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A MULTIFANDOM CROSSOVER FANFIC
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3RD IN THE KENSELTON TRILOGY

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PROLOGUE - Day 3

EPILOGUE - To Boldly Go

Prologue: DAY 3

The eleventh dimension. The final frontier.

Kenselton Hotel floats in an isolated bubble of hyperspace, hanging from nothing, supported by nothing, surrounded by an all-encompassing vacuum. Ten blocks at its inception, an additional central block, and more in the process of construction.

There are no windows anywhere. No entrances, no exits, its interior an unbroken shell of concrete.

Inside, the internal time hits 0730 hours and the transworld teleportation machines hum automatically back to life.

Kenselton Hotel needs to be populated.

It is Day 3 of its operation.
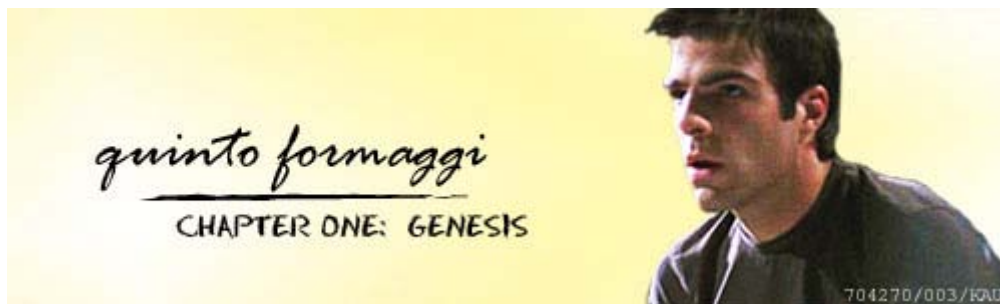
"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."
-   ***Prospero**, "The Tempest" by William Shakespeare*

The shawls of coloured light rose and faded in the air, revealing the figure on the ground as their bright, chiming notes gave way to faint music from unseen speakers.

Adam Kaufman opened his eyes.

Soft light infused his field of vision in a steady glow of warmth. He blinked, still half in the dream he'd woken from, his mind struggling to place where he was.

The first thing he saw was his arm before him, resting against a polished wood floor, and that seemed strange to his half-asleep mind convinced that he had previously fallen asleep in bed and should not, now, be lying on a floor.

There was a plastic tag around his wrist. Adam gazed sleepily at it, trying to figure out what it was doing there. He rolled over and tugged at it with his other hand, turning it around in examination. It had a barcode, said 704270/003/KAU, was made of seamless plastic, and refused to come off.

...He was not in his home and he had been tagged. Suddenly more awake, Adam scrambled to his feet.

He was in a tiny room, just long enough to lie in, high enough to stand in, the walls smooth and cool to the touch. And there was a door with a note on it.

Welcome to Block J of Kenselton Hotel. We are pleased to inform you that you are part of an epic experiment involving the transportation of fictional characters like you into our world, henceforward known as the real world. In time, your services may be solicited by members of our paying public to indulge their whim of choice, which may include but not be limited to murder, sex, housekeeping and cannibalism.

There is no possibility of escape, but for your entertainment we have provided several red herrings that might make it seem otherwise. These are mainly to confuse and discourage you in the unlikely event that we have overlooked a genuine means of getting out of here.

The populating period will be a week or less, depending on when you came to join us. In this time and for some time after, your residence will be here in Block J, on the floor that our receptionist will allocate you based on your unique identification number. Have a pleasant stay.

P.S. Please do not tear this message off the door and throw it at our receptionist. >:(. We have had to replace it twice, and our receptionist knows kung fu.

Adam rubbed a hand across his eyes and blinked. Nothing changed.

He looked at his wrist tag. He looked at the door. He looked at his wrist tag. He pushed the door open, and it slid aside from under his palm.

Beyond lay a small lobby. In the lobby was a desk counter, and behind the counter sat the receptionist who knew kung fu.

Not looking up, she pushed a sheet of paper out between the counter and the unbreakable glass that separated her from everyone else. "This is a map," she said. "Mealtimes are stated here. You will be staying on the seventeenth floor."

Adam stared. There was something off about her movement and speech. "Are you a robot?" he asked.

She looked up. "Seventeenth floor," she replied with a stern look.

"Okay. What's going on here? Seriously?"

"Seventeenth floor."

Adam looked back at the cubicle from which he'd emerged, one of three in the room. He pointed at it. "How did I get there?"

"Seventeenth floor, or I'll call the guards."

"You can't just kidnap me from bed and-"

The receptionist hit a red button. "Code 1," she said into a small microphone. "704270 on J-64. Please assist. Set phasers to stun-"

Adam backed off, palms raised in surrender. "Seventeenth floor. Got it."

The receptionist hit the cancellation button. She tapped on the counter where the paper was. Adam picked it up and looked at it. It was a map. Mealtimes were stated there.   The map had vague place descriptions, like 'bar'.

"You can read it on the seventeenth floor," the receptionist said smoothly.

Adam looked up. "There's something wrong with you, you know that?" he asked.

The receptionist gazed coolly at him.

The lift arrived on the seventeenth floor. Adam went through the stairwell and through a door into the hallway. There were rows of doors to his left and right, most closed, several slightly ajar and opening into darkness. Adam paused at one of the doors and pushed it open.

Light from the corridor cast his silhouette in the doorway as he stood gazing into the darkness of the deserted room. Two bunk beds on one wall, a desk and chair adjacent to them, all of it waiting in the silence for some future occupant. Adam had the sudden fear of having to live here, forever, sucked into its grey waiting depths to be lost in the shadows of template furniture.

This room, the one after... he had the feeling they were identical. This was a hotel of sorts, after all. Identical rooms; it was a pity there were no identical people to fill them in some mechanised fantasy of perfect order. Everything neat, running to function, minds acting as one-

Adam closed the door and turned his gaze ahead. The doorway to the end room stood ajar.

More significantly, its light was on, but in the absence of any sounds of life he did not know if it meant people. Someone, anyone, to help him explain away this mess, to tell him what was going on and why he was here and how it had all been some mistake and he could go home right now back to his bed and his home, ready to leave for yet another day of work at the Counter Terrorist Unit.

He paused before the door and listened; and while he thought he heard nothing at first, he soon became aware of the sound of steady breathing. Slow, as in sleep, barely discernible if not for the silence of the hallway.

Adam nudged the door further open and slipped in, closing it softly behind him.

This room was much larger than the others. There were no beds, no desk nor chair, but a kitchenette to his left and shelves of books and stuff to his right. Before him, facing the television set, was the back of a couch with legs hanging off one end.

This did not seem like a place for answers, Adam thought as he slowly moved around the couch, or a place for locating whoever was responsible for him being here. Such people waited smugly in high-

backed chairs behind their desks, decked out in rich clothing and condescending smiles to bestow on the lowly folk who dared speak to them-

Adam paused by the side of the couch, a chill running down his spine. There was something uneasily familiar about the two people asleep on it.

Two people, oblivious to his entrance, oblivious to his approach; oblivious as he bent lower on shaky knees to get a closer look at their faces and confirm, with a wild, sick feeling, that both of them looked almost exactly like him.

Identical rooms for identical people.

Adam sank down onto the carpet, his breath caught in his throat, unable to take his eyes off the imperfect doppelgangers.

They weren't *him*, that much he was fairly certain of; one was slightly older, the other younger, just a few years out of his teens, both of them clad in the kind of clothes he'd never be caught dead in. But otherwise...

Adam shut his eyes and took several deep breaths. He had to get out of here. He opened his eyes and stood up.

His gaze was drawn back to the two on the couch, sleeping peacefully in each other's company - perhaps a little too close, but his mind refused to go there - and he tried to push aside the sudden mysterious yearning to stay there, with them, and belong-

No, he told himself. *Get out of here. Get out.*

He backed off towards the door, gaze still locked on the couch, and that was when he tripped over the remote control and yelled as he hit the ground.

The younger of the two others jolted awake and sat up. He found the source of the disturbance, and looked quizzically at Adam.

"...Hi," he said, voice wary.

Adam threw the offending remote control aside and looked up; and a jolt of *weird* shot through his mind as their eyes met.

He opened his mouth to say something. Nothing came out. He closed his mouth and went on staring.

"Why are you *staring* at me like that?" the kid said, suddenly defensive. "IS IT BECAUSE I'M BISEXUAL?"

Adam blinked, tension broken. "*What?*"

The other turned to shake his companion awake. "SAS!"

"Ungh."

"*SASAN!*"

"what."

He hit him.

"Ow!" Sasan got up. "Don't-"

"There's a new guy here and he's staring at us."

Adam got to his feet and stepped back. "Forget I'm here," he said quickly. "I'm going to go, okay? Just-"

He forced himself to look away and head towards the door with slow, heavy steps, aware that the others' eyes were on him-

"Where are you going?" Sasan asked, and Adam recoiled at the sound of his voice, different and *wrong* when outside his own head, and he could not bring himself to speak a reply and contribute to a one-voiced conversation.

Sasan got off the couch and came up to him and Adam knew he was there but dared not look and then he was in front of him in curious concern and Adam just wanted to look away, look away, trying to suppress the panic rising in him-

"There's no way out," Sasan said. "Other people have been through the place; there have been escape parties, attempts to break out through the walls, and if any of it had succeeded we would have heard of it by n-"

"*Stay away from me!*" Adam said in a forceful burst, channelling fear into angry frustration because that he could deal with, that he could handle.

"Hey, I'm just trying to help. There's no use in running around out there looking for escape because there are thousands of people in this place and if none of them have gotten anywhere... Are you even *listening*?"

The shock of contact ran through him as Sasan placed his hand over Adam's on the doorknob and tried to push it off.

Adam snapped his hand back, raising his head to look at Sasan with a fear he tried and failed desperately to disguise; angry that he was scared, because there was no immediate danger at hand, angry that Sasan had dared to touch him, still reeling from the feel of his own fingers against his own, and he knew Sasan saw him flinch as he looked at him.

"I... know this is weird," Sasan said. "You'll get used to it eventually, but it might take a while. What's your name?"

"..."

"I'm Sasan. That's Smudge. He's bisexual."

"Yeah, and you're *gay*," Smudge retorted.

"Smudge!"

"You told him I'm bisexual."

Sasan sighed. "Smudge, you tell everyone you meet."

"...Oh. Yeah."

Sasan turned back at Adam, trying to look as though that exchange never happened, and wondered if it was just his imagination or if Adam had taken several steps back.

"So that's us," Sasan said. "What about you?"

Adam struggled again to meet Sasan's gaze, angrily forcing himself to do so because to give in to fear would be cowardice; struggled to make sense of the sight of his own eyes looking back at him, eyes the same and yet somehow different, controlled by a foreign mind. Sasan was a stranger he knew nothing about. Like Smudge, he moved differently, he talked differently, no more similar to him than any hypothetical person grabbed off the street, and this knowledge fought against the instinctual feeling of kinship that arose as Adam looked at them-

"Adam," he finally said.

"There can't be no way out," he added.

"I *would* tell you to go and see for yourself, but the escape parties tend to have a lot of people who don't seem completely human and can do really freaky things and for some reason a few of them keep trying to kill us."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"It helps if you say 'I'm not Sylar' and run," Smudge advised.

Sasan shrugged. "That helps, but I still got hit with a spanner."

"Who's Sylar?" Adam asked.

Sasan bent down to pick up the remote control and return it to the table. "I don't know," he said with a tight smile. "But I don't think we ever want to find out."

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CHAPTER TWO: CLOCK'S TICKING

"Breakfast?" Sasan suggested. "I'm famished."

Adam looked at the clock. He dug the slip of paper out from his pocket and looked at that. "It says breakfast is at 8," he said. "It's only 7:45."

"I know that," Sasan said testily. "I also know that if you want to eat anything without getting repeatedly assaulted by angry superheroes, you've got to get there early. Clock's ticking, let's g-"

"Or you could just stay away from their table," Smudge said.

"It's a bunch of guys in tight spandex. What do you expect me to do?"

"Spanner," Smudge reminded him.

Sasan winced and touched the side of his head. "Touché."

Adam stalked out of the room. Smudge and Sasan watched him go.

"It looks like he changed his mind," Sasan said. "Come on."

They ran after Adam and made it into the lift just as the doors were closing.

The button for the 64th floor was lit.

"Breakfast is on the second floor," Sasan said. "The blocks connect on the fifth-"

"I'm not going there," Adam said.

"But we are," Smudge pointed out. "Why, you don't want to eat with us? Because we're *not straight*?"

Adam ignored him and watched the floor numbers ascend.

"What do you plan to do up there?" Sasan asked.

Adam didn't reply.

They continued upwards in silence.

"...Adam?"

"Don't talk to me."

Silence.

The lift arrived and its doors opened. Adam got out.

The arrival lobby. The receptionist looked up and frowned. "Get back to your floor," she said.

"Seventeenth, yeah, I heard." Adam went over to the small arrival rooms; inspected their doorframes, entered, knocked on the walls, checked the floors, gazed at the ceiling...

"What do you think you're going to find?" Sasan asked.

"Way out."

"There's no way out."

"Seventeenth floor," said the receptionist.

Adam left the room and gave the lobby a quick survey. There was a door next to the receptionist's counter with a label that said 'Computer Room'. He headed straight for it.

"Please don't go there," the receptionist said sadly.

Adam tried the handle. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open and went in.

The receptionist sighed mechanically and pressed the red button. "Code 12," she said into the microphone. "704270 times 3 on J-64, please assist, set phasers-"

"Hi," Sasan said brightly, with what he hoped was a charming and innocent smile.

"Yes?"

"Please excuse our friend over there. He's not very concerned about his continued survival, but we'll deal with him, and you needn't worry-"

"-to *painful* stun," the receptionist finished, and gave Sasan a pointed look that made him quite upset.

"Sas, let's go," Smudge said. "He can stay here if he wants to."

"We stick together-"

Light suddenly filled the room and dissipated as quickly as it had come. Coloured ripples washed up through the air and vanished over one of the arrival rooms.

Smudge went over and slid the door open.

A small lump of cheese lay on the floor. He picked it up. He sniffed it. Then he yelled and ducked as a burst of light sent another lump of cheese out of thin air and onto the floor.

"Smudge!"

Smudge stumbled out the cubicle. Sasan caught him. "What happened?"

Smudge held out the cheese in a dazed sort of way. "It was just lying on the floor."

The receptionist pressed the button again. "Addendum: Code 12c, subsection mozzarella and subsection triple-cream brie."

Sasan let go of Smudge and ran into the Computer Room.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Adam looked up from the awesome computer he had discovered. "What?"

"*Why* is there cheese materialising outside?"

"I don't know. I just clicked on this 'Execute' button. It's some beta testing program... I thought I could run it and figure out how it worked and-"

Smudge came in munching on cheese. "Mozzarella," he said.

"Ew!" Sasan grabbed it from him. "This was on the floor!"

"So?"

Sasan looked at the cheese and decided that all arguments were henceforth invalid. He shrugged. "Five second rule," he decided, and took a bite.

"Okay, I found this," Adam said, as Smudge tried in vain to grab his cheese back. "It's a database; I think it has everyone in here... serial number, name, status-"

"Give the cheese *back*!"

"There's more outside."

"Yeah, but I got this one first!"

"That's only because you've got the disgusting habit of picking up food from the gr-"

Sasan realised that Adam was glaring at them and stopped.

Smudge took advantage of Sasan's temporary disorientation to grab the mozzarella back and stuff the little that was left into his mouth.

Adam turned back to the screen, shaking his head. He looked at his wrist tag, brought up the find function on the screen, and typed in his serial number.

The list jumped to its position.

704270/003/KAU | Kaufman, Adam | Arrived

The list continued on above and below the entry, Sasan and Smudge labelled as the only other 'Arrived' under the 704270 series; the others were all listed as 'Pending', except-

"Who's Gabriel Gray?" Sasan asked.

"Why is he banned?" Adam asked.

"Triple-cream brie," Smudge said, back from the lobby and munching on cheese.

Adam selected the entry 704270/006/GRA and clicked on the 'Change Status' button.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Sasan asked.

"If this place doesn't want him here, why should we make them happy?" Adam asked.

"This place also likes to feed us," Sasan said. "Why should we make them happy by eating?"

Adam selected the 'Pending' option and clicked 'Confirm'.

"Why don't you ban everyone and prevent more people from getting here in the first place?"

Adam realised that this was a good idea.

But then the guards arrived to pull them out, and they had their phasers set to painful stun.

Smudge grabbed for the computer mouse as Adam was hit and fell out of the chair. He found the beta testing program open in another window, and clicked 'Execute' as many times as he could manage. And then a phaser got him, and he blacked out.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The door slammed shut on the seventeenth floor. Adam and Sasan and Smudge lay in the hallway in varying degrees of pain and consciousness.

The door opened. The guards threw Smudge's cheese in.

Then the door slammed shut again.

Smudge got painfully off the floor. He picked up one of the lumps of cheese and regarded it. "We don't need to go for breakfast now," he stated to the others. "We have *cheese*."

Sasan considered this.

"We can't live off that," Adam said, sitting up.

Smudge glared at him for doubting his suggestion. "How would you know if you didn't TRY?" he demanded.

Adam gave up. "Okay, fine. Have cheese if you want. Since I can't get out of this place, I'm going to have proper food."

He stood up and headed out the door.

Smudge picked up a chunk of Gouda and munched on it.

"He's going to get himself killed," Sasan observed as the door swung shut behind Adam.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

TEN MINUTES LATER

Adam gagged, trying to pry away the invisible grip on his throat, barely hearing the conversation:

"It's not him," the emo-looking guy Force-gripping him against the pillar said, not quite looking him in the face.

"Does it matter?" asked emoguy's compatriot, a man in horn-rimmed glasses gazing coolly at them. "Sacrifices have to be made, Peter. For the good of us all."

Adam kicked in the air, struggling. "You're crazy," he choked out.

Horn-Rimmed Glasses smiled coldly at him. "Kill him, Peter."

Some distance away, ineptly hiding behind another pillar, Sasan and Smudge looked on in horror.

"We should do something," Sasan said, rooted to the spot in fear borne out of a desire to continue living.

Peter suddenly released his telekinetic grip. Adam collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath.

"Peter?" HRG asked dangerously.

"I can't. It's not fair. He's unarmed."

"So were most of Sylar's victims."

"I'm not Sylar," Adam said weakly.

"*Run!*" Sasan whispered desperately from his vantage point. "Run, Adam, run!"

"We could just... mark him," Peter said.

"How?" HRG queried. "Shave off his eyebrows?"

Sasan and Smudge gaped in horror.

Adam clutched at a table leg for support and wondered if he dared get off the ground.

"We don't know how Sylar might use him," HRG said.

"What could he do?" Peter demanded. "Create an army? He'd probably just kill them-"

"Decoys, perhaps. We don't know what twisted ideas he might come up with."

Adam wiped blood from his mouth and decided that all he wanted right now was to be off at the office in front of his computer doing work for other people who did not sufficiently appreciate his efforts.

HRG went up to Adam and crouched down before him. He smiled sinisterly. "Hello," he said.

Adam stared. He started slowly propping himself up, hoping to eventually get back on his feet and run.

Then he screamed as HRG threw a punch at his head and grabbed him.

"Noah!" Peter shouted.

"Do you know how long I've wanted to bash that face in?" HRG said through gritted teeth.

Adam decided that he hated life.

"How different could you be from him?" HRG continued, his breath hot on Adam's face. "You share the same DNA-"

"YAAAAAGGHHH!"

HRG released his grip and fell over as Smudge jumped on him.

"*What*-"

Smudge yanked HRG's horn-rimmed glasses violently off his face.   "LEAVE US *ALONE*!" he yelled, full of bisexual fury.

Sasan grabbed Adam's hand and pulled him off the ground.

"PETER!" HRG yelled, trying to get the bisexual guy off him.

Peter didn't do anything.

"Smudge!" Sasan shouted. "Let's go!"

Smudge regretfully let go of HRG and landed on the ground in a half-fall. He scrambled back to his feet. HRG lunged at him in a tackle, knocking Smudge over, but then a sudden crackle of blue lightning blast the older man off.

Smudge looked up in surprise.

"Go," Peter said tersely, withdrawing his hand. "GO!"

Smudge ran.

"Peter!" HRG said in incredulous anger. "I thought we were on the same side!"

"I was. Until you started going after innocent people."

"...Peter. I know you hate him as much as I do-"

"Yeah," Peter said. "Him. *Sylar*. And I want him dead more than anyone else, but they-" he pointed, "-are not him."

"..." said HRG.

Peter stalked off.

"Hey-" Sasan called out as he passed by.

Peter paused.

"Thanks," Sasan said.

Peter nodded.

Sasan held out his hand in offered handshake.

"...I'm sorry," Peter said, turning aside. "I... I can't look at you. I'm sorry."

And Sasan lowered his hand as Peter walked off, and the three of them got free sandwiches from the vending machine, and Smudge dragged Sasan away from the superheroes table and they returned in silence to the seventeenth floor of Block J to eat.

There was someone in the corridor. He turned as they entered, gave a start, and then settled into an analytical gaze.

"Is that food?" he asked.

"Yeah," Adam said. "Take some. Don't go back there."

"Where?"

"The cafeteria or anywhere that's not here," Sasan said. "Unless you want to get beaten up by people who think you're some guy named Sylar."

"...Sylar."

"He kills people," Smudge explained, dropping to sit down on the floor and tearing open the packaging on a sandwich.

Sasan gave the new guy a sandwich. "What's your name?" he asked.

New guy took the sandwich from him and turned it over in his hand. Feeling it, inspecting it...

"Gabriel," he said, looking up at them. He gave a small grin. "Gabriel Gray."

"You were banned," Adam said. "Do you know why?"

"What do you mean?"

"I found a computer upstairs. I changed your status. Someone didn't want you here."

Smudge picked up some cheese from the floor and added it to his sandwich. It was tasty.

"That's gross," Sasan said.

Smudge held out his sandwich to him. Sasan hesitated, then gave in and took a bite. It was tasty.

"So I'm only here because of you?" Gabriel asked.

"I thought you could get us out of here," Adam said. "Can you do anything? Like, special abilities, or-"

"I fix watches," Gabriel said, but there was a strange gleam in his eye that crept Adam out.

"Cool," said Smudge. He dug in his pocket with a free hand and pulled out two watches.

"..." went everyone.

"This one broke when it fell off my guinea pig," Smudge explained, holding it up. "And this one needs battery, but I can't get the back open."

"How long have you been carrying those around?" Sasan asked.

"I don't know. I just remembered they were there. I think that's why there's a soap bubble inside this one. It must've gone through the wash."

Adam noticed Gabriel staring at the watches and twitching slightly. It unnerved him in a way he couldn't quite define.

"Can you fix them?" Smudge asked.

Gabriel reached towards the watches, his gesture almost hungry; then, as with a great effort, he withdrew his hand. "I don't have my tools with me," he said.

"Oh." Smudge put the watches back and continued with his sandwich.

They lapsed into silence, sitting on the floor eating sandwiches in the corridor.

Adam tried to concentrate on his sandwich; to do otherwise made him feel decidedly awkward. Sasan and Smudge didn't seem awkward. They were practically cuddling. And there was still something off about Gabriel, but Adam didn't know what. So he ate his sandwich.

He looked at Gabriel. Gabriel raised an eyebrow. Adam went back to his sandwich.

Smudge finished and chucked the wrapper aside. He slid against the wall to lean on Sasan's shoulder. "(:," he vibed.

"...." said Adam and Gabriel.

Sasan looked at Smudge and went on eating.

Adam got off the floor. He picked up Smudge's discarded sandwich wrapper to join his own and headed off to the common room. He threw the trash into the bin, washed his hands at the sink, washed off the remaining blood from his face, turned off the tap, turned around, and jumped as he saw Gabriel standing there.

He was staring at him.

That analytical look was back; Adam could almost see the metaphorical cogs turning in his brain, studying him, somehow taking apart and carefully examining every facet of his self, and through all that a barely-hidden hunger to *know-*

Feeling suddenly exposed, Adam tried to edge away.

"I want to look at you," Gabriel said. It was almost a command, tempered with a casual arrogance and touch of malice that sent chills down Adam's back.

"I don't think so," he said, tensely, and walked away from the sink.

There was a laptop computer in the common room, hidden away by the shelves. He had missed it the first time. Adam went over, sat down, and turned it on.

He felt Gabriel's searching eyes on him. He wished he would go away.

He didn't.

Adam spun round in the chair. "Are you just going to stand there?" he asked.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Yes."

Gabriel grinned.

Adam tried to meet his gaze and stare him down, but it made his head spin. He got off the chair and took firm steps towards the door.

Through it, he saw that Smudge's head had since descended onto Sasan's lap. Sasan was gently stroking his hair. Murmurs of quiet conversation floated by. He heard a giggle.

Adam thought of closing the door, but that would mean being alone with the creepy guy.

He went back to the computer, annoyed. His weirdness quota for the day had surpassed its limit and it was only after breakfast. It made him feel sick. It helped to just decide that everyone sucked and he was the only sane person around, because that looked better than curling up somewhere to cry.

Gabriel was still staring at him, a smirk playing on his face.

Adam subconsciously clenched a fist.

The computer booted up: Windows Vista. It was unfamiliar to him. Adam checked the date on the bottom of the screen. The year was 2009. The future.

Adam was hit by a belated bout of homesickness.

He opened up Internet Explorer, but there was no connection. He clicked around the control panel, feeling lost, but discovered a thing that said 'Connect to a network' and clicked on that. There was a sole entry on the next screen; someone had wireless Internet access on the fourth floor of Block F. He tried to tap in, but the signal was too weak.

He had to get nearer.

Adam shut the laptop and carried it up, then remembered the dangers of the outside. He hesitated, put the laptop back down, and looked around at the shelves. They had boxes of random things. Adam rummaged in them.

"Looking for something?" Gabriel asked.

Adam glared at him, then continued. He found a small pad of paper, a pen, and a roll of tape.

"I AM NOT SYLER," he wrote, then tore off the top sheet and taped it onto the front of his shirt.

"Convincing," Gabriel commented.

Adam grabbed the laptop and headed out the door.

"Get a room," he muttered at Sasan and Smudge.

Gabriel watched him go.

Wait, he told himself. Lay low. Wait. The time will come. He could sense others in the building. Specials. Their powers danced tantalisingly just out of reach. There were so many of them. But not here, not on this floor.

Adam, Sasan, Smudge: they were only human. Weak, pathetic, common people, and it disgusted him to be associated with them. He wanted them to know that. He wanted them to bend beneath

his will. To scream, to struggle, and know where they stood in relation to him. To know that, no matter what it looked like, he was not one of them, and never would be.

Because he was *special*.

Gabriel lightly levitated the remote control off the table and revelled at the power within him.

"*I am Sylar*," he whispered to the empty room.

Lest he forget. Lest anyone ever forget.

But for now... he would wait.

The time would come.

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CHAPTER FOUR: CONNECTIONS

It is hard to feel imprisoned in a playground.

In a cell, it is easier. Four walls around a tiny space, a slit in the door to let in light, a crude bed and a cruder toilet and rough floor caked with dirt. Streaks on the ceiling, scratches on the walls; sitting and waiting in grey eternities for the next meal to arrive.

Then it is easy to try and escape: to kick at the walls till it hurt to continue, to pound on the door and scream for freedom. And then to give up and sink down onto the bed, back into that stagnant unchanging world of hopelessness and despair.

In a cell, it was easy.

Clutching the laptop by his side, Adam entered the central block and paused to watch the streams of people going by.

Ten residential blocks of over sixty storeys each. A central block for food and recreation, stocked with stuff of a myriad consumerist dreams. Game arcades, bars, cinemas, bookstores, gyms, clothing outlets, sports halls, gourmet food at the gigantic cafeteria... and all of it absolutely free.

The walls were many, the doors were none. No responsibilities, no work, no strings attached. Not enough people were trying to escape.

People...

They mingled in groups both heterogeneous and homogeneous: people finding known friends, or new friendships forged between floormates, though the latter groups were smaller and kept mostly to themselves. There was a self-consciousness involved in hanging out together. Others were individuals, wandering on their own, lost in the tempting fantasy of this brave new world.

Adam could almost imagine this to be a regular shopping mall. A parody of normal society, trapped in this milieu of artificial consumerism. Escalators carried people up and down from floors. Robotic staff manned the stores, cleaned the toilets, mopped the floors, and smiled - when it was appropriate to do so - in automated appropriations of friendliness.

The only doors at the far ends of the central block led back to the residential blocks. There was no outside.

Adam gazed at the ceiling. It ran in unbroken concrete from wall to wall. How do we get out? He wondered. Where do we start? Barging into the leftmost bookstore and hacking at the walls? Or mechanically riding round in never-ending cycles on the escalators, hoping that they would end somewhere; or taking the lifts and pressing a button and wishing that when the doors next opened there would be a glimpse of larger doors headed with an 'Exit' sign, or automated sliding glass through which were cars and roads and buildings and pedestrians; although, if that happened, there would be no knowing if all that, too, were part of the prison.

Single efforts could do little good, and organisation on any large scale was close to impossible with most of the prisoners busy being traumatised by their lodging arrangements.

Block F, Adam reminded himself. He scanned the labelled far-off doorways and found the one that led to F, like the others an ominous rectangle of black cut into the concrete wall, a blip of gloom in the cheery atmosphere of the central block. Stay here, it suggested. Why go back to your weird floormates and be depressed again? Stay here, have fun, have some free stuff, play some games, be distracted, don't try to escape. You don't want to escape. You are not real, you don't exist, you are but fantasies: live as such.

Adam gazed back at the corridor that led to Block J.

He suddenly felt lonely.

The mass of people continued passing him by in meaningless chatter and sad, resigned laughter, forced jauntiness in their steps.

There was no place here for him to sit down and try to access the Internet. The dark doorway to Block F did not look any more appealing, and it was with some hesitation that he took the stairs down to the enclosed cafeteria on the second floor. Breakfast was almost over. He hoped it would be safe. Besides, he had his not-nametag. Adam checked to see if it was still there. It was. It probably made him look like an idiot, but if it meant not getting beaten up, he could deal with that.

The cafeteria of Kenselton Hotel existed in its own bubble of hyperspace. It technically did not exist within the hotel, for it was far too big for that, but it *was* accessible through doorways on its second floor, and for most people that was all they needed to know. Some did occasionally wonder at how the cafeteria appeared far wider, longer and higher than the second floor would allow; but usually by then they would have started eating and ceased to wonder about such trivial matters.

But space worked funny in the cafeteria. Things always seemed closer than they should be, perhaps a result of the building's actual dimensions trying to assert themselves. It made finding tables easier, and going to get food; an amazing number of people discovered friends and family while there, and the superheroes table was always near whenever Sasan and Smudge deigned to enter the place.

Adam chose an empty table and sat down. He opened the laptop, shook it out of sleep mode, noted the slightly stronger wireless signal here and tried once again to connect-

"Hi! Is anyone else sitting here?" asked a perky voice.

Adam glanced up. Some teenage girl.

"No," he said, returning his gaze to the screen. "But I'd like some privacy."

She didn't move, and Adam had the feeling that she was staring at him. He wondered what was up with everyone today, and why the connection couldn't hurry up and get him the Internet, and he was about to tell the girl to go, when:

"It's an 'A', not 'E'," she said.

Adam looked up. "What?"

"Your nametag," she said. "Sylar. It's spelled with an 'A'."

Adam stared at her.

She smiled. "But it's probably more convincing this way. I mean, Sylar would probably spell it right."

Adam slowly closed the laptop.

"I'm Claire," the girl said. "What about you?"

"...Adam."

"Adam." She nodded, and smiled again. "Watch out for Sylar. He's dangerous."

"Yeah, I got that much from all the people trying to kill me."

"What people?" Claire asked.

"Just some guys. I think one of them was called Peter."

"Peter Petrelli?"

"I don't know. Do you know him?"

"He's my uncle."

"Oh. I think the other one was called Noah or something. I couldn't really catch it because he was trying to kill me, but-"

"What did he look like?" Claire asked.

Adam tried to remember. "Horn-rimmed glasses, trying to kill me-"

"Great!" Claire rolled her eyes. "My dad's here."

"He's your dad?"

"Yeeeah. I'm going to find him and let him know he can't go around trying to kill people. D'you want to come with me?"
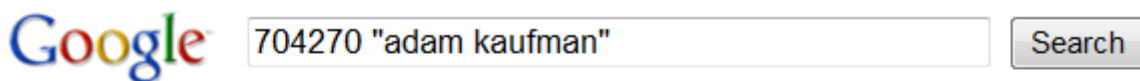
"No thanks."

"All right. Just be careful." Claire got up and left.

Adam opened up the laptop again. The Internet connection was working. He got online onto Google, and hesitated.

He glanced at his wrist tag. It couldn't hurt to try…

704270 "adam kaufman"

He typed it in and hit Enter. There were only two results, and neither looked to be in English.

Google | 704270 "adam kaufman" | Search

Web + Show options…

About: Zachary Quinto ☆ - [Translate this page]
Els seus rols més famosos són com a **Adam Kaufman** a 24, Sylar a Herois i Spock a Star ….
704270 (xsd:integer); Zachary Quinto. dbpprop:name. Zachary Quinto …
dbpedia.org/resource/Zachary_Quinto - Cached

http://telefilm.allblogs.it/cerca/gianluca%20naccarato 2009-12 … ☆
… http://telefilm.allblogs.it/post/**704270**/unamante-di-Tiger-Woods--venuta- …… -realt-al-set-
insieme-ad-**Adam-Kaufman**-e-al-pancione 2009-11-30T20:07:04Z …
telefilm.allblogs.it/sitemap_002.xml - Cached

"…Sylar," he read.

Adam went back to the search bar and typed in "zachary quinto".

Results scrolled down the page, headed with photograph thumbnails from Google Images.

Jolts of recognition shot through his brain.

Jackpot.

*

"I don't want to die," Smudge said.

"Well, it's an inevitable part of life."

"But not *here*." Smudge sat back up and looked pleadingly at Sasan. "Not *now*!"

"We can't do anything about it."

"So you're going to give in just like that?"

"I don't know," Sasan said.

Smudge dropped his head back against the wall.

"Look, we don't know what might happen," Sasan said. "We might get out of this alive and go home and forget that it ever happened-"

"There are so many people here," Smudge said softly. "They're not going to send us home. Not after bringing us here. I don't think they care."

Sasan shrugged. "There's no harm in hoping."

"I want to go *home*," Smudge said, his voice choking up.

Sasan put an arm around him and pulled him close.

"Smudge… we're going to live as long as we can, okay? You read the notice. We've got a few days until this place goes live, and maybe then we can find a way out."

Smudge buried his face in Sasan's shirt.

"And if it weren't for this we'd never have met each other. That's a good thing, right?"

Smudge sniffed.

"Come on; we'd better go and check if Adam's still alive. He wandered off just now-"

The door opened. Sasan looked up. Some new guy was standing there and gazing at them in hesitant confusion.

"Hi," Sasan volunteered. "And you are?"

"…Leo."

"Hi. Smudge and I were talking about life and death, Gabriel's in that room, and Adam's probably getting himself killed."

Leo nodded slowly, not completely sure what was going on.

Sasan turned his attention back to Smudge and gently pulled him off. "You're getting snot on my shirt," he said.

"What is this place?" Leo asked.

"Exactly what it said it was."

"Is that cheese on the floor?"

"Based on its appearance, taste and general consistency I would have to say yes."

"Why is there cheese on the floor?"

Sasan smiled brightly. "Why not?"

Gabriel emerged from the common room, having had his fill of levitating stuff around for the lulz and fixing the clock because it was running five seconds slow.

Leo backed off instinctively. There was something off about Gabriel.

Gabriel smiled creepily at them as he headed out into the stairwell.

"So that's Adam *and* Gabriel getting themselves killed," Sasan said.

"Why, what's out there?"

"People who SUCK!" Smudge said in a sudden outburst, glaring at the floor.

There was cheese on that spot: a nice camembert, and it didn't know why Smudge was glaring at it. *Is it because I'm asexual?* the camembert wondered, and was depressed.

Leo wondered why they were sitting on the floor, and if that was normal behaviour in Kenselton Hotel. He sat down anyway.

Smudge decided that he'd liked it better when it was just him and Sasan alone.

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CHAPTER FIVE: I AM SYLAR

"Claire, where are we g-"

Adam looked up as Claire dragged Noah up before his table, her hand refusing to let him go. Noah saw him, and went silent. The hate reappeared in his eyes.

"Say you're sorry," Claire demanded at her father.

Adam glanced at her. "Look, it's okay-"

"*No*," she said. "He can't try to kill you and get away with it." Claire glared at Noah.

"Stay out of this, Claire," he said. "You don't understand what you're dealing with."

"*What* is there to understand?" Claire shouted. "You're attacking anyone who looks like Sylar, even if they're perfectly nice people who just want to be left alone. That seems pretty simple to me!"

Adam wished they would go. "It's all right, okay? Just drop it."

"Not until he apologises and promises to stop this ridiculous behaviour."

"Claire!"

"*Say sorry, Dad.*"

Adam felt the chill of his eyes as Noah looked back at him, the hate and loathing simmering just beneath the surface of his gaze.

Adam's hands tensed on the keyboard.

"What would you do if you were in my place?" Noah asked.

"..."

"You don't know the things Sylar has done," Noah continued. "You don't know what else he's capable of. I would do anything to stop him. *Anything*."

Adam didn't like being looked at as though he were the scum of the scum of the earth.

"He might not even be here yet," he said.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"I know the others," Adam said defensively. "None of them are serial killers. They're a bit odd, but they're harmless. They don't deserve this."

"And what if you're wrong?" Noah asked.

Adam tried to glare back. "I'm not," he said, with more conviction than he felt.

"What if?" Noah said. "What if one of your odd but harmless friends up there turns out to be Sylar? Whose side will you be on, then?"

"*It's not going to happen*."

Noah gestured at Adam's nametag. "That's an 'A', not an 'E'-"

Adam tore the thing off his shirt and threw it onto the table. He stood up, grabbed the laptop, and stalked off.

Noah watched him go.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Claire demanded.

"I don't want you talking to him," Noah said.

"Dad-"

"Any of them. You hear m- Claire!"

She had run off, oblivious to his shouts.

"Adam!"

He didn't break his pace or look at her. "You heard your dad. Stay away from me. I'm dangerous and might kill you."

Claire shook her head. "I don't believe that."

"It's none of your business, okay?"

Adam found another empty table, sat down, opened the laptop and proceeded to ignore her until she finally went away.

<p align="center">*</p>

The feeling got stronger the closer he got to the central block, until at last Sylar stood amidst the crowd and reached out with his senses to touch the whispered streams of power emanating from people all over the place. And the hunger stirred in him once again. There were so many of them. It would be a feast.

A surge drew his attention; he joined the moving crowd in search of its source, and saw *him* as he got off an escalator and headed towards the doorway to Block G. Peter.

Peter hadn't seen him. He went on into Block G.

Sylar followed quietly after.

<p align="center">*</p>

"Excuse me."

Adam jumped slightly in his seat and looked up to see his table surrounded by a group of people.

"I'm not Sy-"

"Could we have our table back, please?" the speaker continued in a British accent.

"...I'm sitting here," Adam stated.

"Yes, we can see that. But it's one of ours. We sit here all the time. See that tea stain over there?"

Adam saw the tea stain over there.

"Please get up."

"Who are you people?"

"We're the British Holdout Group," spoke another member. "Just a bunch of poor sods who discovered that the fellows who played us weren't British after all. Imagine that!"

The rest of the BHG nodded sagely in agreement.

Adam thought he should probably go before things got stranger. "All right," he said, shutting the laptop and carrying it up. He supposed there was little point in further research. It wasn't as though it could help them or anything.

Smudge and Sasan and some guy who said his name was Leo were sitting on the floor. Adam sidestepped the cheese.

"Why are you all on the floor?" he asked.

"I don't know," Leo said. "I came in and they were sitting on the floor, so-"

"I like the floor," Smudge said with determination.

Adam decided it couldn't hurt to join them. He sat down and opened up the laptop. The Internet connection had died, but he still had several windows open.

"Okay," he said. "I found out some things. This is the guy responsible for us."

He turned the laptop screen towards them.

Sasan paled and looked deeply shaken. "What is he *wearing*?" he cried.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The kid said his name was Jess, in a stammering, panicked voice as he looked down from the stairwell wall onto the last face he would ever see.

"What... what are you doing?" he asked. "Who are you?"

"My name is Sylar," he replied, and sliced Jess' neck wide open.

He looked so much like Peter, Sylar thought, as he observed the teen gagging and clutching at his neck, his hands then falling limply to his side in the stillness of death. Perhaps this would be what it would be like, killing Peter. It was oddly unsatisfactory. He hoped the actual thing would be better. More of a challenge. More of a triumph.

He let Jess' body fall onto the ground. He slit open an arm and watched the blood flow, then dipped his hand into the blood and smeared it on the wall above the teen's dead body.

'I AM SYLAR,' he wrote.

And then he stole away from Block G to wait for Peter to find his note.

He found a bathroom in the common block and washed the blood off his hands. He smiled at the shocked guy staring at him by the sinks.

"It's blood," he explained patiently. "I just killed someone."

The other guy nodded slowly, and waited for a punchline that never came.

Sylar left. He stopped by the bar. It was a fun place, but he could not afford to stay.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"...Sas? Are you okay?"

"I'm actually in the midst of a fashion identity crisis. Please don't speak to me."

Leo decided to give this dream another five minutes to end before he started suspecting that maybe it was really happening after all.

Adam emerged from the common room where he'd gone to return the laptop, carrying a box that he'd found and emptied. He picked pieces of cheese off the floor and threw them into the box.

"What are you doing?" Smudge asked.

"We can't have all this cheese just lying around."

"Why not?" Smudge challenged.

Adam ignored him and continued. Leo reached out for a chunk of Emmental and held it out for Adam to take.

"Thanks," Adam said and chucked it in with the rest. "Watch it," he said to Gabriel as he came back in, bending down to snatch a cheddar out of his path.

Gabriel started to say something, then stopped, and got down to help with clearing the cheese. "Here," he said with an unexpectedly friendly smile as he put one of the triple cream bries into the box.

"They've got a bar in the central block," he continued. "Nice place. You get free drinks. I just spent the whole morning watching people get drunk and throwing chairs at each other." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a coupon. "Buy 2 Get 2 Free," he pointed out.

Adam glanced at it.

"What's up with him?" Gabriel asked, motioning to where Sasan sat against the wall looking distraught and broken inside.

"He's having a fashion identity crisis," Smudge explained.

And then the door flew open and Peter Petrelli stood there, anger blazing in his eyes beneath his emo hair.

"WHERE IS HE?" he demanded.

Adam slowly straightened up from where he'd been picking up another cheddar.

"I told you never to come here," Smudge said, suddenly on his feet.

"I know he's here," Peter said through gritted teeth, his eyes darting between each one of them in frustrated attempts at recognition. "He's one of you."

"Then you're mistaken," Adam said.

"What are you talking about?" Leo asked Peter.

Peter strode up to him and grabbed the front of his shirt.

"Hey-"

"I," said Peter, "am talking about the guy who just killed someone and wrote 'I Am Sylar' on the wall IN HIS BLOOD!"

"What makes you think it has to be one of us?" Leo asked, not liking being shouted at and wishing Peter would let go of his shirt.

"Yeah," Smudge said. "Maybe you're just looking for an excuse to kill us!"

Peter let go of Leo's shirt and looked at Smudge. "If I'd wanted to kill you, I would have done so long ag-"

"Maybe it was your friend," Adam said. "Noah. Ever thought about that? I just met him. Maybe he's trying to frame us. It seems like something he would-"

"SYLAR KILLED SOMEONE!" Peter yelled.

Adam took a step back.

Sasan wished that Peter would stop shouting because it was interfering with his angst.

"It's him," Peter said. "I *know* it's him, all right? I know. And if I have to kill the lot of you to make sure that he's dead-"

"What happened to us being innocent people?" Sasan asked, deciding that this warranted more attention than contemplating the horrors of silver belts and fughats.

"Even if he's here, he might not be on this floor," Gabriel said. "He could have just gone straight on to kill and tell."

Peter's eyes swivelled towards him. Gabriel calmly met his gaze. Peter blinked. *Sylar*, something told him, with some deep, dreaded conviction, but he couldn't know. Not for sure. He couldn't tell...

He looked at the others. He swallowed. Then he thought about Jess' dead body, the casual message in blood almost mocking him from the wall, meant for him to see and understand and fear, and the anger rose up in him again.

"No," Peter said, raising clenched fists glowing white hot with power. "Sacrifices. Have to be made."

Peter opened his palm and thrust it out.

The blast hit Gabriel and sent him flying against the wall, screaming in pain as he hit and fell-

"GET OUT!" Adam yelled, lunging at Peter, Leo barely dodging an arc of blue lightning.

"I'm sorry," Peter gasped and tried to push Adam away, his concentration broken for the moment. Then Smudge jumped on him, hitting at him and shouting incoherently-

"We didn't do *anything*!" Adam shouted, as the off-balance Peter crashed against the wall. "We didn't kill-"

Peter telekinetically wrenched Smudge off his back and threw him down. He raised his arm at him, wanting to attack and yet not, the indecision ravaging his mind-

"What makes you any better than him if he killed one innocent and you kill four or five?" Sasan asked Peter, glancing desperately at Smudge. "Please! Just let us be-"

"If you kill me, I'll die," Smudge stated with impeccable logic tinged with fear. "And then I'll be dead."

"Get off our floor," Adam said, glaring at Peter.

Peter slowly withdrew his hand, still shaking with angry frustration.

"I'm sorry about the murder," Leo said. "But I don't think any of us did it."

"You don't... know."

Leo shrugged. "Neither do you."

Peter gave them a final look, then turned and left the floor. The door swung shut.

Gabriel got off the floor and winced. "That hurt," he said.

"This isn't a dream, is it?" Leo asked.

"No," Adam said.

There were scorch marks on the wall where Peter's lightning had struck.

"If any of you are Sylar, this would be a good time to own up," Sasan suggested.

Adam sat down against a wall and buried his face in his hands.

The door opened again.

"Please don't be Peter," Adam muttered. He looked up, wearily, and then he stared.

The newcomer gazed curiously at them.

"Fascinating," he said.

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CHAPTER SIX: NOTHING TO HIDE

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It was illogical to sit on the floor. So they had moved back into the common room, where there was a couch and several folded chairs that could be sat on.

And Adam asked himself why the presence of their new Vulcan floormate had given him hope; he might be half-alien, sure, but fundamentally he was in the same boat as the rest of them. Just as trapped, just as helpless, just as far away from home. Further.

Adam pulled open one of the cupboards overhanging the small kitchenette. Inside were snacks and drinks, some cutlery, all clean and waiting to be used.

He heard Gabriel chatting excitedly at Spock, all vestiges of his creepiness temporarily gone in his full-out Trekkie mode, looking as though several of his fantasies had just come true.

Smudge and Sasan were lounging idly on the couch, listening. Leo poked quietly through the bookshelves.

Adam made coffee in his little corner of the room.

I'm making coffee, he thought. Why.

He looked over at the others. He looked back at the coffee machine, merrily whirring away. The clean cup waiting. His hand on the counter, the contour of his fingers against the wood. The small

packets of cookies. The dishcloth. The other cups, one for each of them, unless more people came and they'd have to share. More...

More of them, unwilling brothers, running, hiding, escaping, begging for their lives in the face of crimes they did not commit, trapped here, their strange and curious family, in this oasis of safety... a place that, despite himself, was almost starting to feel like a home.

"I know this is weird," Sasan had said, in hours ago that felt like an eternity. "You'll get used to it eventually, but it may take a while."

Adam wondered if he would miss them if they ever did get home.

But for now, his coffee was ready.

<p align="center">*</p>

"We need a name," Smudge mused. "Like... Zachary's Army."

"Who are we fighting?" Sasan asked.

Smudge shrugged. "I don't know. Sylar maybe. It just sounds cool."

"No it doesn't," Sasan said. "It sounds like something that a kid in a playground would come up with to make himself feel more powerful than he really is."

"...You're just jealous that I came up with it first."

Adam came by carrying a cup of coffee. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Zachary's Army is a cool name, *right*?" Smudge asked, looking pointedly at Adam.

"..." said Adam, and drank his coffee.

"I'd say his silence means 'no'," Sasan told Smudge.

Smudge kicked the table.

"I don't think physically abusing the table is going to help."

Gabriel was going on about something or other in Episode 24. Spock was saying something about alternate timelines and looked faintly annoyed, which was a big deal because usually he didn't look anything.

"I thought we had established that the events you speak of are unfamiliar to me," he said. "Why do you keep asking these questions?"

Gabriel's face darkened. He shut up.

"Well, we know one thing," Sasan said, glancing at the door. "If anyone gets killed now, it's not by any of us. We've got an alibi."

"We're the only witnesses," Adam pointed out. "They wouldn't believe us. Peter already thinks we're harbouring Sylar."

"True," Sasan admitted. "But I'd love to see Peter burst in right now claiming that we just brutally murdered someone else. It'll help to reduce the paranoia."

"What does a serial killer look like?" Smudge asked.

"You," Adam said, and drank more coffee.

"Serial killer?" Spock asked.

"Apparently there's some guy named Sylar about who kills people in a serial fashion," Sasan said. "*And* he's supposed to be one of us, so this means that almost everybody wants us dead. Just in case."

"Do they expect that to stop him?"

"They might just want to find him," Adam said. "Contain the threat; know when they're really in danger of dying and it's not just one of us trying to get a sandwich."

Adam looked at his coffee cup. It was reassuring in the same way that tea was for the British.

"So everyone hates us," Smudge added. "But I think you'll be safe. You're different." Smudge's eyes trailed over the ears.

"I could always vouch for your innocence."

"That... won't work," Sasan said. "They don't trust us."

"But it would seem evident that only one of you could be guilty, and that it's unlikely that most or all of you would all condone these killings."

"Try telling that to Peter and his friends," Sasan said.

"We can't exactly have expected him to do anything else," Adam said. "Someone got murdered. With 'I Am Sylar' written on the wall; I mean, that's kind of-"

"He's trying to establish his identity as separate from you," Spock observed.

"We'd like to establish our identities as separate from his," Sasan muttered.

"And if that's the case, I doubt he would stay hidden much longer," Spock continued. "He seems to want to be recognised and have his work acknowledged as his, hence the signature. He wants them to know he was responsible. All of you are just standing in the way."

"So he's going to kill us?" Smudge asked.

"I would consider that a likely possibility. If so many are as afraid of him as you claim, he has to at least be powerful enough to survive on his own. He does not need you. The only thing you're doing is shifting the focus away from him."

Gabriel looked thoughtful, head bowed. "And he doesn't like that," he said, raising his eyes. "Because he wants to be special."

Spock tilted his head at him. "Yes," he said.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Resonance. The voices mingled, joined, flowed, many and yet one, one and yet many. If he shut his eyes, it felt as though he were eavesdropping on a conversation with himself.

And then Leo opened his eyes and the voices were suddenly still; and the air was suddenly still, and he found himself looking straight at a strange old man who had not been there seconds before.

The old man smiled. His eyes did not. "Hello, Leo Fulton Jr.," he said. "I'm the Mysterious Old Man. You may call me Dem."

Leo's hand clutched the bookshelf, not daring to move. Beyond Dem he saw the figures of the others, frozen in time as in a tableau. "What's going on?" he asked, his mouth dry.

Dem shrugged. He moved past Leo and inspected a snow globe on the shelf. "Stopped time for a while," he said. "I've been making the rounds on all the floors. It gives me something to do. Immortality can be a drag, sometimes. Thought we could have a little chat, play a little game..."

"Did you do all this?" Leo asked.

"In a manner of speaking."

"You brought us here?"

"Yes and no," Dem said. He tossed the snow globe up in the air and caught it. "Other people did the grunt work. I just... made suggestions." He smiled. He gestured at the desk. "Take a seat."

"It's all right, I think I can stand."

"Suit yourself." Dem returned the snow globe. "So how are you liking it here, Leo? Or shall I call you Henry?"

"Leo is fine. How do you know my name?"

Dem grinned. "How did I stop time? How am I immortal? Where did I get this magnificent coat? I think a simple database search is nothing compared to those."

"Why did you bring us here?" Leo asked. "We're just regular people who... want to live our lives in peace..."

"Fun," Dem said. "For fun. And to strain the fabric of the space-time continuum in hopes that it will one day just give in and disintegrate. ...Of course, I mean 'one day' in the metaphorical sense, because time is relative."

"The space-time... Destroy the universe?"

"Multiverse, actually," Dem corrected.

"But why... why would you want to *do* that?"

"Answers. To find out what is left when everything is gone. Want some cheese?" Dem asked. He pulled out a piece of mozzarella from one of his pockets and held it up.

"No thanks," Leo said. "But... why are you telling me all this? Why stop time... why not one of the others-"

"Vulcans annoy me, and Smudge is bisexual," Dem explained, throwing the piece of mozzarella into his mouth. "You're standing all alone here in this corner. Makes it easy. Do you want to know who Sylar is?"

Leo looked uncertainly at him.

"You're saying he's here?" Leo asked. "He's here in this room?"

"Maybe," Dem said. He smiled. "Of course, what would you do if I told you? Tell them that a mysterious old man suddenly appeared and told you who Sylar was? Kind of suspicious, don't you think? Alternatively..." Dem dug into the same pocket and pulled out a tiny vial of blood. "This is blood," he explained. "What do you think would happen if I spilled some of it on your shirt?"

Leo slipped his hand off the shelf and backed away. "What are you doing..."

"Someone was killed today," Dem said. "Neck sliced open. Lots of blood. Some splatter might have been expected. Don't you think your friends over there might feel better if they had someone concrete to blame? And to lock up in a room or hand over to Peter and company, safe in the illusion that it's all over?"

"You're crazy," Leo whispered.

"Oh yes, probably. Nine psychiatrists told me that, and most of them were sane. But I think I'm just bored, and humans are so fun to play with. I just want to know what would happen if they all think you're Sylar. I'm curious. Aren't you?"

"Get away from me," Leo gasped. He stumbled backwards into the time-stopped tableau... and then he saw the sprinkle of red fly towards him and land on his clothes, the spots drying and browning with artificial age, and he saw Dem's almost malicious smile mouth *see you later, Leo*, and then time started moving again-

"No!" he shouted, and then he realised that everyone was staring at him, wondering about his sudden exit from the corner of shelves.

"No?" Spock queried.

Leo glanced back at the shelves. Dem was gone.

"There... was..." he started, pointing, and broke off.

"There was what?" Gabriel asked.

A mysterious old man called Dem who just appeared out of nowhere, flicked blood at me and then disappeared, Leo thought.

"What's that on your shirt?" Sasan asked.

Leo tried to wipe it off in a quick, futile gesture. The others were all staring at him.

"I-" he started.

"Is that blood?" Sasan asked.

Adam put his coffee cup down on the table.

"There was a man," Leo said hurriedly. "He just appeared out of nowhere and he knew about us, and he... threw blood at me-"

"That's awfully convincing," Sasan remarked.

Adam stood up and approached Leo with cautious steps. "Or you're Sylar, and blood got on you when you killed that guy," he said warily.

Leo shook his head. "No..."

Adam glanced at the specks of blood. "It doesn't look fresh to me."

"I'm telling the truth!"

"Really?" Adam demanded, backing him against the shelf. "Some guy appeared out of nowhere, flicked blood at you, and then vanished?"

"Look, I know it sounds crazy, but-"

Smudge got off the couch to join Adam.

"What were you doing back here on your own?" Smudge asked. "*Trying to get rid of the evidence?*"

"I'm not Sylar! I swear!"

"We're not that gullible," Adam said, glaring, shaking slightly with fear. "You've got to do better than your mysterious vanishing guy. Why haven't you killed us yet, huh? *What are you waiting for*?"

"This isn't happening," Leo murmured, despairing under the weight of the accusing glares. He looked to the side, and saw the door open. He could leave, right now - run for it; there was no getting out of this; he didn't need them, anyway, didn't care if the rules said to stay on the seventeenth floor; he could be alone, and safe, and-

Leo dashed towards the door. Adam caught him and shoved him down to the ground, his head cracking against the side of the shelf, yelling as the pain and tears flooded his vision, seeing Adam shouting something as he sent the first blow against his jaw:

"I'm sick of it, okay? We can't go *anywhere* without people attacking us! Does that make you happy? *Huh*? Does it?"

"I'm... not... Sylar," Leo tried to say, his voice weak to his own ears as the second blow came; but then he saw hands pulling Adam off him, Adam struggling, and then a figure was leaning over him and pressing cool fingers to his hurting head, and Leo slipped gratefully into a wash of calm logic as another's thoughts probed gently at his weary mind.

Spock broke the mind meld and lifted his fingers off. "He's telling the truth," he said. He raised his head to survey the rest of the room. "It seems we're being watched. Someone is playing with us."

Silence.

"Why would anyone do that?" Adam asked, trying to catch his breath. "What do they want with us?"

"Fun," Leo managed, barely audible. "He said it was for fun."

Adam looked at him. "Sorry," he said curtly.

Leo nodded, eyes shut, hand clutching his head in pain.

"Hey, you could do that mind meld thing to all of us," Sasan suggested to Spock. "Just to check and see that we're all in the clear and none of us are secretly Sylar."

"What if one of you is?" Spock queried.

"*Then we kill him*," Smudge suggested with a bit too much enthusiasm.

"There are six of us here," Gabriel said calmly. "Five against one would be pretty good odds."

"Yeah," Adam agreed.

And so he was declared safe. And Smudge, Sasan...

Gabriel.

Mentally, Spock gave a start.

<<Sylar.>>

Gabriel's face remained impassive.

<<Congratulations, pointy ears. You found me. What do you do? What do you do?>>

<<I have to tell them.>>

<<And then *they'll try to kill me. And I'd have to kill them. Which shouldn't take more than a few seconds, but you know that now, don't you?>>*

<<Your pride suggests you want to reveal yourself on your own terms, and if I tell->>

<<-I wouldn't have much of a choice. I like your brain, by the way. It's... so precise. Like a machine... a perfectly running clock... You don't know how hard it is for me to resist the urge to slice your head open and take a closer look.>>

<<I have to tell.>>

<<You're changing the topic. Why can't we talk about your brain? But if you insist. Tell them, and they die. Keep it a secret and they'll live. For now. What's it going to be, pointy ears?>>

<<I do have a name, which I believe you were fully capable of utilising in our earlier interactions.>>

<<You're not exactly in a position to be making demands, are you? They're waiting for your verdict, pointy ears. What will it be? Will they die or will they live?>>

<<The whole point of this was to establish that we were safe->>

<<And if you tell them, none of you will be safe. You'll be dead. Amazing how this works, isn't it. Come on: what's the logical *thing to do?>>*

"...He's safe," Spock announced.

Sasan dropped back on the couch in relief.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Adam asked Leo. "I only hit you twice."

"His head also impacted on the shelf," Spock pointed out vaguely, his mind elsewhere.

"Did I ask for your opinion?"

"No."

"I'm okay," Leo said, getting up. "I just... need to lie down for a while."

"There are a lot of beds out there," Sasan said. "Just choose one."

"Okay." Leo staggered out the door. Back in the corridor, then into the cool, dark interior of one of the rooms. He shut the door and climbed onto the bottom bunk; sank down onto the pillow and closed his eyes-

The room flickered with entry.

"And that," Dem said, who was suddenly leaning against the wall of the room and casually munching on his mozzarella, "is why Vulcans annoy me."

"Why are you back?" Leo whispered from the bed, blinking at Dem through the fog of pain.

Dem shrugged. "I have all the time in the universe," he said. "Several universes, actually. I think I can spend it wherever I like and however I like, and at the moment, that happens to be right here. Consider it a compliment." He sat down on the desk and took another bite of cheese.

"You've had your fun," Leo said, rolling over to face the wall. "Just leave me alone."

Dem jabbed a finger at his back. "I don't like mortals telling me how I should or should not entertain myself. Understand this, Leo: I've seen things you wouldn't believe. Ships aflame in the depths of an oxygen ocean; teapots duelling off the rings of Saturn; werth in the rain. I've been through time and space and witnessed the creativity of a thousand species, but nothing has ever come close to meddling with the delightful psychology of your human race." Dem smiled. "You are... so... fun... to play with."

Leo covered his ear with his hand.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Smudge had rejoined Sasan on the couch, and Spock and Gabriel were eyeing each other. Adam felt suddenly ignored. He filled a cup with water and left the room, hoping it would suffice for saying 'I'm sorry for hitting you twice because I thought you were a psychopathic serial killer'.

The sound of a voice drew him to a halt outside Leo's room. There was someone else in there. Adam pressed his ear against the door. Something about teapots. The voice was unfamiliar; not one of them.

Open the door, he told himself, his pulse hiking up. Adam glanced down the corridor back at the common room and wondered if he should get help, but if he left, whoever was inside might as well...

Adam grasped the door knob with his free hand, feeling the cool metal beneath his palm. He steeled himself, then threw the door open.

For a second his shocked eyes met those of the strange old man in the room.

And then the old man vanished.

Leo had rolled back over at the sound of the door. He gazed at Adam in a daze.

"Who was that..." Adam started. "*Who was that?*"

"I told you," Leo said quietly. "He's the mysterious old man."

Adam looked helplessly at the spot where Dem had been just seconds before. "What does he want?"

"I don't know," Leo said. "He's just crazy."

Adam remembered the cup in his hand. He held it out.

Leo took it. "Thanks."

"...You should move back to the main room," Adam said. "In case he comes back."

Leo nodded. "All right."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"I saw him," Adam said, entering the common room with Leo trailing behind. "That man."

"Who was mysterious and old and seemed to appear out of nowhere," Spock elaborated, looking at Leo.

"Yeah," Adam said. He shut the door. "I think we should stick together. He vanished when he saw me, so I don't think he likes more than one person around when he drops by."

"Sticking together won't solve the problem," Sasan said. "We were all in this room the first time he came."

"Yeah," Leo said, sitting down on the last free bit of couch. "He can stop time and single out anyone he wants. So far it's just been me."

"Why you?" Gabriel asked.

Leo laid his head back on the couch and shut his eyes. "I don't know. He said he doesn't like Vulcans and bisexuals."

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"So there's nothing we can do to stop him coming back?" Adam asked.

"Why doesn't he like bisexuals?" Smudge cried.

"It's all right, Smudge," Sasan said quietly. "I like you."

Adam went over to the shelves and the stuff on them. He pushed aside a snow globe and reached for the digital camera nested behind it. He hefted it into his hand.

"We've just got to learn to trust each other," Gabriel said.

"I don't think that's entirely wise-"

"Or the next time, someone might actually end up dead," Gabriel continued, looking pointedly at Spock. "The people out there hate us. They're terrified... suspicious... why bring all of that here? We need to know we're safe around each other." Gabriel paused, and some strange expression passed briefly over his face. "Because we're a family."

<center>*</center>

Remember who you are, Sylar told himself. You're not one of them. You're better. You're special. You don't need those pathetic weaklings sapping up all your glory. You're the only one whom all those people should fear; not them. They are nothing, nobodies, unworthy to be deemed your acquaintances let alone your family. Like Mom and Dad. *They* never understood what you could do. They never appreciated your potential. They were not strong enough to accept what you could become. They were not *special*.

And everyone else here will be like that, caught up with their fears and deluded notions of morality. They're terrified. Look beyond the physical: you have nothing in common with them. They're no more than a passing nuisance... an annoyance... that can be easily wiped away so that you can reclaim your true identity and everyone will know that it is you and you alone who is responsible for the horrors they will know. They will know who to fear. They will know who to run from... and they will not be able to run.

But Gabriel observed the calm lull in the room, and something tugged painfully at his heart as Smudge snuggled up to Sasan. He almost wanted this; to belong, to hide, to be... insignificant.

But he could still sense the power out there, just out of reach, waiting for him to take it, claim it, make it his own, and the hunger became an overpowering force over the pieces of his human self that still cried out for a home: the part that wanted to walk away from that other life and just be Gabriel Gray once more, that wanted to be safe among these people and have them be safe around him, to band together and hold each other up no matter what other people might throw at them, to celebrate that they probably had the most epic eyebrows in the whole of Kenselton Hotel, to be the family he had always searched for and never really had.

But the hunger said no, and so he bit the fantasies down with anger and cast fury on the part of him that had ever wanted them. To give in would be weak. He was above this, above them. He needed no friends nor family. He worked alone. He was *Sylar*, and he would never forget it.

<center>*</center>

Adam turned on the camera. It gave a whistling beep and the screen lit up. He went to rejoin the others, gaze not leaving the screen.

"What are you doing?" Sasan asked.

Adam realised the couch was occupied and sat back down on his chair. "Recording a statement. If we can get this out to the Internet, maybe someone can find us and get us out of here."

"Don't you think they would have thought of that?" Gabriel asked.

Adam turned the camera to face himself and swivelled the screen around. He took a breath, then pressed the Record button. A red circle popped up on the screen. REC.

"My name is Adam Kaufman," he said at the camera. "I'm being held prisoner with a lot of other people at a place called Kenselton Hotel-"

"This isn't going to work," Sasan said.

"-and that's Sasan interrupting me-"

"Give me that," Sasan said, and took the camera from him. He smiled into the lens. "Hi. We're stuck in here and we don't want to be. A few people also want to kill us."

"And if they kill us we will die," Smudge said with fatalistic certainty.

Sasan turned the lens to him to give him some air time. Adam rolled his eyes.

"...So if you can get us out, that'll be really cool," Smudge added emphatically.

"I'm recording over that," Adam muttered.

"No, you're not," Sasan said, swivelling the screen back around so he could see what he was filming. "This is a team effort, and the tape stays rolling. Hey, Leo: want to say anything, or would you prefer to remain semiconscious?"

Leo batted the camera away.

"Even considering the possibility that anyone watches the video, it's highly unlikely that they will know what to do about it," Spock said.

Sasan pointed the camera at him.

"You're holding it slanted," Adam said, annoyed at not having the camera.

Sasan straightened it.

"We don't even know where we are," Spock said. "How would anyone know where to find us?"

"Google," Adam said in a resigned sort of way.

"How would a huge number help us?" Spock asked.

"Tell them we're not Sylar," Smudge suggested.

Sasan turned the camera back to himself. "We would also like to take this opportunity to categorically state that none of us are a serial killer by the name of Sylar, and would tremendously appreciate it if everyone stopped assuming so."

"Yeah," Smudge agreed.

"This is the worst video ever," Adam muttered.

"Any further complaints, Kaufman?" Sasan questioned, pointing the camera at him.

"No."

"What do you expect anyone to do?" Gabriel asked.

"Break us out of here," Smudge said.

"How?"

Smudge shrugged. "Beam us out, like in *Star Trek*?"

"This isn't-" Gabriel started, then remembered pointy-eared company.

Sasan had stood up to film a nice panning shot of the whole room.

"See if there are brands on anything," Leo murmured, eyes still closed. "If we can find out which companies have goods here maybe they'll have information on who bought them."

"Everything's unbranded," Sasan asked.

"What about the Coca Cola vending machines?" Adam asked.

"That doesn't count," Sasan said. "Coca Cola is everywhere." He dropped back down onto the couch. "Still rolling. Anything else you'd like to say?"

"Just end the video," Adam said, glaring at the carpet.

"All right." Sasan's finger hovered over the button, then he hesitated and withdrew it. He slowly turned the lens back around to face himself, adjusting the screen...

"And, um," he started, haltingly. "If... you're... watching this..." Sasan broke off. He took a breath and let it out, and gave a nervous smile at the camera. "Hi, Zachary."

He ended the recording.

Adam held out his hand.

Sasan put the camera in it.

"Thank you," Adam said.

Adam left the camera by the laptop and went to search amongst the shelves for a cable to transfer the video over.

"Need my help?" Sasan asked.

"No." Adam pushed aside a mushroom plushie and a box of orange Tic Tacs that claimed an expiry date of 'tomorrow'. He moved on to the next box, opened it, and hesitated.

DVDs. The complete *Heroes* collection. *So NoTORIous*. *Star Trek XI*. The entire third season of *24*...

Adam let the box flap close and returned to the laptop. He brought up one of the saved tabs, scrolled down the filmography, read titles, and looked back at the box. Sasan had reopened it and was scanning covers, reading synopses...

"We should leave them," Adam said.

"*Or,*" Sasan said, putting down his several hours of fame and holding up the complete *Heroes* collection, "we could find out who Sylar is."

Gabriel came up to join them. "What's that?" he asked.

"Answers," Adam said, taking the box-set from Sasan and opening up Season 1. "This should tell us all we need to know about Sylar."

"Is that the new *Star Trek*?" Gabriel asked, pulling it out from the box. His eyes lit up. "Can we watch this instead?"

Adam had left and was crouched by the DVD player beneath the TV.

Sasan pulled a long cable out from behind the box. "Hey, Adam," he called out. "I think I found what you're looking for."

"Great."

"Are you really going to watch some guy kill people when you could be watching *Star Trek*?" Gabriel asked.

"Do you wish to live long and prosper?" Adam asked, not looking up.

Spock raised an eyebrow.

Sasan also discovered a flash drive and a CD labelled 'My First Mangosteen'. He put the CD back and brought the flash drive out.

Adam was fiddling with the remote control. Sasan waved the flash drive at him.

"Get that thing out of my face."

(*The metaphor is odd,* Spock thought. *It is not in his face. If it were, we would see it protruding out of his skin and he would be in excruciating pain.*)

"If you can't get the video online, just save a copy here and maybe we could try to sneak it out somehow," Sasan said.

"Why is there a button on this remote that says 'Lens Flare'?"

Adam pressed it. Lens flare flared across the blank television screen and faded off.

"...Cool," Smudge said.

Spock suddenly felt homesick.

"I'll... leave you to work that out," Sasan decided, "and I'll go and transfer the video." He disappeared back behind the shelves.

Adam stared at a button labelled 'I'm Only Here to Confuse You'.

He worked with computers and miscellaneous tech stuff. He was not going to be defeated by a stupid remote control.

"Maybe the disc is broken," Gabriel suggested. "We should try *Star Trek*."

'Not Work,' said a button. Adam pressed it. The DVD played.

Kaufman: 1. Remote Control: 0.

Adam got off the floor in silent triumph and went to sit on the couch and work the menu, which seemed to be responding well to regular arrow buttons.

Episode 1 of *Heroes* Season 1 started. Words scrolled up the screen in introduction.

Smudge reached over for the remote. Adam glared at him.

"I just want to do the lens flares," Smudge explained.

"No."

"But they're cool."

"No."

"*Is this because I'm bisexual?*"

"Yes."

Smudge looked devastated.

Gabriel was staring at the screen in trepidation.

"You're sitting in Sasan's place," Smudge informed Adam in a passive-aggressive sort of way.

"Uh-huh."

Leo wished they would shut up because it was making his head hurt.

Peter, Gabriel recognised on the screen. *I bet you thought no one was watching your dreams.*

Spock contemplated the metaphysics of what separated fiction from reality and kept an eye on Gabriel.

"All right," Sasan said minutes later, emerging from behind the shelves with the flash drive. "The video's in here."

Adam was lost in concentration on the show.

"Do you want it or shall I keep it?" Sasan asked.

"Keep it," Adam said vaguely, not looking at him.

Sasan slipped the flash drive into his pocket. He glanced at the TV. "Has he appeared yet?"

"No," Smudge said. "And Adam's sitting in your place."

Sasan sat down on a chair. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

Smudge glared at Adam. Adam ignored him.

The last of the opening credits appeared and faded.

"Did Zachary's name come up?" Sasan asked.

"Don't think so," Adam said, still engrossed.

"That means he's not in this episode."

"Some background knowledge might prove beneficial," Spock said. "If we know the context of his appearance, it could help us form a more accurate idea of who he-"

Something utterly awesome happened on screen.

It convinced everyone to just continue watching, except for Leo, who was either unconscious or asleep.

"Does this place have popcorn?" Smudge asked.

"Wait for lunch," Sasan said.

Episode 2. *Don't Look Back*.

The unspoken tension hung in the air between them as they witnessed the aftermath of kills attributed to Sylar: the brutally bloodied corpses stuck in the wall, the top of their heads sliced open, their brains not there.

The onscreen characters debated the culprit; but the small audience knew who had done it, and they knew what he looked like.

Adam felt sick.

Episode 3. *One Giant Leap*.

The name still didn't appear in the credits.

"I think the filmography might mention which episodes he was in," Sasan realised.

"Yeah," Adam agreed, wanting an excuse to move and break the tension. He got up and went over to the laptop. Smudge looked at his vacated seat and looked imploringly at Sasan, who either didn't take the hint or was too polite to move.

"Episode eight," Adam said, returning. He picked up the remote control and navigated his way back to the main menu and the eighth episode.

"If we skip everything we won't know what's going on," Gabriel said.

"We're not watching this for entertainment," Adam muttered, as the episode started playing. *Seven Minutes to Midnight*.

They silently recognised the hand that appeared as the camera panned up towards the shadowed figure. Adam tensed in his seat. Gabriel did too.

They watched the murder.

Episode 9. *Homecoming*.

A too-familiar finger drew a line in the air. A head split open. Blood sprayed on a banner.

Sasan's fist was against his mouth. Adam sat paralysed in his seat. Smudge clenched a fist. Leo watched in silence. Spock looked faintly disturbed. There was a glint in Gabriel's eye.

The door opened. Adam turned his head briefly to look, judged the newcomer not to be a threat, and returned his attention to the screen.

"*What the bloody hell is this?*" the newcomer asked.

He sounded suspiciously like a Beatle. Adam took a second glance and reassured himself that it wasn't a Beatle.

"We're watching TV," Adam said tensely, going back to doing just that, and trying to suppress the revulsion that rose in his mind. The hands that had killed that cheerleader were identical to his. That eye that appeared in the close-up...

"This is not happening," said the not-Beatle. "No. Someone must have slipped something in my drink, and when I wake up I am going to..." He broke off. "Is that *Spock*?"

"Yeah," Smudge said.

"Wh... w... Okay. This is a dream. An extremely strange and surreal-"

Adam grabbed the remote and looked for the volume control to drown him out. It was nowhere to be seen, although it did have buttons that said 'More Cowbell' and 'ROSES!'. He found the pause button ('BRB') and hit it instead, then turned and glared at the newcomer.

"What's your name?"

"...Paul. Paul Kingsley. Who-"

"We're in the middle of something. Either join us and shut up, or get out. Okay? Because this is important."

"You're watching television," Paul observed. "I really don't think that's-"

"The contents of this television programme might greatly aid us in our continued survival," Spock said, and then felt Gabriel's eye on him; "I am not condoning this activity, just stating a fact."

"Oh yeah? Well, perhaps you could start doing some explaining because I *dearly* want to know *what's* going on here."

"So does everyone else," Adam said forcefully.

"What is wrong with you?"

"You sound like a Beatle," Smudge said in awe, before Adam could reply.

Paul stared at him.

Adam got up from the sofa and tossed the remote control onto the table. "Carry on without me," he said. "I've seen enough."

"Adam-"

"Can we watch *Star Trek* now?"

"There's a British Holdout Group," Adam said to Paul as he passed him, not looking at him. "Join them."

Adam went out into the corridor and forced his trembling legs into one of the rooms. He slammed the door shut, hit it, and then slid down it to crumple onto the floor; hugging himself, recoiling from his own touch, shaking, and trying not to cry as images of murdered corpses and sinister faces peering out from under caps played themselves over and over again in his head.

<center>*</center>

"Adam?"

He opened his eyes. He turned to the door, and was about to get up and open it when he hesitated. "Who's that?"

"Sasan."

Adam got to his feet and quietly locked the door. "Prove it," he said.

"...Well, I could tell you about how your first attempts at escape resulted in nothing but cheese, or I could give you a complete critical analysis of everything that is wrong with Zachary Quinto's fashion sense. Which would you prefer?"

Adam unlocked the door and opened it.

Sylar, he thought, but Sasan was busy exuding an air of innocence and the impression did not last long.

"It's getting late," Sasan said. "If we want to get lunch before the crowds come, we should hurry. Paul went off to find the group you mentioned so you needn't worry about him. ...Are you all right? You look kind of pale."

Adam left the room. "I'm ok."

<center>*</center>

"Hello!" said Dem cheerily, appearing out of nowhere in the common room. Those present gave a start.

"So, as I was telling your friend here," Dem said, giving Leo a nod, "Vulcans annoy me. I don't like to be annoyed." He smiled menacingly at Spock.

"I don't believe we've been acquainted-"

"Nope, we haven't," Dem admitted. "But I still don't like you. And you neither, you bisexual smudge."

Smudge glared and leapt off the sofa. "Take that *back!*" he shouted.

"Nah," Dem said. "I'll just take this." He put a hand on Spock's shoulder and vanished with him.

Sasan and Adam rushed into the room.

"What happened?" Sasan asked.

"He came back," Leo said. Something seemed to be up with the vision in his left eye.

"And he took pointy ears," Gabriel said; and there was something about his voice and the way he looked at them that was familiar in a different way.

"...Well, if he won't be back any time soon, want to set off for lunch?" Sasan asked.

"Yeah," Smudge said, slightly forlorn at having been called a bisexual smudge.

"I'll stay here," Leo said, deciding that something was definitely up with the vision in his left eye, and nausea was creeping up on him to join in the party.

"I'll stay with him," Gabriel offered. "I'm not hungry."

Adam went to get the laptop. "The video's in here, right?" he asked Sasan.

"Yeah, and I've got another copy with me."

"Why would he take Spock?" Smudge asked. He missed having ears to stare at.

"I don't know," Sasan said.

They went off for lunch. Silence filled the common room as the door swung shut and the footsteps faded down the corridor.

Leo lay curled up on the sofa.

Sylar watched him.

"It's nice to be alone, isn't it?" he remarked. "It's so... quiet."

He moved over to Leo's side and pulled up a chair; sat down, and let himself gaze uninterrupted at the dozing face, his eyes sweeping over the familiar features with a growing hunger; prodding at Leo's brain, digging into the little he could sense from it, slipping into the fragmented mental landscapes that were at the moment bowed to pain.

*

Dem teleported Spock into the seventeenth floor's locked broom cupboard for the lulz after having knocked him unconscious for the lulz.

*

"Try YouTube," Sasan suggested in response to Adam's wondering aloud about where to upload the video.

"What's that?" Adam asked, typing 'youtube' into the search bar.

"It's a video-sharing site. It's huge."

Adam arrived at YouTube, created an account, and located the video upload page.

"Title... description..."

"The title can be 'Get Us Out of Here' and the description can be 'read the title'." Sasan brought a forkful of spaghetti to his mouth. "Or you could say it's porn. That might help us get more views."

"Yeah," Smudge agreed. "Call it 'Hot Naked Bisexuals with Video Cameras' or something."

Adam gave them both a look. "No."

Sasan shrugged. "Just being practical."

Adam went with 'URGENT - NEED HELP - NOT A JOKE' and a description that said 'read the title'. He attached the video file and submitted the form. The progress bar let him know that it would be done in eight hours.

"It's going to take eight hours," he said. "We can't stay here that long. We'll either get beaten up again or the guards will know something's up."

"You could always leave the laptop here," Sasan said.

"What if someone steals it? Or accidentally stops the upload, or-"

"Hide it."

"Where?"

Sasan glanced around the white spacious cafeteria and realised that this was a good question.

"The guards might find it," Adam continued, watching two patrolling robotic sentries pass by several tables down.

Sasan pushed Adam's plate towards him. "Look... just eat. Forget about the video. Even if you did get it online there's not much chance of anyone seeing it. At least no one who could actually help us."

Thirty-two hours, the YouTube progress bar decided instead, before dropping down to fourteen in the fluctuating strength of the wireless internet connection.

Adam gave up and cancelled the upload. He picked up his fork and ate.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"It's true what he said," Sylar commented, not caring if Leo heard or understood. "It's hard to feel special in this place. And that's all I ever-"

A sound from outside stopped him. Uncertain footsteps exiting the lift, heading for the door. Sylar rose smoothly out of his seat.

"There's someone there," he said, and again the bloodlust tugged at his heart. It was not about obtaining powers, now; not this time. Just the urge to kill, to make his mark, to reclaim himself.

Through the doorway he saw the newcomer enter the corridor.

He smirked. This kill would be easy.

Monty Rodriguez gawked at the figure standing in the corridor, the shadowed face spread in a grin that drove terror into his heart.

"It's nice to be alone, isn't it?" the voice said.

Monty pushed his glasses up his nose with a hand and started backing away amid nervous smiles. "I... I'm sorry," he stammered. "I think there must have been a mistake, I don't think I'm supposed to be here, but I'll go now and-"

"There's been no mistake," the figure said, and with a flick of his fingers pinned Monty against the wall.

The young man gasped in shock, grabbing at the invisible hold on his neck. "How are y-... what are you doing..."

"Clearing an obstacle," came the reply, and the starts of a scream burst mutely into blood.

"Boring old sods," came the annoyed Beatle-accented mutter from outside the door. "Just sitting around drinking-"

The door swung open and Paul drew to a halt as he took in the scene.

Sylar released his grip and let Monty fall lifelessly to the ground. He turned to Paul and grinned.

"...Tea?"

<center>*</center>

"Sas?" Smudge asked.

"Mm?"

"If we get home, can I go with you?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Smudge, you've got to go home."

"I don't want to go home. I wanna stay with you."

"What about your friends? Your family?"

"They don't like me," Smudge said sadly. "Because I'm bisexual."

Adam got more food into his mouth and turned restlessly back to the computer. He opened up Wikipedia and typed 'sylar' into the search bar.

"I've got my own life, Smudge. How would I explain who you are?"

"You could just tell them the truth."

Silence.

"We'll see."

Adam ate another mouthful of spaghetti and glanced back at the loaded page.

His breath caught. The feeling of creeping dread came back.

"...Gabriel is Sylar," he said.

"*What?*"

"He was banned," Adam realised. "That's why he was banned, and I let him come, and-"

Smudge blinked. "But Spock said-"

"I *know* what he-"

"Leo is with him," Sasan said.

"..."

Adam shut the laptop and grabbed it and they ran back to the seventeenth floor of Block J.

<div align="center">*</div>

"Hello, Leo."

Leo didn't respond.

"That looks pretty bad," Dem said. "Minor brain damage. Sylar won't like that."

Leo opened his eyes.

"You're probably going to die," Dem said wistfully. "But since I'm feeling kind today I'll give you a little break; let you end your life healthy. What do you say about that?"

Leo just gazed up at him from the couch. He thought he heard a scream from outside.

Dem reached out a hand and touched him. All the pain and discomfort was sucked away. Leo sat up, suddenly alert.

"Why don't you go have a look at what Gabriel's doing out there?" Dem asked with a large smile. "Taking a while, isn't he?"

Leo glanced towards the door and back at Dem. "What did you mean when you said I'm probably going to die?"

"Which word in that sentence do you not understand?"

Leo left the couch and backed away from Dem.

"Not even a thank you?" Dem asked. "I healed you."

"Thanks. What did you do with Spock?"

"You ask too many questions," Dem said, and vanished.

Leo approached the door haltingly; put his hand on the door knob, turned it, and opened the door.

"...Gabriel?" he said.

The man straightened up from the second dead body on the ground, blood dripping from his hands.

He looked at Leo. He smirked. "My name is *Sylar*."

Leo started to close the door when the knob flew out of his hand and the door banged back open.

"Why," Leo asked, stepping back. "What do you want from me, why did you kill those-"

"Pointy ears was right," Sylar said, enjoying the slow approach. "All of you are just standing in my way."

He flashed open his palm and slammed Leo against the wall.

"Do you know what it's like to kill you?" Sylar asked. "It's like eliminating those parts of myself I don't like very much. There's no point in kicking, Leo. You're not getting off this wall alive until I let you."

"We'll just go, all right?" Leo asked desperately. "We'll get off this floor and go somewhere else and leave you alone-"

"That's not going to work. I'll know you're there. Other people will know you're there. Sometimes they might think you're me, and I don't like that." Sylar grinned. "And this is more fun, isn't it? You should see the look on your face."

"Please-"

Sylar tiled his head. "Please *what*?"

"...I just want to go home," Leo managed, choking back tears.

Sylar shrugged. "We can't always get what we want." He raised his finger. "Any last words?"

Spock dropped him with a nerve pinch.

Flimsy broom cupboards were no match for a determined Vulcan.

Sylar lay unconscious on the floor. The telekinetic grasp was broken. Leo slipped off the wall and landed on the carpet, tears of relief falling down his face.

"I apologise for not being able to get here s-"

Leo hugged him.

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CHAPTER NINE: FREEDOM

The trio stopped short in the doorway as the scene first hit their eyes: the bloodied corpses on the carpet, too familiar for their liking. Sasan shouted, stumbled back on instinct; Adam fearfully gazed ahead towards the open door at the end, and started his way forward.

"They're dead," said Smudge in morbid observation, looking back at his friend.

Sasan had recovered somewhat from the shock and deigned to enter the corridor. "We were too late," he said in shaking tones. "Adam - what if he's still there?"

Adam didn't reply as he kept going, his face set, troubled.

"He's new," Smudge commented as they passed Monty.

Leo appeared in the doorway of the common room. "...You're back," he said.

Adam dropped all caution and ran up to him. "*Where is he?*" he asked.

"He is unconscious for the moment," Spock spoke up, "but he may not stay down for long."

"He saved my life," Leo said, indicating him. "If he hadn't got here in time..."

Adam warily regarded the still form on the floor. Slowly, heart racing, he crouched down before it as Sasan and Smudge came in to join them.

"Sylar," Adam said.

Smudge dropped down by his side. "We should kill him," he stated.

Adam nodded, but didn't budge, curiosity and fear rooting him to the spot. Leo bent down and handed him a knife from the kitchenette.

Adam looked up at him. "I... I can't," he said, standing. "Let someone else-"

"I'll do it," Smudge said firmly, and plucked the knife out of Leo's hand. He raised it into the air, hesitated a moment, and then, with a yell, plunged it straight into Sylar's chest.

The others jumped back at the blood.

Smudge stabbed him again. And again, with an angry, determined violence that seemed disproportionate to the situation. Gripping the knife, twisting it, yanking it out for another go-

Sasan reached out a tentative hand to him. "Okay, Smudge, I think that's-"

Oblivious, Smudge glared at the increasingly bloody body before him and brought the knife forcefully down again.

Blood covered his hand and specked his face and clothes. Somewhere in their midst, tears fell.

"...Smudge?"

Smudge dropped the knife, shaking, breaths coming in gasps, and backed away, not looking at any of them, a strange, wild sadness in his eyes. He perceived the blood on his hands and wondered vaguely at it... walked with stumbling steps into the adjoining bathroom, and shut the door.

Silence.

Sasan quietly broke off from the group and went over to the bathroom. He knocked on the door. "Smudge?"

After several seconds of no reply, he pushed open the door and entered.

Smudge was facing away from him, shaking, his forehead pressed against his arm on the wall.

"Hey."

Smudge turned his head at the voice and gazed at Sasan with a hollow expression.

Sasan pulled a hand cloth off its hook and washed it in the sink; wringed out the water and held it out. "Do you want to clean the blood off or shall I do it for you?"

Smudge just looked mutely at the cloth, so Sasan did the honours, gently wiping blood off fingers that unclenched themselves for him; rinsing the red off and trying not to think about how the blood was probably identical to his.

"It felt like it was me," Smudge finally managed with effort after several moments of silence. "When I was killing him." He swallowed, eyes still downcast, temporarily robbed of their usual energy. "And I liked it."

Sasan lifted up the cloth to Smudge's face and sponged away the tears and drying blood. Smudge blinked, flinching slightly at the damp cloth

"I think I hate myself," he said, almost in a whisper.

Sasan lowered the cloth. "Why would you *think* that?" he asked.

Smudge didn't look at him, gazing unseeingly down at his fingers.

"Come here," Sasan said quietly, putting the cloth down.

He pulled Smudge into a hug.

Smudge held on tightly; trembling with unknown sorrows, burying his face in Sasan's neck, and feeling, for the first time in a long while, that he was loved.

<div align="center">*</div>

"He's still alive," Spock announced, releasing his grip from measuring Sylar's pulse.

"...How?" Leo asked.

Adam went over to the coffee table, opened up his now-beloved laptop and scanned through his saved pages.

"He has regenerative powers," he said.

"*Why?*" Leo asked, who was beginning to suspect that the multiverse hated them.

"How do we kill him?" Spock asked.

Adam shook his head, still scrolling through the pages at a speed that probably wouldn't have let him take in much information even if the answers had been there. "I don't know."

"We could just keep him unconscious until we work something out," Leo said.

Spock crouched down by the body, fingering the torn shirt at the rips where the knife went in, tugging them aside-

"He's healing," he said, seeing the wounds slowly closing over themselves.

"Do we stab him again?" Leo asked uncertainly, deciding that the multiverse definitely hated them.

"Whatever it takes to keep him down," Adam said, getting up. "I'll go look for help. Peter or someone might know what to do."

He sprinted out the door.

Spock administered a second nerve pinch in case the effects of the first one were wearing out. He wondered what Smudge and Sasan were doing in the bathroom, and decided it was illogical to speculate.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The main crowds were starting to enter the cafeteria. Adam weaved his way through the throngs of people, looking around hopefully for one of those people who kept wanting to kill him. He thought about climbing up on a table and shouting. Then he stopped thinking about that, and wondered why he had even thought of it in the first place.

Finally, he spotted Peter sitting alone at a small table, and ran up to him.

"Sylar's here," he said, out of breath.

Peter looked up.

"Please," Adam continued. "We need your help. We don't know how to kill him-"

"How do I know I can trust you?" Peter asked warily.

"*Are you ins-*" Adam let out a breath. "He killed two of us. Okay? And I think that suggests that he doesn't like us very much."

"What's he doing now? Sitting around having tea?" asked Peter, who was terrible at sarcasm.

"He's unconscious," Adam said. He glared at Peter. "Are you going to help us or not?"

Silence.

"*It's not just our lives we're-*"

"Stab him in the back of his head," Peter finally said. "Near the base of his skull. Get something sharp. Drive it in. Leave it there or he'll just heal..."

Adam nodded. "That's it?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry; I'm not going up there. It might be a trap."

"And then what?" Adam asked. "Sylar might be dead but you'll still keep hounding us because you wouldn't know?"

Peter hesitated.

"Nothing's going to happen to you, all right?" Adam insisted. "It's not a trap. Spock nerve-pinched Sylar and he's completely out of it."

Peter blinked. "Spock?"

"Yeah, from *Star Trek*. Guess what. He's one of us."

"I thought Leonard Nimoy-"

"Apparently they made a new movie. What, you don't trust him either? After all those years serving faithfully by Kirk's side?"

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Could I make up something like that?"

Peter thought about this. Finally, he stood up. "Fine," he said. I'll go up with you and kill Sylar, make sure he's dead. Any funny business and *you're* dead."

"Thank you," Adam said, and led the way.

Peter didn't say a word until they arrived on the seventeenth floor of Block J. He was hit by a strange sense of guilt as he saw the two murdered people littering the corridor, but kept it to himself, and noticed the way Leo stepped back instinctively as he entered the common room; and he wondered if he should say something about that, but there were more pressing matters at hand:

"*Spock*," Peter said, mouth hanging open.

"Why do so many people constantly feel the need to ascertain my identity?"

Peter continued gaping. Some part of him realised that Sylar was unconscious on the ground, but he had decided that staring stupidly at Spock was more important than avenging a killer he'd sworn to kill.

Smudge and Sasan came out of the bathroom, Smudge noticeably more subdued than usual, and covered with much less blood than he had been upon entry.

"Why are you back?" Sasan asked Peter.

Peter shook himself out of his Trekkie reverie, pushed aside happy fantasies of being abducted by Spock and whisked off to go on space adventures on the USS Enterprise, crouched down by Sylar, and picked up the knife.

"I came here to kill him, so I'll do it and get out of here."

"I killed him," Smudge stated. "I stabbed him about five times."

"He's not dead," Leo informed him. "He heals."

Smudge's face fell. Sasan patted him on the shoulder and went to get a drink of water.

Peter nudged Sylar over to expose the back of his head. "I've waited so long to do this," he said. He raised the knife and drove it in, and Sylar's pulse flatlined.

Peter released the knife and stood up, satisfied. Everyone was looking at him. It made him uneasy. Then he realised that Spock was among the people staring at him, and this made him feel much better and start thinking once again about being whisked off for adventures on the USS Enterprise.

"...Just leave the knife there," he said. "Don't pull it out or he'll recover."

"Okay," Leo said.

"Thanks," Adam said perfunctorily.

"Anything else you need me to do?" Peter asked.

"Where do we put him?" Smudge asked.

"Anywhere you want," Peter said.

"What; you're not afraid that we might take the knife out and join him in killing people?" Adam asked.

Silence. Peter looked at him. "...No," he said. "I trust you."

He left.

<div align="center">*</div>

They carried Sylar's body into one of the two rooms nearest the stairwell, and after brief discussion brought his two victims to join him. Spock said that while respecting the dead had its merits, it was also illogical to waste a whole other room just for them; especially since corpses eventually start stinking and it was best not to contaminate more than one room in case they needed the beds.

The prospect of the stinking unsettled some of them, and Leo wondered aloud about some other place where they could dump the bodies. Sasan mentioned hearing about a group of people who had hacked their way through the first floor of Block F (to find nothing below but a huge, dark void that seemed to go on forever), and if the hole was big enough perhaps they could push them through. Smudge expressed concern over where they might end up. Adam pointed out that, given their current reputation, it probably wouldn't be a good idea to be seen lugging dead bodies through Kenselton Hotel.

So the dead people stayed in the room for the moment, and they stuffed the crack at the bottom of the door with wet rags they found in one of the boxes on the shelves to keep any smell in. Leo got a sheet of paper and wrote 'DO NOT OPEN. DEAD PEOPLE + SERIAL KILLER.' on it to paste on the door, in case any newbies arrived when the rest of them were not around.

With other rags they cleaned up the place as best they could: wiping the blood off the walls and off as much of the carpet as they could manage. They were, effectively, just making their prison nicer; but with nowhere else to go, they figured that it would be better to be stuck in a place that wasn't splattered with blood.

The work helped them keep their hands busy and gave them less opportunity to angst about their situation, and along the way it started to sink in that Sylar was dead and that threat was gone and they need not spend time worrying about who he might be or what he might do. They were safe now; at least as safe as they could be in this place, and anyone who threatened them from now on could be told the good news and shown the body if they asked and didn't mind the potential stench.

And that sense of freedom loosed their fears and loosed their spirits.

Sasan found a bottle of air-freshener and sprayed it around. It made the place smell like roses. Adam told him to put it away because it was so gay, whereupon Smudge retaliated on Sasan's behalf by splashing Adam with water that wasn't completely clean. Adam grabbed the small bucket, chased him around the sofa and tackled him to the ground, threatening to upend the whole thing over his head. Spock let him know that this would not be wise because then there would be dirty water all over the carpet. Adam relented and let him go, wiping the water off his face with the back of his hand and flinging it in Smudge's general direction. "I saw that," Sasan said. Leo pretended to be greatly interested in a snow globe.

But any hostility could not last for long amidst the absence of Sylar and the smell of roses. Upon realising that they still didn't feel completely safe about going out there, they decided to wait until Peter had time to spread the message of Sylar's death, and only venture out around dinner time to see if things had changed.

Leo found a nice book and retired amongst the shelves to read. Sasan took over the laptop after minimal possessive remarks from Adam, made a brief comment about how he was more of a Mac guy, and proceeded to spend the better part of the next few hours creating artistic masterpieces in Paint ("It's a fig newton," he explained when Smudge asked). Adam popped in the first disc of *Heroes* season 1 to continue from where they'd originally left off in episode 2.

Spock stood silently by the door of the common room, gazing out into the corridor, homesick. He wondered why he felt an outsider even amongst this company. A part of him wanted to leave; go out there, try and locate the rest of the Enterprise crew, see if they had any escape plans... but he knew it would be futile, and that, in a way, the people on this floor needed him.

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CHAPTER TEN: THE EDGE OF FOREVER

Sasan finished his Microsoft Paint masterpiece and digitally signed his name with what attempted to be a flourish but never quite got there. He took the flash drive out from his pocket and saved the file onto it: fignewtons.png.

"Does it mean anything?" asked Smudge, who had been watching the artistic process in rapt admiration.

"No, it's just a box of fig newtons," Sasan said. "Of course, I could always pretend that it's a visual commentary on the commodification of food products and sell it to an art museum."

Adam wished they would shut up because he was trying to watch TV. He threw an annoyed look their way. "Don't close anything on there," he added in reference to the several open windows and tabs on the laptop, shoved unceremoniously to the background by the colourful digital painting.

Sasan pulled out the flash drive and put it back into his pocket. "I might go out and add on to them," he said, unplugging the laptop from where it had been charging. "There's nothing much going on here."

He paused, considering the risks of venturing out far enough for Internet access.

"I thought you were the one who said it's still too dangerous," Adam said.

Sasan shrugged. He looked at Smudge.

"I'll go if you go," Smudge said. "It'll be like our first day again before *they* got here."

"That's the day I got hit with a spanner," Sasan recalled.

Adam wished they would take it outside because he was trying to hear what Mohinder Suresh was saying.

"If anyone tries that again I'll hit them *back*," Smudge declared. He grabbed the remote control off the couch. "With *this*."

"Give that back," Adam said, eyes still glued on the television.

"You can't begrudge us our one weapon," Sasan countered.

Smudge pressed the Lens Flare button. Lens flare flared across the screen.

"Please don't do that again," Adam said.

Spock felt homesick.

Smudge grabbed Sasan's sleeve and tugged him towards the door, remote control in his other hand. "Come on, Sas, let's go."

Sasan picked up the laptop and agreed to be pulled out the door.

It closed as they left. Adam temporarily looked away from the television. "Did they take the *remote*?"

"I believe they did," Spock replied.

<p align="center">*</p>

Smudge released his grip on Sasan when they were out in the corridor.   "We could go back to that place with the electronic elep-"

The door opened. They stopped short before it. Noah Bennet looked sinisterly at them through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Where are you going?" he asked. He smiled.

"What are you doing here?" Sasan asked warily.

"My friend Peter had some interesting news," Noah said. "Apparently Sylar is dead. Or is he?"

Smudge clenched his fingers tighter around the remote control.

"He's in that room," Sasan said quickly, pointing. "Peter killed him, you can look-"

Noah's expression didn't change. "But how would I know it's really him? And where are you two off to in such a hurry? To kill more people?"

"We were just planning on some research-"

"What research?" Noah asked, gazing serenely at Sasan, malice lurking behind his eyes.

Sasan swallowed, cowed by the accusing look. "On... on this place... how to get out..."

"Really."

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Smudge yelled, raising the remote control. "I have a remote control AND I'M NOT AFRAID TO USE IT!"

"A remote control," Noah repeated. "I'm scared." He grinned.

Smudge glared at him.

"This all seems very suspicious to me," Noah continued. "How would you lot succeed so quickly in killing someone whom others have spent months trying to take down?"

"We got lucky?" Sasan ventured timidly.

"Why are you here?" Spock asked from behind them, drawn out of the room by the noise.

They turned.

"..." said Noah, staring at the ears.

Smudge made use of the distraction and yanked Sasan by the hand past Noah and out the door-

"-Hey!"

-and into the thankfully waiting lift, where he slammed the button for the fifth floor and watched in satisfaction as the doors shut before Noah could stick his hand in.

"That was close," Sasan said.

"Yeah," Smudge agreed. "Let them deal with him."

They wandered aimlessly around the central block for a while; remembered their previous encounter with Wolverine and steered clear of him; spent several moments outside the hospital

watching the injured people brought in - some with missing body parts, others covered in blood, some teenager with a newly broken nose - and ran off when a paramedic yelled, "Hey, aren't you-"

On an empty bench outside the games arcade, Sasan sat down with the laptop to check for an Internet connection. There was one. Smudge sat down next to him.

"Here we go," Sasan said, opening up Google and doing a search for 'kenselton hotel'.

He opened up one of the tabs, scanned through, and read:

"The Kenselton Project has as its goal the provision of beings not native to this universe, specifically those of a fictional nature. Touted as the next big step in entertainment, the project will allow members of the paying public to interact with these characters in any manner they choose, including but not limited to murder. The project is expected to go live some time later this month. The public is assured that all these characters retain the fictional nature of their origins and that they should feel no more guilt over their deaths and/or exploitation as they would that in a book or movie. They did not exist in incarnated form prior to their creation during the course of the project."

Sasan stopped reading. He looked at Smudge. Smudge looked at him.

"...While the location of the project facility remains unknown, rumours have leaked of a self-contained residential complex dubbed Kenselton Hotel located in a mini-universe of its own."

"So we can't just break out and run?" Smudge asked.

"It looks like normal escape methods won't work," Sasan said. "But we knew that already."

"We'll learn how to teleport," Smudge said decisively.

"How?"

"I don't know, but we'll *learn*!"

Sasan looked back at the screen. "I don't like how they're suggesting we had no lives before this. I guess that might be true for Adam, but I *don't* think I imagined the last few decades."

Sasan shut the laptop in a huff and got up. "I'm going to speak to the receptionist."

*

"What do you expect us to do?" Adam asked, glaring at Noah. Spock and Leo stood by his side. "Kill ourselves?"

"If you're willing to do so, I'd be extremely grateful," Noah agreed.

"I don't see what's the problem here," Leo said. "Sylar's in that room. If you don't believe that's him you could pull out the knife and see for yourself."

"I'm not that stupid," Noah said with a patronising smile. "If that's Sylar, I pull out the knife and I'm dead. But even if that's him, lying there, it doesn't mean the rest of you are innocent either. How do I know you're all not just like him?"

"How do you know everyone else isn't?" Adam asked, mad that he was missing bits of *Heroes* because he didn't have the remote control to pause it.

"If you're going to suspect all of us of being serial killers you might as well do the same for everyone else in this place," Leo said.

"His logic is sound," Spock agreed. "We are inherently no different from the rest of the people in this building. Sylar's individual failings say nothing about our own."

"Well, you see," said Noah, taking off his horn-rimmed glasses and polishing them, "back when Sylar *was* here, you were just as insistent on your innocence." He put his glasses back on and smiled. "Look what happened there."

"We made a mistake," Adam said. "It happens."

Noah shrugged.

"If you truly thought we were dangerous, you wouldn't have come alone," Spock said.

"Yeah," Leo agreed.

"What did you plan to do?" Adam asked. "Take out your gun and shoot us all?"

"May I?"

"I believe that was a rhetorical question," Spock said.

"My only concern is for the safety of everyone in this place," Noah said.

"Except for us," Adam added on his behalf.

"Sacrifices must be made," Noah said.

"HE TRIED TO KILL ME!" Leo shouted, losing it. "I *saw* him standing over the dead bodies. He came for me and slammed me against the wall and I would be *dead* by now if Spock hadn't come..."

"You just want an excuse to kill us, don't you?" Adam asked Noah. "Because that's what it's all about. You want us dead, even though we've never done anything to you."

"I cannot rest until I know with complete certainty that Sylar can no longer harm anyone," Noah said evenly.

"Yet you did not shoot us on sight," Spock pointed out. "That would seem to indicate that you do still harbour some doubt as to our guilt."

Adam thought about just going back into the common room to continue watching TV. Then he remembered that he hadn't been able to pause the thing, and wouldn't be able to know what was going on.

Noah finally turned and started to walk away. "This isn't over," he said with a last sweeping glance at the three of them, and left.

*

"Hi," Sasan said to the receptionist at the arrival lobby of Block J with what he hoped was an innocent smile. "Is there any chance you could send us home?"

"No," said the receptionist curtly, being immune to innocent smiles of any degree. "Get back to your floor."

"Why not?" Smudge asked.

"It's a one-way trip. Get-"

"So they *did* lie!" Sasan said. "This place doesn't *create* us; it *kidnaps* us from our *homes*."

"I'm calling the guards if you don't-"

"Why are you lying to the public?" Sasan asked. "The press releases about this place say that we never existed prior to-"

"Where did you read that?"

"Online," Smudge said triumphantly.

"There's not supposed to be any Internet access in this place. Not for you. I'm calling the guards."

"Do people know what they're paying for?" Sasan demanded. "Or are they going to think that we're just soulless playthings created for their amusement?"

"Maybe you are," the receptionist said coolly. "Prove that you're real. Haha, you can't. Good luck with that." She pressed the red button and spoke into the microphone: "Code 2. 704270 times 2 on J-64, please assist, set phasers to stun."

"*What if I hit you with this remote?*" Smudge threatened.

The receptionist tapped the hardy transparent banner separating them. She smiled.

Smudge glared. He raised the remote in an attempt to bash it in when Sasan caught his arm. "Smudge, don't."

"*Why?*"

"Adam will kill you if you break that."

"Guards are coming," the receptionist said cheerfully.

"I hate you," Smudge said.

Sasan pulled him away, and they got out before the guards arrived.

*

Adam turned off the television manually, deciding to wait until Smudge got back with the remote control, which had better be still in working condition.

Leo had given up on his book (a collection of academic essays by renowned experts on the subject on how and why spinach would one day become sentient and take over the world) and was now engrossed in losing at chess to Spock.

Adam sat fitfully on the couch and gazed at the spot where the laptop had been. He hovered in that curious zone between abject boredom and the inability to get bored because there was a half-alien in the room playing chess. Adam watched Leo lose for a while, then got up and paced around.

He rearranged some of the stuff on the shelves to make them look neater.

He rearranged the books in alphabetical order by author, flipped through the philosophical text *Understanding is Overrated*, noted the mistakes in *One Day I Will Understand Technology: Confessions of a Tech Noob*, and yelled in pain when *A Selection of Watercolors by Boca Raton Artists* dropped on his foot.

He moped on the couch.

"Checkmate," said Spock.

Adam got off the couch. He went into the corridor and checked on the room with the dead people and the serial killer. He discovered that the wet rag was now just a rag, and went to the bathroom to make it wet again. He stuffed it back under the door.

He wondered if Sylar was really in there or if Noah's suspicions had been right. He opened the door to check. Sylar was there. Adam closed the door. That part of the seventeenth floor did not smell like roses.

He wanted to know just what was taking Smudge and Sasan so long, and what exactly they were up to anyway.

*

"I don't want to go back yet," Smudge had said, and so they returned to the fifth floor and hung around, and joined the small group of people who rushed past them.

"Someone blasted a hole in the wall," one explained after Sasan asked. "It's been there for a while but we just heard about it."

Back to the sprawling central block and away from its chaotic centre, up a side escalator sandwiched between walls of deep polished wood; and they rose on the moving steps basked in warm lamplights from above, and the lights faded away as they emerged at the top and got off.

The once-elegant glass doors that greeted them now lay torn from their hinges. They stepped through into the vast room with its floor of timber and midnight blue, the sweeping wooden bar curving away from them, rows of glasses and drinks still neat behind the counter. Two small robots

hovered above the dance floor lost in their respective paths of sucking up tiny bits of debris, oblivious to the intruders; the possible-robot bartender greeted each person who went up to him and asked what they would like to drink.

But at the end of the room was a yawning hole gashed brutally in the wall, pitch black shining through the opening and seeping through its jagged edges. There were no stars to break its unearthly velvet; no recognisable object that Sasan could see when he stepped cautiously up to the edge and looked down.

"What's out there?" Smudge asked, uncharacteristically quietly, awed by the scene.

"I can't see anything," Sasan said. "Just darkness."

We're alone, Sasan thought. *In a universe of our own. There's really nothing out there.*

A sudden homesickness washed over him; desperation amidst the isolation that now challenged them. Sasan wondered which direction home was, and knew that it was futile. He could run forever and never get there. He let his mind be filled instead with memories of that other world now so far away, places and people and voices that might have been no more than products of his imagination...

Smudge slipped his hand into his. Sasan squeezed it.

And they stood on the edge of forever, and gazed out into the void.

quinto formaggi
CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

"Hey, Adam - prove you're real," Sasan said when he and Smudge finally returned with the electronics they had up and left with.

"What?"

"Yeah, it's hard, isn't it?" Sasan put the laptop down on the coffee table and opened it.

"Give me back the remote."

"It's not yours," Smudge said.

"Smudge, just give it to him," Sasan said, so Smudge did.

"Checkmate," Spock said.

Sasan opened up some of the Internet windows he'd left there. "This is what we found out," he said. "There's nothing much that's new - we can't get out of here unless we learn how to teleport, and in the meantime the powers that be are letting people believe that we were created solely for their entertainment and didn't exist until then. I tried to lodge a complaint, but we got kicked out."

"How could we teleport?" Adam asked.

"Learn," Smudge explained, thinking that it was obvious.

"Yeah. How?"

"If there's going to be any interaction between us and the public, sooner or later we'll go to them or they'll come to us and then go back," Sasan said. "Presumably these are normal people we're talking about, so they'd have to use some form of technology that we might be able to hijack."

"Okay," Adam said.

"But that won't happen for a few days more. Until then we're stuck. There's the very real possibility that we might never see home again."

Adam was silent. Finally he got up, put the *Heroes* DVD back in, picked up the remote and continued from where he had left off. Smudge sat down to join him.

Sasan went to watch the chess game. He decided that Leo was terrible at it.

"That's not a good idea," he said as Leo's hand hovered over a bishop.

Spock raised an eyebrow at him.

Leo gave up. "Take over," He told Sasan, who gladly slid into his vacated seat to play and proceed to lose less spectacularly to Spock.

Leo joined Smudge and Adam in front of the TV.

The hours ticked by.

In the lull between episodes Adam found his mind wandering back to his fate, and to his home and the people he knew, and how he was stuck in a prison which he wasn't trying to get out of. And that drove him to start the next episode and escape back into that world; insofar as it could be an escape, with that mental jolt of fear shooting through him at every mention of Sylar's name, coupled sometimes with an anxious glance behind him half-thinking that he might see the killer standing right there; but these fears proved unfounded.

Adam skipped *Seven Minutes to Midnight*. He'd seen that. He fast-forwarded through most of *Homecoming*. He spent most of *Six Months Before* glaring at the television.

When the time came, they ventured out for dinner. Their increased numbers - five - might have helped contribute to the lack of any incident, with only a few unfriendly looks thrown their way by people they did not know.

They found a table snuggled against a pillar and sat down with their food. Adam opened the laptop again intending to find out more about the stuff Sasan had discovered. His mind was too hyped up on *Heroes* for him to pay any attention.

"I don't know what that is," Sasan agreed when Smudge held up the offending piece of food on his fork and loudly questioned its identity. "Just eat it."

"It's *furry*."

"Some people are into that," Sasan murmured.

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I don't think that's meant to be in there," Leo said, looking at the unidentified furry object.

Smudge dropped the UFO onto the table with a satisfied air and continued on with the recognisable food.

Adam looked up from the laptop to take another bite of food. He stared at the furry thing. "What's that?" he asked.

Spock was giving it a funny look. He'd just realised that it looked an awful lot like a baby tribble that someone had pierced through with a fork.

An unexpected sadness stirred in him.

Spock reached out a hand and picked it up. The tiny ball of fur quivered in his hand and made shaky purring noises.

"...it's a tribble," he said in wonder.

"What was it doing in my food?" Smudge asked.

The purring died away. The tribble went limp in Spock's hand.

"It's dead," he said.

Spock laid it to rest on the table. They went on eating, slightly more unsettled than before.

*

About an hour before midnight saw the arrival of a stunned-looking young man who was about to shut the door again when Leo got up from the couch and went to see to him.

Leo found him standing on the other side of the door, confused and scared, backing off as he approached.

"Hi," Leo said. "What's your name?"

The kid struggled to look him in the eye. "Mike."

"Do you want to come inside? We don't bite."

"...Who are you people?"

"Just people," Leo said patiently. "Normal people. I'm Leo."

"Why... why do you all look like-"

"Same actor," Leo said.

"...Wow."

Mike glanced back at the empty corridor.

"If you want to be by yourself for a while, it's all right," Leo said.

"No... I gotta get home, I can't-"

"There's no way out," Leo said. "I'm sorry."

"But..."

"Some people have been here for days. No one's managed to escape yet."

"I was just home, just five minutes ago."

"I'm sorry," Leo said quietly.

"So what... we're stuck here? Just like that?"

"Yeah." Head bowed, Leo turned to go back.

"What's going to happen to us?" Mike asked.

"I don't know. You can come in if you want to. It's not very safe out here."

Mike warily followed him in. The television was on and had since conquered all of Adam's attention again save for the small amount required to swat Smudge's hand aside whenever he felt that the scene needed more lens flare.

Sasan and Spock were busy with another chess game. Mike looked uncertainly at them, did a double take at the ears ("yeah, that's Spock," Leo said) and hung around feeling out of place as Leo rejoined the two on the couch.

Mike blinked and tried to take in everything; but his breath caught every time he looked at one of them and the disjoined recognition hit his brain; tried to make sense of the images and sound coming from the television; cautiously approached the chess game and watched Sasan progressively lose; finding it easier to get a grip on himself if he concentrated on the chess pieces alone...

"Get a chair if you want to watch," Sasan said, moving a knight.

"I..." Mike left.

A myriad questions swam in his head, but he could not put them into words. He opened his mouth to ask Leo something, then realised that he didn't know what to say and settled for gazing at the back of their heads as he tried to make some sense of everything.

Five minutes. Five minutes ago he was at home. In his room. He'd gotten up from his desk to get a file and found himself stepping into nothingness and then lying on a floor in a cubicle in another universe.

Leo turned to see what he was doing. Mike stood there looking pale.

"Are you okay?" Leo asked.

"I... I think I need some time alone," Mike said, moving back towards the door.

"Okay."

Mike left the common room for the blessed stillness of the corridor, and let out a breath as the door shut behind him.

He padded down the corridor, trying to forget the people in that room, gradually starting to feel like himself again; pushed open one of the doors and looked into the small room. He went in and let the door close.

Alone now.

He climbed up onto the upper bunk and buried his face in the pillow. Squeezed his eyes shut, wishing hard that he could wake up back home and have this just be a dream...

Mike opened his eyes. Nothing had changed. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling, and lay there for a while.

*

Adam didn't want to go to bed. It felt too much like giving in, and it was barely midnight according to the clock. His eyes were tired after more than half a day in front of the television, and their situation had taken other tolls on his mind. But though he tried to fight it, when the latest episode ended, he found that he no longer had the will to continue.

He got off the couch without comment and went to take the DVD out and turn the television set off. Smudge had since fallen asleep on the couch.

"If this is a dream and we wake up tomorrow, we'd never know what happens next in the show," Leo said as Adam returned the DVD to the case.

"I still hope this is a dream," Adam muttered. He put the case down on the coffee table and left for one of the rooms.

The cool sheets were strangely inviting. Adam shut the door and turned off the light. He dropped onto the bottom bunk, clutched his pillow, and fell into a troubled sleep.

Mike turned his head to look when Leo opened the door to check on him.

There were no words that could be said. Leo quietly closed the door, and Mike went back to gazing at the ceiling.

Spock took another room.

The two of them alone now, Sasan gently shifted Smudge down to lie on the couch he had fallen asleep sitting on. Smudge stirred slightly to adjust to the new position, his eyes remaining closed.

"Sas?" he murmured.

"Yeah, it's me."

Reassured, Smudge fell still again.

Sasan opened the door to let some of the corridor light in, then flicked off the common room lights.

He lay down on the couch. Smudge snuggled up to him, a faint smile appearing on his dreaming face. Sasan held him close, and soon sank into sleep as well.

*

Restlessness shook Mike out of the bunk bed. He hopped off the last few rungs of the ladder and exited into the corridor. It was quiet. People were sleeping. He couldn't sleep. Not like that, not after just being kidnapped...

Back out in the corridor, he paused before one of the rooms. On its door was tacked a note. 'DO NOT OPEN. DEAD PEOPLE + SERIAL KILLER.'

Serial killer? Mike wondered. The room seemed quiet. He pressed his ear against the door. Silence.

Mike tentatively tried the doorknob. It turned easily beneath his palm.

It wasn't locked.

Mike pushed the door open.

He recoiled at the sight of the three dead bodies lying on the ground; stumbled back into the corridor, his pulse racing, and then morbid curiosity got the better of him and he inched forward into the room.

He saw no serial killer. Just the dead people, one of whom had a knife sticking nastily out of the back of his head.

Mike swallowed.

He didn't like seeing the knife there. It looked wrong, and painful, and he knew the guy was dead but it didn't stop the instinctive repulsion. Dead people should not have knives stuck into their heads. Especially when they looked more like him than he was comfortable with.

Mike slowly crouched down, his breaths coming fast, and reached out a shaky hand towards the knife. He grasped the hilt, and gingerly placed his other hand on the victim's head for leverage.

He closed his eyes and pulled the knife out.

Mike opened his eyes. He let the knife drop onto the floor and lifted his hand from the head. It looked better now. More natural. Mike stood up, backed out, and shut the door.

Rest in peace, he thought, and continued on towards the stairwell.

<center>*</center>

Sasan opened his eyes in the dimness and wondered what it was that had woken him. Some instinct told him not to move; and so he lay as still as he could, eyes and ears straining to make out anything unusual-

Footsteps. Getting louder in their approach, and then a shadow fell over him and Sasan's breath caught.

The footsteps stopped.

Sasan gingerly turned his head to look at Smudge, but he was fast asleep and oblivious.

Another single footstep.

There's nothing to be afraid of, Sasan tried to tell himself. *Someone might be a sleepwalker. Or wanted water or the bathroom and can't find the light switch... just sit up and look. They're in the light, you're in the dark, they won't be able to see you...*

Growing terror paralysed him.

Do it, Sasan thought frantically. *A single look, it'll be nothing, you'll laugh about it after, just do it, do it...*

Slowly, he managed to force himself up enough to peek over the back of the couch-

There was a figure standing in the doorway. Shadowed against the brightness, but the relative light was still enough for him to tell...

Sasan's mouth went dry. He had never thought his own face could look that evil.

He's dead, he thought. *He's* dead*, Smudge stabbed him, Peter killed him-*

Sylar smiled.

...He sees me.

Fear rose in his throat and yearned to be expressed in a scream.

Get back down. He might not have seen you. He might not-

Suddenly weak with fear, Sasan dropped back down out of sight and grabbed the sleeping Smudge in a desperate hug; trembling, trying not to cry, not daring to close his eyes out of fear of what he might see when he next opened them, and in his mind played the repeated mantra directed at the unwelcome intruder, silently mouthing the words: *Go away. Please go away, please go away, please-*

"Sas?"

Sasan clapped a hand over Smudge's mouth, a pleading desperation in his eyes that led Smudge not to question further even before Sasan lifted a shaky finger to his lips.

More footsteps. Closer. The shadow shifted as its owner entered the darkness of the room.

Sasan gave in and shut his eyes tight, his heart pounding in his chest, hoping, praying, clutching on to Smudge...

The footsteps made a slow, taunting journey around the room. Deliberate. Then the sound got closer, and stopped, and Sasan knew without looking that he was standing right in front of them.

He heard what might have almost been a low laugh.

Malicious, more so in its mocking familiarity; and too close. Too close.

And then... miraculously... Sylar left.

The footsteps receded back into the corridor. The shadow passed across them once more and slipped away, and the stillness of the room returned.

Somewhere in Sasan's mind registered the amazing fact that he was still alive. But he still dared not open his eyes, and did not see Smudge glaring at the diminishing form down the corridor; did not see but felt and heard Smudge get up to shut the door and turn on the small light at the end of the room to chase away the darkness; heard him drag three chairs forcefully against the door before returning to his side; heard Smudge whisper, "*it's okay, Sas, he's gone now*"; and then sleep finally took them once more.

*

BLOCK J. 17TH FLOOR. STILL ALIVE:

ADAM   SASAN   SMUDGE   LEO   MIKE

+ POINTY EARS AND THE WATCHMAKER.

quinto formaggi
CHAPTER TWELVE: THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

In a place where every hour was work-free and sleep was the main escape from dealing with reality, there was no nightlife.

Most of the lights in the central block had been turned off. Those in some stores stayed on, beacons of life in the darkness; although how much they could be considered life was debatable, with the sole occupants of the stores the same semi-robotic figures who smiled plastically at Mike as he passed them. It freaked him out, but they never moved from behind their counters.

Mike stuck his hands into his pockets and continued on. He didn't know where he was going; he just needed to walk, to be alone for awhile, away from the others on his floor, to feel like an individual again...

His feet slowed to a stop. The girl manning the drinks stall to his left was decidedly human and staring at him with a mix of recognition, curiosity and fear.

"Hey," he said.

She gave a quick nod. "Hi. I'm sorry. You look like someone I know."

"Oh. Yeah, there... there are a few of those."

Awkward silence.

"You're not a robot," Mike said. "Why are you here?"

She shrugged. "I guess I just needed something to do. That's Jenny over there," she said, pointing to where one of the standard-issue store attendants lay on the ground, smiling cheerfully and dead-eyed up at the ceiling. "I short-circuited her and took over."

"Wow. I guess being in this place can get boring, huh?"

"Yeah."

Silence.

"...I'm Elle."

He gave a small smile. "I'm Mike."

"Mike. You wouldn't... happen to know anyone named Sylar, would you?"

Mike shook his head. "No. I just got here a few minutes ago."

Elle nodded, but there was a wariness in her eyes when she looked at him that suggested there was more to it.

"Who is he?" Mike asked.

"A serial killer. He... kills people," she added redundantly.

"Is he here? In this building?"

"Yeah."

Mike glanced uneasily behind him.

"-hey, you want a drink?" Elle asked with sudden perkiness, changing the subject.

Mike turned back around. "Sure. What do you have?"

"Anything you want. You can come round the back here and have whatever you like. It's all free."

"Cool." Mike went into the store and joined Elle behind the counter.

The wall was lined with drink dispensing machines for a whole range of non-alcoholic beverages.

"The alcoholic stuff is in the bar," Elle explained. "But the ones here are pretty good."

Mike got himself a cup and filled it with cranberry juice.   "Where do the drinks come from?"

"Yeah, that's the weird thing," Elle said. "Look at this."

She hefted one of the dispensers away from the wall. "No tubes or anything, see? But it never runs dry."

Mike drank a gulp of juice. "Are you sure?"

"I've been here for two days," Elle said, shifting the dispenser back. "A lot of thirsty people drop by all the time, but those things are still full."

"Weird," Mike agreed.

"This whole place is weird," Elle muttered. She got herself a drink as well.

"So do you just... stay here?" Mike asked.

"Yeah. It makes me feel less like somebody's experiment than being up there."

Silence.

Mike finished his drink. He looked at the cup, then found the bin and threw it in.

"...I guess I'll be going now," he said, looking reluctantly back out at the darkness with its robots and occasional stranger.

"Sure," Elle said softly.

He left the store; turned right back towards Block J, and started walking-

"Mike!"

He stopped and turned. Elle stood there in the lighted storefront, slightly ashen. He jogged back. "Yeah?"

"Okay, I... I don't really know how to tell you this, but..." She took a breath. "There are people after you. People who want to kill you or-"

"Wait, wait... why? What did I do?"

"Not you," Elle said. "Sylar."

"The serial killer?"

"That one. He looks like you. Older and more evil, but... There's this man, his name is Noah Bennet, and he says that the only way to make sure that Sylar is dead is to kill all of you-"

"But that's ridiculous-"

"Not if you know Bennet. He's just waiting for an excuse, Mike. And when he does it's going to be the end of it for you."

"That's not f-"

"*You don't know what Sylar is like!*" Elle said. "He slices people's heads open and *takes* their *brains*."

Mike's mouth fell open.

"Look... I'm sorry, but it's better if you know. I don't think it's safe back there with... with your friends. He's probably with them. They might all be in on it-"

"They didn't look like serial killers to me," Mike said.

"Yeah, well, appearances are deceiving."

"They were watching TV and playing che-"

Mike broke off. He remembered the room of dead people.

"What is it?" Elle asked.

"There... there was a room on that floor. With three dead bodies in it."

Elle looked vaguely horrified.

"But they were us," Mike said. "I mean... other people from the same floor... why would they kill... them..."

"Maybe they didn't want to go along with the killings," Elle suggested quietly. "They had to be silenced."

Mike looked at her. "Do you think they'd kill me too?"

"I don't know."

Silence.

"Stay here," Elle said.

"All right," Mike said, a bit too quickly.

"If Bennet drops by I'll vouch for you that you're not some kind of psychopath like the others. He probably won't believe me but it's worth a shot."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

He ruled the shadows, lurking unseen in the dark.

He'd gotten new clothes from a store and thrown the torn and bloodied ones away. He had standards, and did not appreciate looking like a victim. "*Why does it look like you were repeatedly stabbed by an angry bisexual?*" were not the last words he preferred to hear from someone he was about to kill. If it *had* been Smudge who had stabbed him, that is. He didn't think any of the others would have been that violent, but still you never knew. He'd have to check.

But for now, there was the careless young mutant smugly causing cleaning robots to break down from a distance. Revelling in his power, thinking he was alone.

Sylar watched another unfortunate cleaning robot squeak in horror and roll to a sad halt.

"Who's going to clean up all this mess?" he asked.

The teen turned at his voice. "Stand back," he commanded, excitement creeping into his confidence. "Come any closer and I'll kill you."

Sylar grinned. "In that case, I'll just stand here," he said, and raised a finger.

*

Sitting together on the floor at the back of the drinks store, Mike and Elle fell asleep.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Hands banged on the door. "*Hey!* Open up!"

Smudge blinked. He sat up, stared at the door and the chairs shoved against it, and quickly stumbled over to pull them away.

"Okay, okay..."

He pushed the last chair over and opened the door, flicking on the lights.

"Ngggh," said Sasan, and rolled over to bury his face in the couch.

"Why did you barricade the door shut?" Adam asked, looking at the chairs.

"Sylar was here," Smudge said. He rubbed a hand over his eyes to get the sleep out.

"*What?*" Leo asked.

"Sylar is dead," Spock said.

"He was *here*," Smudge insisted, then decided it was too early to argue and trudged back to the couch. He liked the couch. It had a Sasan on it.

"...how could he have been here when he's dead in that room?" Adam asked.

Smudge shrugged and nestled up to Sasan.

"Perhaps he's not in that room," Spock said.

"Where's Mike?" Leo asked.

"Who?" Adam asked.

"That kid who arrived last night..." Leo made his way back down the corridor, throwing doors open and looking in. "He was in that room," he said.

Adam hesitated, then rushed to the room with the sign on it and pushed the door open.

Two bodies.

A distant fear rose in him.

Adam closed the door. He took a breath and walked back to the others. "Sylar's gone," he announced. "You saw him and you didn't do *anything?*" he demanded of Smudge and Sasan. "What if he tried to kill the rest of us?"

"They couldn't really have done anything," Leo conceded.

"Right," Adam muttered. "There's a serial killer on the loose, and they just *go back to sleep*." He glared pointedly at Smudge and Sasan, who were doing just that.

"It's six in the morning," Sasan mumbled, deciding that should cover everything.

"Yeah," Smudge agreed.

"HEY!" Adam yelled.

Sasan muttered something into the couch and finally sat up to meet Adam. "Look, it was late and we were just glad to be alive," he said. "We weren't going to run after him to see what else he got up to, especially since he was supposed to be dead and it might not even have been Sylar but some other freaky guy who likes walking around in the dark. If he didn't kill us, there was no reason to expect him to kill you. All right?"

Sasan lay back down and buried his face back in the couch, having completely exhausted his 6am communicative capabilities.

"You're not going back to sleep," Adam said.

Sasan looked up from where he lay. "I went to bed at midnight and it's just past six. I need more than six hours of sleep to function, thank you very much."

He buried his face back in the couch, having completely exhausted his 6:05am communicative capabilities.

Adam looked at the two of them on the couch and decided that they were hopeless.

"How could Sylar have escaped?" he asked instead, generically pissed off at life and not helped by the fact that he'd had only six hours of sleep rather than the recommended seven or eight hours for healthy adults.

"Leo said that Mike was missing," Spock pointed out. "He might have been responsible for resurrecting Sylar-"

"Why would he do that?" Leo interrupted. "He was new. I don't even think he had heard of Sylar."

"Precisely," Spock said. "He might have been unaware of what he was doing. It could have been an accident."

"Or else the guy in the horn-rimmed glasses was right and we're all potential psychopaths," Adam said. He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to sit down on the couch, then realised that it was occupied and he couldn't.

"I don't think it's safe to stay here," Leo said. "Sylar might be back." He gave another worried glance at the empty room where Mike had been.

"Yeah, try and get them to move," Adam said, prodding the couch with his shoe.

Sasan and Smudge didn't budge.   Sasan had fallen asleep again. Smudge was just pretending to be asleep, because he didn't feel like going anywhere either.

"We should look for Mike," Leo said. "It's still early; I don't think many people would be up and it might be easier now than later."

"If he's still alive," Adam said. "And on our side. Why would *anyone* open a door labelled 'dead people and serial killer'?"

Leo shrugged.

"The strange old man is still unaccounted for," Spock said. "Some of this might have been his doing."

"Yeah," Leo said. "He said he likes playing with us. He might be watching right now."

"...All right," Adam agreed. "We're leaving this place."

"What if newcomers arrive?" Spock asked.

"They'll just have to fend for themselves. Smudge, I know you're awake!"

Smudge attempted a terrible attempt at a snore that immediately dispelled any illusion of sleep.

"You're not fooling anyone," Adam said. "Get up."

Smudge grudgingly did so.

"And wake him. We're leaving. Too many people know where to find us."

Adam went over to the laptop. He picked up its charger and coiled its wire around it.

"Where are we going?" Smudge asked.

"I don't know. Away."

"Wha' time 'sit?" Sasan mumbled when Smudge nudged him awake.

Smudge glanced at the clock. "It's almost 6:10."

Sasan groaned.

Smudge glanced sadly around the room. He'd grown strangely attached to the place in the short time he'd been there.

Leo brushed by Sasan's shoes sticking off the end of the couch and took the *Heroes* DVD from the coffee table. He wandered over to the shelves and grabbed a random book: *I Can Dig It, and Other Philosophical Musings of Jach Juan.*

"If you two stay here and get killed, that's your own problem," Adam said to Sasan and Smudge, the former of whom still had yet to budge. He tucked the laptop under his arm.

"Why can't we just stay here and lock the door?" Smudge asked. He liked this room. It was cosy and had Sasan in it.

"A locked door will not stop Sylar," Spock said. "Or anyone else who is determined to enter."

"If he didn't kill us last night, why would he do so *now*?"

"He appears to like a challenge. Killing people who are asleep is not much of a challenge and would not have fulfilled his egotistical need to feel superior. Alternatively, he had some other reason for his behaviour that I am not aware of. Either way, he has sufficiently shown that he is fully capable of murdering us when he wants to, and as long as he is aware of our location we cannot be assured of safety."

Spock's brief speech had succeeded in making Sasan fall asleep again.

*

Eventually the sorry party emerged from the common room, Leo flicking the lights off for what would probably be the last time. Smudge kept casting longing looks back at it; feet dragging slightly, wanting to stay in the place that had for the past few days been home. Several steps on, he finally resigned himself to the fact that they were really leaving. He nipped into one of the rooms and came out hugging two pillows.

He passed a pillow to Sasan. In his half-asleep state, Sasan thought about how idiotic he would look going around hugging a pillow. Then he realised that self-consciousness was basically moot when hanging around present company at six in the morning, and gave in to the temptations of the pillow. The pillow made him think of sleep. He wanted to go back to the couch.

They left the seventeenth floor and the door swung shut. Echoes reverberated down the empty corridor, and all was still once more.

*

"He's one of them," Noah said. "You can't trust them."

"Maybe not, but I can trust *him*," Elle said. "You don't even know *anything* about him. How could you just... decide that he's got to be some crazy psychopath? Does he *look* like a crazy psychopath?"

Noah looked at Mike. Mike stood there feeling awkward.

Noah shrugged. "Yes."

"He's safe," Elle insisted. "If he wasn't safe I'd be dead by now. Do I *look* dead?"

Noah didn't bother checking, too busy staring Mike down with a creepy smile that made Mike wish he would go away.

"What's your name?" Noah asked.

"Mike," he said. "Sir," he added.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since last night."

"Do you know who Sylar is?"

"Not until Elle told me about him. I'm not a serial killer, I swear-"

"Well," Noah said, "somebody is. This morning, several people were found brutally murdered all over this place. All of them had the top of their heads sliced open and their brains gone. Just the way Sylar does it. The thing is, your friends upstairs claim that he's dead. So who could it have been?"

"Why would he know?" Elle asked.

"I'm not speaking to you, Elle. Well, Mike?"

"I don't know. It wasn't me; I was here with her the whole time-"

"It could have been anyone," Elle said. "How hard is it to imitate Sylar's style?"

"These were powerful victims, Elle. Special people. They were not easy to kill."

Mike wished that Noah would stop looking at him like that.

"Do you want to look at the bodies, Mike?"

"...No."

Noah smiled. "Why not. So you can see what we're dealing with."

*

The bloodied corpse lay on the floor with the top of its skull gaping emptily open.

Mike threw up violently on the carpet.

Noah smiled.

*

"We could go to that place," Sasan suggested when it had finally sunk in that he was probably not going back to his couch any time soon. "The one where they blew a hole through the wall. There were rooms there."

"Where's that?" Adam asked, so Sasan took the lead and tried to be more awake.

The place in question was empty, now, save for the cleaning robots and bartender, who appeared to be permanent fixtures of the place. The bartender smiled perfunctorily at them as they entered and asked what they would like to drink.

"It's six in the morning," Leo said in reply.

Spock had been distracted by the hole in the wall. He stood before it, hands clasped neatly behind his back, gazing out into the darkness of the void. It looked like space. Like standing on the bridge of

a certain ship that was now worlds away. Only here, there were no stars. Just darkness. A never-ending blackness, with no signs of life out there as far as the eye could see...

To boldly go, he thought, and that made him feel a little better.

There were doors along one side of the room, adjacent to the bar; opening them led into a series of small, cosily-lighted function rooms with a long central table and several chairs around it.

"I guess this will do," Adam said, after they piled into one and he shut the door and the silence enveloped them.

They pushed the table against one wall to give them more space and moved the chairs to the side. Sasan adjourned to a corner, where he spent several moments worrying about the cleanliness of the carpet before finally giving in, plonking his pillow down on it, getting down, and letting his sleepiness override any hygienic concerns.

Smudge shortly dropped his own pillow next to Sasan's and curled up to him. He shut his eyes. Sparse voices travelled from the other side of the room; Adam or someone. The door was closed. No one knew where they were. They were safe. For now, at least.

This, too, could be home.

*

"Why," Mike gasped out, still shaking. "Why-"

"I know it's hard, Mike," Noah said calmly, looking strangely as though he was deeply enjoying himself.

"I'd never do anything like that," Mike said. "Never, never, *never*..."

Noah nodded slowly in understanding. "I tell you what," he said. "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. That is, if I can trust you. *Can* I trust you, Mike?"

Mike nodded desperately.

"Good. A few colleagues and I are going to pay a little call on your friends. We are going to get the truth out about these murders, and when we do, things may get nasty. Would you like to come along?"

Mike hesitated. "Yeah."

"If a fight breaks out, will you be able to stand your ground and not run away or defect to the other side?"

Mike swallowed. "Yeah," he said quietly.

"Remember what these people can do, Mike. Remember the bodies you saw. Either they are harbouring Sylar or it turns out that they share his abilities and homicidal urgings. You're not like them, are you, Mike?"

Mike shook his head, face pale.

Noah smiled. "Good boy. Here's a gun. Don't forget whose side you're on."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ONE OF US

I Can Dig It, and Other Philosophical Musings of Jach Juan.

Chapter One: PROMISES PROMISES SON!

"..." thought Leo. He flipped to the next page. And the next, randomly opening pages and scanning through their contents before realising that he should have probably picked a different book off the shelf, because this one looked to be the opposite of enlightening.

Leo shut the book and put it down on the table.

Adam stood up from where he had been plugging the laptop charger into the wall socket, and sat down on the chair as the laptop booted up.

"This place has Internet," Adam said to no one in particular. A sudden thrill shot through him. If they were staying here for good, he could be online as long as he needed. He could try and hack into the system; find out how it worked, how to control it, perhaps bring the whole thing down or send them home or both...

His fingers eagerly attacked the keyboard.

"Where'd the Shift keys go?" Leo asked from where he had been pondering the keyboard.

"I don't know; they were missing when I first found it," Adam murmured absently, then fell silent in activity, engrossed with the task at hand.

Leo watched him for a while before losing interest. He sat back on the swivel chair and gazed idly around the room. Smudge and Sasan were still fast asleep. Spock had wandered back out to the main area to stare out the hole again. He seemed to like that place.

Leo glanced at the clock in the room. 6:25. He looked back at the two asleep in the corner and felt a twinge of envy. They looked so peaceful together, lost in dreams away from the cares of waking life. Sleep beckoned to him. It wasn't as though there was anything else to do. But the carpet was uninviting and he doubted that his intrusion would be welcome if he tried to join Smudge and Sasan.

He found himself thinking of the bed he had left mere minutes before, soft and warm in the cool darkness of the room until Adam had yanked his door open and said to wake up because the common room door appeared to be locked or stuck.

He had felt safe there; almost, with the door blocking off the rest of the world and imagination free to take him wherever he wished. Threats had seemed meaningless then. Time had seemed to stand still. But now that was gone, and they were fugitives sent running to a different part of their prison out of fears they had not deserved.

He wanted to go back. Return to his bed and shut the door and pretend that no one could find him; for all appearances they had left the floor, and he doubted that Sylar would bother going into every room to check. The Mysterious Old Man probably knew where they all were anyway, because he seemed to always know things like that.

He could go back. Catch another couple hours sleep, then rejoin the others... take a few more things from the floor, like pillows and blankets and a better book... he would be quick. Safe.

Leo considered the option. Alone, sleeping, in the dark. He liked it-

No, he told himself. *We left for a reason. It's too dangerous to stay there.*

But if he just nipped by and got the things...

"I'm going back to get some stuff," he told Adam.

"Don't get killed," Adam said distantly, lost in his hacking.

Leo left the room. Spock was sitting by the hole in the wall, looking almost sad by half-Vulcan standards.

On his way down the escalator, Leo realised that he could probably get all he needed free from the various stores. Sleeping bags, food, perhaps a TV and things to watch on it...

Leo pushed the thoughts aside. He wanted to go back to the seventeenth floor. It felt like a right that Sylar had taken away from them. If they had to be imprisoned in this building, he'd rather they be in the place that had been specifically prepared for them. Even if it were just for a few more minutes.

*

"Why is he here?" someone asked, eyeing Mike warily the same way everyone else in the party had.

"He wants to prove that he's on our side," Noah said.

Mike attempted a friendly smile, but the hostile, fearful glances did not stop. He dropped his head and fiddled with the gun instead, feeling deeply out of place.

"Just ignore them," Elle said by his side as they walked towards the seventeenth floor.

Mike nodded, suddenly wishing that he had never volunteered. He found his mind going back to the scene from the previous night: the others sitting around the common room, harmlessly watching

television and playing chess, Leo inviting him to join them, the unspoken sense of family that hung in the air...

He forced himself to think back to the bodies that he had seen. The three on the floor in that room and the latest ones with their heads sliced open. Those people had something to do with it, somehow. *And if that's the case, then they aren't your friends*, he told himself. *They were just trying to lure you in to be a part of it.*

But he still couldn't shake the desperate loneliness.

*

The opening of the corridor link to Block J was unusually crowded. Leo thought about continuing on anyway when he recognised Peter in the group and pulled back on reflex, just as he made out Noah amongst them.

They had to be going to the seventeenth floor, Leo thought as he hung out of sight to watch them pass by. But *why-*

And then he saw Mike amongst the small group, looking scared but determined, and bit back the urge to call out to him, half-hoping that Mike would look his way and half-hoping that he would not.

He didn't like how he had a gun in his hand. Leo didn't want to consider the implications.

They had gone down the hallway. Leo moved uncertainly after them, curiosity driving him now. They entered the lift and headed up. Leo watched the numbers ascend and stop on 17.

They're looking for us, he thought. *All of us. And they brought weapons.*

He shouldn't be here. But Mike was-

Forget him. He's safe. They let him live. They might not be as kind to you. Run.

The lift had started to descend. 16. 15. 14.

Leo left.

*

They were gone, Mike thought, and in that instant all doubts seemed to vanish. Why else but out of guilt and not wanting to be held accountable for their crimes would they have left the floor so suddenly?

"All right," Noah said, as they walked back to the lifts, "we now know that they're all guilty. Shoot them on sight. No questions asked. These people are dangerous."

A few more wary looks flew Mike's way. He huddled in the corner of the lift and tried to pretend that he wasn't there.

The lift doors opened. They walked out.

Mike jumped as the small electric spark hit him from behind. He whipped his head around.

Elle grinned. "Hey. Cheer up."

"What did you do that for?"

"Got your attention, didn't it?" She fell into step with him, trailing a little way behind the rest of the others.

"...Everyone hates me," Mike said.

Elle shrugged. "You can't blame them. You do look a lot like their worst enemy."

"It's not my fault. What do they expect me to do? Plastic surgery? Kill myself?"

"I'm sure at least some of them would like that."

Mike fell silent.

<div align="center">*</div>

"I found Mike," Leo said, bursting into the room. "He's with them."

"Who?" Spock asked, looking up from where he had spent an agonising few minutes trying to make sense of Jach Juan.

"Peter, Noah... the others. They went to our floor, and they had *weapons*-"

Smudge rolled over and rubbed his eyes. He blinked.

"They wanted to kill us," Spock inferred.

"Good thing we got out," Adam said, eyes still glued to the laptop.

Leo shut the door tight. "But why would Mike be with them? He's one of us-"

"An arbitrary categorisation," Spock pointed out. "Technically, Sylar is one of us too."

"That's different-"

"To what difference do you refer?"

Leo gave up and sank into a chair.

"...All right," Adam said with a hint of triumph. "I broke into their surveillance system. Check this out."

A series of camera feeds popped up on the screen. Adam cycled through a few.

"They've been watching us," Leo said.

"Yeah. This whole place is rigged. All the common rooms on every floor of every block... most of the central block-"

"What about here?" Smudge asked, having wandered over to look.

"I'm looking for that..." Adam managed to call up a larger plan of the building. He found their location and called up the camera feeds-

They saw themselves on one of the open windows.

They looked up at the camera.

Smudge gave a slow wave and watched the action repeated on the screen.

"Can they hear us?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Adam said.

"Should we destroy the camera?" Leo asked.

"That would only draw attention to ourselves," Spock said.

"But then they can see us and know we're here," Smudge said.

"We don't know if the feeds are being monitored," Adam said. "There are a lot of them."

"They have a lot of staff," Spock countered.

Smudge waved at the camera again, which caused Adam to scowl at the screen and cycle to another feed.

"Don't do that," he said. "We don't want them to know we know we're being watched."

"But who are these people, anyway?" Leo asked. "If these are the people running the place then they should be content knowing that we're still in here; I don't think they're trying to find us. That's a whole other group of people who think we should die because we happen to look like a serial killer."

In the corner of the room, Sasan opened his eyes and realised that Smudge was gone. He closed his eyes again and tried to ignore all the talking.

"The video recordings could work in our benefit," Spock said. "They prove our innocence."

"I don't know how to access the recordings," Adam said. "These are just the live feeds."

Sasan gave up and got up to join the others, marginally more awake than before. He peeked over Adam's shoulder at the screen.

"They've been watching us," Smudge informed him. He pointed at the camera.

Sasan looked at the camera. He waved at it.

"Adam doesn't like it when you do that," Smudge said.

"Do what?" Adam asked.

"Nothing," Smudge said.

"Can you find Sylar?" Sasan asked.

"There are hundreds of cameras," Adam said incredulously. "It'll take forever to go through each one and hope that he's in front of whichever one I happen to be looking at."

"What about the areas leading to this place?" Sasan asked. "We could keep a watch on those just so we don't get caught unawares."

"Okay." Adam went back to the floor plan and found the place. A single camera hung above the base of the escalator, showing its last few steps and the glow of warm lights on the timber walls and floor. Cosy, yet with a subtle claustrophobic menace.

"Coast is clear," Leo observed.

"We should go and get food before it's too late," Sasan said.

"What if they find us?" Leo asked.

"They might not think of searching the cafeteria this early in the morning," Spock said.

"They'll know we need food," Adam said. "They might start watching the cafeteria to catch us when we go in-"

"Which makes it imperative that we hurry," Spock said. "Hopefully we can get in and leave before they arrive."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Mike decided he needed to be alone for a while. He sat by himself against a wall in one of the empty stores that Noah and the others had fashioned as temporary headquarters, and tried to convince himself that he'd made the right choice. He thought he had. They just needed to see that he was really on their side, and not-

"*Hey!*"

Mike turned towards the voice, and a shoe crashed into his face.

Knocked over onto the ground, gagging in pain as he tried to look up and see his attacker, his hands rising reflexively to protect his head before another kick slammed into his stomach and rough hands were hauling him up by his shirt-

"*You gave us away, didn't you?*" a voice hollered as Mike blinked through redness to make out a trio of angry faces, all strangers, and tried to scream but couldn't as a fist smashed against his face and the hands dropped him back onto the floor, head ringing with pain, trying to protest-

"I didn't... I was with you the whole-"

"*Then how the hell did they escape?*" another voice demanded, or perhaps it was the first, for he couldn't tell; couldn't make sense of the sudden attack, felt thick wetness on his face and tasted blood on his lips.

"I don't know..."

"*Really?*" Another kick. Mike curled up in pain, tears stinging his eyes.

One of them bent down. Grabbed Mike by the collar of his T-shirt, pulled his face close, hot breath against his cheek.

"*Why did you join us?* Mighty suspicious, isn't it? Are you a spy? Have you been telling your friends all about us? Playing innocent, thinking no one will ever suspect-"

"*No!*" Mike cried.

The man shoved him against the ground. His head cracked against the concrete and sent a thrum of pain resonating out throughout his skull.

"No," he said again, rambling through tears of pain. "I swear, I didn't do anyth-"

He screamed as one of them grabbed his ear and yanked his bloodied face up to meet the hostile glares.

"For your sake, you'd better not," one said. "Or the next time, we won't be this easy on y-"

Footsteps. "Let go of him!" Gruff voice, unfamiliar.

His ear was released, his head falling back onto the floor; shielding his face with his arms, knees drawn up as he lay there; heard brief chastisements and angry exchange, and then footsteps left, and one pair stayed behind and with gentle firmness pulled his hands away from his face.

"You all right?" the stranger asked. "You're all right," he concluded, as Mike blinked at him and confirmed he was still alive. "...God, you look exactly like him."

A shake of the head, and then the stranger left too; and Mike was left alone, looking weakly forward to the cool darkness of unconsciousness. He curled up tighter, hugging himself, shaking, crying, wanting his mom...

"Mike?"

Elle's voice.

"*Mike!*"

And he heard her rush over and fall to his side, taking in the injuries, letting loose expletives.

"*What did they do to you?*"

"It's okay..."

"It's *not* okay! Mike! Who were they? I'll go after them; they're going to pay for this-"

Elle wiped the blood off his face with her hands, casting furious glances backwards as though she might catch a glimpse of those responsible-

"I don't... I don't know who they were... it's not their fault, I don't know how the... the other people escaped..."

"Look here. You've been nothing but nice the whole time. You're not a horrible person, and you *don't* deserve this." Elle swore again.

"I can fix this," Mike said.

"What?"

"I can fix this," he repeated, some strength returning to his voice. "I just... I need to show them I'm for real, that I'm on your side, and then they won't hate me..."

He fumbled for the gun in his pocket and wondered if he should have used it earlier; but no, that would only have confirmed their suspicions...

Mike tried to stand up, his head swimming. Elle grabbed him to stop him from falling.

"Mike, you're not going anywhere like this, okay? You need medical attention or something-"

"I'm okay," he insisted, trying to convince himself. "It'll be okay, I just need... I'll find them, and I'll... I'll kill one of them, and then they'd know for sure and then they'll trust me..."

Elle regarded him uncertainly.

"I just gotta prove... It'll be okay, I promise, I can do this. I'll be back, okay? I'll be back..."

And Elle watched him in despair as Mike wiped more blood off his face with his sleeve and limped out of the store, one hand on the gun, face set in earnest determination to prove that he was one of the good guys.

*

"You're up early," said one of the standardised chefs as they found a table near the food counters and got breakfast. "Most people sleep in. No work, no school; just more of the same monotony."

They were the only ones in the cafeteria apart from a smattering of individuals here and there.

"So what's the plan?" Sasan asked as they sat down to eat. "We hide until... what?"

"Until they open the place to the public," Adam said. "Then we try to get out."

"We'll need supplies," Leo said. "It can't be safe to keep going in and out of that room. People might notice-"

"Yeah," Adam agreed. "What do we need? Food? Water..."

"Where can we get food?" Sasan asked.

"They might have packed meals. I'll check." Adam put his spoon down and went back to the counter.

"Do you provide packed meals?" he asked.

"Why would you need them?" the chef asked.

"Does it matter?"

"No," the chef admitted. "But no, we don't. We pride ourselves on the freshness of our food."

"Do you know anywhere we can get packed food?"

"You could get sandwiches from the vending machine. The supermarket sells some. Or you could kill someone and eat-"

"Okay," Adam said hurriedly, and returned to the table.

"...Where's my spoon?" he asked.

Nobody appeared to know, so he got another one.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Hello, Gabriel."

Sylar gave a start, looking up from beneath the brim of the free baseball cap he'd taken from a store.

Dem smiled. "Waiting for someone?"

"How did you find me?"

Dem shrugged. "The same way I find anyone else.   Who is it now... that little girl over there? Picking on kids now?"

"She's special."

"What are you going to do - go up to her and slice her head open in front of everyone? A bit obvious, don't you think?" Dem picked a bar of chocolate off the shelf and peeled off its wrapping. "Or are you just compiling your To Do list for tonight?"

"Why are you here?"

"Why not?" Dem asked through a mouthful of chocolate. "This is good chocolate," he added parenthetically. "Want some?"

"...Leave me alone."

"I'm impressed that you're alive, actually. I had thought I might need to intervene there."

Sylar contemplated the old man and the chocolate bar before him. "Do you know who killed me?" he asked.

"Out for revenge?" Dem asked.

"Perhaps."

"If you must know, it was a collaborative effort between the Vulcan, the bisexual guy and your good friend Peter Petrelli."

Sylar twitched. "Peter," he said.

Dem took another bite of chocolate. "Leave the poor guy alone. He's emo enough as it is. Just look at his hair."

"What about the others? Where are they?"

"In hiding. You scared them off the seventeenth floor. Congratulations."

"*Where?*"

Dem smiled aggravatingly. "Are you just going to barge in and kill them all? Not really your style, is it?"

"Tell me where they are. I'll know what to do."

Dem popped the rest of the chocolate into his mouth and swallowed. "Somewhere on the west side of the central block. That's all I'll tell you."

"Where's west in this place?"

"Find a compass and figure it out."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"That's a lot of sandwiches," Sasan commented as Adam and Spock lugged over the loot from the vending machine and dumped it onto the table. "It's not a very balanced diet."

"There's bread and meat and vegetables," Adam stated. "It's balanced."

"The supermarket's on the third floor," Sasan said. "There's a wider variety of food there."

"Fine; go see what you can get from it."

"What about water?" Smudge asked.

"There should be some there too," Sasan said.

"All right, you two get the water and whatever else you want," Adam said. "We'll take the sandwiches up, Leo can finish eating, and everyone meets back at the room when they're done. Be quick."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Hi, Mike," Dem said cheerfully. "Looking for someone?"

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"All supermarkets should have free stuff like this one," Smudge commented, pocketing pieces of chocolate and cheese off the shelves as he and Sasan made their way through the mostly-empty place.

"It'd destroy the economy," Sasan said. He scanned through the rows of products. "All right, uncooked food is out because there's no stove."

"Where's the water?" Smudge asked.

"It's probably under 'Drinks'," Sasan said, pointing at the sign.

They located and picked up a heavy water tank, carrying it together to balance out the weight. Sasan grabbed a column of disposable cups off a shelf.

"Let's just take this first and come back for the food," he decided, and so they left the supermarket.

"What're we going to *do* up there?" Smudge asked as they headed past stores on the way back, lugging the water tank between them. Standardised attendants smiled blankly out at them from behind the counters.

"We'll figure something out," Sasan said. "This *is* a prison. It's not meant to be entertaining."

"But there's all the fun stuff out here," Smudge said.

Sasan shrugged. "It'll only be a few days at most," he said. "We could spend that time revelling in the beauty of human fellowship and watching the hours go by. Plus, we have a bar, and an android bartender to talk to. We'll manage."

"Yeah," Smudge said, sounding unconvinced.

"Things could be worse," Sasan said. "We could be starving to death somewhere or out on the streets or stuck in some dead-end job typing numbers into a computer."

"Yeah," Smudge said, feeling slightly better.

"Just a few days, and then we'll figure a way out, somehow."

They walked on in silence.

"Sas?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we'll ever get home?"

"I hope so. Don't stop believing, all right?"

"All right."

They turned the corner towards the escalator that would lead them back to the room, and stopped short.

Mike shakily pointed the gun at them. "Don't move," he said.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN: WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

704270/006/SAS

"...Mike?" Sasan asked. "What happened to you?"

"I know what you did," Mike said, his voice trembling. "I saw the bodies, I know that you-"

"What are you talking about?"

"YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!" Mike yelled.

Sasan slowly lowered the water tank, Smudge following his lead.

Sasan raised his hands in surrender. "I don't know what they've told you," he said to Mike. "But we're innocent. We didn't kill anyb-"

"I SAW THE BODIES!" Mike shouted. "They said you said that Sylar is dead, but if he's dead then who killed them, which means that you must have-"

"Mike, put down the gun," Sasan said carefully. "We didn't kill anybody."

"No," Mike said, his voice choking up. "You're lying. I know what you people are like-"

"'You people'?" Sasan repeated incredulously. "Look what they did to you! You're one of us-"

"NO!" Mike yelled, clutching the gun tighter. "I'm not. I'm *not*."

"Put down the gun and we'll go upstairs and talk this over-"

Mike shook his head.

"You're on the wrong side," Sasan said.

"Yeah. The side that doesn't kill people and cut their heads open."

"*You're the one with the gun*," Smudge said.

"I said I'd kill one of you," Mike said. "So they'll know I'm with them."

"You're one of us," Sasan said again, and the words gnawed at Mike's resolve, tempting him with images of family and belonging and safety and-

"*NO!*" Mike shouted.

The gun went off. Sasan cried out in pain and fell as the bullet tore through his leg-

Smudge screamed something and lunged at Mike; knocking him over and knocking the gun out of his hand; Mike lacking the will to put up much of a struggle, trying to get away in panic, and then Smudge delivered an angry punch that sent him unconscious onto the ground.

Smudge pulled away, breathing heavily.

"Smudge-"

Smudge turned and rushed to Sasan's side. "Sas!"

Sasan grimaced, pressing a hand down on the wound to try and stem the blood. "Leave him alone. He's been through enough. Get the others. Let them know what happened."

"Are you o-"

"I'll be fine."

"Can you walk?"

Sasan shook his head. "I might need the hospital. Just get the others."

"Okay."

"Leave the water. You can get that later."

Smudge nodded and ran up the escalator.

Sasan regarded the unconscious, injured Mike on the floor and leant his head back against the wall, eyes squeezed shut in pain. *It'll be all right,* he told himself. *It's just one bullet. You're not going to d-*

"Sasan, is it?"

His eyes flew open. Terror exploded in his mind.

Sylar smirked, rounding the corner. "It's hard to tell," he said, casually looking over the scene. "You all look the same to me."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Smudge ran through the dance floor past the hole and to the rooms; he threw the door open and hurtled in, startling Adam where he was trying to arrange the sandwiches, words spilling desperately out:

"Sasan is hurt and he needs help 'cos Mike shot him and he's bleeding and-"

"What happened?" Leo asked.

"You gotta come help-"

Adam glanced at the laptop screen, still displaying the feed from the base of the escalator; and Smudge saw the look on his face, and rushed over to the screen, his eyes widening as he saw that Sasan was no longer alone.

"NO!"

He made to lunge back out the door when Leo grabbed him.

"Smudge-"

"Let me GO! SYLAR'S THERE, HE'S GOING TO KILL HIM-"

"If you go down there he's going to kill *you*-"

"I DON'T CARE! SAS NEEDS ME!"

"He'll know where we are," Adam said tonelessly, still looking at the screen. "He'll kill you and then he'll kill us."

Smudge kicked, trying to struggle out of Leo's grasp.

"Smudge, listen-"

"WHAT ABOUT SAS?" Smudge hollered, tears forming in his eyes.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," Spock said quietly.

"NO! I can't leave him there, he's going to die, I can't-"

Smudge's gaze travelled to the screen and its camera feed, Sasan helplessly on the ground before the unwelcome visitor, speaking words he could not hear; and Smudge yelled in emphatic pain as a finger twitched and Sasan's head jerked back against the wall; and he tried again to run-

Leo wouldn't let him, hugging Smudge tight, trying to still the panicked limbs that beat against his body; the fear written on his own face and in the lifeless whispers he gave: *Smudge, it's over, he's gone, he...*

"No. NO! *NO!*"

And Smudge bit and fought amidst the tears until Adam had to help Leo hold him back, Smudge screaming futilely as he watched the unreachable events unfolding on the screen so near and yet so far away; pain piercing his heart with every unheard scream from Sasan; Sas needed him, he could help him, he didn't know how, he just needed to be *there*, he had to be *there*...

"He's coming," Adam said suddenly, as they saw Sylar abandon Sasan's still form and head calmly for the escalator. "He's coming up."

Smudge had dissolved into angry tears on Leo's shoulder; Spock had the presence of mind to quickly nip out and flick off the lights of the surrounding rooms and their own and give the quiet command to hide. Leo pulled Smudge under the table and tried to hush his sobs as they heard the footsteps get off the escalator and cross the floor.

Silence.

The footsteps stopped. Then they left.

Adam peered up at the laptop screen from where he crouched beneath the desk. Eventually he saw Sylar step off the foot of the escalator, pass Sasan, and leave.

Smudge started struggling again.

Adam stood up and slowly turned the lights back on.

"Okay," Leo whispered. "Okay." He let Smudge go.

Smudge stumbled desperately out the room, blinded by tears, clutching onto the escalator rail as he ran trippingly down it several steps at a time with no regard for his own safety.

"Sas-" he choked out as he half-fell off the last few steps onto the floor, crawling the last metre or so.

"Sas..." He gripped onto Sasan's hand, still warm, trembling as he looked up to the blood still streaming from the slit neck.

Eyes opened weakly to look at him.

"I'm here," Smudge gasped out, tears flowing freely. "I'm here, I'm sorry, I..."

He felt Sasan's fingers tighten briefly around his own.

Then the eyes shut, and the fingers went limp.

"No," Smudge said. "*No*. Sas... *Sas!*"

He grabbed for a pulse, his own racing. Fumbled with Sasan's wrist, feeling for the steady thrum of life... and found none.

The others came off the escalator and stood a respectful distance behind; and they watched in silence as Smudge broke out into the agonised screams of a newly broken heart.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

A wall away, Sylar listened and felt nothing. No sadness, no triumph; nothing, save perhaps a faint bitter satisfaction in robbing one of them of the kind of companionship he would never have. But no... he was above that. They... they were just there for his amusement, all cooped up in their little room, thinking he did not know where they were. That was all they meant to him.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Smudge."

A hand rested on his shoulder. He tried to shrug it off, but could not get up the will to do so.

"Smudge. C'mon. Let's go. We can't stay here."

Smudge weakly toyed with the idea that it was Sasan speaking; but his fatigued mind could not sustain the illusion for long against the reality to which he was clutching stubbornly, the fabric of Sasan's shirt wet against his closed eyelids.

"Smudge." Leo's voice came again, still patient.

"I wanna stay here," Smudge managed, refusing to open his eyes.

"He's gone, Smudge."

Smudge didn't reply, clutching on tighter to the still form.

Leo got up from the crouch and walked back to where Adam was regarding the unconscious Mike. He let out a quiet curse.

"What do we do with him?" Leo asked.

"He knows where we are," Spock said. "We can't risk him alerting others to our whereabouts."

"Can we even trust him?" Adam asked. "If he shot Sasan-"

"Without a weapon he is harmless. He poses a far lesser threat to us if we were to take him in than if we were to let him go; and, judging by his current condition, if we let him return, they might kill him."

Adam nodded. He looked over at Smudge. "He still won't let go?" he asked Leo.

"They were close."

"I noticed."

Silence.

"Okay, let's just take him up," Adam said, poking Mike with his shoe. "And get the water. Smudge, if you're staying here you might get killed."

"I don't care," came the muffled reply.

Adam sighed and gave up. He yanked Mike up. "Get his legs," he told Spock.

Leo had returned for a second attempt at getting Smudge away.

"It's not safe here," he said.

"I don't care," Smudge repeated distantly.

"Sasan wouldn't have wanted you to die. I think he cared enough about you to want you to stay safe and not put yourself in danger like this. If Sylar kills you too, what would you gain?"

Silence.

"He said I could go live with him," Smudge said softly. "He said maybe. No one else cares about me."

"We care. All of us. That's why we want you to be safe."

Smudge sniffed and wiped the back of his hand across his face.

"C'mon."

Smudge reluctantly let go of Sasan, gazing a few more moments at him through eyes too tired to continue crying; he remembered the times they had spent together: exploring their prison, escaping from angry superheroes, falling asleep together on the couch, making a video cooler than anything Adam could have done-

The video.

Smudge stuck a hand into Sasan's jeans pockets, feeling a temporary dread as the first turned out empty; until his fingers closed over the flash drive snug in his other side pocket and pulled it out.

Smudge clutched on tightly to it as he looked for the last time upon Sasan's face.

"I won't forget you," he promised in earnest decisiveness. "I won't."

He got up and slipped the flash drive into his own pocket. Leo silently put an arm around his shoulder and guided him back to the others, picking up the water tank and cups as they stepped onto the escalator.

Smudge glanced back for a final farewell as they ascended back up into safety. He felt the flash drive in his pocket, and gained confidence in its presence.

"Bye, Sas," he whispered, his voice shaking, and then the escalator lifted him out of sight.

*

The fog of unconsciousness raised itself from Mike's mind and he became aware that he was lying on a floor. Disoriented fragments of thought struggled to reform into coherent wholes amidst the painful throbbing on the side of his head and throughout most of the rest of his body.

Mike opened his eyes. He made out something which he recognised as a shoe; his gaze travelled up the accompanying leg and settled on the profile of a face intent on a computer screen. It looked familiar...

Something clicked.

With a jolt of horror, Mike scrambled to his feet, wincing at the pain - he'd been beaten up, he remembered now, by those guys, and then by that angry bisexual companion of the guy he'd shot. He collapsed unsteadily back against the wall to which he shrank in terror as the others in the room noticed his return to the conscious world...

His panicked eyes roved from face to familiar face; pulse speeding up, palms pressed back against the wall as he made out the door which suddenly seemed an infinity away; to wake up *here*, right in the middle of the enemy, smack in their hiding place with - frantically he checked himself but did not find the gun - no weapon.

"You're up," computer guy said in annoyed observation.

Mike looked back towards the door. Perhaps if he ran for-

Spock seemed to sense his intention and moved calmly to stand before the door.

Mike licked dry lips, breaths coming short. "Please don't kill me," he gasped. "Please don't-"

"*You shot Sas!*" the accusing voice came from the one Mike recognised as responsible for the pounding pain on his head, the fury in his eyes tempered with a wild, profound sadness. "*You shot him-*"

"Just in the leg," Mike pleaded. "It was just to-"

"HE DIED!" Smudge yelled. "Because of *you*, and if you hadn't shot him then I wouldn't have had to go and Sas would still be alive and we... we..." The outburst dissolved into tears.

"You okay, Mike?" Leo asked, and Mike found desperate solace in the unexpected kindness.

No, a part of his mind insisted. *He's one of them too. He can't be trusted. None of them can. They're going to kill you. They took your gun. They-*

Out of nowhere he remembered the promise he'd made to Elle: *I'll be back.*

"Mike?" Leo asked again, genuine concern on his face. "What did they do to you?"

Mike turned to speak but could not find the words; lost again in the overwhelming sense that he *belonged* here, among them; torn between the urge to just give in, and the atrocities he had seen which had been attributed to them. Why else would they have run if not out of guilt; why else claim a murderer dead when he was still alive-

He shook his head in reply, wanting a way out of the tumultuous confusion of his mind, just wanting things to make sense, and to be safe and not to die...

"Do they know we're here?" Adam asked.

Mike shook his head. "They said you killed people," he said weakly, almost hopefully, suddenly wanting so much to be proved wrong. He felt the pull to be included in this odd family; felt too his outsider status, wanting it if they turned out to be as thought, but even then, perhaps not...

Adam rolled his eyes. "And you believed them?" he asked. "They've been on our case since the beginning. We haven't done a thing to deserve it, other than being part of some guy's revenge fantasy because some serial killer pissed him off. And now they got you too. Perfect."

"But then... why are you hiding?" Mike asked.

"To get away from them," Leo said.

"And to get away from Sylar," Spock added. "Whom we have reason to suspect is only alive again because of you."

"What?"

"There was a room," Leo said. "It had a sign on it that said 'dead people and serial killer'-"

"Yeah," Mike said. "I saw that. But they were all dead-"

"One of them was Sylar," Leo said. "We killed him by sticking a knife into the back of his head. He has the ability to heal; without that knife he would have quickly recovered."

Mike felt a slow dread rise in him.

"Did you take out the knife?" Leo asked.

Mike blinked. "I thought... I didn't know..."

"Answer the question," Spock said.

Mike nodded.

Adam muttered some silent curse. "Why," he asked. "*Why* would you do that?"

"It looked painful..."

"He was *dead!*"

"I'm sorry-"

"Yeah," Adam said harshly. "Tell that to everyone Sylar killed since then. Tell that to *Smudge*, who's spent the whole morning sitting and crying in that corner because his boyfriend's dead, just because you thought that a knife in a *dead* body looked *painful*."

"I... I can help clear your names," Mike said. "I'll tell them it was my fault and-"

"Do you really think they'll listen to you?" Adam asked. "*Look in the mirror*. You're one of us. They hate us. I'm guessing it wasn't you who beat you up like that. They were using you, you played right into it, and you're not going back to them to screw it up further. I hope you like sandwiches."

Adam got up and stalked out the door.

Mike stood awkwardly beneath the gazes of the others and wished that he were somewhere else.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'm really, really sorry..."

Smudge ignored him, curled up in the corner with his face buried in the pillows, his mind still struggling to come to terms with the giant emptiness he felt inside.

Leo came over and placed a hand on Mike's shoulder, guiding him out to the bathroom. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

BLOCK J. 17TH FLOOR. STILL ALIVE:
ADAM   R. I. P. SASAN   SMUDGE   LEO   MIKE
+ POINTY EARS AND THE WATCHMAKER.

quinto formaggi
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: FOR TOMORROW WE MAY DIE

"Personal log. Kenselton Hotel, second day since arrival. The events of this morning saw us lose yet another member of our party to the hands of the serial killer Sylar. It would appear that we are not as hidden as we may have thought, although the extent of Sylar's knowledge with regard to our present location remains unclear."

Adam lifted his head from the bar to listen to the clear voice dictating into the laptop.

"It seems that we are being held accountable for the various murders that transpired here last night. I cannot say for certain that they were the sole work of Sylar, but I am convinced of the innocence of all in our party."

Mike opened the door of the bathroom; light beamed out the doorway casting strange shadows onto the bar and against the half-alien figure who stood by the hole in the wall, laptop on the nearby table recording his every word.

"We are very far from home," the dictation continued with what sounded like a lapse in tone into something softer, "and while this place... this prison... offers much to learn, I am nonetheless wary of the possibility that we may not have that much longer to live."

Leo followed behind him and returned to the room. In the semi-darkness, Mike slid down the wall to sit, arms around his knees, trying to be unobtrusive. He looked hesitantly up at Adam in a silent plea for forgiveness, loyalties clashing in his mind:

"Can I trust you, Mike?" Yes. *"Don't forget whose side you're on."*

"They were using you," Adam had said. They were using him, and he played right into it. But they had sounded sincere and they had been good people. Anyone who wanted to put an end to the terrors he had seen had to be good people. Elle was a good person. They had trusted him, and he had betrayed them.

"Look in the mirror," Adam had said. *"You're one of us."*

The bar counter was polished on its side and gave a poor reflection when Mike looked at it. The dimly warped face that looked back at him could have been anyone. Any of them. Could have been Sylar.

Mike had to turn his head away.

*

Smudge was still in his corner with the pillows, curled up and facing the wall in silence.

Leo quietly walked over and sat down near his feet, against the wall.

A loose shoelace lay limp on the carpet below jeans scuffed with dried blood. Smudge's eyes were wide open and gazing at the wall in a kind of distant shock, his body heaving slightly with each ragged breath.

Leo wished there was something he could do. But there wasn't, and so he just sat there hoping that it helped, not knowing if Smudge was even aware of his presence-

Smudge stopped breathing.

Leo stared. Suddenly fearing the worst, he reached out-

"Hi, Leo."

"AAAGH!"

Dem looked dispassionately at him from where he'd materialised and was currently munching on chocolate. "This is good chocolate," Dem said appreciatively. "I stole some from a store. Of course, it wasn't really stealing seeing as how it was all free... Don't worry, he's not dead. I just stopped time again. Annoying thing, time. One needs to keep it in check now and then to show it who's boss."

"Did you do this?" Leo demanded, pointing at Smudge.

"Do what? Make the bisexual smudge depressed? I didn't do that. His friend dying did that. This is really good chocolate; you want some?"

"How did Sylar know where we were?" Leo asked, glaring in a way that made it clear that, no, he didn't want some chocolate.

"You're not exactly in some uber-secret place," Dem said. "And I may have assisted him a little."

"*Why?*"

"Sometimes I like being helpful," Dem said with a smile. He took another bite of chocolate. It released dopamine in his brain and made him happy.

"Why don't you just kill us all right now, then, if that's what you want?"

Dem shrugged. "Where's the fun in that? It would interest me just as much if you survive. I want to see how you do it. Sylar's just one guy. There are five of you. That seems rather unevenly matched in your favour. Of course, Adam's trying to get drunk at the bar, the Vulcan's making diary entries, Mike is being emo, the bisexual smudge is wallowing in grief and you are talking to a mysterious old man who just appeared out of nowhere. Not very impressive, I must say."

"What do you expect us to do?"

"I don't know," Dem admitted. He tossed a chocolate bar at Leo. "Give that to Smudge if you don't want it. You can't say I don't care-"

"Sasan was killed," Leo said. "Because you thought it would be a good idea to assist a serial killer. These are our *lives* you're playing with! Do you know how much he meant to Smudge?"

"People die every day," Dem said quietly. "On your planet, in your time, almost two every second. Over a hundred every minute. More than six thousand every hour. Over one hundred and fifty thousand every day. It is a privileged minority that has never had to deal with the premature loss of a loved one. Get some perspective. One day you will learn that some things are useless to fight."

"That doesn't mean we have to make it worse," Leo said.

"Human lives don't even make a blip on the radar of the cosmos," Dem said. "Your lifespans are so amazingly short when set against the eras of time. Recognise your insignificance, Leo. Sasan's death had no effect on a cosmic scale and even less on a multiversal scale when it comes to caring about things that matter."

"Smudge cares," Leo said. "*We* care."

"Negligible," Dem said. "You overestimate your importance in the grand scheme of things. It's a common human folly that some deities from various universes have also been known to engage in. Humans are but less than a speck. Individually they are a speck on a speck. Sometimes a Spock. Very entertaining specks, but specks nonetheless. Rise, fall, blow yourselves up; in the end, everyone else just moves on. Perspective, Leo. That's your lesson for today. Goodbye."

Dem vanished, and time started moving again.

Silence.

Leo placed a comforting hand on Smudge's side. Smudge blinked and turned his head slightly to look at him, his eyes searching the face which his mind told him was not Sasan but his heart wanted to believe otherwise.

"You'll get through this," Leo said quietly. "All right? No matter what happens. You're going to survive this and you're going to get out of this place and you're going to go home, Smudge. Do it for Sasan. Do it to show Sylar that he can't win so easily. Do it for yourself."

Smudge wiped a tear from his face. "I can't do it alone," he said.

"You'll have us. The five of us... we're going to make it all the way. Somehow. Together."

Silence.

"Things were going to be different," Smudge said in half-whisper. "I... I thought I'd run away and be with Sas. After we got back. And be happy. But now... if we get home, everything will just be normal again." He hesitated. "I don't know if I want that."

Leo picked up the chocolate bar and held it out. "Here," he said. "You'll be fine, all right?"

Smudge took the bar and unwrapped it. He took a bite. It was good chocolate.

*

It was all his fault, Mike realised, the guilt burning up the back of his neck. Everything Sylar had done wouldn't have happened if he hadn't pulled out that knife. Those bodies he had seen with their heads sliced open had been indirectly his doing. Sasan would be alive if it wasn't for him. He'd barely known Sasan; hadn't even known his name until now, just remembering him as the guy who had been playing chess with Spock, unaware that in a few hours he would be dead. He'd barely known him, but the loss weighed on his mind as though he'd just lost a close family member.

Noah shouldn't have trusted him. If he knew Mike was the only reason Sylar was still alive, the only reason everyone on this floor was being held guilty...

He didn't belong here. Not when he was the reason they had had to go into hiding, or the reason they were still being hunted. If not for him, Sylar would have stayed dead. There would have been no more of his signature murders. Noah Bennet and his friends would have left them alone. They would have proven their innocence. Sasan would be alive, as would all the other victims...

He could do nothing here, Mike thought, getting up from the floor. He didn't deserve to be safe here with them. He could go back, face Noah and Elle, and let them do whatever they wanted to him. He'd tell them why Sylar was alive. He'd take any punishment, anything...

Adam didn't notice as Mike slipped passed him, out the broken doors and down the escalator.

Sasan's body was still there, bloodied against the wall. Mike instinctively averted his eyes-

And then he forced himself to look. *See what you've done*, he thought. *See what your actions led up to. Face up to it.*

Mike swallowed. Shaking, he made himself stare at the fatal gash across Sasan's throat before the familiar face; made himself look at the bullet wound in Sasan's leg that had been all his doing; made himself take in the sight of the pooling blood on the floor, made himself see the-

Gun. They hadn't taken it. It had been left where he'd dropped it on the floor.

For a moment the sight of the weapon stunned his mind.

He'd wanted to prove himself. He'd taken that gun with the full intention of using it, of killing at least one of them to show once and for all that he was on the side of the good guys.

One of them. If they'd been responsible for all those horrors, they deserved to die. It would have been easy. It would be easy...

Mike slowly bent down and picked up the gun, feeling its dead weight in his hands.

You're one of us, Adam had said.

It would be easy...

Distantly, Mike thought of his family. His mom and dad, his home, his room; but they seemed now like nothing more than shadows in a half-forgotten dream.

Mike lifted the gun and pointed it at his head, his hands suddenly steady with a confidence borne of justice and troubled earnestness.

He closed his eyes and thought of how much better things would be for everyone when he was no longer around to mess it up.

I'm sorry, he thought.

And then he pulled the trigger.

<div align="center">*</div>

They all heard the gunshot.

By the time they reached the base of the escalator, Mike was dead.

<div align="center">*</div>

And now they were four.

Their youngest lay sprawled on the ground from where he'd fallen, the gun lying loosely in his palm.

Adam kicked the wall.

Leo dropped to the floor and buried his face in his hands.

Back upstairs, at the bar, shadows playing on their faces:

"There are only half of us left," Adam said, staring into a glass of unidentified alcoholic beverage. "Mike, Sasan, those two yesterday... There should have been eight of us. Not four."

Silence.

"We're not going to make it, are we?" Leo asked quietly.

Adam shook his head, not looking at him. He remembered their first attempt at escape; materialising five different kinds of cheese, finding the database, changing Gabriel Gray's status so he was no longer banned. His fault. Unintentional, but still his fault. He took another swig of whatever was in the glass. But deciding on whom to put the blame would get them nowhere.

Faint sounds from the laptop. Smudge was replaying the video they had made, Spock looking on in silence. On the screen, Sasan lived again. If only for a moment.

"I miss Sasan," Smudge said softly when the video ended.

"'Grief changes shape, but it never ends'," the android bartender quoted. "Reeves. They've all lost someone too," he added, gesturing with his free hand at the other three.   A shiny nametag identified him as Arthur.

Adam looked up from his glass and scowled. "Where have you been snooping?" he asked.

"I'm hooked up to the main database. All of us are. We have your files. I know your sister Sara just died. And his mother," he added with a nod towards Spock, "and his adoptive father." He looked at Leo, then went back to polishing glasses that looked clean enough. "Sad group you lot are," he said.

Awkward silence.

"Could you shut down the system?" Adam asked.

"Nope. Even if I could, it would be against my job description."

"What could they do, fire you?"

"My free will is limited to my programming."

"Free will limited by programming is not true free will," Spock said.

Arthur shrugged. "Technically all living creatures are programmed as well. Your DNA dictates a large part of your behaviour. Environmental and upbringing factors beyond your control do the rest. Logically it would seem natural for the universe to be predetermined, and yet it appears to contain an inherent uncertainty that's been proven to result in different end states given identical starting conditions."

"Conversations like this are within your job description?" Adam asked.

"Sure. Lots of people like getting philosophical epiphanies when drunk. I'm only too pleased to assist them."

"Assist us, then," Leo said. "There are a lot of people out there trying to kill us. Surely there's something you can do about it."

"Unfortunately, no," Arthur said. "Communication is all one way. I can access information and receive commands or messages, but I cannot send them out."

"Can I hack your brain?" Adam asked, displaying a marvellous lack of tact.

"You wouldn't understand it even if you could," Arthur said. "I'm a semi-sentient being from another universe. My hardwiring and software would be completely alien to you. Another drink?" he offered instead. "I've been wanting to try my hand at concocting a Pan Galactic Garg-"

"No thanks," Adam said.

"Is this facility equipped with the required mechanisms to send us home?" Spock asked.

"No," Arthur said simply. "None of you want another drink?"

Silence.

"How much longer do we have to live?" Leo asked.

"That's an awfully pessimistic outlook, don't you think?" Arthur asked. "Drink, enjoy life, drink some more, and when the time comes you will barely notice it."

"I do not think it wise to spend what might be our last few days of our lives in a state of intoxication," Spock said.

"Suit yourself, pointy ears. And you've got company." Arthur motioned towards the broken doors where a group of people were making their way through.

They stared at the newcomers, but they seemed primarily interested in the hole in the wall.

"Why are they here?" Adam asked.

"It's a tourist attraction," Arthur said. "The X-Men did it a few days ago. It used to draw lots of people but the excitement died down. Would you like anything to drink, sir?" he called out at one of the new guys, but the latter was more interested in the hole in the wall.

"Don't look at them," Leo said. "Someone might recognise us from somewhere."

"Is there a way to keep people out?" Spock asked.

"I could declare the place dangerous and out of bounds, but frankly I think that will just make more of them interested."

Eventually the others left, and they were alone again.

"You guys may be the last people I see," Leo said.

"What did I say about pessimism?" Arthur asked. "You're not dead yet."

"I'm going to watch TV," Adam decided. He got up with his glass of whatever and dumped it in front of Smudge. "I think you need this more than I do," he said. He picked up the laptop.

"Is he old enough-"

"I'm 23," Smudge stated. He downed the glass. He made a face. "What *is* this?"

"Ask no questions and I'll tell you no lies," Arthur said cheerily.

"It came from that bottle labelled Experiment #42," Spock observed.

Smudge looked sadly at the empty glass.

Leo went off to join Adam in continuing their *Heroes* marathon.

"Would it be possible to alter the present system in a way that might allow our return home?" Spock asked.

 "One-way trip, buddy," Arthur said.

"Even if that were the original intention, could it be possible to modify the existing-"

Arthur shook his head and cut him off. "That's outside my area of expertise."

"Which is?" Smudge challenged, feeling weird from the drink and realising that there was probably a reason Adam had taken so long with it.

"Being on the frontier of new-beverage creation and chatting with half-drunk people about the nature of existence."

"Oh," Smudge said. "I feel weird," he added, and dropped his head onto his arm on the bar counter.

"#42 was a little unstable," Arthur admitted. "Judging from the few I tried it out on, possible side-effects differ from person to person and include amnesia, dizziness and hallucinating green unicorns running across the lab."

"We're not in a lab," Smudge said, confused.

"That's why it's a hallucination," Arthur explained. "And sometimes they sing: *Always, I want to be with you, and make believe with y-*"

Spock raised an eyebrow. Arthur stopped singing.

Silence.

"You'd better get moving," said a voice.

Smudge looked up. Dem sat perched on a barstool. He tapped one of his watches. "New guy on the seventeenth floor. Save him, or leave him to find out the hard way what this place is like?" Dem smiled.

Smudge and Spock looked at each other.

"Getting him would mean leaving this place and exposing ourselves to risk," Spock started, hesitantly.

"What if just one of us goes?" Smudge asked.

"That would not be safe. We should stick together."

"Clock's ticking," Dem said casually. "I say it'll take... five minutes for Sylar to get there after I tell him."

"..." said Smudge and Spock.

Dem grinned. "Good luck," he said, and vanished.

*

STILL ALIVE   RIP

ADAM   LEO   SMUDGE   SPOCK   SYLAR   SASAN   mike   PAUL   MONTY

---

quinto formaggi
CHAPTER SIXTEEN: EXPERIMENT #42

"Hello?"

The call went unanswered.

Tony stuck his hands into his pockets and sauntered into the corridor trying to look braver than he felt.

The place seemed empty; there was a dead air about it, and yet something suggested that there had been people here not long ago. Tony's eyes lingered briefly on a patch of discoloured wall and the carpet below it. *Blood*, he thought, then shook it off. Whatever it was had been cleaned away, though not very effectively.

He jumped slightly as the door shut. Something fluttered in the brief draught of air. It was a note, he saw, as he located it and went over for closer inspection. A note tacked on a door:

'DO NOT OPEN. DEAD PEOPLE + SERIAL KILLER'

...in his handwriting.

Tony stared at it. He blinked.

Nah, he thought, and tried to put the familiar turn of the letters down to coincidence. He stared at the door instead. Dead people plus serial killer. Perhaps it wouldn't be wise to open it. Not now, anyway.

But one thing was certain now; there *had* been people here at some point...

He continued walking towards the room at the end. The door was ajar, but no sound came from it.

He entered, searched for a light switch and flicked it on.

The room had been lived in. Tony made his way through it. Upturned chair lying by the door, empty cup on the table. Remote control. Discarded sandwich wrappers in the trash. More suspicious blood-like spots on the carpet. A faint smell of roses.

There was an area partially blocked off by a long bookshelf. Tony went in and found himself in a tiny library with a desk in the centre. The shelves held books and assorted junk; on the desk was a digital video camera.

Tony picked it up, curious, and turned it on. He found the menu, scrolled to the sole video recorded there, and played it:

A face appeared on the screen. *"My name is Adam Kaufman..."*

Tony's mouth fell open.

"Hello?"

Startled, Tony fumbled the video off and put the camera down.

"Where is he?"

"Maybe Sylar killed him."

"We still have twenty-seven seconds-"

"He could have been early."

Tony emerged from behind the shelves and stared at the people who had just run in. "What the hell-"

"No time for questions," the guy from the video said, as another rushed past him to grab a book, and the camera as an afterthought. "You've got to get out of here. *Now*. Leo!"

Leo ran back out with the camera, its cable and a book about coffee.

"Ten seconds."

"...Is that *Sp-*"

Adam grabbed Tony's arm ("Hey!") and pulled him out the door. Smudge came out from one of the rooms hugging two pillows.

"Because you're not stealing mine," Smudge stated in response to Adam's unasked question.

"Five seconds."

"He said *about* five minutes," Smudge insisted as they ran down the corridor. "Not *exactly*."

Out the door into the lift lobby, where the lift was still waiting for them. They went in and Adam hit the button for the fifth floor.

"What if he's there when the doors open?" Leo asked.

Adam hit the button for the sixth floor.

Tony was busy staring at everyone and wishing that Adam would let go of his arm.

"What's your name?" Adam asked, letting go of his arm.

"Tony."

"Adam, Leo, Smudge, Spock."

"What kind of a name is Smu-"

The doors opened. Adam yanked him out. Sixth floor stairwell. They hurtled down the steps.

"Who are you?" Tony asked. "Why are we running-"

"Questions later," Leo said as they reached the fifth floor and went through into the connecting corridor to the central block.

They slowed down as they entered the crowds, Adam and Leo casting wary glances around as they made their way through to the west side of the block. Past several shops, down a series of corridors, slowing down to a walking pace as they left the crowds behind and entered into a wooden alcove that Tony saw with a shock had two dead people in it.

Leo turned on the camera, facing the lens towards one of the bodies and recording a brief take of it before moving on to the second.

"What are you *doing?*" Smudge asked.

"Someone might have to tell their families that they're gone," Leo said quietly. "They might need closure." He turned off the camera and joined them walking up the escalator, which wasn't moving fast enough for their liking.

Across the dance floor - "You're back," Arthur said pleasantly - and into their chosen room, where Adam firmly shut the door.

Smudge dumped the pillows on the floor a noticeable distance away from the one that had been Sasan's.

Tony folded his arms. "Okay," he said. "Mind telling me what is going on?"

"Whoa," Smudge said suddenly. "I just saw a green unicorn running across the lab."

"We're... not in a lab," Tony said.

Smudge glared at him. "I *saw* it!" he insisted. "Why, you don't believe the bisexual guy?"

Leo mentally face-palmed.

"How is your sexual orientation relevant to your hallucinations?" Tony asked. "Or are you into unicorns as well?"

Smudge was aghast. Tony smirked.

"I *saw* it," Smudge said. "There's... another one... right there..."

Smudge fainted.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Always, I wanna be with you
And make believe with you
And live in harmony, harmony...

"Smudge?"

He looked up, dazed. Sasan was standing by the green unicorn. *Sasan*...

Smudge raced over and grabbed him in a hug. Sasan was real within his grasp. Tangible, solid, breathing... Smudge's fingers closed earnestly over clothes and skin and hair, tears streaming down his face.

"I miss you," he gasped out. "Why did you have to go..."

"I miss you too," Sasan said softly, holding him tight.

Smudge trembled in his arms, trying to lose himself in the rhythm of Sasan's heartbeats; calmer than his own, and a constant reminder of the life that had been taken.

The green unicorn ambled off to another part of the room.

"You're dead," Smudge whispered, his eyes squeezed shut against Sasan's chest. "This isn't real, it's not... there's a unicorn..."

Sasan gently pulled Smudge off him and looked him in the eye. "It's real if you want it to be, okay?" He brushed a tear off Smudge's cheek. "It's just the two of us here with a fabulous unicorn, and that's the only thing that matters right now."

Smudge sniffed and wiped a hand across his nose.

"I mean... Smudge, we got kidnapped from our homes and zapped into another universe. The benchmark for what is real has been moved forever."

Smudge blinked. He turned his face to Sasan's hand on his arm; reached out his own to touch it, tracing the individual fingers, firm and real and *there*...

Smudge looked back up at Sasan's face, the dark eyes looking steadily back at him, and emotion welled up in his throat.

"Sas..."

"I'm here."

"How..."

"It doesn't matter," Sasan said. "Maybe you're dreaming, or I became a ghost and didn't know it, or the green unicorn was responsible somehow." He glanced quizzically at the green unicorn. "I thought unicorns were supposed to be white."

"What if this is all just in my head?"

Sasan shrugged. "Well, there *is* a green unicorn."

The unicorn raised an eyebrow.

Sasan looked reprovingly at it.

"For an imaginary creature, it has terrible manners," he commented.

"I don't want to have to leave you again," Smudge said, his voice shaking. "I need you."

"No. No, you don't, Smudge. You're going to be fine, all right?"

"I-"

"Listen," Sasan said. "Look at me. Smudge. *You're going to be fine*."

Smudge blinked at him through his tears. "But I miss you so much."

"We had good times together," Sasan agreed. "And I don't regret them. I'd do them over if I had the chance, even if it means never going home. ...Though if I knew, I would've let my parents know I was finally moving out."

Smudge hugged him again. Sasan stroked his hair.

"You're going to be fine," Sasan said again. "Put some sense into the rest of them. If Adam bothers you, steal his computer."

"I don't... I don't want to wake up. Don't make me wake up."

"I can't control that," Sasan said quietly.

"I love you," Smudge choked out.

Some unidentifiable emotion passed briefly over Sasan's face.

Smudge hugged him tighter.

Sasan kissed the top of his head.

And then the dream started to fade and die no matter how hard Smudge tried to fight off consciousness; and Sasan grew intangible beneath his grasp, vanishing into mist before his eyes; and then the unicorn too, was gone, and Smudge found himself back with the others, on the floor where he had blacked out, faced with the reality that Sasan was dead.

Tony was munching on a sandwich. "Still seeing things?" he asked; and then he yelled and dropped his sandwich as Smudge lunged at him, knocking him over and delivering an angry punch to his face.

Adam and Leo looked up from where they'd been continuing their marathon. Spock moved to intervene, but Smudge seemed satisfied. He got away from Tony, who was massaging his jaw and looking as though he thought Smudge was crazy.

Smudge got a sandwich, unwrapped it, sat down and ate, alone in his own world, imagining that Sasan was still there with him, and that he was not alone.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The hours passed fitfully by in numbing boredom, confined by fear to wait for an unspecified time when they might be free. Adam and Leo occupied themselves with watching TV on the laptop; at one point Tony wandered over to join them and be clueless about the plot so far, whereupon he left for the next room to be bored and attempt to compose pretentious poetry about how terrible things were:

imprisoned. without reason. company of me. they suck.

Spock engaged himself in conversation with Arthur at the bar.

Smudge sat by the hole in the wall, his legs dangling out into the void as he absent-mindedly shredded the empty wrapper of a packet of peanuts and tossed the pieces out, watching them float lazily down and out of sight. He wondered where they went. He wondered where anybody went when they died here in this constructed universe in the middle of nowhere. Did they fade into oblivion? Did they live on in some afterlife? Did their spirits return home? Did they linger on in unconscious dreams that felt so real...

"Sometimes, yes," Arthur said, his voice carrying over to where Smudge sat. "Although it's not always sheep. Sometimes I dream of electric butterflies, or pigs, or unicorns."

"So there was some truth in the writer's speculation," Spock mused. "He was a visionary of his time."

Smudge tossed the last bit of wrapper into the hole and swung his legs back up. He walked over to the bar and sat down.

"What happens when you die here?" he asked Arthur.

"There's only one way to find out," Arthur said.

"Becoming nothing would appear to be the most likely answer," Spock said. "If this universe were created for the sole purpose of holding this facility, it would have been pointless to go to the trouble of fashioning some afterlife system for it."

"Oh," Smudge said sadly.

"You seem down," Arthur observed. "Would you like another drink?"

Smudge lingered for a moment on the thought of seeing Sasan again. But if it wasn't real...

"Maybe later," he said.

"All right."

"Where are the rest of your crew?" Smudge asked Spock. "Kirk and everyone."

"I do not know."

"Maybe they could help us," Smudge said.

"How?"

Smudge shrugged. He had the vague notion that there was no problem that the crew of the USS Enterprise couldn't solve.

"What's it like being an android?" he asked Arthur instead.

"What's it like being a human?" Arthur replied.

"Scary," Smudge said.

"Why is that?"

"You're mortal," Smudge said. "People die. Sometimes too soon."

"It will always be too soon," Arthur said.

Spock nodded in silent agreement.

"Don't dwell on loss," Arthur said. "Nothing much can come from that. There's no point in wasting your time on things you cannot change. That way lies nothing but pain."

"Is drinking that stuff supposed to make you see dead people?" Smudge asked, pointing to the bottle of Experiment #42.

"Hard to say. Not many have tried it, but you'd be the first with that result. Did you see any green unicorns?"

Smudge nodded.

"I could never figure out where that came from," Arthur said.

"They had terrible manners," Smudge said softly.

"Well, that's green unicorns for you."

Adam and Leo finished Season 1 of *Heroes*, and Leo went to see if the book on coffee was any better than the wisdom of Jach Juan. Adam got the laptop back to displaying camera feeds. He scrolled absent-mindedly through them, his head starting to hurt from the extended period of time spent staring at the screen.

He glanced past shots of people on the various floors. Talking, fighting, being bored, making out, starting fires, trying to hack through the walls, falling through the holes in the walls, eating, running, getting free stuff...

Adam gave a start. He scrolled back and stared at one of the feed windows. A bookstore. People ambling in and out, or reading; and in the corner...

"I found him," he said.

"Who, Wally?" Tony asked, having returned from his poetic exploits in the other room.

"Sylar," Adam said, though he wondered for a moment if Kenselton Hotel was presently home to one bespectacled individual in a red and white striped shirt and a matching hat.

The others came over to look, crowding around the screen. Smudge subconsciously clenched his fists.

Sylar was standing in a corner by the shelves, inconspicuously watching people. Watching, waiting, noting the brief displays of power some of them displayed: telekinetically grabbing a book from a shelf, flying up to get one located too high, reading books just by touching them...

"How do you know it's him?" Tony asked.

"It's him," Leo said, fresh from the *Heroes* marathon.

They continued staring.

"What do we do?" Smudge asked.

"There's nothing we can do," Adam said. "Short of sneaking up to him like the last time, and it's not worth the risk."

"What if he kills more people?" Leo asked.

"What Sylar does out of his own volition is not our responsibility," Spock said. "We are no more to blame for his actions than anyone else."

Smudge opened his mouth to say something, but the words wouldn't come.

They continued watching.

And then, suddenly, Sylar looked straight up at the camera.

Adam swore.

"He can see us," Leo said.

"Closed-circuit cameras don't work that way," Tony said.

"He might have new powers we don't know about," Leo said.

"*Stop staring!*" Smudge shouted at the camera.

"He can't hear you," Tony said.

"We don't know that," Leo said.

"It's not wholly unlikely that he does this with every camera he sees," Spock suggested. "It would serve to create the illusion that he is aware of anyone watching him."

Smudge walked away. Looking at Sylar just reminded him of what had happened to Sasan.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"All right," said the clerk at the Isolated Bubble of Hyperspace Afterlife, coming in with a sheaf of paperwork. Her nametag identified her as Fhille. "The mass suicide crowd's lessened up. It's time to go."

"Where?" Sasan asked.

"I could tell you if the system was up, but it's been down since we shifted everything onto Windows Vista," she explained. "Don't worry. Murder victims usually get off pretty easy."

Sasan looked back across the waiting room. Smudge and the green unicorn had long gone. He wondered if it had been real.

"Um - a friend of mine might be coming back," he said. "Could I wait here for a while more or is that against company policy?"

She sighed. "All right, but not for long," she said. "We're running late. Taxon set all the clocks an hour forward because he thought it was funny, and there's a growing queue of dead people in a few other isolated bubbles of hyperspace that need dealing with. You've got to get out by the end of the day. We normally don't even use the waiting rooms, but the suicide group got messy."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Need any help?" Leo asked, going towards the bar with his hands in his pockets. Arthur was mixing up some other experimental drink; gold liquid bubbled in a flask.

"Sure," Arthur said. "Have a taste of this and tell me what you think."

He poured some of the gold liquid out into a glass. "It is my attempt at the mythical Felix Felicis," he said. "It gives luck. I have yet to arrive at the correct recipe, but I think it makes a pretty good drink, regardless."

Leo took the glass and drank a sip. A deep, glowing warmth spread through him.

"Do you feel lucky?" Arthur asked hopefully.

"Not really," Leo said. "It's good, though." He took another sip, gazing out into the darkness of the dance floor.

"If I may inquire: what are you thinking about?" Arthur asked. "I am often interested in the thoughts of organic sentient beings."

Leo gazed into his glass and swirled the liquid about. "Zachary," he finally said. "Does he know about us? That we're being killed, and... and if he knew, would he care?" Leo looked up at Arthur. "I realised we don't know anything about him," he said. "He could be a horrible person for all we know."

"Would it matter if he was?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah, of course."

"Why?"

Leo hesitated. "What would that say about us?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing."

"But-"

"Bad parents can produce good kids; life-giving inspiration can spring from wells of despair," Arthur said. "You are who you are, Leo, and nothing can change that. Zachary being a complete scumbag of a human being would not reflect badly on you any more than him being a saint would make Sylar any less of a monster."

"...At some point he shared my life," Leo said quietly. "The same... words, actions, feelings... it doesn't get much more personal than that. But he's just a stranger to me, and... and that's frightening."

"The unknown creator," Arthur said, pouring the rest of the drink into a bottle. "By his fruit he shall be known."

"There are too many kinds of fruit," Leo said. "He could be just like Sylar for all we know, and... and the rest of us were just... acts..."

"But you'll never know, will you?" Arthur asked. "Even if you do meet him, one day, that self he presents could also be an act."

"Yeah," Leo said.

Arthur set the flask and bottle down. "What does he mean to you, Leo?" he asked. "What do you think of when you hear his name? What's more important: the mysterious actor, or all of you?"

Silence.

Leo remembered quiet moments. Adam hacking on the laptop. Sasan and Smudge cuddling on the couch. Spock narrating a log into the silence of the void. Tony hanging around picking fights with Smudge. Mike watching them, hesitant. Picking up cheese from a corridor floor, filming a video, sharing meals in an empty cafeteria, huddled around the television, cheating death, running, hiding, always sticking together as their numbers dwindled from the threat of the watchmaker...

"Us," Leo said softly.

Arthur corked the bottle and set it aside. "Then," he said, "that is all that matters."

*

The tedium of the morning turned to the tedium of the afternoon. Adam and Leo eventually started on the second season of *Heroes*; Tony hung around sporadically watching with them, still clueless as to what had happened before. Spock picked up the two books, teaching himself about coffee and digging it, and arched a threatening eyebrow when Smudge and Tony looked about to break into a fight ("why are you always so angry? Is it because you're bisexual or is there something else wrong with you?").

Tony said that they were all being paranoid and that there were so many people in the place that he doubted anyone would notice them if they went out instead of just sitting here and waiting to die, because it wasn't as though he looked particularly conspicuous, and if they didn't jump around yelling, "*look at me!*" nobody would care.

Adam pointed out that Tony had yet to have the experience of being randomly accused of serial killing and beaten up by a complete stranger, and would he please shut up because people were trying to watch a show.

Smudge declared that Tony was an idiot. Tony made a comment about infantile insults, bet that his intellectual capability was higher than his, and that Smudge had no authority to call other people idiots. Smudge raised a fist and told Tony to intellectualise *that*. Tony made a remark about Smudge's tendency to resort to violence, and if he was the one responsible for the two dead guys down there-

Oh no, Leo thought; and then Tony was on the ground with a bloody nose as Adam and Leo and Spock tried to pry a screaming Smudge away from him.

"*You take that BACK!*"

"GET OFF ME, YOU BISEXUAL PSYCHO!"

"Smudge-"

Smudge grabbed Tony by his hair, struggling to get full use of his limbs back from the other three trying to pull him off. "I DIDN'T KILL HIM!" he hollered, tears forming in his eyes. "*I DIDN'T!*"

"So what, you're going to kill me instead?"

Smudge kneed him angrily in the throat.

Spock yanked Smudge off.

"One of you, *get out of the room*," Adam demanded. "There are enough people trying to kill us without you two helping."

Tony crawled off the floor, massaging his neck where Smudge's knee had threatened to break it. He gave Smudge a final look, then limped off back to the other room to compose more pretentious poetry.

waiting. what are the hours that never end? what is the life that's spent confined? what the eff is wrong with the bisexual guy?

"We should have let Sylar kill him," Smudge said, glaring out the door.

"Looks like you're doing a good enough job of that," Adam muttered, returning to the *Heroes* marathon.

The afternoon turned to night.

Smudge refused to let anyone touch what had been Sasan's pillow, and finally took it for himself. Spock conceded to go without a pillow.

They left the door open. Shutting it made the room pitch black, and in this place there would be no knowing when it was day. Sparse light came in from a small lamp at the bar, where Arthur was busy concocting new mixtures of alcoholic beverage and thinking about the nature of life.

Smudge lay fitfully in the dark against the wall, missing Sasan's reassuring presence of the past few nights, the absence heightened by the rough carpet and the cold, unfeeling wall. The others dropped off to sleep, evidently unconcerned by that. Steady breathing filled the room. Smudge stared up at the ceiling.

Eventually he got off the floor and slipped out. Arthur looked up as he approached.

"Can't sleep?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yeah," Smudge said, climbing onto a bar stool. "Can I have more of that drink I had?" he asked.

"Sure." Arthur put down the bottles he was carrying and picked up the one labelled Experiment #42. He poured out a glass. "Miss the green unicorns?"

"Nah. I just want to see my friend again."

Smudge drank a gulp of it. He made a face. The taste hadn't got any less weird.

"But does he want to see you?" Arthur asked.

"It's not real anyway," Smudge murmured. "He's dead."

"How does that make it less real?" Arthur asked. "The dead can sometimes be realer to us than the living,"

Smudge swirled the drink in his glass. He drank up the rest of it. He gazed into the empty glass.

"Thanks," he finally said.

"You're welcome."

Smudge got off the bar stool and trudged back into the room. He lay back down on the pillow, waiting.

A green unicorn peeked through the door and huffed rudely at him. Smudge smiled at it.

Then he fainted.

<div align="center">*</div>

"You're back."

Smudge opened his eyes. Sasan was sitting calmly on a bench against the wall.

"I know," Smudge said earnestly. "I won't leave you, I'll stay here as long as I can and then I'll come back again-"

"Smudge, you can't keep doing that," Sasan said. "You've got to move on, okay?"

"But I can't sleep when you're not there."

Sasan sighed. "Come here."

Smudge went. He climbed onto the bench and snuggled up to Sasan. Sasan put an arm around him.

"Tony doesn't like me," Smudge said. "But I beat him up, so I think it's okay now."

Sasan looked at him. "Smudge! You can't just beat someone up if they don't like you."

"He asked if I was the reason you were dead."

"Hey, if he wants to be an insensitive jerk, let him. It's not an invitation to stoop to his level or lower."

"But-"

"Smudge, you've got to stop hitting people. You don't solve problems that way. Show them you're better than that."

"What about Sylar?" Smudge asked.

Sasan considered this. "All right, for him we'll make an exception."

The door opened.

"Time to go," said Fhille.

"Where?" Smudge asked.

"Not you, him."

Sasan made to stand up from the bench. Smudge clutched his arm. "*Sas-*"

"I've got to go," Sasan said quietly.

"Then I'll go with you," Smudge pleaded. "I'll kill myself if I have to-"

"*NO*." Sasan grabbed him by the shoulders. "You're not going to kill yourself, Smudge, you hear me?"

"..."

"Smudge!"

Smudge blinked.

"Smudge, promise me that," Sasan said. "Promise me you won't kill yourself. Not for me. Promise?"

Smudge managed a tearful nod.

Sasan relaxed his grip.

Smudge hugged him. Sasan returned it; holding each other close in silent farewell.

"Will I see you again?" Smudge whispered.

"I don't know."

Smudge nuzzled against his neck.

Fhille looked warily at the green unicorn. It stared indignantly at her. She raised an eyebrow. It returned the gesture.

"All right," Fhille said, giving up on the unicorn and moving out the door. "Break it up and let's move."

Smudge reluctantly let Sasan pull away. Sasan went towards the door and stepped out after Fhille, then hesitated.

He turned. Smudge stood there, watching him...

"I love you too," Sasan said quietly.

Smudge swallowed back the tears as Sasan turned to leave for good; and then the door closed shut behind him, never to be opened again.

*

"Would you like a drink, sir?" Arthur greeted.

"No."

"I didn't see you with the others earlier."

Sylar shrugged. "I come and go," he said with a grin.

"Turning in for the night?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Good night."

"You too."

Sylar went towards the open door and through it. He stood there in the dark as his eyes adjusted, looking over the five sleeping figures spread across the room. One of them rolled over and fell still again.

Sylar smiled.

This place was where he was meant to be.

---

quinto formaggi
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: AMONG THE SHEEP

He didn't know what, exactly, he was doing here; but there was something about the room that was immeasurably soothing. Sylar made his way silently past the sleeping bodies. He paused briefly before each to gaze at them as they slept on, oblivious to his presence.

Smudge. He was curled up in a corner, his face troubled. Sylar felt a twinge of... something he couldn't define. He left Smudge's side and slid down against the wall, leaning his head back on it; resisting the temptation to just fall asleep there, with them, but when the morning came...

He could kill them all. Right now, as they slept. Quietly break their necks, or slit their throats, and walk off, shutting the door on the scene. No one would ever know.

But there would be no point in that.   He wanted them to know. He wanted them to fear him, and hate him, and destroy the urge he felt to give in and be one of them. Though it would be too late

now; they would never accept him, anyway, and the knowledge sparked a mixture of pride and regret in the battling halves of his psyche: the half that wanted to stand above, and the half that wanted to belong.

Restlessness drove the first ahead. He wanted to be special, he wanted to be powerful. And with each of them he killed, he further severed his ties to the little humanity that remained in him standing in his path to greatness.

The hunger called. He wanted to embrace it.

Paul, Monty, Sasan. Three down by his hand. In their screams he'd heard his past. In their silent begging he'd seen his continued attempts to be good enough for his mother. And as they died, a part of Gabriel Gray died with them, and it made him stronger.

I am Sylar, he thought, and with that went the foolish notion of staying the night.

He stood up, looked them over one last time, and left the room. He could do nothing at this time. But in the morning, when everyone was awake... he could come back.

The android bartender might tattle. Sylar raised a hand and destroyed him where he stood.

*

In the dark, Leo stirred.

He opened his eyes and saw a shadow slip out the room. With a mind fogged by sleep, he wondered who it was.

Leo rubbed a hand over his eyes and rolled over. It was too dark to make out the others beyond vague human forms here and there... Leo slowly sat up. He'd definitely seen someone leave. Leo thought of Mike and feared the worst. Perhaps Smudge had been inspired by him to end his grief.

A little more awake now, Leo scrambled up and out the door. There was no time to check who was in the room and who was not; every second might mean the difference between life and death.

Arthur stood immobile behind the counter, his eyes wide open. He probably shut down for the night, Leo thought, but something about it unsettled him.

At the top of the escalator, Leo saw a figure get off the bottom and into the corridor beyond.

"Hey-" he called out, walking down the moving steps after it, off the escalator, into the corridor, and-

Leo stopped short.

"Sylar," he gasped out. Stumbled back; turned to try and run-

Sylar telekinetically snatched him off the ground and slammed Leo against the wall, his hand outstretched towards him.

Silence.

"You're up," Sylar stated.

Leo swallowed. A dreaded certainty that this was the end fell like a dead weight in his mind. "Are you going to kill me?" he asked.

"I can't let you go, can I?" Sylar asked. "You'd tell your friends I was here, and then you'll move and I won't be able to find you again."

"If you kill me they'll also know you were here."

Sylar considered this. Leo's logic was sound.

"*What do you want with us?*" Leo cried out.

Sylar twitched a finger. Leo gagged and grabbed at his neck.

"You're in my way," Sylar said calmly. "All of you."

"We're not... doing... anything to you," Leo managed to croak out against the pressure on his throat. "We just... just want to be left alone."

Silence. Sylar stared at him, thinking. Finally, he lowered Leo off the wall, and telekinetically shoved him down the corridor.

"Walk," he commanded.

Leo staggered back to his feet. He turned. Sylar remained impassive. "I said, walk," he repeated, pointing down the corridor. "Don't even think of running away. You know you won't make it."

"Where are we going?" Leo asked.

Sylar raised an eyebrow. "There's only one way to find out. Move."

*

The walk seemed to last forever, though it couldn't have been more than five minutes. Leo staggered on, half-asleep, feeling Sylar's presence close behind. Now and then he would hear a direction: turn right, turn left, hurry up; and the slightest indication of an escape attempt would be met with a sharp prick of pain on the back of his neck. Leo tried to remember the route.

They moved further and further away from the others, past rows of shops with their android shopkeepers and no one else, and then into an area where the shops were void lots filled with boxes or bits of scrap material. Sylar stopped by one of these and picked up a long rope lying on the ground. Leo eyed it warily.

They passed another empty lot, only this one was scattered with things - stashes of food and water - and looked lived in.

"You've been staying here?" Leo asked, turning his head.

"Did I say you could speak?" Sylar asked. He pointed at the toilet cubicle at the end of the corridor. "In there," he said.

Leo looked despairingly at the door. Then he gave a shout as Sylar sent a telekinetic jab at his neck, and he moved.

It was a unisex handicapped toilet. Spacious, though that was the least of Leo's concerns. Sylar flicked the light on and shut the door. Total silence.

"Take off your clothes," Sylar said simply.

"...*what?*"

Sylar raised an eyebrow. "Which part of that sentence don't you understand?"

"What are you doing..."

"Someone is going back to that room tonight," Sylar said. "And I don't think it's going to be you."

Leo gaped at him.

"Take off your clothes," Sylar said again. "Or do I have to kill you first?"

Sylar grinned. He raised a finger. Leo hurriedly pulled his shirt off.

"They'll know," Leo said, moments later, as Sylar chucked his own clothes at him. "They'll know it's not me..."

Sylar shrugged. He wet his hands in the sink and looked into the mirror, combing his fingers through his hair as he glanced at Leo's for reference.

Leo felt sick. He stared down at Sylar's clothes in his hands and slowly put them on, disgust pricking at his skin.

Satisfied with his appearance, Sylar picked up the rope. "Down," he said, gesturing at the metal bar that ran most of the length of the cubicle. Helpless, Leo obeyed, unable to shake the feeling that he was looking at himself and that, maybe, the others wouldn't be able to tell after all.

Sylar tied his wrists tight to the bar. Snatches of Leo's memories flashed through his mind as his fingers brushed his skin. "For your cooperation," Sylar said, "I'm sparing your life. For now." He smiled, and slicked Leo's hair back. Leo recoiled at his touch, cringing against the wall.

"You could try screaming," Sylar suggested. "Someone might hear you. We're close to the block of dangerous superheroes, and most of them don't like me very much."

Leo gazed at him in despair.

"Good night," Sylar said, because while he might be a serial killer, he still had his manners. He left the cubicle. The door swung shut.

Leo tugged desperately at the rope around his wrists. It only made it cut deeper into his skin. He tried to get off the floor to work it from a different angle; stood up in a half-crouch and tried to wriggle his fingers into a position to pick at the knots, tears of frustration and pain forming in his eyes at the continued lack of progress.

He surveyed the cubicle, looking for some tool that might help, and caught his reflection in the mirror.

Sylar, he thought involuntarily, and a chill ran down his neck. Revulsion rose in his throat. What the hell had Sylar done to his hair... Leo tried to muss it up against his arm, but didn't get too far and gave up.

He looked away from the haunting resemblance in the mirror and went back to pulling futilely at the rope. Maybe if he got down and kicked his shoes off and tried to use his feet to help...

Leo abandoned the idea as soon as it came. He sank back down onto the floor, hands hanging by his wrists.

"Help," he said weakly, thinking of the dangerous superheroes who didn't like Sylar very much and who also probably wouldn't like being awoken in the middle of the night.

He decided that he didn't care. He might have a chance to explain himself. And if he didn't, a quick death was preferable to a drawn out one here... who knew how long he would have to stay? He doubted that Sylar would be back any time soon, unless something happened and he killed everyone and had nothing left to do. It might be days, trapped here, with no food or water...

Don't panic, Leo thought to himself. *Don't panic.*

He took a deep breath. The light hung dead and silent in the air. The ceramic gleamed. The metal bar shone. Nothing moved but him.

Leo swallowed.

There's nothing to lose, he thought; and so, louder this time:

"*HELLLP!*"

<div align="center">*</div>

Sylar snuck his way back into the room. Everyone was still soundly asleep. He found the pillow where Leo had been, and lay down on it.

He suddenly felt safe.

Tony muttered something in his sleep. Smudge sniffed.

He belonged here now.   For now. Just a day, or two, to know what it was like and satisfy that craving and get it out of the way for good; and to learn about them. Then he could leave. Let Leo turn up dead somewhere, get the credit for it, and no one would ever be the wiser.

From where he lay he could see the stash of sandwiches and water. He could just make out Adam lying nearby. And if he were to make a noise now and they were to wake and see him, they wouldn't do anything. They'd think he was one of them.

Sylar rolled over onto his back.

He was one of them now.

*

Leo pulled at the rope with his teeth. The knot seemed to loosen slightly, but not enough. He released it. His mouth hurt, and he was thirsty, and he was tired.

He thought of Sylar back in the cool darkness of the room with the others, lying in *his* place, in his clothes, in his identity, on his pillow, and glared at his reflection in the mirror, which he had decided would for the moment suffice for Sylar.

Leo looked away and swore under his breath. He made another angry yank at the rope, which served only to tighten the slightly loosened knot and chafe against his already-reddened skin.

He gave up and collapsed onto the floor, dropping his head back against the wall.

"HELP!" he yelled again, his throat sore from the multiple unsuccessful attempts.

The shout died off and left the cubicle feeling emptier than before.

Leo leant his head against his arm and wept.

*

Dem casually released a button and lifted the base of a small metal cylinder off Sylar's neck as he slept.

Dem smiled. "Enjoy normalcy, Gabriel," he said in a low voice, and disappeared.

*

Think, Leo thought, eyes shut, his head against the wall. Sylar had gone to join them. They had pretty much made plans to wait it out in that room until Kenselton Hotel went live and things changed and perhaps gave them possibilities of escape. Which meant Sylar probably wouldn't be able to leave without a good reason if he wished to keep his cover. Except maybe at night, but there would be the risk of someone waking and noticing. And what reason would Sylar have to come back to him? Leo had nothing he wanted. Information, at the very most, but he doubted it.

What are my options for escape?, Leo wondered:

1) *Adam and co. recognise Sylar and this somehow doesn't get them killed. They manage to get my whereabouts and come rescue me.*
2) *I manage to scream for help loudly enough to get someone here who either doesn't want to kill Sylar and anyone who looks like him, or is willing to hear me out*
3) *Managing to get the rope off, somehow.*

Leo opened his eyes, now with slightly more resolve than before. He inspected the knots the best he could; tried to see where each bit of rope went, and which loop to pull on to get it loose...

He settled on one promising-looking loop, bit down on it, and pulled. He let go, let out a breath, ran his tongue over his hurting teeth to ease some of the pain, and tried again.

The loop got slightly bigger. Encouraged, Leo went at it again, the frenzy of survival instinct soon numbing him to the pain. *It's this or almost-certain death*, Leo told himself. *A slow, drawn-out death...*

He yanked at the knot with renewed vigour. Soon, more parts of the rope started to loosen around his wrists; and then, finally, he managed to wriggle a hand out, and then the other, and watch in tired triumph as the rope fell loosely to the ground.

Leo massaged his wrists, relief coursing through him; scrambled up to the sink to let the cool water flow from the taps onto the tender reddened skin; head resting against the mirror as he let his mind go blank for a while, free from his bonds...

"Congratulations," said a voice.

Leo stumbled back from the sink in shock, turning off the tap.

Dem picked up the rope and inspected it. "I wondered how long you would take."

"You *knew* I was here?" Leo burst out, but any anger soon failed in the simple, joyous sight of another person who wasn't Sylar in here with him.

"I know a lot of things," Dem responded cryptically, dropping the rope. "Look at it this way - the victory is yours. You didn't need my help. Not that I would have given it or anything... but enjoy your freedom. You deserve it."

"Thanks," Leo said warily.

"What are you going to do now?" Dem asked.

"Go back," Leo said, having only vaguely considered the next step. "I thought... Sylar should be asleep by now and I could stab him in the head or... or something and hopefully he won't wake and blow everyone up..."

"Risky," Dem commented.

"You've got a better idea?" Leo asked, defensive.

"Not really," Dem admitted. "But I *did* take away all of Gabriel's powers." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the metal cylinder. He smiled. "Maybe that would make it easier."

"...." said Leo.

"And this," Dem said, moving closer as Leo backed uncertainly against the wall, "might make it even easier."

In one swift motion, he jabbed the cylinder against Leo's neck and pressed the button.

Leo yelled and fell back, wide-eyed, his head reeling... and he felt *power* entering him, revealing the world with a sudden, unnatural clarity; noted distantly that one of Dem's watches was running three seconds slow; through his hand touching the wall had brief unwelcome flashes of the people who had entered this cubicle, along with glimpses of Sylar's recent life stored in the memory of his clothes; felt suddenly a connection to everything around him, such that all he had to do was *think* and they would move as directed... and, beneath all that, he sensed a lurking, creeping desire for *more*.

"See you," Dem said cheerily.

"Wait!"

Dem raised an eyebrow.

"No," Leo said, struggling back to his feet amidst the sensory overload. "No, don't... take it back... I don't want this, I don't-"

"Do you want to live, Leo?" Dem asked.

"...yes!"

"Don't you think you have a better chance of survival now?" Dem asked. "You may be the most powerful person in this place at the moment. If you want to kill Gabe, he's helpless right now. You might want to hurry. Good night."

Dem vanished.

Silence. Tentatively, Leo raised his hand towards the door and mentally pushed. The door swung open.

A fearful, excited terror grew in him.

He dropped his hand back down - noting, in a corner of his mind, that the pain and redness had completely gone.

Leo glanced back at the mirror, and to his eyes saw the same person they'd been stalking on the camera feeds.

His stomach did a flop.

He was Sylar now.

Leo threw up in the toilet bowl.

It's okay, Leo told himself feverishly as he washed his mouth out in the sink. *Just kill Sylar and get him out of the way, and everything else will fall into place. He's harmless now. It wouldn't be hard.*

Leo briefly mucked about with his hair in an attempt to look more like himself again, then decided that there was no time to waste. The sooner Sylar was dead, the better.

He ran out the open door.

From the pieces of Sylar's memory he had absorbed from his clothes, he knew the way back.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Leo paused before the door.

Softly, he entered into the darkness with its sounds of sleeping people. Five of them, asleep in their various parts of the room, lost to the conscious world.

Leo located Sylar lying where he himself had been, and a spurt of rage burst in him. And then a deep uneasiness took its place. Sylar was fast asleep; peaceful, unarmed, unawares, the picture of innocence, and looking identical to him in slumber.

Kill him, Leo thought, weakly. *You can do it. He deserves it. He killed all those people.*

Leo swallowed. He glanced at the others and back at Sylar, suddenly feeling like a dangerous intruder on the scene.

Just do it. Snap his neck, lift him out, get your clothes and your identity back, go to bed, and tell everyone all about it tomorrow.

Leo hesitantly reached out his hand. He felt mental tendrils of thought wrap themselves with gradual firmness around Sylar's neck.

Break it. Quick, before he feels you and-

Sylar jolted awake.

Leo stood paralysed in sudden fear, his hand still outstretched.

For a second they just looked at each other.

Then Sylar screamed, and everyone woke up.

Lights flicked on. They winced at the brightness. Shocked out of his stupor into fresh confusion, Leo released his grip as shouts filled the room, the loudest:

"YOU KILLED SASAN!" Smudge yelled.

"No! I'm not-"

Smudge jumped on him. Leo fell back under his weight, staggering, and his panicked mind hit out and slammed Smudge telekinetically against the wall before Leo realised what he had done.

"Smudge!" he called out in concern as Tony backed away in horror-

"HOW DID YOU GET HERE?" Adam hollered over his voice.

"I-"

Sylar was gaping at him. Leo saw him subtly move a finger, pause, and his face cloud over with worry.

"He was trying to kill me!" Sylar suddenly shouted, changing tack.

Kill him, came the desperate command fighting to be heard over Leo's disorientation. *Kill him now*.

Leo shot his hand out towards Sylar. Sylar grabbed at his neck, lifted off the ground, as Leo raised his other hand to slice, a prick of blood bursting out-

-and then Spock nerve-pinched him, and Leo collapsed into unconsciousness on the ground.

Smudge stumbled back to his feet from where he had fallen, tears of pain and anger in his eyes as he ran up and delivered a huge kick to Leo's side. "THAT'S FOR SAS!" he yelled. "And THAT! And *THAT!* And TH-"

Sylar tugged Smudge off Leo. "Smudge," he said softly, "it's okay. He's dead now."

Smudge turned a tear-filled face to him. "No. *No*. It's not okay! I hate him *so much*-"

"Shh." Sylar pulled Smudge into a hug. "It's over."

Smudge sobbed into his shoulder, clinging on tight. "I *hate* him."

"I know," Sylar said. He stroked Smudge's back. "But he's not going to bother you again. Everything's going to be okay."

Adam came back with a knife from the bar, ashen-faced. "He killed Arthur," he said.

Spock bowed his head.

Adam crouched down by Leo. "Base of the skull," he muttered, and plunged the knife in.

Smudge turned to watch, wiping the back of his hand across his face.

Sylar put a hand on his shoulder. "Get some rest, okay?" he said. "You'll feel better tomorrow."

Smudge nodded. He watched Adam and Spock cart the body out, a shaken Tony moving aside to let them pass.

"We'll be safe now, right?" Smudge asked in a small voice. "Now that he's dead?"

"Yeah," Sylar agreed. "We're safe now."

Comforted, Smudge trudged back off to his corner and curled back up on his pillow.

Adam and Spock returned.

"Where did you put him?" Sylar asked.

"Next door," Adam said. He pointed at Sylar's neck. "You're bleeding."

Sylar touched the spot. The wound was small, but it was there. It hadn't healed like it usually would have. He stared down at his bloodied fingers.

"Leo?"

Sylar looked up at Adam's concerned face.

"You all right?"

Sylar wiped the blood off on his jeans. "Yeah. It's just a cut."

But when the lights went back off and the others dropped back into sleep, Sylar lay in the dark with his rediscovered mortality, knowing Dem had to be responsible for it, somehow; and feeling vulnerable for the first time in ages-

He heard shuffling noises and saw a figure approach.

"I can't sleep when I'm alone," he heard Smudge explain. "Not in this place. Can I stay here with you?"

He made out Smudge's earnest eyes in the dim light.

"Sure," he said, and so Smudge settled down by his side, cuddling up to him; and they drifted off to sleep, and the room was silent once again.

quinto formaggi
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: SOMEWHERE IN MY MEMORY

Spock rolled over on the floor and gazed into the dark. Something about the kill unsettled him. The attack had been too rushed, confused; there had been no sense that this was the premeditated work of an experienced killer. He remembered the interrupted exclamation: *"No! I'm not-"*

Not what? Spock wondered. Not trying to attack, not after their lives...

But he had been on the verge of murder, Spock reminded himself. Preventing that was what was important. There had been no time for questions. Stopping and killing Sylar had been the logical thing to do.

But he could not completely assuage the uneasiness he felt.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

In dreams, Smudge lapsed back to before.

First day. His arrival in Kenselton Hotel, shortly before his bedtime. Getting up, disoriented, being met by a receptionist telling him to go to the seventeenth floor...

"Why did you kidnap me?! Are you rounding up all the bisexual people?"

The receptionist remains stoic beneath his volley of questions. She raises an eyebrow when Smudge says 'bisexual'. She presses a button when he refuses to leave after multiple commands to do so. The guards arrive and lift him bodily off the floor as he struggles and yells and hits and kicks and tries to bite; and they cart him off to the seventeenth floor, where they dump him like so much trash and leave.

Panic hits him as he opens door after door into identical rooms and finds no one; he finds the common room, untouched and waiting, and realises that he would probably not be alone for long.

The thought doesn't comfort him. Most people don't like him much. Probably because he is bisexual. Maybe. Smudge doesn't blame them. He doesn't like himself much either.

Rushing back out into the corridor and into the stairwell; climbing, desperately, up the stairs, only to emerge on another floor and face another door that opens to another corridor much like the first.

The despair pulls him back to the seventeenth floor. He returns to the common room and sits on its couch, shaking in terrified confusion. Tears sting his eyes.

Smudge searches the blank television screen before him for answers and finds nothing but his reflection gazing hopelessly back from its grey depths. His head falls back against the couch.

"I'm dreaming," he says aloud, hoping that it would make it true.

Smudge opens his eyes, but the scene has not changed. He closes them again and wishes himself home, only to realise that the thought lacks much more appeal. But he keeps his eyes closed as he sits there, sad, lonely, and bisexual, until sleep finally takes him away.

"Hey."

He wakes at the voice and opens his eyes to meet the identical pair looking curiously at him. The face is his, but older, more refined, and with a quiet friendliness to it. Smudge blinks.

The other slowly moves to sit down next to him, not breaking eye contact.

"Hi," Smudge says, belatedly, still staring.

Silence.

"How... long have you been here?" the newcomer asks.

"Since last night," Smudge says. He almost wants to look away, but finds himself almost hypnotically drawn to the depths of the other's eyes. An undercurrent of fear runs through him as he stares; he senses that there is something wrong *about this, something deeply, strongly unnatural. As though this shouldn't be happening. They shouldn't be co-existing in the same room. They shouldn't be looking at each other.*

Smudge finally manages, with an effort, to pull away. He gazes down at his shoes. One of his laces is undone. He prods it with his other shoe.

"Do you know... why we're here?*"*

Smudge shrugs. "I thought it's because I'm bisexual."

In the pause that ensues, Smudge senses some invisible barrier between them has fallen; perhaps from the way the other shifts on the couch... He looks back up.

"I'm not bisexual," the other says. "I'm gay."

"...Oh."

Silence.

"I'm Smudge," he finally says, with a cautiously outstretched hand.

An interval of nothing. Then the other takes Smudge's hand in his own and gives it a squeeze.

"Sasan," he says with a tiny smile.

Their hands interlock perfectly.

<div align="center">*</div>

Adam's watch beeped at eight in the morning, its insistent and repetitive tone cutting through their slumber.

Adam opened an eye and turned the alarm off. He shut his eye again. *Why get up?* He wondered. The day stretched before him in unending monotony and frustration.

He heard the others stirring. One got up and trudged out the door for the bathroom behind the bar.

We're just trapped here, Adam thought. *Why bother.*

He buried his head in his pillow.

No one was turning on the lights. Adam heard a sleepy *"What time is it?"* that sounded like Smudge.

"Eight," Adam mumbled, his face still in his pillow. It was getting hard to breathe like that. He turned over and sighed.

Silence. Possibly everyone was awake.

Tony trudged back from the bathroom and stood in the doorway. "Seriously?" he asked. "It's *morning*. Get up."

Tony flicked the lights on. Adam wished he would die in a fire.

"Turn the lights *off!*" Smudge yelled, eyes squeezed shut in pain.

Tony ignored him and went to get a sandwich and compose pretentious poetry in his head.

illumination. met with screams. protest comes not from the enlightened.

Sylar got off the floor, slowly. The world still felt different. He left the room.

Out of sight of the others, he extended his hand towards a glass at the bar and tried to move it with his mind.

Nothing.

He took a breath. Glanced furtively around, as if it would bring him answers and get his powers back, but there was nothing.

There was still some dried blood on his fingers: a painful reminder of his lost immortality. Sylar headed for the bathroom to wash it off.

Water gushed out the tap. Sylar scrubbed the blood off with soap, glanced up at the mirror, winced at his reflection, and furiously wiped the cut on his neck clean. It still hurt, slightly; but the pain was nothing compared to his growing panic.

You're one of them now, he thought, looking desperately at his reflection. *Mortal. Weak. No longer special-*

Sylar slammed his fists down on the edges of the sink. Pain shot up his arms.

"*No*," he said hoarsely under his breath. "*No!*"

I am Sylar. I am Sylar.

Prove it, he thought bitterly, but could come up with nothing. Again he raised his hand and lashed out angrily with his mind in what, hours ago, would have stripped the tiles off the walls; but which now did absolutely nothing.

He stalked out the door. Into the room next to the others. He flicked the lights on. Leo lay there on the ground, completely still.

Sylar crouched down by his side.

"What did you do?" he asked. "*What did you do to me?*"

The body gave no reply. Sylar's attention was drawn to the knife sticking out his head; he moved his hand to pull it out, then stopped in unfamiliar fear. He was the helpless one now, the potential victim, and Leo had seemed fairly intent on killing him the previous night.

Sylar raised his eyes to address the empty room.

"Show yourself, Dem," he commanded. "I know you did this. I know you're watching-"

But Dem did not appear, and Sylar went back to the other room.

"D'you want to continue the marathon?" Adam suggested, who wasn't in the mood to do anything other than stare passively at a screen.

Sylar recalled vague glimpses of a *Heroes* marathon from the scraps of Leo's memory he had absorbed. "Sure."

It felt weird, watching himself and people he knew on screen, and also slightly voyeuristic, but Sylar tried to keep his discomfort invisible.

Tony picked up Jach Juan's book and scanned the first page. He looked almost disgusted, but kept reading.

Smudge didn't get up, clutching to the wisps of a dream. Spock was counting sandwiches.

"Hello," Dem said, and appeared out of nowhere.

Sylar gave a start, then realised who it was and glared at him.

"Hi, Leo," Dem said cheerfully. He was munching on a nice piece of cheddar. "What's up?"

Sylar clenched a fist under the table. "We have to talk," he said.

"What about?" Dem asked innocently.

"You know," Sylar said, trying to stay calm and repressing the urge to look overly-angry because Adam had paused the episode and was looking at him.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Dem said serenely. "Hey there, you bisexual smudge!" He beamed at Smudge. "I still hate you," he added. "No fault of yours, I just don't like you. Or you," he said at Spock, dodging the sandwich that Smudge threw angrily at him.

"Why are you here?" Adam asked, wanting him to go, mostly because he wanted to know what was going to happen to Caitlin next.

"Why not?" Dem asked. "I like this room. It's exciting. Congratulations on the kill next door. You're getting better at this. Maybe the next time you'll be even better." He smiled and took another bite of cheddar. Sylar gave him a death glare.

"You came here to praise us?" Adam asked sceptically.

Dem shrugged. He wandered over to Sylar. "Having fun?" he asked, with a subtly raised eyebrow that only Sylar could see.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Sylar quoted back at him.

"That's good," Dem said, meeting his gaze. "Me neither."

They stared at each other for a few seconds, Sylar hostile, Dem happy.

"What's... going on?" Tony asked.

Dem broke eye contact and stuffed the rest of the cheese into his mouth. "Well, you guys look all right, so I guess I can go. Cheers."

Dem vanished. Sylar continued glaring at the spot where he had been.

"...What was that about?" Adam asked warily.

Sylar blinked and with an effort forced himself to snap out of it. "It's a long story," he muttered. He gestured at the screen. "Just continue."

"He's still been appearing to you alone?" Adam asked.

"Yeah," Sylar said shortly.

"...Look, if he's... blackmailing you or anything..."

"It's *nothing*."

"Okay."

They continued watching.

Spock went out to the bar to examine Arthur. Smudge followed after, and watched in silence.

"He appears to have been destroyed from the inside," Spock said. "There's no external damage visible."

"Maybe his battery wore out," Smudge suggested.

"I doubt he runs on batteries."

Smudge slid onto a barstool and hunched over the counter. "Maybe he can be fixed," he said, and then, more quietly: "He's a robot. Not a person."

He buried his head in his arms.

<div align="center">*</div>

Collapsing with laughter on each other, high on the success of their joke.

"Did you see *his* face*?" Sasan manages through giggles.*

They have no idea what they're playing with, and they don't care. All they know is that strangers sometimes give them - Sasan, mostly - terrified looks, and making scary faces in response has hilarious effects.

"He said 'don't take my brain'," Smudge adds, laughing.

"Why would he say *that?" Sasan asks in incredulous mirth. "I don't think I look like a zombie."*

"Zombies don't take *brains," Smudge says wisely. "They eat them."*

Other people are staring. Smudge smiles.

"Okay, I'm totally doing that again," Sasan says, catching his breath. "This time I'll ask if I can have their brain."

"Let's go this way," Smudge decides, and tugs a willing Sasan down the corridor by his hand.

It gets less funny when a spanner is thrown.

Smudge yells and tries to run after them, but Sasan holds him back. "Smudge, it's okay, let's go-"

"HE HIT YOU WITH A SPANNER!"

Sasan's free hand clutches the side of his head, and it surprises Smudge how much it affects him to see Sasan hurt. But Sasan insists that he's all right, and they make their way back to the seventeenth floor of Block J. Smudge casts concerned looks at Sasan every few seconds or so.

Sasan lies down on the couch. Smudge frantically raids the common room for anything that might help; finds ice in the mini-fridge and knocks out a few cubes, carrying them over to Sasan in his cupped palms. Smudge rubs them on the bruise. The cold numbs his fingers but he doesn't care.

When most of the ice is melted or on the floor, Smudge flings the water off his hands and joins Sasan on the couch. Sasan shifts slightly to make way, and puts an arm around him.

And Smudge feels safe.

<p align="center">*</p>

As time ticked towards lunch, Sylar found himself more and more incapable of dragging his gaze away from the sandwiches. Finally, he got up in the middle of an episode and went over to the stash.

"Get me one," Adam said, eyes still glued to the screen.

Sylar grabbed two sandwiches and went back. He held one out and waited for Adam to notice its presence.

Smudge came into the room looking despondent. "Spock says he can't fix Arthur," he stated.

"He's not a mechanic," Sylar said, watching Smudge trudge sadly back to his corner.

"Yeah, but he's smart."

Adam finally noticed the presence of the offered sandwich in Sylar's hand and reached out to take it-

"Intelligence alone isn't enough to fix a machine," Sylar said.

-and Adam did a double take. He stared.

704270/006/GRA, said the serial number on the wrist tag before him.

His blood ran cold.

Slowly, Adam raised his eyes. Sylar was still chatting with Smudge. He hadn't noticed anything.

Heart on edge, Adam furtively searched the profile of his face for markers of identity, trying to figure out who-

Sylar turned. Adam quickly turned back to the screen and clicked the pause button with fingers almost paralysed by fear, and hoped that Sylar didn't hear the tightness in his voice:

"I'm going to the bathroom for a while."

"Okay." Sylar sat back down and unwrapped his sandwich.

Adam willed his legs to un-stiffen and move. *Out the door. Just get out the door...*

He managed it out of the room, terror breaking free across his face once out of sight; stumbled into the next room and almost fell by the body on the floor, scrambling for its wrist, reading the serial number on the tag:

704270/006/FUL.

Adam let go, cold horror sliding up his neck. He forced himself to calm down. He shot a wild glance at the door when he thought he heard a sound, but it was only his imagination.

But he had powers*, Adam thought furiously. *Only Sylar has them...*

Adam tugged at his own wrist tag. It was seamless. Those things couldn't just be taken off. He didn't even know how they had been put on. There would have no reason for a swap, unless Sylar had done it before he died in hopes that this exact thing would happen; that someone would notice, and...

What would be easier to swap? Special powers or three printed letters?

Adam bent his head to better examine the motionless face. He couldn't tell who it was with any certainty. Not when dead. It seemed to lack that characteristic evil that he'd just observed in Sylar in too many *Heroes* episodes, but it could have just been wishful thinking.

You're running out of time, he thought. Sylar - if it was him - would get suspicious soon.

Adam threw another nervous glance at the door.

Don't forget what happened the last time, he thought. *Remember what happened when Mike pulled the knife out.*

704270/006/FUL.

What if you can't trust it? What if it's just another one of Sylar's mind games? What if he planned this all along?

Adam grimaced. He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

He remembered Dem's brief appearance. *"Having fun?"* he had asked the guy-who-might-be-Sylar.

What other reason would he have to say that...

Adam took a deep breath and steeled himself, and pulled the knife out.

He froze with his hand on the hilt, ready to jab it in again if he had to. Fresh blood welled up in the re-opened wound, and Adam watched, wide-eyed, as the skin crept over that and re-fused into a whole; and watched the face for signs of life, and saw the brown eyes open and turn to him, and blink:

"...Adam?"

Adam swallowed. "Leo," he said. "Please say it's you. Unless it's not," he added quickly, but instincts were telling him that it was, now that he could watch him free from panic; taking in the subtle mannerisms, the way Leo moved, and looked at him, and Adam wondered how he had ever been fooled...

"Yeah," Leo said. "It's me. What happened?"

"We thought you were Sylar and killed you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Leo gazed thoughtfully at the knife. He rubbed the back of his head and looked at the blood that came away on his fingers.

"How..." Adam started, "...You had powers."

"That old man," Leo said, still staring at the blood. "He said he stole Sylar's powers and wanted to give them to me. Where's Sylar?"

"Next door," Adam said. "He's pretending to be you. I don't think he suspects anything yet."

Leo nodded. "I don't want this," he said. "I don't want these abilities. I... I don't feel like myself anymore." He hesitated. "I don't know if you can trust me."

"Why wouldn't we?"

"I get thoughts," Leo said, looking up straight at Adam. "Of killing people, and slicing their heads open to see how they tick... I'm trying to ignore them, but it's hard. I got some of his memories, somehow. I remember watching people, making lists of the special ones whom I could go after at night. I can remember their faces and what they can do and where they are, and..." He paused. "I remember killing Sasan."

"It wasn't you," Adam said forcefully. "Okay? I don't know what that old man did to you, but you're not responsible. And I still trust you. So just kill Sylar now while he's mortal, and you can worry about that other stuff later."

Adam and Leo returned to the room. Spock stopped mid-bite in sandwich. Smudge and Tony stared. Sylar stood up and opened his mouth to speak-

"Hi Gabriel," Adam said.

Reflex kicked in. "*My name is Sy-*"

Adam gave a wry grin.

Smudge gaped.

"What are you going to do?" Sylar asked. "Kill me?"

"No," Leo said. "Because I'm not like you."

"Noble," Sylar commented. He picked up his sandwich and took a jaunty bite.

"Get out," Leo said. "Before I change my mind."

Sylar laughed to himself. "Who do you think you are, Leo?" he asked, ambling up to them, chewing on his sandwich. "You're still a nobody. You can steal my powers and get your fifteen minutes of fame, but when it's all over we'll be right back where we started." Sylar grinned.

"I could kill you," Leo said. "Right now."

Sylar shrugged. "I don't believe you," he said, close enough that Leo could feel his breath on his face. "Because if you give in to this, you'll become a killer. And then there'll be nothing stopping you. Do you feel the Hunger yet, Leo?"

Leo tensed. "Get *out!*" he said again.

Sylar smiled. "If you say so," he whispered, and walked out the door.

The door clicked shut.

Smudge ran up to Leo and grabbed him in a hug. "*I thought he was you*," he cried.

"Smudge-"

"Let me kill him!"

"No-"

"I SLEPT NEXT TO HIM!" Smudge yelled. "HE KILLED SASAN, AND... and I let him..."

Leo grabbed Smudge by his shoulders. "It's not your fault, Smudge, all right? It's not."

"I hate him I hate him I hate him-"

"We all do," Leo said, and tried to ignore the absorbed memory of Sasan begging for life before the red burst out from his neck and cut his pleadings short-

"Welcome back," Spock said. Smudge had gone to burying his face in Leo's shirt as he continued his uninterrupted strain of declaring his hate for Sylar.

Leo nodded. "Thanks."

Tony ate his sandwich, feeling alone.

serial killer kills. bisexual guy's vocabulary. down to just three words.

A noise from hidden speakers in the ceiling suddenly drew their attention upwards:

"This is an announcement to those of you holding Keanu Reeves hostage on the fourth floor of Block F. Please release him, and then we'll talk about why we cannot let you go home. To show that we are serious about this, we have halted all food and water supplies to Kenselton Hotel.

"To everyone else, if this makes you unhappy, you know what to do: Go get 'em."

The speakers clicked off.

They looked at each other.

"...it's a good thing we have sandwiches," Leo said.

"Man cannot live off bread alone," Tony intoned.

Smudge wondered what he had been doing when he was interrupted. He remembered.

"I hate him I hate him I hate him..."

"There are people running this place after all," Spock said.

"Do we just stay here?" Leo asked.

"For now," Adam said. He gazed at the closed door. "Hopefully not for much longer."

Leo looked at the Smudge on his shirt. *I killed your boyfriend*, he thought with a sudden flash of uncharacteristic malice; and then, rushing over that thought: *No. It wasn't me. It was* Sylar*, not me, not me...*

And he tried with all his might to push aside the thoughts that said otherwise.

quinto formaggi

CHAPTER NINETEEN: I HOPE IT SEES CLEARLY

beccause I can't any longer see into myself.
I see only murk.

"Could you fix Arthur?" Smudge had asked; and now, standing before the damaged android, Leo could sense every part of him: damaged bits and pulled out wires, pieces out of joint... and he could feel them with his mind. He knew where each was supposed to go. He saw how everything worked.

He could fix him, Leo thought with growing conviction that dragged fear in its wake. This wasn't him. He did not know this stuff; Sylar did, and it was that part of his mind that guided the whole process as Leo reached out mentally to fix Arthur.

It was that part of his mind that glowed with satisfaction whenever a cog or screw moved back into place or a broken circuit board rejoined into one working whole. It was that part of his mind that revelled in the success as Arthur blinked and experimentally moved his limbs; and it was that part of his mind that once again felt the Hunger grow as Leo desperately tried to push it back.

The speakers came on again. "*We have an important announcement to make*," a voice said. "*Please listen carefully.*"

They listened carefully.

Rick Astley music blared through the speakers.

"*YOU ALL JUST GOT RICK ROLL'D!*" yelled the announcer. "*HAHAHAHAHAHA...*"

Leo raised a hand and blew up the speakers. The music cut short. Tony's mouth fell open.

"What happened to me?" Arthur asked.

"You died," Smudge said. "Leo fixed you." He gestured at him.

"Thank you," Arthur said to Leo, and then with a curious glance at his clothes: "That other guy was wearing that," he said.

"Yeah. He..." Leo let out a breath. "Long story."

"That other guy won't be bothering us again," Adam muttered.

"We cannot know that for certain," Spock pointed out.

"We can never know anything for certain," Arthur said.

Tony climbed onto a barstool. "What drinks do you have?" he asked.

"What would you like?"

Leo gazed down at the bar counter where he sat, his fists clenched on his knees.

Tall guy. Faux mohawk. Conjures stuff out of thin air. Block C, 41st floor. Brunette kid. Yellow shirt. Joins things together; anything. Block E, 33rd floor-

STOP IT, Leo thought, shaking as he forced down the rising excitement-

Emo boy. Peter-hair. Doesn't go through walls; they go through him. Block J, 5th-

"NO!" Leo yelled.

The others stared at him.

"...Leo?" Adam asked.

"I can't... I can't get these thoughts out... I want them to stop..."

Leo got off the barstool and with erratic steps went to the wall and rested his forehead against it. He trembled with dry sobs, his palms quivering on the wall.

Smudge went hesitantly up to him.

"Stay away from me," Leo whispered. "I'm not safe."

Smudge hugged him.

"Smudge-"

"Leo," Adam said from the bar, his eyes intent. "Don't let it beat you. You can fight it."

"Prove it," Leo breathed, his eyes shut in distress. "You don't... know... what it's like... Let go of me, Smudge."

"No," Smudge said stubbornly.

Leo opened his eyes.

Kill them, came the casual thought. *Kill all of them. They'll never understand. It'll only take a minute and then you'll be free to do whatever you like and you'll never have to worry about anything again-*

"You let Sylar go free when you had every reason to kill him," Adam said. "That says something."

"It's getting worse," Leo said quietly. "It's too strong. You know the things Sylar did; now I know why. We're not that different after all."

Just raise your hand and blow them up. You don't need them. You'll be free to take all the powers you want and nobody will be able to judge you. You can rule this place. Because you are special.

"Sylar embraced the temptation," Spock said. "You're fighting it."

You could do anything, kill anyone. No one would be able to stop you. You wouldn't need to hide. There would be nothing to be afraid of. Masses will run when they see you. Even the people who brought you here will fall to their knees and beg for mercy. Even Gabriel; poor, helpless Gabriel, the watchmaker's son. He will cower and tremble before you and know without a doubt that you *are Sylar now...*

"No-"

Kill them kill them kill them-

Leo shoved the thoughts aside with an effort and turned to Spock with a sudden feverish desperation. "Do that neck pinch thing on me. Please."

"I don't think-"

"Please," Leo begged. "Before I hurt someone, I don't know how long I can control this, I..."

"What would you do when it wears off?" Adam asked. "You can't stay unconscious forever."

Leo gave a wry grin. "Then kill me."

"NO!" Adam said, getting up. "You've done nothing to deserve being killed, and some old guy playing with us doesn't change that."

"It's not the same anymore," Leo said.

"We're not killing you again," Adam said.

"Do it before you absolutely have to and you can't."

"*No,*" Adam said. "We stick together, remember? We'll pull through this. Together."

"I could kill you," Leo said. "Right now. All of you. Just like that. And you wouldn't know a thing."

"I don't believe you would," Adam countered.

"Try me. I can't even think of anything else, and every second I resist it, it hurts." Leo gave a pained laugh. "You don't know how much I want to kill you right now. Then I won't need to have this conversation and I can go slice some heads open and the pain will stop-"

Smudge hugged him tighter.

"It's like a thirst," Leo said. "A hunger. I can't ignore it, it needs to be fed-"

Adam came over. "Smudge, get off him."

Smudge reluctantly agreed.

Leo stared. "What are you-"

Adam pushed Leo against the wall and held him there, gazing firmly into his eyes. "Your name is Leo Fulton Jr.," he stated with clinical force. "You're not a killer. You're not Sylar. You're a good guy, and you're one of us."

"Adam-"

"You're not going to hurt us," Adam continued, ignoring him. "Because that's not what you do. You are stronger than this. You're going to hold out. You're going to conquer it."

"Adam, let go of me."

"You could push me away at any moment and you know it. But you're not going to, because you're still-"

Leo shoved Adam off him with telekinetic force. Adam fell over to the ground, the others looking on in shock....

Sudden malice flashing in his eyes, Leo jerked a finger up towards him. Then he closed his hand again and forced it down into a fist, the pain written on his face. "Run," Leo said through gritted teeth.

"We're not leaving y-"

"*RUN!*"

They ran.

Leo grabbed the bar counter, sliding down its side to the floor as he clutched on tight; raised his eyes towards Arthur-

"Sir?"

"Kill me," Leo said.

"That's not within my job description."

Leo buried his face against his arm.

He heard Arthur move to the other side of the bar and offer drinks to a pair of newcomers.

"No, it's all right," came the familiar voice in reply. "We won't need you here for a while. Why don't you take a rest."

Arthur shut down.

Leo opened his eyes.

Dem smiled charitably down at him. "Hello," he said.

Leo stared at the other person with Dem. A young girl, about four or five, clutching wide-eyed to Dem's hand. He recognised her. She was special. Bounced off any surface, from any height; the world was her trampoline.

The Hunger lashed out painfully in his mind. Leo gripped on more tightly to the bar counter.

"This is Misha," Dem said pleasantly. "She's special."

Leo shook his head. "Don't do this to me, please-"

"Today's lesson," Dem continued, "is self-control."

"I don't *need* lessons!" Leo yelled. "Why are you doing this? Why are you picking on me?"

Dem let go of Misha's hand and took a packet of peanuts from the bar. He tore it open and chucked a few into his mouth. "Because life gets boring when you are immortal, and I thought I might as well use the time to better some members of your pathetic human race." Dem smiled. "Don't worry; it's nothing personal. You were a completely random choice."

Leo tried to turn his face away from the girl, but it was already taking all his effort not to slice her head open.

She stood there, confused and paralysed by fear, looking from Dem to Leo and back to Dem. Dem gave her a peanut. She ate it and went back to staring at Leo.

"Give in, Leo," Dem said. "Just give in. Look at it this way; if I hadn't done anything, Sylar would have killed dozens in the time since then. You've already lowered the death rate by a whole lot. Just one or two kills wouldn't hurt. Lessen the pain a little, you know. Want a peanut?"

Leo didn't want a peanut, so Dem gave it to Misha, who gladly took it. She liked peanuts.

"I'm not going to kill her," Leo said as evenly as he could manage. "I'm not playing your sick games."

Dem gave Misha the rest of the packet, saying something in another language that brought a smile to her face. She climbed onto a barstool and ate.

"Here are the rules, Leo," Dem said calmly. "You have five minutes, after which I'll... release you, and you can be yourself again. I'll leave Misha here with you. If at the end of those five minutes, she's still alive, nothing else will happen. However, if you kill her..." Dem smiled. "After I take your powers away, I'll bring Sasan back to life."

Leo stared at Dem in despair.

"She's an orphan," Dem continued. "She has no family, and most of her friends are dead thanks to Sylar. She won't be missed much. A lot of people are going to die because of this place, and she'll just be another statistic."

"You're crazy," Leo whispered. "You're a crazy, sick..."

"No one will know it was you, Leo," Dem continued, his face a mask of grave sincerity. "No one will care. But I remember you telling me how much all of you cared about Sasan. Especially Smudge.

Smudge cared about him, didn't he? Think of... how happy he would be to have him alive again. The choice is yours."

Trembling where he sat, Leo brushed a tear from his eye.

"Five minutes, Leo," Dem said. He tapped Leo's watch. The numbers started a countdown. 4:59. 4:58. 4:57.

Dem walked over to Misha and said something to her. She smiled and nodded and went back to eating her peanuts.

4:51. 4: 50.

Dem went through the doors and out of sight.

"I'm not a killer," Leo said weakly to himself.

No one will know.

"I'd know," Leo whispered, trying to give voice to anything that would counter those thoughts. "Dem would know."

Sasan, back. No longer having Smudge going around with that vacant, broken look in his eyes...

One life for another.

What would Smudge do in his place?

Leo turned towards Arthur. The android had powered down. Leo raised a hand and telekinetically turned him back on.

Arthur blinked. He saw Misha seated at the bar, finishing the last couple of peanuts.

"Would you like more?" he asked.

Misha looked at him curiously, not understanding his words. Arthur took a packet of peanuts and showed it to her. Her face lit up, and she nodded.

"Arthur."

Arthur gave Misha the packet and looked down at Leo. "Yes?"

"What do I do?"

3:59. 3:58.

"What's the problem?"

Leo told him.

"Do the right thing," Arthur replied quietly. "Don't have the blood of an innocent on your hands."

"What about Sasan? He could be alive again if I just-"

"Sasan's death was not your fault," Arthur said. "His life is not your responsibility. It would be good to bring him back to life, yes. But it would not be wrong not to."

"I remember killing him," Leo said. "I got... some of Sylar's memories, and..."

"-and you feel guilty?" Arthur asked. "Don't put your trust in false memories, Leo. You've done nothing wrong. Don't start now."

3:04. 3:03.

"I could make so many people happy," Leo said. "Sasan has friends and family, and Smudge..."

"Are the loved worth more than the lonely?"

Silence.

"Is their happiness less important than my clear conscience?" Leo asked in return.

Arthur picked up Misha's empty peanut packet and put it in the trash. "There are no correct answers, Leo," he said. "You just do what you think is right, and be prepared to live with the consequences."

2:33. 2:32.

In the silence they heard more announcements coming from speakers too distant to make out.

"This place is going down," Arthur commented.

Leo slowly got back to his feet. He moved over to Misha and stood by her. She looked up, smiled at him, and offered him a peanut.

The Hunger cried out to be fed.

Leo took the peanut. "Thanks," he said. She smiled again.

If only you knew, Leo thought.

He forced himself to sit down.

"What are you going to do?" Arthur asked.

"I don't know," Leo said. "I can't... I can't think of anything. My mind is just... blank..."

He knew only the overpowering urge to turn and kill, justifying itself with thoughts of the reward; and the effort not to, void of similar promises.

Sasan is dead, he told himself. *He's been dead for over a day. It's over. Let Smudge grieve. People die. It's a part of life.*

Misha held out the rest of the peanuts towards him, her eyes bright with childhood innocence.

"It's all right," Leo said. "You can have them."

She tilted her head in puzzlement. Leo gently pushed her hand back. "For you," he said.

Sparks of her memory flashed into his mind at the contact. Another world, another place. Literally bouncing off the walls. Fantasies of flying away. Gazing down a dreary road waiting for people who never came.

1:47. 1:46.

Leo buried his head in his hands.

Wait it out, he thought. *Less than two minutes, and it'll be over. It'll all be over.*

The thought gave him strength.

When the numbers hit zero, Leo felt the pressure of a small metal cylinder on the back of his neck.

And then the greatest relief he'd ever known washed over him; and he raised his head to see Dem lift the cylinder from his neck, and take Misha's hand and walk away.

"How do you feel?" Arthur asked.

Leo looked at him and gave a faint smile. "Better." He closed his eyes and lingered in the silence and the calm.

Eventually, he got up. "I have to find the others," he said.

Leo hesitated, then went back to the room they had occupied. It was deserted now, like the seventeenth floor of Block J was. A few sandwiches still lay in the corner. Pillows scattered on the ground. The laptop open on the desk, still running. Leo shut it down-

A broadcast telepathic message cut into his mind.

<There are exits through the roofs. This is our chance. Everyone, get out.>

In the distance, Leo heard shouting and running.   He looked at the laptop, lying there, and decided to leave it. They wouldn't need it any more.

He had to find the others now, he thought, running out of the room.

"Joining the exodus?" Arthur asked, with a knowing finality as Leo paused before the bar.

"Yeah. Uh... thanks. For everything."

"If you ever need a drink or a chat, I'll be here."

"I don't think we'll be coming back."

"But if you ever do... I'll be here," Arthur said. "It's not as though I have anywhere else to go."

"All right. Take care, Arthur."

"I will. You too."

Leo nodded. "Goodbye."

He left through the broken doors; down the escalator and out into the corridor-

"Leo?"

He turned. Adam eyed him warily from inside one of the shops, the others with him.

"I'm fine," Leo said quickly. "I'm okay again, the old guy fixed... You waited for me?"

"We stick together, remember?" Smudge said.

"We were going to knock you unconscious and drag you along, but this works too," Adam said.

"Let's go," Tony said. "To the roofs. Let's get out of this place, hurry-"

"There's no need to hurry," Spock said. "It may in fact be safer to wait until the chaos has died d-"

"Whatever," Adam interrupted. "We've been here long enough. Let's go."

And so they ran off to join the crowds.

*

"Go on, Gabriel," Dem suggested after Sylar tested out his regained powers on an unfortunate potted plant. "Escape. There's a whole world out there. Not too many special people, I'm afraid, but it could still be fun. World domination might *actually* be a possibility for you."

"I don't get you," Sylar said.

Dem shrugged. "I don't get me either. Go say hi to Mr. Quinto or something. Just beware the dog; I hear he wears bandanas."

Sylar raised an eyebrow.

"Have fun," Dem said with a grin, and vanished.

People were ignoring them for the most part, too concerned with getting out to care about anything else. Angry voices and conversation played from the speakers; something about a moronic architect who had designed in fire exits as per building regulations, providing everyone with a way out the moment a small fire broke out on one of the floors.

Some dazed fellow in a scruffy beard and half his hair torn out gazed blankly at Smudge as he passed by.

Smudge looked warily back at him.

"Bisexual," the stranger concluded in a low, drawn-out mutter, and continued past.

"HEY!" Smudge yelled, but the other guy did not look back, and was soon lost in the crowd.

"What about Sylar?" Tony asked as they pulled back into a deserted corridor, waiting for the crowds swarming up the stairwell of Block J to lessen enough to join without being constantly shoved about.

"What *about* him?" Adam asked.

"Did he get his powers back? Is he going to come after us?"

"I don't know," Leo said.

"It may be a better option to wait until almost everyone is out," Spock suggested, as another passerby gaped at his ears.

"That'll just make it easier for Sylar to find us," Smudge said.

"Not if he expects us to join the crowds," Adam said. "He could be out by now."

"What floor is this?" Leo asked.

"Sixteenth," Adam said. "It's a long way to the roof."

"We could take the elevator," Smudge suggested.

"It's stopping on every floor," Tony pointed out. "Everyone has the same idea."

"Hence my suggestion to wait," Spock reiterated.

"Want to go back to the seventeenth?" Leo asked. "It's just one floor up, and I don't think anyone's going to be waiting for us in this mess."

So they briefly rejoined the crowd and re-emerged back on the seventeenth floor.

The door shut, muting the noise outside.

Dried blood stains on the wall, 'DEAD PEOPLE + SERIAL KILLER' on a door. It almost felt like home.

Smudge wandered quietly off to the common room, leading the trail as the others followed behind. He went through the door and stood by the empty couch. A pang of pain shot through his heart. He bowed his head.

The last time he had been here... well, the last time he'd been here was when they had come to get Tony... but the last time he had *really* been here, Sasan had been here too; Smudge next to him on the couch, wanting to go back to sleep, not wanting to run away...

Would Sasan have died if they had stayed? Smudge wondered. If they'd stayed here, barricaded the doors, waited it out...

Leo patted him on the shoulder as he passed by.

Adam picked his empty coffee cup up from the table and threw it into the trash.

"This place still smells like roses," Leo murmured.

Tony was opening cupboards at the kitchenette and looking into them. He pulled out a bunch of snacks - potato chips, cookies, chocolate bars, gummy bears - and carried them over to the table, where he dumped the lot.

"If you need a change from sandwiches," he said, tearing open a packet of potato chips.

Spock picked up the gummy bears and pondered the objectification of life. He beheld in his hand the transformation of a fierce creature into a tiny, squishy candy. The possible malnutrition one might encounter by eating nothing but gummy bears for a week. The-

Tony gave him a weird look. Spock put the gummy bears down.

"There might have been more people here," Leo said, "not knowing about the rest of us, or-"

"Or maybe Sylar found them and killed them," Adam said.

"I don't think so," Leo said, and then more quietly: "I don't remember that."

Silence. Smudge had progressed to sitting on the couch, staring wistfully off towards the television set.

"What happens next?" Leo asked.

Adam shrugged and grabbed a handful of chips from Tony.

"Getting out of this place won't get us home," Spock said. "In fact the machines that brought us here are located in this facility. Running away from them would seem... counterproductive."

"We're trapped, we escape," Tony stated.

"For all we know, going out there will just get us killed," Spock said. "We may be welcomed with weapons instead of freedom."

Freedom, thought Smudge. He used to have a guinea pig by that name. It got run over by a steamroller.   He didn't have a guinea pig anymore.

"There's only one way to find out," Adam said.

"Their experiment failed," Spock pointed out. "Faced with a mob the most likely reaction would be murder. From Sasan's information we know that they don't think of us as real. There would be little to stop them from cleaning up the mess and starting over, if we are indeed nothing more than easily-replicated pieces of information stored in their database."

"And then what, it all starts over?" Adam asked.

"Not necessarily," Tony said. "There's chaos theory and all that."

Silence.

"If they're starting over, staying here won't help us," Leo said. "They'll find us eventually, but if we get out, there's always a chance... We have people with superpowers here. I don't think they have that in this world. We could put up a good fight..."

Spock nodded.

Eventually the crowd petered off and they left the corridor for the lift, which had a handful of others in it but was large enough to accommodate them. The lift stopped at several floors on the way to the roof, always too full to take in any more, and eventually they reached the top.

A large hole had been punched in the ceiling through which shone a steady black. Furniture and shelves and boxes formed a crude (but sturdy, held together by someone's magic) stairway up, and they climbed up and out onto the surface of the roof.

They stood on an islet of white concrete. The other blocks formed similar patches of white in the encompassing blackness; it was not dark, not exactly, for it was bright enough as a well-lit street at night, but the void of nothingness stretched out all around them.

Leading from the roof was a staircase to a patch of rectangular light. A door. They went on up; until finally they emerged in the sunlight, in some dodgy alleyway made less dodgy by the amount of people in the vicinity-

There was a sound. The portal *changed*. They looked back to see the door leading into an ordinary corridor, and then the sound of gunfire finally kicked in.

Screaming in the distance.

"They're shooting-"

A helicopter rushed by overhead as they watched.

"You were right," Leo said to Spock; and then hordes of screaming people were upon them, pushing back as the helicopter shot out plumes of greenish gas down at them-

"GET BACK!" someone yelled. In the distance, they saw people falling unconscious-

Adam stumbled as someone shoved him on the way back to the door. The helicopter turned towards them, still spraying gas.

Adam pressed himself against the wall as someone fell against him, collapsing to the ground; he looked up, and in the panicked rush realised that he had lost the others-

Leo grabbed his arm. "We've got to get out of here."

"Where are the others?" Adam asked.

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

His mind suddenly hazy, Adam thought he saw a pair of pointy ears collapse as the helicopter came round again. And then the gas got to them, and they fell unconscious onto the ground.

<div align="center">*</div>

"Where are they?" Smudge asked, pressed into the corridor.

Tony gave him a frustrated glare. "I said I *don't know*!"

Then the corridor vanished from beneath their feet, and they were back in the void again. But in place of the stairs were pieces of unknown black material below them, floating far away from the roofs of Kenselton Hotel-

Tony grabbed hold of Smudge as the thing they were standing on bucked violently. Smudge stumbled under his weight but managed to keep his footing as the thing cracked into two, separating them from the few others who had come in with them.

Tony cast a panicked look around. They were drifting away. All the little floating islands were drifting apart, further and further into the void...

"...What's going on?" Tony asked, suddenly scared.

Smudge was staring wide-eyed at everything. "I don't kn-"

Their floating island dissolved and they fell into the void.

<div align="center">*</div>

Dark.

Tony blinked. Then again, several times, holding his eyes open and closed for longer periods, but finding no difference.

"Smudge?" he called out. His voice echoed faintly.

"Here," Smudge said. "I can't *see* anything."

A small wave of relief washed over Tony. He hadn't gone blind. "Me neither," he said.

Tony tried to move towards Smudge's voice, and then a new horror came over him. He couldn't move his left foot. It was stuck in something...

"Can you... can you come toward me?" he asked. "I think my foot is stuck..."

"I'm coming."

"Yeah... I'm on the ground, don't step on me or anything."

"Okay." Nearer now, possibly close enough to touch. Smudge crouched down, trying to feel his way-

"Yeah, that's my leg," Tony said. "Any idea what's up with my shoe? I can't get to it from here..."

Smudge blinked reflexively, trying to get some light to his eyes. Nothing. The ground below was rocky beneath his shoes. He felt his way up Tony's leg-

"Okay, less groping," Tony muttered. "I know you're bisexual, but this is really not a good time-"

"*Do you want me to help you or not?*"

"...Sorry."

End of his jeans. Sock. Shoe... rock. Smudge frantically felt the area around it again, and came to the same conclusion: the shoe was embedded in the rock wall.

"...I think your shoe is stuck," he revealed.

"I *know* that. Can you get it out?"

Smudge did an experimental tug. Nothing. He hesitated, running his finger along the spot where shoe met rock. "It's stuck in the wall," he said.

"*In* the wall?" Tony asked.

"I think they teleported us here. I guess it wasn't a completely empty space and your foot got merged with-"

Tony swore. He tugged at his shoe in panic.

"You could try just taking your foot out," Smudge suggested. "It might just be the shoe that's stuck-"

"Can you feel the shoelaces?"

"Yeah."

"Loosen them."

Smudge was halfway there, feeling his way, pulling the laces loose. "Okay."

Tony pulled again... and this time his foot came out, leaving the shoe stuck in the wall.

"All right," he said, voice shaking with relief. "I'm out."

Smudge touched the empty shoe.

"Where are we, a cave?" Tony asked. He rubbed his eyes.

"I think so," Smudge said.

"HELLO?" Tony called out. "Anyone there?"

Faint echoes, again.

"Grab my hand," Smudge said, reaching out in the dark. "So we don't get separated or bump into each other."

"Oka- ow!"

"Sorry."

"That's *not* my hand!"

"*Sorry*."

They finally found each other's hands and held on.

"...wait," Tony said. "My watch has a light..."

He let go of Smudge. Seconds later, a pathetic blue glow emanated from his direction. It was barely enough for them to make out each other's faces, and near-useless beyond that. Tony held it up, trying to see as much as they could...

It looked like a cave. A small one, a semicircular concave area cut into the rock, perhaps large enough to seat twenty people; and opposite them:

"There's water," Smudge said.

"Where?" The light came on again.

Smudge pointed. "There."

Tony cautiously broke away from Smudge and moved closer for inspection. The light on his watch blinked on and off intermittently every few seconds as he tried to see where he was going.

It was a tiny, still, strip of pond. Beyond that was more rock. Tony walked slowly along until he reached the rock wall; he put a hand on the rock as he circumnavigated the place, looking for a way out, ending back on the other end of the pond.

He shone his light as close as he could to the rock wall on the other side of the pond, looking for a crevice or anything that might be a potential exit...

"See anything?" Smudge asked.

"No."

"We could wait here," Smudge said. "Whatever brought us here might bring us back..."

"You know what? I don't trust anything that almost teleported me into a wall." Tony let the light off.

"So we're just going to *stay here* until we *die*?" Smudge asked.

Silence.

"That water has to come from somewhere," Tony said.

"It could drip down from the-"

"I don't think so," Tony said. "I don't see any stalactites. Well okay, maybe there are, or maybe this isn't limestone or something soluble like that and water drips down anyway, but... I don't think so. The walls are too smooth; they look water-eroded, like this whole place used to be filled with water at some point and then it receded to that pool there..."

Silence.

The light came on again for a second. Tony committed the brief scene to memory and made his way to the water's edge. He crouched down. Light again. He stuck a finger into the water, and pulled it out. Cold.

Smudge came over and crouched down next to him.

"...there might be an underwater tunnel," Tony said hesitantly. "It could be how the water gets here. Maybe... maybe it goes out..."

He held the light on. Tony glanced back around the cave of smooth unbroken rock. He let the light off and faced the water again.

Smudge didn't think he liked where this was going. "We could wait-"

"*No one's coming, you understand?*" Tony burst out, glaring at Smudge, unseen in the dark. "Whatever happened back there looked like an accident. I don't think anyone knows we're here,

and if we just stay here we're going to die, you understand that? The most we can *hope* for right now is that there's some underwater tunnel down there big enough to go through that leads out to a lake or something that we can swim to-"

"I can't swim," Smudge said quietly.

Tony buried his head in his hands.

"Sorry," Smudge added.

Silence.

Tony finally stood up. "Stay here," he said firmly, kicking off his remaining shoe. "I'll go in and see if there's a way out."

Cold, he thought, his eyes squeezed shut. *Cold...*

Tony lowered himself back into a crouch.

You've got no other choice...

He steeled himself and slid into the water, and yelped as the cold enveloped him in piercing wetness.

"Tony?"

Tony gasped, splashing in the pitch blackness, gulping in sharp intakes of air as he treaded water, turning the light on briefly to get his bearings-

"I'm okay," he managed to say, shivering violently. "I'm... okay, just... so cold..."

Cold cold cold cold cold cold cold

Tony forced himself to stay still long enough to take a deep breath and plunge his head into the near-freezing water. He kicked off towards the wall. Needed light. Tony grabbed for the button on his watch, the water stinging his eyes as he opened them. Pressed the button. The small blue light came back on.

Rock wall. More rock wall. But then, further down, a crevice yawned, black against the rock.

Tony swam towards it, pushing aside the instinctive fear that sprung up at the sight of the gaping blackness; fighting the thoughts that said to get far away from it, right now, not *closer-*

He grabbed the sides of the crevice and tried to peer in; released his grip to turn the light on, saw the beginnings of a tunnel of unknown length, and knew that he would be going in there.

His heart hammering in his chest, Tony let go and went back up to the surface for air.

"There's a tunnel," he told Smudge as he treaded water, his teeth chattering from the cold. "I... I'll go see where it ends, and... and you just... stay here..."

"You don't have to do this," Smudge said. "If we're going to die we don't need to-"

"I have to," Tony said. "It's... the only way we... might ever... get out...

If you have to die, you might as well die trying, he thought. Tony took several deep breaths of air, held them in, and went back under. He flashed the light to see the way, deliberate strokes through the water towards the crevice; and he pushed himself in.

Flashed light. The tunnel was narrow. He swam on, focusing on the end whenever panic tried to get in the way, forcing his limbs on in the subterranean water...

Brushed past smooth rock in narrow bits. Flashed the light again. No space to turn around unless he really had to, and already his chest was growing tight with lack of air.

Turn back now, he thought, his mind whirling. *Or you'll never make it back before you're out of air-*

No, he thought over that. *Then I'd just have to try again, because I'm not going to just sit there with the bisexual guy and die waiting for help that never comes.*

He pushed himself on with renewed determination, his lungs starting to strain for air, flashing the light again and just seeing the same tunnel.

Don't panic; you'll just use up more oxygen, he thought desperately.

His strokes grew more frantic, wild, survival instinct kicking in now, propelling him forward; *need air need air need-*

Out.

Tony felt the pressure change. Half-blinded from oxygen deprivation, he felt the water rushing him upwards...

He broke the surface, gasping, drinking in mouthfuls of air as fast as he could...

Tony's finger hovered over the light button and stopped. There was already a light. Faint, but there, somewhere in the distance slightly above him.

Tony blinked water away from his eyes and swam towards it.

The water grew shallow and he stepped out into rock, stumbling at the sudden return of full gravity. He turned his watch light on again; this cave was larger, and up above he saw the small opening. Starlight? Moonlight? Tony scanned the area below it. This rock sloped upwards; they could climb-

They. He still had to go back for Smudge.

Tony's heart sank at the thought of repeating his underwater ordeal twice, and the last time with someone who couldn't swim.

What're you gonna do, leave him? he thought angrily to himself; and for a moment he was tempted to. Just continue on, climb out, let Smudge assume he had drowned or something, and maybe if he

got out there would be people who could help, and maybe *they* could save Smudge, if he was still alive by then and hadn't tried coming in after him or...

Tony grimaced. He went back into the water, took in all the air he could, and went back down.

He panicked a second as he flashed his light and saw two crevices instead of one. Then he realised that one was too small to go through, and that it had to have been the other one that he'd come from. He grabbed the sides and pushed himself in.

He had some sense of the length of the journey now, and sped up as much as he could. Stronger strokes; faster, using the sides of the tunnel to push himself along at the more narrow bits, playing a song in his head to keep his mind off the cold and wet and the fact that he couldn't see a thing-

Out. He surfaced with a splash and spat water out his mouth.

"Smudge! Get in!"

He heard Smudge give a start at his voice. "Hey, you're back-"

"There's a tunnel... it goes to another cave and there's some sort of opening there which I think goes outside-"

"I can't sw-"

"I know; just hold on to my leg or something, it's just a tunnel and you just need to push yourself along-"

"Where are you?"

"I'm coming over," Tony said, flashing the light. "I'll bring you there. Just *get in the water*, Smudge!"

Smudge swallowed.

"Smudge!"

Smudge looked at the water. He looked at Tony, now close to the edge, waiting for him-

If I die, I'll get to be with Sas again, he thought.

It comforted him. He took his shoes off and mourned their loss; then he climbed into the water, and Tony grabbed him before he sank, his soaked clothes hanging like a dead weight on his body,

"Okay," Tony said. "When we're in there, you've just gotta kick to speed up, and just pull yourself along, all right?"

Smudge's legs flailed in the water, trying and failing to find purchase in the liquid. He tightened his grip on Tony's shoulder.

"You don't need to stay afloat," Tony said. "Just let the water take you down, and then when we're in the tunnel we'll just go through that and we'll be fine, all right?"

In the dark, Smudge looked at him in panic. "Don't let go of me-"

"I'll have to when we're down there. You grab my foot; it'll slow us down but there's no other way, and then just *kick*, okay? And use your hands to push yourself along... Remember that, okay?"

Smudge trembled in the cold. "Okay."

"You get used to the cold after a while." Tony flashed the light to check their position. They were right above the tunnel.

"On three, take a deep breath, on four we're going under," Tony said. "Ready? *On* three. I'm not going to say three or four."

"Okay."

"One... two..."

Three. Smudge took a breath.

Four. And they plunged into the water.

Smudge fought the sudden panic that came over him, reminding himself to keep his mouth *closed*, not to let the air out, as he felt Tony pulling him downwards; saw the flash of light that showed them the tunnel entrance; saw Tony turn briefly and hold out his leg; Smudge grabbed on, dodged a kick, and then they were in the tunnel and it was dark and Smudge felt his air running out already.

With his free hand he tried to help them along, fingers slipping off the side of the tunnel, and kicking wildly as much as he could; his eyes smarting from the water, so he closed them since there was nothing to see anyway, past the single-minded thought of getting *out*...

I need air, Smudge thought, and wanted to cry.

Up front, Tony struggled with the added weight and loss of the use of one leg. He pulled himself onwards, desperate, his arms straining under the effort.

You've done this twice, he told himself. *Just one more time...*

But he was moving much more slowly than the previous two times, and was starting to think that maybe he *should* have left Smudge there and gone to seek help instead. Then, at least one of them would be alive, rather than risking both their lives down here-

And then he felt Smudge's grasp loosening on his ankle.

No, he thought. *No, no...*

As best he could, Tony tried turning around as they entered a wider part of tunnel. He flashed the light to see. Smudge was floating behind him. His eyes were closed. Probably unconscious.

The sight of Smudge's face stirred something in him; strengthened that curious bond that linked them together, and Tony knew then that he couldn't leave him behind.

Smudge's hand slipped off completely. Tony braced himself against the wall, did a half-turn, grabbed for Smudge's hand, caught it, and pulled it up as close as he could, holding on tight as he continued on.

There was no space for the two of them side by side. Half-doubled over, his brain screaming for oxygen, Tony yanked Smudge's hand and continued on in a semi-crawl, his left hand pushing him along as fast as he could.

You can't give up now. Not now, not here. You're getting out even if it kills you.

He had no free hand to operate the light now. Tony continued on in pitch black darkness, the weight of water pressing down on him, feeling his way forward one push at a time-

His head throbbed with pain.

You're not going to faint, he told himself angrily, making an effort to stay conscious. *You're going to get out-*

And then they were out.

Smudge weighed him down. Tony made a quick decision, let go, and burst to the top for air. Swallowed it in, feeding his lungs, easing the pain... then took another deep breath and went back down to grab Smudge. He flashed the light and saw the outline of a hand. Tony grabbed him and pulled him upwards, pushing him towards the surface and out.

"Smudge... Smudge!"

Tony shook him to no effect.

Get on land.

The faint light above was visible again. Tony dragged Smudge out of the water. He laid him by the edge, used his watch light to quickly inspect him, and slapped Smudge about the face a few times, trying to get him to wake-

"Smudge! Don't die on me, you bisexual freak! Wake up..."

Tony checked his pulse. Still there, but faint.

"SMUDGE!"

CPR, Tony thought. *100 compressions per minute, 2 breaths after every 30, hope he doesn't wake up in the midst of that and think I like him that way...*

Tony winced. *Don't think about that,* he thought as he started pumping on Smudge's chest, counting under his breath-

...29, 30.

Flashed the light to see where to aim. Held Smudge's nose closed, blew two shots of air into his mouth, went back to the compressions...

Tony paused, tired. Out of the water, the cold was getting to him again, seeping through his soaking wet clothes and into his skin. He wanted to just lie down somewhere... rest his limbs from the swim, get warm and dry again-

Not now. Not yet.

He went back to the CPR, punctuating it with frustrated, weary shouts and the occasional insult that made over-liberal use of the word 'bisexual'.

"*SMUDGE!*"

Smudge coughed out water. He blinked in the darkness and sat up, Tony's hands falling off him.

Tony flashed the light to ensure that Smudge was really alive and he hadn't just imagined it.

"...what happened?" Smudge asked.

"You nearly drowned, I saved your life, and I hate you," Tony said.

"...Thanks."

"Let's... let's get out of here."

"Okay."

They moved towards the light above, Tony turning on his watch's one now and then to better see the way.

The ground sloped upwards towards the light, enough for them to climb on and make their way up on hands and knees. Bits of fallen rock lay scattered in their paths, pricking palms and scuffing jeans-clad knees; and then they emerged out through the hole onto a stretch of rock and sandy grass, and looked up to the starlit sky, the moon casting enough light for them to see each other's tired faces.

The glow of a town shone in the distance. Tony pointed towards it. "That way," he said weakly, and they started walking. His head felt strangely light; and tired, so tired.

You got out, Tony told himself. *You got out. You're alive. You got out...*

He rubbed a hand across his eyes and blinked. His vision was going weird and blurry. He stopped walking, taking ragged breaths of the fresh air, trying to steady himself-

Smudge looked back at him. "...Tony?"

Tony raised his head to meet Smudge's gaze and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

And then he collapsed to the ground, unconscious, as exhaustion finally caught up with him.

*

Isn't it nice? Adam heard a familiar voice say as he slowly woke up to see grey concrete floor beneath him. *We're all together again.*

Adam slowly sat up. Bars. A cell. Sylar, leaning casually against the bars, smiling cheerfully at them.

Leo was already up, looking stunned. Adam couldn't tell what Spock was thinking, but he hoped it had something to do with considering the best Vulcan military strategy for taking out psychopathic serial killers with super powers.

Adam warily turned away from Sylar to Leo. "Where's Smudge and Tony?" he asked.

"I don't know," Leo said, still not daring to look away from Sylar, although he didn't appear to be doing anything particularly suspicious at the moment.

Adam glanced around. There were other cells near them, some close enough for him to see the people inside.

"What *is* this place?" he asked.

"It seems to be some sort of holding facility," Spock said. "We may have to stay here until they decide what to do with us."

Sylar rolled his eyes. He turned around and telekinetically sliced through a section of the bars. They fell through, and he strolled out.

An alarm sounded. Semi-robotic guards rushed over. Sylar continued walking, raising his hand to blow them away-

...and nothing happened.

Sylar hesitated. He turned and experimentally lifted one of the bars into the air, and it moved fine; tried it again with the guards, to no avail...

One of them grabbed him and shoved him against the wall, the other coming up right behind.

"We know about your tricks, *Gabriel*," the first guard snarled. "They don't work with-"

Sylar angrily jerked a few bars into the air and flew them right at the guards, knocking them over.

"My name is *SYLAR!*" he yelled.

"*Go,*" Adam said in a hurried whisper. "Let's get out of here while they're distracted-"

Spock grabbed Leo's hand and the three of them exited through the gap, running off down a randomly-chosen corridor as Sylar continued his battle with the guards, who weren't going to be defeated that easily.

"Where are we going?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Adam said, glancing up towards the ceiling where crude signs hung over each cell door. "The cells are numbered. We could try getting to the beginning of them-"

"Guards," Spock warned, and they slipped down another corridor as the patrol passed by.

"So we just keep running until we find something or get killed?" Leo suggested.

"Yeah," Adam said, "Find out who's in charge of this place... there has to be some control centre of some sort. They might know where Smudge and Tony are."

"I saw them go back through the portal," Spock informed him. "They may be back at Kenselton Hotel, or somewhere else."

"Only one way to find out," Adam muttered.

"What way is that?" Leo asked.

"...I don't know," Adam admitted. "Let's just find a computer."

"All right," Leo said. "Good start."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

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quinto formaggi

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:
EVERYTHING THAT HAS A BEGINNING

"Tony?"

Smudge crouched down by his side in the grass and shook him, to no avail. He heard shallow breathing - still alive. Smudge shook him again, got nothing out of it, and tried to lift Tony up, but the weight was too much to bear.

Smudge let him back down and looked at the lighted town in the distance. Perhaps someone there could help...

"I'll be back," he promised, and ran towards the town, grass and grit poking his feet through wet socks. He glanced back now and then, committing to memory Tony's position, and hoping that he would still be there, alive, when he got back.

There were two moons in the sky. The sight disconcerted him for a moment, but he pushed on, and finally he entered the town.

The roads were trenches dug into the ground; buildings of unfamiliar architecture rose on slopes upwards on both sides, dark against the sky. Streetlamps punctuated the way: tall, thin structures with pulsating globules of light balanced on their tips.

The road was deserted and still, but Smudge saw lights on in a few of the buildings. Cautiously, he entered one of the sloping breaks in the trench wall and walked on up to what looked like a door or opening of some sort.

"...Hello?" he called out tentatively. After seconds of no response, he raised a hand to knock-

-and his hand went right through the door.

Smudge pulled his hand back in shock, his pulse racing. The door was some gelatinous half-liquid material. He could probably go right through. And then end up in some strange alien lair, and possibly get eaten...

He hesitated.

Tony risked his life for yours, Smudge told himself. *The least you could do is try.*

...And maybe they don't eat bisexuals, he thought hopefully.

He tried to imagine Sasan there by his side, and it made him feel safer.

Smudge steeled himself, and then he stepped through the door.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Guards," Spock said again, and they slipped down another corridor until the guards had passed.

"You're really good at this," Adam commented.

"It is basic military training-"

A voice whispered at them. "*Hey.*"

They turned. A young woman in one of the cells was clinging on to the bars and staring at them.

"Do you know Mike?" she asked.

"...Yeah," Leo said.

"How is he?"

One of her cell mates poked her from the midst of starting a game of Bridge with a convenient pack of cards. "Elle. Three clubs."

"Three spades," she said, then turned back, searchingly.

"He, uh, shot himself," Leo said. "Suicide."

"Oh no."

"I'm sorry."

Elle nodded, and gave a sad, apologetic smile. "It was because of us, huh?"

"I don't know."

Silence.

"There were... more of you guys," she said. "I think they may have been killed. Not by me, but... we were told to shoot on sight. Just in case."

"What good would that have done?" Adam asked. "Sylar can't die."

"I guess it's the same principle of throwing someone into water to see if she drowns, because then she's innocent, but if she floats, she's a witch..."

Silence.

"I'm sorry," Elle said. "Mike was a good guy. And... and I'm sure the others were too."

Silence.

"Are you escaping?" Elle asked.

"We're trying," Adam said.

"Try that door," Elle said, pointing at one adjacent to the last cell in the corridor. "I've seen official-looking people go in there."

"Thank you," Spock said, and so they went to check it out.

"Jackpot," Adam said as he stood in the open doorway. The small room was similar to the one in which he'd first unbanned Sylar from Kenselton Hotel. Electronics filled one wall, and hooked up to that was a desktop computer, which Adam gladly went over to.

"Guard the door," Adam said, sitting down.

Leo shut the door and held it there.

"Do you require my assistance?" Spock asked.

"Not yet," Adam muttered, lost in concentration. His fingers flew over the keyboard, seeking out databases, parsing them for information, locating the bits that pertained to them...

"Found us," he said. "Same coordinates under location for the three of us and Sylar; another set for Sasan and the... other dead people.   Smudge and Tony are somewhere else." He paused. "Far away somewhere else. I don't think they're in this universe. Got pen and paper?"

They didn't.

"What do you need to write down?" Spock asked.

"Coordinates. Here. Can you memorise-"

Spock nodded. "Yes." He did so.

"Can you bring them back from here?" Leo asked.

"I don't kn-"

"HEY!"

They jumped. Then the door flew open and two guards stormed in looking angry.

"Got out, did you?" one asked, as more identical semi-robotic guards rushed over. "What were you trying to do?"

The guard glanced at the computer screen and frowned.

One day I will understand technology, he decided. "Take them back to their cell," he said.

Some guy looked up from behind bars as they were dragged past. He stared. "...Spock?"

Spock turned his head towards the voice. "Captain-"

And then they were past.

The bars had been replaced on their cell and a force field had been erected around it. Sylar lay inside, unconscious.

The guards threw them in and locked the gate and re-established the force field. Leo looked sadly at it.

Adam sank down onto the bench. "Now what?" he asked after a while. "They're just leaving us here to die?"

"That's the worst case scenario," Leo said.

Spock could think of far worse scenarios, but decided that this was not the time to say so.

"And, naturally, we're the only ones with a *force field*," Adam said. He glared at Sylar's unconscious form and cursed the name of Quinto.

Leo winced.

*

Light bloomed out and faded to a dull glow as Smudge emerged on the other side of the door. His breath caught. A collection of... creatures were looking at him; at least he thought so, for they had no visible eyes amidst the fur that covered most of their humanoid bodies.

"I-" he started to say, when they broke into a low conversation amongst themselves in a language foreign to any human tongue, and Smudge took an instinctive step back when one of them separated from the others and approached him.

The alien said something. Smudge shook his head slowly. "I don't understand..."

A hand-like appendix extended itself and touched him on the forehead. Smudge shrank back; but then his mind was filled with a soothing warmth, and he shut his eyes as he felt some connection made through the soft brush of fur against his skin.

"Tony is hurt," he said, and this time he felt as though they understood. "He needs help... please..."

And he felt the wordless response as the other spoke again in words that automatically translated themselves in his head: *Lead us there.*

*

Adam got up and stared at the force field, which was making low buzzing noises. He reached out a hand-

"Don't do that," Leo said. "You don't know what might happen."

Adam decided he had a point. He bent down, picked up Sylar's hand, and used it to poke the force field.

It went *BZWAP!* and disintegrated the tips of three of Sylar's fingers. Adam dropped the hand in shock. The fingers regenerated themselves.

Leo thought of saying *I told you so*, but didn't. He wondered if this might be a good time to get his clothes back from Sylar, then decided he couldn't be bothered, and settled for just repossessing his wallet.

He sat down on the bench with it and flipped idly through the notes.

"Ten bucks says we die in here," Adam said. "If we die, you owe me ten."

"All right," Leo said.

Spock looked deeply confused and vaguely tormented by the logic of this bet.

Adam sat down next to Leo and glared at the floor. After a period of time he looked up at Spock, who had spent the last few moments standing thoughtfully by the bars.

"Was that Kirk just now?" Adam asked.

"Yes."

Adam went back to staring at the floor.

<div align="center">*</div>

The aliens lay Tony down on a hammock-like bed strung across two walls of a room as Smudge hovered around anxiously.

It's all right, one of them said, touching Smudge's arm. *Your brother will be fine.*

"He's not-" Smudge started to say, then decided that it didn't matter. He sat down and stayed on in the room as the aliens left, and watched Tony in his sleep. Perhaps when he woke, they could get out... somehow. Or maybe they'd never find a way to leave, and would have to stay here for the rest of their lives...

Smudge pushed the thought aside. It was too soon to come to conclusions. He sat back, leaning his head against the wall, and returned for a while to memories...

They lie together on the couch in silence, gazing up at the ceiling.

"Who's Sylar?" Smudge asks.

"I don't know," Sasan says.

The first hints of fear creep up on them. The laughter has gone.

At lunch they venture out to eat again, but something has changed. There seem to be more people recognising them than before, and some of the faces hold not so much fear as open hostility.

They hear the name Sylar again. Someone shoots a beam of light that bursts right through the wall behind them in a near miss too close for comfort.

Sasan and Smudge run for their lives.

They return to the seventeenth floor, where it is safe, and they shut the door to the stairwell and pretend for a while that there is nothing else out there; that the only thing that matters at the moment is the world within these rooms, and them, and no one else to interrupt that.

<div align="center">*</div>

On the ground, Sylar blinked and sat up. Spock went almost instantly to his side, hand in position to do the Vulcan nerve-pinch.

"Get your filthy alien hands off my neck," Sylar snarled.

"No."

"I'm the only chance you've got of getting out of here, and you know it."

"That is unlikely," Spock said. "They are aware of your abilities. You have witnessed first-hand that they are immune to anything you can do. The only people you will be capable of harming is us and our fellow prisoners, as you have demonstrated countless times in order to fulfil your misguided notions of superiority. As such I believe that it is safer this way. You may be assured that I do not enjoy this any more than you do-"

"Oh, shut up, pointy ears."

"I do have a name," Spock reminded him.

"Hi," said Dem, appearing out of nowhere in the middle of the cell and startling them. "Absolute time is running out on Opposite Day, which is already really long but after going through everyone else in this facility I'm kind of rushed and it'll be a wonder if I can finish all the Zs even with all the short cuts and time warps.   So if you want to go home, you'd better hurry before I stop wanting to be nice to people." He opened up a crude portal in the middle of the cell.

They stared.

"All right," Dem said. "Since there are so few of you and we're short on time, I'm doing this the quick way."

Dem went over to the bench where Adam and Leo were sitting. He took out a scary cutting device. "Give me your hand."

"Why?"

"Do you want that tag on you for the rest of your life?"

"..." said Adam, and gave him his hand. Dem snipped off the wrist tag and stuck it into a slot on the portal. The space between shimmered and changed. Adam saw his apartment beyond.

"You're sending us home just like that?" Leo asked.

"It's Opposite Day," Dem said, as though that explained everything. "Ultimately all I want to do is to destroy the multiverse with excessive interdimensional travel, and sending a whole lot of people back to their universes will only hasten the process." He smiled. "Get in the portal, Kaufman."

Adam stared at it.

"And when you're through, see that small device thingy on the other side of the frame? Take it. It's an Interdimensional Travel Device Thingy. ITDT for short. It'll let you teleport to visit your friends here whenever you want. You know, speed up the destruction and all."

"What about Sylar?" Spock asked.

"What *about* him?" Dem asked cheerily, with a huge smile. "You're all friends, aren't you?"

"No," Adam stated.

"Awww," Dem said. "Well, I'm sure you'll all learn to get along in time."

Sylar smiled at them.

"...He'll kill us," Leo said.

"Some optimism would be nice," Dem suggested. "Do you want to get home or not? We don't have all day."

"What about the others?" Adam asked. "Smudge and Tony... they're in another universe."

"Do you know where?" Dem asked.

"I have the coordinates from the database," Spock said.

"Just program them into the thingy and go get them." Dem tossed Leo another copy of the cutter thing and two ITDTs. "Pass those to them. Now get in," he said to Adam.

Adam glanced at Sylar to make sure he was out of hearing range. "Meet at my place once you get back," he murmured at Leo and Spock. Then he stepped into the portal and was home.

Dem pointed at the ITDT. Adam took it, and made final eye contact with the others. Then the portal closed up, and he was alone.

Adam turned the ITDT on. Names appeared; he scrolled through them. Some were unfamiliar. He fiddled around with the device, working out how to edit coordinates under a name or add a new location, trying to ignore the fear that at any moment Sylar might pop up and kill him.

You're home, he thought, but couldn't fully register the fact. It wasn't over yet. He wasn't safe yet...

Leo appeared some distance away.

Adam looked up. "Still alive, huh?"

"Yeah."

"We'll go find Smudge and Tony and send them home and then we've got to work out what to do about Sylar."

"There are others in the list," Leo said, holding up his ITDT. "Should we tell them they're in danger?"

"We can't warn everyone."

Spock appeared.

Adam selected the new entry function on the ITDT. "What are the coordinates?" he asked, and keyed them in as Spock recited them.

"All right," Adam said. "Let's go get them."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

They emerged in a trench street under a dawning red sky that cast the buildings in crimson light.

"SMUDGE!" Adam called out. "TONY!"

"They could be anywhere," Spock said.

"There aren't many places they could be," Leo said, looking down the single street.

"These buildings could merely be the entrance to an underground city," Spock said.

"SMUDGE!" Adam yelled.

Inside one of the buildings, Smudge woke. He cast a glance at Tony, still asleep, and stumbled to his feet.

"Someone called me," he said as one of his hosts sent a curious vibe his way; and then he burst through the door to see the others in the near distance.

"I'M HERE!" he shouted, and they heard, and turned, and rushed over.

"Smudge-"

"Where's Tony?" Adam asked, giving a wary look at the furry alien who had just joined Smudge.

"He's inside, he's resting, we had to swim through this underground tunnel..."

Tony was up by the time the four of them came into the room. He regarded them weakly from the bed.

"You're going home," Leo said, cutting his wrist tag off. "We all are."

"Not yet," Adam said, while Smudge hugged their hosts and thanked them. "We've still got to deal with Sylar-"

"There's no need for Tony to come along," Spock said. "He isn't in any state to-"

"I'm fine," Tony said, but didn't sound it.

"We were in this cave," Smudge rattled on, "and we had to swim out, and I nearly drowned but he got me out and saved me-"

"What's the plan?" Leo asked, snipping off Smudge's wrist tag when Smudge wasn't watching. "We're safe here for now; Sylar doesn't know about this place."

"He could be going down the list and killing everybody else," Adam said.

Leo passed an ITDT each to Smudge and Tony and explained what they were.

"The only way to stop him is to take the device away from him," Spock said. "That way we can ensure that he won't be able to leave his universe, short of finding another method to do so."

"Yeah, but first we've got to find him," Adam said. "He could be anywhere. And we'd need weapons or something."

"Are we going to kill him?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Adam said.

"Why not?" Smudge demanded. "He killed so many people! If we let him go, he'll just kill more..."

"There are criminals in every universe," Spock said. "It is not our place to mete out justice on all of them."

"What planet is this?" Leo wondered off-topically.

Smudge shrugged.

"We could just move," Leo said. "Go home, but find somewhere else to stay for a while where he can't find us. We can't keep running."

"He may not even come after us in the first place," Spock said. "His initial motive is gone. We no longer present a threat to his ego; if he genuinely wants to be completely unique he'll have to take on potential millions of alternate universes to wipe out all variant incarnations of himself, and I doubt he will be up to the task."

"So we go back," Adam said.

"We still need to tell Mike's parents about his death," Leo said. "Give them some closure."

Adam nodded. "What about the others?"

"I'll tell them about Sasan," Smudge said quietly.

"Okay," Adam said. "I'll go with Leo."

"I could come too if-" Spock started.

"Nah, I think seeing an alien might be too much of an added shock for them. Go back to the Enterprise. They need you there."

"What do we do if we see Sylar?" Tony asked.

"Hope you don't," Leo said. "The moment you get back, move; something as simple as moving to another room, and hope that Sylar isn't in the mood for hide-and-seek."

And so they went their separate ways, and left the alien planet.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"How are we going to do this?" Adam asked as he and Leo arrived in Mike's room. The curtains were drawn on the windows through which sunlight dimly peeked; staleness hung in the air over the

unmade bed and scattered belongings. Posters on the wall. They heard the faint sounds of people beyond the door. Hints of conversation.

"We just go out there and say to them, *sorry, your son killed himself*?" Adam continued.

"And then they'll ask, *who the hell are you?* And we'll say..."

"Friends," Adam said. "Sort of."

Leo went over to the desk. Bits of stationery. Books. Papers scribbled with handwriting - their handwriting. Odds and ends. A framed photo of Mike and his mother.

"Just open the door and take it from there," Adam said.

"Okay," Leo agreed.

Neither of them budged, but they noticed the conversation outside come to a sudden halt.

And then the door was opened, and they found themselves faced with gaping people.

"...Hi," Leo said, trying to break the awkward silence.

"Sorry," Adam said. "Your son killed himself."

"*Who the hell are you?*" demanded some guy who looked like he could have been Mike's father.

"Friends," Leo said nervously.

"Sort of," Adam added.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Sasan's home.

Smudge stood for a moment in silence, taking it in. The quietness. The sense that something had been missing here for a while.

He sat down on the bed, fingers clutching the bedspread. He took a breath.

"Sas..."

Smudge got no reply. He got up, went over to the closet and opened it; fingering Sasan's clothes, taking in their smell, feeling like a bit of a creep, and stopping that.

He looked towards the closed door.

Smudge went over and opened it slightly. He peeked out.

He heard agitated conversation in a language he did not understand; saw plush hallways that looked as though they belonged to a large house.

This could have been his home, too, if only...

A woman came around the end of the corridor and Smudge could tell by the sudden shock on her face that she had seen him.

He wanted to shut the door, go back in the room, teleport away... but found himself paralysed where he stood, not daring to move as she came towards him with increasing speed, shouting something - he heard more hurried footsteps in response - and then she threw the door open and Smudge stumbled back in fear as she faced him down with a mixture of anger, love and confusion-

"*Where's my son?*" she cried. "Who are you? What have you done with Sasan-"

Other people rushed into the room. Smudge backed away to the bed, overwhelmed by the scrutiny of the group of strangers...

"He... Sasan died," Smudge said, forcing back tears amidst the uproar that met his words. "He was killed... I was there..."

"Who are you?" another woman asked, gazing upon the younger, scruffier, bisexual version of her best friend.

"...I'm Smudge."

"*Why would anyone kill Sasan?*" his mother demanded, close to hysterics.

Smudge blinked back tears. "I..."

Then the second woman hugged him, and Smudge broke down and cried.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

"Hello, Quinto."

Zach dropped the fughat in shock. That voice...

Slowly, he turned around. Sylar was casually leaning against the doorway of his room, propped up on one leg. He raised his hand and telekinetically grabbed the fughat off the floor.

Sylar raised an eyebrow. "Were you seriously going to put this on your head?" he asked, with more than a touch of disgust.

"Sylar." It came out in a whisper.

"Yep." Sylar tossed the fughat onto the bed. "Hi."

"How... I told them to ban you..."

"Adam Kaufman seemed to be of the impression that I could help them escape- Hey, you have a doggie!"

Zach heard Noah growl. "Leave him alone," he said quickly.

Sylar turned back around and grinned.

"What... are you going to kill me now?" Zach asked.

Sylar shrugged. "I'll think about it."

"What did you do with the others? Adam and-"

Sylar lowered his leg from the doorframe and sauntered over. "Some of them were in my way. Let's just say they no longer are."

"You killed them."

"If you want to put it that way."

Noah had followed him in, still growling.

"It shouldn't matter," Sylar continued. "They're not real. Neither am I."

He smiled and flicked two fingers. Zach flew back and slammed against a wall, hyperventilating, his glasses knocked askew.

Noah barked and lunged at Sylar; Sylar twitched his fingers and sent him through the air to join his master, yelping.

"You're pathetic," Sylar said, his hand still raised, keeping them there.

"I made you," Zach said desperately.

Sylar laughed. He picked up the fughat and tossed it at him. It hit Zach's leg, bounced off, and landed on the floor.

"...That doesn't mean I need to worship you," Sylar said.

He released his hold and walked out. They fell off the wall.

Smudge was outside in the living room, troubled from the conversation he had heard, still red-eyed from crying, and he stared numbly at Sylar.

"Why are you here?" Sylar asked. "To see him?" He smirked. "You're an embarrassment to him, Smudge. Probably just some job he had to settle for just so he could afford lunch."

Smudge blinked.

"He doesn't love you, Smudge," Sylar said casually, taking out his ITDT and scrolling through the names. "No one does."

And Smudge opened his mouth to retaliate and say that, no, Sasan loved him, he'd *said* so, in a dream... but then Sylar was gone, and he was alone in the living room.

The door opened. Zach stumbled out, still winded, and their eyes met.

"...Smudge?"

A pang of pain hit his heart. Zach said his name the same way Sasan used to.

Smudge trembled. He wanted to do something, say something; wanted to run towards him or away from him; didn't want to have to go through this...

He stepped back. Zach didn't make a further move.

He doesn't love you.

Smudge swallowed. He stuck his hand back in his pocket, feeling for the ITDT... and his fingers closed around the flash drive in there.

Smudge hesitated. Then he pulled it out, and put it down on the kitchen counter. He saw Zach's eyes go towards it.

And then Smudge activated the ITDT, and he went home.

<p align="center">*</p>

"Hey, pointy ears."

Spock looked up to see Sylar suddenly standing in his room. Reflexes kicked in; his hand flew to his communicator lying on the desk. "Spock to bridge. Requesting secur-"

Sylar slammed him against the wall, holding the telekinetic grip on Spock's neck as he approached. He took the communicator from his hand, not breaking eye contact: "Belay that order. I'm fine."

Spock kicked him. Sylar dropped the communicator and fell back, taken by surprise, as Spock dropped off the wall and did a roll over to where his phaser was sitting on a shelf. He grabbed it. Sylar overturned the table on him.

Spock ducked, raising his arms to protect his head as Sylar sent his fallen possessions flying at him, and fired off a shot - missed. He grabbed his communicator off the floor. "Requesting urgent security at my quarters-"

A book hit him in the neck. Spock staggered back, winded, and fired again as Sylar sent an entire shelf down on him. It landed on his leg, trapping him. Spock yelled in pain and struggled to pull his leg free-

He fired the phaser again. It hit, this time, but Sylar only blinked and looked down at the wound, which was already starting to heal, and telekinetically snatched the phaser out of Spock's hand.

"What would you gain from killing me?" Spock asked quickly.

"Who said I wanted to kill you?" Sylar asked, going closer. "I acted only in self-defence."

"You were intruding on my private sp-"

"Hey, *Star Trek* is awesome. I just wanted to check out the Enterprise, but you *had* to call sec- Oh look, there they are," Sylar commented, as several redshirts with phasers burst into the room and gaped at them.

"Redshirts," Sylar remarked. "How cute."

They pointed phasers at Sylar.

"RAISE YOUR HANDS AND STEP AWAY!" one particularly-enthusiastic redshirt yelled.

Sylar tilted his head. He raised his hands, slowly, and in one swift motion sliced all their necks open-

Leg free, Spock lunged at Sylar, knocking him over.

"Get off me!"

Spock shoved him to the floor, grabbing on tight so as not to allow Sylar to telekinetically push him away.

Sylar glared at him.

"*Live long and prosper*," Spock said, with all the sarcasm that his human side could muster, and administered the Vulcan nerve-pinch.

Shouts in the corridor, presumably over the slaughtered redshirts.

Spock rolled off the unconscious Sylar and got back to his feet, limping slightly and wincing as he surveyed the damage done to his quarters.

Kirk clambered over three dead redshirts and came into the room.

"Spock-"

"Captain."

"You just got back? What happened here?"

Spock nodded towards Sylar. "My quarters were invaded," he stated. "He claimed a pretext of tourism but based on our previous encounters I believe my initial reaction of self-defence was not ungrounded."

"Uh-huh," Kirk said, staring at Sylar. He prodded him with his shoe. "Is he dead?"

"He is merely unconscious for the time being," Spock said.

"Looks like you," Kirk muttered.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Any resemblance between us is purely phenotypical," he said. "He is a serial killer who has murdered dozens of-"

McCoy stumbled in, tripping over a redshirt but maintaining his balance. He regarded Spock with open frustration. "Back for five minutes and the Vulcan's already got a pile up in the doorway," he muttered, then squinted. "What's up with your leg?"

"The shelf landed on it," Spock explained.

McCoy looked at Sylar on the floor. "...My God, there are two of them."

"I can assure you he's nothing like me," Spock said.

"And you knock him out? We could have been friends!"

Kirk patted him on the shoulder. "He's a serial killer, Bones."

"Good. I hate cereal."

Spock regained his earlier look of deep confusion and vague torment. He was still puzzling over how Adam could get any money if they were all dead, and this was not helping.

*

Spock left Sylar in his apartment with a knife through the back of his head and took the ITDT from him.

He scrolled through the names on his own device, and dropped by to tell Leo the news.

"Sylar won't be troubling us for a while more," he reported.

"What happened?" Leo asked. Spock told him.

"Oh," Leo said. "Do the others know?"

"Not yet. I am on my way to inform them."

Leo nodded. A thought struck him. "Hey... um."

Spock waited.

"Let's get together again, a week from now," Leo suggested. "Just to see if everyone's all right. My place. Next week, this time. Could you let them know?"

"I will."

"Thanks."

Spock left to spread the news.

*

Adam sat at his desk after Spock's departure and scrolled through the names on his ITDT, hovering over each unfamiliar one. Other people, other worlds. He wondered what they were like.

Perhaps one day...

They could go together. The five of them. Him, Leo, Spock, Smudge and Tony. Perhaps they'd find new fellow travellers along the way. Home was strangely bland now; the thought of returning to work filled him with mind-numbing boredom.

He'd wanted to be home for so long, but now that he was, and knew he could get back whenever he wanted, some part of him wanted adventure. To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new universes...

To boldly go where no one had gone before.

Adam gave a rare smile, and he tucked the ITDT securely into his pocket.

One day.

THE END

one day i will understand technology, zach thought, waiting for his computer to boot up as he sat on his couch. he picked up the flash drive that smudge had left behind, and stared at it.

it was unmarked. innocuous. mysterious. not very flashy.

he wondered if all that had really happened. if smudge had been there. or sylar. or if they were merely people he had met in a half remembered dream. ephemeral constructs of his imagination.

boot-up complete. zach stuck the flash drive into the usb socket and waited.

a window popped up with a listing of the files in it. one png image file. one video.

he opened the image file.

it was a crude drawing of fig newtons.

"..." zach said; and then he saw the artist's signature. *sasan*.

a funny feeling rose in him.

the video...

a noise. zach jumped in his seat out of his lowercase reverie, and turned.

"Hi," Smudge said cautiously, not quite daring to meet his gaze.

"Smudge..."

For a moment, they just looked at each other. Creator and creation.

Smudge went forward with hesitant steps. Zach didn't budge.

He's not Sasan, Smudge told himself, but he couldn't shake the feeling or the choked, desperate longing. Zach was all of them. All of them, and none of them...

Smudge looked at the screen.

"We made a video," he said. "We thought that someone would see it and get us out..."

Zach turned back to the computer screen. "This one?" he asked, clicking on the file to open it.

"Yeah," Smudge said, and slid nervously onto the couch next to him. His gaze slipped up to Zach's face and stayed there.

He remembered a similar face on a similar couch.

He's not Sasan, he's not Sasan, he's not Sasan...

But then the video started, and grabbed all of Zach's tense concentration; and for the moment...

...For the moment, Smudge could pretend.

<div align="center">###</div>

the story continues in *Plane Between*.