

Alex tried to bolt upon seeing the chair, but the guards held him fast. “You can’t do this to me!” he screamed. “I’m a loyal employee of the company!” He fought against the guards, but they were stronger than he was.

At least he tried to look away from the monstrosity, to glare at the nameless woman who had been his interrogator for that last...month—it had to have been at least a month now. Keeping track of time was hard when he had no chronometer, and hadn’t seen the sun ever since being brought here.

He just couldn’t take his eyes off it. He didn’t know what the chair did, but with the wires coming out of it, the way the headrest looked more like something out of an industrial horror story, and the restraints. It couldn’t be good. He wanted to have nothing to do with it.

He should have done something to keep in shape during his imprisonment instead of moping around after what had been taken from him. Maybe then he’d have a chance to break out of their grip and make a run for it. He looked over his shoulder. The door was closed—locked too, by the red glow on the door control. That stole some of his bluster; he wouldn’t be able to leave the room, even if he managed to get away from his guards.

Alex fought again when they pushed him in the chair. He screamed incoherently, and somehow managed to free an arm and push the anonymous guard away. He saw the staff at the other’s hip and reached for it, but someone grabbed his arm.

“Damn it,” the woman growled. “Will you just hold him down so I can restrain him?” She had a leather strap in her hand, and once the guard was back holding Alex, she wrapped it around the armrest and his forearm, tightening it until it hurt. She looked over her shoulder. “Doctor, come help restrain him.”

The doctor looked up from his console in surprise, the interface over his left eye bobbing up and almost off his face in the sudden motion. “Me?” He straightened it.

“Yes, you. Are you deaf?” She pulled another strap from her jacket and tied down Alex’s other arm. “You said his body needs to stay in place, so you’re going to have to help us.”

The doctor didn’t move.

“Help me!” Alex yelled, making the man jump.

“Doctor,” the woman growled.

Alex saw fear in the scientist’s visible eye.

She sighed theatrically. “Fine. At least come here and tell me how you need him restrained.”

Alex continued pleading with the scientist as he came to him and took one of the ends of the leather straps. The man just looked at it, and Alex had a moment of hope that he wouldn’t do what he was told, but then he indicated to the woman to run it over Alex’s chest, under his arms, and behind the chair, where she tightened it until Alex had trouble breathing.

“I’m sorry,” the man said. He had a soft voice that matched his older appearance, with his gray hair and wrinkled face. “You have to remain still, or this will be painful.”

Alex glared at the man.

“Don’t bother talking to him,” the woman said. “We’ll lock his head in place, that way he won’t be able to move.”

The doctor considered the situation, then indicated where the next strap could go over his temple. Once that was done, and Alex’s head was pulled back against the headrest, the man moved it until Alex could feel them on each side of his head, and see some of the industrial machinery in his peripheral vision. It went to his temple, and over his skull. He tried to get out of it, but where there was a hint of slack at his arm, his head was held firmly in place.

The doctor and his interrogator stepped behind a console. “I thought you said he was participating voluntarily.”

“What kind of difference does it make if he is or not?”

“I—” He stopped at the glare she gave him. “It doesn’t, I guess,” he said, resigned. He fiddled with some controls Alex couldn’t see. “You can begin.”

She nodded. “What is your name?”

Alex didn’t answer.

“I thought you said this thing would get him to—”

“I know what I said,” the doctor answered with some fire in his voice. “But you didn’t tell me he was going to fight. Just give me a moment; I have to calibrate it.” He made more adjustments. “Try again.”

“What is your name?”

Alex had a memory of being held in his father’s arms, his mother cooing over him. Then his teacher was praising him. He was graduating, his grandparents cheering him.

More images came: being accepted at Luminex, praise, and awards he received for his work, but through them he felt his lips move and start to form words, so he wrenched himself out of those memories and forced his mouth shut.

“What was that?” his interrogator asked.

“The machine forces him to remember, based on the question you ask. That’s what we saw.”

“But he didn’t answer me.”

“He is still fighting. I’m going to have to adjust the setting some more.” He played with the controls, and when he continued speaking, his tone had excitement in it. “But what we saw does tell you something about him. You asked for his name, and we got images of other people caring for him or giving him praise. It tells me that on some level, his identity is based on what other people think of him.”

“I’m not here to get insight into his personality. I want him to answer my questions.”

The scientist sighed. “Go ahead.”

“What is your name?” Her tone was impatient.

The images assaulted him again. His father, mother, grandparents, teachers, supervisors, friends, coworkers, and Jack. All of them praising him, or giving him a compliment. He felt his lips move, and try as he might, he couldn’t stop himself from answering her question.

“Alexander Bartholomew Crimson.”

“Finally,” she said. “Tell me everything you know about Tristan.”

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He was sitting at a table, in a gray room, her seated across from him. He’d been eating, but had paused to look at the tablet she’d placed on the table. He was smiling, looking at Jack. He missed him so much. He identified him as such.

“No, that’s Tristan,” she replied.

She’d seemed triumphant when he’d looked at the image, and his eyes had misted. When he told her it was a picture of Jack, she got annoyed.

“I wish you’d stop playing those games, Mister Crimson. You’ve been caught, and Tristan

abandoned you. Come clean now and tell me everything you know about him, and I'll see that your cooperation is remembered."

"I don't know this Tristan of yours."

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He was on the floor of his bedroom, draped in sheets, feeling miserable. He'd been sick for over a day now. He was looking up at someone who looked a lot like Jack, but couldn't be him. Jack never looked at him so coldly.

"Jack doesn't exist," the impostor said. "I used—"

The memory shuddered.

He was on the floor of his bedroom, draped in sheets, feeling miserable. He'd been sick for over a day now. He was looking up at someone who looked a lot like Jack, but couldn't be him. Jack never looked at him so coldly.

"Jack isn't here," the impostor said. "I took him away. You'll never see him again."

The impostor turned and left him there. Alex cried for Jack to come back.

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He was in the gray room. She was telling him how there was no Jack, that he made him up to try to cover his involvement. Alex denied it.

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Alex was covered with sweat, his throat was raw. He was tied to the chair again. No, he hadn't left it. It had been memories. They'd felt so real.

"What was that?" she asked the doctor.

"I told you, he's remember—"

"I know, I mean something happened, like a glitch. Can you play it back?"

She pointed at the screen. "There."

The doctor hummed, then looked in the distance. "He was sick when this happened, suffering a high fever according to the file. It's possible it interfered with the memory."

"Or someone altered it. How come there isn't anything more on Tristan? Except for that part, it's all about me telling him. How come your machine didn't pull out what he knows?"

"It can't get something he doesn't have. I'd say he told you the truth when he said he didn't know who Tristan was."

"No. He's lying, I know it. Somehow he knows how to trick your machine."

"That's unlikely."

She glared at him, and he shrank back.

"But, if he does, you'll have to find an indirect way to get him to reveal the information."

She fixed her gaze on Alex, and it was filled with anger. “Fine. Since you keep going on about that Jack, we’re going to start there. How did you meet him?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex was in his favorite bar, Alien-nation. It was the bar where the aliens in the city went to get away from humans. It took months, but he’d managed to be accepted as one of the regular patrons.

The Jolarnian behind the bar, his good friend Aphalar, had served him his regular drink, and Alex turned to head to a table at the edge of the room, where he’d have a good view of the other patrons.

He took a step and someone backed into him. Alex cursed softly and reached for napkins to soak the liquid out of his shirt. While he was doing that, someone apologized profusely to him.

Alex told him it was fine, that it was bound to happen in a crowded room. And then he looked at the person who made him spill his drink, and he stopped breathing. He’d never seen this alien before now, deep brown fur speckled with light colors, a night sky filled with stars.

The alien introduced himself as Jack, and bought Alex a drink to replace the one he spilled. Alex couldn’t take his eyes off him. There was something so desirable about this alien, but he restrained himself. He wouldn’t be like those humans who had flings with aliens for the novelty of it. He respected them—he forced himself to respect them.

They found a table, and Alex never once looked at another of the patrons in the bar. They talked. Then Jack told him about his situation, and Alex offered for him to stay in his apartment instead of wasting money at one of the hotels.

Jack said yes, and it was all that Alex could do not to drag him back to his place.

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Alex’s head hurt. His mouth was dry. He felt like hanging his head, but it was held in place.

“This can’t be real,” she said.

“It’s what he remembers.”

“That’s bullshit. It’s just a story he made up to cover up his cooperation with Tristan.”

“Memories do alter over time, but no, this isn’t a fabrication. I think you’re—”

She got in the doctor’s face. “Listen to me carefully. I know that man collaborated with the killer who infiltrated the company and killed Tom. Your job is to help me find the evidence to prove that. You claimed this machine of yours can find anything that’s in his mind. Did you lie to me? Are you here hoping to help him?”

“No! Of course not. But this isn’t what you told me we’d be—”

“I don’t want excuses, Doctor. I want Tom’s killer, and Crimson is how I’m going to get him, so you’re going to set your machine to punch through whatever lies he’s making up.”

Alex couldn’t see her face, but by the doctor’s near-panic expression, and the tone of her voice, he could guess she wasn’t happy at all.

“I’ll—I’ll do my best.”

“You do that.” She turned to face Alex. Her rage was barely controlled. “Now what?”

The doctor didn’t answer immediately. “Well, if it’s like you say, and somehow he’s able to fool the machine into thinking they’re memories, we’re going to have to continue and look for inconsistencies.”

“Fine. What happened next?”

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Alex brought Jack to his apartment, gave him the tour of the four rooms, and insisted he take the bedroom since he was too tall for the couch. Days passed with Alex going to work dreaming of coming home to Jack’s presence. Each day the urge to get in bed with him was stronger, but he held it back. He wouldn’t use Jack, he promised himself. He wasn’t going to be that kind of human.

Then came the night before Jack’s interview with Glacamel. Alex woke up to the alien standing over him. Jack explained how he didn’t usually sleep alone, how that wasn’t normal for his species. He asked Alex to join him.

Alex refused. He couldn’t accept. He tried to make the refusal gentle, but his heart broke at how dejected Jack looked as he turned and headed back to the bedroom.

Alex lay there, justifying his decision as being for the best, but he was conflicted.

He knew what was coming. He didn’t want to remember that part, not now, not with them watching. He wasn’t ashamed of it, but it was something private.

He was by the bedroom door now, explaining to Jack he was a xenophile, that he couldn’t trust himself to behave if they shared a bed. Jack trusted him not to do anything Jack didn’t approve of.

Alex lost the battle of will and joined him. Jack didn’t stop his exploration. Their lovemaking played in his mind in vivid detail, and it was only the first of many times. Every day before he left for work, and when he came back. Each time special, because he could see in Jack’s eyes that the alien cared just as much as Alex did for him.

They were seated at an outdoor terrace, after shopping individually in Ilomare Square. Jack presented him with the Defender statue, one of the spiritual beings from his world, and over it, he said those three magical words Alex never thought he’d hear.

They were in his shower. Alex was relieved they couldn’t see this scene since he was blindfolded, but he could feel it. Not just the soap that triggered his nerve ending, but how Jack moved against him, in him. It was the most wonderful time of his life. More days passed, their lovemaking becoming deeper each time.

Then came the day he got sick.

Alex fought against the memory; it was too horrible. Jack left him after seeing to him, needing to go to another interview with Glacamel. Being sick and alone was tough enough, but it wasn’t Jack who came back, it was the impostor.

The impostor told him that men would come for Alex, not to bother lying to them. He turned to leave, but Alex forced himself out of bed and managed to drag himself across the room to grab his arm. Then he was on the floor, his chest hurting from more than the sickness.

The impostor looked at him with cold, angry eyes. "Jack isn't here," he said. "I took him away. You'll never see him again."

The impostor turned and left him there. Alex cried for Jack to come back.

Alex didn't want to remember any of what came after. Fortunately, unlike his time with Jack, this was a quick flash of images, mostly silent.

Men in military gear entered his room, found him crying on the floor. They dragged him somewhere else. Alex was in a gray room, a doctor explaining he had a severe case of the flu to a woman, Alex's interrogator.

He was alone for a time, getting better.

She returned with food and started asking questions. She asked about Tristan, but when he didn't know anything, she switched to Jack, and Alex reluctantly told her about his alien, carefully avoiding the intimate times. But over the days she picked up on them, pressed Alex, called him an alien-fucker, and belittled what he and Jack shared.

Alex snapped, screamed at her, threatened her. No one got to ridicule what he and Jack shared.

Time alone.

She came back and started questioning him again. Again, he didn't know anything about Tristan, so she asked about Jack. She was gentle with her questions at first, but as the days passed, her patience disappeared. She tried to get Alex to admit Jack was Tristan, but he wouldn't. He didn't care they looked alike in the pictures, Jack couldn't hurt anyone; he was too gentle.

When she accused Alex of being a dupe, of falling for the lie Tristan gave him, he lost it again. Jack was no killer he told her, Jack was gentle, a lover.

She attacked their love again, ridiculing it, implying that he was a traitor to humans for loving an alien. Alex threw himself over the table, intent on ripping her throat out. She fled the room, and for a long time, Alex was alone.

Two guards in the same black military garb as when they pulled him out of his apartment entered his cell and escorted him through multiple corridors. They reached a bland door and went through. Alex saw the chair and tried to bolt.

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"What the hell was that?" the woman asked.

Alex's world was black, only sounds. He tried to remember when this had happened, but he couldn't. He had trouble thinking.

"Those were his memories," the doctor answered.

This was now, Alex realized. He wasn't in the past anymore. He tried to open his eyes, to glare at them for raping his mind, but his eyelids were too heavy, or he was too tired. He couldn't tell which.

"There wasn't anything in there about Tristan, and why did we see my interrogation of him?" Her anger was palpable.

The doctor's tone, in contrast, was forcefully calm, like he was dealing with a child about to throw a tantrum. "You told him to show you what happened after he met the alien. Well, that's

what you saw. Everything until he entered this room.”

“Are you telling me that he managed to fool your machine the entire time?”

“No.” His tone was confident. “I’m saying that no matter what you believe, this man doesn’t know anything about the person you’re looking for.”

“No! You’re wrong. That man helped Tristan kill my h—” She shut up. For a long time, the only sound was her heavy breathing. “That man is complicit in Tom’s death. Your machine was supposed to help me prove that.”

“Look, you came to me looking to have memories extracted. My machine did that. The fact that those aren’t what you wanted to see isn’t my fault.”

“You’re worthless. Why are we even funding your research?”

“You—You can’t cut my funding.”

“I’m in charge now, so yes, I can. And I’m going to do it. I don’t waste money on worthless projects.”

“Wait, you can’t drop me.” The doctor was sputtering desperately. “If you’re right, and he’s involved, that means someone found a way to modify memories. You’re going to need me and my machine to figure out how it was done.”

“Can you do it?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied quickly.

“How long?”

The doctor hesitated. “I don’t know. You saw the playback—it was seamless. I have to go over everything again and look for any indication of alteration. I can’t know how long that’s going to take.”

She was silent for a time. “Alright, but you better not be screwing with me, because if I find out you are, losing your funding is going to be the least of your problems. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Good.” Alex heard steps moving away, then the door opening. “Take him back to his cell.” The door closed.