

# the not-particularly-excellent ADVENTURES OF THE KEANU-SPAWN

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a multi-fandom fan fiction novel  
by Anakin McFly

Stand-alone sequel to "Real World". Second in the planned Kenselton Trilogy.

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*The Matrix, Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, Speed, Hardball, Constantine, The Watcher, Something's Gotta Give, "The Tracey Ullman Show: Two Lost Souls", The Lake House, Under the Influence, Feeling Minnesota, A Walk in the Clouds, Point Break, The Replacements, Thumbsucker, Dream to Believe, River's Edge, Bram Stoker's Dracula, Permanent Record, Chain Reaction, The Gift, "Hamlet", My Own Private Idaho, The Devil's Advocate, Much Ado About Nothing, Sweet November, A Scanner Darkly, One Step Away, Little Buddha, Life Under Water, Parenthood, Providence, Street Kings, Freaked, I Love You to Death, The Prince of Pennsylvania, The Brotherhood of Justice, The Night Before, Tune in Tomorrow..., The Last Time I Committed Suicide, Young Again, Youngblood and Babes in Toyland.*

And a few others touched on in passing.

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prologue

t a k e n

---

1st April 2004  
The Real World

The doorbell rang in Room 439 of Kenselton Hotel.

"Keith?"

Two loud thumps on the door.

"Keith, you there?"

Another ring of the doorbell sounded through the deserted room. A mild curse, a final thump on the door, and then a gradual fading of footsteps padding away down the corridor.

Rooms 436 and 437 were empty. They weren't supposed to have been empty, thought Adwin Fong, as he headed towards the last place his brother was likely to be.

The light in the control room was on, spilling through the gap under its door.

*There you are*, Adwin thought, and picked up his pace. He reached the door, swung it open, and let himself in amongst the computers and machine blocks. "Did you kn-" he started, but his words caught at the sight of an old man sitting on Keith's desk and gazing serenely at him.

"Hello there!" the old man said with a sudden cheery smile. "What brings you here, brother of Keith?"

Adwin blinked. "...Who are you? Where's Keith?"

The cheery smile didn't fade. "Keith? Oh, he's dead."

Adwin's mouth fell open.

"As for me," the visitor continued without missing a beat, "you can call m-"

"What?" Adwin interrupted. "What... dead? What... what d'you mean... how did... when..."

"When? Oh, about twenty-five years ago," the old man said pleasantly. "As I was saying, you can call me Dem. D-E-M. Some people call me the Mysterious Old Man, but personally I find that a little tedious to say."

Adwin realised that his mouth was still open, and saw no reason to close it.

"Anyway," Dem said, springing lightly to his feet, "back to business now. The machine is still-"

"But..."

"I would prefer if you do not interrupt, Adwin. I don't like that very much. Where was I? Oh yes. The machine is still in full working order. I believe there was a slight problem with dimensional incompatibility manifesting itself after several days, but as you know, the subjects weren't in this world long enough to experience that. No matter, anyhow. We can always fix that with the new machine."

"The *new*-"

"I said, *don't interrupt*. With the new machine, there won't be any more fiddly little problems with dimensional incompatibility. You'll be able to use the machine as it was meant to be used – large-scale

inter-dimensional transportation. Of course, we don't need to do anything dangerous. No dinosaurs and things like that. Let's keep it simple, and keep to what we know works: fictional characters."

"What?"

"They're human, most of them, which means that they will be easy to control. They won't cause much of a disruption to normal life on this planet of yours. Consider the facts for a moment, Adwin. The book and movie industry make billions of dollars a year. Take *Harry Potter*, for example. You know the size of the crowds that gather outside bookshops hours before a new book is released? They're huge. Huge crowds of rabid, enthusiastic fans desperate to know what happens next in the adventures of Harry and friends."

"Yeah, but what's that got-"

Dem sighed. "How many times do I have to tell you to shut up? Now, how much do you think those fans would pay to meet Harry and friends? Not the actors, but the actual characters, straight out of the books, fresh from Hogwarts, in all their magical glory?"

Adwin decided that Dem probably didn't want answers to his rhetorical questions.

"Ever wanted to be rich, Adwin?" Dem asked with a smile filled with generosity and benevolence and just the slightest hint of a hidden agenda. "Ever wanted to be powerful?"

And Adwin decided that, yes, that sounded pretty good to him.

\*\*

*The new Kenselton Hotel was built by hands not of this world. They came via the machine, all of them, hundreds of skilled workers whose only aim in life was to build the facility. Engineers, architects, crane-drivers, builders. They were efficient, they were fast, they did their work well, and they asked no questions.*

*Kenselton Hotel stands not on land. It hangs in a void outside the space-time continuum, in an isolated bubble of hyperspace with nothing above and nothing below. Teleportation is the only way in, and the only way out. Or so they claim. No one was really paying attention when the architect pointed out how regulations required all buildings to have fire exits, even though that is exactly the kind of thing that you should really pay attention to when planning a maximum security hotel.*

*The hotel itself is staffed by beings from other universes, each one perfectly suited for their job, each one working for free, each one needing no sustenance such as food and water. Security guards, receptionists, cooks – the members of each type are identical in body and mind. It contributes to the organisation of the facility. Organisation is of utmost importance. It's neater that way.*

*On the day when Kenseilton Hotel goes into operation, there are ten residential blocks, each with too many floors and stemming from a central area that holds a library, gaming arcade, cafeteria, hospital, bar and sports facilities, among others. The construction workers are always building new blocks. The space is needed. The multiverse is infinite.*

*Their method of categorising and labelling the residents was stolen straight off the Internet Movie Database, but they figured that no one would notice anyway.*

*There are no windows anywhere.*

*And even if there were windows, there would be nothing to see.*

\*\*

Two months before *The Matrix Reloaded*  
Inside the Matrix

The slightest glint of suspicion flickered on the Architect's face. "You're early."

"I need to be."

The Architect took some time to ponder this reply.

"Your behaviour these past few months has been interesting, Neo," he said. "You seem to have suddenly obtained an ability to avoid danger, even in cases when such danger should have been unavoidable. It is almost as if you know beforehand what is going to happen. It is almost as if you know the future."

Neo remained silent, trying not to think too much about the screenplays for *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* stashed away in his cabin on the Nebuchadnezzar.

"The One has many powers," the Architect continued. "Some degree of precognition among them. But never to this extent. Even the Oracle cannot see what lies ahead with such clarity."

"Maybe I just get lucky," Neo said.

The Architect arched a white eyebrow at him.

"Let's say I can predict the future," Neo said. "I know what I'm supposed to be here for. I know that you were going to tell me that this is the sixth cycle of the Matrix, and that I'm the sixth anomaly. I know that I have to make a choice. My predecessors all chose to go through that door to the Source, which would result in the destruction of Zion and its eventual rebuilding. The Matrix will restart itself all over again, and the cycle will repeat itself. Am I right so far?"

The Architect sat back in his chair. "Yes. Continue."

"But I also know that the program Smith has gone out of control. If he is not stopped, he will spread like a virus throughout the Matrix, leading to the eventual downfall of the system. And you wouldn't want that to happen."

"Interesting," the Architect commented after short hesitation. "Very interesting."

Neo opened his mouth to continue, when a wave of nausea made him close his mouth again. He swallowed; but a familiar tingling sensation had started making its way up his limbs.

*Oh no*, Neo thought as he recognised the experience of inter-dimensional travel. *Not again*.

Then in a sudden explosion of feeling, the tingling turned into a searing pain that shot through him; ripping his mind out of the Matrix and his body out of his universe into blackness, forcing him through a temporary inter-universe void filled with nothing but the scream echoing in his mind.

Several universes away, a young teenager named Ted Logan jolted out of his sleep. He stared unblinking into the darkness of his room, his pulse racing. There was something familiar about the sudden mental intrusion he had felt. A connection he had not sensed since...

"Neo?" he whispered, but nobody heard him.

And then he too was grabbed out of his world.

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## THE NOT-PARTICULARY-EXCELLENT ADVENTURES OF THE KEANU-SPAWN

*"Reality is the #1 cause of insanity among those who are in contact with it."*

- Anonymous



chapter one

arrival

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Kenselton Hotel  
The Real World

Light.

Warm light, coming from somewhere above him, reflecting dully off the smooth floor.

Lying on his side, his gaze idly traced the line where the wall met the floor before his consciousness fully returned and it occurred to him that he had better get up; and his hands moved to push him into a sitting position that allowed Neo to get a fuller view of where he had landed.

He was in a small rectangular room, about two-and-a-half by two metres in size. Soft elevator music played from hidden speakers. The room was bare; or at least it almost was, for in front of him on the wooden door was stuck a laminated paper notice.

Something scratched against his left wrist and he pulled up his sleeve to reveal a plastic tag looped around it. On the tag was a barcode and serial number: 206/999/AND.

Neo suddenly had a bad feeling about this. He pulled his sleeve back down and got to his feet to read the notice on the door.

'WELCOME TO KENSELTON HOTEL,' the heading read. And above it to its right: BLK-F/ENG/6

'Congratulations,' the main message started. *'You have been deemed significant enough to be brought into this universe, hereafter referred to as the real world. Before proceeding any further, let's go over the basics:*

- 1) *You are fictional. In the real world, anyway, which is really the only world that matters.*
- 2) *Your cooperation in all areas is very much appreciated. Failure to cooperate will result in undesirable consequences for you. We know more about you than you can possibly imagine, and will not hesitate to use that information against you if and when necessary. Alternatively we are bluffing. But then again we might not be. Haha.*
- 3) *Violence against members of the staff is not encouraged. We would prefer to keep as many of you alive as possible.*
- 4) *There is no way out, so don't even try.*

- The Staff of Kenselton Hotel

*P.S. The resident cooks have requested that you do not insult the food.'*

There was no doorknob or handle on the door, but it slid smoothly aside when Neo touched it. He stepped out into a lobby of sorts; the room he had emerged from was the farthest right of six identical cubicles lined up on one side of it. To his far left, a corridor ran perpendicular to the line of cubicles,

past the walls into the distance. Everything smelt new. Several metres before him, a standard-issue receptionist sat calmly in a covered booth and looked up as Neo approached.

"Fourth floor," she said with clinical precision, sliding an A5 sheet of paper out from her side of the desk, through the gap between the surface of the desk and the transparent bullet-proof plastic walls of the booth.

"Pick your own room. Mealtimes are stated here, and they are held at the cafeteria located on the second floor of the central block. This is the map if you have trouble locating anything. The lifts and stairs are down that way," – she pointed ahead down the corridor – "but you're wanted at room F62-03 first. Go up the corridor, second door to your left."

Neo picked up the sheet of paper. "What's going on here?"

"It's not my job to answer questions. Room F62-03. He's waiting."

\*\*

"Hi, Neo!" Adwin greeted in Room F62-03. "Remember me?"

Neo didn't at first. A few years had passed for Adwin; he was no longer the pathetically annoying twenty-something guy whom Neo had met only briefly three months ago. Adwin had since grown into a pathetically annoying thirty-something guy. But the family resemblance was there – he was visibly Keith's brother.

"Thought you could run away, didja?" Adwin continued. "Not this time. This time, no one knows you're here. Doc Brown and his flying time machine aren't going to come and rescue you." Adwin grinned. "That's what you get for killing my brother."

This was news to Neo. "Keith's dead?"

Adwin scowled. "Don't play games with me."

Neo decided to leave the matter. "So what is this place?" he asked instead.

"Oh, this, yeah. This would be the new Kenselton Hotel. It's a hyperspatial underground complex with ten blocks, soon to be stocked with several thousand or more fictional characters for the general public to meet, have sex with, or kill. They have to pay, of course. You're one of the first here. Congratulations."

"Several thousand?"

Adwin grinned. "Yep. Enjoy your stay. Don't worry; you'll have food to eat and water to drink and a bed to sleep in, unless they run out of beds. You probably won't die. There are a fair amount of Keanu-haters out there with murderous tendencies, but I'll just direct 'em to one of the other guys when we get them here. I'll let you live, because that way you get to suffer for a longer time and watch as everyone dies around you." Adwin smiled brightly.

"Doctor Brown is going to find out," Neo said. "You can't bring thousands of people over without causing some kind of space-time disruption-"

"Do you honestly think that that old guy has nothing better to do than to monitor the space-time continuum? He only did it the last time because he had an experiment going on, and then because his best friend got zapped over here and he needed to go rescue him. It's not the case anymore. I bet," Adwin said, "that he's happily enjoying his life right now. Besides, all the 'disruptions' have been spaced out over a large spatial-temporal area of the multiverse. Nothing concentrated. Kinda hard to track down. You're on your own this time, Mr. Anderson. Face it."

Adwin leant back contentedly in his chair. "You may go," he added. "Fourth floor. I think your friend should be there by now."

"What friend?"

"Fourth floor. Lifts are that way."

\*\*

The lift opened on the fourth floor with a soft *ding*. The lift lobby had only one exit, so Neo went through that into a stairwell with another door at right angles to him on his right; he went through that as well and emerged in the fourth floor corridor of Block F.

All was quiet, the only sound that of air circulating through vents and Neo's muted footsteps down the fluorescent-lit passageway. Again everything was new: the carpet, the walls, the neat rows of doors on both sides-

A sudden noise startled him as a door opened to his left. Then he recognised the teenager that stepped out, and blinked in surprise.

"...Ted?"

A sudden grin. "Neo!"

"What are you doing h-"

Ted grabbed him in a hug, cutting him off. "I missed you, dude," he said.

The teen pulled away with a smile and pointed at the room he had come out from. "That one's the biggest, and it's got a bathroom. Let's take it."

"How long have you been here?" Neo asked.

Ted shrugged. "About five minutes."

"What did they say to you when you got here?"

Another shrug. "This receptionist babe said to go to the fourth floor, so I went to the fourth floor and then you found me." A pause. "She was kinda cute." Another pause, then a more suspicious tone: "And I think she was a robot."

Ted frowned slightly, then dropped the matter with a shrug, moving past Neo towards the next room. "Hey, check out th-"

"Ted. Did she say anything else?"

"Huh? Oh. Nah... no, wait. Yeah. There was this notice thing on the door with lots of words on it. Something about how there's no escape, or something heinous like that..."

Ted looked as if some of this had finally sunk in. "What are they going to do with us, dude?"

Neo was silent. He pushed open the door nearest to him. Bunk beds on the left, closet on the right, table and chair against the opposite wall. He looked down at the rows of similar doors, and the rhetorical question escaped him in quiet despair:

*"How many of us are there?"*

\*\*

Warm light flickered on when Neo flicked the light switch in the common room, which upon opening the door they had seen was much larger than the other rooms. A small round table a little way in front of them, chairs around it; a counter, coffee machine, water cooler, sink, stove, cupboards soon discovered to be stocked with utensils and food of the snack variety; a sofa, television set, an array of random DVD movies in an open cardboard box, and all over were the shelves – filled with strange things like white tablecloths and not so strange things like books. And boxes... lots of boxes, holding who knew what. Another bathroom sat at the corner furthest from the entrance.

Neo shook his head. "What is this place?" he asked, despite having already heard quite a satisfactory answer from Adwin.

*"... There are a fair amount of Keanu-haters out there with murderous tendencies, but I'll just direct 'em to one of the other guys when we get them here..."*

This floor could hold at least twenty, perhaps thirty, people.

*"... watch as everyone dies around you..."*



Neo sank down on the sofa.

He looked stressed.

Ted flopped down next to him. He looked at Neo.

Neo continued looking stressed and staring at his shoes.

Then some idiot kicked open the door.

They turned at the noise, only to see a gun suddenly swivel to point in their general direction, though far enough away that a shot might possibly miss.

Jack Traven's eyes briefly widened as recognition hit, his grasp on his gun slipping for half a second; then his SWAT training kicked in, and he tightened his grip, grit his teeth, and yelled:

*"Who are you?"* he demanded.

Neo slowly got off the sofa. Ted followed after, raising his arms in surrender, because that seemed to be the logical reaction to someone pointing a gun at you.

Jack took half a step back.

"We're unarmed," Neo said.

*"Answer the question!"*

Neo winced at the raised volume. "I'm Neo. He's Ted."

This information was not helping Jack at all. He moved closer, hoping that the gun looked more intimidating in close quarters.

"What do you want with me?"

"You could put that gun away-"

The soft click of the door being opened the proper way drew their attention. Conor O'Neill came in, saw the three of them, looked stunned, and then wondered why there was a gun pointed at him. He looked at the gun. He looked at Jack, and quickly raised his hands in surrender because that's the logical reaction to someone pointing a gun at you.

*"Where do you people come from?"* Jack shouted.

"Pizza," Conor volunteered, hoping for some sympathy for his interrupted dinner.

Neo stepped around the side of the sofa and spread his arms. "Look, no weapons."

The gun rapidly ditched Conor as target and turned back to point at Neo.

Neo concluded that Officer Traven was a trigger-happy idiot. "We have no reason to hurt you if you put your gun away," he said. "We're not the ones who brought you here. We don't know much more than you do."

Bloodcurdling screams erupted from somewhere a couple of floors up, followed by muted yelling and lots of thuds. Jack glanced briefly at the ceiling.

"We're all in this together, dude," Ted offered.

Jack considered this. Slowly, he lowered his gun and replaced it in its holster, ready to yank it out again if Neo or someone made any sudden moves.

Conor dropped his arms. He glanced around, then moved a little closer to the other three.

"Same actor?" he asked.

"Yeah," Neo confirmed.

Conor nodded. "Thought so." He looked at Jack, and held out his left hand. "Conor O'Neill."

Jack looked at him in disbelief. He felt first entitled to at least one nervous breakdown or a psychotic yelling spree or-

Conor's hand was still extended.

Jack swallowed, and took it in a brief handshake.

"Jack Traven."

\*\*

Their hands were a perfect fit. They both felt it – the distinct weird of two left hands meeting itself, the tactile recognition of same skin, fingers, grasp; they broke off the handshake and lapsed into awkward silence.

Conor brushed his left hand with his right; half-folded his arms, unfolded them, stuck his hand into his pocket. Jack was staring at him with an uncomfortable wariness. Conor looked away, to the floor, suddenly hit with the contradicting sensations of being the only one in the room and not really being there himself. He backed against the sofa, felt its comforting presence against his back and palm of his right hand that told him that, for the moment at least, he still existed and was probably not an illusion. He took a deep breath. Still alive. Still real. Still breathing.

"Okay," he said, in a half-mutter mostly for his own benefit. "Okay."

Conor gripped at the sofa, the soft leather folding under his fingers, and finally deigned to look up again, his eyes not quite focusing. "Um. Uh... so... uh, what do you... what do you know about this place?" he asked Neo.

"It's a hotel," Neo said after several seconds of hesitation.

Conor raised an eyebrow.

"They're bringing people over," Neo continued, encouraged by the visual gratitude. "People from different universes. Who are fictional here, in this one."

"Why?" Jack asked.

Neo looked uncomfortable. He didn't like being stared at and asked questions. He glanced at Ted, hoping for inspiration. Ted looked back at him in a most unhelpful way. "Money," Neo said finally. "Sex. Murder. Just... yeah. Things like that. This... guy up on the top floor just now told me-"

"What guy?" Conor asked.

"His name's Adwin. He's the... brother of the one who invented the machine that brought us here."

"You know him?"

Neo nodded. "We've been here before." He gestured briefly at Ted, who appeared to be reluctantly falling asleep on the sofa.

Conor narrowed his eyes at Neo. "You've been here before," he repeated.

"-Not here, exactly," Neo said, really wishing that everyone would stop staring at him because it was making him nervous and less capable of constructing coherent sentences. "This universe. But, uh, we got out, in a... time machine that could travel to alternate universes-"

"You've been here before?" Jack interrupted. "Why?"

"I think we were one of the first experiments. To make sure the machine worked. And then we got rescued, and it probably pissed them off a little so they got us back."

"How did you get rescued?" Conor asked.

"By a friend of one of the others who got taken. He was a scientist. We managed to e-mail him, he traced it to this universe, and came to get us."

"Could you do that again?" Conor asked.

"I don't know," Neo said. "I don't even know where we are. The last time we managed to get out of the place, and we had a specific address. But here... I haven't even seen a single window. We could be anywhere."

And Neo went on and told them everything else he knew; he gave them the condensed version of the events that had transpired the previous time he and Ted met; he told them about Keanu Reeves ("How'd you spell that?" Conor asked; Neo obliged with the spelling, whereupon Conor spent several seconds finding new creative ways of getting the pronunciation wrong); he told them what Adwin had just told him about Kenselton Hotel, leaving out the bit about everyone dying because that sort of thing wasn't nice to hear.

"So that's the guy running this thing?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so. It's too big for just one person. He's the one behind the idea, but I think that's it."

"I want to meet him."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

Neo started moving; they followed him out into the corridor, Conor with his hands in his pockets trying not to look at anyone. Neo held the stairwell door open and let the others pass through first, then into the lift lobby, the lift just a few floors away. They waited in silence, then created a momentary human traffic jam when the lift arrived and they tried to enter at the same time; into the lift car, doors shut, 62nd floor.

There was no one in room F62-03.

"You should have got him when you had the chance," Jack said.

"And then what?" Neo asked, as they trudged down the empty corridor of the 62nd floor.

"He's around somewhere," Conor said. "He's gotta be. If not it means there's a way out-"

A guard named Harold the Straight materialised in the teleportation bay on their left and narrowed his eyes at them. "*What* are the four of you *doing* here?" he asked.

Conor made a sudden lunge forward to grab Harold the Straight, only to be thrown back against the wall yelling in pain as the guard's electric force field did its duty.

"Whoa," Ted breathed. Harold the Straight looked dispassionately at him, then back at Conor. "Rule number 3," he quoted. "Violence against members of the staff is not encouraged. We would prefer to keep as many of you alive as possible."

"What do you want with us?" Jack shouted.

"It doesn't matter," Harold the Straight said. "You're not getting out of here, and that's all you really need to know. Get back to your floor."

Neo stole a peek into the teleportation bay, but it was just an empty capsule. He saw no electronics anywhere that could be fiddled with.

"Why?" Jack asked.

"You're *disrupting* the peace and order," Harold the Straight replied.

Part of the strict organisation of Kenselton Hotel involved ensuring that people went where they were told to go, which is why arrivals were staggered. If a character arrived alone and was met with nothing but a possibly-robot receptionist behind a bullet-proof, lightsaber-proof, Terminator-proof partition who told him or her nothing except to go to a certain floor, chances are highly in favour of the character going to said floor, if nothing else for the simple reason that it might hold some answers.

However, if there happened to be other people around at the time, there would be a markedly lower incentive to be obedient, and a markedly higher incentive to run around the hotel planning gang attacks and disrupting the peace.

"What happens if we *don't* go back, huh?" Conor pressed on.

"If you *don't* go back, you'll be disrupting the peace and order," Harold the Straight said. "Oh *no*. We can't have *that*."

"Why not, dude?" Ted asked.

Harold the Straight smiled. The air around them crackled with a sudden stinging burst of electricity that vanished after a second.

They got the hint.

"Let's get out of here," Neo muttered.

"Enjoy these few days!" Harold the Straight called sadistically after them as they left. He giggled. "After this, Kenselton Hotel goes public, and *then* the fun will begin!"

\*\*

Back in the common room.

Conor sat at the table fitfully tapping his fingers on it and staring off into space. Ted was on the sofa, on the verge of falling asleep but not wanting to leave for the beds next door because that would mean missing out on whatever interesting thing happened in here. Neo sat on the edge of the sofa watching Jack, who was pacing about and looking angry.

"There has to be a way out," Jack said, shaking his head, though even to him the prospect of searching eleven blocks – ten of which had over sixty floors – for an exit was not a particularly appealing prospect. "They can't do this to us."

Conor gave up on the tapping and did a brief and messy search through the cupboards near him. He discovered a bar of chocolate, pocketed it, then found a packet of potato chips, tore it open, and munched on its contents as he kicked the cupboard door shut against another packet of potato chips that had fallen in the way.

"Maybe there is a way out," Conor said after swallowing a mouthful of chewed-up chips. "Just because they say there isn't one doesn't mean there isn't."

He dug the map he'd been given out of his pocket and studied it as he ate. Eleven blocks. The main one held lots of fun places, as well as a hospital for when the fun places became not so fun. It also had a bar, where people could then go to to make things fun again.

The bar sounded like a fun place to be.

"This place has a *bar*," Conor said, sounding more than a little incredulous and just a little happy.

Aside from the bar, it was another sign of how considerate they were that Kenselton Hotel made efforts to ensure that its time and that of the folks they zapped over were roughly in sync – give or take a few hours – to minimise jetlag.

Ted had fallen asleep. His head dropped against the back of Neo's shoulder. Neo reached a hand behind him and pushed it back.

Ted's head dropped down again, supported by nothing but his neck. Neo grimaced. He got off the edge of the sofa and went to shift Ted into a position that would be less painful for The One. Ted made vague noises. His left arm slid off the sofa and dangled there as he lay.

Neo looked at him. He suddenly felt tired.

"Good night," he said, walking past Jack and Conor ("You're going to sleep?" Jack asked in disbelief), and he left the room for the one next to it, which had beds and a bathroom and a... computer.

Neo suddenly felt not-tired.

\*\*

Jack Traven slept on the floor of the common room that night. He did not intend to get into one of the beds, because that would mean that he was going along with the sadistic little games of whoever ran this place. The last thing he wanted was to give them that satisfaction.

Conor got a bed.

No one at Kenselton Facility noticed either way. There were thousands of surveillance cameras all over the hotel, and hiring staff to watch all of them would just be a waste of money. Besides, most of them just ended up playing Minesweeper or Spider Solitaire or writing fan fiction when they were supposed to be working.

Conor shut the door to his room and just stood there for a moment with his hand against it, looking at it in the dim light that seeped through from the corridor.

He swallowed, shook his head, then left the door and pulled off his jacket. He chucked it over the chair and climbed onto the bottom bunk bed. Sheets, pillow, blanket. He lay there staring out into the rest of the room. Voluntary imprisonment, he thought. What was he doing here; why wasn't he out there trying to get *out*...

He rolled over fitfully in his bed. Weariness crept up on him and blurred thoughts of escape.

He fell asleep shortly after and dreamt of corridors that had no end, running up and down through rooms and stairwells, past endless doors and windowless walls until he woke up in a claustrophobic sweat; only to drift back to sleep once more, and forget.



chapter two

first hours

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Next morning  
62nd Floor. Arrival Lobby, Block F, Kenselton Hotel

Regaining consciousness and standing up, John Constantine glared at the notice on the door.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said.

\*\*

The possibly-robot receptionist told him to go to the fourth floor.

Nobody tells John Constantine where to go.

\*\*

"Let me out of here," John said to Harold the Straight.

"Can't do that," said Harold the Straight.

"Who brought me here? *How* did I get here?"

Harold the Straight shrugged. "The same way *all* of us did. Get moving. You're *supposed* to be on the *fourth* floor."

John Constantine does not like being told where to go.

But John Constantine does not like electric shocks either.

\*\*

Jack woke up, realised that it hadn't been a dream, and let out a muttered curse. He got off the floor. He ached all over, because that's what you get for sleeping on the floor. He was the only one in the room; Ted had been the first up, and his whereabouts were soon discovered as Jack got out into the corridor and saw the teen backed against the wall and staring nervously up the barrel of a very nice flamethrower.

The last thing John Constantine wants upon being forced to go where people tell him to is to find some overly-happy specimen of a teenager who looks almost exactly like him cheerfully greeting him and calling him 'dude'. From his experience, such creatures were probably evil minions from Hell.

Ted just wanted to know what he had done wrong, and if he could have a go with the flamethrower because it looked like most excellent fun.

\*\*

Conor woke and noted with disappointment that his little interdimensional kidnapping had really happened.

He heard voices in the corridor:

"Who are you?"

"His name is Ted. Let him go."

He got off the lower bunk. He didn't hurt at all. That's what you get for going along with Kenselton Hotel's sadistic little games and using the beds.

Conor opened the room's door and gazed sleepily out. The recently-released Ted was creeping off to safety in the general direction of Neo's room.

John looked at Conor.

"...Welcome to the family," Conor said.

John's hand slowly moved towards the secret bottle of holy water that he carried around everywhere just for fun. The first minion from Hell had crawled off, the second was a little out of range, but the third looked within splashing distance...

\*\*

"Dude, wake up."

Ted's hand accidentally brushed the mouse and brought the computer out of sleep mode. Multiple Internet windows were open, most of them displaying the IMDb pages of various Keanu Reeves movies.

Neo had decided that it couldn't hurt to know more about his floormates.

Other Internet windows displayed various *Matrix*-related websites, because this was exactly the kind of situation where Googling oneself was way too big a temptation, and one that Neo had eventually succumbed to.

Now he opened his eyes and raised his head from the desk. His neck hurt. That's what you get for falling asleep at the computer.

From outside they could hear curious splashing noises and angry yells. Neo wasn't too sure that he wanted to know what was going on out there.

"What's going on out there?" he asked nonetheless.

Ted shrugged. "New dude. He has this totally excellent flamethrower, but then he pointed it at me."

Neo scratched his neck. He felt hungry. He remembered something about meals on the second floor of the central block. He looked at Ted. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go, then."

So they left the room, glanced briefly at Jack and a slightly damp Conor angrily holding John against the wall and yelling at him ("Catcha later, dudes!" Ted said), then trooped past them and out the stairwell door in search of breakfast.

The map claimed that the ten blocks connected to the central one on the fifth floor. The lifts looked busy, so they climbed up the one floor via the stairs; went through the connecting corridor via the lift lobby and emerged in the funniness of the central block. Signs hanging from the ceiling informed them that the hospital was just upstairs. One floor down was the bar, currently still fairly empty. Other interesting places were all around. They ignored them and joined the small groups of people trailing into the cafeteria on the second floor.

\*\*

*The cafeteria is the largest room in Kenselton Hotel. Located in the central non-residential block, it is half the size of a football field and filled with neatly arranged tables and benches. Gourmet chefs cheerfully whip up the meals that are served from behind the food counters. Vending machines giving free drinks and snacks line the walls. The bright, spacious room is spotless and white – the standard-issue cleaners do a good job.*

*The place is free-seating, though characters played by the same actor tend to congregate, probably due to a craving for familiarity in this strange world they have been zapped into. There are a fair number of exceptions – mainly those who are sick of seeing their own face, and those who prefer to stick around friends or family who have been brought over as well.*

*It is in fact at the cafeteria that many meet people whom they had resigned themselves to probably never seeing again. Tearful reunions – upon identity confirmations – are common.*

*The British Holdout group staked a claim on two tables in one of the cafeteria's four corners. Ever since then, those two tables have seen more than their fair share of tea stains.*

\*\*

The cafeteria was the largest room that Neo had ever seen. Doorways at various intervals all around led out towards the ten separate blocks. The whole second floor was itself located in its own separate bubble of hyperspace, and took up much more room than its outside dimensions would suggest. Its walls rose up high several stories, its ceiling an unreachable plane of gleaming white.

The standard-issue gourmet chef beamed at Neo and greeted him in his native language. Translated into English, it said: "Good morning, sir. Would you like some breakfast?" By a rather unfortunate coincidence, that same greeting in Huttese sounded exactly like: "My, your grandma sure has stinky toes."

This is all the more curious when taking into account the fact that Hutts don't have toes.

Neo and Ted got their food and sat down at a table near the Block F entrance. They were eventually joined by Jack, a less damp Conor and a somewhat subdued John.

"Hi," Conor said.

Neo ignored them and continued eating. He was feeling antisocial this morning.

Breakfast proceeded largely in silence and avoided gazes. A smattering of other Kenselton Hotel residents were seated at various other parts of the cafeteria in close groups that kept to themselves. No one talked much, let alone attempted escape. That would require cooperation; and cooperation was not something they were up to at the moment.

\*\*

*Discipline in Kenselton Hotel is kept largely through psychological means. One of the reasons – apart from the whole OCD obsession with organisation – why they stick characters played by the same actor together has to do with the fact that it tends to make people highly self-conscious, and when people are too busy being highly self-conscious, they usually lack the ability or desire to go around running riot and causing unwanted trouble.*

*The folks responsible for Kenselton Hotel however acknowledged that this system was not foolproof, and as such intended to make use of the concept of the Panopticon and its surveillance system as a form of second tier defence. Because of this, they installed thousands of cameras all over Kenselton Hotel, the basis of the Panopticon's discipline being that if people know they are constantly being watched, they tend to behave out of fear of punishment from the virtually-guaranteed discovery.*

*The folks responsible for Kenselton Hotel however forgot to put into play the most crucial part of this system – to let the characters know that they were being watched.*

*As such, they forgot – so no one in Kenselton Hotel was aware that there were cameras trained on them practically everywhere, and this had no effect whatsoever on their behaviour.*

*Although, seeing as how most of the camera footage went unwatched due to shortage of staff, it probably didn't matter anyway.*

\*\*

The stairwell door on the fourth floor of Block F cautiously opened. David Allen Griffin peeked in. The place looked deserted, and he deemed it safe enough to enter. There was a patch of wet carpet on the floor. He wondered at it, then went to see what was behind the open door.

The computer was still on; Griffin glanced casually at the screen, then did a double take.

He stared, scanning through several paragraphs of words in the open Internet window, then curiosity got the better of him and he sat down at the desk.



So it came to pass that when Neo finished his breakfast and returned to the fourth floor in hopes of reunion with his beloved computer, he found the chair already occupied.

"Hello," Griffin said instead after a moment's hesitation, and gave Neo a creepy smile that said *I know all about you*. "Mr. Anderson, is it?"

Neo just looked slightly stunned.

"David Allen Griffin at your service." He gestured at the computer. "That was very educational," he said.

Neo swallowed. "Who gave you permission to touch that?" he asked.

"Hey. I came in, no one was around, the computer was on-"

Jack entered, wondering what all the conversation was about. He saw Griffin sitting there with a maddening smile on his face and decided that he didn't like him.

"What were you doing?" Jack asked.

"Research," Griffin replied. "You know – just looking into your personal histories, finding out useful information about you. Like *he* was doing." He pointed at Neo, who glared at him.

Jack strode over to the computer and gave the screen a look-over. He paled. He turned to face Neo. "That," he said, jabbing at the screen, "is *private information!*"

Conor and Ted came in. John Constantine did not, having retired in a fit of anti-sociality to the next room to smoke and think about how much life sucked.

"What's up?" Conor asked, feeling lost.

Neo nodded resignedly. "Fine, I'll stop."

"Stop what?" Conor asked, feeling even more lost.

Neo walked up to Griffin. "Out of the chair," he said.

Griffin got out of the chair. Ted looked suspiciously at him. Neo sat down and closed the Internet windows.

Conor stood about scuffing his shoes on the carpet and feeling ignored.

"How much did you find out?" Jack asked Griffin, fixing him with a stare.

"Why aren't you asking him that question?" Griffin asked, pointing at Neo. "All I did was come in here."

"How long have you been here?" Jack asked, not letting him off.

"I don't know. I didn't time myself." Griffin glanced at his watch. "But I haven't had breakfast. Second floor, right?" He slid out of Jack's gaze and brushed past Conor out the doorway. "See you later, Officer Traven."

"...What was that all about?" Conor asked when Griffin had gone.

"Invasion of privacy," Jack said. "I'm getting out of this place. Who's with me?"

"How're you gonna get out, dude?" Ted asked.

"I don't know yet. I'll find a way. You coming?"

Ted looked at Neo. Neo looked at his computer and didn't seem to acknowledge the existence of anything else. Ted shrugged. "Sure."

"Yeah, I'll go," Conor volunteered, and the three of them left the room.

Neo cast a surreptitious glance at the doorway to make sure that they were truly gone, then opened up a game of Minesweeper and started clicking.

\*\*

'There is no exit here', read the handwritten sign pasted on the door leading to the first floor's corridor.

Conor raised his hands in despair and dropped them. "Great," he muttered.

Jack knocked on the door.

"If you're not one of us, go away," said an annoyed voice, its owner the self-proclaimed gatekeeper of the first floor's door.

"Are you sure there's no way out in there?" Jack asked.

"We're sure. And you're not one of us. Shoo."

"What's at the other end, through the stairwell?"

"A wall."

"Have you tried knocking through it?" Conor asked.

"No, but several folks from the fifteenth floor did."

"Did they manage it?" Conor asked.

"Yes."

"So what did they find?"

"Another wall."

"*Whoa*," said Ted, a look of complete awe on his face.

"Then we managed to kick 'em out."

Some confused-looking guy had meanwhile come out of the lift lobby and had been watching the exchange with puzzlement. "Er," he ventured during the break in the conversation, "I was told to come here..."

The door opened. They had a brief glimpse of a corridor whose end was filled with bits of plaster and a gaping hole revealing a brick wall. Some hapless guy was down on the floor attempting to clean up the plaster.

"Get in there," the sentry said with a jerk of his head in the requested direction, and the newcomer went in looking confused. "Not you thr-" His eyes narrowed in recognition, and he swore. "Hey, you're-" A pause, then he looked back into the corridor and called out: "Hey, Joe! There are Keanu-spawn out here!" He looked back at them, laughed in a not-too-friendly way, and then closed the door in their faces. "Shoo," he added through the closed door, in case the previous pleas to leave had not quite got through to them.

"Keanu-spawn?" Conor asked incredulously.

Jack was meanwhile staring at the grey cement of the stairwell landing. He stamped at it, then stopped and looked back up. "This is the lowest floor, right?" he asked.

"How would we know, dude?"

"There's got to be something we could use to break through..."

Jack trailed off, then suddenly turned and headed back up the stairwell to the fourth floor, Conor and Ted following behind.

\*\*

Jack didn't quite know what he was looking for; a sledgehammer, perhaps, or a pneumatic drill, but until then the boxes stacked on the shelves and floor of the common room seemed filled with whole lots of interesting and mostly-useless things, such as a brand-new copy of a 1987 Singapore postal code

directory whose existence in Kenselton Hotel was completely inexplicable and had probably just been put there for the lulz.

Conor had given up watching him and had gone to rummage through the DVD collection. He flipped through several with no comment, and then he reached a Keanu film. He looked at its cover, hesitated, then flipped it back and stood up. He looked at the box. He used his leg to close its flaps. He stood there a while longer, then looked at the TV, picked up the remote control, and turned the TV on. Some cartoon was showing. Conor walked over to the sofa and slumped down on it.

Neo entered the room in search of water, Ted trailing behind him out of sheer boredom and having nothing better to do than to follow The One around the place.

"Stop following me," Neo muttered as he got a cup and filled it at the water cooler.

"I'm bored, dude," Ted said by way of explanation, and then he realised that the TV was on and screening a most excellent cartoon. His face lit up. He left Neo and went to join Conor on the sofa.

Neo finished his drink, left the cup in the sink and headed back out to his beloved computer; when his joyous reunion was rudely interrupted by the recently-arrived Dr. Julian Mercer, who stared at him as he left the common room.

Neo then realised that nothing was stopping him from continuing on to his beloved computer. So he opened the door to his room-

"Who are you?"

-and mentally swore. Annoyed, he turned to face Julian, trying his best to non-verbally communicate the fact that all he wanted was to get back to the computer, plus he knew kung fu so it really wouldn't be a good idea to try and stop him like he was doing now.

Julian backed off a little. Neo took that as a sign that successful communication had been managed.

Julian looked traumatised. Neo inwardly sighed. "Next door," he said by way of assistance, then went into the room and shut the door.

The problem about the phrase 'next door' is that it can, when the instruction is given near a room flanked by two others, refer to either of two rooms.

So it was that John Constantine found his little smoking break interrupted by some guy who looked a lot like those doctors who wouldn't quit pestering him to quit smoking.

This did not make him happy at all. He glared at Julian, who stumbled back, coughing, out the quickly-slammed-shut door, where he leant against the wall and hyperventilated.

Some teenager named Jesse Walker came through the stairwell door and stared at him.

"Whoa," Jesse said.

"Hi," he added to Julian, walking up to him. "What's going on here?"

Julian just continued looking traumatised.

"Is there anyone else around?"

Julian gave a traumatised nod.

Jesse pushed open the nearest door and was engulfed in cigarette smoke; closed it, pushed open the next, decided that Neo and his beloved computer did not look that interesting; closed that, opened the next, and perked up as he saw signs of life in the forms of Jack, Ted and Conor.

"Hi," he greeted.

Jack had just discovered a disemdoored door bolt and a nice big tube of super-Superglue. He decided that they might be useful in the future, and kept them to a side.

Jesse felt sad and neglected. Then he saw that the TV was on, and screening a most excellent cartoon, and went to join Conor and Ted on the sofa.

\*\*

Back from his breakfast, Griffin saw Julian standing by the side of the corridor looking dazed and not quite there. He smiled and went up to him.

"Hi. I'm David," he said. "What's your name?"

Dr. Mercer wondered if he was still capable of speech, and realised that he was. "Julian," he said after some hesitation. "Julian Mercer."

"Everyone's inside there, huh?" Griffin asked, leaning against the opposite wall and gesturing at the common room.

Julian wouldn't have known either way, seeing as how he had yet to set foot inside the common room. He however decided that said location was probably what that antisocial geeky-looking fellow had meant when he said "next door".

\*\*

The door slid open at a touch.

"Fourth floor. Pick your own room. Mea-"

"How did I get here?" Alex Wyler interrupted.

"-Mealtimes are stated here, and they are held at the cafeteria located on the second floor of the central block. This is the map if you have trouble locating anything. The lifts and stairs are down that way."

"What *is* this place?"

"Read the notice on that door. Fourth floor. Get moving."

Alex didn't budge. "What do they want with me?"

The possibly-robot receptionist wasn't happy at being questioned. She much preferred the obedient ones who just went where they were told, rather than those who kept asking questions. There were some on every floor...

"Look, I'm just a regular guy," Alex continued, studiously trying to ignore the thoughts about his personal time travelling postal service. "There's no reason... This has gotta be a mistake. I've got a family. I've got to get back to them."

"Fourth floor," the receptionist suggested hopefully.

"Who runs this place? Let me talk to them-"

"I just work here. Fourth floor, please. You're holding up the entire schedule for the block." She glanced at a timer on her desk counting steadily down from one minute. When it hit zero, she was allowed to call for guards.

"Who are you getting your orders from?"

"What orders?"

"The ones that tell you to sit in that booth not answering questions."

"Those are not orders. That is my purpose. I have always been here. I will always be here. Fourth floor, please."

Alex frowned slightly.

"Do I need to call the guards?"

Alex shook his head and went off to the fourth floor.

Entering the corridor, he stopped and stared.

"Welcome to Kenselton Hotel," Griffin said.

Alex took cautious steps forward. Julian was staring resolutely at the floor.

Alex started to say something, then stopped. He started to say something else, then stopped as well. No words were coming.

Griffin gave up hope of further conversation and wandered into the common room.

"...Hi," Alex said tentatively at Julian.

"Hi," Julian said in return, thus continuing the scintillating conversation that Griffin wouldn't have missed if he'd just stayed on a little while longer.

There was silence as Alex worked out as much of the situation as he could from what he had seen thus far.

"Where were you before you got here?" he finally asked Julian, forcefully extending the conversation past its natural shelf life.

"Train station," Julian said cryptically. "You?"

"I was... walking," Alex said vaguely.

A pause.

"I'm Alex," Alex said.

"Julian."

Alex nodded. They went back to staring awkwardly at the floor.

Back in the common room, Jack was still rooting through the boxes of random things stacked about the many shelves. He had just found a small blue cube with a big red button on it that said 'Please do not press this button' in nice friendly letters.

His curiosity got the better of SWAT instincts. He pressed the button. Nothing happened. He frowned and chucked it aside.

Unknown to Officer Traven, he had just destroyed an entire galaxy in a particularly cheery part of the multiverse. Enraged at the loss to the point of uncheeriness, the residents of nearby galaxies mounted a full scale investigation into the cause of the unprecedented disaster. They eventually tracked down the cube-makers to another part of the multiverse, refused to believe their pathetic claims that honestly they hadn't done anything and it wasn't like they had anything against the destroyed folks because they had whole planets filled with those little blue cubes, each with the power to destroy a galaxy in a given universe, because they were just into that sort of thing so could they please go now?

The two universes went to war. Trillions of lives were lost. Quintillions more were lost when several blue cubes were accidentally activated in the chaos of battle. The whole fiasco would go down in history as the bloodiest the multiverse had ever seen.

Jack Traven found a packet of tampons. This place confused him. He chucked it aside as well.

"Do you really believe you can get out of here?"

Jack turned, a random Barney & Friends pencil case in his hand, to see Griffin standing by the shelf, hands in his pockets.

"Why not?" he asked.

A smirk. "Does this place look like some shoddily put together prison?" Griffin asked. "The rooms. The floors. The movies in that box. It's obvious that it's all been carefully designed. If we're not supposed to get out, we won't be able to."

"So what do we do, sit here and die?" Jack asked tersely, subconsciously holding up the green-and-purple pencil case in a threatening sort of way.

Griffin glanced back at the three people sitting on the sofa watching TV. "They look pretty content to me," he said.

Jack shook his head and went back to looking through the boxes.

"So... what's the plan, Jack? Blow up a wall? Punch through the ground? I'm sure they'd have thought of that."

Griffin ambled over to the small pile of useful things that Jack had put aside. He pulled his left hand out of his pocket and picked up the hammer. "A *hammer*," he said with a low laugh. He put that down and picked up the next item. "An *ice pick*."

Jack turned and pointed a finger at his small pile of useful things. "Don't touch that," he said through gritted teeth.

So Griffin put the ice pick down and just stood there, watching Jack.

"We're all going to die here, you know," Griffin said after a while.

"No we're not." Jack closed the box and scooped his hammer and ice pick and stress ball off the table.

"You think you've got all this under control, don't you?" Griffin asked quietly as Jack stalked past him and out the door.

\*\*

The noise from the TV receded into the background as Alex Wyler sat at the table, lost in his thoughts and trying to quell the worried panic over what impact his sudden disappearance would have had on his family. Kate and the kid. Perhaps they were here as well, but Kenselton Hotel was far too vast for a proper search to be done.

Julian had taken a room and locked himself in it. Jesse and Ted were still engrossed in some inane cartoon. Conor had abandoned them in the pursuit of happiness and alcohol.

The air conditioning hummed away.

Alex left the room and went to wait in the corridor by the stairwell door. Eventually it opened and a teenager entered; he stared at Alex, then he grew wide-eyed and stumbled backwards, fumbling at the door handle in panic as the older Keanu-spawn approached.

"It's okay," Alex said quietly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The teen pressed himself back against the door, hyperventilating, gripping the door handle for comfort-

"What's your name?" Alex asked.

A strangled silence. "Eddie," he said finally.

"I'm Alex." He gestured at the door. "We shouldn't stand here. People might be coming in."

\*\*

"Hello, Jack."

"*Why do you keep following me?*"

Griffin smiled. "You're a cop. I like cops." A pause. "Can we be friends?"

Jack turned and jabbed a finger at him. "Stay away from me."

Griffin frowned slightly. "That's not a good start."

"Yes it is."

Jack continued walking down the stairwell, squeezing his stress ball for comfort.

\*\*

Conor's wrist tag gave a digital beep as he entered The Salty Snail, Kenselton Hotel's very own bar. Dim lights, drunk people and the smell of alcohol hit him as he entered looking for an age-restricted beverage. He surreptitiously stole a packet of free peanuts from a table and stuffed it into his pocket. He looked up at the disco lights. He looked down at the drunk people on the floor-

"Hey, you!" someone said.

Conor wondered about the best way to navigate around the inebriated teenager lying by his feet.

Someone prodded him. "Hey!"

Conor jumped. A uniformed Kenselton Hotel bar staff was standing there, holding a box-like electrical contraption. "206?"

Conor suddenly felt guilty about the peanuts. "What?"

"Yep," she confirmed, running the contraption in a quick sweep over the general vicinity of his wrist tag. "Get that guy there back to your floor, will ya?" she asked, pointing at one of the unconscious forms at the bar counter. "He's taking up space."

"What-" Conor started again, but she had vanished into the crowd, and didn't seem to care much about the peanuts.

He looked at the unconscious person in question, grimaced, and made his way through the crowd towards him. Arriving, he shifted aside the one-third-full glass of age-restricted beverage and hunched down on the counter to briefly study the guy's face. Yep, Keanu-spawn.

"Hey," he said.

Eyes opened slowly and tried to focus on Conor.

It could have been him instead, Conor thought. Just a few drinks later. Judging from the number of seriously drunk people lying about, this place had good beer. Or just a lot of sorrows that needed drowning.

Conor clapped a hand on the other's back. "Come on, buddy," he said. "Let's get out of here. Can you walk, or do I need to drag you?"

"...You owe me a drink," Conor muttered some time later as he trudged back to the fourth floor of Block F, the other guy's feet dragging along the floor, arm hanging inanimately around Conor's neck.

There was a newcomer standing on the fourth floor landing gazing thoughtfully at the door when Conor dragged his semi-conscious bar souvenir up the last bit of stairs.

The newcomer took a reflexive step back, staring at them-

"Hi," Conor said. "Uh, can you give me a hand here?"

A pause, then: "Sure," and Conor gratefully shifted over some of the weight. He kicked at the door. It wouldn't open. He turned the handle, and it did.

They entered the corridor. Alex and Eddie Talbot were sitting against the wall, talking quietly about something or other. Alex glanced briefly at them, then returned to the conversation.

They unloaded the human bar souvenir onto the lower bunk bed of an empty room.

Conor lifted up the left arm and made it join the rest of its body on the bed. "I'm Conor," he said. "He's drunk. And you are?"

"Paul," replied the other, pushing the left leg into place and wondering if it might have been a better idea to lay the fellow on his back instead. "Paul Sutton."

Conor nodded. "Thanks for your help."

Alex came through the doorway, looking at the semi-conscious individual on the bed.

"And that's Alex," Conor said, gesturing vaguely.

Alex looked up.

"...That's Paul, that's drunk." Conor headed for the door. "And I need a drink."

\*\*

"He's up."

Eyes staring, trying to focus; rolling onto his side, sitting up in bed, hand going to his head which kind of hurt.

"Feeling better?" Paul asked.

Jjaks rubbed his eyes and blinked. The other two in the room looked at him from where they sat against the wall, a moment ago in quiet conversation.

"Where am I?" Jjaks finally managed.

"Fourth floor of Kenselton Hotel," Alex said. "Conor brought you here."

The words seemed to dredge up some vague memory from the recent past; but before he could attempt to reorganise his thoughts, he suddenly became aware of shouting going on somewhere outside the room-

Alex stood up and opened the door, and the external commotion hit them full force.

"You want to get out? Really? Why don't you *try*?"

"They can't keep me here. They can't-"

"Go look for Jack! He's trying to ICE-PICK HIS WAY OUT THE FLOOR!"

"And what about you, huh? You're just gonna stay here?"

Conor spread his arms wide. "See any other option, kid?"

The newcomer grit his teeth. "I'm not a kid. I'm an FBI agent."

"*Right...*"

Johnny Utah shoved him angrily against the wall. Conor caught sight of Alex and opened his palm in a stationary wave. Alex folded his arms.

"How can you just stay here and not do anything?" Johnny hollered.

Conor pushed him away. "Hey. There's free food. I'm not complaining."

"*Hah*. You can get free food in *jail!*"

"Are you threatening to arrest me?"

Johnny swallowed. Feeling suddenly watched, he looked behind him and caught sight of Alex calmly watching the proceedings.

"How many of you are there?" Johnny yelled.

Conor shrugged. "I don't know. Never counted."

The door behind him opened and Ted slid out. "Neo says to keep quiet or he'll totally prove that he knows kung fu."

"What's he doing in there?" Alex asked.

"Working on some computer thing," Ted said uncertainly. "There're these grey squares, see, with this face on top, and he clicks on the squares, and then they become numbers. He says it's to hack into the-

"



"He's playing *Minesweeper*?" Alex interrupted, going over. "Excuse me." He pushed open the door and went in to startle Neo.

"I'm still here!" Johnny shouted, in case anyone had forgotten.

"I noticed," Conor said, because he hadn't forgotten. He wandered towards the next door to see if Alex's departure meant that the drunk guy was no longer unconscious, when Johnny angrily grabbed the front of his shirt.

"Don't you have any *desire*, whatsoever, to *get out of here*?"

Conor looked at him. "We are in a box," he stated, sticking his hands out to illustrate two walls. "No windows. No exits. Just walls. Understand that? There's no way out. Deal with it."

"You said someone named Jack was-"

"Jack Traven is on the first floor of this building," Conor said. "He is trying to break his way out of the floor with a hammer, an ice pick, and a stress ball. Let me go."

Johnny glared at him a while more, then released his shirt and ran off in search of Jack, whom he had decided was the only sane person in this place.

\*\*

There was actually a hole in the floor by the time Johnny Utah arrived. Jack was not alone; about five other like-minded folks from their block were crouched around a spot on the first floor stairwell, surrounded in their cramped quarters by various interesting tools like hammers, screwdrivers and Jack's ice pick.

Most of those tools proved fairly useless and had been chucked aside; but there was a hole in the floor, and some people were trying to make it bigger, while other people were saying that that probably wasn't a good idea because they couldn't see anything but darkness past that hole and who knew what sort of danger they might be opening themselves up to-

"Uh... Jack?" Johnny tried.

Jack turned his head towards the voice and looked up at him. "Who are you?" he asked, and then returned his gaze to the much-more interesting hole in the floor. He suggested getting it big enough to lower someone through to see what lay beyond. Someone else said sure, as long as another person volunteered to go through because she wasn't going.

The first-floor corridor's door flew open. The irate sentry guy was still there. "Hacking up our floor now, huh?" he asked. "Walls weren't enough for you?"

"It's not like you're staying here forever," came a rebuttal. "It's a prison, you understand? We want to get out. So shut up and stop whining."

"Yeah!" came the agreement of the other floor-hackers.

The door slammed shut.

"Try to see if you can see anything..."

Someone got down onto the floor and pressed his eye to the hole.

"Nothing," he reported.

"Really nothing at all?"

"Yeah. But it's too dark. There might be things I can't see."

"It's the bottom of a building," Jack said. "We just need to be able to tunnel out-"

"I don't think we can do that," said the guy with his eye at the hole. "Seriously – nothing. No ground, nothing." He raised his head and shifted his position slightly. He hesitated, then stuck his hand slowly through the hole. He wiggled his fingers. He extracted his hand and shook his head. "There's nothing there."

The floor hackers stared at their little window to the void.

"What's this building standing on?" someone asked. "It's got to be standing on something."

Jack picked up one of the bigger pieces of rubble and dropped it through the hole. They waited for a sound to mark its landing. The sound never came.

"...Nothing," Jack said.

Silence.

"Now what?"

"Okay," someone said. "We've broken through the wall, and there's nothing there, and there's nothing through the floor. So we could either try the other sides of the building or try breaking out through the top – maybe we're hanging from something instead of standing on anything..."

They took a moment to digest the mental picture of ten blocks of over sixty stories each dangling from somewhere with nothing below them but a huge, black void.

"And what if there's nothing there either?" someone asked.

"Then we're screwed."

\*\*

Alex returned to the room and slid down the wall to sit on the floor next to Paul. There was something fun and gravity-affirming about being on the floor. Jjaks was still sitting on the bed and looking slightly dazed; Conor had grabbed the room's only chair and was rocking slightly to and fro.

"So... what are we supposed to do now?" Jjaks asked. "Don't we have to try to get out or something?"

"Yeah," Conor said bitterly. "Try."

Alex decided that this was not the moment for a *Star Wars* joke.

"Ten blocks," Conor said, letting his chair fall back on all four of its legs and holding out his palms to illustrate the number. "Eleven blocks... I don't know, and they're all connected, but... People've been trying to get out, I mean, there's... Jack and his ice-pick and that FBI kid who followed him. And other people must've... must have had the same idea, but there's been nothing and-"

"-and if they planned to keep us here they'd know that we would try to escape," Jjaks said.

"Yeah," Conor said.

"That's what they said in the notice," Alex pointed out. "There's no way out, so don't even try."

"It's just psychological," Conor said. "If we believe there's no way out we wouldn't try too hard to find one. Even if there is."

\*\*

The escape party tried the other sides of the building and tried breaking out through the top.

There was nothing there either.

Just the void, the wide expanse of dark nothingness stretching everywhere as far as they could see.

They were screwed.

"So much for that, huh?" Griffin asked, leaving his vantage point against a wall and falling in step with Jack as the escape party gave up and broke up.

"Why are you still here?" Jack asked without looking at him.

"There isn't really anywhere else for me to go, Jack."

"Then stay on the fourth floor." Jack turned a sharp right into the next corridor.

"But that's no fun."

"So you're going to give up just like that?" asked Johnny Utah, joining them and looking pointedly at Jack.

Jack wished that people would just leave him alone.

"If you've got a better idea, let's hear it," he said, entering the stairwell and starting the 50+ floor descent, because he wasn't in the mood to be stuck in a lift with the other two.

\*\*

"Okay," Jjaks said. "So-"

The door opened. John Constantine looked in and stared at them. "What are you all doing in here?" he asked.

"Feeling sorry for ourselves," Conor said. "Go away."

The sound of the stairwell door opening temporarily drew John's attention from them.

"...Looks like you've got company," he said, then left them and went off to ignore the new arrival and bug Julian Mercer with his smoking. Julian's door was locked. John settled for blowing smoke through the gap between the door and the wall.

The new arrival stared at John as he made his way down the corridor and stopped by the open door.

He stared at the group inside, registering faces and the fact that Conor's chair looked about to topple over and send him face first to the ground.

"Hi," Conor said from his precarious wobbly perch on two chair legs. "Care to join us?"

A half-smile, nervous. "...What is this? Who-"

"The life's work of some actor whose name we can't pronounce," Conor suggested in interruption. "Join the club. There's space on the floor, you can sit there if you- \$#!"

Conor frantically grabbed hold of the bunk bed ladder to stop his fall and righted his chair.

Paul pretended not to laugh and attempted to look very interested in a section of carpet.

"Uh, yeah," Conor said, trying to look as though that had been completely intentional.

Jjaks stood up and held out his hand to the newcomer. "Jjaks Clayton."

The other met his hand in a firm handshake. "Shane Falco."

"Welcome to the family," Conor said from his chair. "D'you have any escape plans?"

"What's the deal here?" Shane asked, looking the group over and wondering why Alex and Paul were sitting on the floor.

"What do you mean?" Alex asked.

"Us... this place..."

"What does it look like?" Conor asked.

Shane shrugged. He gave up talking and sat down on the floor. The tiny room was getting cramped, but no one could be bothered to move to the far larger common room. It felt more private in here; and in fact it was, because the folks behind Kenselton had not installed cameras in the bedrooms based on the assumption that the only thing anyone would be doing in there would be to sleep, and no one other than people with sleep fetishes were interested in watching that.

"Okay," Conor continued. "Situation rundown: evil... scientific corporation teleports a whole lot of people from... other, uh, places over here. Where we apparently don't exist. But they don't exist where I come from either, so I guess we're even. Then they assign us to floors based on the actors who played us. And they tell us to behave ourselves and not try to escape."

"Just like we're doing now," Paul said.

"Shut up," Conor said.

"You're not even going to try and get out?" Shane asked.

"I don't think we can," Jjaks said.

"Yeah, but if you don't try-"

"There are people trying," Alex said.

"Lots of people," Conor agreed. "Many of them more powerful than us because they have... like, special powers. So if Superman can't get out, what makes you think we can?"

"What kind of attitude is that?" Shane asked. "We're trapped in some building; we can't just sit around and do nothing! Why should-"

The door opened. Jack stood there and looked at them. "What are you all doing in here?" he asked.

"Nothing," Conor replied. "How's the floor hacking going?"

Jack shook his head. "There's nothing out there," he said, coming in and closing the door behind him. "Not through the floors, or walls, or roof-"

"Nothing?" Alex asked.

"Yeah. It's all some... really huge empty space. We're not standing on anything or hanging from anything. We're just floating in darkness."

"How can that be?" Jjaks asked.

"How can any of this be?" Jack asked, looking at him.

"So we're stuck here forever," Conor concluded. "Right. I can deal with that." He got off his chair. "No more worrying about where the next meal is coming from or if I'll get killed tomorrow."

"You could," Jack pointed out. "Remember what Neo said about what this place is for? Some people might pay to kill us. For fun."

Conor pondered this, then shrugged. "Still beats real life. Here they actually have to pay. Lunch?"

"But we could use that," Shane said, jumping to his feet. "If other people are going to meet us, that means that either they'll have to come here, *and* leave, or we'll get to leave. Which means that there *is* a way out, and if they come here we might have a chance to follow them back..."

"Great!" Conor said with mock enthusiasm. "We'll do that. When they come here. But they're not here now, are they?"

"Well..."

Conor headed towards the door. "Lunch."

"So there's nothing we can do but wait," Jjaks said.

"Story of my life," Alex said.

\*\*

Alex extracted the three teenagers from the common room with varying degrees of ease. Eddie had been moping at a table behind a shelf but willingly joined the others; Jesse and Ted were still engrossed

in some inane cartoon on TV and claimed that they weren't hungry and were fine with subsisting mainly off potato chips, so Alex let them be.

Alex knocked on Julian's door. "Julian?"

The door opened.

"The rest of us are going for lunch," Alex said. "Wanna join us?"

Julian hesitated, then nodded agreement and left his room.

"Was anything burning?" he asked.

"Not that I know of; why?"

"I thought I smelt smoke just now. Weird."

Neo was apparently in the middle of some important computer stuff and wouldn't join them, so the eight of them went on to the cafeteria without him, passing John Constantine on his way back. He gave them a brief, dispassionate glance and continued on to some other part of the hotel – either the bar or some other fun place like that.

Johnny Utah and Griffin were already at the cafeteria, sharing a table but adamantly refusing to talk to each other. The others got their food and joined them, filling up the rest of the seats and a second table.

Griffin smiled at Jack. Jack glared at him and attacked his chicken with undue force.

On the other side of the cafeteria there was some minor commotion going on near the food counter; an attacked chef lay broken on the ground in front of the counter, fizzing slightly and giving off electric sparks. Nearby people were yelling at each other in angry-sounding ways. Nothing major. Everyone else continued eating.

"So what were the rest of you doing while Jack and I were trying to get out?" Johnny asked.

Jack looked up from his food and stared at Johnny. "You didn't do anything," he pointed out.

"That's only because you wouldn't let me."

"That's only because you dropped my ice pick into the hole."

"It was an accident!"

Jack snorted and returned to his food. "That's what you said when you offed my stress ball."

"...What *were* we doing?" Conor interrupted with sarcastic rhetoric.

"Nothing much," Jjaks said.

"That could be our tactic," Shane suggested. "They *expect* us to try and escape. So if we just sit around and do nothing-

"-we'll have the element of surprise?" Alex asked.

Paul sighed.

"Our best bet is still to wait," Conor said. "They said they're opening up this place to the public in, what, a week? If there's going to be any chance of getting out, it'll be when people are constantly moving in and out of this place.

"A *week*?" Johnny protested. "You're going to be willing prisoners for a *week*?"

"I don't think we have a choice," Jjaks said.

"You're all crazy," Johnny said, shaking his head.

"...and you're young, dumb and full of cum," Griffin murmured.

"We want to get out as much as you do," Shane said. "It's just that it might not be possible. Jack's told us where we are. We're floating in some void surrounded by nothing."

"Yeah," Jack said.

"...and if whoever built this place went to all that trouble to put us here, I don't think we're gonna be able to get out so easily. Face it: we don't even know where to escape *to*. If we want to get home – which I think we all do – then bashing through floors isn't going to get us there.

Paul looked sadly at his broccoli. Then he ate it.

"We've got to get back the same way we got here," Alex said. "Use the same kind of mechanism."

"How?" Julian asked.

"I don't know."

Griffin finished eating; he got up and patted Jack on the shoulder as he left. "See you later, Jack."

Jack jerked away from his touch and glared at him. Griffin smiled and went off.

"...What's up with you two?" Shane asked.

Jack stabbed his potato. "Nothing."

"Yeah, right," Johnny said.

"Shut up."

\*\*

They wandered back into the common room after lunch. Alex declared that Jesse and Ted had had enough TV and if they could get off the sofa please. Ted went off next door to bug Neo; Jesse sat down on the floor and looked TV-deprived.

"So now we wait?" Jjaks asked.

Conor found a pack of cards lying on one of the shelves. He picked it up and gazed thoughtfully at it.

He looked up at the others. "How much money do you all have with you?"

"Why?" Shane asked.

Conor held up the pack of cards. "Poker. Who's in?"

\*\*

Some wanted to be alone and took a room for themselves that night. Others took comfort in being around others in the same situation as them; and in a strange new universe full of unknown threats, it was always good to have company.

Alex looked up as the door opened and Paul peeked in.

"Mind if I bunk in here?"

"Go ahead."

"Thanks."

\*\*

The night turned to morning and another day passed. New people arrived on the fourth floor, and they all took it in different ways. Some – notably a certain dentist named Perry Lyman – seemed completely fine with everything and acted as though this sort of thing happened every day; a couple or so did not stay for introductions, turning pale upon first contact and stumbling out of the corridor only to be discovered hours later majorly drunk at Kenselton Hotel's most excellent bar, by which time they had more or less been rendered incapable of protesting when floormates helped them back to the fourth.

Tommy Wernicke and Jesse Walker hit it off instantly and the two teens ran off somewhere, returning some time later lugging a crate of rum and looking slightly more bruised than they had been before the expedition.

Matt had not said anything; he had found a room and gone to lie down on the bed thinking about life; hours later his roommate Shane ran into the common room asking for help because Matt did not look completely healthy. "I'm a doctor," Julian had said, a statement that he was to very much regret for the rest of his time at Kenselton Hotel. The teen was running a high fever; it could have been the shock, it could have been something else, either way too sick to even open his eyes when Julian placed a cool hand on his head to gauge his temperature.

There were two bathrooms on the fourth floor. Each held various toiletries, including a single toothbrush.

Tommy and Jesse accidentally set one of those toothbrushes on fire while experimenting with John Constantine's cigarette lighter when he wasn't looking.

That left one toothbrush for the whole of the fourth floor.

\*\*

The voice came out of the dark from below. "Do you know what Hell is like?"

Tommy rolled uneasily over in bed and clutched at his pillow as the asker answered his own rhetorical question.

He did not like John Constantine's idea of bedtime conversation.

He wanted a different roommate.



chapter three

passing time

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Yawning, Paul pushed open the door of the common room, blinking at the sole light that had been left on over the kitchen area. It cast dim illumination onto the four people huddled in the far corner between a bookshelf and the wall, engaged in yet another game of Bridge.

"Aren't you going to bed?" Paul asked.

"No," Conor suggested.

"It's 4am in the morning."

"Yep. Still early. Two clubs."

"Two spades."

"Pass."

"...Uh, Jjaks?"

Shane nudged Jjaks, who woke with a start from where he had been dozing off.

"Your turn."

Jjaks rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. "Sorry. Uh... what's-"

"Two clubs," Perry provided.

"Oh, okay..."

Paul let them be and went on to the bathroom.

The sole toothbrush still lay untouched. It's one of those things in life: the people who generally don't mind sharing toothbrushes tend to be the same people who generally don't care about oral hygiene.

Back from the bathroom, Paul paused as he passed the card-playing group, Jjaks still on the verge of sleep but remarkably holding on to a sufficient level of consciousness to play.

There was something soothing about the almost-rhythmic toss out of cards onto the growing pile in the centre, the occasional declaration – two pair, straight flush, full house – delivered in a quiet tone so as not to break the sanctity of the night.

He could stay a little longer.

Paul sat quietly down on the carpet a respectful distance away from the other four, somewhere in the shadowed region that separated the dimly-lit corner from the rest of the room, and watched them play, tucked away behind the bookshelf by his side. Now and then one or other of them would cast brief glances his way; but they did not seem to mind his presence.

"You're Paul, right?" Shane asked him in the space between games, after a half-asleep Jjaks had won the last round and Conor was shuffling the cards for dealing.

"Yes."

"Want to join us?"



"No, it's all right."

"Ok."

The rough swish of card against card as Conor dealt, some relief at how they would not need to change the game in order to accommodate another player. It was too late – or too early – in the day for that. No place for change, just the unceasing, comforting rhythm of game after game in a time outside of time.

The hands of the wall clock lay hidden in shadow, its barely-discernible ticking the only sign that time was passing.

A dealt card flew too strong and flipped over. Perry reached out to get it and returned it facedown to the rest of his pile.

Paul rested his head against the bookshelf and gazed out into the darkness; the sink running lengthwise across his view someway away, the small table and chair beyond that, then the shut door. He didn't really want to return to his bed now, to leave this small oasis of warmth and re-enter the cold loneliness of the corridor and the unchanging inactivity of sleep. Perhaps the others thought the same. It felt safer here, more reassuring, the first time since his arrival that he could see, somehow, how this could be home.

*"How many aces do you have?"*

*"Mm?"*

*"C'mon, Jjaks, we know you're more awake than that-"*

*"Are you sure you shuffled these cards?"*

He could stay here forever; caught up in the calm surreal of this otherworldly islet five decades and several worlds away from his own, in the presence of strangers whose faces and voices were at once both so familiar and so alien to him; in the gentle lull of approaching sleep, the imperceptible hum of the air-conditioning underlying the steady yet meaningless march of time.

One second after another and the scene did not change: the four sitting snug in their corner beneath the amber glow of the single lamp, him watching from the side.

Paul closed his eyes and let the moment surround him with a curious peacefulness. He belonged here. He was safe here. Everything would, eventually, be all right; and even if it did not, he would always have this moment still.

And soon he drifted off to sleep, and did not wake when the four finished their last game and decided finally to turn in for what was left of the night; did not wake when Perry asked if they should wake him, and when they decided against it; when Conor opened the common room door and let some of the corridor's light in, placing the pack of cards on the nearby bookshelf as he left, the others following after to their respective rooms; Shane clicking off the last light as he went out, letting the soft darkness envelop the room as he shut the door quietly behind him.

And hours later the lights came on to mark the morning at 7am, courtesy of Jack, who could be over-zealous when it came to things like waking up early; and people in the various rooms woke up as he came in uninvited to turn on the lights, and yelled at Jack and requested more sleep and the lights off, please, while others adjourned to the bathrooms to wash up or to the cafeteria for breakfast, still others finding such behaviour far too accepting of their lot in this prison and refusing to comply until hunger forced them to.

And so the moment was gone when Paul woke up and stood up, the magic of the previous night shattered by noise and activity and the continued parody of attempt at normal life.

\*\*

The sign greeted them after breakfast that morning, painted large in untidy red letters across the fourth floor's stairwell door: *'Keanu sucks. Kill yourselves.'*

Having finished breakfast earlier than the others, Eddie was the first to see it; the others found him standing in the stairwell, staring at the door.

Jack walked up, touched the still-wet letters, brought his fingers close for inspection.

"It's written in blood," he said.

"Whose?" Paul asked.

Griffin looked fascinated.

The others cast uneasy glances around, as though expecting to find a bloody corpse lying about, but they saw nothing.

"...We should wipe it off," Alex said, and moved forward, deciding that with all those boxes of random stuff in the common room, there had to be a rag in there somewhere.

Eddie took a shallow breath. "It's not even our fault," he said, the words tumbling out in quiet anger. "It's not like we had a *choice*-"

"That's how discrimination works," Alex said. He placed a hand on Eddie's shoulder and gave a gentle push forwards. "Come on. Let's clean that up before other people see-"

"Wait," Jack said, his gaze drawn to a faded trail of blood-like red spots and streaks on the ground leading to the down-heading stairs.

He broke away from the others and made his way down the steps, following the trail to where it ended in front of the third floor's door. He knocked and waited.

Paul approached cautiously from behind, pausing several steps above the landing, Griffin following behind him.

The door opened. Someone popped his head out and grinned crookedly. "You. Finally." The door flung open. "Take him off us, please." He pointed at the corridor, where a bleeding and screaming Keanu-spawn was being kicked for the lulz.

Jack gave a start.

"-Hey," the third floor door-opener continued. "Before you say anything else, he started it, okay?" He looked back. "*Am I right, Harker?*"

"HE WAS AN EVIL CREATURE FROM HELL!" yelled the Keanu-spawn in a weird accent that was almost, but not quite, exactly unlike British.

Jack blinked.

One of the kickers snorted. "Just because someone is a vampire doesn't mean you drive a wooden stake-"

"Chopstick," the second kicker corrected.

"Chopstick," the first affirmed. "-through their heart the moment you see fangs." Kick. "Some of them were *nice* people!" Kick.

"Did you write that message on our door?" Jack asked.

"Sure," Door Opener said. "Our friend James apparently has some eternal deep-seated grudge against the acting of Mr. Reeves, and we figured that, you know, someone's *death* would be a great excuse for him to get away with suggesting suicide to the lot of you. Okay, guys, fun's over. Hand him to 'em."

They roughly dumped Jonathan Harker at the doorway, where he promptly collapsed at Jack's feet, his nose and leg dribbling blood into the carpet. Jack backed away a step.

"His nose wasn't giving out enough blood to paint with so we slashed his leg with a knife," said Door-Opener by way of explanation. "Get him out of here."

"He didn't deserve-" Jack started.

"He killed a total of three vampires from the moment he arrived here," First Kicker said. "He deserves more than a good kicking. Be glad we're sparing his life." He left for one of the rooms for a nice cup of tea.

"Some life," Second Kicker – James – muttered. "Is he even really human?" He walked up to Jack and stared at him. "Are *any* of you human? Or just... strange, badly-acted parodies of-"

Jack lunged at his neck. Both of them fell to the ground, Jack shouting random obscenities, James rebutting them with bad jokes revolving largely around trees and cardboard and Keanu Reeves, grinning as his friends pried Jack off him.

Paul ran up and grabbed Jack by the shoulders, pulling him back-

"Jack, ignore them, let's go, let's go-"

Jack grudgingly backed off, hands still in fists.

"Hey, Keanu-spawn! Don't forget to take him!" James said from the floor, pointing at Jonathan.

Paul hoped that Jack was sufficiently placated, and let go of him to half-drag the semi-conscious Jonathan out the doorway and into the stairwell. Griffin watched the proceedings with a mild interest, then wandered forward to help with Jonathan.

Jack kicked at the closed door. "F\*\*\* them," he muttered in a choked voice.

He glared at Jonathan as they dragged him up the stairs. "What was that all about, huh?" he demanded. "Staking vampires? Didn't you read the notice that said to go to the fourth floor?"

"Says the one who tried to ice pick his way out of this place," David said calmly.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Jack said through gritted teeth.

"Don't worry, Jack. It's free. Because I like you."

Alex was wiping off the last of the blood on the door when they arrived and deposited Jonathan on the floor.

"I see you found the source of the blood," Alex observed.

A random non-Keanu-spawn kid suddenly came hurtling angrily out of the lift, ran up to them and delivered a sharp kick to Jonathan's side.

"THAT'S FOR EDWARD!" he yelled, and then some of his friends pulled him back into the lift before anyone else had time to react.

"...You deserve that," Jack told Jonathan, then went into the corridor.

\*\*

Tommy and Jesse cheerfully picked through the box of DVDs, pulling out one after another the ones marked with a small strip of red tape near the top, calling out titles.

"Providence, Feeling Minnesota..."

"Speed... Permanent Record..."

"Babes in Toyland..." Tommy paused and stared at the dodgy-looking marker-labelled DVD-R. "Is this *porn*?"

No one gave him any answer, so he shrugged and added it to the pile. Jesse picked it up to look at. The DVD-R just continued to look dodgy, and then he put it back because Tommy was still dumping DVDs there:

"Constantine... Something's Gotta Give... Youngblood..."

Jesse continued assisting in the digging out. "Life Under Water... Hardball..."

Several DVDs later, Tommy arrived at a really cool DVD boxset.

"The Ultimate Matr- Hey, this looks *cool*!"

Jesse peeked over at the boxset in question. "Whoa," he said. "Can we watch that?"

Shane jogged over and got down on one knee to grab the thing. "You're not watching anyt-" He broke off, entranced by the shiny of the Ultimate Matrix Collection. "This *does* look cool," he admitted.

Tommy grinned and continued in the task.

Shane opened the box set, glanced through its contents, and a while later gave a furtive look around. "Uh, anyone know where Neo is?"

"He's next door," Chris Townsend offered. "At that computer again. Why?"

"Do you think he'll stay there?"

Chris shrugged. "He was in there the whole of yesterday."

"I Killed My Lesbian Wife, Hung Her on a Meat Hook, and Now I Have a Three-Picture Deal at Disney," Tommy read out.

Shane looked back at him. "You did *what*?"

"That's the title of-" Tommy paused, noticing the lack of red tape. "Oh, it's not one of ours. Guess we're done then." He chucked it back into the box. "What do I- *Whoa!* New *Star Wars* movies!

"Do you want to watch that or do you want to watch this?" Shane asked, holding up the Ultimate Matrix Collection.

"*Star Wars* can wait," Tommy decided, flipping the box lid shut. He pointed at the collapsing stack of Keanu DVDs. "What do I do with those?"

"Just leave them there."

Freshly woken up at the unearthly hour of 11am, Conor stumbled in half-awake with his hair sticking up to see some leather-clad person rolling down the stairs on the TV screen and various people situated around the sofa area totally engrossed in the scene.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Movie," someone said helpfully.

Jack passed him the popcorn.

\*\*

It took them several seconds after the movie ended and the credits started rolling to realise that Neo was standing just behind them, arms folded and not looking very happy.

Conor surreptitiously fumbled for the remote control and turned the TV off.

Guilty faces tried to look less guilty.

Neo unfolded his arms and walked towards the TV, all eyes following him as he went by. He paused by the pile of DVDs, then crouched down and started going through them, scanning synopses for names as he glanced back to the captive audience sitting at the sofa.

*Babes in Toyland*? he wondered. *Is this porn?*

He put that aside; it did not appear to involve a guilty party. His selection made, Neo got back up with the DVDs cradled in one arm and walked past the others and out the door.

The door shut with a low thud. They looked at it. They looked at each other.

Silence.

"...That was an awesome movie," Tommy finally said.

And the tension broke with a chorus of 'YEAH!'s and "Is there a sequel?"

Then they fell silent again as Neo returned, picked up the Ultimate Matrix Collection, and took it back to his room.

\*\*

Conor saw that the sixth floor had a neatly handwritten FAQ (*'Where am I? What is this place? Why does everyone look like me but weirder?'*) pasted on the door leading to its corridor. He thought about stealing it and sticking it on theirs, then realised that the torn paper and newer-looking tape on one corner suggested that the folks on the sixth floor had had that exact same idea.

\*\*

Conor wrote an FAQ and stuck it on the door.

Moments later it was gone and relocated neatly on the door to the forty-second floor.

\*\*

Eddie Kasalivich frowned at the insides of the little blue cube he had just taken apart. It looked alien in make; more importantly, it looked like it had probably been a really really bad idea for Jack to have pressed the red button.

\*\*

Jesse whacked at the door with his fists. "DR. MERCER!"

Next to him, Tommy stood cradling his bloody arm, the newly attained crate of rum at his feet and triumph shining through his tears of pain.

\*\*

People made fun of his accent. Jonathan Harker trudged sadly off out of the fourth floor in search of other British people, and to his joy chanced upon the British Holdout Group.

They too made fun of his accent. Depressed, he returned to the fourth floor to be emo.

\*\*

Unhappy at the theft, Conor wrote another FAQ and made it Keanu-spawn specific this time.

This too was stolen and pasted on the eighteenth floor, where it proceeded to create much confusion, angst and identity crises in those characters horrified to learn that in this isolated bubble of hyperspace, they had supposedly been played by an actor whom they claimed to constantly mistake for a tree.



chapter four

bloodshed

---

The door clicked softly open. He stood there for a moment in the doorway, watching his sleeping prey, fingering the blade in his hands. A small smile, then he stepped forward.

Jonathan was in the upper bunk, completely given over to sleep. One small slice would do it; straight across the jugular just like *that*...

Eyes open wild in choking death, unable to make a sound; David Allen Griffin calmly holding down an arm that yearned to flail as spurting blood spotted pale skin. It is an interesting experience, killing yourself.

And then a sound from the lower bunk revealed that Eddie Kasalivich was up.

Griffin released Jonathan's arm and gazed idly down at Eddie.

He chuckled.

"What are you looking at?"

\*\*

The screaming got the others up.

Officer Traven did not look happy.

\*\*

Griffin did not quite like being yelled at, but conceded that Officer Traven was probably justified in doing so. So he didn't say anything and attempted to look happy in the hopes that it would give others the impression that he knew more than he was letting on. Alternatively, it might give them the impression that he was not completely all right in the head, but you've got to take some risks sometimes.

Jjaks came tentatively into the room and stood by the two corpses looking traumatised and nauseated. He saw dead people.

Neo was still fast asleep. Staying awake all night on the computer tends to make one oblivious to the sounds of death.

Meanwhile, Alex sat up in his bed in the dark, groggily wondering what all the commotion was about. Above him, he heard the bed creak and the shuffle of legs freeing themselves from a blanket.

"Are you awake?" Paul asked.

"Yeah." Alex stood up and opened the door a crack, blinking in the sliver of light that shone through. It was hard to make out the exact words of the raised voices, or just how many were speaking. Other doors were opening; a small crowd was growing near the end of the corridor.

Alex heard an overly-loud thump behind him as the barely-awake Paul underestimated the height between the bunk bed ladder and the carpet. They left the room to join the others, Paul limping a little.

"Congratulations," Griffin said, glancing out at the crowd. "You just woke up everyone."

Jack continued yelling at him.

"I did you a favour, Jack," Griffin said calmly. "I thought you didn't like him. You know you would have done the same, if you had the chance..."

"No!" Jack shouted. "No. That's where you're wrong, you don't!"

"...it's all his fault, remember? He was taken as representative of all of us, got us accused of being badly-acted parod-"

Jack grabbed Griffin and slammed his head against the wall.

Griffin winced. "That hurts."

"What about Eddie, huh?" Jack hollered. "Why him?"

"He didn't look too happy with me when he saw Harker. It wasn't one of my neater jobs, I must admit!"

Conor shoved his way into the room, swearing.

"Are we going to go through all this again?" Griffin queried.

Jack punched him in the face.

\*\*

Roughly shoved into the room, hands shooting out to break his fall as he hit ground; the door slammed shut before he had time to get back to his feet and stop it. The super-Superglued bolt shot home on the other side.

"All of you go back to bed," Jack said tiredly, sitting down by the door to do voluntary guard duty. "I'll make sure he doesn't get out."

The time was 1:50 in the morning.

"Are you going to stay here all night, Jack?" Griffin asked through the door.

Stony silence.

"If you're feeling lonely out there, I'm open to conversation!"

Angry swearing.

"All right, I'll start. How's your day been?"

Stony silence.

"Life of the party, aren't you?"

A pound on the door. "*You stay in there and you shut the f\*\*\* up!*"

"Hey, hey. Calm down, Jack. You don't need to get all riled up like that. I can't do anything to you while you're sitting against the door."

"*WHY, huh? Why did you do it? What did they do to you?*"

"You know something? I've been observing you, Jack. Every single time someone new arrives on this floor you get a little more stressed. I got concerned for you, seeing you like that. So I thought that if I lowered the local population by a little-"

Angry swearing.

"It's not my fault, you know. Mr. Reeves made me this way."

Indecipherable swearing involving Reeves and a ribcage and a heart and rending out and a spatula.

Griffin chuckled. "I don't think you know what a spatula is, Jack."

Silence for a while.

"I'm thirsty. May I have some water?"

"No."

"I know you're not going to let me die of thirst. You're too nice for that." Pause. "Please. I won't get out. I've got nowhere to go."

Silence.

Eventually the door opened, Griffin standing and getting out of the way to let it. Jack stood in the doorway and held out the cup of water.

"Thank you, Jack." Griffin took the cup from him. "You look tired. Are you going to stay out there all night?"

Jack shut the door and re-bolted it.

"Good night, Jack."

At 2:30 in the morning, Jack got up silently and went off to the common room for a cup of coffee before returning to his post.

At four in the morning, his eyes were shut for longer periods of time than they were open, head resting against the wall and only the occasional subtle twitch suggesting that he was still awake.

"Jack."

He slowly opened his eyes.

Alex sat down next to him. "Go get some rest. I'll take over."

Jack stared sleepily at him.

"Find a bed," Alex suggested. "You don't need to keep sleeping on the floor."

Comprehension finally kicked in, and Jack picked himself off the floor onto unsteady feet.

"Thanks," he remembered to say, and managed to make his way into the room opposite the one with the dead people. It was the only unoccupied room left. People complained about the noise from the stairwell, mostly due to that time when the entire Von Trapp family had trooped down the stairs at midnight loudly singing away.

Jack got onto the bottom bunk, noted how much more comfortable it was to go along with Kenselton Hotel's sadistic little games, and instantly fell asleep from exhaustion.

\*\*

"Jack?"

The voice that answered was steadier than Traven's.

"He's gone to bed."

"Oh."

Griffin sounded sadly disappointed.

\*\*

"Check up on the others," Jack told Neo when he woke up. "The next potentially dangerous guy is going straight in there."

"Is Hamlet considered potentially dangerous?" Neo asked, but Jack had already gone off.

Ted shrugged. "Isn't that the dude with the two bees?"

\*\*



"That's one," Neo said helpfully, pointing.

Donnie Barksdale never knew what hit him or just what he had done to deserve being forcefully grabbed and thrown into a locked room within the first minute of his arrival.

"Hi," Griffin said.

\*\*

Hamlet started spouting Shakespeare, which on one hand didn't quite warrant him being thrown into their makeshift jail with a murderer and a potentially dangerous guy, but which on the other hand was still annoying. Besides, there were those two bees that Ted insisted Hamlet had, probably hidden somewhere about him, and no one was in the mood to be stung.

Tommy suggested the broom cupboard. Scott Favor was sitting in there moping about life. They pulled him out of the closet and locked Hamlet in. Bouts of angry Shakespeare filled the air.

\*\*

"Your roommate didn't like you," Jack explained, climbing up the ladder to the bed above John.



chapter five

aliens

---

A few of them had been hanging around the corridor the day that rum guy arrived; so named for his tendency to spend most of his time consuming the rum they stole from the eight floor, though to his credit he often joined in the raids.

He had entered the corridor, hesitated, and then taken cautious steps forward to greet them with a dazed "hi" that did not hint so much at the usual trauma newcomers experienced, but at him having his mind somewhere else, distracted.

"How many of you are there?" was the next thing he said, and while the question itself was not unusual, Conor didn't like the way his eyes seemed to look right through him.

"I don't know. About twenty."

The answer acknowledged with a nod, the newcomer left them and went opening doors, looking in to see who was in each room as he made a mental list in his head.

He reached a door that wouldn't budge. "Who's in there?" he asked, pointing.

"Julian," Scott said. "He locked himself in because he was sick of people asking him for help."

A faint smile.

The common room door flew open and Jack came out, heading for the stairwell door.

"Where're you going?" Conor asked.

"Down. They're planning to go through the floor and climb along the underside. They think there might be generators there holding this place up. I might be away for a while." Jack pulled open the stairwell door and disappeared through it. "Hey-" he said, noting the newcomer gazing curiously at the bolted door, "don't go in there. It's dangerous."

With that, Jack left.

"What's in there?"

"A serial killer and a potentially dangerous guy," Conor replied. "The first one killed two of us, so we locked him in there-"

New guy had paled. "Who was killed?" he interrupted quietly.

"No one you know," Jjaks said. "Just a British kid and a dude named Eddie."

"Which-" A pause. "Where."

Jjaks pointed at the scene of the crime. "In there."

New guy walked slowly to it and opened the door. The bodies had since been taken away by Kenselton Hotel's resident morticiary group, Soy lent Green, but a large streak of blood covered half of one wall, more splatters of dried blood on the carpet.

He stood there, gazing into the room, until the others wondered what he was doing and went up to see. He wasn't doing anything much, just standing there.

"What's your name?"

New guy gave a start. "Uh," he said. "Uhm. Tim. Yeah."

\*\*

"Neo?"

The One hurriedly closed his most excellent game of Freecell and hoped that Conor hadn't seen. "Yeah."

"Guy named Tim just arrived. Look him up."

Slightly pissed off at having his most excellent game of Freecell ruined, Neo grudgingly pulled up the piece of paper lying next to him and scanned through his handwritten list.

"There's no one named Tim," he said. He passed the paper to Conor. "Here, take it."

It was the entire character list of Keanu Reeves' films, names helpfully annotated in pencil with words like 'psycho' and 'mostly harmless' and 'I think this one's the Antichrist'.

"Wow," said Conor. "Is this the full name list?"

"Yeah. Take it."

"So, uh, if there's no one named Tim on here, then who is he?"

"He could be from a TV ad," Neo said, closing the Internet window. "Or he's lying and his name's not Tim."

\*\*

"*What the hell is this?*"

"Texas Hold 'em," Conor replied without looking up from his cards. "Wanna join us?"

Kevin barely heard, starting to hyperventilate as his gaze darted wide-eyed around the room with its casually lounging inhabitants, all of whom looked far too familiar for comfort; he grabbed hold of the doorframe for support and started to stagger backwards.

"We're just a bunch of aliens," Tommy said lazily from where he was busy sharpening a stick with a penknife.

"Yeah," Jesse agreed, playing with the wood shavings. "We abducted you 'cause we want your brain."

Kevin visibly paled. "Why-"

"I fold," Alex said at the table. He pushed his cards to the middle and stood up, going towards Kevin.

"Who are you..." Kevin gasped. "Who are all of you..."

"We're not aliens," Alex said. "We're human. What happened to you happened to us-"

"*Stay away from me!*" Kevin yelled, gripping the doorframe.

"Okay," Alex said, stopping in his advance. "Just calm down before you get a seizure or something. Our resident doctor claims to be overworked."

"*Why me?*" Kevin demanded, still hyperventilating.

"Your name's on the list," Conor said.

"What list?"

Conor tossed forty cents onto the centre pile. "Call." He dug in his pocket and drew out the paper Neo had given him. He threw it at Kevin. It landed on the carpet.

Kevin hesitated; then he let go of the door, inched forward, and picked it off the ground. He unfolded it and scanned down the list of names until he reached his own. He stared speechlessly at it, then back up at the others. Most were ignoring him.

"It's all right, Kevin," not-Tim said quietly.

Kevin stared at him. "*How did you know my name?*"

"There's, uh, a version of that list with pictures," not-Tim said.

"...Speaking of the list," Conor said as he lost \$3.50 to Jjaks and turned around in his chair, "is *your* name on it? Because I don't see anyone named Tim on there."

Sheepish grin. "Yeah, you got me. I lied about that."

Not-Tim went over to Kevin's side to peek at the list. Kevin instinctively flinched away; not-Tim picked up the list from his hand and glanced at it.

"Yeah," he said. "My name's there."

"What is it?" Conor asked.

"That's not important."

Kevin turned his head slightly to focus on him, his eyes still filled with suppressed panic. There was something different about not-Tim that alleviated some of his terror, the fear slowly leaving him to be replaced with the assurance that, somehow, everything was going to be all right.

"Please," he said. "Just let me go home."

"I'm sorry," not-Tim said. "I don't think we're able to do that."

"We're out of beds," Johnny added. "You'll have to sleep on the floor."



chapter six

sticks & stones

---

His mom made better waffles than the ones at Kenselton Hotel.

Jesse Walker poked at the rest of his breakfast, appetite suddenly gone and replaced by an acute shot of homesickness. He bit his lower lip.

He put his fork down and pushed the plate away.

Tommy looked hungrily at the remaining food. "Hey, you want the rest of that?"

Silence.

"...Jesse?"

"I want my mom," Jesse said after a while, his voice strangely choked. "I want to go home."

The word harshly triggered into consciousness repressed thoughts of a previous life outside Kenselton Hotel.

Tommy's hunger left him. He sat there for a moment, eyes downcast, then he forcefully pushed memories of his own world out of his mind. "We'll get home," he said firmly, forcing his voice to be steady. "We have to. Just... maybe not yet..."

But the last bits of his friend's restraint had fallen, and Tommy could only watch helplessly and with his own growing despair as Jesse buried his head in his arms and cried.

"We'll get home," Tommy repeated, with less conviction this time. He swallowed, and angrily brushed a tear away. "*We'll get home.*"

\*\*

He was always watching them, Alex noticed. Everyone else tended to do other things – talk, hang about, refuse to budge from the computer, break out in impromptu fights, read, run off to other parts of Kenselton Hotel, poke John Constantine with sticks... Whereas not-Tim just watched them. Sometimes during the process he would smile to himself at some secret joke that no one else knew about; but mostly he just watched them.

Ted claimed that this proved his alien theory. Aliens liked to observe humans to find out more about their behaviour. They also liked to cut up humans and use them in experiments, but he hoped that not-Tim was not that kind of alien, because getting cut up for experiments sounded like a totally heinous way to die.

Ted had since found Alex to be better company than the fourth floor's resident geek, who just sat in front of the computer all day and made the occasional sound to show that he was still alive.

Ted was also not one to just sit about speculating, and so one morning he went up to not-Tim, who was busy listening to a post-breakfast argument that had broken out between Julian and Perry: a rather colourful affair that involved phrases such as "*covered in germs*" and "*at least it's better than looking at teeth all day and giving little kids nightmares*".

"Are you an alien?" Ted asked.

Not-Tim turned his attention to him. He stifled a laugh. "Why – what makes you think I am?"

"You're not like the rest of us," Ted said. "You're different."

A pause.

The smile faded a little, then not-Tim placed both his hands on Ted's shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

"Ted... if anyone ever makes fun of your intelligence, don't listen to them, okay?"

Ted blinked.

"Just because they don't see..."

Not-Tim broke off as he noticed Alex staring at him. He returned the favour with added intensity.

"Who are you?" Alex asked softly.

Not-Tim released the teen. "Just an alien," he said. "Don't worry; I come in peace."

\*\*

Hamlet was delivering monologues inside the broom closet. Ears pressed against the doors, they could just make out the words:

*"But though the four walls of this closet of brooms  
Doth imprison my body, yet still it hath  
No hold on my spirit, nor on my soul-"*

"We should record this and sell it as the lost works of Shakespeare," Tommy said.

"Yeah," Jesse agreed.

*"And waiteth here patiently for sweet release,  
When- MARRY, A COCKROACH! DIE, FOUL FIEND!"*

The teens heard the sounds of panicked stompings and a sickening squish.

"...I think we should leave out that bit," Jesse suggested.

"Yeah."

\*\*

"*Stop poking me,*" said John Constantine.

\*\*

"What planet are you from?" Ted asked.

Not-Tim looked discomfited by the question. "Um," he started, when he was saved by the loud crash that was Matt overturning the table and shoving Tommy to the ground, where they broke out into a vicious fist fight that Tommy was trying to escape from, screaming apologies whenever his mouth wasn't being hit.

"YOU TWO BREAK THAT UP!" Conor shouted, hurtling over to the teens. Paul was already there and trying unsuccessfully and painfully to separate the two, until Conor and Alex joined in and managed to wrangle them safely apart and hold them there.

"HE POKED ME WITH A STICK!" Matt yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Tommy.

Tommy spat out blood. "I said I'm sorry!"

"WHAT DID I DO TO YOU, HUH?"

Tommy wiped blood off his mouth with the back of his hand and wondered if that was a trick question.

"Okay Tommy, no more poking people with sticks," Alex said. "Give me that stick."

Tommy reluctantly handed over the bit of tree. Alex tossed it aside, where a sudden expletive indicated that it had accidentally hit Kevin. (No one noticed, except not-Tim, who walked over and picked up the stick. He gave it an experimental twirl. He poked himself with it for fun and to see what it felt like. Then he got bored with it and tossed it aside, where a louder expletive indicated that it had accidentally hit Kevin again.

"Sorry," said not-Tim.)

"It was just one poke," Tommy said, thinking of the many more that John Constantine had been subjected to with much less complaint.

"I WAS JUST SITTING THERE!" Matt hollered, blinking angrily as red started to flood his vision, his headache intensified by the recent exertion.

"Calm down, Matt," Alex said quietly.

"Where'd you get that stick?" Conor asked.

"I found it," Tommy said. "In another block. Some guy named Scarecrow was covered with 'em."

Matt extracted himself from Conor's grip and went out the door. He entered his room and lay down on his bed, folding the pillow over his ear to try and quell the throbbing in his head.

He didn't like this place at all.

\*\*

"Yeah, there's an alien," Neo said, slightly annoyed at Conor interrupting his most triumphant Minesweeper game to tell him what Alex had told him not-Tim said. "His name is Klaatu. Go away. I gave you that list for a reason."

\*\*

Alex unbolted the door and nudged it open with his shoe, hand firmly grasping the handle in case he needed to shut it quick. He pushed in a box of food and drinks and stared at a bunch of bottles sitting on the desk.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "Where'd you get that rum?"

- flashback -

*"Want some rum?" not-Tim asked a bookshelf, cheerfully holding up a bottle.*

*"You're drunk, dude," Ted observed.*

*Not-Tim wandered over to the locked room and generously donated several bottles of rum to Griffin and Donnie and Don John, wanting to share the happiness. The three prisoners were initially suspicious of the strange person who stumbled in and gave them rum, then realised that he was simultaneously drinking out of one of the bottles, which meant that they probably weren't poisoned.*

*But by this time, the rum guy had however left the room and remembered to re-bolt the door.*

- end flashback -

"...Right," Alex said.

"Can we get out yet?" Griffin asked.

"I don't think so," Alex said. He shut the door and shot the bolt home.

"Why bother to feed them?" Johnny asked bitterly from his vantage point against the opposite wall. "They killed people. Let them starve."

Alex looked at him. "Two of them are technically innocent," he said, pointing at the locked door. "If you want to kill them, I can lock you in there as well."

Johnny walked off.

\*\*

"I'm serious. I'm not staying here. Get me out of this freak show."

"Newsflash: It's not like the rest of us *like* being here," Conor said, waving his mostly-eaten apple at the newcomer's face.

A dry laugh. "This is insane. I don't have time for this."

"Huh," Conor said. He leant against the wall and took another bite from his apple. "Too bad."

"I have work-"

"Not anymore." Conor finished his apple and held out the core. "You mind throwing this away for me?"

He got a murderous glare and decided that his offer wasn't about to be taken up.

"Fine," Conor said, and went off to the common room. He lobbed the core into the trash and washed his hands. The newcomer had followed him in. Conor rolled his eyes and turned to him.

"What's your name?"

"Nelson."

"Right, Nelson. You're here. You can't do anything about that. So deal with it."

Nelson looked as though the only things stopping him from strangling Conor around the neck were a proud unwillingness to stoop to that level of primitive savagery and an inability to get over the fact that Conor looked almost exactly like him-

"And we're out of beds, so you'll have to sleep on the floor," Conor added.

-but this was pushing it.

Nelson swallowed. "I'm not sleeping on the floor," he stated.

"Yes you are," Conor said.

"No. I'm not."

"All right then, there are three other beds. Two of them are soaked with blood, and the third is in Bob's room. He's been known to throw up on his roommates. In the middle of the night."

"..."

Conor gazed restlessly around the room. "I'm going to the bar," he decided.

"Wait-"

Conor raised an eyebrow.

"How long do we have to stay here?"

"Beats me," Conor said, walking back towards the door. "I'm going to the bar, and you're not following me."

\*\*

"Kevin?"

Kevin rolled over and squinted into the dark to see who was speaking.

"Take the sofa," not-Tim said. "I'll sleep on the floor."





chapter seven

fun & games

---

*It is after a day or two living at Kenselton Hotel when the deeper questions really start to hit you. By that time, the shock and accompanying nausea or excitement upon discovering you are fictional have started to wear off, and the other issues surface.*

*There is, for instance, the ever-present question of what makes you you, what makes you different from everybody else. Many people living regular lives already have problems with this, but at Kenselton Hotel, where for convenience and logistics reasons you are made to live together with other characters played by the same actor who had played you, the question is all the more pertinent. Being almost consistently surrounded by people who look like you and sound like you and in many instances share the same mannerisms and certain aspects of personality as you takes its toll after a while. In many cases, this eventually leads to feelings of being expendable and having to acknowledge the painful fact that if you were to die that day in some gruesome accident, any one of those other fellas could take your place and no one would really know the difference, except maybe family and close friends.*

*Kenselton Hotel is a place where you go against what you think is right and play up all the stereotypes and labels that have been attached to you in your life, clinging desperately on to that last shred of identity that tells you who you are and what makes you different from the others.*

*The more insecure characters usually resort to using nametags, crude stickers with 'HI MY NAME IS ----' printed on them. The even more insecure characters take the alternative route of trying to kill off all their floor mates, which some guy named Gabriel in Block J was rumoured to be in the midst of doing because he wanted to be special or something silly like that.*

\*\*

"Watch out for the rum," not-Tim advised Neo as he entered the common room. "We snicked the eighth floor's supply. Want some?"

Neo shook his head and closed the door. There was a young fellow sitting at the table, munching on cornflakes.

"He's the cornflakes guy," not-Tim informed Neo. "He doesn't talk. Just came in several hours ago."

Neo looked at the cornflakes guy. The cornflakes guy looked back at him. Neo reached out a hand and slowly pulled the cornflakes bowl towards him. The cornflakes guy watched its slow progress across the table, then something seemed to click in his head. With a yell of anguish, he yanked the bowl out of Neo's hands and held it close to himself, his breaths coming quick and shallow as he stared at Neo with hurt bewilderment in his eyes.

"And... yeah, don't do that," not-Tim said to Neo. "The last time someone tried to take his cornflakes, he cried."

Tears were already starting to form. Not-Tim patted the cornflakes guy reassuringly on the shoulder. "It's okay," he said. "I won't let anyone do that again."

The cornflakes guy put his head on the table and wept, arms cradled protectively around the cornflakes bowl. He liked cornflakes. They were his life. They gave him meaning, and purpose, and nourishment, and were the only thing in this strange place that made any sense at all.

He wanted to go back to the rooms that he had always lived in. There was the big room, which had a long dinner table lined with chairs, where he ate his cornflakes, and then there was the small bedroom of his that had just a bed, a desk, and a cupboard. It was connected to the bathroom which had a toilet, sink and bathtub, and next to that was the huge non-house-warehouse filled with cornflakes, packet

milk, and other necessities...

And then something had taken him away from all that and put him in some strange place, and the only things familiar were the boxes of cornflakes sitting on a shelf.

Not-Tim offered him some rum, and he cautiously took a swig. His eyes lit up. He smiled, got off his chair, and did a happy dance just as the door opened and John walked in looking for a weapon.

John Constantine does not like happy dances.

He likes them even less when they are danced by people who look like him.

John glared at the cornflakes guy, took his cigarette out of his mouth, and flicked ash into the cornflakes bowl.

The cornflakes guy broke out of the happy dance and stared in stupefaction at the bits of black ash floating in the milk. Tears once again started making their way down his face. Not-Tim mentally swore.

John couldn't find a gun. He settled instead for a lightsaber which someone had stolen from another floor, and activated it and waved it around a little.

"Look after him," Not-Tim told the recently-entered Ted, pointing at the cornflakes guy and taking the contaminated cornflakes bowl to the sink. He emptied its contents into the trash, glared at John, washed the bowl, poured some cornflakes in, glared at John, added milk, glared at John, nearly got sliced up by the lightsaber, and returned the new bowl to the cornflakes guy.

Satisfied with his new weapon, John left the room, ignoring everyone. Neo followed after.

\*\*

Luke Skywalker searched frantically around for his most prized possession. "Have you seen my lightsaber?" he asked, meeting Han Solo in the corridor.

"The Keanu-spawn took it," Han informed him.

"And nobody stopped them?" Luke asked incredulously.

"Apparently they know kung-fu."

"Not all of them!"

"Why take the risk?" Han asked, then bolted off as Indiana Jones came running down the corridor loudly demanding his hat back.

\*\*

"Where are you going?" Neo asked.

"Finding a way out."

"Jack and his friends already tried that."

John Constantine headed for the lifts without a word. Neo followed him in as he entered one and hit the button for the top floor.

Exiting the lift car, John activated the lightsaber and plunged it into a random wall, carving out a rough square which he kicked in.

He was met with the bewildered gazes of the British Holdout group, sitting in the next room having tea for the umpteenth time that day.

The British Holdout group consisted of British folks who had discovered, to their chagrin, that the actors who had played them were not British, but American or Australian or Canadian or Eskimo or of some other barbarian nationality. Few outsiders knew just what kind of activities the British Holdout engaged in, other than that it involved a lot of talking in British accents, reminiscing about England, discussing English culture, laughing at Americans, and mostly drinking tea.

There had existed for a time an American Holdout group, but people made fun of them and they soon disbanded.

Unperturbed, John left down the corridor, reached the end, and cut out a portion of the wall there. This time it couldn't be kicked in. With the help of the lightsaber, he managed to get the wall portion onto the floor, and beyond the hole was darkness. John stuck his head through, looked down in the darkness past the sheer window-less side of the hotel, looked up in the darkness past the sheer window-less side of the hotel, and took his head out of the hole.

"Yeah, we're screwed," he concluded, deciding that Jack and his friends had been right after all at least about this much.

\*\*

"...Is that Keanu Reeves' bank account?"

Neo jumped. Alex was standing behind him, with Ted, both of them munching on popcorn.

"Oh... that. Yeah." Neo ran his fingers through his hair, making it stick up at odd angles and look vaguely like someone else's hair. "Uh," he said. Then he closed the Internet window, as well as the ones showcasing his attempts hacking into Matrix fansites to make them display the message 'Neo was here' whenever they logged on.

"Want some popcorn?" Ted asked, offering him the bowl.

"No."

Neo closed another Internet window that showed that all four of his Neopets were satiated with food. He bet that Smith didn't have any Smithpets, and that bit of info made him unreasonably happy. He shut down the computer.

"I don't suppose you've got any escape ideas, huh?" Alex took more popcorn.

"What?" Neo asked.

"Just in case you did."

"No," Neo said again.



chapter eight  
t o u r

---

Static. A beep, and we see a pretty nice view of a wall. A small red dot, followed by the letters 'REC', adorn the upper-right hand corner of the screen.

"Awright!" says the teenage cameraman-cum-narrator, the young Keanu-spawn named Jesse Walker. Not that his identity matters, because we won't be seeing much of him apart from what gets in the way of the camera.

"Welcome to the fourth floor of Kenselton Hotel. It starts out over there, see -"

The camera swings to show us one end of the corridor.

"-the stairs are that way, and there are more stairs that way." The camera swings around in a nausea-inducing manner. "If you go up the stairs to the eighth floor, you can find some really great rum."

The camera settles somewhat, and moves along the corridor with the cameraman. Left turn. A hand appears and pushes open the first door on that side of the corridor. We enter the room.

"That's Bob." The camera focuses on Bob Arctor, sitting on the bed and staring blankly off into space. "He doesn't say anything much. So we put him in here. Everyone else complains about the noise from the stairwell."

We leave the room. The door closes, and the camera turns to the one next to it.

"And that's Julian in there. He's our resident doctor, but most of the time he's asleep. He's probably just pretending 'cause he's sick of people pestering him for first aid. Sometimes the rum raids get nasty, see. And..."

A door opens, and out come Neo, Ted and Alex, the latter two still munching on popcorn.

"Hey, popcorn! Can I have s..."

The camera pans down slightly and then goes blank. When the picture comes back on a second later, the amount of popcorn in the bowl is significantly less than before.

"Okay, where was I..."

John Constantine stalks past carrying the deactivated lightsaber in his left hand and looking generally mad at the world. He gives the camera the finger as he passes, not turning his head.

The camera points towards another door.

"That's where we lock up the crazy ones: Barksdale, Griffin, Don John... There was a lot of noise in there this morning; sounded like gunshots, but it's awfully quiet in there now. Let's go take a look..."

A hand appears and unlocks the door. It pushes the door open.

For a moment we see an empty room... then suddenly loud noises erupt, the camera gets knocked around, yells and screams are heard, AND THE SCREEN GOES BLANK.

\*\*

The door opened. A teenager fell out. The door slammed shut. Seconds later, it opened again, disgorged a damaged camera, and shut again.

Jesse Walker picked up his totalled camera and got unsteadily to his feet, left hand clamped over what

he was pretty sure was a broken nose. He used his right forearm to wipe blood and tears somewhat unsuccessfully off his face. Down the corridor, Alex smeared popcorn grease off on his jeans and rushed over.

"Hey, you okay?"

Jesse thought of saying, "Do I look okay?" but didn't, because if he opened his mouth blood would go in, and he was neither hungry nor a vampire.

"You shouldn't have gone in there," Alex said a little too late, indicating the closed door. "We keep 'em bolted in there for a reason... Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"Get a piece of paper, write 'No Entry' on it, and stick it on this door. I'm taking him up to the hospital."

"Sure, dude," Ted said. "Why don't you ask Dr. Mercer for help?"

"I think he's asleep."

Ted ambled out of the supply room minutes later with a piece of paper with 'No Entry' written on it. He looked around, trying to figure out which door it was that he was supposed to stick the sign on. *There's only one way to find out*, he decided with a shrug, unbolting the nearest door and peeking in.

Neo's reflexes kicked in just in time to yank Ted away to safety and slam the door shut. Grimacing, he struggled with the wiggling door handle and shot the bolt back home. Someone on the other side kicked the door. Neo heard swearing and muttering of, "so much for lunch."

"Give me the sign."

Ted passed it over along with the scotch tape, and Neo taped it firmly to the door. No entry.

\*\*

"What happened in there?" Alex asked as they entered the stairwell.

Hand still clamped over what he hoped was still sufficiently his nose, Jesse Walker made several incoherent noises and gave up trying to talk.

He remembered hands grabbing hold of him and yanking him into the room the moment he'd opened the door; camera dropping from his hands and hitting the ground, someone slamming the door shut again, and a sharp box to his face as he'd tried to struggle out of his captor's grip...

"Don't kill him, Donnie. Not yet."

The voice had come from the upper bunk bed in the room, where David Allen Griffin lay smiling at the ceiling.

"Let me go!"

Griffin laughed. "What did you expect would happen when you opened that door? Mr. Jack Traven and his friends keep us locked in here for a reason."

"You killed them!" Jesse yelled. "Jonathan, and Eddie..."

"Yeah," Griffin admitted. "I was bored. What did they do with the bodies, anyway? I never got the chance to ask."

Jesse vaguely remembered a group named Soylent Green assuring them that they would take care of everything.

"What do you want with me?" Jesse asked instead.

Griffin rolled over on the bunk to face the teen down below. "Nothing. You're the one who came in here, after all. Of course, it would be great if you could ask your friend Jack to let us out of here. It's getting a little... claustrophobic."

"What makes you think he's my friend?"

Griffin smiled. "You're not locked in here with us, are you?" He pulled himself up into a sitting position and dropped down to the floor. "See that door?" he asked, pointing at the small room's only exit. "It's unbolted now, thanks to you. We could just walk out there, and they'll just put us back in here. That's not very nice of them, is it?"

"It wasn't very nice of you to kill Jonathan and Eddie."

"Hit him again, Donnie."

Donnie Barksdale happily obliged. Jesse yelled as his nose broke.

"Before they stuck us in here, I did some research on your friends out there," David said. "Why don't you ask... *Neo*... how many people *he's* killed?"

"Neo's a good guy," Jesse gasped through the pain.

David laughed and gestured towards the door. "Let him go," he told Donnie.

\*\*

Humans are, for the most part, lovers of convenience. As long as they have a fairly comfortable life and are not in any sort of immediate danger, most would be content to go on living the same way they have been living for years.

Among movie characters, the population in general is slightly more impulsive and adventure-seeking; even then, many of those in Kenselton Hotel had soon to come to terms with the fact that there was no visible way out. Meanwhile, they had good food from the cafeteria (cooked by standard-issue gourmet chefs who spoke no English and smiled a lot), comfortable beds, lots of company, entertainment facilities and no more worries of regular life.

It was all like a very long holiday, and one they could do nothing about. Most eventually gave up trying to find a way out and resigned themselves to getting by one day at a time.

True, this also meant a significant lack of purpose in life, but who needs purpose when you can amuse yourself by sticking Kryptonite into (the late) Clark Kent's tea when he's not looking?

Besides, there were the tales of those who had tried too hard: a group of intrepid escapees who called themselves the X-Men had rallied themselves together (an impressive feat in itself), broke through an external wall and ventured out into the dark void beyond. They found nothing, and a particularly blue-looking member of their party spent his days following that with a look in his eyes more crazed than before, muttering incoherently in accented English about dark places that went on forever.

Attempting escape upwards, one simply emerged on the roof of the building with nothing but more of the same darkness all around.

The only thing that held promise of escape were the ones who ran Kenselton Hotel: the receptionists at the arrival floors, the cooks, the cleaners, and most of all the guards. But all of these, when pressed or interrogated under torture, claimed knowledge no further than what their jobs entailed; all too were standardised and gave off distinct robotic vibes.



chapter nine

midnight clear

---

Night. A shortage of actual beds meant that a few of them had taken to making do at various spots in the supply-cum-common room. Kevin Lomax hogged the room's only sofa and adamantly refused to share, glaring at anyone who came within a metre of him.

The same group of four huddled in a corner behind the bookshelf engaged in their quiet game of cards. From somewhere near the floor on the other side of the room came the sound of muffled homesick sobs.

Only one light had been left on, just above the table in the kitchenette area where not-Tim sat. The card players were too engrossed in their game to pay attention to him. They did not see as he dropped his head down into his hands, long sleeves slipping a little to reveal a wrist tag that read: 206/964/REE.

In the safety of the night, he could drop the act a while and have the nervous breakdown that had been long coming.

Although he's only here because he asked to come. He could have been far away in the real world now, never getting the chance to see what it was like in here; heck, all he had to do was ask one of the staff, and he could get a free teleport out right now.

But he couldn't just leave the rest of them to die. He felt responsible for everyone on the fourth floor. They wouldn't have been here in the first place if not for him.

Not that they suspected anything; he was just the somewhat drunk guy who for some reason knew them all by name without being told. Stranger things happened in Kenselton Hotel.

Not-Tim raised his head from his hands and gazed at the group of four playing cards, only to be besieged again almost at once by a feeling of extreme self-consciousness.

He felt terribly alone.

Keanu reached for another bottle of rum and tried not to think about it.

\*\*

The door opened, and Alex Wyler walked in in search of a drink of water. He glanced briefly at not-Tim, head on the table either asleep or passed out from too much rum, and grabbed a glass off the shelf before going to fill it at the water cooler.

The cornflakes guy was curled up peacefully under the table, fast asleep and nuzzled against not-Tim's legs.

Alex heard the crying from the other end of the room. Finishing his drink, he walked over and paused before the trembling form of a teenager on the floor, his back to him.

"You okay?"

The crying abruptly stopped and was replaced by an angry silence. Lying on the carpet, Ron Petrie swallowed and tried to reclaim some of his dignity.

"Go away," he said, glaring at the wall and not turning to see who had come.

Alex duly complied. Ron was left on his own again, furious at himself for the tears and filled with a renewed passion of hate for this place that had cheerfully stripped him of his individuality and laughed in his face. All those years trying to be different, and now this...

Ron rammed a fist at the wall.

He hoped that the eighth floor *really* missed that rum.

\*\*

Siddhartha never slept on the fourth floor. He spent all day and all night – the time in Kenselton Hotel being decided by the clocks – sitting in the cafeteria. Just what he did there, no one quite knew, although the more observant people noticed a fairly large quantity of discarded sweet wrappers in his vicinity.

\*\*

One of the disadvantages of having the second-largest room – the only one other than the supply-cum-common room that had an attached bathroom, computer and television set – was that other people got the idea that they could come in as and when they liked, and stay there.

Taking into account the shortage of beds and his habit of staying up way into the unnatural hours of the early morning, Neo supposed that he couldn't really blame Johnny Utah for hijacking his bed. All the same, he didn't like the way that his nice, peaceful, steady clicking of keyboard keys was being rudely interrupted by snores. It disrupted his concentration (and concentration was totally needed when playing Neopets and making fake Keanu MySpace accounts), and it was starting to get on his nerves.

On the other bed, further from the glow of the computer screen, Ted muttered something about disembowelled pelicans and rolled over.

Neo yawned. He closed the Internet windows, shut down the computer, got off the chair and spent several moments contemplating the possible consequences of pushing Johnny off the bed. Neo didn't think it fair that he had taken his bed. Heck, there were three spare ones in the other rooms – the first rooms on both sides of the front stairwell door – that he was pretty sure didn't have anyone sleeping on them. The only occupants of those rooms were Bob Arctor and memories of the recently murdered; people avoided the latter because just because ghosts did not exist in some of their universes did not mean that the same held true at Kenselton Hotel. The blood-infused sheets probably had some part to play in that as well.

Neo wanted neither a brain-damaged dude nor dead people for roommates, and stood before his hijacked bed with increasing frustration.

Johnny slept on, blissfully unaware of the fact that he was at present the target of angry feelings from a guy who knew kung fu.

Neo gave up and left for the common room. The kitchenette light was still on; meanwhile, the card players had either returned to other rooms or had fallen asleep on various parts of the carpet. .

He contemplated pushing Kevin Lomax off the sofa, and had just started moving forward to do it, when he tripped over someone's leg and grabbed wildly at the table to break his fall. Neo's feet gratefully found ground away from the cornflakes guy. And then the numbers and letters on not-Tim's wrist tag – half-revealed by the violent table-hug and now inches from his face – finally registered fully in his mind.

206/964...

Neo's blood ran cold.

For a few seconds he stood frozen in that uncomfortable position too close to the table. His gaze moved slowly and nervously from the wrist tag to not-Tim's sleeping face. He was easily one of the oldest in here, in direct defiance of what the 964 suggested.

Neo swallowed.

He looked back at not-Tim's wrist tag, still partly obscured by the sleeve, and reached out a shaking finger to hook the sleeve further back-

.../REE.



Neo yanked his finger away to safety, his pulse racing. Gasping out a synonym for sacred faeces, he stumbled backwards, fell over, got back to his feet, fumbled with the door handle, got out, and hurtled down the corridor away from the common room on unsteady legs that refused to cooperate.

"Hi Bob," he managed to say seconds later after an unnecessarily clumsy entrance into the room. Neo made his way onto the top bunk, sleep suddenly far from his mind, and lay in the dark filled with tumultuous thoughts until fatigue finally caught up and dragged him unwillingly off to dreamland.

\*\*

Neo was woken the next morning by the sound of the door opening. In his groggy state, it took him a while to remember just where he was. He peered over the side of his bunk; and then he was jolted fully awake by the realisation that the newcomer happened to be not-Tim with a tray of food.

Neo swore and immediately regretted it as not-Tim looked up to see where the sudden expletive had come from.

A pause.

"Good morning to you too, Neo."

Not-Tim glanced at Bob, saw that he was still asleep, and put the food tray down on the table. "I've never seen you in here before."

Neo pulled himself up into a sitting position, hands gripping the rails much tighter than was necessary.

"You can come down from there, you know," not-Tim suggested. He laughed. "I'm not a cannibal."

Neo tightened his grip on the bunk rails and started to engage in low-level hyperventilation.

"Are you feeling all right?" not-Tim asked, concern in his voice. "You don't look too good."

Neo felt decidedly not all right. He was dimly aware that he was trembling, and his eyes didn't seem to be focusing all that well. A sickening chill was making its way up the back of his neck – his dinner wanted out, and *now*.

Reflexes suddenly kicking in, Neo dropped off the bunk, pushed past not-Tim, went out of the door and broke into a mad dash for his room's attached bathroom where he fell to his knees and threw up violently into the toilet.

Not-Tim ran in after him, close behind and looking alarmed.

Spitting the last remnants of his stomach contents into the toilet, Neo backed away, stumbling slightly. "Stay away from me," he gasped.

"Okay, Neo, calm down-"

"I know who you are."

"Just take a deep breath, and-"

"NO!"

Silence.

Not-Tim shrugged. "All right then, I'll go."

He turned towards the bathroom door, outside of which both Ted and Johnny had been watching the exchange with general confusion.

Neo took a shaky breath. "Keanu-"

Not-Tim stopped. For a while he just stood there; then he turned around and looked at Neo for what seemed an eternity.

"Call me Chuck," he finally said, and left the room.

\*\*

No one ever called him Chuck.

News has a habit of spreading fast, and through the twin efforts of Logan and Utah, not-Tim suddenly found himself repeatedly at the end of hushed whispers and uncomfortable stares that quickly led to averted eyes. Laughter had a habit of abruptly dying out whenever he entered a room. Tommy started going around with a crudely-constructed tinfoil hat ("You look like an idiot," he was informed. "You're just jealous that you don't have one and people can read your thoughts," Tommy replied), although not-Tim couldn't be sure if the teen's aforementioned headwear had anything to do with him.

Nobody really talked to him anymore.

There were exceptions, of course; the cornflakes guy for one continued to be oblivious as ever, and still held loyal thoughts towards the one who'd taken care of him and given him his first taste of rum. Bob Arctor knew no better. Hamlet in the broom cupboard had not heard the news; neither had those in the locked room or those who had wandered off to other parts of the hotel. Among those who knew, a few – mostly the older ones – remained civil, but all interactions were painfully polite. There were no more hyper rum raid expeditions to the eighth floor.

Meanwhile, Ted was plagued with guilt; he had not expected his little bit of news to have such results. Later that morning he found not-Tim standing to a side of the fourth floor corridor watching the world go by, and walked tentatively up to him.

"Mr. Reeves?"

"Yeah?"

Ted hesitated.

Then: "Dude, I'm sorry-"

Not-Tim hugged him.



chapter ten  
**fight**

---

Neo sat by himself in the cafeteria, poking at his breakfast and occasionally taking a bite. A random group of teenagers came up to him. One of the girls tapped him on the shoulder.

"Are those seats taken?"

Neo looked at her, communicating in that one gaze an immense amount of angst.

They went away.

\*\*

Neo continued sitting in the cafeteria long after he finished his food. The empty plate lay in front of him; he had not stopped looking at it for a long time, lost in thought and general angst which he was busy trying to resolve.

Eventually he stood up – too many curious glances had been coming his way – and left the cafeteria.

He didn't return to Block F just yet. Hands in pockets, Neo strolled the corridors of the common block, past video arcades, shops full of free things, bookstores, restaurants, cinemas, and the other usual features of a regular shopping mall.

He needed the time to be alone and to work things out.

\*\*

The breathless announcement at the door of the common room: "*Keanu is fighting Neo!*"

Soon one end of the corridor was filled with spectators entranced by the furious kung fu sequences between The One and the out-of-practice actor for whom it had been years since the last *Matrix* film.

You do not truly know someone until you fight them.

Neo was winning.

Not-Tim was starting to regret agreeing to the challenge, but there had been something about the look on Neo's face and the sight of his outstretched hand beckoning him that had just called for an attempted left hook *or else*. So the attempted left hook was given, resulted in a nearly-twisted arm, and it had escalated into this.

Not-Tim unsuccessfully dodged a fist and winced. One day he would show others the roadmap of pain that was his body, pointing out the various interesting medical features on it: "*That one's from a motorcycle accident, that one's from another motorcycle accident, that one's from yet another motorcycle accident, and that one's from the time one of my characters beat me up-*"

He was jolted painfully back to the present as Neo slammed him against the wall, one hand grabbing him by the neck and the other in a fist ready to strike; then Neo released his grip and stepped back, a faint look of triumph in his eyes.

"You're good," Not-Tim gasped, panting for breath. He slid down the wall and lay on the carpet, eyes closed and mouth open in search of more oxygen.

Neo dropped down next to him and sat there. He'd had his catharsis.

\*\*

"If you want me gone, I'll go," not-Tim said to the assemblage of fourteen clustered around the end of the corridor. "I'm sorry if my presence disturbs you or-" A pause. "Tommy, take off that tinfoil hat. You look like an idiot."

"But then you'd be able to read my thoughts," Tommy pointed out.

"I *can't* read your thoughts."

Tommy smiled in triumph. "See, it works!"

Matt yanked the tinfoil hat off Tommy's head, chucked it to the ground, and refolded his arms.

"How do we get out of here?" Nelson asked.

"I don't know. They'll let me teleport out, but not the rest of you. I think that's the only way out of here."

"And where is 'here', exactly?" Conor asked.

Not-Tim shrugged. "They say it's an isolated bubble of hyperspace in an empty section of the multiverse."

Neo was still sitting on the floor. He was the only one on the floor. It made him feel special. ...Well, not really. He thought about standing up, but realised that doing so would probably just draw attention to himself. So he stayed on the floor even though it didn't really make him feel special.

"So we're trapped in this building, *and* in an isolated bubble of hyperspace," Eddie Talbot said. "Okay-"

A desperate weak thump sounded from the broom cupboard.

They turned.

"...How long has Hamlet been in there?" not-Tim asked.

After a brief but frantic search, Paul Sutton finally located the key hiding craftily in the lock in a brilliant example of cleverness that keys are not usually known to possess. The doors were pulled open to reveal Hamlet slumped in the bottom of the broom cupboard, looking half-dead from hunger and dehydration.

"Someone get him water!" Alex shouted as he helped Paul divest the broom cupboard of its largest living inhabitant. The requested liquid soon arrived courtesy of Ted, who somehow always ended up being the one doing errands like these. He passed the cup to not-Tim who passed it to Alex who began the arduous task of rehydrating the Prince of Denmark.

Not-Tim pointed towards the locked door. "Do those guys have food and water?"

"Who cares?" Johnny muttered, crushing Tommy's fallen tinfoil hat just for the heck of it. "They killed people."

"I care. I'm kind of responsible for their existence here, and it would be really nice if everyone stayed alive-"

"Yeah, they do," Alex supplied, handing the now-empty cup to Ted. "Should last them several days. Oi, Ted. Refill."

Unnoticed by most of them, the stairwell door at the other corridor end opened and a newcomer in his early twenties walked cautiously out.

Kip looked uncertainly at the small crowd at the other end. Recognition hit, multiple times. His breath caught. He fell over in a faint.

Neo looked dispassionately at the fallen Kip and decided that someone else could deal with him. He didn't intend to be getting off the floor any time soon. Sitting there didn't make him feel special, but it was a lot more fun than standing up.

\*\*

*Splash.*

The sudden rush of cold shocked him into consciousness. Opening his eyes, Kip wiped the water off his face and wondered what he was doing on a sofa.

"Brilliant, Falco. Now the carpet's all wet and we'll have a mould colony there soon."

"How else would *you* have done it?"

"You could have got a bucket."

"Do you see any bucket? ...Hi. Welcome to Kenselton Hotel."

Kip looked dazedly at them, then at the hand that Conor waved in front of his face to check for signs of life.

"...What happened?" he finally asked.

"Well, it all started with this thing called the Big Bang-"

"You fainted," Conor said, interrupting Shane's impromptu science lesson.

"Where am I?"

"An isolated bubble of hyperspace."

Kip thought this over. "Oh," he said.

"You're taking this very calmly," Conor observed, attempting to dry the carpet by rubbing his foot over the wet spot. "See Kevin over there? He didn't take it calmly."

Kip gazed in the general direction of Kevin. His view was shortly obstructed by Conor waving a hand in front of his face again. He looked back at him.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Kip shrugged. "I do when I have things to say."

"Uh-huh. What's your name?"

"Kip."

"I'm Conor, that's Shane; over there's Kevin, Ted, Jjaks, Neo, Alex; and that's-" Conor gestured vaguely at not-Tim – "that's... you don't want to know. Trust me. ...Nelson, Tommy, Ron, Paul, Johnny, Eddie, Matt, uh, Hamlet, and that's the cornflakes guy."

Kip nodded. He decided that he liked this isolated bubble of hyperspace.

For the first time, he felt that he actually belonged.

\*\*

On the top floor of Block F of Kenselton Hotel, a crude stack of boxes rose up to the ceiling, in which a dark rough square had been cut. The fallen plaster and concrete lay crumbled on the carpet. Faint powdery shoeprints marked the steps formed by the boxes.

Through the hole, on the roof, John Constantine stood and watched the void. He'd wanted to see it for himself. The darkness spread out forever; only a strange unknown light cast a glow on him and the dirty-white roof of the building. Elsewhere he saw the brief patches that were the roofs of the other blocks in Kenselton Hotel, islands of existence in this isolated bubble of hyperspace, the only place that was-

John squinted at a particular spot in the blackness.

He thought he could make out the outline of a door.

\*\*

Hamlet's survival was eventually concluded to be a fairly high possibility. The pronouncement was given by an unhappy Dr. Mercer, who really just wanted to stay in his room with a good book rather than provide free health services for this bunch of freaks whose existence he preferred to pretend not to know about. He wouldn't even have come out of his room, if not for the fact that repeated loud door banging and cries of, "OI, JULIAN!" could get tiresome after a while.

It wasn't long before not-Tim once again found himself being largely avoided and ignored. Most of the others had discovered that being in his vicinity seriously threatened their already-overly-fragile sense of identity, and a stable sense of identity was a vital commodity in Kenselton Hotel. Some still had questions, but they could wait.

Not-Tim wandered off sadly.

The television set was showing Spongebob Squarepants, and nobody quite knew why. Kevin Lomax was mortified to realise that he found the talking yellow sponge strangely amusing to watch. Nelson did likewise but pretended he was not interested, sneaking surreptitious glances in the direction of the TV from behind the cover of a book.

The regular card-playing group of Perry, Jjaks, Shane and Conor had meanwhile hijacked the common room's table and shifted it to a more central location, whereupon they sat around playing poker for unnatural lengths of time. More enthusiasm in the gambling aspect was involved now; while previously there had been an unspoken assumption that none of them were ever getting out and would thus have no use for cash, the revelation of not-Tim in their midst had – despite the overall negative reception of the actor – seemed to re-ignite that dying hope. Some were once more thinking of home as a place that they might yet see again.

Alex had discovered a comfortable corner and was engrossed in a book he had pulled off the shelf.

Most of the teenagers had grouped up and run off to the games arcade, with the notable exception of Ted, who had got it into his head that it would be tremendously fun to follow Neo around.

"Stop following me," Neo said, annoyed at his inability to execute a perfect U-turn without Ted getting in the way.

Ted looked disappointed. He trudged off in search of not-Tim, whom he discovered sitting in the broom cupboard thinking about life.

"Dude, what are you doing in there?"

Not-Tim looked at Ted for a long time in the way that an alien might contemplate its latest human specimen.

"Sitting," he finally answered. "Want to join me?"

Ted blinked.

Not-Tim shifted his legs out of the broom cupboard to make room for Ted. Seeing nothing better to do, Ted got down next to him. Time passed in silence. There aren't many things that one can do in an open broom cupboard, and Ted quickly grew bored. He had the feeling that he should say something, but he didn't know what. Not-Tim meanwhile seemed perfectly content to just sit and stare into space and occasionally at Ted.

Ted found a dead cockroach in the broom cupboard. It made him sad. He wondered how it had died, and if Hamlet had killed it, and if its family missed it, and-

"I wouldn't touch that, if I were you."

Ted's fingers stopped in their path towards the dearly departed. He withdrew his hand with a sigh.

"What are we doing in here?" he asked.

"Sitting," came not-Tim's prompt reply, packaged with a smile in its wake.

The answer wasn't helping. Ted considered just getting up and leaving, but that would probably be kind of rude. He regretted ever sitting down in the first place.

The stairwell door opened and the bulk of the fourth floor's resident teenagers stumbled through, bruised and bleeding in several locations as the result of a gang fight in the games arcade which they had lost. They managed to make their way into the common room, where they found a nice secret place behind a shelf to discuss new and better fighting strategies that might or might not involve using the remaining rum to make Molotov cocktails.

\*\*

Neo typed furiously away at the computer, trying to erase the evidence of his trigger-happy hacking exploits. He re-channelled the cash that he had generously donated all over the world back into Keanu Reeves' bank account and hoped that the once-benefactors wouldn't mind.

The bank balance in Mr. Reeves' account no longer reading 42 cents, Neo allowed himself to breathe a little. Now for the fake MySpace profiles...

After second thought, he handed the passwords to a random guy he found on the Internet. The accounts had since been friended by people; he didn't like the idea of disappointing them. Especially Tom, who looked like a nice guy and shared the same first name as him.



chapter eleven

h o s t a g e

---

Having spent the past few days with random people who had been attempting to crawl their way upside down out of Kenselton Hotel to look for generators, Jack Traven finally returned to the fourth floor and was greeted at the common room door by the sound of exploding rum, followed by a burst of angry yelling, ringing alarms, and running feet.

"Hijack," said a miscellaneous teenager whose face was covered with exploded rum. "Welcome home."

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED HERE?"

"All right," Conor said. "You kids put out that fire, clear up this mess, and get out. NOW!"

"It was *his* idea," Jesse said, pointing at Tommy as Matt grabbed a cup, filled it up with water and tossed the liquid at the flames.

"*You trust a guy with a tinfoil hat?*"

Tommy looked sad and misunderstood. He decided that it might not be the best time to remind them that he no longer had his tinfoil hat with him. He got down on the floor and helped Eddie pick up the shards of broken glass.

"Some help with the fire?" Matt asked testily, giving them a glare and throwing another miserable cupful of water at the conflagration.

Not-Tim handed him the fire extinguisher. Matt looked at him, muttered a brief thanks, then took the fire extinguisher, opened a spray of white stuff on the young fire and put an end to its once-promising future. The alarms shut up.

Not-Tim joined in the task of getting the glass bits off the floor.

"Don't try to make Molotov cocktails again, okay?" he suggested.

Tommy gave him a fearful glance, edged away from him and wished desperately that he still had his tinfoil hat, his trembling fingers struggling to capture a small glass shard.

Ted meanwhile was just happy that the explosion had finally drawn not-Tim out of the broom cupboard, where things had been getting most heinously boring. He went off to find Neo, whom he eventually discovered sitting at the computer doing what looked like important work.

"Why do all those smiley faces keep dying?" Ted asked.

"Go away," Neo said.

\*\*

There were steps forming, inexplicably, in the darkness – black steps, practically invisible in their path from Block F to the barest crack of light that marked the location of the door. It wasn't the only door, as John soon saw – the roof of each block had a similar backdoor exit, steps materialising between each and the roof.

He got on the steps and made his way up.

The door was a little stiff (and also an interdimensional portal), but a good kick burst it open and John suddenly found himself blinking in the sunlight in a dingy-looking back alley, out for the first time in the real world.



\*\*

"Get everyone in here in fifteen minutes," Jack said. "I heard there are fire exits from the roofs. We need a meeting."

"Three of them are at the bar," Conor said. "They won't be happy."

"Or sober," Alex added, but no one heard him except not-Tim, who was the only one paying attention to everyone else.

"I don't care. Go get them." Jack snapped his fingers at Eddie and Tommy. "You two. Go get whoever's in the other rooms."

"What about the ones behind the 'No Entry' sign?"

"Uh... okay, not those. Just the rest."

The two teens left. Seconds later, cries of, "OI, JULIAN!" filled the air.

*I bet this has something to do with that explosion*, Julian thought sagely. "What is it?" he asked through the locked door.

"Officer Traven says to get out of there. He says there's a meeting in fifteen minutes."

"And what happens if I stay here?"

"Then Mr. Reeves says he'll make movie sequels in which we all die."

Not-Tim blinked. "I said *what?*"

"Who- ...Oh." A click of the lock, and Julian exited his room looking vaguely traumatised as the teens proceeded next door to begin the daunting task of separating The One from his beloved computer.

Neo was still engrossed in an expert level Minesweeper game. He had yet to win a single one since arriving at Kenselton Hotel. Lulz noob. Behind him, Ted had been hit by a burst of literary creativity and was currently in the midst of writing a script for a hypothetical remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

"Neo?"

"Mgg."

"How do you spell 'disintegrate'?"

Neo accidentally clicked on a mine and swore. Ted never knew that that was how you spelt 'disintegrate'. Then the door opened and Eddie yelled at them to get out of there.

\*\*

Not-Tim gave a nervous laugh. "No," he said. "You're not taking me hostage, okay? You can't do that--"

"We can do whatever we want," Jack pointed out. "There are twenty-two of us in this room and only one of you."

Not-Tim was disappointed. "That sucks," he said.

From the other side of the room, Eddie pulled out a rope from a box. "Is this long enough?" he asked, walking over.

Not-Tim looked at the rope warily and wondered just how things had come to this, because this was definitely not a situation he had ever imagined he would be in.

He shook his head. "There has to be another way."

"We're sorry," Conor said. "But the best chance we have of getting back home depends on how much your fans want you to stay alive."

"Okay, I get that! But you really don't need to tie me up-"  
"You might escape," Jack said.

Not-Tim grimaced. "Look, I could have escaped at any point in the last few days if I wanted to. I'm still here. Doesn't that at least say something?"

"Do you have any other suggestions?" Alex asked quietly.

Not-Tim looked at him. Alex looked away.

"We can all get out of here," not-Tim said. "Together. Come on."

"We don't want to get *out*," Eddie said. "We want to get *home*. Or do you just not care about that? Because, hey, why should that matter to you when you can just get out of here in some... pretence at a team effort, and then hire hitmen to get rid of us while you return to your multi-million dollar home and pretend none of this ever happened?"

"Ed-"

Eddie threw the rope onto the floor. "*Why'd you even come here in the first place?*" he yelled. "Some kind of ego-trip? Or to laugh at us? To let us know that the only reason some of us have such f\*\*\*ed up lives is because you were getting paid for it?"

"Ed-"

Eddie lunged out suddenly at the actor, grabbing him by the shoulders in an attempt to tackle him to the ground. Knocked off-balance, not-Tim stumbled back; Alex caught hold of his arm to break his fall, as Jack pulled the teen away.

"That's enough, Eddie."

Eddie wrenched himself out of Jack's grip.

"I hate you," he said to Reeves; then he stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

Silence.

Ted looked as though he wanted to say something; but then the moment passed and he returned somewhat forlornly to writing out his script for the remake of TDESS.

Matt tossed the rope at Jack. "Tie him up."

"Just lock him up in a room," Alex said. "The rope is a bit too much."

Not-Tim nodded his thanks. Alex didn't acknowledge it. He stuck his hands into his pockets and walked off behind a bookshelf to continue reading his book.

\*\*

The bolt shot home on the other side of the door.

"...Hi," not-Tim said, not quite liking the way that Donnie's eyes were narrowed suspiciously at him.

Griffin peeked out from his vantage point on the upper bunk. "Hey, you're that rum guy, right?"

"Yeah," not-Tim said. "Yeah, that's me. Name's Chuck. Uh... got any ideas how to get out of here?"

Muffled banging noises came from the small room's closet.

"Don't mind him," Griffin said, gesturing at it. "He started spouting Shakespeare so we locked him in there. What're you in here for? Killed someone?"

Not-Tim shrugged. "I guess they just didn't like me very much."

Griffin broke into a grin. "Welcome to the club."

\*\*

Human beings have a strange tendency to mistreat their creators, either intentionally or unintentionally. At the one extreme, they nail them to trees and leave them to die; at the less extreme they simply lock them up in rooms and hold them hostage. What exactly in human nature causes this kind of behaviour is as yet unknown. A sense of threatened identity, perhaps, or the idea that your life is being decided by someone or multiple someones you know next to nothing about.

On the fourth floor of Block F of the Kenselton Hotel, it was among its little group of dangerous outcasts that not-Tim finally found a much-yearned for acceptance.



chapter twelve

cut off

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Jack repositioned the cornflakes guy by moving his cornflakes bowl to another part of the room. Jack wanted the table to be clear of cornflakes and people eating them. "Okay," he said. "Now we need a way to tell everyone about the hostage situation. The problem is, we don't even know who's running this place."

"I could find out," Neo offered helpfully. "Just let me get back to the computer-"

"All you do there is play the game with the dead smiley faces," Ted said.

"-And I can put up announcements on his fan sites," Neo continued, surreptitiously stomping on Ted's foot to shut him up. The teen winced and hobbled off to the sofa.

"Yeah, good idea," Conor said.

"What do I say in them?"

*"Hi, we are holding Mr. Reeves hostage. If you are interested in supporting his continued lack of death, please help us contact the relevant authorities who can send us home."*

"We need to give them a deadline," Jack said, not looking too happy with Johnny's suggested message.

"Tomorrow?"

"Too soon. Two days should do it."

\*\*

"You don't want to drink that," Donnie said. "That's pee."

Not-Tim hurriedly returned the bottle to its original position on the carpet. "What?"

Griffin spread his arms wide. "Do you see a bathroom in here?"

Not-Tim lowered his head into his hands and wondered how he had got himself into this mess.

"What am I doing here?" he muttered in rhetorical despair.

"I believe it's called 'imprisonment'," Griffin replied a little too cheerily.

"Argh!" Not-Tim raised his head and bashed his fists against the door. "JAAAACK!"

"He won't come," Donnie said.

"OFFICER TRAVEN!" not-Tim yelled, ignoring him.

"He's not going to come," Griffin said. "We've tried that-"

The door opened and Jack stood there, holding the rope and looking faintly annoyed. He pointed at the rope and raised an eyebrow. "Prefer this?"

"OH COME ON!"

Jack shrugged. "Suit yourself." He shut the door, then opened it again on afterthought. "And keep the noise down. We're having an important discussion out here." The door closed again and bolted shut. Not-Tim stared at the closed door.

"I hate this place," he said.

\*\*

"May I sit here?"

Eddie looked up. He nodded, and Perry sat down on the other half of the open broom cupboard.

For a while they said nothing. Then:

"It's not his fault, you know," Perry said.

Eddie just stared at the carpet in silent mutiny.

"Two hours," Perry continued. "Probably less. That's all the part he had to play in your life. Everything else – it's all you."

Eddie said nothing.

"You, your life – it was all there before the script was even written. You remember your childhood, don't you? And history: World War I, World War II... They weren't Mr. Reeves' fault either. Bad things just happen sometimes. It's part of life."

Eddie swallowed. "But what if the script had been different?" he asked in an unsteady whisper.

Perry looked at him. "Then you wouldn't be you," he said. "And it would be someone else talking to me now."

They sat in silence for a while longer, then Perry patted Eddie on the back and returned to the common room.

\*\*

Kenselton Hotel did not strip residents of their weapons.

They thought it would be more fun that way.

\*\*

Alex returned his book to the shelf. He had problems concentrating on anything much, seeing as how Jack Traven and company were busy having highly audible discussions that involved the possible murder of their creator.

He sat against the bookshelf thinking about life, the universe, and everything, when a glint of dark glass near the ceiling caught his eye. Alex temporarily froze, looking at it; then he got up and walked over to Traven and co.

"Hey," he said to catch their attention, then pointed at the small, convex lens on the ceiling. "Cameras. We're being watched."

They looked at the cameras.

The cameras looked back at them.

Jack took out his gun.

The sound of gunshots and shattering glass rudely jolted Kevin out of his nap with a yell.

\*\*

In the locked room, not-Tim heard the gunshots and the yelling. His heart sank. They were killing each other in there and he couldn't do anything to stop them.

"This place is going to get crowded," Griffin said.

Not-Tim shook his head. "It's Jack," he said. "He's the only one with a gun, I think." A pause. "He wouldn't just shoot for no reason. Either... someone else took his gun, or he had a good reason to-" He broke off.

Donnie was busy looking for an empty bottle because he really needed to go.

"They're probably just killing each other," Griffin said. "Nothing to worry about. That's exactly the kind of thing that might get us out of here. The less united they are, the better for us, right?"

Not-Tim just looked sad.

Griffin concluded that he was one strange dude; but at least he was better company than Donnie, who had just located an empty bottle.

\*\*

The rest of that day passed with little event. All they could do now was wait.

Not-Tim hoped that the door would not open in the night and crush his head where he lay on the ground, having decided that it would not be a good idea to fight Donnie over the bed.

David Allen Griffin always took the upper bunk, because according to Dharke he rules, and his ruling must not be questioned.

Not-Tim hoped that someone would remember to feed Bob.

The small desklight was on; in this room of no windows, there would be no daylight to disperse the pitch black of night. A sliver of gold illumination peeked through the bottom of the door, but that alone was not enough to see by.

The sound of repeated bumping noises eventually got not-Tim off the floor and over to the room's closet, where Don John was tiredly trying to get into a viable position for sleep.

Not-Tim spent several moments just standing there by the closet debating over whether it would be a good idea to let him out. He wanted to, but it didn't seem to be wise to get Griffin and Donnie mad at him, especially in this confined space.

He decided that he didn't care. Don John had been stuck in there for the crime of spouting Shakespeare at people, and he wasn't spouting Shakespeare now.

Not-Tim unlocked the closet and let him out.

The once-closeted was half-asleep but sufficiently alert to regard his rescuer with suspicion.

"And who may you be?"

"A fellow prisoner." Not-Tim gestured at the ground. "Get some sleep."

He got back to his own private spot of carpet and eventually dozed off.

\*\*

### The Next Day

In the real world, the news spread quickly out from the fan sites to the newspapers to the public, and a representative of Kenselton Facility was forced at mike-point to admit that, yeah, they had sort of let an actor in there, because a hostage situation had been one of the last things they had expected, and it was coffee break time so could he go now?

"Besides," said a coffee-intolerant Kenselton staff member who took over from his colleague, "the whole thing might have been Reeves' idea, for all we know-"

(Whereupon the Keanu SWAT Team went wtf do you know what a stupid risk that would have been, seeing as how many people already want him dead?)

"-but we won't know for sure either way until we find and watch the surveillance footage."

Meanwhile, the Wachowskis heard the news and its method of initial digital revelation through fan site hacking, and decided that they had a pretty certain idea whose work it had been.

Their eyes brimmed over with pride.

"Good job, Neo," Andy said softly.

\*\*

Somewhere on the Internet

"Why'd they give them Internet access in the first place?"

"Apparently they didn't. They just gave them computers for entertainment purposes."

But Neo had computer mad skillz, and the security guards had wireless communications with the real world, and the two went well together.

\*\*

Elsewhere on the Internet

"Screw Reeves. I just want Dr. Mercer."

\*\*

The Keanu SWAT Team were unhappy at the number of people who were not interested in supporting Mr. Reeves' continued lack of death, and who were making bad jokes about it that mostly revolved around the word 'lifeless'.



chapter thirteen

holding the floor

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The announcement at lunchtime that day rang out from hidden speakers all over Kenselton Hotel:

*"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."*

Silence.

And then angry noises and the sound of running feet erupted all over Kenselton Hotel.

"BARRICADE THE DOORS!" Jack yelled, once the announcement and its suggestion of imminent danger sunk in.

Kevin was tipped off the sofa as three of them lifted it up and managed after several tries to squeeze it out of the common room and shove it across the front stairwell door.

The back stairwell door started to open; Conor threw himself against it and hollered for reinforcements as clawing hands found their way through the growing opening, only to be painfully crushed as backup arrived in the form of Matt, Jjaks and Neo.

Neo mostly just sat in front of the door and braced it. It made him feel special, sitting on the floor.

People were standing on the sofa at the other end of the corridor, it having proved to be of insufficient weight to withstand the combined strength of angry people who wanted lunch.

Meanwhile in the locked room, Griffin and Donnie were regarding not-Tim with a new suspicion. Not-Tim buried his head in his hands and wondered for the umpteenth time just how things had ended up this way.

Donnie pointed at Don John, remarkably still asleep – it had been a while since he had been able to stretch out fully.

"What's he doing out here?" he asked.

Not-Tim looked up. "It's not very comfortable to sleep in a closet," he said.

"Right," Griffin said warily. "Your good deed for the day? So how did a nice guy like you get put in here?"

"Who *are* you?" Donnie demanded.

Griffin hopped off the chair. "What do you think will happen if we shoot the hostage?" he asked, gaze fixed intently on not-Tim as he approached him.

Not-Tim scrambled to his feet and backed against the wall. "Look, I really don't think that'll be a good-

The door swung open.

"Jack says all of you get out of here," said Tommy, looking nervously at the four prisoners.



\*\*

"We were just trying to get home!" Conor yelled at the mob trying to break down the rear stairwell door.

"And we're just trying to get lunch!" yelled an unidentified male on the other side.

"YEAH!" yelled the mob.

Eddie ran out of the common room towards the front stairwell door, rolling the tabletop from the dismantled table and carrying the table leg. "Put this in between the sofa and the door," he suggested

"That means we'll have to move the sofa," Tod said. "Kind of risky – hey, pass me the table leg."

The table leg was passed over, and proved extremely useful for whacking any arm that got through the opening, giving them enough leeway to try to squeeze the tabletop in between the sofa and the door. The doorknob however proved problematic and had a tendency to get in the way.

"Look, if we get them to send us home, they'll send you home as well!" Jack was shouting. "We're all in the same boat here!"

They gave up and instead attempted to squeeze the tabletop through the opening of the door and into the mob.

"You heard what they said!" yelled an unidentified female mob member. "They're not letting any of us out any way!"

"YEAH!" yelled the mob.

"So the least you can do is let the hostage go and get us our food and water back!"

"YEAH!" yelled the mob.

Griffin clapped Jack on the back. "Hi, Jack," he said.

"Get out of the way – Neo! Get back on the computer, and, uh..."

"We're all going to die, aren't we?" Julian observed calmly.

"...and tell them to leave everyone else out of this. Then we'll get out of this place through the roof with Reeves, and we can talk with them-"

"We *are* all going to die," Julian concluded.

Jack was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and pronouncements of certain future death by people in the medical profession really weren't helping.

"It was nice of you to let us out, Jack," Griffin said, who didn't plan on leaving him alone for quite some time.

Alex was sitting on the sofa. It was a pretty comfortable spot to be.

"You're not going to achieve anything from getting in here," he told whoever had not yet been knocked into unconsciousness by the tabletop on the other side of the door. "What're you gonna do, kill all of us? What if you accidentally kill the hostage?"

Scott poked his head out of the common room. "Jack? Do we really need the kitchen sink out here? It's not coming off the ground."

"Okay. *Forget the kitchen sink-*"

"All right."

"Hey, Jack-"

Officer Traven finally lost it. "I CAN'T THINK WITH ALL THIS NOISE!" he yelled, and nervous breakdown -ed against an innocent door.

Not-Tim grabbed hold of his shoulders and shook him. "Calm down, Jack," he said. "Look at me. *Look at me.* Calm down. It's okay. Just breathe. *Breathe,* Jack. I'll take over from here, okay? Just sit down for a while, take things easy, and let go of my arm."

Jack wouldn't let go of his arm.

Not-Tim sighed. He patted Officer Traven on the back to calm him down.

This was the strangest week of his life.

The speakers suddenly came on again, and another voice boomed through the hotel and caused the mob to temporarily stop in their attempts to break down the doors.

*"We have an important announcement to make. Please listen carefully."*

They listened carefully.

Rick Astley music blared through the speakers.

*"YOU ALL JUST GOT RICK ROLL'D!"* yelled the announcer in unrestrained glee. *"HAHAHAHAHAHA..."*

From the background came another voice: *"Jerry, please turn that off, step away from the microphone, and get back to sweeping the floor."*

\*\*

"How's it going?"

Neo jumped at the sudden voice, and did not calm down much when he saw that it belonged to not-Tim.

"I, uh, posted the message," he said anyway. "On all the major news sites that I could get into."

"That was fast," not-Tim said, looking impressed.

"Thanks." Neo wondered just how much of his computer mad skillz Keanu was responsible for.

"I don't own a computer," not-Tim said, and Neo involuntarily jerked in his chair, partly from the sudden paranoid thought that perhaps it might be a good idea to wear a tinfoil hat after all, and partly from the content of the statement itself.

He looked at not-Tim in disbelief. *"What?"* he choked out.

"Relax, Neo. You're always so tense. I can't do anything to you; you beat me, remember?"

Neo wasn't going to let him change the subject so easily. *"How can you not own a computer,"* he said, trying to restrain himself from yelling.

"Well, they aren't exactly essential for survival."

Neo could not believe the blasphemies he was hearing. He turned pale and put a hand on the computer mouse for comfort.

The speakers came on again. *"Well, that's really noble of you,"* the voice said. *"But we're afraid that, no, we're not going to tell them to leave you alone. Cheers."*

The speakers went off.

From behind the rear stairwell door, the sounds of screams and strange buzzing noises suddenly filled the air. The pushing suddenly stopped.

There was a knock.

Conor and Jjaks looked at each other in bewilderment.

The voice that came through the door sounded highly pissed off, but was still sufficiently recognisable as belonging to one of them.

"It's *John*, assholes."

John Constantine gave the barest of glances to the ones who opened the door to let him in. Beyond him they temporarily saw the gruesome remains of those who had not got out of John's way when politely requested to do so.

John put the deactivated lightsaber back into his pocket. "Where is he."

"Who?"

"Reeves."

Scott pointed. "He went into that room."

John stalked off towards it.

"Don't kill him!" Conor shouted, just in case John did not quite know how hostage situations worked.

"Shit," thought not-Tim as he saw John come in, but all John did was toss a communicator onto the computer desk.

"Talk to them," he said. "I got that off a guard."

Then he turned and walked back out the door, digging in his pocket for a cigarette as he spotted a nice smoking spot near Dr. Julian Mercer.

\*\*

Somewhere in the Kenselton Hotel, an interdimensional walkie talkie crackled to life.

"Hello?"

A bored looking temp staff unhappily closed a game of Minesweeper and picked up the walkie talkie. "Yeah."

"Uh... who's that?"

"What?"

"Is that, uh, Kenselton Facility?"

"Yeah duh."

The sound of a brief struggle and "give me that", and then the same voice, but different: "Okay. I don't care WHO you are. Just get whoever's in charge and let us talk to them *right now*, or those guys will pull the trigger and you'll never see Mr. Reeves again."

A pause.

In Kenselton Hotel, Neo looked at not-Tim. "...Did you just talk about yourself in the fourth person?"

Not-Tim grimaced. This place confused him. "I don't know."

Meanwhile, the temp staff wondered if the threatened lack of sight of Reeves was supposed to be a bad thing, because it was a lame geek fish in its spare time

\*\*

The speakers came on.

"*All right, what is it now?*"

The voice was different from that which had made the previous announcements. The fish had indeed got hold of the authorities.

"Leave the rest of them alone," not-Tim said into the communicator, where his voice was picked up from the other side and transmitted back to Kenselton Hotel through the speakers for everyone to hear. "Let them have their lunch. They have nothing to do with this."

*"Of course they do. Hunger is a great motivator. You probably can't keep them out for long. They'll rescue the hostage, send him back to us, and everyone can be happy again."*

"Not if we shoot the hostage first," not-Tim pointed out.

*"Then we'll just leave you all to starve in there."*

"But the hostage would be dead," not-Tim reminded them.

*"And so will you. You have one life in your hands; we have thousands. Think about that, Mr. – who am I talking to?"*

"...Jack Traven," not-Tim said.

An incredulous yell erupted from outside the corridor. Not-Tim glanced nervously at the door and wondered if it might be a better idea to lock it.

Neo was regarding him with a new fear. He slowly edged away, and then left his side for the bathroom.

"You can't starve us to death," not-Tim continued. "We've found a way out. I don't think you want a stampede in L.A."

*"Yeah, right. There's no way out of there."* But the voice didn't sound all too certain, for its owner was busy wondering if perhaps his affair with the architect's wife had been a bad idea after all. *"You're in an isolated bubble of hyperspace, Jack."*

People were shouting outside in the corridor, snatches of words audible through the closed door:

**"YOU SHUT UP!"**

*"Jack, put the gun away. He's not worth it-"*

*"Are you going to shoot me, Officer Traven?"*

*"No. No he's not, no- Jack. Jack, liste- NO!"*

The thump of bodies hitting carpet, and then everybody heard the gun go off.

Things froze for a while.

Then it was with a growing panic that not-Tim sprang out of his chair and hurtled out the door to see Alex Wyler lying motionless on the carpet, and Jack, trembling and wide-eyed with shock, stumbling to his feet, dropping the weapon and backing against the wall-

**"WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?"** hollered their correspondent at Kenselton Facility, but no one was listening to him.

"NO!" not-Tim shouted, dropping to the side of the fallen. "No... No! Alex...!" He grabbed a wrist, felt for a pulse – nothing. "Alex. No!"

"It was an accident," Jack said, his voice cracking. "I didn't... he jumped on me. He was trying to..." Jack looked at Griffin, down on the carpet staring ashen-faced at Alex and knowing that that could have been him.

And not-Tim wondered why he cried for those whom days ago he'd never known existed.

Perry came over, placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, as around them continued the sounds of those trying to break down the doors, and the screaming that came through the speakers declaring that the hostage had better still be alive or else.

In the temporary solace of the blocked-off corridor, blood seeped into the carpet. Alex's blood. Keanu's blood. Their blood.

Then the doors finally burst open, and they were upon them.



chapter fourteen

leaving

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The mob surged through both doors on both ends of the corridor; they were forced towards the centre to make their last stand; some ran into rooms and locked themselves in; at the fringes they were pulled forcefully away from the others and gang-beaten and yelled at. Neo ran out of his room and much increased their overall defence capabilities, but outnumbered and outside the Matrix, his powers were limited.

Tommy noted how they were largely ignoring Alex and promptly fell over and played dead. John fingered his lightsaber, but in such close quarters there was too much risk of team kills.

Some woman had Nelson in a half-nelson because she thought it would be funny.

"Hi," Jesse said, as he turned his head in his hiding spot under a bed to find the cornflakes guy trembling next to him. The cornflakes guy didn't like all the noise.

Not-Tim fought alongside Neo, when the latter felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Found you."

Neo ducked a fist, connected his foot with a stomach, and turned, unable to believe his eyes. "Trinity?"

Trinity kung-fu-ed a rabid six-year-old Dakota Fanning character who was about to ram Neo with an innocent chair, and gave a small smile. "You think I'd miss the fun?" She kicked another guy in the crotch. He doubled over, yelling in pain and sudden impotence.

Kevin leant against the closed door of the broom cupboard, shaking slightly as his imagination put pictures to the noises he heard outside. He wanted an aspirin.

Some blond kid pushed his way through, yelling for Ted, whom he finally discovered unsuccessfully ducking blows as he tried to convince the dude with his hand around the teen's neck why they should totally stop all this heinous fighting and just be friends.

Bill S. Preston Esquire grabbed a piece of broken tabletop and broke it over the strangling-dude's head. "Leave Ted alone, you evil fictional dickweed!" he yelled.

The evil fictional dickweed released Ted and stumbled back in pain as Ted broke into a delighted grin at the sight of his best friend. "Bill!!"

Bill grabbed his arm. "Let's bail, dude."

"I can't just leave them-"

"I believe that they will be able to handle- Hey, how's it hangin', Neo?"

"WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?" Neo screamed, dodging an uppercut and delivering one of his own.

"Right. Catcha later, dude. C'mon, Ted."

And now it was becoming clear that not all who came through the doors had hurtful intent; an increasing number turned out to be family or friends who really did not appreciate being attacked when all they were trying to do was locate husbands, sons, boyfriends, brothers, or friends and get them out of the madness and to safety. Shouted names filled the air.

Not-Tim felt all alone. No one was calling for him. Then again, it was hard to think about things like that when pieces of furniture were flying about, and also taking into consideration that most of the attackers

had him as their objective, only firstly they were having trouble identifying him and secondly they didn't even know if he was still alive.

Down by Alex's body, a woman was sobbing. The wrist tag hadn't been sufficient; Kate had needed to be completely sure; finding his wallet, flipping it open, driver's licence, ID, and a small photo of the three of them – Alex, Kate, and their young son smiling at the camera. That had been all the confirmation she needed. She sat there against the wall, cradling his head and crying.

Jack caught sight of her face and couldn't stop staring. And he couldn't bring himself to tell her that it had been his gun.

Things were slowly quietening down. Those who weren't friends were friends of friends, or friends of friends of friends, or friends of friends of friends of friends.

Six degrees of separation is a beautiful thing.

\*\*

Everything had settled. Jack – having somewhat regained his composure – climbed up to stand on the sofa, using it as his own personal soapbox as he tried to get people's attention over the noise.

"We can get out of here," he said from his soapsofa. "There are exits from the roofs. Go to the top floor, break through the ceiling and get out-"

Someone randomly threw a megaphone at Jack. They missed and hit the sofa instead.

"Ow," thought the sofa sadly.

"There are stairs on top of the roofs that lead out of this place," Jack continued, ignoring the megaphone.

"How would that help us get home?" someone asked.

"It's better than starving to death in here," someone else said.

"Which of you is Reeves?" asked some guy whom we shall call Jeff, though his really name very probably isn't Jeff.

Several of the Keanu-spawn pointed. Not-Tim winced, remembered names, and made a mental note to make sequels in which bad things happened to them.

"Please leave," not-Jeff told not-Tim.

"What good would that do?" Perry cut in. "Do you want to stay here forever?"

"If it means I'm alive, then sure!" not-Jeff said. "How can we survive out there? We have no jobs, no homes, no identification, no money. It'll come down to either a life of crime, or death."

"Not if all of us get out there," someone else said. "There are about 20,000 of us in total. They can't just ignore us like that."

"Uh," said the voice from the speaker, "*what's going on in there?*"

"Everybody, just leave," not-Tim said. "Get out of this place while you can. Tell everyone else to go. We can work things out later. It's not safe in here. I'll talk to them and see if I can stall them a little."

No one was moving much, save several half-hearted attempts out the stairwell door.

Jack picked up the megaphone. "YOU HEARD THE HOSTAGE!" he yelled. "MOVE! GET OFF OUR FLOOR!"

Back in Neo's room, not-Tim sat down by the computer and picked up the communicator. "Hi," he said into it.

"*WHAT THE F\*\*\* IS GOING ON THERE?*" the Kenselton Hotel representative bellowed.

Perry grabbed Nelson's arm as the latter made to leave. "Not you," he said. "We stay here."

"What?"

A sudden telepathic message broke into all their minds, courtesy of a helpful resident of Kenselton Hotel: *<There are exits through the roofs. This is our chance. Everyone, get out.>*

"We don't leave until he leaves," Perry continued, gesturing at the room in which not-Tim sat.

"Well," not-Tim was saying into the communicator, "several people died, for starters, thanks to you. Oh; and I think some furniture got broken..."

The KH rep struggled to regain some semblance of his dignity. *"Is the hostage still alive?"* he asked.

"...Yeah, uh, we're not too sure about that," not-Tim said, randomly checking his pulse just for fun. "Lots of bodies lying around, and apparently some of them aren't even dead. What's the hostage look like?"

*"Er. Six foot one, black hair, br- DON'T PLAY GAMES WITH ME! THIS IS SERI-"* The voice broke off as it was interrupted by a fainter one in the distance. *"What? ...WHAT D'YOU MEAN, THEY'RE BREAKING OUT? ...Well, if it's just the Hulk, that's not really- wait, THEY AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE ABLE TO GET OUT OF THERE"*

Rants about some moronic architect filled the speakers. Not-Tim put down the communicator and looked up as a handful of Keanu-spawn wandered in to see what was happening.

"Why're you all still here?" he asked quietly.

"Moral support," said Johnny in a way that suggested he would rather be escaping with everyone else.

"All of you?"

Johnny shrugged. "Most. Some blond kid dragged Ted away before anyone could stop them."

The KH rep hadn't turned off the connection in his distress, and as he made a private phone call to the moronic architect he had been ranting about, everyone in Kenselton Hotel got to hear the conversation:

*"I SAID THAT THERE WASN'T TO BE ANY WAY OUT, YOU SON OF A-"*

*"Yeah, I know,"* came a lazy drawl from the other side. *"But, well, fire regulations, you know. Apparently you need quite a few of those for a facility that size, and there must have been some fire somewhere in the hotel that activated the escape system-"*

Loud swearing filled the speakers. Several kids in Kenselton Hotel learnt some interesting new words that day.

*"Also,"* the architect calmly continued, *"there's also the matter of that little affair you had with my wife-"*

*"YOU TWO WERE ON A BREAK!"*

Not-Tim got up from the desk and went out into the corridor. Several in the room followed him out, with the notable exception of Neo, who headed straight for the computer and sat there, just looking at the screen.

He placed his hand on the keyboard and hit several keys. A final 'Enter' shut down the computer for the last time; and The One continued sitting there, hand gently gripping the mouse, looking somehow as though he were fighting back tears.

Kate Forster was still there outside, quiet now as she sat by dead!Alex. Not-Tim crouched down next to her.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

Several seconds of silence.

"We've got to get out of this place," not-Tim said. "They might find a way to cut off-"

"Okay."

The stairwell was empty now, the lower floors all cleared. Those who had lacked the foresight and taken the lift found themselves stopping on every floor, only to be met with people who wanted to get in but could not for lack of space, whereupon the doors shut and the lift proceeded to the next floor for the same procedure to be repeated.

"Let's go," not-Tim said, and they left, slowly at first, then faster as they realised that they would have over sixty floors to cover by foot.

Jack, Neo and not-Tim brought up the rear; Jack and not-Tim because they were responsible that way, and Neo because it had taken a while for him to finish saying goodbye to his computer. The One wiped away a tear as he closed the door of his room for good; walking past a dismantled table, a sofa, and a room whose two beds were soaked in blood as he ran up to join the others.

The journey upwards was unexpectedly easy. Those in Kenselton Hotel endowed with magical powers or special abilities had done what they could to speed up the escape; a burst of energy here and there, the occasional escalator replacing several flights of stairs, a helpful tailwind, lowered gravity, or even just cheerful banners of encouragement that assaulted them at various landings and occasionally suffocated someone.

The KH rep and the architect's private argument continued to sound throughout the place.

*"IT'S BECOMING A STAMPEDE OUT THERE! SEE WHAT YOUR FIRE EXITS LED TO?"*

*"Mmm-hmm. ...Hey, Spiderman just swung past my window! Cooool..."*

*"MAKE THEM STOP GETTING OUT, YOU F\*\*\*ING ASSHOLE! ISN'T THERE ANY WAY YOU COULD DO THAT?"*

*"What? Oh. That. Er, yeah... possibly. I guess I could just sever the connection between the two portal... door thingys. Might be a little tricky, though..."*

*"JUST DO IT!"*

*"That's not very polite of you, is it? Say 'please'."*

*"PLEASE!"*

*"And apologise about what you did with my wife."*

*"YOU TWO WERE ON A BREAK!"*

They reached the top floor behind the last of the other Block F escapees, where the crude stack of boxes that John had initially piled up had since been increased in size and charmed to stay completely still and firm and as steady as regular steps, leading up to an enlarged hole that looked out into the blackness of the void.

People streamed up out onto the roof and along the barely-visible flight of free-floating black steps leading up to the patch of rectangular light that was the fire exit and the real world and freedom.

All over, in the distance, they could see similar sights happening on the other ten blocks of Kenselton Hotel. Some had already been completely evacuated of its couple of thousand residents; others were down to the last few.

It was eerie out here; or would have been if not for the constantly moving and pushing crowd. There was no sound in this isolated bubble of hyperspace other than that they made themselves. The broadcast conversation faded away, held captive by the light and warmth that was Kenselton Hotel.

The void stretched on forever, an infinity of unending blackness up down left right all around surrounding the impossible islands that were the several blocks of Kenselton Hotel and their queer, flimsy connections to that other world beyond.

And now they were the only ones left, as the last of those on the other blocks exited through the doors.

Kevin was the first of Block F's fourth floor to make it through into the sunlight, the others following closely behind into the alley and out into the main street where already Los Angeles had turned to chaos under the pressure of thousands exiting through doors all over the city.



At the rear, not-Tim turned to face Neo. "You first," he offered, and then felt the sudden jerk on his leg as Jack grabbed him in panic, the black connecting steps suddenly gone and the rectangles of light winking out all over and he was falling off the roof when Neo grabbed his shoulder, grasp slipping down his arm to his wrist before it tightened securely, Neo yelling as he tried to brace himself flat against the roof, right hand clawing desperately for purchase, something to grab onto as he too started sliding inexorably towards the edge, pulled down by more than twice his body weight-

Not-Tim's foot found the top of a ledge – a pathetic lip no more than an inch wide, but it took some weight for the moment; until his foot slipped off again and tried once more to regain its footing on the tiny area-

"Jack, climb up. Climb up-"

Jack's gaze was fixed upwards to the roof, where Neo was still sliding towards the edge, body desperately scraping the coarse cement-

"Jack-"

A sudden flash of decisiveness crossed Jack's face.

He let go of Keanu's leg and fell into the void.

"*JACK!*"

Sixty floors of white concrete whooshed past in a blur, still-lighted windows into deserted corridors seeming to beckon him towards firm footing and safety-

And now Block F was far above his head, the far-off shouts as distant as in a dream-

And Jack fell into the void, and the void took him.

\*\*

Jack opened his eyes. He was lying face-down on a floor; a fairly nice floor with polished tiles, albeit one that felt slightly damp.

There was a sign just in front of him with words on it. Slowly, he raised his head to read what it said:

*'Caution: Wet Floor'*.

Jack blinked and got slowly to his feet. There was music playing softly from somewhere, the words just audible:

*"Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down..."*

Jack looked around. There was someone sitting behind a desk, feet propped up on it, face partly hidden beneath a baseball cap and partly hidden behind a book entitled 'The Five People You Meet On Earth'.

Jack walked cautiously up to the desk. He opened his mouth to say something, then noticed the short FAQ tacked on the desk:

*"FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS -*

*Q: Am I dead?*

*A: Yes.*

*Q: Really?*

*A: Yes."*

This put his brain off-track for a while.

"Uh, hi," he said instead.

"Mmm."

"Am I supposed to go somewhere?"

A sigh. The person behind the desk put down her book and took her feet off the desk. A nametag identified her as Fhille.

"Name?"

"Jack Traven."

Fhille hit a bunch of keys and scanned through the results on the computer screen. "Yeah, you're listed here. Oh, you killed someone today. That's bad, that is."

"It was an accident!"

"Mmm. I doubt that mattered to Alexander Wyler. He came in a while ago. Nice chap. ...Okay, it says here that you apparently saved two lives when you died, names Keanu Charles Reeves and Thomas A.\* Anderson-

(Fhille squinted at the footnote: *"\* no one knows what the 'A' stands for."*)

"Yeah," she continued, "looks like that act saved you from your initial fate of being boiled in a pot of bolognese sauce for eternity. And... er, yeah, that's it. Looks like they accidentally deleted the rest of your life's history prior to this week. It's been happening a lot lately since IBHA decided to move all our computers onto Windows Vista..."

"IBHA?" Jack asked.

"Isolated Bubble of Hyperspace Afterlife," Fhille explained. "We don't normally get much business, at least not until recently when that hotel thing opened up. So the administration's kind of shoddy. That's why that floor there is always wet, see-"

"What's going to happen to me?" Jack interrupted.

"Sheesh. Relax, dude. There's no hurry. Er... yeah; says here that you're getting spared from the pot of sauce, and instead you're gonna get... uh, reincarnated as Alex's dog. Yep. 'Cause you killed him and all, see..."

Jack spluttered. *"What?"*

Fhille sighed. "Don't worry, I'm sure he's a good master. Just go to that room over there and wait. Unless of course you prefer the eternal bolognese..."

Jack didn't prefer the eternal bolognese. He went along like a good boy.

\*\*

Neo knew that there were times when it was best not to speak.

"Thanks," not-Tim said quietly when they were both safely back on the roof and sitting on its edge, Neo studiously avoiding the other's gaze and acknowledging the gratitude with a simple nod.

More awkward silence followed as they looked out into the void, the steps to freedom no longer there.

"What do we do now?" not-Tim asked.

Neo finally looked at him, then looked away again.

Eventually, not-Tim got to his feet and went over to the opening that led back down to Block F. He made his way down the steps of boxes. Neo followed after him some distance back; speeding up slightly towards the lift as not-Tim held the door open for him.

The descended towards the fourth floor.

"What do I tell them?" Neo asked after several seconds of silence.

Not-Tim hesitated. "If you tell them that I'm still in here, they'll try to get me out. But they might leave you behind." A pause. "Just see if you can find out what the situation's like out there."

Neo nodded.

The lift dinged and opened its doors on the fourth floor, deserted once again except for dead!Alex. Not-Tim closed the stairwell door once they were both through, plunging them into the eerie quiet of the corridor.

Neo made a beeline for his beloved computer.

Not-Tim paused momentarily in the corridor, then went to the nearest room and dragged a blanket out of it. He draped it over Alex's body, covering it, then went off to the common room.

The light was still on, the door still open; no one had bothered about saving electricity in the mad rush of escape, and electricity was probably infinite in isolated bubbles of hyperspace.

Not-Tim entered, side-stepping the empty overturned crates that had once held stolen rum, glancing briefly at the interesting variation of tools lying by the sink from an unsuccessful attempt at prying it off the ground, identical fingerprints marring the shine of the handles of screwdrivers and crowbars and sledgehammers; half a cup of coffee that Scott had given up on was sitting on the counter, and not-Tim picked it up and finished it after a moment's consideration.

A pack of cards scattered on the floor where they had fallen when their table had been hurriedly pulled away; a shattered camera on the ceiling, its sight forever darkened. A stick. Down by a corner of the wall, a bored scribble in his handwriting: *get me out of here*.

This was his room, not-Tim thought, fingering a strand of dark hair he found on the sofa.

This was his floor.

\*\*

"HEY!"

The others turned at Jjaks yell, to be greeted with the sight of the lack of steps behind the door. Where the portal had been was now a regular dingy-looking corridor that led off to boring places.

"I wasn't the last one," Jjaks added hurriedly. "There were others."

Conor gripped the doorway and peered into the boring corridor. "Who?"

"Jack, I think. Yeah. And-"

Conor released the doorway and swivelled around. "DON'T GO YET!" he yelled. "HEADCOUNT!"

"How many of us are there?" Shane asked, as Scott grabbed Tommy and Jesse before they could escape to get a better look at the cool Sith slicing things apart.

"I don't know," Conor said with a grimace. "We never really counted... OKAY, WHO'S MISSING?"

"Jack."

"Neo's not here," Perry said. "And Keanu."

"Alex... no. Ah-"

"Where's Ted?"

"Ran off earlier."

Conor nodded. "Okay. Anyone else?"

"I don't know. You all look the same to me," someone muttered, and shut up before they could find out who it was.

Sirens were sounding in the background above the din created by several thousand hungry people being where they had not been several moments ago.

Eddie gazed up at several helicopters making their way towards the breakout.

"What are they trying to do?" he asked.

"It doesn't look good," Julian said.

Then the sound of helicopter gunfire raked through the air.

"Get back in!" Conor yelled, but no one save the suicidal needed to be told, pushing into the corridor, all Keanu-spawn at first until the rest of the earlier-out crowd caught up, shoving to get into what looked like the only escape-

Orders yelled through megaphones; something about ceasing fire because there were civilians about, to just focus on King Kong because he was big and trying to eat everyone dressed in yellow, and was everyone listening oh crap no one was listening to him man his job sucked and no one cared anymore and he might just as well sit in a corner and wear guyliner and cut himself-

And then a switch was flipped somewhere at Kenselton HQ, and the corridor *changed*.

They were in the void again, only this time with no rooftops in sight, just a strange, shifting black mass beneath their feet that suddenly started to crack, separating them and drifting apart; people at the doorways coming to a sudden stop as they saw no more reliable floor to step on, the momentum of the shoving crowd nonetheless causing several to fall over and into the void-

Tommy doing a running jump away from strangers towards one of the three groups of his floormates, grabbing Shane for support as he landed, pulling both of them down, but still safe; Eddie Talbot too far from any of them on an island of his own, people yelling at him to jump; his attempted starts, then panicked stops as the distance grew from two metres to three, then four, and it was too far to jump and the teen could only just stand there looking desperately towards them as he drifted away into the darkness-

An unexpected bright green anti-Shakespeare robot appearing out of nowhere, accompanied by screams that they wondered about until Hamlet and Don John were sucked up into the belly of the bot and taken away goodness knows where, but this is the kind of thing that happens when the Infinite Improbability Drive is turned on, and I can't write Shakespeare anyway so I'm not complaining-

And then the black islands started disappearing with the people on them, winking out of sight seconds apart from each other, as the previous residents of Kenselton Hotel were hit by the sensation of interdimensional travel, felt only once before and hoped to only feel again with home as the destination.

Somewhere in Kenselton HQ, someone cursed. "WHO OPENED UP ALL THE PORTALS AND THEN LEFT FOR THE BATHROOM?"

Somewhere in Kenselton HQ, someone hit a hurried selection of computer keys and buttons.

The winking out stopped. But there were only the dregs left, the majority of people all gone, and Eddie realising that he was the only one of his floor still around in the void- And then he saw the rooftop of Kenselton Hotel, Block C, materialise just below him and jumped down in relief at finding steady ground again.

Some others were less lucky.

But we don't care about them.



chapter fifteen

separated

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**Group B:** Shane, Perry, Jjaks, Chris, Matt, Tommy

They tumbled out of the portal onto the hard stone floor of a room bathed in a pervasive dark red glow. It was a high room of clean-cut architecture, made symmetrically of stone with no exit or entrance anywhere in sight.

In the centre was a deep, man-made square pool of water that shone red in the untraceable light.

"What is this place?" Chris asked, his voice echoing off the walls.

Jjaks reached out a hand to the wall. The stone was smooth and cool to the touch. It went all around in an unbroken circle.

"Everyone okay?" Perry asked.

A chorus of half-hearted 'yeahs' filled the room.

Shane walked to the edge of the pool and crouched down. He stuck a finger in the water, and then let the rest of his hand fall in as he squinted at something down on the side of the pool.

"There's a-" he started, then broke off. He wasn't sure what it was, but... Shane took his hand out of the water and shook off the droplets. It felt like normal water, not toxic waste or something.

"There's a what?" Perry asked, walking up.

Shane pointed. "That looks like a door," he said, the red glow of the rippling water casting a strange reflection on his face. "Down there."

"It's really deep," Tommy said.

"Very insightful."

A pause. Matt left the pool and went back to the side of the room, following the wall, looking for a break or a line that might indicate a door... He looked upwards. The roof was a perfect dome of bare stone.

Shane got up and walked over to the side of the pool closer to the door. He hesitated. "Do I go in, or does someone else want to volunteer?"

No one else wanted to volunteer.

Shane looked at the pool.

Then he shrugged and jumped in, treading water for several seconds, then taking a deep breath and going underwater as he let the weight of his clothes help him down towards the door.

It wasn't a very good door, if it was a door. It looked sort of like the opening to an old oven of the sort that Hansel and Gretel once stuffed a poor old woman into when all she wanted was to have them over for dinner.

Shane fingered the sides of the door; it was shut tight, with some kind of stiff bolt holding it there. And a lever, next to the door, but he had no time to wonder about that before he felt his oxygen going and kicked himself back up to the surface for air.

"It's a door," he said, gasping for breath as he gripped the side of the pool. "I can't open it, but there's... some kind of lever there..."

Shane took another breath and went back down. He grabbed at the lever. Tugged it upwards. And then it gave as the momentum propelled him back upwards, with a strange whooshing noise that suddenly filled the pool and-

"Get in!" Shane yelled once his head broke the surface and he realised what was happening. "Quick!"

"What?"

"The water's going down! That door's the only way out I can see-"

They jumped in, with the exception of Tommy, who stood by the side looking panicked. "I can't swim-"

"Just get in!"

"I-"

Finally the teen steeled himself and leapt into the water, Shane grabbing him as he started to sink below the surface.

"Downwards," Shane said, turning his head as Tommy spat out a mouthful of water and attempted to unintentionally strangle him. "Kick downwards. Don't kick me. ...I SAID, don't kick me!"

Jjaks came over to assist and got several panicked kicks in return.

The water was receding fast, taking them further and further down until soon all they could see was the ceiling above and the sides of the pool rising up all around; and the door, ahead, getting closer and more distinct in the red light.

\*\*

**Group A:** Conor, John C, Johnny U, Nelson, Paul, Tod, Jesse, Kip, the cornflakes guy.

It took a moment for them to realise that the blast of freezing wind was not part of the interdimensional travel and showed no signs of stopping; nor that their vision was going to get any clearer, and soon, fumbling steps to steady themselves against the force of the gale met packed snow and frozen ice and they realised that the white, white scenery didn't seem intent on changing any time soon.

The cold cut deeper with each passing moment

"What- ... - happened-" Johnny yelled, his voice blown off by the wind as he struggled to regain his footing, arms flailing for a second.

The cornflakes guy was whimpering in the cold, crouching down with his arms hugging himself and rocking slightly, teeth chattering, on the verge of tears. Paul got hold of him and tried to pull him back to his feet. "C'mon, we can't-... here-...-t up-"

Nelson pointed a finger at the convenient mountain face some distance from them, shouting something; Conor agreeing and starting to walk-

"Dimensional travel," John Constantine muttered helpfully. "We could be anywhere."

"MOVE IT, PEOPLE!" Conor yelled in a frustrated attempt to make himself heard over the wind. "DO YOU-.... - FREEZE TO DEATH -...- -ERE?"

The party of nine started moving, buffeted sideways by the wind that stung their faces and exposed skin with pricks of ice. They huddled together, grasping for each other lest the wind blow them too far astray, those in the centre partly shielded by the others.

The cornflakes guy was full out crying now. He seemed adamant to just stop right where he was and die if Paul and Tod would just let go of him.

"J-... - leave him," Nelson said. "-s his choice."

"Nah," Jesse said. "Might n-... – him for food- I'M JOKING, I'M JOKING!" he yelled as he was suddenly met with glares.

Getting closer to the rock, they scanned the mountain face for signs of openings that might mark a convenient cave, stopping by a promising dark narrow gap just wide enough for one of them to crawl through that produced echoes when Conor shouted random stuff inside.

Conor yanked Jesse by the shoulder and steered him towards it. "You first," he said. "Get in there, you cannibal."

Jesse looked at the dark gap with trepidation. "What if there's something in there?"

"Then if it kills you, we can use you for food. Move it."

Jesse stuck a tentative foot through the gap; then grabbed hold of the edges and pulled himself up, looking into the darkness; a step inside – the wind ceased hitting him as he entered; then he yelled as his foot slipped and sent him sliding down a slope to the rock floor below where he hit his head.

Blinking away the red that threatened to flood his vision, Jesse crawled into a sitting position and looked around. The cave went deeper into the mountain. How deep, he neither knew nor wished to find out, gazing with fear at the numerous dark openings he could barely make out in the little light that fell through the opening.

"Watch your step there!" he called out to the others, making their way down after him. "There's a slanted bit."

Inside was marginally warmer. Not much, but around the temperature of a regular cold winter's day back where some of them lived.

Tod was the last to reach the cave floor. "Can't see anything in here," he said.

A disinterested flick of a cigarette lighter was heard courtesy of John Constantine, and an orange flame popped up in the dark. It did little to break the darkness.

"We should start a fire," Kip suggested.

"Sure," John said dryly. "Got any firewood, or are you volunteering yourself?" He flicked off the light and wandered off to glare philosophically at one of the dark openings.

Johnny sank to the floor, hands around his knees in an attempt at keeping warm. "What do we do now?" he asked. "Wait for rescue?"

"No one knows where we are," John said, having failed at intimidating the dark opening. "Everything was chaos. You all saw it."

"Someone has to know," Nelson said.

"Says who?" John countered.

"Okay," Conor said, dropping down some distance from Johnny. "So no one knows we're here. And we don't know where we are."

"Might not even be on Earth," Johnny said distantly.

Paul dropped his head into his hands and sat there looking glum.

"Someone has to know," Jesse said faintly, repeating Nelson's words. "They brought us here, they gotta know we're here. They have to. They have to bring us back, l... I gotta get home..." His voice trailed off, then the half-whine: "I'm *cold*."

"Then don't just sit there," Nelson said. "Move about. It's warmer that way."

"If we stay here no one's going to find-" Kip started.

"*They won't find us anyway!*" Conor shouted. "It's only the nine of us here, can't you see that? Just the nine of us. From that... uh, piece of black thing we were on. And now we're here, and the others aren't, so... so they must have been transported someplace else altogether-"

"-all dead for all we know-"

"-and the whole thing definitely did *not* look controlled or planned to me-"

"-yeah, shouting keeps you warm too-"

"-*shut up, Nelson!* And... and bottom-line is, we're on our own."

Silence.

"I'm thirsty," Kip said cautiously.

"Lots of water out there," John said.

"It's frozen."

"That's ice for you."

More silence.

Kip eventually scrambled back up towards the opening, the frosty wind hitting him hard as he stuck his head out and tried to scoop a handful of icy snow, his fingers numbing with cold. He managed a pathetic few scrapings that melted on his tongue and did little to assuage his thirst.

Kip crawled back in. "John? Can you lend me your lighter?"

The lighter was tossed through the air and gratefully caught.

"Thanks."

Back out the opening, Kip flicked the lighter. Nothing. He tried again, and a flame appeared only to be instantly blown out by the wind. He crouched down and cupped his right hand around the lighter to shield it from the wind, and tried again. He got a lasting flame this time; but it remained annoyingly upright and refused to melt the ice fast enough, then went out.

Kip grimaced. He looked down at his shirt and attempted to rip part of it for use as a wick. His shirt refused to be ripped. After some thought, and already starting to shiver violently, he yanked out several strands of hair and set them on fire, dropping them into the ice.

A miserable ashy puddle formed as the fire burnt out. Kip shook his head in despair, and then the cold got too much for him to take and he returned to the relative warmth of the cave.

"Got your drink?" John asked.

"No." Kip returned the lighter.

"So we're just going to die here," Nelson said rhetorically.

Paul made several inaudible noises from behind his hands.

"Got a better idea?" John asked.

\*\*

**Group D:** Neo, Eddie, Ke- I mean, not-Tim. Yes.

Not-Tim looked up as the common room door opened.

"...You," Eddie said, looking disappointed.

Not-Tim got off the sofa. "Didn't you make it out?"

Eddie nodded, eyes searching the carpet and door for a safer place to put his gaze.

"What- where's everyone else?"



The teen shrugged. "I don't know." His left hand grasped the door, subtly barring the way out. "Where's Jack? Did you kill him?"

*Looking down to see that last look of decisiveness in Jack's eyes, his hand suddenly letting go of his foot-*

Not-Tim took a step closer. Eddie's grip tightened on the door.

"I didn't kill Jack."

"Ok."

"He... sacrificed his life," not-Tim said, Eddie's fidgeting halting at the words – "for me and Neo."

Silence; and then Eddie gave a sudden laugh, cynical in the quiet of the room.

"Right," he said, nodding. "Because you're more important than us." He let go of the door and turned, walking out into the corridor. "I forgot that."

Not-Tim started after him. "It's not- *All three of us would have died!*" he half-shouted, frustrated at the misunderstanding. "Ed-"

But Eddie had since entered his room and shut the door with a slam.



**Group B:** Shane, Perry, Tommy, Jjaks, Chris, Matt

Shane let go of Tommy once the level of water had receded enough for their feet to touch ground, and waded towards the door. He gripped at the bolt and yanked at it. It refused to budge. Shane grimaced.

He looked up at the four walls surrounding them, smooth stone in the dark red light that reached up too high for them to see the floor where moments ago they had stood.

Perry splashed his way over. "How is it?"

"Stuck," Shane said, with a futile kick at the door.

"It's probably just stiff," Chris said. "It's got to open. There's no other way out of here."

Shane mopped wet hair out of his eyes and tried the bolt again, putting his strength into it; and then, finally, it gave a little, moving out with agonising slowness.

"What's this place for?" Jjaks asked, gazing upwards at the far-off ceiling. "Who built it..."

"Government taxes have to go somewhere," Shane said, finally sliding the bolt out and looking accomplished.

"A cage," Matt said.

Tommy looked at him. "What?"

"Like it was meant to keep something in," Matt said quietly. "Something that doesn't like water."

Tommy paled. Jjaks and Chris looked around uneasily.

Perry clapped Shane on the back. "Right. Let's get this open and get out of here." He grabbed the metal handle on the door and pulled, the door creaking grudgingly open.

"I don't see anything," Jjaks said cautiously.

"Could be invisible," Matt said. "You hear that?"

There was a soft fluttering in the distance, coming from the direction of the ceiling; the beat of invisible wings far above them-

A slow panic was creeping over Tommy's face.

Chris and Perry finished shoving the door open. A gap yawned in the opening: a cuboid passageway with smooth sides one metre high and one-and-a-half metres across, just high enough to sit in, still throbbing with that same red light.

Shane poked his head in. "Looks safe," he decided, when an inhuman screech pierced the air.

"...What was that?" Chris asked.

Silence.

And then there was a sudden gust of wind from above as something made a sudden swoop towards them, screeching, and yanked Jjaks by invisible talons up into the air.

"NO!" Shane yelled, running towards the centre of the pool to get closer, but still too far away, too far down...

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?" Tommy screamed.

Jjaks kicked futilely in the air, grabbing at whatever had got him by the shoulders, trying to pry them off amidst his panicked pleadings: "*Don't eat me. Please don't eat me. Don't eat me-*"

A sudden ripple above him; and for a moment he saw starved flesh stretched tightly over bones and a gruesome bird head leering towards him, its beak-mouth open to show rows of sharp teeth that no self-respecting bird should ever have...

\*\*

**Group D:** Eddie, Neo, not-Tim

The door *moved*.

Not-Tim stopped and stared. There shouldn't have been anyone in there. He had just seen Eddie go into the other room; Neo was still occupied with his computer; there was no one else-

A cough. Fake-sounding, almost, as though trying to get his attention.

Not-Tim glanced towards Neo's room. The steady clack of keyboard keys continued to issue from it. He hesitated, wondering if he should get Neo out for backup just in case... then ditched the thought, proceeded cautiously towards the hitherto unoccupied room, and opened the door.

There was someone in there sitting on the bottom bunk. A mysterious old man, who smiled at him.

"Hello, Mr. Reeves," he said. "I'm the Mysterious Old Man. You may call me Dem."

Not-Tim realised that his mouth was open, and closed it. Then he realised that it was rather hard to speak with his mouth closed, so he opened it.

"-How did you get here?" he asked.

"Teleportation. But that's not important. I'm here to make a little deal with you."

Dem got off the bed and motioned towards the wall. "You see this-" he said, and suddenly a screen opened up where he had gestured, showing a place filled with red light and something squirming in centre-screen; then a flick of Dem's finger and the picture zoomed in to show Jjaks struggling in the air in the fierce grip of some invisible monster.

Not-Tim swore.

"Live TV," Dem explained, as the view panned down to show Shane and the others running about looking panicked.

"What did you do to them?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing much. But I will if you refuse to cooperate. You see, this whole project was going along so nicely until you came along and ruined it. I'm not very happy about that, Mr. Reeves. So here's the deal. I'll rewind time by a week, and this time you don't set a foot into Kenselton Hotel. They continue bringing in characters for the public to have fun with, ripping up the space-time continuum in the transportation process, and you stay out of it. If you don't stay out of it as promised, I will be angry. You won't like me when I'm angry. So how's that sound?"

"Or else?"

"Or else, fifteen metres is a pretty far distance to fall," Dem said. "Doesn't sound like much, I know. But it is. Trust me. So. For the life of Jjaks Clayton: what do you say?"

Dem zoomed the picture in closer for dramatic effect.

Not-Tim swallowed. "How many more people would have died if they didn't escape today?"  
"They don't look escaped, do they?"

"They'd got out! I saw them!"

Dem shrugged. "Apparently they didn't like to be shot at, so they ran back in, but there were some technical problems over at Kenselton HQ and everyone inside got randomly sent to different parts of the multiverse. I had no part in it, I swear."

Not-Tim jabbed a finger at the screen. "Then what about *that*?" he asked, anger rising in his voice.

"I merely work with circumstances," Dem said. "Went back in time to that spot with a Radoenix egg and convinced the locals that it would grow up to be a great and powerful monster that would bring them inexhaustible wealth and good luck. All they had to do was to build it a little home right at *that* spot to contain it because it kind of liked the taste of human flesh, and to feed it sacrificial virgins every full moon to keep it alive and happy. They don't take much maintenance, you see. One virgin can last 'em a month. Hardy creatures, these invisible radioactive phoenixes. I raised this one as my pet. His name is Fred. We communicate psychically." Dem smiled.

".....," said not-Tim.

"Well, so what will it be?" Dem asked. "Hurry up. Fred's getting hungry, and if I tell him to let Jjaks live after too long a time has passed, he won't be happy. It's been ages since he had a sacrificial virgin, you see. They got really hard to come by after the sexual revolution. And the nuclear war-"

"How many more would have died?" not-Tim cut in. "If I hadn't come here."

"Oh, lots, I'm sure. Blame human nature. Some folks can get so worked up over a film that nothing would please them more than to kill its characters in the most gruesome way they can imagine. You're a funny species, you know-"

"And they wouldn't die if things remain the same."

Dem shrugged. "Well, yes. But put it this way – you're not responsible for them. You're responsible for *him*." He pointed at Jjaks on the screen. "He wouldn't be here if not for you. He could be at home now, drinking coffee, reading the papers, robbing a bank... it's your fault he's here."

Not-Tim shook his head. "No. I never meant for this to happen-"

"Ah, but you *made* him, see? If you had just passed on that script, poor ol' Jjaks wouldn't be on Fred's lunch menu right now. Of course, he wouldn't exist either, but that's probably better than being killed and eaten by an invisible radioactive phoenix that doesn't brush its teeth.

"So, for the last time: One of your characters is about to be eaten by an invisible radioactive phoenix named Fred. If you just say the word, it'll be one week ago and you can promise to go on with your life and pretend that Kenselton Hotel doesn't exist. The evil unethical scientists responsible for this can continue doing their thing. They're happy, I'm happy, Fred's not happy but that won't matter because he'll never know what he missed, and Jjaks *won't* get eaten by an invisible radioactive phoenix, which, trust me, is a good thing."

Dem grinned.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Forty-two!" Dem laughed. "...No, drats, that doesn't work either. Time's up, Mr. Reeves. Say yes to my deal, he lives. Say no, he doesn't."

"*What if he's going to die anyway?*" not-Tim demanded.

Dem smiled. "Wrong answer, Keanu," he whispered.

And on the screen, Jjaks suddenly fell out of the grasp of the Radoenix; straight at the stone bottom of the emptied pool where he landed with a sickening crack and was completely still. Shane running up to him, screaming; Pery holding him back, grabbing him away as an invisible beak came down to tear into its meal-

"-But you're right," Dem said. "What *if* he's going to die anyway? Better he die alone than along with so many others, right?" He flicked the screen off. "I'll be back later to see if you've changed your mind," Dem said.

He smiled and vanished; leaving not-Tim alone in the room with the sight of Fred's dining etched fresh into his mind, his ears still resounding with the sound of Shane's scream.

\*\*

**Group B:** Shane, Perry, Tommy, Jjaks, Chris, Matt

The metal door was slammed shut, the bolt on the other side slid firmly home, the identical-looking lever pulled and the resulting sound of gushing water refilling the pool that they had just left.

Shane forcefully wiped his eyes with the back of his hand; an angry motion; swallowing, keeping the tears down, getting suddenly annoyed with Tommy's incessant murmured chant:

"I wanna go home. I wanna go home. I wanna go home. I wanna go h-"

"*Shut up!*" Shane burst out.

Tommy shut up and lapsed into a trembling silence, thrust once more into the realisation that he was drenched through and hungry and a million universes from home, a home which he was now almost definitely never going to see again.

They sat there in uncomfortable silence bathed in dark red light, still dripping water that pooled at their feet, the air heavy with unspoken guilt-

"We could have gotten out sooner," Shane said quietly. "If... just... opened the door earlier, and just gone-"

"It's not your fault," Perry said.

Matt got onto his knees and crawled past them, further down the passageway. He stopped and looked back. "Let's go," he said. "Let's get out of here. Wherever it leads."

\*\*

**Group D:** Neo, Eddie, not-Tim

The sound of the door opening as Neo came out of his room; he walked over to the doorway and stood uneasily there.

"I heard... Who were you talking to?"

A long silence, then not-Tim finally turned his head and looked at Neo. He gazed at him for an eternity, not saying a word, a strange sadness in his eyes; and the One felt paralysed where he stood, not daring to move.

Then his eyes suddenly seemed to lose focus, and not-Tim looked away.

"You don't exist," he said softly, lifelessly, and walked past Neo out the door.

It was the gunshot that stopped him in his tracks and made him turn almost robotically to face Eddie's room. Some part of his mind registered that Jack's gun was no longer on the floor next to Alex's body. A sudden flicker of emotion crossed his face; then a step towards Eddie's door, forced and unnatural; a second step, with greater intent this time; and then he was suddenly running to the room and throwing the door open and coming to a sudden halt in the doorway, watching Eddie by the open closet with the gun still raised and the shattered glass of the mirror at his feet.

The teen offered little resistance when not-Tim pulled the gun out of his grip and placed it safely on the table; and the anger on his face subsided into a detached blankness as not-Tim grabbed him in a tight hug and cried.

\*\*

**Group A:** Conor, John C, Johnny U, Nelson, Paul, Tod, Jesse, Kip, the cornflakes guy.

John Constantine was out of cigarettes. This did not make him happy.

"We can't just stay here," Conor decided. "I'll go out, and... and look for... something that might help..."

"Such as?" Johnny asked.

"Food. Water. People. Maybe we're... in Antarctica or something and there might be a... research base or something nearby-"

"And what'll you do if you find one?" Johnny pressed on.

"Get us out of here."

"Where? *Home*?"

"Just... uh, somewhere else. For the time being. Until we work things out."

"We never will," Nelson muttered.

Paul got to his feet. "At least we'll be alive. I'll go with you," he told Conor.

"Thanks. Uh... anyone got any extra clothes to spare?" Conor asked, looking hopefully at everyone, especially John Constantine.

They stared at him looking cold.

"It's much colder out there than in here," Paul pointed out, in case no one had fully understood.

They stared at him looking cold.

Paul looked at Conor and shrugged.

"Okay," Conor said in resignation, and the two of them were about to set off into the ice again, when all of a sudden A BUG-EYED MONSTER APPEARED!

"...We're not in Antarctica," Jesse said.

\*\*

#### **Group D: Neo, Eddie, not-Tim**

Neo stood out in the corridor looking uncomfortable. He didn't like being told that he didn't exist. He wasn't a spoon. And he wanted a hug too... no. No, he didn't. Not-Tim was creepy. He didn't want him touching him if possible. But he wanted to exist. Existing was good. Like his computer. It was good too...

He felt lonely and depressed and took a step closer to the room.

The other two were just sitting there on the bottom bunk, not-Tim gazing at his feet, Eddie with a strange faraway look in his eyes.

Neo figured that it was probably a good time to intervene. He wondered if a fake cough would do the trick, when not-Tim looked up.

"Neo," he said.

Neo wondered if that meant that he existed now.

And then suddenly there was a BAMF! and a mysterious old man appeared out of nowhere, standing in the room with a psychotic grin on his face as he pointed at a screen on the wall that had previously not been there. It showed a view of a dark cave, something with too many tentacles and bug-eyes taking centre stage-

Not-Tim leapt to his feet.

"Pop quiz, hotshot!" Dem shouted cheerfully. "Far away in a cave on the frozen planet of Hagindaz, Johnny Utah is about to be ripped apart by a bug-eyed alien I've just named Luke. You know the deal. What do you do? WHAT DO YOU DO?"

Not-Tim yelled something incoherent and rude.

"That wasn't really nice of y-" Dem broke off as on the screen, John Constantine flicked his cigarette lighter and set Luke on fire.

"Um," Dem said as Luke flailed his tentacles in agony. "Oh, *buggerit*."

Dem scowled and vanished.

"..." said Neo.

"..." said Eddie.

"..." said not-Tim.

\*\*

**Group C:** Griffin, Kevin, Scott, Julian, Donnie, Ron

Pitch black. Futile blinking made nothing brighter and did not give him the security to stand. Julian felt at the floor on which he lay. Carpet. Searching fingers went further and paused as they touched flesh; moving cautiously along it; an arm, a sleeve...

One of the others. Julian withdrew his hand and stared in the darkness, unseeing, listening to the soft sound of breathing.

"Hello?" he asked cautiously.

He got on his knees, hands feeling out in the dark for obstructions, and slowly began to crawl away in a random direction; felt someone else lying in his path and hesitated, considered waking them; then belayed the thought. There was no point in all of them fumbling in the dark-

An obstruction, wide and high before him as he spread his hands over its surface, feeling-

A handle. He grasped eagerly at it, feeling it give under his grip. A door. Hanging on, he rose carefully to his feet, pulled the door open-

-into more blackness.

The first panic started to claw at his heart. Julian looked back at the room, out the door, straining his eyes to no avail, and in a sudden fearful moment wondered if he had gone blind.

His grip tightened on the door handle, pulse speeding up, craning his ears for a sound – any sound – other than the breathing of his floormates.

Julian rubbed his eyes with his free hand, blinking, a sudden desperation to see rising in him...

He bent his head, closed his eyes, tried to steady his breathing. *Don't panic*, he told himself.

He raised his head and took wary steps out the door, moving his hands along to feel the way. Both met walls; a narrow passageway-

"Hello, Dr. Mercer."

He whipped his head towards the direction of the voice, his breaths coming fast once more as backed against the wall.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's David," the voice replied, though it seemed to lack Griffin's usual confidence.

"Can you see?"

"What do you mean?"

The voice was closer now. Julian pressed himself further against the wall. "Where are we?"

"Why is that important?"

"I can't see anything," Julian said, needing to tell someone, anyone-

"I know."

"What- what's going on-"

"A game. Just a game." A pause, then: "I hope you won't miss Donnie. He was... in the way."

Another pause.

"This conversation never happened."

Then there was silence.

"...David?"

No reply.

With suppressed panic, Julian felt his way back into the room and grabbed the first person he came into contact with, shaking him awake.

"Wh?" asked Kevin coherently, wondering why everything was dark and feeling drugged and wondering if the two were related somehow, or if someone just wasn't turning on the lights. "What's going on-"

"We have to get out of here. Now. Wake everyone."

"I can't see anything-"

"I know. Me neither," said Julian, feeling someone's leg, raising it and dropping it in hopes that it would be enough to wake its owner.

"Who are you?"

"Julian."

"I'm-"

"Kevin, yeah, I know."

"How-"

"Either he has superb voice recognition skills when it comes to identical voices, or you have a weird accent," said someone else in a half-asleep voice. "Why're all the lights off?"

"Is everyone up?"

"How many of us are there?"

A small thump.

"ARRGH!" Kevin yelled. "You hit my eye!"

"Sorry."

"Why the hell did you do that?"

"I can't see, okay? What'm I supposed to do, just sit here and freeze?"

Kevin whimpered quietly.

"We've got to get out of here," Julian repeated for the benefit of those who had not been conscious the previous time.

"What is this place?"

"I don't know. But we've got to move. David killed Donnie and-"



"What? Hey, I just woke up."

"...David?"

"Yes?"

"What... you..."

"I didn't kill Donnie. Where are you getting your information from?"

"I... thought..."

"Thought what? Just because I killed two people doesn't mean I'm responsible for every murder in the world."

"But just now... you said-"

"-Guess what, Kev. You don't have a weird accent after all. Dr. Mercer just has superb voice recognition skills when it comes to identical voices."

"I..."

Pause.

"Where's Donnie, then?"

Silence.

"Donnie?"

Silence.

"I was locked in a room with him for days, if I'd wanted to kill him I would have done it long ago."

"Okay, who's here?" Kevin asked. "Besides me, Julian and David-"

"Scott here."

"Ron."

"So it's just five of us," Kevin continued. "Okay."

"One of you was talking to me," Julian said. "You said you could see in this place."

"Wasn't me."

"Or me."

"Yeah, as though someone's gonna say, 'It's me! I killed Donnie!'"

Silence.

"What do we do now?"

Silence.

\*\*

### **Near Group C**

He trembled in the dark, not daring to make a sound, feeling the cold barrel of the gun he could not see pressed against his head.

"He's gone now," came the soft voice of Dem from behind him as the gun was lowered. "Thank you, Eric."

"Who was that?" Eric blurted out. "He's one of... us, right? I mean-"

"That's not important."

"Why couldn't he hear you. Who *are* you?"

"I told you. I'm the Mysterious Old Man. You may go back now."

Eric felt Dem grasp his wrist, and then the darkness fell aside and he was once again back in the cold mountain tunnels.

Something was burning; he could smell it in the air, and then, unexpectedly, voices. Familiar voices. Eric hesitated, looking back the way he'd come. Surely he hadn't been moving in circles-

His torch lay on the ground where it had fallen, its electric beam shining strong ahead. He felt a rush of relief at how it had not gone out when it had landed. This was not a good place to be without a light. He picked it up, glad at its weight in his hand, and made his way toward the direction of the voices.

\*\*

**Group A:** Conor, John C, Johnny U, Nelson, Paul, Tod, Jesse, Kip, the cornflakes guy

"Who's that?" Kip asked suddenly as a figure emerged from one of the tunnel openings.

The others looked up from where they had been warming themselves by the burning corpse of Luke, squinting against the flames, until the newcomer was seen to be decidedly human; and then they saw his face-

"What the hell-" John started, as Eric jumped down the last bit of rock, staring at the group, trying unsuccessfully to place names.

"Where did you come from?" Nelson asked.

Eric looked at him. He looked back at the tunnel. He looked at the others. He gestured vaguely at the tunnel. And then remembered that he was capable of speech. "I," he said. "Uh..."

"What's your name?" Conor asked.

The newcomer raised his hands and dropped them in desperation and confusion. "Eric..."

"Don't remember any Eric," Johnny muttered.

Eric glanced back at the tunnel again and looked seriously lost.

"Where did you come from?" Paul asked.

"That... I... They sent me to scout out the place-"

"They'?" Conor asked warily. "Who are 'they'?"

\*\*

Torch clamped between his teeth to free his hands for climbing, Eric made his way up to the small plateau and paused, turning to light the way for the rest of them. Far overhead, stalactites and limestone shawls hung in silent majesty, reflecting bright in the unfamiliar beam from the torch; then they receded back into shrouds of darkness as the group moved on.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Tod asked.

"What if the flashlight goes out?" Jesse asked.

"Then we'll be moving in darkness," replied the ever-helpful John Constantine, shaking his leg to dislodge the cornflakes guy.

But soon a faint flickery glow of light appeared in the distance, and soon after they emerged from the tunnel into a wider cave than that they had left. Shadowy figures huddled around a messy but cheerful fire burning by the side, the welcome scent of cooking meat in the air; and nearer to them, someone standing, watching them climb down with what did not look at all like a friendly gaze.

"What-" Conor said, surveying the scene.

"Who are you?" John asked.

The person stared at him suspiciously.

"Tom Ludlow," he said. He cast a disparaging eye over the rest of the group. "Who the f\*\*\* are *you*?"



chapter seventeen  
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**Group A:** Conor, John C, Johnny U, Nelson, Paul, Tod, Jesse, Kip, the cornflakes guy  
**+ Group E**

"...Were you in Kenselton Hotel?" Paul asked, after a period of stony silence in which Ludlow and John appeared locked in some sort of staredown.

"Yeah," Ludlow said, not removing his gaze from John. "Block L, 29th floor. You?"

"Block F, 4th floor."

Tod laughed. "They ran out of space-"

People stared at him. He shut up. Nelson muttered something about how they should have done that earlier and saved him the uncomfortable humiliation of sleeping on the floor.

"How long have you been here?" Conor asked as Ludlow released an increasingly pissed-off John from his glare and started walking towards the fire.

"Five days. Wouldn't have lasted one if that squid hadn't tried to attack us."

And now they saw that the source of the fire was not firewood, but a merrily burning tentacled monster with too many eyes.

"Flammable things," Ludlow continued. "They catch fire when they die. Some kind of post-humous self-defence. Ortiz found out the hard way."

The fire had been started right next to the cave wall, such that its flames licked up the stone and heated up a series of narrow ledges, on which several dead fish were being slowly cooked. Near it, a group of five or six teenagers were staring suspiciously at the newcomers. One turned his head and muttered something at the others. They continued staring suspiciously at them, and one leapt to his feet as Tod reached out a tentative hand to the fish.

"That's ours," the teen said, and Tod reluctantly withdrew his hand.

"This has gotta have been planned," Johnny said to no one in particular.

"What?" asked Eric.

"Both groups of us end up in the same place within walking distance of each other, just four days apart. What are the chances it's a coincidence?"

"\*\*hungry\*," vibed the cornflakes guy, but no one was paying attention to him. He felt sad. He missed not-Tim. Not-Tim looked after him. Not-Tim understood him and didn't ignore him. ":(," he concluded.

"There might've just been a small pool of possible destinations," Conor said.

Ludlow snorted. "If you're hoping for rescue, you can forget it. No one knows where we are, thanks to the f\*\*\*ing morons who kidnapped that actor and got us all into this shit."

"Hey, that's-" Tod started, then stopped and stumbled back in pain when Johnny and Conor kicked him to shut him up.

"At least we're free now," Johnny pointed out.

"D'you have any food to spare? We're starving," Conor said at the same time in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

"The fishing pond's that way," Ludlow said. "Get Marlon to catch something for you if you want. Keep your f\*\*\*ing hands off our own food."

\*\*

Marlon James was in charge of the fishing. No one else seemed able to catch any fish; the little things were smart enough to swim away from signs of life.

They had considerably larger difficulty in telling the difference between Marlon and an inanimate object. Most of the time, they were too late.

The fishing hole was located farther back in the cave, where the air was warm enough for liquid water to flow. Kip dropped down beside it and got his much wanted drink.

"...You're... disturbing the fish," Marlon said in mild protest.

The fish in question were strange eyeless creatures that looked more than slightly alien, but Ludlow claimed that they were edible, and no one wished to argue.

Throwing the fish through the flames proved to be a most inefficient – albeit fun – way of getting them cooked, and they finally resorted to acting like civilised humans and placing the fish next to the other cooking fish.

They tasted like chicken.

\*\*

#### **Group D: Neo, Eddie, not-Tim**

Eventually, not-Tim got off the bed and headed for the door. Neo stepped aside to let him pass, watching as he went into the common room.

Crackly noises were soon heard from that direction. Not-Tim poked his head out. "Anybody hungry?" he asked.

Neo looked at Eddie and motioned out at the corridor before going out himself, hands in pockets. Eddie got up and joined them.

A small pile of potato chips, biscuits and other assorted snacks were on the kitchen counter.

"Lunch," not-Tim explained. "I don't think they've resumed the food supply."

Eddie picked up a packet of chips and tore it open.

"The cooks might still be there," Neo said. "We could ask them-"

"Then they'll know I'm here. They'd take me away and leave you two behind."

"Who was that old man just now?" Neo asked.

"I don't know. He says his name is Dem."

"What does he want with you?"

A pause. "He wants me never to have come here," not-Tim said. "Apparently it interfered with his plans for multiverse domination or something. He said he could... rewind time, back a week, and this time I don't set foot here. So the whole operation continues, more of you get brought over, get killed now and then by the public..."

"And if you say no, he kills us anyway?"

"Yeah. But it's twenty or thirty lives against thousands." Not-Tim ripped open a packet of coffee with a bit too much force.

"I thought the others got out," Neo said.

"Apparently they didn't."

\*\*

**Group B:** Shane, Perry, Tommy, Chris, Matt

Soon they started off in silence, following Matt's lead, though in this place there was no chance of getting lost. They half-crawled, half-walked on in the red light as the height of the tunnel varied, hoping for an end, and trying not to think of Jjaks Clayton or whether they might ever see home again.

"I hope this thing ends somewhere," Shane said as they entered yet another corridor and proceeded to make it wetter than it had initially been.

"At least it's not a maze," Chris said hopefully, when they turned around another corner and the tunnel chose that exact moment to branch out into two. A blank wall right ahead of them, spreading smoothly out into the distance; openings at right-angles to it on their left and right.

Chris concluded that the universe hated him.

Matt halted and looked back. He was developing several serious anger issues towards the architect of this place. "Left or right?" he asked.

"Left," Shane decided. "Just keep going left if it splits again. That way we won't get lost."

"If we go left twice, we'll end up moving backwards," Tommy pointed out.

"That's assuming that the tunnels are all at right-angles to each other," Perry said, sitting down and leaning against the tunnel wall.

"What if they are?" Chris asked.

The question hung in the air between the five of them. The absence of Jjaks was suddenly more palpable.

Tommy ran a finger to and fro along the groove where the wall met floor, welcoming the mindless activity.

"Okay," Shane said. "Let's say this is North." He pointed at the wall ahead of them. "We just keep in that direction. So we'll go left now and hope that the tunnel turns right and keeps on more or less in a northwards direction. We'll have to get out eventually."

"What if we don't?" asked Chris, who had developed a sudden penchant for rhetorical questions.

"Maybe this whole place is closed up. We don't even know where we are. Like... what if this was just some drainage pipe or something?"

"There wasn't any other way out-" Shane started.

"-Maybe we didn't look hard enough," Perry said. "Or maybe there was never meant to be a way out."

The beginnings of claustrophobia started to rise at the edges of their minds.

"It's not like we can go back," Tommy said, looking more subdued than he had been all his time in Kenselton Hotel. He managed a laugh that sounded fake even to his own ears. "I mean... because... that... that thing that ate..."

He broke off with a grimace, a faraway look in his eyes.

"Left it is," Shane said firmly. "Lead the way, Matt."

\*\*

**Group C:** Griffin, Kevin, Scott, Julian, Ron

"I think I found a light-"

*Click.*

Light flooded the room.

DEAD ROTTING BODIES DRAPED ALL OVER THE FURNITURE

Light hurriedly un-flooded the room.

The sounds of hyperventilating took its place.

"*Did you see... did you see...*"

"Whoa."

"Why'd you turn off-"

"NO! DON'T TURN IT ON AGAIN! Just... okay. Okay. AGH! WHO GRABBED ME-"

Ron sighed and turned the lights on again.

DEAD ROTTING BODIES STILL DRAPED ALL OVER THE FURNITURE

Griffin let go of Julian, who stumbled back and tried to compose himself, although composing oneself is hard when surrounded by dead people doing just the opposite.

It's okay, Julian told himself. He was a doctor. He'd seen worse. Except that those tended not to be draped all over furniture and STARING AT YOU FROM THE DEPTHS OF ROTTING EYE SOCKETS-

Kevin looked slightly more than faintly sick.

They started unconsciously moving towards each other, in need for live company.

"What is this place?" Scott asked. "And why's there no smell?"

Julian mumbled something about acclimatisation.

"Anyone see Donnie around?" Griffin asked.

"Let's get out of here," Julian said. "Now."

No one seemed to disagree, so they headed towards the door and got out of there into the relative safety of the corridor. Scott located the light switch and turned that on.

Silence.

"No," Kevin said. "*No.*"

"It's not our floor," Ron said hollowly. "We... There wasn't an end room leading from the corridor, just the stairwell... Different block..."

Scott quietly walked ahead and pushed open the next nearest door. Light from the corridor leaked in and revealed the familiar sight of a Kenselton Hotel common room. Only there were more corpses lying about; most of them down by the floor, huddled together in death.

"What's this supposed to be? The future?" Ron asked when they came over to look.

"I thought everyone else got out," Kevin said.

"Could be an alternate future," Griffin said. He left them and walked down the corridor to the other end, pulling that open; this one opened into the front stairwell, and by the light of the corridor and that spilling out from the ajar door of the small lift lobby, he could make out the painted label on the wall.

"Block H," he announced, his voice echoing in the empty stairwell. "Thirty-second floor." He looked

back at the others and gave a weird grin. "Wanna check out the fourth floor of Block F? Chance of a lifetime!"

"If this is Kenselton, all the machines that brought us over should be around, right?" Julian asked as they started walking towards the stairwell, pointedly ignoring Griffin. "Top floor," he continued. "That's where we arrived. Let's go there."

Griffin looked disappointed that no one else seemed interested in visiting the fourth floor of Block F.

"Lights are on," Scott commented redundantly as they entered the lift lobby, the dead, static glow of the lamp casting their shadows on the wall.

Ron hit the call button for the lift. The lighted numbers above it showed it slowly descending from the forty-second floor.

"At least the elevator still works," Kevin said in American.

The lift arrived, its doors opening.

Griffin strolled in. Julian looked at the others, then went in, the rest following after. The door shut on them, and they slowly rose up to the top floor and whatever it might hold.

\*\*

#### **Group D: Neo, Eddie, not-Tim**

"Hello!" Dem said, appearing out of nowhere.

"Stay away from us!" Neo shouted.

"I don't think I will, Mr. Anderson," Dem said. "Now excuse us for a moment-" He grabbed not-Tim, and the both of them vanished from the room.

Not-Tim wrested his arm out of Dem's grip, and met no resistance; they were already at their destination, a small, cosy room with two comfortable squashy armchairs.

"Sit down," Dem offered.

"No thanks, I'll stand."

Dem shrugged and sat down. "I suppose you still haven't changed your mind?"

No response.

"All right. How about I change the deal a little. Do what I told you, and I'll ensure that all of your characters survive. Even the dead ones. Turn back the clock – they don't have to die this time. Jjaks. Alex. Jack. Of course, I'll probably have to make it up with other people, but you don't need to worry about those. They've got nothing to do with you. What do you say to that?"

No response.

Dem took out a most excellently tasty bit of cheese from his pocket and munched on it. One of the great things about interdimensional travel is that you can get the best cheese in the multiverse.

"I'm sure you've noticed something by now," he said. "None of your characters came from where you left them. Most are slightly older, some are slightly younger. Ted's only fifteen, because of... events that happened a while back that put a different time marker on his universe when the machine hooked on to it. Neo hasn't finished the sequel storylines, same reason.

"Others have started families. These are real people, Keanu. They have lives outside of the two hours you gave them. They have friends and family who care about them and would like to know where they've disappeared to. It's been a week. The universes were locked in temporal sync when they got taken. A week here, a week there. There are a lot of parents out there sick with worry-"

Not-Tim gave a cynical laugh. "How's this supposed to convince me to allow even more people to be taken?"



"...Er," said Dem. He put the most excellently tasty cheese away. Though it was most excellently tasty, it tended to distract him from thinking clearly. "Show a little selfishness, will you?" he said instead. "The point is that those people won't necessarily die. They might still have a chance of going home. They'd get over it eventually. Whereas dead people never go home. ...Hang on a bit. Some visual aid might help."

"What-"

Dem vanished.

"..." said not-Tim, but before he had time to wonder if he was trapped in the room and start to panic, Dem reappeared with his arm tight around the neck of a struggling Keanu-spawn.

Not-Tim blinked. "Winston-"

The teen had stopped struggling somewhat, taking relief in the warmth after the stark cold of the mountain cave. "Who are you?" he gasped out, trying to pry Dem's arm from his neck.

"He's the one responsible for your life," Dem answered. "And the one who'll be responsible for your death."

Dem was groping in his pocket with his free hand, looking for his gun. There was a heck lot of most excellently tasty cheese in there. Cheese, cheese, cheese, fishcake, cheese... ah, there's the gun; oh crap, that Reeves guy had just gone kung fu on him and that kind of hurt and whoa that kid could bite; and suddenly Dem felt the gun yanked out of his grip and pointed at him.

He sighed.

Not-Tim shot him, his other arm protectively around Winston.

Dem looked at the bullet hole and shrugged. "You can't kill me," he said. "I'm immortal."

Not-Tim let go of Winston and nodded. "Okay," he said with a wry smile. "Right. But I'm not. Find someone else to play your little game."

And he shot himself in the head.

\*\*

'Caution: Dry Floor' read the sign that greeted not-Tim when he opened his eyes. He stared at it, and then at the subtitle beneath: "Not Suitable for Dead Fish".

Not-Tim sat up slowly and put a hand to the spot on his head where the bullet had entered; there was nothing there now.

He looked up. Not too far from him was a counter, and behind it a teenage boy engaged in an engrossing game of Icy Tower.

Not-Tim got up and walked up to him. "Uh," he started, "where am I?"

The teen glanced briefly at him, then did a double take and half-fell out of his chair, stumbling backwards and taking with him the computer mouse and a stack of papers. He got back to his feet, hyperventilating as he backed against the wall.

"Third mother of Zarquon," he breathed. "It's Keanr Reeves."

Then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fainted.

'Keanr'? not-Tim wondered in puzzlement as he went behind the counter to the teen, whose nametag identified him as Taxon. Not-Tim shook him, but Taxon was out cold.

Not-Tim looked back up. On the desk was a standard short-FAQ: "Am I dead? Yes. Really? Yes. Where's the toilet? Down the corridor, third door to your left."

A funny sound from the computer indicated that Taxon had just lost his Icy Tower game. Stacked next to the computer were a mess of dodgy-looking DVDs, including three which proudly identified themselves as the Matirx trilogy starring Keanr Reeves.

Original DVDs were hard to come by in the afterlife.

Not-Tim looked around helplessly. He shook Taxon again, to no avail.

He sat down in the chair and looked at the computer. The computer looked back at him and asked if he wished to start a new game.

*What's the worst that could happen?* he wondered, then clicked 'Instructions', read through, and in several seconds was happily engaged in a game of Icy Tower.

\*\*

Winston had pressed himself against the wall and was in the midst of some serious hyperventilating, his gaze shifting from Dem to dead!not-Tim on the ground.

Dem was looking rather mournfully at the latter. "Bummer," he said.

He looked at Winston. "I suppose there's no point in killing you now, is there?" he asked. "Oh well. Want to go home?"

"*What?*" Winston asked. "What kind of a question is that?"

"I take that as a yes," Dem said, and teleported Winston home.

Seconds later found Winston back in his bedroom a week after he had left it, feeling lost and confused and wondering what he would tell his parents.

His thoughts went briefly back to the others presumably still in the cave: Rupert, Derek, Martin...

He'd never got the chance to say goodbye.



chapter eighteen  
**seeking answers**

---

**Group D: Neo, Eddie**

Standing about did not bring not-Tim back, and eventually they got unenthusiastically back to their snack lunch, eating in silence, giving only the occasional quick glance at each other, the unasked question of not-Tim's location hanging in the air between them. Neo finished a packet of chips and crumpled up the empty packet. He trudged over to the trashcan, chucked it in; then the door opened and both him and Eddie gave a start.

Neo's mouth fell open in surprise.

One of the three people standing in the doorway broke into a tired grin.

"What-" Neo started. "Where... you..."

Ted shrugged. "We didn't see any of you, but then we found Bob here and he said that everyone went back after the totally heinous shooting started. So I thought that maybe you got stuck in here or something..." Ted hesitated, looking around. "Where's everyone else, dude?"

"Hi," Bill said, feeling out of place in present company.

Bob Arctor wandered off to stare at a wall.

"I don't know where the others are," Neo said. "We got separated. ...What's going on out there?"

"People running about, mostly," Ted said, grabbing a cup off the shelf and getting himself a drink from the watercooler. "Dude, they got the police! And the army, I think. There are helicopters and everything! It's most excellent chaos." He grinned and downed the water. "...it's kinda bad if you're wearing yellow, though. King Kong thought some people were bananas and ate 'em. Then the helicopters started shooting at him and he fell down and people were running away and me and Bill found this place where they gave us free food because they thought we were cool."

"They had really excellent pizza," Bill confirmed.

"Yeah." Ted tossed the cup aside. "With extra anchovies and mushrooms and... Where's Sid?" he asked. "Is he still in the cafeteria?"

"Who's Sid?" Neo asked.

"Siddhartha," Eddie suggested. "The orange guy."

Ted frowned. "He's not orange. He's the Buddha."

"Fine," Eddie muttered.

"I don't know," Neo said.

Ted looked disappointed. He liked Sid.

\*\*

## The Where in the Multiverse am I? Afterlife

Not-Tim finished signing the autograph and passed the dodgy Matirx DVD back to an ecstatic Taxon.

"*Whoa*," he said in awe.

Not-Tim nodded towards the computer. "Now look them up."

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." Grinning, Taxon put the DVD aside and typed at the computer. Suddenly his face fell. "Uh-oh."

Not-Tim gave a start. "What happened?"

Taxon shrugged. "The intranet is down. We've been having all sorts of problems since we switched to Windows Vista... ah, there we go. Okay." He glanced at the sheet of paper that not-Tim had handed to him and typed in the first name. "Right," he said a short while later. "Jack Traven is kind of, um, a dog."

Not-Tim choked on the oxygen in his mouth. "What?"

"...Yep. Alex's dog, in fact."

"*What?*"

"Hey, I'm not the one responsible. Don't worry, he's happy. Eating well, and he'll soon be fully toilet trained."

Not-Tim put his head in his hands. "How's Alex?" he asked without looking up.

"He's a good master."

"I mean after he died."

"Oh. He's working at IBHA as an architect."

"IBHA?"

"The Isolated Bubble of Hyperspace Afterlife. They're building a new recreational wing. Alex is helping with the design."

"...Okay. What about Jjaks?"

Taxon typed in his name and hit the Enter key. "...Uh-oh," he said.

Not-Tim looked up. "What? What happened to him?"

Taxon blinked. "Huh? Oh... Nah. Windows just crashed. Hang on, I need to reboot the computer."

Not-Tim returned his head to his hands.

\*\*

**Group A:** Conor, John C, Johnny U, Paul, Nelson, Tod, Jesse, Kip, cornflakes guy  
+ **Group E:** Ludlow, Eric, Marlon, Rupert, Derek, Heaver, Jack not-Traven

Rupert leapt to his feet in shock as Derek gave a shout.

"What was that?" Ludlow demanded, staring at the suddenly-vacated spot on the cave floor.

"Someone took Winston," Rupert said breathlessly. "Some old guy... appeared and grabbed him and vanished..."

On the other side of the fire, across the invisible line separating the two groups, Johnny Utah raised an eyebrow, but it was dark and no one saw. Near him, the cornflakes guy was meanwhile staring mournfully at the fish that Paul had kindly cooked for him. He wanted cornflakes. He didn't want fish. ":(," he vided again.

"Are you eating that?" Jesse asked him.

The cornflakes guy looked at him.

Jesse tugged experimentally at the fish, met no resistance, and took it for himself. "Thanks," he said.

There was a fairly animated conversation going on in the other group, consisting mostly of:

"He was just sitting there!"

"What d'you mean he *vanished*?"

"I don't know! He just-"

"Are you sure he didn't just walk off?"

"YES!"

From out of the darkness came the sound of footsteps and voices, and the sound of something being dragged-

Several figures emerged from the shadows with a dead but edible-looking alien creature and dumped it near Ludlow and co. "Dinner," one said.

Others glanced at the newcomers of Block F. "Who are they?"

"Ask them," Ludlow muttered.

"Someone kidnapped Winston and vanished," Rupert reported.

John Constantine got up. Curious eyes followed him as he went looking for Marlon and more fish. John halted and glared at them. They stopped staring, and John continued on his way to the pool.

\*\*

#### **Group C:** Julian, Kevin, Griffin, Scott, Ron

The lift doors opened on the top floor, and they got out. The lobby door was hanging on its hinges. Griffin stepped over it into the stairwell; the door to the main corridor was in a similarly wrecked state.

The corridor itself was littered with the bodies of dead guards, victims of vicious physical attacks. The five of them moved past in uneasy silence, heading for the arrival room, still lighted, with someone still-

"Hello."

Kevin fell back in shock and crashed into an unhappy Scott. He hadn't been unhappy a moment ago, but falling Kevins have a tendency to change one's mood.

The receptionist gazed calmly at them from behind the blood-stained desk-to-ceiling barrier. "What are you doing here?"

"You're not human!" Kevin said, pointing an accusing finger at her once he had regained his footing.

The receptionist gazed calmly at him. "You're not supposed to be here. Go back to your floor."

"What's going on here?" Julian asked. "What year is this?"

"2009. Go back to your floor or I'll call the guards-"

"THE GUARDS ARE DEAD!" Ron suddenly yelled. "*Everyone* is dead! Don't you get that?" He bashed a fist against the unbreakable barrier and glared at the receptionist. "How do we get home?" he asked through gritted teeth. "How do we get *back*?"

The receptionist gazed calmly at him. "You're not dead," she pointed out.

The receptionist had been Captain Obvious in a previous life.

Ron shouted something incoherent and probably rude and went psycho on the barrier until Kevin pulled him away, the teen struggling to get away.

"Let me *go*!"

"It's no use," Kevin said. "It-" Then he got Ron's fist in his face and that shut him up. Julian took a step towards them. "Hey-"

The receptionist gazed calmly at everything. Griffin was busy pacing aimlessly around the room and in and out of the doorway, hands in his pockets. Scott leant against the doorway attempting and failing to look cool, mostly because the way Griffin kept passing him on his pacing rounds tended to spoil the effect.

The receptionist didn't flinch as Ron shrugged off Julian's steadying hand and got back in front of the desk, gripping its edge as he glared at her.

"Is there any way out?"

"No."

"Huh. Is that your standard answer or the real one?"

"My standard answer."

The receptionist was drawing a picture of a dog. She added a waggy tail to it and smiled.

"The fire exits," Julian said suddenly, before Ron could go psycho on the barrier again. "If they exist here as well-"

"There's no use in that," Scott said, still leaning against the doorway not-looking cool. "We'd just end up in the future of some alternate world. How would that help us?"

Julian ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Okay," he said. "How are people brought into this place?" he asked the receptionist.

"The machine."

"Right. And is there a... computer... that operates it somewhere?"

"Maybe. You really shouldn't be asking these questions. I'm calling the guards."

The receptionist pressed a button.

Ron gave a bark of laughter. "Yeah," he said. "Call the guards! I bet they'll be more helpful than you. EVEN THOUGH THEY'RE DEAD!"

"Please be quiet," the receptionist said, and went back to her drawing. She decided to call the dog Jack.

"Where's the computer?" Julian pressed on.

"Julian?"

He turned.

Scott pointed at a door next to the desk. 'Computer Room', it said helpfully on its label.

Julian gave a wry smile. "Thanks."

\*\*

### **Groups A + E**

"We've been here for... five days? Has anyone been keeping track?"

"Five days," Martin confirmed with a nod.

"Yeah," Harry continued. "It's pretty amazing we actually managed to survive so long. We thought we'd never even make it past the first night, when it started getting colder and all, but then we found this place. And there were those... squid things inside... Ortiz tried to attack one of them and it, well, kind of burst into flames..."

"I miss Ortiz," Rupert said sadly.

"At least it meant we had heat," Harry said, looking on the bright side. "Then we found that fish pond, and it turned out that Marlon's actually a really good fisherman. But I guess we won't be staying here much longer, right, 'cause you're here and-"

"We're not a rescue party," Nelson cut in. "We're just as lost as you are."

"Or more so," Conor added.

"But you're *here*," insisted some teen named Mike who for some reason gave off adult vibes. "You know, we spent the last few days thinking we'd never see other people again-" John Constantine made a noise that could have either been a cynical snort or an attempt to dislodge a fishbone caught in his throat. "-We thought we would die here once the food supply ran out or the fires died or the pond froze over. Because every day was the same. Nothing changed. Until *now*."

Cancer aside, John Constantine appeared perfectly healthy, so it probably wasn't a fishbone.

"Sorry to get your hopes up," he muttered.

"Whatever brought us here was the same thing that brought you here," Conor said. "There was some... kind of time discrepancy, but that's it. It doesn't... doesn't mean anything."

Martin was looking curiously at the cornflakes guy.

"Is he all right?" Martin asked, gesturing at him.

":(" vibed the cornflakes guy.

"Has he eaten?" Conor asked.

"I gave him a fish," Paul said.

"Uh, I ate that," Jesse said. "Yeah. Uh... sorry. He didn't want it... I think he only eats cornflakes."

Harry got up and pulled John Constantine's fourth fish off the cooking ledge, dangling it by the tail where it was cool enough to hold. He stepped over to the cornflakes guy and held it out for him. "Here you go," he said. "Sorry pal, we've got no cornflakes here."

Paul took the fish on his behalf and looked at him. "You've got to eat," he said.

"...", said the cornflakes guy, who was not well-versed in the technicalities of human nutrition.

Paul picked off a bit of fish and held it out. "It's good," he said.

"At least someone knows we're here," Ludlow said in a change of subject, as Paul continued in the thankless task of attempting to feed the cornflakes guy. "Someone took Winston. And he was quick about it. It was planned."

"But why would someone take Winston?" Derek asked. "What did they want with him?"

"Ransom?" Martin suggested.

"From whom, his parents?" Ludlow asked with unnecessary sarcasm. "Who are they, interdimensional superheroes?"

Rupert shrugged.

"Maybe he just kidnapped him for fun," Tod said.

Ludlow raised an eyebrow at him. This made Tod uncomfortable, and he went to occupy himself instead with the less-dangerous activity of playing with his fish skeletons.

"They might not have been after Winston specifically," Johnny Utah said. "Could have been anyone of us. It's dark, it's hard to tell-"

"Why would anyone do that?" Kip asked. "There's no one who would care about just anyone of us."

"Keanu," Tod said suddenly.

Conor kicked him. Then he realised that he was sitting down, which meant that Tod had not received the kick and now his knee felt funny.

"Who?" Ludlow asked.

"Nothing," Johnny said, as Conor managed in a weird fit of acrobatics to surreptitiously knee Tod in the back. "He coughed."





chapter nineteen  
**surfacing**

---

**Group B:** Shane, Perry, Tommy, Chris, Matt

"Hey, what's that-"

Speeding up the crawl, spurred on by the promise of a change in scenery, a way out of the labyrinth; brought to a halt by the sight of the metal grille, but beyond that not more corridor, just empty space, dark space, the rush of water suddenly audible-

Desperate fingers clawing at the grille, feeling, exploring, another pair of hands join the first, grasping for a hinge, an opening-

"Stuck," Shane said. "It's either rusted over or-" He got a better grip on the grille, shook it forcefully. It budged slightly.

"Do you hear water?" Chris asked from next to him, peeking out through the grille for hope of a glimpse below. He made out the far-off sparkle of light on flowing water, a waterfall, perhaps, or river of some sort.

"Move back," Shane said. "I'll try to kick it in."

He got down on the ground and shoved his foot against the grille, again, again... on the third time it finally gave, its sides coming clean off the walls to land with a distant but distinct splash.

Shane poked his head out the hole and peered downwards. Nothing much. He reached out a hand and felt along the side of the wall below them, feeling for grooves or handholds or-

A ladder.

He closed his hand over the cold metal of the top rung, then the rung after that, and gazed back out at the darkness. Shane withdrew his head from the opening.

"There's a ladder there," he told the others. "I don't know where it leads."

"A ladder?" Chris echoed. "Did we end up in the water system or something?"

"Whatever it is, it's too late now," Perry said. He looked back the way they had come. "We can't retrace our steps."

"So we go down," Shane stated.

"It's dark," Tommy said quietly. Claustrophobia, homesickness, Jjaks' death, and now the yawning pit of darkness through which he'd need to climb, no ground below that they could see, perhaps the ladder broke off halfway and they'd be left clinging there until they fell-

"Right," Shane said. He took a deep breath. "I'll go first. I'll see if it goes anywhere, and-"

"I'll go," Matt interrupted.

"...Sure?"

Matt crawled over to the front, Chris moving back to let him through. He lowered himself over the edge, his feet finding the rungs of the ladder, hands moving down to grasp the sides.

"Okay, just... give a shout every ten rungs or so, so we'll know you're still there," Shane said as Matt began his descent into the darkness.

"Ten!" came the call several seconds later.

"Twenty!" more distant than the first, echoing hollowly off the walls.

"Thirty!" A pause. "It's wet."

Several more seconds of silence, then a small splash, and:

"Bottom! Thirty-six!"

"What do you see?" Shane hollered downwards.

"I don't know, it's too dark!"

Shane turned to the others. "If any of you have a flashlight, now would be a really good time to say so."

No one had a flashlight. Shane stuck his head back out the opening.

"Matt, you still there?"

"Yeah."

"Great. Stay around the ladder. We're coming down."

Shane dropped his feet onto the top rung. "C'mon," he said. "Let's go."

Tommy looked uncertainly at the void beyond.

"If we stick together we'll be safe," Shane added. "Keep together. We'll be fine."

"What about what happened to Jjaks-"

"*Shut up about Jjaks!*" Shane shouted. He swallowed. "That's over, okay? Let's go."

The far-off reddish glow of the tunnel they had left cast a dim spot of crimson light around the vicinity of the ladder, just enough for them to make out each other's faces. Sprays of water hit them intermittently from what they now saw was not a waterfall but an open spout from which the liquid gushed to flow away past their feet into the dark recesses of the tunnel beyond.

"Is this the sewage system?" Chris asked, stepping off the last rung into shallow water

"Doesn't smell like it," Shane said.

They looked out at the two tunnels leading away from them.

"If we're in the plumbing, we can assume we're underground," Perry said. "We need to go upwards. There should be a ladder, or-"

"We just came down a ladder," Tommy pointed out.

"Another ladder, then," Shane said. "Both of those tunnels have to lead somewhere."

"It's dark."

Shane splashed his way towards one tunnel. "Keep to one wall. Human chain. Hold hands. Don't let go."

\*\*

"I can't bring them back to life," Taxon said. "Company policy and all that... if they found out, I'd get fired and be sentenced to eternal toothbrush manufacturing duty or something."

"Okay."

"But yeah, if it's just you, you might have a shot at getting back and reaching the others... hang on, let me call someone."

\*\*

The cloaked skeleton loomed up before not-Tim, scythe in hand and grinning; not that skeletons are capable of any other expression. I mean, if critics think that Keanu is bad, what would they think of skeleton actors? All they do is grin: when happy, they grin, when angry, they grin, when loved ones die, they grin...

CHOOSE YOUR GAME, Death said.

"Um," not-Tim said. "Chess?"

*15 minutes later...*

"Checkmate."

THIS SUCKS, Death said. He sighed. OH ALL RIGHT, YOU WIN. YOU CAN GO.

"Thank you." Not-Tim got up, when Death stopped him with his scythe.

NOT SO FAST, he said. CAN I HAVE YOUR AUTOGRAPH?

\*\*

### **Group C: Shane, Perry, Tommy, Chris, Matt**

Fingers yanked suddenly as Chris slipped in front of him; grabbed tight, pulled him up again and let him regain his footing-

Splashed on in the darkness, Shane leading, feeling his way against the cold rock walls.

Then after an eternity they saw light; sped up towards it, up the ladder and through the open manhole – if it was a manhole – and into the red-lit street beyond.

It was the same reddish glow of the tunnel, but lighter, and more still; and when they looked past the empty street lined with short buildings and turned their eyes upwards, they saw not sky, but more rock, spreading up and away into a gigantic cavern.

"There's no one around," Chris said, and his voice set off a faint echo far above them. They stood facing outwards in a small clump near the spot where they had emerged, gazing at the strange dead world they had arrived in.

The streets were cobbled stone reddish grey in the light, and the broken pieces rattled hollowly down the street when Tommy kicked at them.

Eventually they made the instinctive move towards the buildings – Matt starting towards one and the others trickling behind him, growing sparser and further apart, for somehow this place felt safe, contained, untouched for many years.

The buildings were houses – small affairs no larger than a single room, cube-like structures lined neatly in rows.

Matt pushed at a door long rotted with age. It crumbled quietly at his touch into a heap of fine rubble on the ground.

He stepped in. The others followed from behind. Bed, desk, some shelves, cupboards.

Shane sank down on the bed and stared at the floor. He looked up at them, resignation on his face.

"We're going to die here," Perry said quietly.

Matt checked the stuff on the shelves for anything that might be of use – food, perhaps, to at least ease their hunger; Chris joined in soon after, but they found nothing other than strange foreign trinkets: hard beads glazed black, cloth that fell apart in their hands, ointments or liquids thick and almost solidified. Initially they returned the things once inspected to their original positions, almost not wanting to disturb the age-forced sanctity of the place; but then actions grew more frantic, urgent, boxes chucked to the ground, things dropped, Matt silently choking back angry tears.

Tommy sat on the chair and stared blankly past Perry out the doorway, down the deserted reddish street that seemed to go on forever. And he remembered home; squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, visualised his house, his bedroom, his belongings scattered all over the floor where he had last left them; remembered faces of friends and family, now so far away in some unreachable plane of reality and yet still so close in his mind... just a week ago he had been there, home and safe with everything all right with the universe...

Matt swept the last few items off a shelf in frustration and dropped to sit on the floor, glaring at nothing. Didn't want to die, wanted to fight, fight anything, whatever it was that had brought them here and held them here, just to *do* something instead of waiting quietly for starvation and thirst to take him...

"All this way for nothing," he said, his voice tight.

"We got out," Shane said, his words limp to his own ears. "We got this far. Better up here than down there."

"Jaks got lucky," Matt continued bitterly. "Quick death."

The short conversation lapsed into silence.

Shane brought his legs up to the bed and lay there, trying to hide in sleep.

"I hate him," Chris blurted out with sudden force where he still stood before the shelves.

"Where is Reeves now, huh?" He turned to the others. "It's his fault we're here!"

Perry stepped towards him. "It's not," he said. "He was just doing his job-"

"We wouldn't be *here* if not for him!" Chris yelled in retort.

Perry grabbed him by his shoulders. "Who else do you want to blame?" he asked. "Your parents? You wouldn't be here if not for them, either."

"It's not the same," Chris said, pulling himself away. "You know it's not!"

He broke free and ran out the door.

"Chris- CHRIS!"

The teen ignored the calls, shoes pounding their way down the subterranean street, driven by blind frustration. He didn't know where he was going; he didn't care, it would make no difference if he was going to die anyway, if there was no way out-

The place wasn't flat. There was a horizon in the distance, far off down along the unchanging street; and soon, when Chris stopped for breath and looked back, he could no longer make out the small house where the others were; and strangely they seemed now to grow faint in his memory, as though they had never existed and it was just him, here, always had been-

It was cooler here in this part of the street, some cold draught of air blowing from somewhere... somewhere above...

Chris looked up. And then he saw the far off glimmer of bluish light coming from a wide crack far above... and moving his gaze downwards, he could make out rough steps hewn into the rock, leading up...

"Chris!"

Someone running after him from behind, possibly all of them, still too far away for it to matter. Chris grabbed hold of a step and started his climb, working his way towards that spot of rippling light, the cold intensifying as he got closer...

He poked his head out the crack at the top. He was at the side of some cave. Not too far from him he could make out the ripples of a pond, and sitting next to that, a fisherman.

"Uh... hi," Chris ventured.

Marlon stared at him.



chapter twenty  
reunion

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- + **Group A:** Conor, John C, Johnny U, Paul, Nelson, Tod, Jesse, Kip, the cornflakes guy
- + **Group E:** Ludlow, Eric, Martin, Harry, Rupert, Derek, Marlon, Heaver, Mike, Jack not-Traven

"WHERE THE F\*\*\* DO YOU PEOPLE COME FROM?" Ludlow shouted, interrupting the short happy reunion that had proceeded among the fourteen Keanu-spawn of Block F, 4th floor. The noise died down. Tommy and Jesse agreed that it would probably not be a good idea to poke Tom with a stick.

"Same place you did," John Constantine said. He wanted a cigarette. He didn't have any. This did not make him happy.

"I take it you're not a rescue party, huh?" Martin asked.

"Yeah, we're not," Shane said. "Look, uh, do you have anything to eat?"

"Yeah," Ludlow said, not done glaring at them. "We do. You don't."

Harry glanced at him. "Come on, Tom..."

"There's not enough," Ludlow continued. "We can barely feed ourselves as it is. You think you can just barge in here out of nowhere and take our food? We've been here five days. You've been here for less than one. Why don't you try *getting out there* and fending for yourself, instead of feeding off the resources that some of us have f\*\*\*ing *died* to."

"*Show some hospitality, will you?*" Johnny Utah asked through gritted teeth.

Ludlow looked at him. "Why?"

"Because there are fourteen of us and only eleven of you, and if you wanna fight this out you're gonna lose."

Ludlow looked at the cornflakes guy and raised an eyebrow.

":(" vibed the cornflakes guy.

Shane pulled the FBI agent back. "Johnny don't-"

"Yeah, all right," Ludlow said once he was done intimidating the cornflakes guy. "You want to fight? Okay, let's fight!"

He lunged at Johnny, sending them both to the ground, fists flying, Johnny yelling, and the surrounding people learning that it's always a painful idea to stand behind an angry FBI agent.

"Look," Conor said. "Can we just-"

Then he got a punch in his head and all peaceable notions violently deserted him.

John Constantine calmly bent down and picked up the cigarette that had fallen out of someone's pocket.

"Got a light?" he asked Perry.

"Yeah."

And John was happy again. He leant against the rock wall, blew smoke out his mouth and enjoyed the civil war.

Then a ripple in the air; and suddenly a circular portal opened, and not-Tim stepped out.

"..." he said, surveying the scene.

"Uh, hello?" he said.

Conor looked up; swore; let go of Rupert's hair and stood looking guilty, blood dripping from his nose.

"And who the hell are *you*?" Ludlow yelled at the newcomer, giving the mostly-comatose Johnny one last kick for good measure.

Not-Tim looked at him for a long while.

"The rescue party," he said finally. "You can call me Chuck."

\*\*

Not-Tim walked up to the semi-conscious Johnny and crouched down by his side.

He glanced up at Ludlow, who still didn't look too happy.

"What did you do to him?" Not-Tim asked.

"The little punk was asking for it."

Not-Tim looked back at Johnny. "Quarterback punk," he murmured.

"Can we go now?" Ludlow asked tersely.

Not-Tim stood back up. He surveyed the scene with its beaten and bloodied, his gaze meeting eyes that sometimes turned to look away.

"Just one question," he said. "WHAT THE F\*\*\* IS ALL THIS?"

He stepped over Utah. "Derek, let Nelson go. Yes, I see that you've got him in a half-Nelson. That's very clever of you. But will you please-"

"How do you know my name?" Derek asked.

Not-Tim laughed. "How do I-"

A vaguely psychotic grin spread out on his face. He waved a finger in the air and jabbed it at people as he hopped about navigating bodies. "Tom," he said at Ludlow. "Martin. Harry. Rupert. Marlon. Johnny. Jack. Mike. And- uh."

Not Tim blinked. "Who are you?"

Eric looked crestfallen. "Eric," he said weakly.

A pause. "Um, sorry. Eric, okay. Yeah. And-"

"*You* guys?" Ludlow cut in incredulously. "You're the ones that started it, aren't you? Kidnapping that-"

"Started what?" John Constantine asked.

Ludlow stared at Not-Tim. "'Chuck', huh? What's your *real* name?"

"Yeah, that's... that's a form of Charles. It's my middle name, see. K. Charles-"

"*What's the K stand for?*"

Not-Tim hesitated. "Kool Breeze Over the Mountain," he said.

"Actor?"

"Nah, you don't have to call me that. 'Keanu' is fine-"

Not-Tim saw Ludlow glaring at him and decided that it would probably be a good idea to shut up.

That was when the cornflakes guy broke free of Eric's grasp and bolted towards him, attaching himself firmly to Not-Tim's leg. He smiled. He missed Not-Tim. Not-Tim understood him.

":)," vibed the cornflakes guy.

"Um," Not-Tim said, looking down at his left leg's newest inhabitant. "Can you, uh-"

He tried shaking his leg to disengage the cornflakes guy.

":)," vibed the cornflakes guy, and held on tighter.

\*\*

Neo stood in the doorway of his room, arms folded as he calmly watched the sorry procession pass by into the common room in various states of injury.

Ludlow's gaze lingered on the blanket-covered dead!Alex on the corridor.

John followed his gaze. "That's what we do to people we don't like," he suggested darkly.

Neo watched as Conor and Kip dragged the comatose Johnny Utah along the carpet by his hands.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Civil war," Conor said.

"Who are the others?"

"Found them in a cave and now they won't go away."

Neo watched Not-Tim limp by, the cornflakes guy still hanging on to his leg.

"Hi, Neo," said Not-Tim.

"What happened to you?" Neo asked.

"Hmm?"

"You're bleeding."

"Oh, that. Yeah..." Not-Tim wiped blood off the healing wound on the side of his head. "I killed myself earlier. Shot myself in the head. But I'm all right now. Uh... can you help me get him off?" He indicated the cornflakes guy.

Neo looked at him.

":)," vibed the cornflakes guy.

"I think he'll need to be surgically removed," Shane said. "Oi, Julian!"

"I don't think we need to summon medical assistance just yet-"

Julian popped up. "What is it?"

Shane pointed at the cornflakes guy. "I'm thinking malignant tumour growth-"

Kevin was busy trying to drag his sofa back into the room; he gave up, left it there in the corridor and plopped down on it.

"All you do is sit on that couch," Nelson said. "Ever thought about doing something more useful?"

Kevin sat up and jabbed a finger in his direction. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, not knowing what to say. He settled for looking angry and misunderstood and decided that defending guilty clients was far easier than defending his right to sit on a sofa and do nothing.



Nelson smirked and walked on to the common room, where others were milling aimlessly in and out waiting for something to happen.

A resounding scream broke the air as Julian succeeded in surgically removing the cornflakes guy from not-Tim's leg. "Hold him," he said as Shane willingly grabbed the struggling cornflakes' guy and dragged him further from not-Tim.

":(," vibed the cornflakes guy, hands desperately flailing as he tried to regain his grip.

Not-Tim shook his leg, enjoying the returned mobility. "Thanks, Julian," he said.

He patted the cornflakes guy on the head. He jumped out of the way of a grasping hand.

":("

"Could we sedate him?" Shane asked, trying to figure out the best way to immobilise his captive.

"I don't know," not-Tim said. "Neo? Know anything that might help? Just to keep him still, not injure him or kill him-"

Neo shook his head.

Conor emerged from the common room where he had just deposited Johnny Utah beside the kitchen sink. He looked at Shane and Julian. He looked at not-Tim. He stared back at them. Then he walked off to the sofa and an attempt at returning it to the common room.

Shane looked awkwardly at not-Tim, remembering who he was.

"Let's... take you somewhere else, okay?" he asked the cornflakes guy, and went off with him to the common room where people were accumulating.

Julian stood around looking nervous, then he followed Shane.

Not-Tim looked sad. He looked down at his shoes for comfort. He decided that they were falling apart. Time to bring out the duct-tape-

"Where's Jack?"

Not-Tim looked up to see Griffin standing there.

"He died," he said after some time.

A disappointed nod.

"Miss him?" not-Tim asked.

"I liked Jack."

"Liked him or wanted to kill him?"

"Is there a difference?"

"For most people, yeah, I think there is."

Griffin stuck his hands into his pockets.

"Jonathan and Eddie, huh?" not-Tim pressed on with measured tone. "Planning to do the rest of them in, too? And me?"

"Not you."

Not-Tim laughed. "And why is that?"

Griffin looked at him. "Because you're the only one who understands me."



chapter twenty-one

back

---

The common room was the most crowded it had been, but still large enough to accommodate the thirty or so people hanging around waiting. Ludlow stood by the table and talked quietly with Conor, the latter with arms folded defensively, yet willing to listen and exchange necessary facts. Martin listening from behind Ludlow; John Constantine leaning against a shelf, smoking and attempting his best to make Ludlow angry just by looking at him.

Most of the others sat scattered about the floor in smatterings of uninspired conversation, the group divided between those from Blocks F and L, casting the occasional suspicious glance at each other. Johnny Utah lay unconscious by the kitchen sink for all to see. Away from both groups, David Allen Griffin leant against the wall by the television screen and watched them.

Bill S. Preston Esquire felt highly out of place. He got a bunch of curious glances, which didn't make him feel any better, and instead joined Ted in an animated discussion of what they thought Sid was up to, and how he had gotten so orange in the first place.

Near the back of the room, Tommy and Jesse were discovering the extreme dissatisfaction that came from poking Marlon with a stick. All he did was look at them, and sometimes not even that.

The door opened. Not-Tim walked in, and the conversation from the Block F side of the room suddenly died down into nothing.

Ludlow looked up to see the source of the sudden quiet.

"Hi," not-Tim said, and tried to look inconspicuous.

Ludlow walked towards him; he stopped at an arm's length away and stared at not-Tim with an intense calculating gaze.

Not-Tim fought the urge to look away.

Ludlow turned to face the others. "Why're you all so afraid of him?" he asked.

No one said anything.

Ludlow turned back to not-Tim. "He's just like the rest of us," he said.

In a sudden motion he grabbed not-Tim and slammed him face-first against the wall, ignoring the yell of pain as he grabbed hold of the actor's left arm and twisted it.

"Don't feel so powerful now, huh?"

"Let me go!"

Paul and Shane jumped to their feet and dashed forward. Shane tripped over the cornflakes guy and fell.

"I'm taking over this bunch of f\*\*\*ing morons, you understand that?" Ludlow continued, elbowing Paul in the nose.

"Okay," not-Tim gasped. "Okay. Let go my arm. Please," he added.

Ludlow wasn't finished. "And you'll do what I tell you, same as everyone else."

"Yes!" not-Tim shouted. "Let go my arm!"

"Yes *sir*," Ludlow hissed into his ear.

"*YES MR. LUDLOW SIR!*"

Ludlow released him with a shove, not-Tim stumbling to regain his balance, massaging his arm and blinking back tears of pain.

"Sit down," Ludlow said.

Not-Tim sat down, still wincing and rubbing his arm.

"I'm okay," he said quietly when Julian gave him a concerned look.

Tommy realised that his mouth was hanging open. He closed it.

People from Block F looked nervously from not-Tim to Ludlow.

"Okay," Ludlow said, sweeping the room with his gaze. "The issue here is how to get home. Can they get us home?" he asked, looking pointedly at not-Tim.

"I don't know," not-Tim said. "You'll have to ask them."

"How do we do that?"

"Get out... March on their headquarters..."

"I think they're already doing that," Bill said. "That's why they started shooting."

"Who are you?" Ludlow asked.

"Bill S. Preston Esquire..."

"You're not one of us."

"He's my friend," Ted said firmly.

Ludlow gave up. "Fine. So we go out there and join them-"

"I think you missed the part about the shooting," John Constantine said drily.

A bump at the door. Everyone turned.

"Hi, sofa coming through!" Another bump. Paul got up and opened the door for Tod and Kevin and the sofa and helped them attempt to drag it through the door, whereupon it got stuck and refused to budge unless they tilted it diagonally. They decided they couldn't be bothered, so they left it there.

Tom Ludlow was not happy at his plans being interrupted by a sofa. He glared at it.

":(" vibed the sofa in the language of the cornflakes guy.

"Can we get b-"

And then a Mysterious Old Man suddenly appeared out of nowhere and rudely cut-short Ludlow's sentence. He gazed casually at not-Tim. "I see you're alive," he said.

Ludlow glared at him. "Who are *you*?"

"Could have fooled me," Dem continued, ignoring Ludlow. "I even sent Winston home."

"You can send them back?" not-Tim asked.

"The question is not if I can, but if I want to." Dem smiled.

"What do you want?" not-Tim asked.

"You haven't exactly been very cooperative, have you?" Dem asked. "Do they know what you did to Jjaks?"

Everyone looked at not-Tim.

"What did you-" Shane started.

"I didn't do anything to him."

"You let him die," Dem said. "You could have stopped it."

"Then *other people* would have died!"

"Noble fellow, isn't he?" Dem asked the others. "Willing to sacrifice the lot of you for the greater good-"

"Look-"

"*What?*" Conor demanded.

"Okay, see-"

"Since when did *you* speak for us? Huh?"

Not-Tim looked at him and repressed the urge to say, "In your case, 2001."

Conor shook his head. "I've had enough of this," he said. He stormed out the room. He found his way blocked by the sofa. He kicked it. It wouldn't move. He climbed over the sofa and finished storming out the room.

They heard various loud noises and swearing from outside as Conor went around hitting things.

"New deal," Dem said cheerily against the background noise. "I offer to either bring those dead guys back to life, *or* they stay dead and send this lot back home."

"Hey," Ludlow said. "Who told you you could just barge in here and-"

"I'm not talking to you," Dem said. "Well, Mr. Reeves?"

Not-Tim hesitated. "It's their call."

\*\*

So it was that the one-for-one deal was forged, and Winston Connelly found himself rudely returned to the place he thought he'd escaped for good.

"Hi, Winston," someone said, as Dem trudged out to the corridor, followed by a trailing line of Block F Keanu-spawn.

He pulled out a boot from his coat pocket. "It's the Boot of Life," he explained when asked, and delivered a sound kick to dead!Alex lying in the corridor.

Nothing happened, except the body got bounced around a bit.

"Oops," Dem said. "Wrong boot. That's the insomnia one." He pulled it off and stuck another one on and gave another swift kick to dead!Alex.

A bullet fell out onto the carpet. Wounds healed shut. Colour returned to skin. Alex coughed and lay still.

Dem decided that another kick wouldn't hurt. So he kicked him again, and Alex's eyes flew open with the confused terror that one is wont to experience upon being brought back to life only to see some old guy kicking you with a boot. He swore and rolled out of the way of the next kick.

Dem shrugged. "Guess that's it for now, then." He vanished.

Alex looked up at the people staring at him. They looked down at him.

"...Welcome back," Conor said.

Alex got slowly to his feet. He dimly recalled being exploited as free labour in some strange afterlife place that needed a new recreational wing. The details were growing fuzzy in his mind. He needed to sit down. He sat back down on the carpet.

"Okay," Shane said when it looked as though no further interesting thing was about to happen. "Lunch."

"More like dinner," Conor said.

"We can have both," Tommy suggested.

"What time is it?" Chris asked, but everyone was too lazy to look at the clock. It was probably around six.

Jesse poked his head into the common room. "Who's hungry?" he called out. Several people decided that they were. So they got up, to the decided displeasure of Tom, who wanted everyone to just sit down and cooperate.

The group went enthusiastically out into the stairwell in search of the cafeteria and food.

Sitting on the floor, Alex still felt uncomfortably like a zombie. It didn't help that he was kind of covered in blood. He left for the central block, returning soon after with a free change of fresh clothes, then headed duly for the bathroom and a good shower.

Back in the cafeteria, the chefs stood around in a deactivated sort of way. The food embargo was still on.

The place was eerily still, and clean, and white, the rows of empty tables freshly cleaned and gleaming, the work of the small cleaning robots that now lay dormant by the walls.

Their footsteps echoed as they entered.

Tod prodded one of the chefs. Nothing happened.

But there were ingredients lying about in the cooking areas, and some of them knew how to cook, and others didn't mind eating raw ingredients, and so they got themselves sufficiently full, although the food didn't taste a quarter as good as it would have if Adam Jones had been among their number.

\*\*

Alex held out his hand. "Alex Wyler."

"Tom Ludlow."

They shook hands.

"Where were you guys from?" Alex asked, tossing his towel onto the sofa to dry.

"Block L. The 29<sup>th</sup> floor."

Alex gestured vaguely at the door. "Have you met Keanu?"

"Yes," Ludlow replied shortly.

"Okay."

"What's he doing here?" Ludlow asked.

"I don't know."

"Trying to build some f\*\*\*ing kingdom of his own?"

Alex shook his head.

Ludlow snorted. "It's pathetic."

Alex just looked at him.

"He walks in and suddenly everyone's on their best behaviour."

"It's partly fear. And respect."

"For what?" Ludlow demanded. "What the f\*\*\* has he ever done for us? I've spent my whole life getting by on my own, and he had no say in it as far as I know. He might as well never have existed. Why should that change now?"

Alex just looked at him.

"All he's done so far is to get us stuck in this place. This prison. And since then he hasn't done a single f\*\*\*ing thing to get us out of it."

"He didn't have much of a chance," Alex said. "He got locked up in a room the moment we found out who he was."

"Could have done something earlier, couldn't he?"

"Look around," Alex said. "I think we're the only ones left in this place. Everyone else got out. Because of him."

"Did *everyone* miss the part about the shooting?" John Constantine asked rhetorically from a corner. He didn't need food. He had a cigarette.

"We don't even know what's going on outside," Martin said in a fit of eavesdropping-turned-intervention. "We weren't the only ones that ran back. There were lots of people who would've got sent... who knows where. Most likely they're still there now."

\*\*

Forced friendliness at the table where they sat down to eat; that mix of fear and pity, the tensions running high, and Not-Tim thus excused himself to let them breathe more freely.

Bill and Ted exchanged a glance. They got up and joined him.

Not-Tim returned the smiles.

And the vegetables that Ted snuck onto his plate.

\*\*

Dinner eaten, stomachs full, the whole of Kenselton Hotel free to roam; down lighted hallways and winding stairs, past silent bartenders that did not move. Together again, anarchy high; they mourned the loss of those who died; and vowed that they'd get home some day, against all odds, and come what may.

\*\*

Alex found him in the dark of the common room, sitting at the small table between the shelves engrossed in a book beneath the low desk light.

"You're still up?" Alex asked. The clock ticking in the shadows said 2 am.

Looking up; a shrug. "Yeah." A hand closed the book. *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare*.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to disturb."

"It's all right."

Low snores from the sleeping others filled the silence of the room.

"Alex-"

"Yeah?"

The cracked whisper. "Tell me this isn't a dream."

The face that looked up at him held a haggard weariness; tired from insufficient rest, perhaps, or just the toil of the previous week; and somewhere in that gaze came to Alex the sudden conviction that they were equals, after all, equally powerless, equally human, and a wave of compassion washed over him.

"It isn't," he said.

The actor nodded. He buried his head in his hands and did not move for a while.

"Can I get you anything?" Alex offered.

"Water would be fine."

The gush of the water cooler dispensing clear water into a cup; Alex's footsteps padding back across the carpet, and the hand gently placing the cup before him.

"Thanks," he said, and raised his head from his palms.

Alex pulled out the spare chair and sat adjacent to him, watching as he took a sip and put the cup back down, gazing unseeingly at the shelf before him and saying, "I'm sorry."

"What for?" Alex asked.

"Anything. Everything. All of you being here. For coming here myself and making things worse-

"You don't know that things would've been better if you hadn't come."

"Jack might still be alive... and Jjaks. That was part of the deal. They could be alive now. I just had to agree not to come. Other people would have died, but..." A pause. "Who am I to speak for you. Why should it be my decision."

Alex was listening intently, hands clasped on the table before him. "You did the right thing," he said.

"Did I? I don't know if I did." A gulp of water, then a pause, and quieter: "There was a contract. A few months ago. They sent it to a few of us, asking for consent to bring our characters into this world." Another pause. "I said yes."

Alex narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't know. I didn't know what they... how... I didn't think it would be like this. I just... thought... it would be nice to meet you guys and..."

He broke off, looked Alex in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You had a *choice*," Alex said, his voice terse.

"I didn't think you were real."

Alex looked away from him to the table, brow furrowed slightly.

"I'm sorry," the actor said again.

"They deserve to know."

A rueful smile. "Tom will kill me."

Alex nodded.

They sat in silence for a while.

"Don't tell them," Alex finally said. "It'll only make things worse."

The actor barely registered his words, both hands gripping the cup of water, just looking at it.

"Keanu."

His head turned slightly towards Alex.

"Get some rest," Alex suggested. "It's late." He got off the chair and pushed it back under the table. The other hadn't budged.

"C'mon. You can take my bed. I'm not tired. My whole sleep cycle's been thrown out of whack."

Finally the actor got up, cup in hand. Alex reached around and turned off the desk lamp, then led the two of them across the common room and out the door.

The corridor was silent with night, its light hanging still in the air. Alex pushed open the door to his room and motioned in. Paul was fast asleep in the lower bunk.

The actor paused at the doorway. "Thanks," he said quietly.

Alex took the cup from his hand. "You're welcome."

Paul stirred slightly as the door shut and the newcomer padded across the carpet.

"Alex?" he asked groggily, eyes shut.

"No."

Paul opened his eyes.

He made out the dark figure as it passed him and climbed up the ladder to the top bunk.

"Who are you?" he asked, a little more awake now.

The upper bunk creaked as someone settled into it.

"Good night," came the voice from above him, not answering the question.

Paul Sutton got no more sleep that night.





### **First Combined Meeting**

*Thomas Ludlow presiding*

*Minutes taken by Martin Loader in shorthand, transcribed into longhand post-meeting*

Start of Meeting: 9:50am

Time Collecting Names and Drawing People Map: 4 minutes

Actual Start of Meeting: 9:57 am

Proposed Agenda:

- To discuss current situation
- To discuss options and feasibility
- To decide on best plan and how to carry it out
- To decide what to do with Reeves

Persons Present: 33

9:57:36:

- Ludlow opens meeting, summarises current situation:
- We are probably the only ones still here
- Scouting report from Marshetta says that stairs to outside world are still there
- Earlier reports from Logan and Preston say that outside world is chaotic, full of "people running around and getting shot and stuff."

9:58:42:

- Constantine rolls his eyes, entirely unprovoked
- Ludlow glares at Constantine, demands to know "what the f\*\*\* was that for".
- Constantine takes another drag on cigarette, does not answer question

9:58:53:

- Ludlow continues:
- Many Kenselton Hotel personnel still around, though deactivated
- He found a shotgun off the fifth floor janitor
- Ludlow produces said shotgun from behind kitchen sink and lays it on table

10:00:14:

- Anderson twitches. Gaze fixed on shotgun.

10:00:16:

- Ludlow concludes it will be too dangerous to go out unarmed
- Proposes we search KH for other usable weapons after the meeting
- Suggest we arm ourselves, then go out there and shoot anything that tries to stop us
- Destination is Kenselton HQ

10:02:36:

- Falco asks what we'll do when we get there
- Ludlow says we'll cross that bridge when we get to it
- Logan asks "what bridge?"
- Preston says "the San Francisco Bridge"
- Logan says "oh"

10:02:53:

- Wyler asks what about Reeves and the hostage situation
- Ludlow says he can just stay here and get the f\*\*\* out of our way, because it's all his fault that we're here in the first place

- Constantine, entirely unprovoked, calls Ludlow a "f\*\*\*ing asshole"
- Ludlow tells Constantine to go to hell
- Constantine says sure, but first he'll need a cat
- Logan says "I thought we were in Los Angeles"
- Preston says "good observation, dude. Then it's the Los Angeles Bridge."
- Sutton buries head in hands

10:03:25:

- O'Neill says "right, so basically we just go out there and shoot people. Why didn't we think of that before?"
- Wernicke asks when we can start, and if he's not allowed to use a gun can he just poke people with a stick?
- Reeves says that there's probably a better way to go about things
- Ludlow says he didn't ask for his f\*\*\*ing opinion, and why didn't Reeves come up with a better plan then

10:03:42:

- Lomax points out that Kenselton HQ don't know that Reeves is still alive, and could we work with that?
- Constantine said we could, if not for the fact that Ludlow is a trigger-happy asshole
- Ludlow tells Constantine to "suck it, pretty boy".
- Constantine says "that's what your mom said".
- Ludlow tells him to go to hell
- Constantine says sure, but he still hasn't given him a cat
- Ludlow says that Constantine never makes any f\*\*\*ing sense
- Wyler says can we please all calm down

10:03:56:

- Anderson offers to start collecting guns
- Wernicke says he'll go with him
- Reeves says "I don't think so"

10:04:03:

- Riley says "okay, okay, so they don't know he's still alive, so maybe-"
- Wernicke asks what's wrong with the shooting people plan
- Mercer mutters something about more work for doctors
- Talbot stands up and leaves the room
- Ludlow asks him where the f\*\*\* he thinks he's going
- Talbot ignores him and slams door shut

10:04:18:

- Moss points out that the hostage thing didn't work the last time
- Lomax says that's because KH managed to get everyone else against them by cutting off the food, and they can't do that now because no one is likely to come back in to stop us now that they're out
- Riley says okay, so what are our new demands?
- I say "send everybody home."
- Ludlow says "Martin, shut up and write."
- Favor says "Tell them to send everybody home or we kill him."
- Moss says "I think you're overestimating how much they value his life."
- Utah suggests we kill him first to show that we're serious, and then kidnap another actor to hold hostage
- Reeves says something about Point Break 2.
- Utah shuts up.

10:04:41:

- Ludlow says "Reeves stays alive."
- Reeves looks somewhat happy about this
- Higgins raises his hand
- Ludlow says "What?"
- Higgins points at Griffin and says "I don't think it's safe for him to be out here"
- Ludlow asks why.
- Higgins says "because he killed people and stuff".
- Griffin says "I didn't kill any stuff".
- Falco says "One out of two's enough. Lock him up again."
- Utah suggests we kill him and save the trouble, and Reeves while we're at it

- Reeves clears throat.
- Utah shuts up.

10:04:59:

- Ludlow takes out handcuffs, tosses them at Falco, says "Chain him to a bed or something"
- Ludlow misses, handcuffs hit Lomax on head
- Lomax doesn't look happy, looks about to attack the origin of the flying handcuffs, presumably considers the source, doesn't do anything

10:05:10:

- Falco and O'Neill take handcuffs and Griffin out of room to chain him to a bed or something.

10:05:23:

- Wyler says "Can we just come to some kind of conclusion about what to do?"
- Marshetta says "We find a bunch of guns, we hold Reeves hostage, we go out there and tell 'em about it, and wait until they do something."
- Moss says "This plan sucks."
- Ludlow says "You got a better idea?"
- Moss doesn't have a better idea.
- Townsend suggests we "just stay here and let the other people work it all out"
- Marshetta asks "what if they don't work it all out?"
- Townsend says "at least they tried, and at least we'd still be alive".
- Mercer says "only until the water runs out, and then we'd be dead of dehydration."
- Lyman says "your patients must really love your optimism."
- Mercer says "most of them live."
- Lyman says "all of mine live."

10:06:08:

- Wyler says "I think it would be safer if we just stayed here and continue trying to reach them through the radio link, and maybe come to some sort of compromise-"
- Moss says "like that worked the last time."
- Wyler says "I don't know. Did it? Sorry, I was dead."
- Utah says "we're still here, aren't we?"

10:06:25:

- Falco and O'Neill return and sit back down
- O'Neill asks "so what happened?"
- Moss says "nothing important."
- Wernicke says "can we start looking for the guns now?"
- Walker says "please?"

\*\*

They ran around the hallways stripping bodies of their guns; here is one that's made of silver, here is one that only stuns. Handled different makes and tried them, having mock fights in the halls; fingers slipping on the triggers sent stray bullets raking walls.

"Stop wasting the f\*\*\*ing ammo!" Ludlow yelled.

They collected themselves back in the common room and dumped the loot on the table.

Ludlow located a box and emptied it of its white tablecloths. Not-Tim looked at them. He walked over, crouched down, and picked up a white tablecloth from the floor. He looked at it for a long time.

Meanwhile a few people were checking the guns for ammo, chucking the sufficiently full ones into the box.

Shane tossed a seemingly empty gun aside. It hit the wall, went off, and blew a hole in a cornflakes box.

The cornflakes guy burst into tears.

Neo dodged the cornflakes rain and picked up the last gun to check it.

"Okay," Ludlow said after that was dropped into the box as well. "Everyone who knows how to use a gun, take one. ...ONE, Anderson! ONE!"

Neo sadly returned the other five.

"And can someone tell him to shut the f\*\*\* up?" Ludlow demanded, glaring at the cornflakes guy, still in tears.

Not-Tim sighed. He released the white tablecloth and joined the others on the floor. The cornflakes guy grabbed hold of him.

":(" he vined, burying his face in not-Tim's jacket.

Not-Tim attempted to retain as much of his dignity as was possible with a cornflakes guy attached to him.

":(" the cornflakes guy continued.

"How old are you?" Ludlow asked suspiciously as Ron picked up a gun.

The teen scowled. "Old enough."

"Riiight." Ludlow pointed at the sole remaining cornflakes box. "Hit that."

Ron duly complied. Cornflakes flew out everywhere.

The cornflakes guy re-burst into tears, falling into sniffles when not-Tim covered his eyes.

Ludlow looked reluctantly impressed. He let Ron be and looked over at not-Tim. He took out another pair of handcuffs from his pocket and gestured towards the door. "Get moving."

"Where?"

Ludlow held up the handcuffs. "You're not coming with us, and I'm going to make sure that you don't. Got any problems with that?"

Not-Tim looked at him. He looked at the cornflakes guy. He looked back at Tom. "What if I promise not to go anywhere?"

"Not good enough."

Not-Tim sighed. He pulled the cornflakes guy off him and stood up.

":(!," vined the cornflakes guy.

"You'll be safer here," Alex said doubtfully, then winced as the cornflakes guy attached himself to him instead. "Just... yeah. Hey, um, can someone help get this fellow off me?"

Julian went to answer his call of duty.

"You'll be all right," Alex continued as Ludlow led not-Tim out the door.



chapter twenty-three  
the works of my hands

---

Griffin isn't the only one in the room; they find Eddie seated inside by the side of the door, looking up as they enter, suppressed anger in his eyes.

"What're you doing here?" Ludlow asks.

"Nothing."

"Get out and join the others," Ludlow says. "Everyone goes out except these two."

"You don't tell me what to do."

"Huh."

Ludlow's eyes rove over the rest of the scene, takes in Griffin where he's been cuffed single-handedly to the bed by Conor and Shane, looks at not-Tim, then turns towards the door.

"Keep him here," he tells Eddie. "I'll be right back." He walks out.

"...Hi," not-Tim says.

"Hi."

Silence.

"I don't want to go home," Eddie suddenly spills out, desperate, pleading. "I mean I-... I *want* to get out of here, but I don't want to go home either, and...." He takes a shaky breath. "...and I don't know, I don't-" He lapses into silence.

Ludlow returns with a chainsaw. He tosses it on the ground, then casually drags not-Tim closer to the bed, grabs his right wrist, and handcuffs it to Griffin's left.

Not-Tim looks at it; Griffin's hand moves instinctively away, recoiling, a sudden quickly-hidden flash of anger as he stares up at Ludlow.

Ludlow nudges the chainsaw a little closer to them, just within not-Tim's reach. Its metal blade shines dully on the carpet.

"If you want to get out," Ludlow says to not-Tim, indicating the chainsaw with an uncharacteristically sadistic glee that might have resulted from too much time in John's presence, "chop off his hand."

"And you," he says to Eddie, "get out of here."

The teen reluctantly obeys.

The door booms shut behind them as they leave.

Not-Tim glances at his fellow captive, the other's head bowed in what might have been resignation. Eventually he looks up and meets his eyes

"Do you want to get out?" Griffin asks.

It's not so much a question as a repetition of Ludlow's last words; they hold no offer of friendly alliance, taunting, almost; a dare tinged with false bravado.

"I don't want to hurt you," the actor says. His words ring with a perfunctory hollowness. Lip service to the unspoken obligatory contract between creator and created; one does not wilfully destroy one's own work.

The chainsaw lies untouched on the carpet. Had their positions been reversed, Griffin might have struck by now and be off, free; or perhaps not, for such crudity might have been below him; he would have savoured the power over him a little longer, the presented threat always there but not quite seen all the way through, hanging like a spectre in the night invading dreams and haunting wakeful sleep, tormenting his future victim with the knowledge that he might not wake to see another day.

Weariness moves the actor to sit, slowly, his right hand's descent tugging Griffin's left after; the other joins him on the carpet in silent compliance, looking down at his shoes, just thinking... thinking...

The quiet starts to get to him, dogging him with a curious feeling of insecurity. It is too quiet. Griffin is too quiet, his tongue temporarily tied by present company, currently powerless, waiting for his next move, calculating the possibilities...

Not-Tim tentatively reaches out his left hand to scratch his ear. He dare not move too freely.

"What are we waiting for?" Griffin finally asks. His gaze leaves the carpet and regards the actor with what might have been bemusement. A dark intelligence shines in his eyes. Not-Tim tries to look away.

"There's nothing we can do," he replies flatly.

A smirk. "You could kill me and escape. I could kill you and stay here. There's no sense in wasting a perfectly good saw. Of course... do you *want* to escape? What are you going to do out there? Join the others? You know they hate you. Us. That's why we're in here and they're out there."

Now that the silence is broken, not-Tim wishes that Griffin would shut up. He doesn't like the way his voice creeps up on him, invading a mind tricked into believing it is his own.

"Give up on them," Griffin continues. "There's no use. They're on their own. And we're far safer in here than they are out there."

Griffin's hand lies on the carpet next to his, handcuff round the wrist; take the saw, sever it, and he'd be free, but just the thought of doing so brings up revulsion in his mind. The hand looks too much like his own. He briefly moves his own fingers just to be sure of where he ends and the other begins, and he wonders at the mind that controls that other hand; how it thinks, where it's from, where it's been.

\*\*

Computer... gun... computer... gun...

Neo gazed desperately at his beloved computer as he fingered the awesome shotgun in his hand. If he went out there, he might never come back again. He could die. He might get home. He might get home and then die. And he'd never be able to once again roam the Internet of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

On the other hand, if there was going to be a shoot-people fest, he kind of wanted to be part of it.

He swallowed. The dilemma was driving him nuts.

People were milling about in the disorganised mess that tends to result when thirty or more are gathered in any one spot. A few had possibly run off to other parts of Kenselton Hotel to avoid what might have been irreversible death.

John Constantine hung around the corridor looking out for subtle ways to irritate Ludlow for the lulz.

\*\*

Not-Tim reached for the chainsaw; brought it towards him and hefted its weight in his hands.

He glanced briefly at Griffin before returning his gaze to the chainsaw.

"Let's see what this can do," he said, and got to his feet, dragging Griffin up with him.

Not-Tim turned on the chainsaw. It buzzed to life as he struggled to hold on to it with the limited mobility of his handcuffed right hand.

He realised that he was not standing at a good angle to do any effective dismembering of furniture, and stepped over to Griffin's right.

"I'll try to cut that off," he said, gesturing at the handcuff that chained the other to the bed. "Keep your hand out of the way."

The chainsaw powered up again, and not-Tim directed it at the metal the best he could. Sparks flew. The handcuff remained intact.

"What is this thing made of?" he demanded after the third unsuccessful try.

The handcuffs were probably just made from ordinary metal; the important thing is that when Tom Ludlow handcuffs somebody, they stay handcuffed. Even though in this case it was Conor and Shane who did the deed, in which case that particular fact wasn't really of much relevance at all.

"Try the bed," Griffin suggested, so not-Tim went chainsaw on the metal pole of the bunk bed to similarly little effect. He concluded that the chainsaw sucked, and why exactly was there a chainsaw in Kenselton Hotel, anyway? It made less sense than white tablecloths, which at least appealed to his aesthetic sensibility.

Not-Tim put the chainsaw aside and sat down in a slump of defeat. More silence followed.

"Nice."

Not-Tim's head snapped up at the voice. Dem was leaning casually against the wall, twiddling his thumbs in an in-your-face kind of way.

Twiddle.

"Are their lives really worth worrying over?" Dem asked not-Tim. "Look at what they do to you. Hello," he added to Griffin.

"What are you doing here?" not-Tim asked tersely.

"I thought you could use the company."

Twiddle.

Dem gave up twiddling his thumbs. He looked at the chainsaw instead, then looked up at the handcuffed hands.

"What've you got to do here?" he asked not-Tim. "Chainsaw his wrist off to go free? Nice. What's stopping you?" Dem smiled benevolently. "Jaks eaten by a radioactive phoenix, *suuure*. Simple dismemberment of a serial killer, nope. You're a strange fellow, Mr. Reeves.

"Not to mention," Dem said to Griffin, "he doesn't like you very much. They didn't pay him enough."

"HEY!" not-Tim yelled. "That's not what-"

Dem twiddled his thumbs and gazed at not-Tim with a vague scientific interest.

"...changed the deal and the script..."

Dem shrugged. "Whatever," he said to Griffin. "Crux of the matter is, he doesn't like you very much. He didn't want to do the film but had no choice." Dem glanced at his watch. "Anyway, see you around. Bye!"

Dem vanished.

Silence.

"...They didn't pay you enough?" Griffin asked accusingly, his voice tight with hurt or anger or something more dangerous.

"No," not-Tim said. "It's complicated. Just drop it."

Griffin continued staring at not-Tim and looking wounded. Then:

"Do it," Griffin said softly.

"What?"

"Pick up that chainsaw, chop off my hand. Get yourself out of here."

"Okay, I can't-"

Griffin grits his teeth. "*Do it!*"

Not-Tim just looked at him.

"I've got nothing to gain. It's not fair if you have to die here just because of some... character you didn't even want to play."

Not-Tim looked at him.

"I'm going to die," Griffin continued, meeting his gaze. "And I'd prefer to do so knowing that you don't hate me."

"I don't hate you."

"I don't believe you."

Silence. Not-Tim looked at Griffin's handcuffed wrist next to his own, the two barely distinguishable from each other.

"I can't do it," he said.

A smirk. "Coward."

"Calling me names isn't going to make me like you."

Griffin shrugged. "How pissed off do you need to be before you pick up that chainsaw and use it?"

"You're not making me do this."

Griffin smiled. "I can sit here and aggravate you for hours until you do it just to shut me up-"

The door opened, Tom Ludlow standing there in the doorway and interrupting everything. "Is your house near?" he asked not-Tim.

"...Kind of. Why?"

Ludlow walked over and unhandcuffed him. "Take the kids there," he said. "And you stay there. House arrest. This place isn't safe; it might vanish again like the last time."

Not-Tim stood up and massaged his wrist. "What about him?" he asked, motioning at Griffin.

Ludlow nudged the chainsaw closer to Griffin. "Work it out," he told him.

"You can't just leave him there," not-Tim said.

"He has a chainsaw," Ludlow pointed out. "Are you coming or not?"

People were still milling about the corridor in a disorganised sort of way.

":)" vibed the cornflakes guy as he saw not-Tim, and went straight for his legs again.

":)"

"Okay! If you're under the age of 18, you're going with him," Ludlow announced, pointing at not-Tim, busy trying to regain his balance post- cornflakes guy. "I don't care if you know how to use a gun."

Protests filled the air.



Ludlow smirked. "Thank you. Now I know which of you are under 18. Mike, you don't count. Anderson!"

Neo jumped.

"Go with them. Make sure Reeves stays put."

Neo looked sad.

\*\*

And so while the valiant go off to fight and claim their freedom, he leads the line of reluctant teenagers down the safe way away from the sounds of gunfire – where the rest are charging on towards. Neo joins them at the rear. Interspersed among the kids are Alex, Julian and Paul, having decided to join his party instead – a decision met with the sounds of Ludlow calling them wimps and other less polite things before he and his friends ran off to shoot at things.

The world out there is calmer than he expected, the worst having happened while they were safe in Kenselton Hotel. There is debris on the ground – buildings here and there are missing chunks of concrete, shop window glass litters the sidewalk, streaks of dried blood run down the asphalt; and the scattered people have an aimlessness in their walk.

The troublemakers had been dealt with; King Kong had been baited with bananas and tranquilised and taken away, as had the more dangerous superheroes, minus the bananas. He spots occasional ambulances screaming down the streets and at several points wonders if he should go after Ludlow's group and convince them that their hostage plan would get them nowhere and they had might as well give up. Others had evidently tried something, and whether they had failed or succeeded he had no idea – that path had, either way, already been trod, and re-walking it would prove a redundant waste of time and possibly lives. But he lets it go.

He wonders where everyone is; the city is devoid of rioting fictional masses. He knows it's been a day since the escape, but nonetheless the calm strikes him as out of place. Perhaps it's for the better; no one pays much attention to their odd procession, giving them no more than a glance before trudging over to some other part of road.

They make a fairly large group – him and the other four adults, and then the fourteen teenagers including Bill, still separated slightly into the two arbitrary groups that he doesn't even know why still exist; and he would like to make some comment about all of them being part of the same family, but it would sound strange, coming from him, as does any other statement he makes regarding the unusual relationship that binds them together.

And so he tries his best to ignore the warily suspicious looks that pass between Rupert and Matt or Winston and Ron, and just keeps his thoughts focussed on the destination ahead. He was bringing them home.

And he sees the barely hidden wonder on some of their faces as he approaches the gates of his residence, the initial reluctance giving way to reverence and hints of envy as he lets them through the gates and into his house itself; he hears at least one 'whoa' escape awed lips, but never discovers the culprit.

Most stand around as though scared to touch anything, hands in pockets and regarding his home with jealous respect; others seem to finally acknowledge his presence for the first time since the walk began, and he returns their gazes with a smile.

Neo looks for a computer and doesn't find one.

"So we just stay here and wait?" Derek asks.

"I suppose so," Paul says, attempting to steer the cornflakes guy away from the general direction of not-Tim.

"What's for lunch?" Chris asks; and he decides he could whip up something easy – pasta, perhaps. He sometimes fancies himself a chef, but this is no time for experimentation. One does not use one's characters as gastronomic guinea pigs. It's one of those unwritten rules of life.

But they number nineteen mouths to feed, and the cornflakes guy probably deserves some genuine cornflakes after all this time.

So he orders several pizzas. It's the easiest, and he could add on pasta to that. He used to run a pasta shop; this wouldn't be too hard.

Neo goes around the place once more and still doesn't find a computer. He starts looking slightly agitated.

Hanging around their presence continues to feel uncomfortably surreal; somehow it's much more bearable when it's just him and one of them. There is something about watching them interact with each other that makes him uneasy, and somehow it makes them seem less real, like mere automatons programmed by him with certain characteristics and modes of thought.

But when he is alone with just one of them, they seem completely human; which unnerves him in a totally different way.

He wonders what it feels like from their point of view – in relation to him, in relation to each other...

And, with a sinking feeling, he remembers Griffin, still locked up, and hopes that he will be okay.

"Are you looking for something?" he asks.

Neo gives a start. "...Yeah. A computer."

"I don't have one."

Neo shifts uncomfortably. "I know. You told me. But..."

Neo looks fitfully around in a desperate sort of way, as though it would make a computer somehow materialise out of nowhere. Houses had computers. It was a fact of life, he thought. Which meant that there had to be one here somewhere, just... hiding or something.

The television comes on in the background playing some inane detergent advertisement.

A yell and splash informs them that Tommy and Jesse just pushed Heaver into the newly-discovered swimming pool.

\*\*

The deafening silence is starting to get to him, and Griffin finally forces himself to accept that the door is not going to open any time soon.

But he stays calm; looks at the chainsaw, considers his options. He's probably managed to guilt-trip Reeves. He *hopes* he has, with a sudden twinge of anger, but then he tries to suppress the hurt of being unloved by his creator, because there's no point in dwelling on that.

He runs his free hand slowly along the serrated edge of the chainsaw and feels the mild pricks of pain, driving home his mortality; tries to imagine powering it up and directing it through the flesh and bone of his right wrist, and the thought brings his left hand to a stop. He retrieves his hand from the chainsaw and holds it close.

Griffin slides lower down the side of the bed and leans against it, eyes shut. The sound of his quiet breaths fills his mind.

He wonders what the others are doing. He wonders if he can tell; if he can sense them; if they are connected in more ways than they think; but he gets nothing, and so he gives up trying.

He tries to sleep. Perhaps when he wakes, things will be different.

Someone has to come eventually.



chapter twenty-four  
**breaking out & breaking in**

---

Seventeen suspicious-looking, mostly-armed, and not-quite-heterogeneous individuals congregated on the street corner. At least one of them looked lost.

"You don't know where to go, *do you?*" Conor asked.

Ludlow tried to ignore him. He gazed out at the street and tried to look as though he knew exactly what he was doing.

"Figures," Johnny Utah muttered. "We're just going to stand around here until someone takes us away."

John Constantine casually lit a stolen cigarette and smoked, shifting his position a little such that he was directly beside the 'No Smoking' sign that marked the entrance to a restaurant.

"Someone has to know something," Shane said. "All those people escaped yesterday – they must have gone somewhere."

"Maybe they were killed," Perry suggested.

Bob Arctor looked sad.

A random approaching passerby saw them, stopped, then chose another direction.

"...Is it really that important to get home?" Conor pondered aloud. "Life kind of sucked."

\*\*

"Look after that," not-Tim said to Alex, gesturing at the cooking pot of pasta as the doorbell rang and he ran out of the kitchen to answer it before someone else did.

"Stay away from that door," he said pointedly to Rupert, then opened the door and said hi to the pizza guy.

"Hi," said the pizza guy in return, holding out the pizza boxes and looking expectant in a financial sort of way. Not-Tim took the pizza from him and paid him, whereupon the pizza guy dug out a small digital camera from his pocket.

"Uh," he said, "I'm also a paparazzo in training. Can I take your photograph and sell it for lots of money?"

Not-Tim declined, and so the pizza guy settled for selling a story about Keanu Reeves' secret pizza orgy party to a tabloid that paid him a few thousand dollars for the exclusive interview.

Pizza guy gone, not-Tim dumped the pizza on the table. "Pizza!" he said. "Get a towel from the bathroom," he said to Heaven, who had successfully climbed out of the swimming pool and was now successfully dripping water everywhere.

He went back into the kitchen hoping that Alex was still alive and that nothing was on fire. Living for prolonged periods of time over a large body of water sometimes made people complacent when it came to matters of flammable things.

But Alex was still alive, and the pot was bubbling happily.

"Griffin's still there," Alex said after a while.

Not-Tim nodded.

\*bubble\*, said the pot of pasta.

"I'm on house arrest," not-Tim said.

"No one put Ludlow in charge. And your assigned guard's busy looking for a computer that isn't there."

The pot of pasta bubbled.

"I'll go," Alex said. "I'll take Julian, in case anything happened with that chainsaw, and whoever knows how to pick a handcuff lock, and we'll bring Griffin back before it's too late."

The pot of pasta bubbled a little more.

"You'd do that?" not-Tim asked.

Alex nodded. "He's still one of us."

\*\*

"Hello!" said Dem.

Griffin opened his eyes.

"Thought you could do with the company." Dem gave him a bright smile.

Griffin just stared.

"Want some cheese?" Dem offered. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a chunk of mozzarella wrapped in foil. "Here," he said. "Have the whole thing. It might be the last thing you ever eat." He placed it in Griffin's free hand. "It's spiked with a powerful anaesthetic," Dem added in a covert whisper. "Eat it and you won't feel that chainsaw going through your wrist."

Griffin looked at the cheese.

"Don't worry, it's not poisoned," Dem said. "If I wanted to kill you, I would've just left you here."

Griffin looked at Dem.

"You'd better hurry," Dem suggested. "The portal leading outside won't last forever. It could collapse any minute now, and then you'll be stuck in this hotel for the rest of your likely-short life, even if you manage to cut yourself free. Clock's ticking."

Griffin slowly unwrapped the cheese. It looked innocent and mozzarella-like. He took a bite. It tasted delicious and mozzarella like. He took another bite.

\*\*

**Raiding Party:** Perry, Shane, Conor, John C, Johnny U, Nelson, Kip, Scott, Kevin, Ludlow, Eric, Marlon, Harry, Martin, Mike, Bob

In a fit of increasing self-consciousness, Nelson attempted unsuccessfully to look as though he had nothing to do with the rest of the lost group of misfits carrying guns.

"Are we going to continue standing out here in broad daylight?" he asked.

Ludlow was busy fingering his gun as he scanned the horizon for clues as to where to go.

A few more people walked by staring at them. One took out a handphone and dialled.

Scott emerged from the alley he had temporarily snuck into, bearing a sheet of trampled newspaper which he passed to Shane. He pointed at the headlines as several of the others came over to look:

**MASS BREAKOUT FROM KENSELTON HOTEL**

*Transworld project meets sudden end*

*Just a day before it was to be opened to the public, the several thousand fictional residents of Kenselton Hotel staged a mass breakout onto the streets of Los Angeles. Police and army forces were called in to alleviate the chaos...*

Shane scanned through the rest of the article. "We've gotta hide," he said, looking up. "Anywhere but here."

"But we're armed," Johnny Utah pointed out, waving his gun for emphasis.

Shane pointed at the article. "They're tranquilising unarmed escapees. If you wave a gun at them, I think they'll kill you."

"Not if I kill them f-"

The dart whizzed through the air and into his neck. Johnny grabbed at it, wide-eyed and choking, and then crashed to the ground as the air suddenly became thick with flying tranquiliser darts.

Cars and vans were pulling up now with uniformed guards jumping out of them and shooting as the group broke up and ran in different directions; Ludlow fired off several shots, ducking for cover, and got three guards down before another got him and he collapsed-

The guards were efficient and unnaturally fast, unnaturally strong. They might have been the same robotic entities that had populated Kenselton Hotel; they could not really tell, having no time to get a good look before the darts pierced them and they fell to the ground, and Scott, as he ran down the alley in the mad panic of escape, did not dare to look back.

\*\*

Griffin ran his free hand over his handcuffed hand. "I still feel that," he said.

Dem shrugged. "That's just your sense of touch. Clock's ticking. At least it would be if there was a clock in here. An analogue one. Digital clocks don't tick, you see; they sort of just flash." Dem opened and closed his palm to illustrate the flashing. "And then there are sundials, which just kind of stand there."

Griffin picked up the chainsaw. He looked at it. He took a deep breath. He looked at it. He looked at Dem. Dem raised an eyebrow. Griffin looked back at the chainsaw, and shut his eyes.

His free hand trembling slightly, he powered up the chainsaw; opened his eyes, blinked away a tear, grit his teeth, and brought it slowly down on his right wrist-

He screamed in pain.

Dropped the chainsaw, left hand clamping down on the gash on his wrist, stemming the spurting blood beneath grasping fingers, swearing, tears of pain flowing freely now-

"Oh, wait," Dem said. "It was the cheddar that I spiked. I fed that to my lemming. Oh well. Don't worry. Chicks dig scars. Chickens dig bigger scars. That's why I sold my egg farm."

The door burst open. Dem vanished as Alex and Julian hurtled into the room, Julian heading straight to the bed and ripping the sheets off the upper bunk-

"Rupert, go!" Alex shouted, and the teen reluctantly went forward, dropping to his knees and picking at the handcuff with his piece of metal wire, fingers slipping on the blood until the handcuff came free and Julian sopped blood off the wound with the torn sheets, telling Griffin to press down on his wrist bone and hold his hand above heart level-

"Lie down," Julian said. "Get on the floor, put your arm on the bed. It'll lower the blood flow."

Rupert worked on the remaining handcuff and got it off.

"We've got to get him to a hospital," Julian told Alex.

\*\*

Winston ran into the dining area, pointing back in the direction of the TV. "You need to see this," he said.

Not-Tim shoved the rest of the pizza slice into his mouth and went over to look.

"They've been caught," Winston said, as on the screen the news showed the raiding party, unconscious and being carried into vans.

Not-Tim swore.

*"...will be taken to join the rest of the escapees in a specially-constructed holding facility at-"*

Not-Tim grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled down the address.

*"...while it is decided what to do with them."*

Not-Tim returned to the others. "Neo," he said. "Let's go bust them out. Paul, you're in charge. Don't let anybody in, and don't let anybody kill anybody."

"I thought Alex and Julian took the car," Neo said.

Not-Tim grinned. "We're not taking the car."

\*\*

Neo decided that he definitely did not like motorbikes. He wondered what Trinity saw in them.

"All right back there?" not-Tim yelled as they sped dangerously through traffic on the Norton.

Neo decided that opening his mouth to answer would mean throwing up on not-Tim, so he settled for grabbing on tighter and wishing that they could slow down.

Not-Tim rode them away from the protesting crowds near the main entrance and came to a halt somewhere around the back. Neo stumbled off and promptly threw up his lunch.

"...Sorry," not-Tim said guiltily.

Neo leant against the wall and looked sick and dizzy and not in the mood to do kung fu.

"When you're ready, just let me know."

Neo sank down into the grass and buried his head in his hands.

\*\*

The supply room never failed. Alex located needle and thread and scissors and a forgotten bottle of rum and ran back to Julian with them.

"Thanks," Julian said, unspooling some thread, cutting off a length of it and sticking an end through the eye of the needle. "All right," he told Griffin. "I could tell you this won't hurt, but that would be a lie. Just try not to scream too much."

Julian looked resignedly at the rum, then slopped it over Griffin's wrist. Dried blood washed off into the carpet; fresh red welled up in the cut. Julian splashed rum over his own hand and needle and thread in quick sterilisation that probably wasn't that effective but would have to do for now. He tied a knot in the free end of the string. He held the gash on Griffin's wrist close with one hand, tried not to think about how much it looked just like his, and poked the needle through the flesh and out the other side.

Griffin grit his teeth and bit down a scream.

"This is just to close it for now," Julian said, sliding the needle in again. "If I leave it like that it'll probably get infected and the blood will pool into a clot and you *may* lose at least your hand and you may die."

Julian finished the stitches, closed it with a knot, slopped more rum over everything to wash off excess blood, and then pulled another sheet off the bed. He half-cut half-tore a sizeable strip off it with help of the scissors and pulled it around Griffin's neck, fashioning it into a sling.

"Can you walk?" Julian asked.

"Yeah."

"Let's go."

\*\*

Neo finally lifted his head from his arms and got back onto his feet, hand against the wall for support, still looking a little green but otherwise fine. "I'm okay," he said.

Not-Tim looked back at him from where he had been gazing thoughtfully at the crowds in front of the building. "Sure?"

Neo nodded. "How do we get in?"

"It's not getting in that's the problem. They want you in, with the others. Tranquilised. I'm not sure what they'll do with me, but-"

Not-Tim broke off. He suddenly regretted not shaving that morning. Or the previous morning, as a matter of fact. And many mornings before that, because it meant that any plan they hatched to get in and get the others out or home would have to be carried out without resorting to conveniently swapping positions and making full use of those few but vital seconds when the guards ended up first targeting the guy who knew less kung fu while the other took them out from the back. The vast difference in amount of facial hair was a bit too much of a giveaway. As were the ten years or so of age, but if they were quick, no one might have had time to notice...

Still, awesome science fiction trilogy aside, he doubted that the security holding back the crowds were that familiar with the oeuvre of Keanu Charles Reeves. First to get inside.

They discussed plans, briefly, then not-Tim pulled off his blazer and dumped it on the Norton, looking more generic in T-shirts and jeans, capable of passing as perhaps some guy named Eric, whom no one even knew existed anyway.

"Let's roll," he said, and he and Neo made their way to the front of the building.

They raised their hands in surrender when the robotic guards turned their guns at them.

"I believe you've got our friends in there," not-Tim said carefully.

Somewhere in the crowd, a random *Matrix* fan yelled something happy. Neo looked uncomfortable.

Brief talk among the guards, then four of them broke off from the others. Two grabbed hold of not-Tim, the other two of Neo.

A beep as their wrist-tags were scanned. One of the guards gave a start and looked from the reading to not-Tim, who raised an eyebrow.

They led them inside, and the door clanged dully shut.

The inside smelt new: of freshly set concrete, walls lacking in paint and the floor a dismal grey. Makeshift fluorescent lights swung from the ceiling and flooded the corridor with their glare. More corridors of grey and white led off adjacently from them at intervals. From them came voices, screams, angry shouts, and not-Tim tried to ignore them.

Then they turned into one of those corridors and went down it to the end, until they reached a dead wall ahead with the right side opening up into a large room behind bars.

The others were there, standing or sitting or lying down in various parts of the cell. They watched as a guard unlocked the gate and swiftly shoved Neo and the actor in. Then the gate was shut and locked once more and the guards went away, one of them speaking into his walkie-talkie.

"You," Ludlow said, glaring.

"...Hi," not-Tim said.

"*You were supposed to stay in the house.*"

"Sorry. I-"

Ludlow turned on Neo. "What happened to keeping him there? Huh?"

Neo looked as though he would rather be anywhere else.

"We heard you got caught," not-Tim said. "It was on the news-"

"Yeah, and how the f\*\*\* does you getting caught help us?" Ludlow demanded. "We had a perfectly good hostage situation. We could have told them that we had left the others with instructions to kill you in four hours if they didn't hear from us. And now you've f\*\*\*ed it all up with your little rescue fantasies."

Conor scratched his elbow.

"They want me," not-Tim said. "That's why they stopped the food and water earlier. They regret letting me in, and they wanted me out. If I'm here, I can talk to them-"

"*And you think they'll listen?*"

Ludlow got up from his bench and came towards him, and for a brief moment something fell away and not-Tim saw Ludlow as just another guy. Just a cop with dubious morals, a complete stranger whom he had only really known for two hours, and who was now seriously pissed off at him, and he was suddenly scared.

He was in a roomful of strangers. Strangers whose names he knew and whose lives he thought he knew in strictly one-way relationship, but two hours were nothing. Months or weeks or days spent acting out but a couple of hours of their lives, mere snippets in longer existences that he was clueless about, hinted only briefly at in back-story notes and speculation, and the only thing that bound them all together was suddenly superficial. They might not even share fingerprints. Looks aside, a random group of people off the street might have more in common-

Not-Tim backed off a step into the bars of the cell. "Tom-"

"What do you think they're going to do with us?" Kevin interrupted. "They locked us up. It doesn't look as though they're going to let us go, does it?"

Conor scratched his knee.

"If they wanted to kill us they would have done it long ago," Neo said.

"Right," Ludlow said. "In front of the whole world? They're not stupid, Anderson. They'd never live that down. But they could leave us here to die and claim we got home, and no one would f\*\*\*ing *know*."

The guards reappeared around the corner, dragging Alex and Julian along. They unlocked the cell, shoved them in, and locked up again.

Conor scratched his neck.

"Where's Griffin?" not-Tim asked, as Julian got back to his feet and Alex decided that he didn't mind sitting on the ground.

"Hospital," Julian said. "He was injured so they kept him there."

"The serial killer's in hospital and we're in jail," John Constantine muttered.

Kip sighed.

\*\*



**Stuck in House:** Chris Townsend, Matt, Tommy, Jesse, Paul, Tod, cornflakes guy, Eddie T, Ron, Derek, Jack Nimble, Heaver, Winston, Bill, Ted

"I'm bored," Ron said, looking at Paul from out the side of his eye. "Why're we just sitting here?"

"You could move around if you want," Paul suggested.

Tommy sneaked a handful of cornflakes out of the cornflakes guy's bowl when the cornflakes guy wasn't looking.

The cornflakes guy looked at his bowl. Something wasn't quite right about it. ":(," he vibed.

Ron shoved back his chair and got up. He stuck his hands in his pockets and trudged towards the door, then stopped, turned around, and paced back. "So we're just going to stay here?" he demanded.

"That's what he said," Heaver said, now slightly less damp from his encounter with the pool.

The TV was still on, Winston deeply engrossed in some astronomy programme on the Discovery Channel. Ron walked by, looked at it, looked at Winston's expression of awe, shook his head, and continued in his pacing.

Ron casually brushed stuff off a shelf. Miscellaneous things crashed to the floor.

Paul leaped up. "Hey!"

Ron ignored him and crouched down by the hi-fi system. He poked at it.

"Don't touch that," Paul said, hurriedly returning the fallen things to the shelf and hoping the arrangement looked the same.

Eddie was sitting out by the pool gazing into its depths.

"Hey – Paul?" Bill asked.

"Yes?"

"Do I have to stay here too?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"That's a good question, dude," Bill admitted.

"We could go back to the place with the really excellent pizza," Ted suggested.

"*You're* definitely staying here," Paul said.

"Keanu said not to let anybody *in*," Derek pointed out. "He didn't say not to let anybody out."

"Yeah, and he also said not to let anybody kill anybody," Tod added.

"Those guys who went out got caught," Paul said. "I'm not going to risk that."

"Why are *you* in charge?" Matt muttered, not looking at him.

Paul shrugged. "I'm the oldest."

\*\*

**Stuck in Cell:** Shane, Conor, John C, Johnny U, Nelson, Kip, Perry, Kevin, Ludlow, Eric, Marlon, Harry, Martin, Mike, Bob, Alex, Julian, Neo, not-Tim

"So," Alex said, getting up from the floor. "What's up?"

"What's it look like, Wyler?" Ludlow asked. "We're making cookies."

Alex looked at not-Tim. "Rupert got away," he said. "Some of the guards can't really see. They sense us by this." He lifted up his wrist tag. "His was covered in blood. They didn't even know he was there."

"Where is he?" not-Tim asked.

"I don't know. Loose in the building... But for now he's all we've got."  
"And Scott," Johnny said from the back. "I saw the coward run off when they came."

"Then he's no good to us," Nelson said.

"Do you know what *would* be good right now?" Ludlow asked. "An actor being kept hostage outside, which we could bargain with. It would definitely be a lot more useful than two extra people taking up space."

Neo didn't think he was taking up much space, but didn't say so.

"There's nobody to bargain with," Kevin pointed out with his usual legal insight.

"Maybe if we shout, the guards will come," Kip suggested.

"They know I'm here," not-Tim said, tapping his wrist tag thing. "They zapped that."

"Yeah," Neo added helpfully.

"No one's come, *have they?*" Ludlow continued through gritted teeth. "Looks like you're not so f\*\*\*ing important after all-"

"We came here to help you," not-Tim said.

"Yeah. Some help!"

"Okay, so things didn't go as expected-"

"What did you expect?" Ludlow demanded. "Them to welcome you in on a f\*\*\*ing red carpet? Is that what you're used to?"

"No-"

"If your plan was to end up locked in here with us, then congratulations, but even you're not enough of a f\*\*\*ing idiot to-"

"*I came to cancel the contract!*" not-Tim yelled. "Yeah," he added off Ludlow's stare. "You're only here because I let them. What about that, huh? I gave them my signature. I gave them my *permission*-"

"...All right," Ludlow said. "That's it. I don't care who you are."

He grabbed the actor in a shove. Not-Tim twisted half-out of his grasp and threw a punch, missed, punch returned, missed, pinned against the bars, kick, fist again, caught, arm twisted, screamed, kicked back, Ludlow lost his footing, pulled him down, and Marlon decided he should move out of the way.

"Guys-" Alex started, but his words fell on deaf ears and he hopped out of the way of a violently grasping hand.

Julian sighed.



chapter twenty-five  
return

---

**Loose in Kenselton Holding Facility: Rupert**

Pressed against a wall because he thought it would make him harder to spot, Rupert glanced around the corner. More cells. More strains of conversation from the imprisoned:

*"Get your filthy alien hands off my neck."*

*"No."*

*"I'm the only chance you've got of getting out of here, and you know it."*

*"That is unlikely. 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."*

No help here. Rupert moved on-

"Hello."

Rupert gave a start.

Dem smiled at him. "Rupert Marshetta, right?"

"...Yeah."

"Miss home?"

"Who are you?"

"One of the few people free in this place. I think you've all stayed here long enough, don't you?"

"..." said Rupert.

Dem clapped a hand on his shoulder and nudged him down the corridor. "Come on. There are things to do, people to send home, space-time continua to disturb."

Down the corridor and into another. Past the cells, the bars giving way to doors nowhere near as polished as the ones in Kenselton Hotel had been. Functional doors. They opened and they closed. Dem opened one without knocking and guided Rupert inside.

Adwin jumped and his feet fell off the table. "You-"

"Yes, me," Dem said. "Time for the return. Thought I'd let you know."

"*What* return?"

Dem raised an eyebrow. "What's the point of bringing across a whole lot of people from different universes if you don't get to send them all back again? It's multiversal strain just waiting to happen." Dem grinned. "Who knows – it might be finally enough to destroy everything for good, and I'll finally discover what lies beyond. If not, we could always try again."

"But-"

"I would have put it off, but it seems that the longer we wait, the more of them die. Which means the fewer we can send back. And you're evidently not bringing any more across, so this is more or less the peak population and it's just downhill from here. So. I'll go do that before more die."

"You-"

"Don't forget, this was my idea," Dem said. "If it wasn't for me, they wouldn't even be here. I'll send them home, and you can clean up the mess. Maybe I'll send them back if you can't. Back and forth..." Dem looked thrilled at the idea. "You know what? Maybe I'll do a little more of that before I send the lot back. Just to annoy you."

"W-" Adwin said, but Dem had ignored him in favour of Rupert.

"Let's start with your friends, all right?" Dem asked him, and went back out the door, Rupert looking confused and following after.

"Word of advice, Tom," Dem said when they arrived at the cell, where not-Tim and Ludlow were still beating the crap out of each other with the occasional profanity or existential dilemma. "He made you, he can unmake you."

"WHO THE F\*\*\* ARE YOU?" Ludlow demanded, turning for a moment from bashing not-Tim in the left ear.

Not-Tim always lost these fights.

Dem casually took out a skeleton key from one of his pockets and unlocked the cell gate. He'd gotten it from a real skeleton that he'd managed to coax out of the closet.

"I'm the Mysterious Old Man, and I'm here to rescue you," he said. "It's Opposite Day today," he explained as he opened the gate. "Enjoy it while it lasts. Want to go home?"

Ludlow picked himself off the ground and not-Tim. "That's it?" he asked Dem in disbelief.

Not-Tim lay on the ground covered in fresh bruises. He wondered why he'd ever become an actor. What was the reason he'd given to that journalist so long ago: *'Have you ever wanted to jump off a bridge onto the back of a moving truck?'*

Yeah. In times like these, it was a pretty lousy reason.

Dem took out two small pointy beacons from his pocket and set them on the ground. He took out a remote control from the same pocket and shook it. He gave a satisfied nod. "Nothing broken," he said. "And oh-" Dem pulled out a folded sheet of notepaper and handed it to Ludlow. "Note for you," he said, and turned his attention back to the remote.

Ludlow unfolded the note and looked at it:

"Officer ...please give the actor a break. 'Cause he's the one who made you *you*. He took a character who was the patchwork of three different writers, and gave you his anger, his frustrations, his voice, his drive, his obsessions... even the face you loathed to look at in the mirror. He spent quite some time putting 'you' together. Making you believable. *real*.

And many people say you're one of his best creations ever.

So you might consider helping him off that floor and buying him a Bloody Mary. He deserves it."<sup>1</sup>

Ludlow glared at the note. "Where'd you get this?" he asked Dem.

Dem shrugged. "Gmail."

Dem pressed a sequence of buttons on the remote control. The beacons on the ground threw up a fizzy portal, and he slipped through it into the Reeves residence.

"Hello," said Dem.

---

<sup>1</sup> From LucaM

Paul and the kids stared back at him.

"Rescue party," Dem explained. "Get through here, please. It's easiest to send you all back together."

Paul and the kids stared back at him.

Dem sighed. He went back through. "You," he said, randomly flicking a finger at Conor. "Get in there and show 'em it's safe."

"Why me?" Conor asked suspiciously.

"Why not?"

"I'll go," Alex said, and stepped through the portal. "It's safe," he told the others at the other end, and they finally got up and moved into the cell, once Winston could be separated from the awesome astronomy programme on TV that was almost over, just give him another five minutes please, please, please, ow!

Dem changed the settings another two times and extracted a willing Griffin and an unwilling Scott from their various locations.

"All right," he said cheerfully, oblivious to the glares that the latest two entries were getting. "Would you like the dead people back alive, too? It's Opposite Day, so I've got to do nice things to destroy the multiverse instead of not-nice things to destroy the multiverse. And besides, it's easier, because then all I have to do is reverse the thing that brought you here, and you'll all go home. Or else the dead people will get home dead, or, if I take the trouble to send you home individually, they'll just stay missing forever."

There were no objections, so Dem went off to do the work. He was immortal. He lived millennia. These were the little things that made existence interesting.

An easy bit of time travel got him back just after Jonathan Harker and Eddie Kasalivich had been happily murdered by Griffin. He bribed the Soylent Green folks with spinach and got the two bodies, kicked them with the Boot of Life and dumped the two very confused people back in the cell before going back through the portal.

The Shakespeare bot relinquished Hamlet and Don John after Dem bribed it with spinach.

The workers at IBHA did not like spinach, and told Dem he'd have to wait until Jack Traven finished his sentence. So he skipped a while into the future, was there for Jack's arrival, let him know that he was no longer Alex's dog and could he please get back on two legs. Turned out the IBHA folks liked broccoli, so Dem bribed them with that and got Jack transferred back to his body at the point before he'd died, freefalling through the void of the isolated bubble of hyperspace.

Dem caught him and teleported him back, wondered why he still bothered with the portal, turned it off to save batteries, and left Jack there with the others to be confused and wonder why Griffin was smiling at him and why Alex didn't seem to care.

Dem time travelled back to the world where Shane and co. had found themselves. He dropped into the scene invisible and waited until Fred had started eating Jjaks and the others had left, then bribed Fred with spinach and teleported Jjaks away to a futuristic hospital in another world. He kicked him with the Boot of Life, followed by the Boot of Stop Screaming Please, then let the doctors work on him. Dem skipped to the future and collected him, fully healed, then went back to the cell and let Jjaks join the confused people.

Dem took a short trip back to one of his homes, where he apologised to Donnie for abducting him and forcing him to work on his spinach farm. Upon angry retorts, he kicked him with the Boot of Stop Screaming Please and teleported him away.

As an afterthought, because it was Opposite Day, Dem dropped by a store en route and bought a packet of Silk Cuts. He tossed the cigarettes ("embrace your British side") to a surprised and grateful John Constantine and dumped Donnie there to join them.

Dem made his way to the frozen planet of Hagindaz and made a few more near rescues, pre-dead where he could. The Boot of Life worked only for a few days after death if they were still sufficiently intact; it did nothing for exploded people or those who had since turned to skeletons. Bribing afterlife

folk with their vegetable of choice tended to be a last resort. For those who had died in a universe without any afterlife, that was it. But there were none such cases this time.

The cell got crowded, cramped, and slightly noisy. Hamlet was spouting sad soliloquies again. Others were busy freaking out at the sheer number of people, or perhaps it was just at Ortiz. Not-Tim was trying to stem the flow from a bloody nose, and Ludlow wasn't helping, though the number of glares seemed to have gone down slightly, replaced by a simmering anger and what might have been grudging respect.

Julian thought about saying something, but John looked far too content smoking.

Dem unlocked the gate. "Join your friends," he told Bill. "Cell R16. Go find it."

"But-"

"Go."

Ted looked sadly on as Bill left the cell and went off to try not to get lost.

Dem took out more gadgety stuff from his pockets. They were special pockets. Everything could fit in them, except kitchen sinks because of their weird plumbing. He extracted and unfolded a metal tube, forming it into a door-way over the portal.

Dem held up a small thingy in his palm. "This is known as an Interdimensional Travel Device Thingy," he explained. "ITDT for short. I'll stick it here-" he slotted it onto the other side of the doorway – "and when you go through, it'll be programmed specially for you. If you don't plan on spending the rest of your life in your universe, take it. It'll let you visit each other. Please do that. Do that a lot. Interdimensional travel is good and desirable."

"What time will it be when we get back?" Derek asked.

"The time you left plus the time you've spent out of your world, so you'll have to explain yourself to a lot of people... oh, zark it. It's Opposite Day." Dem looked sad. He sighed. "...all right, I'll send you back the time you left and block all travel until you've caught up and are back in sync. But you'll still have to explain why you suddenly vanished and reappeared, so deal with that."

They looked doubtfully at the portal.

Dem pulled out a small digital readout and tapped on it, adjusting settings until he was satisfied. "All right. Anderson, Thomas, get in there."

"My name is Neo," Neo didn't say. He hesitated and looked at not-Tim.

"Why should we trust you?" not-Tim asked Dem on his behalf.

Dem shrugged. "Because you normally can't, and it's Opposite Day today, which means you can."

Not-Tim looked at Neo. Unspoken words passed between them, and then he pulled Neo into a hug.

"See you," not-Tim said softly.

He let go, and Neo stepped forward to the portal, not looking back.

"OI!" yelled Adwin as he came running up from outside the cell to see what was happening. Dem cast him a dispassionate look. "Take him away," he told Adwin's accompanying guard, and the guard did so, because Dem promised spinach.

Dem pulled out a cutter thing from his pocket and snipped the wrist tag off Neo's wrist. He tapped a button on his readout. The portal shimmered and changed, and through it they saw the vague outline of the Nebuchadnezzar. Neo's jack-in seat was empty; people had just noticed and were starting to panic.

Neo took a breath and walked through.

"Take that," Dem told him, pointing at the Interdimensional Travel Device Thingy. Neo pulled it off the doorway as the Neb crew noticed his sudden arrival and were wondering about the portal- and then it vanished, and those in the cell saw the portal change.

"Arctor, Robert," Dem said. "Get on with it. We don't have all century."

Johnny nudged Bob up from his seat.

And so, alphabetically, they went on through the portal, home.

"Hurry up," Dem said, when Marlon took a while to realise what was going on.

Through the portal they could make out some seedy bar. "In," Dem told Marlon. "Go home. And be quick about it in case someone decides to come through."

Marlon looked at him and blinked, so Dem kicked him with the Boot of Speed, which had come free with the collector's edition DVD where he lived.

Soon it was just two of them and Dem left.

"Come visit some time," Alex said.

Not-Tim nodded. "Sure."

"Move it, Wyler, Alex," Dem said. "I've got a whole building of people to send home."

So Alex gave a final wave goodbye and went on home.

Dem tapped on his device, and the portal changed a final time – the outside of the building, the Norton motorbike parked by the wall.

"That's the lot," Dem said. "Take your bike and go home."

"Why."

"You don't want to stay here, do you?"

"No. Why. All of this."

Dem lowered the device and looked at him. "You can't always have all the answers," he said quietly. "Maybe some things aren't meant to be known." A pause. "But I'm trying."

"What was all that for?" not-Tim demanded. "Bringing them over, making me responsible for their deaths, and then just resurrecting the lot of them and sending them home?"

"It's about understanding," Dem said. "Pain. Love. Trying to see if those things are more than illusion."

"And are they?"

"I don't know," Dem said. "Not yet."

"You can't just keep playing with people like that!"

"But you *are* being played," Dem said. "Every moment of every day. The moment you were born into the system of life and started the fight to stay in it. Where the only way out is non-existence. Why do you fight to live? Why do you struggle against death? There's an afterlife or there isn't. If there isn't, you're free of the system and will never worry again. And if there is, it's the start of a new adventure.

"All I do is make you aware of that struggle," Dem said. "I have my own answers to seek. Take your bike and go home."

Not-Tim finally nodded. He walked off into the portal.



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## epilogue

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### The Real World

He pulls the ITDT off the other side of the portal and looks at it. There are three main buttons and an on-off switch: the two arrow-marked buttons scrolled through names; the large central button took you to them. Other tinier buttons could program additional coordinates in once the user figured out how they worked. Presumably there was a manual for the thing out there somewhere, but Dem had not seen fit to provide them with one.

The portal shimmers into nothing.

Not-Tim pockets the ITDT and goes over to his bike. He pulls his blazer back on, and looks out at the crowds still clamouring outside the building, unaware of what was going on inside, desperate for a glimpse of another world, other worlds, through the people who lived in them; people now gone – or soon to be gone – as though they had never been.

Not-Tim wonders what it was all for.

But answers... Answers can come at another time.

He climbs onto his bike, starts up the engine and rides off home, missing the weight of Neo behind him.

Through the gate, alone this time.

Porch.

Door.

His footsteps make the only sounds.

The television set is on, blaring at an empty couch. Unwashed cutlery dumped in the sink. Stuff arranged haphazardly on a shelf. Puddles of water by the side of the pool.

A sudden empty loneliness descends on him.

His scripts have names, dialogue, descriptions; monospaced serif text typed out on paper. The films have faces and voices and snippets of lives; him but not-him, clashing and combining with memories of the same embodied in flesh by his side, breathing and thinking and speaking and *being*; independent of his control.

It could have been a dream.

Fleeting scenes pass through his mind as he dumps the keys and moves through the rooms, going to the sink to wash up. Half-forgotten conversations already dimming in memory: Neo looking for the computer, Ludlow grabbing for his throat, Griffin handcuffed to his wrist, Alex listening in the quiet of the night.

The memories threaten to flatten and collapse; reduce into half-psychotic extensions of himself, imagination running wild, thought experiments that went too far, back-stories that took on lives too big for them.

But the ITDT is still in his pocket. He holds it, closes his fingers over it, feels the weight of other lives just out of reach but still extant, feels the physical assurance of fiction turned reality, and he hopes, with sudden desperation, that it was not a dream.



With measured reluctance he tries to wake. He shuts his eyes and wills reality through, and for a moment things seem to change...

But when he opens his eyes again, he's still standing by the sink, and the ITDT in his hand still feels solid and real and something not made by human hands. And at a touch of the button, the names scroll down its screen, inhabited with a constancy not known to dreams:

*Anderson, Thomas*

*Arctor, Robert*

*Barksdale, Donnie*

*Clayton, Jjaks*

*Connelly, Winston*

*Constantine, John*

...

Still there. Still alive.

Still real.

.the end.



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## a f t e r w o r d

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'The Not-Particularly-Excellent Adventures of the Keanu-Spawn' had its beginnings almost five years ago in 2005, as short sketches to end off each chapter of a series called 'Matrix Revolutions: The Other Versions' that I had been writing. I never really intended them as anything more than joke fillers, but over time those short sketches started to form a proper story of their own, and eventually I decided to turn them into a full-fledged novel. I wrote it as a sequel to 'Real World', my first novel, which involved five characters – including Neo and Ted – entering the real world and having to deal with the discovery that they were fictional.

Part of the motivation for this fic was due to me missing the characters and wanting to write more about them; another part was due to my growing appreciation of Keanu Reeves' films and the fascinating characters who inhabited them. His characters have always been the focal point of my fandom. Contrary to popular opinion, I find each of them to be completely different, unique individuals, and thought they warranted further exploration. I also thought that they would make an excellent ensemble cast. The fact that this story actually works already says something about their diversity; a cast of identical characters would probably not result in anything very interesting happening, and neither would a bunch of characters who know no other word than 'whoa'.

So this fic was for me as much a character study as a piece of fiction, and when I started out, I was actually unfamiliar with most of the characters I was writing about, having yet to make much headway in the Reeves oeuvre. Many initial characterisations were based off nothing more than screen captures, music videos off YouTube and movie trailers; but they were often enough for me to get a sense of what a character was like, which I think says something about Keanu's skill as an actor at least in the realm of character portrayal. Each of the Keanu-spawn felt like a separate individual, and I liked – and still like – them all in different ways, though my favourites are Neo and Connor.

If 'Real World' was for me an integral part of my early teenage years, this novel achieved the same purpose for my late teenage years, which were largely spent in Keanu fandom – running the articles archive at my Keanu fan site <http://www.whoaisnotme.net>, defending him and his acting on the Internet with the rest of the Keanu SWAT Team, and forming countless invaluable friendships among fellow fans in the fandom. It was another chapter of my life, one filled with lots of angst and whoa and growing up, and it is one that I'll never regret or forget, the possibility of amnesia aside.

As for this novel, the characters still live on in my imagination and in the films that gave me a window to their world. Their story does not end here; shortly after finishing the first draft of this fic (or perhaps some time before), I continued writing about them in short stories and scripts, the characters brought together with the ITDTs. My friend and fellow Keanu fan Caitlin was a large contributor to this; we spent many days and nights together on MSN Messenger co-writing what is at present close to 100,000 words (more than this novel has) of chat-style scripts about the continued adventures of the Keanu-spawn and other people they met along the way, several of those other people forming the basis for what I plan to be the next Kenselton novel. Our scripts will eventually be uploaded once I format them properly.

But for now, this is the end of this novel, and I hope that you've enjoyed it. As always, feedback is greatly appreciated; feel free to e-mail me at [starwarsisnotdead@gmail.com](mailto:starwarsisnotdead@gmail.com) with any comments you may have, positive or negative.

And now, repeating the last part of my afterword for 'Real World', written more than three years ago in December 2006 but which still holds true for me:

*There are still other stories to be told, there are still other ideas waiting to come. So here ends this novel and this part of my life, because it's time to move on to start another.*

The Author  
13 February 2010

0704270/006/GRA

*"There are two kinds of people  
One is all the others  
The other one is me."*

The others were weak, pathetic, common people. He wanted them to know it. To bend beneath his will, to scream, to struggle, and know where they really stood in relation to him. To know, however it might look like, that he was not one of them. He was different. He was better.

Because he was *special*.

**Presenting Quinto Formaggi, the third novel in the Kenselton Hotel Saga.**

<http://www.whoaisnotme.net/anakinmcfly/stories/qfnoel.htm>