

“Hey Mila! *Think fast!*” Josue shouts, before he chucks a wadded up incident response form straight at my head.

I duck, but it still manages to hit me right between the eyes. He grins, swiveling in his office chair, before pretending to look busy at his monitor.

“Josue, I swear-“

He whistles the first few verses of some Journey song and pretends to ignore me.

“Seriously. That’s, what, the fifth time today?”

He continues to pretend to ignore me.

A motion in the corner of my eye catches my attention.

“You seeing that?” I ask, waving him over.

He squints at the blue-tinted monitor, adjusting his glasses. There’s a group of four entering the doors to the upper levels of the hydroponics plant, and they look a little... off. Anxious, like they shouldn’t be here. There’s an elderly white guy, and what appears to be two or three generations of Latino women, seemingly related. All of them are carrying massive duffel bags. One of the women has a can of spray paint.

She’s also elderly, with buzzed white hair. She looks around, finally alighting on the camera. She takes a step towards it, and I lean back instinctively.

She looks the camera directly in the eye and ferociously squirts her black paint onto it with a surprising disregard for company property. The screen goes black.

“Why would she do that?” I ask.

“Maybe she’s trying to, I don’t know, steal a plane,” Josue jokes.

I shake my head.

“She’s an old woman! Why would she want to do that?”

I look over to the next monitor, looking down on the first of the airport maintenance floors. The entire group is now wearing ski masks.

Something about the oldest woman, in her baggy pastel blouse, wearing a ski mask, gives me a lot of cognitive dissonance. It’s just really not what one would expect to see during their boring office job.

My jaw drops.

“Okay, okay, *maybe* they’re up to no good,” I concede, “But... I dunno what.”

Josue is grinning again. I have no idea why.

“This is *the most* interesting thing that has ever happened here.”

He's not wrong. The second most interesting thing was when a kid got a paper airplane jammed in the AC on "Take Your Kid to Work Day". Which was less *'interesting'* and more *'sweaty.'*

It's a pretty boring job, working security at a hydroponics plant. The airstrip on the roof gets a little media attention every so often, for being a pilot project (pun unintended) ran by a local apartment complex. I can't remember how exactly it got built- some guy wanted to teach his kids to fly, and he knew a guy who knew another guy, and pretty soon the whole apartment building was sold on the idea of building a small airport on the roof, what with the city being so big that the nearest conventional airport was a long drive away. Seeing as putting planes and apartments together is a legitimately terrible idea, they decided to share the airport with the hydroponics plant. The runway was put on the roof, hangars and infrastructure taking up the top three or four floors, and the security increased out of necessity. Which meant I got a (small) raise and a free pass to use the airport. Pretty sweet deal, if you ask me.

"No crap, Sherlock," I say, "So, uh, what are we going to do about this? I kind of think we should see how far they make it before we call the cops."

He looks at me like I'm crazy, but I can see him slowly getting the appeal of the idea.

"It's like *real life* reality TV. We should place bets on what they're trying to do."

"Steal the crown jewels," I say, reflexively.

"You think the crown jewels would be held in an American industrial complex?"

"No, but they're not allowed to fly into Britain anymore. So, they're stealing one of our planes."

"*No way,*" he says, his words barely coming out between laughs, "I think the cute old lady has murder on the mind. An affair with a hydroponic farmer gone wrong, maybe."

Another motion catches my eye. I shush him and turn back to the screen.

They're on the floor used by pilots and passengers. Space is limited, so it's all kind of smushed together. The pilots get a small lounge, and there's a few chairs and a small trolley used by the grocery co-op that flies out of the airport. There're also a few pamphlets for one of the aviation programs the local school district is operating in the building, geared towards low-income students. There're a few other programs, but I've heard that the one the school runs is the best.

The youngest of the women takes a moment to look at the airport rules and regulations board. I can see her write down the CTAF frequency and some information on the takeoff setup. The runway is unmanned, so pilots must remember to tap into the frequency to get runway lights and weather information. She turns to say something when the camera is blacked out by a surprise burst of spray paint. I switch our view to the camera in the ceiling and turn the volume way up. My speaker hisses to life.

"-Umber seven," she says, "I don't know if I'll be able to get 'er flying before the end of the runway, but we're on the roof, so we should make it... it could get a *lil'* dicey. You don't get airsick, right, Ollie?"

The old man grimaces.

"I don't think... you... get caught..."

He's fading in and out of the microphone's range. When I turn it up, it just gets staticky.

Josue and I look at each other. We mute the speaker for a second.

"So they're *definitely* going for a plane," I say, "When do we call security?"

"We *are* security."

"No, but, like, the real deal. Cops or the Coast Guard, or, I don't know, somebody."

He grunts.

"Let's keep watching for now. They'll still have to get through security and start one of the ultralights. And they look nice enough."

"Josue..."

We swivel back to the monitors, following them onto the next frame. There are a few uncomfortable moments where they vanish completely from view.

And then the door creaks open. Our door.

"What's *this*, boys?" asks Rosie, our supervisor.

"Nothing!" Josue shouts, switching the monitor off.

I give him the stink eye.

"There's some possible thieves going for one of the planes, we think. I mean, legit pilots just *don't* wear ski masks. And, uh... we figured we'd... er... watch and see what happens."

I expected her to become furious with us, but she starts laughing.

"Continue monitoring them. Nobody likes a criminal on a plane..." she pauses.

"...You interns, I swear to God. Though you're on the payroll now, if I remember correctly?"

"Yeah," I say, "I've been paying for flight lessons in my spare time. It was my dream when I was a little kid, and my access to the airport made it a little more feasible."

She smiles.

"Glad to hear it, so long as you don't start stealing and doing God-knows-what with our planes."

Rosie is an ex-Marine. She's terrifying, *completely and utterly terrifying*. She's a great boss, but the whole office can get fogged up with her irritation in seconds. It's impressive, to be honest, the way she can radiate discontent. Her wife runs the grocery co-op- she's nice, and she's brought Josue and I cookies once or twice.

"Yeah," I laugh, still a little nervous, "So, uh, you want to watch this with us?"

She silently pulls up a chair in response. Josue flicks the monitor back on.

It takes us a few minutes to find the wannabe thieves again. They've covered a lot of ground since we last shut the monitors off, and we have to flip between a few views to pick them out. Two more cameras have been wrecked.

The old guy- Ollie- does not look particularly happy. He opens up his bag, riffling through what looks like... electronics? Some sort of specialty tools? There's a lot of long, thin rods, though it's hard to see through the low-quality camera lenses. Lockpicks, maybe?

I turn the mic on again.

"I think this a terrible idea. I know you really need that cash, and your great-aunts and I would support you in anything, but this is a terrible idea. You could still get a scholarship or some federal relief."

"Student debt is a--"

I turn it off, looking with a slightly different perspective at the subjects of our surveillance. The young one is launching into what appears to be a long, likely profanity-filled rant about college debt.

Rosie winces.

"I don't want to stop them, but we can't just let them go," I say.

"We could try to talk her down?" Josue suggests.

Rosie's jaw is clenched tight. Something about this whole incident seems to be hitting her especially hard.

"Wait," she says, "Let's wait."

The young woman appears to have wrapped up, and so has our quick discussion, so I turn the mic back on. She looks a little less upset.

"The planes are electric, right?" she asks.

"Dunno," the old guy says, "Probably."

He's right on the electricity. It was to make flying here cheaper and cleaner, though the limited range made life a little harder for us. We can only fly out to other small regional or rooftop airports, at least until we upgrade our small fleet.

The group's reached the last security checkpoint, one where they'd usually use an issued keycard or pass to access the planes. Instead, they just try to drill through the mechanism. The grandma pulls out a massive electric drill.

"Hoo boy, I wanna see *this*," Rosie says, with more than a little glee.

The drill doesn't work, it just slides off the metal. Old guy is shaking his head and cussing.

It's hilarious. One of the grandmas is giving the drill the stink-eye, like *that* would help. She spins it a few times, staring at it like it's some cursed archaic machine. The old guy has his lockpicks out, but

it's not a conventional lock. The girl is just kicking it. *Repeatedly*. Finally, the other grandma uses the drill and gets through, though not without some choice words being said. The door swings open.

I snort in laughter, and then I remember the price of that lock.

"So we're still doing this?" the girl asks.

One of the older auntie-grandma ladies nods. She says something in rapid-fire Spanish, too fast for my high-school knowledge of Spanish to catch up with.

The young woman fires something back.

They seem to be getting angrier, and angrier, and angrier. The young woman is shouting, and so is the grandma in the floral print.

And then she breaks into a run.

Josue laser-focuses onto the monitors. He's switching the view on the main monitor, following the young woman up onto the roof. She hauls one of the ultralights to the hydraulic lift. The view switches. She manually unfolds the wings from their folded position. The view switches again as she taxis it onto the first stretch of the runway. She's obviously not an experienced pilot.

There are two runways, a shorter, wider one from the hangar to the main runway that can be used for helicopters, and a longer one that's used for takeoff. The hydroponics complex takes up four buildings, and the runways cover all of them.

She climbs out and pauses for a second, curiously inspecting the tripwire used to make sure landings don't overshoot the building. It's a lot like what you'd find on an aircraft carrier. Most pilots take a little time to adjust, but I don't think she intends to *return* the plane.

"She won't have a key," Rosie says.

"But the older man had, I don't know, lockpicks? Or something like that? He tried to use them on the lock."

"I don't think he'll help her. This whole thing is ridiculous, you know? The girl can fly, sure, and this is the closest airport probably, and the hydroponics farm is secluded, but... there are easier, *legal*, ways to make money. Then again, I joined the military to pay off college. I guess we all do stupid things. *Frick the stupid fricking system.*"

(*Not her exact words. If I repeated those, I would probably be fired.*)

The girl starts anxiously pacing, biting her fingernails. She climbs in the plane. And then she climbs out again. She walks towards the camera. Violently. And I'm expecting her to paint it or smash it or... something. I see my career flashing before my eyes.

But then... she starts to say something, looking directly into the camera. And she pulls off her mask, letting her wind blow in the hair. She's probably no older than nineteen. Her skin's a shade lighter than Rosie's, a light umber color, her eyes a surprisingly vast dark brown. She looks viciously intelligent.

And she almost stole a plane. Some part of me hopes she's alright, another is almost *jealous*, of all things.

"Hello?" she asks.

She shakes her head, apparently not expecting a response.

"I'm sorry, kay? I won't steal your stupid plane. Please don't arrest me. Please. My aunties can pay for the courts or bail or whatever less than they can pay for school."

I look over at Rosie. She's crying. I've never seen Rosie cry.

"Please. I'm pretty sure you're watching, or something, I dunno. I dunno who you are. But please."

She puts her mask back on and leaves the view of the camera. Josue doesn't bother switching the view to follow her.

The rooftop is empty, the plane sitting alone. The tarmac glints in the afternoon, tinted blue and twisted in the lens. It's a beautiful view of the city.

I take a deep breath.

Rosie stands up and walks towards the door of the office. She grabs her coat.

"I'm going to go talk to her," she says, "I'll be back in a bit. *Don't worry.*"

The door slams behind her.

Josue and I sit back, emotionally exhausted. He toys with a piece of paper. I turn off the computer, and we wait.

We sit in silence for quite a while before we start doing our usual selection of office time-consumers. Solitaire, paper airplane tournaments, Tetris, etcetera. I can't even tell how long it's been since Rosie left.

One of his paper airplanes hits me between the eyes.

"Oh, c'mon," I joke, "Last time you did that, we had two grandmas, a bankrupt college student, and some old guy break into the building. What now?"

We wait yet longer.

And then the door swings open, Rosie stepping in, the aunties and Ollie close in tow. The girl follows, her feet striding confidently and yet her eyes on the ground.

"Mila?"

"Yeah?" I ask.

"These are Ollie, Ximena, Edith, and Vera Strand. You're going to teach Vera how to work security so she can pay for college. And, if anyone asks, this deranged plot to steal a plane *never* happened."

“Got it.”

Vera looks at Josue and I, at first cautiously, and then with a little more spark.

“Thanks,” she says, “I’m so sor-“

“Just for the record, that lock wouldn’t have opened no matter how hard you kicked it,” Josue says, grinning.

She looks a little insulted, a little taken aback, and then she starts bellowing with laughter. I can’t help but smile.