

Alex looked at the door to his apartment, and realized he had no idea how he'd gotten there. One moment he'd been looking at the Luminex building—he remembered the sun reflecting off the surface, blinding him—and now he was here.

How had he gotten in without his ID card? Had someone recognized him after all this time, and his changed appearance? No one would have let him in looking the way he did, would they?

The door wasn't opening. It shouldn't since he didn't have his ID. The only other way in was the biometric sensor. He remembered entering Jack's reading so he could come and go as he pleased. His own had been entered when he took possession of the apartment, but it couldn't still be there, could it? There was only one way to find out.

He hesitated a moment before placing his hand on the plate next to the door. It blinked, then turned green. The door opened, and he found himself standing before an opening, unsure if he should go in.

He had to go in. He couldn't just stand in the hall, staring in, but he didn't want to go in. He couldn't shake this fear that once in, the door would close, lock, and he'd be imprisoned again.

He knew the fear was ridiculous; he'd been released, he'd signed the papers, so they didn't have a reason to hold him anymore, and his things were in there, as was food. His stomach growled. It was that thought that made him cross the threshold.

The door closed behind him, and he stood there for a moment.

"Jack?" he called out, tentatively. "Jack? I'm home." He hoped, prayed for a reply. To see the Samalian's head poke out of the kitchen or the bedroom would tell him these last months had been a horrible dream. To see him smile would have made what he'd endured worth it.

No Samalian answered him. No one poked out of a doorway and smiled at him. It had all been real.

He realized he was crying, and he forced the tears to stop. He didn't want to cry anymore. Jack was gone; tears wouldn't change that, wouldn't do anything to bring him back.

The boxes littering the living room surprised him for a moment, but they made sense; the company wouldn't have left his apartment empty while they held him. If nothing else, they'd want to give it to another employee. He wondered if someone had lived here while he'd been away.

He didn't check the boxes. He headed for the kitchen and was relieved to find the fridge was stocked with fresh food. He didn't care if it had been the previous tenant's food, or if the company had restocked it. He took out fruits and vegetables and ate them without bothering to prepare them. The rich tastes ignited his hunger, and he devoured them, moving to ready-to-eat meats once he was done. He was about to start on the cake when his stomach protested.

He couldn't believe he'd overeaten like that. After months of minimal eating, he stuffed himself; no wonder he felt sick. He'd have to be careful. Maybe he could use this opportunity to try and keep his weight down this time around.

Once the worst of it passed, he went through the boxes and found the bed linens. He made the bed, intending to move on to something else, but looking at it, all he wanted to do was lie on it and close his eyes.

He didn't understand the urge. Hadn't he spent enough time sleeping already? Maybe it was the stress of the situation he'd been in finally leaving. He lay down, pulled the covers over himself, and breathed them in.

He fought the tears. He fought them hard, but they won. There was no trace of Jack's smell

left in the sheets. They'd taken even that from him. He was alone, he realized as he fell asleep. Utterly alone.

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Alex woke with a start. He'd heard something. "Jack?" he called, "is that you? How was the interview?" Alex felt odd asking the question.

He saw someone in the doorway: tall, broad-shouldered. Almost invisible in the dimness.

"Jack?" Alex asked. "What's wrong?"

The form stepped into the room, and Alex shied back. That wasn't Jack.

"Jack doesn't exist," the form confirmed, and by reflex, Alex wanted to contradict him. He was right there, the same dark brown fur, the speckling of white through it, but the body language was all wrong, as were the eyes. They were chocolate brown, like Jack's, but cold, so glacial that just looking at them, Alex felt his blood start to crystallize.

"What did you do with him?" he asked, having trouble forming the words.

"I threw him away," the cold Samalian replied. "He served his purpose, and I'm done with him. You were so busy fucking him you never realized how I used him to manipulate you. All you cared about was your dream of having sex with an alien."

"No! I love Jack!"

The alien was standing over him, laughing. "You think Jack loved you? He was just a thing I used. He did what I told him to do, he fucked you when I said so. Jack was nothing, is nothing."

Alex hit the alien, but his blows had no strength. "No, he was real! What we felt for each other was real!"

The alien snorted. "Nothing about that was real, not from him, not for you. You're going to go back to your comfortable job, get back in your routine, and forget about him."

The horror of the words gave Alex the strength to push the Samalian away. "I'd never do that to him."

The Samalian smiled cruelly. "Don't lie to me. I know you. You care more about saving your own skin than him. You'll never be able to work up the courage to come get him."

"Let him go, please. You said you didn't need him anymore. If you need me to do something I'll do it, just give me back Jack."

The alien laughed again, and it was a scary thing. "Anything I want? Or do you mean what you want? If I fuck you, will you give up on him?"

"No. I'd never let you touch me. You're a monster for hurting me like this. I want Jack, not you."

"You think a sniffing thing like you has any chance against me? The only thing waiting for you if you take me on is death, and that's if I decide to be kind to you. You think I let you live because I thought it was something good to do? No, I knew you'd suffer, I wanted you to suffer. Because you want him so badly, I'm going to keep Jack to myself forever."

"No! You're going to give him back to me!"

The Samalian leaned in close, making Alex press back against the mattress until he couldn't move further.

“Come get him,” the alien whispered. “Come and find me if you think you’re strong enough. I’d love to see you try.”

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“No!” Alex’s eyes snapped open and he sat up, scanning the room. It had been a dream, but what the alien had said chilled him. He didn’t want any of it to be true. Jack had loved him as much as Alex had loved him back. That had been what was real.

The voice that had hounded him during his incarceration was silent. It wasn’t there to edge on his doubt in Jack, or what they’d felt for each other. But instead of comforting him, he felt worse; he couldn’t doubt that he’d been used.

The louder he denied it to himself, the more he knew that the Samalian called Tristan had used him, had used him and Jack.

He forced himself out of bed and realized he hadn’t bothered undressing. He threw what he was wearing away. He never wanted to see those clothes again.

He found clothing in the boxes, along with the toiletries he’d been looking for, and kitchen utensils. He showered, dressed, and went back to taking things out of the boxes. Then he found the hologram.

He hadn’t made many recordings of Jack; he’d been too busy being happy, and he also thought there would be more time for them. This had been one of the rare exceptions to that.

They’d gone out to walk in the park, and Alex had left Jack only long enough to go buy them snacks. Coming back, Jack had been looking up at the sky, thoughtful, and without thinking about it, Alex had snapped a holo of him.

He was going to take one of himself—Alex remembered thinking that a matching set would look good on the living room shelf—but he’d fallen sick, then... He could still do it, but without Jack there to share them, it felt wrong.

He held the projector against his chest. He’d thought he’d lost everything of Jack, but he still had this one reminder. The possibility that Jack was just using him nagged, but with this, he could hang onto the belief, the certainty, it had been real.

And then he found the statue, the reproduction of the Defender. Alex smiled at the memory of the game they played at the market, each buying an inexpensive gift for the other.

This time he wasn’t able to keep the tears from falling.

To keep the grief from overwhelming him, he spent the rest of the day putting things away. Once done, he ate.

After his second plate he forced himself to stop, but he wanted more. He was ravenous, but didn’t want to be sick again. He cleaned the kitchen and stood in the living room. The place looked like it was his again, but it didn’t feel like it.

He had to get out. He was in such a hurry to leave that he almost forgot his ID; it had been in a box with pots, almost as if the company didn’t care if he found it.

That he’d lasted this long surprised him. Without Jack, the apartment felt worse than empty. It was a void draining something vital out of him. While busy he hadn’t noticed it, but the moment he stopped it had been there, ready to eat at him.

Once out he felt better, so he walked. Without a destination in mind, he was surprised when

he found himself at a transit station. He wondered why his wandering had taken him there; it wasn't like it could take him anywhere that would help.

Except that wasn't true, was it? There was one place that had always felt comfortable to him, not so much like a home, but at least a place where he felt welcome, a place filled with familiar sounds and voices.

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The clinking of glasses and the thrum of indistinct voices made Alex smile as he entered Alien-Nation. He made his way to the bar, nodding at the aliens he knew.

"Alex," Alphalar greeted him, placing a drink before a scaly insectoid being. "Where have you been? It's been so long since you've dropped by, I thought you'd abandoned us." One of the Jolarnian's head tentacles reached back for a bottle while Alphalar placed a glass before Alex. He took the bottle and poured the dark liquid into it, filling it halfway, then topped it with a clear liquid, turning it to an amber hue.

Alex looked at the glass and fought back tears. It was the same drink Jack had made him spill.

"Hey Alex, are you okay?"

He shook his head. "I lost someone."

One of Alphalar's tentacles patted his hand. "I'm sorry, was it difficult?"

Alex nodded.

"At least you can take comfort that he's at peace now. The universe will look after his spirit."

He stared at the Jolarnian. Alex knew he meant to comfort him, but his words just served as a reminder that Jack wasn't at peace. It wasn't the universe looking after him, it was Tristan.

Alex stood. "I'm sorry, this was a mistake." He turned and stopped in the process of taking the next step. The memory of Jack bumping into him and making him spill his glass hit him, and he couldn't move.

When he was able to again, he hurried through the crowd, pushing them out of his way, not caring about the curses he received in a multitude of languages. He fought the tears the entire way back to the apartment. He reminded himself over and over that he didn't want to cry anymore, but they wouldn't listen.

At least he managed to last until he was in his apartment, the door closed, before the tears burst out and he crumbled to the floor.

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Alex froze before the building's entrance, the flow of people continuing around him. It was Monday and he was ready to get back to work, to get back to his life. At least he'd thought he was. Now he wasn't sure. Would the guard even let him in?

With a breath to center himself, he let the flow of employees carry him inside. The guard didn't even glance up from his station when Alex swiped his ID. He was just one of many

faceless employees. Even the other employees didn't even bother looking at him. One of them had to realize he hadn't been around for months, but if they did, they kept it to themselves.

By the time he reached the floor where the coercion department was located, he'd grown to expect the same there, but he was welcomed with smiles, handshakes, and hugs. Calls of 'welcome back', 'we're glad you got better', and of 'isn't it good the company takes care of your medical bills', confused him.

He kept his responses non-committal, and he was able to piece together that as far as everyone was concerned, Alex had gotten seriously sick; that he'd been hospitalized for all this time. He couldn't believe they thought the story was true, but he played along, not wanting to make waves on his first day back.

He thanked them for the well-wishes, but dodged giving details of what he'd suffered from by saying he wasn't ready to talk about it yet. With grave nods, they indicated they understood and made sure he knew they'd be there for him whenever he was ready to talk about it. Even his supervisor wished him well.

It was so strange to be back at his desk, surrounded by his coworkers. It felt so surreal that until his first order came, he wasn't sure he'd be able to do his job, but the moment he had a target, he went after it with abandon. He fed his sense of loss and betrayal into his attacks, and he was effective.

He'd always been good, but now, with his anger feeding him, he cut through the system's defenses with ease. He talked down the opposing AIs, and showed them no mercy. As soon as he was done with one attack, he requested another target.

He only left his desk for bathroom breaks and food, which was where he saw his interrogator again, standing in a corner of the cafeteria, trying to be discreet as she watched him. He did his best to ignore her, but the idea that she was still there after what she had put him through made him nervous. He fed that in his next attacks, and quickly forgot about his problems.

It was later in the day when, done with his attack, he looked up from his terminal with a sense that unusual sounds had been going on for a while—gasping. He didn't immediately see anything, so he packaged the files he'd extracted from the target server and sent them off to the parsing department. They'd be the ones with a detailed list of what they needed out of the files, and they'd take them apart until they had everything.

The gasps grew closer, and he looked up again. An older man was walking down his row, as if he owned the entire department. The gray suit he wore was perfectly cut and looked expensive; the kind of suits one of the executives wore. Maybe he was here to ask one of the coercionists for information, or a special job; except those should go through the supervisors.

He could be a visiting client, but then where was the executive who'd serve as a guide, and the security detail to ensure the visitor didn't wander out of the planned tour? He decided it wasn't his problem, so turned back to his screen and sent a request for his next target.

As the system's name and coordinates appeared, someone cleared his throat behind him. It was the older man, and he was offering his hand to Alex.

"Mister Crimson, I am very happy you came back to us."

After a moment of hesitation, Alex stood and, looking around to get a sense of what this was about, took the offered hand. A few of the other workers glanced in their direction, but most were focused on their own work.

Before Alex could say anything, the man placed his other on top of his. "If there is ever anything you need, please don't hesitate to let me know." He gave him a warm smile, squeezing

his hand, then let go and left.

Alex watched his back until he vanished around a corner. Utterly confused, he was about to sit when he caught his co-worker staring at him.

“What?” Alex asked the man.

“Don’t you know who that was?”

“Should I?”

“I guess not; you weren’t here when it happened.”

“When what happened?”

The woman on his other side leaned closer. “We were attacked,” she whispered. “Two weeks ago. We had to evacuate the building. From what I heard, someone made it all the way to the president’s office, leaving a lot of dead people in his wake.”

“Not long after that,” the man continued, “we got a new president.”

“It was a coup,” the woman said confidently. “Someone hired a mercenary to take out the old president.”

The woman seated on the other side of his cubicle stood. “I heard it was a vendetta. A feud of some sort.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” the man said. “Who’d pick a fight with the company?”

“A corporation like ours has to have pissed off a lot of people. One of them is going to have the resources to do something about it. What do you think, Alex?”

“I think I need to get back to work,” he replied in what he thought was a casual tone. The surprised expression they gave him prompted him to add more. “I’ve been gone for a while; I can’t afford to slack.”

“I was just asking for your opinion,” the woman said, “not trying to get you in trouble. You don’t have to snap at me.”

Had he snapped? “I just want to get back to work.” Again, he thought his tone had been casual, but they looked annoyed at him as they went back to work.

Their comments nagged at him for the rest of the day. Once home, he did some research and found reports of the attack. One unnamed person had made his way through the company, killing anyone he came across, culminating in an attack on the president’s office itself.

None of the reports he read described him or named him, but Alex couldn’t shake the feeling it was Tristan. Except, the questions had happened months before this attack. Had Tristan come back for some reason?

He tried to forget about the attack, about who might have done it. He didn’t care about company politics, so the attack didn’t matter to him. He hadn’t known the previous president, and he didn’t know the new one, not even recognizing him as the man who had shaken his hand until the report had given a picture of the new president, but that didn’t mean he knew him.

But he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Over the next days he kept returning to it, feeling certain Tristan had been the one to do it. He’d used Alex to get in after all, and why he’d been chosen nagged at him.

Every evening he searched the network for information on Tristan. He wanted to know more about the alien. Maybe in there he’d find a clue to why he’d picked Alex, and what he’d done to Jack. Only there was very little on the open net.

He was a criminal who had a history of mercenary work and was wanted on multiple planets, but there were no details on any of the crimes he was wanted for. Alex could find indication the

information had been there at one time, but someone had gone around and removed it.

He tried to trace who had done it. If he could do that, he'd be able to find everything that had been removed, but his house computer wasn't powerful enough to coerce the node into cooperating with him. He needed something more powerful.

Like the company's systems.