Going Once, Going Twice

by allthegoodnamesaretakendammit

Summary

Danny is fourteen when he walks into the ghost portal and doesn’t walk out.

For all that he'd never thought his parents' portal would actually work, it's the aftermath that's truly unpredictable: a never-ending roadtrip, an issue with ice, and an unlikely mentor.
Danny is fourteen when he walks into the ghost portal and doesn’t walk out.

His life ends with the press of a button: the electricity surging through him, tearing a hoarse sound out of him, his eyes open to the flare of green light that leaves him staggering and stunned.

That’s it. That’s all.

His eyes snap open some minutes later, and he finds himself staring up at the ceiling, flat on his back on the basement floor. His body is throbbing like it’s trying to bring itself down from a boil and back to an even simmer. Danny wants to get up, wants to check the clock, see how long he’s been out, and make sure he hasn’t electrocuted his own hair off—but then, with the ache in his body doubling at the thought of it, he decides to lie here for just a little longer.

The basement door bangs open a while later, and Mom comes bustling down the stairs with an armful of manila folders. But the minute she actually looks up, the folders hit the floor with a smack. There is the cry of: “The portal!” And then: “JACK, GET DOWN HERE.” When Danny looks back at the portal, it’s now a bright vortex of glowing green, seeming to brim with bad news.

Huh. So it does work, after all.

He doesn’t get a chance to congratulate Mom, though, because the instant she sees him on the ground, she says, “Danny, what happened? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Mom.” His legs choose that moment to sink into the floor, like the tile had magically turned into quicksand. “Uhhh...”

Barely breathing, his mother kneels beside him and touches the place where his knee fuses into the ground. Then she looks up at him, her eyes seeming enormous behind her goggles. It looks like she’s been terrified into silence, so Danny tries to explain something that he hasn’t even begun to understand yet. “I was in the portal when it activated. You both forgot to push the on-button, so I went in...”
He can’t finish his sentence because he has a feeling that describing the kind of pain he’d felt in there will do nothing to comfort her. Which is why he uses his tried and true refrain: “Mom, seriously, I’m fine.”

His torso vanishes into thin air and appears again just as rapidly, but he still can’t seem to pull his legs back out of the floor.

With a crash, Dad comes charging down the stairs, his ecto-rifle cocked and blazing before he sees the open portal, Danny on the floor, and the look on Mom’s face. “What the devil--!”

“It’s Vlad,” Mom finally chokes out, her arms wrapping around the parts of Danny that she can still touch and hugging him hard enough to pull his ankles free from the ground. “It’s Vlad all over again.”

The hospital can’t help them much. The food is terrible, the **hmmm**-ing and incessant note-taking of doctors is worse, and after two weeks of open-backed paper gowns and falling through his hospital bed, they finally give him a diagnosis: his DNA has been rewritten. Danny kind of tunes out their prognosis after that. But Mom nods along and Dad shouts a question every now and then, and Jazz holds Danny’s hand so, so tight.

They discharge him that night and Danny only hovers once on the car ride home, which hardly even counts since his seatbelt holds him in place. For his sake, they pick up a bag of greasy goodness from Nasty Burger and he wolfs it down before they even make it back home. But when they do get home, there is the sudden hammering-down of Rules.

Mom and Dad know exactly what will happen if word gets out about their new baby ghostboy--which Mom has taken to calling him because of course she has. So Sam and Tucker aren’t allowed to visit; they aren’t even allowed to bring him all of the homework that he’s been missing. Danny resents it until, at the end of that first week, Mom sits down at the end of his bed and explains where all of the ghosthunters’ main bases are on the eastern seaboard and how long it would take for them to get to Amity Park. She doesn’t need to describe what would happen once they arrive. It’s in her eyes.

Then she gives him his phone and computer privileges back. As it turns out, the frightening silence when she’d found him on the basement floor had partially been white-hot rage. Go figure.
It kills him not to do it, but he swallows his teenage rebellion and doesn’t reach out to Sam and Tucker. There’s nothing he could say to satisfy them except the truth, and he can’t say that. Mom has convinced him of that much. So really, there’s nothing to say. But Danny has to stay inside 24/7 and all he can do is think: *so, what now?*

In the end, it’s Jazz who pushes them onto newer, greener pastures. Danny is floating slowly toward the bathroom, still fogged with sleep, when he overhears one of the super-secret midnight meetings that his family thinks he doesn’t know about. He’s halfway down the pitch black hall when he hears Jazz’s voice echoing up from the living room: “You say you want us to stay in Amity Park to give me and Danny a normal life. But honestly--is that why you raised us to be ghost hunters? So we could be normal?”

Up until that point, Danny hadn’t realized that moving away was on the table. But hot damn, Jazz has a point.

Apparently his parents think so too because the next thing Danny knows, Dad is outfitting the RV with a bigger kitchen and starts renovating the storage space in the back to fit a new and improved ghost portal. With a child-lock. And a deadbolt. And a keypad with only Greek letters on it.

Mom spends the next three months working furiously to make the ghost portal lightweight and small enough to fit on the RV. Danny doesn’t have it in his heart to complain about it when he knows that it’s been their life’s work.

By Christmas, they’ve sold the house and packed up the essentials in the RV and they begin a continual cross-country ghost-hunting trip.

It’s a good thing none of them tend to get carsick.

Danny papers his bunk with NASA posters and spends a lot time staring out the window, practicing his floating from the safety of his seatbelt. He’s cool with not becoming an astronaut, since he now gets to defy gravity anytime he wants. Yet there are times, in those first few weeks on the road, where he’s a little tempted to try to float up above the earth’s atmosphere, just to see what would happen. You know, for science. And also to get some alone time. Life gets pretty cramped in the van.

They stretch their legs often, though. From Pensacola to Milwaukee, Mom and Dad scan promising-looking graveyards and widow’s walks for ghosts while Danny and Jazz sit by the beach or go take a walk in the woods--anywhere as long as it’s deserted. The sudden spells of invisibility aren’t exactly something they want other people to witness. Safety first, ghosts second,
Danny’s getting the hang of ghost-stuff, slowly but surely. Or at least, he thinks he is until the first time he transforms.

It happens in Wyoming. An angry cattle-rancher is rumored to haunt an old farmstead, and of course it’s just Danny’s luck that it’s true. He and Jazz are sitting on the grass, eating PB&Js while their parents point various devices at a ramshackle old house. Between one bite and the next, an angry-looking, glowing cowboy is stalking out of the front door, his spurs making a menacing click as he readies his lasso. It’s like stepping into a really dumb video game. Except that the cowboy is actually here and he lassos his rope right around Dad and tugs hard, clearly meaning to hurl him down into the dirt with bone-shattering force.

Something comes over Danny. It’s hard to describe. It’s… cold fire. In his heart, in his lungs. Rings of light wash over him and he can suddenly feel the clingy material of a patented Fenton jumpsuit on his skin, but he can’t pay that any mind because he’s got to catch Dad before he hits the ground, he’s just got to.

Twice as quick as he’s ever done it, he flies forward and wraps the lasso around his fist, managing to turn the lasso intangible so it slips free from Dad. He lets the rope return to normal and uses it to yank the rancher a step closer, the heels of his boots digging into the dirt as he glares at Danny with blazing black eyes.

It’s kind of a blur after that. They brawl. The cowboy makes finger-guns that actually shoot ectoplasm out of them, and Danny only manages to avoid most of them. Mom and Dad blast sporadic green beams in their general direction and Jazz shouts encouragements like, “Get him, Danny!” or “Watch out! On your left!”

Danny ducks and dives and, in a moment of desperation, he kicks the cowboy right between the legs. The cowboy goes cross-eyed, hollering, “Why, you yellow-bellowed Yankee--!”

Danny punches his lights out.

While the cowboy’s out cold, they stuff him into the portal and triple lock it behind him. Then they run tests on Danny’s mysterious new physiology--white hair? Green eyes? What the actual fuck?--and when the rings of light change him right back into his mostly-human self again, they keep driving. Danny sits dazedly in the backseat as Mom runs over checklist after checklist: asking him how he feels, how many fingers she’s holding up, what’s the capital of Taiwan. And then they go out for tacos because ghost hunting is hungry work and, tentatively, it looks like they have
something to celebrate.

The U.S. rolls by Danny’s window slowly, but the year moves fast. That summer in Maine, Dad proves that the Fenton-thermos works by accidentally sucking Danny into it. By September, Jazz can’t stand the thought of them constantly burning fuel and she bullies Mom and Dad into getting the RV to run off of ectoplasm alone. It might not single-handedly save the planet, but it definitely saves money. By Thanksgiving, his parents finally remember that their children are supposed to be in high school right now. Sadly, their homeschooling begins that night. The curriculum is geography and ghost lore-heavy, but ultimately fine.

He and Jazz swap ecto-filter duty, they start a rock collection from various state lines, and all of them get better at ghost hunting--a lot better at it. Less friendly-fire, more butt-kicking. But when they’ve got nothing better to do, they follow the ghost-enthusiast convention circuit. Savannah, New Orleans, Salem, and so on. It always guarantees to put their parents in a good mood while he and Jazz get a free afternoon to be mallrats or to play tennis in the public courts or, even better, to air out the van after an ectoplasmic gas leak.

Other times, Danny will use his downtime to play Doomed. He actually makes some pretty solid friends on the server; he and FryerTuck and Chaos have a standing date to play together every Saturday afternoon for a couple of hours.

But when he gets really bored, Danny will steal Jazz’s nose--which mainly consists of him turning her nose invisible and saying, “Hey, Jaaaaz...” To which she will instantly shriek for him to put it back, boundaries are key in any healthy relationship Danny, restore my bodily integrity this instant, yadda yadda yadda. The chasing is a good excuse to practice his powers, anyway.

When Danny is nineteen and Jazz is twenty-one, they lie down at Four Corners and take their Christmas picture at the hot, dry place where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet. And after the second time they see the Grand Canyon, Jazz stops putting off college for Danny’s sake and Swarthmore accepts her with a full-ride. The RV starts to run in circles around Pennsylvania and in that first semester, they always happen to “just be in the neighborhood” to take her out for dinner every couple of weeks. By her second semester, she hasn’t been attacked by ghosts or dumped by a fratbro even once, and they manage to drift back towards Kansas for a haunted steel factory. They still Skype three times a week and she seems happy there. Intellectually stimulated, she corrects him. Which is Jazz-speak for happy.

The RV is less cramped without her here, but it’s also less of a home.

It’s a couple of months after that when the freezing stuff starts. It’s shivers at first, an odd chill in his stomach every now and again. Then he’s sweating bullets in his sleep that are frozen beads on his forehead by the time he wakes up. And then, of course, there are the sneezes that leave
anything in front of him covered in frost. He starts sleeping outside in his sleeping bag at night, which his parents object to until they realize that their fuel tank won’t be frozen solid by morning anymore. His parents run tests and they run tests and they run tests and all they can come up with is: it’s a symptom of the accident. Probably. Maybe?

That March, they’re cruising by the Great Lakes on the half-promise of migrating mermaids when Dad gets a phone call. He flips open his ancient flip phone and says, “Yello?” And then, “V-MAN!” Mom has to take hold of the steering wheel when Dad jumps up out of the driver’s seat and starts pacing excitedly up and down the length of the RV, shouting exuberant agreement that’s peppered with words like as soon as possible and actually, Vladdie, we could use your help.

As it turns out, “V-man” is that Masters guy who’s on the cover of Forbes and Time every now and again. It figures that Mom and Dad went to college with him and never bothered to mention it til now. That night, they make French onion soup for dinner and Danny snaps on a pair of goggles to save himself some tears. Dad is butchering a clove of garlic when Danny finally asks him about that phone call, and bits of garlic go flying as Dad gestures with the knife, answering, “V-man is the best, Danny! He’s a ghost expert and an ace with a monkey wrench. But you see, Danny... We, uh, we had an oopsie-daisy with Vladdie, too.”

“What your father is trying to say is that Vlad was also harmed by our portal prototype. He was in the hospital for a long time after that. We haven’t seen him since,” Mom interjects. She turns back to chopping onions, remarking, “He might even have some insight into our little ice problem.”

When they arrive in the middle of Absolutely Nowhere, Wisconsin, the guy’s home is something between a cathedral and a sports museum. Everything is green and gold and looks like it costs a million dollars. Vlad Masters is suave and tall and the minute they’re all sitting in his living room, Mom says, “We thought you deserved to know: you’re not the only one who got tangled up in our mistakes in the lab.” She puts a hand on Danny’s shoulder. “Our son was in our final portal when it activated. As far as we can tell… he’s half-ghost.”

Vlad looks like he’s not breathing. “Show me,” he says, eyes bright and sitting stock-still in his seat.

So Danny transforms, letting light and energy take hold of him, turning him into something else completely. He maintains a resting hover an inch above the couch cushions, feeling odd to look like this in front of someone new.

Vlad laughs disbelievingly--something joyous and wild in it. He looks up at Danny like he’s some kind of miracle. Which, fair enough.
Danny’s life begins again when Vlad says: “There’s something I need to tell you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains stereotypes about ranchers and cowboys. These are largely a product of Danny’s thinking and the types of villains we tend to see in the show. My sincerest apologies to any cattle ranchers caught in the crossfire.

No restless spirits were kicked in the nuts in the making of this story.

Also, goggles won’t help you with cutting onions unless they are absolutely airtight and fit you well. Wikihow has many better solutions, if you’re looking for them.
Two weeks later, his parents are pulling out of Vlad’s driveway, empty-nesters at long last. Danny and Vlad stand on the front steps of the manor, watching the RV until it disappears into the Wisconsin landscape. “So,” Danny says. “What now?”

Mornings are rough, but doable. When Danny stumbles down the stairs at 9AM, Vlad’s pantry is always stocked with lemon poppyseed muffins, super fancy coffee, and, best of all, Badger Cereal. It’s sugary as hell and it tastes really good with chocolate milk. As long as he eats it fast enough, it doesn’t get mushy before he has to dash up to the study for class with the vultures. They tutor him in math, science, and history, respectively. It goes fine, as long as they don’t try to teach him all three at the same time. Vlad teaches him English, god help him. The Dairy King instructs him in... husbandry? And dairy-making. And also local history. Mostly, it just seems like the Dairy King enjoys chatting with somebody, not that Danny’s a very good listener. It’s nice, though, because the Dairy King is cool with walking and talking as Danny tries to get the lay of the entire castle which he, yes, sometimes still gets lost in. They have some good times sliding down the laundry shoots and making shadow puppets in the home movie theater.

But most of the time, Danny is training. He’ll have a sandwich or something for a late lunch, spend the next hour doing whatever he wants, and then he’ll head down to start his stretches in the state of the art gym in the basement. Training’s the only time of day where Danny is absolutely guaranteed to see Vlad. Beyond that, though, their training sessions are pretty unpredictable. Vlad will teach him the fundamentals of fencing one week and they’ll be dueling with ectoplasmic swords the next. Those first two weeks with Vlad are a crash course in ice powers--or elemental powers as a whole, since apparently Vlad is a fire elemental--but things diverge from there. Three weeks in, Danny is no longer freezing his orange juice before he can drink it. Five months in, Danny’s mastered repulsion fields, overshadowing squirrels, and--after giving himself two heads about fifty times--duplication. Right now, they’re working on his shielding. When he gets it wrong, he gets hit with slime. When he gets it right, he feels like the bubble boy from that old movie that Dad loves.

After three hours or so, Vlad will clap a hand on his shoulder, and tell him, Looks like you’ve got the hang of it, my boy, or, I’ll see you at dinner and we can plan tomorrow’s training then. Chin up, Daniel. We’ll get there.

Once he’s got his daily pep-talk and he’s all sweaty from training, Danny will take a dip in the
fountain out front. He likes to take a running leap and dive into it, just to see how high he can get the splash to go. Then he’ll phase the water off of him and fly up to his room to get his homework done. Most of it is reading, and as much as Danny likes *The Great Gatsby*, he really can’t make heads or tails of what it’s actually about. So when he and Vlad sit down for dinner together in the dining room—which they do most nights--Danny will bombard him with questions about it, to which Vlad will answer, *It’s bootlegging, you understand. They are implying that Gatsby has become rich by illegally selling liquor during Prohibition. Or, It’s Gatsby’s obsession with the past that makes him pitiful. He’s fallen in love with the idea of a woman, rather than with the woman herself. You’ll understand when you’re older, Daniel.*

Then Danny will stuff his face from post-training starvation while Vlad bitches about the stupid things that people say during his conference calls. It’s nice. It’s like having a prickly best friend who lets you stay at his house and teaches you about ghost powers. Still, it’s weird to think that Vlad once had this huge old house all to himself with only a bunch of ghosts for company. Danny has a feeling that it was weird for Vlad, too.

Sometimes he can goad Vlad into an after-dinner game of hide-and-seek. You know, to appraise the limits of Danny’s ghost-sense. Not because it’s fun, but because it’s important for a growing half-ghost to test his abilities. To which Vlad will tell him that he’s twenty and he’s not fooling anyone. But every once and awhile, Vlad will grin with a flash of fang and say, “You know, Daniel, I think you rather have a point.” And then it’s on like Donkey Kong, and Danny will barely be able to make himself count to thirty. The Dairy King is the best at hiding since he’s the most familiar with the castle and grounds, but Vlad cheats. Don’t ask Danny how, but he totally does. Still, by Labor Day, Danny can feel his ghost-sense expanding its range, like the flex of new muscle. Not that he has much of that.

If Vlad’s too busy for an extremely mature and necessary game of hide-and-seek, though, then Danny will head up to his room and Skype Jazz, or grab a shower. Then he’ll start watching anime while his hair dries and end up binging it late into the night while stuffing his face with potato chips. Most of the time he falls asleep with the TV on.

He wakes up the next day with Badger Cereal on the brain. Rinse and repeat. He came for the training, but he’s sticking around for Vlad.

But training is pretty great, actually. It’s nice to have the license to make mistakes in a controlled environment where he won’t, you know, be instantly obliterated if he slips up. Saturday is his one totally free day, which is sweet because he gets to keep his regularly scheduled *Doomed* sessions with Chaos and FryerTuck. In fact, it’s the second Saturday in September when he’s booting up his computer to play, and he’s interrupted by a knock on his door. Since nobody else around here knocks, he knows it’s got to be Vlad.

And of course, when Vlad pokes his head in and sees the Doomed loading screen, the first thing
out of his mouth is: “You spend too much time on silly games, Daniel.”

“It helps me with my reflexes!” Danny squawks.

“Doomed does not help you with your reflexes. If it did, you would be able to stop me from doing this—” Vlad plucks a hair from Danny’s head and teleports to the other side of the room before Danny can even say ouch.

So he ends up swiping at the empty air, grumbling, “What was that for?”

“I need a genetic sample. I’m working on a device that will distinguish between full ghosts and half-ghosts. Hopefully, I’ll be able create weapons that only affect full ghosts. Just imagine the convenience of that,” Vlad says as he puts the hair in a tiny test tube and tucks it into his pocket.

“Yeah, okay, that does sound awesome.”

Vlad accepts this acknowledgement of his brilliance with a nod, and as he turns to leave, he says, “I wish you the best of luck, Daniel. I hear multiplayer is particularly brutal on Saturdays.”

“Preaching to choir, buddy,” Danny sighs as he turns back to his now-complete loading screen. And then: “Wait.” Vlad is halfway out the door when Danny asks, awestruck, “You play Doomed?”

Vlad buffs his nails against his shirt, remarking, “I might know a thing or two about it.”

“Dude, you should play with me and my friends!”

“Nonsense. I have a meeting to attend,” Vlad scoffs, but he’s got that tilt to his head that he always has when he wants to be convinced to do something stupid.

So Danny goes for the moneyshot. “What, a meeting with that guy who said that accents were a sign of low intelligence?”
Vlad’s eyes light up and he says, “Point taken.” With that he vanishes into the hall, presumably to bow out of his meeting over the phone. Five minutes later, Vlad drifts back through the ceiling with his laptop in hand, and he sits side by side with Danny on the bed. Danny puts his game face on, ready to show Vlad just what he’s up against. That is, until he sees Vlad’s username: TheBigCheese. He laughs til he’s wheezing and Vlad pokes him in the side saying, “I don’t see what’s so funny, GhostBoy.”

When Danny finally stops laughing, the two of them shoot their way through Levels 1, 2, and 3 to warm up until Chaos and FryerTuck decide to show. They seem unruffled by the new addition and proceed to blast their way up to Level 10 with combo moves and ambushes aplenty.

Unsurprisingly, Vlad is hopelessly competitive when it comes to video games, even when they’re working as a team. By the end of the first hour, they’d had to commit to a “no smacking the other person’s computer” treaty. Two guesses on who started that slapfight.

Two hours in, Vlad puts his hair up in a man-bun and Danny has feelings about it--an immediate, fuzzy-wobbles in the stomach kind of reaction that takes him by surprise.

But when the blitz on Level 17 ends around 5PM, they all say their goodbyes and log off, and Danny finds himself staring at his darkened computer screen, wondering, “What did you come in here to tell me, anyway?”

Vlad puts a hand on Danny’s shoulder, just like he does when Danny gets something right after a long, hard slog in the gym. “The hair, Daniel. Remember?”

“Oh yeah. Are you sure one hair will be enough? You can take my brush if you want.” Vlad smiles like he’s done something adorable. “What? I hate cleaning out my brush, and you’ll be able to do something with all of that hair. Vlad, seriously, what are you laughing at?”

“You’re such a giver, Daniel,” he chuckles as he floats through the ceiling like a balloon let loose.

Chapter End Notes

It’s fanon that Vlad has a fire core, and it’s unsubstantiated by the show itself. But it
makes sense, right? Right???
It starts out innocently enough.

By Friday, Vlad’s Full Ghost Fryer is up and running in the lab, and Danny gets roped into feeding it raw ectoplasm while Vlad records which types of goo it zaps. The thing looks like a seven foot tall lightning rod with a glowing green bulb at the tip. It seems like a winner to Danny because it makes handful after handful of glowing goop extra-crispy, but if he or Vlad shoots an ectoplasmic beam at it, nothing happens.

Honestly, though, it’s just kinda nice to spend time in the lab together. It’s nice to feel useful here, in Vlad’s hands-down favorite room. Everything is purple and dotted with shiny beakers and blinking lights. Vlad is hovering behind the control panel in full ghost-mode, pecking at the readings and making thoughtful, smart-sounding noises.

Danny spent all of yesterday in ghost form, though, so today he’s rocking his human shape and tossing ectoplasm at a metal pole like he’s getting paid to do it. After about an hour of that, Vlad calls out, “I think I’ll turn it up to 90% now, Daniel, and then we’ll really see what she can do.”

Ten seconds later, at most, the bulb begins to flicker between too-bright and way-too-bright. The place where the rod meets the floor sparks warningly and the whole structure begins to emit a high-pitched sound, like a tuning fork.

Danny, who has reflexes borne of years of his parents’ mishaps, ducks under the nearest counter and turns intangible just for good measure. But Vlad had been standing right in front of the thing and is still backing away from it when he calls out, “Stay back, Daniel! I think it’s going to--”

It explodes.

Vlad takes the brunt of it as the eruptions of sparks come in waves that leave the countertops sizzling. When all of that fades, Danny peeks out of his hiding spot just in time to see the blackened rod slam into the floor, the bulb blinking out for good. Vlad is slumped against the nearest counter, holding his head and groaning. “Vlad? You okay?”

At the sound of his voice, Vlad raises his head. He looks… odd, somehow. He’s lost the thoughtful
furrow between his eyebrows, the haughty lift of his shoulders. “Daniel,” he says, something wondering in his voice. And then he grins, straightens up from his slump, and starts drifting toward Danny, backlit by the small fires now scattered around the lab.

There’s something about it that has Danny backing up with his hands in the air, saying, “Woah, woah, dude. Are you alright? You seem… different.”

If anything, Vlad grins even wider. For the first time since they’d met, Danny takes note of those evil-looking teeth. “Oh yes. An improvement, wouldn’t you say?”

“Jury’s out,” Danny hedges. He decides to stop backing up, and when Vlad stops coming closer, it gives Danny a moment to stop, breathe, and think. Finding nothing left to burn, the fires fizzle out all around the room. The lab feels like less of a smoldering wreck now that there aren’t any active fires; just embers cooking themselves into nothing and the two of them. Deciding to play it straight, Danny demands, “What did the Fryer do to you?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say that it has momentarily transformed me into a full ghost. No troublesome human conscience getting in the way.”

Well, that’s not worrying at all. With an entirely appropriate sense of alarm, Danny asks, “Getting in the way of what, exactly?”

Vlad grins wide enough to make his eyes crinkle and answers, “This--” he flashes forward, hoists Danny up by his hips, and plops Danny’s butt down on the counter that wraps around the back of the room--“and this.” He steps forward between Danny’s legs and wraps his arms around him, hugging him tight with his cheek resting on top of Danny’s head.

“Um.”

In the blank stretch of seconds between when the hug begins and when Danny is able to form words about it, he absently notes--not for the first time--that Vlad runs pretty warm for a ghost. It’s nice. Toasty.

“You… want to hold me?” Danny absently notes that he has no idea where to put his hands.

“An inane question, Daniel. I do nothing that I do not wish to do.” That sounds reassuringly like
normal-Vlad. As if he’s just trying to cancel it out, Vlad follows it up with, “Now be still. This opportunity is not to be wasted.” Danny thinks about transforming, but he has a sneaking suspicion that Vlad might not take it well. It wouldn’t exactly be a show of trust. Plus, he… doesn’t exactly mind being held like this. It’s comfortable, cuddling with his mentor cum best friend cum inappropriate crush.

And anyway, he has an escape route if he needs it. He can go intangible and sink through the floor. Or, if Vlad shorts out his powers with the Plasmius Maximus in the drawer next to them, Danny can free himself the old-fashioned way. There’s enough space between him and the wall that he’s not even touching it, so there’s plenty of wiggle room for him to eel away if he has to.

His own voice sounds distant to him as he mumbles into Vlad’s chest, “How did the Fryer even do this to you?”

“The device distinguishes between humans and ghosts. That first blast of energy it emitted seems to have rejected my human biology. Or perhaps the prototype refused to harm my human half, so it temporarily turned me into a full ghost in order to disarm me properly, but it didn’t get the chance to before imploding. Difficult to say, at this juncture.”

“How--how long do you think it will last?”

“Oh, I’d say something like twelve hours. Give or take.”

“And… what about being a full ghost… leads to hugging?”

“Ghosts are all about self-gratification, my boy. What they want, they take. My human half typically reins in these impulses, even when I am in ghost form. But that part of me is on vacation at the moment, so we needn’t worry about any pesky interference.”

Danny wonders how human-Vlad would feel about being called pesky, but he gets side-tracked by the question: “So you… usually want to hold me?”

Vlad pulls away; holds him at arm’s length just so that he can get a good look at him. Only it doesn’t feel like being looked at. It feels like being… beheld.

There’s something sly and confessional in Vlad’s voice when he steps closer again, his hands
rubbing over Danny’s sides as he says, “Are you telling me that your ghost half doesn’t possess instincts that you continually struggle against? Or that your human self doesn’t have desires that your ghost half seeks to fulfill, regardless of what your higher thinking has to say about it?”

“Well,” Danny says, thinking about wanting to fly out above the atmosphere or being unable to stop himself from petting the snow on mornings in Michigan.

“Precisely.”

Danny likes this; being close, the lack of hesitation from Vlad, the intimacy. But the things that normal-Vlad would want are important; maybe even essential. “Still, though. I don’t want to take advantage.”

Vlad pulls him into another full, chest-to-chest hug as he chuckles, “Adorable.”

“Hey!” Danny objects. He knows for a fact that he hasn’t been adorable since he dressed up as Spiderman for Halloween when he was eleven. Jazz is always telling him that, anyway.

“You couldn’t take advantage of me even if you tried, Daniel. If anything, you’ve even eroded my ability to take advantage over time. Moral osmosis, you might say.”

Which leaves Danny blinking at the far wall and asking him, “What?”

“You look at me with the full expectation that I’ll do the right thing. As if I can’t think of twenty different nefarious things to do with a sample of your DNA.” Vlad sighs. “It’s… become difficult to disappoint you.”

It’s weird to have your faith restored in someone about five minutes after you started questioning it for the first time. So Danny just says, “I didn’t think--”

“That’s just it, my boy. You didn’t think, even for a second, that I’d do something horrible with your genetic material. But I could have. By god, I could have.” Vlad drags his nose through Danny’s hair. He’s going to swallow some of it if he’s not careful. “Yet it wasn’t a possibility in your mind. And I find myself less and less capable of aligning myself against you and those you care about as time goes on...”
“Wait. So you have done creepy stuff with my hair in the past?”

“No,” Vlad says, sounding sad about it. “So many missed opportunities, so much hand-wringing and maudlin thoughts at midnight and all the while, I crave you. The absurd questions you ask. The way you look at me like I’m--” He breathes in deeply, ruffling Danny’s hair on the exhale. “Something to you. Something important.”

“Dude, you’re like the most important person I know.” Danny means it in the most general sense of the word, but it still has waves of smugness rolling off of Vlad; Danny doesn’t even have to look at him to know it.

Vlad accepts this as his due and goes on, “In any case, Daniel, you’re old enough that there’s only so much control I can have over you. You are, much to my regret, your own man. As a matter of fact, you’re turning twenty-one any day now.”

“Next week, actually.” And then, thinking to take advantage of Vlad’s unfiltered honesty: “Did you get me something good?”

“Of course, my boy,” he purrs, hands drifting to Danny’s sides again. “It’ll leave you breathless--”

All at once, Vlad’s fingertips are skating lightly over his ribs, making Danny twitch and his breathing hitch as he tries to twist away. But then Vlad is tickling his armpits and Danny is laughing hysterically, his voice echoing around the lab. When his eyes start to water, he redoubles his efforts to squirm away. A wall of heat appears behind him, and a new pair of hands grab him around the middle, locking him into place with his arms trapped against his sides. There are legs framing the V of Danny’s, just as warm and broad as the legs standing in front of him. And between two Vlads, Danny knows he’s struggling in vain. But he’s a fighter at heart, so he kicks out, tossing his head to try and get some space. A pair of ankles twine around his and pin his feet to the cabinets with a clatter. The tickling picks up from there, leaving his attention too scattered to even think about going intangible. He’s howling with laughter, feeling himself go pink from it as the minutes pass. At last, Danny cries out for mercy: “Stop, stop! I’m gonna pee!”

Reluctantly, Vlad stops tickling him, bringing Danny back from the brink of losing control of all bodily function. The Vlad behind him loosens his grip enough to let Danny pull his arms free, but those big arms stay locked around his waist, one hand flat on his stomach to feel it rise and fall as Danny fights for oxygen, every bit as breathless as Vlad had promised he’d be. Which leaves Danny and Vlad staring at each other as the one behind him tucks his face into Danny’s neck, nosing along his hairline curiously. Christ, that feels nice.
Vlad’s face suddenly gets a lot nearer. But it’s not enough. Danny wants him closer. So he leans forward for that kiss—sudden, but impossible to miss from a hundred miles away—and he gets it. By god, does he get it. There’s a big, warm mouth pressed carefully against his and Danny sighs into it as he lets the amazing thing happening to his lips blend with the amazing thing happening to the back of his neck.

Then, on the very nape of his neck, there’s a nip that has him gasping and the Vlad in front of him has his tongue in Danny’s mouth and it’s wonderful—it’s confusing and wet, but that’s what makes it so good.

At some point, he realizes that the Vlad behind him has left his neck alone long enough to take one of Danny’s hands for himself. He raises it up to his mouth so that he can kiss Danny’s palm, taste the salt between his fingers. At least, Danny assumes that he tastes salty. The other one—the original, if Danny had to guess—is still in front of him, kissing him like it’s all he’s thought about for the last year. His hand is trailing over Danny’s cheek, and the other is rubbing the part of his leg just above his knee. The two pairs of latex gloves are making some pretty hilarious noises, but Danny doesn’t have the breath to laugh anymore.

He’s overheated—what with Vlad’s hands everywhere at once, two mouths working towards the same goal. When the Vlad in front pulls away from their kiss, he takes one look at the dazed look on Danny’s face and says, “You see what I mean? Adorable.” The other Vlad nods in agreement, too busy tracing the wrinkles on Danny’s palm with one of his fangs to answer properly.

It’s like they skipped a step. They’ve gone straight from tasteful, silent longing and hopped right into a porn parody of their relationship.

Case in point, Vlad’s temperature is ticking up the longer that this goes on—a line of heat along his back, a pillar of fire standing between Danny’s legs. Must be a fire elemental thing. Danny tries to tell him this, saying, “Things are getting… humid.”

“I think the word you’re looking for,” the Vlad behind him corrects as he dips in close to pinch the shell of Danny’s ear between his teeth, “is steamy.”

“No, I mean humid.” Danny points to the condensation on the beakers nearby, a telling collection of water-vapor that definitely hadn’t been there half an hour ago.

“Huh.”
The Vlad behind him stays right where he is, resting both of his hands on Danny’s stomach as the heat of him ratchets down slowly, a controlled release of power. But the Vlad in front of him takes a step back and lets the energy bleed out all at once, creasing the air before dissipating.

With a bit of distance between them and with his legs still pinned wide open by the Vlad behind him, there is simply no way for Danny to hide his boner. There’s an honest to god sparkle in Vlad’s eye when he sees it, exclaiming with false surprise, “Oh my. What’s this?”

Danny hangs his head and says, “Are you seriously going to shame me for being turned on by being sandwiched between two of you?”

Both Vlads concede this in unison with the sigh of, “Sorry to cramp your style, Daniel.”

Danny mutters, “Oh my god,” into his own chest. On the plus side, it gives the Vlad behind him the perfect vantage point to start loving up on his neck again. It seems like the Vlad in front is content to just watch for the moment. It must be a good look for them: Danny white-knuckling the edge of the counter as the Vlad behind him leaves hot kisses that he’ll be hard-pressed to see in the mirror later.

“Sooooo,” Danny says as the Vlad in front smooths his hands along the tops of Danny’s thighs in a thoughtful sort of way, “I guess this is going to be a regular thing for us now? Kissing and touching and stuff? I mean, that’s my vote, anyway.”

Both Vlads chuckle in tandem, and the one in front leans in to ask, “Would you mind pursuing something more… serious?”

“I mean, we already live together. How much more serious can we get?”

“An excellent point, my boy,” Vlad murmurs before placing a sharp, toothy kiss just behind Danny’s ear in a way that proves just how much more serious things can get.

“Still, though. What about human-Vlad? Won’t he be mad?”

“He’ll be thanking me. Or cursing me between kissing you,” he says with a dismissive wave of his
hand. With that, he places his hand under Danny’s jaw, crooking it just so—perfect for that next kiss and the next and the next, the smokiness lingering about the room fusing with the heat that’s building between the three of them again. The heat of it is a sure thing: as sure as life and death and everything that happens in between. And when Vlad remembers that his human needs to breathe, he traces the shape of Danny’s cheek with his lips as the Vlad behind him does his damnest to keep Danny’s neck red and slick and aching just like that.

Danny finally finds the breath to say, “So. What now?”

“How,” Vlad tells him, “now comes the good part.”

Chapter End Notes

This fic is partially inspired by the artwork of Promsien on Tumblr. I know she doesn’t ship this ship, but goddamn I love her art. I think we have a pretty similar grasp of these characters, even though I then choose use that grip to drag these characters down to Sexy Town. If you’re looking for proof: let me tell you a little story. Six months ago a wrote this: “Vlad has literal Badger Cereal in his pantry. It’s sugary and tastes pretty good with chocolate milk.” One week ago I saw this: https://promsien.tumblr.com/post/152231586809/imnotsorry. Great minds, man. Great minds.

Let me know if you spotted any errors! Or if you enjoyed yourself! Or just let me know what you had for breakfast. I’m not picky.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!