

Chapter 30

Something resembling peace fell over the precinct with the corporate security agent in the detention block, but she wasn't what people talked about. Like them, Victor knew the type; at least once a month one of them came by on an urgent job or another, and threw their weight around. No one liked them, but all they could do was hunker down and wait for the storm to pass.

Victor saw the captain approach, and did his own hunkering down by switching the display to the data he was supposed to enter instead of working on figuring out who had blown up Tristan's ship.

"Barstone, what the fuck are you doing here?" No pleasantries? Whatever had taken place in his office had left him in an even worse mood than usual.

"Going over the files, Captain, just like—"

"I don't fucking care what you're doing. You're a disgrace to this department. I want you out of here."

"You can't fire me," Victor said in as neutral a voice he could.

The man leaned across the desk. "I want you out," he hissed. "You think your life is miserable now? How about I send you to Evidence?"

Victor couldn't hide his dismay. "You can't do that; it's a rookie position."

"It's whoever I decide gets assigned there, and—"

"Captain?" a woman in uniform interrupted.

The man whirled on her. "What?" he snapped.

"Adrien and Xavier are back with a suspect in the Savio case."

"Finally!" The captain walked away. "I can't believe there's actually someone here who knows how to do their job."

The woman who'd unknowingly saved Victor's life walked away without giving him a second glance. He breathed easier. He had until the next time something blew up for the Captain to remember he existed. Then he'd probably be sent to Evidence.

Victor shuddered.

Why that department, housed in a warehouse two blocks away, was even needed was beyond him. It had been decades before he joined that authenticated digital copies had been accepted as evidence in the courts.

He'd spent a month in that large empty building, along with two others from his class. They'd had to walk the alleys formed by the endless shelves and manually verify that each item was still in its assigned location. The reason they were given was that the physical item was needed in case the digital copy was corrupted, but that hadn't happened in the years since the system had been in place.

The three of them had come up with the theory that they kept it around specifically to bore new

officers out of their minds so that when they were let out to patrol the street, it would seem like a great job in comparison. Victor patted his ample stomach. He could use the exercise he'd get there, but the sheer mind-numbness of the place would kill him.

And that was where he was headed; Victor had to be realistic. Sinor had forgotten him for the moment, but he'd remember, and then he'd transfer him to Evidence, and Victor would have to leave or perish in a slow, boring death.

He brought his program up; it was done connecting to the port's feed. He fed it images of known ship thieves, while he requested specific footages. He'd wanted to look into it as soon as he got back, but Sinor had been in an uproar about gang movement, reports of mercs in one of the housing district, about cases being worked on—or not worked on, depending on which officers they were assigned to.

The hubbub normally served as a cover for Victor not doing his job, but this time he kept getting requests to pull files relating to their cases, so he was kept busy, and then had come the explosion at the drug lab.

Victor hadn't been able to get any information on that, but he suspected it was Tristan's work. The uproar in the precinct had gone up a notch, and the reports started coming in, and he couldn't let those sit around, not when it was something as visible as an all-out gang war in a housing district.

So, now he finally had time.

Why exactly he was looking into it, he wasn't sure. It wasn't to help Tristan. He'd never see him again. He finally settled on wanting to satisfy his own curiosity. Why would anyone try to break into that ship specifically? It could be a coincidence, which was why his program searched for the usual suspects, but he had trouble believing that.

He stared at the screen, and realized nothing would happen for a while, so he brought up his accounts.

He had money, probably more than Sinor thought, considering he'd kept Victor from getting the mandated raises. His father had been an asset manager, and he'd written a handful of programs to help with that. He'd managed Victor's money, until he retired to see what else was out there, and then had shown him how to use the programs so he could do it himself.

He had nothing like the kind of money he'd need to retire, if his goal was to have an actual life—and he wouldn't ask his father for help. Keeping him from finding out how he was treated here was hard enough already, if he had to explain why he had to leave suddenly... Fuck, he was going to have to explain it regardless. Well, he'd deal with that when he got there.

Having confirmed his money was all where it was supposed to be, he accessed medical sites. He looked at what was offered, starting with the most affordable: superficial changes. He could be slim and toned, but there would be nothing behind it. If he wanted the strength, he'd have to work out. He'd have to build up his endurance himself.

From there the price went up quickly with every other change he wanted done. It went beyond improving himself. He could change the way he looked, be it like the current superstar, or even an alien species. One corporation claimed they could make him an actual alien, inside and out. Why would anyone want to change species?

He shut it down. He wasn't going to leave the Law, not really; this was what he'd always wanted to do. Alex's words had hit a sore spot, that was all. Make him doubt his life. He couldn't drop everything and go run after someone who wasn't even the person he fell in love with.

He brought up a series of vids, him and Simon, outside, having fun. Visiting the city. Victor had loved recording them. He'd had to be careful to store the racier ones in a secure node. What a great time he'd had with Simon.

But now, after the rest of what he'd lived through, he wondered if things would have been better if he'd never met Simon. If Tristan had never picked him as a way of gaining access to the precinct's servers. Would he have made captain by now? District manager? Maybe planetary—

The door to the detention block opened and chaos returned, this time accompanied by a handful of mercs talking amongst themselves and sending verbal jabs at the officers. The only one not participating was the green-skinned alien. He was sullen.

Victor had heard about that one, and the officers he'd injured. He was happy they were leaving.

"Miss Silt?" One of the uniformed officers tried to get her attention amidst the commotion. "Miss?"

Finally the woman noticed him, and with one word quieted the mercs. Victor was impressed at how well-trained they were. Mercs were not known for taking orders.

The officer offered her a chip. "This is all I could find on the people who were at the scene."

She took it, studied it like she could read the content. Maybe she could? It wasn't like Victor knew the

kind of augmentations she had. Corporate paid well.

“How much about the people who got away?”

“There isn’t much.”

The news didn’t make her happy.

“It hasn’t even been a day,” he stammered. “We’re still gathering—”

“Fine. Then you’re going to send me anything you find as the investigation progresses, understood?”

“Ma’am, that isn’t how—”

“Do I look like I give a damn how things get done?” She waited. “Well?”

The young officer swallowed. “No?”

“Exactly, so you’re going to do what I tell you, or I’m going to come back and you’re not going to like what’s left of your career by the time I’m done, understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the officer replied meekly.

She left with the mercs trailing behind her, snickering.

Victor gave the officer time to settle, but he was still shaking. “Wanna talk about what that was about?”

“Thanks, I just—” He looked at Victor, and immediately looked around.

“Come on,” Victor sighed, “I’m not contagious. I screwed up decades ago, nothing more. And if that’s given me one thing the rest of this bunch aren’t going to get, it’s what it’s like to be talked to the way she talked to you.”

The officer deflated and moved closer, and Victor saw his name tag: Johanson.

“Etrigan gave me the job of getting her all the reports on the explosion and everyone involved. So I did it. I wasn’t expecting to...” He shuddered.

“No wonder he passed it along to someone else.”

Johanson raised an eyebrow.

“She completely emasculated him when she came in. Went right for his desk. I didn’t hear anything, but I have a perfect view, and she might as well have ripped it out and thrown it in the disposal for all that was left of his courage.”

Johanson chuckled. Detective Etrigan was known for hitting on anyone he thought was available. Victor had fortunately been spared that particular experience, but he’d heard plenty of men and women talk, and Etrigan definitely thought more of himself than what was there.

“What’s her deal, anyway? What does a corporate want with a bunch of mercs?”

The officer shrugged. “She’s after some blackmailer, really gun-ho about it too. You saw her go in the captain’s office, right?”

“And felt the repercussions.”

Johanson became uncomfortable. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault. So the mercs are hers? To catch one blackmailer?”

“Those are the one who survived. She had twice that, but things turned into a fight and a lot of people died.”

“Really? I’d love to know who could take down a bunch of mercs like those.”

“Some guy named Martin Asinsky.”

Victor was surprised. He’d expected it to be Tristan, or at least his description. That there was someone else out there who was just as deadly wasn’t good news for the citizens, or the Law. He put the name in the system.

“You hear about the explosion at the drug manufacturing lab?”

Victor nodded. Asinsky had a decent file, but nothing in it showed a propensity for violence.

“She tracked him there, then everything blew up. Almost literally.”

“Wait.” Victor forgot Asinsky. “She was there? Those mercs were there?” That was where Tristan and Alex had been, he was sure of it. And if they were, that explained the dead mercs. Maybe everyone thought that Asinsky had done it, but he knew who was responsible.

“Of course, didn’t you hear me tell her that was what the file was about?”

“You mentioned the explosion, but she asked about people leaving.”

“Some other group of mercs. Left with someone, maybe more than one. The witnesses can’t seem to make up their minds.”

“When can they ever?” Victor asked, absentmindedly. More mercs, and not hers, if she was asking about them. And they’d left with someone? It couldn’t be Tristan; no one caught him. But if she’d been there, it

meant she'd seen the fighting.

"Are you sure she said Asinsky killed them?"

"That's what everyone's saying."

Victor flipped the information on his desk so Johanson could read it. "Do you see anything violent in this? Yeah, Asinsky's pissed off some powerful people all over the Core, but his thing's blackmail, not violence."

The officer glanced at the display and shrugged. "People change. You know what those prisons are like. They make people worse, not better. Maybe he got cornered and lost it." He looked around. "Look, I better get back to work. I don't mean to just rush off, but..."

"You don't want to be connected to someone like me." Victor couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice.

"I'm sorry. I don't... Look, thanks for listening, Barstone." He rushed off.

Victor turned the file his way again. So she believed this man was a mass killer. Well, she was going to be following the wrong trail, and end up meeting someone far more dangerous, if she continued chasing that angle.

He received a notification. He now had access to the port's footage. He brought it up and found the wreckage of Tristan's ship. Rewound it until moments before and easily found the man heading for it. Well-dressed, definitely not one of the thieves they knew about. Just in case he was heading for another ship, he asked for the list of parked ships around it.

He vanished under it. By the ramp, confirming that was his destination, and then the ship exploded. Well, that was one less thief working the port. So who was he? Who had he been before such a fiery death?

He rewound again, following the man out of the port and through the halls until he had a good view of his face. It couldn't be. He brought up Asinsky's file. The two of them did look similar.

He imported all the biometric data from Asinsky's file into his recognition program, then fed it the camera feed and waited.

If this was Asinsky, what were the odds it was an accident he'd gone for Tristan's ship? He'd never come across that name when searching for Tristan, and he'd unearth a lot more than the files on him on the net had. Still, he knew he hadn't found everyone who'd had dealings with the Samalian. But a blackmailer? That wasn't Tristan's type of associate.

His program flashed and gave him a ninety-seven percent match, with all the graphs to indicate how it had reached that conclusion. He shut it down.

He watched the feed, following from camera to camera as Asinsky walked through the port, to the landing bay, to Tristan's ship. Starting with the assumption Asinsky knew Tristan, how did he know that was his ship? It wasn't registered under his name, or Alex's.

The list of parked ships arrived, and he glanced at it before going back to the feed in time to watch Asinsky blow himself up. Then his head snapped back to the list. "*The Noble Enforcer*. Owner, Katherine Silt."

He pulled up the landing diagram and located both ships. Either through luck or planning, her ship was parked six spots away, without any ships blocking her view to Tristan's ship.

This...was nuts.

It was a coincidence. Her last name was Silt, but maybe she wasn't a Katherine. She'd been in the explosion, so that meant the hospital. Narcosy had been placed there to take statements. He pulled those reports and searched until he came across a Silt, a Katherine Silt.

Still, it didn't mean that was how Asinsky had known where Tristan's ship was. She was hunting him, after all. At least that was what she'd claimed. And she'd taken a dozen mercs to where she thought Asinsky would be, hours after he'd died, in front of her ship.

He did a search on the name, and more results than he could look through came back. They might not maintain an open line to the rest of the universe, but they still updated their database daily. There were a lot of Katherine Silts in the universe.

He added what else he knew: corporate, and her face—both the damaged one and the one from an older file in the precinct from years before. A file with all the information he needed.

Why hadn't he started with that?

Katherine Silt, of Silt Security, owner with her husband, Thomas Silt. Long-term contract with Luminex. He frowned. He knew that name.

He brought up the only place he could know it from—Tristan's file—and easily found it. Delaron Four, where Tristan had been recaptured. The only event of note to happen before his capture was an all-out assault on the Luminex Headquarters. The official report had claimed it was a corporate attack, performed by an

undisclosed company, but Victor had known that had been Tristan's work.

Luminex had kept as many of the details as they could from being made public, but the death toll couldn't be hidden. It had been in the hundreds. He brought up a list—a hundred and twenty-eight. Most of them security personnel. There was a notation, linking to another, smaller list, more personnel who'd died in what was marked as a preliminary attack.

The name "Thomas Silt" jumped out at him.

Her husband had died in that first attack.

Wait, if he was dead, why was he still mentioned as one of the owners? He called up the file on Silt Security. It might be corporate, but it still had to file with the government like everyone else, which meant it was in here. There. He was still listed as alive and well.

So if he was actually dead, and she was in the field, who ran things at Luminex? Their company was a small one, the two of them as owners and a handful of people for the paperwork. The security personnel had belonged to Luminex; they just managed them for the corporation.

Okay, he couldn't get anything on Luminex. Corporations weren't required to file with the law, only with SpaceGov, and they had clauses that made it near impossible to get any answers from them.

But he didn't need evidence; he wasn't building a case for the courts. He could make do with inference. He dug out Silt Security's finances. Those proved a lot dryer than he'd expected. There had been no financial influx in years. He looked back. In fact, they'd stopped not long after Tristan had attacked Luminex.

If Luminex wasn't paying her company, didn't that mean she wasn't employed by them anymore? Where did her money come from? Those mercs couldn't have been cheap. He could look at her personal finances, but privacy laws required that she be advised. It wouldn't happen until the next sync in the morning, but she would be alerted.

Did he care?

He'd just confirmed she wasn't corporate, the rest didn't matter. He looked at the exit. She'd conned everyone here. Victor stood and looked for the captain. Sinor would be able to make her pay for the way she'd treated them.

He found him, talking and laughing with some of the detectives.

Victor sat down. Why was he in such a hurry to make that man happy? It wasn't like he would turn around and start treating Victor with anything resembling respect. No, this information was his to use as he saw fit.

Katherine Silt was on the planet under false pretext, and she may or may not have been working in conjunction with Martin Asinsky. Regardless, he couldn't be her real target. So who?

The answer was self-evident. Who would require a dozen mercs to capture? Tristan.

His first instinct was to tell the Samalian, as were his second and third. It didn't matter that Tristan had no interest in Victor, and considering he had Alex, could Victor blame him? Still, he wanted Tristan to know what was really going on. Maybe he'd be grateful enough to...what? No, he couldn't do this expecting anything back.

Fuck that. He wasn't spending his life wasting away here. He made sure Tristan's file was synced with his datapad, then disconnected it from the network and added Katherine's information to it manually. He'd keep an eye on her while he got himself ready. If she was willing to play a con on a whole department, she'd be a good lead when it came time to track Tristan down.

Then he brought up the medical clinics. It would be expensive, it would take time, but he could become someone Tristan couldn't ignore, someone Alex had to be worried about. Because the next time they met, he'd be the one not giving any quarters.

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