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## I: all is gray.

The sign on the shop window says 'Gray & Sons', the text curved in dark italics below an elegant clock face.

The world is curiously silent beneath the overcast sky. The storm clouds crowd in with weighted gloom that casts a greyish hue onto the street below, where dust whirls up briefly by the wind to settle once again.

Sasan lowers his gaze from the sign and turns slowly around to take in the empty street. He doesn't know how he got here; can't remember where he was before this. If he was dead, or sleeping, or...

"Hello?" he calls out tentatively, and his voice echoes hollowly, unrealistically down the street. He looks up to the sky. There is something strange about the way the clouds move gravely against each other, dense puffs of sepia blooming out when they meet.

Down the street, the other shops look dead and grey; like lifeless shells of brick that would crumble and fade the moment he was through the door. But the shop in front of him is different, somehow, though he cannot place why this is so. It seems brighter, starker against the background, and its simple door is unsettlingly inviting.

A gust of wind plays briefly with his hair, then leaves.

Sasan blinks. He has the feeling he should remember what came before this... and for a moment, flashes of memory cross his mind - faces, places, feelings, the memory of laughter - like weak splashes of colour in this grey world that fade quickly to nothing, leaving no answers in its wake.

Gray & Sons.

For some reason the name stirs something in him and makes his skin crawl.

"You *don't* know anyone named Gray, do you?" Sasan asks himself aloud, almost chastising in tone. "No," he replies - although that answer doesn't feel quite right - and then his voice trails off, because there's something about this world that makes talking seem wrong and out of place.

The door to Gray & Sons beckons.

Trying to ignore the sense of foreboding rising in him, Sasan forces himself forward to open the door and step in.

He closes the door, quietly, and becomes aware of a myriad clocks ticking in perfect harmony not a second out of sync. Out of time with the clocks, he hears the soft rustle of clothes. There's someone else here; and Sasan almost calls out, but growing fear stays his tongue.

He takes awkward steps deeper into the shop, making wild glances at the neat array of timepieces on display. The steady ticking invades his mind, sinister in its precision, dragging him deeper into the washed-out hues of the watchmaker's shop.

Someone is at work at the desk, bent intently with tools over an opened watch. Sasan takes uncertain steps nearer; and again the fear pricks his mind as his gaze tentatively roves the length of

the figure and settles on its profile. The hands suddenly fall still, and then the head rises and the face turns to look at him.

Sasan's breath catches in his throat. It's his own face, but different, and again he has the feeling that he knows who this is. They've met before. Somewhere, sometime, in a half-remembered dream.

"Can I help you?" the other asks, calmly, but his eyes betray that same recognition, and there's a cold malice beneath its surface which grips Sasan in terror.

"Um." Sasan gives a smile to disguise his nervousness. "This... looks like a watchmaker's shop and all my watches are running perfectly, so I guess there's no need for me to be here." He lets out a weak laugh and turns to go-

"But there is."

The voice freezes him mid-step. A chill runs down the back of Sasan's neck. He lowers his lifted foot into the intended step, and with effort turns back around in what he hopes looks like a casual manner.

"There is?" he asks. Sasan hears his own voice tremble; and from the slightest of smirks that crosses the watchmaker's face, he knows he hears his nervousness.

"You don't remember, do you?"

Sasan swallows. "Remember what?"

"The last time we... met."

The other's piercing gaze won't let up, and it discomforts him.

Sasan glances desperately towards the door. "I... don't know what you're talking about, and I'm sure it's a fascinating tale but I'd rather be going-"

"Sasan."

Dread grips his heart.

"How did... I never *told* you my name-"

The watchmaker stands up and walks - almost saunters - away from the desk, and Sasan is forced to meet his gaze, involuntarily taking a step back, tightness rising in his throat.

"You did," he says, Sasan watching his lips form out every syllable, the breath warm with life in the cold grey of the shop. "You just... forgot."

The watchmaker raises a hand and telekinetically lifts Sasan off the ground. Sasan gasps; and somewhere, in the depths of his confused memory, a name surfaces...

"*Sylar?*"

The other smirks. "The one and only."

Sylar opens his palm in a quick motion and slams Sasan against the wall.

Sasan chokes beneath the invisible grasp. "I never did anything to you!"

"You and your... *friend*, Smudge... running around... appropriating my identity, ruining my reputation..."

Smudge. *Smudge*. Sasan remembers, his eyes flying wide open. "Smudge! *Where is he?*"

Sylar raises an eyebrow. "Miss your boyfriend?"

Sasan remembers, and the memories tighten his heart with grief and nostalgic longing...

"Sylar. Let me off this wall. Please-"

Sylar shrugs. "Eventually. I like watching you squirm." He telekinetically grabs up a chair and drops casually to sit on it, observing Sasan struggle with scientific curiosity.

But Sasan isn't squirming that much anymore. It's no fun. Sylar sighs and lets him drop off the wall.

Sasan falls to the ground in a heap, takes a second to note with distaste that his clothes are all messed up now, and then gulps in desperate mouthfuls of oxygen.

"I don't like you," he tells Sylar, shooting him a miffed glare from the floor.

Sylar grins.

"We're dead," Sasan says, getting to his feet. "We're dead, aren't we?"

Sylar tilts his head at him. "I can't die," he states.

"Then where *is* this place?"

\*

Smudge doesn't bat an eyelid when Zach finally turns away from the computer screen, and for that moment their eyes meet in an odd lack of mutuality: Smudge sees him, and yet not, his mind struggling to force the illusion of another...

And then reality seems to catch up with him, and Smudge looks away and down at his legs. Embarrassment.

There's something different about Smudge, Zach notices. He's not the same person he left back in 2001. Something changed, and he's not sure what, but he'd seen that deep sadness in Smudge's eyes that he doesn't think was there before.

And he catches Smudge now staring at the computer screen and the blank video window with a strange, painful longing, and decides that some questions might need to be asked...

"Smudge."

Smudge gives a start, disproportionately huge, his eyes momentarily taking on a panicked wildness that then settles into guarded calm. "Yeah?"

There's no real way to do this tactfully. "Are... the others still around?" Zach asks, and then regrets it.

"Some," Smudge says hoarsely after a short eternity of hollow gazing at the screen, fingers clenched subconsciously on his knees.

And Zach guesses: "Sasan?"

The name pierces Smudge through his heart. His body goes rigid, then falls to trembling, his gaze still affixed firmly to the computer screen as the first tears start to fall-

"I'm sorry," Zach says quickly, too late. "Smudge-"

"I wasn't there," Smudge says in a broken whisper, and then, suddenly gaining distraught strength- "I wasn't there for him, I *saw* him, but they wouldn't let me go, and I wasn't... I... I was too late... I couldn't... he... *Sas*..."

And Zach grabs Smudge and holds him tight as his voice breaks into sobs, and Zach tries to stop his mind from wandering off to contemplate the surrealism of the situation or find amusement in the idea of Smudge and Sasan getting together; because Smudge at the moment is a wreck in his arms, and *'but you're not... real'* is not a polite sentiment to have.

Smudge won't let go, a desperate, tragic yearning in his grip as he clutches on to Zach, trying to hold on to someone who isn't there, trying to imagine Sasan back to the living world, in Zach's place; trying to seek comfort from the similarities and ignore the minor differences that tell him that this is a different person. But how different... Sasan is *there*, somewhere; Zach made him; perhaps he could-

*No*, Smudge thinks fiercely, destroying the idea before it finishes taking shape. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be real. It wouldn't, actually, *be* Sasan. He hates that he ever - no matter how briefly - considered it.

Smudge buries his face in Zach's shirt and tries to wish away the world.

\*

And Sasan tries to reach out and touch him and let him know he's there and everything is okay; but his fingers pass through Smudge's shoulder.

"Pathetic, isn't it?" Sylar asks from his vantage point by the window. "He goes running off to Quinto because you're not... *there* anymore."

Sasan doesn't seem to hear him, bent down by the couch with a despairing, searching gaze.

"Smudge!"

Sylar thumps his head back against the wall. "He can't hear you," he drawls out.

"Smudge-"

Sasan reaches out a hand, again, slowly this time; guiding it along the curve of Smudge's face, willing his touch to be felt...

"*I'm here*," he whispers. "Smudge..."

Harold the cat trots out of a room. Half in, half out of the doorway, he glares at Sylan. Sylan aims a casual kick at him. Harold hisses and walks on past. Zach glances over, sees nothing, and goes back to Smudge.

Sasan tries to get onto the couch, but it is intangible, immaterial to him. Or he is to it.

Sylan glances at his watch, then remembers that it is broken. He goes to haunt Harold.

Smudge pulls away from Zach, his eyes lost, and it breaks Sasan's heart to see him.

"Smudge..."

And for a moment - a brief moment - Sasan thinks he sees Smudge hesitate and turn towards him, faint suspicion on his face; but then the moment passes, and Smudge looks away, and Sasan's mind cries out in a sudden, intense, encompassing yearning to touch as he lurches forward-

-and the couch meets him with sudden solidity and he's *there*. Sitting. Sasan blinks. Disorientation. His arm around Smudge. Wildly, Sasan glances down and sees terrible, *terrible* clothes...

Smudge is looking at him in shock. "...Zach?" he asks, an undercurrent of hope beneath the uncertainty in his voice-

"No," Sasan says hurriedly. "No, it's me... Smudge, it's me-"

And as he sees the hope take fervent root and grow he grabs Smudge into a hug with borrowed arms, and thinks that Zach would probably find possession to be good reason to either call the Ghostbusters or get the hell away from his house; but Sasan doesn't care, his face buried in the softness of Smudge's hair, feeling wet tears against his neck, and holding him... just holding him...

"*Sas*-"

"I'm here. I'm here."

"I-"

"Shh." Sasan wipes the tears from Smudge's eyes, stroking the contours of his face.

"Is it really y-"

And Sasan kisses him, and Smudge *knows*.



## II: ghosts. never. die.

For a moment they touch eternity and the worlds all cease to matter.

"I'm here."

Fingers intertwine in eerie perfection, move trembling hands to still. Smudge dares not speak to ask how long they have or how long they *should* have; he thinks of Zach and feels a twinge of guilt, though that soon fades away.

There are so many things Smudge wants to say. So many things to tell him. Yet he can't seem to bring any of them to mind, still struggling to realise the impossible before him, struggling to figure out if this could, indeed, be happening.

"I can't stay," Sasan says quietly. His eyes - Zach's eyes? - linger on the protective grasp of Smudge's fingers around his forearm, feeling the tremble of each erratic breath that escapes the other's body.

"Why?"

"I don't think it's polite, and I think Zach would *probably* like full motor control back."

Smudge looks up to meet his gaze. "Where would you go?" he asks.

Sasan thinks of the dead, grey world and the watchmaker's shop under the sepia sky. "I don't know," he admits, and tries not to let the fear into his voice as he lies: "but I'll be all right, okay?" He lightly brushes Smudge's hair off his forehead. "I won't forget you."

Smudge swallows back tears. "Will I see you again?"

"I hope s-"

And Smudge feels the sudden, violent jerk and sees the rush of panic into Sasan's eyes, and Smudge's own grow wide as he grabs him, searching desperately into Sasan's face to understand:

"Sas, what's-"

Another jerk, Sasan grabbing at the couch with barely-controlled hands, gasping for breath, and managing, just barely, to speak:

"Sylar-"

And then the body falls off the couch, forcefully evacuated, and eternity dies in a scream and outstretched arm.

"NO!"

The frightened eyes that look back at Smudge have changed. Zach blinks, getting slowly off the floor, trying to make sense of what's happening as Smudge yells heartrendingly into the air, trying to see the invisible:

"SAS!"

Zach looks uncertainly around. "Smudge-"

"Sylar took him!" Smudge cries. "He took him away! What's he going to do, *what if he's hurting him?*"

And Zach still feels as though he's in a dream as Smudge falls apart with anguish, turning, lost, around on a spot by the couch, shouting for Sasan, screaming at Sylar, and Zach doesn't know what to do, but he still remembers the presence of the other; and on his lips he feels the memory of a kiss.

And he rushes to grab Smudge and pry the kitchen knife out of his hand amidst violent demands to let him *go*, Sas *needs* him, and there is only one way to get there.

\*

Sasan lands, and the world is grey again.

From the floor he sees the shoes pace through his field of vision and stop at its edge.

"Having fun?" Sylar asks. "Possession isn't... very polite."

Sasan rolls over, painfully, and tries to get up. He pushes himself into a sitting position and gazes resignedly up at the shop around him; then yells as Sylar telekinetically grabs him off the floor and slams him against the wall.

"Why can't you leave me *alone?*" Sasan cries.

"Where's the fun in that?"

Sylar moves his hand and jerks Sasan's head back. With his other hand he runs a telekinetic line across the exposed neck. Sasan swallows.

"I could kill you," Sylar says. "Again... and again... and again." He grins.

"Why?" Sasan asks, choking back tears. "Why?"



"And your boyfriend won't be here to protect you," Sylar adds.

An invisible punch to the stomach sends Sasan falling off the wall, doubling over and dry retching on the ground. He falls to his hands and tries in desperation to crawl away, but Sylar slams him back against a glass case. It shatters, sending glass and watches showering down on him.

"I get... lonely in here," Sylar says, moving forward and crouching down before Sasan, noting with sadistic pleasure the trembling fear in his face. He smiles. Sasan winces. Sylar shrugs. "I could use the company."

Sylar stands and slowly raises his hand, levitating the shards of glass up into the air, swivelling their sharp points to the front.

"No," Sasan begs. "Please..."

Sylar tilts his head. Then he jerks his hand forward, and the flying glass erupts in blood and piercing scream.

Sylar watches the show, an odd look on his face.

"Scream, Gabriel," he murmurs, half to himself. "Scream."

\*

Zach gets the knife out of Smudge's hand and places it firmly back where it came from. He pushes aside Smudge's reaching hands and pulls him back to the living room.

"Smudge-"

"Let me *go*!"

"Smudge, he's dead-"

"NO!" Smudge yells. "He's still there! He's still... there... he *needs* me..."

"You don't know what would happen if you kill yourself."

"I could find him," Smudge insists fiercely. "I'll *find* him!"

"You don't know that," Zach says.

Smudge glares at him. Zach grasps his arm in a reassuring gesture, but Smudge shrugs it off.

"Don't *touch* me," he says, and stalks off to the couch. He sits there, angrily regarding the air before him, blinking away tears; until his defences break, and Smudge buries his face in the couch and cries.

For a while, Zach just watches; almost wanting to do something, but not knowing how...

"You need him too, don't you?" Zach asks softly.

Smudge decides that he hates him.

\*

The sound of thunder.

Sasan opens his eyes and blinks. The shop has gone dark; objects barely visible save through the faint, eerie light that comes through the shop windows, casting long shadows on the ground.

The shards of glass are gone, reformed back into the case. The pain has slowed to a dull throb. The more he thinks about it, the more it fades away.

He does not dare to get up. Sasan tries to see as much as he can from the floor. Sylar doesn't appear to be around.

Sasan cautiously props himself up on one hand and peeks around the glass case. Still no one.

A little braver, he stands up fully, eyes darting nervously around the shop. A heavy clock pendulum swings gravely to and fro.

Ahead lies the door. The sky outside is dark.

Sasan heads towards it with uncertain, halting steps, looking around him every now and then as though expecting Sylar to suddenly jump out from the shadows. But nothing happens; and he reaches the door, and with racing heart opens it-

A strong draught of wind makes him stumble as he steps out. The door blows out of his hand and slams shut. The draught dies down. Sasan blinks.

The street is gone. The other shops are gone. Gray & Sons sits on a tiny plot of land suspended in a void.

Something white is floating towards him, erratically blown through the air. Sasan catches it - a sheet of paper - and stares down at Sylar's handwriting, identical to his own in a recognition that deeply unnerves him:

*You'll never get out.*

\*

Zach feels the intrusion and wants to scream, but he no longer has control over his mouth. He fights it off, for unlike Sasan, this presence is palpably evil; but Sylar is too strong for him. Trapped behind his own eyes, he watches as they pass Smudge - still sniffing on the couch - and pick up the Interdimensional Travel Device Thingy from the table. The names scroll down the screen as his hand operates the buttons beyond his control. Again he struggles, and feels a silent, mocking laugh sent his way. And then the button is pressed, and his house vanishes around them as they teleport away.

The body is lying right there on the floor when they arrive; right before them, temporarily dead, the knife sticking out the back of its head. And Zach knows what they're here to do, and thrashes futilely against the walls of his mental prison, willing his legs to run and his hands to move away from the knife... but he sees it pulled out, and dropped onto the ground with a satisfying air.

"Pointy-eared bastard," he hears his own mouth mutter. "Thought he could get me."

And then in a slow, seeping freedom that suddenly explodes his restraints, he's in full control again, watching in horrified fascination as the wound on the body heals and the eyes open to focus on him.

Zach sees the slow grin. Too late, he remembers the ITDT and dives for it; only to have it whisked out before his hands in a telepathic grab.

Sylar stands, ITDT in hand. He tosses it a brief distance into the air and catches it. "If I'm not back," he says, "you can have the apartment and all of my friends."

\*

"You're a coward," Sasan tells himself in a terrible attempt at a piece of discouraging pep talk, his voice shaking in a way that just reinforces the statement. He can't quite take his gaze away from the edge of the floating island, staring out at the blackness that lies below.

He's been around the floating island. Just the shop in the centre, a bunch of pulsating dark clouds above, and nothing else. No way out. Unless he tries to jump off...

Sasan takes a breath. "You're dead," he tells himself. "You can't die again. What's the worst that can happen?"

And then he thinks up a few possibilities, and regrets the rhetorical question.

He licks dry lips in nervousness. Peers once again over the edge - nothing - and cautiously gets down to his hands and knees, clutching the edge of the patch of land, craning his neck further to see... Still nothing.

He shuts his eyes. *You're dead*, he reminds himself again. *You're dead*.

Sasan gives a quick nod for self-reassurance, then pushes off the edge and falls into nothingness.

He opens his eyes mid-fall and sees the darkness swallow him up.

And then the ground grows solid beneath him, and he finds himself back on the floor of the watchmaker's shop.

The note is lying next to him. *You'll never get out*.

\*

It's a while before Smudge lifts his head from the couch and rubs a hand across his eyes to brush off the last tears. He blinks at the seemingly empty house.

"Zach?" he asks, and on getting no response gets off the couch and moves towards one of the rooms; peers in, but there is no one in them save Noah and a napping Harold who glares at Smudge until he leaves.

"Zach?" Smudge asks again, trudging to the other end of the house. He didn't hear him leave, he thinks, and *would* Zach have left him here on his own? Unless...

Smudge hesitates in the middle of the living room. He fingers the ITDT in his pocket as the dreaded possibility surfaces again.

*There's no time to waste*, he decides, and teleports to Sylar's apartment.

Zach is there. And Sylar. Smudge fixates him with a glare.

"It's polite to knock," Sylar comments.

"WHAT DID YOU DO WITH SASAN?" Smudge demands. He stalks forward, pushing Zach out of the way.

Sylar shrugs. "I think I killed him-"

Smudge lunges forward in a wild grab. Sylar stumbles, momentarily taken aback, and then Smudge is on him, screaming, kicking and whacking at his head-

Sylar flings him off and slams him against the ceiling. Zach gapes.

"PUT ME DOWN!" Smudge yells.

"I don't like being hit."

Smudge doubles up on the ceiling and yanks at his left shoe. "Put... me... DOWN!" He throws his shoe at Sylar's head.

It hits its mark. Sylar flinches but keeps his grip. "You-"

Smudge's right shoe whams his face.

"THAT'S FOR SAS!"

Sylar rubs his free hand over the impact zone. He glances up at Smudge with a satisfied air. "You're never going to see him aga-"

Zach jumps him from behind. Sylar's telekinetic grip fails as he falls over, and Smudge crashes to the ground. He lies there, unmoving, and Zach wants to call out to him but a stream of heavy books fly off a shelf and knock him over.

Sylar gets back to his feet. "You're out of your league, Quinto," he says. "Go back to Hollywood." He takes out the ITDT. "And it's time to teach pointy-ears a lesson."

He teleports away.

Zach pushes a dog-eared copy of 'Watchmaking For Dummies' off his head and extricates himself from the pile of books.

"Smudge?" he asks, going towards the still form. Not quite still, though... he sees Smudge's eyes are open, and they look at him as Zach gets down by his side.

"...I want my shoes," Smudge says, so Zach collects them from where they fell and brings them over, and puts them on Smudge's feet.

Smudge sits up, wincing. "Go home," he tells Zach. "It's not your fight."

"No-"

Smudge digs out his ITDT. He reaches out a hand to grab the other's shoulders, and teleports them back to Zach's house.

Noah gives a surprised yelp as they appear.

Smudge releases his hand. He tries to get to his feet, and limps towards the couch to pick up the flash drive from the computer. He pockets it. Sasan left it to him.

He scrolls down the destination list on his ITDT.

"Smudge, you can't go after him like that-"

Smudge turns on Zach and glares. "*Yes I can!*"

"Smudge, you're bleedi-"

Smudge vanishes.

"Smudge!"

Noah sniffs the air where Smudge had been, and then wanders off to a room.

\*

Smudge arrives in the increased warmth of Spock's quarters. Furniture is toppled. The door is open, and he hears the sounds of a fight going on outside.

Spock rolls back into the room as an electric blast shakes the hallway in a bloom of blue light. Screams. Spock fires several phaser blasts around the door, then ducks his head back in. He sees Smudge, hesitates for a split second. "Get down," he says. There is the start of a gash across his forehead, green blood seeping through. He fires more blasts at Sylar outside; other blasts join his - ship security, but ensuing screams suggest they don't last long.

"I can get you out of here," Smudge says, holding out the ITDT.

"He would just try to find me. There is no knowing how much more damage he might wreak along the way."

Spock glances out the door. A lens flare blossoms and fades. Sylar is mowing through the redshirts, and he feels a twinge of sadness for the lost lives. Sylar is advancing. If he backs him into this room, it's over...

"Stay here," Spock tells Smudge, and then leaps out into the corridor, firing wildly as he backs down the corridor, looking for cover; shoots Sylar in the hand as he sees it raised, and the fingers disintegrate in the blast. They start growing back.

Another room. Spock ducks towards it and hits the door controls, when Sylar raises his other hand and pins him against the door. It opens, and he falls through. Spock lands on the floor, held there by telekinesis, as Sylar casually strolls in for the kill. The redshirts are gone. The bridge crew would be around soon.

"You thought you could kill me," Sylar says.

Spock struggles against the invisible hold. Up the corridor, Smudge cautiously emerges.

"I'm going to savour this," Sylar says. He bends down and runs a finger across a pointy ear, and then along the bloodied wound. Green blood drips off his finger.

Smudge looks around for a weapon; a phaser, something heavy, something sharp...

There's a shard of broken glass lying by a dead redshirt. Smudge limps over to it, blinking at a sudden lens flare, and bends down to pick it off the ground-

Sylar whips it out of his reach. "Don't even think of it," he says, his other hand still holding Spock down. "I should kill you first, you bisexual nuisance."

Distantly, Smudge hears footsteps clanking down a nearby corridor as Sylar's fingers close to point at him, and he screams:

*"HELLLLLP!"*

Time stops.

Some strange guy who wasn't there before is leaning smugly against a wall. Smudge glances from him to the frozen scene, Sylar's hand still outstretched (Smudge moves out of the way), Spock on the ground, dead redshirts everywhere.

"Who are you?" Smudge asks suspiciously.

"What a mess you've got yourself into," the stranger comments.

"Do you know Dem?" Smudge asks.

"Oh, we've met."

"Who are you?" Smudge asks again.

"Call me Q." He moves away from the wall to closer inspect Sylar.

"Q," Smudge repeats, wondering what kind of name that is. "Are you here to help me?"

"If I say yes, you're just going to rattle off a laundry list of chores, aren't you? Save Spock, save Sasan, kill Sylar, buy you a pony..."

"I don't want a pony."

"Ah, but this is a special pony," Q says. "It's bisexual."

"*Are you going to help me or not?*" Smudge demands, raising a fist. It gleams in a sudden lens flare.

Q raises an eyebrow. "Aggression. Just another trait symbolic of the inferiority of your race." He wanders casually through the redshirts. "Here's what's going to happen," he says. "You get to tell me one thing to do. Just one. Spock, Sasan, Sylar, pony, whatever else you can think of." Q lowers himself into a sit, fingers steepling beneath his chin. "And I'll do it."

"...anything?" Smudge asks.

Q shrugs. "Within logical possibility. Just one."

"...I just want to be happy," Smudge says softly.

"Is that it?" Q asks. "That'll cost you a dollar for the Prozac-"

"No!" Smudge says.

Q sighs. "What would you prefer? Memory wipe? I could do that. You'll forget everything bad that ever happened to you. Quite a few good things too, but-"

"No," Smudge says, but the cogs are turning. "Memory..."

"What is it."

Smudge hesitates, working things out, coming back to that same, elegant solution...

"Give Sylar a copy of my memories," he says quietly. "A copy of my mind. In place of his."

Q slowly stands up.

"It'd work, wouldn't it?" Smudge asks. "He'd become like me, and then... then he'd understand, and he could bring Sasan back, and kill himself..."

"That could be fun," Q says, and saunters over to Sylar as Smudge follows him with his eyes. "Come here," he says, and Smudge does.

Q extends a hand to Smudge's head and another to the time-frozen Sylar. A moment passes, and then he lowers his hands. "You have half an hour," he says; then time starts moving again, Q has disappeared, and Sylar is no longer Sylar.

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### III: the unbearable. company. of me.

Smudge sees himself staring warily back at him, and a deep, dreadful certainty grips his heart.

He lowers his hands and quickly stumbles away from Spock, who raises his phaser to-

"No!" the other Smudge says, and then to him: "Are you me?"

He nods, forcing down rising panic and the wave of repulsion that threatens to drown him as he looks down at his hands and knows whose they are. These hands killed Sasan. They *killed*-

"Where's Sas?"

His head snaps up, pulse racing as he regards his other self. The original. But he *feels* original, every memory stark in his mind, the conversation with Q still fresh... Half an hour. Half an hour, and then...

"I don't know," he says. He swallows. He has the feeling that he could know, if he just tried to probe further into the dark presence he feels just out of his mind's reach. He feels power - immense power - at his fingertips, and it excites and scares him, as does the low, insidious feelings of a *hunger*...

"I'm not Sylar," he adds, voice cracking in panic. "I'm not, I'm you, I'm not-"

"You are," his original self says softly. "You just forgot."

"NO!" he yells, and lightning crackles in his palms, and he backs away in terror as he sees the others flinch. He quickly drops his hands and fights back tears. "I'm not Sylar," he says again, eyes pleading with himself to be understood. "I'm not... I'm not..."

"Okay," the other says carefully. "Let's go save Sas. Can you heal him?"

He doesn't know, but somewhere in the part of his mind he dares not go to he thinks he might find an answer. "I think so," he says.

His other self takes his hand and squeezes it in cautious reassurance. He almost wants to pull away - doesn't want to contaminate his own skin with that of a killer - but he doesn't, and they teleport to Kenselton Hotel.



\*

The watchmaker's shop has changed. Rays of sunlight spill through the windows, and the place seems different. Almost familiar. And suddenly, strangely, Sasan feels an overwhelming sense of being loved.

He gets up and slowly heads towards the door. It opens into light; and below his feet, he sees a path leading out to the horizon.

He starts walking.

\*

The body is still there where they left it, and wild emotion stirs up in him as they approach. Mike's body lies a little further off, but it barely registers in their minds.

"Do it," his original self says, stepping back, but he barely hears as he gets down to his knees and places trembling hands on Sasan, gasping out a tear. He touches Sasan's face, runs his hand down to the fatal gash on his neck-

"*Stop touching him and do it!*"

The outburst startles him; he looks up at his other self and sees the restrained hostility and clenched fist, anger barely held beneath the surface.

"You killed him," the other continues, and the words slice into his soul. "Now *fix* it."

"I didn't kill him-"

"You're not me," the other says. "Not really. And you *know* that."

Only he doesn't; but it's a fight he cannot win. And when Sasan comes back, he will not end up with him.

In a sudden spurt of awareness, he forces his hands away from Sasan. He can't let Sylar touch him, he can't...

He chokes down a tear. *Fix it. That's what you're here to do.*

He nervously extends tendrils of thought into the areas of foreign presence he feels, recoiling as spurts of Sylar's memory burst into his mind-

"What are you doing?" his other self asks suspiciously.

"I'm *trying!*"

And he tries again. *Heal him*, he thinks, *fix him*, and there has to be something Sylar knows that can help, but every time he tries to figure out what, he feels the threat of losing himself into the mind that got here first, and it takes all his will and courage to push on.

\*

Smudge fidgets as he watches, wishing he had a weapon of some sort for self-protection. Sylar could change at any moment. There'd be no one to hear him if he screamed for help. And then he'd die, right here, right next to Sasan... it's almost poetic, in a way, and it comforts him some-

It weirds him out, watching Sylar. He moves differently now: just like he himself does, and it takes Smudge a significant effort to remind himself that it's not really him. But it's not quite Sylar either. His eyes are different: softer, more afraid, and the way he speaks...

*He killed Sas*, Smudge fiercely reminds himself. It doesn't matter how deluded he currently is. Half an hour, and Sylar would be back, and they had better get this done before then.

The other turns, hesitant. "It's blood," he says.

"What?"

"Sylar's blood... it can heal. We gotta inject it into... into Sas..."

"...Are you sure?"

A nod. That frightened look is back again, worse than before; haunted, as though he'd just gone through some traumatising ordeal, and Smudge notices the other shaking in low hyperventilation.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

The other drops from his knees to sit. "I'm scared," he half-whispers, eyes wide in fear. "Sylar... his mind... it's there, I can feel it..."

Smudge gets the sudden urge to run before it's too late, but he can't go now, not like this. Not now. "What do we need?" he asks instead.

"Just... a syringe, maybe. With a needle. The hospital here should have one."

"Okay." Smudge hesitates. He doesn't want to leave him here alone with Sasan, but he sees him curled up against the wall, trembling before unknown fears, and cannot bring himself to make him move.

"I'll be back," he says instead, and runs off to the hospital.

\*

The other's form disappears around the corner, and he's alone with Sasan. Probably for the last time, and it's not the real thing: he's not really himself, and Sas is dead. But somehow it's enough, just being together, and not thinking about how they would look to outsiders: a dead body, and the body that killed him.

And Smudge wants to hold him, but knowledge of his current form draws an invisible barrier between them that he cannot again bring himself to cross.

Half an hour. He wonders what would happen after; would he vanish out of existence, or remain here forever, only powerless, smothered by another's consciousness, forever floating in fragments in a frightening foreign mind...

He draws his knees tighter towards him, head bowed, trying to imprint forever this moment in time. He needs to remember who he is, no matter what; because to forget would be to die.

*I'm Smudge, I'm Smudge, I'm Smudge...*

And suddenly he doesn't care anymore, and moves closer to Sasan, who apart from the blood could almost look alive; and curls up against him, his eyes shut, and waits for his original self to return.

"*What are you doing?*"

His eyes fly open. His other self is back, face ashen, glaring at him with a hurt fury.

"I-"

"*Get away from him!*"

He scoots back away from Sasan, but not fast enough. Smudge yells in pain as his other self grabs him and tackles him sideways; he lunges out reflexively in self-defence and in a sudden burst of power blasts him against the opposite wall-

He lowers his hand in horror and scrambles over. "I'm sorry!" he says quickly, and tries to help him off the ground. "I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"Don't *touch* me!"

He hears the hate and fear in his voice and hurriedly steps back; then remembers, and pulls up his right sleeve. "You got the syringe?"

"Yeah."

The needle looks longer than necessary, and he wonders if it is intentional. He grits his teeth as his other self pokes around the front of his elbow searching for a vein, and at the third failed attempt wonders if *that* is intentional. Perhaps not. They've never done this before. Not with a human, at least; once they tried intravenously feeding Viagra to Freedom the guinea pig to improve his sex life, but that hadn't gone too well.

The needle finally finds the vein, and blood draws out into the syringe.

"How much?" his original self asks

"I don't know." Pause. "Remember when we tried injecting Freedom-"

The other glares at him. "Leave my guinea pig out of this." He yanks the needle out with undue force; the small wound heals almost immediately.

It freaks him out a little, seeing that and comparing it to the other's battered body, still limping from the fall in Sylar's apartment, dried blood on the side of his head. He'd been him just a few minutes ago.

He wishes he still were.

\*

Smudge drops down by Sasan's side with the syringe of blood, casting a wary glance back to see if Sylar is still watching him. He is, and it creeps him out. Smudge wishes he would go away for a while. His presence unnerves him more than it used to; sometimes it almost feels as though he...

*No*, Smudge tells himself firmly. *He's not you. He never was, and he never will be.*

He grasps hold of Sasan's forearm and extends it, manoeuvring the needle into position. He pricks through the skin and shoots the blood off into the vein; then pulls the needle out and sits back to wait.

He slips a hand into his pocket and fingers the cool metal handle of the surgical knife he managed to grab while raiding the hospital. After Sas came back, it would be time for some revenge.

"How long d'you think it'll take?"

Smudge jerks at the voice, pulling his hand out of his pocket. "*How would I know?*"

A shrug. Sylar drops to sit next to him. Smudge edges away, barely restraining the anger burning inside him.

He could hurt him now, he thinks; he could hurt him *bad*, and Sylar probably wouldn't even fight back, not in that state. Smudge could *kill* him, the way he killed Sasan and all those other people, because he deserves no less...

Smudge clenches a fist.

How dare Sylar pretend he was really him. How dare he, knowing what he'd done...

Sasan stirs.

"*Sas!*"

The wound has closed, and as Smudge grabs hold of his shirt, searching his face, the eyes blink slowly open.

"*Sas!*" he gasps out again. "*You're back... you're back...*"

Sasan's eyes try to focus on him. They blink again, uncertain and lost. "...Smudge?"

Smudge grabs him in a hug. He's real this time. Not a dream, not a ghost, but here, and breathing, and *real*...

Sasan vaguely remembers a mocking grin as his neck is brutally sliced open. And beyond that, like a fading dream, he remembers a watchmaker's shop and a lighted path to freedom. He returns the hug; but then notices the other person standing to the side, watching...

Smudge feels Sasan's head turn, and looks up to follow his gaze.

"Uh, Smudge? Why is Sylar-"

"Some guy named Q messed with his brain," Smudge says bitterly. "Now he thinks he's me, but he's *not*. It's just for half an hour, so we've gotta kill him before he turns back... Sas?"

But Sasan doesn't hear and doesn't see his pleading gaze, distracted by the single tear sliding down his killer's face.



#### **IV: history repeats. cycles forever.**

"We've gotta kill him," Smudge says, taking out the knife and holding it out. "Before he changes back."

"He's different," Sasan says absently.

Smudge scowls. "If that Q guy hadn't messed up his mind, he would have killed me. *He's still Sylar.*"

But Sasan remembers sunlight breaking through the grey, and the distinct relief from the oppression in a watchmaker's shop he can now barely recall.

"No," he says. "I don't think so."

"But-"

Sasan closes his hand over the knife in Smudge's fist and gently pulls it out. "I'll take care of it," he says. "Give me some time alone with him."

"But what if he-"

"I'll be okay."

Smudge hesitates, then nods and walks some distance off.

Sasan puts the knife into his pocket and gets to his feet. He glances down at his blood-stained clothes and decides he needs a shower. But that can wait.

Sylar watches him warily as he approaches.

Sasan gives a quick smile that doesn't quite hide his nervousness. "Hi," he says.

"...Hi."

He sounds like Smudge. Sasan swallows. "Thanks. For, uh, saving me."

The other's voice comes out in a cracking half-whisper: "I missed you so much."

Sasan looks away, uncomfortable.

"You've... you've gotta kill me now, right?"

Sasan looks back up, and is hit with a strong impression of Smudge; it's him, somehow, looking out from Sylar's eyes-

"...Smudge."

The other blinks away tears.

Sasan hesitates, then tentatively pulls him into a hug. A distant, nagging fear pricks at his mind: telling him that this is the person who killed him, and hurt him, and trapped him, now sniffing against his shoulder.

Sasan holds the fear back. He slowly pushes Sylar's head up, and looks him in the eyes.

"Smudge..."

"I don't want to die," the other says, eyes shining in tearful despair.

And Sasan kisses him; sees the other's eyes close, and with his right hand Sasan fondles his hair as his left slips into his pocket to pull out the knife.

He ends the kiss, forehead resting against his, feeling the other's breath against his lips.

His hand slips down to the back of his neck. Finds the spot.

"Sas..."

"I love you," Sasan whispers, and plunges the knife in.

\*

Sasan is shaking, slightly, the dead body at his feet. Smudge slowly goes up to him.

"I've never killed anyone before," Sasan says, his eyes wide and frightened, but still holding on.

Smudge slips his hand into his. Sasan squeezes it.

"He could come back," Sasan says. "He came back the last time."

"So we've gotta kill him permanently," Smudge says.

"How do we do that?" Sasan asks. "Chop off his head? What if both parts grow back and we get two of him?"

They pondered the horror.

"We could throw him out of that hole upstairs," Smudge suggested doubtfully.

"That might not work," Sasan said. "And it's still part of this place. When you die here you end up in some afterlife with terrible administration and horrible décor. Trust me, I was there."

"We could ask Adam or Leo how to kill him," Smudge said. "They watched a lot of *Heroes*."

Silence. They stood staring down at the body.

"...was he really me?" Smudge asks.

Sasan hesitates. "I think so."

Sasan turns around to take in the rest of the place, letting go of Smudge's hand. Remembering.

He sees Mike, still dead...

"What happened to him?" he asks Smudge.

"Suicide."

"He's the one who shot me, right?"

"Yeah," Smudge says shortly. Then he softens: "We should bring him back," he says. "I got you back," he adds, privately.

So they take the syringe and Sylar's blood and soon Mike gasps out in life, only to see them and shrink away in disoriented panic.

"What... what are you..."

"We made you undead," Smudge declares, tossing the syringe aside.

Sasan throws him a miffed look. "Smudge! That's *zombies*. I have yet to develop a taste for brains and a severe reduction in vocabulary, and I *think* the same applies to him."

Mike looks terrified.

"It's okay, we're not zombies," Sasan assures him. "We just brought you back to life, and now we've got to permanently kill Sylar."

"I... I'm sorry, I shot you, I didn't-"

"It's okay."

Mike's gaze roves over to the body on the ground. He swallows.

"...I want to go home," Mike says.

"They told your parents you were dead," Smudge informs him.

"*What?*"

Smudge digs around Sylar's pockets and finds the ITDT. He presents it to Mike. "Here. You press these buttons to choose where you wanna go, then you press this one to go there. That's yours," he says, pointing at Mike's name on the list. "It'll bring you home."

Mike hesitantly takes it.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Sasan tells Smudge. "He's covered in blood and his parents think he's dead. If he just pops up they'll get a heart attack or something."

Mike looks up at him, lost. "What happened?" he asks, distressed. "There were people after you guys..."

"It's over," Smudge says. "We got to go home."

"Oh."

Silence.

"I'm sorry," Mike says again. "For... for everything."

Smudge nods, but doesn't meet his eyes. "We've just gotta kill Sylar permanently," he says, changing the subject. "Because he might come back again like he did earlier. Adam or Leo might know how. You go ask Leo; we'll get Adam."

\*

Leo turns as he hears someone arrive, and blinks. "...Mike?"

Mike swallows. "Hi."

"What... what happened? I thought you-"

"They brought me back to life," Mike said. "Smudge and Sasan..."



Leo moves towards him. "Sasan is back?"

Mike nods. "Yeah. But they said Sylar might come back too or something, and they thought you might know how to kill him. They... they went to get Adam."

"Okay," Leo says. "Do your parents know you're alive? Adam and I told them-"

Mike shakes his head.

"Go home," Leo says. "I'll handle this, all right?" He looks at the dried blood spread over most of Mike's left side. "...Clean yourself up first if you like. Bathroom's that way, you can take a shower, clothes are there... you can return them another day."

"Thanks."

"I'm glad you're back," Leo says sincerely. "Take care, okay?"

"Okay."

Leo pats him on the shoulder and goes to get his ITDT from the table. He scrolls to Adam's name, presses the button, and vanishes.

\*

*A few moments ago...*

Adam Kaufman gives a startled jump as they arrive, grabbing hold of his chair to break the fall. He swears, and only then realises that one of the three intruders is dead, and another one of them used to be.

"Hi!" Sasan says brightly, before Adam has time to decide on an appropriate response. Sasan points at the dead body. "How do we kill him permanently?"

"...You're alive," Adam says.

Sasan gives a tight smile. "Yes, and if we don't hurry, Sylar will be as well, so you'd better get on with it."

Adam looks from him to the dead body.

"I don't know... how..."

"You watched all that TV and didn't learn *anything*?" Smudge demands.

Adam turns on him, suddenly furious. "I might get *fired*, okay? Something to do with how I hadn't turned up for three days because I'd been kidnapped to an alternate universe, and spent all that time trying to escape from a serial killer who looks just like me. If you don't mind, I've got work to do. Go bug Leo."

"That's not very helpful," Sasan says, looking upset.

"And give me that," Adam says, grabbing the ITDT out of Smudge's hand ("*hey!*"). He stalks across to the main door, unlocks it while dodging Smudge's attempts to take it back, and steps out; fingers working the buttons beneath a concentrated gaze before he finally hands it back.

"Next time, you'll arrive out here and ring the doorbell like everyone else," Adam states.

They go back indoors, where Adam glares at the few drops of blood that have dribbled out of Sylar's head onto his floor.

He drops into his chair and turns the computer on. "I'm really glad you two are back together and I hope you figure out how to kill Sylar permanently, but I need to save my job. So get out of here."

"What would you do if we *don't* get out?" Smudge challenges.

"Let's just go," Sasan says meekly, cowed by Adam's resulting death glare that seems to have no effect on Smudge.

"No," Smudge says. "It's *your problem* too," he tells Adam, returning the glare with an extra tinge of bisexuality. "If he comes back he'll kill us *all*, don't you get that?"

Leo pops up. "What's up?" he asks.

Adam scowls at him. "Give me that," he says, grabbing at Leo's ITDT. Too lazy to get up, he checks his own for reference, and modifies the coordinates for his universe on Leo's. He hands it back to a confused Leo, who just glances at it and puts it back into his pocket.

"Sylar looks dead to me," Leo comments.

"But he could still come *back*," Smudge argues. "Just pull out the knife and he's alive again, like what happened just now-"

"...Who pulled out the knife?"

"*He* did," Smudge says. "Sylar possessed Zach and did it."

"Zach?"

"-ary Quinto," Smudge says.

"Oh," Leo says, looking slightly uncomfortable. "You... you met him?"

"Yeah."

Adam thinks that there are better times and places for small talk than standing over a dead body in his living room while his job is at stake.

"So... Sylar can possess people while he's dead?" Leo asks.

"He's not really dead," Sasan says. "I think that knife just stops him from healing; we've got to actually kill him, and we thought you'd know how."

"What about you?" Smudge asks him. "You could possess Zach too..."

Sasan shrugs. "It's probably because I died in that hotel. Their afterlife system is hopeless and understaffed, but I don't think it's the case elsewhere."

"We could get Spock to throw him out an airlock," Leo suggests.

"Yeah, we could do that," Adam says, wishing they'd just decide on something already. "Send him into space."

"What if he gets picked up by a passing spaceship?" Sasan asks curiously.

Adam glares at him. "What are the chances of that happening?"

"He can't die," Sasan says. "He'd just be floating out there waiting for rescue for, like... a hundred years or something."

"We'd be dead by then," Adam says.

"That's just *selfish*," Sasan says. "What about the people who are still alive and have to deal with him? And we might not be dead; it could just be a year from now or-"

"Or we might be dead," Adam says, intensifying the death glare.

"Might not."

"*Might be.*"

"Might n-"

"*Okay*," Leo interjects. "So in the best case scenario, we're dead."

"That sucks," Smudge decides.

"We could burn him," Sasan suggests. "Like... cremate him until there's nothing but ashes."

"And we can feed the ashes to Zach's dog," Smudge adds.

Sasan gives him a reproving look. "*Smudge!* He's a *nice* dog!"

"...Sorry."

"Yeah, and I guess you own a cremating facility?" Adam asks.

Sasan shrugs. "I've got an oven." He smiles.

Leo doesn't like the mental images he's getting.

"Or we could drown him in gasoline and set him on fire," Smudge suggests. "And chop off all his limbs and stuff until it's just the parts that grow back, unless all of them grow back-"

Leo really doesn't like the mental images he's getting.

"They don't," Adam confirms from his pieces of *Heroes*-verse-regeneration knowledge. "The regeneration probably starts from that spot in his head with the knife in it. Everything else can be... cut away."

"So we chop him up to pieces and just cremate his head in Sasan's oven?" Smudge asks.

Leo dry retches. Adam quickly jabs a finger in the direction of a door. "Bathroom. There. *Go.*"

Leo runs off to it.

"...I was joking about the oven," Sasan says.

\*

Leo stands bent over the toilet, but he hasn't eaten in a while and food refuses to come out. He gives up.

Sasan wanders in and turns on the tap. He scrubs his hands free of blood, and washes it off his face and neck.

"...you were dead," Leo says from behind him, as though just realising the enormity of the situation.

Sasan gives a small smile towards Leo's reflection in the mirror, then bends down over the sink to splash more water on his face.

"This is really weird," Leo comments quietly.

"All of us even being here together is weird," Sasan says, water dripping off his hair. He grabs a hand towel off a shelf to dry himself off, hoping Adam wouldn't mind the blood if and when he finds out.

Leo nods. "Did you... meet Zach?"

"Not exactly," Sasan says. "Sort of."

"What's he like?"

"He's... I don't know," Sasan murmurs. He rinses the hand towel in the sink and leaves it on the rack to dry. "Just an actor."

Smudge stumbles in and takes over Sasan's spot by the sink, washing the blood off the side of his head.

Leo leaves the bathroom.

"It's never going to be over, is it?" Adam asks, staring down at the dead body on his floor.

"I don't know," Leo says.

\*

Mike stands in the shower, water running down his neck and down his back, head resting against his arm against the wall. Lost; fading memories of a strange in-between world, pushed aside for the still-fresh events that preceded his finger pulling that trigger.

Rivulets of blood-stained water run down the shower drain.

Mike looks down at his hands. A near-identical pair murdered dozens. Mike still remembers the killer's face from the first time he saw him, dead on the ground until he unwittingly resurrected him. The memory has seared into his mind, associated with the bloodied corpses with their sliced-open heads that Noah took perverse delight in showing him; and in his mind's eye, he can almost visualise the killings, almost see Sylar crouched by a body, hands dripping with blood as he looks up, overly-familiar features twisted into a grin...

"No," Mike gasps out. "*No.*"

He wipes a hand across his face and pushes wet hair back. He turns off the shower, and stands there for a moment, shivering in the cold and fear from unwanted thoughts.

*I'm just me*, he thinks. *Just me.*

He grabs the towel off the rack to dry himself off.

*...Us.*

Mike almost wants to forget the others, forget they exist, but it seems rude to do so while benefiting from the kindness of one of them. Yet somewhere in his mind still lingers the thought of them as the enemy: indoctrinated by Noah and company to fear them, and by extents himself.

Mike towels off his hair and gazes hollowly into the bathroom mirror.

*You're one of us*, Adam had said; and in his own reflection, Mike sees him, and Leo, and Sylar.

\*

He wakes back in his watchmaker's shop, an image of Smudge watching him in hesitant fear.

Smudge has a heavy book raised in his hands.

"...what, you're going to kill me with that?" Sylar asks.

Smudge tightens his grip on the book. "I could try," he says through gritted teeth, eyes blazing with determination.

"There's not much time left, is there?" Sylar asks. "You'll just fade away into nothing, or I'll get to kill y-"

Smudge whams the book against his head. Sylar winces, winded, and raises a hand to throw Smudge against the wall, but nothing happens.

"You can't *do* that," Smudge says in triumph. "The half hour's not yet up, so you *don't* have any power over me. I'm still in control."

"Some control," Sylar snarls. "Lying dead on the ground somewhere-"

"Not *yet*," Smudge insists. "They're gonna do something. They won't let you come back, and *then* when I'm gone, *you'll* be dead for good."

"You've got a lot of confidence in your friends out there, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"They abandon you here with me... they don't even care..."

"Because I'm just a copy," Smudge says, though Sylar notices how his voice chokes up a little. "I'm just here to keep you down until you're *dead*."

"And then you'll be dead too," Sylar says, walking up close to him. Smudge backs away, still clutching the book. "Do you *want* that?"

Smudge nods. "That's what I'm here for."

"What about this," Sylar offers. "You let me take charge, I'll bring us back, and I'll let you have control now and then. You could do whatever you like, you'll have all the powers, you can see Sasan again, kill your other self, take his place-"

"*No!*"

Sylar remains unperturbed. "You know you don't want to die," he says. "You know you're more than just a copy. A perfect copy, almost. If a strange interdimensional being grants you a wish for nothing, you can be sure there's a catch."

"*I'm not letting you live.*"

"We could rule the world, Smudge," Sylar says, moving closer, till Smudge can feel his breath against his ear. "Just you and I. We'll be invincible. You could have a perfect life. Everything you've ever wanted."

"Go away or I'll hit you again," Smudge says tersely.

Sylar graciously takes a few steps back.

"I already *have* a life," Smudge says. "Out there. With Sasan. And it's not *perfect*, but we'll be happy. Unless you come back to ruin it. So I'm *not* going to let that happen."

"...Have you ever wondered," Sylar asks, "if *you're* the real one and he's the copy?"

Smudge tenses. "It doesn't matter."

Sylar shrugs. "Just thought you might want to consider the possibility." He wanders over to his workbench and sits down. "Got any watches that need fixing?" he asks.

"No."

"Suit yourself." Sylar bends down and picks up a clock. He places it on the workbench, the clock face towards Smudge. Seven minutes to twelve o'clock.

"Seven minutes," Sylar says. "Then your time is up, and you're going to die."

"What would you do?" Smudge asks. "You'll still be lying on that floor."

"The same thing I did the last time."

"You might be dead for good by then," Smudge says fiercely.

"We'll see about that, shall we?"

Smudge hurls the book at his head. It misses, smashing open a glass counter behind him.

Sylar raises an eyebrow. "That's not very nice."

Smudge yells and jumps him, shoving him to the floor and pummeling at his head until Sylar grabs him and kicks him off, Smudge making a grab for his collar and gasping as Sylar elbows him in the neck and makes to stand up; Smudge punches the back of his knees, sending Sylar back down as Smudge angrily shoves him into another glass case. Glass and blood fly; Sylar screams; and this time he doesn't heal, not here, not now-

Smudge leaps onto his back and grabs his neck in a stranglehold; trying to cut off his air, break his windpipe, and falling off as Sylar forcefully whams him against the wall and grabs a chair off the floor. Smudge scoots out of the way; glass shatters into the air as Sylar brings it across at him and misses; chucks the chair aside and races after Smudge, half-crawling away, and lands on him, throwing Smudge back down, head painfully cracking against the floor. Smudge squeezes back tears of pain, temporarily out of it as Sylar wrestles his arms away and pins him down. His face sideways against the concrete, Sylar's knee against his neck.

"Just because I don't have my powers doesn't mean I can't beat you," Sylar says, panting, pressing his knee down further to illustrate the point.

Smudge tries to summon a glare, but he hurts all over, and then Sylar's fist whams into his face and he succumbs to glorious unconsciousness.

Sylar gets up and gives Smudge another kick just for the heck of it.

And he tries to find the others the way he found Zach; tries to locate his body and suitable people to possess and bring him back to life. But nothing happens, and the place doesn't change.

He tries again, with no result.

Five minutes. Maybe he needs his powers back, or...

He tries Zach's place, and this time it changes. Smudge goes with him, still unconscious on the floor, and Noah gives a startled bark.

Zach starts. He glances towards Noah, seeing him growling at an empty spot of air.

"I don't want you," Sylar mutters. "Where are the others? Why can't I go to them?"

Zach doesn't see them, but his gaze fixates on their average location as he backs off and nervously calls Noah to him.

"Yeah, that won't work," says a voice.

Sylar whips around. There's someone in uniform leaning casually against the wall, a nametag identifying her as Fhille.

"Who are you?" Sylar asks quickly, stepping forward.

"Name's Fhille. IBHA crew; that's the Isolated Bubble of Hyperspace Afterlife. I helped handle your case the last time. Oh no, Smudge..." She rushes towards him, crouching down by his side.

"What's going on?" Sylar asks. "Why can't I find the others?"

Fhille looks up, cradling Smudge's head. "You never could," she says. "You're not some free-roaming spirit entity thing. You're just at the brink of death, which brings you right back to the point of your creation. Here. Specifically, him." She points at Zach. "He's the only one you can possess, though I doubt it'd do you any good. No powers, no way out of this world... just an actor in character."

Smudge stirs. He looks up at Fhille.

"C'mon," she says. "It's time for you to go."

"Where?"

"You'll find out." She helps him off the ground.

"Hey!" Sylar shouts. "So what; I'm just *stuck here*?"

Fhille shrugs. "Pretty much. I'll be back for you soon. Working overtime today; I usually don't do collection."

She takes Smudge by the hand and walks towards the closed door.

A burst of light, and they're gone, and Sylar is left alone with a frightened Zach and barking Noah.

---





### V: the plans that we made.

Sasan picks up the wet cloth and wipes a line of blood off Smudge's neck. He touches the grazed, bloody spot on the side of his head. Smudge winces.

"How'd you get that?" Sasan asks.

"I fell off a ceiling," Smudge says, gingerly rubbing wet fingers against the area to get the blood off, rinsing his hands off under the running tap after each round.

"You *fell off* a... How did you get on a *ceiling*?"

"Sylar," Smudge says, which he figures should suffice as an explanation. He shakes the last drops of water off his hands and limps out of the bathroom, Sasan's gaze trailing his injured leg with upset concern.

"*Smudge...*"

Smudge pauses and turns his head to him.

"If you're walking like that I *really* don't think you should be walking," Sasan says.

Smudge glares. "It doesn't hurt *that* much!"

"It's going to if you keep on like that-"

"We've gotta kill Sylar, *okay*?" Smudge yells in defiant determination. "*That's* what's important now-"

"Get Adam and Leo to take care of it. You need a doctor-"

"No I *don't*, I need to k-"

Sasan gives him a pointed prod on the side of his head. Smudge screams in pain and stumbles back; his legs give way, and Sasan catches him to break the fall, both of them landing on the floor.

Sasan pulls an angrily-sobbing Smudge to him. He kisses the back of his head. "Yes, you do."

Smudge clings on to him, eyes squeezed shut.

"I'm sorry," Sasan murmurs. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"..." says Adam, drawn there by the screaming. "Uh," he says, "if you don't mind... there's a serial killer in my apartment I'd like to get rid of before Leo throws up on my hi-fi."

\*

Mike leaves the bathroom and pads into Leo's bedroom; he opens the closet, and realises with a weird feeling that all the clothes in it would probably fit him. He debates for a while over whether he should just teleport home for clothes, then remembers that he's never teleported before, has no idea how it works, and would rather not experience it naked.

He takes a polo shirt and jeans out of the closet and gets dressed. He hangs the towel back in the bathroom, and bundles his own bloodstained clothes together; then he takes out the ITDT that Smudge gave him and looks hesitantly at it. He scrolls through the names, a disproportionate number of which start with the letter S, finds his own name, takes a breath to steel himself, and then presses the button and teleports home.

It's instantaneous.

He's back in his bedroom; standing in the dim sepia light of drawn curtains and closed door. *Home*. A wave of emotion sweeps through him. Relief. Security. Nostalgia. He glances around, taking it all in, savouring the place he'd thought he'd never see again...

But first things first. Mike grabs a pair of underwear to put on.

He clutches the closet door for a second; just holding it, knowing that it's there, and real, and he's *home*...

Then he shuts his closet, opens his bedroom door, and hurtles out; calling for his parents, hearing shouts of shocked responses, and grabbing them tight in desperate hugs.

He's home.

\*

"Do you still have the syringe?" Sasan asks Smudge, ignoring Adam, who stalks off to scare Leo away from his hi-fi. "Sylar's blood could heal you too."

"I'm *not* getting his blood in me," Smudge says.

"You did it to *me*!"

"That's different."

"We'll have to use conventional methods, then."

"What if they put my leg into a cast and won't let me walk?" Smudge asks pleadingly.

Sasan stares at the leg in question and realises that there's something off about its angle halfway down.

"Smudge, I think it's broken-"

"I'm *okay*-"

"No, I don't think so. That looks extremely painful and you're going to a hospital."

"*What about Sy-*"

"Adam!" Sasan calls out.

"..." says Adam.

"Deal with Sylar. I'm getting Smudge medical attention."

"...and what do you expect me to do?"

"Just find a furnace to dump him in or something," Sasan says, fingers searching for the ITDT in Smudge's pocket. He finds it and pulls it out. "There should be lots of that on a spaceship. Go ask Spock." Sasan smiles.

"I could go there," Smudge says quickly. "They have future hospitals and stuff, right? It'll be faster..."

Sasan concedes the point.

Leo wanders over. "So are we going?"

Adam sighs. "Yeah. Let's just get this over with."

"Stay there," Sasan says to Smudge, and hops to his feet. "I'm not running around a spaceship in bloodstained clothes. There may be hot aliens around." He looks at Adam and smiles. "Where do you keep your clothes?"

\*

And Mike reassures them that he's okay, he's okay, pushing through "*who were those people?*"s and "*they said you were dead!*"s and settling, together, into a muddled assurance, the details irrelevant, just that he was alive, and he was home.

He doesn't want to leave. Not now that he's back. But the thought of the others out there still intrudes uncomfortably into his mind, as does the feeling that he should help, somehow, instead of staying safely away from it all; because why should he get that privilege when they did not?

His family needs him, he tells himself, looking over at his parents. His father still barely able to function in regular life, his mother struggling to support them along with Mike's own paltry income; already he didn't think he was doing enough, plus he'd been gone three days; but he doesn't think they'd let him go so soon after what just happened...

But the others. Out there. Possibly in danger. With their own lives being interrupted, their own loved ones who would miss them.

*They're your family too.*

He should at least ask if there was something he could do, other than just sitting around while they might be dying-

*And you got them into this mess in the first place,* he reminds himself. *You still haven't fixed it.*

"Mom?" he starts, and she looks up at him. Mike swallows. "There's... something I gotta do. I..."

She tells him not to go; half-heartedly, seeing the determination shining in his eyes, some desperate need to right a wrong...

"I'll be back," Mike says, although to him his words darkly call to mind the same, uttered in another time in another place to a young woman he'd never seen again. "I promise. I'll be safe. I'll come back..."

And he teleports to Adam's apartment, but Adam and Leo have already gone.

For a moment he stands lost; glances back down at the ITDT, scrolling through the mostly-unfamiliar names, wondering where the others could be-

*Quinto, Zachary \**

There's an asterisk next to the name. The others don't have that. Mike glances uncertainly around the apartment as though hoping to find answers somewhere, but none come to mind.

He looks back at the ITDT. The asterisk has to mean something; but something good, or bad, or...

The possibility of the person's identity swims into his mind. The list is a list of *them*, and for one of them to be specially marked out suggests that he's not, really, one of them, which means...

*He might be able to help,* Mike thinks, through the unease that fills him at the thought. *If he knows all of us.*

He slowly scrolls down to the name.

*He'd be safe,* Mike tells himself.

And, thus assured, he presses the button and teleports over to Zach's place.

\*

Spock's quarters are deserted when they finally arrive, standing awkwardly in the middle with a dead body by their side.

Smudge half-pulls Sasan over towards the bed to sit, leaning on him for support as he hobbles over.

Adam and Leo look at each other.

"Now what?" Leo asks.

Adam goes over to the door. He hesitates, then figures out how to open it. The carnage of before has been cleared up, and only a few phaser marks on the walls suggest the fight.

Leo comes up to join him at the doorway, squinting as a lens flare passes by.

"We could check the bridge," Adam says. "Wherever that is."

The corridor gives no clue. Leo glances back into the room: Smudge and Sasan on the bed, engaged in some conversation he can't hear, and Sylar on the floor. "I don't think it'd be safe to split up," he says.

"Yeah, but it's not like the four of us can go carrying Sylar around the ship looking for a furnace."

Adam leaves the doorway and paces back into the room, surveying the walls and shelves with frustrated concentration, looking for answers he cannot find. He reaches the bed and sinks down on it to sit - Smudge gives him an indignant glare - and drops his head into his hands.

Leo moves away from the door as well. It shuts with a hiss of decompressed air. He picks up a chess set, looks it over, then puts it back down. "There should be some way of contacting the bridge from here," he says. "It could be voice-activated..."

Adam doesn't say anything, having taken to glaring at the floor. He could be at work, right now, staring at rows of technical data, but instead he's on board the U.S.S. Enterprise trying to figure out how to permanently kill a dead serial killer. He hates his life.

"If we just blow him to pieces I don't think he could come back," Sasan says, eyeing Sylar on the ground.

"How do we do that?" Adam asks.

"Or... drench him in gasoline and throw a lighted match at him," Sasan continues. "He's human, right? He has a bunch of powers and he can heal, but he's *human*. He's not that different from us. He can't be that hard to kill..."

Leo shrugs.

"Or we could hack him to pieces and throw the pieces out an airlock, then *smash* his head to a pulp and *keep* smashing it until it *stops* growing *back*," Smudge declares with an air of determination that suggests he would be more than willing to volunteer for the act.

"That's... kind of..." Leo comments doubtfully, and tells himself to stop creating vivid mental images of everything he hears because it makes his stomach feel funny in a very bad way.

"You know what?" Adam cuts in. "I'll do that if I have to. I just want this over with, and if it means nightmares for the rest of my life then so be it."

Adam hops off the bed with determination, then realises that he hasn't exactly thought up what to do next. He sits back down.

*...growing back*, Leo thinks, still unable to stop the mental images. *Smashing a shifting lump of bloodied flesh and bone as it tries to grow back, and if you pause long enough it'll start to look like your face...*

He squeezes his eyes shut tight and desperately tries to think of happy things.

*Happy things*, Leo thinks. *Happy. Barney. Purple dinosaur. I love you, you love me, we're a happy family...*

He subconsciously mouths the words to the song. Adam looks at him funny and then decides it's not worth it.

Sasan disentangles himself from Smudge and gets off the bed; Smudge looks at him pleadingly and makes to get up-

"No, you stay there," Sasan says. "We're obviously not going to get anything done just sitting here, so I'm going out to get help since no one else seems interested."

"How?" Adam asks blankly.

"Find someone and ask for directions to the nearest doctor and the nearest furnace. It can't be that hard."

"What if someone thinks you're Sylar and shoots you?" Smudge asks.

Sasan hesitates. "It won't happen," he says. "I'll be polite."

"Sas-"

"I'll be fine, okay?"

Adam gets up. "I could come with you if-"

"No," Sasan says. "If Sylar finds you and does that possessing thing, it'll probably take two of you to make sure he can't do anything. I won't take long. This ship is full of people; I just need to find one."

"But why can't Adam go instead?" Smudge pleads. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Because I'm nicer and smarter and better-looking."

"HEY!"

Sasan smiles.

"Don't go," Smudge says softly.

Sasan tousles his hair. "Smudge. I'll be fine. We can't be together all the time, all right?"

Smudge looks down.

Sasan kisses him on the forehead. "I'll be back soon."

\*

Mike stands uncertainly upon his arrival, ITDT in hand, gazing cautiously at the other in the room, not quite daring to say hi, and wondering why he looks so terrified.

"...Mike?"

"Yeah," he says; and he doesn't know if it's his imagination, but for some reason he thinks he sees something in Zach's eyes change.

And a smile. A chill runs down Mike's spine. There's something wrong about it. He doesn't know what; he's never met Zach before, he has no grounds for comparison...

"Do you know where the others are?" Zach asks. The terror has gone, replaced by a sudden confidence. "I've been... trying to get to them."

The dog is growling, hackles raised.

"No," Mike says, glancing away from Noah back to Zach. There's something about him that makes Mike want to run. *It's normal*, he tells himself. *He made you, of course it's going to be weird...*

But it's not that, exactly, and the sense of wrongness intensifies as Noah makes a sudden leap at Zach, and Mike watches as he tries to fend him off ("*I'm sorry, he's been like this all day*") and pulls the dog away into a room and shuts the door against angry yelps.

And when Zach turns again, Mike instinctively backs off.

Zach motions at Mike's ITDT. "Can we go?" he asks, and there's an intensity in his eyes that creeps Mike out. "I don't think I'm... safe... here."

*Run*, Mike's instincts tell him. *Get out of here now, and don't take him with you-*

He takes another step back against the wall.

"Where did you last see them?" Zach asks.

"I... they went off to Adam's place, I think."

The intense gaze lessens off, as though responding to Mike's fear. "We could try there," Zach says. He glances around the room. "I think Sylar's around here somewhere. We shouldn't stay."

And so they go off to Adam's apartment, but the others have gone, and they need to try other options.

\*

Adam crouches down by Sylar's body, going through his pockets. He finds a wallet and flips it open. ID, a few other cards, a bit of cash. He pockets the cash. Then he pockets the driver's license too, because the photo looks better than the one on his and it wouldn't hurt to have a spare. Plus, now Sylar could no longer legally drive.

"Hey, I want some," Smudge says of the cash. Adam hands him a dollar bill.

"I don't think we should go so near to him," Leo says doubtfully. "If he's possessing people and all..."

Adam decides he has a point. He sticks the wallet back where it came from and gets up. "Yeah, okay."

"What's the plan if he does?" Leo asks.

"We stay far away from him," Adam says, glancing from Leo to Smudge. "No going nearer for whatever reason, so if someone does, then we'll know... Hopefully he'd try Smudge because he's like an invalid now-"

"I'm *not!*" Smudge insists, and makes to stand up to prove otherwise, but Leo lightly pushes him back down.

"If anything happens to you, Sasan will never forgive us, so you're staying there," he says.

"I don't need babysitting," Smudge says with a pointed glare at Adam.

"Respect your elders or I'll take that dollar back," Adam says, and Leo grabs the important fragile Vulcan cultural artefact out of Smudge's hand before he can throw it at Adam and emotionally compromise Spock.

\*

Sasan skirts around the corner into the next corridor. There are fewer blood stains here, and the smell of dead redshirts is practically non-existent. He sees a map of the ship displayed on a screen in the wall and stops to study it, trying to work out where the *Star Trek* equivalent of a 'You Are Here!' sign is...

"Looking for something?"

Sasan gives a start.

Q is leaning against the wall on an elbow.

"Wow, where did *you* come from?" Sasan asks.

Q shrugs.

"I need to find a doctor and a furnace?" Sasan says, looking hopeful. He hasn't had much experience with asking directions from strange guys who appear out of nowhere on spaceships, but there's always a first time.

"Whatever would you want with that?" Q asks.



"Uh, who are you?"

Q moves away from the wall and with dramatic gravity spreads out his arms in a declarative fashion. "I am-"

Dem pops up munching on a sandwich. "This one's mine," he interrupts, mouth half-full.

Q drops his arms. "I wasn't aware we could choose. Where did you get that sandwich?"

"Got it off some guy on a bench. Sad looking fellow."

"What's in it?"

"I have no idea, but it tastes terrible." Dem chucks the sandwich aside and dusts the crumbs off his hands. "So."

Sasan looks uncertainly between the two of them and wonders if he should say something.

"Uh," he says.

"Sylar's coming back," Dem says to Q, ignoring Sasan.

"I know that. They want to toss him in a furnace."

"And then it won't be exciting anymore," Dem muses.

"I could make it exciting."

Dem raises an eyebrow. "As exciting as running away from an invincible serial killer with an ego problem? If they failed they would die. They've come farther than I thought they would. They're close to winning."

"Flukes," Q says. "Luck, chance... Sylar was careless, and he was outnumbered."

"By regular humans," Dem points out. "One of whom is bisexual."

Sasan's mouth drops open in offense on Smudge's behalf.

"And a half Vulcan," Q says.

"Well, him too. But they've lasted longer than most."

"But how much further could they go?" Q asks.

"I don't know," Dem says mildly. "This group is resilient."

"I'd like to see how resilient they still are when pushed to their limits."

Sasan gives a nervous laugh. "Uh, I'm still standing here..."

"Is that a challenge?" Dem asks, ignoring Sasan.

Q levitates Dem's abandoned sandwich off the ground and catches it, turning it into a Big Mac. He takes a bite and shrugs. "If you want it to be."



#### **VI: sylarphobia. internalized.**

Zach again tries to struggle against the mental invasion, but his efforts come to naught and all he can do is watch helplessly through his eyes.

Adam's apartment. He's never seen this place before, and yet in some corner of his mind it sparks a familiarity: a metaphysical déjà vu, a moment of shared history with an abandoned character.

Sylar walks them over to the kitchenette and picks up a knife from the drawer. "It's for protection," he tells Mike, and Zach feels the blade sliding into his pocket.

He tries to say something to Mike, to warn him and tell him to run, but he has no control of his mouth. Mike's scared, he can see. He knows something is up, but doesn't know what, and mutely hands over the ITDT when Sylar asks for it.

They try other places: Sasan's home, appearing in his bedroom behind a locked door. It's quiet.

They leave, Zach almost wanting to stay on for a while longer in the nostalgic voyeurism of a dream made real. But the nightmare made real gives him no mercy, and they enter yet another world.

\*

"...or we could just stick his disembodied head in a safe and lock it up," Smudge is saying, the conversation having drifted back to the various graphically-violent ways Smudge can think up to permanently kill Sylar. "Then it *won't* have space to grow back.

"What do we do with the safe?" Adam asks, bored and deciding to play along.

Smudge shrugs. "We could give it to Zach."

"I don't think he'll want it," Leo says.

"Just because his head's in a safe doesn't mean Sylar won't come back," Adam says. "We've watched enough of the show to know that. He doesn't stay dead; it's the Universal Law of Sylar."

"But we're not in the show," Leo points out.

"He hasn't managed to stay dead so far, has he?" Adam counters.

Leo gives in.

"We could start a *fire*," Smudge declares suddenly. "Then they'll come running and we can find a furnace."

"No thanks," Adam mutters. "I don't want to go down in *Star Trek* history as one of the people who burned down Spock's quarters."

The door whooshes open. Sasan rushes in.

"Sas!"

"Hi," Sasan says, his eyes darting towards the temporarily-dead body on the ground. "Uh, I don't know how to say this, but we're in trouble."

"...because we were perfectly fine before," Adam says, floating in sarcasm. He gets out and drips with it.

"Did you find a furnace?" Leo asks.

"No. But I met your friend; the old guy? And there was someone else with him, and I think they have it in for us-"

Mike and some guy wearing clashing plaid and stripes appear in the room. Smudge catches a brief glint of familiar evil in the latter's eyes, and he goes suddenly alert.

Sasan is temporarily winded by the confirmed reality that someone would actually wear plaid and stripes *together*.

Leo looks uneasy for a more metaphysical reason.

"Hi," Mike says nervously.

Sylar turns and takes a step over to the dead body, and that's when Smudge shouts something incoherent and leaps off the bed with no regard for his injury, grabbing him and throwing him to the ground.

Trapped inside, Zach yells silently at the pain.

"Smudge!" Sylar gasps out. "It's me, it's Zachary, what are you do-"

A confirmation clicks in his head at the lengthened form of the name. "YOU THINK YOU CAN FOOL ME JUST BECAUSE I'M BISEXUAL?" Smudge screams at him.

A scowl. "Smudge, *get off me.*"

"*I KNOW YOU'RE SYLAR!*"

The others are up, uncertain, moving closer-

Sylar sees Smudge's injured leg and grabs violently at it; in the cry of pain that ensues, he throws Smudge off, stumbling back to his feet and in one swift motion whips out the knife in his pocket and places it against his throat.

He grins. "Stand back or he dies."

Adam wants to say something. The words won't come. He settles for looking angry.

Sylar glances back towards his dead body, near him on the ground.

"We're not going to let you do that," Adam says, finding the words and a glare.

"I think you would," Sylar says dangerously, his free hand scrolling through random locations on the ITDT. He emphasises the knife against his throat. "For the life of Zachary Quinto. What is he worth to you?"

They don't say anything.

"One wrong move from you and he's gone," Sylar continues, and bluffs: "I could keep doing this all day until all of you are dead. You can't stop me."

He crouches down by the body, lowers the knife to grab his arm, gives them a final smirk, and teleports away.

They stand in silence. And then, Adam:

"Mike."

His voice is even. Doesn't look at him.

"I'm sorry-"

"*I thought you were supposed to stay at home.*" Adam turns on him now, anger seeping in, shaking.

*I just wanted to help*, Mike thinks of saying, and then realises it wouldn't be a good idea. "I'm sorry," he repeats instead. "I didn't know, I've never met him before, I-"

Leo places a hand on his back. "Go home, Mike," he says softly, not unkindly.

"I'm sorry-"

"Don't blame the kid," a voice says. "He comes from a simpler world. Don't you, Mike?"

"...*YOU*," Smudge says from the floor, making to get up. Sasan won't let him.

Q finishes the last bite of his Big Mac. "It's Q, actually. U is this moron I went to school with."

"Who are you?" Mike asks.

"The other guy I was talking about," Sasan says.

Adam takes a step forward in a terrible attempt at looking menacing. His eyebrows do most of the work, but Q is the sort of person who doesn't get fazed by eyebrows. "Leave us alone."

Q dusts stray sesame seeds off onto the recently-cleaned carpet. "Do you *want* to know who Sylar is, Mike?" he asks. "You should, you know. That way you won't make the same mistake again."

And Q flings his hand at Mike, and his world goes dim. For a moment Mike panics. He turns on his feet and finds everyone frozen around him - only, no, they're still moving, just very, very slowly, and there's a thin grey veil separating him from the rest of them, soft to the touch but refusing to budge past a certain distance when he pushes at it; and then, on the wall behind him, a projected video starts playing in sync with his time.

Selected clips from *Heroes*. Sylar's finest moments.

Mike's gaze is drawn to the screen, transfixed against his will as the first of many scenes play out. His stomach knots in recognition. A deep, distressed fear creeps into his eyes.

He tears away from the screen; pushes against the veil with both hands. "Let me out!" he shouts, but the veil absorbs his cry. He shouts again, mutely, and then hears his voice twisted and thrown back at him from the screen, casually wielded in Sylar's mocking tones, cruel in its familiarity, and Mike doesn't want to look but he can't help himself.

He swallows. Tensed up, his breaths coming shallow and fast, eyes darting wild and lost and always finding their way back to the screen, because there's nothing else to look at in the near-frozen tableau he's in. He slides down against the veil, wanting the show to stop, wanting the isolation to break and let him through-

The scenes play out in unrelenting assault.

He watches the kills, cringes at the sawed-off skulls, gags at the brains. And he learns to fear the face behind the acts, once an innocent image in a mirror.

"Let me out," he pleads again, quietly, but the phrase catches in his throat the moment he starts, and dies off in a whisper.

Because he's learnt to fear the voice.

\*

"What are you doing?" Leo asks, as they watch the speeded-up events in the bubble of time entrapping Mike.

Q shrugs. "Letting him watch TV."

"He doesn't need to see this-"

"Oh, I think he deserves to know who might come after him if he just goes home."

"He's been through enough," Leo says.

"Why," Q asks, "are you of the opinion that I care about your well-being?"

Adam pushes against the veil. It yields slightly, but no further. He turns to Q. "*What do you want with us?*"

"I haven't figured that out yet, actually."

Smudge glares at him. Q smiles back. Sasan crouches down and holds Smudge to himself.

Adam starts towards Q and tries to grab him, but a force field pushes him back.

"You can't hurt me," Q says casually.

Mike descends from his sitting position to lying on the floor, curled up in foetal position, trembling, his fingers plugged into his ears against the sound.

"*Stop it,*" Adam says. "Let him *out*-"

Q sighs. "Oh, all right." He snaps his fingers. The video ends, veil of grey vanishes, and Q vanishes with it.

Leo rushes over to Mike's side. Still curled up on the floor, fingers in ears, eyes squeezed shut in desperation, knees drawn up towards his elbows.

"Mike-"

He winces at his voice but gives no response.

Leo reaches out a tentative hand to his shoulder. Mike tenses up further. Leo takes his hand away and stands up.

"What did he *show* him?" Adam asks. "Non-stop Sylan? That stuff was bad enough when we watched the whole show-"

"We shouldn't stay," Sasan says, glancing around the room. "He could be back any moment."

"Q or Sylan?" Adam asks.

"Either one. They know we're here."

"What do we do?" Leo asks, gesturing at Mike. "Bring him home? Would he be safe there?"

"He's not any safer here," Adam says.

"We should just go," Sasan interjects nervously, thinking about the conversation between Dem and Q. It's not over. And he doesn't want to stick around anymore than necessary.

Adam takes out his ITDT and scrolls to Mike's name.

"Okay, uh, same precautions as before," Leo says. "When... you get home, don't stay in the room you arrive in. That way it'll look as though you're not there, and hope that Sylar doesn't search any further."

Adam holds up the ITDT with one hand. "Let's go," he says, and holds out his other hand. Leo takes it; takes hold of Mike; Sasan grasps his elbow and holds on to Smudge, and then they teleport away together.

The small object-clearing force field generated upon arrival knocks over a lamp. Sasan deftly catches it and places it back on the end table.

Mike senses home. He raises frightened eyes to meet them, but doesn't say a word as he slowly gets to his feet and backs away.

"Mike?" Leo asks. "It's us." He thinks of adding *you're safe now*, but it would be a lie.

No response; until Mike lifts a shaking hand to point out his door. *Get out.*

The door flies open. Mike's mother, Allison, stands there gaping soundlessly at them. She sees her son, trembling against the wall with a broken look in his eyes, and-

Leo goes out to her, closing the door behind him.

Mike shuts his eyes.

Leo opens the door again. "Maybe you should all get out of there," he says. "In case you know who decides to drop by."

They move. Sasan insists on half-carrying Smudge along. Mike doesn't budge, silently beseeching them to leave with a tearful desperation in his eyes.

"...it's not safe there," Leo says, but Mike doesn't appear to hear, or care; he crawls onto his bed and curls up on it, clutching his pillow tight, body heaving in quiet dry sobs. He's safe enough here, for him. It's home. And Leo finally lets him be.

Mike's father is asleep and they do not wake him, gathered haphazardly in the living room. Leo lays out the situation for Allison; explains to the best of his ability the condensed account of who they are, who Sylar is, and why Mike possibly won't be recovering for a while and please not to let him run off to help them again.

Adam sits slightly apart, not contributing to the conversation; hands clasped between his knees, brow furrowed in concentration. Trying to work things out.

On the couch, Smudge lets out from behind gritted teeth the occasional short scream of pain as Sasan tries to manoeuvre his broken leg straight.

"*Why should my leg be straight when I'm not?*" Smudge cries out after a while of this.

Sasan sighs. "Okay, now you're just being ridiculous."

"You're not a *doctor*," Smudge says. "Don't *touch* it!"

"Yeah," Allison says, looking uneasily at Smudge and Sasan. "I don't think you should."

Sasan decides that they probably have a point. "All right," he says. "Then you're going home and visiting a proper hospital with people who actually studied this stuff."

He takes out the ITDT and is about to scroll; then his finger pauses over the button. He blinks.

The usual list of names is gone. In its place is a single destination.

*Go Here! :)*

Smudge peeks over his shoulder. "What did you do?" he asks.

"I didn't do anything."

Adam looks over. "What's up?"

Sasan holds up the ITDT. "The names are gone. There's just that."

Adam grabs his own out of his pocket. Same thing. Go Here. Sinister smiley face. He tries scrolling. Nothing happens. It's the only entry.

A sick feeling descends upon him.

"Mine too," Leo says.

"What's wrong?" Allison asks.

"It's Q, isn't it?" Sasan asks. "He doesn't want us to go home."

Adam and Leo and Sasan exchange looks of their individual brands of despair. Smudge looks bisexual. Allison looks lost.

"We can't... stay here forever," Leo says.

"We could end up *anywhere*," Sasan says. "And I don't think Q would send us to *nice* places."

"It might not be him," Leo says hopefully. "Maybe the things are just low on battery and that's where you go to recharge them."

No one is convinced.

"It could mean that Sylar can't go anywhere either," Adam says.



"Except there," Sasan points out. "And if we go there we'd be right there with him."

Adam shakes his ITDT. He thinks he sees the words on the screen change briefly to "*don't shake me :(*", but they're back to the single destination when he stops.

"It's not as though we have a choice," he says flatly.

Silence.

"Let's just go," Adam says, not looking at the others.

Leo nods. "Thanks for having us here," he tells Allison. "Try to get Mike out of that room if possible."

"All right. Is he okay?" she asks of Smudge.

"He'll be fine," Sasan says, helping Smudge off the couch. Smudge's foot hits the ground and he lets out a short scream. "...-ish," Sasan adds.

Smudge grabs him tight. The anaesthesia of anger has worn off, and the prospect of having his leg in a cast is starting to sound like not a bad idea after all.

Sasan takes Leo's hand. Leo takes Adam's.

*Go Here! :) says the ITDT.*

Adam presses the button, and they leave.

\*

Several moments ago.

Michael Paul David carefully wipes a smudge of grime off his shopfront window and jumps at the sudden noise of boxes toppling in the backroom. He lowers the cloth uncertainly, glancing around the shop - he's alone - and cautiously steps towards the back.

"Hello?" he asks in a tentative voice. No reply, but there's almost definitely someone in there. He hesitates, wringing his hands. Perhaps he should call the police, or-

Or perhaps it's just a mouse. Or a rat. Not that he likes either, but there's no way a human could have got in without him noticing.

He places a hand on the doorknob and slowly pushes the door open.

And he stares.

"...Hi," Sylar says, looking up from where he's been about to resurrect his dead body. He tilts his head to one side. "Am I bothering you?"

Michael faints.

Sylar sticks the ITDT into the pocket of his dead body. It's weird looking at himself from the outside. He pushes his body over and grabs hold of the knife, then hesitates. It would be better if Zach were further away when he came back. Just in case he tried something.

Michael slowly revives on the floor. Sylar lets go of the knife and stands up. "You," he says, and gestures. "Pull that out."

Michael stares at him in timid confusion. "Who... who are you?"

"Someone you don't want to ignore," Sylar says, stepping over the fallen boxes and moving away from the backroom. "Trust me."

Michael looks at the knife.

"Yes, that," Sylar says, getting impatient. "Pull it out."

Hesitantly, Michael bends down. He casts another look at Sylar, meets a raised eyebrow, and pulls the knife out.

The wound starts closing up. Michael drops the knife in shock, watching in morbid fascination. "Is that... is that supposed to..."

The eyes open. Michael jumps back.

Sylar gets to his feet. "Yes," he replies, running a hand through his hair and looking at the faint specks of dried blood that come off onto his fingers. "Thank you."

Zach is where he left him, looking horrified and trying to hide it, but it's hard to act when threatened with the effects of such.

Sylar claps Michael on the shoulder and gains vague satisfaction at seeing him flinch. "Why don't you two stay and chat?" he asks, looking over to Zach. "Get to know each other, talk about how awesome I am..." He takes the ITDT out from his pocket. "...you know, keep each other company. I'm going home for a shower and lunch." He smiles. "I think I'll have waffles."

Too late, Zach lunges forward to try and snatch the ITDT out of his hand. But Sylar's gone, Zach clutches only air, and a startled, confused Michael grabs his arm to break the fall.

Zach swears.

Michael regards him with a nervous smile that comes across as borderline creepy and more than slightly unnerving. "Hiii," he ventures.

Zach wishes he were someplace else.

\*

Dark.

Then their eyes adjust to the moonlight and the flickering white glow of the single streetlamp standing a distance away against a hedge.

It's a tall hedge of dark green leaves, stretching past the streetlamp and cutting behind them, walling them in on three sides.

The streetlamp lights the path ahead. There's not much they can see of it; it turns sharply to the right a few steps on, further into the maze.

Smudge tugs on Sasan's hand. "Sas."

"Mm?"

Smudge points upwards. "Two moons," he says.

They look up. There's a round moon of orange and a white crescent.

"Looks like we're not in Kansas anymore," Sasan says.

"We never *were* in Kansas," Smudge points out. "We both live in New York."

Leo steps forwards to the streetlamp and stands there, hands in pockets, gazing at it. It's an old-fashioned lamp; at least, it appears to be, but there's a small LED screen below the lamp with words shining out from it:

*Good night, Quintoplets.*

"...They made this place for us," Leo says.

The others come over and read the message.

"Is that a good thing or bad thing?" Adam asks.

"Quintoplets'?" Sasan asks incredulously.

"I don't think they care about our well-being," Leo says. "But if they're just playing with us... they'd want to keep us alive." He looks down the turn in the hedge. There's a light in the distance, and he thinks he can make out a structure with concrete pillars on both sides.

Sasan checks his ITDT. The screen has gone dead. He presses the buttons, all to no effect. "It looks like we can't leave, anyway," he says.

Adam takes the lead. The others follow after, Smudge hobbling along with Sasan and Leo's support and being mad at himself for being a burden.

"We should think up worst-case scenarios," Sasan suggests. "That way whatever happens we might be relieved."

"*Flesh-eating carnivores.*"

"All carnivores are flesh-eating, Smudge."

"What about zombies?"

"Those eat brains, which I think is a terrible lifestyle choice."

Adam hopes there won't be zombies. You need shotguns to fight zombies. They don't have shotguns. Sylar would probably make an effective zombie, he thinks. He's already got the brain obsession down.

Another streetlamp appears to continue lighting the path. The building ahead grows closer. They can see only the front of it: glass doors flanked by the pillars.

"Wait," Leo says, and stops walking, dragging Smudge and Sasan to a stop. "Hear that?"

They listen.

Voices. Human, distinct, but there are many, and they're coming from the building.

"People," Adam says.

"Why would they send us into a bunch of people?" Leo asks.

"They might be the sort who want to kill us," Adam says. He continues walking, apparently unperturbed by this, and the rest follow.

"If Dem and Q want to kill us they would have done so long ago," Sasan says. "They wouldn't go to all this trouble to have someone else do the dirty work for them..."

Sasan peters off, face growing ashen, though it's hard to see in the dim light. And the others can hear it too, now that they're almost at the door. These aren't just any people.

"...Go in," Leo says quietly.

Adam grips the door handle and pushes the glass doors open.

They enter.

The voices fall silent.

It's a makeshift prison. Rows of cells on both sides. The tops of the cells gape open to the high ceiling, from which jut an array of huge, long spikes moving slowly downwards.

And the people in the cells are more of *them*.

They've never met. They don't know their names yet: Peter Sullivan, Louis Ironson, Jay Lambert...

But they meet each other's eyes in mutual recognition, and see the fear in the more-than-familiar faces, tense hands grasping the bars, cast in the shadows of the descending spikes and the fear of impending death. They'd be skewered.

Adam lets out a curse.

On the far wall, a projected message shines:

*YOU HAVE 10 MINUTES TO SAVE THEM.*

And, as they watch, the 10 changes to a 9.

---



**VII: the needs of the many.**

9, Adam thinks, and can think no further. The number burns itself into his mind and overtakes all thought; numb, he stares at the wall and the message on it, the words losing meaning with each mental repetition.

*You Have 9 Minutes to Save Them*

*You Have 9 Minutes to-*

"Adam."

*-Save Them -*

"Adam!" Sasan grabs his shoulders from the front with uncharacteristic roughness born out of fear. "Snap out of it. We don't have time."

Adam blinks, tries to force his brain back into motion. Peripherally, he's once again aware of the others in the cells. There are six. Individual humans only when he concentrates; otherwise an indistinctive mass of homogenous people that he on some level knows he's a part of and yet not...

The voices have started again, a panicked mass of questions and curses and terrified, confused cries rising from behind the bars-

*"What the fuck is going on here?"*

"I'm no one important... why am I locked up, what is this place-"

From the back: "HEY! Can you let us out of here?"

Leo is at the first cell, desperately but uselessly running his hands down the bars; there is no lock that he can see, although there is a hinge for the gate to swing open and a line where it meets the rest of the cell.

He looks up, rushed. "There's no lock-"

Smudge has hobbled his way to over to another, grabbing the bars for support. "Tony?"

Wry smile. "Hey, Smudge. Your turn to save my life, huh?"

"You... you *know* each other?" someone babbles from the next cell.

"Yeah," Tony says nonchalantly.

"How? Did you... did you meet before, did this happen before? How did you get out that time? *Why am I here now-*"

"Shut up, Louis. No one knows anything."

*"But you know each other-"*

On the other side of the corridor, Sasan pushes Adam against the stretch of wall between two cells. His head falls back; looking up, Adam sees the descending spikes. He just keeps staring.

"This is *not* a good time to blank out on us," Sasan is saying. "*Adam!* Look at me. Snap out of it. *Now.*"

"We can't do anything," Adam hears himself say listlessly. "It's all part of the game. They're going to die."

"*No.* No, they're not. We have nine minutes, and we're going to use them. There has to be a way. And if you stop being all shell-shocked then maybe we can figure it out."

"There'll just be something else," Adam says. "It could go on forever. They're just playing with us. We're as good as dead. Like everyone else in here-"

Another flurry of shouting. Adam winces; wishes they would stop; wishes he could shut it all out-

"Eight minutes," Leo says, coming over. "Look, maybe if we all grab one gate and pull-"

Adam slides down against the wall, his face in his hands.

"*Adam!*" Sasan yells.

Smudge tugs on the gate to Tony's cell. Leo comes over and grabs on, Sasan joining him.

"On three," Leo says. "One, two, *three-*"

They pull, but the gate doesn't budge.

On the ground, Adam shakes with quiet sobs.

\*

You can't leave yourself.

Mike trembles on his bed, trying to quiet his breathing; for the sound of his irregular gasps for air makes him think that that's the exact same thing that Sylar hears when, out of breath from a chase, he corners his victim and delivers the final strike. And when he swallows, the movement at the back of his throat feels the same; as does the resonance of his voice inside his head when he speaks.

Mike tightens his clutch on the pillow. Some part of his mind wants to comfort him and lay him to rest in a different world, cleansing him and assuring him that he is good and his existence hurts no one. But then come the memories of Kenselton Hotel and the knowing, sly hostility from behind horn-rimmed glasses, and the overt hate from strangers he's never met, and the three men forcing blood from his body with each blow as they shout, egged on by his screams and pleads to stop, because they see he's just like *him*-

Mike's legs knot up the comforter on his bed.

-because, on some level, he is. There's an unwanted kinship forever there, born of physicality and the shared lived experience of a virtually-identical body. They've seen through the same eyes, heard through the same ears, navigated the world with the same overly-long legs and explored similar nasal cavities with wandering fingers. Physically, the same things hurt. The same things feel good. The same tongue runs over the same teeth and counts them just as well, or badly. And that deepest, private intimacy is something they would always share and Mike would never be able to stop feeling violated by-

*The others. The others get it too. You're not alone.*

*You're one of them.*

Mike opens one eye, the other left shut against his pillow. He makes out his forearm and the downy hair running across its surface, not yet fully grown. Beyond that: his bedroom door.

The door. That's a good thing to concentrate on, a safe thing, and Mike slips his mind into a forced tranquillity.

Nothing else matters. Just the door. And what it signifies: home. He's home. He doesn't need to think about the other things. He doesn't need to think about Sylar. He doesn't exist here. He never did. He has no place here. He doesn't exist...

Mike closes his eyes again.

He doesn't exist.

\*

"All right," Dem says. "What's this."

"Waffles," Sylar explains dangerously, which - much like frowning at a cupcake or looking sadly at a sandwich - is not an easy feat.

"There's no time for lunch," Dem says. "Go find your friends and torment them. Go!"

"But I'm hungry."

"You're also," Dem says, squeezing a bit of maple syrup into a convenient container he takes out from a pocket, "immortal. Missing one meal isn't going to kill you."

"What would I gain from going after them? They're weak. There's no challenge. Give me back the maple syrup."

Dem gives him back the maple syrup.

"Thank you."

"How are the waffles?" Dem asks Sylar.

Sylar raises an eyebrow.

"Not that that's relevant," Dem says. "You're going."

And before Sylar can protest, Dem grabs him and teleports.

\*

Zach forces himself to be civil and tries to ignore the fact that Michael Paul David makes him extremely uncomfortable. For a moment, he finds himself wishing Sylar were there instead. Then he remembers that he likes being alive and doesn't like having his hats made fun of, and so he changes his mind.

He wonders if it should be a good thing that Michael appears equally uncomfortable with him.

Some customer comes in. Zach moves unasked to the back room and sits among the boxes feeling awkward, hearing bits of conversation through the door.

He wishes he had his iPhone with him. Then he realises that it probably wouldn't be able to connect to his universe's internet even if he had.

He composes hypothetical Twitter messages to pass the time.

*strange places. familiar faces. all a dream. or is it?*

\*

"I don't think brute force is going to work," Sasan says. "There has to be another way-"

He lets go of the bars and steps back, eyes sweeping the ceiling and the cells, and then the back wall with its message; and below that-



There's a circle drawn on the wall.

"What's that?" he asks, sprinting over, turning to add a quick: "Smudge, stay there." Leo follows after.

The wall is white, the circle drawn on in thin black. Sasan touches it; and his finger goes through.

*Something* brushes against his finger and he yanks it out with a cry as he feels a sharp nip of pain.

"SAS!"

"*Stay there*, Smudge!" Sasan shouts, as he sees him about to hurtle over. He grimaces, grabbing his finger with his free hand. A bead of blood is forming on the tip. He wipes it off; there's a tiny gash there, and he presses it against his thumb to stop the bleeding. "I'm okay," he tells Smudge, who looks about ready to permanently murder whatever it was that dared to hurt his beloved Sasan. "It's just a cut. Just stay there. Don't walk."

"What's going on?" Smudge calls out.

"*Stay there.*"

Smudge stubbornly limps forward.

"*Smudge-*"

"Hey, the bisexual guy asked a question," a greasy-looking fellow says. "What's going on?"

Smudge stops. "*WHO TOLD YOU I'M BISEXUAL?*"

"...You're kidding me, right?" Louis asks. "You came in and everyone's bi-dar exploded-"

Smudge glares at him and continues on.

Leo looks uncertainly at Sasan. "What was that?" he asks quietly.

"There's... something in there," Sasan says. He swallows. "Something alive. Smudge! I told you to-"

"I'm not leaving you," Smudge says fiercely.

Sasan gives in. They stare at the circle.

"It won't be here for no reason," Leo says.

"I think... one of us has to stick a hand in," Sasan says. "There might be a button or lever or-"

"Sacrifice," Leo says, looking at Sasan's finger. "Maybe it's a flesh-eating carnivore."

Silence.

"Uh, guys," Peter says. "Seven minutes..."

"Maybe Adam's right," Leo continues, ignoring Smudge. "We're all going to die anyway."

"We don't have a choice, do we?" Sasan asks Leo, his face pale. "I guess I... could..."

"Could *what*?" Smudge demands.

They look at him.

"What if you stick your hand in and it eats it up, *huh*?" Smudge asks, looking Sasan straight in the eye with overprotective concern. "*Then what?*"

Leo silently steps forward, pulls off his sweater and wraps it around his hand. He regards the circle, takes a breath, and-

"I'll do it."

He turns. Adam stands there, holding out his hand.

Leo hesitates, then unravels the sweater from his hand and passes it over. Adam wraps his hand up.

"It's all right, you don't have to-"

"It's a game," Adam replies shortly. "We have to play it."

He looks at the circle, steels himself, and plunges his hand in.

And screams.

Shouts of concern from the cells. Adam falls to his knees, Leo grabbing him-

Inside the wall, bleeding fingers stretch out and find a lever. And pull.

A *ka-chunk* resonates through the corridor as the cell doors swing open-

Adam yanks his arm out, covered in tattered cloth and tattered flesh, gasping for breath through tears of pain;

He falls to the ground; through the descending fog in his brain he is aware of the others rushing over; the message vanishing from the wall; a doorway opening up; and the unnaturally-long legs of concerned strangers looming over them-

"Teeth," Adam gasps out. "So many... eating..."

"Don't look at it," someone named Jason says, crouching over him. "That'll just make it worse-"

Adam looks, nonetheless. He makes out the dull white of bone amidst the shredded flesh and muscle and skin, and squeezes his eyes shut against sobs. The voices rise and fall over him, near indistinguishable from one another:

Louis: "Should we amputate?"

Peter: "Are you a doctor?"

Louis: "No, but-"

Peter: "We've got to stop the bleeding... just put pressure on the wound..."

Mitchell: "*Which* one?"

Jason: "Oh god there's so much blood-"

Jay: "If you do a tourniquet it'll stop but he probably lose his arm-"

Sasan: "He works with computers, and I *really* don't think he'll want to compromise his ability to use the keyboard."

Adam feels hands grasping along his arm, and hopes whoever it is knows what they are doing and has fingers that are relatively clean.

Jason: "I think if you don't he could lose his *life*. That's kind of an awful way of repaying him after he essentially saved us-"

Peter: "No tourniquets. That's a last resort."

Leo: "Adam, you still there?"

Smudge: "It looks like he's still breathing-"

Peter: "Look, *can everyone stop crowding around?*"

"...We're his friends," Leo says shortly. "Who are *you?*"

Brief silence.

"...You've got to stop the bleeding at least; I mean that's how people kill themselves, they slit their wrists, and this is definitely way more than-"

"Louis, shut up. You talk too much."

"Go stand in a corner and think about your life."

A grin.

"Tony."

"Jay."

Handshake.

More talking. Adam feels someone wrapping his arm tight in a shirt and someone else pressing firmly down in the middle of his upper arm. The voices merge together into one, and then he blacks out into cool oblivion.

"Keep his arm up. Above heart level; it'll reduce blood loss."

"I'm not touching th-"

Leo takes it.

"Hey guys, there's a room here," Louis says, having come back from exploring the doorway after realising his presence was unappreciated. "And, uh, I think the door's closing. We'd better move."

The door *is* closing; descending slowly from the ceiling to shut off the doorway, and soon a couple of them have scooted through in panic, acting in accordance with the unexamined rule that if a door is closing, it probably means you should get in there quick.

"*What if we're meant to stay here?*" Smudge asks.

"I don't think there's anywhere else to go," Sasan says, looking as though he'd be on the other side right now if not for not wanting to leave Leo to deal with Adam.

"Run out and check," Leo says, and Sasan duly dashes out.

He's back in the maze, though it's not much of one. And as the doors close behind him and leave him in the moonlit darkness with a single streetlamp in sight, he's suddenly afraid. Sasan looks back into the lighted building, tells himself out loud to stop being a coward, and forces his legs on.

He stops, and turns back, deciding to see if that way is truly blocked. It is; the building takes up the width of the path. Sasan peers hesitantly at the hedges, but can't see anything past them. Maybe if they climb over...

There's no time.

He runs, backtracking their path, playing perky Iranian songs in his head to distract him from the darkness. Past another streetlamp, turning the corner... dead end.

Sasan stands there for a while, and then as the thought strikes him, takes out his ITDT.

It's lighted up again.

And on the screen:

*Home. :)*

And a countdown. *10. 9. 8. 7...*

Sasan stares numbly at it.

*6. 5.*

*Smudge*, he suddenly thinks. *You can't just leave him and go home.*

Sasan forces the ITDT back into his pocket and dashes back.

Leo meets him halfway, yelling at him to hurry.

"The door's closing. Any other way out?"

"There's nothing," Sasan says, and they run back to the building.

Smudge is standing in the corridor, looking jittery, his face lighting up with relief as he sees Sasan, and Leo yells at him to *move*, why is he still standing there, and Smudge starts limping towards the door which is almost closed, anxious faces peering through from the other side, and Leo and Sasan half-carry Smudge over and push him through the door, and Sasan rolls in and Leo follows after-

-and the door shuts with a *clunk*.

On the floor, Smudge hugs Sasan. "...I thought you weren't coming back."

Sasan kisses his neck. "I'll always come back."

Some of the others are staring, uncomfortably.

"Are they..." Peter starts.

"Yeah," Leo says, getting off the floor to see if Adam is still alive.

"...that's just wrong," Peter says.

"Yeah," Jason adds nervously. "It's not the gay thing, it's the... other thing..."

Smudge pulls away from Sasan and glares at them. "*What* other thing?"

Awkward silence.

"SO!" Tony says too-loudly from the other end of the relatively tiny room, which for some reason says 'AIRLOCK' in painted letters on the wall. "What's on the other side of this airlock?"

---



### VIII: hell is other people.

The walls are grimy in the weak yellow light; white once, perhaps, but now a streaky beige with patches of brown that might or might not be blood. Dirt has accumulated in the grooves that cut out vague impressions of geometric shapes in the room, and the grime comes off onto Louis' fingers when he scrapes curiously at it.

On the far wall is stencilled the word 'AIRLOCK' in faded red paint.

*We're dead*, Louis thinks, looking at the dirt on his fingernails. He wipes it ineffectually off on the wall. *We're in an airlock. It's going to open out into a vacuum and we'll each end our lives in a final gasp of asphyxiation to float eternally in the everlasting void of space.*

He swallows, the panic rising in his throat. "We're gonna die," he says.

"Shut up, Louis," says that ever-annoying kid - what's-his-name, Tony? - and Louis wants to throw something at his smug little face, if not for the fact that it looks too familiar for comfort, and that he appears to have friends here.

Not like him. He doesn't know anyone, even though every instinct in his brain tells him that they are family. Closer than family. But they've never met before this, and he doesn't even know all their names.

"They wouldn't just put us into an airlock and kill us," Tony is saying. "If they wanted to kill us they would have done it back then."

Not everyone is paying attention. The guy who sacrificed most of his right arm to save them is down on the floor in a perpetual grimace of pain, one of his friends by his side trying to fashion some sort of sling; a few others are still distracted by their resident couple, and looking at them, Louis suddenly feels a pang of... something. Jealousy, hurt, pain, anger... But it passes, and he gives no more than a lingering glance to Smudge's hand clasped protectively over Sasan's.

"But it says 'Airlock'," Mitchell points out. Shifty young fellow. Louis doesn't like the look of him. "What else could it be?"

"Okaaay," Jason says. "So we're just pretending that everything is normal and the only question here is how to get out of this airlock?" He smiles.

Louis steps away from the wall. "No," he says. "No, those guys *know* each other, and *they still haven't told us how.*" He moves subconsciously towards those who had been his fellow prisoners. The subtle division forms in the room. "It's not for no reason we're all here together and I'm certain they have something to do with it. It's likely in our best interests for them to provide some explanation before-"

"What for?" Tony asks, languidly, and Louis wants to strangle him. "We don't have time to talk." He hops over to the door controls. "Look, I'll just open this thing-"

"NO!" Smudge yells.

Tony shrugs and steps away. "We can't stay here forever. Sooner or later we're going to try, so we might as well do it sooner. Hey, worst case scenario, we all die."

"*Open it,*" says the injured guy on the ground. Adam. "They're not going to kill us this easily."

"...and who is this 'they' you keep going on about?" Jason asks.

"Powerful beings who think we're fun to play with," Adam's friend says. "He's right. They don't want to kill us yet. That wouldn't be fun."

"Right," Tony decides. "...or forever hold your peace." He grabs the wheel on the airlock door, rotates it, and pushes the door open.

A draught of air rushes in. Louis grabs the nearest person in panic, then lets go of the mildly bemused Jay as the wind dies down and they look out into the inside of what seems to be a perfectly normal apartment.

"Hey, we're not dead," Jason says.

The place is eerily quiet, the sound of their footsteps absorbed by the carpet as the ten of them enter the room. The airlock door swings silently shut behind them and vanishes into another door; when Jay opens it curiously to check, he sees a perfectly normal bedroom. Other doors lie along the walls.

Across from them is a mantelpiece of polished black wood fixed against the wall over a table.

Two figures lie unconscious on the ground.

On the table is a jug of water, a gun, and a tiny flask of unknown liquid with a note attached to it.

There's a larger note propped up on the mantelpiece:

*THE THINGS YOU FIND IN THIS APARTMENT ARE YOUR ONLY SUPPLIES.*

*ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS SURVIVE.*

\*

Somewhere along the way, Leo had accepted death. There is comfort in acknowledging the inevitable. The fear is gone. Why live if not to experience life, to hope for future adventure and excitement and meaning; and he has received those things.

He stands at the fringe of the group, withdrawn into quiet introspection. Here, in this company, it lets him remember who he is.

He is the first to go forward; he sees one of the younger ones start, then fall back to watch as Leo reaches the two unconscious forms and crouches down to inspect them.

He knows the first. Sylar. He stems the rising terror - he has accepted death. He briefly looks up to the table and the gun lying there, and then realises he does not have it in him to shoot an unconscious foe.

And the next...

"Why is he here?" Sasan asks from his side in fearful concern.

"I don't know."

Leo looks over the unconscious familiar face with eyes since trained to pick up the slightest nuances of difference. Zach's face, as the rest of him, has a certain lack of polish to it: this was not someone painstakingly composed for the screen - although few of them look it, at this point - but dragged out unsuspectingly and unprepared from a rawer reality. Still breathing.

"At least he's alive," Leo says. "Sylar didn't kill him after all."

"But why is he here?" Sasan asks. "He shouldn't be involved-"

Leo stands up. "Why are any of us here?" he murmurs in response, turning his attention to the table. He picks up the flask and reads the note:

*Thought you could use some help. This heals anything. A gay friend of mine snagged it off some kid in Narnia while he was in the closet. - Dem*

"I don't think you can trust it," Sasan says. "That closet doesn't go to Narnia."

"I don't think we have much choice," Leo says. He takes the flask back to Adam, currently leaning against the wall with his eyes shut in pain.

The others have dispersed slightly - gone to open doors, examine the place, and finding no way out. But for the most part they hang around in a vague, uncertain crowd. Still unfamiliar with each other. They are not a team yet, and they cast occasional wary glances at the ones who are.

"Hey, check out the windows," Tony says, sauntering out of a bedroom.

"Why?" Jay asks.

Tony jerks a thumb back into the room. "There's some weird fog out there."

Jay goes in, uncertainly. Mitchell follows after.



Tony lets them be and drops down by Smudge's side. "Broke your leg?"

"Yeah," Smudge says with a smidgen of pride. "I fell off a ceiling when Sylar tried to kill me. But he *couldn't*."

"Nice."

Next to them, Leo uncorks the flask and drips some of its contents along Adam's ravaged right arm.

The flesh fizzes and heals: muscles knitting back together, covering bone, skin growing over-

Adam blinks his eyes open. "What-"

He sees. "Hey..."

Leo holds up the flask. "Guess it works after all."

"What is th-"

Adam's fingers catch the note and he reads it. "...huh. I thought they were trying to kill us." He looks at his healed arm in surprise; bends it, flexes his fingers, runs his other hand across the dried blood on its surface...

"So what's this about?" Adam asks, glancing around.

"Survival," Sasan says, pointing at the note on the mantelpiece.

Adam reads it. He looks at the stuff on the table. "...They want us to kill ourselves," he says.

"Yep," Sasan says. "Can I have that?" he asks, looking at the flask. Leo passes it over.

"Thanks." Sasan sits down and looks Smudge's injured leg over, wondering where to pour the liquid. He lets a few drops fall where the leg looks worst; some of the bruising goes away, but the brokenness remains.

"Maybe I should drink some," Smudge suggests.

"Maybe if you do you won't be bisexual anymore," Tony says, and hits the wall yelling as he dodges a fist.

"Ignore him, Smudge," Sasan says. "We can cure him later. Open your mouth."

Smudge lets himself fall back onto Sasan's lap and willingly opens his mouth. Sasan pours a few drops in. Smudge swallows.

"What's it taste like?" Sasan asks.

Smudge tries to find the words. "Like earwax, but nicer," he decides, and before Sasan can express his horrified disgust that Smudge knows what earwax tastes like, the leg shifts back into form.

"Wow, this is useful," Sasan comments of the flask. He reaches out to grab its cork from the carpet, corks it, and slips it into his pocket.

"Are you still bisexual?" Tony asks, and tries to run as Smudge leaps to his feet and tackles him to the ground.

"Get *off* me! I SAVED YOUR LIFE!" Tony shouts through laughs and pain, and Smudge lowers a fist.

"Yeah," he says, getting off Tony. "But we saved yours, so we're even."

"That wasn't you, that was Adam," Tony says. "At least we know your leg works." His head falls back against the carpet. "Nice ceiling," he says. "Is that Elvis?"

Smudge glances up.

Tony grins. "Made you look."

\*

Louis Ironson lets the bedroom door close slowly behind him. He glances uncertainly back through the narrowing gap and sees the others still out there. It feels kind of weird. Dreamlike, and it almost feels strange that he can't control them or their movements or know what they're thinking; and to see them interacting, talking... He turns back to the room. Inside is quiet with an absorbing silence, and the beds lie cool and inviting. Louis goes over to one and pauses by its side, running his hand over the sheets.

When the door finally brushes against the doorway and closes with a click, he feels suddenly cut off and alone. The others might just as well no longer exist in forms more than pieces of muted conversation on the other side of an infinite door. Yet there's a peace to that. Like a jittery cacophony just got silenced in his brain, no longer trying to talk over the noise and distract himself from losing his mind...

He falls to his knees before the bed and buries his face in his hands.

*sometimes you dream about being swept away to another world where no one knows who you were before and you can pretend that nothing ever happened: not you, not the world, and you could be anyone and start anew and leave all that baggage in the distance and run away for good like the coward you are and have the old life vanish into pieces you'll never see again and no one will have been hurt and you can live free of that guilt and this time do a better job of existing*

*and wake up in a room like this, with people who understand you and know your name and will make sure that nothing bad ever happens again and give you the keys to a kingdom of your own where everything runs the way it should and people are good and easy to deal with and things make sense without need to unravel them in vain speeches that twist and turn back on themselves and have no end in better comprehension because you cannot solve problems with mere discourse; one cannot debate away the world*

They're talking again, outside. Their voices come through like repeated strains of a one-sided conversation with himself, and he cycles between annoyance and abject loneliness and being enveloped with a strange feeling of security. And he has a sudden, wild vision of taking all of them and controlling them and making them bow to him and do his bidding but, no, that's ridiculous, and

he shirks violently from the idea and hates himself for thinking up the twisted egotistical fantasy and asks himself *why*, and reels in sudden, extreme self-consciousness;

But the door is closed, and he cannot see them, and he can imagine the voices are just in his head.

Only not quite, and he just feels deeply unsettled.

"This is wrong," he rambles in soft reply through his fingers, to no audience in particular. "It's just wrong, it's not supposed to be this way-

"Do you want to go home?"

Louis starts, hands dropping away from his face, scrambling to his feet and backing against the wall when he sees the intruder.

"I asked you a question," Q repeats.

Louis jabs a shaking accusatory finger at him. "Okay, *you were not here before.*"

"Neither were you," Q says. "You use doors, I use other means. Let's just cut to the chase. I can get you out of here."

"What... *what makes you think I want to leave?*"

Q shrugs. "You have a hard enough time facing yourself in the mirror. Being around those guys must be hell for you."

"It's not-

"Break them up, Louis," Q interrupts.

A dreaded certainty sinks in his heart. "...What?"

"You know who I mean. That happy couple out there lost in the sweet perfume of first love. Do that and I'll take you home. You won't even remember a thing." Q leans in. "And I'll see to it that you are happy."

"...You can't bribe me-

"Oh, you know you want to," Q says. "Jealousy hurts, doesn't it? You miss that. What they have. It's been a long time since you had it. Why should they be happy when you're not?"

Louis clenches a fist. "You don't know me."

"I know enough. I know enough to know you're going to do it. I saw it in your face. Deny it all you want, Louis, but at the end all you care about is *you.*"

"*You don't know anything!*"

Q watches, impassive, and waits for the outrage to die down a little. Then: "Surprise me."

He vanishes with the hint of a taunting smirk.

Louis is left on his own, again, against the wall and trembling with emotions he cannot quite define; and he sees the door and nudges it open a crack, and finds Smudge and Sasan amongst the small crowd.

And, for a long time, he just watches them.



## IX. malkovich malkovich

*A while earlier*

Jay Lambert hunches over by the bedroom window, his hands grasping the sill as he gazes out into the dense, white, shifting fog.

"If that was an airlock, if we open the windows we might die," he says.

Mitchell wanders up to his side. "You think they'll let us live that long?" he asks in an almost conspiratorial whisper.

Jay turns to him. "What?"

Mitchell nods towards the door. "Those guys. They're tight. If it comes down to it, I think they'd rather have us dead than one of them."

"So... what are you going to do about it?"

"The gun," Mitchell says. "Whoever controls it controls the room. The food, the water... It's us or them."

"That's a bit pessimistic," Jay remarks.

"You know I'm right. There's one jug of water. Twelve of us. How long do you think that would last before things start getting ugly?"

"They don't have to be our enemies," Jay says.

Mitchell gives him a cynical half-smile. "They can't afford to be our friends."

\*

*Same time before*

"...and you can just ignore us," Jason says under his breath, watching the others getting healed and making strange jokes about bisexuality. It's weird, feeling left out in *this* company.

He sees Peter glance at him. Young professional. Still in his office shirt and tie. Jason gives him an awkward nod of acknowledgement, and has it returned. They stand in silence for a while, then Peter offers a handshake. "Peter."

He takes it. "Jason."

It breaks some minor tension between them.

"Are you thirsty?" Peter asks.

"Not yet."

"I am." Peter eyes the jug of water on the table. "But I don't think the water's going to last very long."

"You could just go up and have a drink," Jason says.

"No... that wouldn't be fair. We should ration it out, make sure there's some for everyone..."

"That's, like, less than a cup each," Jason says.

"Yeah," Peter says. "...This is bad."

Jason glances behind him into a short hallway, currently shrouded in darkness. It opens on the right to a small kitchenette. He goes over. "There might be more supplies here."

Peter follows after, finds a light switch next to a terrified-looking power socket, flicks it, and a lamp comes on to illuminate the kitchenette. Jason pulls open a cupboard.

"Loaf of bread," he says, taking it out.

He opens the fridge. There's a single jar of something on the top shelf. He picks it up and reads the label. "Tocherry jam," he reads. "Looks edible." He puts it back down.

"Twelve of us," Peter says, shutting an empty cupboard. "That's barely enough for a single meal." He pulls open a drawer. Cutlery. No spoons.

Jason runs a hand through his hair, flustered. He shuts the fridge door. "We're screwed," he says.

Peter is down on the floor, opening more cupboards. All empty.

"The sink-" Jason starts, then stops. There's a sign over the sink.

*THIS WATER IS NOT SAFE TO DRINK*

Peter stands up and sees the sign. "It could be lying," he says. "Like the airlock sign."

"Could be."

"No cups or bowls," Peter says. "We can't divide the water. There are some knives in there, but that's it."

"Are those for the jam or for killing?"

Peter looks uneasy. "I think that's what the gun is for."

Silence.

"So that's what it's going to come to," Peter says. "Limited resources. Survival of the fittest."

"Could you do it?" Jason asks distantly. "Pull the trigger on someone who looks just like you?"

"It's hard to know what anyone would do to survive. But the psychological fallout-"

Jason turns his head to look at him. "Do we tell them about the food?" he asks.

His eyes hold steady, but his voice is trembling.

And Peter wants so much to say yes; but his conscience fails beneath a sudden urge to live. The calculations work themselves out in his mind. A loaf of bread would last twelve people mere hours; it's not enough for a meal. But two... it could keep two alive for much longer...

He swallows dryly, pushing back the rising guilt. "...Where do we hide it?"

\*

"HEY!" Adam shouts, moving forward. "*Put that down!*"

Mitchell holds the gun in his hand, a dangerous look on his face. "Why? So one of you can have it? To get rid of us? You know we're not all going to survive this. Some people are going to die. And it's not going to be us."

"*Put down the gun,*" Adam says. "No one's killing anybody."

"Who made you leader?" Mitchell asks. Adam glares.

"*He's a better leader than you are!*" Smudge yells, and Adam blinks at the unexpected support.

Peter and Jason emerge from a room, alerted by the noise. Peter steps towards Mitchell and extends a tentative hand to the gun. "Look, you don't have to-"

"You think they're going to let us live?" Mitchell asks him.

"There's no them and us," Jay says, with an almost perverse enjoyment. "We're in this together."

"Really? Because I don't think we're all coming out of this alive, and I don't think any of the good friends over there are going to kill each other if they could kill us."

"We're not murderers," Adam says fiercely.

"Not now. Maybe. But when you're starving and thirsty--"

Jason and Peter exchange a cryptic glance.

"What are you going to do?" Tony asks. "Shoot us instead?"

On the ground, Zach's eyes blink open. He sees unfamiliar carpet. And then he's aware of people around, and panicked voices loudly raised, and in a weird shift of perception he realises that those voices sound oddly familiar.

Recognition hits. He sits up quickly, and his head spins from the movement.

Wide-eyed, he places names to faces. Others he's not sure about, and already his mind is reeling from seeing so many of them together; Smudge or Sylar or Michael alone was one thing, or looking out at four of them when under Sylar's control, but this... this...

Zach swallows.

They haven't noticed him yet, and he breaks out of his trance to realise that he's not witnessing cheerful human interaction. He registers angrily yelled words exchanged in his voice and quick, hostile movements converging on one of them - Mitchell? Is it... And suddenly a full blown struggle breaks out and he staggers to his feet, wanting to get closer or get away, watching the cluster of repeated selves shoving and screaming-

-and the unmistakable sound of a gunshot.

There's a second of stunned silence.

"*TONY!*"

A renewed fight. More yelling. Two rushing towards the fallen kid lying in the spreading pool of blood: Sasan dropping down by his side with panicked eyes peeking through a veneer of calm as he pulls the flask from his pocket and uncorks it, Leo joining him and saying something about not pouring it over the wound because it might just close over the bullet-

Someone blocks Zach's view. He turns his head, instinctively trying to see around, feeling strangely out of place as the others move around him, almost not noticing his presence. Louis emerges from a room and passes him - too close - and Louis sees him, but doesn't know him from Adam.

Louis looks away, moving closer to see what's going on, and as he passes Zach catches a whiff of his scent. It's familiar; yet with something off and barely there about it and he has a sudden urge to go

after Louis and grab him and feel that he's real and force him to recognise him, he has to, he's played him over a hundred times-

"*Louis*," he says under his breath, not loud enough to be heard.

Louis finds a spot by the wall and stands there, watching. Observing.

There's something on the wall next to him; a flickering mark. Zach squints. It's a number. '12', but as he watches it changes temporarily to '11', then flickers back again, to and fro, slowly settling on '11'... and then it pauses, not completely solidifying, and fades back to '12'.

"I'm okay," Tony gasps out from the floor, healed. "I'm okay."

And someone else: "Jay, what-"

Five shots, loud and clear, straight into the carpet. Jay grips the gun with both hands, steeling himself against each recoil.

The gun clicks. No more bullets.

"...You shouldn't have done that," Leo says.

Jay looks at him. "We're not here to kill each other, and we're not going to. If we're going to die, we're going to die. We don't need assistance."

"Let *go* of me," Mitchell says.

"*Why, so you can kill us?*" Smudge demands, refusing to undo the half-nelson. They share a glare, subconsciously aware of how they're about the same age. They could be twins.

"Let go of him, Smudge," Leo says.

Smudge releases him.

"Sylar is here," Adam says. "Now we're unarmed."

"Who's Sylar?" Jason asks.

"A bad person," Smudge says. "He has superpowers and he kills people serially and he's right over there." He points. They look.

And they also see that Zach is awake, and a silence falls over those who know who he is.

"Hi," Zach says, giving them a nod of acknowledgement.

Adam just stares at him. Leo looks down. Sasan give him a nervous smile.

"Hi Zach," Smudge says.

Jason looks mildly dejected. "You guys know him too?"



"Another mouth to feed," Mitchell says darkly.

"There's no food," Jason lies.

"The water, then."

Zach glances around, trying to look less disoriented than he feels. "What's going on?"

"We got *put* in this place and now we've got to survive," Smudge explains.

"For how long?"

"I don't know," Adam says. "Until we all die, maybe. If... Sylar doesn't kill us we'd probably do so ourselves."

"So what do we do about Sylar?" Peter asks, and Jason notices how the group of friends almost subconsciously turn as a whole to look at Zach. Like he's a leader of some sort.

"We should kill him," Smudge says anyway.

"Jay used up all the bullets," Tony says.

"We could break his neck," Smudge says. "And pull his head off and *eat* him."

Zach looks disturbed.

Sasan looks upset. "*Smudge...*"

"We need *food*, don't we?"

"No one's eating anyone," Adam mutters.

"But I'm *hungry*-"

"Cannibalism is wrong, Smudge," Sasan says with a tinge of nervousness. "You don't eat Sylar."

"There's a broom closet back there," Tony reports, coming back down the hallway carrying three brooms. "Stick him in there." He tosses the brooms to the floor. *Nimbus Two Thousand and Two*, they say on the side, but to the roomful of Muggles they are useless as anything more than cleaning equipment.

"A closet won't hold him," Sasan says. "Unless it's the one that leads to Narnia, but I *don't* think the fauns have done anything to deserve him."

"*That's why we need to eat*-"

Sasan pulls Smudge towards him and muffles his cannibalistic suggestions in his shirt. He gives the others an apologetic smile and decides that one of these days he's going to need to talk to Smudge about certain subjects and why he should never, ever, ever bring them up.

"He was bleeding," Zach says, looking up from Sylar's side. "It's just a scratch; he might have scraped against something on the way here. But he didn't heal."

Silence.

"...what if it's not Sylar?" Adam asks.

"It's him," Zach says.

"Okay."

"Uh, how do you know?" Jason asks.

Mitchell rolls his eyes. "They think they're so good at recognising each other."

"If his powers are gone, the closet should hold him," Sasan says, stroking Smudge's hair and trying not to think of quinoa. Quinoa, he thinks vaguely.

"Yeah," Zach says quietly. He bends down, hesitates, and grabs Sylar's legs to drag him. He looks back at them. Leo gets the hint and nervously goes up to join him; moments later, Adam follows.

The three of them carry Sylar down the hallway and shut him into the closet.

"We should barricade the door," Adam says.

"Sure."

"We could use the table back there," Leo says, and so they go to get it.

"On three," Zach says, and they lift it and carry it over and place it against the closet door with a satisfying thud. Then the three of them just stand there in the semi-darkness of the hallway.

"Should we have done that?" Leo asks. "If he can't heal..."

"You're too nice, Leo," Adam says, turning and walking back to the others.

"It's Sylar," Zach reminds Leo. "He'll always find a way to come back."

They lapse into uncomfortable silence. It breaks as shouts erupt in the main room over people drinking water and other people being angry about it, and they go to rejoin the crowd.

"*You're not in charge here,*" Mitchell tells Adam.

"Neither are you, actually," Jason comments, and is ignored.

"We'd all need this water at some point," Peter says. "Just drink only when you need to."

"What makes you think we can trust each other?" Jay asks from the side. "Basic human decency?"

"Because we all want to live?" Sasan ventures, as Smudge ducks out from under his arm.

"That's how wars start," Louis says from his side of the room. "Not everyone can live. We have no basis for trust; we're nothing but a collection of strangers who owe nothing to each other regardless of how much DNA we might share, and these are conditions that do not foster friendship."

"That's exactly what they want," Adam says. "Fighting. Until we kill ourselves."

"We're not getting out by cooperation either," Mitchell says.

Zach wishes they could all just be friends.

\*

It's stifling, being among these people. Louis becomes increasingly aware of it; a kind of existential claustrophobia, something in his mind screaming to be let out. He's hit with a sudden, desperate need for difference: for a voice not of that particular timbre, for a different configuration of facial features, for someone just a little shorter or taller...

He swallows back nausea. *Don't think about it.* It's better when he doesn't think about it. Not much, but a little; just enough to stop himself from screaming-

*-only that wouldn't help, it would sound the same, all their screams sound the same-*

His stomach clenches.

...and enough to create the illusion (counter-illusion?) that he is not alone, watching himself arguing against himself for survival-

He forcefully quenches the panic. *Let me out,* he thinks, and blinks away the start of panicked tears.

Subconsciously almost, his gaze wanders again to Smudge and Sasan. Sasan, mostly. There's something about his intelligent, lazy innocence which arrests him; the bright-eyed joy in his smile and almost-laugh as Smudge conspiratorially whispers something in his ear. At some point there had been pain, but it's since been buried with glib self-deprecating humour and a casual brushing off of anything that might threaten to bother him.

And, somehow, Sasan is easily the best-looking guy in the room. Louis glances over the others, and there's something almost too normal about them, like faces he might see in the mirror at some point in time. But Sasan... Sasan is beautiful.

Sasan catches his gaze. He saw him staring. Louis notices the slight quirk of his eyebrow.

He quickly looks away.

\*

"Don't-"

Adam ignores the plea and lifts the window open. Nothing happens. He pokes his head out, but he can't see past the fog.

"Someone should go out," Jay suggests. "I don't mind." He looks back at the others. "Anyone else want to come with me?"

"I'll go," Tony says, pushing past Peter to get to the window.

"We can go too," Smudge volunteers.

Sasan looks completely unenthused by the idea.

"Nah, we'll be fine," Tony says, hefting himself up onto the windowsill. "If we don't get back, it means we're dead. Don't bother looking." He swings his legs over to the other side and hops off. "Still alive," he reports, as Jay climbs out after him.

"Don't go too far," Leo says. "If you don't find anything just turn back."

"Sure."

"What's the exterior of this place like?" Peter asks.

Tony glances around and shrugs. "Looks like a regular house."

"Without any door," Jay adds. He looks down. Grass, or some whitish-green approximation thereof. He bends down and plucks at a blade. It flinches and withdraws into the ground with a terrified *meep*.

Tony follows the wall, going around the side of the house. It looks the same all around: whitewashed walls, nondescript brick roof, and no door. Just windows. He comes back around from the other side.

"Pick a direction," he tells Jay.

Jay stands and points in the direction the open window faced. "Let's just go that way."

"Okay."

Tony glances briefly back at the window and what he can see of the others looking through it. He flashes them a jaunty grin, and then turns and accompanies Jay into the fog.

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chapter ten  
plane between  
a spinoff from Quinto Formaggi

BY ANAKIN MCFLY

### X. 'til death do we part

"What do we do now?" Peter asks.

Adam doesn't budge from his place at the windowsill. "We wait."

The others start filtering out of the room. Leo hangs back, as does Zach; Leo notices him, and moves out as well, looking uncomfortable. He finds a bookshelf in the main room. There's a script called 'Shadow 19' by Jon Spaihts, and he takes it out to read on the couch.

"*WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?*" Smudge yells suddenly, and Leo looks up to see him angrily facing down one of the new guys.

"I-"

"YOU WERE STARING AT HIM, WEREN'T YOU?"

"Smudge-" Sasan starts.

"He was in front of me," Louis says plaintively. "What do you expect me to do, turn my head every time he-"

Smudge glares at Louis and possessively grabs Sasan by the elbow. "He's *taken*," he states, and Sasan tries to look apologetic as Smudge drags him away.

Mitchell goes towards the water jug. Leo watches.

"...What?" Mitchell asks, and Leo goes back to reading the script as Mitchell takes a drink.

In one of the rooms, Peter shuts and locks the door and turns to Jason. "...We have to tell them," he says weakly.

Jason has since sit down on a bed, head in his hands. "I know," he says. "But we can't."

"They're going to starve."

"I know."

"Could we watch them die?"

"I don't know." Pause. "People... die all the time. It shouldn't be different."

Peter sits down on the bed next to him. Jason raises his head and looks over. It's different. There's a tension between them: a subtle metaphysical bond, or something working on some subconscious biological level; creating the unnerving sense of a complete lack of personal boundaries...

Peter feels it too. He gets up, paces.

"It's not going to make a difference," Jason says. "They're doomed either way."

Peter pauses by the window, gazing out at the fog. "...Yeah," he agrees softly. "I guess so."

Silence. Then he hears the guilty rustle of plastic as Jason pulls the loaf of sliced bread out from under the bed.

"Here," Jason says, getting up and handing him a slice. His eyes are scared, yet determined, yet yearning for reassurance..."

Peter hesitates. He casts a futile look to the locked door, then takes the offered bread.

"To survival," Jason says quietly.

Peter nods, and they eat.

\*

Zach joins Adam at the window. Adam tenses up slightly but says nothing; and as time goes by without a word, Zach starts to seem like anyone else of them; and Adam lets down his guard and relaxes a little. He kind of wants Zach to say something; and then he doesn't.

They watch the fog for signs of the returning exploration party.

"Is that a-" Zach says suddenly, and Adam sees it too.

It's a huge, red tentacle rising up in the distance from the fog.

He looks at Zach, and for a moment the automatic barrier between actor and character seems temporarily dissolved, and they're just two guys who just saw a freaky tentacle.

"...What is that?" Adam asks.

"I don't know. I hope they don't..." Zach peers out the window, looking worried. "They were unarmed," he says.

Adam almost wants to make a comment asking why Zach cared. Adam had known Tony for a bit, and felt some of that automatic kinship with Jay, but Zach wasn't one of them. He didn't *know* them. Maybe in an objective top-down omniscient co-creator way, sure. But not in the way they knew each other, and cared about each other, and risked their lives for each other...

And that thought suddenly made him feel safe. Zach meant nothing to him. He was an outsider. He hadn't gone through what they had. He knew nothing.

"They'll survive," Adam says instead, and he wonders if Zach wonders at the sharp hostility that leaks into his reply.

\*

"Nice day for a walk," Tony comments, after several moments of unchanging scenery in the fog.

Jay gives him a look.

"I... hope we're walking in a straight line," Tony adds, glancing back. "Otherwise we'd be stuck here forever. How long's it been?"

Jay checks his watch. "Four minutes," he says, and then adds, in a sudden bout of dark conversation: "the others might be dead by the time we get back."

"What... all of them?"

"Wanna bet?"

"Uh... those are my friends."

"Technically we share the same relationship to them."

"No we don't. They're my *friends*. I've known them for a while. You haven't."

"Not all of them."

"Well, yeah... not those guys. I don't know them."

Silence. Tony thinks he sees something move in the fog, but by the time he looks, it's gone.

"Do you get used to it?" Jay asks. "Being around all of them."

Tony hesitates. "Not... *completely*, but... we're all different people. After a while it's obvious; and then other people seem strange. Like a different species, you know?"

"That can't be healthy."

"Not if we're stuck together for the rest of our lives."

"You think that'll happen?"

Tony shrugs. He slows to a stop, and then Jay sees the same thing and does too.

There's a shack up ahead, emerging from the fog. Barred windows, but one wall has been violently torn away.

"What the hell happened here?" Jay asks.

They go up to it, stepping over the loose pieces of wood and stone on the ground.

"Shotguns," Tony says, picking one up from the ground. He hefts it; raises it experimentally towards the fog, and fires-

He stumbles back from the recoil; and then they hear a loud, alien moan of pain.

Jay looks at him. "...What did you-"

Tony screams, and Jay barely has time to react before *something* long whips him off the ground; somewhere in his mind he registers the word *tentacles* and it *burns*, the tightly wrapped tentacle around his body, and he feels it secreting some substance that's dissolving his clothes and cutting into his flesh and he gasps out in pain, then screams-

Tony is freaking out on the ground. Shaking hands fire off another shot, and the tentacle flinches, flinging Jay dizzily back through the air. He retches. Red welts have started bubbling up on his skin where the tentacle touched him and in the places on his hands where he tried to push it loose-

Another shot; another rumbling moan of pain... and then the grip loosens, and Jay is flying through the air onto the ground far below-

-he lands, and the ground bends slightly down to accommodate him before returning to level. He throws up out the side of his mouth and is still.

The shotgun clicks. Tony casts it aside and grabs another one as he backs towards Jay, firing off more shots. The tentacles retreat back into the fog, the moans of pain growing more distant.

"Jay!" Tony drops by his side, wide-eyed and short of breath. He takes in the burns. "Oh *shit*... we have to get back. Can you walk? Can you-"

Jay painfully opens his eyes. "...Leave me," he manages, struggling to speak.

"No, no... c'mon, they can heal you, they've got that healing potion thing..."

Tony slings the shotgun around his neck and helps Jay off the ground, grabbing hold of him under his arm from the back, letting go briefly with a short shout as the skin of his hands reacts fiercely with the residue on Jay's clothes; then bracing himself and holding on tight, teeth clenched against the pain as they start back.

"We're gonna make it, okay?" he says. "Four minutes, right?"

Jay manages a nod.

"Yeah. That's not long."

Jay stumbles, and Tony grabs on tighter. He looks with worried eyes to the stripe of inflamed skin on Jay's neck; the aggravated redness is still spreading, slowly, working its way deeper into his skin... He looks up at the familiar face and remembers Smudge in that underwater cave.



*I've been saving an awful lot of lives,* he thinks.

"I can't go on," Jay says.

"Yeah, well, you're going to," Tony retorts. "Or else we'd die here and no one gets to warn the others about the tentacle monsters. And they'll come out after us because no one ever listens to me, and they'd all get killed too, and if anyone ever finds us they'd have a hell of a tough time identifying the bodies. Think of those people."

"I can't... breathe..."

Tony tries to pick up speed, pulling Jay along with him.

It's another few minutes before they see the wall of the house, the window still open, and Tony finally lets Jay down on the grass as he runs the remaining distance to the window and sticks his head in and yells for help.

And Jay distantly sees people rushing towards him - Tony's friends - and the healing cordial is soothing his burns and turning his skin whole as the alien acid battles against its powers... but already a darkness is descending on his mind, and then it lands, and does not leave.

"...He's dead," Leo says, feeling the pulse stop. "We were too late."

Inside the house, the number on the wall turns to 11.

The flask is almost empty, and Tony almost doesn't want to ask for some to heal his hands; but Sasan notices anyway and offers it, and with that, the last drops are used up.

\*

"We're digging to China," Jason replies offhandedly from the doorway when Mitchell asks why he and Peter keep locking themselves in that room. He shuts the door and locks it.

Sasan has several ideas about what two men might be doing in a locked bedroom, but decides that Mitchell probably doesn't want to hear them.

"They can't dig to China," Smudge points out. "We're not on Earth."

"We don't know that," Sasan says.

"Sas, there are *tentacle monsters outside*," Smudge explains patiently. "On Earth, they only hide under your bed."

Inside the room, Peter stands by the window gazing idly out. "People can take weeks to die of starvation," he says.

"It's water that's important," Jason agrees.

"Yeah, and we're almost out of that."

"We... might have to resort to urine."

Peter doesn't look excited about it. "Even if we do, we can't... there aren't any cups or-"

"We could pee into each other's-"

"*Okay, I get it. Stop.*"

The wry smile eventually fades from Jason's face.

Silence, as they try to rid themselves of the mental images.

"It's not as though we won't suffer along," Jason says. "One loaf of bread isn't much of an upper hand."

"It's still one," Peter says. "Everything else remaining equal..."

Jason rolls over on the bed onto his stomach and starts punching the carpet.

"What are you doing?"

"If we're pretending to dig to China we should try and sound like it."

"...no one fell for that."

Jason stops. "Yeah, I know. All right then, when we get out, try and look as though you've just had amazing sex."

Peter stares at him. "I'm straight," he states. "And you're not my type."

"You don't have to tell them that," Jason says, looking rejected.

That's when they hear the banging on the closet door as Sylar regains consciousness and decides he wants out.

\*

"We need to kill him," Smudge says, tugging at the table that was in the way. "He has no powers now. He'll *die*."

The banging has stopped, presumably after Sylar realised who was on the other side.

"He'd also die if we left him in there," Adam says. "If we let him out, it could be a trap."

"But I want to kill him *myself*!"

"What if you lose?" Sasan asks.

"I *won't*."

"Yeah," Louis says. "It could be dangerous."

Smudge glares at him. "*Did I ask for your opinion?*"

Louis shuts up.

Leo remains engrossed in *Shadow 19* and wishes they would all stop making noise.

"All right, just take him out and throw him out," Adam says tiredly. "Let the tentacle monsters get him."

"What if he gets them on his side?" Tony asks.

"*THAT'S WHY WE NEED TO KILL HIM FIRST!*"

"Stop shouting, Smudge," Leo murmurs inaudibly from the couch.

Sasan places a hand on Smudge's shoulder and tries to calm him down. "Okay," he says, eyeing the others for any objection. "We'll let him out. Just be careful."

One of the room doors open. Peter and Jason stand there trying to figure out what's going on. Zach glances over at them. Jason looks as though he's just had amazing sex. Zach wonders who with.

They pull the table away, exposing the closet door.

Sasan wishes he could be hiding under a bed if not out of an obligation to be near Smudge.

Leo looks up from the script.

Sylar is grinning up at them when the closet door opens. "Missed me?" he asks.

Smudge kicks him in the face. He flinches, winded, and when he turns his head back around there's blood on his mouth, and he's marginally pissed off. He hops to his feet, surveying the small crowd that has drawn back away from Smudge, and-

"YOU DON'T HAVE POWERS NOW!" Smudge yells, drawing his fist back for a punch; but Sylar catches it and twists his arm and Smudge screams - Sasan gives a start - as Sylar wrenches him close and hisses in his ear: "*You still can't beat me, you bisexual-*"

Adam rushes forward to help, but Smudge elbows Sylar in the eye with his free arm, satisfied at the howl of pain. "YOU KILLED PEOPLE!"

Smudge blinks the red away from his eyes, his head throbbing with the release of anger held back for way too long. Adam hovers at his side, not knowing what to do...

"Just you?" Sylar asks. He glances over at the others. "Looks like your friends have more civility." He smirks at the hesitant crowd and raises a bloodied eyebrow at Smudge. "They're still *scared*. Look at your boyfriend cowering behind the-"

Smudge grabs Sylar by the head and slams him against the closet door, kicking him in the knees until he collapses to the ground; Smudge climbs onto him, his knee jabbing into Sylar's chest, one hand pulling his head back by his hair-

"You *don't*. Talk. About Sas. That way," he gasps, and pounds his fist into Sylar's face. "I'm going to kill you," he states.

Adam steps forward. "Smudge, that's enough-"

"I'm going to-"

Sylar smiles. A moment later, Adam grabs Smudge and pulls him off, Smudge screaming to be put down.

Adam puts him down, forcing Smudge around to grab his shoulder. "We're better than that," he says. "We're not going to stoop to his level."

Sylar laughs, weakly, wiping blood off his face with the back of his hand. "Noble." He spots Zach amongst the others and blinks. "...Quinto? Seriously?" He laughs again. "This is too good. Do they know who you are?"

"SHUT UP!" Smudge hollers, just for the sake of shouting something.

"Do they... do they know this is all your fault?" Sylar continues, unperturbed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zach says matter-of-factly. Mitchell casts a wary glance his way.

"Why are you all here?" Sylar continues in an amused drawl. "Just to kill me? Is that it? You know it won't work. I'll always find a way back. And I'm guessing that's your fault too," he adds, grinning at Zach. "Did you-"

*BANG.*

Sylar collapses against the closet, dead.

Tony lowers the shotgun. He tries to look casual about it. Everyone stares at him.

"...guess some good came of that expedition," he says.

On the wall, the number has changed to a 10.

Zach points it out to them.

"So it goes down every time one of us dies?" Adam asks.

"Yeah."

"Why?" Smudge asks.

"It might trigger something," Peter says. "When it reaches a certain number, something might happen..."

"All we have to do is survive," Mitchell quotes. "That implies something good happens if we do."

"It didn't say for how long," Peter says. "I don't think it's measured in time, and if that counter is any indicator, our survival is measured in lives."

"So who are going to sacrifice themselves for the rest of us?" Louis asks.

Everyone looks at him.

"It's just a *suggestion*," Louis says uncomfortably. "It would be so much better if we could have some control over our escape. We just feed the system however many lives it takes to get the rest of us out, instead of waiting until we're all starving and dehydrated and equally close to death, such that those of us who get out won't even be guaranteed to live. So let's decide on who can most afford to die and-"

"Louis, shut up," Zach says.

"Okay, see, that's *really annoying*," Louis interjects, looking pained. "I have as much right to share my opinion as anyone else. *You don't control me*-"

The others are walking off.

\*

"Peter-"

The other throws up into the toilet, again, and Jason throws a worried glance at the bathroom door.

"Look, you need help-"

"No..." Peter says from where he's kneeling, feverish and trembling. "They'll... they'll ask why and then-"

"You drank the water, that's all. The sign said not to. It's not the jam-"

"It might have been."

"*We don't have to tell them that*," Jason says. "And we don't know for certain; I mean, we're not supposed to drink the water for a *reason*-"

"...okay." Peter weakly reaches out a hand and flushes the toilet, telltale bits of recent food going down.

"...You look really bad."

Peter sinks down onto the bathroom floor and drops his head back against the wall. Jason watches him, nervous...

Peter jerks; opens his eyes, turns back to the toilet and violently coughs up blood.

Jason hurriedly steps back. "I'm getting someone," he says, and runs out of the bathroom.

\*

There is no doctor amongst them, but all converge on the bathroom door, as much out of curiosity as concern. Peter is on the floor, hunched over the toilet bowl, intermittently retching up blood.

"What happened?" Adam asks, as the others behind him try to see what's going on.

"He drank the tap water," Jason says.

Zach comes forward - Leo and Adam move aside to let him through into the small bathroom - and Jason warily watches as Zach crouches down by Peter's side and places a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Peter."

Peter turns to look at him, breathing ragged, and something about Zach suddenly renders everything else irrelevant. There's a warmth and understanding in his eyes that seems far too deep for a stranger; and he suddenly gets the feeling that he could, and should, tell him everything...

Peter turns his head and coughs up in the toilet again. And now it's not just blood, but strange chunks whose origins he tries not to think about, sensing the burning pain in his chest.

Zach's hand squeezes his shoulder. Peter blinks away tears. *Who are you? Why do I feel like you know me?*

"How much did you drink?" Zach asks softly.

"I don't know," Peter says. There was no way to measure, remembering his head bent over the bathroom sink, frantically gulping water from his cupped hands, anything to wash the terrible, terrible taste of tocberry jam out of his mouth and out from wherever the burning sensation had spread through his body...

Was it the water or the jam? What if the water was drinkable and he was denying them that source...

No, he reminds himself. The sign said not to drink the water.

...the sign was above the kitchen sink; there wasn't one in the bathroom. But it should be the same water. That's how plumbing worked, Peter reasons, then realises that in a strange building in the midst of tentacle-monster-land with jam that tried to kill you, plumbing could work any way it wanted to. The water could have been safe. It could save lives... but someone would need to test it, risk his own life for the rest...

He's shivering violently, the sick feeling still rising up from the pit of his stomach and radiating out everywhere. He sniffs, and his head falls weakly to rest against Zach's shoulder. Zach feels safe, somehow. He doesn't push him away. Peter feels a hand on the side of his head.

*Tell him, he thinks. Tell him about the food...*

"We had food," he finally whispers, just loud enough for Zach to hear, his eyes closed against Zach's neck.

"...What?"

"Jason and I... we... found it. Bread. We've been hiding it." Peter swallows. "Sorry."

He feels Zach move his head to look at Jason, standing beside them and suddenly overcome with guilt as Zach's eyes meet his, but Zach says nothing.

"Thanks for telling me," Zach murmurs to Peter, and Peter wants to sink into him and sleep forever.

"I'm sorry," he says again, and he doesn't know why he's apologising to Zach alone. It seems enough, that Zach knows.

"It's okay," Zach says, and Peter feels forgiven.

The number on the wall outside drops down to a 9.

\*

They tear hungrily into the bread, one slice each. Jason forgoes his share and sits alone, head bowed in shame, as he mourns the loss of the closest thing he had to a friend in this place.

Outside, darkness falls. The white grows grey and slides through blue, deepening into indigo and then to black with suggestions of sleep. It's night for some of them; afternoon for others, but the darkness quietens them all.

In the last rays of light, they huddle outside and bury their dead. The soil moves easily beneath the twitching grass, else they might not have spent the effort. They kick the last lumps of soil over the hole and the grass creeps back over with a whooshing murmur. Jay, Sylar, Peter.

The wind starts to howl, and alien sounds stir the night. They climb back through the window and return indoors.

The water jug is empty now. Nobody talks much. Adam casts occasional glances at Zach, waiting for answers he never gets, sensing a different turmoil going on. He's not one of them.

Smudge plops himself down on the couch. Sasan joins him soon after. Smudge leans into him.

Adam retires to a room and lies on a bed, flat on his back and gazing up at the ceiling. He wills it to go away. It doesn't.

Leo slips through the door with the *Shadow 19* script and hops onto the other bed to read. He glances at Adam, lost in thought. He opens the script and flips through to where he last left off.

"How many more must die?" Adam asks hollowly from the bed.

Leo pauses in his page-flipping.

"That guy... he was right," Adam continues. "All the casualties so far have been the new people."

"That's just coincidence," Leo says.

Adam blinks. "I don't know."

"One of them was Sylar."

"...how did we even split into two groups?"

"It was there from the start," Leo says. "That's just how things were."

"We should be doing this together," Adam says. "Not split up by whatever petty rivalries..."

"It could be worse otherwise," Leo says softly. "If you or Smudge or Sasan died, or Tony..." He hesitates. "It's cruel," he says, and then in a near whisper: "But if all of us get too close, it'll hurt more."

\*

The hunger wrenches him apart and Louis curls up on the bed, trying to stop the growing pain and nausea creeping through his throat. It's not even a day, he tells himself; it's just one meal he's missed out on, but the dizzy lightness fills his mind and cries out to be fed. He swallows, dryly, to no effect, and thinks about the empty jug; and in its place he sees his kettle back at home filled up with water waiting to be poured to slake his burning thirst.

Home.

*Break them up, Louis.*

He drags an arm across his face and lets out a tortured breath. *No...*

*Do you want to go home.*

He sees Sasan in his mind's eye, perfect as always, and something tugs sharp at his heart. Smudge doesn't deserve him; he doesn't appreciate what he has, he drags him around as though he owns him and never sees the subtleties that cross Sasan's expressions; but Louis does, he sees the worry, the occasional flinch at Smudge's violence, the unstated desire to do something else and be his own person instead of half a couple, the...

*Deny it all you want, Louis, but at the end all you care about is you.*

But why not, he wonders suddenly, angrily. Perhaps it's a solipsist world and his the only mind there is, and everyone else is nothing but a figment of his wandering mind, put there to test him, teach him, hurt him, push him to his farthest limits and leave him broken all alone beneath the weight of countless sins and suffer in a void where no one knows and no one cares.

What happens to them... it doesn't matter. He wouldn't see it, he wouldn't be there, it might as well just not exist...

He grimaces into his pillow. He needs food, and water, and can't bear to think of spending the rest of his life in this impossible hell... when the sun came out it would be the same again, another day, another eternity, no food, no water, and they'd die off one by one until the system had enough and the last few escaped by the skin of their teeth and sheer inches from death; why wait, when he could get out now. Smudge and Sasan... one or both might die quite soon, and whatever relationship they had could have but mere days more to last, or hours, and if he could get home before that and grab his cup and splash out water into it and drink each precious, precious drop until



his mind would cease to rage and settle, tranquil, once again, and tear open packs of biscuits and snacks to calm the torment in his gut and maybe cook himself a meal and sit down at his table, and eat, and be full, and then perhaps to sleep and never ever think again of these poor souls left stranded here.

Louis sits up on the bed, and hates himself. He gets to his feet and over to the door, and pushes it quietly open.

The two are sleeping on the couch and do not stir as he pads softly over. Smudge on the inside, snoring slightly, and Sasan on the outside, an arm around him.

He has no plan, but he crouches down beside the couch and gazes at their sleeping faces. Some instinct moves him; he reaches out a hand and runs his fingers tenderly through Sasan's hair. He brings his hand up to his own: the texture is the same, and somehow different: his own revolts him, as does the rest of him, and he's almost loath to contaminate the other with his touch.

But he's started something he has yet to fully understand; and when he lightly trails a line along the contours of Sasan's cheek, the eyes blink open, and Louis takes his hand away, and watches, trying to slow his breaths.

Painfully slowly, Sasan lifts his arm off Smudge and turns his head to look at Louis. His eyes are startled, frightened, shining in the glint of light streaming through the window through the open door of Louis' room. He's perfect.

The eyes soften slightly; Louis isn't Sylar, and Sasan glances back at Smudge before looking back at Louis.

"Hey," Louis greets in a whisper, unable to tear his eyes away.

"What are you doing here?"

Louis shrugs. "I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I can't fall asleep..."

Sasan brings a hand to his face, feeling the fading tingle of a touch.

"...What's it like?" Louis says, his eyes unsteady, yet with a grim determination behind them.

"What's... what like?"

"Him," Louis says, nodding towards Smudge. "You two. You know."

Sasan just looks at him, then slowly sits up on the couch.

"What's it feel like, kissing him?" Louis asks, edging closer, moving from his crouch up onto a knee such that the two of them are at eye level, and a wild, tingling *strangeness* flows through him as they make eye contact.

Sasan gives him a nervous smile. "Uh... why are you ask-"

Louis kisses him; a hand moving forward to the back of Sasan's neck and into his hair, pulling him into the kiss and the strangeness as Sasan tenses beneath him and suddenly jerks away, stumbling

off from the couch, backing into the wall as he stares at Louis in shock, wiping a hand across his lips and he's *so fucking beautiful*-

Louis comes after him, his body shaking with unknown fears and emotions and self-hate.

Sasan raises a trembling hand to hold him off. "Why... why did you... why..."

"You don't *belong* with him," Louis says, his voice coming out steadier than he felt, a confidence entering his steps as he approaches. "Smudge doesn't *appreciate* you. He only cares about himself and what he *wants* you to be. Has he ever let you do *anything* on your own?"

"...Look, we're happy together and-"

"No," Louis says, the words just coming now, and Sasan feels his breath against his chin. "No. You deserve better. You deserve *respect*. You're not his toy, and you *know* that's how he's been treating you. ...I've seen it."

Louis grabs hold of Sasan's hips, feeling them there beneath his clothes and getting that odd jolt in his brain as he realises that's how his own body feels like to another; sees Sasan's eyes trail down towards his hands, whereupon he lifts one and cups Sasan's face upwards to meet his gaze.

"*You could do so much better*," Louis says.

Sasan's eyes shine brightly back through a film of tears, a maelstrom of fright and confusion and yet, somewhere inside, a spark of longing.

*Smudge*, Sasan thinks. *Smudge, wake up... wake up...* He just needs to make a noise, just shout, push Louis away, and...

"He doesn't control you," Louis says. "He can't begrudge you one moment of freedom."

Sasan swallows. Louis' fingers brush against his crotch. His breath hitches.

"You know you want this," Louis whispers, a desperate edge to his voice.

Sasan blinks at him, pushing down the panic as he realises that he doesn't know who Louis is, at all. Not that he's usually averse to hot strangers who randomly hit on him, but this is different, and there's something almost deceptive in the familiarity of Louis' body.

But there's something in Louis' eyes that stills his panic a little; fear, Sasan sees fear, and uncertainty, and pain, and doesn't know why, and along with that a pleading desperation for acceptance that reminds him too strongly of Smudge.

"*Don't you?*" Louis asks, and this time Sasan catches the faint tremble in his voice. How different are they, after all? Him, Louis, Smudge...

*Smudge*, he thinks again, but the thought fades away.

"No one ever has to know," Louis says into his ear, his voice still unsteady. "It'll be quick. I just... I need..."

Smudge... never has to know.

Sasan swallows.

"Please," Louis begs.

Sasan takes a breath. A spurt of dark forbidden passion bursts in him, a twisted curiosity taking over the fear...

"Sas-"

He kisses Louis.

It's different this time, wanting it through the guilt, and it's not like Smudge; he doesn't *know* Louis, doesn't know him as a separate person, and Sasan finds it suddenly easier if he forgets and just imagines that he's making out with himself-

Narcissistic lust sends jolts of fervour through his body. Hands run with desperate longing along Louis' face as they kiss, fingers kneading through his hair-

The other matches his movements with eager desire; Sasan caressing his neck, letting his hands trail down his shoulders as Louis slips his hands up under his shirt, the weird-strange-familiar touch of his fingers and palms moving against his skin... Sasan clutches them, feeling the identical contour of the fingers beneath the fabric of his clothes, rising and falling with every breath...

"Take off your pants," Louis gasps, removing his hands from Sasan's waist and fumbling at the buttons.

Sasan duly assists, all thoughts of Smudge suddenly gone, and he doesn't quite know what he's doing but he suddenly doesn't quite seem to care.

Next to them, on the couch, his boyfriend sleeps obliviously on.



### **XI: the problem is choice.**

Moonlight spills through the window, pooling gently on the floor and settling on the covers of his bed, Adam gazing idly at its silver as he tries to fall asleep.

He glances over at Leo's bed and briefly meets his eyes. Still awake. Adam looks back at the moonlight and wonders why he's not panicking. He feels resigned, almost. The thirst is a dull scratch at the back of his throat, the hunger a distant rumble.

This is normal life now, he knows. He'd never get true normalcy back, even if he did return home one day. Normalcy now is lying in bed in a house with no doors, tentacle monsters outside, and, on the inside, people who look like him. Or he like them; he has no more or less right over his form than they do.

He hears Leo roll over in bed.

He wonders about Zach, whom Tony cheerily agreed to room with. Zach hasn't said much or done much. Adam doesn't know if he's just still in shock or if he's trying to defer to their strange power hierarchy.

Power hierarchy. He has no idea when that came about, and when he became any kind of leader. He hadn't even been aware he was one. He's used to being a follower. Insignificant. Taking orders. Doing his job. Letting other people make the decisions. But here, there weren't any of those other people around. Sasan and Smudge were content in their self-rule; Tony was his own person; and Leo... Leo would never order anyone around. That just left him, in the end, and Adam doesn't really want that responsibility. He just wishes that everyone were a little less incompetent and paid more attention to the gravity of their situation-

"What happens tomorrow?" he hears Leo murmur from the other bed.

Adam turns back over, but Leo is lying on his back and staring straight at the ceiling. There's still that tiny jolt, even now, seeing his own face and then catching the subtle differences and recognising it as someone else: a specific someone else. Adam wonders briefly at that time, long ago, when he didn't think he would be able to tell them apart. It's so obvious now. Leo, Smudge, Sasan, Tony, Zach... new guys...

All right, so he still had some work to do there.

"I don't know," he says in reply, and his tongue is dry in his mouth.

"Why is Zach here?" Leo asks.

Adam wonders if Leo expects him to have these answers or if he's just in a rhetoric mood.

"I don't know... he knows us," Adam says, not really answering the question. "If some of us need to die to save the others-

"-he'll know which ones to choose?" Leo finishes.

Silence.

"This is so messed up," Adam mutters. "How did we even *get* here-"

"Maybe everyone does," Leo says vaguely in the blur of near-sleep. "All those people with normal lives... maybe one day they end up somewhere like this and no one ever knows any better. In the end we have no control. We just go wherever life takes us and try to make the best of it."

"Yeah, and how do we make the best of *this*?"

Leo rolls onto his side to face him, familiar brown eyes steady with a calmness that Adam wants to know the origin of. He wants some for himself.

"We live until we die," Leo says. And then, sincerely: "It's been good knowing you. And all the others."

"...Thanks."

Silence.

And then a bloodcurdling scream from outside rudely jerks them out of the moment, throwing aside the covers and rushing out of their beds as incoherent yelling shatters the quiet of the night.

Adam shoves the door open and stumbles out, Leo coming after-

**"GET OFF HIM!"**

Three figures, a tumbled mess in the corner.

Smudge pulls Louis to the ground by the collar of his unbuttoned shirt and screams into his face.

**"WHAT WERE YOU DOING?"**

"|-"

Smudge rams a fist in Louis' face, his nose breaking into blood; and then another fist, furiously following the first-

Sasan stumbles off the ground, struggling to pull his pants back on. "Smudge! Don't-"

"HOW DARE YOU?" Smudge hollers at Louis, the latter now frightened and struggling to get up, Smudge roughly shrugging off Sasan's hand. "*HOW DARE YOU TOUCH HIM?*"

With an effort, Louis pushes Smudge off, stumbling to his feet in a wild panic before Smudge grabs his legs and trips him and Louis falls back to the ground and they hear a crack; and Louis feels the jolt of pain through his neck and tastes blood in his mouth but Smudge is over him again, now with a *chair*, screaming as he brings it down on his head as Louis' hands raise to block the blow-

"SMUDGE!"

The chair crashes down in an explosion of blood and pain.

Possession fought over the chair; someone yanking it out of Smudge's hands, and Smudge giving way briefly before his hand grabs tight in a stranglehold around Louis' neck, and he wants to push him off and loosen the grip because it's hard to breathe; but his arm hurts when he lifts it;

Smudge, screaming as the others arrive to pry him off Louis while he struggles against them in incoherent rage, the others shouting things that Louis cannot make out; and he tries to roll over and get up but he can't feel his legs *he can't feel his legs-*

But the dread is lost in the fog and pain and the thick wetness - blood? - where his head meets the floor, and there's someone bending over him, looking horrified but trying to hide it...

"Louis..." Zach breathes out, and there's a curse at the tip of his tongue that never quite makes it out.

Behind Zach, Smudge fights against Adam and Leo's combined attempts to hold him back; Tony looking on uncertainly; Sasan torn between shock and guilt and glancing between Smudge and where Louis lies in a bloody mess on the ground-

"*Let me GO!*"

Leo shakes him. "Smudge, no. *NO.*"

"He was... he was..."

"Smudge-" Sasan tries, and instantly Smudge's eyes swivel to face him, full of pain and accusation, and he wonders why he said anything.

"*I trusted you,*" Smudge says, his voice shaking through his tears. "*I TRUSTED YOU!*"

"Smudge, I'm *sorry*... I didn't mean to... Smudge?"

Smudge looks away, trembling with anger and betrayal, Leo holding him tight, stroking his back with forceful gentleness, exchanging looks with Adam, who goes over to join Zach by Louis' side-

"...he's not going to make it," Adam says.

*I can hear you*, Louis thinks groggily.

Zach doesn't reply.

"...There's the gun," Adam adds. "If we need to--"

*I can STILL hear you*, Louis thinks.

"Zach?" Adam asks.

Zach looks at him, frightened in the way most actors would be after watching one of their characters beat another one inches from death with a chair.

Jason drops down next to them. "...Hey," he greets uncertainly. "Do we clean him up or..."

Zach moves a hand to Louis' forehead.

Mitchell rushes over with a handful of towels from the bathroom. He glances perfunctorily at Adam and Zach, then drops the towels on the floor and crouches down by Louis' side.

"That guy is psycho," Mitchell mutters to Jason. He eyes Adam. "And you're friends with him."

"Hey-" Adam starts, then stops himself, with effort. They should be in this together. Not fighting.

"Uh, people?" Tony asks, and a few of them look up.

There's a doorway flickering in the wall. It's right next to the number - now flickering unstably between 9 and 8, the door growing more solid as the 8 grows more solid, only to fade again as the 9 grows stronger...

"It's the trigger," Adam says.

"...Eight people," Leo murmurs, and then he steps forward, pulling Smudge along, glancing at the group clustered around Louis. "*Eight people*, that's the trigger! We can still save him! *Get through the door while it's there* or someone will have to die before it opens again--"

*No*, Louis thinks, not wanting to move, because moving hurts in the parts of his body that he can still feel, but Mitchell and Jason and Zach are grabbing hold of him and lifting him off the ground and he can't find the ability to protest-

"What if it's worse in that next place?" Tony asks, snatching up the shotgun nonetheless.

"Then we'll deal with it," Leo says. "We can't stay here."

The doorway is still flickering, insubstantial. Through it they see what seems to be an extension of the house: a wide, furnished hallway lined with doors and glimpses of a couch by an expensive-looking rug.

"What if it cuts out when we're walking through?" Tony asks. "We might get spliced or someth--"

Smudge breaks free from Leo and runs through the door. He comes out on the other side, turns, looks at them wordlessly, and then goes on down the hallway and vanishes around the corner.

"...Let's *go!*" Zach shouts.

\*

"Louis, Louis, Louis."

He's on the carpet, vision a blur, aware that time suddenly seems to have stopped and that strange guy is back, regarding him with a painfully patronising look and smile.

"You," Louis manages.

"You don't look too good," Q comments, surveying his Smudge-battered form. "I don't think you'll ever walk again."

"You *promised*," Louis says, his voice weak and pathetic to his own ears.

"Why, yes, I did. And it looks like I was right after all." Q hops over, standing behind Jason's time-frozen form and looking down at Louis. "You're a selfish little bastard, aren't you?"

"Please," Louis whispers, voice shaking with oncoming tears. "I broke them up... you said... you said you'd send me back-"

"Oh, I could do that," Q agrees. "Send you right back home and leave you whimpering pathetically on the floor. Maybe someone will hear you if you scream for help. Maybe you'll be able to drag your half-dead corpse to the telephone and call an ambulance. Or maybe you're going to just lie there in the dark until death finally comes to put an end to your miserable, miserable existence."

Louis cries quietly, tears mixing with blood and slipping down the side of his face.

"Or," Q says, looking contemptuously at the tears, "I have another offer. You die, as you're going to anyway. There aren't any medical professionals around, as you can see. Even if there were, not many people can survive a blow to the head with a chair wielded by a very angry bisexual guy who evidently did not like watching you fuck his boyfriend. Then all your little friends here can go home and be happy."

Q bends in close, reaching out a finger to trace the line of tears down Louis' face. "But it's going to be a *very... painful... death*."

Louis squeezes his eyes shut, still shaking with sobs.

"Option three," Q says, his voice maddeningly calm and quiet. "You live. You get healed, you'll walk again. But one of the others dies in your stead. Perhaps he would die anyway. It might even look natural. But you're going to know that it's all... because... of *you*."

And Louis hates himself as the tears run down his face; and he wants to die, and thinks he *should* die, but still that part of him clings on ever so obstinately to life and health and he doesn't even know those other people and why should he care about them and he never asked to be put into this place and all he ever wanted to do was to go *home*, not be caught up in some bizarre morality game and dig himself deeper and deeper into a hole he knows he would never get out of-



"What's it going to be, Ironson?" Q asks, standing back upright. "Home and a slim chance of survival? Sacrificing yourself for the greater good? Or sacrificing someone else for your own insignificant, worthless self snivelling on the floor?"

Louis draws his arm over his head, engulfed in shame and wishing Q would go away.

And he thinks about home, and arriving on his floor in the night with the lights all off, still bloody and barely mobile and trying to grope his way in the darkness and drag the weight of his unresponsive legs over to find the telephone to call someone, anyone, and then maybe getting to end up in a wheelchair for the rest of his life-

Or to die, so that others may live, but no... he doesn't want it to end this way. It shouldn't end this way, it shouldn't-

And maybe all those other people weren't even real. Because how could they be; he *owns* this face, this body, and it's all just a cruel, cruel trick, and he just wants to live, and maybe, if he lives, he could atone for his sins one day, because how could he do that if he died, and they had to understand that, they had to know that he's not a terrible person, he just-

"What do you want, Louis?" Q asks, borderline impatient.

Louis mumbles something from behind his arm, and is overwhelmed by a fresh flood of tears.

Q twirls a pen he picks up from the table. "I can't hear you."

Louis pulls his arm away, eyes swimming in distress. "I want to live," he rasps out.

Q raises an eyebrow. "At the expense of someone else?"

Louis swallows, and gives a trembling nod.

Q smiles. "I thought so." He catches the pen and puts it back on the table.

And then Q vanishes, and the world is alive once more, and Louis feels something snap into place and he jerks involuntarily; and his legs can move again, and he hates himself.

\*

Smudge hurtles down the hallway, tears stinging at his eyes; he angrily brushes them away and keeps on, turning the corner into an open area and pausing, briefly, to take in the sight of the large room, a great marble staircase winding its way up from the centre. Doors curve around the rest of the room; and, ahead, the opening of another hallway. This place is huge.

Smudge pushes on to the staircase. Behind him he hears running footsteps and Sasan calling his name, and his heart pangs for him. Sasan's voice draws fresh tears from his eyes; but he remembers, and so he keeps running, grabbing hold of the banister and ascending the marble steps upward. His footsteps echo.

"SMUDGE!"

He pauses just long enough to look down from his ascent, eyes brimming with tears.

"GO AWAY!" he yells.

"No... no, Smudge, please, I'm sorry-" Sasan reaches the bottom of the stairs and climbs after him, but Smudge has the head start and he rushes on, fuelled by the fury of betrayal.

"Smudge! I'll do anything-"

*"Is that what you told him?"*

"Smudge..."

He's at the top of the stairs now, shoes pushing off against dark crimson carpet and into the enveloping gloom of a new hallway. Wooden doors loom up from shadows on both sides of him. He falls against one, forcefully wiping tears from his eyes, and tugs at the doorknob.

"Please..."

Smudge turns, hand on the doorknob. Sasan stands at the start of the hallway, looking completely dejected.

Smudge swallows back tears. He wants him. He wants him back. So much.

Sasan takes a cautious step forward. "Smudge..."

*"I trusted you,"* Smudge chokes out. *"You said you loved me-"*

"I *do*," Sasan says, taking more steps towards him, speeding up. "Smudge, I did a stupid, *stupid* thing-"

*"What was he like?"*

"Not you. Nothing like you, he was no one, he means *nothing* to me-"

Sasan grabs Smudge's free hand, peering pleadingly into his eyes, and he sees that he's different from Louis; because Sasan knows him, so strongly, and cannot push him away and minimise him into some strange narcissistic fantasy, because he's *Smudge*, a whole person of his own, not some weak copy from a truer original... and Sasan loves him.

"...Smudge. *I'm sorry.*"

Smudge is silent, trembling, muted by his gaze.

"Smudge... We've survived my death, please let us survive this..."

A tear slides down Smudge's face.

Sasan hugs him; Smudge falling into his embrace, crying into his shirt: *"Don't you EVER do that AGAIN-"*

"I *won't*," Sasan promises, holding on tight, kissing his head. "I won't, I won't..."

And for that moment of time, there's just them, again, and everything else ceases to matter.

\*

The flickering wall solidifies. All nine are alive.

"Where do we put him?" Jason asks.

Mitchell nods towards the couch. "There."

The two of them and Zach carry Louis over, relinquishing their load onto the couch.

"Think he's going to make it?" Jason asks.

"The wall closed," Mitchell points out. "Looks like he's not dying yet..." He peters off, looking up suspiciously as Leo comes forward. "What do you want?"

"We got off to a bad start," Leo says quietly. "It shouldn't be like this..."

"Two of us are dead, and *look* at him," Mitchell says, gesturing at Louis. "You don't care about the new guys, huh?"

Adam joins Leo's side. "*It's not our fault-*"

Leo holds out a hand to Mitchell, mutely silencing Adam. "I'm Leo."

Silence. Tony wanders over to see what's up.

Mitchell finally takes the proffered handshake. "Mitchell."

Jason lifts a hand in a cautious wave. "Jason."

"Adam."

"Tony."

"...Zach."

Awkward silence.

Tony wanders off to escape the tension.

Adam looks at Louis. "What do we do about him?"

Tony pops back around the corner. "Hey," he announces, munching on a piece of chicken. "There's food here."

They forget about Louis.

They tear hungrily into the food and drinks, Adam and Leo and Jason and Mitchell and Tony and Zach demolishing the spread that had been set out in the next room (beside a note saying "IF YOU DIE TOO SOON, IT WON'T BE FUN").

Leo wonders aloud where Smudge and Sasan are. Tony says they ran off but they'd probably be back.

Louis lies pathetically on the couch, mouth watering at the thought of food, but still hurting too much to get up. Zach comes by with a plate and cup. He puts them down, goes back to get his own food, drags a chair over to Louis' side, and sits down.

"Here," he says, holding out the cup, and Louis finds Zach's eyes deeply unnerving when he looks at them. He struggles to sit up and takes the cup; desperately gulps down its contents, the water rushing down his throat in overwhelming relief.

He's aware that Zach is watching him, and continues watching him as he eats; and he can't tell if it's love or pity or both that he sees in his face, but at the moment all he can care about is feeding the hunger and feeling the pain slide slowly away with each mouthful of food...

For an odd moment or two, Louis looks at Zach and feels like he's looking at himself. He thinks it should be expected; but somehow it's different with Zach than with the others. It's almost like Zach could *be* him, completely and fully, and no one would ever be able to tell otherwise.

Or that Zach could be any of them, in fact. Louis takes to returning Zach's gaze while munching on a piece of turkey (his own face contorted into an appropriate expression of pain lest anyone forget his cruel beating at the hands of that psycho bisexual guy), and in the tiniest expressions on Zach's face he sees fleeting glimpses of the others. Zach seems... more. More than one person, home to a myriad personalities, a myriad *people*...

Louis feels suddenly vulnerable and doesn't know why.

\*

When Jay comes to, he's standing on the edge of the earth and gazing down into a bottomless pit. He turns around: and there is light, like the fresh dawn of a new day, golden-white skies and bright saturated colours bursting from the grass and the flowers and the trees and the sketchy outlines of buildings.

There's someone else standing a short distance away, staring down into the same pit. A slightly older man, with his face, clad in a rumpled white shirt. Jay remembers him. He walks over, trying warily to catch his eye.

"Hey," Jay says.

The other gives a small start and looks up, eyes searching Jay's face in that confusion of recognition and not-quite-recognition. "Hi..."

"You're Peter. Right?"

He nods. "I remember you..."

"Jay."

Silence. A flock of birds takes off from a tree and vanishes into insubstantiality with a final, echoing tweet.

"Are we dead?" Peter asks, worried. "Where are we?"

The place is changing, losing colour.

"Did you get the feeling of being dragged here?" Jay asks in response. There's something about this world that has him on alert.

"...Yeah."

They're staring now at the row of short buildings, one of which has taken on a sharper focus than the others, and is ever so subtly drawing them towards it.

"It's a watchmaker's shop," Jay states in unasked reply, stepping forward. "Funny kind of afterlife."

Peter follows hesitantly behind.

*Gray and Sons*, say the words printed on the glass. Jay peers through into the shop's confines, almost quaint, almost familiar in a dark, haunting way.

"I don't think we should go in," Peter says, arrested by a sudden unexplained fear.

Jay looks at him. "We're here for a reason," he says, and opens the door.

The colours extinguish in a burst of silence.

The world is grey beneath a sepia sky; at least, that's what they would see if they turned around, but they are both in the shop, immersed in the ticking of innumerable clocks, and there's someone who looks like them sitting at the counter, hands steepled at his chin, a faintly evil grin beneath a piercing gaze as he watches them approach.

The door closes with a thud.

"Is that the serial killer?" Peter whispers at Jay.

Sylar stands, a smooth liquid motion from behind the counter. His gaze passes from Peter to Jay, and his grin deepens.

"It's always nice to have company," he says.

Peter subconsciously sidles a little closer to Jay.

Jay seems unperturbed, still looking suspiciously at Sylar, watching as he ambles forward right up to Peter - who flinches visibly but tries to stand his ground.

"Yes," Sylar agrees. "I *am* the serial killer. And I have a name."

Sylar crooks his finger, and Peter's hands leap to his neck as his tie tightens around it, gasping, terror in his eyes as Sylar leans in close:

"It's *Sylar*."

And his palms raise and slam the two of them against the wall, the sound of their own laughter ringing distantly in their ears.



## **XII. supererogation**

Eventually they break the embrace, Sasan sliding one arm away from Smudge but leaving the other there in a comforting hold.

Smudge blinks, not meeting his gaze; for a moment trembling with raw vulnerability until his defences kick in again, gradually, and the fear fades from view in a few deep breaths. He brushes a hand almost absently across his face to wipe off the rogue lingering tears.

"What's on the other end of this hallway?" he asks, and some of his brash bravado is back. Not all the way; not when he's with Sasan, although Sasan remembers a time when Smudge was even more unguarded around him. Some of that unflinching trust is gone.

"I don't know," Sasan says, a perfunctory reply to a rhetorical question, but seeing it as a good sign that Smudge doesn't seem to mind his hand on his shoulder as they start walking slowly down the hallway.

It gets darker the further in they go, and Sasan tries to ignore the first pricks of panic as the light from the stairway grows fainter. There's something about the velvet darkness that feels like it's smothering him; and the carpet seems to be getting softer beneath his feet, sucking him in...

His hand tightens around Smudge's shoulder, more for his own comfort than anything else.

"Do you... really think we should go this way?" he finally manages to articulate, hoping he doesn't sound as nervous as he feels.

Smudge slows to a halt and looks at him; and Sasan has no idea what he's thinking, no matter how deep or searchingly he gazes into his eyes, now with a strange faraway look to them.

Then Smudge gives a half-shrug. "I was just *curious*, that's all. You don't *need* to come with me if you don't *want* to."

Sasan wonders if this is supposed to be some test, here in the increasingly suffocating darkness (is the hallway narrower than before? he wonders) and a gnawing sense of foreboding creeping at the edges of his mind; but he knows that there is no way he's going to leave Smudge here on his own to face whatever unknown horrors this place might hold.

"I'm not leaving you," he says, and hopes his conviction carries through. "I just... this place..." He takes a breath and gives a weak smile. "It's a bit scary, don't you think?"

Silence.

"...but if you want to go on, I'll go with you-"

"Nah," Smudge says quietly, gazing distantly down the hall. "It's okay then."

"Smudge."

When he doesn't respond, Sasan reaches out his other hand and gently cups Smudge's face towards him. "We're... all right, right?" he asks.

Smudge's eyes dip down. Another shrug. "I guess." Half-hearted. "I just don't know if I still know you anymore."

"*Smudge*-"

"I *want* to," Smudge says, and looks straight at him. "It's just not the *same* anymore, okay?"

The faraway look is gone, for the moment, and it's just Smudge again, like he was moments ago when he cried into Sasan's arms and begged him never to do that again, and his eyes are scared and pleading...

"I love you," Sasan says, and he means it.

Silence. The words hang in the air.

Sasan hesitantly reaches out a hand and trails it lightly through Smudge's hair.

Smudge catches his hand, holds it, looks at it, tries to use it to fill that void in his heart; tries to make himself believe that nothing ever happened with Louis, and things were as they'd always been between them; hating himself for ever having trusted Sasan that much, and yet yearning for that same unbounded faith, too afraid now to make that leap...

It could never be the same again. The ache cuts deep into him, into an ancient loneliness he'd thought he'd never feel again.

*You never deserved Sas in the first place, Smudge tells himself fiercely. You never deserved anyone. If you didn't look like him he wouldn't even have given you a second glance.*

His other hand clenches into a fist.

*...It might have been better if he'd stayed dead.*

But that thought chokes his heart and he gasps out a tear.

"Smudge, talk to me..."

Sasan's hand leaves his shoulder and cradles Smudge's face, desperate for some hint at what was going on in his head, yearning to see beyond the eyes that have since glazed over again. His thumb brushes the tear away.

*You're alone again, Smudge thinks. You're always going to be alone. No one can ever truly love you.*

Sasan hugs him tightly, whispering his name. Smudge trembles in his hold.

*And you can never trust anyone again.*

"It's going to be okay," Sasan murmurs into his ear. There's a tightness in his voice, choked with suppressed tears and cutting guilt. "We're... *We're going to be okay.*"

\*

It's like some kind of awkward family reunion. Like Christmas dinner with relatives you'd prefer you never saw: a few loudly dominating the conversation with updates on what's been going on in everyone's life, crude jokes, awkward laughter, lips silently pursing, kids running around the place...

Well, so it isn't completely like that. It's quieter, for starters; each of the five of them seated at the table are too hungry to talk. But the awkwardness is there, at least, and Jason wonders if he's the only one who feels it so strongly. It's possible. Adam and his friends seem to have long ago attained a level of easy comfort around each other, as though there's nothing particularly strange about being surrounded by people who look almost exactly like you. Since they'd first met, Jason hasn't seen another face.

It unnerves him when he thinks too much about it. So he just eats quietly and tries not to be too conspicuous; lest people remember that he was the one who'd tried to hide food from them. And it unnerves him when he thinks about Peter and his death and realises how, after the initial shock, it hasn't seemed to impact him that much. They didn't exactly know each other that well. They'd met for barely hours. Jason doesn't expect to have particularly strong feelings for the death of any passing acquaintance, but what disturbs him is the way that he's losing his hold on who Peter *was*; like he was just another face, another one of them, his personality and essence blurring against the rest of them into something insubstantial, indistinguishable...

He wonders if he seems the same way to everyone else here.

Everyone else. It's almost a cruel joke. Sometimes he gets the sense that they're all the same person, spread thin over several incarnations, fighting itself, cooperating with itself, and that at any



moment the illusion of individuality is going to shatter and they - he? - would be all alone. Trapped. With no one else who knows that he's here.

Jason tries to keep his calm exterior as he reaches out for more broccoli. The food is quickly going. He wonders where the excess food ends up, if they're all really one person. Or if it's just him, and the others all figments of his imagination...

Adam is staring at nothing as he chews.

"How long before the next thing happens?" Tony asks, a bit too enthusiastically, as he scoops out more unidentifiable but extremely delicious mushy purplish food onto his plate. It was the best thing he had ever tasted, ever.

"Nothing happens," Adam predicts darkly, still staring at nothing, his mind half elsewhere. "We're trapped here, like in the last place. And then we die. After another series of unfortunate events."

Adam finally lowers his eyes back to his plate, and stabs at a piece of potato. "They're picking us off one by one."

"Giving up, huh?" Mitchell asks.

Adam gives him a look.

"It's just a sucky attitude, that's all."

Adam goes back to his food. He briefly looks over to where Zach and Louis are, then decides that nothing interesting is going on there. He prefers Zach being far over there, anyway. Zach disturbs him every time Adam remembers who he is.

"The question is... why do you care, Adam?"

He looks up from his plate, and Dem is perched on the table munching on a cinnamon stick, the rest of them frozen in time-

-no, not all of them. Leo is there with him, just the two of them and Dem active in their little bubble of time.

Adam grits his teeth. "Here to gloat?"

"Oh, I could do that whenever I want," Dem says, dismissing his question with a wave of the cinnamon stick. "The thing is... people die all the time in senseless, pointless ways. You and your friends aren't so special. Is your human worldview so narrow and self-centred that you're only affected when you're forced to face it? Why aren't all of you in a constant state of agony over all the suffering that's going on all the time? Oppression, discrimination, hate crimes, children starving, people wasting away, gruesome murders, natural disasters, diseases, torture..."

"There's a limit to how much we can acknowledge in order to function," Leo says, and Adam is suddenly grateful for his presence.

"In that case," Dem says, "why not ignore all of it? You'd be so much happier then. How is acknowledging a comfortable amount of suffering any less selfish?"

"Is there a point to your questions?" Adam asks testily.

Dem shrugs and chews on his cinnamon stick.

"We do what we can," Leo says. "So maybe it's selfish. But no one's *perfect*. And, yeah, maybe personal interests get in the way, but we're just human-"

Dem jabs his cinnamon stick in Leo's face. "*Aha*," he says. Leo flinches. "But what do you consider personal interests? A bunch of strangers getting skewered isn't exactly that personal, is it?"

"It is when we're the ones supposed to stop it," Leo says.

Dem bends in close. "But think of all the many other horrors you could stop if only you tried. By selling all you have and giving it to the poor... by hunting down criminals in your spare time... by speaking up every time someone does something that isn't very nice... Or do you only do good when there's a huge sign explicitly telling you that you have ten minutes to save a bunch of guys who happen to look exactly like you?"

"We'd have done the same no matter what they looked like," Adam says irritably.

Dem stops staring Leo down and turns his attention to Adam. "Really?" he asks. "Well, maybe. But I'm guessing you wouldn't have felt as bad about it if they had died. History has shown time and again that humans favour people they perceive to be like them. Whom they sense a connection with. Newspapers reporting on disasters in other countries always pay special attention to any of their own citizens who happened to be caught. Maybe just one or two of them, but hey, *they* get the spotlight amidst the thousands of faceless natives. How many parents do you think would willingly let their child die if it meant five strangers would be saved?"

Dem twirls the cinnamon stick. "You know it yourself, Adam. I know that Smudge and Sasan and Tony annoy the hell out of you, and yet you still care about them. Because of that bond. Without it I doubt any of you would have become this close. You're all strangers, you know that. You don't know any more about each other than a random collection of people on the street. Or do you forget that, and just assume? Filling in the blanks with your own assumptions of what the others are? Why did you trust Sylar the first time you met him? Would you have done the same if he had looked different? Would you have been more on alert?"

"Do you keep seeking out humans to blame us for being human?" Adam asks.

"I'm just trying to help you rise above it." Dem lifts the cinnamon stick into the air to demonstrate.

"..." says Adam, suddenly wanting that cinnamon stick.

"...which you're evidently not very good at," Dem says, putting the cinnamon stick back into his mouth. "There are lessons to be learnt among these people. If you can see them as family, there's no reason why you can't do the same for anyone else. Appearances are deceiving. Neighbours, beggars, politicians, annoying co-workers..." - Dem gave Adam a look - "...if they were like the people here, would you be kinder? If you assumed that they too were like you and felt the same, hurt the same way, saw the world through eyes not that different from yours... would you care more? Would you be more willing to understand?"

"You're a bit of a hypocrite, aren't you?" Adam says. "Talking about kindness while you torture us."

"I'm not human," Dem says lightly. "I don't count. And it's called tough love. Sometimes death is involved," he admits. "But it's for your own good. I think."

"Why us?" Adam retorts. "Jealous of our eyebrows or something?"

Dem looks momentarily sad, as if Adam has touched a nerve. Then that expression fades. "You're a completely random group of people," he says. "All strangers, remember? Look past the surface, Adam. You've all got nothing in common. Some of you aren't even the same *race*. You and Louis are Jewish, Sasan is Iranian, Smudge is bisexual..."

Leo puts his hand to his forehead in a subtle facepalm.

"...the odd thing is," Dem continues, "If I were to get enough of you together - say a hundred - the differences are going to become even clearer. Humans always find a way to oppress others. If you can't discriminate on the basis of phenotypical appearance, there's always religion, class status, age, sexual orientation... you'd be a nice little society in no time, full of the privileged oppressing the unprivileged as they fight for their right to exist." Dem shrugs. "You could start a city. Quintopolis."

Leo's other hand joins his first in a second subtle facepalm.

"You know I'm right," Dem says, with a surreptitious look of envy at Adam's eyebrows.

"So what's next?" Adam asks. "It's not very useful learning things if we're all going to die, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Dem says. "I'm not in charge of this game. That's up to Q to decide. I'm just here to enjoy the show and subject you to monologues about the human condition. Cheers. Do you want this cinnamon stick?"

"...No," Adam lies.

"All right then." Dem promptly vanishes.

Jason gives them a double take when time starts going again.

"What?" Adam asks, seeing him staring.

"You... moved," Jason says, looking uncomfortable. He'd seen the same thing earlier before when they'd carried Louis in.

"...Yeah. I'm not dead."

"It's not... it's like you... Never mind." Jason meekly returns to his food.

Adam is about to press further, when Leo picks up a piece of card from the table that hasn't been there before.

"What's that?" Tony asks, leaning over for a better look.

It's a detailed plan of the house: several floors worth, a red dot cheerily marked 'You Are Here!'; and, at the end of a maze of hallways, an arrow marked 'Exit'.

"...It's a map," Adam says.

\*

Smudge untangles himself from the embrace, slipping away like air beneath Sasan's hold and turning away, pushing absently at one of the doors in the hallway and following its path as it opens up into a room, Sasan trailing behind, helpless, devoted, sunk in regret and wanting him back.

Smudge half-turns, meets his gaze, and there's still some of that old connection there that Sasan clings on to... but then Smudge turns back and continues walking into the gloom of the strange large room they've found themselves in. It's half-furnished, as though someone had been moving in and gave up unpacking. Boxes lie scattered on the grey concrete floor, shoved up against unpainted walls or lying in the way. There's a vague outline of a kitchen counter on one side; an unremarkable door near it; scraps of peeling half-done wallpaper. Ceiling high metal-frame windows line the opposite wall. Sunlight shines in: a dead, whitish glow that flows mutely through the glass. An ornate iron staircase winds its way up the centre, its structure tinged with the dull green of oxidisation.

The door shuts behind them. Smudge meanders around the boxes in childlike absentmindedness, thoughts elsewhere, and Sasan can do nothing but follow after.

Smudge slows down by the window, gazing silently out.

"I don't think this is part of the house," he says, and Sasan is just glad to hear him speak. He goes forward to join him, placing a hesitant arm around his shoulder - becoming less hesitant when Smudge does not resist - and looks out with him.

He makes out some semblance of foliage. Green, but with an ancient, crumbly quality... tired plants, left too long to live.

"Perhaps there's a way out," Sasan suggests.

Smudge shrugs. "Maybe."

Sasan looks at him, and with hesitant affection tousles Smudge's hair and brings his head close.

Smudge leans against him, but doesn't say anything.

"I'll always be here," Sasan murmurs. "I'll always be here."

\*

Louis is in no state to walk, and no one knows where Smudge and Sasan have run off to, so Zach agrees to stay there while the others check out whatever that map claims the exit is and report back.

"It could be a trap," Mitchell says as the five of them start making their way down one of the plush hallways, Adam leading the way.

"I don't think we have a choice," Leo says. "If that's the exit, I doubt there'd be any other way out."

"...What if we can't get back?" Jason asks.

"Does it matter?" Adam asks curtly, not looking at him.

"We can't leave them-"

"You barely know them," Adam continues tersely, forging on ahead. "We're probably all going to die anyway."

Jason wishes he wouldn't say that.

Leo steps up to Adam's side in silent support as they walk. Adam swallows; relaxing his shoulders a little.

Leo holds out his hand for the map. "I could take over-"

"It's ok."

Leo puts his hand back down.

Bringing up the rear, Tony munches on an apple he took from the dining table. Adam likes how this means he's too busy chewing to talk.

Jason glances with passing interest at the doors as they go by, and wonders for the moment about breaking away and going into one of those rooms... through the occasional open door he sees more doors, or stairways, or hallways, and wonders how huge this place is; and if some of those doors lead to other worlds, perhaps his own, or just an infinite series of other places that one can spend forever exploring in an unending architectural journey through scenes since deserted by whoever once lived there.

Adam leads them through one of those doors. This room is tiny, clean and square, its smooth walls reflecting a pastel orange from some omnipresent light. It opens up in a corner into a similar corridor, just wide enough for single-file, and they go through.

They pass through more interior vistas: some are recognisably of human origin, some definitely furnished by IKEA, others strange and alien with eerie walls knitting up towards impossibly high ceilings; and, always, there are no people, although sometimes the rooms seem to hold echoes of previous lives.

After ten or fifteen minutes of eternity, they emerge in a wide wooden panelled corridor that grows narrower and lower towards the end. It terminates in a simple, functional wooden door.

Adam draws slowly to a halt before it.

"We're here," he states simply.

Tony steps forward and places a hand on the door handle. He glances at them for guidance; seeing no objection, he pushes it down and opens it.

It looks like a perfectly normal alleyway in some city or other. Concrete walls, dirty ground, bits of junk tossed here and there, the sound of traffic. Cars pass by in whooshing blurs of colour in the distance. Strains of conversation in the distance. People.

The familiarity is reassuring.

"Whose world is this?" Leo asks, as they step out.

"What do you think 'exit' meant?" Mitchell counters. "Did you think we'd all magically end up back in our own homes?"

Tony kicks absently at a can. It bounces off the wall and falls back down. He tosses his apple core aside to join the rest of the junk.

None of them particularly care when the door shuts behind them. None of them notice when it vanishes into the wall.

"We can't all go out at once," Jason ventures. "It might attract too much attention-"

Adam has gone on ahead, Leo a short distance behind, and the others are about to ignore Jason and follow him; when Adam suddenly comes to an abrupt halt.

"What-"

Then Leo sees the same thing, and falls silent.

Adam finally turns around, his face completely ashen. "...We... we've gotta go back," he says. He pulls at Leo, who has gone semi-paralysed in shock. "Leo. Go back."

"Uh, the door is gone," Tony points out helpfully, wandering towards them. "What's going on? Nuclear apocalypse? Zombie apocalypse?"

Jason is staring at where the door used to be. There's a message there now, scratched on in chalk.

YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES BEFORE YOUR EXIT CLOSSES.  
CORNER OF WELLS AND LAKE  
DOOR TO ROOM #29-64  
P.S. DO NOT FALL INTO THE LAKE.

He has a bad feeling about this.

\*

Frightened eyes meet on the floor, sharing a moment's solidarity, lips moving wordlessly in silent sentiments amidst their trembling breaths. Jay cautiously extends his arm across the grey concrete of the floor; finds Peter's hand, grasps hold of it-

- and then loses his grip as Peter is swept off the ground and into the air, Sylar's telekinetic grasp firm around his neck.

Sylar approaches and circles his prey, slow, deliberate steps across the floor.

"What's your name?" he asks, an amused lilt to his voice.

"Peter," he gasps out, and wonders at the grin that spreads across Sylar's face.

"I knew a Peter," Sylar says, his ominously quiet voice carrying throughout the room. "We... didn't get along very well."

He breaks the grip, and Peter collapses to the floor, left hand rising reflexively to massage his neck.

"Lick my shoes," Sylar says casually.

Peter looks up, aghast. "...What?"

Sylar tilts his head at him. "Which part of that sentence did you not understand?"

Jay gets slowly to his feet, then shouts and crashes backwards into a glass case as Sylar absently flicks a hand at him.

"I gave you an order, *Peter*."

"...No-"

Peter gets back to his feet, trying to contain his shaking, and feeling a little more assured when he's standing up at full height, meeting Sylar's gaze with his own, realising that they're the same size, and there shouldn't be any reason to be afr-

Peter screams as a burst of pain erupts in his head; he falls to his knees, only dimly aware of Sylar's crooked finger drawing out the pain.

Jay extracts himself from the broken glass. "Stop it-"

Sylar turns his head to him and raises an eyebrow. "You don't give the orders around here," he says. "This is my world."

Peter has sunk even lower to the ground, curled up in foetal position, hands clutching his head in agony, mouth open in silent cry.

"And it's always nice to have hostages," Sylar continues. He straightens his finger. Peter lets out a gasp of relief, uncurling slightly, hands slipping down his face to lie weakly on the floor, eyes wild and staring blankly at nothing.

"Why would you need *hostages*?" Jay asks.

Sylar grins, and changes the scene.

It's a room they've never seen before, but the two people in it...

Sylar struts over to the man sitting in a chair, a plate of food balanced in his lap, attention drawn by some heated conversation going on by the couch-

Sylar bends down towards his ear. "Hello, Quinto," he whispers, invisible and unheard, although Zach suddenly thinks he feels a strange stirring in his mind. Sylar grins, casting a brief glance back at Peter and Jay. "Missed me?"

And then he slides in, and Zach is no longer Zach.

\*

"I meant that Quintopolis thing as a *joke*," Dem says.

Q shrugs, casually examining an apple. "Infinite multiverse. The place exists. Why let it go to waste."

"My rhetorical tools aren't going to work as well if you're going to make them literal. Give me that apple."

"I got it first." Q takes a bite from the apple and chews. "It's not actually *called* Quintopolis," he adds. "It's a perfectly respectable, normal universe in millions of ways. That was new york I put them in. He spreads his arms wide and smiles. "You know it's going to be fun. Want to make bets on who cracks first?"



### **XIII: the best imitation of myself**

"Adam."

He's hyperventilating, staring out mutely at the passing pedestrians, that shell-shocked look back on his face the way it was when they were at the cells. A hand grips loosely at Leo's arm, the pleas to go back having died into whispers and then silence, the population of this city - this world - having once more stolen his attention.

The men, women, children, and everything in between: they pass by in varying shapes, sizes and occasionally colours, but all are, unmistakably, *them*. Voices vary only along age, sex, accent and cadence. The women look almost like his late sister-

*Sara.*



Cold grips Adam's heart.

"Adam..."

Adam swallows, still transfixed. Leo frees his arm from Adam's grip and guides him back into the alley, meeting little resistance.

Adam lets his head fall back against the wall. A gasping sob forces out a tear.

"...Do we want to know what's out there?" Mitchell asks warily.

"See for yourself," Leo murmurs, as Tony strolls ahead to do just that.

Jason hangs around uncertainly, thinking that everyone should probably know about the message on the wall; but it doesn't seem like a good time to interrupt whatever was going on.

"...I'm not going out there," Adam whispers, eyes squeezed shut, trembling against Leo's hand on his shoulder. "I'm not... it's wrong, it's just... wrong... we've... gotta go back... please..."

"Um, I don't think we can," Jason says, deciding that this might be a good time to say so. "The door disappeared and there's... a message..."

Leo looks over. "What?"

Jason points, looking apologetic.

"Hey," Tony calls out. "Why're you all hanging back there?" He hops back over. "...We've survived each other. What's a few thousand more?"

\*

"Maybe there are dinosaurs out there," Smudge says after a while, a softly distant, almost dreamy quality to his voice. "We could go out and look. Maybe... maybe one might see us and chase us. But then we could come back in here..."

"...Where it's safe," Sasan continues, tentatively. Smudge still isn't looking at him.

"Yeah. And we could close the doors so they can't get at us..."

"...and crawl into the bed together."

Silence.

"There's no bed here," Smudge says. "Just that couch."

"There could be a bed," Sasan counters, taking it and winging it, looking around the drab room, in his head refurbishing and refurnishing... "Smudge, we could live here. Together. We'd make this place good, we'd... tear down that horrible wallpaper and get some paint on. Build in beech cupboards for the kitchen. And one of those shiny things to hang pots on, right next to the stove..."

"A fridge with food in it," Smudge adds wistfully.

"Yes. Yes, food. Good food. With the freezer stocked with as many flavours of ice-cream that you can imagine-"

"Raspberry?"

"It's there."

"Peanut butter."

"Definitely."

"Bacon."

Sasan raises an eyebrow, carefully, not daring to do anything that might spoil the stolen moment. "That sounds absolutely disgusting."

"We'd put in a carpet," Smudge says, gazing at the dusty concrete.

"Good idea. Colour?"

"Olive," Smudge decides. "But not all the way. This part near the windows will just be wood, and we could stand here and look out at the trees like it's our garden-"

"Like we're doing now."

"...Yeah. And a bookshelf over there," Smudge continues. "Full of books. I hate reading, but they'd look nice-"

Sasan gives him a wry smile. "...and then I'd make you like reading because you're missing out on so much."

"You could read to me."

"I could," Sasan murmurs. "If you promise not to fall asleep."

"I won't if it's good."

"What; my voice isn't alluring enough for you?"

Smudge looks at him, his expression unreadable. Sasan reaches out a gentle hand to Smudge's head, sifting his hair through his fingers.

"...my mom used to read to me," Smudge says softly, dropping his gaze downward. "Long ago."

"Really? Do you miss her?"

Smudge shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "I haven't seen her in ten years since they kicked me out for being bisexual." He scuffs his shoes against the floor.

Sasan cups Smudge's face upwards. "Your parents kicked you out at *thirteen*?" he asks, gazing at him in concern.

"Yeah," Smudge replies flatly. "But it's okay. I didn't have to go to school, so that was good. And I had a cardboard box to sleep in and talk to. I named him Eric."

"*Smudge...*"

Smudge forcefully brushes a tear aside. "...and we could move the couch over there," he says, pointing, changing the subject. "Next to the TV..."

He makes to go over to illustrate, but Sasan holds him back.

Smudge looks up at him. "...Sas?" he asks carefully.

Sasan slowly pulls him into a hug. "I'm so sorry," he whispers. "*I'm so sorry...*"

Smudge shifts slightly in his arms.

Sasan eventually raises his face to look at Smudge with an impossible tenderness, wondering how he could have ever done anything to hurt him, wondering how many unstated past hurts Smudge had gone through in his life, wondering just what impact this last one had had, and how he had been responsible for it...

Smudge returns his gaze, his face clear, the subtle defences back up.

"...We could snuggle on the couch next to the TV," Sasan finally says. "We could... fall asleep in front of it while... some perky newscaster goes on about the end of the world..."

Sasan peters off, waiting, wanting...

"-the end of *all* worlds," Smudge finally says. "Forever."

"Forever," Sasan agrees. "Except for this place."

Smudge buries his face in Sasan's neck, his eyes staring emptily at nothing.

"Because we're here," Sasan continues softly, holding Smudge tight, treasuring every moment of their closeness and never wanting to let go. "For... for as long as we want," he says.

"Together," Smudge adds distantly.

"Yes," Sasan whispers. "Because I love you."

\*

A part of him is still waiting to wake up.

Zach has spent the last few hours in a daze; not quite living, just existing, letting the flow of events just carry him along; observing the others and trying to make sense of them, trying to reconcile the paradoxical notions of knowing everything and nothing about them, having them at once be a part

of him (and he of them) and yet autonomous strangers with their own minds and thoughts he is not privy to.

It's curiously frightening to realise how little he knows about them. Some of their lives he shared for mere minutes or hours of screen time, everything else a vague mystery. He doesn't know what they are thinking. It feels strange to try and guess. But from the way some of them look at him - that almost-guilty, self-conscious look - he wonders if they think he does. And when he meets their gaze there is that flash of kinship, a familiarity, triggering memories of a time spent as *them*, in their skins, sharing their clothes and mannerisms and expressions and names; but then the moment passes, or they look away, and they become strangers again.

And it takes a while for him to understand - fully understand - that they are *people*, and any power he may have over them is negligible; that there are parts of their lives that he knows absolutely nothing about, experiences and memories, families and friends: whole lives whose fullness is hinted at in snatches of conversation, or in little quirks that did not originate with him. He wasn't there when they grew up, or went to school, or graduated. He wasn't there when Adam's sister died. He wasn't there for the first meal Leo had when reunited with his biological parents. He wasn't there when Smudge and Sasan fell in love.

But that odd sense of familiarity still lingers, and when Sylar takes over his body again, there's a part of him that recognises it and remembers years spent on the set of *Heroes* feeling the exact same way.

Only now Zach tries and fails to snap out of character as his hands put his plate of food down and his legs push him up from his chair, walking casually past Louis' petulant stare and down a hallway, into a room as his hands shut the door beyond his control and his face spreads in a grin.

"Missed me, Quinto?" his voice asks in a low whisper.

And Zach's mind struggles to regain its control, but Sylar won't let him. He plonks down in an armchair, head falling back against it.

His eyes close, relishing the moment.

"It feels so good to be back," Sylar murmurs with his voice. "Of course, it would be better if I had my own body instead of your feeble mortal one, but it will do."

Sylar grins again. "You can't get rid of me. You know that, don't you? I'll always find a way back." He shrugs, opening his eyes, lightly running his left hand down his right forearm as though investigating it. "Of course, that assumes that this... *is* me. I might not really be here. Maybe this is all in your head. What d'you think about that, Quinto? The famous Hollywood actor slowly... goes... crazy..."

Sylar twirls a finger in circles in front of his ear, then drops his hand down onto the armrest.

"What's it feel like?" Sylar asks, smirking. "You can't do anything unless I let you." He laughs. "Nice role reversal, isn't it? It's almost... *poetic justice*. I control you now, Quinto. I could go out there, pretend to be you... play with them a little..."

Zach tries to move his hand, wrest it out of Sylar's mental grip, but nothing happens.

"...or," Sylar adds, pondering, "I could give you back control of this pathetic body and have you do exactly as I want. And you can stop trying to move your hand. I'm not letting you."

Sylar strokes an armrest with his thumb. Zach feels the rough material against his skin.

"You're... the wildcard," Sylar says. "You could be anybody here. That's got to be useful." He gives up on the armrest and picks absentmindedly at Zach's plaid shirt. "What could we do with that?"

...Maybe this *is* all in his head, Zach thinks again, desperately. He doesn't feel possessed. He feels like he's acting. But he can't stop it.

"We could pick a target," Sylar suggests. "That bisexual guy, maybe. Hey... let's see how many of his friends you can kill off and replace before he realises that it's all... just... you. And maybe he *is* you as well. You're the only person in this place, Quinto. The rest of us aren't real. Right?"

Zach thinks he would be more inclined to agree if he could move even an eyebrow at will, although Sylar does him the honours and raises one.

Sylar sits up in the chair, clasping his hands together, fingers intertwining as he seemingly addresses the air.

"You could be anyone. *Anyone*. That has to be useful. You can get them to do anything you want. ...Anything *I* want. What do you think about that?"

And Zach gets a tiny bit of control back, enough to gasp out in relief, his expression turning in a second from evil to fear.

"...What makes you think I'll do that?" he asks. "You... you can't act as them. Only I can. Which means you won't be in control-"

Sylar takes over his tongue, cutting him off.

"That's what my hostages are for," he says simply. "I believe you've... been acquainted with the recently departed Peter and Jay. So far they've not been enjoying their afterlife very much." Sylar smiles. "I could make it even worse."

\*

It's almost a blessing in disguise, Leo thinks. In any other place, there would probably be no way for the five of them to get anywhere without attracting a whole lot of unwanted attention. As it is, the only stares they get seem to have more to do with how they stand clustered together looking varying degrees of terrified and giving off tourist vibes, making Mitchell mutter about how they could at least *try* to look natural, whereupon Tony breaks out in a spout of nonchalant whistling that draws at least one definite stare.

"We should find a map," Jason suggest tentatively, more curious passersby casting them looks the longer they stand indecisively at the alleyway opening. Tony stops whistling.

"So what... we just walk down the street until we find one?" Mitchell asks.

"Or we could ask for directions," Tony points out.

A young couple pulls their screaming kid past them, the mother yelling something about no more new toys if she tries eating Rover's food again.

Adam's eyes have glazed over when Leo looks at him, withdrawn into the relative safety of his head, unable to deal with the weirdness, unable to process the multitudes of people - visible and hinted at - existing and living with his face.

He had enough presence of mind to set his watch to countdown the amount of time they had to get out, chopping off a couple of minutes to account for the time spent before discovering the message; and it is perhaps only the possibility of being trapped here, forever, that made him move.

"...You guys suck," Tony mutters. "I'm going to ask someone." He leaves their group and heads towards a hotdog stand at the street corner some distance away.

What disturbs Leo most is the normalcy of the place. Overly-homogenous population aside, it could be any contemporary urban city. Skyscrapers, traffic, people, a fountain across the street... It's New York, apparently, or perhaps new york, if the battered page of the new york times flapping against a trashcan is any indicator. Leo doesn't let himself examine it further. He doesn't want to see the photos.

Up ahead, Tony relishes the invisibility and suppresses the urge to strip naked and streak down the street. He walks up to the hotdog stand.

"Hi..." he greets.

The teenager manning the stand looks up from his Biology textbook, lost in studying for an exam as he waits for customers. Hair pokes out from beneath a baseball cap.

"Yeah?"

"Do you... know the way to Wells and Lake?"

The teenager shrugs. "I don't know, man. I think a bus might go there. Or catch a cab or something. Wanna buy a hotdog?"

Tony almost says yes, his stomach having forgotten the meal he'd had not that long ago, but then he catches sight of the cash lying in the till and realises he doesn't have any local currency.

"Nah," he says. "I just ate. Tried selling one to him?" Tony gestures towards a scruffy-looking man sitting on a bench across the street, clad in a blazer and T-shirt and gazing sadly at a half-eaten sandwich in his hand. A pigeon trots past.

"Yeah, I've tried. I guess he likes his sandwich."

The two of them gaze at the sad sandwich guy for a while, watching as he takes a slow, pondering bite and then goes back to looking at it.

"That is *so* not how you eat a sandwich."

Tony agrees.

They watch him chew and take another bite. Tony glances briefly over the hotdog stand, taking in the hotdogs, bread, cash till and Biology textbook.

"You... run this thing yourself?" he asks.

"Huh? ...Oh. Not really; it's just... a part-time job. Trying to save up for college. And then maybe one day I can graduate and get stuck in some dead-end job somewhere." He sighs. "But that's life, right?"

Tony appraises him, remembering a similar time, and makes a decision. He leans in, secretively. "Want an adventure?"

"Hell yeah. Where can I get one?"

"What's your name?"

The teenager hesitates, then decides that Tony looks harmless. "Stanley."

"I'm Tony. And... I'm from another world."

Stanley raises an eyebrow. "Sure you don't want to buy a hotdog?"

"...Hey. I'm serious." A thought strikes him. "Okay, look at this..." Tony pulls his wallet out of his jeans pocket and yanks out a dollar bill. He holds it up to Stanley-

"It's a dollar-fifty for one-"

"*Look at it.*"

And Stanley looks, and his mouth falls open. He picks the bill out from Tony's hand, staring at the illustration of George Washington. "Where'd you *get* this?" he asks in fascination, investigating the rest of the bill. "It's really well made."

"It's real," Tony says. "That's legal tender cash right there. Or at least it is where I come from."

Stanley hands it back. "Okay, this thing is awesome, but it takes more than a dollar bill with an alien on it to make me believe you're from another planet or something."

"Not another planet," Tony says. "Another world. Another universe. Where the people look different from each other."

"...So what do they look like?" Stanley asks, humouring him, having decided that Tony is more interesting than the cellular workings of bacterium. "Not-human?"

"No, they're all human. Just... *different*. Like this," he says, pointing at the dollar bill.

"...Yeah, that's so not human," Stanley points out.

"Look," Tony says. "Someone comes up to you saying they're from another world, there are only three possibilities. They're crazy, or they're trying to sell you something, or they're telling the truth. Do I look crazy to you?"

Stanley shrugs. "Maybe."

"Yeah, well, I'm not. And you don't look rich enough to rip off. Which means I'm probably telling the truth, and if you turn me down now, you're going to spend the rest of your life sitting in an office cubicle regretting it."

Stanley stares at him. "...Now you're getting scary."

"A bunch of friends and I are stranded," Tony continues. "We've got less than half an hour to get out, and we could really do with a local guide."

"I don't know this place very w-"

"You know this *world*," Tony says. "You were born here. You grew up here. We weren't."

Stanley knows all about not going off with dodgy strangers and agreeing to be their tour guide; but Stanley had never been one to listen to the alarm bells that go off in his head, and there was something curiously persistent and earnest in Tony's eyes.

It almost made him believe.

"...Okay," he finally says, slowly. "Just let me lock up the stand."

\*

"You hurt him," the voice says, quietly, and it takes a while before Sasan realises that time has stopped, the floating dust particles hanging suspended in the rays of light, and Smudge warm but unmoving in his embrace. Sasan doesn't move his head, recognising the voice and swallowing back fear as Q casually saunters into his field of vision, a look of mock-concern on his face.

"How could you *do* that?" Q asks. "How heartless did you have to be to break his heart?"

Sasan doesn't say anything, but he tightens his hold on the time-frozen Smudge.

"You're the first person who ever reciprocated his love," Q continues. "You're the first person who ever made him feel he was worth something." Q bends in close. "*And then you blew it.*" The hint of a smirk tugs at the corner of his otherwise impassionate face, but then it fades into a mildly questing eyebrow.

Sasan closes his eyes, breathing in the low musky scent of Smudge's hair.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Q says. "Playing the committed soul mate... you've never managed to keep a boyfriend for more than a *week*. What makes you think this will be different, Sas? Or are you so... *callous*... not to care what it'll do to him, the day you have to admit that you've found someone else?"

"Smudge is different," Sasan says in a trembling murmur.



Q raises his eyebrows. "It looked like you were having fun with Louis."

"I didn't want to," Sasan says tightly.

"Really?" Q asks, and with a thin smile his image shifts and morphs until Sasan is staring in shock at himself, clad in his own clothes rather than ones borrowed from Adam, regarding him with a slightly patronising smile.

"Because it looked like you'd go for anyone who looks like you," Q says in his voice. "A bit of a narcissist, aren't you, Sas?"

A surge of heat and embarrassment rushes through Sasan's body as he tries to keep his eyes from checking himself out, grasping desperately on to the unmoving Smudge as Q tauntingly pulls open the top button of his shirt; Sasan's shirt, he *owns* that shirt...

Sasan swallows. "Don't," he says, his face flushed, trying to break free from the gold-brown stare of his own eyes, his body crying out in want.

Q grins.

And Sasan wants to stop watching but can't bring himself to close his eyes, hot with mortification and forbidden desire, digging his fingers into his palm to try and distract himself.

"*Stop it*," he forces out.

Q raises a perfectly groomed eyebrow. "What makes Smudge so special?" he asks. "What makes him so *different* from all the other guys you've ever had? From all the other guys *here*?" Q leans in towards Sasan's ear, noting his half-hearted flinch as he whispers: "Stop fooling yourself, Sas."

A not-completely-unpleasant shiver runs down Sasan's back.

*Close your eyes*, Sasan tells himself, but his eyes still want to look, moving his gaze yearningly over the perfect copy before him, taking in every contour just out of reach of his subtly twitching fingers.

"Look at you," Q says, thinly-disguised contempt in his voice. He runs a hand roughly through Sasan's hair, Sasan tensing at his touch, breathing fast, a sob caught in the back of his throat.

"If you love him as much as you claim," Q continues, "you'd let him go. He deserves someone better. Someone who'll love him for *him*."

"No..."

"That's being a little selfish, don't you think?"

Sasan opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out.

He remembers quiet nights cuddled on the couch in each other's presence; running around Kenselton Hotel joking and laughing and falling on each other; the grasp of his hand the time Sasan died, Smudge's eyes filled with love and desperation and the unspoken plea for him to live; Smudge's ever-present desire to protect him from all harm, his nonchalant oblivion to the world's

accepted logic, the way his eyes sometimes glaze over when he's thinking, the way he looks at him and holds him and calls him Sas... the kid who was thrown out of his home at thirteen...

"I love him," Sasan finally says, and speaking it gives him some confidence. He hugs Smudge tighter, and finally finds the will to close his eyes and shut out Q's mocking impersonation. "Smudge. I love him. *I do.*"

Smudge moves in his arms. "You do what?" he asks, and when Sasan opens his eyes, Q has gone, and time has started again.

Sasan strokes a thumb across Smudge's lips, swallowing back tears. "This," he says, and leans in to kiss him, and Smudge does not resist.

\*

Jay reaches out a finger to touch Zach, stumbling back as Sylar's mind forcefully rebuffs him, shielding Zach's body from additional possession. He glances at Peter, the both of them near colourless and insubstantial in their half-life state, and he wonders if this is what being a ghost is like. He doesn't even know what he *is*, but when he puts his hands on the armchair, they go right through. The floor seems solid enough, though; at least, until he thinks about it, whereupon his feet sink through and he jumps back up, landing on once-again solidity.

Peter cautiously joins Jay by his side, staring at Zach's body with mild trepidation.

"He played us," Peter says.

Jay is silent, still trying to register this piece of knowledge.

"If... Sylar could take control of him, then we could too, couldn't we?" Peter asks. "I mean, if it's just acting..."

"I'm not 'just acting'," Jay says quietly. "And I don't think Sylar wants to share."

"There are two of us and only one of him," Peter points out.

"He's powerful," Jay says. "Whatever he is."

Silence.

Peter tries to touch Zach, only to encounter the same blocking.

And then, in a burst of will to escape, Jay catches him and pushes him back. "*Go for it,*" he says with sudden fierceness. "*Just keep trying.*"

Peter grasps Zach's arm, feeling Sylar's mind trying to throw him off, when Jay clamps his own hand on top of his, adding mental and physical strength-

Peter's other hand joins his first, his eyes closing as Jay turns him around and pushes him back, falling towards Zach in the chair, Jay suddenly doing a jump and lunging towards him in a huge shove-

Peter jerks up in a suddenly-solid armchair, physical heart thumping, his gaze darting around in shock.

"...Jay?" he breathes out, but the world is now in full colour and he feels everything, and the body he inhabits has a strange familiarity to it.

He brings his hands up in front of his eyes, still hyperventilating, then drops them, looking down at and picking at the plaid shirt he's suddenly wearing.

Peter stumbles out of the chair. Somewhere in his mind he feels a suppressed consciousness. He swallows.

"...Zach," he says, just in case. "It's... it's Peter, I... I don't know what's going on... I'm sorry... I don't know how... how to control this..."

He thinks he hears a scream, but it's coming from somewhere inside his head... and he stumbles against the wall as he feels a violent lunge attempt to tear his mind out of the borrowed body, and Peter struggles to stay in it, wringing his hands together, feeling through the fingers, trying to emphasise every sensation...

*Get out of this room*, he thinks, and runs out the door. Find others. Let them know...

He winces violently and staggers back as Sylar makes another attempt to regain control. The attack breaks off halfway, and Peter hopes that Jay is okay, wherever he is - for he can no longer see him; and whatever he's doing to try and keep Sylar at bay will last long enough-

He doesn't know this place, the pattern of corridors alien to him. Peter runs a hand through his hair and swears.

"Zach?" he asks, feeling as though he's speaking to himself.

But Zach doesn't have any better idea where to go. He doubts that Louis would be any help, and he has no idea where Smudge and Sasan have run off to. All he can do is try to keep Peter there against the continued attacks, preferring him to the alternatives of either having Sylar in there, or waiting in trepidation for Sylar to return.

He's grateful for the company.



#### XIV. in. his. image.

In the routine drudgery of life, there are some things to wish for. Something to break that dullness, perhaps, dragging you out of the course of events you've resigned yourself to, forcing you to deal with new, strange, unexpected realities, and find life - and find yourself - in the adventures that come along with it. It's the stuff that dreams are made of.

And Stanley wishes that he could look at this interruption this way, but his head is filled with thoughts of the Biology test in two days and how he's barely studied for it. The textbook hangs like a guilty weight in the haversack slung around his shoulder. But what Tony said was true - if he ignores this now, he'll live to regret it.

At first glance, there isn't anything particularly alien or out of the ordinary about the group of people Tony leads him towards. But then he gets close, and senses something *off* about them, an inexplicable something that he now recognises in Tony as well: something intrinsically foreign about the group, as though they were tourists, but so much *more* so. Their illness at ease is practically palpable. A couple or so of them almost look sick.

Stanley regards them warily, reading them as they approach.

The fear is a common factor, stronger in some than others. He picks out the most visibly afraid one: geeky-looking fellow, almost clinging to the brick wall, a glazed over look of trauma on his face. Tensed shoulders. Shallow breathing. He's not used to whatever this is, Stanley thinks. He's out of his comfort zone. He likes order; perhaps control, both in himself and others. Highly-strung. Perfectionist.

The man next to him seems to be a friend; he's calmer, with a quiet intensity to his unobtrusive presence. He's scared, too, but hiding it better, holding the fear under the surface, hinted at in just a slight fidgeting. Next to him is perhaps the calmest of the group - he looks almost bemused by everything. Intelligent, though, and alert, with a passive friendliness. The last guy is standing slightly apart from them. Shifty eyes, currently regarding Stanley with suspicion. Scared, too, though he's hiding it, and looks almost as though he wants to bolt and find his own way out of here.

"This is Stanley," Tony says. "He's our tour guide."

"Hi," he says, not quite knowing what he'd just volunteered for, and not quite comfortable with the sudden scrutiny he gets from the group, as though he were some strange creature to be stared at.

"Adam, Leo, Jason, Mitchell," Tony adds in quick introduction, and Stanley joins the people to the names.

"Tony says you guys want to get somewhere?" he asks.

"Yeah," Leo says. "Wells and Lake. Do you know the way?"

"There's a bus station on the next street," Stanley says. "There are maps there you could check out..."

"Sure," Tony says. "Let's go."

Adam leaves the comfort of the wall and they start walking. Stanley leads the way, casting occasional glances back at them. They seem to get more traumatised as they go along. Tony is the most okay, but there's a forced quality to it.

Stanley can almost believe that they really are from another world; or worlds, ones somehow fundamentally different from his own, where, if Tony was to be believed, a whole range of fantastical forms all fall under the category of human.

His mind reels to consider it. How do they get anything done? How do they communicate? Wouldn't different features lead to different expressions, and if so, how would they know what others are thinking, or what they're like? How do they mass produce goods like clothes if there's so much variety in shape and size to account for? Do they fall ill the same way? Are they treated with the same medicines? How would doctors know what healthy was? How could anyone be attracted to alien-looking beings; and what would it be like to have family members that didn't even look like they came from the same *species*...

He thinks of his mom with a hypothetical third arm and an unnaturally-angled nose, and everyone considering that normal, and his stomach churns.

There are a couple of people standing around at the bus station when they arrive.

Adam heads gratefully towards the map. Maps he can understand. They make sense. This one appears to have place names entirely in lower-case, but it doesn't matter.

\*

It takes a while for him to realise that he's alone, and that he can almost feel the silence.

Louis finishes his food and the glass of water that Zach gave him, then puts down the empty plate and cup and carefully swings his legs around to get off the couch. He gingerly places a foot down and slowly stands, testing his weight. His legs hold. They still hurt, but he can walk, and the confirmation sends a wave of relief through him.

The table of food is as the others left it. He's had his fill, though, and wherever the others went off to, he doesn't expect them back soon. If ever. But Zach...

Louis makes his way in the direction he'd seen Zach go, limping a little, and listening out for any sound. Smudge and Sasan are around somewhere too, he knows, and then decides that he should probably stay away. He doubts that Smudge is yet over what happened.

He hears a noise down the next corridor, and picks up his pace.

"Zach?" he calls out; and then he turns the corner and sees him. But there's something different about his eyes and the way he moves-

"Louis," Peter gasps out. "It's Peter, I'm not Zach, something's hap-"

He jerks suddenly, and Louis takes a reflexive step back.

"What-"

"It's Sylar. Jay and I were dead but somehow he... pulled us to him, and to Zach, and-"

"What... *how*?"

Peter hesitates, the struggle having lessened a little. "He's..." Peter takes a breath. "Zach isn't one of us. He's the... original. He *created* us."

Louis just stares. It's starting to make sense, now... that feeling he had that Zach was somehow all of them...

"He's an actor," Peter continues. "He played us. And somehow, it... lets us live again through him, or someth-"

Another jerk. When it subsides, Peter's face is pale. "I... I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

"What happens when you can't?" Louis asks warily.

"Sylar takes over," Peter says. "I think. It's what happened before-"

His body throws itself against the wall, and something subtle shifts in his face. A different person. But not Sylar yet, and there's fear in his eyes-

"Zach?" Louis asks.

Zach blinks and then looks at him.

"*Louis*. You've got to hide me somewhere," Zach says urgently. "Before Sylar comes back. I don't know what he's going to do or make me do, but if I'm locked up or tied up then he can't use me..."

"But where..."

Zach glances around, vaguely aware of a battle going on somewhere in his head as he starts walking, Louis following alongside-

Zach pulls on a door to check. It opens outwards.

"Put me in a room and barricade the door shut," he says. "If I'm trapped in there then Sylar can't-"

Zach squeezes his eyes shut, as though fighting something off. He opens his eyes again. Still him. "When the others get back, let them know. Sylar doesn't have his own body, so he's powerless. He'll be only human, and outnumbered, and if... I have to die to kill him for good..."

Zach peters off. Louis swallows back a sudden twinge of guilt.

"You'd do that?" Louis asks.

Zach cracks a wry smile. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one."

Silence.

"Yeah," Louis finally says, hoping that not too much guilt is audible in the syllable. "I guess."

Zach's gaze is steady, looking right at him, and Louis has the uncomfortable feeling that he *knows*. Yet it doesn't feel like a condemnation or a patronising judgement; it's just the two of them, standing there like equals, and the unspoken comment from Zach: *I was you once*.

"You're a better person than you let on, Louis," Zach says quietly. "I know that."

Louis doesn't say anything, concentrating on holding his gaze and not letting anything slip.

But time is short, and Zach quickly snaps out of it.

"I'll try to get rid of Sylar any other way I can," he says, slipping into the nearest room. Louis follows after, taking his lead and dragging a table out of the room so as to block it from the outside.

"Come back in a couple of hours to let me out."

"How... would we know if it's you or Sylar?"

Zach hesitates, then: "I'll know how to prove it."

Louis nods.

Zach appraises the table. "Do you think this is heavy enough, or-"

He freezes, eyes wide in panic-

"Zach?"

Something changes in his face. A sudden calmness, and a slow grin. An eyebrow raises.

"No, the name's Sylar." He looks Louis up and down, taking in his Smudge-battered form and grabbing his still-hurting arm when Louis tries to hit out. "Who did that to you? The bisexual guy?"

"...Where's Zach?" Louis yells.

Sylar clamps a hand on his shoulder. "Quinto isn't in at the moment," he says cheerily. "And it... looks like we have a common enemy. Let's go find him, shall we?" His grin widens.

"No-"

Sylar figures he could do without him, then. He shrugs. "Suit yourself," he says. He gestures at the open door. "Get in."

"Wh-"

Sylar grabs him and shoves him in. Louis stumbles, trying to regain his balance, when Sylar slams the door shut and pushes the table across.

Louis pounds at the door. "HEY! Let me *out*!"

Sylar strolls off.

\*

They locate Wells and Lake - or 'wells' and 'lake' as it says on the map - and the building at its corner, and a bus that stops near it.

"We don't have any money," Mitchell states, having come to the same realisation Tony had earlier.

Tony looks hopefully at Stanley, who gets a bad feeling about the imminent state of his finances.

"We'll walk," Leo says. "How much time do we have left? ...Adam?"

Adam blinks, retrieving himself from the safe place in his head. "21 minutes," he says.

"It's not that far," Leo says. "We can make it."

Adam pales further at the thought of having to walk through this nightmare, and returns to the safe place in his head.

"...Look," Stanley starts, "if you really need money I can..."

"It's all r-"

"Yes," Jason says, cutting Leo off. "That would be extremely helpful, thank you."

"We'll never be able to pay him back-"

"*I'm not getting stuck in this place*," Mitchell says.

"Yeah, and we might get lost if we walk," Tony points out.

Adam is in the safe place in his head, and doesn't say anything, staring quietly at the map.



Stanley doesn't really know what he's doing; this is hard-earned money he's dealing with, but there's something uncomfortably strange about this group of people. And whatever they're trying to do, they seem desperate.

"You could take a cab," he says. "There's a stand behind there... some big ones that should be able to fit the five of you. It could drop you off right where you need it."

He has the sudden, fleeting thought of going along with them. Tony's request he join them as a tour guide might have been an implicit invitation to come along, but he doesn't think there'd be much need for guiding when inside a cab, and if he went along, he'd have to spend more money to get back...

"20 minutes," Adam says tightly. There's a slow panic building up inside him along with the wild conviction that something is going to go wrong and they'd be stuck here forever. Or perhaps just him. He could be unlucky that way...

*Hitler*, he thinks, in an involuntary fulfilment of Godwin's Law. *Hitler, and all the Jews he killed. Did that happen here too? Did all of them look like me?*

The others start walking and he figures some consensus must have been reached, though he hadn't been paying attention. The realisation bites. He's supposed to always be on top of things like this. He's the one who always pays attention, who knows what's going on-

They're heading towards the glass doors of a shopping mall; the local guy is saying something about a taxi stand on the other side. A new wave of panic hits Adam. Shopping malls are full of *people*, and even back home in his normal world it was enough to make him stay away; but *here-*

He swallows back the beginnings of a panic attack and tries to breathe.

*Ignore them*, he tells himself, as their small party heads through the doors and into the bustle. *Ignore everyone and just walk, and it'll all be over in 20 minutes and everything will be fine-*

*-or not*, he thinks. *You don't know what will happen. You could miss the deadline, or end up somewhere wrong, or...*

Adam allows himself a brief glance at his surroundings, shifting his gaze from the spot on Tony's shirt he had been concentrating on.

It looks like a regular mall. Could be one, if he tunes out the people - both real ones and those looking out from advertisements - and tuned out their voices and the persistent knowledge that every product he's seeing on display was designed and manufactured by hands just like his-

He goes back to staring at the spot on Tony's shirt.

Their small group provides some small comfort against the storm in his brain. Technically it shouldn't - they're physically indistinguishable from the local population - but there's some security in their shared foreignness and their shared memories of different worlds.

*How do they tell each other apart?* he finds himself feverishly wondering, only to sense the answer: *The same way we do.*

*...It's just us, he thinks. On a larger scale.*

And that makes it a little easier to deal with, and calms him down a little.

*If we'd built a city of us. A world. Made that the new normal. This is what it would be like.*

He takes in the sight of everyday people just going about their business: browsing through things, queuing at the counters, chatting animatedly.

And in a burst of clarity, he realises that he doesn't know any of these people. They're all complete strangers. Like any other collection of strangers at a mall.

He finds that if he looks at them carefully, the subtle differences emerge: the way they stand, talk, move, gesture... He picks out three young boys in the crowd as they pass through the toy section. One is cheerily and obliviously pulling teddy bears off the shelf while singing the alphabet song, and another - his brother? - is quietly engrossed with a tiny toy xylophone. The third is staring intently and somewhat angrily at the floor and trying to stomp his way through to china. Adam would probably be able to tell them apart had their parents for some reason entrusted him with babysitting.

He glances around at the local adults milling around the place, and senses the similar differences lying just beneath the surface.

It was just a matter of paying attention.

He wonders if that made people be nicer to each other, if they were always paying attention.

And, for a moment, the world doesn't seem that scary.

\*

At first he bangs on the door, then remembers the table on the other side of it and takes instead to pushing against the stubborn wood, panic driving him to do so for longer than his injuries can take.

"Let me *out!*" Louis cries again, even though Sylar is probably far away now.

The exertion makes his head throb harder with pain, still not recovered from having a chair crashed against it. Q healed him only enough to make him walk again, and the rest of the damage sends up another broken symphony of hurt as Louis throws himself against the door, feeling the impact slam through his body. He rolls back against the door and weeps.

"Let me out..."

No one knows he's here. Just Sylar, and Louis doesn't think he'll be coming back. Images of his own death float through his mind: of slow starvation and thirst eventually taking him, left here alone on the musty carpet to draw his final breaths...

Louis gulps in air while he still can. His lungs ache. He sniffs away tears, wiping a hand across his eyes, and stumbles away from the door. Maybe there's another way out, or something he could use to help...

It's an old fashioned bedroom, almost stereotypically so, with its four-poster bed covered with heavy bedding and the archaic twisted wood of the furniture. Thick satin curtains at the windows. Louis tentatively takes a handful and draws it back, exposing windows that look clearly out onto an amorphous pinkish mist. He stares at it for a moment, then lets go of the curtains and leaves the windows, the pinkish light spilling through the curtain gap and basking the room in its deadened illumination.

Louis runs fingers along the dark wood of the closet, feeling the grain of the texture against his skin with a kind of distant wonder. He grasps the handle and slowly pulls the door open, remembering Narnia.

But it's just a closet. A few abandoned clothes hang inside.

There's a full-length mirror on the other side of the door. Louis exchanges weary glances with his reflection. He swallows, observing the damage, a little scared by how it looks worse than he thought. Several trails of dried blood run down the side of his head, amidst a mass of bruises now turning dark; and his eyes appear more frightened than he feels.

In his features he recognises the others. He sees the recently-encountered Sylar, whom he thinks has never looked this scared; he remembers Smudge bearing down on him repeatedly with his fists and the chair; he remembers Sasan, and a stolen moment gone too soon.

Louis reaches out a hand to touch the mirror and sees his reflected hand come up to meet it. His other hand goes to his head, trying weakly to smooth out hair matted with his own blood. He can almost make himself believe...

But no. Sasan would never look this pathetic. This... his reflection... it's just him, Louis Ironson, and the revulsion churns sickly in the pit of his stomach.

He drops his hand, and turns away from himself, and sees Q standing there.

\*

There is nothing here, but neither is there any other place they'd rather be; and so they stay cuddling each other on the couch, basking in the silence of the room. Words would spoil the moment. But in the quiet there can be healing, and Sasan feels Smudge relaxing more and more against his shoulder as time goes by.

Sasan wonders what this place is, exactly. Some regular parallel universe, or perhaps one perpendicular to all the rest, or a different place altogether... He gets the feeling that this room - and perhaps all the other rooms - is not really part of the house, and that if he closed the door and opened it again, the scene could very well have changed. Perhaps it would bring them back to wherever this place originated, returning the dusty garden to its place beneath its original sky, and let its leaves breathe once again...

He hears the sound of soft footsteps against the floor. Sasan reflexively tenses, and then remembers that Sylar is dead; but the voice that speaks is tinged with a familiar malice:

"Holding hands? *How sweet.*"

Sasan jerks, turning around wide-eyed to see... Zach... only something tells him it's not Zach, not really, not with that grin and the barely concealed hatred in his eyes, and is that a *knife*-

"...Zach?" he asks anyway, almost daring to hope. Smudge has let go of his hand and turned around with him, and Sasan sees Smudge's face darken, his shoulders growing tense in recognition-

The intruder raises an eyebrow. "Really? You think so? ...It's the plaid, isn't it?"

"You're supposed to be *dead*!" Smudge shouts.

Sylar chuckles. "Yeah, nice try there. But I think it's my turn." He regards the knife in his hands. "And you know what the best part of this is?" he asks, sauntering closer and jabbing the point of the knife at them. "You can't hurt me without hurting your dear Zachary." He laughs.

"LEAVE ZACH ALONE!" Smudge yells, clambering over the top of the couch, falling sideways onto the floor with a *thunk* but picking himself up quickly, hands balled in fists, fire in his eyes.

"Smudge-" Sasan starts.

"What are you going to do, you little bisexual?" Sylar asks, both of them ignoring Sasan. "I may not have my powers in this pathetic mortal body, but I'm armed and you're not." He taps the knife. "And you'll never get rid of me unless you kill him. You won't *do* that, would you?"

Smudge glares at him. "*I hate you*," he states, and the words are wrung tight with hostility and the barest shaking of his voice.

The sight pushes Sasan to get off the false safety of the couch and join Smudge, grasping his arms from behind, murmuring his name, trying to pull him back, away, because they could still run from here-

Sylar shrugs. "Lots of people do. I'll have to work on that after I kill you, and if your boyfriend stands in the way he's welcome to join-"

"*YOU DON'T HURT SASAN!*" Smudge yells, and he would have lunged forward and struck out in ignorance of the knife if Sasan didn't pull him back, whispering in tremulous syllables to just leave it, they can still run, they can still get away, but Sasan feels Smudge's body trembling in front of his, muscles tensed and ready to fight, and he knows that they're the same size but Smudge somehow seems so small next to Sylar, and Sasan doesn't want to let him go-

Smudge drops his voice, still eyeing Sylar's tauntingly slow approach. "I can take him," he tells Sasan. "Let me go, I can take him-"

"No you can't."

"*Sas...*"

Sasan doesn't even know if they could run; Sylar is in the way between them and the door, and moving closer to the door means moving closer to him.

"You can't win," he says, loosening his grip slightly. "It's Zach, you can't hurt him..."

Smudge wrenches himself out of Sasan's arms and rushes wildly forward, wondering if he could grab the knife and-

"Smudge!"

Sylar grins. He casually meets Smudge's approach: grabbing him, raising the knife to his neck-

Smudge bites down on Sylar's arm and earns a sharp nick to his ear. He gasps in pain.

"Zach *felt* that," Sylar growls into his ear. "You don't want to hurt him, do you?"

Sylar looks up to where Sasan is standing, rooted to the spot in terror. Sylar raises an eyebrow. "Here to watch your boyfriend die?" he asks. "Poetic, isn't it? First you, now him. Both by my hand, though it would have been nice if you'd stayed dead. Saves me the trouble of having to do it all over again."

"SAS, RUN!" Smudge bursts out.

"Shut up," Sylar tells him.

"Don't..." Sasan says, helpless desperation in his eyes. "Please don't... don't hurt him..."

"Why shouldn't I?" Sylar asks. "He started it. How many times did you *actually* kill me?" he asks Smudge.

Smudge tries to glare at Sylar, then realises he's in the wrong position to do so.

"I *hate* you," he says again.

"I try my best," Sylar admits.

The knife scratches tauntingly against Smudge's neck, scraping a line through the blood trickling down from his ear.

Sylar looks back at Sasan. "Are you just going to stand there while I kill him?" he queries. "Waiting your turn? Or do you somehow think you have the ability to change my mind... Hey. Cheer up. You look like a kicked puppy. It's embarrassing. Someone might come by. Show some respect for that face."

"You're supposed to be dead," Sasan says weakly. "It was supposed to be over..."

"That's the beauty of second chances, isn't it?" Sylar asks. "And third ones... fourth ones... Any last words for Smudge here before I rip his neck open?"

Sasan's tear-filled eyes find Smudge's, and hold his gaze.

\*

Zach tries to move, to do something, anything, but Sylar won't relinquish control, his mind an overpowering presence in his head, dragging him sadistically along for the ride. Sylar plays him like a

puppet - controlling his limbs, his expressions, his tongue, and the bitter irony is not lost on Zach. The character plays the actor.

He feels Smudge grabbed tight in his arms, the knife in his hands casually running against Smudge's neck; sees Sasan standing there, completely broken; and he wants to give some sign of empathy, but Sylar keeps his eyes mockingly cold.

In their own half-coloured world, Peter and Jay watch the proceedings. Jay is weakened from his struggles to keep Sylar out, but wounds don't last long in this place.

"How is he winning?" Jay asks, face deep in concentration. "How can Sylar go against three of us and win?"

"He's powerful," Peter says. "He had all those powers back in the watch shop... maybe using them trained his mind to be stronger, or-"

"Maybe," Jay says.

"We can't let him kill them," Peter says. "There has to be something we can do-"

Jay looks around the place, lost in thought.

"How did we get here?" he asks.

Peter looks at him.

"...Sylar brought us here just by... thinking?" Jay continues. "If he could do that, couldn't we bring him back?"

"If we're not as strong-"

"But it's not about strength," Jay says. "It's about what's possible, and if it's possible to think your way here, it has to be possible to think your way back..."

"Back where, to his shop?" Peter asks. "That's his turf-"

"But we both know what it looks like, so we could imagine it-"

"But-"

"If he follows us there, he won't be here," Jay says. "...We're already dead, Peter. We don't have much to lose." He nods towards Smudge and Sasan. "I think those two do."

\*

*Earlier*

"You," Louis says, but he's too tired to fight.

"Why the accusatory tone?" Q asks. "If it hadn't been for me, you'd be dead by now."

"If it hadn't been for you, *none of this would have happened*-"

Q shrugs. "Maybe. I apologise for interrupting your fascinating, joy-filled life."

"*Are you happy now?*"

"Define 'happy'." Q takes in their surroundings. "This is a nice room."

"Let me out," Louis says, changing tack. "Please..."

"You don't tell me what to do, Louis."

Q taps a wall. A screen expands on it to show Sylar approaching Smudge and Sasan; they're talking, but there's no sound.

"Remember our deal?" Q asks. "Someone is going to die in your place. Or maybe... two."

Louis stares at the screen, lost in the look of terror in Sasan's eyes. He goes up to the screen, palms against it as though he could will himself through, take Sasan away, soothe that scared look off his face...

"*No*," he says brokenly.

"You don't get to choose, Louis," Q says behind him. "You made your decision. Or have you changed your mind?"

Sasan and Smudge are whispering to each other with words he cannot hear. He feels that painful pang of loneliness again: loneliness, desire, jealousy. Sasan never whispered to him like that...

Louis closes his eyes, wetness sliding against the edges of his eyelids.

"Do you think you're ever getting out of this room?" Q queries.

Louis opens his eyes, gaze still fixed on the screen, his mouth dry. He sees Smudge run to attack Sylar and the knife go up against his neck. He sees Sasan, watching, unable to do anything.

He feels the ancient silence of this room. The door hangs heavy and immovable in a corner of his mind, weighing him down with its presence, as though wanting to trap him here forever.

"You... gave me three choices," he says, the beating of his heart tight against his chest. "You... you said that if I... died... you'd send everyone else home."

"If you died *painfully*... and slowly..." Q trails off. "Yes."

Louis swallows.

"*You're a better person than you let on, Louis. I know that.*"

He remembers his reflection in the mirror and how it pales against the image of Sasan on the screen. He doesn't particularly care for Smudge's life, but he sees how Sasan reacts to it being threatened, and he's moved to care.

*I could die for you*, he thinks in a fit of martyring conviction and passion. *I could...*

But so would Smudge.

*Why did it have to be me?* Louis asks bitterly, question poised to the air. *What did I ever do to deserve being abducted into some cruel game of life and death, manipulated against my will to hurt those I would have otherwise never wished ill on; can't they see that I had no choice... but they already hated me. They already hated me from the start, in those cells, in...*

"Louis?" Q asks.

The maelstrom of thoughts peters into quiet.

*You're a better person than you let on.*

Silence.

"Take me," Louis finally tells Q, voice tight and shaking with forced bravado. "Kill me. Send them home. Alive."

"Really?" Q asks, raising an eyebrow. "There's no turning back on this one. And no one will ever know what an... amazing, *wonderfully selfless* thing you did..."

Louis remembers Zach's face before Sylar took over. That calm *knowing* in his eyes...

Louis blinks away a tear. "I know. Just do it. They deserve to live more than I do."

Q regards him in clinical silence.

"...As you wish," he finally says.

And Louis falls to his knees as his legs give way, screaming in pain to a now-empty room.

The curtains flap dully in the breeze, ignorant of his cries. Louis falls onto his side, twitching violently through his tears, bleeding into the carpet in the agony of his sacrifice.

\*

The scene slips away, Sylar's eyes opening in sudden disorientation, losing his controlling grip.

On a whim, Peter thinks-

*my office*

-and he grabs onto the thought in the morphing reality, expanding it into cubicles with their desks and chairs and computers and-

The scene takes hold and grows solid around them. The place is deserted, bathed in fluorescent light. Air hums from an air-conditioner. Windows frame a dark blue sky deepening into black. Clean, shiny computers lie on desks, cold to the touch.



Jay touches a stack of papers. They rustle against each other beneath his fingertips.

Sylar is back as himself, in the same not-quite-tangible form as they are, Zach nowhere to be seen.

"*What did you do-*"

"No," Peter says, as Sylar's hand raises to attack; and he sees the confusion in Sylar's eyes, almost mirrored in his own, as nothing happens.

Jay stares. "How did you-"

"...I don't know," Peter says. "I think we're in my world... my mind. I... I imagined this place, and... if Sylar could take us to his shop, it looks like I can do this too. Whoever creates the construction has control."

Sylar glares. "But you don't have any *powers*."

"I'm a rocket scientist," Peter points out, though his voice wavers a little. "And if... teleporting around the afterlife isn't rocket science, I'm not sure what is."

"...That doesn't even make any sense," Sylar says.

Jay steps around to Peter's side, facing Sylar.

"I think we should move, don't you?" Sylar asks.

And Jay lunges out with his mind as the scene starts to shift; fighting against the greyness of Sylar's watchmaker's shop, keeping Peter's construction steady - feeding off what he sees and concentrating to keep it all there, and present - and soon the intervention stops, and the office is solid around them again.

"There are two of us," Jay says. "And we're all dead. We're even, and you're outnumbered."

"And what are you going to do?" Sylar asks. He looks around at the cubicles, raising his arms and dropping them in amused contempt. "Work me to death?"

Peter briefly considers the possibility of forcing Sylar into eternal data entry, but he doubts he'd be able to hold up the construct that long, and it seems a little too mean.

A thought strikes him, and he tentatively realises a hand, *thinking* out at Sylar-

-and telekinetically raises him off the ground.

"This is my world," Peter says in an awed whisper.

Sylar raises an eyebrow. "You can't keep this up forever."

"Neither can you," Jay says. He steps forward, looking up at Sylar's hovering form. A small smile fleets across his face. "Get used to it. We're in charge now."

\*

He's suddenly back in his apartment.

"SAS!"

Eyes wide in panic, Smudge yanks out his ITDT, furiously pounding the buttons with his thumbs, seeing the screen stay dead-

"No..."

He turns frantically around on the spot, trying to get back to where he'd been, where Sasan was, and what if he was still there with Sylar and-

"NO!" he yells. "SAS! WHERE ARE YOU?"

Hyperventilating, he clambers onto his bed, fingers splayed against the wall as though to somehow break through-

He pounds on the wall, only to hear a frustrated return-pound from his neighbour and a yelled command to shut up.

Smudge wipes tears from his face and returns to the spot he'd appeared in, sinking to his knees, his mind and voice crying out.

"Sas..."

He curls up, trembling, and cries into his knees, hand clutching the dead ITDT, despairing for the end of normality.



### **XV: it. gets. better.**

There are dreams in which you get into a problem and have to work your way out; and then you're almost there, or stuck, when the dream comes to a sudden end... and for a few moments you're still trying to work it out before the realisation hits that you're awake, and dreamtime dilemmas matter no more.

It takes Adam almost a full minute to get over the shock. The mall with its noise and too-familiar faces are gone. He's standing in his apartment, by his chair - which he nearly fell over - and staring at his computer in screensaver mode.

All is silent, save the thudding of his heartbeat and the sounds of his breath as he gazes wildly around, not daring to move, unable to register just what had happened-

His mind keeps returning to the mall: he'd been *there*, he'd just been *there*, they'd been walking, they had a guide, they'd been going to take a taxi to the exit at Wells and Lake and then they'd be home-

He *is* home.

Adam checks his watch. It's counting down from 17 minutes. The sky through his window is dark. The digital clock on his desk reads 2:03am.

He runs a hand through his hair and licks dry lips. "Hello?" he asks.

No reply. A sudden emptiness and sense of loss gnaws at him.

He grabs at his pocket for the ITDT and pulls it out. The screen is dead. He presses the buttons; nothing happens.

"Hello?" he asks again, desperation creeping into his voice. He doesn't know why. He'd waited so long to get home. All of that... he'd just wanted to get home, and now he *is* home, but for some reason he feels the hot sting of tears in his eyes.

He blinks them away. Adam tentatively goes up to his computer and moves the mouse. The screen gets out of its screensaver mode and back to the stuff he had been working on in what seems an eternity ago now, Smudge and Sasan dumping Sylar's dead body on his floor and asking for ways to permanently kill him...

Adam grabs his ITDT again. Shakes it, whacks it. The screen stays dead. He presses a hand against a wall, searching for something he can't quite define, sensing the deepening ache in his heart of a story ended too soon...

"No," he says, although he doesn't quite know what it means. 'No', he wants to go back to that freaky world that traumatised him with every second? 'No', he wants to return to that odd game of life and death as Q and Dem tried to come up with new ways to break them; or his arm sliced into shreds to free familiar strangers, or trying in vain to permanently kill a psychopathic serial killer, or...

Adam glances desperately around the room again, hoping for answers, or perhaps a friendly face to pop up, or even an unfriendly one... anything to let him know he didn't just imagine the whole thing-

No, he didn't. The ITDT lying solidly in his hand is proof of that, as is the bloodied, shredded sleeve on his right arm and the dried blood on his clothes.

He walks through his apartment in a daze. It seems suddenly surreal.

Sasan's blood-stained clothes lie in a bundle on the floor. Adam crouches down to touch them, but the fabric provides no revelations, and the lump in his throat grows bigger.

\*

Leo can't sleep.

His mind still refuses to let go of where he'd been, unable to accept that he is really home, or perhaps just unwilling to accept it.

Everything is too quiet. He's slept alone like this for years and it never bothered him, but this night... it's too quiet. His pre-bedtime routine felt fake, perfunctory. Like he's still waiting for something.

Earlier this same night in another world and in a place with no doors, he and Adam had chatted quietly in their beds. And the nights before that... all of them on the floor in a room, hiding from Sylar and the people after him; or in their own rooms on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of Kenselton Hotel, the others mere doors away...

He can't sleep.

The ITDT lies on his bedside table. Leo watches it, waiting half-heartedly for the screen to light up once more.

It never does.

\*

Maybe this is a dream, Sasan thinks shakily, finally climbing into bed after it becomes evident that no amount of panic is going to bring him back to where Smudge is, or was. Maybe this is a dream, and when he wakes up he'll be on the couch next to Smudge, and everything will be all right...

The clothes he borrowed from Adam are folded neatly by his bed. He'll wash them later. For now, he needs the reminder of the other worlds and their inhabitants: one of whom feels more real to him than anyone in his own world ever had, and whose presence he misses dearly.

\*

They get better at it with time.

Each grows attuned to the other's way of thinking out the virtual constructions they weave with their minds. It's like a game, almost, keeping Sylar at bay, solidifying prison cells and winding ropes and bottomless pits to trap him in.

They sense him fighting back, or trying to; but this is Peter Sullivan's world for now, and he guides the constructions and wields the power, all with the awestruck wonder of a kid with a new toy. He lets Jay change things too, sharing the control. It's a novelty with infinite promise. Their reality is pliable, and they gain a better awareness of how to shape and mould it to their liking. Sylar is their test subject. Neither is fully aware of his long history of wrongdoing, but they know he's a serial killer who had not been nice to them, and Jay at least feels a sense of poetic justice in their punishment.

They conjure up dark passageways with cold stone floors and walls and watch as Sylar tries to fumble his way out, shouting insults at them as they add on to the maze and keep him going in circles; Jay puts in a trapdoor where Sylar stands, sending him falling through into an eternity of thick liquid before throwing him out onto a glassy beach with palm trees that bend their trunks to swoop towards him, enclosing him in a forest of clawing wood and snaking tendrils as his newly-powerless hands try to pry his way out.

Peter stops, eventually, and with some unease watches Jay still quietly going at it.

"We can't keep this up forever," Peter says.

"How do we know if he's learnt his lesson?" Jay asks, but he reins in his thoughts, leaving Sylar lying trembling on a featureless floor depressed several metres into the ground.

They look down at him, and he looks up, eyes still burning with hate.

Peter turns his head away. It still makes him uncomfortable to see his face like that. It feels too familiar. Like they're hurting someone just like them, although Sylar evidently had no qualms doing the same thing.

Jay closes up the pit like a box, trapping Sylar in it. Out of consideration, he provides a lamp for light; and then in a wave of kindness recreates Sylar's watchmaker's shop from memory and puts him in it, with a door that only opens at seven to midnight every day.

*Gray & Sons*, it says on the window. Peter and Jay stand outside, looking in at Sylar staring back out wordlessly at them.

A breeze blows. Inside, the air is still, with nothing but the greyness and the slow ticking of myriad clocks. The simulation is just inaccurate enough to jar faintly at the corner of Sylar's mind.

For a moment, his pride falters; not enough to form any words, but Peter sees the softening of his eyes and the pleading fear in them, and he almost breaks the construct and lets Sylar go; but then he remembers Zach trapped in Sylar's gloating control and the near-murder of Smudge and Sasan, and he cannot bring himself to trust him.

He and Jay eventually turn away from the watchmaker's shop. It stands isolated on its patch of faded grass beneath the sepia sky.

They walk off quietly, Jay's hands in his jeans pockets, their shoes making no sound against the uncreated ground. Peter makes a path for them: packed soil baked dry by an unknown sun, tufts of grass and weeds springing hopefully out from its cracks.

"Where are we going?" Jay asks, and they slow to a stop.

They look back at the watchmaker's shop, small in the distance, connected to them only by the strip of pathway meandering through the whiteness.

"I don't know," Peter says.

He widens the ground they're standing on, expanding it into a small plot of land, as up above them a night sky complete with twinkling stars creeps its way across at Jay's command.

They form a small log cabin and move inside. A rug on the floor and a quietly crackling fireplace. A table with a lantern for more light. Two armchairs. Peter pulls the door shut. Jay carves out a window in the wood. They gaze out at the other patch of land in the distance, with their prisoner.

"We can't stay here forever," Peter says.

"We're dead," Jay tells him, his eyes unreadably calm. "This is it."

They fall silent, looking out the window.

Peter finally steps away: pulling off his loosened tie, slinging it over an armchair and then sitting down, letting his head fall back, his eyes closing, face basked in the shifting glow and shadows of the fireplace.

"It could get lonely," Jay admits, gazing out the window into the fog of uncreated space.

But only quiet meets him, and he turns away from the window to the other armchair.

\*

The pain finally ends, his mind crying out for home. When Louis opens his eyes, he finds himself lying on a floor basked in the early rays of dawn. There's a shaggy grey dog staring curiously at him. It gives a half-awake *wuff* as Louis gets to his feet, noting how he's intact and uninjured once again, but with a greyish-translucent pallor to his skin and clothes. Like he's not really there.

A black cat wanders by, squints at him, and wanders off.

The house almost shines golden in the morning sun. Louis moves past sofas and a bookshelf and finds himself in the doorway of a bedroom. A plaid comforter on the bed, and someone sprawled on top of it, fast asleep.

"...Zach?" Louis asks, but he has the feeling that, even were Zach awake, he wouldn't be able to hear.

He moves closer to the body, wondering if this is what the others had seen - Peter and Jay, wherever they'd been while fighting Sylar for control; if they'd been in this same sideline of reality, a plane between this world and the next, searching out their last breaths through the one who'd first made them live...

Louis reaches out a hand to Zach's arm, feeling the resistance give way until it feels as though he's almost being sucked in-

-and he falls through darkness and violent reorientation, suddenly lying on his back with the bed firm beneath him, and Louis opens Zach's eyes.

He lets out a breath, tight and scared, aware of the tiredness suffusing his newly-acquired body that had, just seconds ago, been asleep. But he sits up, looking down at his hands - Zach's hands - with stricken awe, seeing and feeling them at once so familiar - this body is exactly like his own - and yet remembering a time when he'd *talked* to Zach, seen him around, experienced the existence of this body from a place outside of it.

And if he falls still, and listens inside himself, he senses Zach's mind there-

[Louis?]

"It's me," he says aloud in soft reply.

Silence. Louis sits on the bed, just breathing, feeling the air through his borrowed lungs, feeling the life, savouring the incredible lightness of being.

Somewhere inside, Zach senses enough of Louis' thoughts and memories to *know*.

[I was right about you.]

Louis closes his eyes, the lull of sleep exerting its power over Zach's body. He wants to give in to it; fall back on the bed and drift away into dreams...

He lies slowly down, on his side, head sinking into the pillow, and feels the weight of relief wash over Zach's mind as it does his.

Louis' hand lightly clutches the cool edge of the sheets, soft between his fingers, and then moves to his cheek, knowing that Zach too feels the touch of the gentle stroke against his skin. His hand moves down across his chest to squeeze his side in a one-armed hug.

"Thank you," he whispers. For believing in him.

Zach's presence is calm in his mind. Accepting, understanding, unconditionally loving.

Together, they fall asleep.

\*

"Those were limited edition," Dem says sadly, mourning the destruction of the ITDTs as he and Q share a McDonald's Happy Meal.

Q shrugs. "They wanted to go home, I sent them home. If I'd left those things alone they'd have been off wayfaring the space-time continuum again in no time."

"But that's the *idea*," Dem says. "The more they travel around, the quicker everything disintegrates and we get the answers that lie beyond."

Q gazes disdainfully at a chicken nugget and pops it into his mouth. He chews. "Well," he says. "They're your responsibility now. I'm bored of this game. Do... whatever you want with them."

\*

It's almost been a week, now. Mike finally managed to get out of the comfort of his bed and out of his room and back into the world, but he's a lot quieter than he used to be, his easy-going demeanour replaced by a strange haunted look in the back of his eyes. He jumps at small noises. He has problems paying attention to anything. And he stays far, far away from mirrors as much as is possible.

Nobody really knows what happened to him. His mother has some memory of visitors from other worlds, but has difficulty connecting that experience with whatever has gotten into Mike, or why he looks so terrified all the time, or why he sometimes talks in his sleep, pleading "*I'm not Sylar!*" to invisible enemies, curled up tight on the side of his bed.

You cannot run from yourself.

But Mike tries, anyway, one desperate day after work, breaking out into a sudden run on the pavement, breezing and shoving past unwary pedestrians, across roads past angrily-honking cars, kicking off his shoes and smarting at the prick of asphalt on his bare feet; just running, and *running*, until he could finally run no more;

-collapsing against a wall with hot tears in his eyes and bloodied skin on his feet, heaving in gulps of oxygen through straining lungs as he slides to the ground, shaking; soul crying out for freedom from itself.

And then he'd finally had to backtrack to retrieve his shoes, and slowly trudge back home, head bowed in defeat, immune to the verbalised concern thrown his way, until he was back in his room, back on his bed, and sobbing dryly into his arms.

It is here that Dem finds him. He appears silently in a shadowed corner, looking on with what might almost be pity.

"You're still you, you know," Dem finally says, and the sobbing abruptly stops.

Mike slowly raises his head. He sees Dem.

"Associations are hard to break, I realise," Dem says, walking out from the shadows. "What Q did was unnecessarily cruel, but he doesn't understand or care about humans that much. Granted, I don't either, but I try to draw a line between cruelty and entertaining aggravation, and stay on the side of entertaining aggravation. My only ulterior motive is destroying the multiverse."

Mike's knees are drawn up to his chest. He doesn't budge.

"Whatever Sylar is... it has no bearing on you," Dem continues. "You exist as two independent entities. There are multitudes of people out there with your face who have attained unprecedented levels of perfection... benevolence, compassion, generosity, kindness... and just as many who have done the opposite. You're just one person, Mike, and everyone who exists is only ultimately responsible for themselves. To be the best person that *you* can be. And if others can't see that... if they look at you and see the workings of a twisted individual who until recently you didn't even know existed... then that's *their* problem, not yours."

"But I'm one of them," Mike says in a half-whisper. "I look at myself and see him. I... every time I speak, I... I hear his voice..."

Mike buries his face in his knees.

Dem gazes quietly at him from across the room, and then he vanishes.

\*



"Hello, Gabe."

Sylar spits out dirt, rolling disoriented out of the freshly-dug grave onto the alien grass, eyes wild and confused and filled with the memory of a watchmaker's shop.

"This is potentially a temporary resurrection," Dem comments, biting into a green-and-red-striped apple. He chews and swallows. "You've been a terrible person, and the various afterlife options won't be very nice to you. But I'm going to present you with a chance to redeem yourself. Do a good job, and the resurrection can be permanent. It seems the people in your world need you. They've been missing your special brand of excitement in their lives."

"...Really."

Dem smiles. "Really."

\*

"Do you honestly think you could be *anything* like me?"

Mike freezes at the voice, fear paralyzing him on the bed; heartbeat throbbing loud in his eardrums, eyes open wide at the wall, making out the faint shifting shape of a shadow, too terrified to turn his head and see...

Sylar raises an eyebrow. The action goes unseen and unappreciated. "Oh, please don't be *asleep*," he says. "That would be highly anti-climatic, don't you think?"

Mike trembles, fingers gripping the sheets tight, trying to get up the courage to call for help... but from whom?

He was alone. With *him*-

Sylar sighs and telekinetically flips Mike into the air.

Mike flails, grabbing wildly for purchase as his hands meet nothing but air as his scream finally breaks free-

-when Sylar silences him with his free hand gesturing a telekinetic chokehold into existence.

"Shhhh."

The voice is disarmingly soothing.

Mike whimpers, kicking the air with hands trying futilely to free his neck, panic writing itself out on his face as recorded images of Sylar and brains play out in his head.

Sylar slowly walks across the small bedroom, eyeing Mike as a predator does its prey.

*I'm going to die*, Mike thinks in a burst of clarity. And then that thought takes hold and stalls his mind. *I'm going to die*-

Sylar comes to a stop before him, looking up at the hovering Mike.

"Your mom and dad are busy," Sylar says, loosening his grip on Mike's throat a little. "We don't want to disturb them with your screaming, do we?"

A quivering tear slides down Mike's cheek. *I'm going to die.*

"What's your name?" Sylar asks.

Somehow, Mike manages to get his tongue to work enough for a whispered syllable. "Mike."

"Do you want me to put you down, Mike?"

Mike nods with vigour born from terror. "Don't... please don't kill me," he adds weakly, suddenly desperate to live. "Please don't-"

Sylar lowers him back down onto his bed. Mike instantly backs against it to the wall, trying to get as far away as possible, tears choked up in his throat.

"What would I gain from killing *you*?" Sylar asks, a note of contempt in his voice. "You're not... *special*."

It's a bit different from how Mike imagined it, now that he's actually facing him.

He's suddenly aware of how Sylar isn't some huge intimidating creature. He's the same size as him. And, like with the others, there's an overbearing familiarity to his very presence that seems to subtly coax Mike into letting down his guard...

But he can't do that, yet.

"You killed the others," Mike manages to say. "They... they weren't special either."

Sylar shrugs. "They were in my way. You're not."

Mike swallows. "Then why are you here?"

Silence.

"Someone thought you would... *benefit* from a visit. *Are you* benefitting? What do you want, exactly?"

Mike stares blankly. Sylar just stands there, waiting for an answer, or none; the look of scorn on his face the only potential danger at the moment. He's almost... safe.

"Hey," Sylar says. "*Mike*. Don't waste my time. I don't have all day."

"You're... you're not going to kill me?"

Sylar rolls his eyes and turns around. "That's it; I'm out of here."

He slips his hand into his pocket, activates the exit token Dem gave him, and disappears.

And Mike is alone again, on his bed, in his room, a strange peace settling over his mind.

\*

"It's time to go," the quiet voice says, waking Louis from his slumber.

The room is different now. Changed. Everything has faded almost completely to black and white: the bed, the walls, Zach's body. When Louis sits up, it's just himself that moves, and he's in full colour; as is the young woman standing by the door with a nametag that says 'Fhille'.

The doorway itself is filled with golden light.

"Louis Ironson," Fhille says, making a mark on her clipboard. "C'mon. I've still got two more of you to pick up before my shift is over... Peter Sullivan and Jay Lambert. You guys have a tendency to die, huh? Let's go."

So Louis gets off the bed, glances back at Zach one last time, then takes Fhille's hand and follows her into the light.

\*

On a good day, Smudge doesn't get kicked off whatever steps he chooses to sit on to watch the people go by. On a very good day, someone feels sorry for him and gives him food, or money for food; but that doesn't happen often.

He did not even protest when they kicked him out of his apartment and repossessed most of his belongings in exchange for his long overdue rent. He had been briefly puzzled over what they thought they could possibly do with the mouldy bread in the fridge and the shrine to his childhood pet fish Arthur, but he had not complained.

He finds it hard to do even that, now.

He'd gone listlessly along as they'd thrown him into the street.

Smudge cannot remember the last time he ate. There is only the street - now veiled in the shadows of twilight - and the occasional passerby, and the way Smudge gazes at the passing faces, looking... hoping...

Some part of his mind knows it's impossible. Sasan does not live in his world. But some part of his heart says he was just there... *just there*... it's been a month, but Smudge can still see that last look of terror in Sasan's eyes as they were torn apart; can still feel the touch of Sasan's fingers around his arms before Smudge rushed forward to face Sylar; can still remember a kiss...

Smudge wraps his arms around himself. Partly to protect from the cold, partly to imagine that Sasan is still there, holding him tight.

He doesn't know how to move on.

"Still pining after all this time?"

His head whips around at the voice. There's a mysterious old man seated on the steps next to him.

"You!" Smudge yells, but he can't bring himself to be angry, not in the sudden spurt of hope that has filled his heart at the sight of Dem. "*Where's Sasan?*"

Dem regards him mildly. "Back in his own world. Still alive, if you need to know. He's definitely better off than you are right now," he adds, giving Smudge's somewhat malnourished and unwashed form a look-over.

Smudge bites back frustration on his tongue. He can't afford to mess things up with Dem. Not when he's the only chance at seeing Sasan again.

"Take me to him," Smudge says. "...*please.*"

Dem raises an eyebrow. "Why? I thought all of you wanted to go home."

"I don't even *have* a home now," Smudge says.

He was supposed to have gone to live with Sasan. Once upon a time. But now...

"What makes you think that Sasan even wants to see you?" Dem asks.

Smudge opens his mouth to protest: of *course* Sasan wants to see him, why wouldn't he... but then he remembers Louis, and betrayal, and-

*No*, he thinks fiercely, cutting off that stream of thought. That thing with Louis had been a mistake. Sasan had said he was sorry, and he *was*.

"It's been a month, Smudge," Dem says. "You have to be realistic. You can't expect him to still be waiting for you, can you? ...Granted, I once knew a couple of pen pals who waited two years to see each other, but at least they'd promised to meet at the end of it. Sasan... had no good reason to believe he'd ever see you again."

*But I'm still waiting*, Smudge thinks of saying, despair in his gaze.

"Could you give him up?" Dem asks. "Maybe he's found someone else. Maybe he's happy. Maybe he's *happier* than he ever was with you."

*No*, Smudge thinks desperately, but he has no proof. Just a half-remembered embrace and a whispered *I love you*.

"Perhaps it's time to move on, don't you think?" Dem asks.

*Move on where?* Smudge wonders. He has nothing here but a cardboard box and a broken heart.

"Don't worry," Dem says lightly, patting Smudge on the shoulder. "You'll get over him."

"No!" Smudge says, grabbing Dem's hand, his eyes panicked and shining with tears. "No... no, please... I need... I need to see him again, I *know* you can bring me to him, I *know* it, *please*..."

"Begging will get you nowhere, Smudge."

"I'll do *anything!*"

Dem is silent for a while, then crouches down to meet Smudge's gaze.

"Do you love Sasan?"

"Yes!"

"What if I told you that he's happy now, and seeing you would only make things worse?" Dem asks.  
"Would you love him enough to let him go?"

Smudge swallows back tears, his fingers trembling on Dem's wrist. "I..."

Smudge sees visions of years alone. Wandering the streets, perhaps finding someone one day, but they wouldn't be Sasan... no one would, ever again...

"Would you?" Dem repeats, his voice calm.

...and Smudge thinks of Sasan, and remembers his smile, and how Smudge never knew what he'd done to deserve someone like that. And how it might be true, after all: Sasan might be better off without him. Smudge wants him to be happy. Happy, and safe... Smudge has fought back Sylar and anyone who has ever tried to hurt Sas, and at any moment, Smudge would willingly give his life in exchange for his...

And he finds that quiet conviction within himself.

"Yes," he finally says, eyes downcast.

"Do you need a place to live?" Dem asks.

Smudge regards him mutely.

Dem reaches into a pocket and pulls out a key. He hands it over.

Smudge takes it. His name is engraved on the bow.

"It will work on any surface large enough for a door," Dem says. "The place is stable, so you need not worry about it suddenly vanishing or collapsing into a black hole; at least not until I succeed in destroying the multiverse. If you ever lose the key, say '*Accio key!*' and it will get right back to you. Goodnight, Smudge."

Dem vanishes.

There's power in the key: it seems to be humming, very softly. Smudge stands up with it, cautiously making his way down the last couple of steps, his cardboard box of stuff temporarily neglected.

There aren't many people around this time of night. Smudge would be worried about being mugged if he actually had anything worth stealing, and if he actually got worried about personal safety in the first place.

The key's vibrating gets stronger as he approaches a wall, a little into an alleyway. Something is changing in the wall - faint lines darting across it, and as Smudge brings the key closer, the lines solidify into the outline of a door.

There's a keyhole. Through it, golden light steadily shines. Smudge pushes the key in, turns, and opens the door.

It's a small lobby. A tiny one, about four people wide and two deep, lit with the orange glow of a single ceiling lamp. Right ahead is another door.

Smudge lets the first door close behind him, and the sounds of the night fade away into the background. He slides the key into his pocket and steps forward.

The second door is set into the wall with no knob or handle, just a flat fingerprint reader to the side of it. Above that is a tiny LED screen on which Smudge can make out the word 'WAIT'. It isn't lit up at the moment.

He tentatively presses his finger against the reader. There's a beep; and the door slides open to a newly furnished apartment basked in a still, warm light.

It takes him a while to place it, but then Smudge realises that he *knows* this place: it's the half-finished apartment that he and Sasan had ended up in at that house. It's been finished now. The peeling wallpaper down, walls newly painted, a carpet on the floor stopping short at the polished wood before the ceiling-high glass windows at the end of it, still looking out into a web of foliage. It's night out there, too, with snow falling silently down onto the branches.

In a daze, Smudge slowly makes his way around. Shiny fittings in the kitchen. Beech cupboards still smelling of freshly cut wood. He pulls open the fridge and finds it stocked with food - some of it unrecognisable and possibly not from Earth, but he recognises an apple, pulls it out, and bites hungrily into it.

He chucks the apple core into the trash and turns on the tap - crystal clear water gushes out - to rinse off the juice running down his arm, along with some of the dirt that has collected there since whenever the last time he washed himself was. Smudge realises, belatedly, that he should have probably washed his hands before eating that apple, then decides it doesn't matter, anyway; many worse and more interesting things have found their way into his digestive system over the course of his life.

The spiral staircase winds its way up from the centre of the room, its wrought iron now new and dully shining, no longer rusted and green with oxidisation. Smudge makes his way past that to the other side of the room, where a television set stands facing a couch.

He pauses by the couch, hands grasping its top.

"Sas," he whispers, his words hanging still in the air with wretched longing. Then Smudge wipes the tear off his face and moves away from the couch.

The bookshelf next to the television is stocked high with books: *'who knows where I took this today? A Pictorial Guide to Europe'*; *'ny ny la ca!'*; *'twitter's such an asshole: The Pitfalls of Social Media'...*

He remembers Sasan's offer to read to him, and something tightens in his chest. Smudge leaves the bookshelf and goes towards the spiral staircase.

*I live here now*, he thinks, but there's still an emptiness inside him as he climbs the stairs. They lead into the bottom of the second floor. Smudge pushes the trapdoor open and clammers out, a part of him still hoping-

But the bedroom he emerges in is likewise deserted. There's a single bed against the wall, with crisp, inviting sheets. Bedside table, chest of drawers, and a lamp with an IKEA tag that Dem forgot to remove. Closet. Smudge pulls its doors open and is met with an array of clothes that are overwhelmingly striped or plaid. And a few hats that should never have seen the light of day.

There's a note tacked to the inside of the door:

*I stole these from Quinto's closet.  
They should fit you guys, and he never needs to know.  
- Dem*

...*'you guys'*.

The world seems to stand still for a moment. Smudge glances around, pulse racing, but all is quiet. He's alone.

But there's a new, fervent hope taking root inside him.

There's a door opposite the bed, leading into an adjoining bathroom. Fluffy white towels on the rack. A new set of toiletries by the sink. Smudge glances in the mirror, and decides he could probably do with at least a shower.

It would help to kill time, at least.

Though he doesn't really know what he's waiting for.

He doesn't dare to think about it.

Just in case he's wrong.

\*

Some time later, he's showered, shaved, clad in stolen clothes, hair marginally combed - Smudge dragged the comb through once before deciding that this wasn't a battle worth fighting - and back downstairs wolfing down his first real meal in ages. It's not much of a real meal, as far as real meals go - just a collection of edibles he discovered in the fridge and larder, most of which he can't even name.

He's still waiting.

*'you guys'*, he thinks, again. *Plural*.

Dishes dumped in the sink - he'll do them later, if at all, though probably later, because this place is too nice to ruin with dirty dishes - and feeling contentedly full, he spends some time watching the snow fall onto the trees. He wonders if there's a door out.

Soon after, he's on the couch fast asleep, *A Terrible Neighborhood for Delis* lying open on his stomach.

The snow soon stops, hours later. Dawn peeks through in the distance. Smudge sleeps on.

He doesn't hear the sound of the door sliding open, or the footsteps that make their way quietly across the carpet.

He doesn't see the hand that takes the book off his stomach and puts it down on the table, and gently brushes his hair off his forehead.

He almost feels the tender kiss on his cheek - he stirs slightly, then is still again.

"Smudge."

The whisper lightly shakes his slumber.

"Smudge..."

He opens his eyes to see the couch, his mind filled with the faint memory of a voice. A dream. It had to be a dream...

He almost dares not roll over, just in case. But then he finally does turn over to his other side, a lump catching in his throat as he meets that other precious version of his own eyes gazing back at him...

"...Sas?" he whispers.

Sasan smiles wanly back, mildly embarrassed. "Hi."

Smudge slides off the couch and grabs him in a hug. Holding tight, crying, fingers digging into the back of Sasan's shirt, knowing that everything is going to be all right, everything-

"I said I'd always be here for you," Sasan murmurs, stroking his hair.

"Sas..."

Sasan kisses his ear. "Always," he whispers into it.

Everything is going to be all right.

\*

Adam Kaufman finds the key one day at work.



He doesn't even notice the arrival of the small, nondescript white envelope with his name on it; he looks away from the computer screen for a moment, and sees it propped up against the monitor as though it had always been there.

Adam usually does not look favourably on colleagues who use work time for personal matters, but, hey, this *could* be work related - though he knows that mysteriously-appearing mail is not characteristic of regular business at the CTU - and he can't think of any other way to tame his suddenly-racing pulse, because he knows what things like these *are* characteristic of, and he'd written them off as ending for good a month ago.

Besides, there isn't any national crisis going on at the moment. He can afford the time.

With a quick glance around to make sure no one is paying attention to him, Adam opens the unsealed envelope and empties its contents into his hand.

A key with his name on it.

And a note:

*For loose ends. Works on any large surface.  
If you lose it, say 'Accio key'.  
- Dem*

For a while, Adam just stares. Taking it in. *Understanding...*

...or maybe not. This could be anything. It could be something bad. It could mean being shoved mercilessly around and fighting for his life again as part of some sadistic game...

But he can't bring himself to ignore it. He tries, for a while, putting the key and note firmly back into the envelope and going back to staring at complex graphs and datasheets, but he can't concentrate.

And soon he's looking at the envelope again; and soon he's slipped it into his pocket and excused himself from his desk. If anyone asks, he needs the restroom.

No one asks. It's Adam. They assume he's leaving his desk for a good reason.

He feels the key humming more strongly in his pocket whenever he gets near a wall. Adam turns into an empty and somewhat-dark hallway, and takes out the key. He moves it near the wall, watches a door draw itself out on it, and pushes the key into the keyhole as his mind reels with the impossibility of it all. His hands are shaking, but he gets the door open, and enters into a lobby with another door before him.

There's something in *The Chronicles of Narnia* that mentions it being unwise to let strange doors close behind you, because it's good to be able to see a way out. Adam remembers that, and leaves a gap - hopefully small enough that no curious passerby might see, but large enough to give him the comfort of knowing that he could always turn back.

He sticks his finger against the fingerprint reader. The door whooshes open.

It's an apartment. And he has the feeling that he's not alone.

Adam glances back, making out the gap leading back to the hallway he came from; and then the second door slides shut, and there's a moment of panic before he notices the control panel next to the door with a keyhole on it, among other things.

He puts the key in and turns. The door slides open, and Adam sees the gap again. His exit is still there.

He pulls the key out. The door slides shut a few seconds later.

Adam turns, and slowly walks further into the apartment. He can't stay for long here, wherever this is, but he has to know...

There's a television set, and a couch.

On the couch are two people, their legs hanging off the end, and Adam remembers a similar scene in what now seems like a long, long time ago.

"Hi," he ventures, when he's close enough.

There's a moment's pause; and then Smudge and Sasan sit up on the couch and look at him.

Adam's feet feel rooted to the ground. Somewhere in the last month he'd lost that sense of normalcy over seeing variations of his own face on other people. The weirdness hits him again, albeit with an old, comforting familiarity.

"Adam," Sasan says nervously.

Adam blinks, overwhelmed by how this is actually happening. "... I never thought I'd see you two again."

They turn at the sound of the door opening.

Leo steps in, regarding them in wonder. He comes forward, and pauses before them. "...Hey," he greets softly, a faint smile on his face. "...I've missed you guys. So much."

Adam hugs him briefly, solemnly, kind of awkwardly - as is always the case when Adam hugs anyone - and Leo returns it.

"Who else has access to this place?" Sasan asks. "Not Sylar, right?" He gives an uneasy laugh.

"Sylar's dead," Leo says. He hopes.

"Dem said I could live here," Smudge points out, vaguely defensive over the unexpected intrusions. Sasan nuzzles his neck.

"Yeah, you can," Leo says. He glances around, up at the staircase. This place is awesome, he thinks sadly. He wishes he could live here. All he has is a boring apartment, and the kitchen sink leaks. "We'll just drop by now and then."

Adam is crouched down by the bookshelf, and he stands up with a video camera in his hand and an odd look on his face. "Remember this?" he asks. "That... video we made. It's still in here."

*You're supposed to be working, Kaufman*, his brain tells him.

But he ignores his brain and plays the video.

And they remember.

\*

Tony drops by shortly after and helps himself to some of the ice-cream in the refrigerator, commenting about how unfair it is that he has to pay good money for a poky little college dorm room while Smudge gets this whole place for free. Smudge points out that at least Tony doesn't get people randomly dropping by and taking his ice-cream.

"Yeah, but you shouldn't eat too much ice-cream," Tony says.

"*Why not?*" Smudge demands.

"It's bad for you," Tony explains patiently. "It'll stunt your growth, and you'll never get as tall as me."

Tony ducks a Smudge-thrown copy of *Planerazzied!* and leaves, grinning.

"You could put in another door," Sasan suggests, when it's just the two of them alone again on the couch.

"Nah." Smudge kind of likes the random visits. "You could move in," he says hopefully.

Sasan smiles and runs his fingers through Smudge's hair. "I could. But, hey... I said you should come see my place one day. You don't have anything scheduled for this morning, do you?"

Smudge shakes his head. He doesn't have anything scheduled for the rest of his life, at the moment, and he wouldn't mind completely forgetting about that world if he could. It doesn't mean much to him. He could live here, hang out with Sasan in his world... He doesn't ever need to go home again.

Sasan kisses his head and gets up. "Come on. Let's go. You can meet everyone, freak them out..."

Smudge thinks of saying that he's already been there, once, when Sasan died; but he figures it's not important. He lets Sasan pull him by the hand over to the door. They haven't quite worked out the control panel yet - Adam said he'd figure it out one day when he was free - but for the moment, each key when used in this apartment takes them to whatever door that key last opened in the outside worlds.

Sasan pulls his key out of his pocket and turns it in the keyhole. The door slides open, and on the other side they see a door left open into Sasan's bedroom.

"I should close it, next time," Sasan muses as they step through. "Adam might work out that thing and come through at inopportune moments to ask me for fashion advice."

"He wouldn't *do* that."

"He should," Sasan says innocently, closing the door and watching as its lines fade back into the wall, as though it were never there.

Sasan opens his arms to gesture at the room, then drops them. "So. This is it. Welcome to my home, Smudge."

The last time Smudge was here, Sasan was dead, and he was alone to face a deserted room filled with hollow memories of its absent inhabitant. But now... the place feels happier, more vibrant. It's been lived in over the past month. The bed has been slept in. The television has been watched. The air is alive and welcoming, not still and foreboding like he remembers it.

And he's not alone.

Sasan takes his hand and squeezes it tight. Smudge looks at him, and smiles.

Everything is going to be all right.

\*

*eff*, zach thinks, gazing in stupefied frustration at his closet. *i know i have more clothes than this.*

## THE END

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### epilogue

Sasan moves in, although it's sometimes hard to distinguish that from what the others do. The apartment becomes a kind of clubhouse for them: a place to nip off to for a short while, or a long while, whenever in need of company or a quiet place.

Adam brings in a desk and chair, and sits there sometimes working through the night. His stuff soon takes over a whole corner of the apartment: books, files, CDs, a safe for classified material... all arranged neatly on or near the desk beneath a handwritten sign saying '*ADAM'S STUFF: DO NOT TOUCH*'. He drops by during work sometimes to pick up things he might have forgotten.

Sometimes he stays the night, intentionally or otherwise, falling asleep on the couch with his laptop on his lap.

Leo comes by some nights, too. He's been making his way through the books on the bookshelf.

Others visit, sometimes. Spock once came in, described the place as 'fascinating', then returned to do his duty on the U.S.S. Enterprise. Jason stood around uneasily the first time, not feeling completely at home, but returned one night to ask Adam for tech support ("I hear you're good with computers." "Did you turn on the power?" "...Yes.").

Mitchell briefly visited once when Adam was there, looked at him, and left.

Mike comes by one afternoon when Smudge and Sasan are alone and in the middle of lunch. He hangs awkwardly near the doorway, looking nervously at them. They're the only reason he's no longer dead.

"Hi," Smudge says, spoon halfway to his mouth.

Mike searches his face for signs of remaining hostility, but finds only neutrality. He nods in acknowledgement. "Hi."

Silence.

"You don't have to just stand there," Sasan says. "We won't bite; you're safe here."

Mike lets out the breath he has been holding. "Yeah," he says quietly. "I know."

The apartment piles up with stuff. Food. Books. Stationery. Pieces of furniture. Pillows. Unwanted belongings whose owners can't bear to throw them away. A bulletin board: on which they have tacked messages to each other, newspaper clippings, bad jokes, a used chocolate wrapper...

The place starts to look lived in.

Adam figures out the control panel one day, and shows them how to program their keys to bring them to worlds with potential-doors they know the coordinates to - just ones they've made before, for the moment - not just the last door they opened. They can visit each other, now, though that rarely happens. They meet each other often enough in the apartment. They find the best locations to appear in, so as not to draw too much attention and freak out whoever sees them step out of a door that was previously not there.

Sylar never visits. At least, not that they know of. "He's dead," Leo says again the next time the subject is brought up, although he sometimes has difficulty believing that himself.

They agree to never let anyone else know about this place. Just in case.

It's just for them.

And, this night, it's just them.

At his desk, Adam's fingers type steadily away on his laptop keyboard, face deep in concentration. He's found his happy medium. No more playing for his life. But no more forced isolation from worlds and people who had given his somewhat-mundane existence the most excitement and personal meaning it had ever had.

Leo sits on the couch, a book called '*hope or nope?*' lying open in his hands; sometimes pausing to gaze wistfully out at the garden, where the night-washed plants are dotted with fireflies. He wonders where exactly they are. He wonders if it even matters, and decides, no, not really.

Sasan leans against a wall nursing a cup of coffee, watching Smudge assemble an aquarium for a sad-looking goldfish named 'Sandwich'. He advises Smudge against filling it up with orange juice. "I think Sandwich looks like a *water* kind of fish," he says. Smudge concedes the point. He trusts Sasan.

Tony sits at the kitchen table, one hand scribbling away at his homework or whatever poetic inspiration has captured his mind, his other hand dipping occasionally into a packet of potato chips.

The wall clock ticks softly on at seven minutes to midnight. It's fifteen seconds out of sync, but none of them notice. If they do, none of them care.

And all is quiet.

All is well.

###

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### author's notes

And it's over. D:

This last chapter was started in Eugene, Oregon. It was finished on the other side of the planet, back home in Singapore, more than a month later.

Thanks to all of you who are stayed with this story to the end. I know I wasn't as consistent and regular with updating this as I was with *Quinto Formaggi*, with updates about once a month instead of once a week (although once a month is still far more often than some of my older fics, which were updated like once a year), and I'm deeply grateful for all your reviews, or just your lurking presence.

This story wasn't planned when I started writing, and most of the time I'd only known what would happen a chapter or two ahead. I did not expect it to end this way. There were so many alternate possible endings - I'd been debating between this one, and one in which everyone was dead (but happy). ...OKAY, I NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE OTHER PLOT DIRECTIONS I DID NOT TAKE. feel free to scroll past.

- there was this entire detailed narrative thread I'd worked out in which, at that last scene with Smudge and Sasan and Sylar, Sasan runs off as Smudge requests, and bumps into Louis in the hallway. Q pops up and tells Louis to kill Sasan. He's the life that's supposed to be taken in exchange for his. Louis can't bring himself to do it - he still loves him; and so Q does the honours instead. Sasan dies in Louis' arms.

Meanwhile, Sylar-possessed!Zach fatally wounds Smudge, but before he can deal the final blow, Peter & Jay manage to defeat him and give Zach back his control. Smudge is on the verge of death and calls for Sasan. Zach says he'll go get him; he runs off, discovers dead!Sasan and Louis. After a quick and agonised mental dilemma, Zach swaps clothes with dead!Sasan and impersonates him, just to give Smudge that final moment of peace.

Ghost!Sasan takes over Zach at the last minute. Smudge dies in his arms. They finally meet in their own private afterlife, and are happy. Q gives the others a choice - half of them die and half of them go home, or all of them are left alive but restricted to that house (and all the tiny worlds it reaches into) for the rest of their life. They choose the latter. Story ends with them sitting calmly around the fireplace or something.

- earlier on in the fic I was still running with the format of Q and Dem continuing to dump the characters in various situations that they have to figure their way out of, occasionally with casualties. At one point, there was going to be a zombie attack. I wrote a bit of that scene (Tony had fun with a shotgun, and Louis was assigned to ammo), but it just descended into crack and didn't seem to be going anywhere particularly interesting.

Though as an offshoot of that, I planned to have Smudge and Sasan run out from the bunker they were holding out in, in an attempt to find the zombie leader or something and make a truce. Turns out that Sylar is involved with the zombies (hey, they both share a penchant for brains). They make some deal whereby the zombies agree to pull off the attack and kill Sylar,

but only if Sasan is given up as a sacrifice. Smudge is devastated. They troop back to the others and let them know. Smudge reluctantly agrees to let Sasan go, but is completely broken over this. That night, Adam + Leo + Sasan chat in private. Leo tells Sasan he can't do that; he's seen what Sasan's first death did to Smudge and how it completely destroyed him, and he can't bear to let that happen again. He offers himself instead for the sacrifice. He and Sasan are the closest in age, and he doesn't think the zombies would be able to tell the difference. Adam says that Smudge might give it away. And so they'd have to trick him too, at least for now. More clothes swapping yay. For some reason, I just really like the idea of people impersonating Sasan. Next day, Smudge vaguely suspects that something is off, but he's too depressed to think much about it. He breaks down and loses it when pretend!Sasan goes over and is killed. real!Sasan just holds him, trying to comfort him without giving the game away. There are a lot of feelings. Sylar is killed, the others are free, and then I hadn't planned any further before I scrapped this storyline.

- oh. I also had an idea for one of the challenges being this giant chessboard they had to play their way across against each other, but that was a bit too Harry Potter. :| Only one side would win. The other side would die. Smudge and Sasan were on opposite sides. Dem pops by and stops time and chats with Zach, saying that he could make a choice - let Sasan die, and Dem would let the rest of them all go home. "Smudge doesn't ever have to know," Dem tells Zach. Because impersonating Sasan is always awesome. Smudge can just think that Zach died, and that Sasan is still there with him, at least for as long as Zach wishes to keep up the performance. The alternative is to continue playing the game, and all of the losing team would die.

- for a long time I wanted to slot in a scene where Elle Bishop visits Mike, but I couldn't think up a good reason for her to suddenly appear. There was going to be hurt/comfort and a lot of feelings. ("Do I remind you of him?" "No," she lies.) And some kissing. And more feelings. And maybe some bonus!Sylar.

So many things have changed since I first began writing this fic - which I'd initially intended to just be a one-shot - back in October 2010. Writing this saw me through what was definitely the most intense period in all my 21-ish years, and for that, it'll always have a special place in my heart. I was in a pretty bad place, personally, when I started, as everyone who was subjected to my angsty LJ posts knows. But it got better. It got *so* much better, past my wildest imaginings, and a lot of that journey found its way into this fic.


Through it all, I kept going back to this quote from Zach that he put in his It Gets Better video (which I've watched more times than is healthy):

*"Start by believing that life is worth living. And you... will... find your way."*

And I did.

This fic is sort of a farewell to a phase of my life. This and its prequel are also a tribute to Zach, though I doubt he'll ever read them. I've grown a lot in the months since I started this fic. And I guess it's time to move on, now.

Thank you for reading.

-  [anivad](#), 10 July 2011.