

“Glad to see you make it into work,” Kat says as I walk in.

“Yeah.” I force a few, clearly fake, coughs. “Weather hit me hard lately.”

She rolls her eyes and gets into her office.

I grab the crate from under my desk. Take that to the sink and rinse out the travel mugs in it. Come on. I’ll happily refill coffee I just drank, or that’s a couple of hours empty, but these things have been sitting there overnight, well, two days, actually. I am not ruining coffee with the dredged from two days ago.

Those cleaned and refilled. I sit at my computer as the others arrive, and set to work...on Silt Security work. As much as I want to keep investigating the trafficking ring, until the drives are decrypted and analyzed, anything else is a waste of time. Even finding them had more to do with Asyr intercepting an email than following electronic trails. There is no way I can convince Kat to let me plug in some outside drive into her computer.

Hell, I wouldn’t let me do it until I had run them through all the security software at my disposal.

My problem is that as good as Tristan’s military laptop is; and let’s be honest here. It’s only good compared to other military laptop. It can’t do the work that’s needed here. I wasn’t happy about it, but Tristan convinced me to have them shipped to Asyr. It’s express, so it’s going to get to the destination they gave him in a couple of hours, and hopefully to its final one under a day.

No, there’s no way they gave us their house address. It’s a Po box in a mail center in a shopping mall in Louisville, Kentucky. And no, that won’t be the city they live in. I’d have something like that shipped halfway around the world, before it reaches me, if I were doing it.

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Her shadow stops before my cubicle, and I ignore her. I am, after all, hard at work trying to be bored by taking apart this company’s security system.

“Should I worry about you bringing whatever kept you in bed into the office?”

“Shouldn’t you have asked me that when I got in?”

“I hadn’t had my coffee yet.”

I glance at the digital clock on the wall, and don’t point out that was three hours ago.

“No, I can say with confidence that what kept me in bed isn’t going to show up in the office unannounced.” Wouldn’t that be a sight?

She sighs. “You know sick-days are for when you are actually sick.”

“Trust me, I was definitely bed ridden.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. I appreciate that being married opened you up to—nope, wipe that grin off your face. But you have a responsibility to this company.”

“Look, I am giving Salt Security my all, I promise. You can count on me to not do anything that’s going to get me fired. If I do, I lose access to my supply of coffee.”

“The coffee? That’s what’s keeping you here?”

“That and the charming conversations we share.”

“Uh, huh?” I watch her internal debate. “Just don’t burn through your sick-days just for time with your husband. You might actually need them at some point.” I chuckle and her eyes narrow.

“Don’t worry. I know quite well the fragility of the human body. I’m taking the best

care of this one, so Tristan can—”

“Finish that and I am getting rid of the coffee machine.”

The protests come from the cubicles around mine. They’re all addicted to the stuff.

No, I am not addicted. I simply love it and have no intention of ever stopping. There’s a big difference.

I embrace the situation. They endure it.

“Look, Kat, I know you love hearing about my home life, but you do pay me to work. I’d feel bad thinking you aren’t getting your money’s worth.”

“It’s Katherine.”

I smirk. “I know that.”

She sighs and walks away. I stand just long enough to confirm she walks past the coffee station. I am not the only one making sure, then sit down and go back to finding out all the security flaws in the firewall.

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My cell pings with the arrival of a text from some unknown number as I shut down my computer. Just an address. I plug that into google and just by seeing it’s in Tolleson; I have to stifle my groan. We’re sleeping in a warehouse tonight. Not my preferred accommodation.

“Night Kat,” I call as I leave. Down the elevator, scan myself out and exit to stifling heat and no idea where my car is parked. I don’t even remember what model Tristan got me this time. It’s a good thing there isn’t a guard signing us in and out, because they’d be wondering how I come in with a different car each day.

I take out my phone and bring up the locating app. The beep gives me a direction, and I head there. At least Tristan gets me modern cars with computers I can hack into and make sure I’ll find it at the end of the day. I’d spend all night looking for it if he got me one of those antiques he prefers.

I have to beep it three times before I reach it. Right, a Mazda CX-30, boring gray. How could I have—

I duck at the motion reflected in the driver’s side window and the baton shatters it. I elbow the suited thug and wince as they grunt. Thick fabric over hard muscle; the arm is buzzing from the impact. I turn, ready to teach him the error of taking me on alone.

He isn’t alone.

Seven other suited thugs are making their way around parked cars.

This is a problem.

Ignoring having to take on eight thugs on my own, without being able to shoot them, since that would draw the kind of attention I don’t want. One of them can be them coming across me by accident. Eight means they called for backup, which means they know where I work. Which means I’m now a danger to the rest of Silt Security’s employees.

“Ah fuck.” To start this on a good foot, I kick the guy before me in the balls, then almost jump the hood of the car next to mine to reach the next thug, but it’s going to have an alarm. How about we try to keep this quiet?

I dodge another baton, plant a fist in a stomach, then a knee in a face. Barely step out of a punch, then a baton clips my shoulder and fuck that sting. I take the one next to the downed thug and block with it.

Not one of them has pulled a gun.

I dodge, block, deflect, swear at the one grazing my arm, elbow that guy in the face, then I see stars from the punch in the side of my head. I back, blocking through the haze until my back is against a car. My vision isn't entirely steady, but I think of the dozen I see only five are real.

Still not good odds, considering my head is ringing, and
Thwack!

One of the thug at the back drops. That wasn't the sound of a baton. It was meatier, thicker. A man in a rumpled suit is revealed, holding a baseball bat and looking annoyed.

"This is private property," Thomas Silt states. "That's an employee of mine. And you're delaying me meeting with my wife. I highly advise you to leave now."

He blocks the baton with the bat, and I put him out of my mind. This gave it time to clear, and it's splitting the thugs' attention. I now like my odds.

I kick the one before me in the knee and there's a satisfying snap. I block the baton with mine as I reach down for another one, then I'm breaking bones as I force that attacker back. Another trying to blindside me, only for a baseball hit to bring him down. Then the one before me drops from my latest hit and it's only me and Thomas standing.

"I..." Okay, just how do I go about explaining this?

He takes out his wallet and offers it to me.

"What is that for?"

"It's what you were after the first time we met, isn't it?"

"The first time..." Shit, he realized that was me? Wait, how long has he known? Why hasn't he said anything to Kat. I know she would have let me know about it if he had.

"So," I say. "Now what?"

He pockets the wallet. "Now, you get to tell me what's going on, or figure out how you talk your way out of it."

"I'd expected a 'we call the cops and let them deal with it'."

He snorts and motions to the unconscious men. "This isn't a 'the cop handle it' thing. I've seen my share of high-tier hired goons. There's an expensive lawyer on retainer somewhere to get them out of this trouble, and I have to piss off whoever pays them, trying to make this as expensive as I can. I don't have the time for that."

"Okay, how about this? Tell Kat I have—"

"Katherine. She hates being called Kat."

"I know. Tell her I have to take those sick days I have left. And I promise not to bring this back here ever again?"

"I don't think sick days are going to be enough for this."

"It's going to have to be. I'm kind of out of vacation time. There was a trip to Mexico," I add as he opens his mouth. "A honeymoon, an injury and convalescence. It was worth it, but that means I can't take any of it."

He looks at the men, me, them again, me again. "I'll tell her, but something tells me that you might not be coming back."

"Oh, I am coming back. You're the only place I can have coffee without being looked at like I'm committing murder."

"Considering how much you drink of the stuff, he might be right to do that."

And he knows about Tristan. Or at least that I married a man. Kat probably told him.

“So I can go?”

“It’s your life. Just don’t bring this on my doorstep again.”

I turn, stop, and face him. “And just so there isn’t any confusion. I wasn’t after your wallet to steal it. I needed to confirm you were real. Kat has a habit of talking about you like you are a little too much.”

Thomas smirks. “If you think my wife is someone who makes shit up, you haven’t been paying attention to her in the years you’ve worked here.”

He does have a point there. Other than learning enough to keep her on this side of firing me, it’s not like I got to know her.

Which raises the question of exactly who Thomas Silt is?

If I have a day without so much to do, I might look into that.

I call Tristan as I start the car.

“They know where I work,” I say as soon as he picks up. “You tell Asyr I have four sick-days left for us to bring this to an end.”

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