

The cell was the same as it had been when he'd been escorted from it: spacious and well-lit with gray walls, a bed, table and chairs, and a bathroom. Objectively, Alex knew it was a room and not a cell, but he still couldn't leave it. There was an old saying about gilded prisons he couldn't quite remember.

He made it to the bed, dropped on it, and curled up in a ball. Reliving the memories had reawakened the pain that had managed to dull over his imprisonment. Now when he closed his eyes, all he could see was the impostor, this Tristan, telling him he'd never see Jack again.

Why had he done that? It couldn't be just because he was cruel; no one could be that cruel.

Alex didn't remember falling asleep, but the sound of the door opening and closing woke him. He raised his head only enough to see there was a tray of food on the table and let it drop. He didn't have an appetite, not that there was enough food there to sate him. He'd had to have lost fifty pounds during his time here.

He closed his eyes and fought back the tears. He wanted Jack back. He wanted Jack to hold him, tell him it would all be okay. That this was a bad dream.

His father would have cursed him for needing someone this badly, let alone an alien. Alex didn't care. He loved Jack, and that's what people who loved each other did: they leaned on one another.

Only Jack wasn't there to be leaned on.

He woke up again and saw the door as it closed this time, and part of someone dressed in black. There was another tray of food, and this time he decided he had to eat, no matter how he felt. He forced himself standing, and his body felt like someone had beaten him, but he didn't see any indication of that when he caught sight of himself in the bathroom mirror through the door. It was all in his head.

He picked at his food, knowing he had to eat, but having trouble finding a reason to do so. It wasn't like he'd need the energy for anything. He was trapped here; he might as well just lie back and let himself waste away.

As the idea crossed his mind, he found he was grinding his teeth. What was wrong with him? He might be trapped here, but to just give up?

The anger gave him the strength to eat the food, but when he was finished, he just felt his hunger more sharply. He tried to stoke his anger, but he couldn't see a point to it. He made his way back to the bed and closed his eyes.

Days passed, each the same, the only thing marking their passage being the one meal he got. It couldn't be more than one a day, not as hungry as he always was. Lying in bed, getting up only for the bathroom and food. He knew he should do more, but he had no idea what. A couple of times he tried to engage the guard who brought his food in conversation, if only to find out how long he'd been here, but they remained silent.

After this seventh meal—so seven days since he'd been interrogated—he decided he needed a shower.

It felt good. Once he was done he almost felt human again, and he decided that after he'd slept, he'd start exercising. All he could do was walk around the room, maybe jog, but at least it would be something to do.

When he woke up, he couldn't find a reason to get out of bed.

Not for the first time, he wondered where he was. Where his cell was located. He had trouble believing his own company had imprisoned him, but who else could it be? And if someone else, why all the questions about the attack? At one time he'd thought it was a trick by

a rival to get him to divulge company secrets, but it wasn't like he knew any. He was just one of the many coercionists the company used.

But the company didn't imprison its employees. They were a family, the company looked after its own. That's what he'd been told, and what he'd experienced, until now.

And now he remembered rumors that someone who'd made trouble didn't show up for work one morning, then after a few days, words came from the manager that they'd left the company. There'd always been one person who'd say they'd vanished, been removed.

Alex had never believed them, but now, here he was. What would his coworkers think? What had they been told? Did it even matter?

After another dozen meals, he finally decided he'd had enough of lying in bed and began walking around the room. It didn't help keep his mind from going to dark places where Jack screamed at him for letting him be taken, or where Tristan laughed at him for being so easily taken in, but it let him believe he was doing something to improve his situation.

At least he wasn't moping in bed anymore.

Not long after that, he began keeping track of the days, making a scratch on the edge of the bed each time a meal came in. He was up to eighty-nine scratches when the door opened, and instead of a guard with his meal, a man—dressed in a suit the same black as his interrogator had worn, and he now realized, the same black as the armored guard—entered and sat at the table.

Alex stood there, unsure what to do. He hadn't even tried for the door as it opened. He knew it was pointless—there would be guards outside—but the thought hadn't even crossed his mind. This cell was so much his world now he hadn't considered leaving it when the sliver of a possibility presented itself.

"Will you sit down?" the man asked. His voice was pleasant, but slightly bored. A functionary, Alex decided while he remained where he was.

"Mister Crimson, if you want to leave this place, there are forms I need you to acknowledge, and I'd much prefer we do this seated."

Alex stared at him, at that well-dressed man, clean-shaven, a bit of a jowl, short black hair. Quite the contrast to what he had to look like: thin with a messy beard in dirty clothes. The walking had kept him from turning into a skeleton, but it hadn't done anything for putting mass on his bones. He just wasn't getting enough food for that.

"Mister Crimson, please sit down." His tone was still pleasant, still slightly bored. Like Alex's reaction was something he'd seen so often he barely noticed it anymore. Did the company have that many prisoners?

"You are being released. All that's needed is for you to read these forms," he placed a datapad on the table, "and you'll be free to go."

Alex looked at it, then the man again. Was this a trick? He wondered. Were they back to questioning him after all these months? If so, why this man, instead of the woman, his regular interrogator? Did they realize how badly he'd want to leave once they made the offer? Did they suspect Alex would say anything to get out of here? Not that the idea had entered his mind.

Because he wanted out so badly, he forced himself to move slowly as he stepped to the table and sat. The man pushed the datapad closer to Alex.

"This form indicates you are retaking your position as one of the company's coercionists."

Alex went through the document slowly, trying to give the impression he was reading it, even though he couldn't make the words mean anything.

“There’s space at the bottom for your print, to acknowledge you agree, but if you don’t want to do that, a verbal agreement is also acceptable.”

When he reached the bottom, Alex pressed his thumb on the space provided, and the document changed.

“This form indicates you are retaking your apartment, as well as your belongings.”

Again, Alex forced himself to go through it slowly. At the bottom, he pressed his thumb, and a new document appeared.

“This last one is the standard form stating that what happened here is a company secret, and you are not to talk about any of it, or divulge any information about what happened here. Doing so is punishable by termination.”

Alex looked up at that word, worry on his face.

“Your employment, Mister Crimson. Please, just what kind of company do you think we are?” The man’s tone was light, but Alex couldn’t help feeling like it was forced.

As for what Alex thought of the company, he thought that if it could imprison a loyal employee, what else would it do?

“What if I refuse to sign it?” Alex was surprised at how raw his voice sounded. His throat hurt from speaking those few words. When was the last time he’d spoken out loud? When he’d been strapped in the chair? No, a few days later, when he’d given up trying to talk to the guards.

“I’m afraid all three need to be signed for you to be released.”

Alex wasn’t able to act like he read it. He went directly to the bottom and put his thumbprint. It wasn’t like he was going to talk about his time here, even if he thought anyone would believe him. He wanted to put it behind him, to forget about it.

The man smiled as he took the datapad. “Good. If you’ll follow me.” They left the room, and two guards fell into step behind them.

They walked for a long time, and Alex was happy for all the pacing he’d done. They walked through corridor after corridor, past so many doors that again, Alex wondered just how many people his company was holding captive.

The thought that this was a ruse resurfaced. Maybe they weren’t freeing him. Maybe this man was taking Alex to be killed. His steps faltered. Could he run off? Would the guard catch him? Could he find his way out on his own? Would he rather die trying to escape, or by submitting to it?

He hadn’t figured out the answer by the time they reached an elevator. There were no buttons or floor indicators, so Alex didn’t know how many floors they went up. When the doors opened, he looked at another corridor.

This walk was nowhere near as long until they reached the end of a hallway, with a door in it. Above it was a sign: “Exit”.

The man opened the door, and Alex saw daylight for the first time in longer than he could remember. He heard the sound of vehicles, the sounds of people.

Alex took a step toward his freedom, then stopped. It couldn’t be real. It had to be a trick. They hadn’t gotten anything from him.

“It’s alright,” the man said, placing a hand on his back and pushing him forward gently. “I understand your apprehension, Mister Crimson, but it’s real. You’re free. Just remember, you’re expected at your desk come Monday.”

Alex nodded and found he was on the other side of the door. “Wait.” He turned. “What day

is this?"

"It's Thursday, of course." The man closed the door.

Alex stood there, looking at it for a long time. He was in an alley, at the base of a tall building. This was the back, he knew because of the loading docks where a truck was being unloaded, and another one was pulling away before lifting off.

He walked around the building, curious as to which one it was. He couldn't believe he'd been in the city this whole time. The sun hit him when he stepped out of the alley, and he had to close his eyes at how bright it was. He'd forgotten how bright, how warm, the sun was. His eyes hurt, even closed, but he thought he could stand there for the rest of his life, soaking it in.

Until someone made a disgusted sound and he saw the people walk around him, step away from him. He had a chuckle at the sight he had to be. He'd showered regularly and washed his clothes in the sink, but he couldn't look in any way presentable.

He ignored them and joined the crowd. Reaching the front, he didn't see a name on the building, but he didn't need one to know it. He'd walked to this entrance every workday for the last eighteen years.

This was Luminex. He'd been held inside the company building this whole time. It wasn't just the company-people who had held him prisoner, it was the building itself.

For a moment he thought he was going to be sick, but he forced the bile down. He was free now; the past didn't matter. All he wanted to do was go home and find out that Jack was there, waiting for him.