opened, and a cleaver being put to use echoed softly through the open windows.

It was very quiet on the second level, everyone was outside in the yard, and she walked through the outer area of her and Dar's offices aware of the sound of her own footsteps on the newly sanded wooden floor.

She glanced at the little nest Zoe had made as she walked past her admin's desk, one of the army pallets that Andrew had brought with a sleeping bag neatly tucked around it, and Zoe's backpack sitting on top, the small stuffed kitty looking wide eyed up at her.

It made her smile. Kerry went into her own office and put the box down on her worktable, turning around to regard her space. Then she went next door into Dar's office and stood with her back to the window, considering.

Then she went back into her office and went to her storage closet, opening it up and hunting around inside of it for anything she could use to make their night comfortable.

For obvious reasons, she was somewhat short on things like pillows and blankets, but given the temperature of the office they probably wouldn't need the latter anyway.

Kerry paused, thoughtfully. They could, she acknowledged silently, commandeer one of the two remaining RV's. But that really wouldn't change the comfort level because all it would do would be add air conditioning, since they did in fact have a shower here on the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, and a kitchenette, and the couch in Dar's office was both wide enough for both of them and quite comfortable.

Didn't change not having a change of clothes. With a shrug, she continued pushing aside various boxes of supplies and then paused, as she saw something dark on the floor in the back of the closet. She removed the flashlight from her pocket and turned it on, shining it into the space, hoping like hell it wasn't that damn cat.

No, it was a raincoat. Kerry knelt down on one knee and reached inside, taking hold of the slick fabric and pulling it back towards her. "Could have used this. Don't remember sticking it in ...."

The fabric slithered around her knees as she looked past where it had been shoved, seeing a rounded surface of scuffed leather beyond it and resisting the urge to slap herself on the forehead. "Jesus, I totally forgot about that."

'That' was a leather duffelbag, with handle on the end fastened with brass hardware. She grabbed the handle and hauled backwards, yanking it towards her as she backed up, intent on retrieving it and so she didn't hear anything behind her until something cold and wet hit her in the back of the neck. "Yahhh!"

She whipped around, to find Mocha staring wide eyed at her, his nose the culprit. "Mocha!"

He sat down, then after a pause, licked his lips. "Burf."

Kerry had to laugh. "You scared the hell out of me." She chuckled, then turned back to her prize. "But it's okay, honey. Look what I found!" She pulled the bag and half turned so it was between them. Mocha agreeably sniffed the bag, and his tail started wagging.

"That solves a lot of problems." Kerry stood up, picking up the bag and moving over to put it on her worktable. She unzipped the double zipper on top and opened it up, nodding a little. "Yes, it does."

She then took the box with it's assorted bottles and things and went back downstairs with it, Mocha trotting after it.

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Dar into an incongruous plastic Adirondack chair that suited her long legs and cradled the the cup of tea Zoe provided to her in her hands. She tasted it and found it to be mint, and refreshing. Pete had come up into the cooking area and was opening up the barbeque, and nightfall had brought the temperature down just enough to be bearable.

Chino had laid down next to her, and was regarding the courtyard, tongue lolling idly. "Have a fun day today, Chi?" Dar reached down with one hand and gave the dog a scratch behind her ears, causing her tail to thump on the ground.

The door to the Humvee opened and Hank emerged, stretching and yawning. He spotted Dar and ambled over to her, dropping into a camp chair at her side. "Hey junior."

Dar grinned tolerantly.

"Them kids out there are all right." Hank said. "A little boy scouty, but I figured they'd be okay after they asked me bout the shine." He eyed Dar. "You all know that little pond there, that's spring fed." He said. "Comin up from the aquifer I figure."

"Brackish?" Dar asked. "It's so close to the Bay."

"Nope." Hank shook his head firmly. "Took me some chemical readings. Pretty decent. Got some dissolved limestone and all that you'd spect."

"Sure."

"Drinkable." He said. "I told them we could use it for the hooch." He paused thoughtfully. "What'd you think about that little hut thing."

Dar set her cup on the arm of the chair and then folded her hands on her lap. "What do I think. I don't know that I think anything about the hut." She said. "It's just the bare essentials you need to live in, I guess."

"I like it." Hank replied. "I think that fella was a little sideways but that's all right. I'm a little sideways too." He winked at Dar. "You gonna keep them kids on there? They want to stick around. Made a point of tellin me cause I guess they figured I'd make a point of telling you. Which I now done."

"Hm."

Hank let her think about it, glancing up as Zoe came over with her pitcher of tea. "Hello there little sister." He accepted a cup of the tea with a smile. "Why thank you."

Would she? Dar considered. The property was more than big enough to need some people around to do things to it. Things she didn't know that she wanted to do herself, though the thought of getting a riding mower was kind of fun. "What do they actually do in real life?"

Hank chuckled.

"No, I mean.. they do something to make a living for themselves, right?" Dar asked. "I mean, they're not stupid guys."

"Most of em do stuff like work at hardware stores, that kind of thing." Hank agreed. "Sorta blue collar boys. None of em been to college. Just got out of high school and their after school jobs went full time I guess." He crossed his military boots. "Like me. S'how I ended up in the Navy. Got tired of bagging Publix."

Zoe had sat down next to him on one of the small beach chairs. "My mama likes Sedanos, but I was saying to Maybe just before I like Publix better." She said. "My brother works there as well. He makes sandwiches in the deli."

"Now that's a job." Hank grinned at her. "I coulda done that. Skipped out on all the mess of the military." He glanced over at Dar, who was silently pondering, a faint crease between her eyebrows. "But those are pretty decent guys, junior. Got good hands, good hearts."

Dar's pale blue eyes fastened on him. "You want to come run them?"

Hank remained silent, just watching her face. He put his hands behind his head and leaned back, his eyes narrowing a little bit.

"We have no idea how to take care of a property like that." Dar said, after a long pause. "And it needs a lot of taking care."

"Well." Hank said, slowly, thoughtfully. "I'd come and do for you whatever you want, Dar." He shifted a little bit in the chair. "I just don't know how much I'd like running folks." He said. "Not sure I'd be any good at it, y'know?"

Dar leaned on the arm of the chair nearest him, her eyes twinkling a little bit. "No I wasn't either." She admitted. "Actually I figured I'd rather get everything done myself. It was easier than trying to explain myself to everyone all the time."

Hank made a spectacle of looking all around the courtyard, and at the office building, and then looking at her with an expression of disbelief.

"Eventually I figured it out." She acknowledged the look. "Sort of. Kerry's a lot better at it than I am." She picked up the cup and took a sip of the tea. "Think about it. Let me know."

"Hey!" Pete let out a yell. "Bring that table over here. We got a lot of ribs to plate!"

The group around the hibachi got up and came over, two of them detouring over to where there was, now, a stack of folding tables on the ground. They picked up the top one and brought it over, unfolding the legs and bracing them near the concrete pad.

"Get another one of them." Sasha directed, a large metal bowl in her hands. "Need a place for the dishes."

"C'mon." Hank got up and gestured to Zoe. "Mess call."

Dar was about to get up and help when she saw Kerry coming through the doorway, with Mocha in attendance and a big grin on her face. She waited for her partner to come over, waiting to hear what had made her steps so jaunty.

“Hey!” Kerry dropped to her knees on the ground next to Dar’s chair and leaned her forearms on the arm of it. “Do you remember what we were doing when we heard about this damn hurricane?”

Dar peered at her with a bewildered expression. “Should I?” She eyed her partner in question.

“We were planning a trip down to the cabin.” Kerry informed her. “We were going to take the boat to the sailing club dock, then leave from there last Friday, and head on down.” She said. “Then you looked at the weather channel and said...”

“I said, oh crap. Okay.” Dar agreed, a touch hesitantly. “Yeah, I do remember that but..”

“Do you know where I ended up tossing our go bag?” Kerry arched her brows, her eyes a soft honey color in the light from the torches. “Because I packed it on Thursday morning and brought it to work with me?”

“Ah!” Dar’s eyes lit up in comprehension. “You left it here.”

“I left it here. So we’re covered.” Kerry half turned to watch as everyone came over across the grass to the tables. “So now we can relax and enjoy ourselves.” She exhaled in contentment. “I think they’re going to do more music after dinner. This is going to be fun, Dar.”

Dar leaned back and folded her arms. “It’s going to be something.” She sighed. “At least it doesn’t look like rain.”

“Shh.”

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Dar walked down the hallway, carefully unrolling a lurid orange extension cord along the inside wall, giving the cord a twist as she released it so it would lie evenly and straight on the newly sanded floor.

It was dark, and quiet now outside. Chino was walking alongside her, idly sniffing at the cable in her role as canine escort. Her dark toenails made soft clackety sounds on the wood and as usual her tail was gently waving back and forth.

On the other side of the floor, the techs were squirreled into their space, and the varied temporary residents were bunking down outside in trucks and tents and for some, pallets in the outside by choice.

Carlos and Mayte were still out and about, and Dar and Kerry had helped Zoe settle her things and Mayte’s into the second of the two RV’s after spending some time resisting Zoe’s effort to turn the RV over to them.

The third RV now housed Pete and Randy, and they’d reserved space for Carlos when he got back, and Pete had moved the RV to block access to the front of the office and had named the vehicle “Outpost West.” He and Randy had moved long canvas covered cases and other various paramilitary gear into the rig, and were rummaging around it in thinly veiled delight.

She ran the cable under the door to Zoe’s area, and patiently continued along the wall towards her office door, her bare feet making almost no noise.

Inside the office, the mellow glow of candlelight was showing, and as she approached the inner door, Kerry stuck her head out and smiled at her. “Hey.”

“There you are.” Kerry stepped back to let her inside. “it’s really not too bad in here.”

“Gets a breeze off the water.” Dar finished her obsessively neat laying of cable down and coiled the remainder of the hundred foot length in a perfect circle next to the small box fan near the couch. She knelt and plugged the fan in, and it started obligingly turning.

“Nice.” Kerry complimented her. “I had fun tonight.”

"Me too." Dar stood up and dusted her hands off. "Kinda thinking that Carlos and Mayte should be back though." She frowned. "Or at least called if they were going to hang out near the hospital."

"Well." Kerry took a seat behind Dar's desk and picked up the mug of hot chocolate that had been sitting, steaming gently on it. She took a sip. "I tried calling their cells, but naturally it just fast busied."

"Naturally."

Chino had gone over and curled up in her bed. Mocha was already in his, sitting up, watching them, a tiny tip of his pink tongue showing between his teeth.

Outside, on the back side of the office towards the water where the windows faced it was very dark and very silent. There was a decent breeze blowing, and they could hear the rustle of leaves, and at the back of that the faint wash of small waves hitting the seawall that protected the edge of the bay.

It was an onshore wind, and there was salt on it. Dar went over to the window and sat down on the built in seat under it, leaning back against the edge of the sill and looking out over the neighborhood. "We are the only thing with any life around here."

"We are." Kerry rolled the desk chair over next to her. "I'm glad we stayed."

Dar smiled, reaching out to pat her on the leg without looking. "Damn good ribs." She commented. "That's a pretty broad minded group out there. Some of them surprised me."

"That one ex marine in the back, what is his name, Buddy?" Kerry said. "He has a degree in microbiology." She agreed. "Has no interest in using it. He likes just doing odd jobs."

Dar's face quirked into thoughtfulness. "Might be more interesting. Different things every day."

Kerry moved her hand to cover Dar's and folded her fingers around hers. "They're good people out there. I'm glad they showed up. Even that veteran who was messing with Scott. He turned out okay."

"He did." Dar exhaled. "While I was sitting out there listening to that band play, I was thinking about all the cool stuff we could do with this building. How cool it could look. We never really thought about changing it."

"Wasn't ours to change. I was going to work some reno into our rental contract but.." She lifted her hands with a little laugh. "But now we have to pay for everything."

"We would have ended up paying for it one way or another anyway." Dar let her head rest against the wall. "Maybe I should think about going back to that guy from the state and taking that contract. Numbers he was talking about could cover all of this."

Kerry regarded her thoughtfully. "Instead of going after more new accounts?"

Dar nodded. "Until we get this all back together." She turned her head and looked at Kerry. "If he's still interested. They need the help. You heard them on the news. It'll give us the capital to make things bulletproof so we don't have to be stressed like this again."

She watched Kerry think, her brows contracted just a little. She reached out and tweaked her nose. "Think about it. Who even knows if it's still an option."

"I will think about it." Kerry said. "That's an interesting thought because it's a no cost contract for us. They're just buying your brain."

Dar regarded her with a slight grin. "Isn't that what you said you'd do? Sell my brain?" She stood up and held her hand out. "Lets get some rest. It's been a long ass day."

Kerry got up, rolling the chair back behind Dar's desk. She paused with her hands on the back of the seat, her fingertips pressing a little into the sturdy webbing that it was made of.

She watched Dar walk over to the side table where she'd put their go bag, her tall form outlined in the golden candlelight. "Not sure we can do that and the game thing at the same time, hon." Kerry remarked, leaning on the chair. "They kinda both need your focus."

Dar unzipped the bag, and removed their bathroom kit. "They do." She tucked the kit under one arm and turned to face Kerry, leaning back against the table. "I'd rather go for the sure thing. The gaming rig has too many questions around it." She said, matter of factly. "We can still open up a small office there, to deliver the military contract."

It made absolute logical sense.

But.

"That game console has bigger potential." Kerry said. "That could really be a breakthrough."

She understood at a root level how much more exciting it would be to see that come to fruition, and to be honest, how much more interesting it would be for her partner to do.

Dar's eyes, a colorless tan in the light, met hers. "I realize that."

"Not only that, you could lose those kids." Kerry said. "They're so excited about this."

"Then we find more kids." Dar responded calmly. "Bottom line, Ker, we have to do what makes sense in order to deal with the cards we got right now."

Kerry walked around the desk and went over to her, feeling the distance between them like sandpaper on the skin. As she closed she saw Dar's head tilt, and the faint smile appear on her lips and she bumped up against her in gentle affection.

The warm candlelight brought an intimacy with it, and Dar lifted her hand and gently cupped Kerry's face, acknowledging the moment. "If its meant to be, it'll happen." She remarked, with a simple certainty. "But it's not going to happen tonight."

"No." Kerry leaned into the touch. "Lets wait for tomorrow. No telling what that's going to bring to the table with our usual luck."

Dar chuckled, a low, musical sound. "No kidding." She patted Kerry's cheek gently. "Anything could happen with us here. Lets get some rest before it does."

"Lets."

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Dar wasn't sure what had woken her up. She just went from full asleep to full awake in a breath, her eyes opening into the darkness of her office. She blinked a few times to focus and quietly lay there, just breathing as she tried to figure out what was going on.

It was dead quiet. Next to her on the wide couch Kerry was still deeply asleep, curled on her left side, her left arm draped over Dar's body.

They were using the go bag as a pillow, with half of it's contents removed it was soft and comfortable, and as she lay there, she could smell the rich scent of the leather.

Nearby, the dogs were asleep in their beds, undisturbed.

She stretched her hearing outward, detecting a few faint creaks of the building, and the soft whirring of the fan, wafting room temperature air over her.

Past that, she could hear the generator outside with it's incessant rumble.

All seemed peaceful. Dar let her body relax, and decided it was just the strange location that maybe had stirred her awake, and with a brief twist of her lips she closed her eyes and tried to compose herself back to sleep.

The couch was reasonably comfortable, and after all when Kerry had chosen it for her, it had been with the odd nap in mind to begin with so the furniture was more than long enough for Dar's height, and wide enough to really be more of a daybed than a couch.

With thick pillows in place, you could sit on it, but with the pillows tossed aside it provided a nice resting place, even without air conditioning to relieve the muggy heat.

Dar felt her body relax, and she started to drift off again, when from outside the window, on the water side of the building she heard the sound of a branch breaking.

Her eyes opened again. Quietly, she rolled off the couch and stood up, moving over to the window on noiseless bare feet as she leaned against the built in seat and peered outside.

It was very dark, there were some clouds overhead covering the half moon but after a moment her eyes adjusted to the shadows and she could make out the shapes of the bushes and trees at the back of the building and the wall that enclosed the property.

Between the wall and the building she could see something moving, something the size of a person and in a stealthy kind of way that made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. She watched for a moment more to make sure she wasn't imagining it, then she turned and walked swiftly back across the office and out the front door.

She was dressed in a ratty long t-shirt and cotton shorts to sleep in, and she could feel the breeze coming in from the front door that was standing open, as the door to the courtyard on the inside was open and it occurred to her that this probably wasn't the smartest thing they could have done.

Water under the bridge. Dar moved across the porch, and down the steps, sweeping her eyes to either side as she crossed to the RV that Pete had parked nearby.

She wondered what time it was.

The inky darkness around her lightened a bit, as the moon came out from behind the clouds, but with the guard gone, everything past it, everything towards the road and as far as she could see was blank and dead and as she took a breath of the warm night air some internal instinct warned her of something just not right.

She got to the RV, but before she knocked on the door, she went around the front of it and looked past into the parking lot, seeing that the second RV had been pulled up close to the first, and the third, that Carlos and Mayte had gone off in, was still missing.

The parking lot though, save the front line of it where her truck was parked, was empty.

She turned and looked back at the office. Through the open windows on the lower level she could see some faint glimmers of light, flickers that indicated candles to make the load on the generator as minimal as possible to save on the troublesome to get gasoline.

The top level on this side was all dark.

She looked at the edges of the building on either side, but it was full of foliage and bushes, the tough scrubby plants that had protected the building from the wind in the storm.

Was she just being goofy?

Had she really seen someone in the back or just imagined it?

She stood by the RV, one hand on it's side, for a long moment indecisive. Then caution took precedence and she moved over and was raising her hand to knock on the door when very unexpectedly it opened outward, and from the dark interior, Pete appeared.

He was fully dressed in dark camouflage and had a dark cap on his head, covering his silvery hair and he was carrying a semi automatic in one hand. "Hi there." He said. "I heard you were an early riser, but this is what we used to call o dark whatthell.."

Dar smiled briefly. "I heard something." She said. "And I think I saw someone in the back."

Pete reached behind him and rapped softly on the inside panel of the RV, and a moment later Randy slunk down the steps, carrying a shotgun. "You were righty tighty Whitey." He told him. "I was having a cuppa at that nice

little table inside watching out when you came out the door.” He addressed Dar. “Randy thought he saw someone go down that side street.”

Randy nodded, a short, thickset man with caramel colored skin and somewhat jerky, nervous movements. “Lets go see.”

“Right. Since we have boots and guns, lets do that, and you go back inside?” Pete told Dar. “Might just be a vagrant, smelling that barbeque smoke we painted the area with.”

Dar eyed him thoughtfully.

“Please?” Pete went on. “If something happened to you while your daddy was gone it’d kill me before he did.”

“I’ll go get dressed.” Dar compromised. “Go on, I’ll check out the inside and make sure nothing more than that damn cat got in.”

She turned and went back towards the building.

Pete sniffed reflectively. “Apple didn’t fall very far from that tree.” He cocked his handgun and turned his cap around. “C’mon. Lets go scare the crap outta whatever dipshit’s wandering.”

“Hope it’s a dipshit.” Randy fell in behind him. “Not some fuckin yahoo.”

They got to the edge of the building and Pete pointed right and tapped his chest, then pointed left and pointed at Randy, and they split up and started around both sides.

Dar re-entered the building and was about to mount the stairs, then she paused and diverted over to the inner door. She walked through it, and out onto the concrete pad that had become their outdoor cookpit.

Across the space, she could see the area where the hibachi was, in it’s circle of oddly assorted found rocks, parts of parking lot stops and pieces of limestone gotten from the edge of the bay.

There were four people curled up in bedrolls near it, and past that she could see the tents where others were sheltering, with flaps open and in front of each one a cable snaking inside that was, she supposed, connected to a small fan.

Or perhaps maybe a little digital television.

The concrete pad had given up its heat and the surface felt cool against her bare feet. Dar flexed her toes against the slightly rough material and looked around the internal space, which was utterly quiet and still. Not a thing stirred, and as she tilted her head back and looked up at the sky, she got a sense that it was not that far from being dawn.

There was no sleep left in her. With a sigh, she turned and went back inside the building, halting as she spotted Mocha and Chino coming down the steps towards her, their toenails echoing softly on the wood. Behind them at the top of the steps Kerry was standing, scrubbing a hand through her hair as she looked down at Dar.

Silently, she spread her hands out in question.

Dar motioned her down, resigned to an early start to their day, hoping like hell that was all it was going to be.

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Kerry got to the bottom of the steps. “What’s going on?” She whispered. “What’s wrong?”

Dar put her hands on the bannister. “Not sure. I thought I... no, I did see someone in the back. Pete’s checking it out.”

“Well, at 5am it probably should be checked out.” Kerry answered. “Should we get dressed in case we’re about to be under assault?”

Dar glanced down. “Probably. I should put some shoes on at least.”

They both trotted back up the steps and went into the office, and as Dar went to the table they'd piled their gear on to grab a pair of jeans Kerry stepped over to the window to look out.

"Maybe not stand in the open window Ker?" Dar said, fastening the buttons on her pants. "No idea who has guns out there and at least our guys do."

"Mm." Kerry retreated. "Can't see anything anyway." She came over to claim and pull on her clothes. "Yeesh what a way to wake up."

Dar took her boots over to her desk chair and sat down in it to put them on. "Where'd the dogs go?"

"They stayed downstairs." Kerry perched on the couch arm to pull on her sneakers. "Okay. Lets go see what the hell is going on." She stood up and paused. "Should I go get the shotgun from the truck?"

Dar looked up. "Is it in there?"

"Yup."

"I'll go." Dar got up and headed for the door. "Probably be more useful than the pocketknife I'm carrying."

Kerry followed her. "I don't know, hon. That was pretty useful against that mountain lion."

"He didn't have a rifle."

They clattered down the steps, and now there were two more people coming in from the courtyard, one of Carlo's lifting buddies and Hank. "Hey early risers.. what's the rush?" Hank addressed them, stifling a yawn. "This how you big time corporate raiders operate?"

"Dar saw someone sneaking around the back." Kerry said. "Soo...."

"Got it." Hank whirled and started back towards his truck.

The lifter nodded. "Guys were saying maybe there'd be trouble. Lemme go get a bat r something." He retreated, and as he did they heard the murmur of voices outside as the campers stirred.

"Maybe we should shut the door." Kerry suggested, as Dar started for it. "Don't dawdle."

In response Dar broke into a run as she jumped off the porch and landed on the ground, launching herself forward towards the edge of the parking lot.

Kerry watched her, then she remembered the other RV, and looked around for it, spotting it pulled up near the building. She had started out towards it when she saw motion in her peripheral vision and she stopped, turning to see shadows heading towards them from the road. "DAR!"

Dar had reached the truck and she heard her name, hauling up and spinning, then turning and yanking the truck door open and diving under the back seat.

Kerry stood still for an instant, then she turned and bolted back into the office, letting out a yell as she reached the inner door. "Everybody look out!"

Hank was already barreling towards her, his gun cradled in his arms and a sidearm strapped to his chest. "Move out the way, shortie!" He dodged past her and was out the door and down off the porch in a rapid thunder of boots on wood.

It was far too dark to see much. Kerry hesitated, trying to peer through the shadows. Then she cursed and ran back into the building and into the conference room to grab a large flashlight off the table.

Bodies rushed past the door on the way to the front, and she let them pass then ran after them, going to the edge of the porch and turning the light on to beam it across the yard and towards the parking lot.

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Dar got her hands on the shotgun and pulled it out from under the seat, more concerned with someone else grabbing it than intending on using it herself. She slid out of the truck and slammed the door behind her with one elbow, holding the gun in front of her.

She turned to find a melee in the yard, yells and grunts and silence as men came pouring out of the office to engage with the line of figures dressed in dark clothing, their faces and heads covered and obscured.

Dar paused for a moment, then she ran along the edge of the lot and across the grass and through the bushes, to where Kerry was standing with her flashlight illuminating the fight. "Get inside."

"I want to see who these assholes are." Kerry objected. "Tell you what, you take the light and I'll take the gun." She suggested calmly, as she reached out one hand for the weapon. "They're not interested in us, they're busy Dar."

They were behind the makeshift guard post and Dar had to agree that no one seemed to be paying them any attention. She handed over the gun and took the flashlight, twisting it to its brightest setting and aiming it into the eyes of the hooded attackers. "This is nuts."

"This is nuts." Kerry confirmed, as she inspected the gun and then chambered a round, turning and letting the muzzle rest on the shelf in the shack built apparently for just that purpose, providing a slot to aim out of. "You figure these are those guard guys?"

"No idea." Dar said, busy with her light based assault, which was having some good effect as the attackers threw up arms to block the beam. "No one's shooting."

The scuffle in front of them was surprisingly quiet, but already it was obvious the attackers were being overwhelmed by the locals.

Pete applied a short bat to the head of the figure he was opposing and he went down, then he scrambled and rolled away and let out a shout, getting to his knees and then to his feet and then breaking into a run towards the lot.

He was followed by a flood of other dark clad bodies, apparently obeying an order to retreat. The men from the office let out yells of derision, and Hank stooped to pick up a piece of rock from the ground and threw it after them, hitting one of them on the back.

Dar tipped the flashlight up as their crowd started to return from the fight. "That was idiotic."

Their team was laughing and visibly exultant as they came back over, obviously pleased with the result of the fight.

"Morons!" Pete said, as he dusted his hands off, examining a scrape along his wrist bone. "What a bunch of dipshits. Nice work with the light, junior."

Hank was taking a nose count. "All good here." He announced, as Kerry unchambered the round she'd gotten ready in her shotgun. "What'n'hell was that?" He asked as they gathered at the porch. "Guess they figured they'd catch us sleepin."

"Well." Pete scratched his eyebrow. "Almost did." He indicated the guard shack. "Front door was wide open. They'd have gotten inside more than likely if junior here hadn't come flying out to go hunt em barefoot in her underwear."

"You were out here." Someone pointed out. "What the hell, Pete?"

"They came in the back." Dar spoke up, in a quiet, even tone. "I saw them between the back wall and the building." She paused briefly. "I heard them through the open window in my office."

Everyone fell silent, and looked at Dar, who was standing there, with the flashlight clasped in her hands, pointing at the ceiling of the porch, a splash of the light outlining her face.

"So we probably should make sure that doesn't happen again." She concluded. "I'm not sure what their thought was coming in here, whether they wanted to do mischief or if we were in real trouble." She handed off the light to Pete. "I'm going to go pull my truck into the middle there. Someone open the gate for me."

"I'll check to make sure Zoe's okay." Kerry concluded. "It's almost dawn."

Sobered, the dozen men who had run out meekly went back inside.

Hank settled behind the guard post. "I'll hang out here."

"You two, come with me." Pete said. "Let's take a look around the back, make sure no one's lingerin round." He took the light in one hand and started off, with the other two at his heels.

Kerry watched them go, as Dar stepped off the porch and headed towards the truck. She exchanged glances with Hank. "Creepy."

'Dipshits." Hank replied. "All them were just messin, Kerry. Weren't serious to fight, you saw em." He sniffed reflectively. "I figure they were just sent over here to scare us. Didn't even have no long guns or nothin with em." His evaluation was calm and professional. "Lucky for em Andy wasn't round here. He'd have broken them in parts."

"Mm." Kerry tucked her shotgun under one arm and walked down the steps. "Lets hope you're right."

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Dar angled towards the truck, it's outline easily visible to her in the darkness as she reached the sidewalk and started around to the driver's side as she dug the keys to the vehicle out of her front pocket. The incursion of the attackers concerned her, and she went over the events in her head as she walked.

She rounded the front of the truck and then halted, as she found two men crouched behind it, dressed in the same nondescript dark clothing as the others had been, staring up at her from behind their face masks, hands clasped around black batons.

Dar felt her body react in utter instinct, and she shoved the keys back into her pocket and moved into a defensive posture, spreading her hands apart and leaning forward above her center of balance as the two men started to move to stand up.

One raised the baton he was carrying and without much thinking, Dar shifted and kicked it out of his hand, glad she had her boots on and hadn't tried that barefoot. The baton went flying and now full of adrenaline she kicked out again and caught the man in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards on the tarmac.

The other one scrambled up and reached for her and Dar caught his hands in her own and then let her hold slip down to his wrists as she lunged forward, crashing into him and slamming him against the truck, allowing a low growl to escape.

She was taller than he was, and about the same weight and the energy that was coursing through her was ferocious and aggressive as she slammed against him again as he tried to yank his hands loose and kicked out with one boot that just missed her shin.

Behind her, she heard footsteps running and the scramble of dog toenails coming in her direction but she took advantage of the position she was in and brought one knee up to nail the man she had a grip on in the groin.

He squealed like a pig and sagged in her grip and she released him and turned, hearing the sound of motion behind her just in time to see two large animals rush up in the darkness and issue hideous sounding growls, bustling to get between the remaining man and Dar.

The man threw his hands up and stumbled back. "Hey! Don't hurt me! C'mon! Got mah hands up!"

Dar could see his eyes, in the shadows, wide and fearful. "Chino! Mocha! C'mere!" She ordered, as Hank, Kerry, and one of the weightlifters came barrelling around the front of the truck.

Hank threw his gun up to his eyeline and threw the safety off. "Fuck'errrrrrz!" He let out a yell, then paused, as they took in the one man with his hands up, and the other curled in a fetal position on the ground. "Well, now hell, Dar."

Chino and Mocha came over to Dar, tails wagging, and tongues lolling in the pre-dawn humid air.

"What happened?" Kerry was a little out of breath. "Holy crap, Dar!"

"They were hiding behind my truck." Dar said. "I think I surprised them. They sure as hell surprised me." She went over to the truck and opened the driver's side door. "Bring them inside. Maybe we can find out what the hell this was all about."

Two more veterans showed up behind Hank, weapons drawn.

"We got it, junior." Hank flipped the safety back on his gun. "C'mon dipshits." He went over to the one still standing and grabbed him by the bicep. "You heard the lady. G'wan get moving before she just decides to keep on keepin on with your dumb ass selves."

The weightlifter and one of the veterans each grabbed an arm of the man on the ground and lifted him up, half carrying them between them as they marched back towards the office.

Kerry went around and got into the passenger seat of the truck, letting out a squawk as Mocha jumped up into her lap. "Mocha!"

Dar regarded the scene, then she opened the back door to the truck to allow Chino to, with far more decorum, jump in. Then she got in herself and started up the vehicle. "It's almost dawn. I probably should have just left it here."

"Gives us a minute to stop freaking out." Kerry had her arms around Mocha and now she exhaled. "Because I will not mind telling you I am freaked out."

Dar chuckled, backing the truck out of its spot. "Zoe okay?"

"Slept all through it." Kerry murmured. "Though I might have slammed that RV door on her hand when I realized you were over here fighting with something."

Dar chuckled again. "Lets see what those guys say." She drove along the side road towards the back entrance to the building, turning on the truck's lights to show the makeshift gates in the process of being pushed open to let them inside.

"Did you get hurt?" Kerry asked, suddenly.

"No." Dar guided the truck through the gates towards the area where Hank's Humvee and Pete's Jeep were parked. "Hank was right. Those guys weren't really serious."

"Then what the hell?"

"That's what I want to ask them." Dar pulled in behind Scott's RV and parked. "Was it just something stupid, in which case since we have a lot of people here with weapons and they knew that, it was really stupid, or ... " She turned the engine off and regarded Kerry. "Or what?"

Kerry eyed her back, from behind Mocha's head. "With us? They could be extraterrestrial cat people, Dar." She said. "They seemed really scared of our Labradors."

"Well, they were growling." Dar looked from Mocha, to Chino who was sticking her head between the front seats and drooling on the console. "And they are pretty big." She opened her door. "Lets go see what we can find out."

Kerry sighed, but opened her own door and urged Mocha to get off her legs. "Do I want to find out? I mean.. it's Monday. Could that mean it's anything not horrible?"

"Ugh."

Kerry got out of the truck and closed the door behind her, as the eastern sky morphed into pinks the sun peeked past the buildings between them and the water and sent a few errant spears of light through the windows on the far side of the courtyard.

Everyone was astir in the yard, the construction workers around the cooking pit where one of them was pouring out a pot of coffee.

Sasha came out of her odd, circular tent with its platform that lifted it a foot above the ground, braiding her thick, black hair into a plait as she walked across to join them. "Good morning! Good morning!"

On the far side of the yard, two of the weightlifters were emerging from the sun showers they'd set up, towels around their waists, their bare skin glistening with droplets of water as they walked through the morning light.

Mocha and Chino shook themselves, and then they trotted across the grass to greet everyone, and Dar and Kerry followed them, stepping through the beams of rising sunlight as they came in over the roof, and the sound of rising voices echoed.

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"Okay." Kerry picked up two of the breakfast sandwiches, fluffy eggs inside pieces of baguette with some lettuce, grilled tomato and swiss cheese tucked inside. "Lets go see what our unexpected visitors have to say for themselves."

She put the two sandwiches on a plate and navigated her way through the inner entrance to the office, where the construction workers were setting up their tools and sawhorses and the smell of plaster wafted.

She walked past the reception desk and into the left side conference room, where Pete and one of the weightlifters were keeping watch on their two attackers, who were seated at the table with their head coverings removed, nervously waiting. Dar was just sitting down in her preferred seat, and Kerry took a chair next to her, passing over a sandwich.

The two were young. They were both sandy haired and freckled, with a splash of sunburn across their cheeks. One was still bent over, with his elbows on his knees and periodically he stared across at Dar with a look of suffering. Kerry thought they were perhaps in their early twenties.

Kids.

"So." She set her plate down with its edible burden. "Can I ask what the hell you people were doing here?"

Dar was contented to let her talk, using the time to take a bite of her sandwich after carefully removing the lettuce from it and depositing it on Kerry's plate.

The other boy, who was sitting straight up in his seat, cleared his throat. "We were told to come here, ma'am." He admitted. "We was told, we left something back here, and we were supposed to try and get it back."

"In the middle of the night?" Kerry asked, in a mild tone.

"Figured it was safer." The boy replied. "Just to check the grounds, like."

Kerry had finished a mouthful of breakfast as he spoke, and now she swallowed and wiped her lips with the paper napkin she'd set next to the plate. "So let me get this straight." She said. "You got sent here, to some place that your people in charge knew had armed military veterans inside it, to search the grounds in the middle of the night and they thought it was a good idea?"

"Yes, ma'am." The boy acknowledged, in a somewhat mournful tone. "That's what we was told to do."

"Dumbass." Pete said, from next to the doorway. "Coulda got your ass shot."

"Proibly hurt less." The second kid said, in a strained voice.

"I been shot. Woulda hurt more." Pete told him. "Lasts longer, that's for sure than a set of bruised balls."

Kerry dusted her fingers off. "Are you seriously telling me that no one thought just coming over here and knocking on the door in daylight wouldn't be a better idea? Just asking if you left something?" She leaned on her elbows, studying the two kids. "C'mon."

"What was it?" Dar finally spoke up, staring at the two of them. "What were you all supposedly looking for?" She got to her feet and both of them flinched, and that made Pete smile. "Cough it up, because we need to tell the police I'm about to call what you were after."

The kids exchanged looks. "Ma'am, we don't know." The one she hadn't kicked said. "They just told us to go with the older guys, and help." He said, in an earnest tone. "S'why we were hidin there, behind that there truck. We were waitin for everybody to settle down then we were gonna run off."

The other nodded. "We didn't want to be part of nothing." He muttered. "Whole thing here's been just garbage for us." He looked up. "Don't call the cops on us huh? We didn't do nothin. We just want to get out of here and go home."

Dar studied them with narrowed eyes, ones they refused to meet. She glanced over at Kerry, who was observing in silence, her fingertips steepled and touching her lips. Then she looked over at Pete and the weightlifter guard, also silent.

Dar's lips quirked. "Get them some breakfast." She finally said. "Let me go think about what to do with them." She turned and walked out, and after a moment, Kerry followed.

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"Not a good way to start the morning."

Kerry accepted the cup Dar was holding out to her and they settled together side by side in camp chairs under a tree in the courtyard lawn.

"No." Dar extended her long legs out and braced her elbows on the camp chair arms. "Stupid kids."

"Mm. They're lucky it was you that found them." Kerry mused. "All the rest of us had guns and knives and baseball bats and teeth and I don't know what else." She shook herself briefly. "Damn lucky."

Dar smiled briefly. "Guessing that kid I kneed doesn't agree with you." She demurred. "You buy the story they 'forgot' something?"

"Not in the slightest."

"No, me either."

"In that.. " Kerry continued. "I don't believe that's the reason that whole gang was here. It might have been what they told those kids though." She said, in a reasonable tone. "Let me talk to them. See if I can find out a little more."

"Mm." Dar grunted softly.

"We're not going to turn them over to the cops, are we?"

Dar made a face, her nose wrinkling up.

"Should we even report this to the cops?" Kerry wondered. "I mean, they have so much crap going on would they even come over here and talk to us about it?" She gazed across the courtyards. "Ugh."

"Depends if we offered them barbeque." Dar responded dryly. She studied the open space, where people were starting to work on construction tasks and the veterans were gathered in one corner, perhaps discussing the morning's attack.

Sasha was busy at the cockpit, wrapping and assembling sandwiches which she was stacking efficiently into a steel warmer on wheels in preparation for taking them out and selling them on the street. "Lets not call the cops. I'm not in the mood for them." Dar concluded. "Only damage wasn't to us anyway."

"True. Let me go talk to those kids." Kerry decided. "Then let me get to my inbox. Are you going to call the Pharma guy?" She asked, looking sideways at her. "We've pushed him off long as we can I think."

Dar sighed. "Yeah." She said. "And I better call that VC. Tell him.. I don't know. Push him off too."

Kerry reached out and patted her on the arm. "I'd offer to do that for you hon, but they're just going to want to talk to you anyway." She took her coffee and stood up. "Let me go find out where the heck Mayte is, what's going on with Maria, what our people upstate are doing, and take a damn shower."

“Be right behind ya.” Dar finished up her coffee as Kerry threaded her way along the concrete pad, pausing a moment to speak to Sasha before she moved on into the building. “Damn I wish this whole mess was over.”

With a sigh, she pushed herself to her feet, pausing to watch sunlight turn the courtyard gold, and beams showed dust and gnats in equal portion. “Monday.” She added, aloud. “Yuck.”

Zoe came out carrying a pot of water, which she set down near one of the grills, pausing to wave at her and smile.

Dar waved back, before she headed towards the building, and her stuffy, dusty office, and her phone calls.

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Kerry took the time after her shower to replenish her coffee, stirring a bit of the powdered creamer into it as she stood near the window and pondered her strategy.

The shower, the water lukewarm from its transit through pipes near ground level retaining the heat from the previous day had at least been wet, and she felt somewhat ready to face the day despite it’s nerve wracking start.

She was dressed in a company polo shirt with it’s sleeves neatly rolled up and khaki carpenter shorts, as close to business casual as she could cope with given the lack of AC.

She picked up the cup and went down the hall, turning and moving into the conference room where the two guardsmen were just finishing up the two large breakfast sandwiches they’d been given, along with a dish of tater tots and cups of coffee.

They paused in mid chew as she entered, looking alarmed.

Kerry smiled at them, taking a seat with her coffee. “Keep on.” She waved casually at them. “I just want to have a chat.”

Pete and the weightlifter, who had remained near the door, kept up a casual stance leaning against the wall. The weightlifter had a huge breakfast shake container clasped in one big hand, and he was drinking from it, while Pete was just finishing up one of Sasha’s beef sandwiches.

“Thanks for the chow, ma’am.” One of the two, the chest patch on his chest saying ‘Boone’. “It’s real nice of you given all what happened.”

“Well.” Kerry answered slowly, leaning back in her chair with her coffee cup. “I have to say that we normally have a great relationship with the military, you know?” She indicated Pete with one thumb. “So it’s really kind of sad to have what happened this morning happen, because I don’t really understand why.”

The two just chewed and looked at her in silence.

“I mean – you all couldn’t really have been here to find something you left behind, could you?”

The two exchanged quick looks.

“That was awfully dangerous.” Kerry concluded. “For everyone.”

Boone, who was the luckier of the two and only had a bruise on his wrist to show for his efforts, eyed her and licked his lips. “Didn’t mean no one to get hurt, ma’am.” He said. “We got moved out, you know? We got sent to a real bad place.”

Kerry rocked forward and put her cup down. “Now, you can believe this or not believe it. But we had nothing to do with that.” She said. “I know people were saying Dar called someone but she didn’t.”

“Somebody done.” The other guardsman said. His patch was blank, and he was still hunched over a little, leaning his elbows on his knees. “We were just here, doin what we were told to do, is all.”

Boone nodded. “All them folks got hot up before, wasn’t our fault.”

“Like we couldn’t go off and do nothing.” The other man said. “And man, we didn’t want to, all them people so nasty and rude and yelling at us.”

Kerry thought about that, considering it from the soldier's perspective. "They were upset and angry." She conceded.

"Not even talking like us." Boone said. "Couldn't even understand what we was saying, and its in our country, you know?" He looked up at Kerry. "Why'd they want us to go do for them, they aint even take the time to learn English?"

"You all are from a part of the country where people speaking more than one language is not that common, I guess." Kerry regarded them gravely. "Here, a lot of people do, so it's not as critical, I guess, for people who come here to learn English."

"That aint' right." Boone said, in a heartfelt, sincere tone. "You all come here, want stuff from us, you should learn to talk to us. Not the other way round."

The other man nodded in agreement. "So yeah." He said. "Cap'n said we could come back ovah here, give you all a scare like." He looked across the table at her. "Just a payback, you know? Cause we were done dirty."

Kerry was aware, in her peripheral vision, of Pete rolling his eyes, and though he didn't say it, she could imagine him thinking the words 'grow the f- up.' In his head, because she, herself was listening to that same internal echo. But the young men's resentment was real, and sincerely felt.

It was not by any stretch of the imagination an isolated viewpoint. She'd heard those same words growing up from her father on many occasions and viewed through the eyes of these young people she felt it was an unfortunate, but valid internal outrage.

"I understand what you're saying." She finally said. "When I moved here it was a big adjustment for me. I wasn't used to having to deal with a large number of people around me that I couldn't communicate with. It was hard." She saw them both nod, just a little, and their body tension changed, and relaxed a bit, their shoulders under the dark fatigues dropping. "And I chose to stay. You didn't have a choice."

"Yes, ma'am." Boone agreed. "We're just here cause we were asked to help, and we got screwed."

Kerry nodded, and put her cup down, resting her hands on the table and lacing her fingers together. "Okay, I get it." She said. "So, since we're here talking, and you seem like reasonable gentlemen, let me share some thoughts with you. "

"Ma'am, you all always been nice to us." Boone said. "You seem like a straight up lady."

"We can debate that because a lot of people would tell you I'm not a straight anything." Kerry said, dryly. "But here's the deal. The reason you all think we called someone on you is because Dar told your commander she might have to after he threatened to tell everyone who her grandfather was."

"Say what?" Pete said, starting to laugh. "Oh my god. Did you tell Andy?"

The two guardsmen looked puzzled. "Sorry, ma'am?" Boone said. "What does that got to do with nothin?"

"No." Kerry said to Pete. "Andy's father, Dar's grandfather, is Duke Roberts, from Alabama. You might have heard of him." She swung around to focus on the guardsmen. "I think you all do come from around there."

The two guardsmen were staring at her over the table, eyes wide, mouths open in perfect little O's of astonishment. "For real?" Boone finally said, in a tone of amazement.

"Fo real." Pete interjected. "Andrew B Roberts, Duke's oldest boy."

Boone let out a low, breathy whistle. "Do say." He murmured. "Oh.. now hold on ah did hear bout one of them.."

"Going for the Navy." Pete concluded the statement. "Andy did, cause he hated that man, and son, if I were you I wouldn't mention that old jackass to him if you want to stay upright." He crossed his booted feet and cradled his gun comfortably. "He does not mess around."

Boone looked at him seriously. "Ah won't hear bad stuff against Cap'n Duke, sir." He said. "Wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for him. He paid out for my mama to get a doctor when me and my sister was being born and it was a rough time for her."

The other man nodded. "Gave his shirt off his back for folks." He said. "Don't know what argument his boy had with him, but he done a lot for a lot of people round our parts." He said. "Drove em down to nothin, really, though lately now they got their old house fixed up some."

"Yeah, he took care of folks. Long as they were his kind." Pete said, implacably. "I heard."

"Sure." Boone looked over at him. "Don't know what's wrong with that? Took care of his own. Least somebody did." He said. "Don't know why you all think e'vrybody's due everything just cause. What did them people the other night do to help themselves? Just gimme all."

"You all are here to help them." Pete said. "The hell you all are thinking."

"Well then, sir, them should talk nice to us, and use our language." Boone said. "This place ain't right."

The conundrum gave Kerry a headache. Mostly because there was internal logic to it from these kid's perspective and she could, save the difference in the language and the idiom, hear most of her family saying just the same thing.

Sad, and not a little exhausting. "I guess, I just feel like if you can help people, you do, like us giving you guys a ride, and a meal, even though you tried to hurt us." She concluded. "it's just the right thing to do."

"Well." The other guardsman said. "I guess we all just think different, ma'am."

Kerry propped her chin up on her fist. "I guess we do." She concluded. She glanced at Pete.

"C'mon, kiddos." Pete straightened up. "Lets go for a ride." He gestured towards them with the rifle. "I gotta go pick up some barb wire now in case any more critters get ideas to come mess around with us."

The two guardsman got up obediently and walked out, ducking past Pete with little nods of acknowledgement. He rolled his eyes behind their backs and followed.

"Thanks Pete." Kerry called after him.

The weightlifter came over and sat down in one of the seats the men vacated. "That was some crazy talk." He told her. He was tall, and had beautifully creamy brown skin with a slightly overgrown but closely cropped tightly curled dark hair. "Was I hearing that? They're just right out racists? They said all that out loud?"

Kerry sighed. "You know, Larry, I think it's more complicated than that." She said. "When you live inside a culture where everyone around you looks, and acts, and believes like you do, it's really easy to assume, to really believe inside your mind, that it's right and natural."

"Hey no, they got brains in their heads. They got the internet. They don't live inside a plastic bag, Kerry. C'mon now." Larry shook his head. "I seen people like that all my damn life, looking down on me and treating me like a lower life form cause I ain't white."

"You know, it's easy for me to agree with that." Kerry said. "Because I grew up inside a society where that ideology, though not said quite that openly, was the norm." She pondered. "Still is, and I obviously made other choices."

"And you all are gay." Larry said, casually.

"Yes, so that's a part of it right? When you're not quite in the group there's more reason to think outside it." Kerry agreed. "Its easier to put yourself in someone else's place when you've had to deal with that in your life I guess." She paused. "The one who really just walked out of the box just because he decided to was Andy, Dar's dad. He had every reason to let that be his pattern and he just didn't."

Larry nodded a little bit. "He's a different kind of guy."

." She shook her head a little. "He just said, nope. Not gonna do that. Not me." She mused. "In fact, I'm going to find me a pagan, vegetarian witch and get us hitched just to extra special drive everybody out of their ever loving minds."

Larry smiled. "I really like Mrs. R." He said. "He's a lucky man."

"He is." Kerry looked past him out the window, where she saw Pete trundling out along the road in his Jeep, the two guardsmen along with him. "Wish there were more like him. He's the right kind of different."

"Y'know." Larry smiled a trifle. "One of the reasons I started lifting, aside from liking how I looked and what it felt like was because it gave me something to have people stare at past my color." He paused, considering that. "And I get pulled over less."

"Ah." Kerry murmured.

"Least now, if they see me driving my nice car around, they all assume I'm some rich guy's bodyguard." He concluded. "So I kinda wish there were more folks out there like him too."

They sat their briefly, in silence. "We kinda live in a messed up world." Kerry finally said.

"We kinda do." Larry agreed. "But right now, I got a nice place to lift, and some cool folks to talk to, so today... today's a good day." He winked at her and stood up. "Even if it started out whacked."

He sauntered out, twisting his broad shoulders so they would clear the doorjam.

Kerry stood up and looked around the boxes surrounding her, and the wide open windows letting in the warm, moist air, and shook her head.

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Dar made sure all the jealousy windows in her office were propped wide open, and the shutters were out of the way to allow whatever breeze there was a chance to come in. She sat down behind the desk in her web weaved chair and pulled out her cell phone.

From where she was sitting, the construction in progress wasn't overwhelmingly loud, she could hear the baseboards being cut downstairs, but upstairs the plastering was going on quietly, just the brush sounds and the clang of the bucket the man was using audible.

Outside she could hear faintly the sound of chopping, and the drone of a bulldozer. A bare snatch of radio music blared briefly, but as it disappeared at once it was from a car rolling by.

Dar opened her desk and took out a contact book, opening it up and flipping the pages until she found the one she was looking for. She glanced at her watch, then she typed the number into the phone and started it dialing, holding it up to her ear to listen.

Should she have checked in with Arthur and Elvis first? She was just wondering, but the line was picked up and it was too late to worry about it.

"Dect Pharma, George Macklingburg speaking."

Dar took a breath. "Hello George. Dar Roberts here. Emerging from hell."

A momentary silence. "Oh damn! I wasn't expecting a call from you." George then spluttered. "Been watching the news, figured it was miracle you all got done what you did, last week seeing all those floods and blackouts and everything!"

Dar felt her internal tension relax, just a trifle. George's voice didn't sound angry or agitated as it had the last time she'd spoken to him. "Well, there's a story around how that got done, but you said to call, so here I am." She said. "How's it going?" She added, trying to keep the tone casual.

"Really good, Dar. I have to admit to you, I never thought we'd get here, but that last submission really seemed to pull things together." George said readily. "We've be testing since we got it. My guys have a bunch of things they want as enhancements, but so far, so good."

Dar felt herself to be somewhat nonplussed. "So the integration's giving you back the answers you're looking for?" She asked, after a slight pause.

"The test ones? Sure are." George replied in a satisfied tone. "Listen Dar, I'm sorry I was pressing you so hard about it – it's just been so tough for us this year. This is really looking like it's going to let us move ahead a little bit. Charlie said he took a copy of our real database and put the program against it, and it found a few things already we're looking at." He paused. "Can't say more than that. IP you know."

Dar chuckled a little. "George, I wouldn't know a word about what you all are doing anyway. Not my gig. Hope it works out the way you want it to. Give us a list of the enhancements you want. I'll get the guys to work up a quote for you on them."

"Don't worry we will!" He responded. "But.. I saw video of that area by you, Dar. Are you all floating on the tops of your roofs working off cell phones or something? How in the hell? Or did you move folks out of the area like you said you might."

"We sent our support folks up north." Dar now relaxed into her chair. "I had the server stack moved to the island I live on, and we set something up there with a satellite rig. We've got generator power out there."

"Oh! Huh. Sounds easy." George said. "Well, great to hear from you Dar, and thanks again for making that date for us. I knew we could depend on you." He said. "I'll let you go now, I got Charlie in my doorway and he looks excited."

"Talk to you later, George. Tell him hello." Dar hung up the phone and let it drop to her leg, as she looked around her office in bemused surprise. "Son of a bitch."

Mocha lifted his head from the couch they'd slept on, his tail thumping gently against the leather.

She picked up the phone and dug the card out of her slim wallet, typing it in. "Lets see if our luck holds, Moch. Maybe it'll be an okay Monday after all."

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Kerry had one hand on the stairwell railing about to go up when she heard, through the open front door, the sound of a large vehicle approaching, it's tires crunching on the dead leaves in the parking lot, engine rumbling. She paused and went to the door, peering out.

"Ah." She made a relieved sound. "About fricken time."

"What's up?" Hank appeared literally from nowhere at her side. "Oh, the last bus is back." He watched it approach. "Wasn't that supposed to stay with somebody?"

"It was, but after they left it occurred to me they probably didn't have a way back." Kerry acknowledged. "I mentioned that to Dar, because we also realized they probably didn't have a way to call us because Carlos and Mayte left their sat phones here."

"Sweet planning."

"Well. You know how it is." Kerry walked out onto the porch. "C'mon, lets see what the deal is. Hopefully they have Maria and Tomas in there and we all get to say hello."

"Right behind ya." Hank ambled after her willingly, and they walked together down the sidewalk towards where the big RV was now coming to rest in the lot where previously Dar's truck had been parked.

Behind the wheel, Kerry could see Carlos driving and he waved as he put the brakes on. The RV rocked to a halt and the door popped open, with Mayte right behind it coming down the steps closely followed by her mother, who let out a squeal.

"Aiiee! Kerrisita!" Maria was dressed in a University of Miami sweatshirt and jeans, and was in high spirits.

Kerry smiled in reaction and waved. "Hey!"

They met near the RV and Maria threw her arms around Kerry. "I have been telling everyone how you are amazing!"

Carlos was climbing down out of the RV. "Hey Boss!" He greeted Kerry. "Sorry we took so long! We had some adventures. Hey Hank."

"Us too." Hank grinned briefly at him. "Hello ma'am, I'm Henry." He addressed Maria, who had turned to look at him in question. "I'm a friend of her dad's."

"Yes, Mayte has told us everything and how all the people have come here." Maria released Kerry. "Tomas is resting in the so nice bedroom. Dios Mio, Kerrisita, this is an amazing thing." She took Kerry's hands. "Please you come and see him."

Of course. Kerry willingly followed Maria into the RV, glancing around as they came up into the living area of it. There was a scattering of supplies on the sideways mounted table and the inside smelled strongly of Cuban coffee, which made her smile.

"I was amazed." Maria told her, as she led the way back past the divider and through the kitchenette. "I could not imagine there was so much inside when Mayte told me about this."

"Yeah, we got lucky." Kerry agreed. "I see you got the important stuff." She grinned as they passed the small hot plate, with a silver, black handled coffeepot on it.

"The people at the hotel were so nice." Maria said. "One of the people there, they went out and found a little bodega and brought us back some things for us, for this."

They moved back into the bedroom, where Tomas was laying on one of the lower bunks, his leg propped up on pillows, reading a Spanish language book. He looked up as they entered and then smiled. "Ah!" He put the book down. "The Angel is here!"

Kerry held a hand out. "Hello Tomas! How's the leg?"

The bedroom was neat and tidy, the lower bunk opposite had a bag and some folded shirts on it and on the small table at the very back of the RV there was a stack of folders and paperwork from the hospital.

Tomas himself was dressed in a tshirt and shorts, and was freshly shaved. Nearby, a basic with a washcloth and shaving supplies was sitting on a built in bench.

"It is okay." Tomas indicated the limb, encased in fiberglass, which extended from his foot up to just over his knee. "The doctors put some things inside of it."

"Metal things." Maria confirmed, standing behind Kerry. "Some things, I think, that Dar's papa also has."

"Ah." Kerry nodded. "Plates." She agreed. "You look a heck of a lot better than the last time I saw you." At the side of the bed was a wooden box, and on top of that was the utter normality of a styrofoam cup, with a coffee stained plastic cover and a small stack of tiny plastic thimble sized containers.

"I will go find Dar." Maria said, patting Kerry on the back. "Sit down, Kerrisita. I will soon return." She indicated the other bed, then trotted back out, leaving them alone.

Kerry felt this was likely by design. She sat down and rested her elbows on her knees.

"Would you like a cafecita?" Tomas offered. "I am so glad we came here to see you. I have been thinking in my head what I would say to you when we met again."

Kerry knew better than to refuse. "Sure." She agreed. "I never turn down a good cup of Cuban coffee."

Tomas twisted his upper body and poured out the small cup, handing it over to her. "I know you will say this was nothing for you to do." He said, after she took it. "I have spoken to Maria, and she has said this, that it does not seem amazing to you what you did."

Kerry sipped the inky, pungent, strongly scented beverage. "You mean, maybe I think renting an airboat to come find you and all that is not a big deal? No, it really doesn't seem like it to me." She said, after a quite moment of

silence. "After living with Dar, and doing the things that we do for all this time, that didn't seem amazing. In fact, it didn't even really seem unusual." She paused again, and then smiled. "Your wife knows that. She knows us."

"Si." Tomas also smiled. "She said to me, when we were at the hospital, that everything was not surprising to her. The doctors, and the nurses, I would tell them this and it was surprising to them to hear that. Because you know, Kerry, many people are not like that."

"But a lot of people are." Kerry said. "And.. you know... I like being able to look in the mirror, and believe it when I say to myself, I did the right thing."

"You are an angel."

Kerry shook her head. "No." She responded. "I'm not, but I like to think I work to stay on the side of the angels. I make those choices." She regarded the small cup, then glanced over it at Tomas, who was just sitting quietly watching her. "And you know, I have to live up to Dar, right?"

Tomas laughed. "When Maria first was going to work for Dar she came home and said to me, Tomas, I have a job with a very unusual person." He said. "She said, many of the others there told her Dar was a demon, a devil, you know?"

"Oh, I know. They told me the same thing." Kerry's eyes twinkled. "But I'd already fallen for her so it really didn't matter at all."

"But Maria said, no no, she saw God in this person." Tomas finished, making Kerry's jaw drop, just a little bit. "So like you, yes? She knows every day she is on the right side."

The RV rocked a little bit, and Kerry glanced through the door to see Maria returning, with Dar's tall form behind her. "Speaking of." She said. "Anyway, I'm really glad you're feeling better, Tomas. I just wish your house had fared as well as you did."

"We are here." Maria moved all the way into the little sleeping area and cleared the way for Dar to come in behind her. "Isn't this nice Dar? The men who helped us go from the hospital liked it very much."

Dar ducked her head a little bit to enter. "Hey Tomas." She greeted the man casually, then set her hands on her hips as she looked around the small sleeping room. "It aint' the Hilton, but it's all right." She agreed. "Probably better not to have a lot of space to cover right now."

Kerry patted her knee. "Sit, hon. Before you hit your head."

Amiably, Dar took a seat next to her.

"So now." Maria took a seat on the tiny stool at the very back of the RV. "What has been happening? Mayte has told us some few things, but I am sure there is more."

Dar chuckled.

Kerry cleared her throat. "Where do I start."

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"So Fifty fifty." Dar concluded.

"Huh."

They were upstairs in Dar's office, alone. "Remind me to send a kudos to the kids." Dar added. "That update they sent, it did what it needed to."

"Without you inspecting it?" Kerry was seated near the window, hands braced on the bench seat, her back to the warm breeze coming in off the water. "Nice."

"But no answer from the VC." Dar said. "Hey, I said I would call. I called. I left a message." She shrugged faintly. "I'm not going to worry about it. Maybe he's kiteboarding or something he said he was into that."

"You were going to push him off anyway."

"I was. It's not good timing. We can't focus on that, and it needs focus." Dar said. "We need to get this back online first, and make sure we're not going to have to deal with another one of these."

Kerry nodded. "You're right." She said. "I mean.. Dar, you're always right."

"I am not or we wouldn't be sitting here sweating." Her partner reminded her drily. "And that reminds me, we have to go home tonight."

Kerry blinked at the seeming subject change. "Um... okay?"

"Or we're going to be fighting with everyone not to take one of those RV's."

"Ah."

"Besides, we need to check on what's going on over there." Dar rocked back in her chair. "Just because Pharma worked out, doesn't mean the rest of the plates I was juggling haven't broken." She rested her elbow on her desk and her head against her hand. "Glad Tomas feels better."

"Me too." Kerry smiled. "I know they're worried about their house though. Maria's been trying to get through to her insurance company, but its been nothing but busy signals."

"Not surprised." Dar remarked. "Maybe some of the guys can ride down there tomorrow with them and see if they can get near it." She watched Kerry nod in agreement. "Where'd we end up with the Brazilians?"

Kerry snapped her fingers. "I knew there was something I was forgetting to call Mark about." She got up. "Thanks hon, let me go check." She headed for her office. "I kinda think if he didn't call it's not great news." She said, over her shoulder as she walked through the door that linked the two rooms.

Dar remained where she was, the room mostly cast into shadow as the sun was starting to trend to the west, sending spears of warm, rich sunlight through the windows across the hall.

In the outer room, Zoe was busy with messages and the LAN techs had run a cable down into her office for a phone, and Dar could hear her speaking softly into it, the light scratch of a pen against paper going as an undertone.

The construction was going on, the sound of drills and saws, driven by the battery powered UPS in the hallway interrupted the relative quiet at unexpected intervals, and the smell of plaster and paint came and went.

She wished the whole damn thing was over already.

It was so damned inconvenient and uncomfortable.

"Dar." Maria came into the office, holding her cell phone. "A very strange thing has just happened."

Dar regarded her. "Like what?" She asked. "Pretty much everything's been strange for the last week, so this should be a doozy.. you finally get hold of your agent?"

Maria sat down in the visitor chair across from Dar's desk. "He has not called." She frowned. "But a person just did make a call to our number, and they said they were from the government." She paused. "Do you think this is a scam thing, that we heard on the news about?"

"Maybe. What did he say?"

"Something about a program, and he needs to talk to us about it." Maria said. "I don't know about any program. Tomas says, he doesn't know either. Could it be something to help because of the flooding? They want to send some papers. I gave them the fax thing Mayte set up for us."

"Sure." Dar agreed. "Might be some FEMA help or something."

"But we did not ask for this." Maria said, in a puzzled tone. "How did they know to call me on this phone?" She held up her cell phone. "It is my phone from the office." She explained. "I did not take the one from our house, it was not working and there was no battery anyway."

Dar's lips twitched, just a little bit. "Don't look a gift horse in the ass?" She suggested. "Hey, if the government wants to help ya, let them." She rocked forward and leaned her forearms on the desk. "Maybe your insurance agent went on the lam, and handed over their list of customers to FEMA?"

Maria considered that. "It is possible." She finally agreed. "Anyway I will look at the papers and see what it is." She paused. "So many people are here. They are making the office look so nice." She changed the subject. "if the power comes, it will be almost better."

"Not quite." Dar sighed. "We need comms. More than a tin can and string back to a half assed satellite sitting on that damn island."

"You are worried." Maria said, quietly. "Kerrisita is worried."

Dar regarded her. "I'm more pissed off than worried. Pissed off that we let ourselves get into a mess like this." She responded honestly. "I feel like an idiot. I know what these things can do."

For a long moment, Maria just remained silent because there was really nothing to be said to that, and both she and Dar knew that. Finally, she sighed. "Dar, you cannot think of everything." She said. "I think no one considered that we would have so much business so quickly."

"Yeah, that's what Kerry said, and I know it's true, but I still feel like an idiot." Dar sighed. "I told her we need to slow down and get our act together." She paused. "And who knows how long it'll take for the power to come back.." She paused again, thoughtfully. "Huh."

"You are thinking of something." Maria said, confidently.

Dar blinked a few times. "Yeah, maybe." She murmured. "Maybe."

Kerry re-entered the room, carrying her cell phone. "Well." She said. "I'm not really sure it was how you or I would have done it, but we still have Brazilian clients."

Both Dar and Maria turned their heads to look at her.

"It involves a posse of out of work Brazilian steakhouse waiters from West Palm Beach translating for LAN technicians from Smyrna Georgia." Kerry told them. "So..."

Dar's brows shot straight up to her hairline. "What?"

"Dios mio." Maria murmured.

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It was so nice, and so wonderful to be cool and comfortable, surrounded by the conveniences they were used to around them. Kerry picked up a tray with some hot chocolate on it and went back into the living room where Dar was laying on the couch, dressed in a pair of cotton shorts and a t-shirt, her newly showered hair still damp around her shoulders.

Spread out across their coffee table near the couch were diagrams, brown and dark blue lines that looked a little dusty and had carefully spaced and written letters in blocks on the bottom right hand side.

There was a triangular shaped ruler laying on top of them and a drafting pencil, and Dar had several pages of dense notation in her hands that she was studying.

Chino and Mocha were curled up on the loveseat together, looking very content to be back in their home.

"Dar, was Richard right about us getting into trouble for doing things to this place?" Kerry handed her a cup of the cocoa. "He sounded pretty sure it was going to be a problem."

"Probably." Dar sat up and put the cup down, setting the papers onto the tabletop without mussing them or spilling a drop onto the rest of the pages in a nonchalant display of perfect coordination. "But I don't care. This is the one way we can get this all done, Ker."

"I like it." Kerry sipped her chocolate. "Of course, we're dependent on that telecom to get done what they need to do, but if we have power and comms, and space... hell, why not? Half those guys are living in tents anyway, or underneath desks. We could do it."

"We could do it." Dar agreed. "Bring those RV's in there, and get that electrician in to run us feeds. Hell we don't even need to trench if that's going to be a hassle just run the cables over the ground there. You gave me the idea – we can light the place up with wifi."

"We need aircon for the servers." Kerry said. "And for us, hon, it's August. We have what, three more months of summer left? Where are we going to put that kind of hardware? I agree on the people. Get them out of that office and over there and we have a wall and gates and plenty, plenty of space to work with."

"We can run the cables into the house and into those internal offices. One of them." Dar pointed at a line in the drawings. "Just air condition with spot coolers in those two. One for the servers, one for the people."

Kerry studied the drawing. "Better to do the downstairs. That area near the kitchen and the storage rooms back there. We can use this one for the servers." She leaned over and pointed at one of the large walk in spaces. "We can work on that kitchen table, and use the appliances in there if we power that space."

Dar tapped her pencil on the paper. "We could do it." She said. "Drain the spot coolers out the sinks there. Move the office refrigerators." She looked at Kerry. "Run everything temporary, in case we do get our asses nailed for it, and we can pull it all out."

Kerry thought about it again for a long moment, and then she smiled. "This could work, Dar."

"It could."

"Let's do it."

Dar sat back and picked up her cocoa. "Hell, if Mark could wrangle bus boys to support an AWS migration, we can sure as hell make this house a nerd camp."

Kerry lifted her cup in a toast. "To nerd camp!"

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"Lets take the boat." Dar leaned in the doorway to the kitchen, arms folded.

Kerry looked up from her laptop, one eyebrow quirked. "Given the line to get off the island this morning, it'll probably be faster." She agreed. "And there's a dozen other people at the office with cars if we need a ride. Sure. Why not?"

Dar nodded. "I'm going to go down and turn the engines over." She said. "I'll run by the cottage on the way and check out the kids. I know they said it was all peaches last night at dinner but..."

"But you want to see for yourself." Kerry chuckled. "I'll catch up on the mail and meet you down at the marina. Did you see on the local channel they already demo'd that whole area near the docks? They have a dome up for the dockmaster's office."

"I saw. That was cool." Dar slid her sunglasses into the front of her collar. "I want to find out where they got that tent, because it would work in nerd camp." She winked at Kerry. "C'mon dogs, lets go."

It was a breezy morning. Dar waited for the dogs to jump into the back of the golf cart and then she backed out of the underground spot and pulled up the ramp and paused, regarding the line of cars backed all the way up past their driveway from the ferry dock. "Holy crap."

Chino, seated in the rear dock with her head out the side of the cart, sniffed the wind. "Gruff!" She let out a soft bark.

"Mommy Kerry wasn't kidding, huh?" Dar turned left along the road and rumbled along in the gravel until she got past the cars, then bumped up onto the road and into the right hand lane heading towards the water. "What a mess."

She hadn't realized there was a line. She had just felt like being on the water, with the bright sunny morning, the breeze and the incrementally smaller amount of humidity in the air. To come out and find it was actually a more efficient commute just brought on a wry smile.

As she parked at the cottage, she saw one of the service staff approaching with a small cart bearing a coffee setup and a covered tray. "Morning Carlos." She called out, as the dogs jumped down and trotted over, sniffing knowingly at the tray.

"Morning, Ms. Dar." The waiter cheerfully greeted her. "I was just bringing over some coffee and some little pastries for the boys and girls here."

"Don't let them hear you call them that." Dar chuckled.

"Oh no they are very nice." Carlos paused and stopped the cart, whipping out a cup and picking up a smaller pot to pour thick, dark coffee into a cup, and then handing it over to her. "I like to start out with the deliveries here, because they are all so cute and fun."

Dar accepted the cup. "Thanks." She could smell the rich, sharp sweetness. "How's it going for you all? Things settled down any or are you still sleeping over at the Mansion?"

Carlos had taken the cloth covering off the tray and selected a small pastry, breaking it in half and offering a piece to each patiently waiting, tail sweeping dog. "It is okay." He straightened and regarded her. "Things are a little better, you know?" He made a gesture with his hand. "Everything is moving forward, and so people pay attention to that and don't complain so much."

Dar nodded. "Yeah, I can imagine, though I have no idea what the hell anyone would complain to you about out here." She looked around. "I mean, c'mon."

Carlos smiled, his perfect, even white teeth flashing. "You are very practical. That is what the boys were talking about yesterday, yes? That if you can do something you do something, and if no? Move on and do something else."

"What's the point of complaining." Dar agreed. "Waste of energy."

"Exactly." Carlos nodded. "So I, too, do not complain. We are doing fine here, and everyone thinks even if there are little troubles, it is better to be here than staying on the other side of the water with all the big troubles." He took the cup back from Dar and put it in a dish bin on the bottom level of the cart. "There are many worse places."

Dar thought about the previous day. "No doubt about that."

"I have heard that you and Ms Kerry have found a new house." Carlos remarked, unexpectedly. "They said it was a big place?"

"True. The old Hunter place in the south Grove." Dar said. "House is as big as that damn mansion up there. No idea what the hell the two of us are gonna do with it really."

Carlos regarded her, his head cocked a little to one side, a faint smile on his face. "Well, Ms Dar, if you decide it is so big a place you need some help to take care of it, you will let some of us know that, yes?"

Dar was a touch surprised, then realized she really shouldn't be. "We absolutely will."

Carlos smiled more widely, and then winked at her, before he twitched the cover over the tray of pastries and turned the cart once again towards the cottage.

Dar went over and opened the double door for him to roll the supplies inside, and gave a brief wave to the greetings from inside. She followed him into the cottage and closed the door.

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Kerry had just slid her backpack onto her back and put her sunglasses on when a knock came at the door. She pushed the glasses up onto the top of her head and went over, pulling the door open and taking a step back. "Hey Clemente, c'mon in."

The hospitality manager, sweating as usual, came inside and closed the door behind him. "I am sorry to disturb you, Ms. Kerry, it will only be for a moment." He said. "The booking office asked me to find out for how long you will want the cottage."

"Ah." Kerry considered that. "I'm going to guess about a month." She responded. "We have some other arrangements we're working on, but it's kind of tough out there right now."

Clemente nodded. "There is no problem. At the first, there were many people who were also interested in the cottages, but the idea you said, that Ms Dar said, to contract out the units no one is living in, this was excellent." He said. "Now our problem is with the traffic we have so many people who were so interested in that."

"Ah!" Kerry felt enlightened. "Now I get what the line up is."

"Si." He nodded. "All the solutions make more problems." He agreed. "But all the people who were making so much noise, the government and so on, they are happy now. The unit owners getting fees for their units, they are happy. The booking office now has not enough place to keep the money they are making, they are very happy, and you can be sure that I told everyone where this idea came from."

"Well." Kerry hitched her thumb under the strap of her backpack. "It was kind of obvious."

"Si. Now only the ferrys are not happy, and we have to find a way to fix that problem." Clemente said. "But at any case, thank you for this, and I will let the booking office know, and if you do not mind I am also going to say to them they should not charge you for this because you came with such a good idea."

"Hey, we'll take that." Kerry told him, as they both walked towards the door. "I think they owe us a few favors for Dar's fixing the security cameras and setting up internet for them too."

"Absolutely." He held the door open for her. "And oh yes, Lisette at the desk has told me that the governor is looking to speak with Ms. Dar. He was asking for her last night, but you had not yet come home and he went on his helicopter this morning."

"Uh uh." Kerry walked out onto the landing and started down the steps as he closed the door behind them. "I'll let her know. We're going to take our boat over to our office – so we probably won't be back until tonight but.." She glanced over her shoulder. "Our cell phones work at the office. Have him give us a call if you bump into him."

Clemente nodded. "I will do that, absolutely." He said. "Would you like a ride to the marina? My cart is just there."

"Sure." Kerry agreed. "To the cottage, matter of fact. Dar's probably there with ours." She pushed her sunglasses down as she got into the service cart and hoped for another progressive day.

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It felt amazing to be out on the boat. Kerry put her feet up on the aft gunwhale and sipped her freshly made cup of herbal tea as the Dixie cruised across the slightly choppy water, keeping Chino and Mocha company as they lay on the deck enjoying the breeze.

Dar was up on the flying bridge threading a course past the causeway, and obeying the speed limit gave Kerry a chance to look at the coast on either side of them, remembering their first trip up the waterway and seeing there was some improvement from the wreckage to be seen.

Things that had been half sunken, the overturned boats, and other debris had been towed out of the water, some just dragged up onto the shore, some completely gone, a few of the boats had been refloated and were bobbing near the trashed piers, tied off onto whatever was available.

There were a lot more boats around now. A few police and marine craft, but far more pleasure craft moving across the bay, fishing boats moving purposefully towards the ocean, and here and there, skidoos zipping around near the islands that had taken damage in the center of the bay.

Here in broad daylight, the damage was still visible and evident, but the lack of power and communication were not, and as they passed some of the condos, the windows there were now covered and there were no longer drapes and debris flying around them.

So progress was being made. Kerry sipped her tea thoughtfully, enjoying the tang of the orange spice against her tongue as they made a long, arching turn to the south parallel to the shoreline and with the eastern sun shining brightly there was a lot to see.

Kerry shifted her chair so the sun was at her back and just watched it go by. Along the seawall there were barge after barge parked, some with cranes on them, some with dumpsters, and she could see workers busy removing damaged and destroyed property.

Moving forward, for those owners of this high priced real estate anxious to get the storm behind them.

Different than what she'd seen on the television that morning, where neighborhood after neighborhood inland were still flooded, houses were falling part, and people were in shelters, standing in lines for cups of Kool aid and peanut butter sandwiches.

Two insurance companies had gone under. Just left the state, turned off their phones, scattered to the winds abandoning all their customers. The state government had said they were working on a plan to get some funding to cover things.

No one knew how long that would take. Some people, houses utterly destroyed, just left them, and drove north, leaving their banks holding the bag with now mostly worthless mortgages.

As of this morning, six thousand people had died. Twenty thousand were injured, and in hospitals some of which had taken damage themselves and were struggling. Tomas had been one of the unbelievably lucky ones. The hospital ship Mercy was due to arrive this afternoon, to try and help.

Sea tow was busy trying to clear the channel at Government Cut so the hospital ship could enter, and PortMiami was finding space and enough undamaged pier length to let her tie up.

The storm itself had unexpectedly petered out, being sucked into a frontal boundary that had stolen the energy from it and Bob was now a remnant low, somewhere up near Newfoundland. New York had seen some flooding, but it hadn't been as bad as they'd expected and now that Bob was gone, the news organizations were circling back again to Florida to fill their slots since the threat to the seaboard had just really been that, a threat. They'd swept the leaves up on the Mall in DC and moved on.

Florida Power and Light, who had, truthfully, been working around the clock had reported that morning that while they had a plan for restoring all the power poles that were now probably sunken either in the Everglades or in the Gulf, fixing the two power plants that had taken catastrophic damage would take longer.

One of them was nuclear. Fortunately the structure of Turkey Point had been thoughtfully considered, Kerry had learned that morning, possibly by the same people who had built their condos as it had been rated to stand up to roughly fifty percent higher winds than even Bob had managed to produce.

So they didn't have THAT problem. But the plant was offline and had no external power to run it's management systems and were on a diesel generator to maintain control of the reactors.

Great way to start the morning. Kerry shook her head. "Okay kids, we're almost there. You ready to see all your friends at the office? Even that cat?"

"Growf." Chino commented, tongue lolling.

"Hey Ker?" Dar's voice crackled through the intercom. "We're about ten minutes out."

"Yep." Kerry hit the button and responded. "Need anything?"

"Do we have any oatmeal cookies onboard?"

Kerry got up. "Probably not, hon. Maybe peanut butter."

"Even better."

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There was a lot of activity and yelling voices audible when they walked up the road from the sailing club to the back of the office property.

“Uh oh.” Kerry commented, as both dog’s ears perked up, hearing the sounds.

“We cursed ourselves.” Dar agreed mournfully. “When we said at least it wasn’t Monday.”

“We did.”

They increased their pace and as they reached the side of the building they could see flashing lights ahead of them in the parking lot. “Oh boy.” Dar muttered.

There were at least four police cars in the lot, and as they came around the corner they saw the staff en masse standing in front of the building, fronted by both Carlos and Maria, with Mayte at her side, speaking forcefully to the cops.

“Wait.” Kerry grabbed Dar by the back of her cutoff overalls. “Maybe we should let them handle it.”

“C’mon.” Dar started to move forward, hauling her along. “We own the property and the company, Ker.”

“I know, but if we get involved, will Martians land?” Kerry nevertheless released her and caught up alongside. “I mean, the water delivery worked out, didn’t it?”

They crossed the front yard and were spotted, and their crew separated to let them through, looking without a doubt relieved to see them.

Dar removed her sunglasses and edged to the front, getting between Maria and the police, making the most of her height, and her presence. “What’s going on here?” She pinned the closest policeman with her eyes. “You got a problem?”

Kerry sidled up next to Mayte and tugged her sleeve, bending her head close to listen to Mayte’s rapid whisper.

“I’m sorry? Who are you ma’am?” The cop responded, with brusque courtesy. “What’s your interest here?”

Dar eyed him. “I co own the property and the business that’s inside it.” She indicated with her thumb the building behind them. “So I’ll ask again, what’s going on here?”

State police, she glanced at the uniform. Not the city cops, or the county cops, these reported to the governor and the cars in the lot were FHP.

“Ma’am, this area, the whole section of the city, has been ordered closed, and evacuated.” The officer said, “This has nothing to do with you. It applies to everyone. You have until four PM to leave the premises, or you’ll be arrested and taken to jail.”

“Why?”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Why?” Dar repeated. “We’ve been living and working here since the storm. Why now? What happened?”

“Ma’am, it’s not your business or even my business as to why. We’ve been asked to secure this area, and that’s what we’re going to do. All of these people need to be out of here by 4. That’s all.” He jerked his head at her. “Let’s go.” He said to the other police officers standing by.

“Hold on.” Dar said. “What’s the perimeter?”

The man stopped and looked at her. “Ma’am?” He made the word sound like a curse.

“How far do they have to go. What is the perimeter of your evacuation area.” Dar ignored the tone. “How far south does it extend?”

Faced with a reasonable question and no real reason not to answer it, the man looked around. “Jaspert, can you answer that?” He said. “I’m not from this part of the state.”

“Obviously.” Carlos muttered.

One of the men standing behind him, a tall, lanky man with a very visible Adam's apple nodded. "Main Highway on the west, to St Gaudan's on the south, on up to Mayfair."

The assembled group looked at Dar, clearly waiting for her to respond.

Clearly expecting some fireworks.

Dar just nodded. "Okay, that works." She added, in a mild tone. "We'll be out of here."

Expecting more pushback, it surprised the cop, and his expression shifted a little "Okay, that's good to hear. Have a great day." He gave them all another nod, and then he, and his officers turned and walked back to their cars, not without a few backwards glances.

They got in and drove off, lights still flashing, but in silence.

"Assholes." Carlos said, after a brief silence.

"Payback from them other assholes?" Hank suggested. "So what're we gonna do, junior? Alamo part two?" He asked Dar. "Sure as hell we're not going to just roll our asses over for those beige pussies."

Dar turned and regarded them, her arms folded. "Actually. We're going to do just what they asked us to do." She announced. "Lets get everything loaded into those RV's. Pete, can you hitch your Jeep up to Scott's trailer?"

Everyone looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Say what?" Hank responded.

"I... can....?" Pete said, his voice full of question.

"But Dar." Maria spoke up. "Where are we going?"

"Someplace south of St Gaudan's." Dar seated her sunglasses on her nose. "And damn it, I'm going to need another router." She said as almost an aside. "Josh, grab the production router from the server room and all the AP's we have."

Hank had a minute of realization. "Oh!" His eyes opened wide. "Oh yeah! Yeah! Hell yeah." He turned and started back towards the building at a trot. "Hey Carlos! Get your boys together and put that generator up on my truck."

"What about all that work?" One of the carpenters asked, pointing at the building. "I guess we're done?"

Kerry was chuckling, and shaking her head. "C'mon, lets get going people." She said. "Bring all the tools, too. Where we're going, we're gonna need them."

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It was late afternoon before the caravan started out with Hank and his Humvee in the lead, and the three RV's taking up the rear. Between that were Pete's Jeep, and the rest of the cars the various builders and veterans and lifters had brought and even Scott's trailer in the mix.

Dar was the last to leave the building, and she locked the door behind her while a group of six waited for her on the sidewalk. "Okay." She shoved the key into her pocket and gestured towards the side road. "Let's go."

They headed for the sailing club. Carlos accompanied her and Kerry, along with two of the veterans, Sasha, and Josh, one of their LAN techs.

"Gotta tell ya, boss." Carlos said as they walked along the road towards the water. "That did not go the way I thought it was going to go this morning. I figured it was gonna be a scrap."

Dar chuckled. "Scrapping's fine, but there wasn't really a purpose. We'll end up in a better place this way anyhow, and closer to being functional."

"You think it was those jerks from yesterday?"

"Could be." Kerry had her backpack on her back, full of stuff she'd taken out of her and Dar's office, just in case. They'd locked all the doors, but anyone who really wanted to get in probably could, and all the equipment they could carry had been stacked into the underneath bins of the RV's, and in trunks of the caravan.

Josh had his own backpack stuffed completely full of gear. "Wild." He commented briefly. "But hey, we were just sleeping under desks. Not like it was the Hilton."

"Just roll with it." Dar advised them. "We're not going to the Hilton now, but at least the view'll be better."

"Place has a wall around it, right? Someone said that." Carlos said. "Hank said it, once he stopped laughing."

"It does." Kerry answered, as they crossed the road between their building and the club. The late afternoon sun was at their back, and the club itself had most of the debris and broken furniture removed and hauled away, leaving it looking bare. "But it's not twenty feet tall or anything. Dar jumped over it."

"Still and all, a wall's a wall." Carlos looked content. "And we got the pooches."

Chino and Mocha trotted along with them, noses busy sniffing the onshore coming air.

The sailing club deck was now easy for them to negotiate though, and they walked down the concrete dock to where the wood started, up and across the pier they'd built that was extended out to where the Dixie was sedately tied up and rocking just a little.

"Stupid people. But if they are locking everything up, no one to sell to anyway." Sasha said. "Maybe more people stay down there where we're going."

"We haven't been around there long enough to really know, but probably." Kerry said.

They boarded the Dixie and Dar left Kerry to sort everyone out while she climbed up to the flying bridge and settled behind the controls.

Carlos climbed up behind her. "Feels weird to just leave after all we did around that place."

"Yeah." Dar started up the inboard engines, hearing them rumble to life behind and below them. "But I had enough of the jackassery anyway. If it's legit, and they're locking the area down, no point in arguing. If it's blowback from the guard, no point in sticking around for it. No one'll win that one."

Carlos had sat down in the fiberglass seating area behind her. "Figures you'd show up with a plan though." He chuckled a little. "Never thought of that one, moving ops down to your new place."

"We're loose!" Kerry called up, and Dar engaged the engines and pulled back away from the dock, threading between the two broken columns and the debris she'd moved aside when they'd first gotten there.

She swung the bow around and started south, already looking forward to docking the Dixie into its new home.

She owed the troopers a thank you, for making the shift a mandate, and getting it done all at once, and removing any second thoughts they might have had, and she couldn't repress a smile because she was pretty sure there was some jackassery behind it, and it made her happy it had worked in their favor.

They would make it work. With any luck, they'd started on the trenching and when they got there she could reveal that part of the plan to offset the loss of their internet connection, slow as it had been, with the phones and the comfort of all the office's structure and facility.

There was doubt, Dar knew it. Some of the construction workers had been reluctant to come along, until Hank had talked the place up and that had gotten all their folks a little interested too.

She adjusted the throttles and they were coursing along, the boat rocking a little in the chop the bow was stolidly plowing through, making the most of its V hull and the power of the twin inboards.

The wind from their progress was blowing the hair out of her eyes, and with the sun tilting towards the western horizon, it was pleasant and almost cool, and Dar thought they would have a little time of twilight left to get things set up before it got dark.

It would be interesting, if nothing else, and absent any comfortable couch to rest on, they could sleep right on Dixie and she was glad she'd had them fill up the tanks.

"This is nice." Carlos commented, after a period of silence. "Better than that dodge ball road rage freak show on land. Hope those guys all get down here all right."

"Hank and Pete'll get em through." Dar adjusted the course a little bit, watching the depth sounder. "Would you stop a Humvee with a machine gun on the roof?"

Carlos laughed.

"Me either."

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Kerry passed around some cups as she finished making a pot of coffee in the Dixie's small galley. Their riders were seated comfortably in the living deck and the ride so far had been pretty smooth. "Kinda radical, today, huh?" She brought the coffee pot with its marine gimbal over to the table and put it down.

Then she took a seat in the chair nearest the door and relaxed.

"Yeah." Josh nodded. "Been a freaky week, but I didn't figure to end today in a big boat moving the office." He stirred some cream into his coffee and sat back in the chair. "Sucks we lost net, though."

"True." Kerry agreed. "But given that Key Biscayne's between the new place and our old place there's no way a point to point would do anything useful." She folded her hands. "We'll think of something."

Sasha was seated cross legged on the couch against the sidewall, her hands curled around the coffee cup. "Too much trouble there." She pronounced. "Lots of people where we're going, Residential. Not so far from the U, they kept those kids there for the storm."

"Dar says those buildings are built for it." Kerry leaned on her chair arm. "So they'd probably buy everything you have to sell, Sasha, They've been living on ramen noodles for the last week or so I heard on the local news."

Sasha nodded briskly. "No good back at the other place until the businesses open up again."

"Did you know they were going to shut that down, ma'am?" Josh asked. "You guys showed up and it was like you'd planned for it. We thought we were going to fight about it, but I'm glad we didn't. That thing yesterday was creepy."

Kerry cleared her throat. "Dar and I talked about moving operations last night, matter of fact. We had some things in mind, and we knew that building was becoming a bit of a trouble magnet. I'm just hoping that they really are shutting down the area, and we don't come back to a literal dumpster fire."

"That could happen." One of the two veterans said. "This other place sounds safer. Hank said there was plenty of space."

"Oh, there is." She smiled. "That's the one thing that shouldn't be a problem."

Kerry felt the engines throttle down a little. "And I think we're getting close." She concluded, leaning over to look out the window of the boat. "Yep. Coming up on the dock. This one, at least, we didn't have to put together from wreckage."

They all turned in their seats to look out, as Dar brought the Dixie around the edge of the trees coming to the water and the stone dock appeared, with its seawall, and overlooking the water, the house.

"Oh. Wow." Josh said, in an astonished tone.

"Shooo." One of the veterans whistled. "Lookit that."

Sasha turned all the way around on the couch and looked outside, as the Dixie slowed and turned, heading for the pier. Then she turned back around and looked at Kerry, both eyebrows hiked right up to her hairline.

Kerry got up. "We never do things halfway." She said. "Let me go get ready to tie us up." She went to the door and paused, glancing back at them. "Welcome to Hunter's Point."

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Night found them all in the kitchen. The generator was going outside, and there were long cables run through the open doors to fans making it all tolerable.

The three RV's were parked outside the door to the kitchen, where the loading dock was, and the RV servicing company had just left after filling their tanks.

Tents were scattered everywhere, as the group spread out across the grounds and Sasha had set up her miniature yurt right by the spring, clasping her hands over and over again in an almost ecstasy of silent delight.

The carpenters had taken over the garden shed for a workspace. The general construction guys had spent an hour outside looking at the pool deck, discussing what had to be done to sort it all out.

Along the long counter in the kitchen were the supplies, and in the small courtyard outside in back, in front of the RV's, they'd set up the grills.

"This is actually pretty sweet." Carlos commented, nodding his head. "You weren't kidding when you said there'd be plenty of room, Boss."

"Heck ya." One of the lifters agreed. "We could set up a dozen gyms around the place, and you'd never even see us." He looked around. "Had no idea this place was even by here, and I used to ride through this area every morning on my bike."

"I love all those trees." Josh said. "And the rocks and everything. It reminds me of some places we used to camp at when I was a Cub Scout."

"Place is built." Carlos reached behind him and thumped the wall. "Looks like it didn't even blink at that storm.. but it's up on a little bit of a rise with that deck and everything."

An oddly assorted smorgasbord was spread across the huge kitchen table, a mixture of the sandwiches Sasha had left, along with cookies and doughnuts and boxes of cereal and bags of tortilla chips. No one cared, everyone was content to grab a plate and just munch.

"Tomorrow, we're going to arrange for spot coolers." Kerry said. "Dar was right, we'll set up this area to work in, and that big storage room behind us to the left there we can rig for the servers."

"We can build a platform for them to sit on." One of the carpenters said. "This is some nice woodwork in here. Someone knew what the hell they were doing."

"Someone did." The plasterer agreed. "Six, maybe eight places that need some work, but the rest of it's pretty solid." He looked over at Dar. "You said you had power coming?"

"We do." Dar assented.

"You pay someone off for that?" The man meant no offense, his tone held only curiosity. "Cause I heard that guy from FPL talking before. They're screwed."

"Sorta." Dar's pale eyes twinkled a little in the light from the battery lanterns. "Let's say it was a barter. I figure we have to suffer another couple of days and something decent's going to happen. They already started digging over on the property line."

"That the green metal casement I saw on the edge there?" Carlos asked. "At the end of that big trench? What is that?"

Dar nodded, a smile on her lips, but remained silent as Kerry took up the explanation.

"With our usual luck, it turns out one of the major service provider international lines comes in right off the coast there, and of course we happened to be here when they wanted to ask if they could bring it up over our property,

and of course it was a company who had a good idea of who it was they were talking to.” Kerry pointed her finger at Dar. “So of course, we traded a right of way for power and internet.”

“Of course.” Dar echoed, drily. “Because if that was going to happen, it’d happen here, and to us.”

“No shit, really?” Pete was seated on the counter, eating a banana. “But they can’t get power either, can they?”

Kerry chuckled, and shook her head, looking over at Dar.

“Actually, they can. It’s emergency power. Runs through the conduits from the NAP. Ties into their fiber hub ring.” Dar said. “Which is sitting under the sidewalk on the other side of our wall. So they’re running a tap back in the same trench they’re bringing the line up over and giving us a feed.”

“Of course.” Carlos laughed. “And some internet.”

Dar nodded. “Saved them weeks pulling new lines down the coast to their previous landing point.”

“So that’s why you needed another router.” Josh spoke up. “And that big old spool of cable. And those extra APs!”

Another nod. “Yep. We’ll run a line in when they’re done to the storeroom in there, and split service out from there. It’s open. We can cover a lot of the grounds.” Dar glanced at Kerry. “That was her idea, actually.”

“That’s some damn funny stuff right there.” Hank was in the corner, a bottle of pop in his hand. “Like of all places to have that happen, it comes here?” He said. “And you happen to buy this place? “

Dar lifted her hands in a silent shrug.

It was, really. Kerry smiled. “At least once they’re done, we’ll get our connection back. It’s a pain in the ass not having it after we did.” She leaned back against the wall. “Glad we got hold of the RV folks before we lost signal.”

“So – we’ll have power and high speed like, ten times faster than we’d ever get it at the office.” Carlos summed up. “Damn.”

Dar shrugged again, but chuckled.

Kerry got up. “Okay folks, lets get some rest. It’s been a day.” She ordered. “Lot more to do tomorrow.” She picked up a remaining banana as they rest stood up and started filtering out of the room. “Goodnight!”

Outside the sky was darkening overhead and the clouds had cleared a little, giving them a good view of the stars and with the lack of power in the area, they were more vivid than usual.

Kerry walked outside onto the deck with Dar and looked up, taking a breath of the sea breeze coming off the bay and listened to the soft rush of the tide against the seawall. “You were right about coming here.” She said, as she took Dar’s hand and they started down the leveled slope towards the pier.

Dar had a flashlight in her other hand and she idly lit the path for them. “Maybe. Not like we had a choice.” She said. “But it feels a hell of a lot better to be here, then back at the office.” They skirted the edge of the deck. “Remind me when we get back onboard to try and contact my folks.”

“Let them know where we are?”

Dar nodded, as they walked from level to level, past the empty pool. “Glad we brought our mobile apartment with us though.” She said, as they reached the steps down to the stone pier the Dixie was tied up to. “Wasn’t really in the mood to either fight with staff all night or sleep on that wooden floor.”

Chino and Mocha were climbing down ahead of them, happy and tired from running around their new playground and they walked up the teak gangplank onto the boat and went right over to their large water bowl near the back gunwale, drinking from it together.

“I’m glad too.” Kerry opened the door to the cabin and went inside, turning on the inside lights and the air conditioning that would make the boat a comfortable place to be with it’s kitchenette and it’s shower, and the small refrigerator that was stocked with a supply of their favorite things.

And the queen size bed in the compact bedroom in the bow, with it's soft cotton sheets in ocean colors amidst the mellow scent of polished teak, with shaded windows on either side. After the long, hot day, she was looking forward to stretching out in it, with the quiet of this dark new dock alongside.

She left Dar at the radio station and went to the refrigerator to remove a bottle of wine, setting it on the counter and retrieving two stemless glasses.

The dogs bumped their way inside and went over to the couch to jump up and curl into contented balls. Chino had a smudge of mud on her head and Mocha turned over onto his back and waved his paws in the air.

"No answer." Dar came over and took a seat in one of the two comfortable bucket chairs in the living area. "I'll try again in the morning. But I let the island marina know where we're docked in case they come in and ask."

Kerry brought the glasses over and handed her one, sitting down in the other bucket chair. She held out the glass and touched it to Dar's, letting out a long exhaled breath. "Well, welcome home, hon."

Dar laughed and lifted her glass in a toasting gesture. "Lets just hope it all works out."

"Well, here's to chaos, in any case." Kerry took a sip of the wine and let her head fall back on the cushion of the chair. "It is what it is."

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The next morning was blessedly quiet. Kerry finished up putting things on a platter for a nibbly breakfast and picked it up to carry outside onto the back deck of the Dixie, which was bobbing gently at dock, the rubber bumpers protecting her hull from the stone pier squeaking softly in rhythm.

The pier was also a jetty. It came out from the land and then presented a right angle to the oncoming tide, extending past the length of the boat with a solid surface to the sea bed that protected the docking area from wake and was large enough to hold two boats the size of theirs, or handfuls of smaller ones.

Dar was standing on the pier talking to two men in work boots, Dickie's shirts and long pants, with a logo patch on the sleeve and tool belts around their waists.

Chino and Mocha had already mounted the steps and were roaming around their new playground. Kerry heard Chino bark, far off, somewhere beyond the house.

She put the platter down on the table on the back deck next to a pot of freshly pressed coffee and seated herself, picking up a half a pop tart and taking a bite.

It was warm, but not yet hot, the sun was coming in behind them and lighting up the edge of the property, giving her a nice bit of shade to have her breakfast in.

Dar gave the two men a genial wave, and they departed, their boots making a soft, crunching sound as they climbed up the steps and moved quickly out of sight. With a satisfied nod, Dar came back onto the boat and took the other seat.

"Everything okay?" Kerry picked up her coffee cup and took a sip.

"They're about to bring the conduit in from the road." Dar put her feet up on the gunwale and regarded the tray, selecting a peanut butter cup. "Did we raid a vending machine?"

Kerry chuckled, chewing on her pop tart. "This was left over from when we were stocking the office." She explained. "I didn't have any perishables stocked onboard, like milk or eggs. We left too fast."

"No complaints." Dar bit the cup in half contentedly. "I can hear people getting going up there." She indicated the house. "Our dogs are helping." She took a sip of coffee. "Condensed milk?"

"The very best in hurricane supplies, hon." Kerry relaxed back in her chair. "I feel like we took a step backwards in this whole communication thing though. You think it'll be a lot longer before we get that service in? Maybe we should let everyone carry on here and go back to the island."

Dar thoughtfully chewed her tidbit, her pale eyes regarding the seawall, and the neatly set stones in the front of it. "Without a connection it's not much use us being here." She admitted. "We can get more done back there."

Kerry watched her from her peripheral vision. "But you want to stay here." It wasn't a question, and she could see the corner of Dar's lips twitching into a smile. "Yeah, I do too." She admitted. "I want to explore every inch of this place, because who knows, Dar – we might not have another chance if they get really ratty with us over the legal business."

"Screw them."

"Totally not my gig."

Dar chuckled. "Tell you what, you can go explore and I'll start setting up the infrastructure with Josh. Run those cables and get what I can in place so when they are ready, we can get things moving." She said. "The kids really do have everything under control back there. They're keeping our delivery dates and Angela's in touch with Colleen."

"Did you see Elvis has Celeste doing QA?"

"I did." Dar smiled.

"And.." Kerry suddenly paused and covered her eyes. "Oh my god Dar I completely forgot to tell you, and we never went back to the island yesterday."

Dar watched her in mild alarm. "And?"

"The governor's looking for you. He wanted to talk to you. Clemente told me as I was going out the door and then... well crap. With everything that went on yesterday it slipped me." Kerry lifted her hand and looked up at Dar's profile.

Her partner shrugged, blue eyes widening. "And?"

Kerry's brows twitched. "Aren't you curious about what he wants?"

"No. Not really." Dar responded in a mild tone. "I'm sure he wants something. I'm sure I don't really want to give it to him. Phones being down is a great excuse not to contact anyone." She picked up another peanut butter cup. "Actually I'm glad you didn't tell me."

"Well, I didn't so .." Kerry now also shrugged. "Well, maybe they'll work some miracle and we'll get phone service down here. I'm going to turn on the sat tv inside the boat here and see if I can pick up the local channel, see if there's anything we need to know." She got up, and picked up the second half of her pop tart. "See you up at the house."

Dar toasted her with the coffee cup, settling back to finish it as she watched a few seabirds circling the edge of the shore, their beady eyes, she was sure, firmly planted on her table with it's remaining peanut butter cups. "Don't even think about it."

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"This is cool." Josh rolled the spool of ethernet cable to a halt and followed it into the shade of the open door to the house, flipping it over onto it's side and sitting on top of it as he pulled a crimper from his back pocket and pulled out a loop of slack. "This place is cool."

"It is." Leon, the other LAN tech agreed. "But you lucked out, man, you got to ride on the boat."

"That was really cool." Josh cut the end of the cable, then he used the stripper to peel back the thick rubber covering and exposed the inner copper core. "Its like a regular tiny apartment in there. Got a kitchen and all that."

They were inside the house, just inside the doors to the pool deck, and a carpenter had thrown together a little set of shelves for their makeshift gear. Leon was configuring one of the little switches, powered from a UPS sitting next to it, getting it ready for the cable Josh was working on.

"We drop this here, and then run it along the baseboard back to that side door to the hallway back to the room they're setting up for the servers." Leon said, regarding the little shelves with some satisfaction. "Know what we're gonna need though?"

"PDU."

"PDU." Leon confirmed. "Gonna be sweet to have power and some aircon."

"Yeah, is that not a rig or what?" Josh laughed. "Can you believe that? I talked to those telco guys out there. Man they are so freaking happy with that thing they put there. Like it's a new baby or something. Said it was the first whatever it is in Florida."

"Those guys are almost done." Leon craned his neck and looked outside across the deck, to the edge of the property where two figures were huddling over the metal box, one of them with his head actually inside it, the second holding a flashlight. "They dug a hole right under that wall."

"Yeah with the dogs helping. That was hi-larious."

Josh finished putting an end on the cable, then he made a loop and carefully taped it into a circle, fastening the loop to the back of the shelves with a zip tie before plugging a patch cable into the jack he'd terminated and then extending the other end to the back of the switch. He pushed it into one of the connections, but not all the way. "No telling what'll be on the other end."

"That's what Dar always says. Don't want no spike coming in from it when they power on and blowing this thing up. I don't have a spare." Leon agreed. "Okay, done here. Let me shut it down." He unplugged the switch and stood up. "Lets go see if they got something in mind for a PDU. I bet that guy Hank's got something or knows where to get it."

"Hell he found a refrigerator." Josh dusted his hands off. "Did you see Kerry's look when they drove in with that?"

Leon chuckled. "Man's a born scrounger."

They walked along the wall and then into the entrance to the service hall, where a veritable blizzard of activity was taking place. The big storage room had it's doors flung open and were flat against the wall on either side, and two carpenters were kneeling inside, a battery powered light clamped to a shelf over their heads.

They were fitting a platform into place in the center of the floor large enough to put a rack on top of. "We can run the cables up through here." Leon said, pointing at the shelf running just over their heads along the side walls of the room. "Got to keep those doors open anyhow to vent out the spot cooler with."

"Duct out the hot air through that window across from here." Josh nodded. "That's a good size room there. It's bigger than the server room back at the office."

They continued on into the kitchen, which for the moment was empty of people but not of foodstuffs and a big thermal jug of coffee they took advantage of.

To one side, pushed against a wall in a niche that seemed to be intended for it was a large refrigerator with a satin metal veneer, it's cable draped neatly over the top. It still had the energy sticker on it's front, and the partially opened door emitted the distinctively new plastic smell.

The doors and windows were all wide open, and from the back entrance door they could hear some voices outside, and the beeping sound of a truck backing up, along with the grinding of its gears.

"Coolers you think?" Leon sat down on one of the small stools along the table.

"No idea. Could be anything." Josh was leaning against the work surface across from him. "Spot coolers, more generators, small box of elephants.. lemme go see." He pushed away from the counter and went out the back door, down the entryway to the back door that was standing wide open.

Beyond it, two trucks were standing, their drivers holding papers talking to Kerry, and Carlos was guiding in a third to back into the loading dock. The trucks were mid size panel sided commercials, and as the backing truck stopped Josh could see into the open back of it.

Spot coolers. He nodded. "Six." He said to Leon, who had come out behind him. "And a mess of ducting. Where in the hell did they get that stuff with the whole city shut down?"

"Like this was the plan the whole time." Leon nodded. "We work for fucking wizards and shamans, dude. Aint no other explanation."

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"Okay! It's going hot!"

Kerry regarded the vaguely familiar looking large boxy device now installed just inside the back door leading out to the deck. There were thick, black cables snaking everywhere, and one of them was running across the stone surface all the way across and then off into the ground cover until it reached the big metal box that had been installed.

After a long, almost thoughtful moment, a red light appeared on the device, along with a soft hum. The device seemed to consider the condition, and then a series of other lights lit up on the back side of it, then a series of lights popped on the front of it, where yet more thick black cables were running off inside the house.

Behind her, she heard cheers.

On the low shelves to her right, she saw lights now on the small switch, and it started its little green and yellow dance, and suddenly she experienced a vivid memory of being in New York, her nose almost smashed against the front of a router, a lime green light blaring into her eyes and almost being able to taste it.

Beautiful and cheery, success defined by its color and tangible light.

There was a wireless antenna on the top of the shelves, just lying there, on top of a square piece of very expensive metal with Dar's laptop on top of it, open, a pale blue cable running from it to the box, her swimming fish screensaver sending a splash of reflection against the pale wood wall.

"Is it up?" Dar came back from the inside room, dusting her hands off. She had her hair pulled back in a pony tail and there was dust on the front of her tank top as though she'd leaned against a grimy shelf somewhere.

"It's thinking about it." Kerry indicated the stack of equipment, which was humming and fluttering and making burbling noises as it went about its business of bootstrapping.

Dar lowered herself to the stone floor and settled cross legged behind her laptop. "Let's see what we got." She cracked her knuckles, in a visible good mood. "This is going along better than I'd anticipated."

"Shuh." Kerry admonished. "Pretend it's a shitshow, please."

Dar smiled, as she unlocked the laptop and regarded the screen it revealed. "Switch is up. Now what's coming from... ah." Her brows wiggled happily. "Port's up."

Kerry came round and sat down next to her, looking over her shoulder as her partner's long fingers sped over the keys in a veritable explosion of cryptic command line call and response. "Is that a ten gig port?"

"It is." Dar said, with some satisfaction. "If I'd tried to buy that commercially it'd taken me ten years with the age of facility around here."

"We have a ten gig port in our pool deck?"

"We do. I'm going to steal some of the address space we were going to use for the datacenter Mark was looking for." Dar said. "We'll need a DMZ here... so I'll use that slash 26 for now, and we'll put a slash 23 inside. That should hold us at least for a week."

Her voice trailed off into muttering about masks and gateways as she typed along, her head rocking back and forth a little bit.

Kerry made a snorting sound. "Maybe." She glanced at the shelves, and then jumped a little. "Did you do it already?" She asked, as she dug her phone out of her pocket. "Damn, Dar. That was fast."

"Doesn't take long when you know what you're doing." Dar smiled. "Tunnel's up. Phones should work now." She observed the wireless point, which was now a happy, contented blue color. "They took our routes without any bitching. And our capwap's up. Now let me go figure out where else to light up."

"Just like that." Kerry was scrolling through her messages.

"Just like that." Dar leaned over and bit her on the shoulder. "Those jerks from Alabama did us a favor. Maybe I'll call Gerry and get their asses up to Palm Beach to guard the governor's country club." She winked at her. "Be right back."

Kerry remained where she was, already imagining she could feel the faintest reduction in the humid air from the spot coolers they couldn't possibly have running yet in the hallways behind her as she went through her texts, pausing to respond to two of Colleen's.

Then she turned to her mail, aware of Dar's laptop next to her softly chiming as it picked up mail as well. "What in the hell did we do before we had email?" She asked aloud. "Did we really write in longhand on pieces of dead tree, put them in wrappings of more dead trees, and have someone walk around and hand deliver them?"

She looked up, past the edge of the door, across the pool deck. Outside, four workers were using a manual hand pumped washer, its intake hose dropped right into Biscayne Bay to clean the stone with thick bristled, long handled brushes, the tang of the salt water and cleaner sharp in her nose.

"Hey Kerry!"

Kerry turned around to look behind her, to find Hank coming across the open floor, his boots scuffing a little against the stone surface, one of the contractors trailing behind him with dirt covered gloves and a scattering of pine needles stuck to the knees of his work pants. "Hey."

"Got some good news." Hank said. "Doug here, he dug round the place and this here's got plumbin'."

Kerry paused. "Well, didn't we know that?"

"Useful kinda plumbing." The contractor Doug said. "Like, they did the whole deal, ma'am. There ain't no fixtures in place or nothin, but all the lines go out under the ground and y'all are hooked up to city sewer." He responded confidently. "All it'll take is some porcelain and caulk and you all are good to go. Don't need to bring in them portos you were talkin bout."

"Oh!" Kerry said, slightly startled. "Really?"

Doug nodded. "Now.." He looked to either side, and put a finger along his nose. "I can't say whether that there hookup's legal. Know what I'm saying?" He said. "I mean, it's all solid pipes and all, but I didn't see no typical city meet me for it. Just goes in there."

Kerry thought about that. "Well, it's a hell of a lot better than if you'd told me those pipes just went out into that Bay." She pointed over her shoulder. "So now we just need some fixtures."

"Sure I can find me some." Hank responded. "Aint no problem.. all we need to do after that is get us some water turned on."

"Oh.. well so that." Doug pulled off his gloves and stuck them in his back pocket. "There's a tap off that spring out there. It's valved off and I didn't turn the house on cause I wanted to make sure there wasn't no busted pipes first." He explained. "I didn't see none, so I'll crank it up a little, and do a quick check."

"The spring." Kerry repeated. "Is it potable?"

Doug nodded. "I tested it. It's pretty good, it's coming up out of the aquifer. But if I were you, I'd put filtering on it, in case cause there's lots of stuff in the groundwater round here. Or in case the salt water comes in." He paused thoughtfully. "Place this size, you want to get commercial water turned on, not sure it'll give you enough pressure for the whole place and all that. I saw a city meter. It's locked though."

"But the spring's good enough for now?"

Doug nodded again. "Oh yeah. But like I said about the filtering..."

Kerry smiled at him. "Would you like to install filtering for us? I think it's a great idea. Can you do it or do we need to wait?"

He was shaking his head. "Nope, can do it right away." He said. "Matter of fact, let me go see if I got something I can start with in my truck." He waved cheerfully, and headed towards the entrance door of the house, propped wide open with flashes of greens and browns, whistling under his breath.

Kerry hitched up a knee and rested her elbow on it. "That Guard captain really did do us a favor." She said, in a wondering tone. "Holy cow that's amazing news. That was the last thing I was really worrying about, getting water supply."

"This place right here? This is righteous." Hank agreed. "Couldn'ta worked out any better, and whatcha know? Less assholes round." He looked at the machinery. "That all working?" He pointed curiously at it.

"It's all working." Kerry agreed, with a sudden, grin. "This really is all working." She got up and dusted off her knees. "C'mon. Lets see what else is going on. Maybe Dar found a manatee offering cable tv."

"I can prob'ly can find us a television too." Hank hitched his camo pants up. "Lemme to take the Vee out and find us some crappers. Hey Zoe!" He let out a yell as they walked along together. "Ya'll wanna go shoppin?" He glanced at Kerry. "My ass is colorblind. You all don't want me pickin out nothing that goes in a house."

"Are we going to have a choice of colors?" Kerry eyed him. "Or is to better not to ask?"

Hank grinned at her. "Ya'll are learnin fast."

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The sun was setting in the west, sending long shadows through the trees and spears of red and gold between them. The sounds of work had faded, and now seagulls were drifting over the edge of the land, inspecting the goings on with a wary fascination and cocked wings as the deck emptied of strange humans who retreated into and around the house.

Outside behind the kitchen Jerry the lifter was peeling a mango, standing behind the outdoor cooking area that held the sturdy gas grills front and center, two of them lit and waiting for action, the third already smoking what was, he thought, some jerked chicken from somewhere promising lots of lean protein for dinner.

He cut chunks of the mango into a blender and added several calamondins to it, then capped it, and turned it on, looking on with pleasure as it pulverized the fruit, plugged into a outdoor power strip attached to an extention cord that was running back into the back door of the kitchen.

"This place is great." Pete walked down the slope to the outdoor area, a rifle in a camouflage cover slung over his shoulder. "Ten thousand times better than that office for pretty much everything." He said. "way more space, way less potential assholes."

"No kidding." Jerry finished mixing his smoothie and poured it into a cup, it's contents thick and fragrant, a mixture of the mango's sweetness and the tang of the citrus, with a swirl of green from herbs recently scrounged. "And now we got real internet. Life is good."

"And legit power." Pete picked up one of the unused calamondins and bit into it, chewing it with evident enjoyment. "This is the way to live, y'know? On your own land, and all that." He looked around them, slowly nodding. "Nice."

Jerry nodded. "It's beautiful here." He started consuming the smoothie. "No close neighbors, the water and all... I can sure see why they bought this place."

"Thought they were nuts until I saw it." Pete admitted. "Just snap deciding like that, but Junior's got the knack for that just like Andy does. No thought, just boom." He snapped his fingers. "And now look." He extended one hand out in a wave. "Couldn't ask for better."

Leon and Josh were just coming back from the RV parking area, a coil of cabling over their shoulders, and Leon with an empty backpack draped over his back. They gave the two of them a wave before going back into the house, where the door was now closed as the early evening breeze off the water rustled the fallen, dead leaves from the storm.

“Been such a weird time.” Jerry said, folding his massive arms over his chest. “Two weeks ago I didn’t know any of you all, hardly. Just Carlos, and I was working in the health store selling vitamins to people who would chase em down with a chocolate milkshake.”

Pete smiled. “I was working in a Jiffy Lube.” He said. “No idea when that’s coming back. Whole area’s still flooded. No idea what happened to my trailer, for that matter.”

“You care?”

“Nah. Not really.” Pete smiled a genuine, gentle smile. “When Andy called me and asked me to come help out, I never even looked back. I knew whatever we were getting into, he’d make sure we were taken care of and sure enough, here we are.”

“You were in the service with him?” Jerry asked. “Seems like a straight up guy.”

Pete’s lips twitched, a little. “He is.” He replied. “We’d all have followed him to the bowels of hell and we did a few times. He has that same mojo that Dar does, that thing where no matter what the fuck all is going on, it’ll get sorted out and you’ll end up on the right side.”

“Like you said, here we are.” Jerry lifted his smoothie in a toast. “Nobody round here’s living better than we are.”

“True that.”

The two Labradors came into view, galloping along across the ground heading for the house, ears flapping, tails steering. There was mud on their coats and they pattered over the leaves happily, tongues lolling pinkly.

“Great place for the dogs.” Jerry noted. “Well, let me see what else needs moving.” He picked up the cup and winked. “Then it’s off to the arboreal gym.” He sauntered back to the house.

Pete finished his calamondin slowly, just standing there and looking around, watching as the dogs went to one of the large oak trees, looking up into it and barking.

Squirrel, he deduced.

The yellow dog stood up and put her front paws on the tree trunk, and barked commandingly, and as if in response, not a squirrel but a tall, lanky body emerged from the tree, moving down from branch to branch as the dog’s tails wagged into a blur.

Dar sat on the bottom limb and regarded her pets, as Mocha whirled in a circle, nearly falling down in his excitement. Then she turned and grabbed onto the branch and swiveled around to lower herself and hang from her arms, glancing down to make sure the dogs weren’t underneath her before she let go and dropped the few feet to the ground. “Cut that out, you mutts!”

She had a backpack on her back, and visible against the tree bark was a long cable, and she paused to adjust the cable straight before she turned and walked towards where Pete was standing.

Pete enjoyed the moment. Dar was just one of those people who were so unconsciously unselfconscious it was a pleasure to simply watch her stroll along, moving with that faint swagger and muscularity that was so natural and unstudied.

Dar wasn’t cute, and she wasn’t what he thought of as pretty, but she was primally beautiful and that was seriously attractive to him in it’s frank boldness without really having any sexuality involved. “Hey Dar.” He greeted her. “What’cha doin up that tree?”

“Hanging wifi.” Dar reached him and captured the last remaining calamondin. “Whole area here’s lit now.” She added in a tone of satisfaction. “It probably reaches out to that shack. Maybe even the gate.”

"You could have asked one of your little techie boys to do that, y'know."

"What, and given up the fun of climbing that tree?" Dar's pale eyes widened in mock horror. "Dad's on the way over." She added. "Now that they can call us again they want to see what the hell's going on over here. They got back a few hours ago."

"Sure." Pete agreed. "There's room down there at the dock.. or is he driving over? You tell him the office is blocked off?"

"He's running by there to see if it really is." Dar produced a tiny, somewhat piratical grin. "You know my dad. He's pretty pissed off at the whole thing the way it went down, but I told him it's much better here."

"Truth." Pete glanced past her as Sasha emerged from the house with a large metal bowl of something, and Ben, one of the veterans right behind her with a tray. "Are we going to go rustle up some stores? We could use some resupply."

"I can run the boat out and get some fish." Dar chewed her bitter little orange. "But Sasha seems to have sources."

"Mm."

"Yeah, I don't ask too much either." Dar sighed. "I heard Publix has like five stores they're going to open on generator. I can only imagine the chaos."

Pete's gray eyes widened. "Like Black Friday at Walmart." He paused. "Maybe we should get front in line with that Humvee."

Dar started laughing in reflex. "That'll make the news." She swallowed the last of the tiny fruit. "But today was a good day. We're in a lot better place now. With all the space I can house the whole company in there once we get a few more coolers."

"You going to do that? I mean.. it's your house." Pete said. "Kinda weird."

"Not our house yet." Dar smiled easily. "Gotta do what's right first, Pete. We've got people counting on us to keep things going."

Andy's image. "Yup, hear that." Pete agreed cheerfully. "Think we got ice in that fridge yet?"

"Let's go see." Dar dusted her hands against her cargo shorts and headed for the door, as the scent of char broiling rose around them from the grills, and the sharp fragrance of jerk seasoning followed.

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The kitchen was a bizarre mixture of stolid old house and odd technological post apocalyptic addition, with the spot coolers pumping away and providing a blessed coolness, their vent ducts snaking under hastily built wooden ramps and through the windows to release the hot air outside, and their drain hoses snaking out far enough for the slope to take the condensation all the way to the Bay.

It was more than large enough to hold everyone, though, and between seats by the work counter on the window side of the room and seats around the huge block table on the other side, everyone was busy with plates full of weirdly mixed grill and Vietnamese charred vegetables and pitchers of cold iced tea.

Just to be able not to sweat, and to be comfortable almost made the menu irrelevant but Leon's jerk chicken drew praise from everyone and Sasha as usual made magic with the ingredients on hand.

Kerry's contribution had been the ice tea. There were leftover cookies and doughnuts for dessert, but they were for now sitting back and just talking, discussing the day and what had gotten done, and what the plans were for the following morning.

The water was on in the sinks, and Hank had managed to scrounge a total of two toilets the plumber had installed in two of the downstairs bathrooms. They had no hot water, but the sun shower had come over from the office and with the facilities in the RV's, everyone was pretty much okay.

The pop up tents had moved inside, in the large room just behind the hallway where the spot coolers were providing enough drier, more comfortable air to allow everyone a chance to get a good night's sleep.

There was a feeling of peace and safety. Seated on one of the stools next to Kerry was John, the ranger who had poked his head inside an hour or so earlier, looking around in some amazed alarm.

"So much stuff's going on." He now said. "We weren't sure what all the... I mean, we knew something was happening." He paused. "We weren't sure if it was okay to come over here."

"Of course it is." Kerry answered immediately. "You're all welcome here, and tomorrow we should sit down and talk about how we can be partners going forward." She added. "As long as you all want to. It's a big place. We need help."

John smiled shyly at her. "Um.. what's all with the cables all over?" He asked. "And you all using a generator? I don't hear one going like I thought there was last night."

"It's regular power. The other cables are internet." Kerry told him. "You're welcome to come share."

"How did you do that?"

Dar's phone rang, and she was spared the tale as she opened it and held it up to her ear. "Dar Roberts." She listened for a moment. "I'm sorry about that, we just got phone service back a little while ago." She paused to listen again. "No I'm not, I'm on the mainland." She listened again in silence for a longer period of time. "I wasn't planning to. We can discuss this tomorrow if you're in the area of Hunter's Point. Anyone local can tell you where it is."

Kerry was looking at her with intense curiosity.

"Okay, we can certainly discuss it." Dar's voice had that dry formality that was all business. "Goodnight." She closed the phone. "Governor." She said, briefly, turning her head to meet Kerry's eyes. "Apparently we're going to have him over for breakfast."

She glanced around at all the surprised, wide eyes looking at her. "He's pissed off at something. Probably that nerd that works for him blamed me for his inability to do crap."

"Dar you're a private citizen. You don't have to save the planet for him." Kerry rolled her eyes. "Even though we did talk about you actually doing exactly that."

"Meh."

"Well I'm going to make him pay through the nose for it if that's his problem." Kerry folded her arms. "Not really sure why people being paid by the citizens of this country all think they're anointed by God."

"Meh."

There was an awkward silence, as the entire room looked at both of them with some surprise and alarm. Dar caught the looks and grinned wryly. "We're really not anarchists. Kerry's gotten a closer look at the inside of politics than most."

Eyes shifted to Kerry, who stuck out her tongue.

Conversation at that point was diverted, because the back door to the kitchen area opened behind them. "Lo there!" A moment later, Andrew Roberts appeared in the doorway, closely followed by Ceci. He paused and looked around. "This here a party?"

"Sure." Dar agreed. "There's some hot dogs and peanut butter over there on the counter, Dad."

"Nice." Ceci remarked, as she moved through the crowd and went to the counter, where the dinner buffet was reposing under tin foil. She retrieved a piece of broccoli from one of the pans and turned, leaning against the counter as Andy investigated the other contents.

"Them folks did close off that area, Dardar." Andy said, as he appropriated a dog and a bun, depositing a glob of peanut butter on top with a grunt of content. "Got it all shut down from that main road there."

"Well, at least that was true." Kerry remarked.

"Yes, and they were being pretty snitty about it." Ceci munched her broccoli. "We told them we were happy if they were being jerks to everyone, not just us."

"They were jerks." Hank assented. "But like old Junior there said, they did us a favor cause we came on down here instead."

Ceci looked around the room, at the lights propped in the corners. "I don't hear a generator."

"Ain't one." Pete said.

"You have power here?"

"We have power here, and the internet." Dar agreed. "And some aircon, courtesy of those spot coolers." She pointed. "Enough power to run the servers."

Andy was chewing on his peanut butter covered hot dog. "How'd you all do that, Dardar? Everybody's yapping all over how they ain't got none. You run you a cable over to that there island?" He seemed mildly curious but unsurprised.

"Pfft." Hank waved a hand at him. "Easier than that'd be."

Dar got up and edged around the table. "C'mon, I'll show you. It's easier than explaining." She indicated the internal door to the kitchen. "We just got lucky."

"At some point." Ceci grabbed a paper plate and more vegetables, then she went around and took Dar's empty seat next to Kerry. "We're all going to admit it's not luck."

Kerry propped her chin on her fist. "Maybe it's karma."

"Maybe it's intergalactic synergy." Ceci picked up a charred pepper. "So." She went on. "Fill me in. We were only gone for two days. Can't take all that long."

Kerry gave her a sideways look.

"Then I can tell you about what we were up to."

\*\*

Dar led the way down the deck past the neatly coiled pressure hoses and sawhorses and the stacks of construction material they'd brought from the office. There was a nice breeze coming off the water and it was not uncomfortable to walk in.

"This here's some place." Andy commented. "Ah did not realize that when we were here that first time."

Dar angled across the scrub grass towards the large metal box now planted on the edge of the property, freshly dug and covered ground leading away into the darkness towards the road. "Haven't really had a chance to even go over all of it."

"Ah do like it."

"Me too." Dar smiled, as they arrived. "So this." She indicated the box. "I agreed to let the phone guys install it. They run it off emergency power. So they gave me a feed, and a connection in return." She half turned and looked offshore. "One of the main interconnects comes in off the coast there. We saw them with a work boat hunting for something so we asked what was up."

Andy folded his arms and regarded the waist high metal enclosure. "Do tell."

"They had to bring it onshore two miles north, otherwise. So it was a win win for everyone." Dar concluded. "There's a hub under the road out there. Saved them a hell of a lot of time, money and labor to hook up here."

There was another line of recently covered trench heading towards the house, and just visible in the light near the door to the inside a group of cables were coming out of the ground and going through the opening. "Ah heard there was some all thing that started working at the gov'm,int center. That it?" Andy asked.

"I don't know." Dar said. "I haven't been listening to news all day cause we've been busy. They hit us with that evacuation yesterday and we've been going full out getting settled here all day." She looked around, at the house whose lower level now had visible lights on, all the brighter since nothing else in the area had power. "Where did you guys go off to?"

"Had to do me a favor for a buddy up off South Carolina." Her father responded. "Turned out all right." He didn't seem to be disposed to explain further, and Dar didn't ask him to. "You all goin to bring them server things ovah here?"

Dar pondered that. "Yeah." She finally said. "I don't know how much longer that sat scam's going to hold up. Better connection here. But I might wait a few days until we can get this place more settled. It's pretty bare right now and they need a place to work."

"Need you some tables and all."

Dar nodded. "Richard's going to have a fit when he sees this place. He thinks that society's going to get an injunction against us using it." She said. "Told him I don't care."

Andrew chuckled softly. "They aint got time to bother with that there right now, Dardar." He told her. "That man's a worry wart, always was."

"Well he's a lawyer." Dar smiled. "Maybe I should ask him to be here when the governor shows up tomorrow. He's mad at me for something or other."

"Lord."

"Kerry'll deal with him." Dar looked off over the water, where the only visible lights were some emergency beacons on Key Biscayne, and the flicker of what was, perhaps, firepits out on the shore across from them. That and the stolid, low, red and green of the channel markers. "They wanted me to come do something to help them a week ago and I told them to get lost."

Andy cocked his head in question, one brow lifting.

"We had a crap ton of stuff going on." Dar said, lifting both hands in a faint shrug. "So who knows. Maybe he's going to try and pressure me into it."

"Dumbass."

Dar chuckled. "If hooking this up really did fix something, it'll give us some leverage because I already helped him for free." She remarked. "I should go check the news sites. See what went on." She considered. "And we can actually research it from the boat. The antenna I put in that tree'll cover the waterfront."

They watched Chino and Mocha run across the pool deck, noses down, tails waving.

"Them dogs do like this place." Andy noted. "Plenty of room."

Dar put her hands in her pockets, and drew in a breath of salt tinged air. "I like it." She said. "We're going to make this into our home. Whatever we have to fix to make it happen." She swung her gaze around to meet Andy's. "Whatever deal we have to make over it."

He smiled at her. "You all going to put you a treehouse up in that tree?"

Dar smiled back. "Maybe." She admitted. "I am going to build a climbing wall."

"Hope you aint' gonna fall down off it and break your arm again."

"No way."

\*\*

There was a thunderstorm overnight and it woke them, as lightning flashed visibly through the right hand side bow window, illuminating the inside of the cabin.

Dar lifted her head off the pillow and regarded the window, listening to the drumming of rain on the upper hull and the spit of it wind driven against the reinforced plexiglass behind the light curtain.

Dixie was floating placidly at dock, the jetty providing protection against any incoming waves and after a moment she put her head back down as Kerry gave her a pat on the stomach. "Rain."

"News said it was going to." Kerry murmured. "Summer in Florida. Isn't that what you always tell me?" She asked. "At least we're here inside and it's not in the middle of the afternoon." She relaxed, and closed her eyes. "But damn, for all those people out there with holes in their roofs."

Dar studied the low cabin roof over their heads, it's height just barely enough to clear hers, the doorframe something she had to duck through. But it was fiberglass, and solid, the hull meticulously shaped and sealed and certainly they had plowed through far worse weather with her than tonight's thunderstorm.

But then, this boat, bought new, cost far more than many of the houses that had been wrecked by Bob. Her makers had assumed bad weather, and wind, and the corrosion of sea water and had built accordingly.

Like old man Hunter had, building the dock they were tied to, and the stone seawall that protected the pier. Though Key Biscayne was across from them, south of that they were open to the Bay, and the Bay open to the Atlantic Ocean.

He'd built for it. Dar wondered how he would have felt knowing what he'd built stood up to the worst Bob had brought.

Good, she thought. Satisfied, like she was when some program she'd written tested out. She felt an odd sense of kinship at a distance with the builder of their new home, and though they'd had nothing in common, and he would have likely found her bizarre in the extreme, it would have been interesting to have met.

Thunder rolled again, and more lightning.

"You're not going back to sleep are you?" Kerry asked, in an amused tone.

"It's almost dawn." Dar deferred.

"It is, I heard the dogs sit up." Kerry agreed. "So let me go see what I can arrange for all of our breakfasts, because we finished the peanut butter cups and pop tarts last night."

"Bummer."

"I'm sure there's a jar of peanut butter in the closet." Kerry pulled back the covers and got out of the comfortable bed in the cabin, sliding on a pair of shorts and pulling a tshirt over her head as she heard the sound of dog toenails approaching down the steps from the living area. "Good morning, doggos."

Thunder boomed and their ears went back, but they followed her into the main cabin and waited next to their bowls while she got out their bag of kibble. She poured them some breakfast then stood back as they munched, regarding the kibble bag thoughtfully.

"It's awful." Dar emerged from the small bathroom, wiping her lips free of toothpaste. "The canned stuff is worse."

"Sure would be easier if we could just have people kibble, huh?" Kerry put the bag back into the closet, it's top carefully rolled and clipped. "Turn on the sat, lets see how long this weather's supposed to last while I concentrate on not asking you how you know that about dog food."

"Maybe it'll delay the governor." Dar flipped on the power for the satellite. "Hell, I can check the marine radar on the console." She said, after a moment. "And it was a bet."

"Did you win or lose? No wait. Don't tell me." Kerry retreated to the bathroom to run a comb through her hair and brush her teeth. "At least we can fill up the water tanks with tall that." She came out, to find Dar standing in the cabin, arms crossed, watching the Weather Channel. "Florida off the front page yet?"

"Is Florida ever off the front page?" Dar asked rhetorically. "If it's not hurricanes, it's love bugs, or Florida men, or alligators dancing on Miami Beach or a combination of all of the above."

"Mm. That's true." Kerry admitted. "This state really is weirdo central sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"What's the deal with the weather then?." Kerry diverted the conversation. "Since we're not likely to get Florida to change any time soon."

"It's actually a tropical low." Dar remarked. "Slurping after that front that killed Bob."

"That sounds so evil." Kerry went to the kitchen and studied her options. "Can you cope with jerk chicken this early?"

"Yum."

"Okay, jerk chicken street tacos it is, because I have corn tortillas and canned pineapple."

"I'll make Cuban coffee." Dar offered. "Since that, and milkshakes are about all I can manage and I'm guessing you didn't refill the ice cream." She winked at Kerry and ducked around her, reaching up into the cabinet to remove the small silver coffeepot.

Kerry casually wrapped an arm around her and held her still long enough to lean up and kiss her on the lips. "I'm glad I share the craziness of the world with you, Dar." She looked up into Dar's eyes, pale and reflecting the warm, ochre inside light. "I really do love you."

Dar leaned over and kissed her back. "Likewise." She gently bumped heads with her. "We are really the luckiest people on the planet."

"We are." Kerry paused, listening to the thunder outside. "Do we really need to get up?" She asked, wrapping the sleeve of Dar's shirt around her finger, watching her face.

"Do you mean, do we need to actually get out of bed." Dar's eyes twinkled knowingly.

"Yeah, that's what I mean." Kerry smiled, as Dar's hand cupped her cheek. "Its too early for me to start looking through all that mail and its raining to hard for us to do anything."

"Anything?"

"C'mon." Kerry dismissed the thought of jerk chicken tacos for the moment and eased past Dar, moving in the direction of the cabin.

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By the time the sun was rising over the horizon, the rain had stopped. Dar walked out onto the back deck and then crossed the gangplank to the dock, coming out of the Dixie's shadow into a pool of warmly pink light as she went to the steps and trotted up them.

There was no railing to them. They were neatly made in a zig zag of of the rock wall but the residual damp made them a bit slippery and Dar pondered having both solar lights and iron tread plates put in to make it a bit safer at night.

She could easily imagine them arriving here at night, after a trip, or a dive or just a ride over to Key Biscayne for some dinner. Having the boat this close to the house made it almost as convenient as a car, and she paused, considering again the trade off with having to take the boat somewhere to get it serviced and fueled.

Eh. Crandon Park marina wasn't that far. Dar shrugged and continued upward. Putting a marine diesel tank under the ground probably wasn't in the cards.

At least for now.

Reaching the top of the steps she crossed the pool deck, it's surface now an almost shining decked white from it's cleaning. The pool had been covered with plywood and she stepped over the thick cabling that crossed the space coming from the telco box.

She paused, regarding the cables, tracing their route along the edge of the deck and up to the door, going through one pane of the French doors that had been carefully removed, and then blocked with a square of wood that had a hole cut in the center large enough for the cables to pass and a piece of foam around them for insulation.

It was a nice, thoughtful piece of work and she took the time to appreciate it, making an internal note to find out who had done it and thank them, as well as whoever had routed the cables, the electrical carefully bundled separately from the data, neatly strapped and tucked away.

Not really relevant in terms of it's operation, but it showed care and attention to detail and it made her happy to see it, sparing her the time it would have taken for her to do it otherwise because she would have. Even now there was a bit of a separation between two cables and she nudged them together with her foot.

There.

About to go in, she paused again as she spotted the pop up tents in the big hall beyond, then she retraced her steps and walked around the side of the house instead, up and onto the long, covered porch towards the back.

It was quiet. She could hear birds in the trees, and the rustle of branches overhead. The wooden boards under her feet creaked and shifted as she crossed them and every few feet a lizard raced from one side to the other, surprised by her presence.

On the east side here, the rising sun speared through the foliage and across the porch laying down a pattern on the surface of it. Dar paused midway and turned, facing the water, and looked at the view to the southeast, to the ruffled waters of the Bay as it met the darker blue of the Atlantic.

She imagined working here with her laptop, listening to the sounds of the water and the investigative creaks of the seabirds and she nodded to herself. "Yeah."

She took a breath, and found it full of the smell of earth, and vegetation, the far of smell of wood smoke, and as she continued walking and she got closer to the back of the house, the scent of the barbeque heating up.

Around the back corner she could see the RV's, and if she listened hard, could hear the sounds of people stirring.

Sure enough, one of the grills was open, and as she came to the back entrance, it opened and Pete emerged carrying a bowl. "Morning." She stepped back and held the door open.

"Morning!" Pete greeted her cheerfully. "It sure was nice to just get some shuteye, without crazies or cops around. Tell ya that." He looked around. "Rained last night, but who cares?" He said. "We definitely moved up in the world, junior."

"Yeah, thunder woke us up but we took advantage of that and filled Dixie's fresh water tanks." Dar agreed.

"Kerry's doing some work from the boat. Thought I would come up here and see what we need to get together to move the rest of our guys out here."

"The ones out on the island?" Pete asked. "Why not leave em there? From what those other techie guys said, they're having a ball living the lifestyle of the rich and famous out there."

"I could. But they'll be more productive here, with the high speed access we have." Dar said. "I just have to figure out how to put in workspace and keep them fed." She mused. "They probably are enjoying the service out there though. The staff like them and keep bringing them sodas and chips."

Pete chuckled.

"Ah, it's going to take me a few weeks to get enough furniture around anyway." Dar shrugged. "Everyone get rest in there?" She indicated the house.

"Seems like." Pete set the bowl down on the worktable next to the grill. "Having real power sure does help. I did my share and more of rough living, but boy you don't realize you don't have stuff until you don't have it. You know?"

"I know." Dar agreed mournfully. "One night on our couch in the office was kinda enough for me."

"But you could have stayed out on that island yourselves." Pete said. "I mean, you do live there." He watched Dar's face, splashed in the sunlight. "You don't have to hang out here. We're pretty savvy and all."

"You are. But we're responsible for all this." Dar said, as the door opened and Sasha came bustling out, carrying a bag full of what appeared to be fresh baguettes. "Besides, I like it." She admitted. "I like being in the middle of all the crap going on. It's interesting. It's problem solving. What the hell would I do back on the island? Probably getting my ass in trouble pissing people off or being asked to fix someone else's problems."

"Yeah." Pete said. "Everyone respects that. You do, you know, when you're a grunt, when the guys in charge sit in the mess with you and don't have some cook make them something nice delivered to their tent."

Dar nodded. "Yeah."

"Were you ever a grunt, Dar?" Pete asked. "Bet you weren't."

"No." She smiled easily. "I've been running things, legit or not, since I could walk and talk. Ask my mother. Made her crazy. It's why I never really could have gone into the service. Some striped bozo would have told me to do something and first thing out of my mouth would have been 'why?' and the second would have been 'kiss my ass'"

Pete thought about that briefly. "Andy took orders." He said, after a while.

"I'm not my father."

"He said that last night." Pete concluded. "And said given how everything turned out, he's absolutely all right with that." He winked at her. "That whole thing with the rig out there and the phone guys.. that tickled his ass."

Dar chuckled. "That was sweet. But honestly that was just being in the right place at the right time, and seeing those guys." She admitted. "Lucky we had something they really, really wanted. And for them it was worth it. I checked the local news last night. That line brought up the whole statewide emergency system."

"Win win."

"Absolutely. Everyone won in that carnival of WTF." Dar agreed.

The door to one of the RV's opened and Maria climbed out, spotting her and coming over. "Good morning Jefa." She greeted Dar. "Did you know these things here have a washing machine inside them?" She asked. "It is like having an apartment."

"Well let me get cooking." Pete said. "Want to get everyone fed before the politicos show up. They're not worth Sasha's magic grub." He went over to join Sasha at the prep table, where she was contentedly slicing up the bag full of bread.

Maria observed them for a moment, then she turned and regarded Dar.

"Where did she get fresh baguettes?" Dar guessed her thoughts. "Some things, it's better not to ask." She said.

"No, I had no idea they had washing machines. That was Kerry's gig." She said. "But I am glad you and Tomas are comfortable. That's what counted."

"And now we have the internet." Maria agreed. "Josh so nicely set up a laptop for Tomas and he is very busy now, working to set up insurance claims for all our neighbors." She nodded. "It is good, Dar. I know we have said thank you again and again, but again, thank you."

Dar smiled. "Yeah, this is working out." She agreed, then paused. "What's going on with your house?" She eyed her long time assistant, one of her dark eyebrows lifting in interrogation. "Mayte said you all went by there again yesterday."

Maria clasped her hands in front of her, and cocked her head to one side. "It seems that by somehow our house is being taken care of by some government program, Dar." She said. "They have shown us the paperwork, there is no mistake. There is our name and our house, on it."

Dar's blue eyes took on a distinct, somewhat piratical, twinkle. "So they're fixing it?" She asked in a mild, innocent tone. "Cool."

"It is all ruined, the inside, from the water." Maria said. "But they have taken everything out and are doing it again, like they were working at our office. It will take a long time, of course, but it will be okay at the end."

"Good." Dar nodded. "I know that can't replace the things you had in there, Maria."

"No, but they are just things, as Kerrisita said to us." Maria acknowledged. "So, however, Dar, can you imagine how that could have happened, that program?" She looked steadily at her. "We did not ask for it to be like that." She paused, but Dar remained silent, waiting. "My neighbors, they want to know how they can have that same program and I do not know what to tell them."

Dar leaned back against the tree they were standing under, the tree that she'd climbed the previous day. "I made that happen." She said, after a long moment. "I know you didn't ask for it. But it's a fee I took for doing someone a favor."

"But Dar..." Maria protested.

Dar held a hand up. "There were a lot of people in that program. They were there not because of any merit, Maria. They were there because they were friends of some important people, or given money to some politician, or they were rich."

Now Maria nodded. "This is what happens, with people all the time, everywhere." She said. "This I understand very well. But..."

"Well I made it so those people all could get things taken care of. So for my fee, I added some names." Dar concluded. "Your house is as important to you as some investment property in Coral Gables, Maria. Sometimes when you get an opportunity to even the scales, you take it. So I did."

For a moment, Maria was silent. "Will this make trouble for you?"

Dar's eyes twinkled even more. "Not unless you tell someone I did it." She said. "Those guys don't want anyone to really know about that list, Maria. Makes bad press. You can just tell your neighbors that because your employer does some work for the government, it's a benefit."

Maria drew in a breath to answer, then paused, thoughtfully.

"It's true." Dar said. "In fact, it's the absolute truth."

"Yes that is so." Maria finally said, with a slight laugh. "Tomas said it must be that way. That you had something to do with it. But we can tell everybody this, and they will also understand completely. The government, yes, this is something we understand." She reached out and touched Dar's arm. "We will use our good fortune to help our neighbors."

"Good." Dar slid her sunglasses over her eyes as the sun penetrated the trees and lit up the area. "Now. Where the hell are we going to meet with the governor. Speaking of politicians."

"Ah, this is no problem." Maria reverted to business. "We can use the desk part in our vehicle, yes? They have put up a work area there in any case, and it has some chairs." She patted Dar's arm. "Come look. We will have some cafecita."

"Lead on." Dar pushed off away from the tree. "I made some this morning but Kerry and I both agreed it was more suited to pour on top of ice cream as a syrup."

"That is too much sucar."

"Spoon stayed straight up so you're probably right."

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The Dixie wasn't really set up as an office, but Kerry improvised with the small coffee table bolted to the deck and one of the comfortable bucket chairs nearby. She had her laptop on her knees, and a cup of herbal tea in the holder on the chair arm, and on her screen was a video conference.

"So, Col... anyway." Kerry said. "A lots happened in the last few days."

"No kidding!" Colleen said. "Wait now, Mark'll be here in five minutes. He was just talking to the long term hotel we're staying at."

"Trouble?" Kerry asked.

"For a change? No." Colleen laughed. "And I ... are.. where are you?"

"On the Dixie." Kerry told her. "Connected to wireless in a tree on land on our new property, hooked up to a high speed internet connection courtesy of the telecom company we traded land rights for it."

Colleen propped her head up on her fist. "Y'know, you said something about that in your email." She said. "Great quality." She said. "So you're parked in the water near there I guess?"

Kerry nodded. "Dar just went up to see what was going on, and figure out where to talk to the governor at."

"The governor?"

Kerry nodded again. "We think he wants us to do something." She said. "Don't worry, I'm going to make him pay for the privilege." She said. "So how's it going up there?"

"Not bad." Colleen leaned back in the chair she was sitting in. Behind her were the bland buff walls of the office space they'd rented. "We're holding our own. I found a little company near here that does basic IT outsourcing and we're using them to cover nights for us, so now we're rotating the guys and girls off."

"Good."

"Not that they don't show up here anyway. Not that much to do around here." Colleen admitted. "I'm afraid to tell them the rest of that lot is bunking up by your new place. They'll run out and hijack the bus back there."

"Still want to come back?"

"They do." Her finance director nodded. "And some of them have places and family there they're a bit worried about."

Kerry leaned back and regarded the screen thoughtfully. "That's natural." She admitted. "If we had a place for them to work out of we could handle them here now, with this connection. But there's nothing to sit on even. Give us a few more days."

Colleen nodded. "I'll tell them that. It'll make everyone happy." She said. "I thought that place was a historical something though. They going to go along with you turning it into an IT shop?"

"Probably not." Kerry admitted, with a smile. "Dar just told our lawyer to deal with it. It's not like we had a lot of choice, and frankly I don't know what they're thinking of doing with ... no, I know what they want it to be, but there's no history to restore here."

"Ah heh?"

"Long story." Kerry said. "But we agreed we wouldn't do anything permanent here, just what we had to do to make things functional. So if they throw the book at us we can roll it back."

There was noise behind Colleen, and then Mark walked into camera range and sat down next to her. "Hey poquito boss!" He had a ballcap on his head and took off a pair of sunglasses, tucking them into the collar of his shirt.

"Wow, nice clear pic! Where are you?"

"Sitting in the cabin of the Dixie."

Mark blinked. "Like as in your boat?" He asked, after a moment's silence. "Oh yeah, it must be. I recognize the background." He paused again. "Pops hook you up to a submarine or something?" He hazarded a guess. "Cause that ain't cellular bandwidth you're on."

So nerd. Kerry smiled back at him. "Ain't cellular." She agreed. "C'mon, I have Thor the God of the internets here. How long did you figure it would take?"

Mark laughed out loud. "She take over a military node or something?"

"Sort of. We now have a major pipeline crossing our land that happens to hook into the emergency grid and our fee was power and internet." Kerry informed him. "Give us a few more days to finish setting up, and you could work from our second floor with a nice view of the Bay."

"Once she's done talking to the governor." Colleen informed him, as he was digesting that. "And hello? Do I get a nice view as well?"

"Let me find some folding tables and lawn chairs first." Kerry chuckled. "Its literally an empty building right now except for a bunch of pop up tents and cables running everywhere."

"Kerry, that's freaking amazing." Mark finally spoke up. "I mean.. it's totally typical and all that stuff but wow."

"But wow." Kerry agreed. "Dar's pretty intent on moving operations here until we can get the office power and circuits back. And you know, when Dar puts her mind to something, it does usually happen."

"No that's great." Mark said. "Josh and Leo must have spilled to everyone because they were all looking at me when I got here like they expected me to.. I don't know what."

"Tell them what's going on." Kerry supplied. "So go ahead and officially tell them." She said. "How's the... that Brazilian account going?"

Colleen laughed.

"Pretty sweet, actually." Mark sounded surprised himself. "Turns out those outta work waiters from Palm Beach got some IT skillz. They're only passing on the stuff they can't handle to the guys here." He said. "And it's sweet for them, because they live at the northwestern edge of West Palm, they got a power coop there and they're living in one guy's house."

"Beanbags and laptops?"

"No idea, don't care." Mark admitted frankly. "But they work east in Palm Beach and that's all shut down so they're making their rent doing this. They said if we need more people, they can probably scrounge them."

Kerry pondered that. "Great job, Mark."

"Stupid luck, Kerry." He responded instantly. "Like, really stupid luck because one of the maintenance guys here at this building we're in has a sister who's dating one of the guys in that house. All I did was be in the hall talking to Scott about our problem long enough for that guy to hear us."

"So.. you think the fact that we just happen to buy the property that happens to be the nearest point of land to a major internet inroute and happened to be here when some guys were trying to find a way to bring it closer to a node is anything but luck?"

Mark eyed her.

"C'mon Mark. Listen, I've got some business savvy, and Jesus only knows Dar has a higher IQ than summer temperatures in July here, but we literally did nothing to plan any of this stuff."

"Way higher than summer temps." Mark responded. "But I don't want to take credit for stuff that just happened and I don't want you to think I magicked up this awesome plan."

"But you did." Kerry smiled. "Success isn't knowing what to do all the time, Mark. It's taking what life tosses at you and doing the best you can with it. You turned what would have been a contract cancel into a win for the customer, and for us, and all props, you know?"

"I told him that." Colleen had been listening in silence, her hands folded on the table. "Being in the right place at the right time is just our brand."

They looked at each other in silence for a minute. "I think you just found our company motto, Col." Kerry finally broke it. "That's going to look great on a T-shirt."

"Rightyho." Colleen made a note on the pad at her elbow. "I'll get the process started. I may not know what end of a cable to do anything with, but you're right. That's good marketing."

"So anyway, yeah – if this place hadn't been here, and they'd kicked us out, we'd have figured out something else like hauled everyone over to the island." Kerry said. "Which would have been hilarious. But the service out there for comms sucks."

"Does, Elvis was saying it." Mark went with the subject change. "So about those waiter guys... "

"Did we hire them direct, or are we just paying them a per day?"

"Per day."

Kerry nodded. "Give them a choice. Either they can onboard as a support team and we do that like we usually do, or they can incorporate and we do a B2B contract with them and they handle their own legalities and logistics."

"And taxes." Colleen remarked. "Same thing we offered Carlos. But make it known they need to complete the contract, hmm? When that restaurant opens back up, no running off and abandoning us until we can wind down."

"Got it." Mark smiled cheerfully.

"Great. Now let me go find out what trouble Dar's gotten into and figure out where we can get folding tables." Kerry said. "I'm hoping sometime soon a Walmart will open."

"Call the Miami Beach Convention Center." Mark suggested. "I bet they got tons of stuff in their back room, and nothing to do with it."

"I'll do that." Colleen took a note. "Send you a note if I can get hold of them."

Kerry sat back, feeling a sense of accomplishment. "All right guys, lets just keep on rolling. I'll let you know what comes of the meeting with the governor, if anything. It might end up just a pissing match." She paused. "I can't really believe I am going to say this, but I wish my mother was here so I could throw her at him."

"Maybe she'll show up." Mark said. "Y'never know."

"You never know." Kerry agreed. "Talk to you guys later."

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Dar walked along the beautifully finished wooden floors on the third level of the house, her eyes searching the ceiling intently until she reached the side of the house away from the water and finally found what she was looking for. "Ah."

She was alone. Downstairs she could hear voices and work underway, and now that she was near the land side of the house the sound of a truck backing into the loading area.

But here on the third floor, where there was just the master suite that took up the whole one side and smaller, anonymous rooms here on the land side it was quiet and untouched.

Nothing really to be done here, after all. They would use the many closets, rooms, cubbies, sections, and spaces on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor and 1<sup>st</sup> floor to put things in for work, but this level was intended for living space. She paused at the edge of the back stairs and pondered the thought of having a door put in, to separate the area.

Then she shrugged and dismissed the thought and focused on the hatch in the ceiling, conveniently above the start of the stair bannister.

She judged the height then she put her hands on the bannister and vaulted up onto it, balancing on the narrow beam and reaching up to push against the hatch, which obligingly gave upward, then as she shifted to try and move it aside, it surprised her by lowering itself down.

"Ah." She was charmed. There was a wooden ladder attached which helpfully extended itself halfway down to the floor and kept her from trying something stupid to get up into the crawlspace to look around.

She hopped down to the ground then reached up and grabbed the highest rung she could reach and pulled herself up and got her knees on the lowest step, then straightened up and climbed up into the attic.

It smelled of wood and dust, and she was happy to detect no smell of mold or mildew as she looked around. The roof timbers were heavy four by four, and creosote coated, and she walked along one of them over to one of the roof peaks that held the small, round, boat like windows.

Much to her surprise, she found they were more boatlike than she'd expected, since they were, in fact, portholes that had been fashioned into the wall of the house, complete with their brass fittings and clamps as though Hunter had gotten them from a shipyard supply store.

Odd, but she worked the clamps and with a yank, pulled the porthole open and stuck her head through it. She studied the view over the trees, and noted the sight lines. "Hm." She could see past the western edge of Key Biscayne, and past Virginia Key, and had a clear view of the loading cranes for PortMiami.

Satisfied, she pulled her head back in and carefully closed the porthole, fastening the clamps and checking the seal to make sure she hadn't just introduced a leak into the roof. Then she turned and walked along the timbers through the centerline of the attic, the only path she could take that admitted her height.

There was no insulation. They'd have to install that. But the joins she saw were sound and there were no obvious signs of water intrusion, and surprisingly no signs of resident fauna either.

She'd expected at least a water rat, or a racoon. But it was critterless and she finished her circuit of the attic and arrived back at the hatch and climbed back down to the ground.

It was stuffy, and they'd decided it was a better course to leave the windows closed and not add to the onerous task of the spot coolers in removing the humidity letting in the sea breeze would add. She examined the ladder and found the locking mechanism, unlatching it and watching the ladder retract itself up into the ceiling, the hatch closing with a light, but definite snick.

She admired the workmanship. Like the rest of the house, it spoke of attention to detail uncommon even in the very expensive condo she lived in. "Nice."

The sound of boots on the steps made her turn and look down, to find her father making his way upward to where she was standing. "Hey Dad." She leaned on the bannister. "Good morning."

"Morning there, Dardar." Andrew returned the greeting. "We all are parked up next to you on the water there. Ferry's a mess and a half with all that gov'mint whohaa going on." He said. "That dock there's a good one." He came up to stand next to her.

"Hunter knew his stuff." Dar agreed. "I was just up in the attic, seeing if I could plot out a point to point from here to the island. Might have a sightline if I can get enough elevation out there."

Andrew nodded as though he knew exactly what Dar was talking about. "Man knew how to build." He agreed. "Had him some.. " He made a slight shrugging gesture, his lips twisting a little into an expression Dar could almost feel on her own face. "Didn't have no respect for ladies."

Dar folded her arms across her chest. "What do you mean?"

"Wall, y'know Dardar." Her father seemed a mixture of embarrassed and perplexed. "Folks had some thoughts in the past bout who the head of the family was, that kinda thing." He said. "Kinda was the way it was."

"Sure." Dar finally nodded. "The whole, women are weak, walk two steps behind the husband kinda thing."

Andrew nodded. "Was how he grew, ah suppose. Same as my old man. He didn't have no use for womenfolk running things, or being strong or nothing like that. Felt the good Lord put them on earth to serve menfolk." He paused. "Still people like that, round everywhere."

"Its' true." Dar sighed. "Kerry's father was one of them."

"Yeap."

"Glad you weren't." Dar said, after a moment.

"Your grandmaw done always said ah was cursed with an open mind." He said. "But truly, Dardar, all ah ever done was live by the idea that every'body's equal in the eyes of the Lord. Ah feel like that's done me well in mah life."

Dar nodded slowly. "Wish more people would."

Her father shrugged a little bit. "Anyhow. Ah only talked a few times to that there fella and the last time I done slugged him. Don't matter why."

Dar could well imagine, and she internally, silently agreed it didn't matter, whether it was some insult of him, of her mother, or of her, or just in general. "Maybe that's why that kid was so happy to sell this place to us." She mused. "That makes a little more sense."

"Ah do think so." Andrew agreed solemnly. "So, like your mother says somesuch, what done go around, done come around and bites you in the behind."

"Huh."

Andy put his hands in the pockets of his cargo shorts. "Don't think on it too much, Dardar. Man's gone, he done a good job building, now it's you alls."

Dar was silent for a minute, and he just stood there, comfortable with the silence and waited. "Well, can't do anything about it." She shrugged. "You're right, he's gone, we're here." She chuckled softly. "It's just so ironic."

"Yeap."

"C'mon, it's hot up here." Dar gestured the back steps and started down them. "I want to see what was on that truck I heard coming in."

"Ah do think I heard some fuss at the gates 'fore I came up here."

"Probably the governor."

"Proibly. You all mind if I sit by an listen to his chit chat?"

"Not at all."

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"We don't have any tables inside yet." Dar opened the door to the RV and stood back, allowing the tall, lean man in short sleeves and slacks to climb up ahead of her.

Behind him were two men in sports jackets, sweat rolling down their faces and down through their collars that had spiral corded earpieces disappearing under them.

"And it's air conditioned."

Kerry went next, and Dar followed her.

Inside, the workspace had been set up neatly for the meeting, and two extra chairs had materialized from the other RV's. Maria was standing by near the small kitchen, the folding partition behind it had been closed and fastened and in the front of the RV, Andy was seated in the driver's bucket seat, big hands folded, just watching.

Mayte was in the passenger seat, with a small pad and a pen.

On the desk was a computer, and a phone and a large monitor screen had been mounted against the wall, which was now showing the cloud dashboard with lots of impressive graphs and blinking lights and scrolling content on it.

Behind the desk was a built in credenza, and as though pre-arranged which of course it was, Kerry settled in the chair behind the desk and Dar leaned back on the credenza behind her. "Please sit down." Kerry said, politely. "Tell us what we can do for you."

"Senor, would you and your people here like a cold drink?" Maria asked. "It is so hot outside."

The governor was a man in his mid sixties, with a weatherworn face and straight, gray hair. He sat down in the right most chair in the space and hitched up the knees of his slacks, taking out a handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow with it. "I'd love some cold water if you have it, thank you ma'am."

The two security personnel accompanying the governor sat down in two chairs at his back and gratefully accepted the bottles as Maria passed them along.

The governor opened his bottle and took a long swig of the water, not even asking for a glass. He then put the cap back on the bottle. "Thank you." He said. "Let me get to the point, since we're all pretty damn busy people." He said. "My tech czar tells me he asked you for help, and you turned him down. I'm here, mostly, to ask why that is."

Kerry nodded, as though she'd expected the question. She removed a small folder from the desk she was sitting at and handed it over to him. "Rather than rambling on, if you would mind taking a minute to read over this recap it should set the groundwork for the explanation."

The two security men both nodded at the same time and settled back in their chairs, one of them hitching an ankle up on his opposing knee and sipped on their water.

"All right." The governor took the folder and opened it, removing a single printed sheet and setting it on his left knee. He took out a pair of reading glasses and put them on, and then sat there in silence, taking his time to read through the text.

Dar crossed her ankles, regarding the scar across one kneecap as she used the time to think about the possibility of getting something tall enough on the island to make a connection to. She was wearing canvas sneakers today, her leather hiking boots parked on the Dixie having themselves a rest.

She had on a company polo shirt, with the short sleeves rolled up a turn and khaki cargo shorts, a slightly more formal than tank top and denim concession to this governmental intrusion.

Kerry was dressed similarly, and now she was sitting back in the desk chair, her hands folded on her lap, elbows resting on the chair arms in a posture of infinite patience.

Outside, through the walls of the RV, was the sound of construction, the buzz of a saw, the rumble of a hammer drill, and voices in varying timbres and languages.

Finally the governor finished, putting the sheet back into the folder. "Thank you." He said. "That's quite a lot of information."

"It is." Kerry agreed. "The whole point of that was this. We did that." She said. "We performed those services for the government, was tasked with unusual requirements, and succeeded in what we were asked to do, against some pretty significant odds."

He nodded. "You didn't really need to tell me all this, you know. Your competence was never in doubt, certainly not in my mind. That's why I was so surprised when you turned us down."

"Yep, coming to that." Kerry agreed. "We did all that no questions asked. But when we went to that same government, and presented a bill for what that cost us, to do that, we were told that we should be grateful that we were allowed to donate our time, our energy, our ability, and success to the country and to go home and shut up."

The governor blinked several times.

"So." Kerry concluded. "My question to you is, please tell me why we should help?"

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The governor looked at Kerry in silence for a minute or two, turning the paper over in his fingertips. Then he put it back down on the desk, and gave it a gentle push back towards her. "Not really sure I have an answer to that, but let me ask you this. Do you think it's all right for you to want to profit on that kind of tragedy?"

His voice was mild, but his eyes were not, and one brow lifted in question at her.

"Profit? No." Kerry shook her head. "And if two dozen buddies of various ranking government people hadn't been given lucrative contracts the following month, I might even agree with you that we should have sucked it up and considered it the cost of doing business."

His other eyebrow lifted. "Not sure I heard about that part."

"Well." Kerry smiled briefly and without humor at him. "My mother's a senator. I hear things." She concluded. "At any rate, we have a whole lot of rebuilding to do ourselves, to restore our operations, to help our customers... I get that everything's a mess here, but it's a mess for us too. Is it fair to have us stop what we're doing, and leave our own people in this mess to help out governmental agencies that one would think could handle this sort of thing?"

"We get things going, that helps you too." He countered. "That makes sense, doesn't it?"

Dar shifted a little, wishing she had her laptop and resisting the urge to remove her phone from her pocket and mess with it. She kept her arms folded and let Kerry play out her game, one she knew she had little or no patience for.

Never had. There was an art to negotiation – there had been literally hundreds of people back at ILS who were far, far better than she was at it and if a contract had gotten to the point where she had to get involved in it no one including her had ever enjoyed the process.

It was like having tea with a wolverine, someone had once said, and she'd actually taken that as a compliment. So now she was content to let Kerry handle the sparring right up until the point where, if he decided to get nasty with her, she'd lean in.

"It does make sense, but it doesn't really help us." Kerry said. "Because really, we could just pack up in these RV's and head out of town, up to where my support group is holding down the fort in Melbourne."

He considered that. "So why haven't you?"

"We have people here we couldn't leave behind." Dar spoke up for the first time. "We had to make sure they were all okay first."

"That so?" He tilted his head up to look at her. "Well there are a lot of folks in the same boat, I guess." He acknowledged. "I know its popular to blame the government, when things go in the crapper, but when even the crapper is in the crapper, it's hard to know where to start."

"No one expected it to get this bad." Kerry said. "You never do, right? You always assume at the last minute it'll turn, or die, or something like that. We did." She indicated herself and then Dar. "Day before it hit we were running around trying to get plywood put up."

"You hope you learn from things like this. So next time..." He said.

"Except by next time, that budget went somewhere else." Dar drawled softly.

"Okay." He accepted that. "So then let me ask you, if I sign a contract with you, ahead of time, this time, with Ts and C's, would you give this old man a break and just come help me out?"

Kerry awarded him a smile, a faint twinkle appearing in her eyes as she approved the approach, which showed a fine sense of political acumen and moreso, of the ability to read people. "We've helped already." She commented. "We saw the emergency center come up this morning."

The change of subject threw him a bit offguard. "Sorry?" He said. "What does that have to do with you?"

Dar leaned over and pointed out the RV's window, which was facing the south end of the property. "See that box there? The green one? That's where the connection is coming in that lit up that office." She leaned back against the credenza again.

The governor looked out the window, then he leaned back in his chair. "Well I'll be damned." He said, after a moment's silence. "That's what that man was talking about." He half turned to look at the two security men behind him. "Johnson, right? That's what he said? Something about a cable?"

"Yessir." The man nodded. "Some crazy story about a boat and a cable ... I dunno. But it's workin'." He concluded. "Man those guys were happy, even without no air conditioning." He wiped his forehead. "I thought it was hot in Tallahassee. This place is brutal. Thank Jesus you have some cool in here."

"Si." Maria spoke up. "It is terrible for everyone. We are so fortunate that Kerrisita thought to have these trucks for us to be in." She indicated the RV. "And we have everything we need here to do our work."

The man eyed her with thoughtful speculation.

"With a little preparation, it is possible to do this for your locations." Mayte added, from her seat near the front of the RV. "We have learned many things that can help."

He leaned his arm on the back of the chair he was sitting in and regarded her in turn, then after a moment of silence, he looked at Andrew, who had the driver's seat swiveled around and his long legs extended with ankles crossed. "And you, sir?"

"That's my father." Dar spoke up, to prevent the mischief she could see was coming as Andy produced a grin. "He's our director of operations."

"Got it." The governor turned back around and faced them. "All right, Roberts Automation." He said. "Lets talk T's and Cs."

"You bringing in a lawyer?" Dar asked.

"Nope." He said. "Never bring a lawyer in to do a governor's job, I always say." He half turned again. "Give me that lined pad, willya?" He glanced back at them. "Anyway, I am a lawyer but Jesus did I get bored with that fast. I think I still remember how to write the lingo though."

"Fair enough." Kerry removed a pad from the drawer herself, and from the pocket of her cargo shorts, removed a calligraphy pen she unscrewed the top of, and put it down on the desk. "Lets do it old school."

Dar and Maria exchanged grins, and then Dar went over to one of the built in couches near the small service area, settling behind it and extending her legs out across the carpeted floor.

"Would you like some cafecita, Dar?" Maria asked. "It is the time."

"Yep." Dar agreed. "It is the time. Café all around."

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"Ah think that there fella's all right." Andy pronounced, as they watched the black SUV parade trundle down the lane and out the gates. "Got him some sense."

Kerry was standing next to him, her arms folded. "Yeah, he's not bad." She agreed. "A lot less asshole and a lot more lets just get stuff done than I expected from the governor of the national phallic symbol."

Andrew turned around and stared at her.

Kerry's lips twitched. "I heard that on the internet and it just makes me laugh." She admitted. "Okay, so, we have the rest of today to get all our stuff sorted out before we head down to the emergency headquarters we enabled tomorrow and start fixing things."

Dar came up behind them and draped her arm over Kerry's shoulders. "Good job, hon."

"With the contract?" Kerry chuckled. "Yeah, it's not bad. If we're not going to be able to get business the other way at least it keeps money coming in. I liked that he liked the pay for performance clause." She looked at Dar. "Can we actually do what I committed us to?"

"Sure." Dar said, in an unruffled tone. "So, now how much you think we could charge our island over there if I give them access to high speed internet?" She asked. "Free up that sat rig for us to go uplink the swamplands and send a point to point over there from here."

"I thought you said there wasn't any way to get a signal over the Key?"

"That was before I climbed into the attic. I forgot this is a three and a half story building on a rise." Dar said. "I just need someone to sneak over to our offices and grab that dish."

Andy chuckled. "Ah got that. Be back." He ambled off, attracting the attention of Pete and Hank with a whistle, and then motioning them to follow, which they did, stopping in mid stride and heading his way.

"Have to make some adjustments over there but it should work." Dar said. "I finally got hold of that VC. Told him we're not going to market this year."

"He pissed?"

"Told me not to bother calling him back." Dar said. "But you know what? If it's meant to happen, some other VC'll come along. Or we'll sell the IP and let someone else do it like we said."

Kerry nodded. "This." She gestured vaguely after the cavalcade. "This is the right thing to do, Dar."

"It is. I'm tickled silly you drove a good deal with them, and that we'll do all right this time because we don't have the unlimited resources to blow like ILS did but.."

"But you'd have done it anyway."

Dar nodded. "Has to happen. We can do this, our community needs it." She responded, in a brisk tone. "So lets make the most of today, maybe we can find some grog, do a party tonight before we go headfirst into the crap farm out there."

"Ride the kids over from the island for it." Kerry mused. "They want to see this place anyway. I spoke to Angela about ten minutes ago after I finished with the governor. I took a picture of my chicken scratch and she's turning it into one of our contracts."

"Know what else?"

"What?"

"Lobster season just started."

They were standing under the trees just short of the loading dock and the RV camp, surrounded by rustling leaves and the noise of cleaning and woodwork all around them. Kerry turned and looked at Dar. "Are you suggesting we take time out of our last day before chaos and go lobstering?"

"Yup." Dar bounced up and down on the balls of her feet a little. "Take limit is six per, and we've got at least six divers here. Won't take much time and it'll feed everyone."

"What if people don't like lobster, Dar?"

"More for me."

Kerry started laughing. "Sure. Why not." She lifted her hands and let them fall. "Let me go update Colleen on what happened, and see if we have all our gear onboard for it."

"I'm going to start getting the guys to run cable for that dish." Dar turned and started steering her towards the house. "We got this, Ker."

Kerry wrapped her arm around Dar's waist and moved into step with her. "Long as I have you, my love, everything else is what it is."

“Likewise.”

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The party was outside on the pool deck. There just wasn't enough things for people to sit on yet inside, and no real way to aircon enough of it to hold everyone so they were outside on boxes and crates and benches the carpenters had thrown together.

Luckily, it was a dry night. There was a breeze coming off the Bay and tables set up with pieces of plywood resting on sawhorses holding a true cornucopia of whatever in a radical potluck style that did feature platters of grilled lobsters and a respectable lineup of fish along with two big restaurant style mixing bowls full of Asian seafood curry that was both fragrant and spicy.

And a huge pot of rice.

And a tray of rice krispie treats.

There were two large beer kegs with built in chillers.

There were bowls of cut up mangos and a scattering of calamondins and oranges, bananas and grapefruit all gathered from trees on the property.

The amateur musicians had their instruments out, and were jamming softly on one side of the deck. Two of the rangers had joined them, and the rest, four guys in khaki shorts and tshirts, were sitting with some of the construction guys, talking sports.

Down on the waterside, the Dixie and Andy and Ceci's boat, still unnamed, floated at dock next to each other, each festooned with drying dive gear.

Up near the southern part of the deck Dar and Kerry were in camp chairs next to each other, provided with plates and mugs and roaming from person to person in eternal hope, tails never ceasing to wag for an instant, were Chino and Mocha.

Andy and Ceci were perched nearby, and Hank, Pete, and the other veterans had that contented look that people who'd spent hours in salt water often did.

In a circle nearby, the programmers, along with Celeste and Angela were seated with Josh and Leon catching up with each other and everyone was laughing and just enjoying the day.

The sun was low on the western horizon, behind the trees that ringed the property already and it was a warm and purple long twilight of the tropics that they'd lit with the tiki torches brought from the office, and the scent of citronella wafted over the deck to mix with the lobster, and the spice, and the beer.

“This was a great idea.” Ceci remarked. “And I think your folks appreciate a break from the bing bongs over on Fantasy Island.”

“It's nice.” Kerry admitted. “What a gorgeous night.” She had a mug of beer in one hand and she gently swirled it around before she took another sip of it. “And the viz was atrocious but boy were there bugs out there.” She regarded her plate, which had four empty lobster tails on it. “I only got two.”

“Yeah, it'll take a while for all that to settle down. There was a lot of damage down there. The reef's trashed.” Dar said, mournfully. “And I can't believe Hank caught an octopus in all that murk.”

“You know what is weird?” Ceci had a plate of all kinds of fruits and vegetables she was nibbling at. “It's weird your neighbors haven't come over here to see what the hell is going on.” She indicated the ring of trees. “I know there's a wall, and all the plants, and Hunter was a nut job, but we're making a lot of noise here.”

“Maybe they all evacuated.” Dar suggested. “Its not like I saw anyone out there walking around, not in this area. Closer to the U, yeah.”

“You mean you found neighbors who actually obey the government?” Ceci's voice rose in disbelief. “Are you kidding me?”

Andy laughed. "Could be."

"Someone will, eventually." Kerry predicted. "Those are pretty high rent houses on both sides there, they might have evacuated, Dar's right. They could afford to, and maybe they're all sitting somewhere in North Carolina in a hot tub watching the news waiting for things to get back to normal."

"We could have done that." Ceci said. "We could be up in the Adirondacks in sixty degree weather in some snooty resort. You could have arranged for office space and moved everyone."

"Coulda." Dar agreed wryly. "Next time, we will." She added. "But just like everyone else around here I figured we'd get a skip. We almost always do."

"True. I remember when Hurricane Andy hit, we hadn't had a storm even really close in over twenty years." Ceci said. "After year over year of them going every direction but here, or hitting dry air, or a cold current or who knows what, you forget sometimes it happens."

Kerry swirled her mug again. "Oh, I don't know." She said. "If we had, we'd have missed out on this place." Her tone was thoughtful. "Maybe things happen when they are supposed to. You know?"

"Remind me you said that if we find out we're being sued." Dar eyed her. "We might be house hunting again the next time Richard calls me."

"You really worried?" Kerry asked her, with a smile.

"No." Dar smiled back. "I think you're right. Things happen when they happen for a reason."

Jake came over and sat down cross legged at Dar's side. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar responded.

"We were talking." Jake said, launching into what was obviously a prepared speech. "Me and El, and the gals. We really want to come over here and work here." He glanced around. "Like.. the island is cool and everything. It's just too boring. Know what I mean?"

"Uh huh. I do." Dar smiled at him. "I thought you might feel that way after you saw the place." She pondered. "No real spot to work yet though. It's pretty rough."

"What's wrong with right here?" Jake asked, pointing at the chairs. "Dude, the signal here's kickass. I can just sit here in the shade with a towel under my laptop so I don't toast my nads. You know?"

"Got it." His boss agreed mildly as she heard Kerry stifle a snort of laughter. "Yeah okay we'll work out a plan to grab the servers and bring them over here. You saw the room they set up for them. We're almost there."

"Sweet." Jake looked pleased. "Thanks Dar." He got up. "Let me go tell 'em all."

They were all quiet for a minute. Then Ceci chuckled. "Kids."

"Nerd camp." Dar settled back in her chair. She felt pleasantly tired from the diving, and if she licked her lips there was still a trace of salt on them from it.

Tomorrow there would be more chaos, and probably craziness but today she felt content with their decisions and generally... well... they'd just figure it out.

They'd just figure it out.

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Kerry was sprawled on the back deck of the Dixie as the sun was starting to rise, a large cup of coffee in one hand and the other resting on the bolted down teak table that held the remains of some lobster benedict and one lonely piece of mango.

She studied the horizon, and the still dark surface of the water, seeing in the distance where the Bay met the Atlantic the ruffled white of rollers coming over the shallower reefs and sandbars that came and went with the tides.

A seagull was bobbing near the boat, watching her from the corner of one beady eye, its beak clicking a little bit as he paddled around the stone pilings of the pier.

Knowing better, Kerry tossed him a bit of the crust of her English muffin anyway and he zoomed over to capture it, as she almost saw the thought bubble 'sucker' lift over his sleek white head.

She chuckled. "Yeah, you guys got two live ones here now. Let me tell ya."

Dar stuck her head out of the cabin. "Who are you talking to?"

"Seagull."

Dar emerged and sat down in the other chair. "Did you feed it?"

"Yes."

The slip next to them was empty, Andy and Ceci had cruised on back to the island with their four staff, all of them busy with plans on how to wrap up things and get ready to move over, this time in a more normal fashion involving a liftgate and a truck.

They'd gotten a good night's sleep, with no thunderstorms, and no unexpected events, just quiet gentle rocking until their usual pre dawn wake up and Kerry spent a moment imagining what it would be like to sitting up on the deck of the house, watching the sun come up in just this way.

She could do that now, of course, from the patio of the condo, but there she was always aware of the density of the people and the apartments around them, and the understanding that they were never really alone.

Here, she could see the edges of other properties if she walked to the very edge of the seawall and looked down the coast, but since they were on a point, from the house on the back deck they would see nothing but their own land, and water.

It wasn't quite the same as living on a deserted island, but there was a peace here she was really looking forward to, and hoping like hell they wouldn't be legally blocked from.

"Now you did it. There's a manatee." Dar remarked, pointing at a stubby snout emerging from the water not that far away. "He wants his toast now."

"He wants greens, and I don't have any." Kerry sighed. "I think they like arugala."

"Seaweed." Dar observed. "He's eating sea grapes." She leaned forward and watched the slow moving mammal, who was browsing on the thick purple and green weed washing against the rocks on the tide. "Hey buddy!"

The manatee peered at her, its nostrils wiggling.

"Dar, don't start that up now." Kerry watched her with wry amusement. "You'll have plenty of time to make friends, after we go and do whatever it is we need to do."

"Me? You were the one feeding seagulls." But Dar straightened up and stretched. "Up for another cup of coffee before we start heading out?"

"Sure."

Dar stood and went into the cabin of the boat, where it was mostly still quietly dim, only slices of sunlight coming in the side windows colored a chromed ochre from the tint on the glass. The two dogs had gone shoreside as the sun had started to emerge and she listened for their far off barking as she poured two cups out of the carafe.

It would be an annoying day, and she could already anticipate the arguments, the yelling, the lack of cooperation, the anger, the frustration of the people she'd be dealing with, who certainly would not enjoy some random unknown women coming into their hairball and starting to pull on it.

Dar's lips twitched a little, into something close to a smile, and she took the cups back outside and handed one to Kerry, finding herself halfway looking forward to it. "I thought you said not to mess with that guy." She said, finding her partner leaning over the deck.

"He's cute." Kerry leaned closer. "He has blue eyes." She observed. "They sort of look like walruses, don't they?"

Dar sat down with her coffee. "They're most closely related to elephants."

"Really?"

"If you look at his flipper there..." Dar pointed. "See the edge? See his toenails? Look up what an elephants foot looks like and you'll see."

"Huh."

The manatee decided to cruise along and munch more seaweed, since there didn't seem to be any cabbage or lettuce forthcoming.

"Huh." Kerry repeated, bracing one foot against the back wall. "Should we name him?"

"No."

"How about Charley?"

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They both had backpacks on their backs as they walked up to the deck towards the side porch, the morning sun now fully lighting the stone and the eastern side of the house. Rather than shorts and t-shirts, they were in jeans and company polos, and hiking boots and both were carrying two of the nearly useless satellite phones clipped to their belts.

"Are there more birds around?" Kerry asked, as they walked out of the sun and onto the shade of the porch on the western side of the house. "Or am I just paying attention today?"

Dar paused and studied the trees around the edge of the clearing the house was in. "No, you're right." She said, after a moment. "It was.. I think they know about the storm and clear out."

"Smarter than we are." Kerry hooked her arm through Dar's and they continued along the planked walk, where a broken board was being replaced by one of the carpenters despite the early hour. "Morning!"

The man looked up. "Morning, ladies." He greeted them. "Gonna be a hot one."

"They all are." Dar said.

They walked on, passing another man applying a careful layer of paint over a second newly installed board, and then they reached the side of the house where the RV camp was, and the cook pit. "It's really hard to say what the front and what the back of this thing is, Dar."

"I was just thinking that." Dar said, as they paused. "Those steps up to that entry there could be the front. That's where we went in the first time. Does it matter?"

"Not really." Kerry regarded the still somewhat quiet area. "Well lets get going. It's almost seven thirty." They started along the path past the RV's to the gravel area beyond that held the rest of the cars they'd brought with them including Hank's Humvee, and Pete's Jeep, and at the back of that Dar's truck they'd brought over late after the traffic to and from the island had settled down. "Where first?" Kerry asked. "Emergency management center?"

"Makes sense."

"Lets get a punch list going I guess." Kerry continued. "Then we can see what we need to get them to do for themselves."

Dar chuckled under her breath.

"He was right about one thing, Dar. With all the infighting going on a third party view won't hurt."

"If we can get them all to shut up long enough to listen to us."

"Hah. I've seen you take over a room, Dixiecup. Really won't be a problem."

"Mm. We'll see."

They reached the truck and Dar opened the back door to toss her backpack in, when they both heard barking coming from the main gate direction. "Found our dogs." She remarked, closing the door. "Maybe the neighbors have finally figured out we're here."

"Oh, I hope not. We don't really have time for that this morning." Kerry got in the passenger seat. "Let's go find out."

Dar started up the truck and a moment later they were trundling across the slightly uneven gravel and stone lined path, the tires of the truck making some slight crackling and popping noises as they crunched on the rocks.

As they came around the bend through the trees, they could see the gates and both Mocha and Chino standing at them, robustly barking and standing between one of the rangers on one side, and one of the veterans on the other, who were apparently standing guard.

"Y'know Dar." Kerry mused. "We should maybe not be so post apocalyptic armed camp. You think?"

"Until we fix everything and the power's back on and people can order Domino's pizza, no I don't think actually." Dar slowed as they reached the main gravel roadway. "There could still be zombies, Ker... but in this case, I think it's just our lawyer."

"Ah."

Dar opened her window and stuck her head out, letting out a whistle. "Let him in." She called out. "He's a good guy."

The ranger - it was John, she realized, waved his hand and a minute later they were pulling the gates open, while Chino and Mocha trotted their way, tails waving in happy pride at their skill in guarding.

Richard pulled his rental car inside and they closed the gates behind him. He pulled up to where they had stopped the truck and rolled his window down. "Good morning!"

He seemed wry, but cheerful, and Dar relaxed a trifle, concluding that whatever news he had could not be completely horrible. "Hey Richard. We were just on our way out."

"So I see." He opened the door and half stood, holding into the frame. "Got about ten minutes? You probably want to hear what my last twenty four hours has been like. You headed back to the island?"

"We're headed out to take over the government disaster response." Kerry told him, dryly. "Because, of course we are."

Richard actually laughed. "Well, if you give me a cup of coffee, I'll make it brief and you can get on your way. I couldn't get a flight back down from Tallahassee so I just drove."

"C'mon back to the house." Dar waved him back into his car. "You can take a nap in the Dixie after if you want."

They turned and drove back to the house and parked behind the RV's, which now had figures emerging from them, and a group standing around one of the grills, with paper plates.

Inside the kitchen the coffeemaker was lit, and there was a sheet pan full of cinnamon rolls sitting out on the counter already well decimated along with a plastic container filled with venison jerky and a block of aged cheddar cheese.

They picked up cups of coffee and then Dar led the way to the newly finished server room, empty of any servers, but with a sturdy wooden work surface along one side of the room and several chairs. There were ethernet cables draped over things, and a power strip on the ground under the table, and a large industrial spot cooler pumping away in one corner, tubes extending from it back through a small hatch cut in the door.

There were cable trays up along the ceiling with cables already in them and clamped to them were work lights, giving the space a blare of slightly green fluorescent magnificence, industrial and bare, yet with a scent of antiseptic clean and the fresh wood of newly build up floor and rack platform.

Kerry closed the door.

"This was a closet wasn't it?" Richard said, briefly looking around. "Wow."

"IT space is IT space." Kerry sat down. "We need what we need and it's never just a closet."

"Everything's removable." Dar spoke up. "I remember what you said."

"Right." Richard had set down a backpack and now he opened it up and removed a folder, which he put on the work surface. "I'll make this fast, because if I tell you the whole story we'll be here all day long." He said. "So there I was in Tallahassee yesterday in the tombs digging out all the records on this place." He pointed at the folder. "Wasn't much. But I was looking for all the proof of land transfer and ownership, anything they had on what this place was, any old newspaper clippings, visuals, anything that could just make the case that the historical designation was invalid."

"Uh huh." Kerry nodded. "Because it's not."

"Because it's not." Richard agreed. "You can see this place, there's nothing here but a building, and some nicely done stonework. Then I started to look up the submission, to see if it was legally valid." He paused, and took a long sip of coffee. "So there I was in the records office minding your business when I heard a ruckus."

Dar propped her head up on one fist. "A ruckus."

"So, because I am your lawyer and I heard the name 'Hunter' mentioned, I went around in the vital statistics area to see what the ruckus was, and what do I find there? I find those folks from the historical society."

"Making the ruckus."

"No, actually." Richard said. "Who was making the ruckus was a big old group of environmentalist activists waving papers yelling to beat the band that those historical folks couldn't touch anything here because they had a prior claim."

"What?" Kerry stared at him.

"Huh?" Dar said, at the same time, her brows knitting in confusion.

Richard seemed pleased with the reaction, and he settled into his chair a little more comfortably, and toasted them with his coffee cup. "It was nice to be the witness to the weird for a change, if you catch my drift."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances, then just looked back at him.

"At that point, I'm thinking to go find me some popcorn and settle in to watch the show." Richard said. "But I was a good boy, and introduced myself as your lawyer and to make what would be a long long story short, ladies, the good news is you can do whatever you want to this house." He said. "Any existing buildings? Whatever your little hearts desire. Improve existing facility? No problem."

"What's the catch?" Dar eyed him.

"You can't mess up any of the plants or trees. It's a protected ecological biome." Richard regarded them, with a wry twist to his lips. "You can't remove any of them, you can't build over them, or move them. You have to protect them."

Kerry started to take a breath to talk, then stopped, then started again. "What the hell?"

"Why would he do both of those?" Dar asked, after a moments silence. "Was Hunter really just nuts?"

Their lawyer produced an exaggerated shrug.

"I've asked for copies of the environmental evaluation and the designation." Richard said. "But I got a look at it and there is no doubt it's legit, and no doubt it was registered almost two years before the old man requested the historical thing." He nodded succinctly. "Those are some pissed off historical people." He concluded. "But they aint pissed off at you anymore, at least. Now mostly they're mad as a wet hen at Hunter, which, since he's gone and buried, is completely lacking a point."

"Holy crap." Kerry murmured.

Dar chuckled suddenly. "That's awesome." She said. "Thanks Richard. I really appreciate you coming down to tell us."

"Gotta tell you." Richard grinned suddenly. "I was laughing all the way down I-95."

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Kerry sat on the edge of the wall around what once had been a garden, and now would be again near the entrance to the kitchen. Dar had walked Richard down to the dock, and she was now waiting here for her to come back, enjoying the moment to let her just absorb what they'd just been told.

Hot damn.

She looked around and behind her where the property was a mix of wild growth and limestone elevations and felt a sense of pleasure and relief that it would remain just like that, this relatively tiny patch of nature that held such appeal even to her, even to someone who had been accustomed to pristinely groomed foliage all the years of her life.

And now this house. Kerry swiveled to look at it. She could already imagine it with new shutters, and the stone cleaned and patched, with the troughs around the steps filled with flowers.

The wraparound porch will be full of comfortable chairs, some rockers, some hanging, with little tables and places to work from if they wanted to, or just to sit and play a game of chess at.

She could almost see them doing that in her head, with happy dogs sprawled at their feet or taking a walk through the trees.

This garden here, would be full of herbs. She could taste the mint from it on the back of her tongue and smell the scent of all of it at twilight and at the end of a long day of work, what it would feel like to sit on the seaward deck and just enjoy the breeze from the water.

They would make friends with the manatees, she was confident, and she imagined she could spend some time taking pictures of all the birds. The possibilities seemed endless.

She saw motion from the corner of her eye and she turned to see John the ranger approaching, his hands stuck into the pockets of his khaki shorts. "Hey." She greeted him invitingly.

He came over to her and sat down on the wall. "That guy Henry told me you all want us to stay and do stuff for you." He said, straightforwardly. "Like what did you have in mind? We're not computer guys." He said. "We don't do any of that, cept maybe we can help run some cable."

"No, we've got plenty of people to do that." Kerry half turned to face him. "We found out something really cool today." She said. "This whole property, the whole area here, it's a protected nature preserve." She met his eyes and held them, waiting.

John smiled, just a little. "Yeah I know." He said. "I.. uh...I went and did that." He glanced around. "I signed the old man's name to all the papers and sent it off, few years back." He looked back at her quickly to see her reaction.

Kerry smiled back at him. "I thought maybe you did." She responded, trading his surprise for one of her own. "I thought maybe that was important to you, when you saw I knew about the hammock." She studied him. "And the way you all stayed around here and camped."

He nodded. "You're a smart lady."

"I am." Kerry agreed. "I figured you figured it was a way to make sure it stayed the way it was, if something happened."

He nodded again. "Then when the old man said he was doing the other thing, I was afraid to tell him. Thought he'd get real mad about it, because I signed his name and all that. But he didn't really care about the land and all he just...."

“Just wanted to keep his daughter from tearing down what he built.” Kerry indicated the house. “That’s what he cared about.”

“She would have, that girl. That is what he cared about, you’re right. Because he made this place, he put his sweat into it. He was proud of every inch of it.” John said. “Minnie cared about the land, you know, because she was from it, her people. She didn’t care about the house or nothing. She cared about the trees and she taught us about them.”

“Two opposites.” Kerry mused. “Were they married?”

“Not officially or nothing.” John said. “She took care of him, cause that’s... she was real traditional. He really liked that.” He seemed a touch apologetic. “He liked that she always kind of..” He hesitated. “She did what he told her.”

“Served him.” Kerry concluded.

“Yeah.”

“Wasn’t that long ago that was the way it was in a whole lot of the world, and still is, John.” Kerry smiled at him. “My parents wanted me to be a good political wife, just a piece of window dressing to help some guy get elected like my father did.”

He studied her for a moment. “Didn’t work out I guess.” He grinned, a little.

Kerry laughed. “Nah, unfortunately I turned out to be gay.”

“And smart.”

“And smart, and stubborn, and a rebel. But it’s only been a couple generations where women even voting was a thing. You know?” She said. “I’m pretty sure that old man could not in a million years even imagine me and Dar.” She paused. “So .. we’re going to need help to keep this place safe, and take care of the land and the plants and trees. It’s a big job.” She said. “Hank scientifically knows what to do. He’s got a degree in horticulture management. But he needs a good team.”

John remained silent for a minute and they sat there as the sounds of construction and some laughter washed over them, with the sound of the door to one of the RV’s closing chasing it. “Of course we want to help.” He finally said. “But... are you saying.. is this like.. “

“Paid work? Yes.” Kerry gently cut him off. “We want to hire you all to work for us. Here, taking care of this place.” She said. “So think about it and maybe let us know tonight? We have to go talk to the folks at the county. Hank will get with you and show you what kind of pay scale we had in mind.”

“Okay.” John said. “I think everyone is going to say yes for sure, but we can talk about it.” He paused. “County people causing a problem?”

“County people hired us to fix their problems.” Kerry caught sight of Dar returning, strolling along the porch with her hands in her pockets, looking around and grinning to herself. “So it should be an interesting day.” She stood up, and as Dar approached she lifted a hand and gave him a short wave. “Talk too you later?”

He lifted his own hand and waved back, head shaking back and forth just a little. “Yes, ma’am. For sure we will.”

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They got into the truck and closed the doors, then paused and looked at each other. “Is it a coincidence, Dar, that we decide to help our fellow Floridians here, and the next thing we know, something nice happens?”

Dar regarded her in silence for a minute. “It’s karma, Ker.” She said. “What you put out in the world, you eventually get back. I’m not sure what that says about us since what we usually get back is...”

“But it always works out all right.” Kerry interrupted her gently.

“True.” Dar started up the truck’s engine. “Doesn’t matter, anyway.” She put the truck into gear. “So lets go see what else today’s got in store for us.”

Kerry settled back in the passenger seat and leaned one elbow on the center console. "Mayte and Maria said they'd have the house work areas all sorted out for us by the time we get back."

Dar eyed her, as she paused to let them open the gates again.

"Hank's going to help." Kerry added, with a wry smile. "There's apparently a truck involved."

"Do I want to know?"

"No." Kerry settled her sunglasses onto her nose as they turned and headed up the road. "Lets just hope it's not those convention center folding chairs that pinch you in the ass."

"I can see where this is going. Foraging for beanbags."

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The End.