

Alex entered the office. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes, please take a seat.” The man seated behind the desk indicated the chair.

Alex swallowed and sat. This was his second time meeting the corporation’s president—twice in just over a month. Some employees went their entire lives without ever meeting him in person.

“First off, Mister Crimson, I’d like to know how you’ve been doing since coming back to work.”

Alex hesitated a moment, trying to decide how truthful he should be. He’d never even contemplated lying to the company before. “I’m okay.”

“And everyone has been treating you well?”

“Yes, sir.” As far as anyone knew, Alex had just been away for a few months. None of them knew anything about his incarceration and interrogation. He hadn’t felt like enlightening them.

“I’m glad to hear about that, and please, call me Emerill.”

“Alright, s... Emerill.”

“Good. Again, I want to apologize for the way you were treated by the company. I know it isn’t going to change what happened to you, but the people responsible for your incarceration and the way you were treated during that time have been punished. They treated you like a criminal, and no employee should ever be treated as such by the company he works for. We’re supposed to be a family.”

“Thank you, sir, but why am I here? I mean I appreciate the concern, but surely you have better things to do than seeing to my hurt feelings.” The company hadn’t felt like family since his return. How could it, after the way he’d been treated. No matter the president’s assurance, how could he know it wouldn’t happen again?

Emerill’s face became more serious. “Mister Cr... Alexander, I don’t want to be the type of president who’s ever too busy to make sure his employees are well treated.” He sighed. “Which is why I wish you’d come to see me. It’s been brought to my attention that you’ve been using company equipment to illegally coerce systems.”

Alex looked down. He’d known it was just a question of time before he was caught. He just wished he’d been able to find something useful to make it worthwhile.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Emerill’s tone wasn’t as sharp as Alex expected it to be considering his infraction.

Again he considered lying but decided for the truth instead. He had already lost his job, he might as well explain why. “I’m sorry, sir. It’s just that I needed to know. I’ve tried to get something from my system, but all I can find on the Network is that he’s a criminal, that he’s dangerous. I need to know more. I thought that using the company’s

system, I'd be able to get into systems that would have more information, but I didn't find anything." Alex deflated.

"This is about Tristan, isn't it?"

Alex shrugged. "That's what everyone tells me. But none of that makes sense. The Samalian I knew was a kind and loving man, not a criminal. Except even he said, that was a lie." He looked up. "That's why I needed to get into those systems, I need to know the truth because I can't believe Jack would do what I'm told he did."

Emerill nodded. "Do you understand the danger you put the company in?"

"Yes, sir," Alex replied meekly. "I'm sorry."

The man looked at him and nodded. He put a data-chip on the desk and pushed it toward him.

"What's that?"

"This is what you've been looking for. All the information that's available on the mercenary and criminal called Tristan."

Alex looked at it, eyes wide. "Why?"

"Because I also had a run in with him. It's possible that you and I are the only ones who encountered Tristan and emerge unscathed from this debacle."

Alex didn't say anything. He wasn't unscathed. Tristan had stolen Jack from him, he'd left a hole so deep in his heart Alex didn't know if he'd ever fill it.

"It also means we have a connection of sort," Emerill continued. "And I feel inclined to help you. I want to reassure you that if you give me your solemn word that you will never again perform unauthorized coercions using company systems, you can continue working here."

The words made Alex look away from the chip. "Really?" He'd been certain he was going to be kicked out. What he'd done had broken major company rules.

"Yes, indeed. With this chip, you don't need to go looking for anything more. You'll find your answers on it." He paused. "But Alexander, be certain you want those answers. What is on that chip isn't pretty. You described Jack as being gentle and loving. Tristan is nothing like that."

Alex nodded as he picked up the chip and turned it in his fingers. "Thank you, sir." He stood.

Emerill stood with him. "Alexander, don't feel obligated to come to work while you are dealing with this. Don't worry about your apartment, I'll make sure it's paid for. Just focus on resolving your feelings, come back to us once you're ready. You're the best coercionist we have; I don't want to lose you."

“Thank you, sir. If you don’t mind, I’m going to go home now.” Alex left.

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The chip sat on his desk for two days before he worked up the courage to insert it in his computer. The first page sent him to the bathroom to throw up. It had been a detailed description of Tristan’s first recorded crime, which left six dead and the bodies horribly mutilated.

It took more than a week before he could get back to it. When he did, he forced himself to read it all, no matter how horrible it got. He needed to understand what Tristan was.

The night before he read the whole file was the last time he had a restful night of sleep. Afterward, when he dreamed, he dreamed of death, of Tristan methodically killing people, destroying properties without care for who was hurt. Of Jack being Tristan.

How had he missed the death in those eyes? The blood on those hands? How could such a monster have managed to make him fall in love so thoroughly, Alex still didn’t want to believe they were the same person?

Tristan had told him it was an act, but no one could act that good, that loving. For him to do it, the emotions had to have been there, on some level. Had Jack been that part of Tristan? The glimmer of goodness in him, of love? Wasn’t the fact that Alex was still alive proof that somewhere in that monster was someone who cared for him?

Alex decided he had to find Tristan. He needed to find him, locate the goodness and draw it out. Bring Jack out of him. He owed that to Jack. He didn’t know what it would take, but Alex was going to save him.

Alex didn’t tell the company of his decision. He needed time. He had to figure out how to go about it. Samalia was a planet at the edge of the universe, so remote the Network didn’t have any other information on it. He knew that because he’d looked it up after meeting Jack.

The only other clue he had was the Defender if it was even real.

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Alex walked along the station’s loading docks, looking for the ship he’d been told about. His research had given him hope. Not only was the Defender real, but there were legends attach to it, legends of promises made and promises enforced. He didn’t know if he believed

in them, but he would do anything, try anything if there was a chance it might help draw Jack out of that monster.

That and a few changes of clothing were all he had with him.

The berth became visible, and cargo was moving in and out. He wasn't on the passenger level. The ship he wanted didn't take passengers.

"I'm looking for the captain," Alex said to the first person he saw pushing a crate in. She was dark-skinned, dressed in multicolored clothes. She eyed him up and down, and then indicated a man on the other side of the ramp.

Alex dodged around the moving crates and got cursed at. "Are you the captain?"

The man was a head shorter than Alex, wearing a white vest and work pants. He studied Alex for a moment. "Who're you?"

"My name's Alex, and I'm looking to book passage to go to Samalia."

The man snorted. "This isn't a cruise ship."

"I know, but you're the only one I could find going there."

"Sure, eventually. I'm a transport, so I go where the cargo needs to go."

"That's fine, So long as I end up there."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Maybe you didn't hear me, I'm a transport, not a cruise ship. Go up a few levels for those."

"I'm willing to work."

The captain looked him over. Alex knew he didn't look like someone who worked hard. His incarceration might have taken away some of the fat years of working at a desk had put on him, but he wasn't anywhere near muscular.

"I know I don't look like much, but I'm willing to work. I'll wash dishes if that's what it takes. I'm a coercionist by training."

"What's that?"

Alex almost went into an explanation of what he did but realized it would be a waste of breath. "I work with computers, programs and stuff like that."

"Like cleaning off infections?"

"Yeah, I can do that." It wasn't his specialty, but he'd used plenty of them in coercing systems he could do clean ups.

The man looked over the people moving the crates, then back at Alex. He pursed his lips for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, tell you what. You're willing to work, so I'm willing to take you on, but you better make yourself useful, because the moment I don't find you useful I'm dumping you. Got that?"

"Yes, sir, you won't regret it."

“You damn better hope I don’t.” He looked over the people again.
“Will, get your ass here.”

Alex couldn’t stop smiling. He was finally on his way. He’d sold all his possession, handed in his resignation, and sent a message to his grandparents letting them know he was going on a trip, and he’d contact them once he was back. That would keep them from worrying; they took enough of trips to know that with cryosleep, it could be years until he contacted them. The only material thing that mattered to him anymore was the Defender.

Now it was just a question of time until he found Tristan, and rescued Jack.