

Why did she have to come in? A few more minutes and it would have been done.

All too familiar, the pressure built near his temples and a slight burn reached the corner of his eyes, but he blinked until the tears vanished. Nothing good ever came from crying. It didn't solve any problems in the past and it wouldn't now.

Rushing water trickled through the walls again. Someday he would pry the stones from the walls and climb amongst those pipes until he reached the sunlight. It was up there, far above him; it had to be. If he could only get to those pipes, he could find it. One foot barely in front of the other, he started to pace across the room. Four steps. Turn. Four steps. Turn. With his arms locked behind his back, he tucked his chin to his chest. An outsider observer might think him a philosopher thinking through a difficult question. In some ways, he was.

Why did she have to come in right then?

With every step, his legs shook and threatened to buckle at the knee. Hot lead filled his stomach and cramps reverberated through his bones. Any food or caffeine, or even a little bit of sunlight would set him right. Anything that could give his body some degree of energy or nutrition. His skin was as pale as death, not that he had seen his own reflection in months, and his hair fell out in clumps when he touched it. His fingernails, caked in blood one night, were turning blue and chipped. After 14 months in this hell, he was not going to survive the next week.

But he had to survive. It was what he did. It was all he knew.

Boots clumped against the floor in the hallway. Adams crouched at the door and placed his ear against the metal. It was cold and pricked at his skin where the finisher didn't bother smoothing the surface all the way down. Fast and confident, the steps strode down the hallway toward him. They were coming to his room, which was normal. Anytime he heard the boots they ended up at his door. Were there even other prisoners down here?

He fell backward and pushed himself along the floor until his back pressed against the mattress. Drawing his knees to his chest, he cowered as far into the corner as he could, willing his ribs to fold in so he could be an even smaller target. The shakes started and he bit hard on his hand to still them. Yancey was coming back. Yancey never came back after breakfast unless it was for some recreational activity. There was nowhere to hide, but he had to. His bones practically broke through his skin, how could he survive another beating? Why did Yancey enjoy hitting him so much? Why was he even here in the first place?

Why did she have to walk into the room, carrying her groceries in that dumb paper sack, when he was so close to being done? Ten more minutes, maybe even five, and his father's knife would never have ended up in her neck and he would have never ended up here. Or at least not for a long, long time. Always he knew his life was headed towards somewhere like this, but never would he think it would be quite like this. Like an animal in an abandoned zoo, no one even remembered he was here. Someone had to get him out.

But that wouldn't be Yancey and he was the one coming.

The door slammed against the opposite wall. Shoulders rose to cover Adams' ears. The muscles in his arms tensed uselessly. He shouldn't fight; he probably couldn't fight. His muscles were so shrunken and starved for nutrients, he would be killed in minutes even if the guards decided not to use their weapons. Knowing Yancey, the brute would prefer his fists anyway.

The square-headed guard took two short steps into the room, his eyes cold and face set. A muscle in his jaw worked as he chewed the inside of his cheek. Stubbled ran across his cheeks and over his shaven head. Biceps bulged under his beige shirt as he wrung his hands against each other, the callouses scraping. Why was he so nervous? Why wasn't he attacking right away? He stood against the wall next to the open door, his back straight, his fingers drifted toward the pistol on his hip. His eyes barely registered Adams as they scanned the cell before they snapped straight ahead. "All clear!" he barked to no one.

Of course, it was all clear. What was he expecting? Who else would be in here with him? Was he having regular teatime with soldiers in here? And who was Yancey talking to? River wouldn't be on shift for another four hours at least, unless Adams' calculations were way off. Was someone else on the floor?

The thumping in Adams' chest sped up and darkness crept at the edges of his vision, pulsating and throbbing. He leaned forward to the edge of his mattress and his eyes widened. Was he about to meet the boss? The mysterious shadowy figure that seemed to loom over every decision and make every call in this hell; the person only talked about in hushed whispers and threatening tones. Whoever that was had never made an appearance down here. Adams begged to talk to him, but Yancey would only sneer. Was his wish finally being granted?

A tall man in a wrinkled suit took stumbled and the swaggered into the cell. He was wiry and his hair was frayed. Every movement seemed to cost him more energy than it would an average man. With every step, his legs could break and no one would be surprised. "Thank you, Yancey." His voice was high and raspy. The red tie askew around his neck held a mysterious red mark near the bottom. His glasses were smudged and his shirt untucked on the side.

Was this another prisoner? There was no way this cell could accommodate any other people. It was not even big enough for Adams. But the company would be nice. It would be great to talk to someone that he could actually see instead of the few chances he had to yell through the walls at the other prisoners. The ones that had to be there, even if they wouldn't respond to him. But why was this man wearing a suit? And why was Yancey shifting his weight and watching the man with wide eyes? They had never given him a suit or looked at him with anything but scorn and derision.

"Prisoner 00876." The man glanced at a piece of paper in his hand. Adams didn't answer him. "How are you?" He didn't look up and he didn't wait for a response. He lowered the paper and stepped closer to Adams. Leaning forward, his glasses slipped to the end of his nose and

he peered at Adams as if inspecting a rabid dog. With a quick nod, he made a mark on the paper. "He'll do." The man turned and left his cell.

A large grin spread across Yancey's face as soon as he was alone in the cell. "Looks like I'm done dealing with you. Get up."

"Why?"

Pure steel glinted in Yancey's eyes. "Are you questioning me?" It almost sounded like begging.

Adams swallowed and shook his head. It was hard to stand on numb feet, especially when every muscle in his body trembled, but Yancey wasn't willing to wait. The officer grabbed him by his shoulder and shoved him towards the door. Both weak knees collided with the cement floor and Adams winced. The left knee bent back too far. Add another thing to the growing list of injuries he would have to deal with later.

The hallway had not changed in the past 14 months. At least as far as he could remember. It was still grey, stone, and covered in green moss in a slow crawl towards the floorboards. It had almost made it. The bulbs hanging at odd intervals from the ceiling cast everything in a soft yellow light. There seemed to be a layer of water covering everything at all times.

Yancey wrinkled his nose in the hallway and moved his fingers onto the butt of his pistol, raising and lowering them in a short rhythm. Every once in a while, his eyes shifted towards fleeing shadows. Muscles bulged as he flexed and relaxed. Where was his cushy office to hang out in? It had to be close by. The guards were never too far away.

This was the closest Adams would ever get to a real, historical castle. That was the same thought he had the first time he walked through here. This hallway and its cells were exactly like his mental images of medieval dungeons. Other people had survived in places just like this throughout history. He could too. He had to.

With his head down he could count every rough-cut stone that passed beneath his feet. The cold didn't reach him. Not anymore. Everything was always cold now; warmth barely had a meaning. It had been a year since he had last worn socks. He couldn't remember how they felt, but he missed them, in much the same way, he imagined, a blind man misses sight. He followed Yancey's broad shoulders through a maze of hallways. He didn't pay attention to the turns they made. He didn't know where that cell was. As long as it did not have a physical location in his mind, he could pretend it was a dream. All of this had to be a dream.

Yancey stopped outside of a mahogany door and pressed a small silver button. Grinning at Adams, his chest rose with a deep chuckle. Adams could reach out right now and slap his hand across that face. He could already hear the sound it would make, like deli meet against a counter, feel the way his cheeks caved in under his hand. Quickly, he balled his twitching fingers into his fist.

That would be stupid. He might be on his way out of here. Now is not the time to assault a guard.

"No one ever comes back," Yancey said. The rough voice was like a whip crack in the silence.

"Am I getting released?" A few butterflies sprung to life in his stomach, but he repressed them. Hope was nothing but delayed disappointment. It was easier, and for more efficient, to believe the worst from the start.

Yancey laughed with no joy in his eyes. "God, no. You're being sent away. But you're not gonna like it. I'm happy to get rid of ya myself, but if I were you." He paused and his gold tooth seemed to wink. "I'd want to stay here."

The door slid open and the light was enough to send Adams reeling. He took a half step away, but Yancey gripped his shoulder and shoved him into the small room. Landing against the back wall, Adams tensed his back against the blow that had to be coming. But nothing happened.

“Good luck.” Yancey winked and pressed a button. The doors slid closed and the floor began to move. The sound of Yancey’s baritone laugh fell quickly away as he rose through the ground.

It’s just an elevator. He had been in these countless times. Long ago, in a life that was as distant to him now as freedom was. There was nothing to worry about. After a year in the same, small cell, feeling anything different sent his legs trembling, and there was nothing to hold on to in this room. The walls were smooth, polished metal. There seemed to be light coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The floors, the ceiling, the walls, all of it shone.

The far wall slid open and he jumped. The smell of cinnamon and a soft, warm glow greeted him. A guard, in a much nicer uniform than Yancey’s, stepped into the elevator, grabbed his arm, and yanked him into a room that seemed to be made of wood. A dark desk, surrounded by bookshelves, sat in the middle on top of a rug made of cheetah skin. Or at least it looked like cheetah skin, but they couldn’t let people have those. A man with black hair slicked back and a large hooked nose sat at the desk, tapping a pen against the polished surface. Two guards flanked the door behind him. The wiry man from his cell lounged on a red couch across from the desk, his fingers danced against the keys of a laptop.

Three guards. No, four. One was behind him next to the elevator. Plus the two men in suits. Escape was highly unlikely. The books on the shelves were old, covered in dust and still perfectly alphabetized. Sweat started to leak from his palms. He wiped them against his pants and continued trying to watch every guard at the same time as if he could do anything against them.

Who had this much money? Elaborate paintings lined the walls, mixing seamlessly with the bookshelves. A golden globe sat on the desk. A gold chain watch caught the light and twinkled from the man’s wrist. Hitting this one room would be enough to set him up for life. But there was no way in here without fighting off what was sure to be a small armada of armed

guards. Not to mention the difficulties of breaking into a castle. Not even Stimpf would be stupid enough to do that.

And who's to say the old woman wouldn't be here, too? The same one that cost him his father's lucky knife and 14 months of freedom. Not that he didn't deserve it.

The man behind the desk straightened and smiled at Adams. His teeth were so straight they may have been drawn on. Not a hair was out of place and there wasn't a single wrinkle in his suit. The pen clicked as he stood up. The guards behind him watched his movements as if this scrawny, malnourished prisoner was any match for a full-grown man backed by guards with guns. Leaning against the desk, he crossed his arms and let that smug grin sink in. His cold eyes never left Adams' face.

"So this is the guy, huh?" His voice was bright and warm. It was almost hard to believe it could come from such a cold face. "He's pretty skinny." The wiry man shrugged. "What's your name, son?"

Adams didn't answer. He didn't know what was happening here. He needed more information. Information was power.

"Adams Rucker." The wiry man flipped a page that he was holding, but didn't look up. What else did that booklet say about him?

"Thanks, Max, but I want to talk to our friend here." Four quick strides brought him all the way across the room. His overpowering cologne, like sawdust and cherry, made Adams lightheaded. "What are you here for?"

Adams didn't answer. He still didn't have any information. Who was this guy? And why did he look so familiar? There was something about his eyes that brought Adams back to a warm day, sitting on a bus stop bench, talking to Willow. Was he there that day? Could he have passed by? That seemed so unlikely, but stranger things had happened before.

The man made a clicking sound. "So you don't want to talk, eh?" He winked and Adam's eyes opened. With a quick bite down on his tongue, he barely kept the words in his throat. That

wink. It was the same one he had seen on countless busses and billboards all over the state. Each time he saw it, he wanted to punch the man straight in the face. It was no different this time.

This man was Senator Gavin Winn. Depending on who was asked, he was the most powerful man in all of California. And definitely one of the richest. He strode back to his desk and tapped the tips of his fingers against the polished wood.

“You have had a rough life,” Gavin said over his shoulder. “I can see that. A very rough life. One that no one should ever have to face.” By the time he turned back around, that smile was plastered on his face. “I can see all of that in your file, but I don’t need to. It’s in your eyes. And your shoulders.” He picked a marble orb off of the table, tossed it once in the air, and set it back down. Adams felt his skin ache under that smile.

“It’s so unfair, isn’t it?” Gavin’s eyes narrowed but that smile stayed painted on. Did it ever leave? “You were never given a chance! It’s so...despicable the way our system treats people like you, isn’t it? It’s like you’ve been imprisoned since the day you were born. What justice is there in that? It’s so unfair. And then to be brought here for buckling under the weight of that system designed to bring you down! It’s just so...it’s so *unfair*. I know. I get that.”

What did that mean? People like him? Criminals? Poor? It was unfair, but what would Gavin Winn know about any of that? It was nothing more than an arbitrary campaign platform for him. No part of Winn’s life had ever been unfair.

“I can help you.” The temperature dropped as a pressure descended in the room. Those cold eyes held Adams like a gravitational pull. Falling further and further in, swirling like water in a drain, he clambered for a way out that wasn’t coming. “I can make it fair. You can go somewhere better. You can have a completely fresh start, no strings attached. But you have to help me first.”

Adams tried to answer but the only thing that came out was a guttural rasp. His throat was so dry. Gavin’s face lightened at the noise and he leaned forward like a child expecting

another bite of ice cream. The hunger in his eyes masked the cold, but it was there, creeping at the edges and shadowing the green iris. Adams cleared his throat and winced in pain. "How?"

Gavin walked around the desk and fell into the high-backed chair. The golden orb passed from hand to hand, almost hypnotizing in its monotony. "Max, get our friend some water." Max rolled his eyes but left the room accompanied by one of the guards. That was two people gone. Better odds. Still impossible, though. "Please, take a seat."

With one eye on the guards that remained, Adams stepped forward and felt the bruise forming on his right knee. No one made any steps toward him. Gavin still smiled, a smile that had won him so much, and pointed to the couch across from the desk. With hands balled into fist, Adams tried to sit on the couch only as much as he had to. He didn't allow himself to sink into it the way his exhausted muscles tried to. This chair was more comfortable than anything he had sat on in over a year. It felt like he was floating. His dirty rags and unwashed skin did not belong on something like this.

"What are you here for, Adams?" For the first time, Gavin frowned. But still with the ice cubes in his eyes.

"I..." Adams swallowed hard. Why was it so difficult to answer? Gavin could know all of this with a snap of his fingers. His file was right there on the desk. "I did something bad. And I was brought here."

Gavin didn't ask specifics. Maybe he knew them already. "How long have you been here?"

"Over a year."

Gavin winced. "And I'm guessing you didn't get a trial?" Adams shook his head.

"Typical."

Max shuffled into the room and placed a glass of water on the desk. A single bead of condensation ran down the edge and vanished near the bottom before it could touch the perfect wood. Adams' tongue flicked against his cracked lips. It was water. Actual water. And it was

clear, not the faded brown that they normally gave him. His fingers twitched. But why are they doing this? What's in that water?

With his fingers under his chin, Winn looked like a schoolteacher waiting for his students to finish an exam. "It's all for you, my friend. Take it." Adams' eyes flicked from the glass to Gavin's plastic smile, back to Max leaning against a bookshelf. "It's fine. I promise. I am confident that by the end of this conversation, you will willingly do what I ask of you. There is no need for trickery. I wouldn't do that to you. I, for one, think you have been through so much already that I would never dare compound upon your misery with foolish and dirty tricks."

If Gavin wanted him dead or drugged, there was no reason to go through this charade with the water. Adams was weak and malnourished and Winn had guards at his beck and call. Even if, for some reason, the water was poisoned and he refused it, they would kill him anyway. Adams grabbed the glass and chugged. The water spilled from the corners of his mouth, cutting clean tracks through the backlog of grime on his skin. His throat convulsed and his stomach turned. It was cold as ice, but he didn't notice.

"There's plenty more, don't drown yourself." Gavin's laugh didn't reach his eyes. "Adams, what would you say if I told you I can take you somewhere else. Far away from here where you would never have to come back again."

Somewhere else? What about leaving and going back to his old life? He wanted freedom. There was no trial. America may have rejected him, but he was still an American citizen. He had rights. "I haven't had a trial." Why did his voice have to sound so weak and pathetic?

"Oh, my friend, where I can send you, you don't need a trial. You'll be free. Completely, unabashedly free."

Was he being deported? To where? He was born in California. This was his home. Where could they send him and what country would allow a criminal into their borders?

“Adams, have you heard of the FPP?” The chair creaked as Winn leaned forward. It sounded familiar, but they didn’t need to know that Winn didn’t wait for an answer anyway. “It is a new initiative. A new form of criminal reform, if you will. I have developed it, along with Max and some of the most brilliant minds this country has to offer. We think it would be a perfect fit for you and you for it.”

Criminal reform? He wasn’t a criminal. He had to survive, that was all. He could feel the woman’s warm blood on his hand, see the way it darkened the lines on his palm and made his fingers stick together.

“Where?”

“Somewhere far away. But I think you’ll love it there.” Gavin’s voice lowered an octave. “You can be free there. You can start over. No more fighting for survival every day. No more half-sleeping, wondering who is waiting to take the last bit of money you have. No, that is all over for you. In this new place, you can be whoever you want to be.”

That smile. Adams couldn’t look away. It drew him in. He couldn’t feel his legs and his eye twitched.

“Don’t you want that? Don’t you want to start over, to have a second chance at life? To do it again, but do it right? You were born into a world that had already forgotten you. Don’t you want the convenience of a head start, like everyone else had? The start that you didn’t get? Wouldn’t that be nice?” Gavin leaned back. “Or you can go back to your cell for a while. You know, to think it over.”

That cell. With the constant smell of mildew. The mattress with the cold that somehow never killed the fleas. The darkness and the loneliness. He couldn’t go back there. He couldn’t spend another day in that cell. For the first time in a lifetime, he had a look at a world outside of those walls. A world with water that was clear in a glass that was cold. He couldn’t go back to being alone. Whatever they were going to do to him, wherever they were sending him, it was better than the cell. He could deal with it when he got there.

“Okay.”

Gavin’s smile widened. “Okay?”

“I’ll go.”

Gavin clapped and jumped from the seat. He waved at Max who left the room with the same guard. “That’s so great! I think you’re going to love it, I really do. If you play it right, this could be the greatest thing to ever happen to you.”

Gavin crossed the desk and placed a firm hand on Adams’ shoulder. The senator could snap his collar bone with one quick motion.

“I’m so excited for you, Adams. I really am.”