Danny Phantom, The Lost Arc

by dannyphanwriter

Summary

*Dreams can be bittersweet, but reality is where the true nightmares lie.*

Vlad Master, resident billionaire, mayor, and family friend of the Fentons. Or at least that was what people saw at face value. Daniel Fenton knew different. How would he describe his archnemesis?

Perhaps a creepy middle-aged guy with the hots for his mother and want to kill his dad…? A half-ghost with a serious evil streak? *Villian*?

*A bonified grade-A fruit-loop.*

The man *was* his self-appointed enemy and the scourge of Amity Park!

Now secrets and plots are coming to light and changing everything. Nothing is as it seems. Years of preconceived theories and what he thought of as fact are blown to the winds. Old enemies turned allies and new monsters, ones that Daniel would never have imagined in his
wildest dreams, are on the prowl.

The past is coming, the demons closing in…

Time is running out and one question remains….

Can the Fentons and family piece together the segments before it's too late?
Vladimir Masters was weathering a midlife crisis. Not that he ever would admit to such a problem when he had such a carefully crafted persona to keep up... No, this little crisis was something he had become adept at hiding for a little more than two years now. At present, it had been almost four months since the failed ‘cloning’ incident, as Daniel called it. Chuckling bitterly at his desk Vladimir paused in thought. He didn’t like reminiscing on those events. He had lost more than Daniel would presumably ever know during that time period and Vladimir was still coping with the emotional stress that came from that particular act of desperation.

Grasping the bottle back to his face he took another swig. The ocher liquid splashed greedily against his jaw. Now the mayor of Amity Park, he was having serious issues retaining his narcissistic personality for the boy. The fire for his resentment just wasn’t there anymore. In reality, it never had been. He never detested Jack Fenton. He had been his best friend, and most staunch confident for nearly two years in college. Vlad could never see someone who had comforted him, supported him and shared his problems with him equally, as an enemy. He did; however, carry anger and grief in spades. Jack had abandoned him after the accident….so had Maddie. Vlad was hurting, but he didn’t hate the Fentons. He never had. He loathed himself.

It’s easy to pretend to hate someone and plot from a distance. Their proximity to him, however, was starting to cripple the resolve for his little web of lies. Worse yet, Vladimir was becoming overly attached to the fat oath’s son.

The only two natural hybrids in the world, and they were beating each other up under false pretenses. Vlad groaned and struck his head against his desk. The whiskey wasn’t helping like it ordinarily did. He was second-guessing his motives again, ripping apart his carefully stitched and clumsily taped resolve back into fractured pieces.

Vlad’s fingers drummed his desk in worry. Sitting back up he glared at his hand’s nervous gestures. Perceiving his emotions out in the open was more than a cause for frustration. Angry, he ceased the movements and flung his now fisted hand hard against the mahogany. The closer he became to the Fentons the more his locked emotions became clear, and he HATED himself for it.

“Why should I care if that welp disappeared? He’s sixteen! It’s not like I care for that insufferable brat!!!” Glaring at the bottle in his left hand he took another swig. In his head, the thoughts lamented. ‘Since when did you NOT care Vladimir? Isn’t this all for him? For them?’

Vlad sat the whiskey bottle down on the desk and angrily glared at the almost mocking bottle. Yes... he was overly attached by this point. He wrung his hands in frustration. Enraged at his own thoughts Vladimir’s hand wrapped around the abandoned whiskey bottle and hurled it into the adjacent wall with enough force to crack the mansion’s office wall. The glass shattered and fell against the floor with a heavy crack. Chestnut paneling darkened in color where the remaining liquor had fallen. Angry, and fairly drunk, Vlad slouched in his chair.

“Why the heck did things have to be this way?” Gnawing his lip in frustration he brought his hand to the bridge of his nose. ‘Because I am a deplorable liar…’ He groaned. Sometimes portraying a villain led to more serious morality issues than others. He could hope and trust in Daniel’s abilities, or he could intervene. Vlad’s eyes saddened.

‘It’s already been a week... If you don’t act now it will be too late…’ Getting up clumsily from his office chair, Vlad calmly called his secretary and informed her of his needed absence from the office for a few days. The dull click of the reservoir signified the end of his hastily made one a.m. call to
The woman was odd but hard-working and had never ceased to question his schedules or tendencies. With everything in order, he began re-buttoning his shirt before sighing and casually walking toward the door. A sharp stab of pain in his heel redirected his attention. He had forgotten all about the glass shattered across the wooden floor. Wincing, he reached down and gently grasped the shard that had become embedded in his barefoot only for another sharper and more excruciating pain to blossom through his body. Losing his balance he staggered into the end table adjacent to the Jack Daniel’s remnants. Something hot had scorched his hand when he had removed the shard. In his drunken aggravated state though he had failed to notice its source.

“DAMN IT!” He flinched remembering his therapy and rolling his eyes corrected himself, “Butter Biscuits.” Looking over the floor his gaze trailed to the wall outlet near the booze disaster. Grumbling in frustration, he stood and crouched down to look at the mess. “Just great I fried the damned outlet.” Grabbing his head and standing he berated himself. ‘What was the point of going to anger management classes when I was younger if a couple of bottles of liquor negate everything?!’

Turning from the mess his dark brow twitched in agitation. ‘This week isn’t off to a good start….’

Steel-blue eyes took one last glance at the office and frowning he walked into the hallway and shifted into Plasmius. There was immeasurable pain as the dark black rings expanded from his torso and activated his ghost attributes. The pain wasn’t entirely new. He had attributed it to a relapse in his genetics, similar to the forced reconstruction of his genome when it was first spliced with his ghost half in college. Really, what was he supposed to think? His body strained against the ghost plasma that morphed him. As the rings faded Vlad’s blue-tinged skin, spiked ebony hair and vampire-like appearance came into fruition.

Taking in a tremulous breath as Vlad Plasmius, he absently stared at his right gloved hand. He was having more issues than he could honestly admit to his friends…. Clasping his hand closed he floated intangible into the downstairs lab and opened the portal. The swirling familiar green shifted and danced, lighting the walls in neon sickly hues common in most horror films. Furrowing his brow he calmly stepped between the doorway connecting the two dimensions. Putting a gloved hand to his forehead he floated shakily for a moment to try and stop the spinning in his skull. The booze wasn’t going to help him any tonight… “I really should learn restraint when it comes to that garbage…..”

Flying through the weightless murk of green and the varied assortment of doorways and landmasses that hovered around him he grumbled under his breath. “Grabbing a certain ghost and interrogating him over Daniel shouldn’t be too difficult.” His eyes rolled in annoyance. “It's about time I paid a visit to the Box Ghost.”

Reaching Pandora’s domain Vlad hastily cloaked his breathing and heart rate. Unlike Daniel, revealing he was half ghost carried way more risk… Looking at the maze-like assortment of hedges and Greek architecture Vladimir’s eyebrow twitched in annoyance. The Box Ghost was almost as bad as Klemper and an extended conversation would surely tax his patience for the night.

Floating into the maze, Vlad quickly composed himself. From what he had heard in Amity, the Box Ghost was the last real battle Daniel had fought before disappearing. Granted, the pathetic cardboard obsessed fool was harmless, but he had been the last to see Daniel.

Easily walking past the Cyclops and the three-headed mongrel patrolling the grounds he found the blue specter. Eyes narrowing he casually addressed him, “I see your petty stunt in Amity has left you a common gardener.” Startled, the box ghost froze from his labors and spun around. Seeing Vladimir’s crimson eyes and the subtle crackle of condensing plasma from Vladimirs palms, he squeaked and dropped his hedge clippers onto the black grass.
The ghost timidly lifted his hands up in his customary greeting, “Beware..?” Vlad face palmed himself in annoyance and began asking the ghost about what he needed to know.

“Hello, Lawrence, I came here to ask you about a certain someone…”

The Box Ghost gulped at his name being used so casually. Typically, real names were reserved for only two things. Close friends or serious, often life-altering situations. The types of situations with severely negative and often painful implications. Looking at Vladimir’s expression he was willing to bet this was the latter of the two. Fastening his eyes fearfully with Plasmius, he meekly asked, “Um…whom do you want to talk about?”

Without even a pause of deliberation, Plasmius answered. “Danny Phantom.” His voice echoed threateningly to Lawrence, “The boy is a part of my new territory and as of your little incident no one has seen the brat!”

The Box Ghost’s eyes widened at the news. The boy had been there observing his labors around a week ago? Lawrence's nose squished in frustration. Vlad’s black boot tapped above him as he floated, waiting for the information. Gulping, Lawrence quickly blurted. “We haven’t seen him since he left last Sunday? I think? I mean, human time is different depending on what area of the ghost zone you’re in!”

Vlad’s eyebrows furrowed.”So, I am guessing you have no clue which direction the little monster left by?” Plasmius frowned angrily.

“He said he was going to the timeless zone to check in with a friend before he departed.” The Box Ghost shuffled against the abandoned hedge he had trimmed nervously.

At this information, Vlad instantly felt a shiver go up his spine. Unlike typical ghosts, some didn’t establish their homes in a singular space and would often, instead, stand by secluded areas until prey or a worthy meal came by. The timeless zone was no exception to that. If anything? It probably had many more demons than the younger hybrid could ever imagine. Vlad groaned internally. He was supposed to instruct Daniel on these things... He was the older of the two of them and more experienced. His little game was now causing more harm than good. Clockwork had been hinting for some time that Daniel would have to be taught formally by him about the nuances of their roles. Vladimir was more than apprehensive about the idea. After playing a villain for over a year, he had no doubt Daniel hated him with every fiber of his being. That was the plan, wasn't it?

‘This is my fault... The boy has no clue how the ghost zone really works…’

“For your sake Box Ghost, or more accurately for your afterlife’s sake Lawrence, I suggest you keep our little chat and my appearance here boxed up.”

The box ghost’s head bobbed like a plastic toy in response to both Plasmius’ threat and the menacing purple and pink energy saturating around the vampire ghost’s hands. “Yeeesss sir!” He bumbled and bowed.

Vlad turned and with a whirl of his white cloak vanished in a poof of pink and scarlet mist. Reappearing next to Pariah’s keep, he stumbled and placed a hand to his head. “Hmmm... good, Fright Knight’s sword is still sealing this dump.” Feeling dizzy he leaned against the green shield. Teleporting not only deprived him of oxygen but also energy. Looking around and seeing no phantoms or spirits near the abandoned castle he temporarily turned human and glanced at his watch. Five a.m. flashed in bright fluorescent green against the silver. ‘It’s almost the same color as that little brats ey-‘ Vlad cut off the thought. Annoyed with his drunken thoughts he shifted back into Plasmius. The split and sudden pain seemed to only multiply with the booze drumming against his cranium. Sighing, he absently teleported near Clockwork’s and began exploring the area for the
Danny Phantom was having the time of his life. Vlad was out of his hair permanently. The idiot, after trying to kill Danni, had threatened the entire planet with the ultimatum he and he alone could save everyone in exchange for vast amounts of money and complete control over the world. Flying through the air Daniel laughed. “The megalomaniac, narcissistic Fruit Loop had it coming..” To top it off he had revealed his alter ego to the entire planet before threatening everyone. Daniel paused in his flight and looked up to the stars. ‘Wait. Vlad always took great lengths to keep the fact that he was a half ghost hidden… why flaunt it?’ He shook his head to dispel the thought. He couldn’t possibly be thinking about that space hermit. ‘I mean... Six months have passed. Vlad is probably dead by now.’ Daniel’s green eyes saddened slightly. Looking down at Amity he smiled bitterly. It was a little late to lament his arch enemy and what cause did he have to worry? Vlad Masters had been a manipulative villain to the bitter end. Looking at the moon’s position in the sky he groaned. He was late for his date with Sam. Flipping in the air he spun downward toward the park. Tucker was Mayor. Sam and him were going steady. His parents had fully accepted him, as had every other human being in the world. The ghost’s in the ghost zone didn’t hate him anymore. He was content…... His heart shuttered…

He paused mid-flight and, feeling dizzy, turned human for a split-second and began plummeting to the ground. Catching himself he expertly forced a shift back into ghost form. The sickening jolt hadn’t been the first. They had become more and more frequent as the month’s dragged on. Floating back up into the sky he stroked his silver hair tiredly. Press stress and his hero duties must have been causing his powers to fluctuate. Popularity did that to a person. He grinned widely at the thought and sped his flight to Sam up, unaware of the dark shadow blending into the sky above him, spying and lurking in wait.

Daniel also had neglected to piece a few facts together about his supposed happily ever after…. Space rock...namely an asteroid the size of a small moon, would have taken years to reach earth from Saturn and not merely a few days. Being electrocuted to death wouldn’t have negated his powers and being blasted by every ghost he knew wouldn't have given his abilities back. Turning the ghost repelling asteroid intangible wouldn't have worked. The rock, if it existed, would have simply swatted the energy into the cosmos and shattered the planet like sugar glass…. But what did a happy sixteen-year-old really know? He was content, and everything was perfect for him. No enemies, no fear, no hate.

White hair glistening in the night, Daniel danced joyously between the clouds. With a deep sigh of gratitude, he beamed at the voice below him and sprung downward in delight.

Dreams have a funny habit of seeming perfect, that is until we finally wake up.
Something was off.

Vladimir, having floated through the timeless zone for several hours, was starting to feel weird. A sudden shift in the air around him caused him to cough uncontrollably. There was an unnatural warm searing pain in his chest. Feeling a burning heat flaring from the center of his abdomen, he grasped a hand to the spot in agony and winced. The other hand shot to his mouth in confusion. A narrow sliver of coiled gray smoke had wrestled its way through his fangs and was lazily dissipating in front of his line of sight.

Still recovering from his whiskey bender, Plasmius angrily admonished himself. “Note to self, half ghosts should REALLY drink in moderation.” He frowned. The feeling was unnatural to him and even in his drunken state, he had an inclination that the smoke was a reaction to something in his general vicinity. Pausing he closed his eyes and focused his hearing. His pointed ears twitched and his eyes opened in surprise. He could hear breathing nearby. Reluctantly and cautiously he followed the sound through several warped and congealed masses of green matter until he came to the source. He froze instantly.

A vast, shaded archipelago floated ominously next to him. Purple torrents of poisoned water dripped and dissipated from the island’s waterfall-like protrusions. Inky, shadowy clouds of mist danced and swayed through the spectral foliage. Clearing his head of any doubt he phased through the impenetrable black fog and into the isle’s trees. Seeing a black blossom with red stripes curling around the stem Vlad froze. Touching his glove to the bloom warily, he inspected the plant.

A look of recognition blossomed across his features and his eyebrows twitched in annoyance. ‘I send Skulker and Fright Knight away and end up stumbling onto Nocturn’s isle myself? If that isn’t the most ironic…’ Growling angrily, he withdrew his hand from the bloom and focused back to the task at hand.

Nocturn was fairly elusive, and Vladimir from his extensive studies knew what to expect. Vlad tensed as he quietly looped around the blooms on the forest floor. The last thing he needed was for a sleep demon to get ahold of him. He suffered enough nightmares and being fed on by a dream mahr wouldn’t help his already sleepless nights. ‘Okay, Vladimir…think…you’re completely drunk, but you do possess some knowledge, right?’ He challenged himself as stepped over the thorny stems. ‘Okay…’ He breathed in deeply and narrowed his eyes for a moment in concentration. ‘Nocturn… he’s an Old Norse ghoul who consumes life from dreams. A mårt.’ Vlad’s brow furrowed. ‘He’s reclusive and is fond of hunting people who can’t defend themselves or have heavy self-doubt.’ Vlad opened his eyes and, rolling them, continued making his way deeper into the island. ‘Therefore, technically, I am on the menu…lovely…’ Looking around, his ears twitched animalistically toward the sound of the breathing. It was labored and pained. His red eyes glinted with worry.

‘Focus Vlad! If you step on any of these blasted thorn snares you won’t be able to help anyone…’ He reprimanded and pulled his boot back from the black tendril that had started moving towards the slight warmth emanating from his body. ‘I assume Skulker and Fright Knight neglected the timeless land when they initiated their search because of rumors about Clockwork…foolish ghosts and their superstitions…’ Vlad’s red eyes flashed, and he froze. There was currently a heartbeat to accompany the labored breathing, and it was sporadic and faint. Vladimir almost would have confused it for one of the streams disrupted nearby by debris.

Pushing his way through the lush black grass and underbrush, he made his way to a spacious field-like clearing. The grass was warped and disjointed around the center and seemed to wave of its own
accord, despite there being no wind. ‘Banshee’s Clover?’ Vlad glared at the glowing purple flowers gently waving around in the grass. ‘Okay...you’ve discovered its feeding ground Vladimir...now what?’

Even as he surmised it... he knew what he would have to do. The heartbeat and breathing seemed to be coming from a small pile of rocks in the middle of the clearing about ninety feet away from him. The black and scarlet blossoms favored by Nocturn gently swayed around the outcropping. Looking around and not detecting any traces of the dream demon Vlad strode forward only to gape in shock as he came closer to the blooms.

The mound, as he formerly thought, possessed white-gloved hands entrapped among the flowers. He had found Daniel. Teleporting forward he quickly reached the unconscious teen. Still in phantom form, the sixteen-year-old had not needed nourishment or common necessities to survive in the ghost zone. ‘He should have turned human...What’s-?’ Vlad paled as he fully took in Daniel’s condition. A helmet-like array of blooms looped and curved around his eyes, blocking any outside visuals. The stems and their thorny protrusions laced around his unconscious form and were slowly snuggling into his chest. Green ectoplasm and carnal blood freely flowed from the wound only for the ghost zone’s ambient energy to feed Daniel’s body and resurface the flesh.

“JESUS CHRIST?! Is Nocturn trying to feed off of his comatose state and his core?!” His panicked voice seemed to reverberate and echo in the clearing. Vlad’s hand promptly shot to his mouth. Expecting his drunken foolishness to have alerted the dream demon, Vlad grimaced in anticipation of a confrontation only to be met with stifling silence. The sole things resonating in the clearing were the sounds of Vlad’s now frantic heart and Daniel’s failing one paired with their breathing.

Nocturn had found a better and more sustainable food source than his usual query. He had grown weary of sifting through temporary portals in hospital morgues and feeding off of the comatose or frail poltergeists. Why risk searching out meals away from the zone when a simple substitution would feed him indefinitely? And so he had decided to capture a more coveted prize, the now widely known Danny Phantom.

Vlad, wasting no time, growled angrily and began trying to figure out how to coax Daniel safely away from the plant tendrils without injuring him. Ultimately deciding on a course of action he used his hands to produce a thin, concentrated blast of ectoplasmic energy. Hovering the beam next to the boy, he directed it at the roots of the plants ensnaring Daniel. The plants writhed and flinched away at the violent heat and shriveled once they became detached at their bases. Seeing no more possible tendril-like appendages on the boy, Vladimir gently shook his shoulders to try and rouse him from his ghost induced stupor.

In panicked whispers, he addressed the bleeding half ghost, “Daniel? Wake up for the love of God! We have to...” He was cut off by a white-gloved hand that shot up in his direction. The blast cracked into his ribs and flung him backward in the grass. Vlad moaned. His hand limply held onto the side of his chest that was practically shot through. Daniel floated above him menacingly. And then, plummeting toward Vlad’s dazed form, kicked him into the trees.

Danny’s date with Sam had been going great. After eating at the Nasty Burger in town they had leisurely set-up a blanket on a hill overlooking Amity Park. Not a cloud obscured the flawless crystalline sky and the constellations twinkled despite the lights from the city below them. Sam was fidgeting with a small ring on her finger and blushing next to him. “So which one is Orion again?” She questioned curiously. Daniel smiled and pointed upward.

“Orion is the one with the three bright stars. See that’s his belt. If you follow the dots, you will be
able to make out Betelgeuse. It’s that bright star that forms his armpit. After that? You can keep following the line east along the hunter’s arm to see his bow.”

Sam nodded enthusiastically. “It’s a shame we can’t see Scorpio this time of year.”

Daniel nodded absently. “Yeah, winter does that…Hey, Sam?” He turned to her deep purple eyes and asked curiously. “Why the interest in Scorpio?”

She pondered this absently. “It’s tragic, isn’t it? In mythology, Scorpio slays Orion, the great hunter, because of a trick…” Daniel raised an eyebrow at this morbid remark. Seeing his face Sam laughed. “It’s my Zodiac sign so I read up on the myth…” Daniel furrowed his brow. ‘Why’s she lying? Her birthday falls around August…” Daniel’s blue eyes flashed for a second to radioactive green only to turn back to blue as Sam reached over to his face and kissed him.

Blushing profusely he nervously averted his eyes, “Um, was that a fake-out make-out?” Smiling widely she leaned forwards across the blanket and gathered a soda from her backpack. “You tell me, dream boy? Was it?” He blushed and put a hand behind his neck nervously… She saw his expression and laughed jubilantly. Leaning back towards him, she secured her arm under his jaw. “Why not test your theory?” Smiling he leaned forward to kiss her only for a sudden jolt to shake everything. Vlad Plasmius floated above them threateningly. Daniel’s blue eyes flashed green in rage and shock. ‘NO WAY. HE’S DEAD. HE CAN’T BE ALIVE.”

“Sam! Stay back I have this!” Shifting he turned toward where Sam had been sitting only to pale. An overturned grape soda bottle limply lay across the blanket. Vlad laughed hauntingly from above him. The noise fluctuated and warped like a broken radio signal. Flying upward toward Vlad, Daniel charged his hands. Blasting the figure in the shoulder he watched as Plasmius faded and rippled from view.

“A duplicate or?” Daniel floated warily in the cold winter air. A startled scream from behind him jarred him out of his ponderings. Another Plasmius was suspending Sam by the hood of her purple flannel jacket some forty feet above the ground. Daniel’s vivid green eyes widened in horror.

Vlad snapped through the underbrush and trees with a sickening cracking sound. Winded, he shakily crawled away from the spectral tree that he had snapped in half from the force of his body slamming into it. Coughing up ectoplasm he numbly stared at the gaping gash that extended from his left pectoral muscles all the way down to his lower ribs. Green dripped lazily from the wound and hastily ate at the singed fabric. The teen wasn’t in control of his power levels.

‘Ow.’ Shakily getting to his feet he experienced a moment of temporary dizziness and almost slumped back into the red and black foliage face first. Gloved hands had whirled to his knees and supported him before his face could reacquaint itself with the island. Any other day and Vlad would have been able to intercept the boy’s attacks but today… well, at present he was for lack of a better word fully inebriated. Hearing a branch snap nearby, Vladimir paled.

“Oh, fudge…” The billionaire gasped before being kicked yet again in the wounded area by the teenager. Now back on the ground, he struggled to take in a decent gulp of air after being winded. Wincing in pain he looked up at Daniel. And then it clicked. They weren’t alone, and Daniel was definitely ‘not at home.’ The blank green orbs that locked on Plasmius’ bleeding and struggling form stared at him but saw nothing. They were lifeless.

The boy was sleepwalking to Nocturn’s whims. ‘… Well… this can’t possibly get any worse Plasmius…’ Standing shakily back up, Vlad’s red eyes darted around the boy trying to discover an
opening.’ You could always blast him?’ Vlad’s hands charged and then limply fell back to his sides. ‘Then again...there’s no guarantee that wouldn’t do more harm than good.’ Vlad snarled at his lack of options. Grimacing, he bit his lip and turned intangible. Phasing through Daniel, he swiftly turned solid and proceeded to shake the boy in an attempt to wake him up and sever the connection. Flinging the boy around to confront him he shook him even more roughly.

“WAKE UP DAMN IT!!!” Plasmius all but slapped the teen. A glimmer of something sparked in Daniel’s green eyes. Whatever granule of accomplishment Vlad had gotten in his bleeding and drunken state immediately dissipated a few seconds later when another fierce, searing pain ripped through his abdomen. Daniel had shot him again. Knees buckling to the ground Vladimir struggled to keep his red eyes coherent. “…I hate my job…” He half coherently mumbled.

Daniel could feel his heart stop in his chest. A large tearing sound echoed through the frigid air. Sam’s hood was ripping. Plasmius grinned broadly at the sound. Sam’s hands desperately latched onto his gloved hands in an attempt to prevent herself from plummeting. Her round eyes widened in terror and her ebony-stained lips widened into a scream.

“PLASMIUS! DON’T!” Daniel’s panicked voice ripped through the tension and suddenly everything shook again. The entire world seemed to spin and fluctuate around the three of them. A violent blast aimed at his head shifted his attention back to Vlad. The ghost’s grip on Sam’s hood was now reduced to a lone hand. The other arm was aimed at Daniel and readied to blast him again.

A peculiar muffled noise seemed to reverberate around him.

“WA…UP!” Daniel’s neon eyes widened, and he floated apprehensively, but now puzzled, across from the still evilly grinning older half-ghost.

“Did you just say ‘Was’ up?” It was Vladimir’s voice surely, but the billionaire would never utter something so tactless. In reply to the question, Plasmius leisurely lifted up Sam’s still struggling form in front of Daniel. “DANNY? I’M SCARED!” Sam’s voice pierced through Daniel’s question, and he extended his hands up in front of his face. “Fruit Loop ...please...don’t.She’s not involved in this…”

Vlad’s face contorted in rage. “Not involved? Dear boy, she’s just as much to blame as you are!” Sam’s fingerless gloves latched desperately onto Vlad’s black ones. Scuffing at her attempts to stabilize herself he looked into Daniel’s eyes and smiled. “The world’s hero, huh? Tell me little Badger… you can top what? One hundred and thirty miles per an hour in your current form? I know you’re bad at math, so I’ll make this simple Daniel. If I drop her from this distance would you be able to make it in time?”

He paused and shook Sam’s dangling form to emphasize the point and the hood ripped even more. Sam’s black mascara trailed down her face from her tears. Vlad’s smile morbidly stretched across his features. And then he let go of Sam.

Her form stayed suspended for a split second in mid-air and then her ebony hair tousled up as she began falling. Daniel immediately dove to her. ‘I can make it!’ He could practically touch her.

And then the world shook and fluctuated again. Daniel could feel his heart constrict, and his powers fluctuate. When everything stopped spinning Daniel’s eyes widened in anger and grief. Sam’s body lay limply against the pavement where she had fallen. Her indigo, gray eyes stared into the sky unable to see. Tears snaked across Daniel’s face and his hand immediately shot upward and blasted Plasmius square in the chest.
Vlad, still struggling to stay coherent could detect tepid water dripping onto his face. Puzzled, he locked his eyes up to Daniel's face and froze. Danny Phantom was crying. Vladimir's crimson eyes widened in horror. Choking against the now iron-rich human blood and static-filled ectoplasm in his mouth, Vlad whispered, “Little badger...it's just a nightmare...wake-up...”

Daniel's tears seemed to only grow stronger. A breeze rustled through the grass and around Daniel, whipping his snow-white hair to and fro. A hand latched to Vlad’s shoulder and hefted him up.

The boy's eyes, still distraught, hauntingly contrasted with the smile that played across his lips. 'He’s feeding on him from the inside...Think...Think damn it!' Vlad dully gripped the boy's white-gloved hand in his own ebony one. 'Skulker is going to annihilate me when he finds out about this little ordeal...’ Swallowing nervously Vlad turned intangible and forcefully possessed Daniel's body.

Daniel's body convulsed and flashed red for a moment at the intrusion. Crimson and deepest black fought for control in his unconscious eyes. Vlad, now suspended in Daniel’s body could feel the crippling lattice-like fog rolling over him. “DANIEL!!” Seeing a segmented part of Daniel's subconscious netted in REM sleep Vladimir quickly fused his consciousness into the portal like void. The world seemed to ripple and pulsate and a dazzling flash of brilliant green light temporarily blinded Vlad. When he opened his eyes, the sound of agonized screaming from Daniel jostled his consciousness. Daniel was lifting a young girl’s head in his arms and cradling her against himself. His body racked with grief, he shook against himself. Grimacing, Vladimir stumbled forward and seeing her lifeless eyes he froze. He could feel his guts twist and turn at the sight.

‘What type of hell verse did I just stumble into?! NO WONDER HE BLASTED ME!’ Vlad’s gloved hand desperately latched against his still freely bleeding torso. He was feeling faint. The use of his abilities in his state wasn’t going to be easy. He was the one possessing Daniel any damage made to his temporal form would most certainly transfer to his corporeal body when he returned to the external world again. He could already feel Nocturn’s presence warping his resolve and his thoughts. Daniel’s screams ripped Vlad from his ponderings, and he painfully began making his way towards the teen. “....Daniel? Are you alright?”

Daniel’s body stiffened and the sobbing stopped. Vlad’s red eyes flashed with concern. Clutching the hand from his wounded chest, he reached toward the boy only to feel himself being flung back into yet another tree. “YOU KILLED HER YOU BASTARD!”

Daniel’s hands continued blasting and his green eyes flashed wildly. The blasts were sporadic and fluctuate in intensity and density. Vlad’s form crumbled and fell face-first into the grass. His black-gloved hand numbly dug into the ground as the assault continued. ‘Shield... have to shield...’A weak pink dome shot up to protect Vlad from the blasts only for the sudden exertion to drain his now heavily bruised and bloody body of valuable energy. The boy's blasts internally weren't as fierce, but they did produce sizeable damage. After a few moments, Vlad started to slip and faint. His head dully hit against the ground and the pink shield shattered and broke. Daniel, seeing Plasmius unmoving, quickly ran forward to him. Vlad’s wrist moved numbly as he attempted to crawl away only for a white boot to slam into his back and plunge him back into the ground. Vladimir screamed in agony as his chest was pressed into the frozen earth.

Turning Vlad over with his foot, the teenager glared. Daniel’s glare, however, turned to a look of puzzlement as his focus landed on the older hybrid’s rapidly bleeding chest. He was certain his ectoblasts hadn’t caused that much damage. Vlad’s red eyes dully locked with Daniel’s as he was lifted up. Daniel’s neon green orbs, still grief-stricken, narrowed at Vlad. Lifting up one of his hands from Vlad’s neck, he charged it and rammed it point black against Vlad’s stomach. Vlad screamed in
agony as Daniel lifted him up higher by the nape of his neck. Crimson eyes teared and his hands numbly tried to fight the grip depriving his consciousness of clarity.

After a few moments, his hands began going limp. Vlad struggled through the clinched fingers around his throat to address the teen. “......Badger...wake-up...” Daniel’s hand tightened slightly. Blood dripped down Vladimir’s jaw. “....Wake up...for Christ’s sake...Daniel...” Tightening his grip further and hearing the low gurgle from the adult, inhuman darkness consumed Daniel’s form and a wicked smile morphed onto his face. Placing his other hand around Vlad’s throat, he charged his hands and began burning his neck. Vlad’s body numbly writhed against the burning and his eyes began to try and close. ‘Damn it…’

A movement from behind Daniel prompted him out of his pained stupor. The girl’s body had morphed and shifted into a gray shadow adorned with compact stars. Its red eyes gleamed wickedly as it stared at Vladimir’s injured form. Lifting his arm up weakly Vlad blasted the creature that had previously been disguising as the girl. Daniel’s eyes widened at the barely conscious half-ghost and the inhuman darkness snapped and faded from his body. What the blazes had his arch-enemy just fired at?!

Glancing behind them, Daniel paled. A lumbering shadow hissed and flailed as the blast made contact with its chest. The world shook and seemed to crack around them. As soon as the shadow collapsed everything faded to black.

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Now back on the floating isle Vlad desperately gasped for air. The ghost zone’s cold dry atmosphere stung at his chest. Red had started dripping through the green ectoplasm more profusely. His ghost form was weakening too much to differentiate the shifts between his living blood and his spectral form. ‘Well, this is just peachy!’ Seeing Nocturn’s sprawled carcass across from him he immediately sprang back to his feet.

Daniel’s limp body lay between the two of them. In a pop of pink, Vlad latched on to Daniel and teleported him a reasonable distance away. Popping back to Nocturn he cracked his knuckles. The martyr, now dazed from being knocked back into the ghost zone from Daniel, was moaning and flickering spastically without its food source. A gaping hole through its torso leaked green onto the black grass. The blades guzzled it up greedily. Stepping forward, Plasmius latched his hand under the ghost’s jaw. It hissed angrily and stared into his red eyes with malice and killing intent. Vladimir glanced at his chest and smirked before casually glaring right back into the specter’s equally red eyes. “You really should have stayed in hiding Nocturn…god knows this has damned you.”

Nocturn’s jaw unlatched and his dagger-like fangs extended and exposed themselves. In ghost speak he snarled, “You’re already half out of it! What makes you think I am just going to-” At this, Vladimir smiled wickedly and casually tore off the ebony glove from his right hand with his teeth. Nocturn paled. “You’re the-!”

Vlad charged the hand and knocked it into the nightmare’s jaw, cutting off his sentence. “Shhhhh. The boy’s sleeping. We wouldn’t want him to hear this…” A bubble of white energy and pink sparks encased the compact area. Vlad rolled his neck and still holding Nocturn grinned devilishly. In ghost speak, he lamented. “You just had to pursue my future prodigy didn’t you?” He lifted the ghost into one arm and teleporting above him spiraled his leg right into Nocturn’s bleeding chest. Nocturn realizing he was in dire straights turned intangible only for Plasmius’ hand to latch on to his immaterial form and electrocute him back into reality. “You know… it’s a shame ghosts and demons don’t possess bones. I almost wanted you to know just how painful that really felt.” Vlad snarled. Latching his hand under the ghost’s robes, he pitched him back into the ground and began wailing on him with his bare hands. Five or ten minutes passed with Plasmius just charging and discharging
his hands against the ghoul.

Nocturn hissed and thrashed under his grip. A taloned hand ripped into Vlad’s chest and slashed deeply into the large gashes Daniel had carved into him. Seeing his condition wasn’t favorable for a long confrontation Vlad charged his right hand. It pulsed and warped with a pale white mist. Purplish sparks shot from around his fingers and danced around the palm. Straightening his blue taloned hand, he rammed it into Nocturn’s core. The ghost screamed and crumpled in on itself, fading into black mist as its core imploded. Breathing heavily, Vlad grasped onto his right hand as it burned and pulsed. Grimacing, he summoned a black glove from his spectral energy and re-covered the limb. Standing back up he felt the rings around his chest attempting to transform him back human. He had exhausted his resources for the night. Fighting the transformation rings he quickly walked over to Daniel and picked him up.

‘Well, little badger… I think it’s time we brought you home…’ Holding the sixteen-year-old tightly to his wounded chest, Vladimir teleported back to his portal’s location in the Ghost Zone. Vladimir’s spectral form immediately fizzled out of existence as he stepped into his basement. Without the ghost zone feeding Plasmius’ injured body, the rings simply popped around him and cut it off forcefully in order to redirect energy to his healing. Stumbling, he began falling and he grimaced as he redirected the impact to his back in order to avoid waking up Daniel.

‘Damn it.’ The wounds he had sustained from both Daniel’s physical form and his subconscious form dripped hauntingly through his formerly white shirt. Placing his palm to Daniel’s neck, he sighed somewhat in relief. His heartbeat was stronger. Worriedly he inspected Daniel’s pale form. The boy’s white t-shirt flashed into existence as his own thin frame shifted back human. As the bright white rings faded out Vlad felt his throat catch. A large bleeding circle was carved into the center of his chest.

‘Damn it.’ Ignoring his own state of disrepair, he gently laid Daniel onto the floor. Looking around he growled. The dim light made it practically impossible to see the full extent of Daniel’s injuries. ‘I can’t go looking for medical supplies. My ghost powers are practically toast.’ Vlad’s hands were shaking as he elevated Daniel up slightly off of the floor and lamented his own stupidity.

Tearing off Daniel’s shirt and creating strips from the fabric, he began trying to patch the minor. The boy moaned at the pressure. Daniel’s chest continued bleeding through the hastily made t-shirt bandages Vladimir had fashioned and the adult clucked in agitation. Yanking off his own shirt, he grimaced as the blood dripped down his chest began pooling against his pants. Dizzy, he angrily began tearing off the bloody remnants and straightening the fabric so that it would passably conceal Daniel’s wound. Shrouding it around Daniel, he quickly tied off the torn sleeves at the shoulder and hefted the boy into his arms. Vlad could feel himself slipping under from blood loss.

Vlad’s eyes flashed red as he forced a teleportation against the wishes of his own body. The summer air stung against his bare chest. It was night, meaning he had been gone from Amity for twenty-four hours. Placing the boy on the doorstep, he collapsed against the brick wall and shakily tolled the bell. Dull footsteps could be heard approaching from within the home. Straightening himself against the wall, he took one last fleeting glance at the teenager and teleported back to his manor.

Doubling over in pain, he stumbled and fell to the floor. He gasped as he felt the darkness engulf him and his fatigued body slipped into a troubled slumber. His ghost-enhanced cells immediately went to work resurfacing his torn and bleeding flesh. Several times throughout the night the crimson morphed and fluctuated to green ectoplasm in an act of preservation. Ectoplasm, as the thicker of the two substances acted much like a coagulant and by extension, was needed at the moment by Vlad’s human form. Survival coaxed the dimensional shifts out of necessity, starving oxygen and depleting spectral energy in spades.
Before the sun came up both the ghost and human energies stored in his body dissipated and faded. His chest, for the most part, remained wounded. Vlad stirred slowly from the stone. The early morning illuminated the crimson splattered and pooled across the white herringbone tile. Moaning, he slowly brought himself to a kneeling position. Using the island as support, he straightened himself up to stand on his bare feet. His bangs flopped into his face, partially obscuring his red eyes, as he held onto his chest. Making his way to the downstairs bathroom, he inspected his wounds carefully in the mirror. Too weak to shield or cloak his scars, he simply sighed. He hated his old wounds and the fact he couldn’t conceal them ticked him off slightly. Furrowing his brow, he casually duplicated and began patching himself up. While he wrapped his hands and applied gauze and salve to his chest the clone began unwrapping the bandage rolls from the first aid kit under the counter. Once done bandaging himself, the clone fizzed and popped out of existence.

Physically and emotionally exhausted, Vladimir clumsily made his way from the bathroom and teleported to his bedroom. ‘.. Better to be low on ghost power than to rip myself open going up those infernal stairs…’ Dropping onto the dark green comforter, he balled his fists angrily. Deep-set eyes peaked at his wrist and he groaned. It was two-thirty in the afternoon. Annoyed, he ripped the offending watch from his arm and slung it onto the side table.

‘Knowing Jack and Maddie, they probably hauled him to the hospital…’ Turning on his back he let out a soft hiss of agony. His now watch free right hand lounged across his face as he began thinking over what his little break in character could possibly signify. The palm sparked at the thoughts that raced through his weary skull. ‘Blasted seal…It hasn’t been working correctly since god knows when ..…’

He sighed heavily. ‘ It’s been what? Two and a half months? Everything burns and hurts when I use the blasted thing…Is it possible I tainted it?’ He rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly and then slammed his arms down onto the mattress. He glanced at his palm worriedly. ‘God knows, Clockwork wouldn't pop by after our little fight last year to help…’ He looked to the ceiling tiredly. ‘Is it too much to ask for a little break? Huh?’

Vladimir yawned and turned to his side in an attempt to rest.
Vladimir on the Rocks

Daniel Fenton awoke some time earlier that morning to his father worriedly trying to coax him out of his stupor. They were in an ambulance.

“What's... What's going on?...” Daniel's blue eyes groggily locked onto his jumpsuit-clad parent. Jack displayed deep circles under his normally energetic eyes. The paramedics at his side looked curiously over the teen.

Jack furrowed his brow. “Danny-boy? Where were you? It's been a week! We've been looking everywhere for you!” His father's gloved hand wiped Daniel's black hair out of his eyes gently.

Daniel's eyes widened and he tried to shoot up only for the paramedics to latch onto him.


Daniel, however, was having a mental breakdown. Vague flashes of a monstrous shadow engulfing him after he left Pandora's garden surfaced. He could feel bile trying to score its way up his throat. ‘They don’t know! AGAIN! How the heck am I supposed to tell them?’ Bitter tears started dripping down his face and Jack worriedly put a hand to his shoulder. He squeezed comfortingly. “Danny? What happened?”

Daniel angrily nibbled his lip and stared at his clumsily bandaged chest. Jack, realizing Daniel was in shock, sighed deeply and returned his attention to the paramedics. “So...um...what can he expect when we get there? I attended medical school when I was younger and I'm familiar with the basics. You're keeping him wrapped in that to make sure he doesn't bleed out everywhere correct?”

The male paramedic nodded. “Yeah, the bleeding seems to be contained. We don't want to remove those shirt scraps until we are certain it's not a deep wound that requires a blood transfusion. He looks fairly healthy but maybe a little food deprived. He most likely only has slight injuries, so I don't see him staying longer than a few hours...” The man rubbed the back of his head. “At least, that's my opinion.”

Jack sighed in relief. The ride to the hospital was hauntingly silent after that. Every time Daniel's father went to comfort him, the teen would flinch at his touch. Ultimately giving up, Jack left Daniel to his thoughts. ‘Sam is still alive... but what...? God, my head... I was seventeen already in that damned nightmare... Everyone appreciated me and loved me... and now what? I'm a freak again! I hate this. I DESPISE EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS!!! ’ He cringed as he was wheeled into the hospital. ‘And to garnish it all off? ALL THE GHOSTS PROBABLY STILL HATE MY ECTOPLASMIC HIDE! ’ He balled his tired hands into fists. ‘I'M BACK TO BEING A WALKING, TALKING TARGET FOR MY PARENTS AND EVERY SOLITARY GHOST AND GHOST HUNTER ON THE ENTIRE PLANET AND THE GHOST ZONE! ’ He was jarred from his internal ramblings by the doctor that came in. Cutting off the shirt scraps gently, he inspected the rather shallow wound in the middle of Daniel's pectorals.

“Well my boy, you seem relatively fortunate. The wound won't even require stitches! At most, you merely have to wrap it for a few weeks.”

‘Pfff, you mean two days? I mean, usually, I only get light wounds or bruises. Even Plasmius doesn’t-.’ Daniel froze in thought. Dream Vlad had been in an entirely different league than the regular brand of fruit-loop he had grown accustomed to. Heck, prior to the whole nightmare? Vlad had even started almost becoming... playful? Vlad was many things, but he wasn't a true killer...
‘God… what am I thinking?!’

The doctor snapped him back to attention. “You know... I think all we really have to do is place a band-aid pad over this. It's only about two inches in diameter and it doesn't even seem to have broken through the epidermis and into the muscle. You will, however, most likely bear a sizable scar.” He cleaned the wound and Daniel flinched. “So? What caused you to go missing my boy? There have been posters plastered everywhere for over a week now. Even the mayor was making efforts to locate you.”

Daniel’s blue eyes widened at this information, but he grimaced bitterly at the thought. ‘Yeah, probably to brag to my mom when he found me so he could weasel his way into her good graces again. Lousy cheesehead.’

" I was going over to a friend’s and a ghost snatched me." His voice was flat, but his eyes carried a noticeable amount of bitterness and resentment.

The doctor positioning the band-aid pad sighed. “To bad the Phantom kid wasn’t nearby...then again ghost attacks pretty much dropped right around when you disappeared…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Wait. Really?” The doctor nodded and then shrugged. “I mean... We saw some weird, blue punk-chic with a guitar screaming for Phantom for a few days but even she dropped off the radar.”

Daniel's eyebrow stayed up.

Ember had been searching for him? For what reason? He groaned. Everything was making his head hurt. The doctor smiled encouragingly. “Don’t worry. You’re not with whatever ghoul snatched you anymore.” He paused at the door and scribbled something on his clipboard. “From those wrappings, we thought you were bleeding out profusely. Those shirt scraps are practically crimson. You, however, don’t seem to be bleeding as severely as they suggested when the paramedics loaded you up from your porch.” He paused at the door and wrote something on his clipboard.

The doctor turning out the door finished, “I think it'll be in your best interests to be with your family, so I won't make you stay here. They've been looking for over a week and you don't look like you need to be in a hospital.” And with that, he departed out of the room. Daniel became slightly ill at the sight of the fabric next to him. Both his shirt and what looked like a charred and bloodied adult’s dress shirt were just out of touching distance. His curiosity was gnawing him out of his skull!

The doctor, from his small perspective through the ajar door was in the hallway discussing Daniel's condition with his parents and sister.

A startled yelp and a nurse’s annoyed voice rang down the hall outside his door. “Hey! You two! No running!”

A few seconds later both Sam and Tucker busted into his room. Sam ran up to Daniel and noticing the bandage across his chest frowned. Her hand extended in what looked like a sign of comfort only to end in an angry red blemish on Daniel’s cheek. She had slapped him. Blue eyes widened in shock at the tears trailing down her face.

“Sam! Calm down! I'm alright!” He motioned with his hands for her to breathe slowly and gripped her shoulder gently. Still crying bitterly, she questioned, “Do you mind explaining?”

Tucker walking up from behind them and tore off his rusty beanie before lobbing it at Daniel’s head. “I second that! Seriously man?! What the hell?” His voice was tinged with angry grief. “We couldn't even get into the ghost zone to look for you after your dad and mom locked it up! They thought some monster was prowling after their kids and we thought you were -”
Daniel winced. "Tucker, Sam? Guys calm down. Allow me to explain." He rolled his eyes. "Trust me, this story is one hell of a yarn. It probably tops every other ghost related accident or bullshit fight we've ever had…"

Sam raised her eyebrow and Tucker pulled up a chair. Crossing his t-shirt covered arms over his chest he motioned for Daniel to start.

Daniel groaned. "Okay… so remember the Box Ghost thing? Pandora and all that jazz?" They both nodded.

"Well, after I dropped by her domain to check on that blue moron I decided to visit Clockwork. I mean, he NEVER gets the company so I thought it would be a pleasant surprise for him… I was making good time to until I got blasted in the back of the head. Everything just went dark… really, really dark." He cringed. "Guys. That thing... I don't even know if it’s possible to consider it a ghost. It rooted in my head for hours until it found some good thoughts and memories to make a little dream prison for me. I sincerely thought…" He gripped his fists angrily. "He even made me dream that I had defeated him. Nocturn… that’s his name… or was… I’m kind of vague on how I actually got out of the whole thing. Jesus, guys... he had me so far under I thought six months had passed…" He gripped his fists angrily.

"The dreams were so vivid. I just thought I woke up from a nightmare…” Daniel swallowed. "At the start, he seemed to be appraising me. Figuring out what made me tick. He made this comatose reality where everyone was trapped in some Sleeping Beauty like state while he fed on everyone." Daniel grimaced. "Nocturn, even hinted that he fed off of people's life forces through dreams but of course I was completely oblivious...probably partially because Dash kept popping up to distract me. He was like a corny ‘poster boy’ for nightmares."

Tucker chuckled half-heartedly. "Sounds pretty accurate. Dash can distract anyone…"

Daniel smiled tiredly.

"Then he seemed to start testing ideas for villains or enemies…First, he tried Walker but that didn't really work well at keeping me under. Then he tried Vlad… and well that dream was seriously warped even by regular standards. Valerie and Vlad tag-teamed against Danni and tried melting her to study her remains… god, the screaming…”

He flinched and Tucker and Sam both looked worriedly at him. "Nocturn made sure that the dream version of Valerie seemed more approachable and settled on Vlad as the ideal villain for his whole master dream…”

Daniel jerked his head. "I'm such a moron." He ran a hand through his raven hair tiredly. "There were sooooo many inconsistencies and I still rattled along to that piper’s melody! I mean… his dream in the end? It was so forced and just... just out of sorts… I couldn't break away from it, though. I wanted it to be true so badly. Even if it was outrageous…"

Tucker raised an eyebrow. "How outrageous?" Daniel smiled once more and this time chuckled. "Earth almost got swiped out of orbit by an asteroid the size of a small moon, Vlad turned megalomaniac and threatened the planet as Plasmius, and you… you were mayor."

Tucker raised an eyebrow and then laughed. "Have you seen my grades? Pffff… and out of both of you, I'm far more anti-social. Public speaking? Yeah… only in YOUR dreams." He snickered.
Sam laughed, “Seriously Danny? Tuck for mayor? What was his first rule of business?”

Daniel laughed. “Putting recycled PDAs into the school district so people could get a feel for classical technology.” Sam rolled her eyes and pulled out her iPhone. “Yeah. That's never going to happen. I prefer the modern stuff.”

Daniel grinned at Tucker’s annoyed features. “Don’t we all?” He paused and nervously eyed the fabric across from them.

“Guys? That last dream though got pretty dark. It’s almost like Nocturn was grasping at straws to keep me conked out. Six months passed between the whole asteroid hitting the planet and me revealing I was… well me. And then suddenly he flipped everything. I mean, first, he popped Vlad back into the picture. I thought he was dead somewhere in outer space.”

Observing their faces, he rolled his eyes. “Nocturn made me think that that stupid creepazoid cheesehead became a space hermit after his plan to rule the world backfired. Believe me, I don’t want to elaborate. At any rate, he suddenly puffed back into the world, right as rain’ and murdered…” He looked at Sam and suddenly felt nauseated.

Sam gulped. “Eh… How exactly did-”

Daniel groaned. “Dream Vlad yanked you up by your hoodie and then dropped you onto the pavement…” Daniel shivered. “I'm going to have some serious frightmares for a while after that imagery.” He furrowed his brow and propped a hand to his head. “He furrowed his brow and propped a hand to his head.” The dream just became so disjointed… and then I was killing Plasmius… god… I was so enthralled with the idea, but he wasn’t like the others… And then next thing I knew I was waking up in an ambulance.”

He furrowed his brow and twisted his hair in frustration. “I know I didn't get out of the ghost zone alone and they discovered me on the porch apparently…and… I…just don’t…” He stopped as his eyes landed on the pile of clothing still splayed across the metal tray. A flash of silver had captured his gaze. Both Tucker and Sam followed his line of sight and Sam got up to inspect the metallic object. She paled at the blood soaking the garment and then gently tore the cufflink from the sleeve. Holding it in her hand, her eyes widened. Tucker, seeing her expression, got up from his seat and walked over to snatch the metal piece out of her palm. Noting the letters engraved on it, he dropped it to the floor as if it were molten hot or some sort of venomous animal.

Sam slowly reached down to pick it up and both teens exchanged an equally stunned and somewhat bewildered expression.

“Guys? What is it? Please tell me?” Daniel’s voice broke through their confusion. Looking from Daniel to the cufflink and back again Sam finally walked over to Daniel and placed it in his hand.

“Sam? Tuck? It's just a cufflink! What’s wrong wi-” Sam narrowed her eyes and jabbed a finger worriedly toward the silver. This time Daniel noticed the letters. A small VM was stamped in the metal. “Oh god…What?!”

That’s impossible… That’s impossible…” Daniel shook his head in disbelief. Looking back on everything, though… only one person could have got him out. After all, Vlad Masters was the only one with a currently operating portal…

Vlad was feverish, and he tossed and rolled in his bed trying to rest with no considerable progress. Everything was burning and pained after he slept shirtless and barefoot on the kitchen floor earlier. Angry, he readjusted the makeshift ice pack on his head. The paper towel wrapped mess was
currently his only viable solution to the ungodly heat. 'God...I could really use some spectral painkillers...Where's that blasted green booger when I need him?'

He moved slightly and feeling the excruciating abrasions burned onto the left portion of his side, stifled a pained scream. With his chest ripped open, fever reducers would likely prevent his blood from coagulating. The last thing he wanted was for Skulker and Fright Knight to barge in on him free bleeding all over the floor. Turning ghost was also a big no-no. Plasmius was out of commission. Sure... he could probably chance a shift, but the spectral form would just consume too much energy...he'd have to reserve it for emergencies.

Vlad’s feverish eyes focused on the ceiling. ‘Why? Why am I still keeping up the farce? Daniel practically got killed! ’Vlad gripped his head in frustration and turned on his side. 'No... this isn't helping... I don't need to think about this right now... I need sleep.'

The thoughts persisted, however, fueled by the fever. “How long will it be before I actually lose my sanity over this?” He questioned aloud. His voice was hoarse and sore. Numbly he touched his hand against the burned flesh around his neck. “A collar for a monster perhaps? God knows I probably deserve that much and more...’He winced as his hand made contact with one of the thin finger-shaped pieces of burnt flesh. He could feel his cells morphing and ripping apart around the area as a defense mechanism. His face, his neck... and the visible skin on his hands had always healed completely and faster than any other part of his body. He winced as his hand made contact with one of the thin finger-shaped pieces of burnt flesh. The dangers of being caught due to a visible injury were just too numerous and severe to count. Vlad, however, was currently angry at his body’s prioritization over the minor wounds. His neck was of little consequence. His chest was the far more fatal and dangerous of the injuries. Vlad snickered. ‘The damned mark merely wants to make sure I’m presentable before I get stuck six feet under.’ He paused and rolled his eyes. ‘Not like that’s going to happen Plasmius...’ He turned tiredly and flinched in agony. The science behind healing in ghosts wasn’t a sound one. Vladimir being a half-ghost had never helped the equation. His job also added to his troubles. The more energy that was used by Plasmius, the more likely a wound would scar instead of fade or heal completely. In other words... the more human he was, the more his body healed like a human’s, with the exception of certain parts or extremely damaged areas. Ghosts didn't possess bones. Their organs also didn't work, although they did retain a semblance of human anatomy for their ectoplasm to circulate through. Internal damage healed far faster and more completely than outward damage. The same applied to Vladimir. If ribs were broken, they would be healed first. If he was impaled, the spectral energy would twist its way outward and not inward. He had a suspicion that his face, neck, and hands-only healed so rapidly because they were exposed the most to the portal. His scars were also becoming less and less frequent as time progressed. Whether his super healing was just evolving to the rest of his body or not, he couldn't say.

Thinking about it all made his head throb. A soft groan escaped his lips. Thirty minutes of self-berating and angry mental rants followed the mockingly hungover dissection of his healing capabilities until he finally fell back to sleep. The nightmares, however, were waiting for him...

Memories... raw and violent realities he could scarcely begin to cope with flashed in R.E.M. sleep. He woke up screaming sometime later. It felt like he was drowning. ‘Calm down. You’re fine. It’s just a dream.’He clamped his hands around his arms to stabilize himself. ’You’re safe... Breathe...’He snatched several tremulous breaths into his lungs. Noting the time from the watch splayed under the lamp by his bed, he begrudgingly got to his feet.

Walking into his closet, he snagged a black, long sleeve shirt and began buttoning it up his chest. It was, at present, 8:30 pm and the shirt wouldn't serve any purpose in practicality this evening. It
wasn’t as if anyone would be stopping in… His eyes however flinched at the older scars peeking out from under the bandages. Buttoning up his collar absently, he placed his palm against his now concealed chest. The shirt was more of a support system at this point… Touching his forehead and feeling the heat he groaned. Swearing under his breath, he began tying back his silver hair.

Noting the bandages getting ensnared in his tresses, he numbly shed them off of his fingers and pitched them into a trash can by his bedroom desk. His chest arched up to yawn and he gasped in pain. A searing burn had snaked its way up his chest with the sudden movement. Walking the door, he numbly put a hand to his waist. He smiled sadly, “It looks like the little badger has given me a week of recovery time…” His weary blue eyes rolled in annoyance. He wasn’t going to be fighting or moving suddenly for a while. ‘On the bright side you’re not shot or impaled again…”’ He absently conducted a hand to the bridge of his nose. Vague memories came to mind of the events and a low guttural growl escaped his lips. His fangs, now un-hindered because of his inability to cloak them, glinted from under his lip. Bobbing his head in aggravation, he pushed the thoughts aside and then flinched in pain from the jerking movement. ‘...Smooth move… God… what I need is a pain reliever…’

Teleporting to the kitchen downstairs he almost fell over and cleaved his head open on the still blood-soaked tile by the fridge. Steadying himself slightly, he rummaged through the liquor cabinet and began pulling out multiple bottles. Some nightmares… he reasoned, needed to be drowned out, and seeing as how Skulker couldn’t give him any spectral medications to soothe the pain … a human pain reliever was needed.

Sitting at one of the bar stools, he broke off the end of a bottle of scotch with one hand and began drinking. Half ghosts couldn’t kill themselves with booze… God knows, Vladimir had tried on one or two occasions. Vlad himself detested the idea of drinking and solely reserved himself to it when his mind raced with worry and fatigue. Lately, he was more and more prone to it.

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Having eaten dinner with his parents and sister, Daniel had tiredly snuck up to his room. Glancing at the old rocketship clock next to his desk he began nervously pacing. A silver cufflink jangled hauntingly in his pocket.

Three hours passed with him silently digging his feet across and around the blue rug in front of his bed. His head darted nervously from the window to the bed, over and over again.

‘Fruit-loop wouldn’t have merely dropped me off at my house… There's no way…”’ Daniel wrung a hand through his hair. Frustrated he began whispering aloud his internal ramblings. “He would’ve bragged to mom right? And even then… why not just get rid of me? Every single thing I've seen from the moron contradicts this ridiculous cufflink!” He bitterly wrenched it from his pocket to inspect it for the millionth time. The letters stood out mockingly in the dimly lit room. ‘Damn it! I won’t be able to sleep until I figure this out! ’ Grimacing angrily, he shoved the metal back into his pocket and shifted into Danny Phantom. His clock chimed, informing him to the fact it was past midnight. Neon green eyes locked on the window. ‘You either go now or not at all, Fenton! Man up! You can easily whoop his ass if he gives you any trouble… Just go confront the moron and see if this damned piece of metal is his!!! ’ Growling at himself, he turned intangible and flew through his bedroom window and out toward Vlad’s manor across town on Canterville drive. He typically avoided the area like the plague and he only recalled the address because his family briefly neighbored Vlad's mansion. Vlad's home was almost completely secluded. Two manors neighbored him but neither saw any permanent residents because of Amity’s haunted status. Literally, the area was a dead zone.

Landing in front of the door he paused apprehensively. His hand moved to knock only for him to
retract his wrist. ‘.... He may shoot you… maybe spying around would be better?’ Turning intangible and invisible, he floated through the door and into the entranceway. Looking around, he frowned in confusion.

The inside of the house was similar and yet completely different from what he remembered during is brief stay during Amity’s weather problem. Then again, quite a few things were out of place last time as well…

‘Wait? No, Packers garbage?’ His eyes darted curiously around the almost sparsely decorated entranceway. No greens and golds… just muted honey colors and dark wooden chestnut shades. Some blues and pale reds also peaked through. Raising an eyebrow he inspected the manor's layout questioningly. Despite external appearances, it had no sweeping staircases or wide expansive ceilings, at least from his perspective at the entryway. If anything it almost looked like an average home to the unassuming eye. ‘God… this is so bizarre… Where’s the tasteless extravagance? The pompous greens and yellows?’ He shook his invisible head in annoyance and wrung his hands in the air.

‘I'm not seeing anything fancy or rich! Sam even has fancier digs than this, and Vlad's like two pegs above her family in the wealth department?! Did he fire his interior decorator? Weren’t there vases and-’ Growling angrily he floated bitterly at the crossways between the rest of the house and the front hall. He was almost tempted to blast something until he noted a faint light down the hallway to his left. He passed by three doors as he floated toward the almost eerie yellow. Floating forward he stopped in his tracks. The entire manor-Everything was silent… except for the choked whispers coming from the room only a few feet away from him. Daniel gulped.

Still invisible, he peeked through the ajar door and his eyes widened. He gasped only to hastily cover his mouth. His arch-enemy was laying across his breakfast bar with at least six bottles of whiskey and scotch draped across the floor and counter. Vlad's hair had come unbound from his ponytail as he hunched over the marble. His fingers all but clasped at the nape of another bottle like it was a lifeline. It quivered above the floor, and Vlad shook against himself with his head lounging on the stone. His arm shakily lowered the glass back to the counter and subdued whispers could be heard coming from the inebriated man.

‘...Why… Why did they leave?’ He gurgled.‘... I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…” He shook and wrapped his hands around the bottle only to retract his hand to wipe away the tears accumulating on his face.‘... Please.” There was a small sob and his voice cracked. ‘Forgive me… I just-... Please… don’t…”

Daniel’s eyes where practically jutting out of his skull in confusion at the breaks in Vlad’s speech. The confusion soon faded into grief and remorse though once he finally was able to grasp onto Vlad’s words… ‘Jesus… I never… why is he acting like this? ‘Looking once more at the scene, he began feeling nauseous. Vlad's kitchen looked like a ransacked liquor store.

‘He’s the villain right? My arch-nemesis? I came to confirm the stupid cufflink not to see…’

Vlad’s voice continued in hushed whispers as he numbly wrapped his arms under his head on the counter. ‘... Jack…Mads…m’... sorry…”

Daniel froze again. ‘Apologizing? Doesn’t he loathe my dad? What is this? Am I still drugged up in Nocturn’s fantasy world? ‘Daniel gnawed his lip as he observed Vlad's actions. The older hybrid’s words were becoming fainter and after what felt like an eternity he fell asleep, unaware of the sixteen-year-old lurking and listening to his pained ramblings. Daniel waited worriedly and, noting Vlad's relatively labored breathing, floated into the kitchen. Turning visible he hovered cautiously above Vladimir's unconscious form. ‘He couldn't have… I mean…’
looked from the emptied bottles to Vlad’s almost feverish looking body nervously.

Vlad shivered in his sleep from the proximity to Daniel’s ghost form. Already precariously balanced and slightly askew on the counter he fell to the ground. Daniel’s mouth widened in horror. The bottle which had been laying next to Vlad cracked and shattered against the floor by his arm. A small shard cut against Vlad’s cheek and he grimaced. The blood dripped lazily as he groggily tried to open his eyes. His head rolled absently and discerning the bright neon green orbs above him, he passed out again.

‘Oh my fucking god! Vlad!’Daniel instantly dropped down to the floor in utter panic and began trying to pull Vlad out of the glass and liquor snaking across the tile. Vlad's breathing was irregular and his eyes fluttered spastically behind closed lids. Cradling Vlad's head, Daniel paled considerably.

The adult was burning up. The heat was practically fear-inducing. Daniel eyed the freezer, and returning his gaze to Vlad tried jostling the adult back. Vlad grimaced in his sleep but didn't wake up. Feeling the fever again Daniel noted the long sleeve shirt Vlad was wearing with disdain. Angry, he placed his hands on the fabric roughly. “Why the hell do you wear these ridiculous button-up shirts fruit-loop?!”

Receiving no response from his outburst, he hastily began unbuttoning Vlad’s wrinkled and now drenched shirt.

Daniel's face widened in absolute horror. He immediately retracted his white-gloved hand in fear. The large bandages on his arch-enemy had become loose and red had gradually forged its way through the white. Daniel stared at his glove in disdain. It was also now stained crimson.

“What did you do to yourself?!”He had never seen so much blood in his entire life. Worriedly latching on to Vlad, he wrenched him up a little higher out of the alcohol slowly dripping towards them. Vlad’s feverish head fell to the side as Daniel desperately tried to support him and take in the severity of his wounds. “VLAD! COME ON! PLEASE?!”Daniel shook him.

A small moan of agony and a grimace that exposed vampiric fangs resonated from the adult. Daniel, oblivious to the teeth, was still warily staring at Vlad's closed and practically tearing eyes. ‘He’s completely out of it…’ Noticing Vlad's heavy and sporadic breathing Daniel became even more worried.

“Shit.” Daniel’s eyes darted around frantically in search of a solution to Vlad's predicament. “You just had to play hero this time around!” Hearing his own words, he tensed. ‘Why exactly was Vlad his arch-enemy anymore? He hasn't done anything truly evil in months. He didn't even flirt with mom anymore, and he never went through with his threats on killing his father...But then again… everything prior was just so warped…’

Vlad tossed slightly, jumping Daniel out of his ‘villain versus hero’ mental crisis. Vlad's gray hair was practically plastered to his face from sweat, and his brow was furrowed in pain. The older ghost hybrid’s condition was getting worse. Daniel hastily rearranged the man, so he could handle him. Hefting him upward he clinched him to his chest and, turning intangible, went through the ceiling to where he hoped a bed or a bathroom would be.
A Halfa Bath Bomb

Looking around Daniel sighed somewhat relieved before hastily carrying Vlad to the bed. The sheets were already pulled back. ‘This must be his room…’ reaching his hand across Vlad's chest, he grabbed the black shirt and, turning it intangible, ripped it off of Vlad's panting and now shivering form. His head twisted duly in pain from the sudden temperature change.

Daniel cut on the lamp beside them and looking back at Vlad froze apprehensively. Vlad was scarred? Ribbons of pink, red slash marks, and what appeared to be bite marks haphazardly laced under his bandages and along his arms. ‘Yep… I am defiantly dreaming. No way that's real. I've seen him in his birthday suit… his body didn't look like…’ Vlad’s breathing hitched and Daniel immediately snapped back to attention. Feeling Vlad's neck he frowned. Vlad's heartbeat was way faster than it was supposed to be.

‘Okay. Think Fenton! Mom taught you basic first aid…’Redirecting his attention to Vlad's chest, he began trying to remove the bandages. Before he could turn them intangible, Vlad began moving in his sleep. His head tossed back against his pillow and his mouth opened to scream only for a pained.gasp and labored breathing to escape his lips. Daniel, encountering the fangs for the first time, quickly removed his hand.

"Holy shit. You have fangs?”Daniel rubbed the sweat from under his own snow-white hair and then, seeing Vlad starting to convulse, quickly grabbed onto the adult’s shoulders.

“He's having a seizure…”Releasing Vlad and spying a bathroom connected to the room, he hastily flew in and cut on the cold water to fill the tub. Zipping back into the master suite he grabbed several pillows from the bed and transferred them to the quickly filling claw foot. Submerging them, he heard pained moans from the bedroom. Flying back and seeing Vlad crying and writhing in his sleep he quickly hefted him in both arms again.

“God, I hope this works fruit-loop!”Carrying the panting and feverish man to the bathroom, Daniel ripped off the blood-drenched bandages adorning Vlad's chest with his intangibility. With the utmost care, he placed him in the water. Vlad's eyes opened slightly at the change in temperature only to groggily weave in and out before he fainted again. Supporting Vlad's head, Daniel duplicated himself. While he rearranged Master’s body, his clone began tearing apart the bathroom in search of medical supplies.

‘Okay… obviously, he has a high fever and...’ Daniel's gaze went to Vlad's chest, and he had to restrain himself from vomiting. The wounds were extensive and gaping. Sections of muscle and burnt tissue poked out from beneath the freely bleeding segments of flesh. His stomach, in particular, looked like it had been shot at close range. Realization dawned on Daniel and he could audibly hear his heart falter.

‘...I... I did this?’ To confirm his theory, he gazed back up to Vlad's sweat-drenched face and gently moved aside some of the silver hair floated around his neck. Sure enough, his own handprints morbidly shined against the frigid water now brightly illuminated by the bathroom lights. Vlad tossed lightly against the ghost’s cool presence. His body attempted to move away only for his form to tense in pain. He groaned at the contact.

“Cheesehead? Can you hear me?”Daniel touched his hand to Vlad's head and feeling the still rising temperature frowned.”What would mom do?”He gently rearranged Vlad's wrists to face upward.”I have to cool the areas of his body with arteries close to the skin.”At this, the clone grabbed a towel
and began ripping it into strips. Pitching them to Daniel, it returned to its panicked search for medical supplies. Daniel grasped the strips and dunked them into the water. Bringing them to his face, he froze them with his breath. He was about to place the first strip around Vlad's right wrist when the room's lights started flickering.

Two black rings darted in and out of reality around Vlad's unconscious waist and he screamed in agony as his body was shifted forcefully into Plasmius. Daniel promptly dropped the ripped towel segment and lifted Vlad up slightly from the water. Vlad's ghost counterpart was practically green instead of blue, and his raven tinted spiky hair was clinched across his brow and eyes in sweaty ringlets. His eyes, presently open from the sudden energy spike, were glazing over and the orangish red that usually signified the location of his pupils was fading rapidly. ‘He's...he’s...dying.’ Daniel's green eyes sparked neon blue at the realization, and he hissed angrily. Activating his ghost core fully he began forcefully cooling the room. Vlad's body tensed and writhed slightly from the cold.

His duplicate, having finally found a first aid kit began rummaging through the contents. Finding a thermometer he quickly tossed it to Daniel who snatched it in the hand not supporting Plasmius. Gently coaxing Vlad's mouth open he placed the white and silver instrument under his tongue and waited. A minute later a beep signaled him and he hastily plucked it out. A temperature of 120 degrees Fahrenheit flashed in the dimly returning lights. ‘Dying nothing… he should be dead at this point. Hell, his brain should be toast and he should be pushing up daisies. Normal humans can and usually do die at 108 degrees.’

Dropping the thermometer Daniel groaned. Plasmius, unlike his human counterpart, was completely dressed. Tearing off the adult's gloves, he watched in amazement as the fabric turned into black mist and condensed back into Vlad's body. ‘Woah…That's new.”

Snapping himself back to the task at hand, he swiftly began placing the ice-cloaked towel scrapes along every major blood flowing area, starting with Vlad's wrists and his exposed neck. Removing Plasmius's shoes, which dissipated once they left his body, he placed some at his ankles. Vlad's crimson eyes seemed to be clearing slightly at his efforts. He was crying again. Daniel placed him back nervously in the water and started stuffing more wads of the frozen towel scraps under Vlad's neck, under his arms, and across his groin. Vlad's eyes, still unable to grasp where or what was happening fully, rolled back and forth at the ceiling above him. Daniel, now sure there was enough cold, focused his attention back to Vlad's chest. Green ectoplasm was leaking through his white shirt and splatters of red where clawing lazily through the spectral fabric. Gulping, Daniel latched his hand to Vlad's tunic and cape. Turning them intangible, he gently wrenched them off. Both disappeared the moment they left Vlad's body.

Daniel's clone, now with his hands full, quickly stepped over to the makeshift tub turned cooler and began throwing supplies on the floor. Looking over the boxes of fever reducers and pain medications Daniel furrowed his brow in frustration. ‘I can't give him anything with all that booze circulating through his system…” Aloud he snarled. “ Smooth move moron! What type of idiot drinks when half their organs are almost visible from the outside? You crazy, stupid-”

His rants were cut off by Plasmius. Between labored pants, he had begun whispering incoherently. His pained and cracked voice was begging. “......Jack.......it hurts…”Plasmius clinched his eyes shut and opened them again. “.Please…You promised…”His voice choked.“They...They won't stop…”His head numbly tossed and his eyelids tried to shut.

‘He's talking in his sleep…’

“Vlad?” Daniel dropped the Tylenol in his hands to the floor and worriedly prepared another ice
cloth for Vlad's forehead. “Fruit-loop? Come on... wake up...” Vlad, however, was too far under. “Ed... Romulus... make it stop...” Daniel froze. ‘Ed? Romulus? Who are they? Is he hallucinating from the fever?’

Vlad numbly tried to lift his right arm out of the water only for Daniel to grasp onto it. “......It burns... Someone...” Daniel held onto the limp hand and squeezed reassuringly. ‘This... this doesn't sound like him... he's crying... Masters would never ...’ Vlad's fingers twitched slightly in Daniel's grip. “.... Jack? You won't... You wouldn't... I...” He clenched his eyes shut and his chest arched up slightly from whatever he was dreaming about. ‘Then again he's way past the safe range for body temperature... He's most definitely not of sound mind...’ Daniel worriedly draped the cold cloth over Vlad's forehead and gently moved the black hair out of his face.

“ .... Badger? I... I'm sorry...” Daniel froze and tightened his grip on Vlad's hand. “ I promised... Lied..... I...I...couldn't... I'm a monster.... Please....someone...?” Daniel's hand had begun shaking. 'What's he talking about?!'

“Vlad? Wake up? Come on!” Vlad, however, didn't stir and his eyes began closing as his breathing finally began to calm. ‘I can't bandage him... Not until he's dry... and he's still too feverish to take out of the water...’

Dissipating his duplicate, Daniel began trying to clean the wounds. Vlad flinched and tossed slightly at the movements. Satisfied for the moment with the fact Plasmius's ectoplasm had temporarily sealed the injuries, he continued off and on, switching the towel scraps and freezing new pieces of fabric for three hours. After a while, the telltale spark of energy that encompassed Vlad's injured form laced across his body. Forming the two black rings at his center, the energy spread apart and changed him back into the silver-headed mayor of Amity. Seeing Vlad's fever and breathing returning to safer levels, he grabbed the thermometer again and gently opened Vlad's mouth. Now used to the vampiric canines protruding from Vlad's upper and lower jaw, Daniel carefully slipped the metal through his more human teeth and back under his tongue. Waiting patiently he flinched at the high-pitched beep that signaled the tool was ready. Sighing, he removed the instrument. 101.3 degrees flashed.

“Well, it looks like I'm going to be staying with you for the duration of this.” Standing up, he walked over to the sink and quickly rinsed and replaced the thermometer to its spot in the first aid kit his clone had torn apart. Walking back over to Vlad, he launched himself off of the floor and floated above the adult, debating his next course of action. Keeping the adult submerged would probably cause more damage than good at this point and his chest still needed attention. Carefully reaching down, he looped his arms under Vlad and pulled him up and out of the tub. Noting the now lukewarm water dripping across his own chest from Vlad, he hovered them both over the tub and turning them intangible, focused the water off of their bodies. The once drenched billionaire turned slightly from the movement but didn't wake. With Vlad and himself now dry, Daniel quickly flew into the master bedroom and laid Vlad down on the bed. Seeing some red making its way back through the gashes and cuts, Daniel groaned.

“The movement must have ripped it open again...” Turning his head from Vlad, he quickly flew back to the bathroom and began gathering the gauze, bandages, and antibacterial salves. Carrying the pile in a discombobulated heap, he floated through the wall and back into the bedroom only to drop everything. Vlad was now somewhat conscious, and his hand was shakily reaching to his feverish and throbbing head. Flying over to his sprawled form, he worriedly pulled away the hand to inspect his eyes. Vlad's navy blue eyes dully locked on Daniel's and a muffled question escaped from his lips.

“...Why are-?” And then just as suddenly his eyes widened as he fully took in the teenager grasping his hand above him. His back arched up out of sheer primal instinct and fear at the boy’s presence,
shifting him to a sitting position. He briefly had held himself up before he rolled over in pain. Something wet and warm was lazily creeping down his abdomen.

“CALM DOWN!” Daniel swiftly brought the adult back up to the previous stance. Vlad struggled against screaming from the sudden movements. Duplicating, Daniel had his clone fetch the medical supplies lying haphazardly against the wood flooring.

Vlad’s raspy voice between pants moaned, “What are you…” Before he could complete the question the room began spinning and Vlad's head numbly fell against Daniel's shoulder. Grabbing the gauze and medical supplies now next to them, Daniel began wrapping up Vlad's torso. A numb, quivering hand from the older hybrid latched onto Daniel's chest. A shove, bordering on wet kitten pathetic, tried to nudge the teen away only for the limb to simply fall back to the bed.

“Take it easy Cheesehead.” Daniel frowned. Vlad was sweating again from the movements.

“It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you…. I'm trying to help... Just hold still.”

Vlad seemed to calm slightly against Daniel's shoulder. Daniel, seeing this, motioned his duplicate to get behind Vlad to prop him up. Vlad winced and numbly writhed against Daniel's attempts at wrapping his abdomen. “Vlad… I'm sorry. I have to bind it. You’re bleeding too much.”

Vladimir's eyes were pained, and he was having trouble keeping himself coherent. “...Why...are...you-?...” His voice was strained and dazed. “You hate...me...Why-?” Vlad tried once more to push away only to wince in agony. Slumping forward onto Daniel, his eyes numbly closed and he passed out.

Daniel’s duplicate poofed out of the room and Daniel, now supporting Vlad's unconscious body, gently patted him on the back. Vlad shifted his head slightly in his slumber in reaction to the movements. Daniel’s green eyes saddened considerably. “Vlad?” Daniel swallowed. Seeing the adult had succumbed to his body’s need for rest, he gently arranged him back against the bed and adjusted the pillows under him.

“......Jez…” Daniel pulled up a chair tiredly and rummaged a hand through his hair. Transforming back into Daniel Fenton, he tiredly yanked off his hoodie and looked back to the adult sleeping on the bed next to him.

“What am I supposed to believe after this fruit-loop? After I almost kill-” He winced at the thought. Glancing at Vlad's bandages and heavy breathing, he put a hand to the bridge of his nose. “I was going to kill you… And you just let me do that… What's wrong with you?” ‘What's wrong with ME?’

Looking at the watch on the table, his eyebrow twitched. ‘Mom and Dad are probably freaking out. I can't believe it's 8 am already.’ Standing up hastily, he felt both of his pockets. Flicking out his phone, he frowned. It was out of battery.

Glancing at Vlad nervously, he sighed. “Fruit-loop? I'll be right back.” Turning out of the room he begrudgingly began searching for a phone. To make his search easier he shifted back to Phantom form. Darting in and out of the rooms on the second floor he frowned. With Vlad's room, there were five bedrooms. None had phones and all of them looked to be out of use.

Curiously, there was also a child's room at the end of the hall done up in light oranges and corals. “This is… a little girl's room…..Why would he have-?” Daniel numbly picked up a small stuffed bear covered in dust. Unlike the other rooms, this one had not been cleaned or touched. Daniel felt a shiver run up his spine. He wasn't supposed to be here….it felt wrong. Like he had just walked into
something Vlad had even tried to forget about. Placing the bear down, he slowly backed out of the room. ‘Why have a little girl's room in this place anyway? Hadn't Vlad only been living in Amity the last few months?’ Daniel stopped floating and, landing on his feet, rubbed a hand through his hair. ‘That dust…. That's more than two months… more like four or five?’ Furrowing his brow, he bit his lip. ‘What the heck is going on here?’ He paused. ‘Well, I've known him for what? Two and a half years almost? Then again it's not like we stop to chat about our lives when we go to blast each other out of the sky…’

He leisurely walked down to the hall and seeing another turnoff, paused. Only one door was down that way. Rolling his eyes, he walked past the hall and instead turned his face intangible and peeked into the room. It was desolate. ‘Weird…’ Extracting his head, he made his way to the final room on the second floor. He gasped. It was a second-floor entrance to an expansive library. Floating over the metal railing, he stared in wonder at the dusty volumes and tomes stacked methodically on the shelves. Some of the novels even seemed to glow in spectral blues and greens. “Woah. A library almost as big as half the second floor… that's insane…”

Putting a palm to the stain glass window, he ran his finger along the multicolored glass. A massive tree with glittering shades of yellow and green sparkled from the crystalline mosaic. Scarlet flowers laced themselves among the light ochre roots of the tree and small birds and animals in a medley of sizes hid among the foliage. Latin words were etched along the paneling encasing the iron and glass. The morning sun refracted and flashed the image across the floor below him. Various books and maps littered the tables and chairs. Curious, he descended to the first floor. Looking at the books, he raised an eyebrow. Digging one up, he absently ran a hand along the spine. The Book of Runes: A Handbook for the Use of an Ancient Oracle: the Viking Runes flashed in metallic lettering surrounded by strange symbols. Daniel scratched his head at the book's subject. Laying the red and gold scripted hardcover down he picked up another book. The blue book, slightly smaller than the red that had been stacked on top of it read, Assyrian Mythology; A study in Demons and Gods. ‘Weird choice of reading…Wouldn't he be looking at books about mad science or thievery, and not mythology and ancient languages?’

Sighing, Daniel tossed the book back to its spot on the worn-out dark beige sofa. Looking around and seeing no phone his gaze caught onto something else just as curious. A large leather bound book lay open on a desk hidden in the corner of the room. Several piles of books leaned precariously against the worn-in wood grain. Flying to the congested area he landed next to the desk and curiously leafed through the journal. ‘What the heck is this?’ Strange inhuman writing was scrawled across the pages along with various diagrams and drawings. Torn out segments of pages from other books and manuscripts were pasted between the notes. Large red x’s adorned multiple illustrations of swords, jewelry, helmets, and what looked like old woodcuts of demons and pictures of ancient renderings of gods.

‘This… is soooooooo out of my comfort zone.’ Still flipping through the pages his hand stopped on the most recent entry. Seeing the black star adorned wood engraving with ram’s horns hovering over a Norse boat, Daniel felt his stomach turn. Along with the illustration, there were several news articles about children being pulled off of life support after succumbing to severe comas they initially never had. Slamming the book shut, he backed away from the desk. “What… the actual hell is all of this?” Turning, he walked to the door and attempted to open it only to realize it was locked. Raising an eyebrow he turned intangible and quickly made his way through the hardwood. ‘Phew…. Fenton. Breathe…”

Looking around nervously, he turned into the room on his right and stepped on some broken glass. A shattered liquor bottle was strewn across the hardwood flooring. “And there's even more booze?!” Facepalming himself, he looked at the floor more closely and vaguely made out a dried bloody footprint against the wood.
"I guess he stepped in the glass?"

Floating over the mess, he spotted a landline phone on the desk and grinned broadly. "Okay… now I can…" Daniel froze. "What the hell am I going to say?!"

'Think… Think…' He dully slapped his palm against his brow. 'Wait! I got it! I'll tell them I'm at Vlad's to thank him for looking for me. That works right?' He nodded to himself. 'Yep. That should totally work…'

Flying over he quickly turned back into Daniel Fenton and sitting on the edge of the desk picked up the phone and began pressing the buttons. 'I can't believe I couldn't find a cellphone anywhere… Wait…' Still holding the now ringing phone he groaned. A black Samsung phone was poking out from under a manilla folder. Rolling his eyes, he absently tossed the file aside to inspect the phone. 'I would've pegged him as having some ridiculous futuristic piece of garbage… Why a regular old…?' His father's voice on the other end of the line jostled him from his thoughts.

"Vladdie!" Jack's voice boomed. 'Wait? Why does Dad know his number? What the heck…'

"Um. Actually, Dad, it's me. Danny." Daniel stammered apologetically.

"Daniel?! Why…?" He could hear his father trying to compose himself, so he wouldn't yell. "You're not supposed to leave the house! What if another ghost snatches you?!

"Dad! I'm fine! This time I brought protection for myself. I have the Fenton thermos…"

A deep sigh resonated over the line. "It's a little early for a visit to Vlad's. Daniel? Why-"

Daniel swallowed and catching himself flatly stated. "The doctor yesterday said he was trying to help find me… I wanted to thank him…"

"Well…. God, your mama is going to be so peeved….." A dull tapping noise could be heard. "Okay. Daniel James Fenton? You promise me you won't go wandering around? I trust V-man can take care of you but I don't want you disappearing again." Daniel snickered internally at this. 'Him take care of me? Ha. I am pretty convinced it's the other way around…'

"Dad? I promise I won't go wandering around." 'It's not like I can with Vlad practically comatose upstairs.~'

"Just be careful? And tell Vlad I said thanks as well, k? I know he hasn't been sleeping over this…"

"Of course," Daniel paused and then added, "I'll call to check in later. I love you, dad."

Jack’s voice perked slightly at the promised call. "Love you to Danny. Keep your promises ‘kay?"

"Okay, dad. Okay. I'm a Fenton remember? I'll be fine. Talk to you later!" Hanging up the line Daniel ran a hand through his hair.

A small meowing sound caused him to turn his head. A white cat with piercing golden eyes was leisurely rubbing against a portion of the offices wood paneling. 'Wait… that's right… he got a cat...pff...'

'Daniel put a hand to his mouth to restrain himself from laughing. The dainty feline was clawing against something on the side of the office. Walking over to the snow white cat he gently pulled it back away from the wood. The cat hissed and clawed at his presence and Daniel chuckled. Animals had a questionable habit of reacting differently around him since he was zapped by the portal. Cats especially seemed to resent him.

"Sorry fluff ball." He backed away, palms extended in a sign of peace.
The cat looked at him curiously and then darted through the wall. "Holy shit… A ghost cat or?" Putting his hand to the wall, he noticed the air coming from behind the bookshelf. The cat hadn't gone through the wall, just a narrow crack between the fake shelf and the door’s opening. Pulling open the door curiously, Daniel noticed the security monitors. The cat was leisurely laying against the corner of the wall preening herself.

Sitting at the monitor, Daniel debated looking through the archived footage. Seeing a file time stamped with the day he was found he clicked it. Several images of various rooms popped up. Clicking on the one that apparently showed Vlad's portal, he fast-forwarded through the video. Around six o'clock am Vlad stumbled into the lab clinging onto him. Falling over, he redirected the impact to his spine to avoid waking or hurting the teen. Him worriedly checking Danny Phantom’s pulse and then freezing as he turned human with a look of panic plastered across his face also flashed onto the screen. Lifting Daniel up, he forced a partial shift to his hand. Using his black talons, he quickly ripped off Daniel's shirt and began roughly fashioning it into bandages for his chest wound. Vlad's hands were shaking, and he was darting in and out of consciousness as he worked. Seeing the wound was still bleeding through the bandages he growled in anger and began taking off his own shirt. He grimaced in agony and the Daniel watching the monitor felt his heart drop again. Seeing the wound was still bleeding through the bandages he growled in anger and began taking off his own shirt. He grimaced in agony and the Daniel watching the monitor felt his heart drop again. Seeing the wound was still bleeding through the bandages he growled in anger and began taking off his own shirt. He grimaced in agony and the Daniel watching the monitor felt his heart drop again. Seeing the wound was still bleeding through the bandages he growled in anger and began taking off his own shirt. He grimaced in agony and the Daniel watching the monitor felt his heart drop again.

Nauseous, he maneuvered back to the home screen. Clicking on several rooms and fast forwarding to the present time, he found nothing. Finally seeing the last video feed in the kitchen, he clicked it. Skipping forward he watched in pained horror as Vlad teleported back to his home. Landing in the kitchen his hand numbly tried to grasp onto the fridge only for him to drop to his knees on the floor. Vlad’s body was shaking and then he fell forward onto the tile. His hand moved, clawing across the white as a red puddle began forming under his abdomen. ‘He was bleeding to death.’ Daniel's eyes flinched away from the monitor. Vlad eventually stopped moving. He shifted several times in his sleep from human to ghost. Speeding up the video he watched in disbelief as Vlad crawled onto his hands and knees and shakily stood up from the slasher-isc pool that had encompassed his body. Breathing heavily he stumbled clumsily out of the kitchen. Pausing the video, Daniel rubbed a hand across his face. There were no cameras in any of the bedrooms so he wouldn't be able to see exactly what went on after. Realizing Vlad's drunken stupor was also in the same kitchen he skipped ahead in the video.

Teleporting into the kitchen, an obviously feverish and pained Vlad Masters stumbled and almost cracked his head against the counter only to right himself the last second. Growling and eyes flashing red he began ripping bottles out of a cabinet by the booth near the window. Numbly holding his side, he walked over to the marble island and sat down on one of the bar stools. Snapping off the top of the bottle with his wrist, he bitterly began drinking. After the first two bottles, he retracted the arm around his waist, and sighed in relief. He seemed to be talking to himself but with no audio Daniel could only assume and speculate. After a few minutes, a look of grief and then anger flashed across his face. His eyes flashed red again and his hand sparked. Snapping off the top of the bottle with his wrist, he bitterly began drinking. Holding his head, he began yelling and ranting to the bottle. Soon it was empty and Vlad's eyes tiredly loomed to the ceiling. Teleporting back to the liquor stash he grabbed several more bottles in his arms and returned to the stool. The six bottles almost seemed menacing as he laid them across the white counter. He half looked like he was going to blast them into a thousand glittering pieces. Lifting his arm, his hand sparked and then just as suddenly he...
grasped his chest in agony. Snarling, Vlad began drinking the rest of the liquor he had collected. Around the fifth bottle, he began swaying unsteadily and talking to himself. His conversations seemed to be rather animated and his eyes flashed, enraged. Slapping himself across the face, he picked up another bottle and opened it.

Soon he was crying and whispering against the stone. Daniel already familiar with what was going to happen paused the video feed and stood up tiredly. Looking toward the ceiling, he phased upward and made his way back to Vlad's bedroom. The adult, still sleeping, had turned slightly in his bed. Walking over to him, Daniel gently rearranged him again to keep him off of his sides or his torso. Vlad flinched slightly in his sleep and his leg moved partially but he didn't wake up. Feeling Vlad's head, he sighed in relief. The fever was down to manageable levels. Exhausted, Daniel sat back into the chair he previously occupied and crossed his arms. Now heavily sleep deprived from his efforts, he decided to take a nap.

Vlad's small form stood in shock. The tile felt like ice against his socks. Having just arrived home from his part-time job and school, he had stumbled into a living nightmare. The shadows licked and danced around the dimly lit room. Their adoptive father was standing over the now red tiles with a bemused drunken look on his face. His yellow teeth and shallow brown eyes locked onto Vladimir's frozen form and Vlad felt every single nerve in his body scream. The adult smiled and casually returned his gaze back to the floor. Vlad's eyes followed his. Just across from the man, Vladimir's biological sister was sprawled on her back. Her foot stuck out from behind the laminate cabinets, unmoving. Dropping his bag off of his shoulder Vlad ran forward. A large drunken hand immediately shot out and latched onto his shoulder before he could reach her. He briefly felt the sickening slickness against his sock as he was thrown backward. Winded from the impact Vlad regained his vision only to scream in absolute horror and disbelief. Liza's eyes were lifelessly staring into the popcorned ceiling above them and she didn't stir. Crawling to her, he was wrenched upward by a swift kick to his ribs. Panting on the floor and crying he numbly reached outward toward his sibling. James stared at both his charges. An arm slung out and grabbed onto Vladimir by his black hair before throwing him into the crimson puddle that had accumulated on the floor.

Vlad's screaming ripped through everything. Daniel immediately shot up from his nap. The older hybrid's body was arched against the bed like he was trying to get away from something or someone and his eyes watered behind closed lids.

Panicking the boy ran to his side and began shaking him out of whatever dream he had been having. Vlad awoke hyperventilating and confused. Feeling hands gripping into his shoulder, he numbly shook his head to try and get his bearings. A teenager’s voice jolted him out of his confusion, “You alright? What's wrong?” Looking up, Vlad's eyes grew large, and he immediately flinched away and out of the boy's grasp. Recoiled against the headboard and panting he shakily locked eyes on the teen.

“Why the blazes are you here?!” A sharp pain caused him to shoot a hand to his abdomen. Dizzy, he started pitching forward. “This isn't good. This isn't good at all…” The teen’s arms immediately went to support him, and Vlad knocked his outstretched hands away.

“Vlad? Calm down. I just want to help you. You're going to end up making yourself worse!” Looking at his bandages, Vlad paused. His vision was still swimming, but he could tell the medical work wasn't his doing. “Shit. He saw. How the heck do I explain this?!”

“Aren't heroes supposed to beat villains?! Tell me dear boy; why should... I ... le-?!” Vlad winced at his rants and began toppling toward the mattress again. Daniel caught him this time. The adult numbly writhed and protested against him. “Jez! Relax! You're probably still drunk, just breath for a second Fruit-loop!”
Vlad growled. Panting he snapped, “WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOU?!??!”

Daniel frowned and raised an eyebrow. “Funny, I've been thinking the same damned thing after I busted in here last night to find you bleeding everywhere…” Daniel mumbled angrily.

Silenced, Vlad stared in confusion at the sixteen-year-old. His head was still ringing, and the room and everything around him felt like it was being tussled in waves of static. Groaning, he sighed with resignation and then apologized, “…Sorry….”

Daniel's baby blue eyes widened, and he smirked, “Yeah, you are most definitely still drunk.”

Vlad's eyebrow twitched at this. ‘Drunk? Oh, wait…that's right… I was in the kitchen last night.’ Groaning again, he clasped a free hand to one of Daniel’s. “Why are you even here? Possibly to flaunt your ridiculous and childish presumptions on heroism?” Daniel still supporting Vlad began trying to lay him back down.

“Actually, currently, I'm taking care of a bratty and heavily injured adult who doesn't realize when he should shut up and lay down.” Vlad narrowed his eyes at Daniel's words.

“Okay, little badger. Tell me? Why are you in my manor in the first place? Aren't I your enemy? A deplorable monster intent on killing your idiot father and seducing your mother? You literally have nothing to gain from this interaction!” He hissed, and his eyes flashed crimson to accentuate the point. “Aren't I your villain Danny Phantom?!?! So why are you-” Vlad, suddenly feeling dizzy again, felt his head sway and he slumped further into Daniel's hold.

“Hmmmm…. Not looking very villainous right now, are you? Especially after I found you yesterday…” To prove his point, he roughly pushed Vlad back into the pillows. The adult to winced in agony. Satisfied Vlad was laying down again he stood up to glare at the still slightly feverish moron.

Vlad, grimacing, snarled and tried to shoot upward only to feel a stiff pain in his waist. Groaning he glared at the teen. “Stop avoiding the questions! Why was Danny Phantom lurking around? Better yet, why help me? God knows you despise my very existence! Why not…”

Daniel annoyedly tossed a pillow at the adult, startling him.

“For peat's sake! Shut up already!” He pointed at Vlad's chest, “What the hell was I supposed to do?!?! Especially after I found out I-…”

Vlad tensed immediately and his eyes widened. ‘There’s no way. He couldn't know…There's no possible way...’ Daniel noticed the behavior and sighed. Looking away from Vlad, he continued on his previous train of thought but decided to omit his knowledge of Vlad's little hero act.

“Vlad? Please. Just… just stop… I'm getting really tired of you doing stupid shit. Just relax. God knows you have WAY to much booze in your blood for a normal person to even be able to breathe, much less talk.”

Vlad sighed and stared at the ceiling before lowly growling under his breath. After a few seconds, he began trying to get out of bed. Daniel turned back to the sound and immediately pushed him back against the mattress.

“WHAT.ARE.YOU.DOING?” Daniel reprimanded.

In response, Vlad glared and put a hand to his waist. “Obviously, I'm getting up! I have things to do, and I don't need some teenage-”
At this, Daniel forcefully held him against the bed. “You're not going anywhere! Vlad, you almost went full ghost last night. If that's even a thing with us… Literally, if I hadn't popped by out of curiosity you'd be lying in a morgue right now!” Daniel yelled.

Startled Vlad locked his gaze against Daniel's. ‘What is he talking about? I've had waaaayyyy worse injuries. That and it isn't unusual for me to be drunk after sustaining wounds or unconscious.’

Vlad numbly latching his free arm around Daniel's wrist withdrew the arm to place his hand against the bridge of his nose. “ What are you blathering about Daniel? I've had far worse wounds than this! What exactly happened last night?”

Seeing the boy's dark circles under his eyes, he withdrew his hand from the bridge of his nose to stare into Daniel's angry and slightly worried blue eyes.

“ Vlad? You had a temperature of one hundred and twenty.” Vlad's dark blue eyes widened at this. 'Damn it… the alcohol must've made the fever worse…'

Seeing Vlad mulling the information over but still trying to get up he continued, “You weren't even coherent and your eyes were glazing over.”Daniel's last few words came out as more of a hiss. Vlad stopped moving against his hold. Vlad opened his mouth to argue only for Daniel to glare daggers at him.

“Honestly, I don't know how the hell you managed this far! Heck? I should be tending to a corpse at this point. Every damned brain cell you have should be fried. A regular human would've been set up for a granite slab at one hundred and fifteen degrees! Yet here you are, still being an annoying cheesehead with no sense of self-preservation!”

Vlad, sitting silently flinched at Daniel's words. Seeing a ghost of fear flashing across the teen’s blue eyes above him, he resigned himself back to the bed and dropped his head to the pillow under him. Speaking calmly he addressed the sleep-deprived boy still immobilizing him.

“The fever is new… I …” He sighed and, looking at Daniel bitterly, finished.“ Fine. I won't move.”Looking elsewhere rather sheepishly, he continued, “ But, I do hate to inform you that all I have been sustaining myself with the last two or three days has been Jack Daniel's…..”

He grimaced as Daniel released his shoulders. Daniel stood puzzled for a moment. Finally understanding what Vladimir was getting at, he facepalmed himself in annoyance. Slightly startling Vladimir, he jabbed a finger toward him and reprimanded. “ Seriously?”

The teenager looked like he was going to slug the adult. Turning from the flabbergasted and wounded man he muttered angrily under his breath a string of profanities. “ I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Vlad watched as he phased into the kitchen below him. Resigning himself to what he promised the teen he closed his eyes in frustration. The silence was almost deafening. ‘ Well. This week can’t possibly get any worse…’He smiled somewhat sadly. Several minutes passed and still fatigued he fell back to sleep.

Downstairs near the breakfast booth on the far side of the kitchen, Daniel was debating on how to approach Vladimir's nourishment problem. Walking across the kitchen to the island that previously hosted Vlad's feverish drinking binge he tiptoed through the glass. Not bothering with a shift he casually looped around the island. A hand went to open the stainless steel fridge only for him to find himself pausing at a sickening sticky sound emanating from the floor. Glancing down he frowned. Daniel Fenton’s white tennis shoe had just stepped in a large red and black mass of congealed blood.

“Oh…. that's right… he collapsed next to the fridge yesterday…”Lifting his shoe up he began mentally juggling how he was supposed to handle everything.’Okay… firstly, I need to get this up. I
can't help anyone if I slip on my ass and bust my head open in the kitchen against broken glass and liquor bottles…” Retracting his hand from the fridge, he casually launched himself off the floor and floated to the sink to clean of his sneaker. Cutting on the water he ran his foot under the stream and yanked several paper towels from a small dowel by the sink to wash off the mess. ‘How many did that moron lose? Three?’

Sighing, Daniel left the sink running and returned to the floor. "I need more paper towels..." Seeing the glass shards he groaned, “-and a broom.” Turning into Danny Phantom for ease of access, he quickly phased back into Vlad's room. Glancing at the bed, he smiled at the fact the adult had taken his advice on resting. Now asleep, his breathing had returned to its normal rhythms instead of the panicked hyperventilating he had showcased when he was awake.

Floating past the adult, he casually opened the door and left it ajar. There was a supply closet behind Vlad's bedroom, just adjacent from the abandoned children's room and the staircase. Walking in he casually flicked on the lights. Sure enough, several cleaning supplies in various states of wear were organized neatly on the back wall. Finding the copper dustpan and the broom, Daniel grinned broadly. “Yet again… you surprise me. We even have better cleaning supplies than this…” ‘Granted, these are way better-taken care of.’

Daniel paused as he began taking rolls of paper towels from the shelf to his right. Several cardboard boxes were stacked across from him. We even have better cleaning supplies than this… The first box seemed to be filled with old photos. Picking one at random he glanced at the image. In it, Vladimir was wearing an oversized blue hoodie. He looked to be around eighteen or nineteen years old. Smiling warmly at a college-age version of his dad, his hand was casually draped over Jack’s shoulder. A cake was being held up by Maddie to the right of the photo. Jack was rolling his eyes. Turning over the photo Daniel could see blue ink roughly in the right corner. Jack's 20th Birthday. July 26, 1991. ‘Wait…what? Why keep this?’ Glancing back at the box nervously he shakily put a hand back into the aged cardboard abyss and pulled out another photo. This one, a Polaroid, was a sloppily made selfie. Vlad was grinning broadly and blushing while jerking his thumb backward at Jack and Maddie kissing in the booth behind him at a bowling alley. Daniel's hand shook. ‘What the actual heck is this?’ Turning the photo over he read the small notes on the back. Finally got the blasted morons to kiss in public. Jesus, they're slow. Summer 1991. Glancing at the box apprehensively he tore it down from the shelf. Eyes wide, Daniel pulled another photo out. This one, upside down, was dated the same day. Turning it over, Daniel smiled. Maddie, obviously holding the camera up, was taking a selfie of Vladimir and Jack splayed on the floor of their dorm. Vladimir's black hair and face were plastered in shaving.

Raising an eyebrow Daniel picked up another photo. This one also seemed to be a continuation of the previous. In this one, Vlad was smiling broadly with a small air horn in front of the camera. Using one of the fingers clasped around the cylinder he pointed to Jack mischievously, while lifting up his doodled on wrist. Jack was sleeping with his hands full of shaving cream. His face was covered in sloppily applied makeup. The red lipstick was applied in a long, looping girth around his mouth like a clown’s. Daniel giggled at the photo and turning it over read the back. Maddie, Jack and Me. Prank war. April 12, 1991. ‘I guess mom was taking the photo.’

Setting it down he pulled another one out. This one, upside down, was dated the same day. Turning it over, Daniel smiled. Maddie, obviously holding the camera up, was taking a selfie of Vladimir and Jack splayed on the floor of their dorm. Vladimir's black hair and face were plastered in shaving.
cream from Jack. Jack, grinning, was pushing the laughing Vladimir against their dorms carpeted floor. Maddie sat between them in cargo shorts and a tank top giggling. Her hair was sloppily tied in a braid, and her free hand held several sharpies and tubes of makeup. 'I don’t understand. Why keep any of these? If you hate someone… You wouldn't keep things like this, would you? 'Dropping the photo back into the box he numbly grabbed the others he had been snooping through and replaced them. ‘ I can look through these later. Right now, I have to tend to the stupid jerk.' Pushing the box back in place, Daniel went to turn back to the supplies only to pause at another box with something poking out of the top. Dragging it down he stiffened. A small green and white dress was neatly folded in the center. The ribbon across its middle was tattered. Next to it a small ragged and torn doll laid haphazardly against the side. Something in the pit of Daniel's stomach lurched at the items, and he quickly dropped them and shoved the box back. Realizing he was hyperventilating, he calmed himself and took several slow breathes. ‘Why am I freaking out over a child's dress? What the actual heck?’

Staring worriedly at the shelf, he quickly whipped his head around, and grabbing the supplies, phased through the floor and into the downstairs. Walking into the kitchen he quickly began sweeping up the glass and wiping up the blood. ‘ And today on Vlad's house of horrors? Creepy occult books, contradictory photos, abandoned rooms, and blood… lots and lots of blood…’ Tossing the last napkin in the garbage can under the sink, he sighed. ‘ I just had to walk in on a real-life Amityville horror.’ He quipped sarcastically.
Smiling slightly at his clever but half-hearted pun, he quickly washed his hands and directed his attention back to the fridge. Finally opening it he frowned.

“Has he ever heard of grocery shopping?” The fridge was a barren wasteland. Only two of the shelves had anything on them.

“He even eats like a bachelor…” Daniel facepalmed himself. Eyebrow furrowed he floated to the left of the fridge and began searching the pantry as well. ‘Wonderful… the guy must live off of takeout.’

Glancing down at the bottom shelf, his eyes widened. “Is… is that insta-ramen!?!?” Putting a hand to the cup, Daniel burst out in hysterical laughter. ‘Bachelor nothing… he eats like a broke college student!’ Wiping a tear from his eye he casually grasped the ramen cup to inspect it.

“Yep. I'm probably still in Nocturn’s dream palooza. There’s no way a multi-billionaire would eat instant noodles…” Tossing the cup back on the shelf he absently began taking stock of what he had to work with. Seeing some chicken broth cubes and some egg noodles he smirked. Grabbing the two items he retreated from the lackluster shelves and walking into the kitchen, stacked the two items on the marble island. Opening the fridge again he smiled broadly. Sure enough, there was a package of chicken, some onions, a carrot, and some garlic.

“Chicken noodle soup for the invalid it is then…” Grabbing everything he tossed it all on the countertop. ‘Cause’ I am soooo not making him dollar store ramen. Dream or otherwise.’

Rummaging for a few minutes he found a saucepan, some spices, a knife, and a cutting board. Chopping the onion and the chicken he lightly seasoned them and then stuck them in the pan to cook. Once the meat was white he turned up the burner and walking over to the sink added the water needed to make the broth. Tossing in two cubes he returned to the chopping board and finished slicing the carrots. Setting his broth to simmer with the lid on he quickly phased back upstairs to check on Vlad.

Vlad, still sleeping, shivered slightly at Danny Phantom’s presence. Leaning over the adult, he casually draped a blanket across him only to suddenly tense at the sound of a doorbell being frantically rung. Glancing at Vlad and seeing him shift in his sleep Daniel bit his lip and immediately flew through the building to the entranceway. Turning into Daniel Fenton he roughly yanked the door open.

Jazmine’s knuckles were practically white as she clenched them to her sides. Her turquoise eyes flashed menacingly from under her orange tresses.

Jabbing her hand at the house she growled, “Why aren't you at home resting?” Her eyes narrowed at Daniel. “AND why are you at this deranged moron's house?!?!” Her voice held evident hatred and disapproval as she tapped her black Vans against the doormat.

“Jaz, calm down…. just let me explain.” Quietly ushering her through the halls he led her to the kitchen. Looking nervously around the deserted halls she quickly grabbed his wrist and spun him around before he could get to his destination. “You better have a good reason FOR THIS Daniel!!!!” Her eyes flashed dangerously as she waved her arm around where they were standing.

“JAZ!” Daniel snapped and then glancing at the ceiling nervously continued in hushed whispers,
“Stop screaming… please… You're going to wake him up.”

Jaz gritted her teeth at this and, snarling, retorted, “WHAT'S WITH YOUR SUDDEN CHANGE IN ATTITUDE ?!” Seeing Daniel's eyes flash green threateningly as he jabbed a hand to the ceiling she lowered her voice a couple of octaves and continued. “Did he come up with a mind control ray!?? Or perhaps more nanobots?” Her voice although lower, still held evident contempt.

Yanking his sibling into the kitchen by her hand, he growled, “Jazz? For the love of god, shut up!” He angrily motioned toward the ceiling. “ The situation has changed.”

Now confused Jaz’s brow switched from enraged to perplexed. “Yeah? How so?”

“Remember that shirt? The one you guys found me in?” Jaz nodded and then frowned at Daniel's question. Realizing what he was getting at, she herself angrily jabbed a hand toward the ceiling and raised her eyebrow. “That moron?” She rolled her eyes. “At least that's who I'm assuming you keep motioning towards?” She redirected her gaze back to Daniel. “He would never. Heck? He couldn't possibly have!”

At this Daniel rubbed a hand across his face. “Good to see I'm not the only one to have that reaction.” Putting a hand in his pocket he gently snatched out the cufflink and tossed it to Jazz. She caught it absently in her palm and glancing at the initials looked up to Daniel in utter disbelief. “Too bad everything I've stumbled upon contradicts what we thought huh? I'd still be thinking the same thing as you if it weren't for that cufflink and the state I found him in last night.” Curious, she questioned, “What happened last night?”

A blaring and repetitive ringing awoke Vladimir. ‘God… my head. Make it stop….’

Groaning and ignoring his body's pleas for him to stay stationary he shakily began maneuvering himself out of his bed. Clearing his head somewhat from the feverish fog, his blue eyes flashed tiredly to red. The ringing persisted. ‘Someone's ringing the doorbell? It can't be anyone from the town council. They would have called ahead… and it can't be Bertra, can it?’ Rubbing his eyes he used his right arm as a counterweight to avoid bending his torso as he got out of bed. Dizzy he pitched forward before quickly righting himself. Noticing his lack of a decent covering and the bandages he groaned.

‘Okay… I need a shirt….’ Looking over to his closet he numbly lifted his hand and in a flash of purple and pink a worn-in white dress shirt materialized. ‘Man, that was stupid. I should've just walked over and tore it off the hanger. What a waste of energy…’ Panting with the effort and still slightly feverish he began draping the shirt over himself only to hear angry yelling from downstairs. A haughty and reprimanding female voice echoed and splintered through the absence of the ringing doorbell.

“You better have a good reason FOR THIS Daniel!!!!”

‘That can't be good.’ Looking at the gauze on his chest Vladimir bit his lip. He had choices. The question was which one would be safest with such a large portion of himself trying to heal? ‘I could phase to the kitchen from here. I probably can make it down fairly easily, but the downside is my cells will take longer to recover and my dizziness can leave me open to the obviously enraged female’s attacks, if she decided to do so... I would also lose a chance to access the situation from a distance.’

Rubbing his forehead and feeling the sweat on his brow, he growled. ‘And if I take the stairs like a human I risk breaking my neck… because obviously, despite me being somewhat more alert… I'm
still half out of my head....’ Sighing he glanced back to the flooring. Another yell shook through the house and he stiffened.

“WHAT’S WITH YOUR SUDDEN CHANGE IN ATTITUDE ?!”

Looking from his chest to the floor where the sound was emanating from, he groaned. “I guess I’ll take the stairs....” Stumbling to the ajar doorway, he turned right and begrudgingly made his way past the storage room, avoiding looking at the room just to the left of the barely used staircase. Holding tightly to the banister he grimaced as he made his way down steps. His free hand clutched tightly to his chest as he sagged to the side of the wall and his knees tried to sway out from under him. ‘Lovely….I’m blacking out. Just what I need...’ Growling under his breath he stepped down the last few stairs only to hear Daniel talking somberly to the young female from the kitchen. The words however where to vague for him to make out. ‘ Fuck it. Might as well announce my presence. I can't even stand correctly now, much less turn invisible or teleport upstairs.’ Wincing he stumbled to the open kitchen and began falling forward.

Catching the doorframe, he grimaced in agony. A small line of crimson had sprung across his wrappings. Looking up, he spotted Jazmine Fenton standing near the breakfast bar. Her face turned to him and her jaw dropped in utter disbelief and surprise. “ Of course... more intrusive Fenton brats...” His eyes flashed red as he growled angrily toward the redhead before something else ripped from under the bandages. Eyes wide, his hand dropped from the doorframe and he fell forward.

Seeing the tile through his blurry vision, Vlad grimaced. ‘ Yeah. This is going to hurt.’ He closed his eyes tiredly only to feel a hand latching onto his shoulder. Now on his knees, he groggily made out Danny Phantom’s white hair nestled beside his own gray. Vlad, dazed from his wounds, went limp against the teenager.

Still somewhat coherent he numbly and bitterly addressed the two teenagers. “.....Since...when has my home become a teen..clubhouse...?” Daniel pulled away from him slightly to raise an eyebrow at the adult’s question. Seeing the red snaking across the bandages he himself became heavily annoyed. “Well, good afternoon to you to Plasmius!” Rolling his eyes he growled. “ Nothing says thank you like sarcasm! I mean, I could drop you? God knows you could use more time laying down.”

At this Vlad’s eyes narrowed through the daze and he numbly tried pushing away from the teen only to gasp in agony as his chest moved. Daniel, eyes wide, immediately latched his hands under Vlad's form and hefted him off the floor. Vlad's eyes hazily locked on the teen and realizing he was being carried bridal style he turned crimson. Hissing he glared at the boy. “Put. Me. Down!”

Grimacing at the verbal effort, he numbly struggled only to feel another rip through the gauze. He cringed and shut his eyes to avoid screaming.

“ Hold still you stubborn moron! Are you still drunk? Or do you fancy having your organs splayed all over the kitchen floor?” Daniel growled. Vlad, however, was becoming faint and his head was struggling to focus. Seeing Vlad conking out again and the now slowly turning red bandages he groaned. Jaz, now worried for the adult as well, quickly trailed her sibling to the breakfast booth in the corner of the kitchen.

The morning sun flashed morbidly over the scene. Vlad stirred slightly in the light. Jazmine’s hand quickly pulled back part of the open shirt to get a better view of Vlad's chest. Vlad feeling her hand jolted from his feverish fainted state and growled. “.... What do you...want?...To gloat?” His eyes flashed and sparked crimson angrily. Seeing her concerned eyes his own widened and then returning to a glare he snarled, “Don't pity me!” His hand snapped into the white marble he was laying on with enough force to crack it. Jaz, raising an eyebrow at the temper tantrum, flatly retorted. “Oh, this? This isn't piety, this is concern.” Seeing Daniel phase upstairs for something, she began inspecting
the bandages.

Vlad flinched as her hand connected to them tentatively. Now in pain, he snarled. “Don't touch me!” Seeing his neck she paused. Grabbing onto his shoulder she pushed him back down onto the table to inspect the curious marks on his neck.

‘Great, she inherited her mother's upper arm strength and I'm too injured to protest without passing out or making my condition worse. I should have just ignored the brat and stayed in bed!’ Her hand grasped onto his neck and she turned his face to the side. His brow furrowed in pain and his mouth opened in a silent scream. ‘THAT FUCKING HURTS!’ Feeling the fever from the contact with his skin she winced. “Well… you're really not doing well are you Masters?”

Vlad unable to answer moaned in agony as she continued looking at the marks on his neck. Daniel, having finally come back with the first aid kit, quickly snapped at Jaz. “Jaz? Stop touching his neck! Those are burns! That has to freakin hurt!”

Vlad, seeing Daniel, groaned. Forcing his voice and now slightly delirious he begged. “….Phantom….get her….off…” His head numbly rolled. Daniel in response glared at his sibling and she, finally taking the hint, removed her hands from Vlad's neck.

Vlad sighed in relief. Trying to focus he flinched as a duplicate of Daniel lifted up his torso. “You just had to go and move around! What part of ‘almost a corpse’ do you not understand?”

Vlad in reply, tiredly answered. “In my defense…m' already halfway there…”

Jazmine's eyes widened as did Daniel's. “Did you just make a joke?” Vlad rolled his eyes at Daniel's question.

“....Yes?…so…? Would you rather I talk to you pretentiously or condescendingly?” Vlad grimaced.

The duplicate grinned above Vladimir and Jaz snickered. “Well… that's new.”

Vlad glared at Daniel and Jaz before flatly retorting. “By all means…continue antagonizing me… trust me children….I may be injured but I'm not above kicking you both out by force…”

At this Daniel’s duplicate casually reached over and put a hand to Vlad’s chest. The adult recoiled in agony.

“Suuuuuurrrrrre…” Daniel smiled.

Vlad's eyebrow twitched. Regaining some composure, but still breathing heavily he snapped. “Listen you little punk! I don't have time for this! I've humored your request for rest but I have a job to do this afternoon. Injury or no…” The clone touched him again and Vlad practically fainted. The real Daniel paused from the supplies he was holding and looked to Vlad curiously.


Vlad’s face grew slightly panicked and realizing he was about to slip up he quickly tried pulling away only for Daniel's clone to squeeze his chest. Vlad writhed in agony and fell forward slightly. Sweating he tiredly looked back up at the sixteen-year-old and eighteen year old looking at him in puzzlement.

Swaying in the duplicate's hold, Vlad began mumbling somewhat incoherently under his breath… “...They……should...be back...where are...those morons?... Already found….stupid demon nest....”
Vlad breathed in heavily and, coughing, continued. “I've got work….let go….“ His hand numbly reached for the clones and weakly tried pulling away. “ I...don't want to...you...know...but I will use it...if you don't….” Both Jaz and Daniel stared apprehensively at the adult. Jaz realizing Vlad was out of it questioned.

“ Vlad? What work..?” Vlad, now slumped against the duplicate and breathing heavily, gently tried taking the hand holding him off again. “....Itz…a.....secret...It's important….“

Something on Vlad's palm flashed. His body bucked slightly with the energy and he groaned in pain. “...No…. not here…. damned...seal...stop…” Vlad released the clone and numbly grasped onto his right hand. Daniel, seeing this, motioned his clone to lay Vlad back down temporarily. Vlad’s eyelids heavily draped across the blue underneath and his hold on his palm began to go slack. Daniel, curious as to what Vlad was talking about, motioned his clone to hold him down against the marble. Vlad, unable to protest, tried to keep his right arm out of Daniel's grasp. Daniel however easily grabbed the limb. At his touch, a symbol of glowing white surfaced and fluctuated across the flesh. It was circular in nature with what looked like some sort of ancient writing around and through segments. Both Jaz and Daniel watched in awe as the symbol pulsed and buzzed with energy. “What the heck is that?” Staring over to Vlad, they both groaned. The adult had passed out.

“Well, the mysteries just keep adding up….“ Daniel rolled his eyes.

Jazmine looked from him to Vlad questionably. “ Danny? You never told me what happened and now I'm even more curious…“

Groaning, he got rid of his duplicate and tiredly rubbed his eyes. “Jaz. I'm having some serious issues with all of this. Heck, I still think I'm dreaming….“

At this, Jazmine reached over and pinched him hard on his arm. He yelped. “Okay. Apparently not dreaming…..“

Jaz rolled her eyes. “Let's bandage him first and then you can explain? His chest looks like an abstract painting at this point….“

Daniel smiled bitterly. “Sure. Let's get this over with. You seeing the wounds will probably help when I explain everything.”

Chapter End Notes

PHEW! I'm back ghouls and gals and ready to post A TON!

As you may have noticed this chapter and the following chapters don't have names. That's because you, yes YOU, have a chance to name them! Just go over to:

UPDATE: NAME GIVEN!!!! <3 Thanks Shelly

https://dannyphanwriter.tumblr.com/post/183613759898/chapter-naming

( Please forgive any minor spelling errors or grammar mistakes. The Lost Arc (Part One
and Two) is well over 900,000 words in draft format and editing it all would take FOREVER. <3 )

If anyone wants to make fanart or anything please check out my blog @dannyphanwriter on Tumblr.
Frowning slightly, he made two duplicates this time. Carefully grabbing onto Vlad’s shoulder blades they suspended him up so Daniel could remove the now completely bled through bandages. Vlad’s shirt lay on the bench seat next to him in a ruffled heap from where the left clone had tossed it. Vlad groaned in his sleep but didn’t stir from the movements. The palm still glowed and buzzed but seemed to be getting fainter. Putting a hand to Vlad he turned the medical wrappings intangible and yanked them off.

Jaz, seeing the extent of the damage, stumbled and almost fell backward. “Danny? What happened to him?”

Daniel grimaced. “Me.”

Jaz looked from Vlad’s bleeding and heavily damaged chest to Daniel worriedly. “What are you talking about?”

Sighing, Daniel gently lifted up Vlad’s neck to expose the fading burns ribbed across his flesh and then overlapped his hand to the marks. Jaz paled considerably at the sight.

Daniel gently began cleaning off the blood on Vlad’s chest with a towel he had snatched from the upstairs storage closet. “Jaz? He went into the Ghost Zone to save me and I tried to murder him in cold blood. You know that ghost I told you about? Nocturn? Well, Vlad somehow found me out there and tried waking me up. I think he probably used possession. He showed up in my dream… right after Sam was murdered and I...I just lost it.” Daniel clenched his fists bitterly. “I was ripping him apart, shooting him, burning through his neck… and he didn't even raise a fist at me… and then to top everything off?” Daniel gulped. Tracing a hand across Vlad's wounds he began medically taping the edges together. “God...Jaz. While I was at the hospital he was bleeding to death on the floor a few feet away from us…”

Jaz grimaced and looked to Vlad as she addressed Daniel again, this time stepping forward to help wrap the adult. “Daniel? Are you sure he shouldn't be in a hospital?”

Daniel frowned. “How would he or we explain away finger-shaped brand marks? Or all of these scars I've yet to figure out? I mean look at him!”

He stopped his wrapping and pointed a hand to a large pink scar looped across Vlad's right shoulder in a crescent. “That's a bite mark! Heck, he's riddled with all sorts of bizarre scars under his clothes. I think there are even bullet marks…. He looks like he's been tortured for Christ’s sake! I'm sure that would just go over wonderfully with the ER. Don't you?”

Jazmine traced another scar on Vlad's left shoulder curiously. It looked like a claw mark and beside it, there were two large circular scars rimmed by paper puncher sized holes, long ago sealed over. “No need for the sarcasm...I get what you're saying.” Finishing the wrapping, Daniel motioned his clones to lay Vlad back down. The adult stirred slightly and tried to wake up. Jazmine, noting the movement, ticked her head toward the adult to direct Daniel's attention.

Daniel still oblivious to the movement, had turned to put the rest of the supplies back up. In an annoyed growl, he ranted. “To add to this? When I found him yesterday he was completely drunk. We’re talking 1,000 times the legal limit. I'm pretty sure a normal person would get drunk from a
glass or two of Jack Daniel's or scotch, but seven bottles?"

Daniel wrung a hand through his white hair in annoyance. Vlad’s eyes slowly started to open and his palm flashed. Seeing the light out of the corner of his eye Daniel walked over to the adult and tried to get him to focus. Both clones dissipated. “Yo!! Earth to Fruit-loop? Do you read?”

Vlad stared incoherently at the teen. Shakily reaching a hand out, he limply laid it on Daniel’s shoulder. “Heads ringing….but I think… I read you…” He grimaced and moaned from the movement. “…. I think…. overdid painkillers… Ed wasn't here…. tried booze…and the fever wouldn't go….”

Jaz looked just as confused as Daniel at the name. “Who's Ed?” She hissed to Daniel. Daniel shrugged.

Vlad turning from the teen ranted under his breath. “...Stupid… green… runt…never should've upgraded…. Romulus is way more…responsible…”

“Wait… green?” Daniel paused in thought. Realizing Vlad was still out of it he gently shook the adult's shoulder. “You’re talking about Skulker, right?”

Vlad groaned at the name. “Asked’ the idiot to go searching… Him and Romulus both… Haven't seen them in a week… Already found the island and got…rid of it…”

Daniel's curiosity was peaked now. “Got rid of what?”

Vlad shook his head. “Another… one… dream stealer…was almost too late…. the pulse was fading…” Daniel froze.

Vlad, tired, grudgingly began closing his eyes. “.... It's been....weeks.... Sleep...I need...sleep.... but it hurts....” Vlad tiredly turned on his side and clutched his chest. Still facing Daniel he smiled warmly. His eyes, however, were hazy. Daniel's neon green eyes widened in shock and astonishment. “... Shouldn't have drank… Blood is not normal… transferred to ghost half….everything's mush....” He rolled his eyes. “Used seal… to much…M’ stupid…”

Jaz giggled slightly at this. Leaning in to inspect the adult she smiled. Turning to Daniel she elbowed him, “Danny? I think he's delirious from blood loss…” Daniel smiled slightly at this. “Yeah... that and the residual alcohol in his system…”

“ Fruit-loop? Your job? What is it?” Daniel asked hoping the man's inebriated state would yield the answer.

Vlad's brow furrowed slightly. “... Promised… wouldn't tell… promised to lie...... that's the plan... don't get involved... stupid plan.... brat got hurt...” Vlad was slipping again.

Daniel, now even more curious about the babbling, shook the adult roughly. “Your job Vlad? What is it?” Daniel questioned louder.

“...-demons... artifacts... get rid of... regulate...kill...really hate my job...m’ a halfa target board....” Vlad's eyes were closing.

Jaz put a hand to Daniel's and sighed in exasperation. “Daniel? He's not making sense. Let him go to sleep. I think the strain is messing with his head.” Daniel, however, suspected the opposite. In the last twenty-four hours, he had realized something. Vlad wasn't honest unless he was too out of it to realize what he was saying. Whatever he was babbling about and his expressions while he talked were all genuine. Daniel grabbed the discarded shirt and gently put in on Vlad. Sighing, he relented.
his mental frustrations and gently picked the now unconscious adult up off of the table.

“Jaz? I'm going to take him upstairs and put him back in bed. Do me a favor and don't go wandering around? This place is just as confusing and weird as that conversation we were just having with him…” Jaz raised an eyebrow. “I'll take your word for it.”

Floating into the upstairs bedroom and setting Vlad down on the bed, Daniel began tucking him in. Vlad turned slightly in his sleep. “Fruit-loop… When you actually wake up later today, you are going to have a hell ton to explain….”

Phasing through the floor, he happily noted Jaz turning off the burner on the stove.

Shifting back to Daniel Fenton, he tiredly mused, “I've searched this entire house practically for clues...and it's just making my head hurt worse…. Jaz? He has a box upstairs full of photos of him and dad…. and then there's the weird library… and, of course, I can't neglect to mention the abandoned room behind the stairs…”

Jaz raised an eyebrow. “Wait? Photos? That doesn't make any sense…”

Daniel rubbed a palm to his face, “Neither does Plasmius saving me or his fever last night. Jaz he topped one hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit. I thought he was toast. In fact, I'm fairly sure he would be if I hadn't cooled him down. Everything is a freaking contradiction. When he had his fever yesterday? He was begging and crying out for Dad. What even? And let's not forget him apologizing in his drunken stupor as well…to me, dad, mom…The list just keeps on going!”

Jaz was looking warily at the ceiling. “Yeah… this is really weird Daniel… but then again… he hasn't exactly been acting evil lately has he?”

Daniel nodded. “Yeah, I noticed. I'm even starting to think he's been bluffing for a while now… He is half ghost for god’s sake! If he wanted he could probably just kill dad off in some freak accident, he's smart. I know he knows that's an option. But does he ever commit? Nope. Zip. Nada.”

Jaz nodded. “I'm confused… really, really confused by all of this…”

Daniel groaned. Turning to face her, he flatly sighed, “Jaz? I'll figure this out. You saw his condition. He won't be out of bed for at least another day and a half. Maybe three. Those cuts and burns are deep. Tell mom and dad I’m helping Vlad out for a few days 'kay?”

Pursing her lips, she frowned. “Danny… are you sure? I mean… the cloning thing? Flirting with mom? The whole Pariah Dark incident? The portal stealing? That Red Huntress chick you were telling me about? The nanobots? I can't forgive him for what he's done.”

Daniel tiredly shrugged his shoulders. “Who said I was going to forgive him? I can, however, try to understand him and maybe he can change for the better…”

Jaz sighed. “Okay…okay… that's fair I guess….But, I will be checking in every day. You yourself just got out of the hospital yesterday.”

Grinning, Daniel lifted his shirt and tore off the bandage on his chest. A pale circular scar shined mockingly. In an annoying voice, he boomed, “I am Iron Man.”

“’You mean moron man?’ Jaz leered and rolled her eyes. Daniel, in response, snickered. “Hey! It's not nice to pick on someone when they're out of earshot.” He pointed to the ceiling and she smiled.

“I'm still going to drop by. You need clothes for the week, and a phone charger, right? I'll go home
and pack you some stuff. That alright with you?"

“Suuuurrre mom… whatever you say.”

Sticking out her tongue, she walked to the counter and picked up her keys. “See you in a few hours.”

“See you Jaz.” She then departed, leaving Daniel to cut the stove back on. Adding the carrots he paused in thought.

Vlad's words were still clanking around in his brain. “Another… one… dream stealer...was almost too late…. the pulse was fading…” Ten minutes passed slowly as he tried to decipher Vlad's words.

‘Dream stealer. He was talking about Nocturn. And the pulse thing he mentioned….he must have been talking about me...the question is what did he mean by another one?’

Another word flashed to mind and Daniel nearly dropped the bag of pasta in his hands. “Demons.”

“I think… I think I need a third party opinion…” Looking at the ceiling, he groaned as he felt the completely dead cellular device in his jeans. “Well. I could use the office phone to call Sam but I don't have her number memorized because her mom made her change it.”

Bitterly putting the lid back on the pot, he snarled, “That and Friar Tuck is useless with occultism. I'd be like asking me to do advanced Trigonometry with a toothpick for a pencil…”

Sighing, he absently tossed in the noodles and some celery flakes. Looking around the kitchen, he took note of the rather simple layout.

'Huh... You walk through the door and to your right there's the pantry. Walk forward and you hit the island, the fridge, and the sink. Go over a ways to your right and you reach the stove and the breakfast booth. Shouldn't he have something a little crazier or snobby? This is just a simple and plain kitchen…'

Walking over to the marble booth, he ran a hand across the large crack made by Vlad in his angry and hurt state. “That...is some seriously crazy strength for a half ghost vegetable…..” Picking up the bloodied bandages he went over to the trash can under the sink and chunked them in.

Somberly, he looked up at the ceiling. ‘Let him sleep for another hour. Then you can try and wake him up for food… For now Fenton? Those photos-...You need to double check….”

Morphing back into Danny Phantom, he casually flew over to the stove and cut down the burner.

Backing away from the stove and standing a few feet behind the island to avoid phasing through Vlad’s bed or the adult he jumped up and floated through the ceiling and back into the bedroom.

Vlad wasn't where he left him.

Chapter End Notes

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Vlad slept for a while, at least that's what he assumed. Everything had started to blur after Daniel's clone squeezed his still recovering rib cage. Vlad could still feel the prickles of pain shooting up his chest and flickering under his bruised and torn skin. He was about to go back to sleep when he felt the nausea hit. Holding back the sickness, he tossed the covers aside and half ran, half stumbled to the bathroom. Excruciating agony and pain caused him to almost double over. Choking back the bile snaking up his throat he fell to his knees in the restroom and began retching. ‘The alcohol is finally clearing out of my body… god it burns….how much did I drink?!?!’

Several minutes passed like this with nothing but pained vomiting and moaning to fill the room. ‘God make it stop….’ Delirious, he noted someone leaning down next to him and pulling back his hair. Vlad's bangs masked his view partially. Covering his mouth, Vlad grimaced at the smell of blood and alcohol around him.

Daniel's voice seemed to echo off the walls. “Vlad...just breathe…”

Vlad immediately tensed. Cradling his head with his hands, he tiredly turned toward the teen assisting him. Danny Phantom was worriedly leaning over his shoulder and supporting him so he wouldn't tip over.

Vlad glared at him. Eyes narrowed, he choked out raspily. “...Brat? Was having your clone torturing me really in anyone's best interests? .... I already have broken ribs… I didn't need to be knocked out like that!”

Daniel's green eyes widened considerably. Vlad, now completely empty, reached over tiredly and flushed the whiskey down the commode. The teen paused sheepishly in consideration of his words, “Um… broken ribs?....”

Vlad composed himself and sneered, “Yeah. Broken ribs. Three if I've counted correctly. Being kicked by a—” He stopped abruptly and, turning away from the teen, ripped the boy’s arm off of his shoulder. Leaning back against the wall, he tiredly inspected the bandages on his torso. Raising an eyebrow, he looked back to Phantom. “...New bandages? When did that happen?”

Vlad shook his head tiredly to try and jostle a vague recollection or memory. Nothing. Everything was a blurred blank.

“Well… after my duplicate squeezed you, you kind of started passing out. Jaz and I took the opportunity to change your wrappings.” Vlad tiredly gripped his chest.

“...God everything's still spinning…” Vlad leaned his head backwards against the wall, fatigued.

Daniel, seeing an opportunity, sat down next to the adult. “Vlad? Why do we even fight anymore?”

Vlad's eyes widened slightly at the question but, thinking quickly, he narrowed them and replaced his expression to mimic his mocking tone and voice. Snarling, he answered, “Well, let's see brat… It couldn't possibly be the fact that I hate your father or maybe the fact that I've openly tried to woo your mother into leaving him and marrying me? Take your pick! Or maybe we can just shoot back to the undeniable …”
Daniel groaned and cut the adult off. “Why do you lie to yourself like that?”

Vlad’s eyes widened again and he stopped in thought. ‘This… this isn’t good at all. Have I been slipping up? Of course… since she disappeared- I’m becoming too complacent.’

Daniel looked over to Vlad and seeing the expression from around the hand cradling his head, the teen smiled slightly. “You blame them, and you even say you want to kill my dad, but nowadays, at least in the last few months… you haven’t been into it. Our fights are shorter, and I think you’re even starting to end them earlier and earlier.”

Vlad dropped his hand and a ghost of fear flashed across his blue eyes. He was caught. They both knew it. A hand clasped onto his shoulder and he flinched.

“I used to hate you soooo much.”

Vlad tensed.

“We are the same and yet you’ve hurt my family and me time and time again with hollow revenge and stupid schemes…”

Vlad’s features saddened considerably. Yanking away from Daniel he stood abruptly. His eyes flashed crimson. “Great! Isn’t that the point?!?! I play villain, you beat me, they’re safe. Happily ever after! Goodbye. The end!” He glared first at the boy and then to himself.

“What would a blasted fourteen-year-old have ever known?!? Parading around like he knows exactly how the world works?!?! Two years of catching blasted level one poltergeists and some low-level ghosts in soup canisters and you’re still so dense! It’s arrogance and stupidity! Revenge? Seriously? I don’t need such a stupid excuse! I’m the villain! I hate all of you! Every single blasted Fenton! So why? We both know that’s what you think! Why go through the trouble?!?!? Is it some sickening form of guilt? Or am I really that pathetic?!?!”

Vlad, glowering at the white-haired and gaping teenager, turned abruptly to step out of the room. Still screaming he continued. “Heck! What was I supposed to do? How was I supposed to figure this mess out?!?! MY OWN FRIENDS DIDN’T EVEN WANT ME! And now look where I am? The stupid brat has finally pieced together something though! But wait there’s more… he still fails to grasp that even adults lie.” Shifting into Plasmius, he glanced back at the child who was now standing in stunned silence by the towel rack.

“You have no idea! Not a single clue what I…” Biting his tongue, Vlad turned. There was a flash of conflicted emotion followed by a grimace before he teleported away from the teenager.

Now in the library Vlad collapsed onto his side by the desk. Putting a hand to his throbbing skull he angrily screamed. “Sugar Cookies! I hate this!”

Reaching up to his desk he grabbed the leather-bound journal and grabbing a pen, roughly yanked it open and crossed out the illustration of Nocturn. ‘Blasted brat! And here I went and started ranting! How much does he even know? Should I be concerned about this?’

Growling he slammed the journal back onto his desk and began pacing. “What do I do? I’m already too far down the rabbit hole…. Two and a half years of planning. Scrap that, close to fifteen of me intervening! And for what? All of it to go up in smoke because of some condescending, angry teenager with no sense of fear? I mean FUCK!” Catching himself he angrily put a hand to his mouth. “Jesus Plasmius… pull yourself together…. it’s all just a bad dream… you’re probably passed out in the kitchen again… or Ed’s drugged you to get you to sleep.” He tiredly ran a hand through his
ebony spiked hair.

“ It's all a bad dream…. ” He sighed heavily and feeling the searing pain in his side began ranting again. “ OR not! Dreams aren't this fucking painful!!!!” He growled.

“ And now I'm cussing again. Just wonderful. I finally break the habit somewhat and I'm completely back to square one.” Standing, he gazed around the library.

'I need something to occupy my head…. I can start research on the next item…' Swaying slightly he floated up to a shelf and finding the book on immortality began reading through its contents. An hour passed. No new information surfaced. Snarling, he tossed the book back in its place.

Fishing out one on the Fountain of Youth he absently levitated it above his head and flew back down to grab his journal. Now with the two books hovering above his hand and a black pen, he casually floated to the ceiling and began taking notes. Time passed slowly as he wrote.

Suddenly feeling faint, Vlad bobbed slightly in the air. Dropping his pen to the ground he stared in disbelief at the rings circling his torso. ‘Everything is…-it's going dark...ugh…’

Slumping backward, he fainted. Both him and the items began plummeting to the floor. The books and the pen clattered across the rug. Vlad, however, was caught mid-air by a somewhat guilty and remorseful teenager. The adult’s fever had come back. Opening his eyes, Vlad furrowed his brow and turned away from the teen. “ What are you still doing here? More idiotic and childish stupidity? You might as well drop me and put me out of my misery. Heaven forbid I have to deal with either Skulker or Romulus after this…”

Daniel frowned. “You…. um…. what you said earlier….I….don't understand…”

Vlad, growling in human form, snapped, “ Isn't that the point?!?!?! You're just now learning to drive for pete’s sake! And your grades? Pfff. Of course, you don't understand! Best to just roll with the punches like you usually do, right?”

Vlad angrily teleported out of the teen’s arms and onto the floor. Doubling over, he coughed up blood onto the wood. Daniel paled at the sight of the blood and immediately bolted down to the adult.

Vlad charged a hand defensively and hissed. “STAY AWAY FROM ME!”

Daniel ignored the hand and sat down on his knees in front of the enraged and sickly adult. “.... Fruit-loop? Obviously… I…”

Sighing, he rubbed a hand down his face. “I think it's time we put this all aside…”

He paused and reached out a hand toward Vlad's glowing one. Vlad's wrist started to turn slack and his face grew confused. The plasma energy circulating around his hand faded and dissipated as Daniel latched onto his shoulder. “Vlad….I want a truce.” Everything went silent for what seemed like an eternity.

Vlad's eyes widened in disbelief, narrowing them he quickly whipped his head away from the boy. Dropping his hand onto the floor, he numbly squeezed his arm in an attempt to make sure he wasn't dreaming or passing out.

“ WHY GIVE ME A CHANCE?! ” His voice tried to carry as bitter but came off as pleading and remorseful. “ A truce?! After everything and everyone I've hurt you’re willing to bury the hatchet?! ” Vlad tried pulling Daniel’s hand from his shoulder only for the teen to tighten his grip.
“Of course Vlad… I can’t just go back to fighting you after I almost killed you.”

Vlad tensed instantly.

In an angry self-loathing voice, he questioned, “How did you find out…?”

Daniel smiled sadly. “Who else has a working portal and wears dress shirts twenty-four seven?”

Vlad chuckled bitterly. “Ah… so my own drunken stupidity was my downfall.”

Daniel rolled his eyes tiredly. “Or maybe your saving grace? Vlad? You can show compassion, kindness, remorse, and even grief… You and I? We’re both human and ghost. Those emotions, they don’t just disappear in either form. Granted, I don’t know everything. You’re right. I’m a kid still. I’m brash. I’m stupid at times. But apparently, you have those traits too.”

Vlad’s eyes tiredly stared into Daniel’s green. “And if I accept? How would this work Daniel? We’ve been fostering hatred for each other for over two years.”

Daniel paused and retracting his hand from Vlad’s shoulder put one under his chin to ponder the question.

Looking down at Vlad, he casually answered, “Okay. We do have some serious issues. Thinking about it though? It takes two people and understanding to work towards peace. Our differences… our history thus far…? We can’t ignore it but we can build something better for our futures. I want to work toward that goal. The question is, will you?”

Vlad looked from Daniel to his right hand and back to Daniel. With a defeated sigh he whispered. “I’m… I’m growing tired of this…. All of this. Daniel?” Vlad swallowed. “I think… I can try to strive for peace… It’s not like it matters anymore anyway. The jig is pretty much up.” He lazily motioned to himself. “I’m a pathetic mess playing games and life isn’t very accepting toward that….”

Daniel’s eyebrows furrowed. “You promise you’ll elaborate on all this? Right? I mean- Earlier your hand was glowing and then there are all these books…”


His shoulders fell. “You’re not going to believe the truth after more than two years of…” Vlad sighed deeply.

Daniel in response extended his hand to help the adult up. “Cheesehead? You don’t have to tell me right now… I’m not going to press you for information when you can barely even walk.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow and smiled sadly. “So, a promise to reveal everything eventually?” He chuckled sadly. “Now that really will be interesting.” Standing up Vlad’s legs suddenly began to go numb.

“WOAH! I gotcha. Go easy. You’re still injured!” Vlad leaning against Daniel’s shoulder laughed. “You must be joking… This?”

In response, Daniel looked at the blood on the floor and the red dripping off of his ex-enemy’s jaw. “Vlad? Are you sure I shouldn’t be flying you to the hospital?”

Pure fear and undiluted panic spread across Vlad’s face. He shook his head briefly and spoke in hushed tones to calm himself as he reassured the younger half ghost, “Daniel? I’ll be fine. I just need
bed rest.”

Daniel, having seen the fear flash across Vlad's eyes, sighed deeply. “That bad?”

Vladimir winced. “Little-badger? Humans….humans can be more monstrous than anything that goes bump in the night…. I can't even look at a hospital without-” Vlad grimaced. “Can we change the subject...please?”

Daniel patted his shoulder. “So….erm…. I made food…?”

Vlad raised an eyebrow. “Well… I'm not dead yet. As long as your cooking isn't as bad as your grades I may live through the night.”

Daniel’s eyebrow twitched as he walked Vlad to the kitchen. “This coming from a billionaire with insta-ramen in his pantry.”

Vlad smirked. “Are you insinuating I'm cheap? Pfff. I just have a bad habit of not eating properly.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Sure….and what about that tacky old phone of yours?”

Vlad raised snickered. “I assume you're talking about that old Samsung I use? Ghosts drain energy from surrounding objects to sustain themselves. Half ghosts pull similar stunts. That ‘tacky old phone’ has a really good battery. Additionally,” He sighed, “just because I have money doesn't mean I can spend it on whatever I want. Keeping up appearances is one thing. The money, however, can go toward more suitable endeavors.”

Daniel raised bit his lip in confusion and adjusted Vlad's weight before asking, “Like what? Aren't you supposed to be a thief?”

Vlad tiredly rolled his eyes. “Yes. I'm a thief.” He paused. “That much I'll admit.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow curiously at the statement. It had a double meaning, he was positive of that much. Finally, at the other end of the hall, he led Vlad tiredly into the kitchen. Vlad, still a little faint, timidly tried to pull away from Daniel. “I think I need to wash the blood off my face.”

Daniel in response rolled his eyes and tightened his grip on the adult's shoulder.

Vlad, more than a little peeved, reprimanded, “You know… I can walk just fine? It's what, six feet away? I can easily make it to the sink!”

Daniel snickered. “I had to catch you out of the air before you hit the floor a few minutes ago. Can you just let me lead you over to the sink without being a stubborn idiot?”

Vlad went to turn in order to glare down at the teen only to stop in his tracks. The boy had grown. Apparently, he had inherited his father's height and his mother’s slender frame. Two years ago, the teenager would have scarily reached his chest. Now he was practically at his neck. ‘He's growing fast…’

Daniel was staring at him worriedly. “Hey? Vlad? Are you alright?” He shook Vlad's shoulder. “You're not going faint again are you?”

Vlad snapped his head away quickly and snickered. “Ha. I'm being carted around by a pint-sized half ghost. Then again...this is probably an improvement over me being tossed around by a six-inch green globule with an attitude.”
Daniel smiled. “Skulker?” He shook his head in disbelief. “How do you get along with that lunatic? The guy has threatened to skin me alive multiple times. You’re a half ghost as well. I can’t see him just giving up on the idea of a halfa mantelpiece over his fireplace.”

Vlad groaned. “What have you been smoking? Ed’s not interest—” Vlad paused and facepalmed himself. Sighing he leaned against the sink and cut on the water. “Daniel? I’ll talk with him when he returns…..” Vlad tiredly washed the blood off of his face. A ring at the doorbell startled them both.

Vlad turned and, buttoning his shirt, teleported to the door before Daniel could grab onto him again.

Opening the door, Vladimir immediately froze. A sharp electric whir buzzed around the gun’s barrel. Something painful ripped through his chest, keeping him in place despite his mental pleas to flee. He didn’t even have time to shield before he felt the gun go off.

He screamed in agony as the electrical charge shot through his body. The force spun him from the entrance and into the hall where he crumpled to his knees from the residual charge. Two teens immediately rushed into the entryway.

Vlad slumped forward and fell face first onto the carpet as the shock dissipated. ‘Everything... it’s spinning…’ A girl with black hair and a crop top kicked him over onto his back. Vlad’s right hand sparked warningly. A teenage boy with a red beanie and a sweater vest clasped onto his collar and pulled him up slightly off of the floor. Vlad’s blue eyes sparked red and then white. Realizing he was about to lose control, he purposefully activated the mark on his hand, releasing a bright flash of white light.

Dazed, the two teens held their eyes. Vladimir began backing away in a panic as he felt his body forcefully shifting into Plasmius as a protective measure. White light was engulfing his limbs…. A deep voice echoed. “Child of man! Stay back! My body has no control right now! I don’t want to harm you! Please for my sake and yours, don’t…”

Another blast ripped through the room and Vladimir's body shifted. He screamed in agony. His tunic and cape morphed and a silver glowing armor eclipsed his form. A spectral shield rapidly engulfed his body. Everything was rippling and shifting with the white energy tendrils snaking and wrapping around the dome and the entire hallway glowed eerily as the two teenagers approached to finish the job.

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Pot Heads and Government Hackers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel had relented, thinking Jaz was just dropping his stuff off and that Vladimir could answer the door without hurting himself or being hurt. He couldn't have been more wrong. A large bang echoed through the house and an agonized scream ripped through the warm air. Dropping the bowl he was filling he immediately ran down the hall. A bright flash of white spectral light filled everything instantaneously. A panicked voice was pleading. “Child of man! Stay back! My body has no control right now! I don't want to harm you! Please for my sake and your’s, don't…”

Reaching the entryway he watched in horrified disbelief as Sam shot Vlad with the Fenton Spectral Disrupter in the chest. Vlad screamed in agony and his entire body pulsed in response to the shot. Then everything went deathly still and silent. A strange shield had engulfed around Vladimir's ghost half. His clothes had shifted to some sort of armor and his hand numbly sparked against the floor. His eyes, instead of a luminous red, were a glowing misty white. Daniel immediately ran toward the shield. “Vlad!? Can you hear me?” Vlad's eyes were trying to close.

Turning around to Sam, Daniel took the gun from her. “WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO?” She was staring fearfully behind Daniel. “... Dan…. behind you…. what is that…?”

Turning back to the shield, Daniel’s jaw dropped. Vlad's body was fluctuating rapidly with energy. It sparked and rippled across everything in luminescent white and pink tinted wisps while Vlad seemingly writhed in agony against the floor.

Looking up, he screamed. “ DANIEL! GET THEM OUT OF HERE! I'M TRYING TO HOLD IT IN BUT I DON'T HAVE THE STRENGTH TO CONTROL IT!” Daniel's eyes widened. All three teens could feel their hair standing on end from the electricity sparking throughout the room. Every instinct in Daniel’s body screamed for him to do exactly what Vlad said. Instead, he put his hands to the shield engulfing Vlad. “ VLAD? WHAT'S HAPPENING?”

Vlad clinched onto his right hand in a blind panic. Panting, he glared at the boy. Vlad struggled to his knees and, wincing, teleported in a flash of white and pink. As soon as he disappeared the entire house shook on its foundation. Dust fluttered down from the chandelier in the entranceway like confetti. Daniel gaped. Turning to Tucker and Sam in a blind panic he snapped, “ What did you shoot him with?!?!”

Sam glanced at the discarded gun in absolute fear. “ Just… just that…. I don't understand…”

Daniel immediately blasted the gun to pieces. There was an audible thump and a glow flickered and died around the corner. Running forward, Daniel quickly reached Vlad who had turned back human a little ways past the kitchen. Lifting him up he briefly noted the armor dissipated and condensing back into Vlad's skin. He quickly carried him into the kitchen. Laying Vlad down across the breakfast bar he began checking his wounds.

Dazed, Vlad’s eyes numbly locked on Daniel. “....Some friends….you’ve got....” He blearily tried to focus. “...Shoot first ask questions….later…. birds of a feather, huh?” Vlad flinched as Daniel touched his chest. Sam and Tucker stood at the door nervously.

Tucker seeing the bandages immediately rushed forward. Daniel, still angry at both Sam and Tucker snapped, “What the hell were you two thinking?”

Sam was stood shell-shocked by the door. Tucker, leaning over Vlad, answered, “ We went by your...
Vlad, now half out of it, looked over to Tucker tiredly. Turning to Daniel, he glared. “Why... didn't you get them... away? Do you even realize how much energy my body just zapped the basement with? I just melted a solid concrete wall and six inches of metal in the training room....”

Daniel's face turned ashen. “You did what...!”

Vlad flinched and tried to get up only to writhe in agony. Coughing, he slammed his head back against the white stone defeatedly. He paused. “Daniel... can you help me sit up? I can't breathe properly after your little friends zapped me. My lungs are still not taking in enough and the room is spinning.” Daniel quickly complied and lifted Vlad up to a sitting position. The adult tiredly wiped a palm across his face. Looking at the two teens now in his home, he groaned. “Ms. Samantha Ann Manson and Tucker Jeron Foley...?!” Vlad addressed the two tiredly.

Both Sam and Tucker froze at their names. Daniel also tensed. Vlad noticing their stares rolled his eyes. “What? You think I wouldn't know who's who in your little motley crew of ghost hunting novices?” He shoved a thumb at Sam. “I've already had to intervene on that one's part several times!” Turning to the teenager he growled. “First off! Ms. Manson? Next time you decide to jury rig a bulldozer make sure Daniel's around hmmm? You're lucky I was supervising and inspecting that building as part of my mayoral duties otherwise you'd be dead!”

Sam paled considerably.

“And then there's that idiotic thing you did with that spray paint over that blasted awning... a duct tape harness? Seriously? And...” Vlad's voice was heated and angry. Noting his frustration, he sighed deeply to calm himself and gingerly touched his chest. “Ow.”

Both Daniel and Tucker were staring from Sam to Vlad in alarm. Standing up, Vlad almost fell forward only for Daniel to catch his shoulder. “...Thanks... I'm still a little out of it...” Vlad muttered apologetically.

Daniel leading Vlad to the booth sat him down. Sam was starring from the door, wide-eyed like a kid who had stuck her hand in a cookie jar only for a parent to come around the corner. Vlad, seeing her expression, motioned her forward. “One last thing. When someone answers the door, ask before shooting, hmmm? I just nearly destroyed the neighborhood because of your stupid stunt!”

She looked faint. “You?...I thought...I tripped out of the way of that machine...You couldn't have.” Vlad’s eyebrow twitched. “Ms. Manson? The only reason you're not dead is because I was able to latch onto your ankle and turned us both intangible.”

Looking over to Tucker, he groaned. “At least this one has some brains... then again...” He glared at the teen, “Tell me Mr. Foley, with all your technical prowess and expertise, is illegally downloading government software to speed up a video game really worth it?”

Tucker's mouth widened and he flinched. “Um... How did you-?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “What? Do you think I wouldn't keep tabs on you all? You are kids! Ms. Manson's folks are too pompous to care for her little rebellious streak and your parents are too kind to notice your own idiotic stunts!” Feeling dizzy, Vlad groaned and put a palm to his forehead. “Uh... my head....”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Since when did you start spying on them? I didn't peg you as the
Vlad snickered. “Since when are you the expert on me? Last time I checked, you hated me prior to yesterday.” Vlad numbly put a hand across his waist and grimaced. “I only started spying on them after I realized a nature sprite took over Amity while I was away.”

He absently put a hand to the bridge of his nose. “I leave for what? A week? Next thing I know, I’m hearing news about a Leafman terrorizing an urban populace.” Vlad’s eyes sparked crimson and he snarled, “It’s a shame it attempted to feed on humans… blasted demon…” Vlad shivered. “Finding a disposing of the little weed before it could find a living host again was such a hassle.”

Daniel paused. “Leafman?”

Sam, however, answered, “It’s a nature spirit, one who is often associated with architecture. It’s usually not linked with an actual creature though.”

Vlad smiled tiredly. Clapping sarcastically he looked over to the girl. “Yes, usually... That thing, however, was a poltergeist created from the collective hatred for urbanization and expansion in Amity. An artificial spirit or ghost made from raw emotion and not the death of an actual person.”

Daniel’s eyes widened, “Wait? Undergrowth?”

Vlad yawned. “Yep. Poor Skulker and Romulus dragged me halfway across the ghost zone looking for the blasted monstrosity once it darted through a natural portal somewhere here in town.”

Vlad groaned. “Let me tell you… getting impaled in that thing’s home turf? Extremely painful…” He absently rubbed a segment of his chest just below his right shoulder. Glancing at Daniel, he snickered. “Just thank your lucky stars poltergeists are weak on this side. Otherwise? You’d have been done for.”

Daniel glared at the adult. “Weak? What are you, crazy? That thing zombified the entire town and was trying to turn everyone into mulch!”

Vlad laughed, “Little-Badger? That thing was a million times worse in its domicile. Its pollen could control a human being in the ghost zone. And its limbs? Each branch was able to create toxins lethal to both humans and ghosts. Skulker nearly bit the dust… and if I hadn’t used my body to shield Romulus? He’d be history as well.”

Sam swallowed. Turning to the girl, he sighed. “Ms. Manson? Come here. I have to check something.”

She stepped forward and his right hand shot out behind her neck instantly. She was out before she realized what was happening. Both Tucker and Daniel became enraged and rushed forward only for Vlad to put up a shield between them. Lifting Sam onto the table, Vlad growled angrily. “Of course… No wonder my entire body froze at the door. Blasted thing planted a seedling in her neck!”

Both Daniel and Tucker froze at this. “I take it she was its host?”

Vlad unwrapped some of the gauze on his shoulder. A circular scar was turning black and pulsating outward in vine-like patterns. Grimacing, he felt the spot before turning back to Sam and gently lifting her head. Raising his right palm, the entire room fluctuated with white.

Grasping onto the back of her neck with the charged hand, he extracted a small, red bead-like object. It immediately broke open at his touch and a black mist shot out. Thorny branches snaked across Vlad’s palm and rubbed into his flesh. He smiled condescendingly at the thorns engulfing the mark. “
Ashes to ashes…” Vlad snickered. The vines desperately struggled as he clasped his hand around the barbs, “You should have just stayed dormant. I may have overlooked this if you had just picked a tree to guard or became a nymph but a human host? A regrettable decision on your part, one I’m finally going to alleviate.” His palm sparked and the entire room flashed. When the light cleared Vlad slumped and fell backward into the shield….

“M’kay….. maybe used to much…. The seal hasn't been working properly for months…. Everything’s spinning again.” Grasping his head tiredly, he noted the blood dripping down his right arm.

“Ms. Manson?” He sighed.“You are alright. Wake up will you?”

Sam shot up at her name. Her eyes were wide and she looked confused. Seeing Vlad on the floor, she jumped down from the booth’s table. “What happened to you?”

Vlad annoyedly turned from the teen. “My job. Or at least a segment of it. I honestly thought I disposed of all of that monstrosity. Maybe I could have avoided getting zapped earlier if I would’ve checked you last month…” Groaning, his head swayed and he fell over. “Ow.”

Daniel tapped against the shield worriedly. “Um, Fruit-loop? Do me a solid and drop the shield?”

Vlad groaned and attempted to turn only to grimace in agony. Still facing away from Daniel, he flatly asked. “You’re not going to try and blast me I presume? I saw your hands charge the second I went for her neck. Not one for trust are we? If I jumped in front of a 100,000 pound machine to help her what makes you think I’d harm her now?”

Daniel realized the adult was right and paused awkwardly. “Oh…. Um… sorry? It's kind of a conditioned reflex at this point? I mean you were my arch enemy up until forty-eight hours ago…”

Vlad tiredly chuckled. Sam paled as she leaned over him. “Guys? His chest!”

Reaching down she quickly turned him over and he groaned. A large mark had ripped open where the circular scar had been. Vlad winced as she touched it. “Ms. Manson? Please don’t touch that.”

Feeling her head and her neck she froze. “My migraine is gone…. What did you do?” She paused fearfully.

Vlad’s shield cracked and shattered a few seconds later, dissipating into pink mist. Vlad tiredly responded. “Pffft….Gardening…?”

Daniel lifted Vlad up and glared at the adult's blatant disregard for bodily harm. “Cheesehead? What the actual heck?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “What? Would you prefer I just ignored it? That type of manifestation kills! I'll be damned if I was just going to let her walk out of her with a demonic house plant rooting through her skull!”

Tucker was staring in awe at the interaction. Vlad winced as he was lifted partially off the floor. “Daniel? That’s painful! Stop.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “And now we have to bandage your arm.”

Vlad frowned. “At least it's my right and not my left. I may be able to write with both, but my coordination is rather poor with my right….”
Tucker raised an eyebrow, as did Sam.

Looking at the teens he groaned, “What? Should I just start ranting or laughing maniacally? Proper villainous behavior?” He scuffed. “Sorry to be a disappointment brats but I'm not one to act when the curtains are drawn closed.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow himself. “Wait...what?”

Vlad annoyed teleported out of the teen's hands and plopped back to the booth seat with a defeated sigh.

“Let me simplify. I'm tired. I'm sore. I just blew up half my basement to avoid nuking a city block. And to top everything? I'm still food deprived and I have three chatty teenagers conversing in my kitchen. Two of which have shot or injured me in the last three days. I don’t see anyone who requires me to ‘save face’ at the current time and honestly I don’t really care at this point....” Looking at his arm, he bitterly sighed. “This blood is never coming out of this shirt....”

Absently pecking at his sleeve with his thumb and forefinger, he glared at the limb. Shrugging, he phased the now tattered and bloody shirt off and caught it on fire in a swirling mass above them with a plasma blast. Laying his head on cold marble, he ranted. “Might as well send it off properly....”

Tucker snickered. “You know? He's actually pretty interesting.”

Hearing this Vlad lifted his head to stare at the teen. “Hmmm? How so? Me blasting away things that contain my blood so a demon doesn't duplicate me again? Or maybe my lack of villainous pep?” He rolled his eyes. “Honestly, if that's what you consider interesting you're setting your standards low.”

The room went silent. Vlad rubbed his eyes. Looking at his arm, he casually inspected the damage. “Okay... I have to bandage this fairly quickly.... The poison is setting in.” Standing up he clinched onto his shoulder and with a curt nod teleported.

Chapter End Notes

PHEW! I'm back ghouls and gals and ready to post A TON!

As you may have noticed this chapter and the following chapters don't have names. That's because you, yes YOU, have a chance to name them! Just go over to:

https://dannyphanwriter.tumblr.com/post/183613759898/chapter-naming

( Please forgive any minor spelling errors or grammar mistakes. The Lost Arc (Part One and Two) is well over 900,000 words in draft format and editing it all would take FOREVER. <3 )

If anyone wants to make fanart or anything please check out my blog @dannyphanwriter on Tumblr.
China Dolls and Teenagers

Sam, Tucker and Daniel stared for a good five seconds at the place he had previously occupied. A crash below them knocked them back to their senses. Grabbing onto Sam and Tucker, Daniel phased through the floor. His ghost sense flared and icy air wisped through his teeth.

They were in some sort of vault. A bloody handprint on the door signaled the direction Vlad had went. The lights flickered off and on spastically giving the entire room a serious horror movie vibe. Various beakers, locked boxes, and spectral green cases housed items of every shape and size. Sam reached a hand out to one of the items. It was a doll in a small red kimono. Its brown eyes stared sadly out from under the green casing housing it. The moment her hand became too close to the glass, the object stirred. It's head clicked to the side and the ceramic making up its face cracked into a devilish grin. Sam immediately retracted her hand.

“Okay…. find the billionaire...get out of the basement? Sound like a plan?” Daniel questioned.

Sam nodded and Tucker before glancing back at the doll laughing behind the case. “You know… I may not be afraid of hospitals anymore after this…”

Walking out of the room they found themselves across from a rounded spiral staircase made of metal. Daniel inspected it and seeing no blood turned his gaze. The long room was lined with tools, beakers, and various machines. A portal gleamed warily from the opposite end.

“Blasted poison! I just can't catch a break?! First that lake poltergeist … and then…. that vampiric three weeks ago… and now where are we at Plasmius? You just got tased by some teenage ghostbuster knockoffs for Christ’s sake!”

Daniel, hearing this, clasped onto Tucker and Sam's shoulders and turned the three of them invisible. Going into the doorway they all stiffened. Right in front of them, a concrete and metal vault-like room stood smoking and crumbling. The door, broken in on its hinges, loomed threateningly. Peaking in, they all stiffened. Segments of the ceiling were crashed against the floor and various pieces of metal and wire were melted in odd heaps. Large gauges were torn into the back wall.

Daniel gulped. ‘This looks like the after effect of my ghostly wail...Did that stupid gun set off a similar panic mode?’

Directing himself and his friends from the disaster they made their way to the left. This door, unlike the others, was much thinner and had a small window. It also was ajar. Turning them intangible, Daniel casually stepped into the flickering room. It was a medical ward of some sort. Vlad was muttering under his breath and tossing several items out of a drawer angrily. “Okay. There is no more of that antidote I made for Skulker… That means I have to resort to plan B’.”

Sighing, his glowing red eyes glanced at the right arm, “The question is… with the blood loss recently and my injuries… will I even be able to regulate it?”

Rubbing his temple, he growled. “The limb is already partial shifting into Plasmius, I don't have time to debate this!”

Standing up, he turned to walk out only to immediately tense and freeze. He glared right at the spot the three teenagers were occupying and crossed his arms. “Nosey… intrusive … little morons…” Turning away from that segment of the wall, he stomped through the machinery on the left of the room and into the lab.
Daniel, Tucker, and Sam stood in silence for a moment before they all turned visible. They had been holding their breath from the moment he had looked over at them. “How….the heck?...Did.. he see… us?” Tucker choked.

Daniel was thinking the exact same thing. Running into the lab, Daniel watched as Vlad shifted into Plasmius and fell onto his knees panting. There was a large flash of white light that shot out from Vlad’s injured arm and a strange spark of energy that rippled throughout the entire basement. Daniel’s hair floated up and stood on end despite him already being in Phantom form. The light vanished soon after and Vlad, turning human, began angrily wrapping the limb in bandages.

Growling through the gauze he was holding in his teeth, he snarled, “.... Brats....lucky I didn't…. Stupid...stupid little…”

Tieing off the end of the gauze, he stood up and turned to walk back to the infirmary room only to start swaying unsteadily. Daniel, finally finding his voice, spoke up, “Hey? Vlad? Need a little help?”

Vlad paused and turned his head toward the teenager. Looking at his arm and his unsteady legs, he sighed. “ Yes... I think I can use the help…. but if you could tell those two to get out of.” Vlad suddenly tensed.

His face grew ashen and he teleported. Daniel felt his blood run cold. There was a loud crashing sound and then the screaming began.
Vlad was fed up. Standing up from the floor, he numbly grasped his throbbing and sore right arm. His embassy mark had purified the majority of the poison from Ms. Manson’s plant aliment but there would be traces in his body for a few days. He couldn't afford to strain the mark when his body was still recovering from his escapades in the ghost zone from trying to knock Daniel to his senses. Looking at the ceiling, he groaned. The lab portion was stable, as was the vault and the infirmary, the training room was toast, however.

‘It's a shame… Edmond just remodeled that room, and now it’s in complete shambles.’

“Hey? Vlad? Need a little help?”

Turning his head to Daniel he internally groaned. ‘Where are those other two?’ Focusing his hearing again he made out two heartbeats a little ways past the infirmary. ‘Shit! Those stupid brats are snooping in the wreckage.’

Looking at his arm and his unsteady legs, he sighed. “Yes… I think I can use the help…. but if you could tell those two to get out of-” Vlad suddenly tensed.

There was a familiar cracking sound somewhere close to the area the two heartbeats were coming from. Teleporting, he appeared just above the two teenagers leaning over a demolished practice dummy. The ceiling was coming down. He barely had time to shield before the large mass of concrete and metal fell down on them. Both teens, hearing the crack above, instantly turned and screamed. Everything went dark.

‘Okay… running out of juice….Where's that little moron when I need him?!?!’

Standing over the teens, his eyebrow twitched in annoyance as he numbly supported the shield around them. His arm had started bleeding from the strain on the muscles.“ You know? I'm starting to think you both are just complete idiots! Demolished room? Underground? Ring any bells?”

He swayed slightly with the outburst and dropped to his knees while still supporting the roof. The shield keeping them from being crushed like soda cans had so little energy it was incapable of anything but a light glow, which did nothing to illuminate the small six-foot space. Everything was pitch dark surrounded by a dull, almost dead, fluorescent pink mist. Vlad looked around tentatively. They were somewhere next to the far corner of the training room by the target practice simulation course. Glancing into the darkness masking the thousands of pounds of rubble above them, Vlad groaned.

‘Well, the good news is the house won't collapse on top of us. This is just the first layer of cement… Everything else is supported for large explosions to prevent any more portal mishaps….’

Vlad's eyes glowing red in the dark scanned around tiredly. The pink light encircling the space highlighted vague shadows but nothing else. Both Sam and Tucker were shaking against the floor. Vlad sighed. In a tired whisper, he addressed the two. “…Hey?... calm...calm down….. I'm going to try and phase to ghost form' Kay? I'll take up less oxygen… The brat, he’s-…He’s ... trying to find us…..” Dizzy, Vlad forced a shift.

Tucker and Sam both realized what he was saying and immediately calmed. Seeing Vlad's red eyes trying to close, Sam quickly jumped up to help support him and the shield he was projecting around them. “Just….. a little longer …. he's almost…. everything's getting really heavy…..”
Ms. Manson shook him slightly.

“Plasmius? Dude. Stay awake!” Tucker’s voice was now echoing in the dark.

Vlad smiled tiredly. “…. I've gone months before…. without sleep…. I can last a…. little longer…….” He looked to their left. “…. Stupid kid…. still has… got no clue…. how to focus hearing…. Then again…. the training room is pretty big…..”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “You can hear him?” Vlad chuckled tiredly. “…. How else…. would I …. have known… you were in here?..... I can hear his heart and lungs… he’s…. intangible…. but vibration still carries through the air pockets…… Surroundings…. echo…. lots…..” Vlad's head started falling forward.

Sam shook him again and he winced in agony. Feeling the immediate jolt, he opened his eyes slightly wider. Staring at the teen, he tiredly snapped. “ Ribs…. haven't healed. Still broken…. don't touch…."

‘I'm slipping. Everything's going really dark.’ Vlad tiredly stared at the wall next to them. “….. Foley?....Manson?…. I can't keep this up… forever…… I need the two of you to get underneath me……I-I….can shield…. you…. still…. even if this stuff falls……”

Both Sam and Tucker looked horrified. “ Dude?!? What?!?!”

Vlad annoyedly glared at the boy in the darkness. “ …. I'm critically wounded….. probably wouldn't survive…. can't even turn intangible right now…. poison from earlier… packs a punch…. I'm going to turn human…. I don't have a say.. The shield and the ghost form… are all I've got going right now……”

He coughed and felt something drip down his face. ‘Great…. ectoplasm…. I'm bleeding internally again… Shit… just bear with it…..”

Continuing, he finished. “….Please? …. I know you both…. hate me… kinda comes… with being a…. monster…. but I can still shield you…. The brat is... coming close though… Just a precaution…. if he doesn't.....”

Someone slapped him and he winced. Looking down, he noticed the goth girl’s tense form. “ What-?... What's that for???”

The boy next to her raised an eyebrow. “ Sam? Did you just slap the poor guy? What the actual fuck?”

Vlad groaned. “ Foley…. language....” His head started to sway. His eyes flashed from red to blue and the rings started to try and manifest. Snarling he snapped them back and away to keep his ghost form.

Ms. Manson’s face was horrified as she felt her hand. “ Your face-This… Is this blood?”

Tucker's head immediately turned back to Plasmius. Vlad, now slumping further into the floor, answered. “ ...Probably… Poison?… Blunt trauma?….. Maybe ectoplasm?…. It hurts….”

Tucker crawling over to Vlad put an arm under him to help keep him upright. “Sam? Help me keep him up!” She immediately went under Vlad's right arm and latched onto him. The shield was flashing. “ Stop…. you two…. Get under…. I'm not going to be able to……”

Tucker in response pointed to their left side. “ Sir? How far is he?”
Vlad struggled to hear through the blood drumming in his head. “Three feet… to your right…. There are air pockets… I’m… I’m starting to pass out….” Vlad feeling the rings shift him continued holding the shield in place. “I… I’m almost out of it…. bleeding-… bleeding a lot…. I… I’m going… to make the shield just… above…”

He tightened and constricted the energy just above their heads. Dust shot up as the rubble around them shifted slightly and settled. Vlad slumped against the two teens, his red eyes still tiredly flashing. “… Brat…. heard… he can get in…. get you out…..”

Sam shook Vlad. A futile effort...

There was a flash of green and Vlad finally passed out.
Vlad groggily came to as he was being carried down the hallway. ‘Infirmary…. they're taking me into it.’ “Vlad? Man are you alright? Hey!” Daniel was looking into his eyes and trying to direct his gaze. Dizzy, Vlad noted the cot he was being laid on.

" Hey? Fruit-loop? Come on! I can see you’re awake. Answer me!”

“.... Badger?..... They're safe right?... The ceiling….I heard it coming down...”

Daniel smiled slightly.

“You know Vlad? You’re a complete mess right now.” Vlad's eyes cleared slightly and he tiredly looked at himself. Foley was draping a blanket across his legs and Manson was taking off the gauze on his hand.

Groaning he shifted slightly. “....So much…. for me wrapping it… ?” He tiredly joked. Daniel, now inspecting his head, frowned. “ You used up too much energy earlier with that attack thing you did in that room, didn't you? You’re feverish again…”

Vlad nodded. “...Yeah…. that and the poison from the plant… bad mix…”

Daniel took a disinfectant cloth out of a jar next to them, opened it, and began trying to get the ectoplasm off of Vlad's mouth.

Vlad glared and numbly tried to move from the boy's hand. Unable to talk through the alcohol wipe and still dizzy from the overuse of his powers, he partially fainted from the smell and slumped back into the cot. Everything after that passed in a blur.

Daniel, noticing Vlad was semi-conscious again, gently began to inspect the wounds on his chest. Turning the bandages intangible, he daintily yanked them off.

Sam and Tucker both backed away in horror. “ Holy shit! You mean he was walking around like that?”

Daniel inspected the wounds and breathed a sigh of relief. “ Actually? This is way better than earlier. I can't see into his chest anymore. Everything is just flesh wounds at this point…”

Daniel gently placed his gloved hand against a bruised segment and Vlad groaned. “ Those must be the ribs he was telling me about earlier.”

Vlad tossed as he was lifted up and rebandaged. ‘ This… is ridiculous…. We're wasting more bandages than most hospitals at this point’ Vlad grimaced and almost completely passed out as Daniel pulled the bandages taunt.

A doorbell rang upstairs. Vlad stirred slightly from this. “ ....ugh… Daniel? Someone's at the door again…”


Vlad, in response, pointed to the still flickering lights. Grimacing, he calmly countered. “This place is trashed. Can you just get the four of us back in the kitchen?” He paused at the repetitive and annoying ringing imitating from the upstairs and his eyebrow twitched.
“Yes… that’s Jazmine ….” He stared back to Danny in exasperation. “I’m definitely not answering
this one….”

Tucker smiled and Sam elbowed him. “What? He has a point! I wouldn’t want to answer the door
either after getting electrocuted!”

Vlad smiled. “Glad someone understands….” He sighed.

“I’ll stay in bed for the rest of the day… Just please… get me upstairs? Being this close to the portal
when I have poison that consumes ectoplasmic energy drumming in my blood is making everything
worse, healing included. I need at least a day before it filters out.” ‘Or a week. My seal is being
pretty fickle and doesn’t seem to be working correctly. This, plus everything else is going to seriously
drain me.’

Daniel relented. “Fine. I’ll get you up there.” He looped an arm under Vlad’s shoulder to help him
up and then motioned for Sam and Tucker to grab on. “But I’m only taking you to the kitchen
because you still haven’t eaten.”

Vlad smiled slightly. “That too.”

Vlad sat down tiredly at the booth in the kitchen and, wrapping his hands under his head, he laid
himself against the stone. Closing his eyes, he tried to rest a bit despite the drumming in the back of
his skull. Daniel was somewhere at the door leading Jaz in. Too sore to move, he simply just fell
asleep where he sat.

Walking back into the kitchen, this time with Jaz in pursuit, Daniel glanced over at Vlad. The adult
had fallen asleep against the marble breakfast booth. Tucker was draping the gray medical blanket he
had grabbed from the cot downstairs over his shoulders.

Vague flashes of Vlad’s eyes rolling back came to mind. Daniel almost didn’t make it to them before
the shield Vlad was struggling to keep up broke..’Gez….that was close…’

Sam was next to the stove staring at the soup Daniel had cooked in annoyance. Turning to him she
spoke quietly, “Danny? This stuff is practically inedible at this point…”

Daniel smirked. “Well, I did start cooking it hours ago…” He rolled his eyes. “There’s not many
good options here. Plasmius has practically no food in this dump.”

Jaz raised an eyebrow, “Wait seriously?” Turning to the fridge she walked over and opened it. She
immediately stiffened.

Tucker curiously glanced from his seat across from Vlad toward Jaz.

Turning from the fridge her eyebrow twitched. “Wow….batchelor much?”

Daniel grinned. “I dare you to check the pantry. Trust me… it’s hilarious…” At this Sam dropped
the spoon she was absently poking the soup with and turned to eye the pantry warily.

“Should we be concerned?” She questioned.

Daniel chuckled. “Probably…yeah…”

At this Tucker stared over to Vlad’s sleeping form worriedly. Seeing neither Jaz nor Sam moving to
look in the pantry, he stood up and casually walked across the kitchen and into the sparsely lit room.

Staring at the shelves contents, he frowned. ‘Ketchup, mustard, a loaf of bread, peanut butter, insta-rame…’

He stopped in his tracks. Picking up the box, he restrained himself from laughing at the mental image of a blue-skinned, pointy-eared half-ghost in his thirties or forties slurping on dime store noodles. The image persisted and he burst out laughing.

Both Jaz and Sam ran into the pantry to see what had Tucker practically in tears. Seeing him sprawled on the floor holding a cup of ramen they both turned crimson. Sam snorted and Jaz began giggling. Looking back at the adult and seeing he was still sleeping, Jaz questioned. “Danny? You didn't stick this in here as a stupid joke, right? We're talking about Vlad Masters? Billionaire? Villain?” She prodded.

Sam’s brow furrowed. Looking around she paused and re-evaluated the kitchen. “Wait… there’s no cooks…. or maids….?” Looking at the shelf she absently touched the food. Half the bread was gone. A few apples lay scattered a few feet away on another part the shelf.

“This stuff… it's not even close to what my mom and dad have our butler and chef stock in the kitchen. The bread here? It’s stale....” She glanced back into the kitchen curiously at Vlad.

Daniel paused to reflect on this. “Well, I didn't see anyone in the house. No maids… no nothing. Everything's really clean despite that… Well, with the exception of the little girl's room upstairs. But that… that’s not something I want to ask him about.” Daniel shivered.

Sam paused at this information. “You mean he's been cleaning a house this size on his own?”

Everyone froze. Daniel looked around at everything in a new perspective. “I don’t know…. maybe? Sam, I've only been here for a few hours. Last night he was bleeding to death… it's not like I've had time to ask about his day to day lifestyle!” Realizing he had raised his voice, he looked back to the adult who had shifted slightly in his sleep at the noise.

Tucker whistled. “Dang… and I thought my chores were bad…”

Sam started pulling out her phone. Daniel raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

She covered one end of the phone and whispered, “Getting my homeboy Maurice over here. What else? You can't feed him that mess on the stove with him sick. And we can't make him anything when his food choices are worse than yours!”

Tucker smirked. “Did you just call your butler your homeboy?”

Sam smiled. “It pisses off my mom. I take pleasure in the little things.”

An older gentleman’s voice reverberated in the room. “Yes, Ms. Manson?”

“Hey, Maurice? Can you leave the house for a bit? I need a favor.”

The voice chuckled, “I don't have to dress as a giant frog this time, do I madam?”

Tucker snickered. “Wow.”

She elbowed him and, still smiling like it changed the tone of her call, continued, “No! No costumes this time. I just need you to have Amy cook some things for you to bring over.”
The butler paused, “That is durable. What do you wish for us to bring over? And the address would also be useful.”

Sam paused in thought. Turning to Daniel, she questioned. “What can we feed him?”

Jaz rolled her eyes. “Obviously soup is the best option… just tell him to bring over some edible chicken soup.” She smiled at Daniel's disdainful glare.

Tucker, however, interjected. “Pizzas would be nice to… if you’re buying and what not…”

Sam nodded at the two requests and, turning back to the phone, spoke. “Can you bring one meat pizza, one veggie pizza, two supremes, a couple of canisters of chicken soup, and some drinks to 503 Canterville drive?”

The butler paused at this, “Madam? Isn’t that the current mayor’s residence?”

Sam smirked and rolled her eyes. “Yes, it is. My friend Daniel is helping him out for a few days and we are all too tired to cook right now.”

“Madam? I hate to say this but you are a terrible liar. Whatever the case, I will bring the food you requested. I do expect you to give me a suitable excuse for your mother…”

Sam grinned. “Very funny Maurice! Mom left for that women's socialite event earlier this morning. She won't know unless you bring this up.”

Maurice laughed heartily over the phone. “I’m glad you are so spirited. It makes my job all the more interesting. I’ll bring the requested items within the hour. See you soon.” And then with a click, he hung up.

Reholstering her phone in her pocket she made mock finger guns at the ramen cup on the floor and mimed shooting it. Tucker grinned.

Jaz rolling her eyes walked out of the pantry and toward Vladimir’s sleeping form.

“You know, when he's sleeping he looks fairly normal….” She remarked.

At this, Sam leaned down to inspect the adult's face. Noting the silver gray hair sloppily splayed across his dark eyebrows and the shadow of gray arching across his subtle chiseled jawline, she rolled her eyes. “If you mean normal as in a romantic’s version of a vampire, sure.” She pointed at his rounded face and then smirked. “The guy looks like he’s practically wearing eyeliner he’s so sleep deprived.”

Daniel stiffened slightly. Fangs...

He hadn't seen them since earlier that morning.

He gulped. Sam noticed the reaction and turned. “Um? Why the sudden freeze frame Buzz Aldrin? See a ghost?” She questioned smugly.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “It's nothing. It must have been a trick of the light yesterday.”

Even as he said it, he was leaning in closer to examine Vlad's face. The adult looked fairly young for his age. Dad had told him Vlad was born a year after him, but the half-ghost looked like he was in his early thirties. Vlad shivered at Daniel’s proximity and turned his head ever so slightly in his sleep. Despite appearances from a distance, Vlad had a five o'clock shadow extending across his face and
even the tell tale signs of a light beard. The silver notably, made these small details hard to spot. Only his chin seemed to have a slightly darker shade to it. Hence the subtle goatee he sported. Daniel's interests, however, were on the mouth right below his greek nose. Or more so, what he presumed was hiding there. “So… um Sam? Vampires… How do you test for vampires?”

Tucker giggled. “Okay, guys I know Plasmius looks the part but that’s a stretch.” He pointed, “I saw him open his mouth earlier. No fangs.” He motioned with his fingers to his mouth sarcastically.

Vlad turned slightly in his sleep and yawned. There was a glimmer of something for a split second and everyone froze. ‘Fangs’

Tucker looked mortified. Jazmine, being the most forward of the four, walked over and began laying Vlad down on the booth seat. He stirred slightly and his red eyes locked on her questioningly. “…Watz… going on…?”

Seeing his mouth open briefly and noting the absence of fangs, she smiled reassuringly. “Nothing, you were just falling over… go back to sleep.”

He eyed her tiredly but, deciding he was too worn out, simply turned his head toward the side and fell asleep again.

Jaz put her hands on her hips and smiled. “Nope. Not a Dracula. Case closed.”

Daniel, however, wasn’t sure, and he most certainly would be checking later.

Sam was also staring with new found interest at the sleeping adult.

“You know…. vampires can retract their fangs in a ton of the myths, right? I mean…. He could have just woke up enough to realize and then hid them…”

Jaz raised an eyebrow. “Sorry, but I'm not boarding that particular train of thought. The crazy express can do without one more passenger. I'm already struggling to picture a billionaire surviving off of ramen and peanut butter. Thinking of him as a vampire just makes the entire situation all the loopier.”

Tucker grinned. “Dracula and Ramen? Pffft, yeah... that's a crazy mental image.”
Sam tapped her chin thoughtfully. She leaned over and felt Vlad's head. “Hey, Daniel? He's kind of feverish. Can you get some ice out of the freezer or something?” Vlad stirred slightly at her touch. Opening his eyes again he groggily stared at the teenager leaning over him.

“Uh….Manson? I didn't...almost fall over again...did I?” Vlad tiredly put a hand to his head. Sitting up he tried to stand only for Daniel to latch onto his shoulders.

“Fruit-Loop? Just go back to sleep? Your body is drained and you need the rest.” Vlad in response numbly tried freeing himself from Daniel's grip. “I'm fine….. This is just a normal day.”

Everyone raised an eyebrow at this. “Normal? How is this normal?” Jaz pointedly motioned to Vlad, who now slumped against Daniel's shoulder, scuffed at her appraisal of normalcy. “Granted, I haven't been wounded so severely in at least two years. But yes, this is normal.”

Tucker frowned. “Dude… your chest looks like it was stuck up close and personal to a hand grenade or a weed wacker.”

At this Vlad tiredly glanced at Daniel. “You know Daniel? I think he may have a career as a creative writer. A hand grenade to the chest is pretty accurate for the blasts.”

Daniel grimaced. “Uh… yeah… Vlad... I…."

Vlad sighed. “Don't bother. Apologizing for something you didn't mean to do is pointless. On the bright side, Mr. Foley may have come up with a new nickname for my repertoire against you. Weed-Wacker doesn't have the same zing as Cheesehead but I guess it'll work.” Vlad leaned his head across Daniel's shoulder.

“Just another set of battle scars… heck, give it a few months and they'll just become a part of the collection. You know it's funny? I was trying so hard… Trying to get someone to.....” Vlad's eyes were getting heavy again. “You're all still kids... I probably should just keep my private life out of this. Pfff… better than being torn apart molecule by molecule, right?”

Everyone's eyes widened in understanding of the phrase. Daniel's thoughts raced. ‘Oh god. Vlad knows about that? No wonder he's bitter towards Dad.’

Daniel gently repositioned Vlad on the bench seat. The adult too tired to argue was now sitting up again. He leaned his left arm absently under his head and glared at the table. Daniel, Jaz, and Sam sat across from him. Tucker casually stood near the island six or seven feet away. Finding his voice Daniel questioned, “Fruit-loop? Um. The molecule by molecule thing?”

Vlad's eyes saddened and he smiled tiredly. “Do you think you're the first to hear that? He started using it in college. Jack… and Mads, they thought ghosts couldn't feel pain. They said that dissecting them and tearing them apart wouldn't hurt… prior to the portal. That didn't sound right…. It kind of made me fearful. Molecule by molecule....” Vlad scuffed. “Not that it mattered. Ghost hunters and what not….” He moved his head slightly on his hand to stare up at the teens. “I'm pretty sure that's Jack's catchphrase now...” Vlad groaned. “Kind of like that stupid phrase you used for so long. Going Ghost? Ha. Well, at least the catchphrases didn't get inherited to Jazmine…” Vlad sighed.

The room went silent. Vlad tiredly curled his arms around his head and laid his chin against the stone. Rubbing his eyes he questioned, “What time is it?”
Tucker casually looked down at his watch. “Four thirty in the afternoon.”

Vlad immediately stood up with his eyes wide. “Fudge! That means she's going to…” Suddenly, dizzy Vlad swayed. Daniel immediately rushed up and went to steady the adult only for Vlad to back himself through the wall and out of the kitchen. To shocked to process what had just happened the four of them stood in place silently. Right on cue, a doorbell rang in the hall. A few seconds later the sound of the door opening reverberated through the halls. Vlad's voice could be heard.

“Mrs. Dolce, I do apologize but I have company over right now.” His voice was sincere and even.

A young woman’s voice politely answered. “I’m sorry for the intrusion Vladimir. I just brought the faxes from Trisha and those contracts. I thought you would want to look over them.”

Vlad laughed. “Yes, of course.” There was a pause. “What are these? Pills?”

The woman giggled, “No offense sir, but you've been looking especially exhausted the last few weeks. It's a herbal remedy one of the interns from the company recommended a few months ago. It's supposed to help with sleep.”

Vlad’s voice sounded slightly amused. “That bad? Really?”

“Mr. Masters? I've been glued to you since god knows when. You never sleep well. Just promise me you'll try? I know you have those…”

Vlad's voice stiffened, “Mrs. Dolce? Please. My sleep deprivation is just from work.”

She laughed. “Whatever you say, sir. Who's over? If you don't mind me asking?”

Vlad’s voice in a more kinder tone answered, “A few locals with some concerns about ghosts.”

Daniel and Jaz stifled a laugh. “I mean...he's not lying.”

The women's voice turned jovial. “Ah! The joys of you juggling more than you can handle strike again! Mr. Masters? I will be bringing papers by tomorrow for you to sign. You're already a few months ahead of schedule on all the proposed zoning plans and I'm happy to report that the permits have been cleared with the city.”

Vladimir’s voice became more enthusiastic but also a touch exhausted. “It sounds like you weren't thinking me capable? A business can't function by just handling problems and situations as they come about. We both know that you have to be ahead or you'll end up pulling the rest of the gaggle down with yourself. Running a town is no different.”

Jazmine raised an eyebrow at this, “That’s an interesting way of putting things in perspective….”

Sam nodded in agreement.

Mrs. Dolce's voice became bemused. “I was insinuating no such thing! You are capable. I'm just slightly worried you are overextending yourself.”

Vlad sounded just as bemused. “I'm not dead yet. I think I can handle the company and this town just fine.”

The woman giggled but it sounded strange…warped.

Vlad's voice became slightly confused but was still level. “What's so funny?”

“Oh, nothing! I'm keeping you from your guests. I advise you take those after they leave, hmm?
You look like you could use a nap. I'll see you tomorrow. Oh and there's that dinner party planned for this Wednesday at the fire department. You will be going, correct?"

Vlad’s voice was reassuring and kind. “Of course.”

Mrs.Dolce’s words practically became syrup. “Goodbye Vladimir. See you soooooon.”

Vlad paused and after a few seconds spoke. “Yes, see you tomorrow Mrs.Dolce. Please remember to call ahead this next time?”

And then the door closed. The sound of footsteps could be heard in the hallway. Vlad, however, didn't phase through the wall like they would've assumed. Instead, the slow labored footsteps echoed on the wood as he trudged toward the doorway of the dining hall connected to the kitchen.

The teens stared toward the doorway connecting the rooms in silent wonder. There was an abrupt thump and the next thing they knew Vlad's outstretched arm was laying in front of the opening. All four teenagers immediately bolted from their spots in the kitchen and ran to him.

“Holy shit! How did he change clothes so fast?!?!?” Tucker pointedly addressed the gray suit Vlad was wearing. Daniel, turning Vlad over and noting the fever again, began phasing off Vlad's dress jacket and vest. Vlad stirred slightly.

“Okay….crisis…crisis averted…” Vlad’s eyes were watering.

Daniel, lifting Vlad up slightly from the floor, frowned. “Yeah, sure. Except now you're even worse off. Did you seriously think that through? Your ghost form is already maxed out with trying to heal your wounds and you’re poisoned! Maybe a little more tact?”

Vlad furrowed his brow at this. “Danny Phantom… lecturing me…pffff.” He paused. Raising an eyebrow he deliriously looked up at the teen. “…Where did the vocab come from? …I thought…you were failing…English literature…?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I'm failing. Mainly because my backpack and my homework kind of get destroyed by ghosts. A lot.” He smirked, “Just because my grades are shit doesn't mean I'm not smart.”

Vlad smiled slightly. “Daniel? You've pulled stupider stunts then the other three teens in this room combined….Also, your last sentence was a double negative.”

Jaz broke out in laughter. Sam snorted and Daniel turned bright crimson. Tucker looked away from Daniel with a large smirk.

Vlad smiled tiredly. “Sorry… saw the opportunity…” Vlad’s eyes began closing. Sam rifling through the papers scattered around them began neatly stacking them. Picking up a plastic bag she looked at the contents curiously. Four white pills dimly reflected themselves in her eyes.

Daniel, seeing Vlad unconscious, gently lifted him up off of the floor and carried him back into the kitchen. Unbuttoning the shirt Vlad was wearing, he laid him back across the booth seat. Vlad stirred slightly as he was being set down. “Just go to sleep, you stubborn idiot.” Daniel snapped.

Vlad grudgingly nodded and dozed off.
Sam, still holding the bag, walked back into the kitchen with Tucker and Jazmine in pursuit. Clasping her pointer finger against the pills, she pulled the bag up to eye level and worriedly addressed Daniel. “Um, Danny? These pills that lady dropped off seem sketchy.”

Daniel looked up from Vlad to inspect the bag curiously. “How so? They're just capsule pills, right?”

Sam pursed her lips. “That's the thing… wouldn't she give him a bottle? And there are no markings on these. If I didn't know any better I'd say she was trying to date rape the guy.”

Tucker and Jazmine exchanged a look. “She did sound weird… Vlad even seemed wary….” Jazmine added.

At this, Tucker yanked the bag out of Sam’s hand and began searching up information on his PDA. “Uh… yeah… guys? These aren't listed on anything I can find on the web. And herbal stuff? It's usually not white.” He paused.

Looking at Vlad, he frowned. “These are clear capsules. It's some sort of powder… I think we should throw them away.”

Daniel looked at the bag warily. “Trash can is under the sink. Chunk them. Sleep drugs or not, he doesn't need to be conked out by shady pills, especially with poison running through his system.”

Tuck nodded and turning toward the sink opened the trashcan’s drawer. He was about to throw them in when he stopped cold. “Woah.”

Turning to Daniel, he pointed, “What's with all the booze bottles?”

Daniel groaned. “From what I gathered from the security cameras in this place, Vlad began drinking himself stupid because he couldn't take pain relievers or fever reducers. Trust me…. when I found him yesterday he was completely inebriated. Heck, I'd think he was still drunk if I hadn't seen him vomiting it all up earlier.” Daniel glanced at Vlad worriedly. Shifting back to Daniel Fenton, he sighed.

Tucker dropped the pills in the trashcan and turned back to the group tiredly. “So… are we going to talk about the level of weird here or not?”

The room was silent. “Danny? The guy was trying to get us under him when the roof was collapsing because he knew he was turning human… What type of villain does that? And Sam—...He took that thing out of Sam—”

Daniel leaning over Vlad checked his fever. “I have no clue. I really don't. He and I made a truce a few hours ago. The guy… he's different than I thought. Every other time we've clashed he's been ...I don't know….almost fake? But now…”

He glanced down at Vladimir’s sleeping form on the booth seat. “Guys? I’m conflicted. I've been fighting him for two and a half years and I never thought to look at him with a different perspective. He could have killed my dad. He could've killed me after the cloning thing. Heck, he's mayor now, he could have pulled anything he wanted in Amity and practically gotten away with it! But where are we at? He’s been fighting me less and less. His heart isn't in it. I'm starting to think it never was.”
Sam, seeing Vlad's fever still in full swing, walked to the freezer and began taking out an ice cube tray.

“So...basically, Vlad Masters is off the enemy board?” Tucker pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow.
“ You know... after today? I'm fine with that. He's actually kind of funny when he isn't plotting or doing anything dastardly and I'm growing attached to the sarcasm.”

Sam, finding a ziplock bag began filling it with ice and wrapping it in paper towels.


Jazmine smirked. “ Well, considering how many times he's passed out today… sure. Let's reform a narcoleptic sociopath.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Jaz? Narcolepsy means he conks out during the day. Vlad? I don't think he's slept in weeks. I mean look at the poor guy.” She motioned to Vlad's sleeping form.”

Jaz sighed. “ I'm sticking with sociopath, at the very least, until he proves otherwise.”

Sam rolled her eyes and turning to Daniel nodded. “ Considering he's saved my recyclo-vegetarian tush twice today? I'm fully acceptant of the whole reform the villain plan.”

Kneeling down, she gently draped the ice pack over Vlad's head. The adult grimaced in his sleep and opened his eyes slightly. Sam paused at the flash of red. Vlad's mouth was slightly ajar and a glint, again, caught Sam's eye. “ It's just some ice… it'll help.”

Vlad tiredly closed his eyes again and fell back to sleep.

Turning to Daniel, she smiled. “So… how about a tour?”

Tucker frowned, “ As long as it doesn't involve basements or creepy vaults.”

Sam nodded. “ Yeah, everything except those areas.” Daniel frowned.

“ Guys? This place is pretty boring unless you count the library, the little girl's room, and the storage closet. I can't take you into that bedroom.. it's... I don't know… like he was or is in mourning…”

The other three teens raised their eyebrows at this. He motioned them to follow him out of the room. Walking out into the hall, he led them upstairs where they would hopefully be out of Vlad's hearing range. Turning to them, he recounted.

“ Guys? That room…” He pointed to a door next to the staircase. “ It's like he lost a child. There's dust on everything… And the locks melted on the door.”

Jazmine's face saddened slightly at this. “ What does it look like inside? Besides the dust?”

To answer her question, he turned the wall invisible.

The orange and coral bedspread was caked in a thin blanket of gray. A set of children's books lay half opened in one corner, the pages had begun to turn yellow. A menagerie of stuffed animals peeked out from under the bed. The bed itself housed a lone teddy bear, slightly free of the dust blanketing its surroundings. Its small black eyes stared across the emptiness dully, like it too was searching for the room's occupant as well. The closet, slightly ajar, was filled with a ten or eleven-year-old girl's clothing. There was even a glass of water on the end table by the bed, ringed with
dust.

“Oh…. oh god…..” Jaz was looking at the room with remorse.

“Do you think he had a kid?” Tucker questioned.

Daniel looked away from the room and frowned. “If so….. I mean…..”

Sam looked sadly into the dusty corals. “Whoever she was… he loved her. Look at the books. The edges are worn from being read…. and that bear? It's well made, but if you look closely? The ribbon is frayed.”

The observation made the entire scene even heavier. They weren't supposed to be snooping there. It wasn't in their place. Dropping his hand from the wall, Daniel turned to the room across from them. “Okay…. you saw why I can't take you in there. Ready for more mysteries?”

They eyed the storage closet warily. Opening the door, he ushered them in and pulled the light cord. Sam's eyes immediately went to the cleaning supplies. “Well, those are old.” Tucker nodded in agreement. Jaz absently brushed her fingers across the copper dust pan hooked on the wall.

Turning to Daniel she questioned, “The photos… they're in here aren't they?”

Daniel in response flew up a foot off the ground and gingerly picked up a box from the shelves on the left side of the entranceway.

Placing it on the ground he pointed. “These? These take the cake for contradictory.”

Sitting down, Sam gently picked up a photo from the box. In it, a college version of Vlad was grinning broadly between a roller coaster line and Jack at an amusement park. Jack was wrapping his arm around Vlad who was wearing a large oversized hoodie. Part of Vlad’s face had a bandage across it. They were both happy and carefree. Flipping the photo she read the back. *Bay Beach Amusement Park, September 1991. The fourth week with goofball, 2nd year.*

Sam raised an eyebrow. “I thought he hated your dad… What are these?”

“I think these are the things he treasures……” Daniel looked at the box like it could crawl to life any second. “Which is why I'm almost afraid to look through them…” Sitting down, he picked another photo out of the pile. This one was different. Older. In it, a girl with copper brown hair cut to neck length was leisurely balancing a cookie on her nose while making a face. Her emerald eyes playfully loomed from the aged paper. Looking on the back, he noted the child's handwriting. *10th Birthday, May 11, 1984.*

He frowned. “Jaz? When was Vlad born?” Jaz scratched her head.

“I think he was born in 1972? He's supposed to be a year younger than dad.”

“I wonder who this kid is? A friend of his perhaps?” He motioned at the picture. ‘She looks familiar. I'm almost positive I've seen her before…’

Yeah, probably.” Tucker paused and, seeing another photo, his eyes widened. “Hey look at this one!”

He held up the photo for everyone to see. An eleven or twelve-year-old boy with black hair and an apron was grinning from behind a video game cabinet. His hair was cut in choppy layers and obscured a small portion of his right eye. The steel blue gleamed playfully from under his black
locks. His gray sweatshirt was oversized and frayed at the edges. Everything he wore looked worn in.

“Is that...?” Jaz gaped.

Daniel froze at the photo as well. Taking it from Tucker, he flipped it over. *Lismet Crane Arcade, First Day.* The description was vague but one thing was obvious, the boy in the photo was Vladimir. Dark circles were still evident under his eyes and despite his expression, he looked beaten down and fatigued.

“I've never seen a kid with that look in their eyes before. He looks...like he's broken….” Jazmine whispered.

Sam nodded and then seeing a small shade of green across the boy's wrist in the photo she paled. “Guys? Look at what's peeking out under the shirt sleeve. I think he was being beaten up or something.”

Daniel immediately dropped the photo like he's been slapped. “You think he was bullied or?”

Everyone went silent. Jazmine gently picked up the photo and replaced it to the abyss it came from. Latching onto another one, she smiled slightly. It was a picture of Jack and Vlad sleeping against each other on the floor surrounded by medical textbooks and notes. Vlad's pen lay limply in one hand and his eyebrows were furrowed slightly in his sleep. Jack, in contrast, had an arm looped over Vlad's shoulder and was sleeping with his mouth ajar.

Sam, seeing the photo, giggled. “Hey, Tuck? Daniel? Look at that.” She glanced over to Daniel and pulled out her smartphone again. Flipping through her camera roll, she came across a photo of Tucker and Daniel curled next to each other at the zoo. “Like father like son, heh?”

Daniel turned red with embarrassment and Tucker went to snatch the phone. Jazmine, however, spoke, “Who took this photo?”

Daniel looked toward it and sighed. “Probably mom. She seems to have taken several in there.”

Picking out another photo from the box, Sam grinned. In it, Jack and Maddie had fallen asleep next to each other in a lab. Several cups of coffee and various pens were scattered along the papers they were resting on. Her smile faded once her eyes spied what they had been working on. “Oh.... oh god…”

She quickly turned the photo. *Pfft lovebirds sleeping on the job again. March 6, 1992.* Her hand shook. “Danny? This is from when they working on the portal…”

Daniel immediately snatched the photo. Sure enough, a small metal hoop similar to the glowing green vortex that occupied his own basement was leering just outside of the frame.

Daniel grimaced. “I wonder... if that had never happened... how would all of our lives have played out?”

Jazmine sighed. “Looking at the glass as half empty isn't going to make anyone's outlook better.” She snatched the photo and her expression grew confused. “Is it me or was he setting Mom and Dad up?”

Daniel stiffened and, reaching into the box, he pulled out the selfie Vladimir took when he was younger at the bowling alley. The other three teens reading the back of the photo gaped. “I told you this box was full of contradictory stuff.”
Jazmine tiredly rubbed her eyes. “Vlad was a serious shutterbug in college wasn't he?”

Daniel smirked. “Yeah, except some of these were taken by Mom and Dad.”

Sam and Tucker groaned in frustration. “So...Plasmius has a lot of skeletons in his closet?” Tucker glanced at the box.

Daniel shrugged. “At least in this one anyway…”

Sam remembering something about the library questioned, “Sooo... um.... should we be worried about the library you mentioned?”

Putting up the photos back onto the shelf he smiled. “Sam? It's a thousand times more mysterious than the *Skulk and Lurk* on Elm.”

She smiled broadly. “Lead the way, Casper.”
X's and O's, A Paranormal Tic-Tac-Toe

Walking down the hallway, Daniel swung open the double doors leading into the room.

Sam, Jazmine, and Tucker gaped.

“ You know… I hate reading, but this place? This place may give me a reason to put down my PDA…” Tucker whispered in awe.

Both Sam and Jazmine were fixated on the large stained glass window.

Jazmine reaching over the railing traced a finger along the words enshrined in Latin.

*Ut ego esse praesidio qui opus praesidio,*
Dux pro illis in via,
A navi, ratis, a ponte, nam illi, qui volunt, ad crucem diluvium.
Ut dixi, et sit lucerna in tenebris,
A requies pro fessis,
Medicinam medicina ad omnes, qui sunt male
Vase, de copia, arbor miracula.
Et pro immensa turbas de animantibus
Ut ego adducam alimenta et quibus,
Perennem quasi terra et caelum
Donec omnia entia sunt liberati a dolor
Et omnes sunt excitetur.

Tapping her chin she began deciphering the words. “ That's weird… it's a prayer….”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “ You can read that?”

Jazmine smiled, “ Well duh! I want to be a brain surgeon! Do you know how many terms stem from Latin? I had to pick the language up.”

Both Tucker and Daniel stared at her slightly impressed.

“ Okay, so what does it say?” Sam smugly countered.

Jaz rolled her eyes.

“May I be a guard for those who need protection,
A guide for those on the path,
A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood.
May I be a lamp in the darkness,
A resting place for the weary,
A healing medicine for all who are sick
A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles.
And for the boundless multitudes of living beings
May I bring sustenance and awakening,
Enduring like the earth and sky
Until all beings are freed from sorrow
And all are awakened.”

Jazmine took a long breath after finishing the recitation.
Sam raised an eyebrow. “A Buddhist prayer written in Latin… interesting…”

Tucker frowned. “Not as interesting as the words themselves…the entire thing is basically promoting aid and peace toward others.”

Daniel nodded and touched the glass before he turned to the others. “And the mysteries deepen…”

Grasping onto Sam, Tucker, and Jaz he floated them downstairs.

Sam picked up a book from the chair next to her with a questioning expression. “Woah… interesting reading choice….” Her black nail polish adorned hand lingered across the title and the tell-tale pentagram. *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, & Pagans* flashed in white print over a plain black background.

Tucker, with the same amount of surprise, picked up another book. This one, substantially thicker, was navy blue with golden script tightly knit across its cover that read, *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal, Edited by: Gordon Stein, Ph.D.* Flipping through the book, he paused as a page fluttered out and fell to the floor.

It was a sloppy handwritten note. His brow furrowed. “Hey, guys? Come check this out.”

Daniel immediately floated over to peer at the notebook page.

*Fairy circles as natural portal manifestations? Check rune archives with Ghost Writer. Source of possible European disappearances. Research “sorcerers’ rings” (France). Also, look into “witches rings” and Walpurgisnacht, the eve of April 30. Get Ed and Romulus to gather information in the zone.*

Sam and Jaz raised their eyebrows.


Daniel looked at the page curiously. “Yeah, and then there's the books on ancient languages scattered everywhere and the maps lying all over the place charting the ghost zone and the real world. Heck, most of them are more detailed than the infi-map.”

To prove his point, he picked up a map of the United States covered in green wisp-like lines and symbols. Sam looked at the map in awe. “Daniel? That's hand-drawn.” Daniel stiffened and redirected his gaze to the map. Sure enough, the telltale blots of ink at the edges revealed the line work to have been drawn and not printed.

Jazmine gaped at the delicate and precise cartography. Gently pulling the paper towards herself, she scanned the key in fascination. “The circles represent permanent portals…. there's four in Wisconsin and two in Amity…. Triangles represent fluctuated or inconsistent portals… and the squares mark temporary portal spawning sites…”

Tucker whistled. “Wow… yeah, waaaaayyyyy more detailed than the infi-map.”

Jazmine, still looking at the key, paused and ran a finger over the looping signature in the far left corner. “Vlad drew this.”

Daniel immediately turned the map back towards himself to read the signature. Sure enough, Vlad's elegant looping scrawl was tacked across the bottom. “You know? The more I see the more confused I get?”
Tucker nodded. “Yeah, picturing Plasmius or Vlad drawing at a desk is kind of weird.”

Jazmine shook her head. “Is it really though?”

Everyone looked up to Jaz curiously and she rolled her eyes. “Guys? He is a half ghost. You want to know where you’re going in the zone, right? He’s no different. That, and from what we overheard earlier from that conversation with his secretary, he’s juggling not only being mayor, but his business as well. Tack in his endeavors in the ghost zone and he absolutely can’t afford to waste time getting lost or stranded in an alternate dimension.”

Sam traced the lines across the map with her fingers. “I wish I had this type of finesse with a pen.” She smirked.

Daniel smiled and shook his head. ‘Vlad? You’re one complicated enigma.’

Looking over at the floor, his gaze drifted to the items Vlad had dropped earlier when he fainted. Walking over he reached down and picked them up.

Sam and Jaz raised their eyebrows. “What’s that?” Seeing they were talking about the cramped and overstuffed leather journal, he sighed and tossed the ochre hardcover novel in his other hand to the side.

“This?” He lifted up the worn, tanned item sluggishly. “Like everything else here? I have no earthly idea.” He flipped through it absentely. “It’s written in some sort of foreign language. It looks familiar but I can’t read it.”

Tucker rolled his eyes and, leaning over, took the book and began rifling through it. “This looks like research notes or something…”

Sam peaked over his shoulder. “Yeah. OR SOMETHING. All those red x’s are giving me the creeps.”

Jazmine grinned. “Villainous maybe?”

Daniel shook his head. “I don’t think so.” Taking the book, he flipped through it till he came to the section on Nocturn. His brow furrowed at the large crimson x angrily drawn across the page with the wood engraving. Putting a hand to the image he shivered. “Some of this stuff is ripped from other books. These news articles are in English, so it kind of hints about the topic even if we can’t discern the rest of what's in the book.” He pointed a finger to the image and lifted the book up for the others to see. “This is Nocturn. Or was… I’m starting to get a clue as to what the x’s may be…”

Sam and Tucker stiffened. “So paranormal mafia?” Tucker questioned intrigued.

Jazmine, ignoring the image, began leafing through the articles. Her eyes widened and she furrowed her brow in confusion. “No…he’d have nothing to gain from messing with this thing. These articles are all centered on people being pulled off of life support after becoming comatose. Most aren’t even in this state. New York? Philadelphia? Heck, this one is from Ireland.”

The room went silent. Sam tentatively turned to Daniel. “So….um? Maybe a villain getting rid of competition?”

Daniel groaned. “I seriously doubt it.” Sighing, he shut the book still extended in his fingers and set it gently aside on one of the tables. “I plan on pulling out the truth from him eventually but I want to make sure he’s healed first. He seems to have a really bad habit of moving when he’s practically in critical condition and I don’t need him stomping out of the room again and fainting…” Daniel winced
at the recollection.

Looking to a spot a few feet ahead of them he sighed. “I almost forgot the blood from earlier.” He facepalmed himself.

Sam, Tucker, and Jazmine paled at the blood droplets. Daniel elaborated. “The moron teleported out of my grasp earlier and starting coughing up blood. I think he accidentally ripped something in his gut with all of his angry ranting and floating around. Either that, or it was the fall from the ceiling.”

Tucker looked horrified. “He fell from the second floor?”

Daniel casually waved him off. “I caught him, don’t worry about it, Tuck.”

Jazmine and Sam exchanged glances worriedly. “He fainted?”

Daniel rolled his eyes, “Well considering he was bleeding to death in the kitchen yesterday and had a temperature of one hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit? Yeah, he fainted. I should have dragged his ass to the bedroom again but I ended up bringing him to the kitchen. The guy hasn’t eaten in three days….”

The room went morbidly silent. “Please tell me your joking…three days?” Jazmine whispered worriedly.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “I wish. I had just set him at the sink so he could clean off the blood when Sam and Tucker rang the doorbell.”

Sam grimaced. “Yeah…. that wasn't exactly planned.”

Tucker glared at her. “Funny? Your hand was already on the trigger when I rang.”

Her eyes became downcast. “How was I supposed to know he was injured? Better yet, how was I supposed to know he made a truce and lost his villainous persona overnight? My thoughts were on Daniel being experimented on or cloned.”

Everyone frowned. Daniel absently ran a hand through his hair.

Jazmine sighed and looked at her wristwatch. “Guys? We should probably go check on him.” She pointed toward the blood. “If his track record from the last two days says anything it’s that he is stupidly stubborn.”

Sam nodded worriedly. “Yeah.”

Daniel sighed and, escorting them to the door, phased them all out of the room. Walking down the hallway, Sam abruptly stopped. Her phone had started ringing in her cargo pants. Whipping it out, she casually answered. “Maurice? Ah. You're here?”

She nodded her head to whatever he was saying and then hastily spoke, “No! No… I'll open the door. Don't ring or knock.” She furrowed her brow. Smirking, she casually lied, “Mayor Masters is on the phone with someone.”

She nodded her head to whatever Maurice had said. “Of course, I'll be right over.” Hanging up, she motioned Jazmine to follow her to the front door.

“W’ll bring in the food. You guys go make sure Vlad's ready to eat.” Turning toward the entranceway, she huffed under her breath. “Three days!”
Daniel and Tucker nodded and quickened their pace to the room.

Walking into the kitchen, Daniel worriedly rushed forward. In the hour they had been exploring, Vladimir's fever had apparently gotten worse. Still asleep on the booth seat, he was now laying on his side. The ice pack was sprawled on the floor in a melted puddle and his gray hair was splayed across his face in disheveled layers. His bandaged right arm hung loosely over his chest.

Leaning over Vlad, Daniel quickly crouched down and whipped the hair out of his face. Gently shaking Vlad's shoulder and seeing no real response, he motioned for Tucker to help him.

"Hey? Fruit-Loop? Come on… wake up?" Vlad's eyes were tearing in his sleep. Tucker raised his eyebrow in surprise. Leaning over Vlad and feeling the temperature, he shivered. "Danny? Man? He's not doing too good…"

Daniel nodded and this time turned Vlad over onto his back. The adult's brow furrowed in his sleep. "Vlad?" Vlad's eyes tiredly began opening. Startled, he shot up defensively out of reflex only to slump forward. Daniel immediately caught him. "Woah… easy…. just breathe. Your fever is getting worse. After you eat I'm going to give you some Tylenol."

Vlad grimaced and groaned. "…Everything's….it's burning again…"

Daniel smirked, "Yeah? Well, that's not surprising considering your lack of self-preservation."

Vlad snickered. "Whatever you say Inviso-Bill." Daniel's eyebrow twitched in agitation and Tucker covered his mouth to restrain his laughter.

Smiling, Tucker chortled. "I'm starting to really like him."

Vlad smirked from over Daniel's shoulder and continued, "And self-preservation has never been either of our strong suits, Daniel. Half-dead remember?"

Tucker’s grin broadened. He whistled. "You know Daniel? I believe your ex-arch nemesis has a knack for sass. He's more volatile than Sam and that's saying something."

Vlad raised an eyebrow at Foley and snickered, "Have you seen this kid’s grades? A gerbil could sass him and win."

Tucker’s mouth widened in a surprised and amused ‘o’.

Daniel trying to restrain himself from glaring at Vlad held him outward and flatly replied, "Really? A Gerbil?" Daniel rolled his eyes. "Plasmius? I hate to tell you this but the kid your insulting has saved your ass three times today. A little gratitude?"

Vlad went silent and his eyes became downcast. He bitterly laughed under his breath. "Thanks, Mr. Thermos…It almost would have been ironic if I could have just died after everything I've had to put up with the last…" Vlad bit his lip.

Seeing Tucker’s and Daniel's worried and perplexed expressions, he sighed. "Forget it."

He curled his arms under his head and laid himself against the stone again. "Just file everything I’ve said under the bitter arch-nemesis file you no doubt have stored in a computer somewhere…"

Tucker and Daniel exchanged a guilty look with one another. There was indeed a file on Plasmius
but it was more of a tacky collage of his exploits with some vague notes on some of his possible schemes sprinkled between hastily made quip ideas. It was really more of a cruel joke at this point.

Sam and Jaz came into the kitchen a few moments later with the food piled in their arms. Vladimir looked up at their entrance and raised an eyebrow. “Chicken soup and pizza, huh?”

Sam and Jaz both froze and gaped. Vlad rolled his eyes. “What? Hasn’t Dan…”

A look of realization passed across Vlad’s tired features and his eyebrow twitched. “Are you telling me Daniel hasn’t learned how to focus his powers to *any* of his five senses?”

He looked over in annoyance at the teen. “Dear boy, what do you do in your spare time? It’s been what, two years and you still have no clue how to master the basics of power manipulation? Or perhaps your so dense you failed to realize your powers strengthen more than just your muscles?”

Daniel immediately tensed. Vlad groaned and slammed his head against the stone. Raising a hand in defeat, he mused. “Why am I even surprised at this point? You would think with you being chased to kingdom come by spirits twenty-four seven you’d be able to grasp it…”

The sickly halfa sighed tiredly and Sam and Tucker raised their eyebrows knowingly.

Jazmine, placing the food on the booth counter, duly replied. “In all honesty? Daniel doesn’t learn anything unless he has an example.”

Vlad peaked out and snapped sarcastically, “Oh! I didn’t know that. I wonder how he learned duplication? Or better yet energy manipulation for shielding?”

He leaned in closer to the table. “Little green eye….”

The room went silent. Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Vlad? Erm…”

Vlad lifted his head. His eyes glared daggers at the teenager. “Oh come on! You started trying to master duplication soon after you first met me and your first successful shield was during our second fight. I’d be stupid not to notice your learning curve.”

Daniel sighed and bit his lip. “So? What does it matter?”

Vlad looked up to Daniel and a flash of unrecognizable emotion ran across his features. ‘Was that guilt?’ Daniel pondered.

Vlad turned and attempted to get up to leave only for Jazmine to attempt yanking him back into the seat.

“Let me go!” Vlad tried phasing out of his shirt to get free only to slump and fall forward.

Tucker quickly ran forward and caught his shoulder. “Okay? Guys? Can we all just take a chill pill?”

Looking downward at Vlad’s pained face, Tucker apologized. “Um… Plasmius? Er… Vlad…not really sure what you want me to call you at this point and all.”

Tucker readjusted his hold and led Vlad back to the booth. “I’m sorry for that…I know it probably hurt when I caught you. You need to eat though.”

Dinner was void of any social interaction between the five of them. Vlad ate in silence and once he was finished he stood up rigidly. Turning to Sam he bowed curtly, “Thank you, Ms. Manson, for
the meal.”

And then with a swift flicker, his eyes flashed crimson and he dissipated out of the kitchen.
The rest of the day was awkward between the two half-ghosts. Every time Daniel came into the room to check on Vladimir, the older man would snap at him. Daniel reasoned the sudden shift in attitude had something to do with the expression of guilt Vlad had exhibited earlier at the mention of Daniel’s lackluster power development.

Around eight o’clock in the afternoon Daniel was leading Jazmine, Sam and Tucker out of the house and into Jazmine’s car. Sending them off he looked at the house under a new lens. It was a simple constructed two-story. The outward appearance of the stone masonry was a purplish gray that screamed gothic manor. White spiraled columns stuck out on either side of the two large double doors. The bronzed handles were worn in and lightly faded from use. Five steps down from the entrance a large cobblestone road lazily wove through the greenery and to the wrought iron gate. Purplish pink roses laced up the sides of the yard leisurely. Daniel smirked at the placard dimly illuminated in the setting summer sun. The town had decided to make a removable sign for each mayor that gained residence starting with their previous Mayor, Ernesto Montez three years prior. The sign was a cruel billboard more than anything, that basically labeled whoever was housed under it as the town’s blame guy for the paranormal. The metal Mayor’s Mansion sign had switched locations from Ernesto’s humble suburban dwelling a few months ago to Vlad’s gate with as much fan fair and pep as the town could muster. In two years time, if Vlad decided not to run again, it would probably be in someone else’s lawn.

Sighing, Daniel casually strolled back up the steps and went back into the home.

“Pfff. The house even looks like a vampire’s den with that color scheme.” Daniel froze. He hadn’t had a chance to check Vlad for fangs again… ‘Okay. Time to sneak into his room.’

Creeping close to the wall adjacent from Vlad's bed, Daniel nervously floated past the fireplace and peered over the ruffled blankets. His gaze caught onto Vlad's sleeping form and he stealthily hovered over to the adult, intending to look at Vlad's mouth.

Vlad shivered at Daniel’s presence and turned on his side. A sudden thirty or forty-degree temperature drop tended to have that effect on people. Daniel internally facepalmed himself and gulped.

‘I know he had fangs earlier, so where?’

Slowly, Daniel floated to the side of Vlad and began leaning toward him. He was startled by Vlad's eyes flashing open. The scarlet locked directly onto Daniel's invisible green and then Vlad smiled devilishly.

“Holy shi-!” Daniel immediately yelped and turned visible with his hands raised defensively in front of himself.

Vlad’s laughter cut through Daniel's panic and then he groaned. Holding his bandaged torso Vlad smirked at the teen. “What exactly were you up to little badger? Maybe a game of hide and seek?” His eyebrow raised sarcastically at Daniel's flustered features.

Straightening himself Daniel snapped. “I was just… you… I mean… you had fangs last night?” Daniel wrung his hands in the air to accentuate the point. “What are you? An extra from Fright Night?” The teen stammered and pointed at the slightly annoyed adult.
Rolling his eyes Vlad sat up. “My dear boy, of all the films you could compare me to about vampires you chose that tacky flick? If you compare me to a vampire at least reference a more refined movie.”

“But...you had fangs!” Danny’s voice was laced with evident annoyance but wavered as he spoke.

Vlad, sensing an opportunity to both frighten the teen and shut him up, motioned the sixteen-year-old forward. Once within whisper distance, Vlad sneered jovially, “If you were curious, next time just ask.” Opening his mouth ever so slightly he allowed the teeth to reveal themselves from under the guise.

Daniel starred in perplexed amazement. “Woah! Wait. You mean you always have had those?”

Daniel leaned in closer making Vlad slightly uncomfortable.

Annoyed, he leered, “Always? Pfffff. Spectral fangs just came up a few years after my little accident while I was in the hospital. It unnerves people so I keep them cloaked.”

Daniel rubbed his chin in thought. “So what about that cloak or cape you wear when you transform? It wasn't some weird wear cosplay to science class day was it?” Daniel suppressed a snicker at the thought.

Vlad's eyebrow lifted questioningly and his usually stoic face contorted in confusion. “Cosplay?” He questioned. Seeing Daniel’s amused smirk Vlad assumed insult.

“I'll have you know Daniel, I didn't get the luxury of quick zap powers like a certain hyperactive brat.” He glared at the floating phantom, fangs fully exposed and his voice laced in venom.

Raising up his white gloved hands, Daniel frowned apologetically, “Sorry, I meant no offense fruit-loop.”

Vlad, still angry, continued. “My cosplay as you so sarcastically put it just developed with my powers as I shifted from sickly human to half-ghost. I had no say in the matter.”

“Vlad, do you realize how hilarious this is?” Daniel stifled a laugh. “Your name is Vlad, you have fangs, and you have a cape!” He pointed toward Vlad's annoyed skowl accusingly. “You're an accidental Dracula knock off!”

Vlad's eyebrow twitched. “At least I'm not the half-ghost equivalent of insta-ramen, Mr. one minute spook,” Vlad smirked.

Continuing, Vlad yanked the blanket back slightly and morphed. “As for your originality? You're not the first to point out the obvious. For all intents and purposes, I might as well be a vampire.”

And with that bitter note, Vlad's hand went to his head and he swayed. His half hearted smirk vanished. The rings flickered, and Vlad fell back against the bed with a dull thud. “….I guess I still have some... poison in me....”

Daniel worriedly landed next to him and put a hand to his feverish head.

“You know, it may not be all poison? I mean you were practically whiskey snorkeling yesterday evening.”

Vlad's tensed and gently tore Daniel’s worried hand away from his head. Groaning he brought his own hand up to cover his eyes dejectedly. “You weren't supposed to see me like that.” He flatly
whispered.

Seeing Vlad’s face, Daniel gently spoke, “Vlad? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have gone there.”

Vlad’s frown stayed and his somber eyes darted from Daniel. Turning to the side facing away from the boy he laid back down.

Nervously, Daniel raised a white gloved hand toward Vlad’s shoulder. Vlad tensed at the contact. His voice, muffled by the pillow growled, “Let go.”

Daniel loosened his grip but didn’t release his hold. “Vlad?” Daniel asked tentatively. “Why do you do that to yourself? I found the glass in the study…” Daniel frowned. “Do you do that all the time?”

After a few moments of stifling silence Vlad answered. “Only when I’m having a really horrible day… I don’t do that often, and when I do? I usually almost always grow to regret it after.”

Daniel sighed. “I’m surprised you don’t get liver poisoning.”

At this, Vlad groaned and, sitting up, began removing his bandages.

Daniel immediately yelped and rushed forward. “What are you doing?!”

Vlad, grabbing onto his wrappings, casually phased them intangible. “I’m showing you why the whiskey doesn’t kill me.” Vlad snapped. With one swift flick, the gauze and linen dressings fluttered onto the bed.

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Well, that’s definitely better than earlier…” Vlad’s chest, still riddled with damage, no longer had the gaping burn wounds it had possessed earlier and the large gashes weren’t bleeding.

Vlad, glaring at his wounds continued, “You already know we heal extremely fast correct?”

Daniel nodded. “Yeah, kind of hard not to notice when a large cut or gash disappears after a few days. Granted yours are waaaay worse. You are still trying to heal. Wasn’t that a little bit stupid ripping off those bandages like that?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “But you still assume we can get liver poisoning?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow intrigued.

Vlad rolled his eyes. “Okay, Daniel, teaching moment.” He paused and winced at his wounds. “Our cells, because we are constantly torn between dimensions by our spliced genetics, rapidly regenerate. Dying or damaged cells and flesh are just converted into plasma or spectral energy to feed healthy newly created flesh. Our cells don’t split like a normal human’s, instead, the materials just fade from existence and become something more easily used by our body.”

“Huh?” Daniel creased his brow perplexed.

Slapping his forehead and then instantly regretting the pain, Vlad continued. “We heal spontaneously? It’s kind of hard for liquor to effect someone who’s blood almost instantaneously filters it. When our spectral forms are weak however the healing slows or stalls. Human medicine seems to work on us fairly well because our body accepts it as an aid to our recovery. Liquor is recognized as a poison to our human halves and so our ghost half filters and destroys it much more rapidly. To poison one of us, it would take something far more potent than the average human would be able to handle.”
Daniel nodded, “So your body just regenerates faster than the booze can destroy it?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “In brat terms?” Vlad frowned, “Yes.”

Daniel not wanting to delve further into the whole liquor and self-poisoning topic quickly changed the subject. “Okay, so you say you've been compared to a vampire before but you don't like the movie I picked,” Daniel smirked and rolled his eyes. “Which movie would you want to be compared to?”

Seeing a shift in the conversation the fatigued silver headed adult answered, “Interview with a Vampire.”

Daniel now further intrigued prodded, “Why?”

Shrugging tiredly Vlad replied, “I can relate to Louis.” Vlad pursed his lips, “That and the book was a favorite of mine in college.”

“Oh… well, I mean..” Seeing Vlad's fatigued features Daniel sighed. “Nevermind.”

Vlad smiled curtly, fangs still exposed, and clapped sarcastically. “Congrats, we officially just wasted ten minutes of both of our lives on a conversation with no truly meaningful development.”

Daniel frowned. “That's uncalled for fruit-loop.” He rolled his eyes. “You didn't have to suck the life out of the interaction.”

“You do realize you openly compared me to a vampire, correct?” Vlad countered sarcastically.

Daniel's mouth twitched, “And you compared me to insta-cup cancer. At least I didn't go and poke fun at the fact you openly dissed a classic!”

Vlad, turning from Daniel, put a hand to his face to suppress the laughter trying to make its way out of his mouth. His eyes widened and his lips snaked into a jovial grin. Rolling his eyes he sarcastically quoted, “Oh, call me anything you want. Only you're the one failing trig, not me.”

Daniel stood, shocked at the genuine show of emotion and the rather specific reference. Pointing, he tumbled over in laughter. “Ha! For a tacky flick, you seem to have watched it quite a bit!”

Vlad snickered. “I blame Skulker. That mechanized pain loves the 80’s horror comedy genre.”

Daniel burst into a fit of muffled laughter at the thought of Skulker and Vlad sitting down and watching horror comedies.

Vlad crossed his arms tiredly and returned his expression to something more neutral.

“I hope our truce isn't solely going to revolve around bad puns and poor quality quips at one another.” His eyes flashed away from Daniel and toward the opposite wall. “I honestly have no clue how we are supposed to keep this up if all of our conversations consist of light hearted banter and insults.”

Daniel’s expression became somewhat less enthusiastic and more embarrassed in nature.

“Erm? Vlad? I have been thinking about what you said earlier….”

Vlad turned to him curiously. “What in particular are you referencing? Today I've been quite talkative around you and your friends.”
Taking a deep breath Daniel locked his gaze to Vlad’s tired gray blue eyes. “I was thinking…” Daniel began awkwardly twiddling his thumbs as Vlad stared at him. “Um… maybe we could train together?”

Vlad stiffened and his eyes locked curiously with the teen’s. He opened his mouth to speak only for Daniel to blurt, “We never do anything but fight. At least up until this point. And you were right earlier… I didn't know we could focus our powers like that. I have been learning my abilities solely based off of my fights with other ghosts...but I still don't quite know what I am doing. The only way we have ever resolved things is by fighting so why don't we turn that into something constructive?”

Out of breath, Daniel looked away from Vlad. Vlad’s eyes widened slightly and then he spoke. “So instead of beating the flap-jacks out of each other out of hatred, you propose we wail on each other for closure?” Vlad smirked and furrowed his brow. “You’re kind of weird aren’t you?”

Daniel turned scarlet and quickly tried to defend himself. “Well, when you put i-”

He, however, was cut off by Vladimir’s reply. “I accept.” Vlad casually answered.

Daniel’s neon green eyes widened in disbelief and his jaw dropped. Slamming his hands onto the mattress he questioned, “WAIT? WHAT?”

Vlad frowned and looked away from the teenager again. Dropping his hands from his chest, he tiredly explained the reason for his acceptance of the idea. “I agreed I would concede to a truce because I am sick and tired of fighting empty battles. If you think we can reach a level of peace through brawling with one another-” He rolled his eyes.“-as ridiculous as that sounds, I'll fight toward the progression of that ideal.”

Daniel beamed. Vlad snickered, “Well someone is happy. Is my reply that usual?”

“No… I mean...Just a little ironic.” Daniel’s smile turned into a half hearted smirk and his eyes became somber.

“How so? I don’t quite see what you’re getting at...” Vlad stared worriedly toward Daniel and began getting out of bed. Sitting at the edge of the mattress he pointedly questioned. “Do you mind elaborating?” His voice all though cool carried a hint of intrigue and worry.

Daniel grew silent. “Vlad? Gosh, this is a little awkward…” He swallowed. “You…”

Daniel bit his lip in frustration. “Fruit-loop? Why were you a villain? You kept trying to make me renounce dad… and the cloning thing…? I just don't understand...”

Vlad stiffened and something close to grief and pain flickered across his eyes. The expression soon dissipated into something fearful. Standing abruptly, he teleported leaving Daniel alone in an empty bedroom more confused than when he had first entered.

“He’s hiding something…” Daniel whispered to himself in an attempt to negate the crippling silence around him. A chill ran up his spine and his eyes widened. ‘His chest... and he just…’

Flying out of the room in a blind panic, Daniel began checking every single area of the house to no avail. He even risked a glance in the child’s bedroom. Vlad wasn’t in the home. Taking a peek outside at the foreboding black and gray whisps enshrouding the night sky Daniel paled. It was starting to rain. “Oh god…his fever.”

Daniel began flying desperately through the rain. ‘Come on…Vlad where are you?’ “VLAD!!!” The yard remained silent except for the rain picking up pace around him. “VLAD!!! CAN YOU HEAR
The rain was getting heavier. “FRUIT-LOOP! PLEASE?!?!” No answer resonated over the downpour. ‘Oh….oh god...He probably collapsed or he’s unconscious.’

Daniel darted between trees and outcroppings around the yard to no avail in his search for the adult. Thirty minutes passed with no traces of Vladimir. Stopping mid-air he shook the rain from his eyes. Duplicating into four, he sent two of his doppelgangers into town while he continued searching in the yard.

“Think Fenton..he couldn’t have gotten far with those injuries.” Daniel’s brow furrowed as he concentrated. “How can I find him??”

Vlad’s words came to mind, ‘The ceiling….I heard it coming down…’

Daniel’s eyes widened. ‘Concentrate.’

Closing his eyes, he focused on the sounds around himself. ‘Damn it. All I am hearing is this blasted rain!’ Swallowing, he put all of his concentration into hearing his surroundings. His jaw dropped. Small heartbeats, hidden in the trees pulsed and fluttered against the heavy drops of rain surrounding them. He could hear the small lungs that accompanied the songbird’s tiny beating breasts as they exhaled and inhaled. A much larger heartbeat drew his attention. The lungs accompanying it were strained and the breathing was faint and labored. ‘Vlad.’

Daniel immediately darted to the roof.
A Rose Prye

“How so? I don’t quite see what you’re getting at..” Vlad stared worriedly toward Daniel and began getting out of bed. ‘Is it really that big of a jump for me to be amicable around him? Then again everything I have done so far doesn’t exactly paint me as a dependable.’ Sitting at the edge of the mattress, he pointedly questioned. “Do you mind elaborating?” His voice all though cool carried a hint of intrigue and worry.

Daniel grew silent. “Vlad? Gosh, this is a little awkward…” He swallowed. “You…”

Vlad tensed. ‘Awkward? What can he possibl-?’ Daniel bit his lip in frustration. “Fruit-loop? Why were you a villain? You kept trying to make me renounce dad… and the cloning thing..? I just don’t understand…”

Vlad felt the entire world shaking out from under him. It was like he was suffocating. ‘And in the end? I really am a deplorable bastard...even if I tried to do everything right…’ Vlad stiffened and something close to grief and pain flickered across his eyes. ‘I can try to explain…’ Vlad opened his mouth to speak and then closed it immediately. ‘No I can’t. I am a monster.....They gave up on me...she’s died...he’s died...they’re gone. I am a liar and that’s all this boy has ever known me as. He won't believe a word I say.’

Vladimir could feel the fear lacing across the pit of his stomach. His face grew to mimic the undiluted panic and apprehension he felt at the teenager’s questions. Standing abruptly, he teleported. ‘No… I can’t. I don’t want to talk about why.’

Holding his breath, he felt the familiar airless void between pocket dimensions and the location he was focusing on before he reappeared outside next to the road. Hands shaking, he tiredly leaned against the front gate. ‘Breathe.’

He looked at his hands angrily. ‘Damn’t it Vladimir. You need to tell him the truth...you can't keep coddling the boy and you can't keep resigning yourself to perpetuating this blasted farce!’ He growled at his own cowardice. ‘You have nothing left to lose! Everything else is gone and here you are being given a lifeline by the kid...Just go in and apologize…’ Vlad turned from the gate and looked back at the manor now surrounded by flurries of black rain clouds. Biting his lip, he grimaced.

‘The problem is I don’t deserve forgiveness….I was trying to get them to-’

A deep searing burning sensation crawled up his throat. Coughing he staggered and fell face first against the front lawn. His chest felt like it was being squeezed and constricted against the ground. “What the-” Hacking and still coughing his eyes widened. Everything was spinning and rippling in his field of vision. ‘Couldn’t be... the poison…What is this..?’ Vlad winced and tried to crawl back to the house. With a sudden pop, he felt all the air leave his lungs as he was teleported and slung above the yard, chest first into the large thorny climbing roses encompassing the backyard.

The plants long limbs seemed to wrap around and cradle against his flesh as he fell into them. The burning persisted and seemed to permeate the air. The world became muggy and distorted. Vlad's arm tiredly tried snaking out from under the brambles only for him to feel a mind-numbing pain ripping through his chest. The sudden drop had reopened one of the larger gashes on his abdomen and he was bleeding out heavily.

Vlad’s blue eyes widened in panic. ‘My powers.....what’s?’ Everything was burning...an unnatural
fiery heat...and then suddenly it was raining. Vlad began passing out. Struggling to breathe, he attempted teleporting back to the house only to feel his body being flung into the large cupola over the manor’s purple-grey shingled roof.

A panicked voice was screaming for him against the thunder and heavy rain. “VLAD!!!” The heat was becoming heavy.

Choking, he pleaded, “Help......it burns...” Reaching out a bloody and still thorn covered arm he weakly clawed at the wall obscuring his view. Another sharp pain stabbed through his chest and Vlad’s arm fell limply to the floor.

Struggling to breathe and losing to much blood, he numbly curled against himself. The room was fogging. ‘Why…..I don’t..understand....someone...it’s burning.’

“VLAD!!! CAN YOU HEAR ME?!?” The rain was almost deafening and the thunder made everything numb against the sixteen-year old’s frantic words. Vlad’s eyes were watering. Steam was engulfing everything and Vlad’s soaked clothes drank at his wounds greedily. A small crimson puddle was forming under his waist.

The rain was getting heavier. The boy’s voice, now more frantic, was desperately ripping through the static of water and thunder .“ FRUIT-LOOP! PLEASE?!?!”

Swallowing, Vlad choked, “Badger...here..in here…..”

‘It burns...it’s so dark…’ And with those last thoughts, Vlad’s eyes closed.
Sticks and Stones

Daniel’s ears led him to the small room like protrusion on the roof. Phasing through the wall, he froze as a flash of lightning illuminated Vlad. Eyes wide, he immediately charged a hand with glowing green energy so he could access Vlad’s condition. The adult’s limbs were entangled in several small segments of thorns and briar rosebuds. Small nicks and cuts laced up every square inch of exposed skin. Turning Vlad over, Daniel felt a weight drop in the pit of his stomach. Vlad’s chest had reopened. The large wound in his lower abdomen was now freely bleeding onto the roof. “Vlad? Can you hear me?”

Vlad's breathing, now heavy and labored, came out of his mouth in steam like clouds against the moisture in the air. Daniel gently shook him. “Vlad…. wake up…."

Realizing the dampness wasn't helping him, Daniel gently hefted Vlad into his arms and phased through the roof and into the hallway on the second floor. Flying through the room's, he made it to Vlad's bedroom. Vlad, trying to come to, moaned.

Daniel's eyes immediately darted to Vlad's face. The adult's eyes were trying to focus. “Vlad? Hey?”

Vladimir winced. Coughing, he hoarsely rasped, “….Powers went...spastic….couldn't…” Dizzy his eyes tried to close only for Daniel's hand to redirect him. “…. Badger?....I fucked up…."

Daniel's eyes widened in surprise. ‘ Did he just cuss?!?!?!”

Vlad, still trying to talk, continued, “….Panicked.....wasn't ready to...talk....kinda stupid....Was going to...apologize....ugh.” Vlad's eyes began watering. “... It's burning....”

Daniel, dissolving his previous duplicates, made a new one in the bedroom, “Quick, towels. He's bleeding too heavily.”

Vlad grimaced. “... Fell…. got teleported over yard.....couldn't fly…”

Daniel paled. ‘ Oh god…. he fell?!?!!’

Vlad was starting to pass out again. Daniel gently sat him against the wood floor by the fireplace. “Vlad? How far did you fall? I need to know.” Vlad's eyes were closing again, and Daniel gently patted his cheek to coax him back. “Come on..Fruit-Loop? How far was the drop?”

Coughing, Vlad winced. “Don't know….couldn't breathe...could see the roof…” Vlad turned against Daniel's hold slightly and began blacking out.

‘ That's what, thirty feet? Jesus Christ.’

Seeing Vlad’s eyes closing again, he laid him against the floor on the makeshift towel mat his clone had set up.

Vlad somehow still awake chuckled quietly, “....Ed is....going to...murder me…”

Daniel’s clone returned with bandages from the infirmary and sat down next to Vlad to keep him still while Daniel patched the wound. “Vlad? I think you need stitches…”

Vlad winced. “...You can try.... wouldn't do much good.... it'll start closing...in a few hours …”

Vlad grimaced and tensed as Daniel began cleaning the wound.
Daniel's brow furrowed. “Vlad? I…” He sighed as he began tethering the skin together with medical tape. “I'm sorry about this…”

Vlad grimaced. “…Not your fault…one hundred percent mine…He even warned me… but I didn’t…listen.”

Daniel's eyes widened and he looked to Vlad worriedly. “What are you talking about?”

Vlad winced and now slightly more delirious mumbled, “Clockwork…he warned me…said I had to start teaching you formally instead…of the cloak and dagger bullshit…..Told him to screw off…”


Vlad’s head fell further into the towels. “….Clockwork….after he did that….I was so angry….haven't spoken in over a year…..”

Daniel, now leaning over Vlad's head, gently lifted him up so he could clean the cuts on his face. “You know Clockwork? I don't understand… Every other ghost thinks he's a myth….How do you-?”

Vlad smiled. “….My job….He's annoying….Kidnapped me twice…Real bastard….”

Daniel's jaw dropped. Vlad laughed quietly. “Should have seen….when I decked him….ha…..”

Daniel's eyes were practically jumping out of his sockets. “You punched him? How did you manage that??!”

Vlad snickered. “…M’…more powerful…than him…he's just an appointee….no biggie…” Groaning he numbly reached a hand to his head. “….Uh….now I have to..explain what that is…”

Daniel, however, sighed. “Vlad? Don't worry about it tonight. Just explain everything when you're healed….I don't need you having a panic attack or something when your chest is sliced open.”

Vlad’s eyes narrowed under heavy lids. “Wasn’t….really a panic attack…” He swallowed. “Wasn't sure you...would've believed….after all the...lies...Didn't want to chance it….”

Daniel smiled half-heartedly. “Ah….so you teleporting away from me was because you were nervous?”

Vlad smiled tiredly. In a cracked and faint whisper, he concluded, “...Sure...Badger...let's go with...that…..” And then he was out.

Daniel shook his head to clear out the clutter accumulated from the events of the last twenty-four hours. Cradling Vlad's head, he gently applied two band aids to the deeper cuts on his face and seeing his clone was already done with Vlad's arms and ankles, he phased Vlad's shirt off. Tossing the bloody and tattered fabric aside, he began inspecting Vlad for any other wounds. Seeing none, he sighed in relief.

Glancing at Vlad's pants, however, he openly cringed. The grey suit pants were stained dark crimson. ‘Shit…I can't leave him in those…’

Gently putting down Vlad's head, he quickly phased off the ruined clothes and casually tossed them over his shoulder. ‘Woah…his legs even have scars.’ Seeing a circular mark on Vlad's calf he grimaced. “Bullets, huh?”

Frowning, he looked over Vlad curiously. ‘Claw marks, puncture wounds, bullet holes...teeth
marks…” Daniel groaned. “You know? This isn't helping my head? I'm already confused and this is just adding to it.”

Seeing some cuts along Vlad's lower legs, he began cleaning them. Vlad shivered and attempted to turn on his side. Daniel's duplicate however quickly caught the movement and turned Vlad back onto his back. Groaning, Vlad tried opening his eyes again. “...uh...Daniel...What's-?” Vlad's eyes widened slightly at his state of undress. “Ugh... Daniel...clothes...what happened to my clothes…?”

Daniel sighed and casually flicked his thumb at the wad of bloody fabric behind him. “They're unsalvageable. Do you have any pajamas I can help you into?”

Vlad, grimacing, nodded. “Drawer...in the nightstand…” He tiredly lifted his arm and latched onto Daniel's shoulder as the teen tried to stand up. “...Thanks.... I know... you probably...still...hate...me....”

Daniel grimaced at his words. “Vlad... I…” Vlad dropped his arm from Daniel's jumpsuit and groggily began pulling himself up only for Daniel to quickly latch his arms around him to keep him from falling over. “...I wanted you...to hate...me...that was the plan....” Vlad tiredly slumped against Daniel. “I couldn't avoid it....”

Daniel's eyebrows furrowed. “Vlad? Why did you do it?”

Vlad tensed. In a muffled voice, he whispered, “Daniel? I can't... I just can't tell you.... Not now.... It's too hard to explain...especially when I...” Vlad's voice broke.

Daniel's eyes widened worriedly and he winced. Sighing, he gently helped Vlad to his feet and led him to the bed. Helping him into his sweatpants he smirked, “Do me a favor, will you? Stay in bed tonight and don't go ripping yourself open again?”

Vlad snorted. “Trust me... I don't plan on doing that again.”
“Hey, Vlad?” Daniel sat behind the kitchen island pouring himself a bowl of cereal. The small multi-colored loops clinked and spun against the dark ceramic. “Why don’t you have any maids or cooks in this place?” Casually, motioning around with his spoon he continued, “I mean, you’re loaded. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Vlad smirked and rubbed the back of his neck. “Why would it make any sense to have them?”

Daniel glared from the counter and raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Privacy is a treasure, especially when you dart in and out of alternate dimensions constantly.” Pursing his lips and raising an eyebrow, Vlad turned away from Daniel and re-tied his hair. Rolling up his sleeves, he reached for a small pan above the stove. Yesterday had been strained and awkward with the teenager around and he was starting to find himself falling further and further from his normal habits around the boy.

Daniel groaned behind him. “I still don’t get it. I mean… I have people around at my house constantly, what’s the difference?”

Vlad chuckled bitterly and, raising an eyebrow, turned to the fridge a pulled out some bacon and a couple of eggs.

“Daniel? I have no doubts that you yourself have almost been caught darting out of that portal in your basement at one time or another, now picture that situation with complete strangers milling around who don’t care for anything but their next paycheck.”

Daniel stirred his cereal haphazardly. “So… Big-bad Vlad Plasmius is afraid of company?”

Sighing, Vlad countered. “Just imagine the situation we had yesterday, hmm? If there was a maid or a cook who could gain from exposing my secret they would do so without a second’s hesitation. I’m fairly prone to hazards with my job and I doubt I would last long if I came home injured only for the GWI to incarcerate me because of a hired hand’s loose lips. Being torn apart by humans again isn’t something I fancy.” Vlad, now staring at the food he was tiredly trying to cook, failed to notice Daniel’s sad and almost fearful gaze behind him. ‘Holy shit. I… Jesus… how many of those are from people?’ His mind began running through the dimly lit memories he had of Vlad’s scars.

Yawning, Vlad tiredly stirred his bacon. “Or to put this into a more relatable perspective? How would you feel if a stranger unearthed your greatest secret and stood to gain from revealing it?”

Daniel winced and dropped his spoon. Averting his gaze from Vlad, he muttered, “I guess that kind of does make sense…”

‘Those bullet marks…. those had to be from humans… How many other marks are there?’ Daniel stared at his bowl for a moment before he dejectedly retrieved his utensil.

Turning, Vlad tiredly crossed his arms, “Now dear boy, do you mind explaining why you are still hanging around my house?”

Daniel couldn’t help but reply with sarcasm, “I suppose it’s because I have a desire for the company of a rich bratty adult?” Batting his eyelashes and cradling his spoon to his cheek, he smirked at Vlad.

“I didn’t sign up for a babysitter Daniel.” Vlad’s eyebrow twitched in agitation.
Rolling his eyes and putting another spoonful of cereal in his mouth, Daniel swallowed and then snapped, “Vlad? I'm not stupid enough to let you off the hook after yesterday. Heck? I should be dragging you to a hospital.”

Vlad's shoulders tensed and his eyes flashed crimson. Frowning, Vlad immediately turned from Daniel to stir his food. Daniel frowned deeply and winced. ‘Damn...I just brought up the hospital thing again…’

Looking down into his cereal, he began stabbing his spoon into the milk drenched mess. ‘...fruit loops?’ Something mischievous and playful flashed in Daniel's blue eyes. Vlad distractedly stirred his bacon unaware of the looming doom behind him.

“Hey VLAD!” Daniel screamed. Vlad instinctively morphed as he spun around. A large spoonful of circular multi-colored cereal splattered against his ghost form’s forehead with a humiliating thunk.

Vlad closed his eyes and his eyebrow twitched in irritation. Daniel burst into a fit of laughter at the sight and, gripping his stomach, gleefully prodded, “Look Fruit-Loop, you have company now!”

Watching Daniel's movements from the reflections in the pots and pans above the stove and seeing another spoonful of soggy grain being loaded and aimed, Vlad sighed. A playful and mischievous light of his own flickered across his fatigued eyes. ‘Two can play at this game.’

He pointed his hand upward toward a slightly larger pan above his head. Feigned grabbing it, he took careful aim with a plasma blast. A satisfying pop of ceramic and a loud splash followed. Turning around and crossing his arms leisurely, he smirked at the now sopping wet and angry youth. Shifting back into his normal human form, he raised an eyebrow and prodded, “Next time little badger? Weigh the merits of milking a situation for everything it’s worth before committing.”


’Pffft. Daniel? You had to see that coming.’

Vlad averted his gaze and covered his mouth to keep from laughing at Daniel's shaggy black hair. Several dozen fruit loops were slowly slicking across his raven locks in a race to see what color gravity preferred. Others still, hung around dryer tufts like they were a part of a miniaturized ring game from a carnival.

Hearing the stool being backed up, he returned his gaze to the teenager. Daniel casually glared at Vlad and then turned intangible to relieve himself of his breakfast turned fashion statement. Vlad, turning from the teen, cut off the stove burner and made his way to the fridge. Opening the door, he casually grabbed a carton of orange juice and, glancing back at Daniel, smirked. “And you’re cleaning that up.”

“Stupid old man…” Daniel snarled angrily under his breath. Reaching down, he grabbed the largest segment of the bowl and cradled it against his palm. Vlad, who was pouring himself a glass of orange juice, paused and raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

Daniel’s sneakers squeaked slightly as he rounded toward the trash can with the remnants of the cereal bowl. Looking up at Vlad, he snapped, “You heard me.”

Eyebrow twitching in irritation, Vlad interjected, “I'm forty-two, that hardly counts as old.” Recapping the orange juice, he squeezed past Daniel and placed it back in the fridge. Grabbing his plate and his glass, he went over to the booth by the window.

Daniel stared at him in perplexion. Vlad grabbed his newspaper and casually opened it. “Wait, forty-two? Daniel wasn't the best math student but even he knew the number was off. Eyebrow raised, he continued, “That doesn't make any sense! You and Dad were only a year apart in college and he's turning forty-seven this year.” A frown spread across his face.

Vlad, now tiredly eating his breakfast showed no sign of indiscretion at the observation. Internally, however, Vlad was making careful notes on how to handle future situations like the predicament he had just roped himself into.

’Shit. Okay…. play it cool. You just need to guard what you say more often when you’re around him.’
Casually taking a sip of his drink, he redirected his attention to the newspaper. “Decide what you want, Daniel… It's not like it's a fairly important tidbit of information.”

Daniel, in response, rolled his eyes and stubbornly marched out of the kitchen and toward the upstairs storage room. Grabbing the broom and a mop, he quickly sank through the floor and flew back to the kitchen.

Vlad, having just finished his food, calmly folded the paper on the breakfast bar and grabbed his dishes before trudging to the sink.

Daniel muttered angrily behind him as he picked up shattered remnants of the cereal bowl. “Stupid aim…. lousy old…..”

Vlad smiled warmly out of the view of the teen and, then frowning, he began washing the dishes. Thirty seconds passed and Vlad had just set the items on the counter to dry when he spotted a piece of blue ceramic poking out next to the island. Without thinking, he instinctively reached down to pick it up. Eyes widened and he immediately shot out a hand to grasp the counter.

Daniel’s blue eyes darted to Vlad at the sudden movement and, dropping the mop, he sprinted over to him. “I told you getting out of bed this morning was a bad idea! Cheesehead, Jesus! What part of almost died do you not understand??!”

Vlad frowned, “Shut up. I’m fine Daniel.” Squeezing his eyes shut for a brief moment to gather himself, Vlad abruptly straightened his posture. A sudden jolt almost broke his composure.

‘AH!!! JEZ THAT HURTS!’

“Just clean up your mess!” He snapped. Cutting off the sink, he hastily made his retreat from the kitchen. Rounding the doorway, his eyebrow twitched at Daniel’s parting comment, “Jerky Fruit-Loop.”

‘Little brat.’

Walking down the hall, he stopped just prior to the library and turned into his office, or as Daniel had labeled it “his private study”. Growling as the pain flared up, he casually snatched his cellphone from the desk and attempted to click it on. “Out of battery…. well if that isn’t the most inconvenient-”

Sighing, he grabbed onto the old black landline phone on the edge of his desk and dialed in Bertra’s phone number.

A few seconds passed before Mrs. Dolce’s overly enthusiastic voice dripped on the line, “Mayor Masters? Why aren’t you calling me from your cell phone?”

Cradling his head, Vlad forced a change in demeanor before answering her tentative question. He chuckled dryly. “I’m afraid my cellphone is out of battery and I haven’t the time to charge it.” Absently, he began flicking through the papers Bertra had dropped off the evening prior.

Bertra’s voice chimed over the line, “You sound tired Vladimir. Did you take those pills I gave you?” Vlad paused. He definitely needed the sleep. He had been feeling sickly for several weeks now. Skulker and Romulus had both noticed his deteriorating health as well and had told him to stay in Amity while they searched in the zone for artifacts and demons. He had been attributing the sudden weak spells and feverish episodes to work-related stress. Running a hand through his silver hair, he guiltily answered, “No, I’m afraid I lost them…. Yesterday was rather nerve-wracking with so many guests milling about in my manor.”
Bertra giggled. “So what can I do for you, Vladimir? Are you coming to the office today?”

Grimacing, he politely responded. “No, I can’t come to the office today. Something has come up. Can you bring my work for the day here?”

Bertra’s voice, still upbeat, wavered slightly with intrigue. “Sure Mr. Masters.” She paused. “Do you mind elaborating on the reason? Maybe I can -?”

Vlad sighed heavily and quickly interrupted her question. “Sorry, it’s more of a personal matter. I have company again this morning and he is quite a handful.” His voice at the end dripped with annoyance.

Bertra, immediately picking up on the shift in attitude, teased, “Him?”

“Yes, a him.” Vlad snapped in aggravation. “It’s a teenager, to be specific, the son of an old college friend of mine.”

“I never pictured you as a babysitter Vladimir.” Bertra giggled and Vlad groaned.

‘Funny? Babysitting others seems to be an annoying quirk I’m quickly adaptable to…’

“Mrs. Dolce? The kid is hardly an infant, he just acts likes one on occasion..” Vlad interjected. “If anything an infant would be easier to handle.” He finished flatly.

Bertra’s voice switched to something relatable and reassuring, “I’ll bring everything over as soon as possible Vladimir. Hang in there.”

Vlad rolled his eyes but smiled slightly. ‘Yep… we’ve officially gone full circle, Vladimir. Instead of him trying to kill you? He’s cleaning your kitchen. Ha.’

“Sure thing, Mrs. Dolce. Thank you for your assistance.”

She laughed. “Isn’t it my job to supervise you at this point?” Her voice wavered slightly and almost sounded sarcastic in a cruel or secretive sense. Vlad paused and his brow furrowed.

‘She’s just weird Vladimir….Calm down, she's always been like this.’

“See you soon sir.” And before he could say goodbye she hung up.

Vlad rubbed his temple and began rifling through the papers Bertra had dropped off the day prior. Two of the documents were construction contracts with several small local companies and one was a licensing proposal for a medical invention being spearheaded by Axion Labs.

Vlad snickered. ‘I wonder how everything is going on her end right now?’ Something heartbroken flickered across his face and he sighed. Leaning back against his chair, he looked to the ceiling wistfully. ‘Pff. She's capable...just because I haven't seen her in three months doesn't mean she can’t manage.’

Returning his attention the documents on his desk, he flicked open the file he had been looking over the Friday prior and began signing pages and initialing lines. After some time, he dejectedly opened his desk drawer and picked up the files from the previous Mayor’s term.
Bertra Decides to Pick Up Something Special for Her Boss

As soon as Bertra clicked the disconnect button on her cell phone a ghoulish smile spread across her lacquered lips.

“Interesting.” Straightening her posture and smoothing out the crinkles in her navy blue suit, she daintily reached over to the file cabinet next to her. Her nails trailed across the file names rhythmically.

“Jail...nope...school...nope.....ah..here it is.”

Flicking her wrist, she casually yanked out the file from its nested brethren and leafed through the contents. Standing up from her chair, she smiled. Her heels clicked as she spun around and exited the room. With the file perched between her bosom and steel blue nails, she walked briskly through the hall. The cop standing by the security center at the front of the building watched her in passing and quickly got up from his seat to pursue her.

She rolled her eyes openly and smiled smugly. Taking a brief glance at the man, she phased into the abandoned storage closet at the end of the hall before he could see where she went. Her green eyes flashed crimson and a wicked leering smile ghosted across her features. A deep male voice issued from her mouth once the portly officer retreated back to his post.

“No matter how many times I claim to be married in this guise some blasted imbecile tries to court me.”

An ecstatic laugh echoed from behind her and still grinning Bertra, turned toward Spectra. Spectra sat leisurely on top of the janitor’s desk with her legs crossed. Her flame red pixie cut was slicked back against her ivory skin and she wore an elegant red sundress. Her green, almond-shaped eyes looked to Bertra wistfully.

“ Took you long enough.” She mused. Her thin lips curled into a devilish, toothy grin. “ How is our little meal doing?”

Bertra scuffed and transformed back into the form they both preferred. Now back in his regular black suit and red vest, Bertrand sneered and reached over to rub his feet. “ Firstly, love? Why am I still masquerading as his secretary? You are the natural female here, not me. I’m getting tired of being flirted with by every man in this building with the exception of our little test case.”

Spectra’s eyes rolled at the question, “ Darling? I can’t change forms like you and he’s already seen me before.”

She casually stepped down from the desk and looped her hand under his chin to redirect his pouting and annoyed face. Winking, she teased, “ I’d be counterproductive love.”

Bertrand chuckled hoarsely and blushed, “ Yeah...but heels are annoying and transforming into a woman for almost twenty years is downright irksome and embarrassing.”

Spectra smiled apologetically and reached for his face again. Kissing him on the nose, she grinned. Her eyes, for a split second, flashed crimson and her hair faded to smoke at the contact for the briefest of moments.

Bertrand in response casually smirked. “ It looks like you need to feed off of him again ...your form is shifting back.” She pouted in annoyance and sighed at the observation before questioning
worryedly, “So how is our little bull? In poor spirits, I hope?”

Bertrand frowned. “Vladimir, apparently, is entertaining company today. From what I have gathered, I am presuming it’s that green-eyed brat.”

Spectra’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh!” Her mouth pursed and a tentative smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “And they haven’t torn each other limb from limb yet?”

“From what I heard over the phone the older halfling is annoyed but otherwise not in the killing mood.” Bertrand lifted up the stacked file in his hands to accentuate the point. “In fact, it seems he will be working at home today.”

Spectra pouted. “Aw...but I was looking forward to some quality time with him this evening.”

Bertrand snickered and casually rubbed his mustache at the idea. “I can drug him again if you’d prefer? I still have to get him to consume some more of that spectral poison to weaken that blasted seal…” He scratched his gray hair tiredly, “It’s been too long between doses. I can add the sleeping agent to the drink I am going to bring him when I drop these off.” Bertrand pointedly lifted the papers again.

Spectra put a finger to her chin and paused in thought to mull it over. Looking back to Bertrand, she sighed. “Go ahead and drug him. I won’t feed with that little brat around, but I can get to him later after the nightmares set in.”

Bertrand nodded. “And what do we do about Vladimir’s sudden change of face? He didn’t sound like Daniel being in his home was truly problematic…”

“I want to see how this plays out.” She crumpled a hand under her chin wistfully. “Now that that other demonic is purged, his seal and body will no doubt begin developing to higher levels.”

She yawned. “Watching him wriggle and writhe against his own heart for two and a half years now had been swell and all but I think it’s time we started thinking more progressively…” She paused and smiled at Bertrand. “We’ve been lurking in the shadows for too long hubby.”

He grinned broadly.

Cracking her fingers, she amusedly questioned, “He has reached his freezier point correct, Bertrand?”

“Love? I think after nearly twenty years of being tied to his hip I would notice any physical changes he has.”

She pouted and he rolled his eyes and smirked in retort. “To answer your question? Yes. He has been the same for some time now.”

She smiled and her eyes flashed red again. Crossing her legs on the desk with a look of bliss, she continued, “Bertrand? I want you to spy on Vladimir some more. See how he interacts with the boy. His heart is so torn and shattered right now it’s almost irredeemable. A knight turned into a fading flicker of his former strength and vigor. I want to see the light in his eyes extinguished again, don’t you?”

Bertrand immediately perked up. “Are you saying we will finally be moving forward with the plan?”

Spectra waved her hand casually in the air and scoffed. “I’m not about to let another demon take my meal away. We’ve waited too long. Now that we are sure the bull has no horns and that he is in his
prime, I think it would be in our best interests to tighten the fence and start stunning our prize. If we are lucky we may even be able to snag a young calf in the process!”

At the thought of not having to dress as a ditzy blonde secretary anymore, Bertrand’s smile flickered into view and exposed a set of needle-like fangs. “How do you want to proceed?” He asked giddily.

Spectra smiled warmly, “Firstly, make sure you wear that spectral cloaking device you stole from Vladimir and deliver that parcel and the poison before he gets agitated. Watch how he interacts with that Fenton brat. Once sure of their status, whether friend or enemy, report back here and we will plan accordingly for the harvest.”

Bertrand’s entire face lit up in anticipation. Shifting back into Bertra, he curtly nodded to his spouse and phased through the ceiling with the paperwork for Vladimir.

Spectra stared off into the distance smugly. “It’s finally time I finished what we started all those years ago Vladimir…” Her eyes flickered with energy and she grinned exposing her own needle-like fangs.

“Everything is just going to turn out fabulously!”

And with a giddy laugh, she dissipated from the room.
Cameron Diaz and the Bull

Daniel, having grown bored and wishing to shy away from agitating Vladimir, was reading a book in the entranceway when the knock echoed from the door. Closing the worn out astronomy guide, he had pilfered from Vlad’s library, he casually set the book on the shelf in the hallway and strolled across the red area rug.

Grasping onto the rounded handle, he boredly opened the large door.

A beautiful young woman in her thirties or forties stood in the doorway clutching a styrofoam cup and some documents in her slender hands. Daniel could almost see his own crimson blush reflected in her deep emerald eyes. Adjusting her grip on the items, she swept a curled blonde lock behind her glasses and smiled at Daniel.

‘Holy cow...she’s gorgeous.’

“Is Mayor Masters at home? Usually, he gets the door…” Seeing his confusion, she smirked and chuckled slightly. “I take it you’re his guest? He asked me to drop by with his work from city hall. He has quite a bit to sign.”

Daniel, seeing the papers more clearly, immediately jolted his sluggish brain into focus.

“Come on in… I am pretty sure he is in his office.” Stepping aside, he motioned her through the doorway.

She grinned widely.

Still blushing he quickly turned from her and led her robotically around the corner and to Vlad’s door. Knocking on the door, he hollered without thinking about his surroundings, “Hey! Vlad? There’s a chick out here who looks like Cameron Diaz with some papers you need to sign!”

Bertra laughed behind him and Daniel felt his blush becoming almost intolerable. Pure undiluted humiliation laced across his features at the thought of what he had just screamed aloud.

‘I am such an idiot.’ Internally facepalming himself, he jumped slightly at Vlad’s voice.

Vlad, completely oblivious to Daniel’s words, absently responded, “Come in, the door is unlocked.”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his hair out of his face. The memo on fund distributions from the previous mayor had several gaps between months and portions of information whited out. Piecing together exactly where the town’s money had gone to during the rather rampant ghost issues the past few years was extremely difficult. Vlad groaned. Amity didn’t have a lot going for it in state and government funding unless you counted ghost research. If anything the entire city was almost becoming codependent with the paranormal. A sad irony Vladimir was going to have to alleviate as the city’s new protective saint. Being assigned as mayor after the election meant he had to quell the vast majority of paranormal issues in the area. Funding for the city would have to come from other places.

‘On the bright side? Fewer ghost hunters will frequent the area and the GIW will have a harder time nosing into this town’s affairs.’ Vlad rubbed his temple and highlighted several names and public sponsors from the list. ‘The only way to dig this town out is to start partnering with both private and public organizations and looking into special sales taxes in the area….uh….people are going to hate me more than the ghosts…’
Vlad tiredly scratched out another line item on his notepad. ‘If we look into bank based infrastructure we can at least get some of the roads and the public transit in this town re-established.’

A knock at the door and muffled words could be heard. Vlad tiredly set down his pen.

‘Come in, the door is unlocked.”

Glancing up at the now open door, Vlad straightened his tie. ‘Mrs. Dolce? Quick as ever I see.”

Seeing Daniel, he sighed, “I do hope he hasn’t kept you too long.”

Bertra giggled at this. “He just was a little confused at the door, other than that he would make an excellent doorman, Vladimir.” She paused and reached her free hand to Daniel’s cheek. Lightly pinching, she joked, “Why I could just eat him up!”

Vlad chuckled dryly and tiredly rubbed his eyes. “How are things at city hall?”

Bertra rolled her eyes, “Jim had his shift today.”

Vlad smiled and seeing Daniel’s smitten expression he openly commented, “Maybe you should just wear your wedding band? I doubt he would bother you so vehemently if he saw a visible sign you were attached to someone.”

Daniel’s eyebrow twitched in irritation at the smug grin Vlad was flashing in his direction.

‘Sorry little badger… Miss Gray or Miss Manson would be far more suitable.’

Bertra smirked. “You know that gets in the way of my writing.”

Vlad rolled his own eyes and she stepped forward with the drink and the papers in hand.

Vlad looked at the styrofoam cup questioningly, “What’s this?” He tentatively poked at the brown cup with his pen as she set it down on his desk.

Bertra smiled warmly. “Vladimir? You’ve been under the weather for weeks. It’s a herbal tea.”

Vlad snickered. “Herbal this…herbal that…You’ve been giving me stuff constantly since around the time this entire fatigue set in. I’m not sure if it’s enduring or if I am just that pathetic…”

Vlad tiredly reached for the cup only for Daniel’s eyes to catch his. The boy was looking at him worriedly and eyeing the cup suspiciously.

‘Strange….What is he..?’ Vlad casually retracted his hand from the cup and instead reached for the papers from Bertra.

She gently handed him the documents. “Can you blame me? You’ve collapsed on and off several times the last few weeks.”

Daniel’s eyes widened at the revelation and Vlad grimaced slightly. “It’s just fatigue Bertra. I have a lot on my plate.”

Bertra frowned. “Fatigue huh? What about when your head got split open two weeks ago, Vladimir? You’re lucky I stumbled onto you.”

Daniel’s eyes were round with horror.
‘Goddammit it. Shut up, Bertra.’

She, in response to his self-loathing features, gently pushed the cup forward. Daniel’s eyes narrowed as he glanced at the beverage. Vlad defeatedly took the cup and downed the contents, much to Daniel’s horror and Bertra’s amusement.

Tiredly rubbing his eyes, Vlad set down the cup and lamented, ‘Bertra? I drank it. Please stop shelling out my workplace woes in front of my guest.’

She raised her arms mockingly. ‘Pfff. You’re the one who refuses to go to the hospital, Vladimir.’ Vlad grimaced and Daniel seeing a sore subject was being touched on again left the room.

Vlad redirected his gaze to the desk and lifted the papers Bertra had given him with a defeated sigh. ‘Thank you for dropping these by. I’ll have them to you by tomorrow morning at the latest.’

Bertra smirked. ‘How about tomorrow evening? You still have to attend that firefighters’ fundraising event.’

Vlad smiled tiredly, ‘I almost forgot about that….Thank you for reminding me, Mrs. Dolce.’ He paused and his voice became slightly apologetic. ‘You can take the rest of the day off to spend with your spouse Bertra, I doubt they need you at city hall.’

She bowed low at this and smiled up at him with an amused smirk, ‘Thanks, Mr. V!’ She chortled. ‘Ah...the stupid irksome nickname she uses to piss me off strikes again.’

Rolling his eyes, Vladimir tiredly flicked through the file Bertra had given him. Smirking, she leaned over the desk and questioned, ‘Vladimir? Do you need the stock reports for Dalv or Vlad Co.? I know you’re considering separating yourself from-’

Vlad tiredly raised a hand to silence her. ‘Mrs.Dolce? I haven't decided anything yet.’

Absently brushing his fingers over his brow, Vlad paused in thought. ‘I honestly have no clue where I'm going with anything lately. Do I want to separate myself permanently? Is it responsible to leave Trisha at the reigns of the company while I become a full-time mayor? Can I continue keeping both this and the company up?’ Vlad's fingers rubbed against his temple. ‘God my head hurts.’

‘Mrs. Dolce? If you could just gather a list of our most recent acquisitions for me to look over, that would be preferable. I'm considering meeting with Trisha to discuss the future of the company in a few weeks time.’ He rubbed his eyes tiredly at the thought.

Mrs. Dolce smiled warmly and nodded her head in agreement. Her curled hair, piled in a sloppy bun, shook and bounced against her head as she spoke, ‘Sure, I'll get right on that tomorrow morning.’

Vlad grinned tiredly. ‘Thanks.’

Turning from him she rounded toward the door only to hear a drawer being opened. ‘Bertra Ann? Wait a moment. I need you to fax these over to Trisha.’

He stepped around the desk to hand her the documents. Spinning back around, Bertra had a brief moment of panic as her heel snagged against the rug and she pitched forward.

‘Shit! Catch her Vladimir.’

Vlad quickly stepping forward and allowed Bertra to collide with his chest.
Pure agony enveloped everything and he grimaced.
Testing the Waters

Bertrand had to restrain himself from revealing his ghost form out of sheer humiliation and aggravation. Having tumbled over the rug with every assurance that the red and brown Persian spread below would meet his human guise head on, he was startled instead by his collision with his employer.

He didn't look up for what seemed like an eternity. ‘I hate this form so much….’

Finally looking up at Vlad, Bertrand swallowed his pride and feigned a humiliated smile as he straightened his posture. “Oops!”

‘I'm going to enjoy tearing you apart Masters. Twenty years of me acting like this are finally going to pay off.’

Vlad frowned and he raised an eyebrow in concerned annoyance, “Maybe you should start wearing flats?” He questioned somewhat sarcastically.

Bertrand's face turned beat red with embarrassment. The bull was being condescending. Opening his mouth to reply, Bertrand paused and his eyes widened.

‘That aroma….. I know this scent.’ Bertrand smiled happily. ‘The rich, iron sweet scent of one’s life ebbing away.’ Bertrand giggled. ‘Is it his? Let's find out!’

Vlad's eyebrow raised in confusion at Bertra's odd behavior but was quickly quelled by her sarcastic answer, “Please! A woman without her heels?”

Turning, Bertrand began slowly and clumsily picking up the papers that had fluttered to the floor from their brief collision. ‘Come on Vladimir, I know you'll help… you're to kind hearted.’

Sure enough, Vlad rolled his eyes in annoyance and reached down to pick up a sheet near his desk. Bertrand smiled broadly. The scent was stronger now.

Glancing over his shoulder and seeing Vlad grimacing in agony, a warm spark fluttered through his core. Quickly standing with the page, Vlad gently handed it to his presumably clumsy and fool hearted secretary. Tapping the pile in his hands, Bertrand smiled openly, “Thank you, Vladimir.”

Vlad in response smiled half-heartedly and looped his right arm around Bertra’s shoulder to lead the presumably female human out the door. He was so distracted by his pain, he failed to notice the flicker of scarlet that laced through Bertrand's eyes.

“Goodbye Vladimir, see you soon.” ‘I do have to make sure the dosage is still working after all.’

“Goodbye Mrs. Dolce. See you tomorrow evening.”

‘Oh, our visit will be so much sooner than that Vladimir…’
As soon as the office door shut, Vlad gasped in agony. ‘Ow….ow...ow..Damn it Bertra!’

Every time he turned around someone or some unfortunate accident was ripping apart his almost healed flesh. Strolling toward the desk, he tiredly leaned against the wood and took several calming breaths until the pain from the impact subsided. Using one hand, he began unbuttoning his shirt while the other continued gripping the desk for support.

“ Oh Butter Biscuits…..” He snarled. “ Just what I needed, a reopened chest wound!”

Glaring down at his now bleeding chest, he lamented the stupidity of his little chivalrous act. Placing a palm on his head, he groaned. ‘ If Daniel sees this I'm never going to hear the end of it.’ Vlad paused at the thought and smirked tiredly.

Looking around casually, Vladimir phased into Plasmius and slunk upstairs to his master bathroom. He then quickly made his way to the medicine cabinet perched below his sink. While examining the cut Vlad couldn't help but roll his eyes at his own blatant stupidity.

“ Why did I phase when I could have just teleported the kit to me? Even if I didn't settle on doing that, I could still have just teleported it to, right? God….my head hurts..” Swaying slightly and angrily throwing aside the linen bandages on his chest, he began patching the last two remaining cuts on his abdomen. Squeezing the counter, he grimaced.

‘Why did Daniel look at that cup like that? He almost looked at it like it was poisoned....’ Vlad smiled sadly at the thought. ‘ I doubt after nearly two decades she would just start poisoning me out of the blue...it's more likely for her to slap me upside the head with a pile of paperwork.’ He snickered.

Taking one last look at himself in the silver framed mirror. He buttoned his shirt absentely with one hand and with a curt nod to himself, teleported. Popping back in a cloud of pink and purple, Vladimir reappeared in his office. He wearily sat down at his desk and sighed before he began looking over the papers again.

A splitting burn ripped through his abdomen a few minutes after he finished initialing and signing everything and his head began feeling heavy.

‘ Shit. I must have lost to much blood…’

Vlad dropped his pen to his desk with a dull clatter and cradled his head. There was a painful, tingling throb climbing up his throat. A sharp lemony and static scent reverberated off of everything.

‘Ectoplasm?.....What’s going on…?’

A wisp of black smoke curled from Vlad’s jaw and the burning intensified. Standing abruptly, he brought a hand to his lips and cradled his mouth. He coughed spastically and his free arm knocked over the cup splayed on his desk as he shakily tried to keep his footing.

Everything felt feverish.

His legs buckled a few moments later and the room went dark abruptly. Unable to fight the fog, Vlad tiredly clawed at the floor until his limbs went numb. Now unconscious, he failed to notice the figure looming over him with an expression of disbelief and rage.
“It would seem the bull is beginning to grow his horns after all this time. We can't have that….”
Cursing the Packers

Daniel’s ghost sense was going bonkers.

Darting up from his spot in the hallway, he quickly transformed and rushed to the guest bedroom he had temporarily claimed to retrieve the Fenton Thermos. Feeling the cold intensifying near the part of the house Vladimir was in Daniel paled considerably.

‘Oh….oh no…’

Flying through the wall at breakneck speed, Daniel glimpsed Vlad’s hair splayed out from behind the desk and immediately threw down the thermos. Flying through the desk and cupping a hand under Vlad’s head, he stiffened at the perspiration lacing across the adult’s forehead. Vlad’s fever was back.

“Fruit-Loop? Hey, what happened?” He gently shook him but seeing no response, grimaced. Eyeing the cup next to them, Daniel’s face lit with distrust.

‘ There’s no way…..His secretary couldn't be poisoning him, could she? What if Sam and Tucker are right…?’

Vlad moaned against Daniel’s touch and his brow furrowed.

“ Plasmius? Wake up? Please?” Vlad shifted in Daniel's hold and numbly tried reaching out to his wrist. Opening his eyes sluggishly, he coughed. “....I think…..I need….to go back to bed….Everything--It's so hot…”

Daniel frowned. “ Fruit-Loop? Your secretary said you've been passing out…”

Vlad frowned and grimaced. “Yeah….last few weeks….the fever keeps coming...back.”

Daniel’s green eyes turned away from Vladimir in anger and worry. “ Mind telling me why you didn't share this earlier?”

Vlad’s head fell deeper into Daniel’s hand. In a faded whisper, he answered. “...Didn’t...really come up….with…. the other wounds....” He coughed. “ Ed….and Romulus….they told me to stay at home.....They noticed it to....”

Sighing, Daniel looped his arms under Vlad and began carrying him to his bedroom. Vlad, still speaking, swallowed, “...I don’t….understand though...I was actually...getting a little better… this weekend…”

Daniel’s eyes widened.

“ Vlad? Don’t take anything from that woman again...She claims that stuff is herbal but I am starting to suspect it's something far more dangerous.”

Vlad’s watering blue eyes locked onto Daniel’s curiously.

“...I noticed.....the way you looked.....at the cup.....You think.....she would?” Vlad coughed. His eyes began closing and his breathing became slightly labored. “...If......she wanted to kill...me.....she has had...plenty of chances...the last.....two decades….”

Daniel sighed. “ She may not be trying to kill you. Who knows? She may be genuinely trying to help
Vlad nodded tiredly and began lapsing in and out. Daniel noticed and shook him slightly. “Hey? Vlad? Try to stay awake a little longer... I need you to change into your pajamas. I'm not letting you out of your room for the rest of the day.”

Vlad groaned, “…Sleep….sleep sounds good….Everything is so….hot…it hurts…”

Daniel frowned and phasing into Vlad’s room sat him against the bed. “Fruit-loop? You’re starting to pass out...Stay awake just a little longer?Please?”

Coughing, Vlad attempted to forcefully open his eyes. Looking at Daniel through watery slits, he rasped, “ It’s getting...hard to breathe…..”

Daniel felt his ectoplasm run frigid at the statement. “Vlad…” Reaching down, he put a hand to Vlad’s forehead and felt the still increasing heat on the elder halfa’s flesh. His eyes widened in fear. ‘It’s worse than last time.’

Patting Vlad’s cheek, he reprimanded. “ Stay awake you stupid, old Packer’s nut.”

Vlad’s eyes widened slightly and he growled through his fever. “Fucking...Packers….”

Daniel’s eyes widened. ‘ That has got to be the fever talking……’

Vlad swayed against Daniel and slumped against his shoulder. Now panting, he whispered, “ …..Everything….is spinning….Make it stop...The heat…..”

Daniel, wrapping an arm around Vlad’s shoulder to steady him, gently pulled him to his feet. “ Vlad? We have to cool you off.”

Vlad winced as he was half dragged, half carried to the bathroom. “What’s….going on?....What are we-?” In response, Daniel lifted Vlad up over the bathtub.

Vlad’s eyes widened slightly in confusion. Daniel began filling the tub with cold water. “ Vlad? Phase out of your shirt and coat.”

Vlad, seeming to recover slightly from the drop in temperature, nodded his head and attempted to concentrate only to sway. Daniel caught his arm before he became submerged. Vlad’s breathing was heavy and labored. “Badger..?.... I can’t….Powers...glitching…again...”

Daniel feeling Vlad’s forehead bit his lip in agitation. “ Vlad? You’re burning up…I’m going to fix you ...Just go to sleep. I’ll figure this out.”

Vlad protested slightly against him. “....Sleep?......I need it.....but ….sleeping….means the dreams….they'll come back… with this fever...I don't want…”

Vague snippets of conversation and Vlad’s sudden screaming fit the day prior came to mind with resounding clarity. ‘ He has nightmares…?’

Seeing Vlad was still struggling against the fever, Daniel sighed and phased his shirt and jacket off. Vlad grimaced and his powers instinctively tried to cloak his scars and his fangs from Daniel’s view. Panting, Vlad shook against himself. Daniel’s brow furrowed. “ Fruit-Loop? Just relax...Stop trying to hide the scars.”
Sweating, Vlad whispered. “M’...not doing it…...My seal….It’s a protective measure….Originally it was something I did myself….Now it’s reflex….I can’t stop it....”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at this and then duplicated. His doppelganger casually strolled over to the first aid kit under the sink for the thermometer while Daniel kept Vlad upright. Vlad was still shaking but his voice came out more level and slightly clearer, “ .....Still burning….but not as bad now.....”

“ Vlad, open your mouth… I have to see how bad your fever is.” Vlad tiredly complied. Grimacing, he allowed Daniel to place the thermometer under his tongue. A few seconds later a muffled beep emanated. Taking it out of Vlad's mouth, Daniel glanced at the number readout and nearly dropped the device. Looking from Vlad to the thermometer in horror, he questioned, “ Um, when was the last time you changed the batteries in this thing?”

Vlad winced as he looked up at Daniel from under his bangs.” Its new....Skulker made me get it....haven't used it yet...” Seeing Daniel’s expression, he grimaced, “ How...bad is...it?”

Daniel looked from Vlad to the thermometer in morbid fascination. “ Erm....I mean....you’re not dead, obviously, but um....”

Vlad raised an eyebrow and numbly reached over to grab Daniel’s wrist. Looking at the temperature readout, he snickered, “ ......Must be broken....that doesn't make......any sense.....”

Daniel, however, was having some doubts. He could feel the heat coming from Vlad’s hand. “ What if it isn’t?”

Vlad swayed slightly and dropped Daniel’s wrist. “ If....it isn't.....we have issues....one hundred and twenty-five....degrees...should not be possible....I would be a corpse.” Vlad grasped his head and his body fell forward before Daniel could catch him. Vlad, however, quickly latched out an arm before he became submerged. Panting, he added, “Water....may have messed with it.”

Daniel smiled tiredly. “ Vlad? I'm going to give you some fever meds.”

Giving Vlad the correct dosage, he waited a few minutes in silence for Vlad to stop shaking. Seeing Vlad somewhat more coherent, he questioned, “Feeling any better Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad nodded and looking up he addressed the teen, “ Daniel?...I’m .....Well.... I want to apologize...You're probably onto something with those herbal remedies....”

Daniel beamed at Vlad’s slur-free speech, “ You do realize I'm sticking around a lot longer after this little escapade, right?”

Vlad shivered and chuckled. “ At this point? I think I’m thankful I have the company...the last thing I need is a repeat of what happened last week.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “ What happened last week?”

Vlad smiled sheepishly and tiredly crossed his arms. “ With Edmond and Romulus in the zone, I was forced to intervene in a territory dispute between lovers. Johnny 13 seems set on West Park Avenue because of some ritzy stores that are attracting attractive female clientele. Him setting up shop for himself and his unchivalrous behavior agitated Catherine, and somehow I ended up in the mix.” Vlad snickered and tiredly rubbed his eyes. “ I honestly don’t blame her. After fifty-five years of being practically tied to each other by the hip, him flouncing after every girl in Amity was bound to get him on her bad side again. He thought he was in the right, but the way he went about the situation screamed moronic. We got into a minor argument over one of the buildings and he lashed out with Shadow....”
Daniel gaped and interrupted, “Wait? You didn’t fight him?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “No, I didn’t fight him. The ghosts you face aren’t really evil Daniel...They just get confused fairly easily and become overemotional.”

Daniel rubbed his temple. “Okay finish your recap of your confrontation with those two and then explain what you mean about the ghosts I face.”

Vlad nodded and yawned tiredly. Looking up at Daniel, he questioned, “Badger? Can we finish this from the bed....I’m kinda falling asleep here....”

Daniel shook his head yes and helped Vlad to his feet. Turning them both intangible to relieve Vlad of the water on his clothes, he smirked. Vlad smiled from under his loose hair. “Thanks....I still can’t use my abilities right now. This little feverish episode packed a lot more punch than I bargained for.”

Staring awkwardly away from Daniel, he winced as they made their way to the bedroom. Vlad staggered as they rounded the bed and he tiredly reached down and opened the drawer in his nightstand for another pair of sweats and a tank top. Glancing at Daniel, he cleared his throat. “....Daniel?.... Can you let me change in privacy for a moment?”

Daniel glared at him in annoyance. “Fruit-loop? We are both guys, and I hate to tell you this but I have seen you in your birthday suit before.” Vlad furrowed his brow in agitation and bit his lip. “Humor me? Please? I have scars everywhere from attacks and tortures and honestly, it’s a little unnerving having a teenage boy seeing them all....”

Daniel stiffened and his features became somber. Vlad grimacing, looked to the floor in embarrassment and self-hatred. His hands gripped the fabric in his fingers like a lifeline. Daniel opened his mouth to speak and cringed.

‘Man....I didn’t think about that....’

“Vlad....I....”

Vlad’s shoulders slumped, “Daniel? Please....I consented to explain Catherine and Johnny’s spat, not my scars....Just give me a few seconds of reprieve so I can change?”

Daniel nodded and turned around. A few moments later, Vlad coughed and spoke again, “Okay, Daniel. I'm done....”

Daniel, shifting into Daniel Fenton, looked back at Vlad and stifled a laugh. “You know Vlad? Those suit you way better than your suits.” Vladimir, now sitting on the bed raised an eyebrow and smirked, “Oh, I'm sure I'll enjoy any insult you're about to dish out at me little badger...Fair warning though? I'm of much sounder mind than a few minutes ago and am quite verbally volatile.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and waved his hand in the air to accentuate Vlad’s attire. “Actually? It's not really an insult.” Daniel smiled reassuringly at Vlad, “It kind of makes you look like a monster hunter or a martial artist.”

Vlad’s eyes widened and flashing red, he exposed his fangs in a grin. “Ah, well that's not too far off ....”

Daniel stiffened and his eyes widened slightly. Narrowing them, he rolled his eyes. “You're not going to explain that yet, are you?”
Vlad starred toward his lap and snickered. “I think I would rather explain my job more fully with Ed and Romulus here…. It’s a lot to take in and they would, no doubt, be more efficient at explaining it to you.”

Daniel scratched his head tiredly. “Fine…fine..” Crossing his legs he directed, “How about you lay down already Fruit-Loop and finish that yarn about you being a middleman to a lover’s quarrel?”

Vladimir sighed and leaned back against the pillows.
“A Shadowed Past

“Do you want the full run down or the basics?” He glanced at Daniel smugly.

Daniel grinned, “You might as well give me a full recap. I haven’t been in Amity for over a week and having met them both, I can’t see how you handled the situation without punching someone.”

Vlad laughed quietly and then wincing laced an arm across his stomach. “Full version it is then.”

Rubbing a hand through his hair and clearing his throat, Vlad began, “Johnny Miller, or as you know him by his ghost name, Johnny 13 has always been a roundabout, youthful spirit around Kitty.”

Daniel raised a hand to stop Vlad and Vlad raised an eyebrow in mild annoyance. “I haven’t even started yet and you’re already asking questions?”

“Wait… His last name was Miller? Do all ghosts also go by their living names or…?”

Vlad sighed and explained. “Ghosts and half-ghosts go by their ghost aliases or nicknames but they do have actual names, Daniel. Just like you or I, a ghost was originally given their name. Names in the ghost zone hold power and priority. They are sacred. To use a person’s name, the one given to them when they were first introduced to the world and the one left when they fade from it, is usually only reserved for friendships, formal occasions, and death threats. Not everything you’ve faced has been a ghost though… Quite a few of your would be enemies are poltergeists. They are ghosts made from emotions and feelings cast off from living people and the dead. Usually, a poltergeist doesn’t gain sentience like a human ghost unless multiple people put their power and belief into its formation. They almost assuredly go by simple ghost aliases and nothing more.”

Daniel’s eyes widened in perplexed disbelief and fascination. Vlad seeing the expression chuckled slightly. “You have a lot to learn little badger….”

Crossing his arms, Daniel prodded, “Okay….one more question before we continue the recap. Poltergeists? Who do I know that’s a poltergeist?”

Vlad smiled wistfully. “Okay, I’ll answer this and then you will let me finish my story correct?”

Daniel nodded and Vlad tiredly focused some energy to his palm. Sweating, he condensed it and Daniel rushed forward. Vlad fell back slightly and when he opened his cupped palm a small octopus lay amusedly between his fingers. Daniel’s jaw dropped. The small specter floated up and danced between them.

“This is a simple poltergeist, one created by a human or ghost based off of an emotion or idea. They’re quite unstable and often lack barely more than enough power for simple errands and tasks.” The small spirit faded and melted from view and Vlad winced. Coughing, he continued. “I have two of those you’ve met before but they tend to dissolve after a few months and need to be remade or repaired…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “You mean you made those two? What was the idea or thought behind them?” Daniel asked somewhat bitterly.

Vlad groaned. “Daniel….I don’t ….” Seeing Daniel’s expression he sighed. “Daniel? I promised to answer the one question about poltergeists… not a plethora of them.”

Daniel in response rolled his eyes and pointedly snapped, “Can you blame me for wanting to know
why those two kept getting flung at me?"

Vlad grimaced and seemingly resigned, he looked at his lap tiredly and spoke. “Yes, the octo-twits were my creations, Daniel….but their purpose is to simply be cannon fodder. They're moving target practice, nothing more.”

Daniel, seemingly more confused, opened his mouth and then bit his tongue. “Fine. You'll elaborate eventually.”

Vlad smiled somewhat relieved and continued. “Have you met Desiree?”

Daniel nodded, “Yeah I've met her. Are you saying she’s a-”

Vlad nodded and then explained, “Desiree is a unique anomaly, a split personality created by a heartbroken young woman. A genie, she fed off of her host's desperation and unfulfilled desires. The young harem girl her form was originally created from was courted and used by a man she didn't love with promises of freedom and her own land to govern. The sultan’s wife, however, cast her out and banished her from her land and home to wander the desert as a nomad with nothing but a tattered lamp to keep her company in the cold and searing heat.”

Daniel winced at the story and Vlad rubbing his head tiredly continued, “The girl's emotions and distraught feelings fused with the metal and flickering flames, creating a poltergeist that sought the fulfillment of wishes as a justification for her existence. Desiree’s wishes, however, just like her original creator’s candid dreams, are nothing more than illusions that fade over time. She’s a curse poltergeist, Daniel. You get a wish close to your heart, any desire, fulfilled... but in the end? You yourself become the victim just as her creator did. The lamp became a spectral beacon, and in time, after the harem woman aged and died it was consumed by the ghost zone where it fed on rampant energy from unfulfilled souls.”

Daniel’s eyes were now as wide as saucers. “Vlad? I know I promised not to ask any more questions but I have one more….and it's kind of important.”

Vlad tensed and became slightly worried.

Daniel shifted into Phantom and pointed at the logo on his chest. “Um...my friend a while back, she made a wish around Desiree. This logo somehow survived as a result...Why is it still-?”

Vlad chuckled in relief and motioned Daniel forward. “Daniel?” He mused while poking at the jumpsuit. “Our spectral forms, or at least our clothes, change based off our emotions and needs. Desiree's wish may have instigated the change but it's doubtful this symbol is a visage left from her handiwork. Trust me. If you still had it from one of her wishes, something precious would have been sacrificed in return. Your personal want for people to stop calling you *Inviso-Bill*, no doubt, cemented the costume change.”

Daniel sighed, somewhat relieved, and then mimed zipping his lips so Vlad could continue his recap about Kitty and Johnny Thirteen’s fight. Vlad smiled and then tiredly began again, “As I was saying.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly as if to challenge Daniel. Seeing no further interruption, he continued where he had left off, “Miller was only seventeen or eighteen years old when he met and fell in love with Catherine. Her father, a preacher, was highly against their relationship. Probably for good reason, considering Johnny’s more than simply flirtatious nature and possessive tendencies. The fact that Kitty was underage did not help their circumstances either. They dated for two years and then abruptly decided that the small town they grew up in wasn’t to their speed. They ran away together.
Three months into it they had a lover's quarrel. From what I understand, they were at a truck stop somewhere in the midwest. Probably in Arizona. The scenery Kitty described to me sounds like Sedona, but there is no way for me to know for sure unless I ask again... and, well, that’s not something I am to keen on doing.”

Vlad grimaced and Daniel swallowed. Sighing, Vlad sat up slightly and continued in a slightly more hushed voice. “Johnny and her stopped in a diner nearby for dinner one late Saturday evening. It was near closing time and there were fairly few people around. Just a bunch of old truckers, tired cooks and two lovey-dovey teenagers. The waitress, however, had her eyes set on Johnny and was flirting with him. He, of course, being a lady killer by nature couldn’t resist flirting back. Kitty was hurt. They argued, words were exchanged, and Miller was left alone in the diner to ponder his mistakes. Catherine, in a fit of anger, stormed out and went to smoke a cigarette by the road.” Vlad rubbed the back of his neck and paused for a breath before continuing.

“A few minutes into her cigarette she went to turn around from the diner only to have Johnny crying and begging for forgiveness next to her. They stood talking in the middle of the road for some time. He apologized in earnest and said he would never abandon her or hurt her on purpose. He was crying, she was crying. They made up….The problem is neither of them saw the truck speeding towards them. The driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. Johnny, being the closer of the two to the truck saw his shadow from the headlights and desperately tried to push Kitty out of the way.” Vlad grimaced. “He died with her and his shadow as the last things he saw. His wish for that shadow to have protected her transferred to his ghost counterpart and created a poltergeist with unlucky tendencies. Shadow’s volatile and protective nature can make it quite the nuisance. Catherine died from internal bleeding thirty or forty minutes later. They both ended up together, just not in the way they would have wanted. He still blames himself for her death and she still blames herself for luring him out into the road by accident.”

Vlad groaned. “The two of them are still having on and off fights that usually end up as morbid tests of devotion or jealousy.” Vlad tiredly rubbed his eyes.

Daniel, feeling his jaw hanging slightly, closed his mouth and raised an eyebrow. “So… backstory squared away, what happened last week?”
Vlad rolled his eyes. “Johnny was taking a stroll in a human guise and snapping pictures of different girls on a stolen smartphone. The little moron didn’t notice Kitty lurking behind him. She got a full view of him turning invisible and knocking up several skirts with Shadow to take a peek at what the poor young ladies were wearing underneath. I was meeting with a few employees from Axion Labs to discuss future projects in stem cell research at a cafe nearby when they started tearing the street open.”

Vlad yawned and his eyes became slightly heavier. “I was just about to take a sip of my coffee when Shadow flashed by the window. The glass instantly shattered and sprayed all over the place. Coffee cups slid and blasted apart everywhere, serving trays fell over, chair legs broke, several electronics short-circuited. Mass screaming and panic everywhere. Luckily, I had the sound of mind to duplicate my form. While my duplicate evacuated the immediate area, I transformed into Plasmius and snatched Johnny up by the back of his coat. Turning us both invisible to avoid Kitty’s rather irksome kisses, I flew over to the area with new construction downtown…”

Seeing Daniel's slight confusion, he elaborated, “I'm not sure if you know, Daniel, but Kitty is a specialist in portal displacement manipulation. Her kisses? They're kind of like a female version of your ghostly wail except they're defense and not offense. They create a temporary portal into a pocket dimension. The problem with pocket dimensions though is that they are airless voids. Her kisses act as a portal gateway, they can teleport anyone, male or female to a said space in the ghost zone through pathways in these voids. Pocket dimensions fade and rapidly appear over time. Getting stuck in one gives you a twelve-hour window. Not that it would do much good with no air…” Vlad snickered. “She, thankfully, is merciful enough to transport parts of the environment around her victims into the void before redepositing them in the ghost zone. As one of her past victims… I can testify that the after effects of her little limbo world are beyond confusing…”

Daniel’s eyes widened in terror. “She can do that?” He whispered worriedly.

Vlad winced.

“She uses her necklace to magnify the ability.” Vlad tiredly rubbed his head and laughed nervously.

“She doesn't quite understand her powers and usually just threatens and brags around other ghosts that whoever she kisses disappears after twelve hours if she doesn't put them back. In reality though? She's too kind-hearted to permanently zap someone out of existence and usually settles on blasting her victims straight to an abandoned mid-western town in the ghost zone with no discernable end until she thinks they've been punished enough.” The adult rolled his eyes.

“Johnny would definitely know. The idiot has been stranded there multiple times for his tomfoolery.”

Yawning, Vlad continued, “I figured Miller would not cause as much collateral damage with Shadow if he was out of range of the more crowded areas in the city. Boy, was I wrong.” Vlad snickered and his eyebrow twitched in agitation.

“I mean, when I set him down he was fairly thankful for the quick escape from Kitty’s rampage…but when I asked for the phone? Jez….you couldn’t have seen the guy angrier.”

Putting a hand up in the air, Vlad motioned and mocked, “Why do I have to give you the phone pops? Better yet? Why are you even in Amity? Aren’t your digs in Wisconsin?”
Vlad mimed trying to calm Johnny, “Jonathan? Just a thought? Maybe let me get rid of that before Catherine decides to strand us in an endless Wild Western rerun?”

Daniel snickered and tried not to laugh. “Really Fruit-Loop? First name bases, huh?”

Vlad smiled. “It's either friend them or fight them. I have enough enemies as is and they both are genuinely gentle, if not a bit mischievous, souls.”

Vlad flicked his wrist tiredly and then shot back into the impersonation. Miming Johnny, he raised an eyebrow mockingly and hissed, “I didn't ask for your help Plasmius! I was doing fine with the foxes before you busted into the henhouse!”

Vladimir facepalmed. Raising an eyebrow toward Daniel, he continued with the reenactment. “Johnny? You know that just pisses her off. Aren't you supposed to be loyal to her? To protect her and care for her? Heck… aren't you guys set for a wedding again in the zone? I know you two keep pushing it off but maybe this time….”

Daniel's eyes widened in awe, “Wait. Hold up. They're engaged?”

Vlad chuckled sadly. “Ghosts don't age or change form but their maturity does. They've far surpassed the regular parameters for a healthy relationship at this point and would do much better if they just stopped picking on each other. They have a very bad habit of snuffing and then rekindling a flame that already has sufficient fuel.”

Daniel rubbed his eyes. ‘I honestly didn't know any of this….wow….’

Vlad seeing the question was answered, cleared his throat and continued, this time miming Johnny flicking through a phone. “Pops? I'm not stupid. I was looking for a wedding present.”

Vlad shook his head and then continued, “Johnny? How was sexually harassing those teenagers in any shape or form associated with a wedding present?”

Vlad snickered. “The poor idiot. He was trying to gauge what underwear would look good on her…”

Daniel snorted. “Seriously?”

Vlad grimaced. “My thoughts exactly.”

Vlad, turning back to the story, switched to Johnny and sheepishly turned the phone and rubbed the back of his head. “Erm… Plasmius? Can you help a brother out… Do you think Kitten would wear-?”

Vlad mimed putting a hand up to stop Johnny. “Johnny? If you need to find her a present I would be more than happy to help you but first, you have to get rid of that phone!”

Miming Johnny, he thrust the arm holding the phone out angrily and screamed in admonishment, “Stop being such a square!”

Vlad cringed. Turning to Daniel, he sighed. “He did it out of reflex. Shadow reacts to his emotions protectively. If he's angered the shadow becomes avaricious.”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his eyes and swayed slightly. Daniel, seeing this, reached out an arm to steady him and then laid him down against the pillows. Vlad smiled in gratitude toward Daniel before sighing and continuing the recap. “We were standing on the sixth floor overlooking a large apartment
building currently in the works. Shadow connected against my chest and I blacked out for a split second. Somehow I was able to keep my ghost form up. Johnny was reaching out to help me up when several metal pipes suspended by the crane above us fell. I shielded but was too dazed to keep it up. The shield cracked and I panicked. I tried turning intangible but my powers short-circuited because of the residual energy from Shadow. I was too solid and something hard smacked against the back of my head.”

Vlad swallowed. “You see… only a few people in the zone know my secret and they guard it quite well. Johnny and Kitty didn't know…. They assumed I was a full ghost.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow intrigued. “Wait, hold up. You mean your half ghost status is a secret on that side?”

Vlad chuckled. “Unlike you Daniel? I have way more at stake if the ghosts in the zone knew what I am or what I do for a living. I disguise my heart and breathing around them. They think I’m a full ghost.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow intrigued, “What happened after you got hit?”

Vlad rubbed his head and winced at the memory. “That poltergeist’s ability can be quite bothersome. When I got hit my body slumped over the side of the roof and I fell two stories into the scaffolding.”

Daniel’s eyes widened in horror. Seeing his expression, Vlad grimaced and tiredly leaned back against the bed to stare at the ceiling. “That wasn’t the end of it though…. Kitty saw him coming toward me and aimed one of those kisses. She was assuming he had dropped the phone or something and was trying to pick it up. The kiss engulfed the entire platform, from what Johnny told me, and both of us got flung into her desert prison in the ghost zone.”

“Jesus. Fruit-Loop...Seriously?”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his head. “I haven’t been sleeping well for a long while now...Too much has been going on… and with all the sudden dizzy spells lately and fevers? Heck… I'm surprised I didn't end up worse off from the entire scuffle.”

Daniel winced. “So what happened then?”

Vlad smiled bitterly. “Well, Kitty tends to forget her captured targets for a while…Johnny and I were stuck and he knew it. I kept darting in and out of consciousness as he carried me into the ghost town. Ironically? There are no actual ghosts living there in her little prison space… Nothing but ungodly heat, orange sand, dilapidated buildings and reddish-yellow spectral succulents everywhere. The entire world is spiraled in on itself….If you were to look up you would just see a blue fog surrounding even more desert above you.” Vlad sighed.

“My head was bleeding pretty bad...and my arm was dislocated. Other than that I was surprisingly pretty injury free from the fall. I couldn’t stand correctly or make any sudden movements, but I blame that on the concussion.”

“How did Johnny take you being a human?” Daniel asked intrigued.

Miming Johnny again, Vlad panickedly waived his hands in the air, “Plasmius? Are you-?” Vlad paused and mimed eyes widening.

He chuckled, “I passed out again before I got the full view of his reaction but it's not hard to imagine from the way he was worriedly taking care of me like a mother hen when I came to in the saloon an
hour or two later. The poor guy kept screaming in desperation for Kitty to let me out so I could get help but she didn't listen to him for several hours. He actually bandaged my head and was keeping the fever down fairly well, all things considered.”

Vlad’s eyes were now starting to close and his head was falling further into the pillows. Daniel smiled. “Kitty eventually zapped us back. It was around midnight and I had taken a bit of a turn for the worse. My breathing was labored and I couldn't focus correctly or talk without swaying in Johnny’s hold or passing out. Kitty, thankfully, had the sound of mind to put the lover's quarrel on hold temporarily so they could drag me back home. I woke up in my bed with them both nervously leaning over me. Kitty, in particular, was heartbroken that she had blasted me into a desert with a severe head injury.”

Seeing Vlad starting to pass out, Daniel spoke. “Fruit-Loop? I think you could use the rest right now, let's put this on hold. I'll come back in a few hours with some food.”

Vlad rolled his eyes sluggishly and then chuckled tiredly, “Sure…. I guess I am starting to conk out again, aren't I?”

Daniel nodded and gently draped a sheet over Vlad. Vlad sheepishly looked away from him. “Erm….Daniel? I have to go somewhere tomorrow. It's unavoidable...and I don't trust my current condition. I'm fairly good at acting normal around other people when the situation requires it but if I blackout in public....”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “Is Vlad Plasmius asking me to go to work with him?”

Vlad tensed and his eyebrow twitched. Mumbling under his breath, he growled, “Well it's not like I can just ring up Ed or Romulus in my condition! They've been out of range for over a week now. Usually, when it gets this bad...I have them to keep guard so nothing takes advantage of my situation or wounds.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow and looked at Vladimir somewhat angrily. “This bad?”

Vlad groaned. “Every once in a while I get hurt doing my job... Injuries this severe are rather rare. Honestly? I've become somewhat reliant on them to help keep up appearances in public the last few weeks. Skulker has saved my ectoplasmic tush at least three times in that time frame. And Romulus got me away from my secretary before she could snag me away to a hospital after my head split open at that party two weeks ago.”

Daniel sat back down on the edge of the bed. “Vlad? What exactly happened? I know I said I wanted you to sleep for a bit, but I'm curious about how you got in that situation.”

Vladimir winced. “I was fine for the most part. Actually, more than fine... I was feeling better than I had in weeks. After I made a speech I retreated to the balcony with my drink. I was just standing and gazing out at the cityscape. Bertra came out and we talked for a bit. I set down my glass. She excused herself and went inside. And then everything started swaying. I couldn't see straight and my head began to throb. I stumbled, and the next thing I knew I was in a vivid nightmare. Some time passed and I woke up on the balcony with a large gash near my hairline. Bertra said I fell forward and knocked against the masonry.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed and he raised an eyebrow. “Fruit-Loop? Did she give you that drink?”

Vlad stiffened and then sighed. “Honestly? I don't remember. After I hit my head everything prior became a vague blur. Romulus and Skulker apparently were searching the city in a blind panic because my seal went spastic. Romulus found me first and distracted Bertra with a paranormal
occurrence while Skulker carried me back here."

"Your seal? What is that? You've mentioned it several times."

Vlad groaned. "Daniel? Let's file that under something I need to explain fully when the two of them return? It's a little complicated. For the purpose of answering what happened to me, let's chalk it up to a paranormal life alert bracelet."

Nodding his head, Daniel looked back at Vlad's tired features and smiled slightly. "So… it's that firefighter’s thing tomorrow, right? Do I need to dress formal or-?"

Vlad smiled tiredly. "No, you don't need to dress up. It's just a small event partnering a bunch of business owners and rich families in junk clothes to help out around the firehouse for an evening of upkeep. Bertra labels it as a dinner party but really it's just a lot of people coming together to clean the building and donate funds over a few slices of pizza."

Daniel grinned. "Count me in. You should have just said pizza first. I'm all for free food."

Vlad snickered and began closing his eyes. "I'm…all for any food. Usually, I never have time to cook…." He tiredly tried to rub the sleep away.

Sitting up, Daniel checked Vlad's temperature. 'He's not as hot but that fever is still there.' Vlad looked up at him in mild annoyance as Daniel retracted his glove from his forehead.

"Get some rest Cheese Head."

Vlad nodded slightly and then tiredly closed his eyes. He was out before Daniel made it to the door.

Seeing Vlad fully asleep, Daniel retreated to his guest room temporarily to ponder everything he had just learned. Not only had he never known about the usage of names in the ghost zone, but he also didn't know anything prior to Vladimir’s story about Kitty or Johnny Thirteen. The fact that Desiree wasn’t even a true ghost, also was a complete eyeopener.

'In thirty minutes I learned more about them than I have on my own in the last two years. God, that's pathetic.'
Sir Oreo de Ghoul

Another thought also popped into focus with sickening clarity. Vladimir was probably being poisoned. Thinking about the secretary, Daniel’s heart fluttered slightly. She looked genuinely concerned. She probably really has good intentions, but now I have to guard him to make sure she doesn't slip anything into his system again. The last thing he needs is another fever in the condition he’s in now.’

Grabbing his phone from the top left corner of the queen mattress it was resting on, he dialed up Sam. The phone rang absently for a few moments and then she answered.

“Sam’s Roadside Morgue, You hit em’, we hide them. What can I do for you today, Sir Oreo de Ghoul?”

Daniel laughed and, rolling his eyes, answered, “Nothing much. Really just looking for someone to vent to.”

Sam paused and raised her voice in suspension. “To vent? Plasmius didn’t do-”

Daniel immediately cut her off, “No, surprisingly he’s really easy to get along with.”

He paused and his voice became contemplative, “The poor guy collapsed again today.” Daniel tiredly scratched his head.

Sam’s voice, now worried, prodded. “From those injuries or?”

Daniel grimaced and his voice held evident distrust and worry, “I think his secretary is poisoning him, Sam. She dropped by with a cup of tea earlier and prodded him into drinking it. An hour later he was collapsed on the floor with the highest fever I have ever seen.” He swallowed. “He thinks the thermometer was broken by I am starting to suspect that the herbal stuff she keeps giving him is short-circuiting something in his system.”

“How high was the fever?” Sam questioned worriedly.

Daniel grimaced and sighed a disheartened answer, “One hundred and twenty-five degrees?”

Dead silence filled the line. After a moment, Sam spoke. “Has he eaten lunch yet?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow and sat down on the bed tiredly, “No, he hasn’t. I was going to go and try making him something in an hour or two.”

Sam snorted. “With the supplies he has? What would you make? A peanut butter sandwich?”

Daniel smiled and his voice lightened in response, “You’re worried about him aren't you Sam?”

There was another pause and then a rustle of static over the line that signified she had sighed in exasperation. “Yes, I am worried. It’s kind of hard not to be when someone tries to help you and all you really give them in return is a bowl of soup and a zap of electricity to their torso. I also want to see if I can figure out what that chic has been giving him.”

Tossing his white hair out of his eyes, Daniel smirked. Phasing back into Daniel Fenton, he amusedly added, “Oh? And Sam? Just so you know? The guy does have fangs.”

She paused and then there was a giggle, “I fucking knew it.”
Daniel beamed, “If you think that’s entertaining get this, Skulker has a thing for 80’s horror comedies. Apparently, he makes Vlad watch them.”

Sam snorted, “You’re kidding right?”

Laughing, Daniel tiredly laid down against the bed, “I wish. I started comparing him to vampires yesterday evening and…”

Daniel stopped abruptly and Sam, noticing the familiar pause, questioned, “Something happened after we left, didn't it?”

“He panicked and teleported away from me again yesterday. His powers malfunctioned though, and he was dropped from above the roof into the rose bushes in the yard. It started raining and he was delirious from blood loss. I couldn't find him for thirty or so minutes and when I did he was practically comatose.”

Sam’s voice became tinged with horrified shock, “What made him panic?”

Daniel’s mind raced back toward Vlad’s genuinely fearful and nervous expression right before he had fled from the room. “I asked him why he decided to be a villain. You should have seen him, Sam.” Daniel paused and tiredly rubbed his eyes. “He looked like someone was butchered in front of him. All of the color just left his features. It was almost bordering on terrorized.”

Sam sighed. “I’ll be over in an hour. Keep him out of trouble will you?”

Daniel chuckled, “Ah yes, keep Plasmius out of trouble… What else do you want, world peace?”

Sam laughed. “Touche. Tata, for now, your ghostliness.”

And with that, she hung up.

Staring at the ceiling, Daniel arched his arms up and yawned. Glaring at the clock on the end table, he grudgingly sat back up. “Hmmm… what can I do in this dump for an hour? It's only ten o'clock right now…”

Scratching his chin, he tiredly drifted his gaze to the wall across from him. ‘I probably should get him an ice pack. That fever is still pretty intense.’

Plopping his sneakers against the wood floor and rolling his shoulders tiredly, he drifted through the floor and to the kitchen. “Okay…. ice…” Looking at the depleted ice cube tray, he couldn’t help but groan in annoyance.

‘And we have no ice-’ Daniel’s eyes widened and he facepalmed himself. ‘I'm such a dunce. Ice powers? Duh.’ Grabbing the empty tray and retreating to the sink he, cut on the tap. Torrents of cold water guzzled from the small silver faucet and overflowed the tray. ‘Shoot.’

Growling and shaking the water from his sleeves Daniel retreated from the sink and activated a cold hand under the tray. Hearing the tell-tale cracking of the water as it solidified he began rummaging through the cabinets for a ziplock bag.

Tossing six or seven hastily created cubes into the bag he wrapped it and returned through the ceiling to Vlad.

Vlad was tossing and turning in his sleep. Daniel’s eyes widened in worry as he observed the adult’s unrestful slumber.
‘Nightmares again? Or is it the fever?’ Walking forward and seeing the sweat and Vlad's obvious discomfort, Daniel assumed the fever.

‘What the actual hell did she slip him?’

Gently grabbing Vlad's shoulder, he shook him awake. Vlad, bleary-eyed and still exhausted, stared at Daniel curiously and tried to get up, only to sway unsteadily. Pushing Vlad back against the bed, Daniel smiled apologetically. “I'm just bringing you some ice. That fever is still pretty strong.”

Vlad nodded, “...Thanks.” Daniel, in response, gently pulled back the sheets somewhat. Vlad furrowed his brow at the sudden temperature change and winced.

“Vlad… Whatever she gave you? I don't know what it is, but your body obviously isn't handling it well.”

Vlad grimaced as the ice pack was placed over his forehead. “.... I don't know....either.... ugh....” Vlad coughed and started tossing lightly against the pillow. “It's hurting again…”

“Vlad? Just sleep some of the fever off. I'll cut the temperature down in the room.”

Turning from Vlad’s practically semiconscious form, Daniel activated his core ever so slightly to cool the bedroom.

Vlad's heavy breathing calmed. Looking back to Vlad, and seeing the adult had passed out from fatigue, Daniel smiled warmly.

‘You really don't sleep much do you, Vlad? You're so tired your body is forcefully knocking you out so you can heal.’

Vlad's brow furrowed in his sleep and he turned slightly. Leaning down, Daniel readjusted the ice pack.

‘I'll just slip into the library for a new book real quick.’ Glancing at Vlad, he phased through the wall and flew into the library. Golden hues now flickered brightly against the entire floor and a segment of wall across from the stained glass. Seeing a promising stack of books, Daniel floated over and began reading the spines. One, in particular, was glowing a ghostly blue and tingled against his gloved hand. ‘A Condensed Almanac of Ghost Subspecies and Anomalies, Reprint Composed by Jacob T. Marley.’ Daniel gently yanked the tome from the shelf and gazed at it reverently.

‘Almanac? As is farming? Or does it mean something else in context to ghosts?’

Gripping the book tightly to his chest, Daniel quickly flew back to Vlad's bedroom and gently opened the cover. A small handwritten note graced the print below the title page.

‘Dearest Vladimur,
I know you are busy with your embassary duties old friend, and so I decided to compile this book for ease of reference. (It's written in English but if you wish I can easily redraft one in mortuus loqui.) I've added young Daniel to the contents, although I doubt you need any of the information listed. Do be careful?
Best wishes, G.W.
P.S. Also, thanks for bailing me out of Walker’s prison. I know you’re mad at me as well for my little Christmas driven rage against Phantom and I hope this alleviates some of your anger towards me. Please know that my use of the writer’s artifact was in poor taste and I will be refraining from touching the device until you are sure of my intent. Please feel free to visit.’
Daniel looked from the book to Vlad’s sleeping form with peaked curiosity. ‘Wait… Ghostwriter is friends with him?’

Daniel rubbed the bridge of his nose and pursed his lips at the thought as he tried to digest what he had just read. Vlad was angry with Ghostwriter over what had happened during Christmas two years ago? And then there was all of the cryptic vocabulary laced in the note.

‘Embassary? What is that? And what's an artifact?’

Groaning in annoyance, Daniel began reading through the book. The first chapter covered nature poltergeists and how they were created. Daniel read intrigued only to pause at the information once he reached the end of the chapter.

‘Demonic Nature Poltergeists

Vladimir? I know this is no new information to you but I decided to add it. Most of these you've already dealt with, so I'm sure you won't wander long over these brief summaries.

Vortex, is a weather poltergeist created from human prayer. An Anemoi or wind spirit that has strayed from his pursuits and became vindictive against the living and the dead alike in his pursuit of creating perfect chaos. (As I'm aware, you recently captured him and dissolved some of his memories in the hopes that the observants can corral and detain his abhorrent destructive nature. Granted he doesn't feed off of humans and ghosts, like a regular demonic, but his powers do cause death.) He was born during Greece’s formation as a deity created through prayer. Eurus, the southeast of the world was his given name and so the title still wanes power over his material construct in the zone. He, unlike his three siblings, who have faded and disappeared or evolved to the needs of human desire, retains more individual thought process and egotistical tendencies regarding his purpose. Having been written off as an extra of Greek beliefs and given no season under his birth name, he instead garners attention by creating disaster to sustain himself.

As a tempest spirit, his original form was a horse. He isn't mentioned in Hesiod's Theogony or in the Orphic Hymns.’

A doorbell rang from downstairs and Vlad shifted in the bed. Groaning, he blearily reached a hand to his head. “Ugh….What's…?”

“ Don't worry Fruit-Loop. I'll get it. Just stay put.”

Vlad shifted slightly but nodded in compliance.

“ If it's Mrs.Dolce… just… tell her I ran out?...er..something?.. uh…” Vlad tiredly flinched at the sound of the doorbell.

Closing the book, Daniel sat up from the armchair and phased downstairs to let Sam in.

Sam looked up from behind several large paper sacks and smiled. Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Woah… What's all this?”

She rolled her eyes and stepped inside. “ Groceries and lunch. I'm not about to let you half dead morons fend for yourselves.”

Daniel smirked and snatched two of the bags from her. “ I'm touched...It's almost like you have no faith in my survival skills.”

At this, she playfully reached over and kissed his cheek. Daniel turned crimson. A tired chuckle came from the hallway and both Sam and Daniel turned to face the source of the noise.
Bottled Aggression and Manipulation

Vlad, now with a shirt partially buttoned over his bandages, was leaning slightly against the wall as he sighed in relief. “Sorry…. couldn't restrain checking…. I was worried… My secretary…. has a nasty habit of busting… into my house….”

Swaying slightly, Vlad gripped his head. Two black rings formed around his torso and his eyes widened. “What… the-”

Vlad fell to his knees. Green ectoplasm trailed down the light blue skin under his nose. Daniel and Sam both dropped their bags and rushed toward Vlad. “Woah? Vlad? Can you hear me?”

“Daniel….I… What's happening... to me?...I-…” Vlad's red eyes began dulling slightly. Sam gently moved Daniel aside. “Quick, go get a blanket.”

Daniel immediately duplicated and sent a clone upstairs for the comforter in Vlad's bedroom.

Sam, now addressing Daniel, questioned, “What symptoms does he have besides fever?”

Daniel tensed, “I don't-”

Vlad started trembling. Sam paled. “Vlad? Sir? What's happening? I need to know so we can help you…”

Vlad's eyes watered. Both Daniel and Sam froze in apprehension. Daniel's clone came back with the blanket as Vlad began passing out. Sam immediately lifted his head up and tried focusing his eyes. “Masters? Come on. What's going on?”

Vlad, still passing out, choked. “m' kinda dizzy...throat hurts…” Coughing, Vlad began going limp in Sam's hold. Feeling his pulse she retracted her hand from the feverish heat emanating from his skin. Vlad's bleary eyes fought to stay open.

“ His pulse is a little fast but I don't think he's in any immediate danger. We need to cool him off though.” Sam murmured. “Daniel? Help me get this blanket under him.” Vlad passed out slightly as he was lifted from the floor and set back down.

“I think his body shifted because of the fever.” Daniel groaned. Vlad stirred before tiredly slipping under again.

Sam looking over him in worry. “I think his ghost form actually may be taking more damage. Look at his skin… he's turning green.”

Daniel nodded. “Sam? Go put the food in the kitchen. I'm going to try cooling him off for a bit.”

Sam frowned and gently protested “Let's get him into the kitchen as well? He doesn't need a sore back on top of this and the booth will probably be a better spot for him to rest.”

Daniel grinned. “Well, you're not wrong.” Looking down at Vlad he frowned. “Sam? I'm getting really concerned at this point. Whatever she gave him is practically killing him.”

Sam grimaced and furrowed her brow. “What's this secretary of his like?”

Daniel paused and sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. “She's hyperactive and enthusiastic, but puts off some seriously creepy mother hen vibes.”
Wrapping his arms under the blanket and Vlad, he hefted him up. Vlad’s head slumped against Daniel’s shoulder and curled against the cool imitating from his chest. A soft sigh escaped his lips as part of the heat was relieved. Both Sam and Daniel froze at the small sound.

Sam pursed her lips. “Daniel? When your core is activated how cold is your skin?”

Daniel paused, “Well, it's not really my skin that gets cold, just the energy radiating around me. I’d wager I’m probably about the temperature of an ice cube right now.”

Sam paused in thought. Looking at Vlad, she noticed the green dissipating from under his skin and the slightly steadier breathing. “I'll put up the groceries, but I think I'd be best if you keep holding onto him right now.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow in annoyance. “Seriously Sam? What if he wakes up like this?”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Really? That's what you're worried about? You're such a doofus, Aldrin.”

Leaning over Vlad, she checked his pulse. “Your body is working as a stabilizer for him. Whatever she gave him is causing him to go into shock. Right now he's actually getting better from being close to you.”

Daniel looked at Vlad curiously and, noticing the adult’s gentle breathing, sighed in defeat. “So, I'm playing ice pack for a bratty, forty-something-year-old villain? Lovely.”

Sam snickered. “Well this villain is pretty beat up and sickly.” Feeling Vlad's forehead, she paused and grinned. “That, and this is excellent blackmail material.”

Vlad stirred slightly in his sleep and Daniel adjusted his hold before leaning down against the wall and sitting with him.

Sam gently set down one of the paper sacks in front of the two of them before gathering the rest and running into the kitchen.

Vlad's brow furrowed in his sleep and his head tossed lightly against Daniel's shoulder. Daniel stiffened. “Fruit-Loop? You’re going to be alright.”

Vlad relaxed slightly against him.

A small click echoed from the hallway. Sam had taken a photo with her iPhone. Daniel glared at her and went to move only for Vlad to groan in his sleep.

Sighing, he sat back down and adjusted Vlad so that he was slightly closer to his core. Sam walked forward with a childish smirk of knowing flickered across her brow. Sitting down next to them, she chuckled. “It's not every day you see two half-ghost frenemies in their natural habitat.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and draped a hand over Vlad's forehead to speed up the temperature reduction.

“You know he doesn't look that old if you negate the hair color? When he is in this form, it just becomes all the more obvious. He actually looks a little like a twenty-year-old or someone in his early thirties.” Sam pointed out.

Daniel smirked. “Yeah, except he's a year shy of being my dad's age.”

Sam chuckled. Looking back to Vlad, she frowned worriedly and leaned forward. Eyes wide, she questioned, “Is he crying?”
Daniel's head immediately whipped down to look at Vlad. Sure enough, tears were dripping down his face and splattering against Daniel's hazmat suit. Daniel stiffened and both him and Sam locked gazes nervously. Removing his hand, Daniel gently laid Vlad down in front of them.

Sam worriedly began checking him again. Daniel stopped her, “He's probably just having issues with the fever. He did the same thing when I found him two nights ago.”

Vlad turned slightly and his brow furrowed in his sleep. A sudden knock on the door startled both teenagers.

“Sam? Go answer that. I'll hide us.” Sam nodded and made her way to the door while Daniel latched onto Vlad, the bag and the blanket in the hallway, turning them all invisible. Cradling Vlad against himself he looked to the door with mounting suspicion.

Sam opened on the third knock and Bertra Ann beamed.

“Aren't you adorable! Are you Mr. Masters’ maid or—”

Sam smiled politely, “No, I'm just a friend of the family. I was dropping off some groceries.”

Mrs. Dolce grinned. “Well, I stopped by earlier with some paperwork for him. I made it to the office to fax his report to our company headquarters but ran into some issues with the printer. I tried calling him but no one answered, so I thought I'd drop by again.”

Daniel felt a shiver run up his spine. No one had tried calling.

“I can tell him for you Mrs-?” Sam left the question open and raised an eyebrow.

“Dolce, my name is Bertra Dolce.” The secretary smiled overly warmly at Sam and Sam, in turn, squeezed the door slightly harder.

“Ah, I've heard about you. You're Mr.Masters’ secretary.” Sam exclaimed with false cheeriness.

Mrs. Dolce winked, “Yep. He is quite the handful. Speaking of which, where is Vladimir? I was hoping to spend some time discussing matters for tomorrow evening.”

Sam tensed. Responding cooly, she replied, “I'm afraid Vladimir is dropping Daniel off at his home and will be staying with him for dinner.”

Bertra locked gazes with Sam as if trying to decrypt some secret language before sighing in exasperation.

“I guess I made the trip again for nothing.” She paused and tapped her chin, mulling over her next move. Stiffening, she raised an eyebrow. “How did you get in Vlad's house? If you don't mind me asking?”

Sam snorted and rolled her eyes. “I called ahead and they left the door unlocked.”

Bertra raised an eyebrow and attempted to push past Sam. “I need to check on something. May I come in for a moment?”

Sam tensed. Glancing back toward Daniel, she swallowed and turned back to Mrs.Dolce. “Mam? I don't feel comfortable letting you in while they're out.”

Bertra Ann seethed slightly but composed herself. “Very well.” She went to leave, only to pause. Her heels grated against the stone steps. Rounding back to Sam she pulled a small ziplock bag out of
her purse. “Make sure he takes his sleeping medication tonight, dear? He could use the rest.”

Sam grasped the bag and locked her gaze with the secretary's manipulative green eyes before simpering with false cheeriness, “I'll be sure to remind him. What brand of pills are these if you don't mind me asking? I want to make sure I give him the right dosage.”

Mrs. Dolce stiffened. “Oh, they don't really have a brand name. They're herbal supplements. Two pills wouldn't hurt tonight and he can take the rest tomorrow.”

Sam nodded and, looking up from the bag, smiled warmly, “Thank you for stopping by. I'll be sure to tell him about the fax not going through, and the correct dosage for these.” Sam shook the bag slightly to emphasize the point.

Mrs. Dolce grinned and her eyes flashed with something inhuman. “Thank You. Goodbye dear.”

Both Sam and Daniel watched as the blonde woman stalked away, her heels clanking ominously against the cobblestone driveway.

Shutting the door and leaning against the wood, Sam took a deep breath. Glancing at the bag in her hands, she slung it to the floor like it was a rabid animal.

Daniel flickered into view with Vlad a few moments later.

“Sam.... No one called the house.”

Both teens swallowed and looked to Vlad with increasing worry. Vladimir, still crying in his sleep, tossed against Daniel and began hyperventilating. Daniel's hands latched onto him to wake him up. Before he could shake him, however, two black rings expanded around his torso. Vlad's body arched from the floor and he writhed against Daniel’s hold. A scream of agony ripped through the room. All the two teens could do was watch as Vlad numbly struggled against the change. After an eternity, Vlad's human form flickered back. Panting, he numbly curled against himself.

Looking from the pills discarded on the hall rug and then to Vlad, Sam spoke in a shaky voice. “Daniel? I think she's genuinely trying to hurt him.”

Daniel nodded and began gently trying to wake Vlad up. Vlad relaxed slightly from the cold and soon his breathing was completely normal again. Sighing, Daniel lifted Vlad up against his chest again to relieve the fever some more. Sam, now sitting across from Daniel, pulled out her phone.

Dialing a number, she shakily reached down for the pills.
Shocking Revelations

The phone rang for a moment before someone picked up. An enthusiastic, Santa-like voice shot over the line. “Miss Manson? Do you need to schedule a checkup or do I need to write another prescription for your allergies?”

Sam smiled tiredly. “Dr. Walters? Can you figure out what a pharmaceutical is from the symptoms or do you need the actual pills?”

The voice, mildly worried questioned, “Samantha? Did you get peer pressured into taking something?”

Sam smiled, “No. Of course not. I need help figuring out for a family friend. A girl slipped him something last night and when I came into his home this morning he was delirious. He keeps shaking, crying in his sleep, he has a high fever, and he passed out a little while ago. She left the pills here and I just found them.”

Walter’s voice became worriedly curious. “Samantha? Is this friend in a hospital by any chance? That doesn’t sound like a regular date rape drug.”

Sam frowned. “They don’t look like regular date rape pills either. They're clear tablets filled with white powder and what appears to be small blackish red flakes. I think the chick was mixing things up and making homemade knockout pills.”

Walters paused to digest the information. “Where are you, Samantha? I think I need to see these pills.”

Sam looked over to Vlad and sighed. “I'm at the mayor's house.”

Daniel froze, “Sam? What are you doing?”

Sam paused, “Daniel? If we don't figure out what she's been giving him we won't be able to help him.”

Walters’ voice shot out from the speakers on her phone. “Samantha? Are you saying Mr. Masters was drugged?”

Sam winced. “Dr. Walters? I've said no such thing.”

Dr. Walters sighed in exasperation, “Samantha? I've known you and your family for more than a decade. I know when you’re lying.”

Sam looked back to Vlad worriedly. “If I said yes, what would you do?”

Dr. Walters paused. Sighing, his voice becoming loving and gentle and he answered. “Sammy? You’re like my niece at this point or the daughter I never had. I won't question this and I won't do anything you would see as harmful. If Mr. Masters refuses to see me, then I'll just look over the pills this mystery woman left and give you a prognosis.”

Sam smiled. “Thank you. When will you be over?”

Dr. Walters laughed. “I'm actually close to the neighborhood. I was making a house call. I can be there in five minutes.”
Sam beamed. “See you soon.”

And with that, she hung up. Walking over to Vlad, she gently shook him. Now with a reduced fever, he groggily attempted to open his eyes. Daniel pulled him up slightly from where he was resting to help him back into consciousness. “Vlad? We are going to go upstairs now, ‘kay?”

Vlad nodded slightly and dazedly moved as Daniel hoisted him and the blanket up. Turning to Sam, he commented, “Just stop by his room when the doctor leaves and knock on the door, alright?”

Sam nodded. “Don’t worry. I won’t let him see Vlad. The most he’s going to look at are these narcotics that ditzy blonde serial killer has been drugging him with.”

Vlad stirred against Daniel. “What’s…? Everything’s…spinning…. Where…”

Daniel tightened his hold and flew through the ceiling and into Vlad's bedroom. “It's okay. It's just that herbal garbage your secretary gave you… You’re not quite out of the woods yet so you need some more rest.”

Vlad winced as he was set down in the bed. “….Badger?...ugh… What happened?…. My head….”

Daniel smiled half-heartedly. “You collapsed again Fruit-Loop. This time, however, you seemed to be having some serious issues controlling your ghost half. You shifted involuntarily twice.”

Vlad grimaced. “…..My chest hurts….” Reaching over the side of the bed, Daniel gently redirected the sheets over Vlad.

Vlad tiredly tried to stay awake but ended up falling back into an unrestful slumber. An hour passed before Sam's petite hand cracked against the door. Three small thumps echoed. Daniel opened it and seeing her expression, froze apprehensively. Glancing back at Vlad, he stepped out into the hallway.

Sam tiredly pulled out one of the pills. “Danny? These are some sort of roofie. My doctor thinks these pills are a type of heavy hitting tranquilizer. A highly potent, concentrated medicinal cocktail, meant to immobilize and sedate. We are talking some seriously bad juju. She didn't lie, they’re sleep pills. But they're also something else. There are weird specks of dried flowers and red crystals that kind of look like sugar suspended in the regular white gunk. Dr. Walters said he couldn't help more than that because he isn't a botanist.”

Daniel felt something lurch in his stomach. “Sam? Can I see that?” He paused abruptly as she went to hand it to him only to quickly retract his arm. Looking into her eyes, he stiffened. “Sam? Um… could you break that pill casing open? In your hand? I want to test something… I think I know what the flowers may be.”

Sam nodded and broke open the capsule. Daniel's gloved hand went to touch the powder only for unbelievable pain to creep up his throat and through his limbs.

Collapsing and panting, he wheezed, “Blood…. Blossom…damn….”

Sam immediately ran down the hallway and into one of the guest bedrooms to dispose of the contents of the pill in one of the bathroom lavatories.

Running back to Daniel, she gently lifted up his head. He winced. “Jesus Sam… she's been poisoning both sides…. That amount of blood blossom…? Ingested? I can't even fathom how he’s still alive right now!”

Sam winced. “Danny? She's dangerous. I'd keep him as far away from her as possible if I were you.
That was just one pill. She wanted me to give him more than one…”

Daniel felt his stomach lurch. Wincing, he shakily got back to his feet with Sam's help. A startled yelp shot up from Vlad's bedroom and Daniel immediately phased through the wall. Vlad, now floating slightly over the bed, was staring wide-eyed at his hands. Silver hair was sticking up as if he had just rubbed against a trampoline, and he was shaking slightly. Daniel went to step forward only for Vlad to turn abruptly.

Flinging his arms out dizzily, Vlad warned. “Daniel?... Ugh-” Vlad swayed and Daniel again went to step forward. Vlad floated back slightly to avoid contact and an arch of static electricity shot up from the bed and tacked onto his arm, causing him to wince.

Daniel's eyes widened and Vlad continued, “… Stay back… something's off with my powers again…”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Vlad? Can't I leave you alone for five minutes without you getting into some sort of mess?”

Vlad, somewhat more awake, smiled tiredly. “I need someone to keep me in line, don't I? Villain remember?”

Daniel laughed and gently kicked off from the ground to help Vlad. Vlad's eyes widened apprehensively, “Daniel? What are you-?” Seeing Daniel's hair spiking up and floating from the static, Vlad burst out laughing.

Daniel grinned. “You should see your hair. You look like you stuck your fingers in a power outlet.”

Vlad, realizing Daniel was right, tentatively poked a strand only to yelp again because of the sudden zap.

Daniel burst into hysterics. “Uh… Fruit-Loop? Maybe it would be in your best interests to ground yourself? Like stepping on the floor so the charge can dissipate?”

Vlad’s eyes widened and he raised an eyebrow. “That's a swell observation, Daniel but I think this is a little more electrical build up than the floor can handle.”

Daniel grinned wickedly. “Oh really?”

Vlad felt something twist in his gut. “Urm…. Little Badger? What are you-?”

Before Vlad could finish the statement a small zap from Daniel's hand reverberated through his shoulder blade, causing him to grimace. “Daniel… that's not nice, boy!”

Daniel smiled widely, “What are you going to do about it Plasmius?”

Vlad grinned and casually poked Daniel.

“Yeoachhhh!” Daniel immediately began rubbing his chest. “Gosh, that smart!”

A small giggle leaked from the doorway and both men turned to see Sam trying to restrain herself behind black and purple nails. “Pffft. You two are hilarious.”

Daniel smirked, and seeing Vlad distracted, quickly flew up closer to him and shifted back into Fenton. Vlad’s eyes narrowed. “Don't you dare.”

Daniel grinned. “I'm just giving Unkie Vladdie a hug….”
And with that Daniel's duplicate dispersed and the Daniel behind Vlad latched his arms around the adult before tackling them both to the floor. Sharp prickles of static and zaps of electricity zipped across the floorboards as they collided. Vlad blacked out slightly and awoke to Daniel and Sam worrily looming over him.

Groaning, Vlad tiredly rubbed his head. Staring up at Daniel, he growled, “Brat? Let's just...stick with Fruit-Loop?”

Sam turned to Daniel and elbowed him. “I think he hit his head when you tackled him.”

Daniel smirked. “Well considering I grounded Vlad Plasmius, it's not too surprising he bonked his head.”

Vlad snorted. “That was a terrible pun.”

Sam and Daniel both raised an eyebrow. Sam grinned, “I stand corrected. He's fairly alert considering everything.”

Vlad groaned again and tried to sit up only to start falling backward. Daniel latched onto his shoulder to keep him upright. “I'm right here. Can we stop addressing me in the third person, Ms. Manson?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Sorry, old habits die hard considering you've been unconscious most of the evening.”

Vlad nodded slightly. “Yeah… sorry about that… I don't know what happened...Frankly, I don't remember getting out of bed.” Gripping a hand to his brow, Vlad sighed tiredly, oblivious to the two teenager’s knowing glances at one another.

Sam smiled warmly. “Do you think you can eat anything?”

Vlad dropped his hand and a warm smile, unlike anything Daniel or Sam had ever seen prior lit his face. “I think I can try to eat as long as it's not something Daniel had a part in making.”

Both Daniel and Sam froze, mouths gaping. Vlad's eyes widened at their expressions and in a panic, he turned his head away from them. Biting his lip and closing his eyes, he teleported.

Sam spoke first in unrestrained awe. “Did he just smile at us? Like genuinely smile?”

Daniel looked at the blank space Vlad had occupied and sighed in exasperation. “Yes, and he insulted my cooking skills now that I'm thinking about it.” Pausing, he yanked up a small throw blanket from the chair he had been reading in earlier and motioned for Sam to follow him. “Come on… I can hear him downstairs in his office.”
Phasing through the floor with Sam, he slowly walked over to the office and stopped abruptly. He could hear Vlad talking to himself in low whispers. “Why did they look at me like that? Am I that detestable? God...They looked like Jack and Maddie when they saw-”

Daniel flinched.

Daniel pulled Sam back from the door and winced. Motioning for her to be quiet, he waited a moment.

“Sam? Wait here. I think we brought up some bad memories....”

Sam froze and nodded. Phasing through the office door and seeing Vlad sitting against his desk, he spoke. “Vlad? Are you alright? You running off like that worried us.”

Vlad stiffened and looked toward Daniel with a neutral expression. “Sorry about that...I just...” He swallowed. Chuckling bitterly, he put a hand to his face. “Was it the fangs? You two were looking at me like I was some foreign object instead of...”

Daniel’s hand clamped on his shoulder and placed the blanket over him, all while smiling reassuringly, “Actually? No. We were just confused. You aren't exactly one to smile and it was kind of interesting seeing it.”

Vlad looked up and raised an eyebrow. “I smile all the time, Daniel.” His voice echoed with fascinated amusement.

Daniel laughed. “Not like that you don't.”

Vlad visibly lost the tension in his body and leaned back against the desk. Daniel, seeing an opportunity, quickly stooped down and pulled Vlad back to his feet. “Let’s get some food in you. You’re still an invalid.”

Vlad rolled his eyes. Pausing, he rubbed his head. “Did anything happen while I was out of it?”

Daniel draped the blanket around Vlad and smiled tiredly. “What do you remember exactly?”

Vlad winced. “Vague flashes of me teleporting downstairs. Ms. Manson kissing you-”

Daniel blushed deep red and his blue eyes flickered up at Vlad to catch his expression. Vlad smirked tiredly.

“Daniel? Sorry for intruding on that. If it's any consolation I think you two complete each other. Someone has to reign in the other’s recklessness.” Vlad chuckled softly and pitched forward slightly. Daniel raised an eyebrow and smiled as he readjusted Vlad's arm over his shoulder.

“Do you remember anything else?”

Vlad rubbed his head with his free hand. “I think I passed out? Burning...everything felt like it was on fire and then suddenly everything was extinguished.”

Daniel nodded, somewhat relieved Vlad didn't remember him cuddling against him to cool him down. “Yeah, you definitely passed out. I cooled you down while Sam put up the groceries.”
Vlad nodded slightly. “How long was I out?” Covering his mouth, he coughed.

Daniel tiredly rubbed his head. “About an hour? You didn’t sleep very well. That fever is becoming quite a problem.”

Vlad nodded tiredly as they walked into the hallway. Sam was rounding the corner with the paper bag they had almost completely forgotten about in the foyer.

Vlad looked up apologetically. “Ms. Manson? I do apologize for my behavior…I’m just not used to having living people around, much less people that I’ve acted less than favorable around in the past.” Vlad averted his gaze to the floor.

Sam raised an eyebrow but sighed in relief. “Masters? It’s fine. Trust me. Let’s just get some food in you before you collapse again.”

Vlad nodded. “Yes… that’s probably a good idea.”

Dragging Vlad into the kitchen and sitting him down next to the booth, Daniel turned to Sam. “So what’s on the menu?”

Vlad laughed slightly. “Tomato soup and grilled cheese?”

Sam smiled warmly. Looking over to Daniel, she dramatically took out the plastic tupperware containers from the bag. “What he said.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. Looking over to Vlad, he smirked. “How did you figure out the whole enhanced sense thing?”

Vlad rubbed his eyes. “When enough things want to kill you, you eventually adapt.”

Daniel and Sam both exchanged a worried glance. Sam of course asked. “Vlad? I don’t want to intrude but, um… could you give some examples?”

Vlad paused slightly and his eyes became contemplative. “Erm… you know? I’d rather not.” His expression grew slightly dark and he quickly redirected his gaze back to the table sheepishly.

Daniel, figuring out a loophole, questioned. “How about an example of how you’ve used the scent thing?”

Vlad paused, looking up at Daniel and raising an eyebrow, sighed in defeat. “Avoiding getting shot is a good reason, I presume? Gunpowder… The scent is a cross between charcoal and flint but carries an acrid and sour note.”

Sam and Daniel gaped. And Vlad, oblivious, yawned and finished, “It helps to know when someone’s carrying a gun.”

Looking back at the teens and seeing their expressions, he redirected his gaze to the table and tucked his arms under his head. “Sorry. Maybe I should have used a different example?”

Daniel winced. “No, I asked. I guess being a thief ends with nasty consequences.”

Vlad sneered and winced. Sitting up again, he snapped, “Who said the shooters were chasing a thief?”

Daniel tensed. Vlad continued bitterly. “On one side of the spectrum I’m a wealthy businessman. People in other companies and firms don’t appreciate competition. There are also people that try to
kidnap or exploit me for ransom or monetary promises. Then there are some that simply want to off me because they don’t agree with me. The simplest solution is to go intangible when they bring out the gun or phase the weapon out of their hand. It’s harder to hit something you can’t touch.”

Sam swallowed. Vlad pursed his lips and looked away from them again. “Yes. I’m a thief.” He continued flatly. The word, however, became weighted with double meaning again. “My thievery however only occurs under certain circumstances...”

Realizing he was letting out too much, Vlad looked back to Daniel and Sam dejectedly. “I think it would be ideal if we changed the topic.”

Sam thankfully redirected the conversation as she began laying the food out on the kitchen counter. “Vlad? Don’t you have a microwave?”

Vlad snickered and rolled his eyes. “Had. Romulus panicked and blasted it into a million pieces when Skulker tried cooking popcorn a few months ago. I haven’t had time, as of yet, to get a new one.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Skulker was cooking popcorn? And Romulus... who’s Romulus? I’ve been hearing his name for several days now.”

Vlad rolled his eyes and tiredly stood up. Lifting the picture frame behind him, he smirked. A large black blast mark was stamped into the drywall. “Skulker was making popcorn so he could drag me into the lounge for a break, and he failed to tell Romulus that...” Vlad air quoted. “…the strange black square with a carriage wheel for a heart growls when it’s done cooking the food placed in it.”

Sam smiled and Daniel looked away from the hole and chuckled.

“I take it this Romulus ghost is really old fashioned?” Sam laughed.

Vlad snickered and put a hand to his head, “That’s putting it mildly. You should have seen him when I brought him here to recuperate. The poor ghoul was scandalized every time he saw a girl in a skirt.”

Daniel laughed. “Is Romulus his birth name or?”

Vlad rubbed his chin and then shrugged. “No and yes…. It’s fairly complicated.”

Sam shook her head in disbelief and reached for a saucepan above the stove and a frying pan. Pouring the soup in the saucepan and setting it on low heat she questioned. “So this Romulus guy...What does he look like?”

Vlad, now sitting again, laughed. “He looks like a college student and sounds like one when his armor isn’t obscuring his head. He has black hair that goes down to the middle of his back and green eyes.”

Sam stirred the soup and Daniel sat down next to Vlad. “What century did he get ghosted in?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at the wording of the question and replied, “I’m pretty sure he died during King Arthur’s supposed time period.” Vlad absently placed a hand under his jaw as he leaned against the table. “So he’s older than both Skulker and I but extremely skittish and childish at times. It’s actually kind of humorous considering most of the ghost zone is afraid of him.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, expecting elaboration. Vlad, however, chose to ignore him. Sam, now satisfied with the soup’s temperature, grabbed the sandwiches and began heating them as well. “So
you just have ghosts over at your house twenty-four seven?"

Vlad smirked. “No, not twenty-four seven. It's usually just Romulus, Edmond, and I, and they can't stay full time on this side of the worlds without getting weak or sick. They also have domains to manage in the zone. Occasionally Ember visits, but that's usually to yank Ed back into the zone for some quality time together.”

‘I think I dreamed of something like that while I was with Nocturn?’ Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Why would she want Skulker around?”

Vlad cocked an eyebrow. “You mean to say you didn't know they were a couple? They've been together for over a decade now.”

Both Sam and Daniel froze and glanced at each other. Daniel swallowed. ‘Was Nocturn gathering gossip or something to make the dreams more real? What the actual—’

“I take that as a no.” Vlad smirked.

“You know, witty banter is dandy and all but it may do you some good to actually talk with your supposed adversaries? Hmm?” Vlad prodded slyly. “From what they've told me you instigate the majority of the fights by taunting or ignoring them and then stuffing them in a thermos for several days.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Woah… wait they talk about me? Just casually in conversations?”

Vlad snorted. “Little Badger? You've managed to personally piss off every nice ghost I know, and that's saying something. You're infamous in the zone.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. Vlad rolled his eyes. “Lawrence is a great example. All he wants is a box or two and some notoriety or a pleasant conversation. Granted his habit of sputtering, ‘Beware!’, is rather irksome.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “The Box Ghost's name is Lawrence?”

Vlad chuckled. “He prefers Larry. His full name is Lawrence Jameson Hawthorn. He died during the 1920s in a shipping yard near Manhattan when a rather large wooden crate knocked into him.”

Both Sam and Daniel froze. One of the sandwiches began to burn and Vlad immediately teleported over next to Sam and turned the food. Sam let out a startled yelp from his suddenly close proximity.

“Daniel? Do you ever ask them why they're on this side? Or maybe convince them to go back to theirs? It's not too complicated and I'm fairly surprised you didn't know the name of the one ghost you've caught almost daily for the last three years.” Vlad looked at Daniel worriedly.

Daniel winced. “No… I didn't think to ask them. And I didn't know about the Bo-Larry.” Daniel finished lamely.

Vlad awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck and turning to Sam apologized in earnest. “My apologies Ms. Manson. I saw it burning and didn't want you caught up in a kitchen fire.”

Sam shrugged. “Vlad? Why are you acting this way around us?”

Vlad stiffened. Sighing bitterly and turning from her he muttered. “Ms. Manson? I believe you’re asking the wrong questions.”
Sam crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow as did Daniel. Vlad cut off the burner to the stove and stepped back in thought. Looking at the burner, his eyes grew somber. “The question should have been, why aren’t you acting around us?” He whispered quietly.

Sam and Daniel both froze. Vlad leaned against the stove tiredly. The next words to grace out of his mouth held far more weight and merit than anything uttered prior. “After you sacrifice enough to try and do right by others, at the cost of everything you are, you eventually come to something you can’t really face. You can shield, lie, protect. Ironically you can do all these things flawlessly and still end up destroying both yourself and the people you were trying to save with your own hands… It’s kind of a bitter just dessert really. People just fail to see humanity or compassion and find it easier to look at these qualities in contrast to something bitter or dark. But I think you already knew this Little Badger? Then again my ramblings probably seem fairly vague without context...I-.”

Vlad paused in thought, trying to swallow back the weight in his throat before he continued. Sam gaped. Daniel went to speak only to see Vlad’s body abruptly tense. A cold wisp of air escaped Daniel’s jaw. Sam saw the wisp and seeing Vlad paling ran to his side. Vlad at that moment suddenly felt like he couldn’t breathe. The deep, stabbing pain in his chest resurfaced and the world spun. The sharp electric tang from earlier was dulled and no smoke curled from his lips but the ungodly searing pain still clashed within his flesh.

Daniel flew to him just as his legs gave out. Vlad was out before he hit the ground.

Daniel hissed and looked around the kitchen worriedly. Vlad was sweating and panting against Daniel’s shoulder. “Vlad! Come on, it’s just a ghost.”

Sam bent over Vlad and, turning him, began trying to lift him up. “I think the blood blossom in his system is reacting to the presence of it. Like a spectral flare up or something.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. Looking down at Vlad, he quickly activated his core and lifted him up. Vlad groaned and slumped against Daniel’s hold.

“Damn it.” Looking over to Sam, he worriedly lamented. “Well whatever that garbage she gave him does it’s definitely targeting both sides. You’d think him being in human form would’ve reduced the blood blossoms’ effects, but instead, he’s being harmed just because a ghost is nearby.”
Vlad shivered slightly and tried to open his eyes. “.... Badger?.... Manson...?... What's-?” Wincing, he dizzily noted that he was being floated through the ceiling and laid back in bed.

‘Fudge. I must have passed out again.’

Daniel worriedly leaned over him.

‘I honestly don't think I have ever been this pathetic before in my entire life. Why do I keep fainting?!?!’

“Vlad? Are you alright?” Daniel raised an eyebrow and his lips tightened into a worried frown.

Coughing, Vlad answered. “ Uh… Did we get the…. license plate …of the car that... hit me?” He joked.

Daniel's eyes widened and he began trying to lift Vlad up again. “ Great! The damned fever fried his brain!”

Vlad winced as Daniel fingers accidentally brushed against his still healing chest injuries. “ Badger?... I was...joking….”

Daniel stopped and took his hands out from under Vladimir. Running his fingers through his white hair, he began laughing in relief. “ Jesus, Fruit-Loop. Don't scare me like that. You almost got a concussion earlier. You’re lucky I caught you before your head could hit the tile.”

Vlad turned slightly in the bed. “What… happened…?”

Daniel sighed and began pulling up the gray sheets over Vlad's legs. “ You fainted? I don't know what's happening to you unless you tell me… I can only speculate.”

‘ I fainted? Is it because of my injuries? Or was it Mrs.Dolce’s drink? God my head hurts.’

Furrowing his brow, Vlad tiredly rasped. “ … It's kind of fuzzy… Everything just suddenly felt suffocating and hot…”

Daniel nodded. “ Was there a sharp branding like pain?”


Daniel looked to the floor contemplatively before sitting down at the edge of the bed. “Yeah. Makes sense.”

Vlad turned away from Daniel. “ I take it… you two… figured out...something?”

Daniel winced and looked to Vlad reassuringly. Swallowing, he clasped a hand to his shoulder and spoke. “ Your secretary's herbal stuff? Well, it had blood blossom petals in it.”

Vlad stiffened and his eyes widened. Grasping onto the sheets next to him, he squeezed the fabric and closed his eyes to block out his surroundings. “Why… why didn't it burn… when I drank it?”

Daniel squeezed his shoulder lightly. “ Vlad? I honestly don't know. Sam and I both don't trust her. She stopped by again earlier and tried breaking into the house to check on something.” He practically
his the last part.

Vlad sighed. “I have…. terrible luck… with women…”

Daniel chuckled lightly and Vlad weakly smiled in return.

Sam at that moment came upstairs with a serving tray in tow.

Vlad winced. “I… guess I'm under… house arrest… huh?”

Sam grinned. “That's putting it mildly. You’re not leaving this room until whatever she gave you filters out.”

Vlad snickered. “You sound like Skulker… Granted, he probably... would have drugged me... by now and hooked me to an IV.”

Daniel snorted. “So Skulker is your babysitter?”

Vlad laughed tiredly. “I like...to think… we babysit each other...We...both can be…. pretty reckless.”

Placing the tray over Vlad, Sam reached over to feel his forehead. “Yep, still feverish as hell.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “I could have told you that Sam.”

Vlad grimaced. “Likewise.”

Sam smirked and, placing her hands on her hips, pointed to the food. “Do us a favor and eat before you pass out again?”

Vlad grimaced. “...Fine.”

Coughing, he tried to sit up only to slump back slightly. Daniel, seeing the issue, quickly helped Vlad into a sitting position.

Vlad turned away in embarrassment. “I never thought...I would see...the day… two teenagers… would treat me like...a stubborn child…”

Daniel snorted. “Aren't you though?”

Vlad rolled his eyes tiredly. “Whatever you...say… Inviso-Bill.”

Sam snickered and Daniel gave Vlad the scary eyes briefly before sitting back on the foot of the bed. Sam spied the glowing book on the nightstand and picked it up. Vlad tentatively started taking bites of the soup. Glancing over at the book in Sam's hands, he groaned. Putting down the spoon, he yanked the book from her hands with his powers. Catching it tiredly, he glanced at the cover and winced. “Daniel…?… Ugh-”

Vlad tiredly lifted a hand to his forehead. “You may… want to stay… away from the glowing books…. this one is fairly safe…. but the others can kill…. if you don’t… treat them correctly…”

Sam's eyes widened. Daniel furrowed his brow. “Whaaat? You mean your house has killer books?”

Vlad absently flicked through the blue book before reaching out to hand it back to Sam. Looking down into his soup bowl, he casually pulled up his shirt sleeve. Pointing to a large scar, he mused. “Yes. This house has….. some killer books in it. Or really artifact's... Item poltergeists. The truly
dangerous ones ...are locked away downstairs in the vault but…. a few are in the library hidden in plain sight.”

Daniel winced. Vlad snorted. “Quite the... paper cut, huh?”

Sam flinched and raised an eyebrow. “ Why do you keep stuff like that just lying around?”

Vlad looked up and sighed. “ I can handle the books... in the library fairly well. The only reason I got bit ….by the artifact was that I was drunk... and didn't pay attention to how I opened it.”

“A book bit you?” Daniel and Sam shared equally amused and horrified expressions.

Vlad, in response, chuckled tiredly and smirked. “ You know that one scene from Harry Potter..... with that monster book of monsters? Imagine that….. but with a far more …...vicious and agitated hardcover that can fly.”

Daniel cocked an eyebrow. “You've watched Harry Potter? Seriously Vlad?”

Vlad took a bite of his sandwich and shrugged. Swallowing the bite, he answered. “ Yes? Why not? Granted, I haven't watched... anything in a while due to work…. but Skulker and Romulus both enjoy watching the tv in the lounge.”

Sam shook her head in disbelief. “Okay, I have a bigger question. How did you deal with the book?”

Vlad winced and put the sandwich in his right-hand back down onto the gray plate. “ I would love to say the interaction was in my favor … but that would be a blatant lie… Skulker phased into the room when he heard the glass shattering… at that point, I was pinned… to the floor by several...large paper claws. The book seeing a new adversary...slung me...into the shelving and turned on… Ed.”

Vlad sighed and winced from the memory. “ Ed easily tied the book down and closed it…. After dealing with the origami pseudo me that was strangling the life out of me near the shelving.”

Daniel stiffened. “ Wait… the book made a paper you?”

Vlad nodded and, now slightly more alert, continued. “ It needed the blood to sustain the form. If Ed hadn't come into the room I probably would have become a vampiric book’s lunch.”

Sam rubbed the bridge of her nose. Turning to Daniel, she snorted. “He's a walking, talking entertainment center. That was wild from start to finish.”

Vladimir crossed his arms tiredly and sighed. “ I'm glad to find someone thought it amusing. Skulker wouldn't leave me alone for days after that. Something about me being, and I quote, a reckless halfa exorcist with stubbornly stupid suicidal tendencies.”

Daniel smirked. “ Well, he's kind of right if you were drinking before handling a paper vampire.”

Vlad chuckled tiredly and returned his attention to the food in front of him. “I guess you have a point. In retrospect drinking before handling that particular book was more than a little foolish.”

Taking another bite of the soup, he glanced over at Daniel who was addressing Samantha. “ Sam? Would you mind coming with us tomorrow to a charity thing?”

Sam raised an eyebrow as did Vlad. “ What charity?” Sam questioned.

Daniel paused. “ Okay, rephrasing. Would you accompany the two of us to the firehouse tomorrow for pizza and helping out around the building?”
Sam burst out laughing. “My mom is going to be so confused. Her and Dad were trying to rope me into that earlier this morning and I hit them with a hard no.”

Setting down his spoon, Vlad raised an eyebrow. “I take it you want Ms. Manson around in case something happens?”

Daniel smirked. “Two heads are better than one. If push comes to shove, her being a distraction in the event you pass out again would be good.”

Vlad nodded in compliance and snickered. “Babysitted by you two?…Oh, the irony.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “What are you getting at Fruitloop?”

Vlad snorted. “Nothing.” Vlad paused and rubbed the back of his neck. Looking at Sam, he questioned, “Miss Manson? How did you get rid of Bertra?”

Sam shivered. “Masters? A word of warning? Stay away from that psychopathic blonde. She gives me the creeps and I’ve seen some reaaaaallly creepy stuff.” Sam shivered and pulled a few stray locks of black hair out of her face.

“I told her you were dropping Daniel off at Fenton Works and that I was dropping off groceries for you. Even then she still tried busting through the front door. I ended up promising that you would take some more of her herbal crud,” Sam finger quoted and, looking to Vlad seriously, warned, “-which you will, under no circumstances touch after today.”

Vlad smiled weakly. “Yeah… from what Daniel told me, she’s been feeding me blood blossoms?” He furrowed his brow and grimaced at the thought.

Vlad groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Speaking seriously, he agreed, “I will most definitely be avoiding her remedies from now on.”

Sam beamed. “Awesome. Oh… that reminds me!” Both Daniel and Vladimir looked to her curiously as she ran out into the hallway. The stiff thwacks of her combat boots echoed on the wooden stairs.

Vlad looked to Daniel and confusedly questioned, “I don’t have to worry about her doing anything crazy right now, correct?”

Daniel winced. “Erm… honestly? I have no earthly idea what she just ran off for.”
Both men shared a worried glance before eyeing the door apprehensively. The dull thuds of her boots made their way up the stairs again and Sam busted into the room with her arachnid shaped backpack clutched between her fingers. Shuffling through it, she rounded on Vlad and began pulling out several metal tins and a steel gray pillow. Tossing the pillow to Daniel, she pointed, “That is for that ridiculous fever that keeps coming back. It's made to cool down body temperatures. The fact that you both are supposed to have temperatures of about eighty-one or eighty, on average, and Vlad's reaching over one hundred and twenty is a testament to your need for proper cooling equipment.”

Both Daniel and Vlad's eyes widened. Vlad raised an eyebrow. “How did you know our regular-?”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Daniel couldn't miss any more school days this last year and ended up getting one hell of a ghost bug from Klemper. I had to take care of him between classes and I kind of figured it out.”

Daniel looked at the pillow passively before setting it down on the edge of the bed.

Vlad looked over to Sam with an impressed smile. Looking back to Daniel, he prodded. “May I suggest you two begin going steady? Clearly, she's the more level headed, even if she pulls some stupid stunts.”

Daniel turned bright green before switching back to Daniel Fenton. As soon as the rings finished the transformation, he snarled, “Why should I take relationship advice from a forty-something bachelor?”

Vlad winced and stared back to his soup bowl somewhat somber. “Please...don't go there…”

Daniel stiffened before he tried to apologize, “I mean, if you just could have given up on my mom-”

Vlad tensed and flinched. “I hate to tell you this boy, but I actually haven't had any feelings of the romantic sort since my first year of college with your mother….”

Daniel's eyes widened and flashed green. “Bullshit! You lying, sleazy-”

Vlad growled. “WELL OF COURSE? WHAT LOGIC SAYS I WOULD OPENLY COURT A WOMAN WHO WANTS TO TEAR ME APART MOLECULE BY MOLECULE?!?!?”

Daniel's eyes widened, still angry he charged a hand, “BECAUSE YOU'RE A CRAZY, NARCISSISTIC CLONING BASTARD WHO ONLY THINKS OF HIMSELF?!?”

Vlad's eyes glowed red and a look of absolute agony crossed his features. Snarling, he glared up at Daniel. “FUNNY? ONLY ONE DAMNED WORD OUT OF THAT'S TRUE.YOU'RE RIGHT I AM A BASTARD! IT'S PROBABLY WHY I WAS BUTCHERED FOR FIVE YEARS! OR BETTER YET, WHY MY FRIENDS ABANDONED ME?!?! YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY I HAVE NO ONE? NEWS FLASH BRAT, EVERYONE I HAVE EVER LOVED HAS BEEN HURT BECAUSE I EXIST!”

Sam's features paled as did Daniel's. Before either teen could continue the conversation. Vlad teleported from them.

Sam turned to Daniel and slapped him across the face. Daniel's eyes widened and Sam hissed. “You didn't notice he was being honest? What's wrong with you?!!?”
She looking to the vacant bed with dread. Turning back to Daniel, she snarled, “Is he nearby?”

Daniel winced and clenched his fists to his side. “No. He's gone.”

Pulling out her phone she dialed Tucker. After a few seconds, the techno-geek answered.

“Hey, Sam! What's up? We still on for Doom at your place?” Tucker's voice, painfully optimistic, waited for Sam's response.

Sam, still glaring at Daniel, spoke. Her words angrily reverberated over the line. “Tuck? Daniel fucked up with Vlad and I need your help finding him.”

Tucker's voice became worried. “You need my help finding Danny? I thought Vlad was being nice… Did he blast him or?”

Sam bit her lip and swallowed, “Not Danny. We have to find Vlad.”

Tucker paused and his voice became somewhat cold. “What did Danny do?”

Sam glowered, “Vlad was being honest and Daniel decided to call him a lying bastard. Well, at least that's the summary of what he said.” She hissed.

“Vlad's in no condition to be out on his own and his secretary poisoned him earlier. He can't even walk correctly and his ghost powers keep fucking up. I need your help tracking him down before he has another feverish episode or collapses in an alleyway.”

Tucker paused, “How do you propose we find him? He's half-ghost and we don't exactly have the boomerang locked on him.”

Sam stiffened. “Actually, we may have it locked on him. Remember that cloning thing? The boomerang hit Vlad so now his spectral signature is on it.”

Daniel winced at the memory. “Why even look for him? He was obviously lying! If he's not willing to be truthful, I see no reason why I should-”

Sam snarled, “Daniel James Fenton? Shut the fuck up….Are you really that dense? Jesus… He was genuinely explaining what he did… he was trying to tell you and you full out verbally assaulted him! If anything, he looks like he wants this truce to work more than you!”

Daniel winced and then yelled back. “WHAT THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE?!!?! HE FLIRTS NONSTOP WITH MY MOM FOR OVER TWO YEARS AND I'M SUPPOSED TO TAKE HIM BY HIS WORD?!!?!”

Tucker, on the other end of the line still, groaned. “Sam? I'll run over to Fenton Works to get Jaz and the boomerang. Talk down lover boy before you two go searching.”

And with that Tucker hung up.

Sam stomped her foot angrily. “Daniel? Can you honestly say you haven't seen the way he's been acting around us? He was so close to telling us downstairs! So close! And then, when he elaborates on something truthfully thirty minutes later you bash him and call him a lying narcissistic bastard?”

Daniel winced and sighing he took a deep breath. ‘I took it to far….He just pissed me off so badly…Why flirt if he didn't like her?’

“You're right… I overreacted… This is just… It’s just so confusing and frustrating! Everything I
thought I knew is being tossed up and under piles of contradicting mush and it's making me so angry!"

Sam took a deep breath and gripped Daniel's shoulder. “So you vented at Vlad? Daniel… you offered the truce and he accepted. He just wants peace...From everything we've witnessed he's been keeping a fairly large secret or something equally important from us… Either that or we never really knew anything about him, to begin with.”

She paused and looked toward the bed bitterly. “Doesn't he have enough to deal with right now? He's poisoned, he’s injured, and he’s trying to come to grips with trusting us. I'd like to hope you can somehow reel in your over emotional tendencies to be the hero I know you are and help him…”

Daniel rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. “Damn it… you’re right. He hasn't done a single hateful or cruel thing since I found him in the kitchen a few days ago. If anything he's just been emotionally reserved. We were actually getting along and I just burnt that bridge down…”

Sam cupped her hand under Daniel's chin and motioned for him to transform. “I think it would be a good idea for us to find Vlad so you both can apologize? Just a bit? Sure he was a villain and I can't justify his actions but the fact remains, he's not a callous, heartless prick… He's just confused.”

Daniel nodded. “Okay… Let's go hunt down Plasmius.”
‘That ignorant little… God, that stung! What did I really expect though? He had every right after I flirted with her constantly.’ Vlad groaned and gripped his head tiredly.

‘Then again? Does it actually count as flirting when the aim is not seduction but pissing off the other person?’

Vlad, now invisible, was scuffling through the kitchen of a diner near the outskirts of Amity and making himself some coffee. The waitress on break smiled shyly at the invisible rustling of a styrofoam cup and the slushing of the liquid.

Speaking up, she smirked at the patch of air behind the floating cup. “Another tough day spook?”

Vlad sighed and flickered into being in front of her. “You have no clue…. Teens are just so infuriating!”

The waitress laughed. “You are by far the strangest customer we have.” Pointing to the box near the fridge, she smiled. “Creamer is in there. Do you need any sugar or?”

Vlad smiled politely. “No… I think the bitterness will help with my mood.”

The waitress grinned. “Do you want to talk about it? I know you're a ghost but you’re fairly relatable and I wouldn't mind helping you…”

Vlad gently set down his coffee on the kitchen counter next to the cook’s station. “It's not exactly something that's easily remedied with a lighthearted vent session.”

He paused and stared to the counter, “Two and a half years of bullshit being explained to an ecto-blasting teenager and his accomplices is practically impossible. To add to my woes I'm considered a bad guy to them. Partially my own fault… I was trying to piss them off…Now we've extended an olive branch and everything’s warped and cracked.”

The waitress whistled. “Ouch.”

Fingering her apron, she tapped her chin thoughtfully. She smiled comfortingly as she looked over to Plasmius. “All good things take time. Just be as honest as you can and they'll eventually warm up to you.”

Vlad smiled tiredly and cocked an eyebrow, his pointed ears perked slightly. “Is it ever really that easy?”

The waitress chuckled and, walking over to the box by the fridge, picked out a hazelnut creamer before tossing it to Vlad. “Who said it would be easy? Getting caught in a lie sucks and explaining yourself is even worse. Baby steps, ghost…baby steps…”

Vlad glanced at the creamer and plopped it open tiredly. “Why do you show interest in me? I would think you would openly fear ghosts considering where you live.”

The waitress glanced at the empty diner and smiled truthfully. “The fact my only customer today is you, is a testament to why. Granted, it's pouring rain outside and no one wants to get through the muck….”
Putting a hand to her hip and popping a wrist up she motioned around them. “You look intimidating but I never see you doing anything cruel or fear-worthy. Your tips are pretty awesome too. Seriously? How does a ghost even get one hundred dollar bills?”

Vlad grinned. “The guy I haunt is extremely gracious and gives me a good allowance?”

The waitress grinned. “Is it that cute black haired fellow that keeps dropping by?”

Vlad turned bright green and almost spilled his coffee. “Brown eyes right?”

The waitress grinned. “A twin brother or?”

Vlad smiled. “Yeah. I guess you could say we are two sides of the same coin? Cut from the same cloth?” He chuckled slightly.

The waitress nodded appreciatively before patting Vlad's shoulder. “You both have looked like hell lately. Family issues?”

Vlad shrugged. “Just issues in general. A lot can happen in seven months. Friends die, people forget things...I guess we are both just tired.”

Pausing, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Thanks for talking Damian out of committing suicide. That weather fiasco and work just crushed him. It was nice for him to have friendly human company after such a long time distancing himself, Paula.”

The waitress sighed tiredly. “Yeah… he looked ragged. Next time you see him, tell him to stop by again? I know he's a sucker for the chocolate chip pancakes.”

Vlad beamed. “Sure. I'll tell him.”

A customer walked into the diner and Vlad turned invisible. “See you later Miss Maynard.”

She grinned and, turning out of the kitchen, went to approach the gruff gentleman waiting at the counter for service.

Vlad phased through the ceiling and shielded invisibly to keep the rain off of himself. Flying off toward one of the buildings being constructed, he found a dry spot and hunkered down to drink his coffee.

‘That waitress is something else.’

Vlad smiled warmly and hugged his coffee against himself, savoring the warmth he had been devoid of for several months now. It didn't quite quell his desire for human comfort but it did alleviate some of the ache.

Time passed slowly as he mused over his thoughts. ‘Did I say too much? I really should've just taken what he said without rebuttal. Maybe then this wouldn't be so damned painful? Then again releasing my bent up emotions and heartache probably was never a sound idea.’

Swallowing another sip of coffee, he sighed and leaned himself up next to a metal and concrete pillar. “Just a pathetic bastard, huh?”

Sneering, he looked to the white styrofoam in mock amusement. “The bitterness isn't helping like I thought it would. Maybe I should just go back and get some pancakes?”

Sighing, he teleported back into the diner.
Paula was raising her hands in the air behind the counter and fearfully looking to the gentleman she had previously been serving. Vlad groaned and a shield popped up between Paula and the man. The baggily clothed, and balding gentleman fired the gun and the waitress flinched. The two bullets that fired at her plopped off the shield and clanked to the floor with dull thuds.

“ Well, that's awfully rude. A beautiful young woman offers you service and you in return try piercing her through with hot lead?"

The man spun around fearfully only to be splashed in the face by a boiling hot pot of coffee. The man screamed and fell to the floor. Vlad turned visible and sighed. Setting the pot back on the counter, he glanced down at the man with a look of absolute annoyance. Looking over to Paula, he pointed at the customer screaming profanities on the floor, “ Do you ever have pleasant customers or is it always societal degenerates and oddballs?”

Paula smiled slightly from behind the shield. “ The good ones are few and far between.”

Vladimir sighed and yanked up the man from his previously writhing position into a standing one. “ I'll drop him off at the police station. He's probably done this before.” Punching him in the stomach, Vlad rolled his eyes and hefted the would-be robber over his shoulder. The semiconscious man groaned and Vlad rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. “This day can't possibly get any worse.”

As if to prove him wrong a shattering of glass could be heard behind him. He tensed and went to shield only to feel a heavy smack against the back of his skull. Falling to his knees, he groggily tried to stay coherent only to feel the dizziness from earlier coming back with a vengeance. Paula, in a blind panic, ran out from behind the counter and began dragging Vladimir away from the dazed attacker and the softly beeping weapon that had stunned her savior. Vlad groaned and tiredly struggled against the fizzling energy trying to condense around his torso to change him back. ‘ What….hit me…?...Uh…’

Paula cradled Vlad against herself fearfully, “ Ghosthunters…”

Two dripping wet figures could be seen clambering over the broken window. “ Get away from us! He was protecting-”

Vlad passed out against her shoulder with a small thump.
Tucker and Jazmine were driving fairly fast to keep up with the boomerang. It had locked almost immediately on Vlad's signature and was spinning much faster through the air than it normally did when chasing Daniel. The small homing device was practically hell-bent on pursuing the residual energy clinging to it.

Tucker raised an eyebrow as they drove. “What the actual heck is up with the boomerang today?”

Jaz winced and shrugged as she spun the wheel in pursuit. “Some of this rain may have fried something.”

Tucker nodded and, seeing the boomerang crashing through a small diner, motioned Jazmine to pull over. Both teens hastily jumped from the car and ran, splashing through the water and rain congealing over the road. Tucker leaped through the window first, followed closely by Jazmine.

Both of them rigidly froze at the sight they were met with. A dazed and pain-stricken man was curling against himself next to a large puddle of coffee and by the far wall, there was a waitress protectively holding Vladimir to herself.

Vlad, almost completely out of it, fully slumped against her shoulder as she began screaming in a blind panic. “Get away from us! He was protecting me! Ghost hunters have no business-”

She stopped and her eyes widened. “Y-You’re just a couple of kids?”

Two rings began splitting around Vlad and the waitress hugged him closer. Her surprise at the children ghost hunters was quickly overshadowed by her rage. “WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM!?”

Jazmine raised an eyebrow and bent down to eye level with the woman. She went to reach for Vlad only for the woman to bitterly slap away her hand. “LEAVE HIM ALONE!”

Tucker approached comfortingly. “Miss? Please? What happened?”

The waitress narrowed her gaze and, seeing Vlad's hair turning from short spiky black to silver, she paled. Where there was previously a cold ghost there was now a slightly feverish man being held against her. Whipping her gaze back to the two, she glowered. “What did that device do?!?”

Jazmine raised an eyebrow and bent down to eye level with the woman. She went to reach for Vlad only for the woman to bitterly slap away her hand. “LEAVE HIM ALONE!”

Tucker approached comfortingly. “Miss? Please? What happened?”

Still holding Vlad, she growled. “H-He came by for coffee earlier and left because I had a customer… My customer wanted more than food and pulled out a gun. He came back and took care of the problem and was just about to drag my assailant off to the police station when that thing,” She hissed as she stared at the still softly beeping device behind them. “-brained him!”

Jazmine widened her eyes at this. “How hard did it hit him?!?!?”

The waitress, confused by the worried tone, furrowed her brow. “Hard enough for him to collapse.”

Jazmine cautiously leaned forward and reassured. “It was a tracking device… It wasn’t meant to hurt him. Please…let me check him? He was hurt badly a couple of days ago. The only reason we were searching for him was to make sure he’s safe.”
The waitress allowed Jazmine’s hands to brush over Vlad as Tucker helped lay him down.

The woman's eyes widened. “He’s the mayor?”

Jazmine gently put her palm to Vlad's neck to feel his pulse and shook him slightly. Vlad was unresponsive.

“He's out cold.”

Tucker winced. “What the actual hell was wrong with the boomerang? It's never acted like that before!”

The waitress unfurled her apron and folded it to put it under Vlad's head. “You must be those teens he was talking about earlier.” She whispered quietly.

Both Jazmine and Tucker exchanged worried glances. “What did he say?”

The waitress stiffened and sighed. “Something about struggling with two and a half years of bullshit and how he was supposed to explain the truth? I'm not seeing any ecto-blasting teenagers around so I guess you're his accomplices? He was looking for advice and he was shelling out a lot of self-blame and talking about how he was unsure about how things were progressing.”

Both Jazmine and Tucker winced. “Yeah… we're the ecto-blasting teenager’s accomplices.” Tucker murmured. Looking over Vlad, he questioned, “Why did he come here?”

The waitress rubbed her eyes tiredly. “Him and the other guy that drops by here both have been overly depressed lately. For a little more than six months now. They seem comforted by just hanging out and talking.”

There was a click behind them and all three individuals stiffened.

“I'm taking the mayor with me. You three, get up and walk to the counter nice and slow.” The man's gruff voice stabbed through the air like ice. The gun barrel leaning against Jazmine's long red locks casually tapped against her shoulder before motioning toward the counter. “Move it, little lady.”

Tucker glowered at the man, as did the waitress.

The waitress's eyes sparked and she went to grasp onto Vlad again only for a smoking hole to appear in the wooden floor next to Vlad's head.

“Don't you dare… Just back away from the freak! Any more sudden movements and I'll finish him right here and now!”

The waitress’s eyes widened and, glaring, she backed over to the counter with Tucker and Jazmine. Reaching down, the man quickly ripped some zip ties from his coat pocket and bound Vlad's wrists in front of him. He smiled vehemently as he hefted the now bound halfa up from the floor.

Tossing the adult over his left shoulder and still holding the gun, he began exiting the diner. “This cocky paranormal asshole is coming with me.” He purred the words and smiled leeringly at the horrified expressions of the three behind the counter.

“Don't worry, we’ll have plenty of fun to make up for earlier.”

Still smiling, he aimed the gun and shot just to the right of the small group causing them all to instinctively duck. Seeing his opportunity, he quickly bolted out the door and into the rain with his captive.
Tucker immediately whipped out his phone. “SAM!?!? Where are you guys?!?!”

Sam answered. “We’re in town looking. What’s wrong? Where are you at?”

Tucker winced and looked out to the downpour outside. “Some psychopath just kidnapped Vlad. He has a gun. We're in the northern outskirts of town near Canfield's Diner. Please tell me Danny has some way of tracking crazy bastards?!?!”

Both Jazmine and Tucker ran out of the diner, the young waitress closely followed behind them. The man was ducking into an alleyway about a block ahead of them with Vlad. “Update Sam? The guy just ran into an alleyway nearby with Vlad slung over his shoulder.”

“Danny is on his way. Just keep the guy distracted or something?!?”

Tucker growled. “Easy for you to say! Vlad's knocked completely out thanks to the Fenton Boomerang and the guy still has a gun!”

Sam’s voice, slightly panicked, instructed. “Follow him! Don't let him get out of sight!”

Tucker groaned as he ran through the rain. “Already ahead of you. Jazmine and I are turning down the alleyway right now.”

Hunkering down, the three watched as the assailant threw Vlad onto the ground so he could break open one of the boarded-up windows blocking his entry. Looking down at Vlad, he poked the partially unbuttoned shirt aside and seeing the bandages smiled wickedly.

“Mr. Mayor is in another bought of trouble now, isn't he?” Rifling through Vlad's pants, he snarled at the lack of money. Looking toward the window, he grinned at his efforts and then pulled Vlad up by his hair before hefting him over his shoulder again. Kicking down one last piece of wood, he crawled in with Vlad whistling as he crept further and further from peering eyes.

Tucker snarled into the phone. “He just broke into that abandoned mattress warehouse near the docks.”

Sam relayed the information to someone else on a different line before speaking to Tucker again. “Danny’s three minutes out.”

Tucker winced. “I'm going in… Don't worry, I'm going to keep out of sight.”

Before Sam could protest, he hung up and motioned the two girls to stay behind. “Jaz? Go get your car. Vlad's probably going to need us to cart him home after this.”

Jaz nodded warily and grabbed onto the waitress. “Come on.”

Tucker shook his head. “No. She needs to stay here so she can signal Daniel down.”

The waitress's eyes widened from under the drenched hair flopping against her cheeks in sopping wet ringlets. “Who's this Daniel I'm supposed to signal?”

Tucker grinned tiredly. “Just Amity’s resident ghost hero.”

“So the ghost fighting ghost is going to save a ghost? What-?”

Tucker sighed. “Trust us. We honestly don't want that bastard hurting Vlad. Just stay here and signal down the temperamental ecto-blasting teenager?”
She nodded reluctantly and Tucker raced forward to the hastily made entrance and jumped in. Staying in the shadows and crawling through the cobwebs, he slowly crept down the hallway until he came to a lit office. The man, still whistling, tossed Vlad onto a bed and began reinforcing his zip-tied hands with a pair of metal cuffs. Leaning in to inspect his prize, he rubbed the muzzle of the gun against Vlad's cheek.

Vlad stirred slightly and noticing his hands were tied attempted to phase only for his captor to flip the gun over in one hand before bringing the back of the weapon against Vlad's head. Vlad fell back with a dull thud and his eyes groggily fluttered closed.

“Now now embassary…. we can't have those powers of yours causing us any trouble now can we?” A deep female voice morphed and fluctuated with terrifying inhuman undertones from the shadows in the abandoned room.

The man turned and smiled to a vacant spot knowingly. “I found your prey for you? Really? Wow! Today must be my lucky day...You never said I would be hunting the mayor though.”


The robber chuckled. “Wasn't the big bad paranormal purifier supposed to have more fight in him? A kid's boomerang knocked him senseless! Talk about pathetic.”

“You really are weak now, hmm?” A woman with yellow skin and glowing blue eyes gazing predatorily toward Vladimir materialized into the room and smiled, exposing hundreds of barbed fangs.

“And here I was losing hope you wouldn't be so easily lured out… It's a shame your body is so heavily damaged. I guess I'll have to feed on you slowly?” She tapped her chin wistfully and grinned before leaning in against Vlad. “Your seal didn't even alert you to my taint…. I wonder why that is?” Her fingers slyly brushed through his hair and untied it.

“Come on embassary…. Show me you’re deserving?”

Tucker swallowed and slowly retreated from the opening. Backing up, he made his way to the entrance and phoned Sam. In a low hiss, he whispered, “Sam!?! For fuck’s sake, something inhuman is in there with him!”

Sam worriedly questioned. “What are you talking about Tuck? What about the guy with the gun?!”

Tucker, in a panicked whisper, screeched. “That dude isn't the one in charge. This thing is talking about feeding off of him!”

Daniel appeared next to Tucker and put a hand to his mouth. Hanging the phone up, Tucker sighed in relief. Whispering, he hissed, “Tell me you have a plan? The thing tying Vlad down isn't like the box ghost and honestly, it's creepier than that doll we saw yesterday.”

An agonized female scream ripped through the hallway and both Tucker and Daniel paled. The female voice could then be heard yelling angrily. “Damn it! It’s activating!?!? Lift him up! I need his wrists exposed more….”

There was a shuffling and a stiff bang emanated from the room.

“Don't you dare damage my meal human…”

Tucker nodded and backed up against the window fearfully.
Off the Menu

Daniel turned invisible and crept to the room. Vlad was being secured to the headboard of a bed by an angry and highly irritated man with a gun tucked in his waistband. “Can't you just feed off of him somewhere else?”

A female voice purred. “No, I prefer him unaware and completely secluded like this….Tear off that ridiculous fabric adorning his chest… I can smell the blood and it's becoming rather cumbersome to view my prey bundled up as such.”

The man snarled. “You are quite petty for a demon. Here I summoned you for riches and I'm instead being used as bait and a henchman.”

Roughly grabbing onto Vlad's shirt, he began tearing it off of his chest. Vlad numbly tried to open his eyes and moved slightly against his restraints. The man quickly pulled the gun and snapped the handle to the side of Vlad's head a couple of times, effectively knocking him out. Daniel flew forward to intervene only to pause apprehensively when the woman's voice pierced the air again, “Hold open his mouth. We can't have his other form or his abilities interfering.”

Daniel, seeing Vlad's unconscious form being lifted up slightly against the restraints, hissed angrily and blasted both the man and the monster into the wall. The demon growled ferally and cocked her head to the side as she stared at Daniel. Jumping to her feet, she crouched animalistically. Her ebony locks and plaid skirt seemed to shift and flicker from a non-existent wind as she gazed at the boy.

“And what is it we have here? Some pitiful half-pint hero come to save the embassy?” She cackled and her fangs grew even larger. “You smell familiar boy. Is it not you who butchered him so? He's quite sickly and weak as of now… Why not let us have him, hmmm?”

Daniel grimaced and his eyes sparked. “What the actual fuck are you doing?!”

She raised an eyebrow and laughed with undiluted mirth. “Did you not know the prize you wounded? If you have no clue of its value why not leave us in peace, spirit? Or maybe you find some sort of attachment to your enemy? Why else would one’s spectral signature be so painfully sliced into his being?”

Daniel questioned again, this time more angry and loud. “I'LL SAY THIS ONE MORE TIME. WHAT ARE YOU TWO FREAKS TRYING TO DO TO HIM?”

The man laughed. “Danny Phantom, the ghost hero? Seriously? God the last week has been wild! Well, if you must know kiddo, my partner here is a demon that feeds off of want and flesh. She seems to have her heart set on consuming the balance between or some such nonsense… The Mayor over there just happens to be that and I don't get my money until she's devoured his heart. Understand spook?”

Daniel choked back bile. “You plan on eating him?”

Both of them laughed and Daniel's ectoplasm buzzed uncomfortably. The woman took a step closer to the bed and gazed possessively at Vlad's sleeping form. “Yes boy, I plan on consuming him….He’s no threat as of now and his emotions are just ripe enough to satisfy my cravings.”

Daniel's aura spiked and both hands charged dangerously. “I’m giving you a chance to leave… If I were you? I'd take it.”
The demonic laughed frugally. Eyeing Daniel's expression with giddy amusement, she purred. “You would let me flee where your precious enemy would exorcise me on the spot? And you call yourself the hero? Tell me, boy...Do you know what demons are, what our obsessions center on?”

Seeing Daniel's expression, she teleported to the bed and lightly stroked Vlad’s cheek. “We feed off of the living and the dead by destroying them from the outside and the inside. We get our enjoyment from breaking them. If I can not have him yet, I'll just go after another until a new chance arises to claim him. We do not give up on our meals easily child. So I ask again, why not leave your enemy with me? ”

Daniel growled and hissed angrily. “Get. off. of. him.”

The demon in response sneered before turning Vlad’s bandages intangible and ripping them off. “Begone boy, this concerns you not!”

Reaching down and poking a finger against Vlad's healing chest, she slowly impaled the stomach wound. Vlad’s spine arched slightly and his eyes opened briefly only for him to slip back under. Daniel blasted her and she hissed as she connected against the wall. Lifting the finger to her mouth, she licked the crimson and her eyes sparked slightly.

“Oohhhh! That's why it's activating! Such a pitiful existence and yet he still wishes that? How absurd!” She laughed and starred over to Vlad happily before looking back at Daniel. “He really told you the truth earlier didn't he? Poor little halfling! He was so distraught at your response…”

Daniel's eyes widened fearfully. “H-How do you k-know that?”

The demon gazed at Vladimir and raised her blood-drenched finger up so Daniel could see. Licking it, she purred in contentment. A look of pure disgust crossed Daniel's features and she chuckled. “Blood and ectoplasm share energy patterns... Genetics hold soul memories. My kind do love this so...We can see every weak spot in a person's armor and are capable of ripping into them in every way imaginable… I never thought he would taste so satisfying even with this poison running through his body…”

Daniel's eyes narrowed and he blasted the specter again. She hissed against the wall and bared her fangs. Seeing her human partner aiming the gun in his peripheral, Daniel created a shield. The man grinned at him and motioned back to the demonic Daniel had left unattended. The creature, now lifting Vlad up, smiled toothily as she ran her long serpentine tongue along his exposed abdomen. Her eyes rolled back giddily. “Hmmmm…. how interesting.”

She lifted Vlad’s head up and smiled toward Daniel. “He really hates himself, doesn't he? Such a kind heart…. To protect... he willingly gave it all up, he surrendered and allowed himself to be torn apart…” Tilting Vlad's head back, she began propping open his mouth. Taking a vial out of her orange leather jacket, she uncapped it. Daniel's fist connected against her jaw a split second later and she tumbled off of the bed. Her body glowed with murderous intent as she sprung back to her feet.

“You little spectral nuisance! I'll get rid of you first!” Claws extended from her hands and she circled them angrily.

Daniel growled at her words. “You took the words right out of my mouth, monster.”

Vlad's right hand dully attempted to spark. Creating a shield around himself and Vlad, Daniel began trying to wake Vladimir up. The adult, however, remained limp and unresponsive. “Come on Vlad… Wake up…”
Pulling back some of the wet gray hair from Vlad's brow, Daniel felt his head and worriedly patted his cheek. Vlad groaned and tried to open his eyes only to slip back under again. The fever was back thanks to the rain. Daniel glowered at the demonic running her claws over his shield.

“Give him back boy… That's my meal!” The shield screeched and Daniel winced.

“I laid claim to him!” Her talons extended and raked across the shield harder. The ear-numbing, nails on a chalkboard sound caused Daniel to writhe.

“He is mine!” And with that she thrust her talons through the shield completely, cracking it. The shield shattered like sugar glass and dissipated. Daniel protectively arched himself over Vlad and the demonic lunged forward, slicing into his shoulder. Smiling, she flung him into a wall away from Vlad. Ignoring the teen, she turned toward the older unconscious half ghost and raised her arm with the intent of rendering him as close to death as possible so that she could make the boy's protests pointless. She didn't get a chance to act on her plan. Daniel, eyes flashing a light neon blue, slammed his palm to the floor. A large ice spike spiraled from the rotting laminate and into the creature's spine. She hissed and thrashed. Glaring at Daniel, she began trying to phase only for the teenager to expand the ice through her core. With a muted thud and a yowl of agony, she dissipated in a wisp of black smoke.

Panting and gripping his ectoplasm dripping shoulder, Daniel looked back up to Vlad only to see the human assailant propping a gun to his head. Lifting up some strands of silver the man angrily snarled, “Look what you did ghost brat! Do you realize how much money she promised me?!”

The man latched onto Vlad's head and hefted him up into a sitting position. ‘Damn it. Vlad…’

Creating an invisible duplicate, Daniel had his doppelgänger position himself next to Vladimir. A stiff metallic click echoed as the man raised the gun more snugly against Vlad's head. Daniel's double latched on to Vlad's shoulder and prepared to phase him.

“Well jokes on you, you little ectoplasmic freak! If I'm going down I'm taking your sickly paranormal friend with me!”

‘Now!’

The enraged individual pulled the trigger twice and seeing no blood and no dead mayor, he growled angrily and tried to make a run for it. Daniel sent his double after him. Flying over to Vlad, Danny frantically phased him out of the cuffs and the zip ties. “Fruit-Loop, we're getting you home. You're going to be alright…”

Vlad grimaced in his sleep as he was lifted up. Daniel frowned deeply at the crimson coating Vlad's torso. Laying him back down, he clicked the secure channel on his Fenton Phone to contact Tucker and Sam with a joint call.

Tucker's panicked voice rang out first, “We heard gunfire! Are you alright Pham?”

Daniel winced and looked to his shoulder. “I'm fine considering that thing used me as a scratching post. My duplicate is bringing that guy out to you now. I beat him up pretty good so I doubt he will be getting away on his own. Do me a favor and wait there? I'm sending another duplicate out with some cuffs to phase onto the bastard.”

Sam worriedly questioned, “What happened to Vlad?!”

Daniel went quiet for a moment. Sighing, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Sam? Do you have anything we can wrap him in? Whatever that thing was, ripped his bandages off and was playing
around in his wounds.”

Sam paused, “No… I don't have anything Danny… I'm outside with Jaz now.”

There was a pause. Sam spoke up somewhat relieved, “Okay, we have something! Jaz had a blanket in the backseat of her car. Can we come into the building or?”

Looking at the giant ice spike and Vlad, Daniel smiled tiredly, “Yeah, come on in. I'm probably going to need your help with carrying him out. My left arm got sliced through…”

Sam’s voice, somewhat fatigued gave a brief, “Coming in.” And then with a small click, she hung up.

Tucker, still on the line questioned. “Danny? Dude? What was that chick?”

Daniel paused and swallowed. “Tuck? I think we just met a demon.”

Tucker went silent for a moment. “Can you send out another duplicate Danny? I have an idea about how to handle this bozo out here.”

Daniel smiled slightly, “Sure.”

His duplicate flew by just as Sam and Jaz rounded the corner and made their way into the room. Seeing Daniel's shoulder, Jazmine immediately rushed toward him only for him to push her away. “Treat Vlad first….”

Jazmine glanced over to Vlad and, wincing, rushed over to his side. Cradling his head, she gently tried waking him up. Her eyes widened fearfully. “Danny… this fever…”

Sam, hearing this, sprinted over and began checking Vlad herself. “His temperature isn't leveling out…it's still getting higher.”

Nodding, Daniel began cooling the room rapidly. “He's probably not going to wake up for a while. Those monsters hit him over the head a couple of times to keep him from phasing away or teleporting.”

Jazmine's slender hand gently prodded through Vlad's hair. Her fingers connected to a large bruised portion and Vlad grimaced in his sleep. “Jesus… they hit him hard…”

Probing the rest of his head for injury, she felt something sticky and wet near the back of his skull. Retracting her hand, her eyes widened. “Danny…?”

Her hand shakily lifted, exposing the blood to both Sam and Daniel. Both teens felt their own blood run far more frigid than the icy room. Growling, Sam took the initiative and began tearing up her cotton long sleeve shirt into a makeshift bandage. Gently prodding Jazmine aside, she lifted Vlad's head up and began trying to temporally bandage him. Vlad’s eyes lazily fluttered open and he coughed. Sam gently comforted him, “Vlad? Can you hear us?”

Vlad grimaced and numbly began darting in and out of consciousness. Sam lifted him up slightly and checked his pupils. “No brain trauma. He's just hurt too badly to make any actual conversation.”

Vlad grimaced and fell forward slightly in her hold. She continued expertly trying to wrap his injured head with the shirt scraps.

Daniel and Jaz both worriedly hovered over Vlad and now seeing the back of his head fully, both stared venomously toward the doorway of the room.
Daniel growled, “I think I should have beat that bastard a little more thoroughly...” Looking back to Vlad and leaning down, he tried focusing the adult again.

Vlad numbly registered Daniel's shoulder and his right arm shakily reached for him. There was a flash and Vlad passed out against Sam. Jazmine looked from Vlad to Daniel and then her eyes widened in complete disbelief. “Daniel?!?! Your shoulder! Look at your shoulder!”

Daniel's eyes darted to the numb flesh and then grew round with disbelief. Looking back up at Jaz he questioned, “Did he just...?”

Sam, trying to adjust her hold on Vlad, attempted to look back. “He just what? Some of us are trying to keep him from falling on the floor here! A little explanation would be grand right about now!”

Daniel and Jaz shared an equally perplexed gaze before Daniel answered. “So, um.... my shoulder’s fine now?”

Sam stiffened. “Wait... he can heal other people?”

Vlad moved slightly against her and she cupped her hand behind his neck to keep him steady.

Jazmine moaned in annoyance and Daniel grumbled, “And of course he passed out before we could get an explanation from him!”

Sam angrily snapped at them, “Well excuse him for being a decent human being and getting brained by Fenton equipment! Or better yet, let's stand here ogling at him for being kidnapped thanks to his inability to defend himself because of said faulty equipment and then pistol whipped? Stop bickering and whining! I need your help wrapping him in that blanket and carrying him to the car!”

Both Fenton's turned contrasting shades. Jazmine tinted red and Daniel green, due to embarrassment and guilt. Flustered, they both helped lift Vlad off of Sam. Sam sprung up and, grabbing the blanket she had dropped on the floor, began swaddling Vlad's exposed torso. Turning to Daniel, she motioned for him to pick up Vlad.

Reaching down and hefting the adult up as easily as one would a small bag, he cradled him to his chest. Vlad moved unconsciously toward Daniel's core. Sam smiled slightly. “And the human air conditioner strikes again.”

Jaz nodded and motioned them all to walk forward. Turning to Daniel, she added, “I think you should ride in the back of the car with him Danny.”

Daniel readjusted his hold before speaking. “I'll meet you guys out there.”

They nodded and Daniel turned intangible and invisible. Flying through the wall with Vlad and into the street, he landed on the roof of the car and sunk both himself and Vlad through the vehicle and into the backseat. Laying Vlad up against the seat next to the darkly tinted window and gripping a cooling hand to his head, he waited for Sam, Jaz, and Tucker to get into the car.

The doors clicked open a few minutes later and both Jazz and Sam got into the front seat. Looking into the backseat, Sam instructed Daniel to move over and lay Vlad down.

“What about Tuck?”

Sam smiled wickedly, “Tuck is helping a kind diner waitress with apprehending an armed thug. Something about him sneaking up behind the man as he held her at gunpoint and beating him over with a coffee pot?”
Daniel grinned, “Well, that explains why he asked my duplicates to drag the guy back to the diner. Granted, locking him in the freezer was my idea.”

Sam and Jazz exchanged somewhat understanding glances before hastily pulling away from the street.
A Brief Look into the Mind of Vlad Masters

It was still raining by the time they pulled up to Vlad's manor.

Daniel gently shook Vlad and this time the adult groggily focused on him. “Ugh….Daniel….Where are we? Itzzz all...uh-”

Both Sam and Jazz's heads whipped around to stare at Vlad. Vlad tiredly grimaced and his leg bent in as struggled to grasp exactly where he was and how he got there. Daniel gently comforted. “ It's okay… You accidentally got hit in the head…”

Vlad numbly looked up at Daniel. “Seal…. something dangerous...what? Uh….My head?…n’ you're ...injured..I-I saw...it..”

Daniel hefted him up slightly and gripped him closer. “ That's just the head injury talking Vlad... We're home now. Just calm down Fruit-Loop. You just had a bad dream.”

Vlad tensed and his right palm numbly clawed itself from under the blanket. His eyes flashed white for a moment and he slumped. “ You’re….a bad….liar...Badger…” Wincing, his body's struggles slackened and he fell further into Daniel's hold.

Jazmine smiled apologetically. “Yep… definitely, some head trauma based delirium.”

Sam rolled her eyes and looking toward Vlad, worriedly reached over the seat to check his fever. “ Good. It's gone down some. When we get him inside we'll give him some Tylenol.”

Vlad moved slightly from her touch and tried opening his eyes again only for her to sigh in exasperation. “ Okay… go to sleep already! Do you even realize how injured you are Vlad?”

Vlad smiled slightly and through half-lidded eyes looked toward the sound of her voice. “Manson?.... I...think … I know…M’...kinda hurting...a lot...right now...”

Vlad winced and Sam’s brow furrowed. Looking at Daniel, she questioned. “ That chic? Was she a ghost? She may have activated the blood blossom still in his system.”

Daniel nodded. “ She had a ghost core so I'm assuming yeah?”

Vlad’s brow furrowed as Daniel lifted him up into his lap. “I'm going to float him into the house. I'll meet you both upstairs.”

Sam smiled. “ Gotcha. We'll be in a few minutes.”

Wrapping his free arm under Vlad's legs, he phased them both intangible and through the roof of the car. Flying through the upstairs, he quickly made his way into Vlad's bedroom again and began helping Vlad out of the blanket he was wrapped in. Vlad shakily held himself at the edge of the bed before speaking. “....Badger... I have….to wash the blood off….before we wrap…”

Daniel grimaced and nodded.

“I'll find a washcloth and some water.”

Vlad blearily locked his eyes with Daniel and, looking away, he added, “I….think...I need a ….bath...”
Frowning, Daniel questioned. “How do you propose you go about that Vlad? I can't just let you out of my sight when you're practically unconscious!”

Vlad winced. “I….have...an idea?”

Daniel crossed his arms and cocked an eyebrow. “Go on, I'm listening.”

Vlad smiled tiredly and duplicated. The duplicate and Vlad both grimaced. “I can turn.....one duplicate...into Plasmius...He can..alert you....if I conk out...He'll fade if I lose consciousness…”

Daniel nodded, slightly impressed. “Okay… I'm game for this.” With that, the duplicate morphed into Plasmius. Both Vlad's ghost counterpart and himself fainted partially before righting themselves. The double blurred and then solidified again as Vlad stood up shakily and began pitching forward.

Daniel caught him and, draping him over his shoulder, helped him to the bathroom. “Vlad? I think I'd be more confident in your ability to manage if you took a shower sitting down? No baths where you can drown and no slick tile for you to re-crack your head on?”

Vlad nodded. “… Kind of.....to dizzy to...stand anyway…”

Leading Vlad to the walk-in shower, he gently sat him down on the small lip of tile dividing the bathroom floor from the small wash area. Vlad nodded in thanks and Daniel politely vacated the room.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Vlad sat tiredly for a moment to try and gather the incoherent babble zipping and darting inside his cranium. Every second after the diner was warped and so blurred he couldn't make heads or tails of what happened to him. Phasing his clothes intangible, Vladimir tiredly chunked them to the floor. Standing briefly to cut on the shower, he grabbed the body wash from the shelf and set the water to a comfortable temperature. Sitting down in the stream, he begrudgingly felt the fabric on his head and phased it off as well before he began tenderly feeling the spots he had been clubbed in.

‘Ow...uh… I was hit with a gun right?…’

Vague recollections of him waking up in a strange room with the diner burglar looming over him and hitting him relentlessly in the head until he had blacked out, clawed their way into focus.

‘I guess....I should've...poured the coffee....on his crotch?... Ballzy….bastard…’

Daniel laughed from the other room. Vlad raised an eyebrow tiredly and gently began cleaning his head injury and his chest.

Dizzy, he swayed forward and winced as some of the suds dribbled into his eye. ‘And to add to today's....bs? ....I now have... soap in my eye....Damn that stings!’

This time three individuals could be heard laughing from the bedroom. Vlad rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly and, directing himself back under the stream of water, he mentally ranted, ‘What is...so funny? Did...Daniel...accidentally….fry the cat?.... God my brain….’

Vlad weakly chuckled internally at the thought.

‘Manson would... be livid…’

Sitting under the stream of water and, curling his legs against himself, Vlad continued his ponderings
oblivious to the fact his dazed and equally out of sorts duplicate was muttering his thoughts aloud in the other room.
Spritz! Spritz!

Jaz, Sam, and Daniel were watching the practically semiconscious duplicate in giddy amusement.

“This is so sad. Does he know how out of it he is right now?” Jaz whispered.

“I’ve only been knocked this senseless once Jaz, and I never attempted duplication in that condition.” Daniel snorted and pointed to the dazed clone.

The clone’s brow furrowed as he leaned back against the wall and curled his knees against his chest. Looking to the floor, he mused, “Why…do…I always end…up like this?”

He cradled his head slightly and rubbed his brow against his arm. “mmm… probably cause I’m… a pathetic…. crazy, narcissistic cloning… bastard who only thinks of himself…? Pathetic…ousy…that's true right?… I can't even protect a little girl….. Narcissistic… pfft. I never… thought of myself… as anything but….a man…..I'm less…than that…though…..just a freak….a monster…”

The three watching Vlad's duplicate paled. The duplicate, still oblivious squeezed his shoulders and curled against himself further. “Liz?....I'm so tired….Everything hurts…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Who's Liz?”

The other two shrugged, just as confused by the name.

Plasmius paused and, raising his head abruptly, he questioned, “Clones? Fuck!….Never cloned-…” Vlad's features became hauntingly dark and then he slammed his head back under his folded arms defeatedly. “Uh… god, my head…. make it stop…”

The duplicate shook slightly against himself. “….That's all you could do… Distancing them…. pissing them off… Cruel irony…. Is it wrong…. to want this?...To want…a chance… even after… I failed….?”

Plasmius sighed and clutched his shoulders a little more tightly as his head turned out from under his arm. He was crying. Wiping the tears off, he smirked.

“Photographic….memory hurts…. Words fucking….hurt…..Itzzz my fault though…. I didn't want…. another person… damned like me…”

Vlad winced and one of his legs extended out. Propping a hand under his jaw, he continued. “Daniel's not…like me though......he didn't have his friends....leave him...He has a family… They're alive...not dead….M’ thankful… and proud….He...can still enjoy life...he's not hollow or broken…”

Vlad ran a hand through his hair and winced as his hand connected to one of the bruises. The duplicate’s eyes flashed white for a second and he laughed bitterly. “Another….demon tried….killing me...pfff…. they never learn…. joys of being a monster… Talk about… a...lousy job.”

Becoming slightly sarcastic, Vlad bitterly continued. “Surprise...you aren't an experiment... or prisoner….anymore…. but get this?.... You are damned...for hoping...things could change...Waitress wonders why I was so intent on just shooting myself....Then again bullets….don't work to good… when you instinctively turn intangible...Ha..”

The three teens winced.
Vlad numbly curled up against himself again and, dizzy, he gripped his head. The duplicate flickered slightly but continued staying tangible.

“God, the depressing... thoughts keep... coming... The demon must have... licked or fed...? I haven't...thought this way... in weeks...Damn it...”

Biting his lip and cradling his head, he sighed in an attempt to calm himself. “...On the bright side...I'm not blind...I'm not impaled...and m’ not being pinned to...a table...and--”

Vlad chuckled bitterly and his eyes became downcast. “Damned demon...really must have gotten a taste... Poison in the saliva? ..Not what I needed... then again... doubt this will affect... anything too much.... Cause I'm the lucky... halfa bastard... the entire world wants six feet under...including ...Maddie and Jack...blah...”

Vlad fell over slightly and gripped he hands to his ears for a moment. “So....dizzy....... Feels like Ed tranqued me again...” The duplicate sighed and he smiled warmly. “Him.... and Rom... they're...gonna be livid when... they realize I finally dropped the act...No point... the damage was done...”

Vlad stiffened and his eyebrow raised tiredly. Staring at the ceiling, he mused. “Huh... if Ed tries attacking Danny...should I like hit him with...a newspaper or something?... Spritz...spritz bad...hunter?”

The teenager’s jaws dropped and they quickly stifled more laughter. The sudden sarcasm caught them off guard after such a depressing and heartfelt monologue.

Plasmius groaned. “Little green... moron...And what about Rom? Pretty sure he doesn't like Danny... Then again? Kid’s been labeled a ghost racist... Gotta give Agatha props... not a term you hear every day...”

Yawning, Plasmius slouched down further against the wall. “Damn... got work tomorrow.... Cause joy... paperwork... At least thirty grandmothers... in hoop skirts and....hair rollers aren’t... trying... to molest me again... Fucking Ed... Pisses off a knitting club and leaves my address on a scrap piece...of paper... Spiteful little booger... Excuse me... World’s greatest hunter... my spectral ass. Ohhh, look... gonna hunt a poltergeist into... a circle of old ladies... and I'm going to miss... the fucking monster and instead net two old codgers... and a hospice nurse...”

All three teens burst out laughing and the Vlad duplicate rolled his eyes, “Wonder...what they... are laughing about?... Probably found something humiliating...Fuck it... too tired to care...”

Straightening slightly, Vlad's duplicate tiredly mused. “Probably should summon some clothes....Totally makes friggin sense...right? You're a wizard Vladdie. Pffff.”

Daniel and Jazmine were practically blue from restraining laughter and Sam snorted.

Lifting his right palm up amusedly, Plasmius snapped his fingers. Several stiff thuds could be heard from inside the bathroom. Plasmius grinned and tried to get up only to stagger. “Okay... maybe I should just sit here for a few moments...”

Leaning back against the wall and rubbing his chin Vlad groaned. “... I would shave but... I'm about as coordinated as a sailor in a liquor outlet mall...right now... the...last thing I need... is to butcher my face. I'm... a half ghost, I don't need...to pull an Edward Scissorhands...with my straight razor...’ Could always have a duplicate attempt...What am I thinking? Double... the stupid and uncoordinated?... Wait... that's Daniel's job...” Plasmius snorted.
Daniel raised an eyebrow but let the comment slip by him.

Vladimir, still fairly out of it, curled himself slightly against the wall. “...Uh...why does...my chest hurt?... The burning... it doesn't stop...Blood Blossoms shouldn't... cause this.... It should be circulated through the ectoplasm... by now... Maybe my ghost... half is decaying?..... That's terrifying... But then... why am... I hurting... in human form?.... I'm almost getting used... to the heat... and the pain... Maybe God just likes... fucking with my life... in particular...?”

Plasmius groaned and faded slightly. “Damn it.... damn itzzz hurting.... It doesn't stop... Maybe Bertra did give... me something else... in that drink... I... can't even create an ectoblast... currently or shield... correctly... Shielded Paula in the diner... couldn't shield myself though... -spent too much energy... teleporting... Didn't want to collapse... and fall out of the sky again ...”

The teens stood attentive and listened carefully so they could better help him. “The burning... it's like I'm being roasted over coals ... and when... I shift...? God.... it hurts.... It's almost... like when.... I first got... zapped....”

Plasmius's eyes widened for a moment and his mood soured. Coughing could be heard from the bathroom. “Oh.... oh damn... okay.... maybe bleeding internally?.... Blood... lots of blood.”

Daniel worriedly shouted into the restroom, “Vlad? Are you alright in there?!?!?”

Plasmius went to get up and staggered over. “Lie... for god's sake... you just need a day.... to heal... he doesn't need to know... He still hates... Better he... never knew right?” Plasmius winced and swallowed. Vlad's voice, somewhat shaky and slurred echoed from the bathroom. “I'm fine... Daniel...”

Plasmius faded slightly again and put his cheek to the flooring. “Lying... bastard... stupid... bastard... inhuman freak... Monster... Guess... the demons are right in the end... I never deserved... to live... but why is that...? Did I just get the... lucky universal scratch ticket for... hatred and abuse?”

Plasmius stiffened slightly and he trembled. “Broken... broken and pitiful... She was right...” Plasmius paused. “Probably should apologize... to the kids... especially Samantha ... Danny... Some host... I've been...? Should've just went along ... with what Dan... said... but lying more won't help... I'm sick of lying....”

Plasmius snorted. “Then again?... Daniel... doesn't trust... me... probably would think... I'm up to something... or have ulterior motives... mmmm’... a villain?... Ha... some... villain...”

More coughing echoed from the bathroom. Plasmius’s eyes dulled slightly and he slouched further into the floor. “Blood... Blood doesn't... stop... won't stop... ugh...”

The shower could be heard turning off in the bathroom. Plasmius groaned. “....Passing out..... okay..... clothes...”

There was a rustling of fabric behind the door for a minute and then a heavy muted thump followed by a small cry of pain. Plasmius stiffened and his eyes widened. “...It hurts... someone... I...”

Daniel immediately slung open the bathroom and ran into the room. Plasmius dissipated behind him as he rounded on Vlad's unconscious form. Vlad’s chest was darting in and out somewhat spasmodically and he was numbly curled against himself. An outstretched hand was gripping loosely against the nightshirt, which lay on the floor beside him.

Turning Vlad over, Daniel gently lifted his head and began checking him over. Jazmine and Sam
both rushed in a few seconds later. Sam carried a variety of medical supplies from the downstairs infirmary in her somewhat shaking arms. Laying them down on the floor, she quickly began rifling through the boxes and bottles.

Lifting Vlad's back up slightly and still cradling his head, Daniel grabbed the antibacterial spray from Sam and began liberally dosing the wounds in the hopes that whatever the demon had in her saliva would dissipate with the liquid. Vlad winced and turned slightly in his hold from the stinging. Blue eyes fluttered open for a split second before rolling back and closing again.

Propping Vlad up into a sitting position, Daniel motioned for the gauze and began firmly wrapping it around Vlad's chest. The adult’s eyes shot open and he pulled back, flinching and grimacing in agony at the contact. Jazmine gently lifted Vlad's head up by his chin. “Woah… easy there….It's okay. Vlad? I know it hurts. It's going to be alright.”

Vlad practically screamed as the bandages where tightened and secured. His body went limp right after they were done and his heavy-lidded eyes closed the moment his head slumped backward. Sam stood at the ready to treat his head injury. Gently maneuvering her hold, she motioned Jaz to hold his shoulders while she inspected the head wounds.

“ Well, it's healing fast… The cut was pretty shallow so I don't think he needs any bandages on his head now.”

Jazmine winced. “What do you think did it? The boomerang or that crazy robber?”

Sam grimaced. “There's no telling.”

Daniel gently began slipping Vlad's sweatshirt over his chest. Vlad shook and coughed in their hold, a small stream of crimson gently slipped from his jaw and all three teens stiffened. Daniel's eyes flashed and he motioned for Sam to give him a rag from the sink. Laying Vlad on his side temporarily, Daniel turned to Sam, “Go ahead and dampen it.”

She nodded and cutting on the sink, quickly soaked and wrung out the small parcel of fabric. Jazmine winced as they began cleaning off Vlad's jaw. “So...Vlad’s depressive and self-loathing?”

Daniel grimaced as he gently cradled Vlad up slightly against himself. Turning ghost again, he activated his core. Vlad curled against the cold and sighed in relief. “Apparently… yeah…. Do you guys think he actually tried shooting himself?”

Sam and Jazmine both flinched. “He talked about it but he probably was only theorizing what would've happened.” Jazmine’s words, still slightly unsure, managed to calm the small group. Putting his arms under Vlad and hefting him up, Daniel briskly carried the sleeping older half ghost into the bedroom. Sam followed closely behind him. Moving the tray table from earlier, she tossed the covers lightly to the side of the mattress so Vladimir could be laid down and tucked in properly.

Curling against his left side as he was set down, Vlad gently rubbed his aching body deeper against the soft linens and pillows. Sam beamed and pulled the blanket over Vlad. Tucking him in, she groaned. “Okay, in a few hours we're going to have to wake him up for that medicine. For now though? Danny? Chill that pillow I brought over here, will you?”

Daniel smiled slightly and began cooling the fabric after a few moments he handed it to Sam. She smiled at the delicate cold emanating from the pillow before gently lifting Vlad's head and wedging it between his cheek and the bed. Vlad's arm limply curled under it and hugged it closer.

Jaz smiled broadly. “Vlad is kind of a-dorkable. I mean….This just screams....evil.” She
sarcastically mused. Sighing, she rubbed her temple. “What the hell was with the nanobot thing and that death battle royal though?”

Daniel sat down tiredly in the chair to the right of Vladimir's bed and propped his feet up. “Beats me? I call him a Fruit-Loop for a reason, Jaz.”

He rubbed his temple tiredly. “Let’s just let go of what he has done for the moment? Me doing that is what landed him in this condition earlier.”

Tucker could be heard taking off his shoes in the hallway.

Sam smiled in thanks. “So we are finally giving the poor goofball a break?”

Daniel groaned. “Well after hearing that? And what happened earlier because I verbally lashed him for being honest? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if we just continued pouring salt in his wounds.”

Tucker walked in tiredly and tossed his drenched beanie and coat to the floor.

He was just about to speak when Sam's phone rang.
She quickly answered before Vlad could be jostled awake. “Oh… Hi mom.”

Sam paused nervously. “No, I'm not at the Fenton's. I'm helping one of my friends.”

Sam rolled her eyes and growled, “Well mom, you wouldn't be saying that if you knew who my friend was.” Whatever Mrs. Manson said on the other end of the line caused Sam's eyes to flare dangerously.

In a level and cold voice, she replied, “Excuse me mother…. I do believe I'm inclined to pick my company. You also have no right to pick and choose who I associate with based on lackluster and biased observations. Every single individual I know is worth ten of those societal jerks you insist I conform to and befriend. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm trying to help Mayor Masters around his house while he finishes up some post-election paperwork. Next time instead of insulting me or assuming my friends are classless garbage, consider instead asking me why I'm friends with them or what I'm actually doing in my spare time? Just a thought?”

Sam’s foot tapped in annoyance against the wooden floorboards. “Ask Maurice. I've been coming over to help Mayor Masters with Daniel, Tucker, and Jazmine for the last few days in order to develop character and learn more about politics and business.”

Tucker and Daniel both gaped at the smoothness and flawless execution of her woven lies. Tucker whistled. Elbowing Daniel, he winked. “Danny? I hope you never piss her off.”

Daniel groaned. “You should have seen her earlier..”

Sam, now angrily pacing, continued. “Well, I have to get going now that you realize how rude you are being. I have a dinner to make. The help won't touch this place because it's haunted. I'll call Maurice to escort me home later tonight and I will arrive before curfew. Goodbye.”

And with that she clicked the power button on her phone, disconnecting the call.

The room was silent for a moment. Sam sheepishly tossed her hair out of her face and blushed slightly. “My mom is pretty damned rude.”

Tucker raised an eyebrow. “She can't be that bad?”

Sam cringed. “You didn't hear the words she hissed at me when she assumed I was hanging out with you two instead of being at a luncheon with some preppy snobs at a country club for my summer vacation. She's arrogant and stuck up!”

Daniel nodded in agreement. “Yeah, no argument there.”

Tucker, seeing Vlad curled under the comforter, walked forward and inspected him worriedly. Turning to Daniel, he prodded. “So… What did that freaky piranha toothed chic do?”

Daniel tiredly rubbed his brow. “She mainly was trying to convince me to let her consume him… What's sick is that the robber was all for feeding Vlad to her in exchange for some money.” Daniel shivered. “Something about demons feeding on humans and ghosts and how Vlad was some rare meal? God, it hurts my brain thinking about it! The damned thing stuck her finger through him and tasted him like someone would a pie…”
Tucker's eyes rounded in horror and his jaw dropped. “She tasted him?”

Daniel grew pale at the memory. “Yeah….Three times.”

Jazmine shivered. Sam put a hand to her mouth to resist the urge to gag.

Vlad numbly tossed in his sleep and his brow furrowed in discomfort. Tucker looked at him somewhat worriedly.

“Has he woken up at all since you got him away from the warehouse?”

Sam snorted. “Oh yeah. He was definitely awake… Well, sort of…”

Jaz nodded and winced. “I think it's best he sleeps this off.”

All four teens were startled by the moan of pain coming from the bed. Curling against himself, Vlad dully writhed as the two ebony rings formed around his torso and expanded outward. Plasmius desperately hugged the cooling pillow against himself. Pushing Tucker aside, Daniel began cooling the room again. Vlad's brow relaxed in his sleep and his pointed ears raised slightly.

Tucker cocked an eyebrow at the ear movement and looked over to Daniel's ear curiously before yanking hard against the lobe. Daniel yelped and slapped Tucker across the face in a frenzied panic.

Wincing, Tucker questioned. “I've always wondered… Why does he have elf ears? I can't remember a single ghost we have ever encountered with those.”

Sam raised an eyebrow and looking at Vlad's ears, rubbed her chin in thought. “You know… that's a pretty good question?”

Daniel groaned. Looking down at Vlad's feverish ghost form, he gently wiped the black hair out of his face to cool the adult's forehead. Vlad winced and his ear twitched.

Sam snorted and giggled. “He's like a cat…”

Both Jaz and Daniel quickly covered their mouths to keep from laughing outright. ‘Fruit-Loop? I swear to god….if you start purring…’

As if on cue, something began purring gently below Vlad's bed. Wrapping out from under the wooden post by the nightstand nearest to Vlad, the white blur gingerly leaped up onto the bed and nuzzled herself against Vladimir's pained form. Settling herself in the small gap near his stomach, she purred contentedly and rested her small head against his gloved wrist as she laid against him.

Vlad's brow furrowed again and the cat worriedly nudged his hand as if comforting him. Vlad's ear twitched and his right arm numbly moved in his sleep to comfort the small animal.

Daniel gaped. A click startled him from his astonishment. Sam guiltily put her phone back in her pocket. “What? I kind of wanted photographic evidence. It's not like he is going to remember or admit to cuddling a cat in his sleep…”

Jaz sighed and tiredly rubbed her forehead. “He actually has a cat?”

Looking at the content feline and its bright golden eyes, Jaz smiled slightly.

“She's a beautiful little thing isn't she?” Sam smiled.

Daniel quirked an eyebrow and attempted to reach her collar to see the name only for the feline to
hiss and scratch. Backing into Vlad, she glared at Daniel maliciously.

“How the heck did he get that furball docile around him? Every time I get near her she goes spastic!” Daniel groaned.

Sam winked, “It looks like her owner and her have something in common, huh?”

Tucker snorted. “I never thought he would be the pet keeping type.”

Jaz peered closer to Vlad and gently went to readjust his head.

“We should probably try making dinner while he's out of it.”

Sam beamed. “I gathered supplies for macaroni and cheese. You guys want to help me?”

Tucker grinned and Jazmine nodded. Daniel looked down toward Vlad and sighed. “Sure.”
A Nice Dream

Vlad was having a fairly nice dream for once.

Jack had just walked back to the dorm with him after they both had spent time with Maddie at the movies. *The Silence of the Lambs* had brought up a rather livid conversation about motives and morality. Jack, of course, argued that no one as twisted as Hannibal Lector would have left Starling free to roam around. Vlad had bit his cheek in silent knowing that some people did keep people around to toy with for sick amusement and had quickly shifted the conversation to Jack and Maddie. They were starting to get closer after his efforts the semester prior. The kiss had been the first step but now Jack and Maddie were becoming nervous around one another. Him being dragged to the movies was just another security measure for Jack's increasing nerves. Vlad yawned. There, of course, was a solution to this...He would just have to set them up on an actual date and pay for it in advance so they wouldn't be able to refuse going together. But what could he set them up with? He's eyes tiredly loomed to the ceiling as Jack exited the dorm to go to the showers.

'I know....There's that theater troupe coming to town this April. When was the first showing?....' He furrowed his brow in remembrance of the poster in the campus library. A dark caped figure stooping over a young woman, fangs extended. 'Oh right! The seventh....A Sunday, so I should be able to claim I have work off campus.'

Fluffing his pillow, he smiled warmly and nestled against the comforter Jack had bought him. It was a serious upgrade to what he had been using prior. He drifted off peacefully and to his annoyance, something began shaking both him and his bed. His eyes must have only been closed for a millisecond!

Groaning, he swatted at the movement and shifted against the bedding. It had been a long night and he reallllllyyy needed the sleep. The shaking persisted and Vlad turned slightly to try and get comfortable again only for whatever was shaking him to redirect the movement.

'Fuck.....Maddie decided to wake us up...Stop...N-no....I need the sleep...'
Hearing a muted thwack and a small profanity he smiled in accomplishment. ‘Ha. Deserved it. Go to breakfast already….’

Vlad stiffened as he was roughly pulled over onto his back again. Growling, he groggily yanked the covers up with his arm and moved himself to get comfortable again. One leg splayed over the edge of the bed and his left arm numbly hugged the plush comforter against his chest. Someone was leaning overhead and staring at him intrusively. He could feel their warm breath hovering over his eyelashes. Tossing his head slightly, he angrily muttered. “Flapjack?...Call MC... off or …..I swear to god I'm not…. helping you study anymore…”

Hearing no response, Vlad groaned. There were some muffled footfalls and Vlad smiled contently. The noise, however, was back a few moments later along with a comfortably cool breeze. Muffled whispers permeated the chilly air.

“ You really need my help?” A young male voice questioned curiously. There was a brief silence and feeling the cold coming closer Vlad numbly pulled his leg up and pulled the blankets even tighter against himself.

“ Vlad? It's time for dinner.” Hearing Maddie's voice again, Vlad groaned and plopped the covers over his head.

“ Mads…. If Jack put you up to this-”

Something soft smacked against his leg and Vlad growled. “ Would it kill you to let me sleep in? Take Jack!”

There was silence for a moment. Feeling the cold creeping even closer, Vladimir numbly reached for another pillow from under his blanket and launched it at what he presumed was Jack. “Fenton…. Ugh…. for the love of god...call her off…”

Someone laughed and Vlad smiled slightly. “ Stop laughing...itzzz not funny!”

A hand roughly yanked the blankets back again and Vlad just as quickly pulled them back up.

A soft sigh echoed from somewhere. “ Wow… Talking in his sleep or-?” The young male questioned.

Vlad snorted. “ Maddie? Whoever you wrung up to wake us this morning just escort them out? M’ too tired for this…”

“ Yep… he's completely in dreamland. Hey, why does he keep-” Another female voice shot out.

Vlad, now too annoyed to even care anymore, roughly rubbed his eyes. “Mads... Jack? I'm going to absolutely destroy you for this.”

Grabbing two pillows from beside his head, he expertly launched them toward the noises. Four startled yelps resonated. Vlad smiled contently and hearing no more noise, slipped back fully into his actual sleep.

Walking out of the room all four teens collapsed in the hallway and burst into a fit of laughter.

“ I guess we can always go for round two? Fruit-Loop still isn't awake and we have to get him to take that Tylenol.” Daniel beamed cheekily.

Sam pursed her lips and then smirked, “ He must have thought Jaz was your mom...pffff.”
Jazmine rolled her eyes. “Good! Someone else noticed! For a minute there I thought I stumbled into the twilight zone.”

Tucker groaned and readjusted his glasses. “He didn't even have to look to hit us! What is he, a pillow fight demigod?”

Daniel grinned. “Let’s just let him sleep for ten more minutes? Obviously, he was having a good dream.”

Pausing and rubbing his chin, Daniel smiled devilishly. “But when we go back in there? We are gathering all of his ammunition before we try waking him up…”

The other three grinned in anticipation.
Walking into New Problems

Vlad, feeling a sudden chill, groaned. Hearing laughter and mischievous giggles, Vladimir's brow furrowed and he reached for a pillow only to grasp empty air.

Raising an eyebrow and groggily rubbing his eyes, he sat up and cradled his head. ‘ Weird dream…’

Feeling around him for another pillow and literally touching nothing but linen sheets Vlad scanned the room apprehensively. “ Where did-”

And then, feeling something watching him, Vlad growled ferally before avoiding a streak of white. Dodging and weaving against other bright white blurs, he flipped himself against the ceiling in the corner of the room. Fangs exposed, Vladimir's eyes flashed vaguely to Plasmius's. Seeing thermal outlines and hearing human heartbeats, Vlad's muscles relaxed briefly. Now with the adrenaline fading from his system, his ghost form’s talons faded and retracted from the wall, causing him to slump midair.

Something cushioned the fall and Vlad groggily looked up to see Daniel grinning sheepishly. Vlad raised an eyebrow tiredly and questioned, “ Do I even want to know?”

Daniel snorted, “ We tried waking you up. You wouldn't budge. This was plan B.”

Vlad tiredly took in his surroundings and seeing the pillows that usually occupied his bed scattered in piles and several other pillows from the guest bedrooms, he chuckled lightly. “ So instead of just, I don't know… lightly zapping me or pinching me, you decided to go full out commando with the bedding?”

Sitting up in Daniel's hold and swaying, the adult tenderly felt his head. A set of black nails pulled his hand away from his skull. “ Vlad? Do us a favor and leave your head alone? You got brained like three or four times from what we gathered. You don't need to go agitating the bruises…”

Dropping his hand to the floor, Vlad bitterly mused. “ I got off lightly this time?...Wow......Good to know.” Grimacing, he positioned himself on to his knees beside Daniel and tried to stand. Not making much progress, Vlad relented. “Urm…. I think I need help back into the bed…."

Jazmine paused from her efforts recovering the splayed downy weaponry from the floor to look over at Vlad. Dropping the pile on the edge of the bed, she bent down and questioned. “Firstly, why did you run off to that Diner?”

Vlad stiffened and growled. “ That is none of your concern, Jazmine.”

Jaz tapped her foot in annoyance. Daniel was moving to help Vladimir to his feet when Jazmine snapped at him. “Danny? We aren't helping him up until we get some solid answers. Drop his arm.”

Both Vlad and Daniel exchanged a worried glance.

‘ Well…. what did I do to piss off dear Jazmine now?’

Daniel begrudgingly released his hold on Vlad and backed away. The adult, realizing he couldn’t keep sitting up without proper support, leaned back slightly and laid himself against the wall. “I guess I can become reacquainted with the floor. It's fairly nice down here.”

Jazmine wasn't taking no for an answer. “ Vlad. Answer me right now. Why did you run off to a
ramshackle diner? And no, I’m not asking what led you to it, I’m asking why you chose that place.”

Vlad closed his eyes tiredly. “ I suppose it’s because I couldn’t very well teleport to the liquor store again? Or maybe I just like the coffee there? Decide what you want.”

Jazmine was lightly fuming at Vlad’s unwavering vagueness. “ Answer the question, Claire!”

Vlad raised an eyebrow and peaked an eye open. “ So you choose to go down that route? Fine.”

Clearing his throat he mocked, “Look, I'm not gonna discuss my private life with total strangers.”

Jazmine raised an eyebrow in perplexion. “ Wait...What?”

Sam burst into a fit of giggles. Turning to Jaz, she snorted. “ You accidentally tossed a movie quote at him and he hit you back with one of Claire’s lines from the Breakfast Club.”

Vlad closed his eye again and snuggled closer to the wall, a light smirk snaking across his features. “ Ms. Manson? It’d probably be best if you leave poor Jazmine to flounder. The fact that she let that slip over her head is a testament to her thick-headedness. She probably doesn’t even know the line she slapped me with was from a sexual interrogation scene.”

Jazmine gaped and turned bright crimson.

“ I-I… I what?” Blue-green eyes, bright with embarrassment she wrung her fingers through her now wavy, moisture ridden hair in frustration before pointing a finger at Vlad. “ I didn't mean it that way! You guys are putting words into my mouth!”

Both Sam and Vlad glanced at each other and burst into a fit of laughter.

Jazmine, even more confused, glowered. “ What's so funny?!!?”

Vlad stopped laughing for a moment to speak. “ You accidentally…” Vlad rubbed a hand across his face to control his expression better. “ -quoted the film.”

Sam nodded. “ Word for word.”

Jazmine stomped over and leered in Vlad's face. “ You are so childish!”

Vlad paused and looked up at Jaz with a certain level of mirth. “ Childish? Only on occasion Jazmine. Currently, I'm not the one throwing a temper tantrum.”

Jazmine smiled wickedly and Vlad narrowed his gaze. “ What are you-”

Her hand slammed into the wall next to his head and Vlad groaned. “ Like mother like daughter.” The words, a faint whisper, carried slightly in the silence. Vladimir closed his eyes and growled under his breath.

‘ Does every female in her bloodline punch like a freight train?’

“ If you’re going to hit me just get it over with?” Vlad’s eyes opened to crimson. ‘ Go ahead. Vent.’

Seeing her eyes widening and her mouth gaping slightly, his features became concerned. “ What? What's-?”

Jazmine worriedly bent down to inspect his face. Vlad lightly protested against her touch and she snapped. “ Stop moving!”
Sam, noticing the change in tone, looked at Vlad and then bolted to the bathroom. Running back, she jammed a wet rag against his nose.

‘What are they doing?!?!’

Sam’s hand pressed lightly, “Vlad? Lean forward. Your nose is bleeding heavily.”


Daniel groaned and clasped onto Vlad’s shoulder before tanking his head down. Vlad growled in agitation. “Ow.”

Daniel retracted the hand guiltily, “Sorry. But she's right. Just stay still for a few minutes like that?”

Vlad winced and whipped his head up in retaliation only for Sam to gently pull him down again. Vlad sighed in defeat.

Jazmine, after a few minutes, removed Sam's hand to inspect Vlad's face. Seeing no more blood, she sat down and crossed her legs next to Sam. “You're not getting out of this Vlad. I doubt you can do much right now powerwise and you're far too weak to stand after earlier. Every ten seconds you're practically conking out or bleeding… Can’t you just honestly answer a few questions?”

‘Baby steps….’

Vlad sighed. “Do I at least get an option for answering them? I'm not exactly comfortable just releasing all my secrets to you four after only a couple of days.”

Jazmine paused. “Sure. If you can't answer or won't just say, next question? Sound fair?”

Vlad nodded. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

Jaz paused. “Why did you go to a rundown diner in a flash flood?”

Vlad groaned. “I wanted Miss Maynard to give me some friendly company? If you haven't noticed, I don't exactly have many friends with a pulse.”

Jaz raised an eyebrow worriedly. “So you wanted someone to talk to, but why….?”

Vlad stiffened. “Maybe because I'm half human? There's only so much a person can take in one day. I need a breather like anyone else every once and awhile.”

Sam glared at Daniel and the teen sluggishly slipped his own leg underneath the other to sit beside the group.

Jazmine paused to reflect his answer and then sighed. “Why was she so protective over you?”

Vlad paused and looked up to Jazmine curiously. “Protective? What are you—”

Tucker elbowed Jaz. “I'm pretty sure he was almost completely out of it by the time she laid into us Jaz.”

Vladimir’s tousled gray locks flopped in front of his eyes as he slouched further against the wall. “What are you two yammering about?”

Tucker mimed hugging and batted his eyelashes. “Oh, nothing much. Just the waitress threatening to kill us practically if we laid a finger on you after you got smacked upside the head.”
Vlad winced at the memory. “…..What was that? The thing that hit me I mean?”

Jazmine paused and cocked an eyebrow before rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly, “Erm… a faulty tracking device. Sorry, about that Vlad. It never acted like that prior to today.”

Vlad chuckled tiredly. “Of course….I should have guessed it was Fenton based.”

Jazmine frowned slightly but continued the questioning. “Why did you go back to that diner anyway? That waitress told us you left and then came back.”

Vlad paused and slowly rubbed his rather sore wrist. “I was going to ask her if she would be open to-” Vlad blushed bright red.

All four raised an eyebrow and Tucker suggestively winked. Vlad seeing this, grew slightly irritated. “For god's sake you four are ridiculous! Miss Maynard is barely in college! I was going to take her up on her offer for-”

Vlad covered his face.

Daniel prompted, “For what Fruit-Loop? Spit it out.”

Vlad bit his lip. Finally gathering his nerve, he looked away from the four and elaborated through a whispered growl. “The coffee wasn't helping my mood. The bitter just made everything worse so I was going to see if she'd—” Vlad closed his eyes and stammered. “She knows I like chocolate chip pancakes, alright? She offered and I figured-!”

All four teenagers burst into fits of laughter.

“Seriously Vlad? Pancakes? You have got to be lying! If you like her just—”

Seeing Vlad's humiliated expression, Daniel gawked and his eyes widened. “You're telling the truth aren't you?”

Vlad winced and blushed brighter.

Tucker grinned. “Pancakes, huh?”

Vlad turned from the teens and his eyebrow twitched. “Yes. Pancakes. I suck at cooking and am incapable of even attempting anything other than sandwiches.”

Jazmine giggled, “You just don't do it enough or?”

Vlad paused. “I grew up on food stamps. Most of the stuff I ate was pre-packaged junk food. There's not really room to learn when you’re limited by materials.”

Jazmine's eyes became downcast. “Um…. This is out of the blue and what not… but were you bullied or something as a child?” An uneasy air sparked through the room and Vladimir's blue eyes flickered into a muted and terrifying tone of red.

Vlad took a moment before he looked up to Jazmine somewhat pleadingly. “I…” He sighed heavily. “No… Jazmine. I wasn't bullied as a child.”

Sam quickly steered the obviously dark path back to something light-hearted. “So why chocolate chip pancakes?”

Vlad froze and the tension visibly disappeared only to be replaced by a bright blush. “Err… That's
a bit of a long story?"

Tucker smiled. “Plasmius has a sweet tooth doesn't he?”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched. Sighing he nodded. “Yes, Foley. I have a sweet tooth. Daniel is probably no different. Spectral energy tends to favor crazy amounts of sugar.”

Daniel furrowed his brow and pursed his lip in contemplation.

Vlad noting the silence looked at the four circled around him warily. “Am I free yet? Or do you have something else you want to-?”

An odd, brassy bell sound rung out from somewhere downstairs and Vladimir went ashen. All four teens tensed. Vlad quickly jumped to his feet despite his fatigue and phased through the floor. The teens scrambled after him thanks to Daniel's intangibility. Standing at the portal Vladimir quickly morphed and put up a shaky barrier around the area he was working in. Wincing in pain, he quickly discarded a black glove and placed his finger on the security panel next to the portal. Seeing several energy signatures on a screen, he bitterly cursed a pastry-themed profanity under his breath.

Glaring at the open portal he crossed his arms in agitation.

“Hurry up already Travis!” Vladimir hissed.

Daniel's ghost sense flared up and Vlad seemed to suddenly lose his composure. His breathing hitched and he began sweating. Stumbling back slightly, the rings around his waist flickered. All four teens watched in horror as Walker and two dozen or so ghost cops walked through the open portal.
If Looks Could Kill

Daniel began desperately banging on the shield but it appeared to be soundproof.

"Long time no see Pl-" Walker tensed and, seeing Vlad, an unrecognizably panicked expression ghosted across his features. Vlad gripped his chest in agony and tumbled forward only for Walker to quickly teleport to him. The barrier around Vlad and the ghosts began cracking and the sound of Walker’s words and his men were soon accompanied by the harsh thudding sounds resonating from Daniel’s efforts. Seeing Daniel, Walker glared venomously.

Looking to his men, he ordered. “We're taking him with us. Keep the boy occupied.”

Daniel began screaming. “You crazy asshole! Drop him!”

Walker glared and holding tighter to Vlad, stiffened as he felt the energy ripple from Vlad’s transformation. Lifting Vlad up, he growled, “I don't have time for you punk! Stay out of our business!”

Vlad began hyperventilating against Walker and shaking. In a low whisper, he addressed the warden. “Walker? Ugh... Don’t..... You’re—”

Walker’s face grew rigid, and making a split second decision he motioned one of the guards forward. Yanking a syringe from the ghost’s hand, he quickly uncapped it and stabbed it into Vlad's neck. Vlad shuttered and passed out against him with a muted thud.

The shield broke and Daniel ran forward blasting sporadically at Walker’s men. “Put him down!”

Walker growled and quickly began walking toward the portal with Vladimir in hand. Vlad continued sweating and panting against him.

Jazmine’s voice screamed out. “What are you doing to him?”

Walker growled and glared toward Daniel who was still openly blasting his men. “I'm taking Plasmius away from you blasted rule breaking brats!”

Sam, being the most level headed of the group, ran through the throngs of ghosts and up to Walker. Latching onto Vlad's hand, she growled at the warden. “Why are you taking him?”

Walker growled and pushed Sam off of Vlad. “Don't touch him!”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You’re not trying to hurt him?!?!?”

Walker growled angrily and shouted for his men. “Hold off Phantom until I can get Vladimir away from here!”

Sam shouted louder. “WE AREN’T TRYING TO HURT HIM! PLEASE?!? IF YOU DRAG HIM INTO THE ZONE RIGHT NOW IT MAY KILL HIM!”

Walker immediately froze and then whistled sharply. His men immediately stopped. Looking from Vladimir's heaving and pained breathing to Sam, he commanded, “Elaborate. Now.”

Before Sam could answer, Daniel came flying into Walker. Walker quickly shielded and cradled Vladimir against himself protectively. Both Jazmine and Tucker were running forward. Sam jumped in front of Walker’s shield and angrily screamed at Daniel, “DANNY! STOP BLASTING!”
Daniel growled. “You want that bastard to kidnap him Sam!?!?”

Walker growled and glared up at Daniel. “Watch your tongue child!”

Daniel, still glaring began taking a deep breath in preparation for his Ghostly Wail. Sam paled. “DANNY! STOP! YOU’LL HURT VLAD!”

Daniel's green eyes widened and he quickly closed his jaw. Glaring daggers at Walker and Sam, he questioned. “What the actual hell is going on here?!?”

Walker raised a nonexistent eyebrow. Vlad was sweating heavily and panting even harder. His eyes were darting around spastically under closed lids. Glancing from the portal and then to Vladimir, Walker desperately turned toward Sam. “What's happening to him?!?”

Sam pointed to the portal. “You have to get him away from that! Some chick poisoned him earlier and it's reacting with the paranormal!”

Eyes wide, Walker quickly dropped the shield and teleported to a spot near the staircase. Setting Vladimir down, he hastily cupped a hand under his neck to try and help him breathe. “Vladimir? Come on…. For Pete's sake!”

Vlad's breathing hitched slightly and Walker immediately lifted his neck up higher to ease the intake of air. Daniel came flying and knocked into Walker, slamming him against the wall. Walker's men immediately lifted their weapons in preparation to fire. Seeing this, Walker shoved Daniel aside and commanded. “I said cease fire! You'll hurt Vladimir at this range!”

Daniel froze and his expression grew heavily confused. The green aura that had accumulated around his hands in preparation for another attack dissipated, “What are you getting at? Do you want him healthy for prison or something?”

Walker hissed angrily at the accusation. “You stupidly ignorant child! I wasn't taking him to incarcerate him! I was taking him to get medical aid!”

All the teens froze. Walker motioned his men backward. “Alfonse? Grim? You stay with me. The rest of you? Go back to the prison.” And with those words twenty guards fizzled and faded from existence, leaving two who hovered over warily.

Sam ran forward to Vladimir and feeling the fever screamed. “Danny! For god's sake… cool him down!”

Vlad’s eyes opened slightly and, arching his back against the floor, he began coughing violently. His legs tiredly dug into the metal and his hands were shaking. Sweat was dripping down his face. Daniel immediately bolted forward and scooped Vlad into his hands before phasing into the upstairs master bathroom. Filling the tub with cold water Daniel adjusted slightly and leaned Vlad against his shoulder blade. Walker followed with his men carrying Sam, Tucker, and Jazmine.

Laying Vlad down in the water, Daniel activated his core and began chilling the room rapidly.

Lifting Vladimir's head up slightly in one white-gloved hand, Daniel motioned for Sam to grab another washcloth.

Walker backed up with his men to the far side of the restroom. “What was he poisoned with?”

Daniel growled. “We don't know! The damned pills had blood blossom and god knows what else mixed in!”
Walker’s face soured. “That's not the effects of blood blossom. Whatever that is is far more potent...”

Walker immediately turned to the ghost on his right. “Do you have any of the Ophelia bloom on hand?”

The specter nodded and pulled out a glowing magenta vile from his vest pocket. Walker quickly snatched it and teleported over to Vlad. Pushing Daniel to the side, he gently coaxed Vladimir's jaw open and poured the contents of the tube down his throat. Vlad instantly went numb and his breathing calmed.

Daniel raised an eyebrow and feeling Vladimir's head, questioned. “What did you give him?”

Walker gently wiped the hair out of Vlad's face. “Ophelia bloom. Its extract, when ingested, circulates through a ghost’s ectoplasm kind of like human morphine. It will temporarily restrict spectral energy in his body and in his environment. His powers will be sluggish and hard to pull from for at least a week, but it should alleviate some of the effects of the poison you claim he ingested.”

Vlad groggily turned in Walker’s hand and sluggishly tried to open his eyes, “Travis?...ugh....What are you-? What happened?”

Walker snorted. “You collapsed again Vladimir. Do you not learn? Every time I seem to stop by in order to give you information or leads, you -”

Seeing Vlad's expression, he sighed. “Rough day at work?”

Vlad smiled gently. “Something...like that...”

Walker chuckled, “For the most powerful creature in the zone you can be such a pain to care for Plasmius.”

Vlad groaned. “Walker....? Flattery....won't get you...anywhere...”

Walker rolled his eyes. “Ah, yes! Embassary, forgive me for stating the stupidly obvious. Granted, every time I see you, you're a disaster. Can't you go through a single day without landing in some sort of trouble?”

Vlad numbly tried sitting up only to fall back against Walker's hand. Wincing, he rolled his eyes. “Kind of my job?...I'd think you of all...people understand...”

Walker reached down and slapped Vladimir across the cheek. Vlad's eyes became alert and he hissed. Fangs exposed and he snapped, “What the blazes was that for?!?!”

Walker paused and grinned, “I was just trying to knock some sense into you. I'm glad you revived so quickly.”

Daniel, Jazmine, Sam and Tucker watched the interaction in fascination.

Walker glanced back at the four youths and scowled. Turning to Vlad, he questioned. “Why is Phantom in your domicile Plasmius?”

Vlad blearily answered. “Beats me...I just woke up with him nursing me yesterday...”

Walker stiffened slightly. Glaring, he reprimanded. “Plasmius....I smell blood. What did you get yourself into?”
Vlad chuckled. “Your nose is literally nonexistent. I'm not injured.”

Walker growled. “Vladimir. Phase the shirt off.”

Vlad snorted. “Who are you to ask me to strip in my own home, Jonah?”

Walker gritted his teeth in frustration. Reaching roughly into the water, he grasped onto Vladimir's shirt and yanked it off. Seeing Vlad's normal looking chest, he hissed angrily. “Uncloak your flesh this instant Vladimir!”

Vlad growled. “I'm not in the mood for this, Jonah. Keep your blasted hands off of me!”

Walker's brow twitched in frustration. “Fine. We'll do this the old fashioned way.”

Holding Vladimir down into the tub, he commanded. “Grim? Pass the baton.”

A stick was passed to Walker. Vladimir weakly attempted teleporting to no avail. Struggling against Walker's grip, he snarled, “You annoying, pain in the-”

His words were cut off by the zap to his lower stomach. Vlad fainted and Walker, seeing the skin morphing to show his bandages, gently picked Vlad up and phased the water off of him. “Phantom? A word?”

Seeing the others walking forward, he sighed. “You other three should stay here for a moment.”

They froze apprehensively, unsure of what they should do. Sam, however, nodded in agreement. Seeing her trust in Walker, Jazmine and Tucker exchanged worried glances and then nodded reluctantly as well.

Daniel followed Walker into Vladimir's room. Setting Vlad down on the bed and phasing off the bandages, he stiffened. All was quiet for a moment and then, Walker abruptly turned and socked Daniel square in the jaw. “What the actual zone did you do to him?!?!”

His voice, icy and angry, reverberated in the room. Walker glaringly lifted Daniel up from the floor and pointed toward Vlad's painfully moving chest. “His body is so heavily injured that his seal was practically nonexistent when my arm locked onto his wrist earlier!”

Daniel paled. “I wasn't in the right mind! It was an accident!”

Walker scuffed. “You little spectral delinquent! What the actual heck was running through your head? Was it your biased against ghosts? Or did you just revel in the thought of tearing him apart?!? Those blasts had to have hit his internal organs! He's lucky he's even breathing.”

Motioning toward Vladimir's unconscious form, he growled. “What was going through that head of yours? Hmmmm?”

Daniel snarled. “What does it matter to you?!?!”

Walker looked like he was ready to fillet the boy. “YOU BLASTED THE BALANCE BETWEEN OUR WORLDS PUNK! YOU HURT MY BOSS! MY FRIEND!”

Daniel's eyes widened. “Your boss?!?!”

Walker tiredly rubbed his brow, “Yes, you little neon spackled pain in the ass! My boss!”

Motioning toward Vlad, he continued. “He's worth a thousand of you Phantom!”
Leaning over Vlad and checking the injuries, he hissed mockingly. “Protect the kid. Keep him out of
the zone, Walker so he doesn't land into trouble. Make sure he figures out how to be on his guard.”

Growling, he resisted the urge to blast the lamp on the side table. “What the actual blazes where you
thinking? Do you have no self rule? No moral code?”

Daniel glared bitterly at the floor and winced. “I was possessed. I didn't know it was him.”

Walker growled. “Funny? You don't exactly sound so sure of that.”

Vlad shifted slightly in the bed and Walker lowered his voice. “For his sake? I'll refrain from
blasting you boy. But if you ever hurt him like this again-”

Vlad groaned and slowly opened his eyes. Rubbing his head and wincing, he tried to get out of the
bed. Coughing, he growled. “Jonah… leave the boy be.”

Walker glared at Daniel but kept his avarice controlled to instead put his attention back toward
Vladimir.

Vlad numbly protested as he was hefted over Walker’s shoulder. Using his free arm Walker snatched
Daniel by the scruff of his jumpsuit and phased through the flooring and into the lab. Steering them
into the infirmary, he growled worriedly, “Plasmius? Explain your chest. I already got the basics but
I want it from the horse's mouth.”

Vlad grimaced as he was sat up on one of the cots. “Nocturne showed his true colors. I took care of
it.”

Walker dropped the gauze he was unrolling and stared up at Vladimir in aggravation. “You pursued
the one demon I adamantly begged you not to hunt? Are you just that stupid? Vladimir, that thing
was dream based. You have always had problems with…”

Vlad glared at Walker. “Jonah? Keep my personal life out of this.”

Walker snarled, “Vladimir? Your appointees… Where are they? They should have been the ones
dealing with him!”

Vlad snickered tiredly. “That was the plan originally. I couldn't wait for them though. Nocturne was
feeding on a new victim. If I would have waited…”

Vlad expression turned dark and he became sickly at the thought. Squeezing the cot, he glared at the
floor tiredly.

Sighing, Walker strolled forward and lifted Vladimir's head up. “Do I even want to know why the
scent of blood lingers on your head?”

Vlad snorted. “Yet another poorly timed interaction with a demon. I'm not exactly up to my usual
power levels right now.”

Walker rolled his eyes. “Obviously, Plasmius.”

Daniel, finding his voice, stepped over to Vlad's side. “Vlad? What's the meaning of this? Why is
Walker here?”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his brow. “A work-related visit?” Vlad dropped his hand and looked up to
Walker to confirm it. “Correct, Travis?”
Walker clicked his tongue and winced. “Well, now it’s not! I should just leave my men here to guard you until your flesh heals and go on my merry way, but I won’t even be able to do that! How the heck did you manage to get poisoned on top of all this?” He angrily shoved his hand toward Vlad's chest.

Vlad grimaced. “I’m just as curious as you are. I have known the woman who apparently poisoned me for close to two decades now. You could say I was caught painfully off guard by the entire scenario.”

Walker growled. “Hold still!”

Grabbing Vlad’s shoulder, he began expertly rewrapping the injuries.
Vlad fainted slightly but quickly revived as the bandages were pulled taut.

Daniel broke the silence. “Vlad? He said you’re his boss? What does-”

Vlad groaned and tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose. Eyebrow twitching, he glared at Walker. “What did you tell him, Travis?”

Walker flatly crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. “I told him enough. Just sit still Vladimir.”

Vlad glared and his voice became cold and cutting, taking on a power and authority Daniel had never heard before. It warped and rippled between languages. The English stuck out most prominently. Eyes flashing white, Vladimir questioned. “What did you tell him, Jonah??”

Walker's eyes sparked with something akin to worry and possibly fear.

“I told him you were important to me. That you’re my boss and my friend, and I warned him that the next time he openly-“


Daniel stiffened. Growling he argued. “Why the hell don't you want me in here Vlad? Are you just planning some sort of evil crud again with Walker?”

Vlad froze and bit his lip.

Walker's face turned absolute enraged. “You little… Did you just call him evil? Do you have any idea what he-“

Vlad raised a hand to silence Walker. Turning to Daniel, he leveled his voice. “Badger? Just go upstairs. This doesn't concern you right now.”

Daniel turned bright green in rage. “Why do I even bother with you?? You’re still sneaking around! Can't you ever just try?”

Vlad flinched and his eyes saddened. Looking to the floor he laughed somewhat sadly. “Think what you want…”

Daniel's eyes flashed. “I think you’re a selfish pig!”

And with that Daniel stomped out. Turning invisible in the hallway, he slunk back to listen in on their conversation, making sure he was still in the hallway in the event Vlad heard his heart or lungs.

Walker's voice echoed. “That insufferable little-”

There was a crash of metal.

Walker's voice worriedly screamed out, “Plasmius!”

Daniel immediately flew into the room in a blind panic. Vlad was gently being lifted up from the floor and leaned against Walker’s shoulder.

Growling, Walker snarled, “That insufferable little monster!”
Vlad flinched. “Let it go Jonah.”

Walker gently sat Vlad down on the cot again and turning around blasted the wall to relieve some bent of anger. “He did this to you, correct? God damn it, Vlad! That boy is a fool and he's going to get himself or those kids killed if he continues breaking the laws of our world and this one!”

Vlad flinched and his brow furrowed. Gripping the edge of the cot, he snarled. “Don't you dare speak poorly of him.”

Walker stiffened and whipped around angrily, “AND WHY NOT?!?! HE JUST INSULTED THE MOST IMPORTANT ENTITY IN THE ZONE! EVIL? REALLY? DOES HE HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOUR SCARS ARE FROM? THAT LITTLE MORON IS THIS CLOSE….” Walker minutely motioned with his hand before angrily flipping a medical cart, “-FROM BEING THE NEWEST ADDITION TO SOLITARY CONFINEMENT!”

Vladimir hissed. “Keep your tongue, Travis! If you keep yelling one of them will overhear!” Standing up, he began pacing tiredly. After a minute, he growled and his features sombered. Clenching his fists, he whispered. “That boy is justified for his views on me.”

Walker's eyes widened and he slung a gloved hand around angrily. “HOW?!?! How was any of that lunacy he just spat justified?”

Vladimir growled and swung out his arm, “BE HAD EVERY RIGHT TO VIEW ME AS SUCH! HE EVEN HAS THE RIGHT TO KILL ME IF HE THINKS IT'S JUSTIFIED!”

Vlad swayed unsteadily and dropped to his knees. Walker immediately was by his side trying to help him. “Breathe… Vladimir…for zone's sake...breath.”

Vlad began coughing spasmodically. A small trickle of crimson snaked across Vlad's cupped hand and dripped against the floor.

Walker worriedly pulled the hand away and leaned Vlad forward to clear his airway.

“Plasmius…. I expect you to stay out of the zone for at least a week and a half. Do you understand? You're in no condition to fight anything or anyone as you are now.”

Vlad growled. “And what would you possibly do, if I didn't take your little advice to heart?”

Walker raised an eyebrow. “Firstly, if I see you in the zone at all for that time period I'm dragging you to my domicile and tying you to a medical cot.”

Pausing, he continued, “Secondly? I'll tell Edmond.”

Vlad paled. “You wouldn't dare!”

Walker smiled knowingly. “Oh, I most certainly would.”

Vlad rolled his eyes. Sighing, he questioned. “What did you come by for today old friend?”

Walker picked Vladimir up and carried him to the cot again. This time, he laid him down and pulled a blanket over him. Tucking him in, Walker sighed. “I was coming here to give you reports on the sectors to the north. I know your next artifact is that cursed youth object and I wanted to help narrow the location down.”

Vlad chuckled. “You're holding out on me. Twenty-something of your lieutenants following you
anywhere practically spells disaster.”

Walker smiled sheepishly. “Okay… okay…. I was going to round up Manuel… Or at least try searching for him before the next lunar cycle…and-”

Pausing, he sat at the edge of the cot. He took off his hat tiredly to expose his skull like features and clinched his jaw debatingly. “- I was going to warn you that there are some nasty rumors spreading around about demon hunting parties stalking through Amity. Some human corpses showed up in the zone again, completely drained middle-aged men with their wrists severed open and their hearts missing. Their wallets all carried Wisconsin addresses and the last two we found were from Amity.”

Vlad's features became grief-stricken. “How many died, Walker?”

Walker winced. “Five.”

Vlad sighed defeatedly. “Don't worry about that demonic. Daniel apparently exorcised her earlier this afternoon. She's gone. I just regret we didn't stop her little human meal cartel before now.”

Walker gently patted Vlad’s leg to comfort him. “You can't catch them all Vlad... You're only human.”

Vlad sadly chuckled, “No... I am not.”

Walker closed his eyes in contemplation. “Are you sure she was the only one Vladimir?”

Vlad grimaced. “Most definitely. Her tendencies were black widowed in nature. From the looks of things, she was picking up needy individuals and thugs as lackeys and when she grew tired of them, she fed on their flesh. Classic vampiric behavior.” Vlad tiredly rubbed his eyes. “That and her kind are extremely territorial. She would have most definitely scoped out the town before picking her prospective meals.”

Walker nodded tiredly. Looking down at Vladimir, he questioned. “Why did Daniel get rid of her Vladimir?”

Vlad tensed. “Because I was indisposed?”

Walker snarled. “That is a really vague answer… How about we try this again?” Leaning down, Walker prodded. “Why did that inexperienced boy, you are so content with keeping out of their clutches, come face to face with one in combat?”

Vlad narrowed his gaze. “As I said Jonah, I was indisposed. Whatever is running through my body kept me from fighting.”

Walker tiredly rubbed his eyes before sitting up. “I'll get you back upstairs Plasmius. You need rest desperately. Have you eaten?”

Vlad yawned. “Those kids are probably going to force me.”

Walker snickered. “Well, it looks like something good came of this. Remember that one time you passed out from not eating when you were younger?”

Vlad sniffed and tiredly protested as Walker hefted him up into his arms. The blanket wrapped around him shifted slightly. “M... yeah, not my best idea going that long without food.”

Walker chided, “A month Vladimir? You’re lucky you’re a halfa. Most living men have died from
such complacency. At least you had the sound of mind to drink during that time frame. God knows what I would've stumbled onto in that study otherwise."

Vlad chuckled lightly. “It was that artifact's... fault...” Vlad's eyes were getting heavy again. Walker readjusted his hold and began walking into the lab.

Daniel followed from a distance.

“...because of course, you had to touch a famine relic.” Sighing, he rounded on the stairs.

Vlad groggily questioned, “...Why are...you carrying me up... like this...? You could always teleport or fly with me...”

Walker glanced at Vlad somewhat annoyedly. “I would rather not put your cells through any more strain right now. Phasing through the floor with that brat and you earlier was poorly planned. Even with that spectral bloom I gave you circulating to counteract the poison in your blood, you're still far too weak to withhold from the residual amounts of poison siphoning energy from your ectoplasm.”

Vlad slumped in Walker's hold. ‘Oh... makes... sense... ‘n’ Walker... Why am I...uh...'”

Walker beamed. “I may or may not have injected you with a sleeping agent after your little tantrum. Just relax.”

Vlad smiled gently through half-lidded eyes. “... Drugs ....again? ...Lousy...... spectr-ugh...” And with that, he was out.

Walker stopped and turned toward Daniel. “COME OUT YOU LITTLE MONSTER!”

Daniel stiffened. Turning visible in the room, he guiltily gripped his shoulder and looked away from Walker.

Walker snarled, “You couldn't even respect his wishes, could you? You're lucky I didn't delve into the details of those other victims. Did it even cross your pathetic mind that maybe, just maybe, he didn't want you hearing about people getting butchered?”

Daniel winced. Walker, not done yet, continued. “You call him selfish? Newsflash punk, he just tried to protect you from a hard-hitting fact! There are things in the zone that kill human beings in the most brutal ways imaginable-”

Walker stopped abruptly and looked to Vladimir who had shifted in his drugged slumber. Looking back up at Daniel, he flatly finished. “I'll honor his wishes, even if you are a detestable little brat. I advise you don't betray his trust.” Walker turned and began ascending the stairs again. Pausing, he glared back. “And if you kill him, boy? I'll throw you so far under you'll rue the day you slaughtered him.”

And with that, the warden silently continued his travels up the stairs again. Daniel stood in silence for several minutes before he forced himself through the ceiling and into the hallway.
Walker was talking politely with Sam and Jazmine.

“So he got hit with a tracking device?”

Sam nodded. “A tracking device traveling at a ridiculous speed.”

Walker sighed tiredly and cradled Vladimir closer to himself. Motioning one of his men forward, he gently handed him off. “Lay him down in the kitchen? I don't want him being moved more than he needs to be around his domicile right now.”

The cop nodded and, carrying Vladimir gently, floated into the kitchen.

Jazmine questioned. “Why is he unconscious again?”

Walker groaned and, pulling off his hat, sighed, “He's trying to hide it, but his internal organs are damaged. He kept moving around to suddenly downstairs, so I drugged him.”

Jazmine grimaced. “His organs?”

Walker nodded. “Blunt force trauma? I can only presume because I can't risk turning his chest cavity invisible right now to take a peak. That poison seems to react a little to cruelly to ectoplasmic energy….”

Looking to Sam seriously, he continued. “You need to make sure that punk avoids taking any ghost related shortcuts with him for a few days. And Plasmius is under no circumstances allowed in the zone for at least a week. Too many things would jump at the chance to tear him apart as he is now.”

Walker tiredly groaned, “He's stubborn and will probably neglect my warning after that time has passed….”

Seeing his lieutenant floating back into the room, Walker apologetically bowed to the two girls and tipped his hat. “I need to take my leave now. I can't afford to be near him for the next twenty-four hours and neither can any of my men. His body needs that time to calm and adjust. Tell him when he awakes that he's temporally on sick leave? No work? I don't need the blasted fool hacking up blood all over the floor again.”

And with that, Walker and his men teleported. Tucker walked out of the kitchen with his PDA in hand. Looking at Danny, he frowned. “Dude? What the actual heck was wrong with you?”

Daniel paled and Sam and Jazmine looked to Tucker questioningly.

Tucker grimaced and looked to the floor. “I connected the Fenton Phone you are wearing back to my PDA when Walker took you. I heard everything…..”

Daniel glared at the floor. “Tuck? Let it go…”

Tucker snorted bitterly. “Let it go? Jez man, he was acting so kind earlier and you just had to rail into him again?”

Daniel flinched. “I didn't rail into him.”

Tucker raised his PDA and after a brief second, some dialogue reverberated into the hallway.

“I told him you were important to me. That you’re my boss and my friend, and I warned him that the next time he openly—” Walker sounded comforting and yet wary as if he was trying to settle a large and rather terrifying animal.

There was a pause and Vlad’s voice became kind and gentle. “Daniel? Leave.”

Growling, Daniel argued. “Why the hell don’t you want me in here Vlad? Are you just planning some sort of evil crud again with Walker?”

There was a stifling pause and then Walker snarled, “You little... Did you just call him evil? Do you have any idea what he-”

Vlad’s voice cut him off. “Badger? Just go upstairs. This doesn’t concern you right now.” His words were clearly more pleading than Daniel had cared to notice the first time they were issued. The teen cringed.

A moment later his own voice viciously yelled, “Why do I even bother with you?! You’re still sneaking around! Can’t you ever just try?”

There was a small sad laugh. “Think what you want…” Vlad’s voice broke at the end.

Daniel’s angry and bitter voice echoed cruelly, “I think you’re a selfish pig!”

Tucker clicked a button on the PDA to pause the audio.

Jazmine and Sam looked horrified.

Tucker looked up tiredly, “I'll refrain from playing the rest. Obviously, Vlad had good intentions for why he was trying to get you out of the room.... Are you just intent on confusing him, Danny?”

Daniel cringed. Sitting on the floor against the hall wall, he cradled his head. “He was with Walker, Tuck... My enemy... I didn’t think... It all just came bursting out... He treated me like I was a kid…”

Tucker leaned against the doorway and taking off his glasses rubbed his jaw tiredly. “By the sounds of what I heard? Dan... Vlad openly defended you against Walker... He adamantly wanted Walker to respect you. And to add to all of this? Danny, he was trying to get you out of the room so you wouldn’t have to hear about what that thing had done prior to today…”

Daniel flinched. “I know that now Tuck.”

Tucker glanced back into the kitchen for a moment. “He genuinely smiled earlier... And now he’s probably going to be distant again. What happened to not pouring salt in his wounds?”

Tucker sighed. Turning from the doorway, he began walking back into the kitchen. “You know what hurt the most listening to that? He told Walker you have every right to murder him... Do you have any idea how sick and sad that is?” Tucker replaced his glasses to his nose.

Sam and Jazmine’s features had grown absolutely horrified. Sam broke her gaze from Daniel and trudged into the kitchen. Her combat boots clacked against the tile briefly and rustling could be heard from the corner of the room where the breakfast booth occupied. Jazmine sighed heavily and
walked over to Daniel.

Sitting down next to him, she crossed her arms in her lap and stared into the kitchen. From the angle, she occupied she could easily see Tucker and Sam worriedly rearranging Vladimir so he could sleep easier.

After a moment, she spoke. “Danny? I know you’re angry with him. You have every right to be… But what if everything wasn’t always so black and white?”

Daniel cradled his hands against his ears as if to shield himself from Jazmine’s words. “Jaz? It’s just…it’s so hard… Every time he freezes up or references something he’s done to me…to our family…I just lose it. I spoke to you about wanting to understand him? I don’t. I just don’t. I don’t think I ever will.”

The sixteen-year old’s shoulders shook slightly.

Jazmine reached over with her left arm and cupped her sibling’s head against her shoulder. “I never thought I would see the day Danny Phantom gave up on someone.”

Daniel’s eyes widened in horror. He trembled against her. Biting his lip he hissed. “What was I thinking? Why did I even offer that ridiculous Fruit-loop a truce?”

Jazmine stiffened against him and turning her head, her features became a paler mix of disappointment and grief. “After all of this…you think giving him a chance was wrong? Danny-”

Daniel curled his knees against himself tighter. “I didn’t say that Jaz.”

Jazmine furrowed her brow and, biting her lip, she questioned, “Then what are you saying?”

Daniel grimaced. “Jaz….I just don’t know… “

Jaz stared at the ceiling remorsefully before glancing into the kitchen at Vlad’s gently breathing form and then briefly back to Daniel. “It hurts knowing you’re responsible, in some part, for what happened…doesn’t it?

Daniel’s shoulders slumped. In a quiet voice, he continued. “I am supposed to be the hero Jaz. I’m Danny Phantom…..I save people right? I protect them?”

Jaz gently brushed a hand through his snow-white hair as the rings transformed him back in Daniel Fenton. Daniel choked against the words. “And here I am being the villain…”

Jazmine gently looped her arms around him in a warm embrace. “Change takes time Danny. You both are showing sides of yourselves…feelings you’ve restrained and shoved under the rug for two and a half years now. There is going to be some conflict. It’s inevitable.”

She gently pecked a small kiss on his forehead. “But that’s what will make you all the stronger. You’ll both grow.” She glanced into the kitchen. “And him? I think he’ll grow the most.”

Daniel looked toward Vlad tiredly and smiled. “How can black and white coexist, Jaz?”

Jaz beamed. “You just have to find that warm gray area, little brother.”
I'm not Tolkien

Vlad could hear a young girl giggling above him. He turned slightly against the warmth underneath him and feeling the tug on his hair groggily opened his eyes. Jazmine and Ms. Manson were looming above him and smiling tenderly. He smiled warmly back and seeing their surprised faces, he grimaced and looked toward the wall.

Sam spoke. “Hey...what gives Plasmius? Why the sudden cold shoulder?”

Vlad stiffened and raised an eyebrow. Closing his eyes, he coolly replied, “What are you up to now?”

Sam lightly tugged on one of the strands of silver laying against his shoulder and he winced. “Currently? We are trying to manage your poor hair.”

Vlad immediately opened his eyes and turned in their hold. “Oh no, you don’t!”

Jazmine grinned. “It’s a little late for that Masters. We finished with you a few minutes ago.”

Vlad locked his gaze with Sam for a moment and then turning to Jazmine, he questioned. “Ms. Manson didn’t have access to any hair dyes, correct?”

Sam snorted before Jaz could answer. “Why would I ruin silver elf hair? That would just scream stupidity.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow tiredly and then chuckled. “I guess that’s a bit comforting. I presume you also didn’t take a pair of scissors to me?”

Sam beamed. “I would never cut someone’s hair without permission. Besides, I think this is a good look for you, Vlad.” Lifting a mirror above him she smiled toothily at his somewhat surprised and then accepting expression. Two locks of long hair had been braided backward into a small ponytail above his regular long tresses. His bangs, expertly pulled back into the makeshift style, were almost completely out of his face with the exception of one or two pale stray strands.

Vlad chuckled lightly. “Not bad…”

Both Jazmine and Sam quirked an eyebrow. “Just like that? No sarcasm? No protest?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “I am a bit too drugged, thanks to Walker, to really put up a fight or a struggle right now. The fact you both were genuinely trying to be nice also adds to my ever-growing list of reasons why I am completely fine with looking like a rough and tumble version of Legolas from Lord of the Rings.”

Sam laughed and Vlad realized where his head was laying. “Manson? Why am I laying across your lap?”

Sam cocked an eyebrow. “Because it was easier to tie your hair back with you sitting up. After we were done you started tossing in your sleep so we sent the boys to go and get that cool pillow from upstairs. Or if you want the simple answer? It’s easier to sit you up without hurting your injuries when you’re already partially there.”

Vlad sighed and his eyebrow twitched. “I appreciate the gesture girls, but can we maybe help me up now?”
Jazmine smiled and latched onto his arm while Sam cradled his back up. Vlad grimaced at the movement and tiredly rubbed his brow. Looking around, he questioned, “Where’s Walker?”

Jazmine, now placing some bowls of food on the table, replied. “Back in the ghost zone. He couldn’t stick around. Before he departed he left you a message....”

Vlad groaned. “Let me guess….? Don’t work and don’t go into the zone?”

Sam grinned. “Yep.”

Vlad sighed heavily and leaned back slightly against the wall. “He and Skulker can be so annoyingly underhanded with spectral drugs...”

Vlad lifted his palm up and amusedly tried summoning some energy only to sway and start tilting forward. The small pale pink spark immediately fizzled from his hands as he darted out of consciousness. Tucker quickly appeared from his right side and caught him. Vlad drowsily looked up to the boy apologetically. “I guess Walker doped me up on Ophelia Bloom, huh?”

Tucker nodded. “Yeah… he drugged you up pretty good. You’ve been asleep for two hours now.”

Daniel phased through the ceiling with a pillow in hand. And landing on the kitchen floor tiredly sighed when he caught sight of Vladimir. “Well, it looks like getting the pillow was a bust.”

Vlad coughed shakily and looked away from Daniel somewhat guiltily. Jazmine, in a stent to disperse the tension, shoved a bowl of macaroni and cheese toward Vlad. Vlad looked at the food curiously.

Sam grinned. “Go ahead and take a bite. I swear my cooking is better than anyone else's here. My mother insisted on classes when I was in middle school.” Sam ate a portion of her own to accentuate the point.

Vladimir's expression softened. Taking a spoonful of the rather colorful pasta, he took a tentative bite.

The spiraled rotini noodles, surrounded in a blanket of tomatoes, cheeses, and various minced vegetables, created warm chills throughout the five individuals.

Swallowing, Vlad cocked an eyebrow. “Well… that was unexpected.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, “What? What was unexpected? Did I add too much salt?”

Vlad grinned and looked to her appreciatively. “Nothing of the sort. You just surprised me. It’s not often I find someone who can show up every other macaroni and cheese I’ve tried thus far in my lifetime....”

Sam smiled. Jazmine raised an eyebrow. “She topped every other macaroni and cheese you've tried?”

Vlad nodded. “Yes… She just bested them. Granted, it’s a close tie to the diner in Madison, Wisconsin I used to eat at with Jack and-”

Vlad paused. “...How big of a dose did Walker give me?” His eyes widened worriedly.

Daniel winced. “Enough to keep your powers tanked under for at least a day?”

“I’m not talking about the blossom.... The blossom doesn’t make someone this complacent. I’m
talking about what he stabbed into my calf earlier…” Vlad tiredly stared into his food bowl. “Then again, it was just me and him downstairs…”

Daniel worriedly questioned, “What do you think he gave you?”

Vlad rubbed the bridge of his nose. “If my guess is correct he probably slipped me one of those ridicules ampules of ghost restraint he uses for particularly rowdy specters under his care.”

Vlad grimaced. “The question is… Did he give me a full dose or a half dose?” He spoke the words to himself tiredly.

Jazmine interjected, “What’s the difference?”

Vlad looked up at her and, seeing her expression, laughed. “Nothing dangerous…. Just hindering. I'm probably going to have the world's worst migraine tomorrow morning.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, “Is that all Vlad?”

Vlad snorted. “No. And it’s not like I'm telling you four…” He shook his head tiredly, “No thanks.”

Tucker raised an eyebrow and then an idea dawned on him. “Hey, Vlad? What do you do in your free time?”

Vlad, without even pausing to consider the question, answered, “Usually I spend the hour or two allotted around town making sure there aren't too many natural portals. The portals have a tendency to release poltergeists created from human frustration and sometimes children can stumble into the voids by accident. It takes a lot of energy to close them though and I -”

Vlad's eyes widened in horror and he quickly cupped a hand to his mouth.

Everyone was staring at him with jaws agape. Tucker smirked. “Ghost Truth Serum, huh?”

Vlad shivered at the expressions on the teens that had formed from Foley’s words. Unclasping his mouth, Vladimir protested. “Mr. Foley, I claimed nothing of the sort!”

Jazmine quirked an eyebrow. “But it is truth serum, correct?”

Vlad cocked his head lightly and answered, “Yes and no. Wolfgang's lily is a spectral incarnation of Scopolamine, the white bloom used in creating truth serum. Technically there's no real truth serum in existence though… at least not for humans. A spectral medicine, however, tends to be rather potent. Where Walker's drug is usually used for confinement and interrogation it can also pull away from a ghost's ability to mentally project or create a lie. Really, it's a one-shot whitewash that circulates through the ectoplasm and numbs the response rates of a ghost's energy signature. It's often used as an insta-snooze drug for spirits because it spreads so quickly. The problem is, that blasted drug tends to mind wipe the poor ghoul after a few hours…” Vlad stiffened. Standing up abruptly he roared. “TRAVIS YOU PARANORMAL….WHEN I GET MY MITTS ON YOU I'LL STRANGLE THE AFTERLIFE OUT OF YOU! YOU DID THIS ON PURPOSE! YOU CO--ugh” Vladimir swayed dizzily and held onto the booth table. Sam caught his shoulder.

Jazmine whistled. “Damn. Ghost drugs are pretty powerful juju.”

Vlad worriedly bit his lip and looked at the teenagers. All four carried a peaked interest in his debilitated state.

Daniel stood up. “You really can't lie right now can you?”
Vlad clamped his jaw shut and his body forced his head to nod yes. Vlad's eyes shined with pure undiluted fear. His brain was practically a waterlogged blanket for all the good it did him to fight the movement. Daniel pondered this. Swallowing, he leaned over the table. “Vlad? Why did you accept the truce?”

Vlad stiffened and seemed to be internally fighting something. He hissed slightly at the brief reddish glow that surrounded him to calm his protests and collapsed slightly further against Manson's shoulder. She quickly sat him down against the booth seat. Vlad groaned. Now dazed, he answered. “I never wanted to fight you. It was all really a bad set of circumstances, that I beg you allow me to explain at a future date. I would rather remember explaining everything properly than being mentally molested by you four…”

Vladimir's brow furrowed in pain and he continued, “I accepted because I consider you my family? Kind of pitiful right? I just have no more reason to lie…Granted, the last two months have been rather contradictory toward that. No motivation or goals….The fact you were becoming increasingly endangered by my roundabout ways of handling you only added to the mess.”

He blearily slouched against the seat and began fading out slightly. Covering his eyes, he spoke shakily to the occupants in the room, “Daniel? I know I'm not going to remember this… but if you…if all of you, could refrain from asking why I did what I did… Just for the moment…It would be deeply appreciated.” Vlad shook slightly.

Daniel confused even more questioned, “Why can't we ask that?”

Vlad shook more prominently and his hand fell. Vlad Master’s stormy blue eyes were pained and lost. “I… I just would rather try and be something else…just this once. It's selfish… and god I know how my selfishness hurts… But I want a chance to let go of that…all of that….so I can move forward. I'm getting so tired… -tired of sitting by and watching as everything gets ripped apart and shredded around me. I just want it to stop.”

Vlad bitterly chuckled but his eyes remained tormented. “Guess I'm a villain no matter what, huh?”

The teens winced. Daniel’s gaze softened. “Vlad? I'm not going to ask anything like that… We aren't going to pull something so lousy when you've already been through hell the last two days. Just relax.”

Vlad looked up startled for a moment. “Then what exactly would you ask me? I know you probably are still going to use this situation somewhat to your advantage…”

Jazmine sighed. “What would you be okay with us asking about?”

Vlad shuttered. “Jazmine? I….” He tiredly rubbed his face, “Who I am isn't a good subject…. Neither is what has happened the last three years…”

He gripped his head tiredly as if to squeeze the words out correctly. “I don't know what's safe for you to ask... If you have any suggestions I implore you to run them by me.”

Sam smiled comfortingly. “Easy Plasmius. We won't ask anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

Tucker nodded reassuringly. Vlad relaxed slightly. Looking up toward Daniel, he waited. Daniel pondered his options for a moment. “Would you explain that box of pictures if we showed them to you?”

Vlad tensed and then laughed somewhat jovially. “Couldn't resist snooping around, huh? Guess I was asking for that…”
Vlad closed his eyes deep in thought for a moment and then somewhat forlornly addressed them. “I would like to say yes… but some of the photos in there don't have really good endings. Several of them bring up some rather painful memories I would rather not share openly until I'm more familiar with you all.”

Daniel paused. “Why keep a photo that makes you miserable?”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his eyes. Looking up he smiled sadly. “Sometimes when you lose something precious, it's nice to have mementos. Even if it hurts, it serves as a reminder. We can't repair or save everything. Looking back on kinder times or at someone we miss holds no shame.”

Daniel sat down tiredly besides Jazmine on the other side of the booth. “You are such weirdo Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad smiled kindly. “Takes one to know one Daniel.”

Sam tapped her chin. “Okay, what about a rundown on how you got so chummy with Walker?”

Daniel's interest peaked and he looked to Vlad expectantly.

Vlad considered the question and sighed. “Walker wanted balance to the zone. I just happened to be the naturally born spook made for the role. He thinks of himself as a mediator to balance the rules of life and death. And no, that doesn't mean he sees himself as a grim reaper or some other ridiculous garbage. He just makes sure the living don't get trapped in the zone and the dead don't decay in this world.”

Tucker raised an eyebrow. “Ghosts can decay? Does that mean they die?”

Vlad nodded. “Ghosts are the consciousness left behind from tragedy or unfulfilled lives. You could say that they're life without body. If their core, or more accurately, their soul is left to wander without spectral energy or a source of substance they fade away or die. The soul’s essence, however, circulates back into the system. Energy can't be destroyed, after all, only perpetuated and dispersed into other places.”

Jazmine's eyes widened, Sam gaped, and Tucker looked from Vladimir to Daniel with an are you freaking kidding me expression.

Vlad nodded off slightly but jostled himself back. Sam took the initiative and dragged him closer to his food. Vlad looked to her curiously in his sluggish state before noting the food again. Picking up his fork, he began slowly finishing what Sam had cooked.

After a few minutes he set down the utensil again and continued, “Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, they all had theories on how life progresses after the fact. Plenty of others before and after them carried ideas and notions about life cycles and the state of the soul. Many eastern faiths such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism hold reincarnation as a key part in how we move on.”

All four teenagers listened intently. Vladimir yawned. “And before you ask? No, you don't flip-flop between human and animal. People always stay people. As for karma? God? I have no clue. Heaven and hell are a bit of a paradox. Think of them as a relative state every living and deceased creature is capable of creating and permeating for themselves and others. We experience both those dualities. You don't just get clunked into some scripture stuttering individual’s idea of punishment or reward. Nothing is that straightforward.”

Vladimir's arm blearily curled under his chin as he laid his head against the table.
Sam looked from Vladimir to Daniel with utter amazement. “Well, I guess that alleviates some questions? Fearing mortality is pretty stupid after all.”

Vlad smiled slightly, “Fear nothing but fear itself.”

Tucker shook his head in disbelief. “Vlad is officially the most interesting person I know.” Looking at Daniel, he smirked. “No offense Pham.”

Daniel shrugged. “None taken.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Daniel questioned, “Hey, Vlad?”

Vlad sluggish peered at the teen through half-lidded eyes, “Hmmm?”

“Why did you get a cat?”
The Cat's Out of the Bag

Vlad snorted. “More like, why did I save a cat? It was raining and she was stuck in the storm drain near the diner a while back. I ended up phasing her out and nursing her back to health. I wasn't able to save her kittens though…”

Vladimir cringed. “She wouldn't stop yowling… It took weeks to get her adjusted to human…er-ghost…” Vlad sighed in annoyance, “…Well, joint company.”

Jazmine questioned, “What's her name?”

Vlad turned several shades redder. “…Okay… Don't judge me… I was heavily drunk and…”

Vlad groaned and nestled his head under his arms to hide his embarrassment.

“This is going to be good.” Tucker smirked.

Vlad snorted. “That depends on your perspective Foley. Granted, the name was justified considering how much the feline scratched and snarled at me. And in part, I did name her what I did to spite Daniel for telling me to get a cat. You know, I just figured to hell with it and all…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow intrigued. “Fruit-Loop? Spit it out. What's the cat’s name?”

Vlad swallowed, “I— Well— Her name is Maddie.”

There was a pause and then the room exploded in laughter.


Vlad growled slightly and pulling his head up, he elaborated. Still red with embarrassment, his voice rung. “It's not like that! I said I was drunk alright? I kept calling her mad cat because she kept trying to scratch the blue blazes out of me! I got her declawed and her mood improved. It was late, she was being nice and I drunkenly joked she was only a little mad-ee. Still, out of it, I began laughing about the irony of me accidentally picking up a cat that hates my guts and how the name would probably piss you off. Skulker overheard and couldn't resist fashioning a collar for her so now the name's stuck! Happy?”

Daniel tried to keep a straight face, he really did, but seeing Vladimir's flustered and genuinely embarrassed features he instead found himself bursting into equal hysterics with the other three teens in the room.

Vlad sighed and covered his face under his arms. “You four are despicable…”

Tucker wiped away a tear, “That was beautiful.”

Sam smiled. “Mad Cat. Pfff.”

Jazmine snickered. “That explains why she tried tearing Daniel to pieces earlier.”

Vlad snorted. “Congrats! Yet another half ghost victim of the infamous mad-cat.”

Daniel blushed. “That must have been one of the stupidest ways to name a pet I've ever heard of.”

Vlad cocked an eyebrow. “Again? I was way too drunk and miserable to notice the long term
effects of my inebriated joking. If I knew Edmond was invisibly spying on me to make sure I didn't pull anything stupid I would have been far more careful about what I said aloud.”

Tucker questioned. “So Skulker babysits you?”

Vlad groaned, “Not usually. The last few months however he’s made it a priority to ensure I don’t do anything reckless or fatal.”

Everyone raised an eyebrow at this. Vlad groggily rested his cheek against his arm again.

Jazmine, finding her voice, questioned, “Why did he make it a priority?”

Vlad paused and tiredly scratched his nose. “Probably has to do with all the drinking and that vampiric book that tried offing me in the library a while back…” Vladimir snickered.

Daniel’s brow furrowed. “Fruit-Loop? You lied about how much you drink didn’t you?”

Vlad smiled softly. “I didn’t lie. I’ve just been more prone to it the last few months because of—”

Vlad abruptly paused. Biting his lip he quickly finished, “I think I want to steer away from this subject.”

Daniel winced, “Yeah… I guess discussing your reasons for the booze is a bad idea.”

Vlad sighed. “Lately, I’ve just been using it to conk myself out if that makes you feel any better….”

Sam questioned, “Those dark circles under your eyes are pretty intense. Do you have problems sleeping?”

Vlad grimaced, “I have had problems sleeping from the time I was six years old. Granted, it was better in college…”

Jazmine became more concerned, “You’re an insomniac?”

Vlad blearily narrowed his gaze before shrugging. “I….guess that’s..what I am…?”

Tucker paused. Looking around his brow furrowed. “Vlad? I hope this isn’t too personal but, why do you have no family photos anywhere?”

Vlad was starting to drift off. “I…am assuming….you mean….blood relations?…”

Tucker nodded, “Yes. I mean, we’ve been looking around and there are no photos on any of the walls or in frames.”

Vlad closed his eyes slightly, “Don’t… have any…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “Don’t have any what?”

Vlad pursed his lip and curled deeper against the table as he started falling under the drugs again. “Both….”

Seeing Vlad starting to conk out, Sam gripped his shoulder and gently pulled the gray blanket Walker had carried him up in over him.

Jazmine, not satisfied with the answer and even more intrigued, prodded, “The pictures or-”

Vlad sleepily murmured, “….dead…”
All four teenagers paled. Sam gently shook his shoulder, “Vlad? What do you mean?”

Vlad passed out slightly but managed, “... My family?... They’re dead....”

The room became stifling. Vladimir, even in his debilitated and drugged state, noticed and somberly stared at the table.

“I... was a long... time ago... Just forget I said... anything... I won’t even remember.... the last few hours come morning.”

Daniel felt like he had just wantonly stepped on molten coals.

Vlad laughed slightly. “Manson?... Jazmine.... Thank you...for...everything....” Vlad’s eyes began closing fully, “It was nice,... even if... it won’t... be remembered,... to have... a warm meal... with someone.... You... two kind of reminded... me of......her...”

Vlad smiled gently with the vague word and fully fell asleep against the table. Everyone was frozen in place for a moment and then Sam silently reached over and patted Vlad on the back.

Jazmine winced. “They died? What does that mean? Was he an orphan? Did they get in an accident?”

Tucker tiredly rubbed his hatless head before sitting up from his spot at the corner of the booth. “Let’s get him back in bed....”

Daniel nodded and turning intangible phased through the booth to assist Tucker. Tucker groaned. “Dan? Ixnay on the powers?”

Daniel nodded and silently shifted back to Daniel Fenton once he was on the other side of Vladimir. Turning to Sam, he asked, “Sam? Can you go upstairs and rearrange the bedding with Jaz while we get Fruit-Loop situated?”

Sam smiled tiredly. “Sure thing Aldrin.”

Jaz nodded toward Daniel reassuringly and filed after Sam as they left the kitchen.

Gently lifting Vlad's arms up and over their shoulders, the two teens gingerly hefted him into a standing position. Tucker cocked an eyebrow. “He is really lightweight for his size.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Half ghost, Tuck... Half ghost.”

Tucker snorted. “I know that Danny! What I am saying is that he’s lighter than you....”

Daniel paused and tested the weight leaning against his right arm experimentally. Sure enough, Vlad was indeed lighter than him. “Huh... weird. Maybe it's because he got zapped by a smaller portal?”

Tucker rolled his eyes, “I don't think that's how it works....”

Daniel snorted and began side stepping with Tucker in order to maneuver Vlad out from behind the booth. “It's not like I'm the expert on all things portal zapped.”

Glancing at Vlad, he continued, “Currently, we are carrying the expert.”

Tucker looked at Vlad's passed out form tiredly. “He is going to be absolutely wrecked tomorrow morning. Dan? Truth serum leaves the victim with a nasty migraine. When he wakes up you need to give him some aspirin.”
Daniel nodded as they began ascending the staircase. Jazmine rounded the corner of the landing as they reached the second floor. Giving a gentle smile, she whispered, “We changed the blankets and the sheets. Do you guys need help getting him in the bed?”

Daniel and Tucker both exchanged a look and then snorted. “I think we can lay him down just fine Jaz. If you two want to dot on him like mother hens, that’s your choice.”

Jazmine rolled her eyes. Looking to Vlad and seeing the gray blanket falling off she quickly adjusted it. Speaking softly, she elaborated, “...From a psychological perspective, Vlad’s interesting. I’m starting to think he has a fear of getting attached to people...the fact he’s a chronic insomniac and he has a severe self-hatred is making me a little concerned for his well being though.”

Daniel nodded as they led Vladimir into his room. “Yeah... I’m getting worried for him as well. With all these drugs ripping off his villain mask, he’s becoming someone I want to relate to more... He’s just so...so human when he's not plotting against me or dad.”

Tucker snorted. “Vlad Plasmius... drunkard and jokester. Please tell me we are in some ghost’s idea of the twilight zone?”

Jazmine rolled her eyes. “Let’s just get him in bed?” Holding the door open, she motioned the two and the unconscious adult into the room. Sam was folding the covers back so they could lay him down correctly. Walking over to the right side of the king-sized bed, Tucker and Daniel turned sideways and leaned back with Vladimir to get him onto the mattress. Sam gently cradled his head as they repositioned their arms to heft him over to the correct area of the bed. Two minutes of very delicate and precise maneuvering elapsed. Vlad stirred slightly in their hold but didn’t wake up.

Satisfied with Vlad’s position on the mattress, Daniel gently grabbed his ankles and placed them on the bed. Inspecting their efforts, all four teens smiled in relief. Sam gingerly grabbed the sheets and tucked Vlad in. Vlad turned minutely, and in the muted lighting the occupants in the room could just barely make out a small content smile ghosting across his fatigued features.
Vlad awoke the next morning with the mother of all migraines. Tossing lightly against the pillows propped under his head he sighed and begrudgingly sat up and slid his legs over the side of the bed.

‘Walker must have laid me in bed after I passed out.’ Rubbing his eyes, Vladimir tiredly stood up and walked over to the closet. Finding a simple white button up shirt and some slacks, he changed out of his pajamas. Making his way into the bathroom and glancing at his reflection, he tiredly noted the strange hairstyle he was sporting. Fingering the now rough and stray hair laden braids, he began untwisting them.

Unwinding the rope-like strands, he attempted to phase the black hair tie out of his hair only to feel a pull of resistance against his abilities. ‘That's right...Walker gave my Ophelia Blossom.’ Pushing against the wall like energy restricting his abilities Vladimir managed to phase the tie out. Winded, he leaned against the counter and stared at his bed-headed reflection. Groaning, he stroked his cheek. ‘ And now I need to shave.’

Brushing the tangles out of his hair, he piled all of his hair up into a loose ponytail. He sighed at his weary image as he combed back his bangs and gelled them in place. Despite the unusual amount of sleep the last two days his body was still adamantly craving more rest. Reaching into the medicine cabinet he grabbed his straight razor, his cream brush, the wooden bowl, and the shaving soap. Making a lather, he began the task of applying it to his face.

The ice-cold suds helped him wake up substantially. Grasping the thin silver knife, he gently propped the blade at a thirty-degree angle against his cheek and tediously began trimming the unwanted growth away. Rinsing his face and cleaning off the equipment, he numbly reached for a towel and dried himself off. Looking at his reflection he amusedly snorted. ‘ You’re a mess.’

He went to turn only to feel eyes at the side of his head, watching him intently.

Growling threateningly, he addressed the invisible figure. “ Whoever is hiding, I invite you to reveal yourself.”

No one answered or appeared at his voice and Vlad continued. “ Let’s rephrase. Come out now and I won't have to beat you within an inch if your afterlife…”

A voice snorted. “ Not much of a morning person are you Vlad?”

Vlad's shoulders relaxed slightly and his eyes became tired. “ Daniel?”

Daniel's acid green eyes flickered into view by the tub. Crossing his legs, he musedly twirled a glass of water and a couple of pills in his gloved hands. “ Yep, your resident dogooder and pill dispenser.”

Vlad rolled his eyes, “ I could do without the sarcasm, dear boy.”

Daniel smiled warmly and Vlad tensed awkwardly.

Daniel, in an attempt to quell the animosity he had tossed toward Vlad yesterday, complemented, “So you shave with a straight razor, huh? Where did you learn that?”

Vlad shrugged. “ In high school... I never liked the disposable razors and I was sick of getting a partial shave.”
Vlad smiled in memory of the person who introduced him to his blade. “Believe it or not, a woman taught me how to use it.”

Daniel gaped, “A chic taught you how to use a straight razor?” Daniel's jaw went slack. Swallowing, he questioned, “How?”

Vlad laughed, “How else? By sitting me down and shoving the blade in my hands. She couldn't very well use herself as an example. The woman didn't have a hair on her that required such a tome.”

Daniel snorted. “How did that fair for you?”

Vlad chuckled, “I epically butchered myself under my chin and she yanked the blade out of my hands.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Is that why you allow the facial hair to be thicker there?”

Vlad paused and looked at himself in the mirror. “Actually? I keep my hair like this because a friend recommended it. The scar I got from my razor blade fiasco healed before I graduated. I no longer have it.”

Vlad paused and smiled slightly. “The razor I use was her father's. From what I understand it was passed down for generations from father to son until she was born.”

Vlad yawned and, looking toward Daniel, questioned. “How about we go out for breakfast this morning?”

Daniel’s features grew confused. “Why?”

Vlad tiredly rubbed the back of his neck, “I honestly don't trust myself right now next to a stove and you’re no better.”

Phantom’s green eyes flashed slightly and then he rolled his eyes. “Too bad Sam and Tuck won’t be seeing us till this evening. They probably could have helped us make pancakes or something.”

Vlad sighed. “I am never living the pancake thing down am I?”

Daniel grinned and motioned toward the glass and the pills he was holding, “Just take some of this aspirin already? You look like shit.”

Vlad froze and turned to Daniel, “Language, young man...Language.”

Daniel snickered, “Does the great Plasmius hate French?”

Vlad snorted, “Ce n’était pas français.”

Daniel’s eyes went as wide as saucers. “Did you just speak actual French?”

Vladimir grinned devilishly and took the glass an the pills from the startled teen. Walking toward the door, he quickly tossed the pills in his mouth and swallowed them down with a swig of the water. Before he was out of the bathroom, he playfully questioned, “Une pilule difficile à avaler petit blaireau?”

Daniel groaned and chased after him. Vlad rolled his eyes. “Little badger? Staying in Phantom form constantly just because you can won’t do your body any favors in the long run.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and questioned, “Why?”
Vlad rounded the stairs with his house guest and froze abruptly. “Daniel? Go get your hoodie.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “Why? It’s not like it’s—”

Vlad smugly motioned toward the ceiling just as a clap of thunder emanated.

Mouth agape, the teenager prodded, “Can you predict the future? That’s a ghost power right?”

Vlad smiled and shook his head no. “I just could smell the rain coming… That, and sudden storms like the ones we’ve been having change barometric pressure. After you get enough broken bones the spots that are fractured begin to ache when the weather changes.”

Daniel quickly shut his mouth and flew into the guest room he had been occupying for the last two nights. A few seconds later, Daniel Fenton layered in an overly large hoodie and hole-ridden jeans rushed toward the landing. Seeing Daniel’s foot connecting to the edge of the staircase incorrectly, Vlad quickly latched onto his shoulders to prevent him from tumbling down the landing. Looking into Daniel’s now blue eyes, he smirked. “I see why you prefer Phantom...you’re rather clumsy still, aren’t you?”

Vlad released him and continued walking. Looking back at the furiously red teen, he added seriously, “The reason you stumble into things and have problems finding your footing is that Phantom’s power was used for too long. Your other side is poking its way through your human form and turning things partially intangible when you’re not paying attention to keep up the power flow’s momentum.”

Daniel’s blue eyes widened. Vlad smiled slightly, “You need to learn how to subtly release energy and how to adjust in human form.”

Turning from Daniel, Vladimir stepped into the hall and began walking toward the door. Stopping in the intersection between the entryway and the main hall, he made a detour and turned toward his office. Grabbing a trench coat and two umbrellas, he tossed Daniel one of the parasols. Daniel smirked. “Fruit-Loop? Can’t we just create a shield overhead or something?”

Vlad snorted. “I think you’re becoming too reliant on your abilities Daniel. It helps to be humble on occasion you know.”

Vlad gently tried pulling the coat over his shoulder only to wince in pain and start falling forward. Dropping the umbrella he was holding, Daniel quickly latched onto the adult to keep him upright. Vlad sighed and chuckled. “Thanks for the save….” Wincing and numbly holding his chest, Vladimir straightened himself.

Averting his gaze from Daniel, he gently removed his hand and turned toward the door.

Daniel worriedly questioned, “Are you sure it’s a good idea for you to go out in this weather? I can always fly over to a restaurant and bring back something…”

Vlad shrugged. “I think the walk would do me some good.”

Daniel stiffened. “You do realize we are a good forty-minute walk from town and another twenty minutes from any restaurants right?”

Vlad looked back at the teenager with an unspoken challenge. Rolling his eyes, Daniel snatched his discarded umbrella and followed in pursuit of the gray-headed adult.

Vlad opened the front door tiredly and motioned Daniel out with a curt nod.
Popping open their umbrellas in unison they began walking down the drive. Daniel in a bid for conversation questioned, “So…broken bones…erm- I have had a broken arm and my leg got twisted a while back. What about you?”

Vlad paused and turned to Daniel with a tired expression. “Daniel? Let’s put this under one of those really painful topics I would rather not explore with you until a later date?”

Daniel sighed. “That’s not fair Fruit-Loop. I’m just curious is all… I know you’re pretty scarred and you were talking about the weather affecting your bones…”

Vlad answered. “I’ve broken the majority of my bones more times than it’s possible to recap. Mostly my ribs. Can we leave it at that?”

Daniel nodded and changed gears. “Soooo….where are we walking to?”

Vlad grinned mischievously, “The Nasty Burger.. Where else?”

Daniel gawked, “You’re kidding right?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “What? Do you have a different preference?”

Daniel went ashen, “Vlad? You do realize the majority of the teenage population in this town hates your guts right?”

Vlad paused and tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Ah...yes... our little prank war.”

Pondering his options for a moment, Vlad cocked an eyebrow and smirked. “I should have just enough energy to avoid anyone recognizing me.”

Daniel opened his mouth to protest and Vlad sighed. “Fine. Are you good with donuts?”

Daniel grinned. “Yes...I am good with donuts. You know a place?”

A loud, amused chuckle crept from the adult. “Of course I do. I can’t cook, remember? My best bet is to scope out all the restaurants in an area.”

Daniel snickered, “You’re what? Forty-seven? Don’t you think cooking would be something you'd prioritize? It’s kind of basic Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad snorted, “So says the Pop-tart murder. Tell me, Daniel? How did you so poetically catch the toaster and the box on fire?”

Daniel stiffened and turned beet red. “How did you-?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “Jazmine told me a while back.”

Daniel grumbled angrily for a few minutes while they walked. Vlad paused abruptly and Daniel ran into his back.

“What gives Fr-?!?”

Vlad immediately dropped his umbrella and clasped a hand to Daniel's mouth. In a low whisper, Vlad worriedly instructed. “Daniel? Be quiet. We're not alone.”

Daniel stiffened. A few seconds later his ghost sense went off from behind Vlad's fingers and Vlad hissed in discomfort from the scalding cold. Keeping his grip, he kicked up the umbrella and flung it
to their left. The parasol was ripped to shreds in midair. Fine wisps of ebony fabric and metal scraps clacked to the ground.
A Food Run

Vlad grabbed onto the nape of Daniel's hoodie and jumped upward with the teen in hand. Landing on a nearby roof, Vlad swayed and staggered from behind Daniel. His arm fell from the boy's hoodie. Panting and dizzy, he started blacking out. Daniel immediately caught him by the wrist as he fell backwards. Groaning, Vlad tried to make out what was happening around him.

Daniel's eyes turned acid green abruptly as he latched his arm under Vlad's shoulder. “What the heck is that thing?’

Vlad chuckled, “ Another monster intent...on eating me...?”

Daniel's eyes locked onto Vlad's dazed serious ones and he frowned. “You're joking right?”

“Not remotely.” Vlad rubbed his eyes tiredly, “Usually, I don't get swamped like this... I am fairly capable of handling small fry like these on a normal day. The problem is my powers are toast right now. What little I just used to aid my jump up here with you practically knocked me out.”

Daniel looked to Vlad, “How did you see that thing? Where is it?”

Vlad felt something creeping up behind them and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Turning, he pushed Daniel out of reach as an invisible mass railed into him from the side and slung him up into the air. Flipping over the animalistic claw that made a pass for him, Vlad numbly landed on the creature's back. Daniel watched in disbelief for a moment where he lay.

Vlad looked to Daniel and turned ashen, “DANIEL, BEHIND YOU!”

Daniel turned abruptly and rolled as a set of large, invisible claws raked through the roof.

Vlad slipped in the rain and spiraling through the air, landed on the townhouse’s flat roof in a crouched position. Dodging a claw he yelled, “DANIEL! AIM FOR THE CORE, THEY'RE POLTERGEISTS!”

Dodging another claw Daniel yelled, “HOW THE FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO HIT SOMETHING I CAN’T SEE?!?”

Vlad growled and bit his lip. “DANIEL! SHIELD NOW! FULL SPHERE, OFF THE ROOF!”

Daniel immediately complied. Gritting his teeth, Vlad activated his seal and kicking up rammed his arm in an invisible spot above him. Electricity sparked and rippled in the area, ticking and knocking around raindrops and splitting them with small static snaps. The invisible thing above him flickered into view for a moment and Daniel's eyes widened.

The large elephant-sized creature was bear-like in stature but had eight eyes and large, long sloth like appendages for arms tipped with claws equivalent to those of Wolverine. It opened its green jaw in a hiss and then shattered into a black mist. Vlad backflipped and slid on his hands to avoid the second attacker coming from his right. Using his hand as leverage he shot up and kicked the invisible creature in the neck. A hiss could be heard from below Daniel as the blow connected. Landing on
the roof, Vlad charged both hands with electricity and shot the blast into the wet floor. The power went out in the street and the other figure appeared yowling in pain before it shattered into mist as well from Vlad's duplicate.

Panting and dizzy Vlad fell to one knee and slumped forward only for something else to crack into his side. Vlad rolled and tossed like a rag doll until he came to a stop eight feet away from his original spot. The duplicate fizzled and dissipated as Vlad lost consciousness. Daniel immediately released his shield to aid Vlad. The adult was crumpled in a small heap by the edge of the roof. A faint groan emanated as he attempted to lift himself up from the ground with a shaky hand. The limb shook and fell out from under him, causing him to smack back into the roof with a dull thwack. A small stream of red could be seen dripping from Vlad's mouth.

The rain had picked up and this time Daniel could see what Vlad had been trying to tell him about. The ghosts were invisible but not intangible. The water was rippling off of them...and currently, a rather large adversary was crouching over Vlad.

Flying in front of the adult, Daniel created an ice column and drove it where he assumed its core pulsed. True to form the creature materialized momentarily from the blow and then dissipated into mist.

Daniel turned to help Vlad and his eyes widened in horror. Another creature had picked Vlad's now unconscious form up in one of its hands while Daniel had been preoccupied. Vlad's arm limply splayed from under one of the large paws and hung in the air as he was inspected. Straightening its hold, the poltergeist amusedly rubbed Vlad's sleeping face with a claw, delicately enough not to harm him, but enough for him to stir slightly. The creature's invisible head turned toward Daniel challengingly before it began tightening its hold Vlad's body.

A muffled and pained gasp echoed across the roof. The creature purred contently at the noise and then hissed as it core was impaled by another well-aimed ice column.
Vlad floated momentarily in the dissipating creature’s hold above the roof before Daniel caught him.

Carrying Vlad down toward the roof and laying him down, Daniel questioningly shook him. Vlad tossed lightly and his eyes opened sluggishly, “....Ow....”

“You are freaking mental Vlad! What was that?!?! Where you trying to kill yourself?!?”

Vlad rolled his eyes tiredly and tried to sit up only to let out a pained gasp.

“Woah…. easy.”

Vlad sighed tiredly, “Powers shorted out right after I zapped that one… Sorry, about that…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “Erm… Vlad? How did you fight like that? You didn't fly or shift. Your duplicate was even human. He jumped to kill that last one…”

Vlad smiled tiredly, “You don't honestly think I waste all my time plotting against teenagers, do you? Our human forms are just as physically capable as our ghost forms…”

Daniel sighed. Looking around, he questioned, “There's no more of them right?”

Vlad groaned and sluggishly tried propping himself up. Daniel looped an arm behind his back to help him. Looking up at Daniel, Vlad sighed. “Okay… I have a way of checking but it'll probably knock me out. Can I trust you not to do something stupid while I'm out of it?”

Daniel's brow furrowed. “I'm not liking the sounds of whatever your planning.”

Vlad rubbed his head tiredly, “It may not even work…. It didn't go off like it was supposed to earlier...The mark has practically been reduced to a skin adornment the last few weeks…”

Daniel groaned and flatly reprimanded, “Then I'm saying no.” Putting a hand on his shoulder, he added, “You're not supposed to be using your powers at all today Vlad. Drugged up for a reason remember?”

Vlad snorted, “I don't like playing the invalid.”

Daniel groaned, “Obviously...Fruit-Loop...Obviously…”

Vlad winced as he was helped to his feet. “We may want to grab food before another hunting possie decides to stalk by. I'm a little too weak to close any natural portals right now and those particular poltergeists hunt in packs. We killed four so there are at least two more somewhere. Whether they're in the zone or in Amity, I don't know…”

Daniel sighed. “What did you do to piss them off, Vlad?”

Vlad stiffened and then scuffed, “I exist.”

Daniel tensed, “You mean they just try killing you because you're-”

Vlad sighed, “Daniel? I've never met these creatures prior to today… never touched or even came across them in the zone. They simply wanted to feed off of me as one would a stag or a trophy animal.”
Daniel’s expression turned into disgust, “Why you in particular?”

Vlad smiled sheepishly, “Erm...my job and what I am probably have the most to do with why.” Vlad winced as they turned invisible and floated down from the roof and into an alleyway. “I usually make sure poltergeists with killing intent or avarice in those amounts are disposed of, or I prevent them from feeding…. Bruises, insomnia, sudden anger spikes, depression….These are usually signs of them lurking around, granted those are the small fry. The more advanced ones legitimately take humans and ghosts so they can physically feed off of the flesh, usually killing the individual in some sort of sadistic torture.”

Daniel's eyes widened. “You mean those things were like baby versions of that crazy ghost chic yesterday?”

Vlad nodded yes, “Sort of?....That crazy ghost chic, however, had been feeding for years….She was probably originally a human ghost... Those things on the roof, in contrast, were made from emotions targeted toward someone in town...Who? I don't really know.”

Vlad straightened himself slightly in Daniel's hold and looked down the alley tiredly. “Someone hates something or someone so much that they've created a hunting posey with the intent of murdering the person or destroying that thing. Usually, the poltergeists get birthed in the zone and stay to their confines or domiciles without breaking into this dimension… The only reason they would leave to feed is if they felt a stirring of their own desires toward the object of the malice or they've gained enough avarice to separate and form their own wants. The fact that these particular poltergeists are behemoths in comparison to their pint-sized cousins makes this all the more unusual and unlucky.”

“Wait… so they are someone's emotions?”

Vlad paused, “Yes and no. There must be a portal nearby… a natural one opened from a weak spot between plains. Poltergeists are usually created near the rifts and either get sucked into the zone to form or latch onto their human creator to feed on their life energy… The emotions create the energy that materializes their cores. Think of them as vengeful daydreams or really nasty incarnations of human consciousness.”

“And they want to eat you because you're in the way of them feeding right?”

Vlad groaned and looking to Daniel shrugged defeatedly, “They know I'm pretty much helpless right now… That and I'm a rare item on the menu.”

Daniel shivered, “That's so gross....”

Vlad chuckled tiredly, “Apparently they like Fruit-Loops…”

Daniel paused and turned to Vlad accusingly, “That was-” Seeing Vlad's tired and somewhat delirious features, he sighed and laughed. “That was actually pretty funny.”

Vlad smiled weakly, “Badger....I'm kinda starting...to pass out again...Let's just finish getting...the food? They won't attack if we are in a crowded area... Not with your parents looming around with ghost hunting equipment.”

Daniel smiled. Turning back into Fenton, he sighed exasperatedly before duplicating. “I'll send my duplicate out for umbrellas ... He'll be back in a minute.”

Vlad chuckled and looking toward Daniel’s still rapidly soaking hair, smiled weakly, “At least you got a shower out of this.”
Daniel snorted, “I'll refrain from slapping you considering your practically dead on your feet.”

Vlad groaned and rolled his eyes. Narrowing his gaze, he corrected. “Half-dead…”

Daniel smirked, “That's the spirit, Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad and Daniel both laughed at their half-hearted puns. Vlad, however, was starting to conk out again. Daniel sighed at the sight and smiled sheepishly, “Thanks for the save Vlad.”

Vlad tiredly smiled in return, “I'm not about to let you get shish kabobbed when I can prevent it.”

Daniel, finding a dry spot near the edge of the alley, propped Vladimir up slightly against the wall as they waited for the umbrellas. Trying to keep Vlad awake, he questioned, “So… how often do poltergeists come around to off you?”

Vlad tiredly looked up into the downpour, “Mainly just the last six weeks...usually, they avoid me like the plague. I didn't tell Skulker or Romulus about the attacks because I didn't want them hounding me twenty-four seven.”

Daniel groaned, “You mean you were fighting these things when you were conking out?”

Vlad winced, “It's not like I had much of a choice Badger…It's either I fought them or I became an orderve. It doesn't take a genius to see which route I chose.”

“Well, that's pretty blunt. I guess you have a point.” Daniel mused. Crossing his arms and yawning, he slouched up against the wall.

“Hey, Fruitloop? Have you noticed there haven't been many ghosts around Amity since around the time I went missing? Sam, Tuck, and Jaz say they haven't seen diddly since last Tuesday. You apparently saw Johnny and Kitty, and my doctor at the hospital told me Ember was ranting around, but no severe property damage or really annoying ghost junk seems to have happened. With the exception of that creepy demon chic and those sloth bear thingies, I haven't seen anyone around here either.”

Vlad smiled slightly. “Don't worry about it, Daniel. They probably just found a better place to haunt.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. After a moment his eyes widened at a realization. Wisconsin, with the exception of Plasmius and the Dairy King, was pretty lax when it came to ghost attacks.

‘Did he do something while I was gone?’

Daniel was brought out of his ponderings by a stiff thud beside him.
Rag Doll Dance

Vlad was dizzily holding himself up on his hands and knees. Daniel quickly shot down to help him up, “Vlad? Jesus….Woah, easy.”

Vlad dizzily noted the arms hefting him up and supporting him. Groggy, he weakly gripped the shoulder he was leaned against.

“Fruit-Loop? Can you hear me?”

Vlad groaned, “Danny? Ugh….This week? Kinda sucks.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Vlad? You do realize you just used my nickname instead of my full name, right?”

Vlad blearily twitched an eyebrow and noticing the unanswered question, assured, “I’m fine… Daniel. I'm just a little discombobulated from trying to use my powers earlier.”

Daniel sighed. “Vlad? I was thinking…. You're obviously in no condition to protect yourself or even move to suddenly without assistance, and Sam and I don't want your secretary left alone with you after what happened yesterday… So…um…”

Vlad tiredly wiped his dripping gray hair out of his face. Looking to Daniel questioningly, he asked, “So what? I don't bite… What were you thinking?”

Daniel sighed. “Erm….Can I stay weekdays at your place this Summer?”

Vlad tensed abruptly and his head whipped up to meet Daniel's eyes. A white-gray paler stemmed across his features. Wincing, he attempted to leave Daniel's grip only for the sixteen-year-old to tighten his hold. Baby blue eyes met stormy sapphire and Daniel added, “You agreed to train me right Fruit-Loop? Why not make this summer a ghostly study hall of sorts? One condition though? I don't want you trying to get into my mom’s hazmat suit and I don't want you trying to kill my dad.”

Vladimir's face became a conflict of emotion. The last sentence, however, left him feeling nauseous…. In all his life, those two things had never been his aim. They were just two means to an end….lies he used under his employ to aid in his goal…. That goal, however, was dead. The problem was gone. And now? Now he had a sixteen-year-old thinking he wanted to sexually assault one of his parents and murder the other. Vlad's look of absolute horror and disgust didn't go unnoticed by Daniel.

The teenager immediately became apprehensive at Vlad's expression and jumped to the conclusion the adult was either disgusted with his company or disgusted with his parents. Liking neither scenario, he abruptly pushed Vlad off of himself and onto the ground. Vlad groaned and tried meagerly to look up at Daniel only for the teen to stare at him with a mixture of betrayal and loathing. Vlad's eyes widened and saddened considerably at the sight of the bright, almost neon yellow, green flashing in his direction. Daniel stared at him in silence for several moments before he noticed the crimson dripping from under Vlad's dress shirt. The blood immediately snapped him out of his anger. Vlad gripped his stomach and turned away from the teen. “Whatever you were thinking, Daniel... it wasn't what you assumed. I was just disgusted with the idea that I-”

Vlad glanced back up at Daniel and stiffened. A small icy cloud had went unnoticed from the younger’s lips as he stared at the adult. Vlad had spotted the faint ice wisp and seeing the lumbering figure behind Daniel's oblivious form, he paled rapidly. Eyes flashing red, Vlad teleported. Daniel
turned around just in time to hear the sickening crack of a hastily made shield. Vlad lapsed out and fell to his knees. Feverish and now dazed from the blow that shattered the pink dome, he dizzily noted the blood dripping down his torso before briefly looking back toward Daniel.

A yellowish rope like tongue, sparking with electricity, shot out of thin air and latched onto Vlad's leg. With a muted whip-like snap, it yanked him forward against the concrete and into another invisible creature's clutches. The one that attacked Vladimir first, blocked Daniel as the other slung Vlad against the alleyway wall. Vlad attempted to shield but the impact and the residual electricity was too much and he fainted from the power use. Picking up Vlad's unconscious form in one hand the creature nodded to its companion who began relentlessly attacking Daniel. The teenager's eyes grew enraged. “You disgusting freaks… HE'S NOT YOUR BREAKFAST!”

Eyes glowing bright neon blue as he activated his core, he quickly froze the ghosts to the ground. Not wasting a moment he solidified them into two transparent sloth-bear statuettes. Flying up to Vlad's limp form, Daniel hastily phased the adult out of the ice sculpture’s grip. Hefting the man over his arm, he angrily impaled the two statues, shattering them into a million glittering pieces. Flying to a dry spot and seeing his clone returning with the umbrellas, he laid Vlad down and lifted his shirt up to inspect the damage. The adult shivered and writhed as Daniel's cold hands trailed over the wounds and cooled the rapidly forming bruises. Looking at his duplicate, he sighed and fished into Vlad's pocket for the money. Spying the two one hundred dollar bills the boy's jaw dropped. “Were you planning on buying three hundred donuts or something?”

Getting no response, he handed a bill to his clone. “Go to the Nasty Burger, get two drinks, two burgers and two fries. Meet us back at Vlad's.”

The duplicate nodded and flew off with the money in tow. Picking up Vlad and the two umbrellas, Daniel quickly made his way back to the manor. Phasing through the wall and into the upstairs master bathroom, he quickly dried Vlad off over the tub and removed his now blood-drenched shirt and coat.

Vlad stirred slightly in his sleep and his brow furrowed. Daniel paused from his wrappings afraid he had accidentally harmed or hurt the elder by pulling too tightly on the bandages. Vlad winced and turned onto his side on the bathroom floor. After about ten minutes Daniel sighed and phased them both downstairs and into the kitchen. Setting Vlad at the booth seat he sat beside the adult. “Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad moved and numbly reached a hand toward his now painfully throbbing head. Dark spots were still flickering and dancing in his vision from being thrown against the wall. Weakly propping himself up with shaky arms against the seat he dimly registered the still blurry figure beside him and survival instincts kicked into overdrive. Unnerving green eyes penetrated the fog as he backed up growling into the wall behind him. Daniel's eyes widened, “Vlad?”

At the sound of the boy’s voice, Vlad’s exposed fangs cloaked themselves again and the dull sickly red in his eyes dissipated to a confused and drowsy blue. “Daniel? What’s….ugh...Where are we?”

A lithe arm wrapped around Vlad’s shoulder, “Easy there Fruit-Loop. We are back at your place. I sent my duplicate to get the food. Just breathe for a moment.”

Vlad noted the arm on his shoulder and looked from it to Daniel curiously. Coughing, he questioned, “You’re not hurt right? I”

Daniel sighed, “I’m fine Fruit-Loop. Next time you decide to play the human shield? A little warning would be great. You’re the one injured after all and I was more than capable of shielding the two of us from those things.”

Vlad nodded and averted his gaze. “It was a conditioned reaction...I did it out of reflex…” He went
to remove Daniel’s hand only for the limb to tighten almost painfully around his shoulder blade. Vlad looked up questioningly.

Daniel had a highly unimpressed expression adorning his features coupled with a condensing smirk. “Fruit-Loop? I saw your expression before you teleported. If you were worried about me it’s fine to admit so.”

Vlad shivered slightly remembering the lumbering figure that had almost beheaded the teenager prior to Vlad’s weakly shield blocking the blow. An awkward silence elapsed. Daniel swallowed. “….What was with that expression earlier? Am I and my family that unsettling to you?”

Vlad stiffened and looked like he was going to say something, only for him to close his mouth and avert his gaze to the booth seat. After a moment, he spoke. “It’s complicated Daniel…. I don’t-” Swallowing dryly, he continued, “What you say is partially true but not for the reasons you think. There’s bad blood between all four of us at this point… the idea of being amicable after so much avarice is foreign and a little terrifying… I-My actions haven’t exactly made me the most trustworthy or reliable person in their eyes… Jack still looks to me as a friend but Maddie finally took the hints and well…..Daniel…it’s a mess…”

Daniel clapped his hand across Vlad’s shoulder reassuringly. “I still stand by what I asked earlier Fruit-Loop. You’re not really too bad of a guy right now and I want to help you…”

Vlad interrupted and pulled Daniel’s arm from his shoulder, “If it isn’t obvious Daniel, I have no intent on seducing your mother at this point in time or hurting Jack.”

Daniel froze and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “You really hate my dad don’t you?”


Daniel stared at the expression in confusion. “You’re hiding something.”

Vlad stiffened and Daniel prodded, “Vlad?”

Vlad rubbed his head tiredly. “Daniel? I told you before, some things are a little too painful and hard to explain. I….I messed up. It’s done…It’s over with, and right now I don’t think I am ready to confide fully.” Daniel’s expression became hurt and a little angry. Vlad added, “It has nothing to do with me not trusting you. I’m just…I am still dealing with the repercussions of what I chose. Most of my actions aren’t fair or justifiable but I can honestly say my refusal to explain stems from the fact that it simply hurts too much to talk about it…”

Daniel’s expression became gentle and reassuring. “Vlad? Tomorrow I’m going back to my house to pick up some more clothes. After tonight? You’re not leaving this place until I’m sure you won’t become some sort of ghost snack. You almost got eaten three times in the last two days. You don’t want to hurt my dad or flirt with my mom right now so I think it’s perfectly reasonable that I supervise you.”

Vlad smiled weakly, “Is it really that easy?”

Daniel snorted, “Who said any of this is easy Fruit-Loop? But that doesn’t mean we have to conform to some ridiculous predetermined role or pattern based off of our previous encounters. I want to try for something better, you want to try for something better…..I don’t want to throw a chance away at peace. You need this, I need this. Let’s just take this slowly and when you’re ready you can explain why you decided to royally tick me off for two and a half years.”

Vlad bristled slightly and then nodded in agreement.
The duplicate arrived back with their belated afternoon meal around twenty minutes later. Vlad ate in silence and then got up to exit the room. Looking back at Daniel he smiled warmly, “Thank you Little Badger.”

‘For trying…..but I am afraid that I may be too far gone at this point….’

A voice in the back of his head countered, ‘ Or the hero may just save the monster. Only time can tell, right?’ Hope and a sincere desire for the latter clawed its way through the older halfa’s chest as he strolled to his office. Feeling a crippling heat burning through him again he groggily stumbled into the wall.

‘Breathe….It’s just another feverish episode…. Don’t you dare collapse again! You’re turning outright pathetic with all of your passing out and fainting the last few weeks.’

The rest of the day was a sluggish crawl for the two. Vlad stayed in his study working on rereading materials and taking notes on several assets for his company and Daniel stayed in the library reading several books on astronomy and astrophysics. Three o’clock rolled around and Vlad came into the library to find Daniel floating upside down on the ceiling and reading intently on Greek constellation artifacts. Glancing from the book and seeing Vlad he sheepishly flew down and placed the item on one of the desks. A glowing red novel fell from a stack near where Daniel placed the small green hardcover and Vlad’s eyes widened. “DANIEL!SHIELD!”

Daniel tensed and Vlad seeing the book’s protector poltergeist rocketing toward the teen quickly tackled the boy. They both rolled into the shelving, knocking over several stacks of books as they went. Vlad’s back hit first with a muted thump and he slumped against the younger hybrid weakly. The tengu’s wings flapped angrily as it hissed, “You disrespect my vessel?!?!?”

Vlad growled, “It was an accident Hayato! For Pete’s sake!”

The poltergeist growled and drew its sword. It’s red eyes flickered and flashed. “My business goes to the young ghoul besides your person… move aside, Vladimir.”

Vlad growled and hissed, “He didn’t do anything you feather adorned moron! Your home fell because you precariously balanced it after your offering was given! Next time alert me to put you up after you drink!”

The birdman glowered and stepped forward only for a weakly duplicate of Vlad to tackle the spirit from behind. Daniel froze fearfully and Vlad pushed him, “Quick! Close the book!”

The teen immediately darted toward the pile of literature strewn across the floor. A hiss of pain echoed as the duplicate was flung headlong into Vlad. The Tengu growled angrily, “Masters….I expect retribution for your disrespect to my person.”

A hand gripped the elder up by his shirt. “Ugh… Hayato….stop…”

The raven hair birdman cocked his head in aggravation. “Where’s your honor embassary? Won’t you fight me as an equal Plasmius?”

Daniel duplicated and prepared to blast the spirit, only for Vlad to weakly shield the poltergeist from the attack. “Daniel! Find the book and close it! If you blast Hayato we will have to deal with something much more.”
A fist crumpled into Vlad’s chest and he weakly coughed as he slumped to the floor. The tengu snarled, “Have you grown weak? What is this mockery?”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched, “You tell me I have no honor and yet you pick fights with the injured and children… I’m not the mockery Hayato-”

The dull end of the sword’s handle clipped Vlad in the stomach as he tried to stand. The elder half ghost’s eyes dulled slightly as he slumped over the poltergeist’s arm. The tengu growled, “Your seal is weak guardian and I serve no lord who cannot defend himself.”

A hand curled around Vlad’s half-conscious form and tossed him into the shelves. The Japanese spirit lumbered forward and lifted his sword over Daniel’s frantically searching back, only for Vladimir to hiss angrily and shield the teenager. Growling, he teleported between them and forced his ectoplasmic energy into a weak blade in order to parry the ghoul’s attacks. Panting and heaving, he numbly pushed against the poltergeist. “Daniel….hurry….m’….starting…..to…”

The book poltergeist side swiped Vladimir with a roughly aimed kick and Vlad narrowly blocked with a rapidly wavering shield. “Move aside Embassy! I demand his blood!”

Vlad growled, “Shut….up….you….crazy….bastard….ugh….Daniel?”

More rapid shuffling and searching could be heard behind the two adults.

The tengu snarled. “Did you just insult my person? You pathetic-” The blade came closer to Vlad's neck and began pushing Vlad's own sword into his throat, “excuse for an exorcist!” The shield shattered and Vlad's blade cracked from the pressure. There was a snap of paper and leather behind them and Hayato snarled angrily as he dissipated and faded back into the book he harbored as a vessel. Vlad slumped, frozen in place for a moment before Daniel worriedly flew over to him. The moment the teen’s hand touched his shoulder Vlad’s sword shattered and groaning, he began falling forward. Daniel gently gripped him to keep him upright. “Vlad? Fruit-Loop? Hey…?”

Vlad grimaced and, weakly pushing Daniel away, teleported to the upstairs bathroom where he vomited a mixture of blood, gunk, and ectoplasm into the toilet. Moaning, he dizzily fell against the tile and began shaking against himself. ‘Way to much power use…. The Ophelia blossom is reacting….God…it hurts….it hurts so much…’

Daniel phased up in a blind panic a few moments later and seeing Vlad shaking and weakly clawing against the floor he worriedly phased the adult’s shirt off and turned him onto his back. Vlad furrowed his brow in discomfort. Daniel, seeing the blood and ectoplasm remnants around Vlad’s mouth, grabbed a hand towel and gently cleaned off his jaw. Vlad winced and jokingly rasped, “On the bright side….the…dragon didn’t…come out…?”

Daniel's eyes went wide, “A dragon?!?!”

Vlad weakly chuckled and then gripped his exposed torso in agony. Panting, he numbly clutched the inch wide spot where the swords dull hilt had ripped through the healing flesh.

Daniel's eyes darted to the spot and he, panicking, ripped Vlad's hand from the wound. Touching a shaking hand to it, he watched as Vlad numbly convulsed and clawed into the floor. Putting pressure on the wound, he questioned, “Vlad? Can you heal it?!?!”

Vlad groaned, “No….can't heal myself…usually I just leave…it…and it heals on its….own….ugh…”

Daniel growled, “SERIOUSLY?!?”
Vlad weakly chuckled, “Badger….m’....starting...to black out….I used too much... energy….The Ophelia...blossom....didn't take well...to it…”

Daniel worriedly gripped the adult's shoulder and lifted him slightly so he could continue adding pressure. “Vlad? Stay with me here. What can I do to stop the bleeding? You can't afford to just bleed out when your ghost half is practically toast! It won't coagulate enough…”

Vlad blearily glanced at the wound. “ Dan...you've got...a point...m’...ugh…”

Patting Vlad's cheek, he questioned, “ Come on mad scientist! What can I do to keep you from free bleeding all over the bathroom tile?”

Vlad weakly chuckled and coughed. “ Dan...this is....normal...don't worry about it…”

Daniel growled, “ Vlad? How do I stop the bleeding? You can't keep having this wound ripping open.”

Vlad weakly clutched his hand to Daniel's and briefly glanced at the wound before falling backward against the tile. Daniel's free hand quickly latched behind his head to prevent further injury. Vlad sighed, “ I would...cauterize...the flesh.....I’ve done...it a few...times before….” Vlad groaned and tried turning onto his side only for Daniel to clamp him back onto his spine.

Looking at the still torn flesh and Vlad's deteriorating condition he duplicated. One duplicate grappled Vlad's shoulders to the floor while four more tacked his arms and legs against the tile. Vlad numbly noted the hold and winced. “....Badger...what…?”

Daniel furrowed his brow and smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture before he charging a hand with a low burst of ectoplasmic energy. “ Vlad? This is going to hurt. Just bear with it...I promise you'll feel better afterward.”

Vlad sighed tiredly and coughed. “Badger....do me a favor?... Don't... cook the Fruit-Loop?”

Daniel nodded curtly and using his free hand pressed the wound together at the seams. Vlad writhed and bit his lip to keep from screaming. Limbs went taunt and his spine arched the moment the pulsating green energy connected and began searing the flesh together. Vlad screamed in agony at his touch and struggled against the duplicates’ hold.

After a few minutes of Vlad desperately trying to escape the pain and screaming weakly, his muscles went lax and he slumped in Daniel's grip. Eyes darted and watered profusely as teen finished the impromptu medical work. Vlad passed out as soon as the pain stopped. Dissipating the duplicates, Daniel gently patched the swollen flesh with some gauze and wiped the tears from Vlad's cheeks.

Grasping onto the adult and pulling him over his shoulder to keep the pressure off of his chest, he maneuvered him back into the master bedroom. Groaning, Vlad groggily tried stirring. Daniel sighed, “ Vlad? Just take a nap until Sam picks us up?”

Vlad nodded in compliance as he was set down. “....Thanks.....m’....sorry....about that….”

Daniel's eyebrow twitched, “You're sorry? Vlad? You don’t”

Seeing Vlad's rhythmic breathing and now closed eyes, Daniel sighed and propped a sheet over the adult.
Vlad woke up to Sam and Daniel both worriedly leaning over him a few hours later. Tiredly sitting up, he nodded politely to Samantha and blearily rubbed his eyes. Looking at his shirtless torso apologetically, he sighed, “Ms.Manson? … Can you reach into the closet and grab me a shirt?”

Sam smiled slightly and walked over to the closet. “Do you have a preference?”

Vlad smiled tiredly, “Anything that won’t bleed through easily but can pass as somewhat casual.”

Daniel smiled slightly, “Feeling a bit better?”

Vlad flinched and nodded, “Daniel?… I am sorry for earlier… You shouldn't have had to have been the one to do that…”

Daniel cocked an eyebrow. “It's not like you could've sealed it yourself Fruit-Loop.”

Sam returned with a black long sleeve shirt. “I guess this explains why you wear suits constantly.”

Vlad smiled tiredly, “It's easier to hide injury if less flesh is seen.” Smiling sheepishly he continued, “That and it's more advantageous when it comes to getting to the bandages when you can just unbutton the clothing.”

Danny raised an eyebrow, “You can phase them off, you know that right?”

Vlad snorted and answered somewhat sarcastically, “Really? Twenty-something years of me being a halfa and I never thought about phasing them off.”

Sam grinned. “So why not?”

Vlad groaned. “Ms.Manson? Sometimes I become powerless, whether from injury or a weird occurrence. It's kind of hard to take off a sweater or a t-shirt when a fatal injury is involved...How I am currently is a great example of the scenario. This morning I was forced to take drastic action and as a result, Walker’s antidote from yesterday shortcircuited me as soon as I landed in the bathroom.”

Daniel winced and then paused. “Wait you mean you're humanized right now?”

Vlad rolled his eyes and smiled gently, “Yep... pretty much. Unless I want to have my guts doing somersaults again I'm going to have to keep power use to a minimum. On the bright side, my fangs are still cloaked.”

Sam winced. “Yeah. Let's avoid the whole 'nausea and bleeding everywhere' bit this afternoon?”

Vlad nodded and slowly stood up. Dizzy, he winced and stumbled only for Daniel’s arm to whip out around his shoulder. “Vlad? Tomorrow you're staying home, alright?” Daniel questioned.

Vlad glanced at his chest and then sighed. “I don't think I have much choice in the matter. I’ll probably be laid up in bed as soon as we get back here tonight.”

Daniel smiled gently. “Well, the Mansons are waiting outside. So is Tucker. Jaz decided to tag along to. You ready to get going?”

Vlad nodded and tiredly straightened himself. “You two go ahead and get downstairs. I’ll be down in a minute.”
Sam and Daniel both exchanged worried glances and Vlad smiled somewhat reassuringly. “Ms. Manson? Daniel? You seem to forget my pants are covered in today’s blood splatters. I need to change before I step outside lest we give someone’s parents a heart attack…”

Sam glanced at the dry blood on the suit pants and winced. “Yeah…that’s a good idea.”

Daniel paused reluctantly. “Vlad? I’ll stand outside the doorway… I don’t want you taking a nosedive down the staircase while trying to get downstairs.”

Vlad chuckled. “Sure. That’s a pretty sound plan. I’ll be out in five minutes, okay?”

Both Sam and Daniel exited the room while Vladimir changed into a pair of black dress pants and tucked his somewhat messy hair back into place. Walking to the door, he detoured by the bed and snatched the shoes he had been wearing earlier. ‘Daniel must have taken them off of me while I was unconscious.’

Changing his expression to something more guarded and stoic he tucked in his shirt and clipped his belt around his waist. ‘And now to take care of the fundraiser.’ Walking to his nightstand he grabbed several one hundred dollar bills, twenty-three to be exact.

Amity Park’s constant haunted status had made firefighting a thousand times more tiring and risk related in the last three years due to the Fenton’s portal constantly being open and weakening the space between the two realities. Accidental fires, power outages, homes collapsing, minor injuries… They scarcely got a break and because of Amity’s weird funding situation prior to Vladimir’s election, their pay grade was significantly cut. Ernesto apparently reasoned that repairs to city property were more important than making sure the first responders had adequate pay to survive off of. The charity event was meant to bolster support from the community and give richer individuals a chance to get to know their city’s first responders on a more personal level. Where a regular firefighter in New York would make around $46,000 annually, the firefighters in Amity made a scarce $30,000. Other traditional firefighters also worked in twenty-four-hour shifts followed by a forty-eight hour rest period. Amity had no such system. Montez’s last four terms had all systemed a standard twelve hour work day accompanied by a twelve hour resting period which usually amounted to a two-hour free slot that got bumped over by ghost attacks. Add in a measly seven dollar an hour pay grade and you get twenty-three individuals with dangerous and unfairly compensated jobs. By all accounts, on paper, the system looks good to property owners in Amity but fell extremely short when considering the city’s and it’s employees’ needs. Repairs on equipment and the trucks all have to be paid out of pocket due to ghost related problems not covered by the cities policies. The uneven number of firefighters also made it to where one unlucky individual was usually drawn for the extra twelve-hour slot without compensation at the end of the work week. Vlad had noticed the situation soon after the Vortex dilemma and had been trying to alleviate the problem to the best of his abilities.

Vlad tiredly wadded the money and put it into his pocket. ‘Firstly? Go to the event and see the condition of the equipment and the firefighters again. Secondly? Find a way to alleviate the deficit through more balanced city budgeting.’

Daniel at this point peeked into the room and spotted Vlad’s somewhat troubled features. “Hey, Vlad? You alright?”

Vlad paused and tensed and then smiled reassuringly, “I’m fine… I just have a lot on my mind.”

Daniel cocked an eyebrow, “Come on Fruit-Loop. Let’s get this over with.”

Vlad nodded in agreement and quickly followed the teen to the staircase. Descending it he paused and groaned. Daniel looked back to him worriedly. Sighing, Vladimir questioned. “Daniel? I know...
you probably wouldn’t want to do me a favor but seeing as how I currently can’t use my powers…”

Daniel’s blue eyes softened a bit and he questioned, “It depends on the favor.”

Vlad smiled sheepishly and pulled out the wad of cash. Daniel’s eyes went as wide as saucers at the sight and Vlad obliviously continued, “Okay…. so sometime tonight you’re going to have to sneak into the firefighters’ locker room and slip in a bill in each of their personal belongings. I would do it but seeing as how I can’t exactly go intangible at the moment…”

Daniel’s jaw dropped. “You want me to put money into their lockers?”

Vlad raised an eyebrow, mildly nervous by Daniel’s disbelieving tone, “Yes?”

Daniel looked to the money and then to Vlad again to verify his ears weren’t playing tricks on him. ‘Ah, yes….villain mentality contradictions. I probably just fried the kid’s brain.’ Vlad put the wad back into his pocket. “Nevermind… I’ll figure something out…” Vlad began walking forwards again and Daniel’s hand clipped onto his arm, stopping him.

“You’re being serious?”

Vlad sighed. “Daniel, I’m being serious. Come along now, the Manson’s probably aren't too keen on waiting on the two of us and I think-”

“I’ll do it!”

Vlad’s head whipped around to stare at the flustered sixteen-year-old. A small smile ghosted across his features, “Well that was an interesting turn of events.”

Rubbing the back of his neck and staring away briefly, he questioned, “Are you really okay with-?”

Daniel groaned and stalked up to face Vlad directly, “I said I’ll do it Fruit-Loop!”

Vlad stared at the teen for a few moments and then retrieving the money, slipped it into Daniel’s hands and continued down the staircase.

Daniel froze at the gesture briefly before he ran to the adult. Vlad glanced at the teenager and seeing the bulge in his hoodie, grinned, “Not one to leave the thermos, huh?”

Daniel stuck out his tongue and rolled his eyes before replying, “I don’t need you getting into fights with any ghosts. I think seven confrontations is enough for one day in your condition.”

Vlad snorted as they rounded the hall and reached the entranceway. “The types of things that pursue me little badger aren't the type you would want to capture and release.”

Daniel paused and titled his foot. “Obviously, those things are a kill or be killed scenario fruitloop. I’m talking about the more human stuff. It’s not like you can face Desiree or Technus in your current condition.”

Vlad paused and turned to Daniel abruptly. Smiling, he temporarily exposed his fangs and red eyes. “My friends won't attack me, Daniel.” Turning, he opened the door and stepped out before Daniel could press him further.
Once in the family’s limo, Vladimir kindly engaged in conversation with both of the Mansons and expertly verified Sam’s alibi for her visits to his home. Four minutes passed by somewhat pleasantly until Sam’s mother decided to steer the conversation toward her own motives.

Ms. Manson’s orange curled bob shook slightly as she fingered her powder pink smock. Looking to Vlad she nodded graciously, “Thank you for helping put her on the right track.”

Sam looked like she was slapped. Both Jaz and Daniel cringed. Tucker glowered at the woman.

Vlad stiffened slightly, “I beg your pardon Mrs. Manson? Right track?”

His steel blue eyes sparked. Mr. Manson saw the look and looked to his spouse worriedly. Ms. Manson, however, went unphased by the somewhat volatile glint and continued, “Sammy is going through a bit of a rebellious streak. She hangs out with the wrong crowd and has a tendency to get into trouble.” Her eyes glinted with disgust as she glanced over to Tucker and the Fentons.

Vlad’s eyebrow cocked up and he spoke with an air of authority. “Your daughter can choose her own path Ms. Manson. She’s a hard worker, intuitive, compassionate and responsible. As for her friends, for which I have noticed your disgusted glaring? I consider all three of them close relations. Young Jazmine is already on the fast track to Harvard or Yale starting this next semester. Daniel is an intuitive strategist and idealistic, he can pursue any career he sets his sights on. And as for young Mr. Foley? He has a great future in electronics ahead of him.” All four teens stiffened at his words and went wide-eyed. Both Manson parents froze.

Vlad grinned devilishly, “Tell me, Mrs. Manson? To which of these friends or her own still developing traits do you find discourse in? If it’s a matter of clothing, black attire is seen as a staple in the business world.” He motioned toward himself. “Or maybe you are wanting her under dear Elizabeth’s company assets for which both you and your husband have already discredited? I hate to tell you but the thirty percent of her grandmother’s wealth that you inherited with her stocks at retirement will be a fraction of what she’ll get by the time she graduates unless she pursues her own interests.”

The Mansons went wide-eyed at the simple revelation. Vlad sensing a weak point questioned Sam, “Samantha? What do you aspire to be after high school?”

Sam froze for a second and then smiling she answered, “I was hoping to become a zoologist.”

Ms. Manson looked aghast, “Sammy kins you don’t want a career in-”

Vlad raised an eyebrow. “She is sensible. Did you know the average income for her chosen profession Ms. Manson is approximately $60,000 annually? Sure, it isn’t as high, as say, a doctor’s or a veterinarian’s pay grade but her goal is well defined and suits her interests. Your daughter isn’t much for wealthy aristocracy and I find her position respectable.”

Ms. Manson turned to her husband to back her up. The man rubbed a hand across hers and argued, “Then why not her become a doctor?”

Vlad chuckled somewhat, “Who says she won’t? Careers change. I original went to school to become a surgeon and an accident made it to where I couldn’t even look at a scalpel without shaking. I wouldn’t be who I am currently without the option of changing viewpoints.”
Mr. Manson paled considerably at the statement. And then added, “We want the best for her…”

Vlad sighed exasperatedly and motioned his hand toward Samantha who had taken to staring at her feet, “Jeremy? She’s a sixteen-year-old girl. Your mother knows this, I know this...her parents surely should know this as well. She has nothing but to grow and develop into her own views. Children grow up fast, I’d think you two would want to encourage that growth wouldn’t you?”

Both Mansons looked to Sam questioningly and Ms. Manson went to speak only for her husband to sigh. “Yes, you are right. We want to see her grow.” Looking at Daniel, he narrowed his gaze, “Young man? Refrain from giving us a reason to stint your company around our daughter, okay?”

Daniel rapidly shook his head in agreement. “Trust me, I’d rather keep my friends out of trouble instead of in it.”

Vlad smiled gently at Sam and looking back to the Manson’s, switched to the topic of Sam’s grandmother Izzy.

“I hear Elizabeth is on another world trip. I’m guessing the home’s been fairly quiet while she has been away?”

Ms. Manson laughed at the thought of her mother in law, “Yes, it has been quiet. In her old age, she seems to really enjoy the more eccentric facets of culture. It’s kind of soothing at times and at others problematic.”

Vlad grinned. “Surely she hasn’t been too outrageous since she moved over from Boston a few years ago?”

Mr. Manson paused, “You sound like you’re well acquainted with my mother. Where did you meet?”

Vlad smirked, “Let’s see now…. ” He paused and rubbed his chin in thought. “I believe it was a year after Daniel was born. It was a business purchase of one of her old warehouses so my company could expand shipment routes overseas more easily. We became distant relations and kept in contact over the years. She owns five percent of Vlad Co as of now.”

Mr. Manson and Mrs. Manson sat slack-jawed as their vehicle pulled up to the firehouse. Vlad smiled politely, “It looks like we are here.”

The door opened and he waited patiently for the kids to file out. Seeing Sam’s tense shoulders he soothingly reached out and motioned toward the door, “After you Ms. Manson.”

She nodded and smiled before stepping out. Her parent’s followed suit and Vlad exited last. The chauffeur smiled and nodded to Vlad as he stepped out. “Thank you, sir.”
A Snake can Wear Heels

Vlad nodded curtly to the man and walked up the front steps of the firehouse. The two Manson adults quickly entered the building while the teens stayed outside. As soon as the adults were clear Sam whipped around and hugged Vlad. Vlad froze up instantly and looked sadly at the teen from over her shoulder. Jazmine, Daniel, and Tucker all caught the expression before Vlad hid it. Patting her back he smiled apologetically and, pulling from her, he spoke, “Ms. Manson? I hope I didn’t say anything that—”

She cut him off, “That was fucking awesome!”

Vlad stiffened and his eyebrow twitched in mild annoyance, “Language young lady, language.”

Sam grinned, “Big, bad Plasmius just told off my mom and dad… Do you realize how crazy and cool that was?”

Vlad smiled slightly. “Ms. Manson? Let's get inside before your patriarchal mother and father decide to see what's taking the five of us so long?”

Sam smirked and grabbing the adult's sleeve began pulling him to the group. Tucker snorted at the sight. Jazmine raised an eyebrow, “Did you mean all of that?”

Vlad stiffened and he smiled tenderly, “Every word, with the exception of me backing Samantha’s excuse for visiting my home, was truthful Jazmine.”

Jaz smiled tenderly and then her eyes widened. “Wait…. every word?”

Vlad heard the horror in her voice became apprehensive. He lifted his hands up defensively and stiffened. “Jazmine? What's-?”

“ You wanted to be a surgeon? And the accident- Why couldn't you look at a scalpel?” Jazmine's voice cracked.

Vlad’s eyes flashed red at the memory and something dark and bordering on traumatized ghosted through his eyes. “J-Jazmine? Let's avoid this topic?”

Jazmine prodded worriedly, “Why choose to be a surgeon? Was it for money or-?”. Seeing his eyes more clearly in the dim light she stopped.

Vlad looked absolutely sick and Daniel quickly rushed to his side. “Vlad? Hey? Fruit-Loop? Let's get inside and get this night over with so we can get you home, alright?”

Vlad nodded curtly and took a breath. The five of them trudged into the building only for a large man in his sixties to clamp his arms around Vladimir in an embrace, “Evening Mr. Mayor!”

Vlad smiled kindly. “Ah, Amity’s Fire Chief at his finest. It looks like you could use an off day my friend.”

The man nodded and clamped a hand to Vlad's back, “What gave it away?”

Vlad's features softened, “You haven't had a chance to shave and you look like you've been taking the zombie shift.”

The firefighter mellowed and sighed defeatedly, “Yeah. I picked the short straw. It's not all that bad
though.”

Vlad disagreed, “On the contrary, the situation is bad. Ryan? You're running on what? Two hours of sleep? At your age, that's cutting it to close for comfort.”

Ryan sighed and seeing the shocked group behind Vlad he perked, “I see you coerced some youngin’s our ways Mr. Mayor!”

Vlad chuckled, “I coerced no one.” He paused and, glancing at Daniel, smiled gently. “Well, I coerced one of them. The rest sort of packed together after that.”

Ryan nodded graciously and shook each teen’s hand warmly. “It's a pleasure to meet you all. I apologize for my attire.” He motioned to his firefighters pants, oil stained face and tattered white t-shirt. “As Mr. Masters pointed out, I drew the lot for the zombie shift.”

Vlad sighed, “Ryan? I swear I'm working on-”

The fire chief smiled warmly and raised a hand to interrupt. “Mr. Masters? Don't sweat it. The fact you organized this for us means the world.”

Vlad furrowed his brow, “I'm not resting until I've made good on what I promised you and the boys. It's just taking time to adjust Ernesto’s work. I promise, by Christmas you'll be able to enjoy-”

Ryan beamed and latched onto Vlad’s shoulder. “Sir? You look ragged. Don't worry about it right now. The guys want to meet you formally this time around. Several families have already shown up and your secretary arrived a few minutes ago.”

At the mention of his secretary, Vlad flinched. Daniel's eyes flashed slightly and Sam gritted her teeth angrily. Vlad sighed, “I guess we should join the festivities. Lead the way, Mr. Mayweather.”

Ryan grinned and stroking his growing facial hair, motioned down the hallway to the recreational facilities, “Right this way.”

Vlad hung back slightly with the teens as they made their way through the hallway and into the bright but somewhat disheveled room. Mrs. Manson was being escorted around the living space to the right side of the hallway by a young Hispanic firefighter while Mr. Manson started up a conversation with a couple of higher class families. Paulina Sanchez, her father, and her mother were all conversing with two young firemen about how schedules worked in the building. Paulina glanced toward the new group and her expression soured slightly. In the last few months, the posey had noticed her approach toward Tucker and Daniel had become more mellowed. Sam, however, was still on the chopping block after the whole necklace fiasco. Mrs. Dolce smiled warmly and sauntered over to the fire chief who blushed slightly and motioned toward Vlad.

Vladimir composed his expression and greeted her politely, “Good evening Mrs. Dolce. I'm sorry I didn’t catch you yesterday when you stopped by the home a second time. Samantha informed me that the fax machine broke at city hall?”

Mrs. Dolce grinned sickeningly sweetly, “Yes it did, I called a repairman this evening. I take it that’s why the documents I left in your care aren't with you today?”

Vlad smiled apologetically, “In all honesty, the documents didn't cross my mind. I haven't exactly been feeling well this week.”

His eyes locked with her’s questioningly and she sighed. “You know you are doing to much right? It's only been two months Vladimir…. You need to take a break and catch up on your sleep.
Speaking of which, did young Samantha give you those sleeping pills?"

Sam grasped Vlad’s arm in warning and he, without missing a beat, nodded. “Yes, she gave me the pills. Those herbal supplements are rather potent. You wouldn’t happen to know what herbs are in them would you?”

Mrs. Dolce snickered in amusement, “Why? Do you want to start using them more regularly?” Her Cheshire Cat grin caused Sam’s hold on Vlad’s sleeve to tighten and both Daniel and Tucker to narrow their gazes. Mrs. Dolce tapped her chin in thought. “You know Vladimir? I think the only ingredients I’m certain those pills contain is valerian and sanguinem germina.”

Vlad tensed slightly, “Why Mrs. Dolce, you do know that sanguinem germina is a ghost repellent right?”

Mrs. Dolce laughed but it was an unsettling sound, “Yes, I’m familiar with what it does Vladimir. It’s an odd occult herb with a pension for exorcism but it also cures depression and insomnia.”

Vlad sighed tiredly, “Thank you for worrying Mrs. Dolce.” He smiled politely, “I think we should probably begin helping the others with the cleanup effort now.”

His secretary nodded and smiled toward Sam. “Thank you for your help, Samantha.”

After she walked away Sam growled, “Masters? I don’t care what she said. I think she did it on purpose.”

Daniel came up behind Vlad and added, “I’m agreeing with Sam.”

Tucker shivered. “So… that was the blonde serial killer Sam mentioned…”

Vlad groaned, “I don’t trust her either at this point but until I have solid evidence I can’t just fire her.”

Glancing at his secretary, he continued, “If you four are up for it, I think we can explore the engine room. Ryan talked to me briefly about the equipment a week ago over the phone and I think both Mr. Foley and Daniel will find it interesting.”

They nodded in agreement and followed Vlad through the hallways.
Jazmine smiled slightly, “Hey, Vlad? What was that about you setting this up?”

Vlad smiled curtly, “The previous mayor siphoned money from first responder departments in order to try and bring up property values under his Ghost Repair movement two years ago. As it is now, every fireman you see here today has no choice but to live on site.” He motioned toward the cracked walls and duct taped air vents. “They make around $7 an hour and work overtime without being paid. Call me old fashioned but I won’t stand for seeing an integral part of the city decayed and neglected for some rich real estate developer’s ego.”

Jazmine froze abruptly. “You’re kidding, right? They only get $7 an hour?”

Vlad sighed tiredly. “No, I’m not kidding. I’m trying to remedy the problem but several higher end families don’t quite see the struggle for what it is. This event serves as a slap in the face and as a fundraiser until I can sort out this town’s financial problems fairly.”

Jazmine gaped. Daniel paused and felt his pocket, “So that’s why you asked me to-”

Vlad nodded, “Yes, Little Badger. That is why I asked you to do that favor. Despite popular opinion, I took this mayor gig for the right reasons. Granted, aggravating Mr. Foley, Ms. Manson and yourself was highly enjoyable.”

Daniel cocked an eyebrow and his voice became somewhat hard. “Vlad? You became mayor as revenge for those pranks. You won by possessing everyone. Nothing about that screams right.”

Vlad snorted, “Actually? I was planning on becoming mayor before the incident due to certain circumstances. You phasing my hotel room transparent while I was practically nude was what triggered my spite tactics after the fact. And as for my cheating? I was just poking fun at the fact you couldn’t duplicate correctly still. My proxies faded out as soon as they made it to the voter’s booths. I won because people were growing tired of rampant ghost problems and property damage.”

Jazmine, Sam, and Tucker gawked. Daniel cringed. “You’re telling the truth aren’t you?”

Vlad turned and smiled devilishly at the four. “I’ll let you believe what you want.”

And with that, he walked into the engine room every bit as confident and unphased by the four teenagers disbelieving and confused gazes. Not hearing them in pursuit he motioned with his hand for them to follow. “You’ll all catch flies if you leave your mouths open like that. Come along now before Mrs. Dolce decides to follow us.”

At the mention of the secretary, all four teens immediately followed hot on Vlad’s tail. The engine room was fairly silent. Vlad looked at the singular engine curiously. Ryan stepped into the room behind them. “How do you like the color?”

Vlad chuckled, “Neon green and silver suits the vehicle’s maiden name in my opinion. The Flying Dutchman was recommended by the children’s hospital wasn’t it?”

Ryan beamed. “Yes, it was. It was nice to have the vehicle donated this last month and the kids were ecstatic about seeing her two weeks ago and naming her.”

Vlad smiled, “And what about Clifford? Is that vehicle still in for repairs after the Vortex incident?”
The chief nodded sheepishly. “Yeah…..It was completely waterlogged from being submerged. The ladder controls were toast. We are looking at another two weeks before that big red tank is back in the garage.”

Vlad smiled apologetically. “I’m glad you and those other three were able to get out in time. I’m truly sorry about that ghost’s apparent affliction with that weather taming device I had placed in Amity.”

Ryan sighed tiredly. “It’s not your fault Amity is the most haunted city in the United States. At least not all of the ghosts seem to be bad. That Danny Phantom kid is pretty cool and if it wasn’t for that weird vampire ghost we probably wouldn’t have made it out of the vehicle.”

Vlad stiffened slightly and seeing the teen’s expressions quickly changed the topic. “So what’s the game plan tonight chief?”

Ryan snorted, “I am up for anything. Someone donated some paint and drywall for the walls in the living quarters, so most of the guys are cleaning their rooms desperately right now. They’ll be done in ten minutes or so. If you and the kids want you can help clean up in here while I get everything set up in the other rooms?”

Vlad smiled warmly and nodded in agreement. “I’m fine with that arrangement. Just send for us when you’re ready.”

Ryan beamed and smiled curtly to the teens as he left the room. As soon as he rounded the corner all four teens whipped their heads back to Vlad questioningly. Vlad, however, was quick to roll up the sleeves and grab a broom. Walking away from the teens, he began sweeping a portion of the floor near one of the workbenches. Feeling the teenager’s gazes on the back of his head, he continued ignoring them. Thirty agonizingly silent minutes passed.

Tucker signed heavily after enduring the crippling and awkward silence for so long and went for a dustpan to help Vlad. Sam grabbed another broom and partnered with Jazmine for the other side of the engine room.

Daniel strode over to Vlad and got in his face. “Mind explaining what that all was about?”

Vlad looked up tiredly and Tucker paused by the trashcan to eye the two half-ghosts.

“Daniel? Can we file this under a conversation for a later date?” Vlad questioned tiredly.

Daniel rolled his eyes and somewhat bitterly growled, “I think I have a right to know Vlad.”

Vlad sighed and tiredly looked up from his sweeping. “Daniel….”

“No Vlad. I expect some sort of explanation. You take Vortex from the observants, you dragged me into that mess, you ditched me, and you left me, Tucker and Sam to clean up your mistake!”

Vlad turned to Daniel slightly confused, “How did you know about the observants Daniel? Who told you-?”

Daniel rolled his eyes, “I went to Clockwork after I caught him in the Thermos and he gave me a recap on how you decided to steal Vortex from the observants and use him for your own nefarious ends.”

Vlad dropped the broom. “HE SAID WHAT?” Notable anger and annoyance permeated the air.
Daniel growled at the avarice, “He showed me what Vlad.” Staring at the adult he continued, “You fucking around with Vortex’s weather powers for voting approval ratings screwed up my town!”

Vlad bit his lip and clenched his fists. “Daniel…..Clockwork isn’t-”

“Clockwork isn’t what Vlad? Go ahead. Spit it out.”

Vlad’s eyes flickered with several frustrated emotions. Turning from Daniel, he quickly rounded the fire engine and exited. “If I were you, Little Badger, I would consider what inconsistencies have popped up thanks to your relations with that ghoul.”

Daniel paused. “Wait...What are you-?”

Vlad, however, was already out of the room. Daniel stared at the doorway confused for several minutes until Tucker groaned. “Daniel? Maybe you should go apologize? It sounds like he was madder at Clockwork than he was at you.”

Daniel groaned, “Tucker? My head keeps getting tossed for loops here and I’m getting tired of his vague answers.”

Sam snorted, “Danny? Considering Clockwork tried beheading you when we first met him I am kind of siding with Vlad here. He can stop time for Pete's sake. He probably has several powers we don’t even know about at his disposal. Is it too far of a stretch to consider that maybe Vlad has a reason for being angry?”

Daniel paused. “Now that you mention it..” Rubbing his neck sheepishly, he sighed. “Vlad said Clockwork was a royal pain in the ass and that they haven’t spoken in over a year because of a disagreement…. Vlad apparently punched him…”

Sam interrupted in amazement, “HE PUNCHED CLOCKWORK? THE CLOCKWORK?”

Daniel quickly brought a finger to his mouth, “SHHH. You don’t have to announce it to the entire building Sam.”

Tucker whistled, “You’ve never even managed that before... Why did he punch him?”

Daniel furrowed his brow. “I have no earthly idea. Vlad also said Clockwork kidnapped him twice...Maybe that’s one of the reasons? Whatever the case, they sound like they’re at odds with one another over something.”

Jazmine interrupted, “Is it possible Clockwork showed you an alternate timeline or something to get back at Vlad?”

Daniel froze. “Now that you mention it that could have-”

Sam winced. “Ouch. I guess Vlad has a right to be a little angry if Clockwork bullshited you into thinking he was a mega-villain… Then again a lot of the stuff he’s pulled hasn’t been too far off?”

Daniel leaned across the workbench tiredly and rubbed the bridge of his nose in thought. Vague dialogue came to mind.

‘Clockwork...he warned me...said I had to start teaching you formally instead….of the cloak and dagger bullshit.....Told him to screw off...’

“Oh….guys..? I think I know why Vlad’s ticked off at Clockwork.” Daniel spoke up sheepishly.
Sam and Jazmine waited patiently and Tucker shoved Daniel slightly, “Any day now Pham.”

Daniel swallowed, “Clockwork wanted Vlad to teach me formally and Vlad wanted to teach me through underhanded shenanigans….. Vlad ended up telling him to screw off. Those are his words by the way, not mine…”

Tucker whistled and then froze. “Wait… Clockwork wanted him to teach you formally? About what? Your ghost powers?”

Sam furrowed her brow in confusion. “Wait…. Vlad was trying to teach you?”

Jazmine leaned against her broom. “That’s must have been what he was hinting at that first day! Guys…..Remember? He was talking about Daniel’s learning curb. He wasn’t talking about it in passing… He was openly pointing out key moments in Danny’s development. But why-?”

Daniel sighed and then froze abruptly at the familiar cold wisp that curled from his mouth. “Guys? We have company.”
Vlad was starting to feel feverish again. Mrs. Dolce, seeing him on the edge of the throngs of people, walked forward in mild amusement. “Mr. Masters? You should get a drink of water or something. You look beat.”

Vlad in response tiredly nodded. “I probably should…”

Mrs. Dolce casually lifted up a closed soda can. Eyeing the closed container, Vladimir graciously took it and popped the top. “Thanks.”

Mrs. Dolce smiled overly warmly, “So? Teenagers getting you down boss?”

Vlad sighed and rolled his eyes as he took a sip of the beverage. “They’re intrusive and nosey but I’m hoping they’ll eventually stop being so up in arms around me.”

Bertra quirked an eyebrow, “That so? They asking nitty-gritty personal things or just being regularly annoying teens?”

Vlad rubbed his brow. “A bit of both?” Shaking his head from the encroaching migraine he attempted a weak smile, “It’s complicated.”

Taking another sip of the drink he questioned, “Is everything going smoothly at city hall in my absence?”

Bertra smiled and rolled her eyes before nodding yes. “Everything’s going fine Vladimir. Months ahead of schedule remember?”

Vlad nodded and walking away from Mrs. Dolce began helping the firefighters with their living quarters.

Ryan looked up from his drywall patching and seeing Vlad, smiled warmly. “The kids are still cleaning up the engine room, huh?”

Vlad laughed. “Yes. They seem to have a knack for chattering while sweeping. The topics became a little too personal for comfort so I left them to their own devices.”

Ryan cocked an eyebrow. “Personal?”

Vlad smirked, “The redhead and the black haired boy are practically family. I went to school with their parents when I was younger, and needless to say they can be a little bit in my face about certain topics.”

Ryan beamed, “Ah. Well if you want some alone time there’s one room at the end of the hall that could use some putty in places.”

Vlad finished his soda and tossed the can in the garbage can across from them before extending a hand for the can of putty and the spatula, “Aye aye Captain.” He jokingly quipped.

Ryan laughed, “Here. Don’t overwork yourself, kay?”

Vlad nodded curtly as he clasped the items. “One could say the same to you. See you in thirty or so minutes.”
And with one last wave, Vlad ducked out of the packed living space and made his way toward the darkly lit storage area at the end of the hall. Weaving between several dusty boxes and feeling the wall for a light switch he began to feel groggy and dizzy. Stumbling into a pile of boxes, he numbly dropped both the can and the spatula he had been holding in order to try and stabilize himself.

A small worried voice caused him to look up dizzily from where he collapsed. “Sammy? He doesn’t look too good.”

A six-year-old ghost in a firefighter’s suit and a skeletal dog stared at him from behind the boxes. Seeing Vlad’s eyes on him the boy froze in fear. Only the dead and children or those with the heart of a child could see him. This man looked like neither.

The skeletal dog growled fearfully. “Benjamin? Hide….something is coming…”

The boy looked to Vlad and to his pet fearfully. “Sam? We can’t just-”

The skeleton looked at Vladimir and somewhat ponderingly crinkled its nose-less snout.

Vlad choked and pleaded. “Sam…..Samson?.....Get Benny…..out of here.”

Recognition lit the canine’s features and he quickly morphed into a large snake that surrounded Youngblood to keep him from making any noise. Turning invisible, he watched as Vlad went slack and his breathing became shallow. A glowing green mist-like energy with ruby red eyes slunk into the room and turned Vladimir’s unconscious form onto his back. “Good. The drugs took effect. It seems he didn’t suspect the drink…”

Hefting Vlad up, it slung him over a warped shoulder and smiled wickedly. “That ghost brat should be preoccupied with whatever spook is in the vicinity for a bit, Plasmius. Let’s have some fun, hmmm?”

Youngblood’s green eyes widened in horror and he struggled against his poltergeist’s hold desperately. ‘Sammy! Let me go! We need to help! PLEASE!’

The snake hissed angrily internally but refused to let go of his grip, ‘That thing can destroy you, Benny! I will not disrespect Vladimir’s wishes. We need to get help for him!’

The green figure amusedly looked around the room before he departed with Vlad. Benjamin and Sam both appeared the moment after and quickly flew out of the room in desperation. Spying Danny Phantom floating through the hall with a thermos in hand, the boy pleaded. “Phantom! PLEASE HELP! A MONSTER TOOK MY FRIEND!”

Pale glowing tears traced across his green skin as he wailed. Daniel nearly dropped the thermos in shock before he quickly flew into the small ghost and turned the both of them and Sammy invisible. Rocketing into the room, he sat the young spirit down and questioned, “Youngblood what are you-?”

The small ghost sobbed harder and Samson explained, “Our friend was taken by a malevolent spirit a few moments ago. We need your help.”

Daniel froze, “Who did-”

Youngblood’s voice cracked, “I-IT TOOK PLASMIUS...IT TOOK MY FRIEND...DANNY?...PLEASE? HE TOLD US TO RUN.....HE COULDN’T…”

Daniel turned ashen. Putting a hand on Youngblood’s shoulder and looking around the room he
growled in frustration. “What did the thing that took him look like, and what direction did it go?”

Samson answered, “It looked like a simple ectoplasmic poltergeist but it had red eyes and a strong aura. It picked a rather human-looking Vladimir up and fled due east.”

Danny nodded and quickly latched onto Youngblood’s hand in pursuit. Cutting on his earpiece he contacted Sam. “Guys? We have a problem.”

All three of the other teens groaned through their devices. “It’s not the Box Ghost again is it?” Sam growled.

Tucker snorted, “It’s probably Technus.”

Daniel angrily snarled, “No. Another one of those things decided to corner Vlad while we were all distracted and now he’s gone. Jaz? Do you happen to have the boomerang on hand?”

Jaz, in a panicky voice, practically screamed over the earpiece she was wearing, “YOU MEAN SOMETHING KIDNAPPED HIM AGAIN?”

Daniel growled. “Well considering Youngblood is practically traumatized I think that’s the case Jaz! Do you have the boomerang or not?!?!?”

Sam snapped, “I brought it! WHERE ARE YOU? “

Daniel paused, “Currently on the roof with Youngblood and his boney croney. Just throw it out a window and tell it to find Vlad!”

Sam could be heard running and there was a whoosh over the comlink. “We’ll be right-”

Daniel cut her off, “NO! Stay here and lie if anyone asks where me and Vlad went. Especially if that creepy secretary stalks by. Just keep everyone occupied for a bit while I get Fruit-Loop back!”

A glowing silver device darted from around the building and bolted up. Turning mid-air, it began a breakneck pace towards where it sensed Vlad’s ectoplasmic signature.
Being an Adult Bites

Youngblood trailed after Daniel desperately as they pursued the device. At one point it paused over the town hall and stayed in place as if pondering where the signature went to. Twenty minutes passed before it started moving again. Soon it was leaving Amity and circling through the woods sporadically. Daniel and Youngblood both paused apprehensively before following.

Youngblood spotted the storm drain by the road first. The boomerang dully clinked against the bars. Daniel grabbed it and clicked it off before slipping it in his boot. Looking at the drain he made a move to enter. Samson stopped the teenager and the ghost child from touching the grate. “I’ll check first. You two stay here.”

Daniel’s brow furrowed but seeing Youngblood’s shaking and tear-stained form he nodded in agreement. The snake passed through the bars and after a minute his voice could be heard, “I FOUND HIM! Phantom? He’s not waking up.”

Daniel growled and phasing into the storm drain came to a spot that resembled a room under the road. Vlad lay unconscious in the center of the water with Samson desperately trying to coax him awake. Both arms were roughly secured behind his back by a segment of old rope and he was partially curled against himself on his side. Gray hair obscured his face in the dim lighting. Labored and short breaths echoed through the room and tears snaked across his visible features sluggishly. Something had unbuttoned his shirt to examine the wounds. Daniel’s ghost sense went off again and he tensed. “Bonehead? Go back to Youngblood. Something’s down here.”

Samson nodded and quickly phased through the metal and concrete to get back to his ward. Daniel growled, “Whatever the fuck you bastards are come out! I can sense you damn-it!”

Something laughed and in the metal tunnel the sound came off as even more warped and terrifying. Daniel’s arms wrapped around Vlad’s sickly figure in comfort and feeling the dampness by Vlad’s neck he charged a hand and glanced at the spot. Seeing the blood, he growled venomously, “COME OUT RIGHT NOW YOU MONSTERS!”

There was another laugh at his reaction and an additional snicker. The female sounds abruptly disappeared after a few moments, as did Daniel’s flaring ghost sense. Seeing that the spirit had fled, he quickly grasped onto Vlad and phased the both of them out to where Youngblood and Samson were waiting. Laying Vlad down and phasing his arms out of the ropes, he gingerly checked the adult’s rapid and sporadic pulse. Youngblood worriedly kneeled next to Vlad and gently grasped onto one of his hands, “Plasmius?…..”

Samson growled, “That thing earlier was gloating about drugging him….this looks like the effects of ghost wine when it’s ingested by a human…”

Daniel rubbed his silver hair out of his face and noting the circular wound on Vlad’s neck, he phased back into human form and took off his hoodie. Taking the sleeve, he quickly pressed the cloth to Vlad’s neck. Vlad groaned and his brow furrowed as he wept. Daniel gently begged, “Vlad? Wake up?”

Samson growled, “That thing earlier was gloating about drugging him….this looks like the effects of ghost wine when it’s ingested by a human…”

Daniel’s head whipped up to the skeletal serpent, “Wait… It poisoned him?”

The snake nodded, “It said something about him not expecting it in the drink.”

Vlad shot up abruptly and screamed bloody murder. Red eyes glinted through his tears and
disoriented and confused he backed up weakly. Teleporting, he collapsed a few feet away from them. He wretched and clawed his hands into the ground as spasms of heat based pain racked through his body. Daniel and Youngblood both rushed to his side. Vlad, unable to focus or fight the debilitating torment in his chest, shifted involuntarily and painfully several times. Tortured screaming shot through the trees, scaring several of the avian occupants inhabiting the area. Vlad’s right hand faintly sparked as he struggled against Daniel’s hold. After a few minutes, the adult’s pained protests began to calm. Taking shaky and uneven breaths, he noted the blurred figures around him and the cold pressure around his burning flesh.

An arm gently cradled his head, “Fruit-Loop? Breathe….You’re safe.”

Vlad numbly registered Daniel’s voice and coughed weakly, ” Where…..am I…..? Everything became…..so hot…..I couldn’t…....The nightmares wouldn’t stop………”

Samson eyed Vlad worriedly. “Phantom? This isn’t a ghostly guise. Is he a halfa’?”

Daniel bit his lip and then hugged Vlad slightly tighter to calm the fever he could feel through his hazmat suit. “ Yes. He’s a halfa.”

Samson worriedly curled himself over Daniel’s shoulder, “ Phantom? He needs out of the damp. If he was indeed given ghost wine it was relatively a low dose. Maybe a couple of spoonfuls. Any more and he would be beyond our help at this point. Whatever took him wanted him alive.”

Youngblood worriedly cupped a hand to Vlad’s cheek. “ Plasmius?”

Vlad smiled weakly at the small apparition, “B-Benny……you’re…..safe….I heard…..Samson….I’m glad…..”

Youngblood turned and floated to Daniel’s other side in order to face the teen. “ Danny? He’s going to be alright, right?”

Daniel smiled reassuringly and feeling Vlad’s head slumping against his shoulder and faint breaths by his neck he patted the older’s back reassuringly. “ He’ll be fine….This week’s just been bad for him…”

Samson worriedly nudged Vlad and the adult shifted slightly. “ Phantom? I think he passed out from the trauma.”

Daniel gently retracted Vlad from his shoulder to inspect him. “ Yeah…he’s out.”

Sighing, Daniel contacted his resident goth friend. “ Sam? Vlad’s sick so I’m flying him home. I’m going to send a duplicate your way to help around the fire station. Tell the chief he was called to a family emergency.”

Sam worriedly questioned, “Danny? Is he-?”

Daniel sighed, “ Sam? His neck is bleeding and he is feverish and incoherent. He just phased against his will multiple times and vomited everywhere. Youngblood and his boney compadre think he was poisoned. They heard the thing that took him say something about him drinking something.”

Tucker groaned, “ Pham? Get him home. We’ll deal with things here.”

Jazmine’s voice echoed over the line, somewhat confused and worriedly, “Hey guys? Has anyone seen his secretary?”
The line when dead silent for a moment. Sam growled, “That….that bitch!”

Tucker paused, “Guys? She can’t be a ghost. Danny’s ice breath feature didn’t go off around her.”

Daniel readjusted his hold on Vlad and hefted him up into his arms. Vlad grimaced in his sleep and his arm limply splayed over his stomach. Samson curled protectively around his chest and nuzzled against him. Youngblood hovered beside them as they made their way out of the tree line.

Daniel considered the secretary and shuttered, “She may be working for one of those things?” He pondered into the comlink.

Samson gently rubbed against Vlad’s limp hand as a sign of comfort, “Phantom? The creature we saw was male.”

Daniel paused in confusion for a moment, “What I heard in the drainage pipe was female….So there were two creatures in on this?”

Tucker overheard the ghost and spoke up, “Maybe the male has been phasing things into stuff for Vlad to ingest? I mean…the secretary seems like a stereotypical blonde ditz. It wouldn’t take much to sneak stuff in what she brings him right?”

Sam growled, “Yeah, except she also gave him blood blossom for god knows how long on purpose! Tuck? Danny? I don’t think we should let her within a ten-mile radius of him!”

Daniel smiled gently and landed on a roof in town. Setting Vlad down temporarily, he duplicated and handed the money to his human-looking double. ‘You know what to do. One bill in each locker and help Sam and Tucker clean. Ride back with Sam and her family and then dissipate once you get back to Vlad’s home.’

The duplicate nodded and turned invisible before he flew off.

Youngblood gently hugged Vlad against himself. Daniel noted the behavior curiously, “Youngblood? How do you know Vlad?”

Youngblood stiffened and glared slightly at Danny before he spoke, “He’s one of the only ones who still plays with me. Johnny, Plasmius, Ember….Skulker and Fright Knight …..They’re my friends!”

Daniel stiffened slightly. “He plays with you?”

Youngblood growled angrily, “NOT MUCH ANYMORE! HE’S BEEN TO BUSY PLAYING WITH YOU!” Tears started dripping down the ghost's face again as he almost possessively cradled Vlad. “And when I tried to get him to pay attention to me with Ember and with tormenting you, he still wouldn’t…..I-I…..”

Vlad stirred slightly and a shaking hand limply gripped onto Youngblood’s firefighting suit. “Benny…?.....ugh.....Why are you….crying?....”

Youngblood glared and his eyes flashed, wailing he hissed, “WHY DID YOU PLAY HERO AND VILLAIN WITH HIM PLASMIUS? YOU PROMISED…YOU SAID WE WOULD PLAY!”

Vlad gently pulled Benny against himself and hugged him weakly, “Benny……m’ sorry……I did…..promise….but I got hurt….I couldn’t play….Stuff….kept coming….up...Being an adult….sucks little buddy.....”
Youngblood gripped Vlad's shirt and argued, “Why play with him then?”

Vlad choked out a small laugh. “….Babysitting…..and playing….are vastly different…Chief….“

Youngblood perked slightly, “So you just babysit Danny?”

Vlad smiled weakly, “Benny?….Playing involves….both people…having fun….Neither of us…have ever enjoyed….what we've …done….“

Daniel watched Vlad's dazed apology in fascination. Vlad gently patted the small ghost's back. He arm began going numb. “……You…..can ask…..Danny…Ben?…..m’ sorry….I couldn't….I wanted to….“

Samson sighed at the sight of Vlad passing out with Youngblood protectively gripped to his chest. “Benny? We need to get Plasmius home now. He's really sick and needs medical attention.”

Daniel stared at the boney creature in fascination. “You’re a poltergeist aren't you?”

The snake grinned, “Yes, one made as a protector of the young. Benny is my companion, my playmate. I steer him out of trouble and occasionally fall into trouble with him.”


Daniel groaned, “You're kidding right? Every time we saw each other we were at each other's throats like rabid animals. Nothing about the scenario screamed fun.”

Samson became apprehensive, “So you are his enemy Phantom?”

Daniel took a breath and looked to Vlad worriedly, “No… not anymore. We're trying to patch things up…”

Rubbing his hair tiredly he continued, “He's not as big of an asshole as I thought he was…”

Someone cleared their throat over the comlink, “Little bro? Do us a favor and get Vladimir home already before something else tries eating or maiming him?”

Sam snickered, “Did I just hear Vlad Masters talking to Youngblood like he was his?”

Tucker added, “I second that! What's this about Vlad playing with Youngblood?”

Daniel smirked, “Guys, I’ll talk to you later. I have to detach Youngblood from under Vlad's arms. Vlad was hugging him when he passed out.”

There was a collective gasp before Sam hissed, “You better get a photo!”

Daniel groaned, “Hanging up now.” And clicking the button he disconnected the call. Sam, however, called him again, “I’m going to continue bothering you until you take a photo ‘cause I need undeniable proof a supposed villain is cradling a kid against himself.”

“Sam? Really?” He questioned.

“I’m not hanging up until I hear a click, Aldrin! How else will we know you’re telling the truth?”

Sighing, Daniel shifted into Fenton and lazily took out his cracked iPhone. Turning it on and raising it up, he snapped on the light and took a photo of Vlad and Youngblood. Youngblood looked blurred and faded in spots but was easily distinguishable in the photo. Hearing the click, Sam
gushed, “Send it over as soon as you get Vlad in bed. Toodles!”

And with a half-hearted sigh, she hung up. Putting the phone back in his pocket, Daniel shifted again and walked over to the Vlad and the two ghosts. Youngblood was still hugging Vlad and nuzzling his head against his shoulder. Vlad turned in his sleep and hugged the boy tighter against his chest. Samson gently spoke, “Benny? Phase out of Vladimir's hands. Phantom needs to pick him up so we can get him home.”

Youngblood looked out from under Vlad's arms and sighed remorsefully before phasing through the adult. Daniel immediately bent down and picked Vladimir up. Youngblood hovered nervously near Daniel. “Can we follow you?”

Daniel smiled tiredly, “Yeah. It'll be safer if you use Vlad's portal to get back into the zone anyway…”

Youngblood nodded and Samson draped across his shoulder as they flew beside Danny. Five minutes passed silently until the group landed in the second-floor hallway. Noting Vlad's blood-drenched neck, Daniel paused abruptly and sighed. “I need to bandage him first. You guys can wait here if you want.”

With a stiff nod, the teen phased through two floors and flew into the infirmary. To his surprise, both Youngblood and his companion followed. Laying Vlad down on one of the gurneys, Daniel phased off his shirt and bandages. A small choked sound slunk from Vlad's throat as he was lifted up slightly. Duplicating two proxies, Daniel had the two of them hold Vlad against the bed while he gathered enough alcohol wipes to disinfect and cleanse the injuries. ‘There’s no telling what was crawling in that water...’ Daniel internally snarled.

Gently turning Vlad's neck to expose the bleeding gauge, he began cleaning the wound. After a few moments, he realized what the crescent was. ‘I-It bit him?’ Vlad tossed lightly and groaned at the alcohol seeping into the ripped flesh.

Youngblood gently took his right hand from the cot and squeezed comfortingly as Daniel wrapped and bandaged him. Sighing, he gently hefted Vlad up again and motioned for Youngblood and the now monkey shaped skeleton to follow.
Phasing back into Vlad's bedroom, he questioned, “Um, youn-Benny? Can you pull the blankets back so we can tuck him in?”

Youngblood stared up at Daniel questioningly, “You called me my name?”

Daniel smiled apologetically and nervously fidgeted. “Um… Yeah? It's just...I figured if I'm friends with Vlad and your friends with him then I'm kinda your friend too? If you like Youngblood then I can-”

The child ghost beamed and quickly pulled back the blankets. “I'm fine with either…. Thanks for helping us… If it counts? Plasmius got onto me for the wild western playdate I set up…”

Daniel quirked an eyebrow and looked at Vlad questiongly, “Did he now? How did he find out about that?”

Youngblood shrugged, “I have no zonely clue. He got onto me after I got back home but once he heard I was trapped underwater for so long he ended up letting go of the entire ordeal…”

Daniel nodded and tiredly sighed, “Er- Ben? I'm sorry about that. Why did you and Ember do that anyway?”

“Ember wanted to help Plasmius out with you. Her boyfriend said Plasmius was hurt. I wanted to play to and ended up tagging along with Samson.”

“Wait… he was hurt? From what?” Daniel questioned curiously.

Youngblood scratched his messy green hair and crossed his legs in the air before shrugging. Turning to his companion, he questioned, “Sammy? Do you know what did it?”

The monkey cocked its head and, looking from Daniel to Youngblood, sighed, “Last time I checked, Plasmius ran amuck with a human in Japan with an artifact blade forged to exorcise ghosts. Or at least...that's what Skulker told me.”

Daniel winced as he laid Vlad down and slipped off his shoes, “You mean someone stabbed him?”

The monkey jumped on the bed and patted Vlad's head. Turning to Daniel, he added, “I don't know Phantom.”

Daniel's brow furrowed slightly. “You know you can call me Daniel or Danny right?”

The monkey glared up at the teen, “Considering my ward was stuck at the bottom of that lake without adequate energy from the zone for over a month? I regret to say you haven't earned my use of your birth name, boy. Benjamin hates confined spaces and loneliness. It took everything I had to keep his core from shattering from the fear induced from that escapade. Ember and Skulker even searched for us, Plasmius as well. Skulker actually came close but couldn't hear us through the blasted shield.”

Daniel winced. Turning to Youngblood, he gently floated up and hugged the small and shaking ghoulish. “Ben? I am really sorry. I didn't know… I don't know a lot of things about ghosts or how the zone works. I assumed you were fine… I didn't think ghosts could fade or die...Vlad's teaching me stuff. I'm trying to learn the right way to deal with things. I promise I'll never knowingly leave you or
your bonehead buddy in that situation again.”

Youngblood grinned brightly and his aura flared slightly, “Promise?”

Daniel grinned, “I promise.”

Looking back at the skeleton poltergeist he sighed, “Can I at least call you your name? The fact I don't know what to call you because you're a poltergeist is fairly aggravating.”

Samson rolled his spectral doll-like eyes, “I was born onto the name Sammy or Sam by Benjamin’s desires. I am that name. You may use either. Plasmius alone calls me Samson. Why? I honestly don't know but I've taken it as a form of respect.” The specter paused.

“The reason I hid Benjamin so fast was because Plasmius instructed me by that name. I wouldn't have known it was him otherwise. Benny figured out it was Plasmius a few minutes later when what took him started gloating.”

Daniel furrowed his brow, “I already know a Sam. Is it okay if I call you Samson too?”

The monkey scratched its head and then shrugged before plopping down on the blankets beside Vlad. “I’ll be fine with that. Zone knows... I'm growing tired of the bone puns you use when addressing me.”

Daniel smiled sheepishly. Turning to Vlad and feeling the fever again he sighed and became apologetic to the two ghosts. “He was poisoned yesterday as well with some sort of spectral flare up concoction… Walker gave him Ophelia bloom to calm the effects but he's still having issues with his powers and the paranormal. I want you to be able to stay but it may not be a good idea with the condition he's in.”

Samson nodded and turned to Benny. “Benjamin? I think it's time we leave Plasmius to rest. We can visit him once he gets better.”

Youngblood looked from Vlad to Samson pleadingly. “Sammy? I don't want to leave him after that thing-”

Daniel floated up and assured, “I won't leave his side, Ben. I promise. And when he's all better I'll make him visit you. I'll even tag along and play with you too if you want?”

Youngblood’s eyes widened slightly and a small nervous smile spread across his dimpled face. His freckles squeezed together were his cheeks rose with the expression. “Okay.”

Turning to Samson he grinned, “It looks like I have to clean my room huh, Sammy?”

Samson chuckled slightly. “Yes, Benny. We need to go clean your domicile. I doubt Phantom wants to be buried under a giant checkerboard or attacked by a spectral slinky.”

Nodding curtly to Daniel, Samson added, “He's the closest thing to family Benjamin has. I owe him my life and want nothing but for his well being. Take care of Vladimir.”

Danny nodded. “Don't worry. I'll keep him out of trouble. Or at least snatch him from it if he gets into it again.”

Samson smiled, “Then we will depart. Goodbye Phantom.”

The poltergeist disappeared first and Youngblood lingered for a moment. Flying over to Vlad, he
pecked a kiss on his cheek before he vanished. Daniel stood slack-jawed for a moment before he
tiredly rubbed his forehead. Sitting in the chair by the bed Daniel pondered the night’s events.
Sighing he phased back into Fenton and took out his phone. Sending the photo to Sam, he clicked
off the device and curled against himself for a nap. A few minutes later the phone shook against the
nightstand and woke Daniel up. Reaching over tiredly, he clicked the phone on and answered. His
dad was on the other end of the line.
A Dead Ringer

“Danny? You haven't called the last two days. Your mom and I are getting-”

Daniel rubbed his eyes and smiled slightly, “Sorry about that Dad. Vlad’s been a handful. The guy keeps overworking. Tonight we went by the fire station with the Manson’s, Jaz and Tucker for a charity thing and I haven't had a chance to call because of all the painting and the cleaning.”

Jack chuckled over the line. “He's keeping you busy, huh?”

Daniel snickered, “More than you know. The guy is a walking, talking catastrophe. I'm coming home tomorrow to pick up some more clothing and stuff. He's not going to sleep correctly unless I force him to. He's painful stubborn.”

Jack’s voice became mellow. “His stubbornness isn't necessarily a bad thing. So you're staying with him until he starts taking care of himself Danny Boy?”

“That looks like how it's going to be. He's dead on his feet twenty-four seven and don't even get me started on his meager food supplies. A dozen apples, some peanut butter and a stale, half-eaten loaf of bread isn't exactly healthy.”

Jack's voice became worried, “Really? He's not skipping meals is he?”

Daniel groaned, “I've been getting on to him. I'll probably have to wake him up in a bit to get him to eat something. I dragged him home from that event once I noticed how bad off he was. He's out like a light right now.”

Jack went silent for a moment. “Should I stop by son?”

Daniel froze up and after a minute answered, “No dad. I can handle this.”

Jack paused again and his voice became somewhat more concerned, “Danny? Vladie isn't sick or something right?”

Daniel glanced at Vlad. The adult had turned onto his side in his sleep. “He’s not sick Dad, he’s just tired. From what I’ve gathered he is still juggling his company while also trying to restructure the town. That takes a lot out of a person.”

Redirecting the conversation, he added, “Did you know the firefighters in Amity only make seven dollars an hour and don't get paid for overtime? And they have to live in the building....Poor Vlad apparently is trying to switch some previous city policies around to fix it but a bunch of rich people are arguing against the changes..”

Jack paused, “Woah.... Really?”

Daniel snorted, “Dad? The building’s duct taped together in segments. I’m surprised they haven't been accidentally collapsed in on from a lack of repairs.”

Jack sighed, “How did the charity thing go-”

A sharp pained scream reverberated through the room. Daniel nearly dropped the phone. Vlad had bolted upright from the bed tearing and ripping his fingers through the blankets. Running over to Vlad and slinging the phone aside, he comforted, “Hey? Vlad? It’s just a nightmare. Breathe.”
Vlad’s red eyes blearily focused on Daniel and he shuttered before weakly slumping in Daniel’s arms. Laying Vlad back down and covering him, Daniel grabbed the phone and exited the room. His father could be heard yelling over the line, “DANIEL JAMES FENTON? WHAT’S HAPPENING? WHO SCREAMED?!??”

Daniel quickly shushed his father and proceed to deter the situation. “It’s alright dad! It was just the DVR in the living room. I forgot to unpause the horror flick I was watching before we left and the timer ran out.”

“Daniel…..What's going on there?” Jack’s voice was flat but had morphed into his lesser-known authoritative parent tone. The tone he exclusively used when he was beyond the stage to take any nonsense.

Daniel involuntarily gulped. “Dad? Honest. It was the DVR. Vlad was doing paperwork earlier and I was bored so I clicked on Saw.”

Jack paused on the other end again and could be heard nervously tapping his booted foot against the lab floor. “….Alright son. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Daniel smiled, “Love you, dad.”

He was going to hang up when his father questioned, “Will Vlad be stopping by as well?”

Daniel glanced at the ceiling nervously before answering, “If he doesn’t get swamped by paperwork I'll drag him over.”

Jack’s voice lightened. “Goodnight Danny.”

“Goodnight. Sleep tight...don’t let the ecto-pressure cooker bite.” Daniel mocked warmly.

His dad chuckled and Daniel smiled before hanging up the phone. A knock on the door startled him from his ponderings. Looking at his clothes and seeing no blood, he quickly phased into the downstairs and went to answer before anyone could ring the bell.
Bertra Ann was standing resolutely by the entranceway. “Wow! You sure did get here fast! Is Vladimir alright? I heard he had a family emergency?” Her voice dripped with honey but her eyes remained calculating.

‘She knows something….’

“Yeah, his nephew got hurt and needed his attention.”

Bertra tapped her chin wistfully and leaned down to cup Daniel's face. Purring she admonished, “Vladimir's only sibling is dead. I don't see how he could have a nephew… Is he not feeling well? He looked feverish at the station.”

Daniel felt a shiver go up his spine. “He's fine! Jez lady...give him some personal space? What are you? Infatuated? Maybe he just needs to catch up on some sleep right now.”

Something cold flashed in the woman's eyes and she retracted her manicured hand. Tapping her chin, she glanced at Daniel somewhat venomously. “Maybe I should check on him….”

Daniel stepped in front of the doorway to block her. “Leave. He doesn't need to worry about work or anything else right now. If you really wanted him healthy you'd stop being so intrusive and clingy!”

Mrs.Dolce grinned with an air predatorial hate. “Fine. I will leave. But first…”

Roughly slamming the door open, she strode into the entranceway and questioned, “Those papers he signed and dated are in his office correct? I might as well grab them so I don't have to come back tomorrow morning.”

Daniel eyed the woman angrily and his eyebrow twitched slightly. “Yes, they're in his office. I'll escort you.”

Grabbing onto the woman's wrist he led her to the office and opened the door. “It should be on the desk. Just find the papers and leave.”

She nodded amusedly and with a flinty grin slunk over to the desk. Humming, she began flicking her fingers through the documents in order to find the ones she needed. Daniel angrily glared at her and failed to notice the wisps of icy air that escaped his lips due to the distraction. Berta giggled at his angry expression. “Don’t get so green in the face kiddo. I'm just looking out for his best interests.”

Daniel bit his lip and clenched his fists to keep his eyes from sparking green on impulse. “Somehow? I highly doubt that.”

Bertra leaned against the desk with the stack of documents in hand. Crossing her arms, she rolled her eyes. “Teenagers. Pff. You just complicate the equation. Vladimir doesn't need you little pests crawling around.”

Daniel gritted his teeth and hissed, “Leave.”

She feigned pouting. “But I'm enjoying this conversation. I thought you liked me, Danny?”

Daniel snarled, “I'd like you to leave.”
“Touchy! What did I ever do to you?” She cocked her eyebrow and shuffled the papers on her lap.

“It's not what you've done to me….I'm on to what you're doing to him!”

Bertra giggled, “And what am I doing? Hmmm?”

Daniel glowered before he stepped forward and grappled the woman's wrist. She stood without a fight and laughed at his actions. “My, my… is someone protective?”

Daniel growled, “You've overstayed your welcome. Next time call ahead.”

Rounding the hall, he spotted the door. Bertra snorted, “I'm not the unwanted teenager lounging in his home. You act so noble but I bet you hate him don't you?”

Daniel froze and, turning, he glared at the amused green-eyed blonde. Seeing his confused and angry expression, she continued. “Poor Vladimir has been soooo sick for so long…. It's a wonder my boss has even made it this far. Especially these last two years….”

Smiling, she stepped closer to Daniel. “It’s a shame, isn't it? His kindness really is going to kill him.”

Ripping her wrist from Daniel's hand she waved in farewell. Glancing back she smiled toothily, "Make sure he doesn't skip meals? It would be a waste to see him undone by something as pitiful as poor nutrition…” The words carried a hint of threat mixed in with bitter sarcasm. Daniel's eyes widened. Turning from him, she stepped out and began humming as her heels clicked down the drive.

Daniel immediately slammed the door shut and locked it. Flying upstairs and not seeing Vlad in the bed he panicked. Focusing his hearing and noting the sporadic breathing and heartbeat below him in the kitchen he quickly phased down. Plasmius was numbly curled against himself on the breakfast counter. A small stream of green ectoplasm was dripped down his jaw and he was shaking slightly. Daniel's arms wrapped around him comfortingly and sat him up on the counter. Worried for Vlad’s condition, he gently began coaxing him awake. “Vlad? Hey?”

Seeing groggy red eyes trying to flash from under his almost completely closed lids, he pleaded, “Fruit-Loop? Shift back into human form. Being in ghost mode is depleting you too much.”

Vlad weakly gripped the counter and arching his back he screamed in agony as the rings engulfed him and shifted him back into human form. As soon as the rings eclipsed fully around his body Vladimir's eyes sparked blue and rolled back. Daniel caught him against his chest and comforted him with a brief hug. Vlad's fever was still running strong.

Daniel's eyes grew somber, “Vlad? What did you get yourself into?”
**The Calm Before the Storm**

Cradling Vlad against himself, he phased back into the bed above them and gently laid the adult down. Seeing the ectoplasm remnants plastered across Vlad's pale features, he darted into the bathroom and picked up the hand towel from earlier.

Vlad furrowed his brow slightly and twitched at the damp cloth’s presence. The doorbell rang again and Daniel glanced from the floor to Vlad worriedly. Duplicating, he sent his double outside invisibly to see who was at the door. Noting Tucker and Jazmine with the addition of his duplicate from earlier and seeing the Manson's pulling away he quickly instructed the duplicates to phase the two into the home.

A few seconds later frantic footsteps could be heard slamming up the staircase. Jazmine busted into the room first and worriedly rounded to the bed. Tucker rushed in second. Jazmine's hand brushed across Vlad's head and she looked to Daniel questioningly. “What happened??”

Daniel flatly growled. “Something dragged him off and took a bite out of him….”

Jazmine looked from Vlad to Danny in horror. “Where did it-?”

Daniel walked forward and placing a palm to Vlad's neck, turned the bandages invisible.

Tucker cringed and whipped his head away from the bloody wound. “Dude! What the actual-??!”

Vlad weakly grimaced in his sleep and turned slightly onto his side. Jazmine readjusted the pillows to cradle him better. “What's with him and getting fatally injured or beaten up? What is the likelihood a person could even get kidnapped twice in a week??”

Tucker eyed Vlad worriedly, “Pham? I second what Captain Bearbert said. What the actual heck?”

Daniel winced, “His secretary busted into the house earlier. She knows something guys….”

Tucker looked up to Daniel in disbelief, “She busted into the house?”

Daniel sighed, “Yes. She busted in and I confronted her. She beat around the bush instead of confessing and subtly threatened me… When she wasn't insulting me that is….”

Jazmine gently pulled back the blanket draped over Vlad to inspect his wounds. Spying the bruises on his wrists, she questioned, “What happened to his wrists?”

Daniel glanced at the purplish green marks and bit his cheek before answering. “He was tied up and unconscious when we found him. That's probably from the rope.”

Tucker bent over Vlad and gently patted his cheek. Vlad lapsed in and out briefly before succumbing back into his drugged stupor. Jazmine slunk into the restroom and grabbed the first aid kit lying on the floor. Rounding toward the bed, she turned to Daniel. “Go get a glass of water. Your core isn't cooling him fast enough.”

Daniel nodded and phased through the floor while Tucker and Jazmine began gently trying to wake Vlad.
Bertrand was unnerved by Vladimir's more pointed questions at the start of the evening. Of course, it was only a matter of time before the elder halfa realized the pills contained blood blossoms... but neither he nor Spectra would've guessed the jig would end so soon.

Bertrand, in his female guise, snickered from his corner in the room. For the past few minutes, he had been eavesdropping with his refined hearing on the four brats and his meal. Vladimir could be heard leaving abruptly after they had conversed about the ghost zone’s version of myth, Clockwork. Bertrand and Spectra at one point would have written off their conversations as the blabbering of loons if they hadn't fed on Vladimir's emotions so routinely the last few months.

Hearing Daniel’s annoyance and a few choice curses about a ghost being somewhere in the building and spying Vladimir's slightly paler form entering the lounge, Bertrand smiled broadly.

‘ Time to test the little freak’s core.’

Keeping the cola Spectra had modified earlier in the day concealed, Bertra walked to her boss cheerfully.

“ Mr. Masters? You should get a drink of water or something. You look beat.” Bertrand grinned amusedly at Vlad’s obviously exhausted and slightly feverish state. ‘ His core is trying to flare up...or maybe this is the after effects of yesterday's dose?’

Vlad stiffened slightly but kept his composure. Nodding at her curtly, he made a move to evade her. “I probably should…”

Bertrand quickly pulled out the drink. ‘ Oh no, you don't Masters… We haven't had our fun for the night.’

Holding the can aloft, Bertrand twirled it smugly and motioned it toward the sickly half ghost. Vladimir paused at the sight of the can. He looked from it to Bertra questioningly before smiling politely and taking the can. “Thanks.”

‘ Go ahead...drink it. One sip and you won't even be able to scream for help in a few minutes.’

Smiling overly warmly as a distraction, Bertra prodded. “So? Teenagers getting you down boss?”

Vlad sighed and rolled his eyes as he took a sip of the beverage. Bertrand smirked wryly. ‘ Good….keep drinking. It'll all be over soon Plasmius.’

“ They’re intrusive and nosey but I’m hoping they’ll eventually stop being so up in arms around me.”

Bertrand quirked an eyebrow, “That so? They asking nitty-gritty personal things or just being regularly annoying teens?”

‘ Spectra will be pleased. All of these confused emotions! It's so delectable. We just have to make sure that pathetic core of his doesn't fully form before we can feed off of him fully …’

Vlad rubbed his brow. “ A bit of both?” Shaking his head from the encroaching migraine he attempted a weak smile, “ It’s complicated.”

Taking another sip of the drink, he questioned, “ Is everything going smoothly at city hall in my
Bertrand smiled and rolled his eyes before nodding yes.

‘Ha. Work should be the last thing on your mind Masters.’

“Everything’s going fine Vladimir. Months ahead of schedule remember?”

Vlad nodded and walked away from the fake secretary. ‘And now we wait.’

Ten minutes ticked by and Bertrand dimly noted Danny Phantom’s presence circling through the engine room and the sides of the building behind him in search of the ghoul or specter that set off his core’s pulse. Bertrand licked his lips. Humming, he clicked his red heels down the carpeted hall until he reached the living quarters. Waltzing over to the Chief, he inquired. “Have you seen Vladimir? Someone called him and said it’s urgent.”

The elderly man stiffened and then sighed, “He should be in the storage room, Mrs. Dolce.”

Bertrand beamed, “Thanks!”

Turning from the slightly blushing elderly man, Bertrand rounded down the hall. Seeing no one in the vicinity but sensing Phantom some distance behind him searching the spot he was previously in, Bertrand shifted into an anamorphic green mass and slipped into the storage room. Spying Vladimir’s collapsed form from under a few boxes, Bertrand happily bent down and flipped Vlad’s limp and unresponsive body onto his back. Seeing the faint breathing, he exclaimed happily, “Good. The drugs took effect. It seems he didn’t suspect the drink…”

‘The fool must have drunk it all.’

Grappling two cloudlike arms under Vladimir’s lower back, the ghoul jostled him up slightly. The older halfa’s hair and head limply hung back as Bertrand eyed him curiously. ‘….All the better for me and Spectra.’

Hefting Vlad up, as casually as one would a purse and slinging him over a warped shoulder, Bertrand smiled wickedly. “That ghost brat should be preoccupied with whatever spook is in the vicinity for a bit, Plasmius. Let’s have some fun, hmmm?”

And with a brief readjustment of his load and a small glance around, the specter phased both himself and Vladimir toward city hall, where his darling wife was preparing for their company. Landing in the storage closet with their bull, he unceremoniously threw the helpless exorcist onto the ground.

Spectra’s short spiky red pixie cut fluttered slightly as she floated over to inspect Vladimir’s drugged body. Fingering his shirt she giggled and pulled him up by his hair and toward the desk. “Let’s see what Plasmius’s development status is.”

Bertrand snorted. “Firstly, love?”

He phased into his human guise and tossed the necklace toward her. “Cloak his signature so that those brats can’t find him easily.”

Spectra amusedly fingered the small metal trinket and tied it to Vlad's wrist. Grasping his shirt, she gingerly yanked the fabric apart and began feeling the bandages cloaking the hybrid’s chest. Purring, she transformed into her shadow form for a better dining experience. “Mmmmmm…”

Cradling Vlad’s head in her arms, she cupped the shell of his ear and began whispering. Vlad tossed
slightly after a few minutes and began crying in his sleep. Spectra grinned broadly and detached herself. Straddling him she found a small portion of his neck and rubbed it curiously, “I think it's best I taste him… His misery is delectable, but it doesn't give me a good reading on his core status. The blood will also work wonders for my skin!”

Bertrand snorted and grabbed a newspaper. Crossing his legs, he sat down as his wife began playing with her food. Yanking Vladimir's neck sideways and bending down she allowed her dagger-like fangs to elongate. Licking the points, she leisurely ran her tongue along the nape of his neck. Finding a spot away from any vital areas she angled her jaw and punctured the flesh. Vlad's body convulsed and a hand weakly reached up. Glazed red eyes numbly stared into the ceiling and a silent scream ripped his mouth open. Spectra casually grasped his head and slammed it back into the desk as she fed. Small and weakly gurgles echoed through the room as Vlad unconsciously struggled against the ghoul feeding on him.

Muscles rigidly protested and limply tried freeing him from whatever was biting into his neck. His body eventually became too hot from his developing core's reactions to the proximity of the spirit. Spectra hissed angrily at the burning sensation and roughly detached herself from his neck. Vladimir's head fell to the desk with a muted thump.

Turning to Bertrand, Spectra licked some of the crimson off her hand and motioned him forward. Reverting to her human guise she winked. Bertrand raised an eyebrow and walked over to his wife curiously, only to gasp happily as she kissed him. Tasting the blood, he growled angrily and retracted himself from her.

“He’s coming into the later stages. Darling we have to-”

Spectra giggled, “Berty? He’s growing attached again…. Just think? We get to break him right after he gets glued back together!”

She whipped her head around to Vladimir and examined their pet project more astutely. Twirling a lock of grey hair, she snickered. “Can you imagine the heartbreak and despair losing his last semblance of hope will create?” Forming a small black shadow figure in the palm of her hand, she watched as it screamed in agony. “It'll be the final straw that broke the halfa's back!”

Glancing at Vladimir, she crushed the shadow figure in her hand. “And after all of it’s said and done? We’ll tell little Daniel who's really responsible!” She smiled merrily and clawed a hand against Vladimir's neck wound.

Bertrand grinned, “It sounds like you have something in mind darling?”

She chuckled, “Of course…. but it's not quite time yet....We need to allow them to bond a bit more before we shred them apart!”

Bertrand grinned, “I can spy on them a little more to see how this progresses. The brat seems to be pretty attached already.”

Spectra roughly grabbed Vladimir’s limp form and threw him into the ground. “Darling? Pass that rope from over there….I think it's time we test the calf a bit.”

Roughly securing the hybrid’s wrists behind his back, Bertrand tossed him over his shoulder and latched onto his wife's hand with his free arm. “Let's go and find a good setting for the little loser to play hero in…” He snickered at Vladimir's unconscious body. “It's such a shame he doesn't know what Vladimir's intentions were…” He mused the words sarcastically as a wicked grin lit his features.
Spectra smirked, “He won’t know until it’s too late.”

Phasing through the building and turning invisible, he spied Danny Phantom and Youngblood nervously floating and staring at a stationary boomerang. ‘Ah, that ridiculous tracking device. Too bad, they didn't think to check the building. Pffft…’

Flying away from the group and into the woods, Spectra and Bertrand phased into a secluded storm drain and flung Vlad hard into the inch high water. Pulling out a needle from her coat pocket, Spectra leaned down and grappled one of Vladimir's arms. Injecting the drug, she watched in giddy amusement as Vlad's body fluctuated and rippled between forms spastically. Chest arching, he screamed and numbly curled to his side. Shaking against himself, he dizzily tried to fight the nightmares the drug was encouraging. After a few minutes of him writhing and splashing weakly, Spectra bent down and ripped the necklace from his wrist. “Meet you at his place hubby?”

Bertrand snickered. “You know it. I'll distract the brat and get a feel for him while you tamper with that infernal embassary mark.”

Spectra nodded and pecked a small kiss before she hid in the tunnel. “See you soon…”
Bitter Depressive Musings

Vlad woke up hyperventilating and disoriented in Jaz and Tucker's arms. Coughing, he weakly swayed and tried to take in where he was. Vague, incoherent blurs of a dark figure biting into his flesh surfaced. Wincing, he numbly noted a white-gloved hand bringing a glass of water to his lips.

Jazmine smiled reassuringly. “Vlad? Your fever is pretty high right now. You need to take these.”

Vlad grimaced and noting the pills weakly nodded. “….Jazmin’….what….?…..Everything, it..hurts….”

Vlad coughed again from the verbal effort and numbly swayed only for Tucker to latch onto his shoulder blade.

“Vlad? Do you remember any of what happened?” Daniel questioned as he leaned down to wipe the man’s hair out of his face.

Vlad's brow furrowed and, grimacing, he replied, “ Something….held me down….was feeding...everything was so heavy…..” Vlad's eyes flashed crimson momentarily and he furrowed his brow in pain and squeezed his eyes shut.

Daniel cupped his face gently. “Vlad? I know you're hurting right now… Trust me, we can tell. You need to swallow these pills though.”

Vlad took the pills from Jaz and dizzily cupped them into his mouth. Jaz brought the glass of water back to him and helped him down some of the contents. Laying him back in the blankets, Jaz worriedly questioned, “What happened after you left the engine room, Vlad?”

Vlad coughed before rasping. “.... Left the room... Mrs.Dolce....cornered me… I tried walking past her….wouldn't let up… She said I looked….ill...passed me a drink… it looked safe….wasn't opened ....”

All three teens stiffened. Tucker swallowed, “She gave you a closed drink?”

Vlad weakly nodded. “.....Yeah... I took a few sips...and she backed off...Went to see what...I could do near the...living quarters…. Ryan…directed me to...the storage room… Everything was spinning and it-.....I couldn't breathe....Samson….I heard Samson say something...Something was coming….I told him to run...everything turned black… Few seconds later...she was holding me down...demon wouldn't let go…’ Couldn’t shift.....it’s all… ugh…”

Falling deeper into the sheets, he continued, “Blurs….flashes...I got slammed into something wet and hard…..next thing I knew...the nightmares...they got worse…..wouldn’t….stop….” Pausing tiredly, Vladimir finished weakly. “Dan….something was….in here….”

Daniel's eyes widened in horror as Vlad began lapsing out again. “Woah! What do you mean?!? Vlad?!?”

“ Woke up...in bed….heard the door….something pinned me down...Everything hurt… Screamed...No sound...came out.....It... grabbed...my arm… everything got heavy again….”

Jazmine nearly dropped the water glass. Tucker turned to Daniel in a panic. “How long did that blonde psycho stay in the house, Danny?!?”
Daniel paled, “She was here for six or seven minutes. When she left I rushed upstairs but Vlad somehow was in….”

Daniel’s eyes widened in horror and then he growled, “That bitch! She-”

Vlad groaned abruptly and numbly latched onto his chest. Two black rings circled from his waist and he screamed in agony as they engulfed him. Panting, he numbly writhed in Daniel and Tucker’s holds before he passed out in ghost form. Reaching over and feeling the fever, Daniel hissed angrily and began cooling the room.

“Damn it! She was distracting me that entire time! That evil, conniving monster!”

Jazmine gulped. “She drugged him and set him up…. God….That so-”

“-sick.” Tucker grimaced. Jaz reached over and rubbed Vlad's spiky black hair gently.

“Now what? Daniel… He hasn't had any time to heal…. By the sounds of everything? They're kicking him while he's down…. ” Jazmine’s voice was heavy with worry.

Daniel growled. “I have no clue what to do! Vlad's usually a peg or two above me! I'm not used to being the more capable one… Jesus… It got to him and I was in the same building...Twice! Not once but twice! How the heck am I supposed to keep him in one piece?!!?!”

Vlad’s ear twitched slightly in his sleep as Jaz comforted him. “Obviously they like ganging up on him when he's alone. You're just going to have to make sure he isn't left where they can get to him.”

Daniel nodded. Tucker flipped out his PDA and messaged someone. With a click, he cut off the device and smiled tiredly. “Sleepover at Plasmius’s it is then.”

Daniel smiled slightly. “Thanks, Tuck.”

Tucker grinned, “Don't sweat it. I couldn't live with myself if he turned out to be a nice guy and then got eaten.”

Jaz sighed. “I can run home and get some weaponry for you guys?”

Daniel shook his head no. “I'll send a duplicate to get Sam. She has a few wrist rays and some plasma pistols stored in her backpack. You need to get home Jaz… I don't need Mom and Dad flipping out more than they already are.”

Jaz bit her lip and looked to Vlad somewhat debatingly. “If you think that's best, I won't argue. I'm coming by tomorrow morning though…Okay?”

Daniel nodded. “Sure. I could use a ride. I promised Dad I'd stop by tomorrow morning and if you get me, he may let up a bit.”

Pausing, he added. “And Jaz? If Dad asks? Vlad's just sleep deprived.”

Jaz sighed and then nodded. Taking one last glance at the ragtag group she smiled slightly and went to the doorway. “If that secretary shows up again? Call me. I'll be here with the Fenton Ghost Peeler in a nanosecond.”

Daniel grinned. “Sure. See you later Jaz.”

Hearing the door closing downstairs, Tucker turned his attention back to Plasmius and winced. “You know? If this happens all of the time I'm pretty sure I'd be a bitter depressive too.”
Daniel flinched and looking toward Vlad's feverish form he sighed and duplicated. ‘Get Sam. Tell her what happened. Get weapons.’

The duplicate nodded curtly before disappearing through the wall.
Tucker sat up and cracked his fingers, “So… umm… How has it been around here when it's just the two of you?”

Daniel smiled tiredly. Crossing his legs and sitting by Vladimir he draped a cooling hand over the adult's brow. A small sigh escaped the feverish half ghost at the temperature change. “He’s actually pretty easy to get along with…. He saved my ass at least three times today from various things trying to off us with practically no powers at his disposal. I'm actually surprised he's shifted right now. Then again those drugs those monsters gave him are probably draining him like a battery. He's obviously in pain every time he shifts……”

Tucker winced. “Does it hurt when you shift?”

Daniel debated it, “No… Well at first, when I got zapped it did…..”

Tucker winced. “Yeah…..”

An awkward silence elapsed for a few minutes only to be interrupted by Vlad's sudden tossing and weakly turning in his sleep. Chest arching he numbly cried out in agony as he shifted back into Vlad Masters. Seeing dazed blue eyes, Daniel gently comforted, “Vlad?.... Go to sleep. Tuck, Sam and I aren't going to leave you alone. Just rest.”

Vlad weakly choked, “House……arrest….again...hmmm?”

Tucker snorted, “No, we were thinking more along the lines of a paranormal slumber party, complete with pranks, guns, and spin the phantom.” Sarcasm dripped from every word. Vlad chuckled slightly and then coughed.

“Foley…..pranks?....Bad idea…..you all would……be done for……” He teased.

Danny smirked, “Ha. Vlad? You couldn't prank someone in your condition if you wanted to.”

Vlad smiled slightly and his half-lidded eyes glittered with mischief. “That….a challenge….little...badger?”

Daniel snorted, “Nope. It's a fact. You’re one hundred percent invalid at this point.”

A small smile ghosted across Vlad's features. “Willing……to bet….on it?”

Tucker raised his hand defensively, “Woah! Hey? Guys? Do me and Sam a favor and leave us out if you’re going to pull another prank Armageddon?”

Vlad looked to Tucker apologetically. “Foley……?.....M'....asking Dan….You're safe….unless you aid him…..”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “You think you can prank me? And what's this about a bet? What are we betting?”

Vlad's brow furrowed slightly. “….Ugh….let me think?...If you win…. I'll let you….pick a power….and I'll teach it?....”

Daniel raised an eyebrow intrigued. “Any power?”
Vlad weakly smiled and nodded.

“...And what if you win Vlad?” He questioned curiously.

Vlad’s brow furrowed again. Feverish blue eyes pondered the situation for a moment. “C-could....you help me apologize....to M-Maddie....and Jazmine?....”

Daniel questioningly prodded. “Why do you want to apologize to my sister?”

Vlad stared at the ceiling and sighed. “For lying...about the nanobots?.. Someone...I care about was...dying.... I sent Ed to get the medical....research from Axiom. Jazmine....came to my manor at......a bad time...and Ed dump...in the lab .... Hell?... That day sucked.... couldn't have you two....nosing around so.... I bluffed you out.... She died anyway........”

Daniel and Tucker both stiffened.

“Vlad? Who died....?”

Vlad grimaced, “Daniel?.... She passed a short while ago.... I'd rather not talk about it...”

Both Tucker and Daniel thought back to the child's bedroom and grew nauseous.

Clearing his head, Daniel questioned, “And why my mom?”

Vlad snorted tiredly, “I was trying...to piss.....her off.... Worked pretty good....to....”

Daniel's jaw went slack. “Please tell me you're joking....”

Vlad chuckled tiredly, “Badger....best way to piss of people?....Flirt with their spouse...To bad Jack didn't take that one...in stride, huh?”

Tucker raised an eyebrow. “So you made moves on Danny’s mom to piss off his dad?”

Vlad nodded and weakly raised a finger toward Foley from the bed, “....Bingo....”

Tucker whistled, “Now that is some high-class fuckery...”

Vlad groaned, “Foley.....language?”

Daniel burst out laughing. “You flirted with mom to piss off dad? Jesus...And what about all of your evil ass commentary? The 'Jack's an idiot’ and 'I want to kill him’ crap?”

Vlad groaned, “Both good points that are....a bit hard...to explain....?”

Pausing, he numbly sighed. “Then again.... Mads.....is pretty dense to.... Ew... I almost had to get her to kiss....me...to get the...point across.... I leave two of everything....lying around....and she spends the entire time....looking for a phone....”

Daniel stiffened and raised a finger accusingly, “You-...How did you know about-?”

Vlad smiled slightly as he began lapsing back under again. “Duplicate....followed.... Maddie while I distracted.....you...Had....to make sure....that belt was away....from you both.... That hurt....Willingly hugging you....to get bug zapped....ha....”

Coughing, Vlad continued, “Poltergeists Ed...captured went mental after seeing those....pelts... Those were from....the previous owner by the way.... Vengeful fur balls....however... don't really
care…as long as they have something….to claw into….Ed wouldn’t stop laughing for….a month….Vlad Plasmius, chipmunk chew toy….”

Tucker snorted. “ So you were pissing off his mom and stealing a fashion accessory?”

Vlad chuckled, “ Wouldn't have….worded it….that way….but yes…”

Daniel narrowed his gaze at the sickly adult. “ So you knew I was bullshitting you with the fake dad stuff?”

Vlad nodded his head back and stared into the ceiling before quirking an eyebrow, “Daniel? Your….poker face....is horrible…. You suck at lying…. so does your sister…. You probably inherited it from Jack…”

Daniel went slack-jawed and Tucker grinned. “ He has a point, Danny. You do suck at lying.”

Daniel turned bright red, “ Do not! I'm a great liar!”

Vlad snorted, “ Really Daniel...?... Every time....you bluff...or pull an excuse....it's almost comical....Not saying you're stupid...but you.....can be dense...I could drip with sarcasm....... and it would fly right over your...... head... I mean really? Give me a big hug, new dad? .....Pfff....Yeah....suurrreee.....I saw that belt...coming a mile...away....”

Daniel gaped for a few more seconds before turning redder with embarrassment. “You-....you conniving....”

Vlad chuckled weakly, “ Trust me.... I hated that evening....just as much as you....If not more.... At least you didn’t....get zapped....for several....hours....Ed couldn't get the belt off....and I had to reverse... engineer it....”

Tucker winced. “ How long was it stuck to you?”

Vlad smiled sheepishly, “Eh....Let's see....It was twelvish when....Dan put....it on....me....Huh.... you know....I think it was...on me for close to...sixteen....hours....? M’ kinda fuzzy...on how much I was conscious for.... Ed and a friend periodically kept me up on the flight....home....”

Daniel felt a wave of guilt wash over him. He personally threw the key to the belt from the helicopter and into a river on the way back to Amity.

Vlad began lapsing out slightly. “So.....wanna bet?.... Your poker face...won't land you....in the big leagues....but strategy....is in...your favor...”

Dizzy, Vlad coughed weakly and turned slightly only to groan and fall back into the pillows with a muted thump. “There's....an irony....in me....being told....to stay out of the zone....so demons won't get me.....only for them to make....house calls....” He chuckled weakly.

Daniel sighed. “ I'll take your bet if you promise to stay in the house for the remainder of the week....or better yet? In bed....”

Vlad paused and nodded, “Sure?..... I’ll call...the office....tomorrow....I think I need....the break....” Starting to drift off, Vlad smirked. “Ground......rules?....Separate rooms...when you sleep....n’...stay....out of vault...and library?...”

Tucker snorted, “ No worries on the vault thing. That place gives us the hibbie-jibbies.”
Daniel nodded. “And after today I'm not stepping foot in the library without a thermos or you on hand Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow before he began falling under more rapidly. Too tired to continue forcing the conversation he numbly closed his eyes and slumped further into the bedding.

Tucker worriedly felt the adult's fever and his brow furrowed, “Danny? How far out is Sam?”

Daniel winced at the brief tunnel vision splitting his head and seeing his clone flying over Vlad's yard he smiled. “She’ll be here in three... two...” The teen pointed at the ceiling as a pair of black combat boots accompanied by his duplicate’s white rain boots began phasing through. Landing in the room, Sam set down her bags and stalked over to Vlad's side. Bringing her fingers around his wrist, she worriedly checked his pulse. Noting the pale skin tone and cold sweat on his palm, she removed her hand. Growling, she hissed, “That secretary is a monster….”

Daniel and Tucker both grimaced and nodded in agreement.
Sparked Curiosity

“Hopefully tomorrow he can catch a break.” Daniel whispered.

Vlad turned slightly in his sleep and Sam sighed. Putting a palm to her head she tiredly mused. “How did they even get the jump on him? He was wary of her… He openly tried avoiding her so how could she possibly-?”

Vlad groaned and his brow furrowed. Another set of rings eclipsed his form and chest arching again, he gasped and numbly writhed as he shifted into Plasmius. Panting heavily but still unconscious, he shakily shivered from under the blankets. Daniel winced and, growling, he turned to Sam. “Stay with him. He can’t keep shifting like this…it’s hurting him too much and taxing the energy he needs to heal.”

Sam paused and looked from Vlad to Daniel questioningly, “What are you going to do?”

Daniel looked to Vlad apologetically and sighed. “I’m going to look for that ridiculous ghost taser. If I zap him he should be able to stabilize without having his lungs ripped from his chest every time he shifts.”


Daniel nodded. “Yeah, they regrow with the rings. But looking at his? The shifts are to slow.”

Vlad’s ghost form was slightly green from the fever pulsing under his skin and his breath looked like it was fogging. Sam winced and nodded in understanding. Tucker gently sat by the bed and grasped onto Vlad’s hand in an act of comfort.

Giving Sam and Tucker the go-ahead, the teen phased into the lab. Looking through several drawers and on the workbenches, he eventually found the two-pronged device. Swallowing, he looked to the ceiling remorsefully and quickly turned himself and the small weapon intangible. Reappearing in the bedroom and seeing Vlad caught between another shift and being held against the bed by Tucker and Sam, he turned the ghost taser on. Moving Tucker and Sam aside he positioned the device just above Vladimir’s arching chest and connected the prongs. Vlad screamed in agony and writhed where he lay. Daniel’s face saddened and he quickly looped his arm under Vladimir’s spine to support him. The room flashed white abruptly and swirls of energy condensed and rippled before dissipating. Vlad’s dull and listless red eyes flashed the same silvery hue before he went slack in Daniel’s grip and passed out. Still shaking in his sleep, he numbly turned toward the cold the younger hybrid was emitting.

Tucker gaped, “What the actual heck was that Pham?”

Daniel furrowed his brow, “I have no idea… It may be a defense mechanism brought out by the stress on his body...Kind of like my ghostly wail.”

Sam winced at the tears trailing down the sickly man’s features. “What if it was the ghost taser?”

Daniel furrowed his brow. “Couldn’t have been…. I’ve zapped him with it before. It just drained him like it did me last time.”

Wiping the tears from Vlad’s face, Daniel phased through the adult and began rearranging him on the bed. Sam swallowed and flinched at the sight of the gauze around his neck.
“Is it possible that whatever bit him had venom or something in addition to the poison he ingested?”

Daniel grimaced and looked to Vlad tiredly, “I have no clue...It’s not like I’m familiar with emergency halfa medicine. We just have to hope he gets enough rest tonight to be able to differentiate the shifts.”

Sam nodded and walking over to her bags she pulled out two wrist rays and flung them toward the two boys. Daniel deftly caught his and Tucker fumbled with the one slung in his direction before clasping it in his hands.

Sam smiled slightly. “So...who’s got guard duty first?”

Tucker smiled, “I’ll do it.”

Daniel made a move to protest but Sam and Tucker both smiled apologetically.


Sighing, Daniel looked from Vlad to his friends and nodded in agreement. Turning toward the wall he glanced back tiredly, “You guys have a thermos right?”

Sam nodded, “Yeah, we have a thermos. Go to sleep Casper.”

Smiling, Daniel phased through the room and immediately flopped onto the guest bed he had been occupying the last few nights. The rings circulated and morphed around him and by the time he was Fenton again he was fully asleep.
Vlad woke up screaming sometime around midnight. Sam and Tucker immediately darted up from their positions by the fireplace and to his side. Hyperventilating, the older hybrid shook in his semiconscious state as Sam latched onto him and hugged him to calm him down. Vlad’s crimson eyes numbly flashed and he breathed heavily against the two teens for what felt like an eternity. Crying bitterly, he begged, “...m’ sorry….I was late...Liz.....I promised.....’m sorry……” Sam and Tucker both stiffened and looked to each other in horror.

“ Vlad? Dude, wake up…”

Vlad numbly shook again. “No….Don’t….Leave her alone… God….no…..please…..” Vlad curled against Sam’s hold and continued weeping. After a few minutes of quite incoherent pleas and grief, his muscles went lax again and he slumped against her shoulder.

Patting his back, Sam looked to Tucker questioningly. “ Liz? Who was she?”

Tucker flinched and recalled the bedroom, “ His daughter, maybe?”

Sam cringed. Curling her hand behind Vlad’s neck, she motioned for Tucker to help her lay him back into the bed. Vladimir’s brow furrowed in his sleep and he shakily clawed a hand into the blankets beside him. Covering him properly, Tucker turned and rounded toward the fireplace. Sitting down and cradling his head, he whispered, “ Sam? I don’t think he’s evil…. I’m starting to think he’s traumatized.”

Sam flinched. “ From what though? The portal? Or-”

Tucker shook his head. “ His body is torn to ribbons Sam…. What if something tore apart someone he cared about? Or maybe he’s just been tortured so much he’s become numb to expressing things? I mean…fuck…”

Sam tiredly sat down next to him. “ Why do you think he did it? All of it? The flirting with Danny’s mom and-”

Tucker tiredly rubbed his brow and seeing the dust on his glasses, he took them off to wipe them on his hoodie. “ Sam? The guy was flirting to piss off Danny’s dad. He actually wants to apologize to Mrs. Fenton over that whole scenario…”

Sam froze. “ You mean he was bluffing?”

Tucker snorted. “ Is that so hard to believe? Maybe he’s pissed at Mr.F for becoming a ghost hunter after college? If I was a half ghost and my best friend decided to become a full-blown ghost hater I’d probably hold some resentment to... Or maybe he’s sad and temperamental because Daniel has a family and he doesn’t…”?

Sam pondered the possibilities and grimaced. “ Danny had a support system…” She swallowed and looked to Vlad, “ Why didn’t anyone check or look in on Vlad? He doesn’t like talking about it but from what I’ve gathered from the few times he’s had an emotional breakdown… His friends….Danny’s parents left him alone after the accident…”

Tucker tensed, “ They left him alone?”

Sam winced and nodded, “ He said they abandoned him...Can you imagine? No family...no friends?
Five years of being locked away and forgotten?"

Tucker looked up to Vlad and swallowed. “No wonder he hates Danny’s dad so much… What type of kick in the face would that be? Having someone you thought of as family just forgetting about you like you were some discarded toy and then acting like nothing happened years later…… That’s just so warped Sam.”

Sam brought her knees to her face and whispered, “Vlad was absolutely traumatized when Jaz brought up the hospital…. God… I’ve never seen someone’s face grow so scared and broken so quickly. I mean… he can’t even look at a scalpel without shaking? Why the hell would anyone—”

Tucker shot up immediately and ran over to the bed. “Sam? Help me out… I need to check something.”

Sam quickly got up and helped Tucker pull back the blankets. Vlad’s brow furrowed in discomfort as he was lifted up from the bed. Taking out a pocket knife, Tucker began cutting off the bandages on Vlad’s chest while Sam held him upright. After a few minutes, he tore off the gauze and, reaching over, flicked on the lamp beside them.

There was a morbid silence for a few moments as the teen surveyed the scars more carefully. Tucker then swallowed and looked into Vlad’s sleeping features with remorse before taking a shaking hand to his refurbished PDA. He snapped a photo of Vlad’s chest before placing the device down and grabbing the first aid kit from the side table.

Vlad winced and writhed as Tucker rewrapped him. Groggy, the adult opened his eyes and fought to stay awake. Blearily noting Tucker, he questioned, “Foley...What’s going….on….?”

Tucker patted his shoulder apologetically. “You moved to abruptly in your sleep and accidentally hurt yourself. I’m just patching you.”

Vlad attempted a smile and choked. “Thanks……M’ sorry…..you shouldn’t have to….m’ so sorry…”

Tucker winced, “Just go back to sleep Plasmius… You need some serious rest.”

Vlad groggily noted the hands on his shoulders and sighed before slowly closing his eyes. After a few brief moments, he was asleep in their hands. Finished with the wrapping, Tucker cupped a hand behind Vlad’s upper spine and motioned for Sam to move. Laying Vlad down and covering him, he tiredly rubbed his eyes before glancing at his discarded PDA. Slipping off of the bed, he grabbed the device and motioned Sam to follow him.

Walking into the bathroom Tucker glanced at Vlad and then to Sam somewhat disbelievingly. “Sam?…. I think I figured out why he’s so traumatized and afraid…”

Sam furrowed her brow. “What is it, Tuck?”

Opening his PDA, he zoomed in on several thin silver lines snaking across Vlad’s chest cavity. Turning the device to Sam, he questioned, “Sam? I’m not familiar with hospitals… I’m damned near terrified of them…but this? Sam…..please tell me those aren’t what I think they are…”

Sam brought a hand to her mouth and choked back bile. Looking through the door at Vladimir’s sleeping form, she grimaced and averted her gaze back to the photo. A few tears welled across her cheeks at the sickening imagery the familiar lines she had seen so often on reruns of NCIS and Dr. G procured. “What type of monster dissects a living, breathing person….god….He can’t look at a scalpel? Tuck….His friends left him and someone decided to make him a laboratory frog…..”
Tucker bit his lip and shook his head. “Someone tore him apart…. They poked around inside him… I’ve read about people in Nazi camps being dissected but for someone to take someone in a modern hospital and use them like that….Jesus Christ… Sammy? He has PTSD…That’s why he can’t sleep.”

Sam bit her lip as she digested all of the information they had just gathered. “Maybe the reason Vlad played a monster was because everyone treated him like one…” She looked to Vlad’s sleeping form and flinched, “Can you imagine? What if Danny had no family and we were his support system…his friends… And then we decide to goof off and build a portal. Imagine being zapped by a small portal…” She averted her gaze and looked at Tucker’s PDA bitterly, “Vlad was only zapped in his face…..That means the mutation that spliced him was slower… It had to spread.”

Looking to Tucker, she tried to force her words through choked syllables, “And then instead of helping our friend we somehow decided he could handle it all alone… Or maybe we felt so disgusted with him being scarred we decided to purposefully ignore him… Imagine someone you consider family leaving you to some sadistic fuck with a scalpel who wanted to conquest your body in the name of science…. God…five years….Tuck….He was in a hospital for five years and if they cut him open like that…what else did they do?”

Tucker flinched at the implications. Cutting off his PDA he tiredly shoved the device in his pocket and walked back into the room. “I think we should wait to tell Danny about this….. At least until him and Vlad have a more stable friendship going… I think Vlad needs to know there's someone like him-That he has a support system outside of Skulker and that Romulus guy.”

Sam cringed, “What if he was a villain because he wanted to have a connection, any connection, with the only other person like him? I mean…if he hates Mr. Fenton that badly and Daniel knew…Vlad would probably still want a connection of sorts with him…. At some level, he probably knew Daniel would never renounce his dad and join him… So was him saying it a ploy? Just like his flirting? Piss off Daniel and make the younger half ghost notice that he exists too?”

Tucker sat against the wall and cradled his head. “Fuck.” Biting his knuckles he looked toward the bed. “Sam? You may be on to something.”
Several hours later Vlad shot up screaming again. Sam and Tucker both darted awake and gently comforted him. Crying, he tossed in Tucker’s hold and numbly shook. Tucker winced at the fever coming from the man. Sam gently rubbed Vlad’s bangs out of his eyes and coaxed him out of his dream. Eyes blearily flashing red, soon faded to a fatigued blue. Seeing this, Sam gently patted his cheek to coax him awake some more. Grabbing the glass of water by the side table, she brought it to his lips. “Come on Vlad… here.”

Vlad numbly noted the glass and dizzily took a few small sips with Sam’s help. Slightly more awake from the cold water he attempted moving only to grimace. Tucker patted his shoulder, “Easy big guy… You’re alright… It was just another nightmare.”

Vlad coughed weakly and a shaking hand gripped the pressure supporting his body. Noting the teen’s hand, he wiped his face tiredly and feeling the water his eyes flashed scarlet again. Biting his lip, he flinched from the two teens and tried to teleport only to feel dizzy and discombobulated.

Tucker sighed, “Vlad? Calm down. The last thing you need right now is to waste energy you don't have.”

Vlad nodded and tried to focus on his surroundings. “Sam?…Tucker?…..What's….happening to me..?….I can't….shift….”

Both teens froze at the casual address Vlad used instead of their last names.

Tucker patted Vlad's back, “Daniel tased you so you wouldn't keep shifting forcefully.”

Vlad winced and cupped a hand to head. “Tased?…..ugh….” Vlad groaned and quickly brought a hand to his mouth. Shaking, he pleaded, “Foley?.....I think I need help up…Something’s trying to come up…”

Sam and Tucker immediately began looping their arms under his and dragging him to his feet. Carting him to the bathroom, they worriedly sat Vlad against the floor. Curling against himself, Vlad began coughing sickly green ectoplasm and blood. Tucker averted his gaze momentarily and then swallowed before he quickly helped Vladimir to the toilet. Sam held his hair while he retched. After a few moments of shaking and dry heaving Vlad coughed, “It's...funny….almost…."

Sam quirked an eyebrow worriedly. “What is Vlad?”

Vlad numbly propped his head up with his hand in an attempt to stay coherent. “Dan….never told….you?”

Tucker quirked an eyebrow. “Told us what?”

Vlad dizzily glared at the toilet and snickered. “Guess…it's not to .....common a topic… Thought it was funny….having a toilet and it only being….used for vomiting….ugh….”

Sam and Tucker gaulked. “You mean halfas don’t go to the restroom?”

Vlad flinched, “Insides.....are mostly ghost….we absorb the matter….No waste material…..Kinda surprising….’thought Dan….would brag….Kid’s a bit….of a showboat…..”

Tucker groaned, “That bastard owes me twenty bucks…”

Baby Steps
Vlad dizzily questioned, “He bet…you didn’t he…?”

Tucker snickered, “I should have known he was cheating.”

Vlad hoarsely laughed and swayed slightly only for Sam to keep him steady. “That…kid…likes playing dirty….”

Sam raised an eyebrow smugly. “Aren’t you just as inclined to underhanded stuff?”

Vlad smiled tiredly as he was leaned against the wall. “Subterfuge with permeable cause… directed toward…opposing parties as a… means of distraction and resolution.”

Both Tucker and Sam furrowed their brows again. Tucker groaned, “English Plasmius?”

Vlad ignored them before he coughed tiredly and leaned back against the wall. “M’ glad…Daniel has….you two….Do me a favor though?…Shifting in public?……Bad idea……Only so many times….a person can…. cloak or distract….”

Sam and Tucker both bristled. “Vlad? Sir? Can you elaborate for us…?”

Vlad smiled weakly. “I-I….was out of options……Tell me…..If you could save….the people you love…..at… the cost…of yourself…….would you?…..”

Sam and Tucker shared horrified glances and Sam reached over to feel his head. Hissing at the fever she looked to Tucker worriedly. “Tuck? I think he isn’t all here right now..”

Tucker bit his lip and patted Vlad’s cheek. “Plasmius? Hey….dude? Your fever is up again.”

Vlad opened half-lidded eyes and they flashed a muted red, “Fever….has been….here for….a while….now….Since I got rid of that monster… I never…wanted Danny…to know…….”

Sam gently motioned Tucker to help her lift up Vlad. Vlad whimpered slightly at the pressure on his ribs. Sam froze, “Vlad?”

Vlad groaned, “Sorry….ribs…..Some ribs got broken again…Didn’t tell Daniel…”

Sam glanced toward Vlad’s chest in horror, “When?”

Vlad darted out a little as he was sat against the bed, “When….we were attacked…early today…..A poltergeist…cracked them…. It got a good laugh….at me waking up….to my bones…being crushed…..”

Tucker quickly leaned Vlad back partially and began inspecting the bandages. “You neglected to tell us your ribs were broken?!??!”

Vlad winced, “Uh….sorta…use to it?….It hurt….and I passed out…but I’ll be okay….Happens a lot…..”

Sam began seething and her eyebrow twitched, “What the actual heck do you do to get in this type of disrepair Plasmius?”

Vlad numbly groaned, “Lucky…halfa bastard……?”

Tucker grabbed a blanket and tossed it over Vlad’s shoulder. “How about a vote of confidentiality Vlad? Can you tell me and Sam why you’re such a disaster case?”
Vlad chuckled sadly, “Do…you want me to monologue or…something…Foley? I’m…too far gone to…salvage… things….And I’ve been….a monsters’….cutting board…since I was……six…….I’m a mistake…..that...somewhow….continued being torn apart……. Family? Friends?... Dead or don’t remember I even exist…..I was supposed to die…..but instead, the universe likes….holding me down……and forcing me to watch…..as my own desperate antics…..come back to haunt me….”

Sam and Tucker gulped. Vlad started pitching forward and Tucker quickly looped a hand under him to keep him upright. Sam prodded, “Vlad….what-?”

Vlad wearily tightened his hand against his shoulder, “Playing villain…You know that’s the only thing I seemed to excel at….Pissing off people…. No one ever knew….I faked him out……A hero…..needs a villain…..ha.”

Vlad’s head groggily stared into the floor. “It’s….kind of sad…..when you think about it…..If Danny knew…he’d hate me for sure…..Jack and Maddie want me in a specimen jar……” Pausing, he took a shaky breath. “Demon hunter…..counterbalance…..zone regulation…..returning the lost…..protecting both plains…..Clockwork was ecstatic when Daniel…came along….Another person like me……he gushed about it and complained when….I didn’t teach him formally…..Being…a monster hurts…..He was only fourteen…..He was just a little boy who wanted to play hero……He didn't need to see the hell storm coming…."

Vlad dryly swallowed, “Damned…..bastard traumatized…..Danny……”

Sam and Tucker sat enthralled as Vlad incoherently vented. “Because I…wouldn’t…teach Daniel….Clockwork tried using….the looking glass on him…. He hurt him…God….I was bleeding….so badly….The blood was everywhere….when I stumbled in....and saw Daniel crying.....in his sleep....Darned Sandman.” Vlad gritted his teeth and his eyes flashed crimson “...I punched him so hard my arm busted open……And then, to know….he still….acts like there was….nothing wrong with it… I….told him…not to go near Daniel….not to touch him….So much for that…Danny….trusts….that appointee……but I want to punch him...again….Would…it have killed him...not to humor me…this once with...the villain stuff?”

Vlad winced and his head began slumping tiredly to his chest. Tucker grabbed him and began laying him down. Sam crossed her legs at the left edge of the bed. “So Clockwork did muck with Vortex?”

Vlad nodded, “No doubt….I didn’t take Vortex for political crud. Ha…I ordered the observants….to give him…over so….I could try and get him under control…Too bad Edmond….and Romulus…. Were in the zone…..I was passing out…..a lot…The fever was bad to….Couldn’t do my job so I asked Daniel for help…..The barometer was an…artificial artifact...but it was weak……I was trying to get Vortex corralled… I had duplicates around the city getting people to safety when the flood hit…One of my duplicates spotted the firetruck near…the riverwalk… The wind ripped it up… and flipped it….into the water… Me and Daniel…floated up to Vortex and I began feeling dizzy. I had a choice to make….Daniel…was capable…I was positive…of it……So I sarcastically introduced them and darted out…of view…Danny thought of me as a villain…It…would make sense if I left him to flounder, right?… Only had enough energy to phase the firefighters….As soon as I got them out the fever started again….I made it to an alley and everything got dark…Sometime later I woke up and figured out Daniel got weather zapped…”

Vlad numbly grimaced as he stared into the ceiling, “I got caught…. Two years….of playing the villain...to protect them...and I slipped up…with Nocturn……”

Vlad winced as Sam put a hand to his head. Lightly turning under her palm he apologized,
“Sidekicks...Daniel's...sidekicks are helping...me...Helping a monster...”

Sam's eyes widened and Tucker reached down to try and keep Vlad coherent. Vlad numbly stared into amethyst grey and army green eyes as they comforted him. Vlad choked, “...Kinda...makes me wonder...if that demon... was onto something.... It was...gloating, holding me down and whispering... personal things...Things it should've known.... It didn't bite prior...How did it know?.... It wouldn't stop talking...about them...dying...And then...then it started whispering...about why I did it... It was giggling...purring at what happened....I could feel her rooting around....”

Vlad began tearing slightly. “ I'm so tired....” Wincing his eyes shut, he turned his head and sighed, “I'm sorry....I vented....I'm hurting pretty...bad....right now...and it's hard.....really hard to breathe.....”

Sam gently pulled his head up slightly and began wiping the perspiration and tears off of his face. Swallowing, Vlad numbly whispered, “Thank...you....for helping me....I know you two...probably think.... I'm a lying.....bastard.....to.....It's kind of nice...to have someone.... The last few weeks... Ed and Rom have been too far... I've been passing out....waking up.....to fevers...nightmares...”

Sam tried to smile reassuringly, “Plasmius? ....We don't think that...We're just trying to help and understand you.”

Vlad numbly shivered, “ T-this week's been tougher than most.... Some....balance, huh?....I'm so torn...apart right....now...I can't even....do my job....”

Tucker patted his shoulder, “Shhh, it's alright... Vlad? Go back to sleep.”

Vlad flinched. “ Sleep....sleep is bad.... They're not nightmares like...regular people have...They're memories....”

Sam swallowed dryly and motioned Tucker to wet a rag for Vlad's forehead. Tucker nodded and got up.

Sam gently squeezed Vlad's hand. “ Vlad? What is your job? I mean... we've heard you summarize and explain segments but I don't understand the connection to you?”

Vlad furrowed his brow. “ Told you I regulated the ....zone and this side correct?”

Sam nodded, “ Yes, you did.”

Vlad weakly squeezed the blankets beside him. “ I'm....the...poor bastard....who's...soul summoned a power....scarcely heard of...in either plain....”

Vlad dizzily lifted his right hand and inspected it. “ Clockwork....knows Danny is like...me...But...I didn't want a ...little boy...dragged into...this...We're...supposed to purify...”

Sam finally began piecing together everything and she paled. Vlad winced. “Pure....souls with a strong...life force... have to....be used...for a halfla... Ectoplasm is....to refined a source....it would kill...literally....everyone else.... if it fused to living...flesh....”

Sam brought a hand to her mouth. “ You mean only good people can fuse with ectoplasmic energy?”

Vlad whispered, “Samantha.....don't tell Danny....I-I....think I owe it....to him to tell him....I didn't want him seeing....the darker side....of being a hero....and here I ended up... trying to train him
anyway….guess I knew he would get ahold of a demon by accident…”

Coughing, Vlad turned his head away from her, “ M’.... to talkative….this week….but I am going….crazy….trying to keep….the bs going....”

Tucker came into the room and with a wet rag in hand and gently laid it over the adult's brow. Vlad shuttered and grimaced at the temperature change. Sam clased his hand slightly tighter. Vlad tried to weakly smile. “ It's.....sad....We both....half....died trying to...help the ones we....love....We died.....trying to help people....”

Sam winced and Tucker sat at the edge of the bed tiredly. “ Who were you trying to help Vlad?”

Vlad shook slightly, “ There was....a wire loose....in the portal....I saw it and was leaning...in to inspect it so...no one would get...hurt....And...I think...I....wanted to see my....little sister again....I wanted to tell her...I was sorry.....”

Sam and Tucker grew ashen. “You mean you were trying to fix the proto portal?”

Vlad nodded gently. “ Was’ trying to help...my friends.....It was an accident....I knew that....he didn't know....”

Tucker looked like he was going to vomit. “ Sir? I don't want to pry...but can I ask you something?”

Vlad nodded, “ Go ahead.....I...don't mind....”

Tucker swallowed, “ Mr. and Mrs. Fenton… did they ever visit you?”

Vlad's eyes grew distant. “They said they wouldn't leave me.....I never...saw them once I got there....”

Sam and Tucker both began comforting him to try and calm his slightly erratic breathing.

Vlad shuttered. “ I remember....begging.....god...to kill me...so I wouldn't wake up....for treatments....I never...saw outside of that...room unless...they wanted to try...something...They did it....so many times....I screamed....and no one came....”

Sam paled. “ Vlad… We saw the incision marks on your chest...Did they-?”

Vlad flinched and his eyes turned scarlet at the memory. Biting his lip he nodded and then rasped, “ More than once....”

Sam gently rubbed his hand. “ Are those what you have nightmares about?”

Vlad nodded no and smiled sadly, “ There are....so many...more horrific...things a person...can remember....” Closing his eyes he whispered, “ Lately...I've had to see...them die...again... especially Liz and Anna.....”

Tucker began rubbing his shoulder, “ Thank you for being honest with us Vlad.”

Vlad shuttered slightly, “…I wish….I could've...been honest...with Danny...in the beginning….but if I had…. he would've died.....” Vlad numbly stared into the ceiling. “ I lied...and lies rarely....can be fixed....”

Tucker smiled comfortingly, “Vlad? We are going to give you some fever meds again. Is that alright?”
Vlad nodded yes in reply. Tucker immediately began rifling through the first aid kit. Spying the correct pills, he popped them out of the container and looped an arm under Vlad's back to sit him up temporarily. Vlad grimaced and bit his lip to keep from screaming at the pressure his ribs were under. Sam raised the water glass and gently took the pills from Tucker. “Here Vlad. Take these, they'll help.”

Vlad numbly reached up and popped the pills into his mouth. With Samantha's help, he dizzily downed the contents of the glass. Slumping slightly in Tucker's hold, he rasped. “This...beats…..crawling...to the first aid kit.....”

Sam growled, “You're kidding, right?”

Vlad weakly chuckled. “Have...you seen.....me?....Mostly scar tissue....”

Tucker smiled gently and laid Vlad back against the pillow. Vlad groaned and blearily locked his half-lidded eyes with the teens. “....I...think I'm trying...to distract myself....the nightmares are bad...and I don't want to...slip under....”

Sam gently grabbed the rag that had fallen against Vlad's bandages and smiled comfortingly before laying it back on his brow. “An adult that doesn't want to sleep? That's rich.”

Vlad weakly smiled. “You....wouldn't want...to fall asleep either....”

Tucker patted him again and began tucking him in. “Vlad? I know you don't want to sleep but you need the rest to heal. You're pretty injured. If you have any nightmares again we'll be here. Just relax and try to get some more rest.”

Vlad shifted slightly against his pillow. After a moment he squeezed his hand against the comforter around him and nodded in understanding. Staring at the ceiling, he began dozing off. “..Thank....you...”
Dying Moments

After a few minutes, Vlad's breathing had become deep again and his fever began going down slightly. Seeing he was fully asleep, Sam tiredly cradled her head. "Vlad was good….He is good...Jesus Christ...He was tortured and locked away because he was trying to help his friends…”

Tucker looked to Vlad and then flinched, “More than once. Someone...some bastard...cut him open repeatedly to take a peak at him…."
Vlad numbly turned against his side. Tucker and Sam both watched him curiously as he slept for what seemed like an eternity.

Vlad numbly turned against his side. Tucker and Sam both watched him curiously as he slept for what seemed like an eternity.

Sam fell asleep sitting up and Tucker laid himself out in the floor to process the emotional jigsaw puzzle Vlad left them with. Around four o’clock in the morning, Vlad began shaking like a leaf in his bed. The movements quickly jostled Sam. Worriedly leaning over him, she began wiping his bangs out of his eyes and trying to calm him.

Vlad numbly curled against himself further. “…..M' sorry….I'm a monster....Jack?...Mads?” Vlad shivered. “.....Someone....help...” Red eyes abruptly darted open and Vlad blindly flailed against his covers. Hyperventilating he clumsily backed away from Sam and onto the edge of the bed. In a muted pop of pink, he teleported out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. Every light in the house flickered on and off rapidly. Several bulbs burst and water could be heard coming from faucets in the open bathroom. The shattering of a mirror jolted them to action. Darting into the room both Tucker and Sam eyed the dimly glowing red eyes peeking out from behind Vlad’s shaking arms in the shower.

Daniel could be heard cursing from the bedroom and quickly arrived in Phantom form. Stepping down and feeling the glass underfoot his eyes widened. “VLAD!??”

Vlad numbly swallowed. “ It....it burns....someone....make it stop.....I'm sorry....make it stop…”

Sam and Tucker gently tried coaxing Vlad out of the dark corner so they could inspect him. Daniel leaned down worriedly, “Fruit-Loop? Come on...answer me...?”
Vlad shuttered. “ B-Badger.....the fever......it's getting....worse....won't stop....Someone....make it....make it stop…”

Sam went to touch Vlad's sleeve through the water and her eyes widened in horror before she quickly retracted her fingers. Tucker noted the expression and quickly tried the same thing only to quickly retract his hand in disbelief. Turning to Daniel he yelled, “Pham?!? Cool the room! That waters evaporating off of him!”

Daniel's green eyes flashed blue and he quickly began deep freezing the bathroom. Vlad continued shaking and soon more glass could be heard breaking around the teenagers. Vlad covered his ears and screamed in agony. Green tinted red slowly curled from his nose as he backed up in a panic against the tile.

Hyperventilating he begged, “Someone....please......it hurts......I'm sorry…”

Sam went to rush forward only for Daniel to hold her back. “ Go get the taser!”

Nodding she quickly ran out of the room while Daniel stumbled through the pitch black and toward
Vlad. Vlad began coughing violently. Daniel ran toward Vlad at the sound and hissed from the unnatural heat radiating off of the adult. “Vlad! Come on! I’ve got you!!! Please…”

Vlad numbly registered the voice but his eyes were turning a dull rust, completely devoid of his spectral energy. Daniel's arms cooled and wrapped around him in an effort to calm him. Vlad gurgled weakly as he was held and continued softly spasming. Feeling Vlad's breathing hitch the teen yelled, “SAM! HURRY!”

The thud of boots against tile quickly closed the distance. Grabbing the taser from Sam, Daniel flicked the switch and connected it to the small of Vlad's back. Vlad numbly registered the pain from the shock but unable to scream simply went limp in Daniel's grip. As if on cue the lights in the house flashed on. Vlad's breathing was labored and sporadic against Daniel and his eyes weakly watered as he was held.

Sam and Tucker gaped at the room in horror. In the shower there were splatters of blood and neon green ectoplasm riveted across the walls in frantic grasping motions. Besides those, large claw-like gashes were stamped into the ceramic. Noting Vlad's bloodied hands, Sam ran for the first aid kit. Daniel grimaced and gently hugged Vlad against him in an effort to cool him down. Vlad numbly registered the running water above them and a few tears began dripping down his features. Daniel noticed and comforted, “You're alright Vlad… Whatever those monsters gave you is going to filter out. I promise. Breathe.”

Vlad choked a faint breath before his eyes rolled back and his neck fell over Daniel's arm. Daniel looked to the shower knob above them and cut it off with his powers. Picking up Vlad and gently laying him down in a spot free of glass or blood, he began trying to tend to his wounds with Sam and Tucker's help. Vlad numbly writhed as the bandages on his neck came loose and Sam growled in anger. Blackish tendrils were lacing through the flesh and bruising the surrounding tissue.

Daniel duplicated and positioned his doppelgängers around Vlad. “I'm going to burn the wound…” Tucker grimaced. “Are we sure that's a good idea?”

Sam looked to Vlad sorrowfully. “I agree with Danny. The heat will probably purify whatever's in his system. He's obviously trying to fight a paranormal poison with fever but he can't regulate. If Danny torches the one spot Vlad should be able to recover faster.”

Tucker winced and took hold of Vlad's right shoulder blade. “Okay...Let's get this over with.”

Sam nodded. Daniel took a deep breath and turned Vlad's neck to expose the bite mark. Charging his right hand, the teen squeezed the flesh together. Vlad bucked and tossed slightly. Dull blue eyes shot open once the energy surge connected and the adult choked against the pain. Limbs became rigid and then protested against the contact. Tears slowly leaked and trailed down his pale features as he numbly shook and shivered against the heat burning his flesh. After a few seconds, he began begging in his sleep. “M'sorry...please stop.....please...it burns....please..." Sam comforted, “He's almost done. Hold on...I promise....Jesus Christ, Vlad we're sorry....”

Vlad continued writhing and his chest arched. White light tried condensing around his right wrist and he tried pulling his head away from Daniel. “M’sorry....please....please...stop...it burns....please...”

“I know Vlad… God… I’m almost done. I swear! Hang in there!” Bloodied hands clawed into the tile, scratching and sparking. Vlad was sweating profusely and his features had started elapsing.
between pained states of alertness and hyperized semi-consciousness by the time Daniel completed the burn. Daniel's duplicates faded with a muffled hiss of air. Gasping and choking, Vlad numbly felt a cool hand grasping onto the wound.

Bright red sclera eyes, so commonly seen in Plasmius, flashed spastically from dull blue, to red and then to orange irises despite the ghost taser's usage. Quickly washing and wrapping the wounds, Daniel cradled him against himself to further cool his skin. “Shhh….Breathe Vlad…..”

Vlad numbly reached for Daniel's sleeve and leaned further in against the teen's cryo-core as he held him. Eyes continued flashing spastically between forms and tearing numbly. Still shaking, he began starting to come to. “ D-Daniel……What…..happened…..?”

Daniel began rubbing circles against his back in an effort to calm him further, “Whatever bit you poisoned you Vlad…. It’s alright though… You just need to relax.”

Vlad continued shaking. “ B-Badger…?......It still….hurts...Why…..?”

Vlad coughed weakly and his eyes sparkled white. Sam and Tucker bent down next to him and held onto his hand. Vlad registered the touch and his fingers twitched slightly in their hold. “F-Foley….M-Manson?....That's you two...r-right?”

Vlad swallowed and continued shaking. Sam and Tucker worriedly noted the eye changes and quickly pulled him from Daniel. “ Vlad! Hey… Dude? Can you see anything?”

Vlad fearfully gripped the hand beside him. “ E-everything…..is blurring...It hurts….t-thermal…..night vision…..n-normal…it won't s-stop..”

Daniel's eyes widened at the now more predominant eye changes and he gently cupped a hand to Vlad's jaw. “Vlad? Hey...It's alright. We're going to fix you.”

Vlad continued shaking and dizzily reached for the blurry white and black limb comforting him. “.....B-Badger..?......I-I...am...kinda.....scared....I-am...I can hear....everything...r-right now.....without...p-powers....”

Daniel’s face went ashen. “ Vlad? It's going to be alright. Breathe...just breathe.”

Tears started dripping down his cheeks. “......D-Danny.....c-claws....ripped through hands....didn't shift.....like with ghost form.....t-tore open.....human....side.....s-shifts....aren't s-splitting...”

Vlad's eyes began to dull further. Sam saw the lack of color and paled. Reaching over and patting his cheek she ordered, “ Don’t you dare! Stay awake!”

Vlad's eyes weakly gained back some color again and he tried smiling. “....I-I...am not....the best..c-company.....Ms.M-Manson....”

Sam gently rubbed his hair. Tucker grabbed his now free hand. “Come on….you're going to be fine Vlad. Don't pull something lousy like going full ghost on us when we're just now growing attached to the sarcasm.”

Vlad choked out a weak laugh and reached for one of the hands keeping his face up so he could breathe easier. “.....D-Did....you know....halfa's...can't g-go....full g-ghost....?”

Daniel's eyebrow furrowed. “Vlad….What are you talking about…?”
Vlad numbly swallowed and his hand began going slack. “When...y-you're both...you can't s-switch....back to one...We...c-can't...”

Vlad flinched and shivered as Tucker reached over to get some of the hair out of his face. “Don't talk like this Vlad. You're fine...just confused.”

Vlad swallowed, “F-Foley....?....S-something's....wrong....V-very....wrong...”

Vlad's eyes numbly locked on Daniel as he was lifted up and hugged against him again. “Shhhh...Vlad...It's going to be okay....”

Vlad continued shaking. “B-Badger....I-I think....'m d-dying....”

Daniel withdrew Vlad and sharply inhaled at the sight of green ectoplasm dripping from his jaw and nose. Vlad's normally storm blue eyes looked whitewashed and sickly and his skin was becoming a deathly paler.

Daniel immediately laid him down and began cooling him. “You're going to be okay....I promise...We won't leave you! Just stay awake!”

Vlad numbly choked and tears began dripping down his features again. He tried to smile, “J-Jack...said...t-the....same....t-thing....B-Badger...”

Sam lifted his head up. “Vlad...Keep talking while we cool you down! Please?”

Vlad winced as he was lifted up. “I-I’ll....t-try....S-Sam...”

Daniel quickly carried him out of the shower and to the tub. The teen's white boots cracked against the broken mirror on the floor. Vlad weakly gripped his sleeve as he was carried. Several sickeningly wet coughs came from Vlad's throat and crimson dripped lazily down his jaw. Daniel froze at the red splatters and quickly set Vlad down in the tub. Dull caspian eyes stared blankly into ice blue as the water was turned on.

Sam gently reached under his head to support him better while they filled the tub, “Come on Vlad....You promised to talk.” Sam pleaded.

Vlad rasped, “S-Sorry...What do....y-you...want t-to...talk h’bout.....?” His voice trembled slightly as his eyes stared into the ceiling.

Sam felt his pulse. “Danny! His heart is slowing down!”

“Keep talking to him Sam! Tuck? Quick! Go get ice!!! Every tray in the fridge!”

Sam began patting Vlad's cheek, “Vlad? You're still here right?”

Vlad choked, “Y-Yes...”

Daniel's hands reached down and phased his pants off. Vlad grimaced and shuttered against the teen's icy touch.

Daniel began cooling the room more rapidly. “Vlad? What's your favorite color?”

“...G-green....”

Daniel smiled encouragingly. “Good...What's your middle name Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad started darting out and Sam patted him. “Come on Vlad. Please.”
Vlad numbly turned in the water and winced. “..D-Damian…”

Tucker could be heard stepping over the broken glass with several trays. Vlad swallowed numbly and shook as the ice was poured in. Sam continued, “Your ghost name?”

Vlad coughed and his eyes began rolling back. Daniel shook him slightly. “Vlad! Wake up!”

Crying, Vlad answered, “..Plas...mius-s”

Tucker gently held his hand. “Vlad….hang on man…. Jesus… Just pull through this.”

Seeing Vlad slipping under again, Sam shook him. “ Vlad? What was your little girl's name?”

Vlad began crying slightly harder and he choked, “A-Annabe-ll.”

Sam patted his head gently as he shook. “ How old was she?”

Vlad started becoming distant and Daniel cursed at the sweat still gathering on Vlad's still paling skin. Putting a cold hand to Vlad's brow he gently jostled him with the other limb. “Come on Fruit-Loop. How old was she?”

Vlad numbly swallowed, “ E-Eleven…”

Tucker quickly questioned, “ Who was your mother?”

Vlad trembled against them and began slipping, “ I-I d-don’t...k-know...S-Sheryl..?”


Vlad choked slightly and his hand numbly twitched in Tucker's hold. Daniel leaned over and began patting his face. “Vlad?” Vlad remained unresponsive so the teen lightly shook him, “Vlad? Can you hear us?!?”

Vlad's brow weakly furrowed. “ B-Bad-ger?....I-I…….want-t….to go-o……to s-sleep……”

Daniel growled and shook him again, “ You listen here you selfish asshole! Stay awake! I'll be damned if I finally consider being your friend only for you to fucking die on me!”

Vlad numbly began crying again. “B-Badg….?....It's b-burning…..”

Daniel felt his head and turned to Tucker, “ Tuck! Thermometer, quick!”

Vlad weakly tried lifting his arm only for Daniel to catch his palm. “ Come on Vlad… You always fuck up and come back swinging! Don’t you dare prove me wrong now!”


Grabbing Vlad into his arms, Daniel quickly left Sam and Tucker upstairs while he rushed Vlad to the infirmary.
A Horrible Way to Start a Thursday

Duplicating, he carried Vlad to the nearest gurney and began chest compressions. “Come on!”

His four duplicates began raiding the medical equipment as he worked on Vlad's lungs and heart. Sam and Tucker ran in a few seconds later. Seeing an automated external defibrillator, Sam quickly ran for the device. Tucker ran to Danny. Vlad's lungs weren't being filled adequately and his lips had started turning blue.

Sam growled, “DANNY, KEEP UP CPR!”

Danny nodded and continued beating Vlad's chest in and out desperately, “COME ON PLASMIUS! GET YOUR CRAZY ASS BACK HERE!” Reaching down and taking a breath, the teen clamped Vlad's nose and breathed out. Vlad's chest rose slightly and a minuscule amount of color tried returning. Tucker growled, “Still no pulse!”

Sam quickly flung open the latch on the portable defibrillator. A voice chimed, “Call for help now.” Three small beeps echoed.

Tucker hissed from over his shoulder as he checked for a pulse, “Thanks captain obvious!”

Daniel growled, “Tuck! Switch out. I need to get him air!”

Tuck nodded and quickly jumped onto the gurney to manually move Vlad's chest.

“Remove all clothing from the patient’s chest.”

Daniel growled between breaths and glanced at Sam from over Vlad, “Fuck! Sam?!?!!? We’re losing him!”

Sam ran to the table next to them and placed the machine, “KEEP PRESSING!”

“Pull red handle to open bag.”

A frantic rip of Velcro could be heard from beside Daniel as he worked.

“Look at the pictures on pads.”

Sam began looking at the pictures desperately. Looking up she commanded, “Phase his bandages off!”

Sweating, Daniel motioned a duplicate to phase the gauze off while he continued keeping Vlad alive.

“Peel one pad off of blue plastic.”

Sam quickly complied and the voice continued, “Apply pad to bare skin exactly as shown in the picture.”

Sam's hands grabbed the pad and quickly reached under the right side of Vlad's collarbone to tack it in place.

“Press pad firmly. Peel other pad off blue plastic.”

Sam hastily grabbed the second pad and ripped off it’s backing.
“Apply pad to bare skin as shown in the picture.”

Finding the spot below Vlad's armpit and slightly above his rib cage, she tacked it on.

“ Evaluating heart rhythm.”

Sam swallowed.

The only sounds were Daniel, Tucker and the machine. After a moment the device released a small electrical hum.

“ Stand by. Preparing to shock.”

Sam growled, “ Everyone off!”

Both Tucker and Daniel jumped away from the gurney.

“ Everyone clear. Do not touch the patient.”

There was a buzz from the machine and it spoke again. “ Delivering shock.”

Several muted beeps sounded and then a loud stapler like noise reverberated through the room as Vlad's chest arched from the gurney.

“ Shock delivered. Provide chest compressions and rescue breaths.”

Daniel and Tucker rushed forward again. Checking Vlad's pulse and feeling a faint beat that quickly faded out Daniel growled, “ DAMN IT!”

Beginning chest compressions again he started growling, “ You aren't leaving me alone after you promised to turn over a new leaf! You cocky bastard!”

Sam's eyes began watering. Two minutes passed and the machine began remeasuring Vlad for a pulse. Sensing no vitals it shocked him again. This time however there was a faint gasp and some color crept back into his features.

Tucker's eyes widened and he went to detach the machine only for Sam to stop him. “Wait! We don't know if he has a stable pulse yet!”

Two more minutes passed and they finally got confirmation when the machine chimed, “No shock advised. Continue CPR.”

Running forward, Tucker and Sam began ripping off the pads. Daniel's hand curled up under Vlad's head, “ Fruit-Loop? Do you hear me?”

Vlad's brow hazily furrowed after a few moments and his cloudy blue eyes numbly tried opening. “ D-Daniel?...ugh-”

Reaching over and feeling a strong pulse, Daniel sighed in relief. “ He's got a steady heartbeat and air...I think he's going to be out for a while though...”

Sam nodded and worriedly rubbed some of Vlad's hair out of his face. Walking to the medical cabinet and spying a blanket, she quickly grabbed it and brought it over to Vlad. Covering his legs, she passed a pillow to Daniel. Gently lifting Vlad's head and tucking the fabric under the adult, Daniel tiredly collapsed on the floor and hugged his knees against his head.
“We almost lost him…”

Sam grimaced and looked up to Vlad's worn-out features. “God….what did they give him?”

Tucker swallowed, “Whatever it was? It just almost offed him…. Guys? If he was alone he wouldn't have made it…”

Daniel tiredly rubbed his brow and dissipated the fading duplicates around them. Standing up, he worriedly rechecked Vlad's pulse, and seeing it was still strong he smiled slightly. “You're tough, Fruit-Loop…” Grabbing his hand, he squeezed reassuringly. “I told you, you wouldn't die.”

Sam nodded and smiled tiredly. “I think it’s best we keep him down here until we know he isn’t going to flatline again.”

Tucker nodded in agreement and noting the shallow breathing added, “I think he needs more air… we probably should find a breathing mask or something?”

Daniel groaned, “Tuck? I have no clue how to use one of those things. I don't want to risk him suffocating by accident.”

Sam nodded. “I hate to say it, but Danny's right. We don't know the proper amount or how to hook up a mask.”

Seeing the blood drying on Vlad's jaw, Daniel grabbed an alcohol pad and began cleaning him off.

Vlad dimly registered the touch and weakly squeezed one of the hands holding his. Sam smiled comfortingly at the half-conscious eyes peeking through heavy lids. “Vlad?”

Vlad numbly gripped her hand to show he heard her. Daniel gently put a hand to Vlad's head and, still feeling a fever, sighed. Looking into Vlad's eyes, he reprimanded. “Thanks for giving us a heart attack.”

Vlad weakly tried smiling only to cough and become slightly dizzy. Seeing Vlad conking out again, Daniel gently adjusted the blankets and pillows around him to keep him in the medical gurney. He was going to turn away from the bed for a chair, only for Vlad's wrist to weakly grasp onto his sleeve. Glancing back at the adult and seeing his almost pleading features through the daze, Daniel smiled comfortingly. Grabbing the bloodied wrist he winced and promised, “I'm not leaving Vlad. I'm just pulling a chair over here.”

Vlad nodded his head slightly and with a small thud, fell back against the gurney unconscious. Tucker gently checked his pulse. “We’re good. He just passed out from everything that's happened today.”

Daniel nodded and glancing at Vlad's fingernails, he winced. “Sam? Can you bandage his fingers? He wasn't joking about claws coming out, the nail beds are ripped open from underneath.”

Sam grimaced and nodded before starting work on Vlad's hands.
Tuckered Out

Daniel pulled up a few chairs for the trio and, noticing Tucker's eyes wandering over Vlad's chest, he walked over.

“Tuck? What's up?”

Tucker swallowed slightly. “Hey...Danny? Why did your folks never visit him?”

Daniel paused at the question. “I don't know….People grow apart in college?”

Tucker flinched like he was slapped. “Danny? Man…..They never told you why?”

Daniel awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck and averted his gaze. Sitting down with his hands in his lap he tiredly stared into the floor. “Tuck? They just said they hadn’t seen him since college. That's it. Dad never elaborated and mom shimmied away from the proto portal incident.”

Sam gently squeezed the hand she was bandaging. “Danny? Don't you think there was something wrong with that? Maybe just a little?”

Daniel grimaced and looked down at Vlad's feverish and unconscious form remorsefully. “It's not like I can change the past….Guys? Everything happens for a reason… Maybe this is just how we were supposed to be?”

Tucker growled, “What was that? Clockwork’s words of wisdom?”

Daniel's head shot up. “So what if it is? That ghost has saved my bacon more times than I can possibly count!”

Tucker gripped the side of the gurney angrily. “I don't trust Clockwork. Daniel….Jesus….Can't you see how wrong it was? Did your folks seriously leave Vlad like that?”

Daniel flinched. “So what if they did? He wasn't exactly hero material, to begin with! You should see the stupid shit, Clo-”

Daniel felt the name die in his throat. ‘Clockwork….Clockwork has always been the one to show me… And if he hates Vlad….’ Daniel swallowed his nausea. “Why are you two so interested in Vlad? His past shouldn't account for much considering.”

Tucker looked murderous and Sam flinched. Glancing at Vlad, Tucker made up his mind and decided to reveal what they had learned early.

“Danny? Did you get to asking him what happened yet?…..After the portal?” Tucker whispered.

Daniel froze and Tucker, seeing his opportunity, stomped over and grabbed his wrist. “Fun fact Danny? Your villain?”

Tucker whipped off a segment of the medical blanket, “He's got a pretty damned good reason to be afraid of hospitals.”

Daniel's eyes searched for a moment and then widened in horror at the almost hidden y shaped scars extending from Vlad's collarbone and down his chest cavity.

Daniel's jaw went slack and his hands went limp by his side. “N-No...Fruit-Loop.....”
Tucker snarled, “You tell me, Danny? What type of selfish fucker leaves someone to get ripped apart for five years? And let's add in everything else we learned, hmm? Vlad's suicidal, can't sleep, and has severe self-hatred. Do you want to know what those symptoms add up to? PTSD, Danny. Your villain is so fucking traumatized he can't even look at himself without hating his own existence. Isn't that just peachy?”

Daniel's hand shakily reached up to the gurney and he brought his finger along the line. Vlad began shaking in his sleep and Daniel's eyes widened in horror before he recoiled the limb.

Running a hand through his hair he turned to Tucker. “Someone….Someone dissected him?”

Tucker snorted. “Take another look, Pham! You think they stopped playing operation on him after the one time?”

Daniel leaned over and began looking at the lines. To his horror, multiple thin incisions beside the more pronounced medical cut could be seen, obviously older. Daniel choked at the sight. “Oh….oh god…. Vlad…..”

Sam flinched and gently squeezed Vlad's now bandaged hand in comfort.

Vlad groaned slightly as a set of ice cold hands began looking over the scars. Daniel's fingers stopped once they reached his more recent injuries.

“My dad…. he would never knowingly leave Vlad to this…. Guys? He loves Vlad…..”

Tucker flinched, “Then how did Vlad become someone's experiment, Danny? Wouldn't they have noticed something? Anything?”

Daniel swallowed the lump in his throat. “My dad thinks the world of Vlad… He talks about him constantly…Tuck…..”

Tucker tiredly took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Raising a hand to silence him he pointed to Vlad, “Your dad knowingly became a ghost hunter with your mom Pham! Do you know how fucking twisted that scenario becomes after that? He's best friends became bloodthirsty hunters centered on ripping him apart molecule by molecule!”

Still ranting Tucker continued, “What's the likelihood Vlad had anyone besides some crazy fuck with a scalpel tearing into him like he was some sort of deceased lab rat? How do you think that shaped him, hmmm?”

Danny looked to Vlad remorsefully. Tucker looked like he was going to say something else only for Sam to stop him. Motioning toward Vlad she sighed, “Guys…. that's enough. He doesn't need to be woken up to us arguing or ranting about him…”

Tucker sighed and tiredly threw his beanie off of his head. Turning to Danny he questioned. “Dan? Can I spot you a twenty for some energy drinks?”

Daniel nodded and duplicated. Turning to his duplicate, he motioned to Tucker. “Go ahead. I doubt anyone's going to sleep after this.”

Sam reached over and gently patted Vlad's wrist. Vlad shifted slightly in his sleep and she reached up to feel his fever. “He's still pretty high up there…..”

Daniel nodded and walked over to Vlad's side in order to help cool him. “I think they tried killing him outright yesterday because he stopped willingly taking his secretary's meds.”
Sam grimaced. “That definitely makes sense…”

Tucker tiredly slouched into a chair next to Vlad. “That blonde skank is up to something…”

Daniel nodded, “No doubt.”

Vlad grimaced in his sleep and Daniel worriedly rubbed his cheek. “I have to pick up clothes from my house with Jaz in a few hours… I don’t want to leave him alone though and I’m not skilled enough to keep duplicates up over such a large distance without them fading or disappearing when I get distracted.”

Tucker tiredly smiled, “Pham? My folks split on a trip late last night. I can stay here as long as you guys need.”

Sam sighed and hissed, “I wish I could say the same but my mom will be barging into my bedroom in half an hour for her morning wake up ritual.”

Daniel nodded. “Can I duplicate and fly you home? After you get a change of clothing you can get a ride back from Maurice, right?”

Sam smirked. “That’s doable.”

Tucker jumped slightly as Daniel’s duplicate flew in with the drinks. Passing a Red Bull to Tucker and two coffees to Sam and Danny it dissipated. Tucker's change clanked to the floor as the last tendrils of mist faded into oblivion.

Reaching down, Tucker began picking up the eight dollars and fifteen cents left. Once everything was up, he tiredly jammed the money into his pants. Popping his energy drink, the teen readjusted his glasses so they wouldn't slip off of his nose and took a large swig of the beverage.

Sam took a sip of her coffee and glanced toward Vlad tiredly. “What are we going to do once he wakes up?”

Daniel snorted and rolled his eyes. “Babysitting.”

Sam smiled slightly. “I'm sure Plasmius will just love that word usage.”

Daniel shrugged. “To quote him, *neither of us are having fun with this scenario.*”

Tucker nodded. “In a few hours, we're going to have to try and get him to eat something. He was vomiting last night and I pretty sure he didn't eat any dinner.”

Sam frowned. “I forgot about that….”

Daniel tiredly rubbed his eyes and took another sip of coffee. “We’ll figure out what to do when we get to that point.”

Sighing he growled and leaned against his seat. “I'm almost worried enough to cave and go looking for a doctor or something but then what? Vlad's not human...Heck? I'm not human anymore. Take one blood test they'll know something's amiss. They would probably chalk his illness to blood poisoning and try curing him...*if* they didn't decide to start experimenting on him.”

Sam swallowed. “I guess this room kind of makes sense…. He doesn't have a place to go other than his home…”

Tucker nodded, “Let's be thankful for that... If this room wasn't here he’d be dead in our arms right
Daniel's coffee slushed slightly against the brim as he twirled his cup in his hand. “Should I get Jaz to watch him? I mean… she's pretty level headed most of the time and as long as she doesn't go berserk in his library or the vault…”

“No...no, absolutely not! Dan? Jaz is great but she'll call an ambulance if she sees how bad he is right now!” Tucker argued. Swinging a hand toward Vlad he motioned, “The guy is wrecked. Jaz being added into the mix just spells disaster! Pham? Remember the thermos? Hmm?”

Daniel winced. “Yeah… you have a point…”

Taking another sip of coffee Daniel kneaded his temple with his free hand and silently pondered how they would keep him safe.

Sam rolled her eyes, “Danny? Tuck can hold the fort with you for thirty minutes while I sneak to and from my place. Once I'm here again you can ring up Jaz. Tell her to pick you up at the edge of the drive.”

Daniel smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”
A bright light woke Vlad up from an unrestful sleep. Dizzy and lightheaded, he tried pushing up from where he was laying only to feel someone pushing him back. Squinting through the light he began gathering his bearings.

Tucker was gently holding him back against the cot. “Vlad? You alright?”

Vlad blinked a few times. “ugh…. Foley?… My chest….feels like someone danced on it…”

Tucker grinned. “Well, at least your humor is intact. God, knows I'd miss it if it just disappeared.”

Vlad chuckled weakly. Glancing around he looked to the teen and questioned, “Where are Beetlejuice and Lydia Deetz?”

Tucker snorted, “Daniel's up at Fenton Works and Sam's upstairs cooking breakfast.”

Vlad weakly smiled and numbly tried sitting up again only to gasp in pain.

“Woah! Vlad? Dude, you flatlined last night. Just stay in here.” Tucker gently looped an arm under the adult and laid him back down. Vlad grimaced and winced at the contact.

Swallowing, he questioned, “I flatlined?”

Tucker’s brow furrowed. “Yes. You flatlined. We had to zap you back to the land of the living so I recommend you stay in one place…”

Vlad sighed. “Sorry… I don't know what happened exactly. I thought I passed out from the poisoning?”

Sam came into the door with a tray. “I wish. You were almost a few daisies shy of a headstone, Plasmius. My advice? Fire that secretary, pronto.”

Vlad nodded and blearily smiled, “Good morning Ms.Manson...I'd get up to greet you...but, well...you know…”

Sam smiled brightly. “How are you feeling?”

Vlad quirked an eyebrow, “I feel-” He paused to think about it. “…like I just had my tush handed to me by Agatha.”

Sam quirked an eyebrow. “Who?”

Vlad snickered. “Oh...that's right. You don't go by their actual names, just their aliases. Gosh….what was her alias again?”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his chin. “Luncheon? Box Lunch? Lunch something…”

Tucker gaped, “The Lunch Lady?”

Vlad smirked slightly. “That's the one. A really chatty German grandmother with anger issues right?”

Sam grinned. “The Lunch Lady is named Agatha?”
Vlad nodded from his spot in the cot. “Yep. Death by heart attack. Pretty tragic, hmm? One of my old friends from Wisconsin has a schoolboy crush on her. Whether he’ll ask her out or not is anyone’s guess though.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, “The one with the crush wouldn’t be the Box Ghost right?”

Vlad snorted, “Ew...Lawrence? Ha. That ghoul absolutely loathes Agatha!”

Tucker gaped, “You’re kidding right?”

Vlad smiled weakly. “They’re bitter rivals…Well, sort of. I guess the more accurate term would be angsty neighbors. Me and Skulker betting on who would get stuffed in a box and shipped to Bardo was one of the highlights of 2008.”

“Bardo?” Tucker questioned.

Vlad sighed and stared into the ceiling tiredly. “Please tell me you three haven’t been poking into the zone without respecting the territories?”

Tucker paused. “Wait! There are territories?”

Vlad groaned. “What the actual sugar coated-?.... That boy is so dense…” Vlad tiredly rubbed his brow.

Sam sat the tray down and questioned, “So there are territories in the zone? What does that mean?”

Vlad smiled slightly and closed his eyes to ponder the thought. Opening them he looked toward Sam and Tucker. “The territories are the different cultures and beliefs in what the afterlife entails. Gardens? Roman gods? Buddhist havens? Native American tribal areas? Usually, an entire segment or culture that coincides with the living world is shaped under one banner or territory. Bardo is a segment of the zone that coincides with Tibet. Currently, America’s segment is plastered between Niflhel, a section of Nordic and Medieval areas in the zone, and Bardo. It goes by Oz-.”

Tucker interrupted, “Woah! Woah? Hold up! Oz? Like ruby slippers and yellow brick roads?”

Vlad snorted, “It's just a nickname for the territory. Some ghoul from the 1930’s saw the green ectoplasm morphing and spinning and coined it after the children's book. America’s fairly new when it comes to myths on the afterlife and the culture is a modge podge of everything so it's place in the zone marks a paranormal highway between other territories.”

Vlad tiredly smirked, “I always preferred the Southern Plain. Most ghosts use that name, but more and more seem to favor the whimsy and mystery of Oz nowadays.”

Tucker grinned. “Over the portal, huh?”

Vlad snickered, “Try, over the carnivorous canyon poltergeist. Trust me, waaayyyy more interesting.”

Sam paused, “Wait… the carnivorous canyon? That ghost ravine with teeth?”

Vlad sighed, “It's not an actual ghost. It's a poltergeist created by an old codger who wanted a divider between territories that was easily seen. Nothing says stay out of my domicile like a giant ghoul-eating piece of rock with an overbite. Technically, it's actually an artifact though….Granted, a HUGE artifact.”
Tucker and Sam smiled broadly. Tucker spoke curiously, “And what are artifacts?”

Vlad paused. “Eh…” Rubbing the back of his neck he strained to sit up. “I can show you two if you can help me over to the vault?”

Sam and Tucker exchanged a look with one another and Vlad sighed. “I take it you saw that repulsive Asian Chuckie?”

Both kids nodded and Vlad smiled. “Not something you’d want to play with, huh?”

Both quickly nodded in agreement and Vlad smiled gently, “You don’t have to fear it. It’s pretty docile when it’s imprisoned like that. However, it can be absolutely horrifying when it has free reign. Edmond and I had to track it down in a mansion up in Wales. Blasted thing kept possessing different toys by using noise as displacement zones for attachment. Take one step or one breath and that little murderous doll would fly up behind you with a butcher knife…”

Sam and Tucker gulped, “You mean you had to catch it!??!”

Vlad snorted and motioned toward the lab wall tiredly, “Obviously. It didn’t get there itself did it?”

Vlad paused and smiled reassuringly. “I promise you two will be safe. I just need help in there to grab two or three examples so I can explain correctly.”

Sam bit her lip in frustration and Tucker glanced at the door. Turning to him they caved, “Fine. We will help you up and over to the vault.”

Vlad smiled gently and made a move to get to the edge of the bed. Noting the pajama pants on him he raised an eyebrow. “How did I get in these?”

Sam smiled apologetically. “Danny popped in before he left. Him and Tuck rewrapped and clothed you while I stopped by my place.”

Vlad smiled apologetically, “Sorry for that.”

Tucker shrugged, “It’s no biggie. Besides? You had to try and move eventually. That and you don’t seem the type to want so much skin showing.”

Vlad noted Sam more fully and bowed his head, “Miss Manson? I’m sorry I-”

Sam rolled her eyes. “You were dying. Forget about it… I didn’t even pay attention to your attire this morning.”

Vlad sighed slightly and winced. “I guess you have a point… I truly am sorry though. Usually, I’m not this bad off.”

Tucker snorted and reached an arm under Vlad’s shoulder. “Come on Plasmius. After you explain this artifact stuff we are dragging you back in here for your breakfast.”

Vlad smiled slightly and with Tucker’s support began walking out of the infirmary. Making their way into the lab, Vlad numbly flicked on a light switch. The dark and foreboding space immediately lit up in hues of silver and blue chrome. Tucker whistled, “You know? Lighting works wonders on a place. You just TLC’d a gothic torture chamber into a Meet the Robinsons’ garage.”


Tucker mocked gratitude, “Thank you, thank you. Hold the applause.”
Sam elbowed him.

“Ouch!”

Rolling her eyes she added, “Yes, a real riot.”

Vlad smiled as they came upon the door. “It looks like Travis sealed the vault.” Sighing he glanced
toward the teens, “Okay...ground rules.”

Vlad put a hand to the vault door. “One? Don't touch anything. It's all fun and games until you get
blasted into a video game console or turned into a pigeon.”

Vlad and Tucker went wide-eyed. “Two? Under no circumstances are you to look at that doll. She
feeds on fear and can try breaking the glass if you allow your emotions to consume you.”

Vlad lifted his right hand and a rune-like symbol appeared on the flesh. Wincing and dizzy, he
pressed the limb into the sealed door. The metal briefly flashed white as snake-like vines of energy
slunk into the wall. Steel combed against steel in firecrackery golden sparks as the symbol from
Vlad's palm imprinted on the vault door. With a crack, the entrance slung open. Small white orbs
hovered from the now open door and lit up the room in swarms of firefly-like clouds.

Vlad groaned and leaned in against Tucker dizzily, “Damn….my seal? It's toast.”

Sam and Tucker looked from Vladimir to the now open room in amazement.

“What was that?!?!?” Tucker gaped.

Vlad smiled. “That was a barrier artifact that only opens when my mark or blood seal touches it. Ed,
Romulus and I are the only ones that can access this room unless I gain a new appointee.”
The Key to a Hangover

Sam paused and motioned for Vlad's hand, “This glowing rune thingy is your mark, right? What is it?”

Vlad sighed, “A brand that shows I'm a target board for demonics? A condensed circlet of soul-based energy? A healer's mark? Purification symbol?...Take your pick. Currently, you're looking at the only one in existence as of right now. You have to meet power and age requirements to get one.”

Sam inspected the dimly glowing white mark curiously. “How did it get put on you?”

Vlad smiled slightly and tried straightening himself against Tucker. “I met the requirements for an embassy, so the blasted thing formed from my flesh and tacked itself into my palm. I’m kind of fuzzy on the details. I was bleeding a lot…”

Sam and Tucker both winced. Vlad tried smiling apologetically. “It was a long time ago and I'm pretty injury oriented. Don't pay it too much merit. At least my mark serves a purpose besides reminding me of what a royal klutz I am.”

Sam smiled slightly. “So Danny is supposed to become an embassy, huh?”

Vlad sighed tiredly, “Yes… he is…”


Tucker nodded, “Like that demon chic?”

Vlad nodded, “Yes, like her… and I hate to say she's one of the weaker demonics out there. Daniel almost got eaten because he didn't pay attention to how dangerous the zone is…. People die in there. I've had to bring corpses back several times...Well, what's left of them.”

Sam and Tucker exchanged horrified looks with one another.

Vlad rubbed his eyes, “I wanted Daniel to be able to choose his life… I still want that for him. But he's still growing with his powers, which means he's probably going to get branded as well.”

Vlad sighed and retracted his hand from his face. “And of course, I can't just come out with all of this mess without fostering this truce further... and with Clockwork’s stupidity…” Vlad sighed tiredly. “I have my work cut out for me.”

Tucker gently squeezed his shoulder. “You really wanted Daniel to have that chance, huh?”

Vlad smiled sadly, “Pathetic right? But then what was I supposed to do? Daniel's parents are ghost hunters. What if they-” Vlad cringed and looked away from the teenagers. “They love Daniel, but Phantom? If they accidentally catch Phantom and decide to play operation the boy's ghost adrenaline will kick in. He'll be stuck in Phantom form until the body reverts from blood loss…”

Sam winced. “Ghosts have adrenaline?”

Vlad smiled politely. “Well no… But Daniel and I do. Our bodies adapted to avoid death… and the best way to avoid death? Turning intangible or shielding. Both easier done in ghost form. In layman's terms, our chemical compounds and ectoplasm can forcefully lock the shift if we are in life-
threatening situations as an act of preservation.”


Vlad sighed, “Language Tucker, Language.”

Tucker grinned, “Look at that…Plasmius is dropping formalities.”

Vlad smirked, “Don’t get to use to it Foley.”

Sam paused and glanced into the doorway. Looking back to Vlad, she questioned worriedly, “Why are you showing and explaining all of this to us?”

Vlad snorted, “Would you rather I let you three in the zone without properly knowing what’s in there? Artifacts are dangerous forms of ectoplasmic binding with inanimate objects and human beliefs. A harmless toy can kill or maim. A watch can trap you in a maze somewhere in the zone as a prisoner. A sword can chase you down to run you through. Things happen. I’d rather you speak from my experiences than your own.”

Sam and Tucker gaped. “You mean there is just random possessed crap floating around there and waiting for a worthy victim?”

Vlad smiled, “Exactly.”

Turning into the doorway, he somewhat dizzily motioned the two teens in. “I tried getting Walker to scare Daniel out of the zone a couple of times but that boy just loves poking his nose over boundaries.”

Sam paused, “You mean Walker was trying to keep Daniel out of the zone? I thought he wanted to arrest him for like a one-thousand-year sentence or something?”

Vlad glanced back at Sam and rolled his eyes. “He's always been one for theatrics. Nothing says consequences like imprisonment. Pfff.”

Tucker argued, “But Vlad? Why threaten Danny with jail time?”

Vlad paused. “Honestly? I don't know what Walker’s motives were. He lives by a ‘law is upheld through law mentality’. If I had to guess he figured Daniel, like any fourteen-year-old boy, would be terrified by the thought of getting stuck in ghost prison for a couple of centuries.”

Sam laughed. “So he was bluffing?”

Vlad snorted. “I’d like to think he was offering a paranormal time out. Beggars can't be choosers and Daniel had already proven my word meaningless. What better way to keep him on his toes, if not by making him look over his shoulder constantly for Walker and his goons?”

Tucker nodded. “So you were hiring Walker out as a paranormal deterrent to keep Pham away from the zone….”

Vlad smiled slightly as he looked through one of the shelves. “To put this in a slightly more understandable position? Many demonics in the zone get their kicks by torturing humans and ghosts. They weaken their life forces to feed off of them. Daniel and I are like meal combos. I didn't want that boy or you two snatched and eaten because you threw caution to the wind.”

Sam nodded and then abruptly looked back up to Vlad. “Oh….That's why—…” Her eyes trailed
down some of the large bite wounds and impalement marks adorning segments of Vlad's unwrapped torso.

Vlad paused and looked up to her slightly concerned, “That's why what?”

Sam winced. “Your scars... Those are from the zone aren't they?”

Vlad paused and motioned the two teens forward. Leaning against a barrel full of weapons, he tiredly sighed. “Ms. Manson? Mr. Foley? Humans and Demons are brethren on more than one account. Demons are born from humans. My... appearance- These marks?” He motioned to a few scarred over lines peeking out from under the gauze wrapping his chest. “I would love to say that monsters dwell exclusively in the zone but if I did I would be lying. People can be cruel and dangerous. It doesn't matter if you're a human or ghost, if they don't like you they can do horrendous things to justify or gain something of value.”

Tucker winced. “So everything really does try killing you constantly?”

Vlad went silent for a moment and looking up he laughed nervously. “Lucky halfa bastard remember?”

Tucker and Sam grimaced and Vlad rubbed his arm apologetically. “Samantha? Come here for a moment. You to Mr. Foley.”

Sam nervously shuffled in front of Vlad and he smiled gently. “I'm certain you have heard of this item after that whole Pariah incident. This is the skeleton key.”

Plopping a small gray key wrapped in canvas into Sam's hand he motioned for her to inspect it. “It's an artifact that creates tunnels and openings in time-space.

It's rather weak though because the majority of its energy is based off of how much life energy is channeled into it. It's a parasitic.”

Sam nearly dropped it and Vlad chuckled. “No worries Ms. Manson. It doesn't feed on humans or even ghosts. The skeleton key only works with embassy’s.”

Taking a breath Vlad reached for the key. As soon as his finger connected with the metal his entire body shuttered and the key grew a bright neon green. Red gems glistened and swirled. Vlad groaned and slumped forward slightly only for Tucker to pull him away. Vlad dizzily looked up at the teen and mumbled an apology, “Sorry... it hasn't fed... in a while... I forgot it... was hungry.”

Sam looked to the key in disgust. “It feeds off of you?!?!”

Vlad nodded. “An artifact... that is made and... centered in a single form of energy. Walker calls them SP’s... or singular plasmas.”

Tucker looked at the key in horror. “Dude... You just got slurped by Pariah Dark’s coffin key.”

Sam flinched and looked to Vlad questioningly. “Wait... Vlad? You said the key could only work with embassy's. Skulker told us seven ancients sealed pariah.”

Vlad sighed, “I guess a history lesson is unavoidable. Those seven ancients were appointees. Embassy assistants. The marks we govern to our assistants connect them with us. They sealed Pariah by using the energy that created their marks to activate the key. But as you just saw... using the skeleton key... even touching it, comes at a heavy price.”
Sam gulped. Tucker winced.

“What happened to the seven ancients?”

Vlad sighed. “They faded. The seals used to condemn Pariah were connected to their cores. The moment the key locked Pariah in forever sleep was the moment they all shattered into oblivion.”

Vlad paused. “Well… all except for one. He lived because the embassary prior sacrificed their own life force to save him, making him a partial embassary.”

Tucker and Sam winced. “So the key commits genocide….”

Vlad winced. “When you put it that way? Yes.”

Tucker looked at the key with revulsion. “Vlad? Who was the other appointee? The one that lived?”

Vlad sighed. “Clockwork.”

Sam and Tucker went deathly silent and Vlad continued. “He’s also the ghoul who manifested Behemoth to guard the key after he found out about Daniel and I. Having seen everything to do with embassaries and the appointees slaughtered, he holds evident malice for the key and its usage. I, sadly, had no choice in its use. The crown of fire and the ring of rage were needed as a counterbalance to another pressing problem in the zone. But as you saw, it weakens the user.”

Vlad tiredly slouched against a segment of the vault. Rubbing his eyes and staring at the key he summarized, “The key nearly kills a full embassary when used to open or seal doorways. Pariah got loose easily because he had the crown feeding his spectral form despite his imprisonment and because I was sucked dry.”

Tucker growled. “You mean the key tries killing the user?”

Vlad nodded. “Every single time. I’ve kept it in here to prevent anyone from trying to wake Pariah again.”

Sam glowered at the metal and the red stones in the skull seemed to smile wickedly. Revolted, she asked, “Can I put this back on the shelf?”

Vlad nodded. “Yeah.. go ahead.” Pausing, he turned toward Tucker and weakly smiled. “Mr.Foley… Would you help me up? This next artifact is far more friendly than what you both just saw and I think you and Ms.Manson will find it rather intriguing.”

Tucker nodded and gently helped Vlad back up to his feet. Turning from the children, Vlad kneeled down and gently picked up a long, red velvet adorned parcel.

Smiling, he stood and motioned the two teens to follow him out of the vault and into the lab.
Sam and Tucker eyed the parcel warily. Sam questioned, “Vlad? What is that?”

Vlad smiled gently, “I figured you two would like to meet Vivian.”


Vlad chuckled lightly and looked down to the item in his hands. “You two need to stand back a little. She’ll probably create a pensive pool to form around.”

Seeing them standing back, Vlad bowed his head and connected the end of the fabric against the metal flooring with a dull thud. Twisting the parcel, they watched in disbelief as the fabric curled and burned from around a glowing silver blade cradled in immaterial wisps of light. Vlad lowered his head respectfully and began speaking in a foreign and inhuman tongue. After a moment, the sword let out a ripple of energy and a pool of green ectoplasmic energy surrounded the floor. Fluctuating from neon green to a crystal blue, the pool reflected Vlad staring into its depths, and behind him a woman in medieval garb.

Vlad switched to English, “Excalibur’s herald, the Lady of the Lake.”

The woman reached her hand from the reflection and smiled. “You have brought children to visit me?”

Vlad smiled tiredly. “I do believe the young man and woman giving us company hardly count as children.”

The figure smiled and with a flash of light, she was in the room kneeling across from Vlad. She stopped abruptly and her brow furrowed. “Embassy? Is something ailing you?”

Vlad bowed his head slightly more, “Nothing dear fairie… Just fatigue.”

Sam gaped and squealed in delight and Tucker turned to Vlad in shock. “You mean you had Excalibur lying around in your basement!?!?”

Vlad chuckled lightly. Vivian raised a silver brow and her blue robes swirled slightly, “Is he talking about our arrangement good, sir?”

Vlad smiled, “I was explaining artifacts to them. They are unfamiliar with the dangers present in this world and yours.”

Vivian bent down and curled a hand under Vlad's chin. “You haven't touched the scabbard in a great many moons dear knight. Why? I've grown worried.”

Vlad flinched slightly and kept his gaze averted. “I've just been busy with my duties.”

Vivian's eyebrows weaved worriedly. “Embassy? Look at me… please?”

Vlad refused and instead spoke to the teenagers. “Ms. Manson? Mr. Foley? This is an artifact poltergeist that has gained its own soul from continued human belief. She's a water spirit or fairie tempered into a spectral blade. She resides in my home as a form of protection to ensure no one uses her for ill gain.”

Vivian sighed exasperatedly and turned toward the teenagers. “It's a pleasure to make you
acquaintances Sire Foley and Lady Manson.”

Sam bowed and seeing Tucker gaping, kicked him in the shin. Tucker quickly bowed his head as well. “I-It’s a pleasure to meet you, fair lady!” The teen squeaked.

Vlad snickered. Vivian bowed in return and smiled cordially toward Tucker and Sam. Speaking up, she questioned, “Vladimir? May I show them fate’s tide?”

Vlad stiffened and looked up slightly to meet Sam and Tucker’s gazes. “As long as you explain to them what your premonitions are and why you seek shelter here I see no fault in them.”

Sam and Tucker gaped.

Vivian smiled warmly and motioned toward Sam. “Come child. I wish to tell you your future. A possibility, a shadow set by preexisting circumstance and past action. Whether you are able to follow this path or avoid it is entirely up to you. No fate is set in stone.”

Sam swallowed. “You're an oracle?”

The faerie smiled lovingly. “Yes, dear one. I see things as they progress. I note the tide, the brambles, and stones obscuring it. Before I was used for bloodshed. A weapon. My use, however, was only ever meant for the protection of others. I’m a spirit formed from a want to protect innocence and lovers from death.”

Sam nodded and looked from Vlad to Tucker before stepping into the pool of water.
As soon as her feet connected, small ghostly purple fish began swimming around them. Vivian’s eyes sparked lilac.

“A knot in wood creeps on nimble feet…. Words of comfort and words of strife…. Change the fate by choosing life. Take heed child, time draws near. If you see the blade of darkness, do not fear. Pursue, gather, find, and amend. Your heart of gold may save thine friend.”

Sam’s purple eyes widened and she choked, “What do you mean?”

Vivian’s eyes flashed to their normal ice blue and she bowed in apology. “You apparently have an opportunity in the near future to save someone precious. Don’t allow fear to dictate your choices.”

Sam nodded gruffly and then smiled weakly. “Thank you.”

Vivian gently pulled her back over to the metal floor and motioned for Tucker. Tucker glanced at her hand apprehensively and, looking toward Sam, he swallowed and stepped onto the pool. The fish turned orange and swirled rhythmically above him. Vivian smiled gently and her eyes grew to mimic the color.

“Dire straits lie ahead at the bend. A long-awaited truth will be gained at heavy cost. When the time is right, confront your friend or more than one innocence will be lost. Things are not as they appear...Poisons, enemies and tainted dreams will give you clues. Find the hunter and the sword, dispel the ruse.”

Tucker shivered. “Pretty dark forecasts for such a pretty lady…”

Vivian’s eyes darted toward Vlad worriedly. “Vladimir? This child speaks truth. Why do both their fates stem toward calamity?”

Vlad averted his gaze. “I do not know Vivian. I was assuredly not expecting such premonitions either.”

Vivian bent down beside him. “Vladimir? Let me see your eyes...I know you have never asked for fate, you've avoided it… but this time I think you need to-”

Vlad pulled away slightly, “I'm fine dear lady. Please forgive me of my rudeness at this time.”

Vivian’s eyes narrowed and she stiffened abruptly. “Damian Masters? What is happening to your vessel?”

Vlad stiffened and looked up out of reflex. Caspian blue eyes sparked silver and locked with ice blue. Vivian's eyes widened. Vlad tried looking away but she quickly secured his hands to his sides. Water rippled from the floor and forced him into a sitting position. Vlad's embassary's marked palm shot up against the current to try and free himself from her hold only for the spirit to clasp onto the limb. Her eyes widened in horror. “Embassary?!?! Look at me this instant!”

Vlad numbly averted his gaze. Growling, the spirit turned toward the teens. “If you two value his life you'll come here immediately and hold him still! His mark is fading!”

Vlad growled, “Let go, Vivian! Please!”
“Silence, you foolish demon slayer!”

Sam slipped across the wet floor with Tucker in pursuit. Vivian turned to them. “Hold him down! I need eye contact to get the reading.”

Vlad numbly writhed. Vivian glowered. “I do this for your life, exorcist. Please forgive me.”

And with that, her hand clipped into his stomach. Vlad doubled over and numbly moaned against his restraints. Tucker and Sam looked to the spirit in horror. “What are you doing to him?!”?

“I’m trying to save him. I saw a glimpse of it… I need to see the rest. If you wish him dead I implore you to seal me now. If you wish him life then I beseech you to please help me drag him into the pool! The streams are interweaving and if he isn’t prepared his future will end.”

Tucker growled in aggravation before grabbing onto Vlad and dragging him off of the floor and toward the pool. Vivian pinned him onto the mirror-like surface as soon as his flesh met the water. Groaning, he numbly tried loosening his restraints only for a slender hand to pull his face upward.

Vlad’s blue eyes definitely locked with Vivian’s and she began speaking in the same latinesque language Vlad had used prior. Vlad protested and argued back while fighting against his bindings and Vivian’s hold. She growled before saying some more illegible gibberish in the same ghoulish tongue. Switching to English, she used the water to bind him to the floor. “This is for your own good! Be still!”

“Vivian! Release me this instant!”

Growling, she cupped a hand across his mouth to stifle him. “No. I will not. You let it go that far, Vladimir? A sacrifice that great?!”

Vlad growled from under her hand and tried to morph only to shutter and fall back against the floor in a daze. Pulling his face back she continued, “A heart’s sacrifice repeated over and over again at the cost of a soul. You won but lost something dear. I will not stand by as you get torn asunder again!”

Turning to the teens, she commanded. “Children! Come here at once!”

Both Sam and Tucker stepped into the pool and rushed forward. Vivian’s dress morphed and fluctuated around them. Turning to Tucker, she motioned toward Vlad, “I need you to hold him down so I can sedate him! His seal is too sickly for him to protest this much without causing harm to himself!”

Turning toward Sam, she pointed toward the sword. “Grab the blade, I will force him if I must!”

Sam ran for the sword and pulled it out as Tucker gripped onto Vlad’s head and pinned him against the floor. Vivian instructed. “I’m going to submerge him. Do not panic. My waters have healing properties and his body will see no injury. Pay attention to the verse that transcribes upon the waters and the images branded in ice.”

Vlad weakly groaned against the hand gagging him and tried freeing his wrists. Vivian cupped her other hand to his face and apologized. “I’m sorry dear knight, but you’ve left me no options.”

Turning to Sam, she added, “Lady Manson? Sheath the blade at his feet once the words begin to materialize. My power will wane once the blade turns scarlet. At that moment you must free him or he risks suffocation. Do you understand?”
Sam nodded. Turning to Vlad, Vivian removed the hand gagging him. “S-Stop….Vivian….I don’t….w.”

A set of slender lips locked onto Vlad’s and his struggles went slack. As she kissed him her form meddled and morphed into water, starting with her face. The dress spun and fluctuated, knocking Tucker gently away from Vlad and ensnaring the adult, now druggedly staring into transparent blue eyes. Retracting herself temporarily she brushed his hair from his eyes and comforted, “ Damian? It’s alright….Just rest. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

Vlad’s eyes weakly sparked white and he again tried moving from her hold. Sighing, the spirit reconnected her face to his. Vlad sputtered and choked but after a few seconds, his body went limp in her arms. Cradling him against herself, Vivian nodded to Tucker and Sam. The water immediately filled the orb and both Vladimir and the spirit floated up. Vlad's unconscious red eyes blankly locked with Vivian's as his hair became weightless. Bringing her head to his she reattached her mouth to give him air while they were submerged. A crinkling of ice could be heard and the dome froze over, creating a crystalline prison.

Bright reddish-pink and golden white fish began filling the room and both Vladimir and Vivian's eyes sparked white.

Sam and Tucker gaped and tensed. A reverberating chime of glass sunk through the orb. It cascaded waves of sound against the sides of the sphere in halo-like rings of light. Silver words enshrined at their touch and fluttered in fiery mist.

Sam rushed forward with the blade and plunged it into an outcropping of ice by the base of the orb. The blade twisted of its own accord and the hallowed ring in its hilt filled with a transparent icy gem. At the blades touch, Vivian's voice echoed.

“ Embassary born of strife and grievances, time draws near. Allies and foes stitch bindings of stone. Here lie in ruin the costs of fighting alone.”

Around Vlad's ensnared form, images began to emerge. A young Plasmius in what looked like stealth clothing was cowering and bleeding under a lab table. Two large bulbous red eyes turned to him in the darkness and a shot rang out. He screamed and his fearful eyes fluctuated as the images shifted. The next was Vlad sitting in a child's bedroom hugging a dark-haired girl against himself in the dim light. Broken sobs racked through his body as he pulled her tighter against his chest. In another he lay almost completely lifeless in a pool of his own blood, numbly choking in a wooded outcropping. The image morphed again and Vlad was screaming in agony in a burning house, frantically clawing through the inferno in search of someone or something only to see a pool of crimson dripping from behind an ajar doorway. Red eyes turned hollow and the light died.

Sam and Tucker's eyes widened in horror and Vlad unconsciously writhed from within the bubble.

Vivian's voice continued. “Tread water tainted in past remorse. Monsters and demons await at the source.”

A wickedly smiling green mist with red eyes could be seen grabbing Vlad's unconscious form from the firehouse. Vague images of a black mass pinning him down and extending large dagger-like fangs into his neck rippled through the ice. Laughing could be heard.

“ These harbingers of death court unholy sin. The destruction of balance and protector of men…..”

Images showing Vlad desperately gripping his bleeding chest and running through an alleyway surfaced. Sam and Tucker watched in horror as a bright green blast switched out the vague blurs into
something darker. Daniel's eyes, cold and cruel, stared hauntingly as his foot slowly dug into Vlad's chest. Vlad looked up to him and weakly grasped the leg pinning him down while Daniel charged another attack.

"Tainted souls that have lain in wait, bring traps strung and set with honeyed bait. Eyes harrowed by greed… a heart will be wounded based on their deceit."

A blurry image of a little boy with black hair was being dragged violently into a vehicle kicking and screaming by a smiling older gentleman while a little girl with bright green eyes was being grappled by a thin elderly woman. The images morphed to broken liquor bottles and a bloodied body numbly crawling through puddles of crimson. Familiar and dulled blue eyes flashed from under the mop of raven hair. The images rippled and a young man could be seen shaking in the corner of his hospital room while a woman's shadow eclipsed him with a syringe. The bleak images contrasted darkly against the white lights and glowing marine life surrounding the sphere.

"To amend and save the power strong, a center of love must be nurtured along."

A dark, grisly flash of Daniel being splattered in blood surfaced. Horrified eyes traced up to the source and Vlad numbly gripped onto the taloned ebony hand impaling him before his eyes became distant.

“A core given in turn for what was always free. Take heed protectors, the grim draws near. Once hope dies, a monster…your kin… the ember of light will stall and thin. Tread carefully and tend the flame with truth….For iced grip will condemn him to their use."

Vlad numbly shook from within the dome and Vivian's eyes sparked from white to blue as his eyes closed. Still holding Vlad against herself, she channeled her voice through the blade. “Now Ms. Manson, Sir Foley! Make haste and unsheathe the blade!”

Sam and Tucker ran forward and pulled against the hilt. It immediately slipped from the ice and the water surrounding Vlad and Vivian turned into a green mist that solidified and shot through the blade and into the clear stone, turning it emerald green.

Vivian sat with Vlad curled against her dress, tenderly stroking his hair. Once the blade was finished extracting the water, the ice cracked and shattered from around the two. Sam and Tucker ran forward in a panicked frenzy.

Tucker choked, “What the hell was that?!?!?”

Vivian gently curled a hand around Vlad's unconscious jaw. “It would seem the guardian for our worlds has cast a fate most troublesome upon himself in an effort to save everyone but himself from destruction. These images are what will coincide unless proper caution is used. He will perish by the hand of someone he loves, willingly or metaphorically unless truths become known. A hunting party seeks out, not only his life but the green-eyed child he protects.”

Lifting Vlad into her lap she felt his brow. “It's already starting. The fire is consuming and ripping at the fates weave….This stream has two starkly different endings little ones. He will either die heinously by the hands of his assailants, alone and torn apart because of spite and the anger of the boy or he will finally find the family that has been ripped apart and slaughtered in front of him from his conception.”

Vlad tossed in his sleep and Vivian petted him affectionately as she lifted his right wrist. “He's already losing. The blood must have been poisoned for a great many moons. On top of this, the grief ripped into his heart from loss has made his spirit state fragile and scarred.”
Sam and Tucker looked to Vlad in horror. “You mean he's been poisoned prior to all of this?”

Vivian frowned and gently lifted Vlad's wrist so the children could see his mark. “Little ones? This being represents the ebb and flow of life and death. He is an incarnation of continual energy and healing. This mark mandates his symbolic properties and denotes him as a guardian of life. Both spectral and blood born.”

She paused and touched her fingers to the symbol. Vlad writhed and numbly furrowed his brow at her touch. “But it's contaminated. A powerful drug has been used with occult properties centered on destroying his very energy signature….”

She paused and her eyes widened. Looking up she locked her gaze with Sam, “Lady Manson? Where are Sir Romulus and the huntsmen? They should have immediately felt his illness and come to his aid!”

Tucker looked to the portal, “They left into the zone a week or two ago from what he's told us. They were searching for a demonic named Nocturn.”

Vivian gently pulled Vlad up against her legs more and checked his pulse. “Something has tainted the mark’s warning capabilities. The connection between him and his assistants is frayed and damaged.”

Sam kneeled down with the sword and propped it beside Vladimir's unresponsive fingers. Turning to Vivian, she questioned worriedly, “Is there any way to avoid this?”

Vivian shook her head no. “Events are already in motion. The only thing you two can do is ease the shift. He has a half chance at life as of this moment in time. A faint break between life and death that will be based on both your choices and the green-eyed young man we saw in the water’s path.”

Glancing at the red blade, she hissed in annoyance and scrunched her face with worry. Turning back to Sam and Tucker, she pleaded. “My time draws near. As a spirit born of necessity my uses become limited with such shows of power. Even in his weakened state, sedating him took a heavy toll on my form. I will not be able to aid you anymore. I plead that you see him through this and toward the brighter stream. If you can get him and yourselves to that point all of you will find happiness. If Vladimir falls though, so does the boy. They are linked by more than just the bonds of their kind. Where one shall perish the other shall surely follow. Please…traverse lightly.”

Sam and Tucker nodded and Vivian smiled warmly. Looking toward Vlad she gently caressed his cheek again. “Dear friend, I pray you finally find happiness. May the next time we meet be filled with more grand tidings.”

Looking up at Sam, she smiled and extended her hand. “Lady Manson, Sir Foley? Good Luck.”

And with a soft smile and a few tears, she faded and merged back into the blade beside Vladimir. Tucker quickly reached down and caught Vlad's head as she dissipated. Turning Vladimir onto his back, Tucker tiredly rubbed his brow before turning toward Sam. “Sam? What the actual heck are we going to do?”

Sam bit her lip and gently grasped onto Vlad's hand. “We're going to tread lightly and keep Vlad under lock and key. Those things are hunting him and they're trying their damnedest to separate him off in order to tear him apart. I say we don't let them. You heard the mystic sword. Vlad's fate is in our hands. I don't know about you but I kind of like the idea of everyone getting a happily ever after.”

Tucker flinched and looked down into Vlad's sleeping features remorsefully. “Some of that- some of
those were memories… Sam? What type of fate wheels around someone being tortured emotionally and physically like that without reprieve?”

Sam sighed. “That's just it isn't it? She wished that he would finally find happiness. Tuck? I think that brighter future has to do with an end to the suffering he's been enduring. Maybe this truce is supposed to mean more than just an end to a piety game of cat and mouse? Maybe it's an end to misfortune and heartache for Vlad and Danny.”

Vlad numbly turned against the steel floor and shivered. Tucker smiled tiredly and bent down to help Vlad up. Pausing, he quirked an eyebrow. “Wait…. he's lighter than Danny.”

Sam paused and looked to Vlad curiously, “So?”

Tucker cracked his knuckles and grinned broadly, “That means I can carry him… easily.”

To prove the point, Tucker bent down and scooped Vlad up into his arms. “The guy weighs as much as my cousin! That's what? A hundred? A hundred and ten? Heck, I've babysitted twelve-year-olds heavier than this!”

Vlad turned slightly in Tucker's hold and his head numbly curled up against his chest. Tucker glanced toward the sword, “Sammy? Do me a solid and grab Excalibur? I doubt either of them wants a blade that valuable lying against the lab floor.”

Sam nodded and almost reventaly picked up the blade. “How long so you think he's going to be out of it?”

Tucker looked down into his arms at Vlad's gentle rhythmic breathing and drenched form. “I have no clue. I'm no expert on fairy drugs…. My guess is that the poltergeist knocked him out temporarily…” Pausing, Tucker adjusted Vlad. Vlad's wrist limply fell over his side and his waterlogged tresses fell loosely against Tucker's shirt sleeve. “She said she used to much power while trying to ruffie him so it stands to reason he'll wake up soon, right? I mean that's just a guess-”

Sam nodded and quickly walked ahead to open the infirmary door. Tucker carried Vlad over to the medical gurney and set him down. Grabbing the grey blanket, he leaned the adult against his shoulder and began trying to dry him off. Vlad groaned and flinched at the contact but continued sleeping. Sam laid the sword down by one of the medical carts and began assisting Tucker.

Satisfied with Vlad's now dry hair, Sam kneeled onto the bedding and loosely braided the locks behind his face. Tucker smiled. “You know? The long hair suits him.”

Sam smirked. “He really looked like a knight early, huh?”

Tucker snorted, “The Lady of the Lake claimed him as one outright and seeing all of his scars? Well, I'm willing to jump on the demon purge bandwagon right about now.”

Bringing a hand under Vlad's back the two gently maneuvered him onto his side and replaced the now drenched blanket with a dry and clean one.

Sam plopped into the seat next to Tucker and sighed tiredly. “What do we tell Danny?”

Tucker winced. “Honestly? I have no clue…. You saw those visions. Dan was trying to full out murder Vlad. I've never seen Pham so bloodthirsty!”

Sam shivered at the recollection of the angry and merciless neon green orbs. Glancing at Vlad, she whispered, “We have to tell Danny something Tuck. You heard her. They both will die if proper
steps aren't taken.”

Tucker fiddled with his glasses tiredly. Biting his lip, he groaned. “How exactly are we going to explain us getting a quest from a magic sword, Sammy?”

Sam defeatedly stared into the ceiling. “Er...Just tell Danny we asked Vlad about artifacts? Say you were bragging about a video game or something and Vlad rolled his eyes sarcastically and whipped out Excalibur? That it went frantic and decided to give us a paranormal lesson in palmistry? Use your imagination Friar Tuck.”

Tucker snorted and rolled his eyes. “My imagination is pretty lit after that power show. We just met King Arthur's sword! And the fairy that lives in it? That stuff isn't something someone could just make up on the fly.”

Sam smiled. “Vlad definitely gave us a ghost lesson, huh?”

Looking back to the adult she mused, “It's a shame he didn't get to show us any more artifact's before the Lady of the Lake smooched him into submission.”

Tucker smirked, “I would've traded places? I mean-”

Sam elbowed him. “Keep talking like that and I'll end up wishing you had as well, if only to muzzle you.”

Tucker grinned, “Stingy Samikins?”

Sam glowered, “Easy there... You don't want to pick a fight with a short person Tuck. I'm way closer to Hell than you are.”

Tucker mimed fear, “Ah! So frightening! Little miss gruff-it and her gummy bat loving, gothica tush has wounded my techno-geek heart.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “I'll call Danny. Keep Vlad company while I attempt to tell Pham about Excalibur’s forecast.”

Tucker winced, “Sam? You may not want to delve too much into those images we saw. Just give Danny the basic rundown. I think Vlad should have the right to explain his past and those future images aren't set in stone. If Danny genuinely grows to trust Vlad, I can't possibly see him hunting him down to murder him.”

Sam nodded and looked to Vlad tiredly. “So a basic warning? Beware two demonics with a taste for Plasmius and keep Vlad safe until he heals?”

Tucker nodded tiredly. “At least until we figure out what those things are up to.”

Sam tiredly rubbed her brow before nodding in agreement. Whipping out her phone, she clicked the chrome home button and swiped onto the call menu. Tucker peaked over at her home screen and teasingly poked the photo. “Sammy and Phantom sittin’ in a tree-”

Sam's eyebrow twitched in agitation before she reached over with her arm and clipped Tucker in the back of the head with a small furled fist. Standing up and glaring at Tucker's goofy grin, she casually plincked Danny's number on her screen and pressed the dial button.
Jazmine's teal manicured hands drummed against the steering wheel nervously. Daniel had texted her for pickup around eight-ish and she had been making good time through Amity. She was a block away from Canterville Drive when Daniel intercepted her in Phantom form.

Motioning her to pull over, the white-haired teenager casually turned invisible and slunk into the back seat of the vehicle. Noting the coffee stained upholstery and ectoplasm sparkled foam the ghoul languidly crossed his legs before morphing into Daniel Fenton.

Jazmine sighed in exasperation. “Danny? Why did you meet me out here?”

Daniel rolled his eyes and smirked into the rearview mirror before flippantly answering, “Vlad needs me to lay off a bit. I think he feels out of sorts with everything that’s going on this week. He’s resting up with Friar Tuck and Sam on guard duty.”

Jazmine's eyes flickered slightly and she tapped the steering wheel in agitation. “That didn't answer my question… And everything you just told me was a lie… Vlad Masters is many things but I seriously doubt he'd push the superpowered teenager out in favor of two ghosthunting teens with Fenton Ware. What is really going on?”

Daniel's finger went to his hoodie tiredly. Unzipping the fabric, he sighed before motioning her to drive. Staring out the window he answered. “Vlad wasn't doing to good this morning Jaz. If I had my way I would be staying with him right now and not going to the house.”

Jazmine's blue-green eyes glanced back and she swallowed nervously. “How bad is it? I thought the bite and the poison were stable when I left…”

Daniel bit his lip and stared into his lap tiredly. “Jaz? He stopped breathing.”

A foot slammed into the brake and ripped the vehicle to a stop in the middle of the street. Whipping her head around in a tussle of copper, she screeched, “What??”

Daniel motioned for her to pull over. Growling, she spun the wheel to a nearby curb and parked. Pivoting in her seat, she flung off her seat belt and demanded, “What happened when I left??”

Baby blue eyes became heavy and Daniel's voice cracked, “He couldn't control himself Jaz… His body became so feverish he couldn't do anything but shake against himself and beg for someone to end the heat. The entire house went spastic. Lights flickered and bulbs exploded. And that bite? It was turning black and lacing around his flesh like some sort of bizarre oil drip art. He was so scared.” Daniel shuttered and looked into open palms blankly. Clenching his fists, he waited for Jazmine to speak.

“Danny? You said he stopped breathing… You mean he-”

“He died on us Jaz. We had to restart his heart.”

The car became stiflingly silent and Daniel tiredly rubbed his brow. “Jaz? We need to get to our place and back to Vlad's as quick as possible. He needs my protection right now. If he has another power surge-”

Teal eyes turned back to the road and a seatbelt was clicked into place. Starting the vehicle, she curved away from the sidewalk and began driving to Fenton Works. After a few minutes, she
questioned, “How long are we planning on staying at the house?”

Daniel stiffened, “Jaz… I don’t.”

An angry growl snaked from behind light rose-tinted lips. “If you dare tell me I won’t be coming with… I swear to god I’ll reveal both of your secrets to our parents! He died? Do you realize how horrific that is?!?”

“You think I don’t know?!? JESUS, HE DIED IN MY HANDS JAZ! HE WAS CHOKING ON HIS OWN BLOOD AND ECTOPLASM AND SHAKING AND ALL I COULD DO WAS HOLD HIM AND TELL HIM IT WOULD BE OKAY! I HAD TO FEEL HIM SUFFOCATING!”

Jaz flinched and bit her lip as she turned. Beating the wheel, she pleaded, “I need to make sure he’s okay.”

Daniel’s features sombered, “Jaz? I want you to see him too, but we need to space things out so mom and dad don’t start questioning things.”

Jaz shook her head tiredly, “….Shouldn’t we tell them? Mom doesn’t like Vlad as much as she use to but she still considers him a friend. And Dad? Dad loves him...If he died? Danny, it would destroy dad.”

A calloused and cracked hand swept through black hair and Danny bitterly countered, “That’s right. Dad loves Vlad, but neither of them even remotely like Plasmius. Hell? I’m willing to wager they’d be willing to put him in a specimen jar quicker than Phantom.”

Jaz sighed, “You don’t know that. What if-”

Daniel’s eyes flashed neon green. “What if what, Jaz? Please, I’m all ears. Tell me how mom and dad, Amity’s resident ghost hunters, would openly welcome the two ghouls who have personally set their sights on seemingly messing up their lives? Hmm?”

A bitter silence filled the vehicle. After a few minutes, Jazmine’s voice sharply pierced the void, “They love you both in human form… Isn’t it possible they’d see that humanity in your ghost halves?”

A sad chuckle echoed from the back of the car and Daniel’s eyes became hollow. “I’m sure we’d just love to chance being torn apart molecule by molecule in order to see the sentiment carried over.”

Jaz went rigid. “Danny….They do love you.”

Daniel sighed and his eyes became downcast. Gripping his shoulder, he apologetically concluded, “I’m only staying for breakfast. I have some questions I need to ask mom and dad while I’m here though.”

Jaz nodded in understanding as they pulled around the back of the modified townhouse and into the garage.

Taking the key out of the ignition Jaz tiredly finished before the stepped out, “You need to tell them eventually Danny...Someone’s going to end up hurt or even dead if you don’t.”

Daniel swallowed. His sister was right but admitting to one’s parents that you were half of something they hated with a passion always left a bitter taste in the back of his throat.
His parents had always held resentment toward ghosts. There were even pictures of him in his cradle next to anti-ghost equipment somewhere in the photo albums upstairs. If anything they became more obsessive as they grew older. When he was six, his dad gave him a small ghost alert bracelet for Christ’s sake. Fighting and shielding from the paranormal was their volition, their religion. The portal only came back up as a topic around his twelfth birthday when they realized ectoplasm could generate massive amounts of energy in electronics if purified through a conductor with filtration properties. A drive for upgrading the filtration system of the original prototype portal led to the large doorway in their basement used to harness and split the veil between dimensions. Carbon crystals solidified into rods surrounded by wafer-thin ampules of various metals and electronics created the technology to harness the energy.

A morbid curiosity about death had somehow spiraled into a full out war. Bizarrely enough? No ghost ever caught by the Fentons, with the exception of Daniel's after hour escapades, ever made it into the lab. Strange accidents or unlucky circumstances always led to inventions and random ghost traps rapidly disintegrating or blowing up. Daniel knew from experience that his parents were more than adept at hunting and catching ghosts. They were mad geniuses.

Thankfully, however, they were easily distracted and rather unlucky.

‘ Not that any other ghost hunter has ever caught a ghost… The GIW? The Groovey Gang? Heck…no ghost hunter I've ever met has ever held a ghost long enough to figure out anything! Maybe some things are just meant to be left unknown?…’

Stepping out of the car, the teen stretched slowly to unfurl his tense muscles.

The garage was a crowded mess of cardboard boxes, gun pieces, and net weaving contraptions. Jack had made the space a two car parking area when Daniel was eight because the neighbors complained about the Fenton Family Assault vehicle being on the street. Below the vehicles, a lesser know part of the building was hidden….Jack's practical joke slash family history project. The Fenjeon...or really… The Fenton Dungeon. The room skirted below the lab and made up the sub-basement. A contrast of old and new… that was the entire Fenton legacy.

Fenton Works itself was a miss-mash of paranormal research and city-authorized building permits. The original townhouse was at one point a fire station during World War I. Sixty years of renovation had seen the red three-story reimagined and refaced more times than humanly possible to count. The first floor had four lead-lined glass windows from the original building, neatly nestling a rounded Tudor red door. The front entranceway opened into a short hallway that led to the staircase transitioning to the second floor. If you made your way to the left you'd see the main living room which was rarely used due to experiments and lab equipment strewn over every surface. If, on the other hand, you walked to the right of the entrance you'd find yourself in a cozy waiting room jackknifed off of the kitchen. The kitchen was rehauled when the Fenton's purchased the home to accommodate a large testing facility in the basement. A simple turn to the left, away from the honeyed yellow cabinetry and the industrial grade lab table that served as a dining area and you came straight into the main facility... and of course the portal. Daniel's room was positioned on top of the main living room with one of the four-second story windows providing a view of the street below. Jazmine's room was askew by four or five feet to the left, across from his. Their parents’ room and their mother’s home office were situated over the kitchen and waiting area. The building had three bathrooms. One small one by Jazmine's room that both teens shared, Maddie and Jack's master bath, and the small bathroom upstairs in the guest bedroom located in the ops center. The stairs leading to the attic and the operation booth’s connection hatch were next to his mother's office. Maddie Fenton's work in biochemical medicine and prosthetic engineering provided most of the income for the family and ghost hunting provided the more passion-fueled and fun revenue stream. Fenton Works was known in Amity for the paranormal and ghost hunting, but in the rest of the United States
the small facility was favored by private physicians for limb replacement technology and biochips that simulated nerve function. The battle suit Danny had used to take on Pariah Dark was one of the many examples of the Fentons cross platforming their work and their hobbies.

Daniel tiredly took a breath and got out of the car. Walking past the trap door hiding the dungeon and making his way to the mudroom with Jaz, he slipped off his tennis shoes and hoodie.
The smell of blueberries, cream, and fresh butter wafted through the house. Daniel smiled in relief at not having to smell any remnants from a destroyed experiment. Charred ectoplasm tended to smell like staticky lemon juice, which was pleasant in its own sense….and his mom loved it partially for that cleaning supply like scent. It brought serious fight or flight reflexes to the teen however when it was present. He was just as much ectoplasm as human and smelling the equivalent of his own charred flesh constantly made the home a dismal reminder that doom and a kiss shared the same context.

Something friendly and homey, like his mother's baking, soothed the tension and Daniel couldn't help but pick up his pace as he stumbled through the screwdriver and wire ensnared living room and toward the kitchen.

His mom heard his socks squeaking across the linoleum. Spinning around her eyes locked with his from under her coppery neck length bob. A warm smile ghosted across her lips and clicking the button on her ear she mined talking with his father. Bobbing her head as she cooked she looped her arm through Daniel's hair and pecked a kiss on his cheek.

Winking mischievously she sighed, “Yes. Jack these work fine.” Mouthing sorry to Daniel and waving to Jaz she flipped another pancake as she listened to Daniel's father talking about some sort of power conduit on the roof that they needed to replace. Maddie chuckled and then spoke, “Honey? Daniel's home. Do you want to come down from the observation tower to have breakfast with everyone?”

There was some more chatter over the line and Maddie groaned before playfully bribing, “But boo-berry pancakes Jack? Hmm?”

There was a sigh over the com piece and Daniel decided to use his newfound super hearing to see what his father was up to. He began eavesdropping as he poured himself a glass of orange juice and sat at the dining table.

His father was questioning his mom. “Did Vladdie stop by? I was kinda hoping I could talk with him about something… He didn't answer his phone when I called him at the hospital about Danny and well…I wanted to thank him.”

Daniel's mom tensed and her features turned sad and contemplative as she worked over her skillet. “There's no sign of him. Jaz and Danny are the only ones in the house.”

A heavy sigh reverberated over the earpiece. “Can you send Danny up? I need to attach something before I come down and I could use that kid's eyes so I don't test out the anti-shock capabilities of my suit again.”

Maddie snickered, “I told you upgrading that ecto-shield in this weather was a bad idea!”

Jack chuckled, “It's not like we have much choice babycakes. That freak power surge last night practically fried everything not hooked up to the portal’s power grid! People three towns over had appliances and lights exploding...We're lucky the lab didn't go into lockdown on us.”

‘HOLY SHIT.’ Daniel choked on his drink and Maddie turned worriedly. “Danny? Are you alright?”

Coughing the teen wheezed, “Wrong pipe...sorry.”
Maddie nodded and motioned for him to slow down on the OJ.

“Is Danny alright?” Jack worriedly questioned.

“No worries Jack. He just was drinking to fast.” She smiled.

Daniel’s brow furrowed in worry and Jazmine looked to him curiously before mouthing, ‘What is it?’

Daniel subtly flashed his eyes green and tapped his glass three times. The group’s covert signal for, ‘It’s ghostly and I’ll tell you later.’

She nodded but continued watching him curiously.

Jack yelped over the earpiece and Maddie groaned and clicked off the comlink. Turning to Daniel she smiled. “Sweetie? Can you go help your dad upstairs for a minute with the shield? We had some sort of freak power surge around four o’clock this morning and it fried everything not hooked to the portal.”

Daniel’s mouth froze at the brim of his glass. Taking a breath he laid the glass down on the table and smiled toward his mom. “Sure. I’ll help him. I have to ask him something about Vlad anyway.”

Maddie froze by the stove and looked back to Daniel worriedly. Biting her lip she went to turn back to her cooking only to abruptly turn off the burner. Slipping off her oven mitt, she turned to face her son who was exiting the kitchen. “Danny?”

Daniel froze apprehensively before turning toward her.

“Wait. Before you go up to your father, I need to talk to you for a minute.”

Daniel swallowed, “What about?”

Maddie’s grey-blue eyes tiredly rolled, “For starters… We both know Vlad is-” She paused and bit her lip before settling on a word. “… Weird. So why did you suddenly decide to stay at his house?”

Daniel tiredly rubbed his brow and shrugged. Rubbing his arm tiredly he answered, “I owe him. That and he’s pretty bad off when it comes to sleeping and eating properly. I’ve practically had to force feed him-”

His mother leaned against the counter tiredly, “Daniel….I know how much you detest Vladimir. I can’t possibly see you two getting along after the entire cabin debacle.” She shivered at the memory and Daniel sighed.

“Uh…yeah…mom? About that-”

His mother raised an eyebrow. “What about it?”

“He really is sorry for that entire fiasco… He was trying to piss you off for something… And trust me… He was beyond embarrassed and guilty when I brought that up.”

Maddie bit her cheek angrily, “Well he should have thought about that before he started being a two-faced philanderer…. Danny? I don’t want you hanging out around him. He was a wonderful man in college. The best type of person imaginable but people change and I seriously doubt his little romance stint was aimed at just pissing me off…”

Daniel winced. “Who’s to say that guy you knew in college isn’t still there mom? He said he was sorry… I’ve been lashing out at him the last three days and he’s been nothing but truthful and
Maddie’s eyes grew somber. “Honey?… Having a teenager apologize in one’s stead doesn’t fix what he did. He not only betrayed my friendship but also your father’s.”

Daniel took a deep breath. “He didn't tell me to apologize for him. I am just telling you, from what I’ve seen the last few days, that whatever impression you or Dad have is probably wrong.”

Maddie rubbed the bridge of her nose and somewhat bitterly countered, “Really? So he isn’t being a rich corporate sleazeball pining after a married woman?”

Daniel winced like he had been slapped and both his mom and Jaz noticed the somewhat guilty and remorseful expression. “Mom? Please don’t make the same mistake I made.”

Maddie’s brow furrowed in concern and she walked over to him somewhat confused. “What mistake Danny?”

Danny tiredly gripped the hand she placed to his cheek and removed it. Looking into her eyes he questioned. “If I screwed up you would never hate me right? If I lied? Or had secrets?”

Maddie’s features saddened slightly and she sighed. Wrapping her black-gloved hand around his palm she brought her other hand up to his cheek and gently rubbed it. “We would never hate you, Danny… Even if you lied to us… but what does this have to do with Vladimir?”

Daniel's brow furrowed debatingly. “At one point in time…. mom, wasn't he like family? The way dad talks about him you'd think they were siblings.” Looking up almost pleadingly he continued, “You can't just tell me one lie ruins that! Mom….things aren't always what they seem… People can change somewhat but they're still the same in their core. If you could forgive me if I lied or did something stupid, why not him?”

Jaz’s eyes widened at his words. She had caught the double meanings laced within his plea. He was not only begging for her to be lenient toward Vlad but also himself, to Phantom.

Jasmine's eyes flashed to her mom's pondering features worriedly. Her answer would probably determine if Daniel admitted to being a half ghost or continued lying until something horrible forced him to reveal his identity.

Purplish-gray eyes locked with baby blue and Maddie frowned deeply. “You're my baby Danny… And you're right, Vladimir was practically Jack's sibling for how much he loved him… But I'm not sure any lie he came up with would have justified what he did. No apology would ever lead me to forgiving him for saying something so betraying of the bond him and Jack shared. He was my friend to Daniel but I think his wealth ruined him. He’s a lost cause.”

Jazmine winced and averted her gaze. Daniel's eyes grew angry and he pulled away from his mother. “You think his wealth changed him? That he became some greedy monster? Monsters don't wake up screaming in agony and crying out pleas of forgiveness to every single person they have ever known. Greedy people don't anonymously slip money into people’s lockers even though they themselves only have a few scraps of food to their name.”

Maddie paled as Daniel turned to leave her in the kitchen. “Wait! Danny? Please…. What do you mean he's been screaming in his sleep?!”

Daniel paused and sighed tiredly, “Since you're the expert on all things Vlad, how about you tell me, mom? Tell me why he can't sleep or why he wakes up hyperventilating and crying when he finally does drift off…”
Maddie’s eyes widened in horror. “You mean he hasn’t been sleeping at all?”

Daniel snorted, “I thought we established that at the beginning of this conversation mom. He’s depressive, sleepless, overworked—heck I can probably make a good thirty item list on all of his issues right now. But then again the sleepless bit isn’t anything new from what he’s told us. He hasn’t been able to sleep correctly since he was six.”

Maddie’s brow furrowed. “I never—Vladimir never showed any signs from what I knew about him Danny….”

Daniel sighed heavily. “It’s funny how none of us really knew, huh? There’s a real kicker in seeing someone calling out for their friends in their sleep and knowing that one of his friends has already given up on him.”

Maddie’s winced and her face fell. “Danny…. I just- It’s hard to forgive someone for openly discrediting so much…. I want to believe that the Vladimir I knew when we were younger is still in there but he hasn’t given me anything to prove different.”

Daniel tiredly began exiting the kitchen. “I need to go help Dad now. I have to ask him if he knows what triggered the nightmares….”

Maddie nodded but her brow furrowed in concern. “Danny? I…I’m going to make extra.” She motioned toward the pancakes. “You said he hasn’t been eating… Could you bring him some when you go to leave?”

Daniel froze in the living room and raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said he was a lost cause mom.” His blue eyes darted back to her searchingly.

Maddie flinched, “Until he proves me wrong Danny…. I still see a part of him as the joking and considerate young man I went to school with. That part is probably the only reason I’m even considering having you bringing him food.”

Daniel’s expression sobered. “Guilty until proven otherwise, huh?”

Maddie smiled gently, “Danny? If you truly see that segment buried under everything he’s grown to show me?… Show me he isn’t too far gone. Despite what you think, I desperately want to believe my friend is still in there.”

Daniel smiled sadly. “I’m starting to think he never left….I think he’s just lost right now.”

Maddie nodded. “You better go help your father before he busts down here. Breakfast will be ready by the time you come downstairs.”

Daniel nodded in understanding and began trudging up the stairs. Three flights later and he was in the operation center. Hearing muted curses and a few small yelps of pain above him he glanced at the service hatch leading to the observation deck and, with a sigh, began climbing.
Sneakers thumped rhythmically as he ascended the metal ladder leading to the broadcasting equipment and service panels. A large bulbous orange form could be seen twisting and fidgeting from beneath a string of wires and loose sheets of metal.

Hearing the sound of footsteps nearby, Jack froze from under the machine. “Danny? Can you pass me the needle nose pliers?”

Daniel smiled and began rifling through the old tackle box his father used for his precision tools. Finding the neon green handled tool he passed plopped it into his father’s outstretched hand.

A gruff thanks was whispered as his father worked. After a few moments of tinkering the adult was zapped by a small spark of green energy. Sighing he chuckled, “Can you believe that freak power surge did this much damage?”

Daniel winced. “Yeah, pretty crazy, huh?” Pausing he rubbed the back of his neck. “Is it true that more than just Amity got zapped by it?”

His father casually twisted and tucked the wiring up behind a few buttons before sliding out from under the equipment. Wiping his gloved hands onto his hazmat suit to rid himself of some of the grime he smirked. “Kremmling and Parshall both had blackouts. It seems to have centered out from Amity though. Probably another spook messing with us.”

Daniel cringed slightly. ‘Yeah… a spook…’

Smiling up, his father prodded, “Don't I get a hug? It's been what? Three days?”

Daniel smiled and gladly leaned in toward his father's embrace. Large cable-like arms engulfed him and snuggled him close. Pulling from him he questioned. “So Vladdie couldn't make it, huh?”

Daniel nodded and plopped down next to his father tiredly. “He needs the sleep so I left him in bed. Sorry.”

Jack's brow furrowed and he took a deep breath before asking, “He's still having nightmares isn't he?”

Daniel's eyes went wide and turned to his father in shock. “How did you-?”

Jack chuckled sadly. “Vladdie was my roommate in college Danny. It's kind of hard not to notice when your bunkmate wakes up screaming in agony and crying every other night.”

Daniel grimaced and questioned. “So you knew… How did-”

Jack pulled out a screwdriver and began fiddling with it absently. “I know that scream… You weren't watching horror movies.” Sighing heavily, he rubbed the back of his neck and set the tool down. “It took me a good thirty minutes to place the sound but I don't think I could ever forget it.”

Daniel winced. “You mean he was doing that before the accident!?! What traumatized him that badly, dad?”

Jack's gaze saddened. Turning to Daniel he looked to the boy questioningly. “Has Vlad told you about his childhood, Danny?”
Daniel frowned and looked over at the skyline before answering. “He told me that his family died a long time ago. He hasn't elaborated though.”

Jack nodded. “No surprise there… It took me three weeks of hugging him and comforting him before he finally opened up to me…”

Jack grimaced and then rubbed his hands before questioning. “Danny? Did I ever tell you how V-man and I met?”

Daniel stiffened, “No, you haven't really ever mentioned much about your college days.”

Jack winced, “The accident is partially to blame for that I suppose…” Jack's eyes saddened. “He died in my arms twice before the ambulance got there…..And the blood….Danny? It was enough to give anyone a negative outlook on their carefree college days.”

Daniel’s eyes widened in horror. “You mean he died?!?!”

Jack grimaced. “I wish I could say it ended when he got to the hospital but from what the nurses and doctors told us he just continued dying and rapidly coming back.”

Daniel choked back nausea. After a few moments, he questioned, “Can you tell me? How you two met? And about those nightmares he has?”

Jack smiled slightly and, nodding, he began. “I guess the best place to start is the beginning, huh? You, of course, know that I was raised by your great grandpapi up in Massachusetts until I received my acceptance letter for the University of Wisconsin. I don't know what drew me to that state. Maddie jokes that it was the fact they produce a third of the dairy in the United States but honestly that wasn't my reasoning. I wanted a clean break from everything back home so I could start out on my own and make something for myself.”

Pausing, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Admissions went smoothly and my contract for housing was set. The day came… I think it was August twenty-fifth of nineteen ninety? It was pretty humid out.”

Snorting, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “I spotted Vlad before I knew he was my dorm mate. Or really, I crashed into him with the cart I was using to get my stuff into the dormitory. He fell over onto the cement and ripped open his hands. I didn't get a good look at him because of what he was wearing. All I saw was a scrawny looking fellow in an oversized grey hoodie that obscured his face. By all accounts, the guy looked like some local kid darting around campus. At first glance, he didn't even have any bags or luggage. No blankets, no pillows, just…nothing.”

Daniel winced, “You mean you accidentally bumped into him? How did that fair?”

Jack rolled his eyes, “Well, we actually bumped into each other. We were both looking in different directions and he was running around with a piece of paper in his hands. I bent down to help him up and he rolled away from me. To quote him? ‘Just leave me alone. I can get up on my own.’ The way his eyes darted to my hands though, like he was expecting some sort of confrontation…He just looked so apprehensive. Before I could try and calm him down he abruptly crawled backward and kicked himself up into a standing position. Five seconds later he was gone.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “He bolted?”

Jack nodded. “The paper he was carrying got swept up in the ten mile an hour breeze blowing through campus. It apparently had something important written on it…”
Smiling slightly, Jack locked his gaze on his son somewhat wistfully. “I was the first one in the dorm room and the first to set up. Lunch came around and no one showed up so I ended up heading out to one of the dining halls for a bite. When I got back I saw him again through our dormitory window. He was carting around stuff for some girls and helping them move into their dorm rooms. Time passed and I got bored just sitting in the dormitory by myself so I went to explore the campus.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, “Wait... so he was helping people move in during setup?”

Jack chuckled, “Sort of? From what I gathered he was hired out by several freshmen students to set up and carry their stuff to their rooms while they explored or looked at the campus.”

Daniel frowned, “He was working?”

Jack nodded, “That's my guess. Whatever the case, by the time dinner rolled around he still hadn’t shown up in our room. I ended up going to get food for myself and when I got back at around nine-ish there was a small convenience store bag and a backpack on the bunk corner-tucked against mine. Still no sign of my roommate though. Two more hours passed and I had begun rearranging my bedding to go to sleep. A sound from the door startled me. He didn't see me because the closet wall obscured me as he walked in. He was on autopilot. Vladdie was so dead on his feet he just numbly stumbled over to his bed and began trying to set it up enough to sleep in. After a few minutes, he still hasn't noticed I was in the room with him. He rolled out the dorm mattress in a complete daze and tacked a sheet on before slipping his hoodie off. I thought he was just taking it off to hang it up or something before going to get sheets from the hallway.”

Sighing, he smiled weakly. “I never would have guessed that that tattered hoodie was going to be his blanket for the night.”

Daniel's eyes widened, “He didn't have any bedding?”

Jack nodded. “Not a single piece. No pillows either.”

Daniel's brow furrowed, “What happened next?”

“You mean before he noticed me or before he went to bed?”

“Both?”

Jack chuckled, “He tiredly pulled a bruised apple out of his sweatshirt and crammed it in his jaw before he tried bandaging his hands and face with some dollar store medical supplies he had stashed in his backpack.”

Daniel furrowed his brow, “Wait...what happened to his face?”

Jack winced, “An upperclassman or another freshman who knew one of the girls Vlad was helping cut his face. His knuckles were bruised to...”

Daniel cringed, “So he got beat up his first day?”

Jack chuckled, “No, the other guy got beat up on his first day. No one was going to peg the skinny guy in baggy clothes as the one who wailed on them. Apparently, the guy thought Vlad was a new boyfriend for one of the girls and got jealous so they waited until he was alone and tried teaching him a lesson. They got a good swipe at him with a box cutter to the face and Vlad in return beat the blue blazes out of them. The culprit never came forward but there was one guy that was limping and giving Vladdie a wide girth for four months.”
Sighing, Jack leaned back against the metal paneling. “Any way... back to the story. So Vlad was bandaging his hands and his face while he ate and after he finished both the apple and the first aid, he dumped the dollar store bag on the bed and wrapped the core in it before tossing it over his shoulder and into the trash can.”

Jack chuckled sheepishly. “At this point, I was pretty curious about him so I walked over behind him and went to put a hand on his shoulder. To say that was poorly advised just after he was in a fight was an understatement…”

Daniel paled, “Did he take a hit at you?”

Jack shook his head no, “He felt my hand reaching for him and rolled under my arm. His hand caught onto my wrist and the next thing I knew my arm was pinned behind my back.”

Daniel gaped. “He put you in an armlock?”

Jack smiled, “Easily.” Wincing he added, “It’s a shame he was so worn out. Right after he got behind me his grip abruptly slackened and he fell backwards onto his hands and knees.”

Daniel winced. “So he easily pinned you and then fainted?”

Jack's blue eyes became more dissective as he mulled it over. “I guess that's accurate. He tried getting up again and kind of dizzily fell back against the floor in a half-conscious heap. I went to help him up and he growled out something about flapjacks before trying to push me away.”

Daniel laughed. “The pastry substitutes for profanities were already going strong in college, huh?”

His dad smiled, “That particular profanity ended up being my nickname for two years.”

Daniel grinned, “He seriously nicknamed you after a veiled cuss word?”

Jack chuckled and tossed his wrist up mockingly before continuing, “Yep. Flapjack. I think it was his way of still venting when I agitated him. The fact that he smiled when he said it after about a week though took away whatever menace the word had.”

Daniel nodded and raised an eyebrow, “So what happened after that?”

A somewhat humiliated expression lit the older Fenton's face before he elaborated, “Well... he glared at me after a few moments and then snapped, ‘What are you doing in here Fenton?’ Him knowing my name absolutely terrified me until he pointedly motioned toward the name tag on my t-shirt.”

A small smile ghosted across Daniel's face.

Jack continued, “And then he kind of grasped that I was his dorm mate. His eyes widened ever so slightly and his eyebrow twitched before he got up and made his way around me.”

Daniel cringed, “So he tried avoiding you?”

Jack snorted. “That's the understatement of the century. He was practically a ghost until Monday night came around. That night he curled up under that tattered hoodie again and conked out while I was looking over my textbooks. It got late and I ended up closing up shop around one in the morning to catch a few z’s myself. I was asleep for twenty minutes at most before the screaming started.”

Daniel's expression fell. Jack nodded and continued. “ Completely traumatized doesn't even begin to
cover the state he was in when I rushed over to his bunk. Up until that point, he was distant, reclusive, and he made a habit of acting condescending around me. Heck? Three days and I still didn't even know his name.”

Jack winced. “I had to shake him awake Danny… and he still couldn't stop crying. He was practically blue, he was hyperventilating so much… It was like the life had been completely beaten out of him.”

Daniel's eyes grew somber. His father tiredly rubbed his eyes and continued. “I ended up on the floor next to his bed hugging him like I would you or Jaz when you were little, for hours. He started opening up to me after that but didn't elaborate on why he couldn't sleep. We became good friends quickly… Vlad seemed comforted by just having someone that treated him normal. Believe it or not, V-man was the one who set up the first real date between your mom and me, granted that was a good eight months into us knowing each other….a Dracula play…” Jack’s rounded features brightened at the memory and Daniel burst out laughing. The father looked to his son questioningly.

Snorting, Daniel elaborated, “Sorry, there's just something funny about the date him setting up for you both being centered on a play about monster hunters and the undead.”

Jack smirked, “An irony in your mom and mine’s hobby, huh?”

Daniel nodded and then his features saddened slightly. ‘My mom and dad turned into monster hunters and Vlad…. Vlad’s a vampire practically…Crud.’

Finding his voice, Daniel finally questioned. “The nightmares- You said it took three weeks before he told you what was tormenting him. What-?”

Jack shuddered, “Frightmares would be the better description. Danny?… A regular old nightmare doesn't do that level of damage on a person.”

Swallowing, Jack tiredly locked his gaze with his son and turned to face him. “I promised Vlad I would never tell a soul, son. I haven't even told your mother about what Vladdie told me. But seeing as how you are trying to help him sleep? I'm going to ask you to keep this to yourself. Can you do that son?”

Daniel bit his lip before nodding. Light blue sparked up to a slightly darker hue and he confidently swore, “I won't tell a living soul, dad. Not unless it becomes absolutely necessary to do so.”
Jack nodded and rubbed a hand through his hair tiredly. Closing his eyes briefly he reopened them and flatly began. “Firstly? You need to know Vladimir was a ward of the state. His birth mother was a waitress who could barely afford to feed them and child services came and took both his sibling and him away. Secondly? Their new home? It was nothing less than a living hell.”

Daniel grimaced and his eyes widened in piety before Jack winced and continued. “His frightmares aren’t some run of the mill boogeyman that you can simply wish away in the morning or some ridiculous scenario concocted from something as mediocre as a fear of heights or confinement.”

Daniel’s eyes locked onto his father more attentively. Jack looked away from him and fisted his hands tiredly in his lap. “When Vladdie was fourteen he came home to find the only person in the world who loved him, his little sister….God, she was only twelve…. “

Jack grimaced and choked. Daniel’s eyes widened and he swallowed apprehensively. His father turned back to him remorsefully and continued, “Their adoptive father let her corpse lie on the floor for hours Danny…. “

Daniel’s eyes widened in absolute horror, “She died?!?! What-?”

“-happened?” Jack finished. Eyes growing fatigued, he answered, “Their dad murdered her and left her for Vladimir to find when he got home.”

Daniel’s eyes clenched shut. “What happened to Vlad?”

Jack bitterly gazed out across the observation deck. “Vladdie walked home from his part-time job to find a pool of blood with his little sister in it. And when he tried to get to her in order to see if she was okay, their parent shoved him into the blood and beat him within an inch of his life. The screaming ended up alerting a neighbor and they called nine-one-one.”

Daniel sat stunned. “Is that what he dreams about? That day?”

Jack winced. “That’s what he woke up screaming over when we were in school Danny. He tried keeping the majority of his childhood locked up and I gladly respected his wishes. I never pushed him after finding that out.”

Daniel’s brow furrowed. “Dad? Did he even mention someone named Sheryl to you?”

Jack’s brow furrowed and after a moment he sighed, “That would be his adoptive mother. After Vlad was left homeless she took him in and raised him. She died right before he graduated high school.”

Daniel winced. “Whatever happened to his original mom? And his dad?”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. He was awfully young when he was taken, Danny. Six or seven years old if I’m guessing it correctly.”

Daniel curled his knees to his face. “So his nightmares are exclusively centered on him failing to save the people he cared about?…. Jesus….”

Jack winced. “Yeah…. Vladdie always seemed to have that cross to bear. He’s the best guy I know though. V-man helped me study in school, he’d pick up fudge flavored ice cream when I got
depressed and he even gave me advice on how to woé your momma. Despite that, he always seemed to be apprehensive and guarded around other people. His screaming eventually made the two of us targets for bullying…”

Jack grimaced and smiled sadly, “Vladdie was so distraught over that. He asked me constantly if I wanted to find a different roommate. Practically pleaded so that I wouldn't get dragged down with him.”

Daniel flinched, “ You mean people started picking on him about being traumatized?”

Jack grimaced and fisted his hands. “ I wish….” Loosening his hold he began fiddling with a glove as he explained, “ Sometime around when Mads and I started dating a rumor popped up that Vlad and I were sleeping with each other. He came back to the dorm constantly with bruises, cuts…. heck? One time I thought I smelled gasoline on his clothes. He even walked in while I was studying with a broken wrist once. He claimed it was an accident but the break was just to coordinated. It had a hand shaped bruise around it and everything. He was constantly in or picking fights.”

Daniel thought back to the cast Vlad sported in one of the pictures and had to restrain himself from gagging. “So people just targeted him for no other reason but a rumor?”

Jack nodded but looked unsure, “That's what I gathered …. But Vladdie was an expert fighter…. What injuries he got were usually minuscule in comparison to the guys he tossed hands with. He played the nerd at school but I saw glimpses of what he was when our classmates weren't around. The guy knows how to hold his ground.”

Pausing, Jack winced. “ I remember we all went to the bowling alley together before our second year started… We were having a blast with each other and Vladdie brought this ridiculous camera to tease us with. He was smiling but I saw the way he was bristled. He kept looking over his shoulder the entire time while I was hanging out with Mads. Halfway through he excused himself and ducked outside. I got worried after a few minutes and decided to see what was going on.”

Daniel tensed. “ Someone followed you guys to the bowling alley?”

Jack flinched, “ Try six or seven guys. They were waiting in the parking lot for one of us to come out. I was peeking around the building and into the space between the volleyball court and the fencing to see what was happening.”

Jack sighed, “They were exchanging threats when I caught sight of them. Vladdie’s face was covered in a bandana but I recognized his voice immediately. His more astute side comes out when he's fighting. His first strike always comes verbally when he's taking in an opponent’s capabilities. This time he was severely ticked off.”

Jack rubbed his eyes. “ It's summer break. Don’t you pitiful morons have better volitions than pursuing that harlot’s orders? Or do you honestly have nothing better to do than pick fights?”

Daniel winced. “ So a chick was sending people out to beat Vlad up?”

Jack nodded and continued. “ The real gruff looking guy standing in front of him just kind of rolled his eyes and hissed, ‘The easiest way to get this over with is to just get rid of the problem lying in front of everything. You’re what? One hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet? Against six or seven men and you’re being cocky?’ Vladdie just looked up at him and smirked knowingly through the fabric hiding his face. I felt chills run down my spine. The air around him practically screamed that he was fully capable of taking every single one of them down.”
Daniel nodded and his eyes continued staring into his father's features, entranced. His father then mockingly mimicked Vlad, “The guys she sent last time didn't tell you exactly who you're messing with, did they? Allow me to demonstrate then....”

Jack chuckled, “He just casually put his hands in his pockets and roundhouse kicked the guy in the groin. Another fellow came up from the side and Vlad sidestepped him before tripping him into the wall. ‘How about I make this easier? I'm sure you've watched Sesame Street... God knows with what few brain cells you vermin possess that may even be a stretch. Let's practice your numbers, shall we? I've always loved subtraction.' Vlad then proceeded to dodge a fist flying towards his face. Ducking, he maneuvered the fight into the corner of the space near the back of the fence where it was dimmer. All seven thugs then started smiling like a bunch of morons. Vlad casually took both hands out of his pockets and unzipped his hoodie.”

Jack smiled, “The guy he kicked in the groin was being supported up slightly by one of his friends. He mocked Vlad for acting so tough and being all bark and no bite. The idiot then lunged to swing at Vlad. Vladdie threw his hoodie into the guy’s face, effectively blinding him before using his momentum to sling him into the fence.” Jack mimed Vlad casually propping up a middle finger, “One.”

Daniel grinned. Jack chuckled and continued the narration. “Then the guy’s other buddies decided to rush Vlad because the individual attack approach wasn’t working in their favor. Vlad just casually yanked his hoodie up and locked it onto one of their fists. Stepping on the guy's foot he ducked and one of the other thugs knocked out the fellow he had pinned. ‘Two.’ After that, he just started wailing on them. A guy jumped him from the left and Vlad punched him. ‘Three.’ Another fellow whipped out a knife. Vlad grabbed his wrist and elbowed him in the face before throwing the knife out of the alleyway. ‘Four.’ The last three tried rushing him again. He took the first one out with ease and lifted his hand up mockingly at the other two. ‘Five.’ The remaining two guys growled a string of profanities before the taller one went for Vlad's arm to pin him and the shorter went for his legs. Vlad allowed his arm to get snatched and then kicked up from the wall to tip the taller guy's balance. Vlad fell on top of him and punched him in the face. ‘Six.’ His short buddy tried kicking Vlad from behind but Vlad sensed it and rolled off the guy he toppled. The poor guy took the kick right to the stomach and Vladdie slipped up behind the shorter guy and casually leaned in next to his ear, ‘I guess that makes you the last one? Where were we? Ah, yes. Seven.’ And then Vlad looped his arm around him and strangled him out. Seven guys knocked out or whimpering in writhing heaps in as little as four minutes.”

Daniel smiled, “He likes going for the theatrics, huh?”

Jack smiled slightly and then winced. “Vladdie was coming out of the alleyway to go back inside. I was about to duck back in myself when I saw one of them coming up behind him again. Vlad was just putting on his jacket and reaching for the bandana when the board nailed him upside the head.”

Daniel grimaced. “Did it knock him out?”

Jack winced. “No, it dazed him. But that's all the guy really needed. He latched on to Vlad's head and slammed him into some broken glass near the asphalt. I was running toward Vlad when the guy spotted the knife he had tossed earlier and picked it up.”

Daniel's eyes widened. “The guy grabbed the knife? Please tell me he didn't use it on Vlad…”

Jack grimaced. “He turned Vlad over and pinned him up against the wall. The knife was brought up under his throat and his hair was being yanked up to expose the skin better. At this point, I had grabbed the board the guy had dropped and swung it as hard as I could against his head.”
Pausing Jack furrowed his brow. “Vlad was almost completely out of it but his eyes managed to lock on mine as I was leaning in to help him up.”

Jack snorted. “He tried making his voice sound different. It would have been hilarious if not for the fact I could see something red staining the blue fabric on his face. ‘If I were you dough-boy, I’d scram. These assholes aren’t exactly here for sodas and air hockey.’ You should have seen his face when I raised an eyebrow at the dough-boy insult and smiled. ‘V-man… Word of advice? Don’t piss me off when I’m the one in charge of meals this week.’ His eyes narrowed and his eyebrow twitched. ‘I have no clue who or what you’re talking about. Bamuss.’ The guy had the audacity to continue the fake voice and everything.”

Daniel quirked an eyebrow, “So what did it sound like?”

Jack smirked, “You know that mid-1990’s Batman cartoon you and Jazzy-pants like? He sounded exactly like that Batman.”

Daniel grinned and whistled. “What happened after that?”

Jack grimaced slightly. “Well, Vladdie was still intent on me leaving but I wasn't having any of that with the condition he was in. He ended up shakily getting to his feet and throwing my arm off of his shoulder. ‘Okay. I’m good. Get out of here.’ Again? Batman voice.”

“You know what? Your help is appreciated but I can get back to my own place without you.”

Daniel flinched, “He took a knife for you?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, he took a knife for me.” Jack's brow furrowed. “The stupid bastard who stabbed him didn't know what hit him when I got ahold of him. The second Vlad fell I tackled the guy and beat him black and blue. I may not have been a good combatant but with the weight, I carried to throw around I was as good as a wrecking ball. Once the guy fainted I went over and turned Vladie onto his back to see the damage.”

Jack snorted. “Idiot had the gall to ask if I was okay when he was the one with a switchblade jammed into his bicep. I tore the bandanna off of him and ended up leaning him forward so his bloody nose wouldn’t impede his breathing. ‘So...Um...I guess the... jigs up?’ I, of course, growled at him in response. ‘Next time? Your stubborn hyde is going to agree the first time I ask something!’

Regrettably, the bowling alley we were at was too far of a walk from any clinics. Maddie had her license and she drove us, so I had to go get her. Vladdie knew this and was panicking. ‘Jack...tell her I got mugged? Please...’ I wasn’t about to snitch after he got stabbed for me, so I ended up carrying him out from behind the bowling alley on my shoulder. Maddie was outside of the alley looking for the two of us. Vladdie was out cold on me by the time I spotted her so we dragged him into the car and carted him to the hospital.”

Raising his arm, Jack growled, “Idiot was half an inch from bleeding to death. The blade almost cut into his brachial artery. The lucky bastard nearly gave us a heart attack.”

Daniel gaped. “So he almost got tanked by someone’s knife?”

Jack snorted. “First thing we learned in medical school, Danny? God likes rolling the dice to see
who bites it and who doesn’t. Despite what action films dictate it’s not common for someone to just
go unphased by a knife wound or a bullet wound. Usually, it’s a quick one or two blows and you
bleed to death.”

Daniel winced. “So… say someone was shot multiple times? Stabbed? Impaled? Erm… even
dissected… What are the chances they’d live? Hypothetically?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “That’s a rather morbid question Danny-boy… Depending on where they
were shot they could easily bleed to death or have their organs ruptured. Bullets can also ricochet
once they get into the body. More than one organ can get nicked or shredded. Impalement? Again…
there is a high probability the organs would get punctured unless the poor bastard somehow had the
ability to heal incredibly fast or turn into mist like some of those spooks your momma and me hunt.
We shot a spike at one of them a while back and it pinned them to a wall. They phased out of it and
seemed to heal the damage spontaneously. If it’s a living breathing person however I can only see the
organs somehow miraculously shifting out of the targeted area. And as for dissection? If it’s a living
person it’s called vivisection. After World War II procedures like that were labeled as torturous and
inhumane. They are illegal in every medical field. Doctors even take oaths that say they’ll abide by
helping people and will not harm a person knowingly. If someone did do that though you’d probably
slowly bleed to death unless the person cutting you open decided to leave your organs intact and
sewed you up afterward.” Jack grimaced and looked to Daniel with a raised eyebrow.

“Son? Why the curiosity about such morbid things?”

Daniel flinched, “I saw a ghost with marks like that and was wondering which would have offed him
first.”

Jack winced. “You saw a ghost ripped up like that? Jesus…. What ghost?”

Daniel sighed and looked up to his father tiredly. “Don’t worry about it, dad.” Standing up and
reaching down for his father’s arm, he smiled. “How about we head down for breakfast? Those boo-
berry pancakes sound pretty good right about now.”

Jack grinned. “Sounds like a plan son.” A black hazmat glove reached up and locked onto the limb
for support. Both Fenton men tiredly lumbered down the ladder and through the operations booth.
Jacks and Spades

Jack smirked weakly. “So… how’s V-man handling all the teenagers around his place?”

Daniel rolled his eyes and smiled broadly. “Fairly well considering how he would normally handle a situation around us.”

Jack raised an eyebrow questioningly. “Care to elaborate?”

Daniel flinched and stopped abruptly before sighing. “I think he’s rethinking his usual priorities after I went missing. Usually, he’d lie and kick us out of the house to distance himself as quickly as possible but right now he’s fairly docile and actually likable because he’s trying to strengthen his bonds with us.”

Jack’s brow furrowed. “Distance himself? Why would Vladdie distance himself?”

Daniel shivered and failed to notice the ghost sense that wisped out of his mouth due to the nature of the question his father had asked. Shrugging, he answered before rounding on the hatch leading through the attic, “I’m sure he had his reasons. A lot can happen in twenty-something years. I think a kid he knew passed away recently so he doesn’t like seeing teenagers as much as he normally would.” The half-lie seemed to appease his father.

Jack winced. “I guess that would be a good reason. Has he elaborated or-?”

Daniel grimaced. “I’d rather not ask him…. I think he’s still in mourning for someone and I don’t want to push him when he needs my help to adjust to Amity. He’s working twice as hard as he normally would and I think it’s partially in an effort to bury away some of the grief.”

Jack sighed as they made their way to the landing the bedrooms were on. “I’ll be down in a minute. I have to wash my hands real quick. I got motor oil and all sorts of gunk on my gloves and your mama with murder me if I so much as graze her mother’s vintage glassware with them.”

Daniel smirked. “You could always boycott them again dad. Remember when you used that flask for your coffee and that Petri dish as a plate?”

Jack groaned and smirked before rolling his eyes. “Ah yes… The whole ectoplasm poisoning debacle. No thanks. I’d like to just wash my hands rather than have to toss neon green cookies into a trash bin for two weeks.”

Daniel nodded, “Doesn’t mom have a specimen frozen somewhere? To immortalize that entire biohazard?”

Jack reached for his bedroom handle and smirked. “Yes, she does. I almost made the mistake of taking it out of the mini fridge in the lab a few days ago.”

Daniel snorted and turned from him. “I’ll meet you downstairs. I need to go gather some things from my bedroom.”

Jack smiled. “Sure.” And with a brief nod, he disappeared into his bedroom.

Daniel’s feet tiredly plopped toward his own room. Sliding open the door and seeing the familiar unmade bed and messy carpet, he sighed. “Home sweet home… I really need to clean this.”
A socked foot nudged a couple of fast food wrappers. Sighing, he bent down and picked up the offending paper and plastic remnants before tossing them over to the trash can under his desk. Walking over to the left side of the room and into the closet, he began grabbing several pairs of jeans and a couple of t-shirts to stuff into his backpack. His fingers numbly brushed over the shelf above the rack and finding his spare thermos and a few miscellaneous ghost hunting tools, he quickly dragged them down. Bundling the pile and snatching his bag from the closet floor the sixteen-year-old walked across the room and grabbed several pairs of underwear and socks from the drawer. Jamming the pile into the faded bag he grinned in accomplishment before walking out of the room and making his way downstairs. Passing the staircase and the lab entrance wedged against the kitchen cabinetry, he tiredly entered the room to see his mother laying out plates.

Jazmine smiled weakly and patted the seat beside her expectantly. Nodding, the boy casually made his way to the seat nestled between his father and his sister and sat down. Retrieving his glass from earlier he took another sip leisurely before he started eating the three haphazardly stacked cakes plated on the blue ceramic in front of him.

Maddie filled herself a cup of coffee and sat down across from him. Grabbing the newspaper, she began skimming over the classifieds in search of technology, parts, or ghost hunting jobs to start off the day. Jack ate fairly quickly and with a wink stood up, “I have to fix that shield before we have another freak rainstorm.” Turning to Daniel, he grinned. “Remember to call tonight. And try to get Vladdie on the line?”

Daniel nodded and smiled. “I'll try to get him on the phone. Love you, dad.”

Ruffling Danny's hair, he made his way to the lab in an effort to gather more tools for the repairs. Maddie sighed after a few minutes and tore a page out of the newspaper. “I'll be back in a few hours Jaz. Apparently, there's a ghost running around in the park that's been terrorizing joggers.”

Turning to Danny, she smiled sadly. “Those leftovers are on the counter baby. Make sure he at least tries to get some sleep? And tell him I expect an explanation from him when I see him next time.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and smiled. Pecking a kiss on his cheek, she reached over to Jaz and gave her one as well. “See you two later.”

Jaz smiled. “Alright, mom. See you tonight.”

Maddie nodded and grabbing the keys to the vehicle she absently gripped onto the neon green ghost keychain and smiled. “Danny? There's twenty dollars on the counter next to the pancakes. Use it if you need to get anything. And Jaz? I know you have that study session with Mr.Baxter later this evening. I left your money in the living room.”

Both teens nodded. Jazmine piped, “Drive safe! And remember to pick up milk!”

Maddie smirked and waved farewell from the front door. Jazmine sighed in relief once she left and immediately turned to Danny. “Are you ready to go?”

Daniel nodded. “I've got everything I need to keep those bastards from eating him.”

Jaz nodded, “I'll be in the car. Gather up any last minute stuff.”

Standing up and grabbing her own keys, she went to the counter and snatched both the tupperware container containing the food and Daniel's money. Quickly making a beeline out of the kitchen, she rounded the corner and soon was out of sight. Daniel grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulders. Walking to the doorway, he stopped at the sound of his phone going off. Seeing the contact number,
he immediately answered.

“Sam? Is everything going alright over there?”

Sam’s voice sighed tiredly. “Did you know your archenemy had Excalibur in his basement?”

Daniel tensed. “What does a mystical sword have to do with anything? You guys weren’t attacked right?”

Sam assured. “No, no attacks. Tucker questioned about artifacts and Vlad was trying to explain why the zone wasn’t exactly a holiday hot spot. Long story short? Vlad got knocked out by a mystic sword and is currently sleeping off the mother of all paranormal makeout sessions.”

Daniel blanched, “Vlad did what?!?!”

Sam assured. “He was showing us a poltergeist artifact. Excalibur is an object that houses a female ghost named Vivian. She’s the Lady of the Lake from the story of King Arthur’s sword.” Sam took a breath, “She’s also an oracle and she wanted to show us why she was hidden away. So we both each received a paranormal poem dictating our current futures. Both ended up centered on doom and gloom. The ghost turned on Vlad and began pleading with him to allow her to see what path he was on. He refused so she drugged him up on a paranormal kiss and forced him to let her show us what’s going on with him.”

Daniel interrupted worriedly, “She didn’t hurt him right?!? I mean yesterday he was flatlining Sam! What were you guys thinking?!?”

Sam growled. “She actually managed to heal his chest up a bit. She was helping, Danny. That and she told us some fairly important stuff. Vlad’s being hunted actively. He’s been something’s prey for a while now and whatever it is has pretty brutal plans centered on catching him and torturing him to death. We even saw glimpses of what happened yesterday when the artifact started flashing imagery. To summarize? We either protect Vlad and keep him safe or he gets murdered by two sadistic monsters. As an added bonus? Vlad’s ghost half has been slowly poisoned for months now. The artifact said his mark is too weak to summon his friends to his aid.”

Daniel’s brow furrowed in frustration. “Jaz and I are on our way. Just make sure Vlad doesn’t get up again. We don’t need him tearing open something or coughing up blood again.”

Rounding the corner the teen quickly made his way through the living room and out of sight, completely unaware that two people had overheard a good majority of the conversation.

Jack Fenton numbly gripped the cufflink hidden in his hazmat suit pocket as Daniel ran by. “Vladdie….bud? What did you get yourself into?”

Bertrand quirked an eyebrow invisibly from above him. ‘Interesting. It would seem we need to speed this up a bit. We can’t have this moron ruining all of that wonderful misery we’ve cultivated. And we surely can’t have the boy becoming too attached. We still need him to break Vladimir again after all….’

Jack furrowed his brow. Taking out the metal from his pocket and biting his lip, he tiredly sat down on the stairs. “How do I go about this? If you’re really hurt right now I need to-”

Sighing, his gloved hand closed around the small circle tiredly. “Don’t worry Vladdie…I’ll visit you soon.”

Bertrand sneered and quickly exited the house. “No… My wife and I will be visiting your precious
Vladimir. We will be sure to send our regards.”

And with a wicked laugh that echoed over the building, the ghost quickly made his way to city hall.
Groaning, Vlad sleepily tried opening his eyes to look at whatever was poking his face. Sam smiled gently at him. "Welcome back Masters. You feeling alright?"

Vlad winced and numbly tried sitting up only to crumple to the bed weakly. Tucker worriedly leaned over him. "You're not hurt right?"

Vlad smiled weakly. "No worries...I'm just a little numb. Vivian can paralyze...ghosts and seeing as...how I'm half?....Kinda unable to move...correctly."

Tucker sighed in relief and pulled the blanket up tighter over Vlad's shoulder. "Do you remember anything that happened after she kissed you?"

Vlad winced. "No...not a clue...What happened?"

Both Tucker and Sam exchanged a look. "We got a basic warning that you're being hunted by two demons with a taste for Plasmius."

Vlad nodded and groaned against the blanket. "Figures...that it would be...something we...kind of...know?...Now I...feel drunk...and dizzy..."

Sam quirked an eyebrow, "Drunk and dizzy?"

Vlad blearily curled against the cot. "Yeah...room is spinning...and everything's...garbled...er...echoey...? Then there's the...migraine."

Sam nodded and questioned, "Is that what usually happens with her?"

Vlad winced and sleepily closed his eyes. Murmuring, he answered. "...It's the first....time...she has told my future...M' not...sure I liked it...."

Tucker gaped, "You mean you have a future forecasting sword and you just refrained from using it up until now?"

Vlad smirked and tiredly answered, "Foley?...No...fate is set...in stone...I'm not...going to narrow my gaze on one possibility...I've...only used Vivian's assistance......in healing...people...and combat...I've never...used her vessel with...myself in mind...It's probably why she...was yelling at me...before...she drugged me..."

Tucker smiled weakly and Sam mimicked the expression. "On a scale of one to ten? How tired are you?"

Vlad snorted and peaked his eyes open slightly, "Dead...tired."

Both teens chuckled and Sam rolled her eyes. "Danny and Jaz will be here in five minutes. I recommend you sleep while you can before they both give you a lecture."

Vlad groaned. "The mini-psychoanalyst and...the genderbent powerpuff girl...ohh...I'm just shaking in my boots...with that...combo..."

Tucker burst into laughter. Sam smirked. Vlad smiled weakly and his eyes numbly shut again. After a few moments, he was sound asleep.
Tucker shook his head in disbelief. “If Danny ever gets in a fight with him based purely off of sass he’s going to lose so quickly.”

Sam smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Danny said he’s bringing some more weaponry…”

Tucker snorted, “I have a feeling Vlad probably has some stuff here as well considering all of those crates, boxes, and barrels in that vault filled with swords and guns.”

Sam smirked. “Are you proposing we try offing a ghost with a sword or a gun?”

Tucker rolled his eyes and argued, “Paranormal swords and guns? Artifacts remember?”

Sam quirked an eyebrow before looking at Vlad. “We won’t use those unless he tells us what is safe. He did warn us that we could get turned into birds if we touched anything without being told to.”

Tucker shivered. Looking to Vlad he concluded, “Good point…”

Sam musedly glanced at the now cold tray of food she had brought down for Vlad. Tucker glanced at the food and raised an eyebrow. “That’s a crying shame, you didn’t make him any bacon?”

Sam shivered and furrowed her brow, “I am not going to cook up piglet for anyone Tuck. That and I am Jewish, bacon goes against principle.”

Tucker snorted, “It’s more of a lesson in avoiding waste. By boycotting meat that is raised and slaughtered, you’re really just making the loss of life a moot point. If I eat meat I’m making sure they didn’t die just to get thrown away in some market.”

Sam froze and whipped her head up to Tucker in surprise. “But wouldn’t avoiding it altogether cut off some of their revenue? Maybe fewer animals would die because someone decides to eat veggies and fruits instead of meat?”

Tucker smiled kindly and sat down tiredly. “And that’s your choice, Sammy. You’re entitled to your own beliefs and ways of dealing with problems. You like facing things head on like Danny but you’re better at weighing emotions than he is. I am more analytical.” Lifting his PDA he sighed. “If you want to really take a crack at the whole senseless killing and waste thing you should probably make a video or something. Your family has the connections.”

Sam smiled slightly. “I’ve thought about it…. But you know? I’d rather just see better regulation in the industry. If people eat meat it should be humane.”

Tucker smirked, “That video they showed you in health class in middle school really did a number on you huh?” Tucker paused, “I agree, Sammy. Nothing deserves to suffer but I also believe making sure the reason why they went through it in the first place shouldn’t be forgotten. God, knows I wouldn’t want a ghost cow or chicken chasing me down because I threw out their body like their death was meaningless. If there’s meat already cut and in the fridge, it stands to reason that cooking it would be ideal.”

Sam nodded in understanding. Pausing, she allowed a mellow grin to snake across her fuschia purple lips. “I’m glad you goobers are so down to earth…”

Tucker smiled broadly and nudged his glasses up his nose. “I think our ability to see things differently but still, agree with one another is what makes us such a kickass team.”
Sam smirked. "Why the sudden urge to go all sentimental on me, Tuck?"

Tucker glanced toward Vlad. "I like to think if you and I are friends Sammy, then maybe Vlad and Danny don’t have such a long shot at making it to the same goal."

Sam looked to Vlad and her gaze saddened. "I don’t really think they are that different."

Tucker smirked and raised a hand mockingly from his lap to count off the similarities, "Temperamental? Check. Half ghost? Yep. Gets constantly chased by the Fentons? Again, check. Poor eating habits?" Tucker looked up from his fingers and back to Vlad. "Scratch that last one, Vlad is way worse at managing himself."

Sam winced and nodded. "Instant ramen and apples… It’s a miracle he’s even still around."

Vlad shifted slightly from where he laid and both teenagers worriedly stood and walked toward him. He was sweating again and numbly clawing a hand against the covers. Feverish breaths that seemed to mist slightly escaped his lips in small labored gasps. Tucker and Sam immediately reached over and pulled him into a sitting position. Vlad winced and coughed before noting the two. Grimacing, he reached a hand to his throat. "The burning… it’s getting worse…"

Sam nodded and reaching over to the tray grabbed the glass of water she had retrieved from upstairs. "Here. Take slow sips."

Vlad nodded and numbly reached for the glass. Taking a sip he winced and retracted the glass. "What the-?!"

Sam and Tucker looked to him questioningly. Sam worriedly went to grab the glass only to yelp as the cup made contact with her skin. The glass fell from her hand instantly and shattered on the floor. Vlad worriedly grabbed her hand to inspect it. Seeing her fisting the wounded palm, he dizzily pleaded, "Ms. Manson…? Please. Let me see it."

Sam took a breath and unfurled her palm to reveal red and blistered skin. Vlad’s brow furrowed. "What is going on here?"

He glanced to the glass in the floor and then quickly retracted his own hands from her wrist in horror. Tucker grimaced. "What the fuck did that blonde demon give you Vlad?"

Vlad paled. "I don’t know…” Looking from Tucker to Sam again, he raised his palm up and directed. "Ms. Manson? Can you trust me for a moment?"

Sam looked into his sickly features worriedly. "That depends on what you're planning on doing Vlad."

Vlad tiredly answered. "My job?” Furrowing his brow, he looked away from her. "That burn needs to be treated."

Sam sighed. "If it's all the same to you Plasmius? I’d rather you not."

Vlad flinched and his gaze went to his lap. Sam, seeing the expression looked to him remorsefully. "It's not like that."

Vlad nodded and sighed. "Please? I'd rather not have another mistake layered on my ledger. There’s enough red already…"

Tucker grimaced. "Vlad. It's just a small burn. Danny gave us plenty when he was first trying to
Vlad glanced up and motioned toward Sam dizzily. “Well, Daniel would've had a better grip on his powers if I would've-” Vlad grimaced and tiredly brought a hand to his forehead. “You do realize he never would've been cursed to this if I just would have come clean to Maddie and Jack right?”

Sam and Tucker both cringed. Sam’s shoulders slumped. “Do you really consider it that big of a curse?”

Vlad looked at her and smiled gently. “I regret many things in my life, Samantha. My greatest regret has never been taking that blast. If given the option I probably would do it all over again because I know two people I consider my siblings would have probably suffered in my place. Whether my role or what has happened to me, as a result, is considered a curse? That’s debatable.”

Tucker sighed. “I guess that's something you and Danny are separate in. Danny doesn't deal well with pressure and he jumps to conclusions easily. He blames being ghosted for a lot of his problems.”

Vlad glanced at the shattered glass on the concrete. “My godson is a mess isn't he?”

Tucker and Sam both whipped their heads up. “What??”

Vlad looked up tiredly and chuckled dryly. Coughing, he elaborated, “My life has never been one that most would willingly choose. And god…. it hurt so badly when I received those letters... Not a single phone call or note prior, no signs they even knew I existed or lived and then to have them place their faith in me for protecting two of the most precious things in their lives? To raise and love them in the event Maddie and Jack could not? I remember when Jazmine's birth announcement came first.”

Vlad's eyes lit up slightly. “She was so beautiful. Jack even gave her my little sister's name. He named her middle moniker, Elizabeth...I-...” Vlad squeezed his leg. “I was so happy that they stayed together. That they married and had a baby. And when Daniel was born I was even more surprised and overjoyed. But that joy only brought confusion and heartache.”

Tucker sat down tiredly. “So you're technically like Danny's uncle.”

Vlad winced and nodded. He paused for a moment before continuing. “You know what hurt the most? Reading those letters and realizing my best friends thought they'd die in some freak lab accident one day or get maimed by some paranormal entity…”

He paused and rubbed the back of his neck before smiling weakly again. “And then to realize that you're half of the thing they fear and hate...That you're a monster? A sin that they think shouldn't exist? Something that doesn't feel or understand pain? A simple shadow of a man doomed to wander about because of an obsession or ghostly volition?”

Sam and Tucker both reached out for him to comfort him. Vlad backed away slightly. “Miss Manson? Mr. Foley? I'd rather you not touch me until I can figure out what's causing these power fluctuations. I don't want to accidentally hurt someone.”

Looking to Sam's burnt hand he growled in frustration. “Then again I already managed that much didn't I?”

Sam smiled comfortingly. “If you love Mr. and Mrs. Fenton so much why did you-”

Vlad sighed. “Love makes people do stupid things. I was trying to protect them.”
Tucker raised an eyebrow. “From what?”

Vlad paused and a darkness filled his eyes. “Anything I say on the matter would be grossly inadequate. Just know that I did what I did because I had no other alternatives. That entire ordeal was slated to happen from the moment I got blasted by the portal.”
Vlad's eyes dulled slightly and he swayed against the cot. Noting the change Sam panicked and reached out to steady him. Vlad weakly tried pushing her and Tucker away as they gripped onto him. Whipping out her phone, she dialed Daniel. He picked up on the first ring.

"Is everything okay still?"

Sam quickly questioned. "How far out are you? He's starting to flare up again!"

There was a dull click and not a minute later Danny Phantom was phasing through the lab in a hurried panic. Vlad grimaced and weakly tried phasing out of their grasps. "Stop….I'm….fine.."

Daniel growled, "You aren't fine! You're a walking disaster case with ghost powers! Stay still, you stubborn moron!"

Vlad rolled his eyes numbly and seeing Daniel's ghost sense, paled. A green mist latched onto Vlad's shoulder and with a small thud, he crashed into something in the lab. Coughing from the sudden teleportation, he tried to at least get to his hands and knees.

A taloned hand grabbed onto his neck and dug into the sealed bite wound before yanking him up. A glowing green ghost leeringly sneered and threw Vlad toward the portal. Vlad growled as he made it to his hands and knees. "How dare you enter an embassy's domicile?"

The green figure’s voice morphed and fluctuated between tones and dialects as it spoke, remaining indistinguishable. "Some embassy, aren't you? You're weak Plasmius. Tell me? Was it your little girl's untimely end that finally broke that will of yours?"

The spirit leisurely threw up a shield around them as Daniel flew into the room. Vlad numbly struggled to his feet and gripped his now bleeding neck before glaring at the intruder. "What are you getting at demon?"

The mist-like figure snickered and raised a few fingers nonchalantly to stare at its own black talons. "I'm just doing damage control. We can't have you re-gaining any strength after all. Not like it matters. Little Vladimir is just as helpless and pathetic as that kid that demoness tore into teeny tiny pieces!"

Vlad's eyes sparked and rage engulfed his entire frame. Daniel and the other two teenagers were desperately blasting away and attacking the shield. The green entity noticed and, turning to face Daniel, smirked broadly. Making sure to draw the words from his lips so the boy could read them, he evilly sneered. "Make sure to watch Daniel. This is what happens to pathetic freaks like you and little Vladimir."

Vlad was making a move forward to fight only for a searing pain to rip through his chest. Staggering, his eyes widened in horror and a shaky hand went to his mouth. Red dripped through his fingers and splattered against the floor as he coughed. The green figure glanced back and duplicated. The duplicate switched places with the one laughing at Daniel's horrified features and tapped on the shield to draw the enraged sixteen-year-old's gaze. "Look at that. The little freak can't breathe! I wonder why that is? Maybe his lungs are cooking? Wouldn't that be scrumptious Phantom?"

The other mist figure cocked it's head as it approached Vlad. "Does that hurt Masters? I hope it does…"

Vlad numbly glared and attempted to shield himself. The green mist rolled its eyes at the weak...
energy construct and blasted Vlad through it before clasping its taloned hand to Vlad's shoulder. Vlad glowered through his pain and went to charge a hand to strike. Reaching up to his assailant, he numbly blasted it in the opposite shoulder. The figure hissed and turned angrily, only to see Vlad's knees buckle from under him.

Reaching down and grasping onto his neck, he pinned him against the shield and began leisurely securing his hands to the construct. Vlad's eyes sparked white and his right hand flashed only for his eyes to try shutting. The light he had manifested quickly dimmed and dissipated. The mist tsked at the attempt and reached a hand under Vlad's chin. Lifting his dazed face he turned him from side to side to inspect the growing damage from his proximity. Seeing the smoke curling from Vlad's mouth and the halfa starting to scream in agony he moved out of the way so the teenagers could see. Vlad’s red eyes darted in and out spasmodically as he screamed and soon his body was shaking as he hacked and coughed in a desperate bid to get oxygen. Turning to Daniel, the mist crossed its arms. “I stand corrected. His insides are melting. I bet that's a bitch isn't it?”

Daniel could be seen screaming desperately at the sight and tried even more frantically to break through the dome.

Vlad’s body began forcefully shifting and his chest arched. The mist next to him reached down to Vlad's now black hair and lifted his face up to its own. “You know the brat is just toying with you right? Who would honestly care about you after you let her do that? Not once but twice to the people you cared about? Doesn't that sting?”

Vlad's eyes teared and he began darting in and out as another shift ripped through his now almost completely limp body. Releasing Vlad from the wall and watching him fall against the floor, the figure glowered at the teen focusing himself in preparation to blast the shield with a ghostly wail.

Both their attentions were caught by the flash of black that shifted Vlad. Reaching down and grabbing onto Plasmius, he sneered and threw him roughly in front of Daniel. The duplicate then snickered as Daniel abruptly cut off the buildup for his ghostly wail. The teen's eyes went to Vlad, who was now semiconscious on the floor and gurgling numbly.

Metal was buckling and bubbling near Vlad's body. Seeing the glowing white metal, the mist like ghost crouched down and yanked Vlad up. Slamming him against the shield in front of Daniel, he languidly pointed to the heated and now almost pooling steel. Daniel's eyes widened in horror as Vlad was dragged to the segment of the floor. The figure then threw its voice outside of the shield. “What should we burn first? His face or his hands? Tell me brat...which do you think would be best?”

Daniel snarled. “YOU SICK SON OF A BITCH! LET HIM GO!”

The mist looked toward Vladimir and seeing the halfa now completely unconscious he glanced back to the teen and teased. “Look at that… Big, bad Plasmius seems to have lost his ability to breath again. I wonder if I can get that precious halfa heart stalled twice in one day?” As he spoke two rings engulfed Vlad and sluggishly began splitting. The green specter sighed amusedly. “Darn...The freak’s not shifting correctly. I guess I'll help him along, hmm?”

Wrapping its hand tighter around Vlad's throat, it squeezed just enough to force the shift to speed up. Vlad's limp and bandaged human form came back and the green ghost whistled.

Sam and Tucker growled.

The entity snorted at them. “And it looks like the little loser’s friends decided to start investing in this little asset as well. It's a shame I don't plan on leaving him here.”
Spying the open portal the specter smirked. Turning toward Daniel and squeezing Vlad's neck, he leaned in next to the adult and grinned as Vlad's eyes dulled further and his chest arched from the proximity. The smoke twirling between his fangs was making the shielded space hazy. Seeing the bandages on Vlad's neck, the demon glowered. “Well look at that! Someone decided to keep my wife's poison from spreading.”

Turning toward them again and seeing the still bubbling metal, the figure purred. “You wanted me to let him go? I'll let him go.” Dragging Vlad to the hot surface he lifted him up by his neck and was about to drop him when a large blast echoed through the space. It shattered through the shield and into the spectral assailant’s shoulder with a loud electrical crack. Hissing, the ghost dropped Vladimir next to the bubbling metal and quickly teleported away. The demon left only a few faint traces of ectoplasm plastered across the metal from where it had stood as Jaz’s blow tore into it. Vlad slumped to his knees and, still suffocating, began falling toward the smoldering segment of flooring. A hand caught his shoulder before he could connect and gently hugged him away from the steel.

Jazmine numbly deactivated the Fenton Ghost Peeler as she ran forward.

Daniel activated his core against the adult and watched as the smoke strangled off and stopped. After a few minutes, Vlad's eyes regained some consciousness.

Trying to speak, he weakly attempted smiling. “Thank….g-god Jazmine...has...her m-mother's...aim?”

Daniel laughed somewhat in relief as did the rest of the group. “You wouldn't be saying that if you saw how she handles a thermos.”

Vlad numbly choked. “...S-sorry....about....all....of this....”

A hand reached under his neck and feeling the fever gently patted him. Sam worriedly looked to Jaz. “Jaz? What do we do? He's not breathing correctly.”

Jazmine's hand gently brushed aside her brother's and feeling Vlad's skin she winced. “He's delirious again.... He had too little oxygen and the heat made it worse...”

Vlad flinched as he was picked up and carried to the infirmary. Dizzy and out of sorts the adult numbly grasped onto a small segment of Daniel's sleeve as he was cradled. Shaking, he passed out against him. Turning to Jazmine, Daniel prodded. “Don't we have a prototype ghost shield somewhere at the house?”

Vlad grimaced as he was laid down. Both Sam and Tucker were worriedly stepping over broken glass to check him themselves. Tucker, feeling Vlad's pulse, snapped off his hat and growled in frustration. “WHAT THE ACTUAL F**K IS WITH EVERYTHING TRING TO MAIM AND TORTURE HIM?!?!CAN’T THEY GO AND SCREW WITH EACH OTHER INSTEAD?!?!”

Vlad groaned and turned against the cot. Panting, he tossed his head and gasped as he turned into Plasmius yet again. Green fever could be seen under the greyish blue skin as the half-ghost continued tossing in discomfort and shaking. Daniel flinched and quickly pulled Vlad up against himself. Plasmius writhed slightly as he was leaned against his shoulder but quickly relaxed.
A Special Brand of Unlucky

Bringing a hand to the back of Vlad's neck to steady him and feeling a strange rectangular bump through his glove he questioningly phased of Vlad's cape and tilted him forward. Spying an indentation near Vlad's hairline, he stiffened and motioned Tucker to look. “Tuck? What's that on his neck? I can't look at it from here.”

Tucker pawed the hair and taking a step back his face grew ashen. “Danny….dude… That's a serial number.”

Both Jazmine and Sam leaned in to inspect the area. Nimble fingers lifted a few spiked locks of black and graced across the scarred flesh. Vlad shivered at their touch and Daniel patted his back as he was inspected. Sam looked away in discomfort. “ You know...my great uncle was one of the people placed in Auschwitz? They'd tattoo them to mark them as prisoners….or working property…. This looks just like that…”

Jazmine's eyes darted over the digits questiongly. “ It's a brand.” Pausing, she looked to Vlad sadly before bringing her attention back to the mark. “The flesh seems to have healed over almost completely. There's just a little bit of scarring left. I can't even make out what the numbers were… These last two look like letters though.”

Tucker rubbed a hand through his curly hair and tiredly leaned his head against a wall. “What.the.actual.hell?”

Vlad shifted slightly and his pointed ears flicked up minutely as Daniel readjusted his hold. Sam looked to Daniel worriedly, “ Did that ghost have some sort of flame power?”

Daniel growled. “ Probably.”

Jazmine tiredly sat in the chair in front of the teenager. “ He can't stay in this house. It's not safe.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “ Where do you think we should take him? The guy can't go to a hospital. They'll dissect him.”

Jaz rolled her eyes. “ I think we should bring him to one of the abandoned tenant buildings on Newport street. At least there it'll be harder for anyone to track him.”

Tucker looked over to Vlad and worriedly questioned. “ What do we do if he gets wounded again? He needs the medical supplies…”

Jazmine motioned around. “ We’ll just have to take what we need from here. A day away from this house should give him enough time to try and heal without that Slimer reject coming back to barbecue him.”

Daniel nodded. “ Is there a certain building you have in mind?”

Jazmine furrowed her brow and after a minute nodded. “ Yeah… Actually? I think I may have something better than one of those buildings....”

Yanking out her phone she pressed a few numbers into the screen and waited as it rang. “ Hi, Miss Maynard? Remember when you were talking about offering a safe haven if Vladimir needed it?”

Daniel focused his hearing and began listening in as he cradled Vlad.
A worried voice chimed, “Yes! Of course! Is he alright?!”

Jazmine grimaced. “He needs a hiding spot for the night. Something broke into his house and hurt him pretty badly. Do you have space for him and an ecto blasting teenager or two?”

“The attic in my building has a bed set up for emergencies. You're welcome to stay here as long as you need to. Do you have a pen and paper to write the address or do you want me to text it to you?”

“If you could text it to me that would be swell. We need to carry him out to the car and pack some stuff.”

There was a pause. “How badly did he get hurt?”

Jazmine winced and Daniel grimaced. “Pretty bad for normal ghost standards. He's got a fever and he’s unconscious again.”

“Okay. I'll message you the address. Just knock when you get here and I'll help you in.”

“Thank you.”

The woman paused. “I can't have my best customer kicking the bucket on me. Just make sure he arrives here in one piece?”

“Will do. See you soon.” And with a click, she hung up.

Daniel quirked an eyebrow, “Was that the waitress from two days ago?”

Jazmine nodded. “She gave me her cell number because she wanted to be sure I'd call her when we got Vlad home safely.”

Floating up with Vlad in hand Daniel nodded curtly. “I'm going to take him to the car. How many duplicates do you guys need to grab the stuff we’re taking?”

Sam furrowed her brow. “We need one upstairs to grab my stuff and one to grab your clothes and a shirt for Vlad. Tucker, Jaz and I can snatch some food and the medical stuff.”

Pausing, she worriedly glanced toward Excalibur. Walking toward the sword, she gingerly picked up the blade. “I'm going to go close that vault. We don't need that thing coming back here and stealing a bunch of paranormal weaponry.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “I think it would still be able to get in Sam. We phased into the vault remember?”

Sam's brow furrowed. Walking over to Daniel, she questioned. “Can you float down to floor level?”

Daniel, seeing her intentions, looked to Vlad and sighed tiredly before descending. Sam gently shook the adult. Dazed, half-lidded red eyes groggily opened. “Ms.Manson…?”

Sam smiled weakly, “Vlad? We need to lock the vault. If we close the door nothing can phase into the room right?”

Vlad nodded yes before rasping. “S-Spectral...seal….causes the room...to shift….N-Nothing goes in or o-out…”

Sam nodded and apologetically added. “I'm sorry for waking you up. Go back to sleep Plasmius.”
Vlad coughed and gently smiled. Closing his eyes slightly, he added. “T-thank you….for thinking….a-about it…..” Pausing he drowsily finished. “This…isn’t…m-my week……”

Jazmine peaked over and smiled reassuringly. “It's going to be alright Vlad. Just get some rest?”

Vlad's eyes numbly began drifting out as he was supported against Daniel. He coughed and grimaced as his body tried shifting but failed to cement the change back to Masters. Daniel flinched and the other teens cringed.

Daniel redirected Vlad. “Vlad?”

Vlad blearily groaned, “S-sorry….I'm not…..trying to-”

A cool hand gently went to Vlad's neck and Daniel cut him off. “We know Fruit-Loop… Just breathe.”

Vlad winced out a sigh. “I don't think...I'll be able...to sleep. Badger….My chest….It hurts to breathe…”

Jazmine sighed, “Yeah, smoke inhalation does that.”

Tucker spotted Vlad’s neck and groaned. “Danny? We need to fix him up before we leave.”

Vlad dizzily gripped onto Daniel’s sleeve as he was propped back up on the cot. “Daniel?…..This….probably…..is partially my fault..”

Daniel and everyone else present snorted or rolled their eyes. Grasping Vlad’s shoulder, Daniel inquired, “How so Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad winced as his bandages where phased off and the wound was inspected. “Probably….residual energy from Shadow…..”

Daniel paused and looked to Vlad worriedly, “That wouldn’t make sense Vlad….The most I’ve ever been affected by Shadow was-” Thinking back on it and biting his lip he turned to Tucker.

“Tuck? How long was that bad luck stint we had three or four months ago?”

Tucker raised an eyebrow. “I think it was four days?”

Vlad groaned. “Have you gotten... walloped by him.. recently? Now that...your core is active?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Actually? He’s avoided having Shadow do any damage on me…I want to say he’s being more friendly but…?” He shrugged slightly and prodded, “Why the interest?”

Vlad smiled weakly. “Badger?.... Avoid pissing off that poltergeist...in the future… He won't go easy on you anymore.”

Daniel’s face fell. “What are you getting at?”

Vlad chuckled and coughed against his free hand. Looking up to Daniel, he matter of factly added. “Shadow is a….curse poltergeist...that takes into account….age...experience...and power levels….To put this bluntly…..It's like...a snake. Its ability is the equivalent of venom….It can control the dose it gives...I’m probably still stuck in a bad...luck spell...You’re still young...but now that you have an operational core?....Pfff….he’d do the same to you in a millisecond...despite Johnny’s wishes…..”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Well, that explains a lot. How else would you even remotely end up this
bad off in the span of a week?"

Vlad smiled tiredly. “If this doesn’t kill me? The humiliation of being tooted around like some sort of damsels in distress by a teenage vigilante will.”

Daniel awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. “It’s not like I enjoy it either. Neither of us has much of a choice considering you can’t even walk right now.’

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched. Fueled by a desire to prove he was capable of such a simple task, his voice confidently declared, “I can most certainly walk!”

Daniel glared and his eyes flashed. Grinning he growled, “Fine. Prove it.”

Vlad clumsily staggered to his feet and went to move forward only for the entire room to spin uncomfortably. Tucker rushed to him and quickly latched onto his shoulders to keep him from crumpling to the concrete.

Daniel smirked. “And that cements it. You’re stuck with this arrangement until you can manage on your own.”

Vlad growled. “You’re enjoying this aren’t you?”

Daniel quirked an eyebrow and then leaned down to Vlad’s slumped form in order to stare him down. “Well, I was right which means you were wrong, Fruit-Loop...”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched and composing himself he groaned to Tucker, “And I’ve officially been sassed by the pseudo hamster.”

Tucker smiled gently. “I don’t think it counts Plas. He kind of knew your pride was only going to help you along so far.”

Vlad smirked slightly and winced.

Jazmine worriedly leaned in and questioned. “What hurts?”

Vlad quirked an eyebrow and looked from himself to Jazmine with disbelief.


Clasping a hand weakly to his throat, he sighed. “I think whatever it did burnt the inside of my throat.”

Everyone winced and Vlad snorted. “I think the injury is pretty minor.”

Sam’s eyebrow twitched. “Yes...because getting the inside of your body burned is totally minor.”

Vlad rolled his eyes. Opening his mouth to speak again, he paled and groaned before making a desperate pass for Daniel’s shoulder as he phased threw Tucker’s grasp involuntarily. Seeing Vlad’s body falling toward the glass, Daniel quickly snatched him. Moaning, Vlad dizzily curled his head towards his own chest in an attempt to stop the nausea that had accompanied the sudden movement.

“And now your powers are fucking up again.” Daniel worriedly put a gloved hand to his forehead. “On top of being feverish...”

Vlad winced and peaked up to the worried teens before sighing, “So now what? Daniel.....I can’t control much of anything right now....”
Daniel grimaced and tightened his hold slightly on the adult. “Just don’t hold this against me when you wake up.”

Vlad tensed, “What are-?”

A sharp, prodding pain latched through the skin on Vlad’s lower back and his eyes closed almost instantaneously as he body numbed and went lax. Two black rings sluggishly split and Vlad Masters slumped against the teen’s shoulder.

Daniel sighed and pulled out the spectral dart his mother had been working on the last few months as gently as he could. “That’ll keep him under for a bit.”

Sam worriedly stepped forward. “Isn’t that dangerous? You just drugged him with something and you don’t know-?”

Jazmine interrupted, “It’s a Fenton Ghost Dazer. Chillax, Sam... It’s an energy neutralizer.”

Daniel gently felt Vlad’s pulse and smiled tiredly. “Mom accidentally nicked me with one of those a few weeks ago. I was out for three or four hours. She thought I fainted.”

Jaz nodded. “He couldn’t shift for another two afterward.”

Tucker bent down and smirked. “A humane alternative to using the ghost taser, huh?”

Daniel winced and tightened his grip. “He’s hurting enough without me adding to it. I’ve done enough damage this week.”

Daniel duplicated the requested amount of doubles and curtly nodded to Tucker before phasing himself and Vlad to Jaz’s car.

Jazmine sighed and Sam turned to lock the vault.
A Planned Date

Bertrand clutched the torn, mist-like ligament hanging from his shoulder blade angrily as he landed in the janitor’s closet in city hall.

Spectra looked up at his abrupt appearance and quickly rushed to his aid. “Berty? Hubby? What happened??”

Staggering slightly he glowered to the wall beside him knowing her concern would quickly shift to rage at his admissions. Cradling his head she gently cupped the wound. “Did that fat oath and his wife get to you?”

Bertrand sighed. “Penelope? I-”

Tsking, she tentatively touched the limb and snarled, “Which one did it? I'll tear their eyes out!”

Bertrand swallowed dryly. “You know how I wanted you to accompany me to Vladimir's earlier?”

She paused and her skin morphed slightly to her mist form in anger. “You went anyway didn't you?”

Bertrand growled. “Well, now we have bigger problems! His core is showing more aggressive signs of forced acclimation. In a few days, he's either going to be a corpse or he'll be a fully formed halfa!”

Spectra’s brow furrowed at the news. “What signs did you see?”

Bertrand snarled furiously and held up the hand that had gripped Vladimir's neck. “The bull burned me from the brief contact I made with his flesh and the floor was melting. He’s a fire core for sure.”

Spectra worriedly began pacing and noting the ectoplasm pooling in the floor in thick globules she sighed. “You'll have to feed on some of the blood I stole from him yesterday. That wound is too extensive to heal quickly with a simple detour into the zone.”

Bertrand sighed. “I wasn't expecting that red-headed Fenton twerp to be packing heavy artillery.”

Spectra raised an eyebrow and tapped a manicured finger to her lips in contemplation. “So little Jazmine is in on this as well now?”

Bertrand snorted, “I’d say she's fully invested in our meal. The brat shot me to save Vladimir.”

Spectra growled in frustration. “Why were you so intent on checking on him Berty? You never elaborated early!”

Bertrand sighed heavily. “Jack Fenton poses a problem now. He seems to have pieced together Vladimir’s involvement in saving the brat from that Mahr.”

Spectra’s lip turned into a sultry frown. Pulling a small ampule of blood from her dress suit pocket she tossed it to her husband and sat down on the edge of the desk by the wall. “So that oath is finally closing in on dear little Vladimir’s double life. That definitely adds some layers of intrigue to our little cat and mouse game.”

Bertrand looked to the ampule of blood and apologetically questioned. “Don’t we need this for your plan, darling? If I take it-”
Spectra raised a hand and interrupted. “We will amend the plan. By the looks of things, we will have to make our move sooner rather than later in order to butcher our prize before he fully adapts or destabilizes. I wanted a few weeks to secure their bond but hearing about the situation we may have to rush our little antics in favor of more aggressive tactics. This situation may end up being a blessing in disguise. Use the ampule, Berty. We will get more from him before the show starts.”

Bertrand nodded and quickly downed the contents of the vial. A sharp pulse of white tinted, red energy pulsed through his form and the wound dripping down his arm caved in on itself before filling with new ghost matter. Shivering at the power spike, Bertrand smiled druggedly. “At least we know a physical feeding will be far more potent than just siphoning his energy as we normally do.”

Spectra nodded absently. “Halfa’s are such a delicacy… Two spectrums endowed with strong life forces and powers that neither human or ghost can even imagine. The fact that he’s an embassy only adds to his blood’s value. We would be fools just to consume scraps of shattered emotion when his physical essence is so much more fulfilling.”

Pausing, she sighed heavily. “I was looking forward to dragging this out but now the entire meal has to be prepped and put together in a rush!”

Growling, she slammed her hand into the desk. “The question is how do we incorporate that fat lard ball into this?”

Bertrand beamed. “I see an opportunity, my dear... We know Vladimir’s volitions, his heart’s desires, and his innermost fears. We know every sin and grace he’s ever made. And little Daniel Fenton is no different. Granted, we haven’t fed off that little freak since we tried offing little Miss Brainiac, but we still know enough. Wouldn’t adding something precious as collateral sweeten the pot?”

Spectra paused and, looking to Bertrand, a wicked grin flickered across her lips. Jumping to her feet she clapped her hands together. “That’s brilliant!”

Bertrand grinned toothely and winked, “Isn’t that why you married me, darling?”

Spectra coely wrapped her fingers under his jaw as he transformed back into his normal elderly form. “On the contrary, I married you because you know how to take what you want. You’re devious, possessive, and all mine.”

Bertrand smirked and leaned in against her touch. “Mmmm, and you’re bloodthirsty, conniving, and drop dead gorgeous.”

Spectra giggled at the joke and chortled. “You know we have to make arrangements now….Right, Berty?”

Bertrand rolled his eyes and cupped a hand to her cheek tiredly. “How do you want to go about this? It’s only a matter of time before Vladimir’s appointees figure out he is in peril and return from the zone to aid him.”

Spectra quirked an eyebrow. “Ah…yes... Skulker and that ex-demon. They’re at what? Almost three weeks away from their precious leader while in search of a mahr that no longer exists? I would wager they both will be returning soon seeing as how they were so worried for his well being prior to departing.”

Bertrand grimaced. “Shouldn’t we close Vladimir’s portal forcefully? If they come back to soon our plans will be in jeopardy.”
Spectra nodded and turned to the desk she had been sitting on prior. Rifling through one of the drawers she amusingly added. “We cannot close Vladimir's portal yet. We still need to gather sufficient materials to synthesize a worthy embassy suppressant that takes into account Vladimir's new spectral energy patterns. The problem is I don't know what ghost pharmaceuticals would be most suitable.”

Bertrand tapped his chin. “Can't we just continue the regular doses of our normal spectral poison? It works effectively enough.”

Spectra rolled her eyes and flicked her wrist languidly to her bosom. “Any more blood blossom and he’ll taste off. We need a different brand of misery for our little delicacy. I'm thinking about using wraiths weed….and we need to harvest that plant from the plain near the border between territories. A spectral tranquilizer to keep him knocked out for a couple of hours is also a necessity.”

Bertrand nodded. “But what of his appointees?”

Spectra growled and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “We will gather the plants first and then we'll lock his portal. Unless they somehow find a natural portal in the zone that leads back to Amity, they’ll be far too late to assist him.”

Fingering his cufflink, Bertrand sighed. “Won't we have to shatter their core's as well Penelope?”

A wickedly fanged grin lit Spectra's features. “I wonder? Berty? Do you think we can forcefully activate the embassy's life-line attribute? If we reverse it and feed on him while it's activated his little friends should perish as he does.”

Bertrand laughed giddily and walked up to Spectra. Wrapping a hand around her shoulder, he nodded. “Yes. I think that's perfectly manageable. What else do we need?”

Spectra paused in thought. Turning under his arm and leaning down to cradle his jaw again, she smiled gently. “First? Break into his home and gather that infernal power shorting device…. What was it called again?”

Bertrand’s eyebrow twitched and a weary smirk flickered across his jaw. “The Plasmius Maximus?”

“Pompous isn't he?” She rolled her eyes.

Bertrand grinned. “Just like a certain brat, hmmm?” Cracking his knuckles, he motioned for her to continue. “Anything else?”

Spectra pecked a kiss to his cheek and pulled at his necktie. “We need a stockade.” She grinned. “I was thinking about pilfering the Fenton’s new Spectre Deflector and recalibrating it. We can sequence it to his ghost signature so that it only harms him. It'll be easier to feed once he can't fight back.”

Bertrand grinned broadly and nodded. “And what of Jack Fenton and the brat? If Vladimir is discovered prior to us taking him, that little halfa and that orange suited travesty may end up unveiling the truth and ruining all of that savory fear and heartache we've been selectively breeding in our dear little embassy.”

Heels tapped against the floor for a moment, filling the silence will dull wooden clicks as she pondered the question. “I doubt either halfa would willingly reveal themselves. Jack Fenton may pose a problem, however. How worried is he?”

Bertrand snorted and glowered, “That fudge obsessed, Telly Tubby reject is fully set on marching up
to Vladimir's front door and forcefully checking him for injury or ailments. You'd think that fat bastard would have taken the hints or pieced together what happened to his dear friend!”

Eyes lighting in mirth, he smiled at the thought before purring, “It's pathetic to see a ghost hunter with no knowledge that his own child and dearest friend are half dead because of his own shortsightedness!”

Spectra snorted, “Still spiteful about those two years playing pretend, huh Berty?”

Bertrand’s features soured and he turned abruptly. Raising his hand angrily, he slammed it into a wall. “TWO YEARS COMPLETELY WASTED IF THAT IGNORANT GHOST HUNTER TELLS VLADIMIR THE TRUTH!”

Spectra floated over and laced her hands through his hair. “Why not visit him as Vladimir's secretary? Or better yet? Break into the bull’s home and call him using Vladimir's phone. You drank enough of the embassy's blood to be able to mimic his voice again. Just put him off of Vladimir's tail for a bit until we're ready to harvest.”

Bertrand's shoulders dropped. Turning up his head to look at her he sighed. “So I have to do that again?”

Spectra turned from him and walked back over to her desk. “I can distract him if you wish? I partook in his blood as well. I may not be able to change forms as you do but I can mimic him enough to sound passable.”

Bertrand nodded but quirked an eyebrow before rubbing his chin. Looking up to her face he questioned, “And what of Vladimir's new bodyguards? I doubt they'll leave him unattended now that he's injured so severely. Sneaking into that home will practically be impossible!”

Spectra snorted. “No risk, no reward darling. You've already set them on alert so now it's your job to make sure our precious little test case doesn't escape to pasture due to some foolish human’s kind heart.”

Bertrand groaned but nodded in agreement. “We might as well go and make a house call on the little invalid.”

Spectra smirked, “Yes, yes indeed.” Interlocking her fingers with his, she floated through the ceiling and toward the general direction of Vladimir's estate. ‘I wonder?’ She mused, ‘How will Vladimir look with a collar?’
A Busy Line

Jack Fenton was many things. Reckless, stubborn, obsessive, complacent…. but he prided himself on one key factor of his personality. He was protective of the people he cherished. Probably to a dangerous extent.

Being a neon orange version of a discount store ghostbuster was a result of such characteristics. He was a stubborn scientist with a reckless passion for the paranormal that bordered on insanity. Jack knew it as a provoked obsession. A hobby built from a knowing that something inhuman had, at one time, watched his family...touched his children, and broken into his home for god knows what reason. His superstitions were amply justified. The Wisconsin Ghost, spectral buzzards, ghost animals, a strange mechanical robot like specter, and even a young biker ghoul who had dated his daughter had all entered his home with rather vague or unsavory purposes. Each had also gotten away from him. The town claimed his inability as a simple case of foolish rage driven hunting. ‘A fool with a key to the gun cabinet.’ Had been the previous mayor's words for describing him. He was complacent and that led to serious damage to property. His complacency usually was labeled as idiocy by his neighbors and associates. The problems and mistakes were often due to his often diverted attention. Like any genius mind, he was easily derailed from a task or idea unless something could come out of it that justified or entertained him. His lumbering, door- like frame also did him no favors. Coordination was often his biggest hazard in the laboratory due to his stocky frame. Where his petite five-foot five-inch spouse could easily maneuver around delicate flasks and almost crystalline vials with ease he often found himself knocking over shelving or tripping over wires. Where his wife had claimed the basement he had claimed the operations booth on the roof due to size and comfort with the materials. He was a tinkerer and she was a doctor. He could do finesse if he set his mind to it but he preferred his wife's steady and gentle touch over lab work rather than his own gruff and often clumsy movements.

Pacing in the kitchen tiredly, he swept a hand through salt and peppered hair before looking to the stove clock. The old appliance flashed mutely, signaling an hour’s passing since Daniel and Jazmine had departed.

‘What the actual heck did the kids mean?’ Looking back up to the time readout nervously he pivoted his boot and completed another circuit in front of the lab door. His tools lay forgotten on the dining table where he had set them. There were no vehicles he could use to go and check on Vladimir due to Maddie taking the assault vehicle and Jazmine taking her new replacement car….

Jack rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly and cursed his poor luck. He had been planning on getting Daniel a vehicle that summer but because of the freak weather incident that had totaled Jazmine's car, he had been forced to find her a replacement instead.

‘Stupid ghosts, as always..’ He seethed internally. ‘If that weather ghoul hadn't messed with us there'd be another car in the garage right now and I wouldn't be tearing my hair out!’

Slamming a hand against the metal table beside him, he glared at the tools that had shifted from his movements. Staring at the chrome and silver he bit his lip. ‘No souped-up ghost fighting vehicle and no white sedan. Crud!’

Looking to the aged landline phone the family kept for emergencies, he sauntered over to the counter and dialed Vladimir's number. It rang several times and when no one answered he angrily slammed the plastic back onto the hook. ‘Think….think….What can get me to his house?’

An idea struck and he quickly ran into the lab. Bolting down the wooden stairs and rounding the
banister he quickly grabbed a thermos, a med kit and a small three-inch clicker he had been
developing the last few weeks to operate his intended vehicle. Smiling at his own cleverness, he
leaned down and quickly snapped up a helmet from under one of the lab tables and tucked it under
his arm. Cradling the plastic, he thundered back into the kitchen. He was about to make his way out
of the room when he froze and glanced back at the phone.

Blue eyes rimmed with worry lines as his brow creased, and a thin scowl plastered his face as he
debated the pros and cons of contacting his spouse. As of late her and Vladimir were both at odds for
whatever reason…. She avoided his name, scowled often when he was brought up and gave her
trademark nervous chuckle whenever she saw a conversation pivoting toward him. How she would
react to their children's cryptic conversations and odd behavior would probably only add to the layers
of confusion already brimming one on top of the other.

‘But, the car would be faster.’ Jack’s brow furrowed in agitation. He could use the buggy or he
could call Maddie and possibly insight her wrath. Biting his lip, he turned from the kitchen and made
his way to the garage. Finding the vehicle by the workbench he pushed on the clicker and watched
as the dune buggy adjusted it's wheels for the road and started up. Thirty seconds later he was
speeding out of Fenton Works and toward Vlad’s home, completely unaware that his home phone
had started ringing in his absence.
Both Spectra and Bertrand were beyond enraged once they arrived at Vladimir's home. The house was completely devoid of life. No bull, no calf, and no meddlesome brats…..

Spectra's enraged scowl was highly evident as she dialed Fenton Works for what seemed like the hundredth time since she had arrived with Bertrand. Snarling, she slammed the office phone back onto its hook and blasted a segment of the paneling near the wall. Glowering at the singed paneling, she faintly noted Bertrand phasing into the room and turned to him.

“Did you find them?”

Bertrand snorted and his eyebrow raised. “They're long gone, Penelope. If I had to wager? The calf probably decided taking Vladimir and hiding him away from us would be in their best interests.”

Spectra snarled at his answer and pointedly jammed her pointer finger toward the phone. “The Fentons aren't answering! Doesn't that fat oaf spend his time tinkering all day? He should have immediately picked up!”

Bertrand sighed heavily and tiredly rubbed his brow, “He should be! There are no vehicles for him to use unless he decides to activate that blimp and that in itself would be bordering on ridiculous for a mere check in on a family friend!”

Spectra sat in the chair behind Vlad's desk and ripped her hands through her hair in frustration. Cracking her slender arm against the mahogany desk she hissed. “WHAT TYPE OF CRAZY BASTARD KEEPS A BLIMP FOR GHOST HUNTING?!?!?”

Bertrand tiredly slouched against the desk. “Fentons are crazy bastards by nature… That's what's so terrifying about them! Not one but two halfas created by sheer determination and insanity! Not to mention they created a stable portal and weapons that can actually effect ectoplasmic energy…. They're a dangerous variable.”

Spectra groaned and lifted her head from the desk. Spikes of red hair lazily curled in front if her neon green eyes. Narrowing her gaze at her husband, she sighed. “Those meddlesome fools are making our afterlives difficult…”

A loud, jarring bang echoed through the house accompanied by a jarring electronic hiss. Both Bertrand and Spectra paled.

“What was that?” Spectra whispered nervously.

Bertrand's nose twitched. “A dangerous variable seems to be making a house call.”
Jack Fenton was quick to arrive at Vladimir's home. Pulling along the gate at the base of the drive he quickly tapped in the code on the keypad.  
‘1-9-7-6-*’ With a mechanical click the entire gate shifted and opened inward to allow access to the home. Driving down the cobblestone drive and parking by the front door Jack made a move to get out of the vehicle only for a sharp keening to emanate from the scanner attached to the dash.

He paled slightly before reaching into the storage basket on the back of the buggy and pulling out a blaster proportionate to a SIG Sauer P226, with the exception of the modified barrel attachment, that narrowed ectoplasmic energy into a condensed beam rather than firing physical rounds. The scanner was showing two ghosts inside Vladimir's home. Pulling his visored hood over his face and activating the thermal readouts with his earpiece, he slunk out of the neon green dune buggy and absently unclipped the safety on his weapon. Nudging his frame around the home and to the short enclosed porch off the side of the kitchen, he quickly blasted the door handle and stepped inside the small area. Slinking to the door that allowed access into the home, he wrapped a free hand around the bronzed door handle and pulled.

To his surprise, the purple door swung in with ease. Taking a steady breath, he put his hand back to the trigger on his weapon and used his foot to open the doorway. Creeping inside, he silently made his way down the hallway with a precision that many would assume impossible for his size. The gentle buzz of energy the gun cast through the silence was the only thing audible. Seeing the staircase across from him, he carefully made his way up. If Vladimir was indeed resting he would be upstairs and so it would make the most sense to grab him and then deal with the unwanted intruders in the manor.

‘Where the hell are the kids?!?’ A bead of sweat dripped across his right eye and down his cheek as he made it to the second-floor landing. Looking both ways and seeing no cold spots he quickly marched through the hall to a slightly ajar door he assumed was Vladimir's. The heavy wood creaked as he pushed it open with the barrel of his gun. A vacant bed with disheveled sheets sat in the middle of the room. Walking in, he fearfully whispered, “Vladdie? Buddy…?”

Hearing no one answer, he made a move to exit only for a glimmer from the bathroom to catch his eye. Shifting his footing to continue deeper into the vacant master bedroom and into the bathroom, he stepped forward. Whipping off his hood to view what had caught his gaze, his face turned ashen and his eyes widened in horror. Black boots cracked against shattered glass fragments dripping in crimson blood.

‘My god….Vlad….What happened?’ Pure panic and terror-filled every fiber of his being at the sight of the finger-shaped gauges ripped through the stone in the shower. A familiar burnt lemon smell permeated the stagnant air.

Something snickered from behind him and he turned with his blaster aimed to fire. A malevolent and warped female voice glowered, “And so the fat man has decided to stop by! Tell me? Does your dear son ever really tell you the truth? This is what? The billionth time he's lied? Then again it's not like he can exactly trust you.”

Jack’s eyes widened and, raising an eyebrow, he scowled. “Did you do this freak?”

The voice snorted, “Ohhh, name calling? How quaint. I hate to tell you this Fenton, but this is all Plasmius's and your doing.”
Pausing, it cooed, “Tell me Jackson? How does it feel seeing your friend’s blood splattered upon the walls?”

A mixture of pure rage and horrified disgust sunk into his features and, growling, he fired a shot toward the voice. “Where are they?!? Where are my children and Vladimir you undead abomination?!?!?”

A wicked cackle echoed as the blast shattered against the tile, leaving a molten and seared stone bubbling in its wake. The voice whistled leeringly and continued, “Fatso? Have you ever wondered why Vladimir has acted so strange around you recently?”

Jack narrowed his gaze, “Come out and face me!”

The voice paused, “I think not. It's fun seeing Vladimir suffer, and you may have given me a good snack from these little emotional temper tantrums you've been throwing at me, but I am no idiot. You haven't even calibrated that foolish weapon! I'd wager it could kill a human quite easily right now couldn't it?”

Jack's eyebrow raised. “What the hell are you getting at spook!? Show yourself!”

The ghost giggled. “I bet that little gun could hurt Plasmius pretty badly. Then again you've shot at him before. One little pull of the trigger and you can stop Vladimir's suffering...the question is, would you be willing to see that blood on your hands, Jackson?”

Jack fired again, this time toward the spot by the tub where the voice had echoed from. A cold breeze tangled behind his neck and quickly flung his gun out of reach. “Your brats and Vladimir are safe for now. But for how long? When you find them what will you do? Will you kill Plasmius and Phantom?”

Jack growled angrily, “What are you doing in Vladimir's home?!?”

The female voice sighed heavily. “I was trying to lead someone away but I guess this works just as well seeing as how the targets of my desire are currently far from my grasp.”

Hearing her directly behind him, he quickly shot his elbow out and nailed something solid. There was an angry hiss and a feral growl before something latched onto his arm and slung him into the wall.

Snarling, it rasped, “If I'm an abomination that pathetic morsel is just as much, if not more.” There was a pause and Jack’s gun was languidly picked up. “I'm afraid I'll be taking this. We can't have you cutting our fun short. Give my regards to that brat when you contact him, hmm? Orevuar!”

And with that, both his weapon and the chill in the air vanished. Standing abruptly, he quickly ran through the room and into the downstairs, unzipping a portion of his hazmat suit and tanking out a spare firearm in the process. Slinging open several doors he soon found the office and spying the phone frantically dialed Daniel's number in a blind panic.

The teen picked up on the third ring.
The teens were quick to pile what they needed into Jazz’s white Volvo. Everything they assumed would be necessary was stored in the trunk in less than ten minutes. Daniel sat in the back seat with Vladimir as they worked. The adult's body was laid out against the cushions much like how he would normally lay on the booth seat in his kitchen. His head, however, was lying across Daniel's legs as he cooled him. Despite the young half ghost’s best efforts, Vladimir's fever was still impossibly high. Sam opened the back door near Vlad's legs and quietly shifted him so she could sit as well.

Whispering so she wouldn't wake him, she questioned, “You’re sure he's going to be alright with those ghost hunting drugs in his system?”

Daniel smiled reassuringly and looked to Vlad tiredly. “He's going to be fine Sam. We just have to get him away from here for a day or two until he recovers.”

Sam nodded but her eyes trailed over Vlad unsure. Pulling a blanket from the floorboard and draping it across his legs, she questioned, “So what did you and Jazz do at Fenton Works?”

Daniel sighed, “I tried convincing my mom to give Vlad a chance and I asked my dad to tell me about him.”

Sam twiddled her thumbs nervously and raised an eyebrow questioningly, “What did they say?”

Daniel paused to gather his thoughts. Vlad grimaced in his sleep and tossed lightly. Feeling the movement, Daniel looped his arms under the adult's back and readjusted him. Leaning him against his shoulder better, he answered, “Mom won't accept him until she sees the side we've seen the last few days. She's still open to him being her friend like they were in college, but she doesn't trust him like she use to. No surprises there.”

Sam winced. “Right….the fake flirting. Damn.”

Daniel nodded tiredly. Looking toward Vladimir's arms, now splayed across his waist, he quickly spotted the one-inch mark embossed in his bicep. “My dad ended up telling me a lot.”

Running a finger across the mark he smirked. “Vlad Masters, a homeless and scared college student with a tendency to brawl and get into trouble. This mark? He took a knife for my dad….”

Sam looked to the scar in fascination. “He took a knife for Mr.Fenton?”

Daniel nodded tiredly. “He pushed my parents together and saved my dad’s life….It's crazy to think he loved them so much only for him to end up hating my dad….”

Sam stiffened and bit her lip. “I don't think he hates your dad.”

Daniel snorted. “Oh, he hates my dad. No one would go through that much plotting unless they held some serious contempt for the person they were plotting against.”

Sam sighed and looked to Vlad warmly. “I'll rephrase. Your godfather doesn't hate your dad.”

Daniel stiffened and whipped his head up to Sam questioningly. “What are you talking about?”

Sam shrugged and smirked. “I guess your dad didn't tell you?”

Danny growled slightly, “Sam? That's not funny to joke about!”
Purplish-gray eyes narrowed and her lips thinned in agitation. "Who said I was joking? Vlad is your godfather, Jazz's too."

Daniel looked down to Vlad in a panic. "Since when?!?!?"

Sam snorted and glanced out the window as Tucker slammed the trunk and rounded to the passenger seat. Still speaking Sam smirked, "Since he first got your birth announcements."

Daniel blanched. Tucker, seeing his expression, questioned, "Did I miss something?"

Sam laughed lightly, "I just gave Pham the news that Vlad's his godfather. I think he's handling it pretty well."

Tucker snorted. Seeing Daniel's slack jaw and wide-eyed expression, he languidly motioned toward Jazzmine as she entered the car. "Do you think Jazz knows yet?"

Jazz opened the door mid-question and cocked her eyebrow. "Knows what?"

Tucker smirked and jabbed his finger back toward Vlad, "That Plasmius is your godfather?"

Jaz froze and whipped her head from Vlad's unconscious form to Tucker in shock. "You're joking right?"

Both Tucker and Sam rolled their eyes. Sam added, "If you think that's rich? Get this, your middle name was given to honor his sibling."

Daniel cringed at the information and Jazz gaped. Tucker quickly noted both of their expressions and questioned Daniel worriedly, "What's with that expression Danny?"

Daniel sighed. "Jaz? Start driving. It's a long story and I'd rather we get him away from here before that secretary or some ghost tries harassing him again."

Jazmine nodded and, clicking her seatbelt in place, quickly pulled out of the drive and onto the road. Taking a deep breath Daniel began. "So….it turns out Vlad had nightmares in college too, about his sister…"

Sam raised an eyebrow, "He had nightmares about his sister?"

Daniel winced, "Probably still does."

Tucker turned slightly to look over his headrest, "Why?"

Daniel looked to Vlad for a moment and quietly whispered, "From what my dad told me? Vlad's little sister got murdered by their adoptive dad when he was in the eighth or ninth grade. Vlad came home after work and ended up finding the body on the floor. He went to help her and their dad grappled him into the blood and beat him up for god knows how long until someone heard the screaming and called for help."

Sam, Tucker, and Jazz paled rapidly and the car went silent.

Daniel continued, "I actually don't blame him too much if he's angry at the world. Dead family? Brutally murdered sibling? Left in a hospital for several years? I mean…. Jesus."

Tucker grimaced and took to staring out the window. After a few moments, he added, "So he's like Dark Dan?" Pausing, he continued."Granted? Vlad's not exactly evil….But his family died and he
was left on his own… That's exactly what happened to you in that timeline Pham.”

Daniel's expression soured slightly, “Well that explains how my ghost half went loopy. Evil me was dealing with two strains of loss. I don't even want to know how warped that made my ghost half….”

Everyone sobered and the remainder of the drive was fairly quiet with the exception of Vlad's gentle breathing and the occasional movement against Daniel in an unconscious attempt to cool the heat permeating his flesh.

Jazmine’s voice broke the silence. “We’re pulling up right now. Daniel? You should probably duplicate a human or phantom double to go in with us so you can keep your secret identity under wraps. She seems to really like Vlad but I'm not sure how she'll take to you.”

Daniel smiled weakly. “If she's willing to stand up to someone with a loaded weapon to save Vlad I think I can trust her. That and keeping duplicates up for extended amounts of time is too draining. If something happens I want to be at full strength.”

Sam raised an eyebrow and grinned, “Batman and Robin are trusting their aliases to a diner waitress?”

Tucker snickered, “I'm cool with the boy wonder's decision.” Smirking, he added smugly, “Just promise me you two won't get costume changes? You in a leotard would be absolutely scarring.”

Daniel snorted and cringed. ‘The Dark Knight and Boy Wonder, huh? What does that make the things chasing him? The Joker and Harley Quinn?’

The car came to a stop in front of a slate gray townhouse with cream shutters. Jaz shook her head in disbelief and mild amusement before directing, “Let's get Vlad in a bed and worry about arch nemesis labels later. Vlad needs some serious rest and recovery and this car isn't exactly made for that.”

Sam nodded as she opened her door to step out. Tucker quickly slid from the front seat and, switching places with Sam, motioned for Daniel to pass Vlad's arms so they could maneuver him to the house. Daniel nodded and lifted Vlad toward Tucker. Tucker's hands quickly looped under his shoulders and pulled him to the edge of the seat. Draping one of his arms over his own shoulder, the teen quickly lifted Vlad to his feet. Sam numbly grabbed the blanket that had piled onto the floorboard from the movements and wrapped it around Vlad to conceal his shirtless chest.

Daniel rounded from the other side of the vehicle and taking Vlad's other arm over his, the two boys made their way to the door and rang the bell. A loud muffled running could be heard from the other side and, with a swift yank, the young waitress ripped open the door. Seeing Vladimir, her eyes widened and looking both ways she quickly moved aside and ushered them in.

Propping the door open with a wicker umbrella basket, she turned to Tucker and Daniel worriedly and pursed her lips in disdain. “What attacked him?”

Daniel grimaced, “A pyromaniac ghost with a seriously sadistic sense of humor.”

Ushering them out of the entranceway and toward a couch in the room to the side of them she instructed the teens to lay Vlad down for a moment. Both sixteen-year-olds awkwardly looked to each other before silently agreeing with her request. Laying Vlad down onto the tan suede sofa and propping up his head with one of the green lounge pillows, they turned back to Miss Maynard questioningly.

She sighed tiredly, “I'm washing some blankets right now for him. They'll be done in ten minutes.
For now, I figured the couch would be a good spot until I have everything set up upstairs.”

Daniel nodded apologetically, “Thank you… for helping us. We weren't sure where to take him.”

The waitress's hazel eyes brimmed with a muted warmth and a tinge of fatigue, “What type of person would I be if I left him to fend for himself? He's saved my toosh multiple times. I’d like to think he considers me a friend after nearly two years of us talking and venting to one another. Knowing more of the context I find a lot of his rant sessions hilarious now.”

Leaning over Vlad and noting his feverish appearance, she clasped a hand to his forehead. Retracting her fingers in horror, she blanched. “He's burning up! Haven't any of you noticed?!”

Daniel groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Speaking up, he directed her gaze, “Yeah, we noticed. Don't freak out okay?”

The waitress quirked an eyebrow, “About what?”

Daniel smiled sheepishly and shifted from Fenton to Phantom in front of her. Eyes wide, she growled, “What type of parents do you have?!?!? You're what? In middle school?!? And you fight ghosts and god knows what else?!? Or are you some sort of ghost, like that perverted greaser who crashes in my diner? He can look human and-?!?” She took a breath and motioned to the teen, “Like seriously?!?”

Tucker whistled, “Wow? She knows how to get onto you and it's only been a few seconds.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and, activating his core, he walked over to Vlad.

“My parents are ghost hunters. It’s kinda hard to come out and say your part ghost when they openly hate and revenantly cry out their undying passion to capture and destroy anything ghostly. Also? I'm in high school. As for fighting ghosts? Who else do you see picking up the job and actually doing it with minimal damage? At least I keep the majority of my fights clean.”

Kneeling by Vlad's side, he placed a cold hand onto the adult's brow. Vlad winced in his sleep and numbly tried turning away from the sudden change. Cupping his other hand under his jaw and turning him back under the palm positioned over his forehead, he reprimanded, “Oh, no you don’t.”

Vlad in response furrowed his brow and tossed from under Daniel's hand again. Trying to peak open his eyes to gauge what his discomfort was coming from, he numbly groaned and flinched away again only for Daniel's hand to readjust him a second time.

“Stay still Vlad… I know you're hurting but you need to let me help you.”

Vlad weakly shivered and after a few moments, he relaxed again. Seeing Vladimir's breathing calming and his discomfort ebbing away, Daniel quirked an eyebrow. “How are you even remotely awake right now? Those ghost hunting drugs should have put you under for at least another two hours….”

Vlad groaned and numbly swallowed. “Badger…..?... Where-?”

Tucker piped up, “We took you somewhere safe. Just go back to sleep? You really shouldn't be moving or talking after that thing partially cooked you earlier.”

Vlad dizzily protested. “Ugh….What did you…give me?”

Daniel smiled gently, “A ghost tranquilizer. It'll be out of your system in a few hours. Just calm
Vlad coughed and chuckled lightly before wincing. “Again...? What's with everyone...and drugging...me?”

Jazmine's voice came from the door, “Did he wake up early?”

Daniel snorted, “He's trying to. I'm pretty sure he's mostly out of it though.”

Vlad groaned, “M' right here....Why do you keep acting like I'm....a toddler incapable...of English syntax?”

Tucker snickered, “Danny? He sounds pretty responsive. I think he's awake.”

Daniel rubbed his eyes and called to Jaz, “Hey Jaz? Go get that pill bottle out of the car.”

The waitress who had been observing the exchange raised an eyebrow.

Vlad snorted and questioned, “...Please tell me...you're not drugging....me again?”

The waitress's jaw dropped, “You did what to him?!?!”

Daniel cringed and Vlad furrowed his brow weakly in confusion. “Who’s....that?”

Daniel smiled apologetically. Miss Maynard leaned over Vlad to inspect him and Vlad's eyes widened. Shooting up and backing against the couch he numbly attempted teleporting only to sway into Daniel's arms. Hyperventilating, he dizzily slapped at the limb trying to hold him in place. In a panic, he phased through the armrest and the blanket that previously had covered his bandages. Landing on the floor rather hard, he let out a small scream of pain. Both Tucker and Daniel immediately dragged him out from under the coffee table he had fallen through to assess the damage.

Vlad groaned as they lifted him up, “Paula? Why...is she-?”

At her name, Miss Maynard interjected, “Easy spook! I'm not going to hurt you!”

Vlad grimaced and fell further against Daniel's shoulder. Paula, now noticing the bandages, paled and reached her arm out to help steady him. “What the heck happened to him?!?! He's torn to shreds!!!”

Vlad jerked from their touch and involuntarily phased again. Staring at his hands in shock as he fell against the floor a second time, he looked up to Daniel in a blind panic. “What's happening....to me?”

Daniel's face went ashen, “There's no way.... Vlad? How are your powers working?”

Vlad weakly got to his knees. Swaying, he shot a hand to the sofa only for his arm to phase through it. Slamming back on to the floor and curling his arms around his ribs, he raised his head to look at the crowd surrounding him. “I don't...know...”

Wincing, he numbly added, “You know what?....Drug me....I can't even....stand....right now...”

Bending down and turning him onto his back, Daniel nodded in agreement. “I guess that thing torching you earlier scrambled your ability to regulate your powers...”

Vlad nodded and dizzily grappled a bandaged hand to Daniel's hazmat suit as he was lifted and propped up on the couch. Jazmine came in with Sam a few seconds later with what was left of the
bags and the food that they had boxed up. Jazmine tossed the pills to Daniel and recommended, “You may want to get something in his stomach first. He hasn't eaten since yesterday and taking any type of meds on an empty stomach is going to make him nauseous.”

Paula leaned down next to Vlad and smirked, “Are you alright Mr. Mayor?”

Vlad looked up between labored breaths and smiled sheepishly. “I guess the cat’s out of the bag?”

Sam paled, “I knew we were forgetting something!”

Vlad and Paula both turned in confusion.

Vlad weakly questioned, “Miss Manson? What are you-?”

Sam ran her fingers through her hair in disdain, “We forgot Mad Cat!”

Vlad smiled comfortingly, “Don't worry…. she's good...That cat has better...survival instincts...than most humans….”

Sam still looked like she was going to protest, “But-?”

Vlad sighed, “Trust me… That cat is fine for a while…”

Paula raised an eyebrow, “This wouldn't happen to be the cat Damian tore out of that storm drain right?”

Vlad druggedly nodded. The teens each looked to him curiously. Tucker spoke up first, “I thought you said you dug that cat out Vlad? Who’s Damian?”

Vlad dizzily noted the question and realizing he was revealing a little too much information, decided to answer somewhat vaguely, “Erm…. It’s complicated?”

Remembering a tidbit of info they had gathered from the night before Sam quirked an eyebrow and, looking to Vlad, tapped her foot. “It's you, isn't it? That’s your middle name.”

Paula looked from Vlad to Sam in confusion. Whipping her head back to Vlad, her eyes widened and she snorted. “What are you? A master of disguise?”

She forcefully turned his head to inspect him and pinched his cheek.

Vlad grimaced and somewhat annoyedly growled, “Ow.”

Paula smirked, “The real question is how do you pull off that hair dye color without ruining all of this gray and silver.”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched. “Well, I guess this reveals my incognito mode...So much for a casual guise.”

Pinching his cheek again, she questioned, “So how do you do it?”

Vlad groaned and gently tore her hand from his face. “Both colors are natural for me. I just partially shift.”

Seeing her expectant expression, he tiredly raised his hands and grimaced at the movement, “I'm too weak to do it right now so don't ask…”
Jazmine gently motioned her aside and bent down to check Vlad over. “How do you feel?”


Daniel leaned over his side and questioned, “What about hungry?”

Vlad snorted and turned his gaze to the window on his right in an effort to avoid their line of sight. “I'm not hungry.”

As if to prove otherwise, Vladimir's stomach growled animalistically. The entire room went silent and Vlad turned bright fuschia. Twitching an eyebrow, he turned to face them and raised a finger to try and quell their laughter before it could erupt. He was too late however and everyone openly giggled or chuckled at his expense.

Tucker snickered, “Suuuurreee...Because that totally signifies you aren't food deprived.”

Bringing a hand to the bridge of his nose, Vlad sighed heavily. “Okay... Okay! I get it! I need to eat. The problem is I'm not sure if I'll be able to keep anything down as I am currently.”

Sam interjected, “You still need to try. You're beaten to hell right now and the food will do your body some good.”

Jazmine agreed and pointedly raised the two tupperware containers containing Sam and her mother's cooking. “You heard the teens. Eat now and bitch later.”

Vlad raised his head abruptly and reprimanded, “Language young lady!”

Paula brought a hand to her mouth in order to restrain her laughter. Daniel, Tucker, and Sam, however, burst into an entirely new set of hysterics.

Jazmine rolled her eyes, “Some things never change, do they?”
Vlad growled and his eyes flashed red weakly before fading back to a sickly blue. “Do Maddie and Jack resort to that language often or did you all just pick up the phrases from school?”


Vlad tiredly pinched the bridge of his nose before making a wide arch with his hand to motion at each teen, “One word, *apropos*.”

The teenagers all looked to Vlad in confusion with the exception of Jazmine, who smiled with honeyed sweetness and mocked, “Do you ever actually cuss Vlad?”

Vlad stared up to her and snickered before lazily motioning to his bandaged and scarred body. “If anyone has prerequisites to use expletives it's me. Yes, I spew profanities. The difference is that I only do so when adequate reason arises. I don't just resort to crude language to emphasize or accentuate my vocabulary like cheap dollar store glitter.”

Daniel grinned. “That explains the occasional slip-ups you've made this week. I honestly was beginning to think I was hallucinating the swearing as a coping mechanism for all of the stress you're giving me.”

Vlad leaned back against the couch and stared into the creme ceiling tiredly. “So much for making it a point to censor myself around you, huh?”

Paula gently shook his shoulder and Vlad sighed before closing his eyes, “What is it, Miss Maynard?”

She quirked an eyebrow and gently grasped his shoulder, “Why so formal? You usually just call me Paula when you're venting or discussing stuff.”

Vlad peaked an eye open and smiled apologetically, “Sorry. It's a bit of a habit in this form. What were you trying to get my attention for?”

“You need to eat.” Seeing his expression, she continued but pointed to Sam. “The teens have a good point. You need to in order to keep up your energy up.”

Vlad closed his eyes tightly and plopped his head against the back of the couch before protesting, “You know? Another nap sounds great right about now…."

At this, Daniel forcefully yanked him up and into both arms. Vlad’s eyes shot open abruptly and he stiffened in surprise. Gathering his bearings, he looked up to the sixteen-year-old in shock, “I was under the impression you wanted me to go back to sleep.” He leered.

Daniel rolled his neon green eyes and shook a small segment of snow-white hair out of his face as he adjusted his hold to keep the adult pinned against him, “You need to eat first.”

Turning to Paula, he politely questioned, “Where is your dining table?”

Paula raised an eyebrow and pointed through the arched doorway on their left toward a pine dining area with two small chairs.
Daniel nodded curtly before turning to Jaz. “Do you want to help me with Unkie Vlad?”

Vlad blanched and looked into Daniel’s smug features with tired contempt. “I think I prefer Fruit-loop.”

Jazmine and Daniel both ignored him as they walked toward the table. Vlad groaned and weakly struggled against the teenager’s hold. “Please stop carrying me like this!??! It's absolutely mortifying!”

Daniel sighed. “I know, I know…. trust me? As soon as you're able to get around on your own I'll stop. Until then you're stuck like this.”

Vlad crossed his arms spitefully and snapped, “Why am I being treated like a hapless child again?”

Jazmine snorted at this remark, “Just chill, Plasmius. If you're anything like Danny you need the food to keep both sides healthy.”

Vlad sighed and coincided, “Yes, I need the substance. I just don't need the possibility of hurling again.”

Jazmine and Daniel both smiled apologetically. Jazmine comforted, “You'll be fine.”

Vlad weakly smiled as he was set down. “If I can manage for four hours without another bout of nausea or a dizzy spell, I will be.”

Both Daniel and Jazmine questioningly looked to him for elaboration. Vlad tiredly rubbed a hand through his hair before laying against the table and curling his hands under his head. “Firstly? You owe Mr.Foley twenty dollars for withholding information on your anatomy Daniel.”

Daniel crossed his arms, “What are you yammering about now? Did you conk your head when you phased earlier?”

Vlad blearily shrugged. “To answer your unspoken questions, Jazmine? Halfas digest food differently than humans. Our bodies take four to five hours to absorb the physical matter into energy directly. Our stomach also absorbs the vitamins and minerals needed to sustain our human form as the energy is absorbed. Everything is restricted to that organ so there are no distinguishable uses for the kidneys or intestines.”

A heart-shaped jaw dropped and Jaz’s head spun to Daniel in surprise, “Wait…So you don't need to use the bathroom?”

Vlad popped a finger up to Daniel and snickered from where his mouth was obscured near his elbow, “Bingo.”

Daniel’s cheeks flushed green, “Please tell me you didn't tell Tuck.”

Vlad snorted, “I told him by accident yesterday. It was kind of a delirious, pain induced lesson on halfa anatomy.”

Daniel groaned and rubbed his brow tiredly, “So that's what you meant by me owing Tuck money….Fine, I'll make an effort to pay him back when I get my allowance.”

Vlad snorted from under his arms, “Glad to hear it.”

Jazmine kneeled down and gently shook his shoulder, “Come on Vlad. We have a ton of good stuff
here. My mom even made you pancakes.”

There was a shift against the table and Vlad peeked from over his arm before questioning, “Are they poisoned?”

Jaz rolled her eyes and swept a lock of copper behind her ear. “No, they’re not poisoned. Perfectly edible.”

Vlad sighed, “If I eat...you two will stop harassing me for the evening, correct?”

Daniel nodded in agreement and Jazmine shoved a fork into Vlad's hands.

Vlad bristled slightly but sighed. “You two are something else. I'll eat... See?” Taking a bite of the pancake in front of him, he pointedly glared over to Daniel to make sure he was indeed seeing him eating without further protest.

Daniel smirked, “After you’ve eaten you're going to have to take the meds.”

Vlad paused with the fork a few inches from his mouth and questioned, “What exactly are you going to drug me with this time?”

Jazmine pushed one of the containers closer and dug the pill bottle out of her sweat pants and elaborated, “It's a human sleeping pill my mom synthesized for our pharmaceuticals line. The FDA approved it a few months ago for insomnia. It's basically a human tranquilizer for home use.”

Bandaged shoulders tensed and Vlad worriedly glanced to both teens with a slight hint of fear at the idea. Daniel quickly assured, “It's fine Vlad. Trust me... my dad takes it all the time.”

Vlad relaxed slightly and then questioned, “Is it weight based?”

Jazmine nodded, “Yep. What are you? One hundred forty?”

Vlad smiled tiredly, “I'm one hundred and ten pounds. Well, in human form. In ghost form, I'm less... Last time Skulker had me weighed as Plasmius I was around eighty pounds.”

Jaz raised an eyebrow, “So you weigh as much as a thirteen-year-old? How did that happen?”

Vlad smiled slightly and looked to the food on his fork somewhat contemplatively. “My cells became lighter as my molecules’ vibrations increased. The ectoplasm stabilized the change. It's rare though... usually, someone forcefully merged with ectoplasmic energy or ripped through dimensions either spontaneously combusts or shrivels up as their cells are depleted rapidly to sustain the energy. As a side effect, my body took on ghost qualities in human form. I'm lighter than a normal human for my size, I have fangs and I heal pretty fast.”

Jaz paled. “You mean other people have been zapped before?”

Daniel starred in wide-eyed fascination and horror. “Are there others like us?!?”

Vlad's features saddened, “We’re the only living examples. Everyone else died. Usually a few minutes after getting zapped. People just can't handle that sort of rapid genetic overhaul and the split between plains without succumbing and fading back into the cycle.”

Daniel's shoulders sagged. “You mean we're the only ones to ever...”

Vlad paused and his silence was taken for a yes. Jazmine sighed. “Are there any other tidbits of halfa information we should know about?”
Vlad took another bite of pancake before swallowing and answering, “The vibrational shifts are what allow Daniel and me use of our abilities. We can fly, shift matter, phase, turn intangible and harness invisibility all based on our frequencies. Every ghost has their own core signature or frequency. As halfas? Well, I'm not sure… Daniel has an active core but I've never had any signs of having one. I think it has to do with how quickly and how big of an infusion he was merged with when he received his ghost half.”

Daniel tensed, “You don't have an elemental core?”

Vlad smiled tiredly and nodded in confirmation. “If I had one I'd assume there would have been signs when I first was hospitalized. Plenty of people die in hospitals. I should've felt something or had a physical sign. I can only speculate on why I seemed to have missed out on that stage in halfa development. From what Clockwork told me I'm an anomaly when it comes to the norm associated with half ghosts.”

Pecking at a strawberry, Vlad apologetically looked up to the two startled teens. Daniel was ashen. “You really don't have a ghost core?!?!? Jesus, Vlad! How are you-”

Vlad sombered and with a heavy sigh put down the berry. “How am I alive? I don't know. Trust me, I've asked myself multiple times and have never come up with an answer. By all accounts, I should be unstable and incapable of harnessing or controlling anything…. more so? I should've died like the others. A core is one of the main components in regulating ectoplasmic energy. Ghosts each have one to keep themselves from devolving back into the energy cycle. It's what keeps their form, roots their soul, and allows for the use of their abilities without them dying out like used batteries.”

Jazmine grimaced, “You mean you're not a full half ghost?”

Vlad tiredly brought his hands to his temple as he stared into the table. “I thought we covered this. I'm a stupid bastard who can't even manage to swing by as normal by regular half ghost standards if there’s anything truly normal about being a half ghost, to begin with. Clockwork claims I'm a full half ghost. Without a functioning core though? I don't see how that's remotely possible.” Sighing Vlad bitterly concluded, “I don't know what I am anymore. I think at one point something broke or was lost…. blanketed over and shattered. From what Walker has diagnosed I have something where my core is supposed to be but it's faint and torn.”

Both teens worriedly exchanged glances with one another. Bringing a hand to his mouth, Vlad coughed and hacked. Paling rapidly at the sticky wet liquid he could feel in his clasped palm, he froze.

Daniel immediately whipped a hand forward and grabbed Vlad's wrist to pull the limb from his mouth. Seeing the blood and traces of ectoplasm, his eyes widened. Turning to Jaz, he growled, “Jaz! Get water.”

Vlad shook slightly and grimaced, “Sorry….”

Daniel reprimanded, “Do you have anything to say besides sorry? I don't want to hear you apologizing right now when this bullshit isn't your fault! Just lean forward and keep quiet until that glass of water gets here.”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched, “I’m starting to think you're worse than Skulker.”

Danny forcefully ducked Vlad's head and snickered, “Ghost Zone’s greatest babysitter. I'll gladly take that title if you pipe down and just let us tend to your ever-growing list of problems.”
Vlad sighed, “I hate to tell you this but I'm the one with that title and I'm not relinquishing it so easily.”

“Ladies, ladies...you're both gorgeous.” Both men froze and looked up to Jaz in perplexion. Sighing, she forcefully shoved a glass of water into Vlad's hands. “Take slow sips. And here.” Passing him some paper towels she instructed, “You may want to wipe that blood off of your face before Paula comes in to check on us.”

Vlad nodded curtly and tiredly rubbed the ruby and neon mess off of his mouth. Taking the glass in his left hand and easing it to his jaw, he cautiously took small sips, being careful to keep in mind the burns he had received early from the strange power flare up he had experienced in the infirmary.

An odd buzzing vibration permeated through Daniel's ectoplasm enhanced flesh and he froze abruptly by the kitchen trash can. Feeling the dull fizzy sensation curling from where his hoodie pocket usually cradled his phone, he quickly shifted back to Daniel Fenton and snagged the iPhone out of the garment.

Seeing the caller ID he froze in place. Turning to Vlad, who was now taking slow sips and nibbling at the strawberry from earlier, he questioned, “Vlad? Your landline phone has a Grand county area code right?”

Vlad looked up curiously, “Yes, nine hundred and seventy. Why?”

Daniel's eyebrows squeezed together and his mouth became a tight line. Eyes shining with confusion, he queried, “Does it end in four-zero-ninety eight?”

Vlad raised an eyebrow, “Yes. Why the sudden-?” Seeing the phone in Daniel's hand he froze. Setting down the strawberry he looked from the iPhone to Daniel in perplexion.

Daniel glanced at his phone, which was still ringing frantically in his fingers and then to Vlad. “Last question...Does your cat know how to use the home phone?”

Vlad cringed. “Of course not.”

Jaz interrupted, “This means someone or something is in Vlad's house.”
A Disconnect

Swallowing hard, Daniel nodded and answered. “Hello?”

A booming and panicked voice reverberated over the line, causing cracks of static. “DANIEL
JAMES FENTON! WHERE IS VLADIMIR?!?!”

Hearing Jack, Vlad paled rapidly. ‘Shit.’ Standing abruptly and snatching the phone from Daniel he
quickly answered. “Jack? Why are you calling from my house?”

A gruff and deathly series tone answered. “Vladimir? Where are you?!?!”

Both Daniel and Vlad exchanged panicked glances. Leveling his voice, Vlad answered, “I'm
currently eating lunch with the kids.”

“BULLSHIT!” Jack snarled and a loud crash could be heard from the other end of the line. “Tell me
where you really are right now before I tear the entire town apart looking for you!”

Vlad sighed tiredly. “Jack? Calm down… What's gotten into you?”

“What's gotten into me?!? I just drove by your house to find blood splattered all over the place and
two ghosts lounging around like they own the joint! I'm ticked off!!!”

Vlad, if possible, paled even more. “Ghosts? What-?”

“Vladimir, please… for the love of god…. Tell me where you are this instant.”

Vlad stiffened and looked from Daniel to Jazmine before attempting to craft a reasonable lie.
Swallowing he assured, “Jack? I really am eating right now with Jazmine and Daniel. Granted, I'm
not at home as you've obviously gathered from your impromptu visit. I haven't been at my home for
a while now and neither have the kids. What do you mean by blood?!?"

Jack snarled and could be heard slamming a fist into the desk in Vlad's office. “Don't you dare lie to
me Vladdie! I know this is your blood plastered everywhere! That female ghost was bragging about
it for fuck’s sake!”

Vlad worriedly redirected the conversation. “Jack? If there really is a ghost there it’s not safe for-”

NOW.”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched at the tone used and he replied in the same angry infliction, “I'm afraid I
can't do that. I'm a guest right now and I'd rather not burden my host.”

Jack begged, “Vlad? How badly are you hurt? Please…”

Vlad's face saddened and he bit his lip. “I'm not hurt, Jack.”

“Vladimir Masters… I swear to god… If you lie to me one more time…”

Angry, Vlad snarled, “I'M FINE! I'M SAFE! THE KIDS ARE OKAY! DAMN IT JACK! WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO GET OUT OF ME?”

Jack angrily shot back, “When I get ahold of that bastard who did this…”
Vlad furrowed his brow and his voice became tinged with worry. “Jack? Who-?”

“I’m going to tear him apart… molecule by molecule…”

Vlad shivered at the cold malice dripping over the static-filled line. Seeing a way to shift the conversation, he questioned worriedly, “I take it my house isn’t safe right now?”

Jack paused and a crackle of static signifying a heavy sigh trailed through the line. “You really haven’t been here?”

Vlad leveled his voice again. “Jack? The truth is that I was too tired to make it home from that event last night on my own. A friend packed me from the fire station and Daniel has been watching me ever since. We were going to go back to my home sometime today or tomorrow morning.”

Both teens dropped their jaws at Vlad’s honest recap. Not only had he genuinely told their father the truth, he had done so while negating everything ghost related.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief at the sincerity in Vladimir's voice. “Okay… Yeah, Vladdie? I’d avoid coming home anytime soon until Mads and I can test this stuff.”

Vlad immediately protested, “No!”

Jack’s voice hardened, “No?”

Vlad began swaying slightly in his chair. Gripping the table with a shaking hand, he dizzily stared up to Daniel and Jaz in a blind panic.

Daniel, having heard everything and seeing Vlad’s condition, ripped the phone from his hands. “Dad? That won't be necessary!”

Jack responded with a tinge of aggravated impatience. “And why not?”

Daniel gazed over to Vladimir for advice and, seeing his labored breathing and cold sweating, he cursed under his breath. “Just leave his house alone! Danny Phantom has it covered!”

Jack snarled, “Why would I trust that spectral brat?!?”

Vlad went to stand and with a sudden lurch, he staggered forward. Trying to grip the table, he phased through it. Jaz immediately reached down to support him. Vlad weakly groaned, “Daniel… He’s going to find out…”

Looking to the adult and thinking quickly, Daniel duplicated and sent his double to Vlad’s house flying at full speed.

Still on the phone with his father, he argued, “And why not trust him? Is it because he’s a ghost?”

“Damn straight! Why would I trust something that defies nature like that? Why not just move on? Accept that they’re finished and leave the living alone? Unless it’s afraid of what comes after because it has something to hide otherwise I can’t see a reason for a good person to stick around! Ghosts are cruel, manipulative and selfish!”

“And what proof do you have? You’re just assuming crud! Danny Phantom is a good person!”

“It’s not a person! Jesus… Danny, it’s just a mass of residual energy with an attitude! It can’t even feel!” Jack yelled.
Warm tears began dripping down Daniel’s face. A feverish frame staggered to the teen’s side and gently hugged him before phasing the phone out of his hands. Vlad’s raspy and tired voice reproached, “Jack? Please...go home. You’re not doing anyone any favors and you're worrying the kids.”

Jack’s voice calmed and became contemplative, “They’re worried?”

Vlad tightened his grip on Daniel's shoulder in comfort. “Why wouldn't they be? You just told me there were two malevolent ghosts in my home and blood splattered everywhere on speakerphone. Now they both think you're in danger. Just leave the ghosts in my home to Phantom?”

Jack bitterly rebutted, “Aren't I just as capable?”

Vlad’s expression saddened, “You’re more than capable old friend, the problem is now is neither the time or place.”

Jack argued, “But why Phantom?”

Vlad furrowed his brow before swallowing and flatly stating, “Phantom’s more suited to the task. I trust his judgment and Daniel's. Your children don’t need to be worrying about you. After Phantom scopes everything out….you, Maddie and I can investigate the alleged blood you spotted. Okay?”

Jack paused for what seemed like an eternity before sighing. “I have to go. A new spook just popped up on the scanner.”

Vlad blankly nodded, “Sure. Just please hear me out FlapJack? I don't ask for much…. Just this once?”

Jack paused and his voice softened, “Fine. I won't touch anything yet. I'll leave and let Phantom screw around. That blood will still be all over the place when I get back tomorrow. I can wait.”

Vlad smiled slightly, “Thanks.”

Jack's voice, now fatigued, ended the conversation. “See you tomorrow Vladdie.”

Vlad forced his voice to sound normal as another wave of dizziness hit, “Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

Clicking the disconnect button on the phone with a shaking hand, he numbly questioned, “Daniel…are you alright?”

Daniel froze under Vlad's hold, “Yeah, I’m alright.”

Vlad smiled weakly and Jazmine immediately rushed forward.

“...Good...I'm just....ugh...” Feeling Vlad’s hand slipping off of his shoulder, Daniel quickly whipped around and caught Vlad against himself as he fainted.

Jazmine, having reached Vlad’s back and head to prevent further injury, worriedly questioned, “What’s going on?”

Daniel brushed aside Vlad's swear drenched bangs to feel his fever before frowning and answering, “Right now my duplicate is landing in Vlad’s kitchen. Dad is throwing a tantrum and cursing in Vlad's office. And Vlad? Well, he just left the equation because of what little bit of power he tried to focus in order to grab the phone from me. The ghost dazer is still running through his system and that wave of stress just took whatever energy he had left.” Bringing the hand from Vlad's head to his
neck and feeling his pulse, he sighed.

Looking to Jaz, he motioned toward the food with the hand not keeping Vlad up. “Jaz? Just put the food up. I'm going to get him upstairs.”

Jaz gazed to the barely touched food forlornly and then back to Vlad, “You've got him right?”

Bringing his other hand around Vlad’s back and leaning him against his shoulder, he nodded. “I've got him.”

Jaz nodded gently, “Well it looks like he didn't need the sleeping pills…”

Daniel sighed, “I'll recap you once I get him settled and finish talking to dad.”
At Vlad’s home, Jack Fenton was angrily making his way down the hallway toward the new blimp on his scanner. Opening the kitchen door, he walked in with his gun readied. Daniel’s duplicate sat crossed legged on the bar counter. Looking up at Jack’s entrance, his neon green eyes locked with Jack’s blue.

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear.” Jack mused.

Phantom winced, “What’s your problem with me?”

Jack paused and noting the tears trailing down Phantom’s honey gold skin, he froze. The small, glowing streams unnerved the portion of malice Jack had set aside to use against the boy and he found himself paused awkwardly in the doorway.

“Are you crying?” Jack raised an eyebrow.

Phantom sneered, “What do you care Jack? I’m a monster to you… an abomination.”

Jack stiffly continued his walk into the kitchen and grabbing a stool next to Phantom, sat down and placed his gun on the counter. A black glove tapped against the stone somewhat debatingly. “Why are you here spook?”

Phantom snorted, “Protecting people, fighting ghosts…. The family business I suppose?”

Jack glared, “You know that’s not what I’m asking Phantom.”

Phantom’s green eyes dimmed and he hugged a knee to his chest. “You’re asking why I exist?”

Jack looked to the teen tiredly, “I guess I am.”

Daniel winced, “Is it wrong? To want to live for others? To do the right thing…?

Jack paused and stared up to Phantom questioningly, “Odd choice of words. You know you’re dead right?”

Daniel grimaced and snorted, “Am I really?” He chuckled bitterly, “You know what? I think I’ve been dead inside for nearly two years now… Tell me da-Jack.” Daniel corrected and then continued, “Am I really evil? Is my existence that big of a sin? What if I really wasn’t a ghost? What if I was something more?”

Jack raised an eyebrow and stared into the counter. “But you aren’t. You’re not alive. Living people can’t do what you do. They’d die. You’re the ghost of some poor kid that couldn’t move on.”

Daniel’s features cracked and his expression became broken. Rubbing his knee against his closed eyelid until he could see spots, he peaked his other green eye toward Jack. “For someone who hunts the unknown and looks to every possibility you can be so narrow-minded.”

Jack rolled his eyes and motioned around himself, “What am I supposed to think? Ghosts cause nothing but grief and heartache. They’re shadows that can’t-”

Daniel shot up from the counter and slammed his boots into the floor. New tears plastered through his glowing green freckles in waves and adorned his tanned skin like small pearlescent jewels. “FEEL? YOU THINK WE’RE EMOTIONLESS?!?! FREE OF PAIN?!?! NEWS FLASH! I
FEEL, DAMN IT! I FEEL YOUR WORDS, EVERY GODDAMNED STABBING SYLLABLE! I FEEL PAIN! I FEEL THE BLASTS! EVERY SINGLE SEARING BUZZ AND ZAPP THAT RICHOTETS THROUGH MY FLESH A MILLION TIMES MORE THAN A NORMAL WOUND! I FEEL EVERY SINGLE HIT THAT CONNECTS! I'M A HUMAN BEING FIRST!

Jack stiffened and looked to the boy in confusion. Reaching a hand out to his shoulder and feeling solidity he froze. Daniel phased through his grasp. “AM I THAT BIG OF A MONSTER? WASN’T I A PART OF YOUR WORLD FIRST??!”

Jack grimaced and his brow furrowed. “Let’s change the topic Phantom.” His voice cracked. The ghost teen, despite the subtle glow and the echo in his voice deeply reminded him of Daniel.

Phantom screeched, “Weren’t you the one who wanted answers? I feel! Ghosts feel! And ironically? Human beings have injured me more than the ghouls I fight! Do you have any idea how fucked up that is??!”

Jack froze and dug a hand through his hair before bitterly snapping, “HOW? HOW CAN YOU FEEL ANYTHING? YOU DON’T HAVE NERVES OR LIVING TISSUE!”

The teenager dug his hands through his own hair and winced before turning away from his father. His voice fell and the water accumulating on his face splattered against the tile. “We’re the essence of feeling! The soul’s form of mind! We are nothing but feeling and emotion! How can you just negate that? Is it because ghosts don’t have physical bodies? I mean FUCK!”

Jack winced and turned away from the teen. “That’s enough Phantom.”

Daniel whipped around and unzipped a portion of his jumpsuit. Jack looked up at the sound and paled at what met his gaze. “ENOUGH?” A large blast mark he had received during his first year lay scarred over on the left side of his chest. “You think it’s enough? How do you think it feels? To have your own par-” Daniel stopped and yanked up the zipper to conceal the damage.

Jack sat glassy-eyed, just blankly staring at Daniel's now covered chest. He remembered that night. The image of the boy crying out in agony and gripping his dripping torso as he fell into the park still haunted his dreams. That human scream, those horrified and frightened green eyes…. Jack wasn't one for regrets, he tended to reason his work as justified… but that night had undoubtedly changed his views on Phantom. He had even begun missing shots on purpose just to avoid having to see the same scene transpire. To now know that pain was possible or even plausible left a heavyweight in his stomach.

Phantom flung his free wrist out as he wiped away the water on his face, “What are you still doing here Jack? Go home!”

Jack jostled from his recollections and averted his gaze. “I have some questions…”

Daniel snorted angrily, “Of course you do… What do I need to answer in order for you to leave?”

Jack snickered, “First? Who were the two spooks from earlier?”

Daniel's eyes flashed up and sparked menacingly, “Sadistic fuckers with a taste for blood. They’re monsters.”

Jack paused at the glint in Daniel's eyes and pushed, “Do you know them?”

Daniel cringed and looked to Jack in disgust and disbelief, “Just what are you implying? Do you
honestly think I’d associate with that scum?"

Jack quirked an eyebrow, “They seemed to know you Phantom.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. Pulling out a stool with his ecto-energy, the teenager tiredly sat down, “If you haven't noticed my line of work doesn't exactly make me any friends, human or ghost. I'm positive whatever they mentioned about me was probably a negative relation. Beating ghosts up and stuffing them back through to their dimension doesn't exactly make me a class favorite if you catch my drift.”

“So you don’t know who they are?” Jack concluded flatly.

Daniel snickered and charged a hand threateningly. “They better hope I don’t figure out any time soon…” Snarling, the teen subconsciously flared his core, causing a massive temperature drop. Jack sat unaffected by the sudden change as Phantom hissed inhumanly, “After what they’ve pulled? They’d be lucky if I left enough ectoplasm to fill a matchbox after I get ahold of them.”

Jack nodded absently as the white-haired youth extinguished the glowing mass in his hand. Taking a moment of quiet contemplation, he waited for the unsettling neon blue to fade from the boy’s eyes and then asked, “They mentioned someone else to… Who’s Plasmius?”

Daniel stiffened and looked up to Jack apprehensively, “He’s none of your concern.”

Anger flashed across the man's face, “Not my concern? You seem to forget I have a part in this mess now!”

Daniel raised an eyebrow and flippantly flicked his wrist outward, “And what do you need to know about him? Better yet? What did those demons say about him?”

Jack pondered the teen's question and off-hand answered, “They mentioned him in passing, the same as you.”

Daniel sighed heavily, “If I answer you'll leave so I can handle this right?”

Jack nodded in agreement and Daniel answered tiredly, “You've met him before at Vladimir's castle in Wisconsin. Pointy ears? Blue skin? A Romanian prince knockoff with a cheap costume?” Daniel rubbed his eyes and crossed his arms. “I think you and Maddie call him the Wisconsin Ghost?”

Jack’s voice echoed with malice, “That crazy son of a bitch is in on this?”

Phantom winced and stared up to Jack in confusion. “Aren't you being a little harsh?”

Jack snorted. “Oh, forgive me… I seem to remember that freak possessing me, trying to steal my portal and threatening my family! Hell? You even teamed up with me to kick his ass out of my lab!”

Daniel tiredly rubbed his brow and turned to stand. Floating by the bar stool he languidly spoke in a hushed tone. “Everyone screws up. Things happen. That's life. He’s made mistakes but he's not the villain here.”

Jack snorted, “Sure…”

Daniel voice softened, “He’s not our enemy.”

Jack glared into the counter, “I think we're done here.” Holstering his weapon and standing from his stool, he made a move toward the door.
Phantom reached out and stopped him. “Wait a second…. I know that look. What are you planning?”

Jack smiled coolly. “Nothing that concerns you.”

Daniel’s eyes widened and his mouth became a tight scowl. “If you haven’t noticed I’m already a part of this? Not to throw your own words back at you but here we are…”

Jack paused and laughed lightly. “Am I that readable to you?”

Daniel shrugged, “No… not usually. But I’m familiar with that look. It’s the same look you give when you read about a ghost attack or some random spook and decide to go poking around.”

Pausing, Daniel prodded, “What are you planning on doing?”

Jack turned to face the teen and pointed to the ceiling. “If we’re playing twenty questions, why don’t you explain to me what happened in that room?”

Daniel flinched and locking his gaze with his father’s baby blue eyes he spat. “I was under the impression you were going to leave things alone for me to handle Jack!”

“You know something don’t you?” Jack calmly countered. Phantom’s eyes immediately broke contact and Jack snarled, “You spooks never change! You do nothing but lie and harm people constantly.” Pulling out the gun and cutting off the safety with his thumb, he aimed it toward the duplicate. “Tell me what happened Phantom.”

Daniel’s head whirled and something akin to terror and grief flashed across his features. That single expression crushed any resolve the adult could possibly have hoped to summon in order to pull the trigger. It was pure betrayal and heartache. Closing his eyes, Phantom spoke. “I can’t.”

Jack’s hands shook. “And why not?”

Biting his lip and still keeping his eyes shut tight, the duplicate pleaded, “I just can’t! It’ll hurt too many people! Please.”

Jack winced, “And who could it possibly hurt?”

Daniel’s eyes flashed open and his hand drummed against his own chest, “IT’LL HURT MY FAMILY!” Taking a ragged breath, which went unnoticed by the startled parent, he continued, “You’re right! I’m dishonest! I lie constantly… but you know what? I lie to protect the people I love! I’m human…. was a human… I lie because I have no choice. To prevent the people I care about from suffering I’d gladly lie a thousand times over even if it costs me your faith!”

‘Even if my own father hates me… It’s better he doesn’t know…’

“If you love someone wouldn’t you do the same?!?!?”

Brilliant green eyes locked with Jack’s blue and the man felt his hand loosening on his gun. Sighing, he flicked back on the safety and tucked the weapon back into his belt.

“I’d do the same thing for my family in a heartbeat Phantom. I understand where you’re coming from….but not telling me endangers my family.”

Phantom’s eyes saddened and he rubbed his arm tiredly. “But if I tell you your family will be put in more danger. Jack, please? Just trust me? I know that it’s hard for you given that I’m—” Phantom flinched and swallowed.
Jack winced and sighed. Breaking eye contact, he turned away from the teenager and propped a hand against the door frame. “I’ll leave the matter for now, but I do expect a better explanation later.”

The ghost teen sighed, “I hope it never comes to that.”

Jack smiled weakly from over his shoulder. “Goodbye spook. I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon with company. I recommend you vacate the premises before I return. My wife will shoot first and ask questions later.”

Phantom smiled half-heartedly, “Don't worry… I won't be around tomorrow. I have someone that needs me right now and I can't leave him on his own for too long without him getting into trouble.”

Jack smirked, “Funny? I know two people like that.” Pausing he gently added, “Be careful Phantom.”

Danny beamed a million-watt smile and Jack froze from the familiarity. “Don't worry. I'll be careful.”

Jack turned his head back quickly and exited the home through the door he had come through. Seeing his father driving away, the duplicate quickly phased upstairs and destroyed all of the evidence it could find before dissipating. Unknown to Daniel, however, Jack Fenton had already gotten his samples. When he had been tossed into the wall by Spectra, he had accidentally landed in a small pool of ectoplasm and blood. There wasn't much, but there would be enough to track down whoever was responsible and Jack already had a theory on who that individual could be.

Under his breath, Jack growled, “Vlad was telling the truth but the kids aren't…. That blood has to be his… Was he wounded prior to that charity garbage?”

Thinking back to the bloodied shirt Daniel was wrapped in, Jack flinched.

Turning down another street, he looked to the glove he had flipped inside out to preserve the samples he had accidentally gathered. The ectoplasm was starting to burn his wrist from the contact. “I need to find Plasmius and give him a piece of my mind.” A bitter frown split across his features. “Or a well-aimed blast from my gun. That evil son of a bitch even has Phantom fooled.”

Pressing the gas to speed up the vehicle he finished as an afterthought. “I'll have to fix that...”
Vladimir's List of Insults

Daniel was quick to recap Jaz, Tucker, and Sam when he completed his work at Vlad's. As a precaution, Jaz decided that spending the night with Sam would be in her best interests so she could avoid a confrontation with their parents. Tucker, on the other hand, voted to stay with Daniel while they tended to Vlad. Vladimir, after nearly three hours, was still unconscious and his fever had begun fluctuating again. Paula darted in and out of the room often with clean hand towels and water for Daniel to quell some of the heat.

At one point in the afternoon, the adult began trembling under the sheets draped over his injuries and tossing against his pillow. Black rings flickered in agitation by his waist for several minutes but failed to shift him. An hour after that pained screaming reverberated through the attic and the half-ghost shot up abruptly from the bed in a blind panic. Gripping his chest, he failed to notice Tucker and Jazmine's approach until their hands were on his shoulders.

Tucker spoke gently. “Easy… Take a breath.”

Vlad dizzily noted the voice and followed it's instruction. Jazmine's hand gently began rubbing circles into his back to help calm him. After a few minutes, he was coherent enough to notice who was aiding him. Shivering, he glanced up through watery and feverish eyes at the teenager and the young adult still holding him upright. “What's-?”

Tucker smiled sheepishly, “You had another nightmare.”

Vlad frowned and brought a shaking hand to his head. “They're getting worse.”

Jazmine sighed, “It's probably the stress and the fever's fault.”

Vlad paled, “Is Daniel alright? I don't remember much after I collapsed… What-?”

Jazmine quirked an eyebrow, “You don't remember guilt tripping my dad into leaving your house alone?”

Vlad grimaced, “Vaguely. Everything was kind of fuzzy and distorted after I clasped onto Daniel.”

Jazmine's eyes widened. “You mean you were already out of it before you got back on the phone?”

Vlad groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “How did Daniel's duplicate fair? Jack didn't shoot him did he?”

Tucker patted his shoulder, “Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Daniel smirked as he walked in from the doorway. “How are you feeling Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad smiled weakly. “Horrible. What about you?”

“I've been better…” Pausing, Daniel walked into the room and toward the bed. Vlad clumsily shifted so that his legs were hanging off of the mattress and his feet were planted against the floor. Tucker plopped down in the chair next to him so he could catch him in the event he passed out or fell.

Daniel smiled slightly, “I'm glad to see you're back in the land of the living again. You gave me another mini heart attack when you conked out again earlier.”
Vlad snorted, “It's not like I had any say in the matter.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. Leaning down and pulling Vlad's hands from his temple, he checked his fever. “Are you okay Vlad?”

Vlad sighed and took the hand from his head, “That's what I need to ask you. Daniel? I heard what he said, are you-?”

Daniel sighed, “-okay? Emotionally? Honestly, I'm not sure. My duplicate practically gave me whiplash from the feelings it dumped on me.”

Vlad nodded and averted his gaze. “I had no idea he'd show up. He didn't shoot you did he?”

Daniel sighed heavily and stared into the floor. “He didn't shoot me. He threatened to but didn't commit. He said mom and him will be back tomorrow afternoon with you to check out the house and that's about it.”

Vlad quirked an eyebrow. “You're coasting over a lot of information. What did he say to you, Daniel?”

Daniel's face fell and Vlad cringed, “Nevermind… I can guess from that expression. Forget I even asked.”

Paula came in and, seeing Vlad awake, questioned, “I heard a scream. Are you alright?”

Vlad nodded absently. “I'm fine. I'm sorry for any inconvenience I've caused you, Paula.”


Vlad raised an eyebrow, “I take it someone explained what I am while I was out of it?”

Sam squeezed by the waitress with a food tray, “Guilty as charged.” Locking her amethyst gray eyes on his feverish blue, she smirked and set the tray down on the nightstand by the twin sized bed.

Digging his fingers into the red blanket around his legs, Vlad turned to Paula, “Pick whatever name you prefer. I don't mind.”

Paula tapped her chin, “I think I'll continue calling you Damian. That's the side of you I've ranted the most to after all.”

Vlad smiled slightly, “I'm fine with that.” Dizzy, he numbly began falling forward again. Jazmine's arm gently latched out to catch him and Daniel grappled his shoulders.

Paula worriedly stepped forward and quickly reached the bed. Turning to the teens, she sighed, “He shouldn't attempt getting out of the bed.”

Daniel nodded and Sam propped the pillows up so Vlad could sit up enough to eat. Vlad attempted to protest but a poent glare from Jaz silenced him before he could utter a single word. Groaning, he allowed their help in situating him against the headboard. Curling his legs under himself he leaned his head against the pillows and rubbed his neck awkwardly. Feeling the bandages wrapped around the flesh he withdrew the limb. Sam grabbed the tray and laid it in his lap before he could argue. A bowl of chicken noodle soup lay brimmed in green plastic on the floral plastic tray. Vlad raised an eyebrow. “What time is it?”

Paula glanced at her wristwatch, “It's half past six.”
Vlad grimaced and looked from the food to the crowd with a hint of discomfort, “You mean I slept through the entire day?”

Sam sighed and grabbing the spoon from the tray, handed it to Vlad. “You needed the rest… By the looks of things you still need it. Just eat your dinner?”

Vlad gripped the spoon and defeatingly began eating the food. Between bites, he looked up from the meal and questioned, “Did I miss anything interesting?”

Daniel snorted. “You missed Jazz leaving to tutor a football Neanderthal and me having to catch Lawrence.”

Spotting the thermos attached to Phantom's hip, Vlad paled. “Please tell me you didn't stuff him in that.”

Daniel awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck and grabbed the thermos from his waist. “I didn't want my dad getting ahold of him…”

Vlad sighed heavily and motioned for the thermos. “Pass that soup can, Daniel.”

Phantom quirked an eyebrow. “What are you going to do?”

“I'm just going to have a little talk with that moron. Pass him over.” Vlad motioned an open palm out. Relenting, Daniel threw the thermos toward him. Setting the thermos beside himself and passing the food tray to Sam, Vlad kicked off the blanket and forced a shift. Plasmius’s pointed ears pinned to his face and he gasped in pain as the rings finished. Clicking the thermos open before anyone could protest his power use, they watched as the Box Ghost flopped face first onto the floor.

Shooting up, the blue factory worker spotted Daniel and whipped his hands out, “Bewar-”

Vlad cleared his throat and crossed his arms. Box ghost stiffened and his glow dimmed. Slowly turning around, he gulped at the sight of Plasmius sitting on a twin sized bed with a notable air of annoyance.

“I take it Pandora has finished your punishment for stealing her artifact Lawrence?” Vlad coolly questioned.

Floating up to Vlad, the Box Ghost stuttered. “I-I haven't told a s-soul! Plasmius I swear-”

Vlad's features grew tired and he motioned to Daniel, “Did you seriously pop into Amity again to antagonize him? Can't you leave him alone for a single day?”

Lawrence looked to Vlad's eyes curiously, “Are you alright Plasmius? Your color is off.”

Vlad snorted and rolled his eyes. “I'm fine. I just tangled with a demonic.” Motioning Lawrence forward he smiled tiredly, ”It's not safe for you to be hanging around town right now. The Fenton’s are out for ectoplasm and my normal haunt’s portal isn't secure for you to pop through.”

Lawrence glanced to Daniel dejectedly and then back to Vlad questioningly. Pointing his thumb toward Daniel, the Box Ghost questioned, “You're not mad? You were pretty ticked off when you asked where-”

Vlad's eyebrow twitched, “In my defense? I was rather drunk when I interrogated you. Please forgive my behavior. I was rather desperate and time was of the essence. Daniel is half human after all…. Extended time in the zone would have been too dangerous to chance.”
The Box Ghost nodded. “That explains your threatening and callous attitude. Next time you can just ask politely? I know we’re not exactly compadres but I respect you enough that I would’ve just given you the information.”

Vlad smiled gently. “Noted. Do us all a favor and stay clear of Amity for a few weeks?”

Lawrence sighed. “What about you Plasmius? If I’m not safe you’re not safe.”

Vlad motioned to Daniel, “Phantom has me covered. I’m too weak to travel back into the zone yet. If I attempt it, Walker has threatened to lock me up.”

The Box Ghost nodded minutely and then turned to Daniel, “Since when do you protect ghosts Phantom?”

Daniel sighed, “If you haven’t noticed Lawrence, I almost always catch you before my parents attempt to. Would you rather they test their theories on you or a simple stay in a Fenton Thermos until I can get you back into the zone?”

The Box Ghost crossed his arms and pouted, “How the heck am I supposed to get street credit Phantom? You’ve been around for less than a decade and you’re famous in the zone. And I’ve been-”

Vlad interrupted, “Considering that fame almost netted Daniel a one-way ticket to becoming a demonic’s supper? I think you may want to reconsider your goals.”

The Box Ghost turned a lighter shade of blue, “You mean the demonic that put you in this state was trying to eat Phantom? Jesus… Plasmius? You should’ve called Walker to handle it.”

Vlad smirked, “No, this is a new set of demonic injury, completely unrelated to Phantom and the ghoul who was trying to eat his core. Just put this under my unlucky happenstance tab.”

Cupping a hand to his forehead and feeling the perspiration, Vlad gently motioned Lawrence even closer. “I’m going to send you back to the zone. This is the safest way for you. I know you most likely wouldn’t want to, but if you can find Skulker and tell him I had a run in with a problem on this side… Well, I would deeply appreciate it.”

Raising an eyebrow, Lawrence questioned, “How are you-?”

Vlad smirked devilishly but his chest was beginning to feel like it was being submerged in molten oil. “You hang out near Young Blood’s domicile correct?”

The Box Ghost’s features scrunched in confusion. “Yes, but how-”

Vlad pointed above the bed and coughed painfully a couple of times into his left hand. “I do apologize for this. Happy landings.” And with those words, a portal sprung open directly above the Box Ghost and sucked him in. As it dissipated Vlad groaned and fell back against his pillows. The sharp taste of ectoplasm and the scent of lemons seemed to claw at his throat. “That took…a little too much…effort.”

Two rings formed around his chest but quickly faded out. Lifting his right gloved hand, Plasmius raised an eyebrow. Yanking off the glove with his teeth, Vlad attempted to activate it. Seeing only a dim glow he sighed defeatedly.

Daniel worriedly came up to Vlad’s side. “Vlad? Shift back. You shouldn’t be in ghost form right now.”
Vlad stared into the ceiling and flatly replied. “I can't.”

Jazmine quirked an eyebrow, “What do you mean you can't?”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his brow with his right hand. Turning to Tucker and Sam, he smirked and motioned to himself, “Behold, halfa adrenaline. Lawrence's proximity glued my form temporarily. I'm stuck until it runs out of my system. Twenty or so minutes and I'll be able to shift back.”

“How did the Box Ghost's proximity lock your form? That guy is harmless.” Daniel questioned.

In reply, Vlad lifted the hand he had used to cover his coughing fit. Neon green ectoplasm and a splatter of red lay on his palm. Daniel immediately darted forward and snarled, “What the hell happened??”

Vlad sighed as he was sat back up and inspected. Tucker growled, “I take it that blonde monster’s medicinal cocktail is still running in your system, Vlad?”

Vlad winced, “I have no clue… All I know is that as soon as Lawrence popped into the room my breathing became labored and I began coughing up blood and ectoplasm. For a moment there I almost thought I was about to have a relapse of whatever that poltergeist did to me earlier. I felt like my insides were starting to cook so I zapped him out of here as quickly as possible.”

Leaning Vlad forward and passing him a glass of water, Daniel motioned for him to take a few sips. Vlad nodded and took several mouthfuls of the liquid over a span of fifteen minutes. Dizzy, he fell forward slightly and almost dropped the glass.

Jazmine sighed heavily before reaching out and taking the cup. “I think he's had enough.”

Vlad looked up curiously. “Jazmine? What are you talking about?”

Jazmine glanced to Daniel accusingly and Sam raised an eyebrow. Paula and Tucker looked to the teen in confusion. Vlad numbly tried to stand and Daniel quickly tackled him to the bed and pinned him down. “Just sit still. You're going to want to be in bed for this.”


And then the realization hit.

Red eyes widened accusingly, “Did I seriously just get roofied by a juvenile delinquent with a hero complex?”

Neon green met warm red sclera and orange irises smugly. “Yep. I'm not taking the chance on you using your powers foolishly again.”

Vlad growled and his fangs flashed, “And what was foolish about my use of power? I just kept my secret and protected Lawrence! With everything that has happened, there’s no way you would've been able to make it into Fenton Works without Jack and Maddie using you as target practice! Not to mention your portal is locked! I have no clue how that spectral fool got here but I do know he was in danger if he stayed. Me shifting and zapping him back into the zone was our best option!”

Daniel sighed and pushed Vlad back down forcefully as he tried to get up again. “STAY STILL YOU STUBBORN IDIOT!”

Vlad narrowed his gaze and smiled sarcastically in response, “Aw...The genderbent powerpuff girl is talking about himself.”
Daniel gaped. “Did you seriously just go there?”

Vlad snorted, “I’ve already been there Rowdy Ruff boy. You should hear the nicknames me and Skulker have come up with for you in our free time. I think we’re going at over fifty.”

Wriggling his wrists against Daniel's hold he looked from side to side somewhat confused. The room had begun spinning more rapidly. Squeezing his eyes shut, Vlad groaned. “I feel weird…. Daniel? The room is blurring.”

Daniel paused and his grip slackened slightly. “You seriously just sit with Skulker making up nicknames for me?”

Vlad leaned his head back and tried freeing himself again. “It was Ed's idea of cheering me up.”

Tucker smirked, “Can we hear a few?”

Vlad blinked and then grinned with the realization that Daniel couldn't hold him down and cover his mouth at the same time, “Buttercup, the amazing teenage glow stick, a discount Jack Frost, Hal Jordan, Frozone, Mr. Sarcastic, the invisible boy, the little green man-” Everyone burst out laughing at Daniel’s expense and Vlad paused, “If it makes you feel better I think the last one suits Ed more.”

Sam, who had started recording the encounter at the start of the nicknames, snickered, “Go on! Any more pet names for Inviso-Bill?”

Vlad smirked at Daniel’s twitching eyebrow and green blush. “Mr. Freeze, Captain Cold, the Soup Renegade, Lawrence’s parole officer, the Disaster Master, Sub-Zero, the green-eyed Casper, the lean-green-string bean, Snowflake, ICE-CUBE, Sir Popsicle, the gorilla gynecologist, Campbell’s unofficial spokesperson, the Tasmanian Badger, mini-Jack….” Vlad's eyes began drifting in their sockets. “This stuff…. it's potent… my head is doing things…”

Daniel sighed in relief. “Thank god. You're finally going to shut up.”

Vlad groaned and smiled toothily, “Can't you just let it go, Elsa?”

Tucker was practically blue and Sam was biting her lip to keep herself from laughing again. Jazmine was smiling broadly and Paula was staring away from the duo. Vlad weakly shuttered and began zoning in and out. “...Daniel?.... I'm going to get you for this...It's not fair.... I've got more.... And I'm starting to conk out... I haven't even gotten to the ones we made... about your fighting..... style...or your suit...”

Sam raised an eyebrow, “There's more?”

Vlad laughed and the sound carried genuine warmth and bliss. Daniel's eyes widened in shock. “Vlad? How far under are you at this point?”

Vlad shook his head and snickered, “Fuck...if I know…”

Jazmine gaped, “Did he just curse?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Vlad?”

Vlad smiled warmly up at the teen, “M’ not here… take a message…”

Tucker shook his head in disbelief, “Nice one Pham, you completely scrambled his ability to think.”

Vlad giggled. “Tucker? I can...think… Stuffs just not lining up…. This is worse than...that one time
Ed tested that...new tranquilizer on me…”

Tucker’s eyes practically bulged out of his skull. “He’s so loopy he’s dropping formalities! Danny? How much did you give him?!?”

Daniel looked to Vlad guiltily. “I gave him double the dose. He’ll be fine though-” Pausing, Daniel smirked at Vlad's half-lidded eyes, “...right Vlad?”

Vladimir winced and his ears twitched up. “Yeah... iz fine. People like... drugging me.... and poisoning me.... happens every other week... Kinda normal....this stuff though?... I mean damn.... it feels like someone slipped me a glorified stimulate.... but then m’ dizzy...why is that?...Oh... right, Snoopy slipped me...sleeping pills.” Vlad chuckled again.

Jazmine worriedly questioned, “Was drugging him really a good idea? Couldn't you have just let him conk out on his own?”

Daniel snickered and turned to Vlad. Seeing the adult's eyes flickering between semi-conscious and conscious again, he questioned. “Hey, Vlad? Do you think you could've tried sleeping without the drugs?”

Vlad snorted and teared slightly, “Nope... probably would've...faked it... Dreams have been...getting worse... I don't need to see...my little one dying...again....”

Everyone in the room cringed. Sam spoke up, “Is that what woke you up earlier?”

Vlad groaned and tossed his head against the pillow. Trying to free himself, he struggled dizzily under Daniel's hold. Speaking tiredly, the dazed adult summarized, “Oh… that?… That's part of it. I remember....it grabbing me....I tried so hard...and I totally...screwed up... I wonder if she...hates me?” There was a pause and Vlad tried blinking back tears. A small whimper echoed through the room and he squirmed against the bed. Legs numbly kicked and shifted into the blankets.

Daniel's expression fell. “Vlad? Hey... Are you alright?”

Vlad clasped his eyes shut and bit his lip. “It...it hurts.... someone…”

The room charged with static momentarily and Vlad’s chest arched. Screaming out, he thrashed against the hands restraining him as the rings shifted his form back into his human counterpart.

Panting heavily and still thrashing, Vlad’s eyes rolled back and he went limp against Daniel. The teen immediately released his wrists and pulled him up to check his breathing and pulse. Feeling both and, seeing Vlad shaking like a leaf, he quickly hugged him against himself, “He's alright. The sleeping drugs did what they’re supposed to. He's human again.”

Tucker tiredly rubbed his eyes from under his glasses and motioned toward Vlad, “So you were shorting out his powers?”

Daniel nodded, “It's the only thing I could think of. I can't just send a duplicate to Fenton Works for another Ghost Dazer while my mom and dad are in deathcon one mode.”

Phasing Vlad and himself off of the bed and toward the restroom, Daniel hollered, “Jaz? Tuck? Can you help me change his bandages while Sam fixes the bed?”
The Keeper of the Roses

Tucker gripped onto the frame of his glasses and adjusted them before nodding gruffly and picking up the first aid kit from the pile of supplies they had moved upstairs while Vlad slept.

Setting Vladimir on the toilet lid and duplicating, Daniel had his clones pin Vlad’s shoulders back as he loosened and removed the soiled bandages woven around his body. Jaz soaked a washcloth and brought it to the injuries as gently as she could. Vlad unconsciously struggled against the two duplicates as her fingers traced over the neck wound and segments of his stomach. Tucker walked in behind them with the first aid kit and looked over the injuries strategically. The only true wounds present on Vlad where the three finger-shaped holes situated against his neck and even those were healing fast. Vlad's main problem seemed to be sore bones and burnt tissue. Wrapping the injuries that needed attention, Tucker turned to Danny. “Pham? Go get one of those pairs of sweatpants and that t-shirt Jazz swung by Clark’s and Company for earlier.”

Daniel nodded and quickly phased into the room. Sam passed him the bag and raised an eyebrow. “You know she bought him jeans right?”

A wicked smile curled up Daniel's face. “I know she did. I asked her to. The guy needs to loosen up.”

Sam smirked, “What about the Metallica t-shirt? Was that another wardrobe recommendation you made?”

Daniel smiled and plucked the garments he wanted out of the bag. Phasing back into the bathroom he dissipated his doubles and, kicking Jazmine out, he grabbed a towel from the towel rack and laid it across the tile floor. Tucker sighed as he lifted Vlad up and carted him over to the makeshift mat. Laying him down against the bright yellow towel, he questioningly looked up to Daniel. “So… how are we doing this?”

Tossing the black t-shirt top to Tucker, Daniel divided the tasks. “I'll hold his chest up while you wriggle that on him.”

Tucker glanced down to Vlad and sighed before he readied the shirt. Daniel phased behind Vladimir and hoisted him up into a sitting position. Vlad's head slumped into his chest and silver quickly obscured his face. Tucker slipped Vlad’s neck through the garment first and then with Daniel’s help, maneuvered the adult's arms through the short sleeves. Straightening the fabric and untangling Vlad's hair from under the shirt’s collar, Daniel leaned him back onto the towel. Seeing the plastic package being ripped open by Phantom's white-gloved hands, Tucker quirked an eyebrow, “He's going to kill you… How are you honestly going to get him in new underwear without seeing his junk?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “You know that tablecloth trick where the waiter rips the cloth out and leaves everything behind? I'm going to do that.”

Tucker smirked, “He's still going to murder you when he wakes up.”

Daniel shrugged and phased the pants Vlad had been wearing off. Vlad's head tossed from side to side and his brow furrowed. Pausing, Daniel and Tucker both questioningly noted a rather large scar poking out from under the waistband of Vlad's boxers. Curious, Daniel slid the fabric down slightly to inspect it.
Tucker swallowed, “What the hell did that? The flesh looks like it was ripped out.”

Shifting back into Fenton, Daniel put a hand to the wound in order to try and figure out what could possibly make a mark so large. Vlad clawed his hands into the floor and his eyes flashed open at the contact. Dim white glowered and the adult teleported a short distance away and shielded himself. Both Tucker and Daniel stared in surprised horror.

“V-Vlad?” Daniel questioned tentatively.

No answer came from behind the fluctuating and wavering shield. Tucker turned to Daniel, “Danny? I think he's still asleep.”

Daniel nodded and his voice softened, “Fruit-Loop? It's just a bad dream…”

Vlad's voice numbly echoed and warped between languages, threatened menacingly, “Do not….touch…. me...N-not again….”


White eyes became half-lidded, “She wouldn't stop…. the demon wouldn't stop…. No one heard…. No one came….I'm so tired….” A shaking hand gripped the bathtub and Vlad's eyes teared, “Liz?…. It's all gone….”

Comforting, Daniel coaxed. “Fruit-Loop? You're just having a nightmare. Shhhh…. No one's going to hurt you right now.”

Vlad's shield began fizzling out and Daniel took the initiative to phase through the flooring and around to Vladimir. Now in the shielded area with Vlad, he stooped down and sat in front of the sickly half ghost. A feral growl curled from Vlad's lips. “Leave me alone spirit.... I can smell your energy.... You smell of death....” Vlad froze.

“Electricity... You were killed in an accident....and yet not?...” Vlad's eyes widened with realization and the tears became more prolific.

“It's...Danny.... H-he got zapped... I could've prevented...it.... I could've protected...him.... I trie-”

Daniel's hands quickly reached out to support Vlad as he pitched backward. Tucker ran forward as soon as the shield dissipated. Vlad's eyes were still open but staring blankly into the ceiling.

Tucker gently bent down to help support him. “Vlad?!? Dude…. It's alright. It's a bad dream.”

Vlad remained unresponsive. After a moment he shakily replied. “It's not...It happened.... I wanted it to be...one. Dreams disappear...when we open our eyes...” Vlad swallowed numbly. “Jack....It's not okay.... It's-”

Daniel cut him off. “Vlad...Shhhh.”

Leaning him against his shoulder and rocking him slightly, he comforted. “Fruit-Loop? It happened…. Whatever you're talking about happened. But it's okay. You can't change the past. But you still have a future right? You promised to train me. That's something right?”

Vlad's eyes began closing. “I promised?” Vlad paused for a moment and then smiled weakly from over Daniel's shoulder, “....That's right...Daniel's giving me a chance.... I've gotta get him back.... He drugged me….”
Daniel smiled gently. “And how are you planning on getting him back?”

Vlad sighed contentedly as he was readjusted. “M’ gonna prank him, Jack....Already.... thought about...it... Still, need a camera though...”

Tucker rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Danny? I think he thinks you're your dad right now.”

Daniel continued gently comforting Vlad. “He thinks I'm several people right now... It's probably partially the drugs fault. He's still out of reality. I think he thought I was his sister for a moment as well. Everything that's happened the last few days is finally catching up to him. The stress seems to be venting through his dreams and the drugs are egging everything on.” Wrapping a hand around the back of Vlad's neck he winced, “This fever is making it all even worse....”

Vlad blearily wrapped an arm around Daniel's back. After a few moments, Vlad shut his eyes and the arm went limp. Thinking Vlad had fallen back under he went to pull him back to the towel only for soft whispers and a new wave of feverish tears to erupt. “Anna? I'm sorry.... I couldn't save you.... I was too late... You didn't even know... You were so scared...”

Daniel and Tucker froze in horror and Vlad continued obliviously. “I'm sorry... Couldn't even bury you...You....liked the roses.... It's out back...the stone... Ed and Rom... they miss you...Ed pretends... but he can't walk by the room without pausing.... It hurts.... I'm so sorry....I was too late.... I couldn't be your hero.... I promised I'd be there for you....”

Vlad shuttered and his voice became fainter. “My friends...my friends didn't know... I hid it.... Do you think they could've helped me?.... She was laughing....She took me and she was laughing....They both toyed with me... It hurt so much...It still.....hurts ....”

Daniel bit his lip and gently pulled Vlad back from his shoulder to look at him. The glowing white was now gone and all that was left were two small slits of dark blue peaking out dazedly from behind drugged lids. Tears slowly dripped down his cheeks and collected by his jawline. A few drops fell against Daniel's t-shirt as he shifted him. Unable to keep his eyes propped open Vlad blinked weakly a couple of times before finally closing them.

Tucker gently bent down and motioned Daniel to pass Vlad to him. A stifling silence filled the room for a few minutes with only breathing to interrupt the emptiness. Sighing, Daniel lowly whispered, “I think it's over... Let's just get him dressed and back into the bedroom.”

Tucker winced, “Yeah...” Looking up from Vlad he frowned. “Danny... what do you think-”

“I don't know Tuck. I just don't know. I think it's best we just drop it until he's better.” Daniel's arm latched out and took Vlad from Tucker. Lifting him up and setting him back down on the towel, he duplicated to gently pin his arms down so they could finish dressing him. Slipping a new pair of boxers over the old pair and phasing the old pair off, Daniel quickly grabbed the sweats Jaz had picked and helped Vlad into them. Tucker took the old clothes and trashed them. Carrying Vlad back to the bed and laying him down, the two quickly covered him up and tucked him in.

Paula looked up from the chair she was sitting in and addressed Daniel and Tucker in a low whisper. “Samantha’s mother called and asked where they were. She claimed Jazmine and her were both helping to tutor someone. They left while you two were handling Damian.”

Daniel nodded curtly in understanding. “Thanks for putting up with all of this.”

Paula shrugged and glanced toward Vlad. “What's two more hapless charity cases added to my roster? By my normal standards, you fellows may be the weirdest but you're also the most polite.”
Daniel smirked tiredly, “I guess I'll take that as a compliment?”

Paula stood and went to exit the room. “Your friends left those sleeping bags by his bed. If one of you wants to sleep downstairs, the couch is open. Goodnight boys.”
Jack was checking the sample he had gathered from Vladimir's home for probably the hundredth time that evening under the microscope in the lab. No matter how many times he checked the same anomalies kept popping up. For one thing? This strain of ectoplasm wasn't the regular run of the mill sample Maddie and him would gather on their normal automated rover explorations into the zone. Spectral ectoplasm, in essence, was an energy source that mimicked both liquid and solid properties while maintaining a consistent charge. At its base level, it looked extraordinarily like the clear, gellish outer layer of the amoeboid cells that were christened with the same name. The way it could stand rigid and also give to pressure like the small walls seen in the glass slides of laboratories across the globe had only added to the association. Spectral ectoplasm, however, was not absent of the nodes or granials that the living counterpart lacked. Each segment would fluctuate and spike as energy was continually generated from within the ghost slime. There were no truly organic forms within ectoplasm or ectoplasmic energy. At least not living forms. The liquid had components that looked more like stacks of crystalline building blocks floating within neon green or blue jelly. Maddie and him had even begun researching its compatibility and similarities to known elements and had started their most recent thesis on its uses. Both had even discussed the possibility of adding it to the current periodic table after more data was gathered. This sample rewrote all of the known rules Maddie and him had been studying and cataloging for months. Most striking of all? It had organic components… It had cells. Or at least newly generated structures that mimicked cells. At first, he had hypothesized cross-contamination from Vladimir but even that was a stretch. Ectoplasm was corrosive like battery acid. Human blood would have imploded and dried out on a cellular level with extended contact. The Fentons wore hazmat suits for a reason after all. But this? This strain broke every test, rule, and comparison Maddie and him could possibly have concocted. Rubbing his temple, Jack glowered and put his eyes back to the lens. At the moment he did so, a bright white light engulfed the laboratory. Hissing in pain and rubbing his eyes, he cursed blindly for a minute or two before finally seeing something besides white spots. Glancing around and seeing his portal still closed and no signs of malfunctioning equipment, he froze. ‘What on earth was that? A power surge?’ Taking the sudden change of lighting as ocular fatigue he quickly resolved to glance at the sample one last time before turning in for the night. To his horror, the sample was now nothing more than ash. Gaping in disbelief and then feeling a new wave of anger flaring up, he slammed a fist against the lab table in a fit of fury. ‘Plasmius must have done that….’ Ramming his head into the table he growled in agitation, “Shit! How am I supposed to track down that fucker!??!” Maddie at that exact moment decided to come in through the front door upstairs. Hearing the noise, Jack groaned tiredly and glanced at the pizza boxes, soda cans, and crumpled napkins littering the usually sterile space. Sitting up from his stool, he quickly discarded his lab coat and snatched up the accumulated trash. Tossing it in the bin by the door he drowsily stacked the brief notes he had gathered from the specimen before it had disappeared and placed them by a few containers on the shelf by the lab computer.
Maddie stepped downstairs with a bag of donuts in hand and smiled warmly. Seeing him standing by the specimen shelf she raised an eyebrow. “Jack? What are you up to now?”

“I stopped by Vlad's earlier.” Jack tiredly whispered.

Seeing something was wrong, Maddie set the bag in her hand on one of the movable lab tables and walked over to his side. Putting a hand on his shoulder she gently squeezed in comfort. “What did he do this time?”

Jack tiredly rubbed his eyes. “It's not what he's done… Something's messing with him….” Turning to face her, he swallowed and flinched before looking into the floor. A hand rubbed the back of his neck nervously before he continued, “Daniel was lying to us earlier today. Vlad's hurt… I used the 'Spook Coop' to get to his place. There was blood and ectoplasm all over the floor and walls upstairs.”

Maddie stiffened. “You mean he was attacked?!!”

Jack rubbed his temple and groaned in exasperation. Looking to his spouse, he nodded yes and elaborated. “I also think Vladdie was the one that brought Danny back. I found his cufflink on that bloodied shirt Daniel was wrapped in.”

Biting his lip, he continued, “And Maddie? I overheard Danny on the phone before he left earlier. He was telling his friends to keep Vlad in bed so he doesn't aggravate his injuries or hack up blood. Something's amiss and our kids are bullshitting us. Vladdie to...I got him on the phone earlier and his breathing didn't sound right. He was trying to cover it up but I think he's hurting more than he's willing to admit.”

Maddie froze at the information and turned ashen. Turning abruptly, she made an attempt to go back upstairs only for Jack's hand to latch out to her shoulder. “They're not home Mads. Daniel and Vlad are somewhere else and they've refused to give me an address. I convinced Vlad to meet us tomorrow. I think we should probably knock him out when he shows up and cart him to a hospital. If the blood I saw is any indication he's probably in critical condition.”

Whipping around, she worriedly questioned. “Did you get any samples?!? Jack… we have to…”

Jack sighed again. “I got a sample accidentally but it's gone now. It spontaneously combusted before I could gather too much from it or add the ecto signature to a tracking device. I think I know who's responsible though. There were two ghouls that cornered me at Vlad's place… They attacked me and started gloating so it's safe to assume they're a part of this. I think the Wisconsin Ghost did most of the dirty work though.”

Maddie's eyebrow twitched. “That monster attacked Vladimir?!!”

Jack flinched. “I think so. They were talking about him in passing but it's obvious he was a part of it.”

Maddie rubbed her eyes tiredly. Looking up into her husband's eyes she worriedly questioned, “Do you think he was the one that took Danny?!!”

Jack’s stomach flipped uncomfortably at the thought. Pausing, he nodded gruffly. “That's probably what happened…. That ghost had to have a reason to attack Vlad. It hates our family and Vlad saved a Fenton. It probably decided to get revenge.”

Maddie rubbed the bridge of her nose in frustration. “Why didn't you call me? Jack…. I could've helped you!”
Jack sighed. “Phantom was there. He apparently has Danny and Vlad's trust. I didn't want us pissing them off before I can get to Vlad tomorrow with you. I don't know what they’re pulling but him not being in a hospital can be fatal at this point. You saw that shirt Danny was wrapped in…. Jesus, it looked like someone mopped up a blood bank.”

Maddie grimaced and questioned. “What did you gather from the sample you took? Is there any way to gather more?”

Jack casually plucked the notes he had taken up from the shelving and gave them to her. “That's all I was able to figure out before it turned to ash. As for more samples? The stuff at Vlad's is probably gone now so the only way would get another sample is if we catch the ghost responsible.”

Maddie froze as her eyes trailed over the meticulously scribbled notes. Looking up in shock she blanched, “Are you sure?”

Jack nodded. “Whatever it was? It was unlike any ectoplasm I've ever seen prior. It had structures similar to human blood cells Maddie!”

Maddie looked back at the pages and flicked through the notes in confirmation. “Jack…. Are they evolving?”

Jack frowned. “I sure the hell hope not…But if this is anything to go off of? I think they may be trying to look more human.”

Maddie's brow furrowed, “Like that one perverted ghost that dated Jaz?”

Jack nodded.

Maddie rubbed her temple and turned to Jack worriedly, “Why didn't you tell me about that cufflink you found? Jack… I could have tailed the kids to wherever they were going and found out what happened.”

Jack turned away from her tiredly and popped the piece of metal out of his pocket, “Just because a cufflink has his initials doesn't mean I had adequate proof Mads! The cufflink by itself didn't give me anything to substantiate the theory… I mean… how could Vlad have found Daniel? If a ghost took him it could have dragged him god knows where. The only concrete evidence I had was Daniel panicking after you left while he was on the phone. After I overheard him I rushed over to Vlad’s and walked into a Nightmare on Elm Street parody in the upstairs bathroom. I would have told you but up until a few hours ago, I was just hypothesizing where the cufflink came from. And when it comes down to it I wanted to confront Vlad on my own… I had no clue they fled the house! Much less what I would find when I got there.”

Maddie sighed and set down the papers. Looking up to him she questioned. “What are we going to do about the Wisconsin Ghost, Jack? If he’s threatening our babies or Vladimir…”

Phantom’s words reverberated through Jack’s skull.

‘YOU THINK WE'RE EMOTIONLESS?!?! FREE OF PAIN?!?! NEWS FLASH! I FEEL, DAMN IT! I FEEL YOUR WORDS, EVERY GODDAMNED STABBING SYLLABLE! I FEEL PAIN! I FEEL THE BLASTS! EVERY SINGLE SEARING BUZZ AND ZAPP THAT RICHOTETS THROUGH MY FLESH A MILLION TIMES MORE THAN A NORMAL WOUND! I FEEL EVERY SINGLE HIT THAT CONNECTS! I'M A HUMAN BEING FIRST!’

A shiver ran up the man’s spine. He wanted to teach Plasmius a lesson. He wanted him to hurt like Vlad undoubtedly was hurting…But if ghosts truly could feel… Did he have it in him to harm or
even dispose of the ghoul? Would he be plagued by nightmares just as he was with Phantom? Looking to his wife, he furrowed his brow. “What do you think we need to do Maddie?”

Maddie’s eyes narrowed to the cufflink in Jack’s palm. Taking it from him temporarily and inspecting the silver metal faintly rimmed in rust red tones, she frowned and fist the hand. “Jack? I think we need to start living up to our titles. We’re ghost hunters. I think this is one ghost that needs to be put to rest.”

Jack tentatively reached for her hand. “Mads? If ghosts could feel... What if-”

She slouched her shoulders tiredly. “Then wouldn’t it have empathy, Jack? If it hurt Vlad but could feel pain like us, wouldn’t it feel remorse?”

Jack nodded. “I have some prototype guns down here that need fine-tuning. We can work on them before we pop over to Vladimir’s home tomorrow afternoon.”

Maddie sighed and gently handed the cufflink back to her husband. “What are we going to do about Vladimir and the kids?”

“We’ll have to knock Vlad out as soon as possible. They won’t be able to protest too much if we get him sedated fast enough. After we get him to the ER? We’re going to ground the kids…”

Maddie snorted and tiredly rubbed her temple. “Our kids lied about something this dangerous... Jack? Why would they-?”

Jack plopped the cufflink in his jumpsuit pocket and frowned. Curling his arms around her waist and leaning his head against her shoulder, he furrowed his brow. “I think Vlad may have asked them to keep us out of the loop. You know how stubborn and foolish he can be at times Mads.”

Maddie flinched under Jack’s embrace and he stiffened. Sighing, he retracted himself from her. “What was with that reaction?” A dark black eyebrow raised curiously in the dim lighting.

Maddie shrugged and crossed her arms tiredly. “It’s nothing. I was just thinking of that trip I took with Danny to that science symposium.”

Jack prodded. “And?”

Maddie smiled tiredly. “Jack? If your friend went behind your back and did something insanely stupid or hurtful...How would you go about handling it?”

Bringing a black-gloved hand to his jaw he averted his gaze to the floor as he pondered the question. “I’d probably knock some sense into him. Currently, I am considering doing so to Vladimir. That blasted moron just doesn’t know how to keep himself out of trouble. As soon as we get ahold of him tomorrow evening I’m going to be having some choice words regarding reckless child endangerment and foolish heroism with matters he scarcely understands. Vlad’s not a ghost expert and the idea of him trying to save Daniel by himself from some sort of specter just screams moronic.”

Maddie smirked. “And what if the metaphorical friend pulled a really crappy prank regarding marital roles and betraying your trust? Would you still forgive the said person?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “What are you getting at Mads?”

She sighed and rubbed her fingers through her hair. Putting the gloved hand to his jaw, she crinkled her brow in a debating arch. “Just answer the question, honey.”

Jack looked to her in confusion but answered levelly, “This wouldn’t have to do with Vlad’s weird behavior would it?”
Maddie quirked an eyebrow at the accurate assertion.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Mads? I noticed the fake flirting a while back. Trust me… Vladdie is a lot smoother than that. If he wanted to really try and swing you over to him he would’ve done so with a lot more class and less comedic poise. I don’t know why he’s been annoying you but I can guarantee that’s what it is. I think he’s tried pulling the same thing with me except with low jabs and insults. The only thing I can reason that he’s getting back at us for is that whole reunion fiasco.”

Maddie gawked. Closing her jaw and narrowing her eyes, she growled. “Well, thanks for not telling me this sooner! Do you have any idea how much pent up hatred I’ve been harboring toward him? Jack… I poured scalding hot tea on his crotch for god’s sake!”

Jack winced. “I thought you said that was an accident.”

Maddie averted her gaze to the floor. “Well, now I wish it was… Jack? I actually thought he was coming on to me. Daniel thought he was coming on to me….”

Jack groaned tiredly and rubbed his eyes. “Let’s get some sleep Mads… Tomorrow is going to be trying for both of us and by the sounds of it we both need to give him an earful.”

Maddie snorted and under her breath whispered, “Him and you both.”

Jack tensed, “What?”

Maddie sighed, “Nothing. Come on. We have a busy itinerary and a certain ghoul to track down in a few hours.”

Jack grabbed the bag of donuts from the lab table and nodded. Following her out of the laboratory, he flicked off the lights. Soon Fenton Works was as silent as the grave with only a few tell-tale hums and electrical buzzes to accompany the crickets outside.
Vlad was having one of those weeks. In the past, he often chalked up his unfortunate luck to just simple cases or happenstance or a bad line-up of coincidences. Lately? He was starting to think there was a divine being somewhere royally screwing with him. Vlad Masters was the dictionary definition of ‘if it can happen it will’ and that realization only became more stinging with every kick in the teeth flung his way. Laying in bed and staring at the ceiling above him, he silently mused over the events of the past week.

‘Okay, Vlad... Look on the bright side, in some circles you can be seen as extremely fortunate. Daniel has saved your bacon multiple times this week and he doesn't seem to want to flail you alive.’ Watching the ceiling fan above him turning in counter-clockwise whorls, he added as an afterthought. ‘Then again? The kid drugged me last night.’

Sitting up from the bed and bringing a hand to his eyes, he attempted to rub the residual fatigue and drug-induced sleep away from himself to no avail. A rustle of fabric against his chest caused him to freeze in place. ‘I know I didn’t put this on.’ Fingering the fabric curiously he stopped. A soft sound could be heard emanating from the floor beside where he had been resting. Vlad peaked over the bed and seeing Daniel, a small smile gently ghosted across his lips.

In a low whisper that wouldn't wake the teen, he goaded, “I guess I tired you out Little Badger...” Pausing and seeing a desk with an ink quill and a blue bottle in his peripheral view, Vlad smirked. ‘Oh...this is going to be absolutely wonderful.’

Gently tossing aside the blankets layered on top of him, Vladimir made a move to get out if the bed and paused at the tightness against his ankles and waist. Blue eyes trailed downward and his eyebrow twitched. A thin bemused smile crept across his face. ‘Another thing to add to the list? Stripped and clothed against your will.’

Standing up and rounding the bed to look at the teen, Vlad crossed his arms smugly. ‘There's an irony in a Fenton finally getting me into clothing of their choosing. I would congratulate you but I think some much-needed payback is in order.’ Smirking devilishly, he quietly crept over to the desk and grabbed the delicate quill and transparent glass bottle into his hands. Stalking over to the boy’s side and wielding the writing implement like a brush, he debatingly inspected his unknowing canvas. ‘I think this will be a good place to start...’

Biting his lip and, gently touching the ink into the inkwell, he began drawing a monocle and a thin handlebar mustache onto Daniel’s open-mouthed face. The teen stirred slightly and Vlad stiffened mid-swipe. Seeing the boy still in deep REM sleep, he snorted and as an afterthought painted on a goatee.

Standing to inspect his efforts, he put a free hand under his chin and beamed at his work. ‘Now that’s a Master-piece.’ Daniel shivered from under the sleeping bag and Vlad’s eyes softened. He quickly set down the quill and the ink on the desk and then rounded back to the bed. With a skilled hand, he pulled back the covers that had kept him warm in the unusually cool room the night prior and lifted Daniel, sleeping bag and all, into the bed. Covering him up and turning toward the door Vlad risked one last glance at the teen. Daniel groaned in his sleep and turned to his side, completely unaware of his new paint job. Shaking his head in amusement Vlad exited the room and followed his nose to the downstairs kitchen.

Paula smirked from the doorway of the kitchen and Tucker shot up from the couch. “Vlad? You shouldn't be out of bed!”
Vlad glanced to the ceiling and putting a finger to his mouth, smirked. “I would rather stay away from the upstairs and Daniel, Mr. Foley. Especially, once he notices the impromptu makeover I gave him.”

Tucker froze and cocked an eyebrow. “You got back at him for drugging you, didn’t ya?”

Vlad shrugged, “If I remember correctly, I did challenge him to a prank war. I don’t like making deals or promises unless I have every intent on keeping them.”

Tucker shook his head in mild amazement and looked up to Vlad with a warm grin. “So what did you do to Amity’s resident ghost hero?”

Vlad fingered his own goatee amusedly. Glancing at Tucker through narrow eyes and smiling, he elaborated. “I gave him what every teenager wants.”

Miming a mustache Vlad grinned broadly at Tucker’s understanding chuckle. “Did you seriously give Pham facial hair?”

Vlad shrugged and turned to enter the kitchen. “Yep. My prank, however, is going to prove something that I’ve hypothesized about for a while now. I am actually pretty curious as to how this is going to turn out.”

Paula sighed from her place in the kitchen. “Did you sleep alright?”

Vlad smiled gently. “Yes, I slept fine...Thank you for your hospitality yesterday and this morning.”

Paula propped a hand onto her hip and accusingly pointed a spatula toward him. “So, do you feel up to showing me your incognito mode this morning, Damian?”

Vlad smirked and chose to ignore her query. She rolled her eyes and turned from him. Tilting his head slightly to see what she was cooking on the antique 1950’s era flat range, he questioned her curiously. “I thought you hated bacon, Ms. Maynard. Didn’t you complain to Roy about stocking it in the Diner?”

She looked to Tucker and the teen interjected, “I walked over to the convenience store and picked up some breakfast stuff for everyone. Bacon sounded pretty good.”

Paula returned her spatula to the food and shifted it. The crackling of grease and the fumes caused Vlad’s stomach to gurgle. Whipping a hand toward his abdomen, he flushed fuchsia.

Both Tucker and Paula raised an eyebrow and smirked knowingly. Paula grinned, “If you show me how you change hair colors I let you have first pick.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow, “Are you bribing me?”

Paula shifted the pan mockingly, “I don’t know… Does the notorious coffee vampire of Amity Park accept bribery?”

Vlad sighed. “How many pieces do I get?”

She tapped her chin. “Four?”

Vlad rubbed his chin and leaned against the doorway as he debated the offer. ‘Do I use my powers with the possibility of kissing the floor for four pieces of fatty meat or take the leftovers?’ Paula shifted the meat again to fill the air with the scent and Vlad had to restrain himself from salivating.
Tucker watched the scene intently. After a few more moments, Vlad looked over to Paula and raised an eyebrow. Uncrossing his arms, he began negotiating. “What else are you willing to barter?”

Paula smirked and casually motioned her thumb to the eggs already plated on the table and skirted next to stacks of strawberry topped french toast.

Sighing, Vlad relented. “Fine.” With a small flicker, his hair ebbed to Plasmius’s ebony. Bringing a hand to his eyes he blinked a few times to focus the weakly energy circulating throughout his system and opened them to reveal a warm reddish brown.

Tucker could be heard shooting up from the couch for a second time and running over to Vlad curiously. Leaning against the wall, Vladimir groaned and swayed slightly. Tucker gaped. “Vlad? How did you do that?”

Vlad smiled tiredly and Tucker reached a hand out to help him to the table. Swallowing, he apologetically looked up to Paula, “Is this good? I can’t hold it up for much longer…”

Paula nodded somewhat worriedly, “It’s enough. Stop forcing yourself…”

Vlad nodded and with a sigh, dropped the disguise. Leaning back against the chair he closed his eyes and answered. “Mr. Foley? I partially shift between Plasmius and my normal form. I just focus my spectral energy to my hair momentarily.”

Tucker nodded, “And what about your eyes? Brown isn’t exactly Plasmius’s go to pigment.”

Vlad smiled tiredly. “I mix the eye colors to attain the shade.”

Vlad furrowed his brow. “If that science worked…. Well, shouldn’t they have turned a dull purple?”

Vlad peaked open his eyes and chuckled before adjusting himself on the seat. “Those two colors do indeed make a dull purple, but if you noticed my eyes can naturally shift to three different iris colorations. How? I don’t know.” Vlad smirked. “What I do know is that a dull purple, when mixed with a fluorescent orange, creates a burnt sienna.”

Tucker gaped. “So you just mixed all three forms together to change your eye color? Why?”

Vlad rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. “It’s not like I can just go and eat in town or run simple errands without getting harassed. Then again? That’s been a constant since I first started up my company. Having people with cameras lounging around ogling me twenty-four seven like I am some sort of new exhibit in Central Park Zoo gets old pretty fast.”

Paula smiled apologetically. “Sorry for convincing you to try that… I didn’t know it would drain you so quickly.”

Vlad quirked an eyebrow. “After that? Let’s raise it to five strips?”

Miss Maynard chuckled. “Fine. You earned it. If it wasn’t for you I’d be six feet under by now.”

Vlad tiredly rubbed his eyes. Turning to Tucker he motioned him downward. Whispering in his ear he added, “You wouldn’t believe how many—”

A swift kick to his shin startled him and he looked up to see Paula poking the specified strips onto the plate in front of him. Adding a sixth she reprimanded, “Don’t go and spread any rumors, Damian. That’s bad for business.”
Vlad smirked. “Can I offer a few suggestions?”

She paused. “It depends...do you want the extra piece or not?”

Vlad glanced down to the added bribe and shrugged. “Never mind. I’m not risking it.”

Tucker sat by his own plate and, then realizing no one had anything to drink, he got up and began pouring himself a glass of orange juice. He was about to pour a glass for Vlad when he stopped and turned to the adult who was now contently eating his meal. “Hey, Vlad? Your throat...is it still sore?”

Vlad froze and sighed before nodding apologetically. Paula went to the fridge. Pulling out a gallon of tea, she passed it to Tucker, “I brewed that up last night before bed. It should help reduce any swelling or pain.”

Hearing this, Vlad placed down his fork and crossed his arms. “That doesn’t mean it’s drugged, right?”

Tucker winced and Vlad looked to him in confusion. Seeing the worried glint in his eyes, Tucker shook his head no. “I’m not letting Danny drug you again after last night. Your ghost half is unstable enough, we don’t need to go around fucking with your human half.”

Vlad’s features turned annoyed. Grabbing the fork and spearing a piece of fruit he pointed the utensil accusingly toward Tucker before taking a bite and promising, “One more profanity Mr. Foley and I’ll use the mute button artifact stored in the vault.”

Tucker paled and his eyes widened, “You have a mystical mute button?!”

Vlad smiled devilishly, ‘As far as you know Tucker? Sure. For the sake of improving your atrocious language habit, I have a mystical mute button.’

Tucker, seeing the amused light flickering in Vlad’s blue eyes, quickly nodded and turned to fill the remaining glass with the tea Paula had brought out from the fridge.

Paula sat down and began picking at her own plate. Between bites, she questioned, “So, what is your plan?”

Vlad looked up from his food and paused in thought. Taking a sip of the tea Tucker had handed him, he casually answered, “We’re probably going to depart after Daniel wakes up. His ghost hunter parents are coming over to my home today and I have a lot of very incriminating paranormal items tucked away in my library that need hidden. It’s probably going to be a full-time job getting everything into the vault.”

Tucker nearly choked on his food, “Oh god...you’re right....”

Vlad ran a hand through his hair and nodded tiredly. “We need to get there before they do or there will be a lot of dangerous things crawling through the house.”

Tucker rubbed his eyes tiredly, “And what about those two spooks that tried offing you? What about them?”

Vlad furrowed his brow and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I don’t think they’ll chance another attack again if Jazmine shows up with that Ghost Peeler device.”

Tucker nodded but then paused. “How do you know the device’s name, Vlad?”
Vlad sighed and, grabbing his fork up again, took another bite of his food. Swallowing, he answered, “You didn’t think I was just going to let Daniel flail around in ghost mode with his parents’ weapons on his heels twenty-four seven, did you? I saw the blueprints for it.”

Tucker quirked an eyebrow and nibbled a strip of bacon curiously. After a moment he questioned, “So you’ve been in Fenton Works?”

Vlad snorted, “Several times.” Pausing, he cocked an eyebrow. “But you already know that. You’ve seen me there before.” A small smile laced across his face.

Looking up to the ceiling the small smile became a full-blown grin. Glancing over to Tucker and Paula, he instructed, “Don’t say a word. I want to see how long it takes before he notices.”

Paula raised an eyebrow and opened her mouth to question him just as footfalls echoed down the staircase. Vlad averted his attention back to his food nonchalantly and took another sip of his tea.
Dinner Bell

Daniel’s voice echoed from the living room. “Hey, guys? Is Vlad down there?”

Tucker answered, “Yeah, he’s eating breakfast.”

Vlad interjected, “Was eating breakfast.”

Tucker whipped his head back to Vlad and, seeing his empty plate, gaped. “What did you do? Inhale it?”

Vlad rolled his eyes and with a smirk grabbed a paper towel to wipe the strawberry syrup off of his fingers. Daniel could be heard coming into the kitchen. Paula’s eyes widened and a small smirk traced across her lips. Shaking her head in disbelief she stood and rounded to the sink with both her and Vlad’s plates. Tucker looked up at the teen’s approach and bit his lip before grabbing another piece of bacon and stuffing it in his mouth to quell the laughter trying to bubble up. Vlad sat completely unaffected by Daniel’s presence. Looking up to him and smiling gently he questioned, “Do you ever manage your hair or do you prefer the fresh out of the sheets look?”

Daniel rolled his eyes and rubbed a hand through his messy black locks mockingly. “There, I fixed it.”

Vlad shook his head and pulled the bar stool Paula had placed by the two-person table out for Daniel to sit on. Smiling at the strawberries piled on the plate in front of him and basking in the allure of the bacon, Daniel quickly sat down and began shoveling the pile into his gullet. Vlad snorted and Daniel looked up from his plate questioningly, a piece of eggs stuck under his mouth. “What?”

Vlad pointed to his face. “Maybe you should try eating your food instead of plastering it on your face?”

Daniel glared accusingly and stuck out his tongue in mock anger.

Paula tossed a set of keys toward Vlad and he absently lifted his arm up to catch them. All three men turned to her with the same unspoken question. Rolling her eyes she answered, “I have to go to work now. Be sure to do your dishes and lock up when you leave.” Pausing at the doorway, she locked her gaze with Vlad. “Just drop those off next time you swing by the restaurant?”

Vlad nodded, “I’ll be sure to do that. Be careful.”

The woman snorted, “I am perfectly able Mr. Masters.”

Vlad chuckled lightly but didn’t argue the claim. Turning from them, she grabbed an umbrella and slung open her front door. Taking one last glance back and staring directly at Daniel she added, “And Mr. Monopoly? Do make sure that you both don’t end up fully dead?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at the nickname and both Vlad and Tucker exchanged large knowing smiles with one another while his back was turned. Having said her fill, Paula departed.

Daniel turned to them both with a look of pure perplexion. “What was that about?”

Vlad smiled slightly and Tucker shrugged in mock ignorance.

Changing the subject, Daniel turned to Vlad, “You should be in bed. You’re still injured.”
Vlad sighed. “I couldn’t really fall back to sleep with the fact your parents are going to be poking around my house this evening hanging over my head.”

Daniel groaned and, suddenly losing his ravenous appetite, pushed back his plate. “Vlad? What are we going to do? I think my dad’s on to something.”

Vlad nodded and rubbed his eyes. “Without a semblance of doubt. You heard him on the phone...He knows I was injured yesterday. However, if I cloak the wounds he shouldn’t be able to validate any of his suspicions.”

Daniel tensed. Looking up to Vlad he questioned, “Do you think it will work?”

Vlad smiled reassuringly and shrugged. “I’ve fooled others with far less.”

Tucker sat up from his seat and walking to the sink, began washing the dishes. Turning to Daniel, he added, “Pham? You better summon Miss Gothica and Captain Bearbert. Those ghosts from yesterday probably won’t attempt anything if Jaz is at the ready with the Ghost Peeler.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “So Jaz is our nuclear deterrent?”

Vlad propped up his head with his hand and answered for Tucker, “As I am currently I can’t do much to protect myself or any of you without adverse consequences. I’m not exactly fond of the idea either but that device can rip through a spectral shield with ease. If a spirit attempts to trap one of us she would be the most effective means of defense and offense.”

Daniel sighed. “I’ll ring them up.”

Tucker dried the plates and cups he had washed and made his way out of the room to gather all of their bags. Vlad crossed his arms under his head and laid against the table in thought as Daniel called the two girls. Not even bothering to listen in on the conversation, Vlad began absently assessing what they needed to do once they arrived at his home. ‘All of the spectral books need hidden. I need to cut on the shield around the lab so their equipment doesn’t pick up the portal’s energy signature...What else? Oh...right the research notes and my occult books need to be tucked away. God, this is problematic....Why did Jack suddenly take an interest in Daniel and me? Wouldn’t he have called to say he was coming over ahead of time?’

A firm hand shook his shoulder and brought him out of his thoughts. Looking up and having forgotten completely about Daniel’s makeover, he quickly brought a hand to his mouth to hide his grin.

Daniel’s eyes widened in worry, causing the monocle rounding his right eye to stretch and morph like a Saturday morning cartoon character’s. Daniel froze at Vlad’s strange behavior and seeing him shaking quickly reached to tear Vlad’s hand away from his mouth. “Vlad? Hey! Are you alright?”

The hand came away from Vlad’s mouth and his muffled laughter quickly engulfed the room. Daniel frowned, “Did you finally lose your marbles, old man?”

Vlad froze and rubbed the water from his eyes. Leaning back and staring into the ceiling he flippantly answered, “Not at all. Your face just caught me off guard.”

Pausing, Vlad’s eyebrow twitched. Looking back to the teenager he crossed his arms. “And I’m not old!”

Daniel smirked, “What was so surprising about my face?”
Vlad froze but kept his expression neutral. ‘Darn...Think...How can I get away with this?’ The solution came to him when he glanced at Daniel’s still food plastered chin. A heavy sigh escaped his lips and he motioned Daniel closer.

Once he was in range, Vlad grabbed a napkin and quickly reached up to get the egg off of Daniel. “You eat like a grade schooler.”

Daniel turned fushia and glared. “And you talk like my mom.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow and, crumpling the napkin, tossed it between Daniel’s eyebrows. It plunked off of his head and fell to the floor like a broken paper airplane. Daniel frowned and leaned in to glare at Vlad. Vlad responded back with the same expression but was internally cracking up at the mustache that was bending with Daniel’s frown. ‘Keep it together Plasmius…Keep it together….Oh my god, when he crinkles his nose it squirms…I can’t take this.’

Unable to keep the serious expression up, he burst into hysterics. Daniel’s brow furrowed in confusion and he blanched, “Are you still drugged? What’s with-”

Vlad shook his head no and quickly picked up the paper towel. Several stifled chuckles reverberated. Avoiding eye contact, he stood and tossed it into the trash can by the counter. Daniel followed him through the kitchen and continued prodding, “Seriously Vlad? Come on? Do I have food on my face still?”

Vlad snorted and looked over his shoulder at the teen, “Nope. No food.”

Daniel crossed his arms and tapped his foot in expectancy of an answer but getting none and seeing Vlad walking away from him again he quickly pursued him and turned the man to face him. Vlad’s eyes widened for a moment in surprise but quickly became smug. “I’m telling the truth Daniel, there’s no food on your face.”

Daniel sighed and accusingly reprimanded, “You’re just messing with me for drugging you yesterday aren’t you?”

Vlad shrugged and smiled devilishly. “Something like that.”

Daniel opened his mouth to form a rebuttal only for Tucker to stagger down the staircase with the bags they had brought. Both halfas immediately rushed to his aid and took a portion of the load out of his arms so he wouldn’t lose his footing and tumble down the stairs. Able to see the floor, Tucker turned to Daniel and questioned: “So what did the girls say?”

Daniel gave Vlad a pointed glare to signify their previous conversation wasn’t over and then answered Tucker. “They were already a few minutes out when I rung them up. They should be here any minute.”

The doorbell rang and Daniel smirked, “I stand corrected, they’re here. I’ll get it.”

Before Vlad could protest the teen darted to the door and flung it open. Sam looked up from the doorbell and burst into a fit of hysterics. Pointing and leering she questioned, “Who gave you the costume change?”

Daniel froze, “What are you-?” Eyes widening, he brought a hand to his face and swiftly flew past Tucker and into the upstairs bathroom. A second later an enraged scream echoed throughout the home, “Fruit-Loop!!!!!!!”

Vlad sighed, “And here I thought he wouldn’t notice until much later.”
Sam was still giggling hysterically by the door and holding onto the frame for support. Vlad looked up to her and smiled, “You know we could've taken a photo if you could have practiced some restraint, correct Miss Manson?”

Tucker piped in, “Don’t worry, I snagged one while he was eating earlier.”

Vlad beamed, “Well at least someone was thinking ahead.”

Sam finally took a breath from her laughter and looked to Vlad with amused disbelief, “You were just going to let him flounder around?”

Vlad smirked, “I was doing pretty well at keeping him from suspecting anything up until this point. I honestly thought he’d have at least made it to the vehicle before he would have figured it out.”

Tucker grinned, “How do you think he’s going to get you back?”

Vlad shrugged and stared out into the street. The rain was starting to form again. ‘This weather is a little unusual. I wonder if too many natural portals are opening up?’

Vlad worriedly brought a hand to his chin and surveyed the sky for any electrical anomalies signifying a temporal disruption. Seeing none, he relaxed slightly. Sam noticed his expression and questioned, “Is something wrong?”

Vlad turned to the teen and casually elaborated, “This weather is weird for Amity… There must be an energy disruption somewhere near us. I was thinking that maybe too many natural portals may have sprung up while I’ve been incapacitated.”

Sam winced, “Really?”

Vlad nodded tiredly. “Can’t you feel it? That muggy static charge permeating the air is the veil between plains being torn.”

Sam’s eyes widened, “You mean that’s portals opening up?”

Vlad readjusted the bags he was holding in his right arm and nodded, “Most likely? Yes.”

Seeing his guarded expression, she prodded “Vlad? What else could it be? I can see how uneasy and unsure you are. What is bothering you?”

Vlad paused and swallowed, “If it’s not a portal there’s a rather powerful ghost in peril somewhere. The energy seems to be ricocheting and fluctuating from too many things so I can’t feel it or whoever it is out. Whatever is happening? It’s not normal. Even for a regular energy disturbance, it’s strong. Amity’s been having what? Two weeks of this crazy weather? And these demons that have been showing up around here? Usually, none would dare to invade an area so densely populated by a ghost wary populace much less encroach on each other’s hunting grounds.”

Sam and Tucker exchanged worried glances. Tucker handed the bags he had in hand to Jazmine as she walked up. “If they’re so territorial why would they all swarm to Amity?”

Vlad set down the bags in his hands down on the stairs in front of the door. Turning back to the teens, his eyes filled with apprehension. “The only plausible reason for them to risk a confrontation with others of their own kind or swarms of ghost hunters is if they found a suitable prey item. As I said earlier, this energy could very well be from a ghost who is heavily injured and sending out a beacon subconsciously in hope for aid. Either that or their core is over dispersing energy and the need for substance is ripping open sieve sized holes into our plain in an attempt to stabilize the poor
ghoul. Whatever is doing it? It’s unknowingly flinging blood in the water for sharks.”

Sam and Tucker cringed. Swallowing, Sam questioned, “So some poor ghost is ringing its own serving bell?”

A dark brow furrowed and Vlad looked back to the overcast sky again to debate his answer. “I wouldn’t say the ghoul that’s causing this is weak or poor by any standards. Whatever it is, it has an extremely powerful ectoplasmic signature in order to manipulate the weather and tear so many holes between Amity and the zone. Sure, some ghosts can manage it but it takes many combined beliefs or prayers to affect our plane this adversely.”

Tucker looked up to the sky with a newfound curiosity. “So, Plasmius? You said prayers and combined beliefs...how does that affect our dimension and the zone?”

Vlad smiled tiredly and bent down to retrieve the bags he had temporarily set down. Jazmine was stacking and laying down a few things in the trunk of her car and cleaning out some miscellaneous stuff she had to pick up the night before so that they could sit comfortably. “Mr. Foley? Let’s wait until we are properly situated in the car. That explanation is rather long.”

Daniel came up behind them with his cheeks flushed red and his hair sopping wet. Small splatters of water slunk down his eyebrows and dripped off his face only to trickle through the air and into the pavement with muted thumps. All three individuals milling about on the porch looked to him.

Tapping a white-sneakered foot, Daniel crossed his arms. “Why did you write all over me Vlad?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “I already told you my reasons, Daniel. And if I remember correctly you openly agreed to this a few nights ago.”

Daniel froze and his mouth gaped like a fish out of water for a moment. “You mean that was your first shot at pranking me?”

Vlad smirked and looked over to Tucker with a conspiratorial gleam in his navy blue eyes. Tucker took the unspoken cue and slyly started toward the car. Hearing no footsteps in pursuit, he turned and hollered, “Are you three going to stand there all day?”

Sam adjusted her purple denim jacket before walking over to Vladimir and yanking the bags in his right hand away with a quick jerk. Vlad looked down to her in slight amusement. “Ms. Manson? I can carry a few small bags. I’m injured not crippled.”

Snorting, she twitched her shoulder to motion toward Daniel and smugly replied, “You already have your hands full right now.”

Vlad opened his mouth to argue and she quickly detoured around his frame and toward the car, cutting off any possible arguments before they could erupt.

Daniel looked to Vlad and sighed. Grabbing onto the older halfa’s arm he forcefully began dragging him to the vehicle. Vlad locked up and easily stopped the movement. Clearing his throat, he gently removed Daniel’s arm. “I think I can manage walking on my own at this point in time.”

There was a disgruntled sigh from the teenager, but he relented. “If you start falling over again, it’s back to me carrying you. Just a fair warning Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad cringed and quickly made a beeline for the car. Turning back to face Daniel, he languidly tossed Paula’s keys. The boy caught them and went to turn back to the door only for Vlad to shout, “Just leave her keys on the kitchen table and the lock the home from the inside.”

Daniel smiled slightly and then nodded his head in agreement. “Sure. Just go get in the car.”
Vlad curtly turned back down the sidewalk and toward the second-hand vehicle parked on the side of the road. Tucker and Sam were already situated in the backseat. Making a strategic decision, Vlad chose to sit with them instead of riding shotgun. He was injured and weakly because of unlucky happenstances but he would be damned if a tabloid reporter snapped a picture of him in the front seat of a teenager’s car with a young redhead at the wheel.

Just thinking about the repercussions of such a simple choice made him shiver. Opening the back door, Vlad politely asked Tucker to trade places with him. Rather than asking for elaboration the teen graciously scooted out and allowed Vladimir into the middle seat.
Chinny Chin Chin

Relaxing slightly against the grey upholstery and leaning back he turned at a rather vicious pinch to his thigh. Sam looked at him apologetically and pointed toward the front seat. “You know you can sit up front, right? It’s not like any of us care.”

Vlad pursed his lips and rubbed the now sore spot on his leg for a minute before contradicting, “I’d rather not chance it. Sitting up front could very well be disastrous...”

Two sets of eyes locked onto him in confusion. Rubbing a lock of neck length black hair out of her face, Sam motioned with her hand for him to elaborate. A heavy sigh escaped his lips before he spoke again and his voice carried evident disdain with the topic. “You seem to forget that my human half is quite the spectacle in the world at large. Tabloids and reporters haven’t exactly attempted spying on me the last ten years but a certain woman in Amity with a lot of rather irksome connections has it out for my head. If by chance someone spotted Vladimir Masters in the front seat with a teenage girl it could spell disastrous, even if the story written around it is utter slander.”

Tucker cringed, “What did you do to piss the chick off?”

Vlad snorted and rolled his eyes. “For the sake of not dwelling on unsavory topics, let’s just say she doesn’t take well to being denied.”

Amethyst gray eyes looked to him with a mixture of pity and disgust as Jazmine entered the car and sat down. Sam questioned, “What reporter?”

Vlad rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. “Harriet Chin.”

Tucker gaped, “No way! That hot Asian lady on Amity 5?”

“Mr. Foley? That woman is a vile snake, and although her coloration and scales may be pleasing to the eye they concile poison. Harriet revels in tearing others down and lounging in the wreckage like some sort of sick game. She’s a viper that carries malice in spades.”

Jaz winced from the front seat, “What’s this about Harriet?”

Vlad crossed his arms over his lap and looked up into the rearview mirror Jazmine was using to look back at them with. “Miss Chin is a deplorable liar that has cost a great many good people their livelihoods and careers in exchange for her five minutes of fame.” He flatly finished, “She is spiteful and hates my guts for multiple altercations that have come between us over the years.”

Sam awkwardly asked, “Um...did you and her...um...get intimate?”

Vlad froze up and a look of pure disgust skewered his features, “Hell no.”

Realizing he had cursed in the presence of minors, his eyes widened to comical proportions and he bit his lip. All three teenagers locked up and then began grinning broadly.

Tucker whistled. “Wow, she really must be a royal-” Remembering Vlad’s belated threat during breakfast he quickly bit his lip. Swallowing he finished, “-pain.”

Vlad smirked slightly and nodded before glancing at the boy in his peripheral. A small chuckle echoed in the cab of the car for a few brief seconds. “Nice save Mr. Foley.”
Daniel flickered into the visible spectrum beside Jazmine. Glancing back into the rear seats, he buckled his seatbelt absently. “What were you guys talking about? I heard Vlad cursing.”

Vlad rolled his eyes, “We were just discussing a disgusting gossip breeder with a terrible knack for destroying my mood.”

Jazmine started the car and glowered back at the three in the backseat, “Seatbelts. Now.”

Three metallic clicks resonated from the back and Jazmine smiled in acknowledgment before starting the engine and driving toward Vladimir’s home. Somewhere around central Amity Park, Tucker poked Vlad. “Hey? You promised an elaboration, Plasmius.”

Vlad sighed and smiled wryly. “I did, didn’t I?” Scratching his chin he began almost immediately. “Ectoplasm magnifies and concentrates emotional energy and wishes. It’s like the elemental run off of a person’s being. If enough people put their belief into something, that belief can change the physical world or create a new thing in the zone. Both the living plain and the transition plain between cycles are deeply connected, to the point human manifestations appear in that world and ectoplasm appears in this one. Think of it as oil and vinegar that has been shaken up. Usually, the two stay fairly separate. If adequate force or action is made, however, the two temporarily mix segments with one another. If the bottle is, in all practicality, the known existence of human conscience and life and death then both this side and the dead’s need each other to regulate as a cohesive whole. Ancient cultures often related paranormal anomalies from the zone to mysticism and magic and through prolific belief, occult superstitions, and word of mouth, humans began interacting more heavily with the dead’s domain.”

Vlad paused and yawned. “In the most literal sense, the human belief that cohesive interaction can be made is what stimulates unnatural disruptions between our dimension and their’s. Usually, there are natural fluctuations but we have made it a lot more open the last few years as more cultures clash and people become more interested and invested with different beliefs and customs. If a tribe prays for rain to a deity and then gets an unnatural flood in that area it is because of their belief that it will rain. Not their want for it but their undying faith that they control the deity and in essence the rain.” Vlad groaned and looked to the ceiling tiredly, “Really, it’s a very confusing subject to dabble on. Does that help any?”

Dead silence filled the vehicle. Sam swallowed, “Vlad? How much exactly do you know about the zone?”

Vlad glanced at her and snorted. Sitting back up and rubbing his neck he looked to his lap in silent calculation of exactly how much he knew. “Enough to make me a leading source of their history and our’s. And before you ask? I can’t possibly explain everything to you….That would take at least three years or more and I doubt any of you would want my company for such an extended period.”

Tucker gawked, “Harsh.”

Daniel snorted, “You still have to teach me you know…”

Vlad groaned, “Nevermind. I forgot momentarily what I’ve promised a certain teenage capeless crusader. If Miss Manson, Jazmine, and Mr. Foley want they can listen in on recaps and theories of the zone once we officially start training this summer. Considering I’m a mess right now? That may very well be a week or two from today.”

Daniel nodded absently, “I’m fine with dealing with one problem at a time for now. Two weeks sounds fair.”
Vlad smiled half-heartedly. “Jazmine? How long until we get to my place with the current road conditions?”

Jazmine pursed her lips and quickly replied, “Thirty minutes? Traffic is pretty bad right now.”

Vlad sighed and nodded. “It’s alright if I conk out for a bit right? I’m kind of dizzy right now.”

Sam answered for her, “Just go to sleep. Today’s going to suck and you’ll need as much energy as you can get.”

Vlad nodded and soon was asleep against the back seat.
Jack and Maddie had been jury-rigging the new prototype blasters all morning. Having had the completed version stolen by those two ghosts the morning prior, Jack was extremely adamant about finishing the two weapons in lieu of what they had said before parting. If Plasmius was on their side he would, of course, know the weapons capabilities and possibly would surrender without the need for a physical confrontation. ‘Am I really considering avoiding shooting it? It hurt Vladdie…. it could have hurt Danny and Jaz….’

A black gloved hand reached over and snatched a pair of tweezers and the micro-welder from the workbench. Maddie clucked disapprovingly at his expression. “Honey? What's wrong?”

Jack rubbed his eyes, “ Just fatigue.” He paused and swallowed. “Mads? Remember that night I shot Phantom?”

She unconsciously flinched. Every single motherly instinct she had practically assaulted her senses that night. Phantom’s screams sounded so much like her own baby’s. Even if it faked the semblance of pain to throw them off, the memory of the sound, warbled and keening still scratched at the back of her head like a nervous tick. Jack sighed. “Mads? I have reason to believe Phantom may be like Plasmius somehow… And Phantom? Maddie...I saw its chest. It's scarred. He’s scarred….That wound healed like a human’s.”

Maddie stiffened, “ You mean it didn't just reform after we shot it?”

Jack rubbed his head with one hand and set down his screwdriver with a dull clack. “Phantom has always been an anomaly, Maddie…. I think he’s a different species. Perhaps even a branch family of ghosts that function differently than the standard ghoul. The Wisconsin Ghost? Plasmius? Whatever the hell he goes by? Maddie…. if we shoot it… What happens then?”

Maddie’s red lips became a tight frown and she lifted her protective goggles and hood back from her eyes to stare at him. “ Jack…. If it has hurt Vladimir or our kids I'm going to shoot it regardless of its physical contradictions. It may act human, do things similar to a human, but it is not human. Not anymore. It’s dead. The only option we have is purging it so it can move on. And if Plasmius is a different species we need a sample of his ectoplasm and possibly his core. He won't just give us those willingly.”

Jack agreed with every word that left her luscious crimson lips, but the internal nagging was still there. It felt so wrong… Maddie and him chased Phantom nowadays more out of fascination than actually hunting him. The kid was a nuisance but didn’t need or deserve brute force for his actions. Dead or not the boy was courageous, kind, and completely against the grain where other ghouls were concerned. Jack and Maddie had suspicions he was just lying or plotting something, but as the months passed with him in town they began ignoring him more often and staging fights out of prideful obligation. Excuses, calculated weapon malfunctions, pretending to miss…. all tests to see if Amity Park’s self-proclaimed guardian angel would slip up and blast one of them while they were defenseless. He fled almost every single time. And the few times he had fired at them had felt like small slaps…. warning shots….

Jack nodded but eyed a thermos by the side of the lab. Looking back to her, he calculatingly concluded. “ We need to observe it. If we shoot him, we have to make sure that it's to injure and incapacitate. The lab is too close to the portal. If by chance it escapes, we'll be back to square one…..”
Maddie frowned but nodded. Glancing over at one of the many Fenton Thermoses lined under the table to their right, she sighed defeatedly and slouched. Turning back to him, she crossed her arms and tapped the tools in her right hand against her shoulder as she spoke. “Jack? I can't guarantee a clean shot. If it knowingly sees the gun and still puts up a fight or doesn't surrender...I will shoot to maim. I won't stand by and give it a chance at coming back to harm our family and friends.”

Jack nodded but deep fatigue washed over his baby blue eyes. A flashback of the Wisconsin ghost taunting him and suspending Maddie by her legs like a rag doll in Vladimir’s library surfaced. If it was between her being harmed or Plasmius, he'd choose Plasmius in a heartbeat.“ If it comes down to it. Take the shot.”

Maddie sighed. “ Where would you want to observe it?”

Jack pointed to the storage room under the staircase. “ We just finished that portable ghost containment unit last week… I can set it up in the operations center. That thing is airtight and the charges emitted through the plexiglass will prevent him from phasing to escape.”

Maddie turned toward the thermoses and plucked one into her free hand debatingly. Tossing it lightly, she looked to Jack questioningly, “ How do you plan to get it set up in time?”

Jack looked to her sheepishly. “ I kind of already started while you were asleep.”

Maddie sighed. “ Why didn’t you wake me up? I could’ve helped…”

Jack shook his head and rubbed his eyes. “ I couldn’t sleep and you needed the rest.” Maddie set down the thermos next to Jack and gently squeezed his shoulder. Looking at the gun he was working on, he continued, “ After seeing that room in Vlad’s home? I’m not going to be satisfied until I get answers. Plasmius should be able to provide them but I didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of bringing him into our home without something being set up to keep him from attacking us or escaping.”

“ So you snuck out of our bedroom and secretly cobbled together the cell while I was sleeping?” She rubbed a hand through her bob cut absently and reprimanded, “Jack, you needed the sleep.” A hand motioned toward him. “We have to talk Vladimir down in a few hours and you’re the only one he will listen to. If you’re dead on your feet how do you think it’ll fair? I don’t want to have to use force on him if he’s injured.”

Jack smiled tiredly, “ I wanted to be sure everything is taken care of before we get Vlad to the hospital and before we interrogate Plasmius and get our samples.”

Maddie sighed and set down the tools she had gathered defeatedly before grabbing a donut from the plate beside his elbow. Biting it she looked over his work and raised an eyebrow, “ Why are you calibrating yours for a wider beam?”

Jack looked back to the gun. “ I want to stun him, not obliterate him.”

Maddie sighed but decided not to argue his choice. She, however, would keep her beam calibrated as it was. One shot would be more than efficient in taking down the spector…. and gathering samples of its ectoplasm would be fairly easy if the wounds did indeed mimic human healing. Taking slow bites she amusedly ruffled her spouse’s hair before turning from him and going to her own work table across the laboratory. Finishing her jelly donut she quired, “Jack? How are we going to sedate Vladimir? I have no clue how much he weighs so we can’t use any intramuscular injections on him without risking his vitals or breathing.”

Jack looked to her tiredly, “ If it comes down to it I’ll slug him...or strangle him out…” Jack rubbed
his hands through his hair in exasperation.

Maddie rolled her eyes, “You’ve been reading to many crime thrillers lately Jack. Remember what we learned in college? Strangulation only dazes and as soon as you release your hold he’ll be fighting us again...and as for punching him? I would love to do the honors but I doubt it would knock him out without causing severe brain damage.”

“I know..I know… I dropped out, remember? I just wasn’t cut out for that line of work.” Looking over to Maddie he suggested, “Why don’t you call the hospital that treated him in college? They should have a file on him. With your medical credentials, we can claim that you’re his private physician.”

Maddie nodded no and sat down in her seat. “Wisconsin has a five year record retention period. There would be no files at this point and the data would be outdated.”

Jack leaned back and momentarily forgot he was seated on a stool and not in a chair with a stable backing. Arms flailed in pinwheel motions before he righted his balance, thankfully preventing him from landing on the metal covered flooring.

Maddie looked to him worriedly, “Are you, alright honey?”

Jack groaned, “I’m fine.”

Maddie sighed, “Jack? Medical means won’t work for knocking him out. I hate to say it but the safest route would probably be you holding him down and me restraining him. The kids will fight us but it’s the only route we can go by. If he’s heavily injured though I am kind of fearful of hurting him more than necessary.”

Jack couldn’t help but internally agree with her sentiments. Confronting Vladimir was one thing but dragging him to the hospital would be an entirely different set of problems. One miscalculation or rough handling in the wrong spot and they could easily agitate his injuries. And if he fought back? Jack wasn’t sure how he would be able to detain a confrontation if it flared up. The thought of holding Vlad down and dragging him to a vehicle was less than pleasant every passing second. And the kids? Daniel and Jaz would absolutely fight tooth and nail against them. After a few moments of pondering, Jack looked up to Maddie. “We may be able to convince him to get in the car? I can say I want to test him for ectoplasmic residue with the equipment in our lab... He should come right along and once he’s situated we can get him to the ER.”

Maddie tapped her chin and swiveled around in her seat to stare Jack, “You really think it would work?”

Jack sighed and looked down to his gun, “What other options do we really have, Mads?”
In the Doghouse

Danny had chosen to fly ahead while Vladimir was asleep, to scope out the home before Jaz pulled up the drive. Seeing no ice breath slithering from his jaw and hearing nothing in the house, Daniel quickly landed and flashed a thumbs up to the approaching vehicle. The Fenton phones were currently off to preserve battery power and simple hand gestures did more than enough to convey the message. The coast was clear for the moment.

Jazmine parked and unbuckled her seatbelt before turning to rouse Vlad. Vlad, however, was already awake and now rubbing his eyes to quell the leftover fatigue dragging him against the seat. Sam gently nudged him toward Tucker and the now open door on that side of the car. Vlad nodded and unbuckled his seat belt quickly. Sliding across the patched and holey seat he stepped out and stretched his arms behind his head. Sharp pain laced up his diaphragm and he immediately slackened his posture to accommodate the sore bones and flesh.

Tucker winced, “Do you need help getting into the house?”

Vlad turned to him partly amused. “I think I am able enough to do so on my own. Thanks for offering though.”

Tucker nodded and cracked his fingers somewhat dramatically, “So what is our first line of business?”

Vlad snorted and began walking forward, “We have to get several book poltergeists into the vault and we need to hide my work notes. If Maddie sees something written in *mortuus loqui*, we will have quite a challenge explaining why I know ghost language.”

Tucker sighed and walked forward with Vlad as Sam and Jazmine rounded the car behind them and joined them. Sam quirked an eyebrow. “So we have to confront the spectral books you told us about?”

Vlad smiled gently. “You three? No. You’ll be hiding my personal notes and a few of the more docile novels in the collection. I will handle all of the dangerous reading material because I’m the most familiar with its mannerisms and how to ask their assistance.”

Jazmine paused, “What do you mean ask assistance?”

Vlad sighed as he reached the door and opened it deftly with a quick bout of intangibility. The bronzed handle whipped inward and the quartet stepped in to see Daniel frantically buzzing around the entrance hall chasing after a small green phantom. Vlad noted the spectral canine and stiffened. ‘Oh butter biscuits.’

Pausing, Vlad stood resolute and teleported in front of the puppy. Shifting into Plasmius, he whistled sharply. The small pooch skidded and slid across the wood in front of him, coming to a halt with a small whimper. It’s purple tongue flicked back into its mouth and its head cocked to the side curiously. Red puppy eyes stared up questioningly. Vlad sighed and gently picked up the small animal.

“Now what are you doing back in my home little one?” The ghost yipped excitedly and planted a large sloppy kiss across the elder halfa’s face. Vlad groaned and used his free hand to wipe off the ectoplasm based saliva substitute. The last thing he needed was for his cheek to be glowing with Maddie and Jack around.
Daniel stood stock still in front of the two and raised an eyebrow. “Vlad? You know Cujo?”

Vlad rolled his eyes and scratched the small animal’s head apologetically. “Is that your name little fella?”

The dog yipped happily but the sound warbled and echoed strangely. Vlad paused and his eyes shined white. Nodding silently as if conversing in some sort of gestural language he looked to the dog with a certain sense of amusement. Turning from the pup and, looking to Daniel, he grinned before prodding, “I didn’t know you read Stephen King, Daniel.”

Daniel froze and looked from Vlad to the canine in shock. Pointing toward the small mutt and then to Vlad he accused, “Okay, Doctor Dolittle, how do you know what he’s saying?”

Vlad sighed and cradled the small animal against himself before pointedly speaking. “Once your form matures... ghost tongue, or mortuus loqui, becomes a natural way of conversing. With it, you can speak to any spectral entity as long as you focus on their core’s pulse and emotions. The sounds resonate and transcribe on a micro level.” Looking down to the dog he smirked and added, “This particular dog likes the name but thinks you could have done with better reading material. The horror background and the 200lb character you based it off of does indeed mimic his guardian form but he doesn’t like being characterized as a rabid or uncontrollable beast.”

The dog yipped in the same strange noise again and Vlad had to stifle laughter and look away from the teenager. Daniel tapped his foot. “What did he say?”

Vlad sighed and looked at Daniel playfully. “He says he’s more than fine with it as long burger-kid gives him plenty of snacks.”

Daniel looked to Cujo with a touch of disappointment. “Is that really what he calls me?”

Cujo yipped again and strained against Vlad’s arms. The adult stiffened and looked down to the dog in a panic. In the same weird and choppy tone, he hurriedly questioned the animal about something, much to the aggravation and confusion of the pack of teenagers surrounding him.

After a few moments, Vlad looked to the ceiling in exasperation and cursed. “Fudge Buckets.” Whipping his arms out to Daniel, he pointedly tasked, “Get him into the portal, I have to go detach Mad Cat from the ceiling fan upstairs in the corner guest room.”

And with that, Vlad fizzled away in a cloud of pink and teleported to the room in question. The teenagers looked at each other in perplexion. Daniel glanced down at Cujo and turned the small spectral animal to face him. “What did you do to Fruit-Loop’s cat?”

The dog just licked him contently in reply and the boy sighed in defeat. Phasing into the basement, the teenager pointedly lifted the small spectral animal and flicked him on the nose. “Stay in the zone.” The dog licked his finger and Daniel sighed. Walking to the portal he smiled kindly before tossing the little creature into the swirling vortex and shouting. “GO HOME!”

A stiff chuckle from behind him startled the teen and he whipped around to see Vlad casually leaning against the staircase. “That wasn’t necessary Daniel. I already told him who would be stopping by today. He has no want to antagonize your parents with the probability they have weapons on hand, even if one of them smells like fudge and pizza.” Vlad rolled his eyes and a tired smile lit his features.

Daniel quirked an eyebrow. “What about Mad Cat? Is she okay?”

Vlad averted his gaze sheepishly. “From how she's treating my duplicate upstairs? I’d wager that I’m
just as much in the dog house as Cujo is.”
A Trio of Metallica Fans and Jack's 20th

Daniel winced. “Why use a duplicate?”

Vlad snorted and motioned for Daniel to float over. “We have other matters that need my attention and I think I've had enough injury for one week. A duplicate was the soundest option even if I'm out of sorts from the use of energy.”

Daniel sighed and neon green eyes rose to meet Vladimir's human blue. “I take it that's also why you're in human form again?”

Vlad nodded tiredly. “With that duplicate trying to coax Maddie off of the ceiling fan upstairs, me retaining my ghost form in my physical body would be too strenuous. I'd probably pass out.”

Daniel nodded in acceptance of the explanation but quickly asked, “Why did you come downstairs?”

Vlad looked over to the vault tiredly. “Daniel? Can you stay down here for a few moments? I have to open the vault… I'm the only one who can and it's quite possible I won't be able to stay conscious afterward. I think the fever is trying to come back.”

Daniel looked to the adult disapprovingly. “You know? For someone who prides himself on strategy you pull some seriously risky crud.”

Vlad quirked an eyebrow and rubbed his chin in amusement. Cobalt blue eyes lit with teasing mirth and Vladimir leaned back against the steel staircase leisurely, arms extended. Staring into the ceiling, a long sigh escaped his lip. “Sometimes a strategic route costs a great deal of sacrifice. To save a queen, in chess, a pawn or a knight can set themselves up to take the fall. Sacrifice is often coupled with reward little badger. Don't let anyone tell you differently.”

Pausing, he returned his gaze to the teen. “I just happen to favor calculated risk when I know I have no other alternatives.” A small smile teased at the corner of his mouth. “I actually think that's the sentence that sums up my life. A calculated risk meant to qualm horrendous variables.”

Daniel took a breath and tiredly released it. Turning, he motioned the adult forward toward the door. Vlad nodded and walked to stand beside him. As an afterthought, Daniel questioned, “How did you know about Cujo by the way?”

Vlad's features saddened slightly. “Before I obtained Axiom the previous owners euthanized the guard dogs. They had a breeders kennel on the property here in Amity.” Vlad put his right hand to the door and ran his fingers over the metal in contemplation. Turning to look at Daniel he continued, “That spirit somehow searched me out a few months into owning the property and the rights to the company. I think it's a haunting by association. He never sticks around to warrant any real problems for me so I don’t mind his occasional visits. He's like a begrudgingly inconsistent house guest with a drooling problem.”

Daniel smiled. “I guess that makes sense.” Neon green eyes looked to the vault door worriedly. “Are you sure you're up for this?”

Vlad nodded and with a sideways glance warned, “I'm going to open it now. Stand by in case my powers short out or—”

“-or if you attempt to hug the floor. I know. Just get it over with Fruit-Loop.”
Vlad chuckled lightly and with a shutter, focused his energy into the palm. His seal ruin buzzed and fluctuated, revealing networks of glowing lines transcribed within the door. Metal began grating and Vlad gasped out in pain. The entire world felt like it was being enveloped in a stifling muggy heat. Glowing white eyes widened in panic as claws ripped through human hands. Daniel’s ghost sense gently curled from his jaw and seeing Vlad’s expression and the grimace of pain, he quickly grabbed onto the adult by the neckline of his shirt and dragged him away from the door as it opened.

Landing on the floor a short distance away, Vlad clumsily shifted to his knees and stared at his hands in perplexion. The heat flares were getting worse, not better. If anything the smallest paranormal energy signature was now affecting him adversely. Where he was fine walking into the vault yesterday he was now overwhelmed by the lightest of touches to the door. Even the small dog earlier had enraged the heat. Sharp, excruciating pain flared at the back of his throat. He could smell the burnt ectoplasm. Raising a shaking, clawed hand to his mouth he coughed wetly. Daniel was patting his back in a bid to help him get a decent breath and leaning down to inspect him.

Vlad looked up to him apologetically and noticing the green and red splattering his shirt he rasped, “It looks like I ruined the shirt..”

Daniel’s eyebrow twitched and a light smack hit against Vlad’s shoulder. Growling, the teen pointed to the bloodied hands and the small splatters of green and red on the floor. “Right now I can care less about the shirt! Vlad...What’s happening to you?”

Looking into his hands, Vladimir sighed dejectedly. “I don’t have the answers, little badger.” Swallowing, he flinched and averted his gaze back to the vault. “But whatever is happening presents us with a new problem. I can’t touch anything that harbors an ectoplasmic entity or energy signature, at least not a pure one, in this state without being attacked…. It’s like my own body is rejecting half of itself….” Vlad shuttered at the thought. Daniel leaned in and looped a hand up under the adult’s shoulder to help him to his feet. Vlad coughed. “Daniel? I need to get away from the basement. Hold your breath.” Eyes flickered and sparked with the shift in energy and the air crackled.

Daniel opened his mouth to argue only for the entire world to concave and spin in a medley of blackest ebony and white. Electrical pink sparks played and danced against one another in the airless vortex. Vlad’s hold on the limb that previously had kept him upright tightened briefly and with a muted pop the two of them collapsed in the kitchen. Daniel sat panting and gasping for air and noticing the silence beside him he quickly whipped his head to Vladimir. Worried that his ghost form was causing extensive damage to the adult, he hastily shifted back into Daniel Fenton. Reaching over to the unconscious adult and, gently shaking him, he sighed in relief at the sight of Vladimir’s dazed blue eyes peeking open from under his hair.

Groaning, Vlad weakly tried pulling himself up from where he had collapsed only to feel himself going numb. Daniel’s arms quickly latched under his own and leveled him into a sitting position. Vlad’s leaden fingers shakily reached up to rub his eyes only for Daniel to quickly snatch the hand down before it could connect. Vlad looked at his now restrained arm dazily. “What-?”

An annoyed growl echoed through the kitchen and Daniel’s blue eyes attempted to flash radioactive green in agitation. Glaring, he accused, “Did you seriously pull a power stunt?! Are you a complete idiot?!”

Vlad glared back and pointedly sneered, “Last time I checked I’m allowed to use my powers!”

Daniel stiffened and releasing the hand he had pinned, slapped the adult across the face. “NOT WHEN YOU’RE PRACTICALLY IN CRITICAL CONDITION! I ALREADY HAD TO SWAP SALIVA WITH YOU ONCE AND THAT WAS ENOUGH! I’M NOT DOING THAT AGAIN!!”
Vlad turned ashen and shifted from his shock to stare at the teen with belated horror. “You did what?”

Sam’s voice from the doorway chided, “He gave you mouth to mouth. What’s with all-?”

Seeing Vlad’s hands and the blood and ectoplasm, she stiffened and went slack-jawed. Screaming out of the doorway, she commanded, “Jaz! Tuck?! A little help?!”

Vlad looked like he was going to hurl. Daniel noted the expression and his eyebrow twitched, “You are so lucky I put up with your bullshit.”

Vlad winced and awkwardly swallowed. “How dead was I exactly?”

Daniel sighed and his expression softened as he leaned in to expect the new damage to Vladimir’s hands. “You didn’t have a pulse for close to ten minutes. The only reason you seemed to have made it was your stubbornness and the medical stuff downstairs.”

Vlad looked to his shirt and after a few moments, in an attempt to change topics, he smiled slightly. “Metallica? I take it Ms. Manson or you had the incentive to dress me like this?”

Daniel sighed. “Changing topics Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad winced as Sam and Tucker rounded on him and began cleaning the fingers with sterile pads soaked in peroxide from the downstairs bathroom’s medical kit. Looking up to Daniel he answered, “Can you blame me? Death isn’t exactly a fun subject.”

Daniel rolled his eyes but smiled gently in response. “I told Jazz to get you it over the phone yesterday before she drove back from her tutoring gig.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow, “You told her to get me a Metallica T-shirt?”

Daniel shrugged and retorted smugly, “Why? Does it bother you?”

Vlad laughed kindly and looked to the shirt somewhat appreciatively. “Not at all. Your parents and I actually liked the band. We even saved up for a concert once.”

Sam froze, “You and the Fenton’s were Metallica fans?”

Vlad numbly noted Jazmine coming into the kitchen with bandages. Leaning against the breakfast bar, he nodded yes. “They were good to work to…and it helped block out noises from our dorm at night.”

Daniel winced, knowing all too well what type of horrific noises probably echoed from Vlad and his father’s dorm when they were younger. Changing the topic, he questioned, “So, that concert…did you guys go?”

Vlad winced as Jaz tightened bandages around his fingers. Pausing, he smiled somewhat wistfully. “It was a few weeks before the Fall term in our second year. Jack’s birthday was coming up so Maddie and I conspired against him and set things up. We dragged him to Petaluma for an entire week.”

Jaz furrowed her brow curiously, “How did you three get there? Better yet? How did you get money for a trip like that?”

Vlad snorted and rolled his eyes. “How else? We saved for it. He was turning twenty the Friday
prior to the concert so we decided to make it a big Summer trip between the three of us. I had to check in on some things in California, so I squared away tickets and a place to sleep and Maddie took care of transportation.”

Vlad smiled slightly. “You should have seen his face. He was so happy. You know, it’s a shame so much of my stuff went missing that following Spring. I’m pretty sure I had a photo of him with your mom perched on his shoulder packed away somewhere in my dorm.”

Daniel, of course, asked the obvious question. “How did your stuff go missing?”

Vlad winced and quietly answered, “From what I gathered, the University presumed I had prematurely kicked the bucket. Anything left in my dorm room either got shipped to the address I enrolled from or was chunked. An old friend ended up mailing me a bunch of my old photos a few years later once I made a name for myself.”
An awkward silence elapsed and Vlad quickly tried shifting back into less depressing waters. “Where’s Mad Cat?”

Jazmine sighed but amusedly motioned through the doorway by the breakfast booth. “She’s eating lunch in the dining room.”

Vlad nodded and smirked tiredly to Sam and Tucker. “That furball did quite a number on my duplicate, even without her claws.” He chuckled lightly. “I’m still fairly surprised she was able to hang onto the ceiling fan for as long as she did.”

Sam and Tucker couldn’t help but grin. Vlad’s duplicate, prior to dissipating, had been a sight to behold. Small teeth marks had cleaved and fractured through black gloves and torn white fabric in confetti-like strips due to the small animal’s panicked frenzy.

Sam shook her head in slight disbelief. “Mad Cat is definitely an accurate name for her.”

As if on cue, the small animal tentatively poked its head around the doorway and stared in toward the group tending to Vladimir. Seeing no spectral canines she mewed softly and almost apologetically before slinking into the room and kneading her head against Vlad’s leg. Vlad looked down to her and amusedly spoke, “Saying sorry doesn’t cut it...Maddie stop….”

The cat looked to him a touched unimpressed and began nuzzling one of his now wrapped hands. Giving in to her merciless pursuit for affection, he gently began rubbing behind her ears. She purred blissfully and Vladimir snorted. “You are so fickle.”

Daniel smiled lightly and began leaning down to help Vlad up only for the phone in his pocket to ring spastically. Everyone’s eyes darted to him fearfully as he clicked open the device and answered. “Dad?”

A tired and somewhat authoritative tone rumbled over the line and in the silence, it could be heard by everyone. “I want to speak to Vladimir, son.”

Vlad took a deep breath and reached for the phone with one of his bandaged hands. “It’s alright Daniel. Pass it over.”

Daniel looked from Vlad’s bandaged fingers to his phone and flinched. Vlad smiled encouragingly and brought his hand slightly higher to reach the device. Wrapping his palm around it he brought the device to his ear. “Yes, Jack?”

A rush of static signifying a sigh of relief echoed over the line and Vlad chuckled lightly. “What’s with that reaction Jackson?”

Jack’s voice softened slightly. “I am not in the mood for teasing today Vladdie.”

Vlad snorted and kept an air of casual conversation as he countered, “And I’m not partial to that nickname, but here we are.”

A small laugh echoed over the line. After a moment there was a pause and Jack questioned. “Did you get any sleep? You sound like death warmed over.”

Vlad couldn’t help the smile that flickered across his mouth at the accurate and ironic sentence. “I
slept pretty well considering. Your son and daughter apparently thought it would be funny to buy me a Metallica t-shirt. You should've seen their faces when I told them the three of us were fans.”

Jack could be heard laughing on the other end of the line again despite his best interests. When Vlad wasn’t trying to pull one over on him, every word dripped with genuine warmth. He had missed it for months and was thankful that when Vlad had moved to Amity they had started talking more openly over the phone. It was like his friend had finally stopped the spite tactics and he was grateful for every exchange. Pausing for a moment, Jack collected his thoughts and began steering the conversation to his intended purpose for the call. “Vlad? Buddy? Don’t go over to your house yet until Maddie and I can scope it out. We’ll be around by around five thirty to make sure the coast is clear. Do you think you could swing by around six with the kids?”

Vlad sighed in relief and quickly replied, “Sure. We can manage until then. Phantom, apparently, is making sure the ghouls that invaded my home don’t return to the property until we all meet up there.”

Jack paused at this information. “Vlad? Why do you trust him so much? Last time I checked your campaign platform was centered against Phantom.”

Vlad paused to collect his thoughts. “People can be wrong. Phantom is a good kid, he always has been. Granted, he could use some restraint with his power use. He can be quite reckless and overbearing. He makes a lot of decisions without thinking things through but usually, he does what’s in the best interests for everyone. If anything, I am surprised he trusts me.”

A trembling hand went to Vlad’s mouth. He shook slightly as he restrained the cough trying to make its way into the room. Jack noted the uncharacteristic pause and prodded. “Are you alright Vladimir?”

Jaz leaned down and gently put a hand to his shoulder. Composing himself, Vlad answered. “Sorry, I was lost in thought. A lot has happened in the last few days.”

Jack easily detected the waiver in Vladimir’s voice but chose to not pursue his friend’s injuries until they could coerce him into the car later that evening. “It’s alright.” Jack paused again. “Vladdie? What do you know about a ghost named Plasmius?”

Vlad trembled and his eyes flashed red unconsciously in panic. Eyeing the phone in his peripheral like it was a ticking time bomb, he questioned, “Why the interest?”

Jack pondered his options but levely answered, “We’re just curious about what he has to do with you, Vladimir.”

Vlad almost dropped the phone. Daniel’s eyes went as wide as saucers. ‘Oh fuck….’

Sam, Tucker, and Jaz looked to the phone apprehensively. Vlad took a breath and answered, “I’m familiar with him… He’s just a shadow, Jack.”

Jack sighed. “Vladimir Damian Masters… I want the truth.”

Vlad stiffened and tightened his grip on the phone. “The truth?” Vlad’s eyes glinted red again and he almost blacked out in Jaz and Tucker’s hold. “The truth is he’s been around for most of my life.” He’s been a shattered segment of my being since the accident.’ Vlad tiredly leaned his head against the white paneling behind him and looked into the ceiling with half-lidded eyes. “He’s a lot like Phantom and both of them seem to get into trouble a lot. They’re pretty secretive so I can’t really give you much other than that.”
Daniel’s eyes widened slightly at the carefully pasted words. Vlad had a silver tongue devote to
telling the truth as lie and lies as truth...but this? This was probably the most unnerving show of his
abilities Daniel had ever been granted spectacle to. Here they were, his father begging for
answers….and Vlad was doing his damndest to do so without hurting anyone in the process. The
teen whipped his head up when Jaz roughly reached to his leg and pinched to get his attention.
Vlad’s breathing was erratic and he was sweating uncontrollably. Daniel immediately shot down and
brought a cool palm to Vlad’s head. In a low whisper, he begged. “Vlad? You need to wrap the call
up...Please...your fever is getting worse.”

Vlad acknowledged the touch and attempted nodding only to wince.

Jack became unnerved by the silence and worriedly questioned, “ Pal? Is something going on?”

Vlad swallowed again and answered. “ Just a little fatigued. Sorry, I got lost in thought again. I
think…. I think I need to take a nap. Can I give the phone to Jazmine? She probably needs to hear
your plans for this evening so she can figure out our schedule.”

Jack grimaced from his spot in the Fenton’s kitchen. Maddie was listening in on the call and every
time Vlad paused uncharacteristically her frown grew more pronounced. It was more than obvious to
both of them that Vladimir was forcing himself to stay coherent. Not wanting Vlad to leave the line
to quickly, he protested. “ Vladie, that’s a swell idea and all but I would prefer speaking to you
about this mess. Jaz and Danny are just teenagers, they know some stuff about ghost hunting but not
nearly enough to help efficiently.”

Vlad chuckled scratchily. “ Don’t sell them short, your children are excellent ghost hunters in the
making. Especially, Daniel.”

Jack swelled with a light pride on his end of the line. He paused for a moment and at Maddie’s gentle
prodding, continued. “ Vlad… They’re Fenton’s, of course, they’re good but neither of them has
ever fought a ghost before.”

Daniel would have laughed from the irony if it weren't for the glazed look encompassing Vlad’s blue
eyes and his now trembling hands.

“ Jack… I think I really need to take a nap before this evening. Paperwork has been tiring me out
lately...Can we discuss this more in a few hours?”

Jack looked to Maddie questioningly, almost begging, on his end. She grimaced. “ No one has seen
Vladimir at City Hall in almost a week Jack. His secretary has been the one handling everything. She
said he was taking care of a family problem. I called this morning.”

Jack grimaced and returned to the call. “ You’re lying Vladdie. I can tell.”

Vlad let out a weakly sound in an attempt to laugh, “ How so? I can be a pretty good liar Flapjack,
when the situation calls for it. But this? This is most definitely work fatigue.”

Jack cut him off before he could continue. “You haven’t been at work Vladdie. People talk. Your
secretary told us you were taking care of personal affairs over the phone earlier this morning. From
what me and Maddie have gathered? You haven't been at City Hall since last Friday.”

Vlad, at this point, was darting in and out in the teenagers’ holds. “…Figures… That woman is
starting to- ugh…” A now incoherent mop of silver slouched forward and drifted into
unconsciousness. Daniel quickly caught him against her shoulder and Jazmine grabbed the phone.

Jack heard the break in speech and every nerve in his body tensed with the implications. Maddie
looked ready to snatch the device from Jack out of pure primal fear. “VLADIMIR?”

Instead of his friend, Jazmine answered, “He gave me the phone. Something isn’t sitting well from breakfast. I think you mentioning his secretary caused him to feel nauseous.”

Maddie and Jack both froze in confusion. Maddie tore the phone from Jack and began questioning the oldest Fenton child. “Jazmine Elizabeth Fenton, I want to speak to Vladimir.”

Jazmine nervously laughed and looked to her sibling who was now cradling Vlad against himself and motioning for ice from the fridge. Seeing she was on her own, she quickly answered, “He can’t.”

Maddie could almost feel a vein popping in her skull at her daughter’s answer. “Young lady! I said I wanted to speak to Vladimir! Put him on the phone this instance.”

Jaz froze and looked like she was about to cry from the pressure. She wasn’t a good liar, her brother wasn’t a good liar and her father also wasn’t a good liar. Her mom, however, was extremely good at deception and noticing when she was being deceived. No one pulled the wool over Maddie Fenton’s gaze without first being cross-examined, and Jazmine was utterly unprepared for that type of conversation.

Looking at Sam worriedly holding an ice pack to Vlad’s brow as Tucker lifted the adult with Daniel’s help she realized she was completely alone for this battle of mental might. Swallowing, she snapped back. “And I said he can’t. We’ll see you this afternoon. Whatever you do? Don’t talk to that secretary of his again. She’s one of the reasons we’re in this mess, to begin with.”

Before Maddie could utter another word, her daughter disconnected the call and cut Daniel’s phone on airplane mode. Reaching into her own pocket Jaz quickly did the same to her own device.
Maddie and Jack sat stunned in their dining room with equal expressions of shock and anger. Maddie hung the phone back up and rubbed her eyes in disbelief. “Our daughter just cut me off! When we see them this afternoon? GROUNDED.” She stomped her foot against the laminate angrily and squeezed the counter to calm herself. Jack tiredly rested his head in his hands and looked into the floor in front of him in a fatigued haze.

Looking up to Maddie, he flatly surmised. “I think Vladdie really couldn’t answer Mads.” He swallowed. “I think he passed out mid-conversation. You recorded the call, right?”

Maddie nodded tiredly. “Of course I did. So you think we’ll hear anything if we enhance the audio with the Ghost Gabber?”

Jack furrowed his brow. “I don’t honestly know…. But I am sure if we enhance it we’ll be able to hear the voices in the background better. The Ghost Gabber picks up on all sorts of frequencies and magnifies them. Since we recalibrated it for human tones as well it should help us figure out some more about what the kids and Vlad are up to.” Jack rubbed his brow tiredly. “It sounded like Daniel was whispering something to Vlad but I couldn’t make it out clearly.”

Maddie sighed and pulled the device from the cabinets. Heavy hands deftly set it on the counter. Plucking up a cord to connect the phone to the device, she fiddled and prodded for a few moments until a green light flashed between the two edison style bulbs. Looking to her spouse for the okay, she replayed the audio from their conversation with Vladimir.

“Dad? I am a ghost, fear me.” Daniel spoke the words apprehensively.

Both Maddie and Jack both exchanged a confused look with one another. They had been sure that their modifications had remedied the device’s confusion. Apparently, there were still some bugs to work out.

“I want to speak to Vladimir, son.” Jack’s voice growled.

Both Maddie and Jack paused. The device hadn’t made any errors with Jack’s voice, so why had it signaled out Daniel’s? Was their son’s voice just high enough in parts to register as a ghost?

“It’s alright Daniel. Pass it over. I am a ghost, fear me. I'm dying.”

Both Maddie and Jack looked to the ghost gabber in horror.

There was a pause.

“Yes, Jack? I am a ghost, fear me. I'm a liar…”

Jack shook slightly. This added audio wasn’t pre-programmed. Something else was overlapping Vladimir’s voice.

On the recording, Jack sighed and Vlad laughed tiredly.

“What’s with that reaction Jackson? I am a ghost, fear me. I need to protect them. It hurts.”

Maddie inhaled sharply and brought a hand to her mouth.
Jack’s voice softened slightly in the recording. “I am not in the mood for teasing today Vladdie.”

Vlad snorted. “And I’m not partial to that nickname, but here we are. I am a ghost, fear me. I’m afraid. It burns.”

A small laugh echoed over the line. Jack questioned. “Did you get any sleep? You sound like death warmed over.”

Vlad answered, “I slept pretty well considering. Your son and daughter apparently thought it would be funny to buy me a Metallica t-shirt. You should’ve seen their faces when I told them the three of us were fans. I am a ghost, fear me. We’re not safe.”

Jack could be heard laughing on the recording before he prodded. “Vlad? Buddy? Don’t go over to your house yet until Maddie and I can scope it out. We’ll be around by around five thirty to make sure the coast is clear. Do you think you could swing by around six with the kids?”

Vlad sighed in relief and quickly replied, “Sure. We can manage until then. Phantom, apparently, is making sure the ghouls that invaded my home don’t return to the property until we all meet up there. I am a ghost, fear me. Phantom is here. He’s protecting us. I’m so tired.”

Jack glared at the device. Everything being uttered was cryptic and incoherent. It almost sounded like nails being rubbed through wire mesh.

“Vlad? Why do you trust him so much? Last time I checked your campaign platform was centered against Phantom.”

Vlad paused to collect his thoughts. “People can be wrong. Phantom is a good kid, he always has been. Granted, he could use some restraint with his power use. He can be quite reckless and overbearing. He makes a lot of decisions without thinking things through but usually, he does what’s in the best interests for everyone. If anything, I am surprised he trusts me… I am a ghost, fear me. He’s a good kid. I keep messing up Jack. Sorry, wouldn’t cover it…For either of you…”

“Are you alright Vladimir?” The recorded Jack questioned.

Jaz was quietly whispering, “Vlad? You don’t need to do this. Breathe…?”

Vlad ignored her. “Sorry, I was lost in thought. A lot has happened in the last few days. I am a ghost, fear me. They poisoned me...Everything burns... They took me. The flesh, it stings.”

Both Jack and Maddie looked like they were going to hurl.

“It’s alright.” Jack paused again in the recording. “Vladdie? What do you know about a ghost named Plasmius?”

“Why the interest? I am a ghost, fear me. I know him. I know him well. If they know, will they hunt Plasmius?”

Jack levelly answered, “We’re just curious about what he has to do with you, Vladimir.”

“I’m familiar with him… He’s just a shadow, Jack. I am a ghost, fear me. Don’t pursue this...Please. We have enough to deal with.”

Jack sighed. “Vladimir Damian Masters… I want the truth.”

“The truth? I am a ghost, fear me. I’ll tell you the truth… but I won’t tell you that. That’s a secret.”
You’ll be in danger. You’ll hate us. We can handle it.”

Both Jack and Maddie exchanged panicked glances with one another.

Vlad continued speaking, “The truth is he’s been around for most of my life. I am a ghost, fear me. He’s been around since the accident.” There was another pause.

“He’s a lot like Phantom and both of them seem to get into trouble a lot. They’re pretty secretive so I can’t really give you much other than that. I am a ghost, fear me. Someone….grab the phone. I’m starting to black out….but if I don’t lie they’ll get hurt. Fuck…I hate being this. Daniel? Please….Make it stop…”

Daniel’s voice reverberated over the line in a hushed whisper, “Vlad? You need to wrap the call up…Please…your fever is getting worse. I am a ghost, fear me. They know…We need to get him away….far away. Oh god. Vlad….You’re not breathing correctly. Please, just hang up.”

Sam could be heard whispering something to Tucker, “Get ice. He’s starting to flare up again. The stress is too much.”


Vlad swallowed and answered. “Just a little fatigued. Sorry, I got lost in thought again. I think…. I think I need to take a nap. Can I give the phone to Jazmine? She probably needs to hear your plans for this evening so she can figure out our schedule. I am a ghost, fear me. I need to rest…My body…it’s rejecting….The fever won’t stop…It burns. Jack…please let me sleep. I am so tired.”

“Vladdie, that’s a swell idea and all but I would prefer speaking to you about this mess. Jaz and Danny are just teenagers, they know some stuff about ghost hunting but not nearly enough to help efficiently.” Jack argued.

Vlad chuckled. “Don’t sell them short, your children are excellent ghost hunters in the making. Especially, Daniel. I am a ghost, fear me. The boy knows a lot more than you give him credit…Jazmine to. They’re strong. Daniel saved me, but he has a lot to learn.”

“Vlad… They’re Fenton’s, of course, they’re good but neither of them has ever fought a ghost before.”

Vlad was struggling at this point. “Jack… I think I really need to take a nap before this evening. Paperwork has been tiring me out lately…Can we discuss this more in a few hours? I am a ghost, fear me. They’ve fought ghosts before. More than you and Maddie…pfff. Teenage vigilantes with soup canisters. I’m starting to….ugh my head. Make it stop.”

Jack called out the lie. “You’re lying Vladdie. I can tell.”

Vlad let out a weakly sound that almost sounded like a whimper with the enhanced audio but at second glance resembled more of a fatigued chuckle that was silenced before it could fully dance across the line, “How so? I can be a pretty good liar Flapjack, when the situation calls for it. But this? This is most definitely work fatigue. I am a ghost, fear me. I’m telling the truth. Jack…I was doing my job. I got Daniel back. It cost me…They know…Daniel figured it out. I’m a great liar. You never noticed. I’ve been try-.”

Maddie inhaled abruptly again and tightened her grip on the counter. Jack fingered the cuff link in his pocket and clapsed it into his palm. Vlad saved Daniel. That bloody shirt was Vladimir’s.
In the recording, Jack cut Vlad off before he could continue. “You haven’t been at work Vladie. People talk. Your secretary told us you were taking care of personal affairs over the phone earlier this morning. From what me and Maddie have gathered? You haven't been at City Hall since last Friday.”

Vlad was darting in and out. “...Figures… That woman is starting to- ugh...I...am a ghost, fear me....She...poisoned...me...She lied...”

Daniel could be heard whispering soothingly, “ Easy Fruit-Loop...Jesus...Sam, he’s gone. He probably won’t wake up for a while. I am a ghost, fear me. He protected me. He’s hurt. What do we do? I don’t know what I am doing. He’s already died once this week. We had to bring him back. I’m just a kid... I was always just a kid. I'm scared.”

“VLADIMIR?” Jack’s voice boomed over the line.

Tucker was whispering, “ Jaz needs to answer and we need to get Vlad off of the floor.”

Sam could be heard in the background. “ Careful with his chest… He’s still healing.”

Daniel growled, “ Sam, get a wet rag. He doesn’t need to wake up with blood on his face. I am a ghost, fear me. I hurt him....They tried burning him. They are after him. They want him dead. I’m going to rip them apart if I find them.”

Jazmine answered the phone.“He gave me the phone. Something isn’t sitting well from breakfast. I think you mentioning his secretary caused him to feel nauseous.”

Daniel and Tucker could be heard maneuvering something.

Sam whispered, “ Be careful with him!”

Daniel answered her. “ Let’s bring him to the couch in the study. I am a ghost, fear me. It’s getting worse. He’s not getting better. He can’t defend himself... He’s stronger than me, more experienced, and he knows what we’re up against... What am I doing? I am just some stupid kid who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. If he dies...Will it be my fault?”

“ Jazmine Elizabeth Fenton, I want to speak to Vladimir.” Maddie’s recorded counterpart practically snarled.

Jazmine nervously laughed and her voice trembled, “ He can’t.”

“ Young lady! I said I wanted to speak to Vladimir! Put him on the phone this instance.”

Daniel could be heard swearing under his breath. “ Do you have a decent hold on his shoulders, Tuck? I am a ghost, fear me. We need to be gentle with him. He doesn’t need any more damage.”

Tucker was silent for a moment and there was a rustle of cloth somewhere over the line. “ I got him. Let’s just get him out of here and on that couch so he can rest for a bit.”

A soft groan of pain echoed through the line and both Maddie and Jack grimaced. Jack looked like he was having a panic attack.

Vlad seemed to have revived slightly and was protesting.“....Daniel....ugh...the phone...I am a ghost, fear me.....You need to hide...the notes...Lie...If they find out we are-”

Daniel sighed and interrupted. “Go back to sleep Vlad. Please. You’ve done enough. We’ll take care of everything except for those books you warned us about. Just rest. I am a ghost, fear me. And you
Jazmine steely replied to her mother, “And I said he can’t. We’ll see you this afternoon. Whatever you do? Don’t talk to that secretary of his again. She’s one of the reasons we’re in this mess, to begin with.”

Sam could be heard growling under her breath and cutting on a sink. “That blonde haired monster better not show up here again! So help me god I will shoot her with Fenton ware if she touches him after what she’s-” And with that, the recording was abruptly ended.

Jack and Maddie sat for a moment in stunned silence just trying to digest what they had heard. The ghost gabber had picked up on only Daniel and Vladimir's voices. What the hell did that mean? Were they contaminated by some sort of spectral poison? Is that what the device picked up? Did it warp the audio with EVP somehow?

Maddie bit her lip and yanked the phone down somewhat desperately. Keying in Jaz’s cell, she waited and hearing the number was unavailable slammed the phone back on the receiver. Warm tears began spilling down her cheeks. Jack was no better. His eyes flickered to the ghost gabber in stunned perplexion. That couldn't possibly have been a fluke. Because a fluke doesn't know personal things…. a fluke wouldn't make cohesive sentences… and a fluke most certainly wouldn't glitch his name into the mix.

His best friend was dying, his son was scared, and Plasmius was going to pay for what he had done to both of them.

Swallowing, he looked over to his wife. “I’m going to go calibrate that containment unit in the operations booth.”

Maddie numbly nodded before reaching for the phone. “Tucker and Sam are obviously in on this too. I’m going to try and get ahold of them. And I think...I think I need to call Vladimir’s secretary.”

Jack nodded tiredly and quickly made his way out of the kitchen and upstairs. Sealing the containment unit and pressurizing it once Plasmius was caught would probably help prevent any unwanted power use or charges in the confinement. The cold and lack of oxygen for an explosion to ignite would make it the safest route to keep the ghoul restrained for testing. He had never tested this model before and he could feel apprehension building deep in the pit if his gut. He was going to capture a ghost...And he wasn’t going to let it leave until he learned everything possible about it and why it was hurting his family.

Grabbing a welding torch to finish one of the seams on the small shed sized room, he began mentally going over what Vlad and Daniel were so intent on hiding from him. It couldn’t possibly be just the injuries... What notes? Why worry about such a trivial thing?

Jack didn’t even notice when his wife glided into the room behind him to inspect his efforts close to an hour later. Her gloved fingers graced across the clear acrylic that would soon house an impenetrable electrical current and their targeted ghost. Coming up to him, she placed a hand on his shoulder, startling him slightly. Slipping off his hood and goggles he looked to her somewhat pleadingly.

She sighed and nodded no. “They didn’t answer. The secretary left soon after I called this morning from what the receptionist at city hall was able to gather. Something about her going grocery shopping for her and her spouse. I tried getting a home phone or an address but the receptionist said they didn’t have those on record.”
Jack rubbed the sweat off of his brow and looked to his work. “I think it’s done. Should we put the charge through it to test it?”

Maddie sighed and nodded before pulling up the generator and filtration systems controls on one of the console computers. “Close the door sweety.”

Jack dusted off his legs and casually shut and latched the door, which happened to be the only metal component besides the connector strips in the entire build. A solid steel behemoth that resembled more of a vault door rather than a prison door, it stood a good seven feet tall and was cleverly covered in rubber on the outside to allow entrance for the hunters when they decided to take samples. Sealing it, he walked over to Maddie and gave her the go-ahead, “Everything’s ready. Go for it Mads.”

She took a breath and quickly began typing in the input commands. The walls of the confinement buzzed and fluttering spirals of electrical current leaped and bounced through the hollow crevices that kept it contained. The rubber coating on the underside of the containment bottom insulated the waves from snaking out and connecting to the metal of the observation center. Jack smiled tiredly. “It looks like the confinement field is fully operational. Mads? Test the rate of pressurization. I think we should set the chamber for lower pressure. Gas intake should be six percent O2 with the remaining elements kept at regulatory atmosphere levels. Plasmius doesn’t need to breathe and I don’t want him torching our lab.”

Maddie nodded and began tapping in the required percentages. After a few moments, she pointed the containment unit, “By the estimations, the computer readout is giving me? It’ll take five minutes for the system to filtrate the air and pressurize the cell once he’s in. I set the settings for a simulated altitude of 29,000 feet. Do we need to regulate temperature as well?”

Jack rubbed his eyes tiredly, “Ectoplasm reacts dangerously to heat. Put the room at a flatline level of zero Celsius. The electrical current is monitored by the portal’s energy output so the field won’t lapse even with freezing conditions. That temperature should also solidify the ectoplasm enough for us to be able to jar it for further study..”

Maddie nodded and typed in the settings somewhat tiredly. After another minute, she clicked enter and the operation’s booth console buzzed. Turning to him, she smiled tiredly. “It’s done, honey. Once we get him contained he won’t be able to escape. It’s foolproof.”

Jack nodded and weakly smiled but there was no enthusiasm in his eyes. For the second time in his life, Jack Fenton wanted to destroy a sentient creature….and the mere idea of what he would do once he had Plasmius sent shivers of fear down his spine. Sure, they’d question him...but then what?
Vlad was patted awake by a sandpapery feeling clump of flesh around lunch time. Moaning and swatting at whatever was so rudely awakening him from his nap he failed to shield himself from the small, needle-like fangs that scratched into his palm. Hissing in mild irritation, he popped his eyes open to see Mad Cat lounging on his lap with his hand clutched in her tiny teeth.

A snort and a click from somewhere beside him caused him to turn groggily onto his side, successfully giving him a view of the person watching his plight and dislodging Mad Cat from his hand. Sam was grinning down at him with what appeared to be a sandwich on a plate in one hand and her phone poised in the other.

Vlad sighed and turned back to stare into the ceiling. “I would blast that device but seeing as how I’m practically a paranormal vegetable right now I’ll let you by with the photo.”

Sam smirked and pocketed her phone into her blue jeans. Looking down at him, she apologetically questioned, “Do you think you can sit up on your own?”

Vlad snorted and rolled to face away from her. “I’m not hungry.”

Sam sighed. “Come on Plasmius. Skipping meals isn’t going to help you any, especially with the Fentons due to arrive in four hours.”

Vlad shot up in a panic and immediately doubled over from the sudden movement. Sam set down the plate and somewhat angrily snapped as she manhandled him to a better spot on the couch, “DON’T DO THAT!”

Wincing, Vlad cocked an eyebrow in retaliation, “Why didn’t you four wake me up sooner?!”

A loud snort from the doorway caused him to redirect his gaze. Daniel was leaning against the double doors with a highly amused expression tacked on his face. “Why would we knowingly wake you up when you obviously needed the sleep Fruit-Loop? Jaz, Tucker and I were more than capable handling things while you were out of it.”

Sam cleared her throat and Daniel glanced to her apologetically before taking a bite out of his sandwich. “And Sam.” He corrected as an afterthought.

Vlad rolled his eyes and gently pushed Sam’s hand away from his shoulder before attempting to stand. Daniel was at his side in a millisecond and glaring daggers. “Sit down. Now.”

Vlad groaned and shook his head. “I can’t. I have to get the poltergeists in the vault.”

Daniel forcefully pushed the injured adult back into the couch. Crossing his arms and tapping his turkey sandwich against his elbow, he questioned. “And how do you think you’ll manage that? You said so yourself earlier. You can’t even touch anything paranormal right now.”

Vlad stiffened and then looked up to Daniel in surprise before laughing from behind one of his hands. Daniel glared. “What’s so funny?”

“Besides the tomato making a beeline for your sleeve?” Vlad flippantly motioned around the room. “Well,” A cocky grin snaked across his lips and his eyes sparked. “...who said I need to touch anything to get it in the vault?”
A charge of energy permeated the air and both Sam and Daniel went wide-eyed. Daniel recovered first and growled. “Don’t. You. Dare.”

Vlad’s more trademark devilish grin flickered across his face in rebuttal and in a flash of pink every glowing book in the library was yanked from their placement on the shelves and teleported to the vault. The entire escapade lasted little more than half a second and with a sigh, Vlad leaned back against his seat and crossed his arms in accomplishment over his chest. “How’s that for hiding the evidence?”

Daniel dropped his sandwich and spun in his spot in perplexed wonder as he took in the empty spots in the shelving. White tennis shoes squished against tomatoes and lettuce as his eyes widened. Whipping his head back to Vlad, he couldn’t help the wonder and possible amazement that leaked into his tone. “What was that?!?

Vlad chuckled tiredly and quietly answered, “I teleported the books into the vault. They don’t need air and it was the easiest way to ensure you kids didn’t accidentally unleash a wraith or Banshee in my home. It’s just—”

Before Vlad could finish his sentence, a set of hands clapped onto his shoulders. Daniel’s bright blue eyes were practically bugging out of his skull. Vlad eyed him nervously and the teen practically shook him off the couch as he spoke, “You can teleport stuff without touching it?!”

Vlad flinched and cautiously nodded yes. Daniel shook him again, “I WANT TO LEARN THAT!”

Vlad was dumbstruck for a moment and then a wide grin snaked across his face again. Cocking an eyebrow, he amusedly prodded, “Let me get this straight… Of all my powers and abilities your interests were peaked by me hiding a bunch of hardcovers?”

Daniel snorted and crossed his arms before pointing at himself. “Teenager with a messy room, remember?”

Vlad couldn’t help the laugh that slipped from his lips. Glancing up at Daniel and pointing a finger he cocked his head and added. “Leave it to you to ask me to teach you one of the hardest ghost abilities for a halfa to master.”

Daniel gawked, “It’s one of the hardest things to learn? But isn’t it like any of our other abilities? Just an extension of consciousness and instinct?”

Vlad stiffened and grew perplexed. “That’s a rather astute observation coming from you Daniel.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and clapped his hands together rather childishly in mock prayer. “Please teach me sensei Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched and he averted his gaze to Sam. “Ms. Manson? Can you pass me my plate? Food sounds rather good right now if it means I can avoid Daniel’s teasing.”

Daniel scoffed and yanked the plate out of Sam’s hands before Vlad could grab it.

A long breathy sigh escaped through Vlad’s fangs and he looked back to Daniel and his now ransomed lunch tiredly. “Fine. I have other ways of occupying myself, Daniel.”

To prove the point he smugly teleported a book from one of the shelves and flicked it open. With another pop a footstool appeared beside him and he languidly crossed his legs over it, the picture of relaxation. Daniel gaped and looked from the book to the stool to Vlad in perplexed awe and mild annoyance.
Feeling eyes still on him, Vlad sighed. “Yes?”

Daniel shifted slightly. “Please? I’ll yield to the prank thing? Come on Unkie Vlad?”

Vlad sighed and looked up to Daniel somewhat tiredly before closing his book and setting it on the side table beside him. “Daniel, as much as I want to teach you this ability it’s not exactly something you just learn from example. Surely you noticed the lack of oxygen when we teleported earlier?”

Daniel nodded, not quite getting where Vlad was going with this. Vlad sighed and took his feet down from the stool before motioning for his lunch and for Daniel to sit down. Daniel sat down and stared intently as he handed Vlad his sandwich. “You are right of course, our powers are primarily used and created from consciousness and instinct.”

Vlad took a bite of his sandwich. Sam sat next to the adult to listen to his explanation now that her own curiosity was peaked. Swallowing, Vlad sighed amusedly and looked to Daniel. “I take it your first mishaps with your powers were with our so-called intangibility and invisibility, correct?”

Daniel nodded but Sam interrupted, “What do you mean so-called?”

Vlad sighed tiredly. “Our powers as we name them aren’t what you think they are. When Daniel or I go untouchable or intangible, as we’ve christened it, it is because we are shifting between the ghost zone and our world. True intangibility would suffocate our human lungs and so it’s an ability we do not possess and neither does any true ghost. Invisibility is the same. If we could truly turn invisible we would be blind. Light needs to enter the eye, not refract off of it, for sight. We just shift slightly less between plains and presto, fake invisibility. As halfas we are drawn between both plains, sometimes against our own intentions. My teleportation is the next step in that chain. And no, it’s not really teleportation, Daniel.” He looked over to the amazed younger halfa and smiled apologetically.

Daniel gulped, “What is it?”

Vlad took another bite of his food before taking a moment to figure out how to word his answer. “To put it bluntly? It’s my soul ripping open a bridge through pocket dimensions in a bid to get to the ghost zone. It’s a partial ghost portal that shifts a person out of our plain fully and into a space between the zone and earth or the earth and the zone depending on where it’s activated. When I was first coming into my ghost half I had the same problems as you, except my powers were spaced out erratically. I was forcefully teleported against my will multiple times and occasionally parts would get stuck between plains or I would get stuck completely in a partial shift between the zone and our world for a couple of hours as an invisible specter. It took me close to four years to be able to control the unconscious shifts and another full year to master the three bases of the paranormal quartet. I only learned the fourth a little over a month ago due to an adrenaline spike while trying to deal with Undergrowth.”

Daniel’s eyes widened to comical proportions as did Sam’s. Vlad stared at his sandwich and then to Daniel’s mess near the rug. “Like any of our powers, you need to focus on the outcome and not the method.”

Sighing, he motioned Daniel forward with a finger and then pointed to the mess on the floor. “Hold your breath.”

Daniel froze like a deer in the headlights but quickly gulped in a large segment of air before him, Vlad, Vlad’s sandwich and his own sandwich were yanked into a spiraling black abyss pierced by beautiful strips of electricity and floating plasma clouds. Daniel’s eyes, this time, lingered on the details for the briefest of moments before both he and Vlad reappeared in the kitchen on the bar stools. Tucker screeched at their sudden arrival and Jazmine looked up from what she was trying to
read with a mixture of panic and guilt.

Daniel stared silently into the counter and Vlad worriedly shook his shoulder. “Daniel? Little Badger are you-”

Bright blue eyes turned to Vlad and lit with mirth. “That was a thousand times cooler than anything I’ve ever seen before. It was like an entire galaxy!”

Vlad awkwardly smiled and turned to look at Jazmine. Quirking an eyebrow, he smugly teleported the book she was hiding behind her back into his hands. “I do believe my personal exploits aren’t meant for your psychoanalysis, Jazmine.” Looking at the book, somewhat absently he flicked through a few pages before teleporting it into the vault to join its companions.

Jazmine turned bright fuschia and Vlad pointedly grinned. “It’s not like you could have really read it anyway.”

Feeling light headed from the excessive shows of power, he swayed and groaned. The groan snapped Daniel back to reality and he quickly latched onto Vlad’s shoulder. “Woah! Oh, jeez….That wasn’t a good idea. Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad looked up apologetically, “M’ fine. Just a little drained. Moving objects is different than moving oneself or a companion. I only learned how to do objects with help from Romulus about a year ago. It takes a segment, much like a duplicate in spirit form, to coax the item to where it needs to go. I basically send off a piece of my consciousness every time to escort the stuff while I sit back and watch.”

Daniel furrowed his brow lightly in worry. “Do you need me to carry you to your bedroom?”

Vlad sighed, “What I need is coffee.” He swallowed thickly and cradled his head against the counter. “We still have to discuss our game plan for when Maddie and Jack show up this afternoon. If you haven’t noticed, that call earlier didn’t exactly soothe their now overly apparent worry and panic. They’ll probably bust in here, guns blazing, demanding answers.”

Tucker nodded and ducked into the pantry for some coffee beans and a filter. Jazmine worriedly crouched over the counter and felt Vlad for fever. “Well, on the bright side your temperature is down.”

Vlad snorted and placed his head on the cool marble next to his plate. “Yippee.”

Daniel smiled slightly. “When you’re better...um..” He paused awkwardly. “Do you think you can teach me how to teleport?”

Vlad sat up and smiled toward Daniel warmly. “I’d be more than happy to Daniel, but first I’ll need to gauge your abilities. Teleportation, unlike the other members of the naturally occurring ghoul or phantom powers, is dangerous. I don’t want you getting stranded in a pocket dimension or suffocated because we put caution to the wind.”

Jazmine winced, “Suffocated?”

Sam came into the room somewhat annoyed. “Next time a little warning? You were resting in the library for a reason Plasmius.”

Vladimir sighed. “Jazmine? My teleportation rips away oxygen. And Ms. Manson? I had to clean up Daniel’s mess and Mad Cat was eyeing my lunch a little too much for comfort.”
The sound of a coffee pot heating water and releasing warm caffeine into a tarnished white mug on the counter interrupted everyone’s thoughts. Sam and Daniel both looked to the cup in perplexed wonder. Daniel snorted, “Vlad….does that tattered old thing say what I think it does?”

Vlad looked toward the cup and groaned before setting his head back on the counter. “I’m sure you’re literate, Daniel. You tell me. Does it?”

Tucker, now noticing the cups permanent marker print, chortled. “What brave idiot scribbled *deadbeat* boss on your coffee mug, Vlad?”

Vlad groaned and buried his head deeper in his arms. “A close friend I no longer have the luxury of seeing. He thought it was funny and I kept it mostly out of humoring his poor attempt at getting back at me for a stunt I pulled in the office.”

Tucker smirked. Daniel looked at the mug somewhat curiously. “You seem to like it quite a bit but it looks like it’s on its last limb... Why not get a new one?”

Vlad stiffened. Swallowing, he calmly countered. “If it’s all the same to you? I’d rather continue patching and repairing that mug. I’m not usually at the receiving end of gifts, and that one holds a lot of sentimental value.”

The room became quiet and Vlad peeked out from his arms. “In my life, I’ve received very few meaningful gifts. Of the gifts I’ve cherished, there is now only that mug and my straight razor left. Everything else was either destroyed by a horrific accident or torn apart because of my own reckless stupidity. Thankfully, I’ve been able to keep up the friendships I’ve made over the years with my ghostly acquaintances but lately, those have been stressed…” Vlad yawned and his fangs glimmered from behind his hand. After a moment he sleepily pleaded, “Someone? Pass that mug before I conk out?”
Jazmine took the initiative and gently picked up the steaming mug. Vlad took it appreciatively before pulling his abandoned plate back. Between mouthfuls of coffee and sandwich, he blearily glanced at Samantha and Tucker. “You two may need to hide out away from the manor before they come. They don’t know about your involvement and I don’t want to drag you to into a paranormal game of hide and seek with Maddie and Jack. Tensions are high enough as is without more heads on the chopping block.”

Both Sam and Tucker winced and Sam protested, “Vlad? Are you sure that’s a good idea? What if you need us for your story or whatever you’re going to ‘bs’ the Fentons with?”

Vlad sighed and took another sip of coffee defeatedly. “If you stay you’ll need to hide on the premise. The back yard is fairly safe and if you open the window next to the breakfast booth you should be able to hear any conversations we have with Jack and Maddie. If things turn South you can get through the back door. It’s always unlocked. After that, I can always claim you were dropping by to check on Danny and me because of his hospital stint last week and my sudden bout of dizziness at the firehouse.”

Tucker whistled, “Did you seriously just come up with that off of the top of your head?”

Vlad smiled weakly from over his coffee mug. “I’m good at coming up with plans under pressure. I kind of have to be in my line of work.”

Jazmine nodded and coaxed, “What about me and Danny?”

Vlad snorted from over the brim of his mug. “Daniel will need to duplicate a Phantom proxy to explain the supposed break-in upstairs. I think we can get by with telling them a ghost invaded my home and killed a cat or some other small domestic animal in my bathroom as a threat on some of my policies since taking up the position as mayor. Jazmine? You’ll be a key part of this. I need to know everything that happened after I passed out earlier during that call.”

Jazmine sighed. “Mom protested when I took the phone. I said you felt nauseous hearing about your secretary and that you couldn’t answer.”

Vlad nodded. “I’ll tell them she gave me food poisoning and I’m still recovering from it. Hence, workplace fatigue.”

Sam gaped, “That’s genius.”

Vlad smiled tiredly. “I would hope so. After twenty years of me making excuses and covering my paranormal toosh, I should be a rather experienced liar.”

Vlad rubbed his eyes, “How long do we have before they show up?”

Sam clicked her iPhone on to check. “It’s one thirty right now so we have four and a half hours to putz around.”

Vlad rubbed his chin in thought. Looking up to the circle of teenagers, he questioned, “If you want we can watch a movie. The lounge has quite a few. I feel like a comedy right about now… anything
to calm my nerves... And you all are probably in a similar plight. Especially Daniel and Jazmine. It’s one thing for me to lie to my old friends, it’s another for a child to lie to their parents."

Sam and Jazmine gladly jumped at the idea. Sam questioned, “What do you have that we all can watch?”

Vlad smiled and stood from his seat. “Why don’t you all go and browse the collection? I’m not picky and will be more than happy to watch whatever you choose."

Everyone began moving toward the door as Vlad stood but Daniel stopped. “What are you up to Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad smiled apologetically and lifted his coffee mug, “I think I need a refill. I’ll be in there momentarily.” He paused as he walked to the coffee machine and added as an afterthought, “Please make sure the girls don’t pick anything on the lower shelf. I have to suffer through those films enough with Skulker and Romulus.”

Seeing Vlad was genuinely filling up the pot with more beans, Daniel smiled. “Sure. I’ll make sure they don’t snag anything on that shelf. Hurry up before we hit play, alright?”

Vlad smiled and nodded tiredly, “Sure.” He motioned toward the lounge. “Now hurry along before they get one of those ridiculous films out of the sleeve and into the Bluray player.”

Daniel smirked and began a brisk sprint out of the kitchen. Vlad smiled tiredly as he filled his cup. As an afterthought, he stalked to the pantry and pulled down his secret stache of Rice Krispy Treats from behind the paper towels. Walking, with his now full mug and the box in hand he came to the doorway of the lounge and paused to readjust his load.

Thinking he would get a decent laugh from them discussing Skulker and Romulus's preferred viewing content, he enhanced his hearing. What he did hear however sent waves of confusion and panic through his system.

Samantha was speaking quietly. “Danny? If Vlad cares for Youngblood… Why didn’t he care the same for Dann?”

Vlad paused and his face became a mask of mixed emotions. ‘Why are they talking about Daniel in the third person? I care for Daniel….haven’t I proved that?’

Daniel answered Sam.”Sam… I don’t think that’s something we should be discussing right now. It’s probably for the best she isn’t around him….I mean, he wasn’t acting sane during that whole cloning thing….If he sees her? What would he do?”

Vlad’s eyes widened and flashed crimson spastically at the flurry of emotions strangling their way through his brain. A hand tightened against the box in his arm like a lifeline and the smell of burnt paper began to waft through the hallway. ‘She? Oh god…I couldn’t have…She thought she was…’

Sam became pleading. “But what if he knew Danny? He could help her! You saw her last time…She’s not stable.”

‘SHE’S STILL ALIVE AND I LEFT HER?!?! WHAT TYPE OF MONSTER AM I?!? OH GOD, SHE’S STILL NOT STABLE?!?’

Daniel growled and Vlad felt his own mental rants echoing harshly back at him and grating against his psyche like razor blades as the teen spoke, “And who’s fault was that?! Sam? He threw her aside because she wasn’t perfect! What type of person treats a living creature like their garbage?”
Sam seemed to protest the sentiments. “From the week we’ve known him? That doesn’t sound like who he is. She may be in danger, Danny! She hasn’t called or anything in weeks! She could be starving in a gutter somewhere!”

Vlad bit his lip and could feel blood dripping down from where his fang punctured the flesh. She was god knows where without food and shelter and he was standing in his hallway eavesdropping on four teenage delinquents. Daniel interrupted the panicked haze with a rather crucial segment of information, “I’ll search for her after Vlad gets back on his feet. She was in the zone the last time I checked, so her ghost half shouldn’t destabilize anytime soon. She’s.”

‘SHE’S IN THE ZONE!?!?’ And at that moment all rational thought completely left the equation.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone wants to add or submit fanart, mood boards, or check out art for the fic? Give me a click @dannyphanwriter on tumblr.
Daniel walked into the lounge just as Jazmine reached for the bottom shelf to snatch up *the Princess Bride*. Using his powers he quickly snatched it from her. “The bottom shelf is Skulker’s. Don’t touch it.”

Tucker and Jazmine exchanged smirks. Jazmine fingered one of the plastic cases in disbelief and questioned, “Skulker watches romance flicks and historical dramas?”

Daniel glanced at the dvd in his hand and nearly doubled over at the idea of Skulker and some badass medieval warrior watching Andre the Giant and Prince Humperdinck without blasting the television. “I guess he does? Vlad’s not a fan of that bottom shelf for a reason I suppose.”

Tucker smirked, “Noted.” Flicking through the collection his eyebrow raised. “There’s a ton of kids’ movies on this shelf.”

Daniel winced. “Let’s avoid those. I don’t think he needs that sort of reminder right now.”

Tucker grimaced and a sigh escaped his mouth as he fingered through the plastic cases. “*The Goonies*?”

Daniel shrugged and casually pointed to one of the cases on the top shelf, “How about *Shallow Hal*? That’s a good comedy.”

Tucker nodded but looked unsure. “How about we just yank a few and ask what Vlad wants to watch when he gets back in here?”

Daniel grinned. “Go for it.” Seeing Sam seated on the couch and scrolling through one of the albums on her camera roll, he stealthily leaned over her shoulder and glanced at the photos. His eyes landed on an amusing image of Vlad furrowing his brow in agitation while Mad Cat clung from a long pointed ear by her teeth. A small chuckle escaped his lips and he quired, “I take it that was a segment of the duplicate’s fight with Mad Cat earlier?”

Sam stiffened and went to hide her phone only for Daniel to yank it out of her hands. “You clicked thirty-two photos of Vlad this week? You know if you wanted that many Fruit-Loops on your camera roll you could’ve just poured a bowl and snapped a pic.”

Sam rolled her eyes, “Ha. Ha. Very funny, now give that back!” Yanking her phone back, she paused as her finger enlarged the only photo she had not taken. Vlad could be clearly seen hugging a small blurry specter in his arms on a roof somewhere in Amity. Her brow furrowed and she looked to Daniel worriedly. “Danny? If Vlad cares for Youngblood… Why didn’t he care the same for Danni?”

Daniel winced. “Sam… I don’t think that’s something we should be discussing right now. It’s probably for the best she isn’t around him… I mean, he wasn’t acting sane during that whole cloning thing… If he sees her? What would he do?”

Sam flinched and looked to him somewhat pleadingly. “But what if he knew Danny? He could help her. You saw her last time… She’s not stable.”

Daniel growled against his better judgment, “And who’s fault was that?! Sam? He threw her aside because she wasn’t perfect! What type of person treats a living creature like they’re garbage?”

Sam looked to him irritably. “From the week we’ve known him? That doesn’t sound like who he is.
She may be in danger, Danny! She hasn’t called or anything in weeks! She could be starving in a gutter somewhere!”

Daniel sighed, “I’ll search for her after Vlad gets back on his feet. She was in the zone the last time I checked, so her ghost half shouldn’t destabilize anytime soon. She’s—”

A break of ceramic by the door startled the teenagers and Daniel bolted up from his position by the couch. Flinging open the door with enough force to rip it from its hinges, he stared into the large puddle of coffee creeping along the floorboards and skidding into the wall in horror. Wood shattered and splintered as the door swayed into the wallpaper.

Sam gasped at the sight of the broken coffee mug and the discarded treat box which appeared to have hand shaped burns in its sides.

Daniel could hear someone downstairs slinging equipment and god knows what else in a rushed frenzy. Panicked words echoed through his enhanced hearing and he gaped in horror. “OH GOD…. WHAT HAVE I DONE?! SHE’S ALIVE AND I LEFT HER ALONE?!” Daniel’s eyes widened at the sound of metal being ripped from something in the downstairs infirmary. “I HAVE TO GET HER OUT OF THE ZONE! GOD DAMN IT, SHE’S PART HUMAN! A DEMON PROBABLY HAS HER AND THEY DIDN’T EVEN THINK TO—”

Daniel looked to the floor in horror. “Oh god….he’s going to—” Hearing several items being snatched and a vault door being slammed shut, Daniel shifted. Leaving his shocked sibling and friends behind, he phased into the downstairs lab just in time to see a feverish and bitterly crying Plasmius dart into the portal on the far side of the laboratory.
The First Ripple

There are few times where Daniel Fenton was prone to panicking...This was most certainly one of them...

Vlad had been gone for close to an hour in the zone. One horrific hour of furious yelling and panicked attempts to try and follow him had quickly elapsed. Despite Tucker’s best efforts to unlock the portal door’s extremely strong shield, which Vlad had seemingly activated only seconds prior to him darting into the ghost dimension, they had made no leeway in accessing it or breaking through it. Phasing? Blasting? Nothing was working. Jazmine had even used the Fenton Peeler to no avail. The only signs that she had fired at the shield were the faint singe like marks that rippled across its surface for the briefest of moments before disappearing. Daniel was almost willing to use his Ghostly Wail in an attempt to pry it open, home and other structures be damned at this point.

Currently, all of the teens were circled around a generator in the middle of the lab on the right wall, handing Tucker power tools and various rags as he tried to safely short out the shield while keeping the portal stable. A small movement out of the corner of Sam’s eye caught her attention from the screwdriver she was holding. A singed blue hand was gripping the side of the portal. A sharp gasp escaped her lips and the screwdriver dropped with a muted clatter against the metal flooring. All eyes turned to the doorway just in time to see the hand retract itself back into the zone. There was a momentary pause before a black boot shakily entered into the laboratory.

Vlad stumbled, almost drunkenly, as he walked through the portal. Greens and reds dripped down his mouth, his nose, and a large cut-like gash could be seen on his cheek. A burnt cape was bundled in his arms with Danni’s small arm and head sticking out from where Vlad’s own head would normally be. Two steps into the lab his legs gave out. Wrapping his arms protectively around Danni so she wouldn’t hit the floor, he landed hard onto his back and let out a short scream of pain. At the sound of the scream, all four teenagers ran back to the shield and began banging furiously against it.

Daniel kneeled down and frantically tapped in front of Vlad to focus him. “ DROP THE SHIELD!!!!!!”

Vlad seemingly understood the request and weakly rasped something from behind the dome. An echoing female voice pierced the lab. “ Voice authorization code accepted. Shutting down security protocol DEMI in three, two,”

There was a hiss of air and the shield crackled and dissipated. Daniel’s hand immediately went for Vlad and the adult weakly protested, “ I’m fine.”

Daniel growled, “ YOU STUPID, RECKLESS SON OF A-“

A small noise from on top of Vlad jarred him from his worry. Danni was bruised, battered and unconscious. Anger quickly gave way and his worry turned to rage, “ What did you do to her?!“

Daniel went to grab the girl from Vlad only for Vlad’s arms to tighten around her protectively. Eyes weakly glinted red. “Don’t….touch her….”

“And why not? FOR ALL I KNOW YOU-” Daniel was cut off again by Sam. She pushed the teen aside and gently questioned, “ Vlad? What happened?”

Vlad hugged the twelve-year-old bundled in his arms weakly against the crook of his neck. “ Nocturn… had a twin...of sorts.....They apparently decided....halfa was some sort of delicacy....She almost didn’t wake up...”
Daniel felt a weight drop in his stomach. Vlad wasn’t like the nightmare version he had seen when he was imprisoned. He had repeated the same actions he had made in trying to save him and Daniel had jumped to yet another wrong conclusion for the hundredth time in as little as a week.

Sam gently reached a hand to Danni and Vlad fearfully tried to lean both himself and the child away from her touch. His voice cracked, “Please...just-...just let me hold her...?”

Sam sighed. “Vlad...we need to get you two into the infirmary...you’re torn up.”

Vlad weakly laughed, “You should see the other guy.”

Tucker gently bent down and checked both Danni and Vlad’s pulses. Danni shifted at his touch and moaned against Vlad. Feeling a steady beat, the teen shifted to Vlad and put a hand to his neck. Paling, he retracted his fingers and he growled to Daniel, “Pham? Grab Danni. Vlad’s trying not to show it but he’s not exactly doing great right now...If health class has taught me anything one hundred and twenty beats per minute isn’t normal and it’s certainly not safe. That and his fever is way worse than it was earlier.”

Jazmine winced and nodded in agreement. Vlad groaned, “I’m fine...honest.”

Daniel apologetically reached over and began detaching Vlad from the small white haired girl. Vlad winced and seeing Daniel’s hand getting dangerously close to unfurling his cape from around Danni protested. “Miss Manson and Jazmine need to help her...Most of her clothes got burnt off when she stabilized...”

The room went silent. Sam swallowed, “How did she-”

Vlad smiled weakly. “I was...working on a cure...for her before...before I thought she died... I kept working on it in case something happened to Daniel...It worked...but it caused her powers to flare for a few minutes. She won’t...be able to turn human for at least another hour...”

Daniel looked to Vlad curiously and then back to Danni. Now that he was looking at her more closely she looked a lot like...

And then it hit. A hand retracted in a mixture of horror and disbelief. The photo in the box upstairs of the green-eyed girl, the cloning incident...everything was fitting painfully together in a twisted and bizarre tapestry. “Vlad...She isn’t my clone, is she? I saw a photo upstairs...She looks like Liz.”

Vlad’s winced and lightly reached a gloveless hand around to brush Danni’s bangs out of her face. “You’re-” Vlad flinched and sighed weakly. “You’re right...She’s not your clone Daniel.”

Daniel shivered, “Vlad....how did you..?”

Vlad paused and stared up into the ceiling tiredly. “If I had to explain that we would be here for a month. She’s not made from you. The rest of those monsters? Yes. One hundred percent yours. She was mine and still is though. An-” Vlad winced and his eyes grew hollow. A hand detached itself from Danni’s brow. “Danni was made from me, Daniel. She’s my child...And honestly? I had no clue she-”

Vlad paused awkwardly again before continuing, “Do you have any idea what losing a child not once but twice does to a person? It’s not pleasant...Few horrors compare to that level of self-hatred and anguish.”

Jazmine swallowed and questioned. “Vlad...What happened to Anna?”
Vlad’s eyes wandered back down to Danni for a moment and he gently rasped, “The Anna I knew died a few weeks prior to that entire cloning debacle. Danni followed soon after and…”

A defeated sigh escaped his lips and he turned to Daniel tiredly. “Why didn’t anyone tell me? I thought she died…. Surely, you noticed she wasn’t like those wraiths in the lab? That she was an individual and human in nature?” A small cough dragged Vlad from his questions and his hand soothingly reached around Danni and leaned her head over his shoulder as he attempted to sit up with her. Jazmine, now seeing the ectoplasm splattered on the floor, let out a panicked breath of air and stooped to take Danni from Vlad.

Vlad apologetically looked to the mess and smiled weakly, “That’s not mine. You can chalk that up to Quietus’s death throes.” As an afterthought, Vlad looked to Danni somewhat debatingly. There was a pop of pink light and Vlad tiredly caught a small black hoodie dress in his hands. Looking away from it, he passed it to Sam. “That- That should fit her.”

Jazmine looked from Danni’s small form to Vlad somewhat apologetically. “After we are done wrapping her up you’ll need to be checked over too.”

Vlad nodded absently and leaned against the wall by the portal door. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. Tucker jostled him slightly. “Vlad? Switch back to human form…”

Vlad nodded and two rings weakly appeared by his waist only to short out abruptly. Vlad sighed, “I can’t. The adrenaline from going into the zone is still in my system. I’m stuck.”

Hearing this, Daniel stooped down and gently helped the elder to his feet. “Then you should be resting in the kitchen upstairs and not near the portal.” Tucker made a move to latch onto Vlad as well but Daniel stopped him. “Tuck? Stay down here with the girls and come up when they’re done tending to Danni. I need to have a word with Plasmius.”

Vlad raised an eyebrow but didn’t argue. Tucker, however, looked extremely uncomfortable with the scenario. Turning to Vlad, he questioned, “Are you going to be okay by your-?”

Vlad smiled gently. “I’ll be fine Mr. Foley.” He glanced slightly to Daniel and dropped his head somewhat guiltily. “I have a feeling whatever he’s going to yell at me about is warranted after what I just pulled.”

Tucker winced and looked to Daniel pleadingly, “Dude? Go easy on him?”

Daniel snorted. “No promises.”

And before Tucker could argue further, Vlad and Daniel appeared in the kitchen upstairs in a puff of pink. Daniel flinched and looked to Vlad somewhat angrily. “Will you stop using your powers for stupid shit?”

Vlad smiled tiredly. “Would you rather I pass out in front of Mr. Foley? That conversation was being drawn out a little too much for comfort.”

Daniel stiffened but quickly helped Vlad to the breakfast booth. Once he was seated he sighed and looked up to Daniel. “So…how much trouble am I in?”

Daniel growled in retort. “If you ever pull something as foolish or asinine as leaping into the zone while knowing full well the effects it would have on your body after those monsters poisoned you…” Daniel paused and then spat, “I will lock you in the Fenton thermos.”

Vlad smiled weakly, “It sounds like I am getting off fairly easy for what I did. Are you sure you
don’t want to blast me?” He somewhat jokingly prodded.

Daniel’s eyebrow twitched and he leaned into the booth table to glare at Vladimir. Neon green eyes simmered and flashed, “For some reason, blasting at an invalid just doesn’t hold any appeal right now. That, and considering you can’t even stand correctly? Me letting loose a few rounds against a stationary, clay *Plasmius* pigeon would be more pathetic than entertaining.”

Vlad winced. “Ouch.” Looking into the table to avoid Daniel’s gaze, he blinked in surprise and then retorted. “Since when did you become so egotistical?”

Daniel smirked and flatly snapped, “Since I started babysitting you?”

Vlad chuckled slightly, “How nice, my pride seems to be infectious.”

Daniel smiled gently and kicked up his spectral tail into two human legs in order to sit on top of the breakfast booth. “So… Vlad?”

Vlad sighed and looked up from the table “I take it this is the interrogation part of our little private talk?”

Daniel closed his eyes slightly and sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. “Actually? I think I owe you a small apology…”

Vlad looked to him in confusion before curling his arms against the table, “Don’t bother. Any resentment you hold toward me is fairly justified.”

Daniel flinched but continued, “Hear me out? Please?”

Vlad sighed and peaked up from his arms. A finger twirled to motion the teenager to continue the train of thought.

Daniel took a breath, “Okay… I… I shouldn’t have said those things downstairs. It was wrong for me to jump on you and assume that you-”

Vlad sighed and cut him off. “I’ll stop you right there.” Looking up and locking his gaze with Daniel, he sincerely elaborated, “I am guilty of abandoning her, of leaving her alone for this long….those marks and wounds are just as much my fault as they are that demons. I have blame here, Daniel. In more than one way my actions led to that horrific ordeal involving those pseudo-Daniels and Danni’s disappearance. She and you shouldn’t apologize. I don’t want to hear forgiveness for actions that were so unjustified and reckless on my part. Not only have I failed as a parent, I’ve failed as a protector…”

Daniel winced, “But I-”

Vlad sighed. “Daniel...Please…Just let it go?”

Daniel sighed and swallowed, “Did….did you create Danni because you lost Anna?”

Vlad averted his gaze and cringed. “I had no say, Daniel...Danni was.. unplanned. But I’ve never regretted bringing her into this world. I love her....”

Daniel paused and shook his head in disbelief. “Why then? Why did you threaten her in the lab? Why trap me and spout all that nonsense about the perfect clone son? Vlad, do you realize how fucked up that entire thing was? I still have nightmares about those other Daniels.”
Vlad rubbed his temple tiredly and leaned an elbow against the table. “I have nightmares about them too.”

Daniel’s eyes glinted angrily, “And why would you have nightmares about them, Vlad? You created them!”

Vlad winced and then growled in retort, “Those things weren’t clones! They were monsters! Do you honestly think I would be insane enough to duplicate a teenage boy into a fantastically warped house of horror reflections of his personality out of some twisted father complex? Jesus! I had no want for them! They were vengeful and cruel. And if you haven’t noticed Clockwork intervenes a little too much into other people’s business! That stupid moron is practically at fault for that entire—” Vlad stopped himself once he realized he was yelling angrily at no one in particular.

Daniel sat wide-eyed and tense across from him. “Vlad...What are you—”

Vlad looked away from the teen and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “It’s complicated. Trust me….I don’t even know what you gathered from that and apparently, my brain got scrambled as well. Please….Let’s just never speak of that cloning incident again.” As an afterthought he added somewhat pleadingly, “And trust me when I say that I have never cloned anyone in my life. I am many things but I would never manipulate the creation of life out of sadistic greed and callus want. I’m a liar and a selfish screw-up but I prefer not to drag other people down with me.”

Daniel grimaced and put a hand to Vlad’s shoulder timidly. “You do realize how confusing that all was right?”

Vlad scuffed, “I wouldn’t even know where to begin in order to explain how many horrific failures piled together for that little horror flick personified. If you think my explanation was confusing you’d probably be even more confused by the details of the matter. For your sake? Just let it go…”

Daniel wiped his bangs out of his face and sighed defeatedly. “I won’t push this right now….but I have a feeling you owe both Danni and me an explanation once this current mess you’re in dies down. Agreed?”

Vlad flinched, “Daniel…. I could probably explain it to you, but Danni? She isn’t ready for that… I don’t think I am ready for that conversation with her. You should have seen her face earlier. She hated me so intently for abandoning her…And I just…” Vlad swallowed and leaned his head back into the table. “A parent is supposed to protect their children…. The only way I can protect her right now is to let her judge me as she sees fit. If she no longer wants me in her life, I’d see it as more than fair. I’m just glad she’s breathing…That she’s alive…I never thought I would feel her in my arms again and today I got to hold her.”

Daniel froze at the soft shaking coming from the adult. “Vlad? Are you alright—”

A look of realization crossed the teen’s face and he flinched. A hand whipped back to the adult’s shoulder and gently patted him. “You’re such a mess right now.”

Vlad snorted from under his arms. “Takes one to know one.”

Daniel teasingly rolled his eyes and flicked the back of Vlad’s pointed ear to garner his attention. Vlad looked up somewhat startled and accusingly narrowed his red eyes. “What was that for?”

Daniel snorted and floated up slightly, “Just trying to cheer up my new partner in crime. We aren’t enemies anymore and I hate seeing my friends depressed.”

Vlad rolled his eyes but a weak smile curved up his jaw. “Not enemies anymore, huh?”
Vlad rubbed the water off of his face and laughed quietly. “It’s amazing how much progress can be made in a week. We’ve been at each other’s throats, for what? Two and a half years?”

Daniel laughed jovially and crossed his arms against his chest as he turned upside down to stare into Vlad’s face. “Plasmius the paranormal Fruit-Loop and the gallant Danny Phantom, teen heartthrob… We’re going to be legends!”

Vlad laughed, “A little full of yourself Daniel? And I think the word you are looking for is flamboyant.”

Daniel smiled broadly, “That’s the spirit, Plas! But, in all honesty, you are the one with the cape, not me.”

Vlad smirked. “And you’re the one in the skin-tight bodysuit zipping around in a white logo for every camera and recording device in Amity. I’m not the flamboyant one.”

Daniel floated down and laughed, “Okay...okay fine. Touche.”

Vlad opened his mouth to speak again only for his smile to fall from his face. Eyes wide at the glaring female standing in the doorway with her weapon drawn, he quickly flew up and snatched Daniel just as a blast of condensed ectoplasmic energy railed into the wall by where the teen had been floating. Tumbling into the dining room and covering the teen’s mouth he whispered in a worried tone. “We have a problem.”
Blind Hatred

Daniel locked up in his hold and began hyperventilating against Vlad’s still gloveless right hand. Letting go of Daniel’s mouth he made a motion for the boy to be quiet.

A familiar female voice hissed from the kitchen, “ Phantom! Plasmius! Come out right now so I can acquaint you to another new friend!” Vlad and Daniel both exchanged frightened glances. Maddie continued yelling, “PHANTOM! YOU ARROGANT MONSTER! VLADIMIR AND DANNY TRUSTED YOU!”

Vlad flinched, “ Daniel…?”

The sixteen-year-old looked to Vlad fearfully. “ Vlad...She’s in death-con one mode… We have to change back.”

Vlad nodded and attempted to summon his rings only to gasp in pain. Maddie turned to the noise from the kitchen and spotted the two half ghosts hiding under a table. Vlad could almost see the killing intent reflected in her cherry red thermal goggles. A shiver went down his spine. Despite being invisible, he knew from experience that she could still see them. He quickly rolled to his side and scooped the teen up in his hands. Daniel began screaming, “ Teleport!”

Vlad growled as the blast connected with the table behind them, “ I CAN’T!”

Daniel floated out of Vlad’s arms and propped up a shield between them and his enraged paranormal hunting mother. Knowing that the shield could only take so many blasts, Vlad worriedly questioned. “ Daniel! Is this shield soundproof?”

The boy pointed to his mother who was cursing the blue blazes outside of the dome, her voice completely muted. “ We’re completely cut off noise wise. Do you have a plan Fruit-Loop?”

Vlad nodded, “ I have just enough energy to create a duplicate. We need to get Danni away from here. She can’t shift either and if your mother finds her in this state she may do something rash. On the count of three, we’re going to duplicate and slip downstairs invisibly to retrieve Danni and get as far away as humanly possible. Tucker, Samantha, and Jazmine can hide in the infirmary until the coast is clear. She’s hunting the paranormal so her equipment is probably tuned to our frequencies. She has no reason to check the lab if there’s nothing paranormal to clue her in on what’s hidden down there.”

Daniel nodded and winced at the sound of a bookshelf being blasted to pieces beside them from a stray shot. Maddie seemed to be mouthing at them about surrendering and coming with her quietly. Both Vlad and Daniel looked to her somewhat amused and annoyed by her expression. Vlads pointed ears pinned next to his cheeks and he raised an eyebrow while Daniel rolled his eyes. Looking to Vlad he nodded. “ Operation distract Mama Fenton is a go. Meet you downstairs Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad nodded. “ Three, Two, NOW!”

In an instant, an invisible teen and adult slipped downstairs while the two upstairs continued weathering Maddie’s ruthless assault. Vladimir narrowed his eyes at the portal and flatly commanded, “ Ellen? Activate Pallio Zeli, Stage Five.”

The lab replied, “ Noise and paranormal energy suppressant for level five readings in laboratory is activating in three, two, one. ” A loud beep echoed through the space, accompanied by a thin, hazy
purple mist. The electrical voice then added, “Three high-level paranormal signatures found in lab space. Level 42. Class A specter in infirmary. Level 64. Class C specter in infirmary. Fluctuating variable recognized in immediate lab area. Reading unavailable. Caution is advised.”

Vladimir cocked an eyebrow but flatly commanded, “Is it possible for a full cloak of the immediate area to include these three signatures?”

The lab answered almost immediately, “Due to an electrical surge in the mainframe all cloaking programs level fourteen and higher are unavailable for use until data can be reconfigured. Immediate course of action is advised.”

Vlad growled and gritted his teeth before phasing into the infirmary. “Daniel? We need to leave now! The portal is masked but we are too high for the disrupter to work on our signatures.”

Daniel nodded and gently bundled Danni in one of the gray medical blankets before hugging her against himself. Turning to Jazmine, Tucker, and Sam, Vlad instructed, “You’re safe. She won’t come down here. Just keep quiet for a few minutes while our duplicates lead her away from the manor.”

Jazmine nodded but looked unsure. “Where are you guys going to hide?”

Vlad looked to Danni and Daniel and his brow furrowed in contemplation.

Daniel answered for him, “We’ll be near the center of town on one of the roofs until Vlad and Danni are able to shift back into human form. The generators and electrical wiring are really clustered next to the mall. It should interfere with any tracking equipment they could use to try and follow us.”

Vlad looked to Daniel in shock before weakly nodding, “I agree with the teenage glow stick. We’ll be back when it’s safe.”

Pausing, he commanded, “Ellen, voice activation code nine. Parental lock three, access to Jazmine Elizabeth Fenton. Thermals, image readout, and threat detection authorized.”

The electrical voice let out a small electrical chirp and then answered, “Code change accepted, access voice authorization to Jazmine Elizabeth Fenton. Standing by for verbal sync.”

Vlad turned to Jaz and whispered, “Repeat after me, Ut defendat vitam, protege me. Parental Lock Three. Code sixty-six, seventy-five.”

Jazmine paused and then nodded before flawlessly copying him, “Ut defendat vitam, protege me. Parental Lock Three. Code sixty-six, seventy-five”

“Welcome Jazmine Elizabeth Fenton. Access granted.”

Vlad looked up to the ceiling and winced at the large blasts echoing from the foyer. Turning back to Jaz he affectionately patted her shoulder, “The operations system is named Ellen. Just speak her name aloud and she’ll give you comprehensive thermal readouts of the upstairs. Whatever you do? Don’t come out no matter what you hear. Understand?”

Jazmine swallowed and looked to him worriedly. “Vlad… I don’t like this….Why are you-”

Vlad smiled apologetically and made his way toward Daniel and Danni. “Are you ready Little Badger?”
Daniel cracked a weak smile, “Just try to keep up old man.”

Vlad smirked, “Lead the way Jack Frost.”

Daniel nodded and, phasing intangible, flung himself and Danni through the ceiling and into the sunlight with Vlad close on their heels. Two minutes into their flight, Daniel gasped in alarm. His mother had shot his duplicate despite the other Vlad’s best efforts to shield him from the blast. His clone’s panicked screaming and tear-stricken features as his mother blasted it a second time caused him to almost fall out of the air from the emotional backlash. Vlad, thankfully jarred him back to reality and encouraged, “We’re almost there little badger. Come on… We can do this. The mall is just another minute from here.”

Daniel nodded and continued flying at a steady pace. A sharp, shrill scream somewhere behind them caused him to whip his head back a few moments later. Danni stirred at the blood-curdling noise and seeing the Vlad behind them fading into pink mist she screamed and thrashed against Daniel’s hold. Daniel froze and he felt every nerve in his body lock. The duplicate had been with him this entire time...Which meant that the injured and barely conscious Vladimir he had assumed was a double was the real deal. Vlad had tricked him... and he was fighting Maddie tooth and nail in the manor somewhere behind him. But that scream was way closer...Could Vlad have lured her out of the house and into one of the side alleys?

Danni’s small fist banging against his shoulder jostled him back into action. Wrapping his arms tighter around the twelve-year-old he quickly flew her to the mall and set her down. He made a move to leave only for her hand to claw into his leg. Bright green eyes weakly flashed, “Danny! He’s hurt! He won’t be able to-”

Daniel shushed her and tried to soothe her, “He’s alright Danni. I’m going to-”

Her white ponytail shook violently and tiny tears began dripping down her face. “He can’t be! Danny? I-I hurt him! He’s not going to be able to defend himself!”

Daniel froze and turned to her in shock. “What are you talking about?”

Danni lifted her hoodie dress slightly and showed the teen her singed gloves, still stained in ectoplasm. “I was scared... He wasn’t making any sense and he hugged me and I just… I burnt him...And when he stabbed that needle into my back, I couldn’t control anything! His shoulder…..Oh god….Danny! Fire was everywhere and I think-I think he’s dying!”

‘He lied...That ectoplasm near the portal was his. Damn it.’

Turning from her, he growled, “Stay here! I’m going to try and help him.” Launching himself back into the air he ordered, “Whatever you do don’t move from this spot!”

She nodded and several tears dribbled down her heart-shaped face. Curling against the roof, she watched as he flew as fast as he could back to Vlad’s manor.
Vlad was about done with surprises for possibly the entirety of his life and even his afterlife. This current *surprise* was aiming a gun rather vehemently at the Daniel duplicate beside him and cursing the both of them for everything they were worth. Vlad raised his hands up in a sign of peace. “Can we talk about this? You seem like a reasonable woman Maddie...”

The woman practically hissed in reply, “I’m going to destroy you for what you’ve done! WHY MY FAMILY? Are you just some sadistic fuck with a pension for messing with the living? Do you get your kicks out of endangering children? Kidnapping?”

Vlad cringed and his brow furrowed. The Daniel duplicate’s shield had been reduced to a weak gossamer-thin layer of ectoplasmic energy and sound waves were easily passing through it. Maddie had temporarily halted her assault to question the two ghouls and thankfully hadn’t noticed the shield’s wavering strength.

Speaking gently, Vladimir tried to de-escalate the tension. “Maddie, please... I haven’t kidnapped anyone with the exception of you and that was a two-minute scenario that I deeply regret. There’s a child present right now! Can’t you find it in yourself as a mother to cease this reckless idiocy?”

The Daniel duplicate quirked an eyebrow, “Wow...Low shot much?”

Vlad smiled weakly back at the teen and whispered, “I’m trying to appeal to her motherly side...Just pipe down Inviso-bill.”

Maddie at that moment aimed her weapon at the shield and fired. The blast easily ripped through the green and grazed Vlad’s hastily cloaked but already injured shoulder. Gasping in pain he threw up his own weakly shield to keep her attacks from reaching them. Sweating with the effort, he growled. “For Pete’s sake! STOP! Do you have any idea how much work it’s going to take to replaster the walls?!”

The duplicate snorted, “Stupid, Fruit-Loop.”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched. “Phantom...? Be quiet! The adults are talking.”

Maddie walked forward like a panther and placed the barrel of her blaster point blank against the pink shield. “Where are my son and Vladimir?!”

Both the duplicate and Vlad exchanged tired and slightly annoyed expressions.

Vlad turned back to Maddie and weakly tried giving her an answer that wouldn’t end with Daniel’s duplicate and himself being smeared into the foyer rug. “They’re safe so long as you stop firing-!”

Maddie’s eyes narrowed as she whipped off her goggles. “YOU COCKY SON OF A BITCH! DID YOU JUST THREATEN MY FAMILY? YOU DISGUSTING ECTOPLASMIC PARASITE!”

Vlad swallowed. “Mads, please. It’s not-”

Her eyes widened. “DON’T YOU DARE CALL ME THAT! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT!”
The Daniel duplicate cringed. “Um… Mrs. Fenton? This is a big misunder-

A large blast shot through Vlad’s shield and clipped the Daniel duplicate in the chest. With a startled
cry of pain, the double collapsed behind Vladimir. The adult’s eyes widened in disbelieving shock
and horror. Maddie was walking towards the two of them intently now that the shield was down.
Her gun danced from Vlad to the teen in a whiplash-inducing blur.

The Daniel duplicate was decimated in an instant, but not before Vlad suffered a lapse in judgment.

Vlad hadn’t thought of the consequences of his actions prior to moving, blood loss and fever were
already rendering him weak and sluggish to respond to Maddie’s assaults. The moment her gun went
off, he had leaped to shield the duplicate in an adrenaline induced haze. The crying teen weakly
reached out as the blast clipped through the small opening between the two and then faded into green
mist. Vlad’s red eyes darted to Maddie in unrestrained horror as he landed on the floor. “WHAT
THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?! YOU KILLED HIM!”

‘ She just killed-

Maddie turned ashen at Vlad’s words but snarled, “ You can’t kill something that’s already dead.
He’s in a better place.”

Her words jarred Vlad back to reality. Daniel was indeed safe at the moment. The boy he had just
watched fade into oblivion was just a hollow proxy…An ectoplasm puppet with no will or
consciousness. The pain, however, was still evident in his voice. “ WHAT IF THAT HAD BEEN
DANIEL?! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU-“

Maddie growled and a searing hole appeared in the rug between Vlad’s legs. Pointing the weapon,
she slowly pronounced her words to make sure he was perfectly adept at hearing her. “ You aren’t
allowed to say my baby’s name. You have no idea the suffering you’ve caused us.” She paused and
then shook her head, a warped laugh bubbling from her throat. “ Then again you do, don’t you? You
get your kicks from screwing with my family. This is just the cherry on top.”

Vlad clucked in annoyance and his red eyes narrowed. “ You don’t change. Twenty years later and
you’re still quick to jump the gun! Can you just think for five seconds?”

Her guard dropped from the causal statement and Vlad took the opportunity to rush her lithe form. A
gloveless hand wrapped around her wrists as he pinned her against the floor while his left hand
grasped onto the gun and pointed it away from the two of them.

“LET GO!”

Vlad snarled, “ So you can murder me? Fat chance! I prefer not being six feet under!”

“ Funny? Isn’t that where you’re supposed to be?” Maddie hissed venomously. Vlad flinched and his
grip loosened slightly.

“ You can’t be this blind… Maddie, don’t you notice? You’re a scientist! A doctor! Can’t you feel
that I am tangible? That I have mass and life?”

Maddie tossed and struggled. Seeing his wounded shoulder she eyed him angrily. “All I see is a liar
and a coward! You took Danny and hurt Vladimir!”

Vlad stared at her in absolute confusion. “ What type of lunacies are you smoking down at Fenton
Works? Does it look like I-”
A sharp bang resonated through the foyer. In his desperate pleas to make her see reason, his grip on the gun had weakened, allowing her to subtly aim it at his already wounded arm. Red eyes weakly faded to a dull cherry, devoid of a ghostly glow. Ectoplasm slowly dripped down the arm and splattered against Maddie’s chest. She smiled in triumph only for something warm to land against her face.

“You really can’t see my humanity can you Mads?”

Her eyes widened in confused perplexion. A hand let go of his wrist and trailed up to her face in wonder. A black glove tapped against the water and held it aloft. This ghost was crying…

Feeling himself starting to lapse out of consciousness, he desperately tried pulling forth his human half. Maddie tensed at the black rings that weakly flickered around the ghoul’s chest. They looked like they were splitting apart, but they quickly faded out and the spirit pinning her down gasped in agony and desperately shot up from his spot on top of her. Backing against the wall beside them, next to the tattered remains of one of his bookshelves, he weakly threw up a shield. Despite the intense heat permeating his flesh, he was shivering uncontrollably from his crown to his toes.

‘I’m losing too much….It’s going to morph into blood soon…Damn it.’

Maddie laid on the floor for another moment before she stood up and turned her attention back to the wounded ghost trying to protect itself. From this angle, it almost looked like it was hyperventilating. The doctor side of her noted the large amounts of ectoplasm and wandered in passing if this breed of ghost simulated blood loss and injury for empathy. Pulling a syringe out of her belt and leaning down, she bit off the cap. “Make this easier on yourself. Submit.”

Vlad chuckled weakly, “ And then what? Die?”

Violet-gray eyes regarded him with curiosity. “You’re already dead. You can’t feel. You’re just a spiteful echo. My husband and I are going to help you move on.”

Vlad glowered weakly. “Move… on…? Do…you realize…how stupid you sound?”

Maddie snarled. “Drop the shield spook. We’ll make it relatively painless.”

Vlad leaned his nose against the construct and rasped, “I’m no one’s lab rat Madeline.”

Maddie wiped some of the ectoplasm from her bosom and raised the finger as she pondered. “Well, you already have given me samples. How many more of you are there? The Phantom I shot wasn’t the right power level. He was a fake, probably a pseudo paranormal apparition. You’re real though. The readings I’m getting off of you?” She waved a small scanner above the ectoplasm on her finger and a loud beeping echoed in the hall, almost as frantic as Vlad’s heartbeat. “You’re practically jumping off of the spectrum.”

Vlad gripped his right shoulder in an effort to stop the flow of liquid. Glaring back up at her and wincing, he snarled, “I am glad I’m of scientific interest but I don’t feel like disclosing any information to you of all people!”

Maddie glowered, “You don’t have a choice. We know there’s more than one of you involved and seeing as how I can’t take Phantom, I’ll be taking you.”

Vlad snorted and sarcastically countered, “Always so forward… What would Jack say?”

Her eyes tinged with malice. Duplicating and sending his double downstairs to raid the lab in search of the ghost taser, he quickly stumbled to his feet and leaned back against the wall. Putting an
ectoplasm covered hand to it in mock support, he leaned against the now tattered and neon green smeared wallpaper. Looking back up to Maddie from behind the shield, he growled, “Can’t you just let me prove myself? As a human being don’t you understand that mistakes can be made!? You are just jumping to conclusions! Please? Mads, I swear I can explain!”

Maddie nodded but lifted the needle, “Yes, you will.” Glaring back up to him she added, “We’re going to see exactly what makes you tick. We’ll question you, test some samples and then send you on your merry way.”

Vlad growled and his fangs exposed themselves. “Where’s Jack!? I want to speak to Jack!”

She scuffed. “My husband is searching for Phantom right now. We heard your entire spill earlier. You two monsters actually made us think we could trust a ghost!” Shaking away indignant tears she bellowed, “That’s the last time we ever make that mistake again!”

Vlad’s blue skin, already an ashen paler became a sickly lintish color. The fever flashed green and off grey areas could be seen forming from under his sweat. “Lemon Custard…” Vlad hissed.

Maddie quirked her head in perplexed wonder. For a moment this creature almost sounded like Vladimir.

Taking her confusion as his cue to flee, he launched himself off of the wall and quickly darted around the corner and up the staircase to his master bedroom. Her boots traced hotly at his heels. The buzz of a gun blasting into the walls behind the now ectoplasm splattered staircase, caused the older halfa to nearly pitch headlong into the flooring in order to avoid what would be a fatal blow in his current condition.

Frantic hands clawed animalistically into the flooring as he continued his fear-induced sprint to the master bedroom. Flinging open the door with haste, he quickly began searching the room for the ghost taser. His duplicate did the same in the lab. Both Sam and Tucker were frantically helping the duplicate search for the device in the main lab area while Jazmine searched the infirmary.

‘WHERE IS IT?!’ A blast ripped through the ajar doorway and shattered apart a portion of the wall above his head. Ducking to avoid the rampart of fire aimed at him, he clumsily fell onto his back and screamed in agony. Unable to maintain the energy to continue cloaking his already grievous injuries, he allowed his suit to morph. A child’s handprints were emblazoned into the flesh on his back. The marks cleaved against Maddie’s view as he crawled to the bathroom on his hands and knees.

Choking weakly, he raised an ectoplasm covered hand, “Stop….Y-you’re making a mistake….P-please… Mads…?”

Her eyes softened minutely at the familiarity. However, at the sound of the ghost’s palm cracking against the broken glass in the bathroom, her eyes narrowed and her blood lust resurfaced. Seeing he was out of options and would no longer be able to defend himself, Vlad made the only move available to him at the moment. Lifting his right hand up to where his heart lay, he averted his gaze from his friend. A flash of blinding white light ensnared the room and, clutching his seal to his chest, he forced one last teleportation with the last of the energy he had to defend himself. Seeing the faint pink appearing around the ghost, Maddie took aim and fired without reservation. Both her blast and the figure disappeared in a swirl of air to be replaced by crippling silence. Turning on her communicator, she recounted over the line. “I hit him but he got away. Jack?”

The line filled with static. No noise could be made out over the channel. Maddie’s eyes widened and then narrowing them, she snarled, “That filthy monster must have jammed our signal!”
Chapter End Notes

Welp. It's happening. *PANIC*

{ *≥∀≤}
Jazmine had resorted to using Ellen only a few minutes after Vladimir, Daniel and Danni had departed. Despite the lab being several feet underground, the noises and explosions triggered by her mother’s weaponry could be heard echoing from the staircase and into the lab. Clearing her throat, Jazmine questioned, “E-Ellen? What’s the threat level upstairs?”

The computer hummed for a moment before answering. “Threat Level is critical. All minors are requested to stay in the immediate lab area. Proxy duplicate recognized in upstairs foyer, level thirteen. Un-identifiable class. Human heat signature and ectoplasmic weaponry discharge detected, level thirteen recognized in upstairs foyer. High-level fluctuating variable detected in upstairs foyer. Caution is advised.”

Jazmine’s eyes widened and a trace of fear seeped into her aquamarine eyes. “Ellen? The fluctuating variable? What are its numbers? More importantly, does it have a heat signature?”

Both Tucker and Sam cringed and felt their hands fearfully gripping onto the cot they were sitting on. Ellen answered, “Inconsistent data. High level fluctuating variable is rapidly peaking at 245 and plummeting to below specified warning parameters. From the security feed relayed to my drive, the specter’s internal temperature is fifty-three degrees Celsius.”

Two loud shots echoed from upstairs and the three teenagers turned ashen. The computer paused, “Calibrating data…. Human heat signature and ectoplasmic weaponry discharge in upstairs foyer. High-level fluctuating variable detected in upstairs foyer. Proxy duplicate, recorded previously, is no longer detected. Stand by.”

Tucker quickly grasped a hand to Jazmine’s wrist. “Ask it if there’s any way for us to view the feed from upstairs!”

Jazmine nodded and worriedly spoke, “Ellen? Is there any way for us to see the video feed from the foyer?”

The computer seemed to contemplate the question and after a brief second answered. “No monitors or visual connection can be accessed from this sector of the estate. External connections can be used to acquire a visual feed.”

Tucker quickly whipped out his PDA. “Jaz! Ask it to set up the connection to TuckNFold10 on Vlad’s server network.”

Jazmine quickly did as he said and a few moments later the screen on Tucker’s PDA morphed to show them a horrifying visual from upstairs. The duplicate of Vladimir had just rushed Maddie and was pinning her down to the floor.

Vlad snarled, “So you can murder me? Fat chance! I prefer not being six feet under!”

“Funny? Isn’t that where you’re supposed to be?” Maddie hissed venomously. Vlad visibly flinched and all three teens cringed.

Vlad’s voice softened and he practically begged, “You can’t be this blind… Maddie, don’t you notice? You’re a scientist! A doctor! Can’t you feel that I am tangible? That I have mass and life?”

Jaz trembled her fingers around the device and edged it closer to herself. Her mother’s eyes were hollow. “All I see is a liar and a coward! You took Danny and hurt Vladimir!”
Both Vlad’s duplicate and the three teens cocked an eyebrow in confusion. “What type of lunacies are you smoking down at Fenton Works? Does it look like I-”

A gun went off upstairs and the teenagers watched in confused horror as ectoplasm dribbled down what they thought was a duplicate and landed on Maddie.
Sam swallowed, “Why didn’t it fade? She just shot it….Why is he still-?”

Vlad’s voice crackled over the speakers on Tucker’s device, “You really can’t see my humanity can you Mads?”

Maddie seemingly froze under him and wiped her face. The camera didn’t show what she was removing or observing on her glove but it was obvious that it was confusing her.

Jazmine shook slightly and her eyes widened. “Something’s wrong.” Slinging the PDA into Tucker’s hands she marched toward the lab staircase and ascended it only to come face to face with a metal door surrounded by a shield.

Tucker gasped behind her and Sam swallowed, “Oh….Oh god….He didn’t leave.”

Jazmine ran down the stairs and looked over Tucker’s arm to glare at the device. Vlad was trying and failing to shift back into human form. Unable to force himself back to his natural human body, he flung himself haphazardly off of her mother and backed into a wall.

Maddie pulled a syringe out of her belt, after she sat up and approached him. “Make this easier on yourself. Submit.”

Vlad chuckled weakly from behind a wavering pink shield, “And then what? Die?”

Sam, at this point, began praying to every occult deity and god she had ever read about for aid, but resigned herself to the knowledge that any aid at this point would be futile. They were stuck under the house while Vladimir was being kidnapped for god knows what.

Maddie coldly growled, “You’re already dead. You can’t feel. You’re just a spiteful echo. My husband and I are going to help you move on.”

Tucker froze and flung the PDA into Sam’s hands. Running up the staircase, he began banging fruitlessly on the shield keeping Maddie out and preventing them from leaving.
Jazmine and Sam watched Vlad attempt a glower at his assailant. “Move.. on..? Do..you realize...how stupid you sound?”

Maddie snarled. “Drop the shield spook. We’ll make it relatively painless.”

Jazmine’s brain was doing loop de loops. Her mother was planning on legitimately tearing a sentient creature apart...worse yet? She was planning on tearing Vlad apart.

Vlad, still with his trademark defiant air and debonair scowl, leaned his nose against the construct and rasped, “I’m no one’s lab rat Madeline.”

Maddie wiped some of the ectoplasm from her bosom and raised the finger as she pondered. “Well, you already have given me samples. How many more of you are there? The Phantom I shot wasn’t the right power level. He was a fake, probably a pseudo paranormal apparition. You’re real though. The readings I’m getting off of you?” She waved a small scanner above the ectoplasm on her finger and a loud beeping echoed in the hall, almost as frantic as Vlad’s heartbeat. “You’re practically jumping off of the spectrum.”
Vlad genuinely looked afraid. His eyes glanced to the side of Maddie weakly, as if calculating some unseen scenario. A hand clung to his almost pierced shoulder blade before he snarled, “I am glad I’m of scientific interest but I don’t feel like disclosing any information to you of all people!”

Tucker continued banging on the shield. “PLASMIUS! PLEASE!”

Jazmine growled to the lab, “ELLEN! DROP THE SHIELD!”

The computer replied, “I’m sorry, threat level is too high for Jazmine Elizabeth Fenton’s clearance. Until all threats, are neutralized security parameters will stay in place as instructed by Mr. Masters’s.”

Tucker screamed in frustration, “SCREW HIS PARAMETERS! YOU STUPID PIECE OF JUNK! LET US OUT!”

Maddie glowered over the device, “You don’t have a choice. We know there’s more than one of you involved and seeing as how I can’t take Phantom, I’ll be taking you.”

Vlad snorted and sarcastically countered, “Always so forward… What would Jack say?”

Sam growled, “Did that moron seriously just take a crack at making a joke?”

They were interrupted from their panic attacks by a muted thump behind them. A shaking and practically incoherent Vladimir was splayed on his hands and knees. Jazmine latched onto his shoulder and shook him to get his attention. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?! SHE’S GOING TO KILL YOU!”

Vlad weakly smiled, “There’s an…irony…in them finally trying to…..” Looking back up he pleaded, “We need…to find the ghost taser…..I can’t shift…and I’m losing too much ectoplasm….” He swallowed thickly. “I’m not gonna be able to stay conscious much longer…”

Tucker quickly began tearing the lab apart for the device. Jazmine attempted to drag the duplicate to the infirmary only for him to phase through her hands. “I need….to help look….She’s chasing me up the stairs…….”

All three teens paled rapidly. This was another duplicate. Growling, Jazmine rushed into the infirmary and began desperately searching for the ghost taser in tandem with the others.

The duplicate, after a few seconds, stiffened, “It’s not here! What-?” Red eyes widened and knees numbly clacked against the floor as he collapsed. “No…stop…Mads..”

Jazmine looked to the duplicate in horror. The speaker on the PDA released a sharp, explosive sound but no visuals were available. At the sound of the shot, the duplicate faded and dissipated in a cloud of pink mist. Tucker’s hands balled in disbelief.

The computer system updated them, “Calibrating data….Human heat signature and ectoplasmic weaponry discharge in second-floor master suite. High level fluctuating variable, recorded previously, is no longer detected. Stand by.”

Jazmine dropped to her knees and wrung her hands through her hair in disbelief. Her mother just killed-

A beep from her ear caused her to freeze. Someone was trying to contact them through the Fenton Phones. Clicking the com-link button almost robotically, she heard her mother “I hit him but he got away. Jack?”
Jazmine quickly looked to Tucker and mouthed, “He’s alive. Mom’s trying to get Dad… Tuck… Destroy the line.”

Tucker nodded and unhooked his own device from his ear. Pulling a cord from his PDA and hooking it under the charger port for the communication device, he quickly edited the HTML code and frequency levels so that any calls made between devices would be completely garbled.

Sitting down on the floor next to Jaz and setting down his device, he gently hugged her. Sam joined in a few seconds later. They were trapped until Maddie left….and hopefully, Daniel would realize Vladimir was in mortal peril before she could capture…or worse, kill him.
Rag’n Bone Man

Jack Fenton was driving through a ramshackle collection of old businesses near the center of town. Maddie and him had split up shortly after they had arrived at Vladimir’s home once the energy signatures had fluctuated on his scanner. Prior to the high energy readings bleeping onto the screen? Well, he had the misfortune of overhearing Plasmius and Phantom conspiring with one another like they were old friends.

The betrayal stung worse than anything the teenager could have verbally tossed toward him. Here the ghost teen had ranted and raved about feelings and how he was a human being when in reality, he was just a sadistic little monster with a glory complex.

In a way, him following the energy readings also doubled as a chance for him to confront Phantom. A duplicate would have been siphoned from the ghoul’s energy, much like an imprint in clay. It would be made from Phantom, have similar details, but it wouldn’t be a direct copy of him. If this was a duplicate its energy readings would be a fraction of Phantom’s normal levels. This spook, however, was the normal readout for the teenage apparition. He was closing in pretty quickly to the source. Two specters were with him some four minutes away from Jack’s current position.

A horrific flash of white light above the vehicle and an agonized scream caused him to slam his brakes hard. What appeared to be Plasmius, floated above the street before falling a good ten feet onto the hood of the assault vehicle. The specter’s hands numbly clawed against the glass as he tried to find his bearings. Red eyes with dulled orange irises locked with Jack’s startled blue. The ghost flinched and two black rings tried splitting from his waist. Screaming out again in pain, the ghoul limply rolled off of the hood and landed near the side of the vehicle. The muted thud jarred Jack to action. Grabbing the thermos off of the passenger seat he glanced out of the window to his left. Plasmius wasn’t there anymore.

He growled under his breath in aggravation, but a sharp movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention back to the alley. A trash can had abruptly tipped over and spilled its contents onto the sidewalk. Slipping on his goggles, he made out a dazed figure clutching against the side of a building for support as it gripped its arm and tried to put distance between the two of them.

‘Oh no, you don’t!’ Flinging open the car door and stepping out into the stormy wind, Jack stealthily pursued the injured ghost. As he came closer he noted the overly strong scent of lemons rippling through the air and neon green drops and handprints plastered against the red bricks and asphalt. Several waterlogged newspapers crinkled against his black boots as he prepared the thermos. If Plasmius heard him, he paid no heed to his approach.

A strangled gasp and a muted thud reverberated through the alley. Plasmius appeared back in the visible spectrum again, shaking slightly and numbly curling against himself in a murky puddle. Jack couldn’t help the flinch his body created out of sympathy for the solid looking specter. Black boots stopped within breathing distance of Plasmius’s nose. Jack snorted internally, ‘Breathing...Pfff... Like a ghost actually needed to breathe.’

Plasmius stiffened and choked slightly against the water near his mouth. Trying to teleport he plopped out of view in a puff of pink only to reappear a few short feet from where he had been. The black rings were back again and Jack watched them curiously. They were rather beautiful….like a miniature portal whirring and buzzing apart. For a brief moment, he even thought he saw the ghost’s glow next to its stomach disappear and it’s ectoplasm and bl-

Jack paused. The entity had human blood splattered down its chest, tangling against white spectral
fabric and green ectoplasm in small clumps. Pressing a hand to his comlink and getting nothing but static, Jack assumed the worst.

Plasmius had hurt Maddie… Baby blue eyes lit with murderous intent, “You filthy, lying son of a bitch…..You touched my wife…”

The ghost weakly looked up at the accusation and lifted his right arm, only to cry out in pain. The limb fell back to his side as he scooted backward with his left hand. A wall cut him off from escape and he dizzily looked from Jack to the obstacle in horror. Raising his left arm to block Jack’s anger fueled kick with a weakly pink shield, the ghoul choked, “….Please…..I have to warn….Danny…She’s going to—”

“Like hell you are!” A boot kicked back and shattered into the shield, destroying it and flinging a rather solid ghost onto his injured arm. A small scream rippled through the air and the ghost looked up again. Its voice morphed and echoed weakly in different tongues as it attempted crawling away. “Danny…..isn’t safe…Please..”

His eyes darted and swayed but he seemed to be focusing in on Jack for the first time since the hunter had confronted him.

‘Maddie’s marksmanship seems to have knocked a few screws loose… It’s not even all here right now.’ A black boot shot out and kicked the spirit hard before pinning it against the ground. Dull orange irises flickered and a small whimper of protest clawed its way up the specter’s throat. Jack sneered and pressed down further against the ghoul’s torso. It convulsed and screamed out. Jack couldn’t tone down the malice dripping in his voice if he tried, “So help me god, you’re going to pay for hurting my family.”

The ghost’s left hand weakly gripped his boot and tried flinging him off. Jack cringed. The spook was almost pathetic at this point, not even attempting to phase into the street for escape. ‘It probably doesn’t even know who I am right now.’

Much to Jack’s surprise, the ghost found its voice again and begged,“…J-Jack?...What are-….P-Please….It hurts….I’m s-sorry…..”

Jack froze and shook his head. “You’re coming with me spook.”

The ghost seemed to be straining itself. Two black rings shot out from his waist but flickered out quicker than the previous set. The ghost’s eyes flashed white but soon that color faded as well. Looking back to the man standing over him, he opened his mouth again to plead his case. “S-Stop….I’m t-trying..to...p-please.”

Jack pointed the thermos and clicked the button. A muffled afterimage of the ghost’s eyes rolling back and his form going limp against the pavement carved its way into Jack’s mind as he recapped the device. Looking down at the thermos in his fingers, the man frowned and shook his head. ‘I’ll deal with Phantom later… I need to get this ghost back to the house.’

He shook the canister experimentally but no sound came from the small metal cylinder.

He needed to check in on Maddie before he did anything. Scraping his boots through the asphalt and muddy water on the ground, he turned and rounded back to the assault vehicle. The rain was about to start again…Thunder and lightning could be seen overhead and the air was as thick as pea soup.

He could feel it in his bones.

A storm was coming.
**Killing a Brother**

Maddie was collecting samples in the foyer when Jack pulled back up to the Manor. Pocking another vial of the gelatinous liquid she looked upward at a noise from the hall. She barely had time to gasp before his hands wrapped her in a deep embrace. ‘Thank god...She’s fine… She’s safe.’

Maddie lightly pushed against his broad shoulders, “I’m alright Jack. What happened to your com signal? It just died all of a sudden.”

Jack glanced to his waist where the thermos was and retracted himself. “I ran into a little problem in the form of Plasmius—”

Maddie snarled and pulled away from him. “We need to call the kids. It’s not safe for them or Vladimir to be in this hell hole, not with that despicable bastard running around.”

Jack opened his mouth to speak but paused and his eyes wandered to the blast marks in the wall. Something crimson had caught his eyes. Walking forward he reached a hand to the wallpaper and his eyes widened. It was human blood. ‘What is this? Why are there blood splatters all over the place?’

Jack turned back to Maddie and raised his gloved fingers questioningly. “Mads...Who’s blood is this?”

Maddie furrowed her brow, “What blood?” Jack shifted his frame so she could look at the small splatters. Her eyes widened. “Jack? The recording…Vlad said Phantom was with them! What if they—”

Jack paled rapidly and his fists clenched. Gently pushing Maddie aside, his gaze wandered to a broken coffee mug, long ago spilled, and a box of treats by a broken door. “Maddie—”

Her eyes finally caught on the remnants and a choked sob racked through her body. Jack gripped the thermos at his hip in rage. Looking to his wife he swallowed thickly and instructed. “Mads? Go look for Phantom.”

Maddie slumped to her knees and fingered a small shard of the broken mug before cupping it in her palm. Her eyes looked up to him beseechingly, “Jack? Plasmius...Did you catch him?”

Jack paused and the silence almost became suffocating in the home. Her figure, the way her eyes raked across the broken ceramic…She wouldn’t be able to think rationally if she helped him in integrating Plasmius….And right now Phantom was still out there. Looking her in the eyes he shook his head. “No Maddie, I didn’t catch him. He’s still out there and so is Phantom.”

Maddie nodded and gently laid the fragment back down in the coffee and ectoplasm as if it were a small dead bird. Her gloved hands numbly pulled out the two vials she had collected from the foyer and handed them over to Jack. “I was able to get enough for you to program the boomerang once you find it. I’m going to drop you off at the house so you can fix our comlinks.” She tore her communicator off of her ear. “Whatever Plasmius did seems to have fried the circuitry or something.”

Jack nodded in agreement and pocketed the two ampules and the device. Taking one last glance at the ruined entranceway, he clasped a hand to her shoulder and steered her through the hallway and back to the ajar backdoor. With Maddie searching for Phantom, Jack would have ample time to squeeze the answers he needed out of their invalid specter. Stepping up into the cab of the car, he sat down and tiredly rubbed his brow as Maddie buckled herself in and pulled down the drive. “You
have another thermos correct?”

Maddie nodded absently and pointed to the back seat. “Yes. I have one. Why?”

Jack looked to the one latched to his hip and scowled. “Plasmius did something to mine. I’m going to have to fix it once I get back to the lab.” He lied levely.

Turning his head to face her, he questioned, “You’ll stay in contact via the car radio right? If you find Phantom or-?”

Maddie nodded, “I’m going to search around town and I’ll come back here at the appointed time to see if Vladimir and the kids show up.” Her eyes tiredly grazed across the small road. As an afterthought, she added. “Can you try calling them? Once you get into the house?”

Jack nodded. “Of course.”

The rest of the ride was fairly silent with both hunters stewing over recent developments and plotting out exactly what they would do to the individuals who had harmed Vlad and presumably Daniel.

Before they knew it, they had pulled onto their street. Maddie stopped the car and Jack smiled weakly up at her. “I’ll call you when I figure something out, okay Mads?”

Maddie smiled thinly in return before nodding yes. Taking this as his cue to vacate the vehicle, Jack Fenton latched a hand to the lever on the door and jumped down onto the sidewalk. Maddie was gone before he made it to the front door. His hands mechanically flung open the wood to reveal his dimly lit home. Slinging the door shut behind him, he detoured to the kitchen and unclipped the thermos. Setting it on the counter, he pulled down the phone and dialed Vladimir’s cell number. It rang once, twice, three times. After a few more moments the answering machine picked up and Jack angrily hung up and tried Daniel’s. Again no answer. Jazmine’s? Nothing. He even tried Tucker and Sam to no avail.

His eyes wandered to the thermos and deep seeded loathing scratched up his throat, creating an animalistic growl. Slamming the phone back onto the hook and snatching the thermos up, he quickly marched into the lab and picked up a few supplies. Pocketing the spectral drugs and weaponry, he slunk back up the stairs and made his way to the operations booth.

Twisting the end of the thermos and pinning the green release button on the other side of the canister, Jack launched it into the containment unit and locked the door, effectively vacuum sealing the space. Milliseconds later, Plasmius appeared in the center of the floor, shaking against himself.

Walking up to the acrylic, Jack tapped it to jostle the figure’s attention. The ghost, still dazed from his stint in the thermos, weakly propped itself up partially onto one arm and looked around in confusion. Jack took the discombobulation as a sign to proceed and went to the control area to flick on the electrical field. Plasmius seemed to note the bright light and tensed. Red and orange eyes darted to the confinement walls and he, almost drunkenly, staggered to his feet and put a hand to the wall. An expression of horror quickly overwrote his apparent shock and he attempted phasing a hand through the wall only to scream in agony. Falling to his knees and backing away from the field of plastic and electrical current, he looked up in a startled panic as Jack began messing with the system controls. A speaker was set up in the containment unit for them to communicate with one another and Jack quickly activated the link. “Did someone have a nice nap?” His icy cold voice melded and reverberated in the small acrylic chamber, causing Vlad to wince.

Vlad tried standing again but quickly fell back to his knees. His voice weakly echoed over the line. “W-Where am I?...It’s c-c-old…”
Jack rolled his eyes at the ghost’s practically semiconscious form. The spook was probably going to fade into ectoplasm before he could get anything worthwhile. “You’re new temporary home. Like it? Nice and cozy?”

Plasmius stiffened and his head cocked to the side. Ears pinned to his cheeks and he tried making out the figure through the blurred electrical haze around him. “F-Flapjack?...”

Jack froze and his face quickly lost its mock amusement. “Don’t you dare call me that. You’re not my friend… You’re just some pathetic ectoplasmic freak that gets its kicks from tormenting people.”

Plasmius swallowed weakly and trembled slightly. “T-That’s...a lie….I d-don’t...J-Jack.” Two rings flickered again and Jack scowled. “If that’s some sort of beacon for a ghost to come to your aid, it’s not going to work. This entire building is hardwired to warp and distort any spectral signatures that try reaching outside of the walls.”

There was a pained gasp from within the confinement and the ghost shook his head rapidly. “I’m trying to t-tell you...You’re hurting me...J-Jack.”

Jack sneered, “I think that’s kind of the point Plasmius. You hurt my family and now I can’t reach any of them. Something isn’t adding up and I expect answers.”

Vlad weakly crawled to the acrylic and put his left palm against it, smearing ectoplasm across the surface as he attempted to keep himself up enough to find his assailant through the sparks and black spots clouding his vision. “V-Vladimir...you care about h-him..right? J-Jack...You’re k-killing Vlad...You’re killing m-”

Jack shook his head and pressed the pressure system’s preset altitude simulation code into the computer’s mainframe. There was a hiss in the inside of the unit and Vlad’s red eyes widened in fear. A gunshot like noise reverberated through the room and Vlad felt the entire world inverse abruptly.

Jack watched somewhat satisfied as the specter’s jaw clenched and his pupils dilated into faint red pinpricks. Green ectoplasm lazily snaked from the specter’s nose and pointed ears before dribbling on the floor. Red eyes teared. Noise….it was all blurred and warped.

Jack questioningly walked forward to stare at the specter more intrusively. ‘It almost looks like the eardrums ruptured…..And his nose...What’s-?’

The ghost clumsily fell backward and crawled away from Jack’s shadow. Scared words reverberated through the operations booth. “C-Can’t…shift...Stop...I can’t...I’m trying...please…”

Jack rapped a hand against the confinement. “Plasmius? Where are Vladimir and Daniel!? Answer me!”

The ghoul fell onto his side and stared out to where he assumed the warbled echoing voice was coming from. He could only understand certain syllables under the muck clouding his senses. It felt like he was slowly being submerged under water. “D-Danny? H-he r-ran….Mads...S-She’ll kill him...”

Jack growled and smacked the acrylic. “I asked about Daniel! NOT PHANTOM, YOU PATHETIC MASS OF POST HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS.”

Plasmius shook weakly and coughed, “H-He doesn’t k-know...F-Flapjack….I-I-...”

Jack cut him off and practically howled, “I ASKED YOU A QUESTION!”
Plasmius ear weakly rose. “J-Jack...I can’t s-see.”

Jack snarled, “ And you’re going to stay that way until I know where Vladimír and my kids are!”

Plasmius’s hand numbly shook and gripped against the floor. “T-the s-stars are beautiful….D-do you think...I-I could’ve t-told them t-the truth?”

Jack paused. That sentence was off...warped… It had almost no ghostly echo to it. It didn’t resonate or deepen in pitch abruptly like a regular spirit’s. The glow surrounding the figure that subtly blurred his edges was now faint and fading. Jack felt something stirring in his chest but he pushed it aside. He needed answers now.

“ You’re not making any sense! What the devil are you talking about?!” Jack snapped.

Plasmius weakly chuckled and his chest moved in and out rapidly as if it were struggling to take in enough air to force the words. Jack noted the behavior and paused again.

The figure shook and glanced back to the acrylic unseeing. Tears began gently falling down his face and onto the floor. “ I-I...always...liked….the stars....D-Danny...does to...H-He wanted... to be an...astronaut….”

Jack’s eyes widened in shock. Plasmius continued, “H-He became a h-hero…”

Jack shook his head in annoyance and slight grief. “ You're confusing things! Why are you talking about both my son and Phantom? Plasmius! Tell me where Vladimír and my kids are!!! WHOSE BLOOD WAS IN VLADIMIR’S HOME?!”

Red eyes closed partially and the strangled sounds of the entity forcing what sounded like breathing through its fanged teeth caused Jack to flinch. ‘Damn it….What is this?’. The voice no longer had the echo and it sounded hauntingly familiar. “ What are you talking about monster?”

The figure gasped out a strangled noise before choking out another incoherent sentence. “I-I’m finally dying...and...it’s when I finally f-found something t-to live for...again…” The ghost shook again. “ F-FlapJack...T-the nightmares...n-never-...They…didn’t-...” Heavy breathing echoed through the chamber and Jack felt ice encasing his veins. “I-I’m-...I...I can’t…” And then to his horror, Plasmius screamed out in pain as two rings formed around his waist. Rolling onto his back and arching off of the floor, the vampiric ghost clawed desperately into the acrylic flooring. He attempted phasing through the confine and cried out in pain before writhing as the two circles finally began the process of shifting him.

Jack watched the rings in dread filled amazement and stiffened as the ghost began hacking up a sickly red liquid.

Red eyes rolled backward and garbled panting gasps desperately tried to siphon air from the now oxygen-devoid environment. The twin circlets of black, iridescent light parted around the waist of the figure and agonizingly split to different polarities as he spasmed. Jack could feel his own pulse drumming around him. The rings were flickering and crawling along the form in an otherworldly dance of energy. A black, charred t-shirt and sweats could be seen at the spirit’s waist and his fingers were turning a human shade of cream, tinted with blue and ashen grays under torn and soiled bandages. Jack reached a hand out against the acrylic as they continued parting. Plasmius had
stopped moving a few seconds into it and only a few small twitches and convulsions gave clues to his current predicament. At the sight of the red blood and green ectoplasm dripping from the man’s shoulder, Jack’s breath hitched.

‘No…that’s not….That’s impossible…’

The rings continued and finally reached the crown of the figure’s head and his socked feet. Matted grey hair splayed against the floor and dull, listless blue eyes stared into the sparks above Vladimir as he shuttered and still. Jack’s entire world crashed down all at once and then he was frantically banging on the acrylic. Regaining some of his senses, he ran to the electrical panel and cut off the grid as fast as humanly possible.

Seeing Vlad’s face turning purplish blue, Jack rushed the vault door and slammed it open. The lock gave way with a hiss as air filled the space. Running to Vladimir and kneeling beside him, he gently patted his cheek. His friend continued gasping and struggling for air in the space. Jack swayed slightly, feeling light-headed from the lack of oxygen.

“Vladdie ...Oh god….Please...Breathe.” Pulling a hand up under Vlad’s back he went to hoist him up. A bloodied arm weakly flailed against him and Vlad gasped in pain but choked against the motion. A leg numbly twitched and dug into the floor.

Jack tensed at the large amount of blood trying to consume the tattered and charred t-shirt covering Vladimir's chest. Grimacing, he comforted. “Vlad...Buddy, I'm so sorry…I’m going to help you! Just hang on!”

Forcing his hands back under the nape of Vlad's neck and his legs, Jack watched as his friend seemingly lost his ability to breathe and went limp in his hold. Eyes fully dulled and rolled back as Vladimir's head fell back into the plastic.

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Vladimir’s body numbed and his grip on the small tether connecting him to life slackened as the last of the available oxygen and the now prolific carbon dioxide took hold of him. Tears continued weakly trailing across his face.

‘I’m dying….My best friends…..murdered me….They-’

Something warm began patting his cheek and warbled noise echoed in his ears with no apparent meaning. He weakly protested the hands pulling on him, but after a few moments, his protests became distant. The warmth, despite his fever, was comforting. With a small thud, his head lolled back against the floor and he succumbed to his body’s pleas for rest.
Looking in all the Wrong Places

Daniel arrived back at the manor a few moments after Jack had entered the home. Hiding in the cupola on the roof and increasing his hearing to eavesdrop on his parents he swallowed nervously and dug a gloved hand into the shingles. From inside the house, he could hear his mother and father talking about him and Vladimir.

Jack was shuffling somewhere downstairs. “Mads...Who’s blood is this?”

Maddie questioned, “What blood?” There was a pause and her voice became tense and panicked, “Jack? The recording...Vlad said Phantom was with them! What if they-”

There was another pause and more shuffling, his father started another sentence almost directorially, as if he was pointing something out to her. “Maddie-”

Choked sobs filled the home before someone swallowed thickly. His dad levelly instructed. “Mads? Go look for Phantom.”

Maddie pleaded almost hopefully, “Jack? Plasmius...Did you catch him?”

Silence filled the space below the roof for a few brief moments before Jack assured, “No Maddie, I didn’t catch him. He’s still out there and so is Phantom.”

Daniel couldn’t help the hopeful tingling that coursed through his ectoplasm. ‘Thank god...He’s still out there!’

Neon green eyes darted from the roof to the small slitted view of the Fenton assault vehicle as an engine started up. Seeing both Fentons in the front seat, Daniel quickly phased into the home. White boots thudded against the wooden flooring and Daniel went to shift back into Fenton only to stop mid-morph. Neon green eyes flashed inhuman blue as his eyes raked across the hall in horror. The entire area smelled like burnt lemons and deep gouges and burn marks could be seen in the walls. Dissipating the white rings, the teen fearfully walked through the carnage and stumbled down the staircase in autopilot mode. A frantic banging brought him out of his stupor. Realizing Sam, Tucker and Jaz were still trapped in the lab, he phased through the floor and landed to find all three of them screaming curses and swinging all manner of Fenton tech and large blunt objects at a fluctuating shield. Sam turned at the sudden cool in the room. His hands caught her deftly as she leaped over the metal banister and tackled him. Hugging him in desperation, she growled, “GET US THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!”

Daniel nodded and motioned Jazmine and Tucker toward him. They quickly ran down the staircase and clasped onto his arms. Tucker cursed under his breath and yanked at Daniel’s arm, “HURRY UP! HE’S BLEEDING TO DEATH!”

Daniel didn’t need to be told twice. Phasing into the kitchen upstairs he released his grip on the three and instructed, “Split up. Sam? Take Jaz and look around the neighborhood. I’m going to search around in town for him. Tucker? Go check the hosp-” He paused realizing exactly what he was saying. “Rephrase, Sam? Tuck? You go check the neighborhood. Jaz? Go to the hospital and see if they found Vlad unconscious in a street or something.”

All three nodded and quickly ran out of the kitchen only to lock up in the hallway at the faintly glowing trail of ectoplasm splattered across the floor. Jazmine nearly dropped to her knees again from the emotional overload. Tucker quickly reached over and tugged her shoulder. “Come on! If
we don’t hurry and find him, your parents may get to him first!”

She nodded and forced herself to ignore the gory mess and follow the two younger teens out of the house and into the overcast summer evening. Daniel floated up through the ceiling and pulled the boomerang from his boot. Now above the home, he activated the device. “Find Vlad!”

The boomerang whirred and spun before arching up and making a path through streets and back roads in Amity. ‘I’m coming Fruit-Loop...Just hold on.’

To the teen’s horror, the device abruptly stopped mid-air above a busy intersection. Daniel waited for several minutes and realizing the device had lost Vlad’s ecto signature he cut it off and began searching the nearby streets in a blind panic. There were very few reasons the boomerang would’ve lost the signal. One, a cloaking device was interfering and jamming the sensors. Two, Vladimir was too injured and close to death for his ecto signature to be registered as his… Daniel swallowed thickly.

‘Or option three….He died…’

For all of his flaws and idiotic blunders, Vlad wasn’t someone the teen could remotely imagine leaving his life. Sure...they had problems, misunderstandings, and awkward social interactions between one another the entire week…but Daniel had grown fond of the adult. He even considered him a friend for the first time since they had known one another. Surely, his parents hadn’t unknowingly executed their old friend and the only other person like him! God...Life...No one or thing would be that cruel and ruthless!

Neon green splatters caught his attention near where he had been hovering. Landing in the alleyway his finger shakily touched the ectoplasmic handprints dripping down the wall.

Daniel dropped to his knees. ‘That damned idiot….Stupid….you stupid-’

“SON OF A BITCH! VLAD! PLEASE!?!?”

No one answered, and in the silence the teenager’s sobs could be made out just as it began to rain, washing away any evidence that the adult had ever been there within a few brief seconds. Water obscured glowing tears and Daniel shifted back into Daniel Fenton and looked to his phone. It was nearing seven thirty.

Cutting off airplane mode and dialing Sam, he waited. She picked up on the first ring. “Did you-”

Daniel swallowed, “I haven’t found him... I’m going to go get Danni… She’s probably terrified right now.”

Sam’s voice cracked. “We’ll meet you two at the diner. Does that sound like a decent plan?”

Daniel nodded and replied tiredly as he shook some water out of his black hair. “I’ll meet you, Tucker and…” He paused. “Did Jaz find anything?”

Sam bitterly sighed, “No...there’s nothing. It’s like he popped off of the face of the planet.”

Daniel weakly swallowed. “He’s somewhere in town. I found some ectoplasm in an alleyway a few minutes out from city hall. I’m going to go check that building after I pick up Danni. He may be hiding out in his office or a secret room if we’re lucky.”

Sam’s voice softened. “He’s going to be okay…”

Daniel smiled weakly and leaned slightly against the wall before pulling up his red hoodie to shield
his face. Eyes flashed neon green from under the brim. “I’ll make sure of it. See you soon.” And with that, he hung up the device and crammed it into his pocket.

Shifting into Danny Phantom and flying upward, he failed to notice a familiar vehicle turning down the street towards his previous location. Maddie’s eyes lit with malice at the white-haired teenager darting through the wind and rain.

“Found you.”
Realizing Mortal Error

Jack carried Vladimir as quickly as possible to the steel table Maddie had set up a few hours prior near the operation’s booth monitors. Hefting him up slightly higher to clear the reflective slab, he laid him down onto the cool steel. Vlad’s head weakly rolled and his cheek fell against the icy metal with a muted thump. Biting off his gloves, Jack quickly put a palm to Vlad’s neck to check for a pulse.

A faint, low rhythm tapped against his fingers surrounded by feverish heat. Seeing that Vladimir was tinted blue and his breathing was still labored, Jack turned to the gas masks by the lab console and ripped one out of its emergency casing. Hooking it up to a canister of purified air Maddie and him kept stored for emergency gas leaks and fires, he gently lifted Vlad’s head up and slipped the mask over his nose. Vlad weakly shifted and his brow furrowed at the touch.

Jack’s hands shakily inspected Vlad’s singed and bloodied shirt. Fingers snaked to his friend’s bleeding shoulder and gently pulled out some of the frayed cotton invading the wound. Vlad gasped and withered and Jack grimaced. White fangs vaguely flashed and a small choked sound echoed in the room. Jack removed his hand from the injury and went to place the limb on Vlad’s bandaged hand in an act of comfort. He squeezed lightly against Vlad’s palm and was rewarded with a small groan and a weak squeeze from the unconscious individual. Whipping out a flashlight from his belt pocket, Jack gently unfurled his hand from Vladimir’s and opened one of his eyes. Vlad’s blue eye duly reflected Jack’s ectoplasm and blood splattered form back at himself. The pupil dilated and Jack sighed in relief.

Jack’s eyes darted to the tray beside them and he had to restrain himself from vomiting. Maddie and him had actually decided on strapping Plasmius down and taking samples earlier that morning… If Vladimir couldn’t have shifted, as he had claimed in the chamber… Jack very well could have torn his best friend apart with a scalpel to see how he worked. A small movement from Vlad jarred him back to the task at hand. Vlad’s head was shaking from side to side weakly and he was panting against the mask. Jack immediately set down the flashlight and comforted him again with a small squeeze to his unwounded shoulder. “I’ve got you….you’re going to be alright. I promise.”

Noting the still profusely bleeding limb, Jack began tying Vladimir’s wrists to the table so he could attempt stitching the flesh back together without Vlad jerking or causing further injury to himself.

Vlad subconsciously trembled against the restraints and his breathing hitched. Unconscious blue eyes flickered open and rolled from under almost completely closed lids. Jack reached over to the tray table, set with supplies intended for dissection, and plucked up a pair of medical shears. ‘I’ll get these old bandages and his shirt off so I can stitch it up properly…’

Sliding the shears under the bottom hem of the decimated shirt, he began cutting off the garment. Cold metal lapped against Vlad’s skin and his eyes darted wide open. Hands struggled against restraints in a frenzied panic and he screamed out in pain as his right arm protested against the movement. Jack went wide-eyed and backed away from the table. Vlad shook his head rapidly and curled against the metal. Jack’s hand flew to the tattered Metallica t-shirt to calm him and in an instant Vladimir disappeared in a small poof of pink, his shirt hanging limply from Jack’s hand. A thump near the console jostled Jack from his shock.

A small cry of pain echoed in the room as the hunter approached. Vlad somehow registered the noise and weakly backed against the wall. Hyperventilating into the breathing mask he attempted to shield himself with his left arm. Energy weakly cracked and faded in front of him and he rasped, “S-Someone….please….n-not again….I d-don’t…”
Jack gently reached out for him but froze at seeing Vlad’s torso. Jack’s eyes darted to the thousands
of scars and wound patterns flickering across Vlad’s flesh as he shook. His muscular frame tensed as
Jack moved forward and his eyes weakly watered. Jack looked to each cluster and pattern with a
critical eye. Bullet wounds, bite wounds, gauges… There was scarcely a spot not maimed or mared
grieviously.

A vague segment of dialogue he had shared with Danny surfaced as he looked at the marks, “So…
say someone was shot multiple times? Stabbed? Impaled? Erm…even dissected… What are the
chances they’d live? Hypothetically?”

‘Dissected…Someone butchered him…’ Tears numbly traced down Jack’s face. “Oh
god….Vladdie…”

Vlad backed up further against the wall and shook his head rapidly in a daze. “P-Please…don’t…I.”

Jack winced and unclipped a small syringe made for ghosts from his belt. Vlad wasn’t conscious at
the moment… This was a panic response to being— to being vivisected.

Kneeling down in front of the semi-conscious individual, Jack comforted. “Vladdie? I’m not going to
hurt you. I didn’t know… I’m just going to help you sleep for a moment.”

The voice clicked with something in Vladimir and he froze. “J-Jack?”

Jack gently reached out to Vlad’s right arm and Vlad retracted himself further against the wall. “N-
No….It’s b-broken…..I-It hurts.”

Jack locked up again and weakly smiled through his tears. “Shhh… Buddy, I’m gonna get you fixed
up.”

Vlad shuttered and protested, “D-Danny….W-where’s Danny…?” Eyes widened slightly in a
panicky daze and he attempted to stand only to pitch forward. Jack set down the needle for a moment
and caught him against himself. Vlad let out a small cry of pain but didn’t protest the hold. Jack
opted to hug Vladimir gently in an effort to soothe some of the fight or flight responses coursing
through his system. Vlad calmed in his hold and began sluggishly murmuring against his chest. “R-
ribs…cracked…arm broke…losing ectoplasm…S-something found me…it g-grabbed me… M-
Mads…She w-wouldn’t listen…Daniel….D-Daniel run….p-please.”

A shaking hand curled Vlad’s neck against his shoulder and Jack rocked him against himself. Vlad
slouched in his hold, “F-Found….Daniel….and f-found her….She…panicked…” Vlad swallowed,
“It burns…the heat…”

Jack was about to pat Vlad’s back when his eyes caught sight of the charred and ripped flesh. Large
claw marks caked in dry ectoplasm and blood were rimmed by what looked like a child’s handprints.
They were singed into the flesh, one hand on either side of his spine, as if someone had latched onto
him and hugged into his back hard enough to rip the muscle apart.

Jack swallowed, “Don’t worry… I won’t leave you, I promise.”

Vlad sobbed all the more profusely. “F-flapJack?…D-don’t make p-promises…you c-can’t
keep….M’….a m-monster…”

Jack grimaced and plucked the Ghost Dazer up from the floor with his left hand. “You’re no monster
buddy….”

‘I am.’
Vlad shook his head, “M-Maddie and J-Jack hate g-ghosts...They-”

Jack gently rocked again. “Vladdie… I-”

‘ What the hell can I say to that?? He’s right! Me and Maddie haven’t given him or Daniel anything else prior to go off of!’

Jack froze and his eyes widened further. ‘Daniel….Danny is Phantom… I shot my little boy…’

Vlad groaned and weakly lifted his left arm in a bid to push away from Jack. “ I-I...gotta g-go...D- Danny isn’t safe…”

Jack tightened his hold. “ Shhh. You can’t go anywhere right now buddy… You’re losing to much blood. You’re not even all here right now.”

Vladimir shivered, “ B-blood...M’ losing b-blood?….Can’t be…..I-I was stuck.....C-couldn’t
shift...Mads c-cornered us......h-had to p-protect Danny...and Anna…”


Vlad tried protesting again and, seeing the movement, Jack stabbed the syringe into his lower back and let gravity pull the serum from the dart. Vlad immediately went slack as Jack removed the small needle. Laying him back slightly against the wall, Jack leaned down and scooped Vlad back into his hands to carry him to the dissection table turned operation bed. Setting Vladimir on his left side, Jack went to the medical drawer by the drug locker and plucked out a package of suture thread, some bandages, and a sterile needle to rend the flesh back together safely.

Seeing what appeared to be dirt on Vlad’s lower chest, Jack went to brush it off with a small wet towel only to pause. It was his footprint, perfectly preserved in a garish black bruise.

Daniel wasn’t safe…. If he could do this to Vladimir based off of a false assumption… Then Maddie would unknowingly slaughter their child in a fit of rage. Turning to the radio, he tuned in to the assault vehicle’s radio channel. “Mads?? Please for the love of god...answer me.”

Her voice crackled over the line, “Jack? What is it? I’m kind of preoccupied at the moment-”

Jack interrupted her, “ Maddie! Get back to the house right now!”

Maddie paused, “ Jack... Calm down... What’s wrong?”

Jack’s voice cracked as he looked over to Vladimir’s feverish and bloodied form. “ I have Vlad in the operations center right now and he’s not doing good. Maddie? I need your help… I can’t stitch him up properly...Not when I-”

Maddie practically screeched, “HE’S AT OUR HOUSE?! WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?!”

Vlad had begun tossing in his sleep weakly and shivering from the fever again.

“ Mads? DO NOT SHOOT PHANTOM!”

Maddie swallowed thickly and growled, “ WHY NOT?”

Jack wanted to tear his hair out in frustration. He didn’t know the details precisely but his son and best friend seemed to be fused with some sort of paranormal anomaly. They could take the forms of ghosts and humans. That by itself sounded like an absolute crackpot conspiracy. Maddie was a
woman of science, she needed facts. And here he was standing by his best friend, who was bleeding out all over the place, with no facts to substantiate what he was about to say.

“Mads… for the love of god do not shoot that boy! He’s Daniel! Plasmius is Vladimir! I caught Plasmius and he’s in critical condition! Maddie that blood was Vlad’s! They can shift between plains! I think they’re some sort of species of hybrid, HALF-GHOSTS!”

Vladimir shook against himself slightly more violently and two black rings popped around his waist in agitation.

His body needed to coagulate the wounds…advanced healing could only do so much and he was losing far more fluids than he had after battling Daniel and Nocturn. His fever was already burning through the ghost dazer’s paranormal inhibitors like kerosine soaked tissue paper.

Jack, of course, didn’t know the reason why the rings had formed…. He only knew that his friend screamed out in agony and weakly gripped his broken arm as the two segments split apart. Plasmius appeared, fully clothed and unconscious on the table.

Maddie heard the scream over the radio, “WHAT’S HAPPENING? JACK?”

Jack swallowed. “He just shifted back into Plasmius…He’s unconscious right now… Maddie, I don’t know what I’m doing! Please?! He needs a doctor right now! Not a college drop out with a mechanic’s hand!”

Maddie could be heard fiddling with something. “I’ll be home in a few minutes.”

Jack sighed in relief. “Please hurry…He’s still not breathing correctly.”

Jack took a deep breath and rounded back to the table Vlad was lying on.
A Man or a Liar

‘Now that he’s sedated it should be easier to remove his shirt.’ Grabbing the shears, and this time taking care to avoid touching the metal to Vlad’s skin, he quickly snipped off the garment and cape. A pointed ear twitched and Vlad shivered as the fabric was pulled away. Jack watched in amazement as the white tunic and cape dissipated into a gaseous form and merged back into Vlad’s body.

Hands gently grazed over green tinted wounds and began cleaning the area so Maddie would be able to work on Vladimir as soon as humanly possible. Vlad groaned and his left arm moved slightly as he shifted in his drugged slumber. Jack noted the gloves but decided to keep them on until Maddie arrived. Agitating Vlad’s injured arm, or even considering moving it, if it was indeed broken, would be extremely painful. ‘She’ll need to administer a local anesthetic and we’ll have to take x-rays to confirm it…’

Glancing at the limb he grimaced. The swelling and green pulsating against the skin were obvious to the arm’s condition even if he couldn’t fully see it.

Turning to the radio again he questioned, “Mads? His arm is broken… Should I elevate it?”

Maddie answered almost immediately, “ Is it bleeding?”

Jack grimaced, “ Not at the point of fracture but his shoulder is almost completely shot through. There’s blood and ectoplasm all over the limb despite me cleaning it.”

Maddie paused and after a moment instructed, “ Elevate the limb. Make sure the blood flow to the fingers and hand are not adversely restricted by any clothing.”

Jack took a deep calming breath and looked from Vladimir to the radio tiredly. “Maddie? I’m not sure I want to-”

Maddie cut him off, “ Jack… You need to make sure the limb has decent blood flow. We don’t want Vladimir becoming our next prosthetics patient.”

Jack gulped. “ Maddie? I’m going to hurt him if I touch that arm. It’s completely covered in bandages.”

Maddie could be heard cursing under her breath. “ Jack? Cut them off. Now.”

Jack took a breath and grabbed the shears up from the tray table with shaky hands. Propping the blade up under a small segment of the glove on Vladimir’s right hand, he gently sliced the garment down the middle and slipped it off of Vlad’s wrist. Vlad grimaced and curled against himself with a small whimper. Jack swallowed before placing the shears by the soiled bandages and slipping them under. Vlad flinched in discomfort and his brow furrowed in pain. Thankfully he stayed unconscious as Jack carefully removed the dressings.

Jack tossed the green and red splattered fabric onto the floor and looked at the wounds. Turning back to the radio he lamented, “ They’re off…but I’m not sure what to be looking for. It’s obviously swollen but the bruising is neon green. And his fingers? I don’t know what happened but the nails are fractured to the cuticle.”

Maddie questioned, “ How swollen is the limb? When compared to the other arm?”

Jack grimaced, “ It’s swelling more on the Ulna’s side. It’s about two? Three centimeters out?”
Maddie worriedly questioned, “Did the bone puncture the skin?!”

Jack quickly assured, “No, no puncture from the bone. I think he broke it when he fell on top of the car earlier.”

Maddie went silent on her end and Jack looked to the radio in confusion. A few seconds later she was climbing up the ladder to the operations booth with a pillow, and some ice in hand. Seeing Plasmius, she frowned deeply and approached them. “Are you sure it’s not?”

Jack wrung his hair and grimaced, “You have no idea how much I wish this was some disguise or cruel joke….” His hand gently cupped against Vlad’s neck and Vlad winced. “I suffocated Vladimir… I suffocated my best friend Maddie! And the entire time he was trying to tell me it was him… Maddie… His eardrums burst… and he couldn’t see. I—”

Vlad’s ear twitched as Maddie leaned over him. If what Jack was saying was true…. Then she was just as guilty for hurting him so severely. She had shot him in cold blood… “Why is he laying on his side like this?”

Jack grimaced again. “I didn’t want to cause him any more pain after what I did to him earlier. His back looks like it’s been carved open by a lion and branded by demonic grade schoolers.”

Maddie nodded, “Jack? Go get the local anesthetics out of the cabinet and a few clean syringes.” As she spoke her fingers gently coaxed Vladimir’s right arm up.

‘Jack’s right… the Ulma was snapped. It’s a clean break from what I can tell….’ She paused and, glancing toward Jack, tore off one of her gloves to feel the ghoul’s neck. If this was a disguise, it was fairly detailed. Ghosts, from what she knew, didn’t have bones. ‘If there’s no pulse I’ll have to tell Jack this thing is faking us out…’

Her eyes widened. Ungodly heat and a fluttering and faint heartbeat tingled against her small hand. Jack came up next to her and gently removed her hand from Vlad’s neck. “Maddie… he’s not a ghost. He’s alive.”

Maddie swallowed and tears traced down her face. “What about Danny—Oh god… Jack… that time in the park… Danny started wearing tank tops to bed after that. We—”

Jack took a deep calming breath and put a hand to her shoulder. “We can’t change what we’ve done but we sure as hell can try to fix this mess. Come on Mads… I need you right now. Vladdie needs you.”

Maddie flinched and gently put the palm of her hand to Vlad’s head. “This fever isn’t natural…”

Jack nodded, “I noticed that too. We need to cool him down after we get him bandaged up.”

Maddie retracted her hand and motioned for the syringe. Turning to Jack she worriedly questioned, “Do you have any clue how much he weighs?”

Jack winced. “No, but I can find out really quick. Move aside for a second Mads.”

She did as he asked and Jack leaned in to lift Vlad. Vladimir cried out as his arm moved and Jack quickly set him back down. “He’s around eighty pounds.”

Maddie gently brushed some of Vlad’s hair out of his face. Vlad relaxed again and she began filling and administering small amounts of local anesthesia to Vlad’s various wounds and injuries. Turning to Jack she instructed, “Grab that ice from the side table and keep it up against his arm. I’m going to
patch his back so we can lay him down properly to treat his shoulder.”

Jack nodded and grabbed the ice. Pinning it against Vlad’s arm, he watched as Maddie dutifully cleaned the burns and gashes on Vladimir’s back and bandaged them. Satisfied with her efforts she slipped a cloth from the console under the area to keep the blood and ectoplasm off of the clean bandages. Tacking a hand beneath Vladimir’s chest, she gently turned him onto his spine with Jack’s help.

Her eyes scanned over his torso and her breath caught in her throat. Jack averted his gaze. Maddie looked into Vlad’s sleeping face with evident pain and disgust. “Are those—”

Jack flinched and nodded, “He woke up partially on the table earlier when I was cutting his t-shirt off to get a look at his shoulder. Maddie….I’ve never seen him so fearful… He thought I was going to carve him open like a—”

‘-cadaver….Like a corpse—’

He could bring himself to finish verbalizing the thought.


Vlad’s eyes drifted and seemed to lock on Maddie momentarily. Tears became slightly more prolific. “D-Danny….s-save Danny….p-please…?”

Maddie swallowed. She needed answers… This all-It was too much! Was she really that heartless to just look him in the eyes while he pleaded his humanity? Could she really have shot Vladimir so coldly? Raising a hand to his brow and feeling the heat, she motioned Jack for the ice pack and pressed it against the ghost’s temple. Plasmius whimpered and fidgeted against the table. Maddie turned to Jack, “Go get more ice. There’s not enough up here and his fever is getting worse.”
Stitching Together The Past

Jack looked with uncertainty from his wife to Vlad but nodded and quickly made his way to the ladder. As soon as the room was empty, her hand went back to Vladimir’s neck in search of the pulse she had felt earlier. “If you really are some sort of hybrid, why didn’t you shift earlier? Plasmius… I’m asking this as Vladimir’s friend and Daniel’s mother… If you are Vlad, why couldn’t you shift? Why did you just lead me along?”

The ghoul seemed to note Maddie again and his head tossed lightly. “…I t-tried telling them….T-they wouldn’t listen…."

Maddie’s brow furrowed worriedly. If this was indeed Vladimir he was suffering from the after-effects of blood loss right now. His mind might as well have been drugged… And if it was a ghostly guise? The crimson leaking through the green wouldn’t be possible.

Maddie soothingly brought a hand to his cheek. “You really tried to tell me, didn’t you?… Vladimir….Why couldn’t you shift?”

Vlad seemed to register a segment of the question and tossed under her hand. “A-adrenaline…kept me in place….I-I was stuck…Tried…The rings wouldn’t-”

Maddie’s eyes widened and she bit her lip. Rings….Black glowing rings that had died before they could fully form. He had tried showing her… and she had cornered him like a wild animal, proposing an end to his life and various lab tests under the assumption he had hurt Vladimir. That he had hurt himself.

Vlad shook slightly and she tensed. Orange irises tiredly stared into the ceiling. “I-I’m…in a nightmare….Please….W-Wake me up….Someone…?...They won’t s-stop.”

Maddie’s hand renewed its efforts to calm the crying specter. “It’s okay…Shhh. Oh god, Vladimir…I’m so sorry. We didn’t know! Why didn’t you tell us?!”

Vlad shook his head again. “They’re g-ghost… hunters…”

Maddie shivered and her gaze became downcast. ‘This is our fault, isn’t it? Molecule by molecule….Oh god, Vladimir only started acting that way after the reunion…After we blasted holes in his home and-’

Vague memories of the dinner at Vlad’s Wisconsin castle the first night surfaced in her mind.

Vlad had been acting weird, almost testy the entire evening.

She had sat across from him with Jack while Daniel sat at the head of the table and Jazmine lounged near Vladimir. Pecking at his soup, he looked up tentatively.

“I take it you two are done dismantling all of the traps in the castle?” Blue eyes tiredly shifted from Maddie and Jack almost pleadingly.

Maddie nodded and set down her spoon. “Yes, we took care of all the spectral equipment we brought into the castle, Vladimir. It’s all back in the car.”

Vlad nodded and Maddie swore she saw a sigh of relief escape his lips. Turning to look up at Jack, he prodded with a somewhat begrudging and amused air, “I hear you got rather close to shooting that ghost downstairs. He got away though, right?”
Jack frowned and pouted almost comically at the light teasing but failed to see the glint in Vlad’s eyes as he asked the question. Maddie had noticed though. It was a cross between knowing and hope… She hadn’t pegged the behavior at the time for anything but Vlad’s fatigue from planning the reunion… But now? With new context?

The Vladimir on the metal table was passing out again. Snatching the pillow beside them and gently lifting his head, she propped him up slightly. He shivered against her and his pointed ears flicked to his cheeks.

As she held the ice against his forehead and clasped his gloved palm in her free hand, she was brought back to the conversation Vladimir had made that night with them at the table.

*Jack had taken a spoon full of his soup and sighed heavily. “Yeah, the bastard got away from us.”*

*Maddie had been on guard around Vladimir since the weird flirting stint in the hall earlier that evening and was watching him carefully. Vlad’s grey-blue eyes became a conflict of emotion but he smirked nonchalantly and took another bite of his food before questioning, “You do know the Dairy King is a harmless and a rather kind soul, correct?”*

*Maddie snorted, “That ghost and his buddy are just heartless echoes, Vladimir. They’re wraiths and they have no business existing in our dimension.”*

*Vlad chuckled weakly, “It sounds like you two got off to a rough start with them. As long as I have lived here none of them have bothered me.” A knowing smile graced his lips and he took a small sip of his wine.*

*Maddie glowered into her food. “Inviso-bill seems to have followed us here.” Her eyes darted up to catch Vlad’s eyes and a noticeable look of annoyance and disdain blossomed across his brow at the mention of the uninvited guest who had led the Fenton’s through the castle on a destructive rampage.*

*Vlad frowned and his eyebrow twitched, “Ah...yes the teenage ghoul with no sense of manner.”*

*Daniel tensed slightly at the end of the table. Both Vlad and Maddie looked to him in slight confusion.*

*The teen smiled up weakly, “I always thought Ph- Inviso-Bill was kind of cool. He’s saved a ton of people and-”*

*Maddie sighed and Jack rolled his eyes. “He’s just some poor teenager that couldn’t move on Danny-boy... That’s all.”*

*Both Vlad and Daniel sombered. A determined glint brimmed in Vladimir’s gaze and he shot his head back up. “So you would see it better that they never existed? The ghosts in my castle and Inviso-bill?”*

*Maddie had answered, “Of course. It’s not natural! When you die you’re supposed to stay that way, not come back as some demented ectoplasmic residue intent on butting into the living’s affairs.”*

*Jack came back into the operation’s booth with the ice and Maddie snapped back to reality. Tears leaked down her cheeks. It was all their fault….She had told them they were mistakes...Freaks that should have just ceased to exist...How long had her baby and Vlad suffered because of them? His flirting….his jabs at her and Jack….In a way…. Was he just trying to spite them back? Alleviate some of his own heartache by poking and prodding to get some sort of reaction from them?*
That thought made her clamp a hand to her mouth, a fresh wave of sobs racking her thin frame.
‘Danny...he started becoming distant around the time of the reunion… Oh, god...I pushed my baby away… He’s been so depressed lately, hiding in his room, forgetting to do his homework....’

Jazmine had been comforting him when she should have been the one to-

Her eyes widened and she turned to Jack with a slight tremble in her lip. “Jazmine knew….She knew about Danny.”

Jack flinched and turned his gaze from her to Vladimir. Vlad had succumbed back into an unrestful sleep while he had gone downstairs to retrieve ice. Setting down the materials on the console he patted Maddie’s shoulder and wrapped an arm under Vlad’s head... Lifting Vlad up, bridal style, he motioned for Maddie to follow him to the guest bedroom. “Come on Mads… We can’t keep wrapping him on that metal table.”

Her eyes wandered to the blood and ectoplasm splattered area and her stomach rolled. She nodded and took a deep breath before grabbing the required materials for Vlad’s shoulder and following him. Jack paused abruptly by the door. Two black rings had appeared by Vladimir's torso again. Vlad began panting against the mask on his face and weakly clutched a hand into the air as his spine arched. Seeing he was shifting, Jack ran into the guest bedroom and set him down on the modified bed. Vlad screamed out and gasped as the rings brightened to an almost pure white and shattered into wisps of plasma enhanced energy by his waist.

Maddie quickly leaned over him and coaxed a hand to his jaw while Jack pinned him to the bed. She could feel the energy radiating off of Vladimir and warping the air around them. In a pop of ebony enhanced light, Vladimir’s blue-skinned chest morphed and rippled like a distorted mirage. Peach flesh marred by gangly bruises and dark scarred ribbons of tissue sandwiched itself between the rings as they split sluggishly to either end. Vlad choked against the mask on his face and convulsed again, weakly gripping hands into the sheets he was lying on and tearing the material with his fingers. Maddie watched in disbelief and horrified wonder as the two bright circles finished and Vladimir’s body collapsed against the bed in a feverish haze.

Her hands patted his jaw gently, “Vladimir? Can you hear us?”

Vlad groaned and weakly backed against the bedding. Dazed and semiconscious blue eyes fluttered for a moment and began closing. Maddie growled and turned to Jack. “Hold him down. He’s lost too much blood, I have to stitch him right now before he goes comatose.”

Jack nodded and quickly ran out to retrieve the item while Maddie clipped together the bandage on

Done with the stitches, Maddie grabbed a wet wipe from her supplies and cleaned the spot before reaching to the bandages by Vladimir’s calf and wrapping them expertly around the injury. Grasping for the metal staple to secure the dressings, her hand froze. Red splatters could be seen on Vlad’s pant legs. Cursing under her breath, she turned to Jack, “Go get the scissors again. I don’t think we’re done stitching him up yet.”

Jack nodded and quickly ran out to retrieve the item while Maddie clipped together the bandage on
his shoulder. Carrying the medical shears back into the room, he passed them to Maddie. Putting a finger to the waistband of the hole ridden and singed pants, she slipped the scissors into the seam and began cutting.

Working her way from the right side to his left, she quickly removed the top portion of the sweats and piled the scraps by Vlad’s waist. Jack cringed at the bloody marks dripping down Vlad’s legs. “What did that? It looks like something raked nails through him.”

Maddie grimaced at the thousands of little circular rivets bleeding freely around Vlad’s calves. “I can’t stitch these… They’re too small. We’re just going to have to wrap them.” She gently slipped off the bloodstained socks adorning Vlad’s feet and tossed them to the floor. Jack nodded and went into the operations booth area again for more bandages. He came back however with both the bandages and an x-ray device in tow.

Maddie sighed, “Scan his arm so we can see if the bone needs to be realigned. I’ll get his legs fixed up.”

Jack nodded and added, “I think he broke a few ribs to…”

Maddie grimaced, “We can’t do much for his ribs if they are injured. This house isn’t a hospital…”

Jack winced and nodded before setting the equipment up. The belts restraining Vlad were clicked off and tossed aside so they wouldn’t interfere with the imaging device. Rearranging Vladimir’s right arm and propping it up slightly, he began taking pictures. Fifteen minutes later, Maddie had finished the medical work and was examining the images Jack had taken debatingly. Jack peered over from Vladimir toward Maddie pleadingly and she smiled weakly, “It’s alright Jack, the bone doesn’t need realigned or snapped back in place. We just have to splint the limb and let him rest.”
A Double Homicide

Jack sighed in relief but quickly looked back up to her, “What about his ribs?”

Maddie winced, “Jack….These x-rays….”

Jack paused, “What is it Mads?”

She sighed and pivoted a screen to face him from where she was standing. “If these breaks and cracks are anything to go off of? His ribs have been through far worse. Same thing goes for his arm. If I didn’t know any better I’d say he’s been systematically tortured on a weekly basis for god knows how long.”

Jack gripped a fist against the bed’s metal dividing bar. His fatigued eyes traced the lines and web-like patterns hidden beneath Vladimir’s skin with evident concern as he stared at the monochrome images. Looking back to Vladimir, he bit his lip in contemplation. The hybrid was sleeping somewhat soundly against the pillows.

‘The breathing mask needs to be changed… The canister is probably close to empty now.’

Bending down and slipping off the thin plastic, Jack sighed. “Maddie? Do we have an IV drip and—”

Maddie smiled weakly and pointed to the side of the bed. “There should be a decent connection tube for that mask in the cupboard. The tank is full in the wall.”

She paused and tiredly wiped a strand of short orange hair out of her eyes, “As for the IV? We should have one in the storage closet. Saline bags should be up on the middle shelf in the box they came in. We had a new shipment delivered a few weeks ago for that athlete’s prosthetic repair and I’m positive we didn’t use all of it. There should be enough for at least half a week.” She paused and walked over to Vlad. “We need to give him a pain reliever and a fever reducer as well.”

Jack nodded but rubbed his eyes. “We also need to get ahold of Danny…. He won’t answer his phone though!”

Maddie winced and looked to Vladimir’s shivering form apologetically. “Daniel will wonder where we went and why we aren’t searching for him and Vlad eventually. He’ll end up sneaking into the house to confront us..”

Jack flinched. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Maddie sighed and turned from her spouse. “Keep an eye on him and set up that mask. I’m going to go get the IV, a clean blanket and some of those pajama pants we keep stored for overnight visitors.”

Jack nodded, “I think he’s a medium.”

Maddie nodded and walked out of the room. Jack turned to Vlad and began fidgeting with the equipment. Detaching the temporary canister from the mask and hooking up the tube connecting the plastic to the wall, he adjusted the gas output. Vladimir sighed gently as the mask was slipped back over his face and curled slightly further onto his left side.

Jack snorted, “Why is it you are the one always getting into crazy situations? Aren’t we supposed to be partners in crime Vladdie?”

Vlad shivered again and Jack frowned. There were no blankets in the room and waiting on Mad’s to-
As if reading his mind, Maddie reappeared in the room with a pair of light blue canvas pajama pants, a medical dress, and a wool blanket. “Here, I think it’s best you get him into these before I get that arm taken care of.”

Jack nodded appreciatively and gently lifted Vladimir’s back up from the bed as Maddie departed a second time. Slipping on the gown and tying the back, he patted Vlad’s back as he shifted and groaned against him. Vlad’s voice shakily echoed in the room. “J-Jackie?”

Jack flinched at the nickname and weakly smiled. “Go back to sleep you idiot.”

A small chuckle rasped through Vladimir’s frame. “D-did I have….another n-nightmare?”

Jack squeezed slightly tighter. The Ghost Dazer was probably still fucking with Vlad’s head and with all the blood he had lost? Well… He probably wasn’t going to be all there until his body made up for the lost plasma. Patting Vlad’s back he snorted, “Yeah, just another nightmare buddy. You really scared me… What were you thinking?”

Vlad slouched further in his hold, “I was trying…to protect you…J-Jack…”

Jack laughed slightly, “You are such a royal spaz.”

Vlad sighed contentedly. “M’ a screw up….J-Jack?…”

Jack paused and sighed in exasperation, “What is it bud?”

Vlad swallowed, “T-The portal….t-there’s a wire loose…..”

Jack froze and felt the blood run from his face. The portal….

A gloved hand cradled behind Vlad’s neck, “Buddy… you’re still sleeping aren’t you?”

Vlad seemingly nodded, “I have to be….I-it’s a good dream ….I think? M’….confused by it t-though.”

Jack grimaced, “How so, bud?”

Vlad chuckled weakly, “T-the real…J-Jack hates me….I-saw his face before I c-conked out.in t-the alley. C-couldn’t get to D-Danny… Probably in a s-specimen jar like me….P-probably…dead to…”

Jack flinched and tears slowly started pooling again. “Vladdie…. I could never hate you… You pull stupid shit all the time but I would never-”

Vlad snorted against his shoulder, “H-he didn’t know….I was…part-…..part human. H-He thinks I’m a monster….T-that was the plan…. I tried and I screwed up….J-Jackie? Do you think…D-Danny made it? T-that they got a-away…..?”

Jack sighed, “Buddy. I saw. I know you’re not a ghost… Danny is safe. Maddie and I are going to take care of you.”

Vlad became slightly quieter, “I wanted t-to tell them….but I was s-scared. And then Danny showed up…..D-Danny got ripped apart to….J-Jack? Danny….D-Danny got split between …He was in the p-portal when it cut on…”

Maddie was now by the doorway, frozen in place. The portal was what had turned her friend and child into this…. The portal she and Jack had-
She fell to her knees.

Jack continued comforting Vladimir, “Well, how about you prove this isn’t a dream bud? I can help…”

Vlad smiled weakly from under his mask and his glazed blue eyes flashed a muted red. “H-How?”

Jack rubbed a small circle in Vlad’s spine. “How about you tell me why you played paranormal deviate on Mads and me? I’ll tell you what you said when you wake up and you’ll know you’re safe.”

Vlad laughed weakly. “Lots of crappy…scenarios….J-Jack? I was trying to protect you…You and Mads…d-didn’t see ghosts as human…..as feeling…. And after D-Danny showed up.. I made a decision…I distracted you from him…..so you w-wouldn’t hurt Phantom. I gave y-you a villain….because…my life was already….ending….I was losing….And I thought I could at least save….y-you all…J-Jackie? Danny…he r-reminds me of Liz….”

Vlad swallowed and coughed. “I-In the end….I managed to live…even after they were torn apart….She r-ripped us apart….”

Jack worriledly retracted Vlad from his shoulder, “Who tore you apart? Who’s us?”

Vlad groaned, “Mads…and J-Jack…were hunting the wrong things….Jackie? They’re after….us….One took Daniel…and its sibling s-stole away my little one..”

Jack went wide-eyed, “Vladdie? What things?”

Vlad’s head weakly dropped to his chest as Jack gently shook him. “Demons….corrupted g-ghosts and…poltergeists….J-Jack…? I c-can’t protect them…My p-powers aren’t working….They poisoned me..”

Jack froze, “Demons?”

Maddie held a similar confused and slightly terrified expression. Vlad nodded weakly and half coherently laughed, “J-Jack….? You and Mads…never…caught anything for …a reason….I…took care of the…demonics…..and Clockwork….C-Clockwork manipulates…portals to get…the innocents b-back in the zone….Danny doesn’t k-know the rules…or how it works…”

Vlad began lapsing out, “We…aren’t full ghosts….or fully human….They keep coming…they know. The kids got taken… One was waiting by the d-diner…Six more a-ambushed us….Two snatched me at the s-station. They f-fed…..on us…”

Jack gently put a hand to Vlad’s head, “Maddie? Help me get that IV in him. The fever is getting higher….”

Vlad flinched as his left arm was taken up and a needle was inserted. A cold liquid splashed over the area and Vlad groaned, “Tastes….f-funny.”

Maddie patted his shoulder. “I’m just making sure the site is clean…You’re going to feel a slight pinch.”

Vlad nodded. “Mads?…Mads…I’m sorry….You s-scared me…earlier… I forgot that duplicate wasn’t D-Danny…. I thought he died…”

Maddie grimaced. “Shhh… Vladimir… Just go to sleep.”
Vlad sleepily groaned and flashed a small smile from under the mask, exposing a set of fangs, “D-Dreams...weird....Hospital stuff...but no one’s....cutting me o-open....this time...or electrocuting...m-me...”

Maddie almost dropped the needle she was brandishing by the IV tube. Jack worriedly questioned, “Vladdie? What are you talking about?”

Vlad shivered, “Mads and Jack left.... The nurse....she had fun d-doing it.... My friends left and the n-nightmares started again....”

Jack leaned over the bed and redirected Vlad’s face. “Vladdie.... What happened to you bud? What did the nurse do?”

Vlad groaned and leaned into Maddie and Jack’s hold. “The nurse....and the doctor....they cut me open Jack...T-they lied...She was laughing.” Blue eyes sparked red.

Jack swallowed, “Maddie? Do you have a ghost dazer on you?”

Maddie nodded and pulled one of the darts out of her belt.

Jack gently fingered a spot near the small of Vlad’s back and grabbed the dart. “Buddy? You’re going to take a nap for a bit.... When you wake up we’ll all be here and so will the kids.”

Vlad groaned, “Promise?”

Jack smiled encouragingly. “Yeah, bud. I promise.”

Vlad passed out quickly as the dart pierced the spot and Jack gently re-laid him against the bed.

Maddie was still frozen by the IV and shaking slightly. “What does he mean.... Jack? We were there with him! He was smiling with us in the hospital.... We didn’t leave him!”

Jack furrowed his brow and leaned down to get the pajama pants onto Vladimir. “Mads? He’s been dissected.... The proof is right here.... I don’t know why he never told us or how someone could’ve pulled this with us visiting every single day for almost two years...The fact remains that someone did hurt him and we weren’t there when he needed us most.”

Maddie grimaced, “But how Jack? There would’ve been signs! Something! Injuries that severe...God, it would take months for wounds like that to heal!”

Jack furrowed his brow. “I don’t know Maddie.” He stepped around to Vlad’s right arm. “I just don’t know...Right now we have bigger problems to deal with.”

Maddie sighed in exasperation but nodded. “I’ll get his arm situated. Jack? Try to get ahold of the kids again.”

Jack sighed and nodded. “I’ll be downstairs. Make sure to cover him up...He’s shivering pretty bad.”

Maddie nodded and forced a small smile. “Sure honey.”

Jack tiredly descended the ladder and made his way into the pouring rain outside before unlatching the door leading back into the house.

‘I hope the kids pick up this time....I don’t want them out in this weather.’
Bertrand and Spectra had returned from the zone in a confused haze. The ghost dimension was panicking at the energy discharge that had bounced across the different territories a few hours ago... The blinding flash of white light had been instantaneous and so powerful, that it had shifted doors, domiciles, and islands askew like a child blowing at a dandelion.

Many specters were panicking at the massive energy fluctuation. Talk of the great spectral quake that had shifted the zone years prior was circulating between ghouls and phantoms of every age group. Walker would be gathering men for some sort of search and rescue in the zone... Forces would be mobilized.

The two demonics knew the source of the sudden spike in energy all too well. The bull had sent out a distress call... a rather frantic and desperate plea....and soon enough his beloved appointees and subordinates would be flocking to the portal in an effort to save him. Bertrand glanced at the ectoplasm by his foot in the lab and growled. Sticking a finger in the dully glowing liquid and bringing it to his mouth, he licked the digit and spat the decaying plasma out in disgust. “He’s on this side of the portal.”

Spectra didn’t need to be told twice. Smiling sinisterly, she raised her hand and blasted the portal’s control box, severing the doorway and locking it from their side.

Bertrand grinned, “And now that those pesky ghouls are taken care of, what do you say we find our little meal?”

Spectra giggled, “Sounds like a plan hubby.”
Daniel was flying through the air for probably the thousandth time with no progress. The rain had picked up and no manner of intangibility seemed to keep the cold out. He had circled over the town, under the town, tore city hall apart practically and nothing had even remotely led to Vlad’s location. No blood, no ectoplasm… absolute zilch.

A sudden gust of frigid wind tumbled him slightly as he landed back at the diner. Danni was sitting in one of the booths with an uneaten slice of apple pie in front of her. Sam was gently patting soothing circles on her back and trying to coax her to eat. “Danni? Please champ? You have to eat.”

Danni shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

Sam sighed but didn’t push the twelve-year-old. She didn’t feel like eating much either.

Daniel took a deep breath as he phased the water off of himself. Sam looked up at the noise, somewhat hopefully only for Daniel to shake his head bitterly. Her head drooped to the table and a hand went to her brow. “Danny? What if those two things took him….What if he’s-”

Daniel flinched. “I….I think it’s time we called Tucker and Jaz back in… Vlad is probably inside somewhere right now waiting out this storm.” Even as he said it, his eyes hollowed. The likelihood Vladimir was safe and sound, waiting out this uncharacteristically icy and dangerous weather was beyond minuscule if not completely improbable.

A dull buzzing echoed through his form and he sighed before shifting and tiredly clicking on his phone to answer the call. His father quickly sputtered, “Daniel?! Vlad’s here.”

The teen froze in place and his pupils dilated in shock. Swallowing, he questioned, “What did you do?”

Jack paused, “Danny...god...Son, I never knew...”

Daniel trembled. “Vlad….What did you do to Vlad?”

Jack went silent for a moment. “I made a mistake. Danny? Come home...Whoever else you roped into this? Bring them here to…. We need to talk.”

Daniel’s eyes shifted to an icy blue and the diner’s temperature dropped rapidly. “WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?”

Jack swallowed and took a deep breath. “Danny, please son-”

“SHUT UP!” Icy tears clicked and shattered against the laminate he was standing over. White rings hissed in agitation at his waist, coaxing the teen to forgo his humanity in favor of the Phantom form. Daniel didn’t even notice the phone in his hands shattering into a billion pieces until it was too late. Sam and Danni were staring at him in fear. Sam spoke, “Danny? What?”

Daniel shifted fully and gritted his teeth. “Sam? Take care of Danni. I have to deal with a family issue. I’ll call you after I find Vlad.”

Sam nodded and Daniel floated out of the diner at full speed, dodging cars, signs, people and stop lights as he ascended almost completely tangible. Floating above the town and making out his home a short distance below, he pivoted in midair and dived toward the faint light shining from the
operation’s booth. Phasing through the metal and landing on the steel floor he looked around expecting his father only to freeze at the smell of burnt lemons permeating the air. Eyes locked on the clear cell in horror. Legs became leaden as he stumbled to the containment cell. He could see the blood and ectoplasm smeared across the middle of the floor and the handprint clawed into the plastic.

Daniel couldn’t help what came next. The sensory overload was too much. Falling to his knees his slouched over and hurled. ‘My…..my goddamn parents……They couldn’t have……oh god….Vlad.. ..’

He stumbled back away from the plastic, glowing green eyes darting around the space in a confused and adrenaline crazed panic. He continued backing up until his back hit an unfamiliar object in the middle of the floor. A hand grasped onto the metal numbly. Turning his head toward the table he trembled. ‘No...NO.. NO...NO..NOOOO..’

His white-gloved fingers wrapped against one of the legs, and he brought himself to a standing position. A hand smeared against the green and red dripping from the metal gurney. He, of course, did the most logical thing when confronted with that level of gore and what it could imply.

He screamed.
Maddie was just tucking Vladimir in and propping his arm into some ice when a pained and terrified scream shot through the operations booth. Dropping the pack in her hand to the floor, she whipped around and ran out of the room to find the op center icing over with frost. Danny Phantom…. Her son was trembling against the console and staring at-

‘Oh no.’ Running forward she gently wrapped her arms around him despite the cold. The teen phased through her grasp and fell to the floor in a hyperventilating heap. Maddie raised her hands in a motion of calm. “Danny? Honey… It's alright!”

Daniel shook his head vigorously, “He was protecting us! Why?!? You-”

Maddie kneeled down and attempted to place a hand to the teenager only for him to look at her in horror. Her own jumpsuit was splattered in reds and greens and the dim lighting brought out the ectoplasm’s ghostly glow.

“Y-You didn't…. Mom? Please tell me you didn't kill him! Please!” The last words came out as more of a sob than an actual question. Maddie froze and gently assured, “You're going to wake him up. Shhh. Danny?”

Daniel just stared blankly at her. “You're lying… he couldn't shift…. The blood-”

Maddie cringed and this time her hand connected to his icy shoulder. “Danny? He was hurt pretty bad. That blood and ectoplasm aren't from what you think.”

Daniel trembled as she hugged him against herself. Her hand gently ran through his snow-white hair as he shook. “My brave little boy…. Danny? I'm so sorry…. I'm sorry for every time I yelled at you about school or being late getting home…. Honey? I could never be able to apologize enough….”

Daniel's arms weakly clipped under her waist and pulled her closer. “M-Mom?… Vlad? Where is he?!? The blood-”

Maddie sighed and weakly smiled from over his shoulder. “Come on… I'll take you to see him. We just finished stitching his arm and splinting it.”

She made a move to get up but Daniel held fast to her waist. Sighing, she cradled his soaked and shivering form against herself. Small sobs echoed through the room. Maddie's hand continued rhythmically rubbing through his hair. “Danny? You're going to catch a cold like this baby… Come on. We need to get you warmed up.”

The teen let out a strangled laugh through his tears. In a small whisper, he protested, “I'm used to the cold mom.”

Maddie sighed. “Sure Mr. Hero….sure. Don't go pulling a tough guy act on me when you're shivering like crazy.”

Daniel shook slightly harder from a mixture of relief and fatigue. “I can make ice cubes out of thin air mom… the cold isn't that bad to me…”

A head tiredly slumped against her neck and she stiffened. “Danny?”

Daniel wearily whispered, “Mom?...How bad off is he?”
Maddie winced. “He's still hurt really bad... He was delirious from blood loss and oxygen deprivation when I got here.... Your father thought Plasmius hurt you and Vladimir.... We both did.”

Daniel stiffened and shook slightly more. “D-Dad? Where is he?”

Maddie sighed and clamped a hand to the teen's shoulders. “Come on.... shift already? We have to get you dry. Dad's downstairs in the house calling your friends and trying to get ahold of you.”

Daniel nodded and sighed. “What happened in here mom?”

Maddie cringed. “W-We thought Plasmius.... that Vladimir was a ghost... We put him in a pressurized chamber and he-.... Danny? Your father is beyond hurt and grief-stricken right now. He had to watch Vlad shift and when he couldn't stitch him up he called me back here...”

Daniel grimaced, “I-I want to see him...I want to see Vlad...”

Maddie nodded and rubbed a small circle into his back before helping him back to his feet. The teen stumbled and nearly collapsed again, so Maddie curved her arm under his shoulder blade to support him. His green eyes froze at the table in front of them and he shuttered. Maddie noted the reaction and quickly turned him from the mess. “I'll get it cleaned up Danny... I'm sorry you had to see that. I was so busy getting Vladimir's arm taken care of I didn't think to clean up the operations booth.”

Daniel nodded robotically. “M-mom? You and dad need to get that up.... There's a little girl like us and if she sees that...”

Maddie went stock still and whipped her head to her son. “You mean there's more of you? How many-?”

Daniel sighed. “Only three... Me and Vlad were the first ones from what I gathered. Vlad knows more about us though, he's some sort of paranormal expert... Should be with all of the stuff we were hiding in his house earlier-”

Daniel choked out a weak laugh, “That idiot tricked us... He duplicated but he sent the duplicate with me. He couldn't shift back... Neither could Danni. He had me take her away from the house while he distracted you...”

Maddie openly cringed but quirked an eyebrow, “Danni? She has the same name as you?”

Daniel sighed, “She's not natural like me and Vlad... If there's such a thing about natural for us.” He tiredly rubbed his eyes. “Vlad says she's his...He lost his first kid awhile back and in his grief, I think he tried or ended up making another one of us...”

Maddie cringed again, “So... the little girl is a clone?”

Daniel sighed heavily. “I guess? She's made from Vlad so I think it's safe to reason she's his clone. She's like eleven... I think?”

Maddie sighed. “Are there any more surprises we should know about?”

Daniel paused, “There's a lot actually... Vlad's secretary poisoned him with ghost repellant. She slipped it in these weird pills, roofied him and then she gave him something at the fire station. Two monsters snatched him when he collapsed and took him off into the woods to fuck around with him...” Daniel's teeth gritted angrily. “I got him home and patched him up but that chic showed up downstairs. I went to take care of it and something slipped into his bedroom. Mom? Whatever they
did? Vlad almost didn't make it… He died on us.”

Maddie flinched, “Any other important information?”

Daniel groaned. “Do you want a general recap?”

Maddie nodded slightly and the teen sighed. “Okay… first? Vlad’s been bad off since I sliced him open and beat him black and blue in the zone… I was possessed by this dream demon and Vlad got hurt trying to get me out. I found out because the idiot’s shirt had a cufflink with his initial stamped into it. This whole mess started with me tending to him and more and more bs keeps getting piled on us. The guy hasn’t had any time to heal correctly and earlier this week I could almost poke my hand through his waist! Poisoned? Dragged into a warehouse and taste tested by some harpie bitch? God, his head……He was completely messed up. Tossed into the air and slammed by some sort of mutant gopher monsters? Bitten? Powers fucking up? And then to top off the list? After he was recovering from flat-lining, some sort of green sadist popped into his house and began slow roasting him in front of us.”

Maddie went wide-eyed and cringed. “Elaborate later, honey. For now? He's in here.”

Daniel weakly detached himself from his mother's hold and walked into the room on autopilot. A gloved hand reached over the bed and fingered the IV and breathing mask. “Why’s he hooked up to an IV?”

Maddie sighed, “He has this weird fever…. It still isn't going down and after he lost so many fluids we figured it would be best if he was sedated and given a saline solution.”

Daniel nodded tiredly. “So he's drugged up right now, huh?”

Maddie nodded, “Yeah...he's completely under and probably will still be like this come morning.”

Daniel smiled weakly and wrapped his fingers through the adult's. “You're so stupid Vlad…. So, so stupid... Sam wouldn't stop crying and Tucker and Jaz are probably still freaking out. Poor Danni only stopped crying and blaming herself about an hour ago…”

Daniel squeezed against the adult's palm and a few stray tears splattered against the floor below him. “You're giving me gray hair old man...and I'm not talking about Phantom…”

Vlad shifted slightly where he laid and Daniel chuckled. “I thought you left me...Do you know how shitty that was? I finally have someone who can hold my hand through this half ghost stuff and I thought you bailed on me... Gaining a friend who understands how lonely it is? Having someone who can tell me why my powers work or how ghosts work? I was ecstatic and then the entire world crashed down on me.”

Vlad turned slightly and the teen sighed. “And to top this all off? You helped my parents figure out who I am… Are you trying to one-up me in the hero department?”

Maddie couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. Daniel continued fuming to the unconscious adult, this time with slight agitation. “I am so pissed at you and I can't even vent properly because you're conked out for the billionth time this week!”

Maddie silently stepped forward. “Shhh, he's drugged but he can still wake up if you keep flailing about next to him.”

Daniel sighed and noting the sweat on Vladimir's brow, raised a hand toward him. Instantly the room dropped twenty degrees and Vladimir relaxed slightly against his bed. “How bad has the fever
been? It hasn't hit one hundred and twenty again has it?"

Maddie paled rapidly, “How high?”

Daniel sighed. “The fever has been a side effect of his secretary continually slipping him stuff … It flares up every time he uses too much energy or gets near the paranormal…The moron went in the zone earlier while he was hurt and when you showed up we were trying to calm him down enough so he could shift back human…. Tucker and me were going to try drugging him up afterward to make sure he was okay….”

Maddie’s hand quickly moved to Vlad's temple and she shivered. The fever was definitely more pronounced with the cold in contrast. Vladimir shuttered and a weakly curl of smoke choked out of his mouth and filled the mask on his face. Daniel stiffened as his own icy mist escaped his jaw. Turning around and charging a hand he leered, “Okay you sick son of a bitch! Come out!”

A male voice laughed. “Aw…. look at that…. The little freak is so protective of little Vladimir. Tell me, chump? If I'm not even here fully right now and he's flaring this badly...What is your ghost form doing to him? Hmmm?”

Daniel's eyes went wide. The voice cackled. “You know? I never would've guessed Dr. Fenton would've spared him for us… Such a compassionate heart… Those are the most fun to toy with and break. Is your fat ass husband in on our little game now?” Maddie glowered and the voice snickered, “And here my wife was hoping you'd scare the bull back into our court.”

Maddie glared into the room and seeing Vlad tossing and writhing in the bed she ripped off the mask and went to secure him. Before she could tackle him against the bed, a pop of green materialized above her and a hand shot out. In a small flash, Vladimir was gone. Something slamming into the metal in the operations booth startled both Fentons out of their shock. Maddie ran forward first and unholstered her gun.

Exiting the guest bedroom she froze. Vladimir was on his knees with a molted green arm wrapped through his hair and jerking his neck sideways. A glowing red needle stood by his throat. The green demon’s red eyes flickered up at her entrance and his hand tightened. Vladimir was choking and gasping weakly for air. Sweat was pouring off of his brow and his eyes were numbly cracked open and flashing from dulled blue to sickly red spasmodically.

The ghost tsksed before continuing in multiple voices. “You know you’re just making our job harder? Now we have to taint our meal to keep him pliant for the finale… Do you have any idea how disgusting poison makes ectoplasm? It's like pouring kool-aid in Chardonnay!” A forked tongue curled outward and licked up the side of Vlad's jaw. “Worse still? This particular vintage is the rarest of both worlds! There’s only the one...”

Vlad shivered and groaned. The ghost chuckled darkly. “He’s really killing himself, isn’t he? So many wonderful memories to tear apart and feast upon… Tell me, Doctor? How do you think his human body will fair with my continued contact?”

Daniel could be heard behind her charging a hand. The ghoul snorted and pulled the needle closer. “You know? I believe it would serve my best interests to grab a quick snack…”

The needle was moved aside but still brandished dangerously close to Vladimir’s neck. The green creature cracked a warped smile, exposing rows of pointed and jagged teeth. Daniel gasped, “DON’T!!!”

The ghoul’s red eyes sparked as he fingered a segment of flesh and watched in mirth as Vladimir
convulsed, “Don’t?” The specter glanced up at Daniel and smirked, “But you morons are making
this so easy...Look at him... He can’t even breathe right now at the simplest of touches from me.
And you? You can’t do anything with this so dangerously close to his precious little neck!” The
needle was pricked slightly against the skin. Daniel froze and Maddie stiffened.

Daniel’s voice cracked, “Don’t... please.... What did he ever do to you?!”

The ghost laughed jovially, “Nothing. He’s just so damned fun to tear apart...Jez kid, do you
honestly think I have to have a reason for hurting him? Feeding on him? Slicing him apart like a little
bird on a cutting board? Please!” The ghoul snorted and rolled his eyes, gripping a hand tighter
against Vlad’s hair he shoved forcefully and a small pained gasp echoed through the room. “Your
stupid hero complex really didn’t teach you much did it kid? Here we are at a standstill with me
holding every card in the deck and you pull the ‘what did he ever do to you’ trope!”

Maddie glowered, “Get your disgusting hands off of him.”

The ghost whistled, “Come now, don’t you hate him? He tricked you all...played with your
emotions...lied? Wouldn’t this be fair? Him suffering is nothing new…”

The specter rubbed a thumb against Vlad’s jugular. “I think the little freak is finally starting to die
from it....There’s only so much a human heart can take in such a short time.” A tongue darted out
again and lapped up a small bit of dried blood from Vlad’s cheek. A broad grin flashed across his
face and his eyes sparked white. “Oh...He’s already slipping? And here I thought he wouldn’t
impale himself on his own horns…” The ghoul glared up at the two people standing rigid in front of
him with mixed expressions of horror and disgust. “He’s been lapsing during the fever, hasn’t he?
Forgetting where and who he is? Soon he won’t even exist anymore...We can’t have that…”

Before either Fenton could intervene, a glowing syringe pierced through flesh and Vlad convulsed.
Two rings darted around his waist as he screamed and the ghost yanked the needle out harshly,
extracting a small amount of blood as he did so. Looking up to Daniel and Maddie he leaned
Plasmius closer and tightened his grip on his throat. Vlad’s red eyes weakly locked on his assailant
and a hand tried to charge. The ghost rolled his eyes and pinned the arm. Squeezing the wrist he
watched as the light extinguished. “Poor pathetic little Vladimir...I can smell the ectoplasm in your
body boiling.”

Vlad’s eyes sparked white and the ghoul tsked, “Oh Vladdie! Your little exorcism abilities aren’t
going to work with that energy building up in your body...You’re either going to burn out like a
lightbulb or finally form that sweet little power conduit…. It doesn't matter to me or my wife
though...Either way, as long as we get you before the change cements itself, we win…”

Daniel turned ashen, “WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?!”

Vlad seemed to be struggling against the smoke in his lungs and his eyes were glazing over. To
Daniel and Maddie’s amazement, he managed to weakly glare at the green specter pinning him. His
eyes flashed white again and he hissed, “G-Get off.”

The demon glanced back at his hostage and raised an eyebrow in amused glee, “Oh? You’re more
conscious than I gave you credit for...” A hand tugged into Vlad’s hair and forced him to stare into
his assailant’s much darker red eyes. “Just try it... See what happens. I’m sure little Daniel and his
mother would love to see your true form being ripped apart embassy.”

The energy in the room crackled, “F-Fuck you.”

The demonic snickered, “Just be a good little meal? This is over, it's been over for a long time…
You struggling is just getting pathetic. You’d think after losing-”

Something inhuman sparked across Vlad’s features, and white flashed in the room. The green specter sighed and cocked his head. “Go to sleep brat.”

And without warning a hand shot out, and phased into Vlad’s chest. Vlad froze up and the specter teased, “You’re familiar with this right Vladimir? How about we teach Daniel a lesson in Demonics, hmmm?” The specter’s form flickered around the hand and Vlad’s skin turned an ashen gray tinted teal. “Partial solidification in a living creature causes their body to go into shock.” Maddie and Daniel both rushed forward and the demonic growled, “Don’t jump to any quick conclusions. I can easily kill him from this position if I so choose. Just sit back and watch the show.”

Maddie was at a loss for words and her eyes widened. Bringing a hand to her belt to holster her weapon in mock surrender, she clicked the panic button near her medi-pouch. ‘Jack...please hurry.’

Vlad hacked and convulsed at the intrusion in his chest and the hand deepened, “Oh...That’s your heart isn’t it Vladimir?”

Vlad shuttered and his eyes rolled back slightly. Ectoplasm began dripping down his jaw and a small gurgle echoed in the room. The ghost purred at the sound, “Shhh, We’ll make this quick...Just relax Vladimir....” Vlad’s eyes began closing. The ghost deepened its hand slightly more and Vlad screamed.

The green demonic smiled, “Whoops...To close?”

Vlad fell forward as the ghoul retracted a slightly green and red speckled limb. Black talons elongated on the creature's hands. “Thanks to you Vladimir, the entire zone is buzzing around in a panic like a beehive with a stick rammed through it.” A hand tilted Plasmius’s collar and glowered at the fabric obscuring the flesh.

“That little warning system your body maintains is oh so bothersome. Entire areas of the zone pushed and shoved around like leaves in the wind because of one pathetic little creature’s panicked responses...How about we give your precious friends and appointees something to really panic over?”

A hand lifted Vladimir up slightly and latched onto the collar by his left shoulder almost debatingly. “I wonder how sweet your anguish has made your blood?”

Fingers dug into the fabric and a ripping sound could be made out. Fangs extended and then an eardrum-shattering pop ripped through the space. The specter screamed in agony before fading into green mist in front of the startled occupants in the room. Daniel rushed forward and turned Vlad onto his back. His father was by his side in an instant and lifting Vlad up off of the floor. Carrying Vladimir back to the guest bedroom, Jack turned to his wife and son in a panic, “What happened?!”

Daniel growled and ran to the bed. “A FUCKING DEMON TRIED EATING HIM AGAIN!”

Maddie’s hands worriedly pushed both men aside. “Get out of the way.”

Putting her fingers to Vlad’s neck she growled angrily and began pulling him up slightly against the cot. “Jack? Go lock down the house. That thing was a duplicate and the real one is probably going to try and make a return visit before the night is out.”

Daniel turned to his father, “Did you get ahold of Sam or Jaz?!?”

Jack nodded, “They’re downstairs son. Them, Tucker and a little girl.” He turned out of the guest bedroom and into the lab area. “The ghost shield isn’t fully operationally but I can get it to layer
Fenton Works at the very least.”

Maddie yanked onto Daniel’s arm as he turned to assist his father. “Not so fast. I need your help, Danny… I don’t know anything about you or Vladimir’s bodies.”

Daniel nodded and walked back to the bed worriedly, “What do you need to know?”

Maddie sighed, “What’s a normal standard for you? I can try to gauge what his vitals need to be at if I have you as a base.”

Daniel nodded, “Usually our temperature stays around eighty degrees in both forms, we have accelerated healing, um… and our heart rates are proportionate to our body weights. That’s all I know mom… I’m not the expert on half-ghosts, Vlad is.”

Maddie nodded and instructed, “I need a thermometer… and a needle. I need to see what they just injected him with and what it’s doing to him internally.”

Daniel looked back to her and went to nod only to freeze. Vlad was sitting up behind her and staring blankly ahead. “Vlad?”

Maddie whipped around just in time to see him being encased in angry pink energy. With a muted pop, he vanished from the bed and reappeared a few short feet away from them on his left hand and knees gasping and choking for air. Before he could get enough air into his lungs the energy crackled again and he was flung haphazardly through yet another gap between the zone and Fenton Works. Maddie and Daniel shared an equal expression of horror before a pained scream shot back into the space. Vlad fell with a muted pop from the ceiling and clawed a hand out in desperation. Black rings swirled like mini novas and flickered chaotically, popping and hissing in agitation. Smoke curled up around the spots on his body covered in bandages and he cried out in pain. Daniel pounced, wrapping a hand around Vlad’s arm only to retract the hand with a hiss of pain.

Vlad had burned him.

Choked screaming continued to radiate from the adult and his eyes widened in panic. The rings shifted rapidly and Vlad Master’s popped into being and gasped out against the stifling heat. Claws ripped through bandages and the adult hissed and scratched as rings formed yet again by his waist. Maddie could be seen running out of the room in a blind panic.
Vlad was finally on the very harrowing conclusion that this was one of the worst weeks he had ever had in the entirety of his life... and he had been privy to some really terrible weeks. In fact, he was positive he was the champion for dealing with rather crappy situations and circumstances...but this? Well....This was right up there with being used as a life-sized version of *Operation* and having his mind fucked over for two and a half years by a demon.

‘I’m in a bed?’ That’s the first thought he had before he noted the sharp lemony scent burning up his throat. ‘I’m suffocating again? What is-’

And then he felt the pop and cold static of weightlessness around him. Something had just teleported him. Coughing and struggling against the hold on his chest, Vlad’s eyes weakly trailed around the room before his neck was roughly yanked to the side and he was forced into the floor. ‘Ugh....metal panels....Fenton logos...’ He paused in thought and his brow furrowed slightly. ‘Crud....I’m in Fenton Works? Well, this day can’t possibly get any worse.’

As if to prove him wrong something sharp clipped against the base of his throat. ‘I stand corrected....It just got exponentially worse.’

A demonic was brandishing something extremely thin and sharp by his jugular...

“You know you’re just making our job harder? Now we have to taint our meal to keep him pliant for the finale... Do you have any idea how disgusting poison makes ectoplasm? It's like pouring kool-aid in Chardonnay!”

Vlad internally fumed at the analogy. ‘Great....Just peachy-ugh... How did this thing get into Fenton Works...?’ Vlad twitched slightly to try and see who or what was holding him like a freshly plucked turnip but failed to do so without the grip in his hair tightening painfully. To his chagrin, the situation escalated to the usual progression of events that occurred when a demonic had him in a tight spot. A slimy, ectoplasm coated tongue flicked through fangs and swept a long line up the side of his jaw for a teasing taste. ‘YOU NASTY FUCKER. I HOPE YOU BITE YOUR DAMNED TONGUE OFF!’

The specter smirked slightly, no doubt having tasted a small bit of blood and hearing the internal commentary, “Worse still? This particular vintage is the rarest of both worlds! There’s only the one...”

Vlad shivered and groaned, a cross between disgust and annoyance coursing through his still confused and somewhat drugged mind. ‘Whatever you are? Whoever you are? BREATHMINTS.’

He could feel the specter holding him stiffen slightly at the mental remark before pulling into his hair again. ‘AH! STOP THAT!’

The ghost chuckled darkly. “He’s really killing himself, isn’t he? So many wonderful memories to tear apart and feast upon... Tell me, Doctor? How do you think his human body will fair with my continued contact?”

Vlad tensed slightly. ‘Doctor? Why would a doctor be in--Oh...?Maddie... Wait!? Why am I in human form? Better yet, why am I not clipped to a table and being categorized into beakers like a housewife’s spice rack?’

The ghost holding him seemed to pick up on the dry humor and mocked,“You know? I believe it
would serve my best interests to grab a quick snack…"
Something scraped across the skin next to Vlad’s throat and he restrained himself from squirming.
Daniel screamed out from somewhere in the room and Vlad’s confusion doubled. “DON’T!!”

‘ He’s in Phantom form? His voice is warped...What the heck did I just wake up to?’ His right arm
shifted lightly and he winced. ‘ My arms broke? Well, that’s just dandy…. I guess that happened
when I fell earlier.’ A finger brushed by the flesh on his neck and rubbed against it teasingly, one
sharp point tapped against the side debatingly. Vlad couldn't help the small jerk he gave at being
handled like a kid’s juice pouch.

The ghost smiled knowingly out of the corner of his eye. ‘This smug asshole is still comparing me to
wine and kool-aid.’

“ Don’t?” The specter glanced up and smirked, “ But you morons are making this so easy...Look at
him… He can’t even breathe right now at the simplest of touches from me. And you? You can’t do
anything with this so dangerously close to his precious little neck!”

Vlad felt the tip puncture the skin and dizzily tried pulling back. The ghost anticipated the movement
and held him steady.

“ Don’t….please....What did he ever do to you?!” Daniel’s voice, somewhat panicked, echoed
through the room.

Vlad shivered weakly. ‘ This is the worst wake up call I’ve ever had. What are you up to slimeball?
Going to give me a nifty little piercing?’

The ghost laughed jovially more from the sarcasm than Daniel’s questioning. Regarding the teen, he
flippantly answered, “ Nothing. He’s just so damned fun to tear apart...Jez kid, do you honestly think
I have to have a reason for hurting him? Feeding on him? Slicing him apart like a little bird on a
cutting board? Please!”

Vlad growled internally. ‘ Well aren’t you nice Winifred? How about you just-’ The ghoul snorted
and rolled his eyes, gripping a hand tighter against Vlad's hair he shoved forcefully backward,
agitating his stitched shoulder and pulling a small pained gasp from his throat.

Continuing nonchalantly with the conversation he mused,“ Your stupid hero complex really didn’t
teach you much did it kid? Here we are at a standstill with me holding every card in the deck and
you pull the ‘what did he ever do to you’ trope!”

Vlad swallowed weakly and sarcastically retorted mentally, ‘Wow….flattery! Too bad you're the
joker in this deck. What are you? Ninety percent poorly planned spinach Gerber food and ten percent
stupid? You're in a house dedicated to ghost hunting! Just a friendly FYI, asshole.’

The ghost frowned and roughly yanked against his scalp for the umpteenth time. Vlad's eyebrow
weakly twitched. Maddie's voice jostled him slightly, “ Get your disgusting hands off of him.”

Vlad froze. ‘ What happened to killing me? I was sure she hated this side and Plasmius at this
point?!” The ghost seemed to have a similar thought and whistled, “Come now, don’t you hate him?
He tricked you all...played with your emotions...lied? Wouldn’t this be fair? Him suffering is nothing
new…”

‘ Way to state the fu- ugh...stop screwing around with me!!!’ The specter was rubbing its thumb
against Vlad’s jugular in light warning and mock comfort. “ I think the little freak is finally starting to
die from it….There’s only so much a human heart can take in such a short time.”
Vlad couldn’t help the mental profanities he spewed as the tongue curved back against his face and lapped up a small bit of dried blood from his cheek like an ice cream cone. The specter chuckled lightly but the noise was restrained and easily confused for a light ‘tut’ before a broad grin flashed across his face. Eyes sparked embassy white and Vlad cringed, ‘Well shit….it’s a mimic.’

“Oh…He’s already slipping? And here I thought he wouldn’t impale himself on his own horns…” The ghoul glared up at the two people standing in front of them.

Vlad’s eyes were finally beginning to focus on his surroundings. Seeing both Maddie and Daniel’s expressions of horror and disgust, he mentally slapped himself. ‘Come on Vladimir! You need to take care of this cocky son of a bitch… Wake up.’ The ghost holding him snickered again and a finger prodded at the nape of his neck. “He’s been lapsing during the fever, hasn’t he? Forgetting where and who he is? Soon he won’t even exist anymore…We can’t have that…”

‘WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?’ And then the needle rammed into his neck. A choked gasp broke through his drugged consciousness and he shuddered as the plunger was emptied and a small amount of blood was ravenously extracted from the same spot. His body flailed and bucked slightly in an effort to remove the object digging dangerously close to his windpipe. And then it hit…. The heat became a thousand times worse. At the sight of the rings desperately flickering and spasming around his waist and seeing the halfa caught up in throws of pain, the demonic quickly removed the needle.

Looking up to Daniel and Maddie, he leaned Vladimir closer and tightened his grip on his throat. A finger rubbed against the skin again as if to say, ‘You really should have shut up while you were ahead...bet that stung, huh?’

Vlad growled again mentally, ‘W-What...the fuck....did....you just...do?!’ Red eyes weakly locked on his assailant and he tried condensing some of the rampant energy ripping through his body to his unwounded arm. The ghost rolled his eyes and pinned the arm by the wrist up against his chest, restraining both his injured right and the uninjured left in such a way that pain would be impossible to avoid if he tried to loosen the grip. To get the point across, the ghoul squeezed agonizingly slowly while using the left arm to put pressure on the injured right.

“Poor pathetic little Vladimir...I can smell the ectoplasm in your body boiling.”

‘I’ll show you boiling you giant eyesore!!!’ Vlad’s eyes sparked white and the ghoul tsked, “Oh Vladie! Your little exorcism abilities aren’t going to work with that energy building up in your body...You’re either going to burn out like a lightbulb or finally form that sweet little power conduit…. It doesn’t matter to me or my wife though...Either way, as long as we get you before the change cements itself, we win…”

As if to really drive the fact home, the creature leaned forward and the energy flared up again. It was like dumping gasoline on a bonfire. Energy could tangibly be seen flickering and sparking from Vlad’s body and into the surrounding area. ‘WHAT’S HAPPENING TO ME?!”

Daniel seemed to see the plight and screamed in an angered panic. “WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?!”

The heat was practically bordering on roasting someone over a rotisserie skewer. The sparks were everywhere and black was beginning to crawl back into his vision. The smoke was still there, starving off the air and crippling his lungs with every choked breathe he managed to inhale before sputtering or gasping weakly. ‘FUCK THIS!’

Looking up despite the hold and glaring at his assailant Vlad hissed with evident malice, “G-Get
White eyes flared and sparked in time with the chaotic ripping tearing into his chest right above his heart. ‘ I’m going to fucking core you like an apple if you don’t unhand me this instant!’

The demon glanced back at his hostage and raised an eyebrow in amused glee, “Oh? You’re more conscious than I gave you credit for...” A hand tugged into Vlad’s hair and forced him to stare into his assailant’s much darker red eyes. “Just try it... See what happens. I’m sure little Daniel and his mother would love to see your true form being ripped apart embassy.”

The energy in the room crackled, “F-Fuck you.”

The demonic snickered, “Just be a good little meal? This is over, it’s been over for a long time... You struggling is just getting pathetic. You’d think after losing-”

Something inhuman flashed across Vlad’s features, and white flashed in the room. ‘DO NOT BRING THEM INTO THIS YOU UGLY BASTARD! MY FAMILY HAS NOTHING TO-’ The green specter sighed and cocked his head. “Go to sleep brat.”

And without warning a hand shot out, and phased into Vlad’s chest. Vlad froze up and the specter teased, “You’re familiar with this right Vladimir? How about we teach Daniel a lesson in Demonics, hmmm?” The specter’s form flickered around the hand and Vlad’s skin turned an ashen gray tinted teal. “Partial solidification in a living creature causes their body to go into shock.” ‘S-Shit....ugh....stop...’

Maddie and Daniel both rushed forward and the demonic growled, “Don’t jump to any quick conclusions. I can easily kill him from this position if I so choose. Just sit back and watch the show.”

At this point seeing anything was pretty much pointless. Vlad was being conked out again forcefully and he had absolutely no control over the darkness or the fire seemingly tearing into his veins. Vlad hacked and convulsed at the intrusion in his chest and the hand deepened, “Oh...That’s your heart isn’t it Vladimir?”

‘My heart....but he’s not touching...What is this?...The warmth hurts....Someone...help......’ Vlad shuttered and his eyes rolled back slightly. Ectoplasm began dripping down his jaw and a small gurgle echoed in the room. The ghost purred at the sound, “Shhh, We’ll make this quick...Just relax Vladimir....”

Vlad was starting to agree with the demon’s voice. The heat was just so painful....It was spiraling out from where the monster's hand was clawing and each finger stroke of its taloned hand left him reeling and slipping further into a pained comatose state. Vlad’s eyes began closing. ‘My...heart?....Why...does it burn?.....Someone...make it stop..’

The ghost grinned wickedly at the mental plea and accommodated teasingly by deepening its hand slightly more. This time the heat was accompanied by something just a painful...Something was phasing through his human heart.

Vlad screamed and green demonic smiled, “Whoops...To close?”

Vlad fell forward as the ghoul retracted a slightly green and red speckled limb. He didn’t even notice the slight reprieve before he fainted weakly and plummeted into his capture’s taloned clutches.

The next thing he knew? Well, somehow he had made it back into a bed. A part of him desperately wanted to shrug being licked over and manhandled like a lollipop as nothing more than a fever induced hallucination.... The problem was, this wasn't his bed... and the pained, searing heat was still coursing through his veins like liquid iron.
He winced weakly and dizzily noted someone calling his name. Before he could figure out or even try piecing together the situation, the spot around his heart fluctuated and rippled painfully within him.

Eyes went as big as saucers and with a violent shove, he was sent flailing through pocket dimensions. He tried to take in a ragged breath out of instinct and was greeted with an airless suffocating void. A hand weakly fumbled to his throat and quickly jerked away at the feeling of his neck being subjected to hot iron.

To his absolute horror, voices began flickering against the inside of his head in time with the pulses of heat. Vague, garish images plumed and morphed inside his skull and tainted his vision.

"Dad? When do you think Uncle Skulk will be back from the zone?"

Vlad laughed gently from his spot in the kitchen, "I take it you're getting sick of my cooking, Anna?"

A small giggle and a cold breeze by his ear caused him to turn and his arm quickly snapped out to catch the child as she tackled him. Two brilliant white rings eclipsed her form but then halted at her waist and snapped back. A sickly green paler spread upon her cheeks and Vlad froze fearfully.

'It’s rejecting….Oh….god..’ ‘SWEETY? ANNA? HONEY? WHAT’S-?!’

A small smile tugged at dazed lips. ‘Dad? I d-don’t feel so good...’

And then to his absolute horror, green ectoplasm began trickling down her nose and her eyes rolled back. She fell backward, limp in his arms and he screamed.

There was another pop of fluctuating energy and with a defeated gasp Vladimir reappeared a few short feet away from them on his hands and knees gasping and choking for air.

‘Hey, Liz? You’re stepping on my feet.’ A young raven haired boy smirked from above a head of wavy brown and copper tresses.

The girl looked up with owlish green eyes and smirked, ‘You’re the one who wanted to teach me how to dance, Vlad! If you knew I was this hopeless you probably never would have offered!’ She pouted comically and Vladimir sighed.

‘As much as I love you stepping on my feet Little Badger, I think it would be better if we slowed down. Watch what I’m doing Liz.’ A hand tightened gently around a clammy palm and, seeing she was distracted, the boy smirked devilishly and spun her around, toppling both children into a small twin sized bed. Laughing and giggling with one another, the two stiffened abruptly at the sound of a front door opening and boots being removed in the kitchen. Vlad paled rapidly. Turning to his sibling, he growled, ‘HIDE!’

The child locked up as the footsteps approached and Vladimir hastily dragged her up and pushed her under the bed.

A voice echoed from the doorway as it was pushed open ‘Vladimir? Come here for a moment.’

Vlad shuttered and swallowed before making his way to the door. A large hand whipped out and the memory blackened.

Vladimir gasped at the emotional overhaul on his brain and flailed. Lungs desperately tried taking in the air he would need but failed to do so before the energy shifted to his waist again and he was slung back into another pocket dimension.
“You know, Jack, the Dairy King's ghost could haunt these very halls…” Before he could even finish the thought Jack enthusiastically shouted, “I'll get the bags!”

And then ran post haste out the front door. Vlad smirked with accomplishment. ‘Same old, same old. I'm glad he's still such an obsessive goof….’ A warmth followed by extreme grief flashed through Vlad’s subconscious.

Smiling evilly he lamented, ‘Now I have to scare him…’ he paused in thought and turned away from the Fentons. ‘What the heck would scare Jack?!?! The guys practically immune to everything!’

Flashes of memory came to mind with Vlad trying to prank Jack when they were younger. Fake spiders... air horns... sudden noises... Vlad groaned. This was going to be way harder and much more consequential to both of them. ‘Fake spiders and air horns, does not a villain make…’ He pursed his lips.

Glancing back at the two teenagers bickering in the hall he smirked. ‘Liz? Do you think we could have ended up that way? If you and I could have just lived with Sheryl? If he hadn't…’ Vlad realizing his thoughts were getting darker glanced around the entrance way warily. ‘It's these blasted colors...it has to be... damn it…’

The demon smiled wickedly.

The rings flicked and spasmed against his waist and the fire intensified. Tears began streaming down his jaw. Eyes haloed from brilliant glowing red to muted and almost completely glazed blue as the torrent of repressed emotions and memories clawed apart his mind and the fire consumed him. He couldn’t help the scream that shattered the void around him despite the lack of air and continued once he flopped back into Fenton Works. Falling onto the floor in a shaking and trembling heap he clawed a hand out in desperation. A means….any means to ground himself back into reality.

The nightmares were back….

“Vladimir? What type of name is that?” A voice leered from the locker room.

Another voice snorted, “Vladimir the little butcher. He murdered his sister and adoptive dad, you know that right?”

Vlad stiffened and a hand shook against his chest. Pupils dilated and flashbacks of the kitchen swam in his vision. He clenched his eyes shut. The voice from earlier noticed his stiff posture at the accusation and prodded, as a finger brushed against the nape of Vlad’s neck. “Did the little Ruski have another tumble in a back alley? What has it been? A year? I guess murderers can’t stay all sweet and innocent for long.”

Vlad tugged his sweat shirt down slightly harder against his chest in an effort to conceal the old scars. The words...they stung so badly...

Liz had been gone an entire year and no one was letting him forget how much he had failed her.

A hand whipped out and slammed him into the locker. “You know you should just go and fess up to the cops right? Your new mom’s one, maybe she’ll give you a little plea deal?”

Another boy came up to Vlad’s side and snickered, “Murderer…”

Vlad trembled. ‘Stop. Please...Just stop…’

But they, of course, didn’t stop.
What were a few more bruises? It's not like anyone would believe him. He was a monster.

Black rings swirled like mininovas and flickered chaotically, popping and hissing in agitation. Smoke curled up around the spots on his body covered in bandages and he cried out in pain. The warbled scream echoed in the metal room and an icy limb shot out to Vlad’s wrist. The cool reprieve immediately drew back and Vlad screamed out as the heat intensified.

“Poor Vladimir...They just don’t care anymore, do they? They haven’t been here once since the accident...” The red headed nurse grinned from over her clipboard.

Vlad glowered. ‘They’ll come... Jack promised.’

The nurse noted the expression and tsked before leaning forward over his bed. Vlad backed up and clawed a hand into the blankets fearfully.

Her eyes sparked knowingly. “ I haven’t heard any word from your family either.... Did they give up on you to?”

Vlad’s voice became icy. “ They’re dead.”

The nurse pouted and mimed shock. “Just like your social life huh? What a shame, you’re such a good looking kid.” A hand curved under his jaw and wretched his face up to meet her eyes.

“ Well, you were.” Her finger traced a blue and bloodied line trailing down his cheek.

Vlad shivered and glowered, “ Don’t touch me.”

The nurse sighed and tightened her grip. “Don’t worry, we’re here to help you...It’ll all be over soon.”

The cryptic and almost threatening tone in her voice wasn’t lost on Vladimir. His eyes widened and to his horror, she began pushing him back against the cot.

‘Drugs?....She slipped it in...but when did she?....-ugh’

The question went unanswered as he fell into an unrestful sleep.

The rings shifted rapidly and Vlad Masters’s popped into being and gasped out against the stifling heat. Claws ripped through bandages and the adult hissed and scratched as rings formed yet again by is waist. The heat was building and suffocating him all the more rapidly. He was in Fenton Works but at the same time, something was ripping him apart from the inside and pulling him away. His entire body felt like it was in the center of a paranormal game of tug of war over a flaring volcano.

‘FUCK!!!!! AGH!!!! SOMEONE MAKE IT STOP P-PLEASE!!!!’

The rings flurried out and rapidly ripped him back into Plasmius’s form. Ectoplasm and blood flowed freely from his jaw and metal began melting under his hands, burning him further and causing him to flail backward into the wall.

In a poof of pink, he was ripped upward again and tossed waywardly into a black and rippling void.

‘It’s not enough....I don’t have enough air.......’

The demoness smiled evilly. ‘My poor little morsel?....shhh.’

Vlad’s feverish form laborishly shifted back and forth again, this time his mark had stopped glowing.

for flares of pain to overwhelm his body. ‘Damn.....it......can’t......not enough.....’ A brunette woman and a young man with green eyes stood horrified at the obviously unintentional shifts.

‘......Air......some...someone....’

The demon seemed to consider this. ‘Hmmm. Vladimir? We will continue this. For now, though, it goes in MY best interests to keep you alive....’

Vlad choked against the ectoplasm building in his throat. To his belated horror, the electrical abilities he had harnessed and mastered years ago fluctuated and sparked against his own flesh. Consciousness...really just existing was strenuous at this point and with the sudden sharp prickling zigzagging across his chest? Well, being shot and put out of his misery was starting to cross his mind. With a plop he crumpled on top of the bed he had awoken on in a feverish and panting heap. Eyes continued rapidly shifting and hands sparked and glowed mutley at the bottled up energy coursing through his body.

“ VLAD! HOLD ON!”

A large body wrapped around him and attempted pinning him against the bed despite the heat. ‘J-Jack...No....L-let go....’

Daniel could be heard growling something and Maddie was somewhere nearby ordering the two around, “Hold him down!”

Jack was sweating and cursing under his breath. Small holes were beginning to melt into his hazmat suit. Vlad’s eyes widened minutely. ‘ I-I’m hurting...him...’

A black haired head shook in an attempt to warn his friend but he was too late. With a pop, both Vladimir and Jack fell into the airless void. Jack’s eyes widened and Vlad choked weakly in his arms. ‘ F-Force a t-teleportation...F-force it.’ As if to answer his prayers, the pink mist fluctuated around the two of them again and they both fell back into Fenton Works with a loud thump.

Wheezing and sputtering, Vladimir weakly pushed Jack away from him just as the energy wrapped around him again and slung him back.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

At some point, close to tears from oxygen deprivation, Vladimir fainted. Instead of stopping at the lack of Vladimir’s consciousness the pink fluctuated even more spasmodically. Halfway through the vicious cycle of being tossed around like a paranormal rag doll, the electricity shocked him back temporarily only to paralyze his diaphragm. He was now drowning in both the real world and the one in between. In human form and, turning a sickly shade of blue, Vlad’s body slumped from the ceiling for possibly the twentieth time only to be ensnared by a glowing green net. Ice covered hands grabbed him as he fell. Looking up in a blind panic, Daniel screamed, “ HE’S NOT BREATHING!”

Jack rushed to them and quickly hefted Vladimir back to the now singed and ectoplasm splattered cot.

Maddie was already grabbing the mask and bringing it to Vlad’s face. Jack paused as he set him
down and checked his pulse. Vladimir was flatlining.

Maddie noted the expression and instructed, “Jack!? Get the defibrillator!”

Jack nodded and ran as fast as humanly possible to the medical supplies in the operations center.

Maddie began placing the plastic mask and Daniel desperately began cooling the room. Sweat was dripping in rivets down the spine of his jumpsuit and both Maddie and Daniel’s hair had begun clumping to their faces.

Jack returned and, ripping open the medical gown, handed the device to Maddie.

There was a hiss of static, a charge of electricity as the paddles connected, and Vlad’s body convulsed against the cot.

A diaphragm jolted and, to the surrounding group’s relief, his lungs took in a shaky and pained breath.

Color slowly crept back into his cheeks and the blue tint by his mouth began dissipating to a reddish hue. Jack strapped him in and covered him with the ghost proof netting just as his chest arched and sparks of pink light tried forcefully taking him into a pocket dimension again.

Daniel duplicated and icy hands began pinning the adult down further.

Vlad gasped as black rings sparked around his waist and began forcefully pulling shifts in an effort to dissipate the built up energy.

Maddie was frantically running from the room again. “HOLD HIM!”

Plasmius. Masters. Plasmius. Masters. Pained blue eyes rolled and flashed as tears traced down his features. ‘....Make it...stop....P-Please....someone..’

*Maddie’s eyes narrowed as she whipped off her goggles. “YOU COCKY SON OF A BITCH! DID YOU JUST THREATEN MY FAMILY? YOU DISGUSTING ECTOPLASMIC PARASITE!”

*Vlad swallowed. “Mads, please. It’s not-”

*Her eyes widened. “DON’T YOU DARE CALL ME THAT! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT!”

Maddie reappeared over his shoulder and yanked up his wrist. The IV had been pulled out from the earlier confrontation and would probably be too dangerous to attempt reattaching with Vladimir’s flailing. A needle dug into the vein and Vlad gasped out through watery eyes. The fire was dulling slightly….Gaining enough coherence again to notice Maddie above him, his eyes brimmed with horrified tears and then another shock ripped through his flesh, this one light enough to strangle off air for a moment but not enough to push him back under the fog.

Panting and reeling against the misting mask on his face, he lapsed and began stilling against the bed. Maddie’s hand soothingly brushed up through his hair to get it out of his face and wipe away a few tears. Her head turned from him, “Jack?! The morphine isn’t stopping it quick enough!”

Jack cursed and something really cold fell across Vlad’s chest. A small groan escaped through fanged teeth. Daniel was comforting. “Jesus Christ...Vlad...You’re going to be alright!”

His body shifted weakly a few more times before settling in ghost form. Eyes fluttered shut as rings snapped and flickered in agitation one last time before dulling and fading out with a muted hiss.
An all Consuming Power

Huffing in exasperation, Maddie turned to Jack, “Go get a needle! I need to see what’s going on inside him! NOW!” Her hand deftly ripped up Vlad's shirt sleeve as she spoke.

Jack was already out the door and back with a syringe by the time she finished uttering the last syllable. Yanking the needle from him and uncapping it, she brought it to Vladimir’s arm and filled the tube before telling Daniel to clear away from the bed. Adjusting the ice blanket draped over him and making sure the net was secured, she clicked the switch on the side of the bed and watched as a glowing green shield morphed around the space. Satisfied that Vladimir was safe she turned to her spouse and son, “Watch him. If he starts having another attack, sedate him. I’ll be back in a few minutes once I see why his ghost half is going bonkers.”

At this point, Sam, Tucker, Jaz, and Danni had crowded through the torrential downpour outside and into the operations center. Maddie noted the child with them and almost dropped the syringe in her hand. Looking to Jazmine she panikly ordered, “Downstairs…now.”

It was a little late, however. The twelve-year-old could smell the burnt ectoplasm and she could see the needle. Her eyes swept across the room and caught on the table and containment unit marred in grisly shades of burgundy and neon green. Rosy cheeks tinted a deathly paler and her breath caught. Flashbacks of her own body melting slowly and falling apart prior to being stabilized surfaced. Small blue eyes flashed neon green for a brief moment and with a small thud, she fell forward. Maddie quickly set down the needle in her hand and swung forward just in time to catch the small girl.

Looking up at the terrified teenagers she sighed, “Jazmine? Please….Take Danni back downstairs… That’s her name right?”

Jazmine nodded but swallowed, “What happened up here?”

Maddie shivered and her grip tightened on the little girl in her hands. “Us bandaging Vladimir.” She swallowed. “Vlad’s not doing too well right now. I need you kids, to go downstairs. Take her to Daniel’s room and tuck her in… When she wakes up tell her this mess is from us fixing up his arm.”

Jazmine bit her lip but nodded and quickly latched onto Danni. She froze however and looked to her mom apologetically. “I don’t think we’ll be able to get her back down the ladder in this storm.”

Maddie winced and her eyes swept the space tiredly. She was in between a rock and a hard place. She couldn’t have the kids lounging about in the console area because of the gore and she couldn’t drag them into the guest bedroom without inciting a similar panicked and stressed atmosphere.

‘Damn it…’

Looking up to Jazmine, she sighed. “Vladimir is in critical condition right now… I need to see what’s wrong with him. It’s not a good idea for any of you to stay up here.”

At that moment a green-eyed, white-haired teen walked into the room. “I’ll phase them downstairs. Mom? Hand her over.”

Two more Daniels appeared and grabbed onto the others. Within seconds all of the teens were relocated. Maddie quickly stood up and ran back to the syringe lying on the console. Grabbing it, and pulling open a drawer for some slides, she marched over to the microscope by the medical supply closet and began carefully layering segments of ectoplasm tinted blood onto the plastic.

Propping one of the pieces against the glass she zoomed in with a calculated hand and watched. To
her amazement, the ectoplasm seemed to mimic the human cells and the human cells vice versa. Perfect crystalline structured cellular walls...Well, almost perfect... They were burning out...It was like watching pop rocks or cherry bombs exploding on a cellular level. Human cellular structures were warping and being pulled like taffy in multiple directions and strange flurries of bright pink energy seemed to be blossoming out and invading the unaffected areas. Whatever it was? It was spreading and the structures seemed to be resisting the change.

Her eyes widened with realization. Turning her head she screamed over her shoulder, “Daniel!? His fever, how long has he had it?!”

Daniel appeared in an instant, “From what I’ve gathered from him it’s been acting up for six weeks, maybe longer.”

Maddie shivered. “Danny? His powers… Has he had trouble controlling them?”

Daniel paused but quickly nodded. Maddie winced. She had a theory but it needed to be proven before she acted rashly. “Daniel? I need to take a sample of your blood.”

A wrist whipped out instantly, “By all means, just hurry mom. He’s looking worse off by the second.”

Maddie peaked back and could see Jack gently gripping Vladimir’s left hand through the open door of the guest bedroom. Nodding, she rifled around for a moment and found another needle. Unpackaging it and popping the top, she yanked up Phantom’s sleeve and removed his glove before positioning it and taking a small sample.

She cringed slightly at Daniel’s uncomfortable features. He had always hated needles. Seeing his determined gaze, however, she quickly reassured herself. ‘I need enough for multiple tests if this doesn’t give me any clues…’ Having gotten enough she quickly retracted the syringe and prepared a slide with Daniel’s blood to compare the two samples.

Switching out Vlad’s for Daniel’s she inspected the ectoplasm enhanced cellular structures carefully. Her frown deepened as her suspicions slowly gained more backing. Daniel’s structures were the same as Vladimir’s but they were completely stable and seemed to have a healthier more elemental hue to them. There were no flashes of bright neon pink color like in Vladimir’s, just a constant steady flow of light blue energy that circulated and fed Daniel’s form.

But one big difference, in particular, was becoming rather apparent as she inspected the sample. With an eye still on the slide, she questioned. “Daniel? How powerful is Vladimir?”

Daniel paused and confusedly answered, “I’ve beaten him loads of times when we fought but I don’t know much about his abilities… I can’t say for sure.”

Shakely, she replaced Vlad’s sample. Vladimir’s energy despite the frantic pulses and irregular fluctuations was thousands of times more developed than Daniel’s. But something was messing with it….It was like he was rejecting a critical segment of his own biological makeup. If Maddie had to choose an accurate way to illustrate the problem she’d describe it as a person blowing into a balloon nonstop. Eventually, without some air being released, it would rupture.

Maddie could feel dread in her stomach at the implications. Vladimir wasn’t having these issues because he was using his powers or in contact with the paranormal. He was having these issues because he hadn’t used his abilities enough. His sudden flare-up in the guest bedroom was spurred by the ghost who had attacked him but the reason he was seemingly losing control was because his body had finally reached critical levels. The cells just couldn’t take the strain and were freely disintegrating faster than his body was able to replenish them. His ghost form out of instinct had
decided to use the reserves of energy in an attempt to ladle water out of a sinking lifeboat. Without enough energy usage, he was going to-

The green demon’s words clawed into the back of her head.

“ Oh, Vladdie! Your little exorcism abilities aren’t going to work with that energy building up in your body...You’re either going to burn out like a lighbulb or finally form that sweet little power conduit…. It doesn't matter to me or my wife though...Either way, as long as we get you before the change cements itself; we win...”

‘It had known….It was just playing with him to see the flare up.’ Maddie gritted her teeth. ‘He’s burning out.’

Standing abruptly and marching back to the guest bedroom she stuck a hand through the shield and felt for Vladimir’s pulse. At this point, it was faint enough to be considered life support warranting. Turning to both Fenton men she grimaced. “I think I know what’s happening to him.”

Both froze and she continued somewhat bitterly. “We need to get him to use his powers somehow.”

Jack went wide-eyed, “Mads...you can’t be serious! You saw what just happened to him a few minutes ago right? Maddie...he stopped breathing on us...If we-”

Daniel seemed to have similar sentiments. Eyes flashed somewhat angrily and he pointed to Vlad, “The guy can’t even control them, much less use them purposefully right now!” He grimaced and his eyes become pleading. “Mom? He can’t!”

Maddie looked like she was about to break down. Hands raked through her hair and her voice cracked. “I know...I know...Honey, if we don’t get him to use his powers though? He’s going to die. We are out of choices right now!” Her hand brushed through a small segment of black hair on Vlad’s forehead and she shuttered. If the fever peaked any higher his organs would begin failing.

“The whole reason he’s having these issues is that he hasn’t been using his powers enough! He’s not regulating his ghost half! Whatever is running through his system is tapping off his cells ability to harness and control the energy. He’s slowly being consumed by his own power and with no outlet for it he’ll burn out! He’ll die, Jack!”

Daniel looked from Vlad to his mother in horror. “Oh god....” Tears began brimming around his eyes. “Mom...he doesn’t have a ghost core.....and we kept shorting him out because they kept poisoning him?...That thing that hurt him earlier? They are the ones at fault. NOT you, and NOT Vladimir. Those demons did this.”

Daniel froze up and bit his lip. After a moment he glanced over to Vlad and then to his mother. “M-Mom? What do you have in mind?”

Maddie cringed. Her little boy was blaming himself for something he wasn’t at fault for. Reaching over to him she hugged him tightly and reassured, “Danny? This isn’t your fault. Those things that you said have been poisoning him?...That thing that hurt him earlier? They are the ones at fault. NOT you, and NOT Vladimir. Those demons did this.”

Daniel froze up and bit his lip. After a moment he glanced over to Vlad and then to his mother. “M-Mom? What do you have in mind?”

Maddie took a deep breath. “Danny? What powers or abilities will tire him out that you know of? Anything you can think of that uses vasts amounts of energy would be ideal.”

Daniel winced and averted his gaze. “The only two I can think of at the moment won’t be pleasant in his condition.”

“Daniel?” Maddie asked somewhat desperately.
Daniel grimaced and lowly whispered, “Teleportation and electricity... But they’re too dangerous right now! There's no air when he teleports and electricity probably would harm him more than help him.”

Maddie flinched. “Of the two evils? Danny... If we could get Vladimir to force the electricity... Just until this fever stabilizes? We’ll have a chance at saving him. He may not make it through the night otherwise.”

Daniel paused and looked to Vlad with a determined glint in his eye. Turning, he questioned. “Dad? That ghost containment area you and mom were building near the weapons vault. Is it finished?”

Jack froze and looked up from Vladimir questioningly. “Yes, I finished working on it a while back...Why?”

“I think I know how to get him to safely use his powers.” Daniel confidently answered.

The room went silent as the two parents stared to their son and the faintly breathing specter lying a few feet from him.

Maddie spoke first, “What do you have in mind?”
Jack watched from the control room by the lab as Daniel gently laid Vladimir down on the floor. A white-gloved hand noted Vlad’s slight shudder at the change in temperature and comforted, “I guess we both are pulling an exorcism stint, huh Fruit-Loop?”

Jack activated the mike in the room and spoke, “Danny? Are you sure about this?”

Daniel looked up from where he was crouching with Vladimir’s feverish form cradled against his core. “He did it for me, dad. What type of person would I be if I didn’t try?”

A proud but slightly grief-stricken smile flickered across his father’s mouth. What Daniel had proposed was dangerous. He had told them how Vlad’s forced possession of Daniel’s body had fared and with Vladimir’s inhuman fever, there was a risk of Daniel’s own core taking damage.

“I’m locking down the room. Son...Be careful.”

Daniel smiled weakly at where he knew his father was watching him. “I’m a Fenton. I’ll be fine.”

Closing his eyes Daniel relaxed, took a large breath, and allowed himself to become mist like consciousness. He was neither experienced with the process or exactly sure about the health hazards it probably posed. From the times he had forcefully entered video games or possessed someone, he knew a little on the ability. He tended to have a four to five-hour window before his human body would attempt restructuring itself back into a solid form while in an inanimate object. With a living breathing person, he could last way longer but only because he could meld his own breathing requirements with the host. He had never attempted anything longer than a few minutes in a human being, however. It just felt wrong. An intrusion on personal space that crossed every boundary. Peaking open icy blue eyes, and staring at Vlad one last time, he jumped into the older’s body. Vlad convulsed at the intrusion briefly before glowing blue eyes opened and a strangled pained gasp echoed in the room.

‘OH GOD. VLAD. HOW LONG DID YOU ENDURE THIS? JESUS CHRIST!’

Flames….He felt like he was being burnt alive by thousands of flickering flames. Daniel bit his lip and winced as a fang sank into the flesh. The pain jostled him back slightly and he shakily gripped a wall to get to his feet. Vlad’s legs, even with Daniel’s consciousness in full control, shook and nearly gave out at the simple movement.

Jack’s voice echoed over the comlink, “Daniel? Is everything alright?”

Daniel grimaced and swallowed before attempting to answer. Vlad’s voice answered weakly, “I-I’m going to start...blasting...okay, d-dad?”

He went to charge a hand but paused. Usually when someone was possessed their consciousness retained a murky stranglehold on a segment of the mind… Vlad wasn’t floating by him in this murk….He wasn’t even in the vicinity….That alone was troubling. By medical standards, it would mean he was trapped somewhere in his own mind….a pain-induced coma.

Daniel growled, “Shit.”

Jack and Maddie exchanged worried looks. Jack questioned, “What’s wrong?”

Daniel’s hand wrapped through his now ebony hair in pained fatigue and disbelief. “Vlad’s
comatose. I can't even feel him right now. With the pain his body is going through I'm not too surprised. It's like he's being tied to a stake and burnt.” Looking back up to the two-way pane of ghost proof material between them he added, “I'm going to split off and try waking him up while I'm at it. Don't panic if I don't answer you immediately or if his eyes change colors rapidly.”

Jack looked to Maddie worriedly and she nodded. Turning back to the mike he confirmed, “Okay. We'll wait for your cues.”

Daniel nodded Vladimir's head curtly and closed his eyes in concentration. The heat was messing with his efforts. An eyebrow twitched and Daniel mentally smirked. ‘Great, I'm getting that Fruit-Loop's mannerisms rubbed off onto my psyche. Okay, Fenton. Take a breath….You need to release a few energy blasts so this fever doesn't muddle waking up the moron.’

Concentrating a volley of energy into his hands he opened his eyes and gasped in perplexed wonder. The entire room was practically sparking and dancing with purplish pink light tinted in aftershocks of white. A circular ruin appeared on the right arm, still held fast, in a splint by his chest. Using the left arm, he swung the energy outward and blasted it into the metal and concrete by their side. The energy crackled through the air at lightning speed and tore open the cement like it was tissue paper. Daniel closed his eyes in anger and growled, “You cocky bastard...You were holding back the entire time weren't you?”

Maddie heard the comment and interjected over the speaker, “Sweety? In his defense, this is built up energy your shooting around. His normal power level probably-”

Daniel snorted and rolled his eyes, “Mom? I was intending to use a small little ectoblast to ease this in and instead got a fucking Dragon Ball Z attack. He may have his powers fucking up but even I can see a gap in what he's used on me and what I just paper punched the basement with! The stupid jerk was just-” Daniel groaned and doubled over slightly. Something was burning in the middle of his chest despite the slight reprieve given from the blast. He felt like he was melting faster than the cement beside them.

Jack worriedly interjected of the speaker, “Danny? Are you alright? What's happening?!”

Daniel looked up and winced, “M' fine...just dizzy. Vlad’s chest feels like it's trying to go into cardiac arrest from all of this heat.”

Looking back to his parents, he worriedly questioned, “If I keep blasting like this, the house won't cave in right?”

Both Fenton's exchanged a worried look with one another. If that blast was an attempt at a weakly, little ectoblast, like the ones Daniel had fired at them in the past as warning shots...then this could very well get messier than they had originally intended. Maddie turned to Jack. “We build the basement into solid bedrock...They should be fine right?”

Jack nodded but looked slightly unsure. Turning back to the mike, he instructed, “Just keep the blasts in that one spot and it should stay relatively stable. Don't just hit anything willy nilly or you may cause a minor cave-in somewhere.”

Daniel frowned, “Good to know.” Sweat beaded and fell from Vlad’s face before plopping against the metal flooring.

Snarling in agitation, the teen glared at himself. Lifting the left arm again and taking a calming breath he reflexively shot out at the damaged wall. This time the entire space sparked white and the house shook slightly. Daniel dropped the arm in startled disbelief. After a moment the anger returned, ‘
Well isn’t that just fantastic! The guy could mop the floor with me if he wanted this entire time and instead decided to pity me like some sort of charity case.’

Pointing at the wall and looking back up to the two-way window, he hollered, “You guys seem to know him better than I do. Mind explaining why he just bullshits people constantly?”

Maddie was still distracted by the giant two-foot-deep hole in their basement wall. Hearing Vladimir’s voice, Jack finally tore himself from the carnage to address his son. “Don’t look at us like that, Danny.” Jack cringed, Vladimir’s ghost form was scowling at him with evident annoyance despite the sickly hue to his skin and watering eyes. “This is new territory for us. Vladimir’s just never really been the type to brag.”

The teen scoffed. “Yeah right. The bastard takes every opportunity to flaunt his experience.” The teen jabbed a thumb at the wall with his left hand. “That was me trying to create a small ‘charged’ blast. Think a mini shot from a Fenton wrist ray. We’re talking a few volts here. But look at it! Our neighbors probably felt that at the very least, if not the town next to ours!”

Maddie sighed. “Danny? Ask him once we get him back.” She paused worriedly. “Have you found him yet?”

Daniel groaned, “Not yet, I’m try-” Blue eyes and purple irises flashed red momentarily and Vlad’s body collapsed onto his knees panting against the wall.

“SON?! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?” Jack nearly broke the mic for the pressure he slammed against the broadcast button.

Daniel groaned. “I….think I found something….ugh…It’s like this weird feverish vortex. The entire thing is spinning and warping spastically.”

Both Maddie and Jack exchanged confused looks with one another. Maddie spoke. “What do you mean Danny?”

Daniel chuckled. “Sorry… I forgot you guys are new to this.” He swallowed and looked up to where they were observing him and Vladimir. “When we possess someone we temporarily fuse with their body. We breathe, think and feel in time with the individual playing unwilling puppet. Right now the main segment of myself is knocking around in Vlad’s dreamscape trying to figure out where he is. Usually, there’s a fairly decent area, like a personal calm spot the host’s consciousness lounges in. Vlad doesn’t have one at the moment… Instead, there’s this weird watery area. It’s like an ocean but layered. There’s a whirlpool in it and I’m hearing a ton of weird stuff gargling out of it.”

Jack and Maddie both exchanged a perplexed and slightly awed look. Maddie swallowed, “So they layer themselves with the person?”

Jack rubbed his eyes tiredly, “Honestly? I’m still trying to get over the fact Daniel split himself into two segments inside Vladimir and is knocking around in his cerebral cortex.”

Maddie winced. Grabbing the mic from Jack, she questioned, “Can you create duplicates? Of Vladimir, I mean?”

Daniel paused and after a moment smirked tiredly. “Yeh. I think I can manage that.”

‘Okay…I need to be everywhere….I’m everywhere….Four….I’m four segments.’

With a fizzle of pink, four duplicates merged like mirages from Vlad’s flesh and collapsed against the floor in startled heaps. Groaning, all of them staggered to their feet and stared at each other. Seeing
Vladimir’s body from this angle, Daniel swallowed. The adult’s condition was still bad, if not worse. A slight reprieve rippled through Vlad’s real body at the release of energy and Daniel sighed in relief. His temporary peace of mind was shattered instantly by something looming out of the vortex. Someone had screamed...

Daniel could feel Vlad somewhere in the center of the suffocating black and pink spiral. The sway in consciousness was brief, but enough to nudge Daniel into a decision. Taking a deep breath he looked up at where his parents were watching. “Mom? Dad? I think I found him. The duplicates are going to continue blasting….. Cut on the ghost shield.”

Maddie and Jack did so and the room lit in bright greens.

The Daniel in Vladimir’s REM trapped head swallowed nervously and the body mimicked the movement. ‘Here goes nothing.’

And with a strangled gasp, the teen plunged headlong into the harshly grating pool of memories and emotions.

The duplicates outside blasted steady volleys of ecto energy as he allowed the vortex to pull him deeper into Vlad’s subconscious.
A bright flash of neon pink shattered through his field of vision. Clamping his eyes shut momentarily to gather his bearings, he reopened them to find himself engulfed in a peculiar scene.

He was sitting in a green vinyl breakfast booth in what looked to be another diner. This one, unlike Paula’s, had a serious retro vibe the teen would have associated with a Back to the Future flick. It was raining outside and the tin roof clicked and clacked above him. Eyes wandered across the black and white checkered backsplash at the counter, the various road signs, white plates, and coffee mugs adorning the kitchen wall…

A new looking plaque on the wall caught his attention. ‘Best Omelet in Fresno County, 1977.’

A scratching noise across from him snapped his attention to a small boy scribbling on a piece of coffee stained paper with a few broken crayons. A three-year-old girl with a tightly cut, curled bob loomed over the small raven-haired boy’s shoulder as he worked. The little girl pouted and the small boy looked from side to side conspiratorially, not noticing Daniel across from him, before pausing in his efforts. Leaning into the girl he slipped her a red crayon. She beamed and he returned the smile warmly. “Don’t let mommy see Izzy…”

The girl stuck out her tongue and went to draw as well only to find she didn’t have any paper of her own. The boy next to her graciously ripped his own drawing in half and slid her a piece of the torn rainbow. She paused and a small finger trailed over the sketch. “Bubby? Why is mommy crying?”

Both Daniel and the boy locked in place, stiff at the morbid innocence. Daniel’s eyes quickly loomed around the diner again and his ears searched for a noise that would give away the cause for the small child’s question. He found it just a few moments later.

A young woman with red-rimmed green eyes was coming out of the kitchen with an apron curled against her petite hands. Her yellow dress crinkled as she made her way to the two children and leaned against the table.

The boy’s blue eyes softened and became forlorn. “Mommy? Why are you crying?”

The girl’s small arms reached up from her spot in the booth to try and tug the woman in to embrace as an act of comfort. The small limb easily obscured the woman’s name tag but not before Daniel made out her name.

Janice Petrov dropped to her knees at the child’s touch and shakily reached up to hold her small hand. The boy gently nudged aside his sibling and reached out. The woman’s hands grabbed the two of them and pulled them close as a new wave of tears cascaded down her face. Daniel locked up and went to reach out only for his hand to tap through them like a knife through butter. He wasn’t able to interact only watch as the scene continued to unfold.

Another woman in a similar outfit barged into the restaurant, soaking wet.

Seeing the small group she quickly ran to them and grabbed onto the crying woman’s shoulder. “Janet? I heard what happened! Please. Take the kids and-”

Janet sobbed even harder, “Mari? He’s gone…. T-they called a few minutes ago…H-he didn’t make it.”

Daniel swallowed. Mari flinched like she had been slapped and settled for kneeling against the three
and hugging them close. “I’m so sorry…”

Daniel winced and another flash of pink yanked him seamlessly through the seat, checkered floor, and black abyss before he landed in a different scene altogether.

Daniel felt a shiver run up his spine. Marble headstones and granite slabs poked out like a bizarre child’s craft project in odd angles around him. The boy stood in front of him in a rumpled and stitch worn t-shirt and shorts. The short fit illly at the shoulders and made the small child almost sickly in appearance. Cobalt blue eyes stared at the grave in front of them at a loss for words or action. There was only numbness. Tears gently streamed down the preschooler’s face.


Daniel froze. Realization crept through his features and he felt ice snake up his spine. His eyes darted back to the small boy in front of him in belated horror.

This was Vladimir.

A child in a blue sundress clumsily stalked forward and reached for her sibling’s hand. Daniel’s eyes flickered to her and he grimaced. ‘And she must be Liz. That’s his little sister…’

She leaned down and tacked a small bundle of freshly picked daisies onto the dirt beside the marble slab. Looking back up to her mother, she asked, “Do you think daddy can see the flowers mommy?”

Janice bent down and rubbed a hand against her child’s cheek but kept her eyes averted from the headstone. “Yes baby, I’m sure he can see them.”

Vladimir balled his fists slightly and bit his lip. Looking up to his mom he questioned, “We get to visit папочка, right momma?”

His mother patted his shoulder gently. Liza moved toward their mother to be picked up. Rounding her hands around the small girl, she stood and looked down to Vlad with a weak smile. “Sure sweetie.” Her eyes finally locked on the grave, “We’ll visit papa again, soon.”

Grasping the child in her arms slightly tighter, she placed her hand back to the boy’s shoulder. “Come on Vladimir, I have to get you both home before the next shift starts.”

The boy nodded and went to turn only to freeze in place. Slipping out from under his mother’s hand he clumsily pulled out a small crayon doodle from his pocket and set it beside the daisies. A poorly draw man with blue eyes and black hair was wrapping stick-ish arms around Vlad’s child hewn renditions of himself, his mother and his sister.

“See you soon, папочка.”

Daniel winced as another wave of violent purplish pink energy bobbed him under the cemetery and deposited him near a run-down apartment complex.

A woman’s panicked scream whipped Daniel’s head around.

“PLEASE! DON’T TAKE MY BABIES!!!”

Janet was desperately latching on to the skirt of a wiry, thin elderly woman to the point her knuckles were white. The woman scoffed down at her and the wrinkles she was creating in her red suit.
A now six-year-old Vlad struggled against a stout, shorter elderly man with a bowl cap obscuring his face. A small hand clipped out and smacked the man in the nose, causing him to curse in pain. Vladimir cried out, “MOM!”

Vlad’s small fingers laced out to Janet and she released the woman’s skirt in an effort to grasp his palm. The shorter man recovered and quickly yanked the boy out of reach. A wickedly familiar smile snaked across the older woman’s features as she adjusted her licorice tinted glasses smugly with the hand not pinning Liza to her hip. “You have sixty days until the court case, Janice. With the evidence, we have for child negligence and harm you may want to consider a lawyer.”

Daniel watched in horror as the older man popped open the side door and flung Vladimir in, knocking his head on the other side of the cab. Vlad got up and desperately attempted to push and kick his way out of the vehicle.

Janice was trying and failing to snatch Liza from the haughty woman strolling to the car with her. A neighbor pinned Janet back as she wailed. The older woman quickly threw Liza into the backseat and slammed the door shut. Both children went for the handle nearest their mother and yanked. A lock clicked from somewhere up front and both children quivered. Their mother was still screaming and wailing outside, reaching out and thrashing against the hold on her shoulders and trying to reach the car.

Glancing into the back seat, the older woman’s brown eyes lit with mirth at seeing the bruise forming on Vladimir’s cheek. Turning to the older man in the passenger seat, she smiled vehemently. “Darling? Remember to photograph that.”

Daniel felt his jaw clench in rage. ‘That sick bitch.’

To add insult to injury the elderly woman glanced out of the window and waved as they pulled away. Daniel growled and the noise echoed into the real world as he continued releasing shots into the now shielded walls. ‘WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL!!?’

The scene fluctuated with another wave of pink and Daniel flopped unceremoniously into a rundown kitchen. The room was dimly lit and ill-furnished. Cracked and torn flooring stuck up at odd angles near the counter he had fallen against. Standing up shakily, Daniel searched around the dimly lit space and to his horror, found Vladimir. This time older, the tenish looking child was being gripped by his neck against a white refrigerator. Tennis shoes dully scraped and reached for the floor as he kicked weakly and gripped onto the hand holding his neck.

“J-James…” The man tightened his hold slightly and Vladimir gasped out. Fingers loosened weakly from the brutish limb starving off his air. Vlad tried again, and gurgled, “I-I can’t b-breathe…”

The hand tightened once more and Vladimir’s lips tinted blue. In anger, the figure slung the boy into the floor and rammed his heel into the underside of his chest. “IF YOU EVER TELL YOUR SCHOOL HOW YOU GOT THESE I WILL MAKE SURE YOU NEVER SPEAK AGAIN! AM I CLEAR?!”

Getting no answer the adult shoved Vlad onto his back with his boot and continued the onslaught. Daniel shook against the counter and rushed forward in a panicked daze. His hands went to grip the boy and were met with nothing but an absence of air. The teen gawked as the image of Vladimir crawled backward on his hands and knees to the wall behind him and gasped out, “I-I won’t tell. It was an accident…” Tears were streaming down his face in droves.

A yellow-toothed grin met his fearful features and empty soulless brown eyes looked over the boy mockingly. “Oh, you’ll be sure this never happens again brat.” A belt was slipped out of the adults pants and clasped into one drunken fist.
Daniel’s eyes widened. ‘No….don’t….’

“NO! DON’T!” A girl’s voice layered over his. Liza crawled out from under the kitchen table and protectively curled herself against Vlad. The adult paused at her determined features and with a laugh, slapped her aside. Something malice laced flashed across Vladimir’s features. Grabbing onto the extended wrist, he bit the adult and drew blood. The man screamed out and dropped the belt.

James growled and flung Vlad toward his sister. “YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE BRATS!”

Vlad’s wiry frame protectively hugged Liz against the floor as the onslaught of kicks began anew. Daniel stumbled and looked away as another flash of pink shook through the space and dragged him off again.

This time the scene was much brighter, almost cheerful. He was in a busy arcade by a Pacman cabinet. Vlad was running up excitedly to Liz with a handful of quarters. Giggling, she grabbed two and pointed toward the cabinet Daniel had appeared next to. Walking through him she jovially hollered, “Come on slowpoke! Let’s play this one!”

Vlad laughed and smiled at her warmly before reaching out and grabbing her hand. “Hold up a second.” Rummaging in his hoodie and storing their other coins, he pulled out a cheap disposable camera.

Liz’s eyes lit up with amazement at the simple object. Looking from it to him she questioned, “How’d you get one?”

Vlad smirked and averted his gaze slightly in almost a teasing fashion. Still looking away from her, he questioned. “Liz? How much do you like the arcade?”

Her eyes widened almost to owl like proportions and her jaw went slack before a wide, excited smile teased at her mouth. She jittered slightly and jumped up and down in excitement. “For real?”

Vlad stayed silent but his smile grew. Her eyes glittered with awe as she tackled him, “They hired you?!”

Vlad finally looked back to her and ruffled her hair with his signature grin, “You’re looking at Lismet’s newest cabinet boy.” He proudly drummed a hand against his hoodie. Liz hugged into him even tighter and he winced. A sleeve adjusted slightly and Daniel spotted the bruises Vlad was trying to conceal with the oversized outfit.

Reaching down to his sister, he gently nipped a playful kiss on her cheek before taking the two quarters in her hand and holding them out of her reach. She blushed and growled, “Not funny.”

Vlad leaned in slightly and flicked her nose with a finger not holding the camera. “But I think it’s hilarious. You’re still a munchkin.”

She crossed her arms and hautiliy replied. “And you’re a giant pain in the ass.”

Vlad froze up and waived a finger accusingly, “Language.” He ruffled her hair lightly, “Young ladies aren’t supposed to sound like that.”

Liz groaned, “Vlad, I’m no lady...Stop treating me like some sort of princess.”

Vlad scoffed and rolled his eyes comically in retort. “Who said a princess needs frills? I’m content with you being just the way you are Liz.”
Liz smiled, “I know Vlad…. It’s just..” She paused and her fingers trailed to the roughly patched boy jeans clipped to her hip and her slightly matted hair.

Vlad frowned slightly but quickly corrected the expression with a smirked. “You’re just a Cinderella is all Liz. Trust me….Your fairy godmother will butt in eventually.”

Liz looked up startled and then burst into hysterical laughter. Vlad furrowed his brow. “What’s so funny?”

She mimed wings, “Nothing, just picturing you in a tutu and fairy wings.”

Vlad turned an embarrassed shade of red and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck, “I don’t think I’m fairy godmother material, Lizzy.”

She grinned and quickly latched out her ransomed quarters. “Yeah... I don’t think you would fill that role either… I always pictured you as a knight.”

Vlad paused and noting the absence in his right hand shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t have any fancy armor or swords. I’m just a lowly arcade repair boy and register jockey.”

Liz looked up to him and smiled warmly, “And I’m a princess who hates pink and anything to do with frills.”

Vlad snorted. “Pink isn’t so bad. At this point though, I think you may have to give up your tiara and go into thievery. You have the makings of an excellent pickpocket.”

Liz raised the coins mockingly and stuck out her tongue in a teasing manner, “It’s not my fault you get distracted so easily.”

Vlad sighed and tapped the camera against his chin in thought. “Tell you what, Liz? If you beat me at that game you picked out, I’ll do anything you want for an entire evening. We can set the day aside and go to the zoo or maybe the movies?…..”

Liz swallowed, “Vlad? Are you-”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “I’ve been working here for a week now and my boss paid me a little on the side to help him install a few of the cabinets. Ten dollars isn’t too bad.”

Liz looked to the arcade cabinet nervously and bit her lip. Looking back to her brother she questioned, “What do I have to do if you win?”

Vlad tapped the camera against his chin again and raised an eyebrow, “We have four dollars in quarters here.” He shook his pocket for effect. “We can play and I can decide after?”

Liz bit the inside of her cheek and looked from the Pacman cabinet to Vladimir debatingly. Her eyes glinted playfully and she smiled after a moment. “You’re on Vlad.”

Vlad smirked, “Glad to hear it, but first…” His hand latched out and grabbed her wrist. Turning her to hug her against himself, he angled the camera. There was a flash of white and Daniel stiffened as another wave of pink latched onto him and dragged him violently into another scene.

This new scene was set in the Fall. Crisp orange leaves swirled and crackled underfoot in the small neighborhood he had landed in. Vlad was walking beside him with a patched and torn brown backpack looped over one of his shoulders.
Daniel floated beside him curiously and his eyes flickered from the cracked nails and calluses on the boy’s hands from working with machinery. A few cheap band-aids were looped around some of the fingers keeping the backpack from slipping off of his shoulder. Vladimir stopped abruptly on the sidewalk and looked up to the grayish-blue ranch style home in front of them.

Daniel looked from the home to Vlad apprehensively. “Vlad?...Please… If you can hear me?… Don’t go in there.”

The boy swallowed and looked from his red sneakers to the home before stepping forward. A hand whipped out for the knob on the grey door only for it to open before Vladimir could make contact. James stood with one arm extended. A drunken, angry grimace crossed his features and highlighted the lack of warmth in his eyes as his fingers motioned. “Money. Now brat.”

Daniel tensed and jerked a hand to Vlad’s shoulder. Nothing connected. Vlad grimaced and shook his head no before glaring up at the man. James looked from the boy to the street and making sure there was no one looking in their direction, latched out to the thirteen-year-old by the collar of his jacket. Yanking him forward into the doorway, he quickly shoved the thin boy’s stomach into his fist.

Daniel screamed out, “NO!” Tears traced down Vladimir’s face in the real world and Maddie and Jack stared in perplexed horror and worry. Two of the duplicates had abruptly disappeared as Vladimir’s body collapsed to his knees and clawed his left hand into the floor.

Jack questioned, “Danny!? What’s happening?”

Daniel heard the question from where he was submerged and bit his lip before tightening Vlad’s hand against the metal flooring. His voice echoed in both the memory and the containment room. “He’s taking Vlad into the kitchen…..Oh god…..”

Maddie and Jack both shared a panicked look. Maddie questioned, “Danny? What are you talking about? Sweety?!”

Daniel watched as the shadows of imagery progressed. Vlad struggled as he was flung to the floor. The adult grabbed a bottle of beer from the counter and stumbled toward the teenager. Leaning over Vlad, he lifted the brown glass up and, to Daniel’s horror, cracked it against Vlad’s head.

Now breathing harshly against the floor with blood dripping down his face, Vlad numbly groaned as James began rummaging through his pockets. Daniel shook and the duplicate mimicked the motion. “H-He….he just….oh god…”

The adult eventually found a few dollars stuffed in the left part of Vlad’s jeans. Yanking the money away and counting it absently, he looked up at the sound of someone walking from the hallway. Liz peeked in worriedly and seeing Vlad on the floor her green eyes filled with pained horror.

James smirked and pointed at the boy, “Clean up the trash, Elizabeth.”
How To Lose Everything

There was another flash of pink and Daniel fell into a sparsely decorated bedroom.

Maddie and Jack’s voices seemed to overlap the imagery, “DANNY? DANNY WHAT’S HAPPENING?”

Daniel in Vladimir’s body swallowed and looked up toward the spot his parents were fearfully watching from. “I just stumbled into hell….mom? Dad?…..I can’t stop it….He’s being hurt and I can feel him slipping further and further out of my reach by the moment. This vortex? I think it’s his memories. This guy won’t stop hurting him.”

The heat and pain caused the teen and Vlad’s body to slump forward slightly with a pained gasp. With the pain, the bedroom sharpened in clarity. Vlad was laying against the bed and smiling up at his sister as she ripped a t-shirt up to wrap his head. Coughing, he pulled at her wrist and motioned her to his left foot. “C-Can you take off...my s-shoe?”

Confused the girl looped her hand around his sneaker and gently slipped it off. Several crumpled one hundred dollar bills rolled out of the shoe and landed by Vlad’s gray socks. A small choked gasp escaped the girl’s rosy lips and she looked up to Vlad’s weakly smiling and delirious features with tears welling in her eyes. “You idiot...why?”

She beat against his chest feebly. Vlad winced. After a moment he gently patted her head as she leaned against him. “J-just a little more...a little more and we can r-run...away Liz.”

Daniel gawked. ‘No way….He tricked that monster…’

Vlad gently moved under Liz, “Sis? H-hide it...m’kay?” And then with a sigh, he fell asleep and the room shifted again. A flash of bright pink swirled up from the flooring and submerged Daniel.

They were back in the kitchen.

Daniel locked up and his face turned ashen. Vlad had just taken off his shoes by the door and walked into the room. A mason jar full of crumpled and bent bills lay scattered on the kitchen island and James stood absently looming over something just out of view. Red glossed laminate tile dully shined in the afternoon sun peeking in from the dining room bay window. A bemused smile cracked across the adult’s face as Vlad entered before he stared back to what was on the ground. This time both Daniel and Vlad looked to where he was staring and seeing the small shoe sticking out from behind the island by the edge of the kitchen counter they both rushed forward. Daniel out of instinct and Vladimir out of primal fear. A bag dully thumped against the floor as the Vlad reached out. A strong limb grabbed him by his shirt and threw him into the white fridge across from the hallway the girl was laying half way out of. Regaining his vision, Vlad screamed in horror. Daniel also screamed and the ear-shattering noise split through Vladimir’s real body in the containment room. The blasts around him from the duplicates increased in an effort to vent the emotional trauma fueled by the images Daniel was viewing.

Daniel already knew. That girl was dead… She had died hours prior. His father had told him but the grisly details of it left a hollow feeling in his chest and a bitter bloody taste in the back of his throat. Her eyes were practically grey and her small lips were swollen and starting to bloat. Her shirt was marred by multiple slits and the fabric was blotched in deep ochre reds that had congealed. Vlad,
however, seemed to be fighting against the visual cues and attempted to crawl toward her.

A swift kick to his stomach halted the movement and he cried out. A hand continued reaching forward. James sneered at the movement and picked the teen up by his hair before throwing him to his sister. Vlad’s hands shook as he took in the blood.

Liza wouldn’t be there to welcome him home anymore. Crying, and now blood covered, Vlad clumsily staggered to his feet and charged the man drunkenly towering over them. Pushing him into the counter, the boy cried out as he flailed his arms out to try and hit the adult. A fist curved out and dazed the teenager.

James drunkenly snarled, “You little bitch… Did you honestly think you could hide it from me?!”

The adult roared and, pulling back his fist, struck Vladimir again.

Vlad’s hands numbly clamped onto the arm holding his shirt. After a few minutes, the boy’s wrist went slack and the teen crumpled to the floor by the kitchen island.

Grimacing, Vladimir looked up. Daniel’s throat caught. James was picking up a bloody knife from the counter and twirling it between his fingers.

The blade gleamed wickedly in the dim light and then in an instant, Vlad was screaming.

Tears began pouring down Daniel’s face in the containment room. ‘Vlad! WAKE UP?!’

No answer came from the whirling mirage of imagery and the teenager was forced to watch as the boy’s shirt was sliced off. The screaming lasted for a good hour before someone began desperately banging on the locked door by the kitchen. James looked up at the noise and Vlad seized the moment. Bringing back the heel of his foot, he slammed it as hard as he could into the man’s face, knocking the already drunk individual unconscious.

Weakly crawling next to his sister, he numbly reached his hand out to shut her eyes. Holding her hand small hand in his own, he fell onto his back. Eyes dulled as he stared into the ceiling.

"Please... let me die....."

A bright pink light flashed through the room as Vlad closed his eyes and Daniel shook as he was swept up into another memory.

‘God,’ Daniel whimpered. ‘ -make it stop.’

This room was in a hospital, completely windowless and devoid of any warmth. A young man with neck length silver hair was shaking slightly in a hospital bed with his arms wrapped weakly around his knees. Looking up from behind his legs he questioned, “Are you sure?”

His fatigued features looked hopefully up and Daniel flinched. Vlad’s face had thin blue lines and bloody gashes carved into it. A voice shot up from behind Daniel and he turned to see a blurry afterimage of a woman with a clipboard in hand. She seemed to have long coppery orange hair in a tight bun and bangs obscured her eyes. “I’m sorry Vladimir.” She cooed overly affectionately. Vlad winced.

“They just haven’t stopped by… Not surprising really, seeing as how you’re so ugly. Maybe they didn’t want to face their mistakes?” She simpered.

Daniel gaped. Fists curled against his sides. Realizing no one would hear his rants in the mirage he thrust out a fist at the woman. “YOU FUCKING BITCH!”

Vlad seemed to have a similar reaction and snarled vehemently, “Mistakes? Pff. The only mistake
here is your horrendous haircut. What did you do? Hire someone with a hedge clipper?”

The woman growled. “Let’s be civil Vladimir. I’m the only one who even cares about you… You wouldn’t want to be alone again would you?”

Vlad glowered and his eyes weakly flashed crimson. Daniel gawked. Vlad’s powers were actively showing themselves. The nurse noticed and tsked. “Quite the little temper, hmm?”

Vlad regarded her coolly and raised his arm to expose his bandaged bicep. “Considering you bastards have been strapping me to my bed and cutting chunks out of me? Yeah, I think I have every right to be angry.”

The nurse purred. “Oh, Vladimir… I’m just trying to make you the best you, you can possibly be. That takes time sweety.”

Vlad shuttered. “It’s been a month… I’m not stupid. Why haven’t any other medical staff entered this room? It’s always just you and that doctor!”

The nurse bent down and wrapped her hand under his jaw. Turning his face from side to side, she smirked. “I told you. You’re ugly. Not just your face either…”

Her finger brushed down Vlad’s hospital shirt and tugged slightly to expose scared flesh by his neck and shoulders.

Vlad jerked his head out of her perfectly manicured hand in a mixture of disgust and hurt. Daniel froze and jerked his gaze away momentarily to control his building rage at the inability for him to verbally or physically slap the woman. His attention was brought back by a choked gasp that came from the bed. His eyes widened in disbelieving horror. The nurse was holding tightly against Vlad’s neck as she injected a small syringe into his bloodstream. The memory began warping slightly.

Daniel stood in shock. Vlad weakly lifted an arm in an effort to push the woman away and she deftly caught his wrist.

A cruel smile danced across her lips. “You ask every day and every day I see that light in your eyes die just a little more. They loathe you, Vladimir. You’re just a hapless freak they pitied and took in like a stray dog. No family? No friends? It’s a crying shame… But don’t worry, we’ll take good care of you.”

Daniel and Vlad both shuttered and the imagery shifted in yet another scene in the same room, obviously sometime later. Vlad was laying splayed out on the bed and absently staring at the ceiling. The entire space was morbidly silent and after a few moments, Vlad spoke. “Why haven’t they come?”

Daniel shook slightly. His mom and dad still weren’t there… Vlad’s hair was much longer, maybe shoulder blade length, and his eyes had started to lose their luster. The nurse from before walked in and Vlad shot up fearfully and backed into the bed as she closed the door. Daniel noted the slight smirk on her face as she walked forward and his eyes followed her gaze to Vlad’s chest. He swallowed dryly. There were poorly concealed medical dressings around his abdomen. Vlad noted her stare and quickly backed himself from the bed with his hands raised weakly to shield himself. She raised a letter leeringly in response. “That’s no way to treat me, Vladimir. I brought you a card… Maddie and Jack seemed to have sent you it.”

Vlad’s eyes sobered and he flinched. “C-Can I see it?”

She tossed it to him and turned to leave the room with a blood-curdling smirk plastered on her cherry
lacquered lips. Vlad stared at the envelope a full minute after the door clicked shut. A lock could be heard twisting from the outside. Vlad took a deep breath and Shakily reached for the royal blue envelope. Daniel followed him as he sat on the edge of the bed and gently tore the white card out of its paper prison.

Daniel’s stomach churned as he read over Vlad’s shoulder. It was a note from his father.

Hey Vladdie,

I just wanted to let you know the wedding went well. We’re sorry you couldn’t come. Get some rest.

Love,

Jack

A tear fell onto the cardstock and Daniel winced. A trembling hand tightened on the paper and for a moment Daniel thought Vlad was going to tear it to pieces. To his surprise, Vladimir almost lovingly gripped it to his chest as he sobbed.

Daniel flinched. ‘Did my mom and dad really do that to him?’

A flash of pink shifted the room again and it was suddenly night. Vlad sat curled in the corner of the room shaking against himself near a small pile of cards and envelopes. Holding his head as he rocked back and forth, he mumbled in hushed whispers to himself. “P-please…” He choked, “Help me.”

Eyes abruptly flashed red and Vlad went stiff, a surge of energy filled the room, “No….not again…” In a pop of pink both, Vladimir and Daniel were abruptly ripped from the room and deposited over the hospital roof. Looking over to Vlad, Daniel screamed in horror. Vlad’s face was contorted in pain as he clawed into his hair and wept. Still, in human form, his eyes switched to a dead-eyed version of Plasmius’s sclera red. Blue tendrils flickered and morphed under rosy tones and shattered apart the pale flesh in a sickly vine-like dance of blue and ectoplasmic green. Ears stretched and tapered into longer elf-like points. The blue latched onto this flesh too and Vlad screamed out in agony. He was being eaten apart from the inside out. They floated for a moment and Vlad weakly choked against the cold air before, to Daniel’s horror, he plummeted toward the hospital roof a good twenty feet below them.

A large snow drift on the helicopter pad broke his fall but several muted snaps could be heard as he collided.

“VLAD!” The scream echoed from Daniel and split into the real world as Vladimir’s possessed form continued blasting the now hole ridden containment room more violently.
Cross My Heart

Pink grabbed onto him as he reached for Vladimir and in a pop he found himself sitting on a park bench beside Vladimir and Liz. They both were eating ice cream cones contently. Between licks, Vlad motioned to a small building beside them, “After we finish do you want to go into the reptile house, Liz?”

Liz took a small lick of the strawberry ice cream dripping down her fingers before glancing over to the exhibit area. “Do you think they have a python?”

Vlad snorted and took a bite out of his ice cream. Liz looked at him in perplexion and attempted the same only to groan in pain. Vlad laughed and reached over to ruffle her hair. “Brain freeze Liz?”

She winced and he gently instructed her, “Do what I do and it’ll go away.” Grabbing his thumb, he jammed it up to the roof of his mouth. Liz mimed the movement and sighed in relief, almost dropping her cone onto her lap. Vlad’s hand quickly shot out to steady her’s. “Careful, you’re going to ruin your jumpsuit.”

She quickly corrected the hand and brought it back up to get some of the ice cream dripping onto her fingers up with her tongue. After a moment she spoke, “Vlad? Did you lose at the arcade on purpose?”

Vlad paused from his cone and motioned around them, “I lost and I won. I don’t think I have to elaborate more than that.”

Liz paused thoughtfully and kicked out her legs as she watched a giraffe nudge its nose against one of the trees in its enclosure. “So... is that a yes or a no?”

Vlad paused again from his cone and looked out of the corner of his eye toward Liz. “You saw what happened. The ghosts cornered me.”

Liz sighed, “Are you saying you just let the ghosts win? Because I saw that jerk you made with the stick.” She looked up to him curiously. “You let them corner you…. You let the ghosts kill you. Why?”

Vlad stiffened and after a moment a devilish grin lit his features. “I honestly don’t know. A calculated sacrifice? You were already ahead of me by a couple thousand points and I was already losing...What was the point of dragging it out?”

Liz licked her cone debateably and her green eyes flickered in mild annoyance. “You gave up. Vlad? You could’ve won if you wanted. I asked the girl at the counter… You got the job by beating the owner’s high score on the machine.”

Vlad sighed heavily and his cobalt blue eyes sobered slightly. “Was me being killed by a couple of ghosts really that bad?”

Liz shook her head in agitation. “Promise you won’t do that again, Vlad. Please? I don’t mind losing to you...but you losing because you can’t bring yourself to try or because you gave up before you even began is really shitty.”

Vlad froze and whipped his head around to her, “Language, Lizzy!”

Liz sighed and jabbed his shoulder with her finger, “Promise. Promise me that you won’t just give
Vlad gawked at the language and his eyebrow twitched. Propping an arm against his knee and pouting slightly he relented, “If you stop the foul language for this evening? I’ll promise.”

Liz beamed, “Cross your heart and hope to die?”

Daniel shivered. Vlad mimed the motion across his chest, “Cross my heart.”

Liz sighed happily and seeing the pink trailing down her fingers quickly lapped up the sticky cream. Vlad mimicked the movement with his own chocolate cone.

After a moment his eyes flickered back to her, “So how did your book report go?”

Liz sighed, “My teacher didn’t like the topic. He thought Sally Ride wasn’t interesting.”

Vlad’s brow furrowed, “I thought it was well written… Why did Mr. Klimt hate the topic?”

Liz wiped a little bit of hair behind her ear and sighed defeatedly, “He thinks women being in the space program is stupid.”

Vlad sighed, “Then he’s a fool and doesn’t see the value in people aspiring to touch the stars. Men shouldn’t be the only ones that can attempt it.”

Liz blushed slightly and turned to Vlad questioningly, “Hey Vlad? What are you going to be when we finally leave?”

Vlad gripped his free hand into his jeans and slouched back against the park bench. Looking up wistfully he flashed a weary smile. “I was actually thinking about becoming a doctor.” Turning to his sister, he playfully tapped her on the ear. “What about you?? Any plans?”

Liz blushed bright fuschia and turned to face away from him. “It doesn’t matter…it’s stupid…”

He leaned in closer and jokingly poked her, “Come on?” His smile was one of knowing, and he cheekily smirked. “What do you want to be Liz?”

She rolled her eyes at his cocky expression and, flipping her cone, she quickly lobbed her ice cream at Vlad’s head. The teen wiped a hand across his eyes to get the pink liquid out of his face. Liz giggled hysterically. “I think pink suits you Vlad!”

Vlad licked a finger and smirked, “Mmmmm strawberry. My favorite.” Smiling devilishly, he pulled her giggling frame down by her suspenders and squished his cone against her mouth. Sputtering and spitting, she detached the offending muddy brown mess from her face. Long stripes of chocolate laced up her cheeks from where Vlad’s ice cream covered hand had clamped against her. “ECK! Chocolate!”

He laughed with mirth at her almost pinstriped face, “You look like that one little fanged animal back near the North America exhibit.”

“A badger?” She laughed.

“A little badger.” He prodded.

Giggling, she wiped the ice cream from her cheeks and took back the cone still dripping from Vlad’s forehead.

Daniel was close to tears. “God? Why?”
And then he found himself yanked back into a new scene from the hospital by another cloud of violent pink energy.

Vlad had dark circles rimming his eyes and his face was ashen. It was impossible to tell the time in the room with no windows, but from the way Vlad was dressed, the teen assumed it was late in the night. Sitting up, Vlad stumbled to the corner of the wall and stared up to the ceiling tiredly. “I really am in Hell…. Liz? I think I need to break my promise…”

Daniel shuttered and his eyes went wide. ‘No….Don’t do what I think you're about to do Vlad….Please…’

Vlad paused and a hand rubbed the side of his arm still covered in bandages. “It’s been a year…They won’t stop hurting me….The nurse comes in every day with a blade. She and the doctor won’t stop….and my friends they-” He swallowed and stared at the clenched fist in his lap. “I think they gave up on me a long time ago. I get letters… but no one…no one has come to save me from this…”

Bitter tears began dripping down his face. “I keep waking up with new wounds cleaved into my arms….Yesterday I woke up in the middle of the night and she was just standing over me with this bizarre grin on her face… There was a table with all of these blades and she was tearing into my arm again.”

Vlad shivered and curled deeper against the wall. “I’m scared….”

A small sad chuckle escaped from Vlad after a minute. “You’re probably rolling over in your grave right now. Isn’t it funny how I keep failing to keep my promises to you, Liz?”

Vlad squeezed his clenched fist tighter and Daniel watched as a small drop of blood splattered onto Vlad’s pants.

The boy froze and a chill went up his spine. “NO...NO..NO..NO..”

A hand went out to slap or shake the illusion back to his senses but failed, yet again, to make physical contact.

Vlad unfurled his palm. A small surgical blade lay in his open hand surrounded by pulsing red liquid that faintly sparked glowing green in the dim lighting.

Vlad snickered at the sight. “I really am a monster….” The tears became slightly more prolific. “I overheard them last night…. The nurse was talking with him about my condition…”

Daniel looked up from the blade to Vlad in horror. Vlad continued talking to himself. “Liz? I don’t think they’re trying to help me…I think they’re testing the best way to get rid of me…”

Vlad lifted the blade up and bit his lip. “I hear killing yourself in a dream wakes you up…. Jack hasn’t been here to help the nightmares. They’re getting worse.”

His bloodied hand twirled the silver.

Daniel’s neon green eyes widened. “Fruit-Loop……Jesus Christ….Don’t!”

The plea went unheard. Vlad shivered at the thought of what was about to transpire and, propping the blade against his wrist, cut himself.

Daniel watched in pained horror as Vlad moved to the other wrist with trembling fingers and repeated the process. Soon blood was soaking the ground around Daniel’s white boots.
Falling to his knees he clutched his gloved hands through his snow-white hair and wept as the afterimage slowly began fading away.

Daniel could feel Vladimir’s body cooling and returning to a somewhat normal temperature as he blasted in the containment room. A slight nudge of energy beside him caused him to tense. It was familiar. A hand reached out into the whirlpool and connected with something solid. Foggy red eyes stared out from under the water as Daniel forcefully attempted to rip Vladimir back to the surface.

At his touch, a torrent of emotions and feelings shot through his body. The darkness seemed to tug back on his pull and Daniel bit his lip fearfully. Every instinct in his body told him that letting go of Vlad’s wrist would end the older halfa. There was something so much darker and dangerous lurking in the depths below him and in his condition, Vladimir probably would never wake up again if he sank any further into it.

A flash of pink filled the space.
Never Shallow

Vlad was trembling against himself in a hospital bathroom. Bandaged fingers numbly wrapped around his shoulder as he shook and blue eyes flashed crimson as he brought out his left hand to finger the reflection across from him. “What am I?” Tears dripped down his cracked and bloodied face. The nurse and his doctor seemed to favor leaving the wounds exposed as some ghastly reminder. Vlad slouched to his knees and curled up against the wall. “Jack? Mads? Please...come back.”

Daniel reached for the man’s shoulder only for the room to warp and dissipate in a static blur. Suddenly, Daniel found himself in another unfamiliar setting. It was a sparsely decorated room with two lofted beds near the back wall, one in front of the window and one by the wall on his left. Both sets of furniture were stained a natural orangish tan. The one by the wall across from the closet was empty, and its blankets were furled together in a disgruntled heap as if someone had left the space in a hurry.

Soft sobs from the window bed caused Daniel to look over. Two figures were curled against each other on the floor. A young man with black hair was being gently hugged and comforted from over the shoulder of a broad man with hair in a similar style and color. The larger frame rocked slightly with the thinner man to try and ease his muffled cries and pleas.

“Shhhh, It’s okay buddy…. Wake up…” The man’s voice sounded familiar as he cradled Vlad’s neck.

After a moment the thinner man stirred and groggily noted the person comforting him, “J-Jack?” Vladimir stiffened and tensed. Daniel’s eyes widened. He was seeing his father…

Vlad seemed to try backing out of the hold and Jack snorted, “Easy tough guy. Vladdie? Just breathe for a moment..”

Vlad began hyperventilating slightly and tried pulling away again. Jack sighed. “Come on buddy…Wake up… This panic attack isn’t doing you any favors before finals.”

A hand soothingly began rubbing a circle against Vlad’s back and he slowly began to calm. After a few moments, he sleepily groaned and looked up into Jack’s dark circle rimmed eyes. “Ugh….Jack? What- How did I get out of bed?”

Jack sighed, “You screamed out a few minutes ago and fell out of your bunk. Just calm down for a moment, ‘kay?”

Vlad relaxed against Jack and, somewhat out of it, apologized, “M’ sorry...Jackie? I woke you up again….I didn’t mean to…”

Jack chuckled slightly, “Don’t worry about it V-man. It’s no big deal.”

Vlad groaned and shifted slightly against Jack, “W-why do you put up with me FlapJack? I wake you up constantly...I-”

Jack sighed, “You get me coffee in the morning, you buy me treats, and you help me study…Vladdie? You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Vlad shuttered slightly, “Is this what it’s like...Having a friend?”
Jack paused and sighed, “You’re still half asleep aren’t you?”

Vlad snorted, “Probably…”

Jack sighed and reached behind Vlad to grab the pillow and blanket from the bed. “So I’m your first friend V-man?”

Vlad smiled tiredly, “First person…to try and accept me…You’re the first person since Liz or Sheryl that’s cared….”

Jack smiled slightly, “How could I not? You’re just so fun to get into trouble with.”

Vlad was beginning to doze off again in Jack’s hold. Jack snorted, “That job you took this weekend really wiped you out, huh?”

Vlad smiled blissfully, “Yeah…think I pulled something…I wasn’t expecting those bales to weigh so much…And one of them started rolling…the guy’s kid was playing too close to where we were working…” Vlad snorted and his eyes tiredly began closing. “Got’ fired but I guess it couldn’t be helped….”

Jack sighed, “Is that why your arm is bruised to hell, Vladdie?”

Vlad groaned, “He didn’t hear me…I had to push him out of the way…His father blamed me for it.”

Jack shook slightly and his eyes flashed, “Vlad? How did you get the bruise?”

Vlad groggily shifted against Jack, “The other guy he hired didn’t secure the rope on the side of the bale correctly before starting up the tractor…M’ stupid…should’ve double checked. I saw it snap off and when it began rolling downhill—….I panicked, Jack….”

Jack began reaching over for his own blanket and pillow. “Vladdie? What happened to the kid?”

Vlad blearily snorted. “Property was weird….The guy set the bails uphill overlooking the creek that the cows drink from…The kid was playing near the irrigation ditch that ran into it. I tackled him and pushed him under myself and we rolled into the ditch. The bale sandwiched us…My arm got pinned out…The kid wouldn’t stop screaming. Jackie…I thought he was hurt…Turns out he was just panicking. Perfectly justified…”

Jack sighed, “Crappy morning, huh?”

Vlad groaned as he was laid out on the floor and tucked in. “Happened S-Saturday.”

Jack paused and raised an eyebrow. “Vladimir?”

Vlad turned slightly against his pillow, “Hmmm….yeah Jackie?”

Jack sighed, “If that’s the case you arrived back on campus this morning…Not a few hours ago…”

Vlad peeked open an eye tiredly. “Took a late bus…?”

Jack snorted, “Nice try buddy. Just be level with me. Did you get into another fight again?”

Vlad went to roll over and Jack grabbed onto his shoulder. “Oh no, you don’t. I can see that your left hand is bandaged. Come on Vladdie….Did someone try bullying you again?”

Vlad stayed silent and after a few minutes sighed, “Iz just a few scrapes…Happened a few hours
ago...Iz no biggie…”

Jack sighed and fluffed up his own pillow before lying across from Vlad. Vlad noted the pallet beside his and questioningly raised an eyebrow, “FlapJack?...Ugh… Why are we-”

Jack sighed, “I’d rather not faceplant again trying to see if you have a concussion, Vladimir. It’s easier if we just rough it out. Think of it as camping?”

Vlad chuckled tiredly, “You’re so weird…”

Jack rolled his eyes and gently smacked Vlad with a pillow. “Just go to sleep you damned vampire.”

Vlad laughed. “With your snoring? Pffffff…”

Daniel winced. “You two really were two of a kind, huh?”

Daniel waited for what seemed like an eternity for the images to shift but they stayed in place. ‘Why is there no pink this time?’

He was answered as Jack began snoring. Vlad sleepily opened his eyes and tiredly rubbed his brow. Getting up from the floor he carefully snuck around Jack and grabbed a small basket from beside the closet. Looking back at Jack, he smiled warmly and slouched slightly against the door frame. Daniel floated behind him curiously as they traversed the college campus and made their way to one of the shower areas. Vlad looked both ways cautiously and slipped into the vacant wash area.

Daniel furrowed his brow. ‘What are you up to, Vlad?’

Vlad sighed and dug into the bottom of his small linen basket for something. Daniel cringed. Vlad was holding a first aid kit in his right hand debatingly. Talking to himself he looked over into one of the mirrors wistfully, “I should probably clean out the wound before I attempt this…” Sighing tiredly, Vlad looked toward the door. Walking to it, he quickly locked it and turned back to the mirrors and sinks lined up to his right. A look of disgust and self-hatred blossomed across his features as he numbly removed his oversized sweatshirt.

Daniel’s eyes widened in stunned horror. Vlad was crosshatched with thin lines of varying widths and lengths. Some of the marks were much larger in both thickness and size and almost looked like spots where segments of Vlad’s tissue had been hewn out. A hand numbly went to the poorly wrapped segment of his waist secured with what looked like a couple of socks tied into a makeshift bandage. Vlad tiredly unwrapped the spot and fingered the thin wound as it bled. “Jesus...what’s next? Guns?”

Vladimir rubbed a hand through his hair before walking to a shower in the far corner of the room and cutting the water on to warm up. Stumbling away from the curtain as the room began to mist, he sluggishly kicked off his jeans. A hand went to the hem of his boxers and he paused. A bitter look, unlike anything Daniel had ever seen prior ghosted across his features as he averted his gaze and slipped the article of clothing off. Daniel raised an eyebrow curiously and his eyes went to the spot. A choked noise escaped his throat as his eyes landed to the circular red scar branded into Vlad’s hip, just below where his boxers would normally hang.

Vlad stepped into the shower and winced as he began cleaning the wound on his chest, the entire time avoiding letting his gaze wander to the area that was marred by his pelvis. Daniel’s features saddened. After a moment, Vlad leaned against the tile and smiled wistfully, “What a crappy weekend...Crushed by a hay bale? Slugged by a farmer? And to top everything off? That fudging bitch had them tailed … What is she mafia?” Vlad lathered his hair and submerged himself under the
stream.

After a moment he almost tiredly lamented, “Three guys are pathetic though considering what I did to the last batch….” Vlad paused and shook his head in amusement. “I must be crazy…I’m talking to myself again. Pffft…”

Daniel sighed. “You really have issues just letting people in… Don’t you, Vlad?” The mirage seemed to stiffen and Daniel’s eyes widened. For a moment it’s form shifted from the nude college version to a fully dressed adult version. Before Daniel could grapple the image another flash of pink ripped through the room and morphed it back into the hospital room.

Vlad was being held down by a burly man with a mustache and a doctor’s coat as the nurse tied his wrists to the bed. Daniel looked from the two of them to Vlad in unrestrained terror. Vlad was glaring and vehemently fighting the leather buckles pinning his wrists to the sidebars of his bed. The nurse sighed and yanked his face up by his hair. “Hold still Vladimir! You struggling is just going to reopen those nifty little slits on your wrists!”

Vlad’s eyes sparked red and he attempted snarling something in retort through the gauze stuffed and tied into his mouth. The doctor snorted, “Come now Vladimir, this is your fault after all. If you hadn’t tried to cure yourself a few nights ago we wouldn’t have to do this to you.”

Vlad seemingly seethed and bright pink energy crackled at his fingertips. The nurse tsked disapprovingly. “These little electromagnetic impulses aggravated by your condition are so unique Vladimir! You’re like a little human lightning rod or a balloon shoved against carpet! I wonder if that weird machine that made you such a little freak put heavy metals into your bloodstream? Hmmm?”

Vlad headbutted her and she hissed. Growling, she put a hand to her nose and turned from him to check her face in a compact mirror stored in her pocket. Turning around angrily at the greenish bruise forming on the bridge of her nose, she roughly yanked his gag down.

Vlad immediately spat out the cotton from his mouth and snarled, “How did you like your nose job you ugly bitch?”

The nurse blew a lock of orange hair out of the way of her nose and leaned in close to growl. “I guess we need to fix the voltage. What do you think Dr. Mavrus? A little more zap to help whittle Vladie with his suicidal tendencies?”

Vlad, at the use of the nickname Jack reserved for him, snarled and shot forward again in an attempt to clobber his assailants. “DON’T YOU EVER CALL ME THAT AGAIN! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT!”

The nurse snickered and grabbed onto his chin. “What? Did I strike a nerve Masters?”

The doctor began securing Vlad’s legs to the gurney, humming cheerfully as he worked.

Vlad kicked out as his left leg was being tethered and hit the man in the jaw. Dr. Mavrus glowered and latched out to grab Vlad’s ankle. Glaring into Vlad’s red eyes he squeezed. Vlad cried out and the nurse quickly cupped a hand across his mouth to muffle the noise. The doctor continued his grip on the limb until Vlad’s red eyes faded back to cobalt blue and he collapsed back against his pillow. The nurse allowed his head to flop unceremoniously against the cotton before she patted his cheek to redirect him. Panting, Vlad weakly growled, “B-Breaking my ankle…isn’t t-treatment you b-bastards.”

The doctor snorted and glanced back at the swollen limb before roughly grabbing it again and
securing it. Vlad bit his lip and his eyes watered. Once the limb was properly tied down the doctor answered, “Oh, it’s not quite broken. We wouldn’t want our favorite patient hurt after all...It’s just a sprain.”

Vlad hissed, “Bullshit! You demonic sons of bitches take every opportunity to maim me!”

The nurse laughed jovially and rammed Vlad’s head against the pillow. Clamping a hand back over his mouth she purred, “You’re unique Vladimir...and with that uniqueness comes a certain level of medical need. We’re just cracking a few eggs before we figure out how to make a proper omelet. Just be a good little freak and let us work, hmmm?”

Vlad glared and, adjusting his head slightly from under her hand, bit her. She snarled in pain and retracted the limb, only to bring it back to slap him. Vlad’s lip busted open and a small trail of crimson began leaking down his chin from where one of his fangs had nicked it. Groaning, he weakly struggled against the straps on his arms as a needle was inserted into a vein and blood was drawn.

Daniel swallowed and moved forward, easily slipping through the male doctor. His eyes trailed to Vlad’s ankle. He could tell Vlad’s assertions about it being broken were true. It was now swollen from under the strap keeping it secured and turning an off shade of purple in a hand-shaped pattern. Swallowing, he turned to look at the burly male preparing some sort of machine on a tray table beside them. ‘How did he snap his ankle like that? He broke it and he only used one hand… What the hell is he?’

The nurse caught his attention a few seconds later. Having filled the needle to capacity, she took out another one and began filling it as well. Vlad shook his head weakly. “F-Fuck….Ugh…Stop it….Leave me alone...”

The nurse grinned. “Are those sedatives starting to finally take effect? I guess ten minutes fly by pretty fast when we’re having fun, hmm?” She chirped the sentence before reaching in and feigning an affectionate pinch to Vlad’s cheek.

The doctor walked through Daniel as the nurse regagged Vlad. Daniel felt a shiver go up his spine. The two ends of the device were connected against Vlad’s temple and he bucked, thrashing and screaming muffled pleas against his gag. Daniel felt his jaw clench as he leaped forward. “VLAD! WAK-” The imagery faded out and Daniel stood in the center of the whirlpool again in perplexion.

Vlad was still being held by one of his wrists in Daniel’s white-gloved hand. Daniel tugged and a limp hand surfaced from the pool. Vlad’s red eyes briefly widened in confusion. He opened his mouth to speak to the blurry figure invading his dream space only to choke under the suffocating mass between the two of them.

Daniel’s eyes widened in surprise and in that brief moment the wrist was yanked out of his hold as Vladimir was pulled further in.

“NO!” Screaming out, the boy shoved both arms in and latched onto Vlad’s right arm again. Now submerged partially with him, his eyes flashed bright neon blue as another wave of pink enveloped the two of them.
This time they were both in the kitchen of Vladimir’s childhood home. A translucent adult Vladimir was staring over the shoulder of a thirteen version of himself as he cooked over a stove.

Liz’s voice shot up from behind Daniel and he turned to see her smirking with a half-chewed rice crispy treat jammed in her mouth, “Uo,-eriously uon’t tooo kange uor ame?”

The teenage Vlad at the stove, sighed in exasperation. “Liz? Swallow and chew. That wasn’t even English.” The boy tapped the spoon he was stirring the pasta in front of him with and looked to the box beside him tiredly.

Liz swallowed and asked again, “You seriously want to change your name?”

The adult Vlad behind the child version mimicked the slight head turn the boy used to look at the girl. Liz pouted and motioned for him to elaborate and both versions of Vlad smiled.

The younger’s expression soon became crestfallen and bitter after a moment as he answered, “I don’t need that bastard’s name clipped onto me for the rest of my life… I want my accomplishments to mean something and I don’t want them marred by that monster’s last name.”

Liz nodded sadly in understanding. “Yeah….That and it sounds absolutely ghastly on you….” Her head whipped back up from the table, “Do you think I can get a name change to?”

Vlad smirked, “Of course…..We can’t have you running around with his last name either after we ditch this dump.”

Elizabeth beamed but quickly brought a hand to her chin in thought. “Hmmm. Elizabeth Mari-Hey Vlad? What do you think would be a good name for the both of us?”

Vlad smiled smugly, “I always wanted us to be masters of our own fates Liz…Why don’t you pick a name and we-”

Liz practically jumped from where she was seated at the island, her tiny hands planted firmly against the cheap laminate top. “THAT’S IT!”

Vlad stiffened and an eyebrow raised, “That’s what Liz?”

Liz giggled, “Masters.”

Daniel felt his jaw drop and his eyes water.

Vlad raised an eyebrow mockingly. “You want us to have that as our last name?”

Liz rolled her eyes, “Oh, come on Vlad! It’s perfect!”

Vlad snorted and turned back to his pasta. “I’ll think about it.”

Liz ran up and hugged Vladimir, entrapping both the adult and the teen in a vice-like grip. “Pwease? It would be so bitching!”

Vlad’s eyebrow twitched, “What are Joanne and Melvin teaching you?”

Liz retracted herself and crossed her arms, “Nothing I haven’t learned from you ‘mom.’” She teased
sarcastically.

Vlad sighed and, putting down the spoon in his hand, questioned, “Why the urge to share a name with me, Lizzy? You can have any name you want...anything in the world. Just think of the possibilities you can choose from! Banner? Chase? Hope? Havoc? Armstrong?—”

Liz shook her head in frustration, “You’re my family Vlad. I want a name with meaning behind it. If we’re going to be free why can’t we go with something with oomph! Real pezas, you know?”

Vlad snorted, “Do we really want to have something so pompous tacked onto the end of our names? With that type of surname, we're going to have to buy a castle.”

Daniel gawked. ‘No way…..You mean he—’

Liz interrupted Daniel’s thoughts, “I like it. Besides, an Armstrong already made it where I’m going and I’ll be damned if people confuse my accomplishments for his!”

Vlad smiled defeatedly. “Tell you what, Liz… On my eighteenth birthday? I’ll change both of our names to whatever you choose. You have until then to think about it.”

Liz groaned and looked back to Vlad as he began stirring the food again so it wouldn’t stick. “What about the castle? Can we still get one of those? Like’ with full medieval turrets and cannons and…”

Vlad sighed and stared into the ceiling tiredly, “The day I get you a castle to lounge around in will be the day I tack on a cape and whoosh through the air like a Pixie to fight crime.”

Liz frowned, “So when pigs fly?”

Daniel burst out laughing and Vlad’s eyebrow twitched, “That would mean you’d have to zip through the air first little badger.”

Liz pouted, “Harsh....” Crossing her arms she retorted, “Can’t we negotiate this Vlad? I think a doctor owning a castle would be awesome!”

Vlad sighed, “What? Like Frankenstein?”

Liz stuck out her tongue in repulsion, “Dead dudes and grave robbing? Eck! Nope, naddah. I mean like Doctor Strange or—”

Vlad snorted, “You’re not making a really good argument to plead your case, Lizzy. Doctor Strange never had a castle.”

Liz looked about ready to tear her hair out in frustration as she glowered at him and he smirked knowingly. After a moment he smugly added, “The only people I can think of that own castles, real or not, are rich assholes and vampires. I don’t fit either of those descriptions.”

Liz sat back down and moped “Well at least you have the asshole part down.”

Vlad spun around, “I have half a mind not to share any of this with you.” He pointed at the pot with his spoon.

Liz deadpanned, “This is the ninth day in a row we’ve eaten Mac and Cheese, I think I’ll live.”

Vlad stared into the pot defeatedly and after a moment moved it from the burner and cut off the stove. “Go get your coat.”
Liz raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

Vlad facepalmed, “Do you want a burger or not Liz?”

Liz immediately shot up and almost tripped on the carpet in the hall as she ran.

Vlad snorted as she vacated the kitchen and he rolled his eyes before glancing back at the pot on the stove. “Vladimir Damian Masters and Elizabeth Mari Masters? I guess I can work with that…” As an afterthought, he groaned and looked into the ceiling. “But I’ll get gray hair and die before I ever consider getting a castle.”

The adult Vlad smiled wistfully through clouded red eyes and a ripple of pink flipped the image yet again. A hard tug nearly pulled Daniel completely under the black and he growled before looping his arms under Vlad’s shoulder blades in an attempt to draw him further out of the muck. The darkness was stiflingly bleak and foreboding below the two of them and even at a distance Daniel could make out the flashes of flame, screaming, and various voices taunting and laughing. It looked like Hell in every sense of the word.

“Shit. Come on Vlad…Wake up!” Daniel hissed.

Vlad’s eyes in the dreamscape lulled and began closing.

‘OH NO YOU DON’T!’ And with that Daniel plunged himself even deeper.

To his horror, Vlad’s thoughts soon accompanied the images and memories as another wave of pink threatened to flip Daniel completely into the abyss.

They were now in Vlad’s castle. Vlad was slung out on a burgundy sofa in the library, on his back, with a whiskey bottle in hand. Glaring at the ceiling his eyes sparked red. ‘Why couldn’t the damned portal have just killed me? I’m still alive? And for what? To be reduced to this…? Why is that? Am I that desperate for validation?’ Vague memories of the hospital and of his childhood surfaced. Nauseous, Vlad draped a hand over his eyes defeatedly. Glancing at the bottle suspended in his embassy marked hand he grimaced. ‘Damn it.’ His hand tightened around the neck of the bottle. ‘Damn it.’

Daniel cringed.

Feeling a presence in the room Vlad tensed and his eyes sparked red from under his arm. Three spectral birds had entered. Shifting the hand to the bridge of his nose he grasped the suspended bottle even tighter. A crack appeared along the glass. Flicking his wrist toward the intruders the bottle was slung up and over the carpet where it quickly pivoted and crashed into the stone wall. All three birds eyed him warily as the glass exploded into shards and clattered against the flooring. ‘Not these blasted bird brains again.’

“And what, pray tell, did I say about you feather-headed nitwits intruding into my home without my permission?” He growled ominously.

The middle bird lurched forward slightly and in a thick Bostonian accent chirped, “We know… we know! Yah’ want only to be disturbed for important changes and stuff right?” Vlad tensed. Worry and a sickening feeling of dread filled the room.

Vlad's red eyes sparked angrily at the birds and he tightened his now bottle free fist. Sitting up he rubbed the hair out of his face, “WELL?” He snarled.

The bird looked nervously at its companions. ‘Stupid damned artifact poltergeists! What? What are you-?’
“So you know how yer a halfa right?”

Vlad tensed. “A?” Vlad straightened himself and peered toward the bird speaking.

“You know that Fenton guy? The fat one you wanted us to peck to death? Well, we think another halfa is protecting him.” Vlad latched onto the death thing first and he frowned. Glaring he shot a blast at the birds causing them to duck. A black burn mark fizzled in the gray rock.

“I never said kill him you, damned idiots!” Vlad snarled and a pain of hurt echoed. “You were just supposed to keep him and Maddie-” Vlad paused from his ranting. “Another person like me?!?!?”

His eyes widened and he shook against the liquor clouding his head. ‘Were they in pain?!?!’ Growling Vlad cradled his head. ‘Why would a half-ghost protect Jack?’ Vlad’s heart skipped a beat and something dark and depressing came to mind. ‘You’re just too monstrous. You’re broken…. He abandoned you because you were nothing but a chip on his shoulder…’

Months, no, years of painful and lonely confinement and torture came to mind. Vlad shuttered. ‘Why?’ His eyes looked like they were about to tear. ‘I was his friend! And he…he just….’ Mental images of Vlad being ripped, poked, prodded, electrocuted, crying, and trying to kill himself flashed. ‘Fine! I’m a monster! I might as well start acting the part!’

Daniel gaped and his eyes clenched shut. The buzzards weren’t meant to kill his father…And Vlad? Vlad had to figure out there was someone else like him from three senile old pigeons.

Looking up Vlad tiredly addressed the three specters. “Keep an eye on them until the reunion. Don’t make your presence known.” He paused and rubbed his eyes. “AND absolutely refrain from harming them! Is that clear?”

The bird on the right looked at the blast mark and then turned and answered, “Crystal.”

Vlad's thoughts became somber. His entire chest seemed to burn despite the wounds being nonexistent. His heart ached. ‘I'll just have to mess with them.” Sad-anger reverberated. His hands shook slightly. ‘…I sure as hell can mess with his reputation…make him angry….it’ll be justified.’

Daniel's hands clenched and he bit his lip. Seeing the transparent version of Vladimir by the couch overlooking the images, he growled, “You’re about to ruin your life! Aren’t you going to do something about it Plasmius!?”

To his surprise, the image somewhat incoherently murmured, “It’s too late...It happened. I had no choice….Liz? I should’ve told them….Maybe Daniel could’ve-”

The three specters snapped both versions of Vlad back to the memory. “Boss? You think we should do something about the halfa?”

Daniel stiffened and looked from the memory version of Vlad to the submerged tangible version just a few feet away from him.

A pang of hope and hurt reverberated through the room from Vlad’s more solid looking duplicate. Vlad's shoulders shook with grief but he covered it with a devilish laugh.

“If he is indeed protecting Jack, he should follow him here right?” He smiled. ‘I...I want to know why…. why did he….’ Vlad's eyes saddened slightly. And he turned from the birds and rubbed a hand across his eyes. ‘Does the other half ghost-...Does he share similar pains…?’

“Oh and yah probably should want to know, it's a teenager.”
Vlad's blood ran cold. He was so surprised he failed to cover his emotions. Eyes wide, he questioned, “You mean to tell me a child was half murdered because of that oath?!?!” His brain whirred and grasped onto familiar images. His own accident flashed to mind and James standing over Liza's body surfaced. Something snapped. Uncontrollable rage and anguish caused torrents of pink to tug and pull against the two halfas submerged in the dreamscape.

One second Vlad was sitting and in the next, his hand was latched around the bird's throat. Black talons and blue flesh seemed to lace up his human form and the seal sparked. Fangs flashing he screamed, “HOW OLD?!!?”

The bird gulped, “Pre-teen? … I think …’is Thirteenish?”

Vlad's grasp tightened. The other birds in desperation screamed, “Fourteen! The brat’s fourteen!” At this Vlad's eyes saddened. Is face still held its rage though. Slamming the bird into the wall he turned to the mantel. “Leave me!” He roared threateningly. His hands, however, were shaking against the marble.

Frightened, the three quickly vanished, leaving a flurry of green feathers in their wake. Vlad, still standing near the fireplace mantel, shook with grief. ‘Can I help him? We’re the same!’ His eyes strained as he stared into the flames crackling below him. ‘Maybe I can teach him how to avoid the horror I went through?’

Vlad rubbed his brow in frustration. Daniel, this time, was able to touch the transparent version of Vladimir. Both of them were flung upward as Daniel desperately pulled against the quicksand-like liquid to dislodge Vlad. Vladimir’s consciousness stirred slightly and Daniel growled, “Wake up you selfish prick! You promised to turn over a new leaf, not die!”

Vlad groaned weakly, “S-She’s not letting go….”

Daniel froze and for the first time noticed the clawed female hand and glowing green eyes staring out from just behind Vlad’s shoulder. Eyes wide, he charged a hand and shot the dark figure in the face. With a hiss and a muted pop, the two found themselves on top of the abyss.

A gentler warmth engulfed the water and the depths became crystalline blue tinted in bright hues of pink and burgundy, reminiscent of a sun setting over water. Looking down to Vlad and cradling him up slightly, the teen gently shook him. Vlad’s eyes groggily fluttered open, “Ugh….What’s-” Vlad paused at seeing Daniel and weakly tried getting up. Daniel frowned and pushed him back. Vlad looked around puzzled and then sighed with resignation, “I’m dreaming aren’t I?”

Daniel winced, “Yeah…You went comatose on us so I had to take the wheel for a bit.”

Vlad’s eyes flashed slightly from muted blue to red and he swayed. Daniel gently caught him. “Easy.”

Vlad groaned and winced as he was held up. “You’re not a dream are you?”

Daniel sighed defeatedly, “You know I’ve had like thirty heart attacks today because of you, right?”

Vlad weakly chuckled, “Yep…gotta be a dream…I’m not in a Fenton Thermos yet…”

Daniel rolled his eyes and tiredly smiled, “Vlad? Do you think you can wake up?”

Vlad grimaced and the divider between awake and unconscious shifted slightly before snapping back like a stretched rubber band.

In the containment room, Vlad’s body gasped out and fell to his knees yet again. Looking up to
where his parents were, Daniel groaned. “I’ve got him...He’s not exactly stable with all of this stress and blood loss though. He just tried waking up but his body is protesting against it.”

Jack sighed somewhat relieved before the teen quickly questioned, “Do you think it’s safe for us to stop the energy release now?”

Maddie turned to Jack, “He should be safe now. Tell him to stop...Vlad’s lost too much blood and ectoplasm. His body needs rest.”

Daniel, to their surprise, smirked weakly and confirmed the request without it being put through the speaker. “Gotcha...Dad? Mom? Can you two come in here? I think I may end up conking out.....M-getting kind of...dizzy...”
Jack hastily cut the power to the shield and ran from the control area to the door of the room and barged in just as Daniel dissipated the duplicates and separated himself from Vlad. The teen’s arms weakly latched onto Vlad and held him steady as his head fell back. Two black rings popped by Vlad’s waist and parted as he shifted back human. Daniel groaned and two white rings fizzled and popped by his own waist as his parents made it to his side. His mom gently grabbed his shoulder while his father supported Vlad. Turning human, Daniel groggily fell to his knees and his mother crouched down to keep him from hitting the floor, “M’ beat...How long was I-?”

Maddie grimaced, “Six hours?”

Daniel groaned, “New record....beat that old man....”

Hearing no response, Daniel worriedly peaked over to Vlad. Jack was kneeling over him and checking his vitals. Daniel swallowed and grimaced, “Dad? Is he alright?”

His father smiled reassuringly, “His fever is only slightly above the norm for you two...He’s probably just going to need a few hours hooked up to an IV and some bed rest…”

Daniel groggily detached himself from his mother and crawled over to Vlad. Putting a hand to his shoulder, he gently shook him. “Don’t make me...come in there again….Come on…”

Jack was about to protest when Vlad groaned against the movements and shifted against the floor. Daniel sighed in relief, “Good, you didn’t get yanked under again....”

After a moment, with no outward indications that Vlad would wake up on his own, Daniel lightly charged a finger and gently zapped the adult. Vlad hissed and weakly turned his head toward the offending party. Dull blue eyes dizzily tried opening and Vlad deadpanned, “Ow....”

Seeing Daniel, Vlad cracked a small smile. “N-No thermos...little badger...?”

Daniel grinned broadly despite his fatigue, “Don’t tempt me.”

Closing his eyes, Vladimir sighed tiredly. Jack gently lifted Vlad up against himself and Vlad numbly curled his head against his shoulder unaware of who was supporting him.

Jack snorted after a few moments and risked questioning, “Vladdie? Are you-?”

Vlad’s eyes flashed open in an instant and he jerked instinctually backward against the cable like arms keeping him off of the floor. Jack soothingly redirected him, “Easy buddy...easy…”

Vlad’s fangs flashed and his eyes sparked red. In a pop of pink Vlad reappeared against the wall, hyperventilating. A pink shield blossomed between him and the Fentons. Jack winced and his features became grief-stricken, “Vlad....I-....Buddy, I didn’t know…”

Vlad’s eyes sobered slightly and he flinched like he had been slapped. The shield stayed up. After a moment, and still partially out of it, he dizzily slurred, “I.....uh-Jack? Mads?....Why aren’t you trying to kill me?”

Both Fenton’s grimaced and Daniel bit his lip. Jack walked over to Vlad and spoke remorsefully. “Buddy....Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”
Vlad shivered and weakly shifted. Now Plasmius, he numbly motioned to himself. “Y-you stopped seeing M-Masters as a friend f-first...You n-never would’ve accepted...a monster...”

Jack looked like he had just been kicked. Tearing slightly, he put a hand to the shield. “Vladdie? We never stopped seeing you as our friend...”

Vlad shivered and sad chuckle filled the room. “Y-you lied....You and Mads left....and never came back....”

At this Maddie stood up and glowered at the shield. “Drop that blasted construct this instant Damian Masters!”

Vlad looked to her tiredly, “Mads?” A small bemused snort came from behind the shield, “I’d rather....not...M....so tired...and dealing with you...right now? Nope-”

Strideing over to the pink glowing semicircle, she kicked. “I said drop the shield you blasted moron! I want straight answers! What do you mean we abandoned you?!?”

Vlad winced and averted his gaze to his lap. “I meant exactly what I said, Madelyn. You both stopped seeing me the day I got turned into this....”

Jack furrowed his brow in confusion. “Vladdie? What are you-”

Bitter tears traced down Vlad’s jaw as he glared at his hands. “I didn’t stutter old friend.”

His head tiredly leaned up against the hole-ridden wall and stared out to Jack through half-lidded eyes. The shield dissipated momentarily and came back as he forced himself to stay awake.

“Why?.....Why did I become a monster to you?...I tried so hard and every time I had to go back to the same conclusion...That I’m a defective mutant...An emotionless freak that deserves a bullet in its head.....Why...was that?....”

Vlad swallowed weakly and averted his gaze back to his lap. “Do you have any idea how-” His voice cracked and he curled against himself tiredly.

Maddie glared. “We were by your side for two years Vladimir! You-”

Daniel flinched and his voice cut through the bitter in the room, “Dad?....Mom?...Do you have a Ghost Dazer on hand?”

Maddie, without taking her gaze from Vlad, casually pulled a dart out of her belt. Vlad noted the object and taking one last glance at Maddie and Jack, dropped his shield. In a low whisper, he lamented, “If you’re going to blast me or-”

Jack quickly darted between Maddie and Vlad and, careful to avoid touching Vlad’s injured arm, hugged him. Vlad tensed and Jack comforted, “Vlad?...You aren’t a monster.”

Vlad’s eyes widened slightly from over Jack’s shoulder. Wincing, his ears pinned to his cheeks and his gaze saddened. “I always thought you didn’t take the shot because you pitied me .....Jack? Why? Why do you still act like I’m even remotely worthy of existing at this point... You of all people....I was a complete fudge-up. I acted like a jerk to you both... and you still want to hug me.....”

Maddie sobered slightly and leaned in to feel Vlad’s forehead. “Vladimir? You’ve aggravated your condition again. You’ve lost a ton of fluids and you’re pretty badly banged up...Just shift back?”
Vlad frowned, but after a moment heeded her request and shifted back. Now both emotionally and physically drained, he sluggishly protested as he was hugged. Maddie’s palm went to his neck questioningly. Vlad groaned and tried shying away from the touch only for Maddie to glare vehemently, “Stay still for God’s sake Vladimir!”

Vlad blearily glanced at her as his eyes began closing. “Just don’t drug me again….?”

Maddie noted the look he was giving the hand that still clapsed the Ghost Dazer and apologetically placed it back in her belt. Vlad relaxed slightly more against Jack. After a moment he questioned, “I...I feel weird….What did you do?”

Daniel frowned and tiredly sat across from his father and Vlad as he briefly recapped, “We forced you to let out some energy so that you wouldn’t morph into a nuclear warhead on us.”

Vlad nodded weakly but his brow furrowed in confusion, “Wait? Nuclear Warhead? What are you yammering about now, Daniel?”

Daniel bitterly stared into the floor, “Oh...I don’t know...You destabilizing because you were holding back? What the actual fuck Vlad?!”

Maddie looked to Vlad, just as expectant of elaboration. To both Daniel and her’s confusion, Vlad questioned with the utmost sincerity, “...Holding back?” His dulled and tired blue eyes flashed red weakly but carried genuine perplexion at Daniel’s claims. Still caught off guard, Vlad continued, “What are you talking about?”

Maddie sighed tiredly and jammed her thumb over to the wall beside them. Vlad’s gaze followed her hand and he tensed. Eyes sifted from the two Fenton’s staring at him expectantly and his breath caught. “I...Daniel? That’s-How did you access my-” Vlad fumbled for a few seconds and Daniel interrupted, “Access what Vlad?”

Vlad immediately answered, “My seal....Danny, how did you overshadow my embassy abilities? I haven’t been able to use them correctly in months. You’re too young...”

Daniel stiffened and scowled, “Too young to overshadow you?! Bull-”

Maddie shushed him and, noting the evident panic and worry in Vlad’s eyes, questioned, “Vladimir? What’s so bad about Danny overshadowing-”

Vlad groaned and glanced at his right arm dejectedly before attempting to raise his head to look at her, “Him overshadowing me isn’t the problem! Damn it. When I get ahold of Clockwork I’m going to-”

Vlad lapsed for a moment and Jack worriedly retracted him from himself to help him calm down. “Vlad? Bud....Breathe.”

Vlad took several small breaths but the effort was obviously taxing him. Sighing, Jack stood and bent down to pick him up. Vlad flinched slightly as the wounds on his back were aggravated by Jack’s palms and bit his lip. Jack looked to him apologetically and comforted, “I think we need to continue this conversation after you heal a little.”

Daniel, however, was intent on answers as was Maddie. Daniel shifted back into Phantom and flew over to Vlad. Vlad tiredly noted the teen above him and frowned before turning his face away from him. Daniel glowered and flew in closer, “Why are you being such a-?” Daniel froze at the expression ghosting across Vlad’s face. It almost looked remorseful and hurt...
The teen softened his expression and put a gloved hand to his dad’s shoulder to stop him. Gently poking Vlad, he apologized, “Okay...I’m probably being angry for the wrong reasons, again... Vlad? Why are you panicking over me using your seal thingy? Is it really that big of a deal?”

Vlad turned back to face the teen and winced, “I honestly pray you’re not starting this early Daniel....Sure, Clockwork jabbed you to get your first embassarial power early but a change of this scale? This quickly?” He shook his head tiredly. “Daniel?....Did it come naturally to you? The energy use?”

Daniel flinched, “Um...yeah... I was just trying for little blasts....I wasn’t expecting that.”

Vlad groggily nodded and glanced toward his broken arm. “I hope...it was a fluke...You getting labeled the universe’s punching...bag at sixteen would seriously suck....” He sighed sleepily and his eyes began to drift. “As for holding back? My powers...have always been pretty messed...up....ever since...I escaped the hospital...and with no core.... I kinda fluctuate a bit....”

Jack, Maddie, and Daniel froze. Maddie turned ashen, “What do you mean escaped?”

Vlad leaned his head against Jack and frowned. “I always thought.... being a doctor...That saving lives would be amazing....”

Vlad began drifting further away as he answered, “I never would've guessed they'd do what they did....”

Vlad shivered, “They were planning on harvesting something.... I heard them.... They were giggling over the idea....”

Maddie exchanged a fearful glance with Jack and Jack gently patted Vlad’s left shoulder as they ascended the stairs. He sighed, “Buddy? Why'd you have to break out of the hospital? You could've-”

Vlad hoarsely chuckled, “They wouldn’t let me. Jack? They didn’t care that I was human first....A corpse doesn’t have rights....”

Daniel stopped abruptly in remembrance of the images Vlad and him had been trapped in for so many hours. Eyes wide, he reached over and gently rolled over Vlad’s left wrist to check for the scars that would indicate they were indeed memories and not feverish dreams. Sure enough, a long deep white mark could be seen against Vlad’s peach skin. Vlad looked up wearily at the teenager with an eyebrow raised in question. The teen swallowed, “You really did that to yourself? Fruit-Loop.....”

‘That means all of that....’

Vlad stiffened against Jack. “Daniel? What are you-”

Daniel flinched and averted his gaze from the limb. Jack noticed the silence and chanced a peek at the wrist. For a moment he was puzzled by the thick scared over tissue, but its location and the precise manner for which it was carved gave all the hints he needed. His grip tightened, almost painfully, around Vlad’s legs and the older hybrid winced and flinched in pain. Maddie noted the tension between the two and quickly yanked Vlad’s uninjured arm down to inspect it herself. She didn’t take nearly as long to draw her own conclusions. After a moment she questioned levely, but with an ache of hurt, “Vladimir....When did you-?”

Vlad, now realizing what had brought the unwanted attention, grimaced. Eyes flashing red, he weakly attempted to smile in comfort. The small, defeated half grin he managed in hopes to appease
any avarice or hatred they could harbor toward him at that moment quickly dissipated as he took in Jack and Maddie’s hurt expressions. Swallowing, he answered. “My twenty-first birthday...The nurse found me a few minutes into it.” Vlad sighed tiredly and starred toward the wrist, “I couldn't even kill myself correctly…”

Jack Trembled angrily, “WHY!? Vladdie….Why did you-?”

Vlad frowned and bitterly answered, “What does it matter? It didn’t exactly wake me up like I had intended and they only became more set on hurting me afterward…”

Maddie grabbed his wrist angrily, “What the actual fuck were you thinking Vladimir?!”

Vlad weakly tugged the limb out and snarled, “I was thinking I could finally go to sleep without waking up to someone tying me down and experimenting on me! To bad that really didn’t work out, now did it?! Not two weeks after the fact, they came into the room and dragged me off into the morgue to test a new way of looking at the situation!”

Daniel swallowed, “The dissections...You mean they-?”

Vlad grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut, “What do you think happened? They drugged me to the point I couldn't move but not enough to keep me unconscious and then they slowly tore me apart to see what reactions they could coax out of me…..”
Vlad shivered, “No one ever cared to look for me or help me… I was used as a lab rat for five years. Can you blame me? Can you really look at me and reprimand me for trying any means to maybe just breathe outside or rest without being dragged back into my room and tied down for some ungodly treatment? The few times I managed to escape my confines I only ever managed to get so far because of my injuries. They never allowed me to heal fully before introducing some sort of new test or medical innovation.” Vlad’s last few words were dry and etched in pained sarcasm. After a few moments of silence, his eyes began closing again against his wishes. Maddie reached over to check him as they passed by her office on the second floor.

Her eyes narrowed worriedly and Vlad weakly protested the touch. Looking up to Jack and Daniel, she sighed. “He’s overexerted himself.”

Vlad blearily heard this and growled, “Mads? If...you...do what I think...you’re-” A yawn cut him off and he winced as the movement pulled against his injured right side.

Jack worriedly leaned him against his shoulder and wrapped around a gloveless hand to check Vladimir’s fever. Feeling a slightly worrying amount of heat, he questioned, “Do we need to sedate him, Mads?”

Maddie took a brief glance at Vlad and seeing him almost completely unconscious shook her head no. “He’s already starting to fall asleep...We just need to get him in bed... We can continue asking exactly what happened to him at the hospital when he wakes up.”

Vlad weakly lifted his left arm and grasped onto Maddie’s palm, which had been hovering over his injured right, before protesting, “Ugh….No….we need to...get ahold of...Rom and Ed….”

Maddie raised an eyebrow, “Who?”

Vlad tossed his head back lightly in dazed annoyance, “...' Friends...that can help…”

Daniel frowned, “You want us to get ahold of Skulker and that Romulus guy?”

Vlad winced and tiredly nodded.

Daniel shook his head, “No.”

Vlad went to protest and Daniel elaborated, “I’m sorry Vlad... If you flare up again like you did early we may not be able to stabilize you fast enough.”

Vlad groaned and sighed as his eyes began to dart in and out. “...They’re coming….I can feel it.....They know I broke my promise.....Walker knows to…..”

Daniel stiffened and tried to direct Vlad’s gaze, “What do you mean they know?”

Vlad winced, “When I went in the zone earlier….My powers reacted…. Walker’s probably going to call an emergency portal closure.....and then send in troops…”

Vlad blearily shook his head. “Demons will know to….They’ll flock to Amity….I have to-”

Jack cut him off, “You have to rest. Please bud….Just-”

Vlad shook his head numbly, “You don’t understand......The zone is being disrupted by this.....Our
plain will feel the after effects….”

Maddie stiffened.

‘Entire areas of the zone pushed and shoved around like leaves in the wind because of one pathetic little creature’s panicked responses…”

Her amethyst gray eyes darted to Vladimir’s now semiconscious form questioningly. “Vladimir? What did you do in the zone? I can understand you and Daniel, but what is this about troops?”

Vlad was silent for a moment before answering, “Let’s just say you and I have dueling occupations...I protect ghosts and humans...The troops coming for me? Officers, cops, ghost mercenaries, militia....My subordinates are probably panicking....I lost control for a moment...and the energy warped everything....My appointees will come to our plain first ....The zone’s greatest hunter....and a fifth-century dismounted man of the sword...” Vlad put a hand to his wounded shoulder.

Daniel shivered, “Why all the attention towards you? Vlad….Why would so many ghosts care?”

Vlad blearily faded out for a moment and Daniel tugged on him to wake him back up. Vlad groaned, “Hmm?”

Daniel rolled his eyes and repeated, “Why all the attention towards you? We’re not even fully dead...What association do they possibly-?”

Vlad, now with his eyes closed, answered vaguely. “If….a diplomat got snatched….or killed...m’ pretty sure...same scenario…..” Vlad went quite again and they awaited elaboration only to be received with silence.

After a moment Daniel went to prod the man awake only for Maddie’s hand to stop his. “I’m curious too, Danny...but look at him...He needs to recover before we start questioning him.”

Swallowing, she paused. The rain was still pouring outside and ascending to the ops center with Vladimir would be practically impossible in the downpour. Turning to Daniel she questioned, “Can you get us back into the operations booth?”

Daniel sighed but obliged and soon the four of them were back in the ectoplasm and blood splattered room. Maddie saw Daniel tense and put a hand to his shoulder to comfort him. He tiredly put his hand on top of hers and let out a small sigh. “Sorry….The smell gets to me....”

Maddie winced, “The smell- You mean ectoplasm makes you uncomfortable? Why-?”

Daniel smiled weakly, “Not all ectoplasm....Just the ectoplasm that begins to turn...Samples in the lab, faulty weapons....this…” Daniel glanced at the dissection table. “It’s like walking into a pile of freshly dismantled corpses… My instincts immediately tell me that I’m in danger whenever I smell it…”

Maddie tensed and her eyes lit with horror. She had unknowingly been making their home a house of horrors for Daniel with their experiments...

Swallowing, she gently took her hand out from under his. “Honey? Go help your dad with Vladimir...I’m going to get this mess cleaned up.”

Daniel stiffened and paused before grabbing her hand back. “I’ll do it…. Our ectoplasm isn’t as acidic as a regular ghost’s, but I don’t want you handling more than you have to…” He managed a weak smile “It’ll take me a few seconds.”
His mom looked to him unsure but tiredly nodded after a moment, “I’ll help your father then.” She went to turn and paused. Looking back over to her son, she added in passing, “Sweetie? When you’re done, can you elaborate on everything that's happened the last few days? And—”

Daniel smiled weakly and duplicated his form. “I’ll answer as much as I can.”
Maddie forced a weak smile and, turning from her son, made her way into the guest bedroom as Jack was setting down Vladimir. Jack’s hand numbly rubbed across the scarred tissue on Vladimir’s wrist and his features saddened considerably. “Why did you do it…? Vlad, how could you have just done that? We were celebrating with you on your twenty-first birthday…How could you have just-?” Jack bit his lip.

Vlad’s twenty-first birthday was the day they had chosen to tell Vladimir they were going to get married. Jack had even asked him to be his best man at the wedding if the hospital would allow it. To know that his best friend had attempted suicide while Maddie and him packed their bags to meet Jack’s grandfather in Massachusetts was absolutely heartbreaking.

More so? Both Jack and Maddie had visited him up until the day he was discharged. No signs of him being vivisected or his wrists being torn open had ever been documented from what he knew…Vladimir never spent time in a risk ward for self-destructive tendencies and a vivisection would have taken months to heal at the very least. But multiple vivisections? It would be on par with someone signing an execution mandate. A person being cut open and harmed in that manner would almost surely have died from shock. All of it screamed impossible.

The wounds and signs of trauma, however, spoke volumes. Jack’s eyes went to Vlad’s marred torso in silent ponderment. ‘There are at least four lines overlapping…Vladie…How did you hide this? Why did you hide this? Why are you so adamant that we never visited you?’

Maddie came to his side and gently removed his hand from Vlad’s wrist. Her own hand ghosted across the thick scar and her gaze saddened. “Jack? How could we have missed this?”

Jack, for the life of him, couldn’t come up with a concrete answer. He had never seen bandages near or on Vladimir’s person throughout the duration of his time in the hospital. Daniel appeared by their side and tiredly wiped a segment of white hair out of his face before shifting back into Daniel Fenton. Sighing, he reached over and grabbed the blanket to tuck Vlad in. Turning to his parents, he asked the one question that had been on his mind since viewing the memories, “Mom? Dad? Why did you leave him?”

Maddie stiffened and Jack grimaced. Jack swallowed, “We didn’t…Danny? We visited him every day in the hospital-”

Daniel shook his head tiredly, “No….You didn’t.”

Maddie shook her head in rebuttal. “Danny? You don’t understand… We did visit him. We even have pictures somewhere in the attic with some of his old college stuff.”

Daniel’s eyes widened and his mouth suddenly went dry. “That doesn’t make sense….Mom? I saw part of what happened… That vortex was his memories. He never saw you or dad. Not once. Part of the reason he did-” Daniel flinched as his gaze traveled to Vlad’s wrist which lay nestled above the blankets. “The reason he did that was that he had no one….He was scared and he just couldn’t handle them sneaking into his room every night and hacking out pieces and-”

Maddie’s eyes widened in horror and Jack turned ashen. “Daniel? What did you see exactly when you were trying to wake him up?”

Daniel winced, “The only people he ever saw were the nurse and the doctor in charge of him.”
Daniel shivered and gripped his shoulders before adding in a shaking voice, “They weren’t trying to
save him… I saw them breaking his ankle and electrocuting him for trying to escape his treatments.”
His eyes flickered back to Vlad’s sleeping form. “The nurse was tying him to the bed and gagging
him so no one would hear the screaming.”

Jack was shaking slightly. His eyes darted from his son to Vladimir in grieved perplexion. “How can
there be two conflicting sides to this?… I remember hugging Vladdie and asking him to be my best
man. Danny…? How can he have no memory of that? Or of me and your mom sneaking into his
room with his birthday cake or….” Jack stopped and bit his lip as a few tears graced across his
features.

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut in order to process what he was hearing. Shaking his head tiredly he
added, “The only things he ever saw were letters from you. The nurse came in with them every once
and awhile…” Daniel rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. “Well, at least from what I saw… I didn’t
see everything that happened… Just glimpses because I didn’t want to risk him getting completely
torn under. Whatever was lurking deeper in his head was so dark and hopeless I don’t think he
would’ve been able to come back at all if he slipped any further into the murk.”

Maddie’s hand tiredly went to her brow. Rubbing the bridge of her nose, she questioningly
addressed Daniel, “Obviously someone’s wrong in this scenario… the question is, who?”

Daniel groaned and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Do you want a printed list of all of the ghosts I
know that like fucking with people’s lives? I’m pretty sure I have an eight-page memoir somewhere
next to my snack stash downstairs.” He somewhat sarcastically sighed.

Looking back down at Vlad, he continued, “Whether you actually visited him or not?” Daniel
swallowed again. “The scars don’t lie. He was cut open. He tried killing himself. And he was
tortured. Two years? Five years? If I’m leaning toward what Vlad’s memories showed me? He was
physically and mentally abused and treated like a specimen for half a decade. Those are the facts.”

Vlad shifted slightly in his sleep and began turning on his left side only for Jack to gently adjust him
back onto his spine so the IV wouldn’t get yanked out or tangled. Tired baby blue eyes stared at his
friend in pained fatigue. Looking from Vlad to his son, he questioned, “So how long have you been
like Vlad, son?”

Daniel frowned, “Two and a half years…. It was Christmas break and Sam and Tuck wanted to see
the lab. One thing led to another and we started talking about the portal and how it wasn’t working. I
ended up suiting up and walking in. It cut on while I was near the center and what you see today is
the result. Danny Fenton, the dead ass high school bumbler, who couldn’t even bring himself to tell
his parents he single-handedly fucked up his own life.” Daniel’s eyes squeezed shut. Two sets of
warm hands embraced him and he reopened his eyes to see both sky blue and bright neon orange
hazmat suits squished up against himself.

Maddie growled, “Don’t you dare say another negative thing about yourself Daniel James Fenton.
We are the screw ups. We should have locked the lab. You and Vladimir both ended up victims
because we continually failed to practice lab safety.”

Daniel snorted and leaned his head against her shoulder. “But I really did fuck up my life,
mom… Every single opportunity I was given, I blew. I should have told you both the first day…the
first three months… Instead, I let it continue and somehow it got to a point where I feared revealing
who I was…”

Jack withdrew first and then Maddie followed to stare at their child, after a moment Jack swallowed,
“Danny…. your chest… Can I see it?”
Daniel tensed and his eyes hollowed. “Mom…Dad… I’m not sure you—”

Jack shook his head and his eyes became pleading, “Son… We need to see what we did to you. I—” Jack flinched and his eyes trailed to the scarred spot obscured by Daniel’s clothing. “I need to see what I did to you.”

Daniel noted both parent’s expressions and cringed. Forcing a sad laugh, he looked toward his father apologetically. “Dad… What I said in Vlad’s kitchen…I—”

Jack shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose, “You had every right to speak up and show me what I did…but that was just the one half of the coin. Danny… I want to see what damage it caused your other half. I need to see what I did to this half. I noticed how you’ve looked at the guns in the lab starting from around that time, and your mother knows you’ve been sleeping in tank tops… Please…”

Daniel swallowed and his fingers trembled as he lifted his shirt up. Keeping his eyes trained to the floor so he wouldn’t have to see the damage, he waited.

The sound of fabric being moved and taken off in the room was followed by a cool hand tracing over the scarred tissue. His father’s calloused and cracked palm gently poked and inspected the white, burn scar. Daniel forced a weak smile, “It’s not that bad, dad….When I first got my powers I had strange little white scars all over my chest and neck that would glow in the dark… They healed and disappeared over time… This? It’ll fade away eventually.”

Jack shook his head, “No it won’t. It’s permanent…. Even if by some strange miracle it did heal completely the emotional damage will still be there.”

Daniel looked up at his father and opened his mouth to say something but words escaped him. Jack weakly smiled, “Two and a half years and we never pieced it together….”

Maddie rubbed her eyes and starred to her son sadly. “Those other scars on your chest… Danny? What are they from?”

Daniel grimaced, “A few power mishaps and a couple of accidental run-ins with people toting ghost hunting equipment. Some are from ghosts but they’re really small.”

Jack raised an eyebrow, “You mean the majority of these are from you getting into fights with humans and accidentally hurting yourself?”

Daniel winced, “When you put it that way, you make it seem like I’m a walking, talking disaster case.”

Maddie shook her head in annoyance and jammed her thumb over her shoulder to Vlad, “I believe he has that honor. Unless your ribs look like peanut brittle as well. For all of the scarred over cracks and healed breaks he has, I’m afraid Vladimir is the undisputed disaster case in this scenario.”

Jack rolled his eyes tiredly and retracted his hand from Daniel’s chest. Daniel smiled weakly, “You should have seen when we were enemies.”

Jack and Maddie both raised an eyebrow and Daniel quickly added, “It’s a really long story.”

Jack groaned, “Does it have anything to do with him trying to distract me and your mom with his ghost half?”

Daniel stiffened, “What did he tell you guys?”
Jack sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair, “He was delirious and didn’t know where he was earlier. He ended up elaborating on some things but was a little too out of it to give us a full picture.”

Daniel rolled his eyes, “Well it’s nice to see he follows a certain pattern with this type of stuff…Then again, the fever may be making it easier for him to confide. Did you guys drug him prior?”

Maddie furrowed her brow, “No…At least I know I didn’t.” She turned to her husband questioningly. “Jack? Did you-?”

Jack sighed and turned to look at Vlad. “When I went to get his shirt off, prior to you getting here Mads, he bolted from the table and tried escaping to protect the kids. He was bleeding everywhere and wasn’t in his right mind. I used a Ghost Dazer on him to calm him down.”

Daniel nodded and jammed a finger toward Vlad as he pulled his shirt back over his scars. “It was probably a combination of him being so sick right now and the drugs. Trust me, he usually isn’t so open about anything. Sure, he’s been making an effort this last week but revealing anything about why he decided to tick me and you guys off has been like trying to use gasoline to put out a fire. He just clamps up and changes topics. The most info I’ve managed to get out of him was when he wasn’t in his right mind.”

Maddie looked to Vladimir tiredly, “We should probably keep him under so he doesn’t panic abruptly when he wakes up.”

Jack shook his head in agreement, but added, “Just give him enough to make him drowsy? He still has a lot to explain when he does wake up later.”

Maddie nodded and exited the room for a syringe and the required medication. Jack reached over to Daniel and hugged him gently. Kissing his forehead, he tightened his grip ever so slightly around the teenager’s shoulders. “Danny? We are so sorry….Nothing will ever make up for this… I know that better than anyone.” He swallowed and cradled a hand behind the boy’s neck. “But I promise, from now on we’ll be doing right by you and V-man. Son? We never would have said or done half the things we did in regards to ghost hunting or you two if we just could’ve pieced this together…If we would have known…” Jack’s voice cracked.

Daniel gently tugged a hand out from under his father’s girth and patted his back affectionately. After a moment, he awkwardly laughed and shrugged under his father’s arms. “In all honesty? I thought if I did come out as Phantom you guys would disown me after that whole abduct the mayor bs a bunch of ghost orchestrated to ruin my life.”

Jack groaned and sighed heavily, “We would’ve done no such thing. Sure, I would’ve asked you why you shot me and your mother-”

Daniel stiffened, “I actually thought you guys could have been possessed… I was trying to zap the ghouls out of you…Really, it just pissed you guys off…” His father’s hand tightened slightly and Daniel gulped, “…sorry?”

To Daniel’s relief, his father chuckled tiredly, “And what about that stint of robberies?”

Daniel groaned and slammed his head against his dad’s shoulder, “Some crazy, bald ringmaster used a ghost artifact on me. I honestly didn’t have a choice.”

Jack sighed, “You’ve gotten into a lot of trouble, haven’t you son?”

Daniel phased out of his father’s hold and crossed his arms in front of his chest with a small smile tugging at his lips before shifting into Danny Phantom. “What do you expect dad? The only other
person like me was set on pissing me off and I’m a teenager that suddenly got superhero powers. Trouble is practically a given in that equation.”

Jack crossed his own arms and rolled his eyes before using a finger to motion the teen forward. Daniel nervously shifted a gloved hand to rest on his other arm, rubbing small circles into his suit, as he tentatively flew closer. To his surprise, his father’s arm looped out and snatched him out of the air. Rubbing playfully into the teen’s snow-white hair, he teased, “So my son is Amity Park’s caped crusader?”

Daniel blushed green and goofily grinned at the assertion. “Yeah…. I guess I am, huh?”

Looking over to Vlad, his smile fell slightly. “Vlad says I don’t really know what I’m doing though… And after two years of confrontations and repeat problems in town, I’m starting to think he’s right. I catch ghosts, sure, but the last year it’s been to prevent ghost hunters from hurting them, not them from hurting people. The few that do accidentally end up harming the living do it out of instinct or confusion.”

Jack detangled his arms from the teenager again and walked over to Vlad’s side, “Vladdie mentioned demons… Um, have you-”

Daniel swallowed, “I met my first demon two weeks ago. He was a dream monster named Nocturn. I’m pretty sure Vlad killed…er-um… exorcised him.” Floating over to Vlad’s side, he reached a palm to the adult’s head to check his fever. Vlad groaned and rolled over slightly just as Maddie came in with a small box full of medical supplies and equipment.
Daniel’s eyes questioningly trailed upward to the box cradled in Maddie’s gloved hands. Seeing the bedpan, he snorted and rolled his eyes. “Mom? You don’t need that.”

Maddie paused and bristled by the left side of the bed before looking into the box. Realizing Daniel was talking about the bedpan, she turned a light shade of red and countered, “Daniel? His injuries are pretty serious. He’s looking at being bedridden for at least half a week before I will even consider letting him move around on his own.”

Daniel shook his head in refusal. “Mom? Two facts about halfas you need to know? Firstly, we heal rapidly. What would take you weeks or months takes us hours or days, sometimes less.” The teen walked over and tapped the disposable pan, “And secondly? We don’t need to go to the bathroom. Like...ever.” He added jazz hands for emphasis at the last two words.

His mother gaped and his father raised an eyebrow. After a moment, Maddie nodded defeatedly and set the box down on a small table beside the bed. Despite all of her medical expertise, she was still being thrown for a loop every time she was confronted with how different her son and friend were because of their accidents.

Reaching into the cardboard she yanked out a new syringe and a vial of Lorazepam. Daniel eyed the two items worriedly. “Mom? What is that?”

Maddie sighed, “A tranquilizer. It’ll keep him from panicking when he wakes up and it will calm any anxiety he has.”

Daniel nodded but quickly protested as the needle pierced the rubber top to the vial. “He weighs more when he’s in human form, if that’s weight based he’s around one hundred and ten pounds right now.”

Maddie paused again and, looking from Vladimir to the needle, nodded before filling the syringe with the proper amount. Her free hand grabbed a wipe from the box beside her to clean the medication port on Vladimir’s IV bag.

Inserting the syringe, she pressed the plunger to administer the drug. Retracting the needle and opening a nearby trash can, she motioned for Jack to take the bag down and mix it slightly to infuse the solution equally. Rehooking the bag to the pole, Jack turned to Maddie tiredly. “His shoulder...Will it heal correctly, Mads?”

Maddie paused again and, looking from Vladimir to the needle, nodded before filling the syringe with the proper amount. Her free hand grabbed a wipe from the box beside her to clean the medication port on Vladimir’s IV bag. Inserting the syringe, she pressed the plunger to administer the drug. Retracting the needle and opening a nearby trash can, she motioned for Jack to take the bag down and mix it slightly to infuse the solution equally. Rehooking the bag to the pole, Jack turned to Maddie tiredly. “His shoulder...Will it heal correctly, Mads?”

Maddie paused and rounded to Vladimir’s injured right side. Pulling the blanket up slightly higher to keep him comfortable she reached into the box for some more medical tape and began tethering the side of the gauze that had come undone to the top of his shoulder. After a few minutes, she answered. “He’ll be fine...If what Danny says is true, this will be healed almost completely in a week or two.”

Vlad stirred at her touch as she began tucking him in and groggily shifted before opening his eyes slightly. “Ugh- What’s?”

Jack immediately loomed over him worriedly. “Vladdie? Bud...go back to sleep.”

Vlad winced and sighed before turning to look at what was applying pressure to his injured shoulder. Maddie smiled gently. “Vladimir? Did I accidentally aggravate the wound?”

Vlad winced. “Oh...ugh-yeah? Sorry, Mads...Why is the room spinning...?”
Jack smiled apologetically, “We gave you some medicine to help you sleep and calm some of your nerves. Are you still feeling any pain in your right arm?”

Vlad groggily noted the question and glanced toward the limb, “It doesn’t hurt...I don’t know what?” Vlad furrowed his brow in confusion.

Jack nodded and, noting Vlad’s obviously drugged state, questioned. “V-man? You really should just go back to sleep. I know you’re stubborn in regards to sleeping but forcing yourself to try and stay awake regardless of the drugs in your system is foolish.”

Vlad snorted and closed his eyes for a moment to think of a reply, after a few seconds, he countered, “That’s probably the hundredth time...this week...that ...someone...has told me to ...go to sleep…”

Daniel rolled his eyes and floated up over the adult to glare at him. “Only because you need to. It’s only been thirty minutes since you conked out. Go back to sleep.”

Vlad groaned tiredly and ignored Daniel. His left arm went to the bar on the side of the bed in an attempt to sit up. Jack’s hands immediately whipped out to prevent the movement. “I believe it was an order and not a recommendation, bud.”

Vlad noted the black gloved hand on his unwounded shoulder with slight confusion before looking up to Jack. “...I was under...the impression...that I’m an adult, Jack...Daniel isn’t qualified to command me to do anything.”

Jack and Daniel shared a similar expression of annoyance before glaring at him. Maddie sighed in exasperation. “Vladimir? Stay still.”

Vlad shifted slightly against the bed and tiredly slapped at the hands keeping him pinned. “Maddie? Tell Jack to let go?”

Maddie in response grabbed the seat belt like straps from the side of the bed and began reaching over Vlad to secure him to the cot. Vlad’s jaw went slack before he began moving against the buckles. “Maddie? Jack? What-?”


Vlad’s eyes flashed red as he glowered weakly at the man towering over him. “Unbuckle these infernal restraints right now, Jackson.”

Jack’s eyebrow twitched. “So you can hurt yourself? Fat chance.” He paused before reaching down and tightening one of the straps. Still staring Vlad down, he added in passing, “And for the love of god stop saying my name like that!”

Vlad growled, “Who’s going to make me?!? Damn it! Jack?!? Let me out! Something is fucking with my soul sigil!”

Vlad’s eyes flashed white for a split second and a small glimmer of light flickered from his right palm. Gasping in pain, he bit his lip to keep from screaming. Hearing the pastry free curses and noting Vladimir’s distress despite the drugs, Jack quickly unclipped him. Daniel fumbled with one of the straps by Vlad’s calf in a panic before his mother rounded and undid it. A brutish snapping noise scratched through the material obscuring Vlad’s splinted arm and his eyes widened in shocked pain. Before any of the Fentons could calm him he reached over and yanked the IV out of his left arm. Teleporting to the other side of the room and clawing into the wall with his uninjured arm he faintly registered the white shield, that usually accompanied distress or protection measures generated by his embassy mark, spreading out around
A rather loud snap and a painful burn whipped out from his wounded right arm as two ebony rings forcefully shifted him. Gasping for air by the wall and biting back screaming in agony, he felt the searing energy snaking through his shoulder blade and pulling flesh taunt. The brand like burn continued and, with a flash of bright white energy, Plasmius collapsed and curled against himself on the floor. The splint and gauze protecting his injuries turned to ash before the light faded. The two handprints on his back began shrinking and fading in a mecob blur. The ectoplasm speckled, bloody holes on his legs filled with new flesh. Healthy blue hues darted and danced as the white energy seamlessly fused the claw gauges on his back...

Dizzy, Plasmius noted a blanket being wrapped around him and a set of large arms lifting him off of the floor. The shield had apparently allowed the Fentons in because of their sincerity in trying to aid him.

To his confusion, he was being carried away from the bed he had awoken in and out of the room. Jack jostled him slightly, “Vladdie?! Bud?!?! What just-”

Vlad grimaced, “D-Don’t know… It’s new…”

Jack gently sat him up on the now clean metal table in the operations center.

Daniel was helping Maddie in retrieving what looked like a set of green pajama pants and a portable x-ray machine. “Why are they getting-?”

Vlad turned bright green and looked to his friend in confusion. “Jack?! Please tell me I-”

Jack sighed. “Maddie and I didn’t see it, but Danny says everything covering your human half spontaneously combusted as you shifted.”

Vlad shivered from under the blanket draped over his shoulders and mentally thanked the higher power that had allowed Plasmius’s energy-based clothing to stay tangible on his form throughout the energy fluctuations.

Swallowing, he frowned and glanced toward his right arm. Jack’s line of sight followed his gaze and he winced. Looking back up to Vlad, and directing his attention with a soft shake to his left shoulder, he asked, “Vladdie? Can I cut your shirt off? We have to see what happened to your injuries.”

Vlad nodded no and before Jack could protest, dissipated his tunic and cape. Jack smiled weakly, “Well that’s convenient.”

Vlad nodded and looked at his friend tiredly. “J-Jack? Can I have the pants first?”

Daniel floated over and raised an eyebrow, “Can you keep up your ghost form?”

Vlad’s eyes flashed white against his wishes for a moment before almost closing. Jack quickly supported him as he fell forward.

Still Plasmius, he swallowed weakly, “If I pass out… I’ll end up shifting… back into human form…”

Daniel nodded sympathetically. “Yeah…. From what I saw in the split second before you shifted? Your human side is birthday-suited.”

Plasmius groaned, somewhat annoyed and apologetic, “G-good to know?”
Jack sighed and lifted Vlad’s head to see his eyes. “Vladdie? Are you feeling alright? Your powers didn't hurt you did they?”

Vlad somewhat sleepily shivered. “It hurt for a few seconds... now everything’s just pins and needles.”

Maddie withdrew a flashlight from her belt, “Vladimir? Is pupil dilation the same for this form?”

Vlad nodded, “Yeah... it's the same....”

Turning on the light and holding a hand to his neck to feel his pulse, she checked both eyes. Satisfied with his eyes but not his rapid pulse and somewhat sluggish responses, she questioned, “We heard snapping. Vladimir what-?”

Vlad groaned and lifted the arm not occupying Jack's shoulder for balance in order to cradle his head. Three sets of eyes darted to the limb in confusion. Maddie’s hand gently latched onto the wrist and pulled it down. Tucking aside the blanket to inspect the arm, her jaw fell. Turning to Jack, she commanded, “Lay him down. I need to get images. Whatever you do don't let him move.”

Vlad looked from Maddie to Jack dizzily. “W-What's wrong?”

Daniel looked to his mother pleadingly. “Mom? He's probably going to pass out and when he does he'll be naked.” A duplicate phased through the operations booth flooring with a bag in hand. “I have some stuff he can cover up with. Jaz brought some of the bags she left in the car from when she went shopping for him yesterday.”

Maddie sighed and looked to Vlad questioningly as she cupped his cheek. “Vladimir? I'm going to let Daniel help you get dressed. Can you avoid moving your right side? I think adrenaline may have numbed some of the pain.”

Vlad nodded before rasping, “I'll avoid moving it...”

Looking to Daniel and sighing, Vlad added, “D-Daniel? Can you use this blanket to curtain me?... I don't think I can go invisible right now...”

Jack, however, took the blanket and used it to shield both Vlad and the teen. Vlad smiled slightly. “T-Thanks Jack.”

Jack sighed from behind the gray wool. “So much for one to two weeks, Mads.”

Vlad starred to the blanket slightly confused before Daniel's hand landed on his left shoulder. “Fruit-Loop? Can you stand?”

Vlad pondered the question, “Can you help me up?”

Daniel smiled slightly, “Sure... So how are we going to do this?”

Vlad felt the arm supporting him and weakly gripped onto the teen. Touching his feet to the floor shakily, he answered. “I'm almost out...of it....again. Whatever weird flare up just happened?... It drained me like a battery...M' gonna turn human...and I don't have the luxury of choosing when, hence the blanket...”

Adjusting his left arm to the table for a moment, he motioned for the clothes with a small nod. “I think we can slip these over my spectral clothing...If I conk out and shift involuntarily the fabric will just carry over like it did with my bandages.”
Daniel sighed but nodded in approval of the plan. After a few moments of maneuvering the boxers and pants over Vlad’s boots and trousers, two rings began trying to pop around Vlad’s waist. Ignoring Maddie’s warning about moving his right limb, Vladimir quickly pulled the material up to his hips just as the rings fully formed and began parting.

Daniel immediately glowered, “What part of ‘don’t move your arm’ do you not understand?!”

Vlad snorted weakly and slouched against the teen. “I’d rather agitate the limb than turn into an accidental nudist in front of a sixteen-year-old boy, Daniel.”

Daniel rolled his eyes, “It’s not like I haven’t seen it before!”


Vlad blearily laughed. “Your son?...He pranked me...a while back...Turned my hotel room’s walls...invisible as I got...out of the shower...He also had ghost hunters blow up my house.”

Vlad’s smile fell at the memory and he cringed. Daniel now realizing just how immature and dangerous his little prank could have been for Vlad, immediately swallowed. “Vlad?...About the GIW...They didn’t—”

Vlad’s frown deepened and he tiredly answered. “You know? Part...of the reason...I took this mayor gig...is so they would follow me and not you?.... They don’t...run...like a regular government...agency...They’re not monitored...and they are irrational and immoral...I used one of Desiree’s wishes...Had...to...”

Noticing Vlad going slack against him, and the rings finishing the transformation, Daniel used his free arm to yank on the blanket obscuring them from his parents. “Dad? Vlad is back to normal but he’s semiconscious...Without his ghost half, he’s barely managing to keep his eyes open.”

Maddie tore the blanket down from Jack’s side and brought her arm to support Vlad’s right limb as gently as possible. Turning to Jack and Daniel, she commanded. “Lay him down on the gurney.”

Jack took him from Daniel and gently lifted him up onto the metal. Vlad shivered at the temperature difference before Daniel snatched the wool blanket and lifted Vlad’s back up to get it under him.

Vlad groaned and tossed his head lightly. “This....week.....really...sucks...”

Daniel rolled his eyes and couldn’t help the evident sarcasm that dripped from his scowl, “What clued you in? You bleeding to death in your kitchen or that thing taste tasting you? Or maybe it was your secretary poisoning you and leading you along for that green thing to kidnap you?”

Vlad stared into the ceiling through slitted lids and laughed weakly. “Yeah...nevermind...regular work week....”

Daniel growled at Vlad’s weakly constructed sarcastic poke at normalcy and Vlad smiled gently before flinching as Maddie’s gloved hand connected to his right arm and brought it against a plastic table they used for prosthetic adjustments. Vlad turned his head groggily to stare at her, “What’s....the diagnosis...doc?”

Maddie smiled thinly and clicked the button to take the required images. “You’re a pain in the ass.”
Vlad whistled and turned away from her. “I was...talking...about the arm...but I guess that’s accurate...considering my behavior...earlier…”

Jack worriedly stared between the two of them but kept his mouth zipped as Maddie motioned for him to stay quiet.

Vlad began closing his eyes after a few moments. “Mads...?...M’ sorry...That shot...was kinda...justified...”

Maddie sighed and interjected, “No. It wasn’t justified, Vladmir. Shooting my friend is never justifiable. I don’t appreciate lying but I can see now that you and Danny had a reason to lie to me and Jack as you did. Ghost hunting doesn’t exactly breed a friendly environment when you’re a half ghost.”

Vlad smiled drowsily. “Ironic...words...”

Daniel raised an eyebrow as did Jack. Jack prodded, “What do you mean V-man?”

Vlad smiled tiredly, “Said half ghosts... both became ghost hunters...”

Daniel, realizing how true the statement was, grinned broadly. “I’m surprised you put that together with how out of it you are right now.”

Jack rolled his eyes at the two and questioned, “Vladdie?”

Vlad fidgeted slightly and swallowed, “Yes?”

“If you both are ghost hunters...Why is Daniel’s method wrong?”

Vlad sighed, “Ghosts...aren’t usually easily sorted...Mr. Thermos...is a catch and release hunter....He almost always handles kind or confused spirits...some of which wandered to long in this plain...and became sick....from lack of ectoplasmic energy....Sickness...breeds desperation....Daniel’s...method isn’t exactly wrong...just cumbersome...and sometimes harmful....to the spirits and in most cases....himselves...”

Vlad tiredly glanced at his torso, “I have...no right to judge...I save such...spirits to....but my job usually...gets a lot more....messy...Joys...of being...the flip side...of the coin...”

Maddie raised an eyebrow as she set the machine aside to process the images. Rounding to Vladimir, she questioned, “Can you elaborate on that other side of the coin Vladimir?”

Vlad rolled his eyes and somewhat sarcastically mused. “Congrats....Mads?...Jack?....You guys...managed...to catch...the...chump...in charge of....regulating...both plains...”

Jack sighed and turned to Maddie, “Mads? He’s almost out of it again, a lot of this isn’t exactly adding up-.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and interrupted, “No, he’s actually trying pretty hard to explain what he is...I don’t know all of the details, but from everything I’ve heard this weekend and what he said earlier? I’m willing to bet he’s some sort of border patrol officer for the zone.”

Vlad snorted, “Way...to simplify...Little Badger...”

Vlad sighed tiredly and stiffened abruptly. Shooting up from the table and startling the Fentons, he dizzily rasped, “The kids!? Daniel? What-”
Daniel put a hand to his left shoulder to steady and calm him down. “Woah...easy there. They’re fine. My duplicate is keeping them updated right now. They’re all in Jaz’s room talking.” Daniel paused and his eyes became distant for a moment. After a second, he grinned, “Jaz says if you ever lock them in your basement again like that she’ll personally shoot you in the leg.”

Vlad’s shoulders sagged and he snickered weakly. Looking up to Daniel pleadingly, he questioned, “Daniel?... Is Danni alright? I-”

Daniel sighed and hugged the adult back to his shoulder, “She’s fine. Just worn out. She blamed herself for Mom and Dad getting ahold of you. She woke up a few minutes ago because of a nightmare but she has calmed down a ton since my duplicate explained what happened up here.”

Vlad relaxed against the teen and Daniel raised an eyebrow, “Vlad?”

“Danny? He passed out.” Jack whispered as he reached over and gently laid Vlad back against the table.

Maddie sighed and addressed Daniel, “Can you go get the IV pole and the pillow from the other room? I don’t want to move him more than necessary.”

Daniel nodded and quickly darted to the room for the supplies. Jack reached over to Vlad and pulled the blanket up to cover his chest, successfully putting the scars out of his line of sight. Maddie walked over to the X-ray machine and flicked through the digital images. Eyes widening in disbelief, she turned to Jack and swallowed, “His arm...it-”

Jack looked up from Vladimir in confusion, “It what?”

Maddie quickly pivoted the machine to face Jack. Jack’s eyes trailed over the image and after a moment he felt his jaw go slack. Turning back to Vlad, he gently lifted up his right arm as if it were made of sugar glass. “That’s impossible...”

Daniel, hearing his father’s worried tone, quickly flew up with the pillow in hand as his duplicate wheeled the IV pole toward them. “Dad? Mom? What’s-?”

Maddie pointed to the x-ray on the screen beside them and Daniel turned an ashen gray beige underneath his ghostly tan complexion.

*The bone had healed...*
Skulker was by definition a ghost of patience and level headed decision. A hunter first. Vladimir would argue a friend foremost but that had always been a subject of debate seeing as how often Vladimir would get himself into perilous situations before Skulker could intervene. Pariah Dark? The dreaded Christmas Truce Party of 2002? The GIW shoot out a few years ago? Vlad getting a mystical makeover multiple times because of artifacts? Playing villainous deviant for a couple of teenagers for two and a half years?

For lack of a better way of putting it, Vlad Masters was a paranormal problem child. A lovable idiot with a snarky sense of humor and luck that usually would denote someone going into a mirror warehouse and breaking every single reflective surface.

Skulker rubbed his brow tiredly as he floated through the middle eastern area of the zone. ‘And then there was him losing Anna….’ Skulker swallowed dryly. Vladimir hadn’t been himself in over two and half years….And losing that child had shattered him more than Skulker could stomach. Both Romulus and himself had also grown painfully attached to the eleven-year-old. To find out that she had died in such a gruesome way had only added to the pain.

A hand clipped onto Skulker’s shoulder, startling him, and causing him to draw his gun.

Romulus raised a black eyebrow at the barrel positioned between his eyebrows and his radioactive green eyes tinged with worry. “Edmond?”

Skulker sighed and retracted his gun to reholster it. “You startled me!”

Romulus smiled weakly, “I am the Fright Knight, my friend. Startling people comes with the title.”

Skulker looked over the knight questioningly, “What happened to your armor?”

Fright Knight looked to his black tunic tiredly, “The locals in this area do not take kindly to specters sporting medieval armor after the Christian faith sent droves of holy men with swords to slay them in the name of divinity.”

Skulker nodded, “Oh…right…the crusades…What area is this we’re in?”

Romulus groaned, “This sector is a segment of the zone associated with the eleventh-century version of Jerusalem. I predate the event but these people refuse to stop staring.”

Skulker grimaced and nodded apologetically, “I think we are too far out of Nocturn’s territory. We need to go back and regroup with Vladimir… I don’t feel comfortable leaving him on his own for this long…especially with how many times he’s hurt himself the last few months.”

Romulus nodded and motioned for a second of time before floating over to a booth selling roasted spectral dates. Giving a prayer to the salesmen he pocketed the bag and motioned for Skulker to follow. “We best take our leave. Vladimir’s mark hasn’t summoned for us once since we have left and I feel such silence is not a precursor to good fortunes.”

Skulker groaned and nodded before tailing the black-haired individual through the market’s many alley laden streets. Coming to the ebony territory gate, he took one last look at the busy market behind them before quickly leaping through to the green portion of the zone left unmarred by cultural definition.
Romulus noted his fatigue and stopped ahead of him to take the pouch of spectral food from his pocket, “Edmond? Here. I know you prefer Bardo’s but these are just as good at replenishing a core’s pulse.”

Skulker sighed tiredly and nodded his head before taking the fluorescent purple fruits from Romulus's black gloved hand. Popping the two into his mouth he tiredly chewed and swallowed the ghostly incarnation of the fruit.

The sweet was almost sickening, and the texture was brittle against his long-dead tongue… But spectral food was the only thing that would allow a ghost temporary taste and an energy boost. The zone sustained form and power but additional substance extended use of the energy gathered.

Romulus turned and scanned the area ahead of them, “I think we should take the canyon route.”

Skulker floated over and tiredly slapped the ghoul upside the head. “No...Just NO. I’m not going back to Vladimir as dented scrap metal. He has enough to deal with.”

Romulus turned to argue but was quickly silenced by Skulker’s fatigued scowl.

Skulker was almost always the voice of reason for the group.

Vladimir was the brains and firepower, Romulus was the battle wisened deviant and he was the tracker and weapons expert. Together? They made the most fearsome team the ghost zone had seen since its creation.

On a whole, these last few weeks weren’t exactly to different in regard to how they had been adapting to Vladimir’s recent illness. Him nearly being decapitated by Vlad Dracul a few weeks prior while trying to free Romulus from an artifact had sealed Skulker’s resolve for keeping him away from the zone.

Skulker floated forward with a path in mind and Romulus followed with a defeated sigh.

The fact that they had found him with his head busted open at some weird gala just before the hunt had begun had only added to the pyre for Vladimir’s house arrest.

After a few minutes of flying, Romulus questioned, “Edmond? Do you think he’s eating properly?”

Skulker sighed, “The moron had better be eating properly…” Skulker rubbed his right hand tiredly through the material in his glove. After a few moments, he added, “I think we should take him to see Walker once we arrive back at the manor… Nocturn can be handled by the forces under the warden’s jurisdiction. Vladimir’s sickness isn’t letting up and I fear it may have become more dangerous in our absence.”

Fright Knight shivered in reaction and his eyes flickered to Skulker proddingly, “Your gut feeling again?”

Skulker simply nodded. Every nerve in his being was poised and bristled for attack or catastrophe despite them being surrounded by the void’s peaceful green calm. In his experience, such feelings should never be put off as nervous jitters unless one wanted to end up killed six times over, or worse…

“We’ve been gone for nearly three weeks, Vladimir should have summoned us back ages ago through our marks...We should be able to feel his pulse...even with the distance between us and yet here we are with no tangible validation that his well being is secured in our absence.” Skulker growled and continued flatly, “It’s not so much a feeling as a knowing with Vladimir’s track record.”
Romulus winced and nodded in agreement before picking up his pace to accommodate Skulker’s sudden burst of speed.

Vladimir was a risk taker by nature. If the odds were against him he would almost certainly take the heavy fire route. The halfa was a pure and protective being with a knack for getting into unsavory situations most people would write off as improbable dumb luck or a living horror movie incarnate.

The metal suited specter sped up slightly more at the thought of exactly what trouble his best friend could have landed himself in, in their extended absence.

The hunter had even given him ground rules before leaving, much to Vladimir’s chagrin, in hopes he would avoid unnecessary strain on his obviously fatigued body. The first on the list was a restriction on location. Vladimir was to stay in his home and out of the zone with only a few deviations for work and food. The second on the list was liquor. Romulus and Skulker had nearly seen him die from mishandling a book poltergeist because of his drunken idiocy. A weak level ten poltergeist to be exact...Granted, Vladimir’s blood had given it quite the power boost.

Romulus seemed to voice the thought, “ You don’t think he drank himself incoherent again do you? I know he hates liquor... but since Anna and losing Tr-”

Skulker sighed and cut him off. “He probably refilled that blasted stash in the kitchen while we were away. He’s gotten better with managing his depression but I think you and I need to make sure he has constant supervision the next few months...I don’t want to lose him because he refuses to accept that it wasn’t his fault...and as for Trisha…” Skulker sighed heavily.

That was an extremely painful topic as well….Vladimir hadn’t been quite the same since last November...Sure...When Anna came into his life he had cheered drastically in the aftermath of the break-up, but the hurt was still evident every time Vlad had to make a business call or sign a memo from her office. It was a dry ache...a wound that was continually tarnished with salt every other day before it could close fully.

Ed and Romulus both had half a mind to confront her in hopes of patching at least a segment of Vladimir’s wrecked psyche, but even that had begun to seem hopeless a month into Vladimir’s breakup. Vladimir had ordered both ghouls to stay clear of her and the company due to trauma brought on by an incident.

Around the same time, her home had burnt down, thankfully without her being in the building at the time. They, of course, had questioned his reasoning in asking them to avoid her and were pained to hear his answer. She had no want for the paranormal.

All three of them were creatures reborn through the zone. They were the definition of paranormal. Their abilities, mannerisms, experience? All zone bred.

Rejecting not only them but the core of what Vlad was had been a truly painful thing for all of them to cope with. Skulker and Romulus had honestly hoped Vladimir had found someone who loved him unconditionally. The way his eyes used to light at the mere mention of Trisha... The blush that would stain his cheeks at Skulker’s teasing….Vladimir for the span of two years had been blissfully content and Trisha had accepted all of him in earnest...ghost half included.

And then it all just abruptly stopped. Vladimir came home a broken man with an even more broken spirit. He didn’t eat or sleep for weeks and he drank to the point Skulker and Romulus had to guard his room at night to make sure he wasn’t harming himself.

Turning back to glance at Romulus, he answered glumly, “ She made her choice...and I wouldn’t be surprised if Vladimir had another lapse in judgment while we were away and attempted to drown out his feelings after a rough day of work.”
Romulus cringed and weakly nodded in understanding and grief.

Skulker turned his face back to watch where he was flying as he reminisced on the events that had followed that brutal period of time.

The nightmares had started becoming more prolific once Trisha had left Vladimir. Skulker would almost nightly run into Vladimir’s bedchambers in a frenzied panic because of his mark to find the man hyperventilating and choking in his bed. Random incoherent cries of sorrow would continually spew from the halfa as Skulker shook him back to the land of the living. Talk of ringmasters and green-eyed monsters...Stifled screaming for a sibling long lost...Trisha...and oddly enough the names of the Fentons, Skulker, Romulus and various other relations between panicked breaths and sobs. Eventually, Vlad stopped sleeping altogether to avoid the dreams.

Anna came into their lives a few days after Christmas.

Vlad had been taken during a turf war over an artifact and despite Skulker and Romulus's best efforts they had been unable to track him for close to two days. Skulker had actually resigned himself to breaking into Fenton Works for the boomerang Jack Fenton had engineered as a last-ditch plan to save Vladimir. Both him and Romulus had battled through the Fenton’s security systems undetected only to make it to the basement to find Maddie securing the door and mumbling about faulty thermal readouts. She, of course, turned in time to see both Skulker and Romulus in her basement and opened fire. Romulus's quick teleportation skills had been the only saving grace given before the shields could trap them in the home. They ended up in Vladimir’s lab just in time to find Vladimir’s unconscious form collapsed against a wall with a child wrapped in his cape.

Not an entirely new occurrence for the embassy...Lost children were often a constant due to the nature of innocence and new life…

Vladimir and the girl didn’t wake up for several days. By the third day, Skulker had run multiple blood tests to check for artifact contamination in both the girl and Vladimir only to find out the child was a halfa.

When his friend had awoken it was in a semi-conscious haze in order to search the child out. He teleported to the portal first, startling Romulus who tried to grab him only for the dazed and still recovering man to phase through his hold and into the infirmary. Skulker ended up grabbing onto Vlad’s shoulder just as he picked up the girl and teleported back to his room. Skulker had watched as Vladimir had gently set her down in his own bed and sighed in relief before he fell over into Skulker’s hands in a dead faint from excessive power use.

That child became a daughter to Vladimir and a niece to Skulker. Romulus doted on her like a sibling…

Skulker smiled sadly as he flew.

Vladimir had been almost in shock from the entire ordeal and not two months later, on February 10th, he was gently leading the girl out to a bakery for a birthday cake. With no memory of who she was prior and almost non-existent language development, she had completely become his. She spoke in mostly ghost speak for the first three months in Vladimir’s home but with Vladimir’s constant pushing she quickly became acquainted with English. She played dress up...She liked video games...She would crack jokes and prod Skulker just like her father and, despite being unrelated, she carried the same mischievous glint in her eyes.

When she died…Vladimir became distant and completely devoid of life. Skulker had to watch as he not only lost his adoptive niece but also the man he cared for as a brother slowly wilt and fade.
Vlad became a reckless fool in the aftermath, putting caution to the wind and almost searching out trouble as if seeking retribution for something he couldn’t prevent or control. And with the sudden suicidal tendencies came this debilitating illness that seemed to be affecting his friend’s powers and control.

Skulker’s brow furrowed as he thought about the utter abandonment and loss of self-preservation that seemed to accompany the man.

The hunter was still pissed off at the fool for pushing him out of the way of Undergrowth’s attacks and jumping in front of Romulus without shielding. Vlad being speared through by a viney plant and splattering blood and ectoplasm all over Romulus had subsequently emotionally wrecked the poor ghoul. Vladimir was a human being first and foremost and seemed to forget that both Skulker and Romulus had lived their previous lives already…

There were worse fates than being exorcised and Vladimir taking his own life for granted was a rather poor course of action. Vlad, unlike Skulker and Romulus, was the only one of his kind. Daniel carried halfa status, but Vladimir wasn’t as clean cut. In terms of what he was, he would probably line up to branch species when compared to the child…They carried similar traits, had similar structures, developments and powers at base level, but Vladimir was and always would be a being more entwined with the in between. A self-made, living artifact that used his own life as a counterweight to the zone’s imbalances. A force of healing. In all of the zone’s recorded history, only one other like Vladimir had ever existed and they had died long before any of them had been born in either the living realm or the dead’s.

Vladimir was the accidental leader of the zone and its undistinguished caretaker. In many ways, he was the king attested and appointed to the role but not governed control over the subjects, just management. The single most important figure in the zone and only a select few knew who and what he was at any given time.

To be exact less than ten ghosts, that Skulker knew of, were aware of who Vladimir was and his role. Walker even made it a habit to keep his subordinates out of the loop when concerning matters related to the half ghost. The warden usually just labeled him as a ghost bounty hunter under his protection when his officers needed to become involved.

As it stood, the zone thought there was only one-half ghost in existence.

There was irony in Phantom flaunting his half ghost status and heroism when Vladimir was strictly kept in shadow…

‘Then again the brat doesn’t exactly have to deal with truly life or death scenarios.’ Skulker snickered internally, ‘Most of his fights are accidental or staged to give him a lesson…’
An Embassary's Power

Seeing Walker’s prison nearby, Skulker made a detour to the stone bricked construct. “Romulus? I need to notify Walker of Vlad’s condition and ask if he can prepare a cot in the infirmary.”

Romulus nodded and stopped outside the building. “I will wait for you out here.”

Skulker nodded tiredly and rounded to the gate only to have a flash of green mist appear in front of him. Walker stepped out of the cloud curtly and took in Skulker with a somewhat tired expression. “Good evening Edmond.”

Skulker nodded politely, “Same to you Jonah.”

Noting Skulker’s fatigue, the warden raised a hairless brow, “What brings you to my domicile?”

Skulker sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes tiredly, “I need to request a bed in the infirmary for Vladimir. I fear he needs medical intervention.”

Walker furrowed his brow, “Has he healed yet from the poison in his system? When I saw him last he couldn’t-”

Skulker’s head whipped up in a flash, “What poison?! When did you see him-”

Walker rubbed the bridge of where his nose would have hung in fervent distaste and aggravation. Looking back to Skulker, he snarled, “Phantom grievously wounded Vladimir. I take it you haven’t returned to his domicile yet to take into account his recent injuries? When I came to give him the list of names this quarter he collapsed and almost stopped breathing!”

Skulker growled and whipped his head to Romulus, “ROM? CAN YOU TELEPORT TO VLAD’S GATEWAY?!?”

Romulus nodded hastily and went to do so only to turn ashen gray under his light purple skin. Skulker felt it as well. Vlad’s pulse was drumming against his clothed hand for the first time in weeks, beating erratically and frantically in tune to some sort of weird, fluctuating and burning heat.

Walker noticed their changes in mannerisms and his eyes widened. What followed next was pandemonium. A wave of pure white light rippled through the zone like a tidal wave. Romulus growled at the approaching energy and quickly brought up a large grey and purple shield to surround the compound. The energy warped around the construct as the ghoul struggled with the pressure. Walker could be heard over the roar of white light, “EVERYONE INSIDE! ALLEN? COMBER? LOCKDOWN PROCEDURES!!”

A large crack ripped through the shield as the energy continued fluctuating and hitting violently against it. With a sickening crunch, the entire construct shattered and Romulus has knocked aside like a rag doll. Skulker quickly flew up and caught the ghoul before he could connect with the ghost proof walls of the prison just as the next wave of energy crashed into them. Using his body to shield the unconscious ghost in his arms from the impact of the tsunami force energy, Skulker cracked against the wall with a hard thud. Walker’s green light quickly surrounded the duo and in a flash, all three were safely inside of the prison.

Walker’s gloved hand immediately went to Romulus head. A small stream of green could be seen leaking sluggishly down his cheek from near his temple. Taking out a small vial of pure ectoplasm he motioned for Skulker to hold Romulus tightly. The hunter quickly locked the thinner, more cat-like
frame of his friend against himself as Walker leaned in and poured the vial on the wound. Green eyes darted open with a pained gasp and Romulus flickered slightly. Resisting the sudden pressure around him, he squirmed and writhed. Mist resurfaced the specter’s face and after a few seconds, he groggily focused on his surroundings and relaxed against Skulker. Dust fell down and jolted the trio back to their current predicament.

The prison was shaking. The spectral lights formed from ectoplasmic energy were bursting from their constructs like firecrackers and glass cracked underfoot as Skulker supported his companion over one arm to help him stand.

Romulus groaned and a few long strands of black hair fell in front of his eyes. “The jail-Walker…? The high-risk ward...underneath.....Is it-?”

Walker immediately assured, “You blocked the majority of the impact. We are just being hit by the aftershocks now.”

Romulus looked up dizzily and winced as more dust fell from the ceiling. “What is this? In all of my time enslaved to Pariah, an energy fluctuation of this magnitude has never ripped through the zone so violently!”

Walker winced, “No...This has happened before. Granted, it was while you were imprisoned the past few centuries.”

Skulker swallowed, “What was that Jonah?”

Walker put a hand to his head tiredly. “That…” More dust fell from the ceiling. “This…” He corrected and pointed to the shaking around them. “...is Vladimir’s embassay abilities going spastic.”

Skulker froze up and looked to the shaking in horror. Vlad’s heartbeat had increased to practically fear-inducing levels at the start of the tremors and was still rapidly increasing in tempo. “You mean this frantic energy attack, which is on par with the Great Spectral Quake of 1997, is from Vladimir?!”

Walker groaned at the mention of the last great energy fluctuation in the zone and nodded yes.

Skulker hissed in agitation and pulled the glove off of his right hand. The seal making him Vladimir’s appointee was flashing bright white with hints of red and pink. Walker noted the uncovered limb and quickly brought his hand out to conceal the mark. “Not here Edmond. Not here.”

Skulker whipped his hand out of Walker’s gloved palm and practically snarled. “Vladimir is dying, Jonah! I COULD CARE LESS ABOUT EXPOSING MYSELF.”

Romulus leaned against the wall and nearly lost his footing as another torrent of energy wailed into the side of the prison. Eyes sparking green, he snarled. “What in the zone is Vladimir doing?!”

Skulker glanced outside and watched in utter disbelief as islands moved across the green and doors spun and snapped in dilapidated stacks against one another. Staircases shook and rippled like mirages. Ghosts were screaming in terror and darting into their domiciles fearfully.

Walker followed his gaze and his green eyes flickered with mixed emotions of horror, worry, and fear. The carnage was still continuing outside with no sign of stopping.

Walker swallowed, “My god....”
Romulus looked into the chaos and seeing a small grey specter with cork bottle glasses being flung through the energy and dangerously close to a territory marker, the ghoul forced a teleportation and dragged the teenager into the prison.

Poindexter dizzily leaned against the wall, “Jiminy Cricket this weather is zonkers!”

Romulus raised an eyebrow and turned to Skulker in confusion, “Was that English or am I missing something?”

Skulker sighed and bent down to address the fifteen-year-old. “Sidney Wallace, right?”

The teen quirked an eyebrow and wiggled his nose before straightening his tie and glaring, “I prefer Poindexter, bub.”

Skulker rolled his eyes and with dead seriousness questioned, “What are you doing away from your domicile?”

Sidney sighed and motioned to the chaos outside the shaking building, “Does it look like I wanted to shake a leg near the clanker?! I got whammied through a gateway.”

Romulus groaned, “Edmond? Please…..Gag the boy. My head can’t take this idiotic and warbled tongue much longer without me submitting and throwing him back into the torrents like an undersized fish.”

Edmond, despite the dire straights of the situation, smiled slightly and nodded apologetically to the still recovering knight. Poindexter tapped his foot in annoyance and turned to the knight, “Ain’t that a bite? I prefer my warbled tongue! It gets me hella dames.”

Romulus turned abashed to the youth and poked his chest, “A noblewoman would not dare sit downwind of such a rude youth! I’ve seen wooden spoons with sharper tact then you and I’ve only known you for the better part of five minutes. Five minutes I shall never reclaim in this afterlife.”

Poindexter raised his fists up in a loose fighting stance, “This medieval beatnik needs bobbed down a few shimmies.”

Skulker grabbed the teen’s thin arms in hand and waved a finger in a motion for the teenager to calm down. “Wallace? I would think before challenging the Fright Knight to a dual.”

The gangly book worm paled. A deep growl from behind him caused him to shiver. Walker, Skulker, and Poindexter turned to see spectral armor surrounding the knight. His voice became deeper and more warped, “Did you just challenge me?! You lowly ceorl!?”

Skulker sighed and flung the teen over his shoulder. Walking to one of the cells, he tossed him in and slammed the door shut. Turning to Romulus, he put both hands up in a sign of peace. “Rom? The kid would get splattered. Just calm down.”

Romulus took a deep breath and averted his gaze to the floor before punching angrily into a wall, leaving a good sized dent. Walker swallowed. They had seen dragons crash into the prison with less damage than the knight had inflicted during his mini tantrum. “This is just so frustrating Edmond! We are in here for god knows how long trying to figure out how to get to Plasmius in time and that little monster had the gull to snap at me like a little serpent after I saved his hyde from becoming a paranormal tapestry in the Russian area of the zone!”

Another large shake accosted the grey fortress and the spectral lights shorted out above them with a crack. Glowing eyes flickered brighter to accommodate the difference and soon hundreds of
multicolored eyes shined form the darkness in contrast to the green spectral energy fluctuating outside of the building and the sudden white flashes. Skulker growled and charged a hand to light up the area. Turning to Walker, he podded, “What did you mean by the welp harming Vladimir earlier?”

Walker grimaced. “Vladimir apparently decided to confront Nocturn on his own. You’ve been away from Amity for three weeks and in that time Phantom went missing. The boy’s disappearance led to Vladimir seeking him out in the zone and the possessed brat tore him to shreds.”

Romulus growled, “That little spectral thief maimed my lord?!”

Skulker raised a hand in the darkness in a motion of calm at the outburst and turned back to Walker. “What was his condition when you last saw him?”

Walker grimaced, “His torso was blasted to pieces and trying to close, he had a fever and the children caring for him claimed a spectral poison was slipped into his system by someone. I threatened him with a spot in the infirmary but decided against it after seeing how poorly he was reacting with the paranormal. I don’t understand...He should be healed by now!” Walker turned to look at the turmoil outside with an anguished expression.

The white energy was still violently slinging ghosts and poltergeists about like paper bags in a stout breeze. Seeing the Box Ghost trying to help his arch nemesis, the Lunch Lady, to safety, the knight sighed. With a muffled pop, he appeared by the duo and teleported them into Walker’s prison. The Box Ghost groaned and looked to the Lunch Lady for assurance before his eyes wandered to their protector. Seeing the Fright Knight, he stiffened in place and swallowed thickly. “Thank you?!”

Romulus looked to Poindexter’s cell and leered at the glowing eyes staring at the new arrivals, “That is how you treat someone who saves your dead hyde boy! SEE THAT? RESPECT. The merchant with the obsessive box compulsion is a man of polite virtue. He would be the one to get a dame, or at least an attractive bar maiden!”

The box ghost puffed out his chest slightly at the realization he had just been complimented. Glaring toward the Lunch Lady, he snidely motioned from himself to the knight.”A man of virtue. You hear that, Agatha?”

The Lunch Lady rolled her eyes “A man with an obsessive box compulsion was the only accurate statement out of the knight’s lips.” Her eyes flickered across the knight and she sighed before hearing a cheery voice somewhere in the distance of the cells. “Agatha? Is that you?”

Her smile lit up and a green blush tinted her cheeks at seeing the plump specter bedazzled in his royal attire. “Rupert!” Flying toward him at full speed she tackled the Dairy King in a mirth laden hug. “How is my little muffin doing?” She purred.

The Dairy King blushed blue under his green skin and adjusted his crown sheepishly. “Aw shucks...I’ve seen better days, don’t cha know.... It’s nice to see yah’ again...Sweet as pie as always Aggie.”

The Box Ghost rolled his eyes and mimed gagging from behind the two specters. “Get a pantry.”

The Lunch Lady rolled her own eyes in retort and scuffed, “Come on Rupert, dearie. The prison cafeteria has some good human cheddar we can use for sandwiches while we catch up.”

And with a small swirl of pink and green, the two ghosts vanished. Lawrence, noting the hunter, immediately flew between him and the warden. “Skulker? Plasmius wanted me to tell you that he
ran into a problem in the living’s realm. Phantom is protecting him but the Fentons are out for blood.”

Skulker’s flames snuffed out slightly in shock before he addressed the ghost. “When did you see him, Lawrence?!”

The Box Ghost cringed. “Yesterday night. He was laid up in a bed and stated he couldn’t return to the zone in his current condition without Walker locking him up. I tried asking him a few more questions but he zapped me into the zone before I could get anything from him. From what I gathered? He got Phantom back from the zone and a demon followed him...or something like that…”

The Box Ghost awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck.

Skulker’s head whipped around to the still blatant chaos outside in unrestrained anguish and rage. “I’m going to skin that brat.”

Vlad’s pulse became fainter as time elapsed and soon it was evident that he had left the zone. The energy, however, was still rippling and crashing against the buildings and solid spectral masses in the zone like pond water disturbed by a stone. Debris were being thrashed around and Romulus was in a constant state of teleportation with Walker, in a desperate bid to aid the poor specters caught in the violent throws of the zone as it managed and absorbed the excess energy.

Three hours passed like this before the zone leveled out enough for the ghouls to venture outside. Seeing the calm, Walker immediately began barking orders to his men to prepare for a search and rescue effort. Turning to the Warden, Skulker questioned, “Is the portal opening available to reach Amity? I know you have one and it would be-”

Walker grimaced and nodded no sadly. “The prison portal only opens near Madison, Wisconsin and even if we could force it to open near Amity it would be impossible to use. The gateway was damaged by the energy whiplash earlier. It would be hours…. if not days, even with Technus’s help, to fix the blasted thing and even then I couldn’t guarantee the safety of the people that go through it, Edmond.”

Skulker gritted a mechanical lip in frustration. ‘Damn it…’

Turning to Romulus, who was leaning against a wall and dimly glowing from his power use the last few hours, he questioned, “Rom? Can you open a portal?”

Romulus looked up tiredly and bit his lip before averting his gaze, “I won’t be strong enough to open a stable portal for at least another day...I’m too weak right now….I’ve used too much energy and my powers are still warped from being made a temp vampiric a few weeks ago.”

Skulker turned to Walker, “Jonah? Teleport us to Vladimir’s ga-”

A flash of green surrounded both Skulker and Romulus before the hunter could finish, as Walker’s gloved hands attached to their shoulders. The trio appeared forty or so feet from the front of a circular spiraling vortex signifying a stable portal displacement. Flying forward at full speed, Skulker growled. He could faintly see a female figure smiling vehemently, fangs exposed as she waved from the portal. With a muted zap the image distorted and cut off in a rush of disjointed static. Slamming a hand against the almost completely closed gateway, Skulker growled.

Fright Knight’s hands formed swords, “MOVE ASIDE EDMOND!” Seconds later a metallic scraping and sparks flashed as both blades were jammed into the small metal gap between the void and Amity.

The demonics on the other side seems to anticipate the attempted opening. A large purple spark of
electricity rippled through the circular area and traveled up the sword. Romulus cried out as the electrical current assaulted his form but continued to try and pry the gateway open.

Vague words echoed in garbled and warped male tones from the living’s side as the electrical current strengthened.

“ And now that those pesky ghouls are taken care of, what do you say we find our little meal?”

Romulus’s green eyes widened in pain and his mouth gaped open weakly as his spectral glow began fading. Ectoplasmic muscles went rigid as he spasmed against the forced closure from Vladimir’s side. Ed’s arms connected to the spirit’s shoulders as he screamed and writhed in an effort to detach him. “ROM! LET GO!”

Walker’s hands joined the hunter’s and they yanked together. Both ectoplasmic blades cracked, blasting all three of them away from the door as the gateway completely closed.

Walker’s hands frantically reached for Fright Knight’s torso and seeing the thin gashes through his armor, he growled toward Skulker, “Edmond?! Romulus-”

Skulker turned from the doorway angrily and looked to his friend’s battered form fearfully. Romulus was powerful but that power carried a price... Without him being tethered to, Tyrfing, the demon blade or the Soul Shredder as it was named in the zone, he easily and often would harm himself with his own power. With age came better channeling of the zone’s energy but that energy could easily rip apart an ectoplasmic form with too much use.

A blood-soaked blade had cursed the knight to servitude, and now he was free and new to the zone and the living realm... A specter caught out of time and forced to cope with the mistakes a blade and a tyrant that had garbled his consciousness.

Fright Knight groaned as he was lifted into Walker’s arms. “We need to get him back to the jail to recharge... He’s depleted too much and these wounds aren’t reforming fast enough on their own.”

Skulker nodded but his eyes darted to the now closed portal. Turning to Walker, he opened his mouth to request an escort to the Fenton’s portal only for the warden to cut him off with a defeated sigh, “I know what you are about to ask... The hunters’ portal is closed. They sealed it the day the brat went missing.”

Skulker ran his hands through his flaming hair in complete aggravation and rage. If he still had human hair the majority of it would be severed from his scalp in large clumps from his worried yanking.

Looking toward his unconscious friend, he bit his lip and quickly put a hand to the Warden’s shoulder in preparation for a teleportation back to the jail. Romulus would need to recover enough strength to open a temporary portal into Amity.

Hopefully, Vladimir would be able to hold out from the demonics preying on his injured form until the two of them could make it to his side.

Skulker’s green tinted eyes locked with the warden’s and in a poof of green mist the three vanished.
Bertrand was extremely aggravated as he fiddled with the different items he had stolen while distracting the Fentons. Two ghost repellent belts to be exact. It had been several hours since he had made his rather dramatic debut in their little home and the prizes he had obtained left a great deal to the imagination. From what he had surmised, they worked mainly by implementing high doses of electrical current in short bursts while the small nodules inside the belt absorbed ectoplasmic energy. In effect, the item was self-recharging as long as the individual was touching a ghostly apparition or something with equal *spark*.

Spectra watched as he tinkered, rubbing a hand affectionately on his shoulder in small circles. Thanks to his clever distraction the Fenton’s would no doubt lock little Vladimir away for a short period and guard him against further attacks. No lowly poltergeist, demonic, or vampiric would be able to touch him until they were finished with their preparations. The added prodding at the bull’s deteriorating condition would also cause them to look into his ailments, hopefully administering a power suppressant or sedative in the process, further addling his already tainted mark.

Spectra began humming amusedly and a hand plucked the small syringe Bertrand had teleported to himself once a safe distance from Fenton Works off of the desk. The blood would come to good use but they still would need more. A few ounces already starting to ash and clot would do little to induce a perfect mimicry of the halfa’s form. Fresh blood and ectoplasm would be the more potent option.

Sighing, she stood with the vial and turned toward the mini fridge Bertrand had stolen a few hours prior to hold their samples. “Berty? How long until you’re done with the adjustment on the restraints?”

Bertrand sighed tiredly and looked to his spouse with a hint of mirth. “They are a little bit harder to adjust than that taser. With the taser, all I had to do was create a switch to alternate the current. It’s now a two-way device. We can cut on his powers forcefully and take them away with the bat of an eyelash. With these, however? I’m having to take into account his ecto signature and it’s still rapidly fluctuating from what my connection to his blood is telling me. I don’t know about you but I don’t want to be at the receiving end of these blasted travesties to waist wear.”

Spectra giggled and held a modified and shortened version of the belt up to her fingers, jangling it and causing the small ecto signature suppressant device at its base to pop up and down. “Look how cute they are now though! It’s like a little dog collar.” She gushed with gusto and flicked the triangular shaped pendant.

Bertrand grinned. “It took some tinkering but I was able to create a duplicate of that necklace we stole from him last year...The pendant is just as good as the original if not a bit stronger to take into account his embassary abilities.”

Spectra jiggled the collar slightly to hear the metallic clink. Setting it down, she turned to the cuffs and smirked giddily, “And what are these large blocks attached to the inner chamber?”

Bertrand grinned. “Well, seeing as how the table we originally procured for the extraction was metal, I figured high powered electromagnets would be suitable to keep him in place while we harvest it. You know how much he fights...”

Spectra brought a lime green nail to the silver and green delicately, as if caressing a small infant. Green eyes darted up and met her husband’s with a raised eyebrow before a small pout lined her
features. “But Berttttyyyyy… That’s the fun part! Him squirming and writhing? Calling out and kicking despite his limbs protesting the movements? Those are the most delectable moments of our little interactions!”

Bertrand rubbed his mustache in mock consideration before flashing a flinty fanged grin, “Now, now dear. It’s that type of glee fueled oversight that led to him escaping before we could finish the deed. We were so close last time!” His brow furrowed and he turned back to the restraints with a slightly saddened glint in his eyes.

Spectra sighed and brought a hand under his chin. Bringing his gaze back to hers, she nodded in agreement. “We should have claimed the room as a flight risk area or installed some sort of surveillance…”

Bertrand rolled his eyes, “And what? Get both us and our meal dragged off by some shady science obsessed bumbling? It was best he was kept secluded, even you can attest to the simplicity of cutting him off from the world. There is no greater misery than loss. Abandonment? Death? The wilting of a dream? All of them replenish and stack until a soul inevitably cracks from the pressure.”

Spectra nodded and after a moment pecked a small kiss on her husband’s cheek. Her eyes glinted warmly. “It’s going to be so wonderful finally breaking in all of the equipment and surgical tools…”

Bertrand grinned like a Cheshire cat. “Ah…I almost forgot about all of the tools we carted to the Asylum prior to little Vladimir fleeing. I’m positive none of them are sterile anymore…”

Spectra giggled and purred, “What would that matter to a corpse?”
Vlad sleepily stirred from his spot on the lab table as a strong, bear-like hand gently shook his shoulder to wake him. Several stray beams of sunlight could be seen pouring in from the outside. Groaning and turning slightly, he dizzily opened his eyes to see Jack leaning over him with what looked like a glass of water. “Here bud. You had another nightmare.”

Vlad, now noticing the hoarseness in his throat, rubbed the spot sorely. Evidently, he had been screaming in his sleep again. Thankfully, this recent dream was forgotten the moment he had opened his eyes.

Weakly propping himself up on his left elbow, Vlad attempted to get himself into a sitting position only to feel disoriented and faint. Jack rushed to steady him with his free arm. “Vladdie? Don’t move too fast…” A hand gently cupped behind his shoulders as he sat him up and helped the glass to his mouth. “Slow sips…” Vlad managed to get a few small swallows of the liquid before pulling back from the glass and staring to Jack tiredly. “Uh…Jack?…How loud was I? This building is soundproof last time I checked…For you to make it up here-”

Jack smiled sheepishly and kicked a sleeping bag under the table as he set down the glass beside them. “I was coming up to wake you anyway. Maddie and the kids are probably going to be up here with a bowl of soup for you any second.”

Vlad dimly registered the IV beside him and sluggishly turned to his right arm. Jack noticed his still out of it appearance and apologetically explained, “We gave you a minor sleep aid…Vladdie? I’m sorry…”

Vlad looked from his arm to Jack and his brow furrowed, “For what Jack?…”

Jack sighed heavily. “A lot of things.”

Realizing where this conversation was probably going to detour, Vlad weakly attempted a small smile. “FlapJack? I don’t want us to dwell too much on it…You were just trying to protect the kids.”

Jack shook his head tiredly but decided to drop the conversation for the moment so that Vladimir wouldn’t stress himself out. An absence of weight on his hand and a small movement out of the corner of his eye caused him to look up. Vlad was moving to get off of the table. Jack rounded the metal in an instant to keep him from tumbling forward. Vlad’s head fell dully against his shoulder. A small laugh escaped his lips as he retracted himself slightly, “I really am a hopeless case, aren’t I old friend?”

Jack rolled his eyes but smiled gently, “Not so much hopeless as you are stubborn.”

Vlad snorted as he was helped to his feet. Using the IV pole for support, the half ghost glanced toward the newly risen sun outside. “What time is it?”

Jack rubbed a hand through his hair and looked off to the warm coppery light filling the glass bay windows. “I think it’s around seven?”

Vlad stumbled slightly and a hand went to his shoulder. Jack worriedly led him along as he walked to the window, “You should really be sitting down…Those medications are still pumping through your system right now.”
Vlad nodded tiredly before addressing Jack, “Is...the shield up?”

Jack nodded, “Yeah, it’s up and operating but not at full capacity. Why?”

Vlad furrowed his brow lightly and after a moment his eyes flashed red weakly. Turning to Jack, he pointed into the street below them where a small ten-year-old boy was looking at the front door. “Whatever you do, don’t let that thing in.”

Jack stiffened, “That’s not a little boy?”

The small blue-eyed child looked up and locked his eyes with them. Jack froze and Vladimir growled. “A child wouldn’t smell of rotten flesh and lack a pulse.”

The child cocked his head and a few curled blonde locks fluttered in the light breeze before pink lips parted in a snaggle-toothed grin, exposing shark-like teeth.

Vlad groaned and weakly fell forward. A sharp unsettling child’s laugh echoed from the street as a small stream of smoke escaped Vlad’s jaw. Jack hastily detached the IV from Vlad’s arm and hefted him into his hands to get him away from the bay window.

The hunter went to look up from Vladimir as he lifted him and, to his horror, the boy specter was now on the service platform a few feet away from them. A now taloned hand raked across the shield. Vlad shuttered in Jack’s hold.

“Embassy? Embassy? Why do you run….I just want to play…”

Jack’s eyes widened as he backed away from the glass. “Embassy? What’s an embassy?”

Vlad, now unconscious in Jack’s arms, didn’t answer but the child tsked mockingly in retort. Blue eyes flashed an unsettling yellow color with slitted pupils as they looked to Vlad. “Embassy? Don’t be so mean….Come out and play with us…”

Seeing Vlad unresponsive, the child flicked a finger against the shield like a curious toddler would an aquarium in order to jostle the fish. “If you want a nap we can help….A deep sleep….No one will ever wake you up or hurt you again…Pweease?”

Jack growled at this, “What the fuck are you?!”

The child looked up and frowned, “Oh...you’re a human. We don’t want you….How about you leave him with us? We promise you’ll get him back when we’re done.” A wicked fanged smile spread across the boy’s lips and his voice morphed to something much darker. “It’ll just be in pieces.”

Two rings sluggishly began forming around Vladimir’s waist. Jack’s head snapped to the small ebony light and back to the boy leering at them. Vlad’s hand shakily grappled against Jack’s suit as his eyes opened again. The small spark of ectoplasmic energy had apparently roused him from his temporary fainting stint. Coughing, he commanded. “J-Jack? Put me down…I’m going to teach this thing some manners…”

Jack’s eyebrow raised, “Teach him what? How to face plant onto the operation booth floor? You just passed out a few moments ago!”

Vlad sleepily glowered as his form fully shifted. “If we...don’t get rid of it...I’m going to melt...It burns.....”

A slightly annoyed voice growled from behind the duo. “Fruit Loop? What the hell is that thing?”
Vlad groaned at the sound of Daniel’s voice, “It’s a changeling...it disguises as a child and either lures a real child to play with it or hunts using sympathy from unsuspecting samaritans. Usually, they take on the form of their last victim. No children have gone missing in Amity so I am guessing this one migrated here just to finish me off.”

A long forked tongue flickered between the specter’s teeth. “Naughty, naughty embassy! Don’t you know revealing the costume’s wearer ruins the fun?”

Vlad growled ferally. “Jack...Put me down! Daniel doesn’t know how to kill this thing and neither do you!”

Daniel’s hand went to Vlad’s shoulder. “Won’t a core shot kill it?”

Vlad groaned. “It’s core moves. That form it's using to play dress-up with is a shellac corpse. Basically? It’s a zombie.”

Jack looked to the creature in horror. “So it’s wearing a child’s’—”

Vlad nodded and grimaced. “It must have escaped my sweep of the zone...” Glaring at the monster, he growled. “Something must have tipped it off...”

Daniel frowned and looked to Vlad worriedly. “What is its real body like? Can we pull it out or-?”

Vlad sighed, “It’s a mist with a small spectral core that bobs around and moves to avoid impact. It has no physical body. If you miss on the first go and destroy the husk, the mist will escape or attempt a possession in retaliation.”

Jack nodded, “How big is it’s core?”

Vlad weakly phased through Jack’s arms and put a hand to his shoulder for support. “Eh...Walnut sized?”

Daniel and Jack both looked at him in shock.

The child laughed. “You're being such a meanie! Talking about me so cruelly when I'm right in front of you.” The boy pouted sarcastically as his eyes brimmed yellow again.

Vlad looked up casually and addressed the demonic with a fanged snarl. “What does it matter to you? You'll be nothing more than a pile of dust in a few seconds.”

The boy smirked. “You're dying...I can smell the blood even if I cannot see it. What ails you, demon slayer? Did someone have a bad dweam?”

Vlad stiffened slightly. After a few seconds, he sighed and turned toward the changeling. “Let's just get this over with.” His eyes narrowed. “That means the rest of you demonic bastards can stop hiding now!”

A ripple echoed out from behind the boy and soon a warped mishmash of rotten animals and growling green poltergeists flickered into view. The changeling cocked his head sideways as Vlad put a hand to his mouth and hacked. Seeing the splatters of red leaking through Vlad’s ebony gloves the child bumped a fisted hand into his palm in realization.”Oh! That's why! Your body can’t stabilize with it, can it? No wonder you're dying. You're at the stage where the energy becomes its most powerful and its most weak.”

Daniel looked to Vlad for elaboration but was met with Vlad’s confusion instead.

The fake child giggled manically, “Aw...You don’t know, do you? I’m surprised you’ve even had form for this long! Maybe it's because that succubus-”
Vlad’s demeanor changed in an instant and he raised a charged palm threateningly. “*If you were wise you’d be quite. THAT THING IS GONE.*”

The boy tapped the shield. “Oh, *I know.*” The child grinned wickedly. “Poor little demon slayer. How has being a hero fared? You do the same dance every day. Hunting my kind and then crawling into gutters and back alleys like a wounded mongrel. Hiding every facet of who you truly are. In reality, you’re just a freak. A pathetic monster even your best friends—”

Vlad’s eyes widened before he growled. “You’re that slimy bastard that got away a few weeks ago!”

The boy bowed, “In the flesh.” Pausing, he lifted up a sleeve to reveal rotting tissue. “Well, sort of.”

Looking back up to Vlad and the confused individuals behind him he grinned, “Tell me? Has my little mark healed yet? You cried out so sweetly… I had always wondered what an embassary’s blood would taste like. With this new development though I am left to wager…. Will you still be as vibrant and sweet? Or will you have become savory in your demise?”

Jack looked to Vlad in horror. “Vladimir? What is it-?”

Vlad flinched and growled. “Shut up Jack.”

Daniel tensed and glowered at Vlad. “What the fuck is your-”

The child laughed. “Always the liar aren’t you, Vladimir? Lie...Lie...Lie…”

The child turned to Jack, “The little embassary was away on business a few weeks ago without his little appointees. He always has had a soft spot for children. How old was she embassary? Twelve? SO close in age to the corpse I lured you with. Your senses are so dulled you didn’t even realize until I was cutting you open.”

The child licked his lips. “Do you even have life despite that pulse drumming in your chest? You didn’t fight it and even screaming in agony your protests were so mute.”

Vlad growled. “You’re being rather cocky for a bottom-feeding demonic. That’s not even a recent prey, is it? I can smell the preservatives. A morgue perhaps?”

The demonic smirked, “Not in the mood for small talk Vladdie?”

The operations center charged with white energy and the boy whistled. “Are you going to try and core me?” Fanged teeth parted in a deep chuckle before the child tapped the shield. “Before you attempt it, let’s go over the facts.” A finger scratched into the shield. “First? You’re barely able to breathe much less summon your little friends to your aid. Second? This shield is as much for keeping me out as it is for keeping you in. And we both know…”

There was a flash of blinding light and Vlad was thrown into the operations booth computers. The child could be seen on top of him, holding his wrists down against the metal “THAT AN EMBASSARY’S BLOOD GIVES DEMONICS A HUMAN’S TAINT.”

White energy seeped from around Vladimir’s form and shifted to a glowing spectral armor. Phasing his hand through the spirit, he clamped the palm over its mouth and growled. “You’re forgetting one more important fact. *I never leave a job unfinished.*”
There was a brutal snap and the demonics jaw hung limp as it was thrown through the air and back outside onto the platform. Vlad shakily crawled to his feet and collapsed to one knee in a coughing fit. Sweating and dizzy, he looked up to see the converging masses of demonics crawling toward the now open room. Jack was pulling out a blaster and flipping on his goggles while Daniel flew to Vlad’s side to help him. “Vlad? FUCK! Hey? Can you-”

Vlad growled and hacked another small amount of blood onto the metal flooring. “Daniel? Go downstairs and protect the others. These things will try taking hostages.”

Daniel opened his mouth to argue and stiffened at the heat emitting from the adult. “BUT VLAD! I-”

“I SAID GO DANIEL! I HAVE THIS AND YOU’LL ONLY GET IN THE WAY!” Vlad snapped and pushed the teen into a wall just as a green poltergeist rammed toward them. Vlad’s arm created a small knife-like blade from his armor and impaled the creature between its shoulder blades. With a muted hiss, it dissipated into smoke and faded as its core was pierced.

Daniel glowered at Vlad but hearing the commotion downstairs, quickly phased through the building and to the source of noises. The fight was restricted to the front entranceway as Danni forced a shield over the majority of the downstairs to prevent any more uninvited guests from invading the home. Jaz, Maddie and Sam each stood poised with weapons aimed through small slits in the shield toward the front steps and the creatures trying to wriggle through the paranormal bottleneck they had created. Unable to get through the shield himself, Daniel cut on his earpiece and searched for the channel Sam was on.

“Sam? Where’s Tuck?!” Daniel worriedly yelled.

Sam paused from her shots and clicked the communications button to reply. “He’s hot wiring the shield. It’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Daniel nodded and looked back toward the ceiling. Deciding on a course of action, he went up through his room and around to the street outside, blasting several intruding phantoms as he went. Above him, he could hear the blasts from his father and Vlad as they kept the assault upstairs in check.

A startled cry from his father caught his attention from upstairs and blasting one last specter he leaped up and toward the operations booth.

Vlad immediately stood after Daniel’s departure and began blasting away at the throngs of demonics trying to encircle him. Jack was now backed against him.

“Vladimir? What the actual-”

Vlad sighed, “Welcome to my life. I’m actually surprised we’re not seeing more heavy-hitting poltergeists. These numbers are practically pathetic.”

Jack rolled his eyes and elbowed Vladimir with the gun arm not blasting. “Now what? If you haven’t noticed we are at a bit of a disadvantage.”

Vlad nodded and smiled devilishly before tugging a hand against Jack’s utility belt. “Hold on.”

Phasing them through the corpses and glowing creatures, he released Jack on the service deck. Two rings began trying to spark at his waist again. Feeling faint, Vlad groaned and began falling over.
Jack’s arm quickly caught his shoulder to keep him upright. “Vladdie?! Bud? Hey!”

Vlad winced through a small smile. “S-still here…Jack? I need you to get behind me. Cover your ears and keep down.”

Jack winced and glowered at the beasts surrounding them before glancing at Vlad. “Bud? Promise me you’re not going to do anything reckless?”

Vlad grinned playfully, “Me…? Reckless?…Ha…”

Slow methodically clapping came from in front of the duo. The child mimic chuckled and placed his hands to his hips smugly before reaching up and cracking his jaw back in place. Stroking his chin, he feigned amazement. “Look at that! The metal is actually starting to buckle from the heat you’re giving off! I’ve never been a fan of spicy food but there’s always a first time for everything.”

Vlad looked up to the demonic and growled, “How about you just bite your decrepit tongue off and be over with it?”

Jack glowered and added, “What he said. Looking at that can opener you have for a mouth you should just do us both a favor….”

Vlad finished the thought, “Before we do it for you. And I promise, we aren’t in the mood for mercy considering what you are.”

The child giggled. “A fat orange glob and an embassy that’s being burned alive by his own powers? I’ve don’t like playing with my food but you two are being so gracious. Hell? I’ve never had a meal cook itself and present me with in house entertainment simultaneously before!”

At this Jack worriedly glanced toward Vladimir. “Vlad? Are you..”

A wet hacking cough cut him off. Sickly green and red slowly dripped down Vlad’s jaw. Summoning a blade in hand to keep himself upright and pushing lightly away from Jack, he commanded. “Jack? I’m going to pull something a little stupid. Standby and follow my previous instructions.”

Jack’s face immediately shifted from concern to annoyance. “Has Daniel been dealing with you like this the majority of the week?!”

Vlad chuckled weakly and stood up straighter. “If I said yes how much trouble would I be in, Jackson?”

Jack rolled his eyes and moved to get behind Vlad. Vlad smiled as he covered his ears. “Time to show off a bit. Daniel’s not around so I won’t have to hear him yelling at me for treating him like a child and I’ve always wanted to show you some of what I’ve been practicing.”

Smiling like the devil himself, Vlad raised his blade against his embassy marked palm. Addressing the demonic in front of him, he produced a glowing white shield to encompass Jack and himself. “I feel it obligatory to tell you to pray to whatever higher power you see fit but seeing as how you’re a godless monster that hunts and preys on those who can’t defend themselves? I’ll leave you with the knowledge that judgment will be swift.”

The demonic raised an eyebrow and shook his hands mockingly in front of the dome. “Ohhhh, I’m so scared! What are you going to do? Roast me?”
Vlad snorted and his eyes began glowing bright white as pink sparks entangled through the dome, carving numerous tri-tipped blades and weaponry silhouettes into the energy field. The demonics backed up apprehensively and hissed at the shield. Some pawed and scratching only to hiss in agony as their limbs dissipated. The childlike demonic raised an eyebrow and kicked one of the smaller poltergeists into the shield to test its potency. The ghoul immediately hissed and died in a small poof of inky black smoke. A tinge of fear rose on the boy’s face and Vlad grinned. ‘Step one, intimidation. Step two, liquidation. Good riddance demon.’

The blade was raised and charged to emit a powerful pulse of sonic energy, in lieu of Vlad’s normal method being unavailable due to his weakened state. Propping a shield around Jack to make sure no stray constructs bounced back from the operation center, he let loose a high pitched stream of sound energy against the inside walls of the shield. Thousands of glowing projectiles snapped and parted from the dome. In a white blurred flash, the masses of monsters previously slinking toward them were skewered by numerous daggers and spikes. Hisses and strangled gasps echoed on the roof as, one by one, they faded and dispersed. Soon only the child mimic was left, clutching an almost completely severed and hollow arm in agony.

Jack was gaping like a fish out of water through the shield still protecting him. Vlad glanced back at Jack’s almost giddy fist pump and thumbs up before flashing a small smile and slinking toward the boy now on his knees in front of them. Vlad dropped Jack’s shield once he was sure the danger was gone but motioned for him to stay back. Crouching down with his blade, Vlad cocked his head and questioned the specter. “I know for a fact that my aura is far from this effective so that leaves you with only one way of knowing I was resting in a ghost hunter’s home. Who tipped you off?”

The ghoul snorted and hissed, “They’ll kill you embassy...The shadow of misery and her lover won’t simply allow you to live now that they now what’s forming in that chest of yours.”

Vlad growled and propped a blade under the beast’s chin, “Let’s try this again. WHO SENT YOU BASTARDS?”

The child locked his gaze with Vladimir and laughed vehemently. “They lied, no surprise there.” The demon rolled its eyes. “But they need a certain someone for their plan to work from what I’ve heard...” Yellow eyes flickered to Jack and Vlad felt a chill go up his spine. Ears immediately perked and hearing no core pulsing in the corpse, he turned and flew full speed to Jack, pushing him out of the way just as the blast connected.

Vlad felt his scream die in his throat as he landed haphazardly against Jack’s chest. Jack groaned and seeing the thermal outline of something zooming toward them moved the two of them out of the way of yet another blast. Vlad groaned and lifted his head up. White glowing eyes worriedly glanced toward Jack, “Jack are you-”

Seeing the dark shadow looming behind Jack’s shoulder. Vlad growled and pinned him to the roof as a blade-like projectile sliced through the air. A few small strands of black hair fell on to the metal observation deck. Feeling the figure looming over them and preparing a second strike, Vlad rolled with Jack to the left. ‘WHAT THE FUCK IS WITH DEMONS TRYING TO BEHEAD FENTONS THIS WEEK? IS IT THAT BIG OF AN ACHIEVEMENT?! I MEAN SHIT!’

Jack glanced up as the spirit’s empty yellow eye sockets locked on them. “I think this will be more satisfying if we play by my terms embassy. How about hide and seek?”

Vlad stiffened against Jack and looked up as the figure melted and warped into a spectrum neither of them could see. ‘WELL FUCK.’

Jack groaned and hit his head against the metal, “Fuck.”
Vlad’s ears perked as he closed his eyes. A steady whirring buzz was circling them. The ghost’s core was so small that it was making precise tracking almost obsolete. After a moment, Vlad paled. “MOVE!”

Jack took the hint and yanked Vladimir against himself as he rolled backward unceremoniously.

A voice laughed, “What happened to tearing my tongue out?”

Vlad chose not to answer and put a hand to his lip to motion for Jack to stay silent. Jack nodded and released his friend from his chest. Vlad stood up slightly and made a move to the left. The metal under his feet was melting and warping somewhat more frantically in tune to his pulse. Vlad noted the heat and swayed slightly. A giggle filled the air. “It’s flaring again. Look at that! Embassary? Your form is burning.”

Jack looked to Vlad and his mouth opened in horror. Vlad’s spectral clothing was trying to detach in charred wisps and his blue skin was now tinted in greens and sickly purple shades. “VLAD!”

At that moment a whirring and buzzing core knocked by Vlad’s shoulder and straight toward Jack. Thinking quickly, Vlad teleported and slammed both the demonic trying to possess Jack and Jack into the wall of the operations center. Fighting through the heated haze, Vlad propped a taloned hand against the invisible spot where the core was buzzing, right above Jack’s heart.

A hand plunged downward and ensnared the small orb before it could attach, accidentally tearing into Jack’s suit in the process. The sphere immediately began burning Vlad’s palm, causing him to cry out.

Daniel, having seen only the last ten or so seconds of the interaction growled angrily as he reached forward through the heat and ripped Vlad off of his father. Jack, seeing the gleam in his son’s eyes, opened his mouth in reprimandation only to pale at Vlad’s shaking and hyperventilating form. Charging a hand through his delirium, Vlad destroyed the small invisible core and weakly pushed against Daniel’s tight grip on his shoulder. Daniel shoved the delirious adult away and screamed, “WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?! YOU PROMISED-”

His words were cut off as the shield activated. Vlad only had time to weakly attempt reaching for Jack to check for injury before the green wall of energy knocked both him and Daniel out of the operations booth. Daniel slammed into the wall and was knocked out by the shield, easily reverting back into Fenton, while Vlad was sent flailing into the observation deck. Groaning weakly, he attempted to crawl to his knees. Metal was warping under his hands and starting to bubble.

‘Uh….What’s..? It’s so hot….Someone…Make it stop….’

Hacking and coughing weakly, he crumpled to the metal and cried out as the heat went through his armor and connected with his arms.

“VLAD!” Jack’s voice echoed and cut through the muggy steam surrounding the older half ghost’s form. Vlad tried lifting his head up and a female voice began laughing giddily, “Well isn’t this just fabulous!?”

Vlad felt a taloned hand connecting against his hair and yanking him up. The hand quickly withdrew with a startled hiss. “OUCH! That smarts!” Now on his side, Vlad vaguely noted the foot that turned him over onto his stomach.

Jack was banging against something to his left, “GET AWAY FROM HIM YOU BASTARDS!”

The female shadow snickered at Jack’s desperate plea. “Sorry, but we have some quality time
planned for Vladimir this evening. We have to test our little toys out before the big show after all!”

Vlad turned and weakly clawed into the metal as he attempted to crawl toward where he thought Jack’s voice was coming from. The female above him allowed the small movement before she brought a leg down onto Vlad’s back, causing him to slam back into the floor. Rolling her eyes, Spectra looked to Jack. “Don’t worry, we aren’t going to kill him yet. We have a schedule to keep after all.” Looking around at the marks made in the metal, she musely pushed Vlad deeper into the heated silver material. Vlad cried out and weakly choked.

“Someone took care of our distractions, hmm? I knew spreading the rumor would give us such delectable results!”

A male voice soon joined, “The bull is still alive? Nice job hunter. We were right to trust you with keeping him nice and fresh for the two of us.” Jack snarled. “STOP!”

Vlad numbly registered the electrical current that ripped through his body as the metal was connected to the small of his back. Vlad’s body shuttered as the rings split to reveal a shirtless and dazed human form. The female ghost whistled, “Do we have you to thank for the clothing change as well or-?”

Jack could be heard snarling several choice curses. “VLAD! BUDDY! COME ON! PLEASE!”

A hand roughly reached down and yanked Vlad’s head up. The smoke was growing heavier around him at the continued proximity to the ghouls. Two arms reached under his shoulders to hold him steady, eliciting a hiss from both him and the male apparently pinning him up. A taloned hand gently lifted his jaw and turned his face from side to side to inspect him. Bringing her fingers along his neck and down to his chest, she gently stroked the small spot above his breast bone before glancing toward Jack. Her green eyes lit with mirth as Jack blasted desperately against the spectral shield separating the four of them.

With no warning, a hand phased through Vlad’s chest. Vlad’s eyes widened and he gasped. Solidifying partially, she gently fingered the pulsing sphere now trying to attune and stabilize in the half ghost’s breast.

Vlad thrashed weakly and tried moving against the intrusion only for the hand to tighten experimentally around the orb. Vladimir choked and black spots began flickering in his line of vision. She held the spot for a few moments before leaning him against her shoulder and solidifying just enough to put him in a state of shock. Eyes rolled back and, with a muted thud, his head landed against her neck. Withdrawing the hand and wiping the blood onto Vlad’s pajama pants, she gently brushed her claws through his hair.

Jack was in hysterics at this point. “VLADIMIR! VLAD! PLEASE! LET HIM GO! DAMN IT! LET HIM GO!”

The shadow rolled her eyes and pulled Vlad slightly tighter against herself while Bertrand grappled for his wrist. “Ready my dear?”

Spectra looked to the male drumming against her shield in mock pity, “Tata for now. We’ll be seeing you and that brat real soon.”

And in a pop of sickly green energy, Vlad, Spectra, and Bertrand teleported.

Jack fell through the shield as it dissipated and clutched a hand disparagingly into the metal flooring as he looked up. All that was left of the three was a faint green mist and after a few seconds, even
that was gone.
Vlad somewhat groggly stirred in what appeared to be a basement or abandoned morgue sometime later. At least that was his theory on his location...It was kind of hard to make out any definable shapes or visual cues to his predicament with the blindfold tied over his eyes. All he knew for sure was that it was damp….really, really damp and muggy. He could feel his hair clumping against his brow in sweaty ringlets. The floor was strangely cool in contrast and, with a muted groan, he shifted his weight and rolled slightly from where he was lying. He tried to move his limbs out of habit only to freeze.

‘This cannot be good.’

Both arms appeared to be secured behind his back by some sort of thick, angular cuffs. ‘Butter Brickle….Okay. Try phasing or at least getting this blasted blindfold off.’

Taking a deep breath he went to shift only to feel an absence of energy where his normal reserves would be held. To be precise? He was drained of charge and without the zone or nourishment, his body wouldn’t be able to force itself into using the energy when a risk of endangerment was still present. Another survival factor that was often more hazardous than beneficial when confronted with a lack of energy and danger. By his estimates, he was looking at a three-hour gap between him being able to use basic halfa abilities to try and escape. Even then the possibility of such an attempt working when the restraints around his wrists and the now present weight around his neck denoted pre-planned entrapment were extremely slim.

Someone obviously wanted a more personal imprisonment...Usually, with a regular demonic or enemy, he was simply ripped into to the point of almost dying and then strung up like a welcome banner for a game of ‘mentally torture the halfa’. This was more on the lines of someone carefully orchestrating an execution or holding a certain obsession with him. Regretfully he was speaking from past experiences. Some enemies seemed to enjoy going through great lengths to keep him powerless and yet still able to bite back, if only to gloat about his inadequacy to escape his situation.

A male laugh echoed from somewhere above Vladimir. “Inadequacy is a good word for you isn’t it?”

Vlad tensed, but after a moment growled vehemently, “So we meet again booger boy. Still juggling the idea of slurping me like a juice pouch?”

Bertrand snorted and reached down to yank Vlad up to his knees by his collar. The halfa grimaced and lashed out weakly only for the ghoul to push him back roughly into the metal freezer cabinets behind them. Vlad’s head slumped forward as he choked for air. Bertrand glowered. ‘It would be so easy to just finish you right now but then we wouldn’t have Daniel set up to replace you after you’re gone. We need to shatter both of you.’ A finger turned into a talon and sliced into Vlad’s cheek. Bringing his hand up to his mouth, Bertrand licked the liquid and began humming.

Vlad sneered and struggled against the bindings on his arms. “Well, what the fuck are you playing at?! Why not just eat me and get it over with or do you sick fucks just want to torture me as well until I beg for death?”

Bertrand crouched down and cupped a hand across Vlad’s mouth to silence him. “Tempting...very tempting. But I’m afraid we have something so much more special planned for you and the brat.”

Vlad tossed his head against Bertrand’s hand and the ghoul snorted. Releasing the hand from the
halfa’s mouth, he sarcastically reprimanded, “Language. We wouldn’t want your parents to be tossing in their graves, now would we?”

At this, Vlad rocked the top of his head forward and headbutted Bertrand. The ghoul growled angrily and whipped out the ghost taser from his back pocket. Yanking the half ghost’s head closer, he growled spitefully. “We were just going to let your powers recharge nice and slow but I guess we need to teach you a lesson ahead of schedule, don’t we?”

Flipping the switch to reverse the polarities, he rammed the device into Vlad’s chest and cut it on. Vlad screamed in agony as the two black rings forcefully shifted his form into Plasmius. The collar and restraints on his hands both activated and began continually electrocuting him and sucking the air from his lungs despite the small metallic object’s removal from his torso. Bertrand noted the cuffs and collar’s charge ratio and watched as Vlad weakly choked and convulsed against the wall. After thirty minutes, the rings flickered around the halfa’s waist and he slumped into the floor in an unconscious heap.

A hand roughly reached down and picked the faintly breathing man up off of the ground. Tests would need to be run prior to phase two and he only had a small window of opportunity before the stage would be set for the younger half-ghost and his family. Lifting Vladimir up to clear the table and, laying him down against the rusted metal, he detached the cuffs from each other and splayed Vlad’s arms out languidly above his head before activating the magnets. There was a pained gasp as both wrists were yanked forcefully against the cold surface and secured. Vlad stirred weakly and pulled groggily against the unnatural force pinning his hands above him.

Bertrand whistled cheerfully to ‘Oh Susanna’ as he riffled through his equipment. More blood was still needed for him to accurately mimic Vladimir. Possession of an embassy was practically impossible and too risky of a venture. The few beings who had attempted it each had been slain violently by Vladimir as his soul energy lashed out. Mimicry, as a result, was the best route when pegging the protector against his family.

Bertrand musedly picked up a curved blade from his supplies. A normal doctor would disinfect the area before drawing blood and would target the antecubital fossa for collection.

Bertrand grinned maliciously. ‘But I’m no doctor.’

The ghoul raked a finger along Vlad’s wrists, eliciting a small shudder from the already semi-conscious individual. Reaching down and placing the blade at a slight angle, Bertrand cut the two wrists suspended above the halfa’s head and set his pocket watch. The collection tub at the end of the table would be more than adequate to gather the liquid, giving him no need to attach a bag or search for a vein. Letting the older halfa simply bleed out was just more practical. It wasn’t like Bertrand was alive to contract a disease and he wasn’t going to use the blood for a transfusion.

After thirty seconds, Vladimir’s chest arched weakly and adrenaline began circulating in order to combat the weakness and strangulation of oxygen to his cells, speeding up the loss of blood. Skin became ashen and clammy and a mouth opened and gasped as he shook.

Bertrand paid the changes no mind. Vladimir, as a halfa, had around eight pints of blood in his body at any given time. A healthy human needed to lose forty to fifty percent of their blood volume to bleed to death. A half-ghost, however, would need to lose close to sixty or seventy-five percent to succumb to the same fate. In Vladimir’s case? Close to eighty.

A faint ringing echoed in the room as the timer went off. Bertrand, noting the lack of movement, cursed under his breath and quickly detached the cuffs to tend to bull. Vlad’s head weakly lolled against his capture’s shoulder as his wrists were treated and bandaged. Bringing out a glowing green
needle from his breast pocket, Bertrand injected Vladimir with the contents. A crackle of faint pink light darted under the skin near the wounds and faded out. ‘They should be shallow enough not to endanger his vitals for the moment.’

Lifting Vlad up and phasing the blood off of him, Bertrand carried him to the metal mortician's lockers and laid him against the floor. Spectra walked in around this time and, smelling the blood, looked toward Vladimir’s faintly breathing form with slight worry. Not for his welfare, but rather for the condition of her meal. Walking over to the half-ghost and feeling his pulse, she looked up to Bertrand with a slightly annoyed and angry glare. “You almost over drained him.”

Bertrand rolled his eyes and pulled out one of the freezer tables before melting the wheels in place so that Vlad would be left out in the open. “It’s not my fault muscle memory kicked in mid bleed.”

Spectra clicked her tongue and scooted Bertrand aside to pick up the half-ghost. Vlad’s neck limply fell against her shoulder and she grinned. “Isn’t this just wholesome Berty? It’s almost like the good old days before he ran away from us!”

Bertrand raised an eyebrow and snorted before pointing toward the freezer table. “Just lay him down and cover him up. We don’t need him getting sick before the extraction.”

Spectra pouted but complied. Laying the half-ghost against the metal and cradling a hand to his jaw, she smirked. “How did he take being strung up like a perch?”

The male demonic looked to Vladimir in annoyance. “Oh, the usual bite and banter. That died out quickly enough once the collar and cuffs activated though.”

Spectra nodded and brought out a purplish-black liquid from her pocket. Tossing it to Bertrand, she grinned. “I just synthesized it. After you handle the brat? We’ll need to inject Vladimir.”

Bertrand sighed and began securing the older halfa’s wrists to the table. “I want to weaken the cuffs and the collar slightly. If we torture his spectral form as well, the core will be more manageable and easier to detach from his chest cavity.”

Spectra tapped the bandages at the lip of the restraints in wonderment and nodded after a moment in agreement. “Whatever you think will work best, dear.”

Reaching down, she grabbed the white dust cloth that had previously laid on the dissection table Vladimir had been bled against a few minutes prior. Shaking it away from the three of them, she quickly knocked off the dust and covered their meal. “His body is going hypothermic despite his core. Bertrand? Do we have any other materials to keep him warm? At this rate, he won’t last till nightfall.”

Bertrand frowned and reached a hand to Vlad’s neck to check his pulse. The skin was clammy to the touch despite two ghosts being within whisper distance. Bertrand retracted his hand and in a green poof of smoke, several blankets appeared.

Spectra squealed in amazement at the show of power. Bertrand noted Vlad’s head-turning slightly against the table and motioned for his wife to calm. “Love? Lift his legs up and prop something underneath his feet. His pulse is too rapid and his breathing is shallow.”

Vlad was rearranged limply and bundled in the blankets. Satisfied with their efforts the two of them went to the dissection table for cleanup. Tonight was going to be quite the spectacle.
Valerie Gray was having the worst day of her teenage life. Ghost dogs? Bratty teenage boy ghosts? Daniel Fenton? Her dad losing his job? Nothing compared to the amount of bullshit she was being submitted to in the last twenty-four hours.

Vlad Masters’s equipment was practically dinging every ten seconds because of ghost anomalies around town. The entire community was being invaded and ransacked by hoards of malevolent specters in every shape and size. By three o’clock she had shot, cored and disposed of over thirty green glowing masses and one extremely humanoid looking ghoul. The last, she had warned repeatedly to leave town only to be met with talons and claws aimed for her throat.

Now fatigued and emotionally spent, she flew to the mayor’s home in hopes of getting answers to their current predicament and maybe a few extra blasters. Landing in his front yard, she casually clicked the alarm on her belt to notify him of her arrival and walked to the front door. Her hand went to knock against the wood absently, only for her eyes to widen as the ajar door swung in at her touch. She could already faintly smell the lemon and citrus in the home. Growling angrily and moving behind the wood to obscure her form, she clicked her watch and sent the drone modification into scan for any ghost cores. To her confusion, no cores showed up on her screen. ‘Shit. Mayor Masters? I really hope you aren’t home….’

Finding her benefactor dead when he had just agreed to teach her proper ghost hunting etiquette would severely bite. Especially, now that she was leaning to a more friendly and less business-oriented relationship with the man. As it stood? He was becoming a bit of an uncle figure in lew of his recent decision to become mayor in Amity and move into his home in town.

A hand itched to her belt and the weapons holstered against her hip. Despite her pleas for weapon upgrades to track Phantom or at least give him more than a slight buzz of electricity, she was always met with a gentle no from the elder. From the beginning, her weapons seemed to default around Phantom and various other specters for no apparent reason. Where earlier one blast would core the ghosts wrecking shop in Amity without any calibration, the same shot would do little more than a small zap against Phantom.

Taking out a gun from her holster and, clicking it on with her thumb, she gently kicked the ajar door open. A freehand cupped against her mouth in horror. Decayed ectoplasm, seared blast marks, and small splatters of human blood were littered everywhere. The walls? The floor? Her eyes trailed upward and she went ashen. ‘Even the ceiling has fucking ghost juices and human blood smeared across it….’

Her hand shook weakly against the trigger as she stepped from the entryway and followed the trail of ectoplasm upstairs into what appeared to be Vlad Master’s bedroom. Whatever had happened? A struggle had obviously taken place between a ghost and a ghost hunter. What confused her, however, was the fact that the red was coupled against the green and not from areas the shooter would have occupied.

A gloved hand reached down to the small crimson pool in the bathroom and her eyes tinted with disgust and malice. It didn’t take a genius to figure out Mr. Masters was in some sort of peril and that someone or something had taken him forcefully from his home.

Valerie’s hand shook as she balled it into a fist and clicked on her helmets analysis software. The suit immediately began zooming into the structures present in the ectoplasm in search of a core reading or pulse she could track. To her surprise, the software pulled up a human genome and a set of
fingerprints.
Army gray eyes looked over the readout in shock. A hand tapped her watch to re-scan the ectoplasm on the floor and the same picture popped up accompanied by a file.

‘PROJ.AGRAT.EX_termination
VLADIMIR D. MASTERS
Arrest Warrants- None
Age- [ ] Sex- M
Species- [ ]
Companies:
VLADCO
MASTERSOFT
IPEC INC
DALV
AXIOM LABS’

Valerie paused and looked at the readout in pure aggravation. ‘Why the hell is his age and species blacked out?’ Her hand navigated downward using her watch screen. Just past the company names was a brief article detailing an accident that had resulted in him being hospitalized for a number of years.

A picture of a young man in a baggy gray sweatshirt with ocean blue eyes and black shaggy hair could be seen smiling at what appeared to be a pep rally for the University of Wisconsin.

Her eyes briefly scrolled through the story and her stomach dropped.

‘All medical records and files regarding billionaire Vladimir Damian Masters after the incident involving the substances tested in lab 34D of Wisconsin University in Madison have been deemed lost or private by both the University and state medical record laws.’

Others still were videos of interviews with Masters discussing his companies and business ventures but clipped to shortened segments. Valerie clicked through several of them until she came to an interview dated for December of 1997.

A young blonde reporter smiled coyly, ‘Mr. Masters? What would you say shaped your development into becoming such an influential business executive at such a young age?’

A much younger Vladimir with shorter dark gray hair flinched slightly but concealed his unease with a bright smile, ‘A change in perspective? Given time, anything can change.’

The woman smiled but obviously was left unsatisfied with the answer. Leaning in and crossing her ankles, she prodded. ‘You’re hair was a result of a lab accident when you were a student at the University of Wisconsin, correct? From what I hear, you took the accountability for the accident... Why was that?’

Masters smiled tiredly but seemed to be rather unsettled by the question. ‘As you said... It was an accident. Blaming someone for an event they couldn’t control or stop helps no one. We were just kids.’

The reporter lost composure for a split second and her brow denoted annoyance with the man in front of her. Quickly plastering a honey-sweet smile over her face, she questioned. ‘Some speculate your apparent rise in the industry, straight out of University, as a lucky American self-made success story while others, especially the companies you’ve purchased the last two years, regale media with underhanded schemes and apparent contracts forged without the owners’ knowledge.’
Masters smiled tiredly and spoke with an air of amusement. ‘*I have never forged anything in my business practices. My company's development was simply a row of fortunate scenarios.*’

The reporter bit her lip at the useless and bland information. Thinking quickly she redirected, ‘*Mr. Masters? Your stay in the hospital for your accident was rather recent, was it not? Just last year you re-entered society and finished your degree...Within the span of only a couple of months, you have been named one of the leading tech companies in the Northwestern hemisphere. Before gaining your associate's in business, it was on file at the university that you were given a scholarship to pursue a doctor’s degree... Why did you change to such a different career?*’

Master’s face paled slightly and he looked like he had begun cold sweating. The video zoomed in and locked on his eyes, pausing as they flashed from dark human blue to an inhuman vibrant red. The change was so quick and minor that a normal film editor would chalk the occurrence to a flash or camera flare.

Valerie’s helmet, however, told her differently. It would have filtered flares and errors in the film and adjusted accordingly. The red was real.
Valerie scrolled rather frantically and came to a file marked in red at the end of the page. Clicking it, she was immediately accosted by a file block.

‘*PROJ.AGRAT.EX_termination is not cleared for viewing. EX_termination protocol canceled on April 15th, 2018. Threat level AGRAT, terminated April 9th, 2018 by EMB1Plas. Further Material can be accessed with file code.*’

Valerie quickly typed in her general code, ‘*RedHunt12 ECB*’

‘*ACCESS DENIED*’

Her brow furrowed angrily and instead of trying to open the rest of the files, she settled for watching the footage and reading all of the articles available. No clear answers were given. Reaching to her wrist again, she typed a series of configurations into her suit in order to figure out why the file had made itself available.

‘*DOC Log July2018 Am.17. Reasons for File Export_*’

The suit immediately answered. ‘*Previous Command Prompt requirements for PROJ.AGRAT.EX_termination have been met by affiliate program coding and recent rounds fired from ECTOB4 and StingerD12. Three clips of 45 released. Scans for demonics and residual core pulses made. DNA sample of Vladimir Damian Masters acquired. Sample_01VP does not match Sample_Jy18. Data unusable.*’

“What the actual fuck?....Doesn’t match? Does match? Will something just clear up and give me a straight answer?!’”

Cutting off the digital readout and, standing back up from the spot she had been sitting in to look over the file, she clicked off her helmet and rubbed a hand through her hair tiredly.
‘Think...Think...If he’s a ghost, why would he send me out hunting his own species?...The file had an age line so he must age right? That denotes living….Was he contaminated by something the Fentons made?’ Biting her lip, her eyes wandered over the desecrated bathroom. Claw marks could be clearly seen hewn into the tile of the shower.

An idea formed in her head. Opening the file PROJ.AGRAT.EX_termination on her wrist and duplicating the data stream into a ghost file she already had full access to, she ran the copied date through an info-filter. It wouldn’t give her access to the locked links but it would give her the blanks
in Vladimir Masters’s general information. After a few seconds the red bar on the display fully loaded and she clicked the copied file.

‘PROJ.AGRAT.EX_termination
VLADIMIR D. MASTERS
Arrest Warrants- None
Age- 35 Sex- M
Species- HALFA
Companies:
VLADCO
MASTERSOFT
IPEC INC
DALV
AXIOM LABS’

Valerie smiled in accomplishment but quickly frowned. Vlad Masters had supposedly turned forty-six this last April. It had been in several company printouts and bulletins at Axiom. Thirty-five years of age would be physically impossible. And then there was the word listed under the species-area of the document.

Valerie bit her lip. ‘ Halfa.’ A strange new term. ‘What is a halfa?’

Her eyes looked from her wrist tiredly. ‘ He’s not a ghost….but his eyes and that file….’ Her gaze drifted back to the floor and the broken glass segmenting splatters of thick ectoplasm and now black blood against the bathroom tiles. ‘This blood is his….oh god…..Someone came into his house and-’

Realizing that her father had helped Mr. Masters with the security system in the home, Valerie quickly ran from the bathroom and into downstairs. Coming to his office, she kicked open the door and began scanning walls. A startled mew caught her attention. A terrified white cat with crystalline ember eyes stared out at her from a gap in the shelving. See the opening, the huntress gently moved the cat aside and squeezed into the surveillance hub.

Hours later, Valerie Gray was an absolute wreck of emotions.

At first, the footage had seemed like some sort of edited hoax. The images were just too fantastical to rationalize with a single viewing. She rewatched the last week’s worth of material, pausing and trying to tear apart and understand segments as she went. Black rings, white rings, Masters, Plasmius, Fenton, and Phantom.

Her eyes widened in horror at the most recent addition to the footage. Her helmet had been more than adept at syncing lip movements to English audio and although there were a few obvious errors the vast majority of conversations held in the entranceway, kitchen, and lab were easily dubbed to understandable English.

‘Oh god….Mrs. Fenton shot him…..She ripped through his shoulder like it was tissue paper.’ A hand went to her mouth as she restrained gagging at the sight. From what she could see, Masters had tried to calm Mrs. Fenton down and show her his human form but something had prevented the shift.

“ Can’t you just let me prove myself? As a human being don’t you understand that mistakes can be made!? You are just jumping to conclusions! Please? Mads, I swear I can explain!”

Maddie nodded but lifted a needle, “Yes, you will.” Glaring back up to Masters, she added. “We’re going to see exactly what makes you tick. We’ll question you, test some samples and then send you on your merry way.”
Vlad growled and his fangs exposed themselves. “Where’s Jack!? I want to speak to Jack!”

She scuffed. “My husband is searching for Phantom right now. We heard your entire spill earlier. You two monsters actually made us think we could trust a ghost!” Shaking away indignant tears she bellowed, “That’s the last time we ever make that mistake again!”

‘Oh god….Mrs. Fenton’s going to-’

Turning away from the computer and sprinting through the house and back to the now dark night sky, she activated her hover sled and made a beeline for Fenton Works.

‘Oh god….Oh god…Oh god….Please tell me they didn’t cut open a human being….Please….Mr. Masters, just hold on…’
A Shot in the Dark

Jack was beyond aggravated with his inability to lock onto Vladimir’s spectral signature with the operation booth’s tracking software. They had originally wanted to use the boomerang but it had seemingly disappeared just prior to Vladimir being kidnapped. Daniel after a rather painful lecture from both Fenton parents was out scoring the city in a desperate bid to find the older hybrid. Jazmine, Tucker, and Sam were all armed with Fenton weaponry and split into groups throughout the town. Danni was restricted to the home in the downstairs as she managed the communication between the groups and recovered from the blood she had donated a few hours prior.

Jack looked to the time readout on his screen tiredly. Vladimir had been taken at around eight in the morning by two demonics and it was now nearing midnight. Tired blue eyes raked from the computer to the observation booth windows. Something had moved outside. Grabbing his gun and running to the area previously blasted apart by the changeling and its minions, Jack peered out into the darkness and stiffened. Vladimir was standing on the service platform outside and looking over the cityscape. Unable to see Vlad’s face, Jack stepped forward only for Maddie’s glove to catch onto his shoulder. Her goggles gleamed dimly from the built-in lights behind the lenses and she shook her head no.

Something laughed in the darkness and the Vladimir on the lip of the roof fell forward as a black hand materialized at the nape of his neck. Glowing green eyes leered from the dark and a woman’s voice chortled at the sight of where Maddie’s gun had been aimed previously. “By all means? Go ahead...but I’d look closer with those goggles of yours if I were you. It’s just faint.”

Maddie stiffened and adjusted her goggles with the hand not holding her gun at attention. Her arm went slack in horror. “ Jack...It’s Vladimir...but his heart, it’s-”

A male voice popped in over the roar of the wind outside. “ Ah, so you noticed? I regret to say I may have gone overboard when collecting earlier.” Something green flashed through the darkness and the black figure released Vlad fully so that the new player in the game could hold him against himself. A taloned hand reached behind the halfa’s back and pressed gently between his shoulder blades as red eyes looked up to the two enraged hunters.

Jack spoke first. “What did you bastards do?”

The female giggled and yanked Vladimir from her partner to spin him around. “ What haven’t we done? Tonight’s a rather special occasion after all. Granted, Daniel wasn’t as fun as Vladdie.”

Maddie paled and cut on her comlink. Reaching Daniel’s line, she received nothing but static. A mother’s choked voice growled, “ What did you do to my baby, you slimy bitch?!”

The male figure snorted. “ What morons. Why can’t we just-”

Maddie sighed. “ Hubby? We already have this planned out so his misery peaks. I don’t want to differentiate from the plan again. We already took the effort.”

Maddie felt her blood run icy as she watched the creatures. Vladimir’s pulse was still rapidly fading as they conversed.

The male seemed to notice and tilted Vlad’s head back somewhat angrily. “ I told you we gave the bull to much. He’s flatlining again.”

Jack’s hands shook. “What did you give him? What are you-”
The male rolled his eyes, “Wouldn’t you like to know, Jackson?”

Jack paused and his eyes rounded in horror. The ghost, for a split second, had sounded exactly like Vladimir.

The female snickered and languidly lifted Vlad up straighter by his hair, before yanking. No sound or movement came. Turning to them, she sighed, “It’s sad it takes away the screaming….I always have liked the auditory end of our little play sessions and this is making everything rather dull.” Her eyes locked with Jack’s, “If it’s any consolation? He did cry so much for you two. The begging? The wails we had to stifle so the world outside wouldn’t heed the lonely little freak in his cement walled cage? It was absolutely hilarious.”

Jack and Maddie looked to the creature in perplexion and horror. Maddie snarled, “What are you talking about you-“

The male snickered and raised a hand mockingly. “Oh, come on. Are you two fools really so oblivious? Then again you missed your son being a mutant freak as well for the better part of two and a half years.”

Something clicked and Maddie paled. “You….you-“

The female spirit laughed. “Give the doctor a prize! I think she pieced together a segment of the puzzle! Then again two can definitely play at this whole medical gig, hmmm?”

Black faded and warped around the figure to reveal a young nurse in her twenties with cruel green eyes and red hair piled in a sloppy bun atop her head. Leaning in next to Vladimir, she purred. “He’s my favorite little patient after all.”

Jack’s eyes widened. ‘These things….they-’

Spectra laughed broadly and clutched a hand to her stomach. “You should see the looks on your faces! The misery is just so-” Her eyes opened and a forked tongue split around fanged teeth. “-delectable…” She purred the last syllable.

The green figure snorted as Jack made a move to step forward. Grabbing onto Vlad, he teleported a few feet back to the edge of the roof and tsked with the hand not holding the halfa over the edge by his neck. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you fatso. He’s rather human right now.” Bertrand rolled his eyes as he stared at the halfa slumped in his taloned fingers. “It was either that or his little defense mechanism would be flaying me and my spouse within an inch of our afterlives.”

Turning back to Jack, Bertrand feigned releasing his grip and Jack screamed out. Bertrand grinned manically and quickly caught the half ghost by his wrist. Vlad groaned and weakly attempted opening his eyes. Bertrand glowered. “Who said you could wake up?”

A sharp spark of neon green energy snaked up Vlad’s form and a faint cry echoed before he went slack again. Something wet was trailing down the creature’s hand. Bertrand stiffened and his eyes looked to the arm overhead as the warm red liquid flowed down his own limb and splattered across his cheek. A tongue flickered out to lick it and his eyes widened broadly. Looking back to Jack, the specter lazily threw Vlad onto the observations deck.

“You know there’s no greater thrill than holding a life in your hands. To watch the despair? The agony? It’s one of few things I rarely tire of…” Bertrand leaned a hand down and wrapped it around the half ghost’s chest to lean him up and expose his neck.

Claws dug in and raked from the shoulder to the nape of Vlad’s belly button, leaving thick, oozing
red marks. “How about I show you what a demon does to its prey, hmm? You shot me before I got to finish last time.”

Maddie and Jack both paled rapidly. Maddie screamed out with Jack as the teeth were laid against the flesh. A bright flash of solid pink and red light filled the space as someone shot from above. The blast knocked Bertrand’s right arm out of socket and detached the green into an oozing pile of mush by his leg. Red eyes rose fearfully to meet his assailant and, seeing the young huntress aiming another blast, he dropped Vladimir and grabbed onto his wife. In a flurry of green and warped pinkish energy the two faded and disappeared from the roof.
Maddie stared in shock before rushing forward with her husband to try and reach Vladimir. The young female rocketed between them and hastily arched her body over Vlad’s. A helmet was thrown at the Fentons before Valerie Gray snarled, “Don’t you dare-”

Maddie shook her head rapidly. “Please! He’s-”

Valerie’s hands quickly went to Vlad’s neck and her face turned ashen. Her eyes glared up to the Fentons as she propped up a grenade looking device and activated it. A large, round shield quickly popped up around her and Vladimir, cutting the Fenton’s off from the two of them.

Jack began desperately banging on the shield only for Maddie to stop him. “Jack! Stop!”

Maddie’s jaw fell open slightly. Vladimir had flatlined right around when the green specter had made a move to bite him. Technically, he had been clinically dead for around thirty seconds now.

The young huntress was busting open a portion of her hover sled. Twisting a few wires and propping Vlad up against her knees, she quickly connected the charge. Vlad’s chest arched and eyes weakly rolled as he gasped and incoherently slumped against the teenager. Valerie’s eyes flickered up to the Fentons, mainly Maddie, with absolute disgust. “What the fuck is wrong with you people? Do you know how much bullshit I have had to watch? You bastards broke into my mentor’s home, hunted him like an animal, shot him and then fucking kidnapped him! Just…WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?! Even I fucking warn a creature before fighting them with something. Stray shots? Yelling? But you two… for two grown-ass people to look at anything that legitimately begs and pleads their humanity without asking for anything but a chance to explain and then to fucking shoot them. WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL?!”

Both Fentons paled rapidly. Jack quickly banged a hand against the shield. “You’re Mr. Gray’s daughter, right? Valerie? Please… We made a mistake! He’s my best friend and he’s-”

Vlad shuttered against Valerie and choked slightly as his lungs sluggishly tried to take in air. Valerie quickly brought a hand to his neck to try and help him. Her eyes darted to his chest and glazed with horrified tears at the red, so much darker than her suit, tangled across her midriff. Looking at Jack and Maddie, she pleaded. “You promise- You promise you won’t-”

Maddie nodded frantically. “Please! Drop the shield! His body is going into shock from something! I’m a doctor! PLEASE, Valerie!”

Valerie nodded and shot the device beside them before standing with the adult draped in her arms and walking hastily to the Fentons. Both hunters immediately rushed forward. Jack quickly took Vlad into his hands and made a beeline for the operations booth with the two women in hot pursuit.

Jack could feel the cold radiating from Vlad’s form and the barely-there warmth emanating from his chest as he shook and shivered against him. Laying Vlad down on the metal table from the night before, he quickly began checking him over with Maddie. Valerie watched with a thin frown on her face as hands traced over Vlad’s chest. Her eyes narrowed and she growled as hands wandered to close to Vladimir’s heart. “Don’t you dare touch his core.”

Maddie and Jack immediately froze and looked to each other before looking to Vlad in horror. Maddie turned to Valerie and questioned, “He didn’t have a- Oh…Oh god…on the roof…”

Valerie snapped, “How the fuck do you two hunt? He has a ghost core and a human heart! I saw it
when I scanned the roof earlier! Granted, it's not exactly-.”

A hand whipped out and yanked Valerie in closer, “Not what? What is-”

Maddie put a hand to Jack’s to calm him and Valerie's eyes widened. Looking to Vlad she questioned, “Do you mean he hasn’t had one before now?”

A hand whipped out to the air and a helmet shot out from the darkness outside and rocketed into the huntress’s hands. Clicking the side she replayed the scan via hologram. Bertrand was leaning into Vlad as his heart began to falter and sticking his claws into his chest. At that moment a faint reddish warmth pulsed and swirled just below his breast bone on the thermal reading before weakly snapping back and fading as he flatlined. Valerie pointed at a frozen frame. “If what your telling me is true? It’s a newly forming core. See the wisps? It's not fully attached yet.”

Maddie and Jack immediately began rushing to the medical cabinet. Valerie settled for reaching to Vlad’s arm and checking his pulse only to turn ashen. A small puddle of red was forming on the medical cart. Looking up and putting pressure on the limb, she screamed. “MRS. FENTON! HIS WRISTS-”

Jack was by her side in a second and quickly trying to control the blood flow. The wound was obviously older but had reopened somehow.

Maddie was growling a string of profanities from beside the table as she began fiddling with an IV for a blood transfusion. Turning to Valerie, she instructed, “Grab the mask on the console! He’s hypovolemic and his lungs aren’t gathering enough oxygen to make up for the blood loss!”

Val’s hands quickly went for the mask and slipped it over Vlad’s nose. Maddie began inspecting the wounds after the IV was attached. Gloved hands worriedly ghosted over the tissue ripped open by Vladimir’s wrists.

‘Ah, so you noticed? I regret to say I may have gone overboard when collecting earlier.’

Maddie brought a hand to Vlad’s neck in search of a pulse. Seeing this, Valerie clicked her helmet on the table beside them. A bright light flashed in the room as it zeroed in on Vladmir. A faint tonal beeping soon followed. Maddie nodded curtly to show appreciation for the act as she pushed Jack aside and ordered. “I need you to keep him down Jack… I don’t know what they gave him and if I give him anything right now without knowing he may end up with severe blood poisoning on top of what those freaks did to him.”

Jack swallowed and reached to Vlad’s shoulder to pin him as Maddie began stitching the thick-cut on his wrist. Vlad groaned and flinched weakly as the needle darted in and out. Valerie, noting what was happening, clipped off a portion of her suit. The red spiraled in her hand before floating above Vlad’s other shoulder and pinning the arm. She knowingly picked up a needle and some surgical thread before rounding to Vlad’s remaining wrist. Maddie noticed the movement and Jack shot a hand out to stop the teen. Valerie rolled her eyes and unzipped a portion of her suit to show several freshly stitched portions of skin by her collar bone. “I know what I’m doing. Fight enough and you end up with some pretty nifty scars a bathing suit just can’t hide after a while.”

Jack felt his wrist go slack against the teen’s. ‘My god…’

Valerie snorted and quickly began threading the needle. “You should have seen Masters’s when he found out….Apparently, he has had enough with teenagers and stupid grudges ruining their lives before they even begin.” She rolled her eyes and inserted the needle. Vlad twitched against the weight on his side but remained unconscious as the two women sewed the thicker wounds closed.
Jack cleared his throat and addressed the teenager. “How do you fit into this? You said he was your mentor but-”

Valerie rubbed a lock of hair out of her face and looked to the older Fenton tiredly. “Masters gave me my suit and equipment. He proposed that I keep the stuff in Amity moderately controlled. He wasn’t really one for being in my life until a few months ago when he ordered me out to his manor and requested the suit back. I, of course, told him to screw off.” Val rolled her eyes. “Granted, his reasoning was pretty sound and I actually wanted the damned thing gone...but I think it’s fused at this point. He claimed ectoplasm probably merged the fibers to my being, so now I’m stuck. Val and the artifact symbiote.”

Maddie looked appalled from Valerie and then to Vlad. “You mean to tell us, that Vladimir gave a teenage girl ghost hunting equipment?”

Valerie smirked, “Well it’s not like you two were really capable. Seriously? How many spooks filter through your damned portal? Granted, I can’t touch any of those with my equipment…” Her eyes narrowed at Vlad. “But I’m starting to figure out that he probably put a parental baby lock or something on my stash. Wouldn’t want me shooting my crush or anything would he?” Her eyes narrowed up to the Fentons. “I feel like I can’t stress this enough. YOU SHOT TWO HUMANS. Granted, really weird humans but still humans.”

Her eyes glided to the scarred tissue on Vlad’s shoulder as she moved a hand to begin stitching and bandaging the claw marks on his chest. “You two are at what? One-shot a piece from what I gathered? Daniel’s chest is permanently scarred and Master’s shoulder is partially concave now.”

Vlad groaned and writhed slightly. Jack noted the movement and adjusted his head so that it sat more comfortably on the pillow as Maddie leaned over and began helping Valerie with the sutures. Vlad bucked and shook sluggishly. Seeing two rings forming around his chest, Jack latched an arm out to get the girls to back up. Dull red eyes weakly darted open and Vlad shot up fearfully, pulling at his newly stitched chest. Valerie and Jack immediately grabbed onto him and pulled him against the bed. Vlad slumped in their hold but continued hyperventilating and shaking against them.

Maddie, noting the louder beeping emanating from the helmet, brought a hand to Vlad’s spiky black hair and spoke gently, “Shhhh…. Calm down, Vladimir. Slow deep breaths. Shhh…”

Vlad grimaced and backed his head against the hand. Jack noted the disorientation and confusion worriedly. Bringing a hand to Vlad’s cheek, he tried to direct him. “Bud? Can you understand us?”

Vlad writhed and numbly tried fighting the weight keeping him pinned against the metal. Valerie worriedly questioned, “Mrs. Fenton…What’s-”

Maddie grimaced and ran a hand through Vlad’s hair all the more gently. “Come on Vlad…You can do this…. Calm down…” Vlad’s heart rate began calming and his eyes cleared slightly.

Maddie turned to Valerie. “His body is having a delayed reaction to what they did to him. This is trauma-based adrenaline from extreme blood loss.”

Vlad swallowed weakly and fidgeted against the table, nearly dislodging the blood transfusion still being pumped through his depleted form.

Jack frowned. “Vladdie? Bud…Come on…”

Vlad stilled slightly and weakly rolled his head in his recovering haze. Spotting Jack leaning above him, the halfa grimaced and choked, “J-Jackie….? Are you o-okay….?”
Jack almost teared. “Bud… shhhh… Stop fidgeting okay?”

Vlad shook his head druggedly and tried reaching his left arm out only for Jack to grab it and pull it down. “W-what’s-”

Maddie put a hand to his cheek to direct him to her. “Vladimir? Do you remember what happened to you?”
Vlad groggily felt the pressure underneath his tunic and gasped in pain as his chest darted in and out from breathing. Snapping could be heard from above him and Vlad flinched at the noise. “W-Where….am I…?....”

Jack exchanged a slightly panicked look with Maddie and Valerie cringed. Jack repeated Maddie’s question. “V-man? Do you remember what happened to you?”

Vlad blearily began drifting out as he numbly stared toward the source of the voice. “....W-woke up...C-couldn't see….Electricity...w-wouldn't stop…”

Maddie worriedly redirected, “Vladimir what do you mean you couldn't see?”

Vlad writhed slightly at the memory and several hands snapped in place to keep him still. Vlad calmed again as a hand wrapped around to his palm and squeezed. Jack smiled reassuringly as he fought to control the shaking in his voice. “Bud…? What do you mean you couldn't see? And what's this about electricity?”

Vlad whimpered and shook his head. “ W-woke up… t-tied up...with some sort….of c-collar...E-eyes were c-covered...Forced me...t-to s-shift….”

Maddie rubbed her hand through his hair at a steady pace to keep him calm so he'd be able to revert. They still needed to finish his stitching and avoiding using any cutting implements to remove Vladimir's tunic would be a necessity at this point.

Vlad shivered again and trembled slightly, “M-Mads…? It’s c-cold…”

Maddie frowned and motioned Valerie to get a blanket from the medical cabinet to the left of them. Jack gently squeezed Vlad’s hand. “Shhh...bud...You’re bleeding really bad...Just try to hold still.”

Vlad’s pointed ears pinned slightly and he numbly tried lifting his arm again. “M’.b-bleeding?”

Maddie’s frown grew and Jack brought a hand to Vlad’s cheek as he repinned the arm that had moved. “Vladdie? Stay still. Please...I’m begging you at this point.”

Vlad attempted a weak smile but winced and curled deeper against the table. “W-why...am I-...” A deep set frown crossed his features as he bit his lip to keep from screaming. “ It-...It stings…”

Valerie came back with the blanket and draped it over his legs. Seeing the green and red blossoming under his tunic she frowned. “ Mrs. Fenton? His chest.”

Vlad stiffened and tried to gauge the other voice. Maddie looked to Vlad’s torso and, seeing Vlad trying to look toward the noise, held him down firmly against the pillow. Vlad winced and struggled slightly. “What’s...M-Mads? Who…”

Valerie deeply exhaled through her nose and brought a hand to her brow in contemplation. ’Okay…. Plasmius, one of the highest energy readings I’ve ever scanned, is actually Vlad Masters…..His core is just now forming and his pulse is so faint my helmet sounds like a wristwatch. Look at the facts….Come on girl….What do you need to do to get him stable?’

Almost on autopilot, her hands trailed to the tunic and quickly cut it open while Vlad was distracted by Mrs. Fenton. Vlad noted the ripping noises and tossed against Jack and Maddie’s palms. The
sudden cold as the air hit caused him to cry out and thrash against them. Valerie realized that further movement would probably end up tearing the wounds open before she could finish stitching and detached segments of her suit to pin him down.

Grabbing the needle, she looked to Mrs. Fenton for the go-ahead and received a faint nod. Focusing back to the half stitched torso, she swallowed and pinched together another segment before inserting the needle. The reaction was instantaneous. Masters’ chest immediately tried moving away from the steel object as he gasped and screamed out. Jack flinched. They had now gotten to the deeper area of the marks on Vladimir’s torso and the nerves were obviously not impaired by the large amounts of blood loss anymore.

Valerie winced as he screamed against the mask on his face. The numbness had apparently worn off now that the blood transfusion was taking to his system. ‘Shit...Sir, I’m so sorry…’

Jack was keeping Vlad’s upper torso pinned to the bed with his arm. Vlad thrashed against him as Maddie brought her hands to his head to keep him stationary. “Vladimir! It’s okay!”

Vlad tossed his head and weakly gasped as Valerie pulled the wire taut. Valerie cursed under her breath and quickly tied off the end. Vlad clenched his eyes closed and breathed heavily as he tried to keep himself from screaming out. Jack noticed and brought a hand to his cheek. “ Bud...It’s okay...I know that hurt, but you’re tearing open your lip with your fangs.”

Vlad banged his head back as the last prickles of pain finally left his torso. Dizzy and out of sorts, he began slipping under again. Jack worriedly gripped his palm. “ V-man…”

Vlad shivered again and Valerie motioned for Maddie to help her with the antibacterial ointments and dressings. Vlad groaned at the loss of warmth by his head and numbly tried to follow the vague blurs moving through his tears. Seeing Valerie, he tensed against the table. Valerie noted the frantic beeping from her helmet and looked up to lock her eyes with Vlad’s.

Vladimir pulled weakly against his restraints and flinched as a raw portion of his chest moved against Maddie and Val’s gloves. Valerie stopped what she was doing and rounded to face him directly. “ Hello, Mr.Masters.”

Vlad’s blue skin paled. Even in his debilitated state, he could register that he was in ghost form. ‘Ugh….Miss Gray….knows?!...Shit…’

The heartbeat spiked slightly more and Val worriedly glanced from Vlad to the helmet. Sighing, she bent down and put a hand to his shoulder. “ Easy sir...I’m not going to throttle you. You’ve had the worst week I think anyone is capable of having with all of the bs I saw on the security cameras at your place.”

Vlad relaxed slightly and flinched as Maddie brought a cloth to his stomach to clean the area. Seeing the pillow had come out from under him, Valerie readjusted it. “Masters? What the hell is going on around here?”

Vlad groaned, “....Miss...Gray….? What-” His eyes clenched shut. “ I...don’t know…”

Valerie winced and gently squeezed his shoulder. “Sir... Why didn’t you just tell me about you and Danny? Or the other ghosts? I’ve already noticed his scans have bone mass, I just wasn’t aware of the heartbeat or temperature because I assumed he was a warm core or newly formed spirit. I could have seriously hurt him or you...even without my normal weapons, I could have done damage. I’m fused with ghost weaponry for Christ’s sake.”
Vlad seemingly registered portions of the questions and tiredly stared into the ceiling to avoid looking her in the eye. “Miss…Gray….I” Vlad swallowed dryly. “ I was going... to t-tell you… After I realized...the suit was stuck...and you would….probably be a h-hunter permanently….B-But I didn’t know-ugh…”

Vlad’s chest pressed upward and then away as Maddie rubbed antibacterial ointment into the areas they had stitched. Two rings popped by his waist and he flailed against his bindings as the energy brightened and then parted. With a small thump, he passed out against the table.

Valerie winced and detached the bindings on him as Jack sat Vlad up. Maddie came around with some linen dressings as Jack kept him balanced on the table and began wrapping the wounds. Valerie took a calming breath and began tending to his wrists. Looking at the wounds, she growled angrily, “ The footage was time-stamped from yesterday. Mrs. Fenton? How long has he been with those things?”

Jack grimaced and answered for Maddie. “ He was taken earlier this morning before he could recover from yesterday. We were fighting several demonics on the roof and Danny lost his temper...He assumed Vladimir was trying to harm me and shoved him. Vlad was too disoriented from being so close to the spooks and he wasn’t even fully coherent when the ghost shield slammed him out of the building.”

Jack gently rubbed a small circle in Vlad’s back as he laid against him. The scanner from the helmet beeped lightly at the gentle contact. Maddie noticed and sighed. Backing away from her work, she looked to the two men with a weak smile. “Honey? Can you keep him up like this for a few minutes? I need to run a few tests to try and figure out what those things drugged him with and he seems to be calmest when you’re the one trying to comfort him.”

Jack smiled weakly. “ Some things never change...This is college all over again.”

Maddie raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean Jack?”

Valerie also raised an eyebrow with peaked interest. Jack sighed and patted Vlad’s shoulder as he stirred slightly. Looking away from his wife, he answered. “Mads? You know how Vladdie was always falling downstairs and accidentally hurting himself?”

Maddie frowned. “ You two were lying through your teeth weren’t you?”

Jack winced. “ Urm….When you put it that way it sounds so much worse… I mean-”

Maddie glared and tapped a foot as she found a spot on Vlad’s arm. ‘This test won’t be really accurate considering we had to give him a blood transfusion but we really don’t have much to go off of anyways.’ Sticking in the needle, she slowly pulled up the plunger. Vlad shuttered against Jack and Jack gently tightened his hold. Vlad sighed in his sleep. Maddie averted her gaze from the two and turned toward the lab equipment near the console. “ So what was Vladimir into during college? Gangs? If I remember correctly, he was always covered in bruises and there was that one time his wrist got snapped…”

Jack winced. “ Bullying. There was that nasty rumor going around about our dorm room-”

Maddie stiffened. Turning to her spouse, she widened her eyes in horror. “ You mean that screaming was from Vladimir? And the rumors about you two...I never thought anyone would take it so far as to-”

Jack grimaced. “ Vladimir had PTSD, Mads...He’s had it since he was a child...Those screams were
from him waking up from nightmares…” Jack bit his lip. “They always signaled him out… I never saw any of the bullying… Vlad beat them up more than they beat him though.”

Maddie flinched and looked to Vlad questioningly. “Jack...What caused him to-”

Jack flinched. “Maddie...I don’t think I-” He sighed and adjusted a hand to keep Vlad comfortable. With a small glance at Vladimir, he answered. “I told Daniel, so I think it’s only right you know as well. Vlad swore me to secrecy, but lately, all of these secrets are becoming really heavy and hurtful. There’s enough on the pile as is with him and Danny being half ghosts.”

Valerie, now intrigued, sat down on one of the stools beside the cot. Jack swallowed and looked to Vlad’s sleeping face with a hint of apology before speaking. “Mads? You know how Vladdie never mentioned his family around us?”

Maddie paled slightly but nodded. Jack continued. “Well...That’s because his last living relative died when he was in his freshman year of high school. She was murdered by his adoptive father. Vlad ended up coming home to the aftermath. His nightmares were from that.”

Maddie grimaced in disgust. “What happened to the adoptive father?”

Jack sighed. “The guy died when the cops broke in and Vlad got thrown back into the foster system. A few months passed and he was adopted. His adoptive mom died a few weeks prior to him getting his acceptance letter to Wisconsin University. He was effectively homeless when he met us…”

Maddie looked to Vlad in horror. “You mean he-”

Jack sighed. “He really liked brawling in college. Anger issues galore from what I’m willing to guess.” Jack snorted as Vlad moved slightly against him. “He had every right considering all of the bs our classmates put him through when I wasn’t around.”

Maddie winced and turned abruptly to Valerie. “Can you try and find Daniel?! He stopped answering his com-link... and from what those monsters said, my son is somewhere out there-” Maddie’s voice cracked and she bit her lip. “He’s probably hurt or-.” She looked to Vladimir and tears began trailing down her cheeks. Her son was probably in the same condition if not worse.

Valerie paled and immediately reached for her helmet. She paused at the small blinking light in the corner of the screen. Looking up she raised an eyebrow. “Who’s this other core reading from? It can’t be Mr. Masters considering his isn’t pulsing yet.”

Jack went wide-eyed. “Mads... Danni is downstairs! She’s probably scared out of her mind right now!”

Maddie paled and nodded. Turning to Val, she questioned. “Before you leave can you go downstairs and tell the little girl in the kitchen to come up here? It’s not safe for her to be down there alone with those things running ar-”

Valerie nodded and slammed her helmet on before Maddie could finish. “I got you. I’m guessing this heat signature means she’s a halfa to, isn’t she?”

Maddie nodded and Valerie tiredly sighed before stomping out to the observations deck and preparing for take-off. Pausing, she turned and threw a canister toward Maddie. Maddie caught it deftly. “What is this?”

Valerie snorted. “Protection. It’ll last until morning and keep anything above a level six out. It scrambles frequencies as well, so nothing will be able to lock in on their cores. Your shield obviously
can’t take much more. It’s got a twenty-four-foot radius. Good luck.”

And with a half-hearted wave, she walked to the edge of the roof and fell backwards. A tired sigh escaped her lips as the board she had previously torn apart resurfaced and formed anew below her feet. She spun in midair a mere six feet from colliding with the pavement and darted to the door.

Tonight was promising to be rather nerve-fraying…

Hopefully, she’d be able to find Daniel in one piece so that she would be able to give him a piece of her mind.
One hour prior.

Daniel had searched the majority of Amity. Gas stations, bookstores, office buildings...the school. Vladimir was, yet again, completely off of the radar. Jaz, Tuck and Sam were now patrolling separate areas. Jaz went to stake out Vlad’s house. Tuck and Sam had went to check city hall and possibly confront Vlad’s secretary to try and gather some new information that would help. Daniel himself was flying to the outskirts of town. Amity General's predecessor, North Mercy Hospital, was just past the city’s more dilapidated streets and apartment complexes. The retro-esque, seventies style building was closed just prior to Daniel’s birth due to talk of doctors and patients abruptly disappearing or dying from unknown causes. Heart attacks, comas, shock.....North Mercy was more of a medical tailored morgue in its hay day than an actual hospital.

Daniel’s eyes raked across the sign tiredly. Letters had fallen off some time ago, so now the buildings went by ‘NO MERCY HOSPITAL’ whenever it was discussed at school. People still talked about the strange ghost plague concocted by Spectra and Bertrand between classes. Daniel frowned. ‘I don’t have time to be thinking about this unrelated garbage….Come on Vlad….Where are you?’

Daniel stiffened as he floated over the roof. It felt like eyes were staring into the back of his neck. Charging a hand, he turned.

“Come out! Whatever you are I don’t have time to be messing around! Just screw off and haunt someone else!”

A chuckle echoed from the darkness, bitter and annoyed. Daniel paled. ‘That’s Vlad! Where-?’

Eyes darted worriedly and tried to peg the source of the voice. “Vlad? Vlad! I’m so sorry!! Please!? You were hurt earlier-”

The voice scuffed. “Oh, save your breath, Daniel. We both know this stupid farce has gone on long enough.”

Daniel froze and stared into the darkness confused. Green light reflected off of his hand and onto his conflicted features as he swallowed. “Vlad?...”

“Little Badger... Did you honestly think I was being honest with you this entire time? That I truly cared for you or your pathetic family? Do you have any idea what knowing you fools has cost me? They took away my humanity. And you brat? You took away my sanity... Then again it was already lost to begin with...” A wicked laugh echoed over the concrete hospital roof. “Tell me Daniel? Did you know a halfa can become a demonic? It’s a pretty easy line to cross.” Vlad’s voice became darker and suddenly a hand clasped onto Daniel’s shoulder. A head leered out from the darkness and bent in to whisper. “Do you know the true agony of loss Daniel? The feel of a heart stalling? Blood flowing and seeping into wood around you? Do you know what it’s truly like to be just as dead on the inside as the outside?”

Daniel flinched and spun around from the voice only to see a flash of pink leftover from where Vlad had teleported. Daniel shook his head frantically. “Vlad?! Are you possessed?! What’s wrong with you!?!?! You promised-”

Vlad snickered. “A foolish little teenager who still trusts the words of an adult. I told you before, badger. Adults lie. It’s not my fault you refused to take the lesson for what it was. All that pity and heroism toward a man that can’t even look at you without feeling disgust.”
Bitter tears began pouring down the sixteen-year old’s face as he bit his lip. “So this all was just you screwing with me?! Making me believe I could trust you!? I thought—”

Vladimir revealed himself a few feet in front of the teen and rolled his eyes before crossing his arms. “You thought what? That I just turned over a new leaf?” Fangs exposed in a warped smile, jagged and sharp. “You should have just led with your instincts and blasted me to kingdom come while you had a chance. Instead? You just had to show mercy toward your enemy.”

Vlad swept out an arm to motion toward the startled boy. “You want the difference between us brat? One lives in light, one lives in dark. One has a family for the other to tear apart. Poetic in its very nature? A spiteful irony? Whatever fate delved on us? The one always seems to rip the other to pieces first.”

Vlad’s eyes lit with demented mirth as he charged the hand. Tossing the energy languidly, he crossed his legs in midair and continued. “Killing myself slowly never seemed to work. I guess it’s just best to get rid of the source….Tell me.” Red and orange eyes flashed up to meet Daniel’s neon green. “Who was right in this scenario Daniel? The victim? The hero? The villain? If you could only save the one who would it have been? Would it have been the individual you would have least expected? The broken and warped shards that we view the world through can be so easily distorted…. Red eyes narrowed viciously. And a hand whipped out to blast the side of the building. A large hole collapsed in the side as Vlad raised a hand to his chest.


Daniel’s eyes widened fearfully at the energy crackling from Vlad’s form. White sparks cradled in murky and decayed green and weak pink splayed and ripped through the sky above. “VLAD! I DON’T UNDERSTAND! PLEASE?!”

Vlad snickered and recharged a hand. “Of course you don’t. That’s the point. And it’s going to cost the people you care about more than you’ll ever be able to comprehend.” Vlad smiled wickedly.

Daniel brandished both hands in front of himself and dissipated the energy he was charging into his palms. Raising his hands, up pleadingly he begged, “Vlad! Please? This isn’t funny! Stop joking around!”

A blast of pink energy shot through the darkness, knocking the teen into the helipad with enough force to crack it. Plasmius stepped above Daniel and leaned in against one knee as he reached down and tore a hand through snow-white hair to yank the teen up. “Funny, joke around, Vladimir isn’t here today. Leave a number.”

Tearing neon green eyes stared up into the older halfa’s face in horror as a hand was recharged. Phasing through the adult’s grasp, the teen shot up and flew from the hospital at full speed. Small splatters of green leaked from his shoulder as he darted through the sky. Dazed and in pain, the teen briefly glanced back only to feel a charge of electricity tearing through his spine. A horrific wail of agony shot through the night as thunder and rain began crackling overhead.

‘My god….Vlad….What’s wrong with you…..? You…’ Vague flashes of the adult joking with him and protecting him came to mind as he whipped a hand out to tear the taloned fingers from between
his shoulder blades out. The teen shifted to invisibility and quickly pivoted around to the left so he could continue trying to get away from his deranged pursuer.

A pop of pink appeared in front of him and a hand snatched through the air and clamped against the boy’s throat. Wide green eyes flashed weakly from blue, to icy crystal, to neon green as the oxygen was starved from his body. Trembling, the boy whimpered, “V-Vlad…”

The red eyes locked with his dull green showed no emotion at the teen’s plea. Charging his free hand, Vlad leaned in against the boy and whispered, “Your idiot father is next.” And with a swift flick of his wrist the shot connected point-blank against the ghost teen’s stomach. The boy choked out a strangled scream as the talons were ripped back and slumped against the hand holding him aloft. Plasmius tilted the teen slightly to look at his handiwork and with a bored expression, threw him to the ground below.
Bertrand smiled languidly as he turned and for a brief moment his disguise faltered.

‘ That takes care of the brat until morning. Now...time to get our meal proper medical aid…’

Bertrand reached to his hand and licked the blood from his fingers in mirth.

The boy was betrayed, hurt, and would never see Vladimir as a human being again. The bull was now no more than an object of volition….A monster….

Bertrand smirked at the starless night above and turned back to the hospital. It was time to make a house visit.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Closing his eyes, Daniel weakly tried to direct his decent. Crashing and skidding across the dirt and asphalt in an alley nearby, he slumped against the cold. The boy weakly clawed a wrist into the dirt and cupped his other hand to the wound on his stomach that was now freely gushing ectoplasm across his hazmat suit’s torso. Stumbling to his knees, the teen began crawling toward the general direction of Fenton Works.

Reaching a dead end by a couple of dumpsters the teen cried out and collapsed against himself by the trash cans. Curling into a ball on the wet and cold pavement, he began weakly screaming in agony as he shook against himself.

Danny faintly noticed the figure coming toward his now faint and sickly form and looked up with dull green eyes.

“Phantom?!” In the dark, Daniel couldn’t make out the face of the male leaning in with worried hands. “ Dude? Are you alright? Can you hear me?!”

Daniel winced and cried out as a hand reached around and turned him so that he wasn’t face down in the street. He vaguely noted the school bag being thrown beside him as the dirty blonde teenager leaned in closer. “ Oh god...your chest…..”

Hands worriedly rearranged Daniel’s body so the wound could be inspected. A phone clicked on and a bright light flashed over the two teens. Dash Baxter put a hand against the hole to try and starve off the wound and Daniel cried out and flung his head backward at the touch. Phantom weakly phased through Dash’s hands and slumped against the trash can beside them. ‘ It’s....Dash.....Damn......it.....Gotta....get...away....’

Small panicky and shuddery breaths echoed in the heavy moisture-laden air. Dash flinched at the reaction from Phantom and noting the daze in the ghost teen’s eyes, stepped closer. “ Don’t worry! I’m trying to help! Please...Stop moving?!”

Danny shook his head weakly and tried shielding. “N-No....stop.....Dash....I-”

Daniel’s head dully rolled and the shield began flashing. Dash quickly slipped around the teen to where he was unable to shield and placed a hand to his shoulder. Danny bucked and clawed his fingers into the cement. Dash soothed. “ Woah...Easy…” Noting the wetness under his fingers, Dash retracted his hand in horror. “Oh god....What happened to you?!”

Daniel, unable to answer, groaned and with a faint crackle of green energy, slumped to the side. Dash’s hand immediately whipped under the ghost teen’s neck as he fell. Dull green eyes flashed
and muted as a brilliant white ring sparked and snapped at the ghost’s waist.

Dash watched in horror as his hero seemingly lost consciousness.

As Daniel’s eyes closed, the rings slid to opposite polarities and morphed his form. What was originally a frigid ghost was now a frigid and bleeding Daniel Fenton.

Daniel panted and groaned against the jock’s arm and Dash’s eyes widened at the red seeping through the teen’s hoodie.

Daniel was Danny….Oh god….Fenton is Phantom…” Dash stood in shock for a brief moment before biting his lip and laying Daniel down against the alleyway wall. Slipping off his red letterman jacket, the football player draped it around the thinner teen and hefted him up into his arms. His features turned determined as he looked both ways and darted through a gap in the fencing to their left.

‘ Shit… Fenton…. Where can I bring you that's safe?’

Dash bit his lip and his eyes widened at a familiar turn off ahead of them. ‘ The Casper Shack. That's the only option….Shit. I hope no one's crashing there tonight.’

Turning to the right, he ran up to one of the boarded-up buildings in the line and knocked against the side planking with the hand wrapped under Daniel’s upper back. Hearing no answer, the jock turned sideways and kicked the back door open. Nearly tripping over an overturned pizza box and some beer bottles, the seventeen-year-old stumbled to the tattered and hole-ridden sofa with his load. Sitting Daniel up against the lip of the seat, Dash frantically began removing the blood-spattered hoodie and the orange shirt covering Daniel’s torso. The letterman slumped and fell against the cushion as the teen wrestled the fabric off of his peer.

Daniel tossed and grimaced in his sleep as the damp cloth was torn over his head. Dash felt his stomach flop. He had always assumed Daniel showered alone after gym class because he was shy or uncomfortable around the other dudes in his grade level…. Heck, the entire cafeteria only saw a vague mist blur of him nude when that wall turned invisible a few months ago so Dash would have never thought-

‘You're covered in scars….Oh god...Fenton…..’

Looking into Daniel’s sleeping features, Dash winced. There were already rumors running around
the school that Daniel ran off during ghost attacks because he was a spineless wimp. Dash had even picked on him because of it. ‘Well fuck. I'm the world’s biggest fucking smuck. Dash the freaking asshole Baxter.’

Laying Daniel’s ragged form flat against the couch, Dash ducked under the sofa to retrieve the first aid kit him and Kwan had kept stored for after practice injuries. Kneeling down, Dash yanked out several rolls of medical gauze, some antibacterial ointment, as some duct tape. Daniel shifted on the cough next to him and a wrist numbly fell from his stomach and over the side of the couch. Dash tensed at the sudden movement, but seeing Daniel was still unconscious, he quickly propped him back up and began wrapping the wound on his stomach and shoulder. Daniel weakly twitched and pulled against the wrappings but stayed unconscious as Dash worked.

After a few minutes, the jock taped the end of the bandages to Daniel’s hip and was preparing to lay him back down when he noticed Daniel’s eyes were opened partially. Dash flinched. “Hey? Fenton? Can you hear me?”

Daniel ignored Dash and his eyes flashed radioactive green mutely as he shivered against himself. Dash frowned and leaned him back against the armrest. “Fenton? I'm going to give you something to take the sting off. Stay right here, okay?”

Still getting no response, Dash furrowed his brow in concern and backed to the mini-fridge. Still looking at Danny, Dash reached a hand into the bottom shelf and pulled out a water bottle. Daniel winced and groaned before trying to turn on his side. Dash quickly darted forward and kept him upright. Twisting the bottle cap and reaching into the medical kit, he plucked up two pain relievers and cupped a hand to Daniel's jaw. “Fenton? Can you swallow anything?”

Still no answer. Two white rings sparked by the teen’s waist and began snapping in agitation. Dash raised an eyebrow in shock but quickly looked back to Daniel’s semiconscious features. In a flash of light, Daniel morphed back into Phantom. Dash swallowed and motioned the tan-skinned ghost to focus. “Phantom? Danny? Hey-”

Daniel, seemingly, noticed Dash but it was an almost drugged reaction. He was seeing him, yet also not seeing him. For all it mattered, Dash was more of a ghost than Phantom at the moment.

Swallowing, the ghost teen attempted to stand up. Dash nearly spilled the water in his hand in his haste to keep him from moving. “DUDE! WHAT THE FUCK! STAY STILL!”

Daniel slouched against the arm that moved to catch him and began mumbling incoherently. “...H-he...lied....I thought-....”

Dash tightened his hold and worriedly dragged Phantom back to the sofa. Sitting him down he patted his cheek to try and get his attention. “Fenton? You in there? Hey! Can you hear me?! You’re bleeding a hell ton! I need you to take some of these.”

Daniel stared blankly. “H-He’s...going for them....I need to....ugh…”

Dash brought an arm out to keep Phantom upright as he lapsed for a moment between semiconscious and completely out of it. Seeing Daniel gasping for breath, the jock quickly cupped a hand to his mouth with the pills and forced him to swallow. Daniel protested weakly and a brief spark of neon green energy filled the room but dissipated as the water bottle was connected. “Slow sips... Easy…”

Daniel's eyes fluttered shut after a few mouthfuls and Dash retracted the bottle and laid him back down against the couch. Two rings sparked and Phantom faded back to Fenton. Grabbing a blanket, Dash covered him and pulled up a seat.
Soon it was just the sound of Daniel's labored breathing and Dash’s apologetic murmuring in the darkroom.
‘Ugh….Where am-?’ Vlad winced as he felt the stitches trailing across his chest. Something was digging into his cheeks and wrapped around his jaw as he breathed laboriously. Shifting slightly against the soft down comforter piled on top of him, Vladimir noted the heavyweight pinning his legs and groggily opened his eyes.

Jack was sitting upright on a stool and out cold against the end of the bed. Maddie was no different, trailing against the opposite side of the bed with a sloppy bun piling her short orange hair at the back of her head. Both their arms were overlapping like a lattice against his thighs and knees.

‘How….did….I get back ...here?’ Heavy lids groggily tried shutting again and Vladimir shook his head lazily to try and focus himself. It felt like his brain had been reverted to mush or like Ed dru-

Eyes went wide and he numbly looked to the taunt patch near the crook of his elbow. Sure enough, an IV tube with fluorescent green liquid was snaking from the limb. ‘Well….shit-ugh….this….isn’t good...I have to get Ed…and Rom….’

An arm numbly lifted and Vladimir bit his lip to keep from screaming out. The pain was nothing new to him but these particular wounds seemed to sting a great deal more than usual, despite the numbness and heavy ‘wet blanket’ like feeling the rest of his being was being submerged under.

‘Mads...must have...given me….morphine….Crud….’

Blue eyes weakly drifted to the two Fenton patriarchs as a shaky hand reached to the mask covering his nose. There was no doubt in his mind that the ghost portal in their lab would be locked. He knew from experience that his biosignature wouldn’t be able to open it, which would mean his home portal was the only viable solution.

Phasing the IV out, he worriedly stared to the two. Both had obviously lost a great deal of sleep insuring his safety throughout the night. Maddie had even forgotten to take off her magenta reading glasses before succumbing and Jack’s weary girth was blanketing Vlad in what looked like a ghost-proof net. Vlad sat up quietly and rubbed an aching arm to his forehead. Black spots danced in his vision at the small movement and bandages pressed against his injuries cruelly as he arranged himself.

Vague whispers came to mind as he began regaining his senses. The drugs were starting to wear off and with them his calm.

“The little freak is starting to try and wake up.”

A female voice snorted. “He probably senses the brat snooping above the building.”

The male went quiet for a moment and cold arms shot downward to the spot right above Vladimir’s heart.

“I think we should just fuse it directly. He’s already too weak to fight us and if we phase it through his chest the energy should stick. It’ll give us more than enough time to play with the little calf upstairs.”

Vlad groaned and struggled slightly against what was pinning him only to cry out as sharp pain was ignited by his wrists. Everything was sore and swollen.

“He’s agitating the wounds….I’m going to give him it now. It should stay in circulation until we pick him up again tomorrow for lunch.”
'Bastard...s....s-stop.....it....'

The male chuckled cruelly. “ Good evening, brat. Sleep well?”

Vlad bit the inside of his cheek as an icy tongue snaked across his jaw. Something had just tasted him again. Vladimir struggled again against his restraints and a female hand wrapped around his cheek and through his hair. “Shhhh....Behave and it won’t hurt as much.”

‘Bull...shit....you...ugly.....bitch....’

A hand quickly whipped down and slapped Vladimir across the face. Tasting blood in his mouth and, realizing he had bitten his tongue, Vlad rebutted by spitting on the thing looming above him.

The male hissed in anger. “ Why you little-”

There was a swipe of air above him and Vlad waited for the impact only to be confronted with a muted thump as whatever had been aimed towards him was caught. “ Honey? Calm down. It’s not time yet. You don’t want to eat a half baked cake do you?”

The male growled. “ You wouldn’t be saying that if you could hear the little freak.”

‘.....Fuck.....y-you...’

At this, a hand was latched down to yank up his head. Stale, decayed breath that smelled of blood came close against his cheek and whispered cruelly. “ We’ll be sure to give Daniel a more warm welcome. But for now? Go back to sleep!”

And with that something searing and painful was phased through his chest near where his heart was. Vlad gasped and writhed against his bindings as the horrid cool wrapped around the warmth building around his heart. Something was being starved off and with it Vladimir’s ability to breath correctly. A taloned hand reached for his blindfold with mirth and pulled it back to reveal a mirror image of himself smiling coldly down at him. ‘ This.....is...a ....dream....just a dream....Make it stop...’

The pain was increasing and strangling his heart like a vise.

The image above him glared coldly. “ All I have ever done is lie to the brat. What’s one more?” Wicked fangs elongated and a cruel demented version of Plasmius was soon glowering above him as he faded from consciousness. “ For how could he ever care for a monster like me? Lizzy...Sheryl....Jack...Maddie....Anna...Ed....Rom...Matt...Danny? All I ever do is lie...”

A smile that frequented Vladimir’s nightmares ghosted across the image above him as a hand raked down and caressed his cheek. Breath caught and his pulse speed up rapidly. Whatever was in his chest was causing this....it had to be.

The demonic version of himself patted his cheek in mock affection and finished as his eyes began closing. “ It’s time for the next act Vladimir, and I hate to say the stage was set long before a certain little understudy stole our thunder. Don’t worry though....”

The figure bent down and wrapped a hand through his hair as his breathing became shallow.

“ Daniel will know the truth about us soon enough.”

Vladimir’s navy blue eyes stared off the wall in front of him as he brought a trembling hand to his face. ‘OH GOD. DANIEL.’
Vlad’s eyes flashed to muted sickly red as he tried to escape the weight pinning him. Jack stirred and, seeing Vladimir conscious and detached from the IV and breathing mask, he quickly reached over and clamped a hand to Vladimir’s shoulder to keep him from moving. Vlad stared up to him in horror. “J-Jack?...Daniel-.....Where.....is D-Daniel...?”

Jack’s saddened expression was all the confirmation Vladimir needed. A searing tightness engulfed the space above his heart and Vlad gasped out weakly as he brought a hand to cup the spot. Maddie, having awoken as well by this point, helped to catch him as he fell forward.

“Vladimir?! What’s wrong!?” Maddie worriedly shook him and he looked up dizzily before grimacing.

“D-Daniel....They....were...using....my form....Jack?...The male-....It’s a shapeshifter.....”

Vlad felt the tightness increase as he tried to draw power from his ghost form and he coughed wetly. Blood and ectoplasm numbly trailed down his nose and mouth as he shook against Maddie and Jack’s worried hands.

Both of them turned ashen at this sudden development in Vladimir’s condition. He was now panting and gasping for breath like his lungs had lost the ability to properly siphon air. Maddie reached for a syringe of muscle relaxants and, seeing it, Vlad apologetically locked his gaze with Jack and kicked the netting off of himself before weakly teleporting to his home.

‘Get...Rom...and Ed...Gotta...get help....Ed....Ed can find....Danny.....’
Stumbling through the house, Vlad teleported a shirt to himself in order to cover his wounds and quickly buttoned it with trembling fingers. He would need Skulker to go after Daniel as soon as possible and if Vlad’s wounds were out in the open Ed would needlessly argue against his orders in lieu of caring for him. Something neither halfa could afford at this moment in time with two demonics, with unknown resources, playing cat and mouse with the two of them like a couple of plucked guineas. ‘They…planned this….Shit….Think….Think Vladimir….’

A hand weakly clawed against the hatch that was supposed to be locking the basement and Vladimir paled. A red light was showing...meaning the security protocol and Ellen were both destroyed. ‘The...kids...couldn’t have-’

Vladimir felt a chill run down his spine. His eyes darted to his wrists in horror before he growled and phased through the door. Using the spiral staircase as a support, he numbly stumbled into the lab which was flickering a brilliant red in warning. Dull spectral eyes flashed to the vault and Vlad paled. Something had opened it….

Running and nearly stumbling over his own weakly legs, he fell against the door and peered into the darkness. His right hand raised upward to use his mark and, to his building dread, an inhuman pain latched out from his symbol. Falling to his knees and gasping, he clenched his eyes shut and raggedly breathed in a few gulps of stale air.

His seal wasn’t working, the lab was destroyed, a demonic had somehow accessed the vault and stole god knows what, and…

Vlad’s eyes shot open fearfully as he glanced to the portal. The control panel was charred and merged into a molten mass of wires and bubbled steel. ‘GOD DAMN IT! THEY KNEW I WOULD-’

Feeling dizzy and out of sorts, Vlad went to stand and reached out to the mass of charred technology weakly before falling face-first into the steel flooring with a muted thump. Just attempting activating his mark had cost him too much energy. Small labored breaths escaped from his mouth as he darted in and out of consciousness for possibly the millionth time that week against the cold metal. Time passed erratically as he slipped in and out. Minutes? Hours? Seconds? It was all a warped blur.

Eventually, a set of warm gloved hands rounded under his shoulders and pulled him onto his back. Groggy and dazed blue eyes numbly locked with the glowing green of Danni as she tried to help him regain some of his senses. Vlad, in his delirium, numbly shook as he was held against her. ‘Anna.....run...If...they find you…’

‘Vlad? VLAD?!’ Her panicky voice seemed to echo in the space as she wrapped her small hands around his chest and lifted him up against herself. Vlad’s head limply rolled so that his eyes were weakly staring into the ceiling above them. ‘She….needs….to run…’

‘D-Danni...-ugh’ Unable to keep himself coherent, he went slack against her. Worried for his well being, she quickly put her arms under his spine as he passed out and floated him into the upstairs kitchen. From there she quickly darted through the walls until she came to a loveseat in, what looked like, a library. Laying him down against the sofa she worriedly brought a hand to his face. He was cold sweating and his eyes were glazed.

Without thinking, she called out to him in the one way she was accustomed to before he had
abandoned her. “DAD! PLEASE!?”

Vlad teared against the couch as her hands lifted up his face. Green ectoplasm was starting to drip from his nose again.

‘Anna…..hide….Something..iz’….coming….I can….f-feel it…’

Blue eyes began closing. “-na….r-run…a-away…”

Danni put a hand to her earpiece and went to press the call button only for a doorbell to ring. Vlad weakly reached for her wrist as she stood and she phased through his hand.

Propping his head up with a pillow from the floor, she turned from him and made her way out of the room. Vlad noted the lack of her presence and, grimacing, brought himself up so that he was sitting.

‘I’m….not...losing….her....again….Come on Vladimir….Protect….your...child…..’

Trembling slightly, he placed a hand to the armrest and shakily got back to his feet. Teleporting into the hallway and forcing himself up straighter at the lack of a ghostly presence by the door he rounded the corner.

Mrs. Dolce was smiling broadly at a now human-looking Danni. “Why aren’t you adorable? You must be related to Vladimir….You have his eyes and everything! That same lost, ocean blue…” The secretary gushed and reached a hand down to cradle the twelve-year old’s cheek. Vlad stiffened. There was an icy and cruel demeanor laced under her faux sincerity.

Mrs. Dolce cocked her head and a few blonde curls fell in front of her emerald eyes as she spotted Vladimir. “OH! Vladimir-”

Vlad cooley stared her down. “I haven’t the time for you today. Please leave Bertra.”

She pouted and Vlad realized, with cold dread, the disrepair and gore plastered against his surroundings from Maddie’s ghost chase were still present. Blood and ectoplasm stained the walls…and there were shot marks everywhere. A normal human would be calling the police or-

Vlad’s eyes widened abruptly and, without thinking, he quickly teleported to Danni and latched onto her.

Mrs. Dolce raised an eyebrow but seemed unphased by the unusual paranormal power, confirming his suspicions when her eyes flashed back up to him with a wicked red glint. “Well…It’s a pity your kid is getting dragged along isn’t it?” Red eyes flickered down at the child as Vladimir tightened his hold and teleported the two of them into the kitchen.

Danni was fearfully hugging against his torso as he cupped her cheek in a hand. “An-” He swallowed and corrected himself as his stitches protested her small form’s fearful hugging. “Danni? You need to run. Please…I’m going to-”

“Going to what?” A female voice purred. A black shadow languidly slunk from the wall as she inspected her talons and sat across the counter. Green, poisonous eyes glanced up at the wounded halfa and his ward with mock sympathy. “Don’t tell me you want out of the game so soon when all the players are already in motion?”

Vlad growled ferally and forced a partial shift. Red eyes underneath black, long hair glowered at the female demonic. “We aren’t your toys, bitch.”
The female raised an eyebrow before laughing ecstatically. Kicking up from the counter she floated forward and Vladimir weakly charged the hand not protectively cradling the twelve-year-old against him. Her eyes drifted to the child and she crossed her arms in mock dejection. “You're right about one thing. That little freak of nature isn’t even worthy of being a pawn...Then again you are so attached to her...I wonder what would happen if we cored her in front of you? She is a pol-”

Vlad’s arm released the blast, nailing Spectra in the hip. She hissed and lunged toward them and Vlad quickly brought up a shield to keep the two of them safe. Picking Danni up and putting her over his shoulder, he ran through the walls until he made it to his study.

A sudden blast came out of nowhere and clipped him in the back. Danni’s electric green eyes sparked as she morphed and phased out of his hold to support him. Vlad groaned as he was adjusted and seeing a glimmer in the corner of his eye, flung the child out of the way as a cold metallic object was rammed against his chest.

Smiling, Bertra leaned a hand against his shoulder and pinned him against a bookcase before activating the charge. Vlad arched and screamed in agony as the ghost taser rippled through his system and drained him almost completely of his ectoplasmic energy.

Vlad felt his spectral half becoming distant as he fell against the floor with a thud. Danni growled from her spot on the wood and blasted Bertrand in the back, eliciting a hiss of agony as he transformed from his previous guise and into a putrid green blob.

“OVER HERE YOU OVERGROWN SNOT BALL! LEAVE HIM ALONE!”

Bertrand glowered and turned from Vlad to the girl in annoyance. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, hmmm?”

A wicked smile laced his lips as he shifted his form to look like Vladimir. Danni’s eyes widened fearfully as she looked from Vlad to the sinister duplicate. “He abandoned you….Why protect him? You’re just a little accident he created in his grief. A clone with no identity, no future-”

Vlad growled angrily and forced himself to use his rage driven adrenaline to latch onto the demonic’s ankle. Electrocuting the figure, he turned to Danni. “DANNI! RUN! GET OUT OF HERE! PLEASE!”

A foot kicked back and slammed into the older halfa’s spine, rubbing his stitched chest against the ground cruelly. Vlad gasped out and choked at the pain. His hand went limp from his assailant’s ankle as he cried out. Bertrand smiled with mirth as he glanced to the halfa under his feet. Shifting back into Bertra, he plunged a heel deep into Vladimir’s shoulder blade before twisting. “You know? I reallllllyyy have hated these...But seeing your face twisted in agony?I think I may actually have grown kind of fond of my heels.”
Kiss Kiss the Demon

A blur of black and white shot up and tackled Bertrand off of Vladimir with enough force to cause several shelves to topple in, releasing books all over Vladimir's dazed form. A glowing green shield blossomed above him as two small hands turned him onto his back. Blood was seeping through a small segment of his bandages. Danni fearfully looked up as a snarling figure beat against the shield demandingly. “We don’t have to time to babysit some artifact siphoned clone! DROP THE SHIELD BRAT! PHANTOM IS WAKING UP AND WE NEED VLADIMIR FOR THE FINAL ACT!”

Danni growled as she rearranged Vlad against herself. Vlad hugged her apologetically once he saw the shield cracking. Cupping a shaking hand through her hair, he smiled weakly. “D-Danni? W-Warn….Jack…and….Mads…..”

Danni looked up in horror at Vlad. “Vlad?! What are you-”

She was unable to finish the sentence as Vlad reached his embassy marked palm to her neck. With a small shutter, she passed out in his hands.

‘I don’t have enough energy to teleport us both….Be safe….’

And in a flash of pink the girl vanished from the room. Vlad coughed up crimson and green as he gripped his now throbbing and burning arm. His chest was in a similar state, as icy cold ensnared the spot above his heart and squeezed. Bertrand’s hand reached down and pulled Vladimir up by his hair. “How noble….Too bad it’s going to be in vain. Do you honestly think they’ll be safe?”

Vladimir growled ferally, “Against a booger and a shadow slut? I have reason to think they can tank your demented hydes.”

Bertrand snorted and ripped Vlad to his feet before shoving him into the wall beside them. A pair of startled yellow eyes peeked out from the gap between the shelves and the security room. Bertrand noted the beating heart in his peripheral and stared to the cat. It’s small ears pinned and Vladimir growled as Bertrand reached down and plucked up the frightened animal. He brought its small neck to his jaw with a sly grin, only for a fist to plow into his mouth with enough force to reshape the ectoplasm into a distorted blob. The cat fell into Vlad’s hands with a muted thump. ‘D-Damn…..forgot….Maddie…..S-shit…..Okay….teleport…….the cat….’

Mad-cat raked her teeth out to Bertrand as he lunged forward to grab Vladimir again. Hissing in pain as his lack of foresight to turn intangible, Bertrand cupped his bleeding limb before stalking toward them. “Did little Vladie sympathize with a pathetic stray? Not surprising….She lost her little ones the same as you. She cried out for them long after they perished…She lashed out at the hands trying to help her. Tell me Vladie. Did that furball fill a part of the void or just remind you of your longing?”

Vlad backed against the wall and weakly propped up a shield. Mad-cat was still clawing and lashing out toward Bertrand. Vlad lifted her by the nape of her neck and hugged her close before she too disappeared in a spark of brilliant pink. His shield immediately cracked and soon he was lying face-first against the floor and harshly breathing against the wood. A taloned, shadowy figure leaned down and picked him up by his sweat-drenched shirt before pinning him to the wall.

Spectra purred. “Impressive.” A hand curled under his shivering form and raised his eyes to meet hers. “You somehow managed to activate a small portion...No, a granule of power to save a little accident and a cat.”
Vlad raised an eyebrow and smirked through his pain. “Y-Yeah...this is definitely not my week…”

Spectra adjusted her hand so that she was pinning him by his throat. “But we can surely fix that.”

A green, mottled hand shot out from under her and the taser was connected yet again, this time on a higher setting. Spectra purred as he bit his lip. Cradling his head so that he was staring into her wicked green eyes, her face lit with mirth at his resistance to crying out.

However, only a fool wouldn’t notice the scent of freshly shed blood. Her eyes flickered to his clothed torso. “I take it the Fentons tried putting you back together? It’s a shame all of the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t be summoned to help the halfa again….”

Vlad choked but glared at the female through the continued shocks of the taser. Bertrand retracted it once Vladimir began darting in and out. Vlad weakly swallowed. “…My….friends…..are….going to…..tear you….to shreds…….”

Spectra giggled. “Oh? Do you mean the knight and the hunter? I hate to tell you this Vladimir but they are going to be much too late to prevent us from tearing you apart again.”

Vlad hissed as a hand tightened around his throat and struggled against the hold pinning him. “B-Bastards...What….did...you do to Daniel..?!”

The female dropped him to the floor and rounded to his desk. Sitting languidly with her legs crossed she flicked a hand to Vlad as he was lifted back up by Bertrand. “It’s not what we’ve done, it’s what he thinks you’ve done.”

Vlad’s eyes flashed bright red and sparked as he struggled against Bertrand’s hold.

Spectra raised her hands in mock amazement. “Ohhhhh? Scary eyes!”

Two black rings began forming around Vladimir’s waist before trying to dart out. Spectra frowned and turned to her spouse. “Berty? I think you need to zap the bull again.”

Bertrand grinned maliciously as he pinned Vlad’s arm’s behind his back with a Plasmius duplicate. “With pleasure dear.” Fiddling with the knob on the taser, Bertrand set it to its highest drainage ratio and brought it harshly against Vladimir’s chest. Vlad convulsed and writhed. Bertrand shifted into Plasmius as Vladimir continued thrashing against the blood siphoned duplicate pinning him. Screaming in agony, Vlad’s legs lost their ability to hold him aloft. Bertrand released him and pulled the taser back, rivetedly watching as his boss struggled to try and crawl away.

Spectra jumped from the desk and pulled out a glowing pink syringe. Vlad numbly registered the spectral paralytic and tried in vain to summon any energy he had left to escape. Before he could do so his head was pulled back and the needle was injected into his now completely human neck.

Spectra purred as he numbly struggled against the drug being pushed into his bloodstream. The Plasmius duplicate smirked and raised an eyebrow at Vlad’s waning protest. “Don’t worry Vladimir, we’re going to visit Jackie and Mads to. I can’t leave my old college friends out of the loop now can I?”

Vlad stilled and his vision blurred. Spectra retraced the needle as he seemingly lost consciousness. Vlad’s head fell to the floor with a cruel thump. Bertrand lifted a black boot and poked against him to test the potency of the drug before smiling at Vlad’s absolute inability to move.

The fake Vladimir dissipated his duplicate and turned to Spectra with a smug grin. “I take it we are going to phase two early Penelope?”
Spectra grinned, exposing sharp, jagged fangs. “Of course…. The little loser will be waking up soon and the bull won’t be able to move for at least another hour.”

Bertrand nodded and tossed a vial of Vlad’s blood to his spouse. “Bottoms up, love.”

Spectra grinned and popped the top off of the vial before curling her inhumanly long tongue around the blackish-red liquid and slurping it down. Her greens eyes flashed a brilliant white for a split second as a temporary high ensnared her being. She felt radiant… *indestructible.*

Bertrand noticed the bliss laden smile that crept across her foggy black features before he slyly cupped a hand around her head and brought her against him for a kiss. In his youth, Bertrand had been a similar build to Vladimir’s ghost form and Spectra unchastely leaned into the guise. Pulling back from him, she licked her lips. Someone was watching them.

Turning to the floor and seeing Vladimir’s dazed blue eyes staring to the two of them with absolute disgust and loathing, she leisurely stood. Walking toward him and crouching down next to the partially conscious halfa, she inspected his bleeding features with relish. “Hmm? Aw, little Vladdie still seems to be fighting the drugs!”

She lifted his head into her palms to accentuate the point and he growled.

“So feisty!” She pinched his cheek with her fingers playfully. “But right now? Right now you’re completely helpless. Your muscles won't work for at least an hour and your powers for another three.”

She grabbed a strand of his silver hair and twirled it in her hand absently. Shadows morphed and warped around her as she shifted to her human guise. Vlad stared in horrified shock at her familiar features.

“I hope my favorite little patient appreciates the commitment.”

Angry, Vlad tried to move his limbs to no avail and Spectra giggled contently. Turning her head from him to Bertrand, she chortled. “You know? I’m glad you decided not to strengthen the paralytic. This is sooooo satisfying.”

The Plasmius duplicate grinned and raised a wrist flippantly as he turned. “Well, I’m going to pay a house call to some old friends.”

He snickered as he glanced back at Vladimir’s enraged features and with a pop of bright pink, teleported.

Spectra grinned and looked down to Vladimir smugly. “I’m afraid I can’t stick around either when such a delectable spectacle is going to ensue across town.” She retracted her hands and watched as Vladimir tried to move his arms. He sweated with the effort and Spectra snorted. Leaning in close to his ear, she whispered. “I’m sorry Vladimir…” Her hand gently ran through his hair and he hissed as her talons connected against a segment of his scalp. “-but I feed on misery, and after this?” She snickered. “Well, you get the idea.”

She giggled and stood up as he glowered. Morphing back to shadow she waved stiffly in farewell before teleporting in a puff of green and pink.
Danni’s unconscious form awoke to Maddie sitting her up against the front steps and worriedly cradling her against her chest. “Danni?! Oh god...Danni? Sweety?”

Danni shook against Maddie’s hands and soon was hugging her as she wept. “Vlad...he’s-”

A fresh round of tears cut her off and Maddie gently cupped a hand around the child’s back to comfort her. “Honey?! What happened to Vlad? Please?!”

Danni’s now blue eyes stared up to Maddie in absolute grief. “I found him but he was hurt! I don’t know what was happening but he was bleeding and I tried helping him and these things found u-us-”

There was a bright pop of pink beside them and a small frightened white cat appeared on Danni’s lap. Maddie looked from the child to the cat in horror. ‘He’s teleporting them away so they won’t get hurt….Oh god...Vladimir.’

Grabbing the girl who was now sobbing against the cat and hugging her into her arms, Maddie fearfully backed into the home.

Setting Danni on the living room couch, Maddie turned and cut on her comlink in a blind panic as she rushed into the kitchen and toward the lab. “Jack?! I need you up here now!”

“Mads?! What’s going on? Did you find Vla-” Jack questioned in a panic.

“Danni found Vlad but they were attacked! We need to-” The line cut off with a rush of static and Maddie’s eyes grew round as a deep chill permeated the downstairs.

A cruel female laugh broke through the space and Maddie paled rapidly. The ghost shield was operating at full capacity at the moment.

The only way she had been able to carry Danni in was because she was in human form at the time. Her and Jack had spent the last hour ghost proofing the house and coordinating searches for both Vladimir and Daniel. Nothing should have been able to bypass the shield.

An ebony shrouded figure languidly appeared in front of Maddie and shot a hand to her throat. Maddie retaliated by popping her free arm upward and nailing the ghost in the jaw. A neon green set of brass knuckles buzzed from atop Maddie’s fisted fingers.

Spectra glowered and stumbled to her feet with both hands charged. “I take it you’re not happy to see me?”

Maddie threw off the anti-ghost weaponry from her hand as it began smoking, her eyes brimmed with confusion. Spectra gloatingly smirked to reveal blood-stained teeth. “Ghost proof weaponry packs a little more bang for its buck but I’m afraid it’ll be of ill-use to you at present.”

Maddie stiffened and snarled at the figure. “What are you talking about?!”

Spectra groaned and rolled her eyes before placing her hands on her hips. “Take a gander? I mean...Vladimir is obviously an important piece in our game, correct? He’s by definition a human artifact. A life that proceeds death and mandates punishment for those who try to break nature’s law by slaying the innocent or destroying the natural order. A martyr born from the stupid theorems of a couple of college sophomores with wayyyyy to much time on their hands and no sense of consequence.”
Maddie growled. “And what does Vladimir have to due with your filthy hyde melting my weaponry?!?”

Spectra chortled at Maddie's enraged features and teleported to stand near the counter between the lab entrance and Maddie. Reaching to the wall, she casually blasted the sensor with a concentrated dose of ecto energy. Jack could be seen running to the door as it slammed shut and Maddie reached out only to be flung backward into a wall by a well-aimed kick from the demonic.

The demon raised a hand and tsked the attempt. “Ah, ah, ah…. We aren't finished talking yet, Madeline and god knows you and me have some quality bonding time planned for this evening.”

Blue eyes glowered upward to Spectra’s acid tinted green as Maddie stumbled to her feet. “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT???”

Spectra leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. Yawning, she craned her neck forward and purred. “One question at a time. First? You wondered why I am immune to your weapons? The answer is simple. I fed off of an embassary, the only one, and so I've been given human qualities until his energy signature dissipates. Granted, phasing my structure to mimic Vladimir's is a bitch but the pay off? Worth it.”

Maddie leaned an arm against the kitchen table to steady herself and spit out a small bit of blood onto the flooring.

Spectra continued, “I believe that answered two of your questions. I fed from your friend. The sacrificial shield you and Jack Fenton made in your childish pursuit of the unknown. Notoriety? Morbid Curiosity? Possible fame? Pfffff… You two created the ghost zone’s greatest hero and then almost two decades later created a second abomination.”

Reaching to her boot, Maddie pulled out her fighting staff and extended it. “I take it I was able to hit you because you can't phase or use your ghost abilities without allowing my weaponry to fry you?”

Spectra clapped her hands joyously. “I do so love when people put together the clues!” Her eyes narrowed at Maddie's scowl. “It's a shame you fools just couldn't piece it together in time to save your friend.”

A hand curved up and Spectra elongated her talons. “We first got Vladimir in March of 1992 and in the span of almost five years you never once questioned his mannerisms or slight personality differences. Hell? It took Berty an entire year to act out a decent Vladimir.”

Maddie turned ashen and her hands tightened around her weapon as she lunged. Spectra easily dodged and continued. “Poor thing didn't even last a month longer than that before he tried checking out on his own terms—”

Maddie lunged again and swiped her staff up. Spectra used the momentum to her advantage and swung a heel outward to try and trip the hunter. Maddie slid backward to avoid it. “—and we just couldn't have our new toy break so quickly….not when we weren't finished dismantling it.”

Horrified tears splattered down Maddie's cheeks and onto her jumpsuit. “You were the reason….YOU AND THAT OTHER PARASITE!?”

Spectra grinned broadly to expose her fangs. “Once his wrists healed up we held our own little birthday party a few weeks later. You could say we left him in stitches from our antics…”

A hand nailed Spectra in the jaw and she growled viciously, “Does it hurt Mads? Knowing your oblivious nature cursed him to that level of anguish? We had so many fun treatment sessions after he
officially ‘checked out’ from the hospital.”

Maddie snarled and rounded back for another hit and Spectra caught her fist, causing her staff to drop to the floor. Leaning in and purring, Spectra continued. “It’s a shame he escaped before the fifth year was complete…. We were going to rip his undeveloped core in twain between the two of us…”

Maddie pulled back her free hand and swiftly aimed for Spectra’s gut only for the shadow to quickly snatch her other wrist. “We looked for him for months! Alleys? Gutters? Surely his self-hatred would have left him to the bottom tier of humanity….” Spectra leered and pushed Maddie back into the kitchen cabinets, releasing her wrists so she would fall. “To find out that our perfect little toy had evolved into an embassy however made him all the more worthy of pursuit, even if we had to wait until now to finally harvest our meal.”

Spectra motioned to herself mockingly. “At this point you’re probably wondering why I’m even bothering to tell you all of these scrumptious details, aren’t you?”

Maddie snarled, “Because you're a cocky sadist with no common sense?”

Spectra glared. “Wrong.”

Maddie shakily balanced her arms against the countertop behind her. “So why the evil monologue you decrypted monster?!”

Spectra smirked. “Misery.”

Maddie stiffened and hissed, “MISERY?”

Spectra snorted. “You two really are so wonderful.” She simpered sarcastically. Looking up, she grinned broadly as what looked like Plasmius phased through the wall.

Maddie tensed and looked to the figure in confusion. “Vladimir?”

The specter looked to her and bowed before walking to Spectra and flippantly grinning to expose a mouthful of un-naturally sharp teeth. “Only in form, doctor.”

Maddie quickly glowered at the new addition and hissed. “You're that disgusting slimeball that-”

Bertrand's eyebrow twitched and he quickly changed forms to his normal suited version before pointing at himself and cutting her off. “My name is Bertrand Augustus Hughes. If I hear one more of you pathetic flesh bags prod at my demonic form I swear I'll rip-”

Spectra sighed and reached a hand to his shoulder to soothe him. “Easy hubby…. Did you prep the operation room?”

Bertrand grinned. “Of course dear.

Maddie turned ashen. “Operation room?!!?”

Bertrand noted the horror in her voice and phased into a college-age look-alike of Vladimir from the hospital. “Oh, Mads…” The twenty-something-year-old visage pulled against his medical gown and mimed a ‘y’ shaped incision across his chest with a playful wink. “You always did see right through me… but you know? My doctors never did give me the go-ahead to leave. I'm terminal and that means-”

The figure morphed into a green anamorphic blob and his voice shifted back to Bertrand's, “-that we
get to finally euthanize the little freak.”

Maddie looked to the shapeshifter in stunned horror. Spectra snapped to get her husband’s attention and questioned. “Did you make sure to jam the doorway open?”

Bertrand rolled his eyes playfully and reached over to peck a kiss on his wife’s cheek. “Of course Penelope. The portal will be open for another hour and by then the bull will be to shattered emotionally to even force his seal. Daniel should be waking up any-”

Maddie growled and flung a fisted hand out to interrupt. “ WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY SON?!?”

Bertrand snorted and smirked before changing back into Plasmius. “He’s fine...Right as rain and raring to slay a certain elder halfa.”

Maddie paled and her jaw clenched. “ My son would never -!”

Bertrand leeringly leaned back against the counter and popped a finger toward her. “ Are you really so sure? Consider the facts. I used this form yesterday to shoot your child out of the sky and I just now came to this home to hurt or maim his defenseless family. We all know Daniel’s temper and I’m sure an intelligent woman such as yourself can see where we are going with this scheme.”

Maddie’s mouth widened in horror at the implications. Vladimir was unable to shift and heavily wounded. Daniel was being led to believe Vladimir was some sort of psychopathic murderer and she was being played with by two gloating demonics.

Bertrand glanced to the lab door and sighed before locking his gaze with Maddie. “You’d be surprised what a little bit of Vladimir’s blood and some improve can create. That look of betrayal on Daniel’s face as I shot him point-blank? Priceless…”

Banging could be heard from the sealed lab door, growing even more frantic and heavy as time progressed. Bertrand and Spectra ignored it in lew of tormenting Maddie further. Spectra snickered. “ Him chasing down and attempting to slaughter his self proclaimed paranormal nanny will be sooooo satisfying.”

Maddie snarled at this. Seeing heat starting to bubble the metal in the lab door, Bertrand sighed. “Well….I better take care of the other portal and stage the scene for the brat.”

Before Maddie could even growl in retort the figure faded from view in a wisp of decayed pinks and greens.

Spectra snickered at Maddie’s enraged and horrified tears. Grabbing her staff up from the floor, the hunter pointed the tip toward Spectra. “ My son will know….He won’t be some sick puppet in your twisted psychotic mind games.”

Spectra tsked and motioned around them. “ Who’s going to talk him down? Vladimir? We drained his ghost half so he won’t be able to even shield himself to gain enough time to explain. Jack Fenton? He’s going to be indisposed of for a few hours. Your daughter and your freaky little son’s friends? They’re to far away and would never reach him in time. Danni? Well…” Spectra grinned maliciously.

Maddie stiffened. Danni couldn’t be heard from the living room. Spectra followed her gaze and snapped her fingers. Danni’s unconscious form splayed in front of the doorway and Maddie rushed to the child. Looking up, she growled, “WHAT DID YOU BASTARDS DO TO HER?!”

Spectra’s eyebrow twitched. “ I took the liberty of sending a duplicate to play with the brat while we
discussed Daniel and Vladimir’s immediate future.”

Maddie cupped a hand to Danni’s neck to feel a pulse and Spectra grinned jovially. “Oh don’t worry. We didn’t kill the little clone. It would be a waste of incentive...Who knows? Now that she’s stable she may just grow up to be the next worthy meal in our catch.”

Maddie hugged the child against herself protectively before hissing with evident malice. “I won't let you!”

Spectra grinned broadly at the declaration before tapping a taloned finger to her chin. Staring down to Maddie, she chortled. “I never did answer your third question. Remember when I said you and I had some personal bonding planned? Well...who wouldn’t believe their own mother?”

Maddie paled and Spectra purred. “You get to be our lure.”
Before Maddie could blink, a dark black fog shot toward her. Spectra latched shot through her in a nanosecond and nestled under her skin as if she was a simple change of clothing or a Halloween costume. Light blue eyes flashed a sickening decayed green before shifting to a cold, callous gray.

Spectra raised an arm and looked at her gloved hand in awe. “It’s been years since I possessed such a body…”

A splitting migraine shot through Spectra’s head as Maddie began fighting tooth and nail mentally to regain control.

‘Still awake, hmm?’ Spectra smirked and looked down to Danni who was still leaning against her shoulder.

Maddie’s voice shot out from the abyss she was being dragged into. “D-Don’t…you…d-dare!”

Spectra frowned and tightened her hold. Standing with the child in hand she flew up and through the ceiling until she came to the operation’s booth. Sliding the twelve-year-old onto her shoulder, she quickly scaled the ladder and slipped through a weak portion of the shield. Now in the operations center, Spectra confidently strode over to the metal table Vladimir had been laid upon the night prior and set Danni down. The child stirred slightly at the feel of the metal and numbly tried opening her eyes. Maddie smiled down at her and her eyes flashed a sickening murky green. Danni went to scream and a gloved hand wrapped around her mouth.

“Stay still, brat!” Spectra could feel Maddie’s rising panic as the glowing green restraints on the dissection tray were picked up and latched to the small girl’s wrists, pinning her to the table.

“MRS. FENTON?! PLEASE?!” The child thrashed and sobbed against the metal, biting her lip and shifting to try and escape her confines. Maddie’s body stiffened and refused to move back to the tray only for Spectra to grin wickedly in retort. ‘We’re just going to play a little game, Maddie…Don’t worry, I won’t hurt the little freak too much.’

Forcing the movement, despite Maddie’s protests and mental sobs, she ran a hand through the girl’s snow-white hair. “The prodigal child returned, hmmm?”

Danni trembled at the touch and pleadingly locked her gaze with the adult above her. “P-Please! I’m scared….don’t-” A hand cupped over her mouth and Spectra noticed with annoyance that the limb was trembling.

“Shhhhh. We’re just going to play a little game…” She lovingly pinched the twelve-year-old’s cheek. “Tell me? Have you ever played operation?”

Maddie internally screamed and thrashed against the parasitic consciousness toying with her psyche. ‘DON’T YOU DARE LAY A HAND ON HER YOU DISGUSTING-’

Spectra rolled her eyes and leaned in slightly to inspect her new toy. “Now let’s see…” A hand absently wiped away a few tears from the girl’s freckled cheeks. “Last time I checked you were made from Vladimir in the image of what he cherished most… I can see the different parts but the fact sticks that you’re a duplicate of his dear, sweet departed sister.”

Maddie withdrew the hand not covering the girl’s mouth and tapped her chin. “How did she die again?”
A wicked smile played across the phantom possessed women’s lips as she exclaimed, “If I remember correctly it was suffocation!”

She shook with glee at the thought and Maddie’s consciousness writhed. “Oh god the misery he lived with once the doctors told him! That little brats lungs were sliced into so many ribbons she choked to death on her own blood!” And with that, she removed her hand from the girl’s mouth and phased it through her chest. Danni gasped out and turned ashen. Her small rosebud lips tinted purple at the unnatural intrusion. Maddie’s lips leeringly crooked into a demented smirk before she partially solidified. Danni arched and screamed out in agony as two rings formed at her waist and shifted her. Small watery blue eyes rolled back as her body convulsed and then just as suddenly Spectra withdrew her arm in pain. Maddie had temporarily regained enough control while Spectra had been preoccupied and had stabbed a tool from the table beside them into herself to keep the demon from harming the twelve-year-old any further.

Glancing at the small surgical scalpel embedded in her forearm, Spectra growled. “Really? I thought you wanted to dissect a ghost, Madeline? This little abomination isn’t that far off considering her origins.”

Small choked gasps echoed from the table below them and Spectra smiled at the red the girl was coughing up. Sighing with the realization time was already being stretched too thin for comfort, Spectra detached the girl's wrists from the table and bound them behind her back. Danni, now to weakly to breathe in properly, numbly slouched against Maddie’s shoulder as she was lifted from the table and carried to the ghost confinement Vladimir had been imprisoned in prior to Jack Fenton discovering the truth. Opening the vault-like door and walking purposefully to the middle of the room, Spectra dumped her load unceremoniously onto the floor.

Danni moaned and weakly stirred as Maddie locked the enclosure and activated the electrical field. Smiling at the horrified child backing into the corner of the confinement, Spectra leisurely turned and pulled out the scalpel embedded in Maddie’s arm.

Dropping it to the floor she amusedly glanced downstairs. “I wonder how our husbands are getting along?”
Setting A Honeyed Trap

Jack Fenton, after nearly three minutes of trying to bludgeon the two-foot thick emergency door open, had resorted to using one of the new blasters at its highest setting in order to get to his wife just beyond the blockade. After some give and the metal buckling the charge ran out abruptly. Cursing under his breath, Jack ran down the stairs as fast as humanly possible in order to grab another gun, hopefully with a full charge.

Reaching for the steel lab table on his left, he picked up one of the guns and went to turn back only to freeze as an unnatural chill permeated the lab. His eyes drifted up the familiar form of Plasmius as he languidly crossed his arms on the table across from him. Jack swallowed in the tense air. The Vladimir he was accustomed to, even in ghost form, carried a warmth. This individual in front of him was callous and perturbed at the very sight of the hunter trying to fumble for answers before him.

Jack swallowed and narrowed his eyes.

Vlad’s words prior rang out in his head as he lifted his weapon to point it at the intruder.

“D-Daniel….They….were…using….my form….Jack?...The male-….It’s a shapeshifter…..”

‘It’s a shapeshifter.’

Plasmius pouted dramatically and flippantly smirked at the man aiming the gun at his core. “ Jackie? You do know children shouldn’t play with guns, correct? Someone might get hurt….”

Jack cringed as Vladimir’s voice, now warped and cruel, echoed in the metal-lined space. “ You’re the only thing in here that I’m going to shoot spook.”

Plasmius quirked an eyebrow and stood with his hands curled behind his back. Walking forward and stopping a few feet away from the hunter, he cocked his head and leered. “ Tell me, Jackson, how did it feel crushing his ribs underfoot as he begged and pleaded to save your brat? Was it as satisfying and pleasurable at that moment as he remembers it? Your eyes lighting with mirth above him as he gasped and choked against his rapidly ebbing consciousness? Or maybe we can discuss dear little Vladimir’s stint in the holding chamber? The poor embassary genuinely could only think of Daniel in his dying moments…He even went as far to try and gasp out an apology before he went, knowing full well his brother was accidentally murdering him under a false accusation. The level of misery and pain his blood holds with addition to these moments has only made it all the more sweet.”

Jack shook like a leaf and tears numbly traced down his jaw as he gritted his teeth. “Shut.up.”

The figure rolled his eyes and, using Jack’s heartbreak to his advantage, shot the gun in his hand to an unrecognizable blob.

“Save the Fentons. Save the child. Save Rom. Save Ed. Save Lizzy. Save Anna. The list is so extensive and those aren’t even the tastiest bits! Do you have any idea how delicious forty years of abandonment and grief makes a soul?”

Jack’s usually puppyish features were now cruel, and his eyes cold. “ Stop talking about him as if you know him.”

Bertrand paused and a hearty laugh ripped through the room. “ Know him? I’m the one who tore the little brat and his sweet little sister away from their mother! I know him better than anyone else! His
mannerisms? His hopes? His dreams? His secrets.” The last part came out as a snide purr.

Jack’s eyes rounded in horror and his mouth parted slightly at the revelation cast out by the creature standing before him. Plasmius continued. “You accuse me of not knowing him but you yourself never truly knew him. What fool of a ghost hunter would honestly negate the signs when they were so obvious?”

Jack growled and lashed out. Plasmius smirked and avoided the broad man’s girth before swinging his weight and hurling him into one of the walls with an ectoblast. “Did you know the little monster protected you and your family the entire time? A person loses his humanity and somehow his righteous heart focuses on shielding the very imbeciles who damned him in the first place. He tried everything in his power to prevent losing the people he cared about a second time, but you know what? The little freak was and still is a failure.”

Jack stumbled to his feet and held himself aloft against the wall behind him as he glared. Spitting out a small amount of blood and wiping his busted lip, he snarled. “It was you, wasn’t it? You were the one who played dress up in the hospital to distract me and Mads.”

Plasmius grinned. “We changed the registry the second day he was placed on site. You weren’t even on the same floor as him when you visited.”

Jack, with a speed unnatural for a man his size, whipped a hand out and grasped the collar of the male in front of him before throwing him full force against the wall. To his confusion, the figure stayed tangible. Wincing and standing back up, Plasmius began knocking invisible dust off of his cloak. “You know? For a fat human, you can be quite spry and vindictive.”

Red eyes rose to meet Jack’s pained blue and seeing he had struck a nerve, Bertrand continued. “He actually woke up a few times screaming for you two while we were treating him.”

Jack lunged again and Bertrand shot a hand out to his stomach. Grabbing onto Jack’s suit collar as he crumpled to his knees, he pulled him up to face level and quickly lost his amused expression. “I had to put up with you morons for two years, Jackie. Two years of playing ‘little freak’ while my spouse tied dear little Vladimir down and took away segments piece by agonizing piece! DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH FUN I MISSED OUT ON BY PLAYING THE INVALID?!”

Bertrand shook Jack viciously and Jack lashed out. Rolling on the floor the two ended up sprawled near one of the workbenches, the faux Vlad pinning Jack’s arms at his sides. “I feel obligated to tell you this before your loser son shows up to see the security footage from this exchange. We are going to enjoy every moment of the brat ripping apart Vlad’s newly formed core and when he’s done? We’re euthanizing your dear Vladimir. But don’t worry...It won’t be too sudden...We’ll play with him in your stead…”

Jack snarled and thrashed against the inhuman entity holding him down and Bertrand continued. “I’m going to enjoy telling him just how inadequate he was in the end. An inhuman monster even his own kind considers filth and degenerate in nature. Can you imagine the heartache of seeing the child you’ve protected and nurtured for two years finally seeing past the charade and then finding him even more worthless and undeserving of love?”

Jack headbutted Bertrand and Bertrand hissed before backing off of the man and gripping a hand to his green dripping nose. Snapping it back in place and licking a gloved hand he added. “Do you know what core your best friend has in that chest of his? It’s quite rare, as is Daniel’s. Your son was mutated and spliced with ectoplasm at a moment where he wished for transparency, clarity, and a chance to help his dear parents in the lab. He wanted normalcy and stability and so he was gifted a heart of ice. Your precious Vladimir was ripped in twain with something so much sweeter on his
mind. Do you know what his thoughts were as the portal activated? What he pondered on in his dying moments as a human being?"

Jack froze and his eyes locked with the creature who shifted to a slightly younger version of Vlad’s voice.

“’There’s a wire loose-’” The fake Vlad mimed eyes widening and trying to shield his face. “MADS AND JACK! OH GOD, ARE THEY HURT!? DID I BLOCK IT?!”

Jack clenched his eyes shut as pained tears slipped down his face yet again and Bertrand cackled. “Dear, sweet Vladimir? He was ripped apart with protecting the people he loved in mind. Didn’t you ever wonder why he was so close to the portal? He was trying to make sure it was safe for his precious family.” Bertrand spat the word before snarling. “Tell me, Jack? Why did your loser son have an elemental core’s symptoms from the onset? Any guesses?”

Jack fisted his hands and glared up to the figure. Bertrand motioned to the portal behind them. “The brat had his core’s wishes fulfilled while your dear friend-” Bertrand snorted and smirked as he crossed his arms in front of himself. “Well, we took good care of him in your absence.”

Jack lunged once again and this time Plasmius whipped a hand to his throat. Electrocuting him, he snarled. “A heart based on love to be destroyed by the very things he cherishes. It’s a beautiful irony only a demonic could ever bring to fruition. You all have played into our hands like lambs to slaughter. Every pawn, bishop and knight indisposed while we move in to tear the governing force in charge of purging evil and protecting innocence, limb from innocent limb. You idiots created a human-artifact hybrid, it’s only fitting that your actions condemn it to death permanently. Be sure to tell your idiotic brat just how poorly he failed his dear mutated sibling, hmmm?”

Jack choked and spasmed against the pink current running through his body. Bertrand lifted him slightly higher to whisper in his ear. “I’m going to enjoy cutting his still-beating heart out of his breast and when he calls out for you this time? I’ll be sure that the last thing he hears in this world, as the light fades in his eyes, is that he never was deserving of a family or love in the first place. No parents, no sister, no wife or child, no brother. Villains don’t get happily ever afters and freaks serve only one purpose before they perish...to entertain.”

Jack fought the hold on his neck in hissed in agony as the hand tightened ever so subtly around him, choking off his air. Bertrand snorted. “And I’ll be sure to have plenty of entertainment this afternoon, Jackson.”

And with one final flourish, Plasmius charged a hand and connected it to Jack’s stomach. Jack bucked and with a slight shudder lost consciousness in Bertrand’s hold. Dropping the man like a discarded toy, he turned to the portal and blasted the ectofiltator’s connection hub and bio lock to unusable sludge.

No one would be playing hero this time.
Bax(ter) the Basics

Daniel awoke, dazed and confused, on a tattered green couch that smelled of Budweiser and discount pizza. Bringing a hand to his head and feeling the skin on his abdomen stretch with the movement, the teen’s crystalline blue eyes shifted to an enraged neon green almost bordering on acid vat yellow. Daniel immediately shot up from the bed with an angry and pained growl.

Dash, who had fallen asleep on the armrest next to Daniel, panicked at the sudden movement and fell backward onto the floor. Daniel, unnnoticing of his peer, reached a hand to his chest and phased off the bandages adorning his stomach with a violent yank. Snapping his eyes from the wound, he brought a hand to his face and cupped his almost painfully spinning core in an attempt to calm the turret of violent emotions running through his frame.

Harsh words were seemingly stuck in a horrifying loop.

“ A foolish little teenager who still trusts the words of an adult. I told you before, badger. Adults lie. It’s not my fault you refused to take the lesson for what it was. All that pity and heroism toward a man that can’t even look at you without feeling disgust.”

Daniel shifted unconsciously into Phantom and his hands charged as he stood. The table in front of him was the first thing to go, shattering from the violent blast and shelling masses of splintered pine and vinyl skateboard stickers all over the abandoned living area he was occupying.

“Of course you don’t. That’s the point. And it’s going to cost the people you care about more than you’ll ever be able to comprehend.”

Daniel’s heartbroken and rage tainted scream filled the air as he gulped in air desperately. “PLASMIUS! YOU BASTARD! I’M GOING TO—” He bit his lip and drew a small line of green tainted blood as he flailed another blast to one of the walls on his left.

The room began freezing over rapidly as his core took matters into his own hands to try and calm the ever-growing heartache gnawing in his chest. He had trusted and even befriended the older halfla. He had shared his misgivings, his feelings and fought alongside the elder….And here he was, wounded and used like a discarded kleenex or a wad of gum that had lost its flavor.

“Your idiot father is next.”

Daniel’s lips cracked at the sudden temperature drop and he could feel his limbs locking as he wailed like a banshee into the ruins around him.
‘I TRUSTED YOU! YOU LIED! YOU BASTARD! VLAD!? VLAD-’

“WHY…” Daniel choked the last part and, to his confusion, a set of broad arms fought through the ice to wrap around him. “Fenton?! Fenton? Dude! CALM DOWN!”

Hearing Dash’s voice, the teen phased out of the hold and fell to the floor in a hyperventilating mess. His form shifted slightly to become more feral in nature, fangs quickly growing but going unnoticed while green eyes turned a cold and vindictive blue laced with confusion and fear. “Dash.” He growled the name. “Why do you ever care!? This isn’t any of your business so how about you go back to grabbing defenseless freshmen and jamming them in lockers with Kwan for notoriety points!”

Dash’s blue eyes widened and his shoulders slumped. Something akin to deep set self-loathing
flickered across his features as he looked from the floor to Phantom. “I-..If I would have-”

He shook his head and growled angrily at himself before raking a hand through his wavy dirty blonde hair in frustration. “DAMN IT! THAT'S NO EXCUSE!”

Daniel’s eyes cleared slightly and his teeth returned to normal at the sudden frustrated and pained outburst. Dash latched out to him and worriedly yanked him up by his wrist.

“SHIT! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT I'VE BEEN LIVING WITH THE LAST EIGHT HOURS?!! DUDE I COULDN'T EVEN TAKE YOU TO A HOSPITAL AFTER YOU CONKED OUT!”

Daniel’s eyes widened and his gaze flew to the bandages that lay ripped and partially charred by their feet. ‘DASH FUCKING BAXTER PATCHED ME??’

Dash continued in a venting rage. “ME STUFFING YOU IN LOCKERS AND PUSHING YOU… AND FUCK, THE WEDGIES AND- SHIT!-”

Dash yanked against his hair again and this time tears had formed on his proud features.”YOU’VE SAVED MY LIFE ALMOST MONTHLY FOR THREE YEARS AND I MADE YOU EAT MY UNDERWEAR IN FRONT OF THE ENTIRE SCHOOL! I FUCKING HUMILIATED MY HERO AND MADE HIM SO FREAKING UNCOMFORTABLE AROUND ME THAT HE WOULD RATHER BLEED TO DEATH IN A GUTTER THEN LET ME TRY TO HELP HIM!”

Daniel’s eyes widened and Dash shook his head rapidly as if to try to manually clear his consciousness. His voice became small and broken. “You were my hero….Danny…dude…I-”

Daniel’s eyes dimmed and he found himself reaching a hand out apologetically toward Dash’s shoulder. The jock shied away from his touch and grimaced. Shaking his head, Dash whipped a hand toward the patch of flesh on Daniel’s chest that had sealed thanks to his core and ghost abilities. “Yesterday I could almost poke a hand through your waist! SHIT! FUCK! SON OF A-”

Dash heaved and swallowed before collapsing against the couch and bringing his hands to his eyes. “At this point, I want to believe the last night was some sort of crazy overstudying, summer school bs and yet everything from my bloody t-shirt to you blasting the coffee table I built in shop class is screaming otherwise! You could have fucking wasted me every single time! Defended yourself? SOMETHING! Instead, you just let me use you like a punching bag so that the Juniors and Seniors on the football team would be more accepting of-”

Dash trembled slightly. Prior to freshmen year, he and Daniel had actually been mutually acquainted. No bullying. No social hierarchy bullshit. Just kids in the same grade level trying to survive until freshman year without any stress. That had all changed when Ms.Teslaff had spotted him in the junior high football and athletics department with Kwan.

Two talented kids with a gateway ticket as long as they sacrificed their time toward rigorous practice and after hour drills with team members two or three years older than them. Dash’s parents had jumped on the idea, gushing that their kid was going to make it big in some state or college team after graduation. Dash, in all honesty, hated football. He loathed it. Because of the stupid game his parents always focused on how well he performed on the field and not how he performed in school or life. He couldn't even get a part-time job to pay for his first car or take Paulina out to the movies like a regular sixteen-year-old last year because there was no time for him to have anything outside of sports.
Kwan didn’t even like football either but he had stuck it out so Dash wouldn’t be alone and used as a freshman punching bag by the older team members after practice. Somewhere along the line the whole popularity and acceptance garbage came into sway and Dash had ended up making himself Casper Highs resident tough guy via taunts and small physical altercations with the scrawnier guys in is grade.

All to impress (you guessed it) the football team and his oblivious parents.

Hell? The entire school practically ran from under the football team! Frozen yogurt stamped hall passes, skipping incentives, how long you could smoke a cigarette in the boy’s room without being caught…..

When his grades had started dropping from overworking on the field, his parents had failed to notice. The Fenton’s always paid attention to Danny though…They were weird but they cared for Danny and Danny’s grades were worse than his. So what was his plan going into the first term of Freshmen year?

In summary…he hated football and he hated his parents ignoring him. You can’t be on the team without passing grades so the teen had taken the alternative route and began tanking his grades on purpose to where they were below Fenton’s.

AND HIS PARENTS STILL HADN’T NOTICED.

It took six weeks and a call from Ms. Teslaff saying he was going to be tanked from the team to get them to even glance his way and at that point, he was so angry and upset with everything that Danny and Tucker became his go-to vent solution.

Now, where was he? He had finished his remedial summer school classes while his parents were away on a six-week cruise in Europe so he would be able to start Senior year on the team yesterday afternoon. Kwan quite the team before summer break because he couldn’t take Dash’s BS attitude anymore. His friends were literally disassociating with him and now that he was one of the older boys on the team he didn’t have to keep appearances as much. His grades were now at their lowest despite him trying to raise them back up, because of stress. And to top this all off? HE HAD BEEN BULLYING DANNY PHANTOM.

Dash couldn’t help the trembling that echoed outward from his crown to his toes as he sat in the silent room. ‘Fenton had it way worse…Oh god…He’s a ghost and his parents hunt ghosts. He died-’

Dash’s now red-rimmed blue eyes shot up to look at the more lithe teenager. “Oh god…You died….Danny….Dude….They never noticed you-”

Daniel bit his lip and flinched like he had been struck. His voice cracked as he tried to jokingly relieve the tension. “I’m just dead on the inside Dash.”

Dash couldn’t restrain the broken chuckle that slipped from his lips. “I stuffed the guy who bench pressed a school bus into a locker for two years….You died and your parents never even noticed…Danny, I’m so sorry.”

Daniel worriedly brought a hand to the teen’s shoulder his own temporary panic stinted for a brief moment. “Dash….I’m not really dead-…”

Dash whipped a hand up. “THEN WHAT THE FUCK IS-” The jock motioned to Daniel with an exasperated hand. “ARE YOU SAYING THAT DANNY PHANTOM ISN’T EVEN A GHOST? GHOST POWERS AND-”
Realizing what he had said, Dash froze. “Ghost powers.”

His red-rimmed eyes looked back up to Danny in horror. “………”

Daniel sighed and retracted his hand. “Dash? I promise… I’ll try to explain after I deal with-” The teen’s eyes sparked enraged green for a moment and he clasped a charged fist to control his rage. “-after I deal with a recurring problem.”

Dash flinched and averted his gaze. “I won’t tell anyone, Dan. I promise. But please….When you go and kick whatever ghost fucked you over yesterday to kingdom come? Think about what you are doing….You don’t want to become the thing you hate….Trust me.” Dash recovered his face with his hands and rocked slightly.

Daniel bit his lip and flinched before nodding and flying through the ceiling and toward his home. If there was still a chance Vlad had been possessed the day prior he would try to work out a solution with the elder…

If Vlad had truly loved his parents, as he had claimed, he would be able to break the possession through force of will… Daniel had seen the damage he could do by accident with Vlad’s mark and he knew the older halfa had held back with the charges he had shot at him the day prior. Right now he was hoping the man’s stubbornness had allowed him to wrestle control back before he did something they all would regret.

‘Please…..Please prove me wrong Fruit Loop.’
Break a Leg

It had been thirty minutes...thirty agonizingly slow and fear-laden minutes lying on the cold, hard floor until he had been able to summon enough strength to crawl to the desk. His growing rage at the demonics who had drugged him was causing the fever in his veins to reach a horrifying inferno, burning away the spectral drugs pulsing within him faster than they could inhibit his muscles.

Grappling a pulsing arm to the wood and bringing himself up on shaking legs, Vladimir coughed and curled his free hand to his chest. Something was spinning under his breast bone and whipping out viciously like a caged animal, putting pressure on his lungs and heart like a lead weight.

'Shit….don’t black out….They’re in danger…You need to get to Fenton Works.’

Seeing the landline phone overturned on the floor from where the male demonic had thrown Danni, he bent down to reach it and crumpled against the desk. Wrapping his shaking fingers around the plastic he numbly typed in the landline number for Fenton Works.

‘Please…Please….Please….Jackie...Mads...Pick up.’

On the third ring, Maddie answered. “VLADIMIR? WHERE ARE YOU?! DANNI JUST SUDDENLY APPEARED AND SHE HASN’T WOKEN UP!”

With the last sentence, Vlad’s body became racked with cold. It was as if a part of himself had been snuffed out abruptly. Choking back nausea, he forced himself to answer. “M-Mads? I’ll be right there! PLEASE. Grab the kids and Danni and go to the vault with Jack! We were attacked earlier and they’re heading your-” A wet and bloody cough cut him off. Cupping his throat and seeing the green and red dripping through his fingers, he swallowed and rasped. “Mads….I’m going to be there soon...It’ll take me a few minutes...A few of my ribs are shattered...My powers are toast to-”

Maddie’s voice worriedly questioned. “Vladimir!? Do we need to come get you?!”

Vlad practically screamed. “NO!” Another set of debilitating coughs racked through his frame and he brought a hand to his chest to try and steady his breathing only to find that the bandages on his chest had soaked through the white shirt he was wearing, leaving splotches and trails of green and red in his wake. Taking a calming breath he worriedly elaborated.

Seeing a coat draped by his chair, he numbly reached to it and began draping it over his horror show splattered attire. “Mads...please...Get the kids and hide. They fed on me so they’ll be able to get through your shield! Your best defense right now is offense until I can get there to protect you!”

Maddie argued. "Vladimir Damian Masters, I'm not locking anything up until I know you're safe!"

Vlad growled. "For fuck's sake! Of all the times to worry about my-ugh..."

Dizzy, Vlad propped a hand to his head and began standing with the phone. "M-mads... I'm going to force....a teleportation. AND BEFORE YOU ARGUE, I will make it to Fenton Works. Just make sure everyone is safe until I can get in range."

Another wet cough racked his frame and he adjusted the phone by his ear numbly. "A-adrenaline is keeping a small bit of my ghost abilities intact but it's fading fast... Tell Jack to-"

A scream ripped over the line and Vlad paled. "Maddie?!?!? Jack?!?!” Hearing no answer, he dropped the device. Murky and pained cobalt blue eye lit to a fiery red as he teleported.
The pop was much more violent this time due to the nature of the energy warping the gateway. Appearing in an alley a couple of blocks away from Fenton Works, Vladimir began running full speed toward the townhouse. Stitches and flesh protested the movements, bubbling and chafing against raw edges as his socked feet thumped against the puddles and slick pavement. Rings attempted sparking around his chest but failed continually to allow his shift into Plasmius.

Bertrand smiled giddily from his viewpoint in the sky above. His connection to the bull and the calf was becoming quite handy. Clicking the communication device on his ear, courtesy of Jack and Maddie Fenton, he contacted his wife.

Maddie's voice, tinged with airless merriment from ecstatic laughing, answered. " I take it you have a visual on our meal?"

Bertrand smirked. " He's a couple of blocks away." The invisible demonic narrowed his sclera red eyes and focused on Vladimir's general appearance. The halfa was still wearing the sweats and socks Maddie Fenton had put him in the night prior. His white shirt, however, was now obscured by a coal gray trench coat.

Bertrand inhaled deeply and his eyes sparked at the delicious scent crackling against the power-laden air. " It would seem his wounds are broken open. I can smell the blood dripping down his chest."

Spectra purred at the description and Maddie's voice questioned. " Why not share some of the more fun details before sweet, little Danny comes home to mommy?"

Bertrand raised an eyebrow. " I take it Maddie Fenton is fighting tooth and nail to avoid either of them coming to harm?"

Spectra paused and, in the minor lapse, Maddie's consciousness growled. "B-Bastards....I'll-"

Bertrand snorted and Spectra groaned as she regained control. " She's being problematic. I was hoping we could use her after Daniel disrupts the core merging for the vivisection. Having a doctor present this time would have prolonged the entire experience and made the screams all the more decadent."

Bertrand sighed and addressed the consciousness fighting his wife with slight posterity. " Well, Maddie, what do you think of our game so far? Fun isn't it? Right now your little boy is flying full speed to Fenton Works in order to save his precious little family while Vladimir runs to his execution."

Spectra giggled at the mental profanities and wails coming from the body she occupied.

Bertrand snickered after a few moments. " Ah, Penelope, dear? I believe we're finally getting on board this entire fast-food craze the kids nowadays seem to enjoy so much. I forgot just how desperately the little freak pushes himself for others! He’s cleared three blocks already!"

Bertrand's head whipped around as Vladimir collapsed against a wall, panting and holding his stomach in a bid to keep himself conscious. The demon whistled and added. " The bull is literally tearing himself apart! You should see this Penelope! His heart is fluttering so frantically and the mental anguish emanating through the blood is soooooo scrumptious! He honestly believes the Fentons are in peril and fails to realize that he’s the one we’re hunting!"

On the other side of the line, Maddie’s body began weeping. Spectra brought a black-gloved hand to
her cheek and wiped the water away. Touching it to her tongue, she purred in contentment.

“Maddie? Do you know why we call them halfas? It’s not because they’re half dead...That would take the pleasure out of ripping their still-beating hearts from their chests...No...They are called halfas because they represent the middle ground between death and rebirth...Pure and undiluted life energy. A half state of mind...Little, living batteries with tempers!” She gushed.

Maddie’s consciousness froze and her heart sank.

Spectra purred, “I wonder how many years I’ll revert from consuming his heart and core? Forty? Sixty? And the best part? My form won’t shift back to my demonic appearance after the fact unless I allow it. I’ll be young and beautiful forever! No fading, no decay...Just blissfully tangible power and sex appeal! My spouse and I will be gods amongst ants in the zone!” She smiled ruthfully and spun in the decimated living room like a child.

A throat cleared on the other end of the line and Spectra blushed with slight embarrassment. “Yes, darling?”

Bertrand chuckled. “My connection with the brat is fading...I don’t have enough of his blood to stretch the link any further and Vladimir’s own essence is morphing and confusing the small amount left in my system. The calf is coming in to land at Fenton Works. Break a leg.”

“I intend to.”

Maddie’s tears became more prolific and Spectra simpered. ‘I can use this to my advantage...Enjoy the show, Maddie.’
Daniel could see the front door below him blasted into chunks on the small porch. Heart racing he narrowed his body and dived full speed through the open doorway.

Green eyes brimmed with horrified tears at the sight before him. Large blast marks and burns riddled the walls in garish sloppy patterns. Daniel’s hearing focused as he searched for any signs of life. A small frightened heartbeat could be heard thundering under the couch beside him. Daniel ducked and looked under the piece of furniture in confusion. Mad Cat was curled against the back wall in absolute terror, clawing and hissing. Her hind left paw and tail seemed to be slightly singed. She bristled and backed further away at the teen’s presence. Yellow slitted eyes narrowed as ears pinned and a clawed paw came out to swipe at the boy.

Daniel shot back, his eyes a mask of confusion. ‘How did Mad Cat get here?!’

Soft, heartbroken sobs echoed from the downstairs and Daniel’s curiosity was immediately replaced with fear. Stumbling from the hissing animal and making his way into the kitchen, he turned and looked toward the lab door that had been ripped thru by ectoblasts and claws. His white-gloved palm touched against the metal briefly as he walked with leaden feet down the landing.

His mother sat on her knees, hugging herself for support as she released pained sobs in the cold space. Daniel’s eyes lit with rage and he ran to her. “MOM! Mom? What happened? Mom?”

The teen, so distraught by his mother’s distress, failed to notice the wisp of chilly air that escaped his jaw as he bent down to inspect her.

Maddie grimaced as Daniel’s white-glove ghosted over her wounded arm. Daniel noted the expression and looked to where his hand was cupped in horror. His eyes shot back to her as her voice croaked. “Vladimir...Danny...He-”

All of the color in Daniel’s tan skin ran from his body and for the first time in his half-life, he looked like a true ghost. The teen was as white as a sheet. He stood abruptly and his muscles tensed in rejection of the information his brain was processing.

Daniel shook his head in refusal and backed away from her only to bump into a large warm from behind him. Turning and seeing his father splayed on his side, covered in bruises and roughly patched up he felt his fists clench. Running hands through his hair he screamed. “No…..NO. NO. HE HAS TO BE POSSESSED! HE WOULDN’T-”

At this Maddie screamed out through her tears. “THAT DEMON WASN’T POSSESSED! HE STORMED INTO THE HOUSE AND- AND-” Her voice broke again and a fresh wave of sobs racked her frame. “HE HUNTED US DOWN LIKE ANIMALS!”

Daniel felt his breath catch and his lips tremble. Falling to his knees, he stared blankly ahead. ‘He really was lying….He made me think-’

A light in the corner of his eyes caught his attention. A muted video of Vlad strangling and electrocuting his father was glitched in a never-ending loop on the lab computer. Several blast marks on the walls noted the spots where the cameras his mother had installed when he had disappeared.
were placed before they had been melted into piles of sludge.

Ice began chilling the room as Daniel growled and rose to his feet. His mother was still sobbing against herself, unable to look him in the eye.

Daniel’s voice came out heartless and devoid of affection but assured. “Mom. I’m sorry I didn’t finish this in the beginning…. I-I thought Vlad changed…. That he was a better person...I was wrong...and I’m sorry you had to pay for my foolishness.”

Silent tears raked down his face as he growled. “He wants to be the villain? A psychopathic murder that enjoys fucking with people's feelings? Fine. Then I’ll just have to finish what the portal started on him all those years ago.”

He turned from her and punched the wall beside them with enough force to dent the metal. Green ectoplasm dripped down his fingers and biting his lip he looked to the ceiling.

‘I won’t allow you to hurt my family ever again Vlad. From here on out…? I’m out for blood.’

Turning to his mother, he swallowed. “Mom...The boomerang….Did you find it? I know it went missing when Vlad-”

She nodded numbly and gulped back a fresh wave of tears. Pointing a hand to the work table on their right, she retracted her arm back to herself and hugged even tighter against her shoulders to control her trembling.

Daniel flinched and, averting his gaze, walked stiffly to the work table. The boomerang dimly reflected his sparking eyes back at himself. The air itself was crackling around his fingers as he reached down to pick up the device.

Angry tears continued dribbling down his cheeks. “Mom? Do you think-….Do you think I could have saved him?”

Maddie continued sobbing, leaving him with no concrete answer and conflicted with exactly what he was about to do. Swallowing, he cut on the switch on the underside of the device. “Find Vlad.”

The boomerang crackled to life as an invisible force pulled it up and out of the lab door. Daniel followed it, oblivious of his mother’s muffled ‘sobs’ turning into something so much more sinister.

The laughter echoed through Fenton works for what seemed like an eternity before she daintily hopped to her feet and went to follow after the confused calf and their injured bull.

Chapter End Notes

How’s everyone holding up? Good? * checks on readers worriedly*

Remember to comment compadres. I post based on the comments so the more you make and the more interaction the more content.

Also, did anyone have theories on the ship names a few chapters back in the comment section? * winks* I'd love to hear you guy's theories!
Romulus awoke screaming in terror on a medical gurney in Walker’s prison. Skulker and Walker both whipped their heads to him in a panic as he abruptly stood and phased off his glove in a hurried frenzy. Skulker tensed as well as the burning sensation traveled up his arm from his mark. Both their eyes flashed white briefly at the sudden transference of energy. Romulus lifted his branded palm in horror. The mirror image of Vlad’s soul sigel, which usually stayed visible due to the two’s spectral forms, was dimming and ebbing like a sun-exposed negative.

Romulus growled. “WE ARE LEAVING NOW! CONSEQUENCES BE DAMNED!”

Black and silver armor wrapped and morphed around his limbs as he reached for Skulker’s wrist. Holding him firmly, his green eyes sparked and flashed as he raised his free hand to form a temporary portal.

Skulker looked back to Walker apologetically as the two appointees jumped as quickly as possible through the glowing green abyss. It closed after they made it thru with a brief pop, leaving Walker and his men stranded in the zone with no way of aiding the two unless another portal user was found.

The Warden growled in frustration and shot a blast to the wall beside him. He would just have to pray that two ghosts would be enough to stop the creatures lurking on Vladimir’s side of the portal. Things were looking to be rather bleak if anything from the day prior could be used to validate the state of Vladimir’s condition.

Walker wasn’t one for praying….His idea of god and judgment had basically shifted as soon as he had found himself astray in the zone. This time, however? He couldn’t help the way his eyes looked upward, as he once so often did as a ranger, in silent prayer.

For the briefest of moments, his features flickered to that of the rugged and fatigued lawman he once was in life before he crumpled on top of an abandoned cot. A worn leather-gloved hand tiredly reached for his hat and fisted it into his palm. Wisened and fatigued glowing green eyes shifted as he worriedly rubbed against his hallowed cheekbones and hawkish nose in an effort to calm his lingering apprehension. After a few moments, his core settled and the mirage shifted back to that of the skeletal warden, devoid of his salt and pepper mustache or tanned skin. The scar from being scalped, however, remained no matter how his appearance morphed and with a bitter growl he snapped his hat back onto his bone-colored head.

‘Edmond? I pray you reach him in time. I can feel it in my core….Something wicked is waiting just around the bend.’

The wind whipped and lashed against their undead skin as the two fell through the sky on the other end of the gateway. Thick droplets of rain were starting to trail down the muggy and staticy filled sky around them as they dived to the town below.

Skulker and Romulus both paled at the sight before them. Small portals were blossoming and ripping through the atmosphere, allowing swarms of poltergeists and low-level demonics into the city below. Lightning flashed, creating eerie shadows as the undead hordes were either deposited or sucked back
into the zone by the random temporal displacements.

Skulker swallowed. “My god…..Vladimir.”

In all his years at the halfa’s side, he had never witnessed such a harsh and terrifying show of power gone rampant. The very sky was being torn apart by Vladimir’s aura while his territorial claim over Amity was rapidly trying to counteract and close off the shattered disturbances in his sanctioned time-space.

It was like seeing two halves of Vladimir fighting for dominance in some sort of bizarre paranormal game of tug of war. Skulker growled ferally and pulled a gun from his side holster. With the number of paranormal wraiths swarming the territory it would be a miracle if they would be able to search out Vladimir’s still rapidly fading energy pattern without conflict. Skulker turned to Romulus who was already summoning dual blades in his hands.

A deep and terrifying voice echoed over the area from under the knight’s helmet, primal and enraged. “Those who have invaded my lord’s territory, I give you fair warning. Leave before I paint this decrepit town with your entrails.”

Skulker grimaced slightly. Romulus was obviously extremely pissed if the change back to his demonic voice was any sign of his mental stability. Being a demon’s ectoplasmic costume for several centuries had most certainly tainted the knight’s mannerisms when it came to threatening opposing parties.

Several entities looked up to see the Fright Knight’s unmerciful features and fearfully scattered to whatever portal was closest to them at that given moment. Romulus snarled at the leftover creatures that were either to animalistic or vindictive in nature to go quietly back into the zone. A wicked light glimmered in his green eyes as he raised his swords. “Edmond? I will make haste to the ghost brat’s dwelling. Go and search the manor.”

Skulker nodded and glanced to the ghost hunting facility in the distance with slight unease. Despite the massive ghost invasion, their shield was unoperational. Having studied the building and its schematics thoroughly, the hunter grimaced. “Romulus? Be wary. Their weaponry isn’t operating for some reason.”

Romulus nodded and apologetically duplicated. “Edmond? I’ll get you within range of the home before dealing with our uninvited guests.”

Skulker nodded appreciatively. He would need far more weapons than he was currently carrying. The duplicate latched onto his shoulder and Skulker nodded curtly before he was enveloped in a blob of black and white energy tinted in hues of fluorescent purple.

Romulus winced as his consciousness was rendered in twain. Growling to expose his vampiric fangs, he leaped forward and began viciously dismembering the entities trying to tear the town apart in order to maim his ailing friend.

In his peripheral, his duplicate and Skulker had both just popped into the lawn in front of Vladimir’s manor. Seeing the door ajar, both ghouls felt their cores tingle in dread and without even considering the possibility of an impending threat, phased directly through the home and into what could only be described as hell incarnate.

Romulus paused mid sword swing and, losing his concentration momentarily, felt glowing purple tears streaming down his face at the sights his duplicate was struggling to take in.

The duplicate collapsed to his knees with a small thump and Skulker felt the gun in his hand clatter to the ground with a muted thud.
Pained tears laced the hunter’s small, featureless face as he wept in his suit’s piloting compartment. His voice, after a brief moment, cracked as he leaned against one of the walls for support. “Who could’ve done something like this-?”

Feeling something slick under the glove of the suit he was possessing, he immediately withdrew his hand in grieved sorrow. ‘Blood.’ It was now drenched into the spectral fabric. The smell of decayed and stagnant ectoplasm was practically fumigating the entire building. ‘Vladimir….This is yours….They-’

Skulker felt his throat clench before he growled and slammed a hand violently into the plaster and wallpaper beside him, shattering a segment of the wall. “Romulus? FENTON WORKS. Now.”

Romulus nodded but kept his duplicate with Skulker to aid with searching the home for any evidence discerning Vladimir’s whereabouts. Skulker couldn’t help his building rage when he stumbled into the security area hidden in Vladimir’s office. Not a single piece of technology had been spared. It was completely unrecognizable from the monitors and wiring he and Vladimir had modified.

Romulus, now finished coring the last demon that had chosen to get between him and the townhouses near the vicinity of the high school, felt his duplicate stiffen at the faintly glowing and blackened trail leading toward the stairs. The double swallowed dryly and called out to Skulker. “Edmond…? I think I found something.”

Ed phased through the walls and, seeing where the duplicate was gazing, stiffened. It was a trail of human blood that had been playfully smeared through decayed ectoplasm by sets of clawed hands. Skulker leaned down and put a hand next to one of the sets. “It was those two bastards who locked Vladimir’s gate.” His nose crinkled. The energy radiating from the prints was hauntingly familiar….He could almost swear he had felt their presence prior somewhere in the zone. The hunter stood again and stomped forward, his eyes tracing the sickening amount of blood up the stairs down the hall and straight to-

Romulus and Skulker both stopped in front of Vladimir’s bedroom. A large, garish ‘X’ was playfully slashed into the hardwood as a point marker. Romulus, on his end, was still crying profusely as he glowered and his duplicate blasted the door to Vladimir’s bedroom into an unrecognizable piece of scrap as he strode forward with his friend. Both the knight and the hunter hissed in revulsion at what met their gaze.

‘Dearest Edmond and Romulus,

We do hope you’ve enjoyed our little bread trail! Little Vladimir was so gracious with giving us such a rich and vibrant color to paint with! It’s suuuuccchhh a shame his friends couldn’t come to his aid. The little freak even called out for you two while we played with him earlier… Don’t worry though…We’ll take it nice and slow as we rip his newly forming core out of his chest.

Best Regards,

P.H. and B.H.

PS. Enjoy the show while it lasts. Here are a few mementos to commemorate the occasion.’

Skulker’s hand numbly reached for the envelope stabbed into the wall below the blood hewn letters and tore it down. Ripping the top off violently, he shakily pulled out what looked like several pieces of paper only for his throat to clench. They were photos…

The first was of a dimly lit room with Vladimir dressed in formal attire….The same attire he had been wearing at that party three weeks ago. The fabric was being pulled back slightly and dazed
drugged eyes stared out weakly as a taloned black hand cupped under his jaw to hold him up for the photo.

The second photo was a sloppily taken selfie of a familiar black, shadowy specter pinning an injured and screaming Vladimir to the breakfast bar in the kitchen. She was smiling into the camera as one taloned hand cupped around his mouth to mute him and another kept his arms out of striking distance. A small segment of a black hand could be seen obscuring part of the photo, meaning she had duplicated in order to take it.

Skulker’s green-hued mechanical eyes widened in recognition. Hands tightened around the small stack and, for the first time since being cursed, he could feel raw green ectoplasmic energy circulating to his suit’s fingertips. Shaking with rage, he leafed thru the last two photos.

The third was set in the same darkroom as the first, this time revealing a set of morgue freezers in the space. Vladimir, unconscious and limp, was being carried to a spot by the corner of the wall by Spectra’s husband Bertrand.

Skulker fumbled slightly as he plucked the last and final photo to the top of the pile so both of them could see it. In it, Vladimir was leaned against the freezer doors with his arms splayed out in front of him and what looked like a collar wrapped around his throat. His head was slumped against his chest and his eyes were obscured by a thick piece of gauze similar to the wrappings adorning his wrists. Both appointees hissed in absolute disgust and hatred as they took in the finer details of the braggingly shot polaroid. Vlad’s back, even dimly lit, was tainted in dried blood and his skin was an unnaturally ashen white, almost bordering on rigor mortis.

One of the demonics, had apparently, thought it humorous to draw little lines in red sharpie on the photograph to highlight the slightly red-tinted energy trying to form near Vlad’s heart and the feverish breaths trying to escape his lips.

Skulker and Romulus both went wide-eyed at the implications.

Skulker dropped the photos and whipped his head back to the message written in blood.

‘We’ll take it nice and slow as we rip his newly forming core out of his chest.’

What happened next was pandemonium. Both Skulker and Romulus, whom had began descending to Fenton Works in a frenzied panic, froze as a searing flash of white light sparked from their palms. The heat was bordering on being burned slowly over hot coals. Green eyes widened in unison and Romulus’s duplicate turned to Skulker to try and convey how close he was to Fenton Works only to gasp in pain before fading into oblivion.
The Grim Draws Near

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The real Fright Knight, now within a block of the roof, cried out as Valerie's suit shocked him to the point he was barely able to stay airborne. Shaking against himself and snarling he glared up to the girl as he corrected his body against the wind and rain.

‘Great. Vladimir’s little herald in training has decided to hunt me.’

Valerie's voice shot over the downpour. “I’ll say this once. Leave.”

Romulus countered frigidly. “I regret to say I can’t. I advise you cease your idiotic prattle and let me pass!”

Valerie’s suit crackled and two short firearms spun out from her palms. Pointing the twin ecto-guns, she snapped. “You’re another one of those demonic bastards aren’t you?” Her head cocked as she fired a shot toward the knight’s chest. “Where are they?!”

His shield came up instantaneously, fully blocking the attempted core shot. Glaring from under the shadows shielding his young features, he whipped a hand out to motion around them, “Some interrogation tactic! Why the blazes would you fire at a core first?!”

Growling at her silence and blocking another shot with a purple shield, he snarled. “I HAVE NO TIME FOR THIS! THEY’RE GOING TO CORE-”

His sentence died in his throat as a rather hard and painful object plowed into his back with enough force to smash his muscular frame into the pavement five stories below. The artificial rock cracked with a sickening crunch as his chest connected.

‘Thank god….I don’t….have any….bones….ugh….’ Groaning, he went to reach a palm to his face only to freeze in confusion. His hands were secured at his sides by some sort of green net material. Romulus’s eyes widened in horror at the faint lemony smell attributed from artificial ectoplasm. This was the same netting Skulker used to trap poltergeists and demons before release or disposal. Testing the bindings and writhing against the pavement, he flinched as another shock whipped through his frame. Long dead lungs twitched and convulsed out of sympathy for his core’s pained responses to the charges coursing through his ectoplasm.

Once the charge stopped, he slumped weakly back to the pavement. His nose grated slightly against the black and gray as it reformed and the ectoplasm sloshed sickeningly as his head was roughly yanked up by a slender gloved hand.

The ectoplasmic residue from the collision was already washing off of his face due to the rain pouring down from above them. Streaks of glowing green lazily poked through the shadow like mask protecting his appearance from prying eyes. Valerie seemed to be cupping a hand under his helmet. Growling, the knight headbutted his assailant and fell backward against the pavement.

Trying to get back up to his knees and swaying with the effort, he glared up to the hunter looking at him with a masked expression. Her voice was tinted in malice. “Wrong move.”

“Do you not have a better way of spending your time?!” The knight fidgeted and tried charging his hands again to break through the human element of the artifact keeping him pinned only for the
electricity to come back with more bite than before.

Panting and slumping weakly, he choked. “I don’t want to fight you! Please! We’re running out of time! If they-”

Valerie’s fist whipped back and snapped under the ghoul’s chin, slinging him helplessly across the road and against one of the neighboring buildings. His helmet was illuminated by a bolt of lightning overhead as it spun upward and rolled into the middle of the street. Valerie froze in her tracks. The Fright Knight’s ebony and silver armor had morphed and shattered from under the netting, releasing a massive wave of ecto energy that had activated the net’s restraining properties. A young college aged ghoul was writhing and convulsing weakly from within the bindings cocooning his arms to his sides. With a small muted thump, his hair obscured face slumped to his chest and his glowing green eyes weakly fluttered closed.

Valerie reached the ghoul just as he began falling forward and caught him by his shoulders. Every fiber of her being prior to his helmet coming off had screamed for her to fight back and lash out against him. She had wanted nothing more than to just core Fright Knight for its blatant refusal to leave. Something, however, had caught her eye the moment his helmet had been ripped from his face.

Two trails of glowing purple, to be exact.

Cupping a hand around his neck and parting the long ebony hair wrapped through his lashes, she bent his neck back to inspect the ghost she had captured. The specter winced slightly in his core dazed state as fingers traced across the still repairing segments of the skin on his nose and cheekbones to examine the streams of liquid snaking from his clenched eyes. ‘It’s crying?’

Sam ran out from where she had fired the net and came closer to inspect the unconscious spirit. Tucker, who had seen the fight from some distance away, felt a chill run up his spine. Sam seemed to be glaring at the knight and her fists were clenched to the point her knuckles were white. She was lifting up one of the guns Maddie had given them the day prior. Tucker felt his legs suddenly thudding against the pavement all the faster to reach her.

‘Dire straits lie ahead at the bend. A long awaited truth will be gained at heavy cost. When the time is right, confront your friend ….’

A hand whipped to Sam’s wrist and her gray eyes widened in confusion from her unseen assailant. Flinging the gun out of her surprised hold and pinning her, he winced as she stomped on his sneakered foot with the butt of her combat boots.

‘-or more than one innocence will be lost.’

Sam struggled against his hold and he spun her to face him. Grabbing her shoulders and shaking her roughly, he snapped. “DAMN IT SAM! WHAT WILL SHOOTING FIRST ACCOMPLISH?!”

Sam motioned to the helmet and then to the unconscious knight. “HE’S PARIAH DARK’S UNDERLING TUCK! HE HATES DANNY AND VLAD!”

Tucker snarled. “Why didn’t he openly attack Val then?! HE HAD EVERY OPPORTUNITY AND ALL HE DID WAS SHIELD! Think for one second before you go and take his afterlife!”

Sam seemed to jerk and her heart clenched as she remembered her own prophecy.

‘Change the fate by choosing life.’
Tucker turned to Valerie and bent down to inspect the ghost she was pinning up against a brick wall. The Fright Knight looked nothing like what his armor cladden alter ego so effectively hid. A short medieval tunic with leather gauntlets tied loosely around his wrists was covering his top while a pair of ebony trousers and tooled leather shoes graced his bottom half. Wisps of white and black energy seemed to be lacing around him like spider webs and, upon closer inspection, Tucker came to realize the thin lines were some sort of ectoplasmic shadow of where chainmail had once lain. 

“Sam….I think he’s the sword.”

Black eyebrows clenched and with a sudden jolt, his acid green eyes shot open in a dazed panic. Seeing his assailants pinning him, he backed against the wall and tried phasing through it only to scream out in agony as another jolt of electricity sparked through his form.

Sam and Tucker gaped in shock at the young and scratchy voice that choked against the confinements inhibiting his escape.

Before anyone could make a move to free the pained spirit, a mechanized gray and green blur dived down and phased the flailing and choking knight out of the teenagers’ hold. Pulling him up into his arms and grimacing as the shocks began permeating his own suit, Skulker worriedly began trying to cut through the netting with one of his blades.

‘Things are not as they appear...Poisons, enemies and tainted dreams will give you clues. Find the hunter and the sword, dispel the ruse.’

Sam, Tucker and Valerie stood slack jawed as Skulker willingly took the shocks in a stint to aid the flailing knight. Fright Knight gasped weakly as what symbolized human anatomy in his form, shook and spasmed of its own accord from the continued shocks.

Fright Knight’s voice became pleading. “E-Edmon…” Skulker snapped the last segment of the netting and the younger-looking ghoul slumped in his arms, the last syllable of the name he was trying to plead with dying in his throat.

Skulker ignored the teens and landed some distance away with Romulus draped in his hands. Reaching a worried hand to his chest and feeling the core hadn’t shorted out from Rom’s armor condensing back so suddenly, he snapped his green eyes to the teenagers. Anger quickly replaced his worry as he gently leaned the knight’s head against his neck. “I’ve had it up to here with you brats. Vladimir is always so—”

He stopped himself and his eyes grew worried again. Biting a mechanical lip, he went to stand with Romulus only for the two of them to stiffen in alarm. Glowing white energy lulled Romulus back from his forced slumber and a fanged mouth opened in shock as Skulker dropped to his knees panting. The gloves adorning their marks were being burned off in charred wisps as the connection between them and Vladimir began breaking from the continued strain on his body. The embassy’s mark, in his desperate plight to summon them during his weakened state with a newly formed core, was attempting and failing to rationalize the energy diversion.

And then to everyone’s horror….images began forming from the marks and projecting themselves against the rain.

‘A core given in turn for what was always free. Take heed protectors, the grim draws near. Once hope dies, a monster...your kin... the ember of light will stall and thin. Tread carefully and tend the flame with truth....For iced grip will condemn him to their use.’

Sam and Tucker could only watch as the gory scene repeated itself in real-time above them. Tears
traced down Sam’s cheeks. ‘We’re too late.’

Chapter End Notes

*WARNING. KLEENEX ADVISED NEXT CHAPTER OR SO. TIME TO BREAK SOME FEELS*

(Also, this is an action-horror fic so yes. Angst and blood are given. But don't worry you will have some fluff before part two begins.)

Time for some demon shenanigans......
Blood is Thicker than Water

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vlad’s entire being was shaking spasmodically as the rain seeped through his coat and began smothering his form. His feet were a blur of motion underneath him as he closed in on the building looming in the distance. ‘Just two more blocks.’ He stumbled and slid, socks skidding over asphalt. Falling down and landing chest first against the pavement, he hissed in pain.

‘Damn it!’ A fist slammed against the wet concrete. ‘Damn it Vladimír! Get back up!’ Curling his left arm under his chest and pushing off from the ground and flailed and stumbled into the wall on his left, tipping over several old cardboard boxes and a metal trash can.

Vlad swallowed dryly against the building heat in his throat and chest. The pain was becoming a passing affliction, easily confused for his frantically pumping lungs as they desperately tried to gather enough air to keep up the brutish pace.

Gulping down several deep mouthfuls of damp and frigid air, he began running anew. He was only able to make it a few feet further before a strip of metallic silver and neon green came flying toward him. Instinctively, he went to bring up a shield to protect himself only to pause mid adjustment and instead, leaped out of the way of the projectile. ‘I don’t have…’ He panted. ‘-....enough energy….for that…’

Hearing no connection to the wall behind him, his eyes raked to the metal that had spun toward him in a gravity defying arch. A sharp smack at the back of his skull caused him to teeter mid foot fall and he slumped to his knees. A boomerang branded with a Fenton Works sticker was gently glowing beside him and humming. His blue eyes, now struggling to focus, noted the red staining the object and he brought a hand to the back of his head to confirm what he was being told visually. Pale white fingers shook slightly as he retracted his hand and cupped it out of the rain. Bright crimson lay splattered against his palm. ‘Well….This must be that tracking device Daniel and-’

Vlad froze and went to pick the object up. “Why did they-”

A chill went up Vlad’s spine as instinct kicked into overdrive. He shot up, barely avoiding the bright, neon green blast aimed at him.

A sharp searing heat charred his palm as he gripped his bleeding chest. The coat was now becoming nothing more than a blood soaked weight. Another blast, this one much closer, shattered the pavement by his feet and flung him face first into the ground.

Blue eyes widened fearfully as something frigid gripped the back of his coat and flung him viciously into the brick wall to his left. Something snapped as he connected and he gasped as he crumpled to his knees. Holding his ribs and panting choked segments of warm and feverish air from his lungs, Vlad looked up as a pair of white boots landed in front of him.

Eyes widened and a look of pure confusion and pain crossed the man’s features, “D-Daniel?”

Radioactive green eyes locked with the trembling man and, reaching down, he grabbed onto Vlad’s neck.

Vlad’s eyes weakly rolled as he choked and a blood-stained hand numbly cupped against Daniel’s wrist as he tried to fight the hold. “...anny….st-....”
The hand charged with ice and a pained scream shot through the alleyway. Bertrand couldn't suppress his laughter as he watched Amity Park's hero brutally suffocating an innocent man in cold blood.

Vladimir's frame shook as he kicked-weakly, survival instincts outweighing the possible ramifications of protesting Daniel's cruel grip.

"YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A MONSTER! HOW COULD YOU?!? WE HELPED YOU AND YOU WENT AND-

A hand raised with green energy and railed into the older halfa's stomach. "-HURT MY FAMILY! WHAT DID MY DAD EVER DO BESIDES LOVE YOU?!? I SWALLOWED MY TONGUE WHEN HE SAID HE WAS GOING TO SLEEP IN THE OPERATIONS CENTER- I TRUSTED YOU!!!"

Vlad could feel his tears mixing with the rain as his eyes began closing.

"B-Badger....I-" A hand shoved back violently and Vlad's head connected against the brick behind him with a dull crack.

"Don't you dare...DON'T YOU EVER REFER TO ME BY THAT DISGUSTING NICKNAME AGAIN."

Vlad clenched his eyes shut and his throat bobbed weakly against Daniel's gloved palm.

"Daniel...I'm sorry I couldn't-

A hand tightened even further and Vlad's eyes almost rolled backward. '-protect....you.....or anyone else...You’re right....I'm.... a monster...and a liar....'

Turning human, Daniel brought his knee to Vlad’s stomach. The man weakly plummeted forward as Daniel released his coat and a small stream of crimson and neon green snaked from the adult’s lips to trail into his stubble as he hacked. Hands clawed against the concrete and small sparks began forming around Vlad’s nails as ebony began flashing around them. Talons scraped against the ground as he shook and averted his gaze.

Daniel’s fist spun out as Vlad attempted to get up and a new splattering of blood dripped down the older halfa’s face as he was knocked across the alleyway and into the trash cans. Vladimir grimaced through his busted lip before shakily gripping the ground. The tears-…..they burned.

Before he could stand, or even consider trying to get to his feet, another fist railed toward his left side. His ghost half phased him instinctively and he thanked god for it as the trash can behind him was completely ripped through by the boy’s ectoplasm covered fist. He most certainly would have died from such a lethal blow if it could have connected. Green and blue tinted mist dripped from the teen’s jaw as he yanked his arm back again. Vlad seeing the blow phased again and choked. “B-Badger! ....Mads...and….J-Jack-..”

This apparently had been the wrong thing to say. Daniel’s blue core was now glowing through his shirtless torso. Ice crystalized and wrapped around his hands. Spikes began bubbling up from the cement and Vlad cried out as one of them impaled his shoulder. The cry did little to stop the teen as he reached down and cupped his hands around the elder’s throat again before throwing him back into a brick wall with unbelievable force. Vlad shielded and phased but the impact still jarred his form. Almost blacking out and seeing Daniel leering toward him with angry tears in his eyes and a hand raised to strike again, Vlad shielded and screamed out through the blood dripping down his
The shield shattered as Daniel threw his charged hand forward and shot Vladimir in the chest. The older halfa flailed a hand out defensively and hearing a small crack above, weakly rolled out from under Daniel’s angry and irrational form.

‘Those….two demons-….They must have….’ Vlad’s features became enraged and he shakily brought himself up to stand as Daniel turned. The boy glared with sparking green eyes as he wiped his bleeding nose.

Vlad’s hand numbly gripped his ribs as he motioned to himself. “Daniel! I didn’t do it!” A wave of nausea suddenly hit the adult as a wisp of grey and black smoke seemed to trail from his fangs. Breathing harshly, he glared back up to the teenager now approaching him with what looked like an ectoplasmic blade in his pale white knuckles. Vlad felt his breath catch in his throat at the sight of the ice tinted weapon.

‘ He’s going to kill me…..’

The realization surprisingly didn’t bring any fight or flight movements from the man as the boy charged forward. Red eyes dulled to blue as he stepped almost soberly into the path of the boy’s blade. Daniel’s eyes widened in horror as the point began piercing flesh and, thinking quickly he dispersed the charge. Vlad, now seeing the ice mist more clearly from the boy’s mouth, couldn’t help the feral growl that racked his frame.

His semiconscious eyes locked with the figure looming just behind the teen. Red sparked as his vision adjusted and hearing the core nestled next to Maddie’s frantically beating heart, he made a choice. ‘If a hero can save a monster, little badger….then a monster can save a hero..’

Vlad's right hand numbly sparked white as he teleported. Daniel’s head whipped around at the sound of Vlad popping back into the downpour.

Running forward, Vlad skidded his frame toward the petite feminine form lurking in the shadows. ‘This time? I’m not going to miss.’

“I’LL TEAR YOU APART, YOU DISGUSTING Bitch!”

Spectra ginned internally. ‘ Well look at that! He knows you’re possessed!’

Maddie’s eyes grew wide with shock as the almost gentle charge connected with her breast and sent the manipulative creature hiding in her flash sprawling out of her back.

Spectra smiled out of the view of Daniel before fading from view.

Maddie, now too weak from trying to stay conscious against Spectra, slumped in Vladimir’s arms as he removed his hand. Her head landed against his shoulder and in her fading moments of consciousness, she begged through her tears.”V-Vlad….run….”

“YOU BASTARD!”

Chapter End Notes

Oh look I leave you all at another cliff hangar. Comment your reactions and rants
below. Remember the more comments or likes the fic gets the quicker the chapter posts.
It kind of notifies my email and I realize. "Oh look, they need more."
Feeling the blast coming toward them, Vlad scooped Maddie into his hands and jumped out of the way. The green and blue energy warped and crackled underfoot, creating ectoplasmicly charged daggers from Daniel’s core element. Vlad hugged Maddie briefly as he backed away from the boy. Weighing his options and seeing he would neither be able to teleport her to safety or calm Daniel under regular methods, he swallowed and laid Maddie against the alley wall. Reaching down and wiping a tear from her cheek he stood shakily. Seeing the green blast in the reflection of the wall in front of him, he shielded. Fists clenched with a mixture of rage and grief.

‘This is really how it ends, isn’t it?’ Vlad noted the blood dripping from under his coat and his bloodied knuckles clenched as he swayed.

Looking into the sky above and biting his lip, he spoke. “You wanted a villain, Daniel…” Eyes flashed red and suddenly Vlad catapulted through the air. Spinning around to face the teen, his feet connected with the ground nine or ten feet away. Sliding across the ice, he dived and dodged as blast after blast shattered against the shards, spraying him in artificial sleet. Daniel choked as a partially shifted hand connected to his throat. There was an unnaturally bright white light and Daniel’s eyes widened fearfully as his flesh seemed to bubble from underneath Vlad’s bloodied hand.

Daniel’s hate-filled eyes flickered and locked to Vlad as he brought his own ice-laden hand to the man’s knuckles and began freezing the limb. Vlad winced and bit his lip as the boy flung him backward into the ground. Whatever power he had left was now completely and utterly gone. ‘be safe….little-badger.’

Daniel whipped a fist around and connected it into the wall, inches away from Vlad’s semi-conscious head. “I’m never going to be afraid of you or your idiotic plots ever again!”

Vlad numbly lifted his chin to stare at the green eyes he had grown so fond of. ‘Liz...Did I do right….by you….Did I save someone…?’

Daniel yanked a hand down into Vlad’s gray hair and whipped his face up so he could fully see the monster he was pinning against the wall. Spying the human blood, his stomach turned. Green and blue mist became all the stronger as he snarled. “You wanted to play villain, Vlad?! Then how about we have a refresher course?! THE HERO ALWAYS WINS.”

Morphing fully into Phantom, the teen slung Vlad into the ground back first and began blasting the adult. Vlad’s eyes teared as a boot came down against his chest and pressed into his now charred and bloodied clothing. Even with the rain, the blasts were still causing sizeable damage and the pain was rapidly stealing whatever bit of his consciousness had remained. Daniel’s foot whipped out again and Vlad slammed back into the wall he had been held against previously with a muted thump. Sliding back onto his spine and gasping weakly against the rain, Vlad noted the boy charging his hands to finish the deed above him.

Tears were streaming down the teen’s face and the neon green-tinted crystalline drops fell against Vlad’s cheeks dully. Vlad choked as he stared up to the boy. “W-What’s wrong...little...badger…?”

Daniel sneered at the name and stomped down brutally against Vlad’s chest. Vlad clenched his eyes shut and when he opened them, there was nothing but loss remaining. “Don’t heros...get rid of...v-
villains?”

Tears snaked down Vlad’s face as his eyes began to glaze. A hand numbly wrapped around Daniel’s ankle. Barely conscious, Vlad felt Daniel stomp down slightly harder against his stitched and injured flesh. Daniel was silent for a moment as his expression became searching. Vlad’s hand weakly fell from his boot and slipped down his chest with a muted thump as his eyes began closing.

Daniel growled and reached down to yank him up by his drenched coat. Snarling through the rain, he demanded, “WHY AREN’T YOU SHIFTING?!”

Vlad’s dulled blue eyes looked to the younger’s face pleadingly as his wounds protested the hold. A head weakly rolled as he was shaken roughly. Vladimir’s voice answered from behind him. “Probably because the little freak can’t?”

Daniel’s eyes widened in confusion and he went to turn only for a taser to connect with his side. Screaming out as his transformation was forcefully brought out, he was blasted ruthlessly away from Vlad. Gasping and choking against the puddle he had fallen into, he glared up to the source of his pain and found himself eye to eye with Plasmius.

The ghoul smiled at Daniel’s now human form and cocked his head amusedly. “You are always so quick to jump the gun aren’t you? You never noticed the lack of pulse in me or how dear sweet Vladimir aimed for the core layered over poor Maddie’s delicate little heart.”

A black shadow woman with familiar red eyes slunk from the shadows nearby and Daniel looked from her to the now apparently false duplicate of Vlad in front of him in terror. Plasmius’s voice shifted giddily into a human toned male’s and Daniel felt icy tears trailing down his face as Bertrand leered. “Do you know why he was running to Fenton Works instead of away from the scene, brat? Because his dear family was endangered.”

Spectra gushed as she gazed over to Vlad’s weakly breathing form. “Awwww, the little loser broke the freak….” She paused and a cruel grin stretched across her fanged lips. “Berty? His core isn’t trying to attune at the moment…Why don’t you-.”

Bertrand smiled down to Daniel ruthlessly. “Penelope? Hold the brat. I want him to watch this.”

Daniel’s arms whipped out to swipe at Bertrand, and the demon snorted before casually phasing through the boy’s grip. Bertrand looked back snidely as he harnessed the last of the power siphoned from Daniel’s blood into a mirror perfect replica of the teen. Daniel opened his mouth to scream and a taloned, black hand quickly reached around to cover his mouth as he was pinned.

Chapter End Notes

ANNOUNCEMENT: You may or may not have noticed Danny Phantom, The Lost Arc- Part one is now Danny Phantom, The Lost Arc. This is a pretty big change and it means all of the fic, that's right...ALL OF IT. Will be posted here. Part two and anything after.

So no need for multiple bookmarks and such. A one-stop-shop for the fandom I suppose. That and we can see this fic hit its goals. Speaking of goals?
CURRENT GOAL: 1,000 likes by August 31st

Spread the news. Repost your favorite chapters and tag me. Go crazy my angst army. MWAHAAHA!
“Wake up.” The Phantom duplicate prodded Vlad cruelly with a white boot and Vlad seemed to stir against the rain smothering him. “Is that all you can really do Fruit Loop? A few pathetic passes at trying to appear human when we both know you’re nothing but a psychopathic monster?”

Vlad’s head was yanked up harshly to meet the false Daniel’s glowing green eyes and in his unconscious haze, he numbly attempted to speak. “.....D-Danny....”

An icy hand clenched around the elder’s throat and he spasmed weakly. The real Daniel whipped a hand out from Spectra’s clawed hold and reached for Vlad. She slammed his head against the cement before whipping him back up by his hair so he could see Vlad’s rapidly deteriorating condition. Large tears, tinted lightly with pinkish ectoplasm from his ghost half’s panicked attempts at healing his wounded human body, numbly raced across Vlad’s face as he was pinned. A hand whipped down and connected with his coat, tearing the fabric to tiny shreds and revealing blood-soaked bandages. “You are so pathetic! You just take it and never seem to attempt defending yourself! You’re a bad joke that just gets more irksome with every passing year and I HATE IT.”

Fingers prodded at the bandages and Vlad bucked and choked out a weak scream. Daniel, at this point, was a mass of hysterics as he tried unsuccessfully to get the demoness securing him off of his back.

Bertrand cupped a white-gloved hand under Vlad’s head to focus him again and patted his cheek. “Come on Plasmius...No quips? A harrowing remark about how you at least tried to fight against the ghosts?”

Vlad seemed to regain a small segment of himself and looked to the teen harming him with an expression bordering on pained sorrow. “.....B-Badger...I-”

The fake Daniel scuffed before snarling. “Let me guess?... You’re sorry. Sorry you’re such a failure? Sorry you didn’t just die in the hospital like the worthless sack of garbage you are? Sorry that you still ended up breaking your promises? Or are you genuinely sorry you couldn’t make it to my mom and dad in time? Or is it answer E, all of the above?”

Vlad reached his cut and injured right arm upward in an attempt to comfort what he thought was Daniel only for the hand to be viciously slammed back into the pavement. “AND WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT THAT NICKNAME?! ”

Vlad was choking against the rain and blood in his throat as Bertrand lifted him up slightly from the ground. Holding him up by his neck, the demon began pinning his arms to the wall behind them with ice. Vlad limply fell into place against the stones as the hand around his neck left and a gloved fist whipped out and struck him in the face. Vlad grimaced and his eyes numbly trailed upward in search of his attacker. Spectra saw this and immediately turned herself and Daniel invisible. The false Daniel snapped to direct Vlad’s attention. “Over here, Vladdie.”

Vlad grimaced at Daniel’s heartless gaze and swallowed. “....B-Badger….Mads needs-”

A fist plowed into Vlad’s stomach and the words died in his throat. Bertrand lifted his chin up slightly and tilted his head. “WHAT SHE NEEDS IS TO BE AWAY FROM YOU!” Bertrand
snarled coldly and yanked Vlad’s head back slightly to keep him focused. “Everything you touch just dies so how about you do us all a favor and kick the bucket? I mean fuck! Did you just forget I got a little picture show when I went into your head to wake your miserable ass up?”

Vlad clenched his eyes shut. “S-Stop…”

Bertrand snorted and charged a hand before connecting it to Vlad’s chest. Vlad’s mouth opened in a silent scream as he weakly arched and spasmed against the ice keeping him pinned in place. “STOP WHAT? TELLING THE TRUTH? Does it hurt that much? Knowing that you really should have just bled to death, alone and scared like your sister? Or do you want me to just ghost over the facts? Even then, two things will always remain. YOU. ARE. A. FAILURE. AND. A. FREAK. A demon.” The specter rubbed a small patch of blood from Vlad’s cheek and looked to it with disgust before glaring into Vlad’s eyes. “You don’t deserve love or even the right to breathe.”

Vlad was passing out and the pseudo-Daniel smiled vindictively. “You do, however, deserve everything that’s coming to you and more. Have fun in hell, Vlad.”

Vlad went limp and unresponsive just as Bertrand’s guise wore off. The demon stopped the charge of ecto energy in his palm and leisurely licked the blood he had wiped from Vlad’s face as he glanced back toward his wife and her prisoner. Smiling and reaching out to tilt Vlad’s head up slightly, he called over his shoulder to Spectra. “I think that will make him pliant enough for us to harvest it. His core won’t attach with that amount of confliction running rampant in his form.”

“How scrumptious! I can practically smell the heartache seeping from him!” Spectra gushed as she appeared with Daniel crying underneath her.

Bertrand went to stand and tensed abruptly. His eyes narrowed on a segment of the street some distance away in disgust. “They’re back early.”

Spectra snorted and looked down to Daniel with mirth before starring to Vlad. “Grab the bull, Berty.”

Bertrand nodded and went to detach Vladimir. The sound of Spectra hissing in pain caused him to look up from his work in confusion. A crescent-shaped bite mark was now adorning Penelope’s hand. Daniel began screaming in earnest as he writhed. “VLAD! VLAD I’M SORRY! PLEASE! WAKE UP!”

Bertrand and Spectra both exchanged a look and then sneered. Vlad seemingly attempted to stir at Daniel’s voice and Spectra growled. Shifting to her human guise, she reached into her pocket and tossed a needle to Bertrand. “Sedate him.”

Bertrand smiled. “With pleasure.” Popping the plastic cap off of the syringe and bending down to Vladimir, he poked the metal against Vlad’s pinned arm and jabbed it in. Vlad groaned and his eyes rolled and shifted under closed lids as the needle’s contents rushed through his system.

“STOP! LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE, DAMN IT!”

Bertrand rolled his eyes and looked back toward the teen. “Don’t lie brat. You wanted this.”

Daniel shook his head rapidly and, forcing a small amount of spectral energy despite the taser’s effects, he phased out of Spectra’s hold and crawled toward Vladimir. “VLAD! VLAD PLEASE. YOU’RE LETTING THE GHOSTS WIN! PLEASE! YOU’RE GIVING UP!”

Spectra snorted. “You really are so narrow-minded. Always looking at everything in black and white and never seeing the truth for what it really was.” Her voice became mocking and kiddish. “
Oh! I was turned into a freak and I can’t tell my parents! I guess I should mindlessly hunt ghosts to make them proud of me because I have no self-esteem or future. Boo who…” She feigned tears.

Bertrand looked to the teen as he attempted to reach for Vlad’s leg and scuffed. “He was already losing from the start brat and so were you. We pegged you for brash, but I never would have thought you could become so ruthless. I enjoyed every cruel thought that languished in your head as you strangled and tortured an innocent man.”

Bertrand turned from the crying sixteen-year-old and, charging his hands, blasted the two ice restraints keeping Vladimir upright just as Spectra slammed her heel into Daniel’s back. He growled and went to lash out. She snickered before bending down and ripping one of the needles she had stolen from Fenton Works out of her pocket. “Your dear sweet mother made this to keep Vladimir out of harm’s way...A simple sedative to calm him and keep him still so he wouldn’t agitate his stitches...It’s a shame she couldn’t uncap it fast enough before he fled Fenton Works to try and save you.”

Daniel gasped as the needle entered his neck and his limbs became leaden. Bertrand was bending in to grab Vladimir as he slumped from the wall and toward the pavement. Hands roughly latched under Vlad’s legs and back before lifting him up bridal style. Bloodied silver hair draped across a small portion of his cheek as his head splayed sideways and his arms limply hung from his sides. Spectra turned from the paralyzed younger halfa and lifted one of Vladimir’s wrists. “They did quite a good job of stitching him back together after we played with him earlier...” Her eyes narrowed toward Maddie, who was unconscious still. Turning back to Bertrand, she smiled to expose dagger-like fangs and her skin tinted black. “How about we send them the leftovers?”

Daniel, at this point, was trembling. “V-Vlad...I’ll.....save...you......I promise....”

Spectra heard this and turned from Vladimir to face the boy. Seeing the boomerang on the ground near them she deftly picked it up and twiddled it in her fingers. “Let’s revisit what you said earlier, shall we? That adamant segment of dialogue you shared with Vladimir about heroes always winning?” She pointed a clawed hand to Vladimir’s bloodied and battered form. “Well here’s your precious hero.” She looked back to Daniel and bent down to leer with mock sadness. “What a rather odd way of showing victory! Battered, bruised, and soon he’ll be lain out to rot with his dear little heart exposed to the elements!”

The boomerang was engulfed in a large shadowy green and black ectoblast as she stuck her face inches from his own. Shaking the material from her fingers, she retracted herself and her eyes narrowed.

Tapping her chin, Spectra paused and simpered. “The poor thing used the last of his energy in an effort to protect you, you know.”

Daniel stiffened and Spectra smiled as she reached in to tap his neck. A dimly glowing white mark blossomed on his skin. “It’s not a full appointee’s symbol but it still holds enough energy to call his assistants to help you. I wonder how they’ll take that development, hmmm? The boy that condemned their friend to be torn apart is now their ward.”

Spectra rolled her eyes and stood to go to her husband’s side. Cupping a hand against Vlad’s cheek and smirking ruthfully, she shifted and transformed into a young nurse. Daniel felt his heartbeat speed up as he recognized the face so often blurred or distorted in Vlad’s feverish dreams. Spectra looked back to Daniel with a victorious gleam in her green eyes. “It’s to bad his last act to protect you was in vain. By this time tomorrow? Little Vladimir and his precious appointees will have perished, whether remotely or by me and Berty personally.” She brushed her fingers through some of the silver obscuring Vlad’s bruised face and tucked it behind his ear. Glancing back at the teen.
she waved mockingly. “Be sure to send them our regards, Daniel?”

Bertrand smirked and adjusted his load so that Vlad’s neck was flopped over his arm before turning with Spectra and casually walking away with their meal. Bertrand hollered from over his shoulder. “And Danny? Be expecting a package or two at your doorstep later in the week. We wouldn’t want you missing out on the visuals after all.”

Daniel growled and crawled to his hands and knees. Kicking up, he flailed his limbs out to reach the three of them only for the trio to fade into the rain with a pop of decayed green and muted pink.

Their laughter echoed long after they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

Welp.....Vlad's with them for the final 'checkup/treatment' now.

How are everyone's nerves? Another kick to the face emotionally seeing Bertrand turn into Daniel, huh? Poor Vlad.

Now we should probably check on poor Romulus and Edmond. Fright Knight and Skulker are having a pretty sucky day to at this point.

AND THANK YOU not_my_usual_username and Forestwulf for your wonderful comments!
The moment Vladimir’s eyes closed, the visuals connecting him to Skulker and Romulus snapped and with it the pained screaming and flailing the two had succumbed to as Vladimir was harmed on the other side.

Rom clumsily pushed himself from Skulker and gasped rapidly, despite the air doing nothing for his physical body.

Skulker groaned weakly and plummeted backward onto the cement. His chest felt like it had been shattered into a billion pieces. Eyes widened in unison. ‘They must have phased that damned amulet into his hand!’

Footsteps could be heard running toward the two of them and Skulker dimly noted Romulus protectively layering his body over his suit. Growling ferally to expose fangs and pinning pointed ears, Romulus snarled. “S-Stay away…. from us....”

Whatever strength Romulus had tried to harness immediately left him and, trembling, he collapsed on top of Skulker. “E-Edmond….It hurts…..His ribs…. the child broke them….”

Skulker feebly lifted a shaking hand to protect Romulus’s exposed back and rolled the knight underneath himself. Skulker’s suit would be better equipped for enemy fire and his core would probably be mislocated by the approaching party.

“Rom…. Stay still-”

“Woah! Skulker?!? Are you… Oh god, your suit!” A panicked male seemed to be prying hands around his shoulder to turn him off of Romulus.

“LET GO OF HIM YOU IGNORANT BRAT! YOU WON’T LAY A FINGER ON HIM!” Skulker winced. “Rom? Shut up…”

Romulus’s pained green eyes widened minutely before he hissed and slapped the face weakly staring at him. “Did you just command me to shut up?!?! IF YOU HAVEN’T NOTICED?!?! YOU ARE THE ELDER APPOINTEE DUMBBASS WHICH MEANS YOU TOOK MORE DAMAGE FROM THAT HELLISH ENERGY TRANSFERENCE!”

Tucker and Sam pinned an arm under the somewhat heavy ghoul and attempted rolling him off of Romulus. Skulker growled and Romulus snapped at the teens’ hands. “Get away from...us....”

Tucker snarled at this. “We’re trying to help you two!”

Romulus growled at this and reached a taloned hand out to swipe. “YOU DEPLORABLE LITTLE URGINS HUNTED ME LIKE A COMMON POLTERGEIST AND YOU HAVE THE GALL TO YOU CLAIM AID?!?”

Valerie’s hand snatched the knight’s wrist and held it tightly. He winced and attempted to retract the limb. “LET GO! DAMN IT! I DON’T WANT YOUR SPITEFUL-”
Sam and Tucker worriedly rolled Skulker off of the ghost before Valerie reached down to pin the bruised and flailing ghoul. He went to strike out against the form pinning his wrists and narrowed his eyes in distaste. “Get. Off. Of. Me.”

Valerie detached two segments of her armor to keep his arms pinned to the asphalt. Romulus hissed at the sudden restraints and glowered at the female keeping him stationary. “LET GO! WE DON’T HAVE TIME FOR THIS IDIOCY! THEY’RE GOING TO CORE VLADIMIR!”

Sam and Tucker both went ashen. Sam swallowed. “That’s impossible…..He doesn’t have a-”

Valerie stiffened. “No…He has one but it’s not formed fully…It hasn’t attached yet…” Her eyes locked with the male pinned underneath her. “How did you know-?”

Romulus’s eyes teared and he screamed. “THOSE DEMONIC BASTARDS SMEARED HIS DOMICILE IN HIS BLOOD AND LEFT US A CHEERY LETTER! IT DOESN’T GET MUCH CLEARER THAN THAT- ugh…” Clenching his eyes shut and writhing he stared up pleadingly. “Let go…They’re going to kill my friend!…Please?!…I don’t want to lose my family!”

Skulker winced. “Rom…We aren’t going to be able to track him without the Fenton’s help….”

Rom hissed at the name. “AFTER WHAT THAT LITTLE MONSTER DID?! VLADIMIR SACRIFICED HIMSELF! YOU SAW IT! THAT LAST DOSE OF ENERGY WAS ALL HE HAD LEFT AND HE WASTED IT ON A FOOLISH CHILD WHO COULDN’T EVEN SEE HIM BEGGING- YOU FELT HIS PAIN EDMOND!”

Skulker turned to support himself on a tattered arm and snapped. “Romulus. What matters more? The rage you feel toward the welp or saving your brother?”

Romulus grimaced. Sam and Tucker exchanged looks with one another as they helped Skulker up. “Brother?”

Skulker snorted as he held his ripped arm. “And here I thought you two were the smart ones of the group. Obviously, it’s not a relation by blood.”

Grimacing and looking to his palm, he tightened his fist. “Romulus? The mark is fading still…..”

Romulus snarled. “I don’t understand! From what he taught us an embassy’s mark is supposed to stay on his appointees even after death! SO WHY THE ZONE IS IT FADEING?!”

Skulker growled. “DOES IT LOOK LIKE I KNOW?! ALL I AM CERTAIN OF IS THAT HIS HEART IS DISAPPEARING AS IT DOES!”

Valerie paled. “What are you talking about?”

Sam interrupted. “You’re his appointees, right? Your marks are connected to him…”

Skulker looked to Sam in perplexion. “He told you?” Tucker and Sam winced and nodded.

His eyes widened in horror as realization and disgust played across his metallic features. “YOU MEAN HE TOLD DANIEL AND THE BOY STILL DID THAT TRAVESTY?!”

Sam snapped. “Vlad hasn’t told Daniel anything! Tuck and I are the only ones who got a mini-lesson because he was afraid Daniel wouldn’t trust him!”

Romulus groaned and plopped his head back against the cement. “Why is it every person born in the
last two centuries is imbecilic? Did some sort of pagan artifact dumbify the populace?”

Skulker pinched the bridge of where his nose would have been in disdain. “We need to get to Fenton Works and we need to grab Daniel and Madeline. Time is of the essence at this point. Both I and Romulus are now tethered by more than our marks. Bertrand and Spectra apparently used his blood to open the vault and steal a roman artifact...The Amulet of Clementia...It’s phased into his body and once they core him the two of us will most likely cease to exist as well.”

Sam and Tucker paled and, seeing the mirrored wounds on the two ghouls, Tucker went to remove Skulker’s helmet. Skulker winced and bowed the shell’s head as the boy undid the clasp. The small green-skinned and red-eyed ghoul clenched his eyes shut as the compartment was opened. Sam worriedly reached for him and he backed away from their touch.

“Oh god….Skulker….Dude…”

The small green ghost grimaced and his blurred and muted poltergeist-like features twitched. A squeaky and garbled voice snapped. “That better not be pity. The last thing I need is pity.”

Sam ignored his words and reached into the suit to pull the small ghost out. Skulker screamed in agony as her hand connected with his arm and waist. Romulus immediately tried fighting his restraints. “EDMOND!? LET HIM GO! LET HIM GO-”

Sam gently laid the small ghoul next to Romulus to calm him. Tucker assured. “Calm down...We aren’t going to hurt you two.” Romulus looked to Skulker and tried reaching for him only to wince as his own wounded arm revolted against the movement.

Valerie noticed and gently began inspecting the limb. Romulus grimaced and bit his lip at her touch. She winced and apologetically fumbled with something on her helmet. “Your cores are barely pulsing…”

Skulker chuckled weakly. “No...shit…They phased a paranormal eye for an eye into Vladimir for Pete’s sake....” Valerie reached over and gently lifted Skulker’s blue and green-tinted limb to inspect it. “You both need ectoplasm…”

Skulker grimaced. “Again? Thanks captain obvious.”

Valerie removed her helmet and glared at the small ghoul. “You have no idea how much I’m restraining myself from coring your miserable hide right now, Skulker. So shut up.”

Romulus glared to the teen before glancing toward Skulker. “What did you do to agitate the girl?”

Skulker groaned and closed his eyes. “I tried helping Vladimir with training Daniel and her and somehow it backfired.”

Valerie snarled. “TRAINING MY ASS! YOU TRIED SKINNING US ALIVE!”

Skulker whipped up and flashed a hand out angrily. “If I had wanted to skin you I would have done so while you slept instead of playing paranormal General Zaroff! That stupid ‘Dangerous Game’ hogwash was only an exercise in resourcefulness and general demonic behavior! YOU BOTH NEEDED THE LESSONS!” Feeling faint, Skulker slumped and began pitching backward only for Sam’s hand to gently catch him.

The ghoul peeked open his red eyes tiredly and shifted slightly against her hand. “Ugh….Form...isn’t doing too good....”
The small ghoul shuttered and clenched his eyes closed. An afterimage of a brawny, dreadlocked man in his forties briefly flashed over the blob-like a hollow shell. Rom paled and screamed out. “HIS SUIT! GET HIM IN HIS SUIT!”

Valerie looked to the two ghouls and, seeing the blob’s core spasming, scooped Skulker up and roughly yanked the knight up from the pavement with her free hand. The segments of her suit that had kept him pinned connected in front of his chest like handcuffs. The knight hissed and weakly struggled against her touch as she forced him to stand up by his bindings and looped his arms around her waist. Her sled blossomed out from under them as Romulus pulled and tugged against her. Floating up, she turned to Tucker and Sam. “I’m going to get them to Fenton Works. Call Jaz and tell her to pick up Skulker’s suit. Once we deal with these two we need to find Daniel!”

Both teens nodded and Tucker whipped out his PDA to contact Jaz. Valerie turned and began flying full speed to Fenton Works. Romulus gaped. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

His wrists wriggled slightly against her waist and she snapped. “I’m saving two ungrateful ghosts! Stop squirming!”

Romulus glowered and a light sheen of green could faintly be seen blossoming under his purplish skin. “That’s not what I meant!”

Valerie, now noting the ghoul’s apparent aversion to contacting directly with her form-fitting suit, blushed. ‘In hindsight? Tying him around me probably wasn’t the greatest idea.’

Chapter End Notes

I feel obligated to say there will be a new halfa by the end of this. Any guesses as to who? Romulus is going to end up everyone’s favorite next to Vladimir...

Speaking of which? Favorite characters in the fic? Leave your answers in the comments.

Mine is obviously Vladimir (cause holy cow once Part Two gets Posted...) and then Romulus is second. I get angry at Daniel because of how irresponsible and short-fused he can be.
A Pensive Glance

Skulker dimly spied Romulus’s predicament and almost druggedly whispered from where he was being cradled. “Rom…? Ugh….Why are you-...Everything is spinning….”

Romulus adjusted slightly to peak at the ghost lying between his and Valerie's chests. “Edmond?! My friend, please…” Seeing Skulker starting to fade out, Romulus growled lowly before he maneuvered his form and activated his core against the small ghoul. There was a bright flash of white and black light and Romulus slumped backward unconscious. Skulker’s red eyes cleared to brilliant cherry red and, blinking rapidly, he looked to his repaired limbs in shock before cupping a small hand against Romulus. “Rom?! Wake up! Romulus?!”

Valerie growled. “What just happened?!”

Skulker looked to her fearfully. “He just forced a spectral healing so my form would stabilize.”

Valerie hissed at this development and quickly looped her hands behind the knight’s neck to keep him upright as she quickened her pace. A small groan escaped Rom’s jaw as her fingers laced through his hair and around his neck. Propping him up against her shoulder and placing a hand at the base of his back to steady him, she questioned. “Is his core stable? I can’t get a scan like this!”

Skulker gently moved some of Romulus’s ebony hair out of his face to see the damage more clearly. The knight winced as the small, cold hand tapped against his bruised cheek.

“Shit. He should have focused on himself instead of-” The small green blob snarled and patted a hand against the front of Rom’s tunic. Tiny red eyes widened and he turned to Valerie in a blind panic. “His core- It’s-!”

Valerie cupped Romulus slightly tighter against herself. “Skulker! Hold on!”

The suit acquisitioned and the speed doubled and then tripled, creating red and black afterimages. Coming up to Fenton Works, she growled. “Intangibility. NOW.”

The small ghoul complied and quickly clasped his small hands over both the teenager and Rom as they slid through the observations center and landed near one of the tables. Valerie wasted no time in detaching the ghost’s restraints and lifting him up onto the medical table in the middle of the lab. A stiff banging on plastic cause both Skulker and Valerie to turn in alarm.

Skulker’s red eyes widened in horror as he locked on the small girl dizzily banging against the acrylic prison caging her.

Valerie paled and ran to the containment unit. “DANNI! DANNI?!”

Skulker went ashen. ‘She’s alive…Oh god….does Vladimir know?’

A small green head turned from the girl to Romulus as the specter underneath him convulsed. Skulker did the same and his eyes widened at the circular bruises appearing around his own wrists and Romulus’s. Pained green eyes weakly tried fluttering open as purple tears began tangling across shadowed cheeks. A phantom sensation of something heavy and cold being clacked around their necks caused Skulker and Fright Knight to both gasp in pain. And then another zap rocketed through both of their frames. Skulker was able to bite his lip to keep from screaming but Romulus couldn’t help the choked and gasping shriek that racked through his thin frame as the charges pulsed from his appointee mark.
Skulker vaguely felt the frantic hands pulling him off of Romulus and laying him on some sort of plastic table. Valerie leaned over him and, seeing the distress around both ghoul’s cores, she began tying them down. Skulker was the easier of the two but Romulus whipped and flailed underneath her. Dull green eyes, almost begging, locked with hers as another charge ripped through his ectoplasm. Two smaller hands looped against his head and pushed him back against the table. Segments of Valerie’s suit detached again and clasped around the knight’s arms to keep him stationary. Seeing that neither specter would be able to stay stable much longer, Valerie growled and her suit began scanning the room for ectoplasm, artificial or natural. Seeing some through the fridge on her left, she quickly ran to the spot and began pulling vials.

‘Needles...I need needles....shit.’

A pained scream pierced the space and Valerie's eyes whipped up to see Fright Knight’s body warping and distorting to try and accommodate the un-natural energy coursing through his form from the artifact connecting him to Vladimir.

‘There’s no time! I’ll have to give it to them orally.’

Running back to the two, she quickly handed Danni a vial of the ectoplasm and directed her to pour it down Skulker’s throat. Danni nodded and released Rom’s head. Valerie, realizing the ghost was thrashing too much, jumped on top of him and forced his jaw up so she could pour the goo directly into his mouth. Rom choked and bucked but after a few brief seconds, his struggles became mute. Tired green eyes dimly locked on Valerie and he attempted a weak smile before clenching his eyes shut in pain. Sparks of renewed core energy raced and darted across his flesh to repair the damage from his mark. Bruises faded and disappeared rapidly from both ghosts.

A small sigh of relief escaped through Rom’s fangs as he seemingly lost his ability to stay awake and went limp in the hunter’s hands. Valerie took a deep breath as she looked the two over and evaluated the situation.

Gazing back up to the blood-spattered twelve-year-old, she detached herself from Romulus and latched a hand out to hug the child against herself. “Danni? Shhhh….You’re safe….”

Shaky arms latched behind Valerie’s back as the young half ghost broke out in a fresh wave of tears. “They- hick-possessed-” There was a small swallow as she finished, her eyes locking up to Valerie’s masked ones. “- Mrs. Fenton.”

Valerie clicked off her helmet and, as it faded back into the suit, gently cupped a hand to wipe the girl’s tears. “Danni? I need you to stay with these two while I secure the house. I know you’re scared... but can you be brave for me? Just for a minute? I promise I won’t leave you alone up here with them for too long.”

Danni’s owlish blue eyes tearfully darted to the walls and the containment unit. Valerie sighed. “Danni?” The small raven haired girl looked back to her and Valerie snatched a cloth from the side table to wipe some blood from her jaw. “We’re going to make sure those monsters never hurt you or anyone else again…. But right now? They have Vlad, Danni...They’re planning on hurting him and if I can’t get this situation under control we may end up getting to him too late.”

Blue eyes sparked neon green and the child bit her lip before glancing to the two ghosts lying in a recovery induced daze next to them. “I’ve got this. Go.”

Valerie smiled reassuringly and nodded her head before running to the observations center’s deck and jumping off. Kicking her sled out and spiraling to the right, she easily landed in the entrance hall and followed the trail of destruction to the lab. Feet thudded violently against the stairs.
A pained face flashed in the decimated lab below and reaching down, she quickly turned Jack Fenton onto his back. Eyes went wide at the bloodied wound extending down his chest. Jack Fenton dully gripped a hand to her glove. “D-Danny...he’s going...to…”

Valerie winced. “He already did Mr. Fenton….They took Mr. Masters.”

Jack broke into a fresh wave of sobs and Valerie quickly hefted him up over her shoulder. Jack winced at the movement and looked to the small teen with slight confusion through his tears.

“Sir….We are going to get him back. I promise.”

“Did Danny….Did he really try to-” Jack pleaded.

Valerie grimaced and a few tears traced down her own face. “He didn’t know...They possessed Mrs. Fenton and staged everything...” Bringing Mr. Fenton through the kitchen and to the decimated living room, she gently laid him down on the couch and removed a portion of his jumpsuit to inspect the damage. Her eyes wandered over the burn nervously. Clicking her helmet back from her suit, she scanned his body. “Your ribs near the burn are broken….but nothing was ruptured and you’re not bleeding internally.”

Jack winced as a gloved hand began prodding and looking over the injury. A sound from the door caught their attention. “DAD??”

Jazmine dropped the suit head she had been carrying to the entranceway floor as she ran to her father.

Jack grimaced as another set of worried hands began looked over his numerous bruises and battle wounds. “Easy princess.....I’ll be fine....” He put a hand to her cheek to direct her. “Where’s Danny?”

Jazmine flinched and shook her head. “We don’t know.” Her eyes darted around the house in confusion. “Where’s mom?!?”

Jack and Valerie both grimaced. Valerie answered. “With Danny...Vlad forced the demon possessing her out and Danny-” Her face darkened and a gloved hand clenched in revulsion. “He did something stupid.”

Jaz grimaced and went to turn around only for a small green blob ghost and a dazed college-aged elf looking ghoul to fall through the ceiling and into the coffee table. Jack stiffened and went to jump in front of the two teenage girls only for Valerie to put a hand to his chest. “They’re friendlies.”

Skulker winced and looked up dizzily. “Ugh....What just....”

Romulus shook the ringing from his ears and somewhat dizzily tried to stand only to flop face-first onto the floor. “Ed...mond....?!......What....are they....”

Skulker shivered and wrapped his arms around himself to steady his small form. Looking up to Valerie, he swallowed. “We need...to hurry...They’re giving...him something.....”

Sam and Tucker, who had dragged Skulker’s suit into the home, promptly dropped their load and ran to aid the two ghosts shivering and panting against the floor.

Sam leaned into Romulus and worriedly tried to focus his glazed green eyes. “Fright Knight? Can you hear me? Hey?”
Rom winced and groaned. “I...can hear...you….Lady...Manson....”

Skulker dizzily noted the hands picking him up and carrying him to his suit. Tucker gently set him in the head compartment and locked the piece into place. Skulker’s mechanical eyes opened hazily and a hand numbly went his head to cradle the shared migraine between his suit and his spectral body.

His gaze flickered to the teen worriedly leaning in to inspect him. Tucker’s hands seemed to be tapping something on the device attached to his wrist. “What are you-”

Tucker sighed. “I’m trying to help you. Your suit was torn to shreds. Just hold still, there are a few wires that I still need to connect.”

Skulker nodded weakly and swallowed. “How did you-”

Tucker distractedly answered. “I started repairing it on the way here. No offense, but your real form is pretty weak.”

Skulker winced and numbly stared into his lap. “Yeah...artifacts tend to do that.”

Tucker paled. “That form you shifted to-Was that what you really looked like?”

Skulker sighed heavily. “I got sucked dry by an artifact the day I met Vladimir. This form is the condensed version of my spectral energy. I’m basically a core with legs and an attitude.”

Sam paled. “Oh god…..You mean that suit is-”

Skulker growled and averted his gaze. “A glorified prosthetic.” His eyes narrowed and locked with Sam’s. “Happy?”

Tucker grimaced. “So that’s why you can’t create an ectoblast... Your form can’t release that much raw energy without-”

Skulker sighed. “Without my core dying.”

Romulus numbly stood on shaking legs and Valerie quickly brought a hand out to keep him upright. Jaz looked from the helmet in the hall to Romulus in sudden understanding and her eyes widened. “Fright Knight?”

Romulus glanced up dizzily. “Ah....the young Fenton with flame hewn hair… Uh....Edmond.....What’s her name....again?”

Ed groaned. “Jazmine.”

Romulus nodded and bowed his head lightly before grimacing. “If you....could call me Romulus and not...that disgusting title....I’d appreciate it....”

Romulus and Skulker both tensed at the young girl who phased through the ceiling. “Are you two alright?! I-”

Romulus turned ashen and swiveled his head to Skulker for assistance. Skulker winced and shakily stood. “We’re fine Danni....Just out of sorts....Spectra and Bertrand did something while we were upstairs to Vladimir and are cores glitched in retaliation.”

Romulus seemed to avert his gaze after hearing the detached tone in his friend’s voice. Skulker sighed and looked at Jack worriedly. “You look like shit.”
Jack glared slightly. “Yeah….If I’m guessing correctly, **Bertrand** played with me while his wife took Maddie out on a paranormal fishing trip.”

Skulker grimaced and a fist tiredly hit against the carpet in the hall. “Those nasty bastards….I always knew Spectra and Bertrand were odd but I never would have guessed-”

Romulus glowered. “How were you supposed to know?! It’s not like they openly tried murdering or feeding off of anyone before!”

Sam and Tucker both paled as their brains caught up with the information they were being given. Tucker interrupted. “**Spectra and Bertrand**? The psychotic monsters that feed on misery and tried bug zapping Jaz into a morgue? The same ones that infected an entire high school with ghost parasites so they could harvest traits to make Spectra a new form?”

Skulker and Romulus went wide-eyed and Romulus snarled. “**THOSE COCKY-**”

Jack interrupted. “This goes deeper than that! Those **monsters** are the reason Vladimir couldn’t develop a core correctly! The male gloated about it. They tortured him while he was in the hospital!”

Skulker immediately turned his gaze back to Jack. His form trembled as he stood and made his way to the couch. “You mean that they were the ones who-”

Jack grimaced and his eyes teared. Staring back up to Skulker, he nodded. “I take it you’ve seen the scars as well?”

Skulker hissed. “Of course I’ve seen them! I am usually the one to bandage the moron!”

Feeling the room drop in temperature abruptly, Skulker went to turn only for Romulus to dart in front of him. A purple shield blossomed out just as a torrent of ice hewn ectoplasm was slung toward them. Daniel was standing in the shattered doorway with his mother slumped over his shoulders. “**GET OUT.**”

Skulker growled. “**YOU LITTLE BRAT.**”

Romulus glanced between the two and his eyes shifted to something cold. “I advise both of you get your tempers in check. Edmond? You especially, considering you were the one who told me to keep mine earlier. We can’t save Vladimir unless-”

Daniel’s eyes widened and icy tears dripped down his face. “Oh god….oh god….Vlad….”

Romulus looked down to the teenager and flinched. “You shot us out of reflex didn’t you?”

Daniel grimaced. “I felt you in the house….I heard heartbeats centered in the living room and I panicked….”

Romulus sighed. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. Phantom? Lay your mother besides your father.”

The shield went down and Daniel nodded tiredly before gently dragging his mother to the slightly charred sofa.

Skulker turned to Daniel and commanded. “What happened out there brat? Why couldn’t Vladimir protect himself?”

Daniel grimaced. “I think they hit him with the ghost taser. They hit me with it once I realized Vlad wasn’t shifting and-” His voice cracked and became panicked.”…..AND BERTRAND USED MY FORM TO-”
Daniel felt bile at the back of his throat and shook his head to try and concentrate. “They melted the boomerang….I don’t know how we’re going to find him and the portal-”

Skulker interrupted. “I think we have a clue how they’re getting in and out of the zone. They left me and Romulus photos. Vlad was in a morgue….They usually denote natural portals because of the manner in which they are used to prepare or determine death after the fact.”

Jack paled. “They had him in a morgue?!”

Skulker flinched. “He was unconscious in the photo but it was obvious they took a great deal of blood….They had some sort of collar and a blindfold on him as well…”

Romulus paled and cupped a hand to his throat. “Edmond….The electricity earlier-They put the collar on him again.”

Skulker growled and looked toward Daniel. “Is that exploration vehicle in the lab, ghost proof?”

Jack answered for him. “It’s not. It can shield but it doesn’t have ghost proof qualities. Me and Maddie haven’t built the modifications so it hasn’t been used.”

Skulker snorted and rubbed his eyes. “Daniel? After we get Vladimir back you are going to explain to your father about your little adventures in the zone. For now though? It would seem your oversight is our saving grace. We can phase the ship out of the house and to the morgue once we find it.”

A sharp crackle of energy zipped through the room and both ghosts flinched. Skulker brought a hand to his neck in confusion. Eyes rounded in horror. “They’re injecting him with core suppressants….I…..ugh….Rom….The connection…”

Daniel whipped a hand to his neck in shock. He could feel Vlad’s pulse through the mark in his flesh.

Eyes sparked white and palms flashed as a blurry third-person perspective seemed to fill the space. Vlad was being roughly flopped onto a steel table.
Wet hair numbly dripped onto the metal, creating small pools of blood-soaked water under his sickly features. Glazed cobalt blue eyes rolled slightly as a female figure lifted his wrists onto the table.

She paused and bent in to examine his features more intrusively. “That kid really didn’t hold back did he?”

A human hand shifted slightly to taloned shadow as she cupped Vlad’s bruised and bloodied cheek. Vlad flinched and her eyes widened ruthfully as a wicked smile graced her ruby lips. “Oh? It would seem the sedative is finally running out of his system.”

Bertrand snarled at this. There was a brutal snap and Vlad arched weakly as the restraints on his hands connected to the table. Spectra gently lifted a lock of bloodied silver hair and sniffed it. Eyes flashed to a pupil-less acid green and then red as she jumped up ecstatically. “This is going to be so much fun!”

Bertrand smiled at the now apparent coherence in Vlad’s sickly gaze. “It looks like he’s awake.”

Vlad grimaced and shook his head back against the table to try and jostle the nausea racking his form. Bertrand noticed and raised an eyebrow. “Not feeling too good freak?”

Vlad swallowed dryly as his feverish eyes locked with the two above him. Both demons smiled toward one another. There was a rustling of materials beside Vlad and seeing the tools lined up on his right his faint breathing hitched and his face contorted into an enraged scowl. Spectra noted his distaste and brought a hand to cup his face with mock affection. “Don’t worry Vladimir. We made sure all of our toys will be compatible with your human half as well…”

Vlad growled. “Lucky me…” Limbs weakly spasmed and shifted against the things pinning his arms by his sides to test his restraints. Bertrand noted his legs moving and quickly rounded to grab them. Vlad flailed and lashed out sending Bertrand flying across the room and into a wall with enough force to dent it.

Spectra hissed and getting on top of Vladimir’s chest, phased her hand through the breast bone and near his core. Vlad immediately went slack and convulsed against the table. Skulker and Romulus both screamed in agony and crumpled to the floor in disoriented heaps.

Green ectoplasm dripped from all three’s jaws as they withstood the attack. Spectra, now satisfied, removed her hand. Vlad took in several weak and pained gulps of air as Bertrand maneuvered the steal band at the bottom of the table around his ankles. Bending it in place and locking it, he watched in mirth as Vladimir came back from his pained and breathless state.

A green mottled hand trailed up his leg and across his torso until it reached his neck. Bertrand narrowed his gaze and tapped against Vlad’s windpipe. “Quite the pain tolerance you’ve got there Vladimir.”

Vlad winced and his fangs glimmered as he bit back in retort. “The booger and the shadow slut, again. Wonderful.”

A fist lashed out and Vladimir grimaced as his already busted lip was reopened. Skulker and Romulus gasped and groaned as their own faces took the hit in tandem with Vladimir.

Spectra was leaning in over him. “Aren’t you at all curious as to how you ended up in our hands
Vladimir?”

Vlad’s eyes became confused and he shook his head to try and clear whatever was going through his mind. Spectra grinned and cupped a hand under his chin to direct him. “Poor thing...Don’t try to deny it...You remember don’t you?” Vlad’s eyes sparked a weakly red and seemed to glaze in pinks and oranges. Spectra noticed the change and pouted with mock sympathy. “That core of yours just can’t handle the emotional strain, can it? Then again? The drugs are probably making you see all sorts of glorious things right now...”

Spectra leaned in next to his ear and cradled a hand across his bloodied torso. “He gave you to us, Vladimir.”

Vlad grimaced and averted his gaze. “So what....”

Spectra and Bertrand grinned maliciously. “I don’t think you quite understand-”

Vlad snarled and his aura crackled in the room. “NO YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND! YOU DEPLORABLE DEMONIC-”

A shock went through the cuffs and collar and Vlad stopped mid-sentence only to open his mouth in a silent scream. Skulker and Romulus choked and unable to scream, settled for clawing into the floor.

Vlad’s eyes narrowed through the shocks and he locked his gaze with Spectra before apparently redirecting some of the electrical charge toward his right hand. A shadow mirage of a circular tome wisped from his fingers and dissipated above the limb.

Skulker and Romulus went slack against the floor despite the charges still running through Vladimir. Spectra growled and yanked a hand down to pull Vlad’s head from the table. “And here we went through all of that trouble phasing it in only for you to torch it!”

Vlad winced and glared up at the specter above him. “You stole an artifact of compassion and empathy and turned it into a demented executioner’s blade. I’ll be darned if I ever hurt-”

Spectra growled and slammed his head back into the table. “If you ever hurt the people you care about? I hate to tell you this Vladimir, but it’s a little too late for that. We may not be able to torture or core your pathetic appointees with you now that you’ve severed the artifact but we most certainly can give them a worthy little show.”

Vlad sneered. “Good luck with that.”

Bertrand chuckled and tapped Vlad’s collar. “You’re not going anywhere and we have plenty of time to tinker and rummage through that delicate halfa body of yours...Me and Penelope were thinking two to three days until the moment comes for us to finally rip it out.”

Vlad shook his head weakly. “What are you-”

Spectra snickered. “Your core Vladimir...It finally started connecting to your form after you dispatched that demoness. Funny what near-death experiences do for a halfa’s development, hmm?”

A hand traveled around and through the tatters of Vlad’s coat and shirt to caress bandages. Vlad grimaced and closed his eyes tightly. Sweat was starting to condense on his brow and a small gray puff of smoke was trying to fight its way out of his jaw. Vlad’s eyes attempted to roll back and Spectra quickly redirected his now panting and feverish form.

“How does it feel Vladimir? To have your flesh branded and seared like a common barnyard
animal? Then again that’s nothing new considering your colorful little past.” She tapped a hand against the green and silver surrounding his neck with a telltale smirk. “And with that nifty suppressant around your neck, they’ll never find you in time. Your spectral form is nothing more than a flimsy outfit change. Don’t you think we already thought ahead for this? They’re watching us right now.”

Vlad stiffened and Spectra began playfully drawing a small circle against his glowing and marked palm. “An embassy’s lifeline attribute...Who knew it could be warped for such fantastic results once core energy is thrown into the mix? We know it’s only worked once or twice before to connect the three of you and it has never lasted for more than a few seconds... It’s always been instinctual, that is...until now.”

A hand glided from his jaw to his injured chest debatingly.

"Tell me Vladimir... Even if they can't feel this..." A taloned hand clawed into Vlad's chest and pressed downward. Vlad panted and flinched weakly as she drove blackened nails through the tissue and then retracted them. "-they can still enjoy the view, no?"

Vlad’s heart rate skyrocketed and Skulker hissed. "THAT BITCH! I'LL TEAR HER APART!"

The mist supporting the images began fluctuating spastically.

Spectra scuffed at the glow being suppressed on Vlad's palm. Green eyes narrowed and she smirked. "Trying to sever the connection?"

She grinned. "Always so noble. You're not even breathing correctly and your barely conscious at the moment and yet you are willingly trying to sever the bond between you and your friends so they won't have to see all of our fun."

Vlad snarled weakly. "Your idea of fun isn't exactly my vintage. Screw off."

The images fluctuated and almost completely shorted out before Bertrand reached over and clicked something on Vlad's restraints. There was a sharp buzz and Vlad's blue eyes went wide and almost rolled back as he gasped. Satisfied that Vlad's mark was aglow again, Spectra reached over and snapped the button back. Vlad slumped back to the table, gasping for air and Bertrand snickered.

"How does it feel Vladimir? Loving unconditionally? Protecting everything and still being deemed a pitiful monster? You should have heard Daniel when he gave you over! The little loser and his hero complex just couldn't bring himself to finish the deed!"

A green hand-pulled against Vlad's panting and gasping form to direct his head toward Spectra as she bent down with another needle. "Danny and his family would've done sooooo much better if they never would've met you...You know that, right? You're just a weak little freak who couldn't save the people you cared about. How many people have died because you exist Vladimir? How many people have been hurt because of you? You're just a mistake some science bitch and a fat moron created in their spare time. If you just would've continued the lie we would've left your dear, sweet family alone..."

Vlad was starting to pass out and Spectra snarled. A large slap echoed in the room and Vlad glared weakly at the demon looming by his face. "Ouch."

Bertrand's eyebrow twitched. "It never ceases to amaze me how much of a little shit you are when confronted with opposition."

Spectra smiled at this. "Ah yes... The tough guy vibrato he uses. We'll fix that soon enough."
Vlad bucked and snarled as his head was pinned and a portion of his neck was cleared. The needle jabbed in a few seconds later and Vlad's fangs briefly exposed as he gasped out. Spectra gently retracted the needle and began looking into Vladimir's eyes. Vlad somewhat dizzily tried following the movements and he growled weakly. "Ugh... What did you just...give me...you disgusting......bitch....."

Spectra smiled and adjusted her nurse's attire with a sly smirk. "Just a little relaxant to keep you manipulable for your treatments Vladimir."

Vlad went silent and after a moment he rolled his eyes. Closing them, he chuckled weakly. Bertrand stiffened as he looked up from what he was organizing in a medical cart in utter shock. After a second his shock turned to rage. Growling, he reached down to slam Vlad's head against the table. Vladimir grimaced as his skull was banged against the metal but smiled weakly in retaliation. "Still connected....to me ...huh, booger...boy...?"

Bertrand snarled. "Your little ugly comments are starting to really try my patience, Vladimir."

Vlad snickered, "And your... face is really...trying mine...."

Bertrand glowered and went to slap Vlad only for Spectra to grab onto the hand. Looking down to Vlad's pained form and back to her spouse, she smiled gleefully. "Berty? I do believe he has stitches."

Both demonics broadly grinned at Vladimir. The half-ghost grimaced as his skull was banged against the metal but smiled weakly in retaliation. "Let's play a little game, Vladimir...."

Vlad growled. "Let's not and say we did."

Bertrand chuckled. "You really are pathetic. You're the trophy. You have no say in any of what happens after the fact embassary, we're just seeing who gets which half."

Vlad's eyes sparked and a flash of white shot through the room. Bertrand and Spectra hissed in agony but soon we're laughing ecstatically. The collar and cuffs securing Vladimir were electrocuting him again.

Bertrand tapped the device around Vlad's neck with a small flourish and clicked his now daggered teeth together in a huge grin. "Aw... Did you accidentally burn yourself?"

Spectra jumped up excitedly.

The images blurred slightly as Vlad slouched back against the table. A hand roughly looped into his tangled gray hair and brought his face forward so that he would be staring directly into Spectra's eyes. Vlad flinched as a black finger rubbed against his bruised cheek.

Spectra simpered. "Having a problem catching your breath?"
Small choked and strangled gasps clawed from Vlad's throat as he tried to get a stable lungful of air into himself. Spectra smirked once he was able to catch his breath and squeezed against his face cruelly. Vlad winced and another curl of smoke whispered from his jaw. Spectra blew it back in his face with a sly grin as she tapped the quickly blackening mark on his face.

"I wonder? Is it your heart of fire or the ribs the boy broke that ail you? Maybe both?"

Everyone watching the images in the Fenton's living room grew ashen.

Sam looked like she was going to hurl. "Him being suffocated and burnt was...was his core?!!"

Daniel was staring to the images around them in absolute horror and grief. 'I should have known....Oh god....Vlad....You were really being cooked by your ghost half and I never-...'

Spectra's voice snapped everyone back to the imagery. "Berty? Is it starting to activate or does he need more time before we begin?"

Vlad was weakly darting in and out and the imagery was mirroring the shifts.

Bertrand paused and his red eyes flickered to brilliant white. Smiling, he nodded. "He's ready. The core pulses won't attempt reattachment for a few hours and by then he'll be to shattered for anything to truly merge."

Spectra grinned and looked around before locking with the audience viewing the spectacle. "I guess it's time to start the show? Honestly, I can't see you but from the energy trying to materialize in the room on my end I can tell we have quite the viewing. Romulus? Edmond? Feeling foolish yet?"

Vlad snarled and bucked up from the restraints pinning him. "YOU DECREPIT OLD-" A black fist whipped back and struck Vlad against the head.

Spectra turned and growled to Bertrand. "I'm guessing that the ending of his little insult was rather vulgar?"

Bertrand smirked. "No children are present so he seems to be letting loose everything he can verbally."

Vlad groaned and twisted slightly against the metal keeping him down. Bertrand smirked. "It's an easy fix. Watch this Penelope."

A hand was brought to rest around Vlad's throat and a switch was flipped, this time snapping the collar against the table with a mechanical clicking noise.

Bertrand continued. "That hit you gave him seems to have cut off his equilibrium. I advise that you finish giving his pathetic appointees the details before he regains enough strength to speak again."

Vlad winced and glared over to Bertrand. "I...guess you're...the bitch...in the relationship..."

Both Spectra and Bertrand paled and then growled.

Bertrand's hand charged with a wicked purple light as he leaned over Vlad. "YOU LITTLE RAT-"

Vlad sneered. "S-Same...to...you..."

Spectra, to everyone's surprise, started laughing. Bertrand paused and lowered the charged arm away from Vladimir with a hint of confusion.

"Love? What's-"
Spectra wiped away a glowing green tear. Sweeping over to Vlad's side she smiled with genuine warmth before locking her gaze with her spouse. "Berty? Can you smell it? He's bleeding again..."

Vlad visibly went rigid and coldly replied. "...And your point is...?"

Spectra smirked at her spouse before picking up another lock of Vlad's hair and playing with it. Staring into Vlad's eyes, she answered. "You're trying to distract us aren't you Vladimir?"

Bertrand went wide-eyed and a large grin spread on his face as his eyes flashed white. "No... that's not it." Bertrand brought a taloned hand to Vlad's chest and gently patted the spot above his newly formed core. "Penelope? He's fading again... The poor thing's fever is becoming too high and without a way to release any of his elemental energy his body is using itself as a conduit."

Spectra brought a hand to Vlad's forehead and her eyes widened. "Wow! How high do you think-"

Bertrand snickered. "The bull is reaching critical levels. I'm going to go and get a fever suppressant. We don't want him dying too soon after all."

And with that, the male vanished and Spectra was left alone to guard their meal.

Vlad weakly tossed under her hand. "G-get...off...."

Spectra rolled her eyes. "How about we have a cordial moment between nurse and patient? It's been so very long since I treated you-"

Vlad glowered. "F-fuck...you..."

Spectra smirked and a seductive smile ghosted across her lips.

"You're still ugly Vladimir but even an ugly freak has its merits."

She paused and leaned in against his cheek before purring. "Maybe we should take your advice and-"

Vlad growled and spit into Spectra's face. Her eyebrow twitched before she wiped the blood off of herself. Looking from it to Vladimir she sneered. "Oh... that's right. You vowed never to make that mistake ever again. The woman you loved doesn't even care if you lived or died anymore. Did it hurt going to work every day and seeing her? And what about sweet, sweet little Anna? She was never introduced to her mother was she?" A leering grin spread over Spectra's features. "But how would poor, heartbroken Vladimir ever introduce a child who-"

There was a snap of electricity and Spectra flailed backward. Green eyes went wide and she gripped her mouth in shock. A hand-pulled back in disbelief before her eyes narrowed to Vladimir. A long garish trail of green ectoplasm was now dripping down her jaw. "You. Marked. My. Face."

Vlad hissed. "...An... improvement..."

Spectra snarled. "Did I strike a nerve? A poor heartbroken and miserable father who couldn't even save his little girl from the big bad monster tries everything in his power to save his old college friends and their pathetic, depressive little bitch of a son. Why does he do it? Because he feels at fault for having never told them what exactly lies in wait for them on the other side of the portal. Best to just lead by example, hmmm? Stay away or the big, scary villain will hurt you? Ha."

A hand went to Vlad's chest and violently began tearing off his bandages. "So how about we see what being a shield for others creates? Could it be a happily ever after?"
Vlad screamed out and Spectra snarled. "Play a villain, protect the kids. Play a monster, protect Maddie and Jack. It's too bad he never could finish the job... If he just would've killed you then maybe you wouldn't be where you are now."

There was a violent yank of fabric and swollen, bloodied flesh revealed itself. Vlad grimaced and shook his head as a hand went to his chest and began tracing the y shaped scar layered under Vlad's stitches. Her eyes narrowed as she smirked. "I'm afraid these are in the way. They'll be the first thing I rip out of your flesh."

And with that, a hooked black nail looped to the wire and began pulling it. Vlad's eyes shot wide and his breathing hitched. A pained semiconscious gasp echoed as he thrashed against his bindings. Daniel could almost feel the floor shaking from the pulse drumming against his neck.

Bertrand came back and rolled his eyes. "You started without me?"

Spectra looked up guiltily and averted her gaze. Seeing her jaw, Bertrand glared to Vlad.

"Penelope? Make sure it's removed as slowly as possible. I want him to suffer before we even begin" A hand motioned across Vlad’s chest. “I’ll wrap the pieces with it once we're finished. They wanted to patch little Vladimir back together? Fine...Let’s see if they can sew what’s left of him after the fact."

Vlad seemed to be mouthing something toward the viewers. Skulker and Romulus paled.

'Rom?...Ed?...Goodbye...my....friends....'

Bertrand hissed as he looked to Vladimir’s defiant red eyes. "YOU LITTLE-

Vlad clenched his eyes closed and the connection shattered.

Chapter End Notes

SHIT IS ABOUT TO GET REAL. Also, I feel I should reclarify. There is going to be one new halfa and a hint at two halfas that don't know yet by the end of part one.

You know that kleenex recommendation a few chapters previous? You're going to need them really soon. Someone's going to get cored. Maybe several someones.

Time for some veiled hints------

Also, THE LOST ARC Soundtrack:

grandson: Despicable [Official Audio]
despicable a modern tragedy

NF - If You Want Love * When Vlad loses Trisha and Anna*
Panic Room AU RA * When Wulf, Freakshow, the GIW, and the Demoness hinted show up in Vlad's POV*  
Ephixa & Laura Brehm - Losing You
INZO - Overthinker
Bishop Briggs - River (King Kavalier Remix)
half•alive - still feel
Bishop Briggs - White Flag -Steve Reece Remix
Halsey - Nightmare

XXXTENTACION CHANGES
MISSIO - Everybody Gets High *Vlad's last year few months.*
Joji - SLOW DANCING IN THE DARK *After the home burned.*
Isaac Dunbar - Ferrari * Playing Villian and Freakshow*
Billie Eilish & Khalid - Lovely (Hippie Sabotage Remix) * Vlad under Freakshow.
Hades and Persephone's Dance*
XXXTentacion - SAD! *Before Anna and while fighting hinted Demon*

BURY ME FACE DOWN|PMV
SIAMÉS "The Wolf" * Romulus*
Yas - Empty Crown * Willhelm's Heart*
Can I Exist * The Grave Hidden in the Yard*
DAVID BOWIE ....LETS DANCE REMIX *Elizabeth and Vlad's Song at the Dance*
Bebe Rexha - I'm A Mess (Lyrics)
Original Animatic | CHURCH

Watch or Listen Here:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLuKPAeJvF4ct4A6SrjhYCaIoR8aljpElI
You Want to Be a Hero?

Skulker and Romulus both turned to Daniel. "You, Valerie and the two of us... We're leaving. Now."

Sam, Tucker, Jack and Danni all went to protest and Romulus glowered. "No full humans or children. The last thing we need is one of you getting possessed or harmed."

Jack protested, "Please... He's my friend to..."

Romulus winced and looked from his hands to Jack debatingly. After a moment he shook his head no. "You're too injured and I can't heal humans. I won't have enough energy to aid Vladimir if I attempt the impossible."

Jack grimaced and Skulker added. "What you can do is care for your wife and repair the portal. We'll need to get him back safely and we won't be able to do that if there's no gateway linking us to you. I can treat any injuries he sustains temporarily but he'll need equipment set up prior to us arriving...maybe even a blood transfusion if that's possible with his anatomy."

Jack winced. "How are you going to find him? They gloated that they cloaked his spectral signature."

Sam’s eyes widened. "His spectral signature but not his human one. The Spectre Speeder can track real world objects!"

Skulker and Romulus both visibly released some of their panic and tension at Sam’s words. Turning to Tucker, Skulker questioned. "Can you get the lab portal operational? From what my armor is telling me the main control box was shot..."

Tucker nodded and a determined fire lit his army green tinted eyes. "I’ll have it up and running with Mr. F as quickly as humanly possible."

Skulker nodded and a hand went to Daniel’s shoulder. "You wanted to be a hero, right welp?"

Daniel grimaced and, raising his blue eyes up to meet Skulker’s green, answered. "A hero wouldn’t have just stood by and-"

Skulker interrupted. "That’s not what I asked. Yes, you've saved people before. Yes, you’ve done right by your moral compass. But those are only segments of what true heroism is. Being a hero means putting aside your own biased and rising up against adversity. I’m asking if you can put aside your teenage idiocy and preconceived notions of me and Romulus so that we can save our family member before those things torture and core him."

Daniel bit his lip and looked up to Skulker worriedly. "They zapped me with the ghost tazer...I don’t know why-" His hair frosted lightly. "What if my powers short out and he-"

Romulus snorted. "Halfa adrenaline?" Looking over to Skulker he sighed and reached for his helmet. Skulker nodded and re-addressed the teenager. "You’ll be fine. Being in the zone will rejuvenate the energy lost from the device long before your adrenaline runs out."

Daniel nodded and his eyes flickered to Valerie worriedly. The huntress was standing up tiredly and walking toward him. A large resounding slap echoed in the room as her eyes locked up to his. "That is for lying to me, you selfish prick."
Turning to Romulus and Skulker she growled. “His vitals were bordering on flatlining late last night. We need to leave now.”

Skulker raised a mechanical brow and nodded. Romulus tentatively stepped forward with his helmet in one hand and a palm extended toward the girl. “Lady Gray?” She looked to his hand debatingly and with a sigh allowed herself to be phased downstairs and into the lab.

Daniel glanced to his parents and reached for Skulker. The two phased through the flooring with a dull crack and seconds later an intangible ship rippled through the living room and out through the ceiling.

Daniel began pressing the appropriate switches in the craft once they cleared the roof and the machine quickly began scanning for a large enough portal for travel. After a few moments, Valerie looked to Skulker curiously. “You said the pictures had a morgue in them correct?”

Skulker stiffened but nodded. “It hasn’t been used in decades from the layer of filth coating the metal freezer boxes.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “I know where it is. Everyone? Hang on!”

The ship sharply turned in midair and began a breakneck pace toward ‘NO MERCY HOSPITAL.’
Vlad faintly noted the metallic and lemony smell lacing the stale air around him as he shifted against his restraints. Small breaths racked against his shaking and sore frame painfully as the clicking of a pair of heels rounded to his other side. Metal was being shuffled around. Vlad weakly opened his eyes but kept a portion of his attention on repressing the visual link Bertrand and Spectra had manipulated.

Groggy blue eyes dimly turned to see what Spectra was fiddling with. A thin hand was shaking through medical supplies questioningly. Forceps...Scissors....

Vlad swallowed as his eyes caught sight of the scalpel in her manicured fingers. Turning away and staring into the ceiling, he forced conversation. “...Y-You…two…must…really…love me….Y-You set a b-bed up….and everything…..” Pained sarcasm echoed in every broken word.

Bertrand snorted from where he was seated. The bloodied and stained suture thread from Vlad’s chest injuries was being loosely balled in his fingers as he looked up to Vladimir’s shivering form. Switching voices and smirking, he spoke “Oh...you know me, boss. I aim to make sure you are nice and comfortable, whether in the office or out.”

Vlad grimaced. “...T-Twenty...years...huh?....H-how did you-…”

Bertrand smirked. “ How did I hide the fact I’m dead? It’s actually quite easy to mimic a human heartbeat with a ghost core given all of the human blood and misery Penelope and I have consumed. You should have focused on the lungs or how cold my touch was. A huge oversight on your part.”

Vlad flinched and coughed weakly. “Y-yeah….Probably…should have….listened...to T-Trish...and fired...y-you…..”

Bertrand paused from his winding and looked to Spectra. “ Love? Let’s not cut him open quite yet. He’s starting to slip under again and I’d rather have him bushy-tailed and bright-eyed before we snap his ribs open and tear out his internal organs.”

Spectra sighed and looked from the scalpel in her fingers to Vladimir's bloodied and faintly breathing form. Twirling a lock of orange hair, she questioned. “ What do you have in mind?”

Bertrand set down the thread on a small table beside Vladimir and began inspecting the damage with practiced hands. Vlad bucked weakly and grimaced. ‘Fuck…..that….hurts dammit….’

Bertrand smiled and his eyes briefly locked with Vladimir’s as he tilted his head from side to side. “ Well, we know he and the brat always seem dazed when the taser connects… but it seems longer than the standard effects of a normal taser. It absorbs energy rather than electrocuting them so why do they always seem out of breath after its use?”

Vlad’s tired eyes swam and flickered against the green-lit room. ‘ Taser?....Ugh….That’s right...they stole it…”

A glimmer of something flashed in Bertrand’s eyes as he directed Vladimir. “Vladimir? What happens to a halfa when the taser is used?”

What a Core Yearns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Vlad furrowed his brow weakly. ‘None….of...your business...jackass….’

Bertrand glowered. “ Wrong answer brat.”

Looking back up to his wife, Bertrand smirked. “ Penelope, darling? Did you know Vladimir is afraid of drowning?”

Vlad flinched and glared at the now green specter above him Bertrand was lifting a mask and what looked like another syringe from a side table on his right.
Spectra looked down to Vladimir ecstatically. “ Was it because of the time he first fully shifted?”

Vlad stiffened. A deep pool of frigid water had been the first place the rings had manifested.

Terrifying memories drummed against his dazed subconscious. He had desperately thrashed against his bindings, kicking and screaming through the gag around his mouth. The little power he had developed was mute and ineffective as he was dragged to the edge. There had been weightlessness and then the heavy tug as his was thrown in...After that, there was only fear.... His limbs had slackened from oxygen deprivation...There was a crippling weight in his body and a burning sensation as his lungs starved themselves off against his will in a desperate plea to keep him alive. Something had gone terribly wrong that day….Something had shattered and stilled within him the moment the ebony rings had forcefully appeared around his dying form.

A shiver went up Vlad’s spine and Bertrand lifted a taloned finger to direct Vlad’s face to his. “ Remember waking up Vladimir? The relief and dread coupled together as we carried your shivering and weakly form back to your room and locked you in? You honestly couldn’t decide if you were thankful for our mercy or disappointed that the darkness didn’t finally put you out of your misery.”

A hand raked through Vlad’s hair and brushed a small segment up. Pinching it between his fingers, Bertrand smirked. “ Do you know why your ghost form is so different from Daniel’s?”

‘Probably...because...I had two demonic fuckers….playing with me….?’

Bertrand raised an eyebrow and rubbed his chin as he toyed with the long strand of hair in his hands. “ Yes and no. Your hair is definitely our fault. The rest, however, is something so much more entertaining…”

A hand motioned for a pair of scissors and Spectra complied. There was a short snip and the lock of silver fell into Bertrand’s hand. “ The brat looks like he does because his soul wanted to channel something strong and innocent into his ectoplasmic half. A veritable hero. He received everything except the cape but became bound to the jumpsuit he was zapped in because of his preconceived notions of death. Glowing green eyes, snow-white hair, tanned skin, and a black and white hazmat suit. The question is what did your soul seek out in the moments it harrowed the divide? He wanted stability and an opportunity to help others. You wanted love, didn’t you Vladimir?”

Vlad’s eyes flashed and his head rolled weakly. ‘Love….I always-....’

Bertrand redirected him. “ What was it you promised your sweet, little sister mere weeks before she died? That you’d get gray hair and die before you bought her a castle? Or that only vampires and rich assholes ever managed to live in them? Don’t you find those words ironic? Even a tad bit too close to the vest for how you turned out?”

Vlad’s brow weakly furrowed and he flinched. Bertrand smirked. “ When Maddie and Jack neglected to visit, your undeveloped core needed a pulling force...a drive… What better way than to search out your poor departed sister? You gained comfort from the fact that someone, anyone, cared
if you lived or died. But alas? How would a child ever recognize the scarred young man her sibling had grown into…Unless, maybe he became something familiar or linked to her image of him?"

Bertrand switched his form to that of a hospital aged Vladimir. Using his voice and hugging himself, he simpered. “I’m dying…..It hurts Liz….I just want it to stop.” Eyes clenched shut as the fake Vlad shook. “Liz….I promised I would never leave you….that I would protect you….Liz? When I finally die….Do you think you’ll forgive me?”

Bertrand’s voice came back with a cruel cackle. “Too bad, it was in vain, hmm? She faded back into the cycle long before any of your promises ever came to fruition.”

Vlad grimaced. Bertrand redirected his eyes to meet his again as he shifted back into a green specter. “If only you knew how close you came to having that connection again….”

Vlad’s pained blue eyes lit with confusion. ‘….Again?…’

Chapter End Notes

Anyone putting together all of the little clues and tidbits? Want to put some guesses down in the comments?
Another bite at Hell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bertrand ignored the question and gently began fidgeting with the syringe and mask he had set down prior to shifting his form. Looking to Spectra he grinned at the more youthful appearance she was now sporting thanks to Vladimir’s heightened emotional state. Reaching over with his thumb, he gently wiped the cracked green off of her face to reveal new ectoplasmic skin. “Better love?”

Penelope gushed. “How did you-?”

Bertrand winked. “A soul’s taint can give so much more than the physical body can remember. He knows it’s all true at core level and the facts are all the more bitter with an outside force narrating his pathetic plights.”

Spectra nodded and looked to the mask and syringe questioningly. Bertrand smirked. “Remember I talked about how he fears drowning? Well…I figured we could simulate the feeling prior to us cracking him open. His memories gave enough description as to how helpless he felt at that moment and I figured today is the day to be sentimental.”

Spectra went wide-eyed and her orange tresses bounced slightly as she leaned over Vladimir to look at the instruments. Her nose twitched as she inhaled and she grinned at the syringe. “Adrenaline?”

Bertrand nodded ecstatically and Spectra’s eyes drifted to the mask, “And what of the mask?”

“The paralyzing agent. He’ll be able to feel everything but he won’t be able to so much as move a finger in protest.”

Hearing this, Vladimir feebly tried phasing through his restraints only to scream in pain as another shock tore through his muscles. After a few seconds, he was left panting and writhing against the table again. His heart was drumming spastically against his chest as Spectra grabbed the needle and began leaning in next to his pinned arm.

Vlad shifted and growled against her icy skin and she smiled warmly. “Don’t worry Vladimir...This will only hurt you.”

The adrenaline was stabbed into his bloodstream with a hard shove. Vlad arched as far as his restraints would allow and his pupils blew to double the normal size as the adrenaline entwined with his bloodstream. A mouth weakly gaped open as he breathed in to scream and his wounds protested as his flesh stretched and tore from the sudden movement. Blood splattered and dripped from his arched chest and with a pained thump, he fell back onto metal table. Now more alert, he addressed the two venomously, “Why don’t you just kill me and get it over with?!”

Spectra yanked back the needle and tossed it over her shoulder with a flinty grin. Tapping his cheek, she reminded. “You already know that’s going to be the end result of this arrangement… We’re just going to do what every demonic does before a meal…”

Vlad growled. “The old ‘play with your food’ stint.Lovely. I'm not partial to it so you might as well just core me!”

Spectra rolled her eyes before feigning heartache. “But Vladimir, we’ve gone through such lengths to invite you over for dinner! It would be so impolite-”
Vlad snarled and snapped, “Read. My. Lips. I am no one’s toy. I never will be and I’ll be damned if a green booger and an ugly, coal tinted hag change that arrangement.”

Spectra’s eyes narrowed at the ugly comment and a taloned hand went to his mouth to gag him. Leaning in, she snarled. “Someone has been lying to himself hasn’t he? You’re nothing but a discount demonic’s toy Vladimir. Everything plays with you and we’re not about to break the tradition.”

Bertrand smirked and grabbed a few bandages from the floor. “Step one? Take away his ability to scream.”

Spectra smirked. “Or to sass… I have half a mind to cut out that silver tongue of his.”

Bertrand sighed. “Let’s leave the face intact. I was thinking of mailing his head to Jack and Maddie Fenton as a belated gift for their assistance.”

Spectra seemed to debate this as Vlad glared at her. “You know what? I think it would be better if we just tied his corpse over city hall. Keeping it intact for the most part after we core him may be the more entertaining route.”

‘YOU SLIMY DISGUSTING BASTARDS! I HOPE YOU BOTH GET INDIGESTION YOU SICK FUCKS!’

Bertrand smirked. “You know that’s a lovely idea, Penelope. It would be so much better to boast about killing him. We can bruise and rip the flesh, break his bones…tear out his still-beating heart…and after it’s all said and done we can drag his carcass over to Amity for the little loser and his family to find.”

Spectra laughed and then screeched as a set of fangs sunk into her hand. Spitting green ectoplasm out of his mouth, Vladimir snarled the phrase that usually came to mind in these scenarios. “Go to hell.”

Spectra hissed and reached over to the bandages. Grabbing them from Bertrand, she quickly punched Vladimir in the gut to open his jaw. Vlad’s scream melded with her words as she jammed the bloodied fabric into his mouth and tied it in place. “You’re already here Vladimir.”

Looking back up to Bertrand she nodded for him to put the mask over Vladimir’s face. Vlad bucked and huffed from behind his gag as he tilted away from the mask. Blue eyes turned red and sparks jumped weakly from his body in an attempt to maim his assailants. He convulsed again as another zap permeated through his flesh from his restraints. Bertrand took the temporary stillness to his advantage and quickly snapped the mask over Vlad’s face.

Vlad held his breath definitely. Bertrand snickered as Vlad weakly choked against his gag after a few minutes and inhaled a portion of the drug. Vlad’s eyes widened as his tense muscles went lax.

“This….isn’t right….What-”

Bertrand patted Vlad’s cheek. “You’d be surprised how much time twenty years gives a person to research and forage through the zone for the perfect drug. This particular gas is made from Ajdaha Bloom or Dragon’s Venom as Doratha and her Kingdom call it. It’s a rather quick paralytic isn’t it?”

Vlad’s heart raced and Bertrand comforted the drugged halfa with a wicked grin. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t cut off pain and the effects will only last so long as the mask is kept in place.”

Vlad clenched his eyes shut as a hand swept across his torso debatingly. Something was being lit
behind him. Unable to move his head to see what Spectra was doing, Vladimir numbly stared into the bright green lights above him. Bertrand was setting something up on his right. Vlad’s eyes drugedly rolled to the side and, seeing the camera being placed on the tripod, he swallowed back bile.

Bertrand snickered and pressed the record button. “Let’s see… Penelope? How goes step two?”

Spectra giggled as she twirled one of the scalpels over the small bunsen burner on the table behind Vladimir. “I think it’s almost hot enough.”

Vlad shook slightly despite the drugs and Bertrand grinned. “Vladimir? Can’t you even wave to your family?”

‘What I want to do is flip you the bird but seeing as how I can’t move? Fuck you.’

Bertrand focused the camera to Vlad’s feverish form and smirked. “We’ll be sending copies to Amity’s News stations, the office…and of course the Fentons. I’ll also personally deliver one of the copies to Trisha as well. We’ll make sure she sees and hears everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late updates! I’ve been jumping around transcribing bits and pieces of Part Two and Part four or five for a while. and then there’s the crossover fics and lorde, lotsssss of content.

The Pariah Dark stuff is going to be phenomenal and god Bitter Reunions from Vlad’s point of view *screaming*. 
Vlad’s eyes attempted to spark and a hazed red briefly flickered before fading.

Bertrand began narrating. “My name is Bertrand Augustus Hughes. I was born in January of 1913, and I died in February of 1986. Today we will be recording the last moments of Vladimir Damian Masters, formerly known as Vladimir Petrov and Vladimir Connors. He also goes by his ghost alias, Vlad Plasmius. The time is 1:33, Central Standard Time and the date is July 16th 2018.”

‘One for bragging much?’

Bertrand smiled and motioned toward the half-ghost weakly staring into the camera. “Please note that this particular exchange is nothing personal….” Bertrand mimed facepalming and large fangs peeked from behind his hands. “What am I saying? It is personal. To the humans viewing this? I would like to introduce the little freak who lied in order to protect your side from my kind.”

Ectoplasm morphed and fluctuated in bizarre whisps, creating a monstrous green persona, warped and mangled by different flickering faces. Spectra placed the item she was fiddling with down momentarily and walked to the camera. Doing a little twirl, she shifted into a black shadowy monster with gaping shark-like teeth and large black talons.

Spectra continued the narration with a honey sweet voice from where Bertrand left off. “No doubt you have heard of Mr. Masters and his various companies and organizations...His most notable work, however, is not from brick and mortar buildings or contracts. This poor, foolish gatekeeper for life and death is your veritable shield and sword, but I’m afraid his time will have expired on your plain and ours within the next few hours. We sincerely hope all of you flesh-covered rats in Amity enjoy the view.”

A hand came down and gently brushed aside some of Vlad’s soaked hair. Looking to the camera, Spectra continued. “To the ghosts viewing this? This is your precious embassary.”

She left a moment for this fact to sink in and then continued. “For anyone confused, living or dead? We are demonics. We gain power and life from feeding off of both sides. Today, however? We are going to topple one of the oldest and most sacred forms of artifact binding in our favor. We are going to consume a soul devoted to the protection of others, but first? We’re going to play with him a bit.”

Bertrand snickered and transformed into his usual ghostly guise. “There is a certain method to liquidating a recurring problem. Step one? We took away his ability to scream.”

A finger tapped Vlad’s cheek and pinched at the gag near Vlad’s ear.

Something was being picked up behind Vladimir by Spectra. Her eyes lit with mirth and she continued. “Step two? Make breathing as painful as possible.”

Vlad noted the heat and his eyes watered as the metal connected to his exposed abdomen. Tears dully snaked down his cheeks and a heartbeat could almost be audibly heard in the room as the metal was retracted and reheated against the flesh.

Spectra began singing cruelly. “Inamatus Monstrum, Vladimir.”
Skulker was growling lowly at the sporadic and frantic pulse drumming against his palm. It had been going at a constant pace for some time now without reprieve. Green eyes glowered from the cockpit window and toward Daniel. “Can’t this piece of garbage go any faster?!”

Daniel growled in frustration. “This isn’t exactly a search and retrieval for an anniversary present Skulker! He’s a half-ghost! That means only a segment of him is showing up, and unless we get in range it won’t lock on!”

Skulker snapped disparagingly. “We would almost be better off flying around randomly and searching!”

Valerie was adjusting the Spectre Speeder’s search parameters from her spot on the console. Turning to Skulker, she pointed to a faint blimp. “I think we have a lock on something. It’s human-sized.”

As if to validate her words the system’s computer pulsed bright green and chirped. “Real-world item detected.”

Seeing the course, Daniel quickly shifted the wheel and pressed the gas. The vehicle spun midway and whipped around to the left of where they had been going. Fright Knight set his helmet on the seat he had been sitting in and looked out to the zone worriedly. A hand stroked his gloved palm before he spoke. “It’s been almost three hours….”

Everyone’s eyes widened at this observation. Looking down at the still fading mark, Skulker felt his stomach turn.

Chapter End Notes

TLA Fun Fact: If a body or human object is left in the zone for an extended period without life force it is usually repurposed into energy or made into an artifact by the ambient ectoplasm. Cellular burn out from infusion is also a large issue and many beings hit by an artifact or fused with one seldom leave the endeavor without some form of scarring or physically taint. A human being in the zone can only last a few months before their body fails and they succumb to being pulled back in the cycle or lingering as an apparition as their body breaks down. The opposite also holds true for ghosts. If they are unable to find a source of energy to stabilize or make their way into the zone, they inevitably fade and go back to cycle as well. The more violent spirits that feed off of ambient energy from haunting tend to stay and cement their presence, often becoming demons as they feed on life force. Heavy paranormal areas such as Amity are safe zones for stabilized occupation and allow outlets for the deceased to try reaching out or living out their purposes outside of the zone. Areas of distress and heartache actually can rip open natural portals and allow for haunting and disappearances as well. Graveyards, the Bermuda Triangle, the Black Forest, certain cursed areas and random spots due to belief....

Both good and bad apparations seek these spots. Demons, and wraiths for living without being rebirthed and the good phantoms and ghouls for closure or a sense of humanity outside of the zone.

And Vladdie is the poor sap who weeds out the negative from the positive while Daniel ambles around with soup cans. *frustrated vampire looking ghost noises*
Vlad weakly and painfully breathed in. Spectra and Bertrand had stopped the branding once the nerves had begun misfiring. A hand was now at his cheek.

Spectra was glancing at her husband questioningly. “What just happened Berty?”

Bertrand shivered and looked down to Vlad in confusion. “I don’t quite know…”

Spectra glowered and her humanoid form wiped some of the hair from Vlad’s sweat-drenched face. “How do you not know? You fed the most from his blood—What was that light?”

Bertrand grimaced, “It looked like someone was trying to comfort him…He became unresponsive because his consciousness was transported somewhere else in time-space. If I had to reason? It probably had something to do with the segments of his undeveloped core he gave away to his loved ones.”

Spectra went wide-eyed and stared to Vlad in amazement. “Interesting….So it's like an organ transplant case where the patient feels or gains traits from the donor, except in reverse?”

Bertrand nodded. “She wasn’t happy. Something’s off….Her energy was almost bordering on the calf’s.”

Spectra raised an eyebrow and looked to Vladimir questioningly. “We’ll have to take care of her once we’re done feeding on him. We can’t afford any loose ends of that caliber.”

‘What….are they…talking about…It-It hurts…..’

Bertrand raised an eyebrow. “What a pity…He doesn’t remember her trying to ease his suffering…”

Vlad shivered weakly. The warmth—…It was gone and now replaced with searing pain. A ghost sensation of where arms had wrapped around him caused a few stray tears to drip down his face and tangle into his hair. It was so familiar…Comforting...

‘…T-Trish…..I’m sorry…..I’m sorry I lied….I’m so s-sorry I never told you about the d-demon…’

Bertrand stiffened and his mood soured. Spectra, however, became giddy. “Heartbreak...Loss….Regret…Loneliness….” Her hand gently caressed Vlad’s bruised cheek. “Did it hurt giving your heart so completely to another person?”

A fresh wave of bitter tears leaked down Vladimir’s drugged features. Spectra smirked and tentatively looked up to Bertrand. “I think her comfort only served to addle his anguish…He’s to far gone for her to save. Her knight is dead. All that's left is a pitiful shell hanging on by a few loose threads. The man she knew died with her child and her unconscious whims to search out the segment missing from herself is only making it all the easier for us to tear into him.”

Bertrand pinched the bridge of his nose. It was true…The bull wasn’t even truly aware of where he was or what he was at the moment due to pain and loss.

Bertrand was no fool, however. Vladimir’s core had been recharged from the brief contact and comfort and was now starting to pulse again within his chest. Fever was already misting through the gag and fogging the mask over his nose. Small drops of sweat were lacing through the blood and ectoplasm splattered over his body and dazed blue eyes were flashing red in a bid to cement the changes.
Bertrand hissed and a hand whipped out to the surgical materials beside him. Clawed fingers scraped against the metal and the cart flipped and spun into the wall opposite of them. Looking up to his startled wife he growled. “We need to speed this up. She gave him a jumpstart to his core and the medications won’t be nearly as effective a second or even a third time if we use them. It’s burning through his system to fast.”

Spectra sighed and a heeled foot slid the lock on the wheels of the bed up.

“Let’s bring him to the medical theater then. Grab the camera Berty. We’ll finish step three when we get there and then we’ll cut him open.”

Bertrand nodded and grabbed the camera. Wheels began rolling across cracked and hole hewn flooring. Vlad vaguely stared into the spectral green and blue lights flickering above him as he was dragged to where he would most likely be cored and fed upon.

Spectra looked into his blue eyes as she moved the table and raised an eyebrow. “I’m surprised he’s still coherent.”

Vlad could feel the burning in his chest again and both Spectra and Bertrand stopped the table abruptly. Two black rings were flickering around his waist despite the restraints. Red and orange spun out from black pupils and a white tunic quickly enveloped Vladimir’s bloodied and bruised torso. Short spiky black hair replaced tangled gray. The shift switched back to Vladimir’s human form for a moment and a ragged breath could be heard against the gag.

Masters.

Plasmius.

Masters.

Plasmius.

The shift settled on Vlad’s ghost half after a few seconds and Spectra smirked. Bertrand glowered. “It looks like his form is trying to stabilize the damage. There’s not enough energy to activate the restraints though.”

Spectra giggled. “But that’s perfect. We won’t have to drug his ghost half if we decide to remove his restraints and it’ll be easier to shift him between forms.”

Spectra leaned over Vladimir and smiled warmly, “Hmmm, you know we haven’t truly tortured his ghost half yet? The camera isn’t recording right now...How about we start the footage back up once we go to finish our previous game?”

Bertrand raised an eyebrow but nodded. Spectra’s forked tongue flicked through her fangs to lick her ruby lips. A human hand briefly flashed to shadow as she racked her fingers almost lovingly through Vladimir’s short black hair. “Hello, Plasmius.”

Vlad’s glazed red eyes numbly stared into Spectra’s as she lightly pulled against the spectral fabric adorning his chest. Bertrand placed his free hand to the table and began moving it forward again. “Let’s get him in the room before we begin anything else. The lighting will be better for the camera.”

Spectra grinned and nodded. Wheels began screeching and drumming against laminate again. Vlad closed his eyes as the sound lulled his pained form. Anything that wasn’t reminding him of the burning in his chest was comforting at this point. Feeling a rush of cold air from a door being opened in front of him, Vladimir opened his eyes again. From the slight dip in the floor, he could tell that he
was being moved into an amphitheater-like room. It looked like it was an early 20th-century operation theater. A reflective silver table, obviously a modern addition, was being highlighted by a bright green medical light overhead. Spectra began clicking his cuffs and collar off once they entered the room. Bertrand could be felt at his ankles, lifting and throwing aside the leg restraint. Arms looped under his legs and back to lift him as a duplicate of Spectra grabbed the tank connected to the mask on his face and rolled it behind them.

Spectra hummed gently to herself as she carried Vladimir to the silver table. Bertrand came up behind her with the camera pointed at the ghost being lifted and laid out on the cold steel table. Vlad flinched slightly and eyes weakly clenched against the brightness overhead.

Bertrand drawled. “It is now 4:45, Central Standard Time. We have relocated due to the sudden flairs attributed with his ectoplasm infused cells and DNA. Due to time constraints, we will be euthanizing him a little earlier than we originally anticipated.”

Something faintly clicked in Vlad’s head as his neck was placed down on the table. ‘I’m...in the zone.....’

A tug on his clothes pulled him from his thoughts. Fingers were lacing through the white fabric debatingly. A hand was rolling up his green splattered tunic in order to inspect his wounds. Vlad attempted to look down but couldn’t quite make out who or what was looking over his injuries. Ice cold hands gently drew circles through the blood and a taloned claw poked at the burns. Spectra backed up and went to the other table he had been laying on earlier to retrieve something. Finding Vlad’s torn and bloodied jacket, she turned and walked back to his side. Vlad's head was lifted for a moment and he choked back nausea as his gaze wandered to the right side of his chest. It was cross-hatched with numerous slashes and large flat burns. They had meticulously aimed for the side of his rib cage so medical incisions wouldn’t be hindered once they came down to vivisecting him as they had gloated earlier on camera.

Bertrand smirked and zoomed into Vlad’s feverish features. “This is Vladimir Masters’s hidden legacy ladies and gentlemen.” Spectra smirked and duplicated. The duplicate giggled and motioned for the camera. Bertrand obliged with a fanged grin and walked to the side of the table. Gloves were pulled over human hands with a snapping of latex. Vlad flinched at the noise and Bertrand laughed.

Red eyes flashed toward the half-ghost lying limp against the bed. Looking back up to the camera, Bertrand stroked his mustache and began prodding Vlad’s hyperventilating chest. “No doubt the humans viewing this will want proof that Vlad Plasmius is indeed Vladimir Masters, so we are moving to the final step of the little game we initiated earlier. Step three, suffocation.”
Wear your Heart

Spectra grinned and pulled out the taser. A hand roughly yanked through Vlad’s scalp to direct his gaze to his chest. Smiling for the camera, she flicked a switch on the device and a muted buzz could be heard emanating from the small object. Looking up to the camera she allowed her tongue to snake across Vlad’s cheek before purring. “Let’s see how a flame handles being snuffed out and relit, hmmmm?”

And with that, she brought the device to Vladimir’s chest. His torso arched as energy was sapped from his frame. A small strangled gasp echoed as his lungs disappeared and then regrew into a normal human pair. Spectra sneered and there was another flick of the switch on the taser before it was re-applied. Lungs were ripped out harshly and Plasmius flopped back onto the table with a strained scream against his gag. The process continued for a good hour, back and forth, ghost to human.

Unable to even gain enough air to scream anymore, Vlad simply choked and weakly rasped as his body continued shifting. Growing bored, Bertrand looked up to the camera and smirked as he phased a hand through Vladimir’s human chest and partially solidified. This gave a slightly more livid reaction as Vlad’s form flailed upward against his arm restraints. Spectra, had apparently, deactivated the collar in lew of making sure Vladimir would be able to see what was going to transpire in his final hours. A giddy squeal echoed from the demoness as green and red dripped down from Vlad’s nose and entangled with the gauze binding his mouth.

Unable to breathe correctly, Vlad’s head flopped weakly to the side. The taser continued and Plasmius writhed and arched. Bertrand snickered. “Lowering the gas intake was a good suggestion, Penelope. These reactions are so much more animated. I’m sure the Fentons will especially enjoy his little struggles.”

Penelope smirked and continued viciously zapping the halfa pinned to the table below them. Red could be seen dripping down Vlad’s jaw and pooling on the table. Another zap went through his weakly frame and the concentration he had been keeping to stifle his visual connection with Skulker and Romulus shattered as his heart went out. Human. Ghost. Ghost to blood-drenched human. The taser started up his heart on the third go. Bertrand wrapped a hand around Vlad’s throat as the transformations continued. A small gurgle weakly echoed in the medical theater as taloned fingers ripped through gloves and tightened. Ebony rings crackled and popped like fireworks as Vlad’s body continued being forced through shifts. After another ten minutes, Spectra yawned and looked up to her husband. “Darling? I’m getting bored with suffocating him. Simulating drowning only goes so far and I think our lucky viewers will get just as bored as us unless we spice things up.”

Bertrand sighed and smiled up to the duplicate holding the camera. “You know? I think you’re right Penelope? This isn’t as fun as electrocuting him or branding him and we do have a schedule to keep now that our plans have been sped up.”

Skulker felt like he was going to be sick. Fright Knight’s green eyes sparked and a clenched fist crackled as the images continued flashing through the Spectre Speeder’s cabin. Spectra casually flicked the taser back to Vlad’s chest and watched with mirth as blue eyes attempted rolling back. Bertrand snickered. “I say we just cut him open and poke around for a bit before we rip it out.”

Penelope frowned and tapped her chin. Reaching down to direct Vlad’s oxygen-deprived form, she simpered. “But Berty? I don’t want to just cut him open. We’ve done that so many time before. I
want something *exciting.*”

Bertrand snorted and went to the tank on the side of the table. “I have an idea, but first I’m going to make sure he’s completely incapable of movement like when he was younger. I’ve enjoyed his little spasms but would rather avoid cutting any vital segments of flesh because of his pathetic twitching and writhing. Him dying before we can enjoy ourselves would put a real damper on this evening’s main event.”

Spectra nodded and looked from Vlad to Bertrand with curiosity. “What do you have in mind?”

Bertrand cackled and pointed to the taser Spectra had set down. “What do you think?”

Spectra’s green eyes widened to owlish proportions before she turned back to Vladimir and purred. “We can force his transformations while we butcher him?”

Bertrand reappeared by her side with a scalpel in hand and passed it to her. “I’m curious what he looks like on the inside when he shifts. Aren’t you?”

Spectra clapped her hands ecstatically and leaned in to wrap her hands around her spouse. “YOU’RE A GENIUS!”

Daniel felt his face run pale as he glanced back toward Skulker and Romulus.

‘Oh god….NO. NO. NO.’

Valerie’s eyes widened and a hand went to her mouth. ‘They’re going to-’

Spectra was leaning in above Vladimir and running a hand across the tunic that had rolled down to obscure their handiwork. “You wanted to give your heart to others Vladimir? We’ll help you…”

Vlad’s struggled breathing rasped through the connection and his glazed red eyes weakly tried to lock on the figure running a taloned hand under his shirt. Spectra patted his cheek, “...Shhhhh...It’s okay.” There was a ripping of fabric and Vlad’s chest was exposed to both the camera and the horrified rescue party trying to reach him in time. The fabric was gently folded over and a clawed finger traced over the wounds shining dimly under the lights above. “-we’re just going to finally cure your miserable existence, Vladimir. Don’t you want that? No more pain? No more fear? No more loss? You’re all alone in the world...Even the brat gave up on you and he’s one of the most compassionate people you know. Doesn’t that say something about your situation?” Spectra grinned as she leaned down into Vlad’s chest and pushed him firmly into the table. There was a soft gurgle and a small stream of blood made its way through the gag before his eyes attempted to roll back. Withdrawing and observing the older halfa’s pained form, a frown spread across her face.

She sighed and brought a hand to Vlad’s cheek to try and focus him. Bertrand smirked from the other side of the table. “He’s fainted right now. He should be more active once the pain registers.”

Spectra growled. “But I want him to be aware when we stab into him!”

Bertrand snickered and lazily pointed to the taser. “Be my guest.”

Daniel was desperately forcing the Spectre Speeder forward. Reflections of what was happening to Vlad splayed across the bay windows and contrasted against the green of the zone.

There was a muffled scream and Daniel’s eyes teared.

Spectra withdrew the taser and snapped her fingers in front of Vladimir to keep his attention. “Good.
Eyes on me Vladimir. I want to see the light leave you as we rip you open.”
Spectra passed the taser to Bertrand and smirked before lifting a scalpel up and turning back to
Vladimir’s hyperventilating chest. Everyone in the cabin watched in disbelieving horror as the
scalpel was waved in front of Vladimir’s dazed eyes. Romulus, Skulker, and Daniel all went ashen
as Vlad’s heart rate began beating frantically out of familiarity. Wet and choked breaths seemed to be
tearing through the fog-covered mask obscuring Vlad’s nose and his blue eyes teared.

‘T-they’re going to do it again...They’re going t-to-’

Vlad’s thoughts became a pained incoherent blur as metal was shoved brutally into his collar bone.
The scream that ripped through the gag and echoed in the Speeder’s cabin caused a fresh wave of
tears to trail down Romulus and Skulker’s faces. Daniel’s hands shook on the wheel. Valerie was
cupping her mouth and stifling sobs as the taser was brought back into play against Vlad’s burns.

Spectra was laughing maniacally as she raked the metal deeper and swerved it around to reach the
scars carved into his flesh. “Who knew these would make such a nifty connect the dots game?!”

Bertrand chuckled darkly and continued zapping Vlad’s pained form. Screaming was impossible
now that he wasn’t able to get enough air into his lungs to manage the sound. Spectra reached the
middle of Vlad’s chest and gushed as she felt the black rings sparking and warping through her arms.
Her demonic form soon took hold and her eyes flashed from the normal ruby red to the radioactive
green she so often sported when shedding the last ounces of her humanity. The blade was yanked
out harshly as Vlad’s blue and now red eyes teared. Another shock brought back the human blue and
Spectra gushed. “You never belonged on either side did you, Vladimir? A ghost trying to fit in with
humans? Some freaky little demon slayer with freaky little powers?” She reached a hand to his cheek
and simpered with mock sincerity. “We think we know where you belong though...” A snake-like
tongue licked across fanged teeth as she grinned.

Talonned fingers ran across the deep incision on Vlad’s chest and came to rest between his pectorals.
“Let’s see how much you’ve grown Vladimir.” And with that, two hands were cruelly shoved into
the divide and curved outward as she began lifting and pulling back skin and muscle.

There was a sickening snap and Vlad’s chest pulled up with the force from her hands.
Macy Ann Dolce

Skin was folded over as she laughed. Bertrand, still zapping Vladimir, pointed out, “My...my... The brat broke six ribs! Look at it, Penelope! Look at how marred and scarred his chest wall has become! It’s so beautiful!”

Spectra purred and began touching and prodding bones. Choked sobs racked Vlad’s frame as he clenched his eyes shut. Blue spectral tinted skin was being pulled and yanked. Green ectoplasm oozed and splashed against the sides of his injuries. Another zap of the taser brought pale white skin into focus, surrounded by bright crimson blood. Spectra beamed. “LOOK AT THAT BERTRAND!”

Fingers began looping between gaps in Vlad’s ribs to poke at his lungs as they deflated and disappeared to be replaced by a smaller set of bluish, purple lungs. “A halfa’s lungs fully condense and regrow! Isn’t that exciting?!”

Bertrand grinned. “Darling? Let’s get a better look. The rib cutters are on your left.”

Spectra smirked and went to grab the equipment only for an unnatural amount of energy to buzz through the room. A blast of flame circled out from Vlad’s body and knocked both Bertrand and Spectra away with enough force to dent the walls on the far sides of the room as their bodies connected. The duplicate holding the camera crashed and skidded before being impaled by the tools from the medical cart. The camera cracked and shattered against the floor. Bertrand and Spectra both groggily looked up as Vlad’s body forcefully shifted into Plasmius.

Flesh was being pulled and stretched back into place as the pink and red light near his heart brightened. With a muted snap, Vlad fell back against the table. A frantic and erratic heartbeat drummed against the halfa’s chest as flesh seared itself shut.

Bertrand exchanged a look with his wife, who now had a line of green ectoplasm dripping from her head and down a swollen eye. He, himself, had a scalpel jammed in his shoulder. Standing up angrily, the demon rounded on Vladimir as the flames dissipated. Vlad was darting in and out on the table. Bertrand hissed as he looked from their meal to his wife. “It’s activated. Get the suppressants. We need to harvest him now.”

There was a muted tapping of heels coming toward Vlad as his eyes began closing. “What triggered it?! We made sure-”

The last words were cut off as Vlad’s eyes shut.

Skulker turned to Daniel in a blind panic. “HOW FAR OUT ARE WE?!?”

Daniel looked to the spectral asylum in front of the vehicle and growled. “We’re here.”

Romulus was seething as he gripped his helmet and shoved it over his head. Armor solidified and wrapped around his body like water. Purple tinted flames plumbed from the helmet while a long cape cascaded down his shoulders. Green eyes sparked from under the shadows.

Valerie was connecting Vlad’s location to her suit. After a few seconds, she snapped back the wire and stood at attention by Romulus.

Daniel shifted into Phantom and stood. No words were exchanged as the four exited the vehicle and flew out toward the spectral gray stone building ahead of them. Large claw marks and burns were
scored along the sides of the construct and large clusters of glowing purple ivy were growing and threading through the windows and around pillars. Skulker narrowed his eyes. “It’s zone made. We need to go through an opening.”

Romulus hissed. “So we’re busting through the front?”

Valerie answered. “The door is ajar so they either expect an ambush or are rather lax in making sure they don’t have any unexpected company. I vote we go through the broken window on the left.”

Romulus and Skulker both exchanged a surprised look and Daniel froze momentarily. All three quickly nodded in agreement. Romulus pushed in front of the three. “I have the lightest form because I can control my mass. This may be zone based, but sound is still an issue. Giving away our positions won’t help anyone. Wait here for a moment.”

Skulker nodded as Romulus darted into the opening. After a moment a glowing purple flame appeared next to Skulker. Valerie looked at it in perplexion and Skulker whispered. “I’ll explain it later.”

Valerie nodded and followed the hunter in. Daniel tailed them with charged hands in the event something decided to attack their flank.

Everything was deathly quiet as they crept past several padded rooms. Ectoplasm and remnants of human blood could be seen splattered over various segments of the walls and floor. Skulker growled. ‘It’s their domicile...This is where they feed.’

Valerie’s eyes trailed to a wallet by one of the rooms. Reaching to it, she gently picked it up and flipped it open. A young woman with blonde hair and a tired smile could be seen in the driver’s license. The address was from Madison, Wisconsin but the date it was issued was in 1990. Daniel came up behind her and felt his heartbeat quicken as he took in the image.

It was Bertra Ann Dolce but it also wasn’t. Skulker paused and backtracked to the two teens. His eyes locked on the wallet and he cringed before pocketing it. Eyes trailed to the room next to where they had found it and he slowly pushed past the teens to peak in.

‘So her name was Macy……’ Skulker’s hand trembled as his eyes locked with the hospital gowned corpse lying against the padded floor. Turning away from the dead eighteen-year-old, he motioned for the teens to follow him. Daniel paused and looked to the room questioningly. He had never seen Skulker so somber prior to now. His green eyes feverently trailed to the vague shadows poking against the darkness in search of the cause to the ghoul’s added disdain. Valerie looked up as well but quickly brought her hand to Daniel’s shoulder to redirect him. Her helmet had immediately locked onto the human form. “We can’t do anything for her Danny. We need to save Vlad.”

Daniel went ashen. ‘Bertrand took her form and they-They killed her.’

Blue sparked in his eyes and he had to bite his lip to control the frost trying to escape his spectral form. Pure, undiluted rage swept from his core and to the tips of his fingers at the thought of yet another victim Spectra and Bertrand had probably tortured and then fed upon.

Skulker stiffened and Romulus bristled ahead of them. Daniel’s eyes snapped up and his ears preened. He could hear and feel Vlad’s heart. They were close.

Romulus teleported backward to them and motioned them within whisper distance. “It’s around the corner. There are two entrances. Daniel? Edmond? Can you serve as a distraction while Lady Gray and I grab Vladimir? You two are the more powerful as of now and my form is still not recovered enough for extensive combat.”
Daniel and Skulker both nodded and Romulus went to turn only to pause. Eyes widened in horror as pointed lilac ears perked toward the noises coming from the room Vladimir was being held in.

Skulker and Daniel both growled and began flying at a breakneck pace around the corner and toward the brightly illuminated doorway at the far side of the hall.
Pulling Inside and Black Souls

Vlad could feel his paralyzed body being lifted into a sitting position on the table he had been cut open upon earlier. Spectra’s hand had wrapped around his collar roughly to keep him up as Bertrand unclasped the halfa’s wrists.

His head teetered forward as his hands left the metal and Spectra quickly caught him against her neck. There was a muted click behind Vlad as his wrists were yanked together and locked in place. Dulled red eyes weakly fluttered open as Spectra lifted him up. Her head turned to Bertrand. “Putting him in a medical coma would be easiest. Don’t bother measuring the amount. Just fill the syringe and bring it over here.”

Vlad’s vision blurred slightly as he was laid down on the cement flooring. The was a rustling of chains somewhere nearby and cold taloned hands were suddenly lifting him into a sitting position. Wounds strained as his arms were tied to a chain top marooned in the cement behind him. There was a muted click as the connections were snapped into place and Spectra backed up to examine her work worriedly. Plasmius was now on his knees and slouching forward slightly so that ebony hair was obscuring semiconscious red eyes.

His shirt, cape, and gloves, out of necessity, had stayed in ruined tatters from his lack of ectoplasmic energy. Spectra frowned and leaned in to rip the bloodied fabric out of the way only to pause at seeing the unnatural sparks permeating Vladimir’s eyes.

Bertrand growled from where he was shuffling around on the floor for the proper medications and looked up angrily. “Damn it! He’s waking up again!”

Spectra looked to her husband in alarm, “The drug-?!”

Bertrand shook his head and snarled ferally. “The little freak destroyed the vial!”

Bertrand’s dress shoes could be heard clacking against the flooring as he ran over to Vladimir and Spectra. A hand charged with glowing pink energy snapped into Vlad’s stomach. Eyes widened weakly and with a muted thump, the half-ghost went limp against Bertrand’s shoulder.

“Problem solved.” He snarled and backed away from Vlad’s unconscious form. Handing her the taser, he commanded, “Penelope? Strip his tunic off. The camera is still functional and I want them to have a clear view of it being ripped out.”

Spectra nodded and motioned toward the gas canisters. “Berty? Drag that over here. We’ll have to rely on the paralytic to keep him manageable and I don’t feel comfortable with how low we set it. The last thing we need is our meal doing that again.”

Bertrand nodded and went for the canister as Spectra elongated her claws and began hacking the fabric from Vlad’s body. Tattered streaks of ectoplasm and crimson-stained spectral fabric faded and vanished in small puffs of black and white light as she worked.

The door being slammed wide open caused both Bertrand and Spectra to look up from what they were doing with snarls plastered across their face. Their immediate thoughts trailed to protecting their claimed meal from another demonic or a pack only to bristle in confusion at the sight of Skulker and Daniel.

Spectra’s fanged snarl turned into a giddy cackle once her eyes traced to the two male’s horrified and enraged features. Cocking her head, she flicked off some blood from her fingers. “Well, well….It
would seem we have dinner guests.”
Catch Me Before I Fall

Skulker’s shoulders tensed at the scene before him. Vladimír’s spectral form was covered with gashes, claw marks and burns. Spectra yanked against Vladimír’s hair before cocking her head and flicking off a mixture of crimson and green from her long claws, splattering the floor. “Well, well….It would seem we have dinner guests.” A finger trailed to her lips as she licked the excess.

Daniel was shaking and small tapered points were trying to form from the bones in his mouth to produce fangs. Tears were freezing down his features and clicking against the flooring as an inhuman growl racked his frame. He didn’t even register the pain in his hands as pink tinted talons ripped through his gloves. Pulses of blue and green ecto-energy danced and buzzed around his hands and legs.

The smell of Vlad’s blood and the sight of the older halfa unresponsive to the noises around him had thrown him into a core fueled rage.

Spectra snickered and her hand tightened against Vlad’s jet black hair. “What an unexpected surprise…”

Skulker’s form fluctuated slightly and a strong turrent of wind seemed to thrash from his suit as his eyes sparked and flames heightened. “WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE TO HIM!!?” He went to step forward and Spectra quickly lifted Vlad’s head up to expose his bruised and gagged face.

Bertrand chuckled darkly as Skulker stopped mid-step to take in the damage. Vladimír’s breathing was sporadic and labored and fever seemed to be taking hold of the halfa’s pained features. Spectra yanked Vlad slightly higher by his hair, causing a strain against his wounds and restraints. A brow furrowed weakly and Spectra answered. “We just were playing with our food for a bit.” Spectra snickered. “A hunter should appreciate that.”

Ice began lacing the room. Daniel’s eyes sparked further as he charged both hands with elemental energy. He wouldn’t be holding back. “You bitch…You-

Bertrand interrupted. “You mean you, loser? Penelope and I just reaped the rewards of your actions. You were the one who broke his resolve to live brat! Do you honestly think a being this powerful would be tamed so easily otherwise?!” Bertrand’s skin bubbled as he shifted to Vladimír’s form. “We needed him broken so that his core would be addled enough for extraction and here you are again, raring to go.”

Penelope, as if by some unspoken cue, nodded and viciously snaked her talons against one of Vlad’s shoulder blades. A stream of red and green numbly dripped down Vlad’s chest and his eyes clenched in avoidance of the pressure. Spectra tightened the grip and Vlad grimaced weakly before drugged red eyes fluttered open.

Seeing both Daniel and Skulker in front of him, his heart rate elevated sporadically. ‘Oh god….’

Bertrand snickered. “Are you afraid for the little freak, Vladimír?”

Spectra turned Vladimír’s face to her own and hissed cruelly. “Tell me…Should he fear us or you more?”
Vlad’s eyes weakly clenched and Spectra squeezed tighter against his shoulder to lock his gaze with her own. Her free hand laced to his jaw and patted his cheek. “Did you know that you harmed Daniel and his family while you were unconscious? You hunted them like animals. Jack and Danni are dead, Vladimir. You killed them.” She hissed giddily.

Vlad’s eyes widened in horror and his breathing became sporadic. Daniel and Skulker both felt the now dangerously high pulse instigated from the emotional panic attack Spectra had fueled.

‘I couldn’t! I WOULD NEVER! NO! PLEASE. GOD NO! JACK?! ANNA?!”

A heart raced and shuttered and Daniel screamed in rage. “YOU FUCKING LIAR!”

At this Spectra laughed and shoved a hand into Vlad’s exposed and torn chest. Vlad’s body stayed limp as she began solidifying partially next to his core. Wet and muted gurgles could be heard through the mask as Vlad’s tearing eyes rolled back.

The heartbeat layered on Daniel’s neck and Skulker’s palm disappeared and both tensed. Daniel’s eyes widened in horror. ‘She just killed-

Spectra, unfazed by her meal’s lack of a pulse, calmly twirled the ghost taser in her fingers. After a moment of holding Vlad’s unbreathing form against herself, she absentmindedly brought the device to his chest and forcefully shifted him until a weak hacking could be heard from her prisoner. Vlad’s now human form stayed unconscious against his restraints as Spectra prodded. “I wonder how much blood is in his airway now?”

The taser was tapped against her chin debatingly as her eyes drifted from the hunter and the teenager in silent challenge.

Skulker growled. “HOW DARE YOU TOUCH HIM!”

Daniel hissed, “I’LL RIP YOU MONSTERS LIMP FROM LIMB!”

Bertrand snarled. “Rip us limb from limb? Ha.” Bertrand shifted into a spectral green cat. “Not if we rip you fools apart first.”

Claws extended as he pounced on the hunter. Skulker growled and a gun whipped up to shoot Bertrand in the core only for the demon to dodge the blast. Backtracking, Bertrand hissed. “Penelope! Do it now!”

A bright green and blue shield snapped between Spectra and Vlad, flinging the demoness across the floor the moment she went to replace her hand in Vlad’s chest.

Daniel growled as he gritted his teeth. “WE WON’T LET YOU!” A blast of ice and spikes began to form near Spectra. “I’ll send you to the seventh gate of hell before you ever touch him again! You’ll be lucky if there will be enough ectoplasm left to-”

Bertrand snarled and tackled the teen who had threatened his wife. Daniel’s eyes sparked as the cat attempted to claw him and legs snapped taunt, flinging the cat backward and into the operation table. Bertrand hissed and, shifting into Plasmius, he cracked his neck. “Ohhh...The scary eyes.” He crooned sarcastically in the elder’s voice.

Daniel snarled as the Plasmius duplicate shot forward and pinned him against the wall.

Skulker was aiming a gun at Spectra as she stood while keeping himself strategically between Vladimir and the demoness. Spectra brought the back of her hand to her busted lip and licked off the
ectoplasm with a small huff of indignation. Green eyes shifted and flickered between red and a humanoid navy green as she changed her form to that of Penelope. Stretching her arms out as she stood and raising an eyebrow, she negotiated, “Come on Edmond… Ghost to ghost? Why not help us dispose of the brat and then we can feed on the both of them together. Who knows? Maybe the embassy’s blood with grant you back your original form?”

Skulker paused and lowered his weapon, much to Spectra’s illation. She smiled warmly and Skulker returned the sentiments but his were directed somewhere behind her. ‘Except you’re no ghost Spectra. You’re a demon.’

Spectra barely had time to dodge the core shot and screamed out as her shoulder was shot through. Falling back to the floor she hissed and snarled as her form crackled and morphed back into shadow. Skulker walked forward and aimed his gun towards her chest to finish the deed only for something to buzz up his spectral form. The small ghoul convulsed in his suit as the charge taken from Plasmius was redistributed and then sucked back with part of his own into the device. Metallic legs crumpled to the floor as he spasmed and a gun fell with a muted thump as he landed on his knees. Dazed green eyes looked up weakly as Spectra lifted her hand to strike.
Valerie came out of thin air and blasted the demonic a second time, only for the demoness to whip around with frightening speed. A clawed hand latched onto Valerie’s wrist and tightened to the point Valerie's armor had to support the limb to prevent bone breakage.

Spectra snarled. “Oh look! It’s little miss popular. Still having daddy issues and money problems?”

Valerie snarled and kicked a leg toward the demon’s stomach only for Spectra to phase through the girl with the teen’s wrist in hand so that her arm was pinned behind her back. “You should have listened to daddy and hung up the suit while you still had the choice.” She smirked as she charged a hand and electrocuted the teenager.

Valerie cried out and dropped to her knees. The demoness giggled as she lifted the girl’s limp form up by her wrist. “I could use the appetizer.”

The room darkened abruptly and a feral snarl could be heard from the walls around the demons and their adversaries. Taloned hands and violent purple flames lashed out against Spectra, causing her to release her grip on the unconscious girl. Romulus quickly caught her in his hands and went to move again only for the taser to be rammed into the small of his back. Flickering back to visibility and releasing his hold on the light in the room, Romulus, slumped weakly to the floor and placed his body over Valerie’s.

Spectra smirked. “A former demonic saving a human girl and an embassy. Oh, how you’ve fallen Fright Knight.”

Acid green eyes glared upward at his attacker. “I prefer Romulus.” A hand whipped out and several spheres of glowing purple flame blossomed to surrounded the group like a shield.

Spectra whistled. “Will-o’-the-wisps, hmm? Your signature power. It’s a shame I won’t be misled when victory is so close I can taste it.” Romulus’s eyes widened and he gasped out as the duplicate in front of his double faded. His body had barely blocked the strike to Vladimir’s exposed chest. Flickering back into visibility, the knight weakly choked as the taser was reapplied to his chest, this time at the highest setting Spectra could program.

Leaning in close to his jaw and wrapping a hand under his helmet, she grinned. There was a swift yank and Romulus’s head covering was violently thrown across the floor and toward Skulker. “Fear is beautiful, isn’t it? Shadowed features, fatigued eyes and a voice harrowed from screaming against the darkness. Tell me, Fright Knight? Was it worth it neglecting the power you were born to be harnessed with?”

Romulus grimaced as her hand tightened and the shocks continued. Her eyes wandered from the knight to Vladimir with a sly smirk. “It’s a wonder how many attractive young men come to such ends, hmm?”

A tongue flicked out and licked across the knight’s jaw. “You’re not exactly to my tastes though. Enjoy despair appointee.” A hand whipped back and Romulus was thrown full force into the wall behind Skulker. A sickening crack echoed and Rom weakly tried to get to his knees only to snarl as Spectra threw a familiar device toward the trio. The shield blossomed in front of them just as Romulus slammed his hands against it. Claws raked across the green and hair bristled as he hissed and growled at the demoness.
Spectra smirked. “That takes care of the appointees and the huntress.”

Bertrand snarled at the ice crackling up his arms from Daniel’s enraged form. Smiling wickedly, he questioned the teenager, “How much do you think Vladimir cares for you brat?” Daniel growled and bared his fangs and Bertrand continued. “I’ve tasted his anguish. He cares for you more than life itself. *Almost like a sibling.*”

The grip around the fake Plasmius continued tightening and icy gauntlets cracked against the teen’s fingers as he snarled. “Stop using his form you slimy bastard!”

Bertrand winced and something glinted in his red eyes. “In fact? I’m willing to wager that he would more than gladly give up his heart, his core, willingly for you. You wanted me to stop using his form? Fine. Let’s see you finish what you set out to do in the alleyway mere hours ago.”

And then Bertrand forcefully possessed the young half-ghost.
Selling a Soul and Death's Kiss

Spectra laughed joyously as the look of horror and disgust plastered across Daniel’s features as he tried desperately to fight the movement in his form. Daniel’s boots thumped to the floor with a small jump. Righting himself, he began walking toward the demoness and Vladimir’s unconscious form against his body’s muffled protests.

Feet shook and desperately pulled against the slow walk and the boy bit his lip and growled as his eyes flashed from icy, core laden blue to bloodthirsty red.

A shaky white-gloved hand reached to the mask around Vlad’s face and phased it off. Daniel’s eyes teared and Spectra elaborated. “It’s no fun if he can’t struggle.”

Skulker and Romulus were now desperately blasting and trying to breach the construct.

Skulker turned to Romulus fearfully. “Wake Valerie up! She’s the only one who can get through this shield!”

Romulus nodded but stopped as his eyes rested on the gag coming loose form Vlad’s jaw. Skulker followed his gaze and his fists clenched. ‘YOU SICK BASTARDS!’

Spectra looked up to the two appointees as she tossed the bloodied gauze aside and leaned down to wrap her hands around Vlad’s bruised cheek. The adult remained unresponsive and Spectra pouted.

Her eyes drifted to the blood tangling with his now rugged stubble. Leaning in, she tilted his head up so that her tongue could lick at the blood. After a moment, an idea came to mind and she grinned before looking at Daniel and connected her lips to Vlad’s.

Bertrand sighed in Daniel’s head. ‘Must you taste our meal like that Penelope?’

A tongue slid in and Vlad weakly furrowed his brow in his sleep. Retracting her now blood-caked mouth from his, she snickered. “So delectable. There is just something so alluring about a man close to death’s doors.”

Romulus and Skulker were screaming profanity after profanity through the shield toward the demoness. She rolled her eyes at their comments on her looks and cupped a hand to Vlad’s bruised cheek, “His soul is still stubbornly holding out... That will make the entire extraction all the more sweet.”

Daniel’s gloved hand whipped to hers and pulled her fingers away from Vlad’s cheek. Growling through the possession, he hissed, “I’LL CORE YOU, YOU DISGUSTING OLD HAG!”

Spectra retracted her wrist from the boy and clapped excitedly. “I’m afraid I’m not on the list. True, the only one coring anything today is going to be you, Daniel. However your victims will be as follows: first dear Vladimir, then his two appointees, and then yourself.”

She leaned in next to Vladimir and rested her head above his own with a crooked grin. A taloned hand gently began weaving through a few strands of silver. “I suppose it’s only fair we wake dear little Vladimir up, hmmn?” The taser was casually picked up from the floor and brought to the side of Vlad’s neck. She held it for a moment as she took in Daniel’s horrified tears and gently pecked a small kiss to Vladimir’s unbruised cheek before whispering. “Wake up freak.”

The taser connected and Vlad’s form shifted into Plasmius at a sluggish and sickly pace. Vlad winced as the rings snapped out of existence and his head weakly rose to try and access where he
was. Too out of it to focus on his surroundings, he somewhat hoarsely choked the first name that came to mind as his eyes tried to open. “L-Liz…?” The young face in front of him was blurred but the green eyes were so familiar….

His head began slumping back to his chest only for a taloned hand to roughly grab into his hair and yank him back to reality. “I'm 'fraid not Vladimir.”

Vlad’s heartbeat sped up as he came out of his daze and adrenaline coursed through his aching body. Spectra’s decayed form shifted between the two half ghost’s and she smirked victoriously. “Dreaming of your sibling again?”

Vlad ignored her in lieu of asking his own question. “What do you want?”

Spectra shifted out from between the two and motioned toward Daniel’s shaking and crying form. “I want to make a business deal with Mr. Masters. A core for a core.”

Vlad eyes clenched and he growled venomously. “I won’t make any deals with a viper unless I know all of my conditions are met.”

Spectra whistled. “And here I thought this would be easier but you are a businessman by nature. What terms do you seek embassary?”

Vlad coughed wetly and, noting the ectoplasm on his jaw, grimaced before looking back into Spectra’s eyes. “I want the child, my appointees and Miss Gray, free from your decrepit talons. Not a hair is to be harmed on any of them if I give myself to you and your filthy husband.”

Spectra smiled gleefully. “It’s a deal.”

Vlad snickered. “Not so fast. I never promise on words alone and your word is rather weak.”

Spectra stroked a hand through his hair thoughtfully and Vlad weakly shivered. “So what would you use to cement our deal embassary?”
Vlad closed his eyes and after a moment, answered. “I wish to make a soul’s accord.”

Spectra went rigid and her form shifted slightly at the mention of an embassy’s word binding. “Ah….a core shattering if one party chooses to break the rules of the other. You’ve only used the trait once, did you not? And at that point in time, it was more of a self-mutilation than an actual deal with another soul. Still….It did work in your favor.”

Spectra paused and looked back to Daniel with a wicked grin. The boy wanted to scream, to thrash out and plead for Vlad not to make a deal so poorly laid in his favor, but alas no words were allowed to form.

Spectra turned back to Vladimir and nodded. “I, Penelope Karen Hughes, hereby seal our accord. I and my spouse shall not touch your appointees or the two teenagers in your care in return for your-” Her hand went to her core as she purred the last word. “-services.”

Vlad weakly repeated his own name. “I, Vladimir Damian Masters, hereby seal our accord. I promise my core and my body. In exchange, no harm shall come to pass by the hands of Bertrand Augustus Hughes or Penelope Karen Hughes to either my appointees or the teenagers present.” A palm sparked behind Vlad’s back and eyes turned bright white. A head shot backward in agony as both Spectra and Vlad thrashed and wailed. After a few moments of their spectral energy intertwining, Vlad’s eyes faded to red and he began to slump forward only for Daniel’s arms to catch him. He could feel Vlad’s heart becoming faint as he coughed and weakly choked against his shoulder. Vlad tensed against him and retracted himself slightly so that he was dazedly facing the shivering boy.


Daniel’s eyes widened and tears trailed down his face. Vlad closed his eyes as the hand phased through his chest and passed his breast bone. Daniel shrieked in agony as he felt the adult’s pulse fading from his neck. Vlad tensed and looked up to the teenager. “Shhh...I-It’s okay...little-badger….”

Fingers squeezed violently around Vlad’s newly formed core and the adult’s words were cut off as the man plummeted against the teen’s shoulder. Daniel’s other arm held on for dear life as his hand continued gripping and prying around the older half ghost’s heart.

The warm and pulsating orb crackled and flickered but remained dormant at the teen’s touch. Daniel’s grip tightened and Vlad shuttered against him. Dulled red eyes swayed as blood and ectoplasm began dripping down the elder’s nose. Small and faint whisper’s echoed. “It’s okay….”

One last smile ghosted across Vlad’s lips as the light began leaving his eyes. “I’m glad-”
Bertrand snickered. ‘How sweet. He’s glad you gave him that chance.’ The demon laughed. ‘What a waste of sentiment.’

And then there was a hard yank against the orb. The older halfa’s words choked off abruptly and pained tears traced down his face as he screamed. Black rings were trying to twist out and form around his waist.

Spectra began laughing and mock dancing to the agonized sounds once she was able to stand again. Wincing and gripping her core she simpered. “A heart based on love truly only deserves such an ending.”

Daniel’s left arm hugged tightly against Vlad as he continued fighting Bertrand’s possession but even as he bucked and thrashed against the demon, his other hand continued pulling out Vlad’s core. Soon the screams faded and were replaced by pained semiconscious moans.

Romulus was shaking Valerie desperately while Skulker continued trying to find a gap or weak point in the shield. Their best friend was dying for them and they were being rendered completely helpless to stop it.

The core was submitting easily to Daniel’s grip as he slowly withdrew the pulsing orb. Bertrand smiled. ‘Do you know why he’s dying Daniel? The electromagnetic impulses from his core are entwined with his living heart. The blasted fool is cutting off his natural instincts to protect himself in order to ensure you aren’t harmed. He’s given up living in exchange for the knowledge you’ll be safe from the two of us. Too bad, you won’t be safe from yourself.’

Bertrand reached deep within the boy and smiled vindictively as he pulled from Daniel’s ice core. A voice hummed in Daniel’s head as ice began cracking up his arm and toward Vlad’s core. ‘Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice.’

The ice crackled and created veins of frost around Vlad’s chest that shimmered and glistened. Sweat froze over in small dew like beads over bloodied tissue. ‘From what I’ve tasted of desire, I hold with those who favor fire.’

A white-gloved hand tightened as Daniel screamed and Vlad’s core became engulfed in the frigid air. ‘But if it had to perish twice, I think I know enough of hate…’

Bertrand laughed and Spectra finished the mental recitation as Vlad’s barely open eyes fluttered closed. “To say that for destruction ice, is also great. Goodbye Embassy.”

Vlad’s heart stopped beating against Daniel’s neck and was replaced with a faintly pulsing and flickering warmth now cradled between his fingers, half in and half out of Vlad’s now stilled chest.

Bright wisps of ochre orange, red’s and brilliant blue gently caressed and flickered against Daniel’s ice-coated fingers. The normal pink hue was fading as he continued pulling. Daniel lashed out from Bertrand’s mental hold and scowled through his tears. “WHAT HAPPENED TO KEEPING YOUR PROMISES VLAD?!”

A small beat flickered against Daniel’s neck and he continued. “YOU SAID YOU KEEP YOUR PROMISES! SO WHAT ABOUT ME?! YOU’RE LETTING TWO DISGUSTING MONSTERS BACK YOU INTO A CORNER AGAIN! YOU PROMISED YOU WOULDN’T LET THE GHOSTS WIN!”

Another beat and a flicker of flame shot out from the core now almost completely extracted from Vlad’s chest. Bertrand snarled. ‘Shut up brat!’
A hand tightened around Vlad’s core and the flames almost completely died. Daniel however continued. “YOU DIDN’T KILL DAD OR DANNI! THEY’RE WAITING FOR US TO COME HOME FRUIT-LOOP!”

Spectra snarled and latched a hand to the boy’s throat. “None of you are going home Daniel! Every single one of you pathetic failed heroes will die with him! Now stop.”

There was a flash bright pink energy and Spectra flailed backward as her hand was burned from Daniel’s neck. The room was suddenly filled with warmth and Daniel felt his control return as Bertrand was forcefully pushed out of his body and flung violently into the device keeping Romulus, Skulker and Valerie imprisoned. The demon thrashed and snarled as the portable shield’s circuitry reacted with his ectoplasmic skin.

Daniel’s tears continued as he looked up at the glowing white figure partially disconnected from Vlad’s form. Warm eyes smiled gently to the boy and Daniel, realizing exactly what he was still holding in his palm, quickly shoved the now miniature supernova back into Vlad’s chest.

Plasmius shook and writhed as his heart snapped back into a now frantic rhythm. Steam misted and fluctuated around the bound half-ghost as his head shot back and his limbs went taunt. A feral inhuman growl could be heard creeping from the surrounding walls and from beneath the flames now manifesting and protecting Daniel from Spectra. Glazed red eyes stared into the ceiling as pink energy entangled around limbs.

Flames engulfed Vladimir’s arm restraints and reduced them to a seeping puddle of molten metal and charred circuitry. The sound of Spectra getting up caused pointed ears to preen. A voice echoed in the embers and flickering flames.

“You dare?!”

Daniel went wide-eyed. The voice was Vlad’s but the elder halfa hadn’t moved his mouth to speak. It had come from the spaces around them...thundering and enraged. “YOU WOULD DARE TO TOUCH HIM?! TO TWIST SACRED LAW AND DISRESPECT THE DEAD?!!”

Daniel’s hand went to his neck at the increased heart rate and his eyes whipped back to where Vladimir was only for him to look around in a panic. Plasmius had disappeared from his bindings and was now unseen in the room. There was a pop of violent pink energy that engulfed the entire space as Vlad reappeared with a taloned hand curled around Spectra’s neck.

Snarling and exposing fangs, Vlad brutally shoved the demoness. Flung backward into the floor, she hissed and began backing away on her hands as the flame drenched half-ghost stumbled toward her. Vlad’s black hair looked like it was tipped with fire as it flickered weightlessly above his head in the heated air. Torn and taunt tissue moved effortlessly as he strode toward the female now looking to him in absolute terror. For all intents and purposes? It looked like the king of hell himself was coming to collect for her sins.

Nothing could have been more accurate.

Purple lips quivered slightly as a violent vortex of flame shifted and spun out from Vlad’s boots.

Armor was forming around his marred tissue. Spectra went ashen and, narrowing her eyes, she turned and went to run from her assailant. Vlad noted her frantic bid to escape emotionlessly. He was, in essence, a dead man walking. Semi-conscious and devoid of everything except for the two things that had brought him back to reality gasping and reeling like a drowned man, he calmly began charging a hand.
He needed to protect his family….And he needed to core these two monsters.

And god help anyone who dared oppose those two facts.

Spectra was nearing the door. Vladimir scowled. The voice echoed in the room again. “I’LL MAKE SURE THOSE DISGUSTING TALONS OF YOURS NEVER TOUCH MY FAMILY AGAIN! YOU’VE GONE LONG ENOUGH LIVING FROM OTHERS’ PAIN AND IT’S TIME YOU PAID RETRIBUTION FOR THE ATROCITIES YOU’VE COMMITTED!”

There was a pop of pink mist and Vlad appeared in front of Spectra’s exit. Fanged teeth widened in an animalistic snarl as his hand whipped out and slashed lengthwise across her chest. Spectra’s mouth gaped weakly as the hand grabbed onto her shoulder and teleported her into the air. “YOU WANTED MY BODY AND CORE PENELope? YOU’LL HAVE IT! I’LL USE BOTH TO TEAR YOU APART....”

A leg came around mid-air and kicked into Spectra’s torso, knocking her in a wide arch toward the observation window used by medical students to observe autopsies. There was a crackling of spectral glass as she flailed into the viewing platform with a sickening thud.

Bertrand came to at the sound of his wife screaming and groggily went to stand from where he had fallen only for a mechanical hand to wrap around his neck. Skulker’s eyes sparked. “Your actions today have condemned you to a tier lower than any filth I’ve come across thus far. You’re an animal Bertrand...A rabid beast that needs put down.”

Bertrand hissed and swiped a taloned hand to Skulker’s arm. Skulker released his grip momentarily as angry green energy pulsed from the damaged suit. His core was now centered on the one trait he excelled at. Looking up so that his eyes locked with Bertrand’s fearful, soulless red, he unholstered a gun. “And I do so enjoy the hunt.”

On the other side of the room, Spectra shot up from the glass she had been thrown into and bared her talons only for another pop of pink to distort the air above her. Flames crackled and connected against her body repeatedly as Vlad’s knuckles wailed into every available facet of ectoplasm.

Romulus was now kneeling beside Valerie and desperately patting her cheek in a bid to stir her from her slumber. Dazed olive tinted eyes fluttered open and Romulus smiled somewhat in relief. “Lady Gray? Are you-”

There was a shink of tempered metal and the knight slumped. A splash of green ectoplasm trailed down his jaw as his agony laden eyes fell to the blade that had pierced him. The room spun and the glow in his features dulled. His last moments of consciousness were centered on the crying girl now catching him in her arms as the blade was ripped back from his long-dead heart.

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