The Devil's In The Details

Summary

Shane had never thought too hard about taunting ghosts and demons. But it only takes one badly placed joke to invite in something that is better off left alone. His and Ryan’s comfortable friendship is going to be tested to its limits when a demon unleashes a storm of uncertainties into both of their lives, and lies pile up on both sides. One thing’s for certain: Once the storm passes, his and Ryan’s relationship will never be the same again.

Notes

This idea got me back into writing long works again and it feels so good to be back.

Gonna preface this with a couple things to keep in mind:
1. I have no idea how they make their videos, or how long it takes, or what, so I'm just doing whatever. Forgive me if it is all terribly wrong. I also don't know that much about TJ other than the fact he is usual cameraguy for the videos so, yeah sorry TJ stans he's not gonna be a huge part of this *shrug*
2. We all know a demon's going to show up because this IS a demon Shane fic but the actual
demon is one whose identity is an important part of the plot so if you what to create a
pinboard with red string and figure out which one it is ahead of time be my guest, but please
don’t spoil the surprise for anyone else who wants to make a pinboard with red string and
figure it out themselves! (or wait for the in text reveal of course)

This all came from the heart as a huge labour of love so I hope you enjoy it! And without
further ado, lets rock and roll buckaroo!
In 1937, two lovers were found dead in their home. Their friend found them when he came to return a hammer, two weeks after their presumed time of demise. They were piled one on top of each other inside their bedroom closet, dead as doornails. The doctors never were able to figure out the cause of their deaths and wrote it off as an accident. If it was an accident, then it was certainly a strange sort of accident. No one but the authorities was satisfied by the ruling.

Some said it was murder. Some said it was something far more sinister.

No one will ever know for sure.

To this day, neighbours complain that they can hear screams coming from inside at all hours of the day. The windows rattle. Crows gather in huge numbers on top of the house, no matter the weather. The groundskeeper refuses to step foot inside the bedroom. It’s universally agreed that the spirits of the two lovers were never able to find rest. They haunt the house to this day.

What a load of bullshit, Shane thought to himself as he laid out his sleeping bag. If the house really was haunted, a ghost would have shown up to murder him by now if the taunting he’d done was anything to go by. But there was nothing- no breath on the back of his neck, no voices calling his name, no demons appearing to dropkick him through a window. He had even stood in the closet the bodies were found in, to no incident.

Of course, Ryan had sworn up and down that he heard whispering while he was in the closet, but the house was so drafty that those “whispers” were guaranteed to be nothing but the wind rustling through the cramped hallways.

Sometimes Shane couldn’t believe he was a part of Unsolved. The premise was so ridiculous: him, the biggest nonbeliever on planet earth, hosting a ghost hunting show? And yet he wouldn’t have it any other way. Watching Ryan freak out at flashlights with low batteries and creaky floorboards was hilarious. Less hilarious, he thought as he climbed into the sleeping bag, When you’re trying to get a decent night’s sleep.

Ryan was even more uneasy than usual in the Lovers’ House, the mere suggestion of demons enough to set him on edge. Shane could see him peering into the dark corners of the bedroom, face pale and washed out from the light of his phone.

“I swear to god if we get possessed by demons tonight…” Ryan muttered, chewing on his lip.

Huh. That got the gears turning in Shane’s head. “Hey Ryan,” he said, turning over in his sleeping bag so that they were face to face.

“What’s up, big guy? Feel anything?” Ryan stuck his phone camera into Shane’s face. He batted it away and laughed. “What, other than tired and cold? No, I was just thinking, how do you even end up getting possessed?”

“Uhhhhhhhhhh….. Let me think.” Ryan ran a hand through his hair absentmindedly. “I’m pretty sure you have to invite them in somehow. Like, 80% sure.”

Shane bust out laughing so hard that it felt like he was going to rupture an organ. Ryan stared at him
in consternation, which only made him laugh harder.

“Are you serious?” Shane wheezed. “Are people just going around saying things like ‘Hey demons! Come and possess me!’” He gasped for air just as a cold draft swept through the room and hit the back of his throat, making him cough.

“That’s what you get for laughing at me, asshole!” Ryan said and awkwardly tried to swat Shane. His arm got caught in his sleeping bag though, so he only wiggled around like some sort of dying worm. Shane laughed even harder between coughs. “I’m serious! Isn’t there that tweet that’s like, ‘if satan needs consent to enter your body everyone else does too’?”

Shane smacked his chest until he stopped coughing, still grinning like a maniac. “Oh, so you’re getting your information from twitter now, that’s credible.”

Ryan shook his head in frustration. “Here, I’ll look it up. I swear to god I’m right.”

“I swear to god you’re not.”

Shane flopped back down onto the floor. A brief moment passed where all he could hear was the tapping of Ryan’s phone keyboard and the faint sound of their breathing. Imagine asking to be possessed, Shane thought. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. He almost started laughing again.

“HA! It is a thing!” Ryan shoved the phone in Shane’s face and grinned. Shane groaned at the sudden bright light, but grabbed the phone anyways and squinted blearily at the screen. Really? Shane thought as he read the article that did, in fact, say that to be possessed, someone had to invite the demon in.

“So theoretically, if you tell demons to fuck off you’ll be safe from possession?” he asked, handing the phone back to Ryan before he ended up dropping it on his own face. “If they were real, of course, which they aren’t.”

Ryan yawned and burrowed back into his sleeping bag instead of responding, apparently too tired to argue. “They are real, and one day we will see one, and I will laugh so hard as I prove you wrong,” he mumbled.

“Keep telling yourself that, little guy,” Shane replied and checked his phone. It was three thirty, meaning he still had a few hours to try and catch some shut eye.

Catch some shut eye, he thought to himself. What am I, an old-timey cowboy in the wild west, eating beans out of a can and talking to my own horse? Either way, he was glad that tomorrow was a Sunday. He wanted to at least catch up on a little sleep before going back to the office. Can’t wait to get out of here and into my own bed.

He settled in to sleep, but no matter how he tossed and turned, he couldn’t get comfortable. The nails in the floor were digging into his back. A shiver ran up his spine despite his thermal sleeping bag. Was it just him, or had the temperature in the room just dropped by five degrees?

It was probably just because the house didn’t have a heating system that was even remotely functional. To be fair, it hadn’t been lived in since 1937. Why can’t ghosts ever haunt a five star hotel? He wondered. Why is it always dusty old shacks about to collapse the next time a strong wind blows?

He snuggled deeper into his sleeping bag and felt slightly warmer. Moonlight streamed through the window, outlining Ryan’s face. For once he looked peaceful, staring up at the ceiling in apparent
quiet contemplation. I bet he's thinking about how to avoid getting possessed, Shane though as he closed his eyes. At least he’s getting better at sleeping in these places. I don’t need him having a heart attack because he got scared by something dumb.

Shane finally managed to drift off to sleep to the sound of the wind whispering through the trees outside the window.

---

Shane stood in a field of golden wheat growing up to his knees. The stalks swayed in the wind, despite the fact that he could feel none on his bare arms. The sky was a shade of cloudless blue you only see in paintings. The ground sloped gently downwards until it met with a copse of gnarled trees with branches twisting together like a lover’s embrace. It was shrouded in darkness, despite the fact that the field he stood in was light up like midday. The fact that there was no sun in the sky had no effect on this. Shane flexed his fingers. Despite the serene setting, he felt….. Strangely anxious. No, not anxious. Angry.

The wheat crunched behind him.

He whipped around and his breath turned into sharp gravel sticking into his throat. A man stood right behind him. No, not a man. A creature. It was about eight feet tall and its head, oh, its head… Blank, unfeeling eyes stared out of the head of a monstrous owl, eyes so black it felt as though Shane would be swallowed up by the living, breathing darkness that swelled within them. Dirty grey wings erupted from the creature’s back, so large that they seemed to blot out the sky. It was an angel. No, not an angel. A monster.

Shane and the creature stared at each other, unblinking, for what could have been a century. Time congealed. He had not taken a breath since the two had made eye contact. The only movement in their grim tableau was the wheat, swaying, swaying, in that imperceptible breeze.

“Shane Madej,” A voice boomed, emanating from everywhere and nowhere. The creature’s beak did not move. “Shane Madej.”

“That- that’s me,” Shane said, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Have we met before?”

What could have been a chuckle if it wasn't so cold and emotionless rumbled through Shane’s head.

“In a sense.”

“I think I would remember if I had seen you before.” Shane said, mouth dry. “You’re not exactly a forgettable face.”

The creature did not answer for a very long time. The wheat swayed. Shane’s feet were beginning to feel numb.

“I am hungry.” The creature said.

Shane tried to think of something witty to say in response but his usual bravado had abandoned him. His skin crawled. Everything about the situation was unspeakably wrong.

“You will feed me,” The creature continued.

Shane patted his pockets. Had he been wearing this jacket before? “I’ve got nothing on me right now. You’ll have to find another guy.”
“You do not understand. You will feed me.”

Shane’s palms were slick with sweat as realization dawned on him. Oh no. He tried to take a step backwards but his feet were rooted to the spot.

“I will consume you, down to every last fiber of your being, unless you have a different offer to make. Power. Land. Another soul to take your place.”

The creature stalked closer and Shane instinctively raised his arms to defend himself. “Yeah, buddy, I can make you some nice pancakes, maybe a steak, anything you want, if we could just leave this field…”

“You do not understand.” The creature prowled closer, closer, a tiger stalking its prey. Its wings created a canopy that blotted out all light. “I am so very hungry. I will devour the world whole.”

It lunged and Shane screamed. Its beak opened, wider, wider, until all Shane could see was row upon row of needle point teeth. The wheat had stopped moving but he could finally feel the wind now, it rushed past him like a torrential river, sucking him inwards, inwards…

“SHANE!”

Someone was shaking him.

“Shane, buddy, wake up! Are you okay?! What’s wrong? Are you okay?!”

Shane spluttered, limbs flailing as he snapped violently back into consciousness. He could still feel himself falling, falling… Two strong hands on his chest pushed him back onto the sleeping bag.

“It’s okay Shane, it was just a dream, it was just a dream, calm down, you’re safe!”

Just a dream… Ohthankgod it was just a dream. Shane stopped writhing and put a shaky hand to his face as the room came into focus. His head pounded and his throat felt like it had gone through a shredder.

Ryan, for that was who the hands belonged to, wrapped him up in a tight and desperate hug. “Oh man, am I ever glad that you’re awake. I felt like I was going out of my mind. How are you feeling, big guy?”

Shane squinted in the daylight pouring through the window. He could still hear the wind roaring past him, still feel the hot breath on his face. It was as if he had only one foot planted in reality, the other still in whatever hell that dream had come out of. Ryan somehow managed to hug him even tighter, until it felt like he was crushing Shane’s ribs. He clumsily patted Ryan’s arm until he hit him smack in the face. Ryan grunted and let go.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m alive, it’s a god-fucking-damn miracle,” Shane mumbled, falling back onto the sleeping bag with one arm covering his face. He peeped through parted fingers at Ryan’s relieved face.

“Dude- you were sleeping and then you started screaming and flailing. You scared the shit out of me. You thrashed so hard you somehow managed to rip open your sleeping bag. I didn’t think your noodle arms had it in them.” Ryan gestured at the stuffing strewn across the room. Wow. “I thought you were having a seizure or something.”

“I’m not epileptic, Ryan,” Was all he could think to say. He sucked in a shaky breath. His mind was
going a million miles an hour and he could barely process the avalanche of words falling from his friend’s mouth.

Ryan pulled his knees up to his chin and frowned. “I was worried.”

The look on his face was enough to sucker punch Shane with guilt. He must have scared Ryan half to death, screaming like a man possessed when Ryan was already wound up from the possibility of ghosts. But he didn’t say anything about that, he was only focused on Shane. And Shane was brushing him off like he was being a nuisance.

*I am a supreme asshole,* he thought.

“Sorry, I’m just… disoriented,” he said.

When the intense eye contact became to much for him, he lay down in the wreckage of his sleeping bag and stared up at the ceiling. Ryan scooted closer and looked up at the ceiling as well. Everything was blurry without his glasses, but Shane still tried to make out patterns in the whorls and smudges that made up the ceiling. His arm tingled where it touched the fabric of Ryan’s jeans.

“Do you want to talked about it? That always helps me feel better,” Ryan said. Shane looked up at him, but Ryan was pointedly avoiding eye contact. He could tell from the way his friend picked at his palms that Ryan was holding back the urge to ask whether Shane thought the dream had anything to do with the house they were in. "I promise I won’t laugh if it’s stupid.”

“I can’t remember.” Shane lied. He could remember. He just didn’t want to relive how he felt as though his life was draining out through his feet, how he could smell the rot on the creature’s breath, how he could almost sense the forest moving close until it was right behind him, though he had never turned back to look… No. These things were best left in the dusty corners of his memory where they belonged, not out in the light for others to dissect.

Ryan looked at him funny, but let it drop.

“Okay,” he said. The silence dragged out until it was verging on unbearable. “Well, we’ve managed to survive the night without being harrassed by ghosts, I’m about ready to get out of here.”

Shane jumped on the subject change like a starving dog on a piece of meat. “Yeah, I’m excited to get the hell away from here and go somewhere that isn’t covered in a layer of dust.”

Ryan laughed as he gathered up the sleeping bags, or what was left of them. “You hear that ghosts? We’re leaving!” Ryan shouted as he backed out the door. “You’re never going to see us again! We’re not coming back!”

“Yeah!” Shane felt a little more like himself in the light of day, TJ waiting in the backseat of Ryan’s car guarding the rest of their equipment. “We’re going out to have fun while you’re stuck in there!”

They smiled as they meandered back to the car, ready for the long drive back to LA. Their shadows stretched out behind them in the early morning light, as though they were reluctant to leave the decrepit house. Shane glanced back, just once. There was no figure in the window, nothing to suggest the brutal deaths that had occurred inside of it.

*It’s nothing but an old house,* he thought. *There’s nothing to be afraid of in there.*

Chapter End Notes
I hope to have the next chapter up by next sunday!
If you want to harrass me on tumblr I'm @ryans-ghostly-wheezes
Everyone who kudos gets a high five, everyone who share/reblogs this gets a virtual hug and if you comment I will astral project into your house to sing a song about how amazing you are
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Did I say next chapter up by Sunday? Well by Sunday I meant Friday because I finished it early SIKE
And holy fuck you guys are so nice?? With your comments and kudos?? I'm actually blown away because I'm used to getting 2 views and a pb&j sandwich with everything else I've posted in the past (rip in peace wattpad account of my youth)

But enough of me rambling, you guys don't care about that. Hope you guys enjoy chapter 2!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wheels of the car ate up the road beneath them as the miles to LA whizzed by. TJ had fallen asleep in the back hours ago, head pillowed on his knapsack of equipment, and Shane was on the verge of joining him. He counted the telephone poles as they flicked past the window. One, two, three… If only he had a pillow or something to rest on so he could lean against the window without turning his brain into a smoothie. The radio droned softly in the background, turned down low in consideration for TJ. Time passed in a peaceful blur as Shane drifted in and out of consciousness. Ryan insisted on driving the whole time so that Shane could get some sleep, although Shane was certain his friend hadn’t slept much better.

He awoke to Ryan shaking his shoulder with a feather-light touch, unaware that he had even fallen asleep since dropping off TJ.

“Hey, wake up, you’re home. You can go nap in a real bed now.”

Shane rubbed his eyes. “Thank God. I’ve been sleeping in this car for hours and I still feel tired.”

Ryan helped carry his bag to the door, even though Shane was perfectly capable of doing it by himself. It was always like this, the two of them reluctant to say goodbye after so much time spent together. Each time felt like it should have some sort of poetic finality to it.

“Well, uh, see you on Monday,” he said as he unlocked his door. So much for poetic finality.

“Yeah, see you then. We can go over the footage and look for some EVPs.” Ryan handed him his sleeping bag and jogged back down the stairs, waving to Shane before he got into the car and drove off. The revving engine scared two crows from the sidewalk, and they took to the skies, cawing. Shane waved back, smiling, even though he knew Ryan couldn’t see him anymore.

The apartment was just as he had left it, half-folded clothes strewn across the couch and an open jar of peanut butter sitting on the counter, left over from a last minute snack. He kicked off his shoes and left his bag by the door. I’ll unpack tomorrow, he promised, even though he knew himself well enough to be certain that he would not, in fact, unpack until the next time he needed the bag.

Shane managed to put away the peanut butter and finish folding clothes, yawning the whole time. His exhaustion proved too great to do much of anything else, though, so he flopped into bed fully clothed, even though it was only three in the afternoon. He figured he’d be able to fit a quick nap in
before he had to make himself dinner. *Can’t do anything if I’m sleep deprived,* he decided as he closed his eyes.

Shane stood in the belly of a deep, dark forest. Bare branches twisted up towards the sky like clutching, desperate fingers, intertwining so thickly that he could barely catch a glimpse of the blue, cloudless sky. The trees seemed to absorb sound, muffling even Shane’s breathing as he stared deep into the oozing blackness of the trees. He reached out and ran his hand over the bark of one. It was damp and warm and when he took his hand away it looked as if it had been covered in a layer of charcoal. He made a face of disgust and wiped his hand of his pants. Problem solved.

When he glanced back upwards, the creature was there, looking as though it had always been, and Shane had been too blind to notice. It peered at him through the trees, wings slotting into the spaces between the twisting branches and clawing twigs as though they were grown to fit that exact spot. Shane was momentarily overwhelmed with a wave of déjà vu. He was certain he has seen this all play out before.

“I know you,” he said, squinting at the creature. His insides twisted into a hard knot of anger, though he wasn’t sure why. The creature wasn’t doing anything threatening, per se, just standing there.

“Yet you do not know my name.” The voice echoed through the trees, making the branches rustle with the promise of untold secrets.

“Your name doesn’t matter. I mean, how many bird headed people are there in the world? I’m betting it’s just you, skulking around this forest.” Shane wasn’t sure why he was taunting the creature.

“Names are the most important thing you’ll ever know, Shane Alexander Madej,” The creature spat. No, not spat… Patronized, as if he was some sort of kindergartener who had just said something laughably untrue. If there was one thing Shane hated, it was being patronized. His hands curled into fists.

“Is that right, fuckface?” He asked. “I don’t suppose you would know, considering you’re all alone here. Ooooo look at me, I’m a scary bird man in a spooky forest, I know everything!”

Wings snapped out into their full height. A dozen branches snapped and fell as the wings cut through them like a chainsaw. In the still air they sounded like gunshots.

Maybe taunting that thing hadn’t been the best idea.

The creature moved towards him, dragging itself between the tightly packed trees, claws scraping deep gouges in the bark. It was about time for Shane to start moving. He tried to run but tripped instead, his feet refusing to listen to him. Somehow the roots of the trees had grown into shackles over his ankles, holding him in place before he noticed them. For the first time, Shane realized his role in this grim tableau: a hunted animal caught in a snare. He was trapped, helpless, as the creature stalked closer, closer. It loomed in front of him, eyes dripping black and empty. Shane desperately wanted to fight, to scream, to do anything but stand frozen, staring into those bottomless eyes.

It finally spoke, its voice a drawn out, slithery screech that wormed its way under Shane’s skin, spitting out each word like they were poisoned pills. “I name you Shane, gift from God. I name you Alexander, protector of men. I name you Madej, love of God. I name you vessel, I name you servant, I name you host. I name you mine. You will heel to me.”
The creature plunged its claws into Shane’s chest as though it was water. He gasped and reached with trembling hands for something, anything to grab a hold of and center himself. His hands met feathers and he clutched at them desperately, two creatures locked in deadly embrace as he gasped for air and blood bubbled up his throat.

Shane’s body convulsed as he jerked awake. His heart felt like it was burning as it jackhammered away in his chest. He raise his arms, opening and closing his hands experimentally.

He raised his arms, opening and closing his hands experimentally without telling them to do so. He tried running a hand through his hair. Nothing. His limbs couldn’t, wouldn’t, cooperate. They just kept turning back and forth, palm up, palm down, palm up, palm down, as if his own hands were strangers to him.

Am I still dreaming? It didn’t feel like he was dreaming. That specific three dimensionality unique to reality was there, all right. And yet he felt disconnected, a passenger in his own body. He was on his bed, wearing the same clothes he had fallen asleep in. It was impossible that he was dreaming.

Okay, Shane, stay calm, he thought nervously. He wasn’t claustrophobic but being trapped in your own skin, unable to move of your own free will, was a special sort of unnerving. He didn’t appreciate being reduced to a puppet. His panic rose, choking, as his feet slid off the bed and he stretched, every joint and knuckle cracking in succession as they shifted and realigned in a way Shane had never heard, had never really wanted to hear. Something was settling into him, a pair of shoes to be broken in.

There has to be a scientific explanation for this. There has to be. But with every second that passed out of his control, that hope seemed to be slipping away. A dark mass sat over his heart, burning it, weighing down on him like a rock. He would have been choking if he was the one in control of his own breathing. But even that was out of his power. His feet carried him of their own volition out of the room, down the hall, past the mirror where he caught a glimpse of himself out of the corner of his eye and oh God this had to be some sort of nightmare because there was no way that was his face. It was a blank slate, free of emotion like no human face ever was, and his eyes... they were the same black, fathomless pools that haunted his nightmares.

The dreams, the joking request for possession, the creature calling him vessel, they all clicked into place, puzzle pieces revealing an infernal image. Horror and revulsion rose up in a wave so overpowering he felt he was going to drown in it, and the black fire in his heart rose up to meet it. An indescribable pressure was squeezing his head, and it was about to explode. He was riding on a sea of emotion and his lifeboat was on the verge of capsizing.

His body made no outward signs of distress beyond balling his hands into fists.

I’m possessed. I’m being possessed by a demon. Ryan was actually right for once. His whole world had been picked up, shaken, and then turned upside down for good measure. Demons were real and there was one piloting his body and very likely trying to kill him at that very moment. He needed a hand hold, something, anything to ground himself with in this whirlwind of disbelief. He wished Ryan was there. He would have known what to do, he was prepared for everything.

The darkness pushed again, trying to get him to shut up, to disappear, to yield to this random demon who thought it was important enough to pilot Shane’s body without his consent. Well I was here first you demon fuck. He stopped trying to fight the panic running through him and let it roll over him instead, built it up into a wave of fury, of anguish, of refusal to lay down and be stepped upon. He was going to fight tooth and nail for this. He was going to choke out this weed.
GET... THE FUCK... OUT OF MY HEAD. He screamed, pouring every fiber of his being into it. His body convulsed, just once, and everything snapped back into place as something fled his body, leaving him cold and empty.

Shane told his hands to clench. They did. He told them to unclench. They did that too. He whipped his head up towards the mirror, and a wave of relief so powerful that his knees almost buckled washed over him. His eyes were brown, not black. He was back in control of his body. He let out a weak laugh and ran a shaking hand over his face.

Something hissed in the darkness off to his right. Shane snapped his head around, heart dropping. He wasn’t out of the fire yet. Stretching out from his feet like a twisted facsimile of his own shadow, the demon stood in silhouette, eyes smouldering like coals.

He opened his mouth to say something, before closing it again. He didn’t know what he even could say. Ryan has told him what to do if a ghost followed him home at some point or another, but he hadn’t really been paying attention. He had never seriously expected his taunts to turn back on him.

Shane had a sneaking suspicion that he was completely fucked.

*I could go get exorcised. I could get Father Thomas to exorcise me and everything could go back to normal.* Deep down he knew he was lying to himself. Demons were real. Nothing could ever be the same again.

“Okay, you’ve had your fun. You’ve spooked me. Fine. I’m done now. I’m fucking done. Get out of my house, get out of my head, or I swear to God I’ll have you exorcised. If I don’t then my buddy Ryan definitely will. He sees ghosts when they aren’t even there, don’t think that he’ll miss one that actually exists.”

“Go ahead and try. I will not stop you.”

The demon blinked languidly. Pins and needles shot up Shane’s legs like wildfire and he stumbled as images flooded his mind unbidden. *Anneliese Michel, dead after one too many failed exorcisms.*

*Shane sitting on a table as his eyes turned back before lunging at a priest and throwing him against the wall. Ryan, staring at him in betrayal, in fear, in hatred. And Ryan, laying on the ground hurt, maybe dying, and it was all Shane’s fault, because Shane hadn’t listened, because he had taunted the ghosts one too many times, because without the creature inside of him Shane was nothing but a man who was powerless in the face of creatures that are best left alone…*

“We are inexorably bound together. We have been from the moment you invited me in. You and I are powerless to change it. We are one being until our stories have run their course.”

“Stop it!” Shane half screamed, half sobbed. “You’re just showing what you think I need to see to agree with you! I’m not going to lie down and let myself become some sort of weird puppet!”

The scenes only flipped by faster, an overwhelming list of all the ways Shane could lose, could hurt, could ruin everything by trying to fight this demon. His head felt rigged to explode, he was going to have a meltdown if he saw anymore, but they kept coming.

“Stop lying to me.” Shane spat through gritted teeth. He remembered the smile Ryan had given to him just that morning, using it as a life preserver against the gaunt, terrified faces the demon was trying to sell him. “Stop fucking lying!”

Shane felt something in his chest snap. The shadow flinched, recoiled, and rippled once. The visions came to an abrupt stop and it felt as though a fifty pound weight had been lifted from his shoulders.
“That’s right, I’m running the show here,” Shane muttered. Sweat poured down his back.

“You can fight be we are still interconnected. I am hungry. You want to protect this human. You can resist and suffer or cooperate and reap the rewards.”

Shane paused. On one hand, he knew this creature was undoubtedly manipulating him. He had watched enough movies, he wasn’t an idiot. On the other hand, he was mentally and physically exhausted after less than an hour of fighting against it. He couldn’t imagine having to constantly fight it for days, weeks, or even months at a time. The image of Ryan hurt because of him flashing through his mind one final time and he gritted his teeth.

“What kind of deal are you thinking?” He asked.

The creature stared right through him in a way that made his skin crawl. “You let me make my home inside of you. Every site you visit on your search for spirits, you claim in my name. In return, I will protect your friend Ryan Bergara from harm.”

“At all costs?”

The demon managed to look annoyed despite not having a face. “........ I will protect your friend Ryan Bergara from harm at all costs.”

“And you can’t just go around taking control of my limbs all willy nilly. You’ve got to have a good reason.”

“........ Of course. I will only take control of your body for good reason.”

Shane took a deep breath and steeled himself. This was it. No going back. He held out a hand. “It’s a deal.”

The demon enclosed his hand in its own clawed one. It was simultaneously ice cold and burning hot and Shane had to fight the urge to jerk away. This is the only way to survive.

The two shook hands.

“It is a deal, Shane Alexander Madej. It is a deal.”

Chapter End Notes

As usual (I say, having only posted 2 chapters) I should have the next update up by next friday!
 Everyone who comments, shares or kudos: I will break through your window and give you a giant hug because you are amazing!! And apologize for the window I guess
 If you want to harrass me on tumblr I'm @ryans-ghostly-wheezes
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely comments on the last chapter, they always make my day!
Again, I know absolutely nothing about how they make videos so sorry about the glaring error, idk what I'm doing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane was late to work, so Ryan started reviewing the footage without him. This was a process that took up the better part of a week, poring over hours of footage and audio for signs of activity, frantically tapping Shane on the arm each time he thought he’d found something. It was thrilling sharing his discoveries with someone, even if that someone inevitably dismissed it as anything but a ghost.

He had managed to sort through an hour of footage by the time Shane finally showed up.

“Hey man, how’s-” Before Shane could finish the sentence, he was caught in a massive coughing fit. He leaned on the desk and hit his chest a few times before finally managing to choke out a sentence. “Wow, did they sage our desks again?”

Ryan inhaled deeply. Yeah, now that he mentioned it, it definitely smelt like sage. “I guess so.”

Shane coughed again. “Wow, that is strong.”

“That’s funny, I hadn’t really noticed it. I guess I’m used to it by now.”

Shane threw himself into his chair. “You’ve gone nose blind.”

Ryan laughed. “What?”

“Nose blind. Like in those febreze commercials. Soon you’ll be driving around in a car made out of sage, your sage car-”

“Sage car?”

“Yeah, and you won’t even notice, because you’re so nose blind.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Shut up, Shane.”

“You don’t have an answer because you know I’m right.” Shane coughed again. “Hey, do you think I could be allergic? It feels like my lungs are burning.”

Ryan hmmed, glancing sidelong at Shane. It really was funny how affected Shane was. Was there a chance that…? He typed “signs a ghost is following someone” into the search bar before hastily deleting it. One coughing fit was not compelling evidence. He was getting paranoid. Ryan shook his head to clear it, taking one last look at Shane. “Shit, dude, what happened to your hands?”

Three of the fingers of Shane’s right hand were covered in band aids. Shane looked down at them
almost guiltily. “Oh, uh, this is embarrassing. I, uh, I was cooking dinner and I, uh, I forgot the pan was hot and put my fingers on it. Sizzle sizzle, there go my fingerprints.”

Ryan winced in sympathy. “Ouch.”

Shane shrugged. “Meh, the only thing badly damaged is my pride. And this way the cops can't catch me when I go to steal priceless museum artifacts this weekend.”

“If you manage to escape without tripping over your own feet and breaking everything,” Ryan said, before putting his headphones back on to search for more EVPs. His work was doomed to be interrupted again, though, as an email dropped into his inbox about participation for an upcoming video about food trends. Usually he would delete it, completely submerged in Unsolved work, but he was feeling a little more adventurous today. From the mischievous grin on Shane’s face it looked like he had gotten the same email, and wasn’t going to let him off the hook easily.

“We have to go over footage,” Ryan said, his message somewhat undermined by the fact he was already getting up to participate.

“You’ve always got your head stuck in ghost town after an episode. Live a little! Casper the friendly ghost can wait,” Shane said. “Free food will not. Also, I may or may not have forgotten to pack a lunch.”

Unfortunately for Shane, they realized they wouldn't be eating this video when Ryan was handed a sign reading true or false on either side and directed to sit at the table beside Jen. It turned out they were supposed to be guessing real food from fake ones, not eating weird food trends. He probably should have read the email more closely.

He and Shane had been split into different groups for the video, which made him a little disappointed, even though he liked hanging out with Jen. He had been looking forward to seeing Shane baffled by the weird food he had expected them to eat together.

“Okay, and… We’re rolling!”

“How are you feeling about this?” he asked Jen.

“I don’t think I’m going to do very well. I'm not hip with the kids, as they say. I mostly eat grilled cheese, Ryan,” she said, gesturing with her sign for emphasis.

“I pass by a lot of those trendy food places on my way to work so I don’t know, I think I know what’s cool. I’m feeling pretty confident.”

Steven stood behind the camera, reading off a list of supposed food trends.

“Sushi bagels: Real or fake?”

“Oh, that’s easy! I saw them on Instagram the other day!” Jen flipped her sign. “They’re real.”


Steven gave them a thumbs up. “That’s right.”

The two high fived.

“Cheese tea: real or fake?”

“That can’t be real.” Ryan looked to Jen for confirmation, but she shrugged. “They can’t be real.
Who would buy that? It’s fake.”

“Ehhh, people eat weird things. I’m gonna say it’s real.” Jen looked to Steven, who nodded.

“They’re real.”

“HA! Take that, mr-I-know-what’s-trendy!” She hit him with her sign and Ryan laughed.

“Hey! We’ve still got lots of time. I’m still confident in a win.”

His confidence proved to be misplaced, though, as he flubbed question after question. As the questions drew to a close without him guessing a single correct answer, he put his head down on the table in defeat. “I don’t understand this shit. And I thought soylent was weird.”

Jen patted his arm in mock sympathy, holding back laughter. “You got what, one right? Good job there. You really showed us all.”

“Ryan, stay there. You lost so we’ve got a special surprise for you.” Steven and the rest of the production team looked at each other in a way that guaranteed that whatever the “special surprise” was, it wasn’t pleasant. Jen left, making room for Shane to come take her place at the table.

“They got you too?” Ryan asked as Shane adjusted his seat.

“Oh yeah. Turns out I have no idea what’s going on with the trendy people these days.”

"You? Not trendy? I never would have guessed."

Shane hit him with his own sign. Ryan giggled, throwing up his arms in an 'I surrender' motion.

"Hey, cut that out!"

Steven returned, carrying a blender and a tray full of food. Ryan stopped giggling and sighed, knowing where this was going.

“Now,” Steven said, setting both things on the table. “Because you both tied for last with one point each, we’ve come up with a suitable punishment for you. We’re going to take each item you got wrong and blend it up into a delicious smoothie. And you’re going to drink it.”

Ryan watched, mesmerized, as the blender whirled and screeched. “I bet I can drink mine faster than you.”

Shane raised an eyebrow at the camera. “Are you hearing this? In your dreams, little guy.”

The drink poured out for them was a shade of beige vaguely reminiscent of puke. Shane took a sniff and then gagged. “Smells like roadkill.”

“I can’t wait to drink it,” Ryan said, eyeing Shane to see what he would do.

“Well, cheers,” he said, and they tapped the plastic cups together before bringing them to their lips. Ryan took one sip and then gagged, barely keeping himself from spitting it out. It tasted like someone had taken a vat of sugar and then let it pickle in the sun for a year.

He looked over at Shane in horror to see him head back, chugging down the concoction like it was water and he was in a desert. Refusing to be defeated so easily, Ryan steeled himself and took another gulp, but it was already too late. Shane slammed the empty cup onto the table in victory.

“Delicious,” he said, grinning.

Shane gave him an odd smile. “I wasn’t just going to let you win, was I? And if you drank that disgusting thing you’d spend the rest of the day complaining.” He hunched his shoulders up and put on a squeaky voice to impersonate Ryan. “Ohhh, my poor tummy! I shouldn’t have drank that roadkill smoothie! Ohh, I’m dying!!”

“You have the stomach of a raccoon,” Ryan grumbled. “A shaccoon. That’s what you are.”

Shane’s face lit up in a laugh. “Shane ‘shaccoon’ Madej, that’s me!”

“Shut up, Shane,” Ryan said, but he was grinning ear to ear.

“That’s a wrap,” Jen said in place of Steven, who was busy trying to convince the cameraman to drink some of the leftover smoothie. It didn’t look like he was going to be very successful.

“Was it worth it?” Ryan asked as they made their way back to their desks. “Drinking that- you know what, I don’t even know if it qualified as something edible.”

“It was worth doing it to see your face. You looked like I had just grown horns and a third eye or something like that,” Shane said. “On the downside, it feels like something just died in my mouth.”

“What a shame.”

Ryan had a lot of work to catch up on after joining the video, so he didn’t have a chance to go out to lunch like he had been planning to. Judging from the furious typing coming from beside him, he guessed Shane was in an even worse boat than him. Fortunately, some kind soul had brought pizza in for the office. Unfortunately, by the time he managed to tear himself away from his computer and get some, the entire Buzzfeed staff had already descended like a pack of starving wolves, obliterating the table save for two pathetic slices of Hawaiian pizza.

_Goddamnit._ He stared at the slices accusingly, before his stomach rumbled again. _I guess beggars can’t be choosers._ He swept the slices onto his plate with a shrug. He hesitated before grabbing an apple as well, so he could at least pretend to be healthy. As Ryan meandered back to his desk he realized Shane hadn’t even looked up to realize there was pizza. That was a little weird, usually he would never miss an opportunity for free food. Especially if he hadn’t brought a lunch himself. Ryan looked at the two slices of pizza. He looked back at Shane.

“Hey Shane,” He called, causing the other man to jump. “You hungry?”

Shane took his headphones off. “Starving, but I forgot my wallet at home.”

“That’s a shame, especially since you just missed the free pizza.”

Shane frowned, eyeing Ryan’s plate. “What?! No.”

“You’re lucky I’m such a good friend and brought you some food.” Ryan lifted up the plate and Shane’s face broke into a smile.

“Ryan that’s so-”

“Yeah, I got you this apple. Catch.” He threw the apple at Shane with a shit eating grin.

Shane flinched and tore his eyes from the plate. “Wait, what-” His arm shot out, snatching the apple from the air. The apple exploded.
“Holy shit!” The two shouted in unison as chunks of apple flew through the air, peppering Ryan’s shirt, the floor, computer screens, and covering Shane’s hand with juice. Shane looked at Ryan in horror-no-shock, *why would Shane be horrified?* Ryan stared back, speechless and still grinning ear to ear.

“What kind of apple were you trying to feed me?!” Shane eventually managed to choke out.

“It was a normal one, I swear! I was planning on eating it!” Ryan was still trying to process the event, and he giggled. The look on Shane’s face was ridiculous. “How?!”

“I think I slammed it on the metal part of my chair.” Shane shook out his hand, wincing. Apple sludge dripped from it onto the floor. “This is gonna be fun to clean up.”

“Oh… yeah.”

One mop and countless paper towels later, the corpse of the apple had finally been put to rest. He was just glad most of the office had been having lunch at the time, avoiding being caught in the crossfire. The crazy-tinfoil-hat-wearing part of Ryan’s mind was still having a minor freakout, harkening back to the Sallie house. But that was unrealistic. Hitting the apple on the chair was a much more reasonable explanation. Shane was acting perfectly normal, or at least no weirder than usual. There was no way Shane was possessed. He would have been able to tell from the moment Shane walked through the door. He settled back into his chair with a sigh. Shane would have mocked him to no end if he could hear Ryan’s thoughts.

His stomach grumbled, and he remembered he hadn’t even gotten a chance to eat his lunch. He was so hungry that the Hawaiian pizza even managed to taste good. Or at least, less awful than usual. Seriously, who had thought adding fruit to pizza was a good idea? He realized he was being watched halfway into the first slice. When he glanced over, Shane was longingly watching his eat out of the corner of his eye, trying and failing to stay subtle about it. Ryan lowered his pizza and looked down at his plate. He looked back at Shane. Holding his own half eaten slice, he slid the plate over to his buddy.

“Here, take it. I can’t stand Hawaiian long enough to finish two slices.”

Shane looked from the pizza up to Ryan and back again. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah man, I-”

“Good, because you’re not getting it back!”

Then Shane shoveled half the pizza into his mouth in one impressive bite. Ryan smiled. Seeing Shane happy did something funny in his chest, like all his organs were ungluing.

Okay, back to work. He was already behind schedule as it was. He hadn’t found any EVPs yet but he was confident there would be something soon. And sure enough, there was. *Jackpot.* At the point where they asked who killed the lovers, Ryan heard a quiet raspy voice mumbling something. His heart picked up and he quickly messed with the audio settings to clear up the sound as best he could. No matter how many EVPs he listened to, he would never get used to it. It was always an exciting and unnerving experience, to hear something to suggest that there had been something right there in the room with them, while they stood oblivious. He replayed the audio. The voice was gravelly and faint, but when he listened closely he could make out something that sounded like “mumblemumbleandgrassmumblezkill”. He listened again, just to be absolutely certain. The first part was up in the air but he could definitely hear the word “kill”, clear as day.
“Shane! Shane, you have to listen to this!” Ryan tapped Shane’s arm until he finally looked up from his computer, then shoved the headphones at him.

He raised an eyebrow but put them on. “Have you found more spooky sounding wind for me to listen to?”

“Shut up and listen.” Ryan tapped the play button.

Shane rubbed his chin and stared blankly at the wall as it played and ended. When a minute passed without him saying anything, Ryan hit replay.

Shane frowned, eyes unfocused. “It sounds like someone’s shoes dragging across the floor.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me. Do you see your face right now? You look like you’ve seen-”

“A ghost?” Shane raised an eyebrow.

Ryan sighed. He had walked straight into that one. “Yes.”

“Nice try, but my face naturally starts looking like my soul is leaving my body when I’m trying to decipher the latest sound you’ve uncovered.” Shane handed back the headphones.

“I don’t know why I bothered to expect any other answer.” Ryan shook his head, exasperated. “A ghost could show up, tie your shoelaces together and then do a little jig and you’d still say it was the wind.”

Shane spun around in his chair, grinning. “I’ll ask a ghost to do that at our next location. Then we’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

As usual I’ll have the next chapter up friday, I hope so get lots of writing done this week!
And here's my shameless self promo to go harass me on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They stood staring up at the Lizzie Borden house, breath misting in the freezing air.

“So, are you still going to ask the ghosts to tie your shoelaces together and do a little jig?” Ryan asked, elbowing Shane’s arm.

“Can’t,” Shane replied. “My shoes don’t have laces.”

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you.”

“Oh yeah.”

Shane grinned to hide his nervousness. For the first time ever, he was dreading filming an episode of Unsolved. It was the first place they’d visited since the Lovers’ House and he had no idea what that would mean for him. The first few days of his possession hadn’t been exactly… pleasant.

It was like learning to walk all over again. His body had gone through a complete systems override, and now he had to learn to live within, and hide, the redefined limitations. And his body wasn’t some sleek top of the line model that took two minutes to update. He was more of a crappy laptop from 2003 that was still running windows 8. There were so many new ways for him to get hurt now. He had touched a cross, just to see what would happen, and now his fingers were covered in angry red blisters. He had sat down at his desk only to find out it had been saged again, and then his lungs were burning for the rest of the day. He didn’t even want to imagine what holy water would do. He’d probably melt into a puddle, Wizard of Oz style. Another thing, not bad but certainly strange, was that the spot over his heart where he assumed the demon had settled was always nice and toasty warm, not matter what temperature the rest of him was. It was kind of convenient, actually, having his own personal heater.

The strangest thing by far was his newfound strength. Shane was used to struggling when lifting heavy objects or doing anything that could be remotely qualified as exercise. But now his limbs buzzed with an inhuman strength that he couldn’t always control. He had no idea what its limit was, or if there even was one. He had spent hours at home lifting his furniture without even breaking a sweat. It was unnatural. It was exhilarating. It scared him.

The worst thing about the whole situation was keeping it a secret. It made sense that he wouldn’t be able to run around crowing about the new roommate in his skull without being carted off to crazytown but he couldn’t even tell Ryan, the one person who might have believed him. Shane had spent long hours lying awake turning over all the different ways he could divulge the secret in his head, but in the end he realized the truth for what it was: there was no way he’d ever be able to tell Ryan without changing, maybe even ruining, their friendship forever. Birdbrain, for that was what he had started calling the demon for lack of a better name, didn’t seem to care if he told. But Shane couldn’t bear the thought that Ryan might end up looking at him like a stranger, or even worse, something to be afraid of. It was easier not to say anything. Although that might stem from laziness on his part. Confessions required emotions, and those were hard to deal with. Ryan would have thought he was joking anyway.

“Are you even paying attention to me right now?”
Shane jumped. “Oh shit, sorry.”

Ryan shook his head. “I knew it. I mentioned the Lakers game I was missing for this, and your eyes glazed over.”

“I mean did you really expect anything different?”

“Shockingly, yes.” Ryan shook snow out of his hair and stomped his feet. “Come on, let's go inside before I die of hypothermia.”

They trudged through the snow around to the back of the house. *I really should have brought better shoes for this,* Shane thought as he kicked snow out of his boots, only succeeding in pushing it further down near his toes. *That's going to be fun when it melts.* Ryan unlocked the door. Shane wasn’t sure whether he was shivering from the cold or from the fear rising in his chest. He took a deep, grounding breath and stepped over the threshold.

Nothing happened. A wave of relief and, strangely, disappointment washed over him. He had been hoping for, he didn’t know, something to reflect the monumental change within him. A wave of ghostly energy, maybe, or some plates flying from the walls, something. His heart grew a little hotter, and his fingers started to tingle but that was nothing, that was just the thing inside of him preparing to do… whatever it is that demons do to gather territory. The thought made his skin crawl, so he hurried up the stairs after Ryan.

_Maybe this place isn’t haunted after all._ The statement rang more and more true with each moment they spent in the house. Every time they tried to talk to a ghost there was nothing, no rattling windows, no tapping, no sweet nothings whispered into their ears. He had been certain that something would have showed up to kick their asses after that creepy schoolyard chant, but there was no reply. *Seems like the little ghosties don’t want to come out and play tonight.* The thought gave him back his stolen confidence, which only grew as he stole money from the ‘ghosts’, taunted them, gave them every opportunity to show up and tell him to fuck off, all to the tune of nothing, nothing, nothing.

_Yeah, no way this place is haunted,* he thought as he sat on the bed and listened to Ryan talk about Maggie being the murderer.

Birdbrain laughed. The sound pulsed against Shane’s skull like a headache. Then his ribs felt like they were rotating in his chest and all he had time to feel was a brief flash of panic before fire flooded his limbs and he was sucked backwards into the passenger seat of his own body.

There was no way to describe the feeling other than that he was on the edge of dreaming, like reality had shifted ever so slightly and now it was fuzzy at the edges. It was absolutely, heart stoppingly terrifying. Every reminder of his possession was terrifying. Every time his body moved without him asking it to, every time that little voice that sounded all too much like his own whispered in his head, he wanted to crawl out of his skin and put it through a wringer.

Shane felt his hands lift and his eyes blink a couple times as Birdbrain got settled.

“What are you doing?” He heard Ryan hiss.

“I’m trying to- I’m trying to put myself in her shoes,” Birdbrain said from Shane’s mouth. The only sign that it wasn't Shane talking was the way it stumbled over the words, getting used to controlling something as delicate as a voice.

*God, this is weird.* After the initial stumble, Birdbrain had managed a perfect imitation of him. That
kind of annoyed Shane. He had hoped the way he talked was a little more unpredictable than that. The floor tilted and all of a sudden he was up and walking and- wait, had he just missed an entire conversation? He was used to the conversation waiting for him when he zoned out. But Birdbrain was able to talk perfectly fine while Shane was preoccupied thinking about life. Come to think about it, Birdbrain was a lot better at talking when Shane zoned out. Less mental bickering that way.

“Nah, I’m fine alone, I’ve got my GoPro, see?” Shane’s voice said to TJ, before his feet carried him down the stairs and into the dimly lit front room.

**What the fuck are we doing?** Shane asked.

“Officially, we are banging around to see if your human can hear anything. Unofficially, we are claiming this house in my name.”

Well, that only brought up more questions. **Does this mean I’ll finally get to hear your name? Is it Chad? I’d be embarrassed too, if I were a demon named Chad. How are you going to do it? And for the love of God, can you stop calling Ryan ‘my human’? He had a name.**

Birdbrain grumbled. “Stop talking.”

His hands took a piece of chalk from his pocket, which was mildly concerning, since Shane didn’t remember ever putting it there. Or owning chalk. It got down on his hands and knees, and pulling back a corner of the dusty, moth eaten carpet, drew out what Shane could only assume was some sort of sigil. It looked like the awkward lovechild of an owl and a candelabra.

It placed his hand over it and muttered in a low growl. “Ego hanc domum in meo nomine, in nomine andras, daemon, et spiritus omnes homines ad arcum, et per quem ipsi timent.”

A freezing wind swept through the room, ruffling Shane’s hair, and a hot bolt of energy flew up through his fingers and into his heart. There was a burn mark in the place of the sigil when his hand lifted from the floor. With a quick glance around the room, it flipped the carpet back, leaving the room looking like the entire two minute ritual had never even happened.

**That was… fucking insane.** A piece of chalk and some latin chanting and boom, Birdbrain owned a house now? Or the ghost world version of the house, he supposed. God, that was the weirdest thought he’d had in at least the past week. It was just barely beaten out by the time he woke up thinking about a chainsaw made of fishsticks two Wednesdays ago.

“Your internal monologue is enragingly distracting,” Birdbrain thought at him.

**Oh, I’m sorry, let me just think a little more quietly here, I would HATE to be an inconvenience,** Shane replied.

“I may be an eternal, ageless entity but I understand sarcasm,” Birdbrain snapped as it stood up and banged on the ceiling a few times. “That should be enough to satisfy them.”

It climbed back up to the bedroom. Ryan jumped when he appeared in the doorway, then laughed nervously. “What took you so long?”

“What, did you think a ghost was trying to mug me? I was just trying to find something that didn’t look like it was going to break the moment I banged on it.” Shane’s voice replied. “Did you hear anything?”

“I could definitely hear something.” Ryan scootched over so Shane could sit down.
“Oh, interesting. So Maggie could have been the killer. Tell me more.”

It sat back down next to Ryan, and then his ribs were overturning, and he was thrown back into the pilot seat again. The world slammed back into focus, a feeling as jarring as it was relieving. He wiggled his fingers in his lap, just to make sure he could. Yep, everything seemed to be in working order.

“Do you understand now? That was not so bad. We can keep doing this for a long time.” Birdbrain whispered, causing a shiver to run up Shane’s spine. The fact that it was true, that the ritual was nowhere near as awful as he’d thought it would be, made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He didn’t want it to be true. He didn’t want to be complicit in all this but Birdbrain was making it so easy. He supposed he didn’t have much of a choice in the matter now, though. At least the first house they visited wasn’t actually haunted.

The two took one last look around the house before it was time to bed down for the night. They said goodnight to TJ, who would be back in the morning to complete filming. Now it was just him, Ryan, and Casper the friendly ghost. And Birdbrain, he reminded himself. They set up a camera facing the bed, dumped their stuff, and settled down for another sleepless night. Or at least Ryan did, anyways. Shane was committed to getting at least a couple hours in, despite the bed being too short for his legs and so narrow that he and Ryan were squished together like sardines. At least there is a bed, he thought, then yawned.

“I’m going to sleep now, buddy,” he said and buried his face in the pillow. “Don’t let the ghosts keep you up all night.”

“No promises there,” Ryan replied, smiling down at his phone.

Wonder what he’s smiling at, Shane thought, and then felt stupid. Why did he even care? Ryan was probably looking at pictures of dogs or something. He didn’t want to think about it anymore, so he rolled over and switched off the lights. Ryan startled, and Shane immediately felt bad. “Sorry. Should’ve told you.”

“You’ve never been less sorry about anything in your life, asshole.” Ryan laughed and elbowed Shane in the back. He shrugged, too tired to bother forming a sufficiently witty and coherent response.

Shane awoke shivering. Judging from the fact that he was the only one awake, it was about four in the morning. The room was still shrouded in darkness, the dim outlines of the furniture only discernible thanks to the faint moonlight streaming in through the crack in the curtains. He pulled the blankets tight around him. The temperature must have dropped at least twenty degrees while he was sleeping, because it was absolutely freezing in the room. The only part of him that was even remotely warm was the spot over his heart where Birdbrain lived.

The bed creaked and shuddered and his heart skipped a beat before he realized it was only Ryan turning over in his sleep. God, next thing you know I’m going to be jumping at shadows in the corner of my eyes. Ryan muttered next to him, and he realized with a touch of guilt that he had stolen all the covers for himself. Ryan clumsily patted Shane’s back in his sleep-search for the missing blankets. Before he knew what was happening, Ryan wrapped himself around Shane like some sort of beefy octopus. Ryan’s fingers, icy even through the fabric of Shane’s shirt, settled over the warmth coming from his racing heart. In his sleep, Ryan had turned Shane into his own personal hand warmer. Shane tried to gently pry Ryan off of him but only succeeded in making his friend cling tighter onto him. He tried again, doing his best to get him to let go without hurting his friend with his demon strength. Ryan ignored him. He rubbed his face on Shane’s back and murmured
happily. *Okay, I guess we’re cuddling now.* At least he wasn’t cold anymore, now that Ryan’s hands had warmed up. It was kind of nice, if he was being honest. There were worse things that could happen.

As if his thoughts had conjured it to life, a cold wind ripped through the room and just like that, his ribs were turning over and **no no no not now this is not the time to get possessed.** He threw himself against the metaphorical walls of his mind but it was no use. He was trapped in the backseat of his own brain. Birdbrain pried Ryan’s arms off of him mechanically. Ryan groaned and curled up on the bed. Shane hoped it was from the sudden cold and not because Birdbrain had hurt him. He couldn’t afford to worry for any longer now, because his feet were swinging off of the bed and standing up and he was not going to zone out and miss out on what was happening this time.

Birdbrain turned to squint at the foot of the bed. Nothing. Then it blinked and **holy shit, what the fuck is happening.** It was as if someone had dunked his head underwater. One second the room looked normal, and then it flickered once and he could see the spirits standing there at the foot of the bed, clear as daylight.

_Well, I guess Ryan was right for once, ghosts ARE real,_ Shane thought, because it was that or have a mental breakdown. The days following his possession had given him a chance to get used to the idea of ghosts, but it was still unnerving, standing there, unable to move, as a world glowing blue-white superimposed itself over his vision. It was almost a relief that he wasn’t expected to act, just watch as Birdbrain dealt with the situation.

Two women stood at the foot of the bed, wearing old timey clothing covered in blood. Their dead and hollow eyes were the only sign that they weren’t real live people. That, and the fact that they were translucent and glowing. Shane desperately wanted to glance over and check if Ryan was noticing any of this, but Birdbrain kept his eyes locked on the women. The woman in blue, who he could only assume was Lizzie Borden herself, pointed a crooked, accusing finger at him.

“Leave this place.” The words echoed in Shane’s head, more of an idea than an actual physical sound. “Get out.”

Birdbrain stared them straight in the eye, pinning them down, unafraid. The voice that came from Shane’s mouth was deep, gravelly, and definitely not his own. “This house is under my jurisdiction. You have no power over us. You will bow to me.”

The second woman, Maggie, clenched her fists. Another cold wind swept through the room and the photos on the walls began to rattle in their frames. Ryan moaned in his sleep and Shane’s eyes flicked unconsciously towards him. Laughter filled the room as the two ghosts faded away, no longer trapped by his gaze. The images in the pictures swirled and cackled. The door slammed open and shut. The mirror over the bed began to rattle and shake violently. Shane’s head swiveled wildly, trying to take in everything. It seemed like Birdbrain was getting disoriented from all the activity. Shane certainly was.

With a resounding crack, the mirror jumped from the wall, plummeting towards Ryan’s prone body. In the split second it would have taken to shatter all over his friend, Birdbrain lunged over with inhuman speed and caught the mirror, swinging it free of the the bed and his friend in one fluid movement. Ryan muttered again, face twisted in distress but still trapped in the jaws of sleep. Some other force was preventing him from waking up, keeping him caught in whatever nightmare he was experiencing. The thought made Shane’s blood boil. No one fucked with his friend.

“**THIS HUMAN IS UNDER MY PROTECTION.**” he roared, his own voice layered over Birdbrain’s deep one. His fingers dug gouges in the back of the mirror, burning hot. “**KNEEL.**”
A hot wind blasted through the house like a hurricane, with himself as the eye. The pictures stopped moving. The door slammed shut once and for all. The room echoed with angry hissing that slowly faded to silence. The cold spot that had plagued the room from the moment he had awoken lifted, as well as the shadow over Ryan’s face, and Ryan sighed. Shane’s fingers pried themselves one by one from the back of the mirror. Quietly, so as not to wake Ryan, it hung the mirror back on the wall. Shane’s heart flipped when he caught sight of himself in the mirror. His eyes were filled with a pitch black, hungry darkness. The shadows thrown by the moonlight made it look as though horns spiraled out from atop his head.

He had never felt more dangerous. He had never felt less human.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter should be up by friday. Thank you all so much for your continuing love and support <3 Every comment and kudos you leave makes my day :-)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Fun fact, the next three chapters were all supposed to be one chapter but things got kind of... out of hand. I had a lot of fun writing them though, so I hope you enjoy :-) 

For once in his life, Shane arrived at work before Ryan. It was a bit unsettling to see his chair empty, since Ryan was dedicated to always being on time. Shane could count the number of times he had seen Ryan late on one hand. He’s probably just caught in traffic, he thought and settled down for another day of editing footage for Ruining History. He felt strange without Ryan there to bother when he got bored.

Restless, he went to make himself a coffee. After a second's hesitation, he made one for Ryan as well. He felt stupid even thinking it but he almost hoped that the act would magically conjure Ryan into existence when he returned to his desk. Of course that was not the case, because magic wasn't real. He drank his coffee and tried to ignore the wall of silence beside him by blasting music from his headphones.

An hour later, Ryan threw his bag down onto his chair and sighed. Shane took off his headphones, something he now did automatically when Ryan entered the room, and slid him the now-cold coffee he had made. He heard Ryan take a sip and then cough.

“This is cold.”

“Iced coffee: but better.”

“It’s the middle of winter.”

“The microwave is right there.” Shane gestured vaguely down the hall, still half paying attention to his screen.

“Shane.” Ryan’s tone of voice finally made Shane glance up.

He sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Dude, you look... not great.”

Ryan’s face was unshaven and he was wearing the giant sweater he always wore when he was sick or hungover. Shane called it the ‘struggle sweater’. Books and papers were exploding out of his bag, obviously having been shoved inside in a rush. The bags under his eyes could have carried a small elephant in them without much difficulty. The softness of his outfit was in stark contrast with the rough edges he carried in his exhausted expression. His hair flopped down into his eyes, and Shane had to resist the urge to reach out and brush it away. He twirled a pen in his traitorous fingers instead.

“Partying hard last night?” he raised an eyebrow with a grin.

“Shane.” Ryan looked him in the eye, deadly serious. “Have you seen the video that the overnight camera took when we were at the Borden house?”

Oh shit. He had completely forgotten about the camera. It had been rolling the whole time, straight
through the cuddling, the ghosts, Shane flipping his shit. Ryan knew everything and he was going to hate him forever now.

“No, I… haven’t.” He didn’t think he was pulling off ‘act natural’ very well. He was clutching his pen so tightly his knuckles were turning white. “Why?”

Ryan ran a hand through his hair, eyes wild. “That’s just it, I fucking lost it! I was hoping you had the footage backed up or something, but I guess that was a pipe dream, cause I took the cameras home with me right after the shoot—”

“Ryan, you’re rambling. What do you mean, ‘you lost it?” Shane waited with bated breath, not believing that what Ryan was saying was true. You lost it? You mean you didn’t see me acting possessed? You mean I’m safe?

“Halfway through the night, at around four, the video just cuts off! Nothing! It’s gone! I spent all night trying to retrieve the footage, hoping that it was be saved deep in the thing’s trash files, but there’s absolutely God-fucking nothing! The camera just decided to stop recording in the middle of the night!” Ryan’s voice rose with an edge of hysteria.

Shane leaned back in his chair, suppressing a sigh of relief. He didn't want to feel good when Ryan was so torn up but he couldn't help it.

"If it had not died then Ryan would know. He would feel even worse." Birdbrain assured him.

The fact that Birdbrain agreed with him didn't help his guilt. “Did you manage to catch anything on camera? A friendly ghost, maybe?”

Ryan looked so dejected that Shane regretted teasing him. “No. Nothing but the two of us sleeping like logs.” He put his face in his hands. “Hours of footage, gone, without explanation. And maybe it was a ghost, I don’t know. Those interfere with electronic equipment.”

Ryan would be tearing himself up for weeks with the pain of not knowing. Ryan always needed answers, even if there were none to be had.

“Well, uh. I may have forgotten to check the batteries on the camera before we took it?” Shane lied, putting on a sheepish grin. “So could have just died. Seems more likely than ghosts to me.”

If looks could kill, Shane would have been struck dead on the spot by the glare Ryan gave him. “I can’t… I can’t fucking believe you.”

On second thought, maybe lying had been a bad idea. He could feel Birdbrain tugging at him in the corner of his mind, trying to offer suggestions, but he shoved it down. For some reason he didn’t think Birdbrain would be too good at deescalating arguments. “I’m sorry. It was an accident. Won’t happen again.”

“It’s fine, the editing team can just fade it out… it’s just eurgh, to think we might have caught something on camera… The fact that we’ll never know is what kills me.”

“Hey at least it didn’t die when we were walking around. We would have missed the absolutely riveting performance those ghosts put on.”

“Just don’t do it again.” Ryan put his headphones on and promptly ignored him.

Shane frowned, mentally kicking himself. He had been hoping jokes would take Ryan’s mind off of it, but like an idiot he had made things worse. Good fucking job there, Shane. Really helping a buddy
To top off a perfectly shitty five minutes, Birdbrain decided it was the perfect moment to chime in with its high and mighty know it all advice. “At least he does not know our secret. Sacrifices must be made to keep people safe.”

Sure. Whatever you say. Wasn’t going to stop him from feeling like a bad friend. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t his fault the footage was lost, it was still his fault that Ryan was beating himself up for not thinking to check the batteries. Unsolved was Ryan’s baby and he always took too much of the blame onto himself.

Ryan ignored him most of the day after that, typing furiously as he tried to make up the hour he lost sleeping through his alarm. Shane did his best not to feel bad over it, since he was ignoring everyone else too. It’s not a big deal, he reassured to himself. We’ve argued about stupid shit a million times before now. A couple hours lost wasn’t that bad, considering the amount they cut to meet the twenty-five minute video limit. Didn’t change the fact that he hated seeing Ryan stressed and exhausted because of a dumb spur of the moment lie, though.

Three hours later and Shane was starting to get a headache from looking at Ryan’s tightly scrunched brow. If he didn’t relax soon he was going to get an ulcer. He had to intervene before the second-hand stress killed the both of them. In an attempt to make amends he decided to brave the LA traffic and go to In-n-Out. The ten minutes it took to drive five blocks was all worth it when he grabbed Ryan’s favourite burger, as well as something for himself, from the tired teenager running drive thru. He had their orders memorized, an involuntary byproduct of the two eating there what seemed like every other day. He didn’t even steal one fry from Ryan’s container on the drive back. That’s how sorry he was.

Another ten minutes of painstaking traffic jams later he dropped the bag in front of Ryan, who looked at it in bleary confusion. “Got you lunch.”

“Oh, thanks. Wait. Is that-” Ryan tore open the bag. “A four by four? You remembered??”

“Oh of course I did, you eat one of those at least three times a week.” Shane laughed, trying to gauge Ryan’s mood.

Ryan turned and gave him a thousand-watt smile that somehow managed to wipe all the exhaustion from his face.

Shane raised his eyebrows as if to say, So, are we good?

Ryan returned the look with a tiny nod. Yeah, we’re good.

Shane was an actual saint for getting him lunch. He always managed to be so thoughtful, like he could read Ryan’s mind and give him exactly what he needed before he even knew he did. Ryan felt bad for snapping at him, but he was riled up from the fruitless search until four in the morning, and the panicked rush to work when he realized he had slept through his alarm. Actually, that was a lie. He had felt on edge even since he had left the Borden house with sore wrists and crawling skin. Rationally, he knew it was because he had slept funny, but there was also no way to say it wasn’t because of the spirits there. Either way, he didn’t have the mental strength to deal with anything other than the work at hand, and barely that either. In fact, he was so tired that there was at least a fifty percent chance he would end up sobbing over something irrelevant. Sleep deprivation was one hell of a drug.
He wasn’t so out of it though that he didn’t notice the little glances Shane kept throwing him every hour or so out of the corner of his eye. Of course, Shane never broke from his usual expression of passive nonchalance, leaving Ryan to puzzle over whether it was because Shane thought still thought he was pissed, or if he was worried about Ryan’s health, or if he was planning on pouring salt into Ryan’s next coffee. God, he had no idea what was going on in the guy’s head ninety percent of the time.

Not that he wanted to know what Shane was thinking all the time, that would be weird. It was probably just an endless montage of elevator music in there. He just wished he could focus on his goddamn work without his mind wandering in five different directions at once. He wished Shane would be less distracting, sitting there staring blankly at a pen. Ryan could practically see the loading sign rotating over his head.

Ryan shook his head to clear it and went back to work.

The day passed in a blur of reviewing clips and typing emails. He didn’t even register how late it had gotten until he glanced at the clock and realized it was six thirty. The office was empty save for a couple interns putting equipment away, and Eugene, who never left. Even Shane was gone, and without his usual goodbye. It felt strange leaving without it, as though he had forgotten something. He typed out one last sentence before packing up, organizing the papers and files in his bag much more neatly this time. *I am so fucking ready to go home and take a nap.*

After the usual traffic filled drive home, he was fishing his contacts out in preparation for melting onto the couch and watching reruns until he fell asleep. He put his glasses on, only for a wave of dizziness to assault him, making his eyes water. He ripped them off. *Holy shit these are not-* He scrunched his face up in confusion. *This is definitely not my prescription.* He slowly put them back on again, squinting, and yep, somehow he had managed to mix his glasses up with Shane’s during their last shoot. He turned the glasses over in his hands, considering whether or not he should leave them and go to bed. He sighed as he realized Shane was walking around blind if he had Ryan's glasses. Shane always took his contacts out when he got home. *I should just get it over with and give them back like a nice friend.* But that would mean leaving his house and his couch was calling to him…

Shane wouldn’t have hesitated to text him. He gave without hesitating, without weighing his own comfort against others. Ryan wished he could do that so effortlessly, forget his feelings and think about someone else’s first. *I refuse to let Shane be a better person than me,* he thought as he texted Shane. If Shane didn’t text back in five minutes he was leaving it til tomorrow.

**Ryan (me):** *A) i think i’ve got your glasses do you have mine?? And B) your prescription is insane how are you always walking around w/o glasses or contacts??*

Surprisingly, it didn’t take Shane hours to respond. Ryan hadn’t even turned off his phone before Shane was texting back.

**Bone Stilts:** *A) that would explain why i can’t see and B) echolocation*

**Bone Stilts:** *im kinda busy rn but u can come pick urs up if u want*

He was within walking distance from Shane’s house.

**Ryan (me):** *Be there in 10*

**Bone Stilts:** *doors unlocked*
Ryan wasn’t in the mood to put his contacts in so he decided to brave the streets blind. His prescription wasn’t that bad anyways. He’d be fine.

Fifteen minutes and one walk later he was beginning to regret that decision. He had somehow managed to trip over two different curbs and walk into a tree branch on the way there. It was a wonder he hadn’t taken one of his own eyes out. He was glad he hadn’t ran into anyone he knew while stumbling around like an idiot.

The lights in the entryway were off when he let himself into Shane’s apartment. It was as messy as he remembered from the last time he visited. A delicious smell of frying bacon wafted through the air.

“Shane?”

“In here!” A voice called from the direction of the kitchen. Ryan went to follow and immediately tripped over the pile of bags that was sitting right in front of the door. Books clattered across the floor and he sighed.

“Everything okay in there?” Shane called.

“Why do you leave your shit right in the doorway?!” He knelt down and started scooping books back into the bag.

Long silence. How did Shane manage to fit everything into this tiny bag?

“Low budget security measures?” was Shane’s eventual reply.

Ryan was attempting to wedge the last book into the bag when the gold-embossed title caught his eye. Demonology for Beginners? He did a quick flip through of it, feeling as though he was doing something illicit. Detailed drawings and diagrams covered the glossy pages. Did he get this from… Chapters? The giant 50% off sticker was still glued to the cover. Weird. It wasn’t something he pegged Shane with reading. He carefully put it back with the other books and wandered through apartment, following the smell of cooking. Sure enough Shane was in the kitchen, glasses tucked into the pocket of his flannel shirt, frying up some bacon. A half-constructed sandwich sat on the plate beside him.

His face lit up when he saw Ryan, which made Ryan's chest do something funny. “Managed to make it here alright?”

“No, I walked outside and was immediately assaulted by bears.” Ryan rolled his eyes. “Got your glasses.”

Shane took them, and attempted to shove them on his face while flipping bacon simultaneously, barely avoiding poking his own eye out. “Finally! I can see!”

Ryan raised an eyebrow and wheezed. “You decided to cook dinner while blind?”

“BLTs wait for no man, Ryan. Oh yeah!” Shane handed Ryan his glasses too. Their fingers brushed together and it felt like he had gotten an electric shock. He shook out his hand and put his glasses on.

“Want to stay for a sandwich? I’ve got extra.” Shane flipped the bacon onto the sandwich. Ryan’s mouth watered. He wanted to hang out with Shane, who somehow managed to make something as simple as eating a sandwich exciting. But he didn't want to impose on Shane's dinner, and his heavy eyelids won out.
“Nah, I’ve got a nap waiting for me right now.” Ryan thought about leaving the conversation there, but the nagging curiosity at the back of his mind got the better of him. “Hey, what’s with the demonology book that you’ve got at your door about? Finally admitting they’re real without telling me?”

Shane’s back stiffened and his fingers drummed against the counter. “Oh that was… That was supposed to be your birthday present. I thought it would be right up your little ghosts-and-goblins alley.”

Whoops. He mentally kicked himself. “Oh. Uh. I’ll forget I saw it.”

“It’s fine, I can find you something else.” Shane stared down at the pan in intense concentration.

“Well uh, see you tomorrow.” Ryan turned to leave.

“Thanks for the glasses.”

It wasn’t until Ryan was halfway down the street that he remembered his birthday wasn’t for another ten months. *Was he lying…? No, I'm being stupid. He just saw it and thought ahead, because he’s a weirdly thoughtful tree man. You've read too many conspiracy theories, Ryan.*
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter's a touch late, I've been out travelling all day. And I will admit that I've been putting it off a bit because I'm not entirely satisfied with that chapter. I can't think of how to change it, which means that I'm just stuck in a writing funk where I hate all my work. But I'm nothing if not true to my word, so here it is. I hope you enjoy it, because I've reread this so many times that I think my eyes are bleeding, haha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane was a lot more careful with where he put his stuff after that. Between the apple and the book, evidence was piling up against him if only Ryan cared to connect the dots. Sure, it was all stuff that he could laugh off, but it was far too much for his comfort. Ryan had a knack for connecting the dots in a way that was batshit insane enough to actually figure the whole thing out.

Shane made sure to take the cameras back with him after the Salem visit. He spent all weekend meticulously going through the footage and scrubbing any trace of his possession from the film. To his relief the visit hadn't been half as eventful than the Borden one. Ghosts were nothing but distant shadows, disappearing into mist whenever he came close. A few of them made hand symbols in his direction that Birdbrain informed him were to ward against the evil eye. Well, at least they weren’t flipping him off. It had been difficult to find enough privacy to claim the land, but Birdbrain had somehow managed to in the foundations of Titchiba’s house while Ryan was changing batteries. The ghosts didn’t even bother appearing after that.

It made Shane feel… powerful. Useful, in a way he never felt with Ryan doing all the research and providing all the evidence. Sometimes Shane felt like all he did was tear it all down. But he could help in this way, keep Ryan safe in his life's quest, even if Ryan never realized it.

Outside the shoot, powerful was the opposite of what he was feeling. Time was slipping by in a whirlwind of activity he could barely keep up with as they counted down the days to their New Orleans visit. Ryan whisked the footage from him the moment he arrived in office without so much of a hello, headphones on and hunkering down for a marathon editing session. He stayed fixated on his computer in silence, only looking up to disappear without a word for his lunch break. Shane spent the rest of the day on edge, waiting. The rational part of Shane reminded him that Ryan was always this focused on the first day back, but Shane wasn’t in a very rational mood. Every hour that passed without a single acknowledgement, joke, or even insult had him wound up like an ever more tightly coiled spring. His day felt wrong without Ryan interrupting his work to do something dumb, like stick a post-it note with a doodle of a ghost in the middle of his screen. Had he missed some damning evidence? Was Ryan googling exorcisms at that very moment? He ran over the half dozen excuses he had on hand as to why the video jumped and cut every so often, waiting with bated breath for a confrontation. But nothing ever came.

“Editing’s going to have a hell of a time with this one,” was all Ryan had to say before he packed up and left, speed walking away with a distant look in his eyes.

Shane watched him go, his brows knit together. They had been so close during the Salem visit, laughing and joking like everything was fine and dandy. Forty eight hours of inseparability, and now
Ryan was acting like they’d never met. *He doesn’t owe it to me to spend time with me. He’s worried about the episode.* The thought did nothing to quiet the disappointment that sat in the pit of his stomach.

His only consolation was that he had planned to go out for drinks with Ryan tomorrow to talk about New Orleans. And of course there was their usual Wednesday lunch with Jen, Sara, and whoever else decided to tag along at the absolute last minute. Everything was fine. He was being melodramatic.

He spent the night watching reruns of *The Office* and avoiding checking his phone. For the first night since he bought it, he didn’t touch the demonology book. He wasn’t in the mood to try tracking down the creature in his head. Doing it reminded him too much of Ryan and how he pored over his stupid little file folder of notes for each case. It wasn't like he was in a rush to get rid of Birdbrain anyways.

Ryan was closer to normal the next day, the post-shoot panic having left until the next episode. As usual, he was already well into his mountain of work by the time Shane showed up. He slid Shane a cup of tea to go with the one Shane was already holding.

“Four sugars, just the way you like it, you monster,” Ryan said.

Shane stiffened as panic flashed through him before he realized Ryan was only referring to the obnoxiously sugary tea. “Says the man who ordered a caramel frappuccino last week.”

“Don’t expose me like this,” Ryan said. “I’ve got some EVPs to go over with you today.”

“Great. Can’t wait to see which ambient noises sound like voices to you.” Shane made an over exaggerated thumbs up like he was a satisfied customer in an infomercial. “If I'm lucky there might even be creaky floorboards instead of wind to spice things up!”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Touché.”

By the time the end of the day rolled around Shane was ready to pack up and have a beer. He loved his job, but it could be exhausting. Bickering with Ryan all day over nothing but rustling clothing was exhausting. Especially since their arguments had a strange edge to them today, like they were both more invested in the argument than they let on. Shane knew he was. He worried Ryan would hear one of the ghosts talking about Birdbrain, and had inadvertently been too harsh in brushing off a couple of Ryan’s audio clips. Ryan had seemed put out but it was too late to apologize. They'd be fine after drinks anyways. Ryan was already packed up and about to leave, and Shane couldn't wait to join him.

“We still on for drinks tonight?” he asked as he shut down his laptop.

Ryan stiffened. “Fuck. I completely forgot we were doing that today! I just agreed to help my mom run some trivia night thing. You know how she likes doing things last minute.” He stared up at Shane looking like a goddamn kicked puppy. "Another time?"

“Oh yeah, uh, sure.” Suddenly, his laptop case was very interesting. “You can’t cancel on your mom.”

“Shane, you are a saint,” Ryan’s smile made Shane feel guilty about the hard knot in his chest. Ryan glanced at his phone and frowned. “Ugh, looks like she’s got some thinly-veiled plot to set me up with her friend’s daughter happening.”

Shane forced out a laugh. “Have fun.”
“Thanks man. I’ll text you if I need a quick escape.” Ryan patted Shane’s arm as he passed, heading off for a wonderful time showing off the random unnecessary facts he had stored in his noggin. Shane stare after him for a long time, trying to place the strange burning sensation in the pit of his stomach. When he looked down again, he realized he had snapped the pencil he had been holding in half.

That night he found himself scrolling absentmindedly through Ryan’s instagram. He had been hoping for some sort of picture from trivia night but the only thing on Ryan’s story was a picture of a burger with a crooked smiley face drawn on it. He wondered if Ryan was enjoying himself. If the girl he was being set up with was nice. He bet the two of them were having a wonderful time bonding over obscure sports statistics or some shit like that. He didn’t know why was so bothered over it.

If he was being honest, it was because he was just a tiny bit annoyed with Ryan for cancelling on him at the last possible minute. He had been looking forward to spending time together. And now he was stuck at home with nothing to do but watch Netflix. Alone. Which wasn’t half as fun as watching it with Ryan, when there was someone to listen to his sarcastic commentary.

You know what, Ryan has his own life. If he doesn’t want to hang out with me, he doesn’t have to hang out with me.

Of course, that did nothing to stop him from feeling sullen.

Not wanting to think about it anymore, he attacked the demonology book with a vengeance. He preferred the reminder of Ryan to lying on the couch doing nothing. He pored over page after page of obscure monsters, each more ridiculous looking than the last. It wasn’t actually very helpful. Maybe he should have expected less from a book he got off the sales rack of a major retailer. Weren’t you supposed to find these kinds of things in the dusty back shelves of second hand stores with inexplicably moody lighting? He wasn’t even fifty pages into the massive tome after two hours, and the whole thing was beginning to feel hopeless. He started flipping to pages at random, not hoping to find anything useful. He was really just trying to find the weirdest looking demon at that point. Bored, he threw the book down on the couch, ready to give up and go to bed.

The drawing that unfurled on the page caught his eye. An owl headed man with angel wings, riding what looked to be some sort of giant dog. Jackpot. He scrambled to grab the book and get a closer look but his fingers started burning and his ribs turned over and no no no this does NOT count as a good reason to possess me!

“Self preservation appears to be a good reason in my eyes. You are going to want to be more specific the next time you’re dancing with the devil, Shane Madej,” Birdbrain said gleefully from Shane’s mouth. He could only watch in horror as it tore the pages from the book, shredding them to confetti. It tossed them down the sink and that was that, Shane’s hopes of learning any sort of information about Birdbrain went down the drain. Literally and metaphorically.

“Names have power, Shane Alexander Madej. You will not learn mine. I will destroy this vessel before you get the chance.”

Fuck you.

“We were working so well together before now. What would have you done in the Borden house had I not been there? Our bargain only works if we work together.”

You literally just threatened to kill me.

“You have done the equivalent with that book. I have been nothing but kind to you. No convulsions, no nightmares, no pain. Do not test the depths of my generosity.”
Birdbrain wasn’t wrong, but like hell Shane was going to admit that. His stony silence must have been answer enough, though, because Birdbrain merely chuckled before fading away, putting the reins back into Shane’s conflicted hands. The crawling, shifting mass under his skin felt normal now, a far cry from the first panic filled switch. He picked up the book, running a hand over its tattered and forlorn pages.

Into the trash it went. It couldn’t help him anymore, nothing could.

This was his life now. And he was going to have to accept it.

Ryan spent most of trivia night wishing he was at the bar with Shane. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy spending time with his mom, it was that the event barely fell under that category. Within the first fifteen minutes she had introduced him to a girl called Erica with the suggestion that they “get to know each other” before running off to join a gaggle of her own friends, leaving him on his own in a crowd of strangers. He didn’t know any of the answers either, so he spent the night sitting at the back feeling useless. So much for helping. He wished Shane was there with him. He’d have been able to make a joke about it, remind Ryan to get off his high horse and try to have a little fun.

The one good thing to come from it was that Erica was actually really cool. Effortlessly cool. She saved him from the awkward experience of trying to break into conversations full of strangers by introducing him to her friends, letting him stand there in peace as she told them all about her new puppy. She had shown him a picture of it, and Ryan could confirm that it was one of the most adorable things he’d ever seen. It looked like a tiny cloud. She was a fast talker, had strong opinions about breakfast, and was very, very, gay. She must have made a dozen jokes about it within the four hours he had known her. Relief flooded through him when he found out that she wasn’t expecting him to sweep her off her feet like some sort of modern day knight in shining armour. Although from the pointed looks his mom was throwing his way, that’s what she wanted him to do. Well Mom, I didn’t come here looking for love and I’m sure as hell not going to leave with it. He could find it just fine on his own time. What he did leave with was a box of cookies leftover from the snack table and Erica’s Instagram. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever end up texting her but it was nice knowing he had the option to.

He texted Shane when he got home, right before bed.

Ryan (me): Turns out I suck at trivia. U ok to review New Orleans trip with me tmr?

It wasn’t urgent, but he wanted to make up for the fact that he had blown Shane off for the past couple of days. Going over hotel accommodations and getting all their tickets and passports in order wasn’t a two person job but Shane had a knack for remembering what Ryan had missed. Like the time Ryan had almost tried to leave on a three day trip without a phone charger or pyjamas. As always, Shane took a decade to reply, and Ryan only got his message the next morning. He wasn’t going to bother questioning what Shane was doing awake at four am on a work day.

Bone Stilts: Cant

Bone Stilts: Workin on new ruining history

Bone Stilts: Sry

Ryan’s heart sank when he read the message. He had been looking forward to their little before-trip ritual. At least they were still getting lunch together, if Shane wasn’t too busy for that. As if you haven’t been ignoring him for the past two days. Shane’s job wasn’t to entertain him.
Either way, Shane was nowhere to be found when Ryan arrived at the office. Even though he should have been, judging from the coat and bag piled precariously on his chair. Shane must have been swamped if he was arriving at work before Ryan. At first Ryan thought Shane had just left on a coffee run, but hours stretched by without hide nor hair of him. Ryan’s curiosity started to get overwhelming.

Ryan (me): *where are u*

That looked a little stalkerish.

Ryan (me): *the office is so nice and peaceful without u*

Better.

Shane didn’t reply, of course. Ryan didn’t know what he had been expecting.

Ryan (me): *a ghost came by and gave the office autographs and u missed it*

Still nothing. He shrugged and went back to work. It wasn’t like he was waiting desperately for Shane to return. He was just curious, that’s all. It wasn’t like he had noticed how editing dragged on with Shane’s quips, or how quiet it was without Shane’s incessant foot tapping driving him up a wall. He *definitely* hadn’t leaned over to show Shane something funny before realizing he wasn’t there. The break in routine was messing with him.

Okay, he missed Shane’s big head a tiny bit. He liked having someone beside him who would laugh at his jokes and bring him his favourite lunch when he was feeling shitty.

He needed another cup of coffee. That would help him focus. He passed a stairwell on the way there. A dark figure flitted past out of the corner of his eye. He did a double take, heart skipping a beat. The dark figure turned out to be no other than Shane, sitting on the stairwell as cool as can be, typing away on his laptop.

“Holy shit you scared me,” Ryan said, clutching his chest. “I almost dropped my coffee!”

“Henhwhat?” Shane looked up from his screen, only taking his headphones off when he saw it was Ryan.

“Have you been sitting there all day? Isn’t that uncomfortable?” *Since when was concrete stairs better than a desk?*

“Not really. I’ve been moving around every hour or so, from the couch, to outside, to the stairs. Figured I needed a change of pace, something to get the creative juices flowing in the ol’ noggin.” He tapped the side of his head for emphasis. “Why, did you miss me?”

Ryan fiddled with the lid of his coffee. “No way. In fact, I was enjoying the peace and quiet I finally got without you.”

“I could say the same thing.” Shane smiled, fingers drumming on his laptop. “Sara and Jen said they’d be ready to get lunch at one. Does that work for you or are you too busy with planning for New Orleans?”

Ryan wasn’t sure whether he was making a joke or not. Shane could be such a goddamn enigma. “One is fine.”

He had torn a strip off the lid with his fiddling. The silence stretched uncomfortably long. When it
became unbearable, he nodded awkwardly. Shane put his headphones back on, signaling the end of the conversation.

Ryan couldn’t focus when he got back to his desk. He hated how weird they were both acting, hated how he was overthinking everything. Their friendship had been so easy before, but in the past couple weeks it felt as though some invisible, unspoken presence had come between them and forced them to step around each other like skittish dogs. He wanted it back to how it was before. He couldn’t stand seeing Shane tense and restless and being unable to help him, unable to find the right words to make it right.

He hoped it was only because their swamped schedules kept them from carving time out for each other. He hoped things would go back to normal soon. He hoped the routine of wednesday lunches would put the whole thing into perspective. He hoped a lot of things. This is not as big a deal as I’m making it out to be. He needed to stop stressing out so much and just trust his gut.

One o’clock rolled around and Shane showed up, true to his word, for the first time all day so he could grab his coat. Sara and Jen trailed close behind.

“Ready to go? I found a new sushi place with decent yelp reviews,” Jen said.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” he replied, shutting down his computer.

They all piled into Ryan’s car and away they went at a snail’s pace through the LA traffic. Oh, if only Buzzfeed had some conveniently placed restaurants surrounding it that they could walk to.

The sushi place was a tiny blink-and-you’ll-miss-it hole in the wall tucked away between a donut shop and a Forever 21. The walls were decorated with pictures of the LA coastline and the floor was scuffed from dozens of salt stained boots walking over it. The only people in there with them other than the waitress was an elderly couple and a frazzled looking mom of two toddlers, who were loudly asking for McDonalds.

The food made up for the screaming children a hundred times over. They talked about work, Sara’s latest art project, and Jen’s failed attempt at rock climbing. Ryan almost pissed himself laughing at Shane’s story of how he had knocked over an entire display of basketballs and then ran through the store trying to pick them up before someone noticed and shouted at him. The conversation eventually wandered towards pets as they waited on the cheque.

“I used to have a little German Shepherd puppy when I was a kid. Came home from school one day to find his head stuck in a pickle jar. He was fine, but God did it take forever to get him out,” Sara said, smiling fondly.

“I was out running this morning and I saw a dog that looked like a little cloud with legs. I was so prepared to go to jail right there and then for dognapping.” Jen replied.

“You know if you want to hang out with dogs you could just volunteer at a shelter,” Ryan said.

Yeah, but stealing them has that added layer of mystery and intrigue. Surely you can appreciate that, mr. conspiracy.” Jen threw a straw at him. “I wish I had a dog.”

“Same,” Ryan replied. “Speaking of, I was out doing a trivia thing yesterday and I met this girl who would not shut up about her new dog. Although, y’know, I’d probably do the same thing in her place.”

“Oh yeah?” Shane said, looking down at his drink. “How was trivia night, by the way?”
“Enh, pretty terrible. It was pretty much me in a crowd of strangers who all knew each other,” Ryan said. “Okay, it wasn’t that bad. I mean, I met Erica, she’s pretty cool.”

“Oh yeah?” Shane repeated. He started stirring his drink, ice clinking against the glass. “Cooler than me?”

“Shane, that’s not a very high bar to leap,” Sara said. “Tell me more about this Erica.”

“Yeah, like is there a lot of security on her dog?” Jen added.

“Jen, I’m ignoring you. And Erica, I don’t know, she talks really fast? She knows a lot about european architecture? That was one of the trivia categories- she cleared the board, it was pretty impressive.”

“Damn, she is cool.” Jen and Sara nodded solemnly at each other.

“Yeah, she pretty much saved my ass there by introducing me to her friends. I can give you her instagram if you want, you two would be great friends.” He pulled his phone out to show it to the two of them.

Shane was still staring into his glass as though he expected it to grow a mouth and talk to him.

“Oh look, she works at that shop that opened a couple weeks ago! The one that sells the candles and tarot cards and stuff. There was an article in the newspaper about it,” Sara said, pointing at one of Erica’s posts.

“Cool. Hey, wait- Is that near my house?” he grabbed the phone and squinted at the picture. Yeah, it was- just down the block for him. He had wondered what all that construction was for.

“Small world,” Sara remarked.

“Wonder if they sell anything to protect against ghosts.” New Orleans was crazy haunted and he would be lying if he said he wasn’t a little worried about bringing something unwelcome home with them.

“I bet she just loves ghosts. And aliens. You two can spend all your time together, sitting in your little conspiracy corner telling spooky stories and wearing your little tinfoil hats. I bet you’d love that.” Shane scowled, hands clutching the table white-knuckled. He still wouldn’t meet Ryan’s, or anyone else’s, eyes. His voice was bitter. “A match made in heaven.”

Sara stared at Shane in disbelief. “What the fuck is your problem, Shane?”

“Yeah, Ryan doesn’t deserve that asshole attitude,” Jen added.

Ryan didn’t make a move to defend himself. He sat there in shock, a cold sinking feeling wrapping around him. Shane might as well have punched him in the gut. *What had he done to piss Shane off so much?*

“Jesus Christ, it was- it was a joke okay?” It hadn’t sounded like a joke. “I’m sorry if it hurt your feelings. Just- ugh. Forget I said anything.” Shane heaved himself away from the table, still avoiding eye contact. “I’m going to the bathroom,” he muttered.

He stalked off. The silence was so thick it could have been cut with a knife.

“What is his deal?” Sara hissed when Shane was out of earshot. “Are you two fighting or
“No, I mean— I don’t actually know.” Ryan stared at the place Shane had been sitting at, his organs sitting in a little pile at his feet. “I kind of cancelled on him last night? And he’s maybe been avoiding me all day. Actually, he’s been acting kind of cagey ever since we got back from the Lovers’ House.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve said he’s jealous.” Jen chewed on her straw, a thoughtful look on her face. “I bet he thinks Erica’s a threat to your friendship or something.”

“What?! I’ve known Shane for years. I’ve known Erica for what, twelve hours?”

Jen shrugged. “I don’t know what goes on in his head. I wouldn't worry though, he'll get over himself soon enough.”

“Still doesn’t give him an excuse to be an asshole,” Sara added, and that was that, because Shane coming back to the table, face unreadable. Ryan wasn’t paying attention. he was too busy turning over Jen’s words in his head. He thinks he’s replaceable? That’s insane. Ryan would never replace Shane. He couldn’t imagine life without him. But why else would be be acting this way? He didn’t like where this train of thought was going. The evasiveness. The weird looks. The book as a gift for no reason.

Ryan could only come to one possible conclusion for all of this.

Shane was possessed.

They paid for the meal and drove back to the office in tense, awkward silence. Shane disappeared again with his laptop the moment they stepped through the doors but Ryan couldn’t even bring himself to be hurt over that, the gears were too busy turning in his head.

Okay, he was a little bit hurt. He tried to look nonchalant about it but he couldn’t school his face into the picture of composure he so desperately wanted it to be. Not for the first time, he wished he was better at cutting his heart off of his sleeve. Shane was able to do it so effortlessly, and Ryan was stuck broadcasting every stupid thought to the entire goddamn office. Stupid Shane and his stupid hidden thoughts. That’s what got us into this problem in the first place.

That, and the fact that he might be possessed. Ryan felt a little crazy but a plot was forming in his head anyways, and it was only slightly batshit insane. If he pulled the thing off, then his best friend was well and truly possessed by some sort of evil entity from beyond the grave, and they were both fucked. If it didn’t then he’d have only managed to prove to himself that he was a paranoid idiot.

Shane was feeling shitty for snapping at Ryan. The broken look on Ryan’s face was enough to make him want to crawl under the table and shove the words back into his mouth. But he couldn’t take them back, and they had sat there on the table like ugly toads.

Everything had been going well. Great, even. They had stopped acting awkwardly around each other and he had stopped overthinking every word that came out of his mouth, a first since Birdbrain had entered the picture. But then Ryan just had to bring up goddamn perfect, ethereal Erica, and everything went down the drain. The way his face lit up when talking about Erica and her wonderful dog and friends and life and how wonderful it was to not have been obligated to hang out with Shane made this horrible, dark, angry part of him rise up through his throat and say the words that were best left festering inside of him. For one terrifying second that didn’t feel wholly like him talking he had actually wanted to hurt someone. It hadn’t been him. It couldn’t be him. It was getting harder to tell
whether it was him or Birdbrain talking these days.

The point was, he had made a mistake but he hadn’t known how to fix it, so he ran away like some sort of problem-avoiding coward. Why did he even care that Ryan liked Erica? Ryan could befriend, or date, whoever he wanted, it wasn’t Shane’s life to control. He tried without success to push away the sour feeling he got in the pit of his stomach when he imagined Ryan hand in hand with some faceless girl. He didn’t want to be left behind.

Shane rubbed his forehead. *God, I'm acting like a five year old.*

His phone buzzed.

*Sara:* ryan thinks he offended u somehow

*Sara:* I wonder why T_T

*Sara:* he looks like a sad dog sitting alone @ his computer

*Sara:* idk whats up w/ u two but u need to apologize

Shane sighed. He had no idea what he was supposed to say. “Sorry I’ve been a colossal ass, but it wasn’t me, it was the demon living in my head, kind of maybe not really?” Yeah, right.

*Shane:* idk what to say

*Shane:* i feel bad

*Sara:* good now just say that to ryan

*Sara:* use ur mouth to make words

As unhelpful as that was, she had a point. It was about time he went and apologized. He would say whatever word vomit came to mind when he sat down and hope for the best.

Finding Ryan proved to be easier than he thought. Shane very nearly ran smack into him the moment he left the room.

They both stumbled backwards, and Shane reached out instinctively to steady Ryan, grabbing his arms to keep him from spilling the tea he was holding. “Woah buddy, you okay?”

Ryan looked up at him, brows knitted. “Are we still buddies, though? After your whole tirade?”

“Yeah! Yeah, I-” Shane slowly let go of Ryan’s arms and took a deep breath. “Look, I’m really sorry about this afternoon, okay? I was mad and hurt because I thought you had been ignoring me for the past while and I thought you would start ignoring me even more to go out with Erica, and I let it explode. I acted like a goddamn kid. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Ryan said. “For ignoring you and all that.” He rocked back and forth on his heels, chewing on his lip. “Erica and I are just friends, by the way. No one’s trying to set us up.”

“Oh?”

“She’s gay.”

“Oh.” Shane rubbed his face, feeling more ridiculous than ever. He wished he had never said anything, never invested himself into Ryan’s love life. “I feel like an asshole.”
“So, how you usually feel then?”

Shane laughed in spite of himself. “We’re cool?”

“Ice cold.” Ryan handed him the tea he had been holding. “I was actually looking for you so I could give you this as a peace offering.”

He smiled softly, feeling lighter than he ever had. “Thanks.”

He grabbed the paper cup and took a giant swig. And he had somehow severely miscalculated how hot it was because now his mouth was burning. He managed to choke it down but oh God his mouth was on fire and his ribs were overturning and he tasted blood. Ryan had spiked his tea with holy water.

“Not sweet enough,” Birdbrain said, speaking through Shane’s mouth, smiling like nothing was wrong. It kept his mouth carefully closed, to keep Ryan from noticing the blood coating his teeth.

Ryan raised his eyebrows, looking perplexed. “I was hoping you’d realize how much better tea was without adding half a cup of sugar, but I guess you’re still blind to the facts.”

Holy shit, it felt like he had chugged a mug full of lava and then washed it down with a gallon of orange juice. He was going to need to suck on a lot of ice if he was going to even hope to recover from this. They chatted a few minutes more, Birdbrain pretending to sip Shane’s tea every so often, before going back to work. It tossed the tea the moment Ryan was out of eyeshot.

Shane couldn’t believe it. Ryan had actually begun to suspect that he was possessed. The call had been so close that Shane could feel the metaphorical bullet brushing through his hair. A shaky feeling of relief washed over him as his ribs overturned again and he was returned control of his body.

“He’s off of your trail now. You are lucky I saved the two of us.” Birdbrain whispered.

He had almost been caught, and that would really have ruined their friendship. For good, maybe. His mouth burned, but it didn’t hurt as much anymore. Shane decided, right then and there, that he would gladly drink a hundred cups of holy water if it meant he and Ryan would stay friends for as long as they possibly could.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you have a wonderful Passover/Easter/long weekend! As always, all comments are appreciated. Find me on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes
Love you all :)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful feedback on the last chapter, you've made me feel so much more confident in my writing. You guys are what I'm doing this for :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Three days later and Ryan seemed to have forgotten about the whole incident, although that didn't stop Shane from stepping carefully around him. New Orleans' bright lights provided a welcome distraction from the vague unease that they were both harboring. The whole place was buzzing with activity and colour, and Shane could barely decide which way to look. Birdbrain was buzzing too, warming his chest like a furnace. He could feel the demon flexing and spreading beneath his skin, on the verge of breaking contract and taking control. There was no question that this was the party city for ghosts. He just hoped that he could stay in control when it counted.

Especially after the spiked tea incident. His mouth still hurt. But it was worth it, because Ryan didn't seem on edge around him anymore. Birdbrain had salvaged the situation well enough to keep Ryan away from the trail. If his face hadn't melted off because of the holy water he couldn't possibly be possessed by a demon now could he? Shane just had to make sure Ryan stayed unsuspicious, because nothing would stop Ryan from finding the truth if he got close enough to it. He was relentless in its pursuit. Shane would have to be sneakier than ever when ghost hunting.

The Dauphine Orleans was the first item on their list of places to visit. Not exactly somewhere he'd peg as haunted, but nevertheless, here they were. And it was nice. No rats, no spiders, no crusty old rooms without central heating. There was even valet parking! He could get used to this.

The evening had been going great up until the bordello. Birdbrain had been quiet, and they had yet to see anything that qualified as spooky or dangerous. Well, anything that qualified as spooky or dangerous to Shane. Ryan was still as jumpy as a jack in the box at a trampoline park. All in all, he had been feeling pretty confident, especially after the uneventful Salem visit. The Borden house had been a fluke. Birdbrain would keep claiming land and scaring ghosts, and everything would be fine. And maybe pigs will start flying. Despite the demon vibes Shane knew he was throwing off, or maybe because of them, ghosts seemed to live for fucking with the two of them. Well, not live, obviously, since they were ghosts. So when they heard the door to the bordello open by itself, Shane was ready to go tell a couple more ghosts who had gotten too rowdy to fuck off, like he had in Salem. Y’know, the usual stuff possessed people do.

As they walked up the creaking staircase, his eyesight flickered and Birdbrain overlaid the ghost world on his vision like a paper thin veil, shrouding the stairwell in dim blues and whites. That wasn’t a good sign. Either Birdbrain was getting ready to take over his body, or shit was about to go down. Both, if he was unlucky. He almost hoped it was the former. At least Birdbrain didn’t go out of its way to try to murder Shane.

Ryan looked down at Shane from the top of the staircase, brow creased. “Aaaaaaad the door’s open.”

“Was it open before?”
“Nope.” Ryan took a deep breath and crossed the threshold. “Ah, fuck.”

Shane followed, steeling himself for the worst.

Nothing. It was a normal hotel room, without any trace of ghosts. He breathed a sigh of relief, letting all the pent up tension out of his shoulders. *What’s the big deal with the ghost eyes, Birdbrain?*

“*It always pays to be prepared.*” His fingers twitched involuntarily, Birdbrain pushing its boundaries.

*Hey, don’t forget that contract that you’re so fond of.* He shoved back, and Birdbrain reluctantly conceded. He knew it was only a matter of time before Birdbrain took over again, but he was happy that they had at least stopped fighting all the time. They might not be on the same page yet, but they were at least on the same chapter. Birdbrain seemed contented to leave him to his own devices for the most part, and Shane was happy to let it handle any crises that were way over his head. Crises that seemed to happen more and more often these days.

They moved through the room at a snail’s pace, shining their flashlights over every square inch of the walls. Ryan looked just about ready to jump out of his skin at the slightest sign of danger.

“Oh boy,” he muttered. “I do not like this room at all.”

Shane was turning up nothing in the way of ghosts. Ryan’s imagination was acting up, as usual. It was funny, really, how Ryan seemed most uncomfortable when there was nothing to be afraid of. Unless he was acting as a canary in a coal mine, somehow sensing spirits before they even appeared. Maybe he was somehow managing to sense Birdbrain. Either way, the room was clear of activity no matter how many times Ryan addressed the ghosts.

They crept towards the bathroom, their last stop in the bordello before they gave up and left. Shane stuck close behind Ryan in an attempt to calm him down. If anything happened he’d be ready to step in and fistfight the ghost. He wasn’t afraid of them.

“Woah,” Ryan whispered, looking like he was about to pass out.

“What is it?” Shane asked, looking past him into the tiny room. “Does it stink in there?”

“No, I just got a wave of lightheadedness.” Ryan rubbed at his forehead. Shane wasn’t paying attention. A glimmering light had caught his attention out of the corner of his eyes. *That isn’t good.*

“I’m getting out,” Ryan reminded Shane, trying to force his way by.

“Nope,” Shane replied, still looking down the hall. The light was getting closer, bigger, changing form-

“What?”

“Stay in there.” He was not going to let Ryan see that light, not now, not when things were finally starting to go well. He pushed his friend back inside the room.

“Wait a second, what are you doing?” Ryan grabbed the door, fighting to keep in open.

“Hang on, hang on, hang on,” Shan muttered, torn between looking at the rapidly approaching light and keeping an eye on Ryan. He shovehdown a wave of panic as he shut the door despite Ryan’s protests, trying to ignore the fear in the other man’s eyes. *This is for your own good, buddy.*
Ryan banged on the door. “Oh no no no.”

“Turn out your light. That’s right Ryan, everything’s fine, Shane’s just having a little fun with you, nothing to worry about. “Three minutes.”

Ryan kept talking but Shane wasn’t paying attention anymore, he was too busy focusing on the glowing, angry looking woman standing at the end of the hall. He made a rapid gesture at TJ that he hoped roughly translated to “stay there and watch the door,” and then scrambled off to intercept the ghost. *Come on Birdbrain, now’s your time to shine.* Unfortunately, it was starting to look like Birdbrain was out for lunch. That was bad. He had been counting on becoming possessed at that point, because he wasn’t actually sure what he was going to do when he caught up with the ghost. His plan could pretty much be summed up as “protect Ryan and then hope for the best.”

He was face to face with the ghost now, who was tall, something helped by the fact that she floated half a foot above the floor. She didn't looked a day over seventeen. Seeing her there, dead so young, made him sad. She didn’t look angry, just petulant, a teenager whose parents had barged into her room without asking.

At a loss of anything else to do, Shane started talking to the ghost in a rapid fire whisper to keep TJ from hearing him. “Hey, uh, it would be nice if you or your ghost pals didn’t bother me or my friend tonight. I know he looks like he’d be fun to scare, and he is, but, uh, have you considered not doing that?”

The ghost raised an eyebrow. *Come on Birdbrain, if you wanted to show up any second now that would be great.*

“I’m sorry about what happened to you.”

*Wrong answer.* The girl's face twisted into a mask of anger and she snarled and grabbed his wrist, hair wreathing her hair in a nest of writhing, angry snakes. Shane gasped in pain as frost started blooming up his arm, her fingers so cold it felt like his wrist was burning. She pulled him close so that they were nose to nose, his wide, desperate eyes staring into her blank unfathomable ones.

“*Don’t patronize me,*” she hissed, voice sounding like steam being let out of a kettle. Shane hoped it had been quiet enough that TJ hadn’t heard. How much time did Ryan have left in the bathroom? And dear God, why wasn’t Birdbrain doing anything?! He had lost all feeling in his arm by now. This was it, he was going to end up being killed by a ghost three feet away from the cameras. Ryan was never going to let him hear the end of this.

He swatted his free arm at the girl, but it only passed through her. How do you fight something that doesn’t have a real body? He might as well have tried fighting the wind. The ghost reached her other hand up, plunging towards his heart. *Sizzle.* A bolt of electricity flashed between them, launching the ghost back across the room. Finally, finally, his ribs overturned and fire flowed through his veins, reversing whatever damage the girl had done to him.

The ghost snarled at them from across the room and lunged forwards. Birdbrain made a complicated hand gesture in her direction, cool as can be. “*Vos sunt pulsus spiritum mundi. Volutantur nec hunc in locum.*”

The girl disappeared into a swirl of light, hissing, mere moments before she reached them.

*About goddamn time you showed up,* Shane muttered. *We could have died!*

“You were in need of a reminder about how dangerous spirits are without a guardian. Mock them.
as you wish, but never forget that you and your human are dead without me.” Birdbrain brushed his hands together.

You need a reminder about being supposed to protect us from harm. Shane knew he sounded like a whiny child, but he was too shaken to care.

“I am to protect Ryan from harm. Not you. Remember your wording.” Birdbrain meandered back towards TJ as nonchalantly as was possible after having sprinted off like a man possessed three minutes earlier.

“Thought I heard something,” it said in explanation when TJ raised an eyebrow at him. TJ shrugged. He had seen weirder thing while filming Unsolved.

“I think it’s been three minutes, don’t you? Hey Ryan, you can come out now!” Birdbrain called.

Ryan practically fell onto him in his scramble to leave. “Shane, give me a fucking warning next time! I swear to God I felt something touch my shirt in there!”

Birdbrain laughed. “I was hoping I could trap all the ghosts in there with you! Anyways, it’s my turn, you can hang out here now.” It gave them both a little wave and then click, it was alone in the bathroom. It took a quick look around the darkness, rocking back and forth on his heels. The room was pitch black. Even demonic possession couldn’t help you see when there was no light left.

“And now Ryan is out there, and he’s probably freaking out.” Birdbrain addressed the camera that it knew was across from it, even if it couldn’t see it.

Ryan screamed outside. “My fucking light just died!”

Birdbrain and Shane both laughed, the lines of who was in control blurring, because Ryan had no idea what he had missed while he was trapped in the bathroom. God, he couldn’t even imagine what Ryan’s face would look like if he had actually seen her. Priceless, undoubtedly.

“Shane? Is your lock in done?” Ryan asked.

“Nope, I’ve just got another two minutes!” Shane could practically see him huddled out there, clutching his flashlight like a security blanket. A part of him wanted to go out and comfort Ryan. At the rate things were going, by the time he was thirty Ryan would either be dead of a heart attack or absolutely fearless.

“AGH fuck fuck fuck fuck,” Ryan yelped. Something slammed against the wall, most likely Ryan running into something and scaring himself. TJ would have spoken if something worth worrying about was happening. Shane tried not to be concerned. The scariest thing in the building was Birdbrain, and it was currently having the time of its life listening to Ryan piss himself over nothing. “This is one of the best days of my life.”

This was also their only chance to claim the hotel in peace. Ignoring Ryan’s occasional scream, Birdbrain switched the cameras off, feeling against the walls to find them. It scratched out the candelabra owl sigil on the inside of one of the cabinet’s doors. The chalk strokes glowed faintly, guiding his hand. Shane paid little attention. Birdbrain had the ritual down to a science and the less Shane talked, the faster the whole thing was over. The faster he could leave and check that everything was all right out there.

“Ego hanc domum in meo nomine, in nomine Andras, daemon, et spiritus omnes homines ad arcum, et per quem ipsi timent.” Fire flashed up his body, a now familiar sensation, and it was finished. Now that the ring and circus was done with and ghosts would stop harassing them,
Birdbrain ever so kindly returned Shane the use of his own body. His ribs overturning only made him slightly nauseous now.

He collected the cameras and ventured out to see how Ryan was doing. He was standing at the end of the hallway, peering out into the hotel room, but jumped and whirled around when he heard Shane approaching. His face broke out into a relieved smile when he realized it was only his friend and not a murderous demon.

Well, it was both, but how was he to know?

Shane leaned over him to look into the room. The two of them tilted towards each other, one of them repelled from the space by the possibility of ghosts, the other pulled in by the resigned certainty of it. He was so close he could hear Ryan’s laboured breathing.

For all of Ryan’s fears there was nothing in the room other than the memories of past spirits. To be fair to him, the spot they were standing on was the same exact place that Shane had nearly been murdered mere minutes before. It still glowed with the memory of it, illuminating the planes of Ryan’s face with light only Shane could see. It was that Ryan was sensing more than anything, a bloodhound pointing out all the wrong trails. Shane knew that no matter what they did, there would be no more ghosts appearing tonight, or until they left and returned to their regular hotel, for that matter. They were safe.

Shane stood on scorched ground. A perfect circle, lifeless and ashy, with him as the epicenter. Beyond the boundary, as far as he could see in every direction, wheat swayed in an endless sea. Everything was eerily familiar. He was supposed to be doing something— but what it was, or why, eluded him.

He set off at random, wading through the wheat. He walked, and walked, and walked. The wheat whispered and chuckled. The sky didn’t change, the ground didn’t dip or rise, no matter how far he walked it looked the same as it did hours ago. It was just him, the wheat, and the sun hanging over him like a watchful eye. He was going nowhere. He stopped, looked around. Turned in another direction. Kept walking. Wheat, as far as the eye could see, glowing in the harsh sunlight. It scraped against his ankles with sandpaper teeth.

Stop, turn. Wheat. Stop, turn. Wheat. Stop, turn. Wheat, what, wheat. A single crow flew overhead, cackling and shedding dark feathers like rain. It was hopeless but no, he had to keep going, there was something he needed to do—

He had lost something important. Something he desperately needed to find.

A scream split the air like a meat cleaver. Shane turned around in a circle, searching for the source. He recognized that voice. Another scream, this one abruptly cutting off into a low, wet, gurgle.

Oh no oh no, oh no no no no no.

That was Ryan’s voice. He took off in a reckless spirit, not caring about the sharp leaves tearing at his ankles. He could see a blinding light far off into the distance, and prayed that it was the right place. It was so close, and yet with every step he took the distance seemed to stretch out farther and farther. Fear had a cold stranglehold on him, his breath coming in shuddering gasps. He needed to get to Ryan, no matter the cost. He needed to find him.

One step more and space warped and bent, pulling him forward to the source of the light. It was a looming creature radiating a blinding light, made of eyes and wings and towering high into the sky.
Clutched in its oozing claws was Ryan, hanging eight feet above the ground limp as a rag doll. Dried blood covered his face like a mask.

“RYAN!” Shane screamed. Oh God, was he too late? Was Ryan dead? He stumbled closer, feet crunching over the pieces of a shattered camera.

Ryan stirred weakly after hearing his voice, tilting to look at Shane through unfocused eyes.

“Shane?” he croaked.

The creature shook him roughly, making Ryan groan, and Shane’s heart seized up. Ryan scrabbled weakly at the claws that encircled his neck. He may as well have tried pushing against a brick wall. The creature shook him again.

Shane ran at it, ready to do whatever he could to save his friend with nothing but his two hands and a head full of static. Every step was painstakingly slow, his feet windmilling uselessly through molasses. He could only watch in horror as the creature engulfed Ryan in a pillar of light so bright Shane had to turn away and cover his eyes. When he turned back the creature had disappeared and Ryan was falling, eight feet straight down onto hard packed dirt. He landed on his back with a sickening crunch.

Shane’s feet unfroze, too late, far too late. He raced over, eyes blurry and wet, but he could already tell what he would find from the way Ryan was crumpled like a tin can. He was dead, and there was nothing Shane could do to make it better. Shane had failed him.

He woke with a gasp, sitting bolt upright with his heart going a thousand miles an hour. He was back in their hotel room. He was safe. Ryan was safe, sleeping soundly in his own bed a few feet away.

He was asleep, right? Not dead? Shane sunk back down into the pillows, even though he knew he didn’t have much hope of falling back asleep. He eyed the lump of blankets that was his friend. It was moving, right? Breathing? Oh God, what if the dream was a premonition and Ryan is actually dead?! No. That is absolutely insane. That makes no sense at all, I’ve listened to one too many crazy theory and I need to pull myself together.

But what if?

“Ryan,” he hissed. “Ryan!” He was being irrational, but right then, in a dark room far from home with nothing but the sound of the blood pumping in his ears to keep him company, rational thinking didn’t have much of a hold on him anymore.

“Hmm? Whazzat?” Ryan stirred, and the irrational, anxious knot in Shane’s chest unraveled. Ryan rubbed a sleepy hand over his face. “Did you say something?”

“It’s nothing, I…” Shane realized that this had been a terrible idea. He was about to sound absolutely batshit insane and it was too late to go back. Fuck it. It’s four am and I’ve just been scared shitless. “I was, uh. Just making sure you’re still alive.”

“You were…” Ryan paused, squinting at him in confusion. “Shane, are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m crazy, I know, but you died in my dream and I just…” I was afraid. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Do I… do I want to know what happened in the dream?”
“No.”

“That bad?”

He paused.

“Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Shane could feel Ryan’s eyes on him, but he kept his own locked firmly on his own hands. The whole room felt charged with electricity, the silence a palpable presence in there with them. He wanted Ryan to do something, although he wasn’t sure what. Make a joke, turn over and go back to sleep, give some sort of ridiculous pep talk, anything.

“Sorry for waking you up.”

“No, it’s okay, I do the same to you often enough when we’re on location.”

He laughed in spite of himself. Ryan always managed to get him to do that. “Yeah.”

“You good?” The two words carried weight beyond their meaning, a multitude of reassurances folded up into seven letters.

Yeah, I’m good. It was just a dream, Ryan. Nothing worth worrying about. I guess I’m just… preemptively exhausted. We’re staying up late to shoot tomorrow and I’m probably not going to get any more sleep tonight…” You’re too far away. The truth was, the nightmare had shaken him. More than anything Birdbrain had ever shown him. He needed an anchor, he needed a hug, he needed Ryan, but like hell he was going to say that. In the darkness the two feet between their beds felt like a canyon.

He heard the creak of a bed, then shuffling feet. “Shove over.”

Shane glanced up to see Ryan standing beside the bed, blearily rubbing his eyes.

“What?”

“Shove over. I’m getting in. That way if you have another nightmare you can make sure I’m not dead without fucking waking me up.”

Shane scooched over. Ryan climbed in, settling down beside him with a sigh. They were so close that Shane could feel the heat radiating from him, smell the lemon shampoo that came with the room in tiny bottles.

“You better not snore and make me regret this,” Ryan muttered, turning his back to Shane.

“No promises.” Shane settled down as well, slowly, like Ryan was a wild animal that would spook if he moved too fast. Like he was a ghost. He counted the loose threads on the collar of Ryan’s shirt and wondered if Ryan knew how important he was to Shane. If he thought the closeness was as comforting. If he too wanted to bridge the couple inches between them because goddamnit, Ryan made him feel so safe in this crazy, unsteady world. He was Shane’s anchor just as much as Shane was Ryan’s.

The world felt so small in the darkness, shrunk down to the two of them in their tiny hotel room. And maybe the darkness was making them both a little crazy but when he reached his arm around Ryan’s chest ever so hesitantly, ready for Ryan to push him away, tell him he was being weird, overstepping his boundaries, Ryan only mumbled and pulled him closer. Everywhere their skin touched felt
charged with electricity, but it was a good electricity. Like turning on a lightbulb to reveal the safety of your home. The knot of anxiety in his chest finally dissolved. Shane melted into the touch, relaxing after having been coiling tight like a spring. He could feel Ryan’s back rising and falling against his chest, his steady breathing lulling Shane back into a dreamless sleep. For the first time since the Lovers' House, he wasn't worried. Ryan was here, and he was safe.

Chapter End Notes

Obligatory self promo to follow me on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes
See you next friday!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter is really funny to me because before this I tried to keep the chapters at around 3000 words and then I just write this... 11000 word monster?? That's triple the length of any other chapter?? I can't believe I wrote this much either believe me. I hope you enjoy it, all 11000 word of it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Shane woke up he was cold. He could hear the water running in the bathroom, which meant it was time to get up and get ready for today's shoot. He did not want to get up. Getting up would mean doing things and being responsible. He cracked his eyes open, mentally protesting against the sun for rising. The covers had been thrown back from the bed, leaving him exposed to the elements. Well no wonder I'm freezing. He would have died of hypothermia in his sleep if he didn't have Birdbrain acting as a portable space heater.

He heard the tap shut off and Ryan appeared in the bathroom doorway, yawning. The light streaming through a crack in the curtains illuminated his face like a halo, outlining him in liquid gold. He looked ethereal, he looked regal and warm and like home and holy shit. Shane was in love with his best friend. The thought hit him like a heart attack. Ryan scrunched his face up and moved away, and the moment was gone.

Shane’s mind was short circuiting. Was he really in love with Ryan? Sure, sometimes Ryan would smile at him and make his heart feel like it was doing a backflip, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything, did it? They were nothing but friends, right? Right.

Ryan ran a hand through his hair, staring blankly at the wall with a confused expression. Shane imagined running his fingers through Ryan’s hair, how it probably felt ridiculously soft, how Ryan would look up at him with a heart melting grin and say something stupid and okay, yeah, lying to himself wasn’t going to work. The thoughts running through his head definitely did not fall into the ‘friends’ category.

It’s never gonna happen. He could think of at least a hundred good reasons in favour of that off the top of his head, items listing off in a sobering parade. It was better that they stayed friends, no matter what he was feeling. No mess, no uncertainties, no heartbreak. He was going to have to shelve his heart away- for the sake of their friendship, for the sake of the show. Even if they did get together, they’d break up eventually, and what then? Friendship made more sense. He couldn’t get caught up-caught up on some pipe dream. Ryan was straight, for God’s sake!

Oh shit, he was staring. He was staring and he was in love with Ryan and he had no idea what to do now. He looked the other way, pretending not to notice Ryan yawn and hum a little song while rooting through his suitcase.

He needed to get up now. Summoning all his willpower, he forced himself to sit up and put his glasses on. Okay, there went all his energy for the next few minutes. For the moment he was content to sit there and watch Ryan as he carefully refolded his clothes.

“Sleep well?” Ryan asked.
“Like a baby,” Shane replied. Are we gonna talk about…? He tried to gauge Ryan’s expression, but his back was turned.

“You’re like a space heater,” Ryan continued. Okay, they were talking about it. Cool. He was cool, Ryan was cool, everything was cool. “I was boiling in there. It’s a wonder you don’t cook yourself alive every time you go to sleep.”

He yawned. “Insert witty joke here.”

Ryan did a double take. “Did you just-”

Shane raised an eyebrow.

“You can’t just say ‘insert witty joke here’ like it’s a legitimate response!” Ryan said, giggling.

“You’re laughing, aren’t you? I win!” Shane laughed with him.

“It’s not a competition!”

They got ready in the same comfortable silence they lived in during long drives and flights. The weaved around each other in the same room like they were dancing, magnets that could always sense where the other was and keep from touching. Shane wished they could dance together for real.

“What were we planning to do today again?” Shane asked after brushing his teeth. “I hope it’s something suitably spooky.”

“Shane, I told you what we were doing before we came here,” Ryan replied from the main room.

“I know, but I may or may not have lost the trip itinerary you made for me,” he replied sheepishly. “Who does that, anyways? Make a schedule for travelling.”

He heard Ryan’s sigh through the walls. “We are not on vacation, we’re working. We need a work schedule.”

“My work schedule is just make it up as I go,” Shane replied. “And I mean, we’re kind of on vacation. We were partying it up the day we got here.”

“I need a vacation from you,” Ryan said. Shane could practically see him rubbing the space between his eyebrows in consternation. “We’re going to the former voodoo temple today, for the record.”

Shane remembered now that Ryan had said it. “Oh yeahhhh, and we’re meeting Bloody Mary too, right? I hope she lives up to her amazing name.”

“Yes.” Ryan passed by the doorway, shaking his head. “If you paid attention the first time…” He walked out of the hotel room. “I’m going to check out what this place has for breakfast, before you clean out the whole buffet of food.”

“Bring me back a cup of coffee!” Shane called after him.

Shane was getting the impression that Birdbrain and voodoo didn’t mix. From the moment he had crossed the threshold into Bloody Mary’s house a wave of barely controlled panic washed over him; ribs vibrating as Birdbrain slammed against the inside of his skull. He almost lost control to Birdbrain, only to regain it moments later after being introduced as ‘Shane’ to Bloody Mary. She had raised an eyebrow at him but didn’t comment on the way his fingers were twitching. He swallowed hard.
The static filling his head made it hard for him to concentrate on the conversation, leaving him distracted for the entirety of their visit. He gritted his teeth together, trying to calm Birdbrain down. He wanted to learn, wanted to hang on to every word Bloody Mary had to say because it was so goddamn interesting. He wanted to be fully present in the moment for once in his goddamn life, and Birdbrain was making that very difficult. He had no idea what had it so riled up, Birdbrain had never done anything but laugh in the face of other supernatural beings.

Shut up! He shouted at it. Just shut up! Of course it was too much to ask for that to actually work. His head was pounding, and he was only barely managing to keep up with the conversation. It felt like someone had turned his head into a construction site and taken a jackhammer to his brain. He almost collapsed against the wall when they left, the pressure in his skull releasing in a sweet wave of relief.

Oh thank God. Please never do that again. He rubbed his temples and Ryan looked at him in concern. “Need an advil?”

“Nah, I’ll be okay.” Shane tried his best to smile but it probably came out as more of a grimace. “I’ve had worse headaches.”

“Okay mister tough guy, just tell me if you change your mind. I brought a first aid kit for a reason.”

“Boy scout.”

Ryan laughed and jabbed him in the ribs. Shane chased him down the skywalk, laughing as well. How was it that Ryan was able to make him forget the storm inside his head? He felt like he was walking on clouds.

Things were better when they were outside, although Birdbrain still refused to answer the questions Shane lobbed at him. Hopefully things would go fine at the temple.

Shane had a feeling that it was a thin hope. If Birdbrain was going haywire in Bloody Mary’s house, he had no idea how it was planning on staying calm long enough to claim the temple. Would claiming the temple technically be considered desecration even if it wasn’t currently being used? Would some pissed off voodoo spirit appear and try to fight them? Would Bloody Mary be able to tell he was possessed? He didn’t know and was less than ecstatic to find out.

He wished he could be more like Ryan. The guy was buzzing with excitement at the prospect of finding spirits that night. Sure, he was easily frightened, but at least everything in his head seemed to make sense to him.

He waited with heart in throat as Bloody Mary knocked three times on the doorframe before unlocking the temple door. It was only partly because he wanted to get inside before the rain clouds he could see gathering on the horizon broke.

“Why are you knocking?” Ryan asked.

“I always knock. That’s a ritual gesture, letting ‘em know we’re coming, warning ‘em-”

“Is this a thing you would recommend for anyone? Anywhere?” Shane asked. Would it keep ghosts for being pissed off at him all the damn time?

Bloody Mary gave him an eerily knowing look. “Yes. It’s a thing of respect, and it’s a very simple ritual gesture, three times, lets them know you know they’re there, yes.”

I think they know I’m here all right. The energy coming from the house was palpable, and it didn’t
feel welcoming. He could feel the thing watching him. He didn’t think that was a good sign.

Without further ado, Bloody Mary entered the former temple. “Knock on the way out, knock on the way in.” She smiled, reveling in the drama. “Come on in.”

Ryan glanced at Shane, looking less excited now that they were actually entering the place. Shane grimaced but went in before Ryan. Better to not delay the inevitable.

He crossed the threshold. Birdbrain was quiet. It felt like it was waiting to pounce, coiled like a spring. At this point Shane didn’t really care, so long as he was able to make it through the night in one piece. The amount of things Shane was trying to do all at once was making his head spin. Keep Birdbrain in line, check. Keep ghosts from harassing them, check. Don’t break the contract, check. Oh yeah, and have fun and stop overthinking things. Totally achievable.

Well, he’d do his best.

Bloody Mary’s stories of the building helped bring him back to earth. The history of the place was fascinating, although its current appearance didn’t show it. The electrical fire had wreaked havoc on it and now the mix of half-finished renovations and dilapidated scorch marks made it look more like the stereotypical haunted houses that they usually visited. He did his best to appreciate its former grandeur but the dust collecting on his jacket made it a little difficult.

She finally led them to the true entrance of the old temple. Contrary to what Shane had assumed beforehand, the entire building was not the voodoo temple, but rather the voodoo temple was a smaller section of the building.

“So this is the mirror image of the other side,” she said, gesturing at the unassuming doorway.

“Yeah?” Ryan rocked back and forth on his heels, hanging onto her every word. Birdbrain had begun to buzz softly in Shane’s head, though it still refused to speak. Maybe it couldn’t speak inside such a place.

“Still a lot more construction going on here,” she continued, pointing at the pile of lumber beside them. Wow, never would have guessed, Shane thought.

“But this would have been priestess Miriam’s temple.”

Ryan shone his flashlight over the drywall. “So we’re looking at the bare bones right now.”

“Bare bones.” Bloody Mary confirmed. “Just put the sheet rock up. And then left some of the old, two hundred year old brick walls exposed for you.” She gave a pointed look at the wall behind them. Ryan glanced at it nervously, but Shane looked up at in wonder. The whole building was a mix of old fused with new, something that felt fitting with Bloody Mary standing beside them and acting as an amalgamation of old and new herself. He craned his neck to squint at the ceiling, trying to find more signs of the old building.

“I’m gonna go through this threshold and I’m going to open the way before we do, and I’m going to do that ritually,” Bloody Mary said, making Shane jump. She had moved to stand in the doorway, one foot in the temple full of spirits and one foot in their world. The light of their flashlights threw eerie shadows on her face.

Ryan glanced at Shane for reassurance. Shane shifted from foot to foot, looking back at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Okay.” Ryan was fiddling with the hem of his jean jacket. Shane imagined reaching over and
folding their hands together. Ryan was always fiddling, it would be nice to see him still for once. Their hands were inches apart. He put his hands in his pockets.

“I’m going to have you walk through, and then I’m going to have you wander on your own, okay?” Bloody Mary grinned.

He glanced back at Ryan. “You look so scared already.” What were they going to do when they were actually inside? Bloody Mary’s laugh filled the room and he was glad she was with them, glad she was able to fill the quiet, terrifying empty spaces that left too much room for bad thoughts. He didn’t think he would have been able to manage half of his bravery without her there. She might as well have been ten feet tall with her commanding presence, and infectious confidence was something he needed now that Birdbrain was getting agitated, buzzing like a swarm of angry bees.

Ryan glanced around and shuffled closer to him. Shane couldn’t tell whether the move was intentional or not. “I’ve been more comfortable.”

TJ took out the two bottles of beer and the plate of cookies Bloody Mary had told them to bring for the ritual. He stuck his arm between them to hand them over, and Ryan quickly shuffled back away from Shane with some sort of weird half-shrug gesture. Shane chewed the inside of his cheek and stared at his sneakers. Bloody Mary set the food off to the side and pulled out a piece of chalk. With a sigh, Shane kneeled down. This was probably going to take a while. After a heartbeat, Ryan followed suite.

He tried to steal a cookie while Bloody Mary was distracted, but she smacked him on the hand. “Nice try.”

“There are lots of cookies for the spirits, why can’t there be a cookie for me?”

“Only spirits get cookies. No spirit, no cookie.”

Birdbrain technically qualified as a spirit. He was being cheated out of that cookie.

Bloody Mary knocked on the ground in a triangle three times before starting to draw a sigil on the floorboard, singing in a language that Shane didn’t recognize. Her voice twisted through the room, winding around the three of them and them up to the two hundred year old ceiling. Another shiver ran up his spine and he glanced over to Ryan, who stared down at her with his brow furrowed. Shane dug his fingernails into his palm to keep from reaching over. Ryan would pull through. He did everytime.

“So,” Bloody Mary said, engrossed in the winding, swirling design growing from her chalk. “Guardian of the crossroads has a signature symbolic geometric design, known as a veve.”

Shane watched, transfixed, as it took form, brought back to a time where Birdbrain was the one drawing with chalk.

Bloody Mary finished and whistled a three note tune. “To all the spirits of all directions we call upon you the spirits of fire, we want you to come through, the spirits of water, we call upon you, the spirits of air, we request you, the spirits of earth, we give offerings as well, to feed your way.” With each line she put out a different offering: a candle, water, a breath of air, a crumbled cookie. “Do y’all have some coins? I need some coins for the realm.”

“I’ve got some coins right here.” Ryan dug into his pocket, the jangle of change startling Shane from the trance he had fallen into while staring at the candle flame. Birdbrain was mumbling to him, unintelligible words blending together into a staticky, urgent chant.
“Throw 'em on in,” Bloody Mary said.

Ryan poured the coins onto the veve, fingers trembling ever so slightly.

“I, Bloody Mary, voodoo queen, I Mary Millan, I, Alococroix with many names, in the past, in the present, and in the future, call upon the spirits of place to public part. We ask that we may communicate with you, may we see you, may we hear you, may we feel you, may we photograph you with great respect. Open the way. I present my friends, please state your full name.” She held her hand out to Ryan, who leaned backwards. Shane’s palms were sweating.

“Ryan Steven Bergara.”

“And?”

“Shane Alexander Madej.”

He felt like he was supposed to say Birdbrain’s name as well, but he couldn’t think of a way to do it that didn’t make him look insane. It was too late now. He had hesitated and now Bloody Mary was moving on, past TJ’s name and on with the ritual. Shane crossed his fingers and prayed that he hadn’t made a terrible mistake.

“We call upon them, we let you open the way for them to come through today.” She whistled again, the same three note tune. “Open the way.” Her voice rang out like a gunshot and Ryan flinched. Shane reached out a hand to steady him but he pulled away, standing up. Oh.

“Come on in.” Bloody Mary rose slowly into a stand, and Shane joined her, his long legs making it less of a graceful thing and more of an awkward scramble. The fire in his chest was being replaced with ice, a cold fist of anxiety squeezing his heart. They were going to do it. Walk through that door into who knows what. The air was electrically charged, and Shane was struck by just how different this episode felt in comparison to their last ones. How it felt so much more significant, like something irreversible was going to happen. The static in his head was an all encompassing haze now, so loud he could barely make out Bloody Mary’s next words.

“It is best that you walk through backwards.”

“Why is that?” he asked softly.

“Well, everything is supposed to be seen from the mirror image in voodoo, so, it’s kinda like you’re coming through. Born again.” She walked further into the room, waving her hands for emphasis. “You don’t have to.” Something in her eyes made him feel as though that was at least half of a lie. “Really, you should come through dancing.”

“Oh!” he said, and the static escalated into the grating scream of a train racing down the tracks inches away from you.

“I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO FOLLOW. YOU ARE ALONE. REMEMBER OUR CONTRACT.”

The words were like an ice pick through his skull and he flinched. Ryan looked at him in confusion, hand half raised as if he wanted to touch Shane but thought better of it. Shane gave him a grin and a little half shrug as if there wasn’t a chasm opening up inside of him. Panic was flowing in to replace the space Birdbrain took up.

He was going to have to compartmentalize. He was good at that, putting everything into little labelled boxes that he could pick of and inspect at his leisure later in time. It made feeling easier.
Maybe he couldn’t handle everything at once now but if he cut it down he could figure out how things fit together in the quiet moments when people weren’t watching. This seemed like a lot though. He couldn’t help but wonder for a minute if one day compartmentalizing was going to break him.

That’s a problem for future Shane, he decided, because no matter how much it felt like his heart was about to explode from his chest he knew the show must go on. He took a deep breath and shook out his hands. He was going to dance on through that doorway and deal with any problems as they came.

Bloody Mary started clapping a beat so he picked up his feet and danced as best he could, letting his noodly limbs swing around however they wanted. He had never had a sense of rhythm but he didn’t care, there were so many more important things to worry about than how stupid he looked. Ryan laughed and that alone made him forget his panic. If scared little Ryan was laughing, then what did he have to be afraid of?

He let himself have that moment of carefree bliss. Then his foot hit the other side of the threshold and the floor bucked underneath his feet as a great hole opened up inside of him, taking his organs with it. His hands were shaking and he was sweating bullets despite the fact that he felt absolutely freezing, because somehow his chest had turned into a block of ice without him noticing.

“I’m in, Ryan,” he said shakily, but that was a lie, he was missing a piece of himself. Birdbrain was gone and instead of relief he felt weak, and afraid, and incomplete. That was not a good thought.

Ryan giggled, but it rang hollow now that it was his turn. “I see that.” After a moment’s hesitation he danced in too, spinning around as he passed the threshold like a giant dork.

“Oh, look at that!” Shane said in response, but his heart wasn't in it. It was hard to concentrate on anything but the sucking feeling of emptiness in his chest. Focus, focus.

Ryan laughed now that he was safely on the other side. He wasn’t paying attention and stumbled straight into Shane and had to put a hand on Shane’s chest to keep from falling. Shane’s breath hitched as Ryan’s hair brushed against his chin and they almost toppled over. He wrapped an arm around Ryan’s back to steady him but Ryan was already pushing away, bopping backwards to finish up his little dance.

“Yeah, hey, I’m dancing, yeah, that’s good!” he laughed, and it was a genuine one this time. Shane smiled softly at him and rubbed his shirt where Ryan had touched it. For a second it had felt like Birdbrain was back with him, but no, it was just the sunshine that followed Ryan like the opposite of a shadow. Goddamnit, how did someone so dumb manage to be so adorable? It was illegal. Shane should be calling the police on him right now.

Bloody Mary led them deeper into the temple as they finally started the bulk of their investigation. Without Birdbrain’s muttering everything was so much more quiet. He should have been happy, he should have been celebrating his temporary freedom. But mostly he just felt empty. For the first time in six weeks, he was alone.

As they walked through the halls he drifted closer to Ryan, practically top of him even when rooms were wide and full of empty space. He didn’t even realize he was doing it until Ryan jumped backwards at a noise and stumbled straight into him.

“Shit!”

They fell backwards, an awkward tangle of limbs hooking around each other until they were
hopelessly intertwined. There weren’t many times that Shane regretted his height but this was one of them. He barely managed to catch the back of the table, saving the two from landing on the floor like a sack of potatoes. They sat like that for a heartbeat, processing. Ryan’s elbow was digging into his hip. Then his arms gave out and they toppled onto the floor anyways.

Shane groaned. He was getting to old for stuff like this.

“All your bones intact, big guy?” Ryan was sprawled over his chest like a giant cat. A cat made out of rocks, because Ryan had to weigh a thousand pounds.

Shane groaned louder in response. “I’m dying. You’re crushing me, you big oaf.”

Ryan laughed and got up, rubbing his back. “If you come back as a ghost you’re not allowed to haunt me.”

“If I come back as a ghost I’m going to show up at your apartment at two in the morning and start singing wrecking ball as I smash all your plates. Help me up.” He made grabby hands at Ryan. Ryan rolled his eyes but took his hands and heaved him upright. Shane pretended not to notice how nicely they fit together. He kept a couple feet between them after that.

Exploring the house without Birdbrain gave him a lot of time to think. It had been a long time since he had gotten a chance for introspection without someone chiming in with dumb advice every five seconds. So while the silent minutes of waiting for ghosts stretched out he thought long and hard. About the temple, about Unsolved, about Birdbrain. About Ryan. Shane had seen him grow so much over the course of Unsolved. He was still growing, a garden of good qualities coming out of his chest if only he could see it. Shane could see it, from the way Ryan suggested they split up to look around without even a trace of a tremor in his voice. Ryan was willing to face his worst fears every goddamn shoot they did. And what had Shane done? Gotten possessed by a demon and started building even more walls than he had ever had before. Nice. Great way to strengthen a friendship and show that you care. Because Shane did care, so much, only he didn’t know how to show it like Ryan did. Didn’t know how to say it in a way that Ryan would hear.

Shane had read somewhere about binary stars. Sometimes he felt like he and Ryan were binary stars, orbiting around one another, pulled together by some irresistible force, but never touching, always swinging wide before they got too close. Unable to connect, and if they ever did, it would only end in disaster.

That was a depressing metaphor. Maybe it was better when Birdbrain was in his head. As much as it talked in riddles, Birdbrain had no patience for extended metaphors like that one. Okay, Shane, time to keep moving. But to where? He was just meandering the halls aimlessly as Ryan figured something or another out with Bloody Mary. He didn’t feel like talking to ghosts, when it was just him and his camera. It wasn’t exciting when there was no on to listen to him do it, whether that was Ryan or an actual ghost glaring at him from across the room.

He opened a door at random, wandering into a decrepit bathroom. It wasn’t anything to look at, what with the peeled-back wallpaper and mannequin staring at him creepily from behind the shower curtain, but he kind of liked it. It had its own character to it, the suggestion of a life well lived that Shane would never know about. He flaked a bit of the wallpaper off with his fingernail. There was another wallpaper under it, yellow with miniature flowers. The room was kind of like a person, in a way. No matter how many layers you peel off there’s always going to be another one underneath it. Right then, Shane definitely felt like he had more layers of wallpaper than most. A couple of weeks ago he might have been proud of the fact, but right now it felt suffocating.

He tried to sit on top of the toilet, his knees banging up against the tub as he squatted down. The
moment he leaned his weight on it, though, the thing wobbled precariously beneath him, unattached to the ground. He jerked back up and steadied himself against the wall. Standing room only, then. One fall today was enough.

As it always seemed to, his mind wandered to Ryan. How was he doing without him? Bloody Mary was with him, which was good, because he had been looking kind of faint when Shane had left. He wanted to be there for Ryan, to hold onto him tight and never let go. But what Ryan was trying to do, that was something he would have to do alone. All Shane could do was give him a push in what he hoped was the right direction. What Shane was doing, that was something he’s have to do alone as well. Sometimes that was the only way you could figure things out. He hoped Ryan wouldn’t leave him behind.

He was long past due to say something for the camera. The footage he was getting right now would be mind-numbingly boring. Maybe talking to it would help sort out the turmoil in his head. It was a step, an action, something other than the endless pacing around his head like a caged tiger.

“I’m bad at feeling.” Okay, starting off strong. “I want to be swept up in this. I really want to believe in something outside the norms of…” he sighed. “You know, physics.”

There were a lot of things he wanted to believe in. Ryan. Himself. His poor, uncertain heart.

“Ryan’s having a rough time tonight. Poor guy.” Shane didn’t know how he did it, running into places with only his belief to shield him. Shane wished he could have even a little bit of that belief, the ability to trust in something he couldn’t see, couldn’t know for sure whether it was real or not. He wished he could make the jump and just float down on hope.

“Maybe I’m just too in my head.” Maybe seemed like an understatement. He stared at the mannequin for a long time. Maybe if he stared long enough it would open its mouth and tell him the solution to all his problems.

“I took an improv comedy class once, cause I’m a white guy. And uh, they said just get outta your head.” He scuffed his shoe against the ground, making a trail in the dust. “I can’t, though. It’s a prison.” If only anyone watching knew how true that was. He sighed. “I’ve always gotta think about stuff, you know?” Okay, this was getting to deep. Time to lighten things up, Shane. Before you scare the viewers. He pointed the camera towards the mannequin. He felt pinned down under its lense anyways.

“Like the mannequin in this tub, what’s he doing here?” Nice.

He stood in the bathroom for another minute or so, just staring at the wall.

I could do it. I could make the jump and tell Ryan everything.

“You’re not picking up on- let’s go see what Ryan’s doing.”

The only thing standing in my way right now are my own thoughts.

He retraced his steps, hoping he hadn’t managed to get himself lost in the temple.

And logic.

He couldn’t do it.

TJ was in sight. He could hear Blood Mary murmuring from the other room.
He wouldn't do it.

Wouldn’t, couldn’t, did it matter? The main thing was that he wasn’t going to peel back his wallpaper for Ryan. He was too worried that if he did, Ryan would find a graveyard instead of a garden.

“I’m returning,” he said, peering past TJ into the room. Ryan was sitting on the floor, looking like he was peacefully meditating; as though it was a normal thing to do in the middle of the night with a creepy doll watching you and maybe also a ghost. Bloody Mary watched expectantly from the corner of the room. The flashlight set on the floor threw weird shadows on their faces, making it hard to decipher their expressions.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” he took a step backwards.

Bloody Mary grinned. “He’s channeling.” She winked at him and then turned back to Ryan, continuing their conversation. “And you are correct, there is a little boy here. Little boy, I call him Abe, he had requested stones, ten stones; actually he requested jacks.” She pointed at the cupboard and the ten stones sitting in a circle inside of it. Ryan swallowed hard, but didn’t move from his spot.

Shane didn’t see any ghosts, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there, just that there wasn’t anything Birdbrain wanted him to see. Or anything he could see without Birdbrain to guide his vision. He was powerless, stuck relying on his ears and intuition to find ghosts.

They stood there for a while, watching Ryan, barely breathing. The silence was intimate. A moment of serenity to calm his anxious mind. The whole world had shrunk down to just the four of them as they stood and waited for a sign.

“We’ve got to move on with the shoot,” TJ reminded them, making Ryan jump. Shane snorted. Ryan threw the flashlight at him, but missed by a mile.

“If you ever tried to shoot me I’d be more worried about the guy beside me,” Shane laughed, running after the flashlight before it rolled too far.

“Want to give me a gun and find out?” Ryan called after him.

“One death threat per episode is plenty, little guy!” he fished the flashlight out from under a table and jogged back to find Bloody Mary getting ready to leave.

He looked at Ryan, confused. If Bloody Mary was leaving, then there would be nothing between them and all the ghosts who wanted to turn their flashlights on and off and do other mildly inconveniencing things!

“We just need to investigate the upstairs apartment and then we’re done,” Ryan said in explanation.

“Y’all don’t need me for that,” Bloody Mary added, counting coins in her hand. “Think I’ve got enough for subway…”

“The one where the guy killed and dismembered his girlfriend?” Of course it was that one, ghosts didn’t haunt apartments where people lived average and uneventful lives.

“That’s the one.” Ryan's face was forced into a rictus smile. “Same appliances in there and everything, too. Budget cuts, I guess.”

“If it ain’t broke, don’t replace it, eh? Very practical.”
Bloody Mary patted Ryan on the shoulder. “Now, I’m gonna leave y’all alone for a while, I’m gonna go grab something to eat. I’m only gonna close the front door, so the vagrant world doesn’t get in. The spirit world is in your hands ‘till I get back.” She flashed Shane a pointed look before she left, swallowed up by the darkness beyond their flashlights. The tune she was whistling echoed through the halls long after they lost sight of her.

Shane laughed. “Alright.”

“Okay,” Ryan said, looking like he was about to die.

They did not, in fact, die. Shocking. What they did do was some wandering, some shouting, and some sitting in the dark listening to silence. The usual stuff. He felt like it was time to jazz things up by the time they got to the kitchen. He hated to admit it, but without Birdbrain or ghosts he was getting bored. And he still needed to claim the house.

He shone his flashlight over the oven, rusted metal glinting under the chipped paint. “We’ll turn our lights off, I’ll step out.”

“Wait, what?” Ryan was a deer in the headlights. “That was never part of the bargain.”

“Ryan, you have to face your fears.” Push in the right direction.

“I think you just want to see me freak out. That’s what I think.”

Okay, Ryan was onto him. Was it his fault that the entertaining option and the character building option happened to be the same thing in Ryan’s case?

“No. That’s not true,” Shane said, feigning innocence.

“Don’t try and frame it like you’re trying to help me, you dick, I know exactly what you’re up to.” Ryan’s eyes were the size of dinner plates.

“How about I go first?” he conceded.

Ryan nodded and fled the room to stand in safety beside TJ. “Fine, okay, let’s do two minutes.”

“Okay.”

The door shut and Shane turned his light off. “Here we go.” Let’s boogie, boys.

Or not. Just because there was a death here didn’t mean there was a ghost, or else he’d be staring one down every five feet. Most likely he was in for a relaxing two minutes talking to the air. He was trying to convince himself that he was safe even without Birdbrain. “If there’s anyone here, feel free to reach out to me.”

A shiver ran up his spine. He wished he had brought something warmer than a jean jacket but he had been counting on Birdbrain the space heater.

“If maybe there is a restless spirit of the, um, victim?” He felt kind of stupid, talking to nothing. The oven creaked behind him.

“Can you tell me your name?”

Tinkling laughter filled the room and he stiffened, clutching his flashlight like a lifeline. He turned it on. He was alone.
“You’ve got guts coming here, demon boy.”

God fucking damn it. Ignore it. He was just going to ignore it, and maybe it would go away. He felt hands pulling at his jacket.

“How have you come to laugh at me?”

“Not laugh,” he whispered, mouth dry.

“I heard laughter. What if I dismember your friend too, would you be laughing then?”

Oh fuck no. Not Ryan. Not here, when he didn’t have anything to protect them with. Of course the one time they were in serious danger Birdbrain would be MIA. He could punch the stupid demon in its goddamn owl face. He cleared his throat, his words coming out hoarse. “You can’t. You’re a ghost.”

That laughter again, tinkling like bells. It didn’t sound like any human laughter but rather a twisted, distorted facsimile of it. “What are you going to do? You don’t own this place. I do.”

“I don’t think ghosts can legally own anything. Let me take it off your hands.” In retrospect he probably shouldn’t have procrastinated claiming the temple. Still, he had his chalk and like hell he wasn’t going to try to do it now in a last ditch panic filled effort.

It’s just like being back in university.

The laughter grew louder until it turned into a grating screech. Shane’s heart felt like it had been jump started, beating painfully out of his chest. He wondered if Ryan could hear anything or if he was hallucinating.

Something yanked his leg and he fell hard, head knocking into the hardwood floor. His leg caught the tripod and that toppled too, sliding across the floor with a clatter. He kicked it out of the way, not caring if it was broken. He could worry about it later, when he wasn’t in immediate danger of being dismembered by a ghost.

“Is- is everything okay in there?” Ryan called as though from a very great distance. Shane’s vision was swimming. The back of his head was warm and wet.

“Yes,” he called back, voice shaking.

“Still protecting your friend, demon boy? You should concentrate on saving yourself.”

“Oh, I am.”

He gritted his teeth and dragged himself upright, bracing himself against the oven as best he could. He picked a piece of floor at random- no time for secrecy now- and started drawing. The air in the room dropped ten degrees and his teeth started chattering. The line jittered and shook across the floor, his fingers were trembling and he couldn’t stop them. He finished the circle, although it looked more like an egg, and-

Oh God, I can’t remember how to draw it. If only he had been paying more attention, instead of always assuming he could zone out and let Birdbrain pick up the slack for him. I’m an absolute idiot.

It’s okay, this was fine. There was a ghost clawing at his back and he couldn’t really move his limbs properly but it was totally, one hundred perfect fine. His breathing was ragged, it felt like something was pushing hard against his chest, suffocating him-

The oven door slammed down on his ankles and he yelped, pain shooting through his legs like
lightning. He dropped the chalk and it flew across the room, shattering against the wall. *Shit shit shit shit shit shit.* He had no idea how long had passed, he was going to need to leave any second now but he had to figure this out first, before Ryan came in to face the ghost himself. He stared down at the mess of chalk that was supposed to be a sigil and then peered wildly around the room. There was no way he’d be able to claim the house now.

Okay, time for some improvisation. The laughter was deafening him, making it hard to think of anything but his pounding head. The floor swayed under him. What was it that Birdbrain had said yesterday? When it banished the ghost in the Dauphine Orleans? He couldn’t think. Fingers drummed on the walls, drawing closer and closer to the door handle.

“I think your three minutes are up, demon boy. I want to meet your friend now.”

Ryan was counting on him. The thought helped clear his head, bring the world back into focus. It was now or never. “*Vos… vos sunt pulsus spirit- spiritum mundi. Vol- vol- voluantur nec huck- huck in locum.*” He stumbled out the words, but his mouth seemed to know what to do even if his brain didn’t.

With a great sucking sound, the weight on his chest lifted. He collapsed in relief against the oven, now nothing more than a piece of furniture. The kitchen was deadly quiet, save for the blood pumping in Shane’s ears. He let himself sit there for five deep breaths so he could process.

*Inhale. Exhale.*

He had done it.

*Inhale. Exhale.*

He had actually banished a ghost.

*Inhale. Exhale.*

Birdbrain hadn’t been there to swoop in and save him.

*Inhale. Exhale.*

He had survived. They were safe.

*Inhale. Exhale.*

Okay, the five breaths were up. Time to go outside.

“Alright, that was two minutes,” he said, heaving himself up on screaming ankles. He stumbled and almost fell through the doorway, catching himself against the handle at the last second.

“Oh fuck,” Ryan whispered under his breath as he edged past Shane.

“I, uh, I don’t really wanna talk about what happened in there;” he breathed out. “So, why don’t you head on in.”

He wasn’t even completely sure what had happened. It had been a sensory overload and he was spacing out trying to process it all. He regretted even suggesting they do the lock in, but he had and now they had to go through with it. They were safe, that was the important part. Two minutes, and then they were out of this place forever.

“Shut up, Shane.” Ryan rolled his eyes and made a dumb face to mock him. “I don’t really want to
talk about what happened in there," he said in that stupid voice he always put on when imitating Shane.

“Make sure you turn your light out-”

“Wait. What happened to the tripod?” Ryan swiveled his head between Shane and the fallen device. “I heard a bang- two bangs. What did you do?”

“I-” he swallowed hard. “I fell.”

Ryan gave him a once over, frowning. Shane raised an eyebrow. *I’m fine.*

“It’s because of your noodle legs,” Ryan said, and headed into the kitchen to right the tripod. “You’re lucky this isn’t broken, these things are expensive.”

“Yeah.” Shane picked at the edge of his fingernail. The back of his head was throbbing where he hit it. “Are you going in or what?”

“Oh, fuck that.” the blood drained from Ryan’s face. It would have been comical, really, if Shane had had the energy to laugh. At any other time he might have made a joke, too. But he was too lost in the events of the past five minutes to bother today.

“I’ll- I’ll close it for you.” He gently latched the door shut and prayed that the ghost was actually gone and not playing some sort of trick on him. If it tried anything he was going to bust in there and kick its ass, secrecy be damned. *Please don’t let anything happen.*

“Okay,” Ryan said, voice muffled through the door. Then: “Oh my God.”

He and TJ stared at each other from across the hall, listening for any noises from Ryan. Right now they could hear him mumbling an unending stream of babble in an attempt to reassure himself. That was a good sign. If Ryan went silent, then he would start to worry. That would mean something had scared him so much that he had frozen like a deer in the headlights.

“Interesting that he’s talking to them,” he said to TJ. “Always forgets that.” *Never gets an answer.* He checked his watch. “Almost halfway there.”

Shane couldn’t feel any ghosts with them in the hallway. It was cold, sure, but without Birdbrain everything felt freezing. He carefully felt the back of his head and winced. His hand came away sticky with blood, but it didn’t feel too bad. It was already clotting. He was going to be okay. They were going to be okay, just like they had been in the Borden house and the Dauphine Orleans. It was like going through one of those fake haunted house attractions. Sure, in the moment it felt like you were going to die but the minute you made it out the other side everything was fine and dandy again, back to normal. A few minutes of panic, but that was it. Something survivable.

“Was that one of you?” Ryan’s voice was loud and clear, even through the door.

“No…” his heart seized up. *Calm down, Ryan’s just being paranoid as usual.*

“Did you just- just tug on my shirt?”

“No, we’re not in the room with you.” *Neither is anyone else. Ryan is fine.*

“I’m not talking to you!” Ryan’s voice was steeped in panic and Shane dug his nails into the palm of his hands to keep from kicking down the door. *Eleven seconds. Ten seconds.*
He imagined the ghost hurting Ryan and his stomach roiled. He prayed he had made the right choice.

*Five seconds.*

*Ryan is fine.*

*And… “Okay.” Time’s up.*

“Did you just touch the door?” Ryan asked.

“No.” Okay, time to go. Right now.

“There’s something creaking up in the attic.” Ryan was using his fuck-you-ghosts voice. “I’m leaving! Too late, you lost your chance.”

Shane knew he wasn’t one to talk but he wished that for once Ryan could be his usual cringing scared self. For once he wasn’t in favour of taunting ghosts. Not when they could roast him back.

The door handle rattled. “What the- fuck you, Shane, open the door!”

Shane wasn’t touching the door. *Oh shit.* He lunged across the room, fully prepared to rip the door off its hinges if he needed to. *Nice try, you dead fuck.* His fingers closed around the handle and an electric shock jolted up his arm. He jerked backwards as the door flew open by itself, Ryan getting yanked out of the bathroom and straight into Shane’s arms. They both laughed, Ryan in nervousness and Shane in relief. He tried not to notice how close their faces were, so close he could feel the warmth emanating from Ryan in waves. Shane’s heart pounded in his ears and he wondered if Ryan could feel it through his shirt.

“Typical.” Ryan pulled away quickly, face flushed with exhilaration.

Shane smoothed down his shirt, still feeling the ghost of Ryan’s hands on his chest. “We have fun.”

“That’s hilarious.” Ryan rolled his eyes.

They made eye contact for an uncomfortably long time. Shane glanced away first, feeling as though he was under a microscope. “Okay, clumsy, was there anything spooky?”

Ryan looked away too as he handed Shane the tripod. A little banged up to be sure, but nothing drastic.

“Uh, something, I think, tugged on my shirt.” Ryan didn’t even bother replying to Shane’s ‘clumsy’ jibe. He backed away quickly. “I don’t wanna talk about it. I wanna leave.”

Shane hurried after him, heart in throat. He wanted to ask if Ryan was okay but he would probably fuck it up and make the words come out sarcastic. Ryan would take it as an attack with the way his hackles were up. *Haunted house. You’re only afraid because you’ve been removed from real life in here.* He wasn’t sure whether the thought was directed towards Ryan or himself.

TJ was barely able to keep up with them as Ryan made a beeline towards the staircase out of the apartment.

“Anything else we need to do?” Shane asked. God, he hoped not. If there was Ryan would insist on pushing through for the sake of the show, and he looked like he was about to pass out.

“I think Bloody Mary’s gonna come meet back up with us, maybe close the door.” Ryan’s eyes were as wide as saucers as he glanced around into every shadowy corner, refusing to make eye contact.
“Okay.” Hopefully Birdbrain would be back from vacation when they left. *Wait, why am I hoping to get possessed?*

“But, uh, I don’t really know.”

“You don’t wanna, you just don’t wanna be up here anymore.” Neither did Shane. He could feel something watching them, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Even TJ looked unsettled, which never happened.

“I don’t want to be up in this room anymore.”

“Okay,” he said softly.

“Please.” Ryan grabbed the hem of Shane’s jean jacket as though he was prepared to drag Shane down the stairs himself if Shane didn’t move. He looked so soft and fragile, like he would break if Shane said the wrong thing. “Let’s leave.”

Shane swallowed hard. "Okay," he repeated, voice cracking. The world they were in was too small. He needed to feel fresh air on his face and see the crowds of people on the street to feel normal again.

Ryan’s flashlight flickered and he jumped, letting go of Shane’s jacket. “Yep, leaving now.” he muttered.

They barreled down the stairs as quickly as they could while holding expensive camera equipment. Shane resisted the urge to look behind him back up the dark hallway, afraid that he might see something other than TJ chasing them. Ryan couldn’t; he looked back at Shane with wild eyes. When he flicked his flashlight back to the bottom of the stairs he screamed, skidding backwards and almost falling down the last few stairs. Laughter echoed through the stairwell. From the shadows of the old Voodoo temple emerged… Bloody Mary, holding a takeout container.

“Jesus Christ,” Ryan gasped, clutching his chest. “God.”

“That was a good scream,” Bloody Mary replied. "I'd rate it a solid eight out of ten."

Shane laughed. “Cold chinese, the true horror of life.”

“Shut up, Shane.”

Shane only laughed louder. They managed to make it back to the doorway without Ryan jumping out of his skin. Bloody Mary handed the takeout to TJ without a word, and the poor guy had to awkwardly juggle his camera equipment until he could shove it into his backpack. He dropped the audio recorder and they all gasped as it seemed to fall in slow motion. *OH SHIT THAT IS SO EXPENSIVE*- Shane and Ryan dived for it in unison. After a few minutes of panicked juggling they somehow managed to catch it without headbutting the other. Their fingers tangled together and Ryan let go of the recorder as if it had given him an electric shock. Shane frowned and handed back the audio recorder.

“I’m gonna close the door now, if you’re done dropping things,” Bloody Mary called, already standing on the other side of the doorway. They hotfooted it over towards her.

“Should we be on this side?” Shane said, looking for a place to stand that wasn’t covered in drywall. He was eager to get it over with and have Birdbrain return.

“Doesn’t matter.”
“Okay.” He carefully cleared a spot for the two of them to stand off to the side while they waited for Bloody Mary to close the gates.

“We thank all the spirits involved with all the directions and the spirits of the house, the ones we know, the ones we don’t know. We thank them for letting us have a glimpse into their life. And like Baz opened the gates, we now ask to close the way. Ashe!” She clapped, making Ryan jump and Shane giggle. “Lepopo.”

They danced through the doorway again, in reverse order this time. First TJ, then Ryan, and finally it was Shane’s turn to make his way through. His ears popped as he crossed the threshold. Then something solid slammed into his chest, crushing the air from his lungs with a giant whoosh. It felt like he had gotten hit by a truck. He doubled over in pain, hands on knees with his eyes watering. Ryan didn’t notice because he was talking to TJ, but Bloody Mary raised her eyebrows at him. He shuddered and leaned against the wall. His chest was on fire but he was whole again. Birdbrain was back.

The group was up and moving without him and he jogged to catch up, wincing with every step. The initial bone-crushing impact was over with but Birdbrain was shifting around underneath his skin, recalibrating. His head was filling was static. They were saying goodbye to Bloody Mary but he couldn’t focus. His fingers flexed against his will, popping quietly.

They finally stepped back into real life, the neon signs a comforting reminder of normalcy. His head cleared and Birdbrain was silent, settling back into him with a contented sigh. Finally. He went to help TJ and Ryan pack the car but he felt something grab his sleeve. Bloody Mary pulled him backwards, into the alley beside to the temple.

“Do they know?” she asked.

Shane laughed nervously. Birdbrain reared up. Oh shit. “Know what?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You can’t possibly have expected me not to notice the demon you’re carrying with y’all. You’re not being subtle about it,” she laughed. “I'm assuming they don't know. You should see the look on your face.”

Shane was seized with the urge to hurt Bloody Mary, to push her against the wall and choke her till she turned blue. To shut her up. I don’t want that. That’s not me talking. It’s not me, it’s not me, it’s not me. His stomach was roiling, Birdbrain trying to wrench control from him. Shane tried pushing it back, but it was too strong. I don’t want to hurt anyone!

Bloody Mary tapped his arm. “Esse adhuc.”

The tension left his body. He realized he had been looming over Bloody Mary, hands twisted into claws. He hastily stepped away and glanced back towards the car. “Yeah, I’ve got a… roommate they don’t know about,” he admitted.

“Roommate.” she laughed. “I like that.”

Ryan was looking around to see where he had disappeared.

Bloody Mary grabbed Shane’s jacket collar, forcing him to look at her. “Listen carefully now. It’s not my place to tell your secret. Helping you with your ‘roommate’ isn’t something I can do. You and I have two completely different kettles of fish to deal with. I manage Voodoo, not demons. And I don’t think you want me to help, am I right?”

Shane swallowed hard and nodded.
“But what I can do is give you some advice, whether you want it or not.” She paused. She might have been thinking over her next words but Shane suspected that it was purely for dramatic effect. “Remember what I said before. You’ve got to meet in the middle. You need to listen. And you’re going to have to make a couple sacrifices. Most important, though, is to know when the sacrifice isn’t yours to make.”

“Could you have possibly made that any more cryptic?” Shane sighed.

“It could’ve been a hell of a lot worse, trust me.” she let go of him. “Y’all’re always welcome to come visit me again if you find yourselves in New Orleans. ’Till then, I’ve got some takeout to finish.” She waved goodbye to the three of them and headed off, whistling a tune. Or… the two of them. TJ had driven away with all of their equipment sometimes during his conversation.

“What was that about?” Ryan asked just as Shane said, “Where’s TJ?”

“You go first,” Shane said.

“Shane Madej.”

Not now.

“Oh, okay. TJ said he wanted to go visit a friend he hadn’t seen for a while, so he’s gonna bring the equipment back to the hotel and do that-”

“It’s the middle of the night. Who the fuck is up at this hour?” Shane laughed.

“I don’t know, maybe his friend’s a vampire. Anyways, I was thinking we could explore a bit, then call and uber to bring us back to the hotel or whatever. But what did Bloody Mary want? You looked pretty freaked out.”

“She- uh, she…”

“Shane Madej, you have broken our contract.”

What?!

“The sigil was broken. The words were wrong. You have broken our contract and given up your power.”

A shiver ran up his spine. His ribs were overturning.

Wait on fucking second here, you seem to be forgetting about how you broke the contract before I did. If anyone should be pissed off, it’s me. Shane pushed back, but it was like pushing a brick wall. Birdbrain was well rested an angry, and he was exhausted and achy from fighting off a ghost. And so he was paralysed, his body caught between two pilots fighting for dominance. Where were you when the kitchen ghost tried to fucking murder us all?

“You seem to think that this is a negotiation. You forget your place. You forget what I can do to you.”

I think you’re forgetting whose body this is. He pushed harder, even though it hurt. He had had enough of Birdbrain’s talk.

“Would you prefer action? I can give you action. I will take your flimsy, fragile friend and snap him like a twig.” Birdbrain curled Shane’s hands into fists. “You know how strong I am. And it’s been so
long since I’ve felt good hot blood on my hands. Did you really think you could control a demon? The only people who would ever know what happened to poor Ryan Bergara would be you and me. Disappeared, they’d say. Just one more of those mysteries he loves so much.” Birdbrain was laughing at him, a gleeful, vicious screech. Shane wished Birdbrain had a body so he could punch it in its goddamn fucking stupid owl face.

Don’t you fucking dare touch a hair on his head.

“You should have thought about that before you broke the contract. Let’s see if his smile still reminds you of the sun after I’ve pulled out all his teeth.”

Shane wanted to cry. Stop. It was taking all his willpower just to stay in place, his entire body working against him to try to hurt the person he so desperately wanted to protect. Give me a second chance, one more. We both fucking up, each cancels the other out- Don’t overreact-

“You said you wanted me to act. I will act. You should have appreciated our alliance while you had the chance. Because now that it is broken there is nothing stopping me from hurting the both of you, breaking every bone in both your bodies-” Birdbrain was enjoying this. It was all some sort of sick game. Shane had never been good at games.

Shut up. Shut up. SHUT UP.

“Shane? Earth to Shane.” Ryan’s voice sounded like it was coming from a great distance.

“Beaten, broken, bloody, bruised, this petty world’s violence is nothing compared to what I can bring. You have no idea how it feels to crack open a man’s rib cage with your bare hands like I do but oh, how you’ll learn-”

“SHUT UP!” The words ripped out of him, visceral. He clapped his hands over his mouth, cringing away from Ryan. Oh shit. He had said that out loud.

Ryan cringed away from him too, face twisted in disbelief. “The fuck?”

“Sorry I- I wasn’t-”

Birdbrain was laughing at him.

“Wasn’t paying attention?” Ryan spat. “Cause it sure seems like you’ve been doing a lot of that lately. What the fuck is up with you. Am I so boring that you need to have a conversation with yourself to keep entertained?”

“I was- I didn’t-” What the fuck was he supposed to say?! It was too late to come up with any sort of excuse. He felt like he was going to throw up. “Let’s just calm down a little bit.”

“Don’t you fucking dare tell me to calm down, Shane Madej.” Ryan growled, deadly still, staring Shane down like an avenging angel. Oh shit, we’re pulling out the last names. “You’ve been acting like a crazy person and, to be honest, I’m kind of worried!” Ryan laughed, hysterical.

“Hey at least I don’t believe aliens are coming down to abduct us all, right?” Shane laughed nervously, trying to defuse the situation. He was already slapping himself for it, but jokes were the only things he knew how to use in these situations. “That would be really crazy.”

Wrong move, because he could never say the right thing.

“Is everything just some big old fucking joke to you, Shane?!’” Ryan yelled.
“Hey. Hey. Calm down! Let's just think for a second-” he didn’t know how to explain what was happening, Birdbrain was egging him on with hot anger, and he didn’t know what to do-

“I do not need to chill, Shane. You’re the one who doesn’t care enough. What, do you think the world’s going to wait for you as you zone out, or leave to sulk like some sort of five year old, or miss deadlines at random, or loose footage out of your own carelessness! Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way the video skips around on our location shoots.” Ryan barked out a humourless laugh. “Wake up! I’ve built my career on Unsolved, clawed my way up here with blood sweat and tears. And honestly, I think you just don’t care about it. You don’t understand how much work I put into it. And if you’re not committed, then you can leave, or tell me what’s happening so I can help you!”

Ryan could have punched him in the gut and it would have hurt less. “Ryan, no- Of course I care about Unsolved! Working on it has been better than I could have ever hoped for. You can’t possibly believe what you’re saying, I care about it, I care about you- The truth is-” it was all spilling out now, whether he wanted it to or not. His wallpaper was tearing back in great peeling chunks. "Well- I’ve been having some personal stuff, which is-”

“Then why didn’t you tell me? You can tell me anything. God knows I tell everything to you! Do you ever trust me at all?” Ryan was shouting now. His eyes were shining. A dam had broken in both of them, and now they were drowning in the floodwaters.

“Ryan-” Shane grabbed his sleeve, going to pull him into a hug, trying to make everything better because he didn’t know how to do it with words. Ryan ripped his arm away.

“Don’t.” Ryan’s voice was dead. “Just don’t.”

He turned his back to Shane and stalked down the street. Shane stood there, speechless, arm still outstretched, for a very long time, long past when Ryan disappeared from sight. Ryan didn’t look back once.

Everything is going horribly wrong.

“One last chance.”

The crow sitting on the temple’s roof laughed at him.

“The contract is still in place. Claim another house in place of this one or it will be broken for good.”

Shane already felt broken. He slowly sank down to sit on the curb and put his head in his hands.

“Do we have a deal, Shane Madej?”

Everyone had left the street, off to find better places to spend their night. He was alone. It always felt like he was at least a little bit alone.

Okay.

Okay, you’ve got your deal.

Shane’s ribs overturned, but this time he gave up his power gratefully.

Chapter End Notes
Wow that was a wild ride eh?? If you enjoyed this feel free to check out my tumblr
@ryans-ghostly-wheezes
As always as I appreciate every comment you guys leave here :)


Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter involved a lot of labourious rewriting to get it to a point that I was satisfied with, but I think I finally managed it! The Devil's in the Details is a real labour of love and I want to be sure I'm producing the highest quality work I can. You guys don't deserve anything less. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ryan stalked down the street, seething. He couldn’t believe Shane. He couldn’t believe himself. He walked aimlessly, not caring where he went. He needed to keep moving and work out the pent up anger flowing through him. To lose himself in the sound of the blood pumping in his ears.

_Goddamn insufferable enigmatic son of a bitch._ Couldn’t he see that it wasn’t about Unsolved, not really? Ryan was fine carrying the weight of the show if that was what Shane needed to be okay. It was the fact that Shane was hiding something, that Shane was hurting, that made Ryan flip out. Shane didn’t understand that life didn’t work that way, that it was never one person standing against the world. Ryan wanted desperately to stand with him, but how could he if Shane didn’t trust him?

As if he needed any more bad luck, thunder boomed overhead, and the clouds that had been threatening rain all day finally opened. His jean jacket was soaked through in seconds. _Wonderful._

_Just fucking wonderful._ He entered one of the bars lining the streets at random, just hoping to get out of the rain. He stood in the doorway shivering, and shook water from his hair. The neon lights blurred his vision, making him feel like he was dreaming. He wished it was a dream. Shane was hurting, and Ryan had lashed out and made it worse because he couldn't keep his emotions from boiling over like they always did.

“Party of one?” a waitress with sharp eyes and box braids asked.

“Actually I’m just—” _Enh, fuck it._ “I mean yeah, it’s only me.” _Might as well get a drink while I wait for the rain to stop._ It wasn’t like he had anything better to do. He had run off all his anger, and now he just felt sad and lost. He sat down at the bar in a haze. It took him a good five minutes to notice how empty it was, and that was only because of the eerie quiet. Even the TV was down to a low buzz. He was alone save for the employees and a handful of college girls who were drunkenly braiding each others’ hair, giggling.

“We’re closing in an hour,” the waitress said. Her razor-sharp eyes softened and she gave him a sympathetic look, patting his shoulder before walking off. Damn, he must look like a hot mess to get that response.

The bartender wandered over while wiping down a glass. He looked like Eugene if Eugene had decided to grow a beard and become a lumberjack. “Can I get you anything, or are you just going to sit there looking like a drowned rat?”

“Do you treat all your customers this way?” Ryan asked.

“Only my favourites.” the bartender grinned cheekily at him in a way that was startlingly similar to Shane’s shit eating grin. Ryan sighed.
The bartender, whose upside down name tag labeled him Matt, winced. “Okay, I'll bite. You need a rum and coke and a shoulder to cry on, stat. What’s given you the long face?”

“It’s a long story.”

“The rain’s not gonna stop anytime soon. And the longer I stand here talking to you the less likely it is that someone’s gonna ask me to sweep the floor.” Mat slid him a drink, paper umbrella perched jauntily inside it. Ryan wanted to tear it in half.

So Matt wasn’t going to let him sit around and sulk. And since it couldn’t be a worse idea than storming off in an unfamiliar city in the middle of the night, he let the whole story spill. Shane’s spacey, weird, and frankly concerning behaviour, how footage kept going missing and all Shane had to offer were increasingly thin excuses, how his and Shane’s tiny standoffs had led up to this big, explosive shouting match over everything and nothing at all. By the end of it all, two empty glasses sat in front of him and he was halfway through a third. His clothes were finally starting to dry and he was feeling pleasantly tipsy.

“This Shane guy sounds like quite a handful,” Matt commented.

“You have no idea,” Ryan said, then felt bad. He scratched his eyebrow. “I mean, he’s a giant, infuriating asshole, but I care about him. I think that’s the whole issue, really.”

“Yeah?” Matt had been cleaning the glass he was holding for twenty minutes now.

“Yeah. It’s just that I’m always so invested in things, and with Shane you can never tell. He’s so- so-” Ryan snapped his fingers, searching for the right word.

“Uncaring? Impassive? Nonchalant?”

“Yeah! Nonchalant. No matter what happens he’s always so calm and collected. Not that that’s a bad thing, but it would be nice to have a sign that he cares. I can’t read his mind. And he’s been even more nonchalant- nonchalant-ier? - more nonchalant- than usual. Like, I said that already, but he’s always got this distant look in his eye and he zones out a lot and he’s always fiddling with his hands- he never used to do that- and just being super distant. And I’m worried because, like, was it something I did? Is there something crazy happening in his life that he doesn’t think he can tell me about? Am I overthinking this? I don’t know!” Ryan took a long drink of his rum and coke and sighed. "Maybe he isn’t pretending and actually doesn't care."

Ryan knew that wasn't true but sometimes the dark parts of him couldn't help but wonder. He wanted Shane to care. About Unsolved. About him.

There were so many moments where the two of them were lost in silence, Shane looking far away into the future. Ryan wished he could join him there, in whatever world he was imagining. He always felt stuck on the outside, tracing the outline of Shane’s face in the sun. There were unfathomable depths in Shane’s eyes, and he wanted to understand him just as much as he wanted to understand the secrets of every case they covered on Unsolved. He wished he could appreciate a mystery for what it was like Shane could, but Ryan needed to figure out how the puzzle pieces fit together. With Shane it always felt like he was two puzzle pieces short.

“Do you think he’s doing it on purpose?” Matt asked.

“I don’t think so. God, I hope not.” Ryan traced a finger over the rim of his glass. “I just- I just wish I could see inside his head. I wish I could know for sure if he cares about me as much as I care about him.”
“Listen. You’re not gonna like this, but I think the unsurety is important.” Matt nodded sagely, eyes closed.

Ryan laughed. “Shane would love you.”

“I’m serious. You need to have faith. Give him a part of yourself and have faith he’ll give you a part of himself in return. That’s what love is: mutual blind faith,” Matt said. “Without it you’re only suffering alone.”

“That’s nice, but Shane and I aren’t in love.” Ryan laughed. “Just friends.” But something in the statement rang hollow.

“Wait, what? And here I was thinking that this was some good old fashioned boy drama.” Matt gave a one-shoulder shrug. “The same advice applies to friendships too though.”

“Wait. Stop talking. I need to think for five seconds.” Ryan held up a hand. Matt snorted and walked away to stack martini glasses, finally giving up on the one glass he had polished to a meticulous shine.

Ryan stared intently down at the bar as his mind raced, putting together a case file, connecting the dots. He cursed himself for drinking. He needed all his critical thinking skills right now.

The question: Was he in love with his best friend, Shane Madej?

Theory #1: No. No way.

Evidence: He and Shane had been friends for years. They were close, closer than he was to anyone else. Friends got jealous sometimes, that was normal. Friends cared about each other, that was normal. Friends teased and poked fun at each other and cheered each other up and bought each other lunch. That was all normal friendship stuff. He loved spending time with Shane, but he was happy with their relationship the way it was. They cruised the world searching for ghosts then went to sleep in separate beds. Their friendship was simple. It was easy.

Theory #2: Yes.

This was the theory Shane would laugh at. This was as crazy as aliens, or ghosts, or zombies. But it was a theory, and Ryan had to entertain all theories.

Evidence: The night they had arrived in New Orleans, they took a drive around in their rented car to get a feel of the city. To have fun. Just the two of them, listening to the dulcet tones of the ghostbusters theme song. It was four in the morning and the streets were empty save for a few lonely people returning from the bars. They were nothing but silhouettes gathered under the light pooling from the streetlamps, ghosts who couldn’t stand the shadows.

They had turned into a McDonalds drive thru to pick up some McNuggets for TJ. Stuck behind a red pickup truck, they sat waiting for what felt like hours. But they weren’t impatient. They were content to sit in silence and bask in the peace that only came with back roads and late nights. Ryan watched Shane when he wasn’t looking, distracted by something far off in the distance that Ryan couldn’t see. His face was lit up all red from the traffic lights beside them, backlighting his head like a bloody halo. Shane had such an interesting face, soft and sharp all at once. He always looked like he knew something you didn’t, but that he was about to lean over and let you in on the secret. It was his eyes, Ryan decided. They softened all his expressions into something gentle.

Shane glanced over and caught Ryan staring, and he had smiled with all the softness in the world. Ryan had made a joke, and Shane had laughed- that big, boisterous laugh that made his face crinkle
up and Ryan feel all warm and fuzzy inside, like his heart had been set on fire. It was such a simple moment, but in that car, laughing with Shane in a McDonald’s drive thru, Ryan had thought: *This is it. This is what I want to be doing for the rest of my life.* Laughing about dumb things, travelling the world, making every moment feel like coming home and discovering new roads all at the same time. Spending every moment with Shane, because as enigmatic as he was, Shane was safety. Shane was home.

Fuck. Suddenly theory #2 felt like the most sane theory in the world. It was like saying the sun was hot- Ryan wasn’t sure how he felt about the statement but it was irrevocable and unquestionably true. It was unavoidable. And he had exploded at Shane and quite possibly pushed him away when Shane needed him most.

He jumped from the barstool and fished through his pockets for his wallet, slamming a twenty down on the counter. “I hope this covers everything! Keep the change!” he called, shrugging on his jean jacket. It was still damp and it took him three tries to fit his arms into the sleeves. He felt as jittery like he had drank an entire pot of coffee, buzzing from the revelation and what it meant.

“Where are you going in such a rush, dude?” Matt called after him.

“I realized something! I think I’m in love with Shane after all! I gotta tell him!”

“Woah there, you sure that’s a good idea?” Matt said with the tone of someone who was used to dissuading drunk people from doing stupid things.

“I don’t know but I at least need to apologize.” Ryan already had one foot out the door. “I’m just going to do it- you know, to have faith, like you said. I’m gonna jump and if I fall, I fall, but I’m going to do it anyways. Despite of that. Whatever. I’m tired of thinking, of gathering evidence without results. I need to act.” He couldn’t wait any longer- if he did he was going to get cold feet and get stuck pacing in circles all over again. He didn’t know if he could bear that.

He raced out the door, stumbling a little over the steps. Matt chased after him and called out the door, “Don’t fucking drive anywhere! And for God’s sake, don’t you dare visit a tattoo parlour!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t!” Ryan gave him a little salute and then turned and sprinted back towards where he had left Shane. It was still drizzling, but he could barely feel it- he had fire flowing through his veins, warming him from the inside out.

He skidded to a stop outside the old temple, and then looked around in confusion. There was no one in sight. Only now did he realize that Shane wouldn't have stood around waiting for him for the past half hour. *Shit.* Shane could be anywhere, and with every second that passed Ryan’s resolve was failing. At a loss, he grabbed his phone and texted the man.

Ryan (me): *where r u*

Ryan (me): *i nede to tell u something imprtant*

He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet as he stared at the screen in anticipation. Not for the first time, he wished Shane would check his goddamn phone more often. The three dots appeared and finally, *finally,* Shane responded.

Bone Stilts: *I'm in the park across from the temple.*

Bone Stilts: *I called an Uber, you can join me if you want.*

Ooh, he was using punctuation. That was never a good sign. Ryan didn’t bother to respond. He
raced across the road and into the park, barely remembering to look both ways beforehand. He entered it at a sprint, but slowed to a jog, then a walk, as he made his way through the maze of shrubbery without hide nor hair of Shane. The drizzling rain coupled with the exercise had helped to sober him up, and now he was having serious doubts about his course of action. Walking up to Shane and saying “I think I’m in love with you” out of nowhere suddenly seemed like a terrible idea. What had he been thinking?

But what was he going to do instead?

Of course, he could always go for the classic “do nothing and suffer for the sake of friendship” route. That would be fine. He’d gone this long as nothing but friends, it would be easier staying that way. He’d find someone else eventually, and the feelings would pass. No fuss, no mess.

Just quiet nights spent wondering what might have been.

*You need to have faith. Give him a part of yourself and have faith he’ll give you a part of himself in return.*

He would do something- he had to.

*Do not be afraid.*

But he was afraid. He was terrified that he would jump and that there would be nothing to catch him but the rock hard ground. For all he believed in ghosts it was so much harder to believe in emotion. You could never prove it was there until it was too late.

He couldn’t decide what was worse: to know and be disappointed or never know.

“Ryan!” a voice called. He whipped around to see who it belonged to. It was Shane, of course, melting out of the darkness like a ghost. He had a leaf in his hair as if he had been rolling around on the ground or something. He grinned widely, like he had already forgotten their argument.

“Shane! Shane I’m sorry about—”

Shane grabbed his shoulders, steadying him, and Ryan’s heart jumped. His skin felt like it was on fire, he was so jacked up on alcohol and adrenaline that everything felt like it was happening in ultra high definition.

“Hey. I’m sorry too. We’ve both done some stupid stuff. But I’m tired of the apology tango we’ve been dancing. What we need to do is sit down and have a nice long conversation about…” he gestured vaguely. “This.”

“Wait, did you actually have a good idea? Did you get possessed by tree demons or something while you were rolling around in the grass waiting for your Uber? It’s about time we solve our bullshit like rational adults!” *Thank you,* he wanted to say, but he didn’t want to get sappy. Not when Shane looked so peppy, like the argument had meant nothing.

Maybe talking would give Ryan the puzzle pieces he needed to crack open the enigma that was Shane Madej. Maybe he could finally tear down the walls that had been built between them.

Shane squeezed his shoulder just a little too hard before he let go, his smile pulling a little too wide to be genuine. “Someone gave me some good advice while I was waiting for you to come back.” he squinted at Ryan. “But we also need to do that another time when we’re more coherent and less… drunk. You’re a little drunk right now, Ryan.”
“Shut up, no I’m not.”

“I’ve been your friend long enough to tell these things. You can’t fool me,” Shane laughed and glanced down at his phone. “The Uber’s here. Come on, I want to show you something.”

He strode off, so quickly that Ryan had to jog to keep up with him. He had a wild, reckless spark in his eye that Ryan had never seen before.

“It’s like three in the morning, can’t it wait til tomorrow?”

“No, no, it needs to happen tonight. Don’t worry, you’ll love it.” Shane grabbed his wrist to pull him along faster.

Shane definitely seemed strange right now, but Ryan couldn’t tell whether or not it was because he couldn’t think straight. He felt disoriented, too much happening in his head to concentrate on where Shane was taking him.

They piled into the Uber, a puke-coloured minivan that looked like it was held together by duct tape and prayers. In any other circumstances he’d be apprehensive about trusting it with his life but tonight he didn’t think twice about it. He was too busy trying to puzzle out what was going on inside of Shane’s head. It wouldn’t have been the first time Shane had surprised him with something on a whim, but why here? Why now? Shane was acting like things between them were normal, like he couldn’t feel all the walls and strangeness that had been put up between them. Maybe Shane just didn’t care. Maybe he wanted the walls up. Maybe Ryan had overestimated their intimacy, mirrored the fire he felt back into Shane because he desperately wanted to see it there. He didn’t understand his own feelings well enough to even hope to understand Shane’s.

Shane looked at him out of the corner of his eye like he was trying to tell Ryan something without using words, but Ryan couldn’t understand. He needed words in a way Shane never did. He wanted to know once and for all what Shane thought of him, but he couldn’t find the right words to ask once he had opened his mouth. What was the point of drinking if it didn’t even make you brave enough to say the things you need?

He couldn’t recognize any of the streets they passed. Everything blurred together in a hazy smear of neon lights outside the car window. Shane smiled at Ryan in reassurance, and he didn’t feel so worried anymore. Whatever happened would work out, because they always seemed to do that with Shane. Ryan just had to have faith.

The car sputtered to a stop. At first he thought it had broken down but no, Shane was leaning forward to pay the driver, so they had to have arrived. Wherever it was, it wasn’t the hotel. They were in some sort of high end suburban neighbourhood, all stately houses and gated yards. He got out, confused, only to stop and stare open mouthed at the house looming before him. The entirety of its sprawling, two story exterior was painted black as pitch, from its gabled roof to the stone steps leading up to it. The lawn was overgrown, weeds and thorny ivy climbing the walls. The windows were boarded up with graffitied plywood. It looked like someone had taken every single horror movie stereotype and shoved them all into one building. Add some well placed thunder and lightning and they would have been all set.

Shane joined him in staring up at the house. They stood in silence as the car drove off. Shane looked serene standing there, unbothered by the wind that chilled Ryan to the bone.

“This isn’t the hotel,” Ryan said, at a loss.

“No,” Shane replied. “It’s not.”
This is gonna be long but basically chapter nine is where we come to the end of my chapter buffer. I post faster than I write, especially since chapter eight took so long to write. So Plan A is that I'm going to try to do a writing sprint and carve out more time to write rather than stalk tumblr all the time. If that works out I'll keep posting every friday. But depending on how successful it is I might need to extend the release dates to once every two weeks (Plan B). It pains me to do it, but I want to give you the highest quality work possible, and good writing takes time. I need to sit on chapters and let them simmer to get the best edit. It's a long haul and a lot goes on behind the scenes to bring you this (love you, beta readers!). Punctual posting is important to me, so I wanted to keep you all up to date on the writing situation. I'll keep writing, and hopefully I'll see you next friday!

Thank you all for your continual support, and as always feel free to talk to me on @ryans-ghostly-wheezes (although I won't be on there often, I'll be writing!)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK! Did you guys miss me? Or at least the story, ahaha. I haven't been able to write as much as I wanted to, so we're still stuck on the two week schedule :( (Thanks for your support and patience with me, it means so much to know you've got my back :) Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Where are we?” Ryan breathed. That is not the face of a building that has had anything good happen to it.

They stood so close he could hear Shane’s even breathing. He wondered if Shane knew what he was doing to Ryan, making him feel like his organs were melting into the ground.

Shane shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Long story short, this place is supposedly haunted, emphasis on supposedly. Y’know, like every other house in New Orleans. It used to be a safe house for some rum runners in the twenties before it was busted by the cops. There was a shootout, couple people died, classic gangster movie stuff. It was a good time all around.

“The place eventually got redone to match the rest of the neighbourhood in the eighties but no one lives there anymore. The last family moved out because they claimed they could hear gunshots in the basement, and that disembodied hands pushed them around. At least, that’s what the owner told me. Personally, I can think of plenty of reasonable explanations for those things but everyone’s saying its ghosts.” he scratched his nose. “To be fair, it does look like a goth hellhole.”

Okay, so it was ghosts. The usual. He punched Shane lightly in the arm. “Okay, okay, I’m Shane and ghosts aren’t real, blah blah blah, but why are we here at ass o’clock in the morning? Save it for Unsolved, I could be sleeping.”

“Well, uh. You know.” Shane shrugged, scraped at the pavement with the tip of his shoe. “I’ve heard you wonder a couple of times about whether the lack of ghosts on the show is because they claimed they could hear gunshots in the basement, and that disembodied hands pushed them around. At least, that’s what the owner told me. Personally, I can think of plenty of reasonable explanations for those things but everyone’s saying its ghosts.” he paused. “And me of course, to keep your mind from melting. Maybe you’ll finally find the compelling proof you keep chasing after.”

“Oh.” Ryan hadn’t thought Shane had actually been paying attention when he had said it. He had been staring at the window, out to lunch as Ryan wondered aloud. The fact that Shane had done all this was surprisingly… considerate.

“Oh.” Ryan hadn’t thought Shane had actually been paying attention when he had said it. He had been staring at the window, out to lunch as Ryan wondered aloud. The fact that Shane had done all this was surprisingly… considerate.

“Or further prove how delusional you are for believing ghosts and that I’m on the right side of history.” Shane gave him his classic, infuriating grin and walked up the cracked stone path. Ryan hesitated to follow. Something felt off about the whole place. Of course something feels off you idiot, it’s haunted.

“I’ve already got an okay to poke around for the guy that owns the place, so don’t worry about that.” He glanced back at Ryan. “Come on! Don’t tell me you’re scared.”
That was all he needed. “Shut up, Shane,” Ryan muttered before jogging to meet him.

Shane was fiddling with the door, grumbling. “It’s stuck.”

“I’ll try, noodle arms.” Ryan pushed him aside and tried the handle. It open easily, and he almost fell through the doorway. Okay, that’s weird. He let it slide, though. He’d wait at least a few minutes before opening himself up to Shane’s skepticism. He wanted to bask in the consideration of the act for as long as it lasted.

Shane pushed past him through the doorway. “Well, this is disappointing,” he said. “I was hoping there’d be some cobwebs, peeling paint, maybe even some blood on the walls.”

The interior did have a surprising normality to it in comparison to exterior. It could have been mistaken for any old suburban house, if it wasn’t for the complete lack of furniture or appliances. The emptiness made their voice echo.

“Shane, all you do is complain about the nastiness of the places we visit.” Ryan swept his phone flashlight across the room. No eyes stared out at him from the darkness, but his skin was still crawling.

Shane laughed. “The one good thing about the grossness is that it freaks you out. Oooo, I’m lil scared Ryan running away from those terrifying dust piles.”

“I’m starting to think that you didn’t bring me here out of the goodness of your heart.”

Shane made a ridiculously overdone face of hurt and clutched a hand over his heart. “You wound me.” Ryan could practically see the halo over his head.

The door swung shut with a thump that resonated in Ryan’s bones. He scrambled backwards, straight into Shane’s chest. Shane laughed and Ryan could feel the vibrations through his shirt.

“It’s nothing but the wind, Ryan.”

His heart was pounding, but not from fear this time. He and Shane were so close that he could feel Shane’s breath on his hair. Shane was anchoring him down, keeping the looming feeling of dread that surrounded the house at bay. There was nothing stopping him from opening his mouth and saying those damned words. Have faith. “Shane, I-”

“Come on, let’s explore. We’ve only got an hour or two before we have to leave.”

Ryan had hesitated to long. Shane turned away and moved deeper into the house.

Matt was right. If he said anything he would regret it. Shane was straight, for God’s sake. Nothing could come from it but broken hearts and hurt. And what about Unsolved? If he said something and Shane pushed him away, the show would tank. Unsolved was Ryan’s baby. He wasn’t risking that.

The padded softly through the first floor, Ryan watching Shane instead of the shadows swirling just outside the range of his flashlight. The dead silence made each footstep echo like a gunshot. He shivered, feeling as though the light was the only thing protecting him from feeling cold fingers on the back of his neck. The deeper they went into the house the worse he felt. He edged closer to Shane, but for once this wasn’t a comfort. Shane was distracted, trying to look everywhere at once, not paying attention to a word Ryan said. He barely said a word himself, and his taunts read like he was just going through the motions. It felt like he was searching for something he didn’t want to find. He clutched his flashlight with white knuckles as he swept it back and forth across every inch of the tiled floor. Ryan grabbed his elbow, trying to offer some comfort in a strange reversal of roles. Shane
shrugged his hand away and walked even faster down the hall. Ryan didn’t try again.

Shane had promised to talk, and Ryan would have to have faith that he would do so when he was ready.

That didn’t stop him from wishing that they had gone home after the voodoo temple instead of coming here. Thoughtful gesture or no, everything about the situation had grown an unnatural tint, as though he was looking through a mirror that was ever so slightly warped. But he was stuck here now, he had stepped on this path when he stepped into the Uber- no, earlier than that, when he had stepping into the bar. He felt a storm brewing, inevitable and uncontrollable. He didn’t want to be there when it hit. He didn’t think he had a choice.

“Shane?” he called hesitantly. “I don’t think any ghosts want to come out to play tonight. Let’s go back to the hotel, I can call TJ-”

“No!” Shane shouted, before smiling crookedly as if it would erase the strangled scratchiness in his voice. “We haven’t checked out the basement yet! That’s supposed to be the worst part- they kept all the moonshine there…”

“Shane, I don’t like this place. It doesn’t feel right.” Ryan didn’t know how to articulate the creeping feeling of dread that had stolen over him. His skin was crawling like there were ants underneath his skin.

“Oh, come on, you say that to every house we go. Let’s poke around for five minutes, then we can go. Promise.”

Ryan chewed on his lip. Thunder was in the air, rolling down over the horizon. But he refused to leave without Shane. He wouldn’t abandon his friend, he’d rather drown in the storm.

Shane rolled his eyes, moving halfway down the staircase so that he was just one more of the shadows that suffocated Ryan. His smile was a knife slash across his face. “It’s cold in here. Bad ventilation. That’s what’s giving you the heebie jeebies, not Casper the friendly ghost.”

“Bad ventilation?” Of course Shane couldn’t feel it. It was all in Ryan’s head, the darkness making his mind melt. He had never found the thought so comforting.

“Two minutes. Show me that ghosts are real.”

“I’m holding you to that promise.”

A storm was coming, and he was lost at sea. He could only hope that the boat he was tied to would survive the waves.

He followed Shane down the stairs. The earth swallowed them up, dark and hungry.

The basement was so dark that their flashlights’ attempts to illuminate it were laughable at best. From what little he could see, it was carved roughly from the dirt, a half finished afterthought in comparison to the immaculate ground floor. The floor was made from rough hewn wood, although it was covered by so much dirt it might as well not have been. They walked down the long hallway, every so often passing doorways boarded up by rotting wood. He stumbled over a strap of metal, a relic left over from a hundred years ago. Ryan felt like they were exploring something better left alone, like grave robbers inside an ancient king’s tomb.

“Is- Is there anyone in here with us?” he asked, voice wavering. Dust fell from the ceiling and coated his hair and shoulders, sticking to the still damp denim of his jacket like glue. “Anyone looking for a
drink? I had a few before coming, they were good… You missed out…”

He kept as close behind Shane as he possibly could as they headed deeper into the basement, heart in throat. There was a loud clatter and he jumped, instinctively clinging onto Shane’s elbow for comfort.

“I stepped on some of the metal stuff laying around, jeez.” Shane laughed at him, before jerking his elbow away. “Scaredy cat.” Ryan watched him walk away and tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his chest.

The darkness closed too far in on him and he ran to catch up, feeling strangled by it. “My coward reflexes mean that when the ghost of a 1920s mobster comes to strangle you, I’ll be out the door before you’ve even finished laughing at its—” he walked straight into Shane, who had stopped dead in his tracks. “Hey, what’s the hold—” he trailed off when he saw what made Shane stop. “…up.”

Shane’s flashlight illuminated the scene like a spotlight. Spanning wall the wall across the narrow hallway, a massive pentagram had been painted on the floor. The dirt had been brushed away in an eerily perfect circle, not one pebble out of place. Despite that the pentagram looked hastily constructed, each line a raw, spattered slash the colour of dried blood. Burned into the floorboard in spindly handwriting was a barely legible inscription. The floor underneath was stained dark by something Ryan guessed wasn’t fruit punch.

“Holy shit…” he breathed and stepped backwards, using Shane as a shield between him and the pentagram. “You didn’t tell me there was cult stuff!”

“I didn’t know there was cult stuff!” Shane replied. “Hey, what’ll you pay me to lay down on it?”

“Oh no, we are not having a repeat of the Sallie house.” Ryan edged away from the pentagram, hoping that Shane would get the hint and they would leave.

“You’re boring. Nothing even happened.” Shane stepped into the pentagram, squinting at the inscription. “For all you know this could be a list of Elvis’ greatest hits.”

“In latin.”

“Demons need to listen to music too!” he traced a finger over the letters. “I can’t read it. If only I had paid attention in demon summoning class when I was in high school.” he clenched his fist and looked off into the distance dramatically.

Ryan rolled his eyes and looked over Shane’s shoulder, carefully keeping outside the pentagram. “Let me see. Ego- ego vocare daemones hu- huius? Domus ad me. Lubeo… Lubeo eos loqui. I think.” he paused for a second as he realized what he gotten roped into. “Wait- Fuck. I shouldn’t have done that, I can’t believe you tricked me into reading that. What if I’ve sold my soul to the devil or something??”

Shane stood up abruptly and walked over to stand beside him. “What if you cursed yourself to never eat popcorn again? Even if demons were real, I doubt it would’ve done anything. I mean, look at how sloppily constructed it is. It’s all crooked and lopsided. If I were a demon and got summoned here I would be ashamed.”

Ryan laughed. “All the cultists failed art class and were so frustrated they tried to summon a demon to convince it to give them a better mark.”

Shane ran a hand over his chin. “The more I look at it the more it’s bothering me.” he pulled a piece of chalk from his pocket, like that was a normal thing to carry around. “I kinda wanna see if I can fix
“It now. Teach future cultists how it’s done.”

“Shane!” Ryan snatched the chalk out of his hand. “That’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever said. And that’s saying something. I refuse to summon demons in this creepy ass basement that could cave in on us any second.”

“Oh come on, what’s going to happen?” Shane tried to snatch the chalk back, but Ryan waved it out of reach, keeping Shane at arm’s length with a hand on his chest. “If reading that inscription didn’t do anything then I doubt redrawing a couple lines will. Demons are like Santa Claus, Ryan! Not real!”

“You’re going to get your head ripped off and I’m going to sit back and laugh,” Ryan said through gritted teeth.

He still refused to hand over the chalk, but he was fighting a losing battle against Shane’s ten foot long arms. Couldn’t he see that he was trying to mess with things better left alone? Shane batted at the chalk like they were two kids fighting over the remote, and they stumbled to the back of the hallway. Their shadows danced in the bouncing light of the flashlights. He couldn’t help but laugh somewhat hysterically at the absurdity of the situation. Even without the cameras on them they were still stuck in their endless loop of paranoia versus recklessness, belief versus skepticism. Except the stakes felt so much higher than any petty squabble over flashlights, higher still than even the pentagram in the Sallie House. Something was coming, and only Ryan seemed to be able to feel it deep down in the pit of his stomach.

Even over his own laughter, Ryan heard something scrape against the floor behind them. He froze, arm still braced against Shane’s chest, although it now felt more like an anchor than an adversary.

Inside the murky blackness of the hallway something growled, low and rumbling. He felt it vibrate through his chest right down to his bones. His hand spasmed and he dropped the chalk. It shattered against the floor and Shane inhaled sharply, Ryan could feel it through the fabric of his shirt. His heart squeezed tight, and he balled the fabric up into his fist. Shane put his hand on top of Ryan’s but didn’t try to pry him off. Ryan was grateful for that, because he didn’t think he could unhook his fingers if he tried. They stared frozen into the darkness, hardly daring to breathe.

Heavy, wet, breathing.

Another growl.

Ryan brought his flashlight up with trembling fingers and shone his light towards the source of the noise. The feeble ray of light flashed over shining teeth, so many crammed into one mouth that they stuck out at odd angles. Two blank eyes reflected back at them, like a deer in the headlights. Or a tiger ready to pounce.

“Fuck,” Ryan breathed.

His brain was short circuiting as he stared into those soulless eyes, feet rooted to the ground. He felt like he was on fire, his breath was coming too fast and he couldn’t control it. I am going to die. They had done it this time: pissed off a demon into showing itself and ripping their bones out one by one. He finally had his compelling evidence and the cameras weren’t even running. The irony could kill him.

Shane shuddered, his nails digging into Ryan’s hand before quickly letting go.

“It’s between us and the door,” Shane choked out. He pushed Ryan behind him, shielding him with
his body as if that would do anything against those needle sharp teeth. Ryan wasn’t going to let Shane get hurt, he had to think of something to save them both. He had planned for this- except he didn’t have any holy water on him. Or salt. They were both back at the hotel where he had left them, trusting Bloody Mary’s protection. Useless. He was useless, he should have been prepared, that was his job in the whole production-

“Shane- I-” he was choking on his words, his throat closing up, the world was swaying around him and he felt like his head was going to explode. The demon growled again. It sounded closer this time, although he couldn’t really tell, his ears were ringing-

Shane pulled him in, wrapped his arms around him in a tight cocoon. Ryan melted into his embrace, grabbing onto Shane’s shirt like he could pull them close enough that he could climb inside Shane’s chest and escape it all. They rocked back and forth, Shane rubbing soothing circles on his back, caught between a wall and certain death.

“Shh, shh. We’re going to be okay, we’ll make it out of this alive, it’s going to be okay. Match your breathing to mine.”

Ryan tried, he really did. He squeezed his eyes shut and mashed his face into Shane’s chest, breathing in his smell of coffee and ashes. But the heavy breathing of the demon a few feet away wasn’t doing much to keep him calm. He wanted to stand there forever, it didn’t matter how pathetic he felt, but if he didn’t stop panicking soon they were going to die. The thought didn’t do much to calm him down.

“It’s going to be okay-”

“How?!” the words pushed their way out of him in a strangled wail, voice rising with each hysterical word. “There’s a fucking demon between us and the door, it’s not like we can tell it to-” the realization hit him like a truck, puzzle pieces falling into place. “Tell it to fuck off.”

“What?!”

“Tell it to fuck off! We summoned it Shane, we can tell it to fuck off!” Everything spiraled back to the Lovers House, where things had first gone sideways. The Lovers House had ruined them, but now it could fix things.

Fueled by adrenaline-made bravery, he shone his flashlight into the darkness, ready to stand his ground.

Ohholyshitthat’sclose.

The demon hung from the ceiling no more than a foot away from him, giving Ryan a spectacular view of its snaggle teeth glistening with long ropes of drool. His brief flash of bravery was gone, and he wanted to sink down into the ground a disappear forever.

“Please leave,” he whimpered. The demon hesitated.

“Don’t-” he couldn’t press out the rest of the sentence, his mouth wouldn’t cooperate. The demon stalked forward. Shane’s grip on his arm tightened, fingernails digging into his skin.

He spoke, but it didn’t sound like Shane. The voice coming from behind him was as deep and cold as the demon’s growling. “You are unwelcome here. We arrived first, and this is our house. Leave.”

The demon hissed. Spit splattered onto Ryan’s face and he flinched.
“Leave.”

The demon turned and ran, barbed tail scraping across the ceiling. It disappeared into the darkness, the gouges left by its claws the only sign that it had been there at all.

Ryan sank to the ground with a shudder, no longer trusting his own legs to support him. “What… the fuck just happened?” He sucked in a couple deep, steadying breaths, trying to process the enormity of it all. He had stood eye to eye with an actual, real life, demon. *Holy shit.*

Shane gingerly stepped back from Ryan to look farther down the hall. There were no signs of life as far as his flashlight reached. The pentagram was clear save for some fresh scorch marks.

“I told it to fuck off, just like you said.”

“What was with that *voice,* though?” Ryan said. “That was fucking insane, man.”

Shane gave a shaky laugh, turning back to face him. He looked as unnerved as Ryan felt. “Crazy acoustics in here, eh?”

“I don’t-” Ryan rubbed his forehead. “My mind is melting.”

“I don’t think it’s hit me yet,” Shane replied. “That was a demon.” He swung his arms out like he was receiving a standing ovation. “We just survived a *demon!*”

A grey blur barreled out of the darkness.

“Shane!” Ryan screamed the warning, too late. Time seemed to slow down. His own heartbeat was the only thing he could hear, deafening.

*Ba-bump.*

The demon latched onto Shane’s back like a panther taking down its prey.

*Ba-bump.*

Shane screamed and crumpled to the ground.

*Ba-bump.*

Ryan screamed with him.

*Ba-bump.*

The demon jumped over Shane’s prone body, straight at Ryan.

Ryan scrambled backwards until he hit the wall. He could see each glistening tooth, count the scars on the demon’s face. He closed his eyes and braced himself.

With a roar, Shane lunged forward and grabbed the demon by the tail. It jerked backwards, screeching. He swung it against the wall with a sickening crunch. The passageway shook on impact and dirt crumbled from the ceiling. Shane towered over it’s twitching body, breathing heavily, hands curled into fists. His face was a mask of anger. Unrecognizable. Ryan’s breath caught in his throat.

Shane kicked the demon in the ribs, hard. It let out a grating caterwaul like nails on chalkboard. Shane kicked the demon again, and again, and again, the flashlight on the ground turning the whole scene into something out of a nightmare. The demon snatched his legs as he went in for another kick.
In an instant, Shane was on the ground too. They rolled across the floor, grappling at each other like starving dogs.

Ryan scrambled to his feet. He needed to help Shane, the man didn’t have a chance against those needle teeth. He couldn’t let Shane get hurt. But they were moving so quickly that he was as like to hit Shane as the demon.

They finally rolled to a stop over the pentagram, the demon with its claws around Shane neck, Shane desperately trying to push it off. Ryan slammed his shoulder into the demon, but it was like running into a brick wall. The demon snapped its head towards him and laughed. Ryan stumbled backwards, tripped over their flashlight, almost fell.

And Shane growled.

Fucking.

Growled.

Shane lunged upwards and the demon screamed. Hot blood sprayed through the air, splattering the walls and Ryan’s terrified face. Shane heaved the demon off of him with a yell. It sailed down the hallway, rolling over and over with a sickening squelch. Black blood smeared across the floor- the same stuff covering Shane’s hand and chest.

Shane leapt upright with feline grace. The demon shuddered weakly and his head snapped up towards it like an attack dog towards its prey. His body was as tense as a coiled spring. He stalked forward, his movements slow and measured. No human being moved like that, like a tiger toying with its prey.

For the first time, Ryan was afraid of him.

“Fuck off.” Shane spat through gritted teeth.

The demon shuddered once more before melting into a pool of tar.

Ryan stared at Shane in horror.

Or- whatever was wearing Shane’s skin.

It wasn’t Shane.

But at the same time, it was.

His voice was overlaid with the deep, cold voice from before, echoing through the hall like two people speaking in unison.

“Shane?” his voice cracked on the word.

He needed to know the truth.

Shane turned to look at him, face slack like he was waking from a dream. Ryan clapped his hands over his mouth as a sob escaped him. The floor had been pulled out underneath him, he was falling. Nothing would ever be the same. He stumbled backwards. No. No. No no no no nononono.

Shane’s eyes were a deep, hungry, black.
I made a playlist for The Devil's In The Details, so if anyone wants to know what songs inspired this fic/what I listen to on repeat when I write this stuff, here it is: https://open.spotify.com/user/deeranddragons/playlist/2Oa1zEYOb4hvC8IAQHigA?si=DJCaE38DQOmSuGUCokTlw

As always, come find me on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes, although I haven't been on much since the last chapter b/c real life responsibilities (yikes)
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I'm actually on vacation with my concert band as a post this, far far away from my usual workspace. Even if I'm living it up here, of course I'm still going to post because I'm nothing if not punctual, especially for such faithful readers :P

Thank you so much for all your support, it's thanks to you guys that this fanfic has taken off so nicely. You keep me inspired and remind me why I write: to touch your lives and make your days better. And if i can do that for just one person, then thats enough :)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something happened to Shane when the demon lunged at Ryan. Something broke. No- something grew. The push and pull that had been raging inside of him all evening, his and Birdbrain’s hands around the other’s throat, had finally come to a cataclysmic head. Ryan was in danger. Birdbrain wasn't in charge anymore. Neither was Shane. Something twisted in his chest and some barrier caved and he was two people in that moment, a coin that had landed impossibly on its edge. He understood Birdbrain, felt the burning rage it thrived on rip through his veins, replacing any hesitation with crystal clarity. And in turn he stopped trying to muzzle Birdbrain and let the demon act without hesitation, without trying to force it into something human. He was no longer afraid. Ryan was in danger and he and the demon were united like they had never been before, every disagreement pushed aside, closer to one single entity than two separate ones.

Every choice they had made since the Lovers’ House had led up to this. The storm had been brewing and they had waited for it, dreaded it with bated breath. He was done sitting in the backseat as Birdbrain guided his choices. And Birdbrain had a contract to fulfill.

He lunged at the demon with a roar, liquid fire roaring through his veins.

His hands closed around the sandpaper skin of its tail and he flung it against the wall. It crumpled like a pop can. He wanted to laugh. It was so easy. The demon might as well have been a stuffed toy for how little it seemed to weigh. He'd never let Birdbrain's power flow through him unchecked before, and now he was wondering why he hadn't done it sooner. It was intoxicating.

He loomed over the demon, breathing heavily, hands scraped raw, but he didn’t feel the slightest bit tired. He felt in control, in a way he hadn’t ever been since he was possessed. He could rip apart anything that tried to hurt Ryan. They would be safe, and Shane would be useful. It was a feeling he could get addicted to. He should have let Birdbrain run rampant more often.

No- that wasn't him. He wanted to protect, not wound. He wasn’t a killer.

But Birdbrain was insisting that he was, that to protect someone he needed to become a blade. They began to fall out of alignment, pushing back and forth on how to feel, how to act.

But then the demon twitched and Ryan whimpered and everything snapped back into place. He kicked the demon in the ribs, hard. He felt bones crack under his boot.

It's us or the demon. This is what deals are made for.
He drew his foot back to kick again.

_Sometimes protection means violence._

If saving Ryan meant becoming a monster, well, so be it. He was willing to do it.

_You’re going to have to make a couple of sacrifices._

Birdbrain was enjoying every moment of this. A tiny, twisted part of Shane was as well. He kicked, again, and again, until something soft gave. Then there were claws around his ankle and he was yanked onto the ground. The impact reverberated up his back, making his teeth rattle. They felt too big for his mouth, too sharp, too deadly. He tasted blood.

Time passed in a blur of claws and sandpaper skin. The demon was on top of him and they rolled, flipping over and over in a desperate bid for control. Shane was stronger but the demon was slippery, always managing to escape his grasp before he could crush it. The world had shrunk down to him and the demon, locked in deadly embrace. It had its claws around his neck and everything was starting to get blurry, but he barely registered that he couldn’t breathe. It lunged forward, teeth snapping shut an inch from his face. Spittle sprayed onto his face and he flinched. The demon was laughing, mocking him. It wouldn’t be laughing for long. A guttural growl escaped Shane and he managed to get his hand into the demon’s broken ribs. It wasn’t laughing then. Something gave with a crack and then a wet squishing sound. The claws around his neck loosened. Something warm and oily poured over his hands. The world snapped back into razor sharp focus. He grunted and heaved the demon off of him, throwing it as far from Ryan as he possibly could. Black oil smeared across the floor after it like a gruesome shadow. He vaguely registered Ryan watching him, but then demon twitched and he honed in on it like a torpedo, everything else fading into the background.

_“Fuck off.”_ he growled.

The demon’s eyes glazed over and it shuddered one final time before melting into the ground. It disintegrated into a pile of oil, iridescent under the fallen flashlight's light.

The tension melted from Shane’s body and he let himself uncoil. He and Birdbrain had done it. They were safe. A wave of exhaustion rolled of him, the unity he had been feeling moments before waning. A coin could only balance on its edge for so long.

He almost felt like he was waking up from a dream. He couldn't have been capable of such violence. But Birdbrain was. And now Shane truly was a demon killer. But now Birdbrain was gone, and there was only the crushing weight of his own exhaustion left. His back felt bruised and sore and his knees burned where he had scraped them.

_“Shane?”_ Ryan whimpered. His voice cracked on the word.

Shane turned, disoriented. Ryan’s face crumpled and a sob escaped the fist pressed tightly against his mouth.. The sound cut through Shane like a knife. He stepped forwards, hands reached out to comfort but Ryan wrenched away and pressed against the wall, whimpering, cringing away like he was poison. The demon was dead, why was Ryan afraid? He had kept Ryan safe.

The realization hit Shane like a truck. It wasn’t the demon Ryan was afraid of.

It was him.

Birdbrain had disappeared and left him to pick up the pieces of this disaster.

_“Holy shit, you actually are. You actually are a fucking demon.”_ Ryan stared at him with rising
horror. It looked like he was on the verge of hysterics.

Shane wanted to fold Ryan up and tell him everything was going to be okay, but how could he protect Ryan when he was the thing to be feared? He shuffled closer, arms raised like Ryan was a cornered animal he was trying to soothe.

“Hey,” he said, soft as anything. “It’s me.”

Ryan shook his head. “No. No you’re not, you can’t play your- your fucking demon tricks on me. Your eyes tell the whole story. What did you do to my friend?!”

Shane opened his mouth but any words he wanted to say were caught in his throat. His eyes. Of course Birdbrain had left his eyes black. He couldn't like anymore. He didn’t want to lie anymore. “Ryan,” was all that he could say, whispered like a prayer. “Ryan.”

He blinked the darkness away, and Ryan’s shoulders slumped. “Shane?”

“Yeah buddy, it’s me. It’s Shane.” he swallowed back the lump in his throat. “This is… what I meant by dealing with personal stuff.”

“So you’ve always been a demon? You’ve been lying to me this whole time?!” Ryan spat, pressed up against the wall like he was hoping to sink into it.

“No! Well, yes. Kind of. It’s complicated.” Oh no. Now was not the time to have tears choking off his words. Not when words were all he had to salvage things that were so quickly tearing apart. “But yes. I'm possessed.”

“I knew it.” Ryan rubbed a hand over his face, eyes wild. “Everything makes sense now.”

“I wanted to tell you but-”

Ryan looked like something dead, his face the colour of a corpse in the light of the flashlight. He looked at his hands and slowly curled them into fists. “But what?”

“But-” All his excuses seemed paper thin. The tears were flowing freely now, running down his face as he shook softly. Ryan’s words were breaking him, tearing him in two like no ghost or demon ever could. “I was afraid.”

“How do you think I feel right now? We could’ve died, I’ve seen my worst fears come to life before my eyes, and the person I-” Ryan’s voice choked off. “My best friend has been replaced by some sort of monster! He’s been a monster this whole time!” his face crumpled. “Were we even friends at all? Or was that all a lie too?”

Panic rose in a wave in Shane's chest. No. No. “Through everything, you’ve always been my friend, I swear. I never lied about that. You’re-” His voice cracked and could only continue in a whisper. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Ryan unclenched his fists, face conflicted. “I am?”

“You always have been. I thought you knew. I thought it was a given.” Shane dragged a fist across his face, messily trying to mop up his tears.

Ryan stepped forward like he was in a daze, looking like he was seeing Shane for the first time. “Shane?”
“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything.” Shane reached out, ready to hold onto Ryan and never let go. He couldn’t stand the space between them anymore. There was no room left for lies, or secrets, or demons. Ryan knew what Shane was and he hadn’t run away. There was still a glimmer of hope. He pulled Ryan into a hug, not caring about how disgusting he was with a face full of tears and hands covered in blood.

Ryan’s face twisted and he pulled away like Shane had given him and electric shock. “Liar.”

“What?” The floor had been snatched out from underneath him and now he was falling.

“You almost had me there for a second, you know. I hope you’re happy. But you’re just saying what I want to hear, aren’t you? That’s what demons do. They lie. Shane is gone isn’t he?” Ryan laughed hysterically. “He’s gone.” he sat down with a thump, hands balled into his hair. He whimpered. “He’s gone and I don’t know how to get him back. It was so fucking stupid of me to ignore the warning signs.”

“It’s still me. It’s still me. I never left.” Shane felt like he was drowning, but he wasn’t going to give up. He would never give up on Ryan. He could still pick up the sharp edged thing that had broken between them. He could still glue it back together. “What can I say to show that it’s me?”

Ryan looked up at him accusingly, eyes ringed with redness. “Tell me something only Shane would know.”

Shane dragged a fist through his hair. “I keep my socks mismatched because I’m too lazy to find the second one when I’m doing laundry. I hate nutella. And I love—” Not now. It would be selfish to say it now. “I love eating pickles out of ponds.”

Ryan let out a wet giggle despite himself. He dragged a hand over his face. “Only Shane would make a joke in this situation. Only Shane.” And then the dam finally broke and he burst into loud, shuddering sobs.

Shane hovered for a moment before kneeling down and gently touching Ryan’s shoulder, ready to be pushed away, to be rejected. But Ryan didn’t pull away this time. He leaned inwards instead, collapsing into Shane like he couldn’t support himself. Oh fuck, now Shane was crying even harder. He pulled Ryan closer until he was practically in Shane’s lap, so relieved that he was allowed to do this again. That Ryan trusted him. Ryan grabbed a fistful of Shane’s nasty, bloody shirt and buried his face in his chest. They rocked back and forth, crying together in the darkness of the basement.

“I should have known,” Ryan whispered over and over. “I should have known. I should have known.”

“Shh. Shh.” Shane rubbed soothing circles on Ryan’s back. “Everything’s gonna be alright, little guy. We’ve got each other. We can manage to survive anything when we’re together.”

Slowly, Ryan’s shudders became less violent and his sobbing was reduced to the occasional quiet sniffle. Shane’s tears dried too. He felt as though he had cried out all the water inside his body. But he felt lighter than he had been in a long time. The tears had washed him clean, releasing all his pent up anxieties in a river. It felt good to cry. To hold Ryan in his arms. His weight was warm and comforting, and Shane would have been okay to sit there until they grew old and were overtaken by the earth. He ran his hand over the soft stubbly hair on the back of Ryan’s head and Ryan sighed, the breath warm on Shane’s neck. He had always wondered what it would feel like to do that. It was softer than he had imagined.

“Hey.” Ryan’s voice was muffled against Shane’s shirt. He could feel it vibrate through his chest and
he shivered, heart jumping. “Don’t think that just because I'm happy you haven't been replaced with a
demon imposter that I’ll let you off the hook for explaining how the fuck you got possessed without
me noticing.”

Shane laughed, relieved that Ryan was feeling good enough to try and pick apart the history of
things. For one horrible minute he had thought he had lost Ryan, and that Ryan would never believe
anything he said again. But now he was holding Ryan and everything was different but everything
was right. “Okay.”

Ryan pulled back from their rib crushing embrace so he could hear better. His face was red and
blotchy, blood and dried tears smeared across his face. Shane had never seen anything more
beautiful.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“How about the beginning.”

So Shane did. He sat there and told Ryan everything: the Lovers’ House, the dreams, the deal, the
claiming. Ryan listened in rapt attention, running a hand over his chin. He winced when Shane
talked about Birdbrain possessing him, and laughed when Shane said he had named the demon
Birdbrain. He wanted to be as earnest as possible, but still glossed over some parts. Like how
terrifying it was to confront ghosts, and the whole Birdbrain-wanted-me-to-kill-you thing that had
happened before their fight. He didn't want Ryan to be afraid of him any more than he already was.
He didn’t want Ryan to be afraid of him, period, but it was too late for that now. Ryan had seen him
kill a demon. He had every right to be afraid.

Shane also left out Bloody Mary’s advice. He wasn’t sure why. It felt like a secret, a message meant
for him alone. He was surprised Birdbrain didn’t butt in and try to stop him. But Birdbrain had only
cared about claiming things. It was always Shane who had been afraid to say the truth.

“Wait a minute,” Ryan said when he had finished. “So you’re telling me that you knew ghosts were
real this whole time and you still denied it to spite me?”

“Just because ghosts are real doesn’t mean they’re haunting every single place that’s supposedly
haunted. Also, I gotta stay on brand.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “You are such an ass.”

Shane laughed. “Takes one to know one.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Ryan avoiding Shane’s eyes. Shane chewed on his lip, brow
furrowed.

He took a deep breath. “Are you afraid of me?” he was afraid of the answer, but he was more afraid
of not knowing.

Ryan’s voice was soft. “I could never be afraid of you.”

“Yeah?” now it was his turn to avoid eye contact.

“You’re too noodly to be intimidating.”

Shane laughed, his heart feeling lighter than it had ever been. If anyone would have been able to
keep from looking at him like he was monster, of course it would be Ryan, who was so full of
kindness even when it would make more sense to be angry. He could barely believe it, could barely
believe that Ryan could still forgive him after all the times he had lied and lashed out because he was
to afraid to say what he was really thinking. Ryan’s worst fears had made a home inside of him and
yet Ryan looked past it and saw Shane, hesitant but earnest, instead.

Ryan rubbed his sleeve over his face, cleaning off the dried demon blood. “What are we gonna do
now?”

Shane shrugged. “What we’ve always done. Go around and harrass ghosts. Everything should be
fine as long as I keep claiming houses for Birdbrain.”

Ryan looked at him like he had grown a third eye. “What? You’re seriously planning on staying
possessed? I knew you were a smartass but I never took you for an idiot.”

Shane scratched the back of his head. “It seems the easiest thing to do. I’ve been okay so far.” he
didn’t want to go back to the cold helplessness of the voodoo temple.

Ryan rubbed his hand over his face and groaned. “Okay, there are so many things that need to be
said in response to that. First of all, if you think being possessed by an actual demon is ‘okay’ then
you don’t know what the definition of ‘okay’ is. Second of all, are you forgetting that it’s, I repeat, a
demon?! It can and will kill us the first chance it gets, and, y’know, I’m a big fan of being alive.
Third of all, you know those movies where the protagonist has to choose between what’s easy and
what’s right? That’s us, except we have to choose between what’s easy and what keeps us from
dying horrible deaths.”

“Okay, that’s a little dramatic-”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “You nearly got strangled to death by a demon five minutes ago. I’m
allowed to be dramatic.”

“But that’s exactly why I need to stay possessed! What would we have done without Birdbrain? Flip
it off and hope it would leave? As annoying and vaguely threatening Birdbrain is, I’d rather have it
protecting us than nothing.” Shane chewed his lip.

He couldn’t get the dream about Ryan dying out of his head. It was just a dream, but Birdbrain had
seemed to be a dream too at first. And then it had become all too real. He would never forgive
himself if Ryan was hurt because he decided to get exorcised and save himself. As long as Ryan was
safe, he’d be okay.

“Hey.” Ryan grabbed Shane’s hands, forced him to make eye contact. “We managed fine before
Birdbrain. Have you ever thought that maybe to only reason you’ve had to fight ghosts is because of
Birdbrain? It’s hurting you. You don’t need to hurt.”

Birdbrain didn’t like that. It didn’t bother talking, just pressed against his skull until it ached. Shane
got the message loud and clear. “Ryan…”

“Don’t you fucking dare tell me you want to stay possessed. I will disown you.”

“It’s not like I enjoy it, it’s just…” he felt empty without Birdbrain. He was weak, and cold, and half
of a whole without the demon. It had made its home inside of him, and he was growing into it like a
tree will grow around the noose tied to its branches. “I don’t know if an exorcism is even possible.”

“What?”

“Well, you need to name of the demon to exorcise it, and Birdbrain hasn’t exactly been forthright
with that. And…” his head gave a particularly bad throb. “I’m worried about what Birdbrain will do if
we try.”

Anneliese Michel, dead after one too many failed exorcisms. Shane sitting on a table as his eyes turned back before lunging at a priest and throwing him against the wall. And Ryan, laying on the ground hurt, maybe dying, and it was all Shane’s fault, because Shane hadn’t listened, because he had taunted the ghosts one too many times, because without the creature inside of him Shane was nothing but a man who was powerless in the face of creatures that are best left alone.

“Being possessed isn’t so bad, really. I mean, I can crush an apple with my bare hands now, that’s badass!” he forced out a laugh.

Ryan wasn’t buying it. “You’ve got your contract; Birdbrain can’t touch me. Can’t you see that you’re the one in danger here? Birdbrain’s trying to eat you from the inside out. Don’t worry about me. I can protect myself.”

“You scream when the toaster pops unexpectedly.”

Ryan scowled. “I’m trying to make a point.”

“So am I. Don’t go poking tigers like a dumbass trying to help me. I’m fine.” Shane could handle whatever happened next. If Ryan tried to get rid of Birdbrain… he didn’t want to lose him. Not now that things were finally getting better.

Ryan eyed him suspiciously. “Is that you or Birdbrain talking?”

“It’s all me, babyyy,” he said, although he wasn’t quite sure. “I’m serious, Ryan. Contract or not, Birdbrain’s gonna find a way to retaliate. Don’t go poking your nose into things best left untouched.”

“That’s our entire job description though.”

Shane sighed. “Promise me.”

Ryan scowled. “Fine. But I reserve the right to say ‘I told you so’ when Birdbrain fucks you over three ways from Sunday.”

“Fair enough.” Shane stood up, pulling Ryan up to join him. They stayed holding hands a couple seconds longer than entirely necessary.

After a beat, Ryan laughed and shook his head. “This is unreal. I can’t believe you’re possessed by a demon. I can’t believe I’m not freaking out.”

Shane laughed. “It’s a little crazy.”

He couldn’t believe everything that had happened himself. He was exhausted. He had no idea what time it was but they had to have been up all night. And they still had to go through customs that afternoon.

“If we got an uber, how likely would it be that the driver would call the cops on us?” he asked.

Ryan wheezed. “They’ve probably seen weirder. You do look even more disgusting than usual, though.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “I should have let the demon eat you.”

“I’d give it indigestion.”
They bickered their way up the stairs and the door, feeling more normal than they had in ages. Everything had changed, but they were better than Shane could have ever hoped they’d turn out. There was a new spring in his step now that the weight of his secret was off his shoulders.

Birdbrain’s headache had stopped once Ryan promised not to exorcise the demon. It stayed carefully quiet in Shane’s head, like it was holding its breath. The silence was just as unsettling as it was in the Voodoo temple but Shane was too tired to care. They were safe, and Ryan still wanted to be his friend, and that was enough.

He buttoned up his jean jacket to hide the worst of the demon blood and wiped his hands off on the damp grass outside the house as best he could. He doubted he’d ever be able to wash the blood out of the shirt. It seemed a little too much for a tide pen to deal with.

They collapsed into the backseat of the Uber, clean enough that the driver only did a quick double take when she saw them. He rested his head against Ryan’s shoulder, not caring that it would give him a crick in the neck once he sat up. Not caring that they were much closer than they would ever sit together under normal circumstances. But these were not normal circumstances. They were both different men than they had been when they had walked into that house. And he was too exhausted to care.

Too exhausted to realize that he had never ended up claiming the house from the demon after all.

So much for second chances.

**Chapter End Notes**

As always, kudos are appreciated, and I jump for joy every time I see new comments. Find me on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

The chapters going up a couple hours earlier than usual because for some reason all my big commitments seem to happen on Fridays... and then I gotta squeeze in the updates whenever I've got time. Regardless, I've spoiled you guys here with the second longest chapter of the whole fic (clocking in at over 6000 words) so I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ryan spent the rest of the night processing. When they packed up all their equipment and checked out of the hotel, he was still processing. By the time their flight touched down at the LAX, he had finished processing and was now kind of somewhat okay with the idea of Shane being possessed by a power hungry demon that he occasionally lost control of.

Which was good, because they were about to spend the next hour trapped in a car together as they struggled home through the LA traffic.

Just the two of them. Alone for the first time since their Uber drive home.

Shane had been patient with Ryan throughout this whole... debacle. He had given Ryan the space he needed to think and answered all Ryan’s whispered questions with only mild complaining. He grumbled that he wasn’t Ryan’s personal encyclopedia because he was possessed, but Ryan thought he was secretly relieved to finally have someone to talk to about Birdbrain.

It was weird how a demon had managed to bring their relationship back to something almost normal. Everything Ryan had stressed over was caused by Birdbrain, and Shane didn’t have to dance away from explanations anymore.

Well, he had tiptoed around Ryan for all of fifteen minutes after they got back from the basement. But Ryan had called Shane out on it before it got out of hand. Shane seemed to have been under the impression that Ryan might still secretly be mad at him for not saying anything about Birdbrain; because Ryan tended to get quiet when he was thinking. But Ryan much preferred sarcastic obnoxious Shane over... weirdly nice Shane. Although those few minutes of being treated like a visiting prince had been relaxing. He smiled to himself as he piled their luggage into the trunk. He guessed their friendship had ended up working itself out in the end.

There was only that little fact that he didn’t want it to be a friendship anymore. He couldn’t ignore it, he was pulled towards Shane like a magnet. He didn’t know how he hadn’t noticed it before. But that was the way with revelations: They threw your world on to its head in a span of a second and you learned to live with it. You learned how to push your feelings down, keep them off your sleeve and inside your chest.

Everything had been fixed.

Except that it hadn’t. They had made it past the treeline, sure, but there was still the rest of the mountain to climb. Birdbrain.

And was a mountain it was. As much as Ryan wanted to keep Birdbrain as a resource- how many
firsthand accounts of possession were there? This was a once in a lifetime opportunity- he also wanted Birdbrain out of their lives. Unable to hurt Shane. Because no matter how much he shrugged it off Shane was hurting. Ryan could see it from the way he would wince and rub his forehead after staring into thin air, or how he flexed his fingers as though he was barely restraining himself from curling them into claws. Shane was driving towards catastrophe, Ryan could see it as surely as he could see the road in front of him. He was worried that Shane couldn’t, that Birdbrain had its claws in too deep. That one day Shane would get possessed and never come back. He could hear it every so often when Shane laughed, the two-layered voice peeking out for a few seconds. Foreshadowing what was to come.

Well, not if Ryan could help it. Shane wanted to protect Ryan, but Ryan thought that maybe it was his turn to do that protecting. Shane had made enough sacrifices. He didn't need to make any more.

If Shane was going to stop him from hunting Birdbrain, then he'd do it in secret instead. He didn’t want to go behind his back after what happened last time they kept secrets, but anything Shane knew, Birdbrain knew too. And neither of them wanted to upset the demon. Shane would have tried to dissuade him, but Ryan knew it paid to be prepared. The basement had taught him that. He needed to be ready, before it was too late.

Shane was passed out in the passenger seat, snoring softly. Ryan discovered that for once in his life he wasn’t annoyed by it. It was a reminder that even when everything seemed to have turned on its head, the world marched on. Everyone still needed the same things they always had. Sleep. Food. Love.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” The sentence hadn’t left Ryan’s head since Shane had said it. What had he meant by that? Ryan knew what he wanted it to mean. He wanted it to be Shane’s way of saying “I love you, Ryan. I’ll always love you.” But that was a pipe dream, a passing fantasy worthy of his teenage years.

Shane had never had any close friends during the majority of his childhood, he had mentioned it before, citing “the genetic weirdness of the Madejs” as reason. Pretending he had never been bothered by it. It was so much more likely that that was what Shane had meant. Friendship, and only friendship. Ryan cursed the word. He didn’t want to be the only one melting every time their hands brushed, every time Shane looked at him softly from across the room.

He sighed and knocked his head against the steering wheel in frustration. Okay, Bergara, focus on the road.

Shane stirred beside him.

“Finally awake, Sleeping Beauty?” Ryan asked idly. The license plate of the car in front of them was shaped like a polar bear. He wondered where you’d have to live to get your hands on one of those.

“Shane is asleep,” said a voice from beside him that was definitely not Shane’s. Ryan nearly swerved into the ditch. The-thing-that-was-not-Shane grabbed the wheel and righted them, hand clasped over Ryan’s. He hated how it still made his heart jump.

The-thing-that-was-not-Shane let go and leaned back into its seat with a sigh. Ryan glanced over, stomach roiling. It stared back, lips quirked into a fond smile that screamed Shane. Its eyes were black.

“Didn’t Shane say you were only to come out for a good reason?” Ryan asked, voice strained. It was taking all his willpower to stay calm and keep driving. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.
He was fine. He could deal with this. Nothing to worry about. Just a conversation with a demon.

“Good reason tends to be a little vague in the fine print. Your friend would not make a good lawyer.” Birdbrain stretched and Ryan could hear Shane’s bones crack one after the other. He shuddered. “You are remarkably calm. Is it nice to know the monster Shane is now? Is it nice to know the truth?”

“Shane’s not the monster. That honour’s reserved for you.”

Birdbrain laughed, sounding like nails on a chalkboard. How it managed to do that with Shane’s mouth, Ryan didn’t want to know. “I fear you might be mistaken about that. The issue with two souls sharing the same body is that things tend to get… messy after a while. Blurry. Which makes me fear that if I ever were to leave… He would not be the same person you know him to be now. But of course, you don’t want a big scary demon hanging around.” It took a long sip of water, the same way Shane did when he finished making his latest asshole skeptic argument. “You must be in quite a conundrum.”

Ryan wanted Shane back. Shane could always ground him, calm him down when everything got too overwhelming. It was a cruel irony that it was impossible for Shane to be there where Ryan needed him most.

“I’m not going to exorcise you,” he lied.

“No!” Birdbrain mocked. “You would never hurt Shane.” Its eyes narrowed. “And I assure you, getting rid of me would hurt very, very much.”

Ryan pretended to focus on changing lanes to avoid replying. Eventually Birdbrain would get tired of toying with him and leave. He clung to the knowledge that Birdbrain couldn’t hurt him like a prayer. Even when he was gone, Shane was protecting him. He was fine. His back was sticky with sweat, the air conditioning offering little relief against Birdbrain’s burning presence.

“No, you wouldn’t hurt Shane… because you love him.”

“No!” Ryan shouted, far too quickly. “Why would you say that? We’re just friends.”

Shane raised an eyebrow at him. No, it was Birdbrain doing it. Birdbrain, not Shane. It was terrifying, the way Birdbrain could slip seamlessly between puppeting Shane like something alien and acting so human, so much like Shane, that Ryan forgot who he was sitting beside.

“Shane is not listening.”

“My answer’s not changing.”

“You called him Sleeping Beauty, did you not? Beauty is what you call someone when you’re in love with them.”

“Sleeping Beauty’s a Disney princess. It was a joke.”

Birdbrain narrowed its eyes. “I see.”

Ryan felt like a bug under a microscope, pinned down under Birdbrain’s gaze.

“No need to be so tense. I was only looking out for a friend. I’d hate to see you break after Shane rejected you. Now that you know ghosts are real, you had to go find another false thing to believe in.”
Ryan swallowed hard.

“Shane and I are a package deal anyway. And you wouldn’t date a demon, now would you? You
couldn’t love a monster like Shane, not after you’ve gotten close enough to peer into his depths.”

If words could cut then Ryan would be bleeding out. All of Shane’s softness had been taken out when
Birdbrain took his eyes, replacing everything with sharp angles and sandpaper skin. He wasn’t a
home anymore, he was a barbed wire fence.

“Maybe stick to steal houses, demon.” he spat the word out like it was a burning coal. “Because
you’re wrong about me.”

“Maybe I am, human.” Birdbrain drummed its fingers against its teeth. “But somehow, I doubt it.”

Shane’s eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed against the seats. Ryan barely kept himself
from swerving again, trying to simultaneously drive and grab onto Shane. He nearly clipped the car
with the polar bear license plate. Ryan could only watch helplessly from the corner of his eye as
Shane started to convulse. He had no idea what to do about seizures, much less demon-induced
seizures. Then Shane bolted upright and gasped. His eyes were the beautiful brown that Ryan could
get lost in for hours. He could have cried with relief.

Shane mashed his hands into his face. “Agh, how long was I asleep? I feel gross.” he stuck out his
tongue and made a face. "My mouth tastes like ashes. Yuck.”

Ryan check the time, trying to act calm so he didn’t freak Shane out. Oh God, he was so relieved.
Shane’s reappearance had let all the tension out of his body, “Birdbrain was around for fifteen
minutes, give or take.”


Ryan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, feeling much less relieved all of a sudden.
“Yeah…?”

Shane stared down at his hands like he couldn’t believe they were attached to him. “I thought I had
dreamt that.”

“I’m guessing that’s not normal.”

“No, it's not. I’m always lucid when Birdbrain's possessing me. I’m always aware of what’s
happening. This felt like… an out of body experience. An unreality.”

“Unreality?”

“Shut up, it’s a word.” Shane chewed on his lip. “How are you doing? Birbrain’s kind of an
asshole.”

Ryan kept his eyes fixed on the road. He didn’t think he could bear to see the vulnerability on
Shane’s face. “It’s a giant asshole alright. But hey, I’m not dead. That’s always a bonus when
talking to demons.”

Shane laughed, and the tension in the car dissolved. “We’ve got a very low bar her at Buzzfeed
Unsolved.”

“Oh yeah,” Ryan wheezed. “We didn’t get brutally murdered on camera? The shoot was a
smashing success!”
Shane’s laughter made all his worries seem smaller. If they could still find something to joke about then they would be fine. After all, how hard could it be to find one bird headed demon?

- - -

Apparently very hard. Five days later and he still didn’t have any leads. Every day Shane would come into the office looking more tired and washed out that the last. He didn’t show up on Friday at all. When Ryan called him in a panic Shane assured Ryan that he was fine, and that Birdbrain was just “being an uppity little fucker.” Ryan had trouble believing him.

It served to fuel his ever increasing sense of urgency. He had to find something. But every possible google search had yet to yield something concrete. Who would have thought “owl headed demon” would be too vague a search. The library was useless. Every bookstore in town was mysteriously out of stock of books relating to demons, and amazon would take too long to ship. He was getting desperate. Still, he couldn’t give up now. If Unsolved had taught him anything, it was that it paid to be thorough.

He was at the fifth bookstore in as many hours. If he couldn’t find anything here he was going to go home and watch basketball until his eyes bled. The place didn’t look promising. It was a second hand bookstore on the verge of bankruptcy. Half the store had been completely cleared out and boxed up, and everything else was covered in massive “STORE CLOSING SALE” signs. There wasn’t even the shadow of an attempt at organization. There were stacks of books straight up lying on the floor and blocking the corridors, looking like they’d fall over under the next stiff wind.

Ryan was tempted to give up, say fuck it, and leave rather than try to struggle through this mess. Even if there were books in stock, which he seriously doubted, it would be impossible to find them in this disaster. He was tired, and hungry, and had forgotten to shave for the past three days. Now that he thought of it, he probably looked about as beat up as Shane did. That would explain the funny look Eugene had given him at work yesterday. He forced himself to try for fifteen minutes before he gave up and went home.

He struggled towards the back of the store, searching for someone to help him sort through the mudslide of paperbacks. He made it ten feet before he tripped over a cat the size and shape of a basketball. He stumbled around before giving up and sitting down with a thump to pet the cat. It leaned into his hand, purring.

“You like that, don’t you, Mr. Basketball Cat,” he cooed as he scratched the cat’s ears.

Mr. Basketball Cat snarled and sank its teeth into his hand. He yelped and yanked his hand backwards, the cat still firmly attached. He shook it, letting out a string of swear words that would have made a sailor blush. The cat finally let go, dropping down into his lap and using it as a springboard to launch under a desk covered in papers. It hissed at him. Ryan hissed back, then felt stupid.

“I see you’ve met Angel Cakes,” a disembodied voice said. Ryan looked around, confused. From behind the mountain of paperwork on the desk came the shortest man Ryan had ever seen. He looked to be about a thousand years old and had a mustache so bushy that it would have rivaled Yosemite Sam’s. “You’ll have to forgive her. She’s a bit of a trickster, loves bitin’ new customers.” He chuckled.

“I could use a stronger word than trickster,” Ryan said, rubbing his stinging hand.

The old man laughed. “So I heard. Keep it down next time, there are kids here. Or at least there used to be.” The man peered down the aisles, scratching his head. “Now there ain’t much of
anybody coming ‘round.”

“I’m sorry about your store, uh… sir?”

“Please, call me Ed. And never mind the store. I’m an old man, I’ll probably kick the bucket before I have to clean this place up.” he laughed, a surprisingly loud sound for such a small body. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for a book about, ah, demons. It’s for a friend.” Ryan stood up. He felt too awkward sitting on the floor and staring up at Ed. It wasn’t much better standing, though. The guy was a good foot shorter than him. Is this what it felt like to be Shane?

“That’s what they all say. No shame in goin’ demon huntin’, boy.” Ed chuckled. “Now, I’m certain I saw just the ticket somewhere around here…”

Ed wandered down the aisle, Ryan awkwardly trailing behind. Every so often Ed would stop, pick up a book and mutter to himself. Ryan began to think he was being led on a wild goose chase in retribution for swearing at the cat.

The cat had deserved it. He regretted nothing.

After ten minutes and some wild internal fighting over whether or not to fade into the background and leave Ed to his muttering, Ed finally dusted off a slim tome and handed it to Ryan. It was leather bound, the yellowing pages slightly crumpled from being shoved against the back of the bookshelf. Ryan thumbed through it, holding it like something fragile. He was worried it would crumble to dust if he turned a page too roughly.

Each page was lovingly illustrated with pictures of demons, information and instructions on how to summon them beside them. He was so relieved that he nearly dropped the book and did a victory dance. Never in his wildest dreams would he have thought Ed would have been able to unearth something actually useful.

“Oh my God,” he breathed, flipping through the book faster and faster, caution thrown to the wind. “This is exactly what I need.” he looked up at Ed, eyes wild. “How much is it?”

“For you? Five bucks. You get the cat-bite discount.”

Ryan fished the money about of his wallet. Every second spent at checkout was excruciating. He had found a lead, a rope to hold onto, something, and now he couldn’t wait a second longer to get into researching. Now he understood how detectives felt. No leads was crushing, but finding even the suggestion of a clue made him feel like he’d just chugged a litre of coffee. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet as Ed bagged his purchase.

“Enjoy the book now, son. Hope to see you here again before I’m two feet in my grave,” Ed said with a smile.

“I’ll, uh, I’ll try,” Ryan replied. He gave a little wave and then raced out of the store as fast as his feet would carry him, weaving between pedestrians with well-practiced grace. Fancier footwork than Lebron James, he silently congratulated himself when he made it home in record time.

His apartment was testament to the mountain of research he had undertaken in the past week. Papers were strewn across the kitchen table, passages highlighted and little doodles of demons and ghosts added into the margins. A small army of empty coffee mugs were piled in the sink, so many that he had started playing sink tetris rather than wash them. He was only a few steps short of putting up a pinboard and attaching ideas together with red string. Those things took a surprising
amount of craftiness to make, and he didn’t have the time. But if any situation warranted it, it was this one.

He kicked off his shoes and threw himself down on the couch with a groan. After spending all weekend running around LA, his feet ached. It was a relief to kick back. His hand still stung where Angel Cakes the demon cat had bit it, but he didn’t care. Finally making decent headway into helping Shane was worth a couple scratches.

He pored over the book until well past midnight. The text was tiny and cramped, and every illustration and diagram was so detailed that he had to take a moment and marvel over each one. Admittedly, he got a little sidetracked. Demons might be assholes but fuck, if they weren’t interesting.

He finally made it to the end of the book, only to see the last two pages had been torn out. The only thing left of them was half a drawing. He squinted at it in the dim light. It looked like… a snatch of a wing, half an owl’s head.

“OH FOR FUCK’S SAKE,” he yelled and threw the book against the wall. Of-fucking-course the pages about Birdbrain were ripped out, because the universe hated him. He wanted answers, was that too much to ask? He had no idea what he’d do now that the book had turned out to be useless. Ed’s store had been the last on his list of bookstores.

Ryan got up and retrieved the book in a huff, fully intending to throw it against the wall again. It was childish, he knew, but right then he needed any vindication he could get. The book had fallen open to where Birdbrain’s entry was supposed to be, like it was mocking him.

“Fuck off,” he muttered at it.

The last legible entry was for a demon named Astaroth. It looked no different from the rest of the demons inside the book, interesting but useless. But then he recalled what the entry had read.

“Truthfully answers every question formulated to him.”

No. No way. Ryan was desperate, not stupid. He didn’t fuck with demons. Even if they were guaranteed to have the information he needed. Even if they were guaranteed to volunteer the information without a price if he did it right.

But there was always a price. That was the moral of these stories, wasn’t it? No matter how you tried to avoid it, you always paid. One way or another.

Shane was paying dearly every moment Ryan searched. Whether he liked it or not, Ryan was already fucking with demons. What was one more? One hour with a demon to save his friend who was spending every second grappling with one.

The things I manage to rationalize… He shook his head as he went to gather supplies. Shane owes me at least twenty trips to In n Out if we survive this shit. It didn’t matter that Shane would hopefully never know he had summoned a demon. Ryan would figure out a way to extort them from Shane somehow.

He dumped his spoils on the living room floor, in front of his couch. It was the only place with enough space to draw a summoning circle and have any hope of success. He felt like he was reading a bizarre recipe as went over the instructions.

“1. Perform the ritual between twelve pm and three am.” Check, through pure coincidence. Finally his fucked up sleep schedule was paying off.
“2. Draw the summoning circle [fig. A] with chalk.” Ryan didn’t own chalk, so he was going to use a crayola washable marker instead and hope for the best. He didn’t need his landlord finding out that he had drawn all over the floor. The summoning circle looked something like a star surrounding by complicated squiggles. He did his best to copy it, but there was a reason he hadn’t majored in art. It took him twenty minutes, but he finally managed a serviceable, if slightly lopsided, summoning circle.

“3. Light candles at each point of the star.” He had just barely managed to scrounge up enough candles to complete the ritual. He was grateful he had never gotten around to throwing out the candles Steven kept buying him for Christmas. Ryan didn’t know why a candle scented like “bacon lemon wildflower” had to exist, but he was glad he owned it now if only to summon a demon.

The instructions didn’t say to do it, but he poured a salt circle around the summoning circle. Just in case. He also grabbed his holy water gun from where he had left it on on the kitchen table and clutched it in sweaty hands like a lifeline.

“4. Chant the summoning invocation.”

Ryan took a deep breath, wiped his hands on his pants, and spoke. “Ego invitare daemonium Astaroth in hoc loco. Ut ipse flectere ad voluntatem meam, et respondendum est, mea quaestiones cum honestate. Venit porro, Astaroth. Venit porro.” he didn’t know how he managed it, but he said it without a single stumble.

A cold wind swept through the room, ruffling his hair and sending his carefully stacked notes up into the air in a great cloud. A column of flame erupted from the summoning circle and Ryan stumbled backwards with a shout. He threw up his arms to protect his face from the blistering heat. It felt like the moisture was being sucked out of his skin, leaving him dry and brittle. As quickly as it appeared, the fire was gone.

Ryan lowered his hand slowly, hesitant to see what was in store for him. An eight eyed eldritch horror? A nightmarish fusion between a bear and a goldfish? He probably should have bothered to check what Astaroth looked like before he had gotten into this mess.

The smoke cleared. Laughter filled the room. Ryan’s laughter, because Astaroth looked fucking ridiculous. It had the body of a newborn baby but the head of a full grown man, all pinched up and snobby like it smelt rotten eggs. Two tiny bat wings attached to its back flapped desperately to stay airborne. A crown much too small for its head perched on its greying hair, tilted at a jaunty angle.

“Stop laughing!” Astaroth demanded. Its voice sounded as if it had inhaled a litre of helium.

That only made Ryan laugh harder until he was nearly doubled over. He could barely keep a hold on his holy water gun. He wiped his eyes and giggled. “Sorry, sorry, you’re just not what I was expecting.”

It was difficult to be afraid of something that was a quarter of his height. If things got out of hand he could just drop kick it through the window or something.

Astaroth humphed and adjusted its crown. “I hope it didn’t get summoned here only to be mocked. I get enough of that at home. It’s always ‘Astaroth you’re so tiny and squishable!’ ‘Astaroth, come answer my questions like you answer all the humans! You big pushover!’ As if I’m not contractually obligated to tell the truth.”
“Dude, that’s rough.” Ryan mentally slapped himself. He was not going to feel sorry for a demon. He wasn’t supposed to call a demon ‘dude’ either, but that seemed like less of a problem.

He was supposed to be serious. This was a serious ritual. “I have questions for you, and you are going to answer them.” Good. Nice and professional. Like a proper ghost hunter.

Astaroth’s crown was on the verge of slipping down and covering its eyes. “Yeah, sure, ask away. That’s what everyone summons me for anyways.”

This wasn’t going anywhere near what Ryan had been expecting. Which was a good thing. It didn’t seem like he’d have to use the holy water gun and he wanted to keep it that way. He had enough problems as it was without throwing a panic party in his apartment because the demon he summoned wanted to kill him.

“I need your help identifying a demon. Black eyes, owl head, big wings, about eight feet tall with a human body. Ring any bells?”

Astaroth rubbed a chubby baby hand over its chin. “Hmm. There’s a couple possibilities. Is it currently running around earth and/or possessing some poor schmuck?”

“Yes. It’s possessing my friend and I want it out.”

A scroll appeared in a puff of smoke, and Astaroth unfurled it with a dramatic twirl. It ground a monocle into its eye and squinted at it. “Let’s see here… the only bird demon that’s currently checked out is… Andras. Left hell two months ago, more or less.”

That lined up perfectly with the Lovers House. “Yes. Yes! That’s perfect. Tell me about Andras.”

“No.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “What do you know about Andras?”

“Well, it’s a powerful demon whose legions run amok with orders to hunt and kill men. It likes picking fights, sowing discord, and long walks on the beach. It feeds off of anger and hate, making killers out of the best of men. I find it hard to believe your friend’s been able to last over a month without being consumed by Andras. Usually it has its host burnt out within a week. Literally. They spontaneously combust.”

Ryan’s heart sank. “That can’t be the right demon, then. Shane’s managed to stay in control, he seems fine...ish. I mean, he definitely hasn’t caught on fire yet.”

Astaroth shrugged. “It’s the only option. Your friend is either superhuman or…” Astaroth got quiet, its flippant tone slipping away for a brief second. “He’s made a deal, hasn’t he.”

“Yeah, something about claiming territory. Is that… bad?” Ryan chewed on his lip, afraid to hear the answer. If the demon wasn’t being dramatic out of an inflated sense of self-importance then Ryan was treading in deeper waters than he had ever prepared to face. He had thought getting the name would be enough, that then he could do a banishing spell and be done with it. But things were shaping up to be a lot more complicated than that.

“That’s not good. That’s not good at all.” Astaroth scratched its chin, brows furrowed. “If Andras is claiming territory again, then…” it fell into silence, staring at the ground with a face scrunched up with worry.

“Then what?” Ryan prompted.
“Zadkiel has returned.”

“Excuse me?”

“Archangel of mercy and Andras’ mortal enemy.”

Ryan’s shoulders slumped. This was too much. He wanted to help his friend, not get sucked into a war between supernatural creatures. Hell, he had only just found out that demons were real in the first place. “Will this get in the way of the exorcism?”

“It will complicate things. Andras and Zadkiel are connected, two sides of the same coin. When one gains power, the other loses it. Usually the ebb and flow happens naturally while the angels sleep, pretentious and useless. But once in a while they both awake at once. They meet, they fight, and everyone makes a betting pool over it. Etcetera, Etcetera.”

Ryan was starting to think Astaroth liked hearing the sound of its own voice. At this rate, they’d be here til noon.

Astaroth continued, either unaware or ignoring Ryan’s mounting impatience. “If Andras had made a deal, that means it’s trying to amass as much power as it can before Zadkiel wakes so it can crush Zadkiel like the bug it is. Angels, thinking they’re so high and mighty with their absolution bullshit…” Astaroth trailed off, grumbling. “Anyways. Your friend’s not gonna survive the clash. Andras will snuff him out so it can transform the vessel into a weapon without a fight. If I’m right, which I always am, that’s going to be within the week.”

“Yes, but the exorcism?!” Ryan had never heard a more roundabout way of answering a question. If Astaroth was trying to stress Ryan out, it was working. The knot of anxiety in his stomach wound tighter and tighter with each word it said. Andras was raising Shane like a lamb for the slaughter. For once it didn’t feel good to be right. In fact, Ryan felt positively sick.

Astaroth looked Ryan in the eyes for the first time all day. They turned molten gold, dripping down its face until it looked like it was melting. “To exorcise Andras you must go east. Deep in the waters of the Mississippi, find the warehouse reclaimed by the earth beside Glenn Springs lake. There you will find Zadkiel, for only one can banish the other. Summon it with the rising sun and invite it to make a home in your bones. A burning home: it will burn a mortal from the inside out with its divine light. Only the impossibly good could hope to survive such a thing. Angels do not care for mortal pleas, they only care for rapture. Even an angel of mercy will not spare you, for their mercy is a sham. You must sacrifice. Only then will you banish Andras from its mortal host.”

“Holy shit,” Ryan whispered, rooted to the spot. He took everything back, Astaroth was fucking terrifying. He held the holy water gun with shaking hands, ready to shoot at the slightest sign that Astaroth wanted to escape the salt circle. Its body steamed and it threw its head back and shrieked like a dying animal. Ryan dropped the gun with a shout. Astaroth’s face swirled back into the prunish thing it had been before as Ryan’s heart hammered out of his chest.

“And that’s how you exorcise Andras. Any questions?”

“No,” Ryan said in a small voice.

He stood there for uncountable seconds, unable to go anything but stare at the summoning circle. He felt a bit like he was dying. If he went through with exorcising Shane, he would die. But if he didn’t, then Shane would. And Ryan didn’t think he’d be able to survive that.

Astaroth rolled up its scroll with an impatient snap. “Well? Are you going to dismiss me?”
“Oh. Yeah. Yeah.” it took Ryan a couple of minutes before he could focus on the words long enough to read them. His vision was swimming. It felt like he was in a dream. “Ego, rumpē Astaroth ad unde factum est. Hunc locum relinquere et non soluta nobis est iterum usque ad vos vocati sunt super.”

Astaroth disappeared the same way he came, in a pillar of fire. Ryan was still too stunned to bother reacting. He let the heat sear his face, still staring frozen at the floor. The fire extinguished itself, taking the candles’ flames with it. Astaroth has left the summoning circle scorched onto the floor, but Ryan could only manage a vague feeling of dismay at it. He slumped down onto the couch. He could still see the ghost of the fire imprinted on the backs of his eyelids. There was a lot to unpack.

He was asked to die. He wasn’t delusional, he didn’t hold any hope that he was up to any angel’s standards of goodness. He wasn’t a saint. He was just Ryan, trying to do what he thought was right.

He wasn’t ready to die. He was 26, there was still so much he still wanted to do with his life. He wanted to see Unsolved blossom, he wanted to build a life with someone.

He wanted Shane to live.

It was an impossible situation; no matter what his actions were there would be a death. It was inescapable. Death always was. If they went to Glenn Springs, he wouldn’t be coming back from the trip. But if he didn’t act, Andras would consume Shane like a fire.

It was a choice: save Shane or save himself.

He knew what Shane would pick, but it wasn’t Shane’s choice.

Ryan would rather die than live in a world where he had left Shane to the wolves. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he did. He wouldn’t be able to live without Shane. Ryan couldn’t live in a world without Shane’s soft smile, without his wild hair, without his dumbass remarks that made Ryan laugh until he couldn’t breathe.

He had to make a decision and live with it. Or die with it, as the case may be.

He knew who he would pick.

It was Shane, it was Shane every time. He had wanted to build a life with him. He had wanted Shane to be the person he saw when he woke up, the person he could cling to when he was afraid. Shane already did that for him some days. He wanted Shane to do it forever. But it was too late now.

Ryan had said he would sacrifice.

He wasn’t ready to do it.

He didn’t think he had much of a choice.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Ryan amiright guys? Almost makes you long for the days when his biggest problems were missing footage. If you love this fic, or alternatively want to show how absolutely mad at me you are, then hit those big fat kudos and comment buttons and
give ya pal some love. See you in two weeks!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Yep, I'm back. Thanks so much for the support last chapter, I really hung you guys out to dry there. Hope you enjoy this one just as much :-) things are pulling together for the grand finale!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Meanwhile, Shane was having the worst week of his life.

Birdbrain had stopped talking to him. It had refused to ever since they had left the basement with Ryan carrying the knowledge of their secret. Birdbrain wasn’t talking, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t communicating. It curled inwards into a malicious pounding at the base of his skull. Shane didn’t need any words to know that something bad was on the horizon.

Things started going wrong the day they got back from New Orleans. He unlocked the door to his apartment and dropped his bags in the doorway, where he knew he would trip over them. He didn’t care. All he wanted to do was pass out for the next ten hours and stop thinking about Ryan’s dead look when he had said “My answer’s not changing.” Birdbrain had been mocking Shane, asking Ryan that. They had both known nothing would come from Shane’s little crush, but Shane had still retained a crazy hope. A hope that Ryan would have looked Birdbrain in the eyes and said “yes, I do love Shane. He’s an asshole, but I love him anyways.” Hearing “My answer’s not changing” had been like sticking fingers into a bruise.

He filled up a glass of water, the rushing tap the only sound in the apartment. It had never felt so big until now. It had never felt so lonely. He reached for his phone to turn on some music and chase away the emptiness. He could hear static, so faint that he wondered if it was even there at all.

Then he blacked out.

When he came to, he was standing on a pier, receipts from a dozen different second hand bookstores crumpled in his fist. They all read the same thing: he’d bought out every book about demons that they owned. His hands stung. He looked at them and discovered that they were covered in paper cuts. Scraps of paper floated in the ocean. How he had gotten to that salty, wind swept pier from his apartment was nothing but a blank space in his memory.

This was different from any other time Birdbrain had taken control. He wasn’t in the backseat, he was just… gone.

This is bad.

Birdbrain offered no explanation for the sudden change, because of course it wouldn’t. It always left Shane to figure things out on his own.

But he wasn’t alone this time. He could ask Ryan for help.

But Ryan was already pulling his hair out in stress thinking that Shane was in control of Birdbrain. If he found out that Birdbrain was running off unchecked to do its own errands… He didn’t want Ryan
to worry about him. Not when he was still recovering from the first confession. Shane didn’t need to panic, there was no way of telling how big of a deal this was. He could just wait and see how things turned out before he acted.

So he blacked out again. And again. And again. Waking up in new places with no memory of getting there, whole hours of his day being eaten by the abyss. Outside of a warehouse, fingernails bloody from prying open the doors. In a field of wildflowers, three miles away from the closest footpath. The tenth floor of a lawyer firm. He had had a hard time talking his way out of that one.

Always with a pounding headache at the base of his skull. Never too far away from Birdbrain’s sigil burned into the ground.

So that’s what it’s doing. Claiming territory, making no move to hide its actions. But why? Why not wait until they started filming the next season? And why was a lawyer firm haunted? It didn’t make sense, but then again, nothing about Birdbrain made sense. That was the whole idea of demons, other than the whole torture-and-tempt-mankind thing they had going on. He should have been at a panic by now, but somehow he still felt strangely calm. Shane was confused, but he wasn’t afraid. Not yet.

Not until Sunday.

---

He was burning. He was blind, trapped within a cocoon of oppressive darkness. But he could feel the flames licking his skin, melting him down to his very core. His skin felt too tight. He wanted to split it open and emerge from it like a baby reborn.

He tearing himself open, something sharp and painful was growing from his forehead, bone bursting from the skin of his temples. His mouth ached as his teeth grew into a jumble of wicked fangs. It was all wrong, they were too big from his mouth. Something itchy was growing from his shoulders, a thousand tiny needles poking through his skin. The bones in his body were splitting and morphing into something different, something wicked. Turning him into a weapon.

Everything hurt, he was being crushed as his body protested the metamorphosis. He didn’t want to change. He wanted to reel it back in, stuff the monster he was becoming back underneath his skin.

It was too late. The monster had escaped, and he was unrecognizable.

He was burning.

---

Shane jerked awake, heart pounding. It was dark, why was it dark? It had been morning when he had blacked out. The branches over his head were blocking out the stars. He was in a forest. His head ached, and he clutched it with stinging hands.

His hands were sticky. He raised them to his mouth mechanically, his brain deciding without consulting him that if he couldn’t see what it was, he could figure it out some other way it instead. It was only when tasted iron that he realized what he had done. Oh no.

Oh no no no no no.

Horror rose in the form of a choking hand around his throat. He couldn’t see what had happened, it was too dark, the trees blocked out what little light the sliver of a moon had to offer. He could only agonize over the feeling of tacky blood drying on his skin. Bile rose in his throat. He wanted to peel
his skin off, dip it in scalding water as if he could burn off whatever Birdbrain had done.

If someone was hurt, if he had killed someone, he’d never be able to live with himself. He shouldn’t have let it get this far, what had he been thinking, he should have trusted Ryan like he had promised to. He should have been more cautious.

He had always known in the back of his mind that Birdbrain was a killer but he hadn’t believed it. He couldn’t reconcile the petulant but ultimately useful thing in his head with the cold blooded killer it kept threatening to become, like a dog stuck on a chain. Ryan had believed, but Shane had always thought it was all talk. Nothing but bluster to keep him obedient. It had never shown otherwise, not in a way that had resulted in something so viscerally, unquestionably violent. He had always controlled Birdbrain, reined things in before they got too far. But now the dog was loose. While he was distracted thinking he had the upper hand, Birdbrain had wormed its way inside of him like disease and turned him into a puppet on a string.

Now Shane was paying.

He fumbled for his phone. His hands were shaking so hard he nearly dropped it. Please don’t let me see a body. Please let this be a nightmare. He knew enough about nightmares to know that this scene was all too real.

Oh God.

What if it’s Ryan?

He turned the phone’s flashlight on.

There were no bodies on the ground.

Shane went weak kneed with relief. He was innocent, Birdbrain had absolved him of this much, this tiny victory. His dream was wrong. He was not a monster.

The fire burning in his heart claimed otherwise.

A circle on the ground had been swept clear of leaves. The dark stain of fresh blood cut Birdbrain’s sigil into the dust. It was a messy thing, the lines broken up by gouged up dirt, as if there had been a struggle. The forest was deadly quiet. There wasn’t even a wind to rustle the tree branches. He was alone.

But where had the blood come from? His hands felt like they were burning from the guilt of it. Or no, wait, they actually were burning. In pain. They stung like all hell. He balanced his phone between cheek and shoulder and carefully wiped the worst of the blood off of his hands using his undershirt. A jagged cut ran across his palm, still bleeding fast. He poked at it and winced. It was hard to tell how deep it was in the shaky light of his phone. He could at least still wiggle his fingers. Thin scratches ran up both his arms, as if he had been attacked by an animal.

He was starting to feel light headed from blood loss. He wouldn’t be able to trek back to the car if he didn’t do something about it soon. Tearing off a strip of his undershirt proved more difficult than the movies made it seem, so he took it off and wrapped his hand up tight until it stopped throbbing. His fingers trembled as he buttoned his flannel back up again. He felt like he had been run over by a truck. For all he knew, he might have been.

Something rustled in the dead leaves and he jumped, dropping his phone in fear. He grabbed it off the ground and whipped around to shine the flashlight towards the noise, heart pounding. A tiny crow hopped out of a pile of leaves and cocked its head at Shane. He stared back, dumbfounded. He
had never seen one so unafraid. He could have reached out and stroked its feathers if he had wanted to. It scratched at the ground. Blood glistened on its talons in the light. His blood. It let out a tiny ‘croaw’ and hopped towards the sigil. Flapping its wings, agitated, it scratched at the ground until the sigil was a mess of overturned dirt and blood. The crow glanced at him one more time before launching upwards and flying clumsily into the night, a dark speck on the pitch black canvas of the sky.

He stared at the blood slowly seeping through the fabric of his undershirt. It was his, but it could have just as easily been someone else’s. Birdbrain didn’t care, it had never cared about anything except gaining power. Shane had been nothing but a pawn this whole time, and it had taken him a sigil made of blood to realize it. If the crow hadn’t attacked him, then—well, he didn’t know what would have happened, but he had a feeling he wouldn’t have woken up again.

But whatever Birdbrain had tried to do had been interrupted. Shane had been given a second chance. He wasn’t going to waste it.

He stumbled over roots and rocks as he raced back through the forest, guided by the faint light of the flashlight and google maps. He hit a hole in the trail and fell hard, shins banging against a rock. He was gonna feel that for the next thousand years. He rolled upright on screaming knees, drawn urgently forward. He was finally fighting Birdbrain. With every passing moment it could possess him again, force him to do something he’d regret forever. He couldn’t trust his own hands, but he could trust Ryan to help him. He could always trust Ryan.

His car was parked on the shoulder of the highway. There was a road map of Tennessee tucked in the passenger seat, Glenn Springs lake circled in thick red marker so aggressively that there was a hole in the page. He added that to the ever growing list of things to tell Ryan about.

He drove recklessly, taking advantage of the lack of cars on the road this early in the morning. The pounding in his head grew with each mile closer to Ryan’s house. His ribs were burning. Everything in him was screaming at him to turn around, to go back, to leave Ryan alone to keep him from worrying. But Shane now knew who was saying that, and it sure wasn’t him. Ryan deserved to know. Whatever happened, they’d face it together.

The sun was rising, and Shane felt as though he was on the cusp of something monumental. As long as he could stay in control and make sure he didn’t hurt Ryan.

Birdbrain tried to take over as he drove there, but Shane managed to push it back, shove it deep down into his chest. He pulled over to the side of the road and threw up, sweat soaking through his flannel. He felt like he was being torn in two each time he disagreed with the demon, a knife splitting him down the navel. He had to keep fighting through the pain. He didn’t want to become the monster Birdbrain said he was. He wanted to be able to wake up each day and not have to worry about keeping his hands gentle.

It was six in the morning when he banged on the door to Ryan’s apartment, too wound up to wait until a reasonable hour. Ryan didn’t answer the door. Of course he didn’t, any reasonable person would be asleep at this hour. Shane had texted him a heads up that he was coming, but Ryan wouldn’t have seen it anyways. He hoped there were no early birds in the building that would walk down the hall and see him, looking like hell in a handbasket with dirt and blood smeared all over his shirt and arms.

He raised his hand to knock again just as the door opened. Ryan stood there rubbing his eyes, looking as though he was still asleep. He was in his pyjamas, hair sticking up every which way. He looked impossibly soft. His shirt was so thin that Shane had to physically restrain himself from
staring at the suggestion of Ryan’s sculpted abs. It was too early to deal with this. He had enough trouble with Ryan showing off his arms every time he stretched, the shirt he was wearing right now should have been illegal.

He may or may not have become a little delirious from blood loss. Or exhaustion. He was a bit of a hot mess right now.

Shane wanted to collapse into Ryan’s arms and pass out, safe at last. He had spent so long dealing with all his problems alone, and now he was exhausted. But there would be time to sleep later, once Birdbrain was finally gone. They’d have time afterwards to make up for the days they’d wasted arguing.

“In the name of all that is decent, what the fuck are you doing here at six in the morning?” Ryan complained, yawning. “Not that I’m mad at you, I know you’ve a… situation going on, I just wonder if it couldn’t have-” he finally focused on the full bedraggled mess that was Shane and his eyebrows shot together in concern. “What happened to your hand?”

“Birdbrain. It’s a long story.”

Ryan frowned. “You’d better come inside. I think I’m going to need a gallon of coffee to deal with this.”

He trailed after Ryan into the kitchen, which was messy as always. Stacks of papers scribbled over in red pen covered the table and dishes were piled high in the sink. Sometimes Shane wondered how Ryan survived.

He watched with unfocused eyes as Ryan stretched on tiptoes to reach the last two mugs at the back of the shelf, traced his eyes over the line of Ryan’s spine. Wished he could trace his fingers over it as well. He wanted the domesticity of it all, to be able to wake up together and make coffee together and eat breakfast together, without demons or ghosts or fear in the way. But that could never happen. Ryan’s exchange with Birdbrain had driven the nail into that coffin.

Ryan swept the papers out of the way so he could set the mugs down with a clink. Coffee prepared exactly how Shane liked it, with enough sugar to give a horse a heart attack. Ryan took a long gulp of his before slamming his hand palm up against the table.

“Lemme see your hand.”

Shane held it out. It still pulsed with dull pain, but it didn’t hurt half as much as when he had first come to. Ryan took it with gentle fingers and peeled the undershirt off of his arm. He saw the jagged line scraped across Shane’s palm and winced. Thankfully, it had stopped bleeding, and dried blood was crusted over his palm like a second skin. The crow’s scratches had scabbed over into a map across his forearms.

Ryan let out a low whistle as he turned Shane’s arm back and forth, getting a proper look at it. “Yikes.” his fingers were soft and warm, and he held Shane like he was something precious. “Go wash this with warm water.”

“Under the sink?”

“No, under the dishwasher. I’ll go get the first aid kit.” he patted Shane’s hand before leaving the room.

Shane did as instructed, preferring to watch the dying plants on the windowsill rather than the blood whirlpooling down the drain. It took skill to kill a cactus, but somehow Ryan was managing it. He
paused for a moment, disoriented. *What was I doing again...?* Something smelled like smoke. *Oh yeah, getting this blood off. Yeah.*

Ryan returned with an armful of bandages and a bottle of antiseptic. He cleaned the cuts until the smell of chemicals drowned out the smell of smoke. He winced in sympathy when Shane yelped at the sting. He bandaged Shane’s palm with confidence, pulling it tight enough that Shane’s hand got pins and needles.

“Wow, I look like a one handed boxer now,” Shane said as Ryan finished. “This is great *handiwork.*” he wiggled his eyebrows. “Geddit?”

Ryan sighed. “I should have let you bleed to death.”

“You’re smiling. You love it.” he wiggled his fingers, feeling much improved. “Can crows give you rabies?”

“Nah, only mammals. Wait. You were attacked by *crows?*”

“One crow. Maybe I should start at the beginning.”

So he did. He kept pausing to let himself think and figure out what had happened, his thoughts all meandering around in circles and out of reach. But eventually the story took shape, from the first blackout on arrival to waking up with bloody hands. Reliving that panicked night so soon made his heart pound. Ryan’s eyebrows travelled higher and higher up on his forehead as the story went on. Of course Ryan wasn’t shocked. He had been expecting something to go horribly wrong this whole time.

“... and you were right. About Birdbrain. I can’t live like this. I want an out, before something awful happens.” he ran his non-injured hand over his face in despair. “But what can we possibly do?”

To his surprise, Ryan smiled. “Today’s your lucky day, big guy, because I’m here to save your ass. While you were off pretending being possessed was no big deal, I found out Birdbrain’s identity and how to get it out of our lives.”

Shane gaped at him. He could have kissed Ryan right then and there. “Ryan Bergara, you are a wizard. I will never mock you for being paranoid ever again.”

Ryan shrugged one shoulder. “Don’t thank me until Birdbrain’s gone. Are you certain you want to be rid of it? It will only work if you’re willing.”

“I’m afraid of what Birdbrain will do to me if we try. But I’m more afraid of what it’ll do to me if I do nothing. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Ryan wouldn’t look him in the eye. “The demon’s name is Andras.”

The name sent a bolt of lightning down Shane’s spine. He pushed Birdbrain- no, Andras- a little deeper down. Doing it was like digging his fingers into a bruise, but it was still better than being possessed. His chest hurt. He didn’t know how long he could keep it up for. “Okay. okay.”

“We have to find Glenn Springs lake, Ten-”

“Tennessee? Birdbrain- sorry, Andras- had it circled on a map.” he chewed his lip. “Do you… do you think it’s a trap?”

“We don’t have much of a choice. It’s the only place the banishing will work.”
“Then I guess I’m just going to have to survive your shitty music all the way to Tennessee.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Why do I feel like this is gonna be a rough three days?”

He had been given a lifeline. *Ryan* had given him a lifeline. He had to keep pushing on that bruise for three days and then he would be free.

They called off work, Shane saying he was sick and Ryan citing a family emergency. He hoped nobody important cared enough to wonder why they were both off at the same time, feeling strangely like a schoolkid skipping for the first time.

Ryan made a call before they left.

“Hey, Erika? Yeah, I know it’s early. Listen can I call in a favour? I need…” he wandered out of earshot, brow creased. He returned ten minutes later, carrying a brown paper bag like it held something fragile. Something shiny was wrapped around his fist, glinting in the morning sun. He put it in the trunk and slammed the lid.

“Just in case,” Ryan said softly, almost to himself. Shanee raised an eyebrow but didn’t think much of it. Ryan was a weird paranoid man and at this point Shane couldn’t blame him. He would bet good money that it was more holy water.

They packed their bags and were ready to leave within the hour. It felt like they were heading off to another *Unsolved* shoot, except this time they knew the demon they were hunting down was real. Real and very, very dangerous.

“Ryan,” he said softly as the car idled, heart in throat. “I want to warn you that... well, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stay in control all the way to Glenn Springs. So if I… if I lose it, try to hurt you, please hit back. It’s not gonna be me. Whatever happens, don’t let me hurt anyone. Please.” he fiddled with his seat belt, refusing to meet Ryan’s eye. The thought made him feel sick, but it had to be said. He didn’t want to become a monster.

The silence stretched, agonizing, until he couldn’t stand it anymore. He looked at Ryan. He stared back, hands folded over the steering wheel. Looking at Shane as though he was something to be cherished, not feared.

“I promise,” he said. “But you can’t blame yourself for anything Andras does. I’ve hung around you long enough to know you’re not a killer.”

“No?”

“Of course not, only I get to make the death threats in this team. Because I don’t know if you’ve forgotten, but we *are a team*. You don’t have to shoulder the burden alone. The ghouligans have a bond that cannot be broken and all that.”

The early morning encircled Ryan’s head like a halo and Shane thought that this was what heaven looked like. A hand outreached to pull him upright.

“Okay,” he said, a lump in him throat. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes
*chanting* road trip road trip road trip ROAD TRIP ROAD TRIP

Anyways, thank you as always for reading and supporting me, seriously. I’m blown away with your support every single week. Kudos and comments, as well as reccing this fic to others, is always super appreciated! And as always, you can find me on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes

I hope you all have a wonderful two weeks until I see you again, and good luck to all those high schoolers who have to struggle through exams right now. I believe in you!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7:30 am

They punched through the Los Angeles traffic and shot out into a surprisingly empty highway. The landscape blurred into an endless montage of desert, the cold winter sun hanging over them like a watchful eye. Shane tapped away at his phone, struggling with an anagram game. He could have even passed for relaxed if it wasn’t for the way he had his free hand balled up into a white knuckled fist. Ryan put on the radio to fill the anxious, deafening silences left between them.

He had three days left to live. It didn’t feel real yet. Some crazy part of him was still stuck on the idea that he’d walk out of there alive and safe with Shane, that Astaroth was wrong. He wasn’t built to deal with his impending mortality; it loomed over him like a suffocating shadow. He tried to force himself to ignore it and enjoy the trip with Shane, because it was the last one he would ever have.

He could pretend that things were okay. That they could have had something together. He could build his life in those three days, fit a lifetime together into hushed whispers and winding roads. He would do what he could to ease the pain.

8:59 am

Shane’s fist unclenched as the minutes ticked by and he sank into their usual road trip routine. Ryan relaxed with him, sloughing off the tension that sat against his back like a second skin. The endless desert made it feel as if they were driving in place. That they would live in the car forever, never needing to face the consequences of their decisions. That they could have been going anywhere.

10:13 am

They did a lot of talking during that road trip. It wasn’t about anything important, nothing but plans for future episodes and how they couldn’t wait to go to the beach when it finally warmed up. Ryan thought it was going to be a long winter, but Shane had hopes for early spring. Misplaced hopes, considering that it was already March and still freezing.

It was nice to imagine the things he’d never get to do. To give Shane the hope that things could return to normal afterwards, no matter how short lived it may be. It didn’t make him feel sad. It felt more like nostalgia. Like imagining a rose tinted fantasy that you knew never had a chance at existing.

Although the more they talked, the more a tiny, angry part of his heart festered, turning that nostalgia into jealousy. Into resentment. He resented Shane for being able to walk away from this and live. The angry part of him wanted to stop, to save himself and let Shane deal with the aftermath of Andras alone. The angry part of him blamed Shane, blamed him for not getting help until it was too late and death was inevitable. The angry part of him was selfish. Sometimes loving was very, very hard.

He glanced over at Shane, expecting him to look uncaring, free from the knowledge of Ryan’s future. But Shane had his fingernails dug into the meaty part of the palm of his uninjured hand. He was folded up on himself like he was hoping to sink into the chair and disappear, his face a mask of carefully arranged composure, even as he talked of summer. Any blame that was stewing inside of
Ryan had to have already manifested inside of Shane’s head. Ryan couldn’t help but soften at that. There was no one to blame but the demon. Shane was only doing what he thought was right, same as Ryan. Same as everyone.

He wanted to hold onto Shane until this was over, kiss him until his face unknotted itself and Shane knew how much he cared. But he had to keep driving. That was the best thing he could do for Shane right now.

Talking made them forget- for Shane, Andras’ threat, for Ryan, his impending mortality.

11:22 am

They passed a sign reading “20 miles to Oatman, AZ, the living ghost town.”

“We need to stop there,” Ryan said. “Anything with that great a name deserves to be seen by the boys.”

Shane checked the GPS. “Do we have time?”

“We always have time for oat-related cities. And ghost-related cities. And I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. We can have lunch there.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

They pulled off of the highway and onto a dusty road full of potholes. Oatman, Arizona was a town trapped in limbo. They might as well have gone back in time to the gold rush. Wooden buildings lined the street, their jaunty paint now faded by decades of dust. Donkeys wandered the streets untethered, chasing after tourists in search of a snack. Ryan was forced to slow to a crawl to keep from hitting the donkeys that ambled along in front of their car, either fearless or stupid. They somehow managed to park without running one over, but it was a close thing.

“I expected cowboys, but I didn’t expect donkeys with a deathwish,” Shane said as they got out of the car. “They’re kind of cute, though.” he reached out a hand to pet a grey one that was trying to lick a fencepost. It brayed and cantered away, ears pulled back against its head.

Ryan burst out laughing. “It hates you. It mistook you for Bigfoot and got scared.”


“Here. Let me try.” Ryan squatted down to donkey height and held out a hand, clicking his tongue. “Heeeeere donkey donkey donkey. Please don’t try to eat my hand.”

The donkey ignored him, preferring to try and eat a cactus instead.

“Ryan Bergara: donkey whisperer extraordinaire,” Shane said. “Don’t quit your day job.”

“Shut up, Shane.”

They stopped at the local bar for lunch. Fake wanted posters plastered the walls and a piano played softly in the background. The door had been propped open, but even with a breeze it was swelteringly hot. The entire waitstaff wore cowboy hats, and it was kind of expensive, but Ryan refused to let one of his last meals be McDonalds. That would be depressing. If he was going to go out eating fast food, it would be In n Out at the very least.

Shane took a sip of his mimosa and winced. “Aw man, I always forget.”
Ryan quirked his eyebrows. “Forget what?”

“That I’ve still got sores on the inside of my mouth from the tea you spiked with holy water. Thanks a lot for that.” Shane rolled his eyes and grimaced. His teeth were flecked with red. He didn’t seem to notice. “I knew letting you get your hands on holy water wouldn’t end well.”

“I had forgotten about that. Written it off as paranoia.” Ryan stared down at his plate of fries, the ketchup looking more and more like a spray of blood. “Hard to believe I was right after all.”

“For you, maybe.” Shane sighed and massaged his cheek. “That stuff hurt like hell.” he laughed a little when he realized what he had said. “Geddit? That was good.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Yes Shane. It hurt like hell. Because you have a demon infestation in your head.”

“What would you have done if I had just… spewed the holy water back out all over you? Or if my face melted and I turned into a puddle of demon goo all over the floor?”

“Probably gotten a mop.”

Shane threw his head back and barked out a laugh. “That’s so mean!”

“Well it’s true! What would I tell our coworkers? ‘Watch out for the puddle in the hallway, that’s the remains of our good friend Shane. He melted away like a popsicle. Don’t look at me, I definitely didn’t murder him.’”

“I’m sure you’d think of something.”

“I can’t think on the fly! Not everyone has taken an _improv class_, Shane.”

“Not everyone tries to feed their friend holy water to see if they’re a demon.”

“Touché.” Ryan poked at his fries. “Sorry.”

“Enh, don’t worry about it. I shouldn’t have expected anything different.” Shane traced a finger around the rim of his glass and smiled. ‘You always psych yourself out, looking for things that aren’t there.”

They kept talking afterwards, but Ryan couldn’t get that line out of his head. “You always psych yourself out looking for things that aren’t there.”

Shane knew that ghosts and demons existed. So what had he meant?

Or was Ryan just psyching himself out yet again?

2:22 pm

Shane would put on a song, and then Ryan would change it, and then Shane would put it back on until Ryan gave up. He had done it a thousand times before, but it still made Shane cackle when Ryan sighed dramatically and let Shane’s meme song play. Ryan suspected that Shane liked bothering him more than he actually liked the song itself.

“Shotgun gets to be DJ,” Shane said smugly.

“Driver gets to drive into the ditch because he’s distracted by the shitty song on the radio,” Ryan replied.
Ryan rolled a hundred different scenarios around in his head, a tasting menu of decisions. Worlds where he charms an angel in setting him free, where aliens crash through the roof and abduct them all, where Shane steps in at the last minute and pleads for him, tearfully confessing his lifelong love. Worlds where they kept driving and never stopped, and Andras disappeared and he and Shane fell asleep curled around each other like puzzle pieces. Fate had never meant for them to be anything but a friendship ending in tragedy, but oh, it was a comfort to imagine.

Fantasy was his only refuge when Shane couldn’t talk, couldn’t do anything but concentrate on pushing Andras down and away. He looked like he was meditating: only the white knuckled fists brought to his mouth like a prayer belied the war inside of him.

Ryan knew he would never understand what Shane was facing. All he could do was offer a sympathetic smile and a bag of skittles and hope that Shane understood he was there for him no matter what happened. Regardless of whether he’d be able to charm a charmless angel or not.

“How’s Andras doing?”

Shane looked up from the game of hangman they were playing. “No Qs. Why did you even pick Q, you already know there are no Us either. Honestly Ryan.” he scratched his eyebrows with the pencil. “Sorry, what?”

“Andras. You dealing okay? Need anything?”

“We’re still here, aren’t we? Birdbrain’s throwing a temper tantrum and wants me to grab the wheel and steer us into the ditch but I’m doing an okay job of, uh, ignoring it.” Shane drummed the pencil against his thigh, looking nervous. “I don’t think it’s really trying its hardest.”

“Okay. No driving shift for you, then.” Ryan fiddled with the magnetic clasp of the necklace Erika had given him, before they had left. It was comfortingly heavy over his collarbone, a reminder of a backup plan.

“That might be for the best, yeah.”

Ryan wondered how many things he had experienced for the last time without even realizing it. The last time he had seen his mom was trivia night, and he sure as hell hadn’t appreciated that for what it was. He had barely talked to her. He wished he had acted differently then, made an effort to connect rather than being annoyed over her matchmaking. And now he’d never hug her again, never watch another movie with his dad, never play another basketball game with his brother. They always said to appreciate what you had before it’s gone, but could he have ever appreciated it enough? Even if he had lived to be one hundred, would he have still gone to his grave full of regrets?

There was a gaping hole inside of him, yearning to be filled with the things he had never done. All the things he had thought would wait for him. But life never waited, it took and took until you were empty. Life didn’t care.

He didn’t want to die. But it was the only option he could live with.

The car ate up the miles beneath them far too quickly. Time marched ever onwards.
People kept texting him to ask why he had missed work. He didn’t bother replying to any of them. They would find out what had happened to him soon enough, and by then it wouldn’t matter anyways. The world had shrunk down for good this time, and all that mattered was Shane and the demon that slept beneath his skin.

He wondered what Shane would tell everyone when he was gone. Would it be a tragic accident, a car crash, a murder? Or would he disappear, becoming nothing more than another unsolved mystery for internet shows to cover. He didn’t know which would be worse for his friends to hear.

That seemed to be the problem he was faced with time and time again. Was it better to not know and live off of hope, or know for certain and have no hope left? He still didn’t know the answer. He hoped he’d find out before it was too late.

Maybe he’d come back and haunt Shane as a ghost. He certainly had enough unfinished business to warrant it.

The sun was beginning to set on Holbrook, Arizona, when they stopped there. Orange streaked the sky like spilled paint and the sun hung heavy on the horizon like only the clouds kept it upright.

The town was the perfect setting for a fifties-era movie. Motels with hand painted signs and quaint diners with paint faded into pastels contrasted with the modern cars crowding their parking lots. Beneath Holbrook’s cotton candy veneer was the dust, the hungry desert lying in wait to overtake the city and return it to whence it came as soon as everyone stopped paying attention.

They could have kept going, over the state border and through the night but Ryan was tired and the selfish, human part of him wanted to prolong things. To savour a few more moments with Shane. Andras hasn’t bothered us in a few hours, he reasoned. Shane would tell me if he didn’t think we should stop. He had resigned himself to his choice but he wouldn’t run headlong into it. Death could wait for him patiently. It always did. He felt its shadow every time they were on location, and it was bigger than ever now, looming over him like a tidal wave. Only Shane scared it away, if only for a little while.

Dinner was burgers at the local bar, each one served with a veritable mountain of fries. The place was packed to the gills, and he had to lean in close to hear a word Shane said to him over the din. Apparently there was a festival of some sort happening, people coming in from around the world to celebrate the petrified forest Holbrook guarded. Ryan wasn’t really listening. He was too busy getting lost in the way the fluorescent lights made Shane’s eyes seem like they were flecked with gold. They were shoulder to shoulder sitting barside, practically breathing each other’s air. The crowded bar faded to the background as Shane talked, until he felt as though there was no one but them in the room. The burger was delicious, when he was paying attention long enough to taste it.

“I want to get a brownie, but I’m so full.” Ryan leaned back in his seat and rubbed his stomach. “That was so many fries.”

“You vacuumed those right up.” Shane replied, flipping through the dessert menu. “I looked over and they were gone. Which is unfortunate, because I was planning on stealing some of them to annoy you.” he snapped the menu shut and tapped it against his chin. “We could split the brownie.”

“You sure you want to risk me vacuuming this brownie up too?”
“I do not joke around with brownies,” Shane said seriously. “This guy needs his chocolate. I’ll stab you with my fork if you try to steal my half.”

Ryan shoulder checked him, laughing. “I doubt your noodle arms could muster up enough strength to hurt me.”

“Watch it, or I’ll eat the whole brownie myself.” Shane shoulder checked him back, and Ryan nearly fell off his stool. Shane was strong. He managed to catching himself on the bar top. Shane grabbed his sleeve and hauled him back upright, laughing. Shane smoothed down the fabric of Ryan’s shirt with a careful hand. Ryan had never been so aware of a soft touch and took a long sip of his beer to hide the heat creeping up his face.

This was exactly what he had meant when he decided what he wanted to do with his life. It didn’t matter where there were, as long as they were together, laughing. A brownie the size of a dinner plate didn’t hurt, either.

Shane frowned halfway through the brownie, which made Ryan frown too. It was impossible to be sad in the face of chocolate, so the frown could only mean one thing. Andras was acting up again. It gave him the wake up call he needed. This wasn’t a romantic date, it was a mission to save Shane’s life.

Shane rubbed the space between his eyebrows and gave the wall of bottles across from them a thousand yard stare. “Don’t yell at me in a language I can’t understand,” he muttered under his breath.

“Should have taken those latin classes in high school,” Ryan replied, painfully aware of the girl who sat beside them. She wouldn't stop glancing over, eyebrows creased. She’s concerned because Shane looks like he’s going to puke. Keep your paranoia in its assigned seat at all times, Ryan. He didn’t need any attention being drawn to their situation. The desert was vast and life draining and every town inside of it seemed just a little too eerie and on edge for his liking, no matter how friendly the locals were. He threw an arm around Shane’s back and braced the other on his shoulder, ready to drag him off to the bathroom if Andras got too out of hand. Shane leaned into the touch.

He snapped out of his trance and glanced up at Ryan, managing to crack a sheepish smile. “I said that out loud, didn’t I.”

“Only quietly,” Ryan said, careful to keep his voice down. He had to bring his face in an inch from Shane’s to make sure he heard. Oh, this was painful.

The girl beside them turned back to her drink with a shake of her ponytail.

He hoped it was just the fluorescent lights, but Shane looked about three shades paler than usual. “Can we go back to the car please? I’m not feeling too hot right now.”

“Whatever you want to do. You’re the one with the pissed off roommate, not me.”

They left the brownie half finished and Ryan paid the check. Shane wanted to split it halves but Ryan didn’t feel like doing math and Shane didn’t look like he was in a state to do anything but sit there and lean against the bar for support. Ryan wrapped an arm around Shane’s waist as they left, subtly trying to keep him upright. He was glad he didn’t skip out on going to the gym, because for all Shane looked like one of the inflatable tubes in front of car dealerships, he was fucking heavy. Shane collapsed into the passenger seat with a groan.

“You know how I said Birdbrain wasn’t really trying before? Well he’s definitely trying now.”
Shane raked a hand through his hair, making it stick out in every direction. He looked like he was wearing a hedgehog on his head. Ryan would have giggled if he hadn’t been so concerned.

“Would tylenol help?” for some reason, his first aid course had never covered demon possessions.

Shane rubbed his eyes with a grimace. “Dunno. Do demons qualify as a medical thing?”

“I…. don’t know either. There should be demon scientists who look into these things.” Ryan measured out two capsules and handed them over with Shane’s water bottle. “Can’t hurt to try.”

“I think it could, but fuck it.” Shane shrugged and took them with a long drink of water. “Demon scientist. Now that’s a cool business card.”

“We should probably find a hotel now,” Ryan said as they cruised down main street.

“Well I’m sure as hell not sleeping in this car,” Shane replied. He had his arm slung over his eyes against the glare of the streetlights. His fingers trembled. “My legs would stick out through the windshield and then someone would steal all the junk you’ve got kicking around in this thing.”

“Maybe they’d steal you too. I bet your gigantic leg bones would go for a lot on the black market.”

“They’d never be able to carry me. I’d flop out of their arms like a big ol’ fish.” they both laughed at that.

“Oh man, we joke about the worst things.”

It wasn’t long before Ryan realized that he really should have been paying more attention when the bartender mentioned the tree festival. The town was packed to the gills, which meant that there were next to no hotel rooms available. They passed sign after sign reading No Vacancy, so many that Ryan almost suggested moving on to the next town out of frustration. It might have been two hours away but at least there’d be somewhere to sleep. And Shane had stopped looking like he was three seconds away from passing out, although there was still a mildly panicked look in his eye.

They had resorted to searching at the very edge of town, where the desert had eaten away bites of the road and half the street lights flickered. But then, out of the darkness, they saw it. A shining Vacancy sign glimmering like salvation sent from the heavens above. Or at least illuminating a small homey looking hotel labeled Globetrotter Lodge.

They both whooped in celebration and high fived. Ryan couldn’t wait to collapse into a bed and sleep for the next ten years. What was it about sitting around in a car and doing nothing that made him so damn tired?

Ryan kept the bag he had gotten from Erika tucked carefully under his arm. He wasn’t going to let it out of his sight. It was too important, no matter how much he trusted Shane to keep Andras under control.

They rolled their bags into the lobby, which was painted a cheery yellow so bright it was almost painful to look at. A fire roared in the fireplace, chasing away the nighttime chill. The man sitting at reception was fast asleep.

Shane and Ryan glanced at each other. Shane raised an eyebrow. His skin looked washed out under the harsh lights.

“Um, hello?” Ryan said.
The man snored softly, unaffected.

Shane tapped out a ditty on the bell. In an out of tune sing song he said, “Sleep is cool but you know what’s better than sleeping? Waking up so we don’t have to stand here awkwardly anymore. I don’t know what to doooooo standing here.”

The man snored louder, as if he was trying to ignore them. They looked at each other again. Shane shrugged. Ryan reached out, excruciatingly slowly. Shane nodded encouragement. Ryan poked the man. He jerked awake and Ryan snatched his hand back with a strangled yelp. Shane laughed so hard he had to put his hands on his knees for support.

The man squinted at them from underneath the most magnificently bushy eyebrows that Ryan had ever seen. He had salt and pepper hair that was more salt than pepper, and a face as red as a tomato from the desert sun. “Oh mercy me, did I fall asleep on the job again? Jolene’s going to have my head.”

Ryan didn’t know how to respond to that, so he nodded. “Can we uh... get a room please? Just for tonight.”

“Oh, of course. You’re not standing here to admire the fireplace. Although it is a very nice fireplace.” The man stared into the fire for a couple of seconds before starting and turning to consult his computer. “Oh, fiddlesticks,” he muttered. “We only have one room left. Everything is taken up by that tree festival. The petrified forest’s the pride and joy of Holbrook, after all. Busiest we’ve been all year.” he chuckled. “I supposed we can’t complain. Anyway, it’s a single king. Is that okay?”

Ryan glanced at Shane. Everywhere else was full. This was not the time for no-homo-ing.

Shane must have read Ryan’s face and come to the same conclusion. “That’s perfect.”

“Wonderful. I’ll book you in. You boys are lucky you manage to snag it.” the man typed away at the computer, muttering something about the year 2017 and not making assumptions. Ryan tried to school his face into something neutral, although he wasn’t sure how well he succeeded. Shane always seemed to be able to read his mind anyways. But Shane didn’t seem to have heard, and Ryan silently thanked the lord for that. He would have had to do something drastic like jump out a window if Shane had corrected the man, or worse, made a joke about it.

The man handed them the keys before jumping and slapping a hand against his forehead. “Where are my manners? I’m Don. Feel free to give me a call if you need anything. You might need to wake me up again though.” he laughed again, holding his hands against his chest like a jolly southern Santa Claus.

They shook hands. “Thanks. I’m Ryan. My long-legged buddy here is Shane.”

The hotel room was as quaint as Ryan had expected. The walls were covered in a bright yellow floral wallpaper and framed pictures of kittens. He sank down into one of the overstuffed armchairs with a sigh. After sitting in the car for eight hours it felt like he was sitting in a cloud.

“This is the best part of road trips. When you can finally stop sitting in the car and get to sit in a better, more comfortable chair.”

“Dude you can’t even come close to appreciating how great that is for me. You’re a midget. It’s one of the most underappreciated feelings in the history of ever for us normal sized folk.” Shane flopped down onto the bed with a sigh. “Oh man, this is amazing. Even if I feel like the kittens are watching me.”
Ryan was too relaxed to bother responding to the jab at his height. “Can we live here forever?”

“Only if it passes the shower test.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Shower test?”

“We gotta see whether the Madej mountain fits under the showerhead. You dwarves have it easy.”

Okay, two jabs was too far. He had to keep Shane on his toes, after all. “Just because you said that, I hope you don’t fit.”

Shane stuck his arms into the air and made grabby hands. “Help me up.”

With a sigh and an eyeroll, Ryan got up and grabbed Shane’s hands. He then proceeded to drag Shane off the bed and onto the floor, cackling.

“Hey, wait- No!” Shane protested, kicking his legs, but he was helpless against Ryan’s shenanigans. He landed with a thump on the floor. “How dare you.” he tried to grab Ryan’s ankles, grinning deviously, but Ryan danced out of reach.

Shane gave up trying to reach Ryan and lay there, his sprawled limbs taking up most of the room. Ryan climbed onto the chair to avoid any sneak attacks. “Nice try.”

“You are the worst.”

“Oh, shut up, you know you love me.”

Shane laughed. “Against my better judgement.”

They grinned at each other, and for one golden moment everything was perfect. Then Shane tried to sit up and smacked his forehead on the underside of Ryan’s chair.

“FUCK,” he screamed, then clapped his hands over his mouth. “Do you think the people next door heard me?”

“It’s a bit late for that.” Ryan climbed down from his chair and pulled Shane’s hair back from his forehead to look at the throbbing red line he had gouged into it. “You okay?”

“Yes Ryan, I’m fine. I lost half my brain cells and permanently dented my skull against this goddamn chair but I’m doing just fine.” Shane rubbed his forehead, but didn’t bat Ryan’s hand away.

“With the number of brain cells you have you can’t afford to lose any.”

“That’s no way to treat the wounded,” Shane said. “Let’s check out the bathroom already. Preferably without collecting any more injuries in the five feet between here and there. I’m at least fifty percent bruise at this point.”

The shower was, unfortunately, not nearly tall enough for Shane to stand under. Ryan laughed so hard he almost cried seeing Shane look so disgruntled while standing fully clothed a full head above the shower curtain. He looked like he was in a house made for dolls.

“Oh my God, your head is brushing the ceiling.”

Shane huffed in annoyance. “-100/10. Shower made for midgets. Cool sink though.” he pointed at the sink, which was bright gold and carved full of flowers. You don’t see one of those every day.”
“You can say that again. Imagine walking into a washroom in Starbucks and seeing every sink look like this. Do you think it’s custom made?”

“Well, I’m not going to find that thing at IKEA.” Shane tried and failed to stifle a yawn. “Man, something about ramming your head into furniture really knocks you out. I’m ready to go to sleep.”

“Ignoring that horrible joke, I agree.”

They got ready in tandem, putting on their road trip routine like a well-worn sweater. It could have been any old day, any old shoot. Shane leaned his elbow on Ryan’s head as they brushed their teeth, so Ryan poked his ribs in retaliation until he stopped, giggling like a maniac.

He redressed Shane’s hand before they went to bed. The cuts had scabbed over nicely, but the skin around them was red and raw. Shane poked at one and winced.

“D’you think it’s an infection?” he asked nervously.

“Nah. That’s just part of the process. It’s your body’s way of saying ‘fuck you’ for messing it up. We can air it out tomorrow.” Ryan twisted the bandages back on with careful precision. The little moment was important. It was tangible proof that he was helping Shane. That he wasn’t just sitting there watching Shane suffer. He was making things better. He was needed.

They fell asleep pressed back to back, staring in opposite directions. Ryan could feel Andras’ unnatural heat through Shane’s shirt, burning like fire, but the closeness was still a comfort.

Shane needed his help. And goddamnit, he was going to do everything he could to give it.

He fell asleep listening to the air conditioning whistle and Shane snore softly.

3:33 am

Ryan woke up to screaming. The sound slammed into him like a sledgehammer. He sat bolt upright and reached out to hold Shane before he could even register what he was doing. He just knew that Shane needed him.

Shane recoiled from the hand on his shoulder and threw himself into the corner of the bed farthest from Ryan. He crumpled himself into a ball, nothing but razor sharp, terrified edges, clutching his pillow like a lifeline. He bit down on it and screamed again, the tortured sound strangled by the fabric. Ryan didn’t want to know what scared Shane enough to make him scream like that.

His eyes were wide and unfocused, staring at a point slightly above Ryan’s head. As awake as he looked, tense as electrified wire, he was clearly in another world. A world where Andras was king and everything was crumbling.

“Ryan,” Shane whimpered.

“Yes!” Ryan said, then softened his voice as he realized that Shane was still somewhere else. “Hey. Wake up. You’re safe.”

Shane’s eyes focused and snapped onto Ryan. He looked like a cornered animal.

“You’re dreaming. It’s just a dream, it can’t hurt you. You’re with me, you’re safe.” Ryan reached out, tentative. He didn’t want to make things worse, but holding Shane had worked the last time he was trapped screaming inside a dream. Nothing could be worse than helplessly watching Shane scream. The sound made him want to pull his ears off. It was worth trying.
Shane’s hands unpried themselves from the pillow and reached out towards him. “Ryan?”

“Yeah, yeah, good. You’re okay.” Ryan held Shane’s wrists gently and pulled himself closer. He rubbed soft circles on the insides of Shane’s wrists with his thumb. “Deep breaths.”

Shane reached farther to clutch onto Ryan’s shirt in a tight fist. His face cycled through a rapid slew of emotion and he gasped like he was drowning, chest heaving. The sound only heightened Ryan's distress. His eyes locked onto Shane’s. Even though his face had twisted into a mask of anger his eyes were only filled with one thing: fear. Ryan tightened his grip on Shane’s wrists and leaned backwards. Something was terribly wrong.

The fist in his shirt loosened. Shane’s eyes filled with darkness as he reached his hands up to tighten them around Ryan’s neck.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you all for your continual support and trust as we barrel towards the ending at full speed. It's gonna be a doozy.

As always, kudos, comments, and sharing this story mean THE WORLD to me. It gives me such a warm an fuzzy feeling in my heart to see the response you guys have for me. We’re all in it together.

Hit me up on tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheezes if you want to scream at me. I'm listening :-)


I feel like a pretty good summary of this chapter is my lovely beta reader's comment, "hoooooooo fuck". With that in mind, enjoy!

They fell backwards against the bed, Ryan too shocked to resist. He still had his hands around Shane’s wrists, but now he was desperately trying to pry Shane- no, Andras, Shane would never hurt him- off of him as he gasped for air. The bandages on Shane's hand, the ones he had so carefully wrapped just hours before, tore at his skin. Ryan clawed at them, tearing them away, his hands growing sticky as he reopened Shane’s scabs, blood oozing out and collecting under Ryan's scabbing fingernails. He might as well have been trying to pry apart iron bars. In a desperate bid to throw Shane off of him, Ryan bucked upwards, twisting his hips wildly. But Shane was so goddamn heavy, a hunter pinning down a deer in its death throes, and Ryan’s legs were folded awkwardly underneath his back. He couldn’t get any leverage. He was trapped, helpless, and the panic flowing through his veins was eating up all his air. Every second that ticked by signed his death warrant. His neck was throbbing, burning with pain but he couldn’t think of anything other than that he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe-

“Nothing can harm a dead man,” Andras chanted, the words slurring together into a frenzied crescendo as its thumbs pressed harder onto Ryan’s windpipe. They filled Ryan's brain like black sludge, turning his desperation to sluggish confusion. “Nothing can harm a dead man. Nothing can harm a dead man.”

Black spots floated in front of Ryan’s eyes as the scene began to take on a dreamlike quality. He felt like he was watching in third person as he managed to twist his legs out from under him and kick feebly at Andras’ chest. His thoughts slowed as he drifted farther and farther from the scene, making it harder to escape. To fight. The edges of Ryan’s vision began to fade in and out, tunneling until all he could see was Shane’s twisted, frenzied face. Or no, it wasn’t Shane, was it? He was having trouble remembering. His hands went slack against Shane’s wrists. He didn’t want to fight Shane, right? He didn’t want to hurt Shane.

“if I lose it, try to hurt you, please hit back. It's not gonna be me. Whatever happens, don’t let me hurt anyone. Please.”

The memory came back hazy, but the message pierced through the fog in his brain like a hand hauling him back into his own body. Shane was counting on him. It might have been Ryan's oxygen deprived brain causing him to hallucinate, but for a split second Andras’ face looked pleading.

Sorry about this.

Ryan mustered up his last bit of strength and swung his hand around to the back of Andras’ head. He stuck his fingers into the nasty bruise still left over from New Orleans, pressing down as hard as his body would let him. Andras reared back with a guttural roar, instinctively letting go of Ryan’s neck to clutch at its head. Its face fell slack with confusion, jaw hanging open and eyebrows scrunched together. Like it didn’t know what it felt like to be hurt. Like it didn’t believe Ryan would have been
Ryan took a huge, gasping breath, and the world snapped back into focus. His head swam with colours as the blood rushed back to his head. For a terrifying second he thought he was going to pass out and leave Andras free to finish the job. He clutched his chest, panting. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck, cold and sticky.

Andras had been probing the back of its head, but its attention snapped back on Ryan with his movement. It growled, teeth bared. Ryan had never thought that Shane could become a stranger, but with his face contorted like that he was barely recognizable as human. He might as well have been a wild animal, a beloved dog turned rabid. It made what Ryan was about to do easier.

Rabid dogs had to be put down.

Andras lunged for him once more, fingers twisted into claws aimed straight at Ryan’s eyes. Ryan held it back with one leg planted firmly on its chest, but its demon strength meant that Ryan couldn’t hold it back for more than a few seconds. He scrambled at his own neck for Erika’s gift, fingers clumsy and trembling. His hands curled around the necklace and he ripped it off — thank God for magnetic clasps — and wrapped it around his fist. The tiny cross dangled out the side. Andras pushed down Ryan’s leg, closing the distance, sitting on his chest, crushed him down. Its nails dug into Ryan’s cheek. He felt a trickle of blood.

Ryan screwed his eyes up and looked away, flinching against what he had to do. A knuckleful of silver and crosses collided with soft skin and scratchy stubble. He heard something sizzle. Andras screamed in agony, a terrible, grating thing that made the hair on the back of Ryan’s neck stand up. The weight on his chest lifted and the hands on his face turned soft. They caressed his cheeks. He felt something wet drop onto his face.

Slowly, Ryan cracked his eyes open. Shane’s wide, terrified, brown eyes stared back at him.

“What have I done? Oh God, Ryan, what have I done?” he said in a hoarse whisper, face screwed up in anguish, eyes shining. Tears dripped down his face and onto Ryan’s.

“Nothing that cannot be undone,” Ryan whispered back, the words knives against his throat. Shane’s tears started pouring down onto Ryan in earnest, making his lips taste like salt.

“I was burning,” he gasped between sobs. “Birdbrain said I was burning and that I would hurt you. And now I’ve done it. Why did I think I could fight it? It knows me too well.”

Ryan dropped the necklace and pulled Shane down into a tender hug. “It’s okay.”

Shane pushed away, hands so gentle they were barely there at all, as if he was afraid Ryan would break under his touch. “No, what if Birdbrain- Andras. What if Andras comes back?”

“Then I’ll give it another whack upside the head with this thing.” Ryan held out the necklace for Shane to see. “Silver coated. Couldn’t afford the pure stuff. Andras doesn’t stand a chance.” His hoarse voice detracted from the statement.

“How the fuck…?” Shane rubbed the side of his head, when the necklace had carved a divot out of the hair above his ear.

“Erika gifted me some goodies before we left. Shop’s right down the street from my apartment. Thought I’d keep this baby on me at all times, stay prepared.”

Shane sighed and stared down at his hands. He was hunching up again, curling himself into a ball as
if he could fold himself out of the universe. “You should leave. Take a bus back home. I’m too
dangerous; so I’ll go alone, and if Andras gets too strong, well, then, it’s just me, isn’t it? Not much
of a loss.” Shane laughed shakily, tears streaming down his face. “Not much of a loss at all.”

“If you think that you’re not much of a loss then you haven’t been paying attention,” Ryan said with
conviction. He wasn’t going to let Shane go off and sacrifice himself, not when he had already
committed to the plan they had now. Not when he could see the glazed horror in Shane’s eyes at the
thought of being possessed by Andras again.

“I can feel it clawing at my weak spots, digging a hole straight through me. You pull it out, and half
of me will go with it. It’s too late. I waited too long.” Shane wrapped his arms around himself in
what was supposed to be a hug but looked more like a self-imposed straitjacket. "This is all my
fault."

Ryan pulled himself upright, bed creaking underneath him, so he could look Shane in the eye.
“That’s what it’s telling you to believe. But do you believe that story?” He stabbed a finger at Shane
for emphasis. Shane wouldn't meet his eye.

“I- I don’t know. I only know that I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of me.” Shane picked
at the edge of his bandages, winding and unwinding them from around his wrist. Ryan took his hand
to stop him, held it palm upwards like it was ready to receive a gift. His thumb made slow circles
against Shane's palm.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you saved yourself,” Shane murmured.

“I’ll always pick you. I hope you know that.” Ryan looked down at Shane's hand rather than try to
stomach looking at his face. He couldn’t say he loved Shane, it would be too cruel with only two
days left. He knew it was a pipe dream that was never meant to be, at least not in this lifetime. Fate
had other plans for them both. But he hoped that Shane would understand what he meant. That he
could peel apart Ryan's layers in a way Ryan was never able to reciprocate. He gave Shane’s hand a
squeeze and was rewarded with a watery smile.

“If you’re going to be stubborn like that, then I guess I can’t do anything short of driving off without
you, can I?”

“Like you could figure out how to keep the car from falling apart long enough to get to Tennessee.”
Shane let out a tiny chuckle. “That’s a sign you should get a new car.”

The corners of Ryan's mouth tugged upwards. “Ridiculous. This is all part of my master plan of low-
budget security measures. Can’t steal it if it’s broke.”

Shane shook his head. “Now you’re being stupid.”

“And you’re being a martyr.” Ryan laughed for a few seconds before the sound caught in his throat
and turned to a coughing fit.

Shane bolted upright, untangling their hands and diving across the bed to flick the lights on. “Oh my
God are you alright? Fuck, I should have asked sooner. What was I thinking?”

Ryan winced at the sudden brightness, shielding his eyes with one hand. “I’m fi.”

“Stop talking, you’ll make it worse. Nod yes or no.”

Ryan rolled his eyes and nodded.
Shane hovered awkwardly around him as he finished hacking up a lung. “What can I do to help? Oh shit, what if I’ve permanently messed up your neck?”

“Andras did it, not you,” Ryan said between coughs. “It’s not your fault. And I’m fine.” The fact that his voice rattled like a dying man’s wasn’t going to stop him from telling Shane off. The outside of his neck barely hurt. It was the inside that felt like it had been used as a scratching post. Shane was being stupid, acting all worried.

“Hey, what did I say about not talking and making it worse? Last time I checked it was your neck that was hurt, not your ears.”

Ryan crossed his arms and scowled, tipping his head away like a fussy child. “You’re not a doctor, you can’t tell me how to live my life.”

Shane threw his hands up into the air in frustration. “Who’s being a martyr now? How about you stop pretending you’re fine after I literally tried to murder you five minutes ago.”

“How about you go fuck yourself.” Ryan smiled smugly, as if this was the greatest comeback in the world. If Shane wasn’t going to listen to him, then he was going to take satisfaction in ruffling Shane’s feathers. It was his own fault for not taking Ryan’s word. Shane, on the other hand, looked like he was about to have an aneurysm.

“You’re neck’s all red, it looks like you have some sort of horrible skin disease!” Shane’s voice had risen into the tone of voice that he reserved exclusively for arguing over the existence of ghosts.

“It’ll fade. Stop worrying, I’m not going to keel over dead because of one coughing fit. Don’t give Andras too much credit.”

“You are the biggest-” Shane’s words choked off abruptly. The exasperated expression on his face sloughed off into robotic blankness as his legs buckled and he fell to his knees, staring at a point on the wall. Ryan snapped upright from where he had been lounging on the bed. He could only watch in horror as Shane’s eyes cycled brown, black, brown, black, brown.

“You’re going to be okay, Shane. You’re gonna pull through this. Focus on my voice. Focus on me.” Ryan said, curling his hands around the necklace.

Shane’s face spasmed once before his eyes faded back to brown. They both let out a shaky breath in tandem. Ryan’s arms gave out from under him and he let himself fall back onto the bed, springs squeaking. He clutched his chest as his heart stopped threatening to beat out of his chest. Shane sank down into a loose fetal position on the carpet, eyes wide like a cornered animal.

“Okay, crisis averted. Demon down. Okay,” Shane breathed out in one big rush, words piling together and tripping over one another.

“I’m sorry for riling you up.”

“Don’t be, it... would have…. happened anyways,” Shane said between deep, heaving breaths, each one faster and more desperate than the last. “Don’t…. tiptoe around…. Me.” he was gasping, his fingers clawing at the carpet. “Please.”

“Do you want me to sit with you?”

“That… would be nice.”

Ryan stepped down from the bed and padded over to curl up beside Shane on the floor. He put his
hand on his friend’s shuddering back and rubbed soothing circles. “Breathe.”

They breathed together, lying on the floor until the muscles on Shane’s back unknotted and his fingers unclenched.

“I don’t know how much longer I can hold on,” Shane whispered into the carpet.

“Then let’s leave now. Drive without stopping, straight to Tennessee.”

Ryan stopped moving his hand and left it sitting heavy on Shane’s back, a reminder that he was there. That he was listening. He could feel the rise and fall of Shane’s breathing, feel the unnatural heat radiating from his back. The pile of the carpet dug into his cheek, itchy and rough.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

He kept lying there, listening to their own breathing and the mechanical whir of the a/c. Counting the stitches in Shane’s shirt collar. Three days had been whittled down to two and Ryan was afraid. Afraid for what would happen to both of them.

_I have to do it for Shane._ He would drag Shane out of this madness, because Shane deserved to live. Because he would do anything for Shane to breathe easy again. Because he loved Shane.

“Sometimes I think you’re stupid for not being afraid of me,” Shane whispered. “Hell, I’m afraid.”

“You’ve spent too long looking at yourself and seeing a demon. I look at you, and all I see is Shane.”

“Deep.”

“Yeah. You have to deal with an introspective Bergmeister for the rest of your life now.”

Ryan could hear the smile in Shane’s voice. “How am I ever going to survive?”

It was a quarter to five when they crept out of their hotel room, bags in tow. Shane pulled their door shut ever so slowly so that it closed with a whisper of a _click_. The wheels of their bags dragging over the wood sounded deafening in the quiet hall. They tiptoed past Don, who was still snoring at the front desk. Ryan slid the room key in front of him with a note apologizing for any disturbance they might have caused. When their neighbours came to complain about the screaming, they’d be long gone.

The desert breeze was cold and gritty compared to the hotel’s sterile air that smelled of chlorine. It was still dark outside, so dark they walked past the car twice before they found it. The sky was lit only by a tapestry of stars, more than Ryan had ever seen from his apartment back in LA. He took a minute to stop and stare open mouthed. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. It almost made him glad to be driving through the night, if only to experience the stars one last time.

Because this was the trip of lasts. Last hotel, last drive with Shane, last day.

He started the car, and they were off.

_So long, Arizona. It’s been good._

The world was only as big as what their headlights illuminated. Everything else was nothing but possibility. They rolled down the windows and let the dry desert wind whistle through the car and
tangle their hair. Despite everything, Ryan still felt hopeful.

They left the desert and entered an endless sea of wheat as the sun cracked open the horizon. It reached upwards, stretching even higher than the car, arrows pointing towards the rolling blue sky. There wasn’t another soul in sight, but Ryan couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. They didn’t discuss it, but he knew Shane agreed with him. He could see it from the way Shane stared out the window with his brows knit, like he was searching for something but was afraid to find it.

“Are you sure about this?” Shane asked after a long stretch of silence.

“One hundred percent.” It was true. There wasn’t a doubt in Ryan’s mind that this wasn’t the right choice. It felt like everything he had done had led up to this, and that this was the only path he could have taken since the Lovers House. It might not have been a life where Shane loved him back, or where he even lived at all, but it was the only one he could live with. He was afraid. But that had never stopped him before, and it wasn’t about to stop him now. Some things were more important than fear.

He was driving towards the end. When he thought too hard about it he wanted to curl up in the bottom of the car and sob. So he thought about something else instead.

Yes, he would die. But Shane? Shane would live.

So Ryan drove on, trying his best to be of comfort as Shane dug white-knuckled fingers into the meat of his own palm. Trying his best to ignore the anxious anticipation brewing in his own chest like a storm.

Every few hours the conflict inside of Shane would come to a head and they’d be forced to pull over on the side of the highway so Shane could clutch his ribs and scream. It was an agonizing, soul wrenching sound and every time Ryan heard it he wanted to cry. Possession wasn’t trivial anymore, it was visceral and gritty and awful. Nothing that Andras could have promised was worth this. Ryan watched helplessly as Shane struggled against his own mind, dry heaving into the ditch as Ryan rubbed his back and muttered encouragement. Always with a spray bottle full of holy water from Erika at the ready. After what felt like an eternity the ordeal would be over, and Ryan would offer Shane a bottle of lukewarm (nonholy) water to wash his mouth with. Then they would get back into the car without a word and keep driving. It was all that they could do.

They watched the sun set as they passed through Oklahoma, the sky exploding into a smear of red and yellow. It looked like it was burning. Wheat melted into trees and Ryan couldn’t help but feel relieved when their bare twisting branches blotted out the apocalypse sky. The forest stayed with them as they passed through the state, broken up by snatches of gas stations and dilapidated towns. Ryan thought they stopped for lunch somewhere. He wasn’t sure. The only proof was the aftertaste of burnt fries that coated his tongue and the empty wrappers littering the backseat.

Arkansas came without ceremony, informing them of the change with nothing more than a bullet point on a road sign. By then it was well into the night, and Ryan had drank so much coffee that the backs of his eyes hurt and his hands trembled. Not an ideal situation, but he needed to keep all synapses firing. His focus kept drifting away from the empty road. He and Shane tried playing I Spy, but it was hard when they couldn’t see anything outside the scope of their headlights. Shane had to keep pausing mid sentence so he could stay in control of his own body.

Stopping now felt dangerous, like the darkness would slither out from between the trees and drag them both away. But they didn’t have a choice. If they kept driving while Shane had a crisis and Andras won, there’d be no way for Ryan to restrain Shane and keep driving at the same time. No,
they had to stop. The odds of meeting an axe murderer out in the middle of nowhere were low, but the odds of a demon trying to take the wheel and kill them both were high enough to make the sweat roll down Ryan’s back.

It was midnight by the time Andras forced them to pull over again. Ryan kept watch with his phone flashlight as Shane curled up on the ground and shook like he was dying of fever. Ryan swept his light through the trees, watching the branches shake under the wind, clattering together like a drumbeat. He shivered as the wind cut through his thin jacket. The back of his neck prickled like he was being watched. He didn’t like the darkness. What if an axe murderer, or worse, a bear, came and attacked them while Shane lay helpless? He didn’t think he’d be able to pick up Shane’s noodly body and shove him back into the car in time to avoid a horrific death under nature’s apex predator.

Shane gurgled something in latin, making Ryan’s attention snap back onto his prone form. Under the harsh glare of Ryan’s flashlight, the dark voids of his eyes were all the more terrifying. They seemed to suck up the light.

“How is this possible?” Ryan said.

“Salvum mihi, lupos.”

Ryan aimed the spray bottle of holy water at him. He always kept himself from firing unless it was absolutely necessary, no matter how his fingers trembled. He hadn’t had to use it yet. He wanted to trust in Shane. After a pregnant pause where Ryan forgot how to breathe, Shane’s eyes washed back to brown. Ryan sighed in relief and let the spray bottle fall back to his side. Every time Shane’s eyes turned black, it took longer and longer for them to switch back. Time was running out.

He aimed his flashlight back into the forest. Movement flashed in the corner of his eye and he nearly screamed, stumbling backwards against the hood of the car. It was nothing but a pair of crows alighting on a tree branch. They watched the pair curiously, heads cocked, until Shane finally let out a sigh of relief and picked himself up from the ground. He brushed dead grass from his clothes. Startled by his movement, they flew up from the tree branch and into the sky, cawing. Shane spared them a suspicious glance as they melted into the night sky.

“Let’s go. I don’t like this place,” he said.

Ryan reached up to pick a twig out of Shane’s hair. “You can say that again.”

He spared the forest one last searching look before climbing back into the car.

They kept driving in near silence. Ryan couldn’t help but feel like they were being stalked. It was ridiculous. Not even a bear could keep up with their car. He didn’t even know if bears lived in Arkansas, for that matter. Nevertheless, he kept searching the treeline for a sign, hair standing up on the back of his neck.

Shane managed to improve after their stop in the woods, although “improve” was relative at that point. The bar was so low. But he lost the fog that had surrounded him, trapping him somewhere far away where Ryan couldn’t reach him. Ryan jumped on the change like a starving man, desperate for distraction. Better to talk about how much he hated bears than to sit in terrified silence, waiting for something to go wrong.

“The problem is that they’re so fluffy, like they’re tricking you into wanting to pet them. When in reality they’re actually murder machines. Apex predators. You can see it in their beady little eyes,” Ryan said.

Shane smiled, resting his head against the cold window. “What about Paddington, though? How can you hate a species with such a burning passion when such a cute lil guy comes from it?”
“Paddington is an animated bear. Which everyone knows are far superior to real bears.”

Shane snorted. “Of course. How silly of me.”

“And anyway, I don’t hate bears. I just have a healthy fear of them. Except Paddington, of course.” Ryan looked over at Shane’s sceptical grin and rolled his eyes. Shane was going to end up getting eaten by a bear one of these days. He’d trip over his own stick legs and die. And Ryan would laugh.

“What if Paddington bit you, though? Would you be afraid of him then?”

“Paddington would never bite me. How dare you slander him like this.”

“Let’s just say he would, for this hypothetical-” Shane threw his hand across Ryan’s chest and pointed at the road, which Ryan had forgotten to pay attention to for a while now. “WOOF!”

“No, we’re talking about OH HOLY SHIT.”

A colossal black wolf stood illuminated by their headlights, smack dab in the middle of their path as they barreled towards it at seventy miles an hour. Colossal didn’t even begin to describe it. It was massive, it was gargantuan, it was bigger than he had ever imagined a wolf could ever be. This wasn’t a dog, this was one hundred and forty pounds of muscle and teeth. And it showed no sign of budging.

Time slowed down as they flew towards the beast. Ryan slammed down on the brakes but it was too late, far too late. They’d never screech to a stop in time, not in this ten year old hunk of junk. The wolf was going to go through the windshield, and that would be it.

Ryan grabbed onto Shane’s arm, pressed it against his chest, leaned backwards into the seat as if that would somehow slow them down.

He could see the wolf’s eyes, glowing a flat emotionless green in the headlights. He couldn’t stare at anything else, he was frozen where he sat as his mind went blank.

Shane dove across the car and grabbed the wheel, wrenching it to the left. His elbows sunk into Ryan’s stomach, knocking the breath out of him with a soft oomph. The pain snapped him out of his daze and he grabbed the wheel again, both hands over Shane’s. Together they pulled the car out of the wolf’s path, demanding that the car turn through sheer force of will. The car screeched in protest, skidding across the pavement, slipping, losing traction, turning, finally turning. It swung wildly across the road, spinning round and round, end over end, the forest blurring in front of them. The momentum threw them against the back of the seat, limbs digging painfully into each other, Shane desperately bracing himself against Ryan. Ryan forgot to breathe as the trees dipped and spun past them. Something heavy thumped against the back of the car. After what felt like an eternity but couldn’t have been more than a couple excruciating seconds, the car sputtered to a halt. It settled back on its chassis with a groan.

Ryan and Shane stared at each other with wide, terrified eyes. The sound of their heavy breathing filled the silence. Ryan felt like he couldn’t get enough air inside of his lungs. He couldn’t believe they had survived, that they hadn’t been crushed underneath that immense mound of fur. It would have been such a stupid, human death after all they had been through.

“We need to leave,” Shane whispered, pale as a sheet.

“But the car, what if it’s damaged-”

“We need to leave.” Shane repeated.
“But-”

“Wolves don’t live in Arkansas.”

Ryan’s eyes widened as he realized what Shane meant. “Shit.”

A growl rumbled outside the car, so low Ryan could feel it thrum inside his chest. It was not the growl of any natural creature. The thing-that-was-not-a-wolf threw itself against the side of the car, making it rock back and forth. For one heart stopping second, Ryan thought the car was about the flip.

“Go, go, go!” Shane shouted, slapping Ryan’s arm with each word for emphasis. He scrambled backwards so he was no longer stretched out across Ryan’s chest. The-thing-that-was-not-a-wolf slammed into the car again. Ryan turned the keys in the ignition, but the engine only made an angry grinding sound.

“No, no, no, NO!” he shouted and slapped the wheel. His reward was a sharp stab of pain. “C’mon, now is not the time to break down!” He tried again, to no avail. His heart was beating out of his chest and his fingers were shaking so badly he could hardly keep his grip on the keys.

“I told you this thing was a hunk of junk! Low budget security measures my ass, we’re about to get merked by a demon wolf!” Shane peered out the window, tense as a coiled spring. Something scrabbled against the passenger side door, barking wildly. He jerked backwards. It was too dark outside to see anything but a flash of white teeth and a slavering, red tongue, but they could hear claws scrape against the door with a metallic screech.

Ryan tried the keys again, jamming them forward so hard he worried they’d break. This time the engine turned over. The car roared to life and Ryan slammed down on the gas, not caring that the engine shrieked in complaint, only needing to get out now. They shot forwards, Ryan turning the wheel with his heart in his throat until they careened into a u-turn and raced away from the thing-that-was-not-a-wolf.

Shane leaned over the seats to look out the rear window. “It’s following us.”

“Not for long,” Ryan muttered through gritted teeth. He stepped on the gas.

The thing-that-was-not-a-wolf loped along behind them, he could see it keeping pace from the rearview mirror. Its body was covered in eyes now, each one blank and lifeless. A double row of razor sharp teeth filled its guillotine jaws, ready to rip them to shreds. Long strings of drool dribbled down its chin. Ryan forgot how to breathe. He pressed harder onto the gas. They were well past the speed limit.

The wolf stumbled, faltered, and fell behind until Ryan couldn’t see it in the taillights anymore. A frustrated howl split the air. A series of answered howls and yips echoed through the forest before fading. They kept driving, so fast that the trees blurred together, Ryan wildly scanning the roadside with crazed eyes. He fully expected a whole pack of not-wolves to come careening out and throw the car into the forest’s darkness.

Twenty minutes passed in terrified silence before Ryan felt safe enough to ease up on the gas.

“That was not a wolf,” he breathed.

“No, it wasn’t.”

Ryan was too rattled to take his eyes from the road, but he could feel Shane staring at him. He
replayed the encounter in his head, over and over until it all seemed so absurd and a feverish laugh rose within him. “Oh man, my insurance is going to be crazy after this.”

They had been attacked by a demon wolf, and somehow that wasn’t even the strangest thing he’d seen. He tried to pull himself together, but he couldn’t, because the more he thought about it the more unbelievable it was. “Do they even cover demon wolf attacks?”

Shane cracked a perplexed smile, then giggled, and that was it: they burst into hysterical laughter.

They finally settled down, only for Shane to whisper, “Sue the demon,” and then they were off again. Maybe it was sleep deprivation, maybe he had finally cracked, but there was something that was fucking hysterical about the thought of them putting the demon wolf in a suit and tie and taking it to court. It was ridiculous. Everything about his situation was ridiculous. It was one in the morning and Ryan could not comprehend how he was driving across the country to save his friend from a demon.

The gas light blinked on. They’d need to stop soon. They should have stopped miles ago, but it didn’t feel safe to leave the car anymore. Who knew what else lurked inside the forest, drawn towards their car by Andras’ distress call. He checked the rearview mirror obsessively, expecting the wolf to reappear the moment he let his attention falter. It never did.

They drove for another ten minutes until they found an exit and pulled into a gas station. He felt awfully exposed under the flickering fluorescent lights. There layer of steel in between him and any lurking horrors was gone. Of course, any self respecting lurking horror wouldn’t come anywhere near this crumbling rest stop, with its road that was more pothole than pavement and gas price display whose last number was stuck between 5 and 6.

The one good thing about getting out of the car was that it finally woke up Ryan’s legs. He shifted from foot to foot until the pins and needles subsided, breathing in the fresh air free of the smell of car exhaust and old pennies that LA’s air seemed to have in perpetuity.

Shane groaned as he stretched his arms out towards the sky. His back cracked. “Oh my God, that was so satisfying.”

Ryan winced and shook his head. Still, he managed to crack a smile. It was good to see Shane acting more normal. “You know I hate it when you do that.”

“My body’s a musical instrument, baby!” Shane cracked his knuckles one by one, a shit eating grin plastered across his face.

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘being old’,” Ryan replied as he walked around to the back of the car to see what sort of damage the not-wolf had done to his poor car. There was a large dent on the corner of the bumper, and the painted was scratched on the passenger side door. All in all, they had gotten off easy. Better than being in a wolf’s belly, anyways. They’d be fine to keep driving on to Glenn Springs.

He left Shane filling up the tank and went to stock up on snacks. Man could only survive on gummy bears for so long. The convenience store’s lights felt like lasers straight into his eyeballs. He groaned and rubbed his forehead. He really needed some sleep.

*I’ll sleep when I’m dead, I guess.*

The cashier looked like a zombie, skin washed out and grey. He stared down at his phone with a vacant expression, mouth half open. He was the first person they’d seen in hours, and Ryan guessed
they wouldn’t be getting any thrilling conversation from him. He raided the shelves and piled the loot
on the counter, a mountain that included bottled frappuccinos, two ham sandwiches, and Shane’s
favourite chips. Ryan hesitated, then threw a packet of gum onto the pile. He needed to wipe the
ashy taste from his mouth. He paid for the gas and food, he and the cashier managing to say no more
than two words to each other.

Shane was still filling up the car when he came out, so Ryan leaned up against the side of the store
and checked his phone. He had ten unread messages. Three were from his mom.

Mom: Found a great brunch place!

Mom: We should go on Saturday! Keep you from stressing over your work too much. I worry about
you sometimes.

Mom: I love you my darling son.

Ryan sighed and rested his head against the ice container. The cold water collecting on it seeped into
his t-shirt. His finger hovered over the call button.

He couldn’t leave without saying goodbye. He couldn’t ignore the people who cared about him. He
put the phone to his ear and listened to the ringtone.

He wished there was an outcome to this where no one got hurt. He wished Shane had talked to him
before things got bad. He wished he had learned to slow down instead of hurtling headfirst into
whatever stupid idea seemed the best at the time.

Ring, ring, ring…

He could think of a hundred different ways where this could have gone differently. How would
things have changed if they had never crossed that doorstep, if Shane hadn’t made that one awful
joke, if Ryan had got up and walked away in that basement in New Orleans? Things would be
different, but would things have been better?

The call went to voicemail.

Would he even have fallen in love with Shane at all?

Who would he be, if he had turned his back on danger?

“Hey Mom. I know when you call back you’ll be mad at me for being up at this hour, but I couldn’t
sleep and wanted to call you. Nothing urgent, I just wanted to tell you that I love you. I don’t say it
enough. But yeah, I love you. Dad too. Tell him. You guys kept me from getting into too much
trouble and taught me to always help the people who needed it. I wouldn’t be where I am without it.”
he laughed a little. Fuck, he was starting to cry. His next words tasted like salt. “I couldn’t ask for
better parents. I might be a little biased, but I think I turned out alright. You did good by me and
Jake.” Ryan paused and watched Shane as he struggled to put the gas nozzle back into its holder. His
nose was all scrunched up and Ryan could see him mouth a curse under his breath. “You put my feet
on the right path. I think that… despite life’s struggles, it’s given me good things. I wouldn’t change
my choices.” he sighed. “I love you Mom. See you on Saturday.”

He hung up and mopped up his tears with his already damp t-shirt. He meandered back to Shane,
who had finally managed to jam the nozzle back in.

Shane looked at Ryan with concern, and Ryan hoped he didn’t look too much like he had been
crying.
“You doing okay, Ry? Want me to drive for a bit?”

“I’m fine, I promise.” Ryan swiped his arm across his eyes and cheeks before realizing that it didn’t do much to help his ‘who, me? I wasn’t crying’ case. “It’s just the wind.”

There wasn’t a breeze but Shane nodded anyways, eyes soft. “Okay.”

Ryan insisted that Shane try and sleep for the last couple of hours before they arrived. He complained that he’d never be able to do it all folded up in the front seat but closed his eyes obligingly anyways. His hands still stayed curled into fists in his lap.

“Don’t worry about Andras. I’ve installed an ejector seat into this thing.” Ryan patted the dashboard.

“Oh yeah?” Shane opened one eye to look at Ryan skeptically.

He pointed to the button that controlled the A/C. “Oh yeah. One press of this button and your seat’s out the roof. I use it on people who annoy me.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the phrase, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’? You’re not exempt from that, even if you are secretly James Bond.”

“I’m better than James Bond.”

“I don’t know, he’s got a lot more luck than you in the love department.”

Ryan shook his head, heart sinking in his chest. “Yeah. I’ve got no luck there. No luck at all.”

“Hey.” Shane backed off, probably sensing that he’d inadvertently struck a nerve. “Neither do I.”

“Ah, well. We’ve still got the ghouligans.” Ryan reached over and squeezed Shane’s shoulder. “Sleep.”

Shane closed his eyes. “Fine.”

Over the next few hours Shane slept fitfully in the passenger seat, tossing and turning with his eyes screwed tightly shut. Every couple of minutes he’d wake with a gasp and stare at Ryan, like he was making sure he was still there.

During one of his snatches of sleep he began to whimper and reach out into thin air, hands grasping for nothingness. Ryan sighed. He had hoped it would hurt less if Shane slept, but Andras waited for him even in dreams. Ryan listened to Shane whimper for another minute until he couldn’t stand it anymore. He took one hand off the wheel and grabbed Shane’s instead, lacing their fingers together and holding it steady against the side of Shane’s thigh. It was warm and callused, and Shane clutched onto him with a death grip. The whimpers slowly began to subside. Ryan made circles over Shane’s knuckles until his grip relaxed, Shane uncrumpling himself into something softer. Ryan went to let go but Shane whimpered again and held on even tighter. That was all the incentive Ryan needed. He stayed where he was, and Shane slept peacefully. He allowed himself a small smile, taking as much comfort from the hand holding as Shane was.

They were twenty minutes away when Shane woke up, the dark circles under his eyes looking much improved. He yawned and stretched as best he could, hands pressed flat against the roof of the car. His crumpled edges had smoothed enough that he could smile into the faded night.

He scratched his stubble. “Andras’ gone quiet.”
Ryan looked at Shane out of the corner of his eye. “Think it’s left to spite us? Bringing us all the way out here for nothing…” Oh, if only.

Shane chewed on his thumbnail, still looking out the window. “Nah. I think it’s waiting. Or at least spent from the crazy wolf thing.”

“Let it wait. It doesn’t scare me.” Ryan paused and reconsidered. “Okay, it does scare me. But I’ll still fight it.”

“Ryan, sometimes I think you were born without common sense.”

“I think Andras has chewed a couple holes in yours.”

Shane threw his head back and laughed. “Is that why I believe in ghosts now?”

Ryan joined him in laughing, the tight knot of anticipation in his chest unravelling. There was something about laughing with Shane that could stop time. “Shut up, Shane.”

“Turn left onto Glenn Springs Road,” said the GPS. The anxiety in the pit of his stomach returned in a rush as reality crashed back in, tightening into a noose around his neck. The two fell into silence, but it wasn’t a comfortable one. This was it. Twenty seven hours in a car, two days on the road, running, always running. Now it was time to stop running. Now it was time to fight.

The road stood like a giant maw, surrounded by a dark forest, a fence separating them from the road like it was a monster that needed to be contained. A murder of crows sat heavy on the trees, watching them with dark eyes. The scene seemed alive, as if it was staring them down, daring them to come any closer. Ryan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, hesitating to turn, even as the turn signal tick tick ticked away the time as cars lined up behind them, impatient.

“Do you think you can last long enough for a Starbucks detour? I don’t want to fight demons on an empty stomach.” the words came out in a rush, tripping over each other in a big wiggling mass of syllables. Ryan knew he was backpedaling, trying to elongate his time by even ten more minutes. Could anyone really blame him? He felt like he was on a roller coaster, during those excruciating seconds where they tick tick ticked upwards, and he was convinced that getting on had been an awful idea and that this would be the one ride where it flew off the rails and they all died. He wanted to scream that he took it back, that he wanted to get off this ride, but it was too late. He was already strapped in and they were about to go over the first hill.

“Sure, why not,” Shane said with a half shrug, like Ryan knew he would. He always put up with Ryan’s eleventh hour hesitation. They turned away from Glenn Springs Road and towards the town center. The crows sitting in the tree branches watched them. Waited for them to return. Because even if he shut his eyes, there was no getting off the ride.

The drive thru passed too fast. No one else was awake this early, or at least not enough people to create a line up. It was another reminder that he was wasting time delaying the inevitable. His last meal of a chocolate chip muffin turned to ash in his mouth. Nothing but the leftovers of a burning. That would be him too, in time.

He finished his muffin and Shane finished his coffee and then they were back where they started, staring down Glenn Springs Road. The crows had disappeared. The steering wheel was sticky with sweat under his hands, and his mouth felt numb. They had made the detour, but for what? Nothing, really. Fifteen wasted minutes because Ryan was afraid. Because he couldn’t get out of his own head, because he couldn’t steel his nerves and do what needed to be done, do what he wanted to do, because his fear was a monster than sat on his chest and crushed all the Ryan out of him and replaced
Maybe Shane had been right. Maybe he really had been born without common sense.

With trembling hands, he turned the car onto Glenn Springs road. They drove down it in silence as it faded to gravel, then dirt, then two muddy tire tracks that looked as if they hadn’t been used in over a decade. The road got so bad that the car started complaining and they had to get out and walk. They followed a deer trail through the bare branched forest, Ryan clutching Erika’s paper bag under his arm. A brisk wind bit at their cheeks and made the branches creak and sway. He pulled his jacket more tightly around himself. They could catch snatches of the lake through the trees, steel grey and muddy as the Mississippi it stemmed from. The first rays of light creeping over the horizon painted gold designs on the water and lit up Shane’s face like a halo.

The warehouse rose from behind the trees, blotting out the horizon. It looked like the skeleton of a dead behemoth, ramshackle and rusted, reclaimed by the wild. The breeze swept a strong smell of mildew over them. Above the doorway someone had graffitied in red spray paint, *Its eyes are everywhere.* They stopped in unison, something unspoken passing between them as they stared up at this nightmare of a building they had traveled so far to find. They had made it. Two months of suffering would come to an end today, one way or another.

Ryan was overcome with a wave of doubt that rooted him to the ground. They walked in there, and he wouldn’t be coming out. His fate would truly be sealed. It already had been, but back then he had always known he could turn back around if it became too much. But one more step, right now, and he would be signing his own death warrant. And he didn’t think he could do that. He didn’t think he was strong enough.

He chewed on his lip. Taking the next step seemed impossible. He might as well have been trying to step off the side of a building.

He was tired of always being afraid. Tired of overthinking. Shane had taken on Andras because he had wanted to keep Ryan from being afraid and yet here he was, terrified. Terrified of oblivion. Terrified of being wrong, and that Andras truly did have its claws in too deep to Shane and that they would both die for nothing. Terrified of the fact that Shane would never know how much he had meant to Ryan. Because Ryan had been afraid to tell him, and now it was too late.

He took a deep breath, feeling the air flood his lungs. The same air he had breathed every day since he was born. He was done with being afraid. Done with overthinking *what ifs* and *if onlys* and then hesitating at that last crucial moment. If there was ever a time to shed all that it was now. It was time to stop thinking and try something else for a change.

He already knew what he had to do. The world had been telling him to do it for a while now, but he’d been taking his sweet time on the precipice. But he didn't know if he'd be able to muster up the courage on his own.

“Shane, I’m afraid.” three simple words to voice the canyon in his chest.

“So am I. But it'll be okay.” Shane looked down at him with such a gentle expression that Ryan's heart caught in his throat.

Shane reached out his hand, and Ryan took it.

“Whatever happens, we’ll face it together.”

Shane gave Ryan the strength he couldn’t muster up on his own. They walked into the warehouse,
together.

Chapter End Notes

Wow guys what a chapter. Demons. Wolves. Demon wolves. I hope you're happy. As always, the best way to keep your writer healthy and happy is to leave lots of kudos and comments, as well as maybe checking out their tumblr @ryans-ghostly-wheeze if additional screaming is necessary.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crows filled the warehouse, more crows than Shane had ever seen in his life. They covered the rafters like a blanket, blotted out the holes in the ceiling with their wings. A layer of feathers covered the cracked floor, muffling the pair's footsteps. The crows sat there and watched, without making a sound, without moving, as they tiptoed towards the center of the massive room. The weight of their eyes sat heavy on Shane’s back. He couldn’t help but feel uneasy, unnerved by the silence in his head as well as the silence in the warehouse. There was nothing but the rustling of feathers and Ryan’s shallow breathing.

“What now?” Shane asked in a whisper, afraid to break the silence. As if doing so would wake something awful. He waited for the crows to swoop down and rip them apart, finish the job the first crow had started back in LA.

“Now we banish a demon.”

Shane squeezed Ryan’s hand, grateful for the anchor. Without it, the cold lump of fear in the pit of his stomach would have turned into full blown panic by now. “Is it going to hurt?” the words came out strangled.

Ryan swallowed hard. “I sure hope not.”

The only light poured down through a hole in the ceiling. Shane followed its path down to a circle on the ground, suspiciously clear of feathers. They crept closer. Carved into the concrete was a circle made of swooping, interlocking lines that Shane couldn’t make heads or tails of. He tilted his head and squinted. The lines shimmered like a heatwave and pulled themselves into something almost recognizable, a vague memory he couldn’t quite recall. A memory that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. For the first time in a while, Andras shifted and rolled over in his mind.

“Well, here goes nothing,” Ryan muttered.

He let go of Shane’s hand and reached into the paper bag he was clutching under his arm. Shane rubbed his own hands together nervously. It didn’t have the same calming effect as Ryan’s presence did. Ryan pulled out two glass vials, one filled with water and the other filled with red powder. He poured the water into the powder and then shook it like he was making margaritas, before pouring it out onto the sigil. He spread the paste around with the toe of his shoe, grinding it into the lines. Chewing his lip, he stepped back to survey his handiwork.

Shane had the urge to grab his hand again and pull him away from the circle. Whatever it represented, it wasn’t good. Or was that Andras talking, back to pulling the strings in the background? He realized his nails were digging painfully into his own palm. His skin crawled. Shut up, Andras. I trust Ryan, not you.

Ryan took a deep breath, closed his eyes and stepped into the circle. Shane reached out to grab him, but pulled back at the last second and let Ryan slip through his fingers. He wouldn't let Andras' insidious influence ruin this, not when they were so close. No matter how uneasy he felt.

“Wake up, Zadkiel.” Ryan closed his eyes and tipped his face upwards towards the spotlight streaming down onto him. "Speak through me."
No- something wasn't right. Shane’s heart clenched. He stared at Ryan nervously, fiddling unconsciously with the bottom of his shirt. “What are you- What are you doing?’

Ryan’s eyes flicked open and he gave a tiny, one shouldered shrug, hands shoved deep inside his pockets. His smile was sad. “Sorry for not telling you. If you had known you’d never have agreed to this, you self sacrificing idiot.” the circle began to glow under his feet, emitting a low hum. Or maybe the hum was Andras, rumbling back to life to pry apart the crack in Shane’s armour.

He needed Ryan back beside him. He needed Ryan back right now. Something was wrong. Terribly, horribly wrong, because Ryan wasn’t supposed to be standing inside the circle looking small and alone. Shane’s voice was just as small, strangled with panic. “Ryan?”

“No blame yourself. I can make my own choices.”

“Don’t say stuff like that, it almost sounds like-” you’re about to die. He couldn’t bring himself to voice the thought, because it was only paranoia, right? Ryan wouldn’t do anything that stupid. Ryan was going to be fine. Right? Right? The sigil grew even brighter. The crows hopped on their perches, turning to face the two of them in a rippling wave. Shane dug his nails in the palm of his hand in a futile attempt to ground himself against the rising wave of panic that threatened to overtake him as the hum in his head grew to a roar.

“What are you doing? Stop, please stop.” this was all wrong, Ryan wasn’t supposed to be this calm, he was supposed to be the hysterical one, not Shane.

Ryan tipped his head back up towards the one snatch of sky in that dismal building. “Wake up, Zadkiel. Free my friend. I’m not afraid.”

The circle was blinding, but Shane couldn’t pull himself away. He watched, frozen in horror, as it shot upwards and consumed Ryan in a pillar of light.

He thought he might have screamed. He wasn’t sure.

His ears were ringing, the world around him turned into a muffled blur. He couldn’t see anything but light. It blistered his skin, but the pain barely registered. Something had his ribcage in its fist and crumpled it into a tiny ball.

He screamed again, the sound ripping its way out of him. It scraped his throat raw, but he kept screaming Ryan’s name, until his mouth stopped listening to him. Andras escaped, spilling through the cracks growing in Shane like fire burning him alive. He couldn’t bring himself to care. Ryan was gone and he could only to watch, helpless, as the light burned and swallowed up the person he loved. The person he had been supposed to protect.

When Andras took his voice he didn’t fight. He still hadn’t blacked out, but he wished he would, so he could stop feeling. So he could forget the canyon that had opened up inside his rib cage.

“Too weak to fight without a host, Zadkiel?” Andras taunted.

The light disappeared in an instant, plunging the warehouse back into darkness. Ryan stood untouched in the spotlight created by the hole in the roof, not a hair out of place. His face was slack, expressionless, and distinctly un-Ryan-like, but the vise around Shane’s chest unscrewed itself ever so slightly as he allowed himself to hope. The world held its breath. Even the very air they breathed drew forwards towards Ryan as it waited for an a reply.

Ryan opened his eyes, and then there was light. It spilled out of him, his eyes turning to molten pools of gold. Even his skin glowed. He was sun-kissed, no, he was the sun itself. He was beautiful. He
was terrible. For the first time ever, Shane felt small next to Ryan.

“BE STILL.” Ryan spoke and it sounded like a thousand voices speaking at once, filling the vast expanses of the warehouse with two words. Andras froze where it stood, unable to stare at anything but that mesmerizing light. It clenched his fists, tried to lunge at Ryan, but his legs wouldn’t cooperate. That familiar, burning hot rage flowed through Shane all over again.

“You can not command me,” it snarled. “You are weak. While you have been sleeping, I have been building, and have you ever moved to stop me? No. All you could do was send your precious crows to watch my carnage. I will tear your pathetic host apart limb from limb, and then I will tear you too.”

Ryan- could he even be called Ryan anymore?- frowned. “YOU HAVE TAKEN A GOOD MAN AND TURNED HIM INTO A WEAPON.”

“We are all weapons. Even you. I only revealed his true nature.”

“HUMANS WERE MADE FOR CREATION, NOT DESTRUCTION.”

Andras barked out a laugh. “Have you seen the world lately? Or were you too busy turning your back on it?”

“FOUR AND A HALF BILLION YEARS, AND YOU ARE STILL BLIND.” Ryan tilted his head. "HOW MUCH LONGER MUST WE CONTINUE THIS CHARADE?”

“The only blind one here is you, angel.” somehow it made the word sound like a curse. With a heaving shudder, Andras broke free of Ryan’s hold and lunged forwards with hands curled into claws. The crows chattered and beat their wings. Shane tried to wrestle back control, but two days of constant fighting had exhausted him. It was all he could do to keep himself conscious. He could only pray that Ryan knew what he was doing as Shane braced himself for a spray of blood.

Ryan- no, Zadkiel, it was Zadkiel, what was he thinking? -merely crossed its arms into an X. Andras hit the edge of the circle and with an ear-splitting crack it threw the demon backwards through the air. It hit the ground hard and slid painfully across the concrete floor, feathers scraping against his unbandaged hand. Peeling itself from the ground, it rubbed his aching shoulder and growled. The sound was a guttural rumble that vibrated through his bones. “Come out and fight me, you coward. Don’t tell me you’re afraid of hurting this poor human vessel.”

Ryan shook his head. “I AM TIRED OF FIGHTING. I THINK THAT IT IS TIME FOR US TO TAKE OUR LEAVE.”

Andras twisted his face into a cruel smile. “You can’t pull me from this vessel. He is too entrenched within me. You’ve lost.”

But for the first time, Shane knew something that Andras didn’t. Something had snapped inside of him when Andras had attacked Ryan. The demon in his head had turned from Birdbrain, annoying but harmless, to Andras, blood-soaked and cruel. He would never call it Birdbrain again. Andras could hurt him, it could take his whole life and leave him with blood soaked hands and a memory full of holes. But the moment it laid a finger on Ryan? That’s when it crossed the line. That’s when Andras made its fatal mistake.

It forgot that love was anything other than a weakness to be exploited.
He refused to lay down like a dog. He would rise up and purge the poison from his heart no matter what it took. He would fight tooth and nail to make sure Andras regretted ever learning his name. He'd rip Andras out of his brain, no matter how much it felt like an ice pick through his skull. Because this had always been about protecting Ryan. Because he loved Ryan's stupid, smiley, angelic face.

Ryan tipped his head downwards to look Andras in the eye, face deadly calm. He looked positively regal. “ANDRAS, PRINCE OF JINNESTAN, SPIRIT OF SOLOMON, DEMON OF DISCORD. I BANISH YOU FROM YOUR MORTAL HOST AND CAST YOU DOWN TO WHENCE YOU CAME, JUST AS YOU WERE CAST DOWN ON THE EIGHTH DAY. I CAST ASIDE THIS FALSE NAME AND RETURN TO YOU YOUR TRUE ONE. I NAME YOU SHANE, GIFT FROM GOD. THIS IS TRUE.” with every word his skin grew brighter, until he was surrounded by a halo of light.

“No,” Andras growled, raising itself up on his elbows, squinting against the light. His face twisted in rage. “You can’t do this. You are weak.”

“I NAME YOU ALEXANDER, PROTECTOR OF MEN. THIS IS DOUBLY TRUE.”

“NO.” the word ripped ragged from his throat, each syllable made of thorns. A hole was burning through Shane’s chest. He was afraid that if he looked down he’d see nothing but charred bones and molten flesh. Something was dragging him down, trying to pull him out of his body alongside the burning of his heart. He wouldn’t go, he owed as much to Ryan, who had made the one sacrifice that Shane couldn’t.

He focused everything on pushing apart the hole in his chest. On ripping Andras’ claws out one by one. He could taste ashes.

“I NAME YOU MADEJ, LOVE OF GOD. THIS IS TRIPLY TRUE.”

Ryan’s feet left the ground and he rose upwards until he was five feet in the air, supported by the words coming from his mouth and the gold flowing through his veins.

Andras tried to spit out one last defiant taunt but it only came out as a wet gurgle. Blood trickled out of his mouth and covered his chin. Shane felt like he was trying to rip off one of his own limbs. His vision swam. He couldn’t breath, there was some sort of crushing weight pressing down on his rib cage. Something had to give soon.

“BEGONE, FOR HE IS NOT YOURS TO KEEP.”

The crows that had been watching attentively from the rafters finally took flight. They swooped down in a great sea of feathers, rushing past Ryan and up through the hole in the roof, ruffling his hair from the wind off their wings. Still he grew brighter, until he was engulfed in a light so radiant it hurt to look at. But Shane couldn’t stop looking. It soothed his ragged soul like a balm.

Ryan’s shadow thrown back against the wall was a giant. Attached to its shoulders were a pair of wings as jet black as a crow’s, so massive that they stretched from wall to wall, encircling the building in their embrace.

“He is forgiven. He is forgiven. He is forgiven.”

The pain in Shane’s chest reached a crescendo. It felt like someone had carved open his chest and was ripping his ribs out one by one. Something between a scream and a groan pushed its way out of
his mouth. He was losing, Andras was pulling him out too. No. With his last scrap of energy he shoved Andras away from him, rejecting the power he had grown into like a second skin. GET THE FUCK. OUT OF MY HEAD.

Ryan snapped his fingers.

The pressure in Shane’s chest abated with a pop. He sank back down onto the ground with a sigh, bringing one shaking hand up to clutch at his chest. The silence and stillness inside of him felt so much stranger after the dog fight he had just survived. His skin felt gigantic and empty now that he wasn’t being crushed up against the sides of it by something ancient. An ice cold chasm had opened up inside him, but he wasn’t afraid of it this time. This time it was a relief, a promise that he could fill himself up with something, anything, that wasn’t a demon.

A hush fell over the room. The light around Ryan began to dim, until Shane could look at him without squinting.

Something growled behind Shane, sick and rattling. That was all it took to get his heart pumping again, going a million miles an hour. He twisted around- oh man, he had almost forgotten how it felt to move his limbs without a fight- to see Andras’ shadow stretching out behind him, looking small and bedraggled, shrinking away from the shadow of Ryan’s wings. Its red eyes flickered. The edges of its form were staticky and indistinct.

“This is not over. You cannot defeat me, I will have my payment, I always return-”

“And there will always be those ready to protect others from your wrath.”

Ryan ripped the silver necklace from around his neck and hurled it at the demon. It flew through the demon’s head and Andras screamed, a sound so full of rage that it made Shane’s head feel like it was about to burst like a rotten watermelon. Andras’ shadow collapsed in on itself and fell into a steaming pile, iridescent in the light. The only time Andras was beautiful was when it was dead.

Shane let his head loll backwards onto the concrete. It was over. Andras was gone. It couldn’t hurt them anymore. Shane could hardly believe it. Two months of suffering, two months of mounting pain, and it was all over in the span of ten minutes.

He reached up and felt his heartbeat in his chest with shaky hands. It raced like he had run a marathon. His chest was cold. Andras’ furnace was gone forever. The thought made him positively giddy.

He rolled over to face Ryan, grinning so widely his face hurt.

Ryan wasn’t grinning. The look on his face could only be described as anguish. He mouthed something that looked like “sorry.”

The light surrounding him flashed once, then disappeared. He teetered in the air of a second, staring at a point above Shane’s head. The he collapsed to the ground like a sack of rocks, steam hissing from his skin.

Shane’s rib cage crumpled all over again. “No,” he whispered, then shouted. “NO!”

He scrambled upwards on unsteady legs, a newborn lamb unused to walking. He wobbled over to Ryan’s prone body, but he was too slow, too unsteady, too late. He had been thrown underwater, he could barely hear anything over the pounding of his own heart.
He grabbed Ryan’s shoulders and rolled him over onto his back, carefully, carefully, because even though the panic that made him forget how to breathe he remembered that Ryan was something to be gentle with. Ryan’s skin burned to the touch. Shane held on anyways, he didn’t care how much it hurt, because he desperately needed a sign that Ryan was okay, that he was only unconscious, that they’d be able to walk away from this unscathed.

“Come on,” he said, voice cracking. “Get up. We did it. We did it Ryan, we won, I just need you to get up and see it.”

Ryan was unresponsive. He didn’t talk, he didn’t move, he didn’t do anything but lie there, head lolling like a rag doll. Shane shoved fumbling fingers against his neck, searching for a pulse. Nothing.

“Come on Ryan, cut it out, this isn’t funny, the bit is overdone. Wake up. Wake up!”

He put his palm against Ryan’s lips, hoping to feel a breeze, a whisper, anything.

Nothing.

Shane shook Ryan desperately, but it was useless. His burning hot skin was a mockery of the warmth that used to surround him.

Ryan was dead, and there was nothing Shane could do to change that.

He was breaking, straight down the middle into tiny bits of razor sharp glass. It was over. He had won over Andras, but what was the point without Ryan there with them? What was the point if this was the price?

“It shouldn’t have been your sacrifice. It should never have been yours.” he could barely speak through the hard lump in his throat. He was empty, his chest had been hollowed out into an ice cold cavern. Out of all the sacrifices they had made, why did this one have to be Ryan’s? “It should have been me,” Shane whimpered. “It should have been me.”

He put his head down against Ryan’s chest and sobbed.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry.
Chapter Notes

If you experienced emotional trauma at the hands of chapter 16 of The Devil's In The Details, you are entitled to 0 (zero) dollars in compensation. Call 1-800-im-not-sorry now to see if you are eligible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ryan stood in darkness. He remembered crows, and burning, and Shane. Shane had been grinning—or at least, Ryan thought so. It was all a haze, his time in the warehouse cut up into bits and pieces and scattered like a jigsaw puzzle with half its pieces missing. But Shane had been grinning, that smile that lit up his whole face and made his eyes crinkle at the edges. That meant that they must have succeeded, right? Andras was gone. Shane was free. And he was dead.

He didn’t feel dead. His hands leaped up towards his neck, pressed down on jugulars in search of a pulse. Nothing. Yep, he was dead.

He had expected death to be painful and frightening, but he felt very calm about the whole thing. It was hard to be afraid of something that he’d barely been conscious for. One moment he was in the warehouse, vision fractured into a kaleidoscope, and the next he was... here. In the void. Which, as far as afterlife options went, wasn’t so bad. A little boring, sure, but after the breakneck blur that was the last two days he needed a little relaxation. He would be lying, though, if he said he hadn’t been expecting something a little more… furnished. I should at least get a comfy chair for all my hard work, he decided. Or maybe a TV.

The thought made him think of movie nights with Shane, which only made him think of how that would never happen again, which only made him think of everything else they’d never get to do again. Of Shane, alone.

The thought of it sent needles through his heart. He's free now. No one else is going to get hurt. He didn't want to think about it, he wanted to return to the peculiar calm that had settled over him when he had arrived. It was the best option. That didn't stop him from feeling guilty. He marched around the door in a circle, trying to think of nothingness, trying to think of anything else. I'm dead! Dead dead dead, dead with a capital D. I can't agonize over the living. He needed a distraction.

As if the very thought had conjured it to existence, a door appeared.

It was wooden, painted a nondescript white, and yet it seemed strangely familiar. He walked around it in a circle. It was standing in the same void that he was, unattached to any hidden wall or floor. It didn’t lead to anything as far as he could tell, but Ryan had watched enough movies to know that if he opened the door there wouldn’t be darkness on the other side. Either the film directors were onto something, or the universe was sending him a message so unignorable it was one step sort of slapping him in the face. The universe was saying “Go through the fucking door, Ryan.”

Well, who was he to ignore the universe when it wanted to show him something? He wasn’t Shane. The thought sent another needle through his heart. He pushed it down.

He went through the door.
On the other side was a place so familiar that it made his breath catch in his throat. The table pushed underneath wide windows where he would do his homework every day, the knee-high scribbles on the walls beside the door leading upstairs, the refrigerator covered with alphabet magnets. The cup of coffee on the table, still steaming as though it had sat there for only a moment. He half expected his mom to walk around the corner and ask why he hadn’t emptied the dishwasher yet.

So death had taken him back to his childhood.

He started towards the kitchen, then paused. He needed more information. He knew where he was, but when was it? What was the point in his life that the universe had decided was his most comforting home?

He needed to check out his room. It had changed so much over the years, posters of superheroes being covered by posters of basketball superstars being covered by old movie posters. The room itself was a time capsule. It would hold the key to what era he existed in.

He opened the door to the stairwell, the hinges creaking like they always did. Beyond the doorway was a wall of white light. Okay, so the universe hasn’t thought that far ahead. That’s cool. So the house was in limbo. The scenery had changed, but he was still stuck in a void.

When he closed the door, someone was sitting at the table.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. This was his home turf. Nothing strange should have been happening.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

The person sitting at the table wasn’t a person at all, but...something. It was light personified, sitting at the table nursing the cup of coffee like that was a completely normal occurrence. Bright blue eyes appeared and disappeared across its body at random. It was fuzzy at the edges and kept flickering in and out of existence, as if was barely able to keep its form together. Ryan was certain that he would blink and the thing would disappear.

He asked the only question that made sense. “Are you Zadkiel?”

He prayed to anyone listening that it wasn’t the other one.

“Yes.”

Ryan let out a sigh of relief and sagged against the door. If he had died only to spend an eternity grappling with a demon hell bent on vengeance… he would have had serious words with whoever was in charge around here.

Things might not be much better with Zadkiel, he realized. Possession hadn't been exactly... pleasant. Excruciating was a better word. This could very well be the judgement he had braced for, wrapped up in pretty packaging to soften the blow.

The angel waved a hand, and a wave of calm washed over him. So calm that he couldn’t bring himself to be angry over having his emotions so obviously manipulated. Funny, that.

“You will not be harmed here.” the voice echoed through the room, surrounding him, embracing him. It was a lot more soft spoken now that it wasn’t exorcising demons, its voice a comforting campfire that kept the shadows at bay. “Sit down. We have a lot to discuss.”
Ryan stepped gingerly around the massive black crow’s wings that Zadkiel had draped over its chair and onto the ground. Stepping on its wings didn’t seem like the best way to make a good impression. He pulled out a chair and sat down, the forced calm masking the feeling of stepping up to a guillotine.

“How do you feel?”

“Um. Weird, I guess. Not as bad as I thought I would.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Ryan stared at the coffee on the table, steaming, steaming, curling up and away into the air. He felt like he was dreaming. Everything had led up to this, one long held breath in anticipation. And “this” had turned out to be sitting at a kitchen table watching an angel drink coffee. It felt… anticlimactic.

This couldn’t be all there was. There had to be something to this exchange that he wasn’t seeing. *What does Zadkiel want from me?*

“I… died?”

“Why?”

“You possessed me, you know why.”

“I want you to say it out loud. Saying it makes it true.”

“That… doesn’t make sense.”

“Haven’t you always believed in things that don’t ‘make sense’?”

“Touché.”

He didn’t want to say why. He didn’t want to dig up the agony that had gone into making the decision. Because he had made the jump, he had done what he had to, and he didn’t want to look back on it and regret it. An eternity of regret was a long time. His heart was already a pincushion as it was.

They sat in patient silence for a long time before Ryan gathered the courage to speak.

“I… sacrificed myself for Shane. It was him or me. I chose him. He didn’t deserve to die.” he’d never said the words out loud, and now that he did, the immensity of his actions rolled over him in a wave. He’d done that. Wow.

“And you did?”

“I sure hope not.” he rubbed his temples. “But I made the choice anyways. It was the only option. I’d seen too much to let Andras live inside of Shane unsupervised.”

“It does not do one much good to dwell on the plight of others without first thinking of oneself.”

Ryan squinted at Zadkiel. This was some sort of test, only he hadn’t studied. “So you think I should have let him die? That’s cold, dude.”

“Perhaps.”
“Bullshit. If I let Shane die a part of me would have died with him. Better to go all the way and keep him safe. Go big or go home, right?”

“So this was a calculated thing.”

Ryan was getting a little tired of being grilled. He didn’t appreciate feeling like he was under a microscope. “The drive here gave me lots of time to think about it. More than I might have liked. But I love him. That has to count for something, right? More than any other logic.” he ran his hands down his face and mashed them into his eyes. He couldn’t stand Zadkiel’s light in that moment. It was too harsh, laying all his secrets out to be seen and dissected. “I couldn’t just leave him to die. It wouldn’t be fair to make him sacrifice more than he already had. He needs to learn when to stop and ask for help. Cause I’d do anything for him. I love him. Because I’m absolutely fucking crazy.”

He hadn’t meant to spill so much, but Zadkiel’s presence had a way of pulling the truth out of him. It didn’t matter now, anyways. Not now that Shane was alive and he was dead. Trapped inside this house outside of time. He was beyond consequence now. At least, he hoped so.

Ryan cracked his fingers apart to see Zadkiel nodding, as though it had expected his answer. Dammit.

“How do you think love has made you blind to his shortcomings?”

Ryan barked out a humourless laugh. “I’m in love, not blind. I listed a shortcoming literally five seconds ago, have you been listening? I’ll list some more, just in case. He doesn’t clean up after himself, he tries to do everything at once, he thinks he’s invincible. He’s messed up but you know what, I don’t care! So am I!” his voice had risen until he was almost shouting. He forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down. “At the end of the day we’re a team and I wouldn’t trade that for the world. I can forgive him for his shortcomings.”

“He has done bad things, violent things. He has deceived you.”

“I still forgive him.”

“You are a good man, Ryan Bergara.”

Ryan shook his head. “I did what I thought was right.”

“How do you know how many come to me looking for undeserved absolution? How many think a few well crafted words will undo their wrongs? I am known for rapture not because I am unmerciful, but because so few people repent. Forgiveness can only be given to those who want it for its own sake. To those who are willing to sacrifice for it.”

Zadkiel had stopped looking at him, its eyes misted over as it looked straight through Ryan and into the past. It rubbed a hand over its face, a gesture so human it was jarring to see. “Have you ever thought about the meaning of your name, Ryan Steven Bergara?”

Ryan squinted at it. What does this have to do with…? “Not really, no.”

“Steven was the first martyr. That’s why the name means ‘crown of thorns’. Funny how our names often seem to become self fulfilling prophecies. Alexander, protector of men. Steven, the first martyr.” Zadkiel stared out the window into he darkness beyond. “There’s a reason people are reluctant to share their middle names.”
“And Ryan? What does Ryan mean?”

“It means little king.” Zadkiel looked back at him with doleful eyes. “So, little king? Do you feel like a martyr? Do you wear your crown of thorns with pride?”

The room had gotten very cold all of a sudden. The house had stopped feeling like a home a long time ago. “I think… that I don’t particularly like being called a martyr,” he said, rolling the words around his mouth before letting them fall out.

“I am old, Ryan. Far older than you could ever comprehend. I have battled Andras for four and a half billion years, over and over in an endless loop. Sometimes I have to wonder if it’s hopeless, if our lives are preordained by the names given to us. If it’s possible to change our paths. Every time I defeat it, there is always another human hungry for what Andras has to offer. I am stuck in this hateful pattern. But I still forgive, for that is what I was created to do, and I love humanity. But unchanging eternity is grating.”

It sighed, staring into its coffee. “When you believe something for long enough, you forget that what you think may not actually be true. You forget your assumptions are not written in stone. Age gives you plenty of time to think yourself into circles and corners. It can keep you from seeing the truth that’s right under your nose.”

For one moment Zadkiel was still. Its edges unblurred and its eyes stopped moving and a comforting warmth surrounded Ryan, draping around his shoulders like a blanket. The figure before him was only one small part of a greater consciousness. He was lost in something bigger than himself but for once, he wasn’t afraid. His shoulders relaxed. He hadn't even noticed the tension there until it was gone. Whatever Zadkiel was doing, it wasn’t in malicious intent.

“It is people like you that remind me why I protect humanity. You are both so full of selfless love, of wanting nothing for yourself but everything for the other. You remind me that humans can still be good. That a predestined track can be thrown off its rails. So thank you. Even angels need hope.”

“You’re welcome?” Ryan wasn’t quite sure how to react to this. He didn’t think the martyr accusations would have turned into the angel thanking him. He noticed a trend of needing incredible patience to talk with supernatural creatures. “Happy to help, I guess.”

“You are a good man, Ryan Bergara. So I can offer you a choice.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Is this like Harry Potter? I can choose to get on a train and all that?” if it was like Harry Potter he was going to lose his shit.

Zadkiel blinked in confusion, the eyes covering its body creating a psychedelic effect that made Ryan’s head spin. “What is Harry Potter?”

He shook his head and laughed under his breath. ‘Never mind. Tell me about the choice.’

“You are dead. You can choose to stay dead. Your family will mourn, but they’ll survive and move on, closer than before. Shane will mourn too. He’ll always remember you, even as he settles down and has a family of his own. But the sadness will fade to fond nostalgia. As for Unsolved, well, your death will sensationalize it, catapulting it into film history. You will become the crown jewel of cold cases. People will talk about you for centuries. And now you’re free to kick back with a cold one, as they say, for eternity. No pain, no fear, no
suffering, just endless relaxation inside this house you know so well. You did it, Ryan. You proved ghosts and demons were real, if only to Shane. You saved your friend. What more could you want?"

Ryan rubbed a hand over his chin. He wasn’t going to lie, ‘crown jewel of cold cases’ did sound pretty good. Almost too good. There had to be something about the second choice that Zadkiel didn’t want him to hear. “And the second option?”

“Go back to the warehouse. Live. Return to your human life, with all the uncertainty it brings. You might die tomorrow, or in fifty years, but this is a second chance. I cannot say what the future would hold for you, for humans make their own choices and blaze their own trails. You will have to make a leap of faith and pray that it will bring happiness.” Zadkiel clasped its hands together. “Choose to defy your fate. Become a king when it would have you be a martyr.”

“Yep, this is exactly like Harry Potter,” Ryan mumbled. He looked around the room and contemplated his decision. He had thought choosing to die would be the most important decision he had ever made, but this one was giving it a run for its money. It was true, he had tied up his loose ends, gotten to say more goodbyes than most people ever would. Accepting his own death had been an emotional rollercoaster so taxing that he wouldn’t wish it on his worst enemy. He didn’t want to have to go through it a second time. He couldn’t complain about the outcome of Unsolved either. Shane would be fine without it, he had Ruining History and It’s Debatable to work on. He could be satisfied with this ending.

But was it enough to be satisfied?

He scratched his chin as he took in the room, crafted with as much loving detail as an intricate movie set. And it was a movie set, a two dimensional idea created to make him feel at home without realizing what made the house into a home in the first place. He had thought it was welcoming when he had first come in, but now it just felt empty. The rooms echoed too much without the sound of the TV running in the background, and the air felt dead without the smell of something cooking on the stove. The place was nothing without someone to live in it with. It wasn’t a home without other people.

He didn’t know much about prophecies, or names, but he knew that wherever he went was nothing if he wasn’t there with Shane. If he stayed, he’d be stuck in this unchanging house alone for far too long. And the home that made him feel the safest had changed lately.

He had made his decisive leap in helping Shane. Now it was time to make another one.

“I want to go back.”

Zadkiel cocked its head, looking confused. “You must understand that this is not a decision made lightly. People should not come back to life. It is against the universe’s all encompassing will. I can do it for you, for you are a good man, but there will be a price. It may come in a minute, or twenty years down the line, but you’ll have to foot the bill one day. Are you certain of your choice? Wouldn’t you prefer to stay here, in the paradise of your making?”

There it was. The catch. Ryan traced a finger over the table, following the smooth grain of the wood. He looked out the window. There was nothing but darkness beyond the glass. This wasn’t a paradise. And he certainly hadn’t made it. “You know, I feel bad for you and Andras, if you’re always alone like this.”
Zadkiel followed his gaze. “**Andras has its hosts and its hunger to keep it occupied. As for me, my crows are company enough. They are my eyes and ears and with them, I am happy. Who are your crows, Ryan?**”

Ryan shook his head. “God, this is such a weird conversation…” he put his head in his hands. “Shane. Shane is my crows. I want to go back to him and try again.”

“**So be it. Step through the door and go home.**” Zadkiel pointed a finger at the door that should have led upstairs.

Ryan got up and walked to the door, avoiding the patch of flooring that always creaked out of well worn habit. He put his hand on the handle and took one last, long, look around the house. He had spent two thirds of his life here. He hoped that the next time he returned, he’d have spent two thirds of his life doing something else. Everything he wanted was on the other side. He would give up fame, he would give up carefully knotted endings, he would give up easy comfort for Shane. Because he would do anything for him. Because he loved Shane. Because he was absolutely fucking crazy. But so was life, wasn’t it? So was everything else.

*The universe can’t take anything more than it already has,* he thought. *Let the payment come.* For once he didn’t feel a sliver of doubt at his decision. He was getting good at this jumping thing.

He twisted the knob and swung the door open. There was that bright light again, swirling almost imperceptibly. He could hear the sound of tree rustling, so faint that it could have been his imagination. Zadkiel finally took a sip of its coffee and watched him stand there, teetering on the brink.

It gave him a two fingered salute. **“Go.”**

He stepped through the door and into the light.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe there’s only one chapter left after this. That's crazy. Thank you for all your views, shares, kudos and comments cause I never would have gotten this far without you guys. As usual, come visit me on tumblr at @ryans-ghostly-wheezes. I love hearing from you guys <3
Ryan tumbled through the river of light, the currents pulling him this way and that until he didn’t know how long he had been there. It pressed down on his chest, make it hard to breathe. He shut his eyes. The light grew blinding, glowing red through his closed eyelids. It rushed past his ears in a roar that matched the pulsing of a heartbeat, growing louder and louder until he felt the sound pulsing through his chest.

His eyes snapped open and he gasped. The first breath was painful, a knife to his chest. The second breath felt like cool water on a burn.

He was alive. He was back in the warehouse, and the crows were gone, and he was alive.

The world filled itself in in bits and pieces. There was a rock digging into his back below his shoulder blade. He could hear the lake lapping against the shoreline. The rafters began to come into focus and something weighed heavy against his chest and oh-

Oh.

It was Shane.

Shane was lying half on top of Ryan, chests pressed together, legs splayed out sideways across the concrete floor. His head was over Ryan’s heart, hair tickling Ryan’s nose. His eyes were closed but he was breathing, Ryan could feel the warm air against his skin. His face was shiny with tears.

Oh. Oh. Shane had been crying over him.

Ryan could feel every point they touched in high definition, his skin buzzing with electricity. Shane was lying on him, and that made it hard to breathe, but he didn’t feel crushed, he felt comforted. Like his weight was the only thing keeping Ryan from floating back to Zadkiel. There was a funny feeling in his heart, almost like a knot of grief but tinged with elation. His eyes began to tear up too as the realization hit him all over again, just as raw as the first time.

He was alive, and Shane was with him.
Ryan raised a shaky hand and gently touched Shane’s shoulder. He couldn’t quite move his limbs right, his body still trying to remember what it was to be alive. It didn’t help that Shane had pinned him tight against the ground, his arms holding onto Ryan’s shoulders in a way that could only be described as cradling. Shane jerked at the touch, his head snapping up to look at Ryan.

“Ryan?” he asked, voice hoarse. He looked like he was on the verge of bursting into tears again, face open and vulnerable in a way Ryan had almost never gotten to see before they had embarked on this god forsaken road trip.

“Yeah buddy, it’s me. I’m alive.” he laughed a little at that, like he couldn’t believe it himself. “I’m alive.”

Shane seemed to realize their position and hoisted himself upwards, pulling himself off of Ryan’s chest. He didn’t want Shane to leave, he wanted to keep lying there together and let Shane remind him of what it was to live again. The absence felt like a hole in his chest. They stared into each other’s eyes, Shane on his hands and knees, neither of them wanting to move.

Shane sniffled. A tear fell onto Ryan’s cheek, cold as it slid off onto the dusty concrete. “I thought you were dead.”

“I got better.”

Ryan sucked in a ragged breath. He was about to laugh or cry, he wasn’t sure which. His eyes flicked down towards Shane’s lips unprompted.

“I want to go back to him and try again.”

“It can keep you from seeing the truth that’s right under your nose.”

“I think the unsurety is important. You need to have faith. Give him a part of yourself and have faith he’ll give a part of himself in return.”

Fate be damned, Unsolved be damned, his whole life be damned. If there was ever a fairy tale moment, this was it. The relationship hadn’t been destined in his last lifetime, but things had changed. He had died, and Ryan couldn’t stand to wonder any longer.

He grabbed the collar of Shane’s shirt and pulled him down into a kiss.

Shane made a noise of surprise against Ryan’s lips, the sound vibrating through his mouth more than his ears. Ryan paused for a second, pulling away a fraction as his heart caught in his chest.

Had Andras been right…?

But then Shane fell forwards and melted into the kiss, pushing him down until they lay chest to chest again.

No, Andras had always been wrong about them. And that’s why it’s gone.

Ryan stopped thinking about demons, stopped thinking about anything except the way his lips felt on Shane’s. They moved together softly, gently, as if they were each afraid of hurting the other. As if after all they had been through this one simple thing would make them crumble to dust. Ryan certainly felt like he might crumble under Shane’s soft touch. He could hardly believe this was real, but Shane tasted like coffee, and ashes, and salt, cold and real and human overtop of him. One of Shane’s bony elbows dug into his ribs and there was definitely some dirt that had gotten ground into his mouth but that only proved that it was real, that he was alive and ecstatic and kissing Shane, lips chapped and warm.

Ryan put his hands on either side of Shane’s head, stubble scratching his palms, and pulled Shane
closer, hungry for what he had missed out on for so long. Shane make a tiny, choked off sound that slid through Ryan’s mouth and down his throat until it sat in the pit of his stomach, electric. His insides had been replaced with lightning. If Shane had told him he was glowing, it wouldn't have surprised him.

It felt like he hadn’t been alive until that moment, even counting the time before Zadkiel's light. Shane was giving him a part of himself that he hadn’t known was missing. And he was so happy at this, happy that he was alive, happy that they had won against all odds, that he couldn’t help but laugh. Shane laughed with him as Ryan’s laughter making him bounce up and down on Ryan’s chest.

Shane kissed the corner of his mouth, sloppy with giggles. His eyes were all crinkled up and shiny. The tears finally started to spill out of him as they laughed. Ryan felt something wet and salty run down his face and he realized he was crying too. He had died, but now he was alive and he was kissing Shane and Shane was kissing back, and the bone shuddering relief that filled him top to bottom had to make its way out somehow. Sobbing and laughing mixed together until they were one and the same. They kept laughing as the tears streamed down their face, until Ryan couldn’t stand to see the overwhelmed look on Shane’s face anymore.

So Ryan reached up and kissed him again.

It was so forceful that their teeth ended up clicking together, like they were teenagers again, kissing for the first time. It only made them laugh harder, breath shuddering down each other’s throats. Shane ran his hand through Ryan’s hair and down the back of his head until he was cradling it, pulling Ryan closer as the kiss grew passionate. The way their lips moved together was intoxicating, leaving Ryan feeling as heady as if he had just done a line of shots. He needed the kiss, he needed Shane more than he needed air to breathe. He wanted to keep doing this for forever. He could taste the salt of their tears, the desperation deep inside them, each hoping the kiss could plug their bullet wounds. Because even though they had won, everything had changed. They’d never be able to wipe away the damage Andras had done. Not completely.

But they had each other, and in that moment, that was enough.

They kept kissing until their tears dried and Ryan could let go of Shane’s face without feeling like he would shatter. When he pulled away it was reluctant, but they had to breathe at some point.

“What are we?” Shane whispered as he gazed into Ryan's eyes. The sun made his irises shine with flecks of gold.

“I don’t know.” Ryan was grinning. The cocktail of emotions inside of him had settled and now there was something golden left. It felt an awful lot like hope. “But as long as it’s with you, I don’t think I care.”

Shane laughed, and everything was right in the world. “I don’t know either. But I have to agree with you.”

“Meaning…” he asked, running one hand down Shane's sleeve to settle on his elbow. He knew the answer already, but he wanted Shane to say it. Saying it makes it true.

“Well, Ryan, I think the fact that we were making out a few seconds ago is a clear sign that I’m into you. Unless being possessed burned a hole in your brain.”

“Being possessed and dying. I’m one up on you there, long legs.” Ryan curled his arms around Shane’s neck and smiled.
Shane leaned down and gave him a quick peck on the nose. “I can’t believe I’m in love with such a complete asshole.” he laughed quietly, eyes soft. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to say that.”

Ryan spluttered, completely unprepared for Shane’s words. His heart did a victorious leap even as his brain short circuited. “At least take me on a date before you say that!”

“That you’re an asshole, or that I’m in love with you?”

He smacked Shane’s bicep, which made him laugh. ‘You know which one. Not that I’m not… into you too but can we at least pretend we’re normal? That I didn’t just sacrificed myself to save you, and that you didn’t get possessed by a demon to save me.’

Ryan knew what Shane was feeling. The past two days had felt like an experience beyond the normal passage of time. It was a lifetime captured in a bottle. *I love you* was no great leap after that. What they had done only came with a lot of love, or a lot of stupidity, and God knows he had mountains of both. It was on the tip of his tongue too, melting sugar sweet in his mouth. *I love you.* But he couldn’t let any more of this sweetness be tainted by burning. By sacrifice. If only they could pretend that tragedy wasn’t what had pulled them together.

“I want this to be built on something happy.”

“Okay, stranger.” Shane winked at him. “That means no more kissing until you’ve wiped that dirt off of your face. I have standards, Mr. Bergara.”

“One more. For the road.”

Shane rolled his eyes and leaned down. “God knows I can’t say no to you.”

Ryan decided that he’d never get used to the warmth that melted through him when they kissed. It was over far too quickly for his liking, but real life was calling. They had to get back to the office. A whole week off was going to take a lot of explaining. Some serious begging, too. Not to mention that he really needed a shower.

The crows were gone as they walked back down the forest path to their car, still waiting faithfully for them with its tires dug deep into the mud. The only sound was the wind rustling through the trees and the lake lapping against the shore. Far away, a bird sang. It wasn’t the harsh call of crows. It sang like the dawn. Their lives had turned upside down, but the world kept spinning. And they’d have to keep spinning with it.

Once they had gotten their tires unstuck from the mud, they stopped at the McDonalds in town to splash water on their faces and stop looking like they had been caught in a dumpster fire. They managed to get in during a lull in customers, which meant all eyes were on them as they walked through the doors. If it had been anywhere else someone would have commented on the feathers in their hair and the grime crusted on their clothes, but the dead eyed employees merely raised their eyebrows and went back to flipping burgers. Ryan scrubbed the caked on dirt from his cheek with a wet paper towel. As the cool water ran down his face he felt… not clean yet, but more human. At that point he couldn’t hope for anything better.

Shane insisted on driving the first shift, even though he hadn't slept any more than Ryan, and Ryan claimed he could never sleep in cars anyway. But he had never been awake for over thirty hours either, and the moment his head hit the headrest he was out like a light.

*Ryan was in his apartment watching a movie with Shane. The TV showed nothing but static but that*
made sense, right? That was the movie. They were watching a movie, and everything was fine.

Shane reached an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. “I’m so glad I’m here with you.”

Ryan rested his head against Shane’s shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You make me feel… I don’t know, more like myself.”

A crow burst through the window, the explosion of glass making Ryan jump and clutch onto Shane. It shot through the air, trailing feathers, and swooped so closely over their heads Ryan felt its claws ruffle through his hair. The crow slammed straight into the TV.

“Shane, what—” he turned to the other man, only to find thin air. Shane was gone. He was clutching onto the arm of the couch. Why had he thought Shane would be there? He was alone. He had been alone this whole time.

The TV teetered for a moment on its stand, the mangled corpse of the crow protruding from the shattered screen like some sort of grotesque arrow. It fell to the floor with a crash that made Ryan’s hands jump to his ears. Then the TV caught on fire.

It went up all at once, until the whole living room was ablaze, the heat searing his skin until it felt like it would melt from his bones. He tried to scramble away, but his body wouldn’t cooperate. He was stuck fast to the couch, helpless. The blaze drew nearer.


Burning.

Burning.

Burning.

Something was sprouting from his back, two long knives between his shoulder blades.

He let himself sink into the floor, resigned.

When he awoke it was four in the afternoon and there was a lukewarm coffee waiting for him in the cupholder. Shane had the windows rolled down. With the wind blowing through his hair and his hand hanging out the window he was the picture of carefree. A shudder of relief ran through Ryan. He grabbed the coffee and chugged it to get rid of the ashy taste in his mouth.

“That was mine, you know.” Shane said.

“That would explain why it tastes like sugar sludge.” Ryan made a face of disgust.

“You get used to it after a while.”

“You’re going to die of heart failure at the ripe old age of thirty five. You know that, right?”

Shane shrugged, grinning. “Sleep well?”

Ryan swished around the dregs at the bottom of the cup. “I dreamt I was burning.”

Shane sighed and looked out the window. He didn’t look so carefree anymore. “I know how that
feels.”

“I was hoping that when it was over, it would be over. That when I died, you'd be able to go back to normal. But I'm alive, and I don't know what to do with myself.” he sighed. “I wish I could go back to before everything hurt. It was simpler then.”

“Oh, Ry. Things were never going to go back to the way they were before. I couldn’t go back to being the Shane I used to be even if I wanted to. Things have changed, and that’s the price we’re gonna have to pay for fucking with demons.”

“I've spent so long thinking of nothing but demons and death. I don't know what it's like to think of anything else anymore. How am I going to pick up the pieces?”

“I don’t know either, little guy. But we have to keep going.” Shane ran his hand across the back of his head, right where his bruise still throbbed yellow-green. "Take it from someone who keeps bashing his head against things, it’s never as bad as it looks.”

It’s never as bad as it looks. Ryan's life was a head wound, the gush of blood distracting from the shallow cut beneath. They could stitch each other up in time. This was nothing but one chapter in a long story. A happier story. At least, he hoped so. Right now it felt like Zadkiel had left a permanent chasm in his chest. He worried for Shane, who had lived for two months in a state Ryan had barely been able to stomach for half an hour. Imagining what he had to be going through right now make Ryan's stomach twist. It was a wonder he was still smiling.

That’s Shane, I guess. Tough as nails.

Shane reached out his hand. Ryan twined his fingers around it. It was solid. Real. Shane wouldn't abandon him. They’d be in each other’s corner until the end.

They stopped for the night in Elk City. When they booked a single bed this time, it wasn’t by accident. Neither of them could stomach sleeping alone that night. The hotel was quaint, clean, and utterly forgettable. White walls and white sheets and white floors. The clinic brightness was blinding. It made him was all the more aware of the grime still crusted around his fingernails and behind his ears.

Even after sleeping most of the car ride, his legs still felt too wobbly to support him for long. His eyelids kept drifting downwards, threatening to topple him where he stood before he jerked himself awake again.

While Shane collapsed onto the bed, he peeled off his grimy clothes and went to take an extra long shower. He scrubbed at the dirt stuck to his back and hands until his fingers ripped up scabs and left blood swirled down the drain. Then he stood under the boiling water until his skin turned red. The coughing fan did nothing to clear away the clouds of steam, and he was forced to shut off the water when he couldn't stand to breathe it in anymore. He drew a frowny face on the mirror, sighed, and then rubbed it out.

It was time to get out of his head and go to bed. He pulled on his pajama pants with fumbling fingers, only to realize he had forgotten to grab a shirt. He went to root around his bag for it. Shane had seen him shirtless for enough videos before. Half the world had seen him shirtless before. He didn’t give a fuck.

Shane glanced up from his phone at Ryan when he entered the room, did a double take, then gaped at his bare back.
“My eyes are up here,” Ryan commented as he rifled through his duffel bag. He really should have brought more clothes, there was only one clean shirt left-

Shane shook his head slowly, eyes wide as saucers. “No, it’s not that. Have you- Look in the mirror, Ryan.” he groaned. “Oh man, look at your back.” Shane's face drained of colour as he spoke, until he might as well have been a ghost himself. The horror in his voice was enough to wipe the playful smile off of Ryan's face.

He stumbled back into the bathroom, heart in throat, and swiped his hand across the fogged mirror. Condensation flew from his hand in an arc, fat drops of it spattering his face. When the image cleared, his arm seized up and froze. He felt like a deer in the headlights, watching his destruction unfold but not quite understanding what was approaching. This couldn't be real. This was a dream, and he was looking someone else in the mirror. They might have had the same face, but there was no way the person in the reflection was anything but a stranger. His stomach overturned with a wave of nausea at the idea.

Two long, puckered scars the length of his shoulder blades ran up his back. They were an angry red and crusted with dried blood. He reached back, struggling to get his trembling fingers to cooperate, and ran his hand over one. The skin was raised and rough like a scab. How did I overlook this?

“Was this what Zadkiel meant by payment?” he breathed. Angel wings. He had the remnants of angel wings on his back. Oh God, what if they're growing? He clawed at the scars, desperately trying to feel for anything other than muscle and flesh underneath them.

No. No, there was no sign of anything new beneath them. If anything it looked as though something had been cut from him, his wings clipped in the most gruesome way possible. They didn’t hurt, else he would have noticed them sooner, but they had still taken something vital from him. They were a permanent reminder of what had happened. The scars on his mind might heal, but these wouldn’t. There was no going back now.

The longer he looked at them, the more he wanted to throw up. He had to turn around and clutch the counter to stay upright, staring himself in the eye between water droplets. He had thought he still wouldn’t have been able to recognize himself, but no, it was still him, it was still him. Trapped in this mutilated corpse of body. He flexed his fingers just to prove he was still in control of himself.

Shane appeared in the doorway behind him. Ryan watched him through the mirror as his eyebrows scrunched together. His eyes stayed glued to Ryan’s back. He raised his hand as if he wanted to touch them, and Ryan flinched, ever so slightly. Shane would think of him as broken. They were an announcement of how Zadkiel had claimed him, addressed for the whole world to see. But Shane didn’t know he was thinking that. And now he had butchered what could have been a comfort. Shane’s frown deepened as he pulled his hand away and crossed them over his chest.

“I never meant for you to get hurt.”

Ryan had made the choice. It wasn’t Shane’s fault. None of this was Shane’s fault. His mind whirled as he tried to sort out the knot in his chest.

“I guess this means I can’t take my shirt off for videos anymore,” he said. After everything, that was somehow well and truly the only coherent thought that came to mind.

Shane’s lips quirked into what wasn’t a smile but was close enough. “There goes your favourite pastime. Daysha’s gonna be devastated.”

And with that the scars didn’t seem so bad anymore. If he could joke about it, then he could survive.
Scars were a small price to pay to keep breathing. He was alive, and with Shane, and everything else was secondary. It wasn’t like there was anything he could do about it now. The knot it Ryan’s chest loosened and settled into an odd sort of calm. And when Shane smiled, for real this time, he decided that he could learn to live with this new Ryan.

They made it back to LA Friday night.

Ryan walked Shane back to his apartment, like he always did after a location shoot. They loitered on the doorstep for a minute, breathing in the LA air, that familiar mix of beach salt and car exhaust. He didn’t want to leave, he never did, but this time it felt more monumental than before. He was almost definitely overthinking this, but he worried that now the trip was over they would forget about the kissing, about the dam that had broken between them, and let it fade back to what they had been before. Ryan didn’t think he could stand that. He liked feeling the electricity in his veins that Shane gave him.

“So this is it,” he said as he handed Shane’s bag back.

“Yes.” Shane unlocked his door and then turned around, half leaning on the doorframe. “See you on Monday, I guess.”

Ryan wanted to say, Can I see you before then, can we decide whether we’ll ever talk about this again, can you promise that you still want to kiss me? He wanted to ask, Will you stay? But the words were strange in his mouth, and he had spent so long agonizing that they stuck in his throat.

Maybe he didn’t want his life to go back to the way it was before. Not if it meant forgetting what they had become.

Shane opened his mouth, seemed to think better of it, then closed it again. “See you.” The door shut with a clack that echoed in the deserted street.

Ryan walked back to his car, chest even emptier than when he had first seen the scars.

His apartment was dark and echoing. For the first time since he had moved in, he felt unwelcome. Like he was looking in on someone else’s life, his existence divided neatly into before and after Glenn Springs. The two Ryans were strangers.

It might as well have been a lifetime since he had last been there. The papers from his research on Andras were still strewn across the table, and the sink was still piled high with dirty mugs. Relics of a life he could never go back to. Before he had been possessed. Before he had died. Before he had kissed Shane.

Before he had kissed Shane.

Before Shane had kissed him.

He couldn’t live with the reminders beside him. Not when he already had too many. He swept the papers into the trash irreverently, then scrubbed each mug clean, one after the other after the other until the sun had finished setting and the room had grown dark. He couldn’t live with the reminders beside him. Not when he already had too many. The mindless repetition made him forget the uncertainty of the future for a little while. But the moment he stopped, it all came rushing back.

They had survived.

What now?
Shane had him enfolded in a protective embrace and they were kissing, soft and gentle. Ryan ran his hands up Shane’s back and leaned into the kiss, standing on tiptoe to reach him. He wanted Shane to kiss him until he forgot the world around him. Shane pressed Ryan up against the wall- he didn’t remember there being a wall there, but that didn’t matter right then- and put his hands on Ryan’s cheeks, caressing the stubble on his face before letting them slide down to the sides of his neck. Ryan laughed against Shane’s mouth- that tickled!- but the laugh choked off as Shane pressed harder against his neck. He pulled away, the happy bubble in his stomach disappearing with a pop. A flicker of fear replaced it.

“Hey, stop-”

Shane pressed even harder and Ryan’s words choked off into a gurgle. Shane had his hands around Ryan’s throat, thumbs pressed down on his jugulars. Fear rose in his throat, choking him as much as Shane’s fingers were. The wall turned from a support into a prison. The only way out was through Shane, who had turned from a safe haven into an enemy. Ryan slapped Shane’s chest but his arms were moving through molasses, each blow landing harmlessly. Shane gritted his teeth. They were flecked with blood. His hands grew warmer until they were burning hot brands against his skin. Ryan choked out a sob.

Shane brought his face down so he was eye to eye with Ryan, his face cold and empty. Ryan’s vision faded in and out. Everything turned to shades of red, as if the blood his brain was lacking had collected in front of his eyes instead. The only part of his vision that stayed clear was Shane’s eyes. They were black as spilled ink.

Ryan stopped fighting and slid downwards.

No.

No.

No.

This wasn’t happening, he had defeated Andras, they had won, they had won. Why wouldn’t it leave them alone?

Ryan's legs collapsed out from under him and Shane sank down to follow, hands still squeezing tight. Ryan wanted this nightmare to end, to pass out so he wouldn’t feel like his chest was cracking open anymore. So it didn’t feel like someone was trying to take a hot poker to his neck. He didn’t have the strength to struggle anymore. It took all his energy to keep breathing.

“You thought you could escape death because of an angel with a god complex?” Shane growled. “You’ve only marked yourself a target. Death is never cheated. It will take back what was lost, and everything you’ve gained since. It will take you, it will take me, it will take us all. But I’ll be sure as hell to drag you with me, the only human stupid enough to resist my might. Your kind never escapes their demons.”

Ryan reached up and cupped Shane’s face in his hands. “I don’t... hate... you,” he gasped. The hands on his neck loosened. Ryan sucked in a breath that felt like barbed wire down his throat. “I don’t hate you, Shane.”

“I’m not Shane,” the creature wearing Shane’s skin growled.

It reached its hands back up to Ryan’s neck. He heard a snap, and then there was darkness.
Ryan woke with a gasp, drenched in sweat. He had rolled himself up into a suffocating tangle of sheets during the night. He couldn’t breathe. The sheets were chains trapping him in that world where Shane wasn’t himself, the world that made Ryan want to sob. He flailed his limbs in a desperate bid to escape, lungs aching for a snatch of cool air. With a great ripping sound he tore himself free, kicking the shreds frantically away from him. His skin felt too tight, he was still boiling, burning up. He struggled out of his t shirt, tearing that too, and stumbled out of bed, tripping over the stack of books left on his floor and almost falling. He threw the window open and took a huge gulp of cold air to soothe his burning lungs. He leaned his head against the cool glass of the window and listened to the distant sounds of traffic and birds. Not crows. Good. No more crows. His heart rate slowed, but his mind still raced at a thousand miles an hour.

It was just a dream. Just my stupid fucking subconscious preying on my own fears. Nothing new.

The phantom of Shane’s hands still sat around his throat and he rubbed it, shuddering. He’d never be able to get back to sleep. The panic had faded, but the way Shane’s voice had sounded… he shivered. Not Andras’, but it had still been cold and empty. So different from Shane’s real voice, always full of warmth and gentle teasing. His back ached where the scars sat.

The back of his neck prickled like he was being watched. He whipped around, heart in throat. There was nothing behind him but shadows. Not one thing out of place. His mind was playing tricks on him, egged on by that terrible dream.

He need to hear Shane’s voice. That was the only way he’d be able to put the dream in the grave where it belonged- by reminding his subconscious that Shane was no threat. The real Shane was gentle. The real Shane remembered his order at In n Out and talked in silly voices to make him laugh. The real Shane wouldn’t hurt him, and that was the Shane in control now. It was over. They were safe. It was only a dream.

Then why did anxiety buzz through his fingers as he dialed Shane’s number? He hated that Andras still had control of him even now. He chewed on his lip as the dial tone rang.

“Sorry, the line you are trying to reach is already in use. Please try again later.”

The cheery automated voice was a stark contrast with the hole it carved in Ryan’s stomach. He needed to hear Shane’s voice like he needed the air in his lungs. The room was closing in on him, the shadows on the walls twisting until they looked like stalking figures. Ryan's fingers tightened around his phone. He could face his fears with Shane, but not alone. Not as he was now.

Maybe he had somehow dialed the wrong number. He knew it was impossible, but who could Shane be calling at three in the morning? He tried again, fingers shaking so much that he had to retype the number three different times. The ringtone felt endless.

The call went through.

“I had a dream about you,” the two said in unison.

“What?” Shane exclaimed, just as Ryan said, “Holy shit.”

“I tried calling you, but it wouldn’t go through the first time,” Shane said, voice muffled. It sounded hoarse, like this was the first time he had spoken since waking up.

“I tried calling you,” Ryan replied.

Ryan heard a sigh over the phone and the distinct sound of someone slapping their own face. “This is ridiculous.”
“No shit.”

They stayed silent for a few moments.

“You died in my dream. Some sort of spider monster crawled out of the walls and killed you. I had to sit there and watch, helpless, because Andras wasn’t there to help me.”

“You were still possessed by Andras in mine. You tried to kill me like you did in Holbrook.” *You did kill me.* He ran a hand over the vertebrae of his own neck, making sure they were all still there.

“Oh, man, that’s so much worse. Ryan, I wouldn’t.”

“Shh. I know. I know you wouldn’t. Andras is gone. I’m not afraid around you.”

“Are you sure? Because I wouldn’t blame you if you felt like you needed to, I don’t know, avoid me for a while, recover from the whole I-tried-to-brutally-murder-you thing-”

“No!” Ryan surprised himself with the desperation in his voice. “No. You’re the only one I can talk to about this.” he paused. “Actually, do you think you could maybe come over? Just for a little bit. I need… I need to see your face.” he felt stupid asking it, but the middle of the night always made words spill out of his mouth like he wasn’t in control of his own mouth.

“Okay,” said Shane in a strangled voice.

The call ended with a beep. Ryan looked out the window again, breathing in the night air. A crow was sitting on the lamppost across the street. He couldn’t help but feel as though he was still being watched by the angel they had left in Tennessee. He closed the window and drew the blinds with a jerk. If he never saw a crow again, it would be too soon. They made bile rise at the back of his throat.

He pulled on a new shirt and padded barefoot through his apartment, feeling like a ghost himself. He flicked on the kitchen lights and sat on the counter, kicking his feet back and forth to let out the nervous energy coursing through his veins. He wanted to turn on every light in the apartment, but he didn’t want Shane to laugh and tell him he was acting stupid. He also couldn’t help but worry that the lights would only leave him feeling more isolated when they revealed how empty his apartment truly was.

An eternity passed before finally, *finally,* there was a quiet knock at the door. He hopped down from the counter and slid across the floor, barely catching himself before he slammed into the wall in his haste to open the door.

He took a quick second to smooth down his hair so it didn’t look like he’d just stuck his fingers into an electrical socket. He wasn’t sure how well it worked, but expecting him to look amazing at three in the morning was an impossible request. *There are more important things to worry about than what Shane thinks of your hair,* he reminded himself.

He pulled the door open. Shane’s hair was even more disheveled than usual. Somehow he managed to make it look charming rather than slobbish. He was still wearing his pajamas underneath his BuzzFeed hoodie. His face broke into a smile when he saw Ryan.

Ryan smiled in return as a wave of relief washed over him. Now that Shane was here, the apartment didn’t feel so empty. Dream Shane’s vicious expression was a different person compared to the goofy grin the real Shane wore. Inviting him over had been the right decision. Ryan ushered him in. Shane meandered inside and kicked off his sneakers.
Shane yawned, showing off his molars. “How’re ya doing?”

“Tired. Stressed. Y’know, the usual.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, me too. Me too.”

He sat down in the kitchen and Ryan banged around the cupboards, looking for hot chocolate mix just for something to do. Shane seemed happy to sit in silence, but Ryan wasn’t.

He looked deep in a cupboard to avoid seeing Shane’s reaction. “The dreams… do you think they were a message? Your dreams were like that when Andras first showed up...do you think it’s happening again? Are we not as done with this shit as I thought we were?”

Shane ran a hand over his stubble. “You know what, I don’t think it's a sign. I mean, I don’t know, but Andras’ dreams felt different.”

Ryan turned around, hot chocolate mix in hand. “Is this you being honest or is this you being a skeptic?”

“They’re the same thing! So yes, nothing but honesty from me. We’re done with demons. But, y’know, possession and attempted murder aren’t exactly forgettable. Or pleasant.”

“We’ve got a lot of nightmares ahead of us, don’t we?”

Shane shook his head. “If only there was a therapist who would believe us.”

“Yeah.” Ryan looked down into the mugs as he filled them, watching the hot chocolate swirl into miniature whirlpools.

“Yikes. That's bleak. We’re going to have to carry this shit around by ourselves- forever.” Shane drummed his fingers against the table. “Although I guess it’s not really by ourselves, right? We’ve got each other.”

Ryan set down their mugs and sat across from Shane. “Yeah.” he reached his hand forward, tentative. Whatever they had together still felt like a dream. Shane finished the distance, twining their fingers together. “Yeah, we do.”

Shane slept over at Ryan’s that night. They arrived at work together the next day, Shane in borrowed clothes. Ryan was glad the cuffs of his jeans weren’t sewn shut, or else they would've looked more like capris on his friend. Boyfriend? He still wasn't sure what was happening between them.

They spun a lie of family emergencies and sudden illnesses, and though their boss couldn't possibly have believed them, she let it slide with a shrug. Eugene, Sara, and what felt like everyone else who had ever stepped foot in the office wanted to know where the hell they had taken off to so suddenly. Shane spun the same yarn while Ryan stood beside him, drinking coffee as an excuse to stay quiet. The kerfuffle died down, people filing away to find newer gossip. And then they were back to work.

It was so… normal, and yet it wasn’t. It was like coming home to find someone had moved all the furniture two inches to the right. There was a tiny but insistent part of Ryan that chafed against the return. It was like pretending the change had never happened, and Ryan wasn’t sure if he wanted to do that anymore. Because if he did that it meant that everything he had been through hadn’t meant anything. He wanted to think he had learned something vital from their trial. That hope was all he had. In the end, he couldn't be the old, overthinking Ryan anymore. For better or for worse.
But he liked his job, and so he kept on cutting footage together and tried to ignore the moments where Shane would go silent and stare at a wall for a touch too long. The new season began to air, and they kept working. Ryan did his best to ignore the dwindling number of days before they submitted the Lovers House footage for final review. He ignored the turmoil over who he did or didn’t want to be as well. He was good at ignoring things.

They didn’t talk about what they had seen in the warehouse. They didn’t talk about what it felt like for your skin to not be your own. Not until it was the dead of night and they had woken up in a cold sweat with the other’s name on their tongues, and words came easier than sleep. They’d ignored it long enough. It demanded to be recognized.

So they talked about it in hushed whispers until the sun cracked through the blinds, clutching desperately at each other for an anchor. Whispers turned into lunchtime comments turned into jokes, because what else can you do in such a situation? You either turn it into something to laugh at or resign yourself to tiptoeing around it in fear for the rest of your life.

---

Ryan finished the last of his iced coffee, swirling the ice around until it rattled. He spun his chair around and threw it into the trash with a perfect three pointer.

“Kobe,” he whispered, grinning gleefully.

It had been a good day. No nightmares, for once, and the office had gotten free donuts. They had even finished filming for true crime early. He sighed in contentment and straightened the papers on his desk until they were perfectly aligned. He and Shane were going out for dinner that night, a new tiki bar that Sara had recommended to them. Nothing could ruin his good mood.

A notification popped up in the corner of Ryan’s laptop screen.

Intern Christie: hey, here’s the final cut for the Lovers’ House. Email me any problems you’ve got before we put it up on Friday! :)

Intern Christie: [attached file: windhuntersseason2ep6]

Well, there went that rug, straight out from under his feet and tossed into the next dimension. Ryan stared at the file name for a full five minutes before he finally mustered up the courage to click on it. He had been trying to ignore that this moment was coming. Doing that had made things seem so much more okay. Like the decisions he had made to get here were the right ones. His hands grew clammy as the video loaded; the circle spinning around, and around, and around…

Surely it couldn’t be as bad as the nightmare he had constructed it to be in his head. It wasn’t even the worst they had experienced. It was only the turning point. The point where he had been too blind to miss that something was wrong.

Shane rolled over and grabbed Ryan’s hand in his own white knuckled fist. Ryan squeezed Shane’s hand back and they exchanged a grim nod. For the fans.

“In 1937, two lovers were found dead in their home. Their friend found them when he came to return a hammer, two weeks after their presumed time of demise. They were piled one on top of each other inside their bedroom closet, dead as doornails. The doctors never were able to figure out the cause of their deaths and wrote it off as an accident. If it was an accident, then it was certainly a strange sort of accident. No one but the authorities were satisfied by the ruling.

Some said it was murder. Some said it was something far more sinister…”
He was fine. He had been worried for nothing. Just some shouting, and goofing about, and dramatic shots of them walking through the darkness while Ryan talked in his theory voice. The fact that his fingers around Shane were squeezing tight enough to hurt was mere coincidence. It was no different from their other videos.

Except for the fact that there always seemed to be something following them, a shadow dragging itself along in pursuit of Shane no matter where they were. Even with their flashlights off, it superimposed itself over the darkness, a shadow blacker than the night. It skittered behind them from one room to the other, the sound of claws tapping making Ryan jump in time with the version of himself on the screen. Shane’s hand tightened on Ryan’s, nails digging into his skin, cutting off circulation.

The Shane in the video turned around, making an amused face. “What did you see? Casper doing a jig?”

Video Ryan squinted into the darkness where Andras had disappeared. “I saw… I don’t know. It’s nothing.”

“It’s the wind. There’s nothing here.”

“Wind. Yeah.”

How had they been so stupid? Because they didn’t know. How could they have? Signs don’t add up to anything when you don’t know what you’re seeing. Hindsight is 20/20, Ryan reflected as he chewed on his thumbnail. Then why did he feel so awful?

“And to end off our investigation, we are going to attempt to sleep in the very bedroom adjacent to the closet the lovers’ bodies were found in. Because obviously, we’re not going to fit inside the closet. Not with ol’ bone stilts here.”

Ryan watched with mounting dread, unable to tear his eyes from the screen, as they approached the cataclysm.

“Hey demons! Come and possess me!”

It had been a joke. But demons didn’t “do” jokes.

He watched as a shadow seemed to skitter across the wall and straight into Shane’s back. The white curtains flapped in the breeze like a flag of surrender and Shane was coughing, the grating sound filling their ears and making the hair on the back of Ryan’s neck stand up. Andras had forced its way into Shane, and they had been too blind to notice. The coughing grew louder, Ryan’s laughter mingling with it, until he couldn’t tell who was doing what as his vision swam. It merged into something that sounded all too much like the nightmares that stalked his sleep.

Ryan tore his earbuds out of his ears with a gasp and slammed the laptop shut. He couldn’t bear to watch one second more.

He didn’t realize he had been holding his breath until he shut off the video and his lungs were heaving for air. He slowly turned to look at Shane, eyes wide as saucers. Shane was still staring at the point in the air where the video had been playing a second ago. His eyes were vacant and glassy.

“We can’t air this,” he breathed, so quiet that Ryan almost missed it. “I can’t answer a postmortem on this.”

Ryan looked back at the laptop. Oh shit, the postmortem.
He looked up to see TJ standing there, holding a tray of three coffee cups, staring at them with his mouth hanging open. Ryan realized that anyone standing there long enough to see him slam his laptop shut like it was on fire had every reason to believe they had gone certifiably insane.

“...Coffee?”

Ryan took a second to compose his face into something less... wild. “TJ, listen to me, we can’t air this week’s episode.”

TJ shut his mouth and nodded, brow furrowed. “Is there a reason...?”

“No one that I can explain, but if we let that episode go online... it’s not gonna end well. Tell them that the files got corrupted, that I spilled coffee all over the hard drives and my backups, anything. Just don’t let that episode hit the internet.”

“The boss isn’t going to like that.”

“I’ll take the fall on this, I swear. It’s a good reason. You have to trust me.”

TJ looked from Ryan, to the laptop, to Shane, who had started to run his fingers over the collar of his own shirt mechanically, again and again in an attempt to self-soothe. Ryan ran his thumb over their intertwined fingers. It didn’t take a genius to realized that something about the episode had rattled the two to their core. He didn’t think TJ had ever seen Shane look so distressed.

TJ’s face hardened from confusion to determination, and Ryan knew he had been right to trust TJ with this. He didn’t think he would have been able to muster up the strength to ask himself.

TJ gave Ryan a nod and a two fingered salute. “Aye aye captain.”

The episode never aired. They took all the data associated with it, put it on a hard drive, and burned it. It was the first time since the warehouse that Ryan had thought of fire as something good.

Shane dreamt of ice cold emptiness, and Ryan dreamt of burning. Every time they woke it felt like those first moments where Ryan’s heart had started beating again, when everything good was a paper thin dream. Though they woke in different beds and never voiced it to the other, it was the same feeling. And whoever woke up first would call the other, and they would talk until their hearts stopped pounding and they could breathe again.

“You should sleep over at my house, save me the trouble of a phone call,” Shane joked one night.

“Yeah. You’re right,” Ryan said. His voice was quiet. Serious.

“You would do that?” Shane asked, so softly that Ryan had to strain to hear him through the phone’s static.

“Yeah. Yeah, why not? Half the time one of us ends up making the trek at three in the morning anyways.”

“Okay,” said Shane in a strangled voice. Ryan smiled to himself. Shane was still learning to ask for help, but it was coming.

The next day Ryan brought a backpack with clothes, his laptop, a toothbrush, and of course, pomade- he wasn’t leaving anyone’s house without making sure his hair was presentable first- and headed over to Shane’s apartment after having pizza for dinner. They popped a bag of popcorn and
sprawled together on his couch to watch some generic cop drama. They tuned in halfway through the episode and were too lazy to rewind, so it was a little hard to follow.

During the interrogation scene Shane yawned loudly and stretched his arm so it rested against Ryan’s shoulders, pulling him forward so he was leaning against Shane’s chest.

Ryan laughed and looked up at Shane, who was grinning impishly. “The old yawn-and-stretch trick? Really? What are you, twelve?”

Shane patted Ryan’s shoulder. “Hey, it worked didn’t it?”

Ryan rolled his eyes, but shifted around so he could lay more comfortable against Shane’s chest. The fabric of his flannel shirt was soft against Ryan’s cheek. “I guess I shouldn’t have expected much better from you. I mean, when have you not acted like a twelve year old?”

“At least I’m taller than your average twelve year old.”

“This is slander. You’re slandering me.”

“Shut up and watch this guy get arrested, dwarf.”

Ryan gave a huff but obliged. He fiddled with Shane’s fingers as they watched. His arms had healed nicely since they’d returned and been able to get him proper medical care, rather than Ryan’s slapped together handiwork. A thin red line across his palm was the only sign of the attack.

“Think it’s gonna scar?” Ryan asked, running his finger across it.

“Maybe. Then we can match.” Shane pressed a kiss into his hair.

Ryan smiled against Shane’s chest and twined their fingers together. They fell asleep before the end of the episode. For once, Ryan didn’t dream.

They started sleeping over at each other’s houses; curling around each other at night and driving to work together in the mornings. It was a strange circumstance: they weren’t exactly living together, but enough of their stuff piled up in the other person’s house that they might as well have been. Occasionally they would split up to do their own thing after work but more often than not they left the office together and went home hand in hand. Ryan didn’t know when he had started to think of Shane’s apartment as home.

Ryan ended up taking Shane with him to brunch with his mom- it had become a weekly thing, a way to stay more connected than they had been before the warehouse- and when he kissed Shane on the corner of his mouth after some good natured bickering his mom just smiled and nodded knowingly. He could have sworn he heard her mutter “about time,” under her breath. Shane must have heard it too, because he laughed so loudly the people in the booth beside them glanced over at them. When he took a sip of his mimosa, there wasn’t even a trace of a wince.

The thing between them was still nebulous and unspoken but for once Ryan didn’t find himself worrying over clarity. For all he had talked about taking it slow, they fell so neatly into whatever they had that it felt like they had been together for months. It was new, and strange, and as natural as breathing. It was nice to know someone always had his back.

The nightmares didn’t stop, but whenever Ryan woke up with a scream rising in the back of his throat he focused on Shane’s soft snoring. That was enough to calm him down and send him back to sleep.
After one particularly bad nightmare, though, he flailed around violently enough to wake even Shane, who slept like a rock when there weren’t nightmares to haunt him.

“What happened, Ry?” Shane asked, raising himself to rest on his elbows. He smacked his lips together sleepily and rubbed his eyes.

“Eyes pecked out by crows while I was tied to a chair. The usual stuff.” Ryan rubbed a hand across his face and let out a cross between a sigh and a sob. “I just wish they would stop, y’know?”

Shane nodded and made a beckoning motion with his arms. “C’mer.”

Ryan rolled gratefully into Shane’s embrace. Shane rubbed soothing circles on the small of his back. Ryan clutched onto the back of Shane’s shirt and tried to steady his own breathing.

“It’s okay. You can’t force yourself to heal.” Shane’s hand moved upwards to smooth through his hair, before settling back onto his back.

“I know, I know. I just hate feeling so… helpless.” Ryan rubbed his face against Shane’s chest, breathing in his familiar scent of laundry detergent and coffee. Shane patted his back with an awkward carefulness. It couldn’t be comfortable bending his hand sideways like that, what was he thi-

Oh. He was avoiding Ryan’s scars. A quick search through Ryan’s memory showed that he had been doing it ever since Ryan had gotten them.

Ryan’s breath caught. “It’s okay, you can, ah-” he took Shane’s hand and guided it onto his shoulder blade. Onto the scar. “You can touch them.”

He let go of Shane’s hand and wrapped his arms around Shane’s chest again, clutching a bit too tightly for someone who had said “it’s okay.” He was hyperaware of Shane’s hands, warm through the thin fabric of his shirt. He wasn’t sure what he was afraid of, only that he didn’t want to be anymore.

Shane didn’t say anything, just ran his thumb soothingly up and down the length of the scar. Ryan relaxed into the touch. He wasn’t going to let something as stupid as a scar have power over him. No matter what they represented.

The bags under their eyes improved dramatically. Still, whenever Shane worked on the couches he would sometimes nod off for an hour or so, drooling all over the decorative pillows. Ryan started keeping a blanket at his desk so he could throw it over Shane when he passed out.

Shane started stockpiling dog videos for when Ryan couldn’t stop replaying the scenes from their trip over and over in his head. The distraction helped pull him out of his self imposed spiral. They got better at identifying the blankness that came over him before it got out of hand.

When editing the videos, they stopped avoiding the bits where Shane acted odd and instead gave each other a little knowing look that made Andras seem like a fun inside joke instead of a nightmare.

It was the little things that made all the difference. It was the little things that made their road trip to hell start to seem okay.

It had been three months since the warehouse when Jen rolled her chair over to where they were eating lunch, Ryan with his feet propped up on Shane’s lap, and asked, “So, are you two dating now or what?”
Ryan choked on his sandwich.

Shane turned and look at Ryan as he attempted to wipe the mustard that had exploded out of his sandwich off of his chin. “I don’t know, are we dating?” Do you want to make the decision? I don’t mind, his expression said, one eyebrow raised.

Ryan managed to keep the flip flopping of his stomach out of his voice. “Do you want to be?” No, you make it. I don’t know what goes on in your head, Ryan replied.

You’re insufferable.

Well, you’re stupid.

Jen looked back and forth between them, mouth hanging half open as she watched their silent exchange.

“Yeah, sure we’re dating,” Shane nodded and took another bite of his sandwich.

Jen nodded. “Cool.”

She pushed off of Ryan’s chair and rolled backwards to her desk, narrowly missing Freddie’s feet. Kristen forked over a five dollar bill when Jen leaned over and whispered the news. Shane followed the exchange and rolled his eyes.

Ryan looked at Shane, unable to keep a giddy grin from spreading over his face. He had known, of course, that Shane liked him, but hearing Shane say it always felt like he was hearing it for the first time all over again. Shane returned Ryan’s smile with a lopsided grin of his own.

“It’s about time, boyfriend,” Shane said.

“Now that I’m your boyfriend, does that mean you’re not allowed to get mad at me when I steal your food?”

“No way. I don’t care if you’re George Washington raised from the dead, no one eats my fries except me.”

Ryan sighed melodramatically and draped a hand over his forehead. “What’s the point, then?”

“Y’know, Ryan, I’m hurt, and quite frankly offended, that I’m nothing more than a vessel for free fries to you.” Shane looked into the distance dramatically and faked a sniffle. “I thought we had something.”

“Oh, shut up, you big goon.” Ryan kicked Shane’s leg. “You’re not just a vessel for free fries to me.”

“Really?”

Ryan nodded solemnly, although he couldn’t keep the shit eating grin from tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You’re also a vessel for free burgers.”

Shane burst out into a loud cackle. “Oh my God!” he reached over and mussed up Ryan’s hair despite Ryan’s attempts to fend him off. Admittedly, he undermined his own defense by giggling uncontrollably.

“Hey!” he protested as he patted his hair back into place. “I spent a lot of time on that!”
“My hand is sticky from your stupid hair gel stuff now. I regret everything.”

Ryan stuck his tongue out. “Divine retribution, demon boy.”

It was proof of how far they’d come that they could both laugh at that.

The days grew longer, winter turning to spring turning to summer. Nighttime stopped feeling so suffocating. The trees turned green and traffic got even worse as tourists started pouring in. They started to plan a trip to the beach.

Ryan was brushing his teeth when he noticed that the person looking back at him from the mirror had stopped being a stranger. The haunted look in his eyes had disappeared. The scars on his back still hurt sometimes but they were his. Somewhere along the way he had stopped wishing that he hadn’t burned. Because ashes made good fertilizer for better things to grow. He was whole, here, now, in this new life he had built for himself brick by painstaking brick. The new life that never would have happened if he hadn’t stepped into the Lovers’ House so long ago. He couldn’t imagine ever going back to being the old Ryan again. The only difference was now he didn’t want to.

He rinsed off his toothbrush and went to join Shane in their bed. Shane had already passed out, drooling all over the pillow. Ryan smiled and pressed a kiss on his forehead before pulling the covers over them both.

It was over, and everything had changed. But maybe, just maybe, it had changed for the better.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank my lovely beta reader, Jackie, who is an actual angel taken human form (a better angel than Zadkiel, might I add). I want to thank both google and iced coffee, as well as my laptop for not deleting all my work that one time you crashed before I had a chance to save. I want to thank Amber, for being the best friend and cheerleader ever.
I want to thank Kate, Avery and Megan for not questioning it when I read rpf of a show they’d never watched aloud to them. But most of all I want to thank everyone who has ever taken the time to write a comment, give this story a kudos, message me on tumblr, or send me an ask with incoherent screaming in it. I recognize the urls of the regulars, and I don't have enough space to thank all of you, I appreciate your support. Even if you haven’t done any of that, if you’re reading this now you are a part of the journey this story has taken. So thank you, too. For wanting to hear about what happens when Shane makes a dumb joke during a shoot. You've made it into something beautiful.

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