

Chapter 19

Katherine watched her scattered people casually walk to various exits before heading back in and climbing the ladder to her room, eying the mess. When she came back, she'd have to finally clean this. She went to a cabinet, unlocked it, took out a small case, and unlocked that. From it she pulled her old Luminex ID, as well as her Similic TK-23, which had been her assigned weapon. They had probably upgraded to a newer model now, but everyone got attached to their first gun, even if it was just a stunner.

She went to the attached bathroom and dug through the mess in the drawers for her makeup kit. She hadn't used it in decades, but she knew it was still there, somewhere.

"You really let things slide, Katherine. Thomas wouldn't be happy with the mess. Fuck." Her chest tightened at his memory.

She'd been told it would lessen in time, and she'd both dreaded and looked forward to a time when she could actually think of her dead husband and be able to breathe. She no longer thought about him as often, but anytime she did, the pain came back.

It took her a full minute before her chest loosened. At least she no longer bawled her eyes out each time this happened.

She found the case and opened it, momentarily at a loss as to what to do with the contents. When was the last time she'd used it? She looked at her reflection, at the destroyed right side of her face. Was there even a point? It wasn't like she could cover that up with makeup.

Still, if she was going to play corporate, she had to look it. She applied the makeup as lightly as she could, then used the control on the case to adjust the colors until they enhanced the shape of her left side. She put the case away and left her room.

Brad looked over his shoulder, nodded, and went back to reading on his datapad.

She didn't hurry as she crossed the landing bay. She didn't have to; she was corporate security. She might as well own the place for the kind of authority she could exert. She drew gazes from other ship owners, from guards, but no one approached her. Those that crossed her path didn't run off—they had too much respect for who she represented to act that guilty—but they did take an extra step to add distance between them. Or maybe that was her face.

The administrative office was simple to find. She'd memorized the way ahead of time, but she didn't need to bother. Every intersection had a sign pointing her to it. It was almost like they wanted anyone to go there.

She entered the room and paused, letting the door close behind her. Six desks with four men and two women working at them. She waited until one of them noticed her, startled, then gasped. The sound made the others look, and more gasps. Only one person didn't look up, a younger woman at the last desk on her right.

Katherine headed for her as the others hurried to get back to work. There was a plaque on her desk

announcing her name was Tiffany. How quaint. Katherine waited.

"Give me a minute, I'm finishing something," Tiffany said.

Katherine waited. She'd picked her because she'd been too focused on her work to notice what the others did. She wanted someone who worked hard, because more times than not, it meant someone who spent more time working than socializing.

She finished what she'd been doing with a satisfied smile. She turned to Katherine. "What can I—" She startled hard enough she knocked the glass over. She cursed and dabbed at the clear liquid dripping from the desk to her pants. This would go on longer than needed, Katherine knew. The excuse the woman needed to gather herself after being scared. Her face did that to people now.

It had been a conscious decision not to get it repaired, or at least smoothed over so she wouldn't scare everyone looking at her for the first time. Anyone who saw her knew she'd decided to keep this, and they had to wonder why. What kind of woman wanted to look like this? Wanted a face that would make children cry six blocks away?

No one had ever asked her. If someone did, maybe she'd tell them, or more likely she'd simply smile at them, terrifying them even more.

The woman composed herself, looked up at Katherine, and winced again. She looked around, probably hoping someone would come to her help. "H-How can I help you?"

"My name is Katherine." She didn't smile, or try to appear pleasant as she produced her ID. "I'm with Silt Security." She only thought of the business as she said the name. Anything else and she'd suffocate. "We're employed by Luminex. I need access to your security feed."

Tiffany stared at Katherine.

Katherine raised her left eyebrow. "Well?" She'd had to practice that motion. She'd done it with her right eyebrow before, and not only was that gone, that side of her face no longer moved.

"I'm sorry, m-ma'am, but the security feed isn't public."

Now Katherine smiled, making Tiffany look away. "I'm not 'the public', Tiffany, I'm corporate security." She leaned in, making Tiffany lean back. "Now, I'm sure you don't get visits from us all that often—this place seems quiet enough—so let me tell you how this goes. I tell you what to do, and you do it." She broadened her smile and Tiffany paled. "See, it's that easy."

"I-I-I can't do—"

"Yes, you can, Tiffany. Just access the feed on your terminal and move out of the chair. Or, if you still have work to do, find me a quiet office where I can do my work."

"I think I should call my supervisor." Tiffany reached for the comm on her desk, which forced her to lean forward.

Katherine didn't move. "Don't bother. If you're going to call anyone, call whoever runs this port, because I am not wasting my time going through the ladder being told by one person or another what I can and cannot do."

Tiffany again looked around, but Katherine could see they were all hunched over their terminal, working hard at not noticing what was going on. "Why do you need access?" Tiffany wheezed.

"Now," Katherine said in a pleasant tone and dropping the smile, "that's a productive question." Without taking her eyes off the young woman, she pulled her datapad from a pocket and placed it on the desk. It came on, showing a picture. "There was a prison breakout, and I've been charged with tracking down one of the escapees." The image on the datapad was of Martin Asinsky. "My information indicates that he managed to sneak onto this nice little planet of yours, so I need to go over the security feeds for the last month or so."

The woman looked torn between wanting to obey a representative of some form of law enforcement and obeying the rules laid down by her superiors. Tiffany glanced at the comm again, and Katherine decided on a slightly different tactic.

She sighed. "Is this because you don't trust that I am who I say I am?" She took out her Luminex ID and offered it to her. "Go ahead. Check Luminex's employee database; it's available to the public. You'll see I'm there. Then look into Silt Security. You'll see that we are their security company." She knew that's what a search would tell the young woman, because she had paid good money to make sure her termination didn't reach the public side of the database.

It had been money well spent. The work the coercionist had done ensured that unless someone dug all the way to the private side of the company, everything would match Silt Security being employed by them.

She'd hoped to make use some someone she knew, but those coercionists had been too comfortably ingrained within the corporate structure. She'd had to turn to a list Thomas kept. She gritted her teeth as her chest tightened. He had been the one with the contacts on the less legal side of things, and among them she'd

found one her husband had trusted. She offered him to come with her, but he was strictly a “from home” coercionists. Which meant she was still without one of her own.

Tiffany stood, still looking unsure, but more resolute. “If you’ll let me, ma’am, I’ll take you to where you can work.”

Katherine nodded and stepped out of her way, the only thing she could do at the moment. Tiffany had taken a few steps before noticing Katherine wasn’t with her.

“Is there something else you need here?”

Katherine shook her head and took a breath. She took her datapad off the desk and followed Tiffany to a door at the back of the office, which she unlocked, and then it was corridors until another door, which she buzzed. There was a plaque on it that read “Security”.

The door opened, and they entered a dimly lit office with a wall of screens. The man seated before them was overweight, possibly a reject from the Law. Corporate security rejects were still too good to end up in a room like this. He turned and stared at her face.

“This is Katherine,” Tiffany said. “She’s with Luminex’s security. She needs to look at the port’s feeds.”

Katherine stared back at the man, mildly impressed he hadn’t looked away. When he looked away, it was more out of embarrassment.

“Sure, what do you need?” The man’s voice was deep and rich.

“I’m going to need your chair,” Katherine said.

He got out of it.

She took his place and surveyed the wall of screens until she found Tristan’s ship. “Are all the ships on this screen?” She kept her gaze going. Each camera was stationary.

“Yes, ma’am. Every ship’s got to have a dedicated camera on it. Port policy.”

“And you can control each feed individually?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She began entering commands. “all of them at once?”

“That too. If you want, I can—”

She got all of them moving backward in time. “It’s okay, I know how to operate it.”

“Ma’am, if you tell me what you’re looking for, I’m sure I can find it for you.”

“She’s looking for an escaped convict,” Tiffany whispered.

“Shouldn’t you head back to your desk, Tiffany? I’m sure I’ve already taken far too much of your time.”

“You won’t need me to find your way back?”

Katherine smiled at her over her shoulder. “That is sweet of you, but I can find my own way back.”

Tiffany almost ran out of the room.

She went back to looking at the screens, keeping her eyes moving, but always with one ship staying in her field of vision. Then Tristan’s ship wasn’t there.

She paused the feeds, sped them forward until it landed. Paused. She fixed her gaze on a small corvette all slick and shiny and looked at the time stamp. Eight days ago.

“Is that him, ma’am? That ship’s registry was all in order.”

Eight days. Other than the time she’d lost half her face, this was the closest she’d ever been to him. “Do you know everything about every ship here?”

“No, ma’am, but I got a good memory. I remember what the system flags. It didn’t flag that one.”

“Which ones did it flag among those?”

The man indicated twelve of them, but not Tristan’s ship. Of course everything would be perfect with his registry; Crimson would have seen to it.

She watched as Crimson left the ship, alone. He returned just under an hour later. Ten minutes later they both exited the ship. Tristan closed it, locked it, and they left the landing bay. She couldn’t request the cameras inside the port yet, because she’d have to explain she was following those two, but now she knew which exit they’d taken.

She kept watching. She wanted to speed forward since this time she knew exactly what she was looking for, but she’d have to explain how she knew her suspect wouldn’t show up in that time. She wished she’d gotten an office where she could do this without someone looking over her shoulder.

Eventually her ship landed, and she let it go until she walked out of it. She paused, rewound ten minutes, and let it proceed at normal speed. She found her people walking away from ships as if they’d exited them. She looked for one specific face, and smiled when she found Martin’s.

“Gotcha.” She looked at the man. “I need the feed from all the corridors. And when you’ve set that up,

can you be a dear and get me something to drink?"

"Yes, ma'am. Will coffee do?"

"Yes, but is there anywhere you can get good coffee?"

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The motel room was empty. Not only that, it had been sterilized. If there had been anything organic here at one time, it was gone for good.

She wasn't surprised. Unless he was destroying a place, Tristan never left evidence of his presence. Even in Crimson's place, there had been nothing but some shed fur to indicate anyone else had been there, and she was confident the only reason was that she'd gotten there before he could properly clean the apartment.

He hadn't had time to get to his accomplice's apartment. Or possibly that had been Crimson's job, but he'd reacted more strongly than either had expected to the fabricated virus that they'd used to justify his absence from work, and hadn't had the time to do it before her security showed up.

She had to admit Crimson had been good. He hadn't been a plant, not with working for decades before Tristan became aware of them. How the alien had turned him, she couldn't tell. Love? Maybe? Crimson was a known xenophile, but his file said he was loyal. He'd passed the test every employee was given, without their knowledge. His attendance record was nearly perfect.

The recruiters had to have missed something. A detail, a vice, there had to be something that would allow Tristan to gain more loyalty from him than he had for the company, and in a short period. Crimson had turned so loyal to Tristan that he'd come back to work when she was forced to release him, only to steal corporate property and run back to his...what? Master?

She stepped out of the room and looked at the hover. It was the one Crimson had rented. Convincing the rental to give her the tracking frequency had been simple, and she'd confirmed the hover had been at the Telrize Complex not long before the Law had been called there. But that part was clearly done, and instead of keeping this hover for the rest, Tristan had abandoned it. She had a recording of the hover landing, of the door opening, but no one stepping out, even as the door closed. Crimson's work, no doubt.

She looked around. The street had its own camera, as did the other businesses—well, business. The restaurant was the only thing that hadn't closed down and, by the look of it, they either wouldn't have any security, or Crimson would have taken control of it and cleaned both of them off.

That meant she'd have to deal with the local Law. She didn't know if her ID as a Luminex employee could survive the level of scrutiny they could put it through. It had every other time she'd dealt with Law agencies, but she always did so with caution. It only took one time for her ID to be useless forever.

Sure, Silt Security still existed, but without the power a corporation like Luminex gave it, it was nothing more than a name on a plaque like Tiffany's. It served no functional purpose.

She'd keep the Law as a last resort. Plenty of people walked by here, ample vagrants and others she could question. One of them could have seen something of use. Right, like these people ever saw anything until money was involved, and then they saw exactly what you needed them to.

This was going to be a waste of time, she knew. But otherwise, it would bug her the entire time she dealt with the Law.

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