

Alex wondered if screaming at the screen would help. Not screaming at the node—he knew that never produced anything—but just at the screen. He'd taken out his earpiece and was rubbing his temple. This was proving to be more complicated than he'd anticipated, despite the simple task. His problem was that he couldn't dedicate large blocks of time to tracking down the information on Tristan.

Coercion was a sustained process. It was why when he was given a target, he had to stick with it until he was done. A stubborn system could easily take half an hour before it gave up its information, and all Alex had was, at most, ten minutes between assignments before he automatically received a new target.

There was his lunchtime—he had an hour then—but company policy stated he couldn't be at his station during that time. The company wanted productive workers, not people who drove themselves to an early grave by always working. If he were still at his station, one of the supervisors would be advised by the system, and they'd come check. If he were finishing work on an attack, they'd remind him to take his lunch as soon as he was done. If he wasn't, his access would be cut, and he'd be told to go take his lunch. He'd seen it happen to more than one employee who thought they could get ahead by overworking themselves. He couldn't afford to be discovered.

The idea that he might end up back in that room because of that had kept him from spending too much time on this, and was what frustrated him.

For the last two weeks, he'd been trying to figure out a method to insert a command line here and there in such a way that it wouldn't be detected during a system's regular health checks. He'd worked out a handful of possibilities, and tested them on systems minor enough no one would care about the alarm they raised if they detected the alterations, which invariably they did. System health was a serious matter. Even minor computers had robust immune systems, and major computers had immune systems so strong that it could undo an attack in seconds, if given a chance.

So he hadn't been able to track down where the information was during those snippets of time he could devote to that task, but he did gain a sense of who was hiding it, or rather, what was. He suspected it was a program, and not a person doing the work. Even the best coercionist didn't have the reaction time and thoroughness he was seeing. He'd pick up a trail during a break, figure out the node it led to, then when he returned to it between assignments, all trace of both the node and the trail would be gone. Completely removed, not even a signature left behind, something coercionists were notorious for doing, even when they didn't want to. Even Alex did it, and the company had spent weeks training him and the others not to do it. It was something ingrained too deeply in them.

He was going through yet another of what he felt was a waste of time, following a trail, pushing how long he worked on this rather than his assigned task, in the hopes that this time would be the one that yielded results, but knowing it wouldn't. In the back of his mind, he thought it was time for something more direct, more forceful. Like taking control of the Luminex system after work hours and doing this from home, but if he was caught doing *that*, that gray room would be the least of his problems.

"Mister Crimson." The stern woman's voice froze Alex.

He glanced down the corner of his screen, and there was the notification about his next target. As he watched, it went from blinking green to yellow, indicating he was noticeably late in starting.

He did his best to appear calm as he turned, but he was sweating, and his blood ran cold when he saw *her*. What was she doing here? She was security. At least he noticed her gaze was fixed on him, not the screen, so she hadn't noticed he hadn't been working on an assigned target.

"Y-Yes?" his voice cracked.

Her mouth was tight, her face hard. "Mister Karson wants to see you."

The name was familiar, but he couldn't place it. As nervous as he was, he had trouble remembering his own last name. He thought about asking, but the anger in her eyes kept him silent. Maybe that was her boss. Maybe she'd been demoted for what she did to him. But if security had been brought in to deal with him, then he was done for. His unapproved work would cost him his job, possibly his freedom.

Strangely enough, as he stood to follow her, he realized that being fired didn't cause the same fear it had before, and the idea of losing his freedom only angered him because he wouldn't be able to continue his search for Tristan and Jack. He promised himself that if it came to that, he'd run. He'd find a way to look for the Samalian from the fringes of society.

The elevator went up instead of down, and he found he breathed easier. He didn't know where the head of security had his office, but he knew the room he'd been kept in was below the building. His nervousness returned when the elevator went past the twentieth floor. Everything above that was executive offices. Even the head of security wouldn't be considered an executive, would he?

Alex had never gone above the eighth floor before, and now, Alex was so much higher that he was in a world he'd only heard rumors about. Executives didn't mingle with the common coercionists. If they wanted something, their instructions passed down through dozens, if not hundreds of others before it reached the assigning system. The only reason he could think of going this high was that the lawyers were getting involved. That could only mean the company wasn't happy dealing with him internally. They were going to make an example of him. They were going to turn him over to Government Law and press charges in the public court.

The elevator stopped, and Alex couldn't move. He'd thought he was ready for this. When *she'd* showed up to get him, he'd settled on a plan, but now that he was in the middle of it, his courage vanished.

"Move it," she said, making him jump.

He looked up as he exited, and caught sight of the floor's number: eighty-five. He was on the building's top floor. As far as he knew, there was only one person that mattered on this floor: the company president.

She led him through a corridor without doors, and Alex noticed faint scorch marks on the walls. The only door was at the end of the hall, and as he got closer, the name became legible: Emerill Karson, President.

The door opened to a reception area with two chairs against the wall, an unassuming desk with a well-dressed man seated behind it, and a holo of a nature scene, with the trees swaying in the wind and the clouds drifting lazily in the sky.

The three of them remained unmoving for a moment that felt like an eternity to Alex. Finally, the receptionist looked at his interrogator.

"It's okay, Chief, I'll take it from here."

Alex saw her jaw tighten as she turned to leave, but she paused to glare at him. "We're not done," she whispered.

Alex felt like telling her to take him with her as the door closed.

The receptionist waited a moment, then nodded to himself. “He’s expecting you, Mister Crimson. Please go in.”

Alex straightened his shirt before crossing the room. He wiped his hands on his pants as the door opened for him. He forced confidence in his steps as he entered a modest room with shelves lining the walls. There were no books on them, just objects—things the company made, he guessed, although, here and there he saw rocks and crystals.

The door closed behind him, and he was able to keep from jumping. “You wanted to see me, sir?” Much to his surprise, Alex’s voice didn’t crack.

He had a shock when he recognized the man seated behind the desk as the one who had come to his cubicle and shaken his hand. He now wore a white suit, leaned back in his chair, and studied Alex. He looked much more imposing seated than he had standing, and Alex realized the feeling came because this man now literally held Alex’s life in his hands.

What Alex didn’t understand was why he was doing this personally. This man couldn’t be bothered to fire a lowly coercionist, could he? He had an entire department to take care of that.

The man indicated one of the two large chairs facing him. “Please, take a seat.”

Alex did what he was told. What other choice did he have? You didn’t disobey the company president. Hell, you didn’t normally meet him during your entire working life, and now Alex had met him twice. If not for the trouble he was in, he’d be a star among the other coercionists, if not the whole of the lower floors.

“First off, Mister Crimson, I’d like to know how you’ve been doing since coming back to work.” His voice was deeper, gruffer than Alex remembered.

Alex stammered. “I’m okay.” He didn’t know what else to say. He hadn’t expected that question, and how he felt about the company wasn’t simple anymore. He was grateful to have a job, but he felt betrayed by the way he’d been treated.

“Has...everyone has been treating you well?”

“Yes, sir. After all, they just think I was in the hospital.” The sarcasm dripped off his tone.

The man before him squirmed, which surprised Alex, but it also pleased a part of him he didn’t realize he had, a vindictive part. “I’m glad no one has caused you any troubles. And please, call me Emerill.”

Alex startled. First name basis? What was going on? He hesitated. “Al-alright, si—Emerill.”

The man smiled a pained smile, then sighed. “I want to apologize for how you were treated. You should never have been treated like a criminal. I know this happened to you under the previous administration, and that my words aren’t going to change what happened, but I want you to know that the people responsible have been punished. How they treated you is horrible. The company is here to look after its employees, not incarcerate them. We’re supposed to be a family.”

Alex nodded, more out of reflex than anything else. He’d believed that at one time, before he’d been locked in that gray room, forced in that chair. Now he no longer felt part of this family. He felt, and was, watched, observed, not cared for and nurtured.

When he spoke, Alex was surprised at the civility in his tone. “Thank you, sir, but why am I here?” He’d been so sure why he was here when he’d entered, but the apology didn’t fit that. “I mean, I do appreciate the concern, but you’re the president. You have better things to do than see to my hurt feelings.”

Alex thought he saw pain on the man’s face, but before he could be certain, it was neutral

again.

“Mister Cr—Alex, I’m not the type of president who sits above his employees, apart from them. Like I said, we are a family, and I never want to be seen as too busy to take the time to make sure everyone is cared for.” He sighed. “Which is why I wish you’d come to me. It’s been brought to my attention you’ve been using company resources to illegally infiltrate and coerce outside systems.”

Alex looked away. There it was, he’d finally find out what his punishment was.

“Do you have anything to say?” The tone wasn’t as sharp as Alex expected.

What could he say? What he’d done was illegal, and he’d known it was. He couldn’t claim ignorance. Like everyone else, he got the refresher courses about how coercion without company approval was a major offense.

Alex looked at this man, the president of the company who had imprisoned him, treated him like a criminal, and he thought about lying. He didn’t.

Alex didn’t want to be that kind of man. He was angry, but he pushed that down. This man hadn’t done any of it. He’d taken the position during his imprisonment. For all Alex knew, he had ordered his release, and the way Emerill looked at him now, that was sorrow, not sternness.

“I’m sorry, sir. I had to find out more. I need to understand him, to figure out why he did this. Why he did it to me. How he could even bring himself to do it. I’ve tried at home, but there isn’t anything on the open net; it’s been scraped clean. I thought that with the company’s system I’d be able to find what I needed.” He slumped in his chair. “I couldn’t find anything.”

“This is about Tristan, isn’t it?”

Alex nodded. “I’ve been accused of being his accomplice, when in reality he used me. He brought Jack into my life, made me fall in love with him. I thought that if I had more information about him, I could figure out how he did it, how he fooled me.”

“Do you understand the kind of danger you put the company in?”

“Yes, sir.” Alex looked at his feet. “I’m sorry.”

They were silent for a time, then Emerill slid a data chip across his desk.

“What is it?”

“It’s what you’re looking for. All the information on the mercenary and criminal named Tristan.”

Alex reached for it, but stopped himself. This was too good to be true. “Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“Because you are an employee who was wronged by my company. I owe you reparation. Before this incident you were a valued worker, and I want you to continue working here. I want you to give me the chance to show you the company is still your family, but I can’t afford to have you put us at risk. If you take this chip, I want your promise that you will cease all unauthorized coercion.”

Alex’s disbelief fought to remain. He’d been so certain his job was gone, possibly also his freedom when he’d been taken here. Now, instead, he was offered the answers to his questions, and the price was simply that he stopped looking for them illegally. He searched Emerill’s face, not that he was any good at reading people, but he thought the man was sincere.

Alex reached for the chip.

“Alexander, are you certain you want to see what is on that chip? He hurt you, but that is the least of the horrible things Tristan has done in his criminal career. What is on that chip isn’t pretty. I understand your need to know him, but please, consider the ramifications.”

His finger was on the chip, but he didn't take it. He did what Emerill asked. How badly did he want to know? Did he care what happened after that? The answer came easily.

He took the chip. "You have my word, sir, that from now on, I will only coerce the systems I'm assigned to by the company." He looked at the chip. "Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me."

Emerill looked at Alex, and the sadness in those eyes was deep. "Alexander, take your time with this. Don't worry about coming to work. Focus on coming to terms with what was done to you. I'll make sure your apartment is paid for, I'll see to it you can afford food. Take care of yourself, and when you are ready, come back to us."

Alex nodded. He didn't understand why this man, the boss of his boss's boss, was doing this. This was more than compensation for being wronged by the company, so much more, but Alex didn't press. He had what he wanted. Why the president of the company was giving it to him didn't matter, and even though of a part of him was curious, he didn't want to risk losing what he had by probing into it.

Alex stood. "Thank you, sir." He offered his hand. "If you don't mind, I'm going to take you up on that right now and go home."

Emerill shook his hand. "Please be careful, Alexander."

Alex nodded and left.